

EirGrid Pilot Community Fund

Evaluation Report 2017

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About the report

The report is an evaluation of the EirGrid Community Fund pilot project which distributed €360,000 to community schemes along the path of the new 110kV Mullingar to Kinnegad power line.

The evaluation findings show the scheme to have been an overall success and recommends that community funding schemes should become the norm for large power line projects.

The findings also show that the pilot scheme enabled EirGrid to:

- provide much-needed funds to local communities for useful projects;
- learn useful lessons about how such funds should be managed; and
- develop expertise as well as local and national contacts for future projects.

A context of controversy

The report states that the Mullingar to Kinnegad line is not typical. It is unusually short – just 24km. It was also smaller in scale, and is not as powerful as some future projects will be.

Other power line developments, both in Ireland and abroad, have gone ahead despite public hostility. A growing international protest movement claims that the lines destroy natural beauty and damage human health.

The Government has accepted that if landowners are to be paid for having power lines on their land, then members of local communities, who can see the line, should be entitled to benefit.

In 2012, the Irish Government recommended that communities beside new power lines should be given funding for community ventures because of the disruption and visual inconvenience they suffer. However, academic research has shown that community funds may not guarantee community acceptance since, in some cases, they have been viewed as a bribe to silence community objections.

The Mullingar–Kinnegad pilot scheme, which ran from 2016 to 2017, was EirGrid's first community funding project.

The **aims** of the evaluation of the scheme were to:

- assess how the fund was set up and run, and to examine how this was interpreted by different people involved – for example, applicants, local council members and others;
- compare the two different methods used to distribute funds; and
- share the findings.

What are the findings?

Applying these aims to the scheme, the evaluators' conclusions and recommendations for future projects can be considered under four headings as follows:

1. Paying out

How the money was shared, and lessons learned

The following points could apply to future schemes that involve longer, higher-voltage lines that cross county boundaries:

- Payment could be staggered and money given in more than one instalment. Different rounds of payment could focus on varying needs. For example, an early round could help build the capacity of local organisations, perhaps even helping them to apply for more funding later.
- A second instalment could be made when work on the line is at its peak. This will help to maintain goodwill at a time when people are facing the worst inconvenience.
- Dates announced for payment should be strictly kept. Goodwill was lost because payments on the scheme were late and communication back to applicants was seen as impersonal.

2. Panel membership

How the two different ways of appointing application assessment panels compared, and lessons learned

Under the pilot scheme, grants of less than €10,000 were distributed by a group largely made up of local councillors. Amounts between €10,000 and €50,000 were paid by a

panel largely made up of people from a charitable organisation with experience of managing grants.

The report concluded that both methods worked well. Local representatives brought valuable local knowledge, while outside panellists brought expertise which helped to make objective decisions.

Almost all of the pilot scheme (24 km) was within Co Westmeath, with about 2 km in Co Meath. Longer power lines, which cross a number of county boundaries, will need careful coordination to draw on local knowledge and ensure consistency in the application process and the award of funds.

3. Applicants

How applications were invited, made and assessed

Future schemes need to pay particular attention to the following.

- Application forms must be designed so that they enable panels to gather and assess more of the detailed information they need to make well-informed decisions.
- The need to be objective where applicants' written submissions or presentations do not reach a good standard.
- The need to respect that some worthwhile applicants may need help with form-filling and making funding presentations.

In future, it will help applicants if the details of other schemes and successful applications were available through a dedicated website. This would give them a clear idea of what a successful application looks like.

A problem that the panels making the awards had to grapple with was whether to award funds strictly on the basis of merit – the best schemes and applicants – or to take account of the need for a fair geographic distribution. This should be remembered when considering applications from more sparsely populated areas. This dilemma can be overcome if future schemes use different criteria for different rounds of award.

All the local schemes funded during the pilot should be evaluated after three years to see which ones were successful and why. Panels should use this information when choosing future projects.

Also, the role of ‘boundary setting’ – deciding which areas will be considered for funding – proved critical to the scheme. One of its strengths was the level of consultation that took place before the boundaries were set.

Local knowledge helped to identify people and communities outside the normal boundary who were inconvenienced. This was also critical in deciding where a boundary needed to ‘bulge’ a little to take care of such anomalies. Future schemes can draw on multiple sources of information to set boundaries in consultation with local stakeholders.

4. Governance

How the scheme was run and how future schemes can be made fairer and more transparent. Also, what role EirGrid should play in running them.

The mixture of approaches used to manage the scheme all offered worthwhile models for the future. EirGrid may dedicate staff to manage and administer schemes, or it may ‘outsource’ many management functions. This outsourcing can be done through a voluntary sector charity of the kind used in the scheme, through local authorities or through EirGrid’s own management and staff.

Direct EirGrid involvement:

- builds a relationship with local communities,
- improves the reputation of EirGrid as a caring organisation, and
- helps to develop skills and expertise.

However, it also:

- draws employees away from core functions, and
- may increase the perception in local communities that people who apply for and get grants are being ‘bribed’ by EirGrid.

The report concludes that a flexible approach is best. This will provide varying degrees of EirGrid involvement, depending on which mix best deals with the social, political and economic circumstances of each project.

Where can I get further information?

You can download the full report, which includes quotes from those involved in the evaluation, and details on all aspects of the study methodology, conclusions and recommendations at www.eirgridgroup.com. You can also email the authors at: p.g.devine-wright@exeter.ac.uk

How was the evaluation done?

The independent evaluators were from the University of Exeter. The study was funded by EirGrid and the UK Economic and Social Research Council's Impact Accelerator Award programme.

In addition, the evaluation was qualitative. This means that it focused on gathering the views of project users, applicants and others through in-depth interviews and observation. Their views are reflected in quotes throughout the main report and in its recommendations.

The evaluators also analysed Government documents, advertisements about the fund, maps of community fund boundary areas, and so on.

The evaluation did not focus on a cost-benefit analysis of the scheme.\