

Wind farm 'goodwill payments must stop'

Thursday, October 09, 2008, 10:00

ENERGY firms should be banned from offering cash handouts to communities to help ease wind farms through the planning process, campaigners say.

The so-called "goodwill payments" risk giving local people a raw deal when plans for green energy plants – including wind turbines – are given the go-ahead.

Industry leaders said the money was a way of "giving something back" to areas which will have to live with turbines.

The Government insists planning permission for major projects cannot be "bought or sold" but the system is in place to ensure communities benefit from major developments on their doorstep.

The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) warned against the payments now used in a number of areas to pay for lunch clubs or sports pitches.

The money involved was a fraction of the amount developers were making from the public in subsidies, said a report.

Paul Miner, CPRE's senior planning campaigner, said the payments should be "outlawed completely".

"These offers of community benefit do not go through the proper procedures of the planning system, unlike similar offers from most other developers," he said.

"By accepting them, communities may also be getting a worse deal than they would if wind farm developers were made to offer them through the planning system.

"CPRE supports the need to increase investment in renewable energy, including wind energy, but 'goodwill payments' threaten to bring the planning system into disrepute and are questionable even on the grounds of the need for more renewable energy.

"Energy companies should be required to work through the planning process in the same way as any other developer."

The group said it uncovered at least 35 cases of goodwill payments being offered to, or accepted by, a local community in England, with the money being spent on schemes which bore "no relation" to renewable energy.

It claimed three major wind farm developers – E.ON, npower renewables, and RES Limited – were routinely offering "goodwill payments" in connection with every new development.

The group said in some cases goodwill payments were being used for things that, "however worthy in themselves" bore no relationship to renewable energy, such as children's play areas and senior citizens' lunch clubs.

The CPRE is putting pressure on the House of Lords to make changes to the Planning Bill and ban the payments.

A Department of Communities and Local Government spokesman said: "We are quite clear that there can be no question of planning permissions being bought or sold, nor can there be any perception that this could be the case."

Charles Anglin, director of communications of the British Wind Energy Association, reacted angrily to what he described as an "outrageous assertion" by the CPRE.

"Wind farm developers are damned if they do, damned if they don't," he said. "We recognise wind farms are a long-term presence in local communities and we want to give something back to those communities. That is in the best traditions of local community engagement."

Read Matt Chorley's blog at www.thisiswesternmorningnews.co.uk/mattchorley