Introduction

In March 2020 we launched the Skye Reinforcement Project, detailing our plans to replace the existing electricity transmission powerline that runs from Fort Augustus to Ardmore in the north of Skye. The current line is coming to the end of its operational life, a replacement line is required to maintain a secure supply to homes and businesses along its route, as well as to the Western Isles.

Keeping the lights on and improving network reliability, the replacement line will have a greater capacity to enable the connection of renewable energy looking to connect to the transmission network, supporting the transition to ‘net zero’ emissions. Given the scale of the replacement project, the replacement line will also allow the connection of additional renewables to help meet Government ‘net zero’ climate change targets. This will greatly reduce the need for additional major works in the future, helping to keep local disruption to a minimum.

This report sets out in more detail the stakeholder engagement process, how stakeholders have initially responded to our proposals, and the next steps in the consultation process. We will not be publishing detailed consultation responses here, this will follow in our formal report on the routeing consultation which is due to be published in October 2020.
Past Engagement
Between 2016 and 2018 we consulted on proposals to install a second overhead wood pole line to Skye, broadly in parallel with the existing line, to connect a number of renewable electricity generators to the transmission network.

Following a review of the asset condition of the existing overhead line it was identified that this needed replacement to maintain security of supply. This project was therefore stopped in 2018 to allow for a more holistic and enduring approach that will meet future security of supply needs, connect renewables and support the transition to net zero.

2020 Engagement
In March 2020 we published our Skye Reinforcement Project Consultation Document which presented the preferred 1km wide route proposed for the replacement line. To ensure that our proposals were transparent, this report detailed a number of alternative routes considered across the distinct project sections and outlined the justification for selection of a proposed route in each. Engaging early at this stage of the development process is vital to provide the opportunity for stakeholders to review and provide their views on the proposed route and drivers for the project.

To engage with stakeholders and seek feedback on our proposals we announced a series of public consultation events along the route to provide an opportunity for stakeholders to review the report, share their feedback on our proposals, as well as publishing our consultation materials on our website.

Covid-19
As the pandemic developed in early March, we worked closely with UK and Scottish government and the energy regulator, Ofgem, on the latest guidance to ensure we supported efforts to limit and delay the spread of Coronavirus (Covid-19), ensuring the wellbeing of our customers, colleagues and communities.

To ensure the safety of customers, colleagues and communities we postponed all planned external engagement events across the business in line with Government guidance, resulting in the postponement of scheduled face-to-face consultation events for the Skye Reinforcement Project. Aligning with government restrictions put in place around social gatherings. We remain committed to holding face to face engagement events when it is safe to do so.
**Virtual consultations**

Following Scottish Government guidance on virtual consultations we developed a bespoke virtual consultation platform to host online events on 9, 10 and 11 June 2020. These virtual events were held as an alternative to face-to-face events due to the restrictions put in place around social gatherings.

The virtual platform was designed to enable stakeholders to experience the full exhibition from home on a computer, tablet or mobile device. It was designed to look and feel like a face-to-face consultation in a community hall, with exhibition boards, maps, interactive videos and the opportunity to share views on the proposals. A live chat function was available at advertised times to allow attendees to ask questions and get responses from the project team.

**Promotion of virtual event**

- **Local radio advertisement campaign** reaching up to 24,000 people
- **Targeted social media campaign** - reaching up to 17,853 people
- **Project video** – viewed by 14,400
- **Press advertisements** – circulation to 12,553

The virtual consultation events reached a large number of stakeholders over a four week period with over 4500 people visiting the virtual consultation platform to view the proposals. The consultations enabled us to reach a much wider stakeholder group than ever before. We also saw a large number of stakeholders engage with the platform, speaking to the project team via phone, skype and email.

**Snap shot of the virtual engagement**

- 4555 unique visitors to the virtual portal over 30 days
- 60 visitors to our three interactive sessions
- 54 visitors asked questions to the project team during the interactive events
- 84 emails sharing feedback
- 24 feedback completed forms

The virtual event could be accessed from the project website: ssen-transmission.co.uk/projects/skye-reinforcement/.
Consultation feedback

In developing the Skye Reinforcement Project, we consider technical, environmental, economic and geographic constraints on the design and safe operation of the assets along with views expressed by stakeholders. Gathering views from a variety of stakeholders is vital to developing and shaping a solution that balances different views of stakeholders.

To ensure that we are transparent throughout our consultation process it is vital that we provided the opportunity to share the feedback we have received from stakeholders on the proposals we have presented.

Feedback overview from stakeholders including: Scottish Natural Heritage, Scottish Environment Protection Agency, The Highland Council, Scottish Forestry, RSPB, Historic Environment Scotland, Community Councils, Community members

- Concern about the visual impact of new overhead line towers
- The towers should not be bigger than the current towers on Skye
- The whole line should be undergrounded to reduce the visual impact on Skye and the surrounding areas.
- Broadband connectivity on Skye is poor in some places making it different to join the virtual consultations. Face to face consultation events would have been preferred.
- It is not clear why the line cannot be a woodpole the whole length of the line rather than steel lattice tower as proposed.
- The virtual consultation did a good job in the circumstances.
- The replacement line should follow the route of the existing powerline rather than the proposed route.
- At the next consultation could the new maps be more detailed, some properties close to the proposed route were not on the map.
- More information on the potential impact on private water supply is needed.
- Visual representations of the power lines would be helpful to better understand the visual impact.
- Meeting renewable targets is of paramount importance to Scotland and the planet. Therefore, capacity should allow additional to be generated.
- Future video and articles need more detail with regards to the need for increased capacity for additional renewables.
- In future illustrations should show the existing poles/pylons and the impact on routes as they stand at the present time
- It is important the line is upgraded to allow renewables on Skye to be connected to the national grid.

- The chat function was sometimes slow in responding to questions
- Methodology is heavily slanted in favour of what is easiest and most cost effective for SSE rather than being slanted in favour of environmental concerns and on the effect of local communities
- It is not clear why there has been a change of route selection to the currently proposed route.
- Appreciating the need to upgrade, the visual intrusion and environmental impact should not be compromised.
- Protection of existing forestry and compensatory planting where necessary.
- Robust traffic management plan, including a plan for any required public road improvements and construction working hours.
- Protection of the water environment, including sensitive habitats such as Groundwater Dependent Terrestrial Ecosystems.
- Use of sensitive construction techniques, for example novel approaches to access issues to minimise construction of new permanent stone tracks.
- Avoid and minimise adverse impacts to sensitive environmental designated sites such as Special Protection Areas (SPA) and Special Areas of Conservation (SAC). Examples include the Cullins SPA and Kinloch and Kyleakin Hills SAC.
- Concerns related to landscape and visual impacts, particularly on Wild Land and National Scenic Areas.
- Share information on the potential impacts on protected species.
- Consideration of land slide risk (particularly around Glengarry).
- Consideration for the opportunities to rationalise existing electricity infrastructure.
- Consideration should be given to different technology solutions including undergrounding where appropriate.
What is next?

We understand and recognise the value of the feedback provided by members of the public during all engagements and consultations. Without this valuable feedback, the project development team would be unable to progress projects and reach a balanced proposal.

The feedback we have received during our engagement to date will shape the next phase of project, where we will carry out detailed engineering and design surveys. Without this feedback we would not be able to progress a project that best reflects the view of our stakeholders. We will be publishing the detailed consultation responses in our formal report on the routeing consultation which is due to be published in October 2020.

Continuing our engagement

Our focus in developing this project is to reach mutually acceptable outcomes and consensual decision making. Consulting more widely on the options and trying to reach compromise to respect the views of various stakeholder bodies. We are committed to working closely with all stakeholder groups with a direct interest or influence in the projects design, ensuring transparency and consistency throughout.

Where there are competing interests, we will clearly explain how we have considered the views of stakeholders and the potential hierarchy of how the various factors influencing decisions have been considered, be they economic implications, environmental designations or visual impact concerns.

Although this current phase of consultation is now complete, this does not bring engagement on the project to a close. We will continue to engage with all stakeholders through the next phase of the project, up to and including the planned alignment consultation in spring/summer 2021. Our team will be working closely with all stakeholders during the next stage of the development process.

www.ssen-transmission.co.uk/projects/skye-reinforcement
Skye Reinforcement Project

Keep in touch
If you have any questions or require further information regarding SSEN Transmission’s Projects, please do not hesitate to contact the Skye Reinforcement Project Community Liaison Manager, Lisa Marchi.

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