

CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

Title: CONSULTATION FROM ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL

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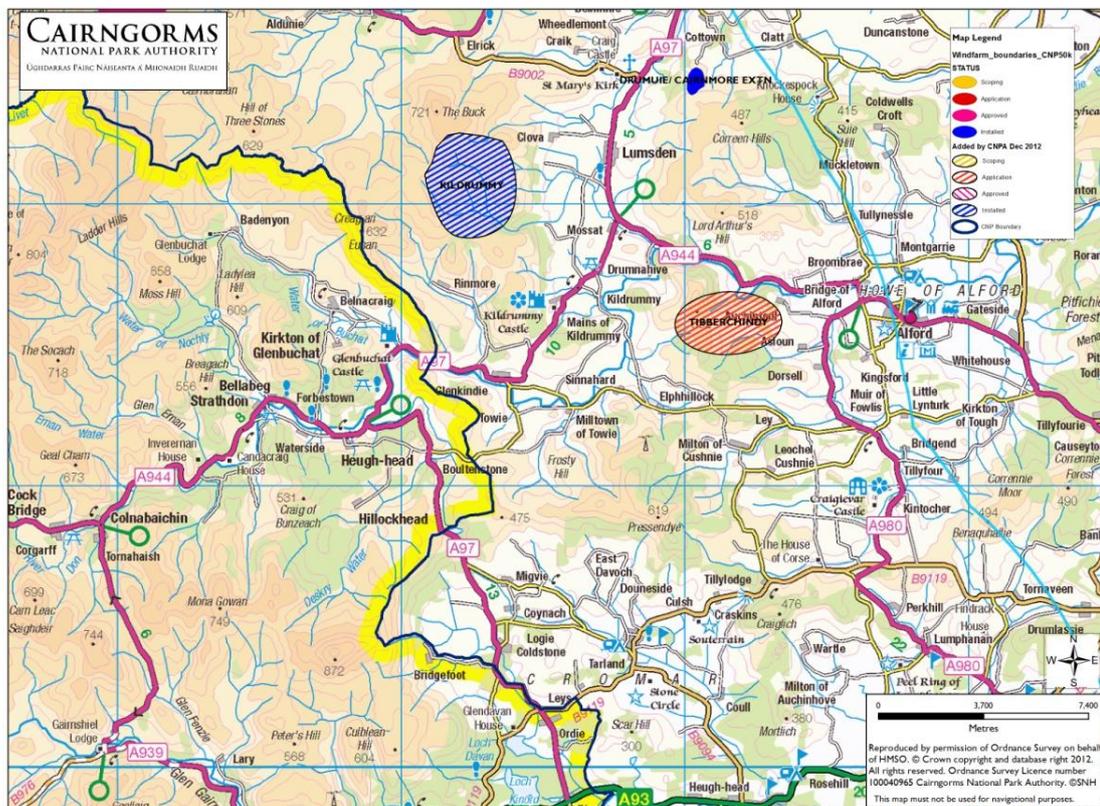
DEVELOPMENT PROPOSED: ERECTION OF 6 WIND TURBINES AND ASSOCIATED INFRASTRUCTURE, AT TIBBERCHINDY, ALFORD

REFERENCE: ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL REFERENCE APP/2012/3405

APPLICANT: INFINIS

RECOMMENDATION: NO OBJECTION

Fig 1.: Location Plan



PURPOSE OF REPORT

1. The purpose of this report is to provide a consultation response to Aberdeenshire Council (who are dealing with this planning application) on a planning application for 6 wind turbines situated at Tibberchindy, some 5km to the west of Alford. The site lies to the east of the National Park boundary.
2. The Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) has been consulted in relation to any impacts upon the park as the application is accompanied by an Environmental Statement under the terms of the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) (Scotland) Regulations 2011. The planning issues being considered in relation to this consultation are whether there are any impacts upon the qualities of the park.

SITE DESCRIPTION AND PROPOSAL

The Proposals and Site

3. This proposal is to erect 6 wind turbines of height 115 metres to blade tip (69 metres to hub) together with around 4 km of new access tracks and 1.9 km of upgraded access track, and ancillary infrastructure, such as hardstandings, anemometry mast, and control building. The overall installed capacity is noted at being between 12.3 and 18 megawatts. A copy of the proposed site layout is attached as **Appendix I**.
4. The site is located some 5 km west of Alford, at Tibberchindy which is located to the south west of the Lumsden to Alford (A944) road and to the east of the Strathdon to Mossat road. It is proposed to take access off a minor road to the south of the site through an existing track over forestry land. The minor road leads through from Kildrummy towards Muir of Fowlis
5. The application site is located around 8 km to the east of the Cairngorms National Park in an undulating landscape, which is visually separated from the Park by “folds” of hills lying to the east of the Park before leading westwards to the Park itself. The area around the site is a mixture of farmland and forestry, with the site itself lying above afforested slopes on the Hill of Coiliochabar.
6. The application is accompanied by an Environmental Assessment as noted earlier, and this includes assessment of ecological and landscape impacts. The area within a 15 km radius of the site is defined as the “local” study area, where significant landscape and visual effects are most likely. A study area of 35 km radius around the site was the subject of the landscape study which included zones of theoretical influence information, wireline drawings and photomontages together with assessment of cumulative effects with other wind turbines in the area.

7. The Environmental Statement (ES) concludes that there will be significant impacts (both from the proposed development and cumulatively with other wind farms) in a number of landscape character areas up to a distance of around 7 km from the nearest turbine, such as the part of the Pressendye unit of the Grampian Outliers and the Howe of Alford landscape character area, but that the impacts upon the National Park will not be significant.

Planning History

8. The CNPA were consulted at the pre application (scoping stage) in 2011 when our Landscape Officer raised the issue of cumulative impacts and recommended assessment from specific viewpoints in order to fully consider landscape and visual impacts. Her preliminary assessment was that theoretical visibility would be at its greatest in the Howe of Alford, Pressendye and Cushnie areas and the hills and ridges in the eastern part of the Park.
9. There is also relevant planning history in this area as follows. To the west of the site an application to erect eight 93 metre high (to tip) wind turbines at Kildrummy (reference APP/2006/4911) was refused by Aberdeenshire Council, with the CNPA objecting to the proposal on the grounds of the impact upon the Park. However this decision was successfully appealed to the Scottish Government's Directorate of Planning and Environmental Appeals (DPEA) and consent was granted in 2009. At this time the Reporter concluded that there would not be a significant impact upon the landscape character of the Park or its wider setting, and placed some weight upon the lack of objection from Scottish Natural Heritage at the time.
10. An application for seven 125 metre high (to tip) wind turbines at Pressendye was also refused by Aberdeenshire Council. (Reference APP/2008/0237) The appeal against this refusal was dismissed. However the Reporter at the time made it clear that the impacts upon the National Park were not considered to be a reason for refusal despite the objection from the CNPA. The Reporter concluded that the special qualities of the Park (notably the wildness experienced on the high tops, the moorland environment, the experience of the local landscape and rich biodiversity, and the close interplay between landform and cultural overlay of the farmed and lowland landscape) would not be affected to a significant degree.
11. More recently the CNPA Planning Committee considered a consultation for three 99.5 metres high (to tip) wind turbines at Blackhills, Cushnie and it was agreed to raise no objection. (This site lies between Pressendye and the current application site.) Aberdeenshire Council have now refused this application for numerous land use planning reasons including landscape impacts (Reference APP/2012/1695)
12. To the north west, an application to extend the existing wind farm (three turbines) at Cairnmore, Rynie by erecting a further five 81metre high (to tip) turbines was refused by Aberdeenshire Council on landscape grounds. An appeal against this decision has been made to the Local Review Board of Aberdeenshire Council.

13. Finally, an application to erect two 46.5 metre high (to tip) turbines at Kinlune to the west of site was refused by Aberdeenshire Council last year on landscape grounds (APP/2011/4129)

DEVELOPMENT PLAN CONTEXT

Strategic Policy - Cairngorms National Park Partnership Plan 2012-2017

14. The Cairngorms National Park Plan sets out the vision and overarching strategy for managing the Park and provides focus and priorities at a time of limited financial resources. The Plan also provides a strategic context for the Local Development Plan and shows how the four aims of the National Park can be achieved together. It sets out the strategic direction and priorities for the Park.
15. Three long term outcomes for the Park are set out as follows:
 - A sustainable economy supporting thriving businesses and communities;
 - A special place for people and nature with natural and cultural heritage enhanced; and
 - People enjoying the park through outstanding visitor and learning experiences.

These outcomes address the interaction of the three main characteristics of the National Park these being that the Park is an internationally important area for nature conservation; a fragile rural economy, and an internationally known tourism destination. Recognising the relationship of these outcomes is at the heart of the National Park. A series of work programmes to help deliver the outcomes is set out in the Plan.
16. Policy I.3 of this Plan states that large scale commercial wind turbines (defined as more than 1 turbine, and more than 30m in height) are not compatible with the special qualities of the National Park and are not considered to be appropriate within the National Park or *where outside the Park they affect its landscape setting*.

National Policy and Guidance

17. Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) sets out Scottish Government's policy on nationally important land use planning matters, and it sets out the Scottish Government's commitment to increasing the amount of electricity generated from renewable sources, identifying hydro and wind energy as the main sources of supply. Policy stresses the importance of carefully considering siting to ensure landscape and visual impact is minimised, and sets out the range of issues to be considered. This is reinforced in Planning Advice for onshore wind turbines. Also Scottish Natural Heritage guidance on wind energy, which all provide guidance on assessment of wind energy proposals. The importance of particular landscapes such as National Parks is highlighted with the aims of the National Parks set out in paragraph 128 which explains that the most sensitive landscapes may have little or no capacity to accept new development, noting that areas of wild land character in some of

Scotland's remoter upland, mountain and coastal areas are very sensitive to any form of development.

CONSULTATIONS

18. **The CNPA Landscape Officer** has been consulted and has summarised that the landscape setting of the Park on this eastern side is to a large extent determined by the continuity of character types across the boundary, and in particular the upland spurs extending out from the Cairngorm Massif, together with free standing areas of high ground separated from the upland areas by lower lying areas of farmland and forested glens. There "Grampian Outliers" are often visually distinctive in their own right and in places contribute to the local character and quality of views from the Park
19. In this case the site is located on the Hill of Coiliochbar, which sits within a small, free standing extent of the Grampian Outliers and is viewed from the Park across intervening farmland. This hill does not have a distinctive or easily recognised profile when viewed from the Park. Consequently, whilst the proposed wind farm would appear as a new focal feature having an effect on landscape character, it is not considered this would have a significant effect on the experience of the special qualities of the Park. Accordingly it is considered to comply with the policies of the National Park Partnership Plan
20. In terms of visual impacts the Landscape Advisor concludes that within views from the Park the turbines range along the hill slopes of Hill of Coiliochbar, with the four most westerly turbines figuring in views. Although the composition as viewed from the Park is generally simple, this line of four turbines does not quite follow the hill slope, and a closer spacing of the four western turbines in a more compact arrangement might produce a better landscape fit.
21. In terms of wildness, the development would be visible from areas of medium and high wildness, but as the landscape and visual effects are not likely to be significant, with the distances across which the wind farm would be viewed considerable, it is considered that the effects on wildness would be minor.
22. Finally in terms of cumulative impacts, the Landscape Advisor agrees with the agent's assessment that the additional landscape and visual impact is not significant. However it is highlighted that there is a high degree of zone of theoretical influence (ZTV) overlap between the proposed site and others in the area (Kildrummy, Clashindarroch and Dorenell) which will have a progressive effect on the landscape setting of the Park.

APPRAISAL

23. The proposed wind farm is located on a site which lies approximately 8 km away from the eastern boundary of the National Park. Based upon the conclusions of the Environmental Statement and the location of the site relative to the Park, there are unlikely to be any significant ecological issues for the Park in this case.

Consequently, the key planning issue for consideration is that of the visual and landscape impact on the setting of the National Park, and views into and out of the Park.

24. The ES suggests that any landscape and visual effects upon the overall National Park will not be significant with viewpoints from a number of points in and around the Park provided which seek to substantiate this view - viewpoints 3 (Gallows hill), 7 (Movern), 9 (Socach) and 10 (Creag na Eunan) The CNPA Landscape Officer concurs with this conclusion as summarised in paragraphs 18-22 above.
25. The site is located at a distance from the National Park boundary, set within an area of the "Grampian Outliers" separated from the Park by intervening farmland with areas of woodland and forestry close to the site. It will be viewed from the Park across this more settled landscape and will have a minor impact upon the wildness experienced in the Park. Furthermore it is not considered that there will be any significant impacts upon the landscape character and setting of the Park.
26. As noted by the Landscape Advisor there is an overlap of zones of theoretical influence in terms of this proposed wind farm and others on the eastern side of the Park which may have a progressive effect upon the setting of the Park. However in this case, given the distance from the Park boundary, local topography, and the overall landscape characteristics of the area, it is not considered that there would be any significant adverse impact upon the special qualities of the Park arising from this wind farm.
27. In these overall circumstances, the impact of this proposal is not considered to warrant objection as it is not considered to have a significant adverse effect on the setting or character of the Park.
28. The proposal has been considered with respect to the statutory aims of the National Park and is not considered to conflict with these objectives. Accordingly it is recommended that the CNPA raise no objection to the proposal.
29. Finally, the CNPA Landscape Advisor, whilst concluding that the proposal will not have a significant effect on the Park, has highlighted that the layout could potentially be improved by re considering the layout of the four westernmost turbines. As the overall visual impact upon the Park is not considered to be significant it is not considered that the CNPA should object on this basis, as the detailed layout is a matter which will be considered by the Planning Authority. However it may be helpful to pass this comment on for information.

RECOMMENDATION

30. That Members of the Committee support a recommendation of **NO OBJECTION** to the construction of six wind turbines of height 115 metres to tip at Tibberchindy, Alford and highlight to the Planning Authority the comments of the CNPA Landscape Advisor that a closer spacing of the four western turbines in a more compact arrangement may produce a better fit in the landscape.

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