

Public Meeting to Debate the Proposed East Bridgford Wind Turbine Community Energy Project held on 19th April 2011 in the Village Hall, East Bridgford at 8.00 pm

Wind Farm Presentation made by Robert Tweed

Some might say that I am not the right person to present the opposition case to this proposal because

- I accept the general case that natural resources are finite and we need to explore alternative forms of energy, as well as making better use of what we have
- I am not an expert on wind energy - and have not made an in-depth study of the issues, unlike the proposers
- Until recently, I had no particularly strong opinion about the merits or otherwise of this sort of development

However, the more I've gone into it, the more I've realised that many of the assumptions made in favour of the project need to be seriously questioned.

It is evident that this project has already had a very divisive effect on the local community and for that reason if no other it needs to be questioned very critically. I also believe that challenging questions need to be asked because

- Like, I suspect many of you, I find wind turbines to be a very intrusive feature in an already overcrowded landscape – and after all this is supposed to be the green belt
- I'm sceptical of some of the assumptions made in favour of wind energy as a technology
- It is debatable whether or not the mathematics of the proposed scheme add up; and
- It is very unclear where such a scheme could lead.

I want to deal with the impact of wind turbines on the landscape first, because I imagine that for many of you this is the most controversial aspect of the development. Some commentators such as Polly Toynbee say they are attractive but for most people, even if the technical and economic arguments are complex and difficult, the aesthetics are very obvious and generally negative.

I am not suggesting that the East Bridgford project is on this scale, but I have heard it said that it's a myth that people don't like the look of them, and I think that's rather disingenuous.

To take the last point next, where could it all lead? We're told that approval of a single turbine would not necessarily lead to approval for a second, because each planning application would be considered on its own merits. But I have to tell you that my personal experience of how planning decisions are made casts serious doubt on that assertion. I used to live in a large Victorian semi in South Manchester and the neighbouring property to it had a basement flat. It was bought by a family who proposed to live in the house and turn the basement into a small day nursery. Although they were a very responsible couple, about

whom I had no qualms whatsoever, I opposed the plans on the grounds of precedent, only to be told that my anxieties were groundless. Guess what? When my neighbours sold the house it was immediately turned into a much bigger nursery, with offices, more parking and no residential occupancy.

Another point about planning is that the proposal is to erect a turbine in the green belt, a key purpose of which is to protect the unique character of rural communities. I'm told that the earlier application to erect an anemometer to measure wind speeds was deemed by the Planning Committee to be inappropriate in the green belt but an exception was made because it was small-scale and time limited. A permanent structure of twice the height would surely be both inappropriate and unacceptable, an argument to which we will no doubt return as a community if the application goes ahead.

Incidentally, I note from reading my wind turbine update reports in the parish magazine that when the planning permission for the anemometer was granted, the promoters of the scheme were going to re-erect it. I assume that the purpose of doing so was to gather valuable information on what the Planning Committee called the "wider environmental and economical benefits associated with investigating the potential of the site to generate power from harnessing the wind". Yet this planning permission has not been used and the anemometer has not been re-erected. My view is that it is essential that the case for this development is solidly based on clear evidence and I am surprised that the investigations that the anemometer would have supported have not been continued. Only if the scheme is supported by the clearest possible evidence of maximum benefit and minimum cost to the environment will the divisions within the community over it be resolved.

Turning to the controversy over the use of wind energy to combat climate change, I do not pretend to be an expert on the subject. It is very obvious that some sort of climate change in the form of global warming is taking place but the naïve assumption that this is clearly man-made has, for me at least, been rather shaken by discussions with more knowledgeable scientists who have some understanding of the natural fluctuations that occur, as well as the impact of environmental phenomena. I am not saying that there is no man-made global warming, but that the interaction between human economic activity and the natural cycle of climate patterns is highly complex and as yet there are many unanswered questions.

We clearly aren't going to resolve that particular controversy here in East Bridgford and, in any case, the impact on global warming of a relatively small-scale wind turbine development is incalculably minute – as compared, say, with the decision to make 60,000 people travel from Manchester to London to a cup semi-final that they could have watched at Liverpool – an environmental folly duplicated the following day for the supporters of Stoke City and Bolton Wanderers. What I would say, however, is that we shouldn't allow ourselves to be made to feel guilty about not doing our bit for the environment without a critical consideration of the scientific issues involved. Emotional blackmail is not the best way to conduct the debate, from either side.

There is also a growing debate about the effectiveness of wind energy as a way of combating climate change. Some experts say that it is a very inefficient system – wind is inherently inconsistent and unreliable. It is certainly true from my own experience that the wind farm located near Coniston in the Lake District, which I visit quite frequently throughout the year, is often not operational – either because there is insufficient wind or because it is too windy! I

assume, by the way, that this is the one that the East Bridgford group visited near Ulverston, which is reportedly not noisy - which it wouldn't be if the blades aren't turning.

The effectiveness of wind turbines is being called into question at government level- the 2,000 or more so far built generate less electricity than a single medium-sized power station. The Daily Telegraph reported last September that Denmark, which initially embraced wind energy very enthusiastically, is having second thoughts because of a growing public backlash against the intrusive nature of wind farms and the stubbornly high cost of the electricity produced. The leading energy company has said it will not build any more onshore wind farms, and similar opposition has now begun in France and Germany.

Of more immediate importance to our community, however, is the issue of whether or not the particular scheme that is proposed here in East Bridgford is economically worthwhile. It is based on the principle that the turbine generates electricity that is fed into the national grid, for which the promoters of the scheme receive money - known as a feed-in tariff. That money will be used initially to pay off the capital costs of building the turbine. After that, the returns will be used to pay a rent to the owner of the land, after which any surplus will be for the benefit of East Bridgford. It sounds attractive, and some may think it sufficiently so to compensate for the negative impact on the local environment.

But there are significant risks to the venture. There is no doubt that feed-in tariffs are currently pitched at a very high level, making the electricity generated highly subsidised. This, according to commentators such as the Environmental Editor of The Times, is part of a deliberate government policy to promote renewable energy, so that Britain can meet targets for renewable energy set by the European Union. We are all too well aware that target-setting is at best a dubious approach to policy, because the perverse incentives within them often lead to unintended consequences.

I am reminded of the targets for train operators, set to ensure that they arrived at their final destinations on time. This led the train operator for Kent, Connex South East, to adopt the practice of not stopping at all the intermediate stations on their route, leaving would-be passengers bemused and angry as the trains sped by. But at least the trains arrived on time!

These tariffs are currently under review because they are perceived in some quarters as being extremely costly to the taxpayer, as well as unfair to other energy producers, and it is by no means certain that they will continue at their present level. If they drop below a certain point, the promoters of the scheme may be faced with unpalatable alternatives - either reducing or abandoning the return to the community, building additional turbines to gain advantages of scale or decommissioning the turbine, leaving a large and unattractive concrete block as its sole memorial.

I referred earlier to the fact that the promoters of the East Bridgford scheme have decided not to take advantage of their permission to re-erect the test anemometer. I note also from the most recent parish magazine update that the Borough Council have said that the scheme does not require a full environmental impact analysis - and that the promoters regard this as good news. Instead, they only need to provide "desk top studies", done by consultants with minimum observations at the site. I fully accept their argument that this will mitigate their costs, which can only be a good thing, not least for them. I note also, however, that they are relieved that this will save time, and here I feel entitled to express some scepticism. If, as is the case, the feed-in tariffs are under review, might it not be the case that the promoters want

to get their scheme up and running under the present tariff arrangements and avoid the risk that, in a year or so, the scheme might appear less economically attractive? I feel that given the impact of this scheme on the village community, the time taken to fully investigate the economic and environmental impact of the turbine development is a small price to pay for getting it right.

As a community, we need to be aware of these possibilities before we consider how we want our representatives to act. We need to look critically at all the evidence, both for and against a scheme such as the one proposed. We need to be aware that this debate often seems to generate more heat than light, and that assumptions often stated as incontestable truths sometimes turn out to be articles of faith instead. Above all, we need the debate to be conducted in an atmosphere of openness and trust, and here an acknowledgement of the potential downsides from the promoters would be more encouraging.

I haven't been able in the space of this presentation to do justice to many of the concerns that people have about potential visual and noise problems, or about the impact of wind turbines on people's health or on the local flora and fauna, and for these and any other omissions I can only apologise. Again, however, I am wary of some of the rather glib assertions made by the proponents of onshore wind turbines that these concerns are negligible.

My professional background is as a psychologist so I freely admit that I am not qualified to pontificate on the scientific or engineering aspects of wind energy. When I told my dad, who was an industrial chemist working for the ICI, that I had got an MSc degree in educational psychology, he asked, rather brutally, 'what's science got to do with psychology?' I do, however, have a training in statistics and a healthy scepticism about scientific assumptions. When it comes to projections made about trends, I'm reminded of the scientists who predicted in the late nineteenth century that by the middle of the twentieth century New York would be six feet deep in horse dung. Then someone went and invented the motor car.