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Community Engagement in Wind Energy: Innovative Approaches to Achieving a Social License

Abstract

Ireland's renewable energy targets require significant expansion of onshore wind capacity, yet community opposition remains a persistent barrier to development. Current policy frameworks, including the Code of Practice for Wind Energy Development and Wind Energy Development Guidelines, mandate community engagement but provide limited guidance on effective implementation. The CoWind research project addressed critical gaps in understanding how community-developer relationships, benefit-sharing mechanisms, and ownership models influence local acceptance of wind energy projects. The research informs evidence-based policy development that enhances community acceptance while supporting Ireland's renewable energy transition.

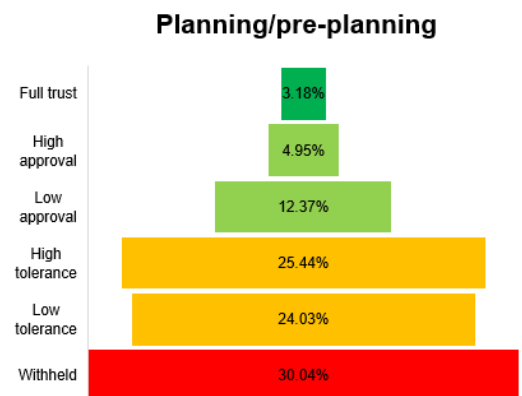
Research Outcomes

A **social license to operate (SLO)** is simply whether local communities accept and support a project or company in their area.

Key points:

- Communities grant or withhold this "license" based on lack of trust and acceptance of the project.
- Support levels change over time and vary by development stage.
- People living closer to projects are often less supportive.
- Evidence: 30% oppose during planning phase (see figure), rising to 63% for near neighbours.

In short: It's community approval that determines whether a project is welcome or not.



Adapted from Boutilier (2017)

Can community engagement increase acceptance?

Engagement Timing and Quality: Early, transparent, meaningful engagement in the pre-planning stage can have both immediate and lasting impacts on project acceptance.

Benefit-Sharing: While the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS) has standardized community benefit funds and near-neighbour payments, the research shows current minimum payments of €1,000 annually are perceived as too low. Non-monetary benefits such as local amenities and infrastructure improvements have more positive impacts on acceptance across all development stages than direct financial payments.

Community Ownership Challenges: Community ownership and co-ownership arrangements increase acceptance but face barriers. Citizens generally prefer investing small amounts and favour less participatory shared revenue models over full ownership. Financial and regulatory hurdles can limit their feasibility.

Recommendations

Early Meaningful Engagement: Require meaningful and transparent engagement at preplanning stage supported by independent trusted third-party intermediaries.

Reform Benefit-Sharing: Prioritize non-monetary benefits like amenity/

infrastructure development over direct payments. Consider increasing minimum near-neighbour payments.

Co-ownership: Building trust between communities and developers would help to promote citizen participation in co-ownership arrangements. Addressing financial /regulatory hurdles is also key.

Implement Proximity-Based Policies: In the absence of significantly increased setback distances, preferential treatment of near neighbours is justified.

Establish Monitoring Systems: Create national renewable energy planning database and implement periodic pulse surveys for enabling ongoing community-developer communication. [Read more](#)

