

Report to Walberswick Parish Council on Proposed Eurolink
and other related Multi-purpose Interconnector (MPI) Infrastructure

On 31 October and 3 November, four WPC Councillors attended webinars put on by National Grid to begin explaining proposals for using Suffolk Coastal as the location for landing underwater electric cables (MPI) and constructing sub-stations to connect to the Netherlands, Belgium and Kent. The proposals for Eurolink and Sealink have not been previously shared with local Parish Councils. The initial proposal for Nautilus was consulted with some of the most likely impacted communities (which does not include Walberswick) approximately a year ago.

This report summarises what was learnt/interpreted from these initial webinars and proposes an action plan going forward. For Walberswick, the most immediate concern relates to Eurolink but all of the projects have the potential to bring negative impacts particularly when the cumulative impact is considered.

Overall situation for the Suffolk Coast

In short, the Government's decision to allow the sub-station for the off-shore Scottish Power EA1 and EA2 to be located in Friston rather than in a brown-field site, and the building of 2 EPR nuclear reactors at Sizewell C, sets up the Suffolk Coast to become an industrialised area not only for power generation, but for more and more MPI, substations and transmission lines. This is because National Grid, a UK State-owned company responsible for transmission of electricity, is mandated to build transmission lines to where power is generated. In other words, it is the owners of power generation (usually for-profit companies like EDF and Scottish Power) who determine where they build their plants and then National Grid must build and install power transmission capabilities to off-take the electricity generated. The national Government (BEIS, under Kwasi Kwarteng during the time that Boris Johnson was PM), supported by East Suffolk Council, have approved the building of these power generators in green field, AONB and SSSI sites along the Suffolk coast. Because of this, despite normally building sub-stations in brown field sites if possible, National Grid is similarly looking to put all of its infrastructure in green field sites in Suffolk coastal. Obviously, the relationship between electricity generation and transmission projects would have been known to BEIS. However, by taking up each project individually as an NSIP, and excluding discussion of how the generated electricity would reach the grid, BEIS could approve projects without considering the cumulative effects. According to National Grid, if Friston and/or Sizewell C were not to go forward, then these cabling systems similarly would not be required in this area.

There are currently three set of MPIs and related above ground substations being proposed to connect Friston to both the UK and European grids (and continental Europe to us).

1. Eurolink: This is the most immediate concern for us as it is proposed that the cable from the Netherlands would come on shore in one of four locations: Southwold, Walberswick, Dunwich or Sizewell and then travel underground (mostly) to a large substation that Eurolink would build somewhere around Saxmunden-Friston-Leiston and then underground again until connecting to the massive Friston sub-station being built by Scottish Power. The choice of locations for coming on-shore was done only as a 'desk study' and no one from Eurolink visited the potential sites. Eurolink's consultants said that in determining the final location, they would consider things like environmental damage, SSSI and AONB, accessibility, population centres, etc.

- If Eurolink were to come ashore at Walberswick, the building site would be 2 hectares (20,000sq metres), so pretty much the whole of the beach, the dunes and the Cliff Field car park. Work would take an estimated 4 years, after which only a “kiosk” (like a telephone box) would be left above ground. It is, therefore, primarily about the destruction caused during construction and damage to the eco-system left behind, rather than the operation of the cable itself, that is most problematic (assuming no other issues or repairs would be required). Eurolink would like to start in 2025 with a target of 2029 for completion. The working life of the cables is 40 years, but may last 60-70 years. No answers were given on the effects of coastal erosion over that period as Eurolink has not modelled it. Eurolink is unwilling to share the desktop analysis that led to the selection of these sites and said that they would not do so until their DCO application is fully formed.
- It would seem to anyone who knows our area, that Walberswick beach would be wholly unsuitable given its inaccessibility for transport or materials, its designation as an AONB and SSSI and the fact that it is a full-year, heavily used beach. Southwold and Dunwich (depending on where the MPI would land) would seem to have similar issues. Only if it landed at the Sizewell nuclear site would these obvious shortfalls presumably be avoided.
- Despite having consultations in every other location where the cable would make landfall, Eurolink has reiterated that they have no intention of having a public meeting in Walberswick. In response to repeated requests by WPC, Eurolink have said that Southwold should be close enough for Walberswick residents.

2. Sealink: This is another National Grid venture (being handled through a separate sub-company) which would link coastal Suffolk (and Friston) to Kent. This is to allow transfer of power around and between the southeast of England. Just like Eurolink, it involves an MPI (originating in Kent) landing on one of the Suffolk beaches, leading to another enormous sub-station (26 metres high and 5 hectares of land). Their announced 'preferred' landing for Sealink is on the beach somewhere between Thorpeness and Aldeburgh (reportedly near Aldeburgh's Seashell sculpture). The sub-station would possibly be in/around Saxmunden, Leiston, Friston area.

3. Nautilus: This is yet another MPI. This one travelling from Belgium and much the same story; coming on shore on coastal Suffolk, connecting to a 3rd substation.

4. New transmission towers? Although this was not part of the National Grid presentation, in answer to a question, a National Grid engineer indicated that the existing pylons at Sizewell cannot carry Sizewell C electricity. They therefore expected that there would be another DCO for another set of above ground transmission lines to connect to Bramford, if Sizewell C goes forward.

Direct Impact of Eurolink on Walberswick

As noted above, if Walberswick were to be the preferred site, the damage would likely be considerable. Many details are unknown because studies have not been conducted. It can be assumed, however, that it would include the loss of access to the Walberswick beach and Cliff Field (which would become a construction site) and the lasting damage that construction would have on the delicate and special coastal fauna and flora on the beach, the dunes, and surrounding marshes. There would also be the construction damage related to digging a trench for the running of the underground cable from Walberswick beach 10 miles or so to wherever the sub-station would be located. This says nothing of the impact on the houses nearby, the loss of the village as a beachside tourist destination during construction (and potentially afterwards because of loss of habitat), the impact on businesses and the lives of all residents. How National Grid would organise the taking of land, including that of the Walberswick Common Lands Charity, is unknown.

If another site other than Walberswick is selected, it will not negate the impact that these MPI projects will have to the south of us. Friston and/or surrounding villages could end up with 5 buildings, each 5 hectares in size and 26 metres tall. This construction would be ongoing for years and at the same time as the building of Sizewell C and the Friston sub-station.

Next Steps

What was made clear is that the decisions (with perhaps the exception of Nautilus) are at the earliest stage. No decisions on location of landings, sub-stations, nor route of cables, have been made. The wide range of places on our coast set out by National Grid as possibilities is an indication of how much engineering work is still needed. National Grid also admitted that they had done no thinking about the transport impacts, how/where they would find a workforce, where this workforce would live, what would be the cumulative impact of Sizewell C and Friston being built at the same time as National Grid's three additional sub-stations and cabling systems. This means that we should have time now to bring some local knowledge and views to the process. But if Sizewell C and Friston are allowed to go forward then overall the die is cast in terms of National Grid's additional infrastructure. (At this time, there are Judicial Reviews pending on Friston and Sizewell C and some £30 billion of financing needs to be identified for Sizewell C.)

This is the moment, therefore, when the Parish Council and all residents, visitors and friends of Walberswick will need to get directly engaged on the MPI proposals. The following steps should be considered by the WPC:

1. The Council should pass a resolution rejecting the 'short-listing' of Walberswick beach as a landing site for Eurolink on the basis of the inappropriateness of the site. This relates to the area being a year-round recreational beach with an excess of 100,000 visits a year (data can be drawn from car park and other sources), an AONB and SSSI, and its inaccessibility by road for construction vehicles. Economically, it could be expected to have a devastating impact on local businesses that would already be suffering from the impact on the tourism sector that the construction of Sizewell C will have in Suffolk coastal. Presumably, the Walberswick Common Lands Charity would suffer from the taking of its land and the loss of its main source of revenue from the car parks.
2. The Council should write to our elected representatives at the District, County and national levels to express our objections and ask for their support.
3. The Council should submit a written response to the non-statutory consultations. Approval of the consultation response should take place at the WPC meeting in December in order to meet the deadline.
4. It will be essential that all concerned residents, visitors to and friends of Walberswick get engaged in the consultation process ongoing until 18 December. This should be done through attendance at consultation events, through written submissions to National Grid, and through writing to elected officials. It is recommended that the Council make use of the Village website, the Village News and social media to raise awareness, explain issues and encourage wide-scale engagement.
5. Councillor Bassinette, who has responsibility for Sizewell C and other energy projects, should be delegated to draft related documents and lead on the effort in consultation with the Chair, the WCLC and with other Parish and town councils similarly impacted by National Grid's plans.

Prepared by Cllr Bassinette, 8 November 2022