

MINUTES OF THE PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENTAL COMMITTEE HELD ON 8TH JUNE, 2021

Present: Councillors R Whitehead (Chair) and Mrs J A Bell, Mrs G Bleasdale, Mrs K Brace, Mrs H Cahill, Mrs R Charlton-Lainé, Mrs S Forster, Mrs L Kennedy, Mrs S Lingard, R Lowery, J MacVeigh, Miss S Morrison, J Purvis, K Routledge, C J Thompson, S Wayman.

Apologies: Councillors R Arthur, Mrs G M Fuller, D Harding, K Shaw.

Officers: P Fletcher (Deputy Town Clerk), C Halliday (Minute Taker).

Prior to commencement of the meeting the Chair advised members of this Committee and members of the public that in line with the amendment to 'the public bodies (admission to meetings) act 1960', which came into force in August, 2014, parts of this meeting may be recorded by photographic, video and audio means.

PL30/21 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

Members were reminded prior to the start of the meeting of the need to disclose any interests, prejudicial or personal, in accordance with the Code of Conduct. Such interests must be submitted to the Town Clerk prior to the meeting.

PL31/21 APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR OF PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENTAL COMMITTEE FOR THE ENSUING YEAR

There were two nominations received for Chair of the Planning and Environmental Committee, Councillors R Whitehead and R Arthur. This then went to a vote:

Councillor R Whitehead – 12 votes
Councillor R Arthur – 4 votes

RECOMMENDED that Councillor R Whitehead be elected as the Chair of Planning and Environmental Committee for the ensuing year.

(Councillor R Whitehead in the Chair)

PL32/21 APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR OF PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENTAL COMMITTEE FOR THE ENSUING YEAR

There were two nominations received for Vice-Chair of the Planning and Environmental Committee, Councillors R Lowery and R Arthur. This then went to a vote:

Councillor R Lowery – 11 votes
Councillor R Arthur – 4 votes

RECOMMENDED that Councillor R Lowery be elected as the Vice-Chair of Planning and Environmental Committee for the ensuing year.

PL33/21 **MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING HELD ON 27TH APRIL, 2021**

RECOMMENDED the Minutes of these meetings, copies of which had been previously printed and circulated to each Member, were approved at the last Full Council meeting and signed as a correct record by the Chairman.

PL34/21 **NATIONAL GRID SEGL1 BRIEFING**

Representatives were in attendance through Zoom to provide Members with a presentation and briefing outlining the project.

Thomas Hall – Public Consultation Team
Emma Bennett – External Affairs Officer
Glyn Sibson – Project Manager
Ben Lander – Marine Consent Officer

The reasons for the project were listed. The Government has a target of net zero by 2050 for England and Wales, 2045 for Scotland. These targets are now enshrined in law. The Prime Minister's ten point plan and the Energy White Paper both of which were published last year, targeted 40 gigawatts of offshore wind to be delivered by the end of the decade which is enough to power every home in the UK. This is a four-fold increase in what is currently produced today.

In order to distribute the green energy from where it is generated to where it is needed requirements to increase the network capability between Scotland and England is necessary. It is proposed to use high voltage direct current links between Scotland and England which will act as electricity superhighways to carry clean green energy from Scotland to homes and businesses across the UK. Two links are proposed, SEGL1 running from Torness to Hawthorn Pit and SEGL2 which would run from Aberdeenshire to Drax in North Yorkshire.

The network will consist of the existing high voltage transmission network with a substation and converter station. It has been selected to use direct current opposed to the traditional alternating current as this provides more efficient energy transport over long distances. As a result of using direct current, additional infrastructure is required to convert the current between AC and DC. The AC current will then connect into existing substations to feed into the power grid.

The proposed sites have been identified as a result of thorough planning, taking into account a variety of constraints including social, environmental and technical.

The sub-marine length of the route is 176km from Torness to landfall in Seaham with approximately 9km between the landfall site and Hawthorn Pit. The route had been identified with a view that it avoids or minimises the impact on the constraints where possible.

A seabed survey of the route has been carried out and this will be utilised to optimise the route and avoid technical constraints such as rocky outcrops, shipwrecks, unexploded ordinance or habitats which would cause issues setting the cable. The survey was carried out from Autumn 2020 to Spring 2021, it is hoped to have the outcomes of that survey within the next month.

It is intended to use horizontal directional drilling to get from the sub-marine section to making landfall at Seaham. The proposed landing site is the beach to the North of Seaham Hall Car Park. The cable on land will be buried approximately 1.2m deep and is often encased for protection. Cable work is carried out seasonally where possible to minimise damage to soils and fields. The outlined route is all off road.

When the route reaches the A19 it is proposed to run parallel with the cycle route before passing the edge of Seaton then heading towards the west of Murton.

The converter station is intended to be sited to the south of the Jade Park Business Park development. The cable route after 12-18 months following installation will blend back into the natural environment. The plan is to keep away from communities as much as possible to minimise disruption with the early designers already looking into this. A haul road will be built to the side of the route.

The converter station will be on a 300mx200m plot, and it is believed the site to be well screened from the local population. Hawthorn Pit was selected as it has a strong connection into the National Grid network. It also is conveniently located on the north east coast to enable the transfer of a huge amount of power without the need for building new overhead lines.

The converter station will be a substantial building possibly reaching 28 metres in height. The new substation will be of similar to size to the existing 275kv station already on site. The total site will be 6 hectares. The detailed designs and sizes are still being drawn up and once progressed drawings are available this will be provided for the later consultation and planning phases.

The project is currently in its first round public consultation stage spanning 24th May until 18th June. Due to covid restrictions all sessions have been carried out virtually for local Councils and public. Members of the public are encouraged to visit the website to view the consultation documents and for the opportunity to sign up for sessions where they can ask questions to the team.

The planned timeline for the project is as follows. In early 2022 further public information events will be held prior to the planning application being submitted. During these sessions more detailed plans will be available for the

local communities to consider and show how any feedback received during the first consultation round was taken onboard. In early 2022 the planning application will be submitted and if approved, construction will commence in 2023 with the project set for completion in 2027.

It is expected if the project gets approved then a community grant programme for charities and non-profit organisations within the development area will be available for applications.

Development of the net zero work force. Research has suggested that a workforce of approximately 400,000 across the whole industry would be required to meet such targets. To assist in this national goal National Grid are working with local schools such as funding Science Made Simple lessons and engineers visiting schools for talks regarding STEM subjects. Working with local authorities to support people with long term unemployment, getting people onboard to help with the construction areas and putting them through development programs.

A construction site observation card scheme whereby people on site are encouraged to note areas of best practice or areas which could be improved upon. For every card which is received £1 is donated to a local charity such as the Foodbanks.

Links were provided to the digital exhibition and feedback form. Adverts are running on social media in addition to local press. Letters have been sent to impacted residents along the route. It is encouraged to share the links to any residents to enable it to reach as wide of audience as possible.

The representatives then opened to a question and answer session.

The Chair commented that the consultation period is short notice given the 18th June deadline. They believe there will be a lot of interest in this topic given the environmental impact along the route. It was felt there could be a lot of objections to this proposal.

People were first made aware initially back in January, we first mailed out and spoke to landowners. We also sent out a letter, including to the Town Council and other nearby authorities such as Murton and South Hetton as locally affected stakeholders they were made aware.

Two weeks previous to the consultation opening up, we went out and sent letters out to stakeholders and spoke with Durham County Council as well as carried out a large letter drop to approximately 3,000 properties close to the route which were told about the public consultation taking place.

We have done a fair bit to make people aware about the consultation for both the local community and stakeholders. Any feedback on how to get it out wider would be greatly appreciated.

The consultation is to get an understanding and to start the conversation off realistically. This is not a formal consultation that would form as part of the planning application this is very much the start of the process.

We welcome any feedback and any questions. We want to understand people's opinions and discuss it with them so that we can then take onboard the views and then so that we can think if the design is acceptable or if adjustments are necessary.

We are carrying out full environmental assessments and we are currently on with that process now. It is screened on a red line which is an identified area following discussions with Planning Officers. To ensure all ecology, biology and habitats are considered. A full and thorough survey is carried out.

The initial constraints mapping exercise, which was discussed earlier, considered environmental designations and various habitats. There is a wealth of information and advice from stakeholders and previous planning applications which is all feed into the research for the proposed routes. That was the initial best base stage and then from their both marine and terrestrial we have gone on to undertake onsite surveys. All this information is feeding into the environmental assessments and the route development.

In terms of the marine aspect the seabed surveys are actively looking for habitats outside the nature conservation areas and conservation sites of importance that can be avoided through micro routing to minimise the environmental impact as best as possible.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their responses and opened the floor to other Members questions.

A member of the public requested to speak.

They disputed the distribution of letters, claiming a visit had been made by a representative of the Energy Company claiming their farmland was to be used in the project and they would be financially compensated for the land. They also claimed they are aware of a farmer nearer the Hawthorn Pit project site who is having similar issues with feeling like land is being forced off the owners. They expressed concerns at the size of land to facilitate the width of construction of a haulage road would require in addition to the scale of the supply for materials necessary in such a project. They expressed concern at the height of the converter building being 28m tall being visible for miles around. They also expressed concern at the short consultation period.

In regard to the ten days, we have had a month long consultation. As previously mentioned, it is not the final consultation. This is only the early stages of the project, so we are just reaching out and wanting peoples feedback.

The items raised regarding the farmer and the converter station is something we can take away and look at.

There was a lot of issues raised there. I am not going to sit here and say that the converter station is not a significant building, it is. Only the substation and converter station are the permanent things that people will see. National Grid always have a balancing act between national need and preserving local communities and amenities.

We have looked at where we could site the converter station. It would be built within the context of Jade Park. It would have distant views from surrounding areas however we believe there is a limited immediate impact on people. The buildings are inert to locals once there, it produces no emission and little noise once there. Whilst the scale and size is challenging we believe the proposed placement is relatively well screened by trees and within the context of Jade Park which is a fairly significant complex already.

We cannot discuss the commercial negotiations regarding land however we do always try to ensure we reach a voluntary agreement with landowners where possible. There are rates which are paid, and compulsory purchase is only looked at as a last option. We have a duty as a statutory undertaker to ensure we build an efficient system for consumers to ensure reasonable value for money is achieved. By developing an efficient system, we needed to review the most efficient way of transferring all this power into the English network. We firmly believe Hawthorn Pit is best based on consideration of many other sites based on efficiency and impact given that we would not need to build a lot of new infrastructure on shore.

In regard to the land, we pride ourselves on returning land, where the DC cables are we will seek easements to keep a permanent right to keep those cables in the ground but then it will be returned back to the farmers use for normal farming purposes. This will have a temporary impact possibly a year or two disruption but afterwards you would not know it was in the ground except for a few cable markers.

The position of National Grid is to endeavour to leave the land in a better condition than it was found. From a biodiversity perspective we have a target of a plus 10% gain on the land.

This is only the start, but we do need to start somewhere, if anyone wishes to have further conversations, please let us know to enable us to facilitate those.

The Member of the public questioned the use of trees to obscure a building of that size.

I do not think we can it is all a matter of perspective. It will have distant views rather than being imposing on a local view. It will be visible, but it will be distant and in context to what is around it to a degree.

A Member queried. If we are talking about Jade Business Park as context and we are also talking about 28 meters. As a visual comparison how tall are the buildings at Jade Business Park?

Probably about half the size. It will be to the South side of the park and if the existing park was to be built out, again this would add further context to the site.

The Chair noted the proposed building is taller than the Angel of the North and will be seen for miles around.

These buildings are significant, we will be working hard to ensure it adds to that built environment. There will be architectural treatment and colours to ensure it matches to the build environment. The expert architects will think about the landscape and relevant colour schemes to blend the building.

The Chair recommended a future meeting be arranged at the Town Hall once Covid restrictions are lifted to have an in person meeting where the public can also attend to hear the proposals. We have a new Council so some Members are only finding about this tonight.

Anybody with any specific interest is welcome to get in touch and we will do our utmost to facilitate. If and when we can a face to face discussion would be welcomed.

Another Member commented. I understand throughout your presentation the use of DC current to reduce environmental problems and approaches to minimise impacts but when you have been asked questions, all the way through you have said you would hardly see that building. You are comparing it to another building which you do not even know the size of, I would recommend when you do come back, you bring all the facts and figures.

Another Member queried. The cable is being brought onto land north of Seaham then ran overland to the south of Seaham. Is there not a better, less invasive route to the south. Why is this option not being proposed?

We did consider about five different landing sites spanning from further north near Ryhope to the south of Nose's Point. The south of Nose's Point route does provide a shorter land route however the proposed route is the least harmful from an environmental perspective. The less impactful to the marine environment locations are the sites to the north of Seaham. Further south the cliffs are steeper which could cause issues with the horizontal drilling due to the angles required.

It is believed there is also fairly significant planning developments and applications in between there and where we are seeking to build which could cause further diversion and additional issues.

After a lot of careful consideration, it is believed the proposed route offers less damage in the marine environment, provides an engineering solution and to work off the main roads better to cause less disturbance to communities even if it is about an extra five kilometres longer.

Our current programme is we are looking to listen to people, take the feedback in and hone our designs. Looking to finalising the designs then coming out with further information late 2021/early 2022. We will be looking to put the planning application in quarter one 2022. We are keen to hear from Elected representatives over the coming months.

Another Member queried. Previously housing applications have been turned down due to a natural fault in the land under Seaham and Murton. In addition to a natural stream which runs through.

What impact will the drilling have on that fault for the foundations of Seaham and Murton?

It was requested if the fault site could be expanded upon?

The Chair added there is a natural fault running through the centre of Seaham from Deneside up to Murton/Dalton Park.

Thank you for bringing this to our attention. We will make a note of the information and investigate this fully. We have carried out desktop studies of the land and nothing was flagged during those studies for our purposes. We are currently doing detailed ground investigations to make sure sites are suitable.

The Chair queried. Is there any possibility the route could be reviewed potentially coming into the south? There was a mineral railway line which ran from Hawthorn Pit all the way to Seaham docks. There could be somewhere you could get the cable in to follow the old mineral line which is now a public footpath so there would be less disturbance as it is on a brown field site. There are natural ravines.

We can definitely look at this and see which sites were explored during the landing study. We will look into this suggestion and feedback what is found.

Another Member queried. Is there any plan to talk to Murton Council regarding the proposals during this consultation period and the date of that meeting?

Yes, we plan to speak with Murton and South Hetton. The dates are not yet set, we are still in discussions with the Clerks.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their presentation and attendance.

A Councillor recommended that the Council's concerns be submitted in writing during the consultation window.

RECOMMENDED that a face to face meeting be arranged when possible for Members and residents to be briefed further on the project proposals by representatives.

PL35/21

PLANNING ISSUES

a) Monthly List

The Chair queried application 5712 which details the applicant as a Bar1828 located at Camden Square. It was advised it is believed the application refers to Dicky Dido's on Church Street and the details listed on the application is the applicant's residence.

RECOMMENDED that Members note the information provided.

PL36/21 **NORTHERN POWERGRID – NEW PRIMARY SUBSTATION**

It was advised Northern Powergrid wish to increase capacity at the New Drive site. It was recommended representatives be invited to present their proposals with elevation drawings to the next planning meeting.

RECOMMENDED that representatives from Northern Powergrid be invited to the next meeting of the Planning and Environmental Committee to discuss the proposals with elevation drawings available.

PL37/21 **PRESS OPPORTUNITIES**

RECOMMENDED that the consultation links for SEGL1 be shared on the Town Council Facebook page.

The meeting was then closed by the Chair.