

# Meeting with representatives of SPEN regarding the application with ELC for Branxton Substation

23<sup>rd</sup> October 2023, Innerwick Village Hall, from 6.45 to 9pm

Chris Bruce, Chair of ELCC, introduced Allan Mitchell and Ross Laird from SPEN.

Ross Laird (RL) took notes of questions that could not be answered and undertook to get back to Chris as soon as possible.

Around 25 local residents attended.

Allan Mitchell (AM) outlined the background to the submission. The first submission was 18 months ago but a lot of changes were required (or requested by ELC) so the current proposal **(23/00616/PM)** is a new one.

AM was asked to outline the works involved in the **55-month construction period**. [Note that this is outlined in Figure 2 in the EIA NON TECHNICAL SUMMARY.] AM emphasised the size and complexity of the project and how dependent the timescale was on weather and ground conditions. The excavation of the 'amphitheatre' to house the substation will itself take at least 12 months. He talked about the building of the haul road to minimise traffic on local roads and the dumping of excavated materials in a 'holding area' near the A1 in order to allow for regularising the traffic volume onto the roads. Both these issues were returned to later in the meeting.

AM was asked if there would need to be any blasting at the site. He thought not as the rocks were soft and could be dug out. A resident with geological expertise queried this. [Note that the relevant documents are EIA VOL II FIGURE 7\_2A BEDROCK GEOLOGY; EIA VOL II FIGURE 7\_2B SUPERFICIAL GEOLOGY; EIA VOL II FIGURE 7\_3 SOILS]

The next part of the meeting was devoted to discussion about why **the location of Branxton Sub-Station was chosen**, what consultation took place, and the planned capacity of the eventual substation for connections. Many of the community present felt that this set of decisions to locate the sub-station at Branxton (rather than, for example, on a site the other side of the A1 near Torness) has resulted in what they view as the unfettered industrialisation of the area without any overarching masterplan or sufficient consultation with the affected community.

AM said the location would have been a strategic Ofgem decision, probably some years ago, taking into consideration the importance of the planned Eastern Link in transferring power from Scotland to England and the finite lifespan of Torness, allowing for other power generating capacity on that site in the future. Several of the community members attending emphasised that there had been zero consultation about the location – which itself determined the location of other developments – rendering the planning process relatively pointless.

AM confirmed in answer to a question that the agreement to purchase the land on which the substation will sit has not yet been finalised. Later he divulged that SSE were seeking to compulsorily purchase some of the required land for their own cable entry. SPEN are objectors in a Public Enquiry into the extent of CPOs from SSE.

There was extensive, and rather confusing, discussion about how many connections from other developments (such as battery storage or solar farms) could be 'plugged in' to Branxton. AM said

that it was never conceived as attracting all these connections but was planned merely as an intrinsic part of the Eastern Link. AM seemed unaware of the plans for up to four other developments whose connections have been approved by Scottish Power Transmission (SPT) although this is publicly available information on the National Grid Tech Register. SPT are required by the conditions of their licence to offer a price and timescale for a connection to any developer who requests it. When pressed on how many connections could be added to Branxton as well as the Eastern Link and Berwick Bank Wind Farm, AM thought up to a further six to eight could be connected, assuming more efficient equipment and allowing for the constraints of the Branxton site. This would suggest that up to four more developments could potentially be approved by SPT.

The **cumulative impacts described in the planning documents** only cover those developments that are in the planning process (either East Lothian Council or the Scottish Government's Energy Consents Unit) at the time of submission.

It was agreed that AM is describing the situation and policies that currently stand, but they are clearly not fit for purpose and don't allow for spatial planning, assessment of cumulative impact or even any coherent traffic management plan, let alone meaningful consultation with the community. Chris Bruce said a meeting would take place with developers, planners and community reps later this week in order to address this. Whatever the outcome, there has to be a way for all developers to work collaboratively.

Chris also reiterated that the community is being consulted far too late in the process. The recent work on the Local Place Plan has indicated a desire for more safe active travel routes and these could have been planned as a legacy of the haul road(s) and cable routes.

The final part of the meeting was devoted to more specific questions about the proposals.

- A resident whose home and business is very close to the haul road asked if Police Scotland, Network Rail and Transport Scotland had approved the transport plans. AM replied that they had been consulted and had not brought up any issues, probably because there were no abnormal loads planned. He was not able to answer a question about how they would safeguard against rocks or debris falling onto the railway tracks from the lorries passing over the narrow bridge.
- RL confirmed that there would be a single Eastern Link telephone number to call if there were any issues, and a designated community liaison officer. It is not clear, with the number of planned projects, that community members will have any idea which developer is responsible for a particular issue.
- Other residents asked for detailed plans the construction traffic on the two small public roads and the railway bridge between the haul road and the A1. Neither EIAR VOL I CHAPTER 12 ACCESS TRAFFIC AND TRANSPORT or its associated Appendices seem to contain any further information than was in the initial consultation. Local residents do not see how local traffic can safely travel to or from the A1 across the construction traffic routes. It seems very odd that the impact of traffic is deemed not significant as it looks to be very significant – at least in this small area which is a key route to and from the A1. AM stated that they would be seeking guidance from East Lothian Council and Transport Scotland on this and in the final decisions on traffic management.
- There was concern expressed about the cumulative impact of the various projects on level of construction traffic on the A1 and the already dangerous junctions. AM stated that this was again the responsibility of ELC and TS. Some wondered how they can be

expected to design an overarching traffic management plan when there is no oversight of the number of projects or their timing.

- There were questions about the 'welfare site' near the A1 and whether it would be lit all the time. The answer was yes, but only when needed for security checks.
- A resident asked if there would be bunding at the sides of the haul road in order to reduce sound and sight of the haul road traffic. AM said no, but some parts of the road would anyway be dug into the slope of the field.
- AM was asked to confirm there would be double handling of the material removed from the Branxton site and put into the spoil heaps near the A1 and if other, perhaps noisier, vehicles would be used to load and unload. AM said that this would be up to the sub-contractors to choose.
- A resident questioned how noise was assessed. (See EIAR VOL I CHAPTER 11 NOISE AND VIBRATION). Measurements were made in dB, but this is not how humans perceive noise. They also thought there was insufficient explanation of the effect of cumulative additional noise and how this is perceived, or of the effect of wind direction.
- AM was asked about plans for community benefit, mitigation or even compensation for those who were directly affected. He responded that direct compensation was not possible but SPEN might be able to fund items of benefit to the wider community.
- AM was asked the cost of building the substation and he said between 100 and 200 million pounds.
- **Several residents requested an extension to the deadline for responses**, given the complexity of the submission and the fact that the documents are only available on the ELC site, which was down over a previous weekend. RL said that the Index prepared by Claire Duffy (since received and circulated) would help. AM said that they would consider the request but did not want further delay of this key piece of infrastructure. Residents did not think a short extension would make much difference to the grand plan but would give a more realistic timeframe for residents to respond to a project that will affect many for 5 years; and others in perpetuity.

**Post script – East Lothian Council did agree to an extension to the deadline for comments on this planning application. Deadline is now 14 November 2023.**