

Statement at Open Floor Hearing 1 for Equinor's SEP/DEP: 17/1/23

I am speaking to you today principally as a resident of Oulton, but I am also a longstanding member of Oulton Parish Council and a founder member of the Norfolk Parishes Movement for an OTN.

I would like to speak briefly on 3 points:

1. Cumulative effects on the health of individuals and the well-being of communities (Principal Issue 21)
2. Cumulative erosion of confidence in the NSIP planning process over the past 5 years
3. Viability and justifiability of the grid connection point (Principal Issue 1).

Firstly, cumulative effects on the health of individuals and communities (Principal Issue 21):

6 years ago, [REDACTED], looking forward to cultivating my vegetable garden and reading the huge pile of books beside my bed. But this was not to be.

This SEP/DEP proposal is the fourth such NSIP application to hit Norfolk.

During the whole of these past 6 years my disposable time and energy has been consistently dominated and regularly overwhelmed by, the need to research and respond to this successive wave of piecemeal NSIP applications for offshore wind farms " through organising meetings, attending hearings and writing detailed, evidence-based submissions to over 40 PINS deadlines.

My health has been affected, my wellbeing has been eroded and I have been robbed of my peace of mind. And I am not alone in that.

For the sake of my own mental and physical health, and that of my family, I cannot contemplate engaging again for another 6 months at this pitch. Other people will bravely step into the breach, but the cost is enormous.

At a Parish Council level, I yearn for the days when we used to have time to look after our footpaths, and contribute active support to community projects. Instead, our parishes are neglected, and we now have difficulty even in recruiting new councillors " as our current preoccupations are not enticing.

In this respect, without any one of these projects yet having got fully underway with construction " the cumulative negative effects on communities have already been devastating. Up and down the cable routes for Hornsea Three, Vanguard/Boreas, and now SEP/DEP " lie communities who are debilitated, demoralised and depleted of optimism about their future.

Many will not now engage with this NSIP process, not for lack of interest or concern, but for lack of ability to muster the resources to do so.

This is a seriously damaging situation and I hope the ExA will examine it seriously.

Secondly, the cumulative erosion of confidence in the planning process:

I have been tempted to appear before you today dressed as a kittiwake, if only to draw attention to the fact that, over the past 4 years and 3 other 6-month NSIP examinations, we have learned to our cost that seabirds are afforded better protection in international environmental law, than is afforded by UK planning law to its own human communities. This has been a startling discovery.

Try - as other Panels have - to seriously consider the weighting they should give in the planning balance to the damage caused by these projects to the onshore environment and communities, every Panel has felt obliged in the end to set those impacts aside in favour of the benefit of the renewable energy produced. Only the fate of kittiwakes has prompted the recommendation to refuse.

-Which has of course, in every case, been overturned by successive Secretaries of State.

This result must have been painful for the PINS Panels concerned.

But it is acutely painful for us to contemplate that this ExA might simply tread the same unprofitable path.

The power imbalance in the NSIP process is stark.

The Applicants have deep pockets, salaried permanent staff, and intimate knowledge of " and privileged access to " every part of this arcane process from The Crown Estate leasing round, through CION and DCO and CfD, to final construction.

Individuals and communities have absolutely none of these resources.

Bravely however, they have sought to participate in the process " as PINS invites them to do " only to be, in the end, ignored.

This experience over several years has been severely damaging to the confidence that communities and individuals now have in the fairness of the planning process - and that loss of faith can only do damage to a key element in the democratic consensus of this society.

However, this is not a cry for pity " this is an urgent appeal for an outbreak of rationality.

Despite all of the above, we have learned to have the utmost respect for the conscientious and forensic way in which successive Panels have examined the issues generated by these applications. Their failure to have a positive effect on the final decision has not reflected badly on their work, but on the limitations of the NSIP process itself.

However, the SEP/DEP project is readily capable of a better solution, which leads me to my final point.

I would like to comment on the viability - and justifiability - of the grid connection point (Principal Issue 1):

The SEP/DEP project has one unique characteristic in terms of Norfolk, in that it is a near-shore wind farm, close to The Wash, and an alternative, much less damaging, onshore grid connection could be made available. There is considerable evidence for the viability of a connection at Walpole or the adjacent Sutton Bridge and written evidence will be submitted to the Examination on this issue from several Interested Parties.

A grid connection at Walpole would eliminate at a stroke the extensive damage to the onshore environment and communities of Norfolk, represented by the use of Norwich Main. It would also avoid entirely the unfortunate suspicion of a predetermination of consent for the East Anglia Green pylon project, necessary to guarantee sufficient capacity for the onward transmission of electricity generated by SEP/DEP, when added to Hornsea Three.

I will leave a discussion of the detail of such a transfer of grid connection to another time: suffice it to say now that I urge the ExA to break free of this cycle of repetitive overturning of their NSIP decisions, and thoroughly explore a change to the grid connection point.

I'm sure you are aware that there are relevant planning precedents for both a split decision (approving the offshore and refusing the onshore works) - and for a recommendation to refuse on grounds of an inappropriate grid connection.

In the pursuit of clarity on this issue, it will be essential for the ExA to request the active participation in this Examination of National Grid, who have thus far resisted all efforts to involve them in explaining what is, in effect, their handiwork.

We all know that you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs, but far more eggs are being broken here, than is necessary.

Thank you for your time.

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