

It is important for members to realise the extent to which AOPA is involved in windfarms, and to know the underlying reason. The work being carried out relates solely to one subject: flight safety. Other agencies are concerned about the interference that the revolving blades cause to radar reception, but this aspect is not one on which the association has been asked to act. By contrast, many organisations and individuals have sought our help on the physical obstructions that these structures cause.

AOPA has been in contact with several local authorities to express concern at the hazards that these turbines can create for light aircraft operations. Much depends on the positions of these structures in relation to a troubled aerodrome or airstrip, in terms of both distance and direction. Whilst clearly a turbine that is under a climb-out or approach path is a major problem, other positions can be not only genuinely hazardous but can have adverse effects on the nervous system. The tips of the blades can be more than 500 feet above ground level, and when this is threatened within a circuit area – in one case directly under the downwind leg – the hazard can hurt.

Developers have countered these points by insisting that turbines are clearly visible. However, these are claims of convenience and in many instances they fail to state the truth: imagine conditions of low cloud, poor visibility, failing light, or when flying into a low sun. Who would wish to fly a bad weather circuit (an established and recognised practice) when there is an obstruction protruding up to the height of that essential exercise?

Wind turbines are one of many types of obstruction that come under the generic heading 'Safeguarding', but at present they are running at the head of AOPA's list of planning problems. Each case is different; each requires individual attention and there are several available information sources. The

association has built up considerable experience in this field and I invite any AOPA members whose sites are threatened to get in touch with me, either in writing to 50A Cambridge Street, London SW1V 4QQ, or by email on david@aopa.co.uk.

AOPA is involved with threats to the safety of flight at nine separate sites. As a starter, these extracts from a detailed report submitted by the operators of Strubby aerodrome in Lincolnshire should give readers an overall insight into the nature and extent of the problem.

"In 2004, while looking for something on the Council website, one of our members found, quite by chance, an application for a 330 ft wind turbine to be erected under our circuit pattern on the turn onto base leg. We could not move our circuit to the other side since there is a gliding strip there.

"The developers claimed that they had discussed it with us and we didn't mind. They also said that the CAA had no objections. They even suggested that as we had not submitted a safeguarding map they did not have to take any notice of us."

All these claims are untrue. "We got our case together, with help from AOPA, CAA Safeguarding and Philip Isbell. Fortunately, common sense prevailed and the application was refused. In the meantime we had set about the safeguarding in earnest... the planning department was not minded to accept the safeguarding application because it would be onerous in terms of time and money."

Strubby's report continues: "Turbine applications in Lincolnshire were spinning out of control: ten under the airfield's approach, two more applications for twenty turbines, one for two, and another for three in a similar position to ours, but on the other side of the airfield near the gliding club. The last application was withdrawn and the Council refused the others."

The applicants appealed against all these refusals. Unfortunately all objections to the main offending turbine seem to have been met, with the sole exception of the aviation safety issue. Because of this, the Council's solicitors advised that their case for appeal

might not be strong, but to their credit they have not backed down and are continuing to fight.

The report continues: "The turbine which is the subject of the present application is in addition to the above development, and to the further six turbines approved there. These turbines are 4 km away from the threshold of runway 26, whilst the proposed turbine is only 1.7 km away and is 40 feet taller. And the proposed giant turbine is within the circuit area, underneath the climb-out from RW 08 and next to the turn onto base leg to RW 26."

The current Strubby case is being heard at a Public Inquiry to be held in May, so it would be inappropriate to go into further detail at this stage, except to add that prior to all this a 'nest' of turbines had been erected in line with the main runway, so this is not Strubby's first problem.

A PI is very expensive financially and in time terms for all parties concerned and it is quite unjust that a relatively small group of aircraft owners/pilots should be faced with the expense just to retain their existing rights to fly. To quote again, "it has taken us hundreds of hours of work and will cost us thousands of pounds."

Government policy for wind turbines to be erected in large numbers in many parts of the UK, must be taken seriously by all in the GA world. The Strubby case is a key news maker, but others of equal concern are developing. In some instances the situations are at sensitive stages and it would be unwise to go into print now, but I have checked with owners/operators of several affected sites and here are some of the responses. Firstly I quote from Barry Pearson, who operates the licensed aerodrome at Eaglescott in North Devon:

"We have just received our third wind farm notice in three years. The first was only 100 metres away in the field we over-fly on finals for 26 but was fortunately withdrawn by the proposer, who was Chairman of the parish council! I believe he had second thoughts. The second one, to the north, has gone quiet for now and this would be positioned approximately late downwind to left base for

Windfarm development: The hazards to come

by David Ogilvy

08. The third lies just outside the ATZ.

"I believe that we will find many more of these proposals over the next few years as farmers diversify or developers exploit farmers whose incomes are low and largely rely on subsidies, until (we have) a policy of planning wind turbines in industrial estates like for example in Gran Canaria, and thus keeping the countryside unspoilt."

Moving into East Anglia, Olaf Brun, who operates Great Massingham, sent this report:

"In the summer of 2005, we became aware of a proposal for a windfarm within 1.5 km of Great Massingham, an unlicensed airfield with a Certificate of Established Use for the landing and taking off of aircraft dated July 1997. We were concerned that the windfarm of twelve turbines 400 feet high would affect aircraft in our circuit, especially as the area involved was used to avoid flying over houses and villages in the vicinity. Representations to the landowners involved were rebuffed. We are therefore setting about the fairly expensive business of 'safeguarding' the airfield.

"Later in 2005 we were told that the windfarm proposal had been withdrawn, apparently at the instigation of the MOD, because of the extensive low flying in this area by the RAF and the Army. These were concerned about the effect of the turbines on surveillance radar. In spite of this reprieve, we intend to press on with the safeguarding procedure, since the windfarm proposal may well reappear."

A little further inland, Ashley's Field at Sloothby in Lincolnshire is suffering from windfarm development at nearby Orby Marsh. Robert Howell reports:

"The main points that should be brought out are that my airstrip has been in existence for some 30 years and has been safely used without incident, despite its limitations in respect of runway length, for all of this time. I am fully aware of the limitations of the strip and obviously have to take full account of these in my use of the Cessna 172. It is worth pointing out that the 172 was used by the previous owner continuously on this same strip over the period that the strip has been in existence. It is a private unlicensed farmer's strip and has planning permission. There is

no intention to licence the strip or extend its scope of use.

"I am upset that Pager Power have attempted to discredit my use of the strip. They imply that an old aircraft is being used in unsafe conditions. This is certainly not the case; the aircraft is fully maintained to current standards and is used with full care and within the limitations required for safe use of the strip.

"They acknowledge that CAA CAP 428 recommends that there be no obstructions of over 150 feet height within 2000 metres of the runway mid-point and yet they propose to construct obstructions of 330 feet height within (at closest) 1734 metres of the runway mid-point. This surely demonstrates a blatant disregard of safety recommendations and clearly increases the risk to aircraft using the strip.

"My main fear is that if the wind turbines are allowed to be constructed then my future use of the strip will be in contravention of this important recommendation and may well result in future use being compromised."

Finally we move westward across the water to Donemana airstrip in Northern Ireland, from which Alfie Danton writes:

"I have been using my strip for over 40 years, I hard-cored it 30 years ago and use it for business and recreational purposes. I am a farmer and have land in Scotland as well as at home in N. Ireland. I have lodged an objection to a planning application to site 18 wind turbines quite close to my strip – 6 are just less than one km from my westerly approach which is up a valley and the turbines will be above the approach path. As it is with certain winds turbulence and sheer already exist and I feel this will be considerably worse with vortices from the wind turbines. We have a range of mountains – the Sperrins – where these turbines could be located without affecting anyone but of course these companies like to locate near centres of population for economic reasons."

These are samples of the many problems that are developing throughout the land. One of several other threats will affect a small aerodrome on the Isle of Skye; although at this stage precise details of the proposal are not available, we have been advised that

Scotland is likely to provide bases for the majority of windfarm sites, so nowhere seems safe.

There are many general issues to be considered. I am grateful to John Stainer of the Vintage Aircraft Club for sending me an article from the magazine 'Professional Engineering' dated 11 January 2006. I quote some of the more pertinent points:

"Investigations have begun into a fire on a wind turbine at the Nissan car factory in Sunderland.

The incident has fuelled the argument for wind to be used offshore only. Flames broke out on one of the six 50m tall onshore turbines that help power the site late last month. Local roads were closed as parts of the turbine collapsed. It has since been deemed a write-off.

The Nissan fire will do little to ease public concerns about the siting of these structures, particularly as they are being proposed close to residential areas.

The Renewable Energy Foundation (REF), which opposes onshore windfarms, believes this highlights the need for better planning and for larger turbines not to be used onshore. It said that fires are a well-documented problem on the continent, which has much more experience than the UK.

'The fire at the Nissan car plant and the disruption to the local road system shows that we need a much more responsible attitude to windfarm planning, which is an ill-informed and subjective affair at best in the UK,' said Campbell Dunford, chief executive officer of the REF. 'As Denmark has now concluded, if wind turbines belong anywhere, they belong well out to sea.'

It seems significant that the Renewable Energy Foundation opposes onshore windfarms. I cannot resist adding that the Nissan factory is on the site of the former aerodrome at Sunderland, which was among the first to be lost when the closure spat started.

I hope this is sufficient to put over the safety message to all who care about the future of UK general aviation. None of us can afford to be complacent about one of the biggest threats currently facing us. ■