

**INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE BRIEFING FROM DFI PLANNING
ON A REVIEW OF STRATEGIC PLANNING POLICY FOR
RENEWABLE AND LOW CARBON ENERGY**

2 JUNE 2021

The Committee will be aware that Minister Mallon announced a **review of strategic planning policy for renewable and low carbon energy** on 21st April, to ensure the Department's planning policy remains up to date, robust and fit for purpose. The Minister took this decision in the context of the climate crisis and supporting the economy and a green recovery from the pandemic.

Dfi retains responsibility for regional planning policy and legislation and determining regionally significant development applications while councils are responsible for preparing local development plans for their areas and for determining the majority of planning applications. This follows the Executive's decision to reform the planning system and to transfer responsibility for the majority of planning functions to local councils in 2015.

The planning system provides a balanced framework for furthering sustainable development in the long term public interest, through the integration and balancing of complex social, economic and environmental factors when place-making and decision-taking. The planning system has played an important role in helping to achieve and exceed the 40% target of electricity consumed being generated from indigenous renewable sources by 2020. Figures indicate that for the 12 month period January to December 2020, 49.2% of total electricity consumption was generated from renewable sources located in Northern Ireland. Onshore wind is the

greatest contributor with 84.9% of that generated from renewable sources being from wind. Other forms of renewable development include solar, biomass, hydro, geothermal etc. The latest annual planning statistics (2019/20) indicate an approval rate of 88% for renewable energy applications, indicating that the system is continuing to help to facilitate appropriate renewable energy development in suitable locations across the North.

The Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS), published in 2015, provides the regional planning policy framework for a wide range of planning matters, including renewable energy. The aim of the renewable energy policy is: *“to facilitate the siting of renewable energy generating facilities in appropriate locations within the built and natural environment in order to achieve Northern Ireland’s renewable energy targets and to realise the benefits of renewable energy without compromising other environmental assets of acknowledged importance.”* Planning Policy Statement 18: Renewable Energy, is also still relevant under the transitional arrangements of the SPPS, however, it will cease to have effect in a council area once that council adopts its new Plan Strategy of its Local Development Plan.

This review of strategic planning policy for renewable and low carbon energy is being undertaken in the context of the climate crisis. DfI is also engaged in the work currently being undertaken by DfE in bringing forward a new energy strategy, with officials contributing to 2 of the 5 thematic working groups, namely ‘Power’ and ‘Transport’. The policy options for a new Energy Strategy are currently out to public consultation, with a closing date of 30 June.

It is accepted that there are mixed opinions on the appropriateness of the current strategic planning policy and that very often it is the submission of a planning application for renewable energy development where conflicts first arise. Whilst in a strategic sense there is evidence that the majority of people support the need for green renewable electricity generation to combat climate change, at the local level, opposition can arise to specific projects and proposals. Issues which tend to attract most interest include the location of developments, visual and residential amenity issues and local environmental impacts.

The scope and content of the review is still subject to development and refinement, however, it is likely to consider matters such as: the relationship between planning and the use of renewable energy targets; the need for a spatial approach to site selection; noise impacts; shadow flicker; separation distances; de-commissioning bonds and emerging technologies such as energy storage.

A key challenge will be to facilitate renewable and low carbon energy development which is acceptable to our communities and also protects the environment, furthering sustainable development in the long term public interest.

As regards local planning policy on this matter, Members will also be aware that all 11 councils are currently at various stages in the preparation of their new **Local Development Plans** (LDP). The purpose of each council's LDP is to set out the council's approach for land use planning matters, with bespoke policies in place to address the local circumstances of each plan area; including climate change and renewable energy development.

Each council's LDP will be comprised of two documents (a Plan Strategy – setting out a vision, objectives and strategy; and a Local Policies Plan – setting out more local detailed policies and zonings). Both documents will be tested for soundness at an independent examination. This will include a consideration as to whether or not the LDP has taken into account policy and guidance issued by DfI, including the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) and the SPPS. This is a legislative requirement. Any amendment to SPPS policy as a result of this review will have to be taken into account by councils in the preparation or review of their LDP as appropriate.

In bringing forward their LDPs, councils have flexibility to produce detailed operational planning policies, tailored to their specific local social, environmental and economic circumstances. However, where a council deviates from the SPPS they must ensure that they have robust evidence to show reasoned justification for such a departure, as this will be examined at the Independent Examination.

Next Steps

The planning policy review process will be taken forward as soon as possible in line with Ministerial priorities and in accordance with established policy making best practice, including this early engagement with the Infrastructure Committee. As a first step a detailed policy development process will be developed, that takes account of this engagement with the Committee, the emerging Energy Strategy, the previous renewable energy planning policy call for evidence, the independent consultants' report that was commissioned and wider research. An iterative Strategic Environmental Assessment will also be undertaken alongside policy development. It is envisaged that there will be a period of policy research, evidence gathering and engagement with

a wide range of key stakeholders over the summer and autumn. Officials will of course engage again with the Committee on the emerging draft policy, prior to any public consultation.

The Minister intends to publish a draft renewable and low carbon energy planning policy for a full public consultation exercise by March 2022, alongside a draft Strategic Environmental Assessment report. It is also expected that any new policy arising from the review will be referred to the Executive, prior to publication in final form.