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Tendring District Council (TDC) – Procedural Deadline 8 Response

Closing Statement

Introduction

Madam Chair and Members of the Examining Authority,

Tendring District Council (TDC) welcomes the opportunity to provide this closing statement in relation to National Grid's Norwich to Tilbury project.

TDC wishes to reiterate that it recognises the importance of maintaining a secure, resilient and decarbonised electricity network and acknowledges the national policy objectives which underpin investment in transmission infrastructure.

However, throughout this examination, TDC has consistently maintained that accepting the need for network reinforcement is not the same as accepting this particular proposal, in this particular location, and in its current form.

The Council's position remains that the project would result in substantial and enduring harm to the District of Tendring, much of which remains unresolved despite extensive engagement and a lengthy examination process. The final Statement of Common Ground between TDC and National Grid confirms that while progress has been made in certain technical areas, significant matters of disagreement remain.

Tendring is one of the Most Severely Affected Districts

TDC has engaged constructively and professionally throughout both the pre-application and examination processes.

The Council has attended hearings, submitted detailed written representations, prepared a comprehensive Local Impact Report, participated in technical discussions and worked extensively with National Grid wherever agreement could reasonably be achieved.

However, the final Statement of Common Ground confirms that substantial disagreements remain regarding:

- The siting of the East Anglia Connection Node (EACN);
- Route selection and alternatives;
- Landscape and visual impacts and lack of effective mitigation;
- Cumulative effects;
- Consultation and transparency;
- Green infrastructure;
- Biodiversity Net Gain;
- Community benefits;
- Landscape compensation; and
- Elements of noise, health and wellbeing mitigation.

These are not minor matters. They are fundamental issues that go directly to the acceptability of the project and whether the proposal before the Examining Authority represents the least harmful solution available.

The East Anglia Connection Node and Route Selection

The Council remains very concerned by the proposed location of the East Anglia Connection Node east of Ardleigh and the associated pylon and cable corridor through north-west Tendring.

Throughout this examination, TDC has consistently argued that alternative locations and configurations have not been adequately or transparently assessed.

In particular, the Council remains unconvinced that alternative locations closer to existing strategic infrastructure corridors such as the A12 corridor have been properly tested against the considerable environmental, agricultural, landscape and community impacts that would result from the Applicant's preferred option.

The consequences of the current proposal are significant and long-lasting:

- Extensive impacts on Best and Most Versatile agricultural land;
- Harm to landscape character and visual amenity;
- Increased pressure on rural roads;
- Significant impacts on heritage assets and settings;
- Additional infrastructure concentrated in a relatively small geographical area; and
- Direct and indirect effects on communities including Ardleigh, Little Bromley, Great Bromley, Little Bentley and surrounding settlements.

The Council remains firmly of the view that these impacts are disproportionate and, in many cases, avoidable.

Landscape and Cumulative Effects – The Greatest Outstanding Concern

If there is one issue that has consistently underpinned TDC's concerns throughout this examination, it is cumulative effects, which include very significant localised landscape harm and harm to the nearby National Landscape.

The Council has repeatedly stated that cumulative impacts represent perhaps the most significant deficiency within the Applicant's assessment.

Tendring is not being asked to accommodate a single energy infrastructure project.

It is being asked to accommodate the combined impacts of multiple major nationally significant infrastructure projects, including Norwich to Tilbury alongside the offshore wind and interconnector infrastructure proposed on and around the Tendring Peninsula.

The cumulative consequences for:

- Landscape and visual amenity;
- Rural character;
- Agricultural productivity;
- Highway networks;
- Community wellbeing;
- Heritage assets;
- Tourism and recreation; and
- The overall quality of life experienced by residents,

Will be profound and are considerably greater than the sum of their individual parts.

Despite repeated submissions from TDC, parish councils and residents, the Council remains unconvinced that these cumulative impacts have been fully understood, adequately assessed or appropriately mitigated.

Indeed, the final Statement of Common Ground clearly demonstrates that significant disagreement remains on cumulative effects and the adequacy of mitigation measures.

Community Benefits and Social Value

The Council has consistently sought meaningful and proportionate commitments relating to:

- Skills and education;
- Employment opportunities;
- Local economic benefits;
- Environmental enhancement; and
- Broader social value for affected communities.

At the conclusion of this examination, TDC remains disappointed that no tangible, legally secured package has emerged that reflects the scale of disruption and lasting change that this project would impose on Tendring and its communities, especially the communities residing in the north of the district.

The Council remains firmly of the view that if benefits are to be realised through infrastructure of this scale, those communities most directly impacted should receive meaningful and lasting benefits in return.

Unfortunately, that position remains unresolved.

Concerns Regarding the Examination Process

Before concluding, TDC wishes to place on record a concern regarding aspects of the examination process itself.

The Council wishes to make clear that this observation is made respectfully and with full recognition of the professionalism and commitment demonstrated by the Examining Authority throughout a complex and demanding examination.

We also recognise the statutory timescales within which the Examining Authority must operate and appreciate the wider pressures facing the Planning Inspectorate during portions of this examination.

However, throughout attendance at numerous hearings, TDC repeatedly observed that time constraints appear to limit opportunities for local authorities, parish councils and affected communities sought to make important oral submissions.

The Council was often reminded that written submissions could be provided separately.

While that may be procedurally correct, there is no substitute for allowing affected communities and local authorities to make critical points orally, publicly and directly to those charged with examining the application.

That is, after all, one of the primary purposes of Issue Specific Hearings.

By contrast the Applicant's representatives were frequently afforded extended periods to address matters before the examination. Whilst the Council recognises the Applicant's need to respond fully to issues raised, TDC occasionally found it difficult to reconcile the relative time available for such contributions when compared with opportunities afforded to local authorities, parish councils and affected communities.

Opportunities for Oral Examination

TDC is also conscious that, at a number of hearings, limited time was available to explore some of the most significant issues raised by affected communities and local authorities.

One example related to discussion of cumulative effects, a matter that has consistently been identified by the Council and local communities as being of fundamental importance throughout the examination. By the time this topic was reached during one hearing session, only a relatively short period remained before the scheduled adjournment. While the Council fully accepts that hearing agendas must be managed within challenging statutory timescales, the impression created for some participants was that insufficient time was available for oral discussion of an issue they regarded as central to the examination.

TDC recognises that written submissions form a critical part of the examination process and that extensive evidence has been provided on cumulative effects. Nevertheless, for many residents, parish councils and other interested parties, the opportunity to articulate concerns directly through the hearing process is an important aspect of public participation and confidence in the examination system.

The Council therefore considers that issues of such significance would have benefited from more extensive oral examination and discussion.

The Need for Robust Scrutiny

The Council fully appreciates the statutory pressures placed upon the Examining Authority.

However, Norwich to Tilbury is one of the largest infrastructure proposals ever to affect East Anglia and the Tendring Peninsula.

Affected communities are acutely aware that the two wind farms and the Norwich to Tilbury project represent only the beginning of a much wider transformation, the consequences of which will be felt by local communities for generations to come.

In TDC's view, matters of such significance warrant proportionate levels of scrutiny and examination.

Where communities face decades of change, it is essential that they are given confidence that their concerns have been heard fully and considered carefully.

The Council therefore respectfully asks that particular care is taken when reviewing the extensive written submissions on cumulative effects and other matters of concern to affected communities, particularly where those topics were not explored orally to the extent that participants had anticipated. Given the scale and longevity of the proposed development, it is important that affected communities can have confidence that the full breadth of evidence placed before the examination has been given careful consideration.

The Planning Balance

Ultimately, this application requires a judgment of planning balance.

For TDC, that balance remains firmly against the proposal.

The District is being asked to accommodate extensive and lasting impacts on:

- Its landscapes;
- Its countryside;
- Its heritage;
- Its agricultural land;
- Its rural communities; and
- The quality of life of its residents.

The Council does not believe that National Grid has adequately demonstrated that less harmful alternatives have been exhausted.

Nor does the Council believe that the cumulative burden placed upon Tendring has been properly assessed, justified or mitigated.

Many of the concerns identified at the beginning of this process remain substantially unchanged at its conclusion.

Conclusion

TDC respectfully requests that substantial weight is given to:

- The unresolved concerns set out within its Relevant Representations;
- Its Local Impact Report;
- Its Written Representations;
- Its Hearing Submissions; and
- The areas of disagreement recorded within the final Statement of Common Ground.

The Council remains firmly of the view that the proposal would impose disproportionate and avoidable harm upon one of the most severely affected districts along the route.

Those harms remain significant, long-term and insufficiently addressed.

For these reasons, TDC respectfully maintains its objection to the Norwich to Tilbury project and urges the Secretary of State to give the most careful consideration to the substantial unresolved concerns that remain before reaching a final decision.

END