Stop Climate Chaos Coalition Opening Statement

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Joint Oireachtas Committee on Communications, Climate Action and Environment

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Chair, Members of the Committee, I would like to express thanks on behalf of the Stop Climate Chaos Coalition for the invitation to contribute to this session on Ireland's approach to climate action. For any members not familiar with Stop Climate Chaos, the coalition is Ireland's largest campaigning alliance on climate action in Ireland, made up of a wide variety of domestic and internationally-focused faith, youth, environmental and development organisations.

Recognising the threat posed by climate change to the mandate and constituencies our organisations have been founded to serve, Stop Climate Chaos members come together to mobilise for Ireland to do its fair share on climate action. The coalition campaigned for almost ten years for the enactment of a Climate Law. With the welcome passage into law of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act the focus is now on policy and implementation. We have a set of policy recommendations which were submitted to the Department during the public consultation on the National Mitigation Plan, and to the Citizens Assembly, and which we believe, if implemented, would go a significant way to getting Ireland on track to meeting its own climate action targets, as well as its increasing EU and global climate action obligations. Today however, we would like to focus our contribution on governance and the crucial role this Committee plays in the establishment of an effective policy and accountability cycle for climate action in Ireland. I will begin by stepping back and setting some context, and will hand over to my colleague Oisín who will provide an assessment of Ireland's progress to date and set out our recommendations for what an effective policy and accountability cycle could look like.

Stepping back, we'd like to recognise once again why action on climate change is critical and urgent. Weather events across the globe and here at home in recent years have seen an increased awareness within Ireland of the reality of climate change and the need for action. Whilst we are starting to witness the more visible impacts here, in other parts of the world already increasingly frequent and intense weather events are devastating lives and livelihoods in the poorest countries that have contributed least to the problem and who have least resources to cope. During the period 2015-16 we witnessed drought and food shortages, and in some cases heavy flooding, in Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Myanmar, Pakistan, Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua. In early 2015 a third of Malawi was designated a disaster zone when a third of its territory was hit by heavy flooding, in a country where the majority of the population live below the poverty line and depend on rain-fed agriculture for their food and income needs. Today, millions in East Africa continue to struggle to cope with persistent drought. Ireland continues to have a proud, longstanding track record for its overseas aid programme, a critical contributor to our global reputation. However, this is significantly undermined politically – and in practice – by our continued poor performance on action.

It is important to also recognise the systemic risks posed by climate change, and by a failure to curb it in time to deliver on the Paris Agreement. We will all recall the impacts that heavy flooding and Storm Ophelia for example, had on communities and businesses in Ireland, and the clean-up costs and reinsurance issues arising. Beyond direct impacts in Ireland, we must be cognisant of spill-over effects of impacts elsewhere in the world on European countries in relation to trade and infrastructure, transport, security and finance, as highlighted by the European Environmental Agency. The risks posed by climate change to the financial system are two-fold, the economic and financial implications of the direct physical impacts of climate change, such as the clean-up costs of more frequent and intense disasters, and the risks of failing to curb emissions in a timely way, leading to the prospect of a late, abrupt transition with significant, systemic financial, economic, social and political impacts. These risks have been highlighted by an Advisory Committee to the European Systemic Risk Board, have been recognised publically, repeatedly by the Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, and are behind the establishment of the international Task Force on Climate-related Risk Disclosure under the auspices of the G20.

The Paris Agreement adopted in 2015 was a major milestone, but we must be clear that it is not a solution but a call to action. In Paris in 2015 all States recognised the need to increase their action prior to 2020 when the Agreement officially comes into effect. Furthermore, at its centre the Paris Agreement contains a ‘ratchet mechanism’ under which States must submit and report on their ever increasing emission reductions commitments and actions, beginning in 2020. This is not an externally imposed agenda, the Paris Agreement ratchet mechanism is a recognition at the highest levels of Government, based on the Government-endorsed science, of the fact that there is only one feasible direction of travel, and we must speed up significantly and consistently, in all our collective interests.

At EU level a 'division of labour' across Member States is commonly taken in many EU policy contexts. However, in scrutinising the Government’s approach to EU negotiations it is vital that the Committee recognises that current efforts to minimise Ireland’s climate action obligations and increase flexibilities is not in Ireland’s interest and threatens the collective EU and global interest.

Although ‘free-riding’ on other EU Member States’ efforts might appear to be an easy short-term strategy, the evidence is abundant that continued delay in action will increase the practical and economic costs of the changes needed. Fines for non-compliance and the foregoing of a range of social, health and environmental benefits of emissions reductions policies which can protect Irish citizens and communities are also a significant consideration. Furthermore, the exposure of Ireland’s laggard approach to climate action is undermining Ireland’s reputation within the EU and internationally. Ireland’s support for the weakest or least stringent provisions in EU legislation serves not only to hinder Irish action but EU action as a whole, undermining the progress of all 28 Member States to the key goals of the Paris Agreement. The EU was and remains a critical player in the global fight against climate change. Deliberate undermining of the EU’s ambition should not be taken lightly. Such factors continue to be unaccounted for in the Government's and various Departments' analyses.

As of now no country's existing climate action plan, emissions targets or pledges are yet compatible with the Paris temperature goals.

That is true of the EU's current targets – a 20% cut in emissions by 2020, a 40% cut by 2030 and an 80-95% cut by 2050. They will need to be ratcheted up to give us a decent chance of achieving the Paris goals.

By the same token, Ireland's existing targets – a 20% cut in emissions non-ETS emissions by 2020 (EU 2020 package), an 80-95% cut in all energy-related emissions by 2050 (Government 2015 White Paper), and carbon neutrality in agriculture and land-use (2014 National Position on Climate Action) – have not been reviewed in light of the Paris Agreement.

Unfortunately, Irish emissions are not even declining in line with our existing targets. In fact they are not declining at all, they are rising.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency:

- Ireland's emissions have risen more than 7% in two years.
- 2016 increased by 3.5 % - all sectors: Agriculture increased by 2.7%; Transport increased by 3.7%; Energy increased by 6.1%
- Significant increases expected to continue in agriculture and transport
- Steep challenges post-2020 without new policies

According to the European Environment Agency, Ireland is one of a handful of EU countries that is going to miss our 2020 targets and the only one of that group where emissions are

Analysis by the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform, and by UCC, has shown that without new, immediate and substantive efforts to cut emissions, Ireland faces financial penalties in the region of €500 million by 2020 for failing to comply with our EU climate and renewable energy commitments Analysis by the IIEA estimates that Ireland may face non-compliance costs of between €3bn and €6bn by 2030 for failing to reduce emissions unless further action is taken.

Irish emissions are the 3rd highest in the EU person, and the 8th highest in the rich world, the OECD.

Ireland was ranked the worst performing country in Europe for action on climate change in the 2018 Climate Change Performance Index, which is produced annually on the basis of joint analysis by two leading European think-tanks, placed Ireland 49th out of 56 countries, a drop of 28 places from last year.

The National Mitigation Plan (NMP) published last July is clearly not fit for purpose:

- The NMP is clear on the scale of challenge
- Unclear on scale of risks and opportunities
- More action promise than action plan
- It's a listing of (some positive) climate-relevant initiatives
- But no clear pathway to meeting our 2020, 2030 or 2050.

As the Chair of the Climate Change Advisory Council put it the NMP is:

> "100 bright ideas but no new decisions".

The verdict of the Department of Public Expenditure in a memo last September, recently released under FOI, is damning:

> '"it would appear that almost no progress has been made on an appraisal-based, prioritised and integrated view of how to meet 2020 and 2030 climate targets'

The official Advisory Council Annual Review in November put it this way:

> '*There is an* ***urgent requirement for new policies and measures, and action beyond what is committed to in the National Mitigation Plan*** *if Ireland is to reduce emissions by 2020 and to move onto a sustainable path to 2050 to tackle climate change*

And the EPA's take in November was this:

> *Achieving Ireland's long-term decarbonisation objective can only take place with a* ***transformation of our energy, agriculture and transport systems****. We need to adopt a much greater sense of urgency about* ***reducing our dependence on fossil fuels*** *while radically improving energy efficiency. In relation to agriculture, Ireland must optimise agricultural production to ensure long term environmental integrity and sustainability. The growth in this sector, particularly for dairy and other cattle, points to* ***very significant risks in relation to meeting our decarbonisation objectives***

Moreover, while the NMP promised that climate change would be central to decision making for the Budget and the Capital Plan, Budget 2018 did not constitute a step-up for climate action:

<u>2018 Budget</u>

- €2 billion investment needed every year to 2030 for retrofitting homes.
- 2018 Budget only delivered an additional €38 million for energy savings schemes.
- €7 million to incentivize renewable heat but scheme excludes community projects.
- Road development €2.4 billion invested over four years
- Only €35 million to support low-carbon projects and only €10million additional funding allocated to cycling and walking.

<u>Heartening honesty from the Taoiseach</u>

The Taoiseach summed Ireland's situation on climate action well two weeks ago when he told the European Parliament that *"... as far as I am concerned, we are a laggard. I am not proud of Ireland's performance on climate change."*

That admission is strangely heartening if it is a prelude to leadership on deciding bold new actions.

To make a start we recommend the following.

What needs to happen every year

The Climate Act establishes an annual policy cycle but too many loopholes.

This committee is central to ensuring parliamentary oversight and accountability.

- The EPA, CCAC and a climate scientist should testify every January
- All four ministers who deliver annual transition statements in December should come before the Committee in Q1
- *Before* EU Councils discussing climate, Minister should lay out approach to Committee
- DPER and DFin should lay out their approach to climate in the Budget in Q2
- CCAC should produce its annual report well before Minister delivers transition statement.
- Actual transition statement must be published before Dáil and Seanad statements (*unlike* 2017).

What needs to happen this year

- This Committee should formally recommend to Minister Naughten that he immediately begin a process to revise the National Mitigation Plan.
- The Oireachtas should start a process to consider the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on climate as they did on the 8th Amendment:

  A special all-party committee to report by end July?
- The Capital Investment Plan must prioritize emissions from transport and buildings
- Minister must deliver on his commitment that the new support schemes for renewables will deliver community ownership of renewables and a fair payment for smallscale rooftop solar power.
- Budget 2019 is key opportunity to look and carbon tax and site value tax