

ENTERPRISE AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 13 January 2004
(*Afternoon*)

Session 2

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ENTERPRISE AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

2nd Meeting 2004, Session 2

CONVENER

*Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Mike Watson (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP)

*Mr Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab)

*Chris Ballance (South of Scotland) (Green)

*Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)

*Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab)

*Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Mark Ballard (Lothians) (Green)

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab)

Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland) (Con)

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP)

George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Dr Jeremy Carter (Skye Windfarm Action Group)

James Fowlie (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Mr W R Graham

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP)

Councillor Alison Hay (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Mrs Marilyn Henderson (Avich and Kilchrenan Community Council)

Mr John B P Hodgson (Skye Windfarm Action Group)

Mr Peter Hodgson

Derek McKim (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar)

Mr Ben Palmer (Skye Windfarm Action Group)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Judith Evans

ASSISTANT CLERK

Seán Wixted

LOCATION

The Chamber

Scottish Parliament

Enterprise and Culture Committee

Tuesday 13 January 2004

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:07*]

Renewable Energy Inquiry

The Convener (Alasdair Morgan): Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to this meeting of the Enterprise and Culture Committee. We have three items on our agenda, or three sub-items, all of which relate to petitions that have been referred to the committee. We have divided the witnesses into three panels. All the witnesses have had to struggle here through varying weather conditions, which is why we have delayed the start of the meeting. Also in attendance is an MSP who is not a member of the committee—Jamie McGrigor.

On panel 1 we have Mrs Marilyn Henderson, who is the secretary of Avich and Kilchrenan community council. Mrs Henderson is here to speak about petition PE493. Mr W R Graham is from Elgin in Moray. I am afraid that I cannot remember the organisation that you represent, Mr Graham, but you are here to speak about petition PE564. Christine Graham MSP is here to speak about petition PE664.

I will ask each member of the panel to make a brief oral submission to supplement the voluminous written evidence that we have received. I will restrict that to no more than five minutes each. After we have heard from the three panel members, I will open the meeting up to committee members to ask questions. Mrs Henderson, would you like to start?

Mrs Marilyn Henderson (Avich and Kilchrenan Community Council): Good afternoon, convener and members of the committee. As you know, I am the secretary of Avich and Kilchrenan community council. Since my petition PE493—on keeping north Argyll free of wind farms—was lodged on 12 April 2002, a lot has happened.

We have one operational wind farm at Beinn Ghlas, with 14 turbines; one wind farm that is under construction at An Suidhe, with 24 turbines, which went to a public inquiry; one at Inverliever, with 22 turbines, which is with the planning department of Argyll and Bute Council; and one

that is being proposed at Carraig Ghael, with between 30 and 50 turbines. The one at Carraig Ghael will be an application under section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989, for which the local council will only be consultees and the community council will have very little say. There is also another wind farm in the pipeline, bringing the total to five wind farms, with 110-plus turbines. All the wind farms are in the one area of Loch Awe and Loch Avich in north Argyll, within a radius of 10 miles from Dalavich.

The Public Petitions Committee wrote to the Scottish Executive, Argyll and Bute Council and VisitScotland, seeking their formal comments on the issues that I raised. In one of its letters to the Public Petitions Committee, VisitScotland stated:

“planning policies should aim to avoid saturation development in the countryside.”

Does this committee agree that five wind farms around the shores of Loch Awe and Loch Avich is, indeed, saturation?

The Scottish Executive's 2003 white paper on public involvement in planning states:

“The condition of our surroundings has a direct impact on the quality of life. Planning supports the safeguarding of our natural heritage and built environment, including the historic and cultural landscape; area regeneration; environmental improvement and restoration; and enabling access to recreational opportunities and open spaces. This brings benefits to local communities and provides opportunities for economic and social progress.”

It goes on to say:

“The planning system supports Scotland's economic prosperity in a number of ways, including ... safeguarding and enhancing the environment—to make sure that new development contributes to a high standard of quality and design and that the natural and built heritage is protected”.

The fact that wind power stations are being built in scenic rural areas surely contradicts what the document says.

I mentioned in my petition how dismayed we are that the power companies are allowed a right of appeal. Third parties do not have a right of appeal if they disagree with a decision by a local authority or by the Executive. That is totally undemocratic.

There is a flagrant contradiction in the Argyll and Bute planning policy. Recently, a planning application for a house was refused because the proposal would have had an adverse impact on the landscape quality and the house would have broken the skyline. What about the effect of wind turbines on the skyline?

In a recent VisitScotland survey, a quarter of tourists said that they would steer clear of an area with a wind development. They said that they came to Scotland for the beautiful scenery and almost all said that they valued the chance to see such scenery, as well as unspoiled nature. Argyll's

rural tourism industry could lose at least £16 million and nearly 749 jobs if more than 17 onshore wind power developments that are planned for the area, five of which would be in the Avich and Kilchrenan ward alone, go ahead. Surely that represents a real risk to an already fragile economy.

At a Scottish Renewables Forum conference, Mr George Harper, Argyll and Bute Council's strategic director of development services, said:

"In light of the significant contribution that tourism makes to our local economy, it is important that developments seeking to realise the renewable energy potential of our area consider the possible effect on the quality and character of our landscape."

One disturbing aspect of the wind turbines is the consequence for birds, especially for protected species. Many raptors, such as golden eagles, ospreys—of which there are five breeding pairs in the area—and hen harriers, frequent the area. They are all protected species, so who takes responsibility for their illegal killing or displacement? Argyll and Bute Council has a habitat enhancement programme in which bird activity is still the subject of on-going monitoring. In a letter to me, the head of planning at Argyll and Bute Council said:

"Until sufficient monitoring data is available it would be premature to assess the efficiency of the measures that have been taken."

As a representative of the community of Avich and Kilchrenan, I ask the committee to think long and hard about the consequences of wind farms on the people of north Argyll and their fragile economy. Industrial wind turbines should have no place in our renowned scenic area, which is unsurpassed throughout Europe.

Mr W R Graham: I thank the committee for giving me this opportunity to speak. I apologise for being responsible for the late start.

The Convener: That was understandable in the circumstances.

14:15

Mr Graham: Unfortunately, the train from Dunfermline was delayed. I understand that the delay was due to problems with electricity coming from the wind farm at Soutra.

A year ago, when I submitted petition PE564, there were five wind farm proposals in the Moray area. There are now 13, all within an 18-mile radius. Principle 22 of the June 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development states:

"Indigenous people and their communities and other local communities have a vital role in environmental management and development because of their knowledge and traditional practices. States should recognize and duly

support their identity, culture and interests and enable their effective participation in the achievement of sustainable development."

Agenda 21 embraces that principle, which is clearly a fundamental of human rights. The current rush by the Government and developers to cover Scotland in wind turbines—in particular, the Scottish Executive's abuse of section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989—is a clear breach of human rights.

In addition, current planning legislation is completely inadequate and clearly favours wind farm developers. For example, the "indigenous people" referred to in the Rio declaration have no right of appeal in planning decisions. Planning departments across Scotland are under enormous pressure—in fact, they are under siege—and are unable to cope with the huge number of applications to build wind farms. The Scottish Executive and the developers are making misleading and, in many cases, false claims about the benefits of wind farms, which are the only commercially available form of renewable energy. The very name "wind farm" highlights that. It conjures up an impression of farming the wind, but what are being proposed all over Scotland are not farms, but industrial electricity generators up to 400ft high, embedded in thousands of tonnes of reinforced concrete, with each site spread over many square kilometres of peat and heather moorland. Miles of access road will cut huge swathes across the moors.

Section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989 allows the Scottish Executive to overrule completely local government decisions, but the clear principle behind the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 is that national Government cannot interfere with decisions that local authorities have made. In addition, if a local authority refuses a planning application for a wind farm, the applicant can appeal and the Scottish Executive reporter can overrule the decision that the local authority has made.

The developer produces an environmental impact assessment, which takes at least 12 months to prepare. When the planning application is submitted, the so-called indigenous people are given 28 days to obtain and read the extremely technical and complicated documents, which are available mostly at remote post offices. Alternatively, they can buy a personal copy at anything up to £250 per copy. That is outside the remit of the average member of the public, even if we assume that they have noticed the small planning application that appears surreptitiously in their local newspaper.

The sole culprit for this malady that threatens Scotland's countryside and heritage is the renewables obligation (Scotland), affectionately

know as ROS. Despite the fact that renewable energy is a devolved issue, Scotland readily adopted the United Kingdom Government's renewable obligation legislation—without, I am led to believe, so much as a debate in the Parliament. That one piece of legislation has given the developers the right to print their own money. It has also given Lewis Macdonald, the Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, the right to ride roughshod over the rights and wishes of the Scottish people. His classic quote in *The Scotsman* on 29 May 2003 sums that up. He said:

“the Environmental message has got through, we must now focus purely on economic gain”.

The question that I ask is, “What message, and to whom has it got through?”

Why is the Government accepting advice from radical groups such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, but ignoring warnings about the folly of wind power from the four main engineering groups? Why is hydroelectricity subject to the climate change levy, which is designed—ironically—to discourage the use of fossil fuels? A jumbo jet produces more carbon dioxide than a large wind farm theoretically saves, but there is no tax on aviation fuel. Is the Government taking energy conservation seriously? If so, why is there VAT on loft insulation? Is the Government really taking carbon dioxide reduction seriously? While Tony Blair has been trumpeting Britain's success, one of his lesser-known departments—the Export Credits Guarantee Department, which reports to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry—has been quietly working since Labour came to power to put £1 billion of public support behind coal-fired power stations in the developing world.

The Convener: Wind up, please.

Mr Graham: I have one small paragraph to go.

Thus for every tonne of carbon dioxide saved by closing power stations in this country, three tonnes are being produced by power stations overseas.

Wind power is neither green nor sustainable, because it has to be backed up by fossil fuel power stations—it is green tokenism. Wind power is a trendy, politically correct non-answer to the needs of an age, which satisfies only the brain washed, the brain dead and the companies that are making a subsidised killing out of it.

The Convener: Finally on this panel, I ask Christine Grahame to speak.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): Thank you very much, convener. I am extremely nervous. I think that every convener should be made to be a witness at some point in their life.

I will set out the context of petition PE664, which concerns Minch moor. The petition is not nimbyist,

but asks the Scottish Parliament to inquire into the planning and environmental issues for proposed wind farm developments and to consider the impact on valued areas of internationally recognised recreational countryside, as my colleague Marilyn Henderson said.

The background is that there are currently about 45 applications for wind farms in the Scottish Borders. There are already two wind farms and they are not a problem. There is a wind farm at Bowbeat and one at Dun law, which is perhaps more commonly known as the Soutra wind farm. The Bowbeat wind farm is the right kind of size and the right kind of project in the right place. It is near Innerleithen and it was planned carefully. It is in a rural area, but it is well screened by trees and it is not offensive to anyone. The Dun law wind farm has been very successful. The area was barren—when one comes up the A68 and sees it, it makes for a dramatic sight. The wind farm there works, as it does its job and it is not displeasing—there are no properties round about.

The proposed wind farm at Minch moor is a different matter. The proposal is for 14 turbines, which will make the site much bigger than the one at Dun law. The turbines at Dun law and Soutra are 65m high; the ones proposed for Minch moor are more than 100m high. There will be 14 of them and they will not be in any old place; they will be sited along the southern upland way. I encourage the committee to take the trouble to go to that part of the southern upland way—I know that some members of the committee are hill walkers—and see what is meant by the statement that the proposal will destroy an amenity.

To give members an idea of how large the proposed turbines will be, I will compare them with the big wheel that was on Princes Street during the recent festivities. The big wheel was 35m high but we are talking about four or five turbines that are 100m high and will be right beside the southern upland way. That is the wrong place and this is the wrong time.

The Enterprise and Culture Committee should be interested—I am sure that it will be—in the business impact of the proposal on a vulnerable economy. The proposal will not only have an impact on Walkerburn, which is typical of many Borders villages and towns in that it is losing its textile and woollen industry and is now coming to rely very much on tourism. Indeed, £1.7 million of public money went into the tourism industry in the Scottish Borders. The annual income from tourism is about £152 million and 6 per cent of the working population of the Borders is employed in tourism. Large sums of money have been spent on upgrading the southern upland way and the associated riding and biking trails.

The Tweed valley forest park stretches from Peebles to Selkirk, roughly along the line of the A72, and the Minch moor has just scooped a high commendation in the dynamic place awards, which recognise excellence in the development of rural environments.

The Scottish Borders Tourist Board is very concerned. I am afraid that the most up-to-date statement that I have from it is a draft response to Scottish Borders Council. No doubt the committee will consider getting in touch with the tourist board. In response to the proposals, the board says:

"The Board is very concerned that this proposed development will destroy this attraction by introducing what is in effect an 'industrial development' to an area which is of high scenic value."

It thinks that the wind farm

"would be entirely out of keeping with the open countryside around."

I should emphasise that the tourist board is not opposed to wind farms per se. We need national planning guidelines so that local authorities can be assisted in what are very difficult decisions to make.

The response from the tourist board also states:

"The Board is particularly concerned about the direct impact the siting of this farm will have on the recreational and tourism use of the Southern Upland Way most specifically for walkers and horse riders."

It continues:

"Of greatest concern amongst Board members was the issue of 'precedent' and 'potential ribbon development'."

Therein lies the rub. Although we know that not all the applications will be successful, what has begun as two or three developments may become a blight on the Borders countryside.

The question is whether the Parliament can sit back and just allow these developments to take place without getting involved in producing national guidelines for the use of local authorities, bearing in mind the input of local communities and the economic impact on those communities if the developments go ahead. I stress that the petition is not opposed to wind farms per se. It is about the fact that, as has been mentioned, local communities feel rather like David against Goliath in trying to fight the commercial companies. Local authorities are in the middle and nobody is helping them to come to informed and structured decisions.

Wind farms will have a huge impact on the environment. They will have a huge impact not just on walks that are taken but on our landscape signature, if I can use that awful expression. One can look up from places such as Walkerburn and see the Lammermuir hills unspoiled. That will not be possible if the development goes ahead.

The Convener: I will start the questioning by asking about tourism, which all three of our witnesses mentioned. Do you have any evidence that tourists to Scotland have been put off? Mrs Henderson referred to the survey, but the survey asked whether visitors would return if they felt that a wind farm had been insensitively sited and detracted from the scenery. Surely that is the crux. If I was asked that question, I would probably say no as well—the question almost invites that answer. Surely the question that has to be answered is whether there is any evidence that the wind farms are insensitively sited to the extent that they will put off tourists. Do our witnesses have any evidence that that is the case?

Mrs Henderson: I expected you to ask me where I got the figures of £16 million and 749 jobs.

The Convener: We may get round to asking about that, but perhaps you could answer the question that I just asked you.

Mrs Henderson: A researcher from Views of Scotland analysed the VisitScotland survey and additional information from the local tourist board, so we presume that our information is correct.

Mr Graham: Up in Moray, we recently fought an application to build a wind farm at Drummur. It was below the 50MW capacity as set out in section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989, so it was dealt with by Moray Council, which voted unanimously against the proposal. The main reason for the recommendation for refusal by the planners—and there is a huge difference between what they say and what the elected members say—was the size and visual impact of the proposed development.

Few people appreciate the scale of the developments. They may have seen them at Soutra and elsewhere, but until they have seen something that is 100m high—the ones in all the proposals in which we are involved are 100m to 120m high—they may not be aware that turbines are visible from 40 miles away. It does not matter where one puts the wind farms; they will be visually intrusive. In the case of Drummur, the development would be at the epicentre of the 12 wind farm sites to which I referred and would be visible from all over Moray.

To go back to your original question on tourism—I am getting there, I promise—Moray, and the area around Drummur in particular, is known for its whisky trail, which attracts a huge number of tourists. A lot of the local businesses, such as small bed and breakfasts, are the backbone of Scottish tourism and have sustainable tourism in terms of return visits. Two witnesses stood up in the Moray Council chambers and showed letters from people who had been coming to the area for up to 15 years.

The witnesses had received a huge number of letters from people who, having been made aware of the proposed development, said that they would look elsewhere for somewhere to go on holiday if the development went ahead—they said that they came to the area purely because of the unspoiled scenery, hills and rivers and because they wanted to get away from industrialised areas. That speaks for itself.

Christine Grahame: I addressed the question in mentioning the contrasting development at Soutra, which has become almost a tourist attraction—there are pull-in places to sit and look at the turbines. However, it is a different matter to put a 100m-high wind farm right by the southern upland way. People do not go there to see wind turbines; they go there to get away from it all. The issue is about horses for courses. We need guidelines for local authorities. Some wind farms may be an asset to the landscape—after all, they are industrial constructions, which can be interesting in the right landscape—but they will not be an asset in a natural, unspoiled area.

14:30

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I think that Christine Grahame has already answered my question, but I will put it to Mr Graham and Mrs Henderson, if I may. I want to clarify where your opposition falls. Are you opposed to renewable energy or to the construction of wind farms? Alternatively, as Christine Grahame said, are you not opposed to wind farms per se, but to specific wind farms, depending on their location and because the planning regime for their situation is inadequate?

Mrs Henderson: People in the communities in Avich and Kilchrenan are in no way opposed to renewable energy, but we are opposed to industrial power stations in the centre of remote rural areas. That is it.

Murdo Fraser: To clarify, are you opposed to all wind farms, or only to those that are in scenic areas?

Mrs Henderson: We are opposed to them in our scenic area.

Murdo Fraser: Perhaps you would not mind them so much if they were in somebody else's area.

Mrs Henderson: We would prefer them to be offshore.

Mr Graham: I love loaded questions. Good afternoon, Murdo; it is nice to say hello again.

Most anti-wind farm campaigners—I do not like being called that, but I suppose that I am one—are

environmentalists, which means that we care about the environment. That sounds like a contradiction but, like many people, I am in favour of sensible renewable energy, which wind farms are not. As I said before, they are cheap green tokenism. Nothing else is available; no other product is on the market for politicians to use to show that they are attempting to comply with the Kyoto agreement, which has now been thrown out of court because the Russians have refused to sign it. The Kyoto agreement, on which the whole wind farm movement is based, is dead in the water. The movement is simply a cheap attempt to show that we are making an effort towards the targets, which have been thrown out by all the major engineering groups because they are deemed to be impossible.

Recently, two front-page stories have appeared on the issue. As we speak, Mr Wilson is turning; he is suggesting that we should stop what we are doing and consider sustaining and keeping what we have. In other words, we should consider where our electricity will come from.

I am against wind farms in principle because they are totally inefficient and are not a reliable source of energy. I hate to keep repeating myself, but Scotland's countryside is far too important to allow short-term, stopgap green tokenism to take over. In five years, we will be stuck with half-completed industrial sites. I mentioned the thousands of tonnes of reinforced concrete that will be used. The promises of the developers to take away the wind farms in 25 years do not include a promise to remove the thousands of tonnes of concrete, which will be left in perpetuity.

I am against wind farms in principle, as are the people with whom I work. If we insist on having them, they should be offshore, but the same problems arise offshore because it is being discovered that the efficiency of offshore wind farms is not much better than that of onshore ones.

Christine Grahame: It would be interesting to see what has happened in countries that have preceded Scotland in wind farm development. I understand that, for instance, the Danish environmental minister described the result of the overdevelopment of onshore turbines in Denmark as environmental blight. At least the Danes have the advantage of manufacturing the damn things, which the Scots do not have—we buy all the engineering from the Danes.

The approach that is taken in the Netherlands is interesting. There, wind farms are treated as industrial developments and so are subject to the planning rigours that apply to industrial developments. I do not think that those criteria are being applied in Scotland.

Apart from having uniformity of guidelines throughout the nation, we must also consider the criteria that are used in identifying wind farms. For some people, they are lovely; for others, they are industrial monstrosities.

The Convener: Some members of the committee will visit Denmark to examine the situation there.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Mr Graham, you highlighted the application for a wind farm at Drummur on the basis of its visual impact and its potential impact on the tourism industry. Would you make the same comments about the wind farm at Aultmore?

You highlighted the number of applications and permissions granted in the vicinity of Elgin. How would you—and Mrs Henderson, who also talked about the large number of applications in one area—respond to the suggestion from the Scottish Renewables Forum that local impacts of wind farm developments do not become national impacts through the establishment of multiple developments? How could planning authorities be assisted by our having a national strategic view about where the developments might be?

Mr Graham: The current planning system is clearly out of its depth on this matter and, therefore, relies heavily on guidance from outside sources. Obviously, one of those outside sources is the Scottish Executive, which, as I am sure that you are all aware, produced national planning policy guideline 6 and planning advice note 45. In both those documents there is a great presumption in favour of renewable energy. However, as wind farms are the only available option in real terms, we can scratch the term “renewable energy” from the documents. Over the next two or three years, the planning departments will be dealing only with wind farms, assuming that we cannot stop the move towards wind farms here and now.

The problem for the planning departments is that they do not have enough expertise or manpower. That means that, when the developer produces an EIA, it is difficult to check it. The council relies on the RSPB to comment on the birdlife and wildlife aspects, and on Scottish Natural Heritage and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency. The latter two bodies are Government quangos and I have considerable evidence to show that they are falling way short of providing the safety measures that are assumed to be in place by people such as yourselves and the ministers who make the relevant decisions. SEPA and SNH are not doing the job that they are supposed to be doing and I have concrete evidence to support my claims that they are merely paying lip service in that regard. Unfortunately, the RSPB is running with the hares and hunting with the hounds at the moment. It is

showing a little bit of interest in the matters that I am discussing, but, as it has a business relationship with Scottish and Southern Electricity, how can it be relied on to produce clear-cut decisions based on the interests of the community and its remit as a preserver of wildlife and birdlife? However, at the end of the day, local councils have to fall back on such organisations. As I said, the EIAs are written by the very people who are developing the wind farms.

Brian Adam: You have expressed concern about a number of applications, but some of those are in Moray and some are in Aberdeenshire. Where there is an undue preponderance of wind farms in an area that crosses local government boundaries, should a strategic view be taken at national level?

Mr Graham: One member of the Scottish Parliament has already attempted to suggest a moratorium until a strategy is in place, but the proposal was pooh-poohed, mostly on the ground that it would affect jobs. That is what the industry has become about. Anybody here who thinks that such developments are about environmental issues should read the stuff that is in the papers at the moment. It is about jobs and building industries. When the decision was made to refuse permission for the wind farm at Drummur, the developer's criticism was that Moray Council's decision would cost jobs. Where would those jobs have been? The jobs would have been in Lewis and Fife, not Moray, but the councillors were criticised for costing Scotland jobs. The industry is not about renewable energy or saving the planet; it is about jobs. That is one of our big problems.

Brian Adam: Will you deal with the question about Drummur versus Aultmore and how such developments would impact on scenic beauty and tourism?

Mr Graham: The visual impact of a development at Aultmore would be exactly the same as that of one at Drummur. If a 400ft tower is built on top of a hill, everyone will see it. Aultmore has exactly the same problems. They are all interlinked.

For the Moray Council hearing, I produced a map to show the cumulative impact of the 12 wind farms by drawing a 10-mile circle around each development. The criterion for cumulative impact that the Scottish Executive laid down in PAN 45—correct me if I am wrong—is 16 miles or 25km. I made the issue even more obvious by drawing simply a 10-mile circle. Those 10-mile circles around the 12 wind farm sites overlapped. The total cumulative effect of Drummur, Aultmore, Clashindarroch and all the other wind farms was enormous, as the whole area was coloured in the colour that I happened to choose at the time. All the various proposed wind farms that I have

mentioned are part of the same cumulative impact problem. They are all part of the same jigsaw. Such is their effect that even removing three of them would still not produce a hole in the colour-coded map as the developments stretch right across the north-east of Scotland.

I produced a similar map for the Highland Council region, when a wind farm application was going through that council. Those 10-mile circles came all the way from Caithness right down to Inverness, into Loch Ness—as you know, three huge wind farms have been proposed for the Loch Ness area—and right across to Peterhead. If I had been allowed to reproduce that map here, you would see the horror story.

Views of Scotland thought that it had the numbers sorted out. We thought that approximately 250 wind farm developments were proposed, but such is the scale of what is going on that the figure is actually about 350. That is what we call a Klondike.

Chris Ballance (South of Scotland) (Green): I want to pick up on what Mr Graham said about the concrete being left behind after the development is removed. My understanding, from speaking to developers, is that most agreements require that the top 2m of concrete be removed, so that the remaining concrete is in a similar condition to the bedrock, which will then be covered with local topsoil. Is that your understanding?

Mr Graham: That may be the case in individual applications, but no general regulation has been laid out that requires that. It depends on what the developers can get away with under the agreement under section 75 of the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997. There is no such commitment in any of the applications that I have seen. I have heard it suggested that that is what would happen, but who will ensure that that happens in 25 years' time?

Chris Ballance: Obviously, that sort of thing would need to be written into the contract.

Mr Graham: It would need to be in the section 75 agreement, but it should be borne in mind that most of the sites are not accessible by anything other than a helicopter or a track vehicle. I cynically suggest that we are in the hands of the developers for that aspect.

Christine Grahame: I understand that each turbine must have an access road, which I presume will stay and will not be covered up. If the scheme went so far, it would damage the landscape permanently.

Chris Ballance: As a South of Scotland MSP, I have heard a lot about the Minch moor campaign, so I was staggered to see on the petition only eight names from the several hundred residents.

14:45

Christine Grahame: I cannot tell you the number off the top of my head, but there are many more signatures.

Chris Ballance: Only one page of signatures has been presented to us. Are you saying that there were several pages?

Christine Grahame: I have not seen the committee's papers.

The Convener: We are trying to save the planet by giving members just one page.

Christine Grahame: Every meeting about Minch moor has been attended by hundreds of people.

Chris Ballance: I wanted to square my understanding with the petition in front of the committee.

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): From a Highland perspective, I will zero in on what Mr Graham said about overstretched councillors and officials who evaluate applications in planning authorities. That is a serious thought. How does that square with the fact that, in recent months, you will recall that officials and councillors have turned down an application for a site in Caithness and have most recently asked for the Beinn Tarsuinn application to be altered? Can that be squared with your statement that councillors and officials are overloaded and are not coping?

Mr Graham: I have been involved only on the fringe of the applications for those two sites by assisting with research and producing maps, so I cannot answer questions on those sites. I know that Moray Council, for example, has drafted in extra help, but as for the calibre of that help, those people have negligible knowledge of renewable energy and the various problems that are associated with it. They admit openly that they are under pressure. Aberdeenshire Council, Highland Council and Moray Council—the three councils with which I have been involved—are seriously overstretched and admit that they do not have the expertise. As I have said, they rely heavily on the information that developers provide in their EIAs to answer many questions.

Mr Stone: You said that expertise was negligible. That, too, is a serious allegation. On what do you base that statement?

Mr Graham: The understanding of the people involved of the local plans obviously does not have shortcomings, but they are not experts in the overall principles of renewable energy and the bigger picture of renewable energy. They are not paid to be experts in that; they are paid to ensure that their local plan is adhered to and that

regulations in town and country planning legislation are adhered to. That is all that they do. They do not have the expertise.

I say with respect that most of the people who produce petitions know more about renewable energy than many councils do. In fact, I supply to my local council much information that I have come across. I have produced a booklet for the council, for which it was grateful. The council does not have the time to do the research that we have done.

Mr Stone: Who makes those statements?

Mr Graham: The situation is just a fact.

Mr Stone: Where are you getting the information from?

Mr Graham: I have been involved in the matter for a little over three years, during which I have spoken to many council planning department officials and elected members. They are learning quickly. The particular problem is that elected members have no idea about the bigger picture. In the past three years, I have taken steps that include forming a political party at the previous election to raise public awareness—members probably remember that. The public, including elected members of councils, are totally ignorant—I do not mean that unkindly—of what is going on with wind farms and renewable energy. That is one of the problems. That is why the Government surveys come out with rosy figures. People decide the answer that they want before they ask a loaded question—they write the questionnaire to suit the answers that they want. If somebody has been led to believe that wind farms will be beneficial for the environment and for our children—those are the arguments that are put forward—nine times out of 10, people agree with them out of ignorance. That is one of the big issues.

Christine Grahame: I am not anti-Borders Council. Borders Council is holding a seminar to learn about wind farms, but it needs assistance, as do other councils. That is why the petition to which I speak looks for national guidelines to help councils. It is not a case of taking democracy away from councils, but this is a large issue for them to deal with and it is gathering speed. Borders Council is holding a teach-in session to learn about wind farms, but that is being done in a patchwork fashion throughout Scotland. We require something to be done at national level.

Mr Stone: Mr Graham suggests that, ultimately, neither the councils nor the officials have the ability to control the situation—for no bad reason. Do you associate yourself with those remarks or are you putting clear blue water between you?

Christine Grahame: I thought that it was clear that I am supportive of Borders Council, which is

holding teach-in sessions about wind farm developments and all related issues of its own volition. That is commendable, but it shows that there is a requirement for some national assistance to local authorities—national guidelines and so on—because it does not matter whether a development is within a local authority boundary, it can affect Scotland nationally. Although the proposed site on the southern upland way happens to be in the Borders, it could have been anywhere. However, it is in the Borders and it is a national matter. Having said that, members of Borders Council must have thought it necessary to have a teach-in session to educate themselves.

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I declare an interest in that I live on Loch Aweside close to some of the proposed wind farm sites that have been spoken about. I am not a registered objector to any of them. In fact, I look at one that is about 8 miles away above the village of Taynult. It does not seem to cause a great problem to many people. Having said that, the height of the turbines at that development is half that of the developments that are proposed to go ahead elsewhere.

Mr Graham implied that SNH was not doing its job properly. My questions to SNH about whether wind farms will be allowed in the national parks have so far met with no definite answers, but instead a presumption that they will not go ahead in national parks. Will the panel comment on that? Can Mrs Henderson tell me whether she knows what the Forestry Commission policy is with regard to having wind farms on its ground?

Mrs Henderson: We have had on-going correspondence with the Forestry Commission since the Inverliever application was lodged with the planning department. I wanted to have a designated core path through Inverliever forest and the Forestry Commission said that it could not say yes or no until the application for Inverliever was either passed or not. The Forestry Commission is waiting for the land to be released.

I am having an argument with the Forestry Commission because the land belongs to the people of Scotland and it wants to use it for a wind factory through which people cannot walk. The argument continues until we know about the Inverliever application. I do not know whether that answers your question, but the Forestry Commission is not helpful to the people in our area.

Mike Watson (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): Mrs Henderson, in your correspondence you were less than complimentary about how Argyll and Bute Council operates. I understand that to some extent. However, Argyll and Bute Council said in a letter to the Public Petitions Committee in May 2002, which I think is the most up-to-date letter that we have from the council:

"We are in favour of all forms of renewable energy sources development in Argyll, as evidenced in our structure plan policies."

That seems to jar somewhat with the fact that tourism is very important in Argyll and Bute, as you mentioned earlier. I am not asking you to speak for the council, but will you comment on that statement? Have you had any discussions with the council about tourism? The council's policy on renewable energy does not appear to take tourism into account.

Mrs Henderson: No, it definitely does not take tourism into account. Argyll and Bute Council tends to favour the Vestas factory in Machrihanish, which employs nearly 200 people. The council is concerned only about that; it is not at all concerned about the tourism industry.

Mike Watson: I know from personal experience that the council is concerned about tourism. However, that appears to jar with the statement in the letter in a rather menacing fashion. Perhaps we should take the matter up with the council at some point.

VisitScotland carried out a survey, the results of which were inconclusive. Has the community council had any contact with or written to VisitScotland to raise its concerns about the application?

Mrs Henderson: No, we did not write to VisitScotland. You will remember that its survey was carried out as a result of my appearance before the Public Petitions Committee two years ago. The figures that I quoted, as I said, came from a researcher for Views of Scotland.

Mike Watson: Thank you.

Mr Graham, in your opening remarks you accused the Executive of abusing section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989. What did you mean by that? In what way do you think that the Executive is operating outwith or contrary to the spirit of the 1989 act?

Mr Graham: First, I want to make it quite clear that any observations that I have made about local councils have in no way been intended to criticise the councils themselves, but rather have been about the councils' remit and lack of control. I am critical of the fact that the councils' hands are tied by the current planning regulations.

I am sorry—I have lost track of your question.

Mike Watson: It was about the abuse of section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989.

Mr Graham: The application of section 36 represents the crux of much of what is going on in Scotland. It is a rather bizarre regulation, which was not written with intermittent renewable energy in mind, but was intended to apply to major

electrical plants, such as nuclear and coal-powered plants. However, it has been applied to wind farm applications.

Developers consider the local situation and if they think that they have a chance of getting a wind farm application accepted, because a local council is very pro wind farms, they apply for consent for a development with a capacity of less than 50MW. That happens all the time. However, if they expect the council to give them a rough ride, they jump over the 50MW level, in the full knowledge that even if the council is not keen on the idea, the final decision on a development of that capacity rests with the Scottish Executive, which as we all know, is desperate to try to meet the ridiculous targets that have been set for Scotland and welcomes applications to build giant wind farms.

That is what happened in the case of the Robin rigg development in the Solway firth. The committee might not have detailed knowledge of that application, but I have some idea about what went on. The wind farm site is on the border between England and Scotland and the councils north and south of the border objected to the development and voted against it. Those objections were overridden by Lewis Macdonald, who made the decision to go ahead under section 36.

However, there is a catch with the Robin rigg development. Under the section 36 provisions, if a local council decides that it does not want the application, there is automatically a public inquiry. In the case of Robin rigg, Dumfries and Galloway Council and the other council south of the border—I am not quite sure of its name—were told that they could not have a public inquiry because the installation was offshore. As a result, we had a catch-22 situation, because the offshore regulations preclude any agreement under section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989.

15:00

Mike Watson: If the law precludes such an agreement, what happened was not abuse of the law. Surely the term "abuse" is quite strong in this respect. After all, it suggests that the law is being contravened or circumvented.

Mr Graham: If you do not think that Robin rigg is a particularly good example, let me give you an example that is somewhat closer to home for me. This time last year, I submitted a petition containing 1,000 signatures from people who were very concerned about the Cairn Uish and Paul's Hill installations, both of which were subject to section 36 provisions. It was the first time that Moray Council had ever come across wind farms in any capacity, and, in its naivety, it did not object

to the two applications because it had been led to believe that it had a responsibility to contribute to the national cry for renewable energy.

However, many people, including the 1,000 people who signed the petition, did object to the installations. Those signatures represent a microcosm of public feeling. I stood outside Asda for eight days and got 1,000 people to say that they were concerned about the proposals and wanted a public inquiry. With the help of two or three more people, I could have collected 10,000 signatures and I suggest that Lewis Macdonald would not have blinked if I had produced 20,000.

The applications for those wind farms went through on the nod. I have the paperwork that shows why they should not have been approved. There was collusion; indeed, there is clear evidence that the developer falsified claims. I eventually received correspondence thanking me and then apologising that my 1,000-signature petition had not been made available to the minister because of an administrative error. That illustrates the dealings that I have had with the Scottish Executive.

When the Views of Scotland group asked Ben Maguire—one of the wheelers and dealers in the Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department's energy division—why there was no renewable energy strategy in Scotland, he replied that it would handicap developers and landowners. Those are the problems we face. As a result, although my use of the word "abuse" might cause offence, it is fairly accurate. Section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989 is being abused by developers and by politicians who want the policy to go down this particular road.

Mike Watson: Well, we cannot take that matter any further at the moment.

In your introduction, you made it quite clear that you are opposed to all wind farm development anywhere, at any time. However, you also said that you are unhappy with the use of fossil fuel-fired energy and mentioned that you are an environmentalist, which makes me assume—please tell me if I am wrong—that you are against nuclear energy. What form of energy are you comfortable with and how are we to meet Scotland's energy needs in the years to come if we do not resort to wind farms or other renewable energy sources?

Mr Graham: Before I answer that question, I should make it clear that wind farms will not contribute at all to the longevity of our electricity supply. The fact that wind farms cannot possibly keep the lights on must be the basis of this discussion. As a result, we have to examine how we can secure our electricity supply.

Earlier, I waved around certain newspaper

headlines. I think that ministers and those who make decisions are quickly coming to the realisation that we have a major problem with the security of supply. We can rely only on our gas and nuclear supplies. However, the gas is going to run out. All the engineering authorities have said that if we rely on gas, we will have to start importing it from politically unstable countries. If we want the lights to stay on, where will we find our supplies? I come back to nuclear energy which, according to the British Wind Energy Association and others, makes me pro-nuclear. I am not pro-nuclear. Like the rest of the people in the chamber, I have horrors about the prospect of another Chernobyl. However, we need to be sensible: renewable sources will certainly not provide a large amount of our electricity over the next 10 years. I am in favour of keeping the lights on, but that will not happen if we rely on renewable energy.

The Convener: I have a general point about strategy, to which Mr Graham, Christine Grahame and, I believe, Mrs Henderson referred, although I am not sure whether they were referring to the same strategy. Will one of you indicate what a strategy would look like and how it would inform the local decisions that we are discussing? The Executive's position is that NPPG 6 and PAN 45 are fine and that local authorities have all the planning guidance that they need, so there is a framework within which local authorities can make the decisions that are delegated to them. What would the strategy to which you referred be and why would it, I presume, rule out the wind farms to which you object? Which wind farms—if any—would the strategy allow?

Christine Grahame: That is like being asked to write an end-of-term essay. I would have preferred early notice of having to produce a complete strategy.

The Convener: The question is reasonable. People have said that we must have a strategy so I want to know what a strategy would add to local councils' information and what kind of wind farm proposals councils would accept and reject having been informed by such a strategy.

Christine Grahame: I can speak only about the issues that I have discussed. The first point is about how to designate a national environmentally sensitive area or an area that is a national natural asset. How do we identify such areas? Have we ever done that? We have two national parks, but many beautiful places are not national parks and are not protected. How do we get criteria that would provide guidelines for local authorities? How do we give local councils guidelines for determining criteria to assess the national and local economic impact of a wind farm development and to allow a proper analysis at local level?

We should also consider examples and models elsewhere. As I said, other nations are much further down the road than we are. We should examine how they tackle the wind farm issue nationally and how they allow local decision making. Within the development of a strategy, there should also be room for proper consultation with local communities. We should leave aside third-party planning appeal rights in the meantime—they may or may not come—but there should be proper and meaningful consultation with local communities, instead of people simply giving them a presentation, listening to their objections and then going off into another room to deal with the matter. Wind farms will affect a local community's environment. I have referred to the roads that provide access for the servicing of turbines and to power lines. It is not as simple as putting up wind farms and taking them down again.

I have given examples of criteria. By putting them together, we could have criteria on which strategic decisions could be based. I could perhaps develop the criteria and draft something, if I were given a couple of days to do so, but the general idea is that local authorities should have a package that they can share with local communities to assist them in decisions, instead of having to deal with issues one application at a time. Almost a little snowstorm of applications is being made and, I inform Jamie Stone, local authorities are being overwhelmed. They have to catch up with the game, while the commercial operators are ahead of the game.

In a political, although not party-political, sense, Scotland is regarded as a soft target because we are not taking a serious national look at wind farms so people think that they should get the applications in and proceed with them now. We should step back and consider what is a serious issue for Scotland's economy in the long term. We must assess what benefits wind farms have for Scotland and for Scotland's local communities.

I do not know whether I have properly answered the convener's question, but I will do so at another time.

The Convener: Does anyone want to add anything?

Mr Graham: The need for a strategy is twofold. None of us here can even begin to answer the question, which was a bit loaded. If I had been asked to produce a strategy before the meeting, I would have done so.

It is important to sort out the basics. Our problem is that the politicians set themselves unachievable targets and do not want to back down. I realise that anti-wind farm campaigners, including me, will not be able to change that

situation, but until it is understood why that is the politicians' position, I will continue to ask the question that I asked at the beginning, which is why the politicians listen to Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth Scotland but ignore the Royal Academy of Engineering, the Institution of Chemical Engineers, the Institution of Electrical Engineers and, more recently, the Institution of Civil Engineers.

Those are the four major bodies on which industry in Great Britain is built. They produce the information to help ministers to make decisions. Why are ministers ignoring their advice? It is so obvious that the targets are totally unachievable. Even if they were achievable, the intermittency of wind would not provide us with a reliable electricity supply.

The whole thing is underpinned by the targets that have been set. Christine Grahame mentioned the weakness in the Scottish planning system. The British Wind Energy Association is the organisation that represents all the developers, and also advises the Government, which is a frightening, almost incestuous, loop as far as I am concerned. The BWEA has said that it is finding it more difficult to get planning permission in England and Wales and admits that it is targeting Scotland. If I could show you the sites on the map that I keep talking about, you would see what I mean when I say that Scotland is being targeted because of the loopholes.

The Convener: As there are no further questions, I thank the witnesses for their evidence. Perhaps they could stay where they are. It would be better not to start playing musical chairs.

We move on to our second panel, to deal with two petitions. We have with us members of the Skye Windfarm Action Group, who will give evidence on petition PE559. They are Mr John Hodgson and Mr Ben Palmer. For petition PE615, we have with us Mr Peter Hodgson—I do not know whether he is related to the other Mr Hodgson. I ask each of the two groups to speak for no longer than five minutes about their particular petition and then we will ask questions.

Mr John B P Hodgson (Skye Windfarm Action Group): The Hodgsons are the lost tribe of Scotland.

Please accept my apologies for any overlap with the previous speakers.

The Convener: If you think that we have heard it before, please do not say it again.

Mr John Hodgson: I am chairman of the Skye Windfarm Action Group. We oppose big-business wind power station developments. I am here today because we believe that the Executive has put the cart before the horse. It is planning to splatter

Scotland's landscape with turbines the size of football pitches without any strategic assessment of the effect that they will have.

The current two-tiered policy for determining wind farm applications, based on whether they will generate above or below 50MW, totally ignores the cumulative impact for Scotland. That clearly shows that there is no strategy. In addition, the under-resourced planning system is being stretched to breaking point by the sheer quantity and complexity of EIA applications. That is a recipe for disaster.

Research indicates that turbines, particularly those that are the size of 30-storey office blocks, pose a threat to the social and economic fabric and the health of communities. Tourism is a substantial source of rural employment and a major contributor to the Scottish economy. A drop in visitor numbers will result in business losses. How many jobs will be lost? How many businesses will go bankrupt? Who will pay compensation?

Local amenity will be severely damaged by noise and visual intrusion, resulting in major falls in property prices. That fact was confirmed by a recent court case in Cumbria. Noise has severe implications for health. There is increasing evidence of that, and I refer specifically to wind farm noise. Community division and discord are fostered because the developments create winners and losers. Is that the way to create sustainable rural communities?

Unbelievably, many wind farms are planned for our peat bogs, which act as natural carbon stores. The destruction of that habitat will result in centuries of stored carbon being released back into the atmosphere. What effect will that have on carbon dioxide emissions?

Wind farms also seriously threaten protected birds. For example, a developer on Skye has suggested that 27 turbines could kill between 20 and 40 eagles over the life of the project. If that is multiplied over the rest of Scotland, what will the result be? Will those endangered species even survive?

Those are just examples of important national questions that can be answered only by a strategic environmental assessment, as happens in the case of offshore developments in England. Why does the Executive prevaricate in the case of onshore wind in Scotland? Is it afraid that its energy policy might be revealed to all as unsustainable and environmentally damaging? SWAG urges the Executive to undertake a full assessment of the effects of turbines on the health and welfare of its citizens. It must not impose turbines on communities before that assessment is completed and the full impact is known.

I will now hand over to my fellow director Ben Palmer, who has done some important research into the survey on public attitudes to wind farms.

15:15

The Convener: I would be grateful if you could restrain yourself to a couple of minutes, Mr Palmer.

Mr Ben Palmer (Skye Windfarm Action Group): We regularly hear from the supporters of the wind industry how Scottish people who live near wind farms want more. The source of that myth is the MORI poll that was commissioned by the Scottish Executive, and I put it to the committee that nothing could be further from the truth. The format of the questions and the manner in which they were weighted meant that the opinion of rural Scotland was never going to count—I repeat, never. A small geographical area south of Edinburgh and Glasgow predetermined the result for all of Scotland. For example, north of Edinburgh and Glasgow, only eight interviews were conducted with people who lived within 5km of a wind farm. After weighting, that counted for less than one opinion—one opinion to cover what is the geographical majority of Scotland.

People were asked about the damaging effect on local businesses and house prices. The answers to those questions failed to appear in the final report. Why? What has the Executive got to hide? When asking about an increase in the size of a local wind farm, it was not mentioned that the current height of turbines approaches the height of the towers on the Forth bridge. When referring to future power generation, hydro was completely ignored. Hydro is by far the largest renewable energy source in Scotland. Tidal power, which is the only renewable source that is capable of supplying large quantities of power 24 hours a day, was also overlooked. That only served to perpetuate the myth that, other than coal or nuclear, the only choice is wind.

The poll is typical of the misinformation that is being used in support of a profit-driven rush for wind power and helps to show the urgent need for a strategic plan. Meanwhile, we call for an immediate moratorium on all wind farm developments in Scotland.

Mr Peter Hodgson: Let me first of all say that I am no relation to John Hodgson.

I emphasise that I am perhaps greener than the Green party and friendlier than Friends of the Earth. I fully support renewable energy, but only when there are demonstrable benefits. Industry is being taxed and wind farms are being subsidised under false pretences. A climate change levy is imposed on industry by the Department of Trade and Industry to “reduce emissions”, in the

department's words. Conversely, power companies get subsidies based on renewables obligation certificates and the amount of power that is produced from renewable sources.

Most people believe that all renewable energy causes less pollution and less depletion of finite resources; that it will replace nuclear power; and, perhaps, that costs will eventually be at least in line with expendable fuel. In other words, people believe that there is a relationship between "renewable" and "green".

Some renewable energy technologies achieve some or all of those goals. Hydro reduces emissions in direct proportion to the electricity generated. Biofuels also reduce emissions in proportion to generation, but are penalised when their use of gas rises above 10 per cent. However, wind farms, in spite of not reducing emissions, suffer no penalties at all.

Members will all know that wind farms do not generate when there is little wind, but they also do not generate when there is too much wind. However, those are not the main problems. Even when they are generating, the amount of power varies widely and continuously with wind speed, and because the national grid needs continually to balance input with output—there can be neither too much nor too little—fossil fuels have to be kept online. Their use must be synchronised, with fuel being burned continuously and power being fed into the grid. Virtually no reduction in emissions is achieved, which is contrary to the provisions of the climate change levy, and there is an increased cost due to the dualling of supplies and the extra, large grid power lines.

A subsidy through renewables obligation certificates of about 300 per cent is awarded alike to all renewables, based not on effectiveness but solely on the quantity of energy produced. No wonder power companies choose wind farms to get at that subsidy, because they are cheap, easy to erect and have no comeback. ROCs are financed from the CCL which, it must be remembered, is imposed to reduce emissions.

We have performance measures for health care—the national health service is measured not on the number of hospitals, but on performance. The performance of all forms of renewable energy should be rewarded not on the basis of the amount of energy produced, but on effectiveness. That would encourage renewable technologies that genuinely reduce emissions, create more up-market jobs and protect existing Scottish jobs through lower energy costs.

The Convener: I want to pick up on one thing that John Hodgson said. You said that you are against big wind farms developed by big business. I was at a loss to see the relevance of that,

because if the wind farm is scenically or environmentally disastrous, does it matter what kind of business developed it, or whether the state developed it for that matter?

Mr John Hodgson: I am thinking particularly of the new breed of turbine. As Bob Graham said, they will be 300ft or 400ft high, or higher. In Skye and other parts of north Scotland, they will be plastered on the side of ridges, some of which are already 1,000ft high. They will desecrate the landscape.

It could be argued that one could have two or three small turbines tucked away somewhere, which could benefit a local community and a local community alone. They would not obscure the landscape, because they could be tucked away somewhere, and they would be vastly smaller. They could have a local economic benefit and would not mar the landscape.

Given previous questions, I suggest that not enough money is being put into tidal power, for example. Professor Ian Bryden of the Robert Gordon University said a year or two ago that the Pentland firth could produce all of Scotland's electricity needs by tidal power. Why is more money not being put into that, which, I understand—and I am not a great technician—would be considerably less environmentally damaging? Indeed, it would be reasonably environmentally friendly.

A good argument could be made for local wind farms, but I say no to big, monstrous machines that only benefit landowners and big companies, desecrate the landscape and ruin village economies.

The Convener: I can understand why people have environmental objections to wind farms, but I wonder whether we do not have groups with environmental objections to other renewable energy sources, such as tidal power, simply because the sources have not reached a particular stage of development. I am not sure exactly how machines would be skewed across the Pentland firth, but I wonder what effect people might eventually claim they have on the fish or sea mammal populations.

Mr Palmer: My history is in engineering, although these days I am in the tourism business. I have spent a lot of time working offshore and am very familiar with what happens subsea. The basic reason why tidal power is not being developed in great quantities is that it is the least profitable form of renewable energy. The weekend before last, I read a report that indicated that tidal power yields a profit of about 4 per cent, compared with 14 to 17 per cent profit from wind farms. At the moment, the issue is straight finances.

From an engineering point of view, any form of

tidal power—whether it be tidal stream or power based on the rise and fall of the tide—is much more efficient than wind power. Water is dense, but wind is not. The higher one goes, the less dense wind is. Wind is a very inefficient way of producing energy. Peterhead power station produces 1,100MW or 1,200MW and covers half a dozen acres. To generate the same amount of wind power, we would need 500 or 600 turbines covering hundreds of thousands of acres. That is not an efficient use of land.

The Convener: That is not the point that I was making. We have already received evidence that suggests that we need to put more incentives in the way of people who want to develop tidal or wave power, before it becomes commercially attractive for them to do so. The point that I was making was that, were that to happen, we would see a raft—if that is the right word—of environmental objections to what tidal stations were doing to fish or sea mammals.

Mr Palmer: Tidal stream power is one of the best forms of renewable energy, because it is totally predictable—week in, week out, month in, month out, every year—and output can be predicted well ahead. I assure the committee from my experience that tidal stream power generators are very simple to install and do zero environmental damage. I have worked a great deal with subsea equipment. When we put a piece of tidal stream power equipment on the seabed, there is no damage. In fact, the equipment attracts fish, rather than turning them into mincemeat. Because water is dense, it generates a great deal of power. Turbines do not have to be driven terribly fast and there are hardly any of them. Tidal barrages are a different story. The facility of which I am aware is at La Rance, in France, which has been working for many years, very efficiently. There would probably be a big raft of objections to such facilities, but they do work.

Mr John Hodgson: That is the reason why we need a strategic environmental assessment—so that we can determine which forms of energy are best and where facilities should be sited, taking everything into account. That is why we are calling for such an assessment. At the moment, there is no strategy. All that is needed is a willing landlord, proximity to the grid and a hugely subsidised company to come in.

The Convener: Is not one of the difficulties with such an assessment that we will discover the problems with wind farms or the veracity of the claims that are made for and against them only once we have built them? We will not find out whether tourists will be put off, whether house prices will go up or down or whether golden eagles will be killed until we have some of the damned things up.

Mr Palmer: Not at all. In 2002 I carried out a survey of more than 1,000 tourists and asked them about wind turbines. I am from the Isle of Skye, which receives a large number of visitors from Germany and Holland, countries that have many wind turbines. The last thing that they want to come to see is wind turbines. Specifically, I remember one Dutch couple on a television programme who, when turbines were mentioned, said that they would go where there are no turbines. People come to Scotland, particularly the rural areas of northern Scotland outside the central belt, for our unspoiled land and seascapes. They do not come to see our finest landscapes industrialised. If that happens, they will not come—it is as simple as that.

Mr Peter Hodgson: Convener, surely your comment emphasises the fact that we should carry out research before we go too far down the line on any one form of energy. There could be 450 wind farms in Scotland, covering visually about 70 per cent of the Scottish countryside, as well as offshore sites that could be polluted for fishing and migrating birds, without our having an alternative and without any research having been done on their effect. That emphasises the need for us to do more now to consider other systems.

Murdo Fraser: I would like John Hodgson to clarify something for me. Are you saying that you are not against all wind farms but would accept some wind farms provided that they were not located in areas of high scenic or tourism value?

15:30

Mr John Hodgson: First, let me say that I do not believe that wind farms are the most efficient means of producing renewable energy. If they have to be created, they should be situated where they will not be an environmental disaster. However, I am against big wind farms simply because I believe that, if a case had to be made for having wind farms at all, a good case could be made for having a very small number of very small turbines that would be of economic benefit to a community, but would not be detrimental to the environment, visual amenity and noise levels because the local community could decide where they should be positioned.

I am against the monstrous new turbines and the huge wind farms that are being planned for parts of Scotland in which tourism is the mainstay of the local economy.

Murdo Fraser: I ask the same question of Peter Hodgson.

Mr Peter Hodgson: I am against all turbines that are connected to the national grid or are interconnected fairly locally. Quite honestly, the place for wind turbines is in an isolated farm or

hamlet in which the only other source of power might be a diesel generator. In such a place, a small turbine—perhaps 20ft at maximum in diameter—could make good use of the wind. However, a huge amount of money will be paid to companies if we connect the wind farms to the national grid and there exists the potential for a national disaster. Two years ago, Denmark nearly had what is called a brownout. It produced too much energy and had to give it away to Norway, Germany and so on. A brownout is disastrous because it collapses the entire system. That is the kind of scenario that Britain could end up in. Everyone is familiar with blackouts, which could occur easily in the sort of uncontrolled scenario that I am describing.

I object to almost all wind farms. I would be prepared to accept one or two here and there.

Mr John Hodgson: I would like to add something to my answer. People seem to forget that, assuming that we were to go ahead and build these monstrous wind farms in the north of Scotland, the system would have to be capable of taking the power to where it is required. That means that we will have not only wind turbines, but huge and monstrous new breeds of pylons that will also mar the countryside. I would not go on holiday where there were huge pylons and turbines; I want to walk ridges and see the countryside.

Murdo Fraser: John Hodgson said in his opening remarks that the planning system was under-resourced, which ties in with what Mr Graham said earlier. Can you give us some evidence of that under-resourcing? I should say that I recall seeing a submission from the Scottish Renewables Forum, which comes at this argument from the other side of the fence, but which also argued that the planning departments are under-resourced.

Mr John Hodgson: I am glad that you asked that question. In September last year, I addressed a renewable energy planning conference in Glasgow. As you might imagine, most of the speakers were planners.

It was consistently pointed out in private conversations and by speakers that planning departments are under-resourced and do not have the appropriate expertise or knowledge; that there were inconsistencies in wind-farm applications; that the EIAs could not be fully understood and so on. I could go on forever. I repeat: planners at a planning conference on renewable energy were saying that they are under-resourced and that, basically, they do not have the necessary knowledge. Perhaps they will acquire that as time goes on; meanwhile, people like us suffer.

Mr McGrigor: In his opening remarks, Mr John

Hodgson said that he was worried about the effect of the turbines on health. Will you expand a bit more on that point? For example, I know that a Dr Harry in Cornwall has produced a paper on the subject. Will you highlight some of the findings of that research and tell us what people have to worry about? After all, the situation is worrying for those who live close to the turbines.

Mr John Hodgson: Dr Harry and another doctor—who I believe is called Dr Manley—have carried out a lot of research into this subject. I think that the research shows that 93 per cent of people who live in close proximity to turbines suffer from illnesses and conditions such as nausea and sleeplessness and have nervous dispositions and so on. Moreover, shadow-flicker was affecting people who might be susceptible to epilepsy. That report was given a great deal of publicity in the papers three or four days ago.

We are concerned that not enough research has been carried out. For example, a report from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has stated that infrasound from wind turbines could cause some of the conditions that Dr Harry referred to. It does not take much to realise that sleeplessness and other conditions can affect one's immune system, which can lead to other conditions. That should be of great concern to the Executive and, in particular, to Mr Chisholm. Although we have written to Mr Chisholm a great deal on this subject, he sends back letters in which he acknowledges our concerns but refuses point blank to answer any questions on the matter.

I can suggest only that members read Dr Harry's report. In fact, I asked for a copy of it to be circulated to committee members. I hope that it was.

The Convener: Yes, it was.

Mr John Hodgson: Dr Harry's report also refers to the Groningen report that was published by a Dutch university, the DEFRA report and so on. As a result, a lot of evidence shows that turbines are bad for people's health, but the Executive has not done enough to examine the matter, nor does it take it seriously enough. After all, prevention is better than cure.

Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab): I want to check some facts. Did you say that no strategic environment assessment was carried out or did you say that there were there no strategic guidelines at all?

Mr John Hodgson: No strategic environmental assessment has been carried out for Scotland as a whole, even though that is required under the terms that were agreed at the Rio conference in 1992.

Christine May: In which case, do you agree that any national planning guidelines must balance environmental, social, industrial and other considerations?

Mr John Hodgson: Yes, of course.

Christine May: In that case, should the strategic environmental assessment be subordinate to national planning guidelines or should it take precedence over them?

Mr John Hodgson: When you say guidelines, are you referring to—

Christine May: I am sorry. I mean the national planning framework.

Mr John Hodgson: So are you referring specifically to the Executive's targets of 18 per cent of energy from renewables by 2010 and 40 per cent by 2020?

Christine May: Yes.

Mr John Hodgson: Someone—I think that it was Christine Grahame—already said that those targets are entirely unrealistic. How can they be realistic if the Executive does not know what types of renewable energy will produce what, how the mix-and-match will operate and so on? The blunt answer to the question is no. The strategic environmental assessment should take precedence over the framework. Indeed, those targets should form part of the strategic environmental assessment to find out whether they can be achieved. If they cannot be achieved, the Executive ought to go back to the drawing board. It is all very well to come up with a number, but how are we going to get to that number? No one has said and no one knows; people leave it to the marketplace to decide. That brings me back to what I said earlier.

Christine May: You seem to be saying that the targets are utterly unrealistic and unachievable. Can you suggest targets that would be achievable? What representations did you or others make to Government at the time?

Mr John Hodgson: I feel, as Christine Grahame did earlier, that I would have liked to have notice of that question.

Christine May: I would be happy to receive an answer later, if you wish.

Mr John Hodgson: I am not sure that I can give you a straight answer, but Dr Jeremy Carter, who is one of our main researchers, may be able to answer that far better than I could.

Dr Jeremy Carter (Skye Windfarm Action Group): The whole point of strategic assessment is to define targets. We do not have enough information to set any targets and neither, we believe, does the Executive. We believe that the

Executive must study the whole matter and must examine from a strategic point of view the environmental costs and benefits of all the technologies with all their pros and cons. The Executive must look at the whole picture in the round as part of a strategic environmental assessment before it decides on targets, methods and guidelines. It is as simple as that.

Christine May: In the meantime, are you suggesting that there should be a complete moratorium, not just on wind farms, but on all other forms of renewable energy?

Dr Carter: We have very serious concerns that by putting the cart before the horse and not looking before we leap, we will just continue to do damage. We thought that sustainable development was about doing something different, rather than about digging the hole deeper.

Christine May: Do all three witnesses agree that there should be a complete moratorium, not just on wind farms but on all other forms of renewable energy, until the environmental assessment is done?

Mr Palmer: No, I do not. I agree that there should be a complete moratorium on wind farms, but not on all other forms of renewable energy. I firmly believe that we must start a programme for tidal development now. That could take 10 or 20 years, but if we do not start now we are looking at blackouts happening before very long.

It is not the percentage target for renewable energy per se that is the problem. The underlying problem is the cutting of emissions. To date, no matter how many wind farms we have, there is not a shred of evidence to suggest that they have cut any measurable amount of emissions, basically because they need spinning back-up. We should be looking seriously at where the emissions come from; they do not come only from electricity. Every one of us who came here by car is contributing to emissions. We need to look at the root problem.

We also need to ask whether there is a problem, because there are so many alarmist theories about global warming and climate change. Is global warming just a blip? Do we have a problem or is it green spin and propaganda that will allow companies to make money? We have to define the problem first and then assess what we are going to do about it. At the moment, that is not happening. Profit-motivated companies are deciding what the problem is and they are giving us the answer.

Christine May: I have two other brief questions on wind farms, but perhaps I should deal with the question on tidal energy first. Do you accept that the experimental module that was towed north around Christmas time represents at least part of the Executive's investment in helping to develop

tidal power, and would you encourage the Executive to make further investment in tidal power?

Secondly, John Hodgson said that the Skye wind farm could kill 20 to 30 eagles. Where did you get that figure from and what is the evidence for it from other countries? Perhaps we can talk about the investment in tidal power first.

Mr Peter Hodgson: I agree with Ben Palmer that we should not create a moratorium on all renewable energy. In effect, that is what is happening now because only wind farms are being produced. We have no evidence on the effect of other forms of renewable energy. They may be harmful, but if we delay trying them out, perhaps only on a small scale, we will never know.

15:45

Christine May: What about the Executive's consultation on biomass energy and energy crops?

Mr Peter Hodgson: I have a response from the Scottish Executive to our petition, which states that it has no control over the forms of renewable energy that producers propose. The Executive does not have a strategy for producing other forms of renewable energy; the strategy is to use whatever is most beneficial economically to the developers.

Christine May: What about the consultation on energy crops and biomass?

Mr Peter Hodgson: There is no point in a consultation if, at the end of the day, the Scottish Executive does not have the necessary legislation or incentive to carry through the results.

Christine May: You have argued all along that the Executive should do nothing without evidence, but you now seem to be saying that it should not look for evidence.

Mr Peter Hodgson: I am not saying that at all. I am saying that financial incentives should be in place now to carry out—

Christine May: Should they be in place without any evidence?

Mr Peter Hodgson: If necessary, yes. It would do no harm to introduce micro-installations in order to make progress. At present, in spite of what you may think, we are making no progress on sustainable renewable energy. The target should not be for 10 or 20 per cent penetration of the market, but for emissions reduction. Renewable energy that does not achieve anything is useless.

Mr John Hodgson: I have just been passed a note. We do not want a moratorium on research

and development, but on deployment, if that makes sense.

Christine May: It makes sense, although I am not sure that I agree with it.

Mr John Hodgson: The point about the eagles comes from the developer's EIA. Dr Carter will speak about that.

Dr Carter: We have a copy of the confidential annex to the Edinbane wind farm environmental impact assessment, which discusses the observations of eagles in the area. In the 60 hours of observations, 67 flights by eagles were observed, which is extremely high. In more than 10 per cent of the observation period, either golden eagles or sea eagles were in flight.

Christine May: I am sorry, but I am trying to ask about the evidence that you have from other sites that eagles will be endangered.

Dr Carter: Okay. The developer says that no more than 10 times the number of eagles that are killed in Argyll wind farms will be killed. We studied the environmental statements for the wind farms in Argyll and some of the confidential annexes, which suggest that four eagles will be killed there in 25 years. That suggests that, as an upper limit, 40 eagles will be killed in Edinbane in that period.

In the Altamont wind farm in California, more than 1,000 golden eagles have been killed in the past 20 years. I would have to double-check the figures, but I believe that in a wind farm in Germany, six sea eagles have been killed. I could provide you with more details of that.

Christine May: I would be grateful for that, particularly for details of the percentage of the total population that have been killed and of the sizes of the areas involved.

Dr Carter: Okay.

Chris Ballance: Do you have the support of the RSPB Scotland on the issue?

Dr Carter: The RSPB objected to the Edinbane proposal, but the objection was not listened to.

Mr John Hodgson: Dr McCall attended the hearing on the Edinbane wind farm proposal, which was in Portree. She was aghast at the lack of information about birds that the developer had supplied—she said that it was one of the worst EIAs that she had ever seen. She has also recently made comments about the proposal for Lewis, which are a matter of public knowledge. She is concerned about the fact that, because peat is a carbon store, it may take 25 years—the full life of the project—to make good the carbon that will be released into the atmosphere by digging deep into the peat bogs.

The first panel was asked about the concrete

that will be left in the soil. Eventually, the concrete will leach into the peat, which will affect water courses, vegetation and various other things in the ridges of Skye or anywhere else. That leaching effect will upset private water supplies and may do a lot of environmental damage.

The Convener: I thank the panel of witnesses for their evidence. We have covered many interesting topics, which we will examine more fully in the months to come.

I suspend the meeting until 5 minutes to 4.

15:51

Meeting suspended.

15:55

On resuming—

The Convener: We have with us Councillor Alison Hay from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Derek McKim, head of strategy at Western Isles Council—excuse me for not using the Gaelic translation, but my pronunciation is not up to it—and James Fowlie, who is the COSLA team leader in charge of environment and regeneration.

Councillor Alison Hay (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): I thank the committee for taking the time to hear evidence from COSLA this afternoon. The previous hour and a half has been extremely interesting and we have sat in the public gallery and listened with interest. We have sympathy with some of the evidence, although not with all of it.

Members have in front of them the submission that we sent the other week and I hope that they have had time to look through it. I will run through what we see as some of the main points that we would like to make this afternoon.

There needs to be a balance between what we hope will be national targets and local accountability. As has been reiterated a lot this afternoon, that could be achieved by linking the development of renewables with a national planning framework, developing an integrated Scottish energy strategy and strengthening local accountability by ensuring that decisions are taken close to the community and by encouraging community involvement and benefit.

We feel that the Scottish national planning framework will ensure that the planning of renewable developments is done in a structured and strategically thought-out way. There seem to be a lot of applications, for wind farms in particular; as I said, we have some sympathy with the previous evidence, although we are not here to talk specifically about wind farms. A framework is

needed to provide direction.

A national energy strategy must include commitments to energy conservation. We see renewable energy and the conservation of energy as important; although we have not discussed conservation in any great depth, it is an important point that must be taken on board. We must set targets to increase renewable energy while reducing the non-renewable source. There must be a commitment to improving the national grid connectivity—I hate that word and I hope that somebody can come up with a better one. In other words, we must ensure that the national grid is capable of taking electricity from the remote areas of Argyll—or rather, from the remote areas of Scotland; I am from Argyll and that was a slip of the tongue—where most of the renewables are going to be exploited. We need to ensure that we maintain continuity of supply.

We need to encourage a wide variety of renewable technologies. This afternoon the committee has majored on wind farms, but we need to talk about some of the other renewable technologies. We need to make a commitment to using renewables for electricity and non-electricity generation purposes. We need to encourage local economic development for community benefit, and we need to encourage locally led sustainable projects.

16:00

A group within COSLA has previously agreed a sustainable energy strategy, which we are going to revisit. The strategy is designed to encourage local authorities, through community planning, to lead the way in energy conservation at local level. Local government is ideally placed to help the Scottish Executive meet its targets—although we feel that a little finance might be helpful in that direction.

Local planning and democracy must be strengthened in tandem with the development of the national strategy. We have to allow local authorities to make decisions on all renewable energy developments irrespective of their size and power output. We have done some investigation into how much the planning fees associated with that would be. Those fees need to be paid to the local authority to allow such work to be done and to allow us to take on staff to help us with the work.

Finally, communities must gain a tangible benefit from nearby renewable developments, perhaps through community benefit funds; consortium and equity stakes; the use of local government powers and duties, such as the power of well-being; the encouragement of small-scale and community projects; and, finally, the stimulation of job creation

where possible.

Those are some of the points that I hope are encapsulated in our submission and that we would like to discuss with the committee this afternoon.

The Convener: I want to ask first about the national energy strategy. I will focus on electricity generation as that is the subject of the petitions that we have been considering, although our inquiry is not so narrow. What might the strategy say that would help you to reach decisions or help the petitioners from whom we have heard today to feel that they were getting a fair crack of the whip? I must admit, I was at a bit of a loss as to what the strategy might contain to remove the difficulties that people seem to be experiencing.

Councillor Hay: What came across from all the previous witnesses was that, among the numerous applications—some completed and some not completed—in various parts of Scotland, there seems to be dislocation. This afternoon you have majored on wind power, but a national energy strategy needs to encompass not only wind power onshore but wind power offshore, tidal power, biomass and the one the pronunciation of which I can never remember, but which I have written here—photovoltaics. The strategy needs to encompass all the renewable sources that we could consider. We need to decide nationally how we will implement some of those technologies. Some of them are at a very early stage of development, but they all have a place. It is horses for courses.

Alongside the energy strategy, we need to consider how to put as much effort into conserving energy as we put into developing renewable energy. There is no point in developing a renewable source in the hope of reducing the use of fossil fuels and nuclear power if we are simply going to increase the amount of energy that we need. We need to consider how to encourage householders to insulate their lofts, wrap their pipes and so on. We need to consider industry and local authority buildings to see how best we can conserve energy at that level. All those things need to be encompassed in an energy policy. It would be helpful if local authorities and yourselves and other involved bodies could work together to do that.

The Convener: I do not necessarily disagree both that there are other means of producing energy and ways in which we can conserve energy and reduce pollution.

Given the stage that the other technologies are at, I suspect that, unless there was to be a huge change in Government thinking, any policy or strategy would probably say that we expect growth of however many megawatts to come from wind energy over the next 20 years. How would that tie

in with your desire to have decisions taken locally? If no decisions under section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989 went to the Government and all decisions were taken locally, councils would still be faced with the current problems about whether to approve wind farms. How can the Government ensure that it will get X per cent from wind energy over the next 10 to 15 years, until such time as other technologies come on stream, if each council, when it is faced with violent objections, finds it much easier to turn down applications?

Councillor Hay: I tend to think that investment should go into some of the other technologies such as biomass, which has previously been mentioned by Christine May. There have been considerable difficulties in the biomass industry. In Argyll and Bute, the company that was dealing with biomass recently went bankrupt or went into liquidation. Such pioneers in those technologies need reassurance from a national level through support and money. Biomass is an ideal example of how that might be done. In Argyll and Bute, we have a ready local source of the material, but the industry needs encouragement. We are doing that in our housing development and in the swimming pool that is next door.

However, biomass is just one technology. Photovoltaics and solar heating also need cash injections to bring them up to the same level. A lot of effort and energy has gone into wind power. I would like to see the same effort and energy go into some of the other technologies, which might not then lag behind.

Christine May: I thank Alison Hay and COSLA for a good paper. I have several questions, which I will try to keep brief.

Under "National Targets, Local Factors and the Need for an Energy Strategy", page 2 of your submission mentions that the best sites are potentially being neglected. Do you mean the best sites for wind farms or the best sites for renewable energy across the range of technologies? I would like to hear a bit more about that.

Derek McKim (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar): We are trying to say that the ad hoc approach across Scotland has meant that some areas have become more attractive than others. The Western Isles is seen as being pro-renewables and pro-wind farms, so we have attracted quite a bit of attention. However, the effect across Scotland is patchy. It would be better if a more strategic approach were taken at a Scottish level about where the best sites might be developed. In the committee's earlier session, somebody referred to wind farms that might overlap two local authority areas. The ad hoc way in which the system is inclined to work at the moment will not necessarily achieve the best outcome. In our view, the best outcome might be facilitated if a more strategic

approach were taken.

Christine May: So, basically, when you talk about the best sites, you are talking about sites for wind farms.

That brings me to my next point, which is about connection into the grid. You mention the grid's capacity to take power from various relatively small sources. It has been argued that the best sites for wind are not necessarily those that are closest to the market. They might well be those that require the most expensive upgrade to the grid. It has been suggested that the Executive should deal with that upgrading on a national level by taking the decisions out of the hands of local planning authorities. Will you comment on that? Who do you think should pay?

Councillor Hay: The Executive should take the grid on board. It is part of the national strategy—

Christine May: Can I press you on that? Do you mean that the Executive should take the grid on board by making arrangements for the upgrading to be done by someone else and at someone else's expense?

Councillor Hay: It should certainly organise how that is done and who does it. The Executive should be taking the lead on that. It is not just wind energy projects that would benefit from an upgrade in the grid; others, such as wave energy projects, would also benefit.

Derek McKim: I agree with what Alison Hay is saying. It is arguable that the grid set-up is upside down at the moment in respect of the offshore and onshore wind resource, as well as tidal and wave energy; the grid gets thinner towards its extremities. If we want to make the best use of the best sites—the windiest places or the sites where the tide and waves are strongest—the grid needs to be turned on its head. However, that means that we are looking at making a significant investment.

To give you some idea of costs, the Inverness-Stirling grid rebuild would be around £190 million; reinforcement is estimated at between £240 million and £400 million; a Western Isles link is estimated at £250 million; and a Shetland and Orkney link would be £270 million. We in the Highlands and Islands, and our consumers, should not be penalised and the cost of the grid upgrading should be taken care of either nationally or on a United Kingdom basis.

Christine May: The penultimate bullet point on page 2 of your submission talks about the transition from reliance on non-renewable sources, or those sources that we use at the moment, to the mixture of those sources and renewables that we will eventually have. How long might that transitional period be?

Councillor Hay: The Executive has set targets

and there have been discussions on whether they are achievable. To me, a target is something to aim for; if it is achieved, that is great, but if it is not, that does not mean that we should stop striving for it. We should strive for the targets that have been set. It would be fantastic if we achieved them, but we must be conscious that we are trying to reduce as much as possible the reliance on fossil fuels and nuclear energy and to replace them with more renewable and sustainable sources. It would be impossible to set long-term targets at the moment because technology is changing daily and we do not know what is in the future that might help us.

Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): I am keen to explore some of the views that are expressed in the COSLA submission and some of the things that you have said today about the decision-making process.

The Scottish Executive and the Scottish Renewables Forum are on record as saying that the existing planning framework is sufficiently robust to deal with renewables. How could the existing planning guidance be improved? You seem to place considerable store and confidence in the forthcoming national planning framework. I think that I am right in saying that you are seeking some revision of NPPG 6. Will you elaborate on that?

16:15

Derek McKim: If we look at it objectively, the section 36 consent is a bit of an anachronism; as I understand it, it was created to deal with power stations. I realise that wind farms are power stations, but they are not power stations as they were thought of when section 36 came into force. In other words, wind farms of the sort that we are talking about today were not envisaged in 1989. The process is one of quasi-planning—I speak from a planning background—rather than a planning process of the kind that one would expect with a normal planning application. One could obviously argue that we are not dealing with normal planning applications, but we will leave that to one side.

Section 36 is not a particularly appropriate mechanism for decision making in 2004, and I can point to two reasons for that. There is a long lead-in time, which has no limit set on it. We have experience of that throughout the Highlands and Islands with the lead-in time, for example, for environmental assessments before we get to the stage of making a submission to the Executive for consent for a wind farm over 50MW. As an aside to that, the 50MW figure is pretty arbitrary anyway. As we see it, although the local authorities are major consultees, we end up doing a significant amount of the work, but the decision-making process is somewhat opaque; it is less transparent

and democratically accountable than the normal local authority planning process.

Councillor Hay: The way that section 36 appears to work is that a lot of work is done, at local level, at the pre-planning stage. Once that work is done, the application is submitted to the Executive's planners, who come back to us as consultees, and more work is done. To be blunt, we do a lot of the work and the Executive pockets the fee; we do not get anything for the work that we have done. That needs to be addressed somewhere.

Susan Deacon: It is clear that you regard the section 36 provisions as an anachronism and/or an anomaly—whatever I can get my tongue round. Does that imply that, if that issue were resolved and wind farm developments were dealt with more in line with other developments through the local planning process, your primary concerns would be addressed? Is it your expectation or hope—I would be grateful if you would differentiate between the two—that the issue will be addressed by the new national planning framework?

Derek McKim: I expect it to be addressed by the national planning framework.

Perhaps I can draw a parallel with what happened round about 1974 or 1975, when six major sites throughout Scotland were identified for steel fabrication yards. That was done at a national level in the sense that, through something akin to the national planning framework, it was decided where on the Scottish map the yards should go. However, the individual planning applications were dealt with by the individual local authorities, and my recollection is that there were no appeals or any further processes in relation to those applications. That is the way in which I envisage the process going.

Susan Deacon: I am sorry, but I did not catch the first part of your answer. Did you say that you thought the matter would be addressed as part of the new national planning framework?

Derek McKim: Yes. The national planning framework would operate at the high, strategic level and the decision on an application for an individual wind farm or tidal device would be dealt with at local level, the national policy having been determined.

I omitted to mention that when NPPG 6 was written, little thought was being given in Scotland to community benefit, which is with us here and now. That omission needs to be rectified.

Susan Deacon: I will leave planning policy behind and ask about energy policy. I note that you have majored in the twin planks of getting the national planning framework right and of having the appropriate national energy policy alongside

that. You say that that would address many, or most, of your concerns.

The use of the word “national” is fraught in many places, not least of which is here. However, you have clearly advocated a Scottish energy policy. Will you elaborate on what you mean by that, particularly in relation to the interface between devolved and reserved policies and the continuing UK energy review? I understand that the Scottish Executive is targeting most of its energies on input to that instead of on developing a separate policy.

Councillor Hay: We mean a Scottish energy policy. I am conscious that much of the subject is reserved, which makes life difficult. Nonetheless, a Scottish national energy policy needs to fit Scottish needs. We must make that clear as part of the wider input to the UK energy consultation.

The situation is difficult. We argue that community benefit must be felt. If energy is to come from the most remote areas of Scotland, the communities in those areas must benefit from that. We are talking about the depopulation of Scotland and about our young people leaving because no jobs are available for them. We have an ideal opportunity to maximise what we can obtain from a natural resource in the more remote areas.

Section 36 issues are difficult, but decisions on those issues should go to local areas. That allows local people to make their voices heard and to feel that the ultimate decision has been taken locally; that may feed into what previous speakers have said. Such a situation might make life very difficult for local politicians like me, but, ultimately, we must take those decisions. People need to feel that they have an input and that any benefits from the approval of such applications will return to the community rather than be transferred out. I am not sure whether that answers Susan Deacon's question.

James Fowle (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): The Scottish Executive makes a commitment in its partnership agreement to increase investment in research and development,

“support the development of wave, tidal and solar energy ... press the UK Government and electricity companies to strengthen the electricity grid”

and

“encourage participation”.

Ministers have also made several relevant statements. The basis of a strategy for Scotland exists. We should bring together all those elements in one document and drive that forward. That would be transparent and long-term strategic thinking.

Susan Deacon: I have a brief question, to which a short answer would be perfectly acceptable. How and when should such a strategy be

developed? I asked about dovetailing with the UK process. What would be the timeline for pursuing the step that you describe in Scotland?

Councillor Hay: Soon.

Susan Deacon: Would we need to await the outcome of the UK process?

Councillor Hay: We must have a Scottish view about what we want up here. We need to decide what Scotland wants and needs. We should not hang about for the rest of the UK before making a decision. We know what we need in Scotland and there is huge potential, not just for onshore but for offshore wind and wave energy—the list is endless. We need to decide our strategy.

Derek McKim: Perhaps “soon” was rather a glib answer. There is a window of opportunity to use alternative and renewable energies as an economic driver and Scotland can benefit from that. However, I think that the sector will eventually move offshore, for a host of reasons, so we must move quickly, as that window might be relatively narrow. A vacuum is of no use to any of us.

There can be a two-way process if we quickly develop a Scottish strategy that can connect much better with matters at UK level.

Brian Adam: Forgive me, but I hardly ever hear from COSLA unless it wants money. The paper is excellent, but I do not know whether the plea for more finance is helpful.

Will you elaborate on two points? First, what specific aspects of the current planning arrangements do you regard as deficient? I note that your submission mentions

“the ‘funnelling’ of developments into a small number of areas.”

Are the planning guidelines deficient in relation to the boundaries between councils or the fact that there are only a limited number of areas that are suitable for wind farm—or other—developments?

Secondly, you suggested that Government investment is needed if we are to have more strings to our bow than just wind farms. Where does COSLA think that that investment should be directed? Should the Executive be taking steps in relation to ROCs—would that be an appropriate way of providing an incentive? What balance should be given to the various drivers to ensure proper economic development that properly benefits Scotland and, in particular, local communities? How should the Executive deliver that?

Councillor Hay: To take your second point first, COSLA needs to consider its position on the different types of renewable energy—since we supplied our submission, the holiday period has meant that it has been difficult for us to gather

detailed information. In some areas of Scotland, certain technologies will bring more benefits than others, but we can come back to you on that point.

Brian Adam: Yes, please do.

Councillor Hay: My mind has gone blank; what was your first question? It was about the planning framework—

Brian Adam: What aspects of the planning framework are deficient? Your submission referred to the funnelling of developments, which I assume means that developments can be concentrated in an area that crosses council boundaries or indeed in a single local authority’s area.

The Executive and the forum for renewable energy development in Scotland say that decisions should be made locally and that there is no place for a national strategic view. You appear to hold a contrary view. Can you tell us why the Executive and the forum for renewable energy development in Scotland are wrong and you are right?

Councillor Hay: The petitioners graphically highlighted the number of planning applications that are in the pipeline in their areas—that came across quite clearly. It seems from their—and our—experience that there is a lack of an overall, Scotland-wide policy about where best to put wind farms. Locally, we can use our strategic and local plans and some councils have structure plans that have been recently approved. Those documents highlight exactly where one can and cannot put wind farms, or where it would be better to put wind farms. What we were majoring on in our submission was the section 36 problem, alongside which is the need for a pan-Scotland look at where it would be best to put wind farms. That takes in your point about developments across council boundaries. We have had a number of developments across ward boundaries, which we have dealt with locally, but developments across council boundaries are slightly more problematic. It would be helpful if some indication was given at a national level as to where it would be acceptable and where it would be unacceptable to site wind farms.

16:30

Mike Watson: I also wanted to ask some questions about section 36. They have largely been dealt with, but a couple remain. The first relates to a statement in your submission, which says:

“It is a view of some local authorities, that at the very least, the section 36 thresholds should be increased”.

Is there a consensus on roughly what the threshold should be? The suggestion is that it should be raised from 50MW, but what sort of

figure do you have in mind?

Derek McKim: There is probably no consensus on that. We discussed the issue when we were putting the submission together. At a draft stage, we were considering something in the order of 200MW. The committee will be aware that the size of wind farms and the size of turbines are increasing all the time. Having thought about the matter further, we would now say that we should be making decisions on all sizes of applications rather than having an arbitrary threshold. As I said earlier, I assume that the logic of section 36 originally was that it applied to something that was in the national interest; in this context we can take "national" as being at a Scottish level.

Mike Watson: That is the power station concept that you mentioned earlier.

Derek McKim: Yes. It is quite difficult to say in relation to wind farms, depending on the location, what exactly would be in the national interest. Any level would be quite arbitrary, so that is why we have not given a figure.

Mike Watson: Staying on that matter, I am not sure whether this is what Brian Adam was talking about when he mentioned that COSLA was seeking additional resources—I think that in a sense that is part of its *raison d'être*. The COSLA submission mentions the planning fees. It states that local authorities should be eligible for planning fees in all situations, no matter who makes the decision. I am not quite sure that I follow the logic of that statement. If local authorities have not done the work—

Councillor Hay: But we do.

Mike Watson: Is the point that local authorities do the work anyway and do not get recognition for it?

Councillor Hay: We get none of the money.

Mike Watson: I see. Your point seems much more reasonable in that case.

The Convener: How much money are we talking about?

Derek McKim: I understand that there is a sliding scale, which varies from £5,000 up to a maximum of £20,000 for something that is more than 500MW. That is not a huge amount of money in one sense, but it is probably in kilter with fees for equivalent normal planning applications.

Mike Watson: The sum represents the time and effort put in by local authority administrators or whatever.

Derek McKim: It represents a proportion of the time and effort that is put in.

Brian Adam: I presume that that task falls

disproportionately on a small number of councils, given that most of the applications are made to a small number of councils.

Councillor Hay: Yes.

Brian Adam: And it is small, rural councils that are affected.

Councillor Hay: Yes. It is councils that have a limited number of staff in the first place. That touches on another slight problem in that we have trouble attracting enough planning staff to the more remote councils. Not everybody wants to adopt the rural lifestyle, so we struggle to get enough staff not only in the planning section but in other sections.

Mike Watson: Thank you for that clarification.

My second point is on a completely different matter. The section of COSLA's submission on community benefit states that you would like to

"Encourage the generators of power to contribute to a community benefit fund on a per MW, per annum basis. This is already happening in Highland Council".

I presume that that is subject to the developer being willing to contribute to the fund. Can you say a little bit about how that works and how you think it might be established more widely?

Councillor Hay: I know that the answer will be slightly different depending on which council you talk to, but if I may be parochial for a moment, in my council area we have a number of wind farms in Kintyre for which community funds were negotiated with the company responsible. The money is put into a separate trust and is used for a number of schemes in the community council areas in which the turbines are erected. The money can be used on virtually any project that it is felt will be beneficial to the area but is restricted to the community council areas within which the turbines are situated. People on Gigha, for example, can see the turbines on Kintyre but get none of the benefits of the money given.

Mike Watson: That is Argyll and Bute. Do you know whether the same situation applies in Highland Council?

Derek McKim: In conjunction with Highland Council, my council commissioned a major piece of work that was put into the public domain on Friday, and so will be available to the committee, which examined the economics of wind farms and how that relates to community benefit. That piece of work will become an industry-wide standard.

My council will follow that up with a further piece of work from the same consultants, looking at how we apply the community benefit from potential wind farms in our area to derive the maximum economic benefit in a long-term sustainable way over and above the localised community benefit

that Alison Hay talked about. We envisage that we will do that by using our new power to promote well-being and by setting up a community well-being trust. That further piece of work is to be commissioned over the next two to three months, and we will work it up. It may be of interest to your committee.

Mike Watson: It occurs to me that some developers could use such benefits to sweeten the pill if there is local opposition. It would be better if proposals came from the local community, rather than the other way round. Do you have a view on that?

Councillor Hay: There are a number of ways by which local communities could tangibly benefit from renewables development generally. We listed a number, which perhaps are not so clearly defined, and I have them here. One of them is that communities could take equity stakes. Also, small-scale and community projects could be encouraged and funded, and funding for small-scale renewables projects in communities could be encouraged.

Chris Ballance: Good afternoon. Thank you for your helpful paper. In your preamble, you commented on the lack of discussion about energy conservation and efficiency. Could you expand on that? In particular, what is the way forward? Is it through pricing, grants or legislation, such as building control regulations? If it is through grants, do you have suggestions for schemes that ought to be provided but which are not at the moment? How should the Executive move forward?

Councillor Hay: I do not quite understand. Do you mean a lack of discussion overall or on specifics?

Chris Ballance: I understood you to be saying that little had been said about energy conservation.

Councillor Hay: Yes. I said that a national energy strategy should include commitments to energy conservation and efficiency. Is that what you are highlighting?

Chris Ballance: I was not absolutely sure what you were referring to, but could you talk in general about the way forward for energy conservation and what you would like to be introduced?

Councillor Hay: We need more discussion with those who work in the field such as, for example, the Argyll, Lomond and the Isles Energy Agency—or Allenergy—in Argyll and Bute, which promotes certain biomass schemes, because we need to find out how those who work in the field can best contribute to a national energy strategy and suggest how everything might link together.

I do not think that we have discussed energy

conservation at all this afternoon, but the issue is still highly important. We must discuss how we can encourage people to look about them to find out how they can conserve energy within buildings. For instance, what work has been carried out to conserve energy in this building or in any local authority building? From a local authority point of view, I think that we are lacking in that area.

I just caught Christine May's eye when I said that.

Christine May: I can tell you what Fife Council has done about energy conservation.

Councillor Hay: I am sure that it is doing a wonderful job. That said, some councils have to be honest and say that they are probably not doing enough on energy conservation in their own buildings. As a result, purveyors of renewable energy, the people on the ground who work in it, local authorities and the Scottish Executive have a lot of work to carry out together and a lot to discuss.

The Convener: This building is under the Church of Scotland's control, which means that a higher power is in charge.

Councillor Hay: As soon as I made that comment, I realised that this building is not yours.

Chris Ballance: I understand that the new Parliament building has higher energy-efficiency standards than this place has.

The Convener: I should point out that we have not majored in energy conservation today because we are dealing with specific petitions that are complaining about wind farm developments. They do not cover the full remit of our inquiry.

Mr McGrigor: Councillor Hay mentioned forestry biomass. I have never been quite able to understand why it has not received the same status as other renewable energy sources. After all, it is carbon neutral and eternally renewable. Such an approach would have a double benefit in that it would boost the growth of timber, for which there is not much money at the moment, and tidy up many forestry areas. What concrete steps could the Executive take to encourage forestry biomass as a renewable energy source?

Councillor Hay: I hesitate to say it, but it could probably be encouraged through seed funding.

That question cannot be answered easily. I think that I am right in saying that the Government has introduced a system of grants for various renewables to encourage the use of biomass in particular. Perhaps it is a question of encouraging people into the industry. However, the question is a difficult one and I would need to go away and consider it before I could come back with an answer.

Mr McGrigor: But biomass does not receive the same status as wind or hydro energy.

Councillor Hay: That is true. However, the same applies to an awful lot of possible renewable technologies. For example, although photovoltaic slates do not have such a high profile, they are still being promoted in quite a number of council areas and are a good source of renewable energy.

We need to discuss how the Parliament can best help the people who are working in these fields to develop such technologies. Perhaps not enough emphasis has been put on the research and development side of renewables, and the Parliament could also help us in that area.

James Fowlie: We see this matter as forming part of a structured response on renewable energy. I do not think that biomass will ever produce the same amount of power as, for example, wind. As a result, although we would encourage small-scale development of biomass technology, we are not convinced that there should be any larger-scale development until additional research has proved the case for that. After all, we also need to think about such issues as the costs of transporting materials to the biomass plant.

Councillor Hay: We would also say that it is a question of horses for courses. No particular form of renewable energy will be the answer to all our problems. We will have to use a combination of renewable technologies, with specific ones being used where they are appropriate.

Mr McGrigor: I agree that biomass energy would not produce the same amount of energy as other forms of renewable energy, but it would produce energy for local communities and give a value to Sitka plantations that, at the moment, are virtually worthless.

Councillor Hay: I cannot disagree with that.

16:45

Chris Ballance: As the issue of energy conservation is one of the three or four main conclusions in the paper, I think that it is important that we hear your views on that as fully as possible. James Fowlie, you looked as if you were about to come in on that point earlier.

James Fowlie: I was not going to add much to what Councillor Hay said. As she said in her opening remarks, COSLA has a sustainable energy strategy, but we have not done enough to advocate that strategy to our member councils and matters have moved on dramatically since it was first agreed. We are currently revisiting it and trying to find innovative ways of ensuring that our member councils are exemplars in the field of energy efficiency and conservation measures in

their local areas through community planning partnerships. As was said earlier, local solutions will differ across the country.

Chris Ballance: In your submission, you say that we should

"Encourage the set up ... of consortia of local authorities and community groups, to create companies capable of generating power for their communities."

Are you thinking about using existing small-scale companies, such as exist on Islay, as a template for that or did you have something else in mind?

Councillor Hay: That is a good template to use. The project on Gigha to erect four turbines for the use of one community is another good template. That will make the community much more sustainable, which is to be welcomed.

James Fowlie: What counts is what works locally. There might be other good models that have not yet been used and we would hope that, through the power to promote well-being, the Executive could allow local authorities, community planning partnerships and so on to develop them.

The Convener: Most of the speakers from whom we heard this morning said, basically, "Wind farms? Over my dead body." Do you think that that will be the typical attitude towards such planning applications as their numbers grow or is that atypical?

Derek McKim: The picture is patchy across Scotland. As I said earlier, by and large, the three island authorities are pro-wind farms but the picture is not as clear in the Highlands. In some parts, people are strongly in favour of wind farms but, in other parts, some people are not in favour of them. I am sure that that is the case in the Borders and Dumfries and Galloway as well.

James Fowlie: I agree. In many cases, a negative perception is caused by the funnelling of a lot of developments into particular areas. We think that there needs to be a bit more strategic planning and thought about where developments should go. Equally, we should not concentrate solely on wind developments. We should take a balanced approach to renewable energy and consider the other opportunities that Scotland's unique geography offers.

Councillor Hay: As a small rider to that, I would like to add that I was slightly incensed earlier when one of the speakers said that Argyll and Bute Council did not value tourism. I want to refute that in public. We value tourism greatly and would not want to do anything that would jeopardise our tourist potential.

The Convener: That is on the record now. I thank the representatives of COSLA for their attendance this afternoon.

I remind members of the committee that next week's meeting will be in Campbeltown and that there will be an informal meeting on Monday as well.

Meeting closed at 16:49.

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