

Transitioning to a Low Carbon climate resilient Society: Proposal for Community Engagement

By,

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Introduction

The challenge of transitioning the country to a Low Carbon climate resilient Society is one of the greatest challenges that is faced by the country, requiring not just action at national and international levels but, most importantly, it requires significant actions and ongoing, long-term, deep engagement at local community level.

Structures now exist at national level, such as the National Adaptation Steering Committee and the High-Level Climate Action Steering Committee. Local authorities and regional assemblies are involved in these structures. There are also Climate Action Regional Offices (CARO's), which are being supported by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (DCCAE) and report into the National Local Authority Climate Action Steering Committee. Separately, the National Dialogue on Climate Action is hosting a series of regional and local meetings across Ireland to generate awareness, engagement and a motivation to act, in relation to the challenges presented by climate change. [Sustainable Energy Communities \(SEC's\)](#) are supported by [the Sustainable Authority of Ireland](#) and these are locally-based voluntary committees that support local initiatives in relation to energy (efficiency, use of renewables, applications for grant aid etc.) but they lack the resources to effect the required changes.

While the [Local Authority Adaptation Strategy Development Guidelines \(December 2018\)](#) is a great step forward in addressing the local authorities' responsibilities at county level, the focus of the current structures and strategy development guidelines is predominantly on adaptation, not mitigation. And they do not address the on-going need to achieve a significant behavioural change at local community level.

This will require some specific guidelines and new dedicated resources and structures to be provided at local community level, along with some conditions to be included in the Renewable Energy Support Scheme, to support local community-owned energy companies.

A specific legal requirement for local authorities to address climate change is required

With the scale of the challenges facing the country in meeting its emission reduction targets to help address climate change, local authorities should be specifically mandated (by law, possibly through an amendment to the Climate Change Act 2015) to make provision for addressing climate change and they should be required to resource this adequately.

While accepting that the role of the Climate Action Regional Offices (CARO's), is evolving and will help in addressing the local authorities' responsibilities, the role of the CARO's in relation to outreach, behavioural change (particularly at community level) and active research, appears to be very limited

and this should be addressed by including these responsibilities in their brief and also resourcing them adequately to do this.

Local authorities should be required to establish and resource a department or unit (like they did a few years ago to deal with tourism). County-wide targets for addressing climate change and climate mitigation should be set that reflect the national targets. As part of this process, local authorities should be mandated to facilitate and actively support engagement with local communities and others in addressing these challenges. They should be mandated to report annually (publicly) on progress in achieving the targets.

The climate change challenge requires greater resources for local engagement

Currently, Government, some State bodies and various committees are addressing the challenges of climate change at national level. While there is a widespread acknowledgement that active local engagement is essential, there are very little resources being committed at local community level (i.e at a level below the county structure within local communities). In the main, there is an almost total dependency on the use of volunteers in the local community. In many cases, these volunteers are required to utilise their own personal resources to address these important community and, even, national issues.

Local engagement is currently achieved mainly through the use of [Sustainable Energy Communities \(SEC's\)](#), that are coordinated by the [Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland](#). While some great work is being done, the growing demands on these SEC's and the dependency on local volunteers is near breaking point and it is unfair to expect local volunteers, using their own personal resources, to address such significant community and national issues.

The recently-established Public Partnership Networks (PPN's) have potential to get more involved in the area of outreach and community engagement but this may require a specific reference to climate action and environment in their role.

In short, the current response to the challenges is not adequate when assessed both against the scale of the challenges and acknowledging the financial and other costs to the country of not meeting the agreed targets within the timelines. The current arrangements are highly likely to fail, unless there is an urgent and significant increase, in the quantum and quality of resources that are tasked to address community engagement in respect of climate change and a new method of engaging with local communities is established, that compliments the arrangements at local authority and regional levels.

Volunteers are required but depending on volunteers will not be adequate

The use of volunteers, while important, is simply not adequate to address the scale of the challenges being faced by the country and the urgency for the actions required. Local bodies, such as the [Local Community Development Committees \(LCDC\)](#), the local development bodies and the [Public Partnership Networks](#) provide a sub-county structure for community engagement, but there is currently no specific mandate for these bodies to address climate change. In most (if not all) cases, even if there was such a mandate, the expertise is currently unlikely to be available locally. A case could easily be made to include a requirement to address climate change as part of the role of these bodies but that would also require the provision of adequate skilled resources to be provided locally and that will take some time to deliver.

Providing the necessary local resources for community engagement

Building on the current local government structures for community engagement and the Sustainable Energy Communities, it is proposed that several options should be considered to support greater engagement at local community level.

1. Climate Action Fund

- a. Government should provide specific funding to support local community engagement under the [Climate Action Fund](#)
- b. In the next call, in 2019, there should be a specific stream addressed at local community engagement initiatives, including those outlined below

2. Local Authorities

- a. Local authorities should be specifically mandated (by law) to make provision for addressing climate change and the local authorities should be required to resource this adequately, with additional specific funding provided by the Exchequer.
- b. To keep a local authority and local community focus on delivering on the Climate Change agenda, a **Climate Change Steering Committee** should be established by each local authority, (with independent Chair and independent members with expertise in the areas, in addition to some local authority members). They should oversee the development and implementation of the local authority **Strategy for Climate Change** and report annually on progress, particularly in relation to the local community efforts across the county.
- c. Each local authority should be required to establish a **Climate Change Unit** (if not already established), led by a **Climate Change Officer**, who has the necessary authority, expertise and resources to implement the Climate Change Strategy on behalf of the local authority. This Unit should focus on supporting local communities across the county in addressing climate change and should also support the Climate Change Steering Committee in its role and liaise with the Climate Action Regional Offices.
- d. A national **Network of Climate Change Officers** should be established , possibly similar to the [Local Authorities Water Communities Office \(LAWCO\), that addresses implementation of the Water Framework Directive. The Network should report jointly to the National Local Authority Climate Action Steering Group and the National Adaptation Steering Committee.](#)

3. Sub-Local Authority structures

- a. The mandates of Local Community Development Committees (LCDC), local development bodies and local Public Partnership Networks should be amended to include a specific requirement for community engagement in respect of climate change. They should be required to support and, where possible, facilitate local groups (both community and issue specific groups addressing climate change) and, more generally, to support local communities in addressing climate change issues, including some financial and other resources.
- b. New specific funding streams should be provided (with additional Exchequer funding) to support initiatives in the local community for addressing climate change. These should be structured similar to current funding streams and subject to the standard governance and accounting rules but aimed at having measurable impacts in the local communities.
- c. Specific funding for cooperative initiatives involving different community and other groups (including educational bodies) and aimed at raising the understanding of climate change issues and/or addressing particular issues, should also be provided.

4. Sustainable Energy Communities (SEC's)

- a. Provide specific funding to [Sustainable Energy Communities](#) (SEC) to enable them to build on the excellent work that has been done to date by funding and resourcing the following:

- i. Core operating costs for the running the SEC – which are not currently funded and which is a source of annoyance and concern to SEC members, who often must fund the SEC expenses from their own resources.
 - ii. Community Engagement Officer/s (full-time post/s) – to support the required level of engagement in the local community, by engaging across the community on an ongoing basis. The appointed people should be required to possess both adequate technical and community development skills.
 - iii. Programme costs to enable engagement with the local community through the provision of training, education, drop-in and mobile Climate Change Centres, local support and other local initiatives.
- b. As Sustainable Energy Communities (SEC's) oversee the development of an Energy Master Plan for the SEC and then identify opportunities for specific projects to be undertaken that may be eligible for Government grant aid, there will be a need to develop new local structures and a body to undertake the various projects. It is proposed that the local SEC's engage with a Local Energy Agency to undertake these projects in a cost effective and technically efficient manner.

5. Local Energy Agencies (LEA's)

- a. In order to ensure that there is a robust supporting mechanism for citizens, communities and business in the energy transition, a funding mechanism should be designed that allows for local Government to ensure that these services are available to citizens via a local energy agency or similar.
- b. Several very successful agencies (CODEMA, 3 Counties Energy Agency, Tipperary Energy Agency) exist, in addition to a few local authorities that provide a small amount of outreach services. In this context a program that seeks to build on the success, while ensuring the full coverage of all counties and provision of all services etc, should be realised. For example, Three Counties Energy Agency has significant transport expertise, CODEMA has significant energy performance contracting expertise and Tipperary Energy Agency has significant building services and deep retrofit skills, all of which could be shared with others.

The funding program could have the following characteristics:

- A fund per county for core funding of a Local Energy Agency (LEA) with overheads (for example, €4 per population covered – max. cost €20 million, if all drawn down)
 - Minimum of 1 Technical Expert (Manager); 1 Administrator, 1 Engagement and Communications Expert; 1 Community Development Expert.
 - Local Authority to be required to apply as the leader of a consortium
 - Requirement for involvement of Local Authority, Local Development Body, Local Education and Training Board, Higher Education Institution and existing Local Energy Agency.
- Who should not be involved:
 - Energy supply companies
 - Private companies
 - Single entities
- Any application must include a Business Plan.
- Must be transparent and operate in line with public procurement and recruitment policies. All staff roles should be required to have independent interview boards and all work should be tendered publicly.

- There could be one Local Energy Agency per county, or they could be regional, with local authorities partnering together
 - Minimum population coverage needed should be approximately 100,000 – 200,000 and geographic coverage should be such that the LEA is easily accessible to the area covered.
- Maximum of 40% of funding can be Exchequer (due to State Aid limitations) so 100% funding should be provided for the first 2 years for new entities and then reduced to 40%
 - SEAI governance and accountability arrangements continue for main programs for investment, as exists currently
 - Utilise Better Energy Communities (BEC)/ Deep retrofit / LEADER etc. programs for funding on a competitive basis.
 - May work commercially but must be at commercial rates and may not be financed through core funding (core staff cannot do for-profit work).
- National curriculum for specific training program, funding etc. to ensure skilled staff are available and run locally in conjunction with local Education and Training Board and HEI's, as appropriate
 - Must allow some to fail, and new ones to be reborn if they do. Minimum Target TCO₂ (not stretching, but not allow sitting on fence) reported through the Sustainable Energy Actions plans for the Counties (under the Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy framework).
- Must provide services to all the following groups:
 - Householders
 - Businesses
 - Communities

Some Local Energy Agencies have already begun to get involved in developing significant energy projects and, if local communities are to be fully involved in effecting the transition to low carbon at local level and receiving the benefits from such engagement, it is going to be very important that the local communities are supported in establishing local energy cooperatives and similar types of companies. In that way, the local communities benefit from and have an on-going interest in the sustainable development of their own local communities. This should also include the financial benefits from being shareholders in local renewable energy companies, through a local cooperative company.

6. Market supports for Community Energy Projects: Pilot community pot in RESS and Microgeneration

For community energy projects to be viable, they need to demonstrate that they will be able to sell the power they generate. There is no currently operational process which facilitates new community groups to sell power in Ireland. Two opportunities exist to remedy this.

- a. To support community-led and citizen-led renewable energy generation projects, it is proposed that a pilot scheme be introduced into the Renewable Energy Support Scheme (RESS 1), with a small specific part of the 'pot' ring-fenced for community-owned projects, which would enable a small number of 'shovel ready' community projects to get off the ground, and would give the sector a significant boost. This would also allow for the development of proposals for the RESS 2 auction, whereby a larger community pot could be offered that should encourage even greater engagement by local community-led renewable energy generation projects. As part of the RESS-1 process, monitoring the performance of the community-owned projects in RESS 1 could be undertaken by the Department of Communications, Climate Action

- and Environment, with a view to developing a functioning and facilitative scheme for greater community-led development to be established for RESS-2
- b. Introduce a feed-in tariff for renewable energy produced from microgeneration, to enable small scale producers to sell the excess power that they generate.

The proposed projects would deliver on several of the consistent themes that emerged from the public consultation on the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme, specifically, as outlined in the High Level Design Paper (page 9):

- i. *Very strong public and industry support for community proposals including mandatory investment opportunities for those in closest proximity to renewable electricity projects and technical, financial and infrastructural support measures for community-led RES-E projects.*
- ii. *Strong call for increasing Ireland's renewable technology diversity away from a singular reliance on onshore wind. Strong industry call for support options for the bio-energy, solar and off-shore wind sectors.*
- iii. *Very strong public support for micro generation and for fair payment for electricity generated and exported to the grid.*

7. Clear and effective narrative on Climate Action

There is a lack of clear vision, narrative and messaging around the low carbon climate resilient transition. The public is receiving mixed messages about what to do about climate change mitigation and adaptation. There are many policy contradictions, including, for example, the clash between consumerism and economic growth, on the one hand, and using less energy/resources and shopping sustainably, on the other. Similarly, there are mixed messages in relation to increasing agricultural productivity, while at the same time, reducing emissions. While some modelling has been done on the technologies available for emissions reduction pathways, this has not been accompanied by higher level visioning for either mitigation or adaptation. As a result, the public is confused when seeming contradictory messages come from different sectors, often in contradiction with each other. Most people do not understand that trade-offs between policy agendas is a common policy driver. When this is coupled with opposing messages from business and industry, together with the advertising and marketing sector, it leads to incomprehensible and non-coherent messages. All this is happening at a time when trust levels in politicians, government, businesses, the media, and academia may be seen to be eroding.

Therefore, a clear vision and narrative around climate action needs to be created, voiced and heard as a good starting point for climate action. The public needs to understand that the key climate change policy objective is to transition to low carbon climate resilience; that there is an urgency to this and it must commence immediately. They must not only understand the direction of travel but the pathways to that end point.

The National Dialogue on Climate Action, represents a promising vehicle through which this national vision and narrative should be developed. The Dialogue is already in place and is mandated to create awareness, impart information and enable the implementation of climate action. However, the Dialogue needs to be supported in the development of such an approach, through a specific task force.

Proposal for a Task Force on managing the narrative around Climate Action

- a. It is proposed that Government establish a Task Force with a focused brief and defined (short) lifespan, to explore the different options around visioning, pathways, narrative and public messaging on climate action, and to make practical recommendations that could be applied across all the bodies and agencies involved in conveying messages in relation to Climate Action.
- b. This should be coupled with sectoral specific narratives, applicable at local community level
- c. The group could include representatives of the following: National Dialogue on Climate Action, SEAI's Behavioural Economics Unit, marketing and advertising sectors, academia, Marketing Institute of Ireland, Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, media outlets, the creative arts, history, community development, social campaigns

9. Educating Public Bodies and Other Groups about Climate Action

To ensure effective community engagement and a mutual understanding of what is involved in respect of climate action, there is a requirement to educate the staff of many bodies across the public service and the broader publicly-funded bodies and groups, including staff and members of local authorities,

- a. To help these various bodies engage with the climate action process, there is a requirement for staff (and board/authority members) in these bodies to be educated and trained in respect of climate action – from what climate action is all about, to what is required of them. This will require a substantive on-going process of education and training and support should be provided for the development and delivery of such programmes.
- b. There is also a requirement for training and/or re-training of various skilled people, such as electricians, installers, fitters, plumbers, car mechanics and others, so that they can understand how climate change will affect their current jobs and how they can re-train so as to provide the necessary services that will be required to underpin the transition to low carbon.
- c. Training programmes are being developed by some of the Education and Training Boards and these could be replicated across the country.
- d. Other groups, such as community groups, sports bodies, farming organisations, trades unions, business groups and others will also require training and education in respect of climate Action. There is a requirement for this to be delivered both locally and nationally and this will be an essential pre-requisite to get effective local engagement and to ensure ongoing engagement.

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