Norwich-Tilbury Consultation - Response from CPRE Essex (August 2023)

1. Background

CPRE Essex objects to the National Grid's proposals to transmit electricity across the unspoilt rural landscapes of Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex to Tilbury. We firmly believe there is no need for this destructive project and that the full range of alternatives has neither been adequately assessed nor properly consulted on. We support and endorse the submission of the EssexSuffolk Norfolk Pylons Action Group.

Our aim is to protect the Essex countryside but we recognise the need to support the local economy and so we seek to achieve the best possible balance between necessary development and a tranquil, productive and beautiful environment. We are the only independent, non-aligned, non-political organisation working throughout the whole county to protect the Essex countryside, green spaces, farmland and environment and we do this by getting involved with the planning process. We are affiliated to other local groups which exist to promote our rural communities and protect our landscapes. Our organisation is a member of the Dedham Vale and Stour Valley Partnership and supports the work and the values of the Dedham Vale AONB.

2. General Points

CPRE Essex appreciates that the UK has to reach net zero targets and achieve greater energy security by increased use of renewable energy. However, emphasis should be on technologies which will minimise any adverse impact on productive farmland and the visual quality of tranquil and historic landscapes. It appears to us that National Grid proposes to transfer the electricity overhead through Essex regardless of the value of the natural and cultural heritage that might be adversely affected.

The route chosen through Essex is through the most rural parts of our county cutting an industrial swathe through farmland, woods, heritage sites and rural communities. Green spaces, green infrastructure, valued landscapes enjoyed for their scenic beauty and tranquillity, would be scarred by the 50m pylons marching through the countryside.

The potential for serious adverse impacts on biodiversity is completely overlooked, with no attempt to explain or qualify how habitats, natural corridors, routes of migrating birds etc would be affected by the proposals. Although it is understood that these issues would be picked up through the required Environmental Impact Assessment to support the application for a Development Consent Order, these matters need to be aired from the outset.

In addition, the setting and backdrop to a number of historic towns and villages in Essex will be potentially threatened by the proposals. These include Ardleigh and Langham (both situated close to the southern edge of the AONB), Coggeshall (with a number of nationally important Grade 1 listed buildings), and the Grade II* landscape of Hylands Park and House.

3. Landscape and Visual Impacts

Despite the massive scar that would be created across the nationally important landscape, we support the proposal to underground cables in the Dedham Vale AONB. However, this overlooks the impact on loss of visual amenity in non-designated valued landscapes. This is particularly the case in the northern part of the county and much of the proposed overground route across Essex passes through landscape areas which are deemed to be highly sensitive to change. The landscape here is predominantly rolling, attractive farmland widely appreciated as a resource in its own right. However, along the proposed route throughout the county as a whole, there will be a multitude of specific views that would be adversely impacted - thereby reducing the general visual amenity experienced by local people.

It is not possible to gauge with any degree of certainty, what the overall adverse impact will be - suffice to say that in both landscape and visual terms, the result will be generally both negative and detrimental.

The associated social impact is also not possible to quantify, other that to flag up the potential for real health and financial downsides for local residents who live in close physical proximity to the proposed route of pylons and/or will lose longer distance views of open countryside because of the intrusion.

In an attempt to analyse the issue, we refer to the report to National Grid in October 2014. VISUAL IMPACT PROVISION: Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment of Existing Electricity Transmission Infrastructure in Nationally Protected Landscapes in England and Wales.

Of those identified factors considered in judging the susceptibility of landscape receptors, the following are considered to be especially relevant to Essex.

a) Land cover

Essex displays complex, irregular or intimate landscape patterns (especially historic field systems), where transmission lines interrupt distinctive land cover patterns and pylons will be more prominent.

b) Scale

Much of Essex can be categorised as a small scale landscape, where transmission lines appear out of scale within the landscape. Comparison of pylons with ‘human-scale’ landscape features such as individual trees and buildings would emphasise the size of the pylons and their dominance.

c) Prominent landscape features

Along the proposed route, Essex has predominantly small landscapes in which church spires and towers are major landmarks. As a result, pylons will almost certainly detract from or conflict with these prominent landscape features.

d) Human influence

In Essex, the proposed pylons, by definition, pass through rural areas which are largely unaffected by very substantial and recent man-made structures. The presence of transmission lines are likely to be in conflict with this traditional settled and farmed landscapes and erode the rural character.

e) Perceptual aspects and tranquillity

A lot of Essex is surprisingly tranquil and the pylons will not follow existing development – in

contrast they will pass through undeveloped areas which are more open, natural and tranquil. The transmission lines will thereby introduce man-made structures into this landscape substantially eroding this perception.

4. Impact on PROWs in Essex

It is now well known that people need contact with nature for physical and mental well being - especially those living in urban areas. On so many levels, it is vitally important that our local countryside is protected from over-development, retains its natural features and remains accessible.

A member of the Ramblers Association, based in Chelmsford, Essex, has investigated the impact the overland proposal would have on the Public Rights of Way (PRoW) across Essex. This was achieved by comparing the National Grid Norwich to Tilbury Interactive Map and the Essex Highways Information Map.

The exercise highlights all of the PRoWs that are within 50m and/or cross the proposed infrastructure and the entries are split under each District/Parish.

With a construction period of at least four years, it's clear that a significant swathe of Essex countryside will be either restricted or inaccessible for those wishing to use the 116 Public Rights of Way that are affected. PRoW in the districts of Colchester and Chelmsford are particularly badly impacted. So too is the Essex Way - a designated long-distance footpath - stretches of which will be demeaned by the close proximity of pylons or their presence in the wider landscape. Similarly, the enjoyment of walkers using the wide networks of PRoWs that interact with the line of transmission will be severely compromised.

5. Off-Shore Option

We are disappointed that National Grid have not engaged on offshore options in recent public consultation events, simply presenting the pylon run from Norwich to Tilbury as a foregone conclusion. Instead, we support the feasible option of developing an integrated offshore grid in the North Sea.

The Winser Review has highlighted the need to shorten lead times in construction of new Grid capacity. In this respect, we would have thought that the planning approval process should be much shorter if a primarily offshore alternative is chosen. Also, in the construction phase, we assume that cable laying on the sea bed is a considerably quicker technique than pylon construction.

The UK already receives energy via undersea cables from several European countries, so it should be entirely feasible to utilise similar cables to link the offshore windfarms within an integrated system thus minimising any overland pylon connections to shorter routes to the required substations and to overcome the stated difficulties of underwater cables in the Thames estuary.

This would avoid the industrialisation of landscapes, minimise disruption to amenities and loss of productive farmland, avoid visual intrusion on the settings of historic buildings, remove the need to protect the many archaeological sites long the proposed route and reduce the potential for disruption to energy supplies by cable damage by high winds or bird strikes.

We, therefore, urge the National Grid to pause this damaging project and await the outcome of imminent additional studies into the environmentally more acceptable integrated off-shore option.