

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/lack-of-energy-plan-risks-panic-bulldozing-ss67zg8wg>

## **Lack of energy plan risks panic-bulldozing**

It's time government laid out what infrastructure is needed where, or we will rush into destroying our countryside

(Libby Purves - Monday September 25 2023, The Times)

It was lively in our village hall on Saturday: steely but civil conversations all day between National Grid employees and a mixture of locals, visitors and wildlife campaigners. There's a string of these "non- statutory consultation" roadshows along this eastern coast — Aldeburgh, Walberswick, Dunwich, Southwold. The subject is LionLink, formerly EuroLink, and posters decry it as creating a "concrete coast".

It's about bringing ashore power from North Sea wind farms: cutting through beaches, driving miles of motorway-width cabling through sand cliffs, areas of outstanding natural beauty, sites of special scientific interest as well as farmland.

We are "Landfall G/G2" and actually one of the more ludicrous options (highly protected marshland and bird reserves, and needing a contractors' road in as well as five hectares of land). Nor do the security-minded think it wise to concentrate a third of the nation's renewable power — which includes Sizewell — in five square miles of remote and rapidly eroding coast. Especially as it lies further from power-hungry London than more easily secured brownfield alternatives.

Last year I wrote about an irritable public meeting with our MP, the environment secretary Thérèse Coffey, who was "reacting with fury" to the fact that the business and energy secretaries wouldn't help her face us, and that National Grid and Scottish Power "have not been straightforward or shown goodwill". Well, these roadshows display at least some willingness by the (privatised) National Grid to send brave employees out in lanyards to answer questions. Like: "Why bring power in here, not via present industrial sites at Bradwell or the Isle of Grain?" Their answer was that the cabling will go to a substation (15m high and 30 acres) that Scottish Power wants to build just inland at Friston village. But as one National Grid representative mournfully observed, "it'd be easier if there was a complete national plan, a map for energy" for companies to follow coherently.

That's the rub. Not only has the government just bungled the offshore wind auctions — no bids — but regarding decarbonisation we are embarrassingly flat-footed compared to the calm Dutch and Belgians (who, incidentally, site their towering substations offshore). The past decade, culminating in the blowhard Boris Johnson years and time-wasting leadership chaos, ministers talked net zero without grasping the huge new need for electricity.

Last month's report from Nick Winser, the UK's first electricity networks commissioner, says our policies are badly out of date. We need £54 billion's worth of new grid infrastructure by 2030 to feed all those electric-car charging points and heat pumps, as well as industry and the prodigal consumption of a nation addicted to digital devices and entertainment streaming. The latter, of course, is fed by massive supercomputer hubs: note the other day's

extraordinary calculation that asking ChatGPT even the stupidest question uses up a bottle's worth of cooling water at the server farm.

Winser added that we need far more pylons — ten times cheaper than cabling — and may need to compensate people living under the new ones. He also confirms that there is as yet no clear strategic plan for the whole grid, nor a public information campaign to explain the cost of net zero. And to take you back briefly to that village hall, the most impressive thing was how comparatively well-informed local campaigns are about alternatives and affordability: professionals consult engineers on both sides of the North Sea about how to get power ashore affordably without trashing a protected coast.

In contrast, it is frustrating to comb through [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) sites over the past decade and a half, searching for seriousness the commissioner wants. Future-tense assurances promise “unprecedented speed in national infrastructure projects” and “barriers reduced, including in relation to land rights and consents”, halving those pesky democratic planning processes “by the mid-2020s”. Which, come to think of it, is now. That was signed by Kwasi Kwarteng, Johnson's energy minister before he was Trussed and dumped. (We've had six cabinet ministers with “energy” in their title in seven years, which might explain the flakiness.)

In the same breezy tone there are papers on commitment to an FSO (future systems operator) to co-ordinate power strategy. If you're wondering about the Energy Security Bill which sets up that FSO, it was last heard of in the Lords on September 5. But hey, it's conference season in a pre-election year. Who's got time for actual government? Or listening to boring old engineers when there are slogans to write?

Of course the lights must be kept on, cars and boilers and factories and digital hubs fed a fat, reliable diet of megawatts. Of course renewables are the future and “net zero” a good ambition. But it is the duty of government to calculate properly the price we pay, not only in bills and habits but in landscape, wildlife and ecosystems. Otherwise, commercial companies such as Scottish Power, National Grid and subcontractors can prioritise their shareholders and directors over the national interest.

Without the solid plan Winser pleads for, the rush to remove democratic “barriers” to every vast substation, pylon run or desecrated coastline risks both opportunistic piracy and public unrest. Now that the prime minister shows a pre-election willingness to ease citizens' worries over cars and heat pumps, there is a real risk that in order to keep net-zero credibility anything labelled “green” will get a hasty VIP nod. I would caution anybody living near a potential turbine, substation, pylon run or cable excavation to brace themselves for debate. And be prepared to lose, even if sense is on their side.