

**Call for Evidence:
Strategic planning policy
for Renewable Energy
development**

Launch date: 7 March 2016

Respond by: 6 May 2016

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Introduction

The Department of the Environment (DoE) will be undertaking a review of strategic planning policy for onshore renewable energy development as set out within the Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland (SPPS). This Call for Evidence will help inform the scope of this review.

How to Respond

You are invited to submit your views in response to this Call for Evidence **by 5.00pm on 6 May 2016**. Comments after this deadline will not be accepted.

All responses must be marked 'Renewable Energy' and should be emailed to the Department at the following address:

sppsteam@doeni.gov.uk

Please note that your response may be made public by DoE. For example, information people provide in response to this call for evidence, including personal information, may be subject to publication or disclosure in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA) and the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA). If you want the information that you provide to be treated as confidential please tell us, but be aware that we cannot guarantee confidentiality.

Background

1. DoE published the SPPS 'Planning for Sustainable Development' in September 2015. The SPPS consolidates some twenty separate policy publications into one document, setting out strategic planning policy in relation to a wide range of subject policies, including regional policy for Renewable Energy development. A copy of the SPPS Subject Policy 'Renewable Energy' is attached at Annex A.

2. The aim of the SPPS in relation to renewable energy is to facilitate the siting of renewable energy generating facilities in appropriate locations within the built and natural environment in order to achieve Northern Ireland's renewable energy targets and to realise the benefits of renewable energy without compromising other environmental assets of acknowledged importance.

3. The regional strategic objectives for renewable energy are to:
 - ensure that the environmental, landscape, visual and amenity - impacts associated with or arising from renewable energy development are adequately addressed;

 - ensure adequate protection of the Region's built and natural, and cultural heritage features; and

 - facilitate the integration of renewable energy technology into the design, siting and layout of new development and promote greater application of the principles of Passive Solar Design.

Why undertake a review?

4. During the consultation on the SPPS, DoE received a significant number of representations on renewable energy planning policy. Taking into account issues raised through the consultation, other representations from the public and elected representatives and as a result of the Environment Committee's Wind Energy Inquiry, the Minister for the Environment, Mark H Durkan, committed to undertake a review of the regional strategic planning policy for renewable energy following publication of the SPPS in final form.

Purpose and scope

5. This Call for Evidence is part of the process of gathering the necessary information to inform the subsequent review of strategic planning policy. The evidence received will improve DoE's understanding of the operation and impact of the existing strategic policy and provide up-to-date evidence on the social, environmental and economic impacts of renewable energy development.
6. It should be noted that this Call for Evidence relates to the regional strategic policy for renewable energy rather than local policy which will be brought forward through Local Development Plan (LDP) policies. Councils are responsible for preparing their LDP and in doing so they must take account of the strategic policy set out in the SPPS.
7. Whilst DoE welcomes comments on all aspects of strategic planning policy for renewable energy (and any other information and evidence that may assist in the forthcoming review) it is particularly keen to hear views on the following key questions.
 - How should the Northern Ireland planning system best facilitate sustainable renewable energy development in appropriate locations without compromising our natural and built environment, and other assets of acknowledged importance?

- How can strategic planning policy best assist with addressing potential amenity issues that may arise as a result of facilitating all types of renewable energy development (e.g. wind, solar, water (hydropower), geothermal energy, biomass)?

Next steps

8. The information gathered as a result of this Call for Evidence will be considered by DoE and will help inform the upcoming review of strategic planning policy for renewable energy.
9. Depending, in part, upon the evidence received, the scope of the review will be refined to focus on the key issues where further research should be undertaken. Any necessary revisions to strategic planning policy will follow the normal policy development process. This will entail preparation of a consultation draft policy proposal which would be subject to full public consultation.

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Annex A

Renewable Energy

- 6.214** Northern Ireland has significant renewable energy resources and a vibrant renewable energy industry that makes an important contribution towards achieving sustainable development, and is a significant provider of jobs and investment across the region.
- 6.215** Making appropriate use of renewable energy sources is supported by wider government policy, including the Regional Development Strategy 2035 (RDS) which emphasises the need to increase the contribution that renewable energy can make to overall energy mix. This commitment is affirmed by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's (DETI) strategic aim for a more secure and sustainable energy system, as contained within the Strategic Energy Framework for Northern Ireland 2010.
- 6.216** Renewable energy reduces our dependence on imported fossil fuels and brings diversity and security of supply to our energy infrastructure. It also helps Northern Ireland achieve its targets for reducing carbon emissions⁵⁰ and reduces environmental damage such as that caused by acid rain. Renewable energy technologies support the wider Northern Ireland economy and also offer new opportunities for additional investment and employment, as well as benefitting our health and well being, and our quality of life.
- 6.217** The main sources of renewable energy are wind, sun (solar energy), moving water (hydropower), heat extracted from the air, ground and water (including geothermal energy), and biomass (wood, biodegradable waste and energy crops such as for use in an Anaerobic Digester).
- 6.218** The aim of the SPSS in relation to renewable energy is to facilitate the siting of renewable energy generating facilities in appropriate locations within the built and natural environment in order to achieve Northern Ireland's renewable energy targets and to realise the benefits of renewable energy without compromising other environmental assets of acknowledged importance.

Regional Strategic Objectives

- 6.219** The regional strategic objectives for renewable energy are to:
- ensure that the environmental, landscape, visual and amenity impacts associated with or arising from renewable energy development are adequately addressed;
 - ensure adequate protection of the region's built, natural, and cultural heritage features; and

⁵⁰ The PfG contains a target for a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by at least 35% on 1990 levels by 2025.

- facilitate the integration of renewable energy technology into the design, siting and layout of new development and promote greater application of the principles of Passive Solar Design.

6.220 Renewable energy development proposals in the marine environment are managed under a separate consenting regime within the framework of the UK Marine Policy Statement. It is important for both terrestrial and marine environments to work together.

Regional Strategic Policy

6.221 Councils should set out policies and proposals in their Local Development Plans (LDPs) that support a diverse range of renewable energy development, including the integration of micro-generation and passive solar design. LDPs must take into account the above-mentioned aim and regional strategic objectives, local circumstances, and the wider environmental, economic and social benefits of renewable energy development. Moratoria on applications for renewable energy development whilst LDPs are being prepared or updated are not appropriate.

6.222 Particular care should be taken when considering the potential impact of all renewable proposals on the landscape. For example, some landscapes may be able to accommodate wind farms⁵¹ or solar farms more easily than others, on account of their topography, landform and ability to limit visibility.

6.223 A cautious approach for renewable energy development proposals will apply within designated landscapes which are of significant value, such as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and the Giant's Causeway and Causeway Coast World Heritage Site, and their wider settings. In such sensitive landscapes, it may be difficult to accommodate renewable energy proposals, including wind turbines, without detriment to the region's cultural and natural heritage assets.

6.224 Development that generates energy from renewable resources will be permitted where the proposal and any associated buildings and infrastructure, will not result in an unacceptable adverse impact on the following planning considerations:

- public safety, human health, or residential amenity;
- visual amenity and landscape character;
- biodiversity, nature conservation or built heritage interests;
- local natural resources, such as air quality, water quality or quantity; and,
- public access to the countryside.

6.225 The wider environmental, economic and social benefits of all proposals for renewable energy projects are material considerations that will be given appropriate weight in determining whether planning permission should be granted.

6.226 Active peatland is of particular importance to Northern Ireland for its biodiversity, water and carbon storage qualities. Any renewable energy development on active peatland will not be permitted unless there are imperative reasons of overriding

⁵¹ Defined as development comprising more than 2 turbines.

public interest as defined under The Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995 as amended.

- 6.227** For wind farm development a separation distance of 10 times rotor diameter to occupied property, with a minimum distance not less than 500m, will generally apply.

Implementation

- 6.228** In decision-taking, the planning authority must carefully consider all development proposals for renewable energy development, including proposals which include micro-generation, and passive building design measures. Consideration of all renewable energy proposals will take account of their contribution to the wider environmental benefits arising from a clean, secure energy supply; reductions in greenhouse gases and other polluting emissions; and contributions towards meeting Northern Ireland's target for use of renewable energy sources.
- 6.229** The factors to be considered on a case by case basis will depend on the scale of the development and its local context. In addition to those factors set out at paragraph 6.228 proposals will also be assessed in accordance with normal planning criteria, including such considerations as: access arrangements, road safety, good design, noise and shadow flicker; separation distance; cumulative impact; communications interference; and, the inter-relationship between these considerations.
- 6.230** It will not necessarily be the case that the extent of visual impact or visibility of wind farm development will give rise to negative effects; wind farm developments are by their nature highly visible yet this in itself should not preclude them as acceptable features in the landscape. The ability of the landscape to absorb development depends on careful siting, the skill of the designer, and the inherent characteristics of the landscape such as landform, ridges, hills, valleys, and vegetation.
- 6.231** Where any project is likely to result in unavoidable damage during its installation, operation or decommissioning, developers will be required to indicate how such damage will be minimised and mitigated, including details of any compensatory measures, such as a habitat management plan or the creation of a new habitat. These matters will be agreed before planning permission is granted.
- 6.232** Some proposals for renewable energy development may require a connection to the National Grid. The grant of planning permission does not guarantee grid connection. Connection to the grid falls within the remit of Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) and therefore liaison with NIE at an early stage of any renewable development but particularly a wind turbine / farm development is considered to be paramount in relation to the viability of such a scheme.
- 6.233** In relation to developments such as wind farms and solar farms, applicants will be required to provide details on future decommissioning, including proposals for site restoration. In such cases planning conditions (or a legal agreement where appropriate) should be used.

6.234 The supplementary planning guidance '*Wind Energy Development in Northern Ireland's Landscapes*' and other relevant practice notes should be