

RESEARCH BRIEF

Public Engagement in Action - EirGrid's 6-Step Strategy



WHAT DID WE DO?

Across Europe, there are plans to upgrade and improve energy infrastructure to help cut down carbon emissions. At the same time, there's a growing push for more open and inclusive ways to handle new energy projects, bringing in a wider range of voices, especially from local communities. Within this context we investigated the deployment of a public engagement strategy by the Irish Transmission System Operator (TSO), EirGrid, concerning an electricity grid infrastructure development. The research team followed the case, Kildare-Meath Grid Upgrade (or Capital Project 966), over the period 2021-2024. Our approach sought to understand how and to what extent do participatory practices open spaces of influence for community actors to partake in decision-making regarding electricity grid developments?

This research brief outlines findings from our study which paid specific attention to the implementation of EirGrid's 6-step strategy¹. The results indicate that early engagement with citizens and communities is feasible and effective in delivering timely infrastructure projects related to grid development. Despite the complexities involved, such as time, resource, and operational constraints, the research demonstrates that practitioners and local stakeholders' value early community involvement. Additionally, the study offers insights into how the innovative establishment of a community forum facilitated broader participation from the community. Within this we highlight points of influence in decision making processes, and members' perspectives on their influence and participation.

STEP 1	Identifying future needs of the electricity grid
STEP 2	Technologies to meet future needs
STEP 3	What is the best option and what area may be affected
STEP 4	Where exactly should we build?
STEP 5	The planning process
STEP 6	Construction, energisation and benefit sharing

Table 1: EirGrid's Six-Step Process for electricity grid development.

Within EirGrid's 6-step strategy (shown in Table 1), a community forum is established as a public engagement model comprising local stakeholders, such as community councils, local volunteer groups, businesses, and authorities. It is usually established between Step 2 and 4, with early creation sought where possible. Its role is to represent community views, provide guidance on local needs, identify collaboration opportunities, resolve issues, offer feedback to projects, contribute to community benefit strategies, and communicate information to a broader audience. Through our research, we provide a novel empirical contribution through the analysis of a six-step approach to engagement, with a focus on the innovative use of community forums, implementing a mixed methodology across the engagement process.

¹ STEPS Team, MaREI (2024). MaREI Research Brief. EirGrid Reflections on Public Engagement: Practice and Strategy. <https://www.marei.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Steps-Reflecting-on-Public-Engagement-in-Electricity-Grid-Development-in-Ireland-Final.pdf>

HOW DID WE DO IT?

We applied a single case study approach within this research, undertaking our empirical data collection between October 2021 and June 2023. EirGrid connected us with relevant participants in this study and we attended public events, community forum meetings, and online workshops, while following the project. We adopted a five-phase approach to the research, as outlined in Figure 1. One key aspect to our approach was to ensure the data collection moved in parallel to the ongoing public engagement processes on the ground.

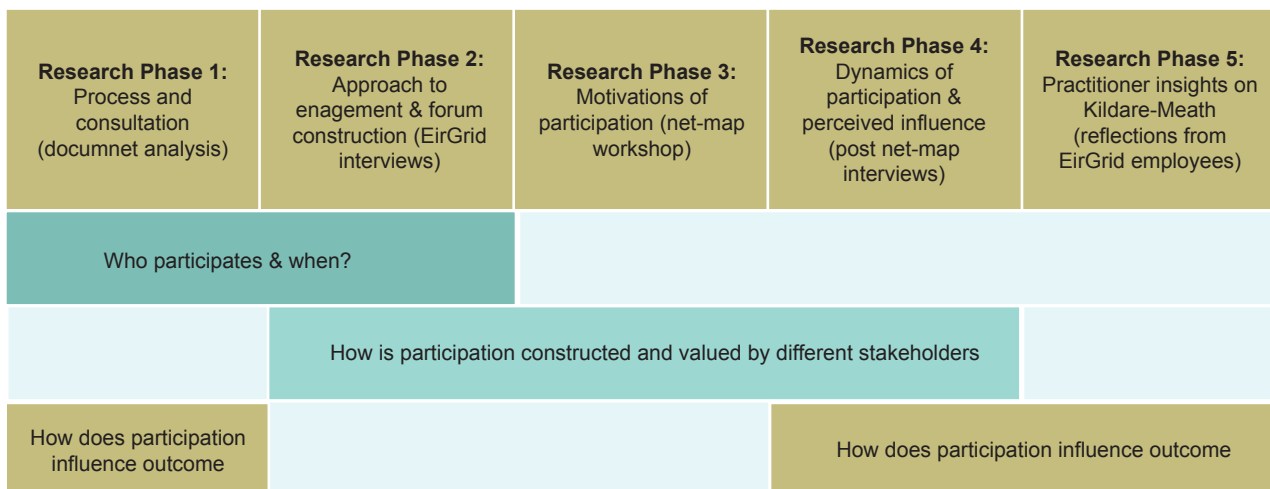
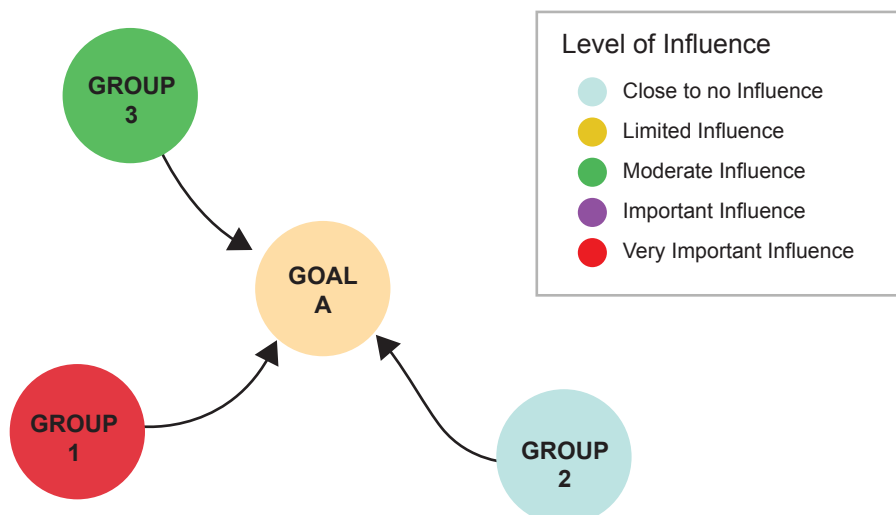


Figure 1: Objective of each Research Phase and questions guiding the investigation.

Central to understanding the motivations and dynamics of participation was the perceived influence which the community forum members felt they had on the process. To explore this, we undertook a net-map exercise, whereby we gathered data in both a workshop and interview setting to create visual maps (as illustrated in Fig.2). We then sought reflections from the participants on these visuals through interviews. The maps were centered around the different goals of the forum members, and who they saw as influential in achieving them.



WHAT DID WE FIND?

EARLY ENGAGEMENT

Questions over ‘when’ public engagement takes place has stressed the importance of early engagement. Often referred to as ‘upstream’ engagement, such ideas try to address failures in traditional one-way consultation by involving stakeholders as early as reasonably possible. The establishment of EirGrid's six-step strategy promotes early engagement and seeks to socialise broader ideas on the need for grid infrastructure upgrades as a priority of national significance and the highlighting of different technological choices available. This approach empowers project developers to collaborate with citizens in shaping project plans from the outset, fostering a sense of community and shared vision before any siting decisions are made. It embraces the challenge of balancing early engagement with the urgency of progress and project delivery. This offers some potential for iteration and reflexivity despite the suggestion that the strategy is a gradual, step-by-step process. EirGrid's six-step process is flexible and allows for the reconsideration of earlier stages in response to public feedback. This adaptability is crucial, especially in instances where public dissatisfaction continues following the finalisation of a technology choice, allowing time to consider stakeholder concerns in a proactive manner. Due to the variability of working in community contexts, it is important to adopt approaches and solutions which are flexible.

COMMUNITY FORUM

The creation of the community forum is a novel undertaking by the Irish TSO and may have useful replicability in other contexts. In this case study, Figure 3 reveals that the primary motivation for the community forum members to participate related to local community development, i.e. the development of each individual member's community related goals. The community forum, created by EirGrid, supports grid projects that qualify for the community benefit fund. This forum helps bring together local residents, community groups, and project developers. Evidence shows that the forum has the potential to improve the community's well-being and encourage local involvement. By allowing forum members to express their needs and ideas, the forum turns these visions into real opportunities to encourage, empower, and benefit the wider community. However, where present-day community concerns and motivations are key drivers for members in the forum, there is often silence around longer -term sustainability opportunities and wider energy transition goals. As such there is a need and challenge in aligning local development with wider energy transition policies and with opportunities to enhance local environmental assets.

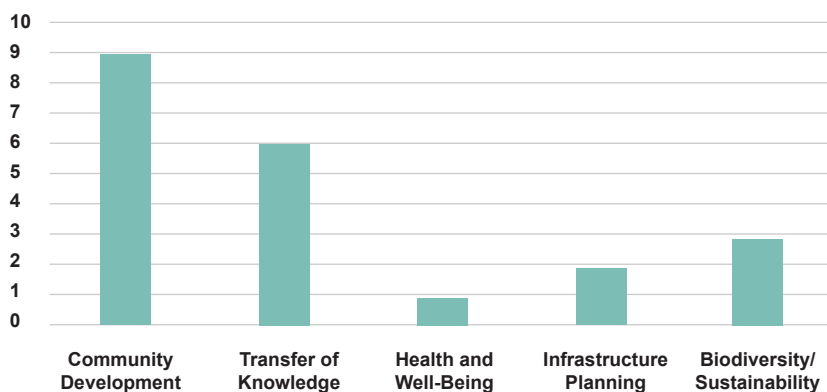


Figure 3: Categorisation of forum member goals by their topics of interest for participation.

While the local implementation of a community forum can provide a novel and innovative approach to grid infrastructure development, in essence acting as a sounding board for the wider community, our research found that further consideration is needed as to the linking of this to wider sustainability goals and national priorities with regards to stimulating energy citizenship.

PRACTITIONER REFLECTIONS

Two staff members within EirGrid's Public Engagement team worked with our research team to provide reflections to the approach taken. The key highlights that emerged from the engagement process on the value of the community forum include:

- Early engagement (starting from step three with a six-step process) allows for transferring rich technical and geographical information to stakeholders.
- Flexibility within the membership of the forum coordinated by the members themselves.
- Independent facilitation is important for open, representative, transparent dialogue and information sharing.
- The small number of submissions received during the planning process indirectly demonstrates the success of working with the forum and engaging extensively with communities and the public.

Recommendations from the practitioners include:

- Greater emphasis on the full life-cycle delivery of the grid project to enhance the community forum's role, which is already delivering regarding information sharing and community benefit fund allocation.
- Each forum should be consulted on their possible need for additional learning and capacity building, with actionable strategies devised to increase both.

CONCLUSION

In this research we consider how EirGrid's new engagement spaces open opportunities beyond the acceptance or unacceptance of grid projects locally. Drawing from the Kildare-Meath project, we can see for the research results that the local implementation of the community forum presents itself as a sounding board for communities to express their preferences regarding the choice of technology and decisions around siting but also that it opens new mechanisms to engage forum members in pursuing other community development goals.