

STIRLING BEFORE PYLONS

acting with

FRIENDS OF THE OCHILS

as a Relevant Person Group

for the purposes of the

STIRLING SESSION

of the Public Inquiry into

**Scottish & Southern Energy's proposals for the
Beauly to Denny 400 KV Steel Tower Double Circuit
Overhead Electricity Transmission Line**

SUMMARY PRECOGNITION

Nicki Baker

**The Ochil Hills:
Landscape, visual impact, recreation & amenity**

1. My name is Nicki Baker. Details of my credentials are given in the full precognition.
2. This precognition deals with issues relating to landscape, visual impact, recreation and amenity, and focuses principally on the Ochil Hills. I write it from the perspective of someone who has lived in the area for the last 13 years, who goes walking in the western Ochils very frequently, and who cares deeply about the area.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE OCHIL HILLS

3. The Ochil Hills face south, in more ways than one. Their south-facing scarp slopes are their most spectacular feature, and the people to whom they mean so much are principally those of the central belt of Scotland, to the south, east and west of the hills. Some 45% of the entire population of Scotland lives within an hour's drive of the Ochils.
4. They are the first "real" hills, the first High Lands, that one encounters on the way north. The very name of the hills comes from the P-Celtic word "uchel", meaning high. Indeed, one may see the Ochils as the gateway to the highlands of Scotland, the place where the extensive, man-modified flat lands of the central belt start to give way to the very different geology and scenery to the north.
5. Hills, and the sort of rugged, "wild", unsettled, unspoilt environment they offer, are of immense importance to a substantial proportion of the population. John Mayhew, Head of Policy and Planning for the National Trust for Scotland, expressed this admirably in his precognition for the Strategy session; his statements apply just as much to the Ochil Hills as the Highlands to the north.

THE SOUTH FACE OF THE OCHILS

6. The south face of the Ochils is truly spectacular. As seen from the A91, as one travels east from Stirling, it offers a delightful range of crags and steep green slopes, liberally covered with gorse in places. This is eloquently set

out in SNH's Central Region Landscape Character Assessment, which describes its "precipitous slopes" as "forming a stunning backdrop to the contrasting farmed, settled floodplains of the Devon and Forth rivers".

7. The Assessment goes on to say: "Location and topography combine to make the Ochils, particularly the south-facing slopes, one of the most visually sensitive areas in Scotland" and goes on to give guidance to "protect the most visually sensitive ground on steep scarp slopes and the junction between escarpment and river plain from further encroachment by development".
8. The south face of the Ochils forms a very crucial part of the backdrop and setting of the City of Stirling and its iconic buildings, Stirling Castle and the National Wallace Monument. Image after image, on postcards, calendars and all sorts of other publications shows one or both, set against the Ochils. Without this stunning backdrop, their impact would be far less.
9. My evidence details many ways in which SSE's intentions for the power line go right against this assessment and its guidance, with its proposals to route it directly up the scarp slope of the Ochils, through Yellowcraig Wood which is of such importance to the views from the south including the settings of internationally significant buildings, and adding to the adverse visual impacts with the requirement to fell large swathes of the Wood for construction purposes and for ongoing safety reasons, as well as having adverse impacts on the University of Stirling HGDL, the Grade B Logie Kirk and Cemeteries and the fine ancient graveyard at the Old Kirk.

IMPACTS ON THE WESTERN OCHILS

10. The interior of the Ochils is an unquestionably highland area. It is hilly, rocky, craggy in parts. It is largely unsettled, ancient, "wild", relatively untouched, and provides a major contrast to the flat, settled carse. It is also of surprisingly small scale, and cannot contain the very large pylon line without severe adverse impacts.

11. The two tiny, ancient roads that give access from the carse up onto Sheriffmuir, into the interior of the western Ochils have very special characteristics, and contribute significantly to the experience of the area. SSE's "case study 4", in its assessment of undergrounding possibilities for the Strategy session, would impose very severe adverse impacts on one of these roads, as well as being a wholly impractical proposition.
12. The road across Sheriffmuir would also, in our view, prove unsuitable for any construction traffic other than private cars.
13. The use of a continuous, 8.5km construction track across Sheriffmuir, parallel to and close to the road, would itself create major adverse impacts, comparable to those of constructing an underground cable route elsewhere.
14. The Dumyat / Cocksburn Reservoir area is easily the most heavily visited part of the entire Ochil Hills range, and attracts twice the number of people who climb the popular Munro Schiehallion. Dumyat is a very well known and popular walk, offering magnificent views all the way up and down as well as from the top. The power line proposals would create very severe long-term adverse impacts on the area, as well as being hugely disruptive to all the recreational users of the area, during the years-long construction period.

THE EXISTING POWER LINE

15. I demonstrate how the existing 132 kV power line, while without question very out of place in the landscapes of the Ochils, nevertheless has very much less of an adverse impact than do the applicants' proposals.
16. I show that the conditions under which that old line was approved and constructed are very different from those of the current day, and this too minimises the argument that its existence serves to justify replacing it with the much larger line.

17. I argue that removal of the 132kV line would deliver significant benefits that should be taken into account in the assessment of the alternative proposals.

THE FAILURE OF THE ES TO RECOGNISE THE ISSUES

18. I look at aspects of the Non-Technical Summary of the Environmental Statement to illustrate the extraordinary degree of failure in the applicants' assessment of the impacts their proposals would have on the western Ochils area. I conclude that, in many areas, their statements were downright misleading. A particularly clear example of this is the statement:

“Moderate adverse effects on the visual amenity of designated areas have been predicted in [3] areas, [one of which is] within the Braco to Denny area indirectly on the Touch Hills AGLV.”

19. The Touch Hills are some 14 km away from the line. Conversely, the route goes right through the Ochil Hills AGLV, with major adverse impacts! Yet neither the impacts nor the AGLV got a mention.

UNSATISFACTORY ASPECTS OF THE CASE STUDY APPROACH USED IN DOCUMENT APL 5/16

20. I believe that the applicants' "case study 4" in their document APL 5/16 rather neatly proves the point we have been making since 2004: that it is simply impractical to consider routeing an underground cable to the east of Stirling.
21. I also demonstrate that the approach to evaluating proposals for underground cabling routes, as set out in APL 5/16, is unsatisfactory and fails to achieve the objectives it set itself.

THE NEED TO SEE FOR ONESELF

22. I set out the reasons for our rejection of the use of photomontages as anything other than a minor tool in the assessment of the visual impacts of

the power line, and demonstrate the acknowledged limitations of the technique by reference to one of the applicants' documents.

23. I urge anyone wishing to form an opinion on the merits of the issues raised to make visits in person to all the affected areas, as this is the only way one can hope to get an appropriate insight.

CONCLUSIONS

24. The community groups I have been participating in worked assiduously throughout the consultation process, preceding the publication of the final proposals, to bring to the applicants' attention all the impacts that their proposals would have on the Ochils area, both its south face and its interior. It has been a great disappointment to see this information ignored, and the major omissions of relevant assessments in the Environmental Statement, as emphasised so well by the bizarre distortions of the Non-Technical Summary.

25. Very early on in the Strategy session, Ms Wilson drew the attention of the Reporters to a part of the findings of the North Yorkshire case, and this has been repeatedly referred to. It is worth quoting again here:

“This section of line would have a very serious impact upon fine views over a Special Landscape Area towards the Cleveland Hills, the North York Moors National Park and the cherished landscape feature of Rosebery Topping. These views are enjoyed by many thousands of people including local residents of Nunthorpe and the surrounding area, users of the sports and recreational facilities between Nunthorpe and the bypass and road users on the immediate busy road network.

“ In addition to the impact on the wider view the line would also dominate and seriously impair the attractive rural setting of Nunthorpe Church, a Grade II listed building.

“We consider that the combination of impacts which cannot be satisfactorily avoided by alternative routeing and the large number of people affected are compelling reasons for requiring this section of line to be undergrounded.

26. In our view, this particular quote quite neatly matches the situation that we have in the Logie / Ochils scarp / Dumyat area of the proposed route, although our situation also includes major additional issues, such as the routing of the line directly up a prominent and highly scenic scarp slope, through felled trees, that provide the settings of internationally important and indeed iconic buildings, as well as impacting significantly on an HGDL.
27. All this, in our view, is enough to justify undergrounding the route to avoid these impacts and, as case study 4 so amply demonstrates, if that were the case then it would need to be put to the west of Stirling because there can be no suitable route to the east.