

**NORTHUMBERLAND NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY
MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL AUTHORITY MEETING
Eastburn, South Park, Hexham, NE46 1BS
Live Streamed
Wednesday 26 April 2023 from 10.00am – 11.30am**

Present:

Ms Jean Davidson (SoS National)
Cllr Sue Bolam (SoS Parish)
Ms Marie Fallon (SoS National)
Ms Fiona Gough (SoS National)
Cllr Mark Mather (NCC)
Cllr Julian Morrison-Bell (SoS Parish)

Mr Chris Mullin (SoS National)
Cllr John Riddle (NCC)
Ms Pippa Ross (SoS National)
Cllr Andy Saunders (SoS Parish)
Cllr Catherine Seymour (NCC)
Cllr Alan Sharp (NCC)

In Attendance

Tony Gates (Chief Executive (National Park Officer)); Rosie Thomas (Director of Business Development); Susannah Buylla (Head of Planning & Policy); Robert Mayhew (Head of Conservation & Environment); Jayne Longlands (Corporate Support Officer); Tom Jenkins (Ward Hadaway).

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting; including members of the public, the press and County Councillor Steven Bridgett, who were also in attendance in the public gallery.

Tom Jenkins from Ward Hadaway (Legal Representative) introduced the protocol an order of events for the meeting.

NPA13-2023 Apologies for Absence

Received from; Cllr Eileen Cartie (NCC), Ms Liz Ellis (SoS National), Cllr Val Gibson (SoS Parish), Cllr Len Glen-Davison (SoS Parish), Cllr Denis Mullan (SoS Parish), Cllr Mark Purvis (NCC).

NPA14-2023 Declarations of member and officer interests

There were no declarations of member and officer interests.

NPA15-2023 Application reference 23NP0023EL

Electricity Notification under section 37 of the Electricity Act 1989: Erection of 12km of new overhead lines interspersed with 4.70km of interconnecting underground cables to secure mains electricity supply to three Emergency Telecom Cell Masts and electricity connections to off grid properties in the Coquet Valley, Alwinton, Northumberland

Susannah Buylla (Head of Planning & Policy) presented to the meeting, providing a visual representation of the proposed route, including locations for undergrounded sections and images of some key locations. She confirmed it would be the role of the Secretary of State (SoS) to make the final application decision, with NNPA advising on the degree of significance to the local environment.

The Head of Planning & Policy said there had been clear support for the proposal from the public and minimal objections raised by statutory consultees.

The key criteria for Local and National Planning Policy was noted. This proposal was considered to be a major development, with demonstration for exceptional circumstances needed to be shown if the proposal was to be acceptable in policy terms.

A photomontage, showing how the proposed wooden poles would visually impact on the landscape was displayed. Clear public benefits were also outlined, such as utilising the existing emergency phone masts to introduce mobile phone coverage to the area. Some site modifications had been considered, such as moving poles for ecological and landscape reasons.

It was the balance between harm and public benefit which needed to be given consideration. The Head of Planning & Policy concluded that there were clear benefits for the proposal and, although there would be harm to the landscape quality, and the potential impact on the landscape had not been minimised on some stretches of the proposal.

The recommendation however was for no objection subject to essential modifications and conditions.

Public Speaking

County Cllr Steven Bridgett presented on behalf of the residents of the Upper Coquet Valley. He spoke in support of providing electricity to this area, noting the families who lived and worked in this remote landscape without many of the amenities that others took for granted. He felt the Upper Coquet residents deserved access to services, with some people having campaigned for years to achieve this aim. It was noted that none of the Upper Coquet residents had received the National emergency alert issued by the government the previous weekend as they were not served by a telecoms mast. He considered some of the measures outlined by the Head of Conservation & Environment in his response were extremely stringent. Councillor Bridgett stressed this was a one-time opportunity to get mains electricity to the community and recommended that this proposal be supported by NNPA.

Questions

The Chair invited members to present questions of fact; general discussions then ensued as follows: -

- Ms Marie Fallon queried whether there were any pre-application discussions with the application and queried why the applicant did not take the opportunity of public speak, which would have allowed the Authority members to ask questions. It was noted that Northern Powergrid were at the meeting but had not taken up the opportunity to speak. She asked about the cost-benefit analysis of undergrounding versus overgrounding, and queried whether the applicant had responded to the conditions with regards to mitigation, i.e. doing tree planting as requested. The Head of Planning & Policy replied that a meeting between MOD, the Home Office and Northern Powergrid had been held previously with discussions having taken place and amendments to original outline proposals suggested by Authority officers. Mr Robert Mayhew (Head of Conservation & Environment) said that some amendments had been incorporated as a result of discussions held, such as an additional underground line at Kingshaws Crag. With regards to the cost-benefit analysis, it was stated that this has not been provided but we were at the meeting to discuss the application before us, and if agreed, conditions would be forwarded to the SoS for their decision. It was further stated that tree mitigation had been agreed in the landscape assessment document submitted by the applicant.
- Ms Pippa Ross queried what the process would be for enforcing conditions if agreed by the SoS. The Head of Planning & Policy replied that it would be NNPA's role to enforce the conditions which would mean that we would be in control of the situation.
- Mr Chris Mullin mentioned the reference to having no further undergrounding capacity and sought clarity as to whether Northern Powergrid had said that it was not physically possible or that the budget would not allow them to do more. The Head of Planning & Policy replied that, in discussions, NNPA had suggested that further undergrounding should take place. It was noted that capacity levels were 4.7km max underground and 12km overground. The Head of Conservation &

Environment understood that it was technically possible to underground more if there were no budgetary constraints. However, being proportionate and given the existing electrical infrastructure between Warkworth and Alwinton and the safety mechanisms that Northern Powergrid have in place, then it is the cost of the additional upgrading of the network that prohibits additional undergrounding from taking place.

- Cllr Julian Morrison-Bell queried what the timings would be for this proposal. The Head of Planning & Policy replied that it would be phased over time with ecology considerations being adhered to.
- Cllr Catherine Seymour asked about the conservation objection raised by the Head of Conservation & Environment for a number of stretches. The Head of Planning & Policy said that this totalled 1.8km across two separate stretches, with 15% of the route causing most concern. The Head of Conservation & Environment said that visibility from the road (which was also a public right of way) and the visual impact against the skyline was the main concern which would result due to the accumulative effect of many poles. However, he felt that tree screening would minimise this.
- Ms Fiona Gough queried whether the applicant had made best use of the undergrounding sections, she asked if the landscape impact assessment undertaken by the applicant was detailed enough, and questioned whether there were other options for the route. The Head of Planning & Policy reminded members that they needed to consider the scheme that was before them. The Head of Conservation & Environment added he considered best use of undergrounding had not been considered, he felt the Linbriggs to Shilmoor stretch could have been underground but agreed members needed to consider the proposals as presented.
- In reply to a query from Cllr Andy Saunders, the Head of Planning & Policy replied that 14 properties were affected, the number of people was not known, with telecommunications masts requiring additional equipment to upgrade and make them suitable for mobile and broadband connectivity.
- Cllr John Riddle queried whether the 7 conditions and 3 informatives were all necessary and acceptable. The Head of Planning & Policy replied that she believed they were necessary and would be acceptable.
- In reply to Cllr Julian Morrison-Bell's query, the Head of Planning & Policy said that planning for the tree planting scheme would be for NNPA to sign off (this would be prepared by the applicant or could potentially be the landowner).

Debate

The Chair opened the item up for debate and members commented as follows:-

- Sue Bolam provided historic events surrounding the provision of electricity to the Upper Coquet. With finances currently being available to carry out this work, she supported the recommendation. However, she did not agree with some of the conditions (such as the line from Barrowburn to Linbriggs, and also the line from Linbriggs to Shilmoor) and also queried the tree planting. She said that, if trees were planted on the good land to mask poles, the ability to farm land to its full potential would be constrained. Tree planting would also take away the grandeur of the landscapes and the current experienced sense of awe in the Upper Coquet.
- In response to a comment from Councillor Riddle it was clarified that a detailed plan for tree planning did not currently exist.

- Ms Marie Fallon did support the recommendation in terms of the conditions but was disappointed that no evidenced costs were available from Northern Powergrid for undergrounding and that there was no one from the organisation available to speak to the meeting. She felt conflicted in making her decision as this full information was not available in order to make the required choices.
- Cllr Sue Bolam was concerned about over-planting and asked if members would have the opportunity to comment on this in due course. The Head of Planning & Policy said the Park would always take members comments onboard if the SoS agrees that such a condition is to be attached to any decision.
- Ms Pippa Ross supported the recommendations, this felt like an appropriate compromise, with the need to achieve a living/working landscape in the Park being important. She asked who would be asking the applicant the relevant questions and whether the appropriate assurances on the cost-benefit analysis could be sought, particularly on the undergrounding. The Legal Representative confirmed this would be at the discretion of the SoS. However, he noted that if objections were received then a public inquiry could be raised.
- Cllr Andy Saunders supported the scheme but queried the details tree planting on the ground.
- Ms Fiona Gough was supportive of the scheme but felt conflicted about landscape impacts. In reply to a query she raised, the Chief Executive said that funding was not currently available for the undergrounding of new infrastructure implementation from national programmes, only for undergrounding existing infrastructure.
- Mr Chris Mullin suggested we convey to the SoS the gist of the discussion held. The Head of Planning & Policy replied that we needed to complete a form containing specific questions, she suggested we may be able to forward the minutes of the meeting together with this, depending upon timescales.
- Mr Chris Mullin queried whether we would we have influence over the works taking place and whether they would talk to NNPA about ecology. The Head of Planning & Policy said she would be satisfied that the works would not harm ecology provided the construction methodologies were adhered to. She explained that the works would need consents and assents from Natural England who would advise on the appropriate processes. The Chief Executive confirmed, if a tree planting scheme were to be conditioned, the Authority would have some control regarding how the condition was met.
- Cllr Mark Mather was supportive of the people living in the Coquet Valley and suggested the scheme went ahead. He hoped that local voices and NNPA would have some say in the tree planting scheme.
- Cllr Alan Sharp was fully supportive of the scheme and hoped it could go ahead as soon as possible, he considered the advantages clearly outweighed any disadvantages.
- Ms Marie Fallon asked if a letter could be issued to the SoS to add context to this case, setting out some of the discussions held; the Legal Representative replied that NNPA would be within their rights to do so. The Head of Planning & Policy expressed concern about this potentially slowing the process down and by expressing concerns this could possibly lead to a public inquiry.

Proposal of, and vote on, the Motion

Ms Pippa Ross proposed the **FIRST MOTION** set out in the report, which was seconded by Cllr Andy Saunders. Members then voted on the proposal with 11 members in favour and one abstention, and it was **RESOLVED** that:-

1. **No objections** be raised, subject to the following minor modifications to the proposed route:
 - Pole 34 – adjustment of location to allow tree to remain in SSSI (not felled) for ecological reasons.
 - Poles 110A to 111A –re-alignment to prevent loss of trees, for Ecological and landscape reasons.
 - Pole 112 – adjustment of location to less prominent siting due to landscape harm.

Mr Chris Mullin proposed the **SECOND MOTION**, which was seconded by Cllr Alan Sharp. Members then voted on the proposal, which was agreed unanimously, and it was **RESOLVED** that:-

2. **No objection** be raised subject to the 7 conditions and 3 informatives outlined in the main report (with the agreement of having a tree planting scheme not being for a particular scheme but just agreeing to having a tree planting scheme which, if approved as a condition, would come back to NNPA for further agreement).

Cllr Alan Sharp proposed the **THIRD MOTION**, which was seconded by Cllr Mark Mather. Members then voted on the proposal, which was agreed unanimously, and it was **RESOLVED** that:-

3. The Authority **does not request** a Public Inquiry be held before the Secretary of State reaches their decision.

Ms Marie Fallon proposed the **FOURTH MOTION**, which was seconded by Cllr Julian Morrison-Bell, as follows:-

4. A letter be prepared by the Chair, to give a flavour of the discussions at the meeting and expressing the Park’s concerns, for issue to the SoS.

Members voted on the proposal, with four members in favour, seven against, and one abstention; therefore it was **NOT CARRIED**.

The Legal Representative said that individual members could write to the SoS if they wished to do so.

NPA16-2023 Urgent Business

There was no urgent business.

The Chair thanked the public speaker Cllr Steven Bridgett, members of the public and the press for attending the meeting; they then departed the room to leave the meeting.

There being no further business, the Special Authority Meeting ended at 11.30am.

Approved: Date: