1. Introduction

Based in Dunfermline but active throughout the UK Burcote Wind is an independent, progressive renewable energy company, with a strong focus on helping to create economically and socially sustainable communities as a result of our projects.

We specialise in onshore wind energy projects from the identification and design stage right through to construction and operation. At every stage, we involve local communities to make sure they get the information they need and reap the rewards from having a wind farm in their area.

We believe passionately in the need for renewable energy but are also acutely aware of the necessity for sensitive and sustainable development. This means we take great care to make sure our wind farm proposals are sympathetic to the needs of local people and the local environment.

With climate change already making its impact felt, we believe that the UK has an opportunity to capitalise on its unique wind resource to move away from damaging fossil fuels to clean, green, limitless wind energy.

2. Issues relating to Economy, Energy & Tourism Committee

(a) Reducing Energy Demand, Emissions and Fuel Poverty

The primary environmental benefits of windpower are to cut carbon emissions, reduce reliance on fossil fuels and improve energy security. Wind developments can also enable wider environmental and habitat improvements. We estimate that, if consented, our projects would displace around 1,103,372 tonnes of carbon emissions a year and provide enough clean energy to power over half a million homes.

In addition, because of the increase in the price of fossil-fuelled utilities, through our discussions with local communities we have been encouraging them to consider using some of the community benefit funds associated with our projects to be used on measures for tackling fuel poverty. This has included suggestions from communities such as retro-fitting improved insulation and other energy efficiency measures into older homes or the installation of small scale renewables such as solar panels to reduce energy consumption. A further suggestion made by communities is to develop district heating systems, which can be cheaper and more environmentally friendly and are already used in parts of Scandinavia.

(b) Renewable Energy

Technically speaking, the 2020 renewables target for the equivalent of 100% of Scotland’s electricity needs to come from renewable sources is achievable and will make a significant contribution towards meeting CO₂ reduction targets set out in the Climate Change (Scotland) Act. The technologies, particularly in the case of
onshore wind, as well as the political will, are there. Our pipeline of projects alone totals around 790MW of potential installed capacity, enough to generate more than 1,900 gigawatt hours of electricity and to displace approximately 1.1 million tonnes of CO₂ each year.

However, Burcote Wind believes that the complexities of the planning process and the high costs associated with connection to the electricity grid present significant barriers, especially for onshore wind projects which will form a large proportion of the renewable energy installations needed to meet the targets. We believe that these barriers have the potential to jeopardise the achievement of those same targets.

(c) Interconnection, Grid Upgrades and Transmission Charges

Grid infrastructure and its associated charging regime currently represent one of the biggest barriers to achieving Scotland’s renewables targets.

With regard to connection charges, developers are currently mandated by National Grid to underwrite enormous costs to upgrade grid infrastructure in areas where it is inadequate. Given the location of many onshore wind farms in relatively remote or rural areas, these costs often run into millions of pounds, even for small projects.

Under the current system, developers are forced to pay a non-refundable deposit (based on a cost-per-kilowatt/hour of the total installed capacity) on the ‘trigger date’, i.e. the date on which work is commenced by the DNO (Distribution Network Operator) to provide the wind farm connection. However, this ‘trigger’ bears no relation to the planning process – so in effect developers must start paying these fees (running into the hundreds of thousands of pounds for a large project) without any guarantee of planning consent.

Furthermore, if planning permission is refused and the connection agreement cancelled, cancellation fees are due and typically run into millions of pounds. If a development does proceed, the connection costs are recovered through the annual connection and use charges paid to the DNO and are not required as an upfront capital cost to the project.

While Burcote Wind appreciates the need to deter purely speculative applications, these fees represent a significant deterrent to smaller onshore wind developers, reducing competition and diversity by effectively skewing the market in favour of a small number of established companies (principally UK and foreign-based utilities) which have the necessary operating capital to absorb such fees.

Regarding transmission charges, Burcote Wind believes improved transmission infrastructure represented by such projects as the Eastern HVDC Link, the Western HVDC ‘Bootstrap’ Link and the Beauly-Denny transmission line, are welcome developments which should hopefully enable Scotland and the wider UK to take fuller advantage of the tremendous wind resource of Scotland.

Nevertheless, a major barrier to the Scottish Government achieving the 100% target by 2020 is grid availability. The current commercial regime means that most applications for grid connection will be made at the time of being granted planning consent for the project, with the DNOs and NGET regularly quoting up to five years
to provide a connection. We are concerned that the DNOs and NGET are not building in enough future capacity to the grid to accommodate likely expansion of renewable generation in certain areas of Scotland.

3. Issues relating to Local Government and Regeneration Committee

Delivering Emissions Targets

Burcote Wind believes that all levels of society and government structures must work together to meet emissions targets. It is not enough simply to install renewable energy; communities must be encouraged and incentivised to work towards achieving reductions in overall electricity consumption in their area, in some cases using money from local renewables projects. In addition, the planning system and local authorities must be able to do their part as well.

i) Communities

Community engagement is hard-wired into Burcote Wind’s approach to our projects and, we believe, has to be thorough and a two-way process to be meaningful and effective.

Community engagement is a through-life process of working with local groups and residents as a valued part of the community during pre-planning, application, consenting strategy, construction and operation of the wind farm. We typically start out community engagement right from the very outset of a project—typically when we seek a scoping opinion from the Local Authority or Scottish Ministers about a site or submit a planning application for a temporary anemometer or “met” mast to measure wind speeds. We believe it’s right to start as early as possible, to give us sufficient time to present our plans to the community and adapt them in light of feedback, instead of simply showcasing a finalised layout.

Through the setting up of a Community Liaison Group (CLG), Burcote Wind works with Community Councils, Schools & Colleges, local Skills Providers, Businesses, local politicians and others in order to encourage local communities to consider major issues for their area and how community benefit funds might be used in the event of a site being approved, including reducing their own emissions.

For example, we have already heard ideas from communities such as investing in initiatives such as in low-carbon community transport, additional local renewables projects, working with colleges to deliver new jobs in the carbon economy or fitting more efficient heating systems to individual buildings or wider communities. All of these measures would not only directly reduce carbon emissions from individual communities but would also inevitably create a raised level of awareness amongst local people which could result in lifestyle changes bringing further benefits.

ii) Local Authorities

Much of the burden for dealing with renewable applications falls upon local authorities, which are either required to decide on applications below 50MW or to
comment on major applications above 50MW as a statutory consultee. For this reason, Burcote Wind welcomes the decision by the Scottish Government to create a fund to help local authority planners deal with high numbers of applications for wind turbines. We are hopeful this will help to speed up the system and result in local authorities being able to produce opinions and to take decisions more quickly than is currently the case.

In addition to this, however, Burcote Wind would like to see closer cooperation between Councils and communities in determining how community benefit funds can be effectively spent. Burcote Wind believes that at least 80% of funding from community benefit funds should be spent on addressing local socio-economic needs, with the remaining 20% focused on smaller ad-hoc projects. In so doing, we believe there is significant scope for these funds to be invested in projects and initiatives that will contribute to reducing CO₂ emissions by reducing energy consumption, improving energy efficiency and tackling fuel poverty. In developing effective community benefit strategies for each of our wind farm proposals, both before and after consent is granted, we make strenuous efforts to broker strong relationships between local communities and the relevant departments in local authorities to ensure these strategies are effectively coordinated with local authority policies and programmes. This enables the Council to engage in exchanges of best practice either by passing on ideas from other areas or, indeed, learning from local communities and sharing this knowledge with other communities elsewhere.

iii) Planning System

Resourcing is stretched in many areas of the system that is integral to the planning process. We have experienced significant delays in our dealings with local planning authorities and statutory consultees, such as Scottish Natural Heritage.

The planning system around onshore wind energy developments is complex. In part, this is an unavoidable product of the technical studies which need to be conducted in advance of a planning application being made. Statutory consultees, including Scottish Natural Heritage, can stipulate a preference for ornithological surveys to be conducted over two and sometimes even three years to monitor the behaviour of certain bird species over a site. This inevitably extends the total duration of the ‘planning’ or, more correctly, the pre-planning process.

In terms of time taken prior to submitting a Planning Application, there is usually approximately six months of landowner negotiation; 12 months of legal agreements; and 24 months of bird surveys, during which time public consultation is also undertaken. This means there is on average a 3.5 year pre-planning period.

Burcote Wind suggest that there should be scope to consider the absolute requirement for extended survey periods on a case by case basis, and where initial survey work indicates low potential for significant bird activity that would be problematic for developments, potentially allow earlier submission on the basis of ongoing survey work throughout the determination period. Burcote Wind have progressed initial dialogue with ECDU and SNH on this basis, and this has been
generally supported, albeit with the caveat that each case will require to be considered on its own merits. A pragmatic approach to addressing survey requirements should assist all parties in terms of expediting the consenting process, and establishing whether a project is deliverable, and can have the potential to make a positive contribution to government targets.

Conclusion

Burcote Wind believes that significant progress has been made towards meeting Scotland’s renewables and CO₂ reduction targets. We believe that, if certain structural changes are made within the grid and transmission system, as well as within the planning system, the future is bright for the environment and for the renewables industry in Scotland.

Our approach of focussing on the importance of communities gives us a unique insight into what can be achieved if local people are engaged properly. With the right support, encouragement and incentives, communities can significantly increase the positive impact of renewable energy projects by undertaking their own initiatives in the area.

We look forward to continuing our work with local communities in relation to the renewable energy projects we are seeking to develop throughout Scotland. In the meantime, we would be happy to provide the Economy, Energy & Tourism Committee or the Local Government and Regeneration Committee with additional information if that would be of assistance.

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