

NOTE FOR RECORD : DSG MEETING WITH MAREE TODD, MSP
Monday 23 May 2022

Cllr Struan Mackie, DSG Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked Maree Todd for taking the time to meet with members. He summarised that this meeting was a result of comments made in the press with regards her opposition to nuclear and subsequent correspondence sent between DSG and MSP.

He stressed that while there was an understanding of Scottish Government's policy regarding nuclear this was contrary to the majority of views in the Far North with a highly skilled nuclear workforce in the area alongside a capable supply chain that can benefit from nuclear decommissioning activities.

While noting that a number of people within the attendance may not agree with SG policy he stressed the need for a courteous and co-operative discussion where better outcomes can be identified for everyone.

Maree Todd thanked DSG for facilitating the meeting noting that the comments that started these discussions had been made in answer to a specific question and it had not been her intention to dismiss the skills within the area that were borne out of nuclear. She did re-iterate SG opposition to old nuclear power noting she herself had personal concerns. However, she added that everyone had an interest in the economics and population diversity, noting that Just Transition was a vehicle to look at forming activity with a cleaner and greener economy.

Summary of discussions

1. Arguments were made regarding nuclear as part of the energy mix that Scottish Government should consider noting other countries were starting to relook at nuclear. Response was that Scottish Government had concerns with nuclear because of safety and cost. A DSG member noted that at present renewables were subsidised.
2. Maree clarified that SMRs were also viewed by SG as old nuclear and would not be supported.
3. Clarity was given that SG had not opposed the STEP fusion bid (and SG policy position is current neutral). Their stance on nuclear had not hindered that with one Scottish site remaining on the short list.
4. Point was made that when looking at UK SMRs sites were being selected on the grounds of joined up approaches by Wales and UK. Some of the messaging coming from SG was detrimental to the area when it came to looking to broaden nuclear support services into decommissioning and new nuclear builds within UK and beyond.
5. Question raised on what SG was actively doing to support the nuclear decommissioning activities – the site could be an asset, alongside this Dounreay is lead and learn site for Sellafield (and other NDA sites) – there could be a huge potential here but needs a concerted joined up approach to take forward.

6. Scotland was unique with an abundance of renewable assets. Ensuring a sufficient baseload was identified as a challenge and Maree had written to the Chancellor to highlight the unfairness of energy costs in the Far North, which is four times as expensive as other parts of the country.
7. Renewables were discussed as a potential for job creation in the area but it was pointed out that a lot of manufacturing activities associated with renewables was undertaken elsewhere. It was estimated that for every 18 turbines that equated to 1 job (which was not always local). A question on how many jobs renewables were estimated to have created was asked.
8. It was stressed that the area was looking to diversify into other sectors and renewables were recognised as one of these strands for future employment. However, it was pointed out that wind turbines did not provide a baseload and the storing of (surplus renewable) energy was still at an early stage. This was where there were opportunities for the area with two battery factories and a large industrial site (Dounreay) that could be used for producing hydrogen. SG wish to deliver net zero by 2045 which means huge investments will be required and the other side of this was to consider the circular economy. It was emphasised that what was needed for clarity was for SG to paint the picture that goes with future opportunities and how it all fits together (renewables, net zero, hydrogen storage, Just Transition, etc).
9. Following up the renewables discussion, there is Moray East and Moray West but noted that they could put their control rooms anywhere. The question was how, collectively, these activities can be attracted into the area. Often these decisions are made at Government level so how can SG influence these decisions. MT noted that SG was very keen to do this noting there were issues around grid constraints but that this could be considered in terms of how to use the power locally.
10. There was a need to focus on what nuclear has done for the area. For several decades it drove people here, whereas now the concern is about depopulation. R&D centre of excellence for fast reactor technology brought people here to stay. Renewables (on its own) will not replace that. There is a need to hook something that drives people to the area – it is more about “this is the place it is all happening”? What could be done to drive the skills here?
11. Stressed the need for a joined up approach by Governments, local authorities, economic agencies (all currently sit within the CNSRP structure) to ensure that resources (funding) is maximised. Opportunity right now due to NDA socio economic remit to invest and lever additional funding through – but needs to be looked at from a strategic level. If this was done correctly each agency/organisation could provide investment but also potentially make savings (through economies of scale)!
12. City Region Deals may be helpful in taking forward some local prospects but need to know well in advance that applications (for what?) are open.
13. Broadband was raised as a potential issue for businesses moving into the area – to attract people to the area requires good connectivity, broadband being an essential service for most. MT agreed noting that depopulation was key ingredient to having that discussion around poor broadband connectivity that can exacerbate depopulation and discourage people to move to the area.. However, the need for good broadband connectivity was only part of the mix, with communication links more generally, transport links, education, childcare, housing and health

services all needing to be considered to attract people to the area.

14. It was stressed that the county was not sitting with a 'begging bowl' out but there was an element of seeking help and support. Noting delivering SG's commitments on net zero and circular economy will be challenging it is important that SG see that our area can help them meet some of these obligations. It is a two-way thing – we have a skilled workforce, industrial sites and natural renewable resources – while other areas can do some of these things we have it all on the doorstep.
15. Recognition that the area has a lot to offer but the geography (natural resources, as in renewables potential?) was to the area's benefit. Biggest issue facing the area (and across the country) is skills right across all sectors. There is an urgent need to address the increase of the gene pool.
16. Maree Todd noted she was encouraging other SG Ministers to visit Caithness and speak to stakeholders. Richard Lochhead had responded stating he would be visiting the area in the summer to speak to stakeholders re Just Transition. Other Ministers would also be willing to visit and discuss.

In relation to encouraging SG Ministers to visit the area, it was noted that the community was frustrated at the refusal of some Ministers not wishing to travel to the area because it 'was too far away'. As an example, the last Transport Minister had not visited because of the distance to travel and the new Transport Minister had agreed to meet with the Caithness Transport Forum via virtual means for half an hour. This was not the sort of support or demonstration of commitment from SG that was useful and did not give sufficient time to get any key points across nor discuss potential solutions to any issues raised.

Actions from discussions:

[Note: actions will be transferred to main DSG action list in due course].

- **Maree Todd to clarify whether Scottish Government will consult on the Energy policy.**
- **DSG to write formally to Maree Todd to identify and request visits of appropriate SG Ministers to visit area.**
- **Maree Todd to research and respond to job creation in relation to renewables.**
- **Maree Todd to encourage SG to paint the picture of future renewable opportunities including opportunities around green hydrogen production.**
- **Maree Todd to visit the Dounreay (and Vulcan) site at the earliest opportunity.**

Cllr Struan Mackie
DSG Chair
10 June 2022