



Subject:	Dfl Review of Regional Strategic Planning Policy on Renewable and Low Carbon Energy – Public Consultation
Date:	20 th June 2023
Reporting Officer:	Dermot O’Kane, Principal Planning Officer
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Is this report restricted?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>

1.0	Purpose of Report or Summary of Main Issues
1.1	The Department for Infrastructure (Dfi) has published and is seeking comments on its draft revised policy document for strategic planning policy on renewable and low carbon energy development (see Appendix 1).
1.2	The Planning Committee is asked to agree the Council’s response at Appendix 2 .
2.0	Recommendation
2.1	The Committee is asked to consider and if appropriate agree the draft response to Dfi’s revised regional strategic planning policy on renewable and low carbon energy as set out at Appendix 2 .
3.0	Main Report
3.1	Background In March 2016 the Department issued a ‘Call for Evidence’ to help inform the scope of a proposed focused review of strategic planning policy for renewable energy. This was followed in December 2021 with the publication of an Issues Paper to gather the views of a range of key stakeholders to help inform the future policy direction. The Council submitted comments for input at both these stages. Dfi has now published a draft revised policy document which is currently out for public consultation.
3.2	The purpose of the review is to ensure that regional strategic planning policy on renewable and low carbon energy is fit for purpose and up-to-date to inform decision-making in relation to development proposals for this subject area. It is also intended to inform the Local Development Plan (LDP) process and enable plan-makers to bring forward appropriate local policy approaches all within the framework of regional strategic planning policy and the wider contemporary context for energy and climate change.
3.3	Planning Policy Context The provisions of the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) apply to the whole of Northern Ireland and they must be taken into account in the preparation of LDPs and are

	material to all decisions on individual planning applications and appeals by planning authorities.
3.4	The Belfast LDP Plan Strategy was adopted on 2 nd May 2023 and includes Policy ITU4 which specifically relates to renewable energy development. The Plan Strategy contains a broad range of operational policies that may be of relevance and require consideration when determining planning applications for renewable and low carbon energy development such as ENV1: Environmental quality; NH1: Protection of natural heritage resources; and LC1: Landscape.
	Wider Policy Context
3.5	The need for this review is understandable given recent developments in the wider policy context particularly in relation to energy and climate change issues as highlighted by Northern Ireland's Energy Strategy (December 2021) and the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. It is acknowledged that going forward the planning system will need to continue to play its part in supporting the delivery of the ambitious target set in the Climate Change Act which requires that the Department for the Economy must ensure that at least 80% of electricity consumption is from renewable sources by 2030.
3.6	Given this wider policy setting the consultation document has been circulated to other relevant sections in the council including the Climate Team to ensure that the response takes account of other relevant strategies and initiatives.
	Scope of the consultation
3.7	This consultation is seeking views as to whether the proposed revised policy will provide an appropriate regional strategic policy framework for plan-making and decision-taking for all forms of renewable energy and low carbon development. Comments are also sought on the appropriateness of a number of new policy provisions including the identification of areas where there would be a presumption in favour of renewable energy development and a presumption in favour of re-powering and extending the life of solar and wind farms.
	Key Issues
3.8	The Council welcomes this review and broadly agrees that the proposed revised policy can contribute, at least in part, to ensuring that the planning system supports efforts to achieve the target set in the Climate Change Act as well as other decarbonising objectives. We understand the rationale for a shift in emphasis from "facilitating" renewable energy development to "maximising" sustainable renewable and low carbon energy from a wide range of technologies at various scales but would maintain there is still a need for a cautious approach in order that environmental assets of acknowledged importance aren't compromised.
3.9	In response to the four consultation questions the Council raises a number of points including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some of the wording used is unnecessarily vague and could become subject to litigation in order to secure legal interpretation. Similarly some of the wording could be interpreted as giving greater priority to certain aims and objectives over other planning considerations; • The Council would query the proposed requirement for LDPs to identify the most appropriate areas for renewable energy development in which there would be a presumption in favour of such development will actually result in providing greater

	<p>certainty to planning authorities, communities and developers. The Council suggests that this approach may be feasible in other council areas but should not be mandatory and that the Council's current approach, as facilitated by our Plan Strategy, where the application of planning judgement with regard to the weight of material, planning-related considerations on a case-by-case basis is both balanced and appropriate; and</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any revision of this aspect of regional strategic planning policy should be accompanied by a review of the Regional Development Strategy (RDS). Using the RDS as a starting point would facilitate the delivery of a cohesive and coherent spatial approach to renewable and low carbon energy which considers the implications of the wider issues of regional infrastructure and projected growth whilst also enabling account to be taken of the contemporary legislative and policy context including the Climate Change Act 2022, the Energy Strategy – The Path to Net Zero Energy (DfE) and Shaping Our Electricity Future Roadmap (SONI).
3.10	<p>The Council's proposed response to the Department's Public Consultation is provided at Appendix 2. Members are asked to endorse this response.</p>
3.11	<p><u>Financial & Resource Implications</u> There are no resource implications associated with this report.</p>
3.12	<p><u>Equality implications or Good Relations implications / Rural needs assessment</u> None.</p>
4.0	<p>Appendices – Documents Attached</p>
	<p>Appendix 1: DfI Draft Revised Policy – Review of Regional Strategic Planning Policy on Renewable and Low Carbon Energy – <i>for Members' info only</i> Appendix 2: BCC draft response to DfI draft revised policy consultation document</p>