

# NORTHUMBERLAND ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY GROUP (NEPG)



## NEPG 2012 – 2022: What has been achieved?

With the approval of Northumberland County Council's (NCC) Draft Plan in 2022, the main work of NEPG has logically drawn to a close.

We can now reflect on what has been achieved over the course of the past 10 years.

In early 2012 representatives of 8 wind farm action groups from across Northumberland met with Geoffrey Purves then Chair of the Northumberland and Newcastle Society (N&N).

They were invited establish the “Northumberland Environmental Policy Group” as part of the N&N so as to engage in any consultation process to ensure that the objectives of landscape protection, residential amenity, impact on tourism and the mitigation of the effects of fuel poverty in Northumberland were more effectively recognised and achieved; whilst still addressing the County’s renewable energy obligations.

### The agreed strategy was to:

- Raise significant financial, political and general support;
- Work with other Organisations with similar Objectives
- Directly or indirectly, engage experienced planning consultants, landscape architects, and other experts as needed, to examine, refine and provide the evidential base to achieve the primary objective;
- Participate in the development of the County’s emerging planning policies and monitor the application of those policies and those they replace during and after their formulation.

## How effective has NEPG been?

### A: Raising Support and providing Information

A sustained policy of information has been mounted bringing to the notice of our MPs, County Councillors, Parish Councillors and wider public through letters and a number of press releases, the substance of our critique and our suggestions.

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## Highlights:

- The landscape consequences of wind farms was the Front page article and images in The Journal of 2013 Journal coverage of appearance of wind farms from the sea as a backdrop to Dunstanburgh castle (still prominent image on website)
- House of Lords debate Windfarms and Northumberland landscape
- Newcastle University “Insight” lecture sponsored by the N&N; Energy Entropy and the Theory of Wealth, John Constable Feb 2016
- Numerous articles in City and County
- 2019 AGM lecture by Andrew Joicey entitled Windfarms What are the concerns?

## **B: Working with other organisations**

Throughout the 10-year life of NEPG, at all phases of policy development, an unprecedented accord developed between the Society and all the Parish as well as Town Councils of Northumberland.

These bodies were provided with the arguments and evidence developed by the Society so as to inform their own representations.

An early example of such activity was the fact that the wind energy section of the Core Issues and Options Consultation received a greater than 10-fold response than any other section, with most comments favouring the establishment of a “separation distance” a key Society argument.

The Parish councils in particular welcomed our representations, so much so that Morpeth Town Council made additional representation to the County Council along the lines of our suggestions.

A particularly close relationship developed with CPRE who co-sponsored all of our representations.

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## C: Raising funds to engage planning consultants and landscape architects

- Approximately £104,000 was raised for the various phases of the 10-year engagement with NCC.

D: Participate in the development of the County's emerging planning policies. This engagement has been the most detailed, costly and longest standing representation in the Society's history.

NEPG's first successful contribution to County Planning policy was to persuading NCC's planning officers to abandon their disastrous policy approach of 'Areas of Least Constraint'. Instead, the NEPG supported a criteria-based approach to the consideration of onshore wind proposals, now, with effect from 29th March 2022, adopted by the Northumberland Local Plan. Our success in arguing for that criteria-based approach preceded but was, in part, overtaken by the impact of the changes introduced by the Written Ministerial Statements in June 2015.

Post June 2015, the NEPG faced three new problems: first, NCC's, then, planning officers strongly resisted the idea that local people should have a major role in onshore wind proposals; second, they argued for the ability to substitute their views for those of affected communities; and, third, they formulated what seemed to the NEPG to be a misconceived approach to the 'identification of suitable areas'.

These issues lead the Society, through the NEPG, to embark on two substantial projects, each of a size and scope far beyond anything previously undertaken by the Society.

The second project involved the presentation of detailed, professional analysis and argument at the Examination in Public ('E.i.P.') of the draft Northumberland Local Plan on 6th February 2020. In this context, the NEPG garnered huge support from individuals and communities across the County; raising substantial financial support; engaged Leading Counsel (Greg Jones KC) to appear on behalf of the Society at the E.i.P., backed up by professional landscape input from Alison Farmer Associates ('AFA'), probably the Country's pre-eminent experts in their field.

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In terms of this project, the Society aimed to overturn NCC's policy objective of 'identifying' some 66% of the entire land area of Northumberland, excluding the National Park and AONB's, as 'suitable for wind turbine development', albeit subject to significant height restrictions.

Although not successful, The Society's arguments did achieve limited but important changes to the relevant policies of the emerging plan. Notably, NCC were forced to concede that 'landscape value assessment' was a distinct but vital component of the assessment of 'landscape sensitivity'. This is now, in effect, a policy component of the process that an applicant for onshore wind development should undertake.

**The NEPG's third project**, was the actual evaluation of a very large area of North Northumberland. This project attracted huge support from individuals and communities across the County; raising substantial financial support; allowing the engagement of AFA. Many local people, some with significant, relevant expertise, also contributed to the evidence base on which AFA relied.

AFA having prepared a draft report, based on their extensive desk-top research and importantly, fieldwork, NEPG consulted local communities within the study area, through their Parish Councils. The results of the consultation were then fed into the draft report, leading to some changes in the boundaries of the area that AFA recommended for designation as a 'valued landscape'.

This report, 'Northumberland Sandstone Ridges and Vales A Valued Landscape Technical Report – January 2022', comprises a compelling piece of evidence that may be deployed in several ways.

- First, it forms a methodological exemplar for the study of other important landscapes in Northumberland and elsewhere.
- Second, it and other reports like it, may be used to formally identify 'valued landscapes' in Neighbourhood Plans – such designations would then form part of the 'development plan.'
- Third, even if not used in the context of a Neighbourhood Plan, Parish Councils may, as many have done, adopt the report as evidence of the value of their local landscape.
- Fourth, the report may be a vital resource available to local people faced with planning applications for inappropriately intrusive development, affecting their quality of life.

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- Most importantly, the report serves as a rebuttal of the idea that NCC's abandonment, in 2010, of the old 'Areas of High Landscape Value', per se, means that those landscapes are no longer worth protecting.
- Initial indications are that NCC's planning officers are impressed by the report and the NEPG is encouraging NCC to follow its example elsewhere in the County.

While the separate role of the NEPG may have reached its natural end, the Society will wish to continue its participation in this vital area of National debate.

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The Northumberland and Newcastle Society is a volunteer based civic society dating from 1924 to protect and enhance the landscape, culture and built environment of Northumberland and Newcastle for the enjoyment of this and future generations.

The N&N's Planning & Development Teams sit monthly to consider planning applications relating to Conservation Areas and listed building consents within the City of Newcastle upon Tyne, North Tyneside and Northumberland.

To fulfill its objectives, the N&N has established committees made up of society members whom have extensive professional experience and or great passion in respect of the built and natural heritage of the area.

Find out more at: <https://www.nandnsociety.org.uk>