

#### **4. NATIONAL GRID PROPOSALS IN THE WOODHEAD TUNNEL (A.862/RJB)**

##### **Introduction**

Members will recall consideration of a proposal by National Grid at the July Planning Committee to relocate the main electricity cable transmitting electricity from the Thorpe Marsh generating station in Yorkshire to Greater Manchester.

The relocation involves resiting the cable from the northern tunnel in the disused former Woodhead railway, built in Victorian era, to the newer (1953) southern tunnel.

The report to the July Committee is attached as Appendix A.

Whilst these works are permitted development in planning terms they raise concerns relating to the Authority's policies in the Structure and Local plans which seek to safeguard the future of the Woodhead tunnels for rail use. It is considered that the resiting of the cable in the southern tunnel prejudices future rail use of the tunnels as the southern tunnel is the most viable for rail on account of its width and structural condition.

The Committee resolved that

"The Government Office for the East Midlands, in liaison with the other government offices and the Minister for National Parks, is informed it needs to take a strategic lead in resolving the complex transport and environmental issues presented by this proposal. Furthermore, it be informed that the Authority considers the proposal is contrary to its Structure and Local Plan policies together with SPITS priorities to retain the Woodhead line as a potential rail link in the interests of achieving national park purposes.

The Peak District National Park Authority wishes to emphasise there is concern that this proposal will prejudice future consideration of options for the rail use of the tunnels. It further wishes to express concern that there has been insufficient meaningful consultation on this issue by National Grid which should be remedied by further consultation."

The Government Office for the East Midlands (G.O.E.M.) has responded and stated it does not wish to intervene. It states

"Your letter expresses concern that the National Grid proposal would prejudice future consideration of options for the rail use of the tunnels. Whilst this is certainly the case, it is also necessary when weighing this issue to take into account the likelihood of the rail route ever being reopened. In this respect you will be aware that a reopening scheme does not feature in any short, medium or long term priorities set out in DfT's 20 year forward look "Regional Planning assessment for rail in Yorkshire and Humberside". It is also significant that the recently published rail white paper, which looks ahead over the next 30 years, gives priority to the need to increase carrying capacity, reduce crowding and improve the quality and safety of rail services to meet the demands of existing customers and attract new ones. Given this emphasis on making the best use of the existing rail network over the next 30 years, there seems very little prospect of the Woodhead line being reopened even if a viable proposal could be put together. Therefore, from the information available, the proposed development would not appear to warrant the exceptional use of Secretary of State powers to make a direction withdrawing permitted development rights "

The response states further in relation to whether the proposal constitutes development requiring a formal Environmental Impact Assessment

"...from the information provided, the Secretary of State's view is that installation of underground electric cables does not fall within the indicative threshold for identification of Schedule 2 Development requiring an EIA and the planned development would not be likely to have significant effects on the environment."

## **Assessment**

It is clear that there are no plans to reopen the tunnels and the government does not consider the current proposal to introduce “cabling” in the southern tunnel as a threat to current transport strategies.

It was explained at the last Planning Committee that this raises strategic transport issues of regional or even national significance and without the support of the government; it would clearly not be possible for this Authority to effectively resist this proposal. However given the commitments in the Structure Plan, Local Plan, SPITS Business Plan and the concerns of the SPITS partnership, the Authority is attempting to generate further consideration of rail use by influencing others. Letters have been written to DEFRA, CLG, DfT and BERR asking that they consider a study of the potential of re-instating the rail route using the tunnels. In addition, papers will be taken to the next Transport Joint Issues Board for the Sheffield City Region in an attempt to generate further consideration of the future rail use of the tunnels and the concerns regarding the current NG proposal.

Members should be aware that the SPITS partnership has also written to DEFRA, CLG, DfT and BERR to outline their concerns of the limitations placed on the potential development of the SPITS area rail network by the proposal and the fact that no appraisal has been undertaken to assess this.

In addition, National Grid have been asked to take up the commitments it made in meetings with officers, to implement landscape schemes in connection with the “cabling” proposal at either end of the tunnel. This will help to address some of the concerns expressed by local people that the opportunity should be taken to soften the intrusive impact of the electricity infrastructure in these areas, but do so in a manner that does not further adversely affect the potential line of the rail route.

Furthermore National Grid have been reminded of the need to consult with this Authority and local people at the earliest opportunity on their proposals to for maintenance and/or replacement of the overhead lines either side of the tunnel. These are works which are programmed to be carried out in the next 5 to 10 years.

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

**The report be noted**