

Parliamentary community benefits promise could aid Lochaber

LOCHABER TIMES News Feb 18, 2025 by Jamie Wills

Communities in the Highlands and Islands that are the site of large scale energy infrastructure projects could be offered improved community benefits after Energy Minister Michael Shanks promised a package on the matter would be announced soon.



Michael Shanks MP.

Speaking during a Cost of Energy debate on February 11, Mr Shanks said it was important to "bring communities with us" as the government sought to build infrastructure.

"I have always said that if we build network infrastructure and a community is hosting that infrastructure that is essential for the country, it is doing a favour for the rest of the country and should

feel some benefit from it.

"We will announce a package of community benefits shortly," Mr Shanks said.

He said this would include expanding community benefits for technologies such as onshore wind and solar, and to network infrastructure.

Mr Shanks added that the government's hope was that communities would own community infrastructure.

Community benefits for energy infrastructure has become a matter of contention in Lochaber, the site of proposed major projects including the Coire Glas and Lochan na h-Earba pumped storage hydro schemes.

Benefits are not mandatory, although the Scottish Government's Good Practice Principles suggest £5,000 per megawatt per annum for net zero energy developments.

A recent sitting of the Highland Council's South Planning Applications Committee saw councillors criticise Lochan na h-Earba applicant Gilkes Energy for offering 0.5 per cent in community benefits, described as 'paltry' by one councillor.

Addressing Mr Shanks on the subject in the parliamentary session, MP for Inverness, Skye, and West Ross-shire Angus MacDonald said fuel poverty in the Highlands is 47 per cent - compared to 13 per cent in England - and questioned why the area was paying so much for electricity.

Having called for five per cent of revenue to be paid as community benefits, of which two-thirds would go to the impacted council ward and one-third to a Highland wide fund, Mr MacDonald was pleased with Mr Shanks's comments.



Angus MacDonald MP. Photograph: Peter Jolly.

After the debate, Mr MacDonald said: "This is a very positive step and one that I hope will lead to further good news. Now is a once-in-a-century opportunity to create real wealth for rural communities.

"However, plenty more pressure is needed to be applied to the Government to ensure that rural communities in the Highlands and beyond receive the compensation they truly deserve for hosting the renewables that the country needs to hit its net zero opportunities."

He added that he planned to write to the minister to attain details on the updated guidance in due course.

Mr Shanks's promise, as well as an on-going Scottish Government consultation on community benefits, were also welcomed by John Fotheringham, Chairman of the Spean Bridge, Roy Bridge and Achnacarry Community Council, which serves the area where both Coire Glas and Lochan na h-Earba are situated.

"It is important that the communities who will suffer the most disruption from these massive developments see tangible benefits for the lifetime of the scheme," Mr Fotheringham said.

"We trust the present voluntary scheme will be extended to ensure all forms of electricity generation are required to mandatory contribute.

We are most grateful to Angus MacDonald MP for his tireless work in persuading both governments that our Highland Communities deserve a share of the profits for the exploitation of our local natural resource."

The Scottish Government consultation on community benefits concludes in April.

Lochaber Times Michael Shanks MP News



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