



Explanatory Note

To be read in conjunction with the SONI Connections Policy

To date, applicants seeking to connect to the Transmission System have had to meet three pre-requisites before an application is deemed valid and the transmission connection offer process begins. These pre-requisites are to have:

- Obtained planning permission or other relevant consent¹ for the project from the relevant authority;
- Completed the relevant application form for the project and provided all information necessary in order to enable SONI to undertake the necessary system studies; and
- Paid the relevant connection application fee.

Currently, an applicant must meet all three pre-requisites in order for an application for a connection to the transmission system to be deemed valid. SONI will only start to work on the connection offer after the application has been deemed valid. These arrangements have been effective in delivering connections over the last period and have been widely supported by industry.

The electricity network in Northern Ireland has become increasingly congested in recent years. At present, the level of committed and connected renewable generation indicates that the Government target of 40% electricity consumption from renewable sources is expected to be met by 2020. Connecting renewable capacity beyond the 40% target (i.e. beyond the current level of connected/committed renewable capacity and existing/planned network capability) will require further substantive network investment.

Background

The current process has enabled SONI to successfully connect a range of projects to the Transmission System over the last number of years. Not all system operators use planning permission as a milestone, in these cases a number of issues have emerged, including:

- Significant amounts of capacity being allocated, through the connection offer process, to projects without planning permission and which are unlikely to materialise; and
- Development of a queue of applicants that wish to connect but cannot due to their queue position relative to projects ahead of them that may or may not materialise and/or may be triggering a need for system reinforcements.

¹ For offshore projects either an Exclusivity Agreement or an Agreement for Lease from The Crown Estate is deemed the relevant consent, rather than planning permission. Similarly, for compressed air energy storage projects a Mineral Prospecting Licence is deemed the relevant consent, rather than planning permission. Reference the October 2014 Decision Paper on consenting requirements, for more information (available [here](#)).

The Utility Regulator Request Regarding Removal of Planning Permission

In its consultation paper on the 'Proposed Licence Modifications to SONI TSO Licence regarding the electricity connection review'², the Utility Regulator stated its view that SONI should not use planning permission as a condition precedent for transmission connection applicants, nor should SONI refuse to accept connection applications on this basis. It should be noted that this did not form part of the consultation.

SONI has given careful consideration to the Utility Regulator's position, as the current process has been successful in ensuring the connection of viable generators, facilitating competition and in preventing capacity hoarding. It has also had broad industry support. However, we also recognise that changing the connection offer process may provide a range of benefits to developers.

SONI Decision

SONI has decided to amend the connection application process to allow connection applications prior to planning permission consents being obtained. However, planning permission will be a key milestone within the transmission connection offer process. This will provide the following advantages to potential connectees to the Transmission System:

- It allows an applicant to apply for a connection prior to receiving planning permission, helping to facilitate competition in the market, particularly where this would allow generators to participate in the T-4 Capacity Market Auctions (where they might otherwise be excluded due to the timing of a connection application);
- It helps to ensure the development of viable projects connecting to the Transmission System because using planning permission as a milestone enables projects that have a greater chance of deliverability to connect to the system (e.g. helps to eliminate the risk of offers being made to projects without planning permission, and which may never materialise); and
- For projects where planning permission is imminent, it enables an applicant to enter the SONI transmission connections offer process earlier which may provide a number of advantages to the connecting party.

SONI is modifying the processes to allow a transmission connection application without planning permission or other relevant consent being in place at the time of the application. This change is effective from 1st February 2018 at 9:00am. However, planning permission will continue to be an important and early milestone within the transmission connections offer process.

Please refer to the SONI Connections Policy for details on how this process will work.

² <https://www.uregni.gov.uk/sites/uregni/files/media-files/Electricity%20Connections%20SONI%20Lic%20Mod%20Consultation%20FINAL.docx.pdf>