

Community engagement and visioning

Introduction

The Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (1998) sets principles for public engagement and participation which have been incorporated into public policies internationally. In Scotland, its principles are represented in a range of policies and strategies, including the Renewables Routemap 2020, Land Use Strategy, Biodiversity Strategy, and Scottish Planning Policy.

This note provides a summary of engagement activities with stakeholders, public and schools in relation to renewable energy, and in particular wind energy, using the Virtual Landscape Theatre (www.hutton.ac.uk/learning/exhibits/vlt).

The research seeks to inform the type of approaches to engaging people and communities in decisions about land use, and in better understanding people's perspectives on renewable energy. The aims are to identify key planning and management issues associated with using land for energy which are important to stakeholders, and to develop approaches to decision-making that take account of the distinction between local, regional and national priorities.

Objectives/Approach

A series of events has been run around Scotland to elicit opinions on options for future land uses, including the development of renewable energy options, and wind turbines in particular. The approach used the Virtual Landscape Theatre (VLT) in which representations of land uses and landscapes were presented to audiences and their views sought on the impacts of land-use change on landscapes.

Visual imagery is used to introduce the area of interest, which is often the surroundings of the venue for the event. This provides a context for discussion, and for participants to raise initial comments about features of interest or prospective change. Scenarios of possible alternative futures are then presented, such as examples of urban and rural land use and coastal change, including the development of renewable energy and low carbon landscapes. Participants are invited to record opinions on specific aspects, such as visual impacts and barriers to change.

In the visioning phase, participants identify topics of greatest interest or importance, such as wind turbines, woodland, or housing, and select and position features in models of the landscape for group discussion, and recording of the perspectives expressed. Outputs and feedback can be presented via a host organisation e.g. national park, WWW, or direct to community groups.

Examples of such engagements are:

- **Polling on renewable energy land uses**
Alternative 'renewable energy landscapes' of central Fife were used to poll public and stakeholder opinions on prospects and impacts of energy crops, woodfuel, wind energy and solar energy (Figure 1).
- **Land use visioning**
Scenarios of future land uses, including public guidance on priorities and change included small and medium-scale wind turbines, and woodfuel, in Deeside (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Polling audience opinions on renewables landscapes, at Festival of Stewardship, Falkland Palace



Figure 2. Visioning exercises with younger audiences in Birmingham, of Tarland, Aberdeenshire



Figure 3. Virtual tour of windfarm development in Aberdeen Bay

Objectives/Approach

- **Windfarm development in Aberdeen Bay**

Representations of four layouts of the proposed development have been used over seven years for purposes of raising awareness of renewable and offshore wind, and learning of people's perspectives on the proposed development as it has evolved (Figure 3).

- **Offshore renewables, west coast**

Scenarios of alternative sizes and layouts of large scale offshore wind energy developments west of Tiree were presented to public audiences to seek feedback on social, economic and landscape factors (Figure 4).

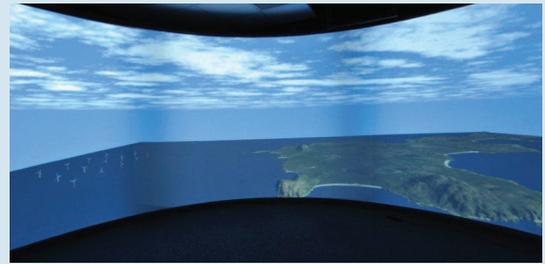


Figure 4 Scenario of offshore windfarm, Tiree

Key findings/outputs to date

- **Polling on renewable energy land uses**

Future landscapes, which included woodfuel and crops, solar and wind energy, were supported by 58% of 312 participants, with 42% preferring the current content and patterns of land use.

- **Land-use visioning**

Visions for future land uses supported renewable energy, but people consulted in Birmingham or Edinburgh favoured medium-scale windfarms on a nearby prominent hilltop, and none close to the village. On the other hand, those living close to, or in, the area were supportive of small-scale wind turbine developments associated with the village or farms, but largely opposed to development on the hilltops.

- **Windfarm development in Aberdeen Bay**

Through time, the principal topics raised by public audiences have changed. Foremost amongst issues in 2006 were: 'never heard of this', 'how many turbines?', 'how big?', 'why there?', and topics of seabed erosion and harbour/shipping. By 2011 leading issues were 'when will it be ready?', 'why so close to land?', 'where else could it be?', 'cheaper electricity?', with associated topics relating to the impact of views from offshore, efficiency of development and cable routing, and the conflict with a golf-course proposal. The research highlighted issues relating to shadow flicker and the extent of visual impacts for coastal housing, the windfarm as a feature of interest, and impacts on acceptance due to familiarity with built structures in the bay (i.e. oil support vessels at anchor). Overall, through the period of discussion, over 80% of attendees were neutral or in favour of a development.

- **Offshore renewables, west coast**

Energy and economic opportunities could be considerable, but concerns raised included the negative impacts of developments on the sense of openness of a significant number of built structures visible in the ocean, particularly in evenings during sunsets.

Planned Outputs

Outputs are planned in the format of scientific papers, presentations, information notes on the examples and issues summarised above, and demonstration of findings to business and stakeholders at the All Energy exhibitions.

Policy Implications

The research process explores the potential for public engagement in developing visions of future land uses, taking account of drivers of change, opportunities, impacts and risks. It illustrates one approach to delivering on Land Use Strategy Principle 1, that 'People should have opportunities to contribute to debates and decisions about land use and management which affect their lives and their future', and demonstrates how this can be achieved as per Land Use Strategy Principle 12 of 'Identify and publicise effective ways for communities to contribute to land-use debates and decision-making'. The range of engagement events and audience profiles has contributed to debates on the role of renewables as part of the wider energy mix, a process envisaged in the Renewables Routemap 2020, and in particular the potential effects of renewable energy technologies on Scotland's landscape and communities.

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