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News release

EMBARGOED until 20 May 2015 00:00h

Unique project asks communities to decide principles for wind farm development

Citizens' juries can be ideal space for deciding on difficult issues

A report published today (20 May 2015) by ClimateXChange concludes that citizens' juries can be an ideal space for helping to make decisions about complex and contentious issues.

The unique research project, the most comprehensive of its kind and a world first, asked three groups of people (citizens' juries) to come up with criteria for decision making about onshore wind farms in Scotland. Despite the diversity of views in the groups, all three juries managed to develop and agree a list of principles, showing that people from very different backgrounds and with varying perspectives can work together through difficult issues and come up with solutions.

To test the citizens' jury format, the three juries were asked to answer the question "What should be the key principles for deciding about wind farm development, and why?" Jurors from all backgrounds enjoyed the challenge of addressing this complex issue, which most had never had the opportunity to discuss with their communities before. They said they learnt a lot and felt supported to participate as part of a fair and engaging process.

The research found that the jurors were eminently able to engage with a complex and contested debate in a very short period of time, and that the process was enjoyable for the participants, and spurred the jurors' interest in democracy and decision-making.

Minister for Local Government and Community Empowerment Marco Biagi MSP said: 'Involving people and communities in decision-making leads to better results, more responsive services and gives communities the chance to have a say on how ideas are delivered.'

'This exciting project offers valuable lessons which will help our efforts to boost participation in local democracy and improve community engagement.'

Research Director Dr Oliver Escobar, University of Edinburgh, said: 'The research findings are very timely given the appetite for more participation at all levels of society in post-referendum Scotland.'

'Through the two-day process jurors who had never been part of any public consultation found their voice and were able to articulate their views on a complex issue like wind farm development.'

'To solve the many pressing problems of our time we need new political spaces that bring forth the voices of those seldom heard. Mini-publics like citizens' juries may provide some of those spaces.'

'From the start of the juries, through hearing from expert witnesses, and discussing within the groups, we saw how the juries became a school in democracy. The participants enjoyed learning about the issue and really appreciated being asked their opinion in an atmosphere of respect for different views.'

Project Manager for ClimateXChange Ragne Low said: ‘This report provides robust evidence of how we can create processes that will be trusted by communities and balance different views. It also gives very practical advice about organising and facilitating good quality public engagement to support decision making.’

‘Participatory forums like citizens’ juries are not an easy option. They need very careful planning and experienced facilitators who make sure that the process is balanced, inclusive and that all voices are heard. What we saw in the juries was real appreciation of getting balanced expert opinion and working through difficult questions together.’

ENDS

Notes to editors

- 1) For more information and photos from the juries please contact Anne Marte Bergseng, Communications Manager ClimateXChange, annemarte@sniffer.org.uk /07776463868
- 2) Download the executive summary of the report ‘Involving communities in deliberation: A study of three citizens’ juries on onshore wind farms in Scotland’ here http://www.climatexchange.org.uk/files/1714/3204/2641/Citizens_Juries_Report_Exec_Summary.pdf
- 3) The report will be presented at an event at the Edinburgh Centre for Carbon Innovation on Wednesday 20 May, see <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/making-better-decisions-using-citizens-juries-in-scotland-tickets-16479471543>
- 4) The project was overseen by a Stewarding Board comprising representatives from organisations with a range of opinions about wind farm development in Scotland. This Board discussed the jury task, project design, choice of jury locations and choice of ‘expert witnesses’. However, the responsibility for the project lies with the project team.
- 5) The three jury locations were chosen to be of similar size and rural characteristics but with different exposure to wind farm developments:
 - i. One location close to an existing wind farm (Aberfeldy);
 - ii. One with a wind farm proposed nearby (Helensburgh)
 - iii. A third with no existing or proposed wind farms (Coldstream)
- 6) There were a total of 47 jurors: 15 in Coldstream, 14 in Helensburgh and 18 in Aberfeldy. Taken together, the three juries reflected the diverse views and demographics of the Scottish population – i.e. education, gender, age and income. This meant, for example, that the juries brought together three generations to discuss the topic.
- 7) Researchers from University of Edinburgh and Strathclyde University led the project, in collaboration with colleagues at University of West of Scotland, Queen Margaret University, Robert Gordon University and Glasgow University.
- 8) ClimateXChange is Scotland's centre of expertise on climate change. It provides a research, advice and analysis service to Scottish Government policy teams and associated public agencies. www.climatexchange.org.uk