

**Opening Statement by Darragh O'Brien, TD,
Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage**

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Environment and Climate Action

15th June 2023

Chair, Members.

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to address the Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action on this topic of Climate Action Plan 2023.

My Department is working hard to achieve our shared goals of achieving net-Zero emissions no later than 2050, and a 51% reduction in emissions by the end of this decade. This Department has a broad remit over the built environment, planning, the marine environment and national biodiversity policy, as well as Met Éireann's role in climate science and the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Many of our actions are high impact and play an important role in the delivery and implementation of the Climate Action Plan, such as in the area of marine planning and responding to the changing climate policy landscape as it evolves, particularly in the area of renewable energy.

All new dwellings constructed under Housing for All are Nearly Zero Energy Buildings (NZEB) which means most new dwellings now have renewable energy heating systems (heat pumps). Ireland is ahead of the requirements of the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive with the phasing out of fossil fuel boilers three years in advance of its requirements.

An extensive programme for the retrofit of Local Authority housing to a Building Energy Rating (BER) of B2 or cost optimal is also underway.

The compact growth objectives of the NPF, which have been translated to the regional and local planning policy level through the regional strategies and local development plans, are aligned with the Climate Action Plan objectives of reducing emissions through reduced commuting patterns, with a focus in particular on locating development near to existing transport facilities. Another of the key priorities identified includes ‘building resilience’ – that is the re-use, adaptability and accessibility in our housing stock.

The newly-strengthened and restructured NPWS has delivered a number of high impact actions particularly in the area of peatland restoration.

I will now outline in more detail some specific actions we are taking which will address our climate goals and contribute both to the reduction of emissions and mitigation and adaptability to climate change.

Offshore Renewable Energy

- Delivery on the Government's energy targets is dependent on the effective and timely implementation of all elements of the new marine planning system and environmental initiatives that are being progressed at the same time.
- My Department will play a key role in this energy transition, and significant developments are currently underway in the planning and consenting regime for the marine environment. The comprehensive changes in the planning and consenting regime will support our ambitions for decarbonising our energy sector through the development of offshore renewable energy.
- My Department will support the new State-led consenting regime for the maritime area by establishing a new Maritime Area Regulatory Authority; A dedicated MARA Establishment Unit is in place within my Department leading the critical work to enable the timely establishment of the agency. The unit is directing a detailed implementation plan along three work streams, governance, corporate development and operational development and is working to have MARA formally established as early as possible in H1 2023. The Marine Area Planning Act 2021 lays the foundations for a modern, efficient and Aarhus compliant marine planning system. Through the establishment of MARA, we will have a well-resourced, modern, professional agency focused solely on regulation in the maritime area.

- In addition we are
 - Adopting a statutory Marine Planning Policy Statement;
 - Developing Marine Planning guidelines; and
 - Working with the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications to prepare Designated Maritime Area Plans for Offshore Renewable Energy (ORE).

Solar and Wind

- As an example of a practical measure already implemented by my Department to make it easier to develop renewable energy, significant planning exemptions were signed into law in October 2022 for solar installations on existing buildings which will have a significant benefit to the roll-out of renewable electricity on domestic and other buildings in the State.
- My Department is also working on revised Wind Energy Guidelines which will provide greater consistency of approach in planning for wind energy development onshore and will provide certainty and clarity to the planning system, to the wind industry and to local communities.

Built Environment

DHLGH is working hard to implement impactful measures for the Built Environment:

- All new dwellings constructed under Housing for All are “**A Rated**”.
- Based on CSO statistics electricity is the main heating fuel in 87% of all new dwellings and these are primarily renewable energy heat pumps. We expect that fossil fuels will be completely phased out of new dwellings by the end of 2024.
- In 2022 , **Local Authorities** were approximately **on target for retrofit** and **retrofitted 2,283** social homes and **in 2023** we plan to retrofit a **further 2400** Local Authority homes with a budget of **87 million euro**.
- By 2030 we will have retrofitted 36,500 local authority homes or 40% of the available housing stock to a BER of B2.
- The largest ever voids programme was funded by Government in 2020. Since the current Government came into office we have funded local authorities to support the return of over 8,300 vacant homes to productive use with an additional 2,300 targeted for this year.

- Embodied Carbon in construction materials makes a significant contribution to the lifetime carbon emissions of new buildings. These embodied carbon emissions are being addressed by the Climate Action Plan, the review of the EU Construction Products Regulation and the review of the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive.
- I am engaging with the SEAI to put in place resources to provide for frameworks for embodied carbon. In collaboration with my colleague Minister Hackett we are establishing an interdepartmental working group to promote the use of timber in construction. My Department will publish a lifecycle assessment report for embodied carbon in traditional buildings in the coming weeks.

Built and archaeological heritage

- The actions included in CAP 2023 relating to the built and archaeological heritage represent a small sample of the actions that are underway to adapt and protect our cultural heritage in the face of climate change.
- This includes the publication of Guidance on *Improving the Energy Efficiency of Traditional Buildings*.
- The reuse of existing buildings will help to reduce emissions from the lifetime emissions of buildings.

Vacancy

- Given the current demand on housing supply, the availability of existing vacant buildings provides significant opportunities to bring these back into use and support home ownership.
- Housing for All sets a clear pathway through policies such as Town Centres First, Croi Conaithe and the Urban Generation Development Fund (URDF) to ensure that houses already built are being fully used as well as resolving issues which sees habitable properties remaining vacant while people are homeless or living in unsuitable accommodation.
- The Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant, funded by the Croí Cónaithe Towns Fund was launched on 14 July 2022 for eligible vacant properties in towns and villages. From 1 May 2023, the grant was expanded to provide for applications for one property which will be made available for rent, in addition to one property which will be a principal private residence of the owner. A grant of up to €50,000 is available for the refurbishment of vacant properties for occupation as a principal private residence or for properties to be made available for rent. Where a property is derelict, a top up grant of €20,000 is available, bringing the total grant available for a derelict property to €70,000. Up to Q1, 2023, 1,559 applications were received by local authorities.

- In January 2023, I announced a third round of funding support under the URDF. Supporting key objectives of Housing for All and Town Centre First, this round of URDF support specifically addresses long term vacancy and dereliction across URDF eligible cities and town to help facilitate the provision of residential accommodation.
- This will be achieved through the provision of a €150m revolving fund for local authorities to acquire long term vacant or derelict properties (residential and/or commercial) and to carry out any associated works needed to de-risk or improve the site to make it more attractive for re-use or sale.
- The reuse of existing built structures offers the opportunity for people to live closer to work, local services and amenities as well as promoting compact growth. The re-use of such buildings will also contribute to climate sectoral targets for the built environment.

NPWS

- The National Parks and Wildlife Service has significantly accelerated its programme of restoration on raised bogs in recent years. Since 2018, with increased funding and resources, restoration measures have been completed on approximately 4,400 hectares of designated raised bogs.
- The proposed EU Nature Restoration Law, which will take the form of a Regulation, provides an opportunity for transformative change in relation to achieving nature restoration in Ireland and the EU as a whole, which is strongly welcomed.

Conclusion

We are working hard on the actions under our remit and welcome the establishment of dedicated Climate Delivery Taskforces. The Department of Housing will be a key stakeholder and will actively support and participate in these taskforces. As I have outlined this Department has a very broad remit and we are all focused on developing and implementing policies which will contribute to a reduction in carbon emissions and in adapting to and mitigating the effects of climate change.

My Department is committed to playing a broad and significant role in Government's response to the climate emergency we now face. The delivery of affordable and quality housing under **Housing for All** and addressing Climate Action are the two key challenges for Government at this time.