

The impact of the 2015 onshore wind policy change for local planning authorities in England: preliminary survey results

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In June 2015 the UK Government issued a [Written Ministerial Statement](#) (WMS) for onshore wind farms in England that has since been incorporated in to the [National Planning Policy Framework](#) (NPPF). The planning policy specifies that proposals for one or more wind turbines will only be considered acceptable if they meet two criteria. Firstly, the turbine(s) must be located in an area that has been identified as suitable for wind energy in a local or neighbourhood plan. Second, it must also be demonstrated that ‘the planning impacts identified by the affected local community have been fully addressed and the proposal has their backing’. The WMS used the language ‘therefore the proposal has their backing’, but its translation into planning removed the word ‘therefore’, and in doing so made this second policy requirement involve two judgements.

As attention is now on the role that renewable energy plays in improving energy security, it is important to explore the impact of the current policy. This research investigated how many local authorities have areas identified as suitable for wind energy development in their adopted local plan documents and their views on the policy. The research was undertaken via a survey sent to all local planning authorities in England. Key preliminary findings are outlined below (full results are forthcoming).



A substantial decrease in onshore wind farm planning applications

Local authorities have experienced a significant decrease in planning applications for new* onshore wind farms since 2015 when planning policy changed and financial subsidies were removed (subsidies returned in 2021). Figures from the [UK Government Renewable Energy Planning Database](#) show that between Jan 2016-Dec 2021 14 planning applications were submitted in England, comprising 23 turbines. This is 1.5% of the number of turbines submitted between Jan 2009-Dec 2014 (1498 turbines on 333 sites). Between 2016-2021 only 11 planning applications for new onshore wind farms were approved, comprising a total of 20 turbines with a combined maximum installed capacity of 42 MW. This is 2.7% of the number of turbines granted permission between 2009-2014 (157 wind farms comprising 730 turbines and a total maximum installed capacity of 1614 MW). **The total maximum installed capacity of wind farms (in MW) granted planning permission between 2016-2021 is just 2.6% of those granted permission between 2009-2014.**



Only 11% of all local planning authorities in England have areas identified as suitable for wind energy in their adopted local plan.

Of the 165 local authorities that responded to the survey, 140 (85%) do not have areas identified as suitable for wind energy development in their local plan. A review of the remaining local authority policy documents revealed that overall 89% of all local planning authorities in England do not have areas identified as suitable for wind energy development in their local plan or in an adopted neighbourhood plan. Within these local authorities applications for new onshore wind farms cannot currently be approved.

65 local authorities stated that they are currently updating their policy or are intending to do so, however they outline considerable challenges. For those that are not planning to update their policies to identify suitable areas for onshore wind farms, key reasons include resource constraints, landscape or greenbelt designations, issues surrounding community support or a lack of potential for wind energy.

*This does not include the repowering of existing sites as they are not subject to this policy.



Onshore wind farms are largely absent from neighbourhood plans

Another route for identifying suitable areas for wind farms is through neighbourhood plans. Of the survey respondents, only 15 local authorities have provided support for neighbourhood planning groups to write an onshore wind policy and 8 have provided support with mapping or evidence gathering. A key reason here is neighbourhood planning groups choosing not to consider onshore wind.



Local authorities are expressing negative experiences of the current policy

The survey provided an opportunity for local authorities to add any comments regarding the current national policy for onshore wind. 46 local authorities provided comments on the current policy, 96% of these comments reflected a negative experience with the national policy.

The most frequent topics were:

- Desire for national policy change.
- Current policy being too restrictive or the 'bar being set too high'.
- Current policy delaying or preventing the delivery of onshore wind farms.
- Challenges surrounding the requirement for community backing.
- Reduction in number of planning applications for onshore wind farms since the policy change.
- Current policy not in line with climate emergency declarations or targets.
- Neighbourhood plans generally not allocating areas for wind farms.
- Lack of guidance for defining areas suitable for onshore wind in the Green Belt

Example quotes:

'The current policy has completely restricted the development of onshore wind developments.'

'National policy needs to be urgently amended to reflect the Climate Emergency and the need to significantly increase renewable energy generation from all sources, including onshore wind.'

'The current blanket policy approach is unhelpful and acting as a block against the cheapest renewable energy solution we have... Identifying suitable areas/allocating in plans is ideal, but many Councils have shield away from this in case it derails other aspects (e.g. meeting housing targets).'



The implications of this research

The preliminary findings demonstrate that a high proportion of local planning authorities have not allocated areas as suitable for onshore wind farms and struggle to assess the community backing requirement. The national policy means that new wind farms cannot currently be granted planning permission in 89% of local authorities in England. This is impacting our ability to address the climate emergency and increase energy security. In response, a review of the requirements and wording of current national planning policy for onshore wind is needed. Meaningful community engagement and community benefits must also be ensured.



Further information

A report of the full research findings is forthcoming. If you have any questions, please contact Dr Rebecca Windemer, Lecturer in Environmental Planning at the University of the West of England, Bristol. Email:rebecca.windemer@uwe.ac.uk Twitter:@RebeccaWindemer