



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for the Environment

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Wind Energy: Northern Ireland Renewables  
Industry Group Briefing

12 September 2013

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for the Environment

Wind Energy: Northern Ireland Renewables Industry Group Briefing

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Ms Anna Lo (Chairperson)  
Ms Pam Brown (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Cathal Boylan  
Mr Tom Elliott  
Mrs Dolores Kelly  
Mr Barry McElduff  
Mr Ian Milne  
Mr Peter Weir

**Witnesses:**

Mr Gary Connolly	Northern Ireland Renewables Industry Group
Ms Meabh Cormacain	Northern Ireland Renewables Industry Group
Ms Lucy Whitford	Northern Ireland Renewables Industry Group
Ms Gail Hitchins	Principal Acoustic Consultant, SKM Enviro

**The Chairperson:** I welcome Gary Connolly, chairperson of the Northern Ireland Renewables Industry Group (NIRIG); Meabh Cormacain, NIRIG policy officer; Gail Hitchins, principal acoustic consultant at SKM Enviro; and Lucy Whitford, vice chair of NIRIG. Thank you very much for coming, and thank you for sending us a very detailed briefing paper. Can you give us a presentation of between five and 10 minutes? I am sure that members will have many questions to ask. As you are aware, we have been to Omagh to meet the west Tyrone group on a number of occasions.

**Mr Gary Connolly (Northern Ireland Renewables Industry Group):** Thank you very much, Chair. You have just shortened my presentation by doing the introductions, which is a good start. You mentioned that you went to Omagh, and it is appropriate that we start by apologising for not being able to attend Omagh on that day. That was for two reasons. The key reason was that Gail was not available at that time. She has travelled across from England today as an acoustic expert, and we were aware that that would probably be an area of interest. Secondly, you may be aware that the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) had published guidance just prior to that meeting. We were not really in a position to comment on that guidance because of the sequencing of the event. We did not think that it would be useful for us to attend without being able to answer some of the questions that you might have asked.

**The Chairperson:** Gary, it would have been helpful to us and to you if you had explained that to us. Your response saying that you could not come was very brief, and there was no explanation why you could not come in June.

**Mr Connolly:** I can only apologise for that. Meabh will now give a brief presentation, and I will finish off at the end.

**Ms Meabh Cormacain (Northern Ireland Renewables Industry Group):** Thank you, Chair and Committee. I will spend a couple of minutes and start by taking a step back on why we are here as a renewables industry. Much of this you will already know. At a global level, we are aware that there is a need to tackle climate change and to reduce carbon emissions. That means that energy policy at a European and Northern Ireland level is looking at having an increasingly diversified secure and sustainable energy supply, and renewable energy is a major element of that policy. Northern Ireland is heavily reliant on imported fossil fuels for energy needs. The trend for fossil fuel prices globally and historically is upwards, and we believe that renewable, and particularly wind, is a proven, scalable, cost-competitive technology and can act as a hedge against fossil fuel volatility. Particularly on the island of Ireland, we have a single electricity market, and, when there is increased wind penetration within this, wholesale prices go down. That is important to be aware of.

Northern Ireland has some of the best renewable resources in Europe, and, in 2012, about 14% of our energy supply came from renewable energy; the vast majority of that was onshore wind. We as an industry are confident that, with the appropriate policy framework, we will be able to reach our 40% targets by 2020 and even more so beyond that. With appropriate infrastructure development and interconnection, we will be able to export more of our clean, indigenous energy resources.

I will touch briefly on some of the challenges that we face as an industry in developing those resources. The first is grid. There is very little value in having a wind farm if it is not connected to the electricity grid. For that, you need the appropriate network investment, and you need the appropriate policy to allow you to connect to the network.

In April 2012, we were expecting to see NIE's five-year fifth price control published, which would have set out the level and types of investment that would have been carried out in five years to enable the electricity grid to, first, continue to function, and, secondly, accommodate additional generation. After delays, and an eventual referral to the Competition Commission, it may be April 2014 before we see the eventual outcome. That creates a great deal of uncertainty.

There has been an ongoing process on connection policy, specifically, for about four years, to try to figure out the best way of connecting wind farms to clusters, which is a method of reducing the need for overhead lines. There have been four consultations. That means that, since July 2010, 14 wind farms are still waiting for revised grid connection offers. As a result, about 200 megawatts of wind energy are at risk of seeing planning permission expire, because there is a five-year planning window for most of them. Specifically, the absence of a second North/South interconnector is preventing us from fully utilising our renewable energy resources, and it is costing consumers, north and south of the border, to the tune of about €20 million a year. That is an estimate. That is one of our key challenges, and we are working on it with stakeholders.

There is a great deal of uncertainty in the market. Northern Ireland is in a unique nexus: we are within the all-island single electricity market, but we are within the UK jurisdiction and UK energy policy. There is ongoing change at the moment, with electricity market reform happening in the UK, which will shake up the energy sector. By 2016, the single electricity market will also have undergone a fundamental change. Such uncertainty in both markets is a challenge for investor confidence.

We believe that Northern Ireland has an appropriate planning policy framework and guidance in place. We believe that the strategic planning team at DOE has the expertise and the experience to deal with complex planning applications for wind farms and, as a result, has made good progress towards reaching our targets. We believe that that is the appropriate home for assessing wind farm applications in future, and they should continue to be assessed as regionally significant applications.

Finally, before I hand back to Gary, numerous surveys across the UK and Ireland demonstrate that most people are in favour of the increased use of renewables, including wind. However, the debate is probably being dominated by a vocal minority. At a local level, where communities have legitimate concerns, NIRIG encourages members to consult communities and to address their concerns. At an industry level, we believe that it is appropriate to have the debate based on credible evidence and factual research.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to have that debate today.

**Mr Connolly:** Thanks, Meabh. I will say a wee bit more about NIRIG and what it is about. We are a trade association; we represent the development sector and those associated with development. I suppose that our mission, for want of a better description, is responsible development. That is what we promote as a trade organisation.

With regard to the development process, the Committee will be familiar with PPS 18. I know that it came before the Committee and was reviewed quite a bit. The PPS 18 planning guidance drives what we do as individual development companies. Typically, it takes us 18 to 24 months to prepare and submit a planning application. There are significant considerations as part of that, such as landscape, ecology, hydrology, noise, shadow flicker, communication, aviation and transport, and they are addressed in some detail in the context of our planning applications.

As developers, we will try to maximise the potential of any site, while, at the same time, minimising the impact on the local environment, including the local community. We understand communities' concerns, and it is worth making the point that, as a development sector, we try to maximise the potential site, and often that means trying to construct turbines that are the most efficient and make the best use of the resource available.

We are here to answer any questions that you may have. In summary, renewables are good for Northern Ireland because they reduce our reliance on fossil fuels, they increase our security of supply and, as Meabh touched on, they give us the edge against the increase in fossil fuel prices.

We are committed to responsible development. Onshore wind has been proven to be the most cost-effective technology for delivering renewable electricity to any market. For that reason and for others, we believe that wind is good for Northern Ireland as a whole, and it is good for the communities that are affected by the development of wind farms. We strongly believe that wind development is safe. and we believe, as an industry, that most people support what we are doing across the UK and Ireland.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you for your presentation. I am sure that I speak for all members of the Committee when I say that we are supportive of renewable energy. We need to explore clean, renewable energy, and we have the potential with the abundance of wind and water around us to explore and exploit tidal power and wind turbines. However, meeting the west Tyrone group raised a big concern for me, which is that 40% of wind turbines that are in the pipeline for approval will be located in a small area of west Tyrone. That will have a cumulative impact on communities, and they talked about health problems, sleep deprivation, the sound of the flicker and also community benefit. I know that the Department has worked with you on the protocol on community benefits; it is trying to win hearts and minds. How will you go about that? You talked about needing the scientific facts and the evidence base to say whether those are real or perceived negative impacts. How do you go about it? Do you have a policy for how to win hearts and minds?

Another issue is whether there is a need for the Executive to have a strategic view on it so that, for instance, if there were mapping areas, they could say that a certain area is already concentrated, so they need to move away from there. There are restrictions under AONBs and ASSIs for building, but, surely, we should have a more strategic view. We have PPS 18, which does not say which area you can build on or not build on, but should we have a zoning exercise to say that certain areas should be encouraged and others discouraged, with public consultation?

**Mr Connolly:** One of my colleagues will speak to the points that you raised, but to deal specifically with the issue of west Tyrone and the number of projects located there, you are absolutely right: a significant number of projects have been developed in Northern Ireland in the west Tyrone region between the two council areas. Some of those who protest against the projects see that as a negative, but it is important that there is also a positive aspect to that. You touched on community benefits. We, as an organisation, have a protocol in place. That protocol is being reviewed in the context of the guidance that came from DECC in London. There are ongoing discussions between DECC and RenewableUK, which is one of our parent organisations. When the outcome of that is clear, we will review our protocol.

**The Chairperson:** I understand that the level of compensation or benefit to communities here is not as high as in the rest of the UK.

**Mr Connolly:** The DECC guidance proposed that it should be raised to £5,000 per megawatt. That is up for discussion between DECC and RenewableUK. When those discussions are concluded we will review our protocol in that way.

Aside from the community benefit, there are economic benefits to communities. I apologise for using an example from across the border, but in County Donegal, which is generally in the same part of the world, 30% of rate income from business comes from wind farms. There has been a clear recognition in that part of the world that although wind farms have an impact on the landscape and so on there is also a very positive impact.

There are people working in Omagh, Strabane and Derry city who are directly involved in the wind industry. We estimate that some 1,300 people across Northern Ireland are working specifically in wind. A reasonable number of them are working in the western region. That illustrates that there is a positive aspect to developing wind in regions as well as some of the perceived negatives.

Lucy may want to comment on some of the planning issues.

**Ms Lucy Whitford (Northern Ireland Renewables Industry Group):** There is special policy guidance on cumulative impacts alongside the development of PPS 18. The guidance contains a section that goes through each of the landscape character areas and gives broad strategic guidance on them and on what could be accommodated in them. That is an important tool that is being used by Planning Service and by the wind farm developers. Each of the projects submitted to Planning Service must assess cumulative impacts on all levels under environmental impact regulations. It is important to know that each wind farm is being assessed on its cumulative impact, which Planning Service will take into consideration when it makes a decision.

**The Chairperson:** Would basing 40% of all wind farms in one area not have a huge cumulative impact?

**Ms Whitford:** Each of the impact assessments has to look at that. The study areas go out to 25 kilometres and 30 kilometres in the assessments that are provided in most of the planning applications. They are studying the proposals, what is in planning and what has been given consent. It is still for Planning Service to decide what should be given consent, certainly in light of a cumulative impact assessment.

**Mr Connolly:** Much of the reasoning for development in west Tyrone is driven by resource, as there is a very good wind resource in that part of the world. If we broaden it out, you could ask the same question: why does such a high proportion of the wind energy delivered in GB come from Scotland? It is for exactly the same reasons. As developers, we tend to focus on the areas that give us the most efficient returns and wind farm performance.

**The Chairperson:** You have to think about the people whose families have lived there for generations. Suddenly, they see wind turbines all around them, and there is a mental effect on them as well. I know that there is evidence to say that outside a certain distance they will not be harmed, but people can see the wind turbines around them.

**Mr McElduff:** I welcome the delegation; it is a strong team. I am familiar with the story in my constituency of West Tyrone. Public representatives are prevailed on a lot by groups and individuals on this particular issue. The two councils there have done a good job. Their position might be best summed up by reflecting their duty to challenge adverse impacts robustly, but, generally, a presumption for.

West Tyrone Against Wind Turbines has gone beyond west Tyrone. There were a number of lobbying days here in Stormont where all the parties groups and individuals from all over the place, including Carrickfergus, Keady. It was a 40- or 50-strong group, and it raised serious issues. Therefore I am glad that the Chair posed those questions about the cumulative impact in west Tyrone, but is there scope for greater focus offshore? Is there scope for greater exploration of the offshore potential? Is it being exhausted?

Secondly, I do not know how you will respond to this, but West Tyrone Against Wind Turbines says that all wind farms are operating illegally and are in breach of European law. Do you understand the point that is being made there in one of these correspondences? I do not understand it, but if anybody else does, tell me what the point is behind that. It states that all wind farms operating here are doing

so illegally and that they are in breach of European law. In another correspondence, a very bleak picture is painted about the loss of tourism-related jobs in areas of outstanding natural beauty, such as the Gortin glens. That is one of the bigger worries about the Lisnaharney application. Perhaps we focus on offshore potential not being realised, but the correspondence relates to the loss of tourist jobs in the Gortin glens, the Lisnaharney application, and that point about the breach of European law.

**Ms Cormacain:** I will kick off on the offshore point. There has been significant work done to zone Northern Ireland's tidal and offshore wind resources. In October 2012, there was a formal launch of the successful bidders for the leases, which are for two separate tidal projects off the north-east coast around Torr Head and an offshore wind project of up to 600 megawatts off the coast of County Down. Zoning was done with DETI and DOE and the Crown Estate, which manages the seabed. They zoned those areas, and 600 megawatts for an offshore wind farm is a significant contribution. That will take a long time to deliver. Lucy might correct me, but there will probably be about two or three years of studies, whether that is mammals, fish, bird life, etc, and then the planning application, construction and then grid connection. Again, Lucy can correct me, but we are probably looking at 2020 or 2021, depending on whether it is built in stages. The potential is there, and the work has been done to develop it in the appropriate areas. I will just go on to tourism.

**Ms Whitford:** Part of the target is 2020 for the projects awarded to be in operation.

**Ms Cormacain:** I have seen the concerns about tourism. All I can say is that studies have been done in Northern Ireland and surveys have been carried out in Scotland. Visit Scotland has done a couple of surveys going back to 2008 because of that concern. Broadly speaking, the outcome of those surveys has been that wind farm development should have a minimal impact on tourism. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board concluded in 2011 that, overall, people were either neutral or in favour of wind farms. In that particular report, there was a figure that said that 3% of domestic tourists, ie, from Northern Ireland, would be put off visiting an area with a wind farm, which is a very low percentage. I think it can be managed, and, on the basis of the surveys that we have seen to date, I think the fear is probably greater than the reality. I can send you links, if they would be of use or help to the people who have those concerns.

**Mr Connolly:** On the other side of that, regardless of whether there is an impact from a tourism point of view, it is worth looking at the positive impact that it has had on jobs in west Tyrone. Adman Civil Projects Ltd in Carrickmore, Alexanders in Omagh, and Nordex, a turbine manufacturer, have bases in and around the Omagh area. They are employing significant numbers of people. A project built last year outside Strabane contributed locally because of the materials that were required. Over £1 million was spent on stones in the quarry sector, for example. The Committee does not need me to tell it the impact there has been on the construction sector over the past five years. Our sector, and what it is building and delivering, has been a lifeline for many small, family-run companies due to the money we are pumping in. Again, the assessment of that project indicated that somewhere between 35 and 40 local businesses in the Strabane district council area benefited directly. That is as simple as a local hotel providing accommodation for some of the technicians from the turbine company who travelled, to local hire companies, and so on and so forth. I think that there is a very real positive economic benefit from construction.

My last point is on the European legislation. I am at a loss, as are you. All I will say is that typical investment in a wind farm could be between £30 million and £40 million. You can imagine the due diligence involved in preparing for that. The company solicitors who review the legal agreements with landowners, the planning procedures, the grid connection, and all the rest of it, would not allow us to spend that kind of money if there was any concern that the development was illegal.

**Ms Whitford:** To add to that; again, I do not know the context of the question, but all of Northern Ireland's planning legislation, and a lot of the European legislation relating to habitats, comes from Europe, and we put it into policy in Northern Ireland. So, the majority of wind farm applications are under environmental impact assessment (EIA) regulations, unless they are screened by the Planning Service. We go through quite rigorous habitat assessment regulations, all of which are driven from European legislation. Like Gary, I am not sure where that question is coming from.

**Mr Milne:** You talked about community benefits and outlined some of them for the construction industry and the local communities that benefit from the work. That is a passing market. The people in those areas are most concerned with what is in the ever-increasing amount of wind farms for them. If you look at the price of electricity today, with all of the wind farms we have, you will see that it is only going up and up. You talked about community benefits. In my opinion, what you have outlined is

benefiting a minority in the community. It is a passing thing. Electric bills affect every household in the country. How can you say that there is community benefit to people who have to sacrifice the way of life that they have had for hundreds of years because of these monstrosities sitting at their back doors, on mountainsides, or in areas of natural beauty, if you cannot tell them that electricity bills are coming down instead of going up?

**Mr Connolly:** I will deal with part of that, and then Lucy will lead. First, I do not agree that they are monstrosities, but you would expect me to say that. Fuel prices are a very important point. There is a misconception that the construction of wind farms and the electricity that they produce is somehow leading to a significant increase in the electricity bill. In reality, the increase that consumers face in electricity bills is coming because of gas price increases. Over the past week or so, you may have seen that two of the main gas suppliers are talking about increasing domestic gas prices, and that change is having exactly the same impact on the electricity-generation market. So, the increase in price has been driven by gas. As an industry, we are very clear that the contribution that the 15% — 14% at the minute — is making to the electricity market is actually helping to reduce the price of electricity. People may say that they are not seeing the direct benefit of that, and that is a fair point. We contend that, if that contribution were not coming from wind farms today, the price would be even higher than it is. It is a very difficult point to make, but that is where we are coming from.

**Mr McElduff:** How great a mitigating effect is it having on the price of electricity? At an individual level, is it contributing to a reduction? Can you quantify it?

**Mr Connolly:** There is a cost for renewable electricity, because, as you all know, wind farms receive support payments. Against that, there is the question of what it does to the price of electricity. To quantify it, it is probably best to use figures from two studies. One is an Irish Wind Energy Association (IWEA) study, which says that if we reach our 40% generation target from 2011 to 2020 we could see a reduction in price in the region of 11%. The reason for that is that, when the wind farms are operating and the electricity has been generated, a gas-fired power station is not generating electricity. That brings down the overall wholesale price of the electricity. We are quite happy to direct you to that report if that is of any help.

**Ms Cormacain:** You asked about benefits to the community. It has been touched on before, but it is worth reiterating that the wind industry has been a leader in putting community benefit schemes in place. They are voluntary, as they are across the UK, and they are an acknowledgement that local communities are hosting developments that are contributing to basically regional and national energy targets.

I will provide a bit of background, and apologies if you are already aware of it. A number of protocols are in place around the UK and Ireland on community benefits. The first was published in England in 2011, and the second was the NIRIG protocol, which we launched in January. There was a lot of uncertainty happening, so we committed to reviewing it as soon as new evidence came out. We went ahead and published it January anyway. There is now a community protocol in Wales, which was done in conjunction with the industry and government. It does not set out community benefit levels. There is a community benefit register in Scotland, and there is now a community benefit protocol in the Republic of Ireland. So, that is the context of where we are, and, as Gary said, we will be reviewing our own protocol.

I disagree with the view that it is a short-term benefit. Wind farms have a predicted lifespan of 25 years. It is not insignificant, when you can give that kind of certainty in community benefits for such a period, especially for the community sector and the third sector, where you tend to work on a one-year or, if you are lucky, a three-year funding cycle. You are constantly chasing your tail to see where the next tranche of funding will come from. To have any degree of certainty over what your income levels will be for five, 10 or even 15 years or more is really welcome. An awful lot of community groups are putting in insulation in their church halls and community halls and are putting triple glazing in houses. That is a really long-term benefit, and an awful lot of communities have benefited from these schemes. So, respectfully, I do not agree on the point about short-term benefits.

**Mr Boylan:** Thanks very much for the presentation. I was disappointed that you could not make it down to Tyrone, because we had an opportunity there to engage properly.

Gary, we met at a previous Committee meeting. There was a situation in which the Department identified a number of landscape character areas; I think there were 130. I remember when we last

talked that you or other members of your group identified certain areas throughout the North where it would be more efficient and effective to erect wind farms.

I remember Tyrone being mentioned in that discussion, but in fairness, the crux of all this is that PPS 18 is a document about all renewable energies and I want you to remember that. Wind energy is one element of renewable energy. After visiting west Tyrone, I genuinely think that there has been a proliferation of wind farms down there.

I have discussed the policy with my colleague here and we now have to ask whether a threshold should be set. I will be honest with you about that, having looked at the area and right across the policy. At the end of the day, the 2020 target is to provide 40% of electricity from renewable energy. How much of that percentage will be provided by wind turbines? I ask that because there should be a lot of other renewable energy outlets.

**Mr Connolly:** We are at about 14%, and over 12% of that comes from wind turbines.

**Mr Boylan:** OK, so it is 12% from wind turbines out of the 14%. All right.

I have loads of questions but I am not going to take up a lot of time by asking them all today. There have been a number of questions, and Barry touched on some of them from West Tyrone in particular. I know that there is a proposal for a wind farm with a number of units in my area, outside Keady, on the Keady to Newtownhamilton road. My constituents have come to me with grave concerns about it.

Having listened to all those people, and taking community benefits and everything else into consideration, I do not think that there has been proper engagement with communities on the matter in some areas. Your first port of call is to do that. Early engagement with people is very important, and it seems to me that that is not happening.

I will be open and honest with you, because a number of single wind turbines have been erected in the Newry and Armagh area that have been backed by businesses. I could see it happening through European funding and support from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and so on, and perhaps there could be engagement with the farming community about erecting wind turbines for their benefit. However, it seems to me that the wind industry is supporting single wind turbines. That is what I am hearing from constituents. I have grave concerns about that. I would like you to respond and tell me whether that is the case.

**Mr Connolly:** Lucy will comment on community engagement, but when it comes to the issue of wind farms versus single wind turbines, we represent the vast majority of wind farm developers, which are members of NIRIG. A number of companies develop single wind turbines, and they are also members of NIRIG.

It is probably fair to say that the majority of single wind turbine applications are from private individuals. They tend to be from farmers, supported by local architects and so on. Therefore, it is difficult for us to speak for them, in the context of what the member companies of NIRIG do with regard to single wind turbines. They have a more systematic approach because they repeat what they are doing over and over again, whereas an individual farmer tends to apply for one or maybe two single turbines, which is a slightly different process.

I take your point about proper community engagement and I agree with you. However, I would not necessarily agree that it does not happen. From our membership's point of view, when we propose to develop a new project, we do engage fully. I will give you an example of a project that will go to the Planning Service before the end of the year. There were 140 households visited to make them aware of the proposed planning application, and a community information event was held on the back of those visits in order to inform people about the possible planning application. I was surprised that quite a number of the people who turned up at the event thought that the planning application had already been made, whereas it was very much a pre-planning information and consultation exercise.

**Ms Whitford:** From an NIRIG perspective, we have been supportive of pre-application community consultations that have come through the local government reform Bill and the Planning Bill. We are also involved with the Planning Service in how we go about pre-application discussions. The Planning Service is trying to develop that policy.



A large majority of wind-farm developers are engaging with us as early as they can. Sometimes it is a difficult process. You need to have the information to be able to go and tell people about a project, especially if you have bird surveys to do for a couple of years and look at the landscape and visual impact of the assessment. You want to be able to talk clearly about the project and answer concerns. There are door-to-door visits around the locality, exhibitions and follow-up information, trying to answer questions as local communities have them.

**Mr Boylan:** I take your point. We are raising this issue only because this is what we are hearing on the ground. We are in the middle. The project has started, you have engaged, but some members of the public are coming back and saying, "We only saw this in the paper." Obviously, it is down to planning and we discussed with the Planning Service how that early engagement and pre-applications should take place.

It is a pity that you were not down in Tyrone, I have to reiterate that, but more and more opposition is growing against wind turbines. I understand the targets and what the industry is trying to do. We are supportive of that. It is Government policy and has been agreed, and that is grand. We will forward some questions, Chair, that were sent here specifically. There are a number of them and I will not get into them.

You talk about community benefit. Somebody could argue the point that there are subsidies for wind farms in the first place. There are charges and somewhere embedded in all that could be the element that goes back to the community anyway. That is an interpretation that some people have. People are already being charged for their electricity. There are European subsidies, so when you say that there may be a monetary community benefit, I do not know what you are talking about. So, people could have that perception. If there is proper engagement with communities, that is the sort of thing that should be teased out.

Meabh mentioned the North/South interconnector, which affects my area. When there are 6,500 objections, it is very difficult. People have the right to object and the point is that, initially, there was not proper engagement with the community. You are then left with people who have a very strong lobby in relation to it. In terms of connection to the grid, I do not know whether that is happening or not.

**Ms Cormacain:** It is one project and a major one. I would not want to comment any more on the application. It is an NIE application, obviously, but as an industry we think that we really need it.

**Mr Connolly:** It is also important to say that it is not a wind project. It is not being built to facilitate wind farms.

**Mr Boylan:** No, 100%, but it would be remiss of me not to mention my constituency.

**Mr Connolly:** Absolutely.

**The Chairperson:** With Gail here, I want to make use of her expertise. Will the mechanism, ETSU-R-97, be reviewed? There are arguments that wind speed at night is so different from during the day and that mechanism may be a bit outdated.

**Ms Gail Hitchins (Principal Acoustic Consultant, SKM Enviros):** Is the Committee aware of the recent publication undertaken by the Institute of Acoustics called 'A Good Practice Guide to the Application of ETSU-R-97 for the Assessment and Rating of Wind Turbine Noise'? What it has done is address some of the common criticisms of the ETSU methodology. An independent noise working group was formed by members of the Institute of Acoustics. Yes, there was an instruction from DECC, which was to look at various applications of the ETSU methodology and how it could be consistently applied in applications to the planning system. There are recommendations in the guide that address measurements of wind speed and how it should be measured at the same time as the background-noise monitoring is addressed. That is the consensus of my professional body of our industry on good practice. So, I refer you to the good practice guide, which is freely available on the Institute of Acoustics' website.

**The Chairperson:** People who talk to us, such as the west Tyrone group, say that, at night, when the wind speed is a lot stronger, it causes them sleeplessness, and that the measurement is not quite correct.

**Ms Hitchins:** I am not sure exactly what technical point there is there. You mentioned —

**The Chairperson:** You said that the distance is big enough for people not to hear the noise. They say that you should come at night. During the day, it is a different matter. At night-time, because of stronger wind, the noise causes sleep deprivation.

**Ms Hitchins:** Obviously, during the day, background noise levels tend to be higher. We are all out driving our cars. There are all sorts of other active anthropogenic noise sources. So, at night, the background noise levels drop. So, there is the ability, perhaps, to perceive turbine noise. However, that change in background noise levels is taken into account by the ETSU guidance. So, essentially, the ETSU guidelines allow for a set decibel level above background noise levels. Those background noise levels will be either day or night levels. So, separate noise limits are set for day and night. I ask you to remember that the ETSU noise limits during the day are set to protect people's amenity of their gardens, so that, on a Sunday afternoon, after a good lunch, you can have that snooze in your garden or on your patio. However, at night, the guidelines assume that you will be indoors asleep — with an open window. So, that is all taken into account in the guidelines.

**The Chairperson:** OK. Is that meant to be reviewed soon?

**Ms Hitchins:** No. As I said, the application of those guidelines — specifically, ETSU — does not contain any guidance on how turbine noise levels should be predicted. It does not tell you which calculation methodology should be incorporated. Likewise, there is an acknowledged area of weakness, perhaps, to do with the measurements of wind speeds and how they correlate with noise levels. Those points have already been addressed by that good practice guide, which the Institute of Acoustics published in May this year.

**The Chairperson:** Fair enough. I will just ask another question quickly. The allegation from the west Tyrone group is that the blades of the industrial wind turbines will warp if they do not keep turning, so they actually require the use of electricity, which is unmetered and is charged to the public in hidden charges on their electricity bills, to keep the blades turning. What is your response to that?

**Mr Connolly:** There is a technical issue. In the unlikely event that there is a prolonged period of no wind, you are absolutely right that, with regard to the power —

**The Chairperson:** This is not from me: it is from the west Tyrone group. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Connolly:** Some power needs to go to the turbines. It is primarily to keep the electronics in the turbine control systems operational. If it is switched off and is allowed to become damp, etc, that causes problems. The blades do not turn in the sense that we stand back from a house and watch them. They are not powered to rotate; they are powered to twist, in exactly the same way that, in a serious storm condition, the turbine stops turning and stops generating power for safety reasons. So, yes, an element of power is required to go back to the turbine. As for how that is metered —

**The Chairperson:** It says it is unmetered.

**Mr Connolly:** At the end of the day, all our sites are net metered, if you like. We are paid only for the difference between the power that we draw and the power that is sent out.

**The Chairperson:** So it is untrue to say that that is charged to the public.

**Mr Connolly:** I am not clear about where that allegation comes from.

**The Chairperson:** We can certainly send letters and get calculations, including the mechanism for measuring noise.

**Mr Elliott:** Apologies for missing part of your presentation. If this point has been addressed, that is fine. One of the issues that came up consistently at the Omagh meeting was the distance from which wind turbines can be built from a dwelling. People referred continually to the Scottish policy and guidance. I cannot remember; was it 3 kilometres or something like that? It was quite a long distance anyway. I am sure that you are very much aware of that policy and guidance. How do you react to the suggestion that Northern Ireland should move to a policy similar to Scotland's?

**Ms Whitford:** I think that that is under consultation at the moment. I will have to triple-check with my colleagues in Scotland, but, as far as I am aware, it is a consultation and it relates to villages. My understanding is that it is not individual properties; it relates to villages. It is an ongoing consultation. As far as I know, there is not a set policy anywhere for a separation distance, apart from what is detailed in PPS 18 and policy RE 1 for residential amenity, which is 10 rotor diameters, and a minimum of 500 metres.

**Ms Hitchins:** I am aware of local authorities in England that have tried, in the context of their local plans and development frameworks, to introduce stand-off distances of varying amounts, but those have been rejected when the policies have gone for examination. They have been found not to be appropriate.

**Mr Elliott:** By whom? Was it the courts?

**Ms Hitchins:** I will have to check. Milton Keynes is the example that I am thinking of. We can certainly get back to you on who exactly rejected it.

**Ms Cormacain:** Guidance from the Department for Communities and Local Government stated that separation distances or buffer zones were inappropriate and should not be used. There are no statutory limits. It is all dependent on topography, landscape, the size of the turbine and other factors, but, in Wales, it was 500 metres or 10 rotor diameters, as it is here.

**Mr Elliott:** Chair, it might be useful if we could get the Scottish issue checked out, and what the actual position is. It was referred to a number of times by the group in Omagh. I met the group privately, and it was also referred to then.

**The Chairperson:** Yes, we can do that. At the moment, in Northern Ireland, it is 500 metres. Is that right? People sometimes seem to think that sometimes it is less.

**Ms Whitford:** PPS 18 sets out a minimum of 500 metres or 10 rotor diameters. If a project goes forward for approval, it has to put its case for anything that is going to be under that, and then it is for the Planning Service to look at. That is certainly the policy context of PPS 18.

**Mr Milne:** We hear a lot about objectors in communities to, for example, a specific wind farm. What support, apart from the owner of the land where you are building a wind farm, do you get from the community? Do you get letters of support from the community?

**Mr Connolly:** That goes back to something that you are all probably familiar with: the silent majority. In the context of the example that I gave earlier, my colleagues visited 140 residences and gave the occupants a brochure and an invitation letter to an event. Of those 140 residences, 30 people came to the event. That did not include the wider advertisements in the local papers. We tend to hear from the people who have a real concern, and that is understandable. Other people are quite content. Meabh mentioned some of the numbers from the broader surveys. Those people do not tend to jump up and down saying, "We really support it". It might be worth mentioning the Embrace Wind campaign that RenewableUK has been promoting.

**Ms Cormacain:** That campaign was started a couple of years ago to provide a voice to the silent majority, to use Gary's phrase. It was prompted in part by the increasing number of objection letters that were being received for specific projects, largely in England at the time. The sense was that more people were in support of wind energy than were not, but that those views were not being heard. Therefore, a campaign was started by Action for Renewables that aimed to give people the chance to provide letters of support. That was quite successful. I do not have any figures to hand. I could find out a bit more about it, but, when people realised that there was an issue and that support letters were not being received as often as objection letters, the number of support letters began to rise. I do not have the specific information on that to hand, but I will see whether I can find out more.

**Mr Milne:** That is fair enough, but —

**Mr McElduff:** Is that an independent group?

**Ms Cormacain:** It was funded by industry, initially.

**Mr McElduff:** That is my point. I wanted to know whether it was funded by industry.

**Ms Cormacain:** It is funded by a number of organisations and chaired by a member of Greenpeace, Phil Jupiter — I think that is the right name. It has a board that comprises a lot of environmental NGOs as well, but I do not know the exact composition of the board. I am happy to send on the information that I have.

**Mr Milne:** When do you see an end to wind farms? Surely there has to be a limit on the number of wind farms that will be put in place in the North.

**Mr Connolly:** That question is almost one for yourselves. From a governmental or Executive perspective, what level of renewable energy do you want in Northern Ireland? As an industry, we are happy to develop projects that are profitable, and if the policy states that we do not need any more, that could bring it to a conclusion. However, that is certainly not what the policy is at the moment. I go back to my earlier comments about the significant knock-on impact of primarily using gas-fired generation and being reliant on that to produce our electricity. There is an element of "out of sight, out of mind" about how we generate our electricity, but, as you are all very well aware, our gas supplies come from fairly unstable regions and if we get to a point when gas supply becomes very expensive and uncertain, we will perhaps be back at the Committee in 10 years and you will be asking us why we are not building more.

**The Chairperson:** Security of supply is very important.

**Mr McElduff:** Could Gail point us in the direction of conclusive reports that say that there are no negative health impacts from low-frequency noise?

**Ms Hitchins:** Yes. Numerous reports reach those conclusions. I refer you to probably the most cited of those, which is the 2006 report that was issued on behalf of the then Department of Trade and Industry and carried out by the Hayes McKenzie Partnership. It concluded that, yes, low-frequency noise can be measured indoors at properties in the vicinity of wind turbines, but that it is well below the guidelines that are permitted by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). Wind turbines are not the only source of low-frequency noise. There are guidelines that aim to control it from a variety of sources. Wind turbines are not unusual in that regard, and, as I said, the levels measured were well below the DEFRA guidelines.

**Mr McElduff:** I have a question about people who are objecting to applications. I am thinking of a particular family from the Aghyaran community on the Tyrone/Donegal border. They are absolutely surrounded by dozens and dozens of wind turbines. They tried to read all the material relevant to the application, but the Planning Service gives only restricted access to those documents. Reading is supervised and allowed for only a limited number of hours. Is that right? Are you aware of that?

**Mr Connolly:** All the applications for wind farms are handled at planning headquarters at Millennium House. There is a facility for anyone to request to see a file and read through it. There is a booking system and time limit for that. We suffer exactly the same issue when trying to see those files. That problem has been pretty much alleviated by the fact that the vast majority of information, and certainly the information that we provide as developers, is now available online on the Planning Service website. That takes away a lot of the pressure of trying to review it in an office in Belfast while someone is looking over your shoulder. It is now much more straightforward. We all use that now to access the information ourselves. It is a much better system.

**Ms Whitford:** It covers not only the environmental statement information that is submitted but the P1 planning application form, all the consultation responses and any other correspondence in relation to a wind farm that comes in, whether it is a letter from a supporter or an objector, and how that is dealt with.

**The Chairperson:** There are no more questions from members. The session was belated but very welcome and very useful. Thank you very much indeed for coming.

**Ms Cormacain:** Lucy has just reminded me of something. We are happy to facilitate a Committee visit to a wind farm at any point, if you wish. The Clerk has my contact details so please feel free to get in touch if that is of interest.

**The Chairperson:** OK. Thank you very much.