



Joint Oireachtas Committee on Environment and Climate Action
AILG Opening Statement on the Challenge and Opportunity for Local
Authorities in Climate Action.

Tuesday 31st May 2022

Cllr. Nicholas Crossan, President AILG

As AILG President, I would like to thank you Chair and your committee members for affording us the opportunity to meet with you today and contribute to your work and discuss both the challenges and opportunities for Local Authorities in climate action.

As you are aware, The Association of Irish Local Government is the primary national body representing the 949 democratically elected local councils across Ireland and our 31 local authority members. As a representative body we provide a networking, policy development and training resource for the elected members of local authorities. We represent the collective interest of our Elected Members as key stakeholders in our local government system and through regular engagement with central government, government departments and state agencies, we ensure that the voice, views and contribution of our members is heard and appreciated in all areas of local government throughout the full range of public agencies.

Climate change is the defining issue of our time with all sections of society aware that we must deal with the reality of climate change. All sectors of society and the economy need to act now to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and thus avoid the worst impacts of climate change. The local government sector is no different. Local authorities have long been at the frontline in dealing with extreme weather events and as these extremes become more frequent, local authorities must ensure local adaptation to a changed climate. The “All of Government Climate Action Plan” is a measure of how involved Councils will be in addressing the climate challenge. The current Programme for Government commits to an average 7% per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030, a 51% reduction over a decade and to achieving net zero emissions by 2050. The 2050 target has been set in law by The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act, 2021 with every sector contributing to meeting this target.

In order to ensure that the local government sector plays its part in achieving the 51% reduction in gas emissions within this decade it is essential that we build the capacity of local authorities to lead locally and engage citizens and communities on climate change and biodiversity. Local Authorities are key decision makers regarding choices relating to energy use, buildings, transport, waste management, green infrastructure and the many other initiatives that can help reduce our emissions. The sector has already commenced this work in leading the local challenge to climate change with the establishment of the Regional Climate Action Offices (CARO) in 2018 who have driven climate action responses at local level including building capacity, awareness and training with both local authority staff and elected members. The CARO offices have developed a comprehensive Local Authority Climate Action Training programme for all local authority staff and in conjunction with AILG for our 949 Elected Members. This training has been rolled out over the past 12 months with tailored training for our members and senior local authority staff in championing leadership to harness that local leadership role of our members in driving effective climate action.

All local authorities including our Cathaoirigh and Mayors have co-signed the Climate Action Charter for Local Authorities and they have been formally adopted in each individual council. The Charter commits Local Authorities to several actions that

will ensure that they play a key leadership role locally and nationally in delivering effective climate action including:

- Putting in place a process for carbon proofing major decisions, programmes and projects on a systematic basis, including investments in transport and energy infrastructure
- Deliver a 50% improvement in energy efficiency by 2030
- Ensure all suppliers provide information on their carbon footprint and steps they plan to reduce its impact
- Build local citizen engagement, particularly with young people
- Partner & collaborate on climate action initiatives with local community groups, local enterprise and local schools and higher level institutions

Local authorities have also prepared and published their Local Authority Climate Action Plans. Further initiatives for the local authorities will include leading the energy transition by retrofitting their social housing stock as part of the government's commitment to retrofitting over 500,000 homes by 2030 as part of the EU Renovation Wave, reducing our dependence on high carbon transport systems by providing safe cycling and walking infrastructure, ensure that local development plans are developed to stimulate economic activity for those areas which were expecting economic development arising from new fossil fuel infrastructure and commit to ensuring no sector of society or community is left behind in the movement to a low carbon future.

We here in AILG are committed to ensuring that our elected members have the required training, knowledge and tools to lead and champion the local response to climate change. We have had extensive engagement with over the last number of years with the Departments National Emergency Management Directorate and Met Éireann who have provided briefings to our members on the local authority response to severe weather events and mitigation of severe climate events. As well as working with the CARO offices on the roll-out of their training programme, AILG have also delivered a comprehensive training programme with the Office of the Planning Regulator and Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications on the development plan review process to include areas such as de-carbonisation, focusing on the implementation of national climate policy and the roll-out of new energy sources and active travel, including innovative development plan practice and wider local authority led enablers to promote public transport, walking and cycling. We have also just delivered a training module for our members on local government and the sustainable development goals. It is important that our members and local authorities embed the SDGs in their County and City Development Plans, Corporate Plans, Local Area Plans and Local Economic and Community Plans. Our members must also ensure that the SDGs are integral to Council policy development across all departments. AILG has also engaged extensively and participated on the advisory body on the Marine Planning and Development Bill and also currently participate on the advisory body on the new National Waste and Circular Economy Action Plan.

AILG were also delighted to partner with UCC this year in developing a Level 7 Certificate in Continuing Education Professional Development in Climate Crisis and

Local Government. This QQI approved level 7 certificate has been designed specifically for Councillors and it will cover up to date policies and initiatives such as the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act and the Climate Action Plan, amongst other pressing climate related issues. Twenty six of our members have just completed the course and are awaiting final results. As we have stated one of the new emerging roles and responsibilities for the local government sector, our 31 local authorities and our 949 Elected Members, is responding to the challenges of climate change. It is imperative that our Elected Members have the necessary knowledge, education and leadership expertise to lead this challenge and the availability of a bespoke accredited course in climate action is of vital importance for ALLG and our members.

However as local authorities rise to the challenge of leading the local response to climate change they also face a number of challenges particularly around resources. Over the last 10-15 years local authorities have seen a reduction on staff numbers and if the targets on climate action set by the government are to be delivered at local government level, local authorities will need much needed additional resources. ALLG welcomes the commitment in the programme for government that every local authority will have a sufficient number of biodiversity and heritage officers among their staff complement. However, additional staff resources will be needed to work with communities and the public on local initiatives to achieve our climate targets. Additional resources will also be required for the local government sector to the core philosophy of a “Just Transition” and ensure that no sector of society or community is left behind in the movement to a low carbon future.

Local authorities have in the past number of years risen to a number of challenges in our society including leading the local economic recovery post the banking and recession crisis and more recently leading the local response to Covid-19 including the roll-out of our community call programme. They will also rise and deliver on the challenges of climate action and ensure that they lead the local response to this global issue.

We would like to thank you Chair and the committee members for listening to our submission and we look forward to participating in your debate this afternoon.