



Cotswolds
National
Landscape

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Cotswolds VIP Project

The Cotswolds National Landscape (CNL) is a landscape whose distinctive character and natural beauty are so outstanding that it is in the nation's interest to safeguard it. The statutory purpose of its designation is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the area. Relevant authorities, including OFGEM and NGE, have a statutory duty to seek to further this purpose.

The CNL is also a living and working landscape in which the social and economic well-being of local communities are important considerations. Maintaining vibrant and thriving local communities is essential to the long-term future of the National Landscape.

The Cotswolds National Landscape Board is extremely disappointed to learn that Ofgem is minded to no longer fund the Cotswolds Visual Impact Provision (VIP) project.

The Cotswolds VIP project seeks to remove a 7km section of overhead electricity line and 16 pylons between Postlip Mill, near Winchcombe, and Dowdeswell Wood, east of Cheltenham. The section of overhead line crosses classic open Cotswold landscape. The visual impact is very high even from several miles away. The line also creates a near persistent crackle for walkers on the Cotswold Way National Trail and the well-used wider public rights of way network and access land.

Delivery of the Cotswolds Visual Impact Provision (VIP) project would significantly enhance the natural beauty, particularly with regards to scenic beauty, and tranquillity of the Cotswolds National Landscape – a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It would also offer a significant opportunity for people to experience increased understanding and enjoyment of the National Landscape and its special qualities – most notably along the Cotswold Way National Trail. As an internationally recognised iconic landscape, the Cotswolds attracts many hundreds of thousands of visitors – many of them walkers – whose enjoyment of the area around Cleeve Common, Belas Knap and other public rights of way in the vicinity of the project delivery would be significantly enhanced by completion of the VIP project.

For Ofgem to withdraw support for this project, part of a programme initiated by Ofgem 13 years ago and approved throughout, will be to miss an opportunity to dramatically improve one of the UK's most cherished landscapes, by reducing the existing visual impact of the electricity-infrastructure across this area of the Cotswolds. It would also represent a waste of the significant financial resources and time already invested in the project to date.

The VIP project in the Cotswolds was the fifth project area included in undergrounding work agreed for a group of five protected landscapes. VIP projects in the Peak District National Park, Dorset National Landscape, Eryri (Snowdonia) National Park and North Wessex Downs National Landscape are either completed or underway. Withdrawing support at this time for the Cotswolds project is a setback for residents, visitors, and the area itself – which has consistently high visitor numbers and high population density – all of whom would benefit from the works going ahead.

The development, design and consenting of Cotswolds Visual Impact Provision (VIP) project has been in progress for over six years and has involved a very thorough and highly engaging consultation period, the result of which is overwhelming public support for the project from the both the local community and stakeholders.

Government is increasingly looking to protected landscapes, National Landscapes and National parks, to deliver its priorities for nature recovery and climate change mitigation and adaptation and has backed this up with additional funding including through the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme, Wildlife Rich Habitat funding. Ofgem would be out step with the approach being taken by Government and would fail in its duty to seek to further the purpose of designation under Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000¹, as amended by the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023, which states:

In exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in an area of outstanding natural beauty in England, a relevant authority other than a devolved Welsh authority must seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area of outstanding natural beauty.

Ofgem would also be preventing the National Grid and stakeholders from delivering on the duty to seek to further the purposes of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the designated AONB.

Last year Ofgem indicated that the business and need case for the project would need to be very strong for it to be approved. The CNL Board believes that both business and need case developed by National Grid is extremely strong, far stronger than the other four VIP projects.

¹ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/37/section/85>

The Cotswolds VIP project is also extremely good value for money. The projected bill impact is £0.13 per year for 25 years, a total of £3.25, equivalent to a half pint of beer.

Cancelling the Cotswold VIP project does not send a positive message about Ofgem's approach to future infrastructure investment, particularly the Great Grid Upgrade and how the impact on landscape and other national and local assets will be dealt with. It would be a lost opportunity to demonstrate both commitment to the environment and that Ofgem listens to and takes into account the views of bill payers and other stakeholders.

For the above reasons the CNL Board does not support Ofgem's draft determination to reject NGET's application. OFGEM should support Option 3 (NGET's preferred option) to replace 71.6km (90%) of the ZF route with uprated overhead line and underground the remaining 7.4km (ZF.2(B) sub-section) through the Cotswolds by 2030.



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