

SEAI National Energy Research, Development & Demonstration Funding Programme

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Designing Renewable Energy Projects that Succeed

Abstract

Policy context: To meet 2030 targets at pace, Ireland needs an auditable pathway for **meaningful engagement** that is repeatable at scale.

Issue addressed: RDD874 converts RDD569's Ireland-based pathway into a scalable, auditable system through the Renewables AT PACE framework (Anchor, Transition, Partner, Acknowledge, Collaborate, Empower) delivered through the Earning Local Support Academy (ELSA)'s science- and empirical- led training, tools and capability-building. By providing a process that can be delivered at scale, it enables the trustful community engagement required for smooth project permitting.

Policy ask: Enable uptake of *Renewables AT PACE* through recognition, Trusted Intermediaries (TIs), funding, and incentives – so projects move from DAD (Decide – Announce – Defend) to *Supported Projects*.

Pedigree: Throughout RDD874, AstonECO worked closely with leading research organisations, developers, and community members in Ireland and

overseas. To further facilitate access to cutting-edge research, AstonECO is the Co-Operating Agent for IEA Wind's Social Science Task.

Research Outcomes

- **The Gap is relational, not technical.** Local trust is the fuel that moves projects forward; without it even strong technical plans stall.
- **AT PACE is a sequenced system.** Internal readiness (Anchor, Transition) precedes outward actions (Partner, Acknowledge, Collaborate, Empower). Sequence matters to ensure meaningfulness and avoid tokenism.
- **From transaction to transformation.** Projects applying AT PACE enable faster planning, broader support, and stronger investor confidence; case stories show “missed engagement windows” and the payoff when the sequence is respected.
- **Literature synthesis.** Opposition largely results from poor procedural justice; its solution includes meaningful, inclusive (co-designed) engagement; **not** DAD-style, one-way information provision.

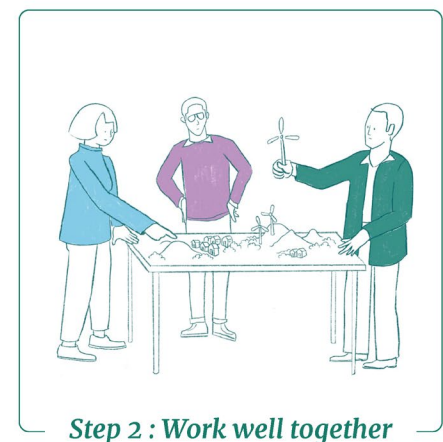


Figure 1. Core to the Renewables AT PACE process: “Two Steps to Success”

AT PACE components matter

Renewables AT PACE replaces the outdated DAD-style engagement with an ordered, evidence-generating, trust-building journey. It first prepares developer teams to show up well – clarifying purpose and responsibilities, and transitioning culture and systems to engage credibly with their host communities in a way that sets up an effective partnership. It then helps them work well together – acknowledging lived-experience and concerns; collaborating on options in the shared/overlap space; and empowering shared project promotion and stewardship. The AT PACE sequence prevents tokenism and avoids deteriorating early goodwill; it builds the trust and data trail that planners and investors need, and results in faster planning, broader support, and stronger confidence in delivery.

AT PACE provides the same professionalism and rigour to building the 'Host Community Supported' pillar as is already mobilised for the technical and financial pillars.

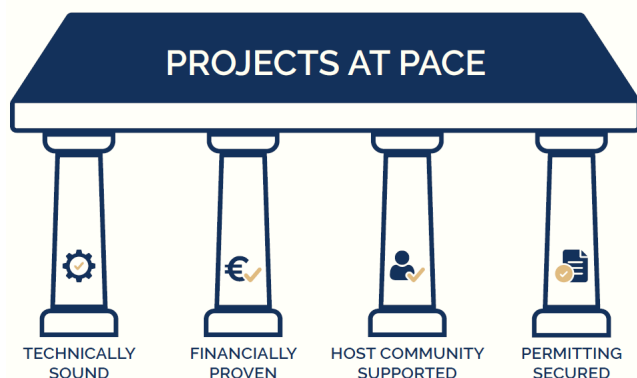


Figure 2: Project success is ensured via four strong pillars

AT PACE overcomes trust barriers

Moving from DAD Projects to Projects AT PACE means moving from a them-and-us situation to a we-are-in-this-together reality. This needs considerable trust-building on both the developer and the host-community sides. RDD874 clarified and tracked these trust barriers.

- 1) Between AT and P: Are we (the developer) ready to reach out meaningfully? Developers need clarity, and readiness to have the confidence to do this – enough for the community to say: “Come in, sit down, let’s talk.”
- 2) Between A and CE: Have we built enough confidence

to work together? Communities ask: “Do we trust you enough to co-design?” Tokenism or rushed timelines here collapse progress.

AT PACE is designed to give all parties the confidence to move through these trust barriers – or ‘credibility gates’ – preventing and replacing the announce → backlash DAD spiral. It provides – and keeps open – windows for engagement that are specific, time-bound opportunities to shape a project before positions harden. It sequences trust-building and co-design. Typical engagement windows such as ‘Early ally’, ‘Engineering with local insight’, ‘Convening for assessment & alignment’, and ‘Commitments and proof’ are some of the windows examined within ELSA.

Recommendations

1. Recognise **Renewables AT PACE** in guidance as an acceptable, auditable pathway for Meaningful Engagement / Collaborative Design, with the **Two Steps to Success** made explicit (show up well → work well together).
2. Trusted Intermediary Programme. Establish a national roster, training, and funding so both sides can access independent facilitation.
3. Update RESS/ORESS/planning criteria to reward verifiable co-design evidence (issues-and-decisions logs, co-authored community reports, option appraisals).
4. Transparent repository & CPD. Host anonymised case studies and promote continuing professional development (CPD) for developers, planners, and authorities on Renewables AT PACE.
5. Pilot & evaluate (2026 – 2028). Enable the building of Ireland’s Trusted Intermediary capabilities through undertaking regional pilots using the Renewables AT PACE workflow; publish KPIs (e.g. time-to-decision, appeals, breadth of participation, satisfaction, design changes attributable to co-design).

Why policy should support this pathway

Faster, fairer decisions that advance national targets, local support, and investor confidence. Projects that follow AT PACE shift from transaction to transformation: communities help shape outcomes; developers gain partners, political legitimacy, and stronger bankability; approvals move faster and hold.