

Electricity Grid Upgrades - Volume 757: debated on Tuesday 26 November 2024

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con)

I beg to move, That this House has considered the delivery of electricity grid upgrades.

It is wonderful to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I am grateful to have the opportunity of this debate.

I chair a cross-party group of MPs from Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk. We are working to promote the Clean Power 2030 objective, but we want to deliver it more cheaply and quickly, because it is becoming increasingly clear that undergrounding high voltage direct current cables is the way forward for the great national grid upgrade. Undergrounding will carry public consent and will avoid delays, and will therefore be cheaper as well as better for the countryside. Relying on new lines of pylons for the entire upgrade, as proposed, will delay decarbonising the national grid, because they arouse such hostility and will end up costing more because of the delays.

This debate is therefore not just local. Decarbonisation is one of the great national challenges that the United Kingdom faces. How it is achieved, how quickly and at what cost is an issue of national importance. The National Energy System Operator's "Clean Power 2030" report is welcome, but it highlights the scale of the challenge. NESO is clear that public support is critical to achieving those ambitions, but its response to the Secretary of State in that document warns that losing public consent is a significant threat to delivering projects on time and within budget.

Fintan Slye, the executive director of NESO, made the importance of engaging community support clear on Radio 4 when the report was launched on 5 November:

"I am acutely conscious that building infrastructure, pylons, does impose on people and their locality."

He also emphasised that "it is really important...that we bring people and communities with us on this journey", and that the transition to net zero only works

"if we can bring society with us".

He is clearly saying that infrastructure solutions must align with community priorities.

The challenge to install new capacity is enormous. The UK has around 14 GW of offshore wind capacity but, to meet future energy demands, that capacity will need to grow nearly threefold by 2030 and continue expanding so it can handle 125 GW of wind by 2050. That is a much faster rate of investment than we have seen so far, but projects for 2030 are already falling behind. Given the strength of public opposition to overhead pylons, it is highly unlikely that any pylon proposals will be delivered on time.

The "Clean Power 2030" report sets out how delays are already affecting key projects such as the one from Norwich to Tilbury, which is 184 km of pylons across Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex. NESO says that it will now be delayed by a year to 2031, and that delay is very costly. NESO estimates that the cost of delay is £4 billion a year—far higher than previous estimates—mainly because of the constraint payments that have to be paid to wind power generators.

Given the public opposition to the Norwich to Tilbury project, the funds being amassed for legal challenges, and the opportunity for judicial review at least twice during the process, it is likely to be delayed for far longer than just one year. That risk is likely to apply to the other 17 pylon schemes proposed in the great grid upgrade. Nevertheless, National Grid plans to use overhead pylons as the primary infrastructure for the massive reinforcement of the national grid. I put it to the Minister that the current concept is not deliverable.

The implication is clear. The way to secure public consent is by pursuing strategies that respect and protect local communities and what they value—their property, their livelihoods and the countryside.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con)

My hon. Friend has done a fantastic job in this area. He has been very persuasive in setting out the damage done to his constituency. Does he agree that the strength of the OffSET group—the offshore electricity grid taskforce—demonstrates that the issue is going to affect communities right across East Anglia, including Margaretting village in my constituency, and that therefore the opposition he talks about is likely to be very strong across the whole region?

Sir Bernard Jenkin

My right hon. Friend is completely right. It affects other colleagues, including some present here today representing, for example, Lincolnshire. We know that there are concerns in north Wales, and on the east coast of Scotland in the area represented by my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), who is representing the Opposition Front Bench. This is a very widespread problem.

Undergrounding HVDC cables is not only technically viable, but the most sensible and sustainable solution for the future of our energy network—that is, if we cannot have it offshore. I acknowledge that quite a lot is going offshore, but it rubs salt in the wound that other areas, from Scotland to north-east England, have the luxury of offshore schemes, but we in East Anglia do not. Our countryside is not worth the investment.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab)

It is interesting to hear the hon. Member talk about delays and the issues with floating offshore wind. Does he agree that we should look at why we have such delays? After 14 years of Conservative Government, one might have thought that many of the challenges would already have been dealt with. Does he acknowledge that many of the current issues are because of a lack of action over the last 14 years?

Sir Bernard Jenkin

I accept that the present Government have inherited a planning system and a philosophy of upgrading the national grid that is out of date.

When we were in Government, we were very slow to recognise that such a big, strategic upgrade needed a proper strategy. We started moving towards holistic network design. We commissioned a report from Charles Banner KC to look at streamlining the planning process—I will come on to putting that streamlining in place—and I very much welcome that the Government have commissioned a spatial review of the entire network, which should have been done years ago. I think we were blind to the failings of the structure inherited from the Electricity Act 1989; we should have moved much sooner.

That report should make it easier for the Government to change the out-of-date policy of a presumption in favour of pylons, which we said in our manifesto that we would review. I am very happy for the Minister to blame the previous Government for the difficulties he is facing and to change the policy accordingly, but it will be very odd if he comes to the Dispatch Box to defend what the previous Government were doing, after what the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) just said—but I suspect that that is what he will do.

I put this issue forward in a bipartisan manner. We should all be able to agree that the great grid upgrade is not going fast enough, and that we need to streamline the planning process and speed up delivery. However, we also need to mend our ideas about how we deliver it, because as I have said, undergrounding high

voltage direct current cables is not only technically viable, but the most sensible and sustainable solution for the future of our entire energy network.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab)

I would like to return to the hon. Member's point about international comparisons and other countries nearby perhaps having a presumption in favour of overgrounding. I draw the House's attention to the fact that Germany's Opposition recently said that using overhead lines instead of digging underground could save the country €35 billion, and that the German political parties that previously, as part of Angela Merkel's coalition, backed underground cables have now called for overhead lines to be given priority. Does the hon. Member agree that the picture is not quite so clearcut in mainland Europe?

Sir Bernard Jenkin

What is interesting about Germany is that its presumption was in favour of undergrounding, so the idea that that is a great big experiment and we do not know what it means is incorrect. There is plenty of expertise in Europe. When we look at cost comparisons between undergrounding and pylons, it also depends on the territory we are dealing with.

Our problem is lack of community consent, as Fintan Slye, the executive director of the National Energy System Operator, rightly says. It is a question of swings and roundabouts, but in the case of Norwich to Tilbury, the consequence of delays from trying to run roughshod over the very widespread and well-funded public opposition will be to put up the cost, which makes the cost of undergrounding advantageous over pylons. That is my point.

I am not necessarily disagreeing with the principle of what the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) says, but undergrounding DC cables has great advantages. The latest estimated cost of just one year's delay for Norwich to Tilbury is four times more than the additional £1 billion cost of undergrounding HVDC—I hope the hon. Gentleman was listening to that: £4 billion a year for delay against £1 billion extra for DC undergrounding. I think that puts this into the field of a no-brainer. Why would we spend all that money fighting through the courts for a very unpopular scheme when we could save time and legal expense by going for a different method?

In the National Energy System Operator's East Anglia network study, which was published earlier this year, undergrounding HVDC was set out as alternative option 8. The great advantage of undergrounding HVDC is that there will be far less public resistance. Moreover, as I have said, the planning procedures could be streamlined—as recommended to the Government recently by Charles Banner—to conform to the regime for installing new major water pipes. If we had the same planning regime for underground cables as we did for water pipes, we could speed up the process for undergrounding cables.

Underground HVDC offers a scalable, future-proof solution that can be delivered with far less environmental impact, with public support and much more quickly. Schemes without pylons that are already planned by National Grid—for example, in north-east England—are being delivered without public opposition or long delays, which seems to be an enormous advantage for the Government's objective of decarbonising the grid. There is no comparable resistance from campaign groups, which is clear evidence that underground HVDC gets public support, making it a far more practical and feasible solution.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD)

I pay tribute to the hard work that the hon. Member has done cross-party on this issue for many years, and I am grateful to be joining that as another east of England MP. The issue of public consent is important, because the proposals could have such a huge impact on local communities. Developers suggest that they

could provide community benefits, but with all due respect, the idea of having a community hall 5 miles down the road does not mitigate having massive pylons going past someone's back garden. Does the hon. Member agree that the problem with regard to public consent is that people who are very well organised will understandably continue to kick up a fuss, which will delay the creation of the renewable energy that we absolutely need and certainly support?

Sir Bernard Jenkin

I am grateful for the hon. Lady's intervention. As the new Liberal Democrat MP for Chelmsford, she demonstrates that this is a cross-party campaign, supported by people who are as committed to decarbonisation as anything else.

As has been said, there is no comparable resistance from campaign groups in the north-east of England. That is clear evidence that underground HVDC receives public support, making it a far more practical and feasible solution.

In East Anglia, the opposition to overhead pylons is not subsiding; it is growing and becoming more intense. Campaign groups are united in their resistance to this outdated approach to infrastructure. The Government, including the Minister, have made it clear that local campaigners will not be able to block their nationally important mission to build clean energy infrastructure across the UK. We are not blocking; we are trying to help. In my constituency, one local group wrote to National Grid, in response to a consultation, saying:

"By all means, build closer to our houses and shorten the route, just put it underground."

That demonstrates that communities are not opposed to infrastructure or the objectives behind it. They are just against bad decisions to achieve it.

I mentioned streamlining the planning system to bring it into line with what is required of water companies laying major water pipes. There is a massive underground Anglian water pipe being installed from Bury St Edmunds, across my constituency to Abberton reservoir in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel). That includes digging a trench through the sensitive landscape of Dedham vale across the Stour valley, almost exactly where the pylons or alternating current undergrounding will go. Nobody is objecting to that underground scheme. I have not had a whimper of complaint about that pipe going in.

Why stick to pylons when that method is slower and delays will make it far more expensive? The Government may argue, as the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) mentioned, that community benefits will compensate for the disruption to affected areas caused by pylons, but those ideas will not buy off the hostility to pylons and other unwanted infrastructure. Solutions that respect communities and their interests, as well as deliver for our energy network, are the future.

For Norwich to Tilbury, the onshore undergrounding HVDC proposal will cause significantly less environmental damage than overhead cables and AC undergrounding. Let me expand on that. For a start, the entire route would be underground, not just through the sensitive landscapes. The cable trenches required for undergrounding HVDC cables are far narrower than for AC cables.

AC undergrounding is proposed for the area of outstanding natural beauty, the special landscape area that I share with my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge). That requires a 120-metre-wide trench, because AC cables need to be spaced out. That means a very wide swathe of destruction, as that vast trench is dug and refilled, and everything in its path is destroyed.

It is extremely expensive to avoid going through archaeological sites. The Stour valley is an archaeological site of the same importance as Stonehenge. If there had been stones in the Stour valley, we would have a Stonehenge, because there is evidence of a wooden henge. Ancient tribes lived there in prehistoric times and it was a significant area throughout Roman times and the middle ages.

All of that is at risk, in addition to the massive destruction of trees, ancient woodland and hedges, in order to install AC underground cables. I am all for mitigating the effect of pylons by undergrounding, but let us not kid ourselves that it is a solution for the most sensitive areas of landscape. It is also much more expensive to underground AC cables than DC cables. I would very much like the proposal to underground cables to be extended to other areas, such as the Roman River valley, which is technically not in the special landscape area but is just as special. The Government have an obligation to respect sensitive countryside, so that could be another cause for a judicial review. A much better solution would be to underground DC, not AC, cables through that sensitive landscape.

Another reason why this proposal is so advantageous is that offshore DC to onshore AC requires huge DC-to-AC converters at the cable end points. When DC current generated by a wind farm lands somewhere such as Friston in the constituency of Suffolk Coastal, there has to be a massive DC-to-AC converter for it to go into the AC grid network. If we started building a DC grid network—for example, if energy ran all the way from Norwich to Tilbury on a DC line—all those connections could go straight into the DC network, avoiding the need for extra infrastructure. Incidentally, that would apply to the interconnectors for energy coming from the continent. Electricity arriving from the proposed Tarchon Energy interconnector would be DC, so we would not need a massive DC-to-AC converter at Ardley in my constituency; we could have just one DC-to-AC converter at the point at which the electricity needs to be converted to AC much nearer London—at Tilbury or even the Isle of Grain.

It is clear that HVDC is right for many parts of the United Kingdom, not just East Anglia. Wind power stations are increasingly located along the coast or just off our coastline, and a DC transmission network would reflect that. Converting power to AC at landfall is inefficient and duplicative. A properly designed onshore and offshore HVDC network would reduce the infrastructure needed, cut down on converter stations and enable us to focus on building for real demand, rather than just peak production.

Globally, HVDC is becoming the standard for modern energy networks. By investing in HVDC now, the UK can maintain its leadership in renewable energy, create jobs and develop skills that will keep us competitive. The alternative is clinging to outdated, mid-20th century technology that will leave us falling behind other countries. Germany will not give up HVDC undergrounding altogether, but that is the presumption in our planning system, which I suggest the Government need to revise.

The Government must show decisive leadership and embrace an HVDC future. This is about more than just reducing costs and avoiding delays; it is about ensuring we meet our renewable energy goals in a way that works for communities, the environment, the economy and the planet.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab)

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. This debate is an opportunity to discuss how to upgrade the grid in the best way possible, because currently, as the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) said, the rules do not work. Despite the fact that we are one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, and the most depleted in the G7, our planning system does not take nature into account.

I welcome the hon. Gentleman's acknowledgment that the previous Government did not adequately reform the energy system. I am also struck by the fact that he mentioned the 1989 Act. He has been in the House since 1992, when all the Government Members in the Chamber, with the exception of myself, were in school. I have been an ardent monitor of this House and energy policy more widely, and I have not seen him quite so enthusiastic about energy market reform until now, so I am somewhat sceptical about his conversion to the idea that we need to change our planning system. I am here to change the rules, and I am glad that he is, but we need to agree on exactly how to do that. We need to preserve our nature, while increasing our efforts to restore it.

Sir Bernard Jenkin

Does the hon. Lady acknowledge it was the previous Government who commissioned the Banner report on streamlining the system? Let us approach this on a bipartisan basis—we are all on the same side, trying to achieve the great upgrade of our electricity grid—and stop scoring party political points, shall we?

Ms Billington

I am perfectly happy to acknowledge when the Opposition are right and I am afraid to say that on this one they are not. We need to preserve the nature we have, while increasing efforts to restore nature. To restore nature by 2030 by 30% is one of our manifesto commitments, and that has to be taken into account with planning and national infrastructure projects. We will not reach our ambitious climate targets without it. I am disappointed there was no reference to the impact of this kind of infrastructure on nature by the hon. Gentleman. Reaching our targets will require a strong land use framework that intersects with an energy special plan, to which we have committed, and an updated national planning policy framework. I am delighted that the Government are currently working on all three of these documents and I look forward to seeing more detail on them.

It was interesting to hear the hon. Gentleman refer to the importance of public consent and support. For anyone who is aware of my work before I came to Parliament, public consent and support are absolutely vital for us to be able to undertake the transformation that we are discussing. That also involves benefit for communities, and ownership and accountability for those communities, in the form of local energy projects to help us build a more resilient grid.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con)

As a former Energy Minister and therefore someone who has been involved in strategic energy policy, including introducing, through the Energy Act 2013, the capacity market—still a critical part of what is used to determine from where we get our energy—and through my long experience in this House, although not as long as my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), I say that public support for these things, linked to public benefit, is often an illusion. I have seen many developers, not just on energy projects, who have promised great public benefits and then they disappear like dandelion seeds on the wind.

Ms Billington

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It is unusual that we agree—it is certainly the first time, although perhaps not the last—that developers end up having far too much say in these things and that the community does not have enough. I agree that we need to talk about how we change that.

An important part of the assessment by NESO and by the Government is that 8 GW of energy could be generated by local and community projects, reducing the need for further strengthening of the grid and enabling smart, local, flexible energy. That would increase our resilience and, if we stop the idea of developers simply trying to buy off local communities with either compensation or spurious benefits, instead having proper, locally owned energy projects, would build public consent and support. Putting energy closer to where it is used will alleviate stress on the grid and help to handle bottlenecks. It is crucial to point out that that needs to be done as well as grid upgrades.

The idea that grid upgrades will not happen is wrong. GB Energy is crucial in helping to develop those projects across the country. I note that Opposition Members voted against GB Energy. I would be interested to know how they think we are going to be able to achieve our goals without it, especially when the right hon.

Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) mentions the vagaries of private developers and their ability to bulldoze local communities.

Locally led energy is going to be crucial, and GB Energy will be able to do that, embracing a locally led approach to building grid infrastructure. By integrating a focus on local place-based energy projects, we can build the grid we need by working with local authorities and communities across the country.

A locally led approach is crucial for building consent among communities, whose members want to see infrastructure built—the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex mentioned that—but want to be included in how it is built. That is why the rules need to be changed. I am pleased to see that there is at least consensus on that. If we are talking about the risks of damage to the environment as well as public consent and support, we need to be aware that a significant amount of undergrounding is more damaging for our climate goals and for protecting nature than some of the proposals on pylons.

This is not a debate about if we upgrade the grid; it is a debate about how we build it. I am assured that the Government will hear my representations on combining our ambitions on a clean energy superpower with restoring nature by 2030.

Patrick Spencer (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I and many Conservatives hope and aspire for a clean energy future, but I wish to make three points that the Government and the House should consider when contemplating the upgrade of our electricity grid.

First, similar to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), are we basing our decisions on the expedient technology of today or on the ideal technology of the future? High voltage direct current is increasingly used around the world. It means only six cables instead of 18, and there are no heat issues, which means they can be closely spaced. Many other countries favour this approach over pylons and, here in the UK, National Grid itself has favoured it in Lincolnshire, concluding that it is cheaper, quicker and less risky than overhead lines. Relying on old-fashioned technology is increasingly a fool's errand. We see it in defence, social policy and now in energy.

Secondly, can we allow for a moment the notion that preserving our national heritage is a fundamental part of meeting our net zero commitments? After all, we do that in other parts of policy. We demand—sorry, I have lost my place. Can I take a moment?

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op)

It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on securing this important debate, which matters a great deal in his constituency and mine. Although there may be disagreements on how we make the improvements, it is great to hear commitment from all sides. As we pursue ambitious goals to decarbonise our economy and expand green industries, we must confront an undeniable reality: the delivery of secure and cost-effective grid connections is not merely important, but essential.

The clean energy needs of green and decarbonising industrial clusters, particularly in regions such as the north-east, depend on reliable grid connectivity, and the problems that many face in being unable to get connections, or only with significant delays, are holding back growth. Without timely connections, we will struggle to meet the demand for renewable energy, deter inward investment and miss opportunities to utilise fully key industrial sites that could be central to our future prosperity. Grid connectivity is essential, particularly in areas poised to lead the way in offshore renewables. Power supply to port and quayside sites, which are critical for the infrastructure underpinning the growth of offshore wind energy, is essential.

The north-east has the capacity to lead the way in green, clean industry, but we are being held back due to grid connectivity and delays in projects and investment. As outlined in the Mayor of the North East's response to the national industrial strategy Green Paper, national grid connections are central to offshore wind developers. They provide much-needed certainty to private investors, manufacturers and supply chains, creating thousands of clean energy jobs. For many industries, particularly in the north-east, the costs and long waiting times for grid connections are simply too high. The current capacity is insufficient to support the renewable energy generation that we require, and the delays in securing grid connections hold back business growth and leave sites underutilised when they should be driving forward our regional economies.

Let us take Newcastle international airport as an example. With a solar farm that already supplies 100% of its terminal's electricity on sunny days, the airport generates more power than it needs. It wants to export its surplus electricity to the grid, yet it has been told that it cannot do so until next year at the earliest. It has been informed that, even then, a full connection may not be possible until 2035, which would mean a full 10 years to wait. It is an unacceptable situation. Like many businesses across the region, the airport has been forced to delay millions of pounds-worth of investment in sustainability schemes simply because it is uncertain as to when it will be able to connect to the grid. With a target of becoming carbon neutral by 2035, Newcastle international airport cannot reach that goal without access to the grid.

It is not just businesses such as the airport that are facing difficulties. Throughout the region, the barriers to grid connection are stalling industrial growth, limiting renewable energy delivery and even restricting economic activity in rural areas, where grid vulnerability remains a persistent issue. What is the solution? First, the Government's upcoming planning reforms need to be fully implemented to improve the ability to approve critical infrastructure. This is essential to accelerate the decarbonisation process and secure long-term energy stability. It is also crucial that the approval processes for grid connections are streamlined, cutting the time it takes to link key industrial sites to the grid. Secondly, we must have better co-ordination between the national grid, the Crown Estate, distribution network operators and the offshore wind supply chain. Co-operative working is key to ensuring that delivery is timely and effective.

In the north-east, the strategic energy board, established through the deeper devolution deal, is already addressing grid challenges at pressure points. By aligning businesses' future grid-connection needs with regional planning, we can ensure that grid reinforcement happens in the areas we need it the most, particularly at key industrial sites and renewable energy projects. Grid infrastructure must not only be viewed as a utility; it must be seen as a strategic tool for economic development. The north-east can lead the way in clean, green energy production, but we need the grid infrastructure in place to support it.

The Government can act now to ensure that our grid can support both our industrial ambitions and our green objectives, driving the growth that is rightly at the heart of the Government's agenda. This is not just about providing power: it is about jobs, investment and the future prosperity of our regions. By working together and prioritising the needs of the grid, we can accelerate the transition to a cleaner, more sustainable energy system, boost growth, unlock the potential of our industries and provide the jobs of the future.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher, and to speak in this debate. I am going to speak about five things: the environment, efficiency, energy, economics and ergonomics.

I will start by talking about the environment, because this debate is clearly couched in a critical and shared understanding that the environment matters. But what is the environment? At a philosophical level the environment is, in a sense, our connection with reality. It is our link to the natural world through the experience and character of the places we live, and the places we live matter because they inspire us or disappoint us; they encourage us or leave us wanting.

Everyone deserves their chance to experience beauty. I make no apology for making the case for beauty; I have done so many times as a Minister, shadow Minister and Back Bencher. Everyone deserves their chance to experience beauty because, as Keats understood, beauty and goodness are inseparable. Beauty and truth are indelibly imprinted one upon the other. So when we speak about the pylons, let us speak about the effect they have on the places in which people live.

In Lincolnshire, particularly in my constituency, a row of huge pylons as big as Nelson's column in a flat landscape will have a devastating effect on the vistas and views of not just the people who live in their immediate proximity but people from miles away. We will see those structures across the flat fens for 5, 10 or perhaps even 15 miles, which is unacceptable. It is an imposition on a flat landscape that historically has never enjoyed tall structures, with the exception of the churches, and they were built to the glory of God. The pylons certainly are not that, and I do not think even the Minister would defend them on that basis—their holiness, that is. So when we think of this immense row of pylons stretching down the east coast, let us understand their connection to the day-to-day environment and the things that affect people's local sense of wellbeing. I hope the Minister will recognise that, for that reason, the more we can mitigate their effect, the better.

Patrick Spencer

May I put on the record my apologies for fluffing my speech a moment ago? One of the points I wanted to make is that we take into account our natural environment when we look at housing and planning policy. The reality is that when we want to build a development on the side of a village, put an extension on a house or expand our housing stock, planning authorities demand that we take into account the natural environment. That importantly includes the aesthetic, which we talk about a lot, as well as the preservation of our landscapes.

Patrick Spencer

If the Government choose to solve the housing crisis by taking into account our environment, why can we not do that with energy policy as well?

Sir John Hayes

We can and do. Contrary to what was said earlier, the existing planning policy does take into account the effect on the environment. That is why, for example, we do not build unsuitable things in areas of outstanding natural beauty. That is also why sites of special scientific interest matter in the planning system, as we mitigate what we can do by them, in them and near them. By the way, these pylons will run alongside one of the most precious natural environments in our country: the salt marshes that run along my constituency. They are a site of outstanding importance because of the bird life they sustain, which makes them a unique environment.

Let us be clear about the need to mitigate all else in the pursuit of maintaining those things that are already embedded in our planning system as highly significant, such as those of the kind suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Patrick Spencer) in his pithy and powerful intervention.

Ms Billington

Salt marshes are very much a unique environment. Does the right hon. Gentleman have concerns about the possibility of trenching through salt marshes as opposed to using pylons, which actually have less impact on

the environment, particularly given the climate sink value of salt marshes? Would he concede that there might be a need for us to reconsider the way in which we tackle fragile environments such as salt marshes, rather than simply trenching them, which has done long-term damage?

Sir John Hayes

That is a good point, and it is why Lincolnshire county council's submission to National Grid specifically takes into account the trenching problem that the hon. Lady raised. It suggests an offshore grid, but obviously one that avoids the damage she mentioned. I recommend that she studies that submission—it is in the public domain—to see how we can offshore that grid without damaging the salt marshes in the way she suggests.

Sir Bernard Jenkin

The hon. Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington) made the relevant point that there are balancing factors. First, once cables are undergrounded, they are maintenance free, but pylons require constant maintenance, which therefore adds to their carbon footprint. Everybody has seen that. Secondly, salt marshes are very often Ramsar sites and migration bird sites, and we do not want overhead power lines interfering with the migration of birds. We often see that scores of swans have been killed on power lines because they are not very good at navigating around these things.

Sir John Hayes

With the insight for which he is known, my hon. Friend has anticipated two of the points that I was going to make. The problem with pylons being so close to SSSIs is that the birds do not know boundaries. Of course, the salt marsh in Lincolnshire matters because, exactly as my hon. Friend said, it is important as a site for geese and duck in particular. To run the pylons so close to that is at best highly contentious and at worse wholly destructive. The offshore grid that my hon. Friend describes can be run further out to sea, which is what we do with cables routinely. If we were able to see the ocean bed around our islands, we would see any number of trunked cables that run through them, which provide vital power and communications infrastructure.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab)

There is an interesting discussion about the balance of trade-offs. One of the other considerations is cost, and the cost of undergrounding is multiple times the amount of overhead pylons. The previous Government were not able to demonstrate that they could do it at the same cost, so how does the right hon. Gentleman balance that factor? Does he not think that his constituents, and constituents throughout the country, might consider the loading of those costs on to them unacceptable?

Sir John Hayes

There is a big argument to be had about costs because we are planning a project that will last decades—perhaps even longer. When I was the Energy Minister, I was very conscious of the fact that we might be making 100-year decisions. It is very hard to gauge costs over time because of two things. First, there are the ongoing maintenance costs associated with any line that runs above ground, and given the changing climate, it is likely that extreme weather events will become more frequent, and extreme weather events will have an effect on anything above ground. Secondly, the relative costs of underground and overhead cables vary according to the kind of cable laid, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) said; and indeed some of the evidence from other places in Europe and elsewhere suggests

that the cost of trunking cables underground is falling, whereas there is no similar reduction in the cost of overhead cables, which, on pylons, have been at the same cost for a very long time indeed.

The final point is about consent. The longer these things take, the more they cost. Certainly in Lincolnshire—and I imagine this is true in Essex, Suffolk and other places—there will be protracted legal challenges to the pylons, whereas, with local support and the support of local authorities like Lincolnshire county council, undergrounding would be a much more straightforward affair. Factoring in those costs is complex, but it needs to happen.

Sir Bernard Jenkin

Very briefly, the ESO review of the east of England network demonstrated that there is a higher up-front cost for undergrounding of an extra £1 billion from Norwich to Tilbury, but in the longer term it saves money. It is just not correct to say that undergrounding is automatically much more expensive. That is a departmental mantra that is now discredited—just read the ESO and NESO documents.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair)

Order. Before the right hon. Gentleman responds to that intervention—he is being very generous in giving way—can I just say that we have to move on to the Front-Bench speakers at 10.30 am and there are many people who wish to participate? I have not imposed time limits; all I am saying is that there are 13 minutes left and probably seven people who want to speak.

Sir John Hayes

On that basis, Sir Christopher, I will not give way again, for as you have noted, I have been immensely generous. I will abbreviate my remarks without missing out any of the other four subjects that I promised to speak about. Let me deal with them very rapidly. Efficiency is critically important in delivering energy policy. As I have already said, if we want to get that policy pursued and delivered quickly, we need an approach that avoids the protracted debates and disputes I have described.

Let us speak more strategically about energy policy, on which the hon. Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington) made a powerful point; we need to understand that bringing supply closer to demand is vital at a strategic level. Successive Governments have failed at this. A lot of people have made comments about the previous Government—the previous Government would have done a lot better if they had listened to me more often. I hope this one will; then they will not go wrong. It is important to reconsider the relationship between supply and demand. No Government have done that with sufficient vigour, and I hope this one will.

On economics, putting in the pylons will also have a displacement effect, because Lincolnshire is perhaps the most important county of all in respect of food production. I understand that about 30% of the fresh produce we consume goes through my constituency. South Lincolnshire produces 20% of the vegetables we consume, 20% of the sugar beet, and so on. The displacement effect of energy infrastructure, including pylons and solar, will have a devastating effect on food production and therefore food security. I simply say to the Minister that energy security must not be made the enemy of food security, and vice versa. That is why the economics are more complex than they perhaps first appear.

Finally, on the cognitive ergonomics of Government, it is really important that in winding up, the Minister assures this Chamber that the Departments across Government are working closely together. We have talked about land use studies, and that is a good thing, but given the commitments that the Planning Minister has made to beauty and the commitments that the Environment Secretary has made to food production and security, it is important that we do not simply pursue a policy that is invidious because it contradicts the other priorities of Government. In my long experience as a Minister in a variety of

Departments, I have found that lateral thinking in Government is a rare and precious thing; I simply recommend to the Minister a more lateral approach in combining those critical priorities.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex is right: we need to approach this in a bolder than partisan way, because we are speaking about fundamental decisions in the interest of our country. This is a matter of national interest, but it does not have to be a matter of national interest that compromises the common good.

Jack Abbott (Ipswich) (Lab/Co-op)

I will speak briefly because I know that many of my colleagues also wish to speak.

I echo the comments made by the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin). This does not have to be a partisan issue, but equally we have to acknowledge the situation as we find it, not the fantasy that we wish it to be. The reality is that we have had 14 years in which decisions could have been made.

Sir Bernard Jenkin

Here we go.

Jack Abbott

The hon. Gentleman says, “Here we go”, but it is absolutely relevant to this debate. Yes, the Conservative Government passed the Banner report—well done. That is the big achievement of the last 14 years. There was a fundamental opportunity over the last decade to recognise where we were going as a country, and what we needed to do. Those decisions were consistently kicked down the line, and now we are here.

The window in which we have to operate is incredibly narrow. We essentially have five years to meet the transition, which we have to do. Yes, underground cabling will cost more, but also there is a significant time delay, too. It is not a 2030 timeframe; it is a 2034 one. Let us get over the fantasy of a magical offshore grid connection that will solve everything way more cheaply and quickly. It just does not exist. We have to be honest with people.

There will always be opposition to any development. I grew up in Suffolk; I know that there will be opposition to the grid upgrades. There is also opposition to solar farms in the west of the county. Obviously, there is opposition to Sizewell C and things like it, but that cannot get in the way of progress. There is also the Green party bingo card—opposing all the projects; well, we definitely cannot go down that route either.

This is about opportunity. There is an opportunity to say that we will be transitioning to renewable energy to fulfil our mission and the guarantee that we made to working people at the election. It is our chance to seize the opportunity for greater energy independence, and for us—including my home county of Suffolk—to seize the opportunity to be world leaders in the energy transition. We cannot keep going around the houses, dithering, delaying and pretending that this stuff will not happen. It might sound good to constituents back home, but I grew up in that area—

Patrick Spencer

Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jack Abbott

I will finish my point because it is directly related to the hon. Gentleman's constituency of Central Suffolk. We already have pylons running through that part of the world. We have Mendlesham mast, which can be seen from miles around. We also have Eye airfield, big business parks, warehouses and farm buildings. We already have infrastructure in place.

Sir John Hayes

We already have horror; let us have more.

Jack Abbott

It is not horror at all; it is infrastructure that people desperately rely on. The right hon. Gentleman might want to live in a fantasy in which costs do not matter and there are no trade-offs. Well, that is not the case.

I also say to the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex: East Anglia and the fenlands, which he mentioned, are critical, because if we do not build the energy transition infrastructure that we need, guess what? There is no landscape. We will be surveying everything from a boat. That is the reality.

Patrick Spencer

The hon. Gentleman talks about speed and the need to do the transition quickly. May I draw his attention to the work of Bent Flyvbjerg? He wrote a book last year called "How Big Things Get Done", in which he noted, having looked at infrastructure projects across the world, that less than one in 10 are delivered on time and on budget. Part of the problem is making bad decisions in the planning process and not making the right decisions. If we want to get things done, we should take our time now and get the planning right.

Jack Abbott

The hon. Gentleman has just made a case for why we must crack on, and stop dithering and delaying. There is a history of doing bad things slowly, and that should never be repeated. It is not an excuse to do nothing now. We cannot afford to keep kicking the can down the road. We cannot keep relying on our constituents to foot the bill for an inefficient, unstable energy system—which is exactly what we have inherited. We can be as bipartisan as we like, but we have to accept the reality. We cannot keep heaping costs on to our constituents and businesses for our failure to invest properly in the system, which we now have five years to do.

To conclude—I am conscious that I want to bring my colleagues in—this debate has illustrated the choice we face between two competing visions for the future. We can choose whether or not we are prepared to stand up for Britain's energy security; we can choose whether or not we are prepared to throw away billions of pounds in taxpayers' money on fantasies that will never come to pass, or act now to slash bills; and we must choose whether or not we are prepared to destroy vast swathes of land, which underground cabling would do, and commit lasting ecological damage. I know which I would prefer, and which my constituents prefer, and I am unapologetic about choosing opportunity over wasteful fantasy projects.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green)

I welcome the chance to discuss matters like this in Westminster Hall—where, in my experience, there is an opportunity to look at the issues and options calmly and without party political point scoring. We must

deliver the energy transition at speed, and with community inclusion. The upgrades to the electricity grid are vital for net zero, but how this is done will shape public trust. We can, and must, achieve rapid progress and meaningful community engagement.

My constituents in Waveney Valley—like much of East Anglia—face floods, droughts, and farmland at risk of submersion: they understand the urgency, and voted for action in the election. The grid upgrade is essential to connect renewable energy capacity and end reliance on fossil fuels. Indeed, I have spent the last 10 years leading national environmental charities advocating for and advancing renewable energy, speeding up the transition, and advocating for strengthening the grid. The question is how we can best do that.

There are significant concerns over this proposed pylon route, as we have heard—concerns about the impact on sensitive nature and heritage sites, including the rural landscape, about the impact on farming, and about the implications for local traffic. This is not just about convenience. We need to make decisions that are right for the long term and resilient to the future climate changes that we face.

I want to zoom out, as other speakers have done, and talk about the overall climate emergency and climate breakdown that we are grappling with and working to address. We have seen in Parliament over recent decades a broad consensus on the need for action to be taken: the Climate Change Act 2008 was passed with cross-party support, and the 2050 net zero target was embedded by a later Government, with broad support across the House. We have not had the kind of polarisation that we have seen in the US, and we need to maintain that strong support and to avoid the issue being weaponised so that it becomes divisive and is used for political point scoring, but we risk that happening if we do not take people with us and if people are not heard.

The energy transition must be done with communities, not to them—communities need to feel engaged and heard to maintain their support. People want to see action taken. Speed and proper community consultation can go hand in hand; indeed, they must. The best way to accelerate the energy transition is for communities to feel consulted and involved from the outset. If people believe projects are imposed on them without proper engagement, there is a risk of slowing progress and undermining trust in the renewable energy revolution—a revolution that must happen.

That is why I want to see us use the time that we have right now. The National Grid consultation closed in July and we face a long delay until a planning application is expected at some point next year—we are not sure when. During this time, other options can be properly considered, and that is all I am calling for: a proper consideration of all the options. National Grid has acknowledged that undergrounding is possible—it is doing it in two small sections of the route—but there remain significant concerns.

Jack Abbott

Will the hon. Member give way? That is an important point.

Adrian Ramsay

As the hon. Member knows, we are about to move on to the Front-Bench spokespeople, so I would like to finish my points. These issues need to be properly considered and the alternatives must be properly examined, including undergrounding more or all of the route, as we have heard, or an offshore grid. Such things are being done in other countries. Indeed, a 2020 National Grid study indicated that an integrated offshore approach could be more cost-effective than piecemeal alternatives. That is why all the options need to be properly considered, and why constituents need to be listened to. People are saying that they feel let down. One of my constituents said:

“So far, we have been subjected to a series of lies, called NIMBYs, and told our rural area is unimportant.”

Another said that there is a failure “to engage with the local community and...to prove the pylons are better than other more sensible alternatives”.

They want the Government to start listening.

The rapid deployment of renewables must happen. The principle is clear: decisions about infrastructure must be made with communities, and we must maintain and build public trust. All connectivity options must be properly assessed. My constituents are keen to support the energy transition, but they need respect and consultation, and to be shown that the impacts are being properly considered and any compensation packages are clearly set out. The energy transition is not a choice between speed and community support. With thoughtful planning and meaningful engagement, we can, and must, achieve both.

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I commend the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) for securing this debate, and I thank all of those attending—it is good to see representation from most parties.

Let me start with the good news that there is considerable consensus in the room, despite a couple of testy exchanges. Members from across the House have agreed that decarbonising our electricity generation is critical to meeting the UK’s contribution to tackling global climate change. A less centralised and more distributed electricity network is also essential for economic growth, and to ensure that our various businesses and homes continue to have power.

The hon. Members for East Thanet (Ms Billington), for Ipswich (Jack Abbott), for Cramlington and Killingworth (Emma Foody), and for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay), as well as the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex, have all articulated the decarbonisation challenge very well. Members have also agreed on the need for a planning system that strikes the right balance between national needs and local voices. That recurring challenge comes up in so many debates in the House, and I will say more about it shortly.

It is welcome that the new Labour Government have committed to delivering “the largest upgrade to our national clean energy infrastructure in a generation.”

It is in all our interests that they succeed, particularly, as the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex conceded, in the context of the previous Conservative Government not acting with anything close to the speed or ambition that the challenge demands. But as we have seen with past goals, such as the previous Government’s original goal to end the sale of full combustion engine cars by 2030, aspirations will remain lofty ideas without a solid plan to achieve them. In that context, around 40% of projects face a connection wait of at least a year, according to National Grid’s figures. Indeed, according to Electrical Review, 75% of energy sector experts identified timely grid connections as the principal obstacle impeding the growth of renewable energy in the UK.

It is therefore essential that the Government show the leadership that is needed not just to upgrade our electricity grid, enabling its decarbonisation and providing greater value for money for consumers, but to tackle in a sensitive and inclusive way the recurring challenge regarding the balance between listening to the voices of local communities and achieving national objectives. The hon. Member articulately highlighted the role of community consent and engagement in delivering the infrastructure that we need, although I would assert that his figures on the cost of buried versus overhead cables are somewhat disputed by a number of sources.

The Liberal Democrats also want to see the electricity grid network reformed to support businesses’ transition to renewable energy sources and to permit local energy grids to supply power to communities who need it most. We support the expansion of the grid network through a strategic land and sea use framework to facilitate an optimum balance between electricity generation, food production and nature recovery. The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) and the hon. Member for Waveney

Valley have articulated the challenge of ensuring that we balance the demands on our land and use it appropriately.

The Liberal Democrats would like to see more done on a rooftop solar revolution by expanding incentives for households to install solar panels, including a guaranteed fair price for electricity sold back into the grid. We believe that upgrades to the national grid are essential to ensure that electric vehicles are cheap to charge and are an accessible step in making everyday lives more sustainable.

Making schemes for community benefit from new infrastructure compulsory will be essential for local buy-in, and we have tabled an amendment to the Great British Energy Bill to that effect. Keeping energy bills affordable, at a time when many are struggling to pay their energy costs, is important, particularly in the context of Government cuts to the winter fuel payment and the forthcoming 1.2% increase to the energy price cap. The Labour Government need to take more radical action to ensure that consumer energy bills remain affordable.

As several Members have said, consent and dialogue are essential. I particularly applaud the observation from the hon. Member for Waveney Valley that consultation needs to be more than just a technical process. It is important to build trust and dialogue so that people believe in the process.

I face some of these challenges in my Didcot and Wantage constituency in Oxfordshire, where Thames Water proposes to build the second largest reservoir, claiming that studies suggest that it is needed to meet long-term water demand. A key challenge is that my constituents simply do not trust Thames Water's motives and its ability to deliver such a large scheme. That is a strong illustration of the challenge of balancing national goals and local concerns.

I do not have the answer to how we strike the right balance, but it is something that we all need to think about, and particularly the new Government. I call on them not to think that their unassailable majority in terms of seats in this place gives them the power to override those concerns. Perhaps they should think more in terms of vote share, and they should recognise that many people did not buy into this Government. It is therefore important to have dialogue and to find the right balance in the planning process between national and local goals.

My constituency has seen huge population growth in recent years, with more than 4,000 further homes planned for Valley Park near Didcot. The science and technology sector has a major presence at Milton Park, Culham and Harwell campus. Harwell campus has a major current and future demand for electricity to power globally important synchrotron and neutron beam equipment and spin-off businesses. In that context, confidence is needed that future affordable energy supply will happen.

If the electricity grid is upgraded, local and community energy projects can provide even more help. Community-owned projects can help with the challenge of getting local buy-in, and may have a return on investment and businesses in local areas. Flexibility in local energy systems can allow local energy trading, meaning energy pricing at lower than market rates, allowing more money in bill payers' pockets and reduced overheads for businesses.

I am pleased to see many examples of solar panel roof schemes in my constituency, but would like more, particularly on new houses. Thames Travel, Didcot Girls' school, Chiltern primary school, Hagbourne school, Fir Tree junior school in Wallingford and Malcolm Building at Ashurst Court in Sandford have all invested in solar panel roof schemes. Just outside my constituency, in Oxford West and Abingdon, the Sandford lock hydroelectric plant uses Archimedes screws to generate electricity from the flow of the river, generating clean renewable power for local community benefit. We need more such projects. I call on the Government to create the electricity grid and wider regulatory framework to empower our local communities to benefit.

The key challenge we face is a national one—the balance between national goals and hearing local concerns and getting local buy-in. Dialogue, and ensuring that things are done with, not to, communities, is essential. I

hope that the Government will not let their majority go to their head, but will engage in the challenge of getting an effective, consenting planning process.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Sir Christopher. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on bringing this important debate to Westminster Hall. It has been a pleasure, as a shadow energy Minister and a constituency MP with similar issues, to have discussed these issues to try to find a way through. It has also been a pleasure to share notes on the experiences of the communities that we both represent—indeed, there are many such communities represented by Members in this room and beyond.

It is good to see so many people attending this debate. It shows the groundswell of feeling outside this Chamber on what we need to do, whether that is on upgrading the grid and making our way to our net zero, cleaner future—everybody in this room acknowledges that we need to upgrade the grid in order to do that—or in representing communities who are concerned about the pace and direction of travel, and the inability, or refusal, of those in positions of power to consider alternative technologies.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP)

Will the hon. Member give way?

Andrew Bowie

As ever, I am delighted to give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Jim Shannon

I thank the hon. Member. He said that all parts of the United Kingdom are keen to achieve and be part of this goal. Renewable energy in Northern Ireland makes up 50% of the electricity generated, but it has to reach 80% by 2030, as I know he is aware. That is six years away. When it comes to scale, pace and complexity, does he agree that there is a need for the whole of the UK to have additional support and funding to reach these goals? That means Northern Ireland needs to be part of this process as well.

Andrew Bowie

The hon. Gentleman knows well, I hope, that my commitment to our entire United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is just as firm as his, and when I speak about the UK, I reference Strangford and Northern Ireland more widely. The situation in Northern Ireland is unique in that the number of homes that are off-grid far outweighs the number of off-grid homes in mainland GB. That brings its own complexities with regard to decarbonisation, moving away from gas or oil, and boilers for heating and other such purposes. I completely understand the unique complexities of decarbonising in a Northern Irish environment, and he is absolutely right that when the Government take decisions on UK-wide infrastructure projects, they should be cognisant of Northern Ireland's unique situation, being in an all-Ireland grid and having so many off-grid properties. That should never be far from our minds.

I thank the hon. Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington), my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Patrick Spencer), the hon. Member for Cramlington and Killingworth (Emma Foody), my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), as ever, and the hon.

Members for Ipswich (Jack Abbott) and for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay) for their contributions. I did not agree with all of them, but they were all very thought through. I know that everybody in this room, whatever their perspective on how we achieve a cleaner future, agrees that upgrading the grid is important. How we go about that is the issue concerning us today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex eloquently highlighted the strength of feeling among communities across the country being asked to take on the burden of what is being proposed. I mentioned that we shared notes, and that is because my constituency, like that of my hon. Friend, faces the threat of huge energy infrastructure bills over the next few years. Communities fear the genuine threat of industrialisation sweeping rural landscapes and the impact on communities as a result.

In my West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine constituency, the energy industry is omnipresent. It is home to the subsea capital of Europe and on the edge of the oil and gas capital of Europe. Many of my constituents work, or have worked, in the energy industry. Many are involved in the design, construction or installation of underground or offshore pipelines for oil, gas or electric cables. If someone digs deep enough in my constituency, they will find national gas pipelines buried underground. The only indication of them being there are the little yellow marker signs on the surface warning people to beware and not to dig anywhere close.

I say that because I stress that my constituents and so many others around the country who are raising this issue are not doing so because they are being needlessly obstructive. They are not doing it because they are being anti-net zero, or because they do not agree the grid needs to be upgraded. They just know, due to their experience working in the industry, that there are other ways forward. It is for this reason, and the overwhelming desire on the Conservative side of the House to exhaust all the options in our pursuit to find the best technology at the best cost that would deliver our decarbonised grid—and not, as the National Energy System Operator report suggested, that we favour pace over perfection—and to do so in a way that does not blight so many communities and our great British countryside, that we committed in our manifesto to take a different approach.

Tom Hayes

We have heard in this debate about the importance of expediency. Does he agree that, uniquely, we live in a world in turmoil? We see growing international threats, and one of the surest ways in which Britain can protect ourselves against them is by being energy independent. As a consequence, we need not just to move quickly to meet our climate crisis—our energy defences are down, and it is important that we can protect ourselves in the future.

Andrew Bowie

I could not agree more. Indeed, I long for a day when we are much more energy independent. That is why I take such issue with Labour's position on the North sea and the wilful destruction of our oil and gas industry, leaving us open to further outside influence and reliant on hostile states. That is one of the reasons why I think that we need to increase our energy security, and why I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need to improve it.

This is not about whether we do that; it is about how we go about it and about taking decisions now in the best long-term interests of people and of the energy security of this country. I do not believe that the way that the Government are proceeding at the minute is in the best long-term interests of the communities of this country. If we get this right, work together, get to a solution where communities feel they have a stake in the energy transition, deliver the clean future and become energy independent, as I used to say when I was the Minister, that is a win, win, win—but we are a long way from that just yet.

I mentioned community benefits briefly. In June 2023, I visited East Anglia to begin the consultation process on the community benefits package. On 7 December 2023, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer outlined the framework of that package. I wonder whether the Minister present might be able to give us an update as to where the process is and where the Government have reached on community benefits

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks).

That was almost a year ago.

Andrew Bowie

Quite. Regardless of the technologies that are selected, of whether the pylons and associated infrastructure are built and of any right hon. or hon. Member's view, communities out there want to know what the community benefits package and the trade-offs will be, and what they will receive as a result of having to host infrastructure in the national interest. An update on that would be delightful.

Ms Billington

I am struck that we have heard a lot about community engagement and consultation, but what does not seem to be clear is exactly what is meant by it, despite the fact that all of us do a lot of community consultation and engagement through the process of democracy. In particular, given how people talk about it, we could quite well end up with a veto by a small number of people of a transformation of our country to increase resilience, reduce costs and tackle the climate crisis. Surely the hon. Gentleman would agree that that is not desirable. That is why we need to change the planning process, so that we can support the transformation we seek.

Andrew Bowie

I respect the hon. Lady's position and welcome her intervention, but it would be reprehensible if hon. Members elected to this House to represent their communities did not do so. For her, it might just be a small number of people complaining about this, but for many Members of this House and representatives in other legislatures across the United Kingdom, huge numbers of people in communities that they represent are very concerned about the impacts that the plans will have on their landscape, their land, their house prices and so on. It is incumbent on us, as the elected representatives of those people, to bring those concerns to the House to debate and discuss, and for a decision then to be taken by the Government. Whether we like it or not, a decision will be taken by the Government about the best way forward, which is why I asked about community benefits.

The consultation that I mentioned a minute ago was focused specifically on the community benefits package, and I asked whether we might see more detail on it in the near future, and whether it might be statutory—I know that that was something being looked at by the Department, but it has been looking at it for some time.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab)

Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Bowie

I have little time, but I will.

Deirdre Costigan

The hon. Gentleman mentioned protecting landscapes. Does he agree that it is rather audacious for those in his party to refer to that, given that after 14 years they have left us with nature targets that they failed to achieve, still drilling for oil and gas, with backing for fracking for a significant amount of time, sewage in our rivers and seas, and plastic bottles across the country because they refused to implement environmental schemes on that front? Does he agree that he has a cheek to mention protecting the landscape? Furthermore, does he agree that many of his arguments today are a delaying tactic? We need that power in west London.

Andrew Bowie

No, I do not agree.

Before I conclude, I will say this. Noticeable today and in discussions on this subject in the recent past, is a certain tone that is being adopted by some Labour Members. While we might disagree about the ways to reach net zero and to best upgrade the grid, there are people out there who are genuinely worried about what these plans might mean for them and their communities. I urge all hon. and right hon. Members to please engage in this debate with an element of respect for the views expressed on behalf of those people and communities up and down the country.

I know that the Minister recognises this. Indeed, he has always engaged in this debate with due respect for those communities. There are people out there concerned about the way forward and the pace at which this change is coming. Please remember those people, consider other options, and listen to those communities. We can then bring the country together, and everybody can contribute to this transition, which we all agree needs to happen in the national interest.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks)

It is a pleasure, Sir Christopher, to serve under your chairmanship. I thank the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) for introducing the debate, for his approach, and for the engagement we have had on the topic in the short time that I have been in this job. While I suspect we might disagree politically on a great many things, his repeated commitment to the need for net zero is important, and separates him from some hon. Members who might make the issue of grid updates part of an excuse to avoid dealing with the climate issue. I welcome that, and I was pleased to meet him and his colleagues recently to discuss the matter.

I also thank all others who have contributed to the debate. I welcome the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) to his new role. He is not just a shadow Energy Minister now, but shadow Secretary of State for Scotland. Clearly, he did not have enough on his plate before. I do not know what it says about the Scottish group of Conservative MPs that he has two jobs, but I will leave that to one side. The debate this morning has been wide-ranging, although I confess I did not anticipate an existential question from the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) about the nature of beauty and the environment. I learned a lot from that, but I will leave the theological debate about pylons to others in the House.

I want to pick up on the general context first, and then some of the specific issues that have been raised. When it comes to the security of our energy future, few matters face us as a Government more important

than the delivery of network infrastructure. It was the topic of the very first meeting I had as a Minister, and has been the topic of almost every other meeting I have had in this job, with a range of different people looking at it. Our network infrastructure is in dire need of upgrading.

I will start with the point that the shadow Minister finished on. I recognise that the impact of delivering these upgrades, while important to our national infrastructure, will be felt in individual communities; that is the nature of this. I recognise that there will be communities across Great Britain and Northern Ireland that will have to host energy infrastructure. We thank them for doing so and, while recognising the importance of upgrading infrastructure for the whole country, also recognise the need to get the balance right.

Jim Shannon

The Minister is always incredibly helpful with questions that I or anybody asks, which I appreciate and thank him for. For Northern Ireland to be successful, it needs support from Government here. The shadow Minister reiterated that. I ask the Minister to say something perhaps similar for the record, so that it is in Hansard. We in Northern Ireland need to be very much part of the strategy for the future. As others have said, it is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We are always better together, but there are advantages—let us see some of those advantages.

Michael Shanks

While I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, me repeating “better together” is sometimes tricky in my political party. I do, however, reiterate my commitment to the whole of the United Kingdom. He will know that I take that very seriously, and I have had a number of meetings on the topic with the Economy Minister in Northern Ireland, who is responsible for energy. Clearly, the role I have is different in Northern Ireland, given the transferred nature of energy policy and the whole island grid, but I take the issues very seriously and commit to that today.

The delivery of a reinforced modern electricity network is critical for every home and business across the country. It is a critical enabler for our Clean Power 2030 mission, which is designed to deliver not just energy security but economic growth, skilled jobs and cheaper energy, which the country so desperately needs. In short, transforming the network underpins our shared commitment to energy security, prosperity and the low-carbon future that the country needs. It is fair to say that this transformation is extremely long overdue. The last significant modernisation of the grid took place in the 1960s. New investment into industries of the future, such as data centres, will play such an important part in the economy of the next few decades. We need to deliver jobs around that, unlocking growth, but electricity demands will increase by an expected 60% by 2035 and double by 2050.

Deirdre Costigan

I want to bring the Minister’s attention to issues being faced in west London. He mentioned data centres; we recently had confirmation of a great investment from CyrusOne, but it has to get power from Enfield because there are huge constraints on the energy system in west London. Does the Minister agree that we need to ramp up the work on connecting these new investments to the grid? We must not allow the tactics of the Opposition, which are about delay and going back 14 years to decisions they should have made but never did. Now is the time to take action; people should not be required to pay higher energy fees than they should, which is another aspect of this issue.

Michael Shanks

I agree with my hon. Friend on that important point. Connection dates on both the generation and demand sides are much too far in the future. We need to build more of the network structure across the country and reform the way we deal with connections, which is ongoing.

I am conscious of time and want to give the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex time to respond. We have heard from a number of hon. Members about the impact of grid expansions on their communities. I want to make three key points. First, I do not accept that grid expansion is riding roughshod over communities. Communities will have a say in these projects. Secondly, I take a less dismissive view than some hon. Members about the importance of genuine community benefits. If communities host infrastructure and generation, they should benefit. The shadow Minister referred to work under way, which he said the previous Government spent a year on and we have moved on in five months. We are moving quickly to work out what effective community benefit looks like. We are developing guidance on that, particularly for hosting transmission network infrastructure, which will be published in due course.

On the point about modern technology, delivery of the network is underpinned by the latest technology, tailoring it to locations that urgently need reinforcement. It relies on upgrading existing power lines first, and uses innovative strategic design and options to find solutions that balance ecological impacts and, crucially, cost. That is important, given that the cost is borne by billpayers across the country.

Hon. Members will be under no illusion that we have to expand the network considerably, rewiring and connecting to new areas of demand in future. That is why we have outlined our mission of clean power by 2030. We will publish our response to NESO's report soon. The mission will be achieved by investment in renewable generation, including onshore and offshore wind, solar and storage. There can be no transition to that clean power future without the grid upgrade. That work will take us to 2030 but, given the increase in demand to 2050, it will have to continue far beyond that.

I want to pick up a point about NESO's advice on cost. NESO's advice on the project in East Anglia concerns whether it will be cheaper or more expensive. A number of hon. Members should review that advice more carefully. I would have gone into more detail but I have only 40 seconds to wrap up. It is worth clarifying that delays in delivering the undergrounding part were not factored into some of the points that the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex made.

To conclude a wide-ranging debate, we are on the edge of an industrial and energy revolution. We want to reduce bills and deliver energy security. To do that we need to upgrade the grid infrastructure, which must be hosted in some communities. We want to bring them with us but that work has to be done, and that is the commitment of this Government.

Sir Bernard Jenkin

I thank the Minister for his engagement and for the meeting he had with MPs. It would be very kind if he could write to me with the further detail that he has not been able to put on the record today. I would also point out that the only orange flag against ultrahigh voltage direct current undergrounding in the ESO review in the spring was about cable availability. It was not a red flag but an orange flag. With streamlining of the planning process, this could be sped up. It is a possibility, and I hope the Minister will continue dialogue on this issue, because I think he will need this as a solution to the problems he will run into.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order. No. 10(6)).