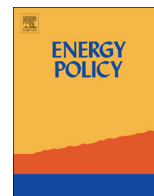




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How wind became a four-letter word: Lessons for community engagement from a wind energy conflict in King Island, Australia

R.M. Colvin ^{a,*}, G.Bradd Witt ^a, Justine Lacey ^b^a School of Geography, Planning and Environmental Management, The University of Queensland, St Lucia, 4072 QLD, Australia^b Commonwealth Scientific & Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), Land & Water Flagship, PO Box 883, Kenmore, QLD 4069, Australia

HIGHLIGHTS

- Community engagement for a controversial wind energy proposal is analysed.
- Key factors driving local conflict are identified and discussed.
- The social identity approach provides understanding of hidden complexities.
- Implications for community engagement practice are discussed.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 April 2016

Received in revised form

27 August 2016

Accepted 10 September 2016

Available online 17 September 2016

Keywords:

Social identity

Stakeholders

Participation

Social acceptance

Renewable energy

Wind farm

ABSTRACT

Wind is recognised as a key source of renewable energy. Despite broad public support for the sector, wind energy proposals have routinely triggered social conflict and localised opposition. To promote social acceptance and avoid conflict, the wind energy sector undertakes *community engagement*. This paper interrogates the community engagement undertaken in King Island (Tasmania, Australia) for a large scale wind energy development proposal which did not proceed to implementation due to external economic factors. Despite the proponent's adoption of what was described as a 'best practice' community engagement strategy, the proposal caused significant social conflict for the community. In-depth interviews ($n=30$) were conducted with members of the King Island community and were qualitatively analysed through the social identity lens. Five key drivers of the local conflict were identified: problematic pre-feasibility engagement; the lack of a third-party facilitator of the community consultative committee; holding a vote which polarised the community; the lack of a clear place in the engagement process for local opposition, and; the significance of local context. These findings are instructive for improving community engagement practice for wind energy and other energy generation and land use change sectors.

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1. Introduction

Wind energy generation can be a politicised and complex issue with consequences ranging from local to global scales (Hindmarsh, 2014; Howard 2015; Juerges and Newig, 2015). At the local level, a stakeholder's perspective will dictate whether landscape and social impacts of proposed wind energy developments are considered beneficial or burdensome (Botterill and Cockfield, 2016). Globally, the agenda for action to address climate change (e.g. Althor et al., 2016) promotes investments in wind and other renewable energy sources (Batel et al., 2013; Curran, 2012; Deng

et al., 2015; Jami and Walsh 2014; Juerges and Newig 2015; Hindmarsh 2010; Lema and Lema 2013; Wilson and Dyke 2016). In Australia, the wind energy industry has the broad 'in principle' support of the public (Hobman and Ashworth, 2013), though large-scale, commercially owned wind energy projects have been often accompanied by conflict (Botterill and Cockfield, 2016; Hall and Jeanneret 2015; Hindmarsh, 2010, 2014; Wilson and Dyke 2016). While social conflict over land use change can contribute to improved outcomes through exploration of a range of perspectives and options, the introduction of wind energy is routinely characterised as dysfunctional conflict, which is where a satisfactory resolution is unlikely and long-term relationships are damaged (Amason 1996; Colvin et al., 2015b). In wind energy issues in Australia, conflict tends to manifest around localised opposition (e.g. Alberts, 2007; Burningham et al., 2014; Anderson, 2013; Kermagoret et al., 2016; Ogilvie and Roots, 2015), often motivated

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: r.colvin2@uq.edu.au (R.M. Colvin), bwitt@uq.edu.au (G.Bradd. Witt), justine.lacey@csiro.au (J. Lacey).

by concerns about health impacts, changes to the landscape, impacts on wildlife, loss of amenity, reduced property values, distributive and procedural fairness issues, and social disharmony (Botterill and Cockfield, 2016; Fast et al., 2016; Gross 2007; Groth and Vogt, 2014b; Hall et al., 2013; Hindmarsh, 2010; Howard, 2015; Jami and Walsh, 2014).

In efforts to avoid dysfunctional conflict and local opposition, proponents of wind energy projects commit time and resources to undertaking community engagement as part of their planning processes (Bell et al., 2005; Fast et al., 2016; Howard, 2015; Jami and Walsh, 2014; Soma and Hagggett, 2015). This is in response to communities and other social actors demanding involvement in decisions which affect them (Moffat et al., 2015; Quick and Feldman, 2011; Ross et al., 2016), and as a result of broader shifts toward participatory processes as a norm of land use change decision-making (Colvin et al., 2016; Reed, 2008). Additionally, community engagement is a mandated requirement of environmental and social impact assessments for wind energy development proposals (Hindmarsh, 2010). To the wind industry, community engagement can be viewed as a vehicle through which to obtain a social licence to operate (SLO); an indicator of community acceptance which can change over the course of a project (Clean Energy Council, 2013; Corvellec, 2007; Hall 2014; Hall and Jeanneret, 2015). However, Hindmarsh (2010) argues that the traditional approach to community engagement for wind energy developments in Australia has been inadequate, and as a result has contributed to the exacerbation of conflict. This inadequacy is attributed to the use of a passive approach to community engagement, where the proponent “provides no guarantee to affected communities of any decision-making power” (Hindmarsh, 2010, p. 543). Reflecting the lower levels of the ‘Spectrum of Public Participation’ (Clean Energy Council, 2013; Hindmarsh, 2010; IAP2, 2015), this approach to community engagement limits community involvement to being ‘informed’ by proponents, or providing information to proponents for possible, but not guaranteed, incorporation into decisions.

In contrast, a collaborative and participatory approach to community engagement is expected to yield better outcomes for both communities and wind energy development proponents (Hall and Jeanneret, 2015; Hindmarsh 2010). This approach reflects the higher levels of the ‘Spectrum of Public Participation’, and is an active and transparent relationship between communities and wind energy proponents which facilitates empowerment of the community to influence decision-making (Hindmarsh, 2010). Attributes of this higher-level of community involvement which differ from the traditional approach to community engagement include:

- engaging community early in the proposal (Anderson, 2013; Bell et al. 2005; Corscadden et al. 2012; Fast et al. 2016; Groth and Vogt 2014a; Hall et al., 2013, 2015; Hindmarsh, 2010; Hindmarsh and Matthews, 2008; Jami and Walsh, 2014);
- genuinely incorporating community input into project planning and design (Hindmarsh, 2010; Hindmarsh and Matthews, 2008; Jami and Walsh, 2014);
- building and maintaining trust between proponent and community (Alberts, 2007; Hall et al. 2015);
- exceeding minimum (mandated or legislated) requirements (Anderson, 2013; Fast et al., 2016; Hall and Jeanneret, 2015; Howard, 2015; Soma and Hagggett, 2015);
- establishing community consultative committees (Fast et al., 2016; Howard, 2015);
- forming a long-term commitment to and relationship with the community (Anderson, 2013; Fast et al., 2016; Hindmarsh and Matthews, 2008; Jami and Walsh, 2014; McLaren Loring, 2007);
- embedding staff locally to develop long-term relationships (Hall

et al. 2015; McLaren Loring, 2007), and;

- avoiding incendiary settings, such as town-hall meetings which can descend into a “shouting match” (Hall et al. 2015, p. 306).

Higher-level (IAP2 style) approaches to community engagement have been recognised by scholars as critical for positive relationships between communities and wind energy developments (Hindmarsh, 2010), and community engagement guidelines developed with the wind energy industry reflect this approach as ‘best practice’ (Clean Energy Council, 2013). Nevertheless, conflict accompanies many new wind energy proposals, causing social disharmony in the candidate host communities (Botterill and Cockfield, 2015; Hindmarsh, 2010, 2014).

This paper presents an examination of a wind energy proposal which, despite the proponent’s claim to have adopted a ‘best practice’ approach to community engagement (Hydro Tasmania 2013c, p. 16), caused significant social disharmony during the time of the proposal in 2012–2014 in the community of King Island, Australia (Hindmarsh, 2014; The Australian, 2013). The aim of this research is to interrogate the King Island experience to identify aspects of process and/or exogenous factors that contributed to the dysfunctional local conflict despite the approach to community engagement adopted by the proponent, and from this to inform theory and practice for community engagement.

This paper first presents a background to the King Island experience and then a description of the qualitative interview and analysis methods. An overview of the phases and events of the conflict at King Island is presented, followed by a discussion of the key findings about the conflict in King Island. Finally, concluding remarks are offered.

2. Background to King Island and the TasWind proposal

King Island is located at the meeting of the Bass Strait and the Southern Ocean, half way between mainland Australia and the southern island state of Tasmania, which is its jurisdictional state (Fig. 1). King Island lies in the path of strong winds; the ‘Roaring 40s’ (Khamis, 2007). The Island is approximately 1100 km² (Coates, 2014; Jones, 2014); 64 km at its longest point and 27 km at its widest (Khamis, 2007). The resident population in 2013 was 1605 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014), with a long-term and steady trend of population decline (Jones, 2014). The local economy is driven by primary production, with dairy, beef, kelp, and other speciality products as key export commodities (Jones, 2014), though there is a growing tourism sector in the Island (Coates, 2014).

Stabilisation of the King Island population and the related goal of economic sustainability are key challenges for the community (Coates, 2014; Jones, 2014). This follows closure of a scheelite mine for tungsten in the Island in the 1990s (Suárez Sánchez et al., 2015), and the more recent closure of the King Island abattoir in 2012 (Jones, 2014). Both significantly dimmed the economic outlook for the community. Additional perennial challenges include the high cost of living, freight, and travel, and limited telecommunications (Coates, 2014; Jones, 2014). Despite the challenges of population decline and disruption to its traditional industries, King Island is buoyed by a strong sense of community, place, and identity (i.e. King Islanders identify as King Islanders, not Tasmanians or Australians), and pride in the Island’s clean air and rugged and agrarian landscape. The laid-back and open community-centric local culture is highly valued by King Islanders. For a detailed perspective on local culture, past change, and future prospects of King Island see Coates (2014) and Jones (2014).

It was in this context of an uncertain future for the local economy and highly valued and cohesive community that a

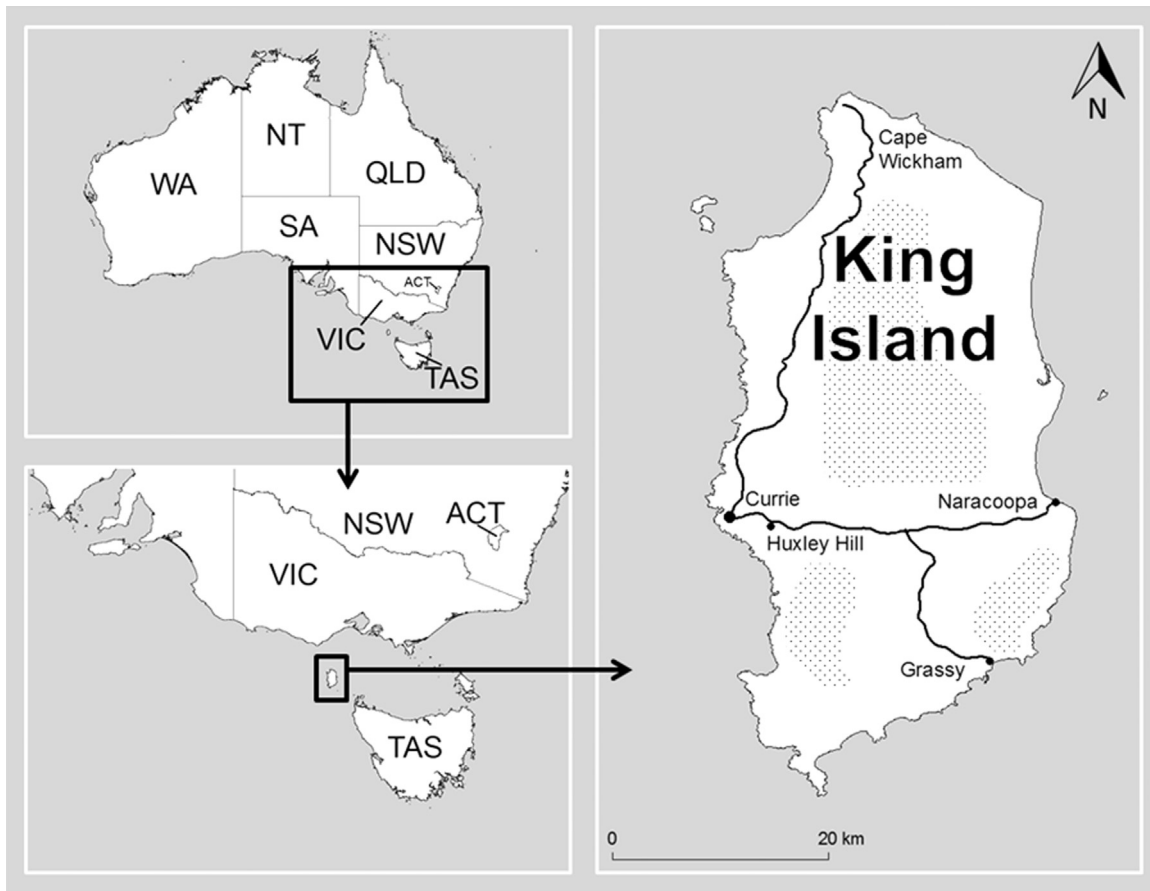


Fig. 1. Location of King Island. The main town (Currie), other settlements (Grassy and Naracoopa), features (Cape Wickham and the 5 pre-existing wind turbines at Huxley Hill), and major roads are marked. Shading indicates an approximate representation of the TasWind areas of interest (Hydro Tasmania, 2013a). Map generated using ESRI ArcGIS (ESRI, 2011).

proposal for a large scale wind energy development was announced by Hydro Tasmania (a Tasmanian state owned corporation which produces energy from renewable sources, predominantly hydro and wind). The \$2 billion 'TasWind' proposal outlined plans for a 600 MW wind turbine development in King Island to produce energy for export to mainland Australia via a proposed undersea cable (Hydro Tasmania 2014). The TasWind proposal included an estimated 200 turbines at 150 m in height (Butera, 2014; Ogilvie, 2013), with a combined footprint expected to cover 20% of the Island's area (The Australian, 2013). As the proposal was to generate energy for export to the Australian mainland, the TasWind proposal was to be independent of the five wind turbines (of approximately 50 m in height) already established on a prominent ridgeline at Huxley Hill near King Island's main township of Currie (see Fig. 1).

The community engagement undertaken by Hydro Tasmania, the proponents of the TasWind proposal, appeared to reflect a higher-level approach to community engagement. Although limited documentation about the community engagement strategy is publicly available, materials produced by Hydro Tasmania (2013c) during the time of the TasWind proposal describe intentions to undertake an "intensive" (p. 27), "innovative" (p. 66), and "open and transparent" (p. 16) community engagement strategy which would reflect "best practice" (p. 16). Through this process the community would be afforded influence over decisions, as the project would "not proceed to development without the ongoing support of the King Island community" (Hydro Tasmania 2013c, p. 15). The community engagement strategy involved a range of specific engagement activities during the early stages of the

TasWind proposal, commitments to ongoing community engagement throughout the entirety of the proposal, and the requirement of community support before proceeding to each stage of the proposal process (Hydro Tasmania, 2012; Hydro Tasmania 2013a, 2013c) (Fig. 2).

Hydro Tasmania announced the proposal at the pre-feasibility stage, when there was no certainty about the viability of the project, and took early steps to engage the King Island community in the decision-making process (Hydro Tasmania, 2014). A range of meetings and information sessions were held throughout the deliberation period, local representatives of Hydro Tasmania were based in the Island, a community consultative committee (the TasWind Consultative Committee, or TWCC) was established and a community vote was held on whether or not to proceed to the feasibility stage (Hydro Tasmania 2013b, 2013c). These actions reflect, at least superficially, adherence to a higher-level, or 'best practice', community engagement strategy where the community is engaged early, there are a range of opportunities for dialogue and collaboration, and the community is given decision-making power over the future of the proposal. In spite of this, the King Island experience was one of conflict, with strain on interpersonal relationships, damage to local institutions, the formation of a local opposition group (the No TasWind Farm Group, or NTWFG), legal actions (taken by the NTWFG against the proponent), and the eventual decision by Hydro Tasmania in October 2014 to not proceed with the proposal due to economic factors (Hydro Tasmania, 2014). As engagement strategies which reflect higher-level community engagement are expected to reduce conflict (Colvin et al., 2016; Hindmarsh, 2010; Reed and Curzon, 2015), the

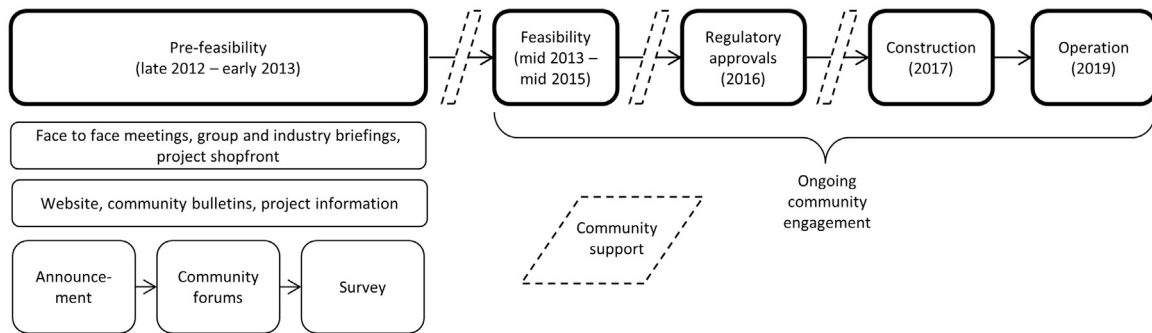


Fig. 2. An overview of the planned TasWind process including key early community engagement activities and the requirement for community support between phases (content from: [Hydro Tasmania, 2012](#); [Hydro Tasmania 2013a](#)).

question is raised as to what happened in King Island to lead to these outcomes, and what can be learned from the King Island experience to improve the practice of community engagement for wind energy and other sectors.

3. Methods

This research project was aimed at understanding why the King Island experience was characterised by dysfunctional social conflict, despite the proponent's adoption of what was claimed to be a 'best practice' community engagement strategy. The aim for this research was therefore two-fold. First, to develop a locally situated and in-depth understanding of the TasWind community engagement process. Second, based on this understanding, to examine the hidden complexities and subtle drivers of the conflict in order to learn from the King Island experience about the successes and pitfalls of community engagement in land use change decision-making.

To achieve this locally situated and in-depth understanding of the King Island experience, a qualitative research design was adopted. This involved visiting King Island in March–April 2015, during which time in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 individuals from the King Island community ($n=30$). As a local perspective on the proposal was sought, external stakeholders (e.g. company and interest group representatives) were not interviewed. While immersion in the King Island community contributed to a deep understanding of the local context, only formal interview content was analysed.

A constructionist epistemology guided the research, in that the differing perceptions of the King Island experience were sought (e.g. [Jürges and Newig, 2015](#)). This was not for critique, but in order to develop a nuanced, balanced, and well-rounded understanding of the issue ([Moon and Blackman, 2014](#)). The theoretical lens through which the research was conducted was the social identity approach. The social identity approach emphasises the importance of group membership and the way groups interact in shaping relationships, thereby affecting the outcome of processes which are driven by intergroup interactions ([Colvin et al., 2015b](#); [Fielding and Hornsey, 2016](#); [Haslam, 2000](#)). The approach incorporates themes such as: group formation; stigma; stereotyping; conforming to identity norms; consensus-seeking behaviour; intergroup power differences; polarisation and extremism; communication, and; intergroup deliberation ([Bliuc et al., 2015](#); [Colvin et al., 2015b](#); [Crane and Ruebottom, 2011](#); [Fielding and Hornsey, 2016](#); [Haslam, 2000](#); [Hornsey, 2008](#); [Mason et al., 2015](#); [Rowley and Moldoveanu, 2003](#); [Unsworth and Fielding, 2014](#)). A central tenet of the social identity approach is the distinction between in-groups and out-groups. An in-group is a group to which an individual belongs, while an out-group is a group to which the

individual does not belong ([Colvin et al., 2015b](#); [Fielding and Hornsey, 2016](#)). The social identity approach as a theoretical lens for qualitative research has been found to be particularly suited to research projects with an interest in understanding social context and complexities ([Jackson and Sherriff, 2013](#)). The explicit decision (see [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#)) to adopt the social identity approach as a theoretical lens informed interview development, analysis and coding, and interpretation.

3.1. Interview development

In-depth interviews were developed around key topics, with few specific questions. This was to allow for a conversational structure to the interviews, and to have the flexibility to pursue unexpected themes as they arose ([Bryman, 2012](#)). This approach was also adopted to allow the interview participants to discuss their perceptions and experiences with limited questioning (which could potentially be leading), in order to gain rich and authentic insights. Probing questions, responsive to the participants' answers, were used to guide the interview and exhaust complex topics. All interviews were conducted by the same researcher, were recorded using a handheld note-taker device, stored on password-protected hard drives, and later transcribed verbatim. Sixteen participants were interviewed individually, and fourteen participants were interviewed in pairs (seven paired interviews). The five topics which were consistent for all interviews were:

- About the participant and King Island.
- What happened during the time of the TasWind proposal?
- Who was involved in discussions about the TasWind proposal?
- How was the participant personally engaged with the TasWind proposal?
- What has happened after the TasWind proposal?

3.2. Participant recruitment

Interview participants were members of the King Island community, and represented a broad range of perspectives on the proposal (from strong support to strong opposition, and including ambivalence, uncertainty, and indifference). Recruitment of participants occurred through making contact with key informants, followed by snowballing. Key informants were identified initially through the news media coverage of the TasWind proposal, and further individuals were contacted based on inclusion in local directories. Information about the research project was shared with local institutions and all interested individuals, with the invitation to circulate with any King Islanders who would be interested in participating or knowing more about the research. Not all people contacted were interested or willing to participate. Of those who were interested in the research, a great deal of goodwill and

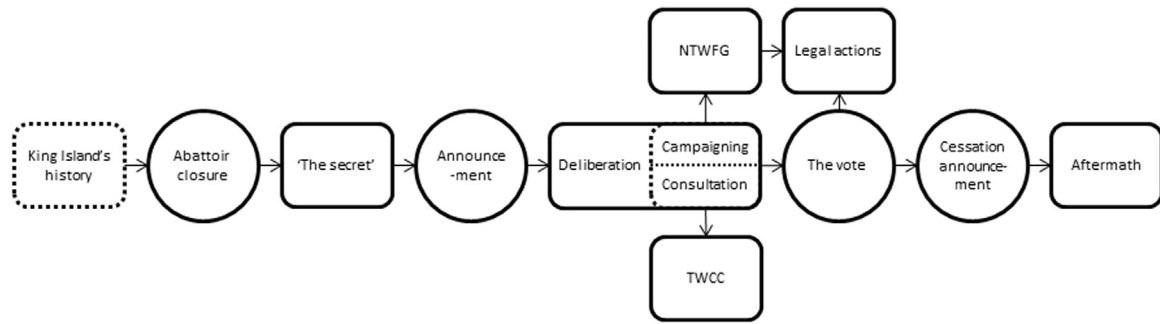


Fig. 3. The phases and events of the TasWind proposal. Phases are rectangular, events are circles. NTWFG: No TasWind Farm Group. TWCC: TasWind Consultative Committee.

openness facilitated significant snowballing recruitment of additional participants. This benefitted from King Islanders identifying others who would have interesting perspectives to contribute to the research. Of note is that King Islanders across all stances on the TasWind proposal were eager to assist with recruiting a broad spectrum of views for participation in the research project. As the issue was divisive, and not all King Islanders were engaged to the same degree, care was taken to seek out a range of people to represent different levels of engagement and different stances on the proposal. To protect the anonymity of participants from a small community, demographic-type information is not presented and direct quotations have not been included (Jones, 2014).

3.3. Analysis and coding

Interviews were coded using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Codes were based on insights while conducting interviews and throughout the data analysis process, and on the theory of the social identity approach. Theoretical analysis codes related to the social identity approach were developed from the literature, in particular Colvin et al. (2015b) and Haslam (2000), and extended with Hogg and Abrams (1988) and Turner (1982). The codebook for analysis was developed prior to commencing analysis, based on the literature, reflections on fieldwork experiences, interview content, and research notes. The codebook was an active tool, and was routinely updated throughout the data analysis process as codes were added, edited, or reorganised. The codebook was developed, and all coding undertaken by, the first author in consultation with the co-authors of this study. All analysis was undertaken using NVivo 10 (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013; QSR International, 2012).

3.4. Interpretation

Sense-making of the coded interviews into a narrative of the King Island experience was conducted through gathering all interview content related to each theme ('queries' on 'nodes' in NVivo 10), and synthesising all perspectives from participants into a multifaceted recount of the King Island experience. The social identity approach informed the way in which the interviews were interpreted and analysed. For example, polarisation was seen to be a product of the interaction between the issue, i.e. TasWind, and social psychological intergroup processes, rather than simply an observed phenomenon. Emphasis was on identifying sequences or causal links between discreet events, or between and within phases of the TasWind proposal. An example of this is associating the closure of the abattoir with the way in which the King Island community appraised the merits and risks of the TasWind proposal. An overview of the TasWind community engagement process and key findings related to the hidden complexities and subtle drivers of conflict in the King Island experience were then

drawn from the sense-making process based on the significance of these issues in the interviews (e.g. consistently reported across participants, highly controversial across participants, or emphasised by participants as a major factor in the King Island experience).

4. Results and discussion

Results and discussion are integrated in this section, presented as findings which will first cover a chronological understanding of the TasWind conflict from the local perspective, followed by key factors which have been identified as drivers of the conflict in King Island. A complete treatment of the complexity of the King Island experience cannot be provided in this paper. As such, the findings present those issues which are considered the most significant lessons for community engagement.

4.1. Understanding the TasWind proposal conflict in King Island

Viewed as an episode of local conflict, the TasWind proposal can be understood as series of phases which are punctuated by specific events, as described by the King Island community (Fig. 3). This section presents a very brief overview of key phases and events of the King Island conflict in order to situate the key findings of the research. This understanding was developed through analysis of interviews, and can be viewed as a local perspective of the events of the TasWind proposal in contrast with the stated community engagement plan (see Fig. 2). Further detail is provided in the following section where lessons for community engagement are discussed.

King Island's history provides the context within which the proposal was understood. Long term population decline and economic downturn present challenges for King Island. The branding of King Island's eponymous cheese fostered a 'clean and green' place identity, which has encouraged growth in the tourism sector, and the in-migration of new residents, especially 'tree-changers'.

The abattoir closure in September 2012, though not part of the TasWind proposal, was presented by most participants as the first key event relevant to understanding the TasWind proposal. Resulting employment and economic losses made the King Island community feel vulnerable, and gave a sense of urgency to the need to find a solution to the gap in the local industry and economy. There was a widely held perception that closure of the abattoir caused the belief that 'something' was needed in order to secure King Island's future.

Following closure of the abattoir, rumours about a \$2 billion project in King Island's future started to circulate throughout the community and became a prominent topic of discussion. This phase is the time of 'the secret'. Speculation in lieu of knowledge caused apprehension and aversion to change, with 'the secret'

known to some in Council but not revealed to the community.

In November 2012, a community meeting was held to announce the TasWind proposal, jointly between the King Island Council and Hydro Tasmania. Much of the detail provided in the announcement was conceptual, rather than specific, likely due to the proposal being in the pre-feasibility stage.

Following the announcement, the TasWind proposal shifted into the deliberation phase. This phase was characterised by conflict within the King Island community, and involved a range of meetings and information exchange which were both community-driven and proponent-driven. Two major elements of this phase include the formal consultation program, facilitated by Hydro Tasmania, and the non-facilitated formation and mobilisation of a local opposition group.

The formal consultation program included establishment by Hydro Tasmania of the TasWind Consultative Committee (TWCC). The TWCC comprised of 17 King Islanders, and functioned independently from Hydro Tasmania. The aim was to serve as a neutral intermediary group between Hydro Tasmania and the King Island community. There were mixed perceptions about the TWCC, variously including that it was 'pro-wind' and 'anti-wind', and a range of views about the efficacy of the TWCC.

At the same time as the formal consultation program, a non-facilitated local opposition group, the No TasWind Farm Group (NTWFG) formed and mobilised against the proposal. The NTWFG brought speakers to King Island, engaged with the national media, conducted an election-style campaign in relation to the community vote (outlined below), and initiated legal actions against Hydro Tasmania. These activities all occurred outside of the formal channels for community engagement.

The vote which was held in June 2013 by Hydro Tasmania to gauge community support for the proposal proceeding to the feasibility stage was a major event during the time of the TasWind proposal, and was a significant cause for campaigning by the NTWFG, and wider contention. There were 878 votes cast by the community. A Hydro Tasmania representative stated 60% was the benchmark for the vote, however the results were returned at 58.7% in favour. Hydro Tasmania took this as adequate, and proceeded with the feasibility study. Some viewed this unfavourably; the NTWFG in particular felt that the vote had categorically failed.

Following the vote, the NTWFG commenced legal actions against Hydro Tasmania. The legal actions were based on the argument that Hydro Tasmania had broken their commitments to the community by proceeding with the feasibility study having not met the 60% level of support, and as such Hydro Tasmania did not obtain a 'social licence' to proceed with the feasibility study. Although the legal actions commenced, they were not resolved in Court.

While the legal actions were underway, in late October 2014 Hydro Tasmania announced that the TasWind proposal would cease. Exogenous economic factors solely were described as the cause; social conflict and the NTWFG's legal actions were not acknowledged. The cessation announcement was delivered in a statement from Hobart-based upper-management of Hydro Tasmania, and disseminated through the news media and social media. Reactions in the community were mixed.

In the aftermath since the cessation announcement (interviews were conducted around 5 months following the cessation announcement), many say King Island is returning to what they view as 'normal'. King Island still needs to overcome the same challenges as before the TasWind proposal, but now with a more fatigued community. Some say the Island is 're-merging', while others feel that below the surface there are irreparable social divides which will endure with the current generation of King Islanders. TasWind - and wind energy development in King Island more generally - has become a taboo.

4.2. Factors driving dysfunctional conflict in King Island during the community engagement process

4.2.1. Pre-feasibility engagement was problematic

The TasWind proposal was announced at the pre-feasibility stage. As such, much of the detail provided in the announcement was reported to be conceptual, rather than specific. Details including the conditions under which the proposal would proceed through feasibility and to development, the siting of turbines, the nature of landholder agreements, and hosting payments were reported to be not specified with certainty at the announcement, due to the intention to develop these details through consultation with the community. While this early engagement at the pre-feasibility stage adheres to recommendations for higher-level community engagement, there were aspects of this early engagement which were problematic.

Announcing at a stage when specific details were undefined caused a lack of certainty about the scope of the proposal (e.g. scale and extent of impact, timeframe, financials, fairness), leading to anxiety in the community. This was true both at the time of, and immediately after, the announcement of the proposal and persisted throughout the following deliberation phase. In the absence of knowledge about the impacts of the proposal on individuals, speculation led to circulation of misinformation and rumours in the community. At the announcement and pre-feasibility stage, Hydro Tasmania representatives were unable to answer some specific questions. The perceived lack of answers was not viewed favourably by some who felt that this represented unpreparedness and a lack of professionalism. Others felt that this indicated that Hydro Tasmania had believed the community would 'passively accept' the proposal, so had not gone to the effort to be prepared to answer questions.

These issues were compounded by 'the secret', which had made many people anxious about an unknown future change (speculation on possible projects at this time included: another abattoir, an immigration or refugee centre, offshore wave energy development, a prison farm, nuclear waste storage, a sand mine, an intelligence/spy facility, and gas drilling). Some members of the community were described as being primed by 'the secret' to automatically oppose whatever was announced, while others were disappointed at the time of the announcement to learn that the secret proposal was not their preferred speculative project. Because the announcement was made jointly by Hydro Tasmania and the King Island Council in a 'town hall' style forum, it was perceived that the Council had already promised community support for the project. This style of forum is considered a risk for successful community engagement, as it can allow dominance of only the loudest voices and encourage conflict (Hall et al., 2015). This, in combination with 'the secret' being linked to the Council, led to a view that the entire project was a *fait accompli* and community consultation was tokenistic at best. The view held by some of Hydro Tasmania as a powerful out-group, in the sense of the social identity approach, caused cynicism about the motives behind TasWind, and beliefs that any benefits for Hydro Tasmania must necessitate losses for King Islanders (Fielding and Hornsey, 2016; Haslam 2000). Combined with 'the secret', this immediately perceived power imbalance and view of Hydro Tasmania as an out-group operating within the space of King Island meant that efforts for building the trust critical to successful community engagement started on the back foot.

Engagement from pre-feasibility about whether to proceed to a feasibility stage meant that there were different perspectives about the purpose of Hydro Tasmania's engagement. Those who were cynical about the motives behind the TasWind proposal felt that the question of proceeding to feasibility was a *red herring*, and felt that if the community consented to the feasibility study then it

would be taken as attainment of the ‘social licence to operate’ for project development (despite Hydro Tasmania’s statements to the contrary). Additionally, framing the discussion around whether the proposal should proceed to feasibility to some extent facilitated those who intended to de-legitimise opposition. This occurred because the opposition view that consenting to feasibility would mean consent to development (or that opposing feasibility was the first necessary step in opposing the project in its entirety) was challenged by the argument that opposing a feasibility study was in effect opposing information. This caused debate in the community where different issues were being argued (e.g. ‘yes to a feasibility study’ versus ‘no to project’), and these misaligned perspectives about the TasWind proposal amplified tensions in the community. In controversial environmental management issues, positions or stances (e.g. support or opposition) can become their own social identities, and this can serve to escalate conflict and lessen the prospect for a conciliatory outcome (Fielding and Hornsey, 2016). In the King Island experience, the misaligned perspectives (‘yes to a feasibility study’ and ‘no to project’) not only served to confound debate and undermine the potential for a common ground for dialogue, but also provided the architecture for position-based identities which facilitate exacerbation of intergroup conflict.

With hindsight, some King Islanders felt that Hydro Tasmania should have completed the feasibility study without announcing the proposal or engaging with the community, as this would have avoided unnecessary anxiety in the community and would have allowed for consideration of a completed proposal. This runs contrary to other research indicating that communities value early engagement (e.g. Soma and Haggett, 2015), emphasising the importance of pairing early engagement with sound process to avoid early misinformation (e.g. ‘the secret’) and misaligned perspectives on the purpose for engagement.

4.2.2. The community committee lacked a third-party facilitator

Establishment of a consultative committee (TasWind Consultative Committee, TWCC) was another way in which the TasWind proposal incorporated recommendations for higher-level community engagement (Clean Energy Council, 2013; Howard 2015; Jami and Walsh, 2014). The TWCC was established by Hydro Tasmania to serve as an intermediary group between Hydro Tasmania and the King Island community. The TWCC was comprised of 17 people from the King Island community, and members were recruited through response to a call for Expressions of Interest for participation following announcement of the proposal. A chairperson, deputy and secretary for the committee were elected from among the committee members at the first meeting of the TWCC. The TWCC undertook a range of activities, primarily including (but among others): organising community meetings to identify community questions; research on community questions (independent of information provided by Hydro Tasmania), and; dissemination of findings to the community.

Perceptions about the neutrality of the committee to the TasWind proposal were mixed. There was a range of views, including that the TWCC was primarily comprised of anti-wind people, and that the TWCC was primarily comprised of pro-wind people. There were others who felt that pro-wind people were sought by Hydro Tasmania for participation with some token anti-wind people included to give the impression of balance. Other people felt that the TWCC was ‘hijacked’ by anti-wind interests, and that the committee presented biased information to the community.

These perceptions of a lack of neutrality in the TWCC contributed to the divide in the community during the time of the TasWind proposal, and this was particularly related to disputes about contested information. For example, perceptions that the TWCC was split between pro-wind and anti-wind people led some

to view the messaging from the TWCC as mixed and therefore not authoritative. The perceived pro-/anti-wind split was also the cause for some people to believe that the TWCC was ineffective in achieving its aims. This view was attributed to view that information from the TWCC was not communicated effectively to the community, i.e. the lack of consensus within the group meant that messaging from the TWCC to the community was unclear.

Of note is that the chairperson, deputy chairperson, and secretary of the TWCC were from the King Island community. While the mixed opinions about the neutrality or otherwise of the TWCC indicate that whether or not the TWCC had a bias for or against the TasWind proposal is a matter of perspective, the lack of a facilitator independent of King Island and Hydro Tasmania may have contributed to the various and sometimes unfavourable views of the TWCC, and indeed this was considered by some in the community to be the case. This point is not to imply that the TWCC leaders lacked objectivity, rather, the perception of the potential for bias served to undermine the efficacy of the committee. Information communicated by a perceived out-group is likely to be dismissed due to identity-based distrust of the out-group (Fielding and Hornsey, 2016; Haslam, 2000). In the King Island experience, allowing the TWCC to be perceived as biased, regardless of the actual value of the TWCC’s work, meant that information disseminated by the TWCC was treated with suspicion and uncertainty.

The importance of a third-party facilitator in wind energy community engagement has been emphasised by Fast et al. (2016), Hindmarsh and Matthews (2008) and Howard (2015). While establishment of community committees has been argued as a way to overcome or bypass conflict and improve democratic outcomes (Fast et al., 2016; Howard, 2015), in the King Island experience the decision to not lead the TWCC with a third-party facilitator contributed to the perceptions that the TWCC was biased or ineffective. This undermined the opportunity for positive outcomes through establishment of a consultative committee, and contributed to the escalation of local conflict.

4.2.3. A vote seemed democratic, but it polarised the community

As a way to measure the King Island community’s support for the TasWind proposal proceeding to the feasibility stage, a community vote was held. It was reported that the vote was not initially part of the TasWind engagement plan (though a community survey was to be held to gauge community views on the proposal), and that the use of this technique for measuring community support was pursued primarily by the TWCC. The vote was to be overseen by Australia’s federal agency responsible for managing elections (Australian Electoral Commission, AEC), with eligibility for voting based on the electoral roll. This arrangement was controversial, as it was reported that newer residents who were not yet registered were ineligible to vote. The NTWFG and TWCC both argued in favour of extending the list of eligible voters to include newer residents, and an alternative arrangement was made to allow all King Island rent-payers or rate-payers to vote via the King Island Council. However, as this was no longer adhering to the AEC’s rules, the AEC withdrew from administering the vote and an external polling organisation was engaged by Hydro Tasmania.

Despite this adjustment to address the voiced community concerns, many people were still dissatisfied with the rules for eligibility. It was reported that the rate-payer or rent-payer criterion meant that short term residents were able to vote, including transient workers who permanently left the Island shortly after the vote was held. There was also the perception that the extended rules allowed people who were not King Island residents, but were landowners, to temporarily move to King Island (or undertake paperwork to this effect, e.g. changing formal place of residence details) to become eligible, vote, then leave the Island again. To

some people, the role of the NTWFG and the TWCC in extending the eligibility rules led to the view that the vote was illegitimate, and that it was allowing people who were not part of the King Island community to influence the outcome of the vote. Hydro Tasmania was seen to 'bend over backwards' to accommodate demands from the NTWFG and the TWCC, though this was viewed as a factor which led to the reliability of the vote being undermined through renegotiation of the rules throughout the process.

In addition to issues with perceived legitimacy, the vote was viewed as a major factor which exacerbated the conflict in the King Island community. Conflict exacerbation was experienced because the dichotomous nature of a vote led to election style campaigning, attributed especially to the NTWFG who were promoting a 'no' vote to the King island community. The NTWFG viewed their campaigning as necessary action to gain a voice ahead of the vote, however, the campaigning was seen to shift the conflict about the TasWind proposal from being between the NTWFG and Hydro Tasmania to being between the 'yes camp' and the 'no camp' (the label 'no camp' was used interchangeably with the NTWFG) in the King Island community. In this way, the vote promoted an intergroup, 'us versus them', frame of the conflict within the community.

The dichotomous nature of a vote also led to polarisation of the community. In holding a vote, it meant that all community members were expected to commit to either a yes vote or a no vote. This expectation had the effect of closing down debate as any opinions in the 'grey area' had the caveat that when it came to the time to vote, the decision would have to go one way or the other. In effect, this meant that all King Islanders would be required to cast their vote and adopt a position-based identity. From the social identity perspective, holding a vote may be viewed as a process which forces position-based identification on those who vote. Position-based identification emphasises polarisation and in a conflictual context can cause extremism of views on the issue, particularly through encouraging in-group insularity which can lead to conforming to identity norms, and stereotyping of others around their position-based identity (Colvin et al., 2015b; Fielding and Hornsey, 2016). Stereotyping places an emphasis on the division between the in-group and out-group which encourages group members to conform to their position-based identity norms (Bliuc et al., 2015; Fielding and Hornsey, 2016; Mason, 2015). This can see groups deprioritising critical evaluation of a range of perspectives, as they seek consensus for group unity (Colvin et al., 2015b), thereby serving to ossify the position-based identity groups into polarised and extreme stances (Haslam, 2000).

Prior to the vote, speculation about others' voting intentions, pressure on people to disclose their voting intentions, and attempts by some people to influence how others would vote further divided the community. Having the responsibility given to the community via a vote for the decision on whether or not to proceed to the feasibility stage meant that debates about the TasWind proposal became decidedly personal. The personal nature of the debate influenced what was described as a lower than expected participation rate (some stated that around half of the population voted, though the number of total eligible voters is not known). While apathy (or passive acceptance) may have been seen as an explanation for this, some people suggested significant levels of boycotting due to both perceptions of illegitimacy and an unwillingness of people to commit themselves to a yes or no vote. The self-protective action of avoiding the stigma of a position-based identity through abstinence from voting was viewed as a safer option amid the social conflict.

One of the most controversial aspects of the vote was described by the participants as the measure of majority community support. Local Hydro Tasmania representatives had indicated that a majority was sought, however during a public meeting, where a

visiting (non-local) Hydro Tasmania representative was speaking, a community member asked for specification of what constituted a majority. At this point, the representative was described as making an 'off the cuff' response, and said that 60% would be considered a majority. The perceived spontaneity of the statement demonstrated to some that the community had little power over the process through which their consent for the TasWind proposal was being assessed. This spontaneity was also seen to demonstrate to some people that the local Hydro Tasmania representatives were not those who held the decision-making power with regards to the TasWind proposal.

The result of the vote was 58.7% in favour of the TasWind proposal proceeding to the feasibility stage. With 878 votes cast by the community (EMRS, 2013), the difference between 58.7% and 60% was the equivalent of around 12 individual votes. This outcome was viewed by some people as being short of the 60% benchmark, but close enough, and still demonstrative of majority community support for the proposal. However, others viewed it as categorically failing to meet the 60% benchmark, and therefore as evidence that the community did not express a level of support adequate for progression through to the feasibility stage. The way in which the result of the vote was framed (i.e. as 'close enough with a majority' or 'failed, due to not achieving 60%') caused controversy about the outcome, and was reported to have fuelled further social conflict within the King Island community. The decision by Hydro Tasmania to proceed with the feasibility study meant that these different framings of the vote outcome were not just differences in interpretation, but became major differences in opinion with regards to the legitimacy of the TasWind proposal and trustworthiness of Hydro Tasmania. This decision was also the cause for the NTWFG to initiate legal actions against Hydro Tasmania (which were not resolved in court).

Voting (or local referenda) has been identified as a potential means for improving local empowerment in wind energy decision-making (Fast et al., 2016; Jami and Walsh, 2014; Simcock, 2014). However, there has been little examination in the literature of the outcomes and value of a community vote. This is likely due to the relative rarity of community votes on wind energy projects (Jeong et al., 2012). Hall and Jeanneret (2015), suggest that asking for explicit approval from a community is daunting to industry. In a Swiss study, it was found that a community vote had little effect on the social acceptability of wind energy proposals (Walter, 2014). Jeong et al. (2012) and Simcock (2014) discuss positive outcomes following a community vote, though this was in a community-owned wind energy development, unlike the TasWind situation of a government-owned corporate and external proponent. A vote may appear to be a familiar and democratic method through which community perspectives can be shared. However, as higher-level approaches to community engagement promote 'consensus-building', where knowledge is exchanged and shared understandings are created (Clean Energy Council, 2013; Hindmarsh 2010; IAP2, 2015), the divisiveness of the vote indicates that this approach may not be considered to adhere to expectations of higher-level community engagement. Bell et al. (2005) caution that a vote may lead to politicisation of a wind energy development, and this was the case for the King Island experience. A vote which appeared to be a democratic way to measure community support instead caused agitation about process and voter eligibility, which undermined the legitimacy of the vote. The dichotomous nature polarised the community as the vote closed down debate and triggered election-style campaigning within King Island. The decision to proceed with the feasibility study despite not achieving the stated outcome of the vote served as proof to some that the engagement process was disingenuous, and provided another point of intractability within the community.

4.2.4. *Opposition had no ‘place’ in the process, so operated outside facilitated channels*

During the deliberation phase and in addition to, and separate from, the Hydro Tasmania-led community engagement processes, a group of concerned community members formed the No TasWind Farm Group (NTWFG) to oppose the TasWind proposal. It was reported that at the time of the announcement, some King Islanders felt anxious about the nature of the proposal, so an unofficial meeting was held which led to the formation of the NTWFG. Concerns predominantly included views (among others) that the proposal would: industrialise the agrarian landscape, impact negatively on human health and wellbeing, undermine community cohesion, and impact negatively on wildlife (especially migratory birds). These concerns are not dissimilar to issues raised by other wind energy development opponents (e.g. Anderson, 2013; Botterill and Cockfield, 2016; Fast et al., 2016; Hindmarsh and Matthews, 2008; Ogilvie and Roots, 2015; Wheeler, 2016). However, the NTWFG were broadly accepting of and positive about the pre-existing wind energy development in King Island at Huxley Hill due to the local benefits from the energy generated and the relatively small scale of the turbines (see Fig. 1).

For those who were members of the NTWFG, it was reported that their motives for group formation included that they felt a group was necessary in order to effectively counter the power and resources of Hydro Tasmania. Additionally, some felt that a formal group was necessary in order to demonstrate to Hydro Tasmania that they were committed in their opposition and that their concerns should be taken seriously. Group formation also provided social identity based challenges and benefits for group members. Identification with a controversial group is known to precede stigma against group members (Haslam, 2000), though in-group bonding also provides emotional support for members and motivation to pursue the group's aims. Both outcomes of group formation were reported to have been the case for NTWFG members.

The NTWFG drew on experiences from other places to inform their approach to opposing the TasWind proposal. For example, community opposition to expansion of the coal seam gas industry in other parts of Australia (e.g. Colvin et al., 2015a; Lacey and Lamont, 2014) was used as an analogy to the NTWFG perspective and experience with TasWind in King Island. This fits with a social identity approach model of referent informational influence, where an identity group will draw from the experiences of others with a shared identity. While they have no direct personal connection, the shared identity (e.g. local land use change opposition group) allows for learning from experiences and conformance to norms of the shared identity (Hogg and Abrams, 1988; Turner, 1982 and e.g. Burningham et al., 2014).

Formation of the NTWFG reflects a perceived intergroup power imbalance between Hydro Tasmania and the King Island community, an issue flagged by Devine-Wright (2014) as critical in many wind energy development conflicts. The NTWFG viewed the power dynamic as a large corporate proponent disingenuously using community engagement processes in order to obtain a social licence to operate. This view reflects Hindmarsh's, (2010) critique of institutions of community engagement for wind energy in Australia, which argues practices are more aimed at persuasion, rather than dialogue. To the NTWFG, formation as a group and subsequent campaigning and other activities were seen as necessary in order to counter this power imbalance. However, to much of the rest of the King Island community, the actions taken by the NTWFG were viewed as creating a new power imbalance; that of between the NTWFG and ‘everyone else’. This was due to the amplification of the NTWFG voice through forming a group and taking strategic action to oppose the TasWind proposal. Others felt that the NTWFG perspective crowded out the voices of others in

the King Island community who were not as resolute in their view of the TasWind proposal.

Outside of the TWCC, the NTWFG was the only community-based group to form in relation to the TasWind proposal. There were reports of an informal ‘yes camp’, which tended to be a nebulous group of the vocal supporters of the TasWind proposal. Based on reports, the ‘yes camp’ was a label applied to known supporters of the proposal who were engaged in the TasWind process, not a grouping adopted formally (or informally). The difference between the levels of engagement with the ‘yes camp’ and the NTWFG reflects a lack of space provided in the community engagement process for strong opposition. Jami and Walsh (2014) indicate that facilitating opposition voices is important in community engagement for wind energy developments. Hindmarsh (2010), similarly, argues that a lack of attentiveness to the concerns of local community-based opposition groups is a significant limitation of community engagement for wind energy development. In the King Island experience, those who joined the NTWFG did not feel that the extent of their opposition to the proposal was given a ‘place’ in the deliberative process. The lack of a place for the NTWFG view meant that the NTWFG operated outside of the formalised and facilitated community engagement processes; undertaking actions which were seen by many to have exacerbated the local conflict (e.g. election-style campaigning ahead of the vote, engaging with the national news media, bringing to King Island controversial speakers, and undertaking legal actions against Hydro Tasmania). It is important to note that it is possible and likely the NTWFG would have mobilised regardless of the community engagement strategy, due to their view that the scale of the TasWind proposal made it fundamentally incompatible with King Island (e.g. Devine-Wright, 2014; Fast et al., 2016).

The operation of the NTWFG outside of the facilitated community engagement meant that those with the NTWFG perspective of TasWind were informed by different information and perspectives compared to those who were engaged in the process. Mobilised groups with a strong social identity will seek authoritative sources which reflect the group norms and understandings (Haslam, 2000). When these sources are not shared with out-groups, different truths will serve to entrench conflict and undermine the potential for common ground (Fielding and Hornsey, 2016). For example, the NTWFG coordinated with broader groups and networks promoting an anti-wind agenda and invited at least one speaker associated with this network to King Island (see, e.g., Ogilvie and Rootes, 2015). Locally, heightened tensions and controversy followed the speakers' visits to King Island.

With the NTWFG operating outside of the formal space for community engagement, there were few opportunities for NTWFG and others in the community to exchange views outside of high-tension settings such as community meetings. As a result, stereotyping of out-group members and suspicion about out-group members' motives was promoted due to the lack of a shared space for deliberation. NTWFG's literature regarding potential impacts of the TasWind proposal was disseminated throughout their membership and the broader King Island community, often with claims at odds with information coming from Hydro Tasmania and the TWCC. These actions outside of any place within the community engagement process were viewed by the NTWFG as a necessary means to balance power with Hydro Tasmania, but nonetheless were considered to have contributed to contested information, confusion, and the exacerbation of local conflict.

4.2.5. *Local context is a critical factor, and the conflict legacy remains in King Island*

The local context into which the TasWind proposal was announced was critical to the response from the community to the proposal. The abattoir closure, while independent of the TasWind

proposal, was consistently presented as the start of the TasWind story. The closure of the abattoir increased the stress and vulnerability of the King Island community (e.g. Oncescu, 2015). When the TasWind proposal was announced within the same year, this vulnerability led to the framing of the TasWind proposal both as a potential 'life-raft' for the local economy, and as an attempt by a large corporate entity to capitalise on the Island's misfortune. During the deliberation phase, commitments by Hydro Tasmania to make financial contributions to redevelopment of a local abattoir and expansion of the local port were seen by some as being a responsible gesture to the community, while others viewed this as akin to bribery. Hydro Tasmania also became the naming rights sponsor of the local marathon the 'Imperial 20', leading to the marathon being renamed to the 'Hydro Tasmania Imperial 20'. For those who were opposed to the TasWind proposal, this was seen to be insensitive, and made the TasWind conflict present at an otherwise unrelated important community event. This experience is not unique to the King Island experience; while Soma and Hagggett (2015) and Devine-Wright (2009) found that proponent funding of local projects can be viewed as appropriate and responsible, Fast et al. (2016) and Cass et al. (2010) encountered the view among opponents of such actions as being a 'bribe'.

Latent social cleavages became toxic during the time of the TasWind proposal. It is known from the social identity approach that pre-existing social identities will be drawn on in situations when they become meaningful for intergroup relations (Colvin et al., 2015b; Haslam, 2000). Those who opposed the proposal, particularly NTWFG members, were routinely categorised as the 'blow-ins' (i.e. residents who had just recently 'blown in' to King Island). Prior to the TasWind proposal this term had been used more playfully to describe newcomers. In the TasWind context, 'blow-ins' became a pejorative term which carried the connotation that newcomers did not understand King Island the way the 'true King Islanders' did. The 'blow-ins' label was embraced and re-defined by some to mean those who appreciated King Island so much they chose to move there, in distinction from the people with more extensive family histories in the Island. When re-defining a stigmatised social identity, if the identity (e.g. 'blow-in') is viewed as fixed, creatively changing the connotations of the identity can serve as a means to destigmatise and emphasise positive attributes of the stereotype. Although there was acknowledgement that these stereotypes were inaccurate (e.g. some newcomers were open to the proposal, and some long-term Islanders opposed the proposal), the toxic nature of these stereotypes contributed to division in the community and disguised the complexity of people and opinions from both sides.

Consideration of the local context should not be limited to what came before the TasWind proposal. The events during the time of the proposal influenced nominations for, and who was elected during, the local Council election; for which voting closed the day following the TasWind cessation announcement. In its aftermath, discussion of the TasWind proposal became a local taboo, and this tension carried over to discussion of wind energy more broadly. Some feel that in the aftermath of the TasWind proposal, King Island is a less desirable place for future investment more broadly, and the TasWind proposal has affected local attitudes to local golf-tourism developments. Local institutions were damaged, and interpersonal relationships broken or strained. Effects on the community continue, and while some feel that the relationships are mending, others describe a more subtle and long-term erosion of community cohesion and trust. The ongoing effects may be related to the lack of a formal closure activity for King Island, a factor which was identified by some as conspicuously absent (while the announcement was made at a town hall meeting with involvement of the King Island Council, the cessation announcement was made via an online Hydro Tasmania

media release and disseminated through the news media, social media, and social networks). The social identity approach indicates that for the long-term, the community may require reemphasis on a superordinate identity, as King Islanders, which embraces the diversity of views on the TasWind proposal (Colvin et al., 2015b; Fielding and Hornsey, 2016; Haslam, 2000).

These findings emphasise the need for an understanding of the local context into which wind energy developments, and other land use changes, are proposed (Paveglio et al., 2016; Soma and Hagggett, 2015). This is both in order to understand how local context and idiosyncrasies will affect the community response to a proposal, and to understand how the *conflict legacy* of such a proposal will affect the community in the longer term (Colvin et al., 2015b; Paveglio et al., 2016). Additionally, Hall and Jeanneret (2015) recommend consideration of how the *conflict legacy* of a single issue can affect perceptions of the entire industry. A shift from a project-centric view of community as the project's context to a *community view of the project* as part of the local history is necessary to situate proposals within their local context and reality.

5. Conclusions and policy implications

The King Island experience of the TasWind proposal was complex, and this paper cannot claim to present a complete discussion of the multifaceted nature of the local conflict and community engagement process. Nevertheless, the five key findings have significant implications for community engagement in wind energy developments and other land use changes. In particular, these findings are instructive for methodological consideration when designing specific engagement actions. We feel these findings also demonstrate the potential for a local-based perspective to inform evaluation of community engagement, and to provide insight into the level across the spectrum of public participation to which an engagement strategy adheres.

The complications relating to the announcement of the proposal at the pre-feasibility stage emphasise the importance of sound process to manage confounding elements and misaligned perceptions. A community-based consultative committee appeared to have its efficacy undermined due to perceptions about potential bias, which may have been avoided if a third-party facilitator led the committee. A community vote which appeared to be a democratic technique served to further polarise the community, and nuances of process were described as undermining the legitimacy of the vote. An apparent lack of a formal space for the local opposition in decision-making meant that the local opposition group acted outside of the facilitated community engagement process, and this contributed to conflict escalation. An understanding of the local context was found to be critical not just to inform how the proposal would be received, but to appreciate the longer-term impacts of the *conflict legacy*. Achieving this necessitates prioritising a community-centric view of the project ahead of a project-centric view of the community.

These insights were found through use of the social identity approach as a theoretical lens, demonstrating the value of this approach to understanding the complexities of social conflict about environmental and natural resources management issues. These findings can inform future strategies for community engagement processes with the aim of achieving outcomes which are satisfactory both to the proponents of sustainable developments, and to local communities.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the interview participants for their generosity of time and their willingness to share their insights, experiences, and perspectives. The interviews were conducted and analysed with honesty and respect for all participants and other members of the King Island community. We also wish to thank Dr Nina Hall for providing very constructive feedback on a draft of this manuscript, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. We extend appreciation to Ms Amanda Sweeney for her support and assistance during the fieldwork for this research. This study adhered to The University of Queensland ethical guidelines (approval number GPEM20130054). This paper forms part of a PhD project which is supported by the Australian Post-graduate Award (APA) and the UQ–CSIRO Integrated Natural Resources Management (INRM) top-up scholarship. INRM funds were used in conducting this study.

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