### Managing Consultation Fatigue in EIA

Public consultation is an essential part of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), bringing benefits to both the public (especially those directly impacted by a development) and the project developer. It acts to inform, involve and empower local communities, providing a forum for the public to express their views and concerns directly to the developer. Benefits include:

**To the public:**
- Opportunity to speak directly to the developer and express concerns/worries;
- Opportunity to influence the proposed development;
- Assurance that fair and proper planning procedures have taken place; and
- Ensuring enhancement of social and economic benefits at a local level.

**To the developer:**
- Improved credibility for the development and reduction in local opposition;
- Opportunity to build community support for the development;
- Local perspective on issues, making the most of local knowledge and experience;
- Greater transparency and accountability in the eyes of decision makers; and
- Opportunity to modify design in response to initially unforeseen issues.

Having worked in EIA for 6 years, I have attended my fair share of public exhibitions. Whether it was a public hall in South Ayrshire or a hotel function room in Wick, these events have been a key element in the progression of each development.

Legislative requirements for public consultation differ depending on the size of the development and the EIA regulations under which an application is being determined. In almost all cases, there is a requirement to hold a number of pre-and post-application public exhibition events local to the development. The event must be in appropriate time for any feedback to be taken on board by the developer and must be documented within any consent application.

However, public attendance at exhibition events do not always meet pre-perceived expectations often with only a trickle of interested participants spread over the course of an 8-hour timeframe. This leads to discussion over the reason for the ‘low’ turnout, with the phrase ‘consultation fatigue’ often agreed as the problem.

It is not uncommon for a number of similar development, e.g. multiple transmission line installations, to be consulting in a region at the same time. It is a common occurrence for the attendees to be unsure in advance of attending an exhibition exactly what development the event relates to. A logical reasoning would be a feeling of exhaustion from the public to constant developer engagement.

The importance of these events is not in doubt; however, a reasonable question to ask is how much is too much? To avoid local consultation fatigue should the number of local consultation events be reduced? Would this encourage a larger turnout? In my opinion...no.
Engagement with the local communities potentially affected by the development is crucial to the design of an EIA, ensuring regulatory compliance for the developer and maximum social and economic benefit for the local community. In a more basic sense, these events give an opportunity for the community to put a face to the developer and provide an identifiable link for information. It is important public events are not held on too regular a basis to maintain focus on key issues, but it often may be beneficial to hold an additional public exhibition at key project milestones e.g. following submission of a scoping report or following award of consent.

There are alternative methods to guard against a ‘low’ public turnout that do not require reduction in the number of engagement events and give the best opportunity for meaningful feedback. These include:

- Timely prior notification, through newspaper advertising, posting of appropriately detailed advertising in and around the town and even actively spreading word of mouth amongst the community;
- Selection of a suitable date and duration of time. Running an event into the early evening will ensure the majority of working people can attend if they want to. Avoiding school holidays and clashes with local events is also advisable, although co-ordination with popular local events can be useful;
- Ensure suitable signage directing members of the public to the event. This may even encourage passers-by to attend, acting to increase local awareness;
- Preparation of appropriately detailed materials including pop up stands, project summary brochures and feedback forms that can be taken away and completed by attendees; and
- An additional media format that has proved beneficial in the past is preparation and live operation during the event of a 3D model. This usefully shows the extent of the development and locals can locate their specific areas of interest in relation to the development proposals.

The benefits both to the public and developer of an appropriately programmed schedule of public information events are clear. Consultation fatigue should not be an excuse to reduce engagement with the local community. Taking appropriate steps to give the best chance of a high turnout and meaningful comment on development proposals will ensure a developer has fulfilled their obligations from a legislative perspective but also their responsibilities from an ethical perspective.

Andrew Hamilton, Consultant, Ramboll Environ, August 2017