



Our public engagement strategy for a cleaner energy future



Delivering a cleaner energy future

EirGrid operates and develops the electricity transmission grid in Ireland. This includes interconnection with neighbouring grids and the wholesale electricity market. The grid brings power from generators to the ESB distribution network that supplies every home, farm and business in Ireland. The grid also delivers power directly to businesses that use large amounts of electricity. EirGrid ensures electricity is always available at the most economic price – today, tomorrow and for decades to come.

Electricity can be generated from renewable sources like wind and solar power. These sources of clean energy will soon replace dirty fuels like coal and oil. Because of this, electricity will increasingly be used for more reasons, like transport and heating. To prepare for this change, EirGrid must make the electricity grid stronger and more flexible. The grid will need to carry more power, and most of this power will come from renewable generation that varies depending on the weather. To make this possible, we will need to upgrade and add to existing grid infrastructure – such as underground cables, overhead lines, pylons and substations.

EirGrid’s work to transform the electricity system is the foundation of the Government’s Climate Action Plan. It will both lead and underpin Ireland’s response to climate change. We have been tasked with getting the grid ready so at least 70% of Ireland’s energy can come from renewable sources by 2030. For this to happen, EirGrid needs to make an evolutionary shift in how we engage with the public: we need to evolve our public engagement strategy. This document explains what we need to do, and how we intend to do it.

It is vital that we all work together if we are to succeed. It is only with public support that we can secure a sustainable supply of electricity for the next generation.



How we developed our new public engagement strategy

Our work to create this new public engagement strategy pursued a rigorous and comprehensive approach. In early 2020 EirGrid established a programme delivery team to find ways to improve public engagement. This team then started a detailed process of investigation and recommendation. They outlined goals, assessed practices, gathered learnings and defined a path to new standards.

This process was informed by a comprehensive analysis of independent reviews on this topic. These included independent reports carried out by external consultants. The research also considered insights from workshops held with internal and external stakeholders. Finally, the team evaluated local case studies, and a range of international and European best practice reviews.

This process allowed us to consider specific lessons learnt from our own projects, and from similar work across the energy sector. In particular, we examined the detail of recent engagements with landowners, community and industry. This allowed EirGrid to make the informed and considered recommendations in this document.



Why our relationship with communities is crucial

In the past few decades, it has been a challenge for government and public utilities to deliver major infrastructure projects – across all sectors. New infrastructure projects often lead to robust and emotive debates. There can be significant delays when communities feel they aren't being heard. Communities expect more persuasive and compelling reasons for disruptive change. They also expect to have meaningful ways to participate in a decision-making process.

In response, EirGrid is determined to better reflect and include the views of communities when planning new grid infrastructure. This echoes the aims of the “Just Transition” - where those affected by climate action measures are supported to minimise this impact. While this is typically seen as providing direct benefits to local communities that lose jobs, we need to take a broader view.

EirGrid believes that landowner and community support are key to the successful transition to clean forms of energy – and ultimately to support the fight against climate change.

Engagement and participation to support change

In the next decade, we will need to develop large amounts of new grid infrastructure - significantly more than in the last ten years. More than ever before, it's important that we gain the support of individual landowners, their neighbours, and their wider communities. We must acknowledge the challenges of what we ask from individuals and communities for the benefit of the entire population.

If we don't engage successfully with those affected by grid development plans, we won't achieve climate action targets.

In response, EirGrid is making community engagement and participation part of our core competence. This complements and enables our well-established expertise in engineering. We are developing in-house skills, increasing our capacity and partnering with best practice providers across the industry. We are also developing effective systems to deliver and assess our public engagement. This includes evaluation and accreditation from independent international experts.

Our aim is to develop a cohesive approach that reflects and is framed by the energy transition – and by the urgent context of climate action. We won't always be able to deliver the specific technical solution that the public want. But where we can't, we will ensure that they understand why.

EirGrid always pursues an approach of continuous improvement in everything we do. As we improve the way we engage with the public, we must recognise and reconcile the impact of these changes on existing projects.

We aim to balance our new approach – seeking to achieve consensus – with the reality of opposition to some existing developments. We cannot ignore those who are fundamentally opposed to some projects – but equally we cannot change our plans in every case. We must now redouble our efforts to engage with opposition groups and concerned communities. We aim to build trust by clearly explaining our goals and our limitations – and we then try to reach an agreed response. Our aim is that this response recognises how their local support helps their locality – and Ireland as a whole.





Our strategy for effective public engagement

Goals

Social Acceptance
Work towards solutions that have landowner and public support.

Capacity
Increase our public engagement capacity and invest in our people and tools.

Partnerships
Renew and revitalise our existing alliances – and develop new ones.

Enablers

- Consider the social acceptability of each solution.
- Improve participation and public engagement methods.
- Enhance community benefits.
- Deliver ambitious education and information campaigns.
- Improve our approach to landowner engagement.

- Review and update our processes and outputs.
- Restructure our teams with a greater focus on public engagement.
- Increase our public engagement capacity by adding personnel.
- Carry out independent evaluation and certification of our public engagement every year.
- Expand our public engagement tool-kit.

- Work with Government on a multi-partner campaign about climate action to support public policy.
- Support and encourage the energy sector to work together more effectively.
- Strengthen relationships with community organisations.
- Renew and develop new alliances with enabling organisations.

Goal 1: Social Acceptance

Work towards solutions that have landowner and public support.

Social acceptance is the biggest challenge we face when we develop new electricity grid infrastructure. As a result, we will place greater emphasis on engaging with and listening to affected communities.

When we consider a range of solutions for new projects, we look at several criteria to find the best performing option. These include:

- the cost of the solution
- the simplicity and stability of the technology
- how challenging it is to deliver
- its impact on the environment
- its impact on local economy and on society

The vast majority of our network is overhead line infrastructure. To make the best use of the existing assets, we still need to carry out ongoing work to maintain and upgrade this network.

Recent experience has shown we can effectively refurbish and upgrade these lines when we respond to any local concerns. This is also true where new overhead lines or underground cables are needed.

While underground cables are more likely to be accepted, there can be significant levels of opposition to major projects. This opposition can then lead to long delays. As a result, we will work more closely with communities and landowners to minimise the impact of projects where possible.



Social Acceptance Enablers

Consider the social acceptability of each solution

When we assess grid development options for a new project, we consider several factors. As we now work towards solutions that have public support, we will consider the social acceptability of each option in our assessment.

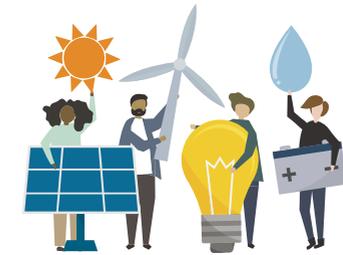
Improve participation and engagement methods

When communities respond to engagement early in the process, they have a greater chance to influence the chosen solution. When communities see that their views have shaped the end result, we can progress the works with greater support. The key to achieving this is to improve levels of public participation in our engagement.

To reach this goal, we are trialling new and innovative methods of early-stage public engagement. This puts communities at the heart of our decision making. We will then assess the effectiveness of these trials.

Enhance community benefits

Since 2014, EirGrid has offered community benefit funds for major projects. This recognises the vital role that local communities make in accepting new grid infrastructure. This model showed promise in smaller projects, but needs scale to reflect the greater disruption of larger works. To reflect this, EirGrid is increasing community benefit funding from spring 2021. Our new approach sees local areas gain from a fund that benefits communities, sustainability and biodiversity. The decisions on how these funds are distributed are open, participatory and inclusive. The setup of community forums on major projects ensures there is even greater community ownership of these funds.



Deliver ambitious education and information campaigns

Our new approach to public engagement aims to find project solutions that are more acceptable to affected communities. Alongside this, we are seeking to increase levels of public acceptance for new grid infrastructure. We know from our research that when the public understands what we do, and why we do it, they are generally more supportive of new grid infrastructure.

To help achieve this, EirGrid is investing in a new national campaign. This campaign educates and informs the public about our role, and explains how vital it is for Ireland's response to climate change. We are also developing our website to meet the needs of different stakeholders. This includes detailing our climate action message for the general public. We are also tailoring and amplifying these messages in all project communications.

Finally, we are seeking new partnerships to help promote and make accessible the ongoing levels of renewables on the grid.

Together, these initiatives help us to explain that completing every project moves us all closer towards a cleaner electricity system.

Improve our approach to landowner engagement

Landowners who host our infrastructure are one of our most important stakeholders. They work around the infrastructure for the duration of its use on the grid. Our specialised liaison teams have seen increasing success in landowner engagement - and we need to build on this. As a result, we are increasing the numbers of our liaison personnel. This allows us to continue providing tailored and direct engagement with landowners.

Goal 2: Greater public engagement capacity

Increase our public engagement capacity and invest in our people and tools.

For public engagement to become a core competence in EirGrid, we need to develop a dedicated in-house team with specialist skills in this area. Building our public engagement capacity will help support communities in shaping our electricity future. We are developing programmes and protocols to ensure we deliver a consistent and appropriate approach on every project.

These recommendations were influenced by a trial model on a recent project to add a new grid connection and substation. For this project, we established a delivery team led by an engagement lead. We engaged early and directly with landowners – which built constructive relationships and trust. Ultimately, it delivered a more widely-accepted solution. We are expanding this personnel-intensive model to pursue this level of trust, understanding and pace of delivery in all our projects.

Public engagement capacity enablers

Review and update our processes and outputs

We have identified several areas where EirGrid needs to update our processes and outputs to support this new model of public engagement.

This includes our project development strategy and the assessment criteria we use to assess options. We also need new tools to provide reassurance to landowners' on their health concerns about grid infrastructure – especially fears about electromagnetic fields (EMF). The national advertising and education campaign plays a role in reassuring people on this topic.



Restructure our teams with a greater focus on public engagement.

The key learning from our research is the need for a dedicated programme manager for strategic projects. This role has greater oversight than project managers. It will allow project managers to focus on day-to-day details whilst ensuring we still meet wider goals.

Increase our public engagement capacity by adding personnel.

We are increasing our numbers of Community Liaison Officers and Engagement Specialists. This will further develop our capacity to working meaningfully with all stakeholders.

Making this change increases our public engagement competence and reduces reliance on external services. This makes for a more consistent, holistic and better experience for all stakeholders, and allows us to deliver more projects on time.

Carry out independent evaluation and certification of our public engagement every year.

We are now pursuing external accreditation for our public engagement activities. This will see an independent body assessing and certifying our work to a recognised international standard.

Expand our public engagement tool-kit

By tool-kit, we mean the ways we engage with stakeholders. We acknowledge the need to increase the rate of participation in our public engagement processes. The social distancing requirements for COVID-19 have accelerated our trials of remote and virtual solutions. These include video conferencing and interactive online maps. We are continuing these tests to expand the breadth and reach of our public engagement. We are also going to use data analytics to improve how we evaluate and target our public engagement.

Goal 3: Partnerships

Renew and revitalise our existing alliances – and develop new ones.

EirGrid has a deeply interconnected role in leading the changes necessary for a clean electricity system. This is reflected in the many partnerships we must renew, build and develop to improve our engagement with stakeholders.

We are creating stronger links with:

- Government;
- Local Government;
- State bodies;
- NGOs;
- Local community and voluntary groups.

We also need to build new alliances with business, industry, education and research bodies. Amongst other benefits, these alliances allow us to develop common practices with key partners. This is important for rolling out coordinated approaches to engaging with local communities.

Partnership enablers

Work with Government on a multi-partner campaign about climate action to support public policy

Our research shows that the public do not understand EirGrid's role in responding to climate change. In addition, most people are unaware of the Government's broader climate action plans. Given this, there is a need for a widespread, cross-organisation campaign to inform the public about the changes needed in the next decade. EirGrid is already leading the process by initiating its own campaign. We are now collaborating with other Government departments and agencies to align messaging on this topic. This is an essential step to educate and inform the public we engage with on the fundamental and urgent need for new grid infrastructure.

Support and encourage the energy sector to work together more effectively.

Given the scale of change required in the next decade, all in the sector need to continue to work collaboratively together. This is particularly necessary to strengthen public engagement. We also need to work more closely with large-scale users of electricity in the industrial and high-tech sectors. The aim in all cases should be to increase collaboration, dialogue and shared insights for mutual support and to achieve common goals.

Strengthen relationships with community organisations.

EirGrid needs to increase our presence and visibility in local communities. We typically only come to the attention of local areas when a route or site for new grid infrastructure is proposed. This is too late to build trust and have an open dialogue.



In response, we are rolling out a community education and information programme on the needs and benefits of the electricity grid. In doing so, EirGrid is building our understanding of communities that host grid infrastructure. This helps us gain a deeper internal knowledge of their priorities and perspectives. More broadly, we are also developing closer relationships with farming and business organisations, Public Participation Networks and Sustainable Energy Communities.

Renew and develop new alliances with enabling organisations.

EirGrid on its own cannot deliver the clean grid that Ireland needs to respond to climate change. We are now identifying and developing new partnerships with organisations that share our challenges and goals. We will review this on an ongoing basis for continuous improvement. This will allow us to reflect new developments in our sector as the pathway to 70% renewables becomes clearer.



Working in partnership for a brighter future

EirGrid now has a strategy to transform our public engagement that builds upon extensive work over the past decade. We are now working with partners and stakeholders to deliver these improvements. These include local communities, landowners and industry.

The external context for this new strategy is the urgent need to respond to climate change – and to secure our supply of electricity for future generations. EirGrid has a unique role to play to deliver on the Government’s climate action plan. As we near the 2030 deadline to achieve the 70% renewables target, our needs will change. Similarly, our approach to public engagement will continue to evolve.

This strategy provides the vision for the start of this process. We must transform our public engagement to provide an even more comprehensive, thoughtful, transparent and inclusive approach. This must continue to be a process of continuous improvement.

We must listen to those who own, work on, and live near future grid infrastructure. Only with their support will we be able to achieve the scale of change required in the next few short years. The scale of this challenge is enormous - but the benefits will be immeasurable.

When we work together, we make better decisions. If we can collaborate to find a shared solution, EirGrid and the people of Ireland can create a better future for generations to come.

If you have any questions about our new public engagement strategy, or if you want to suggest how we can improve our approach, please contact us using the details on the back cover.



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Version 1 published in February 2021  *Printed on recycled paper - please recycle*