



Caithness Courier

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Vandals strike at memorial garden

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'Jabberonaut' is ready to roll

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Home hampers for Melvich pupils

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Unit cuts its hours due to staff shortage

NHS Highland has temporarily reduced the opening hours of Caithness General Hospital's maternity unit due to staff shortages.

The community midwifery unit normally operates between 8am and 8pm. Since Monday, the unit has reduced its hours

to 9am-5pm, Monday to Sunday. NHS Highland said Raigmore Hospital's labour suite in Inverness would triage calls outwith these hours. Caithness midwives will continue to provide out-of-hours cover and support local births.

Mary Burnside, NHS Highland's deputy director of midwifery, said: "We want to reassure all pregnant women and their families living in Caithness that this change will not impact on the level of care or support provided by Caithness General Hospital.

"This is a temporary measure due to staff shortages. The service will be supported by the Raigmore Hospital maternity team and a Caithness-based midwife out of hours."

NHS Highland were unable to say when the service might return to its normal hours.

Reacting to the announcement, NHS Health Action Team said: "Maternity is not a 9-5 service. Is this a fair and reasonable reduction for Caithness mothers and babies?"

Bid to increase height of wind farm

By Alan Hendry
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THE developers behind Limekiln wind farm near Reay want to make the turbines taller.

Energy firms Infinergy and Boralex already have consent for 21 turbines and have applied for permission to construct five more.

But now they want to increase the tip heights of the 21-turbine scheme to align with the proposed extension - which would mean structures of up to 149.9m across the site as a whole.

At the same time, they have come up with a revised track design to

ensure public access to the core path network at Limekiln Forest during the construction work. There was an outcry last November at the prospect of walkers being banned from the 7.8km core path for two years.

Infinergy and Boralex say scoping for a variation to the current Section 36 consent will be submitted to the planning authorities in the coming weeks "which will seek to bring a number of improvements to the project".

The extension is subject to a public inquiry.

Infinergy managing director Esbjörn Wilmar said: "Having started

construction on site with tree-felling and enabling works, it has become clear through dialogue with the local community that our proposed solution to the closure of the core paths on site during the construction works was not supported by local people, local politicians or Highland Council.

"An alteration to the track design looks to be the best solution which will allow us to keep the core path open during construction activities. This will, however, require a variation to the current consent and as a consequence, we will have to submit a Section 36C planning application."

The Limekiln wind farm developers have come up with a revised track design to ensure public access to the core path network during construction.

He added: "The proposed change in the way grid charges are applied to existing and new transmission connected projects in the UK will mean that projects furthest from where most of the electricity demand is, in the south of the country, will see a sharp increase in grid charges due."

"Projects in the far north of Scotland especially will see a severe negative impact. While we are looking to improve the track design, we are also looking to increase the energy yield from the wind farm by increasing tip heights in line with our Limekiln extension project and applying state-of-the-art turbine technology."

"It will allow us to generate more renewable



Our planning expert believes that these amendments should force the original wind farm with its extension to be considered again as a whole.

Brenda Herrick

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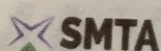
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believe that ratepayers in Highland are due a refund."

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the awards, organised by Highland News and Media Group in association with

Wick are have

Campaigner attacks plans to increase height of turbines

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

energy with the same number of turbines, the same turbine positions, and with the same or even a reduced environmental impact.

"As we will be waiting for an outcome from the Limekiln wind farm extension public inquiry, we have the opportunity to make this application which will then, if both are successful, be built as one development, reducing overall disruption during the construction stage."

Mr Wilmar said enabling works and on-site felling would continue this year to ensure the site is fully prepared. The enabling works are due to be completed by June. Felling work will follow and will last until the spring of 2022.

It is expected the operational date for the wind farm will now be late 2023 at the earliest.

Together with the Limekiln extension project, the wind farm has a grid connection contract in place for 106 MW and the developers say discussions are progressing with National Grid for a revised connection date.

The site is 2.8km south/south-west of Dounreay. The wind farm will provide enough electricity to meet the needs of at least 39,500 homes, based on the average generation mix of UK power sources.

Limekiln will come with a community benefit fund of £5000 per MW of installed capacity, amounting to at least £440,000 a year, or nearly £8 million over the lifetime of the development.

In addition, up to 10 per cent of the project will be made available to the community as a shared ownership opportunity.

Campaigner Brenda Herrick, of Caithness Windfarm Information Forum, said: "This is an increase of more than 10 metres, which in a flat landscape is a lot.

"Don't the people of Reay and surroundings have enough to put up with?

"The first Limekiln application was submitted in 2012. The council raised an objection and it was refused after public inquiry but, as usual, the developers came back with a further, slightly reduced, application.

"This, under a different energy minister, was consented.

"The extension increased the number of turbines to more than the original application so should not have been consented.

"It has become common now for wind farms to acquire extensions - presumably the plan being to get consent for what they believe will be an acceptable wind farm, hoping an extension will then slip through.

"Our planning expert believes that these amendments should force the original wind farm with its extension to be considered again as a whole, but of course this doesn't happen."

Mrs Herrick added: "If the second Limekiln application had been for 26 turbines 149.9m to tip, which is what they are now proposing, would it have been consented? The original refused one was 24 turbines at 139m, so this is much worse.

"Do they think not closing the access path is going to compensate?"

'Spin' accusation over taller turbines

By Alan Hendry
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TWO renewable energy firms have been accused of giving "a masterclass in spin" over their plans to increase the size of turbines at Limekiln wind farm.

Members of Caithness West Community Council say they fail to see how raising the tip height can be described as "optimisation", and warn that the visual impact will be "huge".

Infinergy and Boralex have consent for 21 turbines the site, near Reay, and have applied for an extension of five more. Now they want to increase the tip heights of the 21-turbine scheme by almost 11 metres to align with the proposed extension, which would mean turbines of up to 149.9m across Limekiln as a whole.

Details were announced in a press release sent out by the developers. It said they were seeking to "optimise" the wind farm "in order to address a number of key issues".

The release also referred to a revised track design to ensure public access to the core path network at Limekiln Forest during the construction work. There was an outcry



Jillian Bundy, chairwoman of Caithness West Community Council, warned of 'incremental stealth' over the Limekiln development.

last November when it was suggested walkers could be banned from the 7.8km core path for two years.

Infinergy managing director Esbjörn Wilmar was quoted as saying the track alteration would require "a variation to the current consent".

Jillian Bundy, the chairwoman of Caithness West Community Council, said members had found the announcement "very disappointing".

Responding to Infinergy project manager Fiona Milligan, who sent out the release, Mrs Bundy wrote:

"It's a masterclass in spin that proposals for an additional five turbines, height increase to 149m of all turbines and further core path restrictions can be presented as 'optimisation'."

She added: "We are not sure how such fundamental changes can be considered as a 'variation'. What we are seeing is 'incremental stealth'."

"No doubt the planning authorities will examine the technicalities and legalities, but to the layperson it seems ethically and morally wrong. This is a fundamental change."

Miss Milligan said: "Infinergy has been trying to find a workable solution that will make it possible to keep the core path open and safe for all users during the construction stage of the wind farm."

"This revised access track layout proposal is in response to the very strong local views we received on our original proposals."

"Once the wind farm is operational, the new internal access tracks will also become available to the general public, improving the recreational value of Limekiln by creating miles of additional routes for walkers, riders and mountain bikers."

Mixed reaction in north to Chancellor's budget plans

THE raft of measures announced by Chancellor Rishi Sunak in this week's UK government budget received a mixed reaction in the far north.

Trudy Morris, the chief executive of the Caithness Chamber of Commerce, said: "The news that the furlough scheme is being extended until September will be welcomed by many businesses, who would otherwise be facing a cliff edge come the end of April."

"While we understand the need to begin increasing the business contribution towards the scheme, this



Trudy Morris is calling for governments to fill gaps.

Ms Morris described changes to VAT rates from

throughout this season and into the next."

She added: "The promise of new loan, asset and invoice finance is welcome, but we have been concerned at the inability of some businesses to access other government-backed finance options throughout the pandemic."

"The UK government must work closely with the banking sector to ensure that these new support mechanisms are truly accessible to all businesses."

Jamie Stone, the Liberal Democrat MP for Caithness Sutherland and Easter Ross



Use of the Covid vaccine at Tain Health Centre.

quick and painless'

on seat at Holyrood

IT'S decision time for voters as candidates enter the final day of campaigning ahead of tomorrow's Scottish parliamentary election.

With the standing MSP Gail Ross, of the SNP, stepping aside, there will be a new face in the Caithness, Sutherland and Ross seat this time around.

But will it be her fellow SNP member Maree Todd who takes her place or will the Lib Dems' Molly Nolan manage to cause a shock?

The party's internal polling recently suggested they were within three percentage points of topping the SNP in the far north, though Ms Todd dismissed the figures.

Also in the running are local Conservative Highland councillor Struan Mackie and Marion Donaldson for Labour along with Tina McCaffery of the Freedom Alliance Party and Barry Christian of the Scottish Libertarian Party.

Voters will also be asked to vote for a party or individual to represent them on the Highlands and Islands Regional List.

In the Caithness Courier today, the candidates give their views on how they propose to tackle healthcare issues in the north, while we round up all you need to know about what to expect at the polling stations on Monday and how each ballot works.

and health a prescription for... - pages 4-5

ety first as voters go to the... - page 6

'We're going to be surrounded!'



Jillian Bundy on the Limekiln access road.

By Alan Hendry
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AN increase in the height of turbines planned for Limekiln wind farm would have a "massive impact" on Reay, it has been claimed.

Jillian Bundy, chairwoman of Caithness West Community Council, says the development will dominate the skyline for miles around - and warns that villagers will be "encircled by turbines" if all the proposed onshore and offshore developments in the area go ahead.

Energy firms Infinergy and Boralex have consent for 21 turbines, at heights of 126 and 139 metres, and have applied for an extension of five more. They now want to increase the tip heights of the consented scheme to align with those in the proposed extension - which would mean 26 turbines of up to 149.9m across the site as a whole.

The extension is due to go to a public inquiry next month.

Objectors believe it is the wrong scheme in the wrong place.

"They're going to put through a variation to the consented

scheme to increase the height of all of the turbines to 149.9m for all of them," Mrs Bundy said.

"The reason they're doing that is because the grid connection charges for wind farms in the far north are increasing, because the wind farms are far away from where the demand for the energy they're producing is required.

"The planning legislation requires that wind farms are sited in the right place and are sited sensitively. Increasing them to [just under] 150 metres will have a massive impact on Reay.

"

The grid connection charges for wind farms in the far north are increasing, because the wind farms are far away from where the demand for the energy they're producing is required.

Jillian Bundy

"If they're having to make them so big in order to make them financially viable then that's surely telling you that

they're in the wrong place.

"The consented scheme should either go ahead as is or they don't build it at all. If it's not economically viable then that is telling us it's not the right scheme in the right place."

The scale of onshore wind development in north-west Caithness, and in the adjacent area of north Sutherland, has led to fears that Reay will be surrounded by a "ring of steel".

There could also be turbines at sea if the Pentland Floating Offshore Wind Farm goes ahead. Planning permission is being sought for a project consisting of between six and 10 floating turbines, with a maximum blade-tip height of 270m, to be located around six kilometres north-west of Dounreay.

Mrs Bundy said: "Reay obviously has the Limekiln development which is consented, it has Baillie which is operational, Forss which is operational, Drum Hollistan which is presently going through appeal, and a public inquiry will be held for that at some stage over the summer, Ackron which is just going through the planning stage at the moment and now another

TURN TO PAGE 3

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JOINT DETAIL

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COURSE TO CL. 905

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Objectors fear 'ring of steel' as turbine heights increase

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

one at Kirkton going through scoping.

"And obviously there's the offshore one too. It was going to have been two demonstration floating turbines [Dounreay Tri] but is now going to be a much bigger development, and closer to the shore than the ones in the Moray Firth.

"If that goes ahead then Reay would be completely encircled by wind turbines."

She added: "I think there is very much concerted opposition in the village. And I think it's reasonable to say that even if people haven't been actively against them, they've not necessarily realised the impact.

"Often when I speak to people who haven't objected, or who are maybe a bit more ambivalent about the whole thing, the reason has been 'oh, we'll never see them, they're away out on the hill'.

"I think people just don't realise that they might be two-and-a-half kilometres out on the hill but at 150 metres they will be visible from everywhere. So I think

"

I think people just don't realise that they might be two-and-a-half kilometres out on the hill, but at 150 metres they will be visible from everywhere.

Jillian Bundy

people don't quite realise the scale of them.

"Once they're up, you can't then say 'oh, I didn't realise that's what it was going to look like'."

Infinergy project manager Fiona Milligan said: "We have been speaking with local residents for nearly 10 years and appreciate that there is a mix of opinions - many people are quite comfortable hosting wind farms locally as they know the benefits they bring.

"We recognise not everyone likes to see green energy being produced in this way. However, there are extremely challenging net-zero targets to be met and Caithness should be very proud that it can play such an important role in meeting that challenge."

Miss Milligan added: "The enabling works have seen up to 23 people employed full-time on site, all local to the Highland Council area, in addition to the fencing team of up to eight at any one time."

She also pointed out that Caithness companies had been used to supply plant and fuel.

A Limekiln community benefit fund would offer "a huge opportunity" for local people, while a shared ownership opportunity "will also remain open to appropriate community bodies to invest in, giving them the potential for a regular income over the life of the wind farm".

■ Worries over impact on landscape and amenity - Interview, page 10

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'I think the vast majority of us are opposed'

Jillian Bundy, of Caithness West Community Council, tells **Alan Hendry** about the impact Limekiln wind farm will have on the Reay area – and the strength of feeling among local residents

THE turbines have yet to rise above Limekiln Forest but already the landscape has undergone a transformation. Chopped-down trees are stacked up neatly beside the newly created access road, a long and winding stony track slicing its way through peaty ground. A huge area is being levelled to accommodate a substation. At a nearby borrow pit, where once there were tall conifers there is now a deep, quarry-like gap underneath 30ft cliffs with a crane, a digger and two stone-crushing machines standing by. This is just a glimpse at some of the preparatory work required before the turbine components can take their place in the landscape and start generating renewable energy.

I had joined Jillian Bundy and her husband Martin for an evening walk through part of the Limekiln core path network and along a section of the access road. Jillian is chairwoman of Caithness West Community Council and has been one of the leading voices against

the wind farm and its proposed extension. Infinergy and Boralex already have permission for 21 turbines at the site, immediately to the south of Reay, and want to add five more – all of which will be 149.9m high if their latest plans are approved. They are also seeking to increase



Martin Bundy and dogs at the entrance to the borrow pit.

the operational period from 25 to 40 years.

As the Bundys' energetic Weimaraner dogs, Willow and Macy, went bounding off ahead, Jillian outlined some of the objectors' concerns. The western

edges of the wind farm site border East Halladale Flows, classified as Scotland's Wild Land Area 39 because of "its vast acres of peat". Peat is recognised as a valuable natural carbon store, and Jillian feels "instinctively" that it is wrong to be disturbing so much of the stuff. Indeed, that same week, the partnership pushing for the Flow Country to be recognised as the world's first peatland world heritage site announced it was hoping to make a presentation at the COP26 climate change conference.

"The developers would claim that they will turn things back the way they were," Jillian said after I had taken a couple of photos of her standing against a long embankment of exposed peaty soil sloping down to the access road from well above her head height.

"They're backfilling in some of the peat that has been dug up. They'll replant some of the trees. But it is never going to account for the huge amounts of peat that have been dug up."

"Digging up peat is



It's constant erosion of where we can walk without actually having intimidating wind turbines.



Jillian Bundy at a gateway to Limekiln Forest.

instinctively bad – it doesn't feel right. And we've heard that some of the turbines elsewhere in Caithness may be sinking because the foundations are on peat."

The Bundys acknowledge that Limekiln is a "reasonably tidy" site and that staff from RJ McLeod, the contractor for the access road, have been "polite, very helpful... no issues whatsoever". At a gate leading into the forest, there is an information board and walkers can pick up a laminated guide to the core path on which a map of the forest and a series of safety instructions are given equivalent space. Safety measures even extend to having a hand-sanitiser dispenser attached to a wooden post.

Nevertheless Jillian is unhappy with the impact on walking routes in the area, especially if the extension goes ahead. "The Limekiln extension won't affect me personally view-wise at all," she said. "The extension will head more towards Shebster. My objection to that is the five turbines there are going into Broubster Forest, so it's starting to impact yet another area of forest that is residential amenity for local people. Local people use these forests to cycle and walk. Broubster is popular for horse-riding as well."

"So it's not just the view – it's constant erosion of where we can walk without actually having intimidating wind turbines."

Responding to Mrs Bundy's concerns over peat, Infinergy pointed out that the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) had concluded that "deep peat is not a significant issue at the site" and that one of the pre-construction requirements is a peat management plan which SEPA must sign off. Infinergy calculates that the carbon payback for the proposed development will be around two years or less, adding that had the original scheme been consented in 2013 "it could have by

now conservatively saved approximately 416,000 tonnes of CO₂".

Back outside the Bundys house on the edge of Reay, while Martin went off to feed the hungry dogs, I asked Jillian about the strength of feeling within the community.

"There are one or two people who I would say have been in favour of the development – for example landowners who are being paid for their land to be accessed, and perhaps one or two local contractors who think there might be some work," she said. "That's fair enough. There may be some people who don't mind."

"But I think the vast majority of the people in the village are opposed. That is confirmed by the fact that a 1000-signature petition went to the Scottish Parliament for Limekiln 2 [the consented scheme]."

"It's not necessarily Nimbyism. I was very involved with the Spittal Hill wind farm – purely because it was another one that was very much in the wrong place, it was on top of a hill. Fortunately it was turned down. And I objected to Golticlay as well, for different reasons – the impact on habitats there. Again it is the wrong place."

Jillian highlighted an election campaign comment from the Scottish Greens' lead candidate for the Highlands and Islands, Ariane Burgess, who declared that any further onshore wind developments in Caithness must be of the right scale and "should only go ahead with the full support of local people".

Jillian noted: "If even the Greens are saying Caithness has too many... I can say no better than them."

"It's the democracy thing. I think it was Nicola Sturgeon who said 'power doesn't rest with politicians, it rests with the people.'"

Jillian allowed that thought to hang in the evening air for a few seconds before adding, pointedly: "Does it?"



Jillian is concerned that 'huge amounts of peat' have been dug up to prepare for the wind farm.