

The Impact of Local Campaigns against Wind Energy Developments

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Abstract

Many scholars have emphasised community resistance to locally sited wind energy schemes in their explanations of wind power planning outcomes and deployment rates, while others have questioned the impact of local objectors. To illuminate ways in which local protestors attempt to influence decisions over the siting of wind turbines, and the efficacy of their efforts, we compare four cases of anti-windfarm protest in England. Local protestors employ community mobilisation and direct argumentation in attempting to influence local authority decisionmaking. At this level, mobilisation is effective, not only bringing political pressure to bear on elected decisionmakers, but also helping local groups to raise money to hire experts and professional advocates. At public inquiries protestors have some influence through the supporting role they play to more significant objectors, notably local authorities, but may also influence outcomes through informal contacts preceding public inquiries.

Keywords: wind energy developments; community campaigns; planning decisions; local environmental protest; mobilisation; public attitudes.

Introduction

The imperatives of climate change and energy security have focused the attention of governments around the world on developing renewable energy. In the UK, successive administrations have made wind central to their renewable energy strategies, not least because of the country's plentiful wind resources and the technical and commercial viability of wind technology. Though exploitation of wind energy in the UK has grown greatly, total installed capacity increasing from 552MW in 2002 to over 10,000MW by early 2014 (GWEC 2012; RenewableUK 2014b), it has grown more slowly than in other European states with significantly fewer wind resources (Toke *et al.* 2008). Some analysts have sought to explain the UK's relative underperformance in terms of low levels of public acceptance but, since at least the mid-2000s, polls have consistently found 70-80% support for wind energy (Sustainable Development Commission 2005; GWEC 2009; RenewableUK 2014a). This diffuse public support-in-principle is, however, in contrast to frequent opposition to proposed windfarms among local communities faced with the prospect of hosting them (GWEC 2010; Cowell 2007; Toke 2005; Szarka and Blühdorn 2006; Toke *et al.* 2008; Wolsink 2007; Bell *et al.* 2005, 2013).

Public resistance to the siting of wind energy developments is neither novel nor unique to the UK. Indeed, since the mid-1980s (Gipe 1995, ch. 8) a growing body of research has emerged which aims to understand societal reactions to the deployment of wind energy and renewables infrastructure generally. This research can be divided into two broad areas: studies focusing on understanding public *attitudes*, and research into deployment and planning *outcomes* (Jobert *et al.* 2007).

Research on public attitudes has drawn attention to a number of factors influencing negative perceptions of (proposed) wind energy developments, ranging from demographic (age, gender and social class) through knowledge, values, and perceptions of fairness, to contextual variables (technology type and scale, institutional structures, and spatial factors).¹ By contrast, outcomes research has predominantly focused on 'institutional'-level explanations (Toke *et al.* 2008): planning systems (Szarka and Blühdorn, 2006; Pepermans and Loores 2013), types of ownership and opportunities to participate (Breukers and Wolsink 2007; Breukers 2006), the prevalence and types of community (pro and anti) networks (Loring 2007), and broader cultural factors (Toke *et al.* 2008).

These two bodies of work have provided important insights into the social and political issues surrounding the development of windfarms. However, with exceptions (Bomberg and McEwen 2012), there has been limited research into the dynamics and impacts of protest campaigns against windfarms, which is surprising given the frequent acknowledgement that oppositional networks that mobilise around proposed developments shape both local attitudes and outcomes (Toke 2005; Loring 2007). This view has not, however, gone uncontested.

¹ For reviews of determinants of public attitudes see Devine-Wright (2005; 2008), Gross (2007), Hall *et al.* (2013), and Strazzera *et al.* (2012).

Aitken *et al.* (2008) challenge ‘the view often expressed in the extant literature that opposition groups are a major factor in the failure to meet wind power development targets’ (2008: 795). Analysing a protest campaign and government discourse surrounding a windfarm application in Scotland, they argue that though community objectors influenced the rejection of plans by the local authority, their concerns became marginalised at the public inquiry stage, leading Aitken *et al.* to conclude that ‘opposition groups can slow down, but not stop, wind farm planning applications’, and that their influence is therefore ‘limited and superficial’ (2008: 778).²

Because Aitken *et al.* clearly challenge the widespread assumption that local opposition is a key influence on wind energy planning decisions, their conclusions warrant serious consideration. However, what is not clear from their research is the ways in which objectors managed to influence the decisions of local authorities and to what extent we might consider protestors to be influential in cases where planning permission is ultimately refused. The suggestion that local objectors are ‘not so’ influential may potentially shape the approaches of both government and industry towards affected communities. It is therefore desirable to illuminate the mechanisms, types and extent of local objector influence. To do so, we shall compare four diverse cases of anti-windfarm protest in England.³ However, first we shall consider the implications of research into local protest against other types of infrastructure.

Local environmental protest

The forms of local environmental protest vary, from ‘radical social movements...[to] broad coalitions of groups’, but usually involve ‘small local groups campaigning against a specific locally unwanted land use’ (Carter 2007, 155). Research into local environmental protest has focused on describing and explaining different ‘stages’ of community mobilisation, where the emergence (Gould *et al.* 1996; Rootes 1999; Carmin 1999; Futrell 2003), development (Lichterman 1996; Rootes 2007) and outcomes (Walsh *et al.* 1997; Baggott 1998; Rootes 2009) of protest have variably featured in analyses.

Of particular interest in the literature on local environmental protest in the UK is comparative research into anti-incinerator protest (Rootes 2006; 2009). Rootes argues that waste incinerator siting decisions can be explained in terms of a complex mix of factors relating to political agency and socio-political context and structures. The latter include the socio-economic structures of local communities, the political geography of local authorities,

² In subsequent articles, Aitken (2009, 2010) has discussed the way public inquiries privilege ‘expert’ rather than ‘lay’ knowledge.

³ It should be noted that Aitken *et al.*’s case was in Scotland. Although the regimes governing onshore wind in England and Scotland are similar, the political context differs, principally because of the ambition of the Scottish government to achieve 100% renewable energy by 2020. This may help to explain the higher rate of approval of wind infrastructure in Scotland, but the approval rate there, even under the present SNP government (Toke *et al.* 2013, 62), is only modestly higher than in England; geographic factors, such as Scotland’s lower population density and greater incidence of windy locations, might suffice to explain the difference. Although Aitken *et al.* do not claim that their single Scottish case is representative of the UK or even of Scotland, theirs is one of the few studies that examines closely the nature of objections to wind development, and it has been widely cited.

and the stability of policy context as key explanatory factors. Among factors relating to political agency, the relationship between the strategy and types of arguments utilised by activists is key.

The focus on strategy and political geography is particularly relevant for understanding the dynamics and impacts of anti-windfarm protest. Rootes draws attention to a two-pronged strategic approach on the part of local anti-incinerator campaigns, the first geared towards mobilising local communities as a means of putting political pressure on local decisionmakers, the second involving direct discursive engagement of campaigners with planners in order to persuade them to reject developers' plans. The ways in which protestors frame their arguments are central. Local communities are more likely to be successfully mobilised when protestors' arguments avoid 'abstract and over-complex...universalising discourse', and instead 'focus on particular local concerns and values' (Rootes 2006, 191), primarily because such arguments relate to peoples' specific localities and highlight direct and easily comprehensible threats (Rootes 1999: 293-4). In directly engaging planning authorities, neither universalistic nor particularistic arguments guarantee success, but, in the absence of any local arena in which to challenge settled national policy, the prospects are better for campaigns whose arguments focus on local issues, particularly concerns relating to material planning considerations.⁴

If campaigners' strategies are important, so too is political geography. In England, planning decisions on waste are made by 'first-tier' local authorities (county and unitary⁵ councils). Waste incinerators are more readily sited in county council jurisdictions because counties are much more geographically extensive than unitary council areas, with the result that elected county councillors are less likely to suffer the political consequences of approving locally unpopular technologies, particularly when those technologies are sited at a considerable distance from most councillors' constituents (Rootes 2009, 881). Thus contentious infrastructure planning decisions are made by elected councillors with one eye on the ballot box, and are shaped by a 'political logic' influenced by political geography.

Such political logic is also important to understanding the outcomes of local resistance to windfarms. Although wind energy planning decisions are, with certain exceptions (see below), made by 'second-tier' local authorities (district councils), political logic complements considerations of strategy, as it is the political logic of councillors dependent on re-election that protestors aim to invoke when they seek to mobilise communities to object to proposals. In relation to wind energy outcomes, political logic relates less to the variability in the *geographical extent of constituencies*, and more to the *extent of community mobilisation* that local activists can secure. This point will become clearer in the empirical analysis to follow.

Methods

⁴ Cf. Rootes (2013) on the conditions of success of local campaigns.

⁵ Usually in geographically compact conurbations, unitary authorities combine the functions elsewhere discharged by 'first tier' (county) and 'second tier' (district) councils.

In order to analyse the key dynamics of local protest and the extent to which community campaigns shape local attitudes and planning decisions concerning proposed windfarms, the investigation was based on comparative analysis of four purposively selected cases of local anti-windfarm campaigns in England – two in which proposals were approved, and two where wind developments were rejected; three resulted in public inquiries, one of which found in favour of the developer, and two of which resulted in refusal of planning permission.

The four cases are located in the south and east of England, two in Kent (Romney Marsh and Dover), one in Oxfordshire (Westmill), and one in Cambridgeshire (Boxworth). These cases were chosen because they represent some of the variety of wind energy controversies; there are notable differences between these four cases in terms of the kinds of campaigns waged by opponents and supporters of wind developments, the processes through which planning disputes were resolved, and the outcomes. No four cases can encompass the full range of contention over wind energy facilities in England but, by examining four sufficiently different cases, we hope to illuminate what for us is the central question: what influence do local campaigns have upon decisions concerning the siting of windfarms.

Because it exceeded 50MW, the Romney Marsh development qualified as ‘nationally significant infrastructure’, and therefore required ‘development consent’ from the Secretary of State (Smith 2014: 3). This contrasts with the ‘planning permission’ required from local authorities in our other three cases, which fall below the 50MW threshold. The Westmill windfarm involved cooperative ownership, a type of ownership that appears to have encouraged high deployment rates in Denmark and Germany (Toke *et al.* 2008). Both the Romney Marsh and Westmill developments gained planning permission, granted by the local authority at Westmill, and after a public inquiry at Romney Marsh.

By contrast, Boxworth was selected as it provided an example of a well-organised campaign that culminated in planning permission being refused by the local authority and following a public inquiry. Finally, the Dover case was decided after a public inquiry that was triggered when the developer appealed on grounds that the planning authority had failed to reach a timely decision. This campaign, on-going at the time of selection, provided an opportunity to study an evolving situation, conduct follow-up interviews and attend a public inquiry.

Data for the comparative analysis of cases was collected by means of semi-structured interviews and analysis of documentary evidence. Twenty-four semi-structured interviews were conducted, either face to face or by telephone, with key stakeholders (11 activists, 2 developers, 2 landowners and 9 government officials). Extensive use was also made of government records, activist literature, press articles and developers’ publications. Limitations of space preclude detailed presentation of interview data or analysis of documents, but the account that follows draws extensively on that data.⁶ The descriptive and explanatory analysis that follows will be centred on the dynamics and impacts of protest, but

⁶ A more detailed account with extracts from interviews and documents is available upon request from the first-named author.

the roles of other actors involved in each expression of contention (e.g. developers) will be considered.

Description of cases

Romney Marsh

Because the 59.8MW Little Cheyne Court windfarm qualified as a ‘national infrastructure’ project, the developer – National Wind Power Limited (NWP)⁷ – in November 2002 submitted a planning application, not to the district council, but direct to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. Local opposition to the proposal began several months prior to submission when the developer failed to allay local fears through a public engagement strategy that involved working closely with residents living closest to the proposed development and organizing public meetings within the wider locality. Because the site was partly located within the boundaries of a parish (the third and lowest tier of English local government), members of the nascent Romney Marsh Windfarm Advisory Action Group (RMWAAG) began to utilize existing parish council networks to mobilize other local lower-tier councils to submit objections to the proposal to the planning authority, Shepway District Council (SDC).⁸ Though the scheme’s size meant the decision ultimately lay with national government, the Secretary of State was statutorily obliged to consult SDC, within whose boundaries the development was situated. SDC received notable objections to the development, not least from Kent County Council, English Nature, and 14 local lower-tier (parish and town) councils. Although SDC planning officers recommended approval of the scheme, the development control committee (DCC), which consists of elected councilors, rejected the application in August 2003, citing negative impact on landscape and birdlife, reflecting concerns raised by members of the nascent action group as well as key statutory agencies, not least English Nature.

As a result of SDC’s decision, the Secretary of State called a public inquiry, which began in October 2004. Leading up to this, RMWAAG increasingly focused on mobilizing members of the local community alongside other lower-tier councils. By the time of the Inquiry, where it secured Rule 6 party status⁹, RMWAAG claimed to represent 20 lower-tier councils and 1500 named supporters. It also managed to raise from wealthy local donors the funds necessary to hire legal representation. Among other things, the group argued against the scheme on the basis of negative impact on landscape, birdlife and the effects of noise and shadow-flicker on residents’ health.

⁷ Shortly after the submission of the application NWP became Npower Renewables Ltd. In 2008 Npower Renewables became RWE Innogy.

⁸ Two core members of RMWAAG worked within this parish council; one lived in one of the houses closest to the proposed development.

⁹ Rule 6 status refers to those parties other than the appellant and defendant, in this case Npower and SDC respectively, seeking actively to participate in a Public Inquiry. Rule 6 status confers the right to receive, and the obligation to submit, proofs of evidence available to all parties; it is usually accorded by the relevant case officer to any interested organisation that requests it, but ‘it is unusual for “Rule 6 status” to be granted to individuals’ (Planning Inspectorate 2014, para 2.1).

In addition to these local developments, the campaign developed a national dimension, with prominent figures and groups lining up on either side of the contention, and attracting national media interest. Opposing the scheme, then local MP and Conservative Party leader Michael Howard, and the naturalist David Bellamy, were the most prominent individuals, alongside organizations such as the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and English Nature. Supporting the development, were national organisations such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and the Green Party. That the Romney Marsh proposal attracted such prominent figures and groups at least in part explains the interest of the national media, which at times portrayed the case in terms of a schism within the green movement (*The Independent* 2004), a division also reflected in local media, where voice was consistently given to both supporters and opponents of the scheme.

Westmill

The Westmill windfarm was the brainchild of a local organic farmer, who, in the early 1990s began to consider a cooperatively-owned windfarm on his land near Swindon. After two failed attempts, the farmer teamed up with National Wind Power and Baywind Energy Co-operative. In September 2001 a planning application, which was an amendment to a previously successful application, was submitted to Vale of White Horse District Council (VWHDC) for five 1.3MW wind-turbines. Though planning officers recommended qualified approval of the scheme, in October 2003 the Council's DCC initially refused the application by a vote of 8 to 7. However, at a meeting a year later, in light of additional information and new government planning guidance (*PPS22*), the Council approved the scheme by 9 votes to 8.

Though there had been little public concern prior to 2001, the amended application stimulated formation of a local campaign group, Vale Environmental Concerns (VEC), to 'directly fight the scheme'. The most prominent member of a core group of six was another local organic farmer who also ran a project for autistic children close to the proposed development site. Concerned about noise, landscape and the impact on the autistic children, VEC leafleted the two most affected local communities, organized public meetings and a website, secured 100 formal members, and forged links with local groups (parish councils, the National Trust and a gliding club). In addition to hiring an environmental consultant, paid for by members of the core group, to inform a rebuttal document submitted to VWHDC,¹⁰ VEC's key strategy focused on raising a petition and encouraging locals to formally object.

The Westmill case also triggered the emergence of a pro-wind campaign – Windpower Over Westmill (WOW) – in February 2003 to counter what it considered the dissemination of misinformation by VEC. The group focused on raising awareness about the positive aspects of the scheme (e.g. in relation to climate change) and encouraged local residents to write letters of support to the Council. WOW also promoted a Friends of the

¹⁰ A rebuttal document is a direct response to a developer's planning application and environmental statement that sets out the case why an application should not be approved.

Earth petition in support of the project, and informed people of positive results of a survey carried out by Oxford Brookes University.

Both campaigns were at their most active leading up to the Council's first decision, which led to formal submission of significant expressions of local support and opposition. During this period, both campaigns also sought to broadcast the message via local media, whose reporting on the contention was objective and consistently balanced. Both sides pointed to the political nature of decisionmaking within the council as the decisions changed from one meeting to another, with voting mostly along party lines.

Boxworth

In August 2004, Your Energy submitted a planning application to South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) to site a 16-turbine windfarm on the outskirts of the village of Boxworth, near Cambridge. The developer's plans stimulated strong local community opposition, leading to a sustained campaign.

Stop Cambridge Wind Farm (StopCWF) was formed in summer 2004, after Your Energy, prior to submitting its application, sought to engage locals through a public exhibition and meeting, and a coach trip to a windfarm in Hull. The events, though well attended, did not allay the concerns of many locals, but stimulated greater opposition, the windfarm trip exacerbating locals' concerns when the developer restricted the dissemination of information to other residents on the coach during the trip.

As part of its initial activities, StopCWF sought strategic advice from the anti-windfarm group No Windfarms at Parham, and subsequently developed a well-organised campaign involving a formal paying membership that grew to 1650, dissemination of information via a website, leafleting, email and numerous public meetings, facilitated by a representative in each local village. In addition to hiring planning consultants to inform a rebuttal document submitted to the Council, StopCWF encouraged hundreds of local residents to formally object, systematically lobbied lower-tier councils and local authority councillors, appeared on local radio, and kept the local media, which generally reported favourably on the campaign, informed on developments.

Though StopCWF sought to mobilise public opinion against the proposal, Your Energy was confident that many people supported the project, and to provide evidence asked people in Cambridge to sign letters supporting the scheme, with the result that hundreds were sent to SCDC.

In March 2005 the SCDC DCC accepted the planning department's recommendation and refused the application on the basis of landscape impact, radar interference, noise, road safety and wildlife issues. At this point the contention subsided, but six months later the developer lodged an appeal. A planning inquiry was subsequently set for mid-October 2006.

StopCWF then reinvigorated its campaign, securing the necessary funds to hire a barrister for the Inquiry, where the group appeared as a Rule 6 party. The Inquiry ended on 3 November, with the Inspector dismissing Your Energy's appeal on the basis of negative

effects on local landscape, noise impact and road safety. Having raised some £40,000 during its campaign, StopCWF claimed victory.

Dover

The application to develop a ‘wind park’, consisting of five 120-metre turbines with installed capacity of approximately 10MW, at East Langdon, North Dover, was submitted by Ecotricity in September 2007. Ecotricity made no attempt to engage the local community beyond a public exhibition in the local village hall and Dover town library.

Dover District Council (DDC) planners considered this a highly complex application, and sought advice from expert planning consultants to help assess the impact of the scheme. On receipt of this advice planning officers concluded ‘that further information was necessary to enable the proposal to be properly assessed and a sound decision to be reached’ and requested further information from Ecotricity in December 2007 and February 2008.

Instead of supplying the requested information to DDC, in April 2008 Ecotricity lodged an appeal on grounds that DDC had failed to reach a decision within the statutory timeframe. A planning inquiry was scheduled for early 2009. In the meantime, DDC received hundreds of letters opposing the scheme, and formal objections from numerous lower-tier councils; its DCC on 5 June held an ‘Extraordinary Meeting’ which agreed that, due to the appeal and a lack of information, it was unable to determine the application but stating that it ‘would have been minded to refuse planning permission on the grounds of inadequate and insufficient information and of the likely environmental effects’. DDC subsequently voted to set aside £250,000 to fight the appeal at the public inquiry.

Langdon Action Group (LAG) was formed by a group of eight residents after locals called a public meeting to consider the proposed application. Soon after the meeting the group contacted and sought advice from the leader of StopCWF, who acted as a paid strategic consultant. The LAG campaign therefore followed a similar path to that of the Cambridge group in terms of community mobilisation, establishing a paying membership base, lobbying local councillors, and encouraging formal objections to the local authority. Campaign funds, £36,000 in total, were used to hire planning experts to inform a rebuttal document, rent a helicopter to demonstrate the height of the turbines, and employ a barrister for the Inquiry. The group also established communication channels with the local media, who gave favourable coverage to the campaign.

The Inquiry was held between 7 January and 10 February 2009. LAG appeared as a Rule 6 party alongside others opposing the scheme. In April the planning inspector dismissed the appeal on the basis of threat to air safety, negative landscape impact, and noise and shadow-flicker due to the site’s close proximity to a high density of dwellings.

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Table 1. Summary of anti-windfarm cases: key names, dates and decisions

About here

Analysis of outcomes

In order to explain the outcomes in the four cases, it is useful to divide the analysis into two stages relating to different levels of decision-making: local authority and public inquiry decisions. Outcomes at each stage varied. At the local authority stage, the Westmill application was approved, while those at Romney Marsh, Boxworth, and North Dover were not. At the public inquiry stage, Romney Marsh was approved, while the developers' appeals at Boxworth and North Dover were rejected. How can we begin to explain these outcomes?

In terms of local authority planning decisions, the dual strategic approach (Rootes 2009) is a feature of each case: local citizens sought to shape local authority planning decisions, by mobilising support within local communities to put political pressure on local councillors, while at the same time directly engaging planning officials and elected representatives in efforts to persuade them to reject applications.

Direct arguments and local authority outcomes

Of the two strategies, the impact of direct discursive engagement is more difficult to assess, mainly because of the difficulty of separating the impact of protestors' arguments from the inputs of the numerous agencies, many of whose concerns mirror those of local activists, that planners consult as part of the planning process. The evidence in these cases suggests that political pressure is more decisive in influencing councillors than direct discursive engagement.

Local authority planning decisions are made in light of extant planning criteria relating to the suitability of sites for development, and we can therefore expect arguments in line with such criteria to have a greater impact on outcomes. Interestingly, each group put forward arguments pertinent to planning criteria (e.g. landscape, proximity to dwellings, road and air safety, and ecology) and generally avoided non-material and universal arguments. Yet in spite of this consistency the recommendations of planning officers and planning committees varied: planning officers recommended approval of schemes at Westmill and Romney Marsh, yet recommended refusal at North Dover and Boxworth; and committees refused schemes at Romney Marsh, Boxworth and North Dover, while VWHDC eventually approved the scheme at Westmill.

One explanation for this variation could relate to the *means* of representation and concomitant *quality* of arguments. Here it is worth noting that, unlike the leaders of RMWAAG, who each wrote individual letters to Shepway District Council, VEC, LAG and StopCWF all submitted professionally informed rebuttal documents to their respective local authorities that, in at times highly technical terms, detailed problems based on established planning criteria with the proposed developments. However, though this variation might arguably help to explain the differences between planning officers' recommendations concerning Romney Marsh, and North Dover and Boxworth, it cannot help explain why officers recommended approval at Westmill in spite of a rebuttal document. It also cannot

account for outcomes of decisions by planning committees at Westmill and Romney Marsh, where in the former case plans were eventually approved though a rebuttal document was submitted, while in the latter plans were rejected though activists only wrote letters. This variation clearly suggests that direct discursive engagement by protest groups was not decisive in influencing local authority decisions.

The recommendations of planning officers reflect technical judgements based upon considerations of site suitability judged in relation to national planning guidelines and informed by the inputs of numerous agencies. Clearly, planning officers came to different technical judgements about the suitability of sites in our four cases. However, the decisions of planning committees, which consist of locally elected councillors, appear to be influenced by factors other than technical judgements of site suitability. Here we are led in the direction of a consideration of the ‘political logic’ of planning decisions. This in turn brings us to the issue of the mobilisation of local communities. Here, a far stronger case can be made for the influence of community protest on local authority planning decisions.

Mobilisation and local authority outcomes

Mobilisation efforts, levels of public support and opposition, and planning outcomes varied across our cases. However, there are some patterns within this variety that provide evidence of successful mobilisation, and of the ability of mobilisation to influence planning decisions. Each campaign group emphasised comprehensible local threats (to landscape, health, and / or house prices) in its campaign material, thus helping to maximise mobilisation potential, and efforts to mobilise the general public, either for or against developments, were generally successful.

Numbers of letters of objection or support are at best crude measures of the extent of community hostility to or support for a planned development, but they do provide a rough indicator of the success or otherwise of the mobilising efforts of the contending parties. At Westmill, both campaigns saw high levels of public support and opposition communicated to the council in the form of letters (145 in support, 229 against), petitions (1127 signatures in support, 297 against) and surveys.¹¹ At Boxworth, mobilisation efforts on behalf of Your Energy led to 705 letters of support, while the StopCWF campaign secured 512 letters of opposition and objections from 14 parish councils;¹² the LAG campaign at North Dover attracted 800 letters and objections from 15 parish councils. Where less effort was made to mobilise, levels of public expression were far lower: at North Dover, where Ecotricity made no effort to engage the public beyond statutory consultation, only 4 letters of support reached the council; at Romney Marsh, RMWAAG’s inter-council networking produced 14 lower-tier council objections, but its focus was on mobilising councils rather than citizens, and Npower’s focus more on community engagement than mobilisation, and levels of individual opposition and support remained comparatively low: 48 and 53 letters respectively.

¹¹ A CPRE survey reported 167 residents opposed with 60 in support, while an Oxford Brookes survey reported 70% in favour; two parish councils voiced opposition, while three supported.

¹² Only two parish councils voiced support/raised no objection at Boxworth.

Broadly speaking, then, relative success in mobilising local communities corresponded with efforts to mobilise. But what were the impacts of these different levels of mobilisation on local authority planning decisions?

Though the level of citizen opposition/support is not unimportant, the factor that seems to have the greatest influence on planning decisions is the level of lower-tier council opposition/support. The impact of lower-tier councils can most readily be seen in the Boxworth and Romney Marsh cases where letters of support outnumbered objections, the planning committees unanimously voted against the applications.¹³ At Boxworth, the DCC unanimously supported planning officers' recommendations, yet at Romney Marsh the planning committee unanimously voted against planning officers' recommendation. Thus planning officers' recommendations do not appear decisive. However, where the ratio of lower-tier council opposition to support was high (14:1 at Romney Marsh and 14:2 at Boxworth) plans were *unanimously* refused. This suggests that the influence of lower-tier council opposition on local authority decisions is strong (Cf. Toke 2005), probably because parish councils are democratically accountable and are presumed by district councillors to be representative as well as legitimate whereas *ad hoc* campaigns are not.

If lower-tier councils' opposition can be seen to explain outcomes at Romney Marsh in spite of other potentially significant factors, then the impact of citizen opposition/support can most readily be seen at North Dover, where two waves of mobilisation by LAG, and Ecotricity's minimal effort to engage the public, resulted in limited support and significant discontent communicated to the local authority. DDC's inclination to reject the proposal reflected this weight of local public opinion: at its Extraordinary Meeting to decide the issue, the Council noted the 'very significant risks' associated with 'not opposing the application' given 'a very high level of third party opposition', specifically the '800 letters of public representations'. It therefore seems likely that political logic influenced DDC's decision, and that political logic was stimulated by high levels of citizen opposition.

If Romney Marsh and North Dover demonstrate the power of different expressions of local opposition to shape outcomes, then Westmill highlights the potential of other factors, notably political values, to influence decisions. The Westmill case saw significant levels of local opposition and support for the scheme communicated by lower-tier councils, individual letters, petitions and surveys, and this might appear to explain the close voting on the DCC (initially 8 to 7 against, then finally 9 to 8 in favour).¹⁴ However, this must be considered alongside the role of political values, as voting within the DCC predominantly followed party political lines between pro-windfarm Liberal Democrats and anti-windfarm Conservatives. Here, the fact that public opinion was divided likely provided a degree of confidence that constituents would not be alienated if councillors voted according to political values. The

¹³ It should be noted that SCDC planning department at Boxworth gave less weight to many of 705 letters received in support of the development as they were pro-forma letters from people outside the immediate locality.

¹⁴ It is likely that many of the signatories to the Friends of the Earth petition were from outside the immediate communities; the high numbers compared to the locally focused VEC petition can therefore largely be discounted in terms of impact on the local authority.

interaction of political logic with political values can also be seen at Boxworth and Romney Marsh. In these cases planning committees unanimously voted against schemes in spite of significant variation in the party political make-up of DCCs, an outcome explained earlier in terms of high levels of lower-tier council opposition. These three cases add weight to the conclusion regarding the political logic of decision-making: when cost-benefit calculations suggest limited political fall-out (Westmill), political values may come into play; when such calculations indicate electoral risk (Boxworth and Romney Marsh), political survival trumps political values.

We have seen that the direct discursive arguments of protestors were not decisive in shaping outcomes, yet consideration of the political pressure brought to bear on elected planning councillors via mobilisation does provide evidence of protestor influence, albeit influence mediated by the lowest and most accessible tier of government. Political values can be seen to shape decisions when opposition does not significantly outweigh support.

Having considered the impact of community activism on local authority planning decisions, we now focus on the relationship between activism and outcomes at planning inquiries. In the three cases that went to Inquiry, each campaign group secured Rule 6 party status, hired legal representation and sought to influence decisions via direct discursive engagement and the power of argument. Analysis of planning inquiry reports at Romney Marsh, Boxworth, and Dover suggests that the role of local protestors might be more significant than sceptics such as Aitken et al. argue.

Direct arguments and planning inquiry outcomes

The cases that RMWAAG, StopCWF and LAG presented at public inquiries predominantly spoke to material planning considerations (landscape, health, proximity, cultural heritage, and road and air safety). This is no surprise given the input that StopCWF and LAG received from expert planning consultants, and that all three groups hired specialist barristers to represent them at inquiries.

The impact of local campaigners seems to have been most limited at Romney Marsh, where in spite of explicitly acknowledging the validity of RMWAAG's concerns over noise and visual amenity, the planning inspector approved the development, arguing that 'none of the various impacts are so forceful as to outweigh the benefits of the scheme'. Indeed, the only discernible impact of RMWAAG in this case seems to have been a technical concession relating to the positioning of turbines. By contrast, at Boxworth and North Dover, planning inspectors made explicit reference in their reports to the validity of campaign group arguments, a number of which were reflected in the reasons why applications were not approved. At Boxworth, the planning inspector agreed with StopCWF's concerns about road safety and visual impact, both of which were reasons for rejecting Your Energy's appeal, while at Dover, the planning inspector concurred with LAG's concerns over the developer's noise measurements and noise impacts, which were among the stated reasons for rejecting Ecotricity's appeal.

At Romney Marsh and Dover therefore, it seems that local protestors had some impact on decisions at public inquiries, but the extent of such influence is difficult to determine because in both cases the concerns expressed by the two campaign groups were also raised at the planning inquiries by more significant actors, not least the local authorities. This was largely reflected in the inquiry reports, where planning inspectors often discussed protestor concerns alongside those of local authorities. Thus though it is certainly not the case that local campaign groups were ‘marginalised’ at public inquiries, their impact on decisions was most likely limited to reinforcing the arguments of more powerful actors.

Concluding discussion

We have sought here to address a noted gap in the existing literature on socio-political responses to proposed windfarms. By drawing on other research on local environmental protest, we have considered the dynamics and impacts of four cases of local anti-windfarm protest. This analysis has been carried out against the backdrop of Aitken et al.’s contention that the influence of local opposition groups on planning outcomes is limited and superficial.

Local anti-windfarm groups invested significant time and energy in resisting developments, and shared similar campaign strategies, not least, the mobilisation of communities and direct discursive engagement with decision-makers. In terms of community mobilisation, local groups adopted similar practices to shape local attitudes and encourage active involvement. Among others, these included leafleting communities, organising public meetings, setting up websites and email databases, regularly communicating with an established support base, lobbying local councillors, establishing networks with other local groups, channelling messages through the media, and fundraising. Many of these activities were aided by the availability of resources (voluntary labour, organisational skills, office equipment) embedded within pre-existing community networks (Crossley 2002) – friendship groups, families, parish councils – and were instrumental in encouraging local citizens and lower-tier councils to formally object to proposals, and, through these objections, attempt to influence local authority decisions. The fund-raising activities of local groups not only facilitated many of these other activities (e.g. printing flyers, hiring venues), but also provided the means to hire planning expertise to inform the direct arguments made to local authorities and barristers to represent them at public inquiries. In terms of direct arguments, though it is not clear whether local groups had a decisive impact at the local authority level, there is evidence of community concerns carrying some weight at public inquiries.

At the very least, it is difficult to conclude that groups’ concerns were marginalised at public inquiries, and, subsequently, that their impact was limited and superficial, particularly at Boxworth and Dover. Indeed, even if concerns had been marginalised at this latter stage, and had planning inspectors made the same decisions regardless – which is likely given local authority opposition – local protesters would still have been instrumental actors in the events leading up to planning inquiries and final decisions to refuse planning permission.

It is often difficult to determine beyond question the influence of objectors upon local councils’ planning committees and officers because influence is typically exerted over a long

time, often informally and mediated by other social interactions, and is at best incompletely documented. The members of planning committees are elected politicians and so are susceptible to a variety of pressures and lobbying, but the role of planning officers is to guide councillors to reach decisions that are defensible in law and so to avoid the costs to local taxpayers of appeals and public inquiries, including, where appeals succeed, the legal costs of the appellant. Planning officers are guided by planning law, practice, precedent and national guidelines, and insofar as objectors may influence planners, it is principally by bringing to their attention facts that are relevant but which an initial case officer report may not have taken into account, or they may introduce new perspectives that may problematize officers' initial views (e.g. concerning the value of a landscape).¹⁵ Moreover, although planning officers' reports are largely technical, their recommendations inevitably entail an element of non-technical interpretation and judgement, and it is this that objectors may seek to influence. Whilst it is true that, as Aitken et al. observe, national policies have an 'untouchable status' insofar as the merits or otherwise of those policies are not relevant considerations for planners or a public inquiry, the interpretation and local implementation of national policies are very much matters for public inquiries, and it is here that effective representation of objectors' views may influence outcomes.

For all that it is useful, for analytic purposes, to distinguish two stages in decisionmaking, local council decisions and public inquiries are not simply two separate processes operating according to different rules. Although the game may appear to be reset at the public inquiry stage, objectors, planning authorities and their officers, their legal representatives – and sometimes the appellant – will have been engaged in a complex learning process, much of it invisible to the outside observer. To conclude, as Aitken et al. do, that public inquiries marginalise local objectors and deprive them of voice is surely to exaggerate the extent to which the public inquiry process is inhospitable to lay objectors to developments such as wind energy infrastructure, and to minimise the significance of the influence objectors may have more directly exerted at earlier stages of the planning process. Just because the impacts of community mobilisation are often indirect and mediated does not mean that they are insignificant.

From the evidence presented here, it is apparent that some groups have a clear understanding of, and the resources to implement, the strategies required to maximise chances of achieving their aims. That such groups have this understanding derives partly from the advice of planning experts and specialist barristers hired to inform and fight their cases, and partly from the diffusion of strategic advice among anti-windfarm groups themselves. In some cases their strategic efforts prove successful; in others, less so. Nevertheless, these groups are clearly significant actors in the contentious politics surrounding planning decisions over windfarms.

Proper understanding of the significance of public concern is important because different conclusions may influence the direction of policies and practices of government and industry towards local communities. With the introduction of the UK wind industry's *Communities*

¹⁵ Thus, in the Boxworth case, the planning officer not only (in interview) welcomed StopCWF's intervention but included StopCWF's entire rebuttal document in the appendix to his report

Benefits Protocol (RenewableUK 2011), the government's recommendations and *Action Plan* on community benefits and engagement (DECC 2013), and the industry's revised protocol in response to these prescriptions (RenewableUK 2013), community concerns are clearly taken seriously, not least in the commitment to give communities earlier and greater say in decision-making processes, and increasing compensation to communities hosting developments. How this might influence the future exploitation of wind energy in England is a matter for conjecture, but the pressure to develop new infrastructure to meet renewable energy targets is likely only to increase. More locally contentious cases will arise, and with the budgets of local planning authorities under increasingly severe pressure, the mobilisation of local communities is likely to play an increasingly important role in the scrutiny of development proposals. Whether or not they are effective in determining the outcomes of proposed wind energy developments, local objectors seem likely to be an enduringly important part of the process.

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Table 1. Summary of anti-windfarm cases: key names, dates and decisions.

Case	Developer	Application submitted	Activism began	Protest Group	Planning officers' recommendation	Local authority name and decision
Romney Marsh	NPower	November 2002	Early to mid-2002	Romney Marsh Windfarm Advisory Action Group (RMWAAG)	Approve	Shepway District Council (Refused Aug 2003)
Westmill	Baywind Energy	September 2001	Late-2001	Vale Environmental Concerns (VEC)	Approve	Vale of White Horse District Council (VWHDC) Approved. Oct 2004
Boxworth	Your Energy	August 2004	Mid-2004	Stop Cambridge Wind Farm (StopCWF)	Refuse	South Cambridge-shire District Council (SCDC) Refused. April 2005
North Dover	Ecotricity	September 2007	June 2007	Langdon Action Group (LAG)	None, due to insufficient information, but 'minded to refuse'	Dover District Council (DDC) Developer appealed on grounds of non-determination. April 2008 DCC 'minded to refuse'. June 2008

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Romney Marsh	NPower	November 2002	Early to mid-2002	Romney Marsh Windfarm Advisory Action Group (RMWAAG)	Approve	Shepway District Council (SDC) Refused Aug 2003	Applicant Approved Jan 2003
Westmill	Baywind Energy	September 2001	Late-2001	Vale Environmental Concerns (VEC)	Approve	Vale of White Horse District Council (VWHDC) Approved Oct 2004	N/A
Boxworth	Your Energy	August 2004	Mid-2004	Stop Cambridge Wind Farm (StopCWF)	Refuse	South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) Refused April 2005	Appeal dismissed (Refusal upheld) Nov 2005
North Dover	Ecotricity	September 2007	June 2007	Langdon Action Group (LAG)	None, due to insufficient information, but 'minded to refuse'	Dover District Council (DDC) Developer appealed on grounds of non-determination April 2008 DCC 'minded to refuse' June 2008	Appeal dismissed (Application Refused) Feb 2008

