

Onshore Wind – Call for Evidence

Part A – Community Engagement and Benefits

Comments by

Northern Ireland Environment Link

15 November 2012

Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) is the networking and forum body for non-statutory organisations concerned with the environment of Northern Ireland. Its 57 Full Members represent over 90,000 individuals, 262 subsidiary groups, have an annual turnover of £70 million and manage over 314,000 acres of land. Members are involved in environmental issues of all types and at all levels from the local community to the global environment. NIEL brings together a wide range of knowledge, experience and expertise which can be used to help develop policy, practice and implementation across a wide range of environmental fields.

These comments are made on behalf of Members, but some members may be providing independent comments as well. If you would like to discuss these comments further we would be delighted to do so.

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Policy Context

NIEL welcomes the opportunity to respond to the *Onshore Wind – Call for Evidence – Community Engagement and Benefits Consultation*. The Strategic Energy Framework for Northern Ireland includes a target of 40% electricity consumption from renewable sources by 2020. A number of renewable technologies, both on-shore and off-shore will contribute to this target. As of September 2012 there were 27 onshore wind farms already in operation with a combined installed capacity of 396 MW.

NIEL is supportive of a broad mix of renewables including onshore wind development as long as damage to the environment is avoided or minimised and wind farm proposals are subject to rigorous environmental assessment before development is permitted. Unsympathetic wind farm development can affect our countryside through negative impacts on landscape, tranquillity, character and capacity to deliver other environmental goods such as food, clean water and functional habitats.

As a networking and forum body not directly involved in renewable energy projects, NIEL cannot provide a detailed response to the specific questions raised within this consultation. We would however like to make the following general points on renewable energy and the need for and benefits of community engagement:

Renewable Energy and Climate Change in Northern Ireland

- Northern Ireland is at the end of the ‘supply chain’ and we currently import all fossil fuels and rely on imports for 98% of our energy, with negative consequences for our security and cost of energy. Development of renewable energy and support for micro-generation is very important for Northern Ireland particularly at house, farm, business and community scale level;
- Electricity grid development is essential to ensuring a greater proportion of our power generation is from renewable sources in order to meet our 40% target and to allow for improved connections to Ireland, Great Britain and the rest of Europe;
- While acknowledging that the aim of this consultation is to provide guidance to developers and communities as to how they can best engage with and benefit from, the process of developing onshore wind, it is very important that this guidance is produced in tandem with additional guidance to ensure greater energy efficiency and demand-side management to reduce energy consumption;
- There is a need for Northern Ireland to develop an energy policy based around renewable resources which deliver economic (e.g. local job creation in renewable industries), social (an energy efficiency action plan to help reduce fuel poverty) and environmental (reduced carbon emissions) benefits. This integrated policy could also deliver include compliance with national and international obligations, increased energy security and local air quality improvements;
- On shore wind needs to be monitored in Northern Ireland by DETI in relation to energy targets and DOE for environmental impact;
- The Northern Ireland Executive should introduce a Climate Change Act setting a legally binding regional target to reduce our carbon dioxide emissions by at least 80% from 1990 levels by 2050 with “intermediate” target for emissions in 2020 (42% below 1990 levels), a series of legally binding five year “carbon budgets” and an annual carbon reduction target at an average of at least 3% per annum;
- The Committee on Climate Change’s role in Northern Ireland should be enhanced to facilitate the setting and monitoring of Northern Ireland specific budgets and action plans.

Onshore Wind Energy, Community Engagement and Benefits

- NIEL supports the view that local communities who host wind farms play a vital role in helping us to meet our need for secure, clean energy and as such it is right they should benefit from the development of these installations;
- We believe active participation can help change public attitudes and promote a more positive view of proposed developments. It has been widely accepted that publicly initiated community based projects are more likely to be accepted than top-down, large scale schemes. There are also additional benefits to emerge as results of participation; for example, with community renewable energy projects, people are more likely to engage further with wider energy and sustainability issues;
- Community Planning is one of the new responsibilities being proposed for local councils under the Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland (RPA). Audit Scotland in its Report "Community Planning: An Initial Review". It defines Community Planning as: "the process through which public sector organisations work together and with local communities and the voluntary sector, to identify and solve local problems, improve services and share resources". Community planning therefore provides a valuable opportunity to secure local involvement, participation and consent for local renewable energy projects such as the development of wind farms;
- We are aware that in comparison to Great Britain, little consideration has been given to maximising the opportunities for communities to benefit from onshore wind energy development. We would therefore like to endorse the work carried out by The Fermanagh Trust in this regard and in particular support the recommendations for communities, developers and local councils contained within their 2012 report entitled Maximising Community Outcomes From Wind Energy Developments;
- We believe the Northern Ireland Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment should consider either the establishment of a new not-for-profit body (akin to Renewable Energy Scotland or Community Energy Wales) or develop the functions of an existing body, to implement best practice in terms of community engagement and community benefit in the development of wind farms.