European Commission Call for Evidence: Renewable energy - guidance on designating renewables acceleration areas

EirGrid is the Irish Transmission System Operator (TSO), responsible for developing, managing, and operating the onshore electricity transmission system in Ireland, including exploring and implementing opportunities for interconnection. In 2021, EirGrid's role as TSO was expanded to incorporate the operation and ownership of Ireland's offshore electricity transmission grid. As such, EirGrid has a significant and central part to play in the facilitation and delivery of Ireland's renewable energy targets.

We welcome the opportunity to provide input to this Call for Evidence. We support the European Commission's plans to publish guidance on designating renewables acceleration areas and recognise that, if implemented correctly, this has the potential to fast-track the deployment of renewables in areas which present the most immediate opportunities for achieving scale. The guidance should reflect the need for Members States to adopt a holistic approach, giving consideration to technical, environmental and societal aspects in relation to designating renewables acceleration areas.

Whilst the guidance is aimed at deployment of renewables, it is essential that consideration is given to the electricity grid, to identify synergies and avoid inefficiencies or conflicts in developing renewable generation and the grid. Critically, renewable acceleration areas should be aligned with existing infrastructure and plans already in place for grid development i.e. renewables development should be prioritised in areas whether there is existing grid capacity (or plans already underway to develop capacity). The existing grid should be optimised to maximise use of existing assets and capacity, thereby minimising the need for new infrastructure. Colocation of renewable generation and demand is another key consideration in facilitating effective and efficient deployment.

A whole of system approach is essential for accelerating deployment; planning and regulatory authorities should be required to recognise renewable acceleration areas and prioritise these in their decision-making processes, including funding approvals as required. It is particularly important that locational prioritisation is adopted in regulatory connection policies.

Public support is a critical enabler for delivering renewables deployment and grid infrastructure projects. The guidance should reflect the importance of this and highlight the need for timely and meaningful engagement with communities, and other stakeholders. The introduction of provisions for renewables acceleration areas should not in any way reduce or compromise stakeholder engagement requirements; any negative impact on public support has a knock-on impact on overall renewables deployment (and grid infrastructure development).

Planning of renewables acceleration areas must also consider nature protection and restoration to minimise the impact of renewables deployment on the ecosystem and biodiversity. A holistic approach should be adopted so that acceleration areas avoid the most sensitive or highest risk areas in terms of biodiversity. The guidance should provide detail on nature protection and restoration, including outlining requirements for risk assessments and suitable mitigation measures.

These principles are detailed in Shaping Our Electricity Future, EirGrid's roadmap for delivering an electricity grid fit for 80% renewable energy by 2030, in line with Ireland's climate targets. A highly collaborative consultation process, involving extensive public and industry engagement, was key to developing this plan, which recognises the central role that the grid will play in the transition.

EirGrid

The Oval, 160 Shelbourne Road, Ballsbridge, Dublin D04 FW28
Telephone: +353 1 677 1700 | www.eirgrid.ie