DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY & CLIMATE CHANGE

The Rt Hon Chris Huhne MP
Secretary of State

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[redacted]

By email: [redacted]

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Dear [redacted],

Thank you for your email dated 26 August about onshore wind.

I understand my officials have written to you before on the issues you have raised, and I apologise that you found the replies unsatisfactory.

We need to move from finite, high-carbon fossil fuels to clean, secure energy. No individual technology will provide the silver bullet – our energy mix will have to become increasingly diverse. As part of that mix, onshore wind will have an important role to play.

The Government is committed to the development of wind energy in the UK. As an island nation we have outstanding wind resources, and wind energy is an indigenous source of energy which is needed to meet our renewable energy and climate change goals. The wind industry can be a key player in creating the investment, exports and jobs we need to bring back economic prosperity, and the UK is already a world leader in offshore wind.

The Coalition Programme made clear this Government's commitment to renewable energy. We also want communities and individuals to benefit from the increase in renewable energy, including wind power, and to own a stake in our collective low carbon future. This is why we committed in the Coalition Programme for Government to encouraging more community-owned renewable energy and allowing communities that host renewable energy projects to keep the additional business rates they generate. To underline this commitment we will allow communities that host renewable energy projects to keep the additional business rates they generate[1]. We also support the new Community Engagement Protocol announced by RenewableUK (http://www.bwea.com/media/news/articles/pr20110216.html).

The costs of onshore wind farms depends on a combination of factors including access, infrastructure and ground conditions. The installed cost can be in the region of £1 million to £1.25 million per megawatt. For further information please see link to the Mott MacDonald Report: http://www.decc.gov.uk/assets/decc/Statistics/Projections/71-uk-electricity-generation-costs-update-.pdf.

[1] Local Government Resource Review which will publish first phase recommendations in July 2011

With the exception of large-scale hydro and landfill gas (which have less potential for further expansion in the UK) onshore wind is the most cost-effective and developed of all the renewable electricity technologies. In a time when fossil fuel is becoming scarcer and will inevitably increase in cost, it is inconceivable that we should not utilise wind energy as it is cheap and proven compared to most other current renewable technologies, and has close to zero marginal cost.

There are costs associated with renewable energy but there are also huge opportunities. The renewable energy sector could support hundreds of thousands of jobs by 2020[2]. Renewable energy (including an important contribution from onshore wind) will stem the rise in our use of imported fossil fuels, with the need for gas imports projected to be 20-30% lower than they would have been in 2020. Fundamentally it will also help the UK tackle climate change, reducing our emissions of carbon dioxide by over 750 million tonnes between now and 2030.

I understand that local communities can often feel concerned about planned wind farms in their area. It is of course important that wind farms are sited appropriately. The Coalition Government has made it clear that local communities should not only have a say, as is currently the case, but more power to determine the shape of places in which they live. The Government has committed to reforming the current planning system and will be presenting a simplified and consolidated national planning policy framework to Parliament. The new planning framework will cover all forms of development and set out our national economic, environmental and social priorities.

Wind turbines do make noise, but it is worth putting this in context. The indicative maximum noise level of a wind farm at 350m (1150ft) is usually roughly comparable to the sound of leaves rustling in a general breeze (in the region of 35-45 dB). This is a much lower level than is made by road traffic on a country road, for example. A car travelling at 40mph at a distance of 100m (330ft) will create around 55 dB.

We take seriously the potential for noise impacts from all forms of new development on local residents and those working in the vicinity. Noise impacts are considered within the planning process before any decision is taken whether or not to grant consent to a project. Existing planning guidance states that the "ETSU-R-97" approach should be used to assess and rate noise from wind energy developments.

Considerable amount of research has been undertaken, both within the UK and elsewhere, to determine the significance of any impacts of wind farms on wildlife. Data collected from a number of wind farms have indicated that for the majority of wind farm locations there is little or no evidence of a significant impact on birds. However, careful site selection is still extremely important to avoid potentially significant impacts. The RSPB has noted in its own reports that 'the majority of studies indicate that (bird) collision mortality rates per turbine in the UK are low'[3].

CHRIS HUHNE

[2] Source: "Focus for Success: A new approach to commercialising low carbon technologies", a report by The Carbon Trust, July 2009