



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Wind Farms Community Engagement Good Practice Review: Executive Summary

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This report provides evidence and discussion of good practice in engaging the public about on- and offshore wind farms. It gives an overview of the planning regimes in different countries across Europe, focusing on the opportunities, timing, and procedures for community engagement. We explore case studies of wind farms which have used various good practices, highlighting what worked well and what can be learnt from them. The report is intended to inform thinking on the part of the Scottish Government, wind farm developers and wider stakeholders in the wind industry, about how uptake of good practice can be encouraged.

The countries studied are Scotland, England, Wales, Germany, Denmark, France and Sweden. Across the different countries, there are significant differences (particularly in terms of the heavy emphasis on public engagement at a regional zoning/strategic planning stage rather than at the pre-application stage in the European cases), but there are many common factors. In all countries, we find the importance of:

- Wide-ranging and innovative methods of engagement;
- Methods which facilitate dialogue (rather than just transmitting information);
- Instances where action is taken on the basis of responses gathered;
- Measures to keep engagement going through all stages including approval and construction;
- Using a wide ranging definition of an 'affected' public; and
- Identifying and implementing tangible benefits.

The key findings of our analysis of good practice across Europe are as follows:

Form of engagement:

- Community engagement may take the form of 'awareness raising', where information is delivered to a public who are largely conceived as being passive; 'consultation', which constitutes a two-way interaction and limited forms of public feedback; and 'empowerment', which gives greater control to participants.
- In all case studies, the focus was mostly on awareness raising and information provision. Consultation was also a prevalent approach, often

conducted in tandem with awareness raising. Empowerment is much rarer, and tended to occur only when engagement was facilitated from within the community.

- The different forms of engagement impact upon social acceptance. The wind farms which encountered least public opposition had engagement which used dialogues with the community, changed the proposal in response, and gave feedback to the community on the ways in which their concerns had been taken into account. Additionally, where engagement was led from within the community, this had a further positive impact on acceptance.
- Making changes on the basis of responses received is critical in encouraging public acceptance; and it is very important that people are made aware of how their responses have been used.
- Within the UK case studies we found only limited evidence of substantive changes resulting from community engagement processes, whereas in the European case studies there is clear evidence of the impact of community engagement. Examples from the UK of where people were informed of tangible changes resulting from their comments were rare.

Rationale for engagement:

- The different forms of community engagement reflect different rationales¹: instrumental, where engagement is used to avoid or overcome public opposition; normative, where communities are engaged because it is the *right thing to do* or because they have valuable knowledge about their local area; or substantive, where the goal of engagement is to improve social outcomes in a deeper sense.
- We find public engagement used for all of these reasons. It is used for *instrumental* reasons, to site a wind farm better, remove objections, and increase the likelihood of planning success; for *normative* reasons, where developers acknowledge people's rights and knowledge, and view engagement as an integral part of the process; and for *substantive* reasons, where engagement is used to foster ongoing positive relationships with the public.
- Whilst substantive engagement is valuable in and of itself, it is also important for repowering and extensions; and the image of other wind farms.

¹ Wilsdon, J. & Willis, R., 2004, 'See-Through Science: Why public engagement needs to move upstream' available at www.demos.co.uk

Developers conducting good consultation – which takes account of concerns and addresses them where possible – have the potential to create positive perceptions of other wind farms and of wind energy more generally.

- In addition, our research finds that engagement alone is not enough – the proposed wind farm has to be a good project (in terms of appropriate design, location, fit with landscape and so on); *and* there has to be good engagement about it.

Stage of engagement:

- For the UK case studies, this study focussed on developer-led community engagement; that is, engagement relating to specific proposed developments rather than in local authority led spatial planning processes (such as local development plans or strategic development plans). This is due to the fact that currently community engagement is most active (and contentious) in the UK in relation to particular proposed developments rather than at the spatial level.
- However, in some other European case study countries we found higher uptake of community engagement during spatial planning processes and also that this appeared to be more influential than engagement on specific plans in these countries (as is documented in our report). As such, in order to compare the different approaches to community engagement, we have included spatial planning processes for some of the European case study countries where this seems to be the most relevant level at which to examine community engagement.
- In the UK case studies, developer-led community engagement was usually conducted during pre-application planning; when many of the key decisions about design and location have been made. This limits the range of possible outcomes from the engagement and the opportunities for community members to influence aspects of the proposed development.
- This contrasts with the mainland European cases, which give evidence of public engagement in early planning and/or spatial planning processes which leads to substantive changes (for example to the locations or size of developments).
- Finally, engagement between developers and communities should be an ongoing process (from pre-planning application through to construction, operation and decommissioning of wind farms). Attempts to build ongoing relationships, with trust and communication, mean that any issues that arise can be tackled openly, and have less risk of jeopardising a project as a whole. In addition, a positive experience of developer-engagement for communities

can have knock-on consequences for the image of the industry more widely (and the converse is also true).

Methods for engagement:

- A range of methods are used in community engagement by developers, the most prevalent being public exhibitions; meetings; publicity material; questionnaires and feedback forms. However, there is evidence of more innovative methods such as workshops instead of (or as well as) traditional meetings, and digital methods such as crowd-sourcing and interactive GIS maps.
- There is evidence that these innovative methods positively impact on acceptance because they allow a wider range of responses in different forms, demonstrate effort on behalf of a developer, and allow greater dialogue with local people.
- Methods need be tailored to each particular location, and be responsive to local contexts and needs. A one-size-fits-all approach to community engagement is therefore inappropriate. The methods used should also take account of 'community fatigue', be flexible in terms of timing, and provide accessible channels through which community members can respond. In most cases this does not imply more community engagement, but rather better quality engagement. Ensuring community engagement is meaningful and responsive to participants can serve to affirm the value of their participation and encourage future engagement. It is also important to ensure that communities – who may be dealing with multiple applications at the same time – are supported to be able to participate in the engagement process (i.e. that it takes place at a time and in a form that is most appropriate to them).
- This means that developers need to get to know the local context and its specificities before embarking on an engagement process. It also means they need to open up opportunities for dialogue at the earliest possible opportunity and be flexible enough to respond to any particular concerns that might be raised from members of the community.
- In most of the cases we studied, developers consistently went over and above existing guidance and minimum standards and referred to their own in-house guidelines on community engagement. However, developers who participated in our study typically acknowledged that other developers do not conduct sufficient or satisfactory community engagement and therefore minimum standards could be bolstered to ensure good practice across the industry.

- In addition, there was agreement across developers in our study that guidelines are necessary, but that developers should continue to have flexibility and autonomy to design their own community engagement practices.

On the basis of our research, we make the following recommendations:

1. Developers should be obligated to undertake engagement with a community throughout all stages of planning, development and operation. This obligation should be passed if the developer of a project changes, and developers should be obligated to report on how and why responses have been addressed. As developers are currently under no obligation to act on community views or reflect them in any subsequent applications, current Pre-Application Consultation reporting mechanisms could be strengthened through more stringent requirements relating to detailing actions taken and/or amendments resulting from consultation processes.
2. Existing relevant guidelines on community engagement (including the National Standards for Community Engagement) should be adapted to provide specific guidance relating to wind farms. They should include a clear steer on: starting engagement as early as possible with communities; maintaining ongoing relationships with those communities; using methods that are more wide-ranging than are currently commonly used, and which are appropriate to each particular location; using methods which ensure that there is a dialogue possible between local people and developers.
3. Consideration should be given to strengthening and expanding community engagement not only at pre-application, but also at the spatial planning stage for onshore wind farms, similar to the processes that Marine Scotland have used for offshore energy planning in territorial waters.
4. Guidance should include an onus on developers to support communities in being able to participate, for example in terms of the means and timings, providing accessible channels through which community members can respond, removing barriers to participation and being flexible to adapt the engagement processes to suit particular communities.