

How the UK public feels about renewable energy

1. Key Points

- People's attitudes towards renewables are a function of their beliefs about associated impacts – environmental, aesthetic, local/community, economic, noise and traffic.
- Most people have a positive attitude towards solar, hydro, off-shore wind and marine energy. A smaller proportion views on-shore wind energy and bioenergy positively.
- Males, younger people and people of a higher socio-economic status are more likely to hold positive attitudes towards renewables.
- People who live close to an existing renewable energy development are more likely to hold positive attitudes towards the use of renewable energy than those who live far from one.

2. Introduction

This paper draws on a number of studies of public attitudes towards renewable energy. These studies suggest that a majority of people are in favour of renewable electricity generation. However, onshore wind farms are favoured by a smaller majority than most other forms of renewable energy. The evidence suggests that people's opinions about renewable energy depend to a large extent upon what they believe about the impacts of those renewables – in particular their environmental, aesthetic, economic and local/community impacts.

3. Awareness of renewable energy

Studies suggest that the vast majority of the UK public is familiar with at least one form of renewable energy. A 2003 study found that 97% of a representative sample of UK adults had heard of at least one source of renewable energy (Taylor Nelson Sofres 2003) and a 2009 survey found that 90% of another sample had heard of solar energy; 82%, hydroelectric energy; 81%, wind energy; 59%, bioenergy; 58%, tidal energy; and 57%, wave energy (GfK NOP Social Research 2009).

Existing research thus suggests that whilst the majority of UK adults are aware of solar energy, hydroelectric energy, and wind energy, only just over half are aware of bioenergy, marine energy, and geothermal energy. However, these inferences relate to data gathered several years ago. It is possible that the public is now more familiar with the various forms of renewable energy.

4. Attitudes towards the use of renewable energy

Some research has looked at how people in the UK feel about renewable energy in general. The Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC 2012) found that 79% and 5% of their sample reported respectively supporting and opposing the use of renewable energy. However, in the same study, 55% and 19% reported respectively agreeing and disagreeing with the notion that they would be happy to have a large scale renewable energy development in their local area (DECC 2012). This suggests that public support for renewable energy in the UK is lower in the context of local developments than it is overall.

There is a body of literature relating to how people in the UK feel about specific forms of renewable energy. DECC (2012) found that levels of support and opposition to the use of various forms of renewable energy amongst their sample were as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 Levels of support and opposition for the use of various forms of renewable energy

Renewable energy source	Proportion supporting its use	Proportion opposing its use
Solar	84%	4%
Off-shore wind	77%	7%
On-shore wind	67%	12%
Ocean	74%	4%
Biomass	64%	7%

Data from: Department of Energy & Climate Change (2012). Public Attitudes Tracker - Wave 1. London, Department of Energy and Climate Change.

The DECC (2012) study suggests that large majorities of the UK population hold positive attitudes towards the ideas of generating electricity using solar energy, off-shore wind energy, and ocean energy. Likewise, it suggests that smaller majorities hold positive attitudes towards the use of on-shore wind energy and bioenergy. Lower levels of enthusiasm for the use of bioenergy seem to be related to low levels of awareness. This is not the case for on-shore wind energy though, where there are lower levels of enthusiasm for its use but high levels of awareness.

A recent poll conducted by ICM suggested that 49% of people would support a wind turbine being erected within two miles of their home, with 22% against. Support rose to 68% if the project were community-owned (Guardian, 23 October 2012).

5. Differences in attitudes towards the use of renewable energy

GfK NOP Social Research (2009) considered differences in attitudes towards renewable energy by age, gender and socio-economic status. Whilst 7% - 8% of the over-55s said they did not support the use of renewable energy, this applied to only 3% of those aged under 54. Whilst 91% of male participants supported the use of renewable energy, the same was true for only 80% of female participants. Furthermore, 92% and 89% of those belonging to social groups A/B¹ and C1² supported the use of renewable energy, whereas support amongst social groups C2³ and D/E⁴ was only 83% and 78%. Research thus suggests that younger people, males, and people with a higher socio-economic status living in the UK are more likely to hold positive attitudes towards the use of renewable energy.

Research also suggests that people living in the Highlands and Islands versus the rest of the UK, and living near to renewable energy developments versus further away, are more favourable towards renewable energy developments (GfK NOP Social Research 2009).

¹ Socio-economic status A is higher managerial, administrative and professional; socio-economic status B is intermediate managerial, administrative and professional.

² Socio-economic status C1 is supervisory, clerical and junior managerial, administrative and professional.

³ Socio-economic status C2 is skilled manual workers.

⁴ Socio-economic status D is semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers; socio-economic status E is state pensioners, casual and lowest grade workers, unemployed with state benefits only.

6. Beliefs about the importance of renewable energy in the UK in the future

A 2007 study investigated the extent to which people in the UK believe that various sources of renewable energy will be used in the UK in 2037. The researchers found that 46% of their sample thought that solar energy would be one of the three most used sources of energy; 45%, wind energy; 21%, hydroelectric energy; 20%, marine energy [including wave and tidal energy]; and 9%, bioenergy. This research suggests that people living in the UK are most likely to believe that wind energy, solar energy, hydroelectric energy, and to an extent marine energy are likely to be important sources of electricity in the future. It also suggests that the UK public does not regard bioenergy as an important source of energy in the future (Taylor Nelson Sofres and EOS Gallup Europe 2007).

7. References

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