



**HOUSE OF LORDS**  
European Union Committee

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23 March 2021

The Rt Hon Kwasi Kwarteng MP  
Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy  
Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy  
1 Victoria Street  
London  
SW1H 0ET

Dear Kwasi,

**North Sea energy and ecology**

Thank you for your letter dated 10 December 2020 regarding North Sea energy cooperation and net zero. We are glad that the Government sees cooperation with the EU to be essential in order to achieve cost-effective and efficient development of low-carbon energy in the North Sea.

We have since held an evidence session on the ecological impacts of offshore wind development in the North Sea and are writing to communicate our findings.<sup>1</sup>

The Government's target to develop 40GW of offshore wind by 2030 will make a vital contribution to reducing our greenhouse gas emissions. Witnesses did however suggest that much more work is urgently needed to minimise the possible impacts of this development on the range of flora and fauna that make up the North Sea's ecology.

We strongly believe that more and better research is key. We heard that despite positive initiatives like the Offshore Wind Evidence and Change Programme, the cumulative environmental impacts of large-scale offshore wind deployment are poorly understood. We also heard that research into technologies that can reduce these impacts is not incentivised sufficiently. In addition, the information held by universities is not being fully harnessed. It is clear that in this area of major development it is not possible to make fully informed and sometimes difficult decisions without the right data.

Improving our understanding of the effects of offshore wind on the marine environment is crucial to ensure that possible negative impacts on the North Sea ecosystem—including on sand eels, fish, seabirds and marine mammals—are minimised, and possible positive impacts are encouraged. It would also enable requirements placed on offshore wind developers to be more effective and proportionate. We urge you to explore ways to increase the public and

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<sup>1</sup> We heard evidence from: Helen Quayle, Policy Officer, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB); Professor Melanie Austen, Professor of Ocean and Society, University of Plymouth; and Trudi Wakelin, Director of Licensing, Marine Planning and Blue Belt, Marine Management Organisation (MMO). Links to the recording and transcript of the session are available here: <https://committees.parliament.uk/event/3986/formal-meeting-oral-evidence-session/>

private funding available for research into both the environmental impacts of offshore wind across project lifecycles and technological mitigations, as a priority. This could include channelling more funding through UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

Witnesses explained that in the UK much of the data held by developers for environmental impact assessments is not publicly available. They added that in Norway oil and gas firms are required to publish the environmental data they hold, some of which can shed light on the possible impacts of wind farms' hard structures. We believe the Government should introduce a similar requirement in the UK: it is a low-cost measure that could improve public bodies' decisions on offshore wind. Separately, we support ongoing initiatives to standardise data collection and encourage the Government to promote greater sharing of data between public authorities and universities across the UK.

In our session witnesses also highlighted the importance of international cooperation, including joint research through EU research programmes and the sharing of environmental data. We hope the UK's association with Horizon Europe proceeds as planned with the Government making the necessary funding commitments. We also heard that the North Sea Conferences, the last of which was held in 2006, were a valuable platform for working with neighbouring governments to protect the marine environment. We request that you consider working with other partners to reactivate this platform if environment-focused cooperation cannot be achieved through the mechanism foreseen in Article ENER.23 of the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement.

Alongside being a complex ecosystem and site for offshore wind, the North Sea is a busy area for shipping and the exploitation of natural resources such as oil, gas, and fish. A recurring theme from our evidence session was that a more strategic approach to planning these activities is needed to achieve a balance between them and the marine environment. Witnesses suggested that natural capital approaches could be a useful tool as they incorporate the range of environmental impacts arising from human activities. We strongly recommend that you work with colleagues from across Government and other relevant bodies to develop a more strategic approach to marine planning.

We would of course not wish to see the Environment Bill delayed further, but are disappointed that it does not cover the marine environment substantively. It could have been an opportunity to address some of these issues.

In the development of offshore wind, there is a delicate balance to strike between climate change action and possible ecological impacts. The Government will need to make difficult decisions, and the steps outlined above would help it to do so with a better view of the consequences.

Our Committee will cease to exist after 31 March but we are sure these issues will be pursued further in the House and by future committees. We would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your engagement with the Sub-Committee's work.

We are writing in similar terms to Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Rt Hon George Eustice MP, given his responsibility for some of these matters.

Yours sincerely,

Robin

Lord Teverson  
Chair of the EU Environment Sub-Committee