

Special Meeting to seek and record (following the circulation by the Chief Executive of the Report of the Planning Authority in respect of a Strategic Infrastructure Development lodged with An Bord Pleanála on behalf of Coole Wind Farm Limited for the development of 15 wind turbines, electrical substation, 1 no. burrow pit, 26km underground electricity grid connection to 110kv substation, construction of a link road between the R395 and R396 along with junction improvements to the north of north of the village of Coole, Co. Westmeath):

- The views of the members on the proposed development
- Any resolution made by the Members to attach recommendations to the report of the planning authority to be submitted to An Bord Pleanála

Video Conferencing 24 May 2021 at 15.00

Meetings Administrator's Record

- Presiding** : Cllr. Ken Glynn
- Members Present** : Cllr. Frankie Keena, Cllr. Aengus O'Rourke, Cllr. John Dolan, Cllr. Tom Farrell, Cllr. Johnnie Penrose, Cllr. Liam McDaniel, Cllr. Vinny McCormack, Cllr. Michael Dollard, Cllr. Ken Glynn, Cllr. Aoife Davitt, Cllr. William Collentine, Cllr. Andrew Duncan, Cllr. Hazel Smyth, Cllr. Frank McDermott, Cllr. John Shaw, Cllr. Denis Leonard, Cllr. Emily Wallace.
- Apologies:** Cllr Jamie Moran, Cllr Louise Heavin
- Officers Present** : P. Gallagher, Chief Executive
B. Kehoe, Director of Service
D Reilly, Director of Service
C. Hartin, Senior Planner
B. O'Brien, Executive Planner
M Kearney, Staff Officer
A. Galvin, Administrative Officer

- (a) Roll Call and Declaration of Conflict of Interests.
- (b) Presentation by Cathaldus Hartin, Senior Planner.
- (c) Recording of the views of the Members on the proposed development; and to resolve, if necessary, to attach recommendations to the Report of the Planning Authority as circulated by the Chief Executive.

Conflict of Interest Declared

Cllr Paddy Hill: I declare that I do have a conflict of interest under Section 177, subsection (2) and (3) of the Local Government Act 2001.

I have a vested interest in this project, as a piece of bog land proposed in the planning application, as a site for one of the 15 Turbines in the project development plan by Coole Windfarm is in my ownership and therefore I excuse myself from today's meeting @ 3pm, 24 May 2021.

My interest in this matter will be recorded on my Ethical Framework for Local Government Service Annual Declaration

Presentation to the Members:

Cathaldus Hartin, Senior Planner made a presentation to the Members setting out; details of the development proposal; SID process; obligations to consider in the assessment of proposal; and the role of the Elected Members.

Elected Members Views:

Cllr. Penrose raised concerns regarding the implications and interaction between the consideration of the proposed application having regard to the adopted policy of the Westmeath County Development Plan including policy on the set back distance of 2000 meters and the Draft Ministerial Direction which requests removal of said policy.

Clarity was also requested in relation to the consideration of an old railway line associated with the area in question as part of the application having regard to the natural heritage of the area.

Cllr. Leonard acknowledged that Development Plan policy directs such proposals to bog land and queried the status of current County Development Plan policy associated with wind energy having regard to the status of the Draft Ministerial Direction with respect to set back distances outlined under the Plan. It was submitted that the adopted policy should apply until a formal direction is issued on the matter and the full process is concluded with the ministerial order resolved.

As this is not decided on yet it was felt that the setback distance should remain as in CPO 10.143 of the Plan until it is reinstated or forced to be deleted. With 175m turbines as close as 600m to dwellings which is even outside national guidelines, any adjudication that does not consider CPO10.143 is premature.

Concerns were raised with regard the proximity of homes to the turbines, with one turbine outside the bogland area, some of which it has been suggested are within 500m of proposed turbines, and attention was drawn to the Draft Wind Energy Guidelines in this regard with reference to recommendations that a setback distance for visual amenity purposes of 4 times the tip height be considered.

Concerns were expressed in relation to; rights of way; the impact of the proposal on farmer's payments; noise in the context of WHO guidelines and shadow flicker; the extent to which a cost benefit analysis was carried out in association with the proposal and whether the proposal is solely profit driven as opposed to producing the most energy at the lowest cost in areas where it is needed; impact on the wider area; the impact of the proposal on bogs in an area where bogs have been exploited in the past. Further concerns were raised in association with the grid connection and the potential for impacts on people's homes.

A query was also raised as to the number of turbines required to make the project viable given the proximity of a number of turbines to residential dwellings notwithstanding that this is generally a depopulated area.

Reiterated his main concern that the application is premature pending the outcome of the Draft Ministerial Direction on the County Development Plan.

Advised that members have expressed support for the appropriate form of renewable energy (noting the off shore potential for wind energy in other areas) in the County and indicated that residents must be supported.

Cllr. Smyth requested that the Bord consider the impact of the proposal on biodiversity, soil, with reference to occurrences in Donegal, together with ecological and biodiversity issues associated with the provision of the proposed wind turbines.

Considered that turbines do have impact on those living in the vicinity and benefits for the local community should be given consideration, including payback to residents in local community and consideration of subsidised energy from that produced at the site.

With reference to the felling of trees plans for replacement planting is queried.

Further details are requested in relation to plans for the end of the term of the development in terms of what will be done with the site when the permission ceases.

Recognising the role that peatlands play as important carbon sink it was indicated that we need to ensure that we are protecting peatlands to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in given our climate emergency. In this regard the Irish peatlands conservation community were identified as an important stakeholder.

Concerns being raised by residents regarding sound and the need for mitigating factors to be taken into consideration were expressed.

Full support of the efforts to deliver renewable energy sources in Westmeath were expressed and efforts to try to achieve that was commended.

Cllr Duncan expressed views that he is not in support of the application as it does not comply with the Westmeath County Development Plan policies of cut away cut over bog, with one turbine being located on agricultural lands.

Concerns were expressed in association with the proposal having regard Meenbog, Co Donegal, based on a site visit where the negative impact that the wind farm development had at this location were witnessed first hand.

Advised from experience that such proposals are not good and that he is not in favor of wind energy after visiting the Donegal site. It was cautioned that serious planning restrictions need to be placed on developers.

Requested that a baseline noise measurement be carried out for the site prior to any works commencing.

Expressed that there will be an impact on residents close to site in terms of the value of their property with a certain number of people who will experience a negative impact and the devaluing of their properties in proximity to the site.

Cllr McDermott expressed support for all forms of renewable energy providing that it complies with the law and advised he would not be objecting to the proposal.

Advised, in response to Cllr Penrose, that the railway line isn't in this section of bog.

In terms of separation distances, the Cllr advised that there are 3 houses within 700m of the development proposal; however it was suggested that the properties relate to families that are involved in the planning process. It was considered that, given the nature and location of the properties in the vicinity, there are no concerns associated with the impact of the proposal on property values.

In terms of peat stability, having regard to experiences elsewhere, it was contended that the proposal is situated on a flat plate of grounds and there are no concerns associated with subsidence or movement in the area.

Considered that the site lends itself to a project of this nature, the proposal offers potential for benefits to the community and the area and that the project should be encouraged.

Cllr Wallace expressed concern with the planning application and queried why it was recommended that permission be granted in this instance given the history associated with the site and previous decision in respect of a similar proposal.

Concerns were expressed in respect of the compatibility of the proposal with the policy as adopted by the Members under the County Development Plan.

Reservations were expressed in terms of; underground cabling; carbon impact; extent of supporting infrastructure required including extent of concrete required; impact of draining bogs and extent of setback distances outlined.

Cllr Shaw expressed concern regarding the role of Elected Members in the process, stating that based on recent experience, the process constitutes a box ticking exercise given that the overall decision making process is under the remit of by An Bord Pleanála who focus their consideration, when determining significant development proposals, on wider policy which is over-riding local planning policy. In this regard it was queried whether the opinions of the Elected Members count for anything, noting as an example the lack of autonomy that now exists for members in the Development Plan review process.

Advised that the members have been consistent in their views on wind energy policy and the need to direct to peatlands but agrees with Cllr. Duncan that valid concerns exist in relation to property values and the requirements needed in terms of safeguarding measures.

Expressed fear that the project will be delivered in circumstances where there will not be appropriate measures in place to safeguard the residents of the area.

Cllr. Glynn expressed his opposition to the proposal at this site, or at any location in Westmeath, and outlined his backing for the residents of the area.

Outlined reservations that a successful application in this instance will open the door to wind farm development at any location in County Westmeath as a key area for such unsightly projects with structures extending to 175m.

Reiterated his consistency on the issue over several years and advised that An Bord Pleanála should be clearly informed of the opposition to the proposal.

A commitment to renewable energy was outlined, however it was stated that the role of the Elected Members is to stand behind the people of Westmeath.

Resolution

The Members did not resolve to attach any recommendations to the report of the Planning Authority.

This concluded the business of the meeting