



**PE1564/E**

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The Scottish Parliament  
Edinburgh  
EH99 1SP

Date: 31 July 2015

By email to: [petitions@scottish.parliament.uk](mailto:petitions@scottish.parliament.uk)

Dear Mr Sharratt,

**CONSIDERATION OF PETITION [PE1564](#) (Save Loch Ness and the Great Glen): *Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to take steps to designate the Loch Ness and Great Glen as a National Scenic Area; to recommend a priority application is made to UNESCO for the area to be afforded World Heritage protection; and to take appropriate steps to discourage further wind turbine developments and support the restoration of sites damaged by wind turbines.***

### **THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL'S RESPONSE TO THE PETITIONS COMMITTEE**

I refer to your letter dated 27 May 2015 to the Council's Chief Executive, setting out The Scottish Parliament Public Petitions Committee's request for our views on the above petition and the discussions that took place at the Committee's meeting on 26 May 2015. In particular, the Committee has asked how The Highland Council, in its capacity as a planning authority, takes account of the cumulative effect of wind farms developments when considering new proposals for wind farms. Please note that the timing of request and period for response are such that the following response, prepared by Officers of the Council in consultation with the Leader of the Council and the Chair of the Planning, Development and Infrastructure Committee, has not been considered by Full Council or Committee before submission.

Loch Ness and the Great Glen are of substantial natural and cultural interest, provide a key transport corridor including A82 and Caledonian Canal, contain areas of settlement where people live and work and significant tourist and recreation interest including visitor attractions and the Great Glen Way.

#### **Landscape Considerations in Planning**

National Planning Framework 3 (NPF3) and Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) provide national policy context for the consideration of landscape issues when dealing with applications for development of all types through the planning process. This includes both designated and non-designated landscapes and covers the impacts of developments both individually and cumulatively. The Petitioner in the Petition documentation expresses the view that The

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Highland Council has been “negligent in preserving Scotland’s highland heritage”. The Highland Council strongly disagrees with that assertion. In essence The Highland Council’s approach to the consideration of landscape issues – both through development planning and development management – fits with and supports this national policy.

The papers before Committee on 26 May 2015 said: “Loch Ness and the Great Glen do fall within the Loch Ness and Duntelchaig Special Landscape Area as designated by the Highland Council”. Only a part of the Great Glen falls within that Special Landscape Area (SLA), although another part falls within the Loch Lochy and Loch Oich SLA. A map of SLAs in Highland together with citations for them is available within the [Assessment of Highland Special Landscape Areas](#) on our website. The Council’s policy stance towards SLAs in consideration of development proposals is set out in the Highland-wide Local Development Plan. The Council has, through a process summarised in the SLA citations document, identified these areas as being of sufficient merit to be designated as locally/regionally important landscapes in the absence of them being designated as nationally/internationally important landscapes. This should not be taken as any indication as to whether the Council would or would not be likely to support any proposal for national/international landscape designation of some/all of Loch Ness and the Great Glen. The nature and extent of effect of a designation as a constraint upon development would depend upon a variety of factors, including:

- the type of designation;
- the particular qualities for which the area was being designated, including any reference to how and from where those qualities may be appreciated;
- the location of the boundary of the designation, such as whether it would be defined as lying within the Great Glen ‘trough’ or beyond the edge of the trough, bearing in mind that the effects of a proposal located outwith the designated area may still form part of an assessment of potential impacts.

If the Scottish Government decides to propose any new designation then that proposal will need to be specific and The Highland Council will then consider and comment on the proposal. In any case, generally the policy towards safeguarding environmental and heritage assets is not one of absolute protection from all effects in every instance. There is a balance to be achieved which provides for appropriate safeguarding whilst enabling sustainable development to proceed.

## **Onshore Wind Energy and Landscape Considerations**

“Map 1: Inverness to Fort Augustus” provided by the Petitioner to the Committee is based on application footprints. It does not indicate the location of the existing, consented or proposed turbines, nor does it indicate the (theoretical or actual) visibility of those turbines. The Council publishes information on its website about windfarm development in Highland. Most recently we have been working to provide an [interactive map](#) on our website of wind turbine development and we are in the process of bringing that published information more up-to-date and making it more comprehensive. It currently contains information for constructed, under construction and approved wind energy schemes in Highland as at 1 June 2015. Essentially the map shows the location of each turbine consented. A future update will add in to the map schemes that are ‘in planning’. In perusing all of these two-dimensional maps it is important to note that the presence of multiple wind farms in an area is not necessarily a problem – they are helping to meet energy needs and targets for renewables. It is important to consider carefully the pattern of development in three dimensions and to consider how

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views of it in the landscape are actually experienced by people. When considering all the currently consented wind turbines then most of the views from Loch Ness, the A82 and the B852 from Dores to Foyers (on the south side of Loch Ness) are free of wind turbines.

Indeed, the Council has worked hard to minimise the visual impact of windfarms there and hence minimise the impact on tourism. Further away from the Loch and A82, on higher ground, generally there are more instances where turbines are in view and in some locations cumulative impacts may be experienced. However, in some views those turbines are seen within a landscape which is less confined and of greater scale than what is experienced within the Great Glen 'trough'. The papers before the Committee at its meeting on 26 May 2015 said that the size of the operational, under construction and approved wind farms in the area varies significantly. The Council would point out however that in the Great Glen vicinity, almost all of the consented wind turbines are part of windfarms. Many of those windfarms are of sufficient size that they were subject of Section 36 applications under the Electricity Act, dealt with by Scottish Ministers whereby the Council was a consultee in the process (and the remainder were subject of planning applications to the Council).

Energy Minister Fergus Ewing has reportedly stated that Scotland has enormous potential for renewable energy that is delivering jobs and investment across Scotland, and that he is determined to ensure communities all over Scotland reap the benefits from renewable energy. He has gone on to say that Scotland needs a balanced approach in taking forward this policy, consideration needs to be given to what impact any development would have on the local area and the Scottish Government wants to see the right developments in the right places. In essence The Highland Council's approach to planning for onshore wind energy development issues – both through development planning and development management – fits with and supports this national policy stance.

The Council is currently reviewing both the Highland-wide Local Development Plan (2012) and the Onshore Wind Energy Interim Supplementary Guidance (2012) in the light of NPF3 and SPP (2014). In particular, in March 2015 we issued a Consultation Paper [Spatial Planning for Onshore Wind Energy in Highland](#) which is available on our website. Consultation on that has closed and we are currently considering the responses received, aiming to take a report on this to our Planning, Development and Infrastructure Committee on 19 August 2015. The Consultation Paper includes initial draft revised spatial framework mapping for onshore wind energy, which we are preparing in accordance with Table 1 of SPP. It may be noted that within the initial draft, some parts of the Great Glen fall within areas to be afforded significant protection, by virtue of a range of constraints which SPP says should be included in the framework. It may be noted that the new SPP does not allow the Council to include SLAs in the spatial framework, but that National Scenic Areas and World Heritage Sites are included. The final version of that spatial framework will depend in particular upon the outcome of SNH's recent consultation on Carbon Rich Soils, Deep Peat and Priority Peatland Habitat mapping (SNH's draft mapping has been used in our initial draft spatial framework) and upon the Council's finalisation of its Community Separation area mapping.

The Highland Council reminds the Petitions Committee that:

- only since the publication of the finalised NPF3 and SPP in June 2014 has national policy identified National Scenic Areas (and National Parks) as areas where wind farms will not be acceptable, and identified the A82 (running through the Great Glen
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and alongside Loch Ness) and the A9 for consideration specifically as Scenic Routes/Corridors;

- the predecessor SPP (2010) indicated that planning authorities should include within the areas requiring significant protection (through the spatial framework) those areas where the cumulative impact of existing and consented wind farms limits further development, whereas SPP (2014) does not permit identification of such areas within the spatial framework.

Cumulative impact remains a planning consideration and, national policy and advice indicates, that it can be taken into account when identifying strategic capacity and areas of greatest potential for wind energy development, but national policy does not allow us to identify it within the spatial framework.

Through development plans the Council requires consideration of impacts (including cumulative impacts) of wind energy proposals on a range of considerations including landscape and tourism and recreation interests. Through the development management process we therefore use pre-application advice and environmental impact assessment scoping to identify likely issues for proposals to consider, informed by our development plan and circumstances of the particular proposal. This is with the aim of ensuring that these issues influence whether a scheme proceeds to an application and, if it does, then the design of it. It is also with the aim of ensuring that the application is accompanied by sufficient information, including assessments, to ensure that people can readily comment on the proposals and that the Council can consider them. As part of our review of our guidance we are, as per SPP, looking to identify strategic capacity for wind farms and areas with the greatest potential for wind development. This provides us with opportunity to take account of the pattern of development in three dimensions and to consider how views of it in the landscape are actually experienced by people. It also provides opportunity for us to reiterate the value that the Council attaches to the SLAs. This work is ongoing and Scottish Natural Heritage is working with the Council on it. The outputs of such work will be consulted upon before being approved as part of the Council's guidance.

Yours sincerely,

J Stuart Black  
Director of Planning and Development

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