Report from Irish Rural Link

on

"SHAPING OUR ELECTRICITY
FUTURE" WORKSHOPS

Introduction

EirGrid has been asked by the Government to transform the electricity system in anticipation of a future without coal, oil, peat and ultimately one with net zero emissions. Specifically, it must redevelop the grid to manage 70% of Ireland's electricity coming from renewable sources by 2030. Shaping our Electricity Future is a new strategy that details innovative approaches to developing the grid to meet ambitious 2030 renewable energy targets. It must redevelop the grid to manage 70% of Ireland's electricity coming from renewable sources by 2030. As part of EirGrid's 14-week consultation period, Irish Rural Link held six regional consultation workshops to get the views and opinions of rural communities and individuals.

Irish Rural Link (IRL) is a national organisation recognised for its unique 'community engagement' model that has been implemented successfully across Ireland on programmes for national change, two of which were Digital Switchover and roll out of Eircodes. IRL is currently implementing a key programme for the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and the Marine through the National Rural Network and the outcomes of this, under the Rural Development Programme, have been cited as best practise across Europe. These programmes alone reach far beyond the sector from where the organisation originate, and IRL is recognised across all sectors as specialists in public and community engagement. Our origins and rooting in the community and voluntary sector in Ireland gives IRL the knowledge, skills understanding and ability to engage specifically members of the public which are traditionally 'marginalised or seldom heard. We have led several National Campaigns for various Government Departments and provided COVID-19 Coordinators in every county in Ireland to lead out on the Community Outreach Programme.

Shaping Our Electricity Future comprises four approaches to achieving this, as well as meeting the projected increase demand for electricity over the coming years.

1. **Generation-Led:** Government policy would influence where renewable energy is generated – favouring locations where the grid is already strong
2. **Developer-Led:** In this approach, we continue to connect new sources of renewable electricity as requested in any location
3. **Technology-Led:** This approach uses technical solutions to make the grid more resilient so it can better handle the variable nature of renewable energy
4. **Demand-Led:** Government policy determines where large energy users locate in Ireland

Each of the four approaches requires numerous investments in network development projects throughout the country, with costs ranging from €500 million to €2 billion. There are some foundation projects that are common to all four approaches and the final plan is likely to include elements of all approaches, strongly led by one of them.

Workshop Format

As a trusted organisation, IRL has a long history of consulting with rural communities and relevant stakeholders. IRL design its consultation workshops with the aim of maximizing participation among attendees. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, six virtual workshops were held in the following regions:

- South West Region

- South East Region
- North East Region
- North West Region
- Midlands Region
- Border Region

All six workshops followed a similar format beginning with a presentation from MaREI, this presentation aimed to set the scene and demonstrate why Ireland as a nation needs to meet its renewable energy targets. EirGrid then outlined the four draft options from the "Shaping our Electricity Future" report and existing EirGrid projects within the region. The final presentation was from Community Power, aimed to highlight the role community energy can play in powering our electricity as well as outlining the supports and steps involved for communities to develop a local energy project.

Experienced facilitators chaired the break-out session, guaranteeing all participants' views were recorded in the workshop report. A critical function of the facilitator was to ensure no individuals dominated the break-out sessions. An EirGrid representative participated in every break-out group in the event of technical questions from the audience.

IRL called on its extensive network to safeguard workshop participants were an accurate representation of the views in the local communities. The Irish Rural Link team conducted a needs analysis on each region and identified the appropriate groups and organisations who are demonstrative of the local communities. IRL contacted the local PPNs, local authorities, community groups, farmer organisations, industry and invited them to participate in the regional workshops. The IRL membership database includes individuals and community groups across Ireland, all of which were targeted for the regional events. As a Community and Voluntary Pillar member, IRL called upon other pillar members to distribute the workshop invitations to their database. A full list of invited organisations and groups can be viewed in the appendix.

In addition to the communications and engagement methods outlined above, Irish Rural Link used local and regional forms of traditional media to advertise the workshops. The advertising targeted at individuals who do not engage in digital communications and are categorized as "hard to reach". IRL used its social media accounts to share the invitations to a larger number of community groups. Using the IRL Twitter, the events made 82, 357 impressions while they reached over 20,000 reach on Facebook.

Over 300 people attended the six regional workshops and the following report outlines the feedback from the attendees. All workshops were recorded and uploaded to the IRL YouTube channels. Since being uploaded an additional 150 people have tuned into the regional workshops. The links for the six workshops can be found in the appendix.

Workshop Feedback

Icebreaker
The six regional workshops began with an icebreaker question to the audience, IRL asked 'Ireland should do everything possible so that by 2030, at least 70% of its electricity comes from renewable sources like wind turbines or solar panels.' What do you think of this statement?" The options were Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree or disagree, disagree or strongly disagree. Results indicated that over 80% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. These results are quite telling, the debate has moved on from disputing the effects of climate change and that it is at the forefront of people's mind and priorities. However, participants raised concerns about how a small nation like Ireland can migrate the impact of climate change compared to larger nations. It was highlighted that all nations and individuals have a role to play.

Community Energy
Many workshop participants felt that the four options presented by EirGrid are leaded and should include a Community Led Approach. The current approaches are missing the role communities can play in Shaping Ireland's Electricity Future. Across all six workshops it was felt that the role of communities is undervalued and underutilised, not just in terms of producing energy but also how communities are engaged with developer led projects. It is important to acknowledge that community energy projects alone won't achieve Ireland's renewable energy but they can make a meaningful contribution. The potential of community owned power can only be realised if communities are properly supported by government and their agencies. The North West and Border regions highlighted the "world class" conditions for renewable energy in their regions and believe that community must use these resources to drive their economies. Many believe that a big number of large scale projects on the east coast would be missed opportunity for their region, but it would only be a missed opportunity if the communities are supported to develop renewable energy projects. There were some suggestions that local authorities could begin partnering in community projects, enhancing the capacity of communities. Although attendees recognise the potential of community owned energy they stated their opposition to windfarms in mountainous areas / uplands as they are disastrous for biodiversity / bird population / environment, the Blackstairs Mountain was highlighted as an example.

Community Engagement
Infrastructural development creates debate among all elements of society especially the communities or region hosting the infrastructure. All participants agreed that earlier and continuous engagement with the community is crucial moving forward, attendees were adamant that it must be real engagement and not the "token" engagement of previous decades. Some of the regions highlighted a mistrust between government/ developers and local communities from historical projects, this was particular evident in the midlands. Trust is something that must be built over time and can only be gained through continuous and transparent engagement.

A large agricultural present attended all regional workshops and they believe that the definition of community needs to be revised. Many farmers believe that they aren't included in the

discussion on communities but state that they are central to decision on the location of infrastructural projects.

Site Location

Discussions on renewable energy sources for the past two decades have centred around the debate between onshore and offshore windfarms, these regional workshops were no different but all participants agreed that whatever decisions are made must have minimal impact on the landscape and communities. The impact current wind farms have on people's lives; closeness of these to people's homes, farmland, the visual impact as well as health concerns, were also raised. With participants in some of the workshops saying how their area is already overrun with them. Participants indicated a slightly preference for companies that use a huge amount of power to locate new facilities near sources of renewable electricity and where the grid is strong. They acknowledge that offshore wind farms on the east coast could be a viable option given the large population density.

Although attendees recognise the potential of community owned they stated their opposition to windfarms in mountainous areas / uplands as they are disastrous for biodiversity / bird population / environment, the Blackstairs Mountain was highlighted as an example.

Preference for underground cables rather than over ground
The workshops held lengthy discussion around the practicalities of underground cables and the technology required. There was an understanding amongst the group that underground cables are less straightforward to install and manage than over ground but a strong preference was indicated for their use, where possible. It was felt that the use of underground cables could alleviate some of health concerns of communities but also gain some trust.

Micro-Generation
As mentioned, the workshops were attending by many from the farming community and organisations representing them. Discussions were held in some of the workshops on the role of micro-generation and the use of farm buildings in contributing to energy production. Farmers should also have the ability to sell excess production to the grid or trade with other local farmers.

Conclusion

There was a great deal of interesting debate through this series of consultation workshops, lending itself to the conclusion that there is no simply answer or silver bullet. For Ireland to meet its renewable energy target of 70%, it will require a mix and match of the four draft approaches as well as the addition of a community led approach. One key learning from this series of workshops is that community and rural stakeholders want to actively engage in the debate and influence the decision affecting their region. Infrastructure developers such as EirGrid must consult and engage with communities at all stages of a proposed project, if it is to get community consent. For too long developers have progressed projects without the consent of local community, this historical mistrust must be addressed if Ireland is to meet its renewable energy target.

From these consultation events, communities have indicated a willingness to host renewable sources of energy once the distribution of infrastructure is even across the regions and that communities are consulted with in a transparent manner.

Appendix

Workshop Recordings

South East Region

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XL_TSFnmlmI&t=9s

South West Region

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yVcAqY-RO6U

North West Region

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NqoUKO780Xc

North East Region

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dEkRWCVuvfU

Midlands Region

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7tygTsAsMAs

Border Region

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djQKmz3sl3Q

Border Region 7th May 2021

Notice List:

Media
- Roscommon People
- Anglo Celt
- Shannonside Northern Sound
- Donegal Democrat

PPN Networks
- County Roscommon PPN (Public Participation Network)
- County Donegal PPN
- County Cavan PPN,
- County Sligo PPN
- County Monaghan PPN

Volunteer Networks
- Donegal Volunteer network

- Sligo Volunteer Network
- Cavan Volunteer Network

Leader companies –
- County Sligo LEADER Partnership
- Donegal Local Development Company
- Monaghan Integrated Development
- Cavan County Local Development

IFA County Chairs
- Cavan – Elizabeth Ormiston
- Monaghan – Patrick McCormack
- Donegal – Brendan McLoughlin

GAA County Chairs
- Cavan – Dan Daly/ Liam McCabe
- Monaghan – Michael Owen McMahon
- Donegal – Mick McGrath

- IRL Members
- Wheel Members
- Covid-19 Community Champions
- Pubic Representatives – Through the AILG Secretariat
- In Conversation with Irish Rural Link attendees

Midlands Region 5th May 2021

Media
- Westmeath/Offaly Independent
- Leinster Times
- Midlands Radio 3

PPN
- Co. Offaly PPN
- Co. Westmeath PPN
- Co. Laois PPN
- Co. Roscommon PPN
- Co. Kildare PPN

Volunteer Networks
- Westmeath Volunteer Network
- Offaly Volunteer Centre
- Laois Volunteer Centre
- Kildare Volunteer Centre

GAA County Chairs
- Laois GAA – Peter O'Neill
- Offaly GAA – Michael Duignan
- Westmeath GAA – Billy Foley
- Kildare GAA – Mick Mullen
- Clan na Gael co. Roscommon
- Roscommon GAA – Brian Carroll
- Carlow GAA – Jim Bolger
- Tipperary GAA – Joe Kennedy

IFA County Chairs
- Offaly IFA – Richard Scally
- Westmeath IFA – Bernie McCarthy
- Kilkenny IFA – Jim Mulhall
- Kildare IFA – Thomas O'Connor
- Laois IFA – John Fitzpatrick

- All Midland Public representatives through AILG Network
- IRL Members
- Wheel Members
- Covid-19 Community Champions
- In Conversation with Irish Rural Link attendees

29th April Event North East Region

Media
- Dundalk Leader
- Meath Chronicle
- LM FM
- Roscommon FM

- IRL Members
- In Conversation with Irish Rural Link attendees
- All public representatives via AILG Secretariat
- Covid-19 Community Champions

IFA
- Louth IFA - John Carroll
- Meath IFA – John Curran
- Roscommon IFA – Jim O'Connor
- Longford IFA – Gavin White

GAA
- Louth GAA - Peadar Mac Giolla
- Meath GAA – John Kavanagh
- Longford GAA - Thomas Conefrey

- Roscommon GAA - Brian Carroll

PPN Networks
- Co. Louth PPN
- Co. Meath PPN
- Co. Longford PPN
- Co. Roscommon PPN
- North Dublin PPN

Leader Partnerships incl. 2 Dublin based
- Louth LEADER Partnership
- Meath Partnership
- Longford LEADER
- Roscommon LEADER Partnership
- Fingal LEADER Partnership
- Dublin North West Partnership Company
- Local Link Louth, Meath/Fingal

Volunteer Networks

- Louth Volunteer Network
- Meath Volunteer Network
- Community Wetlands Forum
- Covid-19 Community Champions
- C&V Pillar (17 National Organisations)

North West Region

Media
- Ocean FM
- Galway Mayo Advertiser
- Sligo Weekender
- Connemara Community Radio
- Claremorris Community Radio

PPN – Public Participation Network
- Co. Sligo PPN
- Co. Mayo PPN
- Co. Leitrim PPN
- Co. Galway PPN

LEADER Companies
- Connemara Forum
- County Sligo Leader Partnership
- South Mayo Development Company
- Leitrim Development Company
- North Mayo Leader Company

- Galway Rural Development Company

Volunteer Centres
- Sligo Volunteer Centre
- Leitrim Volunteer network
- Galway Volunteer Network

IFA
- Galway IFA – Anne Mitchell
- Mayo IFA – Jarlath Walshe
- Sligo IFA – Kathleen Henry
- Leitrim IFA – Des McHugh
- Roscommon IFA – Jim O'Connor

- Public representatives via AILG Secretariat
- IRL Members
- Wheel Members
- Covid-19 Community Champions
- In Conversation with Irish Rural Link attendees

South West Region

Media
- Clare Champion
- Kerry's Eye
- Limerick Post
- Carlow Nationalist
- Kerry Community Radio
- West Cork FM Community Radio

PPN Networks –
- County Galway
- County Clare
- County Limerick
- County Kerry
- County Cork

- Individual Invitation emails & reminders to 1550 IRL members/networks incl.
- IRL Members
- Wheel Members
- In Conversation with Irish Rural Link attendees
- Covid-19 Community Champions
- Public Representatives via AILG Secretariat

South East Region

Media
- Tipp FM
- South East Radio
- Carlow Nationalist

PPN Networks
- Co. Wexford PPN
- Co. Tipperary PPN
- Co. Kilkenny PPN
- Co. Carlow PPN
- Co. Waterford PPN
- Co. Cork PPN

- IRL Members
- Wheel Members
- Community Champions
- Covid-19 Community Champions
- In Conversation with Irish Rural Link attendees
- Public Representatives via AILG Secretariat