



29/09/2023

To: kenny.mcpartland@uregni.gov.uk, jody.oboyle@uregni.gov.uk,
leo.strawbridge@economy-ni.gov.uk

Dear Leo, Jody and Kenny,

Re.: A review of the Connections Policy Framework in Northern Ireland – Call for Evidence

Community energy in Northern Ireland was spearheaded by Drumlin Wind Energy Co-operative, with six 250kW wind turbines (total capacity 1.5MW) situated across the region and Northern Ireland Community Energy (NICE) with 18 solar panels installations, ranging from 4kW to 15kW, on buildings occupied by charities and social enterprises throughout Northern Ireland. More information on the organisations is available on www.drumlin.coop and www.nicomunityenergy.org.

Given our unique point of view and interest in growing community energy initiatives in Northern Ireland, we have constituted a joint-committee between our two co-operatives with the task to affect current energy policies in the region.

Therefore, based on our experience, this response to your 'Review of the Connection Policy Framework' draws attention to the support that community energy initiatives would need to enable further growth of these type of initiatives in the future.

With this in mind, we would like to highlight that, in order to enable more community energy initiative, the DfE and the Utility Regulator should include and consider that:

- Any review of the policy framework must make explicit reference to 'community energy initiatives' such as co-operatives and community owned projects and recognise

them alongside other individual prosumers initiatives. We refer you to this EU report [TH_AL_22_007_EN_N_Energy_Prosumers_in_Europe.pdf](#) .

- Although we recognise the need to balance the various stakeholders needs, we believe that there are tangible benefits in enabling community energy initiatives and their possible microgrids to the current energy system. Community energy initiatives creates additional reliability, resilience and economic independence in the current energy system. For an overview of this benefits, you can access this American study here [Microgrids: State Policies to Bolster Energy Resilience \(ncsl.org\)](#) .
- In particular, offering financial incentives would encourage the development of collective and community based initiatives. For, instance the review could consider 'discounted connection charges' or connection charges should be designed to reflect the actual costs of connecting to the grid. These charges can include fixed charges, capacity charges, and usage charges designed for community energy initiatives and justify them in the context of added social value.
- The review also needs to consider that community energy initiatives would benefit from a quicker and more streamline assessment of their feasibility when discussing 'connections'. Please consider that those initiatives are often led by volunteers and with limited resources. The policy should include the possibility of facilitated and more direct engagement between the community energy initiatives and the appropriate authorities/depts. With a dedicated support to community energy initiatives, the knowledge available within the DfE and the Regulator should be easily accessed and may result in appropriate project changes, saving time and resources to all parties.
- The review needs to consider a level of flexibility and adaptability of grid operations to accommodate the unique characteristics of microgrids developed in community-led projects. It is therefore crucial to engage with community energy initiatives at early stages and support them with a cost-benefit analysis if the connection to the grid is economically viable for this type of prosumers.

In addition to the above points, we would like to address some of your questions in more detail.

Q1 Microgrids have the capacity to establish relationships between people and the source and use of their electricity. Availability of microgrid connections would increase the feasibility of Community Energy projects through providing a direct route to a local market and the full range of community benefits would follow their establishment.

NI's first Community Energy Co-op, Drumlin Wind Energy Co-op, has proven the value of local initiatives in six regions of the province. The visibility of the energy source, the financial rewards to stakeholders and the educational aspects all contribute to awareness and growing

the acceptability of energy from renewables. It is widely recognised that changing public perceptions and behaviour will play a major role in lowering electricity demand and changing patterns of power use to allow the net zero target to be reached.

Q2 The Utility Regulator needs to focus more on the long term and sustainability aspects of its remit for the benefit of the entire NI society since the climate crisis presents a major and increasing threat to life as we know it on the planet. A primary focus on keeping power prices low can exacerbate the problem- avoiding fuel poverty needs to be tackled in different ways involving interdepartmental action and policy change.

Q7 Lowering connection charges (by making connection boundaries more shallow) and providing connection quotes quickly (even before planning is granted) followed, where required, by timely connection implementation are all significant tools in promoting renewable generation installations. At present, communities struggle to find viable initiatives as issues like these are so significant in determining feasibility, particularly in the absence of government support for renewable projects. Community projects and the many associated benefits, including keeping profits local, will play a part in helping to meet renewable targets if they receive the necessary encouragement from UR and DfE.

We hope that the above points and the evidence presented will contribute to your review of the connections policy framework. If you want to discuss further, please do not hesitate to contact Karen Arbuckle, Chair of NICE, Anne Ford, Chair of Drumlin or directly me, Tiziana O'Hara as the convenor of the Joint-Committee at tiziana@coopalternatives.coop .

Yours sincerely,

Tiziana O'Hara

Convenor of the Joint- Committee