



An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Eacnamaíoch agus Shóisialta
National Economic & Social Council

Wind Energy in Ireland: Building Community Engagement and Social Support

Executive Summary

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From Challenge to Opportunity

Ireland faces an extraordinary challenge to move its energy system from one primarily based on fossil fuel to one dominated instead by renewable energies. There is potential for wind energy to play a central role in Ireland's transition to a low-carbon economy by 2050. With 180 wind farms currently in operation with 2080MW of installed capacity from over 1,300 turbines, wind energy in Ireland has developed considerably over the last twenty years.¹

Irish people have generally been supportive of wind-energy growth and of electricity infrastructure, but recently there has been a more critical public mood. This signals something of a sea change in social support for wind energy and related infrastructure.

With the shift in public mood comes a responsibility to reflect on potential areas for change in policy and practice. The *Green Paper on Energy Policy in Ireland* recognises building societal acceptance as one of several challenges in further deploying renewable energy (DCENR, 2014a). Indeed, it invites discussion of a number of questions specifically about social support such as: How can we encourage citizens to be part of our transition to future energy paths and the policy-making process that goes with it? Given the scale of changes needed, what are the right mechanisms to engage citizens? What formal and informal mechanisms could be used to enhance citizen engagement with regulatory and policy decisions and how should they be structured? With a heightened awareness of the issues surrounding wind-energy development comes an opportunity to engage communities on their concerns but also to involve them in the transition towards a low-carbon society.

NESC Research and Consultation

In that context, the Council has sought to examine how social support for the transformation of Irish energy, and wind in particular, can be better understood and achieved. In 2013, it commissioned SLR Consulting (SLR) to examine the challenge of community engagement and social acceptance in Ireland and in three other

¹ Irish Wind Energy Association (2014) www.iwea.com.

jurisdictions. The two SLR reports are published alongside this Council report: (1) *Wind Energy: International Practices to Support Community Engagement and Acceptance* and (2) *Wind Energy: The Challenge of Community Engagement and Social Acceptance in Ireland*.² This report draws on that research and wider consultation with stakeholders to examine how social support might be furthered in the development of wind energy in Ireland.

Three Components of Social Support

In national and international accounts of the success and failure of renewable-energy projects, particularly wind, there are three components that we consider significant and that form part of the approach outlined here:

- i. An overarching energy-transition process that facilitates and guides society-wide efforts to transform energy systems:

An intentional, participatory and problem-solving process underpins German and Danish experience. An integral component of the process is a national discussion, informed by international best practice, about how to design an energy strategy in line with society's goals.

- ii. An effective and inclusive process of public participation that helps to shape and share local value:

A genuine and open participatory process for wind energy that brings expertise together, facilitates exploration and executes possibilities is critical. Communities that contribute to and shape the local value of energy are more likely to be supportive of future developments.

- iii. Enabling organisations, and, in particular, intermediary actors, which support the kind of problem-solving and entrepreneurialism necessary to initiate renewable-energy developments:

Intermediary actors have contributed to the successful development of wind-energy projects in other countries and in Ireland.

Our central argument is that there is a need to connect these in an integrated approach to build social support and community engagement.

Framing a National Response

We argue that a policy initiative on the process of wind-energy development needs to adopt a developmental and pragmatic approach. We outline a number of tools

² The reports are available at www.nesc.ie.

that offer a participative process to ensure that value is identified and shared in a fair, open and sustainable way. We present four workable tools to help convene and structure local discussion, exploration and problem-solving, as well as national-level benchmarking and learning.

Four Tools for Renewable-Energy Community Engagement

- i. The substantive agenda around which engagement must occur:

While locally determined, the agenda for discussion should be informed by the need for progressive solutions in relation to Ireland's Energy-Transition Strategy. This means incorporating energy efficiency and renewable energies into the discussion and final outcome. In addition, there would be a developmental approach to shaping and sharing local value, so that the community's overall economic and social development would be the key objective.

- ii. Required processes of inclusive community engagement that can both shape and share local value:

At the instigation of key stakeholders, a Renewable-Energy Community Engagement (RECE) process would be convened. Communities can be the instigators of this process, as can local authorities and developers. We envisage that RECE would be a required (mandatory) process for all developers at the earliest stage of scoping out projects in a particular community. The process would be participative and problem-solving in nature, so that all participants have a voice and opportunity to shape the discussion.

- iii. The engagement and resourcing to enable actors and certified intermediary organisations to bring expertise, facilitate exploration and support execution of renewable-energy possibilities in a local area:

The role of a certified intermediary body is critical in this process and it would bring these tools, supported by guidelines and protocols, to the discussion.

- iv. Linking locally negotiated agreed outcomes such as plans and settlements to a key national institution such as Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI), in a way that validates local agreements as well as creating a process of benchmarking and learning:

From the community engagement process, it may be suitable to draw up a local area energy plan, establish an energy co-operative or agree a settlement which included an element of community benefit, equity share or joint venture. If successfully concluded, any settlement would be registered with an appropriate body such as SEAI or Commission for Energy

Regulation (CER) and provide the basis for ongoing comparison, learning and continuous improvement.

This combination of a required but flexible process of engagement, with direct involvement and certification of intermediaries and final verification of what we call ‘settlements’, provides what we believe to be a positive way forward for Irish wind-energy development.

These tools would need to be supported by national policy supports and measures that would include directed resources, incentives and measures for promoting community and co-operative energy schemes; new financial mechanisms for public investment in renewable energies; and enhancing the key participative practices used by local authorities in their forward-planning functions. As a societal project, the process and policy framework we have outlined is achievable only with support from state agencies and departments, public and private organisations, communities and households.

NESC Recommendations

We believe it is *possible* to build social support with appropriate measures; we also believe it is *necessary* to enable continued development of wind-energy and energy infrastructure, and *beneficial* to Ireland’s energy transition and society, given the job potential, social and environmental benefits of a low-carbon future.

We consider the three components identified at the start as critical to building social support for wind energy and related infrastructure: a National Energy Transition, strong local public participation and enabling intermediary actors. The research for this project confirms the key relevance of these three components and we have attempted to integrate them in a unique way for the Irish context. A National Energy-Transition process is required, which includes local participation and shared local value and a key enabling role for expert intermediaries. The challenge for policy is to design a framework to balance procedural and distributive justice nationally while allowing a degree of flexibility at local level. We believe the participative process we have outlined will help to achieve this. The current policy-review process, in which discussion of the Green Paper on Energy will lead to an energy-strategy White Paper—and the update of the National Spatial Strategy in 2015—provides a timely opportunity to establish an energy-transition strategy as the framework for Irish energy policy.

To support this process and the necessary policy framework, we set out six recommendations as follows.

- i. The policy framework underpinning engagement should include an energy-transition process that is intentional, participative and problem-solving;
- ii. Tailored policies, supports and structures should be developed to: (1) support local authorities, particularly to develop enhanced community engagement in their forward-planning process; and (2) enable communities, through a Community Energy Strategy, to contribute to the energy-transition process.
- iii. Participatory processes of community engagement should be required for all wind-energy developments, such as the Renewable-Energy Community Engagement process outlined here;
- iv. The substantive agenda around which engagement will occur should be shaped with communities and include a range of renewable-energy and energy-efficiency possibilities, as well as local value-sharing mechanisms (from community benefit to community ownership);
- v. Renewable-energy intermediary actors should be certified and resourced to enable and facilitate the energy transition at a local level but also help to achieve community settlements; and
- vi. A key central-level agency (such as SEAI) should be tasked to provide a learning network to which locally negotiated plans and settlements would be linked.

