

CLIMATE ACTION OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS *For The Public Sector*

Climate change remains a primary global and national issue and existential threat. Without seeking to downplay externalities like the digital economy, major conflicts such as the Ukraine/Russia war or other geopolitical issues, future economic and social development will be informed and influenced for generations by long-term policy decisions on climate made in today's short-term political cycle, according to Ciarán Hayes.



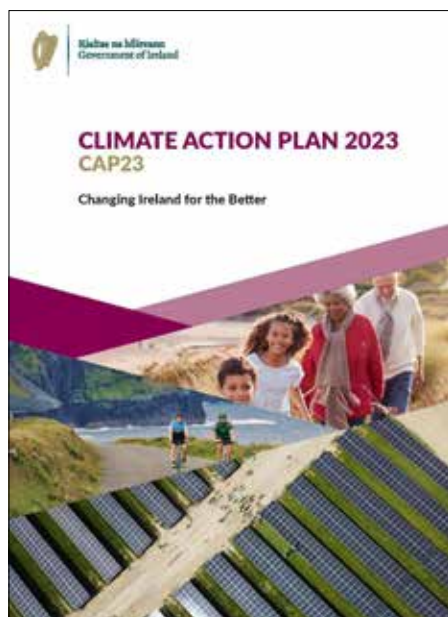
Sixty-five years ago, a post World War II Ireland stood at an inflection point. A young, independent but largely agricultural and rural State, the country embarked on a previously uncharted path and embraced T.K. Whitaker's ambitious and at the time radical 1958 'Economic Development' policies.

The country's long-term development needs took precedence over the much shorter-term political cycles, cycles that continue to this day. Decisions made then sowed the seeds for the emergence of our current small open economy and were complemented by Donogh O'Malley's decisions on free second level education in the 1960s.

Today, the primary global issue and existential threat is climate change, and the country stands at a similar inflection point. After many false starts, climate change has reached the top of the political agenda and shares the stage with other priorities of housing, refugees and inflation. It's a welcome but overdue development.

Human induced global warming and the long-term damage it brings has been known for many years, even decades, but climate continually slipped down the political priority list behind the shorter-term priority or crisis of the day.

There is no doubting the serious consequences, unprecedented nature, or the scale of the challenge but it seems the whole



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The CARO website www.caro.ie went live in April 2021 to support all county and city councils in leading Ireland's climate action efforts.

climate narrative is encased in negativity. Messaging at a global and national level becomes ever more stark leaving people confused and in fear.

Some are overwhelmed, while others see any actions on this small island as futile as we have no control over larger developed economies who will continue to generate emissions regardless of our efforts. Specific sectors of the economy also appear angry and we're witnessing a circling of the wagons, lobbying, and pushing back on the changes they themselves are required to make.

Instead, employment and economic development opportunities exist, opportunities that can counteract job displacement arising from climate change, the start of which is now witnessed in the midlands. The issue is how to avail of those opportunities and there is a case to be made that countries and societies that successfully address climate adaptation and mitigation challenges will have a future competitive advantage in the marketplace.

LEADERSHIP ROLE OF 'CAP 23'

Ireland has such an opportunity having recently adopted one of the most all-encompassing, comprehensive and ambitious policy documents, the National Climate Action Plan 2023 (CAP 23). Building as it does on previous Climate Action Plans of 2019 and 2021, the primary theme of CAP 23 is the leadership role of the wider public sector while containing specific recommendations for all sectors of the economy.

Formulating and developing 'Action Plans'

is what we're good at. We do that well. It's the implementation that holds us back. The short-term issue for the public sector is to demonstrate leadership by finding new, innovative, and creative ways of delivering on the ambitious plans, bearing in mind that many of the challenges have no precedence and time is not our ally.

CARO WORK PROGRAMME

Although operating largely on the basis of tradition, custom and practice, local government responded to the challenge by establishing the Climate Action Regional Offices (CAROs) in collaboration with the Department.

As part of the CARO work programme, it embarked on a comprehensive six-module staff training programme for the entire sector covering elected members, senior management, professional, technical, administrative, foremen, tradesmen, general operatives, and entry level staff.

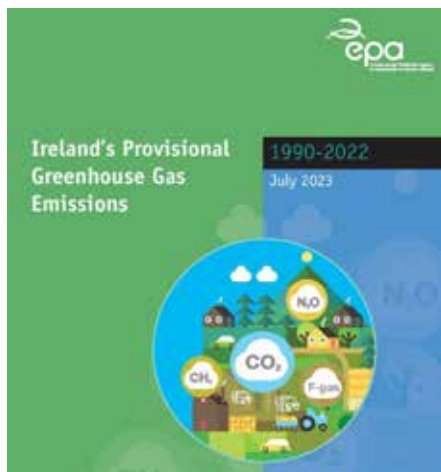
To date, over 20,000 of a total of 28,000 plus staff have been trained and upskilled. New competencies have been recruited including energy officers and sustainable mobility staff while recruitment is currently underway for Climate Action Officers and Climate Action Co-ordinators.

Local authorities are known for their response to severe weather events and major emergency management, issues they have long experienced as 'First Responders'. What's lesser known is the extent of involvement in sustainable and best practice initiatives, and the following examples include circular economy, mitigation and renewable energy projects:

Climate Challenges

- South Dublin County Council has entered a collaboration with Amazon Web Services to capture excess heat generated by the AWS Data Centre for use in a district heating system.
- Kildare County Council is advancing a 'Grass to Gas' project in collaboration with Maynooth University where they are seeking to use what was a waste product of cut grass as a raw material suitable for anaerobic digestion and the production of renewable gas and compost.
- Wicklow County Council has entered a Power Purchase contract with a private sector renewable energy provider. Funded by the private sector, solar panels have been installed in the Council car park with the energy generated being purchased by the Council at a fixed rate.
- All councils are updating their fleet to electric or renewable energy options and have a multi-annual programme of retrofitting older social housing stock.
- Decarbonised zones have been identified and are being advanced by each council.
- Midland councils are actively involved with the Midlands Regional Transition Team seeking to address one of the consequences of climate change i.e. job displacement.
- Louth County Council has engaged for many years with public and private sector stakeholders and is leading the way in energy reduction and other mitigation measures across its functional area.
- A network of Greenways, Blueways, walking and cycling routes are being advanced by councils across the country, many in collaboration with other public and private sector stakeholders.
- Old landfill sites are being repurposed as renewable energy sites.
- Energy agencies in Dublin (Codema), Tipperary and the southeast work collaboratively with councils in their area across a wide spectrum of innovative energy projects.
- Regional assemblies are collaborating with the Department of Transport to roll out sustainable mobility training across the sector.

This list is by no means complete. Local authorities are continuously striving to



Ireland's 2022 Greenhouse Gas Emissions decreased by 1.9 per cent, but much work remains to be done, according to the EPA.

position the sector to meet the climate challenges, are engaging in innovative collaborations and are adding to the growing list of initiatives.

ACHIEVING SIGNIFICANT MILESTONES

While the sector has come a long way in a relatively short timeframe, significant milestones have yet to be achieved, foremost of which is the achievement of the 2030 emission targets, mainstreaming best practice, securing the buy-in of local communities and stakeholders to the climate agenda, and achievement of behavioural change.

CAP 23's requirement for the formulation of a Local Authority Climate Action Plan by February 2024 presents the opportunity to embed climate action into every aspect of council functions. Local government strategies for advancing the economic, social, and cultural development of its cities and counties must now be formulated with a view to climate change risks, need for adaptation and mitigation measures, and sustainability.

All Corporate, Directorate, and Team Development plans and their component objectives and actions must be proofed from a climate perspective thereby creating a climate action culture within each council.

Viewed from a national perspective, there are reasons to be optimistic. The perception from abroad is that Ireland is seen to be a leader in renewable energy. States like Massachusetts can only aspire to a maximum penetration of 20% of their energy requirement comprised of

renewable energy whereas Ireland can aspire to upwards of 70%.

Harnessing the offshore renewable energy potential creates further opportunities. A restructuring of the grid will be required to accommodate the integration of the new offshore renewable energy sources.

Several coastal counties will facilitate the development of critical energy infrastructure in the short and medium term. As access to energy is a factor in economic development, those councils may wish to reconsider their Development Plans accordingly and make themselves more attractive to inward investment and development.

GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSION TARGETS

With all that is happening, why then is Ireland likely to miss the 2030 Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emission targets? The EPA published its Greenhouse Gas emissions projections for 2020-2040 on 2 June noting that Ireland will only achieve a 29% emission reduction and only if the existing plans and proposals are implemented in full.

The 2030 target is a 51% reduction of the 2018 baseline, but all sectors are on a trajectory to miss their target and exceed their sectoral emission ceilings for 2025 and 2030. Ireland is three years into the operation of a relatively new carbon budget system. Five-year carbon budgets were introduced for the main sectors within the economy in 2021 to assist in the achievement of the emission targets. However, the EPA reports that the first two budget cycles are set to be missed by a significant margin of between 24% and 34%.

One reason is the length of time taken to formulate the plans at the outset. Now that they are formulated, the issue is to upskill and train staff across the entire public sector and advance implementation. Local government has a distance to travel in this regard but is ahead of many other public sector agencies and this is largely due to the work of the CAROs.

A second reason is the nature of the agencies themselves. Public sector agencies operate under statute, are very focussed on process, and are risk averse by their nature thus leaving little scope for flexibility in a fast-changing environment.

There's the issue of system blockages.

Climate Challenges

Limerick City & County Council has developed a tidal turbine project to harness renewable energy from the Shannon but cannot put it into operation due to a delay (deemed to be 18-months before it could begin to be assessed) in acquiring a Foreshore Licence.

If the climate action agenda is to be advanced across the public sector, these and other administrative and bureaucratic blockages need to be identified and addressed quickly if we are to succeed collectively in meeting exacting targets.

A need for far greater collaboration between public sector agencies and between the public and private sectors can also be impacted by the silo effect. Addressing climate challenges means dealing with initiatives that have no precedence within sectors with the result that many agencies have limited experience, expertise, or track record of entering into new and innovative public private partnerships.

Initiatives such as power purchase contracts, collaborations with the private sector for the development of a network of anaerobic digestors, development and rollout of district heating schemes, conversion of old landfill sites to renewable energy farms, or exploring the potential for geothermal energy come to mind. Many of these initiatives require collaboration, partnership, revised governance, and new operating models beyond the existing well-established norms.

NEED FOR COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

CAP 23 has identified a need for a concerted communication strategy among public sector agencies. Such a strategy will be as important as any adaptation or mitigation measure if all sectors of the community are to buy into the agenda. It will also help to avert the risk of the public feeling overwhelmed by the scale and complexity of the challenge. Local authorities and the wider public sector have an obligation to engage with their citizens, communities and stakeholders to encourage widespread behavioural change and adoption of climate friendly practices.

It's an uphill struggle when set against the continuing barrage of negativity that served to elevate climate up the political agenda in the first place. Despite

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progress, the EPA report is both timely and sobering. The 2030 targets are fixed notwithstanding the two years of progress lost to Covid-19.

No agency should plan for or expect the deadlines to be pushed back. It remains to be seen therefore whether the CAP 23 obligations and actions prescribed for the public sector, accompanied by a comprehensive oversight architecture, will have the desired effect of accelerating climate actions to bridge the emission ceiling gap as identified by the EPA. Public sector agencies will also be mindful of the inclusion within CAP 23 of penalties for sectors falling short of their carbon budget ceilings.

Albeit early days, our combined response to CAP 23 and the EPA report will determine the trajectory of this latest inflection point. The full ambition of CAP 23 has yet to be realised and major hurdles remain. However, there is one certainty. Climate action is set to accelerate and continue to be elevated up the priority list.

Looking back on Whitaker's 1958 vision, with the benefit of hindsight we can applaud the long-term approach adopted by Government. However, hindsight is not a benefit available to the policy choices of today, and it remains to be seen how the country's longer term policy objectives will be balanced against the more immediate priorities of the short-term political cycle. Time will tell but, in the meantime, the 2030 emission and carbon budget ceiling target deadlines loom.

FACTFILE – CIARÁN HAYES

Ciarán Hayes provides strategic management advice to the public and private sector. Prior to establishing Ciarán Hayes Consultancy



Ltd, he was Chief Executive of Sligo County Council and had experience across five local authorities including 21 years at senior management level.

Ciarán completed a two-year Fellowship in Harvard University researching climate action in December 2022, and has a BA Degree in Public Management and a Higher Diploma in Computer Studies.

He led the local government response to climate change and to the establishment of the Climate Action Regional Offices (CARO). He is presently a Board Member of the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) and the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC).

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