

# 'Lack of joined up thinking' on renewables as new grid rules fail to stop flow of applications



By [Katharine Hay](#)

Rural affairs correspondent

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**There is growing pressure from across rural Scotland for a pause on major energy developments until a standalone national energy plan is in place.**

Scottish community groups have claimed that new rules governing access to the electricity grid fall short of curbing the flow of renewable energy applications, despite industry leaders claiming “all zones are full” for new battery storage applications

The National Energy System Operator (NESO), which oversees connections to Britain’s power network, has introduced reforms to its grid connection queue, including a moratorium on new battery storage projects. However, the changes do not directly affect the planning system, nor do they halt applications being submitted to local authorities — a disconnect that has prompted concern among communities.

The reforms come amid growing pressure across rural Scotland for a pause on major energy developments until a standalone national energy plan is in place.

Four renewable energy conventions with representatives from dozens of community councils have taken place in the Highlands, north east and south Scotland since last summer to call on the Scottish Government to improve the current planning system.

Bob Hope, chairman of Leitholm, Eccles and Birgham Community Council in the Borders, chaired a renewable energy convention in Jedburgh last weekend. He said that NESO’s reforms had yet to make any discernible difference to the number of applications being lodged.

“NESO has told us how much electricity we need from wind farms and how much from battery storage, and each region has been given quotas,” he said.

“But despite that, the Scottish Government is still encouraging developers to submit applications.

“People are affected even by the prospect of developments that may never be built.”

Mr Hope said while his members knew the transition to clean energy was necessary, the disconnect was symptomatic of a lack of joined-up strategy on renewables development.

“If this had been planned properly, there wouldn’t be a problem,” he said.

“If government said this is how much battery storage we need in the south of Scotland, this is why, and we will work with communities to decide where it should go — that would make sense. People could live with that.”



Energy bills for both households and businesses are to rise yet again in January Picture: Michael Gillen

John Williams, chairman of Heriot Community Council, echoed the criticism, describing the absence of a “proper, planned policy” that accounted for local impacts.

“At the moment, connection to the National Grid is not part of the planning application,” he said.

“I think it should be.”

Industry figures, however, said that the reforms will lead to a shift towards connecting “what we need.”

Grace Millman, just transition and communities lead at the clean energy consultancy Regen, said NESO was moving away from a “first come, first served” approach.

“NESO is prioritising projects that have been through the planning process and been granted approval – moving to a strategic approach that only connects what we need,” she said.

Regen, an independent non-profit, engaged closely with NESO as part of its connection reform work, drawing on its insight into how many energy developments had been submitted to local authority planners.

Ms Millman said: “Previously, the connection queue was formed on a first-come, first-served basis, meaning ready-to-go projects could get stuck behind other developments moving more slowly and, in the case of battery storage, we had way more projects in the queue than we need for Clean Power 2030.

“So that's what these reforms are supposed to do, it's a shift to thinking about what we actually need to connect in order to meet our net zero targets, where we need to do that, and which projects are ready to connect.

“Scotland has enough battery and onshore wind developments with planning permission already granted to meet this plan, so the focus is now on getting these built and focusing new development in other areas of the UK.”

According to NESO’s grid reform guidance, no new battery storage projects will be permitted until existing schemes progress and a future application window opens. It states that “all zones are full”, with the highest concentration of battery projects in southern Scotland.

NESO also confirmed that Scotland is already above its target for onshore wind generation for the UK as a whole.

Under the next round of grid connections, only Scottish wind projects with specific protections — such as planning consent — will be eligible, while England and Wales will be open to new “ready” projects.

NESO stressed that it has no role in planning decisions.

A spokesperson said: “Transforming the grid connections process is a vital first step in unlocking the capacity needed for a secure, affordable energy transition. The scale of generation and storage projects in the pipeline had grown tenfold in the last five years, exceeding 700GW, four times the amount needed to deliver Clean Power by 2030.

“The new connections process has identified a strategic pipeline of projects required to deliver on Great Britain’s future energy needs up to 2035, prioritising ready-to-build projects where they are needed most.

“This should not be confused with the planning process which is a question for Government and is separate to the management of the energy connections process that is administered by NESO and network operators.”

Projects not prioritised for delivery by 2030 or 2035 will not receive grid contracts but may reapply in future, NESO said.

Given the oversubscription of battery storage, future projects would require existing schemes to leave the pipeline or to benefit from special designation. Developments that already have planning permission will continue to be built.

When asked if the new connection regulations would inform decisions made by Scotland’s Energy Consents Unit, a spokesperson for the Scottish Government said: “There is no change as to how an application for Electricity Act consent will be processed, considered, or determined.

“All applications will continue to be considered on their merits on a case-by-case basis, in accordance with the Electricity Act, any relevant regulations, and taking into account all material considerations.

NESO is currently developing a Strategic Spatial Energy Plan (SSEP), which was co-commissioned by the Scottish Government.

A spokesperson said: “Following publication of the SSEP, the Scottish Government will consider whether it would be appropriate to amend the National Planning Framework 4, National Marine Plan or sectoral adopted marine plans.”