

Planning Inspectorate Case Team
Aquind Interconnector

By Email

15 April 2020

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Dear Mr Mahon

Re: Aquind Development Consent Order

Thank you for your letter, dated 26 March 2020, confirming that the Preliminary Meeting on 22 April 2020 has been postponed, due to the outbreak of the Coronavirus in the UK.

In line with the government's guidance on social-distancing and shielding, council staff are working from home to help prevent the spread of the Coronavirus. In response to the pandemic, and in line with its agreed Business Continuity Plan, Portsmouth City Council is currently focusing activity on business critical services, so it can focus its efforts on dealing with the public health crisis. Consequently, the council has had to suspend many of its day-to-day services and staff are being made available for redeployment to support business critical activities.

Staff shortages

The coronavirus is having an impact on staffing levels (due to childcare needs and sickness). Some officers in our DCO team are shielding, are part of the vulnerable category or self-isolating due to coronavirus symptoms, some of which have been concurrent for several weeks.

Other key officers in our DCO team have been re-deployed to assist with the delivery of the critical services during the COVID-19 emergency.

The overall impact of this is that the council does not currently have a sufficient number of officers available with the relevant expertise to enable the council to participate properly in the examination for the Aquind DCO process.

Other resources issues

The council has restrict access to its IT network to those staff providing critical services only. Officers in our DCO team are not considered business critical and have had restrictions on their use of the council's IT and telephone systems between the hours of 8:00 and 19:00 hrs.

In the absence of such technology the council is not able to properly co-ordinate and adequately prepare documents which need to be submitted as part of the DCO process.

The council relies upon other organisations (eg. Hampshire FA), to provide information and data to include in its submissions (ie local impact report and representations), but these organisations are not operating during the coronavirus outbreak. This is particularly true for the community groups for which the proposal may have the most significant impacts, such as allotment holders, sports clubs and open space user groups. At this time coordinating responses from such informal groups is not possible. Without access to this information, the council cannot make full and proper representations to the examination.

The council wishes to fully participate in the DCO process, but is currently unable to do so in the absence of the necessary technology, staff and skills, whilst the emergency situation continues.

Public Participation

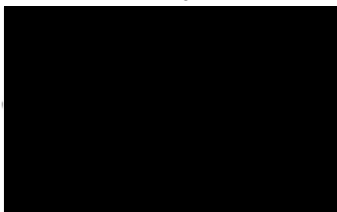
If the preliminary meeting and open floor hearing were to be replaced by either written representations or online hearings this would prohibit some members of the public from participating in the process, in particular for those hard to reach groups, those with disabilities and those who do not have access or ability to use modern technology. There is considerable local interest in this project and we would be very concerned if local people were not able to fully engage in the process.

Legitimate Expectation and Procedural Unfairness

The council and members of the public have a legitimate expectation that they can participate fully in the DCO process, in accordance with the legislation, and that the site visit will take place in normal traffic conditions. Given the unprecedented circumstances, the council consider that it would be procedurally unfair if the Examining Authority were to commence the examination, during the COVID-19 crisis.

In light of the above, the council respectfully requests that the Examining Authority do not proceed with a preliminary meeting by way of written representation and trigger the commencement of the examination, whilst the public health crisis continues.

Yours sincerely

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Ian Maguire
Assistant Director of Planning and Economic Growth