

East Meath – North Dublin Grid Upgrade

Community Forum

7.00pm, 4th Sept 2024, Roganstown Hotel, Swords

Attending (members): Deirdre Arthur (Craobh Chiarain GAA), Cllr. Cathal Boland (Fingal Co. Council), Philip McCormack (Batterstown Village Enhancement Assoc.), Helena Merriman (St. Margaret's Parish Hall Committee), Sheelagh Morris (St Margarets Action Committee), Liam O Gradaigh (St. Margaret's GAA), Denis O'Leary (Kilbride Tidy Towns), Aidan O'Toole (Craobh Chiarain GAA), (Pearse Sutton (St. Margaret's The Ward)

Attending (guests): Eilish Harrington (CEO, Fingal Leader Partnership) Grainne Duffy (EirGrid)

Apologies: David Branagan (Fingal Chamber), Julie Dowd (Scoil Bhride, Kilbride), Caroline Ledwith (Scoil Bhride, Kilbride), Emer Lynch (Scoil Bhride, Kilbride), Tom O'Mahony (Dunboyne Community Centre), Pat Smith (Co. Meath Chamber)

Facilitation: Harriet Emerson

Welcome & Agenda

All members and guests were welcomed; Eilish Harrington (CEO of Fingal Leader Partnership) and Grainne Duffy (EirGrid) were attending.

The agenda was previously circulated and no new amendments were made.

Minutes of meeting on 4th June 2024 & matters arising

The draft minutes of the previous meeting held via Zoom on the 4th June 2024 had been circulated shortly following that meeting. These were approved by those members who had been present. No matters arising were identified for further discussion at this point.

Presentation by Eilish Harrington (CEO, Fingal Leader Partnership)

Eilish gave a presentation on the Leader programme and funding opportunities, and how these might enhance proposed projects submitted to the EirGrid Community Benefit Fund, which will be established if planning permission is granted for the Grid upgrade. A copy of her slides is attached. While her presentation was based on the operation of Leader in Fingal, it is likely that Leader in Meath is not dissimilar.

She explained the EU source and purpose of the Leader Programme; to strengthen the rural economy and improve the quality of life in rural areas, indicating that some €3.4million has been allocated to Fingal Leader for the period to 2027 and a clear shift in focus towards a green economy and healthy environment. Following profiling, needs and SWOT analyses, consultation and alignment with policies, some 6 priorities were identified for Leader's local development strategy, across 3 themes:

1. Economic development and job creation
2. Rural infrastructure and social inclusion
3. Sustainable development of the rural environment and climate change mitigation and adaptation

Eilish set out broadly the sub-themes under each of these, and looked at the local objective and the types of initiatives that will be supported in relation to each of these. *(Please see slides for further details.)*

She then set out the steps involved in bringing a proposed initiative to the Fingal Leader Partnership and taking this through to securing funding. Development officers are available and keen to discuss initial ideas with community groups and organisations to see whether they will meet the eligibility criteria. They will support applicants to ensure that applications are fully ready when submitted for grant approval. They are also able to provide information on other sources of grant funding available. These development officers are able to visit communities to talk about the Leader Programme and how to apply for funding.

She stressed that Leader is unusual in supporting the conduct of feasibility studies (up to 90% of costs), many of which form the basis of further applications to Leader and other programmes for funding, and can also deliver training to boost capacity within communities (100% funded). Capital projects can be funded up to 75%, and if larger than €100,000 draw down of funds can be arranged in stages. It takes usually 6 weeks to draw down funds once receipts are submitted. EirGrid's Community Benefit Funds may represent a source of match funding for applications to Leader.

Leader funding is retrospective; so funds or credit must be secured to pay for works initially, with these expenses then claimed back from Leader. Credit Unions and Clann Credo are potential sources of bridging loans or interim funds before Leader grants can be drawn down.

The Leader Programme cannot fund activities that are the remit of the Local Authority such as providing housing, roads or street lighting. However, Eilish illustrated the potential to work with the County Council to achieve results, as was seen in the Lusk for Life Project which produced a village plan and highlighted the issues for the community, possible actions to address these, and sources of funding that could be explored. A range of topics were touched on in discussion:

- It was explained that Leader Funding could be used for sustainable community actions identified as part of developed plans, such as to complement work in Sustainable Energy Communities or Community Master Plans, etc.
- Strategically, it appears advantageous that different groups within a community apply for funds to develop specific projects, often that may form part of a bigger community plan. In this way, each group applying has an overall cap of €200,000 that they may be awarded.
- Application for Leader funding is open until the funds are depleted. There may be a number of targeted calls but applications across all themes may be submitted. All regulatory permissions, such as planning permission or permission for change of use, must be obtained before an application can be submitted. In many cases, it is helpful to obtain evidence that planning permission is not needed. This can be done by submitting a Section 5 request at limited cost.
- Where property is concerned the applicant needs to demonstrate that they own the property or have a minimum of a 5 year lease. Those in receipt of Leader Funding may be inspected at any point up to 5 years subsequent to the award.
- Proposals do not need to demonstrate universal community approval but DO need to demonstrate need and demand. Purely sporting facilities or activities are unlikely to be funded (indeed are specifically not funded in some Leader areas) but sport-related actions that address social inclusion are.

East Meath / North Dublin Grid Upgrade Update

Grainne provided a brief project update, explaining that it is possible that an An Bord Pleanála may make a decision on the planning application for the grid upgrade before Christmas. Once planning permission is granted, there is a month's period in which appeals can be made. If no appeals are lodged, then the ESB will proceed towards construction. This will involve securing contractors but EirGrid have been working with the ESB on detailed design and production/ engineering matters to ensure delays are minimised. Once planning is secured then EirGrid will appoint an independent

Fund Administrator who will work with the Community Forum on the strategy for the Fund. The aim is to be ready to go live once construction activity commences; usually 6-9 months from the planning decision. Consequently, it is possible that the Community Benefit Fund may be open from as early as June 2025.

Notice of Further Proposed Infrastructure Upgrades (Separate Project)

As mentioned at the previous Forum meeting, EirGrid is developing further proposals for two new substations in this area and associated infrastructure. Grainne updated the Forum on this new project in the North Dublin, East Meath area. The Preferred Options report for this proposal will go out to for public consultation in October.

There will be a new Community Forum established for this development and local communities will be invited to information and consultation days about this in the coming weeks. As there is significant overlap geographically, it was considered important that members of this Forum are all informed about this new proposal.

Next meeting

Harriet pointed to the relatively low uptake of funds under the Biodiversity Pillar of EirGrid's Community Benefit Funds established so far, and the concern that communities are perhaps less well equipped to develop projects in this area. In an attempt to make these actions more accessible to communities, she has contacted Catherine O'Toole (Irish Environmental Network) and the Biodiversity Officers in Counties Meath and Fingal about putting together a joint presentation/workshop on biodiversity, where advice and support can be obtained for community actions in these areas, additional sources of funding, and examples of successful community projects, etc. It was agreed that an evening focused on biodiversity project would be desirable and that an evening in the second half of October would be suitable. Harriet will identify possible dates and revert to Forum members.

The meeting ended at 9.05pm.