

DCLG Statement

The coalition agreement pledged to decentralise power to local people and give local people far more ability to shape the places in which they live.

Through a series of reforms, this coalition government is making the planning process more accessible to local communities, because planning works best when communities themselves have the opportunity to influence the decisions that affect their lives.

However, current planning decisions on onshore wind are not always reflecting a locally-led planning system. Much of this stems from planning changes made by the last administration, which is why we introduced the National Planning Policy Framework and abolished the last government's top-down regional strategies through the Localism Act.

Following a wide range of representations, including the letter of January 2012 to the Prime Minister from 100 Hon Members, and in light of the Department of Energy and Climate Change's call for evidence, it has become clear that action is needed to deliver the balance expected by the National Planning Policy Framework on onshore wind. We need to ensure that protecting the local environment is properly considered alongside the broader issues of protecting the global environment.

Greater community consultation

We have set out clearly in the National Planning Policy Framework the importance of early and meaningful engagement with local communities. The submissions to the call for evidence have highlighted the benefits of good quality pre-application discussion for onshore wind development and the improved outcomes it can have for local communities.

We will amend secondary legislation to make pre-application consultation with local communities compulsory for the more significant onshore wind applications. This will ensure that community engagement takes place at an earlier stage in more cases and may assist in improving the quality of proposed onshore wind development.

This will also complement the community benefits proposals announced by the Department of Energy and Climate Change today.

New planning practice guidance

The National Planning Policy Framework includes strong protections for the natural and historic environment. Yet, some local communities have genuine concerns that when it comes to wind farms insufficient weight is being given to environmental considerations like landscape, heritage and local amenity. We need to ensure decisions do get the environmental balance right in line with the framework and, as expected by the framework, any adverse impact from a wind farm development is addressed satisfactorily.

We have been equally clear that this means facilitating sustainable development in suitable locations. Meeting our energy goals should not be used to justify the wrong development in the wrong location.

We are looking to local councils to include in their local plans policies which ensure that adverse impacts from wind farms developments, including cumulative landscape and visual impact, are addressed satisfactorily. Where councils have identified areas suitable for onshore

wind, they should not feel they have to give permission for speculative applications outside those areas when they judge the impact to be unacceptable.

To help ensure planning decisions reflect the balance in the framework, my department will issue new planning practice guidance shortly to assist local councils, and planning inspectors in their consideration of local plans and individual planning applications. This will set out clearly that:

the need for renewable energy does not automatically override environmental protections and the planning concerns of local communities

decisions should take into account the cumulative impact of wind turbines and properly reflect the increasing impact on (a) the landscape and (b) local amenity as the number of turbines in the area increases

local topography should be a factor in assessing whether wind turbines have a damaging impact on the landscape (i.e. recognise that the impact on predominantly flat landscapes can be as great or greater than as on hilly or mountainous ones)

great care should be taken to ensure heritage assets are conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance, including the impact of proposals on views important to their setting

I am writing to Sir Michael Pitt, Chief Executive of the Planning Inspectorate to ask him to draw this statement to the attention of planning inspectors in their current and future appeals. I will inform colleagues in local government to assist them in their forthcoming decision-making.

DECC statement:

Changes will give communities greater say on - and benefits from - the siting of onshore wind farms.

Press notice: 13/057

Local communities to have earlier and better involvement

Five-fold increase in benefits paid by developers to communities

Stable investment framework maintained

Communities will have a greater say over the siting of onshore wind farms, and reap increased benefits from hosting developments that do proceed, as a result of changes announced today.

The package of measures will include a five-fold increase in the value of community benefits paid for by developers, and proposals that will require communities to be consulted earlier in the application process.

Current planning decisions on onshore wind are not always reflecting a locally-led planning system. New planning guidance supporting the planning framework from DCLG will make clear that the need for renewable energy does not automatically override environmental protections and the planning concerns of local communities. It will give greater weight to landscape and visual impact concerns.

As part of the measures, the Government will make pre-application consultation with local communities compulsory for the more significant onshore wind applications (this is already

the case for national infrastructure applications). This will ensure that community engagement takes place at an earlier stage in more cases and may assist in improving the quality of proposed onshore wind development.

Ministers will be writing to the Planning Inspectorate and councils immediately to flag up that new guidance will become available shortly.

Best practice guidance from DECC to onshore wind developers will lay down the higher standards expected in relation to their engagement with communities, and a new register will monitor best-practice.

Government will also assist local people to gain the skills they need to enable them to engage more confidently with developers.

The Government will be expecting the industry to revise its Community Benefit Protocol by the end of the year, to include an increase in the recommended community benefit package in England from £1,000/MW of installed capacity per year, to £5,000/MW/year for the lifetime of the windfarm.

Communities agreeing a medium-sized 20MW wind farm could therefore receive a package of benefits worth £100,000 per year, or up to £400 a year off each household's annual bill.

Communities and developers work together to decide how the money should be used – for example, to provide households with money off their energy bills, to pay for energy efficiency initiatives, establish local training projects or fund other community initiatives.

At a scheme run by RES at their Meikle Carewe windfarm near Aberdeen, local residents will receive £122 off their annual electricity bills.

A new Community Energy Strategy, published this autumn, will set out how Government can encourage community ownership and investment in wind projects. A Call for Evidence on this strategy has been published by DECC today.

As well as this, a joint DECC/ Defra Rural Community Energy Fund will provide £15 million in loans and grants to rural communities. Based on the latest costs evidence, financial support for onshore wind – which was cut by 10% from April 2013 – will be held at the same rate, in line with the stable framework for investment in UK onshore wind.

On Thursday, Eric Pickles will announce that new DCLG planning practice guidance will become available on onshore wind to ensure more local decision-making and greater consideration for local environmental issues like landscape, heritage and local amenity. There will also be greater community consultation ahead of planning applications being submitted.

Secretary of State Edward Davey said:

“It is important that onshore wind is developed in a way that is truly sustainable – economically, environmentally and socially, and today's announcement will ensure that communities see the windfall from hosting developments near to them, not just the wind farm”.

“We remain committed to the deployment of appropriately sited onshore wind, as a key part of a diverse, low-carbon and secure energy mix and committed to an evidence-based approach to supporting low carbon power.

“This is an important sector that is driving economic growth, supporting thousands of new jobs and providing a significant share of our electricity and I’m determined that local communities should share in these benefits.

Energy Minister, Michael Fallon said:

“Today, we are putting local people at the heart of decision making on onshore wind.

“We are changing the balance to ensure that they are consulted earlier and have more say against poorly sited or inadequately justified turbines.

“When new turbines are agreed, we will ensure that they are developed in a way that benefits the local community, such as through cheaper energy bills”.

Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, said:

“We want to give local communities a greater say on planning, to give greater weight to the protection of landscape, heritage and local amenity”. Government will deliver these changes in collaboration with industry and communities over the next 12 months.

Notes for Editors

Government’s response to the ‘Onshore Wind Call for Evidence’ was published today. The Call for Evidence ran from 20 September to 15 November 2012 and was issued in two parts: a) Community engagement and benefits, and b) examined the latest evidence on the costs of onshore wind to ensure levels of support through the Renewables Obligation were correct. 1,100 responses were received.

DCLG will make a statement on Thursday announcing a series of planning reforms to onshore wind.

DECC will publish further guidance for developers, and establish a register to monitor practices in due course.

Over 10TWh of renewable electricity was generated from onshore wind in 2011, enough to meet the average electricity consumption of almost 2.5 million households.

In 2011, onshore wind provided 3% of UK electricity supply. There is currently approximately 6.3GW (4074 turbines) of onshore wind in operation, 6.7GW (2857 turbines) under construction or awaiting construction and 5.7GW (2995 turbines) in planning system. Given attrition rates to date for planning and construction, this is likely to lead to up to the 13 GW we anticipate needing alongside other renewables to meet the 2020 renewables target. To meet the trajectory set out in the Renewable Energy Roadmap, we expect to need up to 13GW of onshore wind by 2020.

Between 1 April 2011 and 31 March 2012, there was over £1.6 billion of private sector investment in onshore wind, supporting around 1,800 jobs, and contributing to the Coalition Government’s objective to rebalance the economy and support economic growth.

Planning approvals in England have dropped in recent years. In 2008/2009, around 70 per cent of applications were approved and only 35 per cent were approved in 2012/13.