



**Promotion of biogas and its market development through local and regional partnerships**

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Task 6.2

## **Communication guideline for biogas projects In England and Wales**

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# Communication Guideline



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## 1 Fundamental and general communication rules

### **Check – is my business and the determined location even suited for a biogas plant?**

Before further expanding on the idea of building a biogas plant you should thoroughly think about your own business and the location where you plan to build the plant and perform a simple location check. During the course of the construction / project planning of a biogas plant you will be confronted with a wide variety of questions from different people (local people, town or community/parish councils, consultees to the planning process and the Planning Authority itself).

Are you able to give positive and appropriate answers to the following points?

- Chosen site / land use planning
- Possibility of expansion on the chosen location
- Can noise and air pollution be prevented for the local population
- Are adequate transport routes available for the substrate and fermentation residues
- Are the available routes largely avoiding residential and other sensitive areas
- possible uses for the produced biogas
- utilisation of the produced energy
- assessment of available substrates and selection of suitable substrates
- possibilities to utilise the fermentation residues
- area availability for spreading the fermentation residues
- possible cooperation opportunities

### **General communication rules – honesty is the best policy**

Due to their different life circumstances, every person has a different subjective perception. This leads to the same topic often being viewed very differently. Operators of biogas plants should make an effort to try and understand the points of view of the locals / dialogue partners without any prejudice.

By trying to put oneself into the position of the person one is dealing with, the operator of a biogas plant can formulate his arguments in a better way and ensure a positive basis for a conversation.

It is generally an advantage for a successful project to use objective and honest arguments from the beginning. It is often better to admit that some aspects are (currently still) uncertain or hard to estimate. Once promises have been made, locals will not forget about them for many years (even if it was just an orally given promise) and the operator will constantly be evaluated and measured with these promises in mind.

The “cardinal sin” of every form of communication is to make false statements or spread untruths.

Having to later break a once given promise will strain the relationship with the neighbours. If a promise is not kept – no matter if it was even technically possible or not – an operator loses the so important confidence in him and unsettles the local population. An insecure population

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will always be sceptical of a project and watch all activities by the operator very closely – all actions are carefully weighed and scrutinised.

An example: the noise associated with the development may be assessed by the plant operator as barely noticeable, while the neighbours might consider it very disturbing.

Successful and active communication is the key to a constructive cooperation. Even though communication is essential for a biogas plant operator, it should not be seen as an obligation but rather as an opportunity.

- Communication means talking to each other
- Communication means exchanging information
- Communication means giving factual answers to all questions
- Communication means reaching agreements
- Communication means informing
- Communication means consulting
- Communication means accepting different opinions
- Communication means being open for different opinions

### Communication principle

- Humans will only accept what they understand.
- And they only understand something they know about.
- They can only know about something if they are informed or have access to information!

**It lies in the basic sphere of influence of a biogas plant operator to determine where the local population gets its information from and what perception of biogas they therefore develop.**

## 2 Checklist - overview

The following checklist provides an overview of the meaningful activities and of the point in time in which they should be carried out. A detailed explanation of the recommended activities can be found in the following chapters.

Nr.	activity	remark	before construction	during construction	at start up	During operation
1	Informing the local councillor and planning officer (first briefing)		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
2	Biogas study tour		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
3	Information event	Ideally: annually	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
4	Participation of the neighbours		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
5	Communication during permit procedure		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
6	Open house day	Ideally: annually		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
7	PR activities			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
8	Biogas leaflet	regularly		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
9	Web site			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
10	Opening event of the biogas plant				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
11	Biogas round table	Ideally: annually				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
12	Sponsoring	continuously				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

## 3 Brief description of the recommended activities

The activities and measures named in the checklist are briefly described on the following pages. Detailed information and additions to the measures can be found in the next chapter.

**1**

### Informing the local councillors (first briefing)

The first briefing of the local councillor/s is a key to the successful implementation of the project. The costs of further information will greatly increase if you are not able to convincingly make an argument for the biogas plant. The local councillor/s and the town/community/parish council are the first sources consulted by the citizens. It is therefore advisable to inform them of the planned project as soon as possible. With their experience in dealing with the population and the authorities, the councillor can provide important advice and also support. These early discussions will give a pointer to any potential difficulties that might lie ahead.

**2**

### Biogas study tour

During the process of planning and generating ideas, the operators of a biogas plant often visits a variety of biogas plants already in operation in order to get a clear picture of the system as a whole. This advantage in terms of information is often lacking for the rest of the local population and they often don't have an objective picture of a biogas plant. The logical consequence of this is a sceptical attitude by the people towards the project. Bear in mind that:

- **Humans will only accept what they understand.**
- **They only understand something they know about and have already seen!**

An excursion for key people should take place as early as possible but the invitation should also be as open as possible. The choice of the biogas plant is also especially important for the success of the excursion. The plant to be visited should be as similar in nature to the one proposed but there is clearly a rather restricted choice in the UK at the moment.

**3**

### Information session

The population should be informed about the biogas project even before the first plans and documentation reach the authorities. Information sessions should be held at different points in time. It is recommended to hold the first information session before applying for planning

permission for the biogas plant and it can be offered in combination with the study tour. Events should be held during the planning and construction phases as well as after the start up of the plant and at regular intervals (ideally annually).

An overview of the current as well as future state of the energy supply (regionally, nationally, globally) should be offered at an event. The people should slowly be introduced to the topic of biogas. An introductory section should cover the current energy situation and the necessity for green electricity/gas. You should avoid talking about technicalities at a public event and only provide the most important key data (as far as it's already been established). Also exemplary and already implemented projects should be presented. For this you should contact an experienced operator of a biogas plant and/or a neutral expert that can present the biogas topic in an objective way. The information should be aimed at emphasising the positive effects a biogas plant would have on the community but also deal with possible burdens put on the neighbours (e.g. traffic, smell, noise) and measures that can be taken to minimise these.

Through an active information policy you are able to indirectly influence many discussions in a positive way. A negative mood generally only arises due to missing information and the ignorance that results from it.

- **Humans will only accept what they understand.**
- **And they only understand something they know about.**
- **They can only know about something if they are informed or have access to information!**

## Participation of the neighbours

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The goal is to achieve and maintain an acceptance for the biogas project that's as high as possible. By offering opportunities for participation to local people interested in the project you automatically create a larger amount of supporters and generally also increase the acceptance of the population. In the case of plants that are confronted with a difficult relationship with the neighbours it is advisable to make use of a mediator that can ensure an objective discussion and prevent personal attacks. This can shield the participants on both sides from attacks. Whether or not a larger group of operators is formed depends on the specific circumstances and has to be decided individually by the person in charge of the project. The number of actively engaged shareholders should however not be too big in order not to complicate the decision making process too much.

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## Communication during the permit procedure

It is important to meet with the relevant planning officer very early in the process and consult him/her about the requirements for information needed to support the application and to thoroughly brief him/her about the proposal and the technology. It may also be valuable to contact some of the key consultees to the planning process – particularly the Environment

Agency. The lack of information can lead to mistrust and a general negative sentiment. Is a negative sentiment once formed it is hard to change it. The aim must therefore be to create a positive attitude among the involved people.

Getting good information to the Council, its consultees and the neighbours is so very important and you should try to anticipate all questions and concerns and address them from the outset.

## Open house day

Great interest by the neighbours for the new construction site arises during the construction of the biogas plant. An “open house day” for the local population serves the purpose of satisfying their curiosity and their information needs. This allows the local population to get a first impression of the biogas plant and also leads to a positive image of the same.

**Warning:** Secure the construction site and prepare possibilities for on site inspection!

Once the biogas plant starts its operation it should be presented to the public. For this purpose an opening event is usually held that can also be seen as a first “open house day”. It is however important to hold an “open house day” regularly – ideally annually. An “open house day” allows the remaining sceptics to get a positive impression of the biogas plant. As a biogas plant operator you have nothing to hide! A biogas plant is a valuable contribution to the environment and also for the respective locality – it can therefore be presented to the population in good conscience.

An opportunity to hold an “open house day” could also present itself in combination with a regional event. An “open house day” could be organised on a regional or national basis. That way, the possibility of a coordinated, regional announcement arises that will help keep the “marketing” costs for the local event as low as possible.

Such regional events have not been established yet but, if it were, every biogas plant operator is encouraged to actively participate in such a joint campaign.

## PR activities

PR activities represent a meaningful addition to providing information directly.

Humans are generally creatures of habit. In times of an ever increasing information and information overload, people are being forced to absorb information very quickly. New, still unfamiliar things are often quickly perceived in a negative way. It becomes increasingly difficult to change a person’s attitude once his opinion about a matter has been formed. A number of opportunities to put the activities into perspective present themselves during the development and operation of a biogas plant.

Under the motto “**do good things and talk about them**“, you should constantly provide information to your social surroundings.

An important aspect of the work with the news media is the conversation with the reporters. Through a conversation with a reporter it is possible to quickly and easily provide information to a large audience through the respective media (news papers, radio, TV).

During the preparation for the conversation with the press, the following points should be considered and thought through:

- What message do you want to convey?
- Who is the target audience for the information?
- Press kit – what data needs to be prepared?
- Choose the correct time for the conversation with the press
- Invitation of the media representatives
- Contact the right person from the media
- Photographs
- Preparation of a buffet (not absolutely necessary)

The reporters that are present will usually spread the information at no cost to you in the form of an editorial contribution. If however you want texts formulated by yourself (advertising slogans etc.) to be spread through media outlets it is advisable to pay for an advertisement or prepare an article yourself and issue as a press release.

In the case of a newspaper article/press release, you should abide to the following rules:

- The most important information always first
- Plain and simple formulations / is the text formulated in a way that a “biogas-layman” can also understand it?
- **Always consider the usefulness to the reader first**

In contrast to a press conference, where usually a fairly large number of media representatives take part, a conversation with reporters offers a more casual setting and only a smaller group of journalists is invited. The content of the programme is tailored more towards the agenda of the participating journalists.

## Biogas leaflet / biogas newsletter

Since you can't expect all persons concerned with the project to attend the information sessions you should also provide the needed information in a written form (leaflet, newsletter or in an article in the community paper) and send it to the entire community.

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During the project planning phase of the biogas plant it is important to inform the local population for a variety of reasons. The local population can, for instance, later become customers to a district heating system that uses the waste heat of the biogas plant.

The people living in the proximity should not get the feeling that a biogas plant is simply being built in their backyard without them knowing about it.

In the course of providing information, the planned project should be briefly introduced and the key data presented. Bear in mind: bad or even false information will be a cause of mistrust and resentment to arise.

- **Humans will only accept what they understand.**
- **And they only understand something they know about.**
- **They can only know about something if they are informed!**

You should outline the performance of the biogas plant in a leaflet campaign or an advertisement in the local community newspaper on a regular basis (at least once a year). The following important information can be mentioned: reduction in CO<sub>2</sub>-emissions, electricity was generated for xx households, etc.

If your budget (time and money) allows for an in-house, regularly released (e.g. 2 per year) biogas newsletter this provides an ideal opportunity to pass on additional information and shape a positive image of the biogas plant.

A biogas newsletter would inform the local population of planned future activities and provide general information on anaerobic digestion and biogas. This way the community is kept up to date and the biogas plant operator is able to pass on a small amount of his knowledge to the population. A higher acceptance for the biogas plant and a steady “update“ of the knowledge of the readers is the result. Additionally, such a biogas newsletter (or similar) works as a sort of advertisement for the biogas plant and helps create and propagate a positive image of the biogas plant.

It is important to engage the neighbourhood in an extensive discussion process in the run-up to the planning permission procedure in order to avoid unexpected problems in the future.

Ideally, interesting cooperation opportunities will also arise for the operators of the biogas plant.

The timing of this mailing however is also important. The optimal point in time varies from case to case and is up for the project leaders to determine. It is often advisable to ask someone with experience but not involved in the project for advice.

## Web site

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The internet has become an important source of information for many people nowadays. To build and operate a modern biogas plant should also include making use of a web site as a modern communication media in order to inform people about the business. This is, of course, the norm for companies and corporations. The benefits of the biogas plant can be presented and explained over this webpage. This simple measure can be very effective at doing away with preconceived opinions of critical persons and community members, often formed through negative word-of-mouth propaganda, and replace them with honest and objective information. A presence of a web site suggests that the operator of the biogas plant is a modern, innovative opinion leader among the population. Simple measures like the implementation of a forum or a photo gallery (e.g. of the opening ceremony) will prompt the population to visit the site and get informed about new developments surrounding the biogas plant.

An additional link to the biogas web page placed on the homepage of the community also allows people from outside to get informed about the biogas plant which leads to an image improvement of the whole community because of their generation of green electricity and heat. An internet presence can provide the operator of the biogas plant with numerous advantages if the content but also the presentation conveys a positive image of the biogas plant. An early implementation of a web site also provides the opportunity to react in a timely manner to concerns by providing well prepared information.

## Opening event of the biogas plant

A turf-cutting ceremony offers an interesting opportunity for publicity work at the very start of the construction of the biogas plant. The turf cutting ceremony can be carried out at a considerably lower of cost than an opening ceremony and offers a good addition to the public relations activities that take place prior to the opening event.

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Once the biogas plant has been erected, you should not neglect to put on a proper opening event. The opening ceremony is an important event to present the biogas plant to the local community and other people interested in the project. Possible reservations or existing scepticism can be done away with. The biogas plant shows itself “from its best side” during the opening ceremony. The neighbours are offered the opportunity to get an up-close look of the plant. The biogas plant is often viewed as a sort of “ghost” – everyone talks about it but no-one knows anything about it – which inevitably leads to unwanted rumours forming. By inviting special guests (usually local MPs or AMs(Wales only)) and other relevant, regionally active persons (e.g. banks, entrepreneurs, the construction contractor etc.) you are able to demonstrate the depth of acceptance for the biogas plant. The presence (and usually short speech) of politicians conveys the explicit wish of government to erect biogas plants, a signal for the special importance and relevance of biogas plants. The opening event is seen as a starting point for events taking place regularly, eg “open house days” (see “Open house day”)

## Biogas Community Liaison Group

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Additional to the “open house day”, it is also possible to organise regular biogas community liaison meetings. When interesting new developments concerning the biogas plant arise, the opportunity emerges to hold a liaison group meeting. Regularly (annual) liaison events for the local population present a possibility for the neighbours as well as the operators of the biogas plant to talk about it, or biogas in general, in a comfortable atmosphere, in the local pub or the community centre.

It is also advisable to hold biogas liaison meetings whenever problems arise. It cannot be ruled out that some day something could happen (e.g. polluted streets due to bad weather during a harvest, smell nuisance in the case of problems with the fermentation, etc.), you should not try to conceal these problems or act as if nothing had happened.

The local population must know that they can discuss their problems and concerns regarding the biogas plant at any time with the plant operators. An open and honest dialogue between the biogas operator and the local community is of paramount importance in order to nip any problems in the bud.

The biogas operator should openly speak about the current situation at the biogas plant and also roughly outline his vision for the future.

An integration into a general energy round table organised for instance by the local authority would also be good. The energy discussion that takes place can be used to present biogas as an interesting alternative for a sustainable energy policy in the community.

Independent of the biogas liaison group it is always important to keep in touch with the local population, customers (e.g. heat customer), resource suppliers, etc.

## Sponsoring

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Through regular (depending on the budget) sponsoring activities, an added trust bonus is conveyed to the population. In return you can also expect the trust of the local population yourself. Local associations/clubs are ideally suited as target groups. By sponsoring prizes, sports kit or events you are able to ensure a certain degree of acceptance among the population. The leaders of the different associations/clubs are often also important opinion leaders in the community.

Independent of the sponsoring activities it is important to always keep in touch with the local population, customers (e.g. heat customer), resource suppliers, etc. Sponsoring usually gives an opportunity for the name of the business to be highlighted e.g. the placement of a logo on a community mailing or the name on the object that he sponsored (e.g. Biogas Huber Tennis Trophy). Image building and increasing the degree of awareness for the biogas plant play is important.

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