

A CLEANER FUTURE? WHY RENEWABLE ENERGY MAKES CLIMATE SENSE



RENEWABLES



Green Party
for the common good

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Under EU targets the UK is committed to producing 15% of its energy demand from renewable sources by 2020.¹

But the UK Government is proposing to roll back renewable energy generation initiatives. Specifically it plans to:

- Cut subsidies for onshore wind generation.
- End subsidies for larger solar installations (under 5 Megawatt (MW) capacity) from April 2016.²
- Reduce support through the Feed-in Tariff subsidy mechanism for small solar schemes (e.g. rooftop solar panels). The Government wants to cut the generation tariff by 87% with a view to phasing the scheme out completely by 2018/19.
- End exemptions from the Climate Change Levy (a tax on energy supply, originally intended to put a price on carbon) for energy from renewables.
- Tighten up planning guidelines, making it harder for onshore wind turbine projects to get planning permission.

There is no time to lose, as the Paris Climate Conference will take place in December this year. The UK will be expected to consent there, with all the other countries participating, to a universal and binding agreement on climate that makes global climate sense.

The fundamental question is: do the Government's plans to slow down the switch to renewable energy make climate sense?

As part of our #ClimateSense campaign, the Green Party is calling for the Government to set a date, by the end of 2015, for the UK's energy supply to come from 100% renewable sources. This demand comes in tandem with the call from the European Green Party for the Paris Protocol to "lay down the global phase-out of all carbon emissions and phase-in of 100% renewable energy by 2050."³

By supporting the switch to renewable energy sources, the UK can be a credible voice at the climate talks in Paris, and contribute constructively to an international effort to combat climate change.

Green Party members, activists, and politicians are standing up for the climate by demanding increased support for renewables. The Green Party is calling on the UK Government to:

- Support investment in on-shore and off-shore wind farms
- Keep the Feed-in Tariffs for small solar schemes.

We are calling for this to happen as part of the UK's wider climate change objectives.

Caroline Lucas MP continues to push the Government on the issue, asking in September 2015:

"Will the Minister explain how she can possibly think that investor confidence will be enhanced by taking yet another wrecking ball to the British solar industry with the enormous subsidy cuts, alongside ending pre-accreditation? On the latter issue, the Government's own consultation concedes that her Department has not even bothered to estimate the likely impact on deployment. With tens of thousands of jobs at risk, will she withdraw this now and stop all the waffle about consumer bills? If she were serious about consumer bills, her Government would not be subsidising fossil fuels and nuclear to the extent that they are."

This report will outline the UK's climate change commitments, and how the Government's roll back of renewable energy policies contradicts these.

We will demonstrate conclusively that the Government's plans to reduce support for renewables **do not** make climate sense.

INTRODUCTION:

WHAT IS THE GOVERNMENT DOING?

The Government has put in train a range of cuts to its support for renewable energy:

- An end to subsidies for **onshore wind generation** under the **Renewables Obligation** from April 2016. This is expected to terminate around 250 proposed projects and deter future investment.⁴
- A proposal to end subsidies for **larger solar installations (under 5MW capacity)** under the **Renewables Obligation** (see box) from April 2016. To review subsidy levels for existing schemes and to immediately end the procedure of guaranteeing future subsidy levels for projects, which start before April 2016 (so-called “grandfathering”).⁵ This proposal is currently up for public consultation.
- A proposal to reduce support through the **Feed-in Tariff subsidy mechanism for small solar schemes (e.g. rooftop solar panels)**. Specifically to cut this energy generation tariff by 87% with a view to phasing the scheme out completely by 2018/19 and possibly closing the scheme to new applicants as early as next year (currently out for consultation) and to remove the pre-accreditation procedure which guarantees a certain price for the electricity to be generated (results of consultation currently under review). Both these measures are expected to lead to “significantly reduced rates of deployment”.⁶
- An end to exemptions from the **Climate Change Levy** (a tax on energy supply, originally intended to put a price on carbon) for energy from renewable sources.⁷
- New planning guidelines for onshore wind turbines are expected to make it harder for projects to gain planning approval. New tests will require that turbines must be sited in an area already identified as suitable for wind power in a local area plan, and if “the planning impacts identified by affected communities have been fully addressed”.

These moves follow a previous decision to end subsidies for larger solar installations in April 2015.⁹

The Government’s rationale is essentially that these programmes have been so successful in stimulating the development of wind and solar power that they will cost more than expected if allowed to run until their original end date of April 2017.

As the subsidy for renewable energy is raised from consumer bills, the Government is presenting this decision as a step to protect the public from high-energy costs. Energy and Climate Change Secretary Amber Rudd said, for example, that “as we decarbonise it is imperative that we manage the costs to consumers”.⁴

Although it is true that renewables’ deployment has been faster than expected and therefore the subsidy programmes would cost more than expected if continued; this argument is untenable.

Public subsidies for nuclear power and fossil fuels remain much higher than spending on renewables, while support for programmes to reduce household energy bills through insulation and other efficiency measures have been slashed. Green levies make up a relatively small part of energy bills and this is explored in more detail later.

The renewable energy industry and environmental groups have described these changes as “hugely damaging”, “absurd”, “phenomenally damaging”, “disproportionate”, “too soon and too sharp”, “hugely counterproductive”, “destabilising” and “ludicrous”.¹⁰

Greenpeace says, “ministers have now effectively shut down the onshore wind and solar industries in the UK”.¹¹

Subsidy schemes for renewable electricity

1. Renewables Obligation

The Renewables Obligation is the principal support mechanism for renewable electricity generation in the UK. It requires electricity suppliers to source an increasing share of the electricity they supply from renewables.¹²

Renewable electricity generators are issued Renewables Obligation Certificates (ROCs) for the electricity they produce. ROCs are then purchased by electricity suppliers to show that they have met their obligation to a certain percentage of their supply obtained from renewable energy sources. Suppliers who do not show sufficient ROCs at the end of the year are fined, with the proceeds distributed to those who have met their quota. ROCs can also be traded.¹³

Suppliers pass the cost of purchasing ROCs from suppliers on to consumers through energy bills, effectively making this a public subsidy for renewable generators, paid for from a dedicated tax.¹³

The Renewables Obligation was originally due to close in April 2017.

2. Feed-In Tariffs

Feed-in Tariffs were designed to incentivise small-scale household renewable energy generation, e.g. from rooftop solar panels. Households who generate their own electricity are paid a set amount for each unit they generate. They can sell back to the supplier at a set rate any units they do not use and up to half of what they generate back to the national grid.¹⁴

3. Exemption from the Climate Change Levy

The Climate Change Levy was conceived as a form of energy pricing to incentivise efficiency gains and, through exemptions for renewable energy, to promote decarbonisation. The sale of Levy Exemption Certificates also had a cash value to renewable suppliers.¹⁵

WHAT THE GOVERNMENT PROPOSES

“Contracts for Difference” (CFD) make up the Government’s reformed renewables incentive scheme. Under this scheme, renewable – and nuclear – electricity projects bid for a unit price per Megawatt-hour (MWh) produced. Once awards are made, this price is fixed for the lifetime of the project.¹⁶

A critical concern is that the scheme is effectively inaccessible to smaller companies, community schemes and households, so the move is likely to rule them out of future subsidies. It will concentrate generation in the hands of big energy companies, whose behaviour has already been blamed for making energy bills more expensive than they need to be.¹²

HOW DO THESE PLANS SQUARE WITH PRE-ELECTION PROMISES?

The Conservative Party's 2015 election manifesto pledged to, "halt the spread of subsidised onshore wind farms" and, "end any new public subsidy for them and change the law so that local people have the final say on wind farm applications".¹⁷

The proposed cuts in support for onshore wind have therefore been expected since before the election.

However, in 2013 the Government promised to, "continue to provide a stable long term investment framework" for onshore wind.¹⁸ It is worth noting that the manifesto also promised to, "[cut] carbon emissions as cheaply as possible" and to, "[back] good-value green energy". Onshore wind is the by far the cheapest form of renewable energy available which can be deployed on a large scale - according to the Government's own statements¹⁹ - so the attack on it is **completely incompatible** with these promises.

In fact, as recently as December 2014 David Cameron told the solar industry that, "Solar has been a huge success story and has an important role to play... We know what you want: you want no handbrake turns: long-term certainty".²⁰

There was no mention in the manifesto of cuts to subsidies for solar power or of the plan to apply the Climate Change Levy to renewable generation. These proposals have therefore caused particular shockwaves.

WHY THE GOVERNMENT'S PLANS FOR RENEWABLES DO NOT MAKE CLIMATE SENSE

Under EU targets the UK is committed to producing 15% of its energy demand from renewable sources by 2020. This includes not only electricity but also energy for heating and transport.¹

The UK's Renewable Energy Action Plan¹ suggests that this could be achieved by sourcing 30% of electricity, 12% of heat and 10% of transport fuel from renewables by this date.

These figures function as sub-targets but the balance between sectors is in fact flexible as long as the overall target is achieved.

The action plan goes on to note that these figures "should not be taken as an upper limit to the UK ambition for renewables deployment".

The Government's roadmap projects that by 2020, 24-32 TeraWatt-hours²¹ (TWh) of electricity will be generated by onshore wind, 33-58 TWh by offshore wind, and a further 32-50 TWh from biomass electricity. Solar power is expected to provide a growing but still relatively small share of electricity.

Subsidy cuts

In announcing an end to subsidies for onshore wind power, Energy and Climate Change Secretary Amber Rudd stated that renewables already make up nearly 20% of the UK's energy generation and that, "there is a strong pipeline to deliver the rest".⁴ Indeed official figures for 2014 show that renewables made up 17.8% of UK electricity generation that year, totalling 64.65 TWh.²²

This includes:

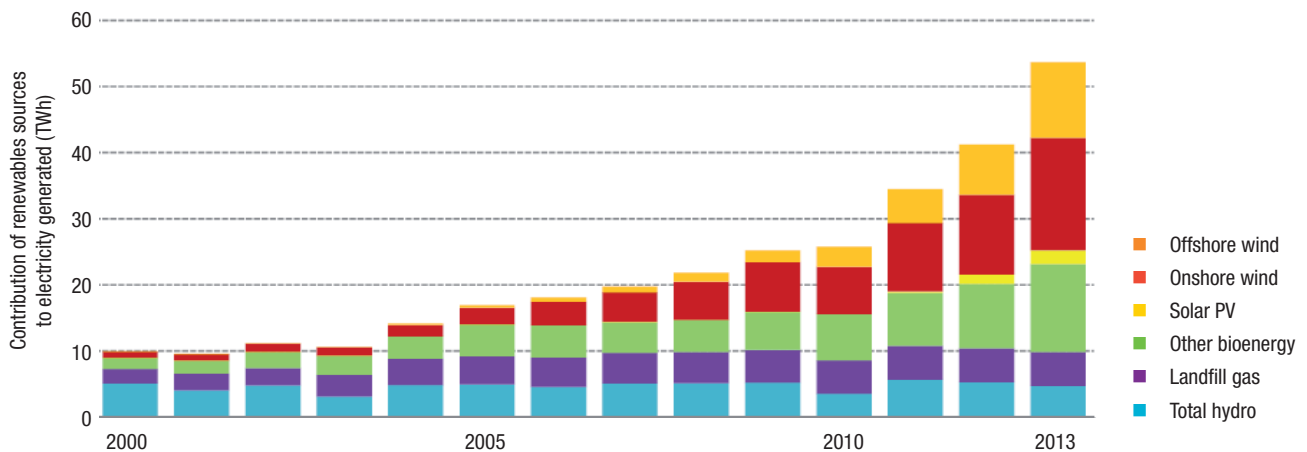
- Biomass 13.1 TWh (total bioenergy including this and landfill gas = 35%)
- Wind 32 TWh (calculate total of offshore as 1.933 = 17% of last year + that much more, and for onshore 1,662 10 %) (onshore wind 29% of total)
- Solar photovoltaic 4.1 TWh
- Hydroelectric 5.9 TWh

So, onshore wind has already reached its target for 2020 levels.

This represents a substantial increase in renewable electricity generation in recent years; in 2000 renewable generation was only around 10,000 Giggawatt-hours²³ (GWh), or between 2 and 3 per cent of total generation.²²

The graph below shows how renewable generation from different sources has grown since 2000.

UK electricity generation by main renewable sources since 2000



Source: <http://www.euenergycentre.org/press-releases-and-news/284-major-changes-for-the-renewable-electricity-market-a-focus-on-uk-contracts-for-difference-cfd> (in fact this is a colour version of graph from https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/450298/DUKES_2015_Chapter_6.pdf)

In 2000, hydroelectric power (including wave and tidal power) made up the majority of renewable generation. Today, the amount of hydroelectric power has changed little but generation from wind (both on and offshore) and plant biomass have soared, with a significant increase in solar power as well.²⁵

It is a sign of the success of the various subsidy programmes that the deployment of onshore wind and solar has exceeded expectations. A government truly committed to tackling climate change would not pull the plug on support for renewables because their targets have been achieved early – they would celebrate this success and raise their ambitions.

Furthermore, these subsidy programmes have been vital in helping these industries grow, reduce costs, and move towards commercial viability. Following years of sustained support, helping the industry to meet costs and encouraging investment by giving assured returns, these industries have almost reached the point where they could operate and raise investment without subsidy.

A board member of the Solar Trade Association (STA) has said that the solar industry is “tantalisingly close” to being able to operate without subsidy.²⁴ It is already profitable in sunnier countries such as Spain and Australia.²⁵ The STA has developed a plan to wean the industry off subsidies and make it competitive with fossil fuels on price by 2020, involving slowly reducing the Feed-in Tariff over time. The sudden end to subsidies threatens to set the industry back just as it is approaching independence from public support.

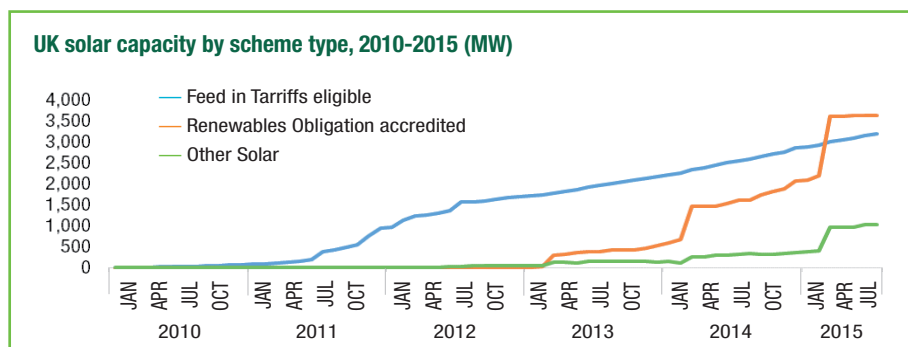
The cost of solar energy has fallen by around 80% between 2008 and 2013.²⁷ Subsidies for solar energy have already fallen by 65–70% since 2010.²⁶

The Government’s proposal to close the Renewables Obligation subsidy to larger solar installations (under 5MW) notes that the cost of solar power has fallen, “making it easier... for the industry to succeed without support”, and that therefore, “future projects could be overcompensated at current levels of support”. However, it takes no account of the industry’s proposal that subsidies need to be reduced progressively rather than ended in one fell swoop.⁵

We have already seen signs that ending subsidy programmes will cause investment to dry up. When it was announced that subsidies for solar installations over 5MW under the Renewables Obligation would be abolished in April 2015, a rush of applications was received which plummeted after the end of the programme.⁹

Feed-in Tariff

The graph here shows that growth in solar capacity in the UK, other than for small-scale installations eligible for the Feed-in Tariff (which is still in operation, for now), has flattened since April 2015, although it is too early to say whether this trend will continue.



However, consultation documents relating to the review of the Feed-in Tariff directly acknowledge that the proposed changes are, “likely to lead to a decrease in deployment levels, as some projects which would have previously gone ahead will now be considered marginal – or not economically viable”.²⁷

Despite policy constraints surrounding renewable energy, communities across the UK are pursuing inspirational community-led energy projects. To find out more about community energy projects in the South East, and Keith Taylor MEP’s support of these, see this report: <http://www.keithtaylormep.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Taking-Back-The-Power-Community-Energy-in-the-South-East.compressed.pdf>

Wind power

Onshore wind is currently the cheapest form of renewable energy available – and therefore surely one where it makes sense to invest, if the Government really wishes to achieve its stated goal of cutting carbon emissions as cost-effectively as possible.

Yet there are fears that the cuts to subsidies will cause investment to dry up. The Chief Executive of non-profit trade association Renewables UK has said that the decision “sends a chilling signal” to investors that the Government is willing to “pull the rug” from planned projects. The World Wide Fund for Nature has also warned “the proposed cuts to onshore wind will drive out investment”.²⁸

The drying up of investment in onshore wind is in fact exactly what the Government envisages. Their decision to axe subsidies is emphatically not based on the belief that the sector is ready to go it alone. Amber Rudd, announcing the closure of the Renewable Obligation for onshore wind, admitted “this equates to around 250 projects totalling around 2500 turbines now unlikely to be built”.⁴ She has subsequently said that a few onshore wind companies are still interested in projects in the UK but has given no details,²⁹ and this is not likely to be attractive to many.¹²

A grace period was permitted for schemes, which already have planning consent, a grid connections offer and finalised land rights. But work has begun on 250 schemes, which are not yet at this stage – work, which may now be abandoned, even if planning is in advanced stages.

The Government has also hinted that onshore wind may be excluded from the CfD scheme in the future, leaving the industry in a grave situation.³⁰

The decision to remove the exemption from the Climate Change Levy for renewable companies is also a considerable, and completely unexpected blow, hitting existing suppliers. These exemptions provide just over 6% of the income of onshore wind generators. A spokesperson for Renewables UK explained that the change is effectively “imposing retrospective cuts on projects already up and running” and will thus “[push] some marginal projects from profit into loss”.³¹

The impact of the new planning tests for wind turbines is yet to be seen but it is widely agreed that it will make it harder to gain planning permission for turbines and will therefore at best delay projects. Some experts have warned that it will put off many applicants.⁸

The Government has stated that it remains committed to supporting other renewable technologies, including offshore wind (which is currently more expensive than other forms of renewables or nuclear, but has the potential for very large scale deployment²⁷), but has warned that these subsidies will not be provided indefinitely. In the short term, offshore wind may benefit from the fact there is more money left in the pot to support renewables.¹² However, following the early closure of subsidy schemes for other renewables, the offshore wind sector is also nervous.³²

Clear, reliable long-term frameworks for support are what is needed to inspire investor confidence – not moving goalposts and broken promises. There is acceptance in the renewable energy industry that subsidies should be reduced over time and eventually phased out, but these should be planned, predictable, and complete removal of subsidies implemented only when the industry becomes fully viable.

EU targets

The UK Government claimed in 2013 that it was on track to meet its obligation to supply 15% of all energy from renewable sources by 2020, having met its own interim target of 4% by 2012.¹⁹

However, the EU demonstrated concern in a June 2015 progress report on renewable energy, stating that the UK (along with a few other countries) was at risk of missing the target and should “assess whether [its] policies and tools are sufficient and effective in meeting their renewable energy objectives”.³³

A letter was leaked from Amber Rudd in November this year, which set out that the UK will miss its 2020 renewable energy targets and is in fact only on track to source 11.5% of energy from renewable sources.³⁴ Subsequently, Rudd publicly admitted that the UK Government does not have appropriate policy frameworks in place to meet the target of sourcing 15% of energy from renewable sources. She said: “Currently, there is insufficient evidence that we are going to make the target for 2020.”³⁵

To add insult to injury, it was announced in November this year that the UK is the only G7 country increasing fossil fuel subsidies whilst cutting back on renewables.³⁶

Greenpeace has calculated that the combined effect of the changes to subsidies for renewables (excluding the slashing of the Feed-in Tariff, which was not yet announced at the time of their analysis) would lead to a total increase in CO₂ emissions of between 2.9 and 7.3 Megatonnes.¹²

The Committee on Climate Change has also warned that in order to meet its legally-binding emissions-reduction target the Government needs to provide longer term secure funding for renewable energy, continue to invest to bring down the cost of offshore wind, and put in place a clear decarbonisation target for the power sector for the 2020s.³⁷

It is clear that the latest raft of policies to cut support for renewable electricity generation run in the opposite direction.

INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLES

There are sound examples of solid investment in renewable energy.

For example, Germany is working towards ambitious renewable energy targets, including a target of 100% green electricity.

Greenpeace notes that China – which is renowned for its coal industry – is, in fact spending more in terms of GDP than the UK on renewable energy.

Energy policy in California is supportive of democratising energy and small-scale supply, with schemes incentivising small-scale investment in local energy generation.¹²

The Committee on Climate Change has concluded that there is scope for the penetration of renewable energy to reach 30-45% of all energy consumed in the UK by 2030 so we should be being more ambitious, not doing the bare minimum.³⁸

CONCLUSION

The Government has reneged on its promises. If it is serious about tackling climate change, renewable energy incentives should remain in place, and the renewable industry supported.

The renewable energy sector is a success story that is within sight of achieving independence but there is a high risk with these cuts of a serious drop in investment.

Moving away from renewable energy generation and increasing the UK's dependency on fossil fuels reduces any likelihood that emission reduction targets will be met.

The Government's range of cuts to renewable energy schemes simply does not make climate sense.

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