

# Wind planning – a storm ahead?



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Considerable **wind resources** place many countries across the region in an enviable position. Yet capitalising on those **resources can prove problematic**, due to local planning restrictions. This case study from the UK highlights the problems faced and offers a number of solutions that will resonate with wind energy suppliers throughout Europe.

The UK has enviable wind resources and the potential to become the green powerhouse of Europe, yet lags behind many of its neighbours in its use and development of renewable energy from wind projects. Ambitious targets have been set by the UK Government, which equate to 30% of electricity from renewable energy resources by 2020.

Currently however, less than five percent of electricity comes from renewables, highlighting the major challenges ahead to meet these targets in the next ten years.

A number of issues surround the UK's delay in exploiting its wind energy resources. However, the complex

planning systems which are in place have been identified by both the government and developers as the major obstacle to progress.

There are many examples of the planning system failing the renewable, and traditional, energy industry in the UK. The Ray Wind Farm proposal



in Northumberland, for example, was the subject of application to the Government in December 2005, but is still undecided after a public inquiry which took place in 2008. As an extreme case, the public inquiry into the Sizewell B nuclear power station, said by the Government to have had direct costs of £30 million, sat for 340 days between 1982 and 1985, making it the longest inquiry of its type. Significant delay and uncertainty such as this are clear disincentives to investment.

Developers of commercial energy projects who want to invest in the UK face a myriad of planning authorities and systems, and can be discouraged from UK projects due to the potential difficulty, time and cost of pursuing an application in the UK. There are different local planning systems and policy frameworks for England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. Individual overhauls of these systems have been investigated and are set to be implemented. Help is available however to potential investors from specialist planning consultancies such as Atmos Consulting which steer developers through the planning process.

Currently, applications for generating stations of over 50MW installed capacity are made directly to the national Government – which could be the UK Government, or the devolved Governments and Assemblies of

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. For developments under 50MW, the planning application is submitted to the local authority or planning service but, under certain conditions, could still be ‘called-in’ by the relevant national Government for decision. This only adds to the complexity and confusion developers face.

A recent BWEA report highlighted the failings of the local planning system; statutory guidelines recommend that a planning application for developments such as a wind farm be decided in 16 weeks by a local authority. However, the reality is that wind farm planning applications are in fact facing an average 14 month wait. The report also showed that of all wind farm applications taken to appeal for refusal or non-determination, around half were then approved – casting doubts over whether local authorities should have such responsibility for decisions on renewable energy capabilities.

The dependence upon local authorities to decide on renewable energy developments is in contrast to a few European countries, who tend to keep decision-making at a regional level. The local focus of the planning system in the UK and elsewhere has created a bottleneck effect – there are more wind energy proposals in terms of MW awaiting decision than the combined

total of built, under construction and consented schemes.

Wind farm developers not only have to navigate the complex local and national systems but increasingly, have to consider the different levels of support that local authorities give to wind farm applications. Aberdeenshire Council, in the north-east of Scotland, and County Durham in England have both embraced wind energy, with County Durham exceeding its target for renewable energy development. In other areas, mobilised public opposition to wind farms can be very strong, and can have the power to ‘make or break’ a wind farm application at the local level. This can often affect local politicians, who might be reluctant to support a wind farm development, and could vote to refuse the application in order to keep voters on their side.

A company called Atmos Consulting ([www.atmosconsulting.com](http://www.atmosconsulting.com)) has found that there is now increasing success in the approval of community level schemes in the UK. They have recently assisted in securing planning permission for a number of community wind turbines in the Western Isles of Scotland, which will create a steady income for local communities for years to come. This is extremely encouraging and should help spread the positive message of renewable energy developments to planning authorities and public opposition groups.

The issues with the planning framework, as related to renewable energy applications, were recognised by the UK Government in its 2007 Energy White Paper. The Government identified the systems of planning control as being one of the top six concerns for inward investors, with major knock-on effects on the UK energy market and wider economy. The government has also declared that it will need a further 4000 3MW turbines to be built onshore to meet its recently announced 30% of electricity from renewables target by 2020.

With a well-developed approach, the UK – and others throughout the region – is well-placed to meet, and exceed, its targets. Specialist companies such as Atmos offer wind farm design and obtaining consents and will continue to offer support to developers of onshore wind projects. Positive attempts are being made to address the current planning system throughout the UK through a series of consultations, proposals and new legislation.

The Infrastructure Planning Commission (IPC) is being established as a response to concerns over the efficiency of the current planning system. This body will deal with all renewable energy proposals of 50 MW, and will be considered alongside other major infrastructure projects such as airports and railways. In terms of wind farm developments, it is unclear whether this will significantly increase the number of wind farms being consented. There are not many schemes over 50MW proposed in England, given constraints placed on large-scale developments by high population density, and the protection given to large areas of countryside. Positive action such as a lowering of the threshold for wind energy projects, or a change in the way in which applications are dealt with at local level, would help alleviate the bottleneck effect. Furthermore, a change in government at the next election would spell the end of the IPC before it has even begun – the main opposition party has vowed to abolish it, should they win the election.

In Scotland, the national planning policy is in the process of being consolidated, which should make for clearer decision making. Scotland has already consented Europe's largest onshore wind farm, and is the UK leader in wind farm developments. The Scottish Government has committed to a target of 50% of all energy to come from renewables by 2020. National policy for wind farm development is advanced

in Scotland. National agencies, such as Scottish Natural Heritage, have extremely well-developed policies for wind farm developments, such as for assessing landscape impacts. This is in contrast to the rest of the UK, where policy and practice is not yet as advanced.

**The conclusion which has to be drawn is that innovative change is needed at all levels of the planning systems if the UK is to meet its renewables targets by 2020. Onshore wind development will be at the very heart of the UK's renewable energy strategy, and the current backlog of applications needs to be cleared as a matter of urgency**

At the local level in Scotland, authorities are being encouraged to produce detailed spatial frameworks for wind farm developments of over 20MW, which will provide greater certainty for investment decisions. Smaller schemes will be assessed against detailed policies.

In contrast, the other devolved areas of the UK are not faring so well. In Northern Ireland, the Department for the Environment is producing a planning policy statement on renewable energy development and supplementary planning guidance on wind energy development. There are concerns that these proposals, in their present form, would limit future development potential. In Wales, the Assembly has focused largely on a number of broad strategic search areas, designated in a technical document called TAN8. By 2007, Wales was 75% behind its TAN8 2010 targets, although progress is being made in respect of consented schemes.

The conclusion which has to be drawn is that innovative change is needed at all levels of the planning systems if the UK is to meet its renewables targets by 2020. Onshore wind development will be at the very heart of the UK's renewable energy strategy, and the current backlog of applications needs to be cleared as a matter of urgency.

Recent planning changes in the UK will go some way towards speeding

up progress for schemes in the future but will do little to tackle the backlog of undecided wind farm applications. What is needed is short term help for local authorities to clear the backlogs and a much more radical solution to deal with problems at local level for schemes below 50MW. Wind energy

developments are set to play a massive role in our energy future and should be considered as essential parts of national infrastructure, like motorways or new railway lines. The approach being established in the IPC in England should be extended more widely to energy projects, enabling progress and ensuring wind power plays its part in tackling climate change. ▴



Philip Lewis is the Principal Planner at Atmos Consulting, a UK-wide environmental consultancy. Philip has seven years of wide-ranging experience on wind farm planning issues, for both the public and private sector, and has acted as an expert witness at four wind farm public enquiries in the past 18 months.