



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

Robert F Erith TD DL
President Dedham Vale Society

Dear Robert,

Lord Gardiner of Kimble
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State

Seacole Building
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

T 03459 335577
defra.helpline@defra.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/defra

By email:

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Thank you for your letter of 8 April 2021 which raised concerns over the significant issues relating to the National Grid's latest plans for the new Bramford to Twinstead transmission electricity connection, and the progress of the Dedham Vale AONB and Stour Valley Partnership's proposal to extend the Dedham Vale AONB.

I assure you that the Government fully recognises and values the crucial role our most valued landscapes, including Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and National Parks, play for conserving and enhancing the country's most beautiful and iconic landscapes, and also all our green spaces as the vital source of recovery and relaxation for many as we work through the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic.

I am also grateful for and fully support the significant role AONBs and National Parks will continue to play to realise the Government's ambitious plans to conserve and enhance these protected landscapes for future generations and bringing more people within closer reach of nature. This includes meeting the Government's commitments to protect and improve 30% of UK land by 2030; and deliver priorities for creating new National Parks and AONBs, programmes for nature recovery, sustainable land management, and green recovery as set out in the Prime Minister's 'Ten Point plan: Green Industrial Revolution' announcement in November 2020.

Please accept my gratitude for the detailed account of the issues raised by the new option set out by the National Grid in its current informal consultation that is due to end on 6 May 2021. In a reversal of the proposal made in 2013 to fully underground the Bramford to Twinstead transmission connection, the consultation now seeks feedback for an option to over ground the stretch of the transmission connection that will run through the Stour Valley. The reasons offered are that, aside from the cultural and scenic heritage of the area, it is yet to be formally designated as an AONB and further work is required to understand whether the additional cost of underground cables is therefore justified.

I share your passionate concerns of the significant impact that this option will have for the landscape value of the Stour Valley. The Government's commitment to achieve 40 GW of electricity generation from offshore wind by 2030 does not in my view preclude compliance with the number of planning protections afforded in legislation and associated guidance.

National Grid is subject to a duty under section 85(1) of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 to 'have regard' to the statutory purpose of the AONB in carrying out its functions. That purpose is of course to conserve and enhance the area's natural beauty. The government's formal 'Planning Practice Guidance' underlines the importance of this duty and makes it clear that it also applies to development schemes in areas which provide the complementary setting to an AONB and contribute to upholding its statutory purpose. The section of the Stour Valley affected by this scheme should come into that category. Helpfully, the National Policy Statement (EN-1) which guides the design and approval of major energy schemes also cites this duty and its application to 'settings'. National Grid also have a duty under the Electricity Act 1989 to 'have regard to the desirability of preserving natural beauty, of conserving flora, fauna and geological or physiographical features of special interest and of protecting sites, buildings and objects of architectural, historic or archaeological interest'; and to do what it reasonably can to 'mitigate any effect' on those things. This is not limited to areas designated as National Parks or AONBs.

In presenting its final options in the formal statutory consultation planned for the autumn, and subsequently in the application for a Development Consent Order, I will expect National Grid, in compliance with the duties outlined above (and being fully receptive to advice and evidence from all interested parties, not least The Dedham Vale Society, The Colne Stour Countryside Association and their local partners and supporters) to provide comprehensive evidence to support the case for undergrounding the transmission section in the Stour Valley.

I have confirmed with officials from Natural England that proposals for the extension of the Dedham Vale AONB have not been formally assessed and that an extension has not, therefore, been ruled out for the future. I have also been assured that Natural England will communicate further with local proposers of National Park and AONB designations or variations in due course. However, as I have already set out, notwithstanding future decisions about potential extension of the AONB, there is a clear legislative and policy requirement to give proper weight to the role and importance of the Stour Valley in the design and delivery of this scheme.

I encourage your efforts and those of other concerned parties, including members of The Dedham Vale Society and The Colne Stour Countryside Association, to submit detailed feedback to the current informal consultation, and the formal consultation planned later in the year.

I am happy for you to share my response more widely if you find it will help to support the arguments to make the case for fully undergrounding the transmission line in the Stour Valley to protect its cultural, heritage and scenic beauty; and also to uphold the statutory purpose of the Dedham Vale AONB as it may be adversely affected by not doing so.

Please be assured that I have asked officials in Defra and Natural England to monitor the progress of the National Grid's development of this transmission connection and to keep me updated.

I have copied this letter to Dr Ronald Blythe CBE FRSL, Patron, Dedham Vale Society, Charles Clover, Chairman Dedham Vale Society; all the Members of Parliament for the area (Rt Hon James Cleverly, Sir Bernard Jenkin and James Cartledge), Viscount Ullswater; and the Rt Hon Anne-Marie Trevelyan MP, the Minister of State (Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth) at the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

Yours ever,
John