

Report of Dumfries Public Engagement Event

Easterbrook Hall

8 November 2017

Note: The following is a distillation of a public engagement event held by the RSE Energy Inquiry Committee. The views expressed at the event are those of the attendees and do not necessarily represent the position of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

Committee Members Present

Prof Gavin Little

Prof Karen Turner

Prof Jan Webb

Prof Little welcomed the audience to the engagement event and provided background on why the inquiry was taking place, what it looked to achieve, and what the Committee hoped to gain from holding public engagement events. Prof Little noted that at this stage in the process the Committee was seeking input and not making recommendations.

Prof Turner took the audience through a presentation on the context of the Inquiry, how energy is currently used in Scotland, and where this energy is generated. Prof Webb then took over to guide the room through the 15 questions the Inquiry posed in the consultation document published during summer 2017.

Brian Richardson, Chief Executive of Dumfries and Galloway Chamber of Commerce, made a short statement on two proposals being put forward by the body. These proposals involved the undertaking of a national study of energy storage locations, and the creation of a Centre for Embedded Intelligence in the south of Scotland.

The first comment from the audience addressed the potential for different approaches to planning and opportunities for community participation in the process. There is merit to ownership at a community level and numerous different approaches that should be examined more closely. Too many decisions are driven by conventional wisdom on economics. The community benefits offered during the planning of windfarms must extend for the entire lifecycle of the turbines or preferably longer.

The next comment addressed local communities and in particular those in social housing. Energy is a significant issue for housing providers and affordability of energy for tenants is imperative. The ability to fund and build highly economical 'passive energy housing' does not fall under housing association funding structures and so cannot be taken on by them. There is also a skills issues in undertaking such projects, as it is doubtful whether local tradespeople would have the necessary specialist training needed.

Electricity supply was also mentioned with the possibility of housing associations serving as a supplier. While making electricity more affordable would help people on low incomes keep their light and heating on longer, this does not help bring down consumption.

Policy decisions need to be aware of unintended consequences. An example of such an unintended consequence of a policy is the need to pull down houses which are uneconomical to upgrade to new energy efficiency standards.

A member of the audience brought up the concept of prefabricated homes where the houses are manufactured off-site and then shipped and assembled. This has been used in continental Europe to bring in high-quality affordable housing.

The next contribution addressed the lack of support provided for small-scale renewable energy projects that can be overseen by landowners. An anaerobic digester operated by the speaker was used as an example. The system provides small scale local energy and if commercialised would have an investment return time of around six years. There is, however, very little in the way of technical support or infrastructure as industry is only interested in larger-scale projects. There is potential for an industry around such small-scale digesters which provide an environmental service by converting potentially hazardous waste into energy.

A member of the audience expressed concern that large energy companies are too far removed from local communities and that smaller businesses serving the area could benefit from the breaking up of large contracts. Currently trying to grow a small business competing against large companies is difficult.

Public procurement rules could play a role in addressing this problem. Legislation needs to catch up with the facts on the ground. Local businesses provide accountability and values which may not be present in bigger companies. Transparency around procurement is important, as is follow-up work to ensure that community benefit conditions inserted into contracts are suitably met.

A point was raised around the importance of education. There is a great deal of ignorance among the public on how we use energy and the impact of our actions. It is increasingly difficult to find trustworthy information and facts. Industry-provided information is widely available, but is produced by a business looking to make a profit.

Marine energy was brought up as an area in which Scotland should develop its capacity and expertise. The Scottish Government had previously championed this, but has not done so strongly in recent years. A focus on marine renewables would provide clean energy while also utilising the skills that already exist from the oil and gas industry. The idea of 'negawatts' – whereby appliances can be automatically turned off during peak demand – was praised.

An attendee suggested that while there had been warm words on the matter, energy efficiency did not seem to be a real priority for the Scottish Government. The Scottish Energy Efficiency Programme has been produced and energy efficiency proclaimed a national infrastructure priority, but this has not translated into action. There should be a cabinet position for the housing minister. The Inquiry should focus on energy efficiency and examine the role the tax system can play in changing behaviour. Taxation could be used to redistribute money from those using large amounts of carbon towards those in fuel poverty. It is simply not possible to reduce energy consumption without driving up the price of energy; the social problems created by higher energy prices will need to be dealt with in a different way.

The point was made that the closer one is to the process of generating energy the more careful one is likely to be with its use. Local engagement is incredibly important. Wind turbines in Dumfries are multiplying very quickly and this has created substantial community

conflict. Common ground must be found through discussion. More time should also be spent looking to build in harmony with the environment, examining locations and trying different designs. Energy infrastructure could also have architectural and artistic merit.

One of the attendees raised concern over wind turbines negatively impacting tourism in Dumfries and queried whether any research has been carried out on this. Another member of the audience drew the attention of the room to a study which examined both turbines and transmission infrastructure and found no significant impact on tourism. There is also research suggesting the public would be willing to pay higher energy bills in order not to have overhead transmission wires. It should be noted that much of the research undertaken is done so for government or industry.

The next contribution suggested that not all communities can dictate energy use or create projects in the same way. Some areas lack the natural resources available. Scotland should be looking to decrease its dependence on wind by diversifying renewable energy sources. The proposed closure of power stations in the coming years will exacerbate this reliance.

There is a general disconnect between how energy is used and how it is generated. Rural communities are often more aware of how energy is produced. The general public needs either to be educated on this or incentivised to use less energy.

Informed debate around energy policy is problematic. Recent decisions by the Scottish Government around genetically modified crops and hydraulic fracturing have not been based on scientific evidence. This damages the credibility of the government when it suggests it will make evidence-based policy around energy in the future.

An attendee brought up the case that when oil and gas was first discovered near Shetland, a charitable trust was set-up which benefitted the community. More recent suggestions of a large windfarm in the islands were proposed to financially benefit those on whose land turbines were placed only.

It was noted that the large decrease in CO₂ emissions experienced by Scotland between 1990-2012 were in large part due to the closure or relocation of industrial plants and factories. Scotland now imports the products that at one time would have been produced in Scotland and so has simply moved these 'territorial' carbon emissions elsewhere. A recent study has suggested that if consumption emissions are included along with territorial emissions that the overall emission reduction in Scotland since 1990 would be much more modest. The Inquiry should examine consumption emissions.

The final comments of the event discussed work that had taken place examining the economic future of Dumfries and Galloway and whether it could become the renewables capital of Scotland. Cost of energy could be related to distance from source of generation which may make living closer to energy sources more desirable. Wind turbines in the area feel like they have been forced on communities rather than with their input and consent.

Concerns over negative impacts on tourism in the area from wind turbines are a red herring. Many more tourists express disappointment at the lack of connectivity than over the renewable energy infrastructure.

Craig Denham

Inquiry Secretariat