SUBMISSION FROM ROSNEATH WEST PENINSULA COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT TRUST

Introduction
Rosneath Peninsula West Community Development Trust is working towards the development of an 11.5MW community wind farm on the Rosneath Peninsula in Argyll. We have rejected offers of “assistance” from developers who would “help” us in exchange for taking most of the benefits generated by the scheme. We are determined that all the proceeds go to benefit the villages on the peninsula. Having been engaged in the project for nearly two years, we believe that we may be able to assist the committee in examining those issues which arise from community owned renewable generation projects.

Targets
We cannot comment on whether or not the Government will achieve its 2020 targets. However we are certain that involving communities in the development of renewable energy would greatly increase local support for such schemes. In this sense “communities” could mean anything from a village to a local authority. It would reduce local opposition to such projects if local people felt their community was going to benefit directly from the project. This more supportive attitude would clearly assist the Government to achieve its targets, and would also assist the sustainability of rural communities.

Challenges
As a small community with a total population of 1520 people, we faced many challenges in pursuing our community wind farm. The first of these is in finding proper advice and technical support. Our best resource here was the guidance of Community Energy Scotland, without whom we could not have started. If Scotland is to pursue greater community involvement in renewable energy, this agency must be supported and strengthened, with more training for its development officers and greater funding for its commercial arm.

As we have a talented and committed board, we were able to get grants to pay for our initial wind farm feasibility study, and to carry out the pre-development work. The lack of available finance for pre-development analysis is the main reason that communities end up having to work with developers and losing control of their project. Further funding in this area would enable more villages to keep the financial benefits within the community rather than in the pockets of major company shareholders.

Access to finance, whether at the pre-development stage or at the development stage, presents a small community with great difficulties. Well thought out schemes are attractive to banks, but they all demand at least 10%, and more usually 20%, equity put in place when agreeing to provide finance. It is clearly impossible for small communities to raise such sums and again they can be exploited by developers. If local authorities or the commercial arm of Community Energy Scotland were prepared and enabled to take up the equity stake, they would not only achieve an excellent return on their investment, but we would keep the returns
within Scotland and the renewable energy sector. This would create a situation where everyone benefits and should be seriously considered by the committee.

We have worked closely from an early stage with officers from Argyll & Bute planning department, who have been very supportive. However, there are so many agencies and stakeholders involved that it becomes a severe test of a communities' resolve to leap over all the hurdles. In our case, these included Argyll & Bute planning, Scottish Environmental Protection Agency, Historic Scotland, Environmental Health, Scottish Natural Heritage, West of Scotland Archaeological Society, RSPB, Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park, Civil Aviation Authority, Ministry of Defence, neighbouring local communities, and others. It would greatly help any community setting out on this road to have better guidance. The mechanism is in place in the shape of Community Energy Scotland, but this organisation requires more officers and training, particularly in the production of Environmental Impact Assessments and the financing of renewable energy schemes.

We would welcome the opportunity to employ one or two local people to act as technicians in the operation of our wind farm. However, as far as we can ascertain, no such courses are available at our Colleges. Perhaps the committee might encourage the introduction of relevant qualifications in this area, possibly with financial assistance from the major turbine manufacturers, who are increasingly opening offices and maintenance centres in Scotland.

Rural communities throughout Scotland have a once in a lifetime opportunity to raise their own funds to sustain their communities. With guidance and a little financial assistance, the involvement of such communities could provide a significant boost to the achievement of the Government's target. This is not a party political matter and we are not the only folk making these points. Prominent figures from the businessman Maitland Mackie to Calum MacDonald the former Labour Party Member of Parliament for the Western Isles have long campaigned against revenue from Scottish renewable energy disappearing out of the host communities and furth of Scotland. The EET Committee has the opportunity to bring these issues and opportunities before Parliament and change this unfortunate situation.

The villages on the west of the Rosneath Peninsula are working hard to develop a wholly-owned community wind farm, which, if delivered, will be the largest community scheme in the UK. Over the last eighteen months we have made mistakes and learnt many lessons. These range from not having a proper critical path to guide our progress to being caught out with consultants who proved to be inadequate. Many of these errors could have been avoided with better knowledge and systems in place. We would be happy to assist the EET Committee in any way that can help other communities along the road to regeneration and sustainability, and at the same time help the country achieve its renewable energy target.

Murdo MacDonald
Convener, Rosneath Peninsula West Community Development Trust.