

National Grid Visual Impact Provision (VIP) – New Forest project update

Overview of the New Forest project:

The Visual Impact Provision project in the New Forest National Park aims to reduce the visual impact of National Grid's overhead line near the village of Hale.

This is potentially a major engineering project which would involve the removal of the existing pylons and burying replacement transmission cables underground.

The section of the line, which runs for approximately 3km across Hale Purlieu, was identified by an independent landscape study as having some of the greatest impacts on landscape and visual amenity.

Since this project was first announced in 2014, National Grid has sought the views of a wide group of stakeholders and the local public.

This has included close liaison with organisations including the New Forest National Park Authority, the National Trust, the Verderers of the New Forest, the Forestry Commission, the Commoners and Natural England, as well as parish councils and community groups.

We were pleased to welcome so many local residents to our public information events held at Hale Village Hall in July. In 2016 over two days, almost 150 people dropped in to find out more about the project, ask questions and give their feedback on our scheme.

We received 53 feedback forms from these events, the majority of which were supportive of the project:

- 31 fully supportive
- 9 broadly supportive
- 2 undecided (reserving judgement)
- 10 unsupportive
- 1 blank

We are keen therefore that as more details of our plans emerge, we continue to take on board the views of the local community and wider stakeholder groups.

Community Liaison Group meeting

In December 2016 we held our first New Forest Community Liaison Group meeting, which was attended by a variety of representatives from local groups and organisations, including the New Forest Association, the National Trust, the Verderers of the New Forest and the Commoners Defence Association.

Councillor Bill Templeton attended on behalf of Hale Parish Council.

During the meeting, members of the Community Liaison Group were given an overview of the project, including the work carried out to date, feedback from stakeholders and local people and an outline of the proposed work programme heading towards planning application submission. Those in attendance were also invited to ask questions and make comments on the project.

We were pleased to hear the Verderers of the New Forest praise National Grid's approach to stakeholder engagement throughout the project to date and to receive the group's support as we move forward.

It was agreed that these meetings be held as and when National Grid has an update to share with the members of the Community Liaison Group.

Ground investigation and environmental survey work

In February 2017, we successfully completed a programme of ground investigation survey work to investigate the feasibility of the preferred route for burying the electricity transmission cables underground.

The work was scheduled to avoid the local bird nesting season and was carefully monitored and controlled to mitigate any impact on designated areas.

Throughout the work, the team on site received a small number of enquiries from passing members of the public, all of whom were already aware of the work's intentions and scheduled duration having received the project update delivered to local residents and stakeholders ahead of work commencing. No negative feedback was received.

The results of the ground investigation surveys are currently being compiled and analysed and will be used to inform the progress of the VIP project in the New Forest National Park.

In addition, we are currently progressing with environmental survey work along the proposed route corridor. This has included baseline investigations into the archaeology, hydrology and geology across Hale Purlieu.

A number of ecological studies are also underway, including Breeding Bird Surveys which have identified a number of European protected species such as Nightjar, Woodlark and Dartford Warbler present on site.

To ensure that the impact of construction work on these species is mitigated, we are in the process of analysing the local habitat to establish whether the wider New Forest contains sufficient suitable habitat for any birds displaced by temporary construction work to establish territories elsewhere for a single breeding season. To help us form a comparison, we are also carrying out surveys in an area immediately south of the proposed site and one 9km away.

National Grid would like to extend its sincere thanks to Hale Parish Council for its continued support of the Visual Impact Provision project and its assistance in helping to keep local residents up-to-date on the project's progress.