

Sea Link Open Floor Hearing 24 March – Cllr Katie Graham

Thank you for the opportunity to speak. I am a district councillor representing Aldeburgh & Leiston ward, which also includes the parishes of Benhall & Sternfield and Friston.

I endorse this government's acceleration of decarbonisation of our electrical grid, it is an urgent and essential priority, only further underscored by instability in the Middle East and beyond.

But following decades of inaction to prepare our country for essential energy transition, our government has inherited a system of commercially led project promoters setting the agenda of how this takes place, and I worry that it is turning communities against the change we need.

Here in this part of Suffolk, despite being an area of high ecological value, we are particular beneficiaries of a lack of strategic oversight. We narrowly missed the last government's Holistic Design Network scheme, already too little too late, and the current government's Regional Energy Spatial Plan is welcome progress for the nation, but also postdates the tangle of development planned or in construction here. This current application for Sea Link, a grid reinforcement project with questionable origins and questionable need, is particularly symptomatic of the chaotic and careless approach of this developer-led transition.

At this point I would like to pay tribute to our communities, the town and parish councillors, the tireless campaign organisers and the hundreds of residents who have given over hundreds of unpaid hours to scrutinising a succession of complex and unconnected project proposals over several years. It has been unrelenting and frequently demoralising. In the course of this, a notable thing has happened. These residents, the future inheritors of poorly planned energy transition, have stepped up to assemble their expertise, commission research and legal counsel to assess the truth of the picture as it has been presented to us by the developer, to attempt to view things in the round where this has historically been lacking from previous governments, and even to explore alternative solutions. For this, I think they deserve to be heard.

There remain many areas of disagreement between East Suffolk council and the developer, and it has been frustrating, to witness the disregard NGET has shown on the future impact of its project locally, as you are aware of from our previous written responses, and as we have already heard from the Cabinet member for Energy and Climate Change. Cumulative impact seems to be ignored, with valuable opportunities for coordination with other projects wilfully missed, and a refusal to align with other developers on basic issues such as acceptable working hours. Cost has been presented as a barrier to more environmentally sensitive construction approaches that other developers seem able to afford, and as we have heard their project plans even risk – unbelievably - railroading existing and essential mitigation for a previous project.

However there is a very fundamental area of disagreement which our communities and the council would welcome a more detailed discussion, and that is the needs case for Sea Link.

And while I am aware that both the council and other respondents have laid out concerns already in writing, and that this is the advised position of the Examining authority, I would like to make the request, on behalf of our exhausted communities, that this discussion be allowed to take place in the more open forum of an Issue Specific Hearing.

There is a history of lack of [REDACTED] with National Grid plc which takes great care to distance itself from the multiple strands of its parent company.

Let us go back to the beginning, when they offered a connection agreement to Scottish Power at Friston which we were told was for two wind farms only. These projects were given consent with the caveat that the impacts were severe and could only just be mitigated. Despite this, there shortly followed applications for other projects under the umbrella of National Grid plc that were seemingly always lurking in the queue, which now had the connection point in place that made it expedient for them to advance. Nautilus, Sea Link, Lion Link.

And then of course, just down the road, development consent was given for Sizewell C, one of the largest construction projects in Europe, against the recommendation of the planning inspectorate, who cited environmental harms as a major consideration. The impacts of this project alone as others before me have already testified, are enormous and will be long lasting.

It is only right that Suffolk, as with other parts of the country, should play its part in a more resilient, greener and future-proofed energy system. But is it right that it should inherit so much, without proper masterplanning, and where the parameters are set by commercially led developers?

The current need case presented by NGET as we have previously heard has changed since originally filing the DCO, and investigations by campaigners informed by research and counsel suggest there are viable alternatives that render it unnecessary, or at least not at this particular juncture. So there is again a very important question about what this grid reinforcement project is really for, if not for its initial justification. What will it open the door to, and what is the end point for energy development in this part of the country? Our communities deserve this transparency. I ask respectfully for an issue specific hearing on this item.