

NIRIG response to Consultation on Review of the Northern Ireland Local Government Code of Conduct for Councillors

28 February 2017

The Northern Ireland Renewables Industry Group (NIRIG) represents the views of the renewable electricity industry in Northern Ireland, providing a conduit for knowledge exchange, policy development, support and consensus on best practice between all stakeholders. Committed to making a positive difference, we promote responsible development, support good community engagement and deliver low-cost electricity generation from sources such as onshore wind, tidal, solar and storage using our greatest natural resources.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation. NIRIG fully supports open engagement between councillors and applicants for planning permission. This will ensure that councillors have the opportunity to be fully informed of the factual content of any development proposal.

We note that in certain circumstances Councillors have avoided meeting with our members during project application stage, due to a misplaced fear of breaching the Code: there appears to be a fear that such meetings could be misconstrued as compromising their position on making a decision on an application. However, by refusing to meet with developers Councillors lose the opportunity to become fully informed about potentially significant projects in their area. We believe that this could lead to sub-optimal decision-making.

Based on our members' experience, we note that:

- Members of planning committees have been actively discouraged from speaking with developers
- At least one Head of Planning is of the opinion that there should be no developer meetings held with Councillors on the Planning Committee
- Some Councillors take the position that they can take a meeting, but only to listen: neither themselves speak nor ask questions, even for points of clarification

- In other circumstances a Councillor has stated that if they meet with a developer about a project then they must recuse themselves from the decision process

These examples clearly illustrate the diverse attitude towards engagement on planning applications. To a significant extent, these approaches will reduce the ability of decision-makers to be fully informed about projects in their area.

We point out that in the '*Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015*¹ in Ireland communications with a Designated Public Official about a planning application that adhere to the local authority's established development policy/development plan would not be considered lobbying and therefore do not have to be entered into the lobbying register.

NIRIG believes that meetings to discuss factual content should be positively encouraged in order to develop a real dialogue and better understanding of such complex projects as renewable energy developments. We would encourage the use of supportive language which promotes this principle within the Code.

Meabh Cormacain

NIRIG

¹ <https://www.lobbying.ie/help-resources/information-for-lobbyists/quick-guide-to-the-act/>