



Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP
Secretary of State,
Housing, Communities and Local Government

Dear Secretary of State,

Re: Suffolk Coast Energy Projects : open and fair public meetings and hearings

We the undersigned East Suffolk Parish and Town Councils write to express our concerns about Development Consent Orders (DCO) being considered by the Planning Inspectorate (PINS) in relation to energy constructions at the village of Friston by Scottish Power Renewables (SPR), and at Sizewell C by EDF nearby. The 2 Scottish Power applications also provide for a new National Grid connector which, if built, would provide the connection point for a further 6 major power projects which are at various stages of planning or consideration. We have already raised the issues around the cumulative impact on our communities (and wider across Suffolk) with the Secretary and Minister of State for Department of BEIS at the end of last year.

We wish to register our specific concern with your department about the issue of allowing PINS to proceed with the DCOs without full and open public meetings and hearings. PINS is considering the use of virtual events instead. Many towns and parishes have responded to PINS with their individual negative views. However, we wish to reflect the strength of feeling within our communities directly with you as Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. We believe that virtual events are inadequate, unfair, and would be subject to legal challenge.

Your own Ministerial Guidance (13.03.20) recognises that there will be some circumstances in which virtual events cannot substitute for open and fair public meetings and hearings;

The Government recognises that in exceptional circumstances it may not be appropriate to proceed virtually and that alternative arrangements may be needed. These alternative arrangements should be taken forward speedily, where possible, taking into account the Government's guidance on social distancing.

Government guidance on social distancing, social isolation and public gatherings prevents us from holding public meetings to consult with our communities on these matters. There is no adequate substitute for these given that rural internet/broadband in Suffolk can be unreliable and slow. Many of those wishing to participate, including many of our local councillors, have limited or no access to the internet and varying levels of familiarity and confidence in using digital technology. As a result virtual events and virtual access to planning information and material will exclude many people from meaningful engagement. SPR and EDF will by contrast be supported by large, well-resourced IT departments with high quality technology and up to date networks. This disparity of resources is already an issue and further disadvantages local communities.

Our small towns and parishes have very limited resources and are made up of volunteers. Individual councils have had to take responsibility for engaging and consulting their own communities in order to respond to the many overlapping consultations about these projects. Time consuming and arduous at normal times, the current Covid crisis has made that responsibility exponentially more difficult when councils are helping their communities to manage the impact of the pandemic. If the current demands on small local councils are added to by consecutive or concurrent virtual DCO meetings and hearings (as well as other developing projects) as is being considered by PINS, this will almost certainly lead to some councils being overwhelmed. It is impossible to overstate that risk.

Despite some recent easing of the lockdown, we continue to have serious concerns about our communities' ability to fully participate in the process. We face ongoing restrictions in holding public events and limitations in being able to view easily DCO materials offline. Moreover, Covid-19 has created serious capacity constraints for many organisations, with key staff members on furlough, re-deployed, still shielding, or focussed on other pandemic-related matters. Given the scale, complexity, the cumulative impact and overlapping nature of such major power projects, it is our view that these applications are totally unsuitable for digital examination. We therefore ask that examination of these projects be delayed until such time as all parties are satisfied that full, fair and open public engagement can take place.

Cllr Tim Beach (Chair of Snape Parish Council), on behalf (list of town & parish signatories)

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