

Den Brook Wind Farm inquiry decision is due in December

EVIDENCE presented at the second phase of the Den Brook Wind Farm Public Inquiry ended last Friday, following four days of intensive and often highly technical evidence.

This final episode of the Inquiry focused entirely on the likelihood of noise impacts for nearby residents from the latest generation of large scale industrial wind turbines that Renewable Energy Systems (RES) are proposing for the Mid-Devon site.

RES are seeking permission to construct nine 120 metres high wind turbines in the Den Brook valley situated between Bow, Spreyton and North Tawton.

Three of the wind industry's leading noise experts were present at the reconvened Inquiry, held at the Ockment Centre, Okehampton, intent on challenging the claims put forward by the Den Brook Judicial Review Group (DBJRG) that RES has not only "misled by not properly assessing all the aspects necessary for providing a robust analysis" but that "procedures adopted by RES fell far short of current planning policy guidance on noise".

Mike Hulme, who lives near North Tawton, has been spearheading the noise case for DBJRG for the past four years.

He told the Courier: "DBJRG's team presented a clear and unequivocal case demonstrating shortfall after shortfall within the evidence presented by RES."

"Using the developer's own data we provided incontrovertible evidence that this proposal is likely to create a significant noise nuisance at numerous nearby homes. Basically, RES' evidence is in tatters.

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"The bottom line is that RES have not complied with the ETSU-R-97 noise assessment guidance, as written.

"And, for the first time in public, Dr Andrew McKenzie, in giving evidence for RES, acknowledged the guidance to be "ambiguous and badly drafted". Furthermore, non-compliance breaches the Government's planning policy, PPS22."

Mr Hulme added: "Inappropriately sited and inadequately assessed developments, like the Den Brook proposal, damage the cause of renewable energy, ruin the harmony of small villages and leave a bad taste in the mouth of all involved.

"Nevertheless, I was immensely impressed and grateful for the unstinting effort of our experts and legal team whose professionalism and commitment was clearly demonstrated throughout the proceedings.

"It is now plain that the proponents of industrial scale onshore wind farms need to go back to the drawing board when it comes to assessing the impact of wind turbine noise pollution upon nearby neighbours."

Advocates for West Devon Borough Council, RES, The Council for the Protection of Rural England and the DBJRG presented closing statements on the final day of the Inquiry, Monday, October 26.

The lengthy closing submissions took more than six hours to present on Monday.

Mr Hulme told the Courier: "There remains considerable

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disagreement over most of the issues raised and it now remains for Inspector Andrew Pykett to weigh up the evidence before issuing his decision which is expected mid December."

NEW NOISE ANALYSIS

RES, in evidence presented at the reconvened inquiry, said the nine-turbine project would generate clean, renewable electricity, equivalent to the annual needs of more than 8,000 homes, without having a detrimental impact on local residents or the local environment.

RES presented new noise analysis by independent consultants Hayes McKenzie Associates.

The wind energy firm said that the analysis demonstrated that the wind farm would operate within official noise limits.

The Hayes McKenzie Associates report concluded: "Operational noise levels from the wind farm will be within levels deemed by national guidance to be acceptable for wind energy schemes."

RES voluntarily carried out additional noise monitoring at four new locations near the wind farm site and commissioned a new independent noise assessment, which was submitted to the planning inspectorate and made available to the public.

Project Manager, Rachel Ruffle said: "We are pleased to say that the latest noise analysis, carried out for us by independent noise experts and based on additional monitoring at the site, reconfirms our original assessment that the wind farm will be within noise limits and will not therefore cause a nuisance to nearby residents.

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"Den Brook wind farm can make an important contribution to England's energy needs and has been carefully designed to do so with minimum impacts on the local community and environment.

"We are grateful for the support shown by many members of the public who now just want to see the wind farm built and generating clean, green power for Devon."

"The costly delays to the project benefit no-one.

"This public inquiry was called specifically to address the noise issue so we were very disappointed when time ran out in July before the noise evidence could be heard. "However, we are confident that the inquiry will now conclude that the project is well-designed and should go ahead."

SHARE OWNERSHIP?

Also this week, RES announced that it is in discussions with Energy4All, the UK's leading expert in community-owned renewable energy schemes, about the opportunities for local people to buy shares in the Den Brook Wind Farm once it is built and operating.

RES hope that it can start construction on the 16MW wind farm next year.

Throughout the development process, RES has been exploring ways in which the local community can benefit directly from the wind farm once it is operating and has so far proposed a number of initiatives:

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An annual community fund for the lifetime of the project, to be spent by local people on local community projects. It will be in the region of £27,000 per annum.

Significant improvements to the line owned by Dartmoor Railways to create a new commuter link between Exeter and Okehampton

Employment opportunities during the construction phase, when RES will seek to use local and regional businesses for services such as haulage, civil engineering, electrical works, security etc.

To further increase the opportunities for local residents to receive direct and tangible benefits from the wind farm, RES is considering offering local people the option to buy shares in the wind farm and Energy4All, a not-for-profit organisation, would facilitate this.

Rachel Ruffle, said: "Energy 4All has 13 years' of experience in setting up and running successful wind farm co-operatives.

"It is dedicated to helping communities to own a stake in renewable energy schemes. We are very keen to explore how residents local to Den Brook could be offered a stake in the wind farm as a way to reap some direct benefit from the project once it is up and running. Energy4All is the ideal organisation to facilitate this for us and we look forward to exploring this further. We are also interested in hearing how much interest from local people there is in the idea."

The announcement of the share offer on the final day was greeted with scepticism by those against the wind farm plan.

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Mike Hulme went on: "It is more than four years since RES first introduced their industrial wind power proposals and one might see this strategically timed announcement as a rather distasteful attempt to distract attention from the real issues at this point in time.

"Furthermore, financial involvement with the project implies accepting higher levels of noise impacts according to the Government's wind farm noise assessment guidance, ETSU-R-97, and anyone contemplating assisting RES with financing of the project should look very carefully at the small print."

Perhaps more astonishingly, only hours after announcing the share offer, RES issued a claim for costs against West Devon Borough Council.

"If successful, local taxpayers will be made to pay a significant proportion of the expenses incurred during RES' attempts to obtain planning permission, despite the overwhelming opposition from thousands of people and the local, district and county councils.

"RES claim that WDBC have acted 'unreasonably' by submitting evidence to the Inquiry that has caused extra work and expense for the developer.

"One might conclude that RES are attempting to takeeth with one hand and want even more with the other."

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