

REPORT ON BEHALF OF THE PROPERTY & PROJECTS GROUP

SUBJECT: UNDERGROUNDING OF OVERHEAD POWER LINES AT GREAT CASTLE HEAD, ST ISHMAELS

Purpose of Report

To seek the endorsement of Members for the proposed undergrounding of existing overhead power lines at Great Castle Head, St Ishmaels

Introduction

Encouraged by the success of its power line undergrounding initiative during the period 2010/15, Western Power Distribution (WPD) has now extended the scheme into their current 8 year business plan commencing 1st April 2015 by allocating a further £1.3m to fund the undergrounding of those sections of their existing overhead electrical supply network which are considered the most damaging to the special qualities of four protected landscapes i.e. the Gower and Wye Valley ANOB's and the Brecon Beacons and Pembrokeshire Coast National Parks. In reality this is an extremely small sum of money having regard to the high cost of such schemes and the extensive network of overhead apparatus and lines which already exist within these four qualifying areas. Identifying candidate schemes, assessing their individual merits and approving 'the best of the best' is undertaken by the Western Power Undergrounding Initiatives Panel. This panel comprises officer representatives from each of the four candidate areas, Natural Resources Wales and Western Power Distribution.

The Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority successfully delivered five landscape improvement schemes during the period 2010/15 at Stumble Head, West Angle, Martins Haven, St Nons & Caerfarchell respectively, while a further three schemes at Treginnis, Dinas Head and Porthgain have already been secured under the current 2015/23 funding initiative. A fourth scheme at Newport Parrog has recently been endorsed by Members and is at an advanced planning stage. The fifth scheme which your Officers are recommending under the current funding initiative is at Great Castle Head.

Background

Great Castle Head is a short peninsula looking out towards the entrance of the Milford Haven Waterway and is characterized by its agricultural use. Its immediate coastal strip is traversed by a section of the Coastal Path National trail and this same section of the National trail is also promoted by this Authority as a circular short walk. Archeological investigations of the seaward end of the peninsula has established the presence of a promontory fort which now has scheduled ancient monument status whilst its coastal slopes and waters form part of the Milford Haven Waterway SSSI & Pembrokeshire SAC respectively. The wider landscape within which Great Castle

Head sits is also designated as the Milford Haven Waterway Historic Landscape Area.

The small cluster of buildings at its southern tip were originally constructed as a 'leading light' visual navigation aid for vessels entering the Haven although they are now converted to residential use and have been supplemented by a nearby navigation radar station operated by the Port Authority. An overhead Western Power Distribution spur line runs south from St Ishmaels to provide an electrical connection for the buildings described above. This spur line is silhouetted against the sea scape and is routed directly above the coastal path for much of its run. The negative visual impact of this existing utility network has been identified as having a significant detrimental impact on this section of the coastal path and the wider sea/landscape through which it passes.

A scheme has now been identified by your Officers, and endorsed by the Western Power Undergrounding Initiatives Panel, to remove the last 1.2km of that overhead spur line and replace it with an underground supply. The relevant property owners have given their in principle support and subject to obtaining any necessary statutory/legal consent, it is anticipated that the actual work on site which WPD will need to undertake could be completed during 2018/19.

In summary, your Officers are of the opinion that the proposed scheme represents an outstanding opportunity to achieve permanent visual benefits within one of the National Parks most iconic locations via the use of 100% external funding. It also offers the potential to be the tenth undergrounding scheme delivered under this WPD initiative within our National Park.

Financial, Risk & Compliance Considerations

No issues

Human Rights/Equality Issues

No issues

Biodiversity Implications/Sustainability Appraisal

See comments below within the selection criteria

Welsh Language Statement

No issues

RECOMMENDATION

That Members endorse the opinion of your Officers as summarised above and set out in the attached selection criteria paper, and authorise their ongoing work towards securing the delivery of an undergrounding scheme at Great Castle Head as soon as reasonably practical.

GREAT CASTLE HEAD UNDERGROUNDING SCHEME – SELECTION CRITERIA

The identification and selection of the Great Castle Head by the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority has been based on two overriding principles; deliverability and quality. So as to avoid emotional and parochial selections, an objective approach based on strict selection criteria has been adopted. The assessment has been made by Senior Officers of the Pembrokeshire Coast National Authority to reflect:

- i) Their close working knowledge of the entire geographic area within the National Park and the communities that live and work within it.
- ii) The location of all the existing overhead lines within the Park and the specific impact that those overhead lines have on the special qualities of the National Park
- iii) The specific fields of expertise that Officers of the National Park have in assessing the merits of individual candidate schemes including Development Control, Recreation Management, Conservation, the historic built environment, community interest, visitor perception, ecology and landscape quality.

Following this approach Great Castle Head has been identified as a sea/landscape of very high quality with excellent public accessibility. It is accordingly advanced as the Authority's preferred 10th scheme for funding under the WPD initiative.

In selecting and promoting the Great Castle Head Scheme, Officers have had particular regard to the following.

- a. The scheme offers the opportunity to remove an overhead electrical network over a distance of some 1.2km from the landscape of the National Park. The extent of that existing overhead network between point 'A' & 'B' is illustrated by the red line on the aerial photo below.



- b. The Authority's Development Planning Officers have extensive case specific evidence that members of the public find the visual impact of overhead lines unacceptable. It has long been recognised that towers, poles and overhead lines associated with electricity supply are visually intrusive and detract from the rural and built environments through which they pass. To reflect this public concern all development plans prepared by the National Park Authority since 1999 have included policies to encourage the undergrounding of overhead lines where this proves to be the least damaging option and where it is technically feasible to do so. Similar aspirations are to be found in the National Park Authority's 14 Conservation Area Appraisals, which form supplementary planning guidance.
- c. The route of the proposed excavation will encroach over the site of a Scheduled Ancient Monument and will therefore require the prior consent of CADW. The known history of the immediate area also suggests a realistic prospect of

encountering archaeology when excavating the trench. It is therefore recommended that Western Power Distribution seek the advice of their own retained Archaeological consultants in advance of the work commencing, obtain the necessary relevant consents from CADW and that they adapt their working methodology in accordance with any recommendations made to them during the period of any watching brief that might be required.

- d. Some sections of the proposed excavation run very close to the coastal slope which comprises a mix of scrub and maritime grasslands and forms part of the Milford Haven Waterway SSSI. WPD should therefore appoint their own ecologist to carry out a field survey and provide recommendations on how to proceed and to consult with NRW if any part of their preferred undergrounding route would encroach into the SSSI

A route inside the agricultural field boundaries would avoid the SSSI although the fields themselves have records of rare Arable Flora which appear on the Section 9 list of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016. Generally arable flora are suppressed by modern farming practices especially the spraying of herbicides and are often only found at the edges of intensively managed fields and species can lie dormant in the seed bank for extended periods of time. The presence of these species would not necessarily prevent the undergrounding work from going ahead and may actually stimulate a flush of germination from the seed bank. The best course of action would therefore be for WPD to negotiate with the farmer not to spray the areas disturbed by the work for the next Spring and Summer following the work to allow any species to germinate, flower and set seed, thus providing the opportunity to replenish the seed bank. The farmer could then manage as normal the following year.

Further background that the WPD ecologist should be made aware of is the presence of *Ranunculus parviflorus*, *Trifolium subterraneum* and *Valerianella eriocarpa* in the general area as identified by the Pembrokeshire County Recorder

- e. The removal of the overhead network will be a direct and immediate benefit to the site and setting of the National trail
- f. The removal of the overhead network will be a direct and immediate visual benefit to sea/landscape of Great Castle Head
- g. Subject to obtaining the endorsement of the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority that this is a suitable scheme, Western Power Distribution would plan to complete the laying of the new underground network and removal of the existing overhead network sometime during the period 2018/19.