SUBMISSION FROM CAMERON COMMUNITY COUNCIL

Cameron Community Council welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Parliamentary Inquiry. We support appropriate renewable energy and economically accessible reductions in CO2 emissions. Like the Renewable Energy Foundation we believe that, for renewable energy to continue to attract widespread public support, these targets need to be achieved without increasing fuel poverty and without creating unnecessary tensions between the several responsibilities of your committee. We also feel small community councils in wind development hotspots are ill-equipped to deal with the applications and attendant community benefit offers and fear that as they struggle to do so, community cohesion and local democracy are being damaged.

1. The main impact on Community Councils (CCs) of the 2020 Renewables Targets comes largely from the enormous increase in planning applications for onshore wind turbines of all scales from wind farm developer proposals to feed in tariff inspired proposals from landowners and other developers. They are ill served by government at both national and local levels. Training, information and support including funding for CC members are wholly inadequate to cope with the challenges which these applications present. Moreover the CC system, which does its best, is not designed to deal with the complex and contentious questions from local communities which arise from wind farm applications.

2. Rural communities divide between the agricultural industry who work the land and see renewables as an opportunity to provide additional income, local people whose families have lived there for generations and newcomers who see the landscape as a valued amenity resource to be enjoyed, and amongst these are some who have a quasi-global view and the values of these groups or factions as they sometimes become do not overlap. They cannot talk to each other in mutually comprehensible terms but understandably the values are strongly held and lead to strong reactions. The John Muir Trust has spoken of the divisive nature of the current dash for wind – and CCs are on the front line, caught between the diverse interests of these groups.

3. In wards adjacent to Cameron, wind development and community benefit have produced so much conflict that one ward continues to lack enough volunteers to form a CC following extensive acrimony over a local turbine application. In another ward all the CC members 'retired' en masse amid official complaints and allegations of backroom dealing with a wind developer. In a third the CC is also mired in official complaints to Fife Council and hopelessly split because of a significant overlap in membership between the CC and board members of a local development trust which is intent on courting wind developers for community benefit. CCs are subject to next to no monitoring or regulation by Fife Council – there is a great deal of very sensible guidance and advice in Fife Council’s Scheme for Community Councils but little is statutory. Fife Council officers and
elected members tend to stay out of CC business, especially where it concerns controversial issues like turbine applications. There are no agreed or consistent procedures for how a CC should determine its response to a given planning application, and this can vary even within a CC according to how the majority of CC members ‘feels’ about a particular application. Experience with wind applications shows how the operation of CCs relies too much on the good sense of its Chairman and members, and too little on properly agreed and followed procedure.

3. Small CCs have a duty to represent their residents and attend to their interests at a local level. They are remitted to discuss problems such as litter, hedgerows or potholes. They are manned by volunteers with a variety of backgrounds and qualifications and often only meet every two or even three months. They have no income to engage professional help or advice. Small CCs in hotspots for wind turbine development, as in east Fife, do their best within the human and financial resources available to them to frame considered and informed responses on behalf of their communities.

4. The great increase in smaller (up to 50 metre) turbine applications (often by farmers) has required CCs to call extra meetings to discuss these. The recently introduced system whereby (at least in Fife) CCs are no longer automatically considered to be statutory consultees on planning applications affecting their area means they must now request formally to be considered as a statutory consultee for a particular planning application. They are then constrained to respond to the application within 14 days (with extensions beyond 14 days not usually possible) and this has made it much harder for CCs to respond to planning applications. Sometimes they miss responding to important applications altogether and often there is just not enough time to gather and process the information on an application in order to hold an informed discussion with the community in a CC meeting. It seems unfair that applicants and their agents can spend years or months preparing their applications and the only organisation representing the local community has a time frame of four weeks at most for the biggest applications. The elected members who represent the community at a higher level of course have to stand on the side lines until they determine the application.

5. The complex environmental information for applications for the industrial scale wind developments run to hundreds of pages. Paper copies are only available at considerable cost so the material has to be accessed on-line. Accessing the planning application information is impossible for people who do not use the internet, and not all Members of CCs, let alone all members of a community who would like to express a view, use the internet. Given the average age profile of CC Members (and regular attendees of CC meetings), this is not surprising. It is a constant complaint that non-internet-users are discriminated against and excluded from the decision-making process by the lack of affordable paper copies.
6. The difficulties experienced by CCs in Fife appear to reflect those experienced by Fife Council where the planning department that should have the appropriate expertise is deluged by applications that are always complicated and occasionally misleading, incomplete or wrong. Applicants rarely supply all the information asked for in Fife Council’s Supplementary Guidance for Wind June 2011 (SPG), particularly with regard to individual and cumulative impacts. For many months, elected members of Fife Council have been requesting an up-to-date map showing all the proposed and consented applications for turbines in Fife. This is vital in assessing cumulative impact. If elected members struggle with the lack of information when they have to make a decision, how are CCs supposed to manage, especially when they are asked for a response very early on in the application process (sometimes developers respond to requests for further information from planning officers but by then the opportunity for a CC response has passed)?

7. Policies have been set at national and local levels. However, many of these are vague and hard for ordinary voters to understand. For example, the 2km setback for turbines in Scottish Planning Policy and adopted in Fife SPG seems to be something that planners can apply or not at will. We appear to be on the brink of the same “discretionary” approach with Fife Council’s SPG. Here policies that seem clear to the man-in-the-street can seem like just another argument to be obfuscated or discarded under pressure from applicants. This does not serve local democracy well. The policy of wind energy is perceived to be imposed from above, with local opinion as ‘disposable’.

6. At Cameron we decided that our residents should at least have some background to the debate and arranged a series of talks about renewable and in particular wind energy. It is an example of how uncontrollable the debate is (with competing, well-resourced applicants and pressure groups of all opinions) that one of these “Is Wind the Answer?” became a national news item. At least we have been able to take a poll of an informed community in formulating our response to a local application.

7. Beyond the planning issues that the CC is drawn into, there is also the question of community benefit. This divides individual communities as much as the principle of wind energy. As wind developments often cross CC boundaries, and community benefit is proposed by an applicant sometimes before an application is lodged, competing interests can lead to inter-CC strife where there can be an air of competition over who gets what and how much. This can set CCs against one another as approaches to both negotiating and allocating benefit differ. We believe that benefit should be negotiated, and the structures for allocating it be established, AFTER consent. Thus the ‘bribery’ charge is avoided and the issues of community benefit cannot be seen to influence the planning and decision-making process. This gap in direction/support is another indicator of how local communities, left open to potential exploitation by market
forces, are ill served by the political forces – which many perceive as favouring big companies over small communities. Perhaps there should be legislation at a national level to provide a detailed framework for community benefit.

8. We do not believe that the Scottish Ministers have made adequate efforts to understand the concerns of people living in rural and semi-rural communities and the CCs that represent them. Targets and subsidies drive the market and these are massive forces. By relying on the market and incentivizing those who want to erect wind turbines to force the pace, it has left local communities feeling disenfranchised and disconnected from the processes that shape their lives.

Gordon Ball
Chair, Cameron Community Council
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