

REPORT ON BEHALF OF THE PROJECTS & PROPERTY GROUP

**SUBJECT:
PROPOSED UNDERGROUNDING OF EXISTING OVERHEAD UTILITY SUPPLIES
AT CAERFARCHELL**

INTRODUCTION

As a result of extensive lobbying by this Authority and others, Western Power Distribution has allocated £1m within their current 5 year business plan commencing 1st April 2010 to underground 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.

The selection criteria has therefore been set at a very high level to achieve the best possible outcomes. 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, The Countryside Council for Wales and Western Power Distribution. The Pembrokeshire Coast National Park has already successfully delivered four landscape improvement schemes under this initiative at Strumble Head, West Angle, Martins Haven and St Nons. The next scheme which your Officers are recommending would benefit the historic built environment of Caerfarchell village.

BACKGROUND:

Caerfarchell is a small village approximately 2.5 miles north east of St David's. The quality and historical importance of its built environment is recognised and protected under its designation as a Conservation Area. All of the buildings at Caerfarchell lie within the Conservation Area boundary and the vast majority are serviced by an existing network of Western Power and BT poles, stays & overhead lines. The negative visual impact of this existing utility network is expressly referred to within the Caerfarchell Conservation Area Proposals document which indentified their undergrounding as a priority objective following local consultation.

The opportunity to secure that objective now exists following the endorsement of such a scheme by the Western Power Undergrounding Initiatives Panel. The individual property owners within the village (approximately 20 in total) have also given their support whilst BT Openreach have also agreed to fund the cost of undergrounding their own network. Obtaining any necessary statutory/ legal consents, as well as funding and undertaking the actual work on site would be

undertaken by Western Power and BT Openreach and could be completed during 2013.

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. We also believe that the comprehensive undergrounding of an existing overhead utility network within a Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Conservation Area would be a unique achievement. It also offers the potential to be the fifth undergrounding scheme delivered under this WPD initiative within our National Park.

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 Caerfarchell as soon as reasonably possible.

CAERFARCEHLL VILLAGE UNDERGROUNDING SCHEME – SELECTION CRITERIA

The identification and selection of the Caerfarchell Village 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 Caerfarchell Village has been identified as a built environment of very high and unusually unspoilt quality. Furthermore, the opportunity to underground both the existing electricity and telephone network as part of a single scheme is considered an opportunity that is unlikely to be repeated. It is accordingly advanced as the Authority's preferred fifth scheme for funding under the WPD initiative following successful schemes which have already been completed at Strumble Head, West Angle, Martins Haven and St Nons.

In selecting and promoting the Caerfarchell Village Scheme, Officers have had particular regard to the following.

- a. 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.
- b. As one of only 14 designated Conservation Areas within the Pembrokeshire National Park, Caerfarchell is recognised as an area of outstanding historic and architectural importance. The Caerfarchell Conservation Area Proposal Document identified the negative impact of the existing overhead utility network within the village and expressly identifies its removal as a priority objective. Your Building Conservation Officer has given his unqualified support to the proposed undergrounding scheme.

- c. The National Park Authority's Culture & Heritage Manager has advised that whilst the route of the proposed excavation does not encroach over any Scheduled sites, the known history of the immediate area suggests a realistic prospect of encountering archaeology when excavating the trench. It is therefore recommended that Western Power Distribution be asked to supply this Authority with a copy of any desk top assessment or advice received from their 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. The National Park Authority's Ecologist has advised that the proposed route of the underground cables raises no bio-diversity concerns on the proviso that a badger survey be carried out prior to any works and that best practise is followed to avoid disturbing any nesting birds and minimising any adverse impact on hibernating reptiles or natural linear features such as hedge rows. Any breaches made in hedge banks and other linear features should also be restored as soon as possible after completion of the work.
- e. The local CCW Field Officer has advised that the proposed route of the scheme will not encroach into any protected habitats. The Officer is also fully aware of the works required in relation to the scheme and is supportive.
- f. The scheme offers the opportunity to remove the entire existing overhead utility network from within the built designated Caerfarchell Conservation Area. The extent of that existing overhead network is illustrated by the red lines on the attached aerial photo while the visual benefits that would result from its removal are presented on the attached 'Before' & 'After' photos.
- g. In addition to securing the support of the Western Power Undergrounding Initiatives Panel, the Authority's Estates Officer has also successfully promoted the scheme to all of the private and public property owners across whose land the existing overhead network runs, Pembrokeshire County Council in their capacity as the street lighting authority and BT Openreach
- h. Subject to obtaining the endorsement of the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority that this is a suitable scheme, Western Power Distribution & BT Openreach would plan to complete the laying of the new underground network and removal of the existing overhead network sometime during 2013.

Gary Meopham

EXISTING OVERHEAD
UTILITY NETWORK =





Pembrokeshire Coast National Park
National Park Authority Meeting 6th February, 2013

