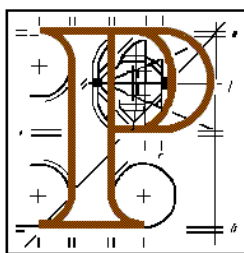


An Bord Pleanála



Inspector's Report

Case Ref. No:	19. PC0209
Issue:	SID Pre-application – whether project is strategic infrastructure development
Proposed Development:	Windfarm of 21 turbines with an output of 63MW
Location:	Cloncreen, Offaly
Applicants:	Bord na Mona
Planning Authority:	Offaly County Council
Inspector:	Stephen J. O'Sullivan

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report deals with a request by Bord na Mona plc for a pre-application consultation in respect of the development of a windfarm

2.0 SITE

- 2.1 The site lies in the east of Offaly, north-west of the village of Clonbulloge. It consists of c1,000ha of worked bog. The prospective applicant indicated that it was likely that the entire site would be cutaway bog by 2020. Edenderry power station is across the regional road R401 to the east of the site. A licenced ash repository for the station is on the site. The Mount Lucas windfarm stands c5km to the west of the site. There is extensive worked bog in the wider area. However there is also agricultural land with numerous one-off houses, particularly to the north, east and south of the site. An aerodrome operates from a site c3km to the south.

3.0 PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

- 3.1 The prospective applicant intends to develop a windfarm of 21 turbines, each up to 170m high, with a total output of 63MW. It provided a revised layout at the second meeting with the board on 18th May 2016, stating that it would achieve a separation distance from each turbine of 700m to houses and 2km to the village of Clonbulloge, and 2.7km to the aerodrome. There were options for connection to the national grid at Rhode and Edenderry, and two possible locations on the site for a substation. Each of the options would be described and appraised in the EIS. Haul routes for construction would be from the M6 and N52, thence along the R420, R402 and possibly the R401, with an access point to the site identified on each of the latter two roads.

4.0 LEGAL PROVISIONS

- 4.1 The 7th Schedule of the Strategic Infrastructure Act, 2006, as amended by the Planning and Development (Amendment) Act, 2010, Class 1 provides that the following shall be infrastructure development for the purposes of sections 37A and 37B:

An installation for the harnessing of wind power for energy production (a wind farm) with more than 25 turbines or having a total output greater than 50 megawatts

- 4.2 Section 37A(1) says that an application for permission for any development specified in the Seventh Schedule shall, if the following condition is satisfied, be made to the Board under section 37E and not to a planning authority. Section 37A (2) says

That condition is that, following consultation under section 37B, the Board serves on the prospective applicant a notice in writing that, in

the opinion of the Board, the proposed development would, if carried out, fall within one or more of the following paragraphs, namely –

- (a) the development would be of strategic economic or social importance to the State or the region in which it would be situate,*
- (b) the development would contribute substantially to the fulfilment of any of the objectives in the National Spatial Strategy or in any regional planning guidelines in respect of the area or areas in which it would be situate,*
- (c) the development would have a significant effect on the area of more than one planning authority.*

5.0 POLICY PROVISIONS

5.1 The National Spatial Strategy refers to the need for a reliable, secure and cost-competitive energy supply and section 4.4 states that “many worked out bogs in the Midlands are highly suited to wind energy development at a significant enough scale to support ancillary manufacturing, servicing and development activities helping to position Ireland as an innovator in wind farm technology.”

5.2 The Regional Planning Guidelines for the Midlands Region 2010-2022 apply. Section 3.3.4.6 recognises that the region contains worked out peatlands which offer potential for renewable energy installation including wind energy, with reference to the history of energy production in such areas and the extensive electricity infrastructure that is in place. Section 3.4.6 of the guidelines also refers to the development of renewable energy sources such as wind on work-out peatlands. Section 3.4.6.1 states that the guidelines support the development of wind energy generation in the region, subject to appropriate siting. Policy TIP33 in chapter 5 of the guidelines is to support the sustainable development of infrastructure required to assist the region in the delivery of renewable energy.

5.3 The National Renewable Energy Action Plan sets a target that 40% of Ireland’s electricity would be generated from renewable sources by 2020 and the REFIT 2 scheme provides a guaranteed price for the operators of renewable generation facilities with a total capacity of up to 4,000MW.

5.4 The site is in an area designated as being suitable for wind energy development by the Offaly County Development Plan 2014-2020. The site and adjacent bogs are not subject to designation under the Natura 2000 network.

6.0 MEETINGS WITH THE PROSPECTIVE APPLICANT

6.1 The prospective applicant met with the board’s representatives twice, on the 18th November 2015 and the 18th May 2016. The board’s representatives met with the county council on 17th May 2016. Various

planning matters that are likely to be relevant to the consideration of the proposed development were discussed at the meetings, as set out in the minutes that are attached to this file. The preliminary maps, plans and photomontages that were submitted by the prospective applicant are also attached.

6.2 The prospective applicant argued at the meetings and in correspondence with the board that the proposed development would constitute strategic infrastructure development on grounds that may be summarised as follows –

- The minimum power output from the revised proposal for a 21 turbine windfarm would be 63MW, which is above the 50MW threshold set out in the seventh schedule to the act.
- The scale of the proposed development would render it of strategic economic and social importance to the region and the state. It would assist in meeting renewable energy targets set by the state and result in a significant reduction in carbon emissions from electricity generation and the state's dependence on imported fossil fuels. It would represent a capital investment of c €110 million with additional contributions from commercial rates, development levies, community gain proposals and associated infrastructure improvements, which in sum would be significant for the economy of the region and the state.
- The proposed development would contribute substantially to the fulfilment of objective TIP33 of the planning guidelines for the region and the provisions at sections 3.3.4.6 and 3.4.6.1 that recognise the region's potential for renewable energy development.

7.0 ASSESSMENT

7.1 The proposed windfarm would have an output of greater than 50MW. The development would therefore come within Class 1 of the Seventh Schedule to the planning act.

7.2 Having regard to the scale of the proposed 63MW renewable energy facility relative to the 4,000MW of generation capacity promoted by the stated under the REFIT 2 scheme, it is considered that the proposed development could make a significant contribution to the achievement of the target set in the National Renewable Energy Action Plan that 40% of electricity be generated from renewable sources. The proposed development would therefore be strategic economic importance to the State within the meaning of section 37A(2)(a) of the planning act.

7.3 Both the National Spatial Strategy and the applicable regional planning guidelines have objectives in favour of development to generate energy from renewable sources which refer to the use of cutaway bogs for wind energy development. The proposed development could contribute

substantially to the fulfilment of those objectives within the meaning of 37A(2)(b) of the planning act.

- 7.4 The haul route for the proposed development would pass through Westmeath. The site is c5km from the boundary of Co. Kildare and turbines may be visible from that county. However the potential effects in this regard are not so significant as to bring the proposed development within the scope of 37A(2)(c) of the planning act.

8.0 RECOMMENDATION

- 8.1 I recommend that the prospective applicant be informed that the proposed development of a wind farm of 63MW capacity at Cloncreen, Offaly falls within Class 1 of the Seventh Schedule of the Planning and Development Act, 2000, as amended and complies with the conditions specified in sections 37A(2) (a) & (b), and consequently constitutes strategic infrastructure development. A planning application should be made in the first instance to An Bord Pleanála under S37E of the act.

Stephen J. O'Sullivan
4th July 2016