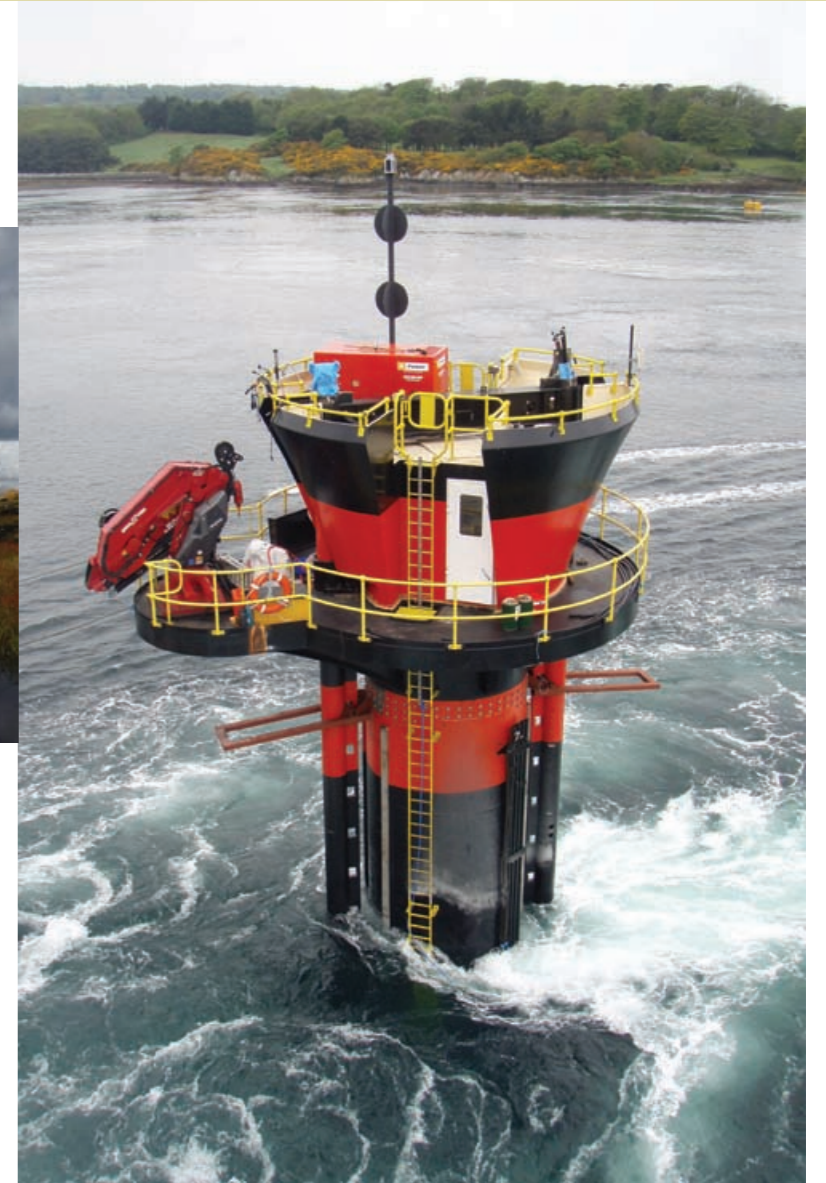


# ESBIE Eyes Up The Challenge Of An All-Islands Marketplace

ESBIE is an organisation which has shown in the past that it's not afraid of challenges. The first company from outside of Northern Ireland to enter the marketplace here when NIE's monopoly was broken down, ESBIE is now turning its sights towards the potentially huge UK electricity market.



"It's a relatively small marketplace but it is a very competitive one, and I think there's no doubt that it will get even more competitive. The acquisition of the Irish-based Airtricity by SSE (Scottish & Southern Energy) will mean even more activity in the marketplace, and the new group will be in direct competition with ourselves and Energia."

"We already have a firm foothold in the UK marketplace, and we have clear plans to accelerate our presence and to compete with the so-called Big 6 companies operating across the Irish Sea," says ESBIE's Operations & Marketing Manager, Susan Kinane.

Responsible for the group's operations throughout the region, Susan Kinane is an experienced utilities executive, having worked throughout the organisation in IT, billing systems and overseas on consultancy projects with ESB International before returning to Dublin to take up her current management role.

"My role is a wide ranging one," she says, "ranging from operations management through to customer service, billing and credit management, and it also includes energy efficiency programmes as well as marketing."

She has seen the Irish electricity marketplace change almost beyond recognition during her time in the utilities sector.

"The most significant change by far, at least from the customer perspective, has

been the advent of the Single Electricity Marketplace which has delivered a much wider choice of suppliers for most consumers in the business community."

But, while supplier choice is on the increase, electricity prices remain unpredictable at best.

"We've been through a period of real volatility in price terms. During the summer and autumn, there were significant rises in the cost of gas and oil, with a knock on effect on electricity price levels," says Susan, and her analysis of the short-term future isn't optimistic.

"I think we're in a temporary period of stability, but the view is that it is temporary. Further down the line, there is little doubt that we will see further increases in the future which will impact on customers."

ESBIE has stepped up its efforts on the sustainability front, and works closely with its customers to get across a clear message.

"We have a lot of experience in this whole area," adds Susan. "Sustainability and good management of electricity usage isn't just

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about helping to improve our environment. It's also about keeping costs down, and that's an important message for businesses.

"We are able to assist our customers in a variety of different ways. We will look at their specific requirements, at their processes, at how they can reduce emissions and how they can make bottom line savings. This is an added value service that a growing number of customers are making full use of."

With increasing numbers of customers switching from one electricity supplier to another, ESBIE provides interval meters, which allow end users to fully monitor their consumption levels.

"The data means that they can quickly make alterations or adjustments to their processes or working practices...and reduce their costs as a direct result."

Since it first arrived in the Northern Ireland marketplace, ESBIE has built up an expanding business customer base which includes larger industrial and commercial users, hotels and retailers.

"It's a relatively small marketplace but it is a very competitive one, and I

think there's no doubt that it will get even more competitive. The acquisition of the Irish-based Airtricity by SSE (Scottish & Southern Energy) will mean even more activity in the marketplace, and the new group will be in direct competition with ourselves and Energia.

"And there is always the chance of some of the other big suppliers taking a look at Northern Ireland as a potential market."

Susan Kinane admits that, while many organisations are only too happy to look at independent suppliers when it comes to electricity, there are always some customers who are reluctant to change.

"There is an old worry out there that changing electricity supplier might mean that you are taking a risk as far as continuity of supply is concerned," she says. "But, of course, it makes absolutely no difference."

"There is no doubt that right-thinking companies know to look at the costs and the full service package offered by a number of different electricity suppliers."

ESBIE has a team of customer relationship managers on the ground in Northern Ireland

and based in both Belfast and Derry. Each of these managers works closely with his or her own portfolio of customers to maximise customer benefits and value.

"Our customer relationship management structure is an extra dimension to what we offer our consumers. Our managers are our front line, and they provide a whole raft of support measures for companies out there.

"We don't have any outsourced customer service centres or anything like that. If a customer gets in touch with us, he speaks directly to ESBIE."

Meanwhile, with an all-island operation working well both north and south of the border, Susan Kinane says that the next logical step for ESBIE is its planned assault on that UK marketplace. Once there, it will take on the so-called 'Big Six' UK suppliers - Scottish Power, SSE, EDF, British Gas, e.On and nPower.

"I think we've shown what we are capable of by being the first competitor to enter the Northern Ireland marketplace, and while the UK is on a much larger scale, it's a challenge that we're very much looking forward to."