

East Meath – North Dublin Grid Upgrade

Community Forum

7.30pm, 25th March 2024, via Zoom

Attending (members):	Deirdre Arthur (Craobh Chiarain GAA), Cllr Cathal Boland (Fingal Co. Co.), Cllr. Brian Dennehy (Fingal Co. Co.), Philip McCormack (Batterstown Village Enhancement Assoc.), Helena Merriman (St. Margaret's Parish Hall Committee), Walter Moran (Dunboyne AFC), Sheelagh Morris (St Margarets Action Committee), Liam O Gradaigh (St. Margaret's GAA), Denis O'Leary (Kilbride Tidy Towns), Pearse Sutton (St. Margaret's The Ward),
Apologies:	Tom O'Mahony (Dunboyne Comm. Centre), Cllr. Caroline O'Reilly (Meath Co. Co.)
Attending (EirGrid):	Grainne Duffy (Community Liaison Officer), Ailbhe Farrell (Community Engagement Specialist)
Facilitation:	Harriet Emerson

Welcome & Agenda

Everyone was welcomed and a short agenda of items to be discussed was distributed.

Minutes of meeting on 22nd February 2024 & matters arising

Those who were present at the meeting approved the draft minutes of the 22nd February 2024 at Dunboyne Castle Hotel (previously circulated).

EirGrid update:

Planning submission

It was confirmed that EirGrid intends to submit the planning application for the East Meath North Dublin Grid Upgrade on the 28th March. An Bord Pleanala has indicated that the public consultation for this application will be from the 5th April to the 23rd May 2024. The application itself can be viewed on the An Bord Pleanala website or at either the Fingal or Meath County Council offices. Ground investigation works are anticipated to take place in Quarter 3 as outlined in minutes of meeting of 22nd February, and these will be notified to communities and local residents in advance.

Community Benefit Fund Policy

The Community Benefit Fund Policy was revised 2 years ago and emphasises creating and leveraging partnerships and additional funding opportunities to maximise community benefit. Participation is at its core, and the Community Forum plays a key part in this. There is a Fund specific and ring-fenced to each project, calculated at 3% capital cost of the cable. Exact costs are not known at present but the Fund for the EMND project is expected to be about €2m -€2.5m

Funding streams and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The Fund aims to help communities transform their area and become (or remain) a “sustainable energy community”. The fund is divided into three equal streams:

- Sustainability – transforming how communities think about, generate and use energy.
- Biodiversity – enhance biodiversity and appreciation and experience of this biodiversity
- Community – supporting local communities to thrive and be resilient

The Fund will support initiatives that incorporate the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), leaving a positive legacy following the roll out of the project.

Fund administrator

EirGrid will shortly put out a call for tenders for an independent Fund Administrator who will then be ready to begin work when planning permission is received. The Fund Administrator will work closely with EirGrid and the Community Forum to develop a Community Benefit Strategy that is appropriate to the area of the project. Their role will include:

- Managing and administering the Community Benefit Fund
- Working with Community Forum members to oversee the Community Benefit Strategy
- Assist with applications through the application process
- Establish an evaluation panel for applications
- Support the capture of Community Benefit Fund stories and impact
- Reinforce EirGrid's objective of delivering positive legacy in the community.

This window of time prior to the planning decision is key for the Community Forum to inform itself so it can feed in most effectively to the Community Benefit Strategy.

Community Benefit Strategy

Local communities and stakeholders will be provided with an opportunity to inform and shape the community benefit fund priorities for the East Meath North Dublin area. This Strategy for the rollout of the Community Benefit Fund in the East Meath North Dublin Grid Upgrade project will be based on input from the local community, underpinned with information and analysis, and relevant to the geographical areas of the project and its development. (See p. 10 of the Community Benefit Policy booklet for further details.)

Rollout of the Community Benefit Fund

Once planning is received and the Strategy is in place, the application process will begin. There will be 3 rounds of applications over the space of 3 years;

- the first round, with 40% of the Fund being made available, when construction begins,
- a second round when cable jointing commences, with 30% of the fund made available, and
- a third round when the upgrade goes live, also with 30% of the fund value.

Any group(s) can submit applications for each round if they wish. An application made under any particular round that receives approval will obtain all the funding awarded under that round, and not split across different rounds.

If all of the funds available in one round are not distributed to applicants, the balance left will be rolled over to the next round of applications.

EirGrid hopes that works on the upgrade will be able to commence at the end of 2025/ early 2026 if planning is granted in a year to 18 months and will be completed in 2029. This is the 3 year period over which the three rounds of applications will be spread.

Before the application process opens there will be a range of supports provided to local communities to assist them with applications such as community information evenings, template and sample documents, FAQs, and guidance. There will also be widespread promotion of the Fund to the local community ahead of the opening for applications.

Next steps

The months before a planning decision is made gives an opportunity for the Community Forum to gather information; about the SDGs, other potential project partners for communities such as LEADER (EU funds supporting community-led local development), Sustainable Energy Authority Ireland (SEAI), Local Authority Climate Action Officers, but also from within their communities about priorities for local development.

Discussion

A range of questions and points of clarification were raised in discussion, summarised below:

- Individual projects can identify 1 or more of the 3 funding streams (community, sustainability and biodiversity) under which to apply for funds.
- Each application will be reviewed on its own merits. If all the Funds allocated for a round are not disbursed, these will be rolled over to the next round (allocated to the same Fund stream) and remain available to be taken up. They will not be lost.
- There will be meetings across the project area to inform communities about the Fund and how it will be administered. This will be done once planning has been obtained, which is the point when the Fund commences. While the Community Forum will be gathering information this year, members should also be feeding back to their communities, giving them the heads up to be thinking of projects they may want to apply for funding towards.
- The Fund is likely to be divided on a pro-rata basis across the geographical length of the project area, and will not all be concentrated in one area.
- The Fund Administrator will be appointed and ready to get to work promptly planning permission is granted. There will be a period of time between the grant of planning and the start of works, this is when the Administrator will work on the Strategy for how the Fund is to be rolled out in the East Meath North Dublin project.
- Where a proposal will require statutory approval (Planning Permission or other permissions/ approvals) these will need to be in place before an application to the Fund is considered.
- Some element of self-funding on the part of those applying for Funds will be necessary.
- An example was raised of a local sports club looking for funds to build ladies changing facilities which it does not previously have. While it was not possible to comment on any individual proposal, it was pointed out that gender equality is one of the SDGs, illustrating the need to have a good working understanding of these.
- The Community Forum will continue separately but in parallel with the administration of the Community Benefit Fund, continuing to keep the flow of information on the project open between the local community and EirGrid.
- Information on applications and initiatives that have received money from Community Benefit Funds in other project areas will be forwarded from EirGrid.

It was agreed that 3, possibly 4, further workshop meetings this year should be scheduled for the Community Forum. The first in late April, to look at the SDGs, with a second in late May/ early June with presentations from SEAI and SECs within the project area. A third meeting with LEADER representatives is also to be arranged, probably after the summer months. Harriet will discuss with EirGrid how input on the Biodiversity funding stream can be made.

Any other business

No additional items of business were raised for discussion.

Next meeting

It was agreed that EirGrid will identify an appropriate person to present on the SDGs and a number of possible dates for this in late April/ early May. Harriet will then circulate a brief survey for all members to identify the date which suits most members for this session.

The meeting ended at 8.50pm.