ONSHORE WIND – PLANNING ISSUES AND SUPPORT

We are writing to highlight some issues regarding onshore wind energy and in particular with respect to the planning system. We would also like to suggest some constructive means to help deal with some of those issues.

As you will know, the Scottish Government is strongly committed to renewable energy. We have a target that renewables could provide the equivalent of 100% of our demand for electricity by 2020 – and there is no question that onshore wind developments will continue to play a vital role in achieving that goal.

One obvious area is to improve the coverage and quality of spatial frameworks for onshore wind farms in development plans; coverage currently being incomplete and in some cases inconsistent with Scottish Planning Policy, out of date or unadopted. The clear identification of areas of search for wind farms is in everyone’s interest – planning authorities, developers and the wider public. For that reason, the Scottish Government will in future require Spatial Frameworks to form part of the Development Plan as required by Scottish Planning Policy rather than in interim supplementary guidance. We will be making a formal announcement on this issue during the course of this week.

Of course, we appreciate that our target and the support available means that local authorities are, in some instances, dealing with a significant number of planning applications. We also realise that the complexity of some of the issues which these applications can raise, coupled with the strong local interest that is often created, places a burden on the local planning system. We are already taking steps to improve matters – for instance by updating technical approaches to impacts from noise, carbon assessment, wind farm visualisation and wild land protection. We believe that there are further ways in which we can work together to improve the current situation and alleviate the burden.
From our experience of assisting Heads of Planning Scotland with the collation of data to inform the Scottish Parliament Energy, Economy and Tourism Committee’s inquiry into the achievability of the 2020 targets, it is clear that information is not consistently or readily available to some planning authorities regarding the number, status and nature of wind turbine application and developments in their area. We will be working with planning authorities to understand how best to make this information available in the public interest, whilst minimising burdens on staff or data-management resources.

Clearly, applications which are determined by Scottish Ministers under Section 36 and 37 of the Electricity Act also require considerable resource from the relevant planning authority as the statutory, and principal, consultee. To that end, we would like to propose a seminar for planning authorities and relevant Scottish Government officials, to be arranged by the SG Energy Consents Unit. This should examine current procedures and working practices with a view to finding ways we can work better together and better support each other throughout the Section 36 and 37 process.

Of course, I appreciate that dealing with these issues places a strain on resources, particularly for those authorities dealing with a large number of such applications. That is why we are looking just now at ways in which the Scottish Government can bring additional resources to bear which will assist those planning authorities where the need is greatest. Our initial assessment has concluded that funding of at least £0.3 million should be made available from Scottish Government for this purpose. We will encourage the renewables industry to proactively support this work and are developing the details of this initiative, and intend to say more shortly.

We wish to stress that these proposed changes and initiatives are about improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the system. The location of existing and planned wind farm developments demonstrates that projects are going ahead only in the right places, which is as it should be. We want to work with you to ensure that this remains the case, and that the system remains consistent, transparent and properly resourced.

Yours sincerely

DEREK MacKAY

FERGUS EWING

Taigh Naomh Anndrais, Rathad Regent, Dùn Èideann EH1 3DG
St Andrew’s House, Regent Road, Edinburgh EH1 3DG
www.scotland.gov.uk

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE