

## Generating involvement

*You may not realise it, but a new era of community involvement in the planning process is quietly being ushered in. And the unlikely vehicle is PPS 22 - the Government's planning policy statement on renewable energy. Penny Walker describes a breath of fresh air in the planning system.*

### Introduction

You may well be familiar with some of the statement's more robust elements: local authority strategies should encourage rather than restrict the development of renewables; targets should be set; and these should be seen as floors, not ceilings, for generating capacity. But perhaps little attention has been paid to a short but sweet paragraph (section vii of the Key Principles) on community involvement?

"Local planning authorities, regional stakeholders and local strategic partnerships should foster community involvement in renewable energy projects ... Developers should engage in active consultation and discussion with local communities at an early stage in the planning process, and before any planning application is formally submitted." \*

These few words signal a move away from a purely adversarial planning system, towards one which seeks to understand concerns and needs on all sides, and to address solvable issues early in the process.

### Involvement

What's the point of this more 'involving' approach? Eva Beresford, from the Environment Council, a charity specialising in stakeholder engagement, puts it like this: "We'd like to see developers and communities interact better during the planning process, making sure the right decisions are made on the way to meeting the very challenging targets for renewables generation."

Community involvement in the process can make a real and positive contribution says Cheryl Hiles, of Regen SW – the South West Renewable Energy Agency. "We saw how developments were being approached in the South West and there was a range of practices on consultation and involvement. Some developers consulted widely before applying for planning permission, others did little or nothing above the legal minimum. The benefits of more involvement are that any flaws in a scheme get addressed before the formal planning stage, and there are better information flows. Concerns and opportunities can be spotted early, and people in the communities know who to contact if they have questions or want to find out more. People have a thirst for knowledge and should have easy access to it. This helps build trust."

Having worked a bit on community engagement on waste, minerals and public transport schemes myself, I recognise the signs. Without early involvement, local people can be taken by surprise. Fear and anger can be the primary drivers for entrenched positions and fierce opposition. So projects are



Photo courtesy of Renewable Energy Systems Ltd

turned down flat, and the chance for them to be creatively amended to make them more acceptable is lost. Fifty per cent of planning applications for renewable energy generation in the UK have been rejected, compared to sixteen per cent for planning applications in general.

With a process that seeks to engage and involve the community from the very beginning, the rationale for developing renewable energy power stations can be set out without getting people's backs up. Unfounded fears can be assuaged; concerns and needs can be expressed and understood. Developers can then take account of them as actual plans are drawn up.

The theory is persuasive, and PPS 22 now provides exhortation to take community involvement seriously. But what should developers and planners actually do, to put this into practice?

### Practical help

There are a number of sources of help and advice. The Environment Council has run a series of training workshops for developers, energy companies, planners, councillors, RDAs and regional assemblies, as well as members of environmental

# Engaging People

and amenity groups. Co-sponsored by the DTI and RES UK Ltd ([www.res-ltd.com](http://www.res-ltd.com)), these one-day courses gave a broad overview of the concepts and approaches involved in planning effective engagement processes for stakeholders.

According to Eva Beresford, there was a surprisingly low level of understanding, and few people at the workshops had experience of these approaches. "The idea of going beyond statutory consultation was quite new to people, and many worried that it might be costly, ambitious and unrealistic. There was also a lack of clarity on who is responsible for leading on engagement, and about what's a requirement and what's a 'nice to have'. The workshops helped people understand this better, and people worked together to think through community engagement plans for real projects."

Annette Deveson, from RES UK, who gave presentations at the workshop, agrees that there needs to be clarity on roles. "Developers have a role, but so do local authorities – especially in educating people about renewable energy in general, and preparing the ground for new projects."

And in the South West, Regen SW has developed a protocol for community involvement for wind energy (although it can equally well be used for other technologies, such as biomass). \*\*

## Local protocol

The protocol began life before PPS 22 was issued, and was formally launched in late September this year. The protocol was piloted by RES UK Ltd who are using it to guide their approach to community involvement at Den Brook in Devon, where they are hoping to build a wind farm. Community involvement certainly hasn't meant that there has been no opposition – a complaint to the Advertising Standards Authority about RES's leaflet was rejected. But it has meant that lines of communication are open and relationships have been built up. It's provided the opportunity to raise and discuss matters such as a potential community fund to spend on local projects, and possible upgrades to a railway line to transport turbine blades, before any formal planning application is submitted.

Annette Deveson says that various ways of getting information to and from people have been used – leaflets and questionnaires, a website ([www.den-brook.co.uk](http://www.den-brook.co.uk)), community meetings and public exhibitions. These can be big jobs to take on – websites need to be updated, independent researchers or facilitators may be needed for opinion polling or stakeholder meetings, and information requests need responses. Attitude of mind is important too – this stage is about being open to hearing concerns and needs, and being prepared to think creatively about how initial ideas could be improved.

There is no standard template for involving communities and other stakeholders. The protocol explains the principles of effective engagement. Signatories to the protocol, who include local authorities and developers, have agreed to take their role in engagement seriously – in particular, developers will:

- prepare a clear 'engagement plan';
- identify stakeholders;
- agree timescales for providing information;

- have a point of contact for questions and concerns; and
- keep people up to date on progress.

Local planning authorities agree to:

- have clear guidance and policy on wind energy;
- help ensure that objective information is sourced on controversial matters;
- help ensure that their members are well informed about wind energy and planning; and
- give support to the engagement plan through the same kinds of commitments as the developers – clear points of contact, responding within agreed timescales etc.

Stakeholders, in turn, are expected to enter into constructive dialogue, acknowledge responses, identify other stakeholders and help the full range of local opinion to be heard and understood.

"It's important to understand that signing up to the protocol doesn't imply support for wind energy, but it's about supporting a way of involving people in an open and transparent process which should lead to more win-win solutions being identified," says Cheryl Hiles. Community groups can still campaign against the eventual proposal, and planning authorities can still reject it. But the chances of coming up with solutions acceptable on all sides are greatly increased.

## The pay off – a low carbon future

"Up front engagement is hard but it does pay off," says Eva Beresford. "Developers and local authorities need to do more to raise awareness about renewables before individual applications come in, and local authorities shouldn't be afraid to build a relationship with developers, to help ensure better planned engagement with communities. And if sharing a platform with a developer is seen as too risky then an independent third party could be brought on board to run processes or provide a forum."

If this approach is successful, then we should see more good quality renewable energy power stations, fewer fiercely contested proposals, and more genuine involvement in creating a low-carbon future.

*Penny Walker, MIEMA, CEnv  
Penny is an independent facilitator*

*\* Planning Policy Statement 22: Renewable Energy,  
[www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm\\_planning/  
documents/page/odpm\\_plan\\_030334.hcsp](http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_planning/documents/page/odpm_plan_030334.hcsp)*

*\*\* South West Public Engagement Protocol and Guidance for Wind Energy.  
[www.regensw.co.uk/content-download/Report-SWPEPWE-  
ProtocolandGuidance.pdf](http://www.regensw.co.uk/content-download/Report-SWPEPWE-ProtocolandGuidance.pdf)*

*For further information about The Environment Council's work on  
renewable energy and community involvement, please contact  
Maeve O'Keefe on tel: 0207 632 0118, [maeveo@envcouncil.org.uk](mailto:maeveo@envcouncil.org.uk)  
[www.the-environment-council.org.uk](http://www.the-environment-council.org.uk)*