

REPORT ON BEHALF OF THE PROPERTY & PROJECTS GROUP

SUBJECT: NEWPORT PARROG UNDERGROUNDING SCHEME

Purpose of Report

To seek the endorsement of Members for the proposed undergrounding of existing overhead electrical and telecom infrastructure at Newport Parrog.

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 and Dinas Head and Porthgain have already been secured under the current 2015/23 funding initiative.

Background

Newport Parrog was designated a conservation area in 1999. It is a place rich in history and archaeology and served as the port of the medieval 'planted' town, noted for its herring trade and ship-building. The C19 saw a revival of sea-trade, evidenced by the sea-walls, a former warehouse and the Victorian houses built along the strand for retired native sea-captains. A number of buildings are listed, including some houses and the limekiln, their setting remarkably unaltered and evocative of an age when sea-trade remained strong in areas of west Wales distant from the railways. It also falls within the Newport & Carningli Historic Landscape Area.

Today, Newport Parrog is home to a small resident population and is a ‘honeypot’ visitor destination. Its attractions including historic buildings, beach side location, boat launching facilities, holiday accommodation, direct access to the coast path and popular food and drink offers.

The undergrounding of cables and relocation of poles is a specific issue outlined by the community (and ratified by Newport Town Council) within the Newport Parrog Conservation Area Proposals Document, which forms supplementary planning guidance to the Local Plan.



The existing network of overhead electricity and telecom poles/cables that serve the Newport Parrog conservation area have been identified as having a significant detrimental visual impact on this important built environment. A scheme has now been identified by your Officers, and endorsed by the Western Power Undergrounding Initiatives Panel working in conjunction with BT Openreach, to remove their respective existing overhead networks, and replace those same networks with underground connections . The approximate extent of the proposed scheme is indicated red on the photo immediately above and will involve approximately 30 different land owners. Initial approaches to all of those land owners has established their 100% in principle support. Subject to obtaining any necessary statutory/ legal consents, the actual work on site would be undertaken by WPD and BT Openreach and could be completed during the period 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. It also offers the potential to be the ninth undergrounding scheme delivered under this WPD initiative within our National Park.

Financial, Risk & Compliance Considerations

Unlike WPD, the continuing support shown BT Openreach for these undergrounding schemes is at their complete discretion. Their willingness to exercise that discretion again on this occasion is partly a reflection of the proven economies of scale of laying their cables in to shared trenches dug by WPD and the good working relationship we have developed with them on previous schemes. However, unlike previous schemes where they have voluntarily funded the full cost of their works, on this occasion their support is conditional upon the National Park contributing £14,000 towards the total BT Openreach costs which they have estimated to be in the order of £33,000.

Your Officers are of the opinion that an externally funded WPD only scheme in this location (which would leave the existing overhead BT Openreach network in situ) would not achieve the required level of landscape gain.

The combined cost of the proposed WPD and BT Openreach schemes is presently estimated to be in the order of £220,000. A contribution by this Authority in the sum of £14,000 equates to approximately 6.5% of that overall scheme cost.

Human Rights/Equality Issues

No issues

Biodiversity Implications/Sustainability Appraisal

No issues

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 Newport Parrog to include a financial contribution by the Authority towards the schemes cost in the sum of £14,000.

NEWPORT PARROG UNDERGROUNDING SCHEME – SELECTION CRITERIA

The identification and selection of the Newport Parrog candidate site 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 Newport Parrog has been identified as a built landscape of very high quality with excellent public accessibility. It is accordingly advanced as the Authority's preferred ninth scheme for funding under the WPD initiative following successful schemes which have already been completed at Strumble Head, West Angle, Martins Haven, St Nons, Caerfarchel, Treginnis & Dinas Head and Porthgain due to start on site in the very near future.

In selecting and promoting the Newport Parrog Scheme, Officers have had particular regard to the following.

- a. With the exception of a single pole mounted substation which must be retained for operational reasons, the scheme offers the opportunity to remove an overhead electrical and telecom network extending across a distance of approximately 400m from one of the National Parks most important built environments. The extent of that existing overhead network is illustrated by the red line on the aerial photo.
- 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 utility supplies 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 does not encroach over any Scheduled sites. However, the known history of the immediate area does suggest a realistic prospect of encountering archaeology when excavating the trench. It is therefore

recommended that Western Power Distribution and BTOpenreach seek the advice of their own retained Archaeological consultants in advance of the work commencing 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. Whilst the proposed route of the scheme does not encroach into any protected habitats
your Ecology Officer has highlighted the proximity of the saltmarsh habitat and has recommended that environmental controls should be put in place during works to ensure pollution protection and to avoid the risk of introducing foreign materials onto the foreshore.
- e. The removal of the overhead network will be a direct and immediate visual benefit to the conservation area of Newport Parrog.
- f. Subject to obtaining the endorsement of the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority that this is a suitable scheme, Western Power Distribution and BTOpenreach would plan to complete the laying of the new underground network and removal of the existing overhead network sometime during the period 2018/19.