POLICY BOARD

DATE: 25 MARCH 2015

IMPACT OF ONSHORE WIND TURBINES ON TOURISM

Report of the Lead Executive Director

Policy Board Member: Councillor Allan Hepple – Planning, Housing and Regeneration

Purpose of report

To note the report that has been prepared to assess the impact of onshore wind turbines on tourism.

Recommendations

It is recommended that Policy Board:
1. Note the report
2. The report is used to inform the preparation of the Core Strategy evidence base.

Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the Places and Environment priorities of the Corporate Plan 2013 – 2017.

Key issues

1. The study provides an extensive and thorough review of available research studies which assess the effects of onshore wind farms on tourism in the UK.
2. The study is clear that there are limitations to the studies that have been reviewed, mainly concerning the age of the studies which means that they relate to a smaller scale of wind energy development and they were carried out in settings that are different to Northumberland. This has been emphasised throughout the report.
3. The general conclusions of the study are:
   - the conclusions of the review of research studies suggests that there is no evidence to conclude that the development of wind farms has either a significant negative or positive impact on tourism although there could be localised impacts in terms of tourism being displaced;
   - the scale and rate of wind farm development in future could, if improperly located, change the value judgements of tourists.
4. The study recommends areas for further work given that there is an identified lack of research that has been done on this issue, the age of the studies that do exist and the geographical location of those studies.
5. The Regeneration Working Group has steered the preparation of the study.

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Background

1. The study was commissioned late in 2013 following a decision by full Council to evaluate the effect of existing and planned onshore wind turbines on the tourism industry. The commission was split into two elements: a visitor perception study and a business impacts study. Two consultants were appointed in January 2014 to undertake the work.

2. Public Knowledge, based in Hexham, was commissioned to undertake the visitor perception study. An online survey was developed to identify potential visitor views on whether the existence of wind farms has an impact on their decision to come to a rural area, and to Northumberland in particular.

3. In order to make the survey as objective as possible the initial questions were very general, covering issues including: the importance of natural scenery and landscape; where else in the UK visitors had stayed or plan to visit; and factors affecting visitors decisions to visit or stay in Northumberland – wind turbines were included in a list of factors. Later in the survey questions were asked about what factors may deter visitors to come or stay in Northumberland, again wind farms were included within a list of other factors. There were also questions to assess whether respondents were familiar with large scale turbine development. The online survey took place during March and April 2014.

4. The Business School at Northumbria University were commissioned to undertake:
   - An extensive desk based review of research studies which assess the effects of onshore wind farms on tourism in the UK;
   - A survey of Northumberland tourism related businesses looking at the impacts of wind farms in Northumberland;
   - A review of the approach and findings of the Public Knowledge visitor perception survey; and
   - A focus group with representatives of groups or organisations that are interested in and/ or concerned with the impacts of wind farms in Northumberland.

5. A draft report was presented to the Regeneration Working Group on 17 September 2014. The Working Group identified clarification that was required to the report to better explain the presentation of the results of the studies. These included:
   - Identifying clearly the age of the studies reviewed and therefore that they would have related to a smaller scale of wind turbine development and in addition, they were carried out in settings that are different to Northumberland;
   - Clearly identifying other limitations/ robustness of the studies for example where the study may have been commissioned by a particular interest group or developer;
   - Ensuring that there is a balanced reporting of the potential impacts on tourism that has come from research on existing studies and the visitor perception and business impacts surveys.

6. These changes have now been incorporated by the University and at its meeting in January 2015, the Regeneration Working Group was content that there is a more
balanced presentation of the research that has been reviewed. The final draft report is attached as appendix A.

Conclusions and Recommendations of the Study

7. In terms of the studies that have been reviewed, the conclusions and recommendations are summarised as:

- There is no evidence to suggest that the development of wind farms has either a significant negative or positive impact on tourism in the UK.
- Where there have been negative effects, these are often in the form of displaced tourism, rather than an absolute loss of tourists to an area.
- There is some evidence to suggest that older visitors, in particular those that value remoteness, landscape, and scenery are the most sensitive to the visual effects of wind farm developments on the landscape. However, it was considered that in locations where this market is significant the potential negative effect on overall visitor numbers may still be low, or at worst moderate.
- Young people and overseas visitors are generally well disposed towards wind farms, and tourists exposed to wind farms are less negative about them than those who have not been exposed to them.
- There is some evidence to suggest that wind farms accompanied by visitor centres could allay concerns of tourists and attract other tourists although the report does stress that there is no empirical evidence to support this.
- The size and position of wind farms are major issues in terms of impact mitigation. Therefore, wind farms need to be sited in the most appropriate topographical, landscape value and tourism economy contexts.
- The scale and rate of wind farm development in future, could if constructed poorly, change the value judgements of tourists, especially if a ‘tipping point’ is reached whereby valued landscapes are felt to be saturated by wind farm developments. The University highlighted however, that there is no evidence in the research studied in the report, to suggest this has happened or will happen in practice.

8. The main reasons identified in the visitor perception study for visiting Northumberland are the scenery and the coastline. In terms of the visitor perception study, the University considered that the findings overall are consistent with the studies that were reviewed. A summary of the findings are:

- 11% of respondents would be discouraged from visiting Northumberland due to wind farms, and 30% will definitely or may be encouraged to visit somewhere other than Northumberland in the future because of the presence of wind farms. This was primarily because of the impact on scenery and because wind farms are unattractive.
- 4% of respondents have been discouraged to visit Northumberland in the past due to wind farms, the same percentage have visited the area because of wind farms.
- 41% of respondents think Northumberland has a sufficient number of wind farms, 43% think that the area could support more wind farms and 16% think Northumberland has too many wind farms.
- 61% of those surveyed agree that a correctly sited wind farm does not ruin or intrude on the landscape.
9. The report includes a number of draft recommendations for consideration by the Council:

- It would be beneficial to carry out research in Northumberland that specifically addresses the impacts of wind farms on tourism. This would enable conclusions to be drawn that would be up to date and specific to the County.
- As many of the studies reviewed are more than ten years old, it would be timely and useful for their conclusions to be tested in the field by further research in the locations they were conducted.
- The draft report includes a guideline framework to aid decision making, which has been informed by the key considerations extrapolated from the most significant studies reviewed. They key considerations are grouped into three factors:
  - Scale and characteristics of existing and proposed wind farm developments in the area;
  - Characteristics of the local visitor economy and its offer;
  - Characteristics of visitors.

Next Steps

10. It is proposed that the final report will be released as part of the evidence base work for the Core Strategy. This report would be published together with a report that was commissioned to assess the extent to which existing onshore wind developments in Northumberland have been successfully accommodated into the landscape. The reports are complimentary and should be considered together as part of the evidence base to inform the development of the renewable energy policies.

11. It is also recommended that the Council investigate the potential for some additional research including:
- Field survey work carried out in the vicinity of existing wind farms in Northumberland;
- Desk based review of the impact that visitor facilities associated with wind farms have had on tourism.

Implications

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**Consultation**

Consultation has taken place with the Regeneration Working Group on this report. There is also extensive consultation being undertaken on the Core Strategy.

**Background papers:**

Evaluation of the Impacts of Onshore Wind Farms on Tourism, October 2014

**Report sign off.**

*Authors must ensure that relevant officers and members have agreed the content of the report:*

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