

VoS Brief

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All Froth – No Substance

VIEWS OF SCOTLAND shows that the Executive's second 'You'll-come-to-love-your-windfarm' survey is as flawed as the first

IN AUGUST 2000, the Scottish Executive published a lengthy report on a survey researching local attitudes towards the four wind power stations then operational in Scotland.¹

It was instrumental in formulating policy on 'renewables' and in re-drafting key planning policy papers NPPG6 and PAN45; it was frequently quoted by the media and widely used by wind-power developers liaising with planning authorities; it was hailed by New Labour politicians seeking kudos for 'green' energy policies and was quoted in the Cabinet Office paper, *The Energy Review*.

It took a VIEWS OF SCOTLAND researcher to point out that the area where most interviewees supposedly lived was all but uninhabited.² Sloppy grid-reference research meant that the majority of respondents lived 10-20 km from the site and not five km as reported.

Although it was claimed, rather pathetically, that the error did not affect the results (it certainly did), the report was quietly withdrawn and a new study commissioned.³ Its results, published in September 2003, were broadly similar and the Executive's energy policies were apparently vindicated anew. VIEWS OF SCOTLAND has shown that this second survey is as flawed as the first: it does not measure public opinion but seeks rather to mould it.³

Despite its title, the survey neither polls 'local' residents nor attempts to measure problems associated with living 'close' to a wind site.

No doubt polling was conducted in exemplary fashion but it tested the perceptions of those who lived too far from sites to make an informed response.

If the research was constrained by the small

This VoS Brief is an edited version of a longer analysis of a Scottish Executive September 2003 report (*Public Attitudes to Windfarms: A Survey of Local Residents in Scotland*).

It is intended as an overview of the main arguments and, for clarity, omits much of the point-by-point refutation that the longer document provides.

Anyone wishing either to use information in this Brief (particularly if preparing objections to wind-power planning applications that make explicit use of the Executive's report) or to reply to or augment points made herein is urged first to consult the more exhaustive document, *All Froth and No Substance*, which can be found on www.viewsofscotland.org.

number of sites currently operational in Scotland, this could have been overcome by a face-to-face survey at each of the 3,000 households genuinely close to turbines. An intelligent scientifically-based survey of problems associated with on-shore wind would be invaluable in informing the current debate.

The Executive chose instead to question one per cent of all households within 20km of a wind site, weighting responses in proportion to the total number of people living in each of three proximity zones. Three-quarters of those identified did not participate so the final weighted response numbers were:

within 0-5km	(0-3 miles)	35
within 5-10km	(3-6 miles)	164
within 10-20km	(6-12 miles)	1611

Anything less likely to reveal actual problems is hard to imagine. The perceptions of the 90 per cent of respondents who lived 10-20km away are irrelevant while the experiences of those living close to sites have simply not been properly examined.

The Executive's failure to commission a meaningful survey is to be regretted since there are now proposals for sites ten times the size of those in the survey (see maps on p. 4), often with turbines 400 metres from people's homes.

It is particularly worrying in the light of recent press reports highlighting research by a GP in Cornwall into patients living near a wind power site. She identified a number of alarming health issues allegedly associated with turbine noise.⁴

Flawed sample

Because eight out of the ten operational sites are in clusters, proximity zones overlap substantially. It is

probably impossible to identify a random population sample without selecting respondents who live simultaneously at more than one site and the Executive has produced no satisfactory explanation of how a robust sample was identified.

The extraordinary claim that people designated as living from 10 to 20km from the site reported disturbance from turbine noise ...

However, in an apparent effort to test the validity of the sample, respondents at eight of the sites were asked which one was closest and how far away from it they lived. Many people said they lived at a site or in a zone which was not the one to which they had been assigned. They were not reassigned.

This might explain anomalies in the report such as the extraordinary claim that people designated as living from 10 to 20km from the site reported disturbance from turbine noise.⁵

One of the survey conclusions is that 54 per cent of respondents would support a 50 per cent increase in the number of turbines. But this conclusion is invalid if respondents were not assigned to the nearest site: interviewers could have suggested an increase of perhaps four turbines when the nearest site comprised 46 – an increase of only ten per cent.

Dilution by distance

The object of the survey was to establish the views of local residents on a number of issues: visual impact, noise from turbines, TV and radio interference, environmental or ecological effect, impact on house prices and ‘other local economic factors’, disturbance during construction, consultation prior to construction and expansion of the sites.

Two-thirds of those ‘issues’ were reduced to a list of answers suggested by the interviewer in two questions on anticipated and actual problems.

Turbine noise and television interference were reported by some of those living furthest away but not those living nearest, which points to flawed sampling.

Responses from those who had problems with disturbance during construction would have been well and truly buried by those who could not possibly have experienced them.

People living in the outskirts of Edinburgh were among those asked about construction of a site near Peebles.⁶

Damage to birds and bats (which studies are increasingly showing to be at risk from turbines) was

not a response option. Suggestions like ‘Damage to plants or animals?’ , ‘Reduction in houses prices?’ and ‘Damaging effect on local business?’ are well outwith the average person’s ability to judge.

In many cases it is almost impossible to correlate claims made in the report with the questions the survey asked or the data it obtained. Reactions from respondents reflect not only the ambiguity of some questions but the fact that an overwhelming majority lived so far from the turbines.

The report suggests respondents lived in rural areas ‘close’ to the sites, ignoring the fact that 90 per cent were polled between 10 and 20km away, many in urban areas.

Only 12 per cent of respondents could see turbines from their homes, over half saw them only when travelling in the wider area and 20 per cent never saw them.

By omitting percentage figures the report exaggerates reactions, stating, for example that, of those who pass comment, three times as many feel the windfarm has had a positive impact. It fails to mention that only a quarter ‘passed comment’. Less than 20 per cent said the site had a positive impact.

Future generation

Respondents were asked whether coal, oil, nuclear, wind or wave-generated electricity (Scotland has no commercial-scale wave-power generation) should be increased, reduced or stay the same. Gas, hydro or other types of renewable generation were not response options.

The report makes much of the fact that 82 per cent said wind generation should be increased and an ‘increase’ in wave-power was favoured by 69 per cent. It was like entering a polling booth and finding only one name on the ballot paper.

The first step ... would be the commissioning of a comparative environmental audit for all forms of electricity generation ...

Support for renewable energy in general is clear but, given the partial list from which respondents could choose, there is no evidence to back the claim that onshore wind-power was preferred.

Expansion of the local site

The report claims that respondents would support a 50 per cent increase in the number of turbines at their local site. Not so. They were asked about an increase of a specific number of turbines ‘at the windfarm’ (half the number at the site to which they were assigned). Since many may have lived nearer a

different site, this could have been as low as 10 per cent of the turbines at the nearest site.

They were not told that the extra turbines would significantly increase the area of the site or perhaps bring it much closer to their homes or that the new turbines might be twice as high as the existing ones.

Nor, surprisingly, were they told that plans were already in hand to extend three of the sites.⁷

Information and consultation

Of all the questions which actually sought people's views (rather than information about themselves) half were about this one issue.

Respondents were not asked their opinion of the present planning process.

The questions used the word 'consultation' inappropriately and served to mislead respondents on the various responsibilities of developers and local authorities in planning matters.

It is not necessary to use a publicly-funded survey to come to conclusions such as 'two-thirds of respondents are not aware of any consultation by the developer' when the developer has no duty to consult.

From a long series of badly-researched questions containing even longer lists of suggested answers, the report draws two worrying conclusions. The first is that people were not dissatisfied with the very low level recall of any consultation.

- Therefore, we are invited to conclude, people do not particularly want to be consulted.

The second is that those who were dissatisfied with the consultation were more likely to prefer a leaflet through the door (the survey's syntax, not ours).

- From the way this is worded, we are invited to conclude that people would rather receive a leaflet announcing a wind site than be part of the present planning process, however flawed.

A cynic might wonder if these questions had

anything to do with proposed revisions of planning law which seek to relax what little consultation obligations exist explicitly to make it easier for wind sites to be built.

The survey draws several conclusions, all of which are disputed above. However, it draws none about the issues it was commissioned to explore.

Conclusion

Once again, the sample is fatally flawed: the data are not robust and the survey's conclusions are meaningless within the context of its aims.

An attempt to use its upbeat findings in support of new applications – where thousands of people may live much closer to turbines than those surveyed – would verge on deception.

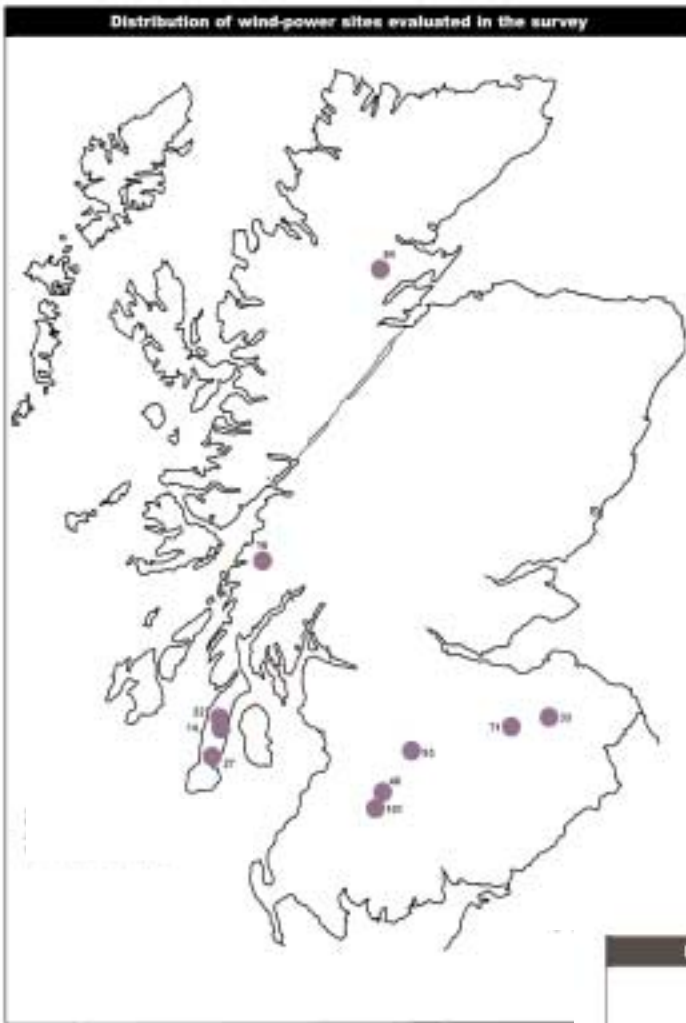
The Executive must withdraw this second report.

It must, at the very least, conduct a proper literature review of European studies on the effects on residents of turbine proximity and fund an independent face-to-face survey into the experiences of one person from every household within five km of every wind site in Scotland.

Notes

- 1 *Public Attitudes Towards Wind Farms in Scotland: Results of a Residents Survey*, Scottish Executive, Central Research Unit, August 2000.
- 2 See *Scotland's Landscapes – England's Windfarm?* on www.viewsofscotland.org for the full analysis of the flawed survey.
- 3 *Public Attitudes to Windfarms: A Survey of Local Residents in Scotland*, Scottish Executive, September 2003.
- 4 Articles appeared in several papers including *The Sunday Telegraph*, 25 January 2004.
- 5 VIEWS OF SCOTLAND has anecdotal evidence that noise nuisance is significant at distances greater than is generally acknowledged but no study we are aware of suggests that it extends to over 10km.
- 6 Dun Law.
- 7 Dun Law, Novar and Windy Standard.





What the Executive's survey measured ...

and what, in reality, is being planned for Scotland

(We have been authoritatively informed that this map plots no more than two-thirds of the sites currently being considered for 'development' in Scotland.)

