

A LEADING AUTHORITY ON IRELAND'S SUSTAINABLE ENERGY GOALS

Ireland is targeting a 51% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030 to achieve its climate action goals, and William Walsh, CEO of the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI), sees both challenges and opportunities ahead. He tells Deirdre O'Flynn that community action will have a central role to play in Ireland's response to the climate crisis.

The pandemic has upended expectations and operations globally, whilst also changing people's perception of what is possible. And therein lie the opportunities for positive climate actions.

On his official appointment as the CEO of the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) in May, William Walsh commented, "To achieve our ambitions, we need a mass movement of society towards new and sustainable ways of living".

He told 'Council Review' that the overarching reason for this is to achieve Ireland's target of 51% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030 and to comply with the 1.5 degrees Celsius global warming as agreed in the Paris Agreement.

Achieving these goals will involve every sector, from the State to multinationals, SMEs, communities, and individual households.

"At household levels, it involves retrofitting and reducing heating bills. As an organisation, we're charged with delivering retrofitting in 500,000 homes through to 2030 – this home energy upgrade will improve people's wellbeing, comfort, and introduce energy-cost savings. And improved BER ratings will increase the value of people's homes – convincing people to invest in their homes will help us to achieve Ireland's climate targets."

At a local level, SEAI has partnered with local authorities to



William Walsh, who was officially appointed CEO of the SEAI on 21 May 2021, first joined the Authority in 2013 as Chief Financial Officer and has served as Chief Operations Officer, and as interim CEO from September 2019.

provide bridge funding to assist communities in achieving their sustainable energy ambitions. Grants valued up to €25,000 will be paid up front, with the local authority involved recouping the initial funding cost from SEAI.

PUBLIC SECTOR PATHFINDER SCHEME

In June, the SEAI announced a partnership with the Atlantic Seaboard North Climate Action Regional Office (CARO), which consists of counties Donegal, Sligo, Mayo and Galway. This partnership is essentially the roll-out of the SEAI's Public Sector Pathfinder Scheme that supports key public sectors in advancing deep retrofit and energy management at scale in their portfolios.



The key to achieving energy targets is sustained senior management leadership, adequate resources and continuous investment, according to recent evidence from the SEAI.

The model has been tried and tested with other public bodies over the last few years, including the Health Service Executive, the Office of Public Works for central government, and the Department of Education for school retrofits.

At local authority level, the model is being developed across the CARO regions, directly with the local authorities. The Atlantic Seaboard North CARO region is leading the adoption of this model for local authorities.

And other CARO regions and sub-regions are now in the process of engagement, including Midlands East (Meath, Kildare and Wicklow), and the counties of Carlow, Kilkenny and Wexford. Dublin CARO, local authorities and other CAROs/sub-regions are actively engaging in getting similar models off the ground, according to the SEAI.

COMMUNITY ACTION

For Walsh, “community action plays a central role in Ireland’s response to the climate crisis”. He points to research on carbon emissions conducted with the EPA during the pandemic.

“Economic activity fell, there were no cars on the roads, no planes flying, and emissions fell by 6%. We have to hit a reduction of 7% year on year, that’s a challenge – and

SEAI ACHIEVEMENTS AND INVESTMENTS IN 2020

The SEAI works with the government, homeowners, businesses, and communities to achieve this, through expertise, funding, educational programmes, policy advice, research and the development of new technologies. SEAI is funded through the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC).

In 2020, the Authority invested €121 million in Government funds, including €90 million into building energy retrofits, while over €5 million was invested in renewable and ocean energy research, development and demonstration projects.

In total, 20,700 homes and 240 community and commercial facilities were upgraded, while 4,843 new electric vehicles and 3,523 home charger installations were supported.



the response to that challenge has to be within the area of sustainable living.”

The SEAI has also targeted the small business sector with its Energy Academy, which was launched in mid-2020. A free online training resource to help businesses reduce their energy costs, the Energy Academy aims to help to lower energy bills by as much as 10% in educating employers and employees on changing energy use behaviours and effective energy management.

With 2,200 subscribers in 2020 alone, the Academy intends to “make modules more sector specific” to meet the different needs of businesses as diverse as a dairy farmer and a jeweller.

GETTING THE TRANSITION RIGHT

At a macro level, the Climate Action Plan 2021 and the Climate Action Bill require sectoral targets, which will compel businesses and the public sector to reduce the impact of their activities on

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Tasked with helping to achieve the target of 900,000 electric vehicles by 2030, the SEAI is setting up an Office of Low Emission Vehicles to drive the uptake of electric vehicles.



the environment.

“Carbon will be the measure – how much carbon is produced and how to reduce that,” said Walsh.

The 51% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030 “is realistic and achievable – there’s no other option. It requires a significant ramping up of activity”, he pointed out. This will include ramping up the number of electric vehicles on the road – the Climate Action Plan has set a target of 900,000 electric vehicles by 2030, along with offshore wind energy, and storage of electricity.

“This will produce multiples of what is needed. There are also export opportunities, while storage in hydrogen, or batteries, will allow for a stable source of power. However, it’s also about a just transition and that no one is left behind.

“There will be job losses in certain sectors and opportunities elsewhere. We must get the transition right and have the agencies to help people upskill to new careers.”

SEAI PUBLIC SECTOR ENERGY CONFERENCE

With the Government's Climate Action Plan having set an ambitious vision for the public sector to halve energy-related emissions and for all public buildings to be B-rated by 2030, the SEAI's Public Sector Energy Conference in June focused on how leadership in the public sector is working towards decarbonisation.

Addressing the online conference, Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Eamonn Ryan TD said: "The Climate Bill and the Climate Action Plan 2021 has set ambitious targets and a clear path for delivery for the rest of the decade that we can all get behind. The public sector has made significant progress in improving its energy efficiency, reducing costs, and increasing its contribution to our national and EU energy and climate targets.

"We also need to speed up practical and visible measures such as EV procurement and retrofitting more of our public buildings," the Minister noted.

Conference delegates also discussed the issue of decarbonising buildings and transport and strategic planning to secure the necessary supports.



The SEAI's Annual Report 2020 shows that over half the number of public sector organisations had achieved, or are on track to achieve, their 2021 energy targets.



PUBLIC SECTOR ENERGY ROLE

Key to the transition will be the role of the public sector as exemplars and leaders in the country.

In June, the SEAI's online public sector energy conference focused on how leadership in the public sector is working towards decarbonisation.

In addition, the Climate Action Plan has set a 2030 vision for the sector to halve energy related emissions and for all public buildings to be B-rated at that stage.

"The public sector can show what can be achieved to other sectors, create better

buildings, transport systems, and reduce energy costs and related emissions," said Walsh.

The SEAI also liaises with local authorities given their role around on-street electric vehicle charging; ownership of buildings, housing, depots, transport fleets, and parks; public lighting; planning and development of renewable energy developments.

"There are 150,000 local authority houses nationally – they will all require work to get to B2 certification by 2030 – we have the technical expertise and have

partnered with local authorities in the past two years to retrofit the stock," the SEAI chief executive pointed out.

REDUCING EMISSIONS BY 2030

Designated the national retrofitting body in 2020, the SEAI has set up specific units tasked with ensuring that 50,000 homes per year are retrofitted. This will be done through a one-stop-shop infrastructure overseen by the SEAI that will deliver retrofitting to the private sector.

The SEAI is also tasked with helping achieve the target of 900,000 electric vehicles by 2030. "We are setting up an Office of Low Emission Vehicles to drive the uptake of electric vehicles. The retrofitting and electric vehicles are two key objectives and will be included in the SEAI's Strategic Plan for 2021-2025."

The SEAI's wide ranging services require technical expertise in addition to funding of €350 million. Exchequer funding is available to us this year – whereas our budget in 2016 was €70 million. Our role is to reduce energy-related emissions overall by 2030."