

Gestingthorpe Parish Council Submission, to Braintree District Council, on

Planning Application 22/01147/FUL - Land Adjacent Butlers Wood and Waldergrave Wood West of A131 (In the Parishes of Bulmer and Twinstead)

A new 400/132 kilovolt (kV) Grid Supply Point (GSP) substation including two super grid transformers

Introduction The Parish Council recognises the need for low carbon electricity generation and a system to distribute it. The PC recognises the need for a new Grid Supply Point somewhere near Sudbury, whether or not it is part of a scheme to supply parts of the London area overland from the east coast, but it does not think the chosen location is the most suitable. Over the last decade, it made representations on these matters at the appropriate times.

The PC recognises that decisions have been made that are not reversible without major cost increases and delays. The PC is thus focussing on the action needed to minimise the impact of the Grid Supply Point on the area.

Gestingthorpe is in the Stour Valley South Ward of Braintree District.

The north-east of it is in the “Belchamp Brook Valley” part of the “A2 Stour River Valley A2b side valleys Landscape Area”. Most of the A2b area which is within the Parish is also in the Stour Valley Project Area.

The rest of the parish is in the B5 and B6 Yeldham and Wickham Farmland Plateau Landscape Areas.

The people of Gestingthorpe regularly walk or cycle throughout the Stour Valley area. We count ourselves lucky to live in such a fine landscape and feel a responsibility safeguard it for the enjoyment of future residents and of visitors seeking to enjoy its tranquillity and special landscape. Spoiling any part of the Stour Valley South Ward, spoils the whole effect.

The countryside between the Belchamps, Gestingthorpe, Wickham St Paul, Bulmer and Twinstead, has a low population density, with huge blocks of land crossed by (mostly) well-maintained footpaths and bridleways, but few roads. It valued by residents, day-trippers from elsewhere in the Region and people staying in the area to explore it in detail. Visitors patronise pubs, restaurants, and village shops. Some stay in inns, hotels, B&Bs and self-catering accommodation to explore the area. They help keep businesses viable in this thinly populated area.

In the last decade, especially since the Covid pandemic, ever more people have been coming into the countryside, not just to exercise physically, but to gain relief from the stresses of life in general, and especially of life in busy urban areas with little open space. More are seeking tranquil relaxing landscapes, rather than tourist hotspots, to improve their mental health.

The proposed Grid Supply Point Substation is located on the highest point in the area. While it is screened from the north and south by ancient woodland, it is exposed from the east and west. Adequate screening of the GSP from footpaths to the west and north of it is essential.

Landscape Areas The applicant is **incorrect** to consider to only the Farmland Plateau area in which the GSP will stand. The Stour Valley planning guidance state that development in adjacent areas, that would impinge on the skyline viewed from the valley should be avoided.

The Braintree Essex, A2 Stour River Valley Landscape Area was given Special Landscape Area status many years ago. The detailed Landscape Character Description made in 2006 did not take away of the specialness, it described it in more detail and assessed its sensitivity to development.

The Applicant is **incorrect** to be dismissive of the quality of the landscape of the Stour Valley and Farmland Plateau areas because they are not (not yet in the case of the former) parts of an AONB, and dismissive of the Public Rights of Way passing through them, because they are not named long-distance paths. This unacceptable. People need uncrowded quality landscape they can access without major journeys from home.

Areas with steep sided valleys make a refreshing contrast from the flatness of most of the East of England. As such features are on a smaller scale than in mountainous areas in other parts of England, they are more sensitive to infrastructure.

As the applicant has avoided discussion about landscape value, I have extracted the following from the 2006 Braintree section of the Essex CC Landscape Character Assessment, which includes interaction between Landscape Areas.

***Extracted from the LCA Section A2 STOUR RIVER VALLEY
(Sub Unit A2b) (the part of A2 that Gestingthorpe is in).***

Characteristics

Steep valley sides.

Narrow valley with a stream in the centre.

Meadows and small wet woodlands cover the floor of the valley.

Large arable fields are located on the valley slopes.

The Stour Valley also includes tributaries such as Belchamp Brook.

Sensitivities to Change.

Sensitive key characteristics and landscape elements within this character area include the patchwork of pasture and woodland on the valley sides and meadows (divided by hedges and/or wet ditches) on the valley floor, which would be sensitive to changes in land management.

The secluded and relatively tranquil character of the network of quiet rural lanes and public rights of way is also sensitive to change.

The skyline of the valley slopes is visually sensitive, with potential new development being highly visible within views across and along the valley floor.

Views to the valley sides from adjacent Landscape Character Areas are also sensitive. There is a relatively strong sense of historic integrity

Overall, this character area has relatively high sensitivity to change.

Suggested Landscape Planning Guidelines

Maintain cross-valley views and characteristic views across and along the valley.

Ensure any new development on valley sides is small scale, responding to historic settlement pattern, landscape setting and locally distinctive building styles.

Conserve the tranquil undeveloped character of the intimate tributary valley of Belchamp Brook.

Location The Grid Supply Point is only 1.8 km from the special A2b Landscape Area, where twin headed stream from Wickham St Pauls, (locally known as the Wickham Brook) flows down a steep narrow valley to join the Belchamp Brook. Looking up this valley one sees the 400 kV line “fencing off” the head of the valley. If one climbs the side of the valley to the site of the Roman Villa, the Line of 400 kV pylons leads the eye to the 132 kV line behind them and the 132 kV line to Belchamp. It will also guide the eye to the GSB Substation in the gap between the Butlers Wood and Waldegrave Wood, making it more noticeable in the landscape than it would be without being part of the enclosing effect of the 132 and 400 kV lines.

The map A2.7 (Environmental Appraisal Appendix 2: Landscape and Visual Appraisal April 2022, Annex 3 Figure A2.7) shows that there will be a distant view of the GSP, down to ground level, from Gestingthorpe Playing Field and from the Stour Valley Project Area opposite the houses on Nether Hill, with a closer one from the track from Wiggery to Wickham St Paul. It also shows there will be in view to the mid height from the footpaths in the area immediately south and east of Wiggery Wood.

Paths and other PRoW A glance at the Applicants PRoW Map A2.3 (Environmental Appraisal Appendix 2: Landscape and Visual Appraisal April 2022 , Annex 3 Figure A2.3) shows that (especially to the west of the GSP) there is a dense network of footpaths that can be linked up to allow long distance walks, including ones relieving parts of the St Edmund’s Way and Stour Valley walks, that become overused close to urban areas, and very muddy in wet conditions.

The above discussions demonstrate that effective Tree Screening is essential to protect the landscape, especially at the western end of the site. It is considered in depth on the following page.

Lighting It should be noted that this area of has some of the darkest skies in lowland England. In its “Dark Villages” and the lowly populated areas in between, skies are exceptionally dark (except when cloud reflects light from towns). There are several residents with astronomical telescopes. It is important that the promise of no lighting, except occasionally when personnel are visiting to do maintenance, is kept.

Noise The area between Bulmer, Wickham St Paul and Gestingthorpe is exceptionally quiet. At night individual vehicles on the Bulmer Tye to Hedingham road can be heard from the Belchamp Brook Valley.

Residents need protection from construction noise especially at night.

For the long term, in addition to high bunds to deflect air bourn noise, care is needed to avoid ground transmission in the underlying chalk. Constant transformer hum in very low background noise area is disturbing at night, even at very low levels, because of its inescapability.

Effective Tree Screening of the western end of the development.

As discussed previously, this is essential for the environment.

The screening proposed by the applicant would be inadequate in extent, height, and speed of establishment.

The Mound of excavated soil to be made at the west end of the site is beyond the area sown on the “PROPOSED SITE SECTIONS 1988069”. However, it is described as having a maximum height of 2.5 metres. This would make a small increase in the height of the screening, **provided** soil quality and moisture level in the excavated soil is suitable for rapid growth of trees planted in it. Consideration could be given, whether increasing the height of the mound, could increase the speed with which the screening reaches an effective height.

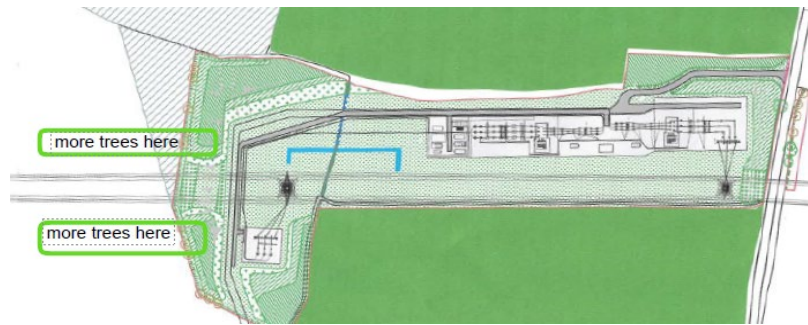
Extent of Shielding The principle shielding proposed comprises two narrow belts of trees, roughly parallel to the site boundary, on either side of an approximately 50 or 55 m wide gap, with about 40 m length of low various low growing scrub above 400 kV overhead lines and short lengths of woodland edge mix on either side. [Distances estimated because no scale bars on planning scheme.] The wide gap in the narrow line of trees would allow views, from the countryside into the site, from a wide angle.

This view into the site should be reduced by making the tree belts wider overall and by adding two **further rows of trees, positioned along either side of the 400 kV lines.** (*Sketch on p5*)

Woodland Planting It is proposed that the only 15% of the main planting will be with trees of height 3.0 to 3.5 m, 10% slow growing oaks and 5% weeping birches which have low growing branches. A further 45% between 1.75 and 2.0 m are proposed. The rest suggested will have planting heights between 0.4 and 1.5m.

Only 15% of the plantings proposed are evergreen, 10% holly and 5% privet, both planted at heights between 0.4 and 0.6 m.

The aim should be to provide as **high a level of screening as soon as possible**. In addition to increasing the planting area eastwards, a higher fraction of the planting should be:- with trees exceeding 3m in high; with evergreens; and with trees that gain height and volume rapidly. The planting could include non-natives, to be harvested once the natives have established.



Other Matters

Condition The Parish Council notes that following the new 132 kV supply from the GSP and the removal of the 132 kV to the east of the former “diamond crossing” south of Twinstead T, the 132 kV line from its new Supply to the area south of Twinstead will carry no current. The Parish Council asks for a Condition that the 132 kV cable, from its new supply point south of the GSP, to the “diamond crossing” site south of Twinstead T, will be removed.

Re the Local Suggestion to move the GSP compound’s contents westwards and move the north side cable sealing end and down-lines from pylon 4YL80 to new pylon 4YL 81, **Gestingthorpe Parish Council** considers that, if it were to be adopted, it would make of the more of compound’s apparatus close to the western end, and thus more difficult to screen. Should the suggestion be adopted, the “further rows of trees”, suggested for either side of the pylon line, illustrated above, would need to be over 100 m long.

SUMMARY

The Parish Council supports the generation of low carbon electricity and the provision of infrastructure to transmit it from areas of production to areas it is needed.

It is not convinced Walgrave Wood is the best location for a local Grid Supply Point, but it accepts that it is not practical try to alter the decisions that have been taken.

Gestingthorpe Parish Council thus calls upon Braintree District Planning Committee to require that the Applicant takes all possible measures to minimise the adverse effects of the development on the lives of residents, and the enjoyment of the valued landscape by residents and visitors, by attending to the issues detailed in its submission, including construction noise and the protection of the landscape by effective screening of the site.

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