

NIRIG response to the Planning Bill 2013

15th March 2013

The Northern Ireland Renewables Industry Group (NIRIG) is the voice of the Irish Wind Energy Association and RenewableUK in Northern Ireland. NIRIG provides a conduit for knowledge exchange, policy development support and consensus on best practice between all stakeholders in renewable energy. NIRIG welcomes the opportunity to submit its opinion on the Planning Bill to the Committee for the Environment.

On the whole, NIRIG welcomes the publication of the Bill as it will allow for the expedition of a number of planning reforms contained within the Planning (Northern Ireland) Act 2011. NIRIG would comment on specific clauses as follows:

Clause 2 – NIRIG supports the establishment of a statutory duty towards sustainable development, promoting or improving well-being, and promoting economic development. NIRIG feels that this is consistent with PPS18, and appreciates that, in practice, all current planning decisions balance these competing considerations anyway.

Clause 5 – NIRIG welcomes the codification of pre-application community consultation. To a certain extent, this merely formalises the best practice, responsible approach currently employed by most NIRIG member companies who implement a number of techniques to gather public opinion, e.g. public exhibitions, open days, questionnaires, door to door visits etc. NIRIG has consistently supported an appropriate community consultation process, as indicated in our response to the consultation on Local Government Reform 11th March 2011

“NIRIG would support the concept of ‘An Effective Community Planning Process’ – which would involve community consultation from an early stage in the planning process. Clarification in terms of what degree this would take in the Development Plan, Planning Policy and Development Managements is also required. The provision of guidance in this area would allow for more transparency in this area. NIRIG would therefore request that guidance for this area should go through the formal consultation process”

NIRIG recommends that a standardised approach would be helpful, to provide clarity on expectations as regards pre-application community consultation. We suggest that this go through a formal consultation process and we are keen to engage with DOE on this matter.

Clause 6 – NIRIG welcomes the emphasis on economic benefits as consistent with PPS18 and the genuine benefit from investment in renewable energy infrastructure.

Clause 7 – NIRIG would like the term ‘similar application’ clarified in the context of Clause 7.

Clause 12 – NIRIG would note that all relevant considerations need to be considered at appeal stage if a robust decision is to be taken

Clause 23 - NIRIG very much welcomes the introduction of this duty to respond to consultation. The response must be sufficiently substantive so as to give an opinion as opposed to a holding response. Additionally, NIRIG would suggest a response period of no longer than 21 days, after which it will be accepted by the Department that no response is going to be forthcoming.

The ability of consultees to respond rapidly will be supported by an appropriate and functioning pre-application discussion process. NIRIG understands that guidance notes are currently being drafted and look forward to continued engagement with DOE on this matter.

Furthermore, in order for this response time to work for Wind Farm planning applications these applications should be considered to be regionally significant applications and should remain centrally within the remit of the Strategic Projects Team in DOE.

We hope that this submission is of use and we welcome the opportunity to respond.

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