

Good morning, My name is Avril Ní Shearcaigh. I am a native of the Aran Islands in Co Galway and I am currently employed as the manager of Comharchumann Fuinneamh Oileáin Árann Teo, the Aran Islands Energy Co-Operative. Our co-operative has 5 main goals which are also in line with the recently published islands policy and its accompanying action plan and we believe the energy transition offers us a unique opportunity to significantly contribute towards achieving these common goals. Our goals are;

GOAL 1: To stabilise and sustainably increase the population on the 3 islands. We will work to achieve this by:

- • Securing our local economy by generating our own energy and owning its infrastructure. The secondary benefits of this would be retained across the islands, affording us some independence and autonomy, as well as providing a cashflow to pursue more of our common goals.
- • Creating new sustainable and diverse employment opportunities outside of tourism, in areas such as sustainability, renewable energy and biodiversity.
- • Increasing the attractiveness of the islands to residents and visitors alike by creating a decarbonised, sustainable place to live, work and thrive.

GOAL 2: Maintain the language, the culture, and the heritage of the 3 islands. We will work to achieve this by:

- • Using the Irish language in our work wherever possible.
- • Achieving the energy transition on the islands without damage to its cultural heritage.
- • Supporting Irish speaking sustainable energy communities throughout Ireland in sustainable projects in their locality, as well as others outside the Gaeltacht regions.
- **GOAL 3: Be sensitive to the beauty and richness of the natural environment in which we live.** We will work to achieve this by:

- • Supporting the protection, and enhancing the unique biodiversity, of our flora, fauna, and marine life, and establishing local initiatives in these areas.
- • Supporting the sustainable lifestyle choices of our residents and visitors which help to protect our soil, our water, and our air quality.
- • Providing educational programmes in our community and elsewhere in areas of sustainability, alternative energy, and ways of living in harmony with the rest of nature.

GOAL 4: Increase the comfort, energy efficiency, and sustainability of our homes and transport.We will work to achieve this by:

- • Promoting and supporting clean energy generation and usage in homes, community buildings and businesses.
- • Promoting and supporting the retrofitting of homes, community buildings and businesses.
- • Promoting and supporting clean energy usage in all our transport, on land, sea and in the air.

GOAL 5: Promote the 3 Aran Islands as lighthouse communities, offering inspiration, support, and examples of best practice, to other communities in Ireland and throughout the world.We will work to achieve this by:

- • Maintaining good communications e.g., website, newsletter, social media, other media.
- • Participating in national and international research projects.
- • Offering cooperation, support, mentorships, and internships to colleges and students of sustainability and other specialities.
- • Networking and cooperating with other communities – knowledge transfer.
- • Lobbying for change and greater support for community led initiatives in areas of renewable energy, conservation, sustainability and biodiversity.

- • Consultation with local, national and European agencies as well as NGOs, the community and voluntary sector.

In order for our offshore islands to thrive we need to ensure that the communities living on them are empowered, that they are resilient and that the disadvantages associated with living on our offshore islands ultimately do not outweigh the advantages. Many challenges felt by mainland communities are often felt earlier and more keenly by islands communities, this is true of climate change, the cost of living and in areas such as housing, education, health and transport. The energy transition on our islands can have a positive impact in all of these areas, but not without government support and strong political will.

By generating our own, community owned, clean energy locally we can make the islands self sufficient, generate additional employment opportunities, lower energy costs and generate a public income to support local community development projects. This could improve the standard of living on islands, the amenities available to locals, the services available and much more.

By retrofitting homes and businesses on the islands to a high standard we can improve the living conditions in the often older, less efficient, (and more expensive to run) homes and even free up additional homes which have been left vacant. This would again aid significantly in lowering the cost of living on our islands, solve some of the issues we have in relation to the shortage of housing, improve the health and wellbeing of our residents and in turn aid in re-growth of the islands population.

By decarbonising the transport systems, both on and to, the islands we can reduce our carbon footprint. On the Aran Islands our transport (mainly the transport to the islands) accounts for over 60% of our carbon emissions, according to our energy masterplan.

There is no shortage of examples available to show how important the energy transition on the islands could be in solving many of the challenges we face. Not only would carrying out this important work help the problems we face now, but it would also help to sustain the islands into the future.

I understand that all I have outlined will take significant investment from Government, and buy in from organisations like SEAI, CRU, ESBN and the local authorities and many more. The will of the community on the Aran Islands is certainly there, and I have no doubt that it is on the other islands too. So far we have retrofitted 50% of buildings across the islands to some degree, many homes have PV panels, EVs and heatpumps. But we are finding it increasingly difficult to continue this work without additional measures and funding above and beyond what is already available. We recognise the new efforts being made through the living islands policy aims to tackle some of these issues, but that support needs to be scaled up drastically if we are to grasp this opportunity which we now have.

I think the islands also present a valuable opportunity to the government to trial a transition to clean energy which maximises the secondary benefits for its citizens like I have outlined above and where valuable lessons can be learnt before scaling up a similar transition for the rest of the country.

Finally, I want to thank you very much for inviting me here today, and for giving us this opportunity. Go raibh maith agaibh.