Quakers in Britain submission to consultation on Building the North Sea's energy future

April 2025

Summary

As Quakers in Britain we are writing to express our views in response to the UK government's 'Building the North Sea's energy future' consultation. Quakers have a particular commitment to truth and integrity, and although we welcome the government's focus on building the UK clean energy industry, we see a risk of over-reliance on carbon capture, utilisation and storage (CCUS) due to expectations that are not supported by the scientific evidence. We urge the government to instead focus on evidence-based, cost-effective investments in renewable energy.

About us

Quakers are a faith community working for equality, peace, truth, simplicity and sustainability. We try to find God in ourselves and those around us. We are a national church supporting a network of thousands of Quakers across England, Scotland and Wales. We are also a charity that represents Quaker views by working for climate justice and peace.

Our response to this consultation is informed by our work for climate justice. For over a decade, Quakers have understood the climate crisis to be deeply intertwined with global economic injustice. To solve the crisis, we must make our economic system more equal, prioritising people and planet over profit. We must also be truthful about which ways forward represent genuine solutions.

Renewable energy

We support the UK government's focus on fostering a world-leading offshore clean energy industry through public investment. Given the UK's historic role as a major source of carbon dioxide emissions and the severity of climate impacts that vulnerable communities around the world face today, it is vital that the UK leads the way in emissions reduction. Renewable energy is an area where the UK could achieve significant emissions reductions while also lowering bills for the public and becoming able to sustainably provide for future generations. It could offer us true energy security, not just in the short term, but the long term too.

However, the government's strategy for clean energy is over-reliant on CCUS technologies, which are not a reliable solution. Our concern about CCUS springs from several places.

a. Truth and integrity in building a sustainable future

Quakers have a deep spiritual commitment to truth and integrity as an essential part of a moral life. On a national level, the public trust that flows from governing with truth and integrity is essential to democracy and our confidence in it. When that trust breaks down, particularly in relation to climate policy, it provides a platform for those undermining climate solutions by throwing doubt on their affordability and feasibility.

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Overly optimistic narratives around CCUS are distracting from the real work of the green transition. Overreliance on CCUS shifts investment away from well-evidenced solutions that would benefit the wider UK public and towards speculative technologies that would primarily benefit energy companies' shareholders.

b. International scientific consensus on the unproven effectiveness of CCUS

Our concern also springs from Quaker experience in international climate negotiations. Our partner organisation, the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) is the only independent faith-based accredited observer at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). They highlight rising political interest in reliance on not-yet-proven-to-scale techno-fix approaches (including large scale reliance on CDR, CCS and CCU technologies) where they are seeing risks that continue to be downplayed by those seeking to rely heavily on them.

In 2022, the IPCC acknowledged that CCUS is among the least effective and most expensive ways to meet 2030 climate targets. Meanwhile, the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis' research shows that no CCUS project in the world has managed a capture rate of more than 80 percent, with many capturing much less. In September 2023, the International Energy Agency also noted that "the history of CCUS has largely been one of underperformance".

c. Overreliance on CCUS in "Building the North Sea's energy future"

The UK government has recently placed much emphasis on the need for economic growth, arguably at the expense of action on carbon dioxide emissions. CCUS may be seen as offering the potential to bridge this conflict in priorities, but investing huge sums in unproven technologies will not guarantee jobs or the energy sector transformation this country needs.

We do not see this widespread uncertainty about the feasibility of CCUS reflected in this consultation document. Instead, we see a worrying optimism in the claim that CCUS can "help decarbonise our electricity system, our heavy industries such as cement and chemicals, our waste and aviation sectors, and support the growth of the hydrogen economy", as well as delivering negative emissions to offset remaining sectoral emissions. We are particularly concerned by the language of "decarbonising oil and gas production". Although CCUS may be helpful for industries whose emissions are the hardest to abate, we must not build new oil and gas architecture on the expectation that CCUS will mitigate the associated emissions, especially not at the expense of investing in electrification and renewables.

Conclusion

This consultation is a critical opportunity to ensure that the UK government has a transition plan for the North Sea which is rapid, fair and in the public interest. We hope to see an outcome from this consultation that is clear and truthful about the potential role of CCUS technologies in this transition, and the risks and limitations of relying on these unproven technologies.

The government's focus in building the North Sea's energy future must be on evidence-based and sustainable solutions such as electrification and renewable energy. This will ensure the UK leads the way on reducing emissions while also bringing about a genuine transformation for the energy sector and building a sustainable future for our country.