



RICHARD BACON MP

STATEMENT TO MR DAVID LAVENDER MRTPI

HEMPNALL PLANNING INQUIRY

THURSDAY 1 OCTOBER 2009

1. Thank you for providing me with this opportunity to speak and for your flexibility on the date and time. On 14 August 2008, South Norfolk District Council (“SNDC”) refused planning permission for seven wind turbines on land at Busseys Loke, Hempnall with a maximum height of 125 metres. Five reasons were given for refusal, which I do not propose to restate this morning.
2. The principal issue that is now in dispute between SNDC and the appellant is where to strike the balance between the harm that the proposed development would cause to the landscape - including the impact upon visual amenity, the effect on the occupants of nearby residential properties and the setting of St Margaret’s Church - compared with the government’s guidance on wind turbines.
3. SNDC’s own planning policy UTL 13 states that planning permission will be granted for renewable energy projects provided that the benefits of exploiting the renewable resource are not outweighed by demonstrable harm to the locality. I believe that the proposal before you was plainly in breach of UTL 13, as well as other local plan policies. Policy UTL 13 is clear and balanced, neither giving local communities a ‘get-out’ clause to escape any unwanted but necessary development, nor favouring energy developers in all circumstances.

4. In his opening statement, counsel for the appellant Mr Hardy stated that negotiations had revealed: "...a serious misunderstanding on [SNDC's] part regarding the way in which Central Government expects this project to be treated". Mr Hardy was referring to paragraph 40 of PPS 1, which states that developers of projects that could contribute to meeting PPS 1's Key Planning Objectives should: "expect expeditious and sympathetic handling of the planning application" from the local planning authority. However, I believe that neither PPS 22 nor Paragraph 40 of PPS 1 are instructions for local planning authorities to approve any and all renewable energy developments, irrespective of their suitability. They merely ask that local planning authorities give renewable energy projects serious consideration, that they deal with the application quickly and that renewable energy developments should be capable of being accommodated throughout England in locations where environmental, economic, and social impacts can be addressed satisfactorily.
5. It is my belief that SNDC has given this project serious and sympathetic consideration and has come to the conclusion, rightly in my view, that the benefits of exploiting the renewable resource are outweighed by demonstrable harm to the locality and that the environmental and social impacts of the proposal cannot be addressed satisfactorily, bringing the proposal into conflict with key principle i) of PPS 22. As such I believe that SNDC was correct in refusing planning permission.
6. Counsel for SNDC, Ms Ellis, has already eloquently made the point that the government, if so minded, could have sought to take all renewable energy infrastructure away from development control. To date, it has not done so and, whilst the Planning Act 2008 seeks to determine nationally important renewable energy projects at a national level, onshore projects producing less than 50MW of electricity do not meet the government's test for

national importance and therefore fall outside the scope of the Act. This project would generate 14 MW of electricity at best and thus fails this test. It means that by the government's own standards this project is not of national importance.

7. You may recall that I was unable to address the inquiry last Thursday because I was taking constituents to meet the Energy Minister Lord Hunt on a separate, but related, matter. One of the most interesting points which the minister stressed at that meeting, which he kindly agreed to in order to discuss with my constituents renewable energy infrastructure and the impact of the Planning Act 2008, is that even where the government wishes for nationally important energy infrastructure projects to be decided nationally, the government is still very keen to preserve a local voice.
8. In the case of Hempnall, I was left in no doubt as to what precisely that local voice was saying, and the strength of feeling locally about the inappropriate scale of this development, when I was invited to a packed meeting in Hempnall Village Hall, attended by residents from Hempnall and all the surrounding villages. I regret that the appellant chose not to address the meeting and therefore did not make the best use of the opportunities presented to it by Hempnall parish council to engage with local people and to address their concerns.
9. The local District Councillor for Hempnall ward, Michael Windridge, was determined to obtain an accurate assessment of local opinion and he was particularly interested to encourage electors who supported Enertrag's proposal to confide their views. Councillor Windridge wrote directly to every single elector in the Parish of Hempnall and, to protect respondents' confidentiality, he supplied a stamped, self-addressed envelope, entirely at his own expense. I understand that the results of that opinion survey have been included in the evidence submitted to you and it is worth remembering

that the parish councils of Hempnall, Saxlingham, Shotesham, Tasburgh, Woodton, Topcroft, Morningthorpe with Fritton, and Shelton & Hardwick all voted against the Enertrag proposal.

10. It is also my understanding that Councillor Windridge has subsequently written again to any new arrivals to Hempnall since March 2007 and that he will present those findings to you today. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Councillor Windridge, on behalf of his constituents and mine, for all his hard work in ensuring that the voices of local people are heard.
11. The appellant has claimed that there is a large silent contingent in the affected area who support this proposal but do not want to call attention to themselves by being open about it. Councillor Windridge has provided any covert supporters with every opportunity to give their views in confidence and all I can say is that with just a few exceptions they were silent then and they are still silent now.
12. The guiding principle for my approach to the question of wind power, or indeed any development issue, is one of balance. We need more alternative energy sources and personally I regret that the United Kingdom has not taken action sooner to harness the various forms of renewable energy at our disposal. Britain has some 11,000 miles of coastline; as an island we are surrounded by some of the windiest seas in the world; and North Sea Oil has provided us with more than 30 years' experience in working offshore. All this presents Britain with very significant opportunities. Average wind speeds offshore are higher than onshore, meaning wind farms at sea will generate far more power than onshore wind farms ever could, with the added advantage that they are where we cannot see them. Micro-generation could give many homes and businesses the opportunity to generate power for themselves and for the National Grid, and for centuries, windmills built

on a human scale have blended seamlessly into the countryside. I accept fully that we require a diverse energy mix to see us through the years ahead and to make sure that Britain's lights stay on. I simply do not accept what appears to be the appellant's contention, that the challenge of climate change means that we are always required to accept giant on-shore industrial wind turbines in sensitive rural landscapes.

13. There is a place for onshore wind power. SNDC has approved a development of wind turbines at Hethel. That development placed wind turbines on industrial land, which intuitively seems more appropriate. I have also visited the wind farm on the Yorkshire moors at Ovenden, and it also seems that remote moor land is a more appropriate location for wind turbines.

14. In conclusion, SNDC's policy, UTL 13, is clear: renewable energy projects will be granted planning permission *provided* that the benefits are not outweighed by demonstrable harm to the locality. Industrial wind turbines 125 metres in height and seven times taller than St Margaret's Church in Hempnall, which is currently the tallest building in the parish, would indeed inflict demonstrable harm on a very significant scale. That is my view. That is SNDC's view and, most importantly of all, that is overwhelmingly the view of local residents. The proposal before you is neither sensitive to the surroundings nor is it appropriate to the proposed location. SNDC has in my view acted correctly in refusing permission for a development that is inappropriate for the area in question.

ENDS