

Westminster Hall
Thursday 10 February 2011
[Mr Charles Walker in the Chair]
BACKBENCH BUSINESS
Onshore Wind Energy

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.-(Mr Newmark.)

2.30 pm

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Walker. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for enabling me to introduce this very important debate about onshore wind farms.

First, I congratulate the Front-Bench team for their part in bringing the Localism Bill to Parliament. It is absolutely key that we in Britain reverse the tide of centralisation and start to give power back to communities and people. I applaud the intention to remove regional spatial strategies and to abolish regional renewables targets. Putting power back into the hands of local communities and better allowing people to determine the outcomes for their area is certainly something that we need to do, so I thank the Front-Bench team for that.

The debate about onshore wind farms goes to the heart of the question of localism versus the national interest. Where onshore wind farms are concerned, a big tug-of-war is going on. There are real issues of national interest that must be taken into account. I shall mention three, the first of which is the energy gap. Although this is not a party political debate, Labour's leaving of our economy in such a shambles is one of the legacies that we are fighting. The other is the way that it left our energy situation. The sad fact is that between now and 2020, some 35% of British power generating capability through nuclear and conventional power stations will be retired due to old age.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): I welcome the debate initiated by the hon. Lady. It is a good opportunity. I also welcome her saying that it is not party political, but will she note that in the middle of the economic recession that we had and the difficulties that we had, and still have, the wind sector grew by thousands and thousands of jobs? It was not coincidental that that growth began from 2007-08 onwards. Is that not a good story about green jobs started under the Labour Administration?

Andrea Leadsom: As I plan to say, wind energy plays a part, but what we actually needed to do was to rebuild conventional power sources, and start building new ones, that will genuinely meet the needs of the country in the next decades.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on obtaining the debate. On the subject of conventional power stations, will she note that wind power will not alter one jot the number of power stations required? A report by Scottish and Southern Energy notes that receipts from its extensive wind turbine farm were down by 20% last year, beyond its expectations, showing that we simply cannot rely on there being sufficient wind to eliminate conventional power stations.

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree, and will come to that point.

The second challenge where national need is tugging against local need is energy security and our dwindling North sea gas reserves. We are now a net importer of gas and will increasingly rely on potentially unreliable sources for importing power, so there is a great need to rebuild our own generating capability. The third "tug" comes from our binding EU target to meet 15% of our energy needs through renewables by 2020. Again, that presses us towards urgent action that at times can appear to go against local requirements.

I therefore welcome the Government's focus and determination to solve these problems while at the same time taking account of what local people want. What are the solutions? The former leader of the CBI, Richard Lambert, said clearly that nuclear energy was the answer. It is low carbon and has a high base load. I am pleased that we are seizing that bull by the horns and pressing for more nuclear capability. That will be key.

As the hon. Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies) suggested, however, the big race during the last decade has been for onshore wind, not just here but in Europe. Let me set the scene. At the moment, Britain has 350 operational wind farms, 260 either under construction or awaiting construction and 250 at the planning stage. That means that there are already 3,000 turbines in the country, with another 6,500 either awaiting construction or planned. To meet the 10,000 turbines needed to ensure that we hit our 15% renewables target by 2020 would cost us dearly in terms of the impact on communities and electricity prices.

At the moment, onshore wind farms provide for about 2.1% of total energy needs in the UK and they are by far the largest renewable source, but the big question is: are they worth it? To examine that, I shall consider the case of Denmark, which has led the way on onshore wind. It now has more than 6,000 wind turbines for a population of just over 5 million people. In theory, wind turbines could provide for one fifth of Denmark's energy needs, but its national power company-DONG Energy-has stopped supporting new onshore wind turbines, for three reasons. The first is the enormous public backlash. Communities have just had enough. Secondly, electricity prices in Denmark are the highest in Europe. Since 2005, subsidies paid by businesses and consumers to wind farm developers have totalled some £620 million.

However, the key reason why Denmark is putting a stop to onshore wind farms is effectiveness. Electricity generated in Denmark could provide for 20% of its total needs, but not much of it is used in Denmark. Why? Because the wind does not blow at peak times in Denmark, so the country sells its surplus energy to Norway, Sweden and Germany, often at a substantial loss.

Another key issue in Denmark is that the Danes have failed to close a single conventional power station. Why? Wind energy produces excesses of power at times when it is windy and when it is working, but at other times it is not useful to them, so it has not significantly reduced their carbon footprint. In addition, they have to keep their power plants ticking over because the carbon footprint from constantly ramping up power stations when the wind drops is counter-productive.

The other reason why Denmark has stopped building onshore wind farms is that subsidies have been reduced significantly by the Danish Government. Of course, that points to the fact that the big push for wind is a result of taxpayer subsidies; that is why developers want to

build wind farms.

What does that mean for the UK? First, in the UK we know that wind farms are unreliable. The intermittency causes a problem for the grid. Too much wind means that the turbines have to be turned off. No wind means that they are useless. Wind cannot be stored, and in the UK the average production from wind turbines is about 30% tops. That means that the theoretical capacity of 100% is only achieved to the tune of 30% on average because of the intermittency of wind. We therefore have to keep all our power plants going to provide a back-up source and we will have to build new power plants to cope with that.

Secondly, last December, when temperatures dropped to an average of minus 0.7° and demand for heat rose by 7%, there was no wind. Wind power contributed not a jot to meeting that 7% increase in demand for heat.

Thirdly, we have to consider the costs. It is difficult to establish the relative costs because they move all the time, but roughly speaking, wind energy costs about two and a half times the price of nuclear energy and twice the cost of traditional fuel sources. However, it is not just the fuel itself. There is also the cost of building the turbines. The costs of the raw materials for that are increasing, and as the demand for wind turbines increases, so does the cost of building them.

Finally, there is the cost of upgrading the grid to deal with the enormous amount of new connectivity that will be needed by 2020 if we are to have a total of 10,000 onshore wind turbines. The cost has been put at around £5 billion.

James Wharton (Stockton South) (Con): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about the cost of wind turbines. Is it not the case that there is not only a cash cost, but that the carbon cost of manufacture detracts significantly from the environmental benefits that onshore turbines are supposedly meant to bring?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes a good point, although some would argue that the cost would be defrayed over a few months, once the turbines are built. Of course, it all boils down to how much energy the turbines produce.

Upgrades to the grid will cost about £5 billion by 2020. That alone will add 1% to every fuel bill, as it is consumers and businesses who will be paying the cost. In 2005, Paul Golby, the chief executive officer of E.ON, said:

"Without the renewable obligation certificates nobody would be building wind farms."

In 2007, Ofgem said,

"we think there are cheaper and simpler ways of meeting these aims"-

the aims of reducing carbon emissions and promoting renewables-

"than the renewables obligation scheme which is forecast to cost business and

domestic customers over £30 billion."

In 2008, the Centre for Policy Studies predicted that meeting the 2020 renewables target would require a taxpayer subsidy of between £4 billion and £5 billion a year. That would add £3,000 to the total fuel bills of every household-that excludes the cost of infrastructure -and it takes no account of the fact that, in 2009, 4 million households were in fuel poverty. The cost of these things must be taken seriously into account.

I am delighted that the Government have announced that they intend to share the financial benefit of onshore wind farms with communities. That is important because there is no doubt that taxpayers will be paying the price; it is fair that the communities that host wind farms should share in the rewards.

Another cost of wind farms that is hard to quantify is the impact on communities. Hundreds of campaigners are fighting against having wind farms in their areas. Their concerns are wide-ranging. They include visual problems: many of the new wind turbines are bigger than Big Ben and taller than the London Eye; they are said to intimidate villages and ruin areas of outstanding natural beauty, and there is mess and disturbance while they are being built.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): We have exactly the same problem on the Isle of Axholme in North Lincolnshire. Several local villages in my area were faced with about 14,000 vehicle movements for up to two years during the construction of a 34-turbine wind farm. The wind farm was refused permission by the local authority, but it was granted on appeal. It is not only what happens afterwards. It includes what happens during the construction phase, which is not a short time.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes a good point.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way twice so quickly.

It is instructive that in the Chamber for this important debate there are, at a glance, some 26 coalition Government Members and only two Labour Members-one Whip and the shadow Minister. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is because the visual impact of wind farms is almost exclusively felt in constituencies represented by Conservative and Liberal Democrat Members, but that the constituencies represented by Labour will benefit as they will be using the energy?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I would add to it. The rush to build wind farms under Labour's top-down planning now makes it difficult for Opposition Members to stand on a localism ticket.

Tony Cunningham (Workington) (Lab): I hope that the hon. Lady will wait and listen carefully to what I shall say.

Andrea Leadsom: I look forward to that.

Huw Irranca-Davies: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way again in this good-humoured debate. May I point out that the comments of the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray)

are a complete fallacy? In the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Tony Cunningham) and in many places in Wales, including in the uplands of south Wales, more than 60% of the land is within the TAN8-technical advice note 8-area for development. It is not true to say that wind farms are to be found predominantly in Conservative or Liberal Democrat areas. That is not how the mapping is done.

Andrea Leadsom: I thank the hon. Gentleman, but the fact remains that not many Opposition Members are present in the Chamber.

Stephen Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Further to that point, may I suggest that one reason for that may be that the leader of the Labour party was the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change? He signed legally binding targets that are highly questionable. Indeed, the Labour Chair of the Public Accounts Committee was behind a report that concluded:

"We are concerned that the Department agreed to the legally binding EU-target"-
the 2020 target-

"without clear plans, targets for each renewable energy technology, estimates of funding required",

and without understanding other factors such as planning issues. We will come later to the fact that the legally binding target, which will require 10,000 new turbines by 2020, notwithstanding the fact that 40% of planning applications fail, is beyond the control of the Department that signed it.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right to raise that point. As I said at the start, that binding target is one reason why we have a tug-of-war between the national interest and what local communities want.

I was talking about the visual impact of wind farms. One of the main problems is flicker. Sunlight on the rotating blades disturbs many people; it creates genuine hardship because it is constant when the wind is blowing and, obviously, when the sun is shining.

Turbines also have an aural impact. They are audible at a great distance-potentially, as far as two miles, depending on the landscape. I have been given some wonderful descriptions of the sound. It is described variously as like an aircraft continually passing overhead, a brick wrapped in a towel turning in a tumble drier, someone mixing cement in the sky or a train that never arrives. Wind turbines are often noisiest at night, and the sound is constant. One cannot get away from it and it does not stop.

Wind turbines also have an impact on wildlife, as we heard earlier. A survey estimates that 350,000 bats have already been killed by turbines, as have 21,000 birds of prey and millions of small birds, and that each turbine kills between 20 and 40 birds a year. Larger animals, particularly horses, seem to find turbines disturbing.

Mr Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate, and on her powerful speech. I visited the Davies family in South

Lincolnshire a couple of years ago. They were forced out of their home by the noise of the local wind turbine. I am sure that that is why so many hon. Members are here today: they do not want their constituents to suffer that sort of imposition, especially as local decisions are overturned by central authorities.

Andrea Leadsom: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent contribution.

Another key concern cited by communities is interference with television and radio. Emergency services are concerned about the impact on their frequencies. The Ministry of Defence is concerned about interference with radar, and that some of these huge turbines might be a threat to aircraft.

There is also the question of house prices. It is much disputed, as it is not clear whether turbines have an impact on house prices across the board, but it has been the case in some areas. In Denmark there is a requirement for wind farm developers to compensate home owners if there is proven loss in the value of their property. Therefore, at the moment, planning favours the wind farm developer.

Only one in three wind farms are approved by democratically elected local authority planners. I hope that the Minister can shed some light on this, but I wonder how many of the other two in three wind farms go on to be approved on appeal, rather than being rejected in their entirety.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that local authorities might be tempted to be both judge and jury when it comes to applying for and granting consent for wind farms on property that they own?

Andrea Leadsom: I agree with my hon. Friend. When planning for onshore wind farms, the views of people who have to host them should be taken into account, no matter who owns the land.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way once more. An Ecotricity application for three wind turbines adjacent to the South Marston village was deferred on Tuesday. It is as if the planning process is fearful of the inspector, and that all the concerns listed by my hon. Friend—the tangible effects on local residents—are almost irrelevant as planners seek to avoid dealing with them; ultimately, the unaccountable inspectorate will give the approval.

Andrea Leadsom: I quite agree and that has certainly been explained to me by many councillors in my own district.

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for giving way and I congratulate her on securing this debate. The village of Yelvertoft in my constituency has, hanging over its head, the prospect of eight turbines the size of the London Eye being built. Some 72% of the village were against it, including the local council, me, as the MP, and the MEPs. The decision went to appeal. One person from the planning inspectorate turned up for a few days and overturned that decision, which is why these turbines are now being built. That is not localism.

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that that is outrageous.

One of the biggest criticisms about the planning system for onshore wind farms is that there is no requirement, at the moment, for the developer to prove that the place is actually windy. You would think, Mr Walker, that before the taxpayer was expected to fork out billions of pounds someone would require the developer to find-as Winnie the Pooh put it-a windy spot. It is a fairly basic requirement. That brings me on to South Northamptonshire, which is not a windy spot-other than my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), who, I am told, can be full of wind at times. *[Interruption.]* Yes, hot air.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): Before the hon. Lady moves on geographically-I come from a totally different part of the country-let me congratulate her on the way in which she has constructed a very strong argument against wind energy, although it is not one that I entirely sign up to. However, I feel that she has overplayed the negatives. Turbines, for example, are not operational for about 100 hours a year as a result of strong winds. She has also rather underplayed the economic benefits to the manufacturing sector in the UK. Does she not agree with the way in which this Government are approaching this issue? They are constructing incentives for communities to benefit from wind farms rather than simply having them established in the landscape with no benefit to the local community. Does she think that that might help to change people's attitudes towards them?

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. Many colleagues want to speak. Can we have pithy interventions?

Andrea Leadsom: Absolutely. As I said earlier, I completely applaud the Government's intention to enable communities to share in the benefits of wind farms; it is absolutely right. It should have been done before now. I completely agree that where wind farms go ahead, communities should benefit. None the less, I slightly take issue with the point that my hon. Friend made about the amount of time that wind turbines are actually working. The latest statistics show that, on average in the UK, they operate between 25% and 30% of the time.

Andrew George: The figures across the board show that the turbines operate about 70% to 80% of the time. About 100 hours are lost when they have to be shut down as a result of excessive wind speeds. That is 100 hours a year per turbine.

Andrea Leadsom: I thank my hon. Friend for that, but I think that we are talking about two slightly different things. I am talking about 30% of wind farm capacity being effective at any one time.

I move on to my own constituency of South Northamptonshire. The Met Office confirms that it is one of the most sheltered parts of the UK. Our average wind speed is around 8 knots, which means that we are towards the lower end of effective speeds for a wind turbine. Nevertheless, I have four applications for wind turbines in my constituency-one in Greatworth and Helmdon, one in Roade, one in Alderton and one very recently in Paulerspury. A local study suggests that the capacity of the wind turbines would be around 19%, which is extremely low. We will, none the less, face massive disruption during construction.

Having spoken to a number of developers, I am told that the factors that attracted them to

South Northamptonshire were the excellent roads, the convenience of the sites to the motorways, the good links to the grid and the rocks. They did not say that they were attracted to Northamptonshire because it is an exceptionally windy place. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister on today's announcement, which he kindly sent to my office this morning. It said that the Government will consider giving wind farm developers a new incentive to build in windy places rather than in constituencies such as mine where there really is not enough wind to be worth the cost.

Sir Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): That is slightly worrying to those of us who represent rather windy places. In the hilltop village of Wingate, in my constituency, residents faced the prospect of being encircled by wind farms, which were separately applied for by different developers, and that is a planning process that they find very difficult to cope with.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. I agree that the issue of the local need versus the national interest still applies. Let us start from the basis that we build wind farms where it is windy and not where it is not windy.

Huw Irranca-Davies: On a point of order, Mr Walker. The hon. Lady intrigues me. It is a very good debate and she has put some powerful points. However, has there been some policy announcement today? From what she has said, it sounds as though it may be beneficial. Are we hearing here and now a policy announcement?

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): That is not a point of order. In his summing up, the Minister might want to refer to the letter that he sent to the hon. Lady, but it might just be a personal letter that we all receive from Ministers.

Andrea Leadsom: I can confirm that the letter was simply a piece of information that was put on the Department of Energy and Climate Change website. The Minister's office sent me a link to it, so I can confirm that the information is in the public domain.

Mr Gray: Is it not an irony that the windiest places in the UK tend also to be the most remote from the places where the energy is being used? Therefore, the visual impact that my hon. Friend mentioned is doubled because of the necessity to have wires going from the windy place, such as Northumberland, to London where we are actually using the energy.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. That will always be the issue—turbines being very close to the grid and therefore on top of a community or being further away from the grid and potentially having an impact through the connectivity issues. That will always be a problem.

We have painted rather a gloomy picture here and I can add one last bit of gloom, which is that sadly—before we all go out and shoot ourselves—we also do not benefit from the manufacturing of wind turbines. At a time when the renewable industry offers great potential in terms of business growth, it is something that we must take great strides to improve, and we are doing so in this Government.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): In my constituency, Converteam manufactures components of turbines. It is working on gearless turbines, which will address the issues of noise that greatly concern both my hon. Friend's constituents and my constituents. Therefore, there are

some UK manufacturers of wind turbines, which means that there is some benefit to the UK economy.

Andrea Leadsom: That is music to my ears, and I hope that we will progress with that and go on to manufacture even more wind turbines and other sources of renewable energy in this country.

Mr Graham Stuart: We are a world leader in offshore wind turbines. We have the largest capacity of almost any other country. Siemens has announced that it wishes to come to Hull to create 700 jobs, and others will follow. We have a huge opportunity with large-scale wind turbine farms; we can drive down the cost until it can compete with fossil fuels. Surely we should be focusing on offshore wind where we have world leadership and manufacturing potential because that offers a real benefit for this country. Onshore wind upsets our constituents, contributes little and has many inefficiencies, which my hon. Friend has so powerfully explained to us today.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point and it is one that I completely agree with.

There is now a fairly gloomy picture in this country, where it appears that the taxpayer foots the bill for wind farms, communities pay the price of the loss of amenity and the wind farm developer takes all the reward without even needing to prove that there is a benefit in terms of reducing our carbon footprint. So I again applaud the Minister for the way in which we are moving to a different environment, in which communities will have a greater say and will share in the proceeds that accrue from the building of wind farms.

Having looked into this issue in great detail in the last few weeks, I accept that there are marginal benefits from onshore wind. However, it is very difficult to suggest that onshore wind will mean that we can reduce our reliance on conventional power sources. By the very nature of wind, that will not be possible. Nevertheless, wind should be present in the mix of what we are trying to achieve: reducing our carbon footprint, plugging the energy gap, and ensuring good energy security.

Having said that, the benefits of onshore wind have been hugely exaggerated by the developers who stand to make huge sums from the taxpayer incentives. In addition, we are genuinely adding to fuel poverty in this country and costing consumers and businesses billions of pounds because of this battle to develop onshore wind. Another study, by the Centre for Policy Studies, suggested that 61% of people are either fairly unwilling or very unwilling to see their electricity costs rise to pay for onshore wind development.

So what are the solutions? First, as I have said, I welcome the Localism Bill. It goes a long way to providing solutions that will put people back in the driving seat. I welcome the commitment to sharing the financial benefits of wind farms between developers and the communities that host them. I thoroughly welcome neighbourhood planning, which will allow local communities to exclude or include wind farms within their neighbourhood plans.

Secondly, if those neighbourhood plans include wind farms, they can be up to a capacity of 50 MW. I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to take my proposed amendment to the Localism Bill as his own and to adopt it. What I have proposed, with a great deal of support from hon.

Friends and colleagues across the House, is that the capacity for onshore wind farms that come under the neighbourhood plans should be 100 MW, in line with offshore wind farms, rather than the 50 MW that is the current capacity. The reason is that otherwise there would be the perverse incentive for developers to apply for planning for a 52 MW capacity wind farm to get around the neighbourhood plans. Therefore, I urge the Minister to consider my amendment seriously.

Thirdly, we need to look very carefully at the rights of communities, to ensure that we have the right balance in this sector. In Denmark, for example, there is a minimum distance from habitation of four times the height of the wind turbine and in Scotland the guidance says that there should be a 2 km exclusion zone. There is certainly more that we in this country can do to ensure that people can defend their immediate environment.

Fourthly, we should look very carefully at how we ensure that developers go to those areas of the UK that are very windy and not to those areas that are marginal in terms of the amount of wind that they receive and that are only profitable because of the taxpayer benefits that they offer.

My fifth point is that we in this country should be looking much more closely at other sources of renewable energy. In particular, I want to highlight ground source heat pumps, which have been described as

"the most energy-efficient, environmentally clean and cost-effective space-conditioning systems available."

There is an advert for them.

There are also tidal and marine technologies, which are more predictable and reliable than wind, and they are cheap to maintain once they are established. Hydroelectric power is even more reliable than tidal power, because it allows water to be stored to meet peak demand.

I also want to make a call for action on the renewable heat incentive. Last week, I saw a company in my constituency that turns methane from landfill sites into biofuel. The machines that the company uses to do that generate heat, which the company plans to use in polytunnels in Kent, allowing the strawberry-growers there to compete with our colleagues on the continent. What could be better than trying to use that long chain of renewable energy to provide yet more energy?

So what we need is cheap, reliable sources of energy and to have a better balance between onshore wind, which has such a high cost for communities, and other sources of renewable energy. In conclusion, onshore wind plays its part but as a country we need to balance the national priorities with the right of local communities to have their voices heard.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. We have an extraordinary number of colleagues who wish to speak. We have an hour and 40 minutes left before the wind-ups by the Front-Bench spokesmen, so I will leave colleagues to do the mathematics.

3.4 pm

Tony Cunningham (Workington) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) on choosing such a very important topic for debate today.

I do not want to be party political at all, but I gently point out to the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) that at the last election my constituency covered about a third of the Lake district, including six lakes, some of the highest mountains and some of the most beautiful countryside anywhere in the United Kingdom, and it is represented by a Labour MP. Therefore, the idea that all Labour MPs represent "dark satanic mills " and so on is not quite the truth.

Mr Gray: I accept the hon. Gentleman's point. I absolutely apologise for my disgraceful slur. I just ask him what has happened to his colleagues who are not here today?

Tony Cunningham: There is no way that I can account for my colleagues. I can account only for myself.

As I said, I will not be party political. I want to speak on behalf of the people of west Cumbria, the area that I represent. The hon. Member for South Northamptonshire said very clearly, and I agree wholeheartedly with her, that we have to accept that there are two major problems: energy security and climate change. If we are to deal with both those problems, wind turbines must play their part.

However, let us take west Cumbria as an example. Recently, we have had a wind farm constructed offshore. On a good day, it produces probably enough electricity for about half the entire population of Cumbria. On a very good day, it produces even more electricity than that. I think that the people of west Cumbria would say, "It's large, it produces a huge amount of electricity, we'll put up with it because of the amount of electricity that it produces". Sellafield is about 15 miles from where I live. There will be a brand new nuclear power station constructed there, which will generate huge amounts of electricity. There is a plan-one that is only in its infancy-to build a barrage across the Solway firth, which would produce a large amount of electricity. To echo the point that the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire made, the wind blows some times and not at others, but the tide tends-most days-to come in twice a day, so tidal power is a very reliable form of energy.

The people of west Cumbria would say, "We've got huge offshore wind turbines, there are plans for a nuclear power station and plans for a barrage across the Solway. We are doing our bit, not just for Cumbria but for the entire United Kingdom. And yet they will still come to west Cumbria and say, 'We want to put three turbines in a field, generating enough electricity to boil a kettle on a good day.'" That is what people get annoyed about.

Stephen Barclay: The issue for many colleagues is not what is going on with turbines in their own constituency, but the lack of action on turbines in many metropolitan areas. Does the hon. Gentleman share the surprise that I experienced when I looked at the figures for this sector and discovered that the last Government set a 10-year target on renewable electricity, beginning in 2000 at 2.7% but only reaching just over 6% by 2010? Moreover, in 2009 they set an even more ambitious target, of 31% by 2020. Do those figures not surprise the hon. Gentleman?

Tony Cunningham: I strongly concur with the hon. Gentleman on one point. When I speak to groups in my constituency who talk to me about the visual impact, the noise and everything else associated with turbines that are proposed for their area, they remind me on many occasions that there are not a lot of turbines in Green park, Regent's park or any of the parks in London, or indeed any of the other areas where there are no wind turbines at all. Why is it that people come back time and again to a small area such as west Cumbria?

The point that I want to move on to is a cogent one. The question that those people in my constituency keep asking is, "Isn't there a balance? Isn't it tipped too far the other way in favour of wind turbines when it comes to the disadvantages that we're up against?" We are trying to protect the environment in a beautiful part of the world. We are trying to develop tourism not only in the centre of the Lake district, but across in west Cumbria. The balance in favour of wind turbines is being overtaken by the need to protect our environment and develop our tourist industry-that is the problem.

The Minister might be interested to hear that I wrote to the inspector to ask whether he or she would take into consideration the cumulative effect of having so many wind turbines in one area, shifting the balance against wind turbines. I got a letter back saying, "Yes, we will take into consideration the cumulative effect of so many wind turbines in one area." We have dozens and dozens of wind turbines in west Cumbria, and the local authorities turned the last two planning applications down. Those applications resulted in huge campaigns by local residents, and I spoke vehemently against both at the public inquiries. None the less, the inspector turned around and said, "Well, on balance, we'll allow them to go ahead."

What was slightly scary was when I got a phone call from someone who asked, "What can we do?" These are honest, decent people, who have reached the end of their tether. They are wondering, "What can we do? We've been to a public inquiry. We've done everything we legitimately can, but they still want to put three turbines in a field. These turbines won't generate a great deal of electricity, but they're going to blight the area." That is worrying.

Andrew Percy: I want to reinforce the hon. Gentleman's point. A planning application was turned down twice in my area and it recently went to appeal. Precisely because there would be a wind farm with 34 turbines opposite the proposed site and another wind farm with 18 turbines a little further up the road, and precisely because there was already a wind farm opposite with eight turbines, the inspector, rather than taking into account the cumulative impact, turned around and said, "Actually, this is a wind turbine vista. As such, people will not be impacted significantly by another eight turbines."

Tony Cunningham: I can only agree with the hon. Gentleman. These things sadden me. I do not want to get into the issues raised by the Localism Bill, but we are, rightly, concerned about generating enough electricity and dealing with climate change, and the community is saying, "We'll help you. We'll agree to a barrage. We'll agree to offshore wind. We'll agree to nuclear. But in return, can you please prevent any more onshore wind farms from being built?"

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Charles Hendry): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one reason why these cases have often gone through on appeal is the regional spatial strategies and the regional renewable energy targets? Does he agree that it is absolutely right to remove those because inspectors have often used them to

override a strong body of public opinion?

Tony Cunningham: Anything that helps to support people locally-anything that gives greater power to local people-must be welcomed, although if we imagine a different scenario, in which local people say that they do not want a nuclear power station, we would not say that, therefore, we were not going to have any more nuclear power stations. We cannot do that; there must be a balance. The point I am trying to make, however, is that the balance has gone too far.

Andrew George: The hon. Gentleman uses the word "balance". In a sense, he is advancing the argument that we need a balanced energy supply, and his part of the world is demonstrating that it has a balanced energy supply. However, is he saying that wind energy should never be used in the UK or that it should be used on occasion to contribute to the balance of energy supply sources?

Tony Cunningham: I am saying that. However, what people in west Cumbria are saying very clearly is that they have already achieved that. We already have offshore wind, plans for nuclear, plans for a barrage and lots of onshore wind. We have done our bit. The balance is therefore shifting too far against the environment and the development of tourism and in favour of onshore wind in small clusters, which-I say this with the greatest sincerity-do not make a huge difference.

To conclude, the people of west Cumbria have plans for other forms of energy. They are simply saying that enough is enough.

3.15 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mr Walker. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) for bringing this excellent debate to Westminster Hall.

I represent the people of South Dorset, which includes East Stoke, a lovely village situated between Wareham and Wool. An application was made there for eight wind turbines, although the number has now been reduced to four. The stress, worry and concern that the application caused my rural constituents, not to mention the campaigning they have done, and the cost and travel that has involved, far outweigh the small amount of energy that the four turbines will produce, if they are indeed erected. We are talking about the big, 400-metre turbines, whose output is, as the hon. Member for Workington (Tony Cunningham) said, sufficient to boil a kettle. I agree that a big project such as a nuclear power station or an offshore wind turbine establishment is a different ball game. Indeed, plans are under way to have 180 giant offshore wind turbines, built by a company called ENERCON, off the Isle of Wight and south Dorset.

We talk about balance, and I have heard the word several times in the debate, which has been excellent and good-humoured, as has been said. Surely, however, common sense, if I dare use those two words, should be the judge and jury when determining whether something such as an onshore wind farm is erected. Do we need onshore wind farms to keep the lights on? The answer, in my humble opinion, is no. What we need are new nuclear power stations to keep this country-an island nation-free and independent so that we are not at the mercy of people

who import gas and oil, or others. We will be able keep the lights on and tell our constituents that when the lights do go on, they will remain on for the next 10, 20 or 30 years because we have invested in this country's future. We do not, therefore, need onshore wind farms. With offshore wind farms, the issue is debatable, although I would rather the wind farms were out there, where we cannot hear them, than onshore, where we certainly can.

At this point, I declare a personal interest, before I am hoist with my own petard. A wind company proposed to build 16 giant, 400-metre wind turbines on my land. Between my experience of looking at the issue as a landowner and the experience of those who saw themselves as the opposition-the local residents fighting to stop me-it was an interesting three months. Rather than just throwing the proposal to the wind and saying that I would not consider it, I spent three months looking at it, which included a trip to Germany. Interestingly, the wind farm company said that I was the first landowner ever to ask to go to see a giant turbine. My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Mr Walter), who is in the Chamber, knows all about the proposal because he campaigned against it.

Off I went to see the giant turbines. Four other farmers and I stood 1 km away, 500 metres away and literally on people's doorsteps. We listened, we asked questions and we learned an awful lot. It is possible to hear these monsters; they make a huge woofing noise. Although there were many other factors, what finally convinced me was a psychiatrist from Denmark who was heavily involved in cases there. I asked him, "If people hear these wind turbines, will it affect their health?" He said, "Richard, the point is, even if they don't hear them-even if they think they hear them-it will have the same effect as if they do." That is an interesting point, because if people see or hear something they are affected by it, often when they do not even hear it. Because of the flicker and many other arguments against the proposal I was finally convinced and said to the company, "No, I'm sorry. It is a non-starter."

Sadly, all the onshore wind farms are, as has been mentioned, in rural constituencies, which are heavily represented here today, and not least in the mountains of Scotland and Wales-some of the most beautiful parts of our country. Let us face it: we live in an island that is overcrowded; with respect to population we are as bad as Malta. There are few areas left in this country where someone can go for a walk and enjoy the beauty of this island.

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that there are two types of environmental damage: that caused by carbon emissions and that caused by putting wind turbines in some of the most beautiful parts of the country, which will ruin them for ever?

Richard Drax: I agree. The argument put to me by the wind company was that wind turbines can be taken down in a day. I suppose that there is a certain argument that a nuclear power station cannot be taken down in a day. It takes decades, so in that sense the statement is true; but there is still a huge concrete plinth stuck in the ground.

My argument is that rather than looking at the issue from a balanced point of view, or any other point of view, we should look at it from the common-sense point of view. I implore the Minister to include wind farm applications in the Localism Bill so that when constituents such as mine in East Stoke stand up and say "We do not want this here" their voices are heard. That is the local issue. As for the national issue, we should apply a little more common sense so that we rebuild our nuclear power stations to keep an independent country where we

pay for our own power and are strategically safe and where, most important of all, the lights stay on in the years to come.

3.22 pm

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I am delighted to speak on this subject and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) on securing this very timely debate. She is an excellent champion of her constituents on the issue and deserves considerable credit for her efforts.

I confess that I am an enthusiastic fan of renewable energy, for many reasons. It is vital that we diversify our energy sources and find cheaper, cleaner, greener ways of powering our economy. The last Labour Government left us in a real mess over energy policy. It is no secret that our ageing nuclear power stations will have to be decommissioned soon and that our North sea gas and oil reserves are running low. That Government responded with indecisiveness, leaving us in a situation where we may have to be more dependent on foreign fossil fuels, which is environmentally undesirable at best and dangerous to our energy security at worst. To put the debate in context, Britain faces the possibility of power cuts and much higher carbon emissions. That extremely worrying situation does not get the attention it deserves, perhaps because it is not seen as exciting or immediate; but we should make no mistake-it is one of the most important issues facing our country at present. After all, it is impossible to encourage private investment in a country that cannot keep the lights on.

Before I depress everyone with gloom and doom, I should say that I am an optimist. I have every confidence in the abilities of mankind to develop the technologies necessary to cope with those challenges. History teaches us that if there is a necessity, our brightest engineers and inventors will find a way, like grass growing through the cracks in the concrete. I fundamentally believe that a new generation of nuclear power plants will be an essential part of the mix, providing security, reliability and very low carbon emissions. Conversely, I do not believe that the case has been made for onshore wind energy at present. In my view, onshore wind power is vastly inferior to the offshore variety, which has two key benefits. It generates more power and has the advantage of not being on beautiful British countryside or too close to homes.

I want to talk specifically about an application to build a wind farm in my constituency very close to the beautiful market town of Frodsham. Peel Energy is applying to build at least 20 125-metre-tall wind turbines on Frodsham marshes, which is an important wetland habitat for numerous bird species. This year marsh harriers, which are birds of prey rarer than the golden eagle, nested successfully on the deposit bed where the majority of the turbines would be situated. Highly respected bodies such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Natural England and the National Trust have objected vigorously to the proposal. That highlights one of the many problems with onshore wind energy.

A further problem is that of proximity to residential areas. The proposals in my constituency would lead to the construction of England's second largest wind farm less than 2 km from 14,000 of my constituents' homes. It would also be entirely within an important area of green belt-the only significant green area on the south bank of the Mersey between Runcorn and the sea. Anyone local to the area knows that the green belt is an essential green lung sandwiched

between the refineries of Ellesmere Port and the chemical works at Runcorn. However, hon. Members should not let that description give them an inaccurate impression of the area. The countryside surrounding Frodsham, Helsby and their hills is some of the finest that Cheshire has to offer. Indeed, I have a magnificent painting hanging on the wall in my office of Helsby hill as seen from Frodsham. That, again, illustrates the problem with onshore wind energy. While wind turbines generate electricity only for an estimated 25% of the time, they are a blot on the landscape of beautiful countryside 100% of the time. For my constituents, that is unacceptable.

Mark Pawsey: Can my hon. Friend tell us whether the applicant has provided any evidence that the site in question has sufficient wind power to generate the kind of energy that the country needs?

Graham Evans: The applicant has given some information but as I shall say shortly, it has been dismissed by local campaigners. It is a generic, ambiguous evidence statement, which can easily be contradicted.

Another crucial factor against onshore wind energy is lack of public support. Opposition to the wind farm at Frodsham is overwhelming and I pay tribute to the local campaign group, Residents Against the Wind Farm, or RAW. I mentioned nimbys earlier today on the issue of high-speed rail, but that is not a label that can be attached to RAW. They have made evidenced-based and sensible objections, which dismiss the applicant's evidence. I hope that Ministers are listening and that they will take the right decision on the application at Frodsham marshes.

Matthew Hancock (West Suffolk) (Con): I attest to the beauty of Frodsham and Helsby hills, which my hon. Friend talked about. The area is almost as beautiful as the area near Clare in my constituency, where there is a proposal for a six-turbine wind farm, to which I am strongly opposed. There, too, residents formed an action group, Stop Turbines Over Clare, and I commend them for that. They also found that wind speeds are much lower than the applicant suggested. I hope my hon. Friend will agree that the Minister needs to look at objective measures of where the wind is. Does he agree that often the choice of where proposals are made seems entirely random and does not take into account local populations or the beauty of the local environment?

Graham Evans: I agree that there is an underlying theme that the evidence submitted by applicants is dubious, to say the least. It always strikes me that lay people use common sense to look at the applicants' figures and dismiss them.

The case for onshore wind energy has yet to be made convincingly. We must pursue energy diversification and encourage the development of new and improved renewable technology, but we should vigorously oppose attempts to force through every application for wind turbines, no matter how poorly thought out and inappropriate for the area.

3.29 pm

Mr Robert Walter (North Dorset) (Con): I am delighted to speak in this debate and to support my hon. Friends. I can claim to have successfully fought off four applications for wind farms in my constituency over the past 10 years. There is another one before us at the

moment. My hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) referred to one of those areas in the beautiful Winterbourne valley, which, although not in an area of outstanding natural beauty, is sandwiched between two AONBs. The wind does not blow that often.

We had another application, for the village of Cucklington on the Dorset-Somerset border. Technically, the village is not in my constituency but in that of the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr Heath). However, I can claim to have been part of the campaign because the proposed turbines were within 100 yards of my constituency boundary, so my constituents would have been affected.

Two years ago, the same applicant came back with an application for a site not far away, adjacent to the small village of Silton. Silton has a delightful Saxon church, is within sight of two National Trust properties and is overlooked by the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire downs area of outstanding natural beauty. I am pleased to say that we successfully defeated that application as well.

The argument that we advanced against the applications was on three grounds, the first being environmental. The 100 to 120-metre-high structures in beautiful open countryside are a blot on the landscape. Secondly, in the areas where the applications have been made, there is little evidence that the wind blows for more than 20% of the time, and on cold mornings when everyone wants to put the kettle on, and perhaps the electric fire because the central heating has not quite warmed the house up, there is no wind at all, so we depend on other sources of electricity. Thirdly, in the last application we considered, the applicant's business case was very much based on the 60% revenue subsidy that he would get from the rest of us to erect and run his wind turbines. The case did not stand up economically.

I am a great supporter of renewable energy, and believe that there is a very good case for offshore energy, which we should look at. As a sailor, I know that the wind blows off our coasts pretty strongly on many occasions. We should also look, as other Members have suggested, at other better renewable sources, and I certainly include nuclear, which I believe has a proven track record that stacks up very well.

I want to raise my deep-seated concerns about the effectiveness of onshore wind power in meeting our future energy needs and in tackling the huge challenge we face on decarbonisation. I shall outline my concerns in the national context, and then return to the effect on the residents of my constituency of the relentless focus on this particular source of renewable energy.

I assure the Minister that some of my constituents listened in despair to the Secretary of State's recent comparison of these vast 120-metre-high structures with 200-year-old windmills. I have yet to see a historic windmill standing taller than Salisbury cathedral or the Statue of Liberty. I am aware that in expressing the genuine concerns of thousands of my constituents about the proposed developments and the reliability of onshore wind as an energy source, I shall no doubt be subject to cries of nimbyism, or negative localism as some people now prefer to describe it. I recognise that there are many and contradictory views on the efficiency, economic viability and reliability of wind turbines in meeting our energy needs; some are strongly in favour, some strongly against, and many more are still undecided. Part of the reason for that divergence is, I believe, the distinct lack of independent and

verifiable data on the impact and performance of individual renewable energy generators. Clearer data would help experts and local communities better to judge their energy contribution against loss of amenity, which I shall come back to in a moment.

People who are strongly in favour of onshore wind have for many years cited the experience of our European neighbours as grounds for the UK's previously single-track policy on renewables. Indeed, the previous Government's relentless focus on onshore wind power was undoubtedly to the detriment of research and development into alternative means of reducing our CO2 output, such as offshore wind, biogas, nuclear, and carbon capture and storage, not to mention tidal and wave energy, which has been talked about, solar power and even ground source heat pumps. That legacy has left us poorly placed in Europe on renewables, and I therefore fully commend the Government's policy of looking at a much wider network of energy solutions to meet our legally binding climate change obligations. It is also noteworthy that both France and Denmark are now backtracking on onshore wind development and we, in the UK, should be asking why.

This might be an apt moment to raise another concern about the use of renewable energy data. Last July, when the Secretary of State made his annual energy statement, I rose to welcome his statement on the low-carbon economy and his commitment to offshore wind, and I commented on the high level of subsidy paid to onshore wind farm developers. I then asked the Secretary of State to confirm that any judgment on the application in my constituency-to which I have referred-would rest with the local planning authority. He responded by confirming that it would, but also said that the most recent study by Mott MacDonald had shown a dramatic reduction in the cost of onshore wind, with the result that it was deemed competitive, on the free market, with other sources of energy. He went on to say that we have seen the cost of onshore wind

"come down dramatically precisely because of the encouragement of the public sector."-[*Official Report*, 27 July 2010; Vol. 514, c. 876.]

I followed up that statement and, drawing from the "UK Electricity Generation Costs Update" study, found that I was far from alone in my surprise that onshore wind was suddenly being declared cost-competitive by comparison with conventional power generation. In fact, commentators of all persuasions who had read the report were keen to point out the significant omission. An article on the report by NewEnergyFocus in June 2010, states:

"Only costs borne by the owner in relation to the operation of a project have been considered, with special revenue support measures, such as Renewable Obligation Certificates (ROCs), not taken into account. As a result, Mott MacDonald stresses that the findings should be handled with care and are dependent on a complex set of factors which may change."

More detailed examination of the figures also reveals the application of an additional carbon cost to gas and coal generation that has the effect of bumping up the cost-competitiveness of onshore wind.

I share the concerns of colleagues who were able take part in the debate in Westminster Hall last October about the removal from Hayes McKenzie's 2006 report-on the instructions of the then Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform-of highly pertinent World

Health Organisation guidelines that suggested a lower level of night-time noise than in current planning guidance. Our local authorities must have access to all the information on this complex subject before they can be expected to make a truly informed decision, which after all, is all that the people of Silton and West Bourton ask for.

Noise may be of as much, if not more, concern for residents living adjacent to smaller wind farm developments. The latest four-turbine proposal for a site near Silton is for larger wind farms that would by their very nature have to be sited much further from people's homes. I have received more than 2,000 letters and e-mails objecting to the current application for a wind farm at Silton, citing among other reasons concerns about noise nuisance, the negative impact of industrial development on the beautiful Blackmore Vale landscape and below-average wind speeds resulting in a minimal contribution to our national energy production.

Despite revisions to an earlier application for six turbines that was rejected by the local council, the closest residents still live less than 675 metres from the nearest turbine blade. Four other properties, one of which is a thriving business providing holiday lets that relies for survival on the area's unspoiled location, are less than 975 metres away. In an attempt to emphasise a positive view of onshore wind among the general population, the developer, Ecotricity, included in its planning statement information from a survey conducted in 2009 indicating that most individuals are happy to live within 5 km of a wind farm. I am sure that my constituents would be considerably happier about the wind farm proposals if they lived 5 km away.

The Localism Bill was mentioned. I will not go into that, but it is intriguing that in the two years since the last application at Silton, the applicant has been measuring wind speed and frequency on the site, yet his latest application to the local authority contains none of the data from those measurements. He continues to rely on extrapolated regional data. That prompts the question: what was wrong with the data from the site?

The last application on the site was recommended for approval by the local authority planning officers. I am pleased to say that North Dorset district council's development control committee rejected it unanimously. Interestingly, the applicant did not appeal, but we will do battle again over the application on 1 March. I will certainly add my voice again to those that say that four 120-metre industrial structures are unsuitable for the beautiful Blackmore Vale, within sight of two National Trust properties and an area of outstanding natural beauty. It is clear that the wind there blows less than 20% of the time, and the noise and flicker consequences for those living less than 700 metres away are unacceptable. The scheme depends totally on the 60% revenue subsidy that it is likely to receive. I will therefore be among those who appear at the planning committee meeting, to ensure that my constituents' voice is heard yet again.

3.43 pm

Mr Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Walker. I represent Beverley and Holderness. The Holderness plain is a flat area with a large skyline on the east Yorkshire coast. Unfortunately, it does not lack wind, so I cannot use that in defence of my constituents. What it does have is a tremendous flat landscape with some of the most productive farmland in the country, the towns of Withernsea and Hornsea and a collection of villages and hamlets. Funnily enough,

the people who live there love the landscape in which they live. They appreciate it. It might not be an officially designated area of outstanding natural beauty, but the people who have chosen to live there adore it, and they wish to feel that they have control over it.

We have heard different arguments from different Members about onshore wind. To sum up the central point made by Conservative Members and the hon. Member for Workington (Tony Cunningham), local people should decide on local wind turbines. There is a qualitative difference, not to mention a quantitative one, between a nuclear power station, which makes a huge contribution to national energy needs, and individual wind turbines. All the components of the coalition Government promised local people that they would have a greater say. We can tell the worm has turned when a Labour Whip starts to say so, as the hon. Gentleman did passionately and vehemently today, although, to chide him, I wonder whether he made the case so forcefully to Labour Ministers, who introduced the appallingly centralised, arrogant and overweening system in which local people's opinions are routinely overturned. He is nodding to say that he did. I congratulate him on that, and naturally I believe him.

The situation that the Government have inherited in terms of local democracy is unacceptable. It cannot be right, when local councillors, residents, MPs and everybody else in an area agree that a potential wind farm is not correctly sited, that they should be overturned by Obergruppenführers from some inspection regime in Bristol. It is not acceptable. The central thread of the manifesto on which Liberal Democrat and Conservative Members were elected last year was a promise that there would be a change. I believe that we can deliver more onshore wind turbines if we respect local people's views and do not set up the expectation that their views are meaningless and that they are wasting their time trying to make their voices heard at meeting after meeting. If we tell them that they will benefit and if they can make that assessment without being overturned, we have more chance of developing a greater constituency of people who recognise the need to green our energy supply and are happy to have onshore wind as an appropriate part of an energy mix and not inappropriately sited.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I agree with what the hon. Gentleman and others have said about local people's right to decide on wind farms, but the last thing that he said is the first thing with which I have really disagreed during the 45 minutes that I have been in the Chamber. There are not only good local reasons to stop wind farms; at a national level, they are ineffective and inefficient at contributing to the energy supply. Not only do they require huge subsidies, they must be backed up by coal-fired stations running at lower efficiency just in case the wind does not blow. On many occasions in this country, although the wind may be blowing, it blows at only 1 or 2 mph, which is not sufficient to power the generators.

Mr Stuart: The hon. Gentleman leads me on neatly to the next part of my speech. My point is that it should primarily be a decision for local people and that although onshore wind might have a part to play, the central task in dealing with climate change in this country and globally is to reduce the cost of cleaning up our energy supply. We must live sustainably on this planet with lower emissions, due to the potentially catastrophic impact of those emissions on climate change. I do not know whether the science is right, but the risk that emissions could have deleterious effects on the globe seems sufficient for us to take action. The only way to do so, given economic pressures and the fact that so many people live in poverty, is to

drive down cost.

We have a finite amount of money; ever less, since the hon. Gentleman's party was in Government. Is it best expended in subsidising unpopular, small-scale wind farms scattered around the country that turn people against the green agenda and deliver precious little in return? I suggest that it is not. In line with what he said, we must consider where we can play a leadership role and how our limited resources-financial, intellectual, geographical-can be harnessed for the global good.

We are a global leader in offshore wind. We now produce 1.3 GW of offshore wind, I think-the Minister will correct me if I am wrong-and aim to produce 33 GW by 2020, which will keep us narrowly ahead of what the Chinese are planning, although it is worth saying that when the Chinese plan something, they have a tendency to do it, while we have a tendency to talk about it without doing it. However, that aside, offshore wind provides the opportunity for scale and investments like those made by Siemens, GE and other companies elsewhere if the Government do everything possible with the limited money that they have to develop a supply chain that can drive down the costs of offshore wind. If they do, there is every reason to believe that within relatively few years, the currently high costs of offshore wind can be driven down below the costs of onshore wind and make a long-term contribution. The Minister shakes his head, in which case I would question whether we should have any form of wind energy if we cannot drive the cost down. The central task in tackling climate change is to find ways of greening what we do at an acceptable, lowest possible cost. Everything we do and every time we spend money should be designed for that purpose.

I have some questions for the Minister. I have been led to believe that Ministers are personally committed to making the local voice stronger. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) has said:

"To be successful it is vital to have broad public support and the consent of local communities. This includes giving communities not only a say, but also a stake, in appropriately-sited renewable energy projects like wind farms."-[*Official Report*, 2 June 2010; Vol. 510, c. 36W.]

Some people call it a bribe to have something unacceptable, but if something is going to happen and the local community has the final say and decides that the benefit outweighs the disbenefit, who are we to stop it? I support that. When are this Government going to overturn the monstrous inheritance of centralised control and replace it with a local voice? That is what I would like to hear from the Minister.

When will the Minister introduce regulatory protection, which others have talked about? Other countries have a distance limit. Does the Minister see no merit in having a distance limit of some description so that no turbine can be erected within-pick a number-1 km or 1.5 km? Is that possible? That would give reassurance and show that the voices of protest around the country had been listened to by a listening Government. I would love to hear the Minister say that he will consider doing that, so that a wind turbine may not be erected within a certain distance of a domestic dwelling without the permission of the homeowner.

Many others wish to speak. I hope that the Government will allow the local voice to be

dominant. We should let local people who take a wind turbine to have a share in it, but we should also make sure that we focus what little resource we have on that which will make the greatest contribution to reducing emissions and to leading us all to live sustainably.

3.52 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I apologise to you and to the Minister in advance, because I may not be able to stay for the whole debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) not only on securing the debate, but on her fantastic speech. I hope that, if nothing else, this debate will show the Minister the strength of feeling on the issue.

I, too, approach the issue from a local interest, namely the proposed development of a wind farm in the village of Denholme, which is on the edge of my constituency. My constituents and I are wholly opposed to it, and it has made me look further into the benefit of wind farms. I want to talk about the bigger picture rather than focus on my particular area, because I think that wind farms are one of the biggest scandals in public policy. The more one looks into the issue, the more of a scandal it becomes. People might refer to my constituents and me as nimbys and use it as a term of abuse, but I would take it as a compliment-I am proud to be a nimby. By definition, nimbys are people who are concerned about their local area and community. We should not be disparaging about that; we should be proud of being nimbys.

I speak as one of the five MPs who voted against the Climate Change Act 2008 in the previous Parliament. It is a great irony that those environmentalists who are such zealots for things like wind farms are prepared to see such damage done to the local environment by wind farms being put up in the most inappropriate locations. We really need a change of tack.

It is surprising that no one has yet pointed out that one of the Government's problems is that wind farms are a huge part of their attempts to deliver a renewables obligation that has been handed down to this country by the European Union. This Government therefore feel that they have no option but to go down that route, however desirable or undesirable it may be. I do not think, however, that that is a good enough reason to impose such a ridiculous policy on this country.

Many green activists may have us believe that wind farms are a painless panacea and that they are marvellous and very green, but that is nonsense. My constituents want to know how much this is going to cost them. How much will it add to their bills? To be fair, the Department of Energy and Climate Change has been open and honest about the issue. It has made it clear in parliamentary answers that there will be a rise in gas and electricity bills of 18% and 33% respectively for domestic consumers, and of 24% and 43% respectively for medium-sized businesses. That means that, by 2020, the average annual domestic electricity bill will have risen by £105, and that the average medium-sized non-domestic user will face rises of £246,000. That is an increase in their energy bill just in order to follow this particular policy.

It is a ludicrous situation. We are trying to encourage and help our manufacturing businesses- we have a crisis in this country with people relocating their manufacturing business elsewhere-but the Government are pursuing a policy to add a quarter of a million pounds to their energy bills, and we wonder why companies relocate to countries such as China, where

they can churn out whatever they want because they do not really care about this. The Government need to do some joined-up thinking.

We seem to not want to upset the green zealots who send us postcards from Friends of the Earth, but why not be honest about what their policy actually means? It is easy to say, "Yes, I agree with your postcard about green energy," but why not be honest? What they are actually saying is, "We want to add all this cost to your energy bill and to those of manufacturing businesses, and we want them to relocate abroad."

Huw Irranca-Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Philip Davies: I hope that the shadow Minister will be honest about what he believes.

Huw Irranca-Davies: That is why I am intervening. I am sure that the Minister will reiterate what I have to say. Would the hon. Gentleman care to comment in his passionate oration on the current comparative prices between ourselves and France and Germany, which are two of our nearest neighbours, and how we compare internationally as a place to do business in terms of electricity and energy generation prices?

Philip Davies: I am pleased that the shadow Minister has mentioned that, because I will mention some illuminating international comparators in a moment. As my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Mr Stuart) has made clear, there is no evidence that our constituents are prepared to pay more for their electricity in order to pursue these policies. In fact, only 15% of people polled said that they were either "fairly" or "very willing" to pay higher electricity prices if the extra money funded renewable power sources such as wind.

Mr Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is making a powerful point. The costs, as I mentioned in my speech, are a paramount issue. To correct him on one point, the Chinese are not in the position that he says they are. In fact, they announced recently that they will pass a comprehensive law next year. It is not yet as tight as ours, but the truth is that they recognise, as do others around the world, that we need to find ways to drive down the cost and emissions. We are not Don Quixote, alone in our tilting at windmills.

Philip Davies: Perhaps we will be gracious enough to introduce those kinds of limits when we have about 80% of the world's manufacturing in our country. Given that we are not in that position, I would like to think that my hon. Friend would like to help the manufacturing industry in this country.

The bottom line is that these policies will produce for Britain the most expensive electricity in the world if we carry on down this particular route. Is it morally or politically acceptable, particularly at a time of national austerity when families are struggling to pay their bills, for the Government to keep raising them just to meet an EU target? I do not think it is. It will hit the poorest people in our communities first.

I do not understand why the people who propose these green policies are so shy about it. Anyone can say that they are in favour of green energy. It is like asking someone, "Would you like a Rolls-Royce car?" Most people would say, "Yes," but if one were to ask, "Would you like a Rolls-Royce car? You'll have to spend the rest of your life living in a tent to pay for it?" they might say, "No." If we ask people whether they are in favour of green energy,

they say, "Of course we are-it sounds marvellous." However, if the hon. Member for Ogmere (Huw Irranca-Davies) were to ask them whether they were prepared to pay astronomical bills in order to pursue that, I think that he might get a different answer.

Huw Irranca-Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Philip Davies: I have given way enough, and others want to speak. The point is that I find it nauseating to hear politicians for ever bleating on about how terrible fuel poverty is when those very same politicians advocate policies that entrench fuel poverty in this country and make it worse. They should be honest about what they are doing. They cannot in one breath say, "I want to see more wind power in this country; it will add this amount of money to people's bills," and in the next breath say, "Isn't it terrible how bad fuel poverty is?" I find that nauseating.

At the moment, Britain is only obtaining a fraction of its electricity from renewable sources. That will have to be expanded massively to hit these targets. The wholesale price of that quantity of electricity is about £1 billion. However, on the renewable obligation, the complex subsidy paid to generators but drawn indirectly from bills adds a further £1.4 billion to those bills. That more than doubles the cost to the British consumer. If 30% of UK electricity is to be renewable in 2020, an ongoing annual subsidy of £6 billion a year or more is required. That is before all the hidden costs of major grid expansion and so on.

Graham Stringer: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Philip Davies: I need to press on because other hon. Members want to speak.

What is worse is that the National Audit Office has identified wind power as being one of the most expensive ways of reducing carbon emissions, with recent reports claiming that abating 1 tonne of carbon costs between £280 and £510, compared with £10 to £20 per tonne in the European emission trading scheme. There seems to be no light at the end of the tunnel. When I asked the Minister a parliamentary question about these issues, he replied that the Government have spent £2.2 billion supporting wind energy between April 2002 and March 2010 and that, despite that huge outlay, they have found it impossible to predict when the energy source will prove profitable without grants. The Minister stated:

"We expect that over time we will be able to reduce support for wind power and other renewable energy technologies as they become more economic, but it is not possible to put a specific timescale on this."-[*Official Report*, 8 February 2011; Vol. 523, c. 185W.]

I was also struck by the comment about wind speeds and the extent to which they are brought to bear on planning decisions on wind farms. I asked the Government about that last year in a parliamentary question that states:

"what guidance his Department issues to planning authorities on taking into account prevailing wind speeds in determining planning applications for wind farms."

I would have thought that that would be pretty obvious to most people. I was appalled-although perhaps I should not have been surprised-to be told in the answer that the advice is

that

"local planning authorities should not make assumptions about the technical and commercial feasibility of...projects and should not reject planning applications simply because the level of output is small."

The answer goes on to state that local authorities

"should not question the energy justification for why a proposal...must be sited in a particular location".-[*Official Report*, 3 November 2010; Vol. 517, c. 818W.]

Basically, wind speeds are not to be taken into account whatsoever when determining planning applications for wind farms. You could not make it up, Mr Walker.

Wind farms are very inefficient. In fact, during the chilliest periods, when demand is often greatest for electricity, most of the 3,000 wind turbines were virtually stationary. They were working at less than a 100th of capacity and producing electricity for fewer than 30,000 homes. A report by the John Muir Trust-one of Scotland's leading conservation bodies-found that wind turbines are 25% less effective than claimed. For a total of nine days during some of the coldest periods, output dipped below 10 MW, which is barely enough to boil 3,000 kettles. The situation is absolutely ludicrous.

I could talk about many other issues. Noise is certainly one problem. I reiterate the comment made by my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness about having distance guidance on where these things could be sited. Scotland has guidance on such matters, as does Wales. I hope that the Government will introduce such guidance for England, too. There are also concerns about wildlife.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire made a great point about the problems in Denmark, but I do not think she mentioned this point, although she may well have done. As the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) mentioned, the conventional power plants have to keep running at full capacity in case the wind does not blow sufficiently. As a result, the increasing demand for coal needed to plug the gap in Denmark left by underperforming wind farms meant that Danish carbon emissions rose by 36% in 2006. That was when Denmark was massively expanding wind farms. It seems bizarre to say the least. Reports have shown that Danish gross domestic product is approximately 1.8 billion krone lower than it would have been had it not embarked on such an energy policy.

The hon. Member for Ogmore asked for international comparators. In Spain, in 2007, a law passed by the Prime Minister guaranteed producers a so-called solar tariff of as much as 44 cents per kilowatt-hour for the electricity for 25 years, which is about 10 times what they would be able to get on the wholesale market. That has nearly bankrupted Spain, which has obligations of about €126 billion to meet.

There are alternatives, one of which I want to draw to people's attention briefly. Calor has developed a liquefied petroleum gas fuel cell boiler that has the potential to deliver 50% reductions in carbon emissions in existing homes. It does not require huge subsidies or place a huge burden on the economy, and it reduces fuel bills, rather than increasing them. The

technology is practically and commercially available. The boiler is based on clean technology-cleaner than oil, coal and biomass-and I urge the Government to consider some of the other options, rather than pursuing a blinkered approach that results from the belief that wind farms must be good because they sound green. They are doing huge damage to not just our local communities, but local households, which are faced with increasingly big bills to pay for the policy. Such an approach is also damaging our manufacturing industry, as it simply cannot afford it.

4.6 pm

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) on securing the debate. She might call me windy-maybe I am occasionally full of hot air -but she has done very well to secure the debate. I impress upon hon. Members the importance of signing up to her excellent amendments to the Localism Bill.

It is a shame that the debate is taking place in here and not the main Chamber. We are not in the main Chamber because an important debate on votes for prisoners is going on, but how many more people would be present if another important debate were not taking place? I emphasise to the Minister that there is a very big political push behind the matter. Many hon. Members were present when I introduced my Adjournment debate in this place on the subject and they sponsored my ten-minute rule Bill on the matter. I would like to think that there is a growing level of support for people who are rightly questioning the value of onshore wind.

The Minister will know that I consider onshore wind to be about as useful as a cat-flap on a submarine when it comes to fulfilling renewable objectives. What it does for the economy can only be described as bad. My constituency is pretty much flooded with proposals for wind farms. I managed to get them rejected in Kelmarsh and Harrington. I mentioned Yelvertoft, which was passed by the Planning Inspectorate. Other proposals include: Watford Lodge, Watford Gap, Lilbourne Fields, Winwick Warren, Boddington and Hanging Houghton, the proposal for which has fortunately gone away. There are loads and loads of these blooming proposals coming out of the woodwork because people are basically subsidy farming. They are taking the cash that the Government are offering, which is way in excess of what it should be.

A number of hon. Members have mentioned campaigns in their own areas. They will all know that, in every campaign, there are people who are genuinely worried about what is going to happen to their property if it is near any proposal, so they turn themselves into fantastic experts on the subject. Such people have helped me with my contribution today. In my constituency, Trevor Sherman, Richard Cox, Adrian Snook, David Unwin and Richard Humphries have all become absolutely brilliant experts in this field. They noticed that the Department has issued a consultation on the revised draft policy statement EN-3 on renewable energy infrastructure. I wanted to pick up a couple of things on that because they are directly related to what we are talking about.

First, a number of hon. Members have alluded to the problem of noise. The Minister and I have been in correspondence because I wanted to recommend an expert to peer-review the ETSU-R-97 noise guidance. I am troubled by the Hayes McKenzie proposals. ETSU-R-97 contains fundamental errors, which means much time and money is wasted by public

inquiries and in debating how to remedy those flaws. The Government's current response is:

"There is no substantive evidence to demonstrate that the fundamental guidelines are unsound and the Government therefore has no plans to revise them."

Actually, I think that it is very easy to demonstrate that ETSU-R-97 is incorrect. For example, the guidelines are predicated on a fundamental misunderstanding of how wind speeds vary with height and weather conditions, and thus the guidelines underestimate noise impacts. The evidence for that is covered in a series of peer-reviewed scientific papers by van den Berg dating from 2003, and the point has been widely accepted in the scientific world and by planning inspectors.

The ETSU-R-97 guidance on noise conditions is deficient at the most fundamental level. For example, the guidance fails to specify that noise compliance measures be taken with the wind blowing towards a complainant's property; that they should be taken at the appropriate time of day and in similar meteorological conditions to those which triggered the complaint; or that they be taken with the turbines working, or working in a normal mode. The absence of those requirements renders the guidance at best vacuous or at worst harmful to the public interest.

On the issue of peat, there can be no reason why wind farms should be built on, or in close proximity to, peat. To do so releases so much carbon dioxide that any good that might be done by installing wind turbines is reduced.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire talked about shadow flicker. Yet again, the Department's revised draft national policy statement for renewable energy infrastructure, EN-3, repeats the unsubstantiated claim that shadow flicker only occurs within 10 rotor diameters of a turbine. In correspondence with the Department of Energy and Climate Change last year, the Renewable Energy Foundation requested the source from which this statement was derived and was informed that it was a paper written by A. D. Clarke in 1991 for the Open university, entitled "A Case of Shadow Flicker/Flashing: Assessment and Solution". However, on examination the REF found that that paper does not prove the 10-rotor-diameter claim. In fact, its recommendation was that

"turbines should be sited at least ten diameters distance from habitations, and more if sited to the East/Southeast or West/Southwest, and the shadow path identified"

On a point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Mr Stuart), I wondered, because there is so much angst on the issue, whether the Minister would kindly explain, in the simplest of terms, the reasons behind and the meaning of today's article in *The Daily Telegraph* about localism and incentives. I think I welcome that, but I am not entirely sure. If the Localism Bill becomes law as it stands, will the Minister confirm that it would be down to neighbourhoods, in conjunction with the districts and boroughs in which they reside, to choose to have wind farms of up to 50 MW, whether they are incentivised or not? That would solve a huge number of problems for all of us in the Chamber.

Andrew Percy: My hon. Friend is on entirely the right point, but we also need clarification on what exactly the appeal process will be. We have not had that in previous debates with local government Ministers. We are not yet clear what the appeals process will be and we

need to know that residents will have the final say and that they are not going to risk getting it peeled off to somewhere down in Bristol again.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I completely agree. I was actually about to come on to that in the next couple of sentences, so I will not talk about that in order to give hon. Members more time to speak.

It would be very helpful if the Minister could outline both what the Localism Bill means for onshore wind farms of less than 50 MW, and any appeal process after that.

Finally, the Minister, the shadow Minister and I enjoyed a couple of hours together, a couple of Wednesday mornings ago in European Committee A, talking about energy. The Minister, in answer to one of my questions, said:

"We have expressed concern that feed-in tariffs were not intended to be used to convert farms, which could produce crops, into large solar farms", -[*Official Report, European Committee A, 2 February 2011; c. 17.*]

and that things were being adjusted to stop that happening. If an excessive subsidy in one area of renewables leads to unforeseen consequences and it is of detriment to the local environment, it would be wise and sensible to apply that same logic to onshore wind, where excessive subsidy is causing even more concern across the whole country.

4.14 pm

Eric Ollerenshaw (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who has demonstrated, if anything could, that this is no longer a particular constituency problem, but a national issue that is building up.

I recognise the need for energy diversity, which is obvious considering what is happening in the middle east and considering the fact that the previous Government did not drive forward nuclear power stations. I object to the pro lobby immediately trying to paint into a corner anyone who objects to wind farms as some kind of climate change denier, or as someone who is against renewables, although one or two of my hon. Friends might be against renewables - or a particular hon. Friend, shall we say. I go through all that to explain that I am not against diversity and I am not against renewables, but I am against these particular monsters and the nature of them.

Like many other hon. Members, I am concerned about the size of wind turbines; local planning regulations, which have been mentioned; efficiency, which has also been mentioned; and the numbers. Consistency has been mentioned by other hon. Members, so I will not speak too long on that, but on 2 February, *The Times* said that there was a 20% fall in the amount of electricity produced by some wind turbines in the UK last year. We have all heard the reports over the winter that 3,000 operational wind turbines in the UK produced less than 1% of the nation's power on several days. We all know that wind varies, but I do not think that any of us expected it to vary by that much, given the numbers.

Turning to the numbers, I think it was Lord Marland, in a written answer in the other place on

19 January, who came up with the figure of 70% renewable regeneration coming from wind. That would equate to 4,000 offshore turbines and 10,000 onshore turbines, as other hon. Members have mentioned. That is quite a forest of turbines. My own humble calculation, looking at the planning applications in my area, is that the average onshore turbine sits in a footprint of 260 square metres; 260 multiplied by 10,000 comes to 2,600 square km, if my maths is correct-I think I got a C grade in my O-level maths, which I had to get for some reason-or for other hon. Members, that is 1,004 square miles in proper measurement. That is equivalent to the whole of Derbyshire being covered by wind turbines if this policy continues, or almost the whole of Oxfordshire, or almost 90% of my county and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney). That is quite a lot of English countryside covered in wind turbines.

Size is also an issue, as other hon. Members have mentioned. In my area, the turbines are 125 metres. That is nearly as tall as the London Eye. As the hon. Member for Workington (Tony Cunningham) so powerfully put it, the question that comes up in my area is why do we always get these things? Why do I not see them when I come to London?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. There is an issue of fair play and justice. Rural communities have been asset stripped. They have lost their pub, they have lost their village hall, and they have lost their magistrates court. In fact, they feel that pretty much everything has been taken away from them, and then they see this metropolitan agenda imposing turbines on them out of all proportion. I have had heartbreaking letters from constituents saying that they feel the only thing left in their rural landscape is the view when they take their dog for a walk. They write to me saying, "Please don't take that away". It comes back to the issue that a number of Members have made about balance, which is the point my hon. Friend is making.

Eric Ollerenshaw: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He is right about balance, but it also goes beyond that. We are told that there is not much wind in London. Well, it is pretty windy on Primrose hill, but that perspective is protected by London planning law because of the view of St Paul's. There are protected sightlines, yet the rest of us have to see our sightlines being destroyed; our new sightlines are wind turbines.

Chris Heaton-Harris: There is another problem. In urban parlance, a wind turbine is something quite nice to stick over the front door to assuage middle-class guilt. When we drive round the north circular, we see three or four little windmills opposite IKEA and think, "They're not so bad". It is the scale and size of the wind turbines that are being imposed on us in the countryside that cause huge concern.

Eric Ollerenshaw: I was going to say that we are not dealing with a wind turbine of the size that someone would put on top of a house in Notting Hill. They are somewhat bigger.

I want to say something about renewables obligation certificates. I quote Professor Ian Fells, who is emeritus professor of energy conversion at Newcastle university. He stated in *The Guardian*-so it must be right-in 2008 that

"engineers do know a great deal about renewable energy: first and foremost, it is expensive, and is only being developed commercially because of the provision of

subsidies of various kinds. This amounted to £1bn last year"-

in 2007-

"and will gross up to more than 20 times this figure by 2020...Wind power onshore has been successful because of marketing subsidies"-

the ROC regime-

"...but even after 15 years it only provides the equivalent output of half a typical gas or nuclear station."

I love the term "subsidy farming" used by my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), and I shall try to remember it, because that is what seems to be happening. To be fair, the Minister has pointed to the reform of the ROC regime that is coming later this year. I hope that it will have the potential to produce a level playing field for other renewables. I have mentioned before that in my area there is a proposal for a barrage on the River Wyre that has been lying around since 1991. Just a slight tweaking of the ROC regime could put that in contention, and it would produce real renewable energy.

To return to local problems in my constituency, Caton is a village in the Lune valley, which my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) knows extremely well. There are already eight turbines sitting on the hill directly behind it. People cannot miss them as they drive up the Lune valley. I do not know how that got through planning.

There was a proposal for a new farm of 20 125-metre turbines beyond Caton, a few miles up the road on Claughton moor-this is 6 km inside the Forest of Bowland area of natural beauty. That application, which was rejected unanimously by the council, is now at the planning appeal stage. As in the cases described by hon. Friends, it was the efforts of volunteers and people in the locality that drove that rejection. The application is going through the appeal process, but the same company has put in a new application for 13 turbines, which is already going through the system. It has an appeal for 20 and a new application for 13 on the same spot if the appeal is turned down.

The people who are trying to fight the application are just ordinary people who live in the area. They are dealing with the highly-paid renewable wind farm industry, with all its massive support, glossy literature and professionals and lawyers. We rely on a group called FELTS-the Friends of Eden, Lakeland and Lunesdale Scenery. The proposals for wind farms along the M6 from Lancaster to Carlisle would result in the area becoming wind turbine alley in about 20 years. The group has consistently fought the proposals, but at huge cost to themselves. The people who are defending the proposals are subsidised by everyone else, including us, through the electricity rates. It is unfair competition. That is one example.

Another example is the application by Lancaster university, which has been told to cut its carbon emissions. Fine. It was told about the subsidies and put in an application for two huge, 125-metre wind turbines that was turned down at planning. What does it come back with? A proposal for one turbine, which would be within 300 metres of where people live. Everybody says, "We can understand the university, because we can understand what it will get in

subsidy."

That brings me to my final point. I compliment hon. Friends who have raised the problem of distance. It really irritates people on the ground that there is nothing in the guidance that specifies minimum distances. Welsh guidance suggests 500 metres, which is typical; Scottish planning says 2 km from local communities; in England, there is nothing. People want consistency.

I saw an article in *The Sunday Telegraph* on 1 August in which the Department of Energy and Climate Change admitted that noise regulations, and thus minimum distances, have been applied inconsistently. They are totally inconsistent when one looks at the results, and that causes ordinary people to lose confidence in the system.

Yes, I have great hopes for the Localism Bill and the fact that it will give people power. However, Minister, we do not want this country covered by a huge forest of wind turbines. We want a level playing field for other renewables, and we want a chance for ordinary people to take ownership of the land that they cultivate and protect, and have protected for so long.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): We have 25 minutes left. I see three Members who wish to speak, but there might be room for four, depending on how Members handle their time.

4.25 pm

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): Thank you, Mr Walker. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) for securing this debate. I want to talk about the balance between big society and localism principles, and current planning policy. I am dealing not with spatial strategies or targets that were set by the previous Government but with current planning policy.

Planning policy statement 22 under the previous Government gives no consideration to local people; in fact, the only things that need to be taken into account by local planners are nationally designated sites such as national parks and world heritage sites. Even so, small-scale developments are allowed in those areas in certain circumstances.

Local authorities have no planning powers to protect local people: there is no allowance for buffer sites, for example, around hamlets or semi-rural areas; there is no power to decline onshore wind farms on grounds of water tables, peat erosion or local nature conservation areas; there are no powers on grounds of distance, as we have heard often today; there are no powers to make as a condition on wind farm owners any form of compensation to those whose homes are sited under wind farms where there is evidence of property devaluing, as it does; and there are no powers to assess the effects on health of close proximity of wind farms. I accept that there is no actual evidence of medical harm, but there are many examples of third-hand effects through lack of sleep caused by the constant droning noise of wind turbines, particularly at night and in high winds.

At a recent inquiry on the Crook hill planning application-Crook hill is in the Calderdale and Rochdale local authority areas-the planning inspector said that the need for alternative energy supplies far outweighed any local objection or need. He quoted the planning policy as his

reason for saying that, despite the many thousands of pounds and man hours that it cost Calderdale and Rochdale metropolitan borough councils and the Friends of the South Pennines group to object to the plans.

A letter from me to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government brought back the reply that local authorities already have powers to establish their own criteria for local planning issues, but what good are those so-called powers for local authorities to set distances from homes, for example, if the inspectors can ride roughshod over local opinion and concerns? I repeat that this is happening not because of spatial strategies or local targets but because of slants in planning policy. Will the Minister look at PPS22 and any other planning policy that allows such a clear breach of the spirit of the big society principles?

In the same spirit of the localism agenda, a good deal of public concern has been raised across the country as a result of the rush for wind power onshore. The health reasons for seeking to increase the set-back distance may be difficult to prove, but the distress to local communities and individuals is demonstrable in many cases. It is precisely the differences in local circumstances and topography that make set-back distances so important. A 125-metre turbine at a distance of just over 500 metres up a steep exposed hillside above one's home will appear even bigger, more threatening and intrusive than the same size turbine on flat land. In the Calder valley area, we have four valleys that have high peaks, and there are applications for wind turbines on all those peaks.

The impact on a village community of a wind farm of several 100 to 125-metre-high turbines 500 or 700 metres away, or even 1 km away, will be significantly different when local landscape, tree cover and wind conditions are taken into account. That said, many countries have already recognised the importance of siting large onshore wind installations away from homes, partly, I suspect, to maintain public support for renewable energy generation in the countryside.

The UK should do the same thing as other countries, even in the absence of clearly proven evidence of any medical harm whatever. It is important to allow local communities to make decisions depending on local conditions, while also giving the wind industry an acceptable minimum distance to work on. That acceptable minimum set-back distance does not exist in this country. ETSU-R-97, as hon. Members will be aware, set a 500-metre distance for turbines that were less than half the size, and less than a sixth of the installed capacity, of modern turbines.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend from a neighbouring constituency for giving way. I also thank the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) for securing the debate. What a wonderful turnout—at least from the coalition.

My hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) hit the nail on the head. I have joined communities from Birdsedge, New Mill and Scapegoat Hill in opposing ugly and unsuitable wind farms in my constituency. All sorts of planning technicalities have come up in our objections. These wind turbines are an absolute minefield—perhaps minefields would be a good thing to stop the wind turbines, by the way. If we can get to the bottom of the issues through the Localism Bill and through Energy Ministers, it will stop all this positive energy,

which would solve our energy problems if we could harness it, from community groups. I hope the Minister will take the planning considerations on board, and I look forward to them being included in the Localism Bill.

Craig Whittaker: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Although I do not for one minute propose minefields, I certainly propose that we should take into account local planning policy effects on the principles of localism and the big society. I do not believe that a full and comprehensive review of ETSU-R-97 should be necessary to alter guidance on set-back distance. The priority is to bring the guidance into line with the realities of modern turbines, and to help increase the acceptability of onshore wind farms. Will the Minister advise us of any changes the Government intend to make to the guidance? That question is on top of my first question, which, no doubt, the Minister has already taken into account.

4.32 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) on securing the debate.

We have heard a lot about balance this afternoon. I want to add to the balance by recognising the need to increase the proportion of our energy from renewables, while specifically ensuring that the views of communities are taken into account. The general thrust of the Localism Bill is particularly important in that regard.

Like many hon. Members, wind farm proposals affect my Rugby constituency. There is an application for a site at Bransford Bridge near Churchover, where there is a great deal of local opposition to the proposals, and I fully understand local residents' concerns. The community in Churchover has formed an action group called Against Subsidised Windfarms Around Rugby-ASWAR. They are building a convincing case against development both on that site specifically and more broadly. They argue that, in this particular case, the turbines will spoil the local countryside and landscape, particularly surrounding the ancient church of Churchover, which is referred to in the Domesday Book. The nearest turbine would be only 700 metres from the officially designated conservation area. However, in their campaign they recognise that it is only subsidy that is stimulating the development. My hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) drew attention to that issue. In the absence of the massive Government subsidy, many sites would not have been developed and many of the applications that hon. Members face would not be put forward.

There is another proposal for a wind farm at Copston Magna. In that case, consent has been granted for a test mast, which is now erected and gathering data on the site's suitability. A principle of fairness is involved. Often local communities see a test mast application as the thin end of wedge, and oppose it, but it is fundamentally fair to permit developers to erect test masts to identify whether a site is viable. As part of that principle, the data should be shared among the local communities, so they have access to information should they wish to oppose an application, if appropriate. The point I make to communities is that it is not impossible that the data will prove that a site is unsuitable, but we have already heard that there are dangerous incentives to allow a development to proceed even though the site may not be viable.

There are two matters of concern in respect of a community's ability to influence decisions,

which relates to my previous point. First, councils receiving an application for a wind farm are not obliged to take into consideration the economic viability of the project or whether conditions at the proposed site are suitable. The developer of the Bransford Bridge site says that it is a good site, but he has no obligation to provide any evidence of that.

Secondly, hon. Members have already referred to the fact that there is no guidance on the appropriate distance between a wind mast and the nearest residential property. I accept that that may vary according to the site, but it seems to be pretty wasteful that each planning authority has to seek professional advice on a site-by-site basis, when one generally available piece of work or research would reduce the costs of the planning process and, more important, give local residents a degree of certainty about the determination when an application comes forward. Therefore, I added my name to the list of supporters of the private Member's Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry, which will give planning authorities the opportunity to determine what they consider appropriate distances between wind turbines and housing, after they have consulted local people.

Under the regional special strategy proposals, the previous Government forced their views on local areas and imposed developments to the dismay of local communities. When those communities made, often successful, representations to locally elected planning committee members, the matter went to appeal to be determined by a planning inspector. They took account of PPS1 on sustainable development and PPS22 on renewable energy, which both give a presumption in favour, such that in 2009, 82 applications were approved and only 65 were rejected.

We need to give more consideration to the views of local people and councils, and, in that respect, there are some welcome principles in the Localism Bill. The Government stated that the planning system will be reformed to give neighbourhoods greater ability to determine the shape of the places in which their inhabitants live. Part of that will come through neighbourhood planning, which should become a useful tool in this contentious area. Although neighbourhood planning is principally about setting a vision for a community-what they wish to see-and local communities making a positive statement, it will, therefore, be of benefit to communities who want wind farm development. As Members who represent our constituents, we all know that will happen only in very few cases. More important will be the situation with development control, when communities oppose applications they wish to see off.

Provisions in the Localism Bill for pre-application consultation are welcome and sensible. In any event, a sensible developer would carry out the activity in the first place, before submitting his application. The provision means that when applications for wind farm development come forward, communities will have been more involved in the early stages and the developer would apply with the support of local people.

Craig Whittaker: I recently wrote to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to ask how the localism agenda and things such as community plans fit in and what powers they physically give. The reply was very much that they fit alongside current planning policies and guidance. If that is the case, surely we need to change some planning policies and guidance to fit hand in hand with them and physically give power to local people. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Mark Pawsey: My hon. Friend makes a fair point, and I will speak later about the efforts made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire to table an amendment to the Localism Bill to do precisely that—give more power to local communities.

There is some good news about manufacturing. I referred earlier to Converteam, which manufactures permanent magnet generators in my constituency. Those are key components of turbines. Such technology removes the requirement for a gearbox in a turbine, which makes it particularly suitable for use offshore because of the reduced amount of maintenance involved. The gearbox is the component that fails most in turbines, and it is also the part that makes the most noise. If that technology can be developed, there will be benefits. There is a strong manufacturing history in my constituency, and I want to see it continue through the use of that new technology.

When we oppose onshore wind farms, we must offer alternatives. More consideration must be given to offshore wind technology. Of course, the marine environment must be considered, as must the efforts needed to get the energy onshore. However, few individual residents will be affected by offshore wind farms, and we must therefore give the matter more attention. We must also consider clean coal and other renewable sources such as tidal energy, which has been referred to.

In conclusion, for wind farms to be successful they must have broad public support and the consent of local communities. Provisions in the Localism Bill will go some way to putting communities in charge during the planning process, but it remains to be seen how far the changes in planning law will affect wind farms. I recognise that wind power can make a vital contribution to the renewable energy supply, but it must be used with other sources to ensure that energy is clean and sustainable. I support the business investment that will take place in my constituency as a consequence of wind farm development. We have heard many facets of the debate, but for me, the key issue is to ensure that local communities have a greater say in future development.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. I would like to get in two last speakers.

4.42 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I will be as quick as I can, Mr Walker, despite the plethora of wind farm applications that is currently affecting my constituency.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): We have an extra five minutes, so the hon. Gentleman does not need to rush too much.

Andrew Percy: Thank you, Mr Walker. That gives me time to mention all my various campaign groups. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) on securing the debate. Since her election, she has proven a vociferous campaigner on this and many other issues, and it is good to see her standing up for her constituents again today.

On a positive note, I am a big supporter of the renewables industry, which has the potential to

offer thousands of jobs up and down the country. As the Minister knows, in the Humber, fantastic opportunities are coming our way with the announcement that Siemens is coming to the region for offshore wind. Companies are coming for manufacturing, and all sorts of opportunities are facing us. All MPs, local authorities and businesses are trying to support the Humber, and I thank the Minister for the support that he has shown. The region has suffered considerably over the past 10 years, never mind the current austerity measures, but renewable energy is one way that our region can come back. I am a big supporter of renewable energy, especially offshore wind. When it comes to onshore wind, however, with no whiff of hypocrisy I have a few concerns about where the country is heading.

My constituency crosses east Yorkshire and north Lincolnshire and contains some of the flattest parts of the country. A lot of it is drained marshland; it is very flat, we have wide horizons, and consequently we also have high wind speeds. That means that we have been besieged by wind turbine applications. Such applications are not for small wind farms. When I heard one hon. Member speak of three or four wind turbines I thought, "If only."

A wind farm application for 34 turbines at Keadby has been given permission on approval. There is permission for a wind farm at Goole Fields for 20 turbines, and at Twin Rivers for 15 or 18 turbines—there are so many, I forget the exact numbers. Wind farms already exist at Bagmoor, and there is another of 18 turbines at Saxby Wold. There is an application for a number of turbines at Worlaby, and I have 14 turbines opposite my house in the village of Airmyrn, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams). We successfully fought off an application at Elsham and, most recently, just this week North Lincolnshire council refused planning permission for the third time for Flixborough Grange. That was for a small development of eight turbines. It has been through the planning application twice, and been to the planning inspector once. On that occasion, the inspector upheld the local authority's decision, but within less than a year the application came back in exactly the same format as the first one. The planning committee at North Lincolnshire council said no again on Wednesday, and I thank Conservative colleagues on the council, along with a small number of Labour councillors, for standing up for local residents.

Such things demonstrate how ridiculous the situation has become. North Lincolnshire hit its 2020 targets two or three years ago, but it continues to be besieged by application after application, and something has to give. We were willing to play our part. One or two of the applications I have mentioned—including that at Goole Fields, which is in the east Yorkshire part of my constituency—went ahead, despite being a big development, with very little public opposition. Residents were generally supportive of that location, so it is not a case of saying no to everything. We were prepared to do our fair share. In North Lincolnshire, when the Conservatives ran the council, we adopted a policy of, "We will take our fair share but we want a say in where the wind farms will be located." Because of that policy, we hit the 2020 target. Nevertheless, it made no difference. Applications continued, they were approved on appeal, and the 2020 targets meant nothing. Thanks to the vociferous campaigning of groups such as BATs—Burton Against Turbines—and SWATs—Saxby Wold Against Turbines—we have managed to stave off some of the applications. However, if it were not for well-organised individuals in particular villages, we would be covered in wind turbines.

There are great opportunities in the Localism Bill for communities to have more say. However, I am concerned that we will end up in a situation where, as one Minister said, we

have to "frontload" the system. That is all well and good in parts of the country that have not already played their role, but we feel that we have played our part and hit our target. We have hundreds of wind turbines planned. They are all 410 feet high—we will have none of that metric nonsense. Imagine looking out at 34 turbines, each 410 feet high, and then turning a little and seeing a further 20 turbines three or four miles up the road, and then a further 18 a couple of miles further on. We are creating landscapes of turbines that are encircling communities.

We do not mind playing our part on energy. We have Drax power station, Keadby gas-fired power station and several coal and gas-fired power stations in the area, and we are willing to accept them as important and necessary for the country. We must, however, ensure that as substantial numbers of turbines have been approved, a planning system is in place to support residents who say, "No, we've done our bit already." We cannot ask communities to do their bit year after year, and I would like to hear from the Minister about our position on the big, onshore developments. I too will support the amendment to the Localism Bill tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire.

I do not want to take much more time as one more Member wants to speak. The issue of appeals is perhaps not in the Minister's remit, but I am sure that he talks regularly to his colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government, and we must establish what the appeals procedure will be. We understand that there will have to be an appeals procedure for bigger developments, as they are national infrastructure issues. The system must take local people into account and not allow what happened to East Riding of Yorkshire council a few years ago. It had a good record of risking public money in defending appeals and had turned down a number of wind turbines. However, through the Secretary of State, the inspector not only overturned a decision, but said to the democratically elected councillors, "You must stop rejecting these wind turbines."

Where is the democracy in that? That is the planning system we have been left with by the previous Government. That is why it is so important that localism means exactly what I think it means—local people having real power and a real say over what goes on in their communities.

I again pay tribute to the Minister for his work in supporting our renewable efforts in the Humber. I hope that he will respond to my debate in this Chamber next week on the renewable opportunities in the Humber. We support renewable energy, but when it comes to onshore wind, we in Brigg and Goole say that we have done our bit. We were happy to do our bit, but enough is enough.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. The winding-up speeches will start at 4.55 pm. I call Stephen Barclay.

4.50 pm

Stephen Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Thank you for letting me speak at short notice, Mr Walker. I endorse the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) about our hon. Friend the Minister. We are very fortunate that he is handling this important brief. I also echo the comments of various hon. Members about my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) securing the debate

and the formidable way in which she campaigns for her constituents.

I want to make three points before we move to the winding-up speeches. First, I want to press the Minister on whether we have the right funding balance for the various renewable technologies. In reply to my parliamentary question, he helpfully clarified that the cumulative expenditure between now and 2020 is anticipated to be £8.3 billion for onshore wind, £14 billion for offshore wind, £2.5 billion for solar technology and just £1.1 billion for tidal technology. We are an island nation and tidal renewable energy is something that we can sell around the world if we build that expertise. Given the climate of the UK, I wonder why we are spending on tidal energy less than half what we are spending on solar technology, and such a disproportionate amount less than on wind turbines. Perhaps the Minister will comment on that.

Secondly, what has come out very helpfully from this debate is the need for greater clarity on guidance, particularly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Eric Ollerenshaw) pointed out, in relation to the distance between turbines and homes. That is a central concern of constituents of mine in Tydd St Giles, who are fighting an application for 12 turbines, which would be such a blot on the landscape of the fens.

May I suggest to the Minister a further area of clarification that could be put in the guidance? It relates to communities that reach the point of providing for 100% of their electricity need from renewable onshore wind turbines. In my constituency, Fenland has, on 2008 figures, 41,800 homes, yet we now have so many wind turbines that we already provide enough renewable energy for the equivalent of 40,000 homes. To return to the point about balance, if we are already at the point at which we, as an area, are producing enough renewable energy just from onshore wind turbines to power all our homes, it seems disproportionate that our beautiful and distinct open landscape is being over-burdened by too many wind turbines-it is fast becoming the "forest" of the fens. That goes back to the point about balance that a number of hon. Members made so clearly.

My third point is one that I tried to make in interventions. It is about the lessons to be learned from the targets that were set by the Department, albeit before the Minister's term of office. In particular, what lessons do we draw from the target set in 2000-a 10-year target-which the previous Labour Government missed so badly? What lessons have the Minister's officials learned? Have they conducted an analysis of what went wrong so that they can learn the lessons?

Furthermore, can we ensure that we are not paying, in terms of fuel poverty, for perverse consequences from the very odd, legally binding commitment that was signed up to in 2009-the earlier commitment having been missed-for a massive increase in the amount of renewable electricity to be produced? The figure is over 30%, although the Department, by its own estimates, reckons that it will take 12 years-from 2000 to 2012-to deliver 8%. That period, on the Department's own figures, according to evidence to the Public Accounts Committee, accounted for 8%, yet in 2009 we signed up for a target such that over the remaining eight years we would add a further 21%. Again, there are lessons to be learned.

Have we got the funding balance right? Can we have greater clarity on the guidance? Can we learn the lessons from the targets that my hon. Friend's ministerial predecessors set and

subsequently missed? I look forward to his clarification of those matters.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. Front-Bench winding up speeches will last until 5.25 pm. Then the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) will have five minutes to wrap things up.

4.55 pm

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): It is a delight to take part in the debate. I congratulate not only the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), but all hon. Members who have contributed. It has been a genuinely good debate. Many hon. Members have spoken with passion. I did not agree with every point that they made, but I shall come to that. They did speak very well and have done their job commendably as constituency MPs, speaking on behalf of their constituents. I do not say that in a patronising way. It is what we are sent here to do. Sometimes we are denigrated for this job, but we are actually sent here to perform on behalf of our constituents and to make the points that are necessary.

I want to make a point that is perhaps obvious but is rarely made in these debates. It is rare to find an energy proposal of any type that attracts universal commendation. It is rare to find a proposal to which no objections have been made. That is the case whether the proposal involves onshore wind-the subject of today's debate-or offshore wind. Offshore wind was at one time-we heard this comment today-seen as our salvation, not necessarily because it was the new green energy messiah, but because it was the alternative to onshore wind. Then when offshore wind was objected to, as it frequently was, barrage, wave and tidal technology became the possible messiah, and so on. Hydro is another one; hydro turbines have been described as fish blenders.

Nuclear energy is popular in some areas. All credit to the previous Government on that. It is great that we are all now lined up across the three major parties in our determination to deliver nuclear, and we need to do it at pace. In some of the places where there have been nuclear facilities and jobs have relied on the nuclear industry, there is a tremendous wish for us to get on with that. With the previous Government, through the independent Infrastructure Planning Commission and the national policy statements, and now the present Government pursuing the agenda, we hope that we will get the new plants up and running, but of course they are contentious.

Biomass generation is criticised because of the transport implications and sustainability issues. Waste incineration is criticised-it goes on and on. All I shall say is that we cannot create the energy mix that we often talk about, from both Front Benches, with little wind turbines on chimneys-although fair do's to the Prime Minister for having a darned good try. I am sure that he is not assuaging his middle-class guilt, as the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) put it. He is making a contribution, as we all do with photovoltaic panels, wind turbines, deep geothermal and whatever else we do. My sister-in-law in Ireland has a massive field full of geothermal capacity. That is fantastic. All those things contribute, and so does onshore wind in some ways.

I want to respond to the points that have been made. First, the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire gave a very passionate and eloquent critique of onshore wind, describing a

tug-of-war between local and national interests. That is where much of the debate has focused. She made the point that we cannot rely on wind. No, we cannot rely entirely on wind, but I strongly suggest that we have to rely on wind as a contributor to our energy mix, in the same way that we have to rely on marine and tidal power and on getting over the investment hump in relation to that. They will all play their part. Wind is not the entire answer and certainly nuclear is not the only answer, either.

The hon. Lady referred to the former CBI director, Richard Lambert, saying that nuclear is the answer. It is indeed part of the answer. We are joined up on this: we have to get on, look for the new generation of facilities and deliver them on time, because they will provide a significant amount of our capacity. I think that the mood in the country has changed towards that. It has taken some time for us to get there, but we have, although nuclear is not the only way forward.

The hon. Lady went through a range of areas that other hon. Members have covered. Those included intermittency or variability of wind quality, the need for interconnectivity and the costs that come with that, and the need for price support. I shall simply say, as has been said in the comprehensive spending review, that it is not only wind that needs mechanisms for support, both for the initial capital investment and for the ongoing revenue costs of operating. It is not alone, by any means. The hon. Lady sees the Localism Bill, as many do, as a way to put power back into the hands of the people. It has been claimed that we could see a massive growth in onshore wind turbines as a result of the Localism Bill, but others said that they expected to see a slowing down in their development. I am not sure which it will be, but I am sure that the Minister will respond to that point.

In an intervention, the hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Stephen Barclay) said that legally binding targets are questionable. I would ask whether the Minister agrees with him. Those are legally binding targets. We are fully signed up to them, and I suspect that the hon. Gentleman is as well. We need to deliver on them, not walk away from them. I hope that the Minister does not intend to revisit them, revoke them or try to argue his way out of them. Both Front-Bench teams are committed to them; by that I mean both Liberal Democrats and Conservative, and Labour.

Stephen Barclay: Would the hon. Gentleman not agree that, in trying to meet those legally required targets, we start from a much worse place? Instead of being at 10% in 2010, which is what the Labour Government signed up for, we were below 8%. The permanent secretary to the Department of Energy and Climate Change said that we would be at 8% by the end of 2010, and that we would not reach 10% until the end of 2012. We will have only eight years left to ensure that a further 21% of our needs are met by renewable energy.

Huw Irranca-Davies: In response to the hon. Gentleman's well-observed intervention, the question is how to accelerate our drive for renewables. Part of it will come through the work being done by the coalition Government in driving for offshore energy, and part of it will come through microgeneration. We often banter from the Front Benches on this question, but the wind ports competition, with its £60 million investment, was set up by Labour. This Government have delivered-well done-and Gamesa, Siemens, Mitsubishi and others are coming in with jobs on the back of it. We also have to do it with onshore wind.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman, but the logical extension of his argument is that, unless he

says no to onshore wind, onshore will have to make a contribution. We have to find a way through the Localism Bill to make that happen. As has been said, we need to see a mushrooming of local communities saying, "We can now see the community gains. We are going to go for this, and we'll do it for ourselves." That would be great. I hope that hon. Members are right, but we have to see what the Minister has to say about it.

The Minister was asked whether he is considering bringing locally determined projects up to the 100 MW level from the current 50 MW. There has been much debate on that over the years. I do not think that he is considering that, but perhaps he would clarify the situation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Tony Cunningham) spoke passionately not only for his constituency but for his constituents. I was with him there on an occasion of great trial and disaster at the time of the Cumbria floods. He spoke eloquently. West Cumbria is a beautiful area, with great people. He was right to speak of the contribution that can be made by other energy mixes, including the Solway Firth barrage and the potential for new nuclear build.

I guess that the trick and the theme of this debate is the balance between the local, the regional and the national. I think that all Members here today agree that we need to do three things—to develop nuclear energy security, to do so in an affordable manner for UK plc and for Mrs Miggins, who lives at the top of one of the valleys, and to hit our low-carbon targets. The theme of our debate is who is to bear that cost, and who will benefit from the jobs that could be created from green technology.

The hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) shares his name with one of the most well known rapid reaction generation facilities, the co-stoked biomass Drax power station. It is beyond today's debate, but it raises the question of carbon as we move forward with our electricity market. He asked whether we needed onshore wind farms in order to keep the lights on. I hope that I have made it clear that we do. He also spoke of listening to the community's concerns—he said that if the community says, "We don't want these here", their voices should be heard. It is vital that communities' voices are heard, but we need a balance. He made an interesting point about common sense in connection with the Localism Bill, so I look forward to the Minister and his team drafting common sense into legal statute.

The hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans) took a technocentric approach, putting great faith in our engineering, technical and scientific capacity, particularly for developing our nuclear future. He also spoke of his opposition to local wind farms, as did many Members.

The hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr Walter) despaired of the Secretary of State's warm words for larger wind turbines. I am sure that the Minister will relay those thoughts to the right hon. Gentleman. The hon. Gentleman spoke unfavourably of the market mechanism. There are possibly more market mechanisms to come that could incentivise low-carbon or renewable technologies. Indeed, they are necessary if we are agreed on having a lower-carbon future.

The hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Mr Stuart) said that we would see much more onshore wind energy as a result of the Localism Bill, as communities across the land grasp the opportunity of community engagement. I am not sure that that is quite what

Members here today were hoping would result from the Bill; we shall hear what the Minister has to say. Like several hon. Members, the hon. Gentleman asked whether the Minister is considering increasing the distance of turbines from homes to 1.5 km or more.

The hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) made a passionate speech. He is not in his place, but I am sure that he will read *Hansard*. He said that one of the biggest scandals is wind energy. I could not disagree more. If we look purely at megawatt costs per hour, we will get one solution to the question of the way we should be going. It may be the French solution, it may be something else, but the UK has the potential to be at the cutting edge globally of green technology, design research and jobs. There is more to it than megawatt per hour costs. In response to what the hon. Gentleman said about international competitiveness on price, I am sure that the Minister will confirm that we are competitive throughout the EU on our basic energy prices—with the exception of petrol—including compared with France and Germany. The critical factor in that mix of energy security and low carbon is whether it remains affordable, as we drive towards a low-carbon future.

The hon. Member for Daventry spoke of his opposition to schemes in his area. He touched on microgeneration and the feed-in tariff review. There is a real job to be done there. That has caused some consternation, as was dealt with at the Dispatch Box today. However, that issue is for another day.

The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Eric Ollerenshaw) spoke about minimum distances in England and the issues in his area. The hon. Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) spoke on a wide range of issues, including compensation, which came up again and again. Again, I ask the Minister to say whether he is considering compensation. Traditionally, requests for compensation have not been acceded to. Is he now considering it? He also asked whether the Minister would consider PPS22 and the minimum set-back distance.

The hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) called for balance in this debate, and I welcome that. It was the first time that I have heard a Government Member start a speech by saying that we need some balance. He recognised the need for wind to be part of the mix. He called for fairness for developers, not least in putting up wind-testing devices, and to ensure that the information is shared with residents. He welcomed the Localism Bill.

I am rapidly running out of time. The hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) announced that he was a big supporter of renewables. He mentioned Siemens and Gamesa, and the investment on the back of the £60 million wind ports competition. However, he was not inclined towards onshore wind. He saw energy coming from the offshore sector, but that sector cannot do it alone. The hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire also called for localism and the revocation of targets for wind generation.

As I am running out of time in this intense debate, I will just ask the Minister how he is getting on with Renewable UK's balanced and considered view of the Localism Bill. On the idea of a local referendum, Renewable UK says that it should have an important part to play, but decisions need to be based on qualified professional advice. Other issues that it raises relate to pre-determination, pre-application consultations, the abolition of regional spatial strategies and the community infrastructure levy. The organisation has been restrained and controlled in what it has said. It has not tried to object to the Localism Bill, but, as the

Minister knows, it is quite concerned that the measures could slow down the development of onshore wind farms. The hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness will be disappointed if onshore wind farms cease to happen because of the Localism Bill. I ask the Minister to tell me that that will not be the case.

5.10 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Charles Hendry): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Walker. We could not have picked a better debate to have in this Chamber this afternoon. We have had a passionate debate, with displays of knowledge, strong opinions and good humour. The speeches, of which I did not agree with every single word and paragraph, have shown this House in a very good light because of its determination to deal with such a challenging issue. I absolutely join others in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) on securing and delivering this debate.

Most of us, I think, share the same objectives. We believe that renewable energy is necessary for our energy security and for environmental reasons and that the view of local communities is vital in deciding where wind farms should be located. I want to look at both sides of that equation, to address what I think has been the democratic deficit and to show that wind farms can bring real benefits to communities as long as they are in the right place.

There is no doubt that the UK must become a low-carbon economy. We must decarbonise our electricity supply, which will be a massive challenge for us. It will cost us something in the region of £200 billion over the next 10 to 15 years. Our old coal plant has to close not because of CO₂ emissions but because of sulphur emissions. Our old nuclear plant is coming to the end of its physical life and running out of fuel, so we have no choice but to rebuild our energy infrastructure. Much of that work and the decisions on investment will need to come in the course of this Parliament. I completely support the comments of my hon. Friends the Members for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans), for North East Cambridgeshire (Stephen Barclay) and for South Northamptonshire that this would have been a much easier challenge had we not had this legacy of failing to secure more of that investment over recent years. However, that does not mean that we have to pull back from such a challenge; we must show a determination to take it forward. There will be a dramatic change in the way in which we generate electricity, and that will bring challenges and disadvantages. We must ensure that we drive forward with this agenda if we are to secure our climate change and energy security goals.

We must consider the time scale. If we push the button today to start the construction of a new nuclear plant, and EDF decided that it wanted to go with Hinkley Point, it will still be towards the end of the decade before the plant can come on stream. We have allocated £1 billion to carbon capture and storage, which is more than any Government anywhere in the world have given to a single plant. However, it will still not be commercially at scale until the end of the decade. The technologies that others have talked about, such as the roll-out of offshore wind, have significant costs. The costs may come down, but as we go further out-I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness accepts this-waters become deeper and the installations more challenging, which, in turn, will push up costs. Although we want to see a broad mix of technologies, we must recognise that there is a real urgency to construct plant now, so that we can meet the challenge of the old plant that is

coming out of commission.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) was right when he talked about the need for common sense—sadly, he is not here to hear my response. Common sense tells us that we need a balance of technologies; we need to ensure that we have new nuclear within the mix. We have continued much of the work that was started by the previous Government. We need to have clean coal and a broad mix of renewable technologies. This is not a case of saying that we should only have onshore wind. There will be a real drive for offshore wind and for biomass. We will take forward renewable heat issues. For example, ground source heat pumps, which were mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire, will be an integral part of the renewable heat incentive.

Common sense dictates that we should consider our own natural resources. We have the strongest wind resource anywhere in Europe. To turn away from that and say that we should not be using it would be a serious mistake by Government, and one that we are not prepared to make.

Mr Graham Stuart: Will my hon. Friend the Minister give way?

Charles Hendry: We have had many contributions, so I hope that my hon. Friend understands that it will be difficult to respond to them fully if I start taking interventions.

Common sense also tells us that if we are to make the right decisions on our energy security and ensure that future generations look back and say that we did the right thing, we have to put new plant somewhere. During the debate, we have heard a lot of calls about why constituencies are not right for certain types of new development, but, with the honourable exception of the hon. Member for Workington (Tony Cunningham), I have not heard anyone saying, "I don't want wind turbines, but I do want something else." No one has volunteered for a new nuclear plant. No one has volunteered for a new gas plant, a coal plant with carbon capture or a biomass plant. If we do not put them anywhere, we cannot survive on invisible electricity. We all want the switches to work when we push them on, but we do not think that we need to see where the energy is being generated. Energy plants need to be sited in appropriate locations, and common sense tells us that that is the right way forward.

We have carefully considered the contributions that different technologies can make. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) will understand that much of the cost that we are considering—the increase in costs for consumers—is based on an oil price of \$80 a barrel. Everything changes when oil is \$100 a barrel. The central strategy of the American Administration is based on oil at \$113 a barrel. At that price, the move to a low-carbon economy brings real benefit to consumers because fuel costs would be lower than they would have been had their supply been based purely on hydrocarbons. We should be in no doubt of the important contribution that renewables can make towards our security of supply and low-carbon objectives. There is a range of different ways in which we can meet the challenge. After this debate, people can go on to the DECC website and look at our 2050 pathways calculator. We can tap in for ourselves and see what keeping our lights on does to carbon emissions. We are not wedded to one approach on the various technologies, but we do want to create an environment where people can see for themselves what will be the best technologies.

As for the suggestion that my hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire made, we will not simply go down the route of targets. Targets alone do not deliver anything. Government must have a determination to show how targets will be met, which is why we will put in place road maps so that people can see what is happening and how it is taking place.

We will be taking forward this matter in the most robust way. We also recognise that as a result of the investment that has already been made in wind turbines, some 5.5 million tonnes of carbon emissions were avoided in 2009. That is the equivalent of the total annual emissions of the bus transportation fleet in this country, which starts to show the contribution that such technology is making.

Many of my hon. Friends have talked about the intermittency of wind, but that is an issue with which technology can increasingly deal. It is not about having a whole fleet of coal-fired power stations standing by to be pumped up into action when the wind does not blow. Let us consider the scope for pumped storage—an electricity interconnector to Norway, perhaps, or a new one into France that builds into its nuclear capacity—and the work that is being done on battery technologies and on a whole range of new technologies that will mean that the power can be there when we need it rather than when the resource happens to blow. That will be one of the big changes that we see coming through in this decade. The issue of intermittency will become one that can be fully addressed.

Regarding security of supply, we also need to recognise that when Sizewell B—our most modern nuclear plant—did not operate for seven months last year wind was powering 800,000 homes in this country during that time. So it is not a case of one technology or another. The core to a sensible energy strategy is ensuring that we have the right balance of different technologies within it.

However, we must change the way we go about achieving that balance and that is what I will focus on for the rest of my remarks. We have heard very sincere views expressed during this debate and I completely understand the views that my hon. Friends and others have expressed. But let me reaffirm the Government's commitment to reform the planning system to ensure that communities have more ability to determine the shape of the places in which they live. Many of the changes will come through the Localism Bill, which has been discussed in Committee today.

We will abolish the regional spatial strategies and their top-down regional energy targets. Members have talked today about how planning applications have been overturned on appeal and granted on appeal. It will be much more difficult for applications to go through on that basis if the regional energy targets are taken out of the mix. Responding to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire, I would say that people can already look to the cumulative effect that exists. However, I do not think that we want to go down the route of saying that each constituency should be generating energy only for its own needs and no more, because that would conflict with the principle that these facilities should be put in the areas that are most appropriate.

We are introducing provisions for projects to be submitted to local planning authorities, so that developers will have to show that they have worked with communities to develop their planning applications. That will help to develop a better approach regarding these

applications, so that more of them can go through with planning consent being given locally rather than having to go to appeal.

We are introducing neighbourhood planning, to enable communities to draw up neighbourhood plans to shape the development in their own locality and to permit development without the need for planning applications. In addition, we are of course abolishing the Infrastructure Planning Commission.

I do not think that it is right to go down the route of having specific distances between onshore wind farms and residences. The way that such distances have been interpreted in Scotland and Wales is not actually the way that they have been enforced in those countries. However, the challenge that I face with regard to that issue is that very often we would find brown industrial land—a brownfield site—that we would all believe was an appropriate place for a wind turbine, but if one were to say that the presence of one house near to that turbine, within a distance of 1 km or 1.5 km, could stop that development from happening that would prevent us from using some brownfield sites, which could be well used in that respect.

The new planning framework will be a concise and more strategic document, which will bring together much of the work in this area to provide much greater clarity. It will provide much greater transparency, to ensure that local authorities can take well-informed decisions.

We are also looking at some of the other issues that have been raised today. We are reviewing how noise is monitored and how flicker is assessed, and we will publish the results of those reviews during the next months so that work on addressing those issues can be developed.

Huw Irranca-Davies: Will the Minister give way quickly?

Charles Hendry: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me but I will not give way, because there are important points that I need to make in the final moments that I have left.

We have brought forward the review of the renewables obligation certificates, because ROCs are an important way of ensuring that we can see investment in renewable technologies. However, we must ensure that those technologies are not put in place in unsuitable locations. The review will make sure that developers of wind farms are encouraged to go to the windiest locations, because the principle of ROCs is that if a company does not generate electricity it does not receive any payment. Therefore, ROCs are a better mechanism than some of the suggestions that have been made today about requiring planning committees to identify how much electricity can be generated by a particular development. We will develop that work on ROCs during this year.

We are examining the cost of grid connections, because often that cost means that there is an incentive to put wind farms close to where the electricity is needed rather than where the wind resource is strongest. That is why Ofgem's fundamental review of how transmission charges are levied is so important and it is also why we have made it clear to Ofgem that its review of the transmission charging system must deliver security of supply as well as low-carbon generation.

We intend to go further by rewarding local communities, so that they have a real say about how their communities should develop. As part of the coalition agreement, we have

announced that business rates from renewable energy developments will be retained locally. In parallel with that, I am pleased that the wind industry itself is looking at establishing agreed minimum standards for the contributions that wind farm developers will make to local communities. Financial contributions by developers might include, for example, investment in energy efficiency measures to reduce electricity bills, or cheaper prices. Of course, the most powerful reward for a community is to have a direct stake in a project. That is why we are keen to see this work happen.

In conclusion, we have had a helpful debate today. I hope that we have been able to show that we believe that wind energy onshore has an important contribution to make. What we can also do is to ensure that wind farms are put in the right locations, where the resource is strongest; that we have a funding mechanism that drives that process; that we have a transmission system that makes the development of wind energy achievable, and a planning system that shows that where communities decide they will consent to such a planning development they will derive a real, direct benefit from having it in their locality.

Once again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire for securing such an important debate.

5.25 pm

Andrea Leadsom: Thank you, Mr Walker, for your chairmanship. Well, you heard it here—this is where the rubber hits the road, or more likely where the peregrine falcon hits the turbine.

We have heard some very impassioned speeches today from a number of hon. Members, none of whom are the sort of fashionable green activists who look at the theory of it all and think, "Onshore wind is the answer and you're just going to have to lump it". There has been a series of speeches from MPs who are speaking out for their constituents. I know from my own constituency that people cry over this issue and spend huge sums of their own money and hour after hour after hour of their own time to try to defend the community that they live in.

Onshore wind farms are rather unique in the renewables sphere in terms of the amount of intrusion that they create. Other renewables do not create so much intrusion, they are not as widespread and, as many hon. Members have said, they do not come back time after time after time. Communities do not end up with four hydroelectric plants, up and down the valley, one after the other. Therefore, Members here today are speaking out with genuine urgency on behalf of their constituents, and those on the Front Benches should take note of that.

Another important point to make is that nobody in Westminster Hall today is speaking out loudly in favour of there being more onshore wind in the energy mix. There is a very important issue here, which is that we already have 3,000 wind turbines in this country and 6,500 more are either under construction or in planning. That is an enormous number of new turbines and any new legislation that we introduce at this point is likely to come too late to deal with them. We could have three times the current number of onshore wind turbines before people can start to benefit from changes in legislation that might say, in fact, that their area was not appropriate for a particular number of turbines or that the turbines could not be

put in a particular location. Those are important points to remember.

The hon. Member for Ogmore, who is the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, was extremely good-natured and good-humoured during the debate, and he made very generous remarks to us. However, I still feel that his view is that of his party, which is that onshore wind development must happen to the exclusion of the views of local communities. He spoke out passionately in favour of onshore wind and did not apologise for the fact that his party embarked on this race for onshore wind when it could have looked instead at developing far less intrusive forms of renewable energy.

This is the key point-if we did not have this renewable target for 2020, would we now still be saying, "Let's continue going for onshore wind", or would we be looking at alternative forms of renewable energy that are much less intrusive? Those alternatives have been mentioned today: hydroelectric; marine and tidal developments, which will all be coming on board in 2022 and beyond; ground source heat pumps; photovoltaic cells, and other possibilities that would be far less intrusive for communities. Potentially the time frame that we are operating under will leave us with very little opportunity to pursue those alternatives fairly.

I thoroughly welcome the Localism Bill. It is going in completely the right direction and our Front-Bench spokesmen are making great strides to plug the energy gap, and to meet both our energy security needs and our renewable targets. We hear a lot of talk from our Government about fairness and localism, two principles that I subscribe to very strongly, and I urge our Government to uphold those principles for the sake of all our communities.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

- Ends -