

**Dr Ciaran Byrne, Director of National Retrofit
Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland
Opening address to the Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action
24 May 2022**

Chairperson and Joint Committee members, thank you for the invitation to attend the meeting today to discuss empowering Local Government and communities to climate action. I am joined by my colleagues:

- Brian O' Mahony, Head of National Retrofit and Community Department (Online)
- Ruth Buggie, Programme Manager, Sustainable Energy Communities
- Gillian Baker, Programme Manager, Renewable Energy Support Scheme
- Andy Fox, Programme Manager, Renewable Energy Support Scheme

I would like to thank the Committee for affording me the opportunity to present my opening statement.

Introduction

The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) is at the forefront of Ireland's clean energy transition. We are funded by the Government of Ireland, through the Department of the Environment, Climate, and Communications (DECC), and the Department of Transport. We have had a major transformative impact on the Irish economy, and in the last decade our actions have underpinned more than €1.2 billion in energy savings.

We are catalysts for action through our grant and incentive programmes, and through our capacity-building processes. Citizens, communities, businesses, and other stakeholders are at the heart of everything we deliver.

Climate Action Plan 2021

SEAI's work supports the delivery of the Climate Action Plan (CAP). The CAP outlines many actions supporting citizens and communities on their transition to a climate neutral Ireland, such as supporting sustainable energy communities, supporting existing and planned renewable energy

schemes, and enabling community-led climate action (including on microgeneration and retrofitting). The CAP commits to further strengthening the community energy framework, including community-benefit funds, and community ownership provisions, such as in the Renewable Energy Support Scheme (RESS).

It is against this backdrop that I would like to set out SEAI's priorities and actions.

Role of SEAI

SEAI delivers a number of programmes and initiatives empowering communities and enabling local climate action, including programmes such as the Communities Energy Grant (CEG), Sustainable Energy Communities (SEC), and Renewable Energy Support Scheme (RESS). In addition, SEAI works with Local Authorities on a range of other measures, such as supporting their decarbonisation journey, providing energy and data to support Local Authority Climate Action Plans, supporting community energy officers, and working with Local Authorities on decarbonisation zones.

Communities Energy Grant (CEG) Programme

The CEG programme aims to fund projects that deliver energy savings to a range of homeowners, communities, and private sector organisations. All projects applying for communities funding are required to include a community benefit to the project, and to take a cross-sectoral approach. The preference is for larger projects, which deliver significant energy savings, to assist and support smaller community projects, which may be less cost effective or require additional investment. Thus far in 2022 SEAI has received 11 applications to support energy projects, with a total value of €74.8 million. The level of grant support requested is €29.5 million. The current call for communities projects remains open for applications.

Sustainable Energy Communities (SECs)

SEAI recognises the importance of the citizen in our transition to a low carbon economy. The ongoing convergence of energy technology around the individual, and trends towards smaller scale energy generation, will give the energy citizen more power to help shape our future. It is therefore essential that we prepare society for newer technologies as we move beyond basic energy efficiency. This will see us promote new behaviours and technologies beyond early adopters, to society as a whole.

The Sustainable Energy Communities programme was set up in 2015 to support communities in

the transition to a low carbon society. Communities are provided with a range of supports as they develop along SEAI's three-stage journey of "Learn- Plan -Do".

- The "Learn" stage is the SEC Network where communities are supported via mentoring and through a peer to peer network.
- The "Plan" stage is the development of local energy master plans with 100% financial support from SEAI, and the development of a register of opportunities of projects that best suit the community.
- The "Do" stage involves actioning what communities can achieve, with support from SEAI programmes, in particular the Communities Energy Grant.

The 2019 Climate Action Plan set a target of 500 SECs Network members by 2025 and 1,500 by 2030. Currently the SEC Network has 655 communities nationwide, and there are 12 local authority members within the Network.

Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS)

There is a new range of supports for communities who wish to develop a community electricity generation project for inclusion in the RESS auction. These supports include a combination of grants and trusted advisors who guide the projects through this process. SEAI have also developed an excellent online toolkit of supports and information on the key aspects of renewable energy including wind, solar, planning, and grid.

RESS Community Benefit Funds

Another aspect of RESS which SEAI are responsible for is the management of the Community Benefit Fund national register. All RESS projects, both Commercial and Community, must pay € 2 per MWh of electricity generated into these funds. The register has two main objectives;

- It will act as a transparent information resource for communities to identify where significant sources of funding are available in their localities,
- It will also have a central registration and reporting system which can be monitored for compliance.

Over the lifetime of RESS the value of Community Benefit Funding is estimated to be in the region of €750 million. This is a significant investment in local communities from renewable energy projects.

Local Authorities

Additionally, SEAI support Local Authorities through the development of Local Authority Renewable Energy Strategies (LARES). LARES aims to facilitate consistency of approach to spatial planning for renewable energy by local and regional planning authorities, guiding the preparation of renewable energy strategies, and assisting local authorities in developing robust, coordinated, and sustainable strategies in accordance with national and European obligations.

The SEAI Public Sector Programme provides a range of supports to public bodies in the delivery of their 2030 targets. Local Authorities are actively engaged in partnership delivery of a range of pathfinder projects supported by SEAI.

SEAI also provide a range of best practice guides, energy reporting advice, supports for energy performance contracting, dedicated energy advisors, and energy management training and mentoring to Local Authorities.

In addition, every Local Authority has been asked to select a pilot decarbonisation zone, and SEAI worked closely alongside the Department of Housing to develop draft Management Guidelines for these zones. The majority of locations identified as Decarbonization Zones are supported by existing Sustainable Energy Communities in place in these locations.

Conclusion

We recognise the challenge in empowering Irelands citizens in the transition to a carbon-free future. We passionately believe the clean energy transition must happen urgently; and we stand ready to support all of Irish society on this journey. Our programmes are far reaching and have a proven ability to support and enable climate action. We are ambitious in our strategy to strengthen these platforms of engagement, as the challenges ahead require us to work at pace and to deliver ever greater results, learnings, and improvements in collaboration with key stakeholders.

Our thanks to our colleagues in the Department of Environment, Climate Action, and Communications for their continued support and close collaboration. I welcome discussion with the Committee, and my colleagues and I are happy to answer any questions you may wish to raise.

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