

National Grid – Going underground in the North Wessex Downs:

North Wessex Downs Visual Impact Provision (VIP) project update

This note has been prepared for Wiltshire Council's Devizes Area Board to provide a progress update on the construction and community activities for the North Wessex Down VIP project.

To recap, the project will see 13 pylons and approximately 4.6km of existing overhead line removed close to the Millenium White Horse and the site of the Civil War battle of Roundway Down, north of Devizes, and replaced with underground cables.

Once completed, the scheme will transform the skyline and views in this part of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape and enhance the landscape for the many local people and visitors who regularly enjoy it.

The project has been developed over several years in collaboration with stakeholders including the North Wessex Downs National Landscape, Wiltshire Council, local landowners, town and parish councils and local people.

Construction update

Having received planning approval in autumn 2023, construction work started at the beginning of the year and National Grid's appointed main contractor Balfour Beatty has been continuing to make good progress on the initial phase of activity, which is summarised below:

Archaeological surveys

- Prior to the start of the construction work, an extensive programme of archaeology surveys was undertaken across the project site which had been agreed having worked closely with technical stakeholders including Wiltshire Council and Historic England.
- Wessex Archaeology were appointed to conduct the surveys, which began in January. Using a 'strip, map, record' method, large open trenches between 2,500m² – 30,000m² were excavated in seven locations along the length of the route.
- Once the topsoil was removed, expert archaeologists excavated each trench by hand to locate and assess any archaeology present, then fully reinstating each area once the works were complete. Only archaeological remains that would be potentially affected by the project were investigated, with an aim to not disturb any remains unnecessarily.
- The surveys revealed that the North Wessex Downs VIP project site is located in a landscape that is rich in archaeology and indicates:
 - Activity from the Early Neolithic (4000 to 3350 BC) through to the post medieval period (1500 to 1800 AD)
 - A previously unknown Early Iron Age (700 to 400 BC) settlement comprising of up to six roundhouses (to the west of the A361).
 - Settlement activity from the Late Iron Age (100BC to AD 43) and Romano – British period (AD43 to 410) on the western part of the route near Conscience Lane
 - Finds have included a well-preserved skeleton of a large dog from a Romano-British ditch and a bone comb that was most likely used in wool production and slag fragments which suggest metal working activities. Signs of prehistoric activity were uncovered including a series of large postholes that possibly indicate a remnant of a structure. Lead bullets and a 3-inch 4-pound iron cannonball were also found, discovered close to Roundway Hill, thought to date from the Battle of Roundway Down in 1643.
- All finds are being carefully recorded and will be archived at the Wiltshire Museum.

Enabling work

- A programme of enabling work began in spring, which resulted in the project becoming much more visible in the community. The first phase of activity included vegetation clearance (carefully timed to take place ahead of the bird nesting season) and preparation for the installation of the temporary site compound and project offices in the area adjacent to the Hopton Industrial Estate.
- A key part of the initial work on site has involved the construction of the temporary stone haul road which runs the length of the project route. This has been created to enable the project team to access the site, allowing construction vehicles and HGVs to safely carry out excavation works, move soil to and from storage areas and deliver the cables on large drums along with the sub soil and topsoil mounds. The temporary haul road is due to be completed by the autumn and will ensure that construction traffic will not need to use any local roads including Conscience Lane.
- Construction work has also been ongoing over the last few months to install four new temporary pylons, two each at the western and eastern ends of the route corridor at Rickpiece Plantation and Horton Road respectively. These 'one-armed' pylons have allowed us to divert the existing overhead lines a short distance to provide space for the team to construct the new sealing end compounds (SECs) at either end of the new underground section, while ensuring there is no disruption to the network. The SECs will connect the new underground cables to the remaining existing overhead line on completion of the project.
- Work is also now underway on excavating the trenches and installing the ducting that will house the new underground cables. Three cables are included in each trench, with two trenches either side of the temporary haul road, making a total of 12 cables. The ducts are buried 1m-1.5m below the surface, below deep ploughing depth, and then covered with protective tiles and backfilled with the topsoil reinstated. The first cables are due to be delivered in the early autumn.

National Grid in the community

- The project team hosted its first **Community Liaison Group (CLG)** meeting in January, where we briefed invited stakeholders about the project and the construction programme. The group has been set up so that local groups and organisations can hear the latest on the project, report any problems and provide feedback. The group provides a forum for discussion and will meet throughout the construction phase. The next meeting is scheduled to take place in October. Members include representatives from local schools, town and parish councils, community and user groups, and wildlife organisations. Meetings are by invitation only.
- In March we arranged and held three **public information events** in Bishops Cannings, Devizes and Rowde. We spoke to more than 200 people over three days, taking the opportunity to explain the construction process, answer questions about the project and advising local people what they can expect to see over the next two years that work is taking place. The events generated a significant amount of positive feedback from the local community, even providing an opportunity to speak to *BBC Radio Wiltshire*.
- In June, members of the project team hosted a group of walkers to learn about project as one of a series of events organised during the popular **North Wessex Downs Walking Festival**. Starting at the Millenium White Horse, the five-mile walk followed the path across Roundway Hill and the site of the Battle of Roundway Down, before joining the Mid Wiltshire Way towards Beacon Hill and Oliver's Castle. 16 walkers attended the event and were able to see the progress being made, learn about the archaeology and understand more about the positive impact the project will have on the landscape.

- We issued the first of a series of community newsletters to local residents during the summer, introducing the project as we move into the first stages of construction and providing an overview of VIP in England and Wales.
- In July, National Grid and Wessex Archaeology organised and hosted two events as part of the **UK's annual Festival of Archaeology**. Local residents and history enthusiasts were invited to a family friendly drop-in event at Devizes Town Hall to learn about what has been discovered and see the finds first-hand, including:
 - A bone comb that was most likely used in wool production and slag fragments which suggest metal working activities.
 - Details about a well-preserved skeleton of a large dog that was recovered in an area of settlement activity dating back to the Romano-British period.
 - Lead bullets and a 3-inch 4-pound iron cannonball, discovered close to Roundway Hill, thought to date from the Battle of Roundway Down in 1643.
- Virtual Reality (VR) headsets enabled people to explore the lives of people living in Iron Age and Romano-British settlements, as well as during the English Civil War, informed by the evidence they've left behind. The project team spoke to approximately 60 people during the day.
- In the evening the team gave a talk about the archaeology that had been discovered at Wiltshire Museum that was attended by over 50 people.
- National Grid's Community Grant Programme is aimed at community organisations and charities in areas where our work impacts local people and supports projects that meet local community needs by providing a range of benefits. As part of our engagement we've been encouraging local organisations to apply and to date funding has been awarded to four local initiatives including:
 - Devizes Outdoor Celebratory Arts – working with 45 young people to develop and deliver their own public outdoor cultural event.
 - Caenhill Countryside Centre – creating a workshop area and outdoor classes where children will learn about their countryside, their local provision of food and more, supported by a dedicated team who can assist and tutor SEND placements.
 - The Mind Tree Café – redecorating the cafe building and revamping outside space to be able to host workshops, provide a space for the community to come together, and sell fruits, vegetables, and flowers at an affordable price for an estimated 500 members of the community.
 - Clean Up Devizes Squad – around 60 people will be replanting both roundabouts in the town with a mix of wildflowers, pollinator friendly plants and bulbs to improve the biodiversity of the area as well as its aesthetic.