

# Fury as turbines get green light

## ■ Group up in arms at farmland scheme

A GROUP set up to counter the spread of wind farms in Caithness is up in arms about a five-turbine development being given planning approval without going before councillors.

The venture is set to go ahead on farmland at Wathegar, near Watten, close to the existing small wind farms at Bilbster and Achairn.

Caithness Windfarm Information Forum (CWIF) has welcomed the newly-issued decision to dismiss an appeal against the Highland Council's refusal to sanction a five-turbine scheme at Shebster, west of Thurso.

But it is furious that the Wathegar scheme has been given the green light by officials.

CWIF spokesman Stuart Young said his group had objected mainly on the grounds of the cumulative impact the turbines would have in the area.

Local farmer Danny Miller, of Netherton Mains, is behind the scheme to put up five turbines, each 101 metres to the tip of their blades.

Mr Young said: "How is it possible in a democracy for something like a £7 million to £10 million industrial development in the middle of the countryside to be approved by officials without even as

much as a nod to the elected members?"

Mr Young said: "Nobody seems to be very sure of how the process operates. Several members of the planning committee I spoke to didn't know the scheme had been approved and the committee chairman, Donnie Mackay, was stunned when I told him."

Mr Young said it appears to be a case of approval "by stealth".

He meanwhile welcomed Scottish Government-appointed reporter Richard Dent's decision to uphold the council's rejection of the five-turbine plans for West Shebster.

Dismissing the appeal by local businessman Charlie Sutherland, Mr Dent concluded that the turbines would have an unacceptable impact on residents, particularly in association with the recently-approved plans for 21 turbines on nearby Baillie Hill.

Some residents, he pointed out, would be just a kilometre away from turbines to the north and to the south of their houses.

Mr Young said: "We're, of course, delighted that the people who faced looking out to these huge structures – some of them for the rest of their lives – are now spared

that. Saying that, they are still going to have to contend with the Baillie turbines."

Senior council planner David Mudie said the Wathegar scheme is one of, if not the first, developments of its kind in the Highlands to be dealt by delegated powers.

He said: "Our new scheme of delegation allows us to delegate many more types of development. It's also an acknowledgement that the technology involved is well understood and some of the issues not as controversial as before."

He said CWIF was one of two objections. The new regime means an application only requires to be referred for a decision by councillors if there are at least five objections, from different addresses.

Mr Mudie said applications go through the same rigorous examination by officials, whether or not they end up being delegated.

He added that councillors are not notified when officials make decisions on their behalf though all the information is posted on the council's website.

Officials recently used their delegated powers to refuse planning consent for two turbines at Olgrimore, Scotscalder.