**Introduction**

In 2014, Natural Power was instructed to undertake an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) as part of an application to vary an already consented but not constructed wind farm. The site in question had a long history having previously been over ten years in planning. By the time the application was approved, many of the principles under which the project was originally designed had been superseded by an improved understanding of wind farm construction and operation, and more up to date legislation and working practices. In short, much of the consented project (with the exception of the turbines) was no longer fit for purpose and as such, a redesign of the ancillary elements of the project; track layout, borrow pits, substation and grid connection was undertaken with a view to bringing these up to a level which was consistent with current good practice.

A further challenge was presented by the client's grid connection commitments meaning that the variations had to be consented within a set timeframe. This, in turn, brought into focus the Scope of the Environmental Impact Assessment work required and the process for achieving consent. Scoping therefore became the cornerstone against which the project would either stand or fall.

**Scoping**

By comparison with the more generic approach to scoping which has perhaps become commonplace in wind farm development and has in turn given rise to a standardised checklist response from many consultees, the scoping process for this project became much more focussed. More information was provided up front to enable the decision makers and consultees to gain more comfort from the process than might otherwise have been the case. Central to this was a series of pre-scoping meetings which were held with the planning authority and key consultees.

Information was presented at these meetings to enable each organisation to understand the issues which were being considered, the reasons why they were being considered and how the information relating to the evaluation of these was going to be presented. More importantly however, in terms of agreeing the scope of the eventual EIA, information was presented on those matters which were being scoped out. By gaining a much greater level of acceptance at the pre-scoping stage, all of the consultees were able to confirm the scoping approach within the regulation timescale after the scoping report was submitted. Not only that, but when the application itself was submitted less than 10 weeks later, it too was determined within normal statutory timelines.

**Lessons**

Although this was a variation of an existing consent which had already been subject to an EIA, making the reduced scope more likely, it did bring into question how much of the time spent assessing wind farm applications and preparing ES's is actually necessary in EIA terms.

The trigger for EIA under Schedule 2 of the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2011 is a wind turbine with a hub height in exceedance of 15 m. Thus, whilst the turbines themselves will generally require EIA level assessment of the issues which arise from being over 15 m high, especially where they are over 100 m to tip, much of the ancillary development or enabling works associated with wind farm development does not appear in Schedule 1 or 2. These latter aspects of the development are considered in the EIA either due to their association with an EIA project or because of planning policy.
What this example illustrated was that when the turbines themselves are taken out of the equation, how little of the actual development was considered likely to give rise to significant effects, how little actually required substantial assessment in EIA terms and how much of the assessment process has become a habitual tick box response to addressing planning policy requirements rather than focussing on the proper and necessary assessment of potentially significant effects under the EIA regulations.

Conclusion

Going forward, as we move into the next phase of wind farm development under a levelised cost of energy where costs will be at a premium, but also where the use and reuse of sites where the principle of wind farm development has already been established, the need to review the extent to which wind farm development should be routinely subject to full level EIA across all of their component parts needs to be queried. The potential impacts of elements which under other consenting regimes might be exempt from planning consent let alone EIA, especially need to be reviewed. Thereafter and based on 20 years’ experience of assessing and consenting wind farms, the extent to which even those elements which are perceived as having potentially significant impacts also requires a re-evaluation such that the process is specifically focused on the key determining issues and not lost amongst the largely unnecessary over evaluation of minor and non-significant considerations.

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