

Getting the community alongside



Photo: Von Muller

Public opinion surveys show that people are in favour of wind power, but when it comes down to individual wind farms local opposition can be fierce. Can this be avoided? Zoë Casey takes a look.

People resist change. Especially when they know little about the changes taking place. The energy sector is in a time of change – from a system reliant on burning fossil fuels that is now ageing and outmoded to one based on creating electricity from renewable sources like wind power.

While on a broad level people welcome these changes – a recent survey found that 70% of Europeans think renewables should be prioritised over fossil fuels – on a local level this could mean differences to people’s views from their houses and gardens, as well as the raising of possible concerns over noise and the health effects of wind turbines people read about in the media – even if they are unfounded.

Being a good neighbour

Wind energy developers and planners are well aware of the need for a wind farm to be a ‘good neighbour’ to those who live in its vicinity. From investment in local schemes and locally owned cooperative wind farms, to regular and committed community engagement, there is a way for every wind farm to sit well with its neighbours.

To help this process along the way, several wind energy associations have developed community engagement guidelines.

Funding local projects

“Increasing community acceptance of wind energy is central to the efficient deployment and expansion of wind energy in Ireland,” says Kenneth Matthews, Chief Executive of the Irish Wind Energy Association (IWEA). “A well-considered and executed community engagement plan will improve the likelihood of community acceptance of projects,” he adds.



Photo: EWEA/Dunne

In Ireland, funds from some wind farms go to local schools

Wind power and health – the facts

2013: the Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) found that coal-fired power stations cost the EU up to €42.8 billion a year in health costs and 18,200 premature deaths.

2013: a University of Sydney study found that supposed health warnings from anti-wind power activists are likely to be causing some people to think they are getting sick.

2012: a study for the Massachusetts Department of Public Health said: “there is insufficient evidence that noise from wind turbines is directly...causing health problems or disease.”

2012: the Bavarian Environment Agency in Germany found that wind turbines do not generate infrasound at a level that would damage human health.

2010: the Australian government's National Health Medical Research Council concluded: “there are no direct pathological effects from wind farms and any potential impact on humans can be minimised by following existing planning guidelines.”

2009: The American Wind Energy Association and the Canadian Wind Energy Association found that: “there is no evidence that the audible or sub-audible sounds emitted by wind farms have any direct physiological impacts.”

Links to the above studies can be found on EWEA's blog: www.ewea.org/blog

The IWEA Best Practice Community Commitment and Engagement Principles paper sets out the range of benefits for local communities including jobs, local authority rates and land rents, as well as the broader benefits of wind power including more stable energy prices for the consumer, reduced dependency on imported fossil fuels, and lower carbon emissions.

Developers should engage with the community from an early stage allowing local concerns to be considered during the planning phases of the wind farm, as well as informing locals about the benefits of the wind farm, IWEA says. Community engagement and dialogue should then be continued throughout the different phases from planning and environmental impact assessments, to construction and operation.

One wind farm – Lisheen – in county Tipperary, set up a community fund as soon as the farm became operational. Funds generated by the wind farm are channelled into a local athletic club, a community hall, a youth group, and a local school among others. “Over the lifetime of the development, it is expected that approximately €600,000 will be contributed to the local community in total,” the IWEA guide says. “The community funding scheme has been highly successful to date, with tangible benefits visible within the local area,” it adds.

Another set of wind farms in Ireland – in Bindoo, Gartnaneane and Mullananalt – also contribute to local community funds, including the local school. The fund has supported the replacement of single glazed windows and doors in the school with double-glazed energy efficient ones. “This will result in an estimated 20% cut in our energy costs and reduce heat loss by around 50%,” said Berni Power, from the board of management of Laragh National School.

Other examples outlined in the IWEA guide include funding a soft play area for children in the vicinity of a wind farm, travel help for senior citizens, and transport and equipment for pupils taking part in classes run by the Disabled Association.

Not taking local acceptance for granted

The Canadian Wind Energy Association (CanWEA) in its community engagement guidelines warns wind energy developers against taking local acceptance for granted. It says that residents of every community have a right to ask questions, be sceptical, be concerned and oppose plans.

“A successful community engagement programme should include a wide range of activities geared to creating and maintaining opportunities for two-way communication between the developer and members of the community,” it says.

As key pointers, the guide recommends identifying key local opinion leaders, such as politicians, media, farmers, environmentalists and academic experts from a local university or college, trying to understand what they think about plans to develop wind energy, and engaging with them before they become potential high-profile opponents.

Ways of actively engaging with the local community stated in the guide include: community bulletins outlining questions from locals along with answers; setting up a project website; establishing a dedicated phone number for questions; regularly scheduled meetings, workshops and trips to other wind farms; and media interviews and advertisements.

Local energy for local people

Germany is in the midst of a huge energy shift away from nuclear towards renewables known as the Energiewende. While this is taking place at



national level, Hermann Albers, President of the German Wind Energy Association (BWE), said that this transition will “not be possible without popular acceptance”. In BWE’s guidelines on community ownership of wind farms published in 2011, he said that, “community ownership is therefore key to the success of Germany’s energy transition. Here, we are not only talking about a technological or ecological transition, but mainly a societal one.”

Community wind farms allow locals to play an active role in energy policy and one in which they can also voice concerns, increasing public acceptance, the BWE guidelines say. Ways in which this can be achieved include: local developer firms plan the wind farm; local firms take part in construction; local banks provide financing; trade tax revenue can be paid to local government and long-term jobs can be created for turbine servicing and maintenance, BWE outlines.

In one example, in the North Frisian town of Friedrich-Wilhelm-Lübke-Koog, the wind farm “was only possible because local citizens were so committed to it,” the guide says. When the farm was first conceived 20 years ago, the 44 local share-holders wanted to set up 22 turbines. By 1999 it had expanded to 32 turbines with an installed capacity of 18.5 MW. Throughout the lifetime of the project locals have been informed and included, thus conflicts could be dealt with early in the planning stage.

No energy transition without local engagement

From a community hotline and visits organised to other wind farms for those living near a potential wind farm site, to active financial engagement, there are a plethora of ways of getting the locals onboard a wind energy project.

And, as wind farms can face vocal opposition, it is vital to the future sustainability of a project to be a ‘good neighbour’ by listening to and acting on local concerns, in addition to fully communicating the benefits of wind power. Only then will the times of change happening now and in the future to the energy sector be accepted where it matters most – at a local level. ■