SUBMISSION FROM PLANNING AID FOR SCOTLAND

Following a recent meeting with Murdo Fraser MSP, Convener of Economy, Energy & Tourism Committee in relation to the Committee’s inquiry in the Scottish Government’s renewable energy targets, Planning Aid for Scotland has prepared a response to some of the key questions set out by the inquiry.

Part of the inquiry’s remit is to consider the risks and barriers to achieving the Scottish Government’s 2020 renewable energy targets, including the following:

- “How can national priorities be reconciled with local interests?”
- “Are we confident that the necessary infrastructure can be developed?”
- “Is planning adequately resourced and fit for purpose?”

These questions are considered in our response overleaf and are based upon our experience of working with communities, local authorities and key agencies around Scotland to help improve people’s engagement with the planning process.

One of the key factors that will determine the success of the Scottish Government’s renewable energy agenda is the way in which civil society engages with the planning process.

By implementing an early, open and responsive engagement process, the planning process can be streamlined and become more efficient for all involved. Whilst a positive process cannot make any guarantee regarding outcome, it does provide important groundwork so as to enable well-informed decision-making.

Given the polemic that can arise around renewable energy proposals, it is particularly important that public engagement in the planning process be earlier and more innovative in nature (as also identified in Audit Scotland 2011 report ‘Modernising the planning system’).

How can national priorities be reconciled with local interests?

There are inevitably tensions between the planning process and the political process. Through the preparation of Local Development Plans, the planning authority is tasked with looking at development over the long term. However the planning process is intertwined with the democratic political process, which often operates in much shorter cycles.

The tensions between the planning and political processes may be lessened through greater training for elected members on their role within the planning system and within the community engagement process. Each planning authority currently issues its own guidance to members, which often leads to great differences in approach from authority to authority. Greater and clearer training for elected members across Scotland’s local authorities may help to improve the planning process.

Are we confident that the necessary infrastructure can be developed?

For the planning system to best deliver a low carbon economy, it is vital for individuals and communities to be aware of the national priorities as set by the Scottish Government. Currently there is a gap between the debate held at the national level and the local debates held in local authorities across Scotland. The
renewable energy targets are set at the national level, but decisions regarding infrastructure are largely made at the local level. There is a need for much greater discussion and awareness of the Scottish Government’s priorities at the local level.

Whilst separate to the planning process, community benefit schemes are nonetheless playing an increasingly important role in the delivery of renewable infrastructure. It is our experience that communities require a greater awareness and understanding of community benefit schemes.

Is planning adequately resourced and fit for purpose?

PAS supports a well resourced planning system. However one area in which the planning system is systematically under-resourced is in community engagement. We believe that investing in meaningful and effective engagement from an early stage is not only beneficial to the planning process, but may be considered by planning authorities and developers as a form of preventative spending. As the modernised planning system places increasingly greater emphasis on ‘front-loading’ the planning process, it is important that this is matched by greater front-loading of the engagement process.

An important part of good community engagement in planning is about managing the community’s expectations throughout the planning process. People should be well informed about the process and how they can input into the process, as well as a clear understanding about what they can and cannot influence – and crucially, the reasons why.

Renewable Energy Targets Inquiry – Evidence Session, 6 June 2012

It is worthwhile to highlight the evidence given by members of the renewable energy industry to the Committee on 6 June 2012. In the evidence session, there was support from all parties for better community engagement around renewable energy developments. The Scottish Government and planning authorities are also committed to finding ways to continuously improve the planning process.

We therefore find ourselves in a situation where essentially everybody agrees on what is required – better engagement in planning for renewable energy developments – but there remains a lack of creativity as to how we should go about achieving that.

Support from PAS

PAS has built up a unique wealth of experience and tapped into the local knowledge of communities all around Scotland and their experiences of the planning system. In the nearly twenty years of its existence, PAS has worked with over 1,000 community councils, planning authorities and key agencies, helping people to understand the extent to which they can influence decisions about their local environment.

We would be pleased to assist the Inquiry further with any aspect of its work in relation to better engagement with the planning process.

Planning Aid for Scotland
30 August 2012