

Could windfarm money pay for 'life-saving' screening?

Orkney geneticist sets out hopes for getting screening efforts off the ground for Scotland's islands

By **Ethan Flett**

MONEY from major windfarm developments should be used to cover the costs of screening the population for harmful genetic variants, according to an Orcadian geneticist.

Just one of Orkney Islands Council's (OIC) three proposed windfarm projects could yield £144,000 in benefit money each year.

For the scientist at the helm of the Viking Gene study, Professor Jim Flett Wilson, it "fits the bill just perfectly" to use money like this for the screening programmes he believes are needed in Scotland's island groups.

The concern about "founder variants" first focused on Westray where, it was announced in 2023, the BRCA1 gene variant had been discovered.

Like the subsequent BRCA2 variant found in Whalsay, this increases the risk of breast and ovarian cancer (as well as prostate cancer in the case of the Shetland island).

In September last year, Professor Wilson told *The Orcadian* that the Westray discovery was "the tip of the iceberg," and that a further eight disease-causing variants had been discovered in the Northern Isles populations.

Since calling for "a proper screening programme for anybody and everybody who comes from Orkney and Shetland", Professor Wilson has been meeting with politicians from the Scottish and UK Government to try and make this happen.

"Certain people have been very supportive," he has told the newspaper this week, highlighting his work with Western Isles MP Torcuil Crichton.

Professor Wilson added: "I think it's easier for people who are not in power — who are not in government — to support things because when I speak to Scottish ministers, while they say this is interesting and important, of course you then run

into the problem that there's not a lot of money around."

The geneticist has had discussions with the cabinet secretary for health, Orkney-born MSP Neil Gray. But, the scientist says it "hasn't moved forward very far" — probably, he believes, because of the costs.

Professor Wilson's discussions with Mr Crichton have led him to the idea of using community benefit money from windfarms to get the screening off the ground.

The Labour MP knows first-hand about the impact of such a scheme. He has hemochromatosis, which is one of the conditions Professor Wilson has studied, and found a variant causing a higher preponderance of in the Western Isles. A disease of the liver, it causes the build-up of iron in the blood, and can poison organs.

Speaking in *The Guardian* last week, Mr Crichton said the screening efforts mooted by Professor Wilson would be "revolutionary" and could "save lives, and put us two decades ahead of the rest of the country in preventive medicine."

In Orkney, community benefit money could come from one of the OIC windfarms mooted for Quanterness, Hoy or Faray. This Thursday, councillors will decide if the first two of these developments go ahead.

If both do, this could generate over £280,000 in community benefit money each year.

Professor Wilson said: "These funds are usually about better transport links and improved housing, which are important things, and I don't disagree with that."

"But, improving your health, the health of the population, is maybe the most important thing of all that people can do to avoid disease and lengthen their lives."

A scheme is already under way with NHS England



During last year's Orkney International Science Festival, Professor Jim Flett Wilson gave an update on his research of harmful genetic variants in isles' populations.

for the Jewish population, in which three BRCA variants have been found, and people with one or more Jewish grandparents can get screened.

In time, Professor Wilson believes Scotland's NHS will pay for the screening of people from Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles. Until then, though, he says that community benefit funds can get this work started.

The scientist says such screening would not only help the community in the present day, but also future generations, as genetic faults can be identified, and people who have them can take action early.

Professor Wilson added: "The people in Edinburgh and Glasgow do not have, in general, these risks."

"The Shetland people have their risks. The Orkney

people have our risks and the Hebrideans have theirs, so it's sort of specific as well. I think it fits the bill just perfectly [for community benefit funding]."

Beyond BRCA1, Professor Wilson told *The Orcadian* that he and his team have also found a variant that causes a considerably higher frequency of a type of bowel cancer in people from Orkney.

In our population, there are also a couple of other variants that increase the chances of suffering from rare diseases — with Wilson's disease being one example, which causes a harmful build-up of copper in the body. Other variants, Professor Wilson said, are currently being studied.

The geneticist's recent research has focused on the Western Isles, where similar discoveries are being made.

Housing stats point to a gloomy picture?

Mixed response inside council chamber as to OIC performance

By **Iain Grant**

ORKNEY Islands councillors have given a mixed response to the latest stats on how its housing service compares to similar authorities elsewhere in Scotland.

A report on the latest benchmarking was considered along with the results of a tenant survey at the latest meeting of the council's education, leisure and housing committee on February 5.

Councillor John Ross Scott said: "Reading through this, I became quite depressed in some respects."

"I think this would have been a pretty damning report if we had not written it ourselves as it looks like a poor show on an awful lot of the bigger issues."

While he accepted that OIC performed well in some areas, Councillor Scott believes officials have done "a good job" in glossing over the negatives.

Overall tenant satisfaction was logged at 73.6 per cent, compared with the peer group's 81.6 per cent and the Scottish average of 86.5 per cent.

The percentage of tenants who felt involved in the decision-making process was 70.9 in Orkney, against

the peer group's 79.6 and the Scotland-wide 87.7.

Just 67.1 per cent of OIC tenants were satisfied with the quality of their homes against 81.6 per cent of the peer group and 84 per cent in Scotland.

Tenants in Orkney (88.6 per cent) were marginally more satisfied than elsewhere when it came to satisfaction with the repairs and maintenance of their homes but when it came to judging the management of the neighbourhood they live in, just 59.1 per cent of Orkney tenants were happy against 82 per cent of the peer group and 84.7 per cent Scotland-wide.

OIC performed well in the time to complete emergency repairs and medical adaptations and the level of its 1,000-strong stock meeting the Scottish Housing Quality Standard.

It also scored relatively well on the number of tenancy offers refused; low levels of abandonments; gross rent arrears and collection rates; and low levels of anti-social behaviour.

Other areas where OIC compared less well included time to complete non-emergency repairs; the average time to process homeless presentations; the percentage of tenants in arrears after their tenancy

ends; and the time to re-let properties.

Housing manager Lesley Mulraine said that while the peer group looks at the same indicators as OIC, their operating conditions and access to different services can vary significantly.

Councillor Scott persisted: "There are quite a few we're well below on — that is the issue."

"I'd love to know, say if we're below Shetland or Western Isles, but we can't see that as they are mixed in with the peer group."

Head of community learning, leisure and housing Frances Troup undertook to provide the comparative information for the two other island authorities.

She commented on the fact that how surveys are carried out can affect the results.

Some authorities, like OIC, have the survey carried out independently. There are varying use of face-to-face, phone and paper questionnaires, all of which, she said, can affect responses.

Councillor David Dawson welcomed the positive indicators such as overall rent arrears and low rate of anti-social behaviour, but said others "filled me with a degree of gloom."

"We've clearly fallen short in some areas and I'd welcome if we could

drill down a bit further into those, particularly tenant satisfaction with the quality of their homes, the management of their neighbourhood, and the stock meeting the quality standard."

Asked by Councillor Janette Park about action being taken to reduce rent arrears, Mrs Mulraine said local authorities had faced the perfect storm in their efforts to do this.

She said the pandemic had been followed by changes in the way the rent element of Universal Credit was paid and the cost-of-living crisis.

OIC has reviewed its policy on chasing arrears, which included a drive to seek to intervene before tenants get into serious difficulties.

This included making referrals to the local Citizens Advice Service and increased monitoring of and support for tenants who fall into arrears.

Mrs Mulraine said OIC has higher levels of arrears owed by former tenants as it tends to devote more resources than local authorities in pursuing individuals to recover the debt.

OIC convener Graham Bevan congratulated officials on a very comprehensive report.

He believed the satisfaction survey presented an unfair representation of the service.

He said: "I see plenty of positives in this report in terms of where we are. We're doing quite well."

Councillor Bevan said sometimes numbers and statistics seen for the first time can be misleading.

"The explanations from officials give a much more rational view of where we are."

Councillor Steven Heddle was also keen to defend the authority's housing record given the resources it has.

He said: "I don't want anyone to go away from this item with the words 'damning' or 'gloomy' ringing in their ears. My own experience of the service over a long number of years is of a very high-performing, very well-run service that always does the best it can for its tenants."

While he agreed there are areas which can be improved on, Councillor Heddle said he was surprised by the results of the tenant satisfaction survey.

Orkney's peer group includes other local authorities and housing associations which hold housing stock of less than 10,000.