

The Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate Action
Wednesday 16th January 2019

Opening Statement

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Chairperson, Committee Members, thank you for the invitation to come before you today. This is the first time that RTÉ has been invited to attend before this particular committee, and we welcome the opportunity to engage with national legislators and policy makers on this important issue.

As I understand it the purpose of this committee session, is to explore some of the ways in which RTÉ can contribute to the broader discussions and awareness relating to climate change. In that regard, this engagement is especially timely, as it coincides with a range of editorial opportunities we are exploring at this time.

As Ireland's leading national public service media entity, RTÉ plays a unique role in Irish life and society. With a 94% weekly reach across all adults in the country across our services, we continue to play a central role in the national conversations – a position that we never take for granted. As a dual funded broadcaster, RTÉ receives approximately 50% of its overall operating costs from licence fee collected from the public, and for that, RTÉ must deliver against a very wide ranging remit which includes national and international news coverage, provision of an Irish language media service, the provision of online services, orchestras and performing groups, a national media archive, and the coverage of national sports.

RTÉ plays a trusted and important role in informing Irish citizens and in shaping national debate. Coverage of climate change and environmental issues has been regularly reflected in both News and Current Affairs coverage, and across many other different types of programming. A cursory review of coverage over the past six months on this issue demonstrates that RTÉ is making genuine efforts to engage with this subject across a diverse range of output and from a wide range of perspectives. Apart from dedicated reportage in long running programmes such as *Eco-Eye*, or consistent analysis and reports from our correspondent George Lee, the topic is well reflected in output which ranges from: bespoke children's games and programmes on RTÉjr; current affairs debate (on radio and on television); longform articles and opinion pieces on RTE.ie; exploration of the moral and ethical considerations on programmes in worship and faith-related programmes; and putting the topic in more localised context in output such as *Big Week on The Farm* and *Science Week on RTÉ*. Beyond that the more global impacts are reflected in programmes such as *This Week* and *What in the World*.

Efforts are being made to make the topic relevant, accessible, and in regular focus in relevant sectoral debates such as those on programmes such as *Countrywide*, or *Ear to the Ground*. The subject has also been well represented in various political debate programmes such as *Drivetime*, *Today with Sean O'Rourke*, *Late Debate*, or *Saturday with Cormac Ó hEadra*. It has also featured on primetime flagship entertainment programmes such as *The Late Late Show* – with questions on this issue being raised with former President Mary Robinson, and the Taoiseach as but two recent examples.

The topic of climate change can be perceived as complex and somewhat removed from day to day life. But in terms of our own editorial contribution, we are trying our best to ensure that it is explored and discussed from many perspectives to meet the needs of different audiences.

That is not to say that there is room for complacency. The coverage of climate change, and other sustainability topics, are a matter of ongoing review in terms of our editorial activities, and we have renewed ambition in this regard for 2019. By way of example, some of our plans include making it be theme of one of our Big Picture projects (a themed week of programming exploring a particular topic with depth and range across the unique range of multiplatform services that RTÉ offers). Giving a single topic such concentrated focus and amplification can deliver significant impacts in terms of public attention and action. We are also looking at our lifestyle programming to explore ways in which we can make some of the mitigating actions seem more relevant, more accessible. Given the growing levels of public interest and concern around this issue, the topic of climate change will be a thematic priority in our news and current affairs coverage. And we are exploring partnerships and imaginative approaches in terms of messaging this to younger audiences through our RTÉjr services (the only dedicated national children's media service in the country).

However, notwithstanding our own reach and remit (and the importance of national media in general), I would caution that if there is an ambition at a broader political level, to create mass awareness on climate change and related corrective action, there is no substitute for bespoke public information campaigns, and a correlating level of leadership actions and policy implementation. The state routinely and effectively develops public information campaigns – focused on communicating clear, easily understood, pathways to practical action by citizens around broad areas such as healthy living, road safety, nutrition, etc. While such campaigns, to be effective must be accompanied by substantive and coherent policies and incentives, they are essential in bringing about the broad understanding critical to changing behaviour.

As a broader point, if there is little by way of action on climate change in terms of legislative change, policy initiatives, parliamentary debate and business innovation; regrettably there is less for the media as a whole to report on.

And yet perhaps this is one of the other ways in which RTÉ can demonstrate its value. The work of RTÉ is only possible with the support of Irish citizens; and it exists to serve the needs of those citizens. Among those needs is the requirement for an independent media voice which will hold the powerful to account – on what they are doing; and what they are not.

Arising from their wide-ranging deliberations, the Citizens' Assembly have delivered a focussed range of cogent recommendations for action. There are clearly ways in which as a country, as a society and at an individual level we can make a contribution. And I can assure you that RTÉ is keen to play its part within this framework, and within this conversation.

Thank you for your attention, and we look forward to addressing any questions that you may have.