

Ariane Burgess MSP

Convenor

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

The Scottish Parliament

By email: localgov.committee@parliament.scot

3 November 2025

Dear Ariane,

Further to the Committee's evidence session on 28 October, I am writing to provide more detail on a couple of points regarding energy use of data centres, the use of AI within housing planning applications and a General Power of Competence for councils.

Energy use of data centres

The Scottish Government is committed to Scotland becoming a net zero nation by 2045, and we have consistently set out our opposition to the continued use of unabated fossil fuels to generate electricity, including for powering data centres. Scotland's abundant renewable energy generating capacity presents an opportunity for the country to become a leader in green data centres. For example, in 2023, 70% of electricity generated in Scotland was from renewable sources – a marked increase compared to 32% in 2013 – and, as of June 2025, there is an estimated capacity of 76.5 GW of renewable energy projects in the planning pipeline in Scotland. This means there is ample opportunity to utilise excess renewable generation for data centres, helping to reduce the impact and costs of network constraints, with £390 million paid to Scottish wind farms in 2024 alone. As the National Energy System Operator (NESO) recognised in its 2025 Future Energy Scenarios, up to a fifth of future data centre demand in Great Britain could be based in Scotland.

The Scottish Government appreciates the importance of the timely delivery of major grid reinforcements, and we are working closely with the UK Government and other relevant stakeholders given the largely reserved nature of this policy area. We await the conclusion of the NESO Connections Reform Process which it is hoped will provide more clarity on grid connection timescales, and subsequently how the electricity network will move towards achieving clean power by 2030.

In October 2025, the UK, Scottish and Welsh Governments jointly commissioned NESO to produce a Strategic Spatial Energy Plan (SSEP) for Great Britain. The SSEP will spatially optimise a small volume of flexible data centre demand (1-2 GW). This will indicate where opportunities for energy system benefits exist, such as co-location of renewables and data centres, supporting the development of government policy on the spatial location of data centre demand. The Regional Energy Strategic Plan (RESP) for Scotland will further enable the coordinated development of the energy system across multiple vectors and is intended to be shaped by Scottish local authorities, providing confidence in system requirements and supporting the energy system's transition to net zero in a cost-effective manner.

Use of AI within housing planning applications

The Scottish Government recognises the importance of taking urgent action on the Housing Emergency and for planning applications to be processed at pace support delivery of homes. The Scottish Government is currently developing a new, modernised planning application portal to replace the existing eDevelopment.scot service. This initiative aims to simplify the process for applicants, and reduce the administrative burden on planning authorities, allowing them to focus their expertise on priority areas, such as the assessment of housing proposals.

Alongside this, the Scottish Government is actively exploring opportunities to incorporate AI into future phases of development given the potential of AI to benefit all types of development, including new homes. However, it is important to note that professional judgement and advice, as well as community engagement, will continue to be an important feature within the broader planning context. The Minister for Public Finance intends to engage with Sir Tom Hunter to explore this issue further.

General Power of Competence

I wrote to the Committee on 28 October to provide further information on activity underway to explore the introduction of a Power of General Competence for councils in Scotland. This letter noted the results of a public consultation held earlier in the year and confirmed my intention to progress interim measures to expand flexibility available to councils.

I hope the Committee finds this information helpful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Shona Robison' with a horizontal line extending to the right.

SHONA ROBISON