Process for preparing spatial frameworks for wind farms

Snapshot: Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) (February 2010) maintains the requirement that planning authorities should set out in the development plan a spatial framework for onshore wind farms of over 20 Megawatts (MW) generating capacity and that authorities may incorporate wind farms of less than 20MW generating capacity in their spatial framework if considered appropriate.

The purpose is to guide wind turbine developments to appropriate locations, to maximise renewable energy potential and to minimise wasted effort and resources on inappropriately located proposals.

In contrast, most planning authorities have prepared spatial frameworks, in non-statutory supplementary guidance not yet forming part of the development plan. Circular 1/2009 Development Planning - paragraph 97 states that matters that should be included in the LDP or SDP, and not in supplementary guidance include…‘development proposals of more than local impact’…

In some lowland and more populated areas, the Feed In Tariff Scheme has driven a notable shift to scales of wind farm below 5MW and locally developed planning guidance catering for that scale of development will serve developers and communities well.

Unless there is a reasoned justification not to, it is important that where planning authorities have yet to prepare spatial frameworks either as part of the development plan or as supplementary guidance with an intention to adopt, that timetables are prepared as a matter of priority.

Planning authorities should draw on SPP in explaining the purpose of their spatial framework and the approach adopted locally. At stage 1 of the process, authorities should refer to the SPP in determining international, national and local designations.

It should also be noted that the former PAN45 Annex 2 Step 3 is no longer part of the process in preparing spatial frameworks.

Cross-reference should be made with online guidance for onshore windfarms.

Suggested areas of focus for planning authorities:

- If a spatial framework for onshore wind farms of over 20MW generating capacity has not been started, development plan schemes should set out a timeline for preparation and production. If a spatial framework is not required, the reasons can be given in the development plan scheme.

- If a spatial framework for onshore wind farms over 20MW has been prepared, updates could provide further guidance on where there is greatest potential for wind farms below 20MW.

- If a spatial framework for onshore wind farms has been prepared as supplementary guidance and not adopted, a timeline for adoption should be prepared where this is intended. If this is not intended, reasons should be set out.

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### Suggested Approach to Preparing Spatial Frameworks

#### Stage 1 – Identify areas requiring significant protection
- Sites designated for their national or international natural heritage value
- Green belt
- Where the cumulative impact of existing and consented wind farms limit further development

#### Stage 2 – Identify areas with potential constraints
- Consider matters relating to the historic environment; regional and local landscape and natural heritage designations; tourism and recreational interests; communities; aviation and defence interests; and broadcasting installations
- Where proposals will be considered on their individual merits against identified criteria

#### Stage 3 – Identify areas of search
- Where there are no significant constraints on development
- Where appropriate proposals are likely to be supported subject to detailed consideration against identified criteria

The following suggestions are made:-

| Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) | SEA ([Planning Advice Note 1/2010](#)) should be integral to the development of spatial frameworks, to inform choices and front-load the process. PAN 1/2010 provides advice on efficient approaches to SEA, the significance of effects and cumulative effects and recommends separating the SEA from any appropriate assessment under the Habitats Regulations. |
| Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) | Presentation of Spatial Framework Stages 1, 2 and 3 would normally be expected to be map based. Maps may need to be periodically updated as new information becomes available or because capacity is reached in an area as applications come forward. |
| Areas Requiring Significant Protection | Authorities should explain the reasons for identifying these areas. This will primarily be based on statutory environmental requirements. There is practical benefit in wind energy developers knowing about this and recognising that the potential of sites would be expected to be lower than within other areas, owing to the application of the precautionary principle. This information should help developers reduce project risk in identifying suitable sites. Authorities should not impose additional zones of protection around areas designated for their landscape or natural heritage value and should not identify buffer zones on the spatial framework. |

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## Cumulative effects

Cumulative impacts occur when two or more wind farms are visible either in combination, in succession or sequentially. There are three potential scenarios that will give rise to those types of cumulative impacts:

- Cumulative impacts between two broad areas of search (BAS);
- Cumulative impacts between BAS and areas outside them;
- Cumulative impacts of wind farms within a single BAS and cumulative impact outside BAS.

The three scenarios are related and should not be treated in isolation. For example, cumulative impacts between two BAS could be heightened by the presence of poorly sited and designed small schemes within the areas between BAS.

The cumulative effect of inappropriately sited multiple wind farm development could be to create the perception of a landscape dominated by wind farms, where the Landscape Character Assessment and Landscape Capacity Study indicate the landscape is unable to accept such a level of change.

- Broad areas of search should be planned with the existing pattern of development with the intention of encouraging clusters of wind farms and the spaces between clusters as an essential element of the spatial framework. Spaces may need to be identified as areas requiring significant protection in order to avoid coalescence between two wind farms to protect a coherent pattern of wind farm development and thereby reduce the potential for adverse cumulative impacts.

## Areas with Potential Constraints

Authorities should explain that the existence of constraints does not equate to a blanket restriction on development and that it will be necessary to assess proposals against criteria-based policy applicable to the particular constraint. Authorities could give specific examples showing that it is possible to overcome a constraint. A tailored design that is sensitive and proportionate, considers location and limits the number, height, scale or pattern of turbines, might allow a proposal to be accommodated within the historic environment or within an area designated for landscape value.

Authorities should emphasise that in identifying constraints, such as aviation, defence and broadcasting there is scope for developers to address potential impacts through discussion with the relevant bodies.
### Areas of Search

Authorities, in identifying ‘broad areas of search’, should explain that sites may still be constrained by other factors. This might include the desire to protect other natural heritage interests. In some cases, it may be appropriate to show these areas on a map, but this should not result in a reduced area of search. It would be inappropriate to identify non-designated sites as areas to be afforded significant protection on the basis of high sensitivity to individual developments.

Authorities should be clear that the practice of introducing zones around communities as a means of guiding developments to broad areas of search, along with the guideline separation distance of up to 2km between areas of search and the edge of cities, towns and villages, is applied solely to guide developments to the most appropriate sites, but decisions on individual developments should take into account specific local circumstances and geography.

### Other Considerations

Authorities should consider, in consultation with the renewables industry, issues such as wind speed, site access, ground suitability and other environmental factors which could affect the viability of a development, in identifying key opportunity areas.

Grid limitations should not be used a development constraint. Demand for grid connection as a result of renewable energy consents will drive the extension / upgrade of the grid. The highest charges for use of the grid system in areas with the best wind resources may change following UK Energy Market Reform to transmission charging.

Taking into account information emerging from the preparation of the spatial framework, authorities should consider steps to help bring forward wind turbines in suitable locations, within the development plan action programme.

Authorities should emphasise that the purpose of spatial frameworks is not to put in place a sequential approach to determining applications which requires applicants proposing development outwith an area of search to show that there is no capacity within areas of search.

Variations on the above approach, which are appropriate to local circumstances and which remain compatible with SPP, will be supported by Scottish Government.

**Useful Reference:** Scottish Natural Heritage - [Strategic Locational Guidance for Onshore Wind Farms in Respect of the Natural Heritage](#)