

# UK wind red tape planning headache

**Words:** Gerry Lalonde, CEO, Orenda Energy Solutions

Planning consent is still a grey area for the small/medium wind turbine market and it is about time we had consistency and predictability rather than disparate decision making that often blights and inhibits progress across the UK.



Gerry Lalonde

It has been known for years that planning authorities decision making varies depending on location and geography which might make anyone but the most determined user look at other renewable schemes that offer an easier pathway to energy self-sufficiency, when wind energy ticks many boxes in terms of its appeal – grid friendly with no grid structure required,

unobtrusive, as well as offering revenue and investment opportunities.

In my view, that's why we need to shake off the planning shackles because, as the energy industry in the UK continues to evolve, small/medium wind can be pivotal as the 'driver' as the scheme of choice particularly for farmers and private landowners. Turbines at this level, around the sub-50kW mark, are vital to maintain this continuous drive to underpin the UK's small-scale renewable needs.

Even the Chief Executive of the National Grid, Steve Holliday, was on record in a recent interview stating that "by 2020 small-scale, distributed generation will represent a third of total capacity in the UK, a quadrupling in just a few years. It represents a massive increase from the old days of centrally dispatched generation....."

The case for small/medium distributed wind is a compelling one. A recent Scottish Renewables report suggested that small and medium wind turbines help businesses hedge against future electricity costs and help communities generate their own energy. The sector provides significant numbers of jobs in the UK including manufacturing and assembly and most importantly, the sector is incredibly innovative – with new technology, new behind-the-meter business models and

hybrid/micro-grid solutions.

Moreover, recent 'State of the Industry' figures from the same source revealed that the small and medium wind industry alone delivered 391GWh and saved 168,257 tonnes of CO2. This is a hugely significant figure for a sector that employs approximately 3500 people in the UK. (source: RenewableUK)

There is clearly potential to unlock and exploit great opportunities within the sector, but ask any farmer or private landowner looking to utilise their own land for the purposes of self-sufficiency in wind power generation, if the planning and siting of the turbine was straight-forward and you will often be regaled with tales of planning red tape and bureaucracy. It clearly frustrates and often hampers progress when the land is privately owned and doesn't impinge on anyone outside the farmer or landowner's perimeter fence.

It remains unfair, that someone wishing to install a solitary small wind turbine, on his land for electricity self-generation, should be hampered by a cumbersome and protracted planning application system. There should be a point at which small wind and big wind planning applications are treated differently, but largely, they are not. Currently both small wind and large wind planning applications are tossed into the

same basket and whilst the former is for private use, the latter has significant commercial benefits to an energy utility company.

Planning authorities should be distinguishing between planning laws for small wind turbine applications – those below the 50kW bandwidth – and their much larger megawatt cousins that cluster much of our landscape, but this isn't a uniformly accepted doctrine.

Planning regulations vary too much. The approach is too disparate. There are differences depending on which environmental planning office you speak with, so isn't it about time a concerted effort was channelled into making this system easier especially for farmers and private landowners who wish to erect small/medium turbines for their power generation?

It is easy to understand why farmers and private landowners may decide that installation isn't worth the bureaucratic hassle, especially when “small” units of distributed generation don't require major infrastructure upgrades to any road network or the grid, like many large installations.

Small/medium turbines can simply plug into the grid as soon as they are sited. What's more, these largely singular, solitary, small/medium wind turbines are usually located in areas that don't have the cumulative visual or environmental impact of the big wind farms.

Look across Europe and you'll see a robust, yet unburdened approach. Planning for small/medium wind turbines in Italy is governed by tight regulation, but their process is far quicker and is not weighed down by a sluggish and tiered administrative process.

For turbines up to 60kW, the Italian Ministry for the Environment and Territory requires GPDO – General Purpose Development Order documentation to enable a small/medium turbine to be sited and installed. It's a relatively straight forward process, carried out within a set timeframe.

Moreover, we run the risk of lagging behind the rest of Europe in these matters. And, if we are to be on target and in line with the government's renewable strategy over the next few years, we need to do more to align our thinking on planning applications across the country. In other words, we need consensus.

Even stringent matters in the UK such as certification for Environmental Impact Assessment could well be valid for a solitary small wind turbine, as it would for a much larger scale wind farm!

I think a great opportunity is being missed here. Those wanting to install small and medium wind turbines can create hybrid renewable energy systems with solar or biofuel, creating even more possibilities for self-sustainment.

The price of conventional energy sources, especially fossil fuels, is constantly rising, whereas the costs of small wind, in particular, are showing a gradual decline, emphasising the attractiveness of these technologies, however, local planning consent needs to be adjusted, so more landowners and farmers can an option to adopt these initiatives.

Let's hope a standardised approach in planning consent laws happens. We need to accelerate specification changes to encompass small/medium wind turbine applications and not have a uniform – ‘one size fits all’ approach to wind turbine applications, as is currently the case.

Gerry Lalonde is Chief Executive Officer for Orenda Energy Solutions.

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