

JAMES HEAPPEY MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

The Rt Hon Amber Rudd MP
Secretary of State
Department for Energy and Climate Change
3 Whitehall Place
London
SW1A 2AW

5
January 2016

Dear Amber,

Before Christmas, I presented a petition to the House of Commons expressing the real concern of my constituents over the building of a new transmission line from Hinkley C to Avonmouth. The petition was generated exclusively within the four most affected parishes and was signed by over half of those on the electoral roll. Had I invited the remainder of the constituency to contribute, I am confident that the petition would have generated thousands of signatures. This is a hugely unpopular project locally.

Over the last eight years, my predecessors David Heathcoat-Amory, Tessa Munt and I have been working with local campaign groups to engage with National Grid's consultation process and then the Planning Inspector's inquiry last year. Similar efforts have been made in the other affected constituencies of Bridgwater & West Somerset, Weston-Super-Mare and North Somerset.

There is a real feeling that National Grid have not listened to local public opinion and that they have failed to value the visual amenity of the countryside these pylons will scar. This is a landscape overlooked by the Mendip Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the Levels themselves are (in part) a Site of Special Scientific Interest. Tourism is an essential part our economy and these pylons will be right in the shop window dominating the landscape as visitors look into Somerset from the M5 and the mainline railway.

The key 'concession' from the consultation is that 'T Pylons' will be used but there are wide-ranging concerns about these too. Firstly, they are heralded as being around 15m shorter than the 420kv lattice pylons that would be employed on a project of this size but they are, nonetheless, much taller than the pylons that are already in the area. More striking is the width; the T Pylon will be 30 metres wide (for comparison, a tennis court is just under 24m in length). And they are solid, meaning that this incredible corner of the UK will be blighted by 100ft pillars topped by 'T-bars and ear-rings' that will be as wide as they are tall. The impact will be significant.

I do not have the benefit of having yet seen the Planning Inspector's analysis of these pylons but I felt it important to stress to you just how unpopular they are. I would be grateful if you could also ensure that all appropriate tests have been done on how these T Pylons will perform when strung under tension in the very wet environment of the Somerset Levels. Thus far, the limited testing that has been done was conducted on a very different terrain at the National Grid's test centre. We need to be clear that their design will withstand the demands of this landscape without requiring excessive foundations which could impact on the water table and drainage of the field they are in. They are going through the area that was so badly affected by flooding in early 2014 – there can be no gamble.

Member of Parliament for the Wells Constituency

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Furthermore, I understand from a recent ECC Committee trip to National Grid that lattice pylons have undergone some ballistic testing to check their resilience to a potential terrorist attack. They were unable to tell me whether the T Pylons have undergone similarly robust testing. Clearly the security and resilience of our network is vital, especially when this part of the network will be used to transmit such a significant part of our nation's generation capacity to the Grid. I hope that you will call for full testing to be completed before agreeing that these pylons can be employed.

Finally, I have always held the view that National Grid's plans for this line are inconsistent with both their own Future Energy Scenarios and Government policy. The cost benefit analysis of transmission overhead, underground or under the Bristol Channel/Severn Estuary has been done over just a thirty year period and considers exclusively the cost of connecting Hinkley C. The National Grid's Future Energy Scenarios looks out over a 60 year horizon and includes much discussion of marine energy generation from both offshore wind and tidal schemes off the Somerset, Devon, Cornwall and South Wales coasts. The life of the pylon line is anticipated to be 90 years.

In my view, we should be building an undersea connection not just to service Hinkley C but as an investment in all the other marine based energy schemes that will need connection in the future. How ludicrous that each of them might require their own overland connection project at both significant cost and environmental damage when we could have taken the opportunity to put something on the sea bed now that could service it all.

It may be that the Planning Inspector has come to the same conclusion in which case, I look forward to your announcement. However, in the event that she has reached a different recommendation or that you feel she has not adequately examined some of the issues I have raised in this letter, I hope you will consider delaying your decision until you have been able to satisfy yourself that these pylons are ready for deployment and that there is no other way to connect Hinkley without blighting the Somerset countryside. Local opinion is clear – we should be pursuing an undersea solution as we have elsewhere in the UK in recent years. It is worth noting that there is time for further consideration given that National Grid are still intending to have the line complete by 2022 whilst Hinkley will not be operational until 2025.

I am seeking some Parliamentary time to raise these issues before you are scheduled to make your announcement and would further welcome the opportunity, with Liam Fox, to meet with you to discuss in more detail.

Yours ever,