

Joint Committee on Climate Action
Opening Statement by Dermot Byrne
Chairperson Designate
of the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI)
Tuesday, 9 February 2021

Introductory remarks

I want to thank the Committee for the invitation to attend this meeting today. The Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications, Eamon Ryan T.D. has proposed me to serve as Chairperson of the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland. I will begin by summarising my own career before setting out my vision and priorities for the Authority.

Career summary

I joined ESB as a graduate engineer in 1973. This was at the tail end of the Rural Electrification Scheme, which underpinned one of the greatest societal transformations in this country in terms of its impact on peoples' lives. One of my last assignments in ESB was to head up the newly formed ESB Networks directorate, and to revisit and upgrade those rural electricity networks to make them fit for service in the 21st century.

In 2005 I was appointed as the CEO of the newly formed EirGrid, Over the following years we assumed responsibility for the all-island electricity market, and also built the East-West Interconnector - a €600m project - on time and within budget. I am particularly proud of the work we did in setting EirGrid on a path to be a world leader in integrating wind energy on to the Irish power system.

Since retiring in 2012, I have been active in a number of energy related activities. On behalf of the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications I chaired an expert group to develop an Energy Research Strategy, to support the transition to a low carbon energy future.

For the past 6 years I have chaired VITA, an Irish Development Agency working in East Africa with a mission *to reduce poverty, hunger, and inequality amongst rural households through knowledge-backed, community led initiatives leading to sustainable livelihoods*. Climate action - both mitigation and adaptation - is a core element of our work with these African communities, who are on the front line of the climate crisis.

As President of Engineers Ireland in 2016-17 I witnessed and worked with a community of professionals who are determined to play their part and to lead on climate action, and to inspire the next generation to take on the technological and societal challenges that we face.

Vision for sustainable energy

The reality of the existential threat posed by Climate Change is, I believe beyond question. The science is clear. The Paris Agreement sets out a global action plan to put the world on track to avoid dangerous climate change by limiting global warming to well below 2C, and closer to 1.5C.

The Government is committed to an average 7% per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030 (a halving over the decade) and to achieving net zero emissions by 2050. We saw last week in the joint SEAI / EPA report that emissions last year reduced by 6% on the previous year, and that was largely due to the impact of the pandemic. So, we know the size of the challenge we face in the next 10 / 20 / 30 years.

However, I believe that having a clear goal to aim for, a goal that we all subscribe to, is extremely powerful as a means of unlocking the energy and creativity of all sectors of society to deliver that goal. A good example was the target of 40% renewables in the electricity sector by 2020, which many believed to be unattainable back in 2008 when it was set by the then government. That target had the effect of changing the mindset and delivering a major energy transition on the supply side, a transition that is still underway with the development of solar, offshore wind and further interconnection.

The focus now changes to the demand side - in transport, industry, public sector and residential homes - where our decarbonisation efforts have been less successful to date.

This is perhaps not surprising. Here we are looking for behavioural change and investments at the household and community level, at a time when many households are struggling with the impact of firstly the financial crisis and now the COVID pandemic. This societal transformation will take leadership, time and collective effort. Nevertheless, we know from past experience that societal transformations, underpinned by major energy transitions, can and do occur, and bring us to a better and more sustainable place. I mentioned earlier the Rural Electrification Scheme as one example.

The good news is that momentum is building. The moral and ethical imperative, as expounded by Pope Francis and Greta Thunberg among others, reinforces our sense that sustainable living is the 'right thing to do'. Government policy, incentives, regulations, and emerging technologies are helping to turn this ecological awareness into behavioural change and sustainable investments at the household, community and business levels. And it is the right thing to do economically, in terms of new jobs and business models created, and new and innovative products and services developed and taken to a global market.

The role of SEAI

And that brings me to the role of SEAI. We are an agency of government working directly with homeowners, communities and businesses in delivering a cleaner energy future for Ireland. Over the last decade SEAI has delivered major impacts for Ireland. We have helped to inform and shape policy, we have provided access to genuine solutions and been the portal for many people and communities to engage with new technology and sustainability. Because of SEAI, more than a quarter of a million homes are warmer and cheaper to run, more than 500 communities have started their sustainable energy transition, thousands of businesses are more competitive, and Ireland's public services are exemplars in energy efficiency.

Building on this platform, and to deliver on the targets set out in the Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan, we in SEAI are now in the process of stepping up a gear. We are putting in place the leadership team to drive the organisation forward, and we are recruiting the people with the necessary skills - technical, communications and

community engagement. We are preparing our next Statement of Strategy for the period 2021-2025, a key theme of which will be collaboration:

- Collaboration with businesses, industry and the public sector, and with other state agencies such as Enterprise Ireland.
- Collaboration with the SME sector, for example in the establishment of a National Climate Cluster.
- Collaboration with our Energy Research and Innovation sector, to help develop the technologies and innovative approaches needed.
- And most importantly, collaboration with all actors in the retrofit sector, with Local Authorities, and primarily with citizens and communities to drive the National Retrofit Programme forward.

Collaboration is at the heart of our work. We deliver through others. We in SEAI will be providing the leadership, the expertise, the ambition and the innovation that will drive and inform the change.

Governance

SEAI is entrusted with significant exchequer funds, and we are very conscious of the need to be transparent and accountable in all our spending decisions. Since 2011, SEAI has maintained SWiFT 3000 corporate governance certification from the National Standards Authority of Ireland (NSAI). I want to assure you that the maintenance of this standard certification remains a key objective for me as Board Chair and for the SEAI Board, to ensure that SEAI operates to the highest international standards of corporate governance.

Conclusion

I am deeply honoured to be nominated by Minister Ryan to lead the SEAI Board at this critical juncture. I can assure you that I will be giving it my full attention, working closely with the Board, the executive team, and the fantastic and dedicated staff that we have in SEAI.

Through my work in Africa with VITA and other organisations, I have seen the consequences of Climate Change and ecological degradation on households and communities. Climate

action is for each and every one of us, and I am committed to playing my part as chair of SEAI.

Again, I thank the Chair for the invitation, and I will be pleased to answer any questions the Committee may have.

Appendix 1: SEAI Statement of Achievements for 2020

Summary

- Total €121 million Government funds invested in sustainable energy upgrades and projects.
- Of this, €90 million in building retrofit supports leveraged more than €95 million in private funds, for total investment of €185 million.
- Annually €21 million cost savings and 93,000 tonnes lower CO₂ emissions.

Communities and citizens

- €60 million grant support towards 16,955 home energy upgrades, including 1,615 vulnerable energy poor homes upgraded free of charge, 196 deep energy retrofits and 2,917 solar PV systems.
- Additional 656 homes and 240 community and commercial facilities upgraded with €18.7 million support to 39 community energy projects.
- Energy retrofitting finance trials supported moderate to deep upgrades in 129 homes.
- 83,800 residential BERs, 3,270 non-residential BERs and 423 DEC's published through SEAI systems.
- SEAI administer of the Energy Efficiency Obligation Scheme (EEOS) for energy credit allocation to large energy suppliers recorded 330 non-domestic projects and 56,500 home energy upgrades resulting in approximately 670 GWh savings.
- €25.7 million grant support for 4,843 electric vehicles and plug-in hybrid purchase and the installation of 3,523 home charging units.
- SEAI community energy network now has 485 member organisations nationwide, comprising more than 25,000 citizens.
- 15,800 school pupils participated in SEAI's education programme including 343 classroom and teacher workshops and 1,200 participants in the SEAI One Good Idea final.
- The Climate SOS book for children was published, with 3,735 copies distributed or downloaded to date.

Public and business sector supports

- Supported public sector achievement of 29% energy efficiency improvement, with additional annual savings of 313GWh, towards a 33% target.
- Provided €8.2 million support towards pathfinder projects in key sectors with retrofits in 90 public buildings across Schools, Higher Education, Office of Public Works, and Health Service Executive. Total project investment was €19 million.
- SEAI established 17 new energy efficiency partnerships with large public bodies, bringing the total such partnerships to 136.
- 50 projects fully committed through Support Scheme for Renewable Heat amounting to €1.3 million annually for fifteen years, accounting for 11 ktCO₂, 39GWh RESH.
- Supporting 26 projects with technical support towards energy contracting delivery with €130,000 in Project Assistance Grants.
- Launched online Energy Academy for business with 16 learning modules on all aspects of energy management. Over 2,200 subscribers by year end.

- The 199 members of SEAI's large industry network implemented projects which achieved 420 GWh energy savings reducing energy costs by €13.9 million.
- SEAI delivered more than 40 best practice knowledge sharing and training events to more than 1,400 attendees across business and public sectors.
- The National Public Sector Energy Conference had over 800 delegates.
- Supporting 85 new EXEED projects, committing €5.5 million to achieve savings of 69 GWh. 14 new EXEED Assets achieved certification to IS399.
- SEAI Energy Awards 2020 secured 125 nominations, with aggregated savings of €42 million.

Policy insights, research and innovation

- €3.2 million invested in more than 100 innovative research projects. This includes leveraged funding from strategic partners Met Eireann, Marine Institute, DAFM, DTTAS, Gas Networks Ireland and Geological Survey Ireland.
- €2 million invested in ocean energy prototype devices and ocean test site development.
- Built EU OPIN network of over 400 companies related to Ocean Energy.
- Commenced a comprehensive national heat study that will build an evidence base for policy making in the largest emitting sector.
- Delivered of Ireland's national energy statistics and projections, informing emissions inventories and projections.
- SEAI behavioural economics team provided significant input to policy makers on what encourages consumers to act on sustainable energy.
- Harnessed Ireland's network of energy technology expertise (currently 40 experts) to represent Ireland at the International Energy Agency.
- SEAI co-hosted the second Energy Research and Policy Conference with the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment which focused on the role of research and policy in transforming Ireland's heat sector.
- SEAI energy modelling, technology analysis and research outputs underpinned preparation of Ireland's final National Energy and Climate Plan.
- SEAI supported the publication of policy options paper on corporate power purchase agreements for renewable electricity and, separately, an impact assessment framework for community measures in the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme.
- SEAI partnered with NSAI in the development of a Standard Recommendations for Heat pumps and Domestic Heating.
- Working with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, SEAI developed the revised 'Heating and Domestic Hot Water Systems for Dwellings – Achieving compliance with Part L and Energy Performance of Buildings Regulations'.
- Provided analysis to support the Government decision on the future of Edenderry power and the development of the policy business case for biomethane.
- Published best practice guides for AD and biomass technologies with comprehensive supporting website.
- 295 energy and eco-design market surveillance audits completed covering manufacturers, appliance retail outlets and tyre resellers. Retail stores 87% compliance rate for correct energy labelling.
- Significant upgrades were made to Ireland's National Energy Modelling Framework to enable deeper insights into projected energy trends to inform policy making.