

From: Thérèse Coffey MP <therese.coffey.mp@parliament.uk>
Sent: 20 December 2023 10:16
To: Town Clerk
Subject: Sealink consultation (Case Ref: TC117428)

Dear Town Clerk,

As your Member of Parliament for Suffolk Coastal, I am writing to you about National Grid Venture's Sealink consultation, which closed on Monday the 18th of December 2023. I will set out my stance and submission below.

I commend the submissions made by Suffolk County Council and East Suffolk District Council. Officers and councillors have worked hard on the technical detail. I also commend the submissions by several local parish and town councils, including Aldeburgh and Saxmundham – the two most affected areas. Finally, I commend the efforts of SEAS and their submission.

I responded to the initial Sealink consultation in December 2022, opposing all the proposed landfall sites, cable corridors and converter stations, which if constructed would have a devastating impact on our precious landscapes and have a profound impact in the quality of people's lives here in East Suffolk.

I have been clear and continue to press the case that onshore connections for offshore wind should be placed on brownfield land. I am, therefore, incredibly disappointed that this latest consultation recommends landfall into Aldeburgh with underground cabling to a converter station to the southeast of Saxmundham then further cabling into a proposed substation at Friston, which is currently subject to a judicial review. These proposals are completely unacceptable when alternatives are available and I, once again, formally oppose them via this consultation response.

I also question the overall need for Sealink. Ultimately, Sealink is being proposed as a response to resilience for energy in the South East and London, not the East of England, as backup or insurance in layman terms. First, I question if this insurance is truly necessary – especially given the timings of other projects for the future. This project feels premature at best. Furthermore, if changes are to be made onshore, improvements should be made in Kent, Surrey and Sussex for resilience rather than the undersea cabling proposed between Suffolk and Kent. Alternative technology is also possible through a series of offshore grids, like we see on the continent and make landfall further down the coast where the power is needed. There is absolutely no need to deviate power generated offshore into Suffolk if its final destination is the South East.

If it is deemed necessary to develop this link now, on the basis that undersea cabling is being proposed for this project, then it should be considered for a shorter connection involving the brownfield site of Bradwell rather than developing high quality agricultural land that is being used currently for the production of food and other horticulture.

I recognise that the inclusion of Sealink in the Offshore Coordination Support Scheme (OCSS) process has only been announced during the current consultation. The OCSS opportunity does open the door for a complete re-evaluation of this project. Considering that is now the case and that that process will explore coordination with Five Estuaries and North Falls, I am concerned that this consultation is proceeding and instead it should be dropped entirely or at least paused. This is especially the case as what we will end up with will likely be a very different project to what is being consulted upon here, and so will need to be consulted upon again or risk further judicial reviews.

If the outcome of the OCSS work determines that Sealink, Five Estuaries and North Falls are coordinated – then I would strongly urge National Grid Electricity Transmissions to look for alternative landfall sites away from the Suffolk coast. This could be into the Isle of Grain, as is being explored for Nautilus, and Bradwell.

I know some work has been done, as described in the option selection and design evolution report, which includes

three offshore connection options and one onshore pylon option all with a starting point at Sizewell – with the alternative onshore option dismissed because of lifetime costs. However, I cannot see that any serious work has been done to assess the costs of an offshore transmission network or undertaking a comparative study properly assessing the environmental impact of landfall in Suffolk with brownfield alternatives.

So far, National Grid have not published their rationale for not pursuing the other potential landfall site of Bradwell and I strongly encourage them to do so.

Aside from the OCSS, the recent National Grid ESO written commitment to look at offshore alternatives to pylons across East Anglia reinforces the point that power needs to come ashore closer to the population it is intended to serve.

In their Cabinet discussion on the Sealink proposals, the County Council also recognised the widespread and significant public concern about this project and also pointed to the forthcoming ESO review. They plan to formally write to National Grid ESO asking them to consider alternative proposals, specifically in relation to the suggestions I have previously put forward about Bradwell and the Isle of Grain. I welcome this.

I also express my concern about the extent of compulsory purchases that would be required and the lack of meaningful compensation that has been discussed with landowners.

Suffolk is a flat landscape with considerable agricultural production and multiple designated sites for environmental purposes. As such, the sites proposed for substations and landfall are unsuitable.

- On the edge of Saxmundham, the site proposed for the converter station is at the top of a hill and will dominate the landscape considerably. The current dominant feature is the Grade 2* listed (since 1949) mediaeval church of St John Baptist. It is not clear that flooding, runoff or drainage problems have been considered in the selection of this site. It is well established agricultural ground that will be lost permanently and may make the rest of the farm unviable.
- The landfall site at Aldeburgh Beach and through RSPB North Warren is particularly fragile. While not directly in the AONB or SSSI, it is adjunct. I am concerned by the impact on wildlife, including migrating birds. I understand it is proposed to cable very low (12m underground) to mitigate but drilling itself is likely to impact this fragile coast.
- Cable corridor passes through environmentally sensitive areas. It also disrupts existing businesses that will permanently not be able to farm in the same location. Lifetime compensation will be needed.
- Paths and rights of way are likely to be permanently closed.
- Light pollution – recognising the dark skies of this area, with policy designed for lights to be switched off, the extent of light pollution during construction and its permanent use is in complete contrast to the local environment.
- Noise pollution – the permanent noise of the substation will be harmful to residents and drive wildlife away. Therefore, for the reasons set out above, I once again oppose the proposals set out in the consultation document. Instead, I encourage National Grid Electricity Transmissions to better explore the other options that are available and take advantage of the opportunities that have now been presented as part of the Offshore Coordination Support Scheme before re-consulting. I will also continue to engage with the Secretary of State and the Energy Minister both individually and through the Offshore Electricity Grid Task Force that I helped set up with other East Anglian MPs on this matter.

If the worst was to happen and National Grid Electricity Transmissions pursues the current proposals to an NSIP application then at the very least significant changes will have to be made to mitigate the impact.

First, the proposed converter station at Saxmundham needs to be dug into the ground with a proper landscaping plan. The current proposal suggests it is going to be 26 metres high with no conifers or similar providing adequate screening.

Second, after various conversations with local farmers including those in Sternfield and Friston, their concern is that the cables are only going to be 0.9 metres underground. Farmers subject to future compulsory purchase are particularly concerned due to the nature of drainage and the effect of the sandy soil. There is a genuine risk to life if cables can be accessed so readily while farming. Any cabling needs to be at a minimum of 1.5 metres to avoid this (and engineers should explore if it needs to be further). This effectively sterilises a large portion of agricultural land along the proposed route for fear of interfering or damaging the infrastructure. For that reason, I would also encourage National Grid to pursue voluntary rather than compulsory purchase of what is primarily agricultural land to facilitate the cable corridor. It is vitally important that those who want to continue to farm their land can do so.

Third, I specifically associate myself with the technical and highways concerns that the County Council raise in relation to construction constraints.

Yours sincerely,

Rt Hon Dr Thérèse Coffey MP

Suffolk Coastal

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