Response to call for ideas
National Planning Framework 4

GreenPower is an independent originator, developer, owner and operator of renewable energy assets with projects in onshore wind, hydro and solar, founded in 2000, is based in Alloa, central Scotland and has a specialist team leading development, construction, acquisitions and operation of renewable energy projects. GreenPower has consented over 270MW of renewable assets and currently has projects in development of over 170 MW with further ambitious growth targets.

Our objective is to play our part in tackling the climate emergency by developing and operating projects that directly reduce carbon emissions and deliver economic and social benefits to local communities and the wider Scottish economy.

We welcome the 'call for ideas' to create a new National Planning Framework for the country and to reform the 2014 Scottish Planning Policy. GreenPower is a leading member of the trade body Scottish Renewables (SR), and we support much of the SR submission already made to the consultation process. We would like to take the opportunity to elaborate and add the following comments:

A credible response to the climate emergency

It is critically important that the planning framework responds adequately and timeously to the nationally and globally declared climate emergency. We are currently seeing just how quickly and radically countries and communities are capable of responding to emergencies in the shape of the coronavirus pandemic, the climate change crisis requires a similarly serious response.

This means that the NPF4 and policy focus should be on 2030 targets primarily, with a view to delivering on the 2040 and 2045 targets subsequently. The NPF is in any case a plan for ten years and this should be explicitly stated. This will sharpen the minds of those in the policy and development arena that action is needed now, it is urgent, and it is simply not credible to put off taking important decisions and new approaches till later in the journey to 2045 or 2050.

Planning policy and the NPF4 should acknowledge that significant deployment of additional onshore renewable energy capacity is required to achieve our climate change commitments. The Climate Change Committee, in its advice to Scotland in 2019 stated that renewable generating capacity 'must quadruple'.

The existing policy frameworks for renewable energy technologies — the National Planning Framework (NPF), Scottish Planning Policy (SPP), the Scottish Energy Strategy (SES) and Onshore Wind Policy Statement (OWPS) — are now significantly out of date and must be joined up and be materially enhanced to enable the scale of deployment required.

GreenPower welcomes the commitment by the First Minister to a more 'radical' approach to ensure a more positive and supportive approach to the widescale deployment of renewable energy technologies and look forward to this being incorporated into NPF4.

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Action can be taken now, no need to consult on the climate emergency

It should also be recognised that many planning decision makers are not taking on board the climate emergency as things stand, but instead reverting to the out of date policy environment of 2014 when targets were much less challenging. We would recommend that Ministers intervene ahead of the conclusion of the NPF4 revision process which could run to the end of 2021 – by declaring that more significant weight and priority be given to low carbon energy developments without further delay.

This latter point has a basis in existing policy and law, given the over-riding purpose of the enacted Planning Act of 2019 is "to manage the development and use of land in the long-term public interest" alongside the current presumption in favour of development that contributes to sustainable development set out in SPP 2014. For decision makers to continue to be able to ignore increased emphasis through the declared climate emergency is surely a gap in current interpretation of policy which could be filled without waiting on the conclusion of the NPF4 process.

Subsequently, NPF4 should explicitly state that renewable energy development is both sustainable development and in the long-term public interest.

Delivering on multiple policy objectives through planning

Scottish Government, many local authorities and renewable energy operators, all want to see communities and the Scottish economy gain maximum possible benefit from renewable energy development. In addition, many rural authorities where much of the commercially viable wind resource is to be found, also want to encourage re-population and retention of young people in their areas. **Renewable energy development can fulfil these additional objectives, and it is the planning system which is the key to this, and this is often missed by policy makers.** If there is a positive planning environment for renewable project development, then long term investment will follow – and with longer term vision, investors in the supply chain will flourish and invest for the long term.

This means that Ministers must urgently address the need for planning policy to enable commercially viable projects. There is little point in Ministers demanding supply chain benefits and jobs for Scotland, if planning policy is framed in a way that restricts the ability of developers to build projects both in areas where there is suitable energy and land resource, and at a scale where modern technologies can be deployed. The mantra of 'right projects in the right places', combined with the current approach to landscape policy on wind for example, might as readily be interpreted as: 'as few projects in as few places as possible' and where narrow and subjective stakeholder interests dominate disproportionately over the logistical and practical needs of renewable energy development. It is time for a new approach to onshore renewables which is proportionate to the climate emergency and where viable projects can be delivered where the people of Scotland can benefit.

Building a Scottish Supply Chain

The need for a more positive approach to planning policy is clearly illustrated by the repowering opportunity for Scotland. With around 8GW of existing projects coming to the end of their lives over the next ten years or so, a policy which strongly presumes repowering of those sites on a commercially viable, zero subsidy basis, would create huge momentum across the supply chain and the development community. This would in turn create opportunities for that supply chain to provide for the new onshore

development that the country will need to decarbonise the rest of the economy. Thinking strategically and focussing on making viable development happen is what is needed. Taking a landscape/plan-led approach will not achieve this. No amount of repeating the mantra 'right projects in the right places' will make them happen, particularly when at the local development management level additional criteria can be used to undermine the national effort – we need strong, practical, deliverable planning policy in order to succeed in what should be a shared endeavour of government and industry.

Landscape policy is out of touch with public opinion and not fit for purpose in a climate emergency

In a climate emergency, approaches to the weighting of different considerations in the decision-making process must clearly change. Landscape policy for onshore wind is the most obvious, where current approaches appear significantly out of step with both the reality of impact on receptors given the 15 years or so of development to date, and with huge public support for onshore windfarms in particular currently standing at 79%.

The protection of National Parks and National Scenic Areas is not under question but the application of 'Landscape Capacity Studies', particularly through adoption as supplementary guidance by Local Authorities and the way they are promoted by SNH has to be seriously questioned. It should come as no surprise to officials and Ministers that such studies, alongside the 'Wild Land' quasi-designation, are unique to Scotland – and are regarded by the renewable energy industry as tools that have emerged in recent years, either by design or by default, in order to specifically and unreasonably constrain further onshore wind development and repowering. Both Wild Land and Landscape Capacity Studies are very broad brush, highly subjective and not in any way close to reflecting the actual effects of a project specific Landscape and Visual Impact assessment - yet they are being regularly and inappropriately interpreted as the most significant determinants of acceptability.

In recent years we have witnessed the emergence of Landscape Capacity Studies, prepared on behalf of planning authorities, produced by a very limited number of landscape consultants who do not generally advise on commercial onshore wind energy developments.

These studies take their starting point that turbines in the environment are an inherently negative development proposition and are focussed on what an individual landscape architect considers acceptable in certain landscape types. These studies state that specific sized wind turbines are unacceptable in certain locations and are often used as grounds for objecting to developments, even when a development is supported by local people.

Landscape Capacity Study-based objections to wind farm proposals are often overturned by Reporters at appeal, some not, and the position appears to be confused and inconsistent. There are many example planning decisions to illustrate this, which clearly demonstrate a lack of fitness for purpose in the way such studies are prepared and applied by planning authorities to decision making.

The suggestion by the Ironside Farrar research report into SPP that Landscape Capacity Studies would provide a 'more robust' approach to wind farm development has no basis nor evidence to support the comment made by the authors, and therefore should be rejected. At another section of the report it is also stated at para 4.3.25 that:

“The scope of LCS should be fully addressed in {NPF 4}. It should be noted that these high-level studies are not a substitute for detailed and site-specific landscape and visual impact assessments. Preferably these should be replaced by Landscape Sensitivity Studies which are restricted to the sensitivity of the landscape and do not attempt to arbitrarily advise on the likely acceptable capacity of an area to different scales of onshore wind development”. Landscape Capacity Studies provide a partial and inappropriate approach which prevents development and is incompatible with meeting Scotland’s climate targets.

NPF4 should quash Landscape Capacity Studies and rely instead on high level information such as more objective and available landscape character studies, to assist the development assessment process through identifying relative sensitivities within the landscape. GreenPower would advise caution in accepting any proposal that ‘Sensitivity’ studies automatically replace ‘Capacity’ studies without very clear government direction, to avoid any risk that these could be produced to continue a ‘business-as-usual’ approach and maintain a highly negative position towards any landscape change that can accommodate commercially viable onshore wind.

Landscape Character Studies should be used to inform the baseline of site-specific Landscape Visual Impact Assessments (LVIA), incorporated into EIAs and should not specify “appropriate” turbine heights, nor seek to impose arbitrary height restrictions on wind turbines nor used as a means to assess an individual project’s suitability.

Planning policy should instead recognise that site-specific LVIAs be afforded primacy in informing, not deciding, the overall acceptability of a scheme and all proposals should be considered on a case-by-case basis by planning authorities or Ministers.

Spatial Frameworks approach need revision

The SPP 2014 spatial framework for development had its benefits in making clear to developers that Group 1 areas such as National Scenic Areas and Parks were not appropriate for large scale development such as wind farms.

However, Group 2 considerations as set out in accompanying policies were highly problematic in a number of respects. We agree with the SR assertion that it will not be possible to achieve the level of onshore wind deployment needed to achieve climate targets, without changes to Group 2, either to remove highly subjective considerations like wild land or to change the way they are dealt with in policy to shift emphasis to more positive development outcomes.

The rationale for this is that whilst it is possible to ‘substantially overcome significant effects through siting, design or other mitigation’ in a measurable way for example on carbon rich soils through habitat and restoration works and through assessment of carbon payback times, it is much less possible to verify and mitigate against subjective matters such as wild land and landscape and visual effects. In other words, current policy wording creates a planning test that is open to very wide subjective and inconsistent (mis) interpretation.

In addition, the mapping of Group 2 elements such as carbon rich soils and wild land can also be interpreted by planning authorities and other stakeholders as ‘no-go’ areas. This leads in some instances to an unnecessary and unhelpful politicisation and heated debate through the development assessment process rather than objective and pragmatic consideration.

In other words, the mapping of subjective matters in Group 2 combined with a policy test that is difficult if not impossible to pass, simply fuels conflict in the system rather than removes it. The data that forms the mapping, especially for wild land and carbon rich soils, is very high level and is not a reliable basis upon which to consider the acceptability of a project proposal. NPF4 should make this clearer.

GreenPower strongly supports the position of the trade body Scottish Renewables, that decisions on the suitability of wind farm developments outside Group 1 areas should be evaluated on a case by-case basis, based on the findings of the very detailed EIA process, by planning authorities or Ministers who are able to balance the extent of effects with other important policy objectives such as the climate emergency and the rural economy. Decisions should be ultimately informed by site-specific LVIAs and EIAs rather than through the application of constraint-based mapping within Local Development Plans (LDPs).

SPP Table 1 has resulted in most applications for renewable energy projects in and adjacent to Group 2 wild land areas being refused, even in some instances when supported by local planning committees. Projects refused include Sallachy, Glencassley, Beinn Mhor, Culachy, Limekiln, Glenmorie, Allt Duine, Carn Gorm and Caplich, resulting in a negative impact on the economic development of communities in these areas.

The Scottish Government has consistently ruled out making wild land a designation and did so again most latterly during the passage of the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 through Parliament. Its inclusion within Group 2 and its subsequent interpretation in decision making and day-to-day practice amounts to that of a designation. NPF4 needs to deal with this.

More generally, we advocate against drawing up map-based spatial plans for distributed forms of energy generation such as onshore wind whether this is on a regional or national basis as this is a fundamentally flawed approach which cannot adequately allow for other important locational factors such as grid, land and transport access to be appropriately considered.

Nearly 15 years ago, a national spatial planning approach was attempted in Wales using Welsh Technical Advice Note 8 (TAN8), intended to facilitate the deployment of 1666MW of onshore wind from seven defined areas. Instead TAN8 caused delays, led to excessive costs and ultimately led to missed targets for renewables deployment with only 565.8MW delivered by 2018.

Carbon Rich Soils

The map of carbon rich soils is a useful resource at a high level to inform project development, but its use in the spatial framework process is severely limited, given the site specific variability of the extent and quality of peatland in any specific location. The importance of high-quality peatland continuing to provide a role as a carbon store is not questioned here. However, the ability to develop renewable energy projects in areas of carbon rich soils in a careful way so that peatland is well managed and, in many cases, subject to significant restoration work should also be recognised.

Developers will always seek to avoid the deepest peat areas not least because of practical and cost reasons, and through site investigation proposed projects will be subject to rigorous environmental assessment to ensure impacts on peat are minimised. Indeed, there are many projects that have been built or proposed on peatland areas

where there is already significant damage to the peat through drainage, overgrazing and historic (mis) use such as those heavily ploughed and drained for sitka plantations. There are examples such as SSE's Strathy South and Viking projects, where the overall impact of the development is proposed to restore and regenerate damaged peatland on the sites. GreenPower's Carraig Gheal project in Argyll is located on an area of peatland but has been built sympathetically and was supported unanimously by the local planning committee, and not objected to by SNH. GreenPower supports the additional submission by Scottish Renewables on carbon-rich soils where a host of examples show that development in carbon-rich soil areas can be mutually beneficial for the local natural environment and the global and national imperative of tackling climate change.

Rather than take a more restrictive approach to development in such areas, each project should be assessed on its own merit, with careful attention to the EIA process and carbon payback calculations, combined with positive restoration and habitat and construction management conditions to minimise any unnecessary peatland losses if necessary.

Upgrade the carbon calculator

The carbon calculator used to assess projects should be enhanced to consider the 'whole energy grid' carbon intensity as part of the equation. This means including the volumes of carbon created by sectors such as transport and heating, where electrification will result in substantial carbon savings assessed against any short-term losses from the construction process. Clarification of this more meaningful approach should be set out in NPF4. Simply branding all peatland as the same and banning all development in areas of carbon rich soils would be a backward step and deny the opportunity to save carbon from well designed and executed low carbon development.

Aviation lighting

Given the need for Scotland to adopt a positive approach to enable modern, efficient and commercially viable wind deployment, the issue of obligatory aviation lighting on turbines taller than 150m to tip has come to the fore. Scottish Natural Heritage has created a substantial workstream aiming to inform the development process, but we are also beginning to see objections to wind farms on the basis of night time aviation lighting being unacceptable if visible for example, from Wild Land Areas in the middle of the night. In the face of a climate emergency this issue should be considered in proportion to the environmental threat from climate change. Objections to wind farms on aviation lighting should not be considered reasonable under NPF4, and this matter could simply be screened out of the assessment process unless a proposed development is within a designated Dark Sky area.

Transport and Heat policy

GreenPower broadly supports the submission from Scottish Renewables on transport and renewable heat to the call for ideas. We believe Scotland should take immediate action to reduce carbon emissions from transport, to focus on renewable energy driven heat solutions and adjust our policies to reflect that urgency.

The trunk road network in Scotland should be targeted for classification as carbon free travel corridors, with a clear strategy and policies to promote development of appropriate fuelling infrastructure. We would like to see regional transport fuel strategies promoting local generation and consumption for transport. Specifically, we would wish Scottish transport authorities to be given powers to identify and classify transport corridors according to their environmental status e.g. the public roads included along the North

Coast 500 route could be classified as sensitive routes and consequently only appropriate low-carbon impact vehicles permitted to enter.

Our proposals support the introduction of Clean Air Zones in urban areas, and we wish to extend management of road traffic environmental impact to the trunk routes and major tourist routes in rural Scotland.

We would like to see an environmental impact assessment of the trunk roads across rural Scotland and appropriate schemes implemented to protect, remediate and improve the environment adjacent to trunk roads.

In those prescribed areas of Scotland with high natural capital, we would like to see management of road transport access for petrol and diesel vehicles, with zero carbon alternatives made available, e.g. A83/A816 be prescribed as carbon free routes.

Such approaches proposed above would also require specific assistance for residents to transition their vehicles from petrol/diesel to low carbon vehicles.

There should also be a strong presumption against any proposals for new petrol and diesel stations in the new NPF4 regardless of what is promised by fossil fuel developers regarding zero carbon fuel supply at some point in the future. There are enough petrol and diesel fuelling stations already.

We would like to see a presumption in favour of energy generation projects where those projects are designed to produce fuel for local transport strategies e.g. hydrogen filing stations with wind turbine generator, storage battery and electrolyser adjacent to roads.