



An
Bord
Pleanála

Record of Meeting ABP-307620-20 1st meeting

Description	Proposed development of 15 no. wind turbines together with grid connection and all associated site works, Coole, County Westmeath.		
Case Type	Pre-application consultation		
1st / 2nd / 3rd Meeting	1 st		
Date	1/10/20	Time	11 am – 12.30 am

Representing An Bord Pleanála

Ciara Kellett, Assistant Director of Planning (Chair)

Sarah Lynch, Senior Planning Inspector

Rob Mac Giollarnáth, Executive Officer r.macgiollarnath@pleanala.ie

Representing the prospective Applicant

Ciara McGuinness, MKO

Jimmy Green, MKO

Ellen Costello, MKO

Claire Walsh, Statkraft

Dónal O'Sullivan, Statkraft

Chris Kenny, Statkraft

Introduction:

The Board referred to the letter received from the prospective applicant requesting pre-application consultations and advised the prospective applicant that the instant meeting essentially constituted an information-gathering exercise for the Board; it also invited the prospective applicant to outline the nature of the proposed development and to highlight any matters that it wished to receive advice on from the Board. The Board mentioned the following general procedures in relation to the pre-application consultation process:

- The Board will keep a record of this meeting and any other meetings, if held. Such records will form part of the file which will be made available publicly at the conclusion of the process. The record of the meeting will not be amended by the Board once finalised, but the prospective applicant may submit comments on the record which will form part of the case file.
- The Board will serve notice at the conclusion of the process as to the strategic infrastructure status of the proposed development. It may form a preliminary view at an early stage in the process on the matter.
- A further meeting or meetings may be held in respect of the proposed development.
- Further information may be requested by the Board and public consultations may also be directed by the Board.
- The Board may hold consultations in respect of the proposed development with other bodies.
- The holding of consultations does not prejudice the Board in any way and cannot be relied upon in the formal planning process or in any legal proceedings.

Presentation by the prospective applicant:

Planning History

Coole Wind Farm Ltd was granted planning permission on appeal by An Bord Pleanála (ABP Ref.300686) for 13 no. wind turbines. This decision is currently subject to judicial review. This present application under the SID process seeks to optimise the existing site and whilst it will be considered as a standalone development the location of the previously approved 13 no. turbines will remain unchanged, an additional 2 turbines are proposed at 2 new locations, the power generating capacity from all 15 turbines is proposed to be 90MW, as such the applicants are not proposing an amendment to the previous consent and will propose the development in its entirety for the SID application.

ABP previously considered the associated substation upgrades and Grid connection provisions did not constitute strategic infrastructure (ABP Ref. 304794) and therefore directed that any such grid application should be made to the local planning authority. Coole Wind Farm Ltd. have recently (September 2020) been issued with a Section 5 (S5-8-20) confirmation from Westmeath County Council in relation to the provision of improved technology within the approved 13 no. turbines which would increase the power generating capacity of the permitted development to 65MW. Westmeath County Council did not consider the increase in power generating capacity to be development and issued a Section 5 declaration to this effect. A SID pre application which preceded this S5 declaration relating to this issue remains open under 306188.

The applicant clarified that the previously approved windfarm and grid connection including the use of improved technology to achieve greater power generating capacity will remain an option to develop. **Site location**

The study area measures approximately 2,460 hectares and is located 2.4 km north of Coole village, 6.7 km north west of Castlepollard, County Westmeath.

Strategic Planning Policy Context

Wind energy is acknowledged by stakeholders as the main component of Ireland's renewable energy development, and wind energy is accepted as the main contributor to meeting the Country's national climate change and energy supply obligations.

Local Planning Policy Context

All of Westmeath has been designated as "Low Capacity for wind farm development" in the current plan, with exception of Uisneach LCA ("no wind capacity"). Refer to objectives P-EN1, P-WIN2 and P-WIN 6.

The Draft Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027 maintains its policy that the preferred locations for large scale wind farms are located on cutover cutaway peatlands, subject to nature conservation and habitat protection requirements being fully addressed (Policy CPO 10.135). In addition, the Draft Plan has transposed in full Variation 2 as Policy CPO 10.132 which maintains the existing separation distances between wind turbines and residences..

Landscape capacity map

Westmeath County Development Plan's Landscape Character Assessment indicates that the Inny River Lowlands is classified as having 'Low Capacity' for wind energy infrastructure. Notwithstanding, Policy PWIN-2 of the CDP specifically cites cutover cutaway peatlands as the strictly preferred location for large scale renewable energy development.

Project Design/Constraints

The design of the proposed Coole Wind Farm is constraints and facilitators-led, thereby avoiding the most environmentally sensitive parts of the site. The design and layout will reference the recommendations and guidelines set out in the Draft Revised Wind Energy Development Guidelines December 2019 (and revisions thereof) and the 'Best Practice Guidelines for the Irish Wind Energy Industry' (Irish Wind Energy Association, 2012). The constraints map for the proposed development includes the following features and relevant buffers:

- Natura 2000 and Designated sites plus 200 metre buffer;
- Dwellings plus typically 700 metre buffer (meeting the requirement for a 4 x tip height separation distance);
- Telecommunication Links plus operator-specific buffer;
- Existing overhead transmission lines plus 3.5 x proposed rotor diameter buffer (as required by EirGrid);
- Watercourses plus 50-metre buffer;
- Lakes plus 50-metre buffer; and
- Archaeological Sites or Monuments, 50-metre buffer, plus 'Zone of Notification' as required by the National Monuments Service.

The inclusion of all the above constraints on a map of the site of the proposed development allows for a viable area to be identified.

Site Constraints

18 no. houses within 1km of the 15 turbine layout.

Proposed Development

Although the optimal layout of the proposed development is still being finalised, it is anticipated that the proposed wind energy development will comprise 15 no. wind turbines with a maximum overall blade tip height of up to 175m (increase in rotor diameter from 140m to max of 155m for previously permitted turbines) and all associated works, including: access roads and entrance(s), onsite substation, borrow pits, electrical cabling for grid connection, temporary construction compounds and junction improvement.

The planning application includes for the construction of underground electricity cabling from the proposed onsite substation located in the townland of Camagh. This connection is carried out via an underground cable which is almost entirely contained within the public road corridor to the existing 110kV Mullingar substation located in the townland of Irishtown. Proposed upgrade works at the existing Mullingar substation will consist of the construction of an additional dedicated bay to facilitate connection of the cable. The total length of the proposed cable route is approximately 26.4 kilometres. The grid connection will be fully assessed as part of the EIAR.

The proposed project will have a total output of c.90MW.

Scoping, Pre-Application Consultation & Public Consultation

A scoping document, providing details of the proposed Coole Wind Farm project and the proposed development site, was prepared and circulated to prescribed statutory bodies in August 2020.

Pre-application consultations with Westmeath County Council are being sought.

Public Consultation

- Community liaison officer (CLO) is appointed to the area (in place since 2013).
- Community liaison strategy (in place since 2016).
- Ongoing house to house calls extending to over 115 households in the local area.
- Ongoing meetings with local community/individuals, local businesses and community groups..
- Engagement with locally elected representatives.
- Project specific website established www.colewindfarm.ie
- Dissemination of information booklets and leaflets in the area and follow on newsletters.
- Public information evening event 2017.
- Provision for conducting consultations on-line given Covid restrictions.
- Circa 90MW dev/t has the potential to provide €8 million to the local community over the lifetime of the RESS.

Environmental Impact Assessment Report

Includes all relevant headings/chapters. Studies/assessments are being undertaken in respect of all the relevant topics i.e. bird and bat surveys, peat stability, archaeological, traffic impact, noise, hydrological, ecological, landscape impact assessments, visual impacts, shadow flicker.

Strategic Infrastructure Criteria

The proposed Coole Wind Farm is expected to comprise 15 no. wind turbines with an installed capacity of approximately 90MW. The proposal exceeds generating capacity thresholds specified in the 7th Schedule.

Project is of strategic economic and social importance to the Eastern and Midland Region and the state. The capital investment required for a project of this scale will cumulatively represent a significant economic contribution to the Region and the State as a whole.

Project in accordance with the promotion of sustainable energy development as set out in provisions of the Strategy for Renewable Energy 2012 – 2020 (2012), Ireland's Transition to a Low Carbon Energy Future 2015-2030 (2015), Ireland 2040 – National Planning Framework (2018) and the Climate Action Plan (2019). The proposal will significantly contribute towards meeting sustainable renewable energy targets and objectives at Local, Regional and National levels.

Proposed development site is located in its entirety in County Westmeath. There are no other planning authority areas within proximity to the application site, and it is therefore considered that the development will not give rise to any significant effects on the functional area of any other planning authority.

Discussion:

The following matters were discussed:

- The Board's representatives stated that on the basis of the information presented the project would appear to constitute strategic infrastructure, however the final decision is a matter for the Board.
- It would be important that any accompanying EIAR in a subsequent application should robustly assess alternatives to both the proposed windfarm and the delivery route proposed.
- All road alterations and works to facilitate the delivery of the turbines should be detailed in the application.

- In relation to biodiversity the classification of habitats should be done in accordance with TII guidance. It was also stated that all baseline surveys should be up to date. A question was raised as to the presence/absence of wet heath.
- A full schedule of mitigation measures would need to be included.
- The impact of the hydrological regime in the area would need to be fully assessed. Peat depths would need to be fully detailed and any impacts that may occur to peatland ponds in the area.
- The location and depths of borrow pits must also be detailed and considered within the context of hydrological impacts. Details of tonnage to be excavated from borrow pits should also be specified.
- Details in relation to blasting, duration and frequency should be provided and assessed in terms of potential impacts.
- Impacts to local wells should be examined.
- The prospective applicant should detail the carbon loss over the lifetime of the scheme (with the loss of peat/forestry).
- The cumulative noise impacts in relation to construction would need to be set out (including all construction equipment). Regard must be had to both the current Wind Guidelines and the draft guidelines in the context of the Balz judgement.
- Visual impact assessment should be undertaken for a 15km radius.
- A question was asked as to how the public engagement was going.
- A question was asked as to whether an NIS would be submitted with the application.
- The Board's representatives referred to the risk of major accidents to be considered within the EIAR.
- On behalf of the prospective applicant it was submitted that there was no loss of wet heath as part of the project. There would be no blasting activity (there

had been feedback from the local community regarding this). A NIS would be submitted. The cable route was close to certain designated sites but would remain within the road corridor. It was mentioned that public engagement was ongoing and consideration was being given to virtual consultation.

- The Board's representatives stated that in line with current guidance should the Board determine that the subject proposal is strategic infrastructure a subsequent application together with the electrical connection can be lodged as a single application under section 37(A).

Conclusion:

The record of the instant meeting will issue. The prospective applicant can then respond with their own comments on issues raised in the record. It may be that a further meeting will be held to clarify and to develop issues or if the prospective applicant was satisfied that a further meeting was not required, they could request that the pre-application consultation process be concluded.



Ciara Kellett

Assistant Director of Planning

06/10/2020

