

APPENDIX 4.1: PUBLIC CONSULTATION REPORT

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1.1	Purpose Of Document	1
1.2	SSEN Transmission Route Selection Process	1
1.3	Route Stage: Consultation	2
1.4	Route Stage: Consultation Responses, Key Issues and How The Project Responded	3
1.5	Route Stage: SSEN Transmission Project Responses	4
1.6	Alignment Stage: Consultation	5
1.7	Alignment Stage: Consultation Responses, Key Issues and How the Project Responded	6
1.8	Alignment Stage: SSEN Transmission Project Responses	7
1.9	Conclusions	9

Annexes

Annex A: Melgarve Cluster Project: Stathspey & Badenoch Herald Advertisements and The Press and Journal Advertisements

Annex B: Melgarve Cluster Project: Route Stage Consultation Event Letters – November & December 2021

Annex C: Melgarve Cluster Project: Alignment Stage Exhibition Boards – February 2023

Annex D: Melgarve Cluster Project: Alignment Stage Consultation Booklet - February 2023

Annex E: Melgarve Cluster Project: Mail Drop (Alignment Stage) – February 2023

Annex F: Summary of Route Stage Consultation Feedback from Statutory & Non-Statutory Consultees – May 2022

Annex G: Summary of Route Stage Consultation Feedback from Local Community & General Public - May 2022

Annex H: Summary of Alignment Stage Consultation Feedback from Statutory & Non-Statutory Consultees – June 2023

1.1 Purpose of Document

- 1.1.1 This document provides a summary of the public consultation undertaken by SSEN Transmission, in relation to the proposed Melgarve Cluster Project (the Proposed Development) which seeks consent under section 37 of the Electricity Act 1989 to connect consented Cloiche Wind Farm¹ and the proposed Dell 2 Wind Farm² to the national grid via 132 kV connections to the existing Melgarve substation near Laggan in the Highlands.
- 1.1.2 There is no statutory requirement to undertake formal consultation for applications made under section 37 of the Electricity Act 1989. However, SSEN Transmission has sought to maintain an open dialogue with local communities in the vicinity of the Proposed Development throughout the evolution of the project. This has included carrying out virtual consultation events (due to Covid) during the route option stage and in person and virtual consultation events during the alignment selection stage. These were to engage with any local elected members such as Ward Councillors and Community Councils, landowners, residents, community groups and businesses that may be affected. SSEN Transmission held parallel communication with key statutory consultees to understand their views on the proposals at the route and alignment selection stages, which has led to key areas of design evolution and development.
- 1.1.3 This Public Consultation Report documents the consultation process for the project which has been undertaken. It describes the key responses received and details the actions taken in response to the issues raised.
- 1.1.4 The main body of this Public Consultation Report is supported by a series of appendices.

1.2 SSEN Transmission Route Selection Process

- 1.2.1 The approach to the route selection of the Proposed Development was informed by SSEN Transmission's guidance 'Procedures for Routeing Overhead Lines and Underground Cables of 132 kV and above' (September 2020). The guidance sets out SSEN Transmission's approach to selecting a route for an OHL or UGC. This document helps SSEN Transmission to meet its obligations under Schedule 9 of the Electricity Act 1989, which requires transmission license holders:
- to have a regard to the desirability of preserving natural beauty, of conserving flora, fauna and geological or physiographical features of special interest and of protecting sites, buildings and objects of architectural, historic or archaeological interests; and
 - to do what they reasonably can to mitigate any effect that the proposals would have on the natural beauty of the countryside or on any such flora, fauna, features, sites, buildings or objects.
- 1.2.2 The guidance develops a process which aims to balance these environmental considerations with technical and economic considerations throughout the route options process.
- 1.2.3 The guidance splits a project into six stages, as follows:
- Pre-Routeing Activities: Selection of proposed connection option;
 - Stage 0: Routeing strategy development;
 - Stage 1: Corridor Selection;
 - Stage 2: Route Selection;
 - Stage 3: Alignment Selection; and
 - Stage 4: EIA and consenting.

¹ Received consent from the Scottish Government in November 2023.

² It should be noted that in August 2019, an application to build and operate Dell Wind Farm was consented following an appeal to the Scottish Ministers. However, the wind farm has been re-designed at the same location to increase capacity and energy capture with fewer wind turbines. The application for Dell 2 Wind Farm was submitted to the Scottish Government Energy Consents Unit on behalf of the Scottish Ministers on 11th March 2024 and awaits decision. It is this proposed re-designed Dell 2 Wind Farm that this EIA Report refers to throughout, rather than the previously consented design.

1.2.4 The stages that are carried out can vary depending on the type, nature and size of a project and consultation is carried out at each stage of the process as appropriate. At both route selection stage and alignment selection stage consultation was undertaken for the Proposed Development.

1.3 Route Stage: Consultation

1.3.1 The appraisal of route options was set out in a Consultation Document³, published in October 2021. The Consultation Document provided a summary of project need, the route option process that had been undertaken and a description of the route options appraised. The Consultation Document sought comments from stakeholders and members of the public on the route option studies undertaken, and the rationale for, and approach to, the selection of the preferred route.

1.3.2 To engage stakeholders on the project, (while remaining in line with the Town and Country Planning (Miscellaneous Temporary Modifications) (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Regulations 2020, that were in place at the time), SSEN Transmission undertook a Teams meeting hosted by The Highland Council and held online consultations via a virtual consultation platform to enable the local community to experience the full exhibition from home on a computer, tablet or mobile device.

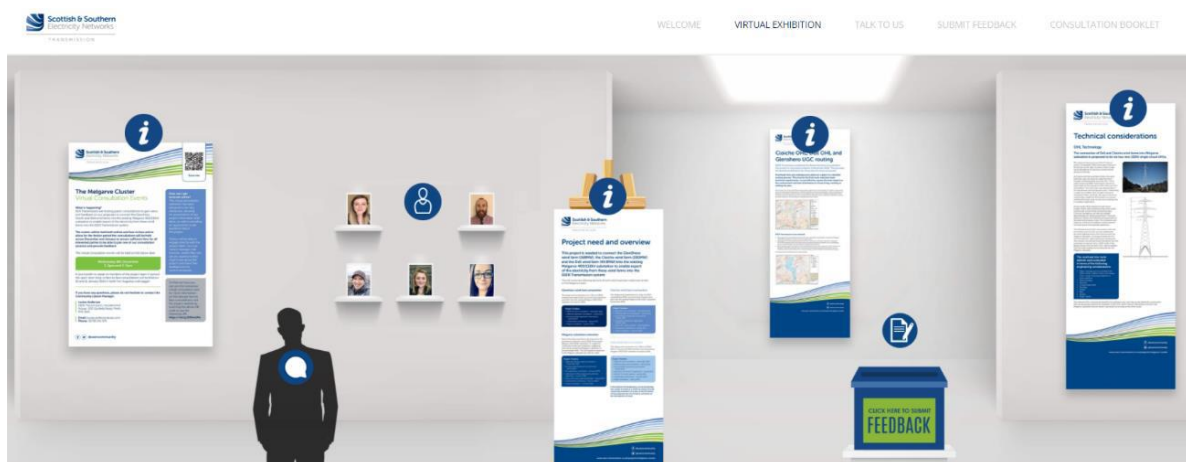
1.3.3 In the Teams meeting with representatives from THC, NatureScot, SEPA and HES on 3rd November 2021, SSEN Transmission delivered presentations on the route options to the representatives in attendance and followed with a round table discussion of each statutory consultee's comments and suggested actions in relation to the proposals.

1.3.4 During the online consultation via a virtual consultation platform, visitors were able to engage directly with the project team, via a live chat function, where they could ask any questions about the project and share their feedback on the current proposals. The online exhibition was designed to look and feel like a real consultation in a community hall, with exhibition boards, maps, and the opportunity to share views on the proposals as illustrated in **Plate 1.1**. A feedback form was provided on the portal and all visitors were invited to complete this.

1.3.5 The virtual consultation events took place via the project website <https://www.ssen-transmission.co.uk/projects/project-map/melgarve-cluster/> at the following times:

- 10th January 2022: virtual public exhibition 16:00 – 19:00; and
- 11th January 2022: virtual public exhibition 16:00 – 19:00.

Plate 1.1: Virtual Event Portal



³ Melgarve Cluster Consultation Document: Route Options (October 2021), produced by SSEN Transmission

1.3.6 The virtual consultation events were advertised in the local Press and Journal on 8th, 10th and 12th November 2021, and then again on 3rd, 5th and 7th January 2022. They were advertised in the Stathspey & Badenoch Herald on 2nd December 2021 and 6th January 2022 (see **Annex A**). SSEN Transmission's social media channels and the dedicated project management website were also used throughout this period to advertise the virtual consultation events. A letter informing of the event was also delivered to 822 households within the vicinity of the Melgarve Cluster proposals on 25th November 2021. This was followed up by a letter on 22nd December 2021 advising that the in-person events were moved to a virtual platform due to Coronavirus guidance. The letters can be seen in **Annex B**.

1.4 Route Stage: Consultation Responses, Key Issues and How The Project Responded

- 1.4.1 Comments received from all stakeholders (including members of the public) in response to the Consultation Document (October 2021), or following virtual consultation events, were documented in a Report on Consultation, published in May 2022.⁴
- 1.4.2 **Annex F** sets out a summary of the feedback received from statutory and non-statutory consultees following the consultation period (October to December 2021). **Annex G** sets out a summary of the feedback received from the local community and general public during the live virtual consultation events held in January 2022.
- 1.4.3 The consultation responses for the Proposed Development largely related to the design evolution of the connections. It was outlined that the development proposals must demonstrate sensitivity and respect towards the local distinctiveness of the landscape. The natural heritage of the area was raised as a key issue, in particular the River Spey SAC, which is protected for salmon, freshwater pearl mussel, sea lamprey and otter.
- 1.4.4 The need for supporting landscape and visual assessment material such as ZTVs or visualisations was outlined and advice was given on the SLQs of the Cairngorms National Park and on WLA 19 - Braeroy - Glenshirra - Creag Meagaidh and WLA 20 – Monadhliath. It was recommended that the choice of route and connection type should be informed by further landscape and visual assessment.
- 1.4.5 In relation to habitats, it was stated that the route selection process should be informed by surveys and assessments and that appropriate assessments should be undertaken to ensure suitable mitigation is provided to avoid disturbance impacts. Attention was also given to likely presence of Annex 1 habitat types including blanket bog and alpine heath.
- 1.4.6 In relation to ornithology, it was recommended that potential impacts to wider countryside birds were assessed against the relevant Natural Heritage Zone (NHZ) population. Attention was brought to the potential for the connection proposals to impact on the NHZ golden eagle population, both on their own and in combination with the other developments in the area. It was recommended that available information from surveys and assessments for other proposals in this area, is used to inform the route selection process so that it minimises potential impacts to golden eagles.
- 1.4.7 Advice also focussed on transport and access. It was noted that a TA should accompany the applications and that it should include a Framework Construction Traffic Management Plan (CTMP) aimed at minimising the impact of the construction-related traffic on all other users of the local public roads, including any measures deemed necessary to protect the safety of cyclists and pedestrians.
- 1.4.8 The community consultation responses from the virtual public exhibition events raised a number of comments querying the rationale behind the use of OHL rather than UGC for the Dell and Cloiche connections due to Glenshero and Stronelaairg wind farms opting for an UGC connection. The comments suggested a need to revisit the rationale regarding OHL rather than UGC or, if this is not practicable, rationalise the connections as

⁴ Melgarve Cluster Project: Report on Consultation (Route Stage) (May 2022), produced by SSEN Transmission

far as possible. Also raised by consultees was the need to consider the use of single circuit lattice towers against the use of double circuit lattice towers in more detail.

- 1.4.9 Concern for the potential for adverse effects on the operation of existing and proposed wind farms in the areas and interference with users of the access tracks was also raised in consultee comments. The main points raised related to the connection for Cloiche and Dell both passing through or adjacent to Stronelairg Wind Farm and access roads. In contrast, comments raised by statutory consultees requested that existing infrastructure and already disturbed ground be utilised as far as possible to minimise disruption to as-yet undisturbed areas.
- 1.4.10 Concerns were raised in relation to potential disruption of the community and tourism in the area as a result of the project. This related to the local community's sensitivity to transport disruption. Consultees encouraged SSEN Transmission to provide a Design and Access Statement addressing these concerns. An appropriate Transport Assessment was also requested, which should detail any and all abnormal loads requiring to be transported and how existing structures along the route(s) would be affected.
- 1.4.11 Potential impacts on sporting activities within the Stronelairg estate (namely shooting) were mentioned, as well as potential impacts on long distance walking routes. The potential for adverse effects on the scenic qualities of the area by new OHLs was raised, in particular on the Special Landscape Qualities (SLQs) of the Cairngorms National Park and on Wild Land Area (WLA) 19 - Braeroy - Glenshirra - Creag Meagaidh and WLA 20 – Monadhliath. Comments from consultees also related to protected species, given the rural nature of the area, in close proximity to native woodland and watercourses which is likely to be home to or foraging ground for several protected species.
- 1.4.12 Potential adverse effects on designated natural heritage sites, sensitive habitats, including peat soils, and sensitive bird species, including Golden Eagle, were raised. Concerns were raised in relation to woodland impacts. A number of comments were also raised in relation to flooding and drainage, with an emphasis on designing the developments to accommodate a 1 in 200 year storm event.
- 1.4.13 Several requests for additional direct consultation on various elements of the development design were made during consultation, including with SSE Glendoe to discuss Glendoe Hydro Scheme assets, with SSE Renewables for Cloiche Wind Farm, and further consultation with the public and local community councils.

1.5 Route Stage: SSEN Transmission Project Responses

- 1.5.1 **Annex F** and **Annex G** provides the SSEN Transmission project responses to the consultation responses received at route stage consultation, along with confirmation of the action to be taken, where relevant.

To address the consultation responses, the following actions were undertaken:

- The reasons for the preferred use of OHL rather than UGC were set out in SSEN Transmission responses throughout **Annex F** and **Annex G** which were included in the May 2022 Route Stage Report on Consultation⁴. However, the design of the proposals was still progressing at route stage and alternative options, including use of UGC connections, were explored further as the project design progressed through to the alignment stage.
- Rationalisation of the two separate OHL connections into a single lattice tower solution was a key element of the design development moving forwards, and opportunities to consolidate connections to minimise development footprint were explored alongside further technical and environmental studies.
- Moving forwards, the OHL or UGC alignment would be intended to be designed and positioned so as not to interfere with the operation or output of any wind farm or the Glendoe Hydro Scheme. At route stage, SSEN Transmission discussed the development design further with developers and

landowners to arrive at a design solution which best accommodates all parties while making best use of existing infrastructure and already disturbed ground;

- Landscape and visual impacts were considered further as part of the alignment selection stage, and alignments with minimal potential impacts on the landscape and visual receptors in the vicinity, on balance with other environmental considerations were sought. The potential impacts of the development on the nearby WLAs were considered.
- Assessments have been undertaken as part of the EIA process to determine potential impacts on designated natural heritage sites and their qualifying interests, woodland areas, sensitive terrestrial and bird species and sensitive habitats, including peat soils and heathland, and ensure suitable mitigation is provided to avoid any significant impacts arising.
- The Proposed Development was been designed with flooding and drainage in mind, as well as potential impacts upon the Glendoe Reservoir catchment.
- Transport assessments and Construction Traffic Management Plans will be implemented during the construction period to limit the impact on residents and road users. SSEN Transmission will set up a Community Liaison Group prior to construction starting in order to keep the local community and businesses up to date with construction activities regularly during the construction period. SSEN Transmission will also look to coordinate with wind farm developers to ensure impacts are managed. Care will be taken to ensure that existing paths and rights of way are not blocked and that disruption to recreational and / or tourism interests are minimised.
- Further consultation was organised with key statutory and non-statutory consultees, local councillors and local communities to provide updates on the project during subsequent project stages. Formal consultation was organised on completion of the alignment studies to enable comments to be sought on the preferred alignment identified.

1.5.2 All comments and considerations at route stage were taken forward into the alignment stage. This process remained inclusive, seeking further consultation where appropriate.

1.5.3 The reporting on the consultation process concluded with the confirmation of the proposed route option derived from the preferred route option. The route option put forward as the proposed route option from the above was **Route Option C3, Route Option D1 and Route Option G1** as it was considered to provide an optimum balance of environmental, technical and cost factors.

1.5.4 All comments and considerations at route stage were taken forward into the alignment stage. This process remained inclusive, seeking further consultation where appropriate.

1.6 Alignment Stage: Consultation

1.6.1 A Consultation Document⁵ setting out the results of the alignment selection process was made available for download via the online project website in January 2023: <https://www.ssen-transmission.co.uk/projects/project-map/melgarve-cluster/>

1.6.2 In-person consultation events were also undertaken to seek the views of the local community. The consultation events were held at the following times:

- 8th February 2023 2-7pm, Laggan Community Hall; and
- 9th February 2023 2-7pm, Fort Augustus Village Hall.

⁵ Melgarve Cluster Project: Consultation Document: Alignment Options (January 2023), produced by SSEN Transmission

- 1.6.3 A copy of the exhibition boards is provided in **Annex C**, whilst a copy of the alignment stage consultation booklet that was made available for attendees to take away from the event is included in **Annex D**.
- 1.6.4 Community Councils and councillors were made aware of the Consultation Document, and updates were issued via email. In addition, SSEN Transmission held virtual meetings with representatives from THC, NatureScot, and SEPA on 7th and 17th February 2023. At these meetings, SSEN Transmission delivered presentations on the alignment options to the representatives in attendance and followed with a round table discussion of each statutory consultee's comments and suggested actions in relation to the proposals.
- 1.6.5 Consultation events were advertised in the local press, SSEN Transmission's social media channels and the dedicated project website. The consultation events were advertised in the local Press and Journal on 23rd, 25th, 27th and 30th January and the 1st and 3rd of February 2023 (see **Annex A**). They were advertised in the Stathspey & Badenoch Herald on 26th January and 2nd of February 2023 (see **Annex A**). A mail drop informing of the event was also carried out to 854 households ahead of the alignment stage consultation, as can be seen in **Annex E**.
- 1.7 Alignment Stage: Consultation Responses, Key Issues and How The Project Responded**
- 1.7.1 Although no feedback forms were received by post or online after the virtual consultation, comments received from stakeholders in response to the Consultation Document or during the consultation events, were documented in a Report on Consultation, published in June 2022.⁶
- 1.7.2 The Report on Consultation also confirmed how SSEN Transmission responded to comments received by stakeholders on the preferred alignment and design solution, and detailed the actions that would be taken as the project progressed through to the EIA and consenting stage.
- 1.7.3 **Annex H** sets out a summary of the feedback received from statutory and non-statutory consultees following the consultation period (January to March 2023). Feedback received from the local community and general public in response to the public consultation events was minimal and no feedback forms were received by post or online after the virtual consultation.
- 1.7.4 At alignment stage, the consultation responses raised a number of comments seeking further understanding and justification for the use of OHL rather than UGC for parts of the connection. Comments also sought clarification or set requirements for further assessment, particularly in relation to landscape and visual and ornithological constraints. These points included recommendations for continued consultation with stakeholders, and the importance of various surveys / assessments for landscape and visual considerations as the project progresses. The importance of the surrounding infrastructure as existing operational assets was also highlighted by stakeholders.
- 1.7.5 Some of the key themes discussed in person with members of the public at the events related to technology types including the use of OHL and UGC, traffic concerns regarding the main access roads for construction and hours of HGV traffic, and timings on key project steps.
- 1.7.6 Priority peatland habitats and Policy 3 of the Fourth National Planning Framework (NPF4) was highlighted by statutory and non-statutory consultees as it would be particularly relevant when considering the implications of this proposal. The importance of Wild Land Areas (WLAs) was also highlighted given the project's proximity to WLAs and the potential for significant effects to arise.
- 1.7.7 A lot of the statutory and non-statutory consultees, referred to their previous comments on the Melgarve Cluster Project provided at route stage. They suggested that these comments remained valid.

⁶ Melgarve Cluster Project: Report on Consultation – Alignment Options (June 2023), produced by SSEN Transmission

1.8 Alignment Stage: SSEN Transmission Project Responses

- 1.8.1 **Annex H** provides the SSEN Transmission project responses to the consultation responses received at alignment stage consultation, along with confirmation of the action to be taken, where relevant.
- 1.8.2 The concerns of stakeholders in relation to the use of OHL rather than UGC for parts of the connection and the need for the protection of existing infrastructure were noted by SSEN Transmission, and justification for the use of OHL over UGC can be seen throughout **Annex H** as was set out in the June 2023 Alignment Stage Report on Consultation.⁶
- 1.8.3 Given the somewhat conflicting preferences across environmental and engineering topic considerations the choice of a proposed alignment and proposed technology for the Proposed Development was not clear cut. While there were some slight preferences for particular alignments from an environmental perspective, the differences between the options were subtle. Whereas there was often a clear engineering preference focused on the technical feasibility of constructing each of the options. This balance was taken into careful consideration when coming to an overall proposed alignment.
- 1.8.4 Ultimately, the decision to progress with an UGC solution through the existing (Stronelairg), the proposed (Dell) and the consented (Cloiche) wind farms was dictated by technical requirements given it is not possible to achieve an OHL alignment through these areas due to the proximity to wind turbines and the resultant 'wake effect' that can lead to premature fatigue and failure of the OHL. As a result, an UGC was deemed to be required on this project at higher elevations through the wind farms. A section of UGC would also be required for the final approach to Melgarve Substation in order to cross under the Beaully-Denny 400 kV line.
- 1.8.5 For the remainder of the Proposed Development, an OHL solution is stipulated. This is in line with SSEN Transmission's obligations to develop an efficient, co-ordinated and economical system of electricity transmission, and the contracted position between SSEN Transmission and the Cloiche and Dell 2 wind farm developers. In environmental terms, it is also considered that the use of OHL has some advantages over UGC in terms of its ability to span over and therefore reduce impacts on sensitive habitats, biodiversity and watercourses. This accords with the requirements of NPF4 (which was introduced between the routing and alignment stages) which seeks to minimise impacts on Peat. In engineering terms, there are clear cut advantages in using OHL over UGC, including in terms of traversing terrain, rock, water crossings and other underground assets as well as in terms of maintenance.
- 1.8.6 Further justification for the use of OHL over UGC as set out in the June 2023 Alignment Stage Report on Consultation⁶ included:
- Although land has already been disturbed in the area from Junction B down to Melgarve substation by the existing Stronelairg UGC, consideration was given to the interaction between the existing Stronelairg UGC and any potential future UGC circuits. UGC circuits generate heat, and the performance/rating of a cable is impacted by the temperature that it can safely be operated at. The inclusion of additional UGC circuits in proximity results in an increase in the heating of the surrounding soil mass and would therefore negatively impact the existing Stronelairg UGC circuit and the existing capacity for which it is designed. Furthermore, the heating effect of the existing Stronelairg UGC on any potential future UGC circuits for Cloiche and Dell 2 wind farms would result in the need of an easement width that well exceeds the width of previously disturbed ground. Issues of thermal interaction can be exacerbated in areas of deepening which are necessary to cross watercourses and other natural obstacles. As soil temperatures increase with depth, circuit spacing would have to increase further in these cases. An additional construction easement width of approximately 40 m over undisturbed ground would be envisaged to accommodate any new UGC for the potential Cloiche and Dell circuits where they run in proximity to the existing Stronelairg UGC. Given these technical constraints, and to minimise disturbance to habitats and watercourse, an OHL solution from Junction B to Melgarve substation was preferred.

- Resilience of an UGC circuit has also been considered. While reliability of UGC is generally good with relatively low failure rates, SSEN Transition must consider contingency scenarios should remedial works become necessary in order to maintain operation of the circuit or re-establish operation in the shortest possible timeframe. The size and weight of plant necessary for the excavation, retrieval and replacement of UGC and associated joints well exceeds that of an OHL and would be impractical to do so should that ever become a necessity in winter. Experience with the installation of the Stonelaire UGC has demonstrated these challenges and is another key factor in the technology selection.
- Maintenance of a line in the future has also been considered. In the event of a fault on a line, the fault can be detected and rectified in a matter of days with OHL. However, if a fault occurs in an UGC, the time needed to locate and rectifying the fault increases and could potentially take months to fix and cause ongoing disruption to the land.
- Undergrounding a line would result in increased impact to the surrounding ground, as well as the overall footprint of the project. The installation of UGC would require a cable trench, a 30 m – 37 m construction zone with an approximately 6 m wide and 1.5 m deep trench to be dug. It is considered that this can increase potential to damage local environments during construction.

1.8.7 SSEN Transmission continued correspondence with, and in some cases had follow-up meetings with the following stakeholders to discuss comments and possible infrastructure interfaces further:

- SIMEC (Glenshero WF and Jahama Highland Estate);
- SSE Generation Limited as owner/operator of Glendoe hydro scheme;
- SSE Renewables (Cloiche WF); and
- Stonelaire Wind Farm (SWFL).

1.8.8 The continued correspondence often related to the surrounding infrastructure as existing operational assets and how the Proposed Development would exit in their context. Details of 'as built' infrastructure was utilised in the design of the Proposed Development to ensure there would be no significant impacts on any existing operational assets.

1.8.9 As can be seen throughout **Annex H** and was set out in the June 2023 Alignment Stage Report on Consultation,⁶ the alignment selection process involved consideration of the potential landscape and visual effects of the OHL. Further assessment has since been included in the EIA stage, and a landscape and visual impact assessment (LVIA) has been included in the EIA Report.

1.8.10 A Transport Assessment (TA) that sets out the main access roads for construction and hours of HGV traffic, and timings on key project steps for the Proposed Development, with justifications for the suitability of those routes has been included as an appendix with the EIA Report.

1.8.11 SSEN Transmission have continued to engage with consultees as the project has progressed in relation to peat depths, peat quality and habitat survey results. Potential effects on WLAs have been considered in developing the Proposed Development. The Proposed Development would not be situated within the WLA and would be seen only in the context of other similar developments including the Melgarve Substation and Beaulay – Denny 400 kV OHL from within a very small and peripheral part of it. It is therefore considered that Proposed Development would be unlikely to lead to any significant loss of wild land characteristics within the WLA and a WLA assessment has not been included in the EIA Report.

1.8.12 All comments and considerations raised through the alignment stage consultation, as well as those resulting from any further meetings and liaison with stakeholders were taken forwards to the EIA and consenting stage, through which assessments will be carried out for all relevant environmental aspects. The process remained inclusive, seeking further consultation where appropriate.

1.9 Conclusions

- 1.9.1 SSEN Transmission reviewed and considered the responses provided by stakeholders following the route and alignment stage consultations. SSEN Transmission concluded from their review that the proposed development set out within the Melgarve Cluster Alignment Options Consultation Document⁵ should be taken forward as the proposed design solution, subject to some minor alterations resulting from further design and survey work, any further meetings and liaison with stakeholders with respect to the proposed locations of cable sealing end compounds and the UGC alignment. This therefore was how the Proposed Development as presented in the EIA Report was arrived at. The Proposed Development is considered to provide an appropriate balance between the competing preferences of environmental, engineering and cost factors. Where applicable, it has taken into consideration the views and comments from statutory and non-statutory consultees as well as communities and the public.