

Dedham Vale Society

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The Lord Gardiner of Kimble
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Dear Lord Gardiner,

Dedham Vale AONB Urgent Boundary Review Request

An extension to the Western end of the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty towards Sudbury has been formally requested by the Dedham Vale AONB & Stour Valley Partnership since November 2009. The extension, some 30km in area, was reviewed by the leading landscape consultants Alison Farmer Associates in 2016 which found that, with minor exceptions, the area would meet the demanding criteria for AONB designation.

The extension is supported, indeed campaigned for, by the MPs for the area, Rt Hon James Cleverly, Sir Bernard Jenkin and James Cartlidge. It is also strongly supported by Essex and Suffolk County Councils, Colchester Borough Council, Babergh and Braintree District Councils and all the Parish Councils in the area concerned. The extension is a principal goal of CPREssex, Suffolk Preservation Society, The Dedham Vale Society, The Colne Stour Countryside Association, Gainsborough's House in Sudbury, Essex University and by the principal landowners in the area concerned. We do not know of any opposition despite widespread local media coverage of the campaign for AONB status over the past decade. It has also been on the official list for review by Natural England since 2016.

National Grid (NG) Bramford to Twinstead Connection Proposals.

In view of the enormous anticipated future demand for green electricity, there is a massive investment in power generation by windfarms in the North Sea covering an area the size of Norfolk. A new nuclear power station, Sizewell C, will add greatly to that capacity. Although we understand that from 2030 it is planned that undersea cables will start to link these sources to London and probably to Europe as well, NG have made clear in their annual NOA document that further overland power lines will be required by 2028.

One additional 400kV line is planned from Bramford near Ipswich to Twinstead north of Halstead in Essex. A second may be routed South from Bramford probably through the Suffolk Coast & Heaths AONB to Tilbury. When NG were planning 18 miles of new 400kV cables from Bramford to Twinstead, in the period 2009-2013, the company agreed, after wide consultation, to put the connection underground through both the Northern stretch of the Dedham Vale AONB and also through the Stour Valley, even though it was not yet an AONB

(although it is managed as such). This was partly on the basis that AONB status had been applied for and was likely to be granted. In addition, the older 132kV overhead lines and infrastructure will be taken down. There was no commitment at the same time to underground the existing 400kV overhead lines, even though this would seem an obvious thing to do despite the extra cost. However, it was suggested that we might benefit from the £500m Ofgem fund to underground “eyesores” in protected (designated) landscapes.

In recent weeks NG has again begun consultation on the first of these new 400kV connections. Informal consultation ends on 6th May 2021. Preparation of Statutory Consultation material including a Preliminary Environmental Report is scheduled for Autumn/Winter 2021 leading, after due process, to Order application submission and Development Consent in Autumn 2022 with construction starting in Summer 2024 for completion in Winter 2028. (See attached NG timeline).

In its consultation document NG say:

The review work and cost analysis has confirmed that an underground cable should be progressed for Section E Dedham Vale, due to the area being designated as an AONB of national importance.....

Although recognised as a landscape of value and with links to famous artists, the Stour Valley (Section G) is not formally designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the review has identified this area as requiring further work to understand whether the additional cost of underground cables (£118m) in this location is justified. We are therefore seeking views from stakeholders and consumers as to whether the previous decision to underground this section still provides value for money.

In particular, National Grid would like to understand views on:

The landscape and cultural value of the Stour Valley;

Progress on proposals to extend the Dedham Vale AONB boundary in the Stour Valley towards Sudbury

The construction effects of undergrounding in the Stour Valley (on ecology, archaeology and traffic); and

Anything else National Grid should consider.

In response to the first point, you should know that Gainsborough’s House in nearby Sudbury, birthplace of the great artist Thomas Gainsborough, has been awarded a lottery grant which together with other funding is resulting in a major development costing around £10million. This will make it one of the principal arts centres in Eastern England. There will be opportunities for displaying artistic treasures of all kinds but the principal emphasis will be on the works of Gainsborough and Constable including those that relate to this part of the Stour valley. Indeed, the Stour Valley landscape is an integral part of the cultural heritage asset of which Gainsborough’s House is at the heart.

Both of these quintessentially English artists took their inspiration from the countryside found within the current and proposed extension of the AONB and in Gainsborough’s case from the same location in which this new row of pylons and cables is planned. There are some of his major paintings from here and many sketches derived from his walks throughout the district. It is anticipated that very large numbers of visitors will want to visit the House and also the

related countryside around. Councils in the area are keen to promote tourism and the green agenda and this will be particularly important for Sudbury which has suffered severely from the pandemic and the decline in retail.

The valley, which you and your two predecessors, Lord de Mauley and Lord Benyon as Ministers responsible for Protected Landscapes, have visited with me, is, as you have all commented, very beautiful and would still be recognisable by both Constable and Gainsborough. AONB designation ensuring the rural status of the valley and its artistic links will be key to the region's future prosperity.

This gentle countryside with its winding river, woods, fields, hedges, ancient parish churches, and so many listed properties, is loved by its inhabitants and admired world-wide as typical of the best type of landscape in lowland England. It should be treasured in its pristine state and blighting it with giant pylons and their massive alien swags of overhead lines will be hugely damaging. It is simply impossible to hide or screen such pylons as they dwarf and dominate all features of the landscape here. Over the period of generations for which these pylons will be there, the economic as well as the cultural and heritage loss is incalculable. This priceless green lung will be so much more valuable to future generations if left unsullied and will deliver huge wellbeing benefits.

The matter of AONB status for our proposed extension is now crucial.

NG have signalled clearly that if the area was to be part of the AONB, the connection would be undergrounded. Even if there were to be a clear message from you that the evaluation process was soon to be underway, it would be enormously helpful.

I attach a letter from Ms Hannah Thacker, head of Natural England for East Anglia, indicating progress but not realising the urgency required in our case, to which the Chairman of the Dedham Vale & Stour Valley Partnership, Cllr Nigel Chapman has replied confirming the Partnership's wish for the boundary review to go ahead.

On behalf of the Dedham Vale Society and also all the organisations and individuals mentioned earlier who have lobbied for many years for this extension, I urge you to make resources available to treat this much longed for boundary review with the immediate urgency it now requires. The Prime Minister's commitment to protect 30% of the UK's land – an additional 4% - by 2030 should start here and now.

I look forward to hearing from you.

With best wishes

Yours sincerely

Robert Erith

Robert Erith TD DL

President, The Dedham Vale Society

