

East Coast energy connections – time for a re-think

Three flawed assumptions

I. That new undersea power cables need to come ashore on the Suffolk coast rather than in the Thames estuary where the power is needed.

I.1. In March 2017 a private company, National Grid Electricity System Operator (NGESCO), identified a new substation at the medieval village of Friston in Suffolk and a new converter station at Saxmundham as the only viable options for connecting new undersea power cables to the grid, discarding the ideal brownfield sites in the Thames Estuary – Rayleigh (Essex) and Grain (Kent) – where the energy is actually needed.

I.2. The potential damage to the environment and economy of the East Suffolk coast was multiplied because these rural sites inevitably became the preferred connection points of several planned schemes – Lion Link, Sea Link, Nautilus, East Anglia One North, East Anglia Two – not to mention Sizewell C.

I.3. The alternative option of longer offshore cables was dismissed as non-viable in terms of cost, but we were not given the figures to make a judgment on this vital point – either the estimated cost of the proposed scheme and the alternative options, or the cost of the damage to the tourist economy of East Suffolk over the many years of construction, installation and its aftermath.

2. That national and international protection of the environment can be ignored

2.1. The proposed scheme would do irreparable damage to numerous protected areas, each of which is supposed to have statutory protection – AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty), RAMSAR (Wetlands of International Importance), SSSI (Sites of Special Scientific Interest), SAC (Special Areas of Conservation), SPA (Special Protection Areas) and four areas of Ancient Woodland.

- 2.2. The scale of this damage has been consistently downplayed but involves working areas for trenches up to 112 metres wide, plus access roads, large sites for construction material, equipment and vehicles.
 - 2.3. Much is made of the assertion that the trenches, once complete, will soon fade into the landscape, but the estimated timescale of construction is a minimum of five years, during which time hedges, woodland and wildlife habitats will be destroyed, endangered species driven away by noise, light, vibration and damage to their ecosystems. This damage will often be permanent or else take many decades to rectify.
 - 2.4. Also permanent will be the damage to the environment caused by the construction of buildings up to 16 metres high for the Substation and up to 26 metres high for the Converter Station, each of which will occupy many hectares of land and be visually intrusive for miles around.
3. 'It is not anticipated that the construction of the proposed onshore scheme would result in a significant effect on tourism in East Suffolk as a whole.'

3.1 This breath-taking assumption can only have been written by someone with no first-hand experience of the tourist industry on which so much of East Suffolk depends, and its extensive ramifications involving virtually every other industry in the region. Tourism here is based on the fundamentals of 'Outstanding Natural Beauty', rural peace, wildlife heaven, interlinked footpaths and reserves, and places of quite exceptional character and charm such as Southwold, Walberswick and Aldeburgh. All of which are threatened by the proposed schemes.

3.2 As someone involved in this industry for all of my former working life, as Director and subsequently Chairman of Adnams of Southwold, I know only too well how vital tourism is to pubs, hotels and restaurants, local breweries and distilleries and to all the many industries which operate in symbiotic ways with these enterprises – local builders and handymen, farmers and food suppliers, longshore fishing, newsagents, clothes shops, etc – in fact pretty well every aspect of economic life in the region is dependant in one way or another on tourism.

3.3 Official statistics take no account of these factors, assuming for example that only about 24% of employment in Southwold and Aldeburgh is linked to tourism, whereas the

real figure is much higher, and should in any case include those who travel to work in these towns from Lowestoft or Ipswich or smaller towns in the vicinity.

3.4 The tourism industry is still recovering from the impact of Covid, followed by the energy price shock brought about by the Ukraine war and subsequent inflation. It is in no state to withstand the damage caused by a scheme that endangers the heartlands of Suffolk's tourism, from Southwold to Aldeburgh. The likely cost to the local economy could easily exceed £1 billion over the five years of construction and much of the damage would be irreversible. Many enterprises would be put permanently out of business and the entire economy of the East coast seriously endangered.

Those assumptions proved worthless

It was recently announced that Nautilus, a projected subsea cable between Belgium and the UK, would no longer be brought ashore at Walberswick in Suffolk but continue undersea to Grain in Kent, with a converter station built in the North Sea. This is exactly what campaigners in Suffolk have argued all along. It completely destroys the arguments of cost and convenience that are still being propounded for Sealink, LionLink and other schemes, with the damage to the Suffolk coast that these projects would entail.

It makes no sense, therefore that LionLink has just confirmed that its preferred landfall site is Walberswick, surrounded on three sides by one of the most beautiful villages in England. It would be hard to think of a way to cause greater economic and environmental damage.

Act now to prevent environmental and economic vandalism

I and many others voted for the present Government because we hoped that prudent economic policies would be combined with a real commitment to the environment and social well-being. It is time to deliver on those hopes.

Simon Loftus OBE, 17 March 2025