

**Norfolk Boreas Wind Farm Project – Development Consent Order Application**

**Breckland Council Local Impact Report – Summary**

**4<sup>th</sup> December 2019**

Breckland Council supports the principle of renewable energy development and welcomes this to the District in line with national and local planning policies and guidance. However, the key onshore infrastructure required in association with the Norfolk Boreas Wind Farm project, and in particular the new substation and the extension to the National Grid substation, would have a major impact on the visual appearance of the landscape and the countryside. This would be exacerbated should the sister Norfolk Vanguard proposals also be successful. The scale of this development would be disproportionate to the existing built and natural form of the locality and these advantages must be carefully weighed against one another when coming to a view on the acceptability of these proposals.

The Local Planning Authority appreciates Requirement 16(2) which secures authority for the approval of the final details of the layout, scale and external appearance of the development. Officers would support the offer by the applicant of producing a Design Guide and this would be shared with local communities and key stakeholders for feedback. This approach needs to be included in the Design and Access Statement.

The council would also encourage the establishment of a Local Liaison Group to achieve maximum economic benefits for local communities arising from the development.

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### **Introduction**

A Local Impact Report (LIR) is defined under Section 60(3) of the Planning Act 2008 as “a report in writing giving details of the likely impact of the proposed development on a local authority area (or any part of that area)”. The content of the LIR is a matter for the local authority concerned as long as it falls within this statutory definition. This provides a means for Local Planning Authorities to present knowledge and evidence of local issues in a full and robust report to the Examining Authority. This report is based on the existing local knowledge of Council Officers and Elected Members.

This is a Local Impact Report relating to the submitted Development Consent Order (DCO) application for the Norfolk Boreas Offshore Wind farm and Onshore Supporting Infrastructure. It has been produced in line with Version 2 of the Local Impact Report Guidance (the Advice Note) produced by the Planning Inspectorate dated April 2012. It specifically considers the likely impacts of the proposed development on the district of Breckland. Breckland Council is a statutory consultee for this Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) as it is one of the Local Authorities within whose administrative area many of the key works will take place. All renewable developments over 50MW capacity are currently considered by the Secretary of State for Energy under the Planning Act 2008 with the council acting as a statutory consultee.

The national guidance note for LIRs states that, when the Examining Authority decides to accept an application, it will invite relevant local authorities to submit a LIR. It is the responsibility of local authorities to prioritise preparation of the LIR irrespective of whether the local authority considers the development would have a positive or negative impact on their area. A number of topics are suggested which may be of assistance in the report. The relevant ones are included in this report, reinforced by local knowledge and evidence for the benefit of the Examining Authority.

The LIR may also comment on DCO obligations and their impact on the local authority’s area. The advice note is however clear that in producing an LIR the local authority is not required to carry out its own consultation with the community. It is understood that parish councils, organisations (such as the Necton Substation Action Group) and members of the public are able to make representations directly to the Planning Inspectorate as “interested parties” so that their comments about the scheme will be considered by the Examining Authority. As such the views of local interest groups have not been sought specifically for the purposes of this report, though general discussions with residents have been held, including around the Issue Specific Hearings held in Norwich during November.

This report has been written to incorporate the relevant topics and guidance in the Advice Note specifically arising from the DCO application. This has been prepared in close collaboration with Senior Officers of the Department of Place and leading Councillors with a particular interest in development and regeneration.

## Breckland District

Spanning over 500 square miles Breckland is a geographically large rural District located in the heart of Norfolk. The District is characterised by a dispersed settlement pattern of market towns, villages and hamlets. There are five market towns, a network of local service centres, and numerous small villages and hamlets. Approximately half the current population live in one of the five market towns of Attleborough, Dereham, Swaffham, Thetford and Watton with the remaining population dispersed across the District. The area is represented through 112 town and parish councils and the District Council.

Two trunk road routes run across the District and Breckland's strategic position is emphasised by good road communications offered by the A47 and A11. The A47 links Dereham and Swaffham with Norwich in the east and King's Lynn in the west and further afield to Peterborough and the A1(M), while the A11 links Attleborough and Thetford with Norwich and the Norwich Research Park to the north-east and Newmarket, Cambridge and the M11 in the south-west. The remaining parts of Breckland are served by a network of non-trunk "A" category, secondary and minor roads.

## Necton Village

The key onshore work associated with this project would be developed in Necton. Necton is located between Dereham and Swaffham and has access from the A47. The new Breckland Local Plan was formally adopted by the Full Council on Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> November 2019 and this identifies Necton as a Local Service Centre. A minimum target total of 283 new dwellings is proposed for the housing growth of this settlement during the plan period up until 2036. The area has a regular bus service and is located on the X1 route between Peterborough and Lowestoft. There are approximately 39 businesses within the parish.

## Proposal

The key proposed element of the scheme affecting Breckland involves the creation of onshore grid connection infrastructure to support a new offshore wind farm development of turbines in a 735sq.km area in the North Sea, located approximately 73 km from the Norfolk coastline. This infrastructure would include cabling to transport power over approximately 60km of land between Happisburgh South and a new onshore project substation at Necton. The onshore cables, the onshore project substation and the extension to the Necton National Grid substation present the key visual and landscape impacts for the District of Breckland.

The council has previously considered the potential local impacts of the "sister project" to Norfolk Boreas, which is the Norfolk Vanguard Wind Farm development proposed by the same parent company, Vattenfall Wind Power Limited (VWPL). The two projects would have the same maximum capacity of 1,800 megawatts (MW) and would be immediately adjacent to one another. The potential cumulative effects must therefore be carefully considered. It is appreciated that the strategic approach adopted by Vattenfall has presented opportunities to share some the enabling works at the same time and mitigate impacts in that regard. As such the installation of the ducts to house the Norfolk Boreas cables along the onshore cable route, the works required at the A47 junction with Necton and the creation of the access, all of which would serve both developments, may actually be approved under the separate DCO application for Norfolk Vanguard.

However, there is a possibility that Norfolk Boreas may proceed without the Vanguard development taking place and so it is important to also consider the individual merits of this particular scheme. This Local Impact Report is therefore based on two alternative scenarios as follows:

- The first scenario is that both the Vanguard and the Boreas proposals are implemented in full with the installation of all ducts and other shared enabling works taking place under the Development Consent Order for the former;
- The second scenario is that the Vanguard development does not take place and all elements of the Boreas scheme are implemented independently under the Development Consent Order for the latter.

#### Principle of the Development – National and Local Planning Policy Context

The revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) 2018 includes a dedicated section on meeting the challenge of climate change because addressing this is one of the core land use planning principles. There is a responsibility to provide opportunities for renewable technologies. Central Government places a requirement on the planning system support renewable energy and associated infrastructure. Green development is crucial to the future of the nation and planners must help increase the supply of renewable energy. It is necessary to provide a positive strategy for energy from these sources, whilst ensuring that adverse impacts are addressed satisfactorily (including cumulative landscape and visual impacts). Applications should be approved if impacts are (or can be made) acceptable.

This identifies the crux of the matter in this case from the point of view of the Local Planning Authority. It cannot be disputed that Norfolk should accommodate the creation of wind farms in principle and the benefits of non-renewable energy are supported for Breckland. However, the District enjoys a special and unique landscape character and this development proposal would have a significant visual impact on the countryside. Local Planning Authorities should ensure that protecting the local environment is properly considered alongside the broader issues of protecting the global environment.

Also relevant is therefore the section in the NPPF about conserving and enhancing the natural environment. In line with this part of the framework, the Local Planning Authority seeks to protect and enhance the valued landscapes of the District and recognises the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside. The countryside includes not just designated landscapes but also the wider countryside.

At the local level Breckland Council has very recently adopted a new Local Plan on Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> November 2019. This includes Policy ENV 10 which is specific to renewable energy development. This states that:

“The Council supports proposals for renewable energy development and low carbon development, subject to consideration of the impact of the development and whether this can be made acceptable. Proposals will be considered having regard to the extent to which there are (amongst other matters):

- i) adverse impacts on the local landscape and townscape;
- ii) adverse effects on residential amenity by virtue of outlook / overbearing impact, traffic generation, noise, vibration, overshadowing , glare or any other associated detrimental emissions, during construction, operation and decommissioning;
- iii) an irreversible loss of the highest quality agricultural land; and
- iv) cumulative impacts of renewable energy development on an area”.

Proposals will be permitted where the impact is, or can be made, acceptable. Applications will be expected to demonstrate that any adverse impacts can be mitigated. Proposals for renewable energy development including the landward infrastructure for offshore renewable schemes requiring planning permission will be assessed to determine whether the benefits they bring in terms of the amount and usability of energy generated outweigh any adverse impacts. When attributing weight to any harm, in addition to other relevant policies in the Local Plan, regard will be given to national policy and guidance, statutory duty and legislation which seeks protection and enhancement of the landscape.

The principle of the development is therefore supported. As this is classed as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) under the Planning Act 2008 this Development Consent Order will ultimately be determined by the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. Technical consultees have the duty of responding to consultations to advise on the likely material planning implications of this project based on local knowledge and experience.

In terms of the key impacts of the development there is a two-tiered level of governance for Breckland at the County and District levels. Norfolk County Council has a statutory role to assess matters relating to the highway network, minerals and waste, flood risk and public health. As the principle of the development is supported in line with the national and local agenda for renewable energy technologies, the main responsibility of the District Council is therefore to judge the merits of the proposal with particular reference to the visual effect of the proposal on the special landscape character of the area.

### Design

The Local Planning Authority has considered with interest the project design envelope put forward by the Applicant and appreciates that this sets parameters for a potential grant of consent. The council accepts the principle of applying some flexibility in allowing the detailed design to evolve during the process leading to construction and in providing worst case scenarios as a means of control. However, this is a hugely significant project for a number of towns and villages in Breckland, and Necton in particular. Whilst this is a project ultimately to be determined at the national level, it is also relevant and helpful to consider the proposals against local policy requirements.

### Cumulative Landscape and Visual Impacts

Cumulative landscape impacts and cumulative visual impacts are best considered separately. The cumulative landscape impacts are the effects of a proposed development on the fabric, character and quality of the landscape; it is concerned with the degree to which a proposed renewable energy development will become a significant or defining characteristic of the landscape.

Cumulative visual impacts concern the degree to which proposed renewable energy development will become a feature in particular views (or sequences of views) and the impact this has upon people experiencing these views. Cumulative visual impacts may arise where two or more of the same type of renewable energy development will be visible from the same point or will be visible shortly after each other on the same journey. Hence it should not be assumed that, just because no other site will be visible from the proposed development site, the proposal will not create any cumulative impacts. There is the existing substation and planned extension and the proposed HDVC convertor station to consider in this location (along with the potential Vanguard development).

Under either scenario the predicted change in the form of development is of considerable size and magnitude. The proposals would result in visually disproportionate additional development in the countryside. This must be balanced against the advantages of this major renewable energy project.

### Local Plan

The GEN 02 policy in the new Local Plan requires the Local Planning Authority to achieve “high quality design in all development within the District that respects and is sensitive to the character of the surrounding area and makes a positive architectural and urban design contribution to its context and location. Innovative and contemporary design where it enhances sustainability will be encouraged and promoted across the District. Development of poor design, that does not respect or improve the character or quality of the area and the way the area functions, will be refused planning permission”.

The new Local Plan also includes Policy COM 01 which focusses on design. It states that:

“New development should be designed to the highest possible standards. All new development must achieve a specification of high architectural, urban and landscape design quality and contribute to the distinctive character and amenity of the local area. The Council will promote high quality design in the District by requiring that the design of new development integrates to a high degree of compatibility with the surrounding area, in terms of layout, form, style, massing, scale, density, orientation, materials and design. It should also consist of high quality details and materials that respect or improve local character. Development that does not fully address these matters will not be permitted”.

All development proposals should respond to current best practice and demonstrate that they are in general conformity with the design principles set out in established urban design guidance.

However, the council also believes that good quality development is based on a clear understanding of the site and its context. Neither the Norfolk Boreas substation and National Grid works in their own right, nor the Norfolk Boreas substation alongside the Norfolk Vanguard structure, should be divorced from the surroundings or their relationship to each other. Development should have regard to the form, function, and structure of an area, place or street and the scale mass and orientation of surrounding buildings. Design-led developments that respond to site characteristics and local context make the greatest contribution to improving the built environment.

In terms of the protection and enhancement of the landscape, Policy ENV05 of the new Local Plan states that “development proposals will be expected to contribute to and where possible enhance the local environment by recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside. Development should have particular regard to maintaining the aesthetic and biodiversity qualities of natural and man-made features within the landscape”.

Whether it is developed independently or in combination with Vanguard, the Boreas substation and National Grid extension works will be of such a scale that it will be difficult to argue that they will complement the natural landscape, natural features and built form that surround them. Due regard therefore needs to be had to the distinctive qualities of the proposed structures and their surroundings and the contribution new development makes to these qualities of these features.

The way in which a structure is detailed, the quality of materials and how they are used can have a significant effect upon the overall appearance of a development. Consideration therefore needs to be given to how the detailing and materials used in a particular development gives expression to an overall design. Therefore, detailing and materials should be a key part of the building design, stemming directly from the functional needs of the building and not be used as an afterthought.

The Examining Authority requested Action Point 12 during the Issue Specific Hearing 1 on the Development Consent Order when this was held in Norwich on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2019. This requires the Applicant and Breckland Council to work together to provide a response on what additional design details should be secured for the onshore works at Necton at this stage of the draft Development Consent Order and the Design and Access Statement. Following this the Local Planning Authority is now in receipt of a new document note on the onshore project substation design dated Monday 2<sup>nd</sup> December, a copy of which is attached.

In this the Applicant proposes a particular approach in order to fulfil Requirement 16(2) to enable Breckland Council to retain authority over the layout, scale and external appearance of the onshore works. The Applicant has accepted responsibility for producing a Design Guide to detail the steps undertaken to minimise visual impacts and open up the aspects of the design which can be influenced.

The NPPF explains that all communities have a responsibility to help increase the use and supply of green energy, but this does not mean that the need for renewable energy automatically overrides environmental protections and the planning concerns of local communities. As with other types of development it is important that the planning concerns of local communities are properly heard in matters that directly affect them. The points made in feedback must be fully addressed.

The Local Planning Authority would therefore seek to involve the community and key stakeholders on these matters. Officers would expect different options to be available to present to third parties for their feedback. The council would therefore respectfully encourage the inclusion of this approach in an updated Design and Access Statement in order to secure the following of this process by the Applicant.

The Council would make the point in response to the written questions issued by the Examining Authority that the real and perceived heights and scales of buildings relative to each other and their surroundings is an important assessment. It is therefore considered that the limit stated in the Design and Access Statement (which is secured through the draft DCO Requirement 16 and certified under Article 37) to restrict all but the converter halls in the onshore project substation to a maximum height of 13 metres is appropriate. It is also considered that design details of the link boxes should be secured via the Design and Access Statement. The maximum sizes for the temporary compounds (mobilisation areas and their compounds and the cable logistics area) should be captured in the DCO.

#### Economic and Community Benefits

Whilst these matters are to be considered outside of the Development Consent Order process the Local Planning Authority would encourage the Applicant to work with the community on maximising any economic benefits that may arise from the development. There are opportunities including local employment roles, construction jobs and operation and maintenance requirements over the next 25 years. The council also welcomes the possibilities of apprenticeships and internships for residents and is committed to working with the Applicant to secure success at the local level. The establishment of a regular, inclusive and proactive Local Liaison Group would be helpful.

#### Conclusions

Breckland Council remains supportive of the national and local agenda for using renewable energy technologies and considers it acceptable in principle for this type of development to be

accommodated in the District. However, the landscape of the area is unique and of great importance and weighing against this is the disproportionate nature of the additional development, whichever scenario is carried out. Breckland Council agrees with the approach proposed by the Applicant to prepare a Design Guide for approval by the Local Authority of the exact details of the layout, scale and external appearance of the proposed development.