

Community Energy Resource Toolkit

# Stakeholder and Community Engagement



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## SEAI Community Energy Resource Toolkit

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### Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland

SEAI is Ireland's national energy authority investing in, and delivering, appropriate, effective and sustainable solutions to help Ireland's transition to a clean energy future. We work with the public, businesses, communities and the Government to achieve this, through expertise, funding, educational programmes, policy advice, research and the development of new technologies.

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# Introduction

→ The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) intends this Stakeholder and Community Engagement Toolkit to be read in parallel with the other toolkit guides that have been prepared as part of its enabling framework.

It is important to note, that while your project is a community endeavour and may be supported as such by SEAI and other relevant State organisations, effective and well-managed community and stakeholder engagement is extremely important for your project. This is because a community project is likely to rely on community support to a far greater extent than a developer-led project would.

*“Support from Government and society at large, including from the local communities where we want to build wind farms, is part of our licence to operate.”* Wind Europe – Wind industry standards on community engagement, June 2020

Community and stakeholder engagement is more than meeting the consultation requirements associated with a planning application process, it is about ensuring that the relevant project stakeholders are fully aware of its content and you give them opportunities to voice their opinions. It is also about being a good neighbour throughout the lifetime of a project.

Along with the necessary planning permissions and licences that a renewable energy project requires, a ‘social license to operate (SLO)’ is also a key consideration. This is when a project has the ongoing approval and social acceptance from the local community and stakeholders. It must be sought from the local community, it must be earned and it must be maintained throughout the lifetime of the project.

Not all stakeholders and community members will be part of your Renewable Energy Community (REC) and therefore it is important that you keep these stakeholders adequately informed and give them an opportunity to provide feedback to the REC.

A REC project may be required to establish and administer a Community Benefit Fund (CBF). This fund will be opened up to the broader community. It requires effective communication and engagement to ensure the overall community benefits of the project (including the CBF) are understood, accessible and realised. More information on community benefit funds can be found in the Community Benefit Fund Good Practice Principles Handbook.

# How to use this toolkit

This toolkit is designed to be used online. Links are [highlighted in blue](#) and denoted with this symbol:  Click on the highlighted text to activate the link.

Navigation buttons are displayed at the bottom of every page.  
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# Overview of effective community and stakeholder engagement

→ A stakeholder is any person or entity that has a potential interest in the proposed project or has the potential to be impacted by it. Examples of project stakeholders include:

- The group directly involved in the development of the project
- The local authority
- Relevant State/semi-State entities
- Local community/voluntary groups
- Local political representatives
- Local businesses
- Local schools and clubs
- Local residents

It is well recognised at industry level that effective community and stakeholder engagement is vital in the development of a successful project.

To develop a successful project, you will need a comprehensive and inclusive Community and Stakeholder Engagement Strategy. Effective community and stakeholder engagement involves the development of a consistent and regular communication channel which promotes inclusion and constructive dialogue to ensure a trusted relationship is created with key stakeholders. This engagement should begin as early as possible in the project development and bring the broader community and stakeholders along with the project as it develops. It should be managed as a circular process, with continuous improvement throughout from start to completion.

The beneficial outcomes of a positive, well thought out and delivered, effective engagement process include:

- Trusted relationships are established between key players and stakeholders.
- Creative solutions are found that best fit the social and environmental context.
- The chance of conflict and confrontation is reduced.
- There are open and transparent communication channels between all parties that support and maintain the trusted relationship.
- Respectful discussion is promoted between everyone involved.

Good community engagement can help the REC to:

- Build and maintain support for new projects – trusted relationship.
- Identify community concerns and make project adjustments to address these concerns – creative solutions.
- Provide an opportunity for community stakeholders to be directly involved in the renewable energy project – reduce possibility of conflict and confrontation.
- Identify and create new opportunities and benefits for both the REC and the broader community within which the project will be developed.
- Increase public knowledge, acceptance and awareness of the importance of renewable energy and its place within the community.

An example of an effective community engagement model is the seven Scottish National Standards for Community Engagement.

*“Community engagement is a purposeful process which develops a working relationship between communities, community organisations and public and private bodies to help them to identify and act on community needs and ambitions. It involves respectful dialogue between everyone involved, aimed at improving understanding between them and taking joint action to achieve positive change.”* National Standards for Community Engagement, Scotland, 2015

The Scottish National Standards for Community Engagement are seven good practice principles that show what good engagement looks like, and how to achieve it. The seven Standards are:

- Inclusion
- Support
- Planning
- Working together
- Methods
- Communication
- Impact

Reference: [www.scdc.org.uk/what/national-standards](http://www.scdc.org.uk/what/national-standards)

Figure 1: Seven Scottish National Standards for Community Engagement



The National Standards for **Community Engagement**

Image credit: Scottish Community Development Centre (Scdc)

The information provided in this toolkit supports the delivery of these community engagement standards.

## → Effective communication

Effective communication is fundamental to effective engagement and building a trusted relationship. This includes before, during and after the formal engagement effort. The more understanding that both stakeholders and communities have regarding your project process, goals, possible outcomes and general information, the more likely that trust will be built and will endure.

How to do this:

- Communication materials should be in plain English (and alternative languages as appropriate) and free from jargon to ensure that it is accessible to all.
- Early public consultation with meaningful engagement where stakeholders feel listened to and part of the process.
- Transparent communication channels where all materials are shared as widely as possible, and available in accessible formats (both online and paper based).
- Respectful communication, allowing ample time to respond.
- Use existing community networks to publicise events for greater impact.
- Appoint a single point of contact in the REC to whom communications may be addressed – appoint a Community Liaison Officer (CLO).

# Key principles and good practices for community and stakeholder communication and consultation

→ As stated earlier, the key to successful project development lies in early and effective engagement and dialogue with all stakeholders. You should do this in person where possible, be transparent and inclusive, with comprehensive information and communication.

Ensure you support community engagement with the values of equality, fairness and a sense of justness. This should be alongside your assurance to continually learn and improve the engagement process. Developers, in this case the REC, need to make sure that they provide project information at a very early stage, in a transparent and accessible way to all stakeholders.

Provide **adequate communication resources** when exchanging with residents to understand their needs and concerns. Examples of communication resources are outlined in section 4.2 of this toolkit and include:

- A well informed communication team to carry out the engagement.
- Physical resources to provide information on the project that are suitable for the particular stakeholder concerned – newsletters, pamphlets, project website etc.
- Means for receiving feedback and recording same – meeting notes, contact details etc.

Create **effective and clear communication channels** that allows for a two-way exchange between the REC and the broader community and stakeholder. This will:

- Allow community developers to get to know the stakeholders and identify local issues.
- Enable communities and stakeholders to raise concerns and allow any potential misconceptions to be addressed.
- Mean the community can begin to understand the details of the project and the benefits it could bring to the area.
- Help to build trust, as the community understands how and when it can expect to be engaged during the development process.

Ensure that there are **no barriers to participation**. The engagement strategy should be all-inclusive to enable stakeholders to engage meaningfully. Not all stakeholders and community groups will have the same communication needs and priorities. Good practice engagement should recognise that stakeholders and community members are different, so you should select the most suitable communication channels, such as email, online platforms, social media, phone or in-person group meetings. Offer people a variety of options to communicate and provide their input.

**Spirit of partnership and collaboration** – Ensure the community is engaged at the start of the process and can help to identify and plan the engagement strategy together. This will guarantee a feeling of being a partner and collaborator in the process.

**Equity** – Fairness is essential in any stakeholder engagement process. Use methods of engagement that maximise the number of voices that are heard, and that are acceptable and accessible. For example, some stakeholders may feel too intimidated to share their opinion in large group setting and may feel more comfortable giving feedback in a smaller focus group. Similarly, some stakeholders may be

less technologically literate than others and require information to be disseminated through more traditional methods such as print and radio as opposed to via the internet.

**Collective action** – All stakeholders agreeing to work together will achieve a successful engagement process. The roles and responsibilities should be defined, and procedures agreed and followed. This helps maintain the trusted relationship.

**Empowerment** – Ensure that decisions you make reflect the views of the participants and stakeholders and you provide feedback to the community on how the engagement process influenced the final decisions. This demonstrates to the community that you have heard their concerns and acted upon them where appropriate.

# Developing an Effective Engagement Strategy

→ You should develop a Stakeholder Engagement Strategy at the earliest possible opportunity. This strategy can evolve with time as the project moves through the various stages of development. Therefore, the elements of the strategy do not have to be fully populated from the outset, but by simply preparing it puts thought into the process which increases the likelihood that the engagement will happen effectively.

Typically, a Stakeholder Engagement Strategy has four stages – Plan; Prepare; Implement; and Act, review, improve – as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Four stages to developing an effective Stakeholder Engagement Strategy

PLAN	PREPARE	IMPLEMENT	ACT, REVIEW, IMPROVE
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Profile and map stakeholders</li> <li>2. Determine engagement levels and methods</li> <li>3. Set Terms of Reference</li> <li>4. Draft Engagement Plan</li> <li>5. Establish indicators</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mobilise resources</li> <li>2. Build capacity</li> <li>3. Identify and prepare for engagement risks</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Invite stakeholders to engage</li> <li>2. Brief stakeholders</li> <li>3. Engage</li> <li>4. Document the engagement and its outputs</li> <li>5. Develop an action plan</li> <li>6. Communicate engagement outputs and action plan</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Monitor and evaluate the engagement</li> <li>2. Learn and improve</li> <li>3. Follow up on action plan</li> <li>4. Report on engagement – Community Report</li> </ol>

## → Stakeholder Engagement Plan

The REC should draft a Stakeholder Engagement Plan (SEP) at the outset of the project. The SEP should include community and stakeholder engagement activities related to both the development and community benefits. A good SEP will evolve and develop over time as the project moves through its different phases and in response to the engagement itself.

### Objectives of stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement must have a purpose. A key aspect to developing a SEP is determining the engagement’s objectives. Community developers need to identify and decide upon what their objectives are; for example, are they related to strategy development or operations? Are they long term or short term? Some examples you may consider include:

- Develop a renewable electricity generation project for the benefit of the local community.
- Develop a renewable electricity generation project with the community.
- Identify potential off takers for any future CBF associated with the project.
- Gain knowledge to inform the development of the project.
- Build trust with the community stakeholders.
- Ensure best practice methods are used throughout the lifetime of the project.
- Ensure transparent continuous communication with all parties throughout the process.
- Ensure early and honest responses to complaints and concerns.
- Address and improve operational issues once the project is energised.

The list above shows the engagement objectives will change as the project moves through the various stages of development and into the operation stage.

Typical early-stage objectives may be as simple as:

- Gauge the community interest in a community renewable energy project being developed within the community.
- Identify community members that may be interested in joining the REC to help develop the project.

Whilst later-stage objectives during construction and operation may include:

- Communicate Construction Plan and potential disruption associated with construction noise or traffic.
- Update community on the project; for example, how much electricity is being generated? What does this mean for carbon offsetting and economic benefits to the community?

## Profile and map stakeholders

Stakeholder mapping is an essential activity, as noted in the key principles and good practices for community and stakeholder communication, although not all stakeholders and community groups will have the same communication needs and priorities.

When identifying the relevant stakeholders, it is important you consider the why and the how of the engagement; why are you doing it, what do you want to achieve and how are you going to do it?

An example of one of the highest priority stakeholders in any potential project is the landowner associated with the development. Because of the direct impact of the development on this stakeholder, a high level of engagement will be necessary to ensure this relationship is maintained. Why are you engaging? Simply put, because the maintenance of this relationship is vital for the project to proceed. How? Ongoing engagement in person, on phone and via letter/email in relation to legal matters.

An example of a potentially lower priority stakeholder may be a State organisation that requires consultation as part of the statutory planning process, but the project does not really impact its services. Why are you engaging? Because it is a statutory engagement. How? A one-off letter/email communicating the project details and requesting feedback if deemed necessary.

A list of potential stakeholders is provided earlier in the toolkit – really, a stakeholder is a person, entity or group that has the potential to be impacted by the proposed project in any manner. There is also a list of statutory stakeholders that you will need to consult as part of the planning process.

Table 2 is a sample mapping template to help you undertake a stakeholder mapping exercise for your project. This template can list out the stakeholders, identify their potential interest in the project and evaluate their priority level for engagement.

Table 2: Mapping template for identifying stakeholders’ interest and priority

Stakeholder	Interest in issue	Influence/power	Impact	Priority	Contact details
Local residents		High/Medium/Low		High/Medium/Low	
Community associations		High/Medium/Low		High/Medium/Low	
Local businesses and business groups		High/Medium/Low		High/Medium/Low	
Local voluntary organisations		High/Medium/Low		High/Medium/Low	
Local political representatives		High/Medium/Low		High/Medium/Low	
Social groups		High/Medium/Low		High/Medium/Low	

Stakeholder	Interest in issue	Influence/power	Impact	Priority	Contact details
Key service providers		High/Medium/Low		High/Medium/Low	
Environmental groups		High/Medium/Low		High/Medium/Low	

## Methods of engagement

There are many methods of engagement that you can use to ensure effective engagement. However, it is not a 'one size fits all' and you should tailor the method of engagement based on the stakeholder mapping, the individual stakeholder's capacity to engage (some stakeholders will require face-to-face engagement) and the project development stage.

Table 3 evaluates different methods of effective stakeholder engagement along with their strengths and weaknesses. The table has been adapted from [www.communityplanningtoolkit.org](http://www.communityplanningtoolkit.org).

Table 3: Evaluation of different methods of effective stakeholder engagement

Method	Strengths	Weaknesses	Appropriate uses
<b>Art and creativity:</b> Includes photography, songs, poems, artwork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suitable for all ages</li> <li>• Interactive, engaging</li> <li>• Generates ideas in a participative approach</li> <li>• Exhibits can stimulate/further discussion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of confidence in creative skills</li> <li>• Needs a large space to exhibit</li> <li>• Interpretation of art may be challenging</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More suitable for younger stakeholders where the community wish to involve local people of all ages</li> <li>• Very useful at the start of an engagement process to raise awareness</li> </ul>
<b>Community mapping:</b> Maps and photos used to allow people to say what they like or dislike about their area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stimulates discussion</li> <li>• Builds a sense of community ownership</li> <li>• Help people to see their community in different ways</li> <li>• Can map land use, community assets, facilities and transport options</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can generate ideas that are impossible to implement</li> <li>• People need to be familiar with the area</li> <li>• May be difficult to interpret ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As part of a public meeting – useful way to engage people of all levels of capability</li> </ul>
<b>Planning for Real®:<sup>1</sup></b> Construction of a model of the area in question, cards with ideas are placed where people want the facility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adds variety and engages people who may not otherwise get involved</li> <li>• Accessible to all</li> <li>• Builds a sense of community ownership</li> <li>• Helps people to see their community in different ways</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can generate ideas that are impossible to implement</li> <li>• Event prep can be time consuming</li> <li>• Card count may be seen as conclusive and can cause disagreement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As part of a public meeting – accessible to people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities</li> <li>• Enables participants to identify issues and prioritise actions</li> </ul>
<b>Door-to-door engagement:</b> Home visits to local stakeholders to inform them of the proposed project and get their views	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meets the proposer at their home location so accesses people with limited mobility or access to technology-based forms of communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some people may not appreciate a call to their home</li> <li>• Time consuming; can result in spending a disproportionate time with a particular stakeholder</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Useful way to engage with landowners and stakeholders in the immediate vicinity of the project and the proposed access route</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> Planning for Real® (PFR) is a nationally recognised community planning process based on a 3D model. The process allows residents to register their views on a range of issues, to work together to identify priorities, and in partnership with local agencies go on to develop an action plan for change. For more information, see [www.planningforreal.org.uk/what-is-pfr/](http://www.planningforreal.org.uk/what-is-pfr/).

Method	Strengths	Weaknesses	Appropriate uses
<p><b>Public meetings:</b> Face to face meetings that could be open to the public or by invite for target stakeholder groups.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enables many people to have their say</li> <li>Can allow for small group discussion and feedback</li> <li>Provides opportunity to explain the process and get feedback</li> <li>Demonstrates openness and transparency</li> <li>Can attract publicity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Unlikely to be representative</li> <li>Attendance can be low unless people deeply concerned</li> <li>Some people not comfortable speaking in a large group</li> <li>May lead to conflict</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As part of a series of events, can be a valuable way to share information and demonstrate openness and transparency</li> </ul>
<p><b>Workshops and focus groups:</b> Designed to exchange information, can focus on a single issue or range of topics</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>People can discuss ideas in an open and relaxed atmosphere</li> <li>Encourages active discussion</li> <li>Efficient way of identifying and clarifying key issues</li> <li>Easier to handle conflict in a small group</li> <li>Can target hard-to-reach groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Difficult to ensure representation in small groups</li> <li>Can be dominated by certain people if not managed</li> <li>Need experienced facilitators</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Useful way to encourage discussion among those who feel less confident in a large group</li> <li>Can be used to target certain interest groups</li> </ul>
<p><b>Door-to-door engagement:</b> Home visits to local stakeholders to inform them of the proposed project and get their views</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meets the proposer at their home location so accesses people with limited mobility or access to technology-based forms of communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some people may not appreciate a call to their home</li> <li>Time consuming and can result in spending a disproportionate time with a particular stakeholder</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Useful way to engage with landowners and stakeholders in the immediate vicinity of the project and the proposed access route</li> </ul>
<p><b>Newsletter correspondence:</b> Publish a quarterly project newsletter in local paper/community circular and email to those who provided an email address for contact purposes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Allows up-to-date project information to be published periodically and ensures that contact details for communication liaison officer are widely available</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Would only update periodically, so risk of some information becoming out of date</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Useful way to keep the community informed of project progress</li> <li>Can inform of broader community engagement activities</li> </ul>
<p><b>Web-based engagement:</b> Includes online discussion forums and blogs, Facebook, online surveys, social networking, ratings and voting and digital interactive TV</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>People can choose a convenient time</li> <li>Very useful for people that may be housebound</li> <li>Cost effective</li> <li>Reach a large audience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May need a moderator to manage online comments</li> <li>Excludes people with no internet access</li> <li>Some people may feel intimidated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May work best as part of a package of methods</li> </ul>
<p><b>Community surveys:</b> Identify the needs and views of many people in a standard format, can be postal, drop and collect, telephone or interview</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can engage many people</li> <li>Useful for getting quantitative data</li> <li>Data can be compared over time</li> <li>Useful for identifying needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Needs to be very well designed</li> <li>Time consuming and labour intensive</li> <li>Information may be limited</li> <li>Typical response rates are 10-20%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Best used as part of a programme of other methods, otherwise can be limited in scope and provide little meaningful community engagement</li> </ul>

Method	Strengths	Weaknesses	Appropriate uses
<b>Roundtable/ consensus building:</b> An open discussion usually comprising 16-24 participants representing a variety of sectors; operated by consensus – no leader but may need facilitator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brings people together as equals</li> <li>• Encourages open discussion</li> <li>• Confronts issues rather than people</li> <li>• May create innovative solutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires a lot of preparation</li> <li>• Needs skilled facilitators</li> <li>• May preclude some parts of the community, open to dominance by powerful social groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Useful for peer exchange and building trust between stakeholders and facilitators</li> </ul>
<b>Street stalls:</b> Outdoor displays capturing the views and comments of large numbers of passers-by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interactive so encourages open discussion</li> <li>• Can engage many people</li> <li>• Generates interest</li> <li>• Can reach people who may not normally participate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can generate a large amount of off-topic data</li> <li>• Requires more extensive planning, particularly in creating the display and if aimed to coincide with local events</li> <li>• Need several facilitators</li> <li>• Weather may affect the event</li> <li>• Footfall not guaranteed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choose a busy public location</li> <li>• Could coincide with a local festival to maximise number of participants</li> </ul>

Take some time while preparing your engagement plan to determine which methods of communication are the best fit for your project and its associated stakeholders. Prepare a rough programme for when the key engagement activities are likely to occur, most likely linked to key project development milestones.

Using a variety of communication channels and engagement activities is key to ensuring that the outcomes of an engagement process represent the local community's views.

Community developers exhibiting good practice should:

- Combine face-to-face events with digital communications and engagement methods to reach a broad range of people.
- Record and share the outputs or events.
- Plan events around people's lifestyle patterns. Consider the timing and location of events and use existing channels or meetings that people already attend.
- Use innovative methods such as visual representations and 3D models, photomontages and site visits to bring the potential development to life.

## Planning legislation requirements and Guidelines for public consultation

As noted in the introduction to this toolkit, effective community and stakeholder engagement is a vital aspect in delivering a successful project. There is also a minimum level of consultation that is required as part of the planning process that community developers need to know.

The legal framework for the planning system in Ireland is the Planning and Development Act 2000, which states that the purpose of the legislation is *"to provide, in the interests of the common good, for proper planning and sustainable development"*.

The 2019 draft revised Wind Energy Development Guidelines<sup>2</sup> include several new measures to increase and enhance the levels of community engagement. Both communities and industry have welcomed the new Guidelines. These measures will help to develop SLO, and include:

- Enabling planning authorities to consider the degree to which wind energy developers have meaningfully and properly consulted with the local community and facilitated public participation.

<sup>2</sup> [www.gov.ie/en/publication/9d0f66-draft-revised-wind-energy-development-guidelines-december-2019/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/9d0f66-draft-revised-wind-energy-development-guidelines-december-2019/)

- Opening up opportunity for community participation in renewable generation.
- Planning authorities should require that any developer prepare and submit a Community Report with their planning application to ensure early engagement with the communities. The Community Report must include following:
  - A map of the project and all communities within a 10 km radius.
  - Steps taken to understand the views of the community.
  - A summary of the community responses and any decisions taken as a result of that feedback.
  - Details of the enduring economic benefit for the community through investment or benefit funds.
- A condition should be attached to all planning permissions requiring developers to comply with the community engagement proposals as per the Community Report for the lifetime of the project.
- New planning applications for wind developments under these guidelines will be required to comply with the Code of Practice for Wind Energy Development in Ireland Guidelines for Community Engagement (see below) and demonstrate annual compliance with its provisions.

In addition to the Guidelines above, the Code of Practice for Wind Energy Development in Ireland Guidelines for Community Engagement<sup>3</sup> issued by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (2016) is “intended to ensure that wind energy development in Ireland is undertaken in observance with the best industry practices, and with the full engagement of communities around the country”. The Code of Practice sets out several practical steps that wind energy development promoters must comply with in engaging with communities:

1. **Contact and visibility:** A nominated CLO should be appointed, who is readily accessible and schedules ongoing community engagement.
2. **Arrangements for making contact:** Extensive dissemination of the project must take place.
3. **Engagement:** Engagement with the local community occurs throughout the project, and start as early as possible.
4. **Compliance with statutory/regulatory obligations:** Planning consent, community engagement and Environmental Impact Assessments must be fully complied with.
5. **Community benefit:** Due consideration must be given to the economic benefit of the project to the local community throughout the lifetime of the project.
6. **Impact mitigation:** Some projects can have both a positive and a negative impact on a local community; reasonable steps must be taken to mitigate or compensate for these impacts.
7. **Independent advisory and information bodies:** Local communities should have access to independent State bodies for advice, such as SEAI, National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Geological Survey of Ireland (GSI).
8. **Expert professional advice:** Individuals are advised to take independent legal advice before signing agreements or contracts for wayleaves, benefits, etc.
9. **Ancillary development:** All information related to projects, such as grid connections, road access, traffic management, must be fully disclosed to the local community.
10. **Reports:** Every 12 months, the promoters should publish a report with the following information: actions that they have taken in accordance with its principles; any issues that have arisen; complaints received and response undertaken; and benefit measures implemented with local individuals and communities.

Whilst the above reference documents are wind-related, the principles also apply to solar development.

<sup>3</sup> [assets.gov.ie/109110/b419a104-e6df-4a3e-a7ef-172166932bee.pdf](https://assets.gov.ie/109110/b419a104-e6df-4a3e-a7ef-172166932bee.pdf)

## Establish Terms of Reference

It is important for the REC to consider the Terms of Reference for their stakeholder engagement. This means that when developing the plan, you decide on what and when stakeholders can provide input.

Why is this important? If stakeholders have not agreed and understood clear Terms of Reference at the outset of the project, it may lead to a misunderstanding later on as to where and on what a stakeholder has influence. This could lead to them feeling that you have not listened their views and cause a break in the trusted relationship.

It is also important to note that not all stakeholders will have the same Terms of Reference. For example, a State body consulted about the planning process will only provide input on their specific area of authority, whereas a community stakeholder will probably interact on all aspects related to the layout, location and access of the project.

Therefore, having undertaken your stakeholder mapping exercise, establish the Terms of Reference for each stakeholder group.

## Prepare the Stakeholder Engagement Plan

Having undertaken the activities described in the preceding sections, you will have essentially prepared your SEP – What, Who, How and When.

The REC should collate the information associated with the SEP into a single document for which one member will be the owner. Given the limited resources that may be available to the REC, the owner of the SEP should ideally be the dedicated CLO. Throughout the project life, you will need to review and update the SEP as required, depending on the stage of project development, new information received regarding a stakeholder, feedback from engagement activities, etc.

The next stage is to prepare for the engagement activity, undertake what you have set out in the SEP and ensure feedback from the engagement informs your project design.

## → Prepare | Implement | Act, Review, Improve

Your REC will need to mobilise a team to undertake the stakeholder engagement. A key member of the team is the nominated CLO, who will be responsible for:

- Leading the engagement strategy preparation.
- Mobilising the team to undertake the engagement.
- Leading the engagement activity.
- Preparing reports on the activity.
- Updating the SEP as necessary as the project progresses through the various phases of development.
- Ensuring the community and stakeholders realise how their input has influenced the design and the trajectory of the project.

### Prepare

Following preparing the SEP, and identifying stakeholders and the preferred communication methods, the CLO should identify the resources required to undertake the planned engagement. The resources will be varied, and different activities will be required to be undertaken by different resources. The team will consist of:

- REC members – responsible for most of the engagement activities.

- Members of the professional team supporting the project – particularly at the design, planning, pre-construction and construction stages.
- Potentially SEAI TAs and other resources to advise on support available to communities in developing renewable energy projects.
- Other communities that are undertaking their own renewable energy project journeys to provide their experiences.

It is important that the engagement team are aware of the time input that will be required of them (particularly the Renewable Energy Team members), and clearly understand the why (objective) and the what (relevant project details). This information should be in the SEP so it is important that all team members are aware of its contents.

Besides human resources, other resources required to implement the SEP may include:

- Project pamphlets providing relevant project information
- Project poster and drawings that may be required for community engagement events
- Project website
- Project models
- Project email address and phone number for communication
- Etc.

Once the appropriate resources are in place, you can implement the SEP.

## **Implement**

The SEP is ready, the team is ready and the resources are ready. Now it is time to implement.

As part of the development of the SEP, your REC will have identified the relevant stakeholders and set out how you intend to engage with them. Following the SEP, invite stakeholders to engage using the chosen communication method for them.

Different methods to invite stakeholders to engage include:

- Email or letter informing stakeholders of engagement event and/or providing project information and requesting feedback.
- A notice in the local paper of an upcoming community engagement event/meeting.
- A leaflet drop informing stakeholders of the engagement event and/or providing project information and requesting feedback.
- A stand at the local village/ shop informing stakeholders of the engagement event and/or providing project information and requesting feedback.
- Calling door to door informing stakeholders of engagement event and/or providing project information and requesting feedback.
- Word of mouth.

After each engagement activity, document the outcomes. A register of engagement activity that identifies the stakeholder, logs the activity and notes the outcome can be useful for single engagement activities such as door-to-door activity, letter and email correspondence, and village stalls. Also record in this register any feedback or engagement activity received in writing.

You should prepare a more detailed report for meetings which sets out the information that was provided in the meeting, the number of stakeholders in attendance, feedback received and any

particular issues that require direct follow-up with a stakeholder. The high-level details from the report can be included in the engagement register to summarise all activity in one location.

The register of engagement can form the basis of an action plan – a plan to review and update the project details and design based on feedback received as part of the engagement. It can also form the basis of the community engagement report that will be required to be submitted as part of any potential planning application for the project.

At each new engagement event, provide feedback to stakeholders on:

- The outcome of the previous engagement.
- How the REC listened to the feedback from stakeholders.
- What actions the REC took regarding this feedback – this includes changes to project details and also where, following review, an explanation of why it was not possible to implement a specific aspect of the project feedback.

It is important that you follow the SEP and update it throughout the engagement activity. This ensures that you are following the SEP as established from the outset and no stakeholder is missed. When involved in time-pressured activities associated with a renewable energy project development, it is very easy to forget the need to engage and communicate your decision-making process. Having one person on the REC responsible for this – the CLO – will mitigate this risk, as they can ensure that engagement is a topic at every project meeting.

## **Act, Review and Improve**

As you move through the project development phases and carry out the engagement as set out in your SEP, you will likely make mistakes or engagement may not happen as you envisioned.

This is perfectly normal and is to be expected. It is one reason you should review and update the SEP regularly. It is also an important reason to hold the engagement register and prepare reports following engagement events. Carrying out these activities helps the REC to understand what is going well and what is not working. Having this knowledge enables your group to change its strategy, improve it and ensure more effective engagement, thereby giving your project a greater chance of success.

It is also very important to ensure that your community group acts on the feedback it receives regarding the project. Failure to act on feedback – this can be by updating project details/design or stating why aspects of the project cannot change – will result in a breakdown of the trusted relationship. Stakeholders will feel like the engagement activity was just a box-checking activity and their views were not really important. It is very hard to regain trust once it has been lost.

Community engagement will continue right through the project's lifetime – potentially 30-35 years of an operational period. As the project moves into this operation phase, the intensity of communication may reduce and the strategy may evolve to be one of engaging stakeholders in the benefits of the community energy project through target site visits for other community groups and schools.

# Benefits of community and stakeholder engagement

→ There are many benefits to your project by carrying out well thought out, executed and responsive community and stakeholder engagement. These include:

- **Securing local acceptance for a project:** People participating in the engagement process increase the likelihood of the project being accepted. People commit to help to make the projects happen, so try to foster trust in the process.
- **Building local consensus:** Using local knowledge from a diverse group creates solutions that are more practical and effective. People can practise their communication and decision-making skills. When people from different areas of the community work together, they often find that they have much in common.
- **Identifying collaborative opportunities:** This increases community knowledge and problem-solving skills. People learn about the issues, and knowledge allows them to see multiple aspects of the issues. Try to create opportunities for regular discussions; this will allow the community to express concerns before things are out of control.
- **Building connections:** By creating local networks of community members, the more people who know what is going on and who will work toward a goal, the more likely the community will be successful in reaching its goals.

# Reference material and further reading

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Climate Action Plan 2021 – Government of Ireland: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/6223e-climate-action-plan-2021/> 

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SEAI Community Energy Resource Toolkit – Solar PV: [www.seai.ie/publications/Community-Toolkit-Solar-PV.pdf](http://www.seai.ie/publications/Community-Toolkit-Solar-PV.pdf) 

Community Energy – A practical guide to reclaiming power. Friends of the Earth Europe, REScoop.EU, Energy Cities: [friendsoftheearth.eu/publication/community-energy-guide/](http://friendsoftheearth.eu/publication/community-energy-guide/) 

# Glossary

→	<b>CBF</b>	Community Benefit Fund
	<b>CLO</b>	Community Liaison Office
	<b>EPA</b>	Environmental Protection Agency
	<b>GSI</b>	Geological Survey of Ireland
	<b>NPWS</b>	National Parks and Wildlife Service
	<b>REC</b>	Renewable Energy Community
	<b>RESS</b>	Renewable Electricity Support Scheme
	<b>Scdc</b>	Scottish Community development Centre
	<b>SEAI</b>	Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland
	<b>SEP</b>	Stakeholder Engagement Plan
	<b>SLO</b>	Social licence to operate



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