Regional Energy Strategic Plan policy framework consultation response.

The primary aim of this consultation is to streamline energy planning policy in order to try to achieve decarbonisation of the grid by 2030. This is an unrealistic, over-ambitious and frankly unachievable arbitrary date that is driving a one-dimensional approach to future electrical infrastructure development and is leading to poor, short-sighted decisions being made. The risk is that, by putting all the emphasis on how to achieve decarbonisation of the grid in the quickest way possible, the critical issue of achieving it in the best way possible has been overlooked. Thus, whilst I of course support coordinated development of the distribution system, I think this consultation is looking at the wrong sort of coordination. Instead of looking to separate the country into regions and focusing on how to fit new energy production transmission into a system that was designed for old-fashioned fossil fuelled energy production, the UK needs to think outside the box and pivot towards a more holistic long-term view of coordinated spatial strategic energy planning.

As an island nation, Britain is well placed to become a “Clean Energy Superpower” by maximising on the huge potential offered by wind power and tidal power, but this needs to be considered as a “whole system” rather than trying to reconfigure a grid system that was originally intended for last century energy production. It is not reconfiguring of geographical regions that is required here, but recognition that the UK needs to adopt a whole new strategic approach to electrical infrastructure development fit for the future of new energy production.

Since the majority of electrical infrastructure development in the UK is carried out under the National Grid umbrella, the government is looking to National Grid to provide the means by which decarbonisation of the grid can be achieved by 2030. This gives National Grid a planning dominance that is enabling it to implement projects using outdated technology that have been devised in the best interests of its shareholders rather than in the nation’s best interests. If we look to what our North Sea neighbours are doing for transmission of wind power, we can see that government-led bodies are developing integrated offshore grids with onshore infrastructure being established at major brownfield sites close to electricity demand. We should be looking to keep up with the neighbours with this rather than letting National Grid try to tack new transmission infrastructure onto the existing grid that has suffered from decades of underinvestment. The UK has incredible wind power potential and a proper strategic approach to this could put the UK as the key player at the heart of the North Sea corridor interacting flexibly and optimally with its North Sea neighbours.

Consider the regional energy planning that is taking place in East Suffolk at the moment. Instead of taking a common-sense view to transmit the electricity due to be generated at Scottish Power’s EA1N and EA2 offshore windfarms directly to a brownfield site close to demand, it is due to be delivered to a greenfield energy super-hub in East Suffolk at which three super-sized substations and at least three 26m converter stations, each covering an area of 16 acres will be imposed on an established community. As part of this Saxmundham Masterplan, National Grid is planning to develop two inter-connecters: Lion Link which will be a point-to-point connection between the UK and the Netherlands and Nautilus which will be a point-to-point connection between the UK and Belgium. The real elephant in the room with this is that Lion Link and Nautilus are merely conduits allowing electricity to be brokered between Europe and the UK with National Grid earning a flat fee for every unit of electricity transmitted. Whilst being part of the energy markets will allow access to cheaper electricity some of the time, the supply will be exposed to global pressures and this will contribute to energy insecurity. More than that, inter-connecters will not generate meaningful employment and they are nothing to do with electricity generation. In fact, some of the electricity being imported from Europe will have been generated at fossil-fuelled power stations abroad so that even though the UK may be getting closer to decarbonising the national grid at a superficial level, the electricity we will be using may not necessarily be clean.

There is another major flaw with the plans for East Suffolk. If the amount of electricity arriving at Friston from Lion Link and Nautilus is added to the amount generated at Sizewell B, that due to be generated at Sizewell C and that already connected from the Galloper and Great Gabbard wind farms, then it becomes clear that grid capacity will be exceeded. Hence National Grid is proposing to develop Sea Link, a HVDC connection between Suffolk and Kent in order to move excess electricity straight back round again from Friston where it is not needed to the South East where it is. No amount of geographical reconfiguration will make up for what is clearly a highly costly diversion here. It is the flawed proposals that need to be reconsidered, not the geographical regions and more place-based understanding needs to be applied to this absurd situation.

Plans for concurrent development in East Suffolk of a nuclear power station, three substations and up to four converter stations are threatening the Heritage Coast with irreversible industrialisation. Such major construction in one small area will inevitably have terrible adverse and cumulative impacts on the local population, the environment and the economy, especially Suffolk’s valuable tourism economy. There are thus multiple costs at stake and Ofgem needs to broaden its view to recognise this. We also need to dial back and remember why we are trying to move away from fossil fuels. We are transitioning to renewable energy in order to try to stop the relentless progression of climate change, but proposing to develop onshore plans that are threatening to destroy the very biodiversity we are trying to protect in the first place is counter-intuitive and counter-productive. It makes no sense and needs to be properly addressed. It is all very well looking to introduce new RESPs to accelerate decarbonisation of the grid, but this is missing the wood for the trees if the wrong plans are being show-horned into the wrong places in the name of stopping climate change.

The UK has a unique opportunity right now to get this right. We can’t afford to get it wrong. Great British Energy is currently an investment company based in Aberdeen, but with vision, it could become a state-owned energy company generating homegrown renewable energy at homegrown wind farms which could then be transmitted via a homegrown offshore grid whilst avoiding the needless destruction of our precious onshore biodiversity. This would ensure energy security and resilience, it would create employment and growth, it would re-invigorate the manufacturing industry, it would encourage accelerated investment and would be properly “green”. It is a no-brainer – a perfect example of “where perfect timing is in sync with the perfect solution”. Offshore4sure.

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