

Public Attitudes to Windfarms

MORI Scotland

In February 2003, MORI Scotland was commissioned by the Scottish Executive to conduct survey research among people living close to Scotland's operational windfarms. A total of 1,810 adults aged 18+ were interviewed by telephone between 27 February and the 18 March 2003. All respondents lived within a 20 km zone of the 10 operational windfarms that have 9 or more turbines. The survey obtained results that are representative of people living within three zones (up to 5 km of a windfarm, 5 km to 10 km and 10 to 20 km), and are representative of people living within 20 km of each of the ten windfarms.

Main findings

- People living within 20 km of a windfarm like the areas they live in, mentioning the peacefulness (28%), scenery (26%), rural isolation (23%) and friendly people (20%) as particular strengths. When asked to say what the shortcomings are, most commonly mentioned are a lack of amenities (20%), poor public transport (18%), and lack of jobs (8%).
- Unless prompted to do so, people who live within 20 km of windfarms rarely mention the local windfarm, if asked to describe the positive or negative aspects of living where they do. Five respondents in the survey spontaneously mentioned their local windfarm as a negative aspect of the area, and two mentioned it as a positive aspect.
- Three times the number of residents say that their local windfarm has had a broadly positive impact on the area (20%) as say that it has had a negative impact (7%). Most people feel that it has had neither a positive nor a negative impact.
- People who lived in their homes before the windfarm was developed say that, in advance of the windfarm development, they thought that problems might be caused by its impact on the landscape (27%), traffic during construction (19%) and noise during construction (15%). By comparison, since the windfarm development, only 12% say the landscape has been spoiled, 6% say that during construction there were problems with additional traffic, and 4% say there was noise or disturbance from construction traffic.
- There is substantial support for the idea of enlarging existing windfarm sites among those who live close to them, particularly if the increase in the number of turbines involves the addition of no more than 50% of the existing number. A majority (54%) would support an expansion of their local windfarm by half the number of turbines again, while one in ten is opposed (9%). Support drops somewhat if the proposal is to double the number of turbines. In this case, four in ten would be in favour (42%) and one in five (21%) would be opposed.

Visibility of windfarms

Just one in eight people who live within 20 km of a windfarm can see the turbines from their homes (12%), and one in five say that they never see the turbines (20%). For those who live closer to the windfarm site, the turbines are more visible. For example six in ten (63%) of those who live within 5 km of their local windfarm site can see the turbines from their homes.

Of those who do see the turbines, few say they can see them all the time (12%), although this is more common for those that live within 5 km of the sites, of whom 58% say they can see the turbines all the time.

Many of those living within 20 km say that they see the turbines when travelling on local (45%) or major (48%) roads.

Attitudes towards the area

Most people who live within 20 km of a windfarm rate their area as either 'very good' (50%) or 'fairly good' (42%). They like the peacefulness (28%), scenery (26%) and rural isolation (23%). The drawbacks mentioned by respondents are the lack of amenities (20%) and poor public transport (18%). Only seven respondents spontaneously mentioned their local windfarm as either a negative or positive aspect of the area.

Overall impact of windfarms

People are three times as likely to say that they feel that their local windfarm has had a generally positive impact on the area (20%) as they are to say it has had a negative impact (7%). Many hold mixed views (51%), or express no opinion at all (22%). People living within 5 km of the local windfarm hold the most positive views, with 45% saying that they think the overall impact has been positive, and 6% saying they think it has been negative. Those living between 5 and 10 km of the windfarm share a similar opinion, with 43% saying the windfarm has had a positive impact and 6% saying it has been negative.

Anticipated, and actual, impact of windfarms

Respondents were asked to think back to their views prior to the construction of the windfarm, and to say whether they had anticipated certain specific problems as a result of the proposed windfarm. Three quarters of people living within 20 km of a windfarm say that they were resident when the windfarm was developed. Of these people, around half (54%) say that they did not anticipate problems with any of the issues. On the other hand, 27% thought the landscape might be spoiled, 18% thought there might be extra traffic during construction, and 15% thought that construction might cause noise or disturbance. One in eight (12%) thought there might be damage to plant or animal life or that there might be noise from the turbines.

Asked to comment on the extent to which each of these issues had actually been a problem, eight in ten say that none has (82%), while one in eight (12%) says that the landscape has been spoiled, 6% say that there was extra traffic during construction, and 4% say that construction caused noise or disturbance. Those living within 5 km of a windfarm are no more likely to say that these issues have been problems.

Information provision

People within 20 km of the proposed windfarm recall getting information about the proposal from local newspapers (40%), but many do not remember getting any information at all (37%). People living closest to the windfarm, within 5 km, are just as likely to say they got information from the local newspaper, but are more likely than others to say they got information from the local authority planning office (13%), a public meeting (12%) or by word of mouth (11%).

Suggestions for methods of communication and consultation for any future windfarm proposals include the use of local newspapers (43%), household delivery of leaflets (33%) and public meetings (29%).

Consultation

Few people living within 20 km of a windfarm prior to the development of the windfarm can remember being consulted **by the developer** about the proposal. One in ten (10%) says that they can remember being consulted, but did not respond, and 3% say that they did respond. However, two thirds say they think there was no consultation by the developer (64%) and a quarter simply cannot remember (23%). People who live within 5 km are more likely to say they responded to consultation by the developer (13%), or remember that there was consultation, but that they did not respond (21%).

Within the 20 km zone, fewer still recall being consulted by their **local authority** (9%), although once again, those living within 5 km are more likely to say they responded to consultation by the local authority (8%), or that they remember it, but did not respond (15%).

Most people who were living within 20 km of a windfarm prior to its construction say that they hold fairly neutral views about the level of consultation prior to the development. While 18% say they were satisfied with the consultation by the local authority and 16% were dissatisfied, 23% were satisfied with the consultation by the developer, and 11% were dissatisfied.

Attitudes towards expansion of the local windfarm

The majority of people living within 20 km of a windfarm would support its expansion by adding half as many turbines again (54%). One in ten (9%) is opposed. Support is higher among those living within 5 km of the site (65%), while opposition is similar (8%). However, levels of support fall when people are asked to consider a doubling of the number of turbines at their local windfarm. Faced with this, four in ten would support expansion (42%) and one in five would oppose (21%). Support is higher among those who live within 5 km of the windfarm (50% support), while opposition is similar (20%).

Future energy policy

There is overwhelming support for an increase in the proportion of electricity generated in Scotland by wind energy among people living within 20 km of a windfarm site. Eight in ten support an increase (82%), while 2% think it should be reduced and 11% maintained at current levels. There is also widespread support for increasing the use of wave energy (69%). On the other hand, few want to see an increase in the use of coal (9%), oil (also 9%) and nuclear (7%) generation. Many would like to see a reduction in the use of these sources (60%, 48% and 68% respectively).

The majority believe that the Scottish Executive's policy is to increase the proportion of electricity generated in Scotland using wind energy (66%). The Scottish Executive's commitment extends to all forms of renewable energy technology, from wind (onshore and offshore), hydro and biomass to wave, tidal and solar.

About the study

At the time of sampling for the survey, there were a total of 10 windfarms operating in Scotland comprising nine or more turbines. The research was conducted among residents living within 20 km of these 10 windfarms.

Each of the 10 windfarms was located and mapped using a grid reference approximate to the centre of the windfarm. Zones were plotted around each windfarm, corresponding to distances of 0-5 km, 5-10 km and 10-20 km. The small user file of the Postcode Address File (PAF) was then used to list all postal addresses falling within each zone. Sampled addresses with telephone numbers were then selected at random. Finally, once contacted, at each address the individual selected for interview was randomly selected from all adults (aged 18+) living at the property. At the analysis stage, data were weighted by population size within each zone for each windfarm site, to correct for the disproportionate sampling strategy.

A total of 1,810 adults aged 18+ were interviewed by telephone between 27th February and 18th March 2003, with a response rate of 28%.

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