COSLA

Thank you for your recent letter regarding the conclusions of the Scottish Parliament's Economy, Energy & Tourism Committee inquiry into the achievability of the Scottish Government's 2020 renewable energy targets. This matter was considered by COSLA's Development, Economy & Sustainability Executive Group at its meeting on 29th November.

As several of the recommendations in your Committee's report relate to Local Government I have been mandated by my Executive Group fellow councillors to respond on COSLA's behalf.

We note that one of your recommendations is that COSLA and Heads of Planning (HOPS) publish regular reports which provide a breakdown of renewable energy developments by local authority area to demonstrate progress towards Scottish Government targets on the 2020 renewables targets for heat and energy.

You will be aware that COSLA, Heads of Planning (HOPS) and the Scottish Government recently agreed a comprehensive Planning Performance Framework effective from September this year. This is a comprehensive performance assessment which is submitted by planning authorities to the Scottish Government. In addition, the Scottish Government's statistics division also produces quarterly statistical data on a range of application types. Whether the diversion of planning resources to completing yet more statistical returns will achieve the desired planning outcomes of quality, speed and certainty of outcome is debatable, although perhaps in relation to the larger energy applications managed by the Energy Consents Unit (ECU) in Scottish Government the ECU could undertake such a role. It should also be noted that the bulk of ECU work also falls onto local government planners for Electricity Act applications although we do not receive a sufficiently proportionate element of fee income.

The report makes reference to the proposed fee increase as outlined in the planning consultations for both Planning Act and Electricity Act applications earlier this year. COSLA welcomed the proposal for increasing fees given the current situation is creating an unsustainable funding gap where council tax payers are effectively subsidising the development sector. However I would wish to highlight that the as yet-to-be-confirmed planning fee increase was intended to address the existing funding deficit which has seen cost recovery fall from over 80% in 2004/5 to around 50% in 2010/11 according to the Scottish Government's own figures. Your Committee's proposal that this be hypothecated to 'address the duplication of effort for developers' by requiring planning authorities 'to take on tasks such as gathering information on cumulative visual impact from their own records rather than each developer having to undertake this task separately' raises three clear issues for COSLA.

Firstly, the fee increase has not been confirmed and even if it is forthcoming it is not intended to solely support the renewables sector, but to address severe resource issues in local planning authorities. Any proposed hypothecation of the fee increase is not appropriate as it is intended to address the system as a whole and not to meet
specific outcomes for specific sectors nor to resource the achievement of national targets in relation to renewables.
Secondly, such a proposal would need to be discussed as an additional new obligation and would have to be negotiated directly with COSLA as part of the wider local government financial settlement. Thirdly the issue of cumulative visual impact will by its very nature change with each and every application and may create a 'tipping point' at a certain stage, so it is only right that this necessary supporting information for a renewables application should be borne by the applicant. To place this additional burden on the already over-stretched resources of a planning authority is not appropriate, unless again funding is available to cover the costs of this new obligation in its entirety.

Another recommendation is that the Scottish Government gives greater support to the preparation of development plan policy and spatial frameworks relating to renewable energy. Any additional support from Scottish Government would be welcome, but I would stress that these plans are locally developed and must reflect local priorities developed with local stakeholders through the local democratic process and not simply to reflect and deliver national targets and priorities. Your recommendation that developers should give due regard to local plans is particularly welcome given the Government's clear aim of delivering a plan-led planning system.

You will be aware that during the period of your inquiry that COSLA and Heads of Planning (HOPS) have been invited to participate in the Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism's Short Life Working Group on Onshore Consents and some of these matters will be taken forward in that context.

Your report also recommends that planning policy should be adjusted to highlight the local economic benefit of projects. COSLA members agree that economic benefits are important considerations but that we should not lose sight of the wider consideration required of environmental and social impacts, including on health and well-being and which we believe merit equal consideration with economic matters. Planning authorities already interpret Scottish planning policy in a local context through their strategic and local development plans.

With any planning application there will be specific local contexts and relevant material considerations which will need to be taken into account in order to reach a decision. Communities expect local decision-making on applications to carefully consider a variety of factors, not solely by reference to economic matters. Councils must also consider the wider environmental and other impacts in accordance with their statutory duties.

COSLA also notes the points made in your report regarding impact on tourism of renewable energy infrastructure, and that there is no empirical evidence to demonstrate tourism is adversely affected by renewables, as evidenced by statistical information from Visit Scotland.

As noted above the local planning process considers economic, environmental and social impacts of proposed renewables developments, with tourism forming part of this.
Regarding transmission charging for island communities, members agreed with the committee's proposal to urge greater joint working between all parties involved to ensure that the finalised transmission charging does not disadvantage island-based developers from being appropriate schemes.

Also, we note the reports comments regarding the role of local authorities in the transition to a low carbon economy and the proposal that we take a greater leadership role at a local level.

COSLA's view is that there needs to be a continuing greater role for the whole of the public sector in Scotland, not just local authorities and it disappointing that the Committee has chosen to focus on local authorities specifically but also fails to reflect up on the existing level of leadership and commitment given to this agenda across all 32 councils.

We welcome further support for our efforts to achieve the 2020 renewables targets, building upon the Scottish councils existing voluntary commitment to the Scottish Climate Change Declaration and work under the requirements of the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009, COSLA's role in co-chairing the Public Sector Climate Action Group with the Scottish Government and our support for the Sustainable Scotland Network practitioner group Local authorities are undertaking a leadership role in relation to electric vehicles and a national charging network and we are keen that the focus of electric vehicles goes beyond local authorities to the wider public sector, including Scottish Government.

I hope that these comments on your report are seen as a welcome contribution to the ongoing discussions on achieving a sustainable future for Scotland.