

Statement to West Burton OFH 24th January 2024

There is a lot in the news about what the country must do to decarbonise, and the mounting pressure on National Grid to deliver the networks to enable offshore wind. You may have seen or heard the “Great Grid Upgrade” campaign from National Grid, explaining the need to connect offshore wind to power the UK.

Offshore wind will provide 70% of the UK’s electricity by 2050. It must, therefore, be connected to the cities across the country, and to do that, we must lay out high voltage overhead power lines – or underground cables.

National Grid is already consulting on routes for such overhead lined across Lincolnshire, for NSIP schemes which would undoubtedly have environmental impact, but would make a significant contribution to delivering the lion’s share of the country's future energy.

It is for another examination to consider whether those benefits outweigh the harms, but there is an absolute requirement to deliver offshore wind, there is no alternative to wind being the backbone of our energy system.

Solar is different.

First of all, it will deliver a fraction of what offshore wind will deliver, between 7% to 10% of the UK’s electricity by 2050, even with 70GW to 90GW installed.

And it doesn’t need to be deployed in the way being proposed by the Applicant.

Deploying solar at scale, miles from a substation, creates unnecessary impact as well as the need for additional transmission lines.

Despite the Applicant’s protestations that their scheme is essential to deliver the UK Government’s 70GW ambition, this is not the case.

Germany is a fantastic case study for what can be achieved.

Germany has already delivered 80GW of solar, without a single large-scale ground mounted scheme of size being proposed at West Burton. Their largest scheme is less than 200MW, and over 70% of their capacity is installed on domestic and commercial rooftops.

In 2023, within a single year, Germany installed 14GW of solar. Half of this came from domestic rooftops alone.

Remember, this is a country with 50% greater land mass than the UK – and, despite having a higher solar gain than the UK, it chooses not to squander its land resources by deploying ground mounted solar at the scale being proposed by the Applicant in the UK.

By contrast, after 15 years, the UK has only installed 16GW of solar, and every day, we build more houses and commercial buildings without solar.

In the UK, the developers argue to the Examining Authorities that their large-scale solutions are the only way to deliver the Government's ambition – but, this is clearly not the case.

Over the years, we understand more about how we decarbonise, with clearer and louder calls for strategic co-ordination to deliver key technologies, effective use our land, and what our priorities must be.

This is not a hollow cry from 7000Acres. Strategic co-ordination is called for in reports by the Electricity Commissioner, Chris Skidmore, by the National Audit Office, by the BEIS Committee and by the UK Climate Change Committee.

We need independent and objective consideration of how best to deliver decarbonisation. Instead, we have a fractured landscape, where developers see opportunities and act in pursuit of their financial interests and lobby accordingly.

We have seen this through the last twists in the development of the National Policy Statements, where the Critical National Priority to deliver Offshore Wind, has been watered down to become a Critical National Priority to deliver...any form of low carbon generation, regardless of what it can contribute. It renders any effective prioritisation utterly meaningless.

Such jockeying is unhelpful in a world that can ill afford to put a foot wrong on the path to decarbonisation, because of shortages of skills, shortages of natural resources, shortages in supply chains, and shortages of time.

So, of course, the Applicant will reinforce their call for Urgency, given the Government's ambition for 70GW of solar;

...but from a starting point of 16 GW already installed;

...and 20 GW in a consenting process;

...and 130 GW in National Grid's development connection register,

With none of this being rooftop solar, there is a real risk that the opportunity to deliver the called for "rooftop revolution" will be redundant in the wake of this tide of ground-mounted development.

So, isn't it any wonder that the developer is advocating for urgency?

Their urgency is to get their scheme consented, before the Government wakes up to what it is presiding over, and the harm of having allowed such uncontrolled, uncoordinated development – which will, ultimately impede decarbonisation efforts.

So, we agree there is an urgency – but not to act rashly or in a way that will be cause for major regret.

We recognise that decarbonisation is genuinely difficult.

It is too complex and too challenging to leave exposed entirely to global market forces – which is why the government is scrambling to drive measures to support what really needs to be done – starting with unlocking the queue of grid connections to deliver offshore wind.

In the course of this examination, we have highlighted many examples where the Applicant has provided a one-sided view, to support their case. Their assertions on the inadequacy of rooftop solar and the absolute need for such large-scale ground mounted solar being clear examples.

Our real fear is that the reams of partial and mis-information presented by the Applicant, in the guise of evidence, cannot be sufficiently challenged within this process, and their words will be taken for the truth.

For the region, for the country, to deliver energy security and decarbonisation, this issue is too important to leave the Applicant to be trusted to produce their own body of evidence.

The country has a much clearer idea about what should be done to decarbonise. Major, sensible, objective reports have laid out the priorities as follows:

- Co-ordination and planning of the energy system
- Solving grid connectivity issues – especially to deliver offshore wind generation
- Accelerating deployment of wind and nuclear power generation
- The need to manage energy flexibility and intermittency of renewable energy sources.

There is absolutely no clamour for large-scale ground mounted solar.

The only voices you will hear pushing these schemes is from the developers themselves.

That fact alone should sound an alarm.

Amongst all this noise, the Examining Authority has to pick a way through.

And in this moment of turbulence, preside over a decision that will change the nature and character of the region for the rest of our lifetimes – and most of our children's lifetimes.

We must all have faith this decision is right.

Lastly, the premise of renewable energy is to protect the environment, not to destroy it in the process.

Thank you.