

## **Presentation to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Climate Action**

Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2019; Report for the public record.

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Chair, members, Thank you for your invite to the committee. I wish to address the area of Sustainable energy communities today and I will focus this statement on supporting communities and citizens taking action in their locality. Paul Kenny, from the Tipperary Energy agency will be available with me for Questions and Answers, on any of the topics.

Engaging Citizens in Climate Action is something that has been quite difficult in Ireland to date. The growing awareness of Climate change and the consequences, **makes this committee on Climate Action, in our view, the most important group in the country.**

When we set out to build Irelands first community wind farm, we didn't think it would take 12 years nor that 20 years after, we would still have the only community wind farm. As I discussed when I met some of the committee members previously, access to the national grid is an issue for all generators, but is particularly difficult for potential community generators. We would like to welcome the ambition in the climate action plan, action 28,30 and 31 that sets out to achieve increased levels of renewable generation and citizen and community generation. **We would also like to thank the Minister and his officials for the inclusion of a community pot in the upcoming RESS auction.**

### **Grid Access: Medium to Large**

How is the System weighted against local development ?

At this moment there is no affordable way, an energy project wholly owned by a community, of 4 - 5 Mw or larger, can be connected to the national grid. This is in stark contrast to most of our European neighbours who openly encourage such developments. In Ireland such community projects are expected to compete with large scale developers, with large budgets and no affinity for the area or its inhabitants. These large projects take up all available capacity in the local power transfer stations, creating long queue's and delays lasting for years, which deny local communities access to their own grid network. The grid operator has no technical or social obligation to connect local projects. We totally accept the need for large developers, but it should be balanced with community access to the grid. **If it requires legislation to change this situation, you as a cross party group must ensure that it is put in place.**

It is hardly surprising that when communities become aware of this, they turn away. It is no surprise that only one community owned wind farm has been successfully developed in Ireland to-date.

The advantage of a 100% locally owned development is enormous. All revenue generated remains within the area, giving a huge boost to the local economy. In Templederry the two locally owned Wind Turbines will generate more income for the parish, than a thirty (30) turbine development owned by an outside developer. Outside developer's leave only three and a half percent of revenue to the landowners for leasing the site of each turbine, plus a

paltry subscription to local clubs and community groups. **Why local politicians have not promoted this concept of locally owned generation in their own communities, is a mystery to us. Instead a negative attitude about wind and Solar has been allowed to fester and grow.**

One local community has received a grid offer from ESB networks of €2.9 million, to connect 4 Mw of Solar to their local grid network. Two more examples of 1.9 million and 1.3 million have also been received. (documentary proof available) These are not viable options and when eventually they are received, a lot of time, energy and money has been lost, So the system is preventing these initiatives from ever getting off the ground. In the UK and some continental Country's, this cost would be 50k - 120k.

### **Grid Access - Small**

If you are a farmer with a large roof in Germany, you most likely derive a portion of your income from the energy produced off that roof. In Ireland, we support a paltry 6kW and 11kW, but preclude you from any more, through a series of administrative barriers - i.e Planning permission, grid connection fees and cost uncertainty. Which prevent anyone looking for an export licence today above 11kW - outside of large commercial solar or wind farms.

We believe that every Sustainable Energy Community should be able to install roof solar on their homes, on their community centre and their schools, sell their surplus and generate enough funds to run their educational and social centre's and maybe kick-start other energy projects.

In the case of communities coming together to develop large generation, communities sit at the end of the developer queue, that requires significant funding from people and communities, before one can even get a grid offer, which is a pre-requisite for accessing the market. Templederry community wind farm shareholders have forgone dividends of over 7 figures to date to help 4 other communities to develop their generation assets and we hope that the establishment of a Community and Citizen owned energy company will facilitate all communities fulfilling their sustainable energy ambitions.

We are at a loss to understand why no changes have been made. Access to the national grid has and continues to be a **Huge Issue**. Old excuses of upgrading the grid and frequency harmonisation no longer hold good, because of a whole range of Smart Energy Management Systems now reaching the market.

**If legislation is required to change this. we once again call on this committee to work with the Regulator, Department and the minister to ensure the necessary changes are made.**

### **Planning**

Since last year it is necessary to have planning before you make a grid connection application. This means a very large outlay of money, before your application will even be considered for processing. If you add the fact that the grid offer, when it eventually arrives, is very likely to be prohibitive and totally unviable. Your planning, if you were lucky enough to have been granted the planning in the first case, is totally wasted and a large amount of money has been lost. It is easy to conclude that the system is totally biased against community.

### **RESS:**

**We strongly commend the minister for bringing forward the community element of the renewable electricity support scheme and will welcome the release of the terms and conditions as soon as possible. Ring fencing a community pot was a lifesaver. We need to make sure it is not abused by large developers and is followed by a system of affordable access to the grid**

Even before any official announcement as to RESS or other conditions. A queue has formed, estimated to be twice the size of what will ever be required. Without the ministers commitment to a community pot in the RESS, then no community owned solar project would ever be constructed. **This now needs to be followed by provision of affordable grid for community.**

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### **Sustainable Energy Communities: Supports**

We heard that the Sustainable Energy authority of Ireland launched a tender for consultants to support sustainable energy communities. Our support for the last 20 years has been from the Tipperary Energy Agency. The cost of supporting all communities with an energy agency in every county would very likely be less than what is envisaged in this tender. I would suggest if this committee is serious in seeing citizen climate action, they should consider the establishment of local energy agencies and using the SEC program to build capacity and knowledge in the community and social enterprise sector in Ireland.