



Wind Power Planning and Public Engagement: Challenges and Opportunities

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Background	1
Challenges facing developers	2
Challenges facing local objectors	2
Opportunities for more positive experiences	3
Opportunities for public participation	3
Key considerations	4
Recommendations for developers	4
Recommendations for planners	4

Background

The development of renewable energy is an important part of the Government's strategy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.¹ Targets exist for the amount of electricity which should come from renewable sources (see Box 1). Currently, wind power is the most developed renewable energy technology and is considered to have enormous potential to contribute towards these targets.²

Box 1. Key targets relating to renewable energy (for the year 2020)

<i>target set by:</i>	<i>goal:</i>
EU	20 percent of the EU's final energy consumption is to come from renewable sources
UK Government	15 percent of the UK's energy (electricity, heat and transport) is to come from renewable sources
Scottish Government	50 percent of the demand for Scottish electricity and 11 percent of Scotland's heat is to be supplied from renewable sources

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1 DTI, 2007, *Energy White Paper: Meeting the Energy Challenge*. www.berr.gov.uk

2 *ibid.*

However, it is argued that a significant obstacle to the deployment of this technology – and hence to the meeting of national targets – is public opposition to wind power developments.³ Planning applications for wind farms are frequently met with local opposition leading to many applications being rejected by local authorities. Rejections are commonly appealed (such appeals normally take the form of a public inquiry). The result is that decisions for wind farm planning applications are often delayed and developers and local communities can face long periods of uncertainty.

Challenges facing developers

Delays in the planning stage for wind power projects can be costly for developers. They therefore have strong motivations to secure planning permission at the initial local authority stage. Since it has been found that local views are a strong influencing factor on local authority decisions,⁴ this may be translated as a motive to generate local support for wind power projects.

It has been argued that public involvement in the planning and development of energy projects leads to greater public acceptance.⁵ However, developers face a number of challenges in facilitating public involvement. In particular, members of the public are often suspicious of commercial developers⁶ and may be sceptical of their attempts to engage with local communities. Public involvement will only lead to positive outcomes if members of the public have confidence that their involvement is meaningful. If they do not feel that their views are being given due consideration, or that they have the capacity to influence decisions, they may be unlikely to participate. Developers therefore need to be willing and able to grant a degree of power to members of the local community.

Challenges facing local objectors

Despite arguments that local objectors to wind power planning applications are influential, these actors also face a number of challenges in planning processes.

A key difficulty relates to the fact that local objectors are typically lay people: they lack expertise relating to the planning system, policies or processes. Objectors may never previously have been involved in planning processes and may be uncertain how to object. Local people concerned by a planning application in their area have to seek information and rapidly learn how to express their views within the planning system.

Accessing information about particular planning applications can also be challenging. The terminology used in planning documents can often be inaccessible to lay people. Environmental Statements (ES) produced by developers include a Non-Technical Summary but even this can appear highly technical to non-experts.

A further challenge relates to how local objectors should articulate their views. As non-experts, they generally lack technical vocabulary to discuss issues of concern. Moreover, local concerns are typically based on local knowledge, whereas developers' arguments are made by reference to technical assessments and expertise. Reconciling these different sources of knowledge can be very challenging.

Local objectors may be concerned about a range of issues, but are likely to highlight the ones which they feel will be perceived as most credible or most legitimate. As such the issues raised in objection letters may, at times, represent those which local objectors perceive as most likely to be taken seriously within the planning system rather than necessarily those about which they are most

3 Breukers, S. & Wolsink, M., 2007, 'Wind power implementation in changing institutional landscapes' *Energy Policy* 35(5): 2737-2750

4 Toke, D., 2005, 'Explaining wind power planning outcomes' *Energy Policy* 33(12): 1527-1539

5 see footnote 3

6 Bell, D., Gray, T. & Haggett, C., 2005, 'The "social gap" in wind farm siting decisions' *Environmental Politics* 14(4): 460-477

concerned.⁷ Local objectors do not always have confidence that their local knowledge will be valued. This can make it difficult for the planning system (or developers) to fully address local communities' concerns.

However, local knowledge can be very valuable. It is often based on many years – or decades – of experience and is highly specific to the local area and/or environment. For example, whilst developers conduct short-term surveys of bird populations in the area, local people may have knowledge spanning many years relating to these populations. This body of knowledge could therefore be of significant value and benefit in planning processes for wind power developments.

Opportunities for more positive experiences

Current planning policies place significant emphasis on public participation and this plays an important legitimating role in the planning system. Participation may also present opportunities to address the challenges facing developers and local objectors. However, it is important that participation is meaningful and influential. It should not take the form of 'public consultation' whereby members of the public are simply asked for their opinion on carefully chosen questions, but rather it should represent full 'public participation' through which members of the public are empowered to lead decisions. The distinction between these two concepts is crucial and is summarised in Box 2.

Box 2. Differences between public consultation and public participation		
	public consultation	public participation
The process is led by:	facilitators (developers/planners)	participants
Questions are set by:	facilitators	participants
Power is held by:	facilitators	participants
The result is that:	facilitators interpret results and come up with solutions/strategies	participants identify possible solutions/strategies

Opportunities for public participation

Ideally, public participation would begin at the very earliest stages of planning a wind farm: before the site has been selected. Participation at this stage may help to create a positive connection between community members and the development/developers. Involvement in decisions on which of a range of sites are most appropriate may also increase understanding of why a wind farm is built in a particular locality. Developers could demonstrate that they are willing to abandon particular sites, or change aspects of the design if public participants indicate that they are inappropriate.

After a site has been selected, members of the public could be involved in designing aspects of the project (e.g. how many turbines, what size of turbines, or how the turbines are to be distributed). Members of the public should be invited to review and comment on different options, and where appropriate suggest alternatives. There may be restrictions on which decisions members of the public could be involved in, but the central premise should be that public participation is facilitated wherever possible. Public participation should be viewed as a routine and essential part of planning and design.

7 Aitken, M., McDonald, S. & Strachan, P., 2008, 'Locating power in wind power planning controversies' *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management* 51(6): 777-799

Public participation could also play a valuable role in designing community benefits packages. These are voluntary on the part of developers but are routinely provided. Participation should start as early as possible and could give a high level of control to local community members. Important considerations such as determining who the recipients of benefits should be, what form these benefits should take or how they should be administered could most appropriately be made by local community members. This is an area where the local community could lead the decision-making process, ensuring that the outcomes are appropriate and beneficial to the local community.

In the formal planning process, it is important that public participation facilitates open and full discussion of public concerns. Participants must have confidence that their views will be taken into consideration and treated as significant material planning considerations. Members of the public (whether objectors or supporters) should feel that they can freely express their views and that these will be fully considered within decision-making to determine the planning application.

Key considerations

Public participation should

- be influential in decision-making processes;
- devolve control to participants – this is essential to gaining the trust of participants;
- begin as early as possible, so participants can influence a wide range of aspects of the planning application and subsequent development;
- encourage the expression of public (local, lay) knowledge.

Recommendations for developers

Prospective developers should facilitate public participation as early as possible when designing and planning wind power projects. This would benefit not just the local community but also the developers, and should be viewed as an essential component of planning and development. Public participants should have opportunities to influence key aspects of the project. Public trust will only be earned if participatory exercises are felt to be meaningful and to devolve a reasonable amount of power to participants. Crucially, developers ought to be open to the possibility that public participation could indicate flaws in their approach or design. They should be willing to abandon projects or aspects of projects if participatory processes indicate that these are inappropriate.

Recommendations for planners

Public participation is an essential part of the democratic planning process. However, it is not straightforward or easy. Members of the public encounter a number of challenges when they participate in planning processes. Planning officers and committee members should support members of the public. In particular, the planning system should be open to listening to a range of views based in a variety of sources of knowledge and experience. Local knowledge in particular should be valued and encouraged. Members of the public should be supported to articulate their full range of concerns and interests by reference to their own particular perspective, experience or knowledge.

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