



Initial Response to Just Transition Progress Report

The Government welcomes the first Progress Report of the Just Transition Commissioner, Mr. Kieran Mulvey. It represents a significant milestone in addressing the impacts on Midlands' counties of transitioning away from the use of peat to meet our energy needs, honouring commitments made by Government in the Climate Action Plan 2019 and in Budget 2020. It will also form an important element of the wider economic stimulus that will be required to address the broader and severe economic fallout from the Covid-19 crisis.

Detailed Implementation Plan and Future Reports of the Just Transition Commissioner

The report makes a series of interim and innovative recommendations, providing opportunities and processes for securing employment in the Midlands, including for ESB and Bord na Móna workers, in relation to: the Just Transition Fund; infrastructure; land and facilities; tourism, heritage and leisure; planning, licensing and regulation; a centre for climate change and just transition; incentivising green and allied enterprises to locate in the Midlands; renewable energy potential; the carbon tax; electric vehicle charging; and loss of rates income. The Government will consider all the recommendations made, and publish a detailed implementation plan. This plan will be updated in the light of future progress reports from the Commissioner. The following actions represent the Government's immediate response to the Just Transition Progress Report.

Evolution of Just Transition Policy and Governance

The report notes the importance of effective governance in the Midlands to deliver a just transition and makes certain recommendations in that regard.

The Government will use the National Economic and Social Council report, 'Addressing Employment Vulnerability as Part of a Just Transition in Ireland,' (March 2020), the recommendations in the report of the Just Transition Commissioner, and consultation with the relevant local authorities, Government Departments and State agencies and the Midlands Regional Transition Team, to agree an appropriate and efficient governance arrangement for managing Just Transition in the Midlands Region. These arrangements will have regard to the ongoing roles that key regional stakeholders, including Local Authorities, the Regional Transition Team, the Regional

Enterprise Plan committee and the Eastern and Midlands Regional Authority, will play in achieving a just transition in the Midlands.

EU START Programme

In February 2020, a Service Level Agreement for Technical Assistance for Regions in Transition (START) was agreed between the Secretariat of the Coal Regions in Transition Platform, and Offaly County Council, on behalf of the Midlands Regional Transition Team. This programme will, *inter alia*, assist in the further refinement of potential medium-term investment needs for the region that can inform future Exchequer and EU funding decisions.

START project pipeline

A project engagement process, supported by the START, opens today. The consultation process will identify projects that will support a Just Transition in the Midlands. The Midlands Regional Transition Team, the Commissioner and the START team have established a positive working relationship. In keeping with just transition principles, these must be projects which create new opportunities and reduce negative consequences on communities and individuals most affected by the move to a low carbon society. It is anticipated that projects identified through the consultation process would create a project pipeline for future funding from a variety of sources, including the Government's Just Transition Fund, the EU's Just Transition Fund and Project Ireland 2040 funds, subject to subsequent application to relevant funds and meeting the relevant requirements for each fund, including best practice being followed in terms of corporate governance and compliance with State Aid rules.

Just Transition Fund for the Midlands

The Government's Just Transition Fund for the Midlands amounts to €11 million in 2020. €6 million of this is funded through the carbon tax with ESB providing an additional €5 million.

There will be a two stage process for accessing this funding. Stage 1 is to register details of potential projects with the START engagement process that opens today.

Stage 2 will see the launch of the Just Transition Fund for applications by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment. This will open in the week of 15 June. Full details will be published on the Department's website at this time.

Midlands Retrofitting Scheme

€20 million of carbon tax revenue was allocated in the Budget to the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government to support a new energy efficiency aggregation scheme in the Midlands.

The scheme has the potential to retrofit approximately 750 local authority homes. Private homes, funded through SEAI grants, will have the opportunity to opt-in and thereby avail of the economies of scale benefits associated with the aggregation scheme.

The scheme design has been completed and final survey work and procurement of the build programme will commence when public health advice permits.

Peatlands Rehabilitation

The €5m scheme approved by Government in Budget 2020 for peatlands restoration has been rolled out by the National Parks and Wildlife Service of the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. This scheme will rehabilitate 1,800 hectares on 9 raised bog protected sites across 7 counties in the Midlands. Following preparatory fieldwork, restoration works will commence as soon as public health advice allows in 2020.

The Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment and Bord na Móna are progressing the development of appropriate measures to facilitate the advanced rehabilitation of a further 33,000 hectares of Bord na Móna bog previously harvested for peat used in electricity generation, commencing this year, subject to further consideration by Government.

Income and return to work services/supports

The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP), in conjunction with Laois-Offaly Education and Training Board, has to date provided numerous information sessions for affected employees on available income supports and all other supports available to assist with return to work, upskilling and retraining. Further to this, the DEASP has also conducted 1 to 1 sessions with affected employees to discuss their individual needs and assist them in accessing the broad range of DEASP services & supports available. The DEASP will continue to provide these supports and services as required by the affected employees both through their own auspices and the Department's involvement in the various outreach initiatives in the local affected communities.

Tourism, Heritage and Leisure

Substantial Government funding is already being invested in Tourism, Heritage and Leisure measures in the Midlands including:

- Over €4m was allocated to Offaly and Kildare to progress sections of the Grand Canal Greenway in 2019 funding under the Strategy for the Future Development of National and Regional Greenways. When local authority co-funding is taken into account the total value of the investment will be in the order of €6.75m.
- Funding is also in place for the Galway to Dublin Greenway (that has been constructed from Maynooth to Athlone) with an expenditure of €5.75m in 2019 in Westmeath and a further €2m in 2020. Funding of €814,000 for the Royal Canal was allocated to counties Longford, Westmeath and Kildare in 2019.
- The Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht's Irish Raised bog LIFE project is also developing a number of amenities proposals around bogs this year in County Offaly (Clara Bog and Ferbane Bog SACs) and in County Galway (at Carrownagappul Bog SAC). A feasibility study on amenity development at priority protected raised bogs to be restored is to be undertaken in 2020 by Bord Na Móna on behalf of the Department. These hold potential to link in with existing plans for blueways, greenways and peatways.
- The Midlands benefit from a broad programme of Fáilte Ireland supports for the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands regional tourism experience brand. These supports aim to develop visitor experiences and associated tourism products and infrastructure, enhance industry capability, and run targeted marketing campaigns and other promotional activity. A key focus of Fáilte Ireland's regional brand development work at present is on delivering Tourism Master Plans for the River Shannon and the Beara Breifne Way.

Detailed implementation considerations can draw on Fáilte Ireland's collaborative, cross-organisational approach to developing and implementing actions relating to the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand. Fáilte Ireland has already developed a series of strategic partnerships with key State bodies to gain maximum tourism benefit from State-owned attractions and natural and/or cultural heritage sites.

Centre for Climate Change and Just Transition

Bord na Móna is working with a number of partners with a view to establishing a Peatlands Centre of Excellence which focuses on the role peatlands can play in climate mitigation and adaptation. In addition, there will be a strong focus on the just transition in supporting communities and SMEs in developing low carbon, sustainable and circular economy enterprises. These developments will be complemented by a Visitors Centre that promotes climate action. Funding has been applied for

under the EU LIFE Programme. A number of Government Departments and agencies have also committed resources to the project.

Use of State Agency Lands in the Midlands for Green Energy Projects

The Government notes the extensive range of green energy projects underway or proposed in the Midlands, including the Lumcloon battery storage project, the Rhode Energy Business Park, and several other developments by Bord na Móna, ESB and others.

The Department will write to State agencies and enterprises to identify land and facilities which could be of used for further such projects.

Study on Energy Hub in the Midlands

The Department and ESB will commission a study to examine the potential for using the existing infrastructure in the West Offaly and Lough Ree power plants as an Energy Hub in the Midlands.

Electric Vehicle Charging

The Climate Action Fund (CAF) currently provides €10 million in support nationally, matched with another €10 million from ESB, towards upgrading existing charging infrastructure and providing new charging points across the country. The Midlands region will benefit from this support and particularly with respect to the commuter belt locations and areas that are crossed by primary national routes. There are currently 98 chargers operated by ESB within the Midlands region (i.e. 8 counties) and more upgrades and expansion of these 98 is planned under the CAF over the next 18 months. Current EV infrastructure policy is undertaken using a needs assessment on a national basis in line with related policies and programmes. Within this context, the next round of the Climate Action Fund will look at the potential that exists to further expand the charging infrastructure nationally which will include an evaluation of the feasibility to further enhance the network of EV infrastructure in the Midlands region.

The Public Charge Point Scheme, administered by the SEAI, is providing €2 million in 2020 to local authorities. Local authorities in the Midlands are encouraged to apply for this funding, with a substantial portion of the 2020 funding remaining unallocated to date.

The Home Charging Grant, also administered by SEAI, is providing €4 million in 2020

Updated building regulations, currently being finalised, will include new rules in relation to EV charging points in new buildings. These regulations will promote, over time, more widespread availability of EV charge point installations.

Broadband Infrastructure/Digital Hubs

The anticipated shift in working pattern with a significant increase in the incidence of remote working will bring positive impacts for the economy and society, including: increasing the productivity of individual workers while at the same time reducing the hours they spend commuting to work; reducing demand for office space in cities, allowing construction work to be focussed on other priorities; and reducing transport costs and associated emissions.

Under the National Broadband Plan Contract 91 Broadband Connection Points will be provided in the Midlands by end 2020. 21 are schools and the remaining 70 provide access to high speed broadband and may offer opportunities for flexible and remote working. Work has commenced across the State on putting these BCPs in place.

Incentivising Green and allied Enterprises to locate in the Midlands

The progress report includes a number of recommendations for additional Government incentives and EI/IDA actions to promote enterprises to locate in the region, including an Enterprise Package for the Midlands. These recommendations will be considered further by the relevant Departments, including in the context of Budget 2021, having regard to the very significant impact on unemployment levels nationally, and the intensified demand for enterprise supports and programmes across all regions as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Agricultural Schemes

Under Budget 2020, €3m was allocated to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) to pilot new agri-environmental schemes to support the Government's Climate Action Plan objectives in 2020. DAFM have established a working group to progress with a particular focus on the use of the European Innovation Fund framework which facilitates locally led initiatives.

Carbon Tax

The progress report makes recommendations in relation to the allocation of future revenues from the Carbon Tax. These recommendations will need to be considered by the Government in the Budget and Estimates process for 2021.

Planning/ Licencing and Regulation

Robust, independent planning and environmental licencing processes are essential for delivering development in Ireland that is both sustainable and for the common good.

The complexity of the current dual system of planning regulation and the Environmental Protection Agency's Integrated Pollution Licensing for large-scale commercial peat extraction, which primarily derive from adjustments made to ensure compliance with EU environmental legislation, is, however, acknowledged. The Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, with the assistance of the Department of Housing Planning and Local Government, are engaged in addressing these complexities, with the aim of streamlining the peat extraction consenting process, as recommended by the Government's National Peatlands Strategy 2015. The invaluable insights raised in the Commissioner's Report will further inform the basis upon which the Departments' work is taken forward.

Loss of Rates Income

The Government, through the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, will engage with the relevant Local Authorities on these funding matters.