

# Beyond Nimbyism

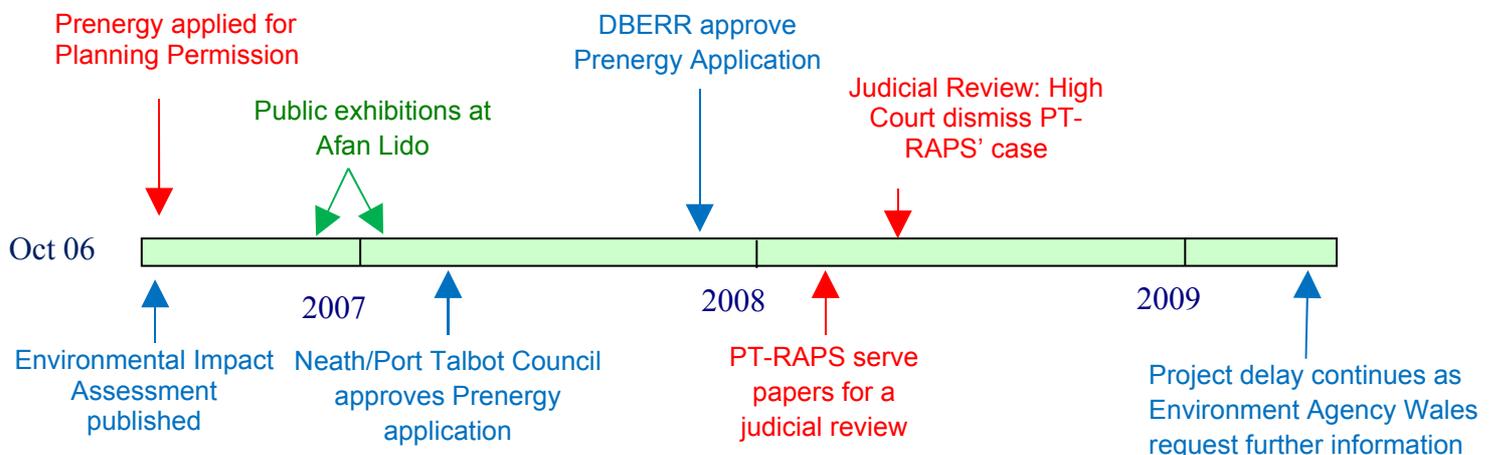
## Case Study: Preenergy Biomass Plant, Port Talbot, Wales

This proposed renewable energy plant will be the largest biomass fuelled electricity generator in the UK to date. When the plant becomes operational it will supply enough renewable electricity to supply around 600,000 average homes, delivering almost 70% of the Welsh renewable electricity target for 2010. The plant will burn wood chip which will be sourced outside the UK and be transported to the site by sea. Port Talbot is a town strongly associated with heavy industry – particularly the CORUS steel works - and has been designated as an Air Quality Management Area. There was minimal engagement with the local population and none before the planning application was lodged. This case study is also notable for the ongoing involvement of the local action group PT-RAPS (Port Talbot Residents against Power Stations).

**Developer:** Preenergy Power Ltd, based in London   **Sector:** Biomass   **Scale:** 350MW  
**Location:** The plant will be located on a derelict industrial site adjacent to a deep water harbour.

**Decision Process:** The size of the proposed plant requires consent from the Secretary of State. As a statutory consultee, Neath and Port Talbot Council approved the development. Following DBERR's subsequent approval a Judicial Review was requested by PT-RAPS but their case was dismissed. As the next step an Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control permit is required from Environment Agency Wales before the plant can operate. This has not yet been granted and construction of the plant is thus delayed.

**Timeline:** Almost three years after planning permission was requested, and eighteen months after the application by Preenergy was approved by DBERR, this process is still ongoing.

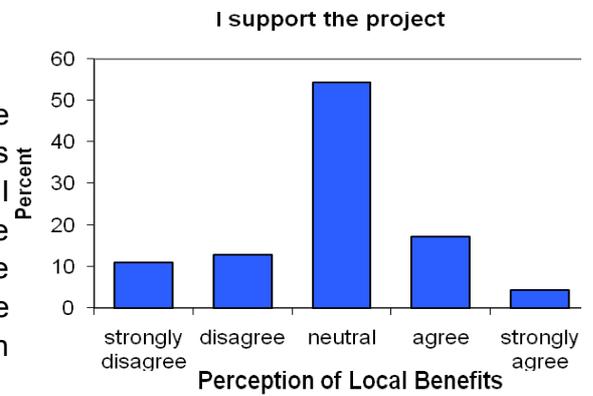


**Engagement:** There was no engagement by the developer prior to planning permission being lodged. Leaflets about the plant were distributed to Port Talbot residents in Nov 06 & Jan 07 prior to two public exhibitions. These exhibitions were held in Dec 06 & Jan 07. Members of PT-RAPS were extremely active in opposing the plant. There were marches through the town centre and fund raising activities to help to pay for the costs of legal representation. They gave presentations to interested groups in the town in order to explain some of the technical terms and the issues involved in the proposed plant development.

**Data collection:** *Interviews:* 2 members of PT-RAPS; 2 Councillors; Director of Environment; Chief Planner; Developer. *Focus groups:* Mariners Point; Aberafan; Taibach; Margam (25 participants in total); *Survey* conducted door to door: 805 completed questionnaires Total number of participants: 937. All data collection March - July 2008.

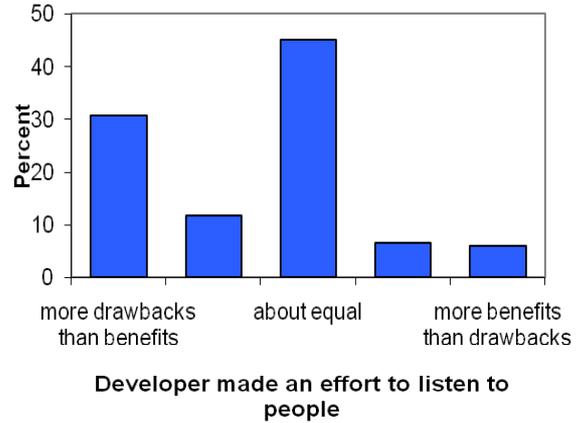
**Results:**

**1. How much do local residents support the project?** The most notable result here is the high percentage of respondents (54%) who neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement, 'I support the Prenergy Biomass Power Station'. Those who were neutral were less likely to be familiar with the project. The numbers who did and didn't express a view on the project were fairly evenly split: 24% said they agreed or strongly agreed with 22% saying that they disagreed.

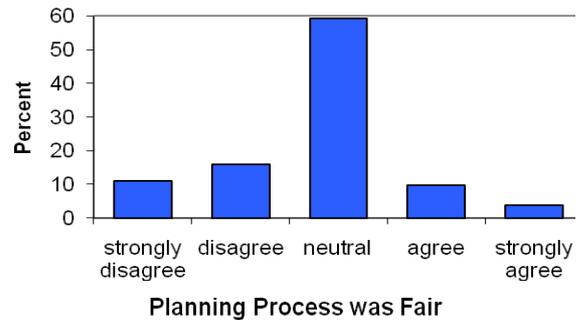


**2. What were the main reasons for support or opposition?**

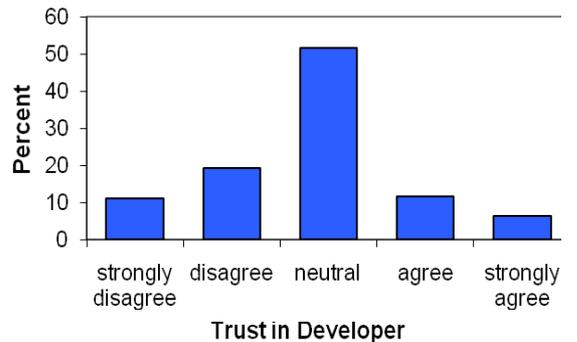
**Local impacts:** Again, a high percentage of people (45%) did not express a view in either direction saying that the distribution of benefits and drawbacks was about equal. There was also a high percentage (42%) who believed the project was associated with more drawbacks than benefits with only 13% expressing the opposite view. Both the survey and the focus groups showed that air pollution levels and the consequent health effects were the primary concern of local residents alongside disbelief that importing 3 million tons of wood chip annually was a sustainable strategy.



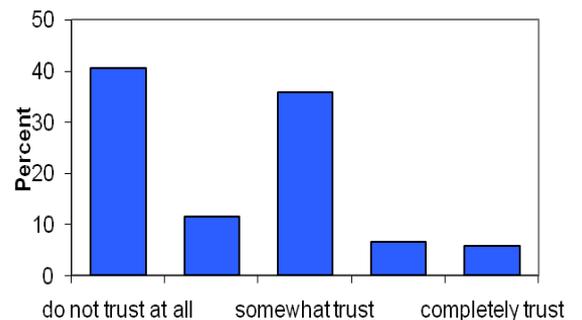
**Developer engagement:** Almost 60% of people neither agreed nor disagreed that Prenergy made an effort to listen to people. Of those that did express a view either way: 44% disagreed that they had made an effort to listen with only 14% agreeing that they had. The focus groups suggested that poor behaviour on the part of the developer was to be expected (as they are London based and simply interested only in profit) whereas the council were seen to have a greater responsibility to engage with local residents for whom they have a duty of care.



**Planning procedures:** Here too there was a high percentage (52%) of neutral responses. 30% disagreed that the planning process was fair and 18% agreed that it was. 33% considered it had been secretive. Along similar lines, 24% disagreed that local people had a say in the planning process and 36% disagreed that the final decision as to whether permission for the plant should be given should be made in London.



**Trust:** The majority of people (40%) said that they did not trust Prenergy at all in contrast to the 6% who said they trusted them completely. The developer was trusted significantly less than all other stakeholders (DBERR, the Welsh Assembly Government, PT-RAPS and Neath and Port Talbot Borough Council). PT-RAPS were trusted significantly more than any of the other stakeholders.



**Conclusions:** In the heavily industrialised town of Port Talbot where air pollution levels are an ever present issue, survey respondents tended to express an ostensibly neutral point of view across a range of issues. The qualitative work suggests that previous experiences had shaped low expectations of both planning and engagement procedures and there was little confidence that air pollution levels will not exceed agreed levels. Although some positive aspects of the biomass plant were acknowledged it was simultaneously considered a further imposition on local residents, with few benefits to Port Talbot.