

National Planning Framework 4 - Call for Ideas Consultation

Coriolis Energy Ltd

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About Coriolis Energy Ltd

Coriolis Energy was formed in early 2007 by a group of long-time managers of a major utility's renewable energy business where, between them, they were responsible for the successful development of some 300 MW of wind farm projects throughout the UK.

After becoming independent the team delivered over 100MW of consented projects under a partnership with Falck Renewables Ltd, all of which are now in operation. It is now continuing to develop a 400MW pipeline of onshore wind energy projects in partnership with the Irish Utility company ESB.

The Need Case and Policy Platform for Onshore Wind

In 2016 renewable electricity generation displaced approximately 9,400,000 tonnes of CO₂, equal to around 21% of Scotland's carbon emissions in 2015.

The Committee on Climate Change has calculated that we must quadruple the amount of electricity we produce to enable the decarbonisation of heat and transport.

Scotland must continue to be an international leader on climate change action and an up-to-date and ambitious policy framework, the likes of the Climate Change Plan (2018), Scottish Energy Strategy (2017) and Onshore Wind Policy Statement (OWPS) (2017) will help to ensure this is realised.

The Scottish Government's OWPS, for example, stresses in paragraph 2 that they "*expect onshore wind to remain at the heart of a clean, reliable and low carbon energy future in Scotland*".

The OWPS also states in paragraph 25 that "*The Scottish Government acknowledges the way in which wind turbine technology and design is evolving, and fully supports the delivery of large wind turbines in landscapes judged to be capable of accommodating them without significant adverse impacts*".

Planning has a key role in enabling a carbon neutral Scotland and combined, these two policy commitments must be reflected in the new National Planning Framework and should be at the heart of the planning policy platform to help decarbonise the entire energy sector by 2045.

Following the publication of OWPS, CCP and SES, 2019 was a year which saw a number of landmark climate change reports and new statute / law including:

- The Committee on Climate Change (CCC) report on 'Net Zero' published in May 2019.
- The declared UK and Scottish Government 'climate emergency' positions.
- The Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019 – which received Royal Assent and has introduced legally binding very challenging greenhouse gas reduction targets of 75% by 2030 and net zero by 2045.

- The United Nations 'Gap' Report, published in November 2019 which set out the major disconnect of 'where we are and where we need to need be' with regard to action on the Paris Agreement and GHG reductions.

Furthermore, the Scottish Government's 'Programme for Government' which was published in November 2019 made it clear that "there is a requirement for transformative change". The First Minister is quoted in the document: "This Programme for Government sets out some of the next steps on Scotland's journey to net zero emissions and raises our ambition in light of the emergency we face. We are leading the world in setting challenging targets, but we must also redouble our efforts to meet them."

In the Programme, a commitment is that "the Fourth National Planning Framework will help to radically accelerate reduction of emissions" and it adds "the global climate emergency means that the time is right for wide ranging debate on more radical planning policy options...we will begin engagement on the Fourth National Planning Framework in autumn this year. Through it we will explore planning options that radically accelerate reduction of emissions."

The Need for Interim Policy Guidance

The pre-health emergency programme for the review of national planning policy indicates that a draft NPF4 is not to be issued until September 2020 and the final document will not be adopted until late 2021 when at that stage, it would become part of the statutory development plan.

No details are yet available for a revised programme for NPF4, however the likelihood, as per the Chief Planners letter of 3rd April 2020 is that public consultation will now take place during 2021.

However, even prior to the COVID-19 health emergency it was considered that such a long programme does not sit well with a declared Climate Emergency and the need to have significant wider deployment of renewable energy – advised by the Committee on Climate Change to achieve the net zero targets.

The Scottish Government were planning to issue a new Climate Change Plan (CCP) around the end of April 2020 and this it is expected will set out the renewable energy generation and low carbon generation requirement in order to attain the net zero targets that are now enshrined in law.

Although it is accepted that NPF4 will be dealing with policy matters in detail, the timescale for the preparation of NPF4 and in the context of a Climate Emergency situation, we feel there is a need for interim policy guidance for decision makers to allow them to place more weight on the need case.

There has very clearly been a material strengthening in the needs case for renewable energy developments since both SPP and NPF3 were adopted in 2014.

Onshore Wind

Consents in Perpetuity and for Onshore Wind

Unlike other industries and other renewable technologies, onshore wind planning consents are issued for limited consenting periods, usually 20-25 years. This may have made sense when wind turbines were an emerging technology and their likely operational lifespan was poorly

understood. However, onshore wind is now a mature technology, an established and widely supported part of our electrical infrastructure and the cheapest source of electricity generation.

Under NPF4 onshore wind should be treated in the same manner as other industries and granted consent in perpetuity. It is our expectation that developers will still be required to include plans for the decommissioning of a scheme if it is not operational over a period of 12 months or within a timescale which is otherwise agreed with the planning authority.

- Under NPF4 renewable energy developments should be consented in perpetuity in line with other developments.
- Planning authorities should only be able to impose time-limited consents if they can demonstrate exceptional circumstances for requiring a temporary permission.

Modern Turbines

Following the withdrawal of support under the Renewables Obligation (RO), there are approximately 3.5GW of onshore wind schemes that are consented but unbuilt. Very little of this 3.5GW capacity with planning permission is likely to be viable without the use of modern turbines. To unlock this capacity, these projects may need to be re-consented to allow for the use of modern turbines with taller towers, larger rotors and increased blade tip heights.

The Scottish Government recognises the need to enable developments with modern turbines in the 2017 OWPS: “We acknowledge that onshore wind technology and equipment manufacturers in the market are moving towards larger and more powerful (i.e. higher capacity) turbines, and that these – by necessity – will mean taller towers, and blade tip heights.”

- NPF4 should provide a supportive policy context for the installation of modern turbines and have the flexibility to accommodate the speed of technological change in turbine design.
- The new policy approach must go beyond the rhetorical phrase “the right development in the right place.” NPF4 should recognise that addressing the climate emergency will have some development impact on landscapes and the acceptability, or otherwise, of any significant landscape effects must be considered in light of the climate emergency and our net-zero target.
- New onshore wind energy development will be different in scale from older wind farms as they will incorporate more modern turbine designs. NPF4 should set out that only limited weight should be afforded to scale disparities between new and “legacy” turbine schemes given the climate emergency and the vital role that onshore wind will have in achieving the net-zero

Extensions of existing wind farms

In addition to repowering existing wind farms, extending a site with additional turbines is a very effective way to deploy additional renewables capacity. Such extensions make best use of existing infrastructure such as access tracks, substations and grid connections, in addition to helping developers reduce costs.

Current planning policy does not take the sustainable development benefits of wind farm extensions into account and, as a result, the outcomes of applications to extend can be

unpredictable and uncertain. To make the best use of existing infrastructure it is highly desirable that NPF4 brings more clarity and certainty to this process.

- NPF4 should recognise the sustainable development benefits of wind farm extensions and should create a policy framework to ensure consents for wind farm extensions are dealt with swiftly, consistently and with predictable results.

Landscape Capacity/Sensitivity Studies

Landscape Capacity Studies prepared on behalf of planning authorities, have been produced by a very limited number of landscape consultants who do not generally advise on commercial onshore wind energy developments. These outdated studies do not take into account the climate emergency, treat onshore wind turbines as an inherently negative development propositions, and are out of sync with the overwhelming level of public support for wind turbines in the environment. Several of these studies state that specific sized wind turbines are unacceptable in certain locations and are often used as grounds for objecting to developments.

Landscape Capacity Study-based objections to wind farm proposals are often overturned by Reporters at appeal. There are many example planning decisions to illustrate this, which clearly demonstrates a lack of fitness in the way such studies are prepared and applied by planning authorities to decision making.

NPF4 should prevent the preparation of further Landscape Capacity Studies and replace them with Landscape Sensitivity Studies, as has already been agreed with SNH. Landscape Sensitivity Studies (LSS) should be strategic studies designed to provide high level information to assist decision makers through identifying relative sensitivities within the landscape. They should be used to inform the baseline of site-specific Landscape Visual Impact Assessments (LVIA), incorporated into EIAs.

LSS should not specify “appropriate” turbine heights, nor seek to impose arbitrary height restrictions on wind turbines nor should they be used as a means to assess an individual project’s suitability. Planning policy should instead recognise that site-specific LVIAs be afforded primacy in informing the overall acceptability of a scheme and all proposals should be considered on a case-by-case basis by planning authorities or Ministers.

- NPF4 should replace Landscape Capacity Studies with Landscape Sensitivity Studies to inform site specific project assessment, not overrule them.
- Scottish Government should prepare guidance in collaboration with stakeholders setting out how Landscape Sensitivity Studies should be prepared and used.
- NPF4 should state that Landscape Sensitivity Studies used to inform planning policy should be properly consulted upon.

Scottish Planning Policy Table 1 – Spatial Frameworks

It is recognised that the constraints set out in SPP Table 1, categorising land as either Group 1, 2 or 3, has assisted, to some degree, in site selection and the delivery of consents for onshore wind to date. However, it is our view that it will not be possible to achieve the level of onshore

wind deployment needed to achieve net-zero, without changes to Group 2, either to remove highly subjective considerations like wild land or to change the way they are dealt with in policy to achieve positive development outcomes. Furthermore, a more permissive approach should be taken toward Group 3 areas in light of our net-zero targets.

Decisions on the suitability of wind farm developments outside Group 1 areas should be evaluated on a case by case basis by planning authorities or Ministers who are able to balance the extent of effects with other important policy objectives such as the climate emergency and the rural economy. Decisions should be ultimately informed by site-specific LVIA and EIAs rather than through the application of constraint-based mapping within Local Development Plans (LDPs).

The current Group 2 policy is too restrictive, not fit for purpose and obstructs the ability of democratically elected planning authorities and Ministers to make decisions in the long-term public interest and stimulate regeneration in the rural economy.

SPP Table 1 has been in effect since 2014 and it has resulted in most applications for renewable energy projects in and adjacent to Group 2 wild land areas being refused, even in some instances when supported by local planning committees. Projects refused include Sallachy, Glencassley, Beinn Mhor, Culachy, Limekiln, Glenmorie, Allt Duine, Carn Gorm and Caplich, resulting in a negative impact on the economic development of communities in these areas.

The Scottish Government has consistently ruled out making wild land a designation and did so again most latterly during the passage of the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 through Parliament. Its inclusion within Group 2 and its subsequent interpretation in decision making and day-to-day practice amounts to that of a designation. NPF4 needs to deal with this.

More generally, we advocate against drawing up map-based spatial plans for distributed forms of energy generation such as onshore wind whether this is on a regional or national basis as it is a fundamentally flawed approach. Such an approach does not allow for other important locational factors such as grid, land and transport access to be appropriately considered.

A national spatial planning approach was attempted in Wales using Welsh Technical Advice Note 8 (TAN8), intended to facilitate the deployment of 1666MW of onshore wind from seven defined Strategic Search Areas by 2017. Instead TAN8 caused delays, led to excessive costs and ultimately led to missed targets for renewables deployment with only 565.8MW delivered by 2018.

- NPF4 should remove wild land from Table 1 or ensure that the accompanying policy position is significantly more positive towards consenting renewable energy development in Group 2 areas. The current policy wording in essence creates a no-go designation for commercial scaled wind energy developments – this is proven by the fact that no consents have been forthcoming for any turbines within wild land. Creag Riabhach, a project which had some turbines in a wild land area, was consented but was deemed by Ministers to be contrary to SPP.
- NPF4 should recognise that landscape capacity and landscape accommodation are subjective matters that should be weighed in the planning balance with more certain matters such as the climate emergency and the need for sustainable rural energy development to address it.