



Consultation to Inform a Grid Development  
Policy for Offshore Wind in Ireland

Coastal Concern Alliance submission

July 2020

## INTRODUCTION

Coastal Concern Alliance (CCA) is an independent voluntary citizens' group set up in 2006 to campaign for the reform of the outdated and undemocratic Foreshore Act 1933, governing construction at sea and the introduction of marine spatial planning to ensure that development in our seas is sustainable, balances competing interests and conserves Ireland's unique marine wildlife, habitats and landscapes – key facets of our natural capital. We have no political or industry affiliations and are supportive of the development of marine renewable energy to help meet our climate and energy goals.

The impetus to set up our group came with the realisation that environmentally sensitive coastal waters close to Ireland's east coast were being leased to private developers for construction of some of the biggest offshore wind farms in the world under outdated legislation (Foreshore Act 1933) on the sole authority of the Minister for the Marine without the knowledge of the vast majority of Irish citizens. Sites were selected by developers on a "first come first served basis" with no marine planning and no environmental constraints.

Since 2006, CCA have clearly and consistently drawn attention, officially and on the record, to the very serious shortcomings in Ireland's foreshore consenting process and the manner in which large-scale development in our near shore zone has advanced contrary to Irish and EU legislation, and out of line with good international practice. Marine management processes in Ireland have involved, and continue to involve, breaches of key pieces of EU legislation e.g. Birds and Habitats Directives, Environmental Impact Assessment Directive, Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive, Marine Strategy Framework Directive, Public Participation Directive and Irish legislation e.g. Foreshore Act 1933(as amended).

The massive scale of developer-led offshore wind projects permitted and progressed in Ireland's sensitive near shore zone under legislation acknowledged to be unfit for purpose, is the defining feature of Ireland's coastal management regime. This legacy has not been openly acknowledged or addressed. On the contrary, despite promises of reform, it continues to shape future plans with the recent designation by government of "relevant projects" (largely legacy projects) to be fast-tracked under the discredited Foreshore Act 1933, in advance of imminent new foreshore legislation and marine planning.

As an independent citizen's group who have been seeking reform of foreshore governance for 15 years, Coastal Concern Alliance totally disagree with the proposed fast tracking of an Irish Grid Development Policy to facilitate the fast tracking of developer-led offshore wind farms, advanced on sensitive sites close to our coasts, under outdated legislation currently under reform. We call on the incoming Government to ensure that Ireland's grid development policy involves a proper and democratic consideration of environmental, economic and social factors and is based on the national interest rather than private profitability.

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## Consultation Questions.

### 1. Cost levels

To date, no independent cost-benefit analysis to assess total costs (associated infrastructure, grid development, back-up, decommissioning etc) has been published. It is therefore impossible to confidently assess costs and benefits. Plan-led grid development is most likely to facilitate economies of scale and co-ordinated planning. Research indicates that grid development costs can be substantially higher when the location decision is based on private profitability rather than a socially optimal location.

**Answer:** CCA recommend Option 4

### 2. Environmental Impact

Developers' plans for large scale, near shore wind farms off the East coast have been advanced under an outdated and undemocratic regulatory regime in breach of EU and national legislation. Site selection for these legacy projects (recently designated as "relevant projects") was entirely developer led. Sites were chosen by developers on what was described by the Marine Institute in 2007 as a "*first come first served*" basis with no environmental constraints.

Most of these vast projects are proposed for shallow near shore banks, the cheapest and easiest to develop. Shallow sandbanks are a priority habitat listed for protection under EU Habitats Directive Annex 1. The most recent EU Conservation Assessment Report 2019 concludes that (almost uniquely in Europe) Irish sandbanks still have a 'favourable conservation status'. However, the report goes on to say that while current status is favourable, the habitat is vulnerable to the potential impacts of wind energy infrastructure. Dredging, already required for the maintenance of the 7 small turbines on the Arklow Bank, is the second stated threat. In previous assessments, increased risk of coastal erosion has been flagged as a possible consequence of damage to the sandbanks.

With regard to environmental impact it is important to note that The **Marine Strategy Framework Directive** requires European member states to reach good environmental status in the Marine Environment by the year 2020 at the latest. The aim of the Directive is to protect Europe's waters by applying an ecosystem -based approach to the management of human activities. The **MSP Directive** also requires member states to apply an ecosystem-based approach to maritime spatial planning.

The problem now for the Irish government is to graft an ecosystem-based approach to grid development onto what has been an entirely developer-led approach to zone and site selection for offshore wind farms close to the coast in the Irish Sea. Environmental impacts (marine wildlife and habitats, coastal processes and landscapes) have not been properly considered under existing outdated and undemocratic legislation, acknowledged to be unfit for purpose and currently under reform. This problem is particularly acute as Minister Richard Bruton has, unaccountably, announced plans to fast track these legacy/relevant projects, close to Louth, Dublin, Wicklow, in advance of impending reform.

Developer-led "relevant projects" on sites selected without environmental constraint and associated grid development, pose a significant environmental threat to Ireland's east coast environment, a unique and precious resource. Given that lower cumulative environmental impact is expected to result from the coordination of onshore-offshore transmission works, it seems that a plan led approach would be most appropriate.

**Answer:** CCA recommend Option 4

### 3. Future Proofing and Technologies

Due to widespread concern about the environmental impacts (biodiversity, coastal processes, landscape/seascape etc.) of near shore wind farms, large scale near shore developments are generally no longer proposed in EU and USA markets. The future of fixed bottom offshore wind is acknowledged to be in large scale developments far from shore. The average distance from shore of offshore wind farms under construction in the EU in 2019 was 59km, compared to an average distance of 10/15 km for legacy projects/ relevant projects proposed for fast tracking off Ireland's east coast and in Galway Bay. Fixed bottom turbines can now be located in water depths up to 50-55m. Floating offshore wind is a fast maturing technology which could be particularly suited for Ireland with vast ocean resources far from shore off the west coast.

A state body is better equipped to anticipate the planning horizon, adapt to changing conditions and take a balanced long-term view, *in the public interest*. Progressing with the developer-led system that has dominated Irish marine planning can no longer be justified. CCA recommend a plan led approach.

**Answer:** CCA recommend Option 4

### 4. Required Infrastructure

As above at 3. Plan-led management of required infrastructure should be aimed at avoiding potential negative onshore and offshore impacts of these massive unprecedented developments. The responsibility for this must rest with State bodies, charged with acting *in the public interest*.

**Answer:** CCA recommend Option 4

### 5. Compatibility with Relevant Projects

The unacceptable manner in which these developer-led legacy projects have been designated as "relevant projects" and selected for fast-tracking by Government, in advance of long-awaited reforms currently underway, is a cause for deep concern. Given the speculation and inadequate regulation which underpins these projects, ([See CCA website](#)) it is clear that to maintain any semblance of proper democratic planning these "relevant projects" must not be a driver of grid development.

**Answer:** CCA recommend Option 4.

### 6. Social Acceptance

Due to the undemocratic manner in which these legacy projects/relevant projects have been advanced on the sole authority of the Minister for the Marine under outdated legislation with no statutory involvement of local authorities, no public tender and no right of appeal, there is no awareness of the economic, social and environmental impacts implications of these vast, near shore wind farms and hence no social acceptance.

Experience in EU countries and in USA shows that social acceptance of offshore wind is heavily dependent on size and scale of developments and distance from shore. In Ireland, lax regulation means that no minimum distance from shore was specified by the State and site selection for some of the biggest offshore wind farms in the world proceeded off Ireland's beautiful East coast, unhampered by environmental and landscape impact considerations.

All the large-scale legacy projects designated by Minister Bruton as “relevant projects” are well inside the de facto buffer zone, (usually around 22km +) adopted in other EU countries such as Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, and now in USA. In addition, the Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) of all these projects acknowledge that they will have major adverse visual impact on coastal landscapes and “protected views and prospects “of Ireland’s high amenity East coast, recognised as central to our tourism, heritage and quality of life. There appears to be an assumption that Irish people will accept large scale near shore developments increasingly ruled out in the very countries which are proposing to build these projects in our waters. (e.g. *in relation to Dublin Array, Adverse Visual Impacts were predicted from 16 of the 22 viewpoints from which impact was assessed in the developer’s EIA, including Adverse Major Visual Impacts from Bray Head, Killiney Hill, Vico Road and Howth Head*).

Allowing developers to pick out sites for large scale offshore wind development with no restriction on size, scale or proximity to shore was totally out of line with good international practice. Allowing such practice close to Ireland’s beautiful East coast was indefensible. The Strategic Environmental Assessment of the *National Marine Planning Framework (NMPF)* states ‘*The main issue associated with the implementation of the draft NMPF is the resulting potential for both direct and indirect impacts on landscape and seascape character, areas of outstanding natural beauty, protected views and similar designations.*’ (p95) The Irish Government must now try to remedy this situation by specifying minimum distance from shore, linked to size and scale of development, in line with good international practice.

Acceptance of grid development on land has proven problematic and can be expected to promote significant opposition at sea, particularly given the inappropriate manner in which massive near shore “legacy /relevant projects” have been progressed, and recently fast-tracked, in Irish waters.

**Answer:** CCA recommend Option 4.

## **7. Facilitating timely development of offshore wind capacity to achieve the 2030 target**

CCA draw attention to the following

The 2030 target

- Has been selected with no public debate, no cost-benefit analysis.
- Is based on developers’ plans for legacy projects advanced under a discredited legislative and regulatory system, on near-shore sites selected with no environmental constraints.
- Is out of line with good international siting practice. (Other EU countries have ruled out such vast near shore projects.)
- Was arbitrarily increased recently due to political pressure to accommodate formation of government.
- Has not been approved by the Irish public who are largely unaware of the giant developer-led, near-shore projects proposed for much loved coastlines and the major economic, social and environmental impacts involved.

With regard to the wider economic environment:

- Ireland is facing an unprecedented economic crisis due to Covid 19.
- Ireland contributes 0.04 % of global CO<sup>2</sup> emissions.
- A recent Irish times IPSOS poll revealed that only 8% of the population prioritise climate change in the current crisis.

Coastal Concern Alliance query the premise underlying this consultation question *i.e.* that the “timely development of offshore wind capacity to achieve the 2030 target”, is in the public interest.

On the contrary, at this crucial juncture in the Marine Spatial planning process, we urge caution in adopting a developer-led programme which will, on the developers’ own admission, have major adverse visual impact on the natural beauty of East coast and Galway Bay landscapes, and unknown impacts on biodiversity. The Irish coastline is an invaluable and irreplaceable resource. Given that there is no real imperative, other than political expediency, to develop 5GW of offshore wind by 2030, CCA strongly recommend that the current reform agenda is allowed to run its course. No offshore wind development in Ireland should be advanced until the NMPF is adopted, the required Seascape Landscape visual impact analysis carried out, a robust MPA network is identified to preserve and restore marine habitats, and a full cost benefit analysis is carried out.

CCA is in favour of responsibly sited offshore wind to help meet our climate and energy targets. However, given the absence of any proper environmental and economic assessment of the implications of the 5 GW target by 2030, CCA cannot deem the achievement of this target to be in Ireland’s interest. We trust that the new government will take on board the diverse issues raised above and centrally plan our offshore grid in the public interest.

**Answer:** CCA recommend Option 4.

## **8. Ranking of key drivers in order of Importance**

1. Environmental impact (Biodiversity & Landscape)
2. Social Acceptance
3. Cost levels
4. Future proofing of policies and technologies
5. Required infrastructure

## **9. How important is it for Ireland to develop indigenous offshore wind industry?**

Only a few European countries have espoused offshore wind to any great extent, notably UK and Germany, who together account for 80% of all offshore wind installations in the EU. These are followed by Denmark 8%, Belgium 7% and Netherlands 5%. In each of these countries, the ability to leverage existing marine expertise, industry and infrastructure (deep-water ports etc) and to protect marine jobs, was a key factor in the national decision to develop offshore wind. In these countries, the offshore wind industry is now sophisticated, well-developed and focusing on supplying export markets in other EU countries and indeed worldwide. Supply chains, operation and maintenance are also already well developed and, in most cases, tied to turbine manufacturers. There is no evidence

that Ireland will be able to compete in this market for anything other than the crumbs from the rich man's table.

What Ireland does have of course is shallow, near shore waters, close to population centres where sites have been allocated to developers on a first- come first- served basis without environmental constraint. Such sensitive near shore sites are now out of bounds for large-scale offshore wind development in the EU countries which will be supplying us with the lion's share of equipment. These near shore coastal areas are central to our biodiversity, hydrodynamics and landscape /seascape protection. There can be no justification for sacrificing such a precious and vulnerable resource to international utilities to meet the electricity demands of data centres or indeed the demands of export markets such as France or UK.

**Answer:** It appears that the only way Ireland can develop an indigenous industry is to **target emerging technologies such as floating offshore wind**, recognised as a future growth area because of the potential to site projects in deeper water away from sensitive near shore areas, hence lessening biodiversity and landscape impacts. This work is currently under way led by MaREI and Eirwind. With regard to offshore wind, we suggest a local content requirement should be a central element of the Irish tendering process.

## 11. Considerations to reduce cost to consumer

It is proposed to develop OWF in Ireland to reduce carbon emissions. When the total cost of manufacture, transport, installation, maintenance, back-up, grid development, decommissioning, etc are accounted for, what emissions savings will accrue? Is this the best way for Ireland to cut CO<sup>2</sup> emissions? A carbon-based cost benefit analysis is needed.

If the "relevant projects" proposed on near-shore sites are constructed, the cost to the Irish consumer would be immeasurable and would include environmental costs (degradation of habitats, risk to protected species, increased risk of coastal erosion etc.) lost opportunities to designate MPAs & Natura 2000 sites, heritage costs (unspoilt coastlines changed for ever) and social costs (tourism, recreation, visual) as well as unknown financial costs.

**Answer:** To reduce environmental costs which in the long run deplete our natural capital and hence amount to economic costs, Strategic Marine Activity Zones for offshore wind, as promised in the NMPF, should be introduced by Government, following constraints and resource analysis. Grid development could then be centrally planned to accommodate appropriate development in these zones in the most cost-effective way. Unfortunately, the Irish Government, unlike its EU counterparts, has sidestepped its responsibility to select Strategic Zones (subject to SEA) for offshore wind. Instead it has, in effect, handed over the crucial process of site selection to developers via the fast tracking of large scale "legacy projects" in advance of the new planning regime being put in place.

## 12. Developer compensation

Construction consent should only be given when Eirgrid and ESB are in a position to offer grid connection to appropriately assessed, suitable projects. The speculation and inadequate regulation that has characterised Irish OW development to date, where developers have 'flipped' leases before construction netting massive profits, must be halted.

**Answer:** No developer compensation arrangements should be provided for delayed delivery of offshore grid connections to renewable projects.

### **13. Further drivers for Grid Development Model**

In the Policy Context section of the consultation document, the **National Marine Planning Framework** and the **Climate Action Plan** are referenced. However, the unprecedented developer-led projects proposed in Ireland's sensitive, near-shore area, raise serious concerns about the failure to emphasise **Biodiversity** protection, a cornerstone of sustainable development, and to reference **Ireland's Biodiversity Action Plan 2017-2020** (NBAP). (Note references to Ireland's obligations to adopt an ecosystem approach under WFD and MSP directives outlined in 2 above).

The general heading 'Environmental Impact' is inadequate. All proposals for development must be considered with reference to the conservation of biodiversity, habitats and species. Ireland's NBAP aims to ensure *'That biodiversity and ecosystems in Ireland are conserved and restored, delivering benefits essential for all sectors of society and that Ireland contributes to efforts to halt the loss of biodiversity and the degradation of ecosystems in the EU and globally.'*

The **European Environment Agency** states *'Destruction and loss of biodiversity is as catastrophic as climate change..... The conservation status of more than 60% of species and habitats protected under the EU Habitats Directive is unfavourable. This has fundamental consequences for our society, economy and human health.'*

Sites for large scale offshore wind development, 10/15 km off Ireland's east coast, have been selected by developers on a "first come first served" basis. The danger these near shore legacy projects pose to our landscapes is obvious. Given the unique natural beauty of the Irish coastline, its central importance to our heritage, tourism, economy and quality of life, and the predictions in developers' Environmental Impact Statements of major adverse visual impact, it is clear that **Seascape/Landscape Impact** must be a key consideration in assessing a grid delivery model for offshore wind development in Ireland. The MSP Directive highlights the importance of proper assessment of land/sea interaction. The National policy context, in which decisions must be made, includes Ireland's National Planning Framework and National Landscape Strategy derived from European Landscape Convention.

**Answer:** Biodiversity Impact and Landscape Impact are particularly important drivers in an Irish context. They must be considered when assessing a grid delivery model.

### **14. Which grid delivery model is most appropriate for OWF in Irish context?**

Given the unique, unspoilt nature of Ireland's coastal environment, the most appropriate grid delivery model for this country is one which focuses on site selection, protects marine biodiversity, avoids seafloor degradation, maximises distance from shore, ensures appropriate size and scale of development and avoids landscape / seascape impacts.

**Answer:** Model 4 is most appropriate as an enduring grid delivery model for offshore wind in an Irish context.



## **15 What should transition look like?**

Coastal Concern Alliance do not accept the statement that *“a transition towards the chosen enduring grid delivery model will be required to leverage the development of Relevant Projects in the short term”*.

CCA is an independent voluntary citizens’ group, who have been seeking reform of marine planning for 15 years. We wish to state on the public record that we totally disagree with the drafting of Irish Grid Development Policy to facilitate the fast tracking of developer-led, near shore wind farms, (recently dubbed “Relevant Projects”), advanced with no environmental constraint, in breach of Irish and EU legislation under undemocratic Foreshore Act 1933, long acknowledged to be unfit for purpose and currently under reform.

ENDS