

# Stay the course

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## Government investment in renewables is vital but support for communities must be improved

The Scottish Government has set world-leading targets for carbon reduction and renewable energy. These targets can be secured if Scotland stays the course, and fully embraces the business and societal challenge. One such challenge is to ensure that Scottish society more widely participates in the transition towards a low carbon economy.

With a target of meeting 100 per cent of the demand for electricity from renewable energy sources by 2020, an important delivery mechanism recently announced by the Scottish Government is an enhanced contribution from community-scale renewable energy projects. I strongly support the 100 per cent target and further, the recognition that communities should play a greater role in the transition to a low carbon economy.

My own work in the field of community wind power around the world has been arguing the case for an expansion of Scottish community renewables for the past decade. One important lesson that can be drawn from the international experiences of Denmark and Germany relates to the significant role that local or community ownership arrangements can play in enhancing the social acceptability and delivery of wind power projects. There are already proven examples within Scotland to illustrate this including the community-owned wind farm that operates on the Isle of Gigha.

The current target of 500MW of community-owned renewable energy projects does not go far enough. The Scottish Government now needs to be more ambitious in its efforts to deliver community-owned renewable energy projects. To secure the necessary step change in social attitudes towards the deployment of renewable energy technologies (RETS), such as onshore wind, this target should now be increased to at least 1000MW by 2020. The positive effects of such a target might be to assist in overcoming social conflict in the planning process, speed up delivery, and generate new revenue streams for rural communities so that there are clear and genuine benefits to communities when engaging with onshore wind projects.

While some financial support has already been made available to community-based organisations



Glasgow-based Gaia-Wind is a world-leading maker of small turbines for rural areas, businesses and communities

(CBOs), and other actors, the Scottish Government now needs to put in place more dedicated policy measures as well as greater targeted financial support to overcome barriers such as high connection costs to the grid. This is especially true for island communities.

Supporting CBOs to develop much needed knowledge and skills in planning, enterprise and finance, and project management, is also a

While the Scottish Government has made some great strides in planning policy reform there remains the need for further action to transform planning law in the arena of corporate community benefits provision. In addressing past policy and funding support failings, which has favoured ownership 'remote' of communities, the approach by commercial developers to win local support for their projects has been to provide a community benefits fund.

In the current planning process, however, the available evidence indicates that such funds are only playing a very small part in winning wider community acceptance of wind power, and further in helping developers secure planning consents. Indeed, the available evidence indicates that the current system within which community benefits provision is agreed is actually acting as an additional source of tension, and this is likely to continue until a more radical approach is taken.

I would strongly recommend that current national policy and local planning guidance should be revised to incorporate a more robust and systematic consideration of community benefits packages and that high mandatory levels of payment should be offered by commercial developers. However, the Scottish Government should avoid the temptation to defer to an industry protocol, such as that recently implemented in England and Wales. Such protocols tend to generate a lowest common denominator approach.

There is also a need for the Scottish Government and other organisations to improve advice and guidance, establish better practice, as well as greater transparency by commercial developers. In addition to fostering better relationships between local communities and developers, these recommendations if implemented would ensure that Scottish society more widely participates



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in the transition towards a low carbon economy. By owning or sharing a stake in renewable energy projects, or debating how community benefit streams might best be invested, society can contribute to and be involved in setting

prerequisite to successful outcomes in community renewables. Courses in these areas are already provided by the Scottish Higher Education sector, and their expansion and take-up should now be a priority for the Scottish Government. The MSc in Energy Management at the Aberdeen Business School offers a highly innovative programme in renewables management which could be used as a model for excellence elsewhere.

sustainability goals more generally.

The Scottish Government should maintain their commitment to 'no' new nuclear build in Scotland and continue to heavily invest in Scotland's renewable energy industry and new CCS projects. We should embrace the massive opportunities that renewables and CCS can bring to Scotland and continue to offer international leadership on climate change. We must stay the course. □