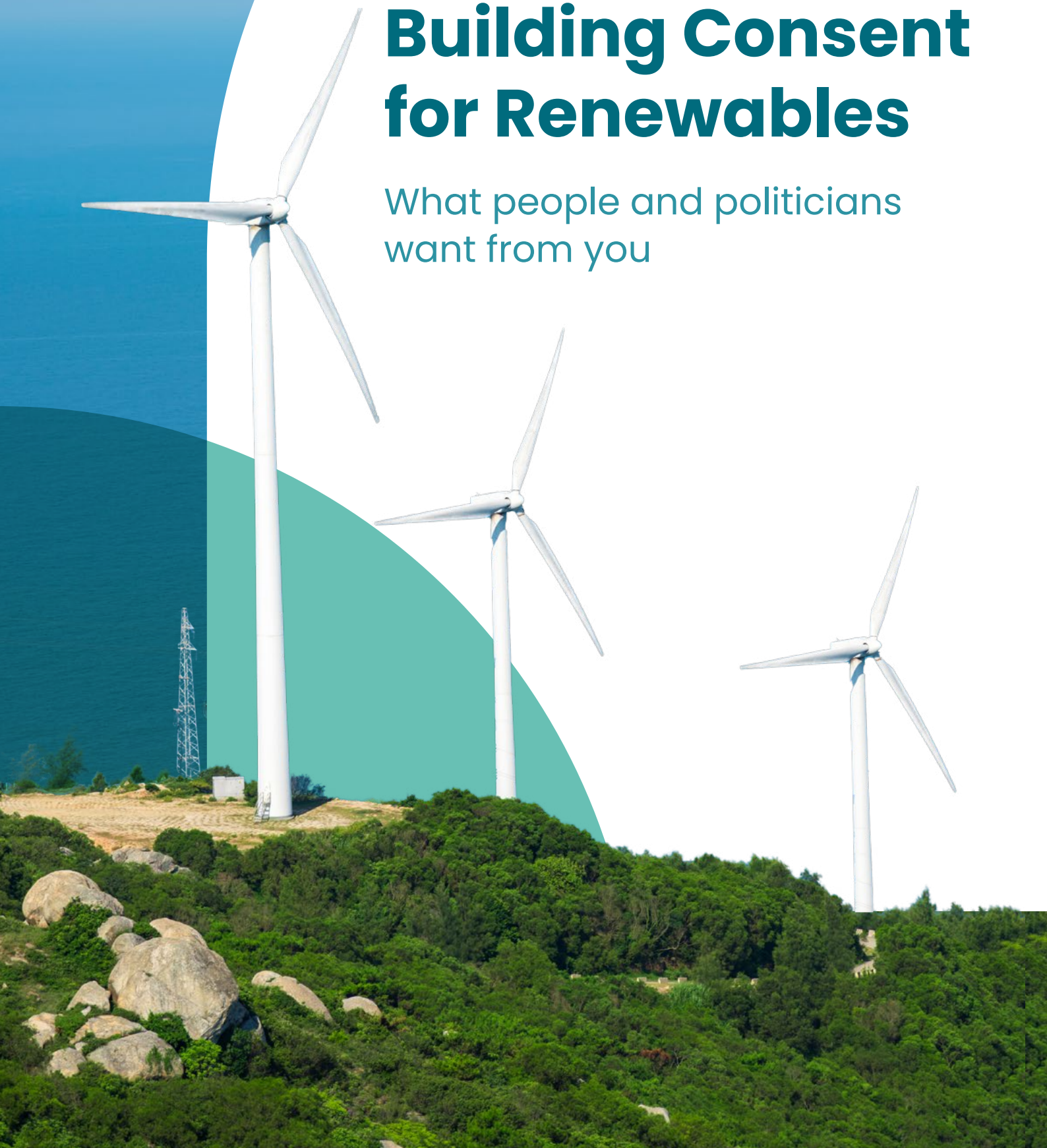
Building Consent for Renewables

What people and politicians want from you



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Introduction

The renewables boom

The UK Government has set an ambition to make Britain energy-secure with clean power by 2030. This will necessitate the rapid development of clean-energy infrastructure and presents exciting new possibilities for developers to bolster the country's stock of renewables.

The cost of opposition

Renewables continue to divide opinion though and, even with central government support, local politicians and communities may not welcome the prospect of a new energy project on their doorstep. This is true for both large developments, such as wind and solar farms, and smaller-scale developments, like energy and hydrogen storage centres.

> This presents serious operational and reputational risks. Local political and public opposition is at best costly for developers, who must contend with legal challenges and protests, and at worst project-ending for those who are refused permission to proceed.

The value of engagement

Copper has decades of experience supporting developers to get complex (and often controversial) projects over the line, including more than 65 Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects.

We know the value of engaging with local policymakers and communities to mitigate the risks associated with opposition by securing active support for projects. Earning a social licence to operate through effective engagement in this way is essential to both expedite delivery and create opportunities.

Engagement can take many forms, from formal consultation events to digital and social media activity. This doesn't always involve intuitive decisions; for example, designing a polished website may not be the best way to persuade local MPs that a developer is right for their constituency.

Guiding you to success

To help you choose the right methods and engage successfully with your local stakeholders, we have conducted a series interviews with local politicians and a representative cross-section of the public.

We asked both groups why they might oppose a renewable development in their area and what developers could do to turn their opposition into neutrality or, better yet, advocacy.

Their answers, distilled in the following report, act as a guide for anyone looking to develop renewable energy infrastructure anywhere in the country.

They have also informed our Community Engagement MOT, which you will find information about at the end of this report – a tool to help you assess and improve community engagement.

Methodology

We conducted written response interviews with policymakers from across the UK, including MPs, Councillors and Special Advisors. These included a range of questions on topics such as their minimum expectations for community engagement by a renewable developer and the kinds of engagement that would make them consider a developer to be trustworthy.

This insight was supplemented by a focus group consisting of eight participants which took place over an hour-and-a-half in February 2025. This involved a wide-reaching discussion that touched on the views of both participants and people they knew. We chose the participants without having any prior knowledge of their attitudes towards renewable energy. However, almost all participants had recent experiences, both positive and negative, with renewable-energy developers that informed their contributions.

Responses from both groups were qualitatively analysed by Copper's expert team ofcommunications and engagement consultants to identify key themes and trends.

All quotes contained within the following report are taken from the interviews and the focus group discussions conducted by Copper. Some quotes have been altered slightly to protect the anonymity of individual contributors and to distil certain contributions into coherent statements.

Social licence to operate

At Copper, we believe in earning a social licence from those people who live around a development whose lives and local landscape will be affected by it. This means not assuming developers have the right to develop an area in the way that suits them, and instead directly consulting with local policymakers and communities to ensure the development will be in keeping with their needs and expectations. The consent of local people, given by their informed acceptance of – or, better yet, active support for – a development is your social licence to operate. Earning this licence requires engagement and dialogue, where people's views are listened to, considered and then reflected in delivery.

Be strategic

Views from the general public

"**People struggle to trust developers**. People just have a general either mistrust or an apathy of them. [It shows] the importance of transparency and the importance of information."

"We had a tidal barrier put in [near our town] and the PR job on it was absolutely excellent. Everyone knew exactly what was going on and **the community fully supported the project because we knew what was going on**. We got regular updates and, yeah, the town was all for it."

"Not far from us, they put in planning permission to put wind turbines up. They're keeping local residents up to date, what each step will mean – you know? They are ensuring that everybody understands the process and that they're adhering to the processes that they are required to go through."

Views from regional policymakers

"I expect upfront consultations on new energy projects and a willingness to adapt the development to deliver the project with community spirit." (Labour MP)

"It makes me think a developer is trustworthy if I can see they've engaged a public affairs or public relations agency before any process starts." (Labour MP)

"I would expect a developer to contact Ward Councillors early on in the process, as [they] know their area and residents well. **I welcome the opportunity to input at an early stage before the public is made aware.**" (Liberal Democrat Councillor)

"**I consider a developer trustworthy if they come to me ahead of a planning application** – seeking advice from those who know the area locally." (Conservative Councillor)

"Change is going to upset some people, and they'll make noise – and then they'll go to the Local Authority. If a project team has done the groundwork to reach out, though, they'll discover support." (Welsh Labour MS

"People can become suspicious and think there is more to something. A developer that goes out of their way to deal with that is best placed. **A willingness to adapt plans is good, and engagement needs to be sincere.**" (Welsh Labour MS)

Be strategic

Introduction

A common but costly mistake that renewable developers make when embarking on a new project is to assume that planning permission equates to a social licence to operate. The key distinction is that planning permission is granted, whereas a social licence is earned every day through meaningful engagement with the community.

This is borne out by Copper's research and numerous testimonials we collected from the public and policymakers. The message from both groups was unambiguous: trust in developers, and especially energy developers, is at an all-time low and people are primed to mount resistance to new developments unless they can be convinced effectively and early on that these developments are in their interests. This means that developers need to be more strategic than ever with their community engagement efforts.

Focus group analysis

The good news for developers is that there was widespread acknowledgement that we need to build things. Our focus group demonstrated that people understand the need for new energy infrastructure to boost growth and tackle environmental crises. Most participants expressed a willingness to facilitate the unobstructed delivery of wind, solar and other renewable-energy projects, as long as developers were willing to meet them halfway by engaging with the community. Crucially, all participants noted that this is a commitment they require from the early stages of a development and throughout the project lifecycle.

Policymaker analysis

The policymakers we canvassed were of a similar mind. They told us that for a renewable energy development to win their support they need to see that the team behind it are in early talks with a wide and representative portion of the community about its impact. One influential public official we spoke to in particular noted that they expect to see the views of local people embedded in a developer's wider strategy. They also made clear that they expect developers to engage with them directly, ideally ahead of bringing their plans to the general public.

Copper Consultancy guidance and input

The lesson here is that, to earn a social licence and remove opposition to a development, engagement with the local community needs to be a core strategic consideration. Just as coordination with existing infrastructure and utilities is a non-negotiable part of early-stage construction plans, having a clear plan and timeline for continuous engagement with the local community is essential best practice.

At Copper, we've been called in to support many projects where developers failed to approach stakeholder engagement tactically, leaving fractured relationships with local communities that required urgent repair. This process is complex, costly and avoidable. Our experience has taught us that policymakers and local communities will support projects, large and small, if developers think carefully about how to engage with them and make them feel part of the process.

Be on the right channels

Views from the general public

"There's one big hill range around here you can see for miles and they're talking about putting wind turbines up there. The only information I've seen about the proposals for these turbines is on Facebook, and not everybody is on Facebook. I have an elderly auntie that lives in the same town as me. She's 86. She's not going online. So how is she going to find out what they're proposing?"

"We've got good local news – TV news programmes where at the end they give out the email address for anybody who wants to give their opinions on the subject they're talking about. **Put the story across on the local news. Make it a topic that people can respond to.**"

"On these Facebook community pages – there's inevitably going to be some sort of discussion. **I think a company would have more integrity if they were involved in that conversation**. You know, if they had a company page on there, they're posting, if they're addressing rumours, misinformation. I think that would give me a lot of reassurance if they were acting proactively on that."

"I know a company that puts leaflets through everyone's door, invited people to in-person engagement at the local village hall, which I thought was good."

Views from regional policymakers

"**I expect to see something face-to-face, a proper in-person consultation event where the public can view plans and ask questions** – a presentation at a council meeting and opportunity for councillors to ask questions." (Conservative Councillor)

"Very rarely do I go to the developer's website, so they would need a more direct approach. Leaflet drop, emails, notices, social media, press releases, radio adverts, public consultations – at sensible times for communities to engage." (Conservative Councillor)

"**I want to see the widest consultation possible**, including in-person, and less reliance on social media and more direct engagement." (Labour MP)

Be on the right channels

Introduction

To successfully engage people with a development, you need to know how to reach them. This is more difficult than it's ever been, with fractured audiences getting information from any number of different sources. In short, the channels that engage one group will likely be entirely different from the channels that engage another. This is especially important to consider when trying to engage hard-to-reach groups, such as those with special access needs.

Our research uncovered a common frustration at the failure of developers to meet people where they are, as well as a number of specific recommendations to reach and engage everyone equally.

Focus group analysis

Our focus group included a broad demographic and explored not only participants' own views but also the perspectives of their families and friends. The discussions reinforced that people consume information in very different ways, and that it's essential to reflect this diversity when communicating with residents and developers.

Younger participants tended to prefer digital platforms, including social media, while older participants were more comfortable with traditional methods, such as newsletters. Regardless of their preferred channel, there was a clear consensus: people want to feel informed, and they value having options. Using a range of communication methods is essential to ensure all stakeholders can engage in a way that works for them.

Policymaker analysis

In-person communication, with politicians and especially local communities, was identified as the most valued form of communication by policymakers. In their view, face-to-face interaction (ideally in person but at least virtually) is best not only for reaching diverse groups but also for building connections with the communities that are essential for the lifecycle of the development. In particular, multiple and wide-reaching public consultations were recommended to provide the public with opportunities to ask developers questions and receive immediate responses. It was also clear that speaking with people directly demonstrated to the policymakers we spoke to that a developer was serious about their intentions and willing to go the extra mile.

Copper Consultancy guidance and input

Expert stakeholder analysis is essential to understanding the right audiences to reach and how best to reach them. A multi-channel approach is always advisable to engage different audiences effectively. However, without detailed insights into the demographics of an area, it's impossible to know how to focus efforts across channels for the best results. While not mentioned specifically in our research, accessibility is also a key consideration, and we advise consulting communications specialists to ensure content is accessible to all, whatever the channel.

Be creative

Views from the general public

"People think if it's a website, they need loads of content, but you don't. What you need is a picture of the area and to say, "This is what it'll look like, this is why and this is how it will benefit the area." You see so much overcomplication in things and you're like, hang on. If you're doing an A4 sheet, you wouldn't have all this other junk. So let's get rid of it. **Just keep it nice and simple.**"

"**I like it to be interactive. Don't just run through a boring PowerPoint**. I want it to be properly explained, like maybe do some activities or a quiz or a combination of a bit of everything so it is fully explained and I'm not just talked at."

"I think **in this day and age it's got to be done in an engaging way**. You've got to grab people's attention. You've got to be creative in how you get that information across."

"If they've got a time lapse of something they've seen through to completion, people would be interested because they can imagine that's what it looks like and see all the stages – you know? – night, day, different weather that they've built it through."

Views from regional policymakers

"**I would want to see a video of the site and its development potential**, together with other success stories." (Conservative Councillor)

"**I expect clearly presented material, succinctly drafted, with minimal fuss**. "We are..." slogans and "We believe..." statements do not compute in development contexts. Factual information, correctly sourced and drafted well, is what many serious-minded councillors would like to see." (Conservative Councillor)

"**I always like visualisation of the project, what it looks like, comparisons to other projects**, case studies of where they've been before, the safety of the technology." (Conservative MS)

Be creative

Introduction

Choosing the right channels is only half the battle, though. If you want to engage audiences, you need to reach them with creative content that will cut through the noise of their daily lives and resonate. People are bombarded from every angle with distractions and ploys for their attention. If news about your development is going to compete successfully with this, it needs to be creative and engaging. Moreover, you need to be able to measure the success of your content to find out if it has hit the mark.

Focus group analysis

Our focus group participants were blunt about their unwillingness to entertain content that they saw as "boring" or "complicated". They called for content that was visually dynamic and conveyed only the need-to-know information about a development. Even participants who said they would eventually want to learn about a project in detail explained that they initially only sought top-level information. There was agreement, too, that engagement materials, be they physical newsletters or social media posts, should be light on text and heavy on visuals. Videos and images that illustrated the present and future of a development (as well as the main stages in between) were cited by many participants as being essential to helping them understand and support a project.

Policymaker analysis

The policymakers we spoke to wanted content to be both engaging and easy to digest. The hectic work and travel schedules of political life leave little time to take in full details about every prospective local development, and so it stands to reason that the main ask we received was for engagement materials to be succinct and to the point. This means highlighting information about a development that aligns with current political priorities, such as boosting growth or decarbonising the local area.

Like our focus group discussion, our political interviews highlighted the importance of visually compelling content. Videos were noted in these as vital, as were photos and other materials that could demonstrate a history of success with similar, previous developments.

Copper Consultancy guidance and input

Creative, visually impactful content really does drive higher rates of engagement, which is amplified still further when that content is interactive, whether this is in the form of social media carousels or physical materials that invite audiences to provide feedback on specific aspects of a design. We advise collaborating with skilled content creators and graphic designers on all engagement materials to ensure they meet the right standards for engagement – to grab people's attention and effectively share messages about a development.

Crucially, you only know if your content is engaging and influencing your target audiences if you can measure its success. A clear content strategy with well-defined and measurable key performance indicators is essential, combined with analytical tools to help you gather and interpret metrics such as social media content reach and impressions.

Be credible

Views from the general public

"I think Octopus Energy is great. I know the branding and it's really good and just the use of statistics and facts. You just feel like you have a sense of trust in them – you know? – engaging people in the right sort of way to build that trust."

"**Explain why you've entered the market. What do you want to do?** If you're new, recognise you're new and explain why you're doing what you're doing."

"[Developers should] talk about a previous development and tell us about the feedback they had, how they changed the development in response and about the ongoing benefit to that community. **Show that you listen and act upon feedback**."

"Testimonials sometimes just don't seem genuine. Some of them are really engaging and do seem really genuine, but some of them I think look so unnatural that it's just like, that's just not real."

Views from regional policymakers

"A lot of developers can be viewed as shady by constituents. I think transparency is key to ensure this view is held by as few people as possible." (Conservative Councillor)

"**The fewer facts and glossier the literature, the more sceptical I am**. I want to hear that the developer believes in the project for more than crude financial gain." (Conservative Councillor)

"**I consider developers to be more approachable if they have a track record of delivery in other areas** – being able to believe what is said will indeed be delivered [is crucial]." (Conservative Councillor)

"I want to know why the developer feels that its work is important; where it fits within the market and UK energy contexts; what its plans for growth, employment and future prospects are." (Conservative Councillor)

"There's a general lack of trust in what developers say, so transparency is key. **If it's a brand I'm unfamiliar with, I'd want to see a clear introduction: who they are, what they aim to do and their track record with other communities**. Showing prior projects and the outcomes for local people helps build credibility." (Plaid Cymru)

"If they're a new developer, I'd want to see transparency on their funding streams, a visible track record – if they're a brand-new company, track record of the staff involved, anything that raises the legitimacy of the company." (Conservative MS)

Be credible

Introduction

There is widespread misinformation about the reliability of renewable-energy developers, fuelled by competing commercial interests, an often-sceptical news media and a number of high-profile failures in recent years. It is understandable, then, that a core recommendation from everyone we spoke to was that renewable-energy developers should establish early on that they are genuinely committed to and capable of delivery.

Focus group analysis

Our focus group participants went as far as to imply that they would be unable to support a developer who didn't come across as reputable from the outset. Moreover, participants said that they wanted to see the credibility of a developer signposted in most engagement activities, like in-person interactions, leaflets or social media posts.

Octopus Energy was repeatedly mentioned throughout the focus group as setting the gold standard in credible communication. People especially liked their use of easy-to-understand facts and figures to demonstrate their impressive credentials. When asked how emerging companies without access to these kinds of statistics should demonstrate credibility, there was agreement that developers need only to clearly explain why they are passionate about seeing the project through and to point to any examples where they have successfully done so in the past.

A fine line needs to be trodden, however, between confidence and bluster, especially when using testimonials to verify credibility. People noted that engagement must come across as authentic in order to provide the foundation for a positive relationship.

Policymaker analysis

Policymakers echoed this guidance and emphasised the importance of communicating credibility transparently. Their demand of developers was simple: show that you have the right intentions and financial backing to deliver them. They told us that a strong track record of success to prove this is ideal and that they welcomed any information on past projects as background. This isn't essential, though, and for emerging companies the policymakers we spoke to said that a detailed (but concise) briefing with information on the development, its funding streams and the objectives of the partners involved would be sufficient to convey credibility and earn their trust. This is especially true if the developer can make credible claims about its ambitions for the local economy and job market.

Copper Consultancy guidance and input

To position a brand as trustworthy and dependable, it's important to make every effort to appear professional, friendly and knowledgeable. There are many ways to achieve this, and a dedicated communications agency can help you find what works best. However, a professional website and social media presence with well-written, well-presented case studies is a good place to start.

Be committed

Views from the general public

"Giving back to the community [is important], and then making sure that's communicated so that people can see value in the project and not just a random abstract company that no one's ever heard of."

"I think just being proactive and showing that you're perhaps a little bit philanthropic or you care about education, that you're investing in things that the community obviously cares about."

"If you're going be taking away, cutting across public footpaths or bridal ways, are you going to reroute the footpaths and bridal ways so that people can still have access? **How will the community benefit?"**

"Quite often you see a company is going to put a chunk of money into the community, to build a playschool here or a park here, but then there's no long-term ongoing investment. **I'd rather see smaller-scale, but ongoing, investment into the local community** so they can benefit throughout the life of a wind farm or solar farm or whatever the investment is."

Views from regional policymakers

"**I would expect a clear, definitive plan from the developer presenting the benefits they can give to the area**. It is essential they take into account the views and opinions of locals and act on any requests made." (Conservative Councillor)

"I think a developer is committed to the local community if they show interest beyond their own interests. **Support local organisations. Talk to local people and business to see if this is the right place for them**." (Conservative Councillor)

"I trust a developer is committed to the local area if they can provide a number of local jobs, and not just in construction [but] continual jobs." (Conservative MS)

"If there is significant impact on the local community, I might expect to see the developer consider liaising with the local community as to what they can do to help with local infrastructure, such as a community centre where there is not currently one or a children's playground." (Liberal Democrat Councillor)

"Right now, funding often goes towards short-term projects like playparks or sponsoring a local rugby team. While these have value, they only benefit a small group of people and don't leave a lasting impact. **What would make a real difference is setting up long-term funds for initiatives like retrofitting homes**." (Plaid Cymru)

Be committed

Introduction

Today's average consumer is savvier than developers might think and less easily bought than they might hope. Once stakeholders are satisfied that a developer has a credible reputation and can be relied upon to deliver, their attention often shifts to what the development will mean for their local area. Our research shows that stakeholders expect commitment to social value that endures for the lifetime of the development.

Focus group analysis

Our focus group participants ranked commitment to social value as more important than even factors such as efficiency and consistency of construction activities.

No single method of engagement emerged as the preferred way to do this. In fact, several contributors noted that what mattered was simply being reassured that a developer had engaged in some way with the community to understand, and attempt to meet, local needs.

Our focus group also shared anxieties that developers might not be willing to invest in the project and the local community beyond the initial stages of construction. They identified assurances such as contractual maintenance arrangements and ringfenced funding as a prerequisite for gaining their support and wanted these guarantees to be made explicit in any communications.

Policymaker analysis

Policymakers are also watching keenly for evidence that developers are committed to and willing to give back to the local community. The policymakers we interviewed expected developers to include this into early-stage consultations and demonstrate that they were not only generating social value but doing so in line with the needs and priorities of local people. Unsurprisingly, they also wanted to see robust projections for how a developer would boost the local economy. Demonstrating that a developer will provide continuous employment opportunities and is collaborating with existing local businesses were highlighted as promising signs that would help win their support.

On a more practical level, several policymakers urged developers to prove that they had the financial capital to deliver in the long term. There was a general sense of wariness about the tendency of some developers to make bold, unsubstantiated claims about their long-term commitments to the area. Their message was simple: these kinds of claims wouldn't be taken seriously unless policymakers believed a developer had the long-term capital to back them up.

Copper Consultancy guidance and input

Many engagement methods demonstrate that a developer is a principled and considerate neighbour. The best approach depends on the local context and stakeholder environment, and should be based on a detailed insight-gathering exercise. Additionally, it is crucial to employ the right experts and techniques to measure social value and refine your approach, ensuring you make the best first impression possible.

Be approachable

Views from the general public

"You just want to meet them. Kind of get that sense that they are going to do what they say they're going to do and hopefully listen to you. They can't please everyone, but if they do their best, that's what you want, really, isn't it?"

"I think that **familiarity with the people who are in charge, the boots on the ground attending council meetings**, is important."

"I'd like the developers to come talk to us like – you know? – at meetings. We can hear what they've got to say and put in our objections or our ideas, but like it'll be good that they actually listened, actually take stuff on board."

"I think **if someone's willing to put their face and name out there, it shows that they've at least got a bit of confidence in it and they're taking some accountability for it**. If the project manager was going to put their face out there and their name and say, "Contact me," that's showing some accountability, so I have confidence things are actually going to happen."

Views from regional policymakers

"Renewable-energy developers are a lot more approachable if they're not faceless corporate bodies and have people known to local communities representing them, not just paying lip service – when they actually care about the communities that will be potentially affected by their decisions." (Conservative Councillor)

"There was a good example of a developer locally. They have someone embedded in the community, running **weekly drop-in sessions to answer questions and address concerns. That kind of regular, face-to-face presence makes a real difference.**" (Plaid Cymru)

"**The ability to speak directly with someone is crucial**. When tensions run high, having a real person to listen and respond can defuse a lot of the anger. I've seen examples where developers reacted defensively to community frustrations – that only made things worse. A calm, open line of communication goes a long way." (Conservative MS)

Be approachable

Introduction

People are more likely to engage positively with a project if they can put a face to it and recognise the people behind it as part of their community. Being approachable and getting to know local policymakers and residents on a personal level helps to build familiarity and trust in a way that no other method of engagement can. When you become part of the local fabric, you can directly share the aims of your development with the people affected by it – and bring them along with you on your journey.

Focus group analysis

A number of participants in our focus group shared an admiration for developers who took the time to speak with them personally and who they knew by name. This, they explained, was as much about the developer showing willingness to become part of the community for the duration of the project as it was about providing an opportunity to discuss their concerns. There was a consensus that being personally recognisable and contactable was a clear sign of accountability – and that won trust and support. Participants acknowledged that this approach would be time-consuming but said they would happily welcome developers at existing community events, such as parish council meetings.

Policymaker analysis

Policymakers also highly regarded developers who they considered approachable and personable, with an emphasis on the benefits this brings to fostering productive relationships with stakeholders. They noted that, especially when things don't go to plan, frustration mounts when their constituents feel they can't speak to a "real person" about their problems. On a personal level, too, many of the officials we interviewed said they would be cautious about dealing with any developer they perceived as hiding behind a "faceless company". Having a senior representative embedded in the community was seen as positive, both as a measure of the character of a developer and as a means of reassuring policymakers that they could find and speak to decision-makers when they needed to.

Copper Consultancy guidance and input

Developers often face conflicting priorities and demands, making the prospect of taking time to embed themselves in the community and encourage direct engagement feel daunting. Luckily, help is at hand to streamline this process, and we advise employing experts in community engagement to identify quick wins to help boost visibility and build personal relationships with political and public stakeholders in tandem with project delivery. These could include regular drop-in sessions at community centres, pop-up stands at shopping centres or any number of other methods that work best for the specific development and local area.

Community Engagement MOT

We have distilled the findings of this research along with our decades of experience positioning developers to win local support into a comprehensive evaluation service.

Through our Community Engagement MOT service, we offer a comprehensive evaluation of your standing within the communities you hope to develop your infrastructure, measured against the expectations we know local policymakers and communities have for renewable developers.

Thorough analysis of your organisation, brand and positioning, combined with bespoke research and polling in your region of interest, we will provide you with a series of advisories to improve stakeholder relations and derisk projects.

These advisories feed into tailored guidance with specific actions to protect against potential crises and form positive relationships with local people that facilitate frictionless delivery of your developments unhindered by political and public opposition.

Get in touch

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