

Net-Zero, Energy and Transport Committee

The role of local government and its cross-sectoral partners in financing and delivering a net-zero Scotland

Submission From **Scottish Renewables**

Council planning, decision-making and capacity in relation to net zero

1. How effective are councils at strategic planning, budgeting, and making procurement decisions that align with net zero goals? If there are barriers, what are they?

Renewable energy is Scotland's main source of electricity meeting 98.6% of Scotland's gross consumption and playing a leading role in tackling climate change.

Scotland currently has 11.9GW of installed capacity with onshore wind accounting for 71% of this. Our industry already supports 22,660 Scottish jobs and an economic output of £5.2 billion a year.

The Climate Change Committee (CCC) calculates that the UK will need to quadruple the amount of renewable electricity deployed by 2050 in order to meet net-zero climate change targets. To keep Scotland on track for achieving net-zero, Scotland will require an additional 11GW of offshore wind and at least 12GW of onshore wind by 2030 to provide the electricity to decarbonise heat and transport.

Delivering on our ambitions for onshore and offshore wind will provide opportunities for Scottish supply chain and ports, creating new green jobs and skills. Achieving an additional 12GW of onshore wind will for example create £27.8 billion in GVA and 17,000 jobs across Scotland.

To ensure that Scotland can reap the economic and social benefits which renewables brings, we need council planning systems to be fit for our net-zero future, as advocated in our recent public affairs campaign Beyond COP26 – next steps for Scotland's clean energy revolution.

Despite independent surveys commissioned by the UK Government¹ consistently showing very high levels of public support for onshore wind, with the latest figures showing support of 80%, with just 4% opposed, we are still seeing a high percentage of councils putting in place planning policies that do not support onshore wind developments. This is undermining our ability to achieve net-zero.

2. What role can the local government planning system and local development plans do to help us reach net zero? Could the planning system do more?

The Scottish Government is currently consulting on the National Planning Framework Four (NPF4) to enable Scotland to achieve its net-zero ambitions. The NPF4 make the commitment that "*climate change and nature recovery should be the primary guiding principles for all plans and decisions within the planning system*".

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/beis-public-attitudes-tracker-autumn-2021>

In practice this means a fundamental rebalancing of the local government planning system and local development plans towards net-zero and nature crisis objectives in the determination of all relevant applications, both in terms of the planning balance and for the timing of decisions.

A change of approach not seen since the 1940s Planning Acts is required, and quickly, if the word emergency is to have any meaning. We cannot have a repeat of the current situation where the presumption in favour of sustainable development in the Scottish Planning Policy is continually challenged and/or overlooked in local policy and decision making.

3. What innovation, skills and capacity are needed in the local government workforce when it comes to making net zero achievable? Does that capacity exist or are there gaps?

Research commissioned by Scottish Renewables found the number of planners employed by councils in Scotland has fallen by 20%, from 1,515 in 2011 to 1,216 in 2020 but the number of applications they will have to grant must increase if Scotland is to stay on track to net-zero emissions by 2045.

We are already seeing lack of capacity in council planning departments increasing the length of time taken to process renewable energy planning applications and we expect that this will get worse if action is not taken to address the capacity shortfall.

There are also considerable skills gaps within statutory consultees for posts such as experienced ornithologists and ecologists. A key reason for this gap in capacity is that skilled, experienced experts within key parts of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) chain can earn higher salaries in the private sector. Further work is needed to identify how these skills gaps can be addressed.

There is also an ongoing shortage of landscape planners who are required for a project to be consented. We recommend The Scottish Government supports an apprenticeship programme with the Landscape Institute for Landscape Architects in Scotland as already exists in England.

We recommend that The Scottish Government could help deliver its ambitious net-zero targets by supporting the training of town and country planners in collaboration with The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) where there are gaps in both capacity and skills.

Partnering to achieve net zero goals

4. How well do councils leverage in support and finance from the private sector for net zero delivery? Are City Region Deals being used effectively for this? What mechanisms or forums are there for sharing opportunities and good practice?

Onshore wind projects generate £20 million per year in Community Benefit funding and provide thousands of pounds of investment in peatland restoration. All the benefits above are delivered through private sector finance.

Rebalancing of the local government planning system and local development plans towards net-zero and nature crisis objectives in the determination of all relevant applications is an effective way to leverage private sector finance into the delivery of net-zero.

5. How well do councils partner with the voluntary sector and social enterprises to work towards net zero goals? Are there instances of good practice you can point to or areas where opportunities are being missed?

6. How well do councils involve local communities in decision-making on major net zero projects and how do they support community-led initiatives?

As stated in our answer to Question 1 there is widespread public support for renewables. Renewable energy projects deliver significant community benefits packages.

For example, Fred Olsen Renewables' Lethen wind farm planning application (see below) includes climate change mitigation measures which would be delivered as part of a community benefits package.

Community

If consented, Lethen Wind Farm could provide over £17million in community benefit throughout the lifespan of the project.

We want to ensure that this is utilised to support local aspirations. From speaking to the local community, and exploring their priorities, we understand that fuel poverty and energy efficiency is a priority locally. We want to make it easy for people to consider how they heat their homes, switch to a green tariff, or explore insulation.

We are proposing that, as part of our community benefit package, we will create the Lethen Wind Farm Energy Efficiency Programme. It will support local residents and help them to:

- *Reduce energy bills – saving money*
- *Improve energy consumption*
- *Increase energy awareness*
- *Play an active part in Scotland's drive towards net-zero*

We want to develop a programme that will:

- *Employ an energy efficiency officer locally to provide advice and information*
- *Address fuel poverty and energy efficiency in local households*
- *Identify and support those living in fuel poor households*
- *Provide additional support over and above existing financing mechanisms*
- *Help to bring forward energy efficiency measures for individual households*
- *Support a community-wide energy conservation strategy*

The majority of onshore wind project also offer communities shared ownership opportunities.

Despite the overwhelming public support for renewable energy, its key role in achieving net-zero and the significant benefits it delivers to communities we are still seeing a high percentage of councils putting in place planning policies that do not support onshore wind developments and ignore majority support for onshore wind in communities in favour of a vocal minority of objectors.

Role of the Scottish Government and its agencies

7. What is the Scottish Government doing to help the local government sector deliver on net zero goals? What, if anything, could it do more of to help the sector?

Beyond our comments on planning and skills gaps in Question 3 we have no further comment as this falls outwith the remit of Scottish Renewables.

- 8. What is the role of enterprise agencies or other public bodies as enablers of joint working on net zero goals by local government and its cross-sectoral partners?**

Local government work on net zero in particular areas

- 9. How are councils working with cross-sectoral partners to decarbonise heat in buildings and to ensure they have greater energy efficiency?**

The Scottish Government has published its Heat in Buildings Strategy which states that organisations including local authorities, The Scottish Government and the new National Public Energy Agency will have roles in overseeing implementation of different aspects of the overall framework.

The proposed Public Energy Agency should take on council capital programmes relating to heat, as resourcing of local authorities, especially considering extra consenting obligations which came out of the Heat Networks (Scotland) Act 2021, continues to be constrained.

In addition to the Heat in Buildings strategy, the Heat Networks (Scotland) Act states the requirement for a Local Authority Cost Strategy. However, the current delivery date for this is 2024, which is much too late. Work needs to be undertaken now with local authorities and COSLA to ensure no council is left out of pocket. Funding must reach local authorities before 2024, for example, to support Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategies (LHEES) and zoning.

For heat decarbonisation, we recommend a zoning and a street-by-street approach, which local authorities can support, rather than ad-hoc individual consumers going out and looking for information. A climate emergency collective approach from the local authorities would support heat network operators, for example, to be engaged and plan a much more strategic approach. This approach facilitates economies of scale.

Having a localised, local authority-led approach will also support the Distribution Network Operators (DNOs) as they need time to prepare for electrification. For example, if they know that approximately 800,000 homes will be migrating from the gas network, the DNOs can plan for the grid reinforcements required. Taking a localised, programmatic rollout approach will facilitate DNO readiness and should bring down the associated REPEX and reinforcement costs.

- 10. How are councils working with cross-sectoral partners to decarbonise transport (including encouraging active travel) and to improve air quality?**

No comment as this falls outwith the remit of Scottish Renewables.

- 11. How are councils working with cross-sectoral partners to promote recycling and a “circular economy”?**

No comment as this falls outwith the remit of Scottish Renewables.

12. How are councils working with cross-sectoral partners to use the natural environment (its “green infrastructure”) to achieve net zero targets?

No comment as this falls outwith the remit of Scottish Renewables.

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