

NOTES OF THE MEETING BETWEEN THE COMMUNITY COUNCILS OF GARVE, STRATHPEFFER, CONTIN AND MARYBANK, SCATWELL AND STRATHCONON WITH THE BETTER CABLE ROUTE GROUP AND SSEN TRANSMISSION (SSENT)

HELD ON FRIDAY 23 FEBRUARY, 2024 AT 2:00PM BY MS TEAMS

1. PRESENT

SSENT: Euan Smith, Lida Johnston, Simon Hall, Ahsan Mahmood, Martin Godwin and Tara Cowley.

CC's and BCR: Ron McAulay (Chair), Christine MacKintosh, Dan Bailey, Don Westwood, Helen Smith, John Heathcote, Kit Bowen, Sadie-Michaela Harris and Jon Thomson.

2. OPENING STATEMENT

An opening statement was made on behalf of the CCs. It referred to the opening statement made at the last meeting held on 2/5/23 where a plea was made for SSEN to work with the CCs to develop this project and find the best (or least awful) solution for it. The statement went on to highlight how this was the second meeting of this group almost ten months after the first one. The level of engagement from SSEN in the intervening period had fallen far short of what had been expected.

3. ALTERNATIVE ROUTES

a. Route D1.3 (Referred to in the meeting by SSENT as Alternative OHL Routes 3 and 4)

SSENT shared a slide which showed four alternative routes through this area which passes Strathpeffer, Contin, Tarvie and Scatwell. Two of these routes were those presented during the earlier round of consultation in 2023 and the other two were alternative routes identified during the consultation. A long list of engineering and environmental constraints arising largely from the formal classifications which apply to different sections of this land were highlighted and SSENT indicated that their preferred route was to continue with the original D1 route. A long discussion followed on the criteria used to assess different routes. All members of the CCs/BCR were disappointed to note that the only criteria used to assess the impact on communities remains one that stipulates that the line should avoid houses by approx. 170m. No criteria exist that take into account the health and well-being of communities or loss of amenity. This issue was highlighted a year ago, when the first meeting of this group was held and nothing has been done to address it by SSENT or the industry as a whole.

Post meeting note from SSENT: Impacts on visual amenity, recreation and land use will be assessed as part of the Environmental Assessment Impact (EIA).

Questions were asked about burying cables across sections of this route. It was noted that in Germany, transmission lines were being buried over great lengths. Why can this approach not be adopted in Scotland? During a walk out held with SSENT last year it was suggested that short sections of say one or two kilometres may be able to be buried but the feedback from SSENT at this meeting appeared to rule this out. It was also noted by the chair that the public leaflet SSENT had produced to explain why it was so difficult to bury cables had not really presented any insurmountable issues.

ACTION: SSENT were tasked with and agreed to an action to provide clear information on why cables could not be buried over short sections as had previously been suggested by their staff during meetings and site visits. SSENT also undertook to clarify the technology choice and voltage used in Germany to see if the scenarios provide a like for like comparison with this project in Scotland.

ACTION: It was proposed by the CCs/BCR group that a workshop be held with members of the CC's/BCR group to discuss and explore why burying cables was so difficult. SSENT agreed to consider whether or not they would be willing to host such an event.

On the issue of the weighting given to different criteria used to select routes, it was agreed by SSENT that the use of such weightings was 'not perfect'. SSENT stated that they therefore give no weighting to the criteria within their routeing guidance, instead preferring to use a RAG assessment and professional judgement to compare options and levels of constraint, as per their guidance. Land which has been classified/protected under a range of different policies and legal mechanisms presents a greater constraint than those without and therefore rate more highly in the RAG. Community engagement is therefore intrinsic to the process to ensure the scale of local sensitivities are able to be considered against these constraints.

The CCs/BCR noted that to date, the very strong community feedback to SSENT had not appeared to have resulted in any changes to their plans. In the opinion of the CCs/BCR, this would appear to suggest that community engagement plays no or very little part in the SSENT assessment process. SSENT accepted that their RAG assessment criteria did not include actual measures of impact on the community.

When asked if this would be reviewed and amended, it was confirmed by SSENT that a review is in progress and work is being undertaken by their socio-economic team to look at what additional criteria and RAG ratings could be applied and included in updates to their guidance. The timescales to produce and consult on these criteria mean that these are unlikely to be in place to retrospectively apply to the routeing process for this project. SSENT went on to state that stakeholder feedback is therefore the key mechanism for ensuring community concerns are raised and given due consideration in the overall assessment of route options.

Given this issue was raised almost a year previously, the timescale for implementation was viewed as being extremely disappointing by the CCs/BCR.

It was pointed out by the CCs/BCR that this whole process was very subjective. It was stated by the chair that land which has been classified or protected under a range of different policies and legal mechanisms clearly seem to carry much more weight than anything given to impact on communities.

ACTION: The view of the CC's/BCR group was that SSENT were not being open with their route criteria and selection process and asked SSENT to share this information in more detail with us. SSENT advised that they had a "redacted" version of their routeing guidance which they may be able to share with us. When questioned about what they had to hide in a "redacted" version, SSENT indicated there may be commercial issues/personal information that were confidential. SSENT undertook to share this routing guidance with us.

Impact on private water supplies

Concerns were expressed about various private water supplies in the Tarvie area. SSENT confirmed that this will be assessed within the EIA and gave an overview of the methodology of assessment and mitigation to provide assurances that any private water supplies would be identified and measures taken to ensure that they would not be affected.

b. Heights Alternative Route

This suggested alternative had been sent to SSENT quite late in the day (28 January). SSENT had given it consideration but highlighted that it would pass through class 1 Peatland which would not

only cause great difficulty for the building of the line but would have significant environmental impacts.

ACTION: SSENT was asked to provide a clearer map showing the full extent of the class one peatland area to allow the CCs/BCR to consider whether or not the line might be pushed further to the north and west. SSENT agreed to provide this map.

When asked if there were any other areas of class 1 peatland along the route between Spittal and Beaulieu where the line will be erected. SSENT confirmed that there were but explained that in those cases, there was no alternative route available to avoid peatland, whereas the alternative route provided through the consultation process would have a greater impact on peat and other formal designations than the route presented as SSENT's 'preferred' route at the March 2023 consultation.

Considering the original D1 route along the Heights, questions were asked about the potential impact on archaeological sites. Many of the sites were not properly catalogued and therefore would not appear in the databases being used by SSENT. SSENT acknowledged that many of these sites are unrecorded and therefore were undesignated assets. SSENT confirmed that they have received information from local experts and have shared this with their environmental advisors for consideration in their assessments as part of the EIA. It was suggested that SSENT should use local experts that knew the Highlands and SSENT confirmed that they had committed to work with local and regional heritage groups during the assessments and have been engaged with these groups since summer 2023. When asked who SSENT were actually using for these assessments, it was advised that the main consultant carrying out this work on behalf of SSENT is ERM. They will appoint subcontractors to carry out different areas and cover different specialisms. While SSENT can influence ERM, it is for ERM to decide who they use. The need to use local specialists with local knowledge was emphasised by the CCs/BCR.

ACTION: SSENT undertook to share the general survey programme. The timing is considered very important given the seasonal growth in the area affecting the ability to see the archaeology.

c. Alternative Route past Loch Achonachie

The route proposed by the BCR group which proposed a line to the south crossing the Conon and running up past the Fairburn Wind Farm before heading east, was also discussed. This route was also ruled out due to peatland. However, an option D1.4 was suggested by SSENT which ran parallel to Loch Achonachie but further to the south. This route remains an option being consulted on.

It was stated by the CCs/BCR that if this transmission line ran through one of the sites currently proposed for a wind farm, the wind farm would probably not be built. SSENT agreed.

4. SSENT CONSULTATION – NEXT STEPS

A further round of consultation is planned for March. Notices of venues and dates have already begun to be circulated.

This round of consultation will consider "route options" from the alternative routes which have not been previously consulted on with the aim of finalising the route options before a further consultation exercise begins in June. The round of consultation in June will consider "route alignment" issues which means that SSENT will consider indicative overhead line alignment and pylon positions, subject to further assessment within a route corridor that has been chosen following the consultation in March.

Concerns were expressed by the CCs/BCR about the lack of time between the consultation for the alternative routes and the consultation for the alignment options to allow matters of concern to be fully considered.

Various other issues were raised as follows:

Communications

Material should be tailored to suit the audience and should be clear. Examples given were the quality of maps used by SSENT. They lacked clarity and detail and should be improved. SSENT advised that they have high-definition maps available and will use them during these rounds of consultation.

Timing of consultation meetings

People who work find it difficult to get to the sessions in time. The sessions should be extended into the evenings to around 9:00pm.

ACTION: SSENT agreed to take this request away for consideration and then to provide a post-meeting note with confirmation of any amendments to the published events.

Community Liaison Groups (CLGs)

SSENT proposed that a CLG be set up for the areas covered by the CCs on this meeting. This was welcomed providing it was a meaningful forum through which the views of the communities would be heard, considered and not ignored.

5. SSENT APPLICATION TO ENERGY CONSENTS UNIT (ECU)

SSENT advised that the target date for submitting this application was the end of 2024. It is uncertain how long the process will take but it was thought it could take anywhere between 12 and 18 months. If a Public Inquiry is required then the process would take longer.

The consultation period under the ECU process will last for a period of 28 days after the consultees have been notified. It was unclear when these consultees would be notified. Adverts will run in the local and national press to advise when the consultation period is starting.

ACTION: SSENT (Martin G) agreed to advise the CCs/BCR group when the application is due to be submitted and will liaise with community groups when they have been advised of the likely consultation period.

6. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

a. The plans for the transmission network out to 2050

National Grid ESO publication was expected in December 2023 however, this has been delayed and SSENT expect this will now be published in March 2024.

ACTION: The plans will be published on the National Grid's website when they are made public and SSENT will inform the CCs/BCR when they are available.

b. Financial issues

The CCs/BCR highlighted that they believe this route option process seems to have been carried out with the criteria that least cost is most important. As the cost will be spread over many decades and many millions of customers, the individual impact will be minimal. There does not seem to be any

understanding of the need to spend a little more to save the Highland's biggest asset, the countryside.

SSENT noted the cost differential between overhead line (OHL) and underground cable or subsea option, but highlighted that in addition to this, maintenance, return to service times and other environmental impacts were also a core consideration. In reference to alternative OHL options, SSENT do not view the least cost option as the determining factor influencing routeing decisions within the Strathpeffer area, but rather as part of the consideration with environmental and engineering constraints.

ACTION: SSENT was asked to share the brief they were given to develop this project. They agreed to do so subject to any commercial issues being redacted.

c. Using existing corridors

At the time of the last meeting in May 2023, utilising the existing corridors was a proposal being considered. When asked why the existing corridors were not now being considered, SSEN agreed to share their detailed assessment for the area around Dingwall through to Fairburn.

ACTION: SSENT agreed to share this assessment with the CCs/BCR.

7. FUTURE MEETINGS

SSENT (Martin G) and CCs (Ron McA) were tasked with setting a date towards the end of April for a Community Liaison Group (CLG) meeting to be set up.

ACTION: SSENT and CC to set up a CLG with first meeting towards the end of April.

Ron McA/24/2/24.