

REPORT ON BEHALF OF THE PROPERTY & PROJECTS GROUP

SUBJECT: PORTHGAIN UNDERGROUNDING SCHEME

Purpose of Report

To seek the endorsement of Members for the proposed undergrounding of existing overhead power lines at Porthgain.

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 two schemes at Treginnis and Dinas Head have already been delivered under the current 2015/23 funding initiative.

Background

Porthgain is a conservation area of significant architectural and historic importance reflecting its long industrial heritage. It was an important local port supported by a trilogy of industries (slate, brick and stone) c. 1840 – 1931. A remarkable amount of industrial relics survive, including the vast brick hoppers (containing the crushed road-stone), the machinery shed for the brickworks, the industrial housing, the pilot's house and navigation beacons and even the communal *ty-bach*.

Today, Porthgain is home to a significant resident population and a small commercial fishing fleet. It is also a 'honeypot' visitor destination with large numbers of day visitors attracted by Porthgain's unique character, direct access to the coast path and popular art, food and drink offers

Much of the open public space within Porthgain is owned by the Authority and a significant amount of conservation and enhancement work has been carried out over the years with the Hoppers and Ty Mawr having been restored by the Authority, and a number of other properties benefitting from financial grants made under the Authority's Conservation Area Grant Scheme. The undergrounding of cables and relocation of poles, transformers etc is a specific issue outlined by the community (and ratified by Llanrhian Community Council) within the Porthgain Conservation Area Proposals Document, which forms supplementary planning guidance to the Local Plan.



Prominently sited at the entrance to the village within the boundary of the designated conservation area is a large pole mounted electricity substation (see point 'A' on the aerial photo above). The negative visual impact of this substation and its associated overhead wires and back stays has been identified as having a significant detrimental

visual impact on the village scape. A scheme has now been identified by your Officers, and endorsed by the Western Power Undergrounding Initiatives Panel, to remove this pole mounted transformer and replace it with a small ground mounted substation to include the removal and replacement of approximately 90 metres of existing overhead wiring with new underground cabling between point 'A' & 'B'. The land across which this proposed scheme runs is already within the ownership of the Authority. Subject to obtaining any necessary statutory/ legal consent, the actual work on site would be undertaken by WPD and could be completed during 2016/17.

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 eighth undergrounding scheme delivered under this WPD initiative within our National Park.

Financial, Risk & Compliance Considerations

In its capacity as the relevant land owner, The Authority will need to enter into a new wayleave agreement with WPD to provide for the siting of the proposed new ground mounted substation and underground cabling. This is not considered to be onerous or detrimental to the value of the Authority's land ownership.

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 Porthgain as soon as reasonably possible.

PORTHGAIN UNDERGROUNDING SCHEME – SELECTION CRITERIA

The identification and selection of the Porthgain 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 Porthgain has been identified as a built landscape of very high quality with excellent public accessibility. It is accordingly advanced as the Authority's preferred eighth 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.

In selecting and promoting the Porthgain 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 90m 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 above running between the points marked 'A' 'B'. The existing pole mounted substation is located at 'A' and is shown in the photo insert.
- 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 does not encroach over any Scheduled sites. The known history of the immediate area does not suggest a realistic prospect of encountering archaeology when excavating the trench. However, it is still recommended that Western Power Distribution 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. The National Park Authority's Ecologist has advised that the adopted working practise of WPD in this instance should avoid any prospect of spreading Himalayan Balsam which is known to be growing in this immediate locality. That same working practise should also avoid any prospect of surface water run-off from any excavated material adversely impacting on the neighbouring wet meadow which is situate to the south of the proposed trench run.
- e. The proposed route of the scheme will not encroach into any protected habitats.
- f. The removal of the overhead network will be a direct and immediate visual benefit to the conservation area of Porthgain.
- 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 2016/17.