



Irish Rural Link
Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann

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Report

An independent evaluation of the current community understanding of the proposed construction of a sub-station at Coolnabacky, Co. Laois as part of the Laois Kilkenny Electricity Transmission Project.

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1.0 Introduction

Irish Rural Link (IRL) were contracted by Electricity Supply Board (ESB) Networks in October 2019 to carry out an independent evaluation of the current community understanding of the proposed construction of a sub-station at Coolnabacky, Co. Laois as part of the Laois Kilkenny Electricity Transmission Project.

IRL is a non-profit organisation which directly represents over 600 community groups with a combined membership of 25,000. Recognised as experienced independent experts in community engagement and facilitation, it's national network comprises of organisations and individuals campaigning for sustainable rural development in Ireland and across Europe.

The main objectives of this evaluation are to;

- Analyse the views of community
- Chart the process of participation to date
- Assess the level of support or otherwise from the community for the project
- Examine areas, or potential areas, of common agreement between communities and provider
- Analyse and assess possible solutions
- Determine the willingness of the Ratheniska/Timahoe/Spink (RTS) Action Group to engage in further dialogue.

In presenting IRL's findings and recommendations it is necessary to state that it was unnecessary for the purposes of this independent evaluation to carry out an in-depth analysis of the history of this case as it has been well documented and all relevant observations, reports, objections, supporting statements pertaining to the planning and subsequent actions and engagements are on public record.

2.0 The Proposed Project:

Since 2006 EirGrid has operated and developed the national high voltage electricity grid in Ireland. EirGrid is a state-owned company and is independent from ESB. EirGrid are proposing to reinforce the network in the general Laois-Kilkenny region.

This project was a direct application to An Bord Pleanála for approval under Section 182A of the Planning and Development Act, 2000, as amended by the Planning and Development (Strategic Infrastructure) Act, 2006, the Environment (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2011 and the European Communities (Public Participation) Regulations, 2010. The proposed development consists of the construction of a new 400kV/110kV GIS (Gas Insulated Switchgear) substation in the townland of Coolnabacky, County Laois, approximately 5 kilometres southwest of Stradbally; the breaking of the existing Moneypoint – Dunstown 400kV line and its diversion by 1.4 kilometres in a south-easterly direction into and out of the new proposed substation at Coolnabacky; the making of a new connection this proposed substation from the existing Athy Portlaoise 110kV line; the construction of a new 110kV/38kV/MV (medium voltage) substation beside the position of the existing 38kV substation in Ballyragget, County Kilkenny, which would then be dismantled; a new 110kV overhead line over a distance of 26 kilometres between Ballyragget and Coolnabacky; an upgrade of the existing Ballyragget -Kilkenny overhead line over a distance of 22 kilometres with increased pylon heights and two additional earth lines; a new bay in the existing Kilkenny 110kV station; modifications to the existing Athy -Portlaoise 110kV line.

2.1 Location:

The site extends from the townlands of Money Lower and Loughteeog in County Laois, approximately 7.5 kilometres southeast of the centre of Portlaoise, generally in a southerly direction, but with many changes in alignment, to the townland of Scart in County Kilkenny, approximately 5.5 kilometres east-southeast of the centre of Kilkenny city. In addition, the site includes a field of 6.7 hectares in the townland of Coolnabacky in County Laois to accommodate a new 400kV/110kV substation and a field of about 1.5 hectares in the townland of Moatpark in County Kilkenny, about 1 kilometre north of the village of Ballyragget and 17 kilometres north of the centre of Kilkenny city.

The townland of Coolnabacky is mainly flat/level land comprising of large fields and one off housing as you would expect in any rural agricultural area.

2.2 Need for the Project:

EirGrid have identified problems that affect quality and security of electricity supply in Kilkenny, Carlow, Kildare and Laois. Existing increases in demand for electricity have caused these problems. They are of the opinion that projected growth in demand will further worsen the situation.

To resolve these issues, EirGrid proposed the Laois-Kilkenny reinforcement scheme as a solution. They state that the Laois-Kilkenny reinforcement scheme will address the concerns on the network in the local area. In particular, it ensures that the system can comply with the grid's technical standards.

2.3 Planning Decision:

A planning application was lodged in January 2013 to An Bord Pleanála under the Planning and Development (Strategic Infrastructure) Act 2006. Planning consent was granted in April 2014 following oral hearings.

There was a High Court judicial review in November 2014 which was dismissed in January 2015.

A detailed an Bord Pleanála Inspector's Report is available on public record reference number RVA0015.

2.4 Current Position:

There is considerable local opposition to the construction of the substation at Coolnabacky with a group known, Ratheniska/Timahoe/Spink (RTS) Action Group holding a protest at the entrance to the site every morning. IRL as part of this evaluation engaged with all relevant stakeholders to establish the level of opposition in the broader community to this project and to determine if there is a pathway for negotiations and dialogue to bring about a resolution to this current impasse.

3.0 Methodology:

The objective of this evaluation informed the most appropriate methodology to analyse findings with the use of qualitative analysis as opposed to quantitative analysis.

A mixture of questionnaires and one to one interviews were chosen for the purpose of this evaluation to ascertain the required information. Questionnaires were distributed to local organisations, politicians, and the Public Participation Network for Co. Laois (PPN) to establish the level of awareness and support/opposition for the project and to seek the public's views and recommendations. The questionnaire was used solely for IRL's information to gauge the level of interest and awareness of the issues in the broader community and not to quantify the level of support or opposition to the project.

Unstructured interviews were held with individual National and Local Public Representatives, civic leaders, EirGrid, ESB, landowners in the immediate vicinity of the substation and the RTS Action Group. All those interviewed were assured that their comments and suggestions will remain anonymous, with IRL providing a broad overview of findings in general.

A meeting with the RTS committee was held to determine their willingness to engage in further dialogue with EirGrid/ESB.

4.0 Findings and Observations:

IRL acknowledge the welcome which was received across the community with full participation by all those invited to engage in dialogue. We observed differing levels of understanding and support for the project with residents from the Ratheniska area well informed, researched and strong in their opposition of the project while residents from the Timahoe and Spink areas were less concerned or opposed to the project.

There is genuine regret throughout the area that there is a divide in the community as a result of this project with great empathy for all those directly involved on both sides of the divide.

There is general acknowledgement that this project is regarded to be of national importance and as such is classified as Strategic Infrastructure but some members of the community are not convinced of its need or location and have raised the following issues:

- 1) **Aquifer:** Notwithstanding the findings of the An Bord Pleanála inspector where he concluded that “the substation at Coolnabacky can be constructed without undue risk to local groundwater sources and that the development could be carried out and operated satisfactorily from an ecological standpoint”, there is still significant concern in the community that the proposed substation is a potential risk to the aquifer which supplies water to thousands of homes.

- 2) **Purpose of Project:** There is a strongly held belief that the community were misinformed at the outset as to the purpose of this project, which has resulted in a breakdown in trust. Opponents of the project contend that this project is required to supply electricity on a greater scale than the counties stated in the planning application and in addition to this there is anxiety in the community that this project will provide the necessary infrastructure to facilitate large scale wind development in the area. There was also a belief that alternative sites should have been considered.

- 3) **Visual Impact:** Concern was expressed that there will be a spider web of overhead lines and pylons in the area which would negatively impact on the local environment

- 4) **Hexaflouride Gas (SF6) and Oil Filled Cables:** There are concerns around the use of oil filled cables and SF6 gas. These concerns have been exacerbated in recent months in light of the findings of RTE Primetime Investigates report.
- 5) **Planning Process:** There are strongly held views that the Planning and Development (Strategic Infrastructure) Act 2006 is unfairly biased in favour of the Planning Applicant and puts communities at a distinct disadvantage from the outset. In future IRL would like to see resources made available to the community to allow them put forward their case.
- 6) **Community Engagement:** There is huge discontent in the community with the level of transparency throughout the process. There is evidence on the ENTSO-E Transmission System Map Ref: 465, that the Coolnabacky site was chosen for development of this substation in July 2009 prior to any discussions or engagement in the community. Community Participation is the preferred option where “real” dialogue and negotiations would be entered into prior to site selection or planning proposals. It is acknowledged that the ESB had distributed explanatory leaflets last year in the greater Ratheniska, Timahoe, Spink and Portlaoise area addressing some of the concerns which had been raised by the general public. There is disagreement amongst the community as to the value of this communication and many felt that the information was inconsistent and does not bring clarity to the issues raised.
- 7) **Community Fund:** There were a number of questions around the community fund as to when it will be made available to the community and as to how it will be distributed.
- 8) **Trust:** There is a significant lack of trust in the broader community with EirGrid and the ESB. This appears to have arisen as a result of a breach of planning regulations by the ESB. It really is difficult to see how this trust can be rebuilt.
- 9) **Future Dialogue:** EirGrid and ESB would like a pathway to dialogue and negotiations, but it was articulated very clearly to IRL by the RTS Action Group, who are currently blocking access to the site at Coolnabacky, that they are not

interested in further or future dialogue unless it is with the CEO of EirGrid to discuss the “withdrawal” of this project.

5.0 Recommendations:

- 1) **Aquifer:** An Independent Hydrologist should be engaged by ESB to carry out a thorough investigation of the site to ensure that there is no threat to the water supply of the area.
- 2) **Communications:** An updated information leaflet, in plain English, should be drafted to address all of the concerns which have been raised by the community. This leaflet should contain an accurate visual to show the impact of this substation, overhead wires and pylons on the landscape.
- 3) **Wind Developments:** Given the history over the provision of wind energy in the Midlands, precise clarification is required to address the question of possible future large scale wind energy developments.
- 4) **Community Forum:** IRL suggest that a voluntary community forum is established comprising of local residents, community activists, political representatives to consider proposals for the disbursement of future community gain funding and to develop local area plans. There are very good case studies available and IRL are willing to advise and assist the community in this regard should they require us to do so.
- 5) IRL strongly recommend that all parties remain open to further dialogue on this project.

5.0 Appendices:

Questionnaire Attached.

