

Inquiry into Carbon Reduction in Wales: Evidence on Energy Production from the Sustainable Development Commission.

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Introduction

The Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) strongly believes in the importance and urgency of developing large scale renewable energy solutions, as a key element in the de-carbonising of the electricity supply system. The SDC has completed two major reviews for government on renewable energy from wind and tidal sources

The SDC also supports the development of a more localised and dispersed renewable energy provision, but does not see this as an either /or option. A de-carbonised electricity supply will require a mix of off and on grid provision. The Commission has also previously submitted a report to Government which recommended that this de-carbonisation should not be achieved through the expansion of nuclear power.

The SDC has also produced a report on the operations of OFGEM - "Lost in Transmission" - which highlighted issues of grid capacity and connectivity which needed to be addressed for the expansion of large scale renewable provision.

The findings set out in the OFGEM report together with issues of infrastructure planning represent barriers to the development of large scale renewable energy. However the SDC is clear that it is the weakness of effective public engagement strategy which is the most under rated factor limiting expansion of large scale renewable energy

Engagement and Renewable Energy Development

If we are to tackle the complex issues of climate change and energy supply, government cannot rely on the traditional approaches to decision making to bring about the understanding, mandate and mobilization necessary to address these issues The SDC's view on engagement is summarized in the attached paper

One of the key constraints to national or local government's ability to act is the lack of political space to make bold decisions. The majority of government's communication campaigns on climate change have been aimed at raising awareness and changing behaviour. The hope has been that these campaigns would open up space for collective action as individuals who commit to more environmentally friendly behaviours on a personal level will be more ready to support increasingly radical action by government and others. However it is clear that this form of engagement has had limited impact and we need to take a more radical and direct approach to opening up political space through public engagement.

The main argument for the need for a new approach is that climate change is a new kind of challenge - a collective problem on an unprecedented scale with massive uncertainties and involving impacts over long periods. It is a problem government cannot solve on its own, but rather one in which everyone must engage in deciding a way forward. A key problem for any Government trying to open up the process in this way will be if the issue is subject to intense party competition.

The SDC has particularly welcomed the establishment of the Climate Change Commission in Wales as a cross party/sector body. It is a critical step in building the consensus needed for change.

The SDC has recently completed a review of the Commission and made recommendations that are intended to increase the effectiveness of the Commission in engaging across sectors and with communities.

It is particularly important that the role of the Commission is one of engagement with local authorities, town and community councils, framing the debate in the context of the challenge of climate change. The SDC is also working with the Spatial Plan process to ensure that low carbon strategies are central to regional planning. There is no doubt that many of the current barriers result from local levels of democracy not having a chance to be fully engaged in quality processes that allow them to contribute to consensus building.

This situation is further accentuated by the approach of the renewable energy companies themselves

"It has taken a long time for wind energy companies to realise that the skills needed to engage with local communities are different from the skills needed to build wind farms - and that communication skills were "at least as important as engineering skills" to their business. "We have seen in many companies a tendency to belittle and marginalise that expertise - finance directors often think these people are a rather questionable overhead and there are many suggestions that they are just the 'hippy' element. It is absolutely critical to recognise the contribution that this skills set can make to the industry."

Sir Jonathon Porritt Chair of the Sustainable Development Commission speaking at the BWEA Annual Conference

The need to develop a more constructive approach may point to be a greater role for formal Protocols on Public Engagement, such as that developed for wind energy by the Renewables Advisory Board. The SDC understands that this protocol was never ratified in Wales, yet it does provide independent framework based on international best practice and may have a role in filling the current gap in guidance

The SDC is also recommending UK government considers adopting a range of more direct and focused engagement processes - such as the UK Citizens Council for the Future (see attached paper). It is important that such approaches are considered within the governance structures of Wales and we move away from the vast number of relatively limited consultation exercises that currently characterise policy development.

A recent IPPR report for the SDC on engagement strategies recommended four core principles:

establish credibility - to address the "trust" gap through clarity, clear leadership, sound independent evidence base, providing analysis that organises, clarifies and makes the relevant information more visible to underpin the framing of choices

engage with sceptics - through clear segmenting on the opinion base

frame choices - once an argument is framed in peoples' minds it will govern the way information is absorbed. At this stage more needs to be done in framing the debate on large scale renewables in the wider context to build consensus

act at scale - the challenge of bringing together mass media, the reach of large civil society organisations with a two way engagement process.

It is important to recognise the challenges brought by the speed of change and need to come to terms with the unfamiliar. Critically however in the need for urgent action, government and private sector organisations need to recognise that successful engagement strategies need time and money.

The SDC would argue that the slow progress on large scale renewable energy is in large part due to far too little emphasis being put on an engagement process that frames the debate, leads the airing of views and builds public opinion towards a majority view. Too much time is currently being spent in defending large scale renewable energy and as a result the debate is not moving forward.

Without this proper engagement the way is open to disinformation campaigns, to attempts to play different renewable systems off against each other, to discredit proven technologies, and to increase confusion and uncertainty. Effective early engagement with communities will really help acceptance of large scale renewable generators, help to speed up the planning process and allow for a more strategic approach that will bring investment to Wales, underpinning the Green Jobs strategy

The wider implications of this "engagement" problem should not be underestimated in terms of maximising the economic opportunities from large scale renewables, in job creation, in developing a low carbon industry, in attracting companies to Wales, and in making sure the benefits are seen locally. To quote a developer of large scale renewable energy:

" Developers are so busy dealing with problems and working through the vacuum, there's no opportunity to take forward these things as you're fighting fires all the time and everyone is putting (usually different) obstacles in front of you!!! Large scale projects really should be an opportunity to bring green industries to Wales, and this isn't happening, and won't happen while all the issues with engagement and local relationships (both with communities and local authorities) continue!"

In Summary the SDC Recommends that:

community engagement and development strategies are seen to be a central to tackling climate change and increasing renewable energy supply.

The Climate Change Commission is developed as a long term, cross party/sector vehicle for leading a national debate, using the full range of engagement processes.

Welsh Assembly Government and the National Assembly considers new models that create new spaces for citizen's voices and long term thinking, such as that proposed by a "Citizens Council for the Future"