



Public participation in renewable energy projects and community benefits



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Introduction

The EU has set the stage for a faster transition to renewable energy with the Renewable Energy Directive (the 'RED', adopted in 2023, full text available [here](#)). However, how we accelerate matters. While many projects are well-planned, poorly planned projects can harm nature and exclude communities, fuelling legitimate criticisms as well as opening the door to groups that would like to see all renewables blocked.

Public participation is key to a democratic energy transition, and the earlier communities can be involved, the better the outcomes. Meaningful involvement ensures renewable energy projects benefit both people and nature, builds public trust, and helps deliver climate action that works for everyone. **This guide explains how the new EU rules will allow citizens to participate in renewable energy planning in the EU**, from the planning phase to the proposal stage.

Section 1 summarises the new rules on permitting and renewable energy development. Section 2 focuses on public participation within these new rules, including the organisation of public consultations. Section 3 highlights financial benefits that local communities may raise in public participation processes.

References: RED: arts 15-16 (permitting), art. 15(b) (mapping), art. 15(c) (RAAs)

1 July 2024*

Faster permitting rules must be passed into national law

21 May 2025*

Remainder of new rules, including mapping of territories, must be passed into national law.

21 February 2026

Renewables Acceleration Areas (RAAs) must be identified.

* [In progress - Whilst some countries have started adopting the new rules and mapping processes, most are behind on implementation - as of August 2025, only Denmark has met the legal deadlines so far.]

1. New rules on permitting and renewable energy development

The RED III aims to speed up deployment without harming nature by requiring countries to carefully map their territories, select especially suitable areas, and facilitate project approvals. The Directive entered into force in November 2023, but the associated rules only come into effect when each EU country adopts them into law.

The timeline explains the deadlines for EU countries to adopt the new renewable energy development rules - note that most EU countries have failed to meet these transposition deadlines so far. *With these new rules, the planning and permitting process will change significantly:*

New rules for development of renewable projects and infrastructure

- Coordination across countries towards a joint renewable energy target of 42.5% by 2030
- Accelerated development of renewables via:
 - streamlined permitting
 - mapping
 - RAAs

RAAs

New tool, 'renewable acceleration areas' (RAAs) where renewable energy projects can be sited even faster

mapping

mapping obligation for coordination of renewables siting

streamlined permitting

new permitting rules



1. New mapping obligations

EU countries are obliged to map their territories - land, sea, and inland waters - to assess renewable potential alongside future energy demand and existing or planned grids and storage, prioritising multiple uses of the same areas. These plans should be coordinated across national, regional, and local authorities and reviewed regularly, corresponding to the needs for renewables analysed in countries' national energy and climate plans (NECPs). Each NECP covers a ten-year period, and EU countries are obliged to provide one update during each cycle; the last update was due by 30 June 2024, which are updated every five years. Reference: RED III Arts 15(b), 15(c).

2. Renewables Acceleration Areas

Based on the mapping work, EU countries must then identify 'Renewables Acceleration Areas' (RAAs) for at least one type of renewable energy (e.g. solar voltaics or wind turbines). RAAs are a subset of the areas identified for renewable energy development through the mapping process where renewable energy projects are not expected to have a significant impact on nature and can therefore benefit from faster and simpler permitting procedures and requirement exemptions. Countries are obliged to avoid protected areas when designating RAAs and determine "effective mitigation measures" for each technology and area. The designation of RAAs must be based on a more rigorous Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and an **appropriate assessment** in line with the Directive 2001/42/EC ('SEA Directive') and Art. 6(3) of Directive 92/43/EEC ('Habitats Directive'). Alongside environmental considerations, the general public's opinion can also be considered in both assessments. See p.31 of ClientEarth's [Guide to the revised Renewable Energy Directive](#) for more details of how the SEA and appropriate assessment are changed and strengthened by the RED III. Reference: RED III Arts. 15c, 15c(2), 16, 16a. **Reference: RED III Arts. 15(c), 15(c)(2), 16, 16(a).**

SEA: strategic environmental assessment.

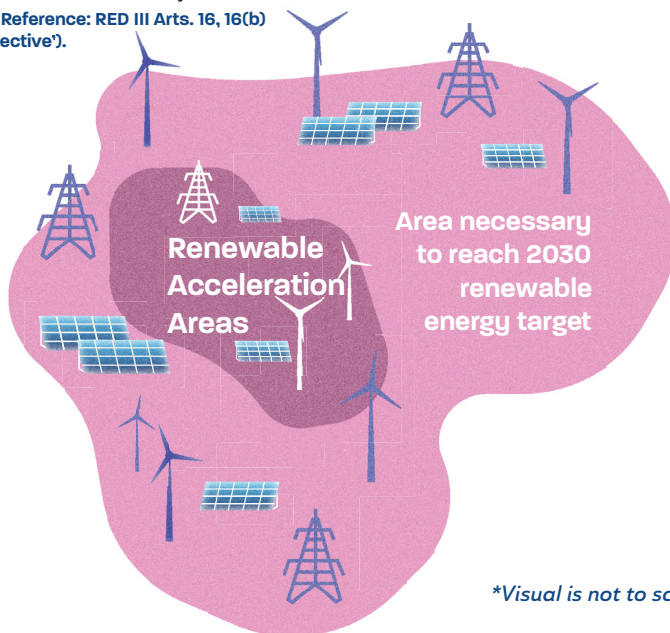
Larger-scale planning assessments conducted before projects are chosen. They evaluate environmental, social, and economic impacts of potential renewable energy infrastructure. When a country wants to designate an RAA, they have to apply a different, strengthened SEA.

Appropriate assessment: Assessments required for any plan or project that could impact a Natura 2000 site. They evaluate how a project or plan could affect the Natura 2000 site's conservation objectives. The plan or project can only be approved if it's proven that it will not harm the site's ecological integrity.

3. Streamlined permitting

EU countries must offer developers a single, streamlined process for obtaining the necessary permits for renewable energy projects and related infrastructure. Under EU rules, projects in RAAs may be exempt from a full Environmental Impact Assessment (**EIA**) if they meet certain planning-stage criteria, such as having effective mitigation measures in place. EIAs normally require public participation, so exempting some projects in RAAs means that there can be fewer opportunities for citizens to voice their opinion for individual projects. Projects outside of RAAs should not be affected by this change, and receive an EIA if they meet the national requirements. **Reference: RED III Arts. 16, 16(b) Directive 2011/92/EU ('EIA Directive').**

EIA: environmental impact assessment. Assessments carried out at the **project level** (e.g. for a wind or solar farm). They examine the likely impacts on people, biodiversity, water, and landscapes, and propose mitigation measures. They are usually required for large-scale projects - thresholds are set by national law.



**Visual is not to scale*

Public participation opportunities in and outside of RAAs



no opportunity for
public participation



opportunity for
public participation

SEA planning & appropriate assessment

EIA project-level

Outside
RAAs



Inside
RAAs



Is project
highly likely
to give rise to
'a significant
unforeseen
effect'?

YES



NO

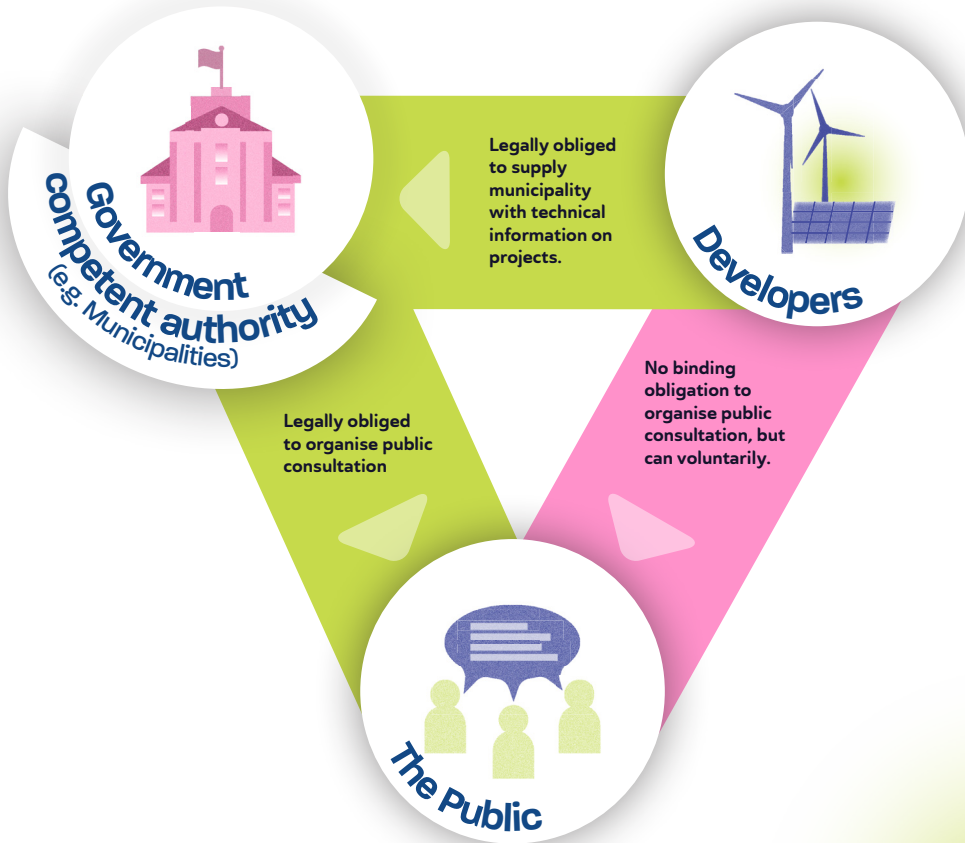


RED III Arts 16(b)(2), 16(a)(4)(5); EIA Directive Article 6(4); Aarhus
Convention Article 6, SEA Directive, Habitats Directive Art.6(3)

2. Public participation

‘Public participation’ can refer to legally required consultations or voluntary feedback initiatives, though here we focus on the legally binding processes. Countries are required to ensure that local communities are able to participate directly and indirectly when a renewable energy project is planned, including through consultations. The new EU rules on renewable energy development explicitly oblige countries to ensure and promote public participation. EU countries must identify the members of the public affected or likely to be affected by the designation of an RAA and ensure that EU rules on public consultation are followed, per RED III Art 15d. Public participation should be carried out according to the baseline of EU law, outlined in Art 6 of Directive 2001/42. Reference:. However, every country has its own specific rules for public consultation. Public consultations may include written and oral elements (e.g. planning or consultation meetings).

Consultations may also be organised by developers - in some countries such as Denmark, developers of large projects are legally required to hold public meetings - but these are usually not considered public consultations. In general, affected EU citizens have a right to submit their opinion directly to the decision-maker without project developers filtering, altering, or selecting what is and isn’t passed on.



These legal obligations are provided by EU law. National legislation may not always be aligned with these rules.

Golden rules of public participation

Early & timely involvement: The public should be involved as early as possible - this input matters most when decisions are still being shaped.

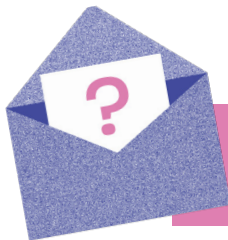
Access to information: The public should have clear, complete, and accessible information to be able to understand what's at stake and respond effectively.

Inclusive Engagement: Environmental decision-making should include people across diverse segments of society, including marginalised and vulnerable groups.

Transparency: Processes should be fair and transparent, with clear explanations of how decisions are made and how input is used.

Capacity Building: The public should be able to seek out and ask for tools, training, and support that help to engage fully and confidently.

Reference: UN Maastricht Recommendations.



Information that should be provided in public consultations

Public consultations for a plan designating a Renewables Acceleration Area (RAA) or a proposed renewable energy project should be accompanied by all the relevant documents provided in a timely manner. **If any of the below information is not provided, interested citizens have a right to request it.**

- Details on mapping results, draft plans, consultation timelines and formats
- Plain-language summaries and explanations, written in accessible language and length
- Contact information for the relevant authorities
- Clear explanations of the criteria used for site selection
- Information on projected environmental and economic impacts, including draft environmental impact reports, cost-benefit analyses, and advice issued to the competent authority
- Alternatives to the proposal considered by the authority Information about your rights to access information & documents, participate, and seek justice

When & how should consultations happen?

From the earliest stages of mapping and site selection, people living in nearby areas should be **informed through accessible channels** such as emails, letters, municipal websites, media, or public notices. Participation in public consultations should also be open to anyone affected or likely to be affected, not just those formally notified. If a project could affect them, citizens have the right to know early in the process and to get involved. All options must still be open, practically and legally: affected members of the public should be able to suggest changes or raise objections. Public consultations must allow enough time for reading and understanding the information, expressing and receiving feedback. Reasonable timeframes are normally, at a minimum, six weeks for the public to submit input.

The competent authority has the obligation to **seriously consider the input** and explain how the feedback influenced the final decisions. Responses should be **clear and specific**, especially to major objections or suggestions raised.

References: Directive (EU) 2023/2413 preamble, recital 20; recital 30; recital 34; Article 1(4)(b); Article 15d(1). SEA Directive Article 6, 8 and 9. Aarhus Convention Arts 6 and 7; C-280/18, Flausch and Others, Opinion of the Advocate-General, §53.



Challenging poor-quality public participation in court

EU citizens can challenge poor quality public participation in two ways.

- If the processes breach national rules, the case could be challenged in national courts.
- If the national law itself fails to meet EU standards, the issue could also be challenged before national courts and may be referred to the CJEU through a request for a preliminary ruling.

In either case, if the issues are serious enough to justify legal action, it is necessary to seek legal advice to assess the case's strength before proceeding further. The European Commission may initiate infringement proceedings and impose sanctions on EU countries that fail to adequately transpose EU law into their national legal orders, Consult ClientEarth's guide for more information on the right of access to justice in environmental matters.

References: Directive (EU) 2023/2413 Recital 30, Article 16(5). Aarhus Convention, Article 9

3. Benefits for local households and communities

Public participation not only provides the opportunity to discuss how to mitigate any negative impacts of renewables developments, but can also help local households and communities benefit from these projects.

The extent of financial benefits available depend heavily on national laws and policies, so what is available - and how it works - can vary across countries. Here are four ways communities are already benefitting from renewable energy projects in some areas of Europe:

Community benefit funds: in some projects, developers put money into a local fund to support community projects - such as parks, schools, and energy efficiency upgrades.

Example: [Renewable Electricity Support Scheme](#) in Ireland

Direct payouts are payments made to individuals or landowners near a project to compensate for any impacts.

Example: [Annual 'RE bonus'](#) to locals living near wind and solar parks in Denmark





Shared ownership opportunities allow members of the community to invest in or co-own the renewable energy project, giving them a share of the profits and a say in decision-making.

Example: [ZEZ Sun](#) in Križevci, Croatia

In-kind benefits are when instead of money, the developer provides something in exchange, usually services or infrastructure.

Example: [Sports and community lighting upgrades](#) in Vydmantai, Lithuania

For real-world examples and explanations of how these models have been successfully - and unsuccessfully - used across Europe, see Climate Action Network Europe's 2025 policy paper "[Community Engagement and Fair Benefit Sharing of Renewable Energy Projects](#)".

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