## Wind farm developers offering 'bribes' to local communities, campaigners say

By Louise Gray, Environment Correspondent Last Updated: 10:46AM BST 08 Oct 2008

Developers are "bribing" communities to back wind farms by offering to pay for lunch clubs for pensioners and children's play parks, according to campaigners.

Wind turbines: the 'goodwill' payments can be worth million of pounds over the lifespan of a wind farm  $\,$ 

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The Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) say at least 35 communities have been offered so called "goodwill" payments - one for every English region - by developers interested on building wind farms in the area.

The payments, also known as "community funds", can be worth millons of pounds over the lifetime of a wind farm and pay for a range of projects, from bird watching events to sailing clubs.

The CPRE say the payments could be seen as "paying for planning permission" and do not offer as much money as communities deserve from wind farms. The organisation is calling on the Government to outlaw the system and instead force companies to contribute to environmental or rural schemes whenever a development goes ahead.

However, developers say the payments are a transparent and routine part of "corporate social responsibility" which offers money to the community where large scale developments are planned.

The CPRE looked at a range of wind farm developments, either at the planning stage or operational, that had offered money to the community either as a one-off or over the life of the wind farm.

Paul Miner, CPRE's senior planning campaigner, said the payments could be seen as "bribes".

"What is concerning us is generally these kind of things would not be allowed in planning system because they would be seen as bribes or buying planning permission," he said.

"If this is allowed to become widespread then it is going to lead to people thinking planning permission can be bought and sold."

Mr Miner also said communities would be entitled to more money from the windfarm if payments were made an official part of the planning process.

"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," he added.

The CPRE is campaigning for the Government to outlaw goodwill payments in the new Planning Bill going through the Lords and instead make wind farms liable to a levy that will go towards small scale renewables, district heating or countryside improvments in the area.

Mr Miner added: "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. We believe that the solution is to outlaw these payments completely.

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

However a spokesman for the British Wind Energy Association said it was "outrageous" to suggest community funds could be unlawful.

He said community funds were set up in partnership with prominent members of the community as a way of ensuring the local area benefits from a development, for example by renovating an historic building or furnishing a sports club.

"To suggest that there is an unlawful element and bribery is outrageous," he said. "The way things work, this is a way local communities can share profits from a wind farm."

Developers E.ON and RES routinely offer a community fund for any large scale industrial development. Both companies said it was a transparent process designed to enable communities to directly benefit from development in their area.

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