

MEETING CLIMATE TARGETS FOR 2030 IS IN OUR HANDS!



A radical shift in gear is required to meet Ireland's climate targets for 2030, according to Prof John Fitzgerald, Chair of the Climate Change Advisory Council. He tells Deirdre O'Flynn that with limited resources, the policy focus must be on delivering cost-effective, socially sustainable and environmentally compatible measures that achieve decarbonisation and climate resilience by 2050.

With Ireland having missed its climate change targets for 2020, the Climate Change Advisory Council urges the Government to act now to reduce emissions. Whilst the European Union had set a target of sourcing 20 per cent of its energy from renewable sources by the end of 2020, Ireland has had a lower target of 16 per cent (due to a poor renewable energy infrastructure).

"The government committed to meeting its targets and failed to take action," said Professor John Fitzgerald, Chair of the Climate Change Advisory Council (CCAC). "Now, bigger actions are required to get our emissions down by 2030 – tackling climate change very rapidly is more expensive, but failure to act makes it more difficult and expensive to achieve our targets."

The Council's Annual Review 2020 stressed the urgency of shifting from planning to action to reduce emissions, to meet Ireland's climate targets and to put this country on track to achieve a net-zero emissions economy and society by 2050.

In October 2020 it was revealed that Ireland will have to pay €50m to other EU

countries under an EU credit purchase scheme to make up for missing our overall climate target by the end of 2020. “That €50m may be reduced, as Covid-19 will result in emissions being down, but we will still to exceed our target”, Prof Fitzgerald noted.

Interestingly, the EU may be moving from a system of national penalties for non-compliance to setting a collective target to which all nations would contribute to meeting.

The CCAC’s annual review contains strong recommendations for additional policies and measures to ensure Ireland meets its existing targets. Areas of concern include no significant change in national emissions in 2018, rising temperatures with 2019 the ninth consecutive year with temperatures above normal in Ireland and the winter of 2018-2019 the warmest winter on record in 119 years.

CLIMATE ACTION BILL

The annual review also notes that in order to better prepare for current and future climate extremes, Ireland must implement priority measures (already identified) at both national and local level. Some of those priorities are contained in the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2020 published in October 2020.

One of its measures is a commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by, on average, at least seven per cent per annum for the next 10 years. “The increased ambition is good, but that means doing more and putting measures in place to achieve it,” said Prof Fitzgerald.

A radical shift in gear is required to meet Ireland’s 2030 targets, he said.



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CARBON TAX INCREASES

Steps have already been taken by the Government with carbon tax increased to €33.50 per tonne in Budget 2021. By 2030, it is planned that carbon tax will be €100 per tonne, in line with a key recommendation from the Climate Change Advisory Council.

According to the Council, the increase in the carbon tax is required to address the effects of the fall in fossil fuel prices over the last year, which would otherwise lead to an increase in emissions.

“We welcome that commitment and that the government has laid out how that increased revenue will be spent.”

The Budget outlined that €100 million of carbon tax revenue generated would be invested in increasing the energy efficiency of homes, including expanding the Warmer Homes Scheme and providing for new energy efficiency schemes, such as the National Home Retrofit Scheme.

RETROFITTING DUTIES

“Landlords have a duty to retrofit houses for their tenants – the State is the biggest landlord in the country, so it has a duty to retrofit its own stock of houses,” said Prof Fitzgerald. This will benefit people with low incomes in local authority or social housing by reducing their outgoing on energy “and it will have significant health benefits for older people who may not heat their homes properly”.

This is in line with the Council’s stand that “the burdens and benefits of policy measures necessary to tackle climate change must be fairly distributed across

WISH LIST FOR CLIMATE CHANGE TARGETS

Changes in Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to encourage changes in farming

“I’d like to see farmers moving to more environmentally and financially sustainable approaches, as they will also be hit by Brexit. We need to incentivise farmers so that they can make more money by changing what they are doing and do good for the environment.”

“The Council recommends that CAP income support payments should be tailored to encourage farmers to reduce emissions, through reduced fertiliser use, reduced animal numbers and increased carbon sinks. The Council recommends setting a separate 2050 target for significant reductions in biogenic methane emissions, consistent with the objective of carbon neutrality and the Paris Agreement. In relation to land use, the obstacles to forestry need to be removed.”

Reduce transport emissions, including implementation of transport infrastructure

“Improved spatial planning was identified by the Council as one element of emission reduction along with public transport investment. Spending money on public transport in a decade will not change emission figures in that decade, but not spending money on public transport means we will not reach our 2050 targets.”

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Eliminate the most carbon-intensive fuels, coal and peat, from space and water heating in homes and other buildings.
- Utilise innovation and research to ensure that Ireland achieves a net-zero society and economy in 2050.
- Explore use of zero-carbon fuels such as biomethane and green hydrogen which may also create economic opportunities for Ireland



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the population, ensuring that those on lower incomes or with other vulnerabilities are not disadvantaged – in other words, that there is a ‘just transition’, outlined Prof Fitzgerald.

He also pointed out that retrofitting at scale, where local authority engineers can tender for builders to work on local authority housing, allows for better pricing and quality.

And he cited the case in one local authority where private householders, living on an estate that included social housing, were willing to pay the local authority-sourced builder to also retrofit their houses.

EXEMPTION ON ELECTRIC CARS

The Annual Review 2020 has given particular attention to the transport sector, identifying the potential for a substantial reduction in transport emissions through improved spatial planning, public transport investment and the widespread deployment of electric vehicles.

However, the Council is concerned that the current approach relies too heavily on very rapid deployment of electric vehicles – the Government is committed to replacing one million petrol and diesel cars with electric cars by 2030.

“It’s great if that can happen but we would be concerned about the practicality of it – if it doesn’t happen, we’re not going to meet our climate targets,” noted Prof Fitzgerald.

Incentives for electric vehicles need to be better targeted towards those with high mileage, including commercial and rural drivers. These should be supplemented by disincentives for petrol and diesel vehicles, according to the Climate Change Advisory Council.

In Europe, for instance, initiatives being considered by the EU to boost electric vehicle sales include a potential EU-wide VAT exemption on electric cars. “A price differential in favour of electric cars will help to facilitate a changeover,” he said.

However, to reach the Government’s target of one million electric vehicles in circulation by 2030 will require significant changes in behaviour. “Electric cars

will have to have a big share of new car sales over the next decade – and when will second-hand electric cars become available? It’s not just about price.”

RURAL DRIVERS TARGETED

In the United States, he said, people underestimate the potential savings from fuel-efficient cars by 50 per cent, so policies and better communication is needed to persuade people to make the switch.

Prof Fitzgerald believes that emissions will be cut by a move to electric cars for people living in rural areas, in particular on the basis that they drive longer distances so there are bigger savings to be made than for urban drivers with shorter journeys.

“That will happen if electric cars are cheaper – with an increase in carbon tax, the price of fossil fuel cars and a decrease in the price of electric cars and savings on longer journeys. So, it makes sense to target rural drivers.”

Contingent on targeting rural drivers is ensuring that electricity distribution is consistent with charging cars at home, he said. This is especially the case on farms where there are other farm-related demands on electricity. “So, there is the issue of rolling out high-speed charging,” he added.

“If done right, climate action can bring resilience, employment opportunities, improved air and water quality, biodiversity, health benefits and warmer homes,” according to the Chair of the Climate Change Advisory Council.



CLIMATE CHANGE ADVISORY COUNCIL (CCAC): The role of this independent statutory body, established under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, includes the provision of advice to Government on national policy relating to climate change. It was formally established in January 2016. For further information visit www.climatecouncil.ie/

Prof John Fitzgerald is the Chair of the Climate Change Advisory Council. He is adjunct professor in Economics at Trinity College Dublin and Electrical and Electronic Engineering at UCD. He is a former research professor and currently a research affiliate at the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). Prof Fitzgerald is also a member of the Commission of the Central Bank of Ireland, and is a member of the governance board of both the UCD Energy Institute and the Irish Centre for Research in Applied Geosciences (iCRAG) in UCD.

