SUBMISSION FROM THE LAUDERDALE PRESERVATION GROUP

Lauderdale Preservation Group has observed the effect on local people and communities of applications for wind farms and single turbines in Lauderdale over the past 15 months.

We are deeply concerned by the divisive effect of these applications on rural communities and way in which long standing relationships between neighbours are being destroyed.

We are further very disturbed by the lack of consideration given to residents by the planning process and the way in which it appears to be biased towards the interests of developers and against those of local people.

Our conclusion is that the relentless pursuit of overoptimistic renewables targets will destroy rural communities and damage the credibility of government and institutions amongst rural residents.

Background: the extent and density of onshore wind turbines

There are around 2000 onshore wind turbines in operation or under construction in Scotland. If proposed targets for renewable energy were to be met, we estimate that up to 8,500 could be required, depending on precisely how the target of ‘100% of electricity from renewables’ is to be interpreted.

Applications for turbines appear to be concentrated in particular locations. As the map below shows, many of these are located in Lauderdale. To date only those in purple are operational, but the remainder are at various stages in the planning process. New applications for single turbines, some over 200 feet high continue to be submitted almost monthly.
If even a proportion of these proposals are consented there will be few homes in the area which are not within sight of wind turbines. More seriously, many previously tranquil homes will suffer from disturbing and health-threatening noise from turbines.

Public Attitudes and Ignorance
Most people in Scotland live in cities and large towns and are unlikely to be directly affected by wind turbines. Only the minority who venture into the countryside on foot, cycle or horseback can have any appreciation of the impact of wind turbines on the countryside and its inhabitants.

Government, developers and ‘green’ pressure groups promote the view that the UK’s wind energy programme will ‘save the planet’ from climate change. (Which it will not, as increased emissions mainly from China and India will overwhelm any likely reduction in the developed world.) They further insist that wind energy is entirely benign, denying for example the devastating and well documented effects of wind farm noise on nearby residents.

It is thus unsurprising that surveys, commissioned by wind energy developers, claim that the public is in favour of renewable energy. Even without the loaded questions which these have featured, most people simply do not appreciate the impact of wind turbines on the countryside and on those who live there.

The views of those faced with the prospect of a wind farm near their homes are quite different.

Impact on Affected Communities
As soon as an application is threatened the community starts to disintegrate. Those who stand to benefit financially are clearly in favour. Those who know what the effects of turbines on their amenity and the value of their property - which for some represents their life savings - are opposed. Those initially ignorant, but who take the trouble to investigate the experiences of people who have been forced to live near wind farms soon become committed opponents.

Whether or not the application is progressed and consented, the damage is done. Financially uninvolved residents feel that they can never again trust neighbours who, having signed nondisclosure agreements with energy companies and been instructed not to talk about the development, have implicitly lied to them. Those who stand to gain are resentful that others have objected to what they see as their right to profit. We have seen some astonishingly petty behaviour by members of the latter group, especially when faced with the likely rejection of a proposal.

Another invidious and divisive aspect of development is so-called community benefit. In principle it is not supposed to be an issue in the planning process. In practice developers offer it to community councils as what can only be considered a bribe to encourage support from councils that are statutory consultees to the planning procedure. We have seen how this corrosively divides community councils between members who wish to protect constituents living near proposed wind farms and those, usually themselves living remote from the development, who want spending money.

As a group we initially took a generally favourable view of smaller single turbine developments. However in practice we have seen that these can be even more damaging to relationships between neighbours.

Members of the Committee might consider how they themselves would react to their next door neighbour installing a piece of machinery which would overshadow their own house and garden and emit continually noise at the level of a pneumatic drill. And as electricity consumers how they would feel about him collecting several thousand pounds a year via their own electricity bills.
We have seen how any proposed wind turbine development, on any scale, whether or not it is actually consented, can destroy the communities which it affects. Residents can thus suffer a double loss, both of actual amenity from the noise and visual impact of turbines and from the poisoning of relationships with their neighbours.

The Planning Process
As we have become involved in the planning process, we have come to believe that it is biased in favour of applicants and against residents and members of the general public.

The fact that multinational energy companies can spend years developing an application to which individuals are given four weeks to respond, immediately puts the latter at a disadvantage. Energy companies have deep pockets and access to teams of experts. Individual objectors have to spend their own savings and cannot even count this against their taxes.

The criteria against which applications are judged seem to give little regard to the effects of developments on the lives of people who, through no wish of their own, are being forced to live with them. Scottish Borders Council’s recent Supplementary Planning Guidance on Wind Energy is largely a well balanced document, but in its 50 pages we can find less than one side in total which addresses the issues of impact on residents. Developers’ environmental impact assessments spend much more space on archaeology, wildlife and scenery than they do on noise and matters which will affect residents. While all these things are significant, we do feel that people are more important.

It seems to us fundamentally unjust that planners may not consider the destruction of property value by developments. While denied by the energy companies, estate agents confirm that proximity to wind farms not only reduces the value of a property but can in fact make it unsaleable. Where a development makes money for one party and creates a loss for another it would seem entirely reasonable not only that this should be taken into consideration, but that if the development proceeds, the loss should be made good by the developer.

On the specific planning issues of noise, the experience of residents and the views of independent experts clearly demonstrate that existing rules provide insufficient protection. We are concerned that both UK and Scottish Governments join the developers in denial of the damage to peoples’ lives. The position of the developers in understandable, but that of government is simply shameful.

One positive aspect of Scottish Borders Council policy is a presumption against large scale wind development within 2km of habitation. Alas, this minimal protection for the population is invariably challenged by developers on the grounds that it is not supported by the Scottish Government. And indeed attempts to get support for such a separation from Ministers has met with equivocation or hostility.

We have found council planning staff to be both conscientious and helpful. Unfortunately, the large number of wind energy applications encouraged by government policies means that they are likely to be overwhelmed. We are concerned that in an effort to meet statutory deadlines it may not be possible for them to give proper consideration to specialist issues such as noise and visual impact.

Perhaps the most damaging aspect of the current planning environment is the way in which unambiguous decisions by local planners and democratically elected local councillors are routinely overturned by reporters appointed by Holyrood. There is a wide belief that these enquiries are not truly independent but are ‘fixed’ by the Scottish Government to support their policies. Certainly, the historical record suggests this.
Credibility of Government and Institutions

The committee should be aware that amongst residents threatened by wind turbines there is deep resentment of the Scottish Government’s renewables policy. There is cynicism about the Scottish Government’s attitude to, and rôle in, the planning process. There is a view that the Scottish Government does not care about people, and is allowing multinational energy companies to damage our quality of life in the pursuit of profit. Institutions which are supposed to protect these things are failing to do so, and we are concerned that this failure suits many of our politicians.

There is a real danger that the continuing proliferation of wind turbines close to homes of those who gain no benefit from them will erode faith in government, institutions and indeed of the belief that we live in a democracy.

Lauderdale Preservation Group
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