

Acceptance and Realisation of Waste-to-Energy Projects – Communications of the Project Management with Politics and Concerned Persons –

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1. Introduction

The real control over the success rate for building new EfW plants is not how well we communicate the technology to hosting communities, but their perception of the risk from that technology.

To be clear we need to define what the risk may be – for some members of the community it will be fears about impact on the environment from emissions, fear of the risk to the general amenity near their homes, or places of work e.g. visual intrusion or nuisance issues associated with increase traffic, noise or smell. While for others it may mean fears about the risk to their investment in their property or business i.e. will this development put off my customers or reduce the value of my home.

In any event, the relative perception of risk and the way information flows about that risk will determine the level of opposition to a development and in turn the potential time taken to achieve a successful planning outcome.

After more than 20 years working in the waste and energy sectors, we believe we need a new approach to the way we both develop and run EfW in Europe. In practice, we need to engage with communities far earlier about the need for energy security, the relative safety of the technology and why such technology is appropriate – close to them.

The plain fact is that EfW is a safe technology which has safely disposed of millions of tonnes of municipal and commercial wastes throughout the world for many years. The EU has, rightly in my view, taken time to deliver an incineration directive that means that all EfW plants within the Union operate to some of the lowest emissions levels anywhere on the planet.

Probably of greater importance than avoiding landfill is the fact that EfW can deliver much needed renewable energy.

So, we have a clean technology which reduces waste to landfill while generating much needed energy, but still many communities object to EfW. The problem does not lie with the technology, but the perceived fear of all its risks therefore, to increase the speed of EfW development we must review why our potential neighbours have such strong perceived fears about the technology.

2. Cultural and Historical Context

Every country has a different cultural and historical context for EfW, the UK is no exception. However, recently the UK coalition Government is trying to do something about a change in approach to the planning system. If the new approach is implemented fully, it will radically transform the relationship between communities, developers and Government at all levels.

The starting point when looking at any major infrastructure development sector should be to review both the historical and cultural context of the development.

2.1. Learn from history

In Denmark, Austria and Germany, among other member states, a lack of cheap landfill and the serious need for heat and energy (particularly in the winter) provided a context of trying to make the most of all resources. This was especially so in Denmark where the additional context of a lack of fossil fuels meant that EfW constituted a necessity rather than an option. So it is hardly surprising to learn that Denmark has had EfW since 1903. As a result, many communities within these countries have an understanding of the need for this technology, as well as practical experience of living with it operating for many years. This increases understanding, thereby lowering perceived risk. In essence, their cultural and historical context means they will view arguments about EfW in a different way to a country like the UK. Experience within the UK was different – we had cheap landfill and had some poor performing EfW plants in the 1970s. In essence, within the UK – we don't need EfW because it's more expensive than landfill, its dirty (historical emission problems) and we have very limited experience of living with such technology. In this environment perceived risks are high – which is one reason why we have one of the worst records on getting new EfW plants built.

2.2. People too close may not listen at all

How close a person lives to a proposed EfW plant will influence not just their level of interest, but their attitudes as well. In my experience, those people who live too close to a proposed plant will view it less objectively than those who live at a distance from it. Too often developers spend all their time talking to residents who live very close to the proposed plant, while not engaging with audiences who live further away. The truth is that a new EfW plant could benefit an entire community within say 40 km – but developers often only

talk to those within the closest 5 km. This is probably because the developer is trying to limit the number of people who are made aware of a development and, in so doing, limit the potential number of objectors.

Our view is that communications in support of a new EfW plant should engage with all those audiences who have a legitimate interest, not just those who live closest. The logic is simple, why should a minority of people who just happen to live close to a proposed plant determine if that plant gets built or not, when it could benefit the whole community?

Of course, people who live close to a proposed development believe they are the most important audience by the very fact that they are nearest to it – they perceive greater risks for themselves.

So when you think about it, the people most likely to object to a new EfW plant are those who have no experience of the technology and live so close to it that they perceive they are at greatest risk. This is often the only community developer's talk to and it is therefore not surprising that the planning success rate for new plants is low.

3. Public Attitudes and Resistance to Change

The three core principles about human motivational behaviour when it comes to development are:

1. The perceived risks of the development,
2. What's in it for me, and
3. People don't like change.

We have talked quite a bit about the perceived risks of development. The second point about what's in it for them is an important one. For a whole community there could be a lot 'in it for them,' but the people who are too close would disagree. One fact often overlooked is the costs to tax payers of a long protracted planning system – the longer it takes to get a new development built the greater will be the cost. It's therefore beneficial to progress through planning as quick as possible – with due diligence of course, and by definition the community will need an efficient disposal point for non-recoverable wastes ideally helping them to access renewable energy into the bargain – that's a lot of benefit for any community. However, those living too close may view their proximity to the proposed development site as too high a price to pay for these benefits – the days of taking personal inconvenience for the benefit of the whole community are long gone.

The fact that people don't like change is almost irrelevant, but not quite. The point about this principal of reactionary behaviour is that it's almost an instinctive human reaction to believe people don't like change. In our view, people don't mind change if principals 1 and 2 are positive for the individual, or perhaps more importantly, they have control over the change. People change things all the time. They grow up, get educated, move home, change jobs, build extensions to their homes and live in communities that evolve and change all the time. However, most of the time these changes are slow to be perceived or they perceive some form of control over them i.e. it's their choice (often when it's not). Where the change is rapid and where people believe they have limited or no control over that change, the reaction is generally negative.

This has implications for those delivering messages about changes. Far too often it's the developer who drives any consultation process, often with local government looking on nervously. This is the most ineffective position as the vested interest of the developer gets

in the way of effective dialogue. The information provided by the developer will be seen as biased, because they stand to make a lot of money if the development goes ahead. As a result, all audiences are assessing the potential risks of the proposed EfW plant will not trust the information being provided. Even more objective audiences living further away will be sceptical, but they won't object because they will perceive they are further away from the risks.

The best combination for the successful delivery of EfW plants in the UK, is where the developer and local government are committed to the proposed development i.e. their interests are aligned. The reason for this is not just the fact that the developer and the planning authority agree the best approach is being taken, but that the planning authority can legitimately talk to the whole community about the proposed development.

Most communities oppose EfW because:

- They perceive potential risks for the environment, their health and most importantly the value of their homes.
- They see no positive in the EfW for them, even if it takes their waste. Anything else will do as long as it's not EfW and ideally, nowhere near where they live.
- They filter messages and information looking for arguments that fit their new strongly held views against EfW – and of course, the internet is full of such data (e.g. www.ukwin.org.uk).
- They fear they have no control of the decision making process – how could someone else do this to them just to make money?

4. It's not Their Problem

In essence, most people living near a proposed EfW plant believe they don't want such developments because it's not solving a problem they acknowledge.

So the key to gaining public acceptance of EfW is that we must get communities to see that it IS their problem.

The fact is that we have lots of evidence to demonstrate that this is the case. We need safe and effective disposal routes for non-recoverable wastes and we need security of energy supply.

In the UK, we have a developing energy crisis with a need to replace and estimated 25 % of current electricity generating capacity over the next 10 years. Currently the length of time taken from initial discussions to deliver a new conventional power stations is about 7-8 years.

The response to this situation from the coalition Government in the UK has been mixed, on the one hand it introduced a new act of parliament, the Localism Act 2011, which purports to give a greater say to local communities about what is an acceptable development near them. On the other hand, it is changing the planning system to include, among many other things, a presumption in favour of sustainable development. The UK is currently undergoing the most significant change in its planning system for more than 50 years and probably the most radical in the EU.

So we have this paradox – we need more energy plants but, through Localism, are giving more power to people who are most likely to oppose such developments.

To gain genuine *buy-in* to EfW, communities must see the need, understand the technology, and value the change. Ironically the combination of the Localism Act and the presumption in favour of sustainable development can help, but on their own they will not deliver the move in public attitudes required.



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5. Three Steps to Gaining Acceptance of EfW

In my view, there are three essential steps to deliver this new paradigm, where EfW is seen as a positive development that communities will accept and may even, on occasion, proactively seek to ensure such development in their own areas.

5.1. Step One – National positioning of EfW

Two simple questions:

- 1) Is EfW safe?
- 2) Is EfW needed?

We all know the answer to these questions, but the key point here is who should answer the question. As we have already demonstrated, if the developer answers these questions their vested interest will prevent some people from objectively accepting the answer – we need to look further afield.

The EU can take a lead in defining the long-term needs of member states and encourage them to invest in a far wider range of energy generation technologies than has been the case in the past. This EU energy security plan can be seen as a positive environmental benefit that will help maintain EU competitiveness in world markets, securing jobs as well as vital energy. EfW should form a key part of this plan.

With greater awareness of the issues and appreciation of urgency which can be achieved by widespread publicity about the EU energy security plan, member state governments can be seen to be positively acting for the benefit of their own people.

The implementation of Localism provides the ideal opportunity to generate a national debate about the need for energy security and the options available to the UK. In this context all renewable energy can be repositioned as an essential development – even including onshore wind and nuclear power. But there needs to be a publically discussed covenant between the Government and the people. That covenant needs to include the recognition that change needs to happen and happen now. To work, both the public and the Government need to have this debate at an adult level with the provision of accurate, objective and frank information delivered by independent third parties (such as leading Universities), without any attempts to gain political advantage.

In this environment, the public can become aware of the problem and its potential impact on them. To work positively, the solutions to the problem need to be presented – *it's not all doom and gloom, there are solutions but you (the public) need to be ready for them.*

All the available, and developing technologies, would need to be discussed, with likely time frames for delivery and relative costs. Research in the UK has shown (Public Attitudes to Community Buy-in for Waste and Resource Infrastructure, 2011 www.sita.co.uk/downloads) that when all the facts are presented about waste management issues, solutions and relative costs, communities tend to review the issues in a far more objective light and therefore have the potential to accept change far more readily than before.

As part of this process, all renewables could be repositioned as desirable, but EfW has also got the benefit of disposing of residual waste – it's a genuine win-win solution. This approach would also provide the opportunity for debate about all energy needs and would provide the context for a much needed review about nuclear power, which would dominate the debate – wind and EfW should be almost seen as obvious choices.

5.2. Step 2 – Local delivery of EfW

Soon after any national debate is underway, there should be regional debate about delivery – before any planning applications or sites are mentioned. This will generate greater awareness of the issues and potential solutions before personal vested interest, and the three principals of personal behaviour, can begin, resulting in an informed debate at a local level. It will be inevitable that some people who end up close to proposed facilities will still react in the same way as before, but now they will be doing so against the more widely understood and accepted need for the facilities from the wider community.

5.3. Step 3 – More effective community engagement

There are some important elements of any community engagement programme which we would recommend if it is to be delivered within the spirit of Localism.

The first point to remember is that simply changing the emphasis of communications to focus on energy, rather than waste, will not deliver significant change. In fact, it may actually make things worse, as many in the community may feel that you are starting a PR exercise or you are trying to hide the fact that the proposal is still an incinerator with a fancy name.

There are clearly more specific formats for community engagement required, if a development needs to go through more formal processes, such as those required in the UK for projects that need to go through National Infrastructure Planning at the Planning Inspectorate. For other projects, you should consider the following:

Phase 1 – Issues Focus

Firstly, communications should start early and well before any planning application is discussed.

The debate needs to be a genuine two way dialogue – there is a huge amount of cynicism around consultation, because it has been demonstrated on previous occasions that activity appearing to be consultation was in fact a *box ticking exercise*. There was no genuine attempt to listen to what the community was saying.

Communications must be wider than has previously been the case, and needs to ensure that hard to reach (those who, for example, are physically isolated, have language and cultural barriers etc) members of the community are also included.

Finding grounds for community members to get involved in the debate at an early stage is tricky. Without a planning application, or environment impact assessment (EIA) exhibition to provide the focus, there is little incentive for the community to get involved. This is one reason why the three step approach above would provide significant awareness of the issues for discussion and encourage participation before any development exhibition takes place.

The use of third party facilitators to run issue focused workshops can help establish an understanding of the context for development, without the vested interest of developers getting in the way. These events can also allow a discussion about community benefits in a broad context which reduces the allegations of bribery. Community benefit funds are common place in the renewable industry, but are still quite rare in the waste sector. The format and focus is often quite different to previous structures which looked at the redistribution of landfill tax monies.

The development of a community benefit fund would be extremely helpful. This would need to be in addition to any section 106 agreement with the Local Planning Authority (LPA).

This may require some re-educating of the LPA about the scale of section 106 agreements to ensure that enough monies can be made available for a meaningful community benefit package without making the whole project unviable.

This issue focused consultation will need to identify the developer's long-term purpose which will help to identify those issues of concern to the local community, thereby allowing more targeted communications in the next phase.

Phase 2 – Project Focus

Before any planning application is submitted there needs to be sufficient time to discuss a plan of the development in some detail – this should include an EIA exhibition supported by group discussion, face-to-face briefings and the distribution of information (see below).

This more detailed consultation phase should be about a proposed development allowing people to understand:

- The need for the development,
- How it fits into its chosen location,
- What it will look like,
- What is open for change,
- How the community will benefit from the development,
- How the community can be involved in the project, including a community forum.

The community forum needs to be more than a simply liaison group for the distribution of two way information from the community to the developer and back again. The forum should have an opportunity to genuinely influence the proposed development. The forum could develop, in the long run, into the body that administers any community benefit funds.

The area covered by consultation needs to be wide enough to gain a critical mass of people and to effectively involve enough objective residents who lack the proximity issues. In practice, this will vary from project-to-project but in rural locations could anything from 3-10 miles, while for urban areas could be anything up to one or two miles.

There is no set time for phase two but typically (and illustrated in best practice guidance) this should be in the order of three – five months, depending on the complexity of the project.

There may need to be a Phase 2, part B, if significant changes to the proposals occur during the project's development. Under the Localism Act, there are specific provisions that define when additional consultation needs to be delivered for projects that require an EIA. This will result in repeating the Phase 2 consultation, involving another period of 3-5 months.

The whole process should be summarised in a report on community consultation which is written as an objective summary of what happened, and how the development has progressed. This is not a PR or promotional document for the development itself, but a faithful summary of engagement activity undertaken and the evolution of a project as a result

Once a planning application is submitted, public consultation should not stop but should continue to ensure that any new issues that arise as a consequence of the planning process have an opportunity to be communicated widely and understood by the community so there are no surprises when a final decision is taken.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, we need to start to dramatically change the way we engage with communities about EfW, in order to increase acceptance of the technology. In essence:

- It is vitally important that before any planning engagement begins, the context of any proposed development has been discussed at a national level – giving clarity about why change is needed and why it is needed quickly.
- Engagement with communities must include practical contact with those living with existing EfW plants i.e. share the experience of an existing host community with those who are trying to decide if EfW is acceptable or not.
- Engagement with communities should be far wider than simply with those who live nearest to any proposed development. More objective audiences will be found.
- All engagement should be genuine two way dialogue where the community has a real prospect of influencing the outcome of any decision taken.

In this way you are more likely to find communities who wish to see their EfW plant thriving, because there is something in it for them. EfW would be rightly seen as providing a secure source of renewable energy reducing dependency on fossil fuels, prevents waste to landfill and gives the host community something tangible in return – such as cheap power and heating.



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