Meeting of the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands

Water and Energy Connections in Rural Areas

Committee Meeting

Wednesday 6 December 2023, 9.30am

Good morning, my name is John Finnegan, and I am the Principal Officer responsible for Hydrogen Policy, Electricity Networks and Systems in the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications. I will use these opening remarks to address the topic of renewable energy generation and in particular the availability of grid infrastructure to feed renewable electricity generated in community projects back to electricity users in general, as the Committee has indicated that this is the main topic that it would like to discuss with the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications.

Under the Climate Action Plan 2023, Government has set an ambitious target of having an 80% share of electricity generation capacity coming from renewable sources by 2030. In this context, a key priority is enabling citizen and community participation in the energy transition across the country, including in our rural communities including our offshore islands.

This will be achieved through a combination of government support schemes and policies to encourage and subsidise the generation of renewable electricity and as well as corporate power purchase agreements and private wires.

RESS

One of the major Government policies to help deliver on Ireland's ambitious climate and energy targets is the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS) - an auction-based support scheme which invites grid-scale renewable electricity generation projects to compete to receive a guaranteed price for the electricity they generate.

Over 1 GW and 1.8 GW of new wind and solar generation respectively was secured in the first two RESS auctions and Ireland is on track to reach 6 GW of grid connected renewables by the end of 2023. In October, Minister Ryan announced the results of the third onshore RESS auction (RESS 3). The successful projects, mostly solar PV projects, represent a 12% increase in Ireland's renewable energy capacity from current levels

Community Enabling Framework

A core aspect of the RESS is the provision of pathways for communities to participate in renewable electricity generation. The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) has developed a Community Enabling Framework. This is a suite of complementary resources to support communities to develop their own projects. These are:

- An Information Hub

SEAI has developed a number of useful resources and guides that are the first reference point for any community group. This toolkit of guides contains information on grid connection, the planning process, solar PV, the planning process, onshore wind, the electricity system, financing projects, community groups and governance, stakeholder and community engagement and business planning and procurement.

- Trusted Advisors

SEAI specialist technical experts are available to community groups there to guide them on every step of their project, from forming a community group, through to site identification, feasibility studies, designing a project, making grid and planning applications.

- Financial Support

SEAI can provide grants for early, mid and late-stage development costs to help projects realise their ambitions. Grants are available to support project design and planning, grid connection, submission costs and advice for project financing.

MSS

The Micro-Generation Support Scheme (MSS) provides support to domestic and non-domestic applicants for renewable installations up to 50 kilowatts, in the form of grants provided through the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI). It aims to support 380 megawatts of new micro-generation capacity by 2030. This amounts to some 60,000 homes and 9,000 non-domestic installations, such as small farms and businesses, schools, and community groups.

SRESS

The Small-scale Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (SRESS) will offer supports for renewable electricity installations which are not as suited to other support measures, such as the utility scale RESS and the MSS. It will also be a simpler route to market for community projects under 6 MW than the competitive RESS auction process.

Offshore Wind

Ireland has now moved to a plan-led approach to deliver our offshore wind targets. This means that all future ORE developments, and associated grid connections, will be determined through the National Spatial Strategy (due to be published in Q4 this year), Future Framework Policy and Offshore Transmission Strategy (both due to be published in Q1 2024).

Electricity Grid

Moving to the electricity network, the transformation required to meet the up to 80% renewable electricity target by 2030 will require significant investment in the electricity grid. In 2020 CRU, the energy regulator responsible for oversight of national electricity grid costs, sanctioned a €4 billion euro capital investment spend on the grid over the 2021-25 five-year period. EirGrid and ESB Networks, are using these funds to accommodate the high level of renewables being added to the system as well as the increased demands from the electrification of our heat and transport sectors.

In July 2023, Eirgrid published an updated version of “Shaping Our Electricity Future”, which is a plan-led approach to deliver an electricity system to meet Ireland’s Climate Action targets and Carbon Budgets while allowing for electricity demand growth. Implementing the required changes at transmission level will see over 350 projects undertaken, which will contribute to improved energy security.

In January 2023, ESB Networks published their “Networks for Net Zero” Strategy which outlines its commitment to futureproofing Ireland’s electricity network, meeting our 2030 goals, and making the country’s goal of net zero by 2050 a reality. Having incorporated system flexibility, to include flexible demand, generation and storage, into their published plans, Irish System Operators will be able to increase network efficiency, resilience, and their ability to integrate variable renewable energy sources, while reducing the need for new infrastructure.

New and enhanced grid connections are provided in response to new investments in renewable generation. The “Enduring Connection Programme” from CRU sets out the framework for providing these connections to new generation projects. This programme provides for 115 connections applications to be processed by ESB Networks and Eirgrid each year from 2021 to 2023. At least 15 of these applications are reserved for Community projects. Further applications up to a total of 30 are reserved for micro projects with a maximum capacity less than 500kw or self-supply projects.

We understand that the members of the committee are anxious to ensure that the grid will be upgraded as necessary to grid to allow electricity to be exported from islands to the mainland. The intention of the Enduring Connection Programme in place is that the grid will be upgraded as and when needed to facilitate renewable generation on the islands, or indeed anywhere where there is potential for renewable power.

I thank the Committee for inviting DECC to attend. I am happy to answer any questions.