VIP New Forest National Park Stakeholder Reference Group

13th February 2018

Meeting note

The following organisations were represented:

- National Grid VIP home team (+Camargue)
- New Forest National Park Authority
- National Trust
- Natural England
- Verderers of the New Forest
- Forestry Commission

Meeting Notes:

1. National Grid presented a project update on the various aspects of the scheme including:
   - Engineering
   - Survey work
   - Obtaining rights over land
   - SPA breeding birds

2. The route alignment proposed at the previous meeting of the Stakeholder Reference Group (SRG) was shown on a detailed plan. National Grid confirmed that it had been working on the detailed engineering for this alignment. National Grid ran through a schematic presentation of the phasing of the work across the whole working area including the removal of the pylons at the end of the project. A representative from the Verderers of the New Forest enquired whether the red dotted line shown on the plans represented the full width of the haul road. National Grid confirmed that the width of the haul road represented by the orange line would be approximately 4m widening to 6m in certain locations to allow for passing construction traffic. The red dotted area represented the full working width, i.e. haul road, four trenches, storage of topsoil and subsoils and turf (in heathland areas). A representative from the New Forest National Park Authority asked whether it would be possible to have a copy of the schematic. National Grid agreed to circulate it to all SRG members.

3. A representative from the New Forest National Park Authority asked when restoration would start. National Grid confirmed that restoration would commence as soon as a section was completed (and not wait until the end of works before it was begun). So, for example, Section 3 of the cabling on the plans would be completed during Stage 3 and restoration would then begin on this section during Stage 4 (although the haul road could not be restored until all works were complete – Stage 9).

4. National Grid reported that there would be three intermediate ‘link pillar locations’ to link the underground cable sections. The locations for these boxes which would be on the surface were indicated on the final slide of the sequence. There will be 12 link pillars in total (four at each of the three cable joint sections) as marked on the plan.
5. A representative from the Verderers of the New Forest asked to see the presentation again from the previous SRG, which showed how the western valley would be crossed and a temporary bridge constructed. These were shown and SRG members requested that these also be circulated to SRG members.

6. Issues were raised about the accessibility of the proposed route for construction traffic to access the stream crossing due to overhanging trees. A representative from the Verderers of the New Forest said that most of the trees were in his ownership and that National Grid was welcome to trim them back to allow access. There will be four trenches in total at a depth of 1.5m – 2m below the surface and work will be phased.

7. A representative from the Verderers of the New Forest was concerned about the hydrology of the area and National Grid’s ability to reinstate the stream / re-introduce the water once the geology of the area had been impacted during the construction process.

8. A representative from the Verderers of the New Forest asked what experience National Grid had and if it had ever done anything like this before. National Grid stated that it had considerable experience of trenching to cross streams and water courses, but that no two situations were ever exactly the same. National Grid is carrying out more hydrological and geological surveys in the area before it commences work. A representative from the Verderers of the New Forest asked that National Grid ensured that flow rates will be maintained both during and after construction as the geology and hydrology changes.

9. National Grid pointed out that the area is subject to seasonal change and is often dry in late summer. This might be the best time to undertake this work. National Grid indicated that these works would be done at the start of construction and their timing could be scheduled for the most advantageous time of year in terms of reducing impacts on hydrology, geology and ecology.

10. A representative from the Verderers of the New Forest asked what the effects of the concrete ducting would be on the hydrology. National Grid stated that the concrete would be encased in a membrane to prevent any adverse effect on the hydrology.

11. A representative from the Verderers of the New Forest requested that National Grid undertake monitoring of the hydrology after the project is completed. National Grid agreed saying that this could be built into the specification for the work.

12. Questions were also asked as to why National Grid’s first trench was shown imposed on the mire. National Grid and others commented that the area in question is not in fact mire but more of a channelised stream in this location – although there is mire to the north and south. The lack of mire in this location was the main reason it was chosen as the best point to cross the water course as it would have least impact.

13. A representative from the Verderers of the New Forest asked about the overall timing of the project. National Grid confirmed that electrical works, i.e. installing the underground cable and making it operational within the circuit, would take about two years. The removal of the pylons would then follow. National Grid estimated that the works including pylon removal
would be completed by Easter 2022. As covered in point 3 above, restoration works would begin during the phased construction and monitoring would continue after the construction and pylon removal works were complete.

14. SRG members asked whether the eastern SEC would be on made ground within the landfill site. National Grid confirmed that it was in discussions with the landowner and was considering options but that it would not construct the SEC on made ground / landfill.

15. National Grid reported that discussions were ongoing with the landowners for both the eastern and western SECs. In terms of the route, agreements would now be sought with landowners following the SRG’s approval of this alignment.

16. National Grid updated the group on the status of discussions with Natural England, the National Park Authority and the National Trust regarding the impact on the SPA breeding birds. Survey results show that there was potential for negative impacts on nightjar and that, as a result, it was the opinion of Natural England that, for the project to proceed, it would be better to accept an ‘adverse effect’ and pursue an ‘Imperative Reasons of Overriding Public Interest (IROPI) case.

17. National Grid talked through the IROPI process and confirmed that a Habitats Regulations Assessment would be drawn up in conjunction with Natural England. Drafts of this would then be submitted to the National Park Authority as part of, or prior to, the planning application. A representative from Natural England indicated that Natural England would also review the IROPI evidence presented by National Grid and make a recommendation to the National Park Authority as part of the planning process. It would be up to the Park Authority as the planning authority how it involved the Secretary of State.

18. Natural England reiterated that a major advantage for the scheme is that its impacts are likely to be only temporary and that this would be a factor in determining any IROPI case.

19. There was discussion as to which Secretary of State would be required to make a final decision. It was agreed, that as this was a planning issue, it was likely to be the Secretary of State in the Department for Communities & Local Government. A representative from the New Forest National Park Authority commented that several of her planning colleagues had felt that the decision of the Secretary of State on whether to call in the project or not would depend on the position of statutory bodies and the weight of public opinion. If both were favourable, then the project may not be called in.

20. National Grid reported that following a meeting last July involving Natural England, the National Trust, the National Park Authority and National Grid, a paper had been commissioned from Professor Carys Swanwick on the impact of the work on the landscape in the New Forest. This work came following a request from the CEO of the New Forest Park Authority, who was present at the meeting to undertake work to balance the evidence on the landscape side – it was felt that although there was a body of evidence from the environmental and ecological perspective, there was very little on the landscape side.

21. Professor Swanwick had convened a Technical Reference Group including representatives from Natural England, the Park Authority and the National Trust to discuss the issues and
impacts. This group met towards the end of 2017. Professor Swanwick has produced a draft paper which will be circulated first to Technical Group Members for their comments and, once agreed, more widely to the SRG. A representative from Natural England offered to obtain Natural England’s formal views on the paper and the landscape side of things once the report is finalised. The representative will circulate internally to the relevant individuals within Natural England on the landscape side.

22. Camargue outlined proposals for public consultation, which is scheduled for September 2018 ahead of the proposed submission of a planning application in December 2018. National Grid then invited the SRG to suggest additional venues that might be useful for it to attend to gauge public opinion. The SRG suggested the following events:

- Ellingham & Ringwood Show
- New Forest Show
- Nomansland Summer Fayre

23. A representative from the New Forest National Park Authority pointed out that there are many fetes and fayres in the New Forest and that Camargue should talk to the New Forest National Park PR team to find out which were the best / most suitable.

24. A representative from the Forestry Commission raised the issue of winter-only working as a possibility as it would lead to less habitat being lost. National Grid pointed out that this had been raised and discussed at length during previous SRG meetings. Unfortunately, the impact of winter only working on the engineering programme would render the project unfeasible and, as a result, a continuous programme of works is being proposed.

25. Natural England asked whether any data was available on the birds nesting along the existing overhead line and if there were many ground nesting birds under the pylons. National Grid reported that there were two years of data available and that they would investigate and respond to Natural England. It was agreed that far fewer people used the area under the pylons than the rest of the Purlieu. There are parts of the Purlieu near the proposed cable route that are ‘wall-to-wall dogs’.

26. A representative from the New Forest National Park Authority commented that although there was some archaeological information available on the gravel terraces, they wanted to know whether National Grid intended to do more work to assess these as very little is known about them. There is no information as to where the Palaeolithic terraces are. The representative stated that according to the NPPF, the archaeological evaluation work should be undertaken so that the results could be provided in advance of submitting a planning application. The representative suggested that the ideal opportunity to do these works would be in the autumn and winter outside of the ground-nesting bird season. National Grid suggested that it may be possible to condition as part of the planning consent before construction started, along with studies into surface archaeology, and would speak with National Grid’s archaeological consultants regarding this scope of works.

27. A representative from the New Forest National Park Authority commented that they would like to see a methodology as to how this would be done. It may be decided that selected
locations could be looked at, rather than the whole site, and that the project geo-archaeologist need not be on site at all times. The representative raised that the geo-archaeological requirements for work to establish the Palaeolithic gravel sequence and a deposit model was fully supported by Natural England’s Senior geologist and the Regional Science Adviser for Historic England. The research requirements are set out in the New Forest National Park Authority’s research strategy for the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods.

28. A representative from the Forestry Commission highlighted the need for consultation and collaboration particularly where the planning authority was concerned. The representative suggested that National Grid needed to present options to the planning authority and not a fait accompli. National Grid stated that the whole process had been about considering and developing options and that the Park Authority had been closely involved throughout. However, the comments were noted, and it restated its commitment to full and open public consultation. National Grid pointed out that a full scoping exercise had been undertaken and approved by the Park Authority. A representative from the New Forest National Park Authority confirmed that despite the slight route change, the scoping report was still valid.

29. A representative from the Verderers of the New Forest asked whether much timber would be removed at the western SEC site. They were concerned that if a large number of trees were removed then both the SEC and the next remaining pylon would be more visible. National Grid pointed out that a full Landscape and Visual Assessment would be done on the SEC sites and any appropriate mitigation undertaken to ensure that the situation was not made worse by the project.

30. National Grid updated the Group on the status of the Landscape Enhancement Initiative (LEI). Three schemes from window one are up and running. During the meeting National Grid received confirmation from Ofgem that the seven schemes included in window two had received approval and that funding would soon be released to the successful AONBs and National Parks. Window three submissions were being prepared for imminent Ofgem review. Window four opened on 9 February and would close on 9 March, while window five was scheduled for the Q3 2018.

31. One of the successful projects in window two is in the New Forest and a representative from the New Forest National Park Authority ran through details of the scheme. Using LEI funds, the New Forest National Park Authority will make improvements to Holbury Manor Park and Warren Copse – a woodland area within the National Park. Working in partnership with Fawley Parish Council, the Park Authority will use the fund to restore and manage the character of the ancient woodland, including maintaining the site of a new wild play area which was funded through a £2.8m grant awarded by the Heritage Lottery Fund in 2015. The representative also stated that the National Park was working on a new bid for window four.

32. National Grid stated that there would be a workshop for all eligible AONBs and National Parks in June this year. [Post-meeting note: the LEI workshop is now scheduled for 8 May]

33. National Grid then ran through highlights of the other three major projects in the Dorset AONB, Peak District National Park and Snowdonia National Park.