

## **MOTION TO EAST LOTHIAN COUNCIL**

**26 August 2025**

### **Impacts and Consenting of Renewable Infrastructure in East Lothian's Communities**

#### **Preamble**

For over 20 years, East Lothian Council has supported the energy industry to deliver significant change in our energy supply. We are continuing to consider every opportunity that will help the nation reduce its reliance on fossil fuels, reduce energy demand, and lower costs for businesses, householders and public services.

The Seventh UK Carbon Budget was recently published by the UK's Committee on Climate Change, and represents the official scientific advice to the UK Government. This budget lays out the need for rapid expansion of renewable infrastructure in order to meet our legally binding emissions pathways. The electrification of our heat and transport sectors will mean the UK requires twice as much electricity by 2040 as we used in 2023. To meet this demand, the UK Climate Change Committee recommends a six-fold increase in offshore wind capacity, doubling of onshore wind, and increase of solar capacity to 82Gw (all by 2040).

The Carbon Budget report underlines the economic benefits this transition will bring with upfront investment soon leading to paybacks in cheaper bills and protection from volatile international fossil fuel markets. Other multiple benefits identified include skilled jobs, opportunities for green finance, health benefits from reduced air pollution, and restoration of nature.

However, the benefits of this transition have so far not been felt by all, with Councillors from all parties being told by constituents that they are frustrated that the profits of the new infrastructure appear to flow mainly to large companies and a small number of local landowners. In East Lothian, many communities, especially in the east of the county, derive little benefit from this development and yet suffer many impacts of construction, traffic and change in land use which they feel have been inadequately consulted upon.

Councillors hear that, while energy developers have paid staff and significant budgets for each project, small communities (often represented by volunteers) are struggling to engage and respond meaningfully to the burgeoning number of development applications. This is a burden over and above the construction and operation impacts of projects. This is increasingly contributing to people feeling overwhelmed and under threat.

This motion is a cross-party attempt to recognise the feelings of the community and to indicate what actions East Lothian Council will take, alone or in partnership, and what changes we will call for at Scottish and UK government level.

## **Motion**

### **1. Spatial planning**

It is noted that currently development applications come in on a speculative and profit-driven basis and that the assessment of these, whether done under local planning regulations or by the Energy Consents Unit, cannot include the question of the strategic need for the particular development, nor whether its proposed site is in fact the right location. For example, the independent energy agency NESO (National Energy System Operator) recently found that far more Battery Energy Storage Systems have been consented than will be required between now and 2030. This suggests many projects with consents will not ultimately go ahead – but this uncertainty creates even more stress for communities and leaves all stakeholders unable to proceed with alternative uses for the land which may be more environmentally and socially beneficial.

- This Council therefore agrees to ask the Leader of the Council to write to the UK and Scottish Governments, calling for greater strategic planning of renewables development, with greater devolution of power to local authorities to determine suitable sites for development within their areas.
- This letter should also go to both UK and Scottish Governments commending the joint commissioning of National Energy System Operator (NESO) to carry out a Strategic Spatial Energy Plan. This plan will identify all the infrastructure required to deliver the green, affordable energy capable of meeting our future energy needs. It should also ensure that such infrastructure is distributed fairly and equitably across all regions of the United Kingdom. However, the letter should also convey Council's concern that while we wait for the Strategic Spatial Energy Plan, many applications are being determined with no overarching strategy, and that further cooperation between local, Scottish and UK government is needed to address this lack of oversight.
- The letter will also ask the UK and the Scottish Governments to investigate whether a system similar to the Housing Land Requirement could be operated, with each local authority given a target for renewable capacity and applications within their authority be assessed against that target, to ensure a fair distribution of the burden of development between areas.
- Council also notes the fact that a landscape capability study is being produced to inform LDP2 as a way of directing development to appropriate areas, and that local communities will be consulted on sites in the proposed statutory plan making process.

### **2. Energy Consents Unit**

The current limit for local planning determinations is set at 50 mW – this is now an outdated threshold as many developments currently exceed this threshold despite not being of national strategic importance, and are therefore passed to the Energy Consents Unit (ECU), with limited local authority input into the decision. Council recognises that many of our constituents have voiced concern that the ECU is not

subject to the same transparency or accountability as other planning authorities, and they only very rarely turn down development.

- This Council therefore agrees that in the letter to the Scottish Government requested above, the Leader of the Council will also specifically call for a review of the Energy Consents Unit, giving local planning departments the power and resources to determine more applications, and reviewing both the threshold for ECU determination and the transparency and processes of the ECU.

### 3. Community benefits

The current model of community benefits is outdated and does not offer enough to communities.

Some recent examples of local good practice in community benefits have included developers offering communities shares of the development (usually 1-2%).

Community ownership is in line with our agreed Community Wealth Building strategy and has been proven to increase community acceptance of renewable development elsewhere. Denmark's legal requirement for 20% of renewables to be community owned has in practice resulted in a sector in which more than 50% of wind capacity is owned by communities.

Council notes that the Scottish and UK Governments have both recently run consultations on community benefits and that ELC has responded to these arguing for all renewable developments to be mandated to provide community benefits.

- Council agrees that the Leader of the Council, when writing to the Scottish and UK Governments, should request a change in legislation so that all development must include community benefit, including a minimum of defined shares for community ownership which should be set at an ambitious threshold.

### 4. Other community concerns

Planning policy needs to be stronger to allow the consenting authority to impose conditions on energy development, ensuring meaningful engagement with local communities, for example on traffic controls, fire risk mitigation, and biodiversity enhancement plans, and to include a presumption of responsibility for the capture of waste heat and use for local heating purposes, unless it can be comprehensively shown that such a use is not possible.

- Council directs ELC officers to report on what policies could be included in LDP2 to give maximum strength to these types of conditions under current legislation, with a report to come back to a future Council as soon as is feasible.
- Council asks the Leader of the Council to write to the UK Government requesting that more powers are delegated under the Planning Act, and to the Scottish Government to then request more powers to local authorities under National Planning Guidance, both of which changes would strengthen the

powers of local authorities to impose conditions to mitigate development impacts and risks.

Proposed by (name): Shona McIntosh

Date: 14 August 2025

Seconded by (name): Norman Hampshire

Date: 14 August 2025

Received by (name of officer): Linda Gillie – Team Manager, Democratic & Licensing

Date: 14 August 2025