



Public social licence to operate offshore wind in Australia

Project Factsheet

Background

Offshore wind energy is poised to help Australia transition to a low-carbon energy future. Energy produced from offshore wind can complement onshore wind and solar, allowing the grid to draw on stronger, more consistent winds over the ocean.

However, a critical determinant of the success of offshore wind farms will be the Australian public's understanding and attitude toward them, and the associated social licence to operate granted to the sector.

Unlike formal regulatory processes, a social licence is an intangible, informal social contract that requires maintaining trust, transparency, and legitimacy.

Neglecting public perceptions and social licence has proven to be detrimental to offshore wind development in other countries, sometimes resulting in delays and conflicts. Early experiences in Australia have suggested similar risks exist and there is an urgent need to better understand and benchmark the Australian public's social licence of this emerging industry.

What did we do in this project?

In this project, we take a national snapshot of the current social licence for offshore wind energy in Australia and begin to understand factors shaping public perspectives.

We undertook a nationally representative survey of 3,000 respondents. We sampled different age groups over 18 years, from regional and metropolitan areas, and from all states and territories in September 2023. The survey used established methods to measure social licence¹ and was designed and tested through a series of focus groups and scoping interviews.

The survey maps public perceptions of offshore wind farms, measures the current social licence to operate, and explores the links between environmental and ocean values, beliefs, and support for offshore wind.

This national snapshot does not explicitly focus on local communities in proposed offshore wind areas. Understanding social licence at local scales and how they differ from the Australian public at large is an important area for future research.

¹ Thomson and Boutilier, "Social license to operate," in SME Mining Engineering Handbook 3rd Ed, P. Darling, Ed. Littleton, USA: Society for Mining, Metallurgy & Exploration, 2011.

Benchmarking social licence and support for offshore wind

Our survey reveals that most Australians (61%) have a positive social licence for the future offshore wind industry in Australia.

69% of people surveyed expressed overall support for building offshore wind in Australia, while 17% were undecided and 14% expressed some form of opposition.

These results suggest a majority acceptance of the value proposition of offshore wind to the Australian public. However, they also highlight risks. Discernible segments of the public are withholding their social licence (19%). Additionally, we find that 84% of

Australians have higher ratings for economic aspects of social licence for offshore wind compared to the components of social licence that imply a strong degree of social and institutional trust. As such, considerable work is yet to be done in building a more robust social licence for the offshore wind industry.

Benchmarking current perceptions

Focus groups suggest that the public are seeking more information from trusted sources on the potential negative impacts and positive outcomes of offshore wind development in Australia.

To gauge current perceptions, respondents in the survey were asked about their current beliefs about the social, economic and environmental impact of offshore wind if developed in Australia (Figure 1). The results highlight relatively positive views on the potential for offshore wind to provide reliable electricity and economic growth. However, they show community concerns in terms of impacts on the marine environment, coastal property values, and visual amenity.

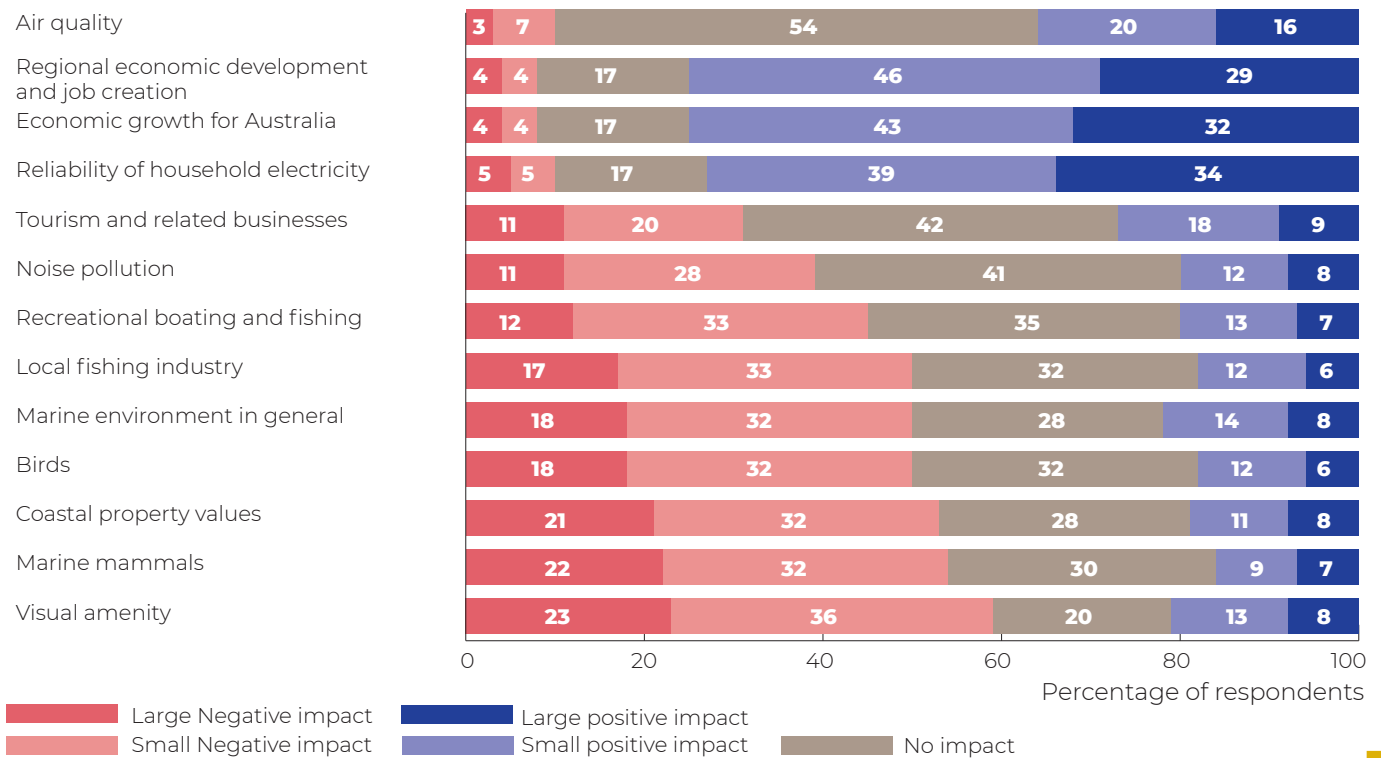


Figure 1. Public perceptions on the social, economic, and environmental impacts of offshore wind in Australia.

Going deeper on understanding public views on offshore wind in Australia

Our results highlight that perceptions about the impacts of offshore wind are important dimensions of the social acceptance of offshore wind. International research emphasises that perceptions of the impacts are not isolated but are shaped by core values and worldviews.

To deepen our understanding of public attitudes we explored how core values about the environment and the ocean shape beliefs about climate change and offshore wind impacts, which then shape support and social licence (Figure 2). Our modelling revealed many insights. Individuals with stronger pro-conservation environmental values – such as recognising the ecological limits to growth and human impact on the environment – were more supportive of the offshore wind industry.

However, those with higher ocean conservation values – valuing the ocean as a place for recreation, culture, and nature conservation – were less supportive. Specifically, individuals with higher ocean conservation values had more negative perceptions of the social, environmental, and economic impacts of offshore wind, rated the urgency for climate action lower, and ultimately were less supportive of offshore wind energy development in Australia.

Our findings indicate that ocean conservation values significantly influence public views on the offshore wind industry. Australians who rank in the top 25% for ocean conservation values are, on average, 10% less likely to support offshore wind.

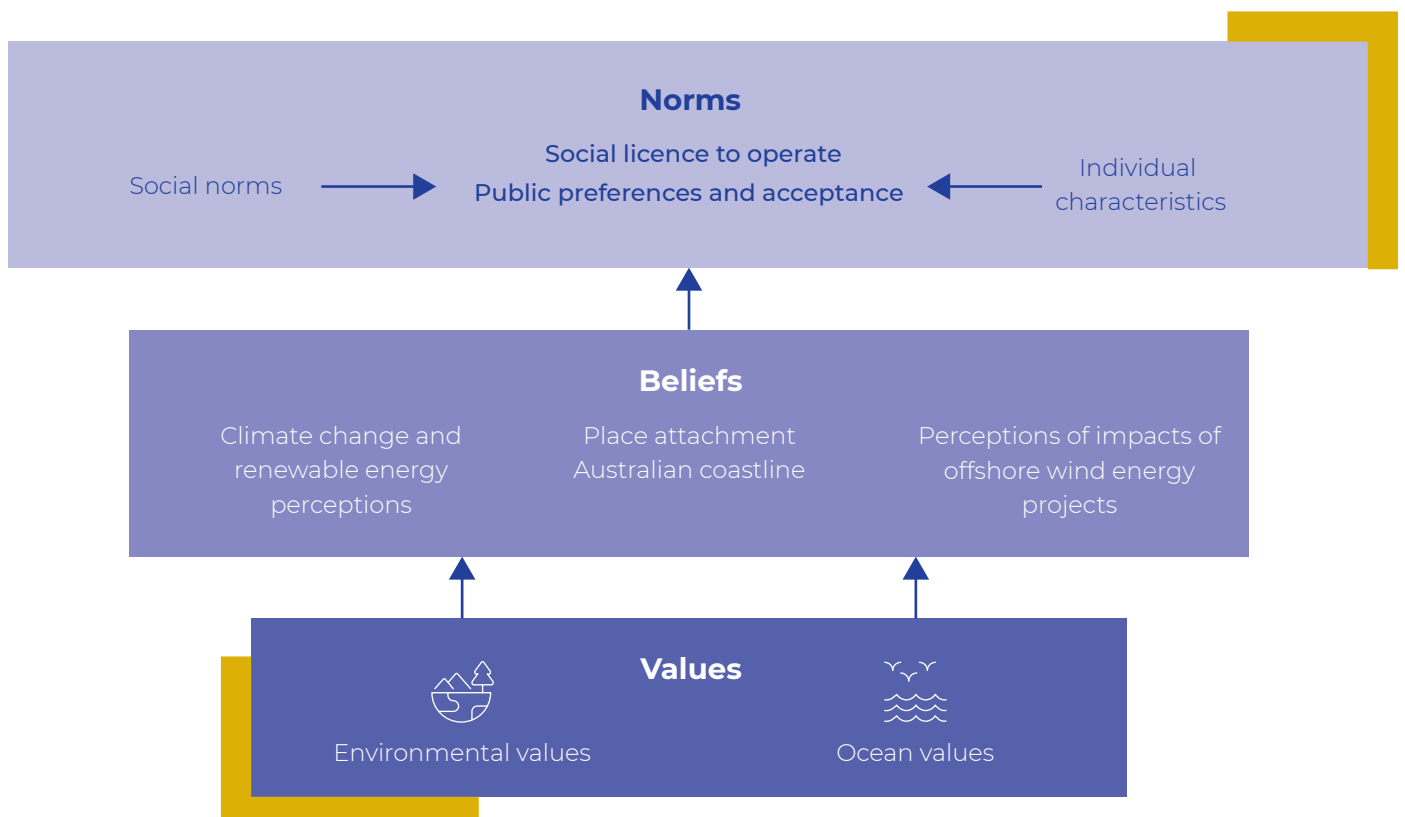


Figure 2. A mental model showing how values, beliefs, and norms are connected.

Next steps for social licence of offshore wind energy

Measuring a social licence to operate is challenging because it involves a dynamic set of social preferences and expectations that are related to industry legitimacy, company trust, and sustainable development. Projects or industries may be unaware of the status of their social licence to operate, often taking it for granted until they are at risk of losing it.

This national snapshot of social licence in Australia highlights the nuances in public sentiment towards the industry. Much of the support for offshore wind appears to be driven by the decarbonisation opportunity and economic potential of the industry. While these are important, there also needs to be a focus on building trust and legitimacy with communities.

Based on this research and learnings from the literature, we have identified 3 key strategies to help build a public social licence for offshore wind in Australia. Whilst not a comprehensive list, these strategies provide initial evidence-supported guidance.



Position offshore wind in the decarbonised energy grid

Community members identified the need to better understand why offshore wind was being considered, and how it fits into the energy mix. Positioning offshore wind as a complement to other renewable energy sources and outlining its role in Australia's energy transition, are important for securing social licence. It is crucial to communicate the connections between developing offshore wind, energy decarbonization, and reducing the environmental impacts of climate change, including those on the marine environment. Establishing this connection will add nuance to discussions on the overall impacts on the marine environment.



Strengthening communication and addressing information vacuums

It is important to establish reliable, trustworthy sources of information on the social, environmental, and economic impacts in ways that meet community expectations and facilitate an informed discussion that builds legitimacy and trust.

In the absence of clear and trusted information, community members may rely on less robust information sources. With the help of experts, the anticipated impacts (positive and negative) of offshore wind energy can be informed by international experience and contextualised for Australia.



Engage in meaningful dialogue with local communities

Many community members have legitimate concerns about how the development of an offshore wind industry aligns with local community aspirations and are currently withholding social and institutional dimensions of social licence. Securing these dimensions of social licence will require the offshore wind energy sector to have a shared vision for the development of coastal regions.

This involves conducting meaningful community engagement processes to build social support and endorsement, and co-designing shared benefits with communities and impacted groups.

As interest in offshore wind energy increases in Australia, there is a need for social science research to ensure the energy transition occurs in an equitable, inclusive, environmentally responsible, and socially acceptable manner.

Whilst not a focus of this national snapshot, First Nations peoples have unique rights and connections to Sea Country. It is critical that the offshore wind sector establishes partnerships with First Nations communities early in the process to obtain a cultural licence to operate².

For more results and project updates please contact

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2 Hunter, Lee, Wood, Marsh and Fischer, "Cultural Licence to Operate in the Blue Economy, Final Project Report", Blue Economy Cooperative Research Centre, 2024.