RESEARCH BRIEF

EirGrid Reflections on Public Engagement: Practice and Strategy

EirGrid GROUP

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MaREI Energy · Climate · Marine

STEPS STEPS FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH ENERGY TRANSITIONS IN AN ERA OF CLIMATE CRISIS

WHAT DID WE DO?

To achieve the energy transition to a low carbon future, we need to build new energy infrastructure throughout Europe. The societal dimensions of the energy transition are increasingly recognised as centrally important, and approaches to infrastructure development that seek to incorporate such considerations are essential. EirGrid - Ireland's national electricity transmission system operator, has undergone a journey to develop new strategies for citizen and community engagement relating to electricity grid developments. As illustrated in Figure 1, EirGrid's key public engagement milestones have been numerous and varied since taking over grid operations in 2006. These include the development of a six-step strategy in 2016, establishing a dedicated public engagement team in 2021, and staging the first energy citizen roadshow in Co. Donegal in 2022.

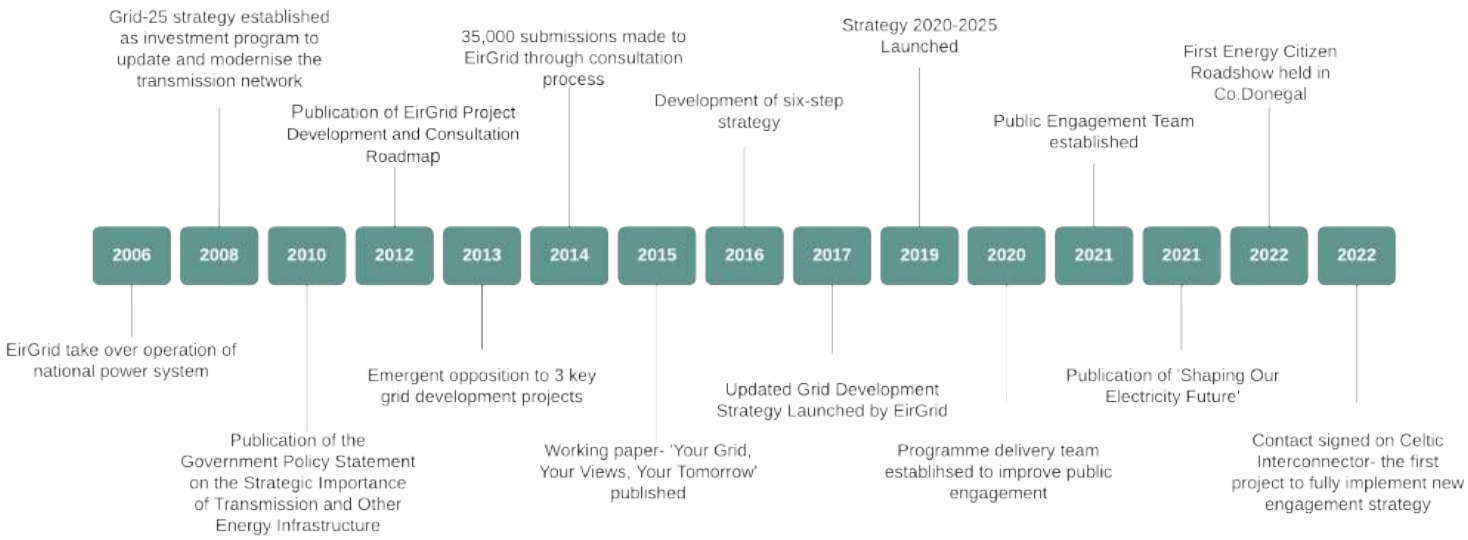

Figure 1: Key milestones in EirGrid Public Engagement Journey 2006-2022

This learning brief outlines findings from two research studies. Firstly, working with the public engagement team within EirGrid we share their reflections on ten engagement case studies based on their own organisational practices. Secondly, and at the cross-organisational level, we document barriers and drivers for the development of necessary new approaches to public engagement. Together these findings offer insights on practice and strategy for developing, embedding, and improving public engagement approaches. They are relevant to a range of actors within the energy transition considering the societal dimensions of the collective transition towards new energy systems.

HOW DID WE DO IT?

We applied a reflective practice approach to both of the research topics, which are published as journal papers forming the insights presented in this brief. Firstly, through an in-depth literature review, we outlined ten case studies on different forms of engagement (Table 1). We then presented these case studies to the public engagement team over two workshops and reflections were generated through questions. There were seven participants in the reflective practice workshops, four females and three males. All participants are working at the local level to deliver engagement across various projects, within the EirGrid Public Engagement Team.

CASE	FORM OF PARTICIPATION	SOURCE ARTICLE
1. Resident participation in high-voltage transmission line planning procedures in Germany	Engagement	Mueller, 2020
2. The planning regulation of major renewable energy infrastructure in England and Wales	Engagement	Rydin, 2020
3. Acceptance of infrastructure development under different involvement schemes in Ireland	Public Acceptance	Hyland & Bertsch, 2018
4. Sensemaking and public acceptance of energy infrastructure project: insights from Denmark	Public Acceptance	Aaen et al., 2016
5. AI-powered communication and engagement framework for energy projects.	Digital Engagement	Buah et al., 2020
6. The use of participatory Web GIS in electricity grid expansion and the siting of renewable energy plants	Digital Engagement	Maran & Stella, 2020
7. Living-labs and micro smart-grid imaginaries: the urban innovation campus in Germany	Demonstration Sites	Engels & Munch, 2015
8. Cross-border electricity infrastructure: illustrations from the German-Polish border	Governance	Puka & Szulecki, 2014
9. Local opposition to new electricity grid developments and compensation along the spectrum of weak to strong sustainability options	Protest	Tobiasson &Jamasb, 2016
10. Electricity Transmission Line Siting in the UK	Consultation	Cotton & Devine-Wright, 2011

Table 1: Ten case studies presented to public engagement team for reflections through two workshops

In the second paper, we developed a six-stage model of reflection (Figure 2) which was completed by participants over a two-month period. In some cases, we used interviews to guide participants through the process. Seven individuals working across different levels of the EirGrid organisation completed the reflective practice process, comprising a community liaison officer, chairperson, non-executive director, senior planning officer, head of public engagement, external affairs, and head of network development. Experience within the organisation ranged from 2 years to 15+ years. The gender balance represented was 4 male and 3 female participants.

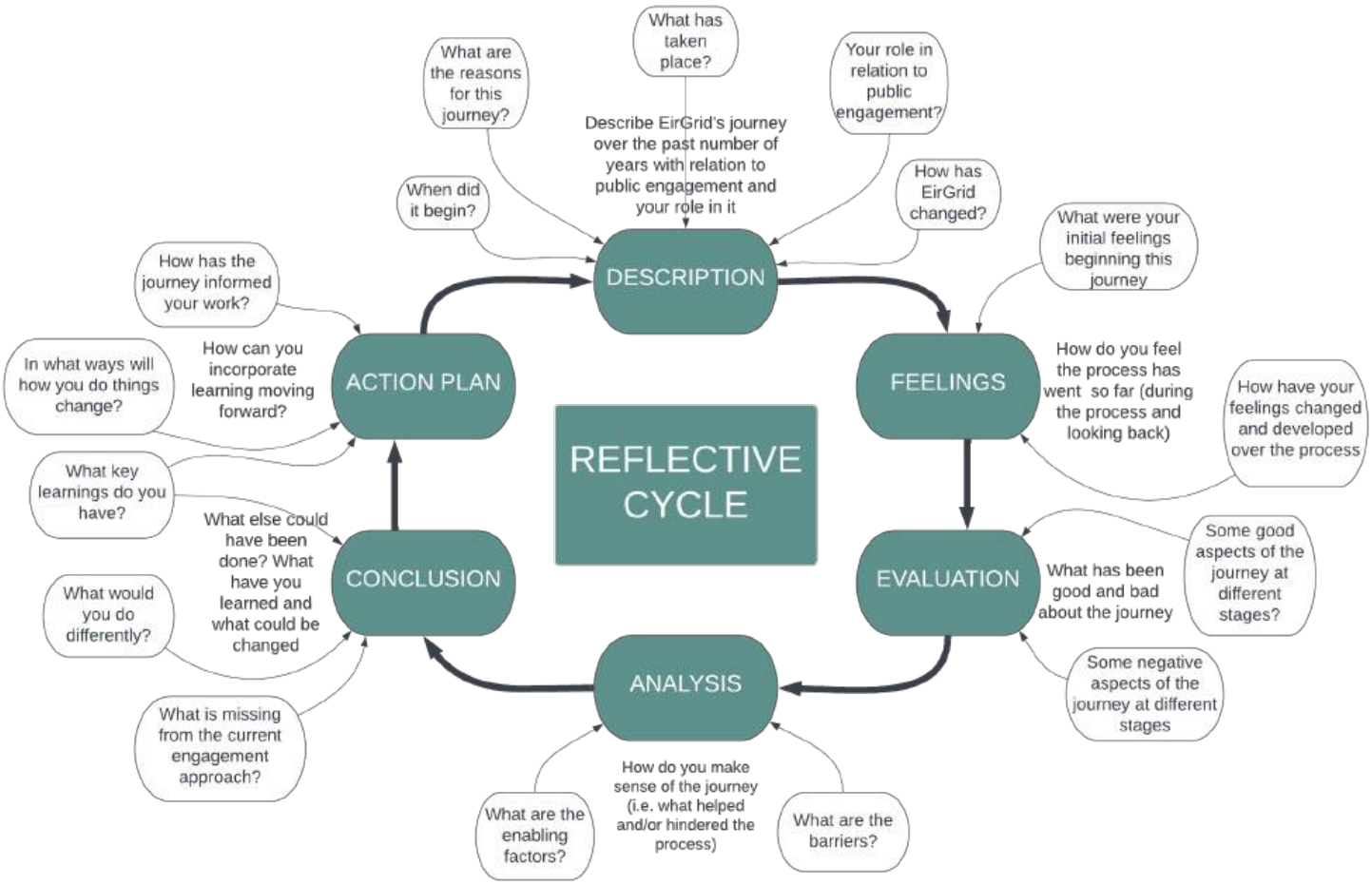

Figure 2 Reflective cycle with six stages and relevant questions outlined

WHAT DID WE FIND?

First, we present findings from practitioner reflections on the ten international public engagement case studies from within the literature:

SCALING PRACTICE AND ACCOUNTING FOR SOCIO-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

- Concrete examples of public engagement with grid expansion were generally well-received by practitioners, but the transfer and applicability of such practices to the Irish context were questionable.

- Accounting for socio-cultural differences was a key concern regarding the transferability of learning and practice. It was felt that Irish-specific views on land ownership, sense of place and equity permeate much public practice engagements on the ground.

- The demographic profile of communities was noted as very important, and notably, age, socio-economic background, and educational attainment were seen to inform choice to participate (younger people were notably more disengaged) and ways of engaging with issues associated with the energy grid (i.e. “working with the willing” who already have an interest around energy issues as opposed to those who are disengaged for instance).

DIGITAL TOOLS AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

- All participants expressed strong support for continued innovations and advancements in the use of GIS as a public engagement tool. However, in this context there were concerns about potential digital literacy issues that could lead to the exclusion of certain groups. In contrast, there was no consensus regarding the use of AI to enhance engagement with the energy grid.

- The consensus is that AI will have no significant role in moderating, facilitating, or driving public engagement with grid infrastructure in the short term. AI is largely perceived as a futuristic technology with immediate opportunities that are not easy to grasp, in contrast with GIS, where the experience and benefits are more palpable.

THE TIMELINESS OF RESEARCH

- The time-constrained nature of the grid infrastructure system, whereby information is largely demand-driven and designed to address immediate needs for quick results means access to real-time simple solutions and innovations is prioritised over distilled knowledge drawn from past experiences.

- The accelerated pace of climate change policy makes it challenging for practitioners to find the right balance between long-term plans and short-term actions to bring about change in society.

Next, we present insights from the cross-organisational reflections on public engagement:

UNIFIED APPROACHES TO ENERGY TRANSITIONS

- Energy transitions do not take place in a vacuum and, as such, are influenced by a wide array of external factors across numerous sectors of society. In the face of external pressures such as pandemics and wars, often short-term responses are implemented, which can impact transition and decarbonisation pathways.

- A unified narrative—which can be co-created to some degree with the citizenry—concerning the direction of travel related to the energy system can increase the transition's success potential and protect against external events and pressures.

SLOWING DOWN TO SPEED THINGS UP

- The traditional linear logic of project development and delivery within technically dominant infrastructure developers is inattentive to the non-linear and uncertain nature of societal responses to infrastructure developments.
- The need to coherently explain the time required for public engagement, and the conflict this can potentially have with linear project delivery approaches, is crucial to the successful implementation of an effective public engagement strategy.

EARLY ADOPTERS, ENGAGEMENT, AND NAVIGATING PITFALLS

- The insights derived from this reflective exercise offer relevant lessons in implementing strategic, structural, and personnel changes for impactful public engagement, mitigating controversial public scrutiny and operational delays.
- A vast array of entities related to energy infrastructure (TSOs, DSOs, wind, hydrogen, gas etc.) may face societal challenges when seeking to build infrastructure for the energy transition. While nothing can ensure success, a well-developed and resourced public engagement strategy may support and inform project development and contribute to wider societal engagement in relation to energy transitions.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on research and policy recommendations about engaging the public in grid developments emphasises the importance of enhancing policy and research transfer capabilities. Further opportunities to interpret, experiment with, and translate insights to facilitate more effective transfer should be pursued, drawing from operational and practitioner expertise. Some of the lessons drawn out from this reflective exercise may inform other entities undergoing similar strategic, structural, and personnel changes in relation to public engagement.

The Authors acknowledge the support provided by MaREI, The SFI Research Centre for Energy, Climate and Marine and EirGrid [Grant no. 12/RC/2302_P2].