

Chapter 56

Community Opposition and Public Engagement with Wind Energy in the UK

Matthew Cotton
University of Leeds, UK

ABSTRACT

In the UK, wind energy is an important component of a renewable energy strategy designed to mitigate climate change and secure long term electricity supply. However, wind developments are exceedingly controversial amongst locally affected citizens. This chapter focuses upon the socio-political aspects of wind farm siting in the UK, examining the issues of Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY) protest, the attitudes of developers towards ‘the public’, and the policy and practice of public engagement in wind siting decisions in light of recent changes to the domestic planning legislation for Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects.

INTRODUCTION

In the United Kingdom’s electricity sector, Government strategy has undergone a recent shift towards the development of low carbon energy resources from renewable forms of generation and the renewal and expansion of nuclear power. The low carbon energy policy agenda is driven by environmental restraints on the use of fossil fuels to achieve CO₂ reduction targets and hence mitigate long-term anthropogenic climate change,

as well as concerns over rising energy costs and the nation’s long-term energy security in the face of dwindling non-renewable reserves. The move towards the development of low-carbon energy systems within the European Union was codified through the European Parliament’s resolution of the “Road Map for Renewable Energy” in 2007. The Road Map called on the European Commission to present a proposal for a legislative framework for energy from renewable sources, referring to the importance of setting targets for the shares of energy from renewable sources at Community and Member State level. The resultant Directive

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2009/28/EC sets a 20% overall EU renewables target, which is broken up into differentiated legally binding national targets for Member States. In the UK, the energy policy agenda towards renewables has been refined in successive Energy White Papers (Department for Trade and Industry 2007; Department for Trade and Industry 2003) that have emphasised the advantages of shifting towards low-carbon resources, and in legislative changes, notably The Climate Change Act, that has established legally binding ‘carbon budgets’ aiming to cut CO₂ emissions by 34% by 2020 and at least 80% by 2050 primarily through investment in energy efficiency and renewable generation technologies (Department for Energy and Climate Change, 2009). Within the electricity sector specifically, targets have been set to provide 40% of UK electricity from low carbon sources by 2020, thus displaying a clear commitment to substantial increases in the requirement for electricity suppliers to sell renewable electricity; encouraging research and innovation in renewable energy technologies; and to creating favourable conditions for bringing renewable generation capacity to the market.

Of the range of low-carbon energy technologies available, this chapter focuses primarily upon the expansion of onshore (and to a lesser extent offshore) wind capacity, as these technologies are frequently identified as the most technologically viable and cost-effective energy options (Morthorst & Chandler 2004; Meyer, 2003), and as such, represent core components of sustainable future UK electricity generation capacity (Department for Trade and Industry 2007; Strachan, Lal & von Malmberg, 2006). In exploring the implementation of wind power within the electricity sector, this chapter focuses upon some of the social aspects of the planning process to achieve a more sustainable electricity system, namely, how the impacts of wind developments produce locally unwanted social and environmental effects and how this leads to public opposition to proposals. The chapter then goes on to examine the prob-

lem of public opposition to energy infrastructure developments in terms of both the policy and practice of wind developer ‘engagement’ with locally affected communities, and how this in turn affects siting decisions within the renewables sector. Though the focus is upon wind energy, the discussion presented within this chapter is pertinent to a range of other large scale low-carbon electricity sources, notably tidal, nuclear, large scale biomass and hydroelectric projects, where land-use for power generation generates public and political controversy within the planning system for infrastructure projects.

BACKGROUND: WIND ENERGY DEVELOPMENT IN THE UK

The first wind farm in the UK was constructed in Cornwall in the Southwest of England in 1991, and since the early 1990s wind energy has gained prominence within the UK renewables sector. The former Labour Government in particular placed great emphasis upon wind development, providing a £250million business support programme between 2002-2006, the intention of which was to improve the success of the UK renewables sector and challenge the internationally dominant competitors in the US, Denmark, Germany and Spain (Alvarez-Farizo & Hanley, 2002; Meyer & Koefold, 2003; Strachan & Lal, 2004). In 2007, wind energy overtook hydropower to become the largest renewable generation source in the UK, contributing 2.2% of the UK’s electricity supply, with onshore wind comprising the bulk of this output. Overall wind energy has seen the fastest growth of any renewable technology globally, and this trend is forecasted to continue, due to falling technology costs and international commitments to sustainability and energy security (Junginger, Faaji & Turkenburg, 2005). As such, the UK Government’s Renewable Energy Strategy sets out ambitious low-carbon electricity targets, and

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