

Countryside Update

July 2006 (Issue 73)

In this latest update we will try and inform you of some of the key happenings over the last four months.

New Countryside Campaigner for England

Patrick Grady will start work in mid-June as the RA's Countryside Campaign Manager. Patrick is an experienced campaigner and is passionate about protecting the countryside, supporting and working with volunteers to achieve campaign aims.

Thanks to Chris Wingrove (Admin Team), Becky Dixon (Footpath Policy) and Philip Connolly (Freelance Campaigner) who have been holding the fort at Central Office since Sarah Williams left.

Whinash Victory for Ramblers

Back in March planning permission for the largest wind-farm in England was rejected. The 27-turbine project was to be situated between the Lake District and Yorkshire Dales National Parks along Whinash ridge. The turbines set to be erected at this site were to be 115m tall from the base to the tip of the blade, nearly twice the height of the 'Angel of

the North' statue. Energy Minister, Malcolm Wicks, announced that he was to uphold the public inquiry verdict that the development would have an unacceptable effect on the surrounding landscapes.

The decision clearly agrees with current RA policy that on-shore wind farms should not be placed in visually sensitive areas, and preferably well offshore. However, the campaign is still far from over with 400-plus applications for renewable energy projects in Scotland alone. The RA will continue to campaign for changes to the renewables obligation that provides an unfair economic advantage to onshore wind farms.

Weymouth Relief Road

As you receive this newsletter the appeal period for commenting on West Dorset's draft Local Plan will have just closed. Following an RA campaign to stop the planning application (see Countryside Update issue 69 for more) the planning inspector recommended that the proposal be withdrawn from the local plan. Following this, West Dorset Council intends to reject the recommendation and push on with plans for the road. The RA launched a further campaign in response to the news, issuing a standard letter for

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volunteers to fill in and send. We await the outcome of this campaign, stay tuned for updates.

Our Energy Challenge

The Ramblers' Association responded to the Government's review of energy policy in April this year. This review comes a mere three years after a previous extensive consultation exercise which defined Government policy on energy use and climate change impacts.

Our concerns lie with the impact of very large wind turbine developments in the countryside, especially in remote and environmentally sensitive upland areas, as wind turbine developments are getting to a size which is difficult to easily accommodate in the landscape. There is a need to recognise that our landscapes are a valuable national asset and ensure that scenic values are cherished, not despoiled.

It's not a question of whether wind turbines look nice or not – it's the creeping attrition of heavy engineering projects into our remaining remote and fragile uplands that is the problem. It's the visual intrusion of industrial scale developments in rural areas. But if we stop building large onshore wind turbines, how do we meet our international obligation to address global warming and drive down carbon emissions?

To get by without these huge turbines we need to address current energy issues; to see renewable energy in a wider context. Our contribution to the Energy Review points out that there are many paths to achieve emission reduction targets. Foremost is the need to be active in pushing for reducing energy use – the less we use the less we need to generate.

Improvements to building standards would make homes more energy efficient. Using microgeneration technologies to generate power at domestic and community scales would reduce demand on the grid and save on energy bills.

Only by promoting such ends can we put any sort of brake on giant onshore wind turbines. Avoiding these issues consigns us to the margins of the debate – we need to engage to have effect.

You can read our full response to the Energy Review at <http://www.ramblers.org.uk/countryside/energy.html> or contact Davie Black for a paper copy.

'Green toolkit' for Wales

CCW (Countryside Council for Wales) has been busy developing a new methodology for local authorities to plan and improve natural green spaces for people in urban communities. As Sue Essex AM stressed at the launch, in urban areas, green space provides a valuable link back to nature, with very real benefits for physical and mental well-being. The programme recommends that no person should have to live more than 300m from an area of natural green space.

The tool kit, which has been initially trialled in Wrexham, prompts local authorities to overview an area – consulting with local communities to map existing open spaces and to assess them for 'naturalness'. This information is then used to find ways to improve the quality and accessibility of those spaces. This is a very positive move, which should assist in creating more walking opportunities. Local groups in Wales may want to get involved in pushing their local authority to get on board with the initiative.

The programme will be rolled out with grant funding available for 4 local authorities in 2006 and up to 10 authorities by the end of 2007.