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Accelerating the Renewable Energy Transition

While delivering for nature and communities:

Recommendations to UK policy-makers

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a global non-profit organisation operating in over 75 countries to tackle the challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss. We support a rapid and responsible renewable energy transition to address these twin challenges: we work with partners across multiple sectors to achieve this, including supporting the global campaign for tripling renewable energy by 2030 and championing a nature-positive transition. Our 'Site Renewables Right' work in the US, India, and Europe demonstrates that smart siting is the key to accelerating renewable energy deployment while protecting biodiversity and community rights.

To reach the UK's climate, Net Zero, and energy security targets, and unlock the potential benefits for economic investment across the country, we need to rapidly accelerate deployment of renewable energy while also delivering for biodiversity and local people. **The renewable rollout can be achieved while safeguarding nature and communities.**

By implementing innovative regulatory, administrative, and development solutions to do so, we can speed up that transition and build confidence with developers, investors and local stakeholders that clear, credible, and consistent criteria are in place to ensure that renewables are sited responsibly.

TNC believes that **siting on low-impact, low-conflict sites can mitigate impacts on biodiversity and help accelerate the renewable roll-out** through reduced delays and development costs, delivering benefits for consumers, businesses, and job creation across the country.

TNC has identified a number of recommendations for policymakers that can address the barriers to accelerating the transition to renewable energy systems and unlocking the benefits for people, nature, and planet:

1. **Identifying Renewable Energy Acceleration Areas**
2. **Developing a national toolkit for onshore renewable planning and development**
3. **Optimising land use**
4. **Rewarding market leaders through introducing clear biodiversity criteria in Non-price Factors**
5. **Favour repowering of established sites based on existing land use baselines**

1. Identifying Renewable Energy Acceleration Areas

Current restrictive planning regulations for onshore wind, which have held the UK back from unlocking the huge potential of wind energy, should be removed, placing onshore wind on a level playing field with other energy infrastructure. As the following recommendations set out, tools and approaches exist to ensure onshore wind can be delivered in a site-sensitive way that can also benefit local communities and biodiversity.

One such tool is the identification of Renewable Energy Acceleration Areas. Spatial mapping and planning methodologies can proactively identify suitable areas for renewable energy where impact on wildlife and communities is likely to be low and which can be fast-tracked for risk assessment and permitting. Pre-identified low-impact **Renewable Energy Acceleration Areas front-load socio-environmental risk assessment**, thereby de-risking investment for developers and local communities and cutting planning times. This does not forego the need for rigorous Environmental Impact Assessments and community consultation, but could help to speed up permitting processes. Where possible, brownfield or already degraded sites should be prioritised for renewable energy siting and accelerated permitting, reducing impacts on nature and communities.

A nation-wide mapping exercise, combined with a national framework for identifying suitable Renewable Energy Acceleration Areas could provide Local Planning Authorities with a mandate to ensure more efficient permitting processes for fast-tracking renewable technologies in locally-appropriate Acceleration Areas in Local Development Plans or Local Area Energy Plans.

Common, consistent methodologies would build confidence among local decision-makers, planners, communities, and developers in a new generation of onshore renewable sites that will unlock economic investment and jobs across all regions and accelerate progress towards net zero. The concept of pre-screening for biodiversity and social risks has been endorsed by IUCN and many industry actors.

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2. Developing a national toolkit for onshore renewable planning and development

Lack of capacity for siting and planning in Local Authorities is a primary obstacle to the acceleration of onshore renewables. Just 11% of Local Authorities have identified suitable sites for onshore wind in their local plans.[1]

To support Local Authorities to build internal capacity and ensure a consistent, trusted, high-integrity approach to proactive identification and development of local renewable energy projects, TNC proposes that the UK should develop a **common, consistent, clear, credible methodology at a national level to help identify suitable renewable energy sites**. Alongside extra funding for spatial planners and ecologists, such a toolkit should support local authorities to:

- **proactively identify suitable areas** for onshore renewable energy, based on a nation-wide mapping exercise using the latest technology for geospatial mapping and socio-ecological land use indicators. For example, the work of the Geospatial Commission through the National Land Data Programme provides an example of how geospatial data can support decision making for land use planning;
- **execute credible and clear EIAs** that ensure biodiversity and nature are not sacrificed for energy and climate goals;
- **conduct community engagement** to assess local support for renewable siting, following guidance previously produced by DESNZ for community engagement;
- **conduct ongoing monitoring** of impacts;
- and **plan for repowering and life-extensions**.

Such a toolkit would accelerate development of renewable energy in low-impact areas, cutting planning delays and costs, and increasing investment in communities in all regions. The toolkit should be developed in collaboration with local authorities, civil society, developers, and government to ensure the needs of all stakeholders are met. It could also support local authorities in planning for **multifunctional land use** of onshore wind and solar sites, with co-benefits for agriculture, leisure and wellbeing, and nature.

1. Windemer, R. (2022). The impact of the 2015 onshore wind policy change for local planning authorities in England: preliminary results. UWE Bristol. Available: https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/9206381

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3. Optimising land use

Accelerating the renewable transition while ensuring low impacts on biodiversity, communities, food production, and other land uses would be enabled by a **national land use framework.** This would facilitate a **comprehensive, evidence-led, and collaborative approach to land use planning,** including renewable energy, nature restoration, and food security.

TNC recommends the establishment of **a Taskforce on Land Optimisation for Renewables**, bringing together different sectors and land users to explore **co-location**. Supported by open-source data and land use and marine spatial planning, co-location has the potential to mitigate pressures on UK land. Co-location, for example science-based deployment of agri-photovoltaics, which combines agriculture or pastoral farming with solar panels, can **reduce pressure on limited land resources and generate increased income for farmers** through exporting energy to the grid. In the case of offshore infrastructure, multi-functional sea use can ease pressure on the UK's seas and harness multiple benefits of marine resources, supporting fishing industries and coastal communities.

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4. Reward market leaders through introducing clear biodiversity criteria in Non-price Factors:

Introducing **non-price factors (NPFs)** for biodiversity and community development into leasing auctions and Contracts for Difference auctions would encourage developers to consider nature and local communities from the outset of developing their proposals, while rewarding ambitious and progressive developers and de-risking nature-positive developments. Countries including the Netherlands and Germany have successfully introduced such NPFs in offshore wind auctions.

TNC encourages the use of nature and biodiversity related NPFs. This has the potential to incentivise and reinforce best practices already being implemented by leaders and first-movers, sending clearer market signals, rewarding market leaders, and supporting the UK to become a world leader in nature-positive renewable design and development.

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5. Favour repowering of established sites based on existing land use baselines

Repowering of renewable energy installations coming to their end of their life will become increasingly common and will be essential for the UK to meet long-term net zero and energy security targets. TNC therefore recommends that the National Planning Policy Framework clarifies that the **baseline of the current use of the site** should be used for assessing repowering and life-extension applications. Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) should therefore be cumulative, considering previous impacts, and potential impacts of the proposed repowering. Projects that have had incommensurately high impacts during operation would therefore not be repowered.

A presumption in favour of repowering based on a baseline of current land use will avoid uncertainty and ensure long-term progress towards net zero, allow Local Authorities to make long-term plans for land use, and create an enabling environment for investment in renewable energy and the circular economy.

The UK can demonstrate global leadership in accelerating decarbonisation while ensuring the highest standards for safeguarding nature and community interests. The recommendations from TNC could help to speed up the renewable transition, and the associated benefits for energy security, consumers, businesses, job creation, and the climate, while addressing concerns over land-use conflicts and impacts on biodiversity.

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