

Department of Rural and Community Development Opening Statement

I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to address you here this afternoon.

I welcome the opportunity to address the Committee on the Department's role and in particular on the contribution that we are making, and can make, to the overall national effort on Climate Action.

The Department of Rural and Community Development was established by Government in July 2017. Its stated mission is *"to promote rural and community development and to support vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities throughout Ireland"*.

Climate change is an issue that will impact Ireland at a national, regional and community level. Whether it is farming, forestry, fisheries, tourism or recreation, rural communities are effected by the quality of the environment and are impacted on by its degradation. We have all witnessed over recent times how adverse weather conditions have a profound effect on those whose livelihoods depend on the elements.

While the Department does not have a direct role in mitigating Greenhouse Gas emissions from energy, agriculture or transport, our core mission enables us to play an important role in supporting the transition to a low carbon future.

Supporting the development of resilient and sustainable communities is at the heart of the Department's mission.

This is also at the heart of the challenge facing us in addressing climate change.

Through a range of programmes, policies, supports and investments, the Department seeks to promote balanced regional development and economic opportunity, the diversification of rural economies, the enhancement of towns and villages as attractive places to live, the strengthening of communities, community life and opportunities for active local civic participation and decision making.

- We are providing direct support for volunteering, social enterprise and social innovation.

- We are investing directly in locally generated ideas and initiatives in the green economy and in facilitating community ownership of projects, both literally and in terms of input into development strategies at local level.
- We are helping people in accessing locally based job opportunities.

All of these supports are at the core of delivering on the Department's mission to support vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities and all of these objectives are essential elements of a low carbon future.

I want to give some specific examples of the relevant policies, programmes, projects and supports that I am referring to.

The LEADER programme will see almost €24 million invested in projects under the Rural Environment theme in the following sub-theme areas:

- Protection & Sustainable use of Water Resources
- Protection & Improvement of Local Biodiversity
- Development of Renewal Energy

Projects approved for funding include large scale initiatives such as Glasha Hydro Project in Waterford and smaller projects such as renewable energy heating systems and a self-sustainable solar-powered Ecolodge in Co Clare.

To date, more than €1.5 million has been approved to fund 58 projects under these sub-themes, and the Department looks forward to dispersing the full €24 million allocation in conjunction with Local Action Groups.

The Department is also providing a number of climate relevant supports through the Dormant Accounts Fund, through the Social Enterprise and Social Innovation Fund measures and the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme.

These include grants to applicants providing home insulation services, reducing our food waste, sustainable energy actions, bee-keeping and training in thermal insulation installation.

Additionally, investments under the Town and Village Renewal Scheme support the diversification of the rural economy through funding for enterprise hubs, digital hubs and

other projects that support localised employment opportunities. These impact positively on commuting requirements and carbon emissions.

The Department is also making investments through the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme and the Walks Scheme that protect and sustain our natural heritage and identify ways to assist communities in maximising the value of these assets for the local area.

Greenways, Blueways and mountain trails are delivering economic, recreational, health and climate benefits; reducing car journeys and creating employment and tourism opportunities.

The Department's role in relation to local community structures, such as Local Community Development Committees and Public Participation Networks, affords us the opportunity to harness all the potential resources at the disposal of communities by bringing together people, groups, agencies, and voluntary and statutory bodies to make a positive difference in the development of sustainable communities.

Through encouraging citizen engagement we aim to increase awareness of climate issues and to foster community involvement in policy development and decision-making processes.

In addition to these initiatives and programmes, the Department has an important coordination role when it comes to policies affecting rural Ireland across Government.

Realising our Rural Potential, the Action Plan for Rural Development, which was launched in 2017, contains over 270 specific actions to be taken across a variety of Government Departments. In addition to measures on enterprise, tourism, culture and connectivity, it is clear on the importance of our environment to ensuring sustainable rural development.

It contains actions associated with climate mitigation, renewable energy and energy efficiency that are of relevance to rural Ireland. In general, these actions are to be delivered by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and the Environment or its agencies.

The Action Plan is also clear on the importance of climate adaptation measures such as the flood relief programme to be delivered by the OPW.

Reports in relation to progress on all actions in the Plan are published every six months and, to date, have shown that 93 per cent of the actions across Government were either completed on schedule or substantially advanced.

It is important that we continue to look to further opportunities to support community led initiatives in the green economy.

The planned introduction by the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and the Environment of a Renewable Electricity Support Scheme will open up opportunities for rural communities to not only invest in new renewable electricity projects, but also potentially to develop and operate their own projects.

Involving communities in the development of new renewable energy projects will not only provide a long-term, sustainable economic dividend but will also help to change the perception of renewable energy projects in rural Ireland.

The Department has already provided funding supports to those who are exploring the potential of renewable energy and to local projects in that sector.

For example, a €50,000 grant has been committed over the next two years to facilitate a community-based renewable energy project in the Iveragh Gaeltacht in Kerry.

Across a range of activity, the Department is providing direct support to the required national climate action effort. The new Rural Regeneration and Development Fund, one of the four funds established under Project Ireland 2040, will provide further opportunity to build on this.

I have attempted to give a very short overview of current investments, programmes and partnership activities of the Department of Rural and Community Development that are assisting communities to identify and engage in climate positive initiatives. We recognise

that the scale of the challenge involved in meeting climate action targets requires effort and mobilisation across Government and at every level of society, with a particular challenge to engage citizens and communities. We will continue to look to opportunities to support progress in this objective.