

ONSHORE PLANNING AS AN ENABLER

Post-meeting letter to Hannah Mary Goodlad MSP, Minister for Public Finance
From Scottish Renewables, Solar Energy Scotland and the Scottish Onshore Wind
Developers Forum

24 September 2026

Dear Minister Goodlad,

Thank you for meeting with us on 27th August 2026 to discuss onshore planning levers and for a genuinely constructive discussion. We were encouraged by your wish to hear directly from industry about what is working, what should change and what should stop, so that onshore planning can enable investment and delivery.

We welcome the Scottish Government's commitment in its recent Programme for Government 2026 to 2031 to begin consultation on various reforms to simplify our planning and consenting systems to speed up processes, giving greater confidence to those looking to invest while providing local people with the confidence and understanding on various reforms.

Planning is wholly devolved, so this is one of the strongest levers to deliver asks in the Scottish Government's gift. We would urge that a targeted approach is taken whereby capacity and consistency is prioritised to enable faster decisions by continuing to resource the Energy Consents Unit (ECU), together with improved funding for planning authorities, consultees and the Planning and Environmental Appeals Division (DPEA). We have set out our feedback below in two parts: first, what the Scottish Government is doing well and should continue to do; and second, the areas where change is needed.

Our central message is unchanged from the meeting: Scotland's renewable energy policy framework remains strong. The principal challenge is delivery. The change industry and communities need is not a weaker planning system, but planning with the confidence to reach conclusions through a system that listens carefully, tests the evidence, resolves what can be resolved, balances what remains, and then decides effectively.

Part 1 – What is working well

1. Policy support and the framing of planning as an enabler

We strongly welcome the framing of planning as an enabler. This core devolved power is a significant lever to deliver renewable energy and economic success for Scotland. NPF4 supports the deployment of renewables, leading to employment, investment, business and supply chain opportunities, and development, contributing to local and regional community wealth-building.

The evidence¹ shows the framework is working in principle: of the 54 Section 36 decisions since February 2023, 42 were consented with a 78% consent rate. Where a proposal is not subject to a public local inquiry, the consent rate rises to 97% (29 of 30). Applicants are not, in the main, failing on policy considerations.

2. A stable and trusted consenting route for major projects

The Section 36 regime itself is functioning. Decisions are being taken across the full range of local authorities, at scale and at modern turbine heights (average consented tip height of 183m, with 200m now the most common consented height). This is a system capable of

¹ Evidence supplied to Scottish Renewables by Eversheds under copyright, 2026.

accommodating the next generation of projects. The policy context and consenting frameworks are not broken and do not need substantive reform, as noted in Scottish Renewables and Solar Energy Scotland's recent responses to the Consultation on the threshold for applications under the Electricity Act, the threshold should remain at 50MW.

3. Investment in consenting capacity through the Onshore Wind Sector Deal

We recognise and welcome the additional planning and consenting capacity delivered through the Scottish Onshore Wind Sector Deal, and the establishment of the Planning Hub to offer consistency and specialist support to planners. These were positively intentioned interventions.

4. Openness to industry evidence

Your recognition at the meeting that investors, manufacturers and contractors need long-term visibility and confidence before committing capital was welcome, as was your receptiveness to planning system capacity and your invitation for further evidence. That is the spirit in which this letter is offered, and we will follow up shortly with a body of evidence showcasing that increasing the number of ECU case officers was not a simple fix to shorten project determination timelines; the problem is more complex and requires proper resourcing of the planning system and statutory consultees to enable them to meet statutory timeframes.

Part 2 – Where improvement is needed

The following themes are where the gap between policy ambition and delivery on the ground is widest.

Theme A – Decision timescales are too long and are not improving

This is a significant concern, and the casework statistics showcase this. Across the 54 decisions, the average time from application to decision is 35.7 months, which is close to three years before a Final Investment Decision can be reached. The trend is not moving in the right direction: annual averages were 42.2 months in 2023, 29.7 months in 2024, 33.7 months in 2025 and 35.4 months across 2026 to date. The improvement seen in 2024 has not been sustained.

For context, the Onshore Wind Sector Deal commitment that resulted in a doubling of the ECU staff came in during 2023. Critically, this means the additional resource secured through it has not yet translated into materially faster decisions. We are not arguing that the investment was wrong; we are asking why the output has not followed and offering to work with officials on the diagnosis.

Asks:

1. Publish a target determination timescale for Section 36 (generators) and Section 37 (grid) and Major Applications related to grid and associated onshore infrastructure, for all renewable technologies and report performance against it annually.
2. Commission a short review of why additional consenting resources have not reduced determination times. As noted above, we believe the root of the problem is the lack of resources and/or commitment to meet delivery expectations in the planning process (local authority planning departments and statutory consultees).

Theme B – Public local inquiries are the primary driver of delay

Of the 54 decisions, 23 (43%) went to a public local inquiry. Those cases took an average of 43.8 months to determine, against 29.5 months where no inquiry was held, where an inquiry adds around 14 months.

The inquiry outcome data matters just as much: 57% of projects that went to inquiry were ultimately consented. In other words, in the majority of cases, the objection that triggered a year or more of delay was not sustained. The cost of that delay is borne by consumers and by Scotland's investment pipeline.

Furthermore, in speaking with the DPEA, the number of cases that are live at the moment are at their highest ever level for Section 36 and 37 projects, with more than 25 predicted to be transferred in the next six months, resulting in the stacking of cases.

Ask:

1. Front-load and time-limit the inquiry process and empower decision-makers to reach a balanced judgement on the evidence rather than waiting indefinitely for unanimity between qualified specialists.

Theme C – Statutory consultee positions on single issues

Objections from statutory consultees on single issues are derailing or delaying projects that are otherwise policy-compliant, such as cultural heritage 'setting' effects being a recurring example. The NatureScot position on peat is also disproportionate, with developers expected to restore ten times the area of peatland a scheme may affect plus 10% for enhancement. There is no justification for that, and a more proportionate approach is needed.

Statutory consultees should have a strong voice, but not an unreviewable veto. Where qualified specialists disagree, the decision-maker should be empowered to evaluate the evidence and to fold that single issue into the overall balance of positive and negative impacts. The requirement is not weaker scrutiny, but active professional judgement and accountable decision-making. An examination of Climate Act (2009) duties on public bodies would help ensure consultation responses take the broadest possible view, and a structured feedback exercise with developers would quickly surface the scale of the problem.

Ask:

1. Examine proportionality in relation to 'setting' effects on scheduled monuments and of peatland restoration expectations.
2. Examine public bodies duties under the Climate Act (2009) in relation to consultation responses and consider a structured feedback exercise with developers.

Theme D – Strategic uncertainty: SSEP, the Energy Strategy and targets

The absence of a refreshed Scottish Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan (SESJTP), and of an agreed long-term strategic framework, is creating uncertainty for communities and investors alike. The Scottish Government has a role to play in the coordination of the UK Strategic Spatial Energy Plan (SSEP) by developing the SESJTP ahead of the SSEP rather than waiting for it in late 2027 or into 2028.

Our key concern is the proposed SSEP, co-commissioned by the Scottish Government. There is a significant risk that it will not cater for the levels of onshore renewable development that would benefit Scotland and the thousands of jobs on offer. The de facto ban on Scottish onshore wind after 2030 initially proposed in the Clean Power Action Plan

has already delayed or switched off billions in planned investment. The UK Government is updating its plans for aligning grid and generation development under the SSEP, and so we urge you, with the Energy Minister, to ensure the model adopted continues to deliver low-cost onshore wind through the 2030s, and to consider what a 2040 target or ambition might look like, as has been done for Scottish offshore wind. There are numerous reports that demonstrate onshore wind (and solar) are among the cheapest forms of electricity generation.

A practical, immediate point: developers are meeting push-back from communities and consultees based on the initial Clean Power Action Plan position post-2030 – ‘you are not needed’. This is untenable. Clear communication to planners confirming that such views are not relevant to the decision, and that the SSEP is not intended to supersede NPF4 as a material consideration, would help now and cost nothing.

Ask:

1. Set a target for onshore wind to 2040.
2. Ensure planning decisions are not subject to interference by the Clean Power 2030 Action Plan and SSEP processes.

Solar and Storage in Scotland

The Clean Power Action Plan ambitions beyond 2030 also fall short for solar. We recommend the Scottish Government set an ambitious target to deliver for solar and communicate that ambition to NESO and DESNZ, so it can be reflected in strategic grid planning. During the last parliament, the Scottish Government publicly committed to 4–6GW by 2030, yet that commitment appears to have waned, with the narrative now suggesting this is an industry’s ambition rather than one shared by the Scottish Government. Given the benefits solar offers, from both rooftop and ground-mounted installations that reticence is difficult to understand.

Continued investment in storage will enable the smart roll-out of renewable technologies and allow for a more resilient grid network through the supply of ancillary services and help to optimise system costs.

Asks:

1. The Scottish Government should therefore reaffirm and demonstrate its commitment to solar energy, working with industry to publish a Solar Sector Deal or Vision that includes a 2035 target.
2. Storage should be factored into the whole systems approach to energy in Scotland.
3. A range of further policy asks on solar and storage are set out in the Solar Energy Scotland manifesto published in November last year ².

Theme E – Planning system capacity and expertise

The number of planners with the right skills to make decisions is falling, in the ECU and in local planning authorities. We welcome the Planning Hub, but support should be given to expanding the number of qualified professionals. We need planning with new planners who have the confidence to reach conclusions. This is something that has been raised with the Royal Town Planning Institute in the past and they are actively working to bring new

² [Solar Energy Scotland Manifesto • Solar Energy UK](#)

planners into the sector. Could the Scottish Government sponsor more planning courses to be set up in Scotland again through Scottish Institutions?

We were concerned by suggestions that larger projects could be diverted back to local authority decision-making. Local authorities are already under significant resource pressure, and we do not believe such a move would improve performance. We disagree strongly that the Section 36 threshold should be raised to 100MW or above; this is not an area that is broken (see the comments above for further information in footnote 2). Any increase in planning officer capacity must also be matched by investment in the DPEA, or delay will simply move further into the system.

Fees have increased significantly, both to the ECU and to local planning authorities, without improved outcomes or timescales.

Asks:

1. We would welcome a clear link between fee levels and service standards.

Theme F – Specific blockers requiring Ministerial attention

- **Eskdalemuir:** together with transparent aviation-mitigation arrangements, this should be treated as an early national investment-enabling priority to unlock multiple Gigawatts of renewable generation.
- **Aviation mitigation:** developers are struggling to distinguish a demonstrated operational effect from a reasonable technical mitigation and from a commercial negotiation over the price of that mitigation. We are concerned that the planning process is being used to leverage commercial agreements from projects, increasing the cost of electricity to consumers. Landscape and visual effects arising from aviation lighting now feature as a determining issue in a substantial share of decisions.
- **The Wull Muir (Raeshaw) judgement:** live projects have been halted pending 'whole project' assessment. We understand EIA guidance is being prepared and that legal cases are ongoing, but the resulting uncertainty, delay and cost are significant and looks set to worsen consenting timescales.

Ask:

1. We ask that Scottish Government examines every opportunity to minimise the risk of increased costs and delays, and that guidance taking onboard the themes raised by all organisations in our interviews with Fothergill Training is issued as soon as possible.
- **Abnormal loads** and infrastructure coordination: needs greater coordination via a link to policy work between consenting authorities and infrastructure providers is needed if consented projects are to be built on time.

Ask:

1. The exorbitant cost of temporary land use at pinch points en route to sites, particularly for oversail of blades over land, is an area that also merits some attention.

Theme G – Community benefit and local engagement

Strengthening community benefit is a shared ambition. But we would caution against simply increasing the financial expectations placed on projects: in a market environment driving the cost of energy to the lowest possible level, escalating financial requirements will risk

constraining deployment without delivering better outcomes for communities. We would rather see a continued momentum to build on maximising the long-term value these funds can deliver for communities by supporting community organisations to participate effectively, encouraging peer-to-peer learning between communities, and developing models that create enduring local benefit rather than headline financial contributions. The onshore sector has contributed significantly to community benefit schemes over the last three decades and there are some excellent examples of where that money has been used further skills, jobs, education and recreational opportunities.

An additional and far more powerful measure would be to localise business rates from renewable energy development. This would at least triple community wealth building from development overnight, without loading further cost onto projects. More broadly, reform of non-domestic rates would improve project economics and viability for onshore wind.

On engagement, the ECU appears distant from local community engagement processes. Post-COVID, face-to-face meetings with consultees and the ECU have reduced significantly. Piloting ECU attendance at community events to explain the process and site visits for major applications would be a positive step in connecting national decision-making with local participation. Engagement with developers needs to step back up as well, with the re-introduction of portfolio meetings so that project timelines and themes can be shared as projects work towards determination.

Theme H – Joined-up government on solar

There is a clear opportunity to communicate a joined-up government approach to solar, linking planning, energy, agriculture, soils, biodiversity and rural development. Solar farms deliver biodiversity and wildlife benefits, particularly in areas of intensive agriculture, and can protect farming businesses from weather-related volatility by insulating them from the worst effects of the climate crisis and enabling them to continue producing food. Farming can continue between and around panel arrays, in what is becoming a substantial area of worldwide innovation in agrivoltaics. Land use for solar targets is minimal (0.1%), and a more balanced narrative is needed. These matters are set out further in the Solar Energy Scotland manifesto.

Ask:

1. Examine the tension between NPF 4 Policies 5 (Soils) and 11 (Energy) in determining solar energy projects, identifying how competing policy objectives should be balanced in planning decisions.

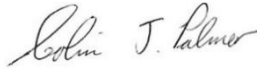
In summary

Our view is that the planning system does not need substantive reform. It needs to be empowered, with the drive and the resources to encourage engagement and enable investment. Planning has traditionally had a broad presumption in favour of development; this is being re-embraced elsewhere in the UK through the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), and it is vital that Scottish decision-making reinforces that approach, as it should not be about proving why a project should be approved, but a balanced assessment of whether the development is acceptable.

With a strong planning system and a Ministerial hand, there is an opportunity to resolve temporary blockers such as Eskdalemuir by working with the UK Government, ensuring that reforms such as the SSEP do not prevent the delivery of Scotland's potential, and using devolved powers to give planners and decision-makers the confidence to reach conclusions. Without these being addressed, we will not see the scale of investment Scotland needs.

We would be delighted to discuss any of the above further with you and your officials, and to share the underlying decisions data in full.

Yours sincerely,



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Annex – The evidence base

Source: Eversheds analysis of all 54 Section 36 onshore wind decisions, February 2023 to March 2026.

Measure (54 Section 36 decisions, Feb 2023 – Mar 2026)	Figure	What it tells us
Overall consent rate	78%	42 consented, 12 refused – policy support is real
Consent rate where no inquiry was held	97%	29 of 30 consented
Average time from application to decision	35.7 months	Almost three years for a consented project
Average where no public local inquiry	29.5 months	The best-case position today
Average where a public local inquiry was held	43.8 months	An inquiry adds c.14 months
Proportion going to public local inquiry	43%	23 of 54 – far too high a share
Success rate at public local inquiry	57%	Objections are frequently not sustained
Longest / shortest determination	62 / 13 months	Scoop Hill / Creag Riabhach Extension
Annual average determination time	42.2 (2023), 29.7 (2024), 33.7 (2025), 35.4 (2026 to date) months	Improvement after 2023 has not been sustained