

# Meeting note

<b>Project name</b>	North Falls Offshore Windfarm project
<b>File reference</b>	EN010119
<b>Status</b>	<b>Final</b>
<b>Author</b>	The Planning Inspectorate
<b>Date</b>	6 November 2020
<b>Meeting with</b>	North Falls Offshore Wind Farm Ltd
<b>Venue</b>	Microsoft teams
<b>Meeting objectives</b>	Project inception
<b>Circulation</b>	All attendees

## Summary of key points discussed and advice given

The Applicant and The Planning Inspectorate (the Inspectorate) Case team introduced themselves and their respective roles. The Inspectorate advised that a note of the meeting would be taken and published on its website in accordance with section 51 of the Planning Act 2008 (the PA2008). Any advice given under section 51 would not constitute legal advice upon which applicants (or others) could rely.

## ***Project Information***

The North Falls Offshore Windfarm (NFOWF) is located in the southern North Sea, approximately 20km from the UK coast. The total area of the NFOWF is approximately 150km<sup>2</sup>. The name of the project is derived from the North Falls, which are a seabed feature and continues the pattern of naming OWFs with names that would be recognised by mariners.

NFOWF is an extension project adjacent to the Greater Gabbard Offshore Wind Farm, which generates approximately 504MW and was opened in 2013.

NFOWF is a joint venture between SSE renewables and RWE. Progress to date:

- In February 2017 the Crown Estate (CE) invited operators of existing projects to apply for extensions.
- A "Plan Level" Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) was undertaken utilising independent advisors and involving consultations with statutory and non-governmental stakeholders.
- In August 2019 the successful extensions were announced.
- The Agreement for Lease between NFOWF and the CE was signed in Summer 2020 and the project is now in the early stages of development.

NFOWF aim to sign a connection agreement with National Grid in 2021. The final stages of the feasibility consenting activity is anticipated to commence in January 2021.

Future key milestones include:

- Mid Q1 2021 - A Scoping request to PINS and consultation with the relevant local authorities on the Statement of Community Consultation (SoCC).
- Consultations in Summer 2021, Summer 2022 and Autumn/Winter 2022.
- Spring 2023 – EIA/HRA completed and the start of discussions with stakeholders on Statements of Common Ground (SoCG).
- Summer 2023 – application for a Development Consent Order submitted to the Inspectorate.

The Inspectorate asked the Applicant whether an evidence plan was anticipated to be prepared. The Applicant confirmed that this was in the early stages of preparation and they had agreed access with Natural England (NE) to their discretionary advice service.

The Inspectorate enquired whether, given the cluster of projects coming forward in East Anglian coastal region, NFOWF had considered a co-ordinated approach to evidence gathering with other developers.

NFOWF agreed this made sense and was desirable. This is something that may evolve but NFOWF are in the early stages of project development and can't currently say much about that at this point. NFOWF commented that a shadow derogation case under the Habitats Regulations may be necessary in that context. RWE (one of the joint venture partners) has interests in multiple projects in the area and that may facilitate some joint working in the short term.

Key consenting activities to April 2021:

- March 2019 to Feb 2021 – aerial bird surveys/marine surveys; land referencing; stakeholder engagement with Councils; ongoing consultation with shipping stakeholders and aviation consultation.
- Oct 2020 to March 2021 – onshore wintering bird surveys to be conducted from public rights of way.
- Oct 2020 – cable route/landfall/substation selection activity to start.
- Q4 2020/21 – pre scoping engagement with relevant stakeholders; secure site access licences for phase 1 habitat survey.
- Q1 2021 – final EIA Scoping Report submitted to the Inspectorate.
- April 2021 – baseline geophysical and benthic survey programme commences.

The Applicant commented that they are looking at what turbines will be available during the construction phase in the late 2020s. The tip height of likely future turbines will inform the Rochdale Envelope approach.

The Applicant enquired whether the Inspectorate would be open to observing the planned engagement activity with the Councils, primarily through virtual meetings. The Inspectorate commented that in principle they would be interested in being involved, but a decision would need to be taken at the time about the availability of resources.

The Applicant explained some of the current issues affecting the project:

- In-combination effects and the large number of NSIPs in the area, including other OWFs and grid reinforcements.

- Stakeholder resources and the demands on public bodies in the area, given the large number of energy projects being promoted there.
- Ongoing discussions with aviation and shipping interests are expected to reveal any major hurdles for wind turbine heights/position with regard to navigational safety.

The Inspectorate asked whether legal services had been procured by NFOWF. The Applicant confirmed that legal procurement was nearly concluded.

The Applicant sought advice from PINS on the best approach for consultation and whether to plan exclusively for virtual consultation events.

The Inspectorate advised that it would be prudent to plan for both physical and virtual consultation events given the uncertainties about what could happen in the near future with regard to the pandemic. For example, by securing venue(s) and appointing an Audio-Visual company. The pre application consultation activity was a good opportunity to build a good working relationship with a suitable company that would allow a flexibility of approach if needed. It was likely that given the reach of virtual events they would remain a part of the consultation techniques in the post-Covid world. However, it was also noted that there may be digitally disadvantaged communities in this rural area for which virtual events may be more challenging to access.

The Inspectorate asked whether NFOWF had considered a digital approach to the submission of the ES.

The Applicant stated a preference for a more traditional approach to the submission of the ES. This was how they were proceeding but the approach would be kept under review.

### ***Specific decisions/ follow-up required***

The following actions were agreed:

- First points of contact for the Applicant and the Inspectorate were agreed until a case team is assembled – this will be communicated to the Applicant when it happens.
- The Inspectorate to set up project page on the National Infrastructure Planning website once NFOWF return the necessary project information.
- Next meeting to be arranged between the Applicant and the Inspectorate for early February 2021.