Meeting of the Joint Committee on Climate Action

19 June 2019, 2pm

Opening Statement of Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment

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Introduction

I would like to thank the Committee for its invitation to appear before it here today.

The Committee’s work is extremely important. It will help determine the level of cross-party Oireachtas support for our climate policy ambition for the next number of years.

This work is being undertaken against the context of ever more stark warnings from the scientific experts of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), that the international community is completely off-track in reducing its emissions in line with the goals of the Paris Agreement.
The IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C, published last October highlights the negative impacts of climate change and illustrates the unprecedented urgency to step up global efforts to reduce its impacts. It gave us timely and detailed information on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C and 2°C and on global greenhouse gas emissions reduction pathways to keep global warming within the temperature goals of the Paris Agreement.

The report found that limiting global warming to 1.5°C could be achieved by the international community but would require global “rapid and far-reaching” transitions in land, energy, industry, buildings, transport, and cities”.

At the UN climate conference in Poland last year which I attended, the message was equally stark for anyone who was not already aware. It was made clear that the window for the world to respond to the massive challenge we face is closing fast, and that the consequences of failing to respond are truly catastrophic.

The Committee therefore will appreciate the urgency and importance of the domestic climate challenge ahead of us. Achieving economy-wide
emissions reductions at the scale now required will be a huge task which all countries will face over the coming decades.

**Climate Action Plan**

There is no question that we, as a country, are playing catch-up on our obligations in relation to climate change. EPA projections published at the start of June show that Ireland faces significant challenges in meeting EU 2030 reduction targets for greenhouse gases. Progress in achieving targets is dependent on the level of implementation of current and future plans.

In response to the challenge posed by the clear message delivered to the international community by the IPCC and the imperative to step up Ireland’s domestic policy ambition to meet our EU targets, the Government agreed, on 20 November 2018, to the preparation of a new Climate Action Plan.

Building on the National Mitigation Plan, the National Adaptation Framework, and Project Ireland 2040, the Plan sets out how this Government intends to make Ireland a leader in responding to climate change.
The Plan, which was launched by government yesterday, sets out over 180 actions, together with hundreds of sub-actions, and embraces every relevant sector: electricity, enterprise, housing, heating, transport, agriculture, waste, and the public sector. It’s ambitious but realistic and will:

- Eliminate non-recyclable plastic and impose higher fees on the production of materials which are difficult to recycle, implement measures to ban single-use plastic plates, cutlery, straws, balloon sticks and cotton buds;
- Establish a new Micro-generation Scheme, allowing homeowners to generate their own electricity and sell what they don’t use back to the national grid;
- Move to 70% renewable electricity by 2030, currently only 30% of our electricity comes from renewable sources;
- Bring 950,000 electric vehicles onto our roads, deliver a nationwide charging network, an electric vehicle scrappage scheme and legislation to ban the sale of petrol / diesel cars from 2030;
- Expand our network of cycling paths and “Park and Ride” facilities, helping ease congestion;
• Deliver an intensive programme of retrofitting to install 400,000 heat pumps in homes and businesses, replacing the existing carbon-intensive heating systems;

• Establish a system of 5 year carbon budgets and sector targets, with the relevant Minister responsible for delivering on the target, with penalties if they are not met. These targets will be underpinned by a new Climate Action Act. All major government investments and decisions will be carbon-proofed;

• Deliver reductions in greenhouse gas emissions in agriculture by creating new, sustainable opportunities for family farms;

• Deliver a new Retrofit Plan to retrofit 500,000 homes, with large groups of houses being retrofitted by the same contractor to reduce costs, smart finance, and easy pay back methods; and

• Every public body will be given a climate action mandate by their line Minister to prioritise climate action and new letters of expectation will issue to semi-state bodies on Climate Action.

The Climate Action Plan, like the Action Plan for Jobs, will be annually updated, with actions reported on quarterly. The government has also approved the establishment of the Climate Action Delivery Board to
ensure that the delivery of the plan is overseen by the Taoiseach’s office.

The Plan has been strongly informed by the ground-breaking work of the Citizens Assembly and the work of the All Party Committee on Climate Action which managed to achieve a broad cross-Party consensus on a number of difficult issues.

**National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP)**

I am aware that the Committee’s Terms of Reference also includes contributing to the development of the National Energy and Climate Plan, or NECP, which my Department is currently preparing. The NECP, addressing the period 2021-2030, is one of the key reporting provisions of the agreed Governance Regulation of the EU Clean Energy Package.

The NECP represents an overarching framework which streamlines a large number of existing energy and climate planning and reporting requirements and also introduces a large number of new requirements. Work has been underway in gathering a huge amount of information, as well as generating new energy and emissions projections, to provide the key analytical underpinning for the NECP.
My Department submitted a draft NECP to the Commission in December 2018 and is due to submit a final version by the end of this year. This will set out clearly how we will meet our emissions targets for 2021-2030 and what contribution we will make to the overall EU level targets on renewable energy and energy efficiency.

**Net Zero by 2050**

The Climate Action Plan also puts us on a trajectory to meet our 2030 target for carbon emissions, which is consistent with achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050. I secured Government approval this week on our commitment to support the emerging EU ambition of net zero emissions by 2050, the Plan commits to evaluating in detail the changes required to reach this ambitious commitment and in the new Climate Action Act, we will include a 2050 target in law.

This would be a significant step change in our mid-century ambition but I am clear that it would also be based on the best scientific advice available from the IPCC. It would also be in line with the most ambitious decarbonisation scenarios in the European Commission’s Long Term Decarbonisation Strategy proposals.
National Dialogue on Climate Action

The Citizens’ Assembly demonstrates that individual citizens can produce very clear recommendations when provided with an opportunity to reflect and consider in detail a specific societal change. It also underlines for me that Ireland will not achieve its climate objectives through Government action alone and engagement with wider society on an ongoing basis will be vital.

For this reason, the Climate Action Plan also includes actions to ensure that all of us as citizens become engaged and mobilised to take climate action, while ensuring that the necessary societal and economic transition that we have to make is fair, both in Ireland and globally.

Specifically we will engage with communities across the country through:

- Establishing a Community Outreach Programme
- Driving action through the National Dialogue on Climate Action
- Increase the number of Sustainable Energy Communities to 1,500
- Develop flagship low-carbon projects in all Local Authorities
We will also establish a Just Transition Review Group which will identify transition needs among cohorts of workers, enterprises, communities and specific groups of people.

The Climate Action Plan is to be seen as a rolling process for effective consultation and implementation of change. I plan to immediately engage in a series of consultative meetings to explain the approach, hear views and take on ideas. A Climate Action Plan 2020 will be published next year which will also take into account all consultation that takes place.

Conclusion

To conclude, every generation wants to leave the world in a better place than they found it for their children. We have a short window of opportunity to act. The longer we leave it, the higher the final costs of adjustment will be and the opportunities much lower or completely lost. This Climate Action Plan provides our way forward.

We are currently 85% dependent on fossil fuels. This Plan sets out radical reforms, which will cut our reliance on carbon, making our businesses more competitive, our homes more sustainable and our
farms more efficient. We will be doing things in new, innovative ways. Most of the actions set out will actually save money in the long-run. We will now implement this Plan, rolling out the required actions through a sustained effort.

I am under no illusion as to what is required to achieve this ambition. Every person, every home, every community, every school and every business will have to make changes in the way we live, learn and work. Nothing less will do if we are to make the changes needed to create a sustainable future for everyone.

Given the scale of the challenge, there is a need for a growing political consensus on this issue and this Committee is well placed to help deliver this consensus. As such, it is my intention to work constructively with all parties to put us back on course to achieving our targets and position Ireland at the forefront of global efforts to tackle climate change.

I look forward to the input of Committee members.

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