

BENHALL & STERNFIELD PARISH COUNCIL

Minutes of the Benhall & Sternfield Parish Council Extra Ordinary Meeting, which took place at Benhall Club on Wednesday 13th December 2023, 7.00pm.

Present: Cllr Hilary Graham – Chairman, Cllr Riven Brace – Vice Chairman, Cllr David Secret, Cllr Sue Nicholson, Cllr Alan Woods, Cllr Deborah Dann & Cllr Chris Durrant.

In Attendance: 10 members of the public and the Clerk.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE and to approve. Cllr Beverley Barclay & Cllr Archie Bhatia both prior engagements, Cllr John Slade – work commitments. The Parish Council approved the absence's

2. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS. None.

3. TO ACCEPT THE RESIGNATION OF THE PARISH CLERK.

The Chairman reported that a letter of resignation has been received from the Clerk, she has given 3 month's notice, her last day to work will be 23rd February 2024.

4. TO CONFIRM THE CLERKS ANNUAL PAY INCREASE BACKDATED TO APRIL 2023.

The NALC Local Government Services Pay Agreement 2023 has been confirmed and received from SALC. The Clerks pay to be increased from £2949.00 up to £3209.00.

5. TO AGREE A SUB GROUP TO APOINT A NEW PARISH CLERK.

Cllrs Durrant, Brace & Barclay to form a sub group to recruit a new Clerk, this was agreed by all.

6. ENERGY ISSUES – RESPONSE TO SEA LINK STATUTORY CONSULTATION.

On behalf of the Parish Council the Chairman thanked Cllrs Nicholson & Secret for the work they have done on preparing the draft response.

Cllrs Nicholson & Secret have met and had 3 site visits with ESC Councillors and the head of energy projects from ESC. Online meetings with Highways & SCC. Met with Saxmundham Town Council and Kelsale Parish Council. The Parish Council has also received a presentation from Sealink.

The Chairman read out the proposed Parish Council response to the consultation;

1. Introduction

Whilst the consultation acknowledges that the proposals will impact on communities and mitigation will be necessary, it was disturbing to find out during the exhibitions that some of National Grid Sea Link's (NGSL) representatives had either not heard of Benhall or Sternfield, or had no idea of the nature of the communities. Therefore, the Parish Council (PC) would like to start this response with an introduction to Benhall and Sternfield.

The villages of Benhall and Sternfield lie immediately south of Saxmundham, and whilst, historically, were two separate villages, today operate with a joint Parish Council, whilst still retaining their individual characters.

Benhall is the larger village, and straddles the A12. The current line of the A12 was opened in 1987, and was designed to relieve Benhall, Saxmundham and Kelsale of through traffic, particularly HGVs. The original settlement was to the west of the A12, but more recently has developed to the east, and is known as Benhall Green. The housing is quite diverse, with a high percentage of social housing and very few large houses, giving a balanced community. Facilities include a primary school, community hall, and a large and much used village green, which is also used by the primary school for outdoor teaching in the summer. The principal access to Benhall Green is from the former A12, now B1121, Main Road. The most recent housing accesses directly onto Main Road, and this development is soon to be expanded by a further 40 – 50 houses.

Sternfield is the smaller village. Most of the housing is along the B1121, Church Hill and The Street, and along Sandy Lane, linking to Benhall Green. It is classified as countryside, and as such has little recent housing. Of the more scattered housing, it is worth noting that Hill Farm House (sold away from Hill Farm), is only 250m from the indicative location of the proposed converter station. Some years ago, improvements to the B1121 through Sternfield were curtailed to avoid demolition of listed

Chairman's initials.....

buildings, leaving the length to the east of Start Farm, The Street, more akin to a country lane. There are two significant agricultural holdings at Hill Farm and Redhouse Farm, both accessed from the B1121 at Baldry's Corner, that generate a significant amount of HGV movements. The former operates as a produce chilling and packing station for seven months a year, and the latter is mostly arable, but also has four large duck rearing sheds (mistakenly identified by one of NGSL's representatives as an industrial estate), as well as some farm diversification. Recent development at these holdings have shown the inability of the B1121 east of Start Farm to cope with HGVs, in terms of inability to pass other traffic, and consequential damage to the highway.

2. Overarching consideration of proposal

The PC contends that the consultation documents fail to produce a convincing argument for not developing off shore infrastructure, to limit on shore works. Countries on the other side of the North Sea consider off shore infrastructure as the environmentally and socially acceptable way to proceed.

It is appreciated that the four divisions of National Grid are separate legal identities, but despite assurances to the contrary, this appears to be a restriction to full coordination. Submitting separate applications for DCOs does not allow the communities to adequately consider the accumulated impact and mitigations. National Grid Group plc must take a role here and find a way for meaningful coordination.

In the 'Non-statutory Consultation Report (Version A October 2023)', 6.2.8, NGSL's dismissal of the semi-brownfield disused Leiston airfield is far from convincing. It is said that it is too far from the Friston substation, yet both Nautilus and LionLink have identified it as a viable option. Whilst the report tells of the increased cost of cabling, it says nothing about the increased cost of mitigation by building so close to Saxmundham, nor the savings that would result from being close to the Sizewell access road.

The PC's response to NGSL's non-statutory consultation commented that the appropriateness of the Wood Farm site would depend, inter alia, on the access. NGSL has shown options for accesses, but not how they will link to the principal road network, and suggested that they will select the option and impose mitigation later. Whilst the PC will comment further below, it is hoped that when the access option is finalised a supplementary consultation will be carried out.

3. Converter site access

The PC will restrict comments to those accesses which directly impact on Benhall and Sternfield, namely S-BM09 (from the B1121 south of Saxmundham), and S-BM13 (from the B1121 along the track to Redhouse Farm).

The comments below relate only to NGSL's proposals. If further converter stations are constructed using the same accesses, the PC will respond further in due course.

3.1 Access S-BM109, leaving B1121 south of Saxmundham

It is assumed that NGSL intend to route traffic from the A12, along the B1121, Main Road, through Benhall to the access point north of Bigsby's Corner.

The PC's concerns regarding the significant increase in traffic in relation to the safety of existing road users are tabulated below:

Concern	Suggested mitigation
Safety at A12 / B1121 junction – conflict between turning traffic and overtaking traffic northbound. This concern is compounded by Sizewell C traffic on same timescale.	Suffolk County Council to review junction safety and appropriate measures identified.
The footway from Benhall to Saxmundham is along the west side of Main Road, whilst all but a few houses are to the east. There needs to be safe crossing points. Some school pupils walk between Benhall and Saxmundham, along Main Road.	Provide safe crossing points at the following principal points: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whitearch Park (by railway bridge), • Forge Close / Shotts Meadow / Kiln Lane, and • School Lane / Gray's Lane. The significant increase in traffic, coupled with inadequate visibility, warrants that these crossing points have halfway refuges, with local road widening to accommodate them as necessary.
Potentially fatal conflict between lorries and vulnerable road users (cyclists and	A segregated cycleway should be provided from the A12 to Saxmundham. The length from Forge Close

equestrians) The significant increase in HGVs from the proposal makes it imperative that vulnerable road users are separated from the main carriageway. Benhall is little more than a mile from Saxmundham, and non-motorised travel is encouraged. Further, a cycle route to Saxmundham and beyond is signed from the A12, south of Benhall Green.	to Gray's Lane could be substituted with suitable traffic management in School Lane.
Noise and emissions (nitrogen dioxide and fine particulates) pollution – health concerns.	Only HGVs complying with the latest environmental standards should be permitted. A 30 mph speed restriction should be imposed between the A12 and the access.
Impaired visibility at junctions	Cut back vegetation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • North of Forge Close to assist traffic turning right out of Forge Close • Opposite B1121 Sternfield Road, so that traffic turning right into Sternfield Road can readily see approaching traffic

3.2 Access S-BM 13, leaving B1131 along track to Redhouse Farm

The presumption is that NGSL intend to direct traffic along the B1121 from Bigsby's Corner through Sternfield.

It is noted that the traffic count was taken in Friston, and so missed the significant traffic generated at Hill Farm and Redhouse Farm, the majority of which passes through Sternfield, not Friston. It should be noted that the HGV traffic from the packing station at Hill Farm currently operates April to October, concurrent with holiday traffic.

Further, it must not be overlooked that this road is not just for cars and lorries, but is also regularly used by pedestrians (particularly dog walkers), cyclists and equestrians. There is no footway east of Start Farm.

The width of the road by Start Farm has been measured by SCC highways to be 5.0m, and insufficient for a centre marking. Further, the visibility eastwards from Start Farm is impaired by the curvature and hump in the road alignment. The centre marking creates a false sense of security to car drivers, who, all too often, are confronted by HGVs, which have no choice but to travel along the centre of the road. SCC have admitted that the centre line should not be there, and have suggested that it be removed and replaced with edge markings to avoid the false sense of security and alert drivers to the narrowing. The PC is currently pursuing this safety measure with SCC.

This part of the B1121 does not feature on the SCC Lorry Route Map, even for the lowest classification, and the attached photographs illustrate the current conflict experienced on a regular basis. Scottish Power has accepted that this road is unsuitable for the routing of HGVs, and any proposal by NGSL to route any HGVs along the B1121 through Sternfield is strongly opposed.

3.3 Opportunity for enhancement to the highway network

Whichever access NGSL pursues, consideration should be given to the opportunity for, with appropriate modification / extension, the access to be adopted as a public highway, enhancing the network, and leaving a beneficial legacy to the local community.

4. Rights of Way

The Parish Council accepts that the footpaths across the converter station site will need to be diverted. This is the only footpath route from Sternfield to Saxmundham, and even temporary closures should be resisted. The preference would be to divert the paths before any work commences through landscaping swathes, so that within just a few years the substation(s) is largely hidden from view. Whilst this may not be entirely achievable, it should be the aim, and only if not feasible should a temporary route be provided.

The PC will welcome any enhancement to the Rights of Way network, and upgrading to bridleway where possible.

Chairman's initials.....

The PC notes the visual impact assessment presented in the documentation, but is concerned that no viewpoints have been considered from the rising land to the south of the B1121 through Sternfield. From Red Lane / Kiln Lane, the new buildings at Hill Farm and Redhouse Farm sit below the treeline, and do make a significant visual impact. The converter station(s) are expected to rise above the trees, and the PC asks that this additional viewpoint be adopted in considering impact.

Clearly there is the need for early preocular planting at key viewpoints, and the PC would strongly support such a policy.

6. Surface water run-offs – flood risk

The area identified for the converter station drains to the east and south into the watercourse from north of the B1119 to Redhouse Farm, past Glebe Farm and into the River Fromus. Only the length from the Fromus to Baldry's Cottages is under the jurisdiction of the Internal Drainage Board. However, there is little maintenance carried out by the IDB, and the condition of the watercourse is largely in the hands of the riparian owners, and is maintained to variable standards. It is noted that some run-off will be pumped to agricultural reservoirs, and beyond this there will be some attenuation measures. Hill Farm and Redhouse Farm also have considerable impervious areas and discharge, with some attenuation, into this watercourse.

The PC is concerned about the impact on the natural drainage system through Sternfield and Benhall, and seeks assurance that a full hydrological study will be carried out, including the accumulated impact of further converter stations at Wood Farm and the run-offs from Hill Farm and Redhouse Farm, together with a watercourse maintenance review, to ensure that there is no increase in flood risk.

Whilst the PC cannot welcome the proposals for development at Wood Farm, we equally understand that it is likely to be granted DCO. Therefore, the PC would prefer to work with NGSL to agree suitable mitigation and community enhancements, such as improvements to the community hall, or the wildlife site. Whilst it is acknowledged that the major negotiations will be through East Suffolk Council and Suffolk County Council, we would ask that NGSL also communicate directly with the PC where appropriate for the unique local insight that can only come from the community.

Q&A was then received from the public

Suggest a local MP to help support the Parish Council.

There will be no light pollution at the converter stations, as all of the lighting will be within the buildings. There will be no noise pollution as everything will be enclosed and insulated. Once the converter stations have been built there will be little additional traffic.

The Clerk will send the response to Sealink on Friday 15th December. Copied also to SCC & ESC.

The Chairman informed the Parish Council that this is his last meeting as he will now stand down as a Councillor.

The meeting ended at 7.45pm

Signed **(Chairman)** **Date**