

## **Dealing with wind turbine applications –some basic guidance for parish councils facing this difficult planning area**

We are a small rural parish council which since 2005 has had to deal with applications for three wind farms (turbines to 103m blade tip) and seven single turbines (17.5 to 70m) .We had had no previous experience of big planning applications of any kind. Turbine applications are, as we learnt, particularly difficult to handle, not only because of their size but also because they include a good deal of technical information, little of which can be taken at face value.

Feelings also run high; local residents close to the site may be deeply distressed at the implications for their lives and homes, while applicants are eager to qualify for the very large subsidies while they are available.

Some applicants are the small to medium farmers whom rural parish councils would normally wish to support, though behind these there is often a commercial developer who will receive most of the benefit.

There are no short cuts, but there are pitfalls it is possible to avoid.

### **1.The application**

**a)Reading it** .These applications are large and controversial, and cannot well be delegated to a planning sub committee. So all councillors need to see the papers, of which you should receive one hard copy from the LPA, if the site is in your parish. A wind farm application will include a full Environmental Statement which will be very long, including sections on Landscape, Ecology, Noise, Residential Amenity, Transport and many maps and plans.

An application for a single turbine will include at least some and possibly all of these, depending on size and whether there has been previous consultation with the LPA on its requirements.

All the components of the application will be on the District Council website, but not all your councillors may be happy to read online.

Possible solutions:

- Have at least one copy made so two can be circulated, and have copies of at least the site plan and the Zone of Theoretical Visibility diagram made for all the council to have in front of them at the meeting
- Persuade one councillor to read the whole and summarise key points for discussion
- Split sections between councillors to lead in debate; if skills include eg engineering then that councillor might deal with the claims in relation to energy output and the noise report, while another takes residential amenity and so on.

- Recommend that everyone does at least read the Design and Access statement, which should contain most of the basic information.

**b)Time to do this.** In the case of a wind farm there will be plenty of time, as the LPA will almost certainly be asking for further information from the developers. Ring the case officer and agree a realistic deadline for your response. In the case of a single turbine, however, they may feel they must stick to the 21 day limit.

If information is missing (such as the actual height of the turbine, not unusual) you may be able to get an extension. If not, fix the date for the meeting as soon as you get the application or, if not in your parish, hear the news.

If you have not been consulted, ring the case officer and say that you will be commenting as a neighbouring parish. In either case, ask the case officer if the developer has requested a screening letter and look at the reply. This will give useful headings as to the LPA's concerns.

**c)Make a site visit before the meeting;** it can be very illuminating, however well you think you know the patch, and raise new queries. Stand on the site (by appointment) and outside the nearest neighbouring properties.

**d)Public exhibition.** Ideally an applicant will discuss outline plans with the Parish Council in advance, and this can lead to some agreement on mitigation of the impact, eg by a smaller turbine or a shift in site.

In practice developers usually only meet the guidelines on community consultation by mounting an exhibition with site plans, photomontages and some general information on renewable energy.

Councillors should attend the exhibition if possible but be careful to make no comment on paper or verbally. Questions are fine, but better put in front of third parties.

## **2. The decision meeting**

**a) A special meeting.** Except for a very small single turbine this has to be a special meeting; there is too much to discuss to fit it into the normal agenda. In the case of a wind farm it is usually possible to have a discussion-only meeting first, with the developer there to answer questions, and an independent speaker (eg CPRE) to provide some balance. For single turbines one meeting will have to do and representatives should be invited as above.

**b) Venue.** It is probable that at least 50 members of the public will attend. You need the village hall, not a committee room.

**c) Declarations of interest.** The chair needs to be punctilious about asking for these since a controversial decision has to be made. It may be sensible

(so as to avoid being inquorate) to check in advance whether any councillor thinks they might have a prejudicial interest preventing them from voting; if they have doubts, the DALC (01392 248919 ) is very helpful or the District Council monitoring officer will be able to advise.

**d) Procedure.** The chair needs to explain procedure at the start of the meeting.

Some councils normally observe the practice of restricting public comments to 10 minutes at the beginning. This will not do for a turbine meeting; numerous residents will be there to make their case, often in a state of considerable stress. They deserve to be heard, and the information they have collected may be important. You may also have members of the Green Party or others wishing to address you on general global warming points; they need to be restricted to information relevant to the project.

The best way we have found to manage is to have an **agenda**, itemised by each of the headings under which you may wish to object to or support the proposal – eg planning policies, benefit, landscape and environment, residential amenity, transport, cumulative impact with other turbines.

We invite councillors to speak first under each heading, then open the item to members of the public, asking each to limit themselves to 3 minutes ( and give name and address), then give the floor back to councillors who may want to comment on a public contribution.

This procedure also has the advantage of making it easier to minute the reasons for the final decision. Before moving on to do this it may be of interest to have a show of hands to indicate public feeling for or against.

The final decision is of course made in public, but with no public intervention allowed.

**e) Co-operation.** If the project is near to a parish boundary, two or even three parish councils are likely to be equally involved, as the nearest residents will be divided between them. Considerable time is saved by organising a joint meeting, especially if outside speakers are being invited.

Sarah Child, chairman Rackenford & Creacombe Parish Council