

**Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate, Energy and
Environment
Wednesday 10th December 2025**

Presented by Clare O'Connor, Friends of the Earth - on behalf of The Society of St Vincent de Paul, National Women's Council of Ireland, Disability Federation of Ireland, Irish Rural Link, Social Justice Ireland, and One Family.

Introduction

We are presenting this opening statement on behalf of multiple civil society organisations working on energy poverty.

We believe that the positive policy focus we saw on energy poverty in recent years due to the cost of living crisis should be retained into the future. It is essential to frame this discussion not solely in terms of energy affordability, but in terms of energy poverty, which is a long-term problem with clear, structural causes. The causes of energy poverty are low incomes, high energy costs, and poor energy efficiency. I will address each of these and put forward solutions which we have collectively developed, while also noting the structural inequalities that often determine who is at the highest risk of energy deprivation.

We are concerned that the previous Energy Poverty Action Plan, in which our group played an active part, has been replaced with an Energy Affordability Action Plan, which has excluded civil society to date. While affordability for the general population matters, it must not dilute the State's responsibility to tackle the structural drivers of energy poverty or to ensure a fair transition away from fossil fuels.

This group believes that there is an urgent need for both targeted supports and long-term solutions that ensure that the energy transition does not result in a two-tier energy system, whereby higher-income households can benefit from cheaper, cleaner energy, while others remain left behind in cold, damp homes, dependent on increasingly expensive fossil fuels. Recent research from Pobal shows this divide is already emerging, with households in the most disadvantaged areas almost five times less likely to use renewable energy than those in the most affluent communities.¹

Structural Inequalities

Already, many of our organisations are seeing increased requests for support from households struggling with energy costs. We are supporting people in cold, dark homes, scared to turn on the heat; households who must turn on the heat for medical needs or reasons of vulnerability, who dread receiving their energy bills; and families with children, skipping meals to keep their

¹ Pobal (2025) *Renewable Energy and Deprivation: Investigating the Relationship between Area-Level Deprivation and Household Renewable Energy Usage using the Pobal HP Deprivation Index*
<https://www.pobal.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/250298-Renewable-Energy-Research-Report-2025-FINAL-190925.pdf>

meters topped up. Research suggests that households' experience of energy poverty this winter will have long-term impacts on their health and wellbeing. For the children in these homes, a recent longitudinal analysis from UCD has linked energy poverty to lower educational outcomes for affected children, with cumulative effects on older children, particularly for their mental health².

It must be noted that energy poverty is closely correlated with poverty generally, which must be addressed with renewed political urgency. Each of the drivers of energy poverty should be viewed in the context of wider inequalities and vulnerabilities. Data from recent household surveys, the Pobal deprivation index, and the 2022 census finds that the groups most likely to have low incomes, poor building efficiency, and higher energy costs - and therefore are most impacted by energy poverty - are: one-parent families, the Traveller community, disabled people, people with long-term health problems, those needing end-of-life care at home such as cancer patients, older people, those with caring responsibilities, migrant families, and rural households.³ Any strategy to address energy poverty or affordability must specifically target these groups. It must collect data and measure the impacts of its actions, and must identify and deliver targeted support to address income gaps and related barriers to retrofitting. We call on the committee to write to the Minister to ensure that any taskforce established to tackle energy affordability or poverty contains both civil society and lived experience representation.

Income and Energy Supports

For low-income households, energy costs take up a far larger share of disposable income. Some households also have higher energy requirements (often year round, though exacerbated during the winter period) due to disability or ill-health. Our organisations are supporting households struggling with rising energy arrears to keep their homes safe and warm. Many households, particularly those on pre-payment meters, are rationing their energy use to avoid self-disconnecting from electricity and heat. We see households cutting back on food, medical needs, or turning the heating off to deal with this - with potentially catastrophic health consequences.

We recommend the committee put forward the following solutions for the upcoming Energy Affordability Action Plan:

² Da Silva Pedroso, M., Winston, N. Dingley, O. et al. (2025). Improving Child Wellbeing: The Effects of Transport and Residential Energy Poverty on Education and Mental Health of Children and Adolescents. *Child Indicators Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-025-10284-0>

³ See for example [Survey on Income and Living Conditions \(SILC\): Enforced Deprivation 2024](#). 2024 SILC data shows that last year:

- One in five people in single-adult households with children went without heating due to lack of money
- Unemployed people and people unable to work due to long-standing health problems were more likely to be unable to afford to keep their homes adequately warm. i. One in ten unemployed people and 11.4% of people unable to work due to long-standing health problems were unable to keep their home adequately warm, compared to the national average of 4.9%.
- People living in rented or rent-free accommodation were more likely to experience heating-related deprivation than those in owner-occupied homes

- Increase and benchmark the Fuel Allowance so that it restores lost purchasing power and aligns with actual energy prices and needs.
- Introduce an Energy Guarantee Scheme⁴, ensuring everyone can meet basic energy needs. This scheme would be based on an adequate standard of warmth and take into account factors such as income, energy efficiency, and energy prices.
- Provide additional targeted supports for households most at risk of, and already in, energy poverty, similar to the extra lump-sum payments made to Fuel Allowance recipients under previous Cost of Living measures. While universal energy credits provided much-needed support to many households, they were not targeted. Any future supports must be directed specifically toward energy-poor households and accompanied by long-term, dependable structural changes.
- Social welfare rates must be indexed or benchmarked annually, to a level above the poverty line which takes account of inflation and wage growth. The MESL can also provide a guide⁵.
- Introduce a Cost of Disability payment to support people with disabilities who are more at risk of energy poverty and often require higher usage.

High Energy Costs & Fossil Fuel Dependence

The EU Commission's 2025 'Country Specific Report' highlighted concerns that energy poverty has increased in Ireland in recent years, and that we had the third highest household consumer electricity prices in the EU⁶. High energy costs, as a result of Ireland's fossil fuel dependence, must be addressed. As long as both our national energy system and households remain dependent on imported oil, gas, and solid fuels, they will remain exposed to global price shocks beyond their control. Ireland's energy costs are high due to our reliance on gas, high PSO levies, an ageing grid and poor interconnectivity with Europe. Until Ireland can reduce reliance on fossil fuels, particularly gas in electricity generation, and take advantage of indigenous renewable electricity by electrifying heating and transport, we will be exposed to volatile commodity prices and geopolitical shocks. A fair energy transition away from fossil fuels where lower income and vulnerable households can directly feel the benefits, must be prioritised.

High household energy costs also arise from household-specific factors, including:

- medical energy needs, where people undergoing medical treatment or living with chronic illness require constant heating,
- vulnerability-related heating needs, such as for older people, disabled people, or families with young children,
- rural households who rely on expensive fossil fuels including solid fuels, kerosene or bottled gas and have limited access to alternatives.

⁴ O'Carroll, N. (2023). "Research Note: Energy Guarantee." Vincentian MESL Research Centre. <https://budgeting.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Energy-Guarantee-Research-Note-.pdf>

⁵ See <https://budgeting.ie/> for more on the Minimum Essential Standard of Living.

⁶ European Commission (2025), 2025 Country Report – Ireland, p. 99.

We recommend:

- Expand the definition of “Vulnerable Customer” to include financially vulnerable, as committed to in the 2022 Energy Poverty Action Plan, but is yet to be legislated for.
- A plan for a socially-just phase-out of fossil fuel heating be included in the National Building Renovation Plan, as committed to in the Climate Action Plan, and in line with Energy Performance of Buildings Directive (EPBD) requirements, ensuring that those who switch to renewable solutions are not paying more than their fossil-fuel counterparts
- As committed in the Programme for Government, target older homes dependent on oil for retrofitting and renewable heating solutions, explicitly excluding funding for false, unsustainable solutions such as Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil (HVO).

Energy Efficiency

Ireland’s least efficient homes are overwhelmingly occupied by those least able to upgrade them. The groups outlined above are disproportionately living in cold, damp, or inefficient housing, and are as a result exposed to increased likelihood of negative health impacts including indoor air pollution, and respiratory and cardiovascular disease. Renters in the private rental sector, in particular, remain effectively locked out of energy efficiency and renewable energy supports, while experiencing significantly higher levels of energy deprivation than homeowners. In 2024, people in rented accommodation were:

- More than twice as likely as owner-occupied homes to go without heating at some point in the year (13.2% vs 6.0%).
- More than three times as likely to be unable to afford to keep their home adequately warm (9.4% vs 2.9%).

Yet they cannot access most upgrade schemes, and there is no obligation on their landlords to act. Equally, groups on lower incomes cannot afford to, or are not permitted to avail of retrofit or solar panel grants, given the upfront cost involved. This is leaving a large section of the population behind in the energy transition.

To address this, we recommend:

- Scaling up funding for the SEAI Warmer Homes retrofitting scheme so that households in energy poverty are prioritised⁷, and expanding eligibility to include, at the very least, HAP and RAS tenants, on condition of a long-term lease (5+ years) being offered to the tenant.
- Facilitating greater participation of landlords in existing retrofit schemes to improve energy efficiency in the private rental sector, with dedicated supports for this also contingent on security of tenure for existing tenants.

⁷ Data released by the SEAI in 2025 show that just 7,700 of the 53,000 homes grant-aided for retrofitting in 2024 were fully funded under the Warmer Homes scheme.
<https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-climate-energy-and-the-environment/press-releases/government-supported-nearly-54000-home-energy-upgrades-through-seai-in-2024/>

- Resourcing the National Building Renovation Plan - of which a draft is due to the European Commission by 31st December 2025 - and ensuring it includes the required meaningful focus on energy poverty, deep renovations, renovation passports, and priority access for those most at risk.
- Prioritising marginalised households - including Traveller families, disabled people, older people, rural households, and people with serious illness - within retrofit and heat decarbonisation programmes, to ensure these households benefit first from upgrades and renewable heat.
- All social housing should be prioritised for retrofitting, and fitted with solar PV, which would lower the electricity costs of those households substantially.

Energy efficiency is the most durable, long-term way to reduce bills, improve health, and meet climate targets. But it will only achieve these outcomes if the people who need it most can access it first. This access must include, where necessary, training and education to ensure households see the benefits of energy efficiency.

Finally, we are asking that the committee writes to the Minister to ensure that the new Energy Affordability Action Plan is put on a statutory footing, with clear, measurable, and time-bound targets to reduce energy poverty, and strong governance that includes civil society and people with lived experience of energy poverty.