



Campaign to Protect
Rural England

Wind farm free-for-all threatens countryside

In 2004, the Government issued its flagship policy on how local planning authorities should consider applications for wind and other renewable energy development. This was Policy Statement 22: *Planning for Renewables* (PPS 22). It was written as 'enabling' planning policy to remove what the Government saw in previous planning guidance as obstacles to the development of renewable energy.

CPRE believes that there are serious weaknesses in the planning regime for onshore wind farms. Case studies from three areas illustrate what is going wrong.

Humberhead Levels – overcrowded

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Eight wind turbine applications from different developers have been made in and around the Humberhead Levels near Scunthorpe. Two large applications, Keadby and Tween Bridge, are 'Section 36' applications of over 50 megawatts (MW) each – with the planning decision made by the Secretary of State rather than the local planning authority. Six smaller wind farm applications have been submitted to local planning authorities in the area. These are known as the Twin Rivers, Goole Fields, Rusholme, Flixborough, Eastley, and Aire and Calder applications (the latter previously known as Pollington).

CPRE Peak District and South Yorkshire (CPRE PDSY) agrees that the Humberhead Levels can be considered suitable for a number of wind turbines. CPRE PDSY, however, has objected to the large Tween Bridge proposal by EON (United Utilities) for 28 turbines of 125 metres in height because it is too close to Thorne Moor, England's largest raised bog and peat ecology area and extremely important for biodiversity, and wildlife. The wind farm would extend as close to 300 metres to the moor. Along with nearby Hatfield Moors, it is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), a National Nature Reserve and European Special Protection Area.

CPRE PDSY argues that the proposed large wind farms are not required to meet the regional target for renewable energy capacity set in the revised Regional Planning Guidance (RPG) 12, especially given that other land-based forms of renewables are expected to make a contribution. This also illustrates one of CPRE's major concerns about planning for renewables; that the current 'minimum' regional and sub-regional targets for renewable energy capacity are encouraging developers to put forward projects which would lead to regional or sub-regional targets being exceeded.

There may be a joint planning inquiry for all eight applications. This would be the first time that large and small applications would be considered together. CPRE would welcome a joint inquiry but is concerned about whether the inquiry will use a proper methodology for assessing the cumulative landscape and visual effects which can arise from multiple wind farms proposed across a given area. Unlike Scotland, which uses a sound cumulative landscape and visual effects methodology developed by Scottish National Heritage, dated and unsatisfactory guidance is still used in England.

Fullabrook Down – after the council says no, boost your application and get Government to decide

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In 1993, North Devon Wind Power (NDWP) applied for 12 turbines at Fullabrook Down near Barnstaple. North Devon District Council refused on the grounds that the site is in a scenic landscape worthy of being designated an Area of Great Landscape Value (AGLV). In 1994, NDWP applied for 9 turbines at Fullabrook Down and for 14 turbines at nearby Crackaway and Hore Down. The council refused again. NDWP appealed. When the appeal was dismissed, the NDWP took the case to the High Court and then to the Court of Appeal. In 1996, the court upheld the planning inspector's original decision recommending refusal.

NDWP has now applied for planning permission again. The latest application is on a much larger scale, comprising 22 turbines which are 110 metres in height, covering a much larger area than previous applications. For the first time, because of the scale of the application (it exceeds the 50 megawatt threshold) the planning decision will be made by the DTI rather than the local planning authority. North Devon District Council is now acting only as a consultee, making a recommendation to the DTI on whether the application should be accepted or rejected, rather than making the decision itself. A public inquiry is expected soon.

Conisholme Fen Farm – pressure tactics

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Ecotricity made an application for 20 turbines at Conisholme Fen Farm in Lincolnshire in 2003. The local council's planning officers recommended approval but elected councillors rejected the application on the grounds of visual intrusion due to the proximity of the Lincolnshire Wolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty four miles away. The Government's Countryside Agency had supported the case for refusal. In 2004, the Planning for Renewable Energy Targets in Yorkshire and Humber 2004 report was published, having been commissioned by the Government Office for Yorkshire and Humber and the Regional Assembly. The report's landscape sensitivity assessment identified the area of Lincolnshire Wolds as a landscape of high sensitivity, describing it as:

'Unspoilt, with few settlements and few, if any, industrial features. This area has strong historical associations, notably with Tennyson who wrote about the refreshing and peaceful qualities of the countryside.'

Ecotricity has appealed against the council's decision and a public inquiry will be held in January 2006. In July, this year, Ecotricity submitted another application for slightly larger turbines on the same site. A decision may be taken by the council on the second application before the public inquiry begins early next year. This kind of situation puts a great deal of pressure on local planning authorities. Every appeal against refusal can cost a council thousands of pounds in legal costs. One experienced planning officer quoted total costs to his authority for an appeal of £40,000 to £50,000 for a barrister and expert witnesses.

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