

Government Policy Statement on the Strategic Importance of Transmission and Other Energy Infrastructure



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Strategic and Economic Importance of Investment in Networks and Energy Infrastructure

Energy is the lifeblood of Ireland's economy and society. Electricity and gas demand for business and for households must be met safely and securely on a continuous basis 365 days a year. Our ability to attract and retain Foreign Direct Investment and sustain Irish enterprise depends on guaranteeing energy supply at competitive cost at all times. Our ability to rebuild the economy, deliver regional development, create jobs and growth and ensure the wellbeing of everyone as well as realising the economic potential of Ireland's own renewable energy resources requires significant energy infrastructure. And starting now, over the coming years, Ireland needs to deliver a world class electricity transmission system in all the regions which meets the needs of Ireland in the 21st Century.

The Network Investment Programmes by EirGrid, ESB Networks and Bord Gáis Éireann over recent years have given us energy networks which have met the test of severe weather episodes and record peak demands. Ireland's energy networks compare most favourably with other countries in terms of safety and resilience. Continuing the steady level of development and renewal of the networks is essential to ensure that Ireland's energy system is fit for purpose, safe and secure, and ready to meet increased demand as economic conditions improve. The Government has therefore reaffirmed its intention to retain the gas and electricity networks in State ownership as national strategic infrastructure to ensure that it is developed and maintained in the national interest. We have mandated the State owned Networks Companies to deliver the State's network investment programmes in the most cost efficient and timely way possible in the interests of all energy consumers who need the investment and who also pay for it.

The Government endorses the major investment underway in the high voltage electricity transmission system under EirGrid's Grid 25 Programme. Grid 25 is the most important investment in Ireland's transmission system for several generations and will position our energy system for decades to come. The Grid 25 projects, including GridWest in Mayo, the Meath-Tyrone transmission

line and GridLink in the South and East are vital developments for the regions and for the economy and society as a whole. The benefits include:

- securing future electricity supply for homes, businesses, farms, factories and communities
- Underpinning sustainable economic growth and new jobs in the regions
- Enabling Ireland to meet its renewable energy targets and reducing the country's dependence on imported gas and oil and reduce CO₂ emissions.

The Government in underlining the need and urgency for new energy infrastructure in the national interest and in the interests of individual consumers is equally conscious that public acceptability of such infrastructure is a major challenge. Social acceptance and understanding of the need for new infrastructure is critical.

Public acceptability requires public confidence that adheres to the highest international standards of safety, health and environmental and visual impact, and technology choice. The Government affirms that EirGrid and ESB Networks and Bord Gáis are obligated to adhere to all relevant guidelines and standards and they act in the national interest, and on behalf of all electricity consumers. The Government has confidence that the forward process from the national planning framework of the National Spatial Strategy, to Regional Planning Guidelines and local development planning and the Strategic Infrastructure Act provides the necessary framework for ensuring that all necessary standards are met and that extensive statutory and non statutory consultation are key to creating public confidence to this effect. The Government underlines the imperative for the State Companies, and all developers of energy projects, of early, transparent engagement and consultation with local communities and stakeholder and the appropriateness of building community gain consideration into project planning and budgeting and as an intrinsic part of the ongoing consultation with local communities and local authorities.



Public and Local Community Acceptance

While the case for proceeding urgently with energy infrastructure in line with overall economic social and energy policy goals is profoundly in the national interest, one of the key challenges the projects have to face is lack of community acceptability - even after all the regulatory processes have been gone through.

Many people are concerned about the impact that new transmission lines and other energy infrastructure can have on the landscape, the environment and on local communities. It is essential therefore that Grid 25 and other energy infrastructure is taken forward on the basis of the best available knowledge and informed engagement on the impacts and costs of different engineering solutions.

The Government fully expects that EirGrid and ESB Networks will always undertake and communicate, well informed objective and authoritative analysis, thoroughgoing impact assessment and pre-planning consultation in arriving at optimal routes, technology choice, design and costings. Using the best available advice and expertise the State Companies are required to address and mitigate, as necessary, human environmental and landscape impact in delivering the best possible engineering solutions for Ireland's small and still isolated electricity system. The Government also notes that EirGrid and ESB Networks are mandated to plan these developments in a safe efficient and economic manner in accordance with their licences from the Commission for Energy Regulation.

Adherence to National and International Standards in Designing and Constructing Energy Networks and Infrastructure

The Government does not seek to direct EirGrid and ESB Networks or other energy infrastructure developers to particular sites or routes or technologies. These are matters for the developers and for the forward planning process through regional and local development plans and at project level through the development management process. In this context, energy infrastructure developers are encouraged to work with the forward planning processes at regional and local level to set a clear context for assessment of individual applications for planning consent to facilitate as wide a degree of consensus as possible as to how (and where) to meet grid development needs.

The Government does expect the Companies in making their choices, of project specific technologies and routing as well as mitigation measures, to take account of all relevant national and international standards, to follow best practice and ensure value for money and be informed by detailed consultation at local level.

In addition to undertaking extensive statutory and non statutory public consultation, the State Companies and energy developers must adhere to national and international standards on health, environment, biodiversity, landscape and safety as an intrinsic part of the Planning process. Compliance together with appropriate impact mitigation measures are central to the Environmental Impact Assessments which form the basis of planning applications to An Bord Pleanála. This includes compliance with EMF exposure limits set in International Commission on Non-Ionising Radiation Protection Guidelines and associated EU Recommendations, and Environmental, Habitat and Biodiversity national and EU legislation. The Government in affirming the broad principle of adherence to all standards, underlines the importance of the statutory and non statutory consultation processes in ensuring public and stakeholder confidence that standards are met and where necessary mitigation measures are put in place.

Importance of Early Consultation and Engagement with Local Communities

The Government underlines the imperative for early and ongoing engagement and consultation with local communities and all stakeholders before entering planning. This is essential for building public confidence ensuring a more balanced public debate and a more timely delivery of projects. The consultation process as well as the planning and consent process needs to ensure timely sustainable and acceptable outcomes for all stakeholders. EirGrid, ESB Networks and BGE are fully committed to early and transparent consultation and engagement with local communities and stakeholders. As part of this engagement the companies will communicate the local and national socio-economic benefits from the investment and projects. The Government will keep under close review the effectiveness of the consultation processes at local level as well as the Strategic Infrastructure Act in delivering the necessary outcomes which balance the concerns of local communities with the economic, social and energy security benefits of other projects.



The Government considers that structured transparent consultation and information sharing will contribute positively to delivering appropriate mitigation measures including the scope for delivering landscape and visual benefits through reconfiguring or rationalising existing networks.

Building Community Gain Considerations into Energy Infrastructure Planning and Budgeting

The Government would like to see enhanced co-operation with local authorities on the potential for delivering landscape, biodiversity and civic amenity benefits as part of Grid 25 and other energy infrastructure development. Delivering long lasting benefits to communities is an important way of achieving public acceptability for infrastructure.



Grid 25 and other essential energy infrastructure will have positive impacts for all local communities in underpinning regional and economic development and jobs. While everyone ultimately benefits from national energy infrastructure, potential negative impacts resulting from concerns about visual amenity health and safety

need to be mitigated through the consultation process and where appropriate, community gain measures. The Government considers that greater focus needs to be given to co-operative work with local communities and local authorities on landscape, biodiversity and civic amenity benefits bringing long lasting benefits for communities. The Government therefore underlines the appropriateness for the State Companies and energy project developers to examine appropriate means of building community gain considerations into their project budgeting and planning. The Government is therefore fully supportive of a community gain approach in the delivery of energy infrastructure.

Conclusion

The Government reaffirms, in conclusion, the imperative need for development and renewal of our energy networks, in order to meet both economic and social policy goals. The planning process provides the necessary framework for ensuring that all necessary standards are met and that comprehensive statutory and non-statutory consultation is built into the process.

We acknowledge the need for social acceptance and the appropriateness of exploring ways of building community gain considerations into project planning and budgeting. Delivering long lasting benefits to communities is an important way of achieving public acceptability for infrastructure.

The State network companies are mandated to plan their developments in a safe efficient and economic manner. They are also required to address and mitigate human, environmental and landscape impacts, in delivering the best possible engineering solutions.

The major investment underway in the high voltage electricity transmission system under EirGrid's Grid 25 Programme is the most important such investment in Ireland's transmission system for several generations.

While the Government does not seek to direct infrastructure developers to particular sites or routes or technologies, the Government endorses, supports and promotes the strategic programmes of the energy infrastructure providers, particularly EirGrid's Grid 25 investment programme across the regions, and reaffirms that it is Government policy and in the national interest, not least in the current economic circumstances, that these investment programmes are delivered in the most cost efficient and timely way possible, on the basis of the best available knowledge and informed engagement on the impacts and the costs of different engineering solutions.

