

# ENERGY, EVERYWHERE, ALL AT ONCE

ENGAGING EXPERIENCED  
COMMUNITIES ON LARGE-  
SCALE SOLAR DEVELOPMENT



# INTRODUCTION

The UK is going through the biggest change in the way it produces and uses energy in a generation. The amount of new infrastructure involved means the Government expects to consent double the number of NSIPs in this Parliament than have received consent since the Planning Act 2008 became law.

While there's virtually no region of the UK that won't see change, some places are currently seeing multiple projects come forward at once. In parts of the country, like the East Midlands, those are mostly solar farms, but other regions face combinations of wind, nuclear, storage and transmission infrastructure.

That means it's becoming increasingly common for developers to engage with communities that have recent experience of new infrastructure. Many applicants are finding their public launch won't be the 'first hit', and that communities are ready to hit back. Campaigns against new infrastructure are increasingly organising on a regional basis – communicating far wider than many project promoters.

With the volume of major infrastructure projects only set to grow over the next five years, we wanted to test the impact of this experience on sentiment towards new projects. We've looked at solar farms because there are regions which have already seen more than one project come forward – but the findings are relevant to other infrastructure.

SEC Newgate's 2025 NSIP research indicates it's the interaction between awareness, knowledge, and communication that plays a crucial role in shaping public sentiment towards solar farms. This report explores the key findings on how experienced communities engage with solar developments and offers recommendations for improving communication strategies.

'More people than ever feel they are experiencing infrastructure development in their area. Our 2025 NSIP research shows that communication about new development has a real impact on the way people feel about it – and what they will do about it. Even where legislation doesn't require it, the industry must work together to improve how people experience NSIPs if the energy transition is to enjoy continued public acceptance.'

**Douglas Johnson,**  
Director, Advocacy Local

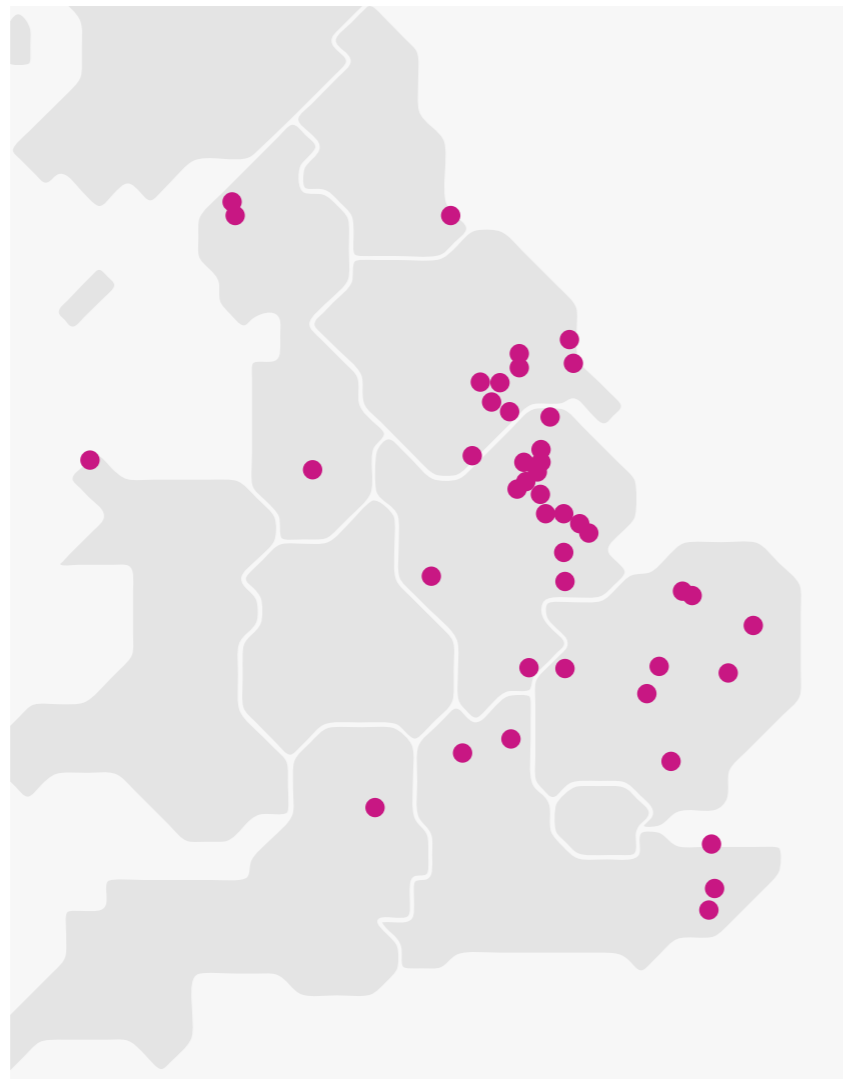
# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

SEC Newgate UK conducted a 10-minute online survey with n=1,204 respondents (between 6th - 17th January 2025).

The survey sample included residents who were most likely to have experienced large scale solar development, living in a ca. 10 miles radius of a solar farm that is being planned or has been built.

Despite proximity to large scale solar farm development, the study found that 7 in 10 of local residents are operating from a very low baseline of knowledge regarding solar farms.

**71% of residents say they know nothing or only a little bit about solar farms.**

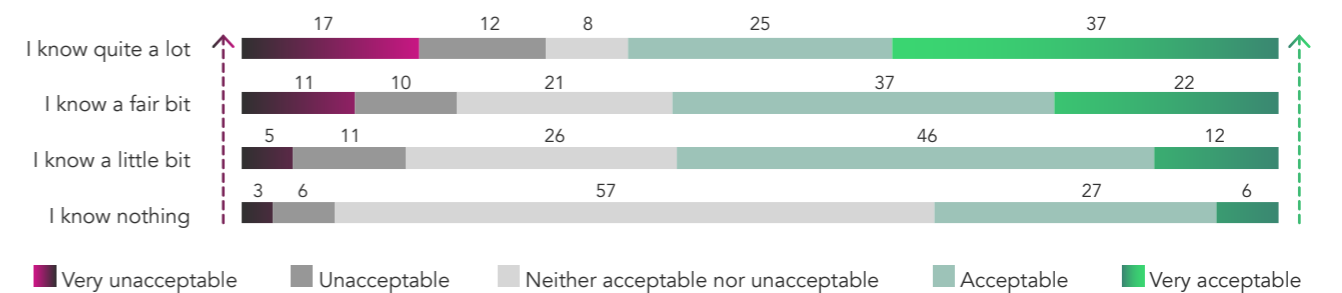


Map of solar NSIP locations

There is a relationship between knowledge about solar, experience of solar development and how acceptable residents find solar development in their local area.

SEC Newgate's research reveals a strong relationship between (self-reported) knowledge of solar energy and the acceptability of solar farm development. However, level of knowledge is double-edged, leading to stronger views on acceptability of development- positive or negative. Residents who feel they have greater knowledge of solar are both more likely to accept or not accept solar development in their local area.

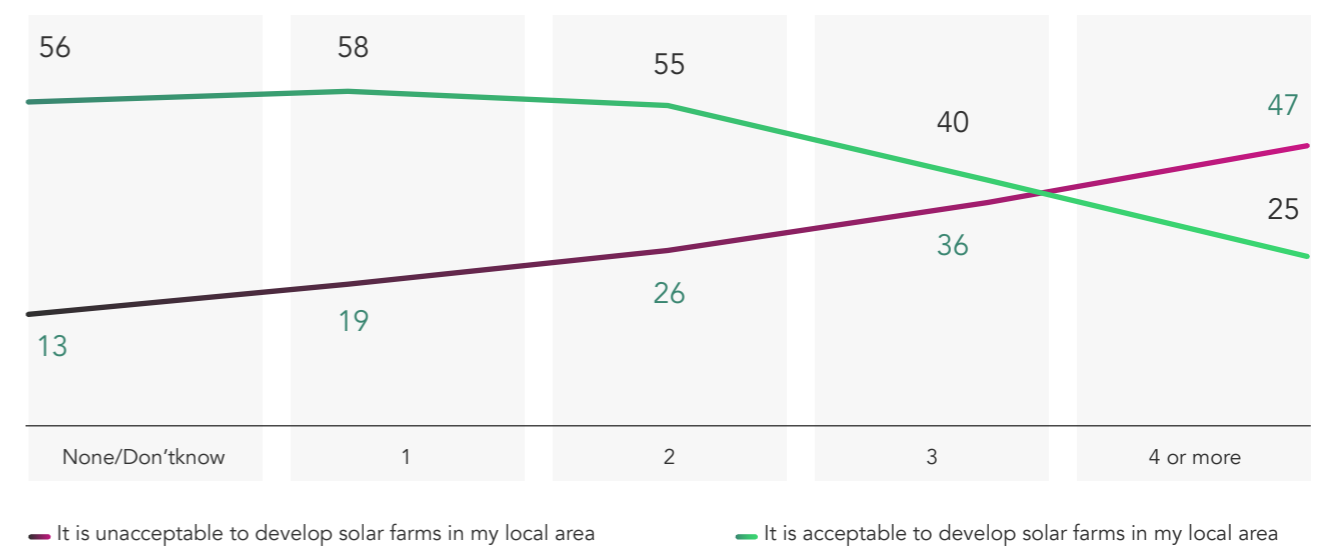
## Knowledge



## Acceptability

Similarly, as experience of solar development sites in their area increases (the number of sites), so do feelings of unacceptability towards development, with a tipping point identified at experience of three or more sites.

## Acceptability



## Awareness of no. of sites.

Source: SEC Newgate's NSIP Survey 2025. A3. Now thinking about solar farms specifically... How much do you feel you know about solar farms? A5. How acceptable or unacceptable do you feel it is to develop solar farms in your local area? B1. How many solar farms are you aware of being planned OR built in your local area? Base: Total Respondents n=1204

# In areas where large-scale solar is being developed, communities can be segmented based on their attitudes.

To understand local communities in more depth, SEC Newgate conducted segmentation analysis of key audiences based on their attitudes towards solar farm development.

**This analysis identified three core segments, based on their:**

> Position on renewable energy

> Sentiment, knowledge, concern and acceptability ratings towards solar farm development.

## Detractors 20%

More **negative towards the transition to renewable energy and solar farms, and highly concerned** about solar development.

"I live in a beautiful town with lovely surrounding countryside, and I would hate for that to be spoilt for the ridiculous notion that solar, wind (renewable energy) is the way forward. It's not, it's an idiotic ideology."

- Detractor

## Passives 37%

**On the fence** about the transition to renewable energy and their sentiment towards solar farms, whilst also **neutral in their concerns** about solar development. Their knowledge about solar farms is **starkly lower** than Detractors and Optimists.

"I don't know enough about solar and what it does to make a judgement."

- Passive

## Optimists 43%

More **positive towards the transition to renewable energy and in their sentiment towards solar farms**, demonstrating **low concern** about solar development. Their knowledge about solar farms is middling.

"To help us become greener, we have to accept that these measures will be taken. We all have to play our part for the future of the world."

- Optimist

# Narrow engagement strategies risk missing key audiences.



**65%** of residents within a ca. 10-mile radius of proposed or current development **have not seen any communications about solar development in their local area.**

**6 in 10** of those living in areas of high density solar development **have not seen any communications about solar development.**

**70%** of residents **have not taken any action in response to solar development in their local area.**

Despite living in areas where solar development is taking place, the majority of residents say they are not receiving communications about solar development in their local area. This may be influenced by typical engagement strategies which tend to focus on zone 1 consultation with local residents who are considered to be directly impacted by a project (i.e. within 1.5 miles of a proposed development).

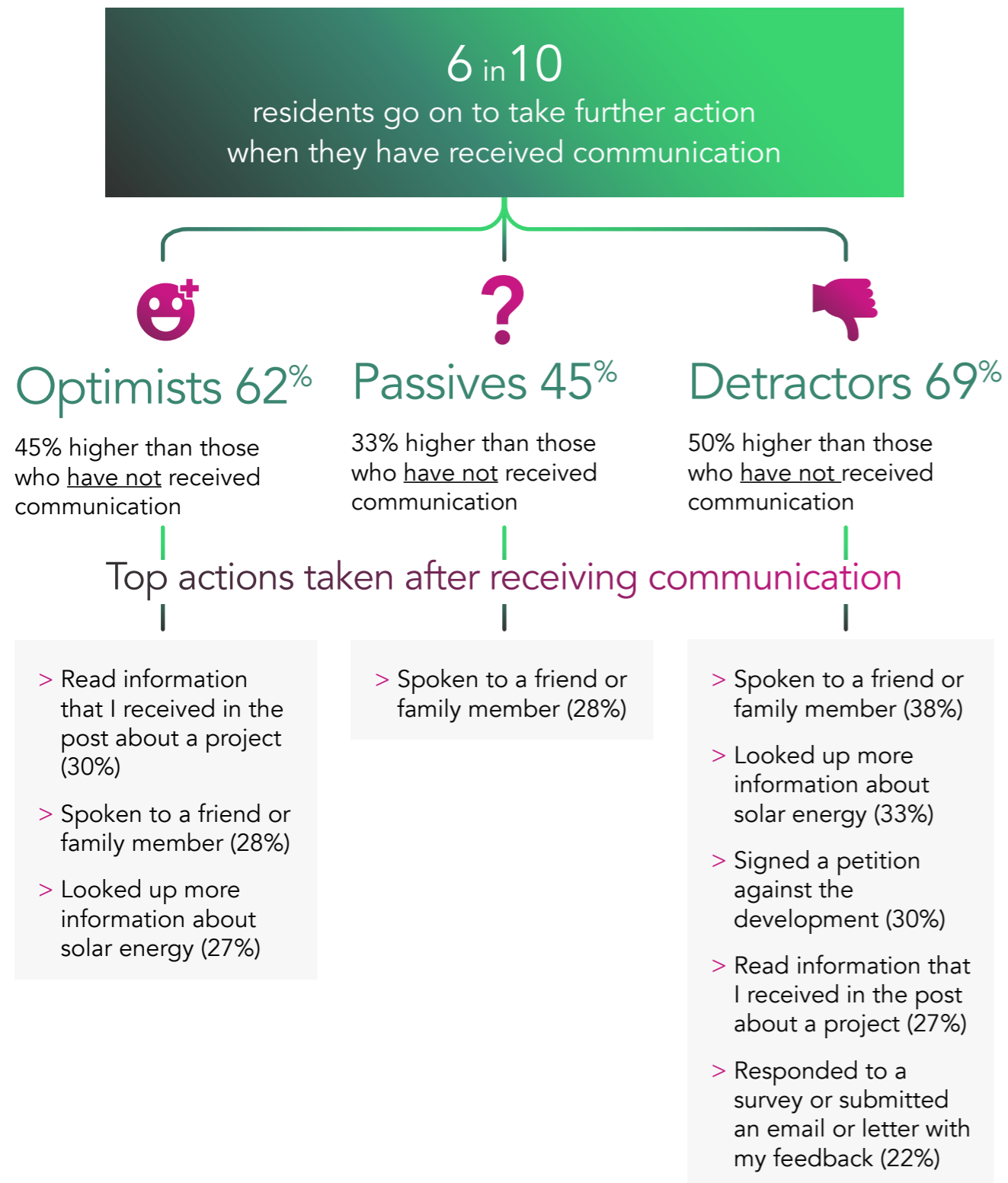
It is striking that engagement from residents is similarly low. The majority (7 in 10) have not taken any follow-up action in relation to solar development in their areas e.g. seeking further information, speaking to friends or family, going to a consultation event, signing petitions and responding to requests for feedback about a project.

Research findings on current communications and engagement suggest narrow engagement strategies are **missing some audiences who do consider themselves affected by development.**

Source: SEC Newgate's NSIP Survey 2025. C1. Thinking about solar farm development (including supporting infrastructure) in your local area which of the following actions have you taken? D5. Looking at the scale below how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the communication you are receiving about the solar farm(s) and supporting infrastructure development in your local area? Total Respondents n=1204 Those who have received communications n=424

# However, when residents do engage with communications, action follows.

All three segments are more likely to take some kind of action when they receive and engage with communications about solar development in their local area. Different actions taken by each segments demonstrate nuance in their engagement needs.



**Passives** are the least engaged cohort, with only one prominent action that they will tend to take – **speaking to a friend or family member**. This exposes a potential vulnerability in how Passives may receive information – and build knowledge - about solar development, with the possibility of being swayed by the more ‘active’ **Detractors** and their stronger negative stance.

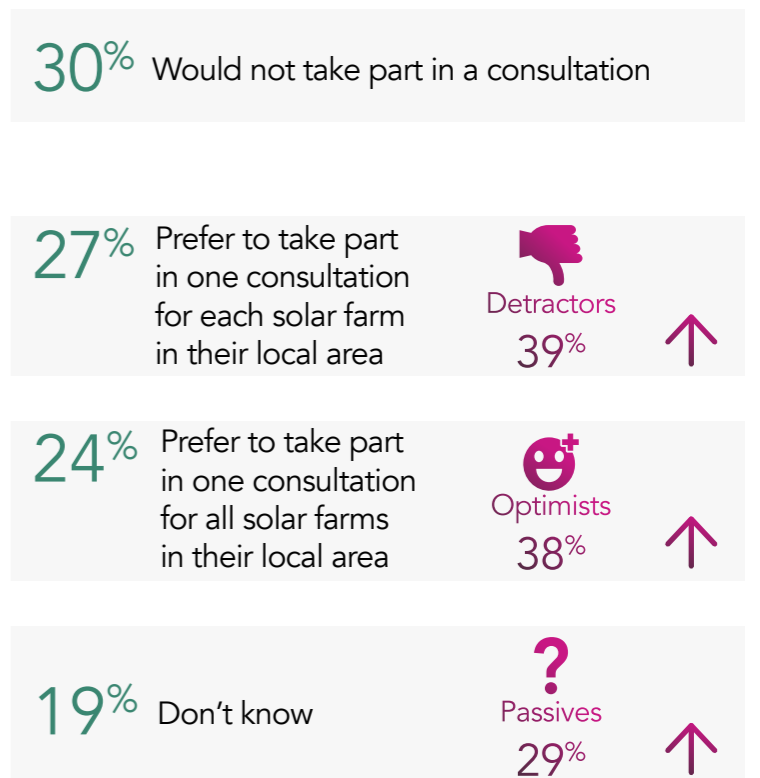
**Optimists** are the second most engaged group and are most likely to read through the information they receive on solar development – an action that reflects their more positive viewpoint as they take in information. However, from SEC Newgate’s experience of leading engagement, typically, **Optimists** will not act further upon this positive sentiment and their views tend to be lightly held, also making them vulnerable to negative campaigning if they have lower knowledge.

The research confirms what we see ‘on the ground’, that **Detractors** are most likely to take action in response to communication about solar development, with current engagement often dominated by **Detractor** voices. Their actions demonstrate a breadth of engagement, ranging from conversations with family and friends, looking up more information and signing petitions against development.

## Consultation preferences also highlight a need for nuanced engagement tactics.

Local residents living near solar farm development are divided on how they would like to be consulted. Close to 1 in 3 will be hard to engage at all, saying they would not take part in a consultation. However, **over half want to actively take part in consultation** and within this cohort, preference is approximately split between one consultation for all solar farms in their local area or a unique consultation for each solar farm.

Preferences for consultation are driven by the identified segments, once more highlighting a need for nuance and examination of how communities are engaged within a context of increasing solar infrastructure development.



Source: SEC Newgate’s NSIP Survey 2025. D4. If there were multiple solar farm developments being proposed in your local area which of the following best describes how you would like to be consulted? Base: Total Respondents n=1204, Solar Optimists n=520, Solar Passives n=442, Solar Detractors n=242 D5. Looking at the scale below how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the communication you are receiving about the solar farm(s) and supporting infrastructure development in your local area? Base: Detractors who have received communications n=118, Passives who have received communications n=141, Optimists who have received communications n=165 Detractors who have not received communications n=124, Passives who have received communications n=301, Optimists who have received communications n=355

# BROADENING YOUR ENGAGEMENT

At this point, project promoters face a conundrum. There is a good reason that many developers of proposed solar farms have focused consultation on the areas directly in and around the projects.

These are the locations where people are most likely to be directly affected – and therefore most likely to offer specific design feedback. Making changes which respond to this feedback and help consultees accept development is an important part of consultation as framed in the Planning Act 2008.

The risk is that, in areas where detractors are communicating on a wider basis than project promoters, people outside the immediate project area will already be mobilised against development.

Project promoters therefore need to consider how they engage with that wider audience, while safeguarding their ability to secure actionable local feedback. The answer is in adopting an approach to communications and consultation tailored to each different audience.

Our insight-led approach uses qualitative and quantitative research to identify relevant audiences – and the best tools and messages for each.

## A tailored approach to engagement



### The Wider Public

- > Low information levels
- > Low levels of interest



### The Local Representative

- > Middle information
- > Highly interested
- > High vulnerability to opposition group



### The Opposition Group

- > High information levels
- > Highly interested



### The Near Neighbour

- > Low information
- > Highly interested
- > High vulnerability to opposition group and misinformation

# CONCLUSIONS

Developers will increasingly find themselves working in communities which feel affected by existing projects. They will find that they no longer have the luxury of a first hit at communications – someone else will almost certainly have got there first.

Our research shows that people well beyond the typical consultation zone feel impacted, and if they hear from anyone, it's likely detractors. For those undecided on the energy transition, early communication is crucial in shaping attitudes.

This isn't just about tougher opposition to new projects – it risks weakening overall support for clean power.

We think there are steps that project promoters and the wider industry can take to support their projects – and the wider push to clean power.

1. Project promoters must recognise the potential impact of existing detractor campaigns– misinformation and a lack of trust. Initial communications need to address proactively the points commonly made by detractors, simply and informatively.
2. Project promoters should expect to provide more detail earlier in the process and be prepared to engage with people who consider themselves to be well-informed. If programme constraints force a light touch launch, it's important to communicate the information available within the wider context of consultation to come.
3. Detractors' focus on promoters' fitness to build and operate infrastructure means corporate reputation and trust is more important than ever. Project promoters should carefully review their broader communications: do they give communities confidence that they could live comfortably near the project?
4. Project promoters should be prepared to communicate beyond the immediate vicinity of their project. The wider community is vulnerable to mobilisation by anti-development campaigners, and our research shows that proactive communication by developers can make a real difference.
5. Project promoters must recognize the impact of a mobilised community on elected representatives and other stakeholders. Councillors and MPs will be publicly constrained by their past statements on similar projects, making early engagement essential to identifying real concerns and creating opportunities for flexibility. Providing more, sooner, in terms of community benefit is a key part of this, as engagement with potential partners ahead of launch can help prepare the way and offer tangible evidence of benefits to the community
6. Project promoters need to consider opportunities to coordinate their communications with affected communities. This can be challenging for competitors, but communities feel affected by projects together: they need to see joint working to feel reassured about impacts.

Our 20-strong specialist infrastructure practice sits within an award-winning integrated communications consultancy. Drawing on experts in digital, design, research, public affairs and corporate reputation, we are uniquely placed to address any communications challenges 2025 might throw at you. Together, we've worked on over 8GW of solar and storage, and within 90% of local planning authorities. We know solar, and our solar specialists are here to ensure successful projects.



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EMEA AWARDS 2024

**COMMUNICATIONS  
AGENCY OF  
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EDIE NET-ZERO  
AWARDS 2023

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

## GET IN TOUCH



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