

Email to:  
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Joe Perry, Climate Change Coordinator, Highland Council  
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05 September 2022

Dear Dr Andrews and Mr Perry,

**Response to: The Flow Country Partnership consultation on the proposed Flow Country World Heritage Site Management Plan – July 15, 2022**

Scottish Renewables is the voice of Scotland's renewable energy industry. Our vision is for Scotland to lead the world in renewable energy. We work to grow Scotland's renewable energy sector and sustain its position at the forefront of the global clean energy industry. We represent over 300 organisations that deliver investment, jobs, social benefit and reduce the carbon emissions which cause climate change.

Our members work across all renewable energy technologies, in Scotland, the UK, Europe and around the world, ranging from energy suppliers, operators and manufacturers to small developers, installers, and community groups, as well as companies throughout the supply chain. In representing them, we aim to lead and inform the debate on how the growth of renewable energy can provide solutions to help sustainably heat and power Scotland's homes and businesses.

Scottish Renewables (SR) welcomes the opportunity to provide our view on The Flow Country Partnership's consultation on the proposed Flow Country World Heritage Site (WHS) Management Plan.

The renewable energy sector recognises the dual challenges of the nature and climate crises, and the need for urgent, strategic-scale action and proportionate statutory protection to address them. Renewable energy developments can deliver for nature, including via peatland restoration, and therefore have the potential to tackle both the nature and climate crises in tandem. Renewable energy developments can also contribute to energy resilience and provide societal benefits, for example via community funding.

The sector welcomes proportionate and robust statutory protections and acknowledges the potential benefits that World Heritage Site (WHS) status could bring to the Northern Highlands, such as tourism. However, as drafted, we have several concerns with the proposed Management Plan and consider there are several opportunities to strengthen the plan, to ensure the Flow Country fully contributes to and facilitates net-zero progress. We have summarised these below.

Please also refer to our related submission dated July 26, 2022, to The Flow Country Partnership consultation on the proposed Flow Country World Heritage Site and boundary.

**Proposed Flow Country World Heritage Site and Boundary Consultation**

SR members note that the draft Management Plan was available online before the end of the consultation on the proposed boundary. Further, the draft Management Plan consultation is dated July 15, 2022, but the boundary consultation did not close until July 29, 2022. The draft Management Plan proposes a site boundary and utilises the proposed boundary in relation to the approach it sets out for the management of various land uses. We recommend clarification be provided by the Flow Country Partnership on how the WHS boundary consultation responses will be taken into account.

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As stated in SR's boundary consultation response, the sequence of considering the appropriateness or otherwise of the boundary first, and then going on to examine the content of a management approach/plan is the wrong sequence of consideration and should be revised.

Further, the consultation on the boundary was entirely silent on the matter of renewable energy which is a key land use in Caithness and Sutherland. Our members agree that there should be explicit recognition of wind energy development as part of the 'working' landscape of Caithness and Sutherland which can continue to successfully co-exist and further evolve.

### **Statement of Outstanding Universal Value**

The proposed Management Plan clarifies that the Flow Country is being nominated as a WHS under UNESCO's criteria for ecosystem processes (criterion ix) and biodiversity (criteria x) but not natural beauty (criterion vi). The statement of Outstanding Universal Value is explicit and reinforces these qualifying features.

However, this message is not consistent throughout the document and there is conflicting text, notably in Section 6.7, which states that:

*"Although the Site is not being proposed for its natural beauty... the visual impact of wind farm developments needs to be considered as this can be relevant for the way people experience the Site in respect to its setting. The Outstanding Universal Value of the peatlands is not just in the value of the individual areas, but in the way it is experienced and understood."*

This implies landscape protection for the WHS, which is inappropriate within the context of the UNESCO criteria for the proposed bid. This ambiguity would also result in difficulties when implementing proposed policies 1.7 to 1.11, which, in summary, dictate opposition to developments that will negatively impact the Outstanding Universal Value.

Such opposition would only be appropriate where developments would result in unacceptable impacts on ecosystem processes and biodiversity but as drafted, this could be interpreted as relating to Landscape and Visual impacts. We also note that draft National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4), Policy 28, states that "*Development proposals that affect a World Heritage Site or its setting should only be supported where their Outstanding Universal Value is protected and preserved*", which further clarifies the needs for the protection of WHS to focus on its specific Outstanding Universal Value.

Further, as noted elsewhere in the document, landscape protection is already afforded through other planning policies and guidance. We, therefore, recommend that the text in Section 6.7 stated above be amended or removed to confirm that the WHS does not represent a landscape designation. The wider proposed Management Plan should also be reviewed to ensure consistent messaging in this regard.

Section 6.7 also states that:

*"In terms of the setting, whether or not large schemes are a threat to the way the Site is experienced and presented will need further exploration"*.

This is vague and ambiguous. The impacts of large schemes would be assessed, managed, and regulated through the planning process, both in relation to stand-alone and cumulative developments. This text should therefore be deleted.

## **Supporting Appropriately Sited Renewable Energy Developments**

The Flow Country is located in or bordering an area of Scotland that will remain strategically important for renewable energy developments for the foreseeable future. Northern Highlands will have a crucial role to play in pursuit of Scotland's legally binding target of reaching net-zero by 2045 and the binding interim targets for 2030 and 2040.

Indeed, this is recognised in The Scottish Government's draft National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4), which states that the Northern Highlands can stimulate green prosperity by supporting renewable energy generation. Renewable energy developments can also provide socio-economic benefits, for example via the community benefit funds generated from wind farms. These can be used to tackle current and emerging challenges, such as energy security and contributing to alleviating fuel poverty, the latter of which is a recognised challenge for rural areas in Scotland, including Caithness and Sutherland<sup>1</sup>.

The proposed Management Plan should therefore reflect these points and set out a clear, positive position that supports appropriately sited renewable energy developments. This can be achieved via the following:

- Section 6.7 should be expanded to include a statement that the Flow Country WHS will support appropriately sited renewable energy developments, where potential impacts have been demonstrated to be acceptable through the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and planning processes. This should cover new renewable energy developments, inclusive of wind energy and other renewable energy technologies, and the repowering and life extension of wind farms within the Caithness and Sutherland area.
- Section 6.7 should elaborate on the positive benefits that renewable energy developments can offer for society and nature. For example, research undertaken at Coriolis Energy's Causeymire Windfarm from 2004 to 2019 identified significant improvements in bog condition, with the RSPB monitoring method identifying large improvements in the extent of several indicators of good bog condition and breeding bird habitat, particularly increased cover for Heather and Bog-moss Sphagnum.

Similarly, ScottishPower Renewables (SPR) has delivered a wide range of biodiversity initiatives at its sites, including the restoration of degraded peatland habitat, creation of native woodlands and species monitoring. SPR currently manages approximately 8,500 hectares of peatland habitat and has spent £2.5 million on peatland restoration and research over the last decade, including investigating the impact of constructing infrastructure on peatland habitats, thus demonstrating the positive impacts of renewable energy developments for peatlands.

## **Policy Framework and the Statutory Development Plan**

The WHS bid will be submitted in early 2023 with the current programme anticipating a decision by summer 2024. By this time, Scotland's National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) will be enacted and under the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, the statutory Development Plan now consists of the NPF4 together with the Local Development Plans (LDP). We, therefore, recommend that Section 4 of the proposed Management Plan be amended to provide further clarity on the policy framework for Scotland.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/collections/scottish-house-condition-survey/>

## Conclusions and Recommendations

- Our members highlight that designation as a WHS by UNESCO brings no additional statutory controls, but protection is afforded through the planning system and the site-specific management plan. The majority of the proposed Flow Country Site and boundary is located within existing overlapping statutory designated sites, including SSSIs, SPAs, SACs and Ramsar sites. These designations provide an appropriate level of statutory protection for the blanket bog. Therefore, WHS designation is in environmental protection terms more of an accolade than a necessary layer of protection.
- The boundary of a WHS should be restricted to existing designations, namely SACs, SPAs and SSSIs and additional land beyond those designations should not be included. Land beyond the Site would be the 'setting' and it will be subject to national planning and local planning policy and any further guidance in relation to the setting once that has been developed, consulted on and put into force. This will allow a balanced approach to land use management and environmental protection in terms of the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) for the WHS.
- There should be explicit recognition of wind energy development as part of the 'working' landscape of Caithness and Sutherland which can continue to successfully co-exist and further evolve. Further, there should be no 'buffer zones'.
- There should be explicit recognition as set out in the current draft Onshore Wind Policy Statement (OWPS) Refresh that the Government is expecting "*a consistently higher rate of onshore wind and other renewables capacity, year on year*".
- Full account should be taken of the final content of National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) and the new Onshore Wind Policy Statement (OWPS) both of which are expected to be published in late 2022.

Our members highlight that such an approach to the formation of the boundary for the proposed WHS would provide clarity and confidence for the land use activities which are present, and which are continuing to be developed and at the same time would allow full protection of the Site.

It is trusted that Scottish Renewable's concerns and matters raised above will be fully taken into account when considering the proposed boundary for the WHS area and the finalised Management Plan.

Scottish Renewables would be keen to engage further with this agenda and would be happy to discuss our response in more detail.

Yours sincerely,



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**END**