

MINUTES
of the
CHELMSFORD POLICY BOARD
held on 28 September 2023 at 7:00pm

Present:

Councillor C. Adutwim (Chair)

Councillors N. Chambers, B. Massey, M. O'Brien, G. Pooley, E. Sampson, T. Sherlock, A. Sosin, A. Thorpe-Apps, N. Walsh, R. Whitehead and S. Young

Also present: Councillors I. Fuller, B. Knight and M. Steel

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs P Clark and Whitehead. Cllr Chambers substituted for Cllr Whitehead.

2. Declarations of Interest

Members were reminded that they must disclose any interests they knew they had in items of business on the meeting's agenda and that they must do so at this point on the agenda or as soon as they became aware of the interest. If the interest was a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest they were also obliged to notify the Monitoring Officer within 28 days of the meeting. Any declarations are recorded in the relevant minute below.

3. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting on 29 June 2023 were confirmed as a correct record.

4. Public Questions

Two public questions were asked at the meeting. One related to Item 5 and the other to Item 6.

The question for Item 5, was from a Member of Little Waltham Parish Council. They stated that their area was one of the most affected by the National Grid proposals and residents were angry and uncertain about what was happening. The Board heard that they had been searching for an alternative solution and were grateful for the Council's support in opposing the current plans. The Board were asked to consider asking the Council to undertake a full and fair impact assessment for Little and Great Waltham, rather than one carried out by National Grid. It was noted that this would have better access to information, would be more reliable and independent from National Grid themselves. The Board were also informed that the first preference would be for underground cabling instead as this would resolve various

concerns and the Council were also asked to support an alternative route using uninhabited agricultural land.

The question for Item 6 related to the Council's decision to delay the revision of the Local Plan to late 2023 or early 2024 to understand with greater clarity the review to the National Planning Policy Framework. The Board were asked whether it was now best to continue with the revisions already underway and to submit it before June 2025 or to wait until the new rules were enacted and start again. The Board were also asked what effect the new process would have on both made and upcoming Neighbourhood Plans and what action those Councils should be taking in order to keep up with the proposed changes.

Both of the above questions were answered by officers during the relevant reports and the responses are detailed under those items below.

5. Norwich to Tilbury Powerline Proposals – Responses to Second Non-Statutory Consultation

The Board were asked to consider the draft consultation responses to the second non-statutory consultation from National Grid on the Norwich to Tilbury Powerline proposals. It was noted that the 1st consultation responses were not being referred to at this point and just the changes would be focused on by officers, although in the response itself National Grid were being redirected to the 1st response. It was noted that due to its nationally significant nature, the application would be submitted directly to the Planning Inspectorate rather than the relevant local authorities. The Board heard that the proposals were for a new 183km, 400kV Transmission line in East Anglia, connecting the Norwich Main Substation, with Bramford in Suffolk and Tilbury in Essex. It was noted that a new substation would be built at Tendring Peninsula, connecting to proposed new offshore wind farms and the Overhead lines would have conductors and steel lattice pylons with a height of 45-50m. There would also be a section of underground cabling in the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The preferred alignment of the route through Chelmsford was detailed to the Board, which passed through a narrow corridor in the Walthams, then through North Chelmsford toward Writtle, adjacent to ancient woodland, before continuing towards Brentwood and Basildon. The Board heard that this route had been assessed by officers and there were concerns about the very narrow gap planned to be used in the Walthams, that had lots of heritage assets of significant historical value. It was noted that a full assessment of these concerns had not yet been carried out by National Grid. It was noted that the potential of underground cabling could be a solution, but this was something that could raise other issues and until impact assessments were carried out it was difficult to raise solutions. It was noted by officers that as they were not proposals of the City Council, they could not themselves carry out the relevant heritage assessments and that was a matter for National Grid to carry out.

The Board were provided with an overview of the proposed consultation response, which is summarised below.

- Supports the transition to a low or zero carbon economy to address climate change and improve sustainability – where schemes are appropriately located and suitable mitigated.
- Asks for more evidence that the reinforcements are needed by 2030.
- Confirmation that inclusion for accelerated investment has not effectively scoped out an off-shore option.

- Continues to raise strong objections in principle to the proposal as the project still considered premature as not all the potential alternative options have been fully explored and assessed.
- Raises very serious concerns about the preferred alignment itself:
- The absence of detailed impact assessments, in particular Heritage Impact Assessments to identify the significance of individual and groups of designated and non-designated heritage assets and assess the impact, including cumulative impact on their significance.
- Once heritage significance and the impact of the proposals have been identified and assessed, then suitable mitigation measures need to be considered. This includes undergrounding, pylon design and landscape mitigation.
- Particular attention needs to be given to suitable mitigation where there are a concentration of designated heritage assets in close proximity to the proposed alignment e.g. the narrow and sensitive corridor between Great and Little Waltham.

The Board were informed of the next steps, which would involve the statutory public consultation in 2024, the Development Consent Order application in 2025, construction in 2027 and the powerlines fully operational by 2031. Officers also confirmed to the Board that the 2022 consultation response would be resubmitted with the one being agreed.

In response to questions from the Board, officers noted that;

- Indications were that an offshore scheme could be up to 5 times more expensive, but another part of National Grid were exploring the option. Until it was clear whether it was a possible solution it was difficult for officers to comment or compare the two options, therefore they felt the proposals from National Grid were premature.
- The future of the Bradwell site was not part of these specific proposals and that would involve a separate DCO being submitted for that. Officers did note however that there would be issues that affect each DCO and if the Board wanted to highlight this as a potential point in the response, officers could do so.
- The Neighbourhood Development Plan in Writtle had been referred to in the consultation and if preferred officers were happy to reinforce the importance of this in the consultation response.
- National Grid had contractual arrangements to connect to new wind farms in the North Sea and that was one of the reasons why the powerline was needed by 2030.
- It was disappointing that the initial response in 2022 had effectively been ignored by National Grid, but that National Grid had been in touch with key officers and had held a consultation event in Chelmsford at an earlier date.
- The required heritage assessment in areas such as the Walthams, had to be carried out by National Grid themselves, as it was their application, but the City Council would continue to encourage its undertaking and the Council's Heritage Officer will assess and provide feedback on its outcomes and recommendations..
- The impact of these national projects was often much higher on the actual areas they took place in, with the benefits being spread nationally. There was always an opportunity for local communities to benefit from environmental funds and this would be explored by the host authorities in the future.

- It was hoped that the Council's response would be looked at before Christmas and it was also noted that the City Council had been continuing to work with other neighbouring authorities.

The Board agreed to support the proposed response with some additions as detailed below.

RESOLVED that the consultation response set out at Appendix 1 for submission to National Grid, with additional comments on the request to provide more detail on the generating requirements for Central Essex, with reference to the Bradwell site, the Writtle Neighbourhood Plan and the concerns expressed for the narrow corridor being used in the Walthams and the lack of information on relevant heritage concerns.

(7.03pm to 8.pm)

6. Consultation on National Planning Reforms – Implementation of Plan-Making Reforms

The Board were informed of the government's proposals to implement the parts of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill which related to plan-making and asked to consider the draft responses from officers to the consultation questions. The Board heard that the main element behind the proposals from the Government was for a quicker plan making process that could be updated more frequently and that would be more digitally accessible. It was noted that the proposals contained new ones, previously promoted ones from earlier reform consultations and proposals to improve features of the existing system. It was noted that a 30-month plan-making timeframe would be implemented instead of the current system which typically took five to seven years for a plan to reach adoption. The Board heard that the time spent to examine plans would be reduced and that there would be a greater emphasis on community engagement and the use of digital tools, alongside light touch annual monitoring returns with a more detailed one four years after plan adoption.

The Board were also informed that existing adopted local plans would still be considered as up to date under the proposals and that they would stay in place until the adoption of new ones, officers felt that was an appropriate approach. The Board heard that officers were broadly supportive of making the plan-making process easier but did have concerns that some of the proposals would be unrealistic in practice. Officers also felt there were a number of additional financial burdens, and that the 30-month plan-making process was not feasible and would not allow for delays in getting information from 3rd parties, the complexity of evidence bases and potential changes in political leadership. Officers stated that the proposals would have a real and significant impact on future local plan making and this was demonstrated by the draft response prepared.

In response to the earlier public question, officers confirmed that arrangements for neighbourhood plans had not yet been set out by the Government but would be in due course. It was noted that future Government plan-making consultations would be expected to be considered by the Policy Board as well. It was also noted that in the interim officers would continue to support those areas developing neighbourhood plans and encourage them to continue with their plan making processes.

In response to questions from the Board, officers noted that;

- They would add some further detail on the Board's views of the importance of neighbourhood plans and to request clarification and certainty on the impact of the proposals for those areas working on their plans.

- The list of prescribed bodies in Question 29 did include relevant statutory bodies and that the draft response did include mention to the list being widened to include neighbouring planning authorities. Chelmsford City Council already consult Parish/Town Councils.
- It was hoped the proposals would lead to a wider audience being reached during consultation stages with the enhanced digital tools, but it was important to note that the Council already used many of these within its existing processes.

The Cabinet Member for Growing Chelmsford highlighted to the Board, that the Council were very fortunate to have high quality work from their officers in areas such as local plan development and the detailed consultation response demonstrated this.

RESOLVED that the consultation responses set out at Appendix 1 be noted and approved with the additional comments on the importance of neighbourhood plans and requests for clarity and certainty on the impact of the proposals on neighbourhood plans.

(8pm to 8.28pm)

7. Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

The meeting closed at 8.29pm

Chair