

N2T – Open Floor Hearing Essex – 12.2.26: Oral Contribution by North-West and South-West Chelmsford Parishes Group [REDACTED]. Full Text.

John Blake, for the West of Chelmsford Parishes Group. Thank you for this opportunity to contribute. Our Group of 9 parish councils seeks to work constructively with planners and to bring clarity by speaking with one voice.

Our strong preference is for HVDC cabling wherever possible, underground or offshore. However, as others will speak more eloquently on that subject this morning, I'd like to focus instead on another strand of our work. This strand takes overhead lines as a given and considers the best route for them around Chelmsford.

We took as our starting point National Grid's CPRSS Report of 2022 and looked in detail at corridors L and Q to the east and south of Chelmsford. Using our local knowledge, we identified strategic options and mapped detailed routes with potential variations. Finally, we submitted our proposals to an independent landscape consultancy, which concluded that our principal combination of route sections significantly outperforms the preferred route.

All our work will be submitted to you at Deadline 1 – my apologies that there is a lot of detail. We also reached out to National Grid and met with them during the 2024 consultation. We accepted, and still do, that our proposals will need discussion and refinement – as any proposals inevitably do. At this useful meeting, it was agreed to continue the dialogue into the Autumn when pressures on NG colleagues would ease. Our emails to arrange further meetings were initially welcomed, but ultimately no dates were offered and eventually our emails went unanswered. So sadly we cannot submit an SoCG as we'd hoped, though that is not through want of our trying.

So, the Group remains baffled – primarily by NG's decision (before the first informal consultation had even begun) to prefer a route through untouched countryside to the obvious alternative east and south of Chelmsford where there are opportunities to close parallel and rationalise with existing power lines. Self-evidently, the general duty imposed by Schedule 9 of the 1989 Act to 'preserve natural beauty' would be better met if effects can be limited to existing OHL or trunk road corridors. The CPRSS estimated that this eastern and southern route would be slightly cheaper and it's shorter. Its Annexes present no fundamental objection either. It would have less overall impact on the setting of heritage assets and Grade 2 farmland. The Chelmer Valley with its backdrop of wooded hills would invite the blessing of Holford Rules 4 and 5. Instead, NG have chosen a route that runs along the edge of the elevated Pleshey Farmland Plateau, meaning that almost every metre of pylon can be seen against the skyline. Time prevents me from describing the attempt to squeeze pylons between two sensitive conservation areas at the Walthams, the impact on the adjoining Langleys registered Park and Gardens, the impact on designated Valued Landscape west of Broomfield and much more – which could all be avoided entirely by a better route.

It seems this strange choice stems from the fact that in 2022, the possibility of undergrounding or rationalising sections of the 132kv UK Power Network line had not yet been considered. This would be necessary to achieve the east and south of Chelmsford route, but undergrounding did not emerge as an option until 2024 by which time NG had long made its decisions. 'Back checking' is fine for checking but isn't really capable of going back to the beginning where this is required. All relevant issues and options should be considered and consulted on at the outset. Once a decision has been made and months of follow up work invested, it's very difficult to go back to first principles if new factors need to be applied.

However, it is the only way of avoiding the problems which this 'choose and defend' approach has created. Therefore, Sir, we urge you not to approve the current application until there has been a complete re-evaluation of the options around Chelmsford and a full and genuine consultation.