

Rt Hon Alok Sharma MP
Secretary of State
Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
1 Victoria Street, Westminster
London SW1H 0ET

27 July 2020

Dear Secretary of State

Southampton to London Pipeline Project

I write, jointly, with the Leader of Rushmoor Borough Council, Cllr. David Clifford regarding the Southampton to London Pipeline Project (SLPP) and the Planning Inspectorate's Recommendation Report on which you will soon be making a determination. We wish to bring to your attention, specifically, the proposed approach by the Applicant, Esso Petroleum Company Ltd to the installation of the pipeline in Queen Elizabeth Park, Farnborough.

Firstly, we would like to recognise the strategic importance – as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) - of the SLPP, and our support for its delivery. Throughout the application process we have collectively sought to engage constructively with Esso's representatives to ensure that the Project can be delivered in a satisfactory way for all parties involved – and especially for the local residents we represent.

However, at the conclusion of the Planning Inspectorate's Examination, Esso remained insistent on a 'trenching' technique to install the pipeline within the Park to its significant detriment. This would include many mature trees likely felled and numerous others' root zones impacted, perhaps fatally. We therefore request, should you be minded to approve the application, you impose conditions that protect the Park from any unnecessary impacts of the pipeline.

Queen Elizabeth Park, once part of the Farnborough Hill estate and formerly the outer reaches of the Royal Windsor Great Park, is a 24-acre area of woodland containing a great many veteran and notable trees, including a centuries old beech tree known locally as 'The Fairy Tree'. It offers a tranquil oasis for local people, and a haven for a vast variety of wildlife. The Park is therefore a highly valued local asset and there is, understandably, significant feeling that it must be preserved. This is evident from a several thousand signature-strong petition, and the hundreds of individual letters of concern we have received from constituents in recent months.

Rushmoor Borough Council, and local residents' group Friends of Queen Elizabeth Park, have tried to work with Esso to have them seriously consider appropriate alternatives to their approach, and have made substantial representations during the Examination to this effect.

These submissions to the enquiry have been measured, detailed, and - we are pleased to say - taken seriously by the Examining Authority. Esso's own technical expert conceded during cross-examination at one of the Examination's hearings that a drilling, rather than trenching, technique would be feasible. However, Esso have consistently failed to explore such means of installation that would have a less harmful environmental effect on our park.

The Council, as a result, commissioned independent consultants to undertake a preliminary assessment into the feasibility of using the Horizontal Directional Drilling (HDD) method for pipeline installation, as an alternative to the conventional 'open cut' method proposed by Esso. Their report concluded that there was insufficient information within the application to enable an accurate assessment of all possible construction techniques to be undertaken, with groundwater, geological and topographic surveys required. However, from the geology of boreholes drilled on the adjacent site, these consultants could see no reason why a less invasive technique could not be undertaken. The Inspectorate's draft consultation Development Consent Order (DCO), issued at Deadline 6, leaves the determination of the method of installation to Rushmoor Borough Council, and we are therefore hopeful that the final DCO submitted to your Department reflects this published draft.

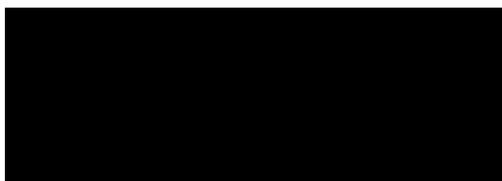
Having reflected upon the above, we would ask you to ensure conditions in any DCO:

- hold to the position set out in draft that leaves determination of the method of pipeline installation in Queen Elizabeth Park to Rushmoor Borough Council; and
- deliver on Esso's existing commitments to temporarily re-provide the children's play area within the Park (and away from their proposed working areas) during installation, and to reinstate it at completion to at least the same standard that exists now.

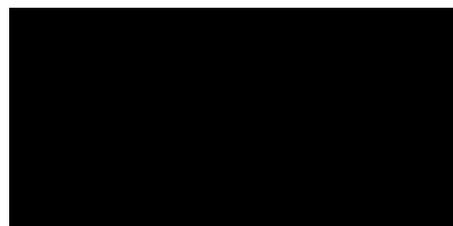
In any event, we can assure you that Rushmoor, as the local planning authority, would remain open-minded and determine matters relating to the Park purely on their merits. Rushmoor recognises the need for the pipeline, its timely construction, and is committed to ensuring it proceeds expeditiously through local planning processes should you approve it.

The value of Queen Elizabeth Park to our local community cannot be overstated, particularly given the recent COVID-19 restrictions. The Park is a quiet haven for residents, with an array of wildlife and woodland, and has been a source of exploration, education and enjoyment for generations of local families – please help us ensure it remains this way.

With very best wishes,



Leo Docherty MP
Member of Parliament for Aldershot



Cllr. David Clifford
Leader, Rushmoor Borough Council