

Calls for clarity on Council's wind energy policy

CALLS for clarity on the wind energy policy of Waterford City & County Council were made at the September meeting of the Comeragh District last week.

Fianna Fáil Councillor Mary Butler raised the issue, inquiring about the Council's current policy on the issue.

"I'm very conscious that I can't discuss any individual case, but at the moment there seems to be a glut of planning applications for wind turbines," she said.

Cllr Butler spoke of the difficulties experienced by those living near existing turbines in the county.

"Wind energy sounds very good, but not when it is affecting people's lives. People have reported sleep deprivation, constant noise, and not being able to leave a window open at night because of the noise. On top of that, there is also the visual impact."

She continued: "In Portlaw, we are one of the only model villages in the south of Ireland and we are hoping to apply for heritage status in the next couple of months. Certainly, any wind turbines would not help this application."

Cllr Butler also raised concerns over the suitability of roads in areas where wind turbines are being proposed given that machinery will need to access particular sites.

"In some cases, the roads are little more than bohreens," she said.

Fianna Fail colleague Cllr John O'Leary supported Cllr Butler's stance. "Deep frustration is driving people out in opposition to wind turbines," he said.

He queried the need for wind turbines given the recent decline in industrial activity in Waterford.

"There's nothing nice about them. They don't do anything for the community," he said.

"I can remember a time when we had massive industry in this county and there was no question at that time about a shortage of electricity. I think it's become a 'fad' and an investment for people who want to make money on the back of rural people," he said.

Cllr Seanie Power (Fine Gael) concurred with his fellow Councillors and further highlighted the stress endured by people because of wind turbines, stating that companies seeking to erect wind turbines were simply out to make a profit.

"I don't think people are going to stand for it," he said.

Cllr Declan Clune (Sinn Féin) said that while he was conscious of the renewable energy targets set out by the EU, the human and health costs associated with wind turbines could not be ignored.

He asked if there were other options which could be explored apart from submissions in order to allow the public to further engage with the issue.

Fine Gael Cllr Liam Brazil also said he would like to see more engagement from the public facilitated and raised concerns over the proximity of wind turbines to homes.

"Nobody wants wind turbines beside their house and 500 metres is a very short distance to have them from the house," he said.

Comeragh District Cathaoirleach Michael J O'Ryan (Fianna Fáil) concurred with his fellow Councillors.

"I think something has to be done nationally as this is creating an outcry almost weekly," he said.

He agreed with Cllr Clune that new strategies could be looked at in order to help people engage further.

Director of Services (Planning & Environment) Brian White said the Council had a wind energy policy and map available to view on the Council's website.

"In terms of what the council's policies are, they are published and they are available to examine," he said.

Mr White said the policies provided for the categorisation of different areas of the county, including the most suitable areas for wind energy projects.

"We have to be consistent with national wind energy strategies," he explained.

"Even though we are aware that the national strategy is under review at the moment, and new guidelines are promised, we still have to deal with any application that's made in the interim."

He added: "Although some Councillors have asked for decisions to be deferred until the new guidelines are in place, there is no mechanism to do that under the Planning Acts."

Mr White explained that there were currently two live wind projects in County Waterford, and one at pre-planning stage.

"Our next review of our policy will take place immediately after the national guidelines are published," he said.