

An
Bord
Pleanála

Record of Meeting

ABP-313680-22- 2nd Meeting

Description	ABP-313680-22 - Development of a 110kV substation and grid connection serving a proposed solar PV farm at Blackwater Bog, near Shannonbridge, Co. Offaly		
Case Type	Pre-application Consultation.		
1st / 2nd / 3rd Meeting	2 nd Meeting		
Venue	Virtually by Microsoft Teams		
Date	22/09/2022	Time	11:00am – 11:30am

Representing An Bord Pleanála

Ciara Kellett, Assistant Director of Planning (Chair)

Una Crosse, Senior Planning Inspector

Sarah Caulfield, Executive Officer

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Representing the Prospective Applicant

Ann Marie Doherty - Bord na Móna

Sean Creedon - Bord na Móna

Caitriona Carter - Bord na Móna

Sinead Ryan – MWP

Andrew Morrow – ESB Networks

Michael Butler – ESB Networks

Introduction:

The Board referred to its previous meeting with the prospective applicant of the 4th August, 2022 and the record of this meeting. The Board asked if the prospective applicants had any comments it wished to make on the record of this meeting; the prospective applicant replied that it had no comments to make.

Presentation by the prospective applicant:

The prospective applicant provided a brief recap on the first meeting and said the main topics to be discussed today include the EIAR requirement for the proposed solar farm and grid connection, and an overview of the existing EPA licences within the study area.

The prospective applicant noted that solar farms, substations and underground cables are not mandatory project types requiring EIA under the current EIA legislation. It noted that EIA screening has been completed and said there is the potential for exceedance of thresholds for forestry felling (greater than 10 hectares of natural woodland) & the construction of new internal roads (greater than 2 kilometres), depending on the final location & layout of the solar farm. It also noted the potential for significant environmental effects due to the size and scale of the proposed development and said an EIA may be triggered if these thresholds are exceeded.

It was submitted by the prospective applicant that a pre-planning meeting was held with Offaly County Council on the 14th September 2022 and it said the local authority's preference is that an EIAR is submitted with the planning application for the solar farm. Therefore, the prospective applicant said if an EIAR is required, it would be completed for the entire project (solar farm, substation, and its grid connection).

The prospective applicant confirmed that there are 2 existing EPA licences within the area of the proposed development. One being an industrial emissions license (IE Licence P0611) for the ESB West Offaly Power Station, Shannonbridge for previous activity including combustion of peat and biomass to generate electricity and the disposal of ash in repository to east of site. The prospective applicant said the power

station closed in December 2020 and the EPA licence is still in place for implementation of the closure plan.

The second EPA license is under IE Licence P0502, for Bord na Móna Blackwater works for the extraction of peat. The prospective applicant confirmed that peat extraction ceased in 2019 and the licence is still in place for low level transportation and sales and decommissioning/rehabilitation activities.

Discussion

The following matters were discussed:


- The Board's representatives referred to the prospective applicant's statement within its presentation that the proposed development has the potential for significant environmental effects due to the size and scale of the proposed development which may necessitate an EIAR notwithstanding that solar farms and underground cables are not a class in the EIA Directive. It was suggested that this may contradict details provided by the prospective applicant as outlined in the record of the 1st meeting.
- The potential for the submission of reports specific to identified potential impacts rather than an EIAR was outlined.
- The Board's representatives said a screening determination has not been requested from the Board and therefore the decision on whether to submit an EIAR is a matter for the prospective applicant to decide.
- The Board's representatives said solar farms and underground cables are not a project type for the purposes of EIAR but noted the prospective applicant's comments in relation to forestry and roads.
- In response to a query on the matter, the prospective applicant said the forestry required to be felled is characterised as natural woodland (Broadleaf).
- A general discussion was had around the requirement for an EIAR for the construction of private roads greater than 2 kilometres and the interpretation of what constitutes a road or an access track within the EIA Directive. The

prospective applicant is of the opinion that the development of an internal road of more than 2 kilometres regardless of its function triggers a requirement for an EIAR.

- The Board's representatives advised the prospective applicant that if an EIAR is submitted, to demonstrate the reasoning behind it.
- The prospective applicant said Offaly County Council highlighted the importance of amenity connectivity through the site. The local authority is interested in whether the proposed development could potentially enhance two amenity projects in the area, namely the Galway Athlone Greenway and the Shannon Monastic Greenway. The prospective applicant said this is currently being assessed.
- In response to a query on the matter, the prospective applicant confirmed that a Natura Impact Statement would accompany the planning application.

Conclusion

The record of the meeting will issue to the prospective applicant, and it will then be a matter for the prospective applicant to submit any comments on this if it wishes to do so. It will be a matter for the prospective applicant to revert to the Board if it requires a further meeting or if it wishes to close the pre-application consultation process.

 26/9/22

Ciara Kellett

Assistant Director of Planning