



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Infrastructure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Renewable Energy:
ABO Energy; Renewable Energy Systems;
RenewableNI

26 June 2024

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mrs Deborah Erskine (Chairperson)
Mr Danny Baker
Mr Cathal Boylan
Mr Stephen Dunne
Mr Mark Durkan
Mr Andrew McMurray
Mr Peter McReynolds

Witnesses:

Ms Patricia McGrath	ABO Energy
Mr John Boyce	Renewable Energy Systems
Mr Steven Agnew	RenewableNI

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): We welcome to the Committee Steven Agnew, who is no stranger to us. Welcome back to the Assembly, Steven.

Mr Steven Agnew (RenewableNI): Thank you, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Steven is the director of RenewableNI. We have Patricia McGrath, head of project development in Northern Ireland for ABO Energy; and we have John Boyce, development director, wind, at Renewable Energy Systems Limited. You are welcome to the Committee. If you do not mind, we will go to you for a brief outline of perhaps five minutes, and then we will come to members' questions. We have been given some written evidence as well, so we are keen to come to questions.

Mr Steven Agnew (RenewableNI): Thank you, Chair. I will keep the intro brief. As members are aware, we have a Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 target of 80% renewables by 2030. It is a target that RenewableNI campaigned for, supports and believes to be achievable with the right policy interventions. We have commissioned various reports, and studies suggest that achieving the target could bring in over £3 billion of gross value added to the Northern Ireland economy, reduce consumer bills by around £100 million a year and reduce power sector emissions by around three quarters from what they are today.

We currently sit at 45% renewables, but that success — Northern Ireland has been a leader in renewables — came through the policies of the past decade. We need to more than double that capacity to reach the 2030 target, and we face significant challenges in doing so. One report that we commissioned, 'Accelerating Renewables' by KPMG, surveyed developers, 82% of whom said that Northern Ireland was not currently an attractive place in which to invest. Many of those will have

invested in Northern Ireland in the past. One of the key issues was market support, which, DFE has announced, is coming. It is not coming quickly enough, but it is coming. The other major drawback was planning, in both policy and processes. It takes, on average, over three years to get a wind farm through planning, and we are starting to see increasing numbers of refusals. Things are heading in the wrong direction in that regard.

We engage with the Department consistently and persistently. The main thing that we get back is that it is almost our fault, because of the quality of the applications, and that bringing in validation checklists will solve everything. These guys develop projects around these islands. Given that Northern Ireland is where the planning problems are most acute, I do not accept that, just in Northern Ireland, we are putting in bad planning applications. That is not credible. We need radical planning reform. If we get that, "80 by 30" and all the advantages that come with that are still achievable.

I will now hand over to Patricia and John to briefly introduce themselves and their companies, and then we will take your questions.

Ms Patricia McGrath (ABO Energy): Thank you, Chair and members, for the opportunity to meet you today. I am head of development for ABO Energy in Northern Ireland. ABO Energy is a renewable energy development company headquartered in Germany. We are active in 16 countries across the world. We have been present in Northern Ireland from 2010. We employ around 20 professionals, based in our Lisburn office. To date, we have achieved planning approval for over 515 MW of projects for wind, storage and hydrogen and have delivered almost 90 MW of projects for wind and battery storage. We have a further pipeline of 160 MW of projects that are currently in the planning process. There is an opportunity to contribute to delivering that 80% target if we are able to secure planning consent and deliver those projects. That will involve investment of over £450 million. I welcome the opportunity to meet you and to discuss the challenges that we face.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Thank you.

Mr John Boyce (Renewable Energy Systems): I work for Renewable Energy Systems (RES), which is the world's largest independent developer. By "independent" we mean that we are not tied to a utility company or a turbine manufacturer. We have been in business for just over 40 years and have been in Northern Ireland for around 30 years. We have an office in Larne and about 50 full-time staff. We have an operational portfolio of about 200 MW in Northern Ireland. Perhaps more importantly and pertinent to today's debate, we have a development pipeline of around 600 MW of projects, and around 200 MW of that is currently in the planning system.

Steven mentioned a little in his intro the statement that some of the problems are due to the applications that are being submitted. The meetings that we have had directly with DFI staff and local planners suggest otherwise. They have been content with and quite complimentary about the level of detail in our applications. When we eventually get to have a dialogue with them, we often find that there is, of course, a need for further environmental information on a specific issue to help address a concern, but, on the whole, we get good feedback on our applications.

I have a useful stat that, hopefully, provides a good frame of reference for the challenges in front of us. As Steven mentioned, we had a lot of success in Northern Ireland: we got to 40% of electricity from renewable sources in 2016 off the back of the Northern Ireland renewables obligation (NIRO) scheme. We now have a target of 80% by 2030. As of today, we are at about 45%, so, in the eight years since 2016, we went up 5%, and we have six years to make up the remaining 35%. Hopefully, that is a useful stat for a little context.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Thank you. It seems really ambitious, does it not, given that last stat? That brings me on to my question. Realistically, how achievable is that target of 80% electricity consumption from renewable energy, especially considering the stat that you just gave us?

Mr Agnew: My argument is that we need to achieve it, for a start. The current UK policy is for zero-carbon electricity by 2035. We see 80% as a staging post in getting to zero-carbon electricity. The Labour Government — sorry. I am getting ahead of myself.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): A Freudian slip.

Mr Agnew: Yes. The Labour Party —.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): We are not past 4 July just yet. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Boyce: Strike that one from the minutes.

Mr Agnew: The Labour Party is committed to zero-carbon electricity across the UK by 2030. Energy is a devolved issue, so what that means in practice I will leave to the politicians, but that is the pace that we need to move to. The International Energy Agency says that all advanced economies should be at zero-carbon electricity by 2035, so we need to get to 80%. Is it achievable? If we keep doing what we are doing, we will not achieve it.

Our 'Accelerating Renewables' report shows that, of the 1,900 MW that we need, only 725 will be developed if we keep going at the pace we are going at. Therefore we will not only miss it but miss it by a mile, if we keep doing what we are doing. That is why we are calling for more radical reforms of planning. The market support that is coming will be a big part of bringing developers back to Northern Ireland and giving them the confidence to invest here again, but you still need to get through those project timelines. We think that the three years for planning needs to be reduced to one year. The target for major applications is 30 weeks. We are saying, "We don't mind you missing your target or missing your target by almost double". We do not think that the request of one year is unreasonable, but we have not heard anything from the Department that gives us confidence that that is where we will get to.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): To tease that out, is there sufficient capacity in the commercial providers and operators to meet a doubling of renewable capacity in Northern Ireland?

Mr Agnew: We just talked about a figure of around 1,900 MW. There are other figures up to maybe 2,500, but we need somewhere in between those two figures. Currently, there are 2,500 MW of onshore wind alone in the pipeline, with at least 650 MW of solar. We do not have the same visibility over the solar pipeline as we have with wind. We know that there is enough capacity in the system, and that is before we even get to offshore. It will be incredibly challenging to connect offshore by 2030, but we are trying to get it over the line in that time frame. However, there is enough onshore alone in the pipeline to meet the targets, if it was to get through in time to allow it to be connected by 2030.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): The main issue for you is planning and the delays in the system. You talked about it taking an average of three years to get planning. Obviously, some planning applications take much longer than three years, which is disgraceful, as you see when you look at other jurisdictions. You want to see that reduced to a year, because that will help, I assume, with investors and one thing and another in looking at Northern Ireland and our ability to meet those targets.

Will you outline the key differences between the jurisdictions? How are we different? Is there a correlation between the available funding and population size? Your written evidence shows the average time for planning approvals in the various jurisdictions. It would be interesting to tease out what, you think, is the main cause of the delay. Is it investment or expertise, or what is the problem?

Mr Agnew: I will bring the guys in to speak to other jurisdictions, because they know them better than I do. We have this unending process; there are no timelines. In the Republic of Ireland, we are starting to see the climate action plans and planning being brought together with hard stops. One of the things that we have called for is a hard deadline with statutory consultees, because it can take 12 months to get a response from a statutory consultee. Their target is three weeks. The accountability is on the developer. There is nobody with a big stick. There needs to be a cut-off point for that. We cannot have unending planning timelines. John or Patricia, do you want to speak about other jurisdictions?

Ms McGrath: As you have pointed out, Northern Ireland's target for major applications is 30 weeks. Our experience of the average is in and around three years. We currently have five wind farm applications in the system. Three of those applications were submitted across 2022 and 2023, and they are still in the system, so they are there over 17 months without a decision. They remain undecided. The consultee response times contribute heavily to those delays. For some key consultees, it can take between eight and 17 months before we get a response. We are effectively at their mercy, waiting for some feedback on the application.

We have two further applications sitting with the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC). From our perspective, the delays are compounded by the timelines of the PAC. Those two applications have been sitting with the PAC for coming up on two years now — 24 months. Those applications have

been in the system for seven years and nine years respectively. For the application that was in the system for nine years, two adjustments were made to the proposal, but, working even from the last adjustment that we made, it has still been sitting in the system for four years without a decision. The feedback from the PAC is that it is unable to resource, and timelines for a public inquiry date are, at the earliest, the end of 2025 or early 2026. We are effectively just sitting there and waiting. We are trying to maintain those applications in terms of the currency of the information.

I work across the South of Ireland as well, and, comparing the timelines, decisions on applications come through in about eight months. There is a legislative target for the local planning authorities to provide feedback within eight weeks, whether that is a request for further information or a decision on the application. Generally, we see a decision come through within eight months. The delays in Northern Ireland create uncertainty in retaining investment. ABO is present across 16 countries, and retaining that investment in Northern Ireland is challenging when the timelines here are much more extensive than those in other jurisdictions.

Mr Agnew: John, you have experience in Scotland as well.

Mr Boyce: I do indeed, yes. I echo all the comments about the delays we see in NI. We have four projects, almost 200 MW, in the planning system. As I was preparing for today, I wrote down the dates of those. The longest of those applications has been in since August 2019, so it is almost five years now. That sits in the appeals queue and has done since the tail end of last year. As Patricia says, the feedback we hear at the minute is that no decisions will come out of PAC for those in behind the gold mine applications until maybe 2026. On the face of it, we are looking at maybe seven years for that project, at which stage I can almost guarantee that the turbine technology that we put into that application seven years ago will be outdated. Then, to even do a minor change — not to increase the size of the machine but maybe install a slightly bigger rotor — will get put back through the same planning system, which exacerbates that pressure on resources and lengthens the timeline again. As well as the main applications, there is how we handle amendments to those applications. That is worth due consideration.

As Steven mentioned, I look after a part of the business where we work across Scotland, England and Wales as well. Scotland is a good example to look to at the minute. They started out probably a year and a half ago with an onshore wind strategy. Similar to our "80 by 30" target, they have 30 GW by 2030, which is an extra 11 GW in the system in Scotland. They then follow that through with a planning policy which is supportive of that. They have National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) in place, which in effect puts a higher weighting on the environmental benefits of the renewable applications and higher weighting on the climate crisis. It does not override other issues and consultees, whether that be visual, Historic Environment or NatureScot, but it puts a higher weighting on the environmental benefits of the scheme and their importance. The final piece of that jigsaw is the onshore wind sector deal, which we are currently working through. That is a detailed document between industry and government on how we will deliver on those targets. The plan is that, by 2025 — next year — they will have schemes determined within what they call "nine, 12 and 24": nine months for a re-power scheme, 12 months for a new application and 24 months where a new application has to go through an appeal or public inquiry process. They will set clear targets for that, and their consultees will have to respond within those time frames.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Really, I suppose, it is frustrating for the likes of yourselves that you are not seeing government policy match up with the systems that are in place to try to get some of those things through. I assume that that is the case; I do not want to put words in your mouth. In short, is expertise an issue in Northern Ireland in getting those planning applications through the system at council level? Can you give a yes or no answer?

Mr Agnew: It is a bit more than a yes answer. Yes, there is expertise, but it is more about numbers than ability. We would like —.

Mr Durkan: It is a lack of experts rather than a lack of expertise.

Mr Agnew: Yes, a lack of experts rather than expertise. We need more people. For example, for many years, there was one person in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) responding to wind applications. We understand that a temporary additional person has been put in there. That is where our main bottleneck is with regard to statutory consultees. We are holding up multimillion-pound projects for the sake of maybe an additional two or three civil servants. Given that the planning fees

that are charged in Northern Ireland are the highest across these islands — we are not objecting to that — we want the value to match the fees that we pay.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Fair enough. Just lastly, in your experience, how many, in percentage terms, of those large developments go to appeals?

Mr Agnew: I do not have a figure off the top of my head.

Mr Boyce: I do have a figure off the top of my head for that one. Since planning was devolved to councils, major applications above 30 MW have gone to DFI. That was in 2015 or 2016. Of those, 100% have gone to the Planning Appeals Commission.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Wow.

Mr Boyce: The majority — I do not have that number off the top of my head, but I think that it is 80% or 90% — have subsequently been overturned. As well as the resource issue, there is an issue with implementation of policy. The policy that is in place is not so far away that a lot of those decisions should have gone through without that. That really surprised me as we prepared for these meetings. I knew that it was bad, but, when we saw that it was 100%, that was a real surprise to us.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Yes. It is a surprise to me too. That comes back to my first point. How will we reach that 80% when we are stuck in this logjam? I am sure that other members will want to tease out some of that.

Mr Boylan: Steven, welcome back.

Mr Agnew: Thank you very much. It is good to see you.

Mr Boylan: You used to sit on this side.

We have been through it many a time on planning. I just want to tease that out more because, clearly — excuse me, my voice has gone — the planning is an issue. I am trying to find out about major applications that are being held up at DFI and locally. I take it that most of them are onshore applications?

Mr Agnew: Yes.

Mr Boylan: You are talking about resource. How will we get to the bottom of it all? It seems that you are making good applications. We brought in validation checks to try to eliminate all that stuff, but now you are saying that good applications are going in and they are still waiting. What excuses — I had better choose my words carefully. What are the Department and local authorities saying back to you about the real reason for the delay?

Mr Agnew: The Department is saying that it is due to the quality of applications. We do not accept that. A lot of money — these guys can speak better to the figures — is being spent on those applications, plus the same people are putting in the same types of applications across different regions of these islands and are not seeing the same planning timelines, so we do not accept that that is the main factor.

There is an issue of over-consultation, which, to be fair, the Department itself has identified as an issue. Again, these guys can speak to more detail. You can make relatively minor amendments. John mentioned that you might have to change blade capacity. Those things take so long in planning that, often, the technology becomes obsolete and you have to make amendments. You are then in a vicious cycle. If you are making a minor change, you do not necessarily have to go back to every consultee, but some councils do. They are covering their backs. There is no accountability on those timelines. If a council does not go back to a statutory consultee but should have, it is accountable, so they go back to all of them, just in case. There is nothing on the other side to say, "Look, we have just paid our planning fee of x hundred thousand pounds. You have not met your side of the contract". A contract that says, "Once we pay that fee, this is the level of service that we expect", is not part of our planning system. That is what we need to be built into our planning system. John mentioned what happens in Scotland: there are timelines that have to be met. In the Republic of Ireland, timelines have to be met. In Northern Ireland, we have some nice targets, but if they are not met — you know.

Do you want to add anything?

Mr Boyce: Yes. On accountability, we struggle even to get a dialogue going with the planners or feedback from them. We talk about working across other jurisdictions: whether it is Scotland or Wales, we see a continual dialogue. There are delays in the other jurisdictions as well, but where there is a delay, there is transparency about it. You are told, "We are delayed for this reason". You are given an option: "You can push for a non-determination and take yourselves straight into an appeal queue, if you wish, or you can allow an extension of time for that statutory consultee to come back". There is transparency and dialogue there, but we do not see either of those in Northern Ireland at the minute. We just get hit with a wall of silence, so that kind of accountability across the resourcing. Steven picked out a good point on that: it is almost about the confidence of planners to use the system that is there. It is about not having to reconsult on every single issue but having the confidence to say, "OK, this application has already been assessed. We do not have to go back to every consultee. It may affect that issue, so let's reconsult there", because, whether you are DFI or councils, you are dealing with the NIEA and the same consultees.

Mr Boylan: I am just trying to tease it out. I know the answer to the question before I ask it, because I have been here for that long. Surely it is about the principle of development. The technology might change — you might argue that something is a wee bit taller — but that is a different matter. We have to get down to the principle of development and the policies that are there. That is the key element. That is the argument that we need. That is why you are here. That is what we are trying to get a better understanding of, so that we can move it forward when we go back to the Department or whatever. Obviously, we have limited control; local authorities have their own autonomy. Are you saying that Nimbyism is still an issue at local level, Steven?

Mr Agnew: In some ways, you are in a better position to tell me. You know your local councillors and how they address that. We did some polling at the beginning of this year. I will just check my notes so that I do not give you false figures. We asked about the 80% renewables target, and only 6% opposed it. We thought that the key question was, "Do you support new wind development?", because that seems to be where the objection comes from, but only 7% opposed new wind development. We have started talking about the myth of opposition. There are people who object, and they shout loudly, but they are in the minority. We even had the question, "Would you support renewables being fast-tracked through the planning system?", and there was over 60% support, I think — I did not write down the figure — for that. The problem with supporters is that they sit at home and think, "I want that", but the opposition comes out. I ask politicians to know that, when it comes to council planning committees, your constituents sit at home and quietly support renewables, while the people who knock at your door to oppose are the minority.

Mr Boylan: I have two final points, Chair. Even though we record Nimbyism, people are entitled to object to any planning application. The other point, which I am surprised at, is the level of PAC and the length of time that is taken. That was the next step to move it on. What does it say? Is it a numbers game again? It is resource again?

Mr Agnew: We have had a huge turnover of staff in the PAC. I cannot speak to the reasons for that, but it has meant that a lot of people are in training, essentially, and they are not hearing renewables cases. I think that ABO got a letter to say that it would take until 2025 or 2026.

Ms McGrath: Yes, and it clarifies that it is a resource issue that is causing that delay. Following through on the application list that they have in order of date of receipt, there is no prioritisation given to renewables applications. Obviously, we have a target there to meet. There is nothing in legislation that restricts the PAC when prioritising renewables applications, but legislation also provides for DFI to appoint an alternative independent expert. The feedback that we have received to date is that that will be prohibitively expensive for DFI, but we have not received anything that sets out what has been done to investigate that any further.

Mr Boylan: That is versus the economic benefits of the project in the first place.

Mr Boyce: To add one little note on that, the planning fee, which, I admit, all goes to DFI — it does not go to any of the statutory consultees — is up to £329,000 for the application. The fee for planning appeals is £126.

Mr Boylan: I could ask more, but thank you very much.

Mr Dunne: Thanks, folks, for your presentation. That 82% think that NI is not an attractive place to invest is alarming, and everybody should take note of it. Lessons need to be learned from across the UK and the Republic, as you have rightly pointed out.

Obviously, a big part of the success on the 40%-plus was that there were support schemes in place. Steven, you just hinted that there might be market support coming forward. Can you give an update on where and when you think that will come?

Mr Agnew: Our understanding from DFE is that it has published the high-level design, and we are now in consultation with officials around the details of the scheme. The timeline they have given us is the end of 2025 to the beginning of 2026 for the first auction.

Just to explain briefly, it is a competitive auction, you bid in, and, if you are successful — if you are one of the lowest price bidders — you get a guarantee of that price for 15 years. It balances the risk between the consumer and generator. Everybody knows the price that they pay and what they receive. That is the nature of the scheme, and that is how it works in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland, by and large.

With 2025-26, if the scheme comes in on time, it is tight, but we can still do things. Our worry is about slippages, because we have seen every stage of the scheme. I took up this post in October 2019. My then line manager sat me down and said, "You need to get a 70% target, and you need to get a support scheme." We got an 80% target, so job done. The support scheme is coming, but I have been talking about it since 2019. The industry has been talking about it since long before that, and it has been in place in Great Britain since long before that. We are playing catch-up, and we cannot allow those timelines to slip.

Mr Dunne: Yes, I appreciate that. You mentioned that the NIEA is one of the worst offenders on consultation response times. What other consultees would have such slow response times?

Mr Agnew: That is the main one that I hear about.

Ms McGrath: Across our applications, the Historic Environment Division would probably be another slow one but probably not to the same extent.

Mr Dunne: Just a final question on councils. I am keen to tease out a wee bit more about your engagement with the 11 councils that represent different areas. Do you feel that there is much variation in councils' approach to and engagement with the sector and in their local development plans?

Mr Agnew: In terms of engagement, we in RenewableNI have a job to do to upscale ourselves. It is a lot easier to come to the Infrastructure Committee and the Infrastructure Minister than it is to get round 11 councils, the various parties on the councils and everything else. There is a job of work there. We have had some engagement, but it could be improved.

On the performance of the councils, it is fair to say that it is different. John made the point about having the confidence not to re-consult over every different thing. I think it is fair to say that varies across councils. I do not know whether you want to give any detail on that, John.

Mr Boyce: I probably agree with all of that, really. We see a spread across councils in the way that different things will be handled. Again, that is not entirely uncommon across Scotland or Wales. We have all been quite harsh on a lot of the staff in those departments: there are lots of really good staff in those departments, whether they are councillors or staff in the Department for Infrastructure or in the NIEA. Again, I suppose that accountability and drive have given those teams a framework to work within, the confidence to make decisions and the confidence that the overriding principle should be climate emergency and prioritising renewable development — not at all costs, by any stretch of the imagination, but it can provide a good rationale for their decision-making. Giving all those decision-makers that accountability and confidence is really key. The policy behind that could do with updating and refinement as well, but, even in the policy that we have at the minute, giving guidance and a clear mandate to those teams would be really positive.

Mr Dunne: I appreciate that. It is worth pointing out that it is not just the renewables sector that feels the frustration around consultee responses in councils and with major applications, but your point is important. Thank you very much.

Mr McReynolds: I thank everyone for coming in today. Steven, you mentioned in your opening comments that, typically, the standard of the application is cited as one reason why there is so much delay. I raised that with the Minister in a question for oral answer and asked him to specify whether he meant local, major or significant applications, and he said, "All of them". What is your assessment of that response, and can you tell me about the work and resource that goes into those applications?

Mr Agnew: Patricia, do you want to talk about that?

Ms McGrath: Yes, no problem. It is frustrating to hear that feedback from the Minister. Time and money is invested. It costs between £250,000 and £300,000 just to prepare and submit one of our applications. We go through a lengthy process of identifying sites, securing those lands and undertaking three different environmental surveys as part of our environmental impact assessment. We appoint an independent expert to prepare those on our behalf, and we engage with the councils, formally or informally, on pre-application discussions.

Our experience to date of the benefit of those discussions and how they feed into the applications in general is that the feedback is very generic; it is generally standing advice. Therefore, we have taken the approach of front-loading the applications, and we make sure that what we submit is comprehensive. When we submit an application, we expect that there will be potential requests for clarification or further information. That is a good sign, in the sense that the experts — the consultees reviewing the applications — are interrogating them and making sure that they stand up to scrutiny, so we welcome that. On the quality element, I am not sure whether the requests for further information lead to the conclusion that the applications are not of good quality, but, from our perspective, we are confident that our applications, as well as those from across the industry, are of a good standard.

Mr Agnew: We are not opposed to validation checklists. If the Department feels that they would be helpful, then, by all means. To give an example, I just submitted a consultation response to Fermanagh and Omagh District Council on its supplementary planning guidance on solar. It lists all the things that should be included in a solar application but says that the list is not exhaustive and that it may require further information. The council itself acknowledges that, no matter how long it makes the checklist — I think there were about 15 things on the list — there will always be a need for more information. If we resource pre-application discussions, we can tease some of that out, but further requests tend to come as standard.

Mr Boyce: To take a little of the subjectivity out of that, we submit similar applications across all regions and do not get that feedback. We do not get it from the planners on the ground in Northern Ireland. That does not feel correct.

Mr McReynolds: OK.

Mr McMurray: What number of installations is required to meet the 1,900 MW? Also, forgive me, but the discussion has been very wind-centric: are there other options? Is there hydro, solar, or even offshore or tidal? I am curious as to how they can make an impact. Chair, can I come in with other questions, or shall we get through those ones first?

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): We will take those questions first, and then I will come back to you, Andrew.

Mr Agnew: Wind makes up about 85% of our renewable capacity. We talk a lot about wind because it is the best resource. I remember a conversation with one of John's colleagues, and I said, "I have been in this job a while now, and I only ever hear the problems. You are an international company. Why do you keep coming to Northern Ireland?". His answer was, "The wind is great". We have one of the best wind resources in the world, and that is why we have a focus on wind.

Solar makes up less than 300 MW of the 1,800 MW of renewables; solar is the next largest percentage. Hydro falls into the "Other" category in the chart. It is about onshore wind and solar, and, from 2030 onwards, we will see offshore generation coming online. The proven wind — onshore and offshore — and solar projects are the cheapest forms of electricity generation technology. There is a small opportunity for tidal generation in Northern Ireland, but it comes at around four times the cost. Those will be the predominant technologies.

We need diversity, and tidal generation gives predictability. We need battery storage, as the wind blows strongly at night, when there is not a lot of demand, so we need to store the energy. We also need battery storage to balance the system. Other technologies will come in behind wind and solar generation, but they will be the main technologies.

Mr McMurray: Thank you. It has been relayed to me that South Down has poor renewables infrastructure. How do you see the infrastructure? What help is needed from other agencies to upgrade the infrastructure? I would love to hear more about offshore generation, but that is for another time.

Mr Agnew: Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) is going through price control at the moment, and there will be a significant upscale of the investment in the grid, and RenewableNI provides the pipeline data. I mentioned the number of projects in the pipeline, and RenewableNI provides the data to the System Operator for Northern Ireland (SONI) and NIE to help plan the network ahead of time. It has been a frustration in the past because, when we want to connect a wind farm, the infrastructure is not there; we are trying to get it in place ahead of time. We are making some progress, but, if you do not have the infrastructure, you cannot get the generated power to where it needs to go.

Patricia, do you want to speak about South Down? You have a project there.

Ms McGrath: The upgrades and the required improvements to the grid infrastructure apply across all of the North. As Steven has pointed out, SONI and NIE are aware of the scale of the improvements that are required, and they have been working with the industry to ensure that the infrastructure is put in the right places to connect the projects.

Mr Boyce: I will add some context to that. We have consent for 100 MW projects that are awaiting construction. One project was consented to in 2020 and the other in 2021, and the energisation dates are 2027 and 2028. If we think about it in the context of "80 by 30", it shows the scale of the challenge in front of us. Some of the delays in the planning system are due to the grid infrastructure. It supports Steven's comment that, for "80 by 30", wind and solar are the mature, developable technologies with projects in the pipeline that are ready to deliver. If you start from absolute zero, you will struggle to get the technologies into the system by 2030.

Mr McMurray: We have touched on the planning process. I find that I ask a question and the answer leads on to another question. Mr Durkan mentioned that it is not just about the expertise but the experts. Will there be a role for DFI to invest in upskilling to increase the knowledge capacity? From people I speak to, I get the impression that there is discrepancy among council areas and council planning departments as to what planning applications go through. That is the problem, obviously. How does the solution work out?

Mr Agnew: There is definitely a role for DFI to coordinate some of that upskilling. We can provide the expertise. That is not to discredit planners. A lot of planners, if they are sitting watching this, will say, "I have been handling wind applications for x number of years. I know what I am doing." It is about the changes in technology. In one of the independent examination sessions for one of the councils, they were asked, "What are you doing to accommodate wind?". They said, "We have identified these areas for 80-metre turbines. Nobody is developing 80-metre turbines any more. The technology has moved on; the tip heights are larger. So, we need an ongoing engagement just to make sure that planners understand the changes in technology as well as new technology.

DFI has asked whether we are willing to provide support and training around battery energy storage, which is still a relatively new technology to many planners. We have absolutely said yes to that. We are waiting for the Department to coordinate it, but we will step up, as we have been asked to do so.

Mr Durkan: I thank the team for coming in. It has been very good. You have answered a lot of the questions that I was going to ask, which is always the sign of a good presentation. It is clear that a lot needs to be done to change policy and practice to get to those targets, to the benefit not just of this place but of the planet.

Patricia, you said that it was "frustrating" — I think that that was the word you used. You keep hearing this excuse, almost, that, "It is the fault of the applicant" or, "The quality of the applications is not good enough." You referred to the independent experts and the amount that you spend per application, never mind on the application itself. It is not Trotters Independent Experts here, *[Laughter]* so it is extremely frustrating. It is insulting, as much as it is frustrating. In that respect, I was thinking that the

validation checklist — Steven says that they are not exhaustive — might actually work to your benefit as well. It would remove that smokescreen. You can say, "That item was in", because you have ticked the box to say that it was. Do you see how it could work to your benefit in that respect?

Mr Agnew: That is the wall that we come up against consistently for a long time. Every time we talk about timelines, they say, "We are doing these validation checklists", so bring them on, it is fair to say. We absolutely hope that they tick the boxes that the Department wants, but our expectation, our analysis, is that, if they help, it will be marginal, and there are bigger issues that we need to reform in our planning system.

Mr Durkan: We now have a statutory as well as a moral duty, to meet the targets, and clearly there must be more investment in planning — and not just in planning. You referred to your own fees. That goes into planning but not to the consultees, who are obviously struggling as well. When we talk about future efforts to incentivise renewable energy, I am concerned that an already overstretched and struggling system might be stretched beyond breaking point if something comes from the Department for the Economy next year that might create an avalanche of applications in renewable energy. Has any consideration been given to that?

Mr Agnew: That is a legitimate concern and one that we hold. This is a time of low demand. I mentioned that the majority of renewables connected last decade. Only three projects have connected since 2020: 86 MW, compared with 400 MW in a single year, in 2017. This is a time of low demand, and the planning system is struggling. What happens when that ramp-up comes? To be fair, projects have been put through planning in anticipation of market support. However, you know that, as we move closer and closer to 2026, we are only going to see that ramp-up, because you cannot enter the market, the auction, when it comes, unless you have planning consent. That is the likelihood; that is how it works in other jurisdictions. People are trying to get planning consent now for when that comes.

Mr Durkan: The point has been made that these delays and frustrations are not exclusive to renewables, and they are not, but we have to view you not just as a sector but as a customer. You are not grumbling about the fact that decisions have been refused; you are complaining about the fact that decisions have not been made. Given the cost of the applications, you have to ask this: are you getting value for money? I do not know whether there is an itemisation or a breakdown of the fee. Obviously, it is not in the Department's or the councils' interest for applications to roll on, because the longer they go on, the more they cost in resource for whichever agency is dealing with them.

You touched on public opinion. I still have the scars of many's a site meeting from my time in the Department of the Environment (DOE) and the objections to onshore wind farms. Some of those were perfectly understandable, but I did not necessarily agree with them all. It is easy for the majority of the public to support something when it does not land at their front door or in their back field. There was mention of nimbyism. I found that — I think that this is exclusive to renewable energy — there is "wnimbyism", as in "Why not in my backyard? Why are you building a turbine in his field from which he will get the benefit? Why not my field?". I have never seen that with anything other than wind farms. Do you have much interaction with residents in areas that have been earmarked for wind development after people have come forward and said, "Here, I have somewhere for you."?

Mr Agnew: These guys have more experience of that than I have.

Mr Boyce: Our sites come from various sources. Often, a landowner will approach us and ask us to look at their scheme. Often, we will look at a scheme with a landowner and try to see how we can maximise that. For all schemes, we start early doors to engage with communities and talk about the benefits that it can bring. RES pioneered a local electricity discount (LED) scheme that we roll out in a lot of our projects. It means that everybody within a certain range of a project can get a discount on their electricity bills. That came about directly from feedback that we used to hear at exhibitions: "Why is our electricity not cheaper because of these turbines?". Our response was, "It's a bit more complicated than that". Eventually, however, we thought, "We have to find a way to address that question in a more positive manner", so we developed that scheme. ABO Energy and all the developers will do similar schemes to really get into a community and maximise the benefit of hosting such a scheme.

Mr Durkan: That was going to be my final question. *[Laughter.]* I was going to ask about the benefits to local communities. What has become particularly pronounced over the last couple of years with the cost-of-living crisis is the number of people in communities who have said me, "How does a war in Ukraine double my electricity price when I can see those turbines through the window?". Promoting

those schemes and the sustainable benefits to local areas will be vital in getting full buy-in from residents, elected representatives, councils and decision-makers.

Mr Boyce: There are stats on that. Renewables saved the Northern Ireland consumer £500 million in 2022, when energy prices really peaked. Even as those prices dissipated in 2023 and dropped to a more normal level, renewables still saved consumers £243 million. If renewables had not been there and if we had to rely solely on coal and gas imports, Northern Ireland consumers would not have saved that.

Mr Durkan: That is mad. *[Laughter.]* I wonder whether you could forward that information to us. You need to get that out there.

Mr McMurray: I would like to get that figure, too.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Yes. Will you provide that to the Committee? It would be good to see it. People on the ground do not necessarily feel that, so it would be good to get those figures.

Mr Agnew: It is hard to say to somebody, when their electricity bill has gone up, that it would have gone up more if it were not for us, but that is the reality.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Yes, 100%. Keith Buchanan is not here today, but he has asked me to ask a question. Could you answer briefly, because we are running over time. The question is in relation to restrictions to turbine erection around the international airport. Is there a hold-up for people trying to erect them in that area? Is there a specific issue there that you are aware of?

Mr Boyce: No, not that I am aware of around the international airport.

Ms McGrath: Not currently with any of the schemes that we have, but I understand that the airports have restricted areas around their respective locations and that they seek to put radar mitigation schemes in place. However, there is certainly no direct experience for us currently.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): It may be one for Keith to follow up with you, if he knows of something in particular.

Mr Boyce: It is definitely a constraint that we consider when we are siting the wind farms, whether it is Derry airport or Aldergrove.

Mr Durkan: *[Inaudible]* — for sonar, definitely.

Mr Boylan: Steven will know this: a good number of years ago, a mapping exercise was done across the North on where the most efficient and effective corridors were. There is just all this thing about moving the process forward quicker. Are we using that principle, or is it the case of the landowners coming and saying —. Is it a bit of both, or is that what you are targeting?

Mr Agnew: As I alluded to, we are trying to work with NIE and SONI so that we are almost planning the grid together. In terms of the planning system itself, where there have been attempts in other jurisdictions to try to say, "Look, can you just develop in these areas?", they have not been the attractive areas. You mentioned a mapping exercise. When I sat on the other side and sat in Committee, my predecessor came to the Committee. She showed two maps and said, "Here is the map of all the best wind areas in Northern Ireland, and here is a map of the visual-sensitive areas", which were areas of outstanding natural beauty. They were practically the same map. You build wind turbines on hills, and so a planner's approach would be to avoid the difficult areas.

Mr Boylan: That is what is happening, and that is why there are so many objections and the conversation just rolls on and on, with people afraid to make decisions. I would not doubt the application you put in, because nowadays we know all those conservation areas. Those are well identified, right across the board; it takes a wee bit of homework in submitting the application.

Mr Agnew: John, you can tell me, but I don't think you choose sites to try to annoy people.

Mr Boyce: No. As companies and developers, we are looking at the best places to site the schemes and at the most sensitive as well, as we try to strike a balance with the effect that it will have on the

environment. We need this to be a joined-up process, in which NIE and SONI are bringing the grid into those areas, because they are quite discreet areas. We know where the key sites for development will be, so we want the grid to be there, awaiting our schemes, and not the situation, as I mentioned, where schemes were getting consent in 2021 and were sitting for another seven years or so, waiting for grid connections.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Mark, I can see that you are indicating. Very briefly, please.

Mr Durkan: Is most of the lower-hanging fruit already gone, and is that why there are so many objections? I would think that the more schemes that come forward, the closer they will get to the bigger populations of people, and we could probably see even more objections than we have seen to date.

Mr Boyce: We also have the opportunity now of repower schemes. Some of the initial schemes that were built in the mid-to-late-1990s are now coming towards the end of their life. We have three or four projects — three in Northern Ireland and, maybe, another one in Southern Ireland — where we are looking at that end-of-life strategy. So, we are extending those existing schemes out to, maybe, the early 2030s and starting the planning process now for a scheme that can be there to replace that.

Mr Durkan: The technology —

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Mark, please.

Mr Durkan: — is ever-evolving, but how much could we theoretically increase output on one site by updating technology?

Mr Boyce: It is very site-specific, but I can think of one of the projects that we are looking at at the minute; we are considering taking down 28 turbines and replacing them with about six, but doubling the capacity of that site.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): My last question — answer very briefly, if you can, because we are over time — is on investors choosing certain council areas because of the timings or because they are easier to work with. Is that a scenario that you see, or is it just an issue across Northern Ireland, where we have issues everywhere?

Mr Agnew: There is variation, but developers will choose the best sites. I will say, though, that I have seen applications go in for 29.5 megawatts, so that they do not go to DFI. People are choosing councils over DFI rather than choosing one council over another.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Thank you very much for coming to the Committee. We really appreciate the evidence session. There is a lot of work to do. Thank you.

Mr Agnew: Thanks very much.