



Rural Community Network
SUPPORTING RURAL COMMUNITIES

Community
Places



Re-thinking NIMBYism

Rural Community Network and Community Places



2016





Introduction

Often the views of communities who object to RET proposals are characterised as a form of “NIMBYism” by the renewable energy industry and more widely in the media.

The number of renewable energy developments in rural areas has grown significantly in the past decade and the siting of large scale renewable energy projects has become a divisive issue in some communities.

The NI Executive has set a target to achieve 40% of electricity generation from renewable sources by 2020. To achieve this target more large scale renewable energy projects will need to be developed.

Both Rural Community Network and Community Places have been in contact with grass roots community groups over the past five years who were objecting to the siting of large scale Renewable Energy Technology (RET) projects in their area. In the same period, we have also advised other community groups who have developed their own renewable energy projects. Some of these groups were interested in installing small scale renewable energy installations on their own premises to reduce their energy costs. Others were interested in developing their own standalone renewable energy projects with the objective of selling electricity into the grid, and earning income from ROC payments. Some other groups were keen in exploring how community benefit schemes associated with many large scale renewable energy projects could be utilised and maximised.

Often the views of communities who object to RET proposals are characterised as a form

of “NIMBYism” 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 the objector’s proximity to that development. The term has developed pejorative connotations and characterises NIMBYs as selfish, ignorant, parochial and emotional¹. From our interactions with groups who were objecting to RET proposals we knew that their objections were much more complex and included issues related to people’s values, their attachment to place, who benefitted from the development, social class and land ownership.

RCN and Community Places partnered to submit an application to the Building Change Trust Civic Activism Awards Programme. The purpose of the Civic Activism strand of BCT’s work is to explore how the Northern Ireland Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector can, and should, play a key role in allowing people to better interact with those who make decisions about their future. BCT produced a Civic Activism Toolkit which explored a range of approaches to citizen engagement across the world:

“We have developed a toolkit that allows VCSE organisations to see how similar organisations across the world have used innovative methods and activities to help citizens get closer to politicians and decision makers.”²

Notes:

¹ Definition taken from a presentation delivered by Professor Patrick Devine Wright to project participants at a workshop on 02.03.16

² BCT Civic Activism, Civic Thinking www.buildingchangetrust.org/civic-thinking/Civic-Activism





Introduction

The Awards Programme was a call for Community and Voluntary organisations to submit a project proposal that would use one or more of the “tools” identified by the Trust to engage with citizens on an issue of public policy. This would facilitate projects to live test some of these approaches with citizens in Northern Ireland whilst exploring some of the public policy issues that were important to project promoters and their stakeholders.

RCN and Community Places submitted an application to explore the issues associated with the siting of RET in rural communities focusing on community engagement. We chose the Public Conversations Project (PCP) Dialogue tool which was specifically designed for exploring deeply divisive topics that are not easily resolved through compromise. As well as using the PCP Dialogue tool the project drew on the research of Professor Patrick Devine Wright from the University of Exeter. His research on community reactions to the location of large scale RET projects reinforces the fact that communities have long held and legitimate emotional attachments to “place” and that local opposition to RET infrastructure is better understood as a form of “place protective action rather than NIMBYism³”.

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. The project used the Public Conversations Project dialogue tool to develop a deeper understanding of the complex attitudes and perspectives on wind energy development in rural communities.
- Make recommendations for improving community engagement in the future.



Notes:

³ For research published by Professor Devine Wright click http://geography.exeter.ac.uk/staff/index.php?web_id=Patrick_Devine_Wright&tab=pubs



The Public Conversations Project Methodology

The BCT Civic Activism Toolkit identified a range of tools and approaches which projects could use to explore issues of public policy and engage communities.

It also asks people to participate as individuals and speak for themselves rather than as representatives of a group or position.

The Public Conversations Project dialogue tool was developed by the Public Conversations Project in the 1980s in the USA as a methodology designed specifically for discussing divisive issues that are not easily resolved through compromise⁴. It is deeply rooted in values and this is important in many host communities for Renewable Energy Technology (RET) developments where attachment to place is strong, and where, in some cases, there are issues related to power, the ownership of land and assets.

"The PCP methodology is a relationship based approach that includes:

- Preparing people for new conversations
- Reflecting on one's own and others' perspectives
- Using shared agreements that guide the conversation
- Encouraging curiosity and honest questions
- Structured conversation that prevents old, unproductive patterns and enhances listening and speaking respectfully"⁵

We believed this type of approach would be suited to the issue of the siting of RET in rural communities. We were also drawn to this method as it was clear that the purpose of PCP dialogue sessions was not about changing participant's minds on a particular issue, but rather about exploring the nuances of complex issues and developing understanding of why people held the views they did. It also asks people to participate as individuals and speak for themselves rather than as representatives of a group or position. We felt that these factors would give confidence to participants to fully engage in the project whilst also allowing us to examine the issues in more depth.

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 this meant in practice was designing community workshops that had two distinct parts. The first part was delivered in a very structured way using the PCP methodology before the second part opened up into a more conventional and less structured discussion workshop. We used the structured process of speaking and listening amongst participants to provide the basis of a more informal conversation in the second part of the workshop.

Notes:

⁴ For further information on the Public Conversations Project see <http://www.publicconversations.org/>

⁵ <http://www.publicconversations.org/our-method>





Project process

It was easier to identify communities where opposition to the siting of RET was organised and where a planning proposal for large scale RET was imminent.

Identifying Community Partners

Our initial phase of work began before our funding was drawn down from BCT. A condition of the letter of offer that accompanied our grant stated that we were to identify 3 specific partner communities and provide BCT with written evidence of support from a community partner or partners in each. We identified areas where we knew the siting of RET was an issue. We then developed a one-page summary document setting out the purpose of the project and the outcomes we hoped to achieve. Part of the rationale for the project and for testing the PCP methodology was that we involve community participants who had differing views on the siting of RET in rural areas. We therefore needed to attract a mix of participants some of whom were opposed to the siting of RET in their community and others who were in favour of the siting of RET in their community or had benefitted from it.

We used contacts in our networks to identify potential partner communities. It was easier to identify communities where opposition to the siting of RET was organised and where a planning proposal for large scale RET was imminent. Two of the groups who participated in the project came from this perspective and were already working with Community Places and Rural Community Network in relation to these issues. It was a greater challenge to identify communities who were positively disposed to the siting of RET in their area and who were willing to take part in the project. This can be partly explained by the fact that

people who are involved in community groups who are campaigning against RET in their area had become highly motivated by the issue and, as we found throughout the project, have become well-informed on a wide range of issues related to planning, the environment and renewable energy. We stated clearly to all participants at the outset when we were explaining the purpose of the project that this work would not relate directly to a specific planning application and was more about the wider planning and community engagement issues. However, some participants in partner communities who were objecting may have become involved as they believed that the project could help them in developing their understanding of the issues which could further inform their thinking in relation to any future planning application.

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. In this area the operator was distributing community benefit funding to 3 neighbouring community groups, people were reconciled to the location and existence of the wind farm and were very positive about the community benefit funding.

Supporting Rural Communities



Project process

We also asked that they consider attending a joint workshop with participants from across the 3 communities further into the project process.

The third community partner was a long standing community association that is campaigning against the development of a wind farm in their area. We found it more difficult to secure engagement in this third community. Our initial meeting to explain the purpose of the project was attended by 25 people as the community association has mobilised a very active campaign group in the area. Members of the group were cautious of our motives and of the project when we explained that we would be engaging with the renewables industry as part of the project. This can be partly explained by the fact that they have had poor experiences of engagement with the renewable industry and the developer in their area. After further correspondence by email and reassurances that they would remain in control of the information from the community workshops that would be shared with other project stakeholders and the public they agreed to be part of the project.

Preparation phase

The PCP methodology was designed into our community engagement workshops and is a structured process of managing dialogue which encourages participation and listening amongst participants. We held initial preparation meetings with key activists in our host communities that ascertained their interest in participating. An important part of securing people's participation was the assurances we gave on confidentiality and how the information from community conversations would be used. These initial meetings were

important to ensure participants had an understanding of the purpose of the project and to build trust between facilitators and participants. The meetings also allowed us to start to identify the issues that were relevant in that local area so we could design dialogue questions that were appropriate to that community and that would explore the most important issues in that area.

We asked participants to commit to at least two PCP based workshops in their own community to discuss the issues around the siting of RET in that area. We also asked that they consider attending a joint workshop with participants from across the 3 communities further into the project process. We discussed any concerns participants had at that stage as well as practical arrangements including venues, timings and who should be invited. We agreed that the community workshops be targeted at people who we would invite rather than be organised on a public meeting basis. Although PCP conversations can be designed to manage public meetings the methodology works better if participants have some knowledge of the process in advance and are aware of the issues that will be discussed⁶.

Community workshops

At the community PCP workshops questions we devised based on our initial meetings were asked of participants. People were given 2 minutes to think individually about their responses.

Notes:

⁶ See pp38-41 of Fostering Dialogue Across Divides: A Nuts and Bolts Guide from the Public Conversations Project, Herzig M. & Chasin L 2006 for further detail on issuing invitations to PCP sessions. Available as a free download at http://www.publicconversations.org/sites/default/files/PCP_Fostering%20Dialogue%20Across%20Divides.pdf





Project process

This was done to foster an environment where participants were comfortable sharing their views.

Participants were asked to respond as individuals, rather than as representatives of a group or position. Facilitators then asked people to respond individually to the question for no longer than 2 minutes and participants' responses were timed. In some cases, facilitators interrupted participants and asked them to bring their remarks to a close after the timer alarm had sounded. Participants were also asked not to interrupt whilst others were responding to the PCP questions. All participants were encouraged to make notes on questions they had or points of clarification they would like to seek when the less formal part of the session started.

Agreements on how we would work had been made at initial meetings and were referred back to in the community workshops. Agreements were made that comments made in workshop sessions would not be attributed directly to participants and that confidentiality would be maintained by participants within the wider community. This was done to foster an environment where participants were comfortable sharing their views. We agreed that communities would have control over information emerging from the project and how it was disseminated and this was crucial in developing trust between participants and facilitators.

We also agreed that participation was voluntary and that participants could walk away at any stage in the process. This was a risky strategy as, if people didn't come back after the community workshop phase to participate in the joint community workshop,

the scope of the project would be much reduced. Finally, we agreed that we would test out the PCP workshop methodology in a spirit of co-operation and learning and that we as facilitators would be open to honest feedback from participants on how they were finding the process.

2 community workshops were then held in each area. The first workshop utilised PCP methodology to look at 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

The second community workshop also utilised PCP methodology to look at:

- How people responded to the proposed/ actual RET development
- Have people taken action and how that has felt
- Uncertainties people have felt about the issues
- Interactions with developers, planners, political representatives and other decision makers





Project process

- The factors that inform how different stakeholders approach issues around renewable energy

Following the community workshops notes were shared back with participants to verify the key points and check for misunderstandings. The discussions at both community workshops were then summarised into an issues paper for each community which was circulated back to each group of community participants to agree. The agreed issues papers were then circulated to participants from the other communities in preparation for the joint community workshop.

There was a two-month delay between the completion of the local community workshops and the joint community workshop due to difficulty in scheduling dates for keynote speakers and stakeholders. We were concerned that this gap would lead to participants becoming disengaged from the project. This concern did not materialise as we kept in contact with participants by email sending reports of workshop sessions and to some extent this minimised disengagement.

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. Some participants were wary of attending the joint workshop and meeting other project participants who had a differing perspective to the siting of RET. In order to

break down potential barriers and to help the participants to be more at ease with each other we designed a Carousel ice-breaker exercise which was very successful. The workshop also had input from Professor Devine Wright about his research across the UK on community reactions to the siting of RET. This helped to frame the discussion and enabled the group to compare experience from across the UK with the local context. The final part of the workshop focused on identifying recommendations for better community engagement drawing from both the positive and negative experiences which the participants had. We used these initial suggestions and comments to develop emerging recommendations which we presented to the stakeholder audience the following day. We also asked participants to reflect on the value of the PCP technique and whether they would use it again. The responses were in the main very positive and all of the respondents noted that they would be likely to draw on elements of the PCP approach in the future - this is detailed further on pages 17-20.

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 recommendations for improving community engagement on

We were concerned that this gap would lead to participants becoming disengaged from the project.

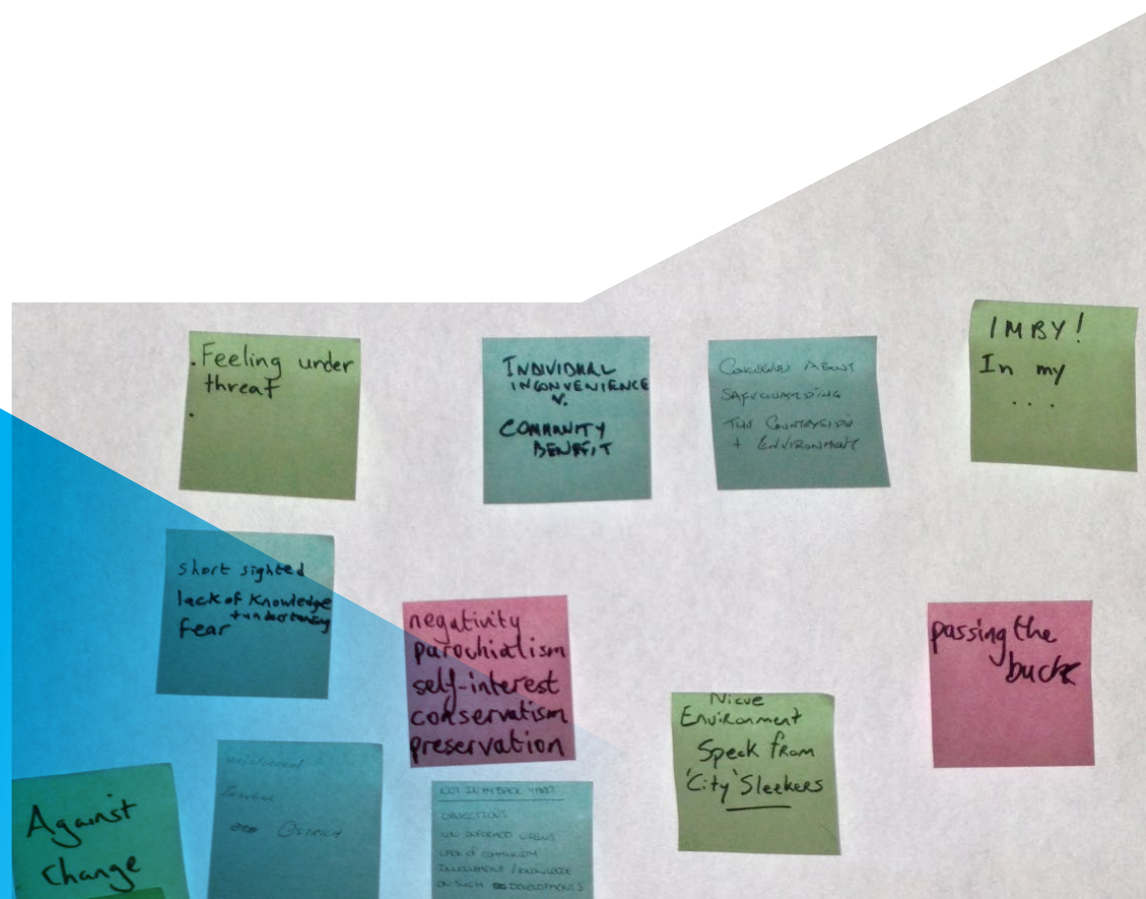




Project process

the siting of RET. This audience also heard an input from Professor Devine Wright. The stakeholders were then invited to reflect on and share their thoughts on the issues and recommendations which had been presented. This generated a rich discussion and highlighted the multiple views held within the room and potential opportunities for improved engagement practices.

The workshop also had input from Professor Devine Wright about his research across the UK on community reactions to the siting of RET. This helped to frame the discussion and enabled the group to compare experience from across the UK with the local context.





Community partners

The group relayed the very negative experience they had of community consultation and were critical of the lack of support for their campaign from local political representatives.

Community One:

Community one is a rural area where a 250-acre solar farm is proposed. The land where the proposal is to be sited is currently used as farmland and the site is owned by one person. The landowner has stated that if the development goes ahead he will still graze livestock on the site. The proposed development is close to an electricity sub-station which will facilitate a convenient connection to the electricity grid. The proposed development will run along both sides of a country road and will be overlooked by the houses that are built along this road. A small group of neighbours, the majority of whom live along the road, have come together as a campaign group to oppose the planning application. This group of neighbours all have strong connections to the local area even though many have moved to the community from other places. The group relayed the very negative experience they had of community consultation and were critical of the lack of support for their campaign from local political representatives. The group had a poor experience of speaking to the local council about the proposed development. They explained that they felt dismissed, belittled, patronised and as if the councillors present had already made their minds up in favour of the proposal. The application was validated one day before the requirement for Pre-Application Community Consultation came into operation. Participants were angry about this and felt that the Department had facilitated the developer in avoiding Pre Application Community Consultation.

Community Two:

Community two is a rural community where a wind farm has been developed which was commissioned in 2003. Originally the site opened with 20 turbines but a 9 turbine extension was commissioned in 2007. The site is well located with very few houses in close proximity. The site had formerly been used for large scale peat extraction for many years before the wind farm was developed so it was not considered by locals to be a green field site. Similarly, to the other communities the development was located on a site owned by a single landowner. There was no recollection of community opposition to the windfarm when it was built amongst the people we engaged with in this area (although none of the participants lived in close proximity to the site). As far as people knew the small number of residents who lived relatively close to the site had no issues with, or objections to, the windfarm. Three community groups, whose area of benefit adjoins the site, receive community benefit funding from it. This takes the form of an annual payment from the community benefit fund to the community group. There are no restrictions on what the community benefit funding can be used for as long as it fits with the purposes of the group as set out in their governing document. The community groups in the area are very appreciative of community benefit funding. It provides guaranteed annual income from the community benefit fund index linked to inflation. The groups have used the community



Community partners

benefit funding to lever in additional resources and improve facilities and services in their areas.

Community Three:

Community three is located in a rural upland area where a 36 turbine wind farm is proposed. This proposal involves one landowner on a green field site. The site is located within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty with many local sites of environmental, archaeological and biodiversity interest in the area that hold accompanying EU designations. The area has a strong and well established community association which has acted as a focus for local opposition to the proposal. A planning application for the proposal was submitted in December 2015 and is awaiting decision. In this community participants also described a poor experience of pre-application community consultation. People felt that the developer's staff had talked down to them and had not listened to their concerns or seriously engaged

with the issues they raised. They were aggrieved that although the developer held three public engagement events as part of the pre-application community consultation process these happened in towns and a village far removed from the site of the development. They were disappointed that no public engagement event was organised in their community which is the area that will be most directly affected if the proposal goes ahead.

The area has a strong and well established community association which has acted as a focus for local opposition to the proposal.



Issues emerging

In communities one and three project participants live in close proximity to the proposed development, a single landowner is involved and the proposals were to be located on greenfield sites leading to strong objections from local people.

Each community context was unique and the project participants held a range of complex views on the issues associated with the siting of RET in rural communities and renewable energy more generally.

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. In community two where participants held positive attitudes to the windfarm it had been commissioned in 2003. At that time wind farm development in rural communities in Northern Ireland was a relatively new phenomenon. This area was already considered to be, to some extent, industrialised due to the large scale peat extraction that had taken place over previous decades. The site of the wind farm was relatively remote in that area with very few houses in close proximity. None of the project participants lived in close proximity. In communities one and three project participants live in close proximity to the proposed development, a single landowner is involved and the proposals were to be located on greenfield sites leading to strong objections from local people. The following issues emerged from the PCP workshops in each community and the joint community workshop.

Strong attachment to place was a feature in the three communities.

The majority of participants had been born in the area and had lived there all of their lives. Those that had moved to the area had done so primarily to put down roots and raise a family. 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. The vast majority of people, when questioned, couldn't imagine having to leave the area. Others stated that they would be totally devastated if they were forced to leave. Participants acknowledged that the "place" they were attached to had changed incrementally over time and that these had been both positive and negative changes.

Most people heard rumours about proposed developments before any official pre-application community consultation or notification was received.

Most participants heard about the proposed development before any formal pre-application process or through any other official channels. People became aware through rumours or because one or two people in the community heard about the proposal and made others aware of it. In community two the majority of participants we spoke to weren't aware of the proposed development until planning approval was in place. They were then engaged by the developer to discuss how any community benefit fund would operate.





Issues emerging

Participants in these two communities stated that they felt intimidated, frustrated, worried and had been made to feel like trouble makers during the consultation process.

In community one participants stated that they believed that the then Department of the Environment had facilitated the applicant in avoiding the formal process of pre application community consultation.

Experience of the community consultation process was poor in two communities where RET development is proposed.

In the two communities where RET development is proposed participants complained of very poor experiences of community consultation, including the new process of pre application community consultation. Participants said that at public consultation events developers didn't answer questions put to them directly by people who were opposed to the development but requested that questions be put in writing. In one case the developer's representatives stated that they would only meet with people in smaller groups. Participants in these two communities stated that they felt intimidated, frustrated, worried and had been made to feel like trouble makers during the consultation process. In community one participants stated that they believed that the then Department of the Environment had facilitated the applicant in avoiding the formal process of pre application community consultation. The planning application had been validated just before the 01 July 2015 cut off point. However, the group felt that the application should not have been validated as not all of the information had been submitted at this point. In community three people were aggrieved that the formal pre-application community consultation meetings were not held in their area despite the fact that it would be impacted most if the proposal were approved.

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.

All project participants stated that they had difficulty in understanding the technical information provided by developers.

Descriptions of the technical aspects of RET are difficult to understand in terms of the scale of RET in the landscape and the estimates of energy generated in megawatts. In the early 2000s when the wind farm was commissioned in community two there was no requirement on developers to engage in pre application community consultation however people in this area also said that they found it difficult to interpret technical information. Despite these difficulties it was clear from our conversations with people throughout the project that they had invested a lot of time informing themselves on issues related to RET including, planning regulations, environmental impact assessment, renewable energy technology and wider issues related to electricity generation and the electricity grid.

Questions were raised over how information was assessed in the planning process

The issue of how claims made in supporting documents that accompany planning applications were assessed was raised by participants from



Issues emerging

Before the development the groups knew of each other but they did not collaborate.

communities where people were objecting to development. Planning applications for RET are accompanied by Environmental Impact Assessment reports and statements of economic impact. Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) reports are substantial documents and assess a wide range of factors including impact on biodiversity, bird and bat species, impact on peat bog, archaeology etc. Participants questioned how the claims made in EIAs were assessed objectively by planning officials and the levels of expertise of planning staff to assess the claims made. Similar questions were raised about claims developers made in relation to the economic impact of proposals and the job creation that results. It was suggested that the assessment of these claims in a more systematic and objective way would allow a more rounded assessment of the merits or otherwise of these aspects of RET proposals to be made.

Developed stronger community links and friendships

The proposal to develop RET in two of the communities had brought people together in opposition to the developer's plans. People in these communities already knew each other but talked about friendships being deepened as a result of campaigning together to oppose RET. In the area where RET had been commissioned in 2003 that development has brought three community groups closer together as they all benefit from the community benefit funding. Before the development the groups knew of each other but they did not collaborate. The community

benefit funding has brought them together on a regular basis and has built better relationships between them.

The groups had very different experiences of, and views on media coverage of the issues.

The groups who were campaigning against RET proposals were quite critical of the media coverage of the specific issues involved in the RET proposals in their local community as well as media coverage of renewable energy issues more generally. Their experience was that they found it difficult to get their views across in the local media. In their experience local media adopted one of two approaches to covering these situations. The first approach was to present the proposals as a good news story focusing on the provision of local employment and the perceived positive economic boost to the local area. The second approach was to cover the "dispute" between developers and protestors rather than critically engaging with the issues. This framing of the wider media debate on renewable energy in terms of it being clean, green and free was also discussed in detail by both these groups. They questioned who in the media was critically engaging in examining the claims made by the renewable industry. Issues were also raised about the power 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



Issues emerging

They also expressed concern that if, for whatever reason, the site was to cease operation after the current turbines became obsolete how would they be decommissioned and the site restored.

not current as people were welcoming of the wind farm and were very appreciative of the community benefit funding. The groups did state that the operators were now much more conscious of using media opportunities to promote the work that community benefit funding was enabling. In the early years community benefit fund cheques would have been handed over without any publicity but in more recent years presentations are made which are then publicised in the local media. This could reflect the development of greater awareness within the industry of the importance of presenting more positive stories about RET in reaction to the negative publicity generated by proposals where local communities are objecting.

All the communities raised concerns about the decommissioning of RET installations

The communities who were campaigning against RET raised concerns about how the decommissioning of installations would happen after they reached the end of their operating life. In the community where a solar farm is planned the group were particularly concerned (from research they had carried out) that licenced contractors were required to decommission solar panels. The group stated this was due to the toxic materials used in their manufacture. The group where a wind farm was proposed raised concerns regarding the decommissioning of wind turbines when they became obsolete and the impact on the landscape/environment of the large concrete bases required to install them in a pristine upland landscape.

The community where groups were accepting of RET also expressed concerns over the decommissioning of the wind farm in their area. This was a more tangible concern for them as the wind farm had been commissioned 13 years previously and most developers estimate that wind turbines have a useful operational life of twenty-five years. These groups' concerns were focused on the potential loss of community benefit funding if the developer chose not to replace obsolete turbines. They also expressed concern that if, for whatever reason, the site was to cease operation after the current turbines became obsolete how would they be decommissioned and the site restored.

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 community opposition and facilitate RET development. Several participants made the point that the level of community benefit funding on offer from renewable developers represented a fraction of the income generated by the RET developments. They also raised the point that in many RET developments community groups from a wide catchment area (up to 11km away in some cases) can apply for community benefit funding but will experience very little adverse impact. The groups in the community where RET had been commissioned held a completely opposite view. They stated that



Issues emerging

community benefit funding has been a life line in their three community groups. It has given them a guaranteed source of income that their groups have used to lever in additional resources and has enabled them to provide additional services. Their main concern was what would happen when the turbines came to the end of their operational life and the potential that the community benefit funding would end.

Transparency of political party donations

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 was lobbying politicians and officials and stated that they believed that it should be a requirement that all party political donations in Northern Ireland be made public.

They also raised the point that in many RET developments community groups from a wide catchment area (up to 11km away in some cases) can apply for community benefit funding but will experience very little adverse impact.





Reflecting on PCP

Project Participants' Reflections

As part of the process we asked project participants to complete a short evaluation to gauge their experience of using the PCP Dialogue method throughout the project. 14 participants at the joint community workshop completed the evaluation form.

We asked participants a series of five questions and also invited people to comment on each question.

1. Did you find out anything you didn't know when using the PCP method in the discussion workshops in your community?

All respondents indicated they had found out new information in the discussion workshops in their community.

Comments made by participants included:

"Yes. People/neighbours' passion to protect their environment and not just to stop developments on your doorstep."

"Those who are quiet in a group get the opportunity to talk."

"Workshops held with our group enabled discussions to be open, frank and kept to the subject matter."

"Everyone had the opportunity to express an opinion without being interrupted or talked over."

2. Did you find out anything you didn't know when using the PCP method in today's workshops with all the community participants together

12 participants indicated that they had found out new information in the joint community workshop, 2 indicated that they hadn't.

Comments made by participants included:

"Great system from keeping meetings running on longer"

"How short a minute of speaking is when you have a point to put across"

"Some people have very fixed views"

"how to relate to views how to react to certain points"

"The issues and concerns other groups faced in obtaining information to contacting renewable/energy providers"

"Views from the pro-renewables group all individual and not cut and dried as I'd assumed. Also that money is definitely a big incentive - if you don't live too close"

"Absolutely delighted with this process and how this was organised. Rural Community Network brilliant - Community Places brilliant."





Reflecting on PCP

"Without the PCP method we would still be at the workshop"

3. Do you think the PCP method allowed people to share their opinions more freely?

13 participants indicated that they thought that the PCP method had allowed people to share their opinions more freely, one participant indicated that they did not.

Comments made by participants included:

"With really listening to all the others yes they shared their opinions"

"Some people are not as vocal as others, this gives everyone the opportunity to speak"

"I think we all felt comfortable sharing our diverse views and everyone had taken on board the "rules" about not criticising other group members."

"The groups worked well together though there were no issues of conflict which otherwise might have caused problems."

4. Would you recommend that other groups use PCP methodology as a way of discussing issues in their community?

All 14 participants indicated that they would recommend the use of PCP methodology as a way of discussing issues in their community.

5. Any other comments or feedback

11 participants commented and 3 did not respond. Comments included:

"Your icebreaker at the start was very effective"

"Found this very interesting and with PCP method you heard all opinions very well rather than everyone talking over each other."

"Yes - in more hostile situations this would allow people to speak in an open and uninterrupted way to get their point across."

"Other groups would gain from discussing issues together"

"Enjoyable as well as informative, also nice to talk informally to Patrick, Community Places and participants before, during and after the session."

"Think this was excellent opportunity to get information across to wider public. Great for confidence building. Also someone to listen and show they care"

"Should be introduced at all meetings."





Reflecting on PCP

Facilitator's Reflections

Our use of PCP dialogue in the process was largely a positive experience. Whilst we chose PCP Dialogue as the tool we would test as part of the BCT Civic Activism application it was only when the project was awarded funding that we developed our understanding of the PCP methodology and adapted it to use in workshops in local communities. We had the opportunity to speak to Bob Stains and John Sarrouf both experienced PCP dialogue facilitators who work at the Public Conversations Project in Boston. This was invaluable to developing our understanding of the application of the PCP technique and they were able to offer us helpful advice as to how to plan and design the PCP dialogue sessions. Our contact with the PCP project was facilitated by Clive Mitchell from Involve⁷. Involve was one of the external organisations delivering a learning support service to the BCT Civic Activism projects. Clive also played an important role in helping us to reflect on the learning emerging from the various elements of the project.

The amount of time required to undertake pre dialogue preparation work in each community should not be under-estimated. Even in two communities where RCN and Community Places had already developed relationships with some key activists we needed to spend time talking to key people to ensure they were clear on what the purpose of the project was. It also allowed people space to ask questions about the project, be clear about the time commitment needed to participate and to build trust between the participants and ourselves as project facilitators. We spent considerable time at initial meetings discussing confidentiality and how information and learning shared at community workshops would be disseminated. This was important as the siting of RET in some rural communities had been controversial and many people hold strong views. We agreed that participants would see transcripts of workshops and that short papers summarising the issues arising in the three communities would be agreed by participants and facilitators before being shared with the other communities participating in the project.

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Notes:

⁷ For more information on the work of Involve click on <http://www.involve.org.uk/>



Reflecting on PCP

As facilitators we invested considerable time in preparing for the community workshops. We developed detailed workshop plans and key to the PCP methodology was ensuring the questions we asked in the PCP segment of the workshop reflected people's experience of the reality of RET in each community as well as incorporating the concepts associated with Professor Devine Wright's research on place and place protective action. 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 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. As facilitators we were overwhelmed by the open, frank and often personal and emotive comments, fears and concerns which participants shared with us and the PCP approach created a safe environment for this to happen. The initial structured part of the workshop informed the discussion in the less formal second half of the workshop. PCP dialogue is a valuable methodology that would have useful application in discussing contested issues in Northern Ireland.





Recommendations

This would help to reduce the negative impact of rumours, misinformation and scaremongering which can take place. 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.

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. This would help to reduce the negative impact of rumours, misinformation and scaremongering which can take place. 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, 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 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

Assurances 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 Netherlands operate an EIA Committee which is a legally appointed independent advisor in EIA procedures. It advises the government (or competent planning authority) about the content and the quality of environmental impact assessments (EIAs). The Committee provides a recommendation at the start of an EIA procedure: on what information must be included in the EIA and after the EIA has been drawn up assesses whether the EIA contains all the necessary information to fully consider the interests of the environment for a project.



Recommendations

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

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 quality rather than minimum standards and a rigorous assessment of documents. In some cases, this will involve specialist areas e.g. ecology, landscape or economy. This will require planners with particular skills and sets of expertise in order to adequately assess such applications. Some communities currently feel it is being left to them as lay people to inform themselves, review planning documents and to highlight to planners any weaknesses, inadequacies, misinformation or inaccurate information.

We fully appreciate that a shift to a more rigorous and scrutiny based 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.⁸

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 benefit of a RET scheme. The matrix would 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

Notes:

⁸ 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/



Recommendations

on renewable energy but it could be argued that the media focus has been on reporting the dispute between developers and communities who object. Some participants noted that the terminology which is used to describe wind or solar proposals is selective. Terms such as 'farm' or 'park' are utilised rather than 'power station' all of which influences people's attitudes to renewables. The media needs to more critically examine the issues around energy production, 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 to enable them to 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*⁹. Community owned models are commonplace in Denmark, Germany and Canada where income generated by community owned renewable energy projects is ploughed back into local communities¹⁰.

Re-thinking NIMBYism

Often those who are objecting to planning proposals in their area are labelled as 'NIMBYs'. This is a pejorative and demeaning term which often fails to acknowledge or value the very real and strong attachments which local people have to place and their desire to protect and safeguard it. 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 Methodology

The Public Conversations Project dialogue methodology 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 methodology could have further application across the region in dealing with contentious or heated issues and should be tested in other planning and development contexts.

Notes:

⁹ Available to download at <http://www.fermanaghtrust.org/images/custom/uploads/127/files/Community%20Energy%281%29.pdf>

¹⁰ See <http://www.theguardian.com/public-leaders-network/2015/oct/02/energy-cooperatives-uk-germany-denmark-community>



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.

These aren't issues unique to Northern Ireland, but questions of political influence, transparency and perceptions of fairness in decision making and government 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. To this end transparency of donations to political parties, which came up in our community conversations, would assist.

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 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.



Rural Community Network
SUPPORTING RURAL COMMUNITIES

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

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