

Understanding Public Opposition to Wind Power as an Opportunity, Not an Obstacle

a report by

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Renewable energy is a crucial component of government strategies for meeting national targets for producing 'clean' energy and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. To date, wind power has played a central role in progress towards meeting these targets and has considerable potential to contribute further.¹ However, it is often contended that public opposition to proposed wind power developments has created an obstacle to effective deployment of the technology and consequently to the meeting of national targets.²

Public opposition to wind power developments has often been discussed in terms that suggest that it is a 'problem' or 'obstacle' that needs to be overcome. Low rates of planning approval for wind power developments have been attributed to a perceived 'planning problem', and researchers have demonstrated a greater commitment to the aim of securing higher rates of planning approval than the equally important aim of fully understanding public attitudes and responses to renewable energy.³ This article aims to demonstrate that depicting objectors as a 'problem' has limited benefits in terms of improving planning and development processes. Instead, engaging with public views and seeking ways to address – rather than simply overcome – opposition can present valuable opportunities to improve both processes and outcomes.

Restrictive Assumptions About Opposition

An important distinction to make is the difference between public attitudes towards renewable energy – or wind power – in general, and public attitudes towards particular (proposed or actual) renewable energy developments. It is frequently argued that there are generally high levels of public support for renewable energy and wind power.⁴ Opinion polls routinely suggest that the majority of the public are in favour of developing 'clean' sources of energy.⁵ However, when particular renewable energy developments are proposed, this same level of public support is generally not expressed, and instead planning applications are often met with vocal public opposition.

This dissonance between general public support for wind power and vocal public opposition to particular wind power developments has been the focus of considerable attention by academics aiming to explain a 'gap' in public attitudes.⁶ It is presumed that opinion poll data demonstrating high public support for renewable energy present accurate representations of public attitudes to renewable energy and therefore that public opposition to proposed developments is a deviation from 'real' public opinion.³ This line of reasoning suggests that public opposition to wind power developments is 'wrong' or misplaced and that it does not represent wider public opinion. Therefore, opposition has frequently been described as a vocal minority, and attention has been paid to how to motivate the 'silent majority' to express their support for proposed developments.⁷

Additionally, objectors have frequently been discredited as being not in my back yards (NIMBYs). The NIMBY concept describes individuals who support something in general (i.e. wind power) but oppose it when it is proposed in a way that would directly affect them or their lifestyle (i.e. a wind farm near their home).⁸ It was long presumed that, given that the majority of the public was considered to be supportive of wind power, where individuals opposed particular projects this was an inconsistency in their own views. Opposition was considered to relate not so much to the general opinions of individuals on renewable energy but rather to private concerns or interests relating to, for example, the value of their property or the impact that the development might have on views from their home.

A further means through which opponents to wind power have been discredited is the argument that opposition arises from misunderstanding or a lack of awareness about climate change, wind power or the details of particular proposals. It has been suggested that individuals who have greater awareness or experience of wind power are also more positive about it.⁹ Similarly, it has been argued that although individuals may object to a wind power development when it is proposed, they tend to have positive opinions about such developments after they are constructed.⁸ These arguments imply that opposition to wind power developments is a result of ignorance or lack of experience. The danger of this position is that it might encourage the view that the arguments of objectors are not valid and that individuals will be happy with wind power developments once they are constructed. Hence, it could be argued that it is not necessary – or even appropriate – to take local views on board in the planning phase when they are likely to be unduly negative.

These representations of public opposition – depicting opposition as something deviant from 'real' public opinions – begin with the implicit (and at times explicit) assumption that objectors represent a problem that needs to be overcome. They do not allow for a full consideration of why individuals object or how this opposition is expressed and mobilised. Presuming that opposition is inconsistent with 'real' public opinions encourages policy-makers and practitioners



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to disregard opposition arguments. This then implies a need for stronger policies to support wind power development and increase rates of planning approval without necessarily fully engaging with public views and concerns. It has been suggested that there is a 'planning problem' facing wind power,¹⁰ whereby the desired goal of increased renewable energy capacity is being impeded by ineffective planning processes. This presumes that the appropriate outcome in planning processes is greater rates of approval for wind power developments and largely overlooks the crucial democratic character of the planning system.

Moving Towards a Fuller Understanding of Public Opposition

Despite significant work in this area, it has been acknowledged that public responses to renewable energy are still not fully understood.¹¹ As a result, there have recently been a number of studies that have aimed to engage more fully with public opinions and responses to wind power; there has also been a widespread rejection of simplistic explanations such as NIMBYism.^{4,12} Researchers have begun to look in more detail at the reasons behind public opposition and the ways in which planning and development processes are experienced and perceived.

In particular, the assumption that opposition to wind power developments represents a deviation from 'real' public opinion has been critiqued. It is now widely acknowledged that public opinion is "flexible, transitory and adaptable".³ It is not static, but instead changes in response to *inter alia* social, political or environmental factors. Moreover, individuals who express support for wind power may retain certain qualifications in this support that opinion polls do not reflect: "Most of the people who support wind energy do not support it without qualification. They believe that wind energy is a good idea but they also believe that there are general limits and controls that should be placed on its development."⁶ Accordingly, opposition to particular wind power developments is not necessarily at odds with a positive opinion about wind power in general. It must be acknowledged that public opinions will change and adapt in relation to changing situations and particular circumstances.

The notion that opposition emerges from a lack of awareness about wind power also appears to be an overly simplistic supposition. Increased awareness has been shown to result in both support and opposition for wind power.¹³ Debates concerning renewable energy are routinely present within the media and there is "a proliferation of diverse civic organisations openly contesting or supporting the legitimacy of government policy for renewable energy generally and wind energy particularly".¹⁴ As such, information relating to renewable energy is publicly contested. As has been noted elsewhere, "In many cases increased knowledge... might in fact lead to lower acceptance, especially when this means that one becomes aware of competing and conflicting scientific theories".³ There is no clear relationship between knowledge and acceptance of wind power: "Indeed, many objectors appear extremely well informed about these issues".¹⁵

Moreover, local responses to proposed wind power developments are typically rooted in significant – and potentially valuable – local knowledge and experience.¹⁶ For example, concerns relating to potential impacts on bird populations might be based on years or

even decades of experience of living in the local area and witnessing bird activity. Equally, concerns relating to construction traffic may have been informed by previous experiences of encountering large vehicles on the local roads or by awareness of accidents (or near accidents) in the area. Developers will typically conduct highly technical evaluations of the local area and potential impacts that the development might cause. While such assessments are informed by significant expertise and scientific or technical knowledge, this should not be taken as necessarily more accurate or appropriate than the local community's own knowledge and perspective. Indeed, there may be significant value in seeking to incorporate local knowledge and perspectives into design processes. Evaluations performed by developers are likely to be based on highly technical but short-term assessments, whereas local knowledge is likely to be based on long-term experience of the particular environment in question. As such, the two forms of knowledge might complement each other. Finding ways of incorporating both within decision-making processes could open up new opportunities to improve both design processes and outcomes.

In itself, this may have a role to play in addressing public opposition to wind power developments, since issues of fairness and trust appear to be of great significance in the formation of public attitudes and responses to proposed developments.¹⁷ In particular, where individuals do not trust developers they are unlikely to accept the proposed development as being fair. Equally, where individuals do not feel that the processes through which the proposed development was designed or the planning application was determined were fair, they will be unlikely to accept the outcomes as fair. Thus, perceptions of outcome fairness (or acceptance of a wind power development) will always be connected to perceptions of procedural fairness in decision-making processes and to assessments of the trustworthiness of developers. Therefore, addressing opposition requires engagement with public views and the facilitation of decision-making processes that members of the public will consider fair.

Conclusions – Working with Rather than Against Opposition

In the past, public opposition to wind power developments was typically framed as a problem or obstacle that needed to be overcome or avoided. This informed approaches to policy and practice that overlooked the complexity and value of public knowledge and experience. More recent work has highlighted the subtlety and flexibility of public views and the importance of trust and fairness in attempts to generate support for wind power developments. It is not appropriate to disregard opposition as being uninformed or as representing a deviation from 'real' public opinion. Instead, there is a new emphasis on seeking to understand opposition and to find ways of engaging with objectors and addressing (rather than discrediting) opposition arguments.

Involving members of the public in decision-making processes relating to wind power developments is one way of securing a sense of fairness relating to the processes and of generating trust in developers, and may result in a sense of fairness in the outcomes. Community involvement could be facilitated at a number of stages, including the selection of a site and the design of the development (i.e. in relation to the number or size of turbines or how the turbines are to be

distributed). Additionally, community members could play an important role in assessing potential impacts of the development by contributing their own perspectives and local knowledge. If taken seriously, such local knowledge may prove very valuable in assessing potential impacts and finding solutions. Incorporating public knowledge might ensure that the project is environmentally, technically and socially acceptable.

Public involvement could also play a valuable role in designing community benefits packages. Here, local community members could play an important role in determining who the recipients of benefits should be, what form the benefits should take or how they should be administered. 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 order to engender a sense of fairness, prospective developers should aim to facilitate local community involvement 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. However, public trust will be earned only if participatory exercises are felt to be meaningful and to lead to visible outcomes or changes. In this respect, if earning trust is the goal, community members should have opportunities to influence key aspects of the project and, crucially, developers ought to be open to the possibility that public participation could indicate flaws in their approach or design. Ideally, they should be willing to abandon projects or aspects of projects if it is indicated that they are inappropriate.

Engagement with members of the public should begin from the understanding that opposition is not necessarily a result of ignorance and that it is not a deviant position. If the 'problem' of opposition is ever to be overcome, it must first be understood, and the reasons underlying it must be addressed rather than overlooked. ■

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