## Public Consultation for Overhead Electricity Transmission Line EIA Projects – Engaging Local Communities

Stakeholder consultation and engagement is an essential part of an effective development process, including the EIA process, and should allow changes to a scheme to be considered and incorporated throughout project development. For developers, stakeholders, and decision makers one of the challenges in taking forward a development proposal is to ensure that stakeholder engagement is undertaken in a way which is meaningful, inclusive and timely. How can this be achieved as part of the EIA for overhead transmission line projects, and are there any key requirements?

**What does “successful” public consultation look like?**

The key issue in relation to overhead transmission line projects is acknowledged by relevant guidance published by transmission licence holders, including National Grid, Scottish Power Energy Networks and Scottish Hydro Electric Transmission, to be landscape and visual amenity. This is an issue which can evoke strong feeling among communities, particularly in rural and scenic locations. Guidance published by transmission licence holders recommends a number of design principles be followed in order to minimise potential landscape and visual impacts, while also recommending frequent interaction with consultation bodies and local communities throughout the early stages of project planning.

A ‘successful’ consultation might look different in terms of its achievements depending on whose perspective it is considered from. For a developer, the outcomes of a successful consultation might include the following:

- Completion of public consultation in a timely manner;
- Good attendance of consultation events by local communities;
- Identification of people’s concerns; and
- Avoidance of legal challenge.

For a local community, the outcomes of a successful consultation would be more likely to include:

- A perception that the consultation process was ‘fair’;
- A willingness on the part of the developer to listen to people’s concerns and take action to address them; and
- A solution that represents the best compromise between the developer’s ambitions and local community concerns.

Decision makers would be keen to ensure that local communities have been given ample opportunity for involvement in the route selection and project planning stages, and that developers have provided timely feedback to all stakeholders at key stages of project planning, particularly to cover design changes such as changes to the route for a new transmission line.

There are a number of challenges associated with achieving these objectives to the satisfaction of all parties, many of which relate to the length and scale of a new transmission infrastructure project. For any project, development constraints (e.g. lack of an alternative site, cost, timescale) are typical; therefore, there is a need for an effective and proportionate approach to consultation. Early dialogue with the decision maker to identify and agree a consultation strategy, including relevant consultation bodies and timescales for community consultation, will ensure an early focus on the context for the proposals and on areas of risk.

### Presenting Environmental, Technical and Socio-Economic Constraint Information

One of the greatest challenges in public consultation for EIA developments is the presentation of technically complex information to stakeholders. For transmission line projects, a developer needs to have considered all of the potential technical solutions for delivery of a connection, and determined that an overhead line is the most appropriate solution, before proceeding to the overhead line route selection stage.
Thereafter, the developer must ensure that a robust and comprehensive route selection exercise has been completed, ideally with advice from statutory consultation authorities regarding environmental sensitivities and locally important features. Once these two stages are complete, a developer would typically consult with local communities in order to gain further information on locally important features and any other local issues.

In order to successfully engage with local communities, it is important to build trust through adopting a transparent consultation process. The following recommendations for effective engagement, including presentation of technical, environmental and socio-economic information, are made:

- **Purpose**: advance planning will ensure that consultation is undertaken at key stages of the project development and that the purpose of the consultation events is clear.
- **Process**: consultation materials should set out what part of the overall consultation process each consultation event belongs within.
- **People**: clearly advertising the events (such as in newspapers, on local noticeboards and newsletters, on the internet, on the radio, social media) is essential in order to ensure the correct people are made aware and to allow as wide an engagement as possible. Engagement with community councils, MPs and MSPs is also recommended. During the events, appropriate members of the project team should be available to engage with attendees and ensure that a variety of questions can be answered. In addition, efforts should be made to engage with the full community, which may include deposit of materials in public places for review by the public in remote areas.
- **Content**: information can be presented across a variety of media (e.g. reports, maps, web pages, newsletters); however, first and foremost all information should be fit-for-purpose and concise, with clear intent to target local communities effectively. They should be presented in plain English and be clear about what questions are being asked.
- **Context**: project team members must be familiar with potential local issues, including cumulative developments, and must be absolutely clear to the public and stakeholders about what’s in scope and what’s already been ruled out, and why. The project team must also be honest with people about any aspects of the project that may change, in order to manage potential uncertainties.
- **Outcome**: feedback forms should be made available at each event and on the project website, which should be structured around the key questions that are being asked.

**Feedback, Monitoring and Evaluation**: after each consultation event, relevant experiences among the project team should be shared and reviewed. This will assist in maintaining a consistent approach among the team to addressing different queries from the public/attendees and in managing any particular challenges.

In conclusion, a successful consultation process which truly informs the EIA process can be challenging to achieve for large-scale transmission line projects where local communities can be keen to raise objections. Key requirements include early dialogue with the decision maker to agree a well-planned consultation strategy, and a transparent process characterised by meaningful dialogue with local communities.