CLASP. Environment Resilience Resources & Support

Briefings for Elected Members

BRIEFING 4:

Assessing and Understanding Renewable Energy Developments

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Liverpool City Council

Environment Agency

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Introduction

Members have a key role in deciding whether many planned renewable energy installations go ahead and the challenge of balancing the often-conflicting national requirements with local impacts. This briefing explains the evidence and planning policy needed to support decisions on renewable energy developments, your role as an Elected Member and key questions to consider. It includes case studies and links to further information. You will also need to understand the impacts, limitations and contributions of different technologies for which CLASP has produced technology packs (www.claspinfo.org/resources). This briefing is for members of the planning committee as well as for Elected Members who have renewable energy planning applications coming forward in their ward areas.

Why It's Important

Statutory requirements: Under the National Planning Policy Framework, local planning authorities are required to promote and support suitable renewable and low carbon energy developments.

Consultation: Local renewable energy developments can be highly controversial, but thorough and considered consultation can lead to these being appropriate to their location.

Planning strategically across local boundaries: Local authorities have a duty to cooperate on planning issues that cross administrative boundaries, particularly those that relate to strategic priorities such as climate change. A demonstration that such work has been effectively and continuously undertaken is a legal requirement and will be the first thing that an Inspector looks at when examining a local plan.

Determining planning applications: Local planning authorities are going to see increasing numbers of planning applications for renewable energy installations, so planning committee members need to be well-informed of the benefits and impacts of these.

Achieving energy targets: The UK has a target to provide 15% of our energy from renewable sources by 2020. It is expected that we will need to provide around 30% of our electricity, 15% of our heat and 10% of our transport fuel from renewable sources.

Energy price stability: Most renewable energy technologies involve a capital investment, with minimal operating costs, thus reducing the long term risks from fuel price inflation.

FACT BOX

Renewable Energy in the UK

Renewable sources generated 34 million MWh of electricity in 2011, or 9.4% of all electricity produced, enough to power around 7.8 million homes. 45% of this came from wind with bio-energy and waste providing 37%. Renewable heat contributed 14 million MWh with the majority of this coming from wood or other bio-fuels.

FACT BOX

The **National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)** sets out requirements to support low carbon energy developments in paragraphs 93–98, including:

97. To help increase the use and supply of renewable and low carbon energy, local planning authorities should recognise the responsibility of all communities to contribute to energy generation from renewable or low carbon sources. They should:

- Have a positive strategy to promote energy from renewable and low carbon sources.
- Design their policies to maximise renewable and low carbon energy development while ensuring that adverse impacts are addressed satisfactorily, including cumulative landscape and visual impacts.
- Consider identifying suitable areas for renewable and low carbon energy sources, and supporting infrastructure where this would help secure the development of such sources.
- Support community-led initiatives for renewable and low carbon energy, including developments outside such areas being taken forward through neighbourhood planning.
- Identify opportunities where development can draw its energy supply from decentralised, renewable or low carbon energy supply systems and for co-locating potential heat customers and suppliers.

98. When determining planning applications, local planning authorities should:

- Not require applicants for energy development to demonstrate the overall need for renewable or low carbon energy and also recognise that even small-scale projects provide a valuable contribution to cutting greenhouse gas emissions.
- Approve the application if its impacts are (or can be made) acceptable. Once suitable areas for renewable and low carbon energy have been identified in plans, local planning authorities should also expect subsequent applications for commercial scale projects outside these areas to demonstrate that the proposed location meets the criteria used in identifying suitable areas.



FACT BOX

Nationally Significant Infrastructure Developments

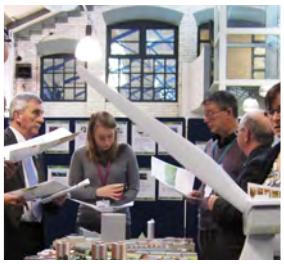
On-shore renewable energy developments over 50 MW and off-shore developments over 100 MW will be determined by the Secretary of State. Local planning authorities have a formal role in advising on the community consultation process, commenting on the adequacy of this, submitting a Local Impact Report and local views on the proposal, negotiating terms for the development and commenting on draft conditions. They can also have an important role in working with the developer to ensure that the best scheme is proposed, and that adverse impacts can be avoided or mitigated.

Developing Local Policy

Good **evidence** is fundamental to achieving a policy which can be used to determine appropriate renewable energy technologies and assess applications. This will be a mixture of the **views of your community** and **technical studies**, including landscape character assessments. It should include:

- An understanding of your local carbon reduction aims and the role that renewable energy generation will play in this.
- A clear demonstration that options for various renewable technologies have been considered.
- A Sustainability Appraisal that scores different options for the delivery of renewable energy options against social, economic and environmental objectives.

Evidence on renewable energy can be used alongside other objectives: for example where fuel poverty affects particular areas there may be a case for the use of planning policy to improve energy efficiency or local energy generation projects.


CASE STUDY

Consulting the Community on Renewable Energy[1]

LANCASTER CITY COUNCIL
Promoting City, Coast & Countryside

In developing the Core Strategy, Lancaster City Council ran workshops on five key themes which had emerged as important to people in the District. Renewable Energy featured highly in the area which already had a wind farm in an Area of Natural Beauty (AONB), two nuclear power stations, and further proposed large wind developments. The Renewable Energy and Climate Change workshop invited representatives of agencies and key stakeholders, as well as those who had expressed strong views in response to earlier consultations, with the deliberate aim of getting a mix of people who wouldn't agree with each other. They used the World Café Style approach to allow everyone to hear all the disparate views in the room, finally coming to a greater understanding of all points of view.

Maurice Brophy, Planning & Housing Policy Officer, commented: "The workshops helped the planning policy team come to a rounded view when preparing the draft policies. They also supported further discussion between Policy Officers and their Development Management colleagues, and developers, to improve the clarity and practicality of policy on renewable energy and climate change."



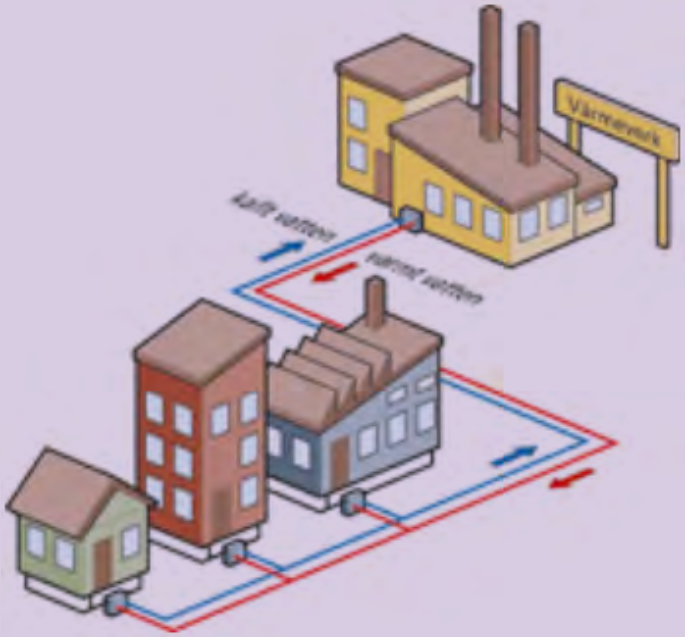
CASE STUDY

Developing a Policy for District Heating in Stockport[2]

STOCKPORT
METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

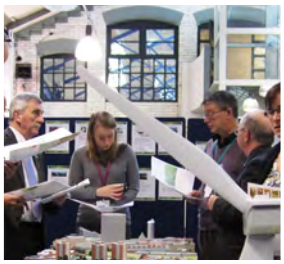
Stockport Council identified that district heating (DH) can provide an important source of low carbon energy for the borough. Their policy states that new developments should, where feasible, either install a DH network to serve the site, connect to an available DH network, or install heating and cooling equipment that is capable of connecting to a DH network at a later date. To support this, they carried out a heat study to identify areas where DH would be most feasible, and produced guidance and case studies to help developers through the process. They have also run training for their planning officers and for developers to help them understand the requirements and how the process should be managed.

Of course, promoting the policy remains important, and it has had positive results:



- The policy supports development of the Council-led scheme being developed for Stockport Town Centre.
- A commercial development in the town centre aims to be future-proofed by allowing for future connection to the proposed town centre network.
- A number of small biomass-fired district heating schemes have been installed by a social housing provider in blocks of flats: although these may have been done anyway, the existence of the policy contributed to the decision and supported the planning application process.

The policy officer commented, “We have learnt that adding a reference to energy policies in the Planning Validation Checklist will improve compliance with the policy.”


How Can Elected Members Make a Difference?

Local planning authorities have statutory duties to develop sound planning policies that are based on good evidence, and to consult with a wide range of organisations and the local community. But members also have an important role in:

- **Communicating:** Participating in the local consultation and debate, to determine the most appropriate low carbon energy for your area, and providing a clear voice for community concerns. Making sure officers, Members and potential developers are aware of policy and plans.
- **Understanding the technologies to inform decisions:** Keeping up to date on the different energy contributions, efficiencies and other issues (e.g. ecological impact) of renewable technologies compared to fossil fuel alternatives and whether threats are real or perceived. Informing residents of facts that help people appreciate renewable energy technologies and understand planning policy (e.g. material considerations).
- **Supporting delivery:** Supporting appropriate proposals through the planning process. Approving applications where the impacts are, or can be made to be, acceptable.

Who to Involve

Low carbon energy developments raise issues for a large number of people and organisations:

- Agencies: e.g. Environment Agency, Natural England, Highways Agency, CPRE
- Councillors and Parish Councillors
- Council officers: e.g. planning, regeneration and economic development, ecology, air quality, transport
- Community organisations: e.g. Sustainability groups such as Transition Towns or Low Carbon Communities, Community Energy groups, Ramblers Association, Anglers Association
- Landowners and developers (construction and energy)



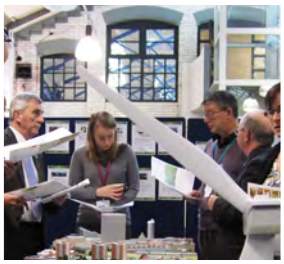
CASE STUDY

Assessing Wind Turbines in the Lake District National Park[3]

In 2011, the Lake District National Park Authority (LDNPA) gave permission for three 5 kW wind turbines to be installed behind the Kirkstone Pass Inn, a historic (but off-grid) property in the heart of the National Park. This decision had very strong support from the members. Key factors in the decision were:

- The economic impact for the Inn, which was reliant on diesel generators for electricity, the cost of which was starting to affect the viability of the business.
- They will be removed after 20 years or if they fail to produce electricity for a year.

Councillor Judith Cooke, LDNPA and then Chair of the Planning (Development Control) Committee, commented: "As a National Park we are required to preserve the wild and beautiful landscape, but also need to help our businesses. This was a potentially contentious application in an empty landscape greatly favoured by tourists and walkers, Some of us started out thinking "you can't be serious". However, the applicant worked hard to get the right scheme for the site. Members and local Parish Councillors had an early pre-application visit to the site to talk through the issues, and our landscape officer worked with them to get a scheme that was acceptable. It took a long time to get to the right solution but by the second and formal planning committee visit it was clear that the scheme had been improved. In fact it changed from two larger turbines to three smaller ones, which were significantly less intrusive and changed the feel of the proposal. We were almost surprised that we voted for it. It has been less contentious than we expected and we've had no significant local opposition. But each site is different and has to be judged on its own merits and this was all about the economic survival of the Inn and the impact of these turbines on that area."


Key Questions

Understanding the Local Capacity and Opportunity Areas for Low Carbon Energy

- Have we had a capacity study and other evidence such as a landscape character assessment?
- Do we understand why certain technologies are recommended or not for our area?
- Do we have new development areas with opportunities for district heating?

Consulting the Community

- Which areas do people think are suitable for low carbon energy, and which types?
- What are the local concerns?
- Are there people or groups who are interested in helping develop our plan?
- Do we have external expertise we can draw on to help communicate technical issues or draw out the issues for debate?
- Will the development of low carbon energy support local businesses?

Policy Making and Use

- Does our policy meet the low carbon energy requirements laid out in the NPPF?
- Do we have a strong evidence base to support our policy (e.g. capacity study, landscape character assessment, designated areas or species)?
- Have we set a local target for renewable energy capacity? What does this mean in terms of number or type of installations? Have we identified opportunity areas?
- Do we clearly state our policy for dealing with planning applications?

Assessing Applications

- Does our decision take into account our local and national policies and evidence?
- Do we understand what will be classed as a material consideration?
- Do we fully understand the impacts of the development?
- Have we balanced any adverse impacts against local and national benefits?



"Assessing renewable energy applications are no different from any other development – it's all about getting the right balance."

Resources

CLASP resources
www.claspinfo.org/resourcemap

Planning for climate change – guidance for local authorities
www.tcpa.org.uk/pages/planning-for-climate-change-guidance-for-local-authorities-2012.html

[1] www.lancaster.gov.uk/planning/planning-policy/local-development-framework/local-planning-policy/work-in-progress/development-management-dpd/
[2] More details available at: www.stockport.gov.uk/planningsustainabledevelopment
[3] Planning Decision Reference No: 7/2011/5488