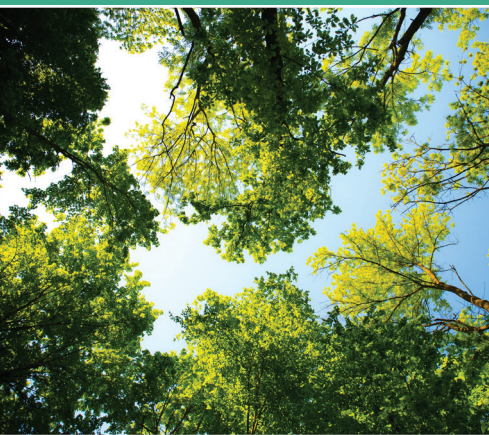




Empowering Communities in Climate Action



Darren O'Rourke TD and Senator Lynn Boylan

Contents

Introduction.....	3
Resourcing Sustainable Energy Communities (SECs)	4
Enhance the SEAI Sustainable Energy Community Programme: Local Energy Action Fund	5
Invest in Community Renewable Energy Projects	6
Establish a Just Transition Commission	6
Support Communities in Energy Innovation	7
Community Wealth Building	8
Ciste Beithe - Public Parks and Woodlands for Local Communities	9
Place the National Biodiversity Centre on a Statutory footing	10
Support communities in Environmental Planning	11



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Introduction

The transition to a carbon neutral society will require radical change, not just technologically but socially too. We need to support communities in developing and recognising their hopes and aspirations for a sustainable future. Therefore, while the journey to net zero brings about real challenges, it also brings with it immense opportunity. In order to not squander it, we must empower people to be the authors of this change, rather than feeling like they have been left behind.

Sinn Féin recognises that the transition must be inclusive and democratic if we are to bring people along the journey. It is essential that communities are part of the design and implementation of that change. Done the right way, with a genuine bottom-up approach, not only will community engagement help make the transition fair and democratic, but it will make it fast too. This is key to a just transition.

It is essential that local communities are engaged and afforded real opportunities to not only become involved in decision making processes but also to co-design programs and policies. Including the voices and experiences of those whom climate action affects has a proven success record.

Our proposals on Community-Led Climate Action therefore seek to unleash this untapped potential. We believe it can not only play a critical role in reaching our climate targets, but can also deliver tangible benefits for local communities, their economies and the environment. We believe that a genuinely just transition is intrinsic to climate action.





Resourcing Sustainable Energy Communities (SECs)

Sinn Féin would increase funding for Sustainable Energy Communities to help expand the capacity of communities to realise a carbon free future: €2 million

- What are Sustainable Energy Communities?

Sustainable Energy Communities (SECs) are community-led initiatives where people come together to improve how energy is used for the benefit of their community. These communities work to use energy in a more sustainable, holistic way. This not only concerns domestic use, but also energy use in local transport and business, in local schools, communities and in sports centres, for example. In essence, local communities share knowledge about climate action and work together to make energy improvements in their own area.

There are many benefits to this. First, community energy projects lead to warmer, healthier homes and community buildings. This improves the quality of life for everyone but especially those living in or at risk of energy poverty. Sustainable energy communities have also proven successful in reducing local energy bills through local energy projects. This means there is more money to reinvest in the local community longer term. Thirdly, these projects bring communities together and contribute to bigger goals such as tidy towns, green tourism and eco-congregation activities. Finally, changing our energy use is essential in the transition to net zero. It is an essential strategy in the endeavour to cut carbon emissions.¹ Research has shown that energy communities can act as catalysts for long-term energy behavioural change.² By forming energy communities, not only is the impact on the environment even bigger, it is also more durable because communities have adapted to more sustainable ways of living due to the proven benefits it can bring.³

It is therefore of little surprise that the popularity of sustainable energy communities is growing both internationally and here at home in Ireland.⁴ As it stands, there are 727 SECs and a target of 1500 by 2030. In Sinn Féin, we want to be even more ambitious. We want to further nurture this growing movement as it puts climate action directly into the hands of people and allows them to identify changes that can be made in their locality that will benefit their community and the environment.

We believe this ground-up delivery model for climate action has significant potential to grow, particularly in rural Ireland, and in government we will invest in this community-led climate approach.

1 Start a Sustainable Energy Community | SEAI
2 Building a sustainable energy future, one community at a time - ScienceDirect
3 Microsoft Word - Klein Coffey REVISED manuscript CRE3 RSER 8-21-15 tables removed (sciencedirectassets.com)
4 Microsoft Word - Klein Coffey REVISED manuscript CRE3 RSER 8-21-15 tables removed (sciencedirectassets.com)

Enhance the SEAI Sustainable Energy Community Programme: Local Energy Action Fund

Sinn Féin would establish a new Local Energy Action Fund, to help unleash the power of communities to deliver climate action: €8 million

In Ireland, SECs are supported through the SEAI's Sustainable Energy Community Programme. It empowers local people to make changes that will benefit their community and the environment. Utilising mentoring and grants from the SEAI, locally formed committees identify changes that should be made to help reduce energy use and to increase renewable energy production.

Homeowners can share their first-hand experience of energy improvements, including information on grants, works completed and energy bill savings realised, with an aim of encouraging their neighbours to follow suit.

For example, one homeowner who has installed solar PV on their roof can organise to have their neighbours over and share their experience to date, highlighting the cost, the work involved, the grants available, the cost savings to be made and the benefits it delivers for his household and the environment, with the aim of encouraging more people in the locality to follow suit.

Workshops can be organised in community centres or active retirement groups to inform people about grants to insulate their home and share tips on how to reduce their energy use and bills.

GAA clubs can work as a team to have their lights replaced with more efficient LED alternatives and identify changes that can be made by their local authority, such as active travel access to their grounds, to encourage more people to walk or cycle.

There is a chance to go even further, however. Through meeting with community groups that have gone through the Sustainable Energy Community programme, it has become clear that they are being held back. SECs are funded to network, research, and plan what they would do to reduce emissions. However, when it comes to putting those plans into action, funding has been lacking. This is a serious hole in the government's plan to harness the potential of community-led climate action.

Sinn Féin would address this shortcoming by providing €8m of funding for a Local Energy Action Fund, administered by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, to help unleash the power of communities to deliver climate action.

By increasing the funding to the SEC and furthermore by enhancing through independence through the establishing a Local Energy Action Fund, more communities can become local arbiters of and advocates of the transition to net zero and ensure that the benefit from the new opportunities that arise and are not disproportionately negatively impacted by the radical changes in our energy use that are taking place. By embedding the transition in more local communities and adopting a more democratic and inclusive approach we are helping to ensure that the transition is a just one and that no one is left behind.

Invest in Community Renewable Energy Projects

Sinn Féin would increase the target of community and locally owned renewable energy projects by 2030 and double the funding for community renewable energy projects this year: €2 million

In Sinn Féin, we want to harness the significant environmental and social benefits that community renewable energy projects bring.

The Templederry wind farm is the leading example of a community owned windfarm, with the two-turbine scheme generating €1 million for the local community annually. Unfortunately, we don't have enough Templederry examples across the state.

The Climate Action Plan 2023 aims to have 500MW of community based renewable power on the grid by 2030, but we would like to see this ambition significantly increased. Sinn Féin would target at least 10% of our new renewable energy capacity to be community owned by 2030.

Current funding allows the SEAI to provide an advisory service to community groups and funds enabling grants. In 2023, we would double this funding, to ensure other community groups who want to generate their own local renewable energy are empowered to do so.

Establish a Just Transition Commission

Sinn Féin would establish a Just Transition Commission: €1 million

The magnitude of the societal and technological transformation we are embarking upon is seismic. We cannot take for granted that the outcomes produced will be equitable or that the benefits and / or burdens of change will be shared equitably within society. Therefore, it is not sufficient in isolation to simply include local communities to ensure a sustainable and liveable future for all. Rather, we must empower them and prioritise the principles of fairness and equality in all aspects of our pathway to carbon neutrality. In other words, we must ensure that the transition to net zero is a just one.

In our 2023 Alternative Budget, we committed €1 million to establishing a Just Transition Commission. This Commission would bring together workers, communities, employers, and government in social dialogue to drive the concrete plans, policies and investments needed for a fast and fair transformation to a low carbon economy.

Under the approach to climate action adopted to date by successive governments, poorly planned climate action has become synonymous with reduced standards of living. This eco-austerity sets us back in our mission to reduce emissions by squandering public support. The transition must make tangible improvements to people's lives if it is to enjoy enduring buy-in from the public.

As for the current government, any notion of a just transition is clearly an afterthought. The initial draft of the government's Climate Bill did not so much as mention the phrase 'just transition'. The final version that was passed by the Oireachtas stopped short of giving meaningful effect to a just transition and only went as far as paying lip service to the idea.

Support Communities in Energy Innovation

Sinn Féin would establish a new fund for innovative renewable energy projects: €20 million

There is much untapped potential in Ireland's renewable energy resources. In Sinn Féin, we firmly believe that local communities must benefit from the harnessing of this potential. We also believe that, with effective support, a bottom-up approach can play an important role in energy innovation.

The Climate Action Fund currently exists to provide financial assistance, within state aid rules, for projects which contribute to meeting energy targets and encourages innovative projects to develop climate change solutions. In Sinn Féin, we would increase funding specifically for the development of innovative initiatives in renewable generation, but importantly we would prioritise funding for projects which derive benefits for the local community and prioritise local engagement. Not only is this going to increase the likelihood of success, it will also produce more just and equitable outcomes.

- ⚙️ **WAVE ENERGY:** the Offshore Renewable Energy Development Plan identified development potential of 31,100MW of wave energy off Ireland that could be extracted without having likely significant adverse effects on the environment. Ireland's wave resource is greatest on the west, south and north coast where environmental conditions are more extreme. The sporadic nature of wind and solar requires a broad mix of renewable energies.
- ⚙️ **TIDAL ENERGY:** in 2014 the SEAI identified a total development potential of 3000MW of tidal energy off the South East and North West coasts and in the Shannon Estuary. The future of both wave and tidal depend on making the technology cost effective, so research funding from the CAF can help bring down these costs.
- ⚙️ **GREEN HYDROGEN:** hydrogen made using renewable energy, that has emerging potential in the transport, shipping, aviation and energy sectors. Ireland's abundance of offshore wind offers the state huge potential to develop this new energy.
- ⚙️ **BATTERY STORAGE:** renewable energy production will be intermittent, so to reduce the use of fossil fuel backup when the wind doesn't blow and the sun isn't shining, battery storage will play an important role to help maintain a stable electricity grid.
- ⚙️ **DEMAND REDUCTION:** when balancing the grid, reducing electricity consumption has the same net effect as increasing generation, so demand reduction will have a growing role in our electricity system as more intermittent renewable technologies come online. The greenest MW we can have is the one we do not consume. Local communities can play a particularly significant role in this.
- ⚙️ **DISTRICT HEATING:** district heating systems deliver heat for both space heating and water heating needs, to buildings through a network of insulated underground pipelines. This heat can be generated centrally, but even better, it can be recovered from energy intensive facilities like power plants, incinerators, data centres and other large energy users. Denmark delivers 60% of their heating demand from district heating, but in Ireland it's potential remains untapped.
- ⚙️ **HYDROTREATED VEGETABLE OIL:** HVO is a bio-fuel diesel alternative, made from vegetable oils, such as rapeseed or sunflower. HVO has potential in the heavy transport sector, where electrification isn't currently an option. It also has applications in the heating sector, as existing oil boilers can also be converted to burn HVO, which can reduce emissions by 80%-90%.



Community Wealth Building

Sinn Féin would create a Community Wealth Building Fund to assist local authorities to develop/implement CWB strategies and establish a Workers Co-operative Development Unit and Fund: €3 million

The climate and economic crises are deeply interlinked. We cannot solve one without solving the other. The structural causes of both are the same. As a result, we need to look beyond our current political and economic system for solutions. Community Wealth Building⁵ is one such model that offers an alternative economic model that is both fairer and more sustainable.

Through the Community Wealth Building approach local and regional economies are reorganised to ensure that wealth is not extracted from towns and counties by absentee owners but retained and recirculated. This development model aims to leverage existing local resources to meet local needs while promoting values of equity and sustainability.

If traditional economic development tends to be about attracting industry to a community, this strategy instead focuses on under-utilised local assets to make a community more vibrant. It's about developing assets in such a way that the wealth is added to a community and not simply extracted. This model aims to empower ordinary families, workers and communities in order to control their own economic development.

Community Wealth Building encourages local employment and shorter supply chains. Local economic development means investing in local businesses and sourcing goods and services from local suppliers and reducing our climate footprint. This is in stark contrast to the current policy of simply going with the lowest cost or tender, which in the long run is a false economy.

Overall, community wealth building provides a holistic and inclusive approach to climate action. By focusing on local ownership, equitable distribution of resources, and sustainable economic practices, communities can address climate change challenges while building resilient, prosperous, and environmentally conscious local economies. This approach not only contributes to global climate goals but also enhances community well-being, social cohesion, and long-term sustainability.

5 Community Wealth Building | Sinn Féin (sinnfein.ie)

Ciste Beithe - Public Parks and Woodlands for Local Communities

Sinn Féin would establish a dedicated fund for public parks and native woodlands: €10 million

It's hard to imagine now, but Ireland was once covered in temperate rainforest. Only about 2% of Ireland is still covered in native forest, one of the lowest rates in Europe.

The Celtic Tiger era of developer-led construction and poor planning produced many areas with dense residential development but with little or no public green areas. This was especially apparent during the pandemic. Many people realised the huge benefit of a local public park or woodland. However, it also highlighted the fact that for many others, they lack these amenities in their community.

Very little action has been taken by the government to address this significant gap. This means we are failing to harness the well-documented benefits of incorporating green areas into our residential communities. Incorporating areas covered by grass, trees and vegetation into our communities can deliver significant benefits in terms of health, exercise, well-being, socialisation, pollution, and biodiversity.

Therefore, Sinn Féin are proposing a €10m 'Ciste Beithe' (translated 'Birch Fund'), a dedicated public park and woodland fund, which would allow local authorities apply for funding to help assist in the purchase or development of parcels of land for use as public parks and green areas. No such fund exists currently. Ciste Beithe will complement and enhance CLÁR and LEADER funding and will address an important funding gap.

Dedicated funding for the protection and expansion of our native woodland cover can help sequester carbon dioxide, enhance air quality and protect our biodiversity.

Our proposals would also allow ENGOs like the Native Woodland Trust to apply for assistance in purchasing areas of native woodlands in order to protect them, buy adjoining lands for natural expansion of these woodlands, or fund the purchase of new sites for afforestation. Publicly accessible woodlands can deliver significant benefits for people's health and wellbeing.⁶ It's a win-win for the communities and the environment





Place the National Biodiversity Centre on a Statutory footing

Sinn Féin would place the National Biodiversity Centre on a statutory footing: €1 million

Alongside the climate crisis, Ireland and the world is also facing a crisis in biodiversity.

Rather than seeing the solutions to tackle these twin challenges as being in conflict with one another, Sinn Féin believes it is essential to adopt approaches that view them as two component parts of one broader challenge. Thus, we seek to further democratise and strengthen local and community participation in Ireland's response to our biodiversity crisis.

Established in 2006, The National Biodiversity Data Centre is currently structured as a programme run by the Heritage Council. It is an example of a citizen driven science monitoring programme that collects and manages data on Ireland's biodiversity in order to document Ireland's wildlife resource and to track how it is changing over time. This further helps to identify Ireland's evolving conservation priorities. The centre not only seeks to make data and information more freely available and accessible, but also to broaden participation in monitoring and stewardship. As well as input from researchers, public bodies, farmers and NGOs etc, local community groups and the general public can submit casual records. The National Biodiversity Data Centre acknowledges and values the expertise that local communities and laypeople have.

As it stands, the National Biodiversity Data Centre is not an independent agency. Prior to 2022, it was run as a private company on a contractual basis. As of December 2022, it was restructured as a Company Limited by Guarantee. While this marks progress, it does not go far enough.

As part of Sinn Féin's alternative budget in 2023 we proposed a €1m next year to establish the National Biodiversity Data Centre as a standalone state agency. We believe that it is essential to recognise the vital work the centre work does in this area. We also believe that placing the centre on statutory footing would contribute to its sustainability over the term and reinforce the robustness of its activities. At Sinn Féin we remain committed to ensuring that our transition is democratic and inclusive of a multiplicity of voices. Therefore, it is essential we provide support to existing bottom up approaches that are successfully achieving their aims.

Support communities in Environmental Planning

Sinn Féin would double funding to the Irish Environmental Network: €2.1 million

The Irish Environmental Network provides grant funding to a range of individual ENGOs. These organisations work to protect and enhance the environment and to advocate for its protection. They seek to place environmental issues centre stage in planning and policy development.

Ordinary people and local communities are deeply concerned about the impact climate change is having yet they often lack the vehicle to communicate these concerns to the government and thus to influence policy and planning decisions. This is especially relevant when it comes to actions that can have a particularly significant impact locally. This includes the construction of new infrastructure as well as efforts to protect and nurture local flora and fauna. ENGOs play an important role to represent these views of local communities and thus to ensure their representation. However, they have extremely scarce resources and this is only one facet of their important work.

Therefore, Sinn Féin would double funding available to them so that they would have more resources to include advocacy on behalf of local communities and their environment.



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