

Cabinet

4 December 2008



North East Wind Energy Development and Landscape Capacity Study: Upland Coalfield Areas, West Durham

Report of John Richardson, Corporate Director, Environment (Cabinet Portfolio Member for Environment – Councillor Young)

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To seek approval to release funding to contribute to joint commissioning of a Landscape Capacity Study for wind energy development.

Background

- 2 The North East Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) identifies a number of broad areas of least constraint for wind energy development. Work undertaken as part of the preparation of the North East Renewable Energy Strategy (RRES) in 2003, which underpins RSS renewable energy policies, included a Landscape Study, provided as a starting point in identifying levels of sensitivity to wind development. However, this early study did not give any guidance as to the capacity of a particular landscape to absorb multiple developments. Neither did it consider cumulative impact of successive developments.
- 3 In County Durham, the great majority of wind developer activity to date has focused on these broad areas, indicating that the strategic planning framework is providing effective spatial guidance. However, the scale of development emerging in some of the broad areas is raising issues of cumulative impact as wind proposals enter the planning system. Both RSS and national policy require an assessment of cumulative landscape and visual impacts.
- 4 Developers submitting planning applications and accompanying Environmental Impact Statements will demonstrate the impact of their own proposals but until developers submit a planning application it is not possible to model their cumulative impact. Local Planning Authorities are faced with a particularly difficult task when assessing cumulative impact. It is therefore proposed that two further area studies are commissioned to seek to provide a better understanding of these issues and how to address them.

Proposal

- 5 This policy 'gap' has already begun to be addressed in County Durham and elsewhere in the region through carrying out 'Landscape Capacity Studies' to allow a consistent and objective assessment of the multiple applications in identified resource areas. The aim of the studies is to ensure that wind energy development is consistent with the RSS in

relation to acceptable visual impact, and that a consistent approach is taken to the assessment of planning applications for wind energy development within a given broad area. An initial study addressing landscape capacity on the East Durham Limestone and Tees Plain was completed this summer (following approval from Cabinet in July 2007 for a contribution from the County Council as a partner authority). The Study generated useful information on cumulative impact and remaining capacity in these areas, finding limited opportunities for further wind energy developments in the East Durham Limestone area, and some potential for further developments in the Tees Plain area.

- 6 It is now proposed to carry out two similar studies on the North and South Durham Coalfield Upland areas, on the edge of the Pennines, the two broad areas of least constraint for on-shore wind development in the west of the County, as identified in RSS. The proposed study areas include Derwentside, Wear Valley and Teesdale. The studies would be carried out using the same methodology as earlier studies for the East Durham Limestone and the Tees Plain area, and earlier studies in Northumberland, to ensure regional consistency.
- 7 Work needs to be commenced and completed at an early stage because of the advanced stage of pre-planning activity being undertaken by developers and because of the importance of not slowing down the development process, so that wider renewable energy targets can be achieved with minimal environmental impacts.

Funding and Procurement Arrangements

- 8 The estimated cost of the study will be in the region of £35,000. The North East Assembly (NEA) has agreed to make a significant contribution towards this, with the residual amount needing to be funded by the planning authorities covered by the studies.
- 9 The NEA has requested a contribution of up to a maximum of £6,000 from each partner authority, the precise figure depending on the final project cost. There are sufficient funds within the Planning Delivery Grant for the County Council to support the initiative and I consider that it would be an appropriate use of this fund.
- 10 NEA will be the lead authority and the accountable authority for the project. The funding required falls outside the limit delegated to the Chief Officers of the County Council to authorise payment. Therefore, approval is sought to make a payment of up to £6,000 maximum in order to procure the work for the purpose outlined in this report.

Recommendations and Reasons

- 11 Cabinet is recommended to approve the proposals outlined in the report with a contribution of up to £6,000 to NEA, drawn from Planning Delivery Grant.

Background Papers

None

Contact: Rick Long

Tel: 0191 383 3774

Appendix 1: Implications

Local Government Reorganisation

Does the decision impact upon a future Unitary Council?

The project will allow the future Unitary Council to make better informed decisions on the landscape impacts of future wind energy proposals.

Finance

A contribution of up to £6,000 from the Planning Delivery Grant to be made to the NEA.

Staffing

Arrangements for working with the NEA in co-ordinating the project as required will be carried out by existing staff within the Planning Division.

Equality and Diversity

N/A

Accommodation

N/A

Crime and Disorder

N/A

Sustainability

The project will contribute to the better understanding and assessment of wind energy proposals in order to meet County Durham's sub-regional targets for renewable energy.

Human Rights

None

Localities and Rurality

The project will address landscape and cumulative impact issues from wind energy proposals in Derwentside, Wear Valley and Teesdale districts.

Young People

N/A

Consultation

N/A

Health

N/A