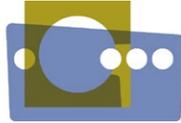


Rural Community Network
SUPPORTING RURAL COMMUNITIES

**Community
Places**



Re-thinking NIMBYism

Rural Community Network and Community Places



**Executive
Summary**

2016





Introduction and background to the project

The NI Executive has set a target to achieve 40% of electricity generation from renewable sources by 2020.

As a result, the number of renewable energy developments in rural areas has grown significantly in the past decade. In order to achieve the Executive's target more large scale renewable energy projects will need to be developed. The siting of large scale renewable energy technology (RET) has become a divisive issue in some communities.

Often the views of communities who object to Renewable Energy Technology (RET) proposals are characterised as a form of "NIMBYism"¹ by the renewable energy industry and more widely in the media. Although NIMBYism has multiple meanings it is generally understood as a term that explains local opposition to some type of physical development in an area based on objector's proximity to that development.

The term has developed pejorative connotations and characterises NIMBYs as selfish, ignorant, parochial and emotional². The project drew on the work of Professor Patrick Devine Wright who has researched the social and psychological aspects of the siting of new energy infrastructure in communities across the UK³.

RCN and Community Places partnered to submit an application to the Building Change Trust (BCT) Civic Activism Awards Programme to explore the issues associated with the siting of RET in rural communities focusing on community engagement.

The project aims were to:

- Explore in depth a range of community perspectives and opinions to the location of renewable energy infrastructure in rural communities.
- Make recommendations for improving community engagement in the future.

The Public Conversations Project Methodology

The Public Conversations Project (PCP) methodology was developed by the Public Conversations Project in the 1980s in the USA as a set of techniques designed specifically for discussing divisive issues that are not easily resolved through compromise⁴. The primary goal of PCP dialogue is the shifting of relationships and communication rather than reaching agreement, which we believed was a more realistic goal when discussing this issue in rural communities.

What we did

Identifying Community Partners

Part of the rationale for the project was to ensure that we involved community participants who had differing views on the siting of RET in rural areas. The first community partner that agreed to take part in the project was a group of neighbours who were campaigning against the construction of a large scale solar farm in their community. We secured engagement in a second area where a wind farm had been operating for over ten years, people were reconciled to its location and existence and were very positive about the associated community benefit funding. The third community partner was a long standing community association that is campaigning against the development of a wind farm in their area.

Notes:

- 1 The NIMBY acronym refers to Not in My Back Yard
- 2 Definition taken from a presentation delivered by Professor Patrick Devine Wright to project participants at a workshop on 02.03.16
- 3 For research published by Professor Devine Wright click http://geography.exeter.ac.uk/staff/index.php?web_id=Patrick_Devine_Wright&tab=pubs
- 4 For further information on the Public Conversations Project see <http://www.publicconversations.org/>



Introduction

Preparation phase

We held initial preparation meetings with key activists in our host communities that determined their interest in participating. An important part of securing people's participation was the assurances we gave on confidentiality and how the information gleaned from community conversations would be used.

Community workshops

The community workshops utilised the PCP methodology to explore the following issues:

- Place attachment, or how people were connected to their local place
- How the place and the community have changed
- How people felt about proposed or actual RET developments in the area
- How people responded to the proposed/ actual RET development
- Have people taken action and how has that felt?
- Uncertainties people have felt about the issues
- Interactions with developers, planners, political representatives and other decision makers
- The factors that inform how different stakeholders approach issues around renewable energy

The discussions from the community workshops were then summarised into an issues paper for each community which was

circulated back to participants to agree. The agreed issues papers were then circulated to participants from the other communities in preparation for the joint community workshop.

Joint community workshop

The joint community workshop brought together representatives from the three communities to share their views on actual/ proposed RET in their area using the PCP methodology. The workshop had input from Professor Patrick Devine Wright about his research across the UK on community reactions to the siting of RET".

This enabled the group to compare experiences from across the UK with their local context. The workshop also identified initial recommendations for better community engagement.

Stakeholder workshop

The stakeholder workshop was aimed at politicians, planners, renewable industry representatives and NGOs. At this workshop we presented the work done in the community workshops, the issues emerging from the joint community workshop and initial recommendations for improving community engagement on the siting of RET.

Issues emerging across the 3 communities

Participant's views were shaped by the context of the site of the development/proposed development, their proximity to it, their attachment to place and, to a lesser extent, when the proposal had emerged. Strong attachment to place was a feature common to the three communities. In all three communities participants identified the



scenic qualities of the area and the rich environmental and cultural heritage as being important elements that defined the place.

Most people heard rumours about proposed developments or were informed by neighbours before any official community consultation or notification was received. Experience of the community consultation process was poor in two communities where RET development is proposed. Participants in these two communities stated that they felt; intimidated, frustrated, worried and were made to feel like trouble-makers during the consultation process.

Project participants said that they had initial difficulty understanding technical information provided by developers but people who were campaigning against RET technology in their area had, subsequently, developed considerable knowledge and understanding of the associated issues. Questions were raised about how claims made in supporting documents that accompany planning applications were objectively assessed. Similar questions were raised about claims developers made in relation to the economic impact of proposals and the job creation that results.

The proposal to develop RET in two of the communities had brought people together in opposition to the developer's plans. In the area where RET had been commissioned in 2003 that development has brought three community groups closer together as they all

receive the community benefit funding.

The groups had very different experiences of, and views on, media coverage of the issues. The groups who were campaigning against RET proposals said they found it difficult to get their views across in the local media, who framed the issue either as a good news story providing an economic boost to the local area, or as a "dispute" between developers and protestors rather than critically engaging with the issues. Questions were also raised about who in the media was critically examining the claims made by the renewable industry. Issues were also raised about the influence of energy generators and the amount of revenue they spend on advertising in both local and regional media. In the community where RET had been commissioned these issues were not significant as people were welcoming of the wind farm and were very appreciative of the community benefit funding.

All the communities raised concerns about the decommissioning of RET installations.

The groups had very different opinions on community benefit funding. The communities which were campaigning against RET proposals in their area stated that they viewed community benefit funding as a "bribe" to buy off opposition and facilitate development. The groups in the community where RET had been commissioned stated that community benefit funding has been a life-line in their three communities providing them with a guaranteed source of income.



The issue of the links between the renewable industry and political parties was raised by the groups who were campaigning against RET in their area. Both these groups raised questions about how the renewable industry exerted influence over politicians and officials and stated that they wanted real transparency on all party political donations in Northern Ireland.

Reflecting on the Use of the Public Conversations Project Dialogue Methodology.

Facilitator's Reflections

The amount of time required to undertake pre-dialogue preparation work in each community should not be under-estimated. We needed to spend time talking to key people to ensure they were clear about the purpose of the project. We spent considerable time at initial meetings discussing confidentiality and how information and learning shared at community workshops would be disseminated. On a practical level using the methodology was initially challenging in that our natural instinct as facilitators was to question and to clarify where we felt that was needed. Several times, especially in earlier sessions, we found ourselves consciously holding back from interrupting participants. The method worked well in surfacing new information and in allowing people to share views and opinions, as individuals, rather than as members of a group representing a particular position. We believe PCP dialogue is a valuable methodology that would have useful application in discussing other contested issues in Northern Ireland.

Recommendations

Early and Meaningful Engagement

Early and meaningful engagement on all aspects of RET developments from siting to decommissioning is critically important. Every opportunity to provide meaningful and early engagement should be taken. Information provided at this initial stage should be clear and accurate so that all stakeholders are adequately informed. Renewable industry representatives noted that this does present challenges due to the commercially sensitive nature of negotiations with landowners before they enter an agreement to buy or lease a site to develop.

Participatory planning approaches and decision-making

A shift away from adversarial planning to more discursive and participative forms of planning practice would help to reduce conflict, address inequalities of power and inform practical decision-making. It is essential that mutual respect between developers and communities, especially those that are commenting or objecting to proposals, and other stakeholders is fostered. As the new planning authorities, local Councils are well placed to bring about this change of approach.

Plan-Led versus Developer-Led

The current legislative framework supports a move away from developer-led towards a plan-led system which is to be welcomed. However, it will take time for local development plans to be put in place. This presents an opportunity to discuss land



use, and in particular the siting of RET, in a more strategic manner. A plan-led approach will provide greater clarity and certainty for all stakeholders.

Assessing and Verifying Supporting Information

Assurance that supporting information, documents and assessments are accurate is crucial to build trust in the planning decision-making process. One way of overcoming this issue would be for an independent third body to prepare, for example, Environmental Impact Assessments or Noise Assessments. The relevant Council or the Department could allocate the assessment to a list of approved consultants thus creating a degree of separation and independence from the developer. The fee for these types of development could reflect this requirement.

The Local Council Planning Authority or Department should also make it very clear to applicants that incomplete or substandard supporting documents will not be accepted and that such applications will not be validated. There should be an emphasis on achieving quality standards rather than minimum standards and a rigorous assessment of documents. This will require planners with particular skills and sets of expertise in order to adequately assess such applications.

We fully appreciate that a shift to a more rigorous and scrutiny focused approach requires adequate financial and human resourcing which is a challenge in a climate of limited public resources and austerity.

However, planning fees for such commercially valuable projects should reflect the cost of proper assessment.

Develop guidelines for community engagement

Further guidelines should be developed to encourage best practice in community engagement for all those involved in place-shaping. Lessons can be learned from the Scottish National Standards for Community Engagement and Planning Aid Scotland's SP=EED, Successful Planning – Effective Engagement and Delivery which is a practical guide to better engagement in planning.⁵

Community Benefit

Community Benefit is clearly a divisive issue - while some communities are fully supportive of it others hold strong views that it equates to being 'bought off'. These polar positions are often shaped by the proximity of the individual and community to the proposal. A matrix could be developed in order to assess the weight to be attached to support for community benefit funds. This would map levels of community support against proximity to the proposal. Often objectors who live in very close proximity to a proposal and will be most impacted by it have no interest in drawing down community benefit funding offered, while those who live further away and may have reduced impacts are supportive of community benefit funding. Whilst community benefit is not supposed to be a material consideration in the planning process in reality it is often considered to be one element of the wider economic and social benefits of a RET scheme. The matrix would

Notes:

⁵ Scottish National Standards for Community Engagement is available to download at www.gov.scot/resource/doc/94257/0084550.pdf
Planning Aid Scotland's SP=EED, Successful Planning – Effective Engagement and Delivery is available to download at pas.org.uk/speed/



help decision makers take a more balanced view of the actual community benefit accruing with regard to proximity to and impact of the proposal.

Shaping Public Debate

There is a need to have a more informed debate on the complex issues surrounding renewable energy in Northern Ireland.

The media plays a key role in shaping public attitudes on renewable energy but it could be argued that the media focus has been on reporting the dispute between developers and communities who object. The media needs to more critically examine the issues around; energy production, energy consumption, energy choices, costs to the consumer, climate change, subsidies, economic viability and community benefit.

Alternative Business Models for RET

Communities living in close proximity to proposed RET developments should be offered the opportunity to invest in them so they can share in the economic benefits. Detailed recommendations as to how community ownership of Renewable Energy can be advanced in Northern Ireland were made by Fermanagh Trust in their 2014 report *Community Energy: Unleashing the Potential for Communities to Power Change*⁶. Community owned models are commonplace in Denmark, Germany and Canada where income generated by community owned renewable energy projects is ploughed back into local communities⁷.

Re-thinking NIMBYism

All stakeholders involved in decision making processes should be careful not to label or dismiss what can be legitimate and real concerns. People who object to planning applications for RET should not be viewed as 'NIMBYs' but as 'place-protectors' or custodians of local communities.

Role of PCP Technique

The Public Conversations Project dialogue technique offers a valuable approach to exploring divisive issues such as the siting of RET. It encourages all stakeholders to: express their views in a controlled and non-confrontational manner; actively listen to and reflect on different perspectives; develop a rounded and informed position; foster respect and encourage honest exchange. The technique could have further application across the region in dealing with contentious issues and should be tested in other planning and development contexts.

Conclusion

A key question that arose in our discussions with community activists was "who has access to the decision makers?" In those communities where people are objecting to RET proposals there was an over-riding feeling that the decision making process was loaded against them. They viewed their situation as a David v Goliath struggle against industry and landowners who they believed had much greater access to decision makers than they would ever have. It is essential that people and communities have access to support and

Notes:

⁶ Available to download at <http://www.fermanaghtrust.org/images/custom/uploads/127/files/Community%20Energy%281%29.pdf>

⁷ See <http://www.theguardian.com/public-leaders-network/2015/oct/02/energy-cooperatives-uk-germany-denmark-community>

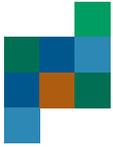


information to enable them to engage effectively with planning processes, to respond and comment on planning applications and to participate in broader debates on RET and other types of development which will impact on their local areas.

These aren't issues unique to Northern Ireland. However, questions of political influence, transparency and perceptions of fairness in government decision making are particularly important in the context of a fledgling democracy where the effectiveness and legitimacy of our political institutions are questioned daily and public confidence in our institutions is declining - as evidenced by the decrease in voter turnout at successive elections. Legislation to introduce transparency on donations to political parties would go some way to reversing this decline in public confidence.

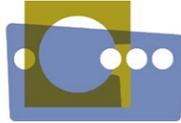
Where RET is appropriately sited with early and meaningful community engagement it can be more easily accepted. We need to support mechanisms which enable communities to invest in RET, where appropriately sited, to become producers of energy so they can share in the economic benefits. This project has demonstrated that citizens are prepared to engage in challenging conversations on contested policy issues. The challenge for community organisations, policy makers and politicians is to ensure the voice of the citizen is heard.

To access a short video explaining the work of the project with contributions from community activists who took part click on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p5MQsS7iAgk>



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