

Scottish Government
Planning and Architecture

30 March 2020

Dear Sir/Madam

NPF4 – Planning for Scotland in 2050

We welcome the opportunity to set out our views with regards to the future of planning in Scotland and what we would like to see within National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4). I have provided comments below for your consideration with regards to the five questions set out within the NPF4 early engagement information.

Our comments are focused on NPF4 and the renewables industry, in particular onshore wind farm developments and the onshore elements of offshore wind farms (electrical cables and onshore substations).

1. What development will we need to address climate change?

Taller turbines

NPF4 should support the installation of taller turbines and have the flexibility to accommodate the speed of technological change within the turbine development industry. There will also be a difference of scale between modern taller turbines and previously proposed turbines. This should be given limited weight in the decision-making process given the climate emergency and the vital role onshore wind will have in achieving the target to cut emissions by 75% by 2030 and the 2045 net-zero target.

Repowering and life extensions

NPF4 should include a presumption in favour of repowering and life extensions, recognising the likely sustainability benefits in doing so, however, there should be scope to fast track such applications so that they do not need to go through unnecessary lengthy full planning applications with full Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) if there is no reason to request this, such often unnecessary processes could very well make repowering or life extensions of such sites unviable. Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) also notes that “areas identified for wind farms should be suitable for use in perpetuity”, this should be recognized in NPF4 too.

Extensions to existing sites

Where the environment allows it, extending existing wind farm developments with additional wind turbines makes best use of existing infrastructure and has clear climate change and economic benefits. As communities would be used to seeing turbines as part of the landscape, it is likely that, subject to the necessary assessments, extensions would have less visual impact.

Turbine blade length extensions

Blade extensions at existing wind farms should be supported by NPF4 and considered for permitted development rights (PDR). This would provide a rapid and cost-effective way of increasing renewable energy in Scotland to meet our 2030 target and 2045 net-zero target.

Co-location of compatible technologies

Co-location of compatible technologies such as onshore wind and storage (battery, hydrogen, etc.), onshore wind and solar, and other compatible technologies should be given more focus in NPF4. Scope for including some aspects of energy storage and co-location within PDR should also be considered in NPF4.

Consents in Perpetuity

Unlike other developments and industries, consents for onshore wind and some other renewable energy developments are issued for limited time periods, generally 25 years. Given that the majority of renewable technologies are now mature, planning permission for new consents for renewable energy developments such as the ones outlined above should be granted in perpetuity to bring this in line with other industries and developments. This would also mean that it is aligned with SPP (see comments on SPP above).

Supportive planning environment

If the above technologies and developments are to be successful there needs to be an overhaul of the planning process. Local planning authorities currently do not have the tools, resources, training or policy direction to efficiently consider the types of planning applications that will be necessary to meet the 2030 and 2045 targets. Areas that need greater consideration include:

- **Consistency and joined up approach across Government and Planning Authorities** - local planning authorities and Government agencies need to be aligned in their approach and advice, the current position where interpretations of process and procedures differ means that it is very difficult for developers to plan ahead with any form of certainty.
- **Delivering consents swiftly** - The time taken to determine applications is often longer than statutory timescales. More focus is required on these timescales and why local planning authorities are exceeding statutory timescales for some developments. Focused assessments for applications, will mean less documentation

and concise documentation for review, which should help speed the process up (see bullet below for more detail).

- **Proportionate Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA)** – With regards to applications associated with renewables, particularly wind farms, it should be noted that despite the recent focus on proportionate EIAs only considering likely significant effects (in line with the 2017 EIA regulations), local planning authorities and stakeholders such as SNH, SEPA, etc. are still asking for an assessment of impacts that are likely to be non-significant. The result of this is a process that is not efficient and results in EIA's that are lengthy and not proportionate to the likely effects. This ultimately increases costs for developers and results in an unnecessary amount of work and time for local planning authorities. It should also be noted that further costs in a zero-subsidy environment have the potential to make some developments unviable.
- **Training for Planning Authorities** - Without suitable training and the necessary tools, resource and policy direction for local planning authorities and other decision makers it is likely that the developments highlighted above will fall into unproportionate EIAs and lengthy decision periods. As such, more work is required to ensure local planning authorities are suitably equipped to deal with such applications.

2. How can planning best support our quality of life health and wellbeing in the future?

With increases in renewable energy deployment (and a planned pipeline of projects) through the types of developments listed above and improvements in the planning process within Scotland we also see the following positive benefits:

- Renewable energy developments that help address the climate emergency we are facing
- Addressing fuel poverty
- Positive socio-economic impacts locally and nationally
- Increased supply chain opportunities/investment
- STEM – careers, training, etc.
- Rural businesses and community projects benefitting from renewables which can help to reduce energy costs and increase economic sustainability locally
- Making planning easier for some smaller scale developments and community developments would also help with economic growth and wellbeing within rural areas
- Local energy systems such as battery storage, electric vehicles, etc.

3. What does planning need to do to enable an economy that benefits everyone?

The planning process needs to ensure that developers are not being asked to do unnecessary assessments and are not subject to unnecessarily long determination periods, subjecting them to greater uncertainty (see question 1 above). Both of which can result in

projects becoming unviable which can then have a knock-on effect in terms of the supply chain and jobs that could have been supported (see question 2 above). In addition, with greater project certainty and pipeline the wider supply chain can invest and develop within Scotland.

It should also be noted that unnecessary delays and uncertainty do not just impact large scale renewable projects, but small-scale projects associated with local businesses or communities are also impacted, resulting in negative socio-economic impacts for that developer and the local area that the development is located within.

4. How can planning improve, protect and strengthen the special character of our places?

RRPL support the principal that the climate emergency should be central to NPF4 and the 2030 and the 2045 targets should be embedded in NPF4 to ensure these are core considerations in policy and decision-making, however there also needs to be an overhaul of the planning process as it is currently not set up to be focussed on the climate emergency, but instead focus is on more local impacts, some of which are very subjective such as landscape and visual impacts.

Instead planning decisions should be evidence-based, minimising the focus on subjective matters, and be taken in the wider public interest. RRPL is of the opinion that each proposal should be assessed on its own merits and subjective matters such as landscape and visual should not be given any more focus than any other matters, unless there is a justifiable reason to do so.

NPF4 also needs to recognise that addressing the climate emergency will result in some development impact on landscapes and the acceptability of any significant landscape effects must be considered in light of this emergency.

Landscape Capacity/Sensitivity Studies

Planning can improve, protect and strengthen the special character of our places, but a balance must be met to ensure that those features of places that may be subjective are not put before the need to meet the 2030 and 2045 targets.

Currently landscape capacity studies are used to assess the suitability of a project within a certain landscape, however, are outdated in that they do not take into account the climate emergency and consider onshore wind to be inherently negative. With regards to onshore wind, objections are often based on landscape capacity studies, however, are often overturned by Reporters at the appeal, suggesting that they are not fit for purpose to assist planning authorities in the decision-making process.

Landscape Capacity Studies should be replaced by Landscape Sensitivity Studies (LSS) designed to provide high level information to assist decision makers through identifying relative sensitivities within the landscape and used to inform the baseline of site-specific Landscape Visual Impact Assessments (LVIA), incorporated into EIAs. LSS should however

not specify “appropriate” turbine heights, not impose arbitrary height restrictions on wind turbines and should not be used as a means to assess an individual project’s suitability.

In line with our previous comments, training will be required to ensure proportionality and their use by local authorities are in line with expectations and used in the same way across different authorities. Local planning authorities currently do not have the tools or training to consider planning applications in this way and a great deal of work will be required to ensure that local planning authorities and other decision makers are able to do so.

In addition, we recommend that stakeholders such as SNH and other agencies should only comment on the assessment of effects likely to arise from a project, rather than on the acceptability of those effects, which ultimately should be a judgement for the planning decision-maker.

Scottish Planning Policy Table 1 – Spatial Frameworks

Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) Table 1 sets out constraints categorising land as either Group 1 (Areas where wind farms will not be acceptable), 2 (Areas of significant protection) or 3 (Areas with potential for wind farm development).

Group 2 has however provided an unjustified constraint to development which has resulted in wild land and peatland becoming effective designations, pre-empting opportunities to evaluate projects on a case-by-case basis. It should be noted the way that this has effectively introduced a blanket ban on developments in or near wild land and peat land areas, despite some being supported by local planning committees, and has had a negative impact on the economic growth of communities within these areas. There needs to be more flexibility to allow appropriate development in appropriate areas, allowing much needed regeneration within these rural areas, if we are to meet our 2030 and 2045 targets.

5. What infrastructure do we need to plan and build to realise our long term aspirations?

All renewable energy projects over 50 MW should be recognised as nationally significant within NPF4, however this should also be extended to ‘all infrastructure’ associated with renewable energy projects, which will therefore allow for consideration of the onshore infrastructure (onshore electricity cables and substations) required for any offshore renewables projects.

We trust that our comments will be taken on board in the preparation of NPF4. Should you wish to discuss any matters raised in this letter further, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely



Marie Adkins
Onshore Environment and Consents Manager

for and on behalf of
Red Rock Power Limited