



Meeting note

Project name	North Falls Offshore Windfarm project
File reference	EN010119
Status	Final
Author	The Planning Inspectorate
Date	7 May 2021
Meeting with	North Falls Offshore Wind Farm Ltd
Venue	Microsoft teams
Meeting objectives	Project Update Meeting
Circulation	All attendees

Summary of key points discussed and advice given

The Applicant and The Planning Inspectorate (the Inspectorate) Case team introduced themselves and their respective roles. The Inspectorate advised that a note of the meeting would be taken and published on its website in accordance with section 51 of the Planning Act 2008 (the PA2008). Any advice given under section 51 would not constitute legal advice upon which applicants (or others) could rely.

Project update and programme

The Applicant provided an overview of the work completed in Q1 2021, and the programme of activities for the remainder of the year and into Q1 2022. It was continuing to engage in the Pathfinder programme with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), OFGEM and National Grid ESO. The Pathfinder programme intends to unblock any short-term issues with offshore wind project delivery to support the Government's 2030 renewable energy generation targets. The Applicant was aiming to refine its project design envelope during 2021 and it would need the Terms of Reference for the Pathfinder programme during Summer 2021 and clarity on its aims and objectives regarding early opportunities and Pathfinder for 2030, whilst an enduring solution is established more widely. The Applicant queried the consultation process for the forthcoming National Policy Statement (NPS) Review. The Inspectorate advised the Energy White Paper target of the end of 2021 therefore the consultation may occur within the next couple of months.

The Applicant engaged with typical SNCB consultees and received feedback on its evidence plan process. The initial pre-scoping expert topic group (ETG) would meet at the end of June 2021, and it was exploring post Preliminary Environmental Information Report (PEIR) ETG meetings regarding Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) and aspects of appropriate assessment.

The Applicant continued to work on the onshore envelope at its own risk, engaging with National Grid, Essex County Council and Tendring Council. Offshore aspects of the project are generally more defined. The Applicant had consulted with a number of

statutory and non-statutory conservation bodies and also the shipping industry. Offshore Geophysical and Benthic surveys were planned from mid-June 2021 and it had engaged with local fishing associations regarding the facilitation of those marine surveys. The Inspectorate advised ongoing consultation arrangements should be maintained beyond the geophysical surveys. The Applicant advised that it would keep the fishing liaison working group arrangements in place during the pre-application phase to engage with the fishing industry regarding data gathering for input into the relevant chapter in the project's Environmental Statement (ES).

In Q3 2021 the evidence plan process would commence. The Applicant had obtained agreement with Natural England (NE), Marine Management Organisation (MMO) and Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS) on seabed locations for benthic sediment samples. This would feed into the PEIR and ecological chapters of the ES. It was looking to gain agreement from consultees to de-risk the exact locations from where on the seabed samples should be extracted.

Informal consultation was ongoing with Essex County Council and Tendring Council. Planning performance agreements were under discussion. A memorandum of understanding (MOU) was planned between the two councils to ensure there were sufficient resources and project coordination, particularly in relation to Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) elements of the project.

Scoping was estimated to be submitted during July 2021. Offshore screening for the HRA would be submitted simultaneously or consulted on via the evidence plan process ETG. A split approach to the onshore/offshore HRA was planned due to the delays in certainty regarding the onshore substation location. Meanwhile, it could progress its offshore envelope since two years of ornithological data had been gathered and geophysical work to gather seabed data would be complete by August 2021. Through ETGs it aimed to de-risk specific issues early, through screening and appropriate assessment. This would largely cover impacts on the Outer Thames Estuary Special Protection Area (SPA). The onshore HRA was planned for Q2, 2022. Onshore routing and site selection work would be ongoing, including EIA phase 1 surveys and desk-based archaeological assessments. Virtual public information sessions were planned to follow the scoping opinion. Q4 2021 would involve the preparation of the Statement of Community Consultation (SoCC) and preparations for non-statutory consultation in early 2022, and statutory consultation towards the end of 2022.

The Applicant referred to another project in close proximity; Five Estuaries Offshore Wind Farm. Both project teams had agreed an information sharing agreement, to assist with the evaluation of project coordination and EIA. The Inspectorate advised the Applicant to monitor the Norfolk Boreas and Vanguard decisions, to identify any relevant lessons for its cumulative EIA. The Applicant acknowledged the timings of the National Grid substation and Five Estuaries projects could affect its own ability to co-ordinate and hence, from an EIA and ES, HRA perspective, it planned to consider a worst-case scenario. It would work with other parties to minimise impacts and temporary disturbance wherever feasible.

Rochdale Envelope

The Applicant was proceeding with defining its onshore and offshore Rochdale envelope, aware that National Grid would confirm its onshore substation location in early 2022. The location of National Grid's substation would have a significant bearing on the location of

the Applicant's substation. The Applicant had previously advised on different cable land fall options that it had evaluated, in engineering, NPS compliance and environmentally. It expected its onshore Rochdale envelope to span an area amounting to 20km inland from the north Essex coast and its envelope would be wholly within the Tendring District Council peninsula. It would remove Special Protected Areas, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and areas of residential density from its Rochdale Envelope. These assumptions would be referenced in scoping and the Applicant would be preparing a set of plans to discuss with Essex County Council and Tendring Council. It had considered the Inspectorate's Advice Note 9 on flexibility and the Rochdale Envelope.

Work was ongoing to refine the area of seabed for the turbine array area for its offshore Rochdale envelope. Consultation had been completed on the transmission cable route. The Applicant had previously advised on five different cable corridor options from the array area to the coastline. It consulted with statutory bodies on each of these options and had arrived on an avoidance strategy, wherever possible for the majority of environmental designations.

HRA and PEI

Two years of offshore aerial bird data collection had been obtained to understand environmental constraints. A section of transmission cable was planned offshore that would be located 7km within the Outer Thames Estuary SPA. HRA offshore screening would be completed in July 2021, and onshore screening would conclude in April 2022. The PIER was programmed for July 2022, with the evidence plan process taking place over the next few months. It sought to understand from a HRA perspective what would need to be presented at PEIR, including references to derogation and compensation. It was aware of the Hornsea Project Three and Vanguard cases which dealt with these matters at Examination. Due to the Applicant's advanced position with data collection, it could be in a position to agree a compensation matrix prior to PEIR and was seeking legal advice on whom to consult with regarding HRA matters in respect of the PEIR. It had a particular query regarding guidance on Associated Development. It planned to provide a further update on this at the next project meeting and the Inspectorate would consider if this issue had arisen on other cases.

Update from PINs

The Inspectorate advised the Applicant to monitor any Brexit related changes to Habitats Regulations and Defra guidance.

Specific decisions/ follow-up required

The following actions were agreed:

- Next meeting to be arranged between the Applicant and the Inspectorate for late June 2021.