

CLIMATE ACTION BILL TO EXPAND ROLE OF THE CCAC

These are interesting times for Ireland's Climate Change Advisory Council (CCAC) as its new Chairperson Marie Donnelly starts her five-year term, just as the new Climate Action Bill makes its way through the Oireachtas. She tells Deirdre O'Flynn that the new legislation will send out a strong message internationally about Ireland's commitment to climate change.

The proposed Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021 is set to expand the role of the Climate Change Advisory Council (CCAC), and it will be the role of the new Chairperson Marie Donnelly to help the organisation to safely navigate these new waters.

The Climate Action Bill will deliver on a promise in the 2020 Programme for Government to put Ireland on track for a 51% reduction in emissions by 2030. "This is well up there with international ambitions, with the US talking about a reduction of 49%. This sends out a strong message internationally about Ireland's commitment to climate change," Donnelly tells *'Council Review'*.

The former Director General of the European Commission (with responsibility for Energy Efficiency, Renewable Energy and Innovation), has taken over from Prof John Fitzgerald, who remains on the Council for a three-year term, as an ordinary member,

Donnelly oversaw the implementation of the main energy-related EU Directives over the past decade. Since retiring, she has actively supported Ireland's energy transition through a range of voluntary positions in social, research and representative organisations.

FIVE-YEAR CARBON BUDGETS

The ultimate objective is to achieve a climate neutral economy by no later than 2050. This will be achieved by embedding the process of carbon budgeting into law.

The Government will be required to adopt a series of economy-wide five-year carbon budgets, including sectoral targets for each relevant sector, on a rolling 15-year basis, starting in 2021.

"This makes it real for people in terms



Marie Donnelly, who was appointed as the new Chair of the CCAC by Eamon Ryan, Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, earlier this year, pictured here after receiving the SEAI Energy Award in 2019 for her Outstanding Contribution to Sustainable Energy.

of carbon budgets for 2021-2025 and 2026-2030 as it can be hard to motivate people around a date like 2050. The Council is responsible for producing the first two budgets plus a provisional one for 2031-2035," she says.

This move is a strengthening of the role of the Climate Change Advisory Council, with the Bill providing that the first two five-year carbon budgets should equate to a total reduction of 51% greenhouse gas emissions over the period to 2030.

And this will be in line with the Programme for Government commitment. The Council is actively working on this because it wants to be ready when the Bill has passed through all of its stages, notes Donnelly.

The Bill also outlines that actions for

each sector will be detailed in the Climate Action Plan, which will be updated annually. Meanwhile, Government Ministers will be responsible for achieving the legally-binding targets for their own sectoral area with each Minister accounting for their performance towards sectoral targets and actions before an Oireachtas Committee each year.

ANNUAL MONITORING AND REVIEW

"The most positive element is the monitoring and review process on an annual basis," says the new climate chief. "The Ministers, within their own portfolios, commit to taking responsibility for the targets in their own areas – they know the policy levers to bring in those results. It will be monitored and reviewed, and it's the right way to do this in terms of

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having checks and balances.”

Importantly, the Bill gives a role to the local authorities, according to Donnelly, because much of the work in developing and implementing climate change at local level is essentially undertaken by the local authorities.

In fact, there is a requirement for each local authority to prepare a Climate Action Plan, to include both mitigation and adaptation measures and be updated every five years. Local Authority Development Plans will also align with their Climate Action Plan.

The Council will see its membership increase from 11 to 14, with future appointments to provide for a greater range of relevant expertise and gender balance. “That will allow us to bring in a diversity of experience. We have set up a scientific committee to draw together knowledge and expertise built up in Ireland over the past few years. We want to bring this country’s wealth of analysis and research together to inform the work of the committee.”

CLIMATE JUSTICE

Coming from the energy sector herself, Donnelly says that she is in a “listening

The role of this independent statutory body, formally established in January 2016 under Section 8 of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, includes the provision of advice to Government on national policy relating to climate change. Visit www.climatecouncil.ie/ for further details.



mode” to the climate expertise and other experts in Ireland. This approach will help the CCAC adhere to the Bill’s stipulation that the Council must “have regard to climate justice” when carrying out its functions.

“We want to ensure that we take into account the implications for Ireland, in terms of jobs, our competitiveness as a country and social justice,” she says. This will also include determining the balancing act between the first and second five-year budgets.

“Do you frontload the effort in the first five-year budget or backend to the second five-year budget? We know where we want to be in 2030 and what new technology is available to use now and could be developed in the next four to five years. And there is a need to leave space for new technology.”

And as regards her personal wish list for Ireland’s energy landscape, the CCAC chair concludes by saying that she wishes Ireland would adapt established and viable technologies around district heating systems.

CLIMATE ACTION BILL 2021

The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021 will support Ireland’s transition to net zero carbon emissions and achieve a climate neutral economy by no later than 2050.

It will establish a legally-binding framework with clear targets and commitments set in law, and ensure the necessary structures and processes are embedded on a statutory basis to ensure Ireland achieves its national, EU, and international climate goals and obligations in the near and long term.

Other key elements:

- To place on a statutory basis a ‘national climate objective’, which commits to pursue and achieve no later than 2050, the transition to a climate resilient, biodiversity-rich, environmentally-sustainable and climate-neutral economy.
- To prepare a National Long-Term Climate Action Strategy every five years.
- Public bodies will be obliged to perform their functions in a manner consistent with national climate plans and strategies, and furthering the achievement of the national climate objective.