

Opening Statement for Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate and the Environment

Review of Climate Action Plan 2023

Thursday, 22 February 2024

(1,225 words / 7 minutes)

[1.] Introduction

I would like to thank the Committee for the invitation today to review Climate Action Plan 2023 and to outline actions that we are taking to cut emissions in the transport sector. I am joined today by Officials from the Department of Transport - Caoimhin O’Ciaruain (Assistant Secretary responsible for the Department’s Climate Pillar), Naoise Grisewood and John Martin (from the Climate Engagement and Governance Division), Aoife O’Grady (from the Department’s Zero Emissions Vehicles Ireland (ZEVI) Office), and Aoife Fleming and Maurice Harnett (from our Sustainable Mobility Management and Implementation Division).

[2.] Current State of Play

While Ireland’s National Emissions decreased by 1.9% in 2022, the EPA’s provisional emissions inventory for 2022 reports that transport emissions increased by 6% from 2021 to 2022. This reflects the continued growth in economic activity following the pandemic years, coupled with continued demographic growth. During the first two years of Ireland’s first carbon budget period (2021-2025), the transport sector has used approximately 42% of its

54MtCO₂ eq. budget. Initial indications are that the rate of increase is slowing, and 2023 emissions are unlikely to have grown by the same rate. Nonetheless, emissions for 2023 are expected to be above those reached in 2022, but will remain below our 2018 baseline figure of 12.2MtCO₂eq. against which our targets are measured.

Having passed the midway point of the first carbon budget - the EPA's provisional emissions inventory for 2022 shows very clearly that cumulative emissions for the transport sector are currently at the very upper limit of being aligned to the required compliance pathway to 2025. We must continue to do everything we can to cut emissions in the sector, both out to 2025, and more rapidly in the second half of the decade.

[3.] Status of CAP24

As you will be aware, Climate Action Plan 2024 was approved by Government before the end of last year subject to Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Appropriate Assessment (AA), and public consultation on the draft will run until the 5th of April. CAP24 sets out how Ireland will speed up action to respond to the climate crisis and, while setting out that Ireland is making progress across many key sectors, it reinforces that measures must continue to be implemented at greater speed and scale to reduce emissions further, particularly in the transport sector, while ensuring that quality of life is improved.

[4.] CAP23 Delivery

In terms of CAP23, under the reporting mechanisms established by the Department of the Taoiseach in the delivery of high-impact CAP23 actions, the

Department has achieved a 61.5% delivery rate, with 16 of 26 high-impact actions completed.

Key achievements included the ongoing expansion of rural mobility services under the NTA's Connecting Ireland programme and the completion of the first projects under our Sustainable Mobility Policy Pathfinder Programme. The Department has published its National Cycle Network Strategy and our National EV Charging Infrastructure Strategy & National En-Route EV Charging plan. The 'Your Journey Counts' national advertising campaign was launched, and new and revised Metropolitan Area Transport Strategies were completed for the Waterford, Limerick-Shannon and Greater Dublin Areas. BusConnects, DART+ and Metrolink have all progressed through major milestones in our consultative and planning systems.

The 10 delayed actions will be considered for 'legacy reporting' or carried forward under revised actions in Climate Action Plan 2024. I am satisfied that the majority of these outstanding actions are subject to short-term delays owing to planning, legislative and consultation processes among other issues, and they will not impact on our emissions reduction targets in the medium-term.

[5.] Achievements in Transport

Ultimately, however, good progress is being made and the public is with us in making the shift:

- Over 308 million passenger journeys were made in 2023 — a jump of nearly 25% over 2022. Local link services saw a 78% increase in passenger numbers between 2022 and 2023 — a seven-fold increase since 2018.
- 60 new bus routes were launched across rural Ireland in 2023, adding 2.3 million annual kilometres to the public transport network. Over the past 2 years, there has been a new or enhanced bus route every week.

- Electric vehicle adoption is surging, with a total of over 114,000 EVs now on Irish roads, of which almost 65,000 are pure battery electric. We are on track to meet the 2025 target of 195,000 EVs.
- The Government has cut public transport fares for adults by 20% and by an additional 50% for young adults up to the age of 26. It has also delivered almost 190km of walking and cycling infrastructure, 54km of Greenways and 4 new pedestrian and cycle bridges in 2023.
- Progress is being made in the delivery of public transport infrastructure, and just this week Metrolink has moved into a critical phase with the commencement of An Bord Pleanála's Oral Hearing for the project.
- The transition to E10 in Petrol and publication of an ambitious policy trajectory for renewables fuels for transport which has proven to be one of the key impactful measures in the decarbonisation of transport to date.

[6.] Recommended Measures and Need for further action

However, we must continue to do more and accelerate our action. While the transport chapter of CAP24 reflects progress being made, it also highlights the risks to delivery that we must work hard to overcome – across all areas of Government. These risks are well known – whether its inflation cost, market constraints, planning and other systems bottlenecks. Finding mitigations are more difficult. Our approach in transport, as with other sectors, is to work collaboratively with all the relevant stakeholders to seek solutions and maintain our focus on the ultimate prize – a transport system that is integrated, resilient and decarbonised.

Furthermore, CAP24 highlights new actions in specific policy areas where we need to find further abatement potential: these include, for example, reviewing the national ports policy to include consideration of key recommendations of the

draft All-Island Strategic Rail Review with regard to enhanced rail connectivity to our ports, in order to improve and encourage greater integration of rail freight and rail passenger transport with our seaports.

I have also asked my Department to reassess the policy pathways and models to identify any additional measures that can further accelerate the decarbonisation of the sector. This will not be easy – particularly as I believe we have identified all the correct policies and strategies to decarbonise transport. The final policy component in the Avoid, Shift, Improve approach will be a national Demand Management Strategy which I intend bringing to Government in the coming weeks. Implementation of policy measures at pace is the priority now and I look forward to discussing with this Committee how we collectively drive that implementation.

We must do everything we can to engage the public, our communities, the public sector, and our businesses to play their part in helping to cut transport emissions.

[7.] Conclusion

In conclusion, I am aware that just this week, the Climate Change Advisory Council expressed concern that Ireland may not meet the first carbon budget. This echoes a recent report from the EPA (Irish Climate Change Assessment), which showed that Ireland has now used almost half of our Carbon Budget for 2021-2025 in the first two years.

However, I believe good progress is being made in the transport sector – I believe our emissions have peaked and ‘the ship is turning’, but now is the time for accelerated action, with support from all sectors of Government, and not for complacency.

Thanks for your time, and I am happy to take any questions you may have.