



Engagement in tidal power

In 2006, the Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) launched a research project on tidal power in the UK. The project comprised a detailed desk research exercise (from November 2006), followed by a public and stakeholder engagement programme (from March to April 2007). The SDC published the report of the findings from the engagement programme, and its own policy position report¹, in October 2007.

This summary report identifies the main findings from the evaluation study of the engagement programme. A full report of the evaluation is available, which includes analyses of all the statistical and qualitative data.

The evaluation research was carried out over the whole of the public and stakeholder engagement process, from February 2007, and was completed in March 2008. The research included observation and informal interviews at events, questionnaires at events, interviews with public and stakeholder participants, policy makers using the outputs from the engagement processes, and those involved in commissioning and delivering the process, followed by quantitative and qualitative analysis of all the data collected.

Context

The issues around tidal power in the UK have been discussed over many decades, but it is only in recent years that it has become a national policy priority.

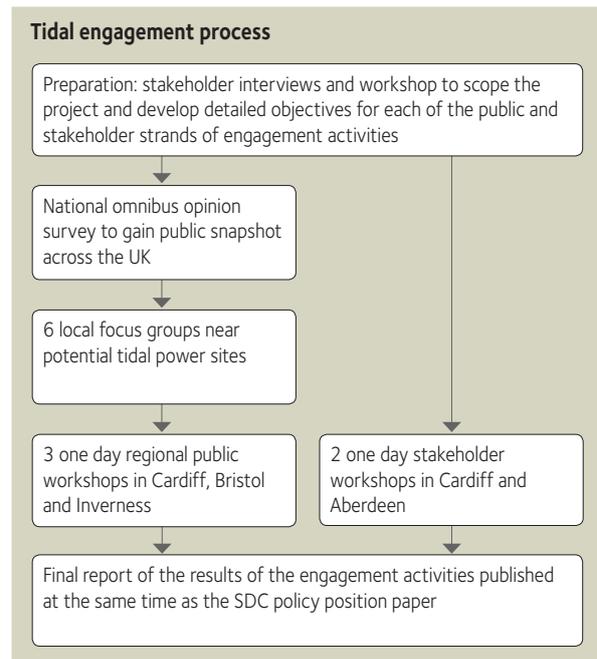
In 2006, the SDC identified the potential for a project on tidal power from a UK-wide perspective and, later that year, the Government announced that the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) would work with the SDC and the Welsh Assembly Government, the South West Regional Development Agency and other interested parties "to explore the issues arising on the tidal resource in the UK, including the Severn Estuary, including potential costs and benefits of developments using the range of tidal technologies and their public acceptability". Public acceptability, and the involvement of stakeholders, was therefore a key element of the SDC's work on tidal power.

The Sustainable Development Commission has invested significantly in public and stakeholder engagement programmes in the past, and is known for promoting good practice in the field. Their final policy position report said that "effective engagement is essential to the development of truly sustainable policy-making... Engagement is particularly important for understanding new technologies such as tidal power, as new technologies represent an unknown quantity to many stakeholders and to the general public. It is also important when considering potential large-scale infrastructure development such as tidal barrages and lagoons, which have significant potential effects on the environment, economy and society at a regional and local level." It was therefore important for the SDC to review and identify lessons from this major and highly contentious programme on tidal power to inform its own and others' future engagement activities.

The engagement activities

The overall purpose of the engagement programme was to understand public and stakeholder attitudes towards tidal power generally, particular tidal power technologies and proposals for the Severn Estuary, as well as views on financing and decision making, and conditions for public and stakeholder acceptability of tidal power. Detailed objectives were developed for each of the public and stakeholder engagement strands of activity.

The main engagement process (as below) integrated public and stakeholder engagement activities, alongside other work with stakeholders conducted by the SDC.



The public engagement programme was delivered by Opinion Leader and comprised:

- An **ombibus public opinion survey** of 1,000 people across the UK (eight questions added to a public opinion survey), to gather information on current public awareness and views on tidal power, and a tidal barrage across Severn Estuary.
- Six **focus groups** (of 8 people each), with two groups in each of three local communities which could be directly affected by potential tidal power schemes. Two of the locations were either side of the Severn Estuary, and the other in the Orkney Islands. Some participants from the focus groups went on to attend a workshop in their locality.
- Three **regional workshops** in areas close to sites that may be affected by tidal power developments (Cardiff, Bristol and Inverness), with 20 participants at each.

The stakeholder engagement programme was delivered by The Environment Council and comprised:

- Two **workshops** with a total of 72 key stakeholders: 22 in the North (Aberdeen), and 50 in the South (Cardiff).

The SDC work with stakeholders, alongside this main programme, included an online debate with the SDC's Stakeholder Panel, email circulations of updates, discussions with individual stakeholders and a workshop with local authorities from around the Severn.

What worked well

The evaluation has identified several aspects of good practice through analysis of questionnaire feedback (shown as percentages of respondents; based on a return rate of 95% from public and 94% from stakeholders), interviews and observation:

The process worked very well for participants. 97% of public respondents and 86% of stakeholders were satisfied with the event they attended, and 94% of public respondents and 95% of stakeholders said they had enjoyed taking part. There was a good mix of participants at all events, and there was a lot of support for the workshop approach especially working in small groups in which participants could share views easily with others.

Participants learned something new (including from each other). 95% of public respondents and 77% of stakeholders agreed they had learnt something new. These figures are unusually high for stakeholders, who usually have a good level of knowledge on the subject. In this case, the level of learning may have resulted from the breadth of coverage of issues on the day (so few stakeholders knew everything about everything), the wide range of stakeholders present, and the willingness of participants to listen to and learn from each other.

Participants from both strands particularly mentioned the value to them of learning from each other: 51% of stakeholders said that hearing each others' views was one of the best aspects of the event for them - as one said "Hearing views from different stakeholders, seeing what was important to and them why was very interesting" (Aberdeen interviewee). However, the public in particular also found the information provided valuable, and 87% of the public and 54% of stakeholders agreed the information had been fair and balanced.

Participants could have their say and be listened to.

81% of public respondents and 78% of stakeholders agreed that they had been able to discuss the issues that concerned them. Participants also felt everyone had an equal chance to speak and that no single voice was allowed to dominate. Stakeholders particularly appreciated the non-confrontational atmosphere which enabled people to air their views freely.

Clarity and transparency. There were high levels of understanding of the objectives of the event (90% of public and 88% of stakeholder respondents). However, there were much lower levels of understanding of how the results of the events would be used by the SDC in policy making (60% of the public and 41% of stakeholders).

Recording and reporting. The use of flip charts for recording and reporting stakeholders' views worked well to ensure that everything recorded was transparent and open to challenge throughout the meetings. Stakeholders valued receiving the transcripts of the flip charts soon after the events. There was also agreement that the outputs of the events did genuinely reflect the discussions by participants: 86% of public respondents and 60% of stakeholders agreed.

Increased enthusiasm for future involvement. All the public participants interviewed said they were more likely to get involved in future in discussions of this sort as a result of their involvement here. This is a very good indication of satisfaction with the process, and provides evidence of the impact of the process on participants' willingness to become 'active citizens' by getting involved in future.

Clarified participants' thinking. The process had a major impact in terms of helping participants to clarify their thinking: 94% of public respondents and 73% of stakeholders agreed the event had helped them think more clearly about the issues. This type of clarification could be seen as a significant contribution to taking the debate forward. In addition, 58% of public and 24% of stakeholder respondents said they had changed their views as a result of attending the events.

Money well spent. Almost all public and stakeholder interviewees agreed that public engagement in policy is important and generally money well spent (only one of each disagreed)². Comments included:

"Yes. I don't think it's right if engineers and surveyors just go out and build without the say-so of those who will have to live with the changes." (Cardiff public interviewee)

"Yes it is important. We hopefully represent the views of the public, and perhaps raise questions that might not be considered." (Cardiff public interviewee)

"Participation on issues like this is critically important and definitely worth the money." (Cardiff stakeholder interviewee)

Developing contacts and networking. For stakeholders, this was one of the most useful aspects of the event. For example, one said "Just the act of bringing different stakeholders together - improves awareness of different concerns for different groups - got people talking that otherwise would not have met" (Cardiff stakeholder questionnaire).

What worked less well

Feedback from participants was generally that 'nothing' did not work well. However, a few concerns were identified:

Information in advance. Both public and stakeholders said they would have liked more information in advance. They wanted to know what stage the SDC's work on tidal power had reached and so how the engagement fitted in, but also simply details of the broad agenda for the event so people had an idea what to expect.

Reporting back to public participants. Immediately after the event, stakeholders were sent a transcript of notes taken during the day, and they were then informed by email of the publication of the SDC's final policy position and the final report of the engagement (October 2007). However, there was no communication with the public after the event, so they have had no information about what was produced from their events, nor about how their input influenced the SDC's final recommendations. This was an important gap in the delivery of the engagement process.

Lack of time on some issues. Some stakeholders felt there was not enough time for discussion on some key issues (e.g. financing and governance).

Value for those involved

The process had value for the public participants, the stakeholder participants, and policy-makers, as outlined below.

Value for public participants. As outlined above, the feedback was that the process worked very well and was a positive experience for public participants. They learnt something new, they felt they had a say and were listened to, and they valued sharing views with others.

Value for stakeholders. The feedback was that the process worked well for stakeholders, they appreciated the transparent methods of recording and reporting, they learnt something new (especially from each other), the event clarified their thinking, they liked meeting and working with other stakeholders (including building contacts and networking) and the interactive and non-confrontational atmosphere which allowed everyone to express their views.

Value for policy makers. Feedback from policy makers was that they felt the process was effectively designed and delivered. The interviews with policy makers also identified other areas of value to them:

- **Learning about engagement.** The process impacted positively on policy makers views of engagement. Comments included:

"My line on public opinion would in the past have been fairly negative and would have highlighted risks. Now I wouldn't be so negative, I would point to the SDC work as evidence of overall positive response. This is evidence-based policy-making." (policy interviewee)

"I've learnt. Not about how to do stakeholder engagement but that I should include that element in other work and take it a bit further than what we normally do." (policy interviewee)

"We've become more convinced that this has got to be part of what Government has to do when considering options." (policy interviewee)

Quality of outputs. The presentation of the key findings from the engagement programme directly to the SDC was particularly valued, and the final report was considered essential in providing an evidence base on public and stakeholder attitudes and concerns, to inform the policymaking.

Enabling policy to go forward. Some policy makers felt this was a necessary and unavoidable step to enabling policy to move forward; some felt that the results of the work also had genuine value and were a useful contribution to future work on tidal power.

Identifying areas of conflict and consensus. The process increased understanding among policy makers of the general acceptability or not of certain policy ideas. Comments included:

"Ministers have been pleased with the range of views sought by the SDC, from focus groups to the big stakeholder workshops. This seems to be the best way of collecting views, especially as views are so polarised, and it's important to get that difference." (policy interviewee)

"You can find common ground and deliberative processes help to reach that consensus. Engagement can help to find agreement on the right way to make developments." (policy interviewee)

Contribution to the evidence base for policy decisions. Policy makers recognised that integrating data from different sources into policy development (including from public and stakeholder engagement) was a creative and sometimes difficult process. The data on public and stakeholder views was seen to be an essential element of the evidence base. Comments included:

"I think that policy making is learning to integrate public opinion with other information." (policy interviewee)

"We have a report that includes stakeholder data along with other information...We looked at all the information and discussed it... We came to a consensus view. All views were heard, understood and taken into account. We got a richer final output." (policy interviewee)

The SDC role. The independence and open-mindedness of the SDC in running the process was seen by policy makers as a particular strength. Comments included:

"It was very clear that the SDC was independent and separate from the Government. The SDC's role came across well – DBERR couldn't have got the same input from people. The SDC conducted itself very well while maintaining good relations." (policy interviewee)

"What impressed me most was the ability [of the SDC/ process used] to keep minds open until the end. There was no pre-judgement. I think it was a model for decision-making." (policy interviewee)

Influence. While there were few radically new or surprising issues or ideas emerging from the engagement programme, the process did provide evidence that influenced the confidence with which the SDC could come to conclusions, and which was of value to other Government departments. Comments included:

“There was genuine debate at the SDC, which was informed by the workshops. The conclusion – the SDC’s view that a Severn barrage could be developed to benefit wildlife and habitats – could not have been foreseen...” (policy interviewee)

“I was not expecting what happened with the final output. I found myself telling [the Minister] that I had the sense that the public were fairly positive – that surprised me. Most of the letters we receive are from people who don’t like things, but going out and talking to people reveals quite a lot. Our perceptions inside the Department are wrong and that opens up policy options.” (policy interviewee)

Value for wider debates on sustainability. Feedback shows that public participants had talked about the issues quite extensively with other people after the event: the 10 people interviewed talked to about 70 others about the issues. In terms of public education on tidal power, this is quite a remarkable circle of dissemination – even if only judged in increasing levels of interest and awareness rather than increased detailed knowledge. Raised awareness about the nature of the issues (rather than specific details) is very valuable to the policy-making process, contributing to a better informed and more knowledgeable public.

Lessons for the future

Mix methods. A mix of engagement methods can be particularly valuable in gaining the maximum diversity of views from different constituencies; in this case, the mix of national polling, alongside focus groups and workshops in appropriate locations, provided a rich mix of data from different participants.

Appropriate size. Although a diverse range of views can be obtained from a relatively small sample, larger groups can sometimes provide additional benefits such as a greater sense of legitimacy and status among participants as well as policy makers, at potentially minimal extra cost.

Value of deliberation. Deliberative engagement processes provide new information and time for the participants to carefully consider input and develop their views through discussion. These processes can be very valuable in providing an opportunity for deeper engagement with benefits of public education as well as data on more considered attitudes and views, even on complex, technical and controversial subjects.

Good communications. The design and delivery of good engagement processes require significant skills and experience to be effective. In this case, the delivery organisations achieved all the objectives set for the process and delivered significant value throughout. This was only possible through close collaboration and communications between internal and external staff, and continuous discussions with key stakeholders, funders and others.

Transparent integration of data. The integration of data from different sources in policy development (including from engagement programmes) is an art rather than a purely technical exercise. It is important that this process, although complex and creative, is as transparent as possible to maximise trust and credibility in the process.

Feedback to participants. Feedback should be given to all participants as soon as possible after their involvement. Ideally feedback should provide a summary of what was provided to the decision makers based on their input, what influence that input had, and what is finally decided at the end of the process.

Appropriate information in advance. It may often be appropriate to provide more detailed information for participants in advance of their meeting, so they have a better idea of what they are being asked to do, and the nature of the process they are becoming involved in.

Clear evidence of influence. Evidence will always be needed of the influence of the results of the engagement programme, as this will affect the views of participants of the value of the exercise, and will affect trust in engagement generally.

Final conclusions

Developing an effective public and stakeholder engagement programme on the potentially highly contentious issue of tidal power, especially in the geographical locations most likely to be affected by any new developments, was a major challenge.

It was a flaw in the process not to have provided feedback to public participants on the final SDC policy position, and the influence of the public engagement process. It will be important to ensure better reporting back in future.

Overall, however, this was a very good and effective public engagement programme which met all the objectives set. The process has also provided significant value to the all the public and stakeholder participants involved, and to the policy makers who have used the outputs of the process in coming to policy conclusions. It has increased public awareness of the issues of climate change and the potential for tidal power technologies in the locations where they are most likely to be developed. It has also increased the willingness of public and stakeholder participants, and policy makers, to get involved in public and stakeholder engagement programmes in future. This process can therefore be seen as a significant contribution to the future of public and stakeholder engagement on issues within sustainable development.

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¹ *Turning the Tide. Tidal Power in the UK.* SDC final report on their study of tidal power. October 2007

² The question was: *Public engagement obviously has financial costs. Do you think public engagement in public policy issues is important and it is generally money well spent, or not? If not, why not? What do you think would make these sorts of events really good value for money?*