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SUFFOLK SHOW

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Suffolk Energy Action Solutions

Campaigning to protect our beautiful coasts

By Susie Kearley

The new Labour government has pledged to transition to clean energy by 2030, creating 650,000 jobs and working with industry to invest heavily in wind and solar power. The scale of wind farms off the East Anglian coast is set to expand in the coming years; they should be powering 20 million homes by 2035. However, this is not without its challenges and opposition. Among the local community, many people despair at the existing plans for energy to be brought onshore along the Suffolk coastline, because the coast will be blighted by massive electricity substations, converters, and pylons.

On 3 February 2025, the BBC screened an episode of Panorama entitled *Rewiring Britain: The Race to Go Green*. It featured an interview with lobby group Suffolk Energy Action Solutions, whose representatives explained why they're opposing relentless developments along the Suffolk coast, in the name of clean and

Aldeburgh Carnival

renewable energy.

I met with Fiona Gilmore, founder of the group, who said the tranquillity of the coast will be destroyed by massive infrastructure developments, which would be better placed offshore. She said, "Offshore grids would be cheaper, and faster in the mid-term because there is less onshore infrastructure required, quicker community buy-in and fewer judicial reviews.

"The UK electricity grid transitioned from public to private ownership in 1990 and it's now in the hands of international investors who don't have the best interests of British people at heart," she explained. "The UK government's drive for clean energy has resulted in developer-led planning, which doesn't take account of community needs and doesn't consider the best approach for the local environment. We are not against green energy, but there are better ways to bring the electricity generated to locations across the UK where it will be used.

"The government needs a master strategy for its infrastructure developments, including energy hubs, with substations and converters. These plans should be drawn up with communities in mind. Our European neighbours are following government-led strategies and their hubs are not located in nature reserves and tourism hot spots.

"The proposal for Suffolk is to lay infrastructure through the second oldest nature reserve in England, damaging wetlands that are vital for saving the planet from the effects of climate change. When they dig up the nature reserve, it will release greenhouse gases by disturbing the peat, and it will destroy homes for wildlife, at a time when many species are already under threat.

"The current plans are to lay pipes under North Warren Nature Reserve (between Aldeburgh and Thorpeness) and then take them overground on the other side. But the trench they'll have to dig through North Warren to lay the pipes will be the size of the M11. The environmental destruction and negative impact on wildlife is completely unjustifiable when there are better options available."

British wildlife has declined massively in recent years, with 43% of birds at risk of extinction according to the 2023 State of Nature report. The report also says that UK wildlife has declined by 19% on average since 1970.

Fiona maintains that an offshore grid would be much better and would minimise environmental damage. "Our recommended hub location is on the Isle of Grain and another site nearby. That wouldn't bother anyone," she said.

However, at the moment, the outlook for Suffolk is bleak. Concrete substations and converters are planned, with some being "as big as Buckingham Palace," said Fiona. "The plans for Friston and Saxmundham are the equivalent of covering 80 football pitches in concrete. Lights would destroy the dark sky that is currently enjoyed by stargazers, and the coast would be littered with massive concrete energy hubs and other related infrastructure.

"Walberswick is lovely. Big skies, wildlife, wilderness, estuaries. It's a home to artists and creative people - people who live there because they love the natural environment. Walberswick has been chosen by the National Grid as another landfall site for an additional project - and that cable trench will go close to homes looking over the meadows towards the sea.

"Developers are making these plans without consulting the communities

Campaign Pop Up Shop, Saxmundham

Aldeburgh campaign rally: Rick Wakeman (CIRCLE) performed and Jenny Riddell-Carpenter, MP, (ABOVE) spoke. Lord Deben, John Gummer gave a rallying speech to ask the Government to pivot to offshore solutions and protect the biodiversity on which this planet depends.

> *"Offshore grids would be cheaper, and faster in the mid-term because there is less onshore infrastructure required"*
>
> - Fiona Gilmore, Suffolk Energy Action Solutions

Aldeburgh campaign rally

> *"the trench they'll have to dig through North Warren to lay the pipes will be the size of the M11."*
>
> - Fiona Gilmore, Suffolk Energy Action Solutions

Offshore windfarm

that live in these beautiful places. And it makes no sense to take in 30% of the UK's energy needs on shore at Suffolk, when the cabling could go under the seabed and be delivered onshore at its point of use.

"We had a report done by a marketing consultancy who estimated that we would lose 15% of visitors to Suffolk – that's £1 billion in lost tourism over the 12 years of its construction.

"There have been suicides by people affected by this. One poor man in his 60s, who was living alone, was told by the developers that he would have three substations built in his garden and cables going through his property. He'd invested everything he had in that property and was told by an estate agent that they were unable to value his property, but they felt the proposed development would hit its value hard. It was one of the triggers that eventually led to him taking his own life.

Protest outside Suffolk County Council

"The impact on the local community is colossal. We have been to court twice to challenge it, but we haven't won. 30% of Britain's electricity will go through Friston. It will destroy the character of the area, the tranquillity and the natural landscapes. It will industrialise the Suffolk coast."

The group recognises that they will need to be new pylons and are not against all development, but they want it to be proportional, well considered, and not taken across the land when offshore cabling could offer a better solution.

"We recognise that new pylons will be needed," said Fiona. "But planners and developers should deal with people sensitively and with understanding. Local communities should have been approached before they chose the hub sites.

"One suggested solution is a floating platform at sea, close to the shoreline. It makes much better sense. Germany is already building a converter on a floating platform - the technology is available now. Then we would have fewer substations and converters on land. We don't need all these huge concrete monoliths. The issue is that Britain has had its eyes closed and now it's catch up time.

"Also, the longer the cable, the cheaper the electricity. Burying the cables in the seabed, and only taking them onto land where the power is used makes much more sense. Our European neighbours are making their sea-based platforms wildlife friendly, too.

"The Suffolk coast is getting UNESCO recognition as a bird migration route. This is needless vandalism to a beautiful part of our coast."

Since the campaign was referenced on Panorama in February 2025, its profile has been raised and they are hoping that planners will be more willing to work with local communities to reach a satisfactory resolution.

Protest in Saxmundham

■ **For more details their website is www.suffolkenergyactionsolutions.co.uk**

All photos (except the Offshore windfarm) courtesy of Suffolk Energy Action Solutions.