RSPB Scotland, April 2005

Strategic Locational Guidance for Wind Farm Developments

Background

Delivery of renewable energy projects could be undermined by the lack of strategic guidance in Scotland, in particular the current upsurge in wind farm proposals has resulted in increased levels of conflict with other interests, including environmental ones. The Executive have not made it clear how much wind or any other renewable electricity development Scotland can take place without compromising other Government obligations, such as conserving important wildlife sites. As a result, there has been an ever-increasing number of wind farm proposals, which could have implications for sensitive wildlife sites.

In publishing their targets for renewable electricity, the Scottish Executive have not spatially apportioned the land-take for the rapidly growing body of wind farm developments. The report commissioned from Garrad Hassan by the Scottish Executive *(Scotland's Renewable Resource, 2001*) suggests that Scotland could accommodate more than 59GW of installed renewable capacity outwith those areas protected for their cultural or natural heritage value and taking into account grid constraints, low flying areas, marine navigational risks and 'social' constraints. How and where this will happen has not been considered or determined at a national level. We believe the easiest and most effective means of doing this is through strategic locational guidance for renewables.

The current policy framework is failing to deliver the necessary results. The Scottish Executive, in consultation with various stakeholders, has determined the criteria to be considered by consenting authorities when determining renewable proposals in the form of NPPG 6. This national policy guidance should then be translated into structure and local plans. NPPG 6 requires development plans to define broad areas of search, identify areas where renewables would only be considered in exceptional circumstances and develop criteria for all development proposals.

The Welsh Experience

Pressure for onshore wind farm developments in Wales in the mid to late 1990s resulted in a dramatic decline in the number of consents being issued, with no new onshore wind farms being connected to the grid in 1999 or 2000. This was largely as a result of growing public concern and objections. Consequently, the Welsh Assembly have addressed the issue by producing a Draft Technical Advice Note, which identifies strategic search areas for onshore wind power. (website: http://www.wales.gov.uk/subiplanning/content/tans/tans_e.htm). Scotland has a comparatively high rate of consenting success, which could be significantly reduced or delayed as public concerns grow. Statistics from 1999 to 2003 show that less than 20% of the wind farm applications in Wales were approved during this period (by both local authorities and government), in England the comparative figure was under 60% while in Scotland it was more than 80% (figures taken from British Wind Energy Association web site).

RSPB Scotland 'Planning for Renewables Project"

An ongoing project by RSPB Scotland, to review policies for renewables in development plans across the UK, has found that the identification of 'areas of search' or 'preferred areas' is limited primarily to structure plans, with local plans relying heavily on criteria based policies. Local

authorities are finding it difficult to translate the requirements of NPPG6 into action due to limited technical expertise and the weight of development pressure. With current proposals to remove universal structure plan coverage and instead produce four Strategic Development Plans for the city regions, large areas of Scotland will be without any strategic locational guidance. Reliance on local plans without national strategic locational guidance will increase the probability of cumulative impacts, while failure to identify areas of search could result in the sterilisation of areas, which are most appropriate for wind farm developments.

This project aims to identify and evaluate energy polices in development plans and strategies throughout the UK. To date, our review has shown that approximately one third of Structure Plans produced since 1999 include some form of mapped 'preferred area' or 'areas of search' for wind farms.

Examples:

- Aberdeenshire/Aberdeenshire, Stirling/Clackmannanshire, Fife, Highlands and the Scottish Borders all offer good policies for renewable energy and wind farm developments at Structure Plan level.
- The Aberdeenshire/Aberdeen Structure Plan (2001) identifies preferred areas for wind farms through a tiered approach planning policy. Policy 26: 4 Tier Policy Areas for Minerals, Landfill, Land Raise and Wind Farm Proposals sets out those areas appropriate for such developments based on natural heritage and built environment designations. In addition Aberdeen Council have produced Strategic Planning Guidance on wind energy development for Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire. This guidance adopts the tiered approach in the Structure Plan.
- The Stirling/Clackmannanshire Structure Plan (2002) defines broad areas of search (mapped) where wind energy developments are considered acceptable. These areas have been categorised as follows:
    1. Areas of search;
    2. Exclusion areas;
    3. Exclusion areas subject to detailed definition local plan;
    4. Areas subject to further consideration.

  A weakness in this policy is that it excludes criteria for international designations. It only refers to NSAs in the Exclusion Areas.
- Fife Council identifies preferred areas for wind farm developments within the structure plan, however states that the local plans will define and safeguard the broad search areas in the most appropriate ways, taking into account the SNH, Fife Landscape Character Assessment. Again, this Plan fails to consider natural heritage interests. The Glenrothes (2003) and Cupar & Howe of Fife (2003) Local Plans analysed as part of this study fail to define broad areas of search.
- The Highland Structure Plan contains a criteria based policy. We understand the Council does not intend to identify preferred search areas, because at this strategic level, potential constraints may exist which are difficult to assess other than on a site specific basis. These include nesting, roosting, feeding/hunting and flight path areas of protected birds, proximity to residences in terms of visual impact, proximity to other locations where it is important that scenery should be protected, and cumulative impact with other wind farms or proposals for wind farms.
- The Scottish Borders Structure Plan (2002) contains a criteria based policy and identifies areas of search to facilitate wind energy developments. Policy 20: Wind Energy assesses

wind energy developments against a number of criteria including natural heritage designated sites, impact of noise on residential developments, interference with aircraft activity, shadow flicker and cumulative impact. Areas of search have been identified (and mapped) as follows:

1. Preferred;
2. Potentially Sensitive;
3. Sensitive.

Many planning authorities are currently working on supplementary guidance in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, in order to address the pressures from wind farm developments. For example, Perth & Kinross Council have recently produced Wind Energy Guidance, which seeks to direct wind farm developments to the most appropriate location. The Council have adopted a "map based" approach to identify suitable sites (strategic areas of search/strategically sensitive areas) for wind energy developments. This approach identifies those parts of Perth & Kinross, which are not considered appropriate for wind farm development, such as national designated sites, and then leaves the remaining areas for consideration by potential developers. The Council is currently consulting on the preferred areas for wind farm development.

Whilst we commend the approach being proposed by Perth & Kinross Council, we have serious concerns with the detailed guidance for strategically sensitive areas. The detailed guidance for these areas does not provide adequate protection for internationally designated sites (SPAs/SACs) or birds protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and listed on Annex 1 of the EC Birds Directive e.g. golden eagles, sea eagles and hen harriers). The policy in its current format places greater emphasis on landscape issues and less importance on international and national designated sites.

By evaluating existing local plan policies in Scotland against NPPG 6 we have concluded that East Lothian, West Lothian and Moray Council Local Plans provide good examples of a criteria based policies.

Examples:

- Policy NRG3: Wind Energy of the East Lothian Local Plan contains a good criteria based approach to guiding wind energy developments to the right location. This policy considers a number of criteria including: natural and built environment designations and applies a general presumption against wind farms within these areas.
- Moray Council Local Plan (2000) assesses renewable energy developments against Policy L/ED10: Renewable Energy Proposals. Proposals for renewable energy developments are considered against a detailed list of criteria including natural and built environment interests, tourism/recreational interests, aviation interests and agricultural land interests.

Development plan policies in Wales tend to only contain general renewable energy policies, which are predominantly criteria based. A third of plans looked contain specific policies for wind energy developments, for example Caerphilly (2003), Ceredigion (2001), Conwy (2003), Carmarthenshire (2003) and Denbighshire.

Carmarthenshire UDP provided the best example of a criteria based policy for wind energy developments.

RSPB View of Strategic Locational Guidance

RSPB Position

The Society strongly supports renewable energy developments, provided the location is right. Wind farms must be designed and located so that they have minimal effects on existing wildlife, especially high conservation priority species and habitats. We believe we can respond to climate change without irreversibly damaging the wider environment.

Strategic Locational Guidance (SLG)

RSPB call for the Scottish Executive to adopt a more strategic and long-term planning approach to guide wind farm development than is currently being taken. A strategic approach will guide the location of wind farm development to areas that minimise effects on birds and the natural heritage, particularly those sites of national and international importance. SNH has produced SLG for onshore wind farms in respect of natural heritage interests and we welcome this as a useful first step towards providing guidance to planning authorities seeking to identify potential areas for wind farm developments. With the addition of other known constraints to wind farm developments, this guidance could become the basis for national strategic locational guidance.

RSPB believes SLG should comprise of a 'map-based' approach, underpinned by defined criteria to be considered when identifying suitable sites wind farms. The criteria should cover a wide range of issues, including:

- Natural heritage interests (e.g. international and national designated sites - Natura 2000/Ramsar sites/SSSIs);
- Protected species and habitats outwith natural heritage designated sites (i.e. EU Habitats Directive Habitats listed in Annex 1/Annex 1 birds species listed in the EU Birds Directive/Species listed in Schedule 1 of Wildlife & Countryside Act);
- Landscape and recreational interests (e.g. National Parks/NSAs/AGLV/Gardens & Designed Landscapes);
- Cultural heritage interests (e.g. World Heritage Sites)
- Aviation/MOD interests (e.g. aircraft flight paths, low flying zones and radar interference);
- Community interests (e.g. proximity to settlements);
- Cumulative impacts

In identifying suitable areas for wind farm developments in Scotland, the Scottish Executive must have a detailed understanding of the issues listed above. Each of the criteria must then be categorised into varying levels of sensitivity (i.e. high/medium/low or red/amber/green) and then mapped accordingly. Sensitivity is judged on the basis of the importance of the interest and its susceptibility to impact by wind farms. High/red categories of sensitivity relate to those interests that should be avoided. Whereas, areas of low sensitivity (green) offers greatest potential for development, providing they are undertaken sensitively and with due regard to cumulative impact.

As a minimum this should result in a clearly mapped selection of areas where wind farms are considered to be inappropriate unless developers can clearly show that none of the protected

interests will be affected. This approach could be further refined with the addition of sequential testing, for example encouraging the use of brownfield sites before others.

A map based approach has the following advantages compared a criteria based approach which is commonly used (in isolation) in existing development plans in Scotland:

- It provides greater certainty to development control planners/developers/third parties;
- It consequently reduces the likelihood of costly delays which will reduce the possibility of successful developments, delays which will cause concerns for those providing financial backing for the renewables industry;
- It enables strategic decisions on grid connections, upgrades and new routes to be made in the knowledge that those areas being 'opened up' for development offer significant development potential and will not be subject to serious constraints;
- It enables local authorities to assess cross-border impacts;
- Normal development control procedures will still apply.

Enterprise Committee Recommendation and Executive Response

We are disappointed that the Executive does not support the recommendation made by the Enterprise Committee that a national framework for wind farms should be produced. The Executive's response indicates that decisions about the exact location of wind farms should be decided locally. A national framework would not prevent this; it would simply aid those local authorities who are currently struggling to develop local guidance. It also ignores the fact that many wind farm developments are already determined by the Scottish Executive as S. 36 applications.

The Executive has further responded that setting local targets would could close down certain potential development sites. We do not see how locational guidance or local targets can 'close down' areas for development, guidance is simply guidance and targets are aspirational not absolute. By comparison English policy contained in PPS22 on Renewable Energy specifically requires English Regions to establish targets in their Regional Spatial Strategies.

Conclusions

The Scottish Executive should produce strategic locational guidance for onshore (and offshore wind farms). It should be possible to produce onshore guidance within the next six months:

- At this stage, strategic locational guidance could be limited to onshore (and possibly offshore wind farms). Other renewable technologies are either locationally specific e.g. tidal barrage, very localised (solar), or not yet commercially viable
- Without strategic locational guidance the effective role out of renewable developments will be subject to increasingly lengthy delays and associated costs for both developers and the environment;
- The use of strategic locational guidance to set a clear policy framework for developers should go some way towards reducing pressure on sensitive sites;
- Additionally, the information provided by the guidance will enable cumulative impact and capacity studies to be undertaken in those areas where greatest pressure is anticipated.