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Submission to “Our Rural Future” consultation

<https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-rural-and-community-development-and-the-gaeltacht/consultations/public-consultation-our-rural-future/>

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The electricity climate change sectoral adaptation plan offers an opportunity to create grassroots bottom-up local resilience, through community owned, renewables-based, microgrids, capable of meeting essential electricity needs while islanded or disconnected from the main grid.

Electricity grid investment

While the document mentions “utilities” there is merit in expanding this to specifically mention the types of utilities needing to be strengthened in rural areas. The document mentions “smart energy infrastructure”, but this could be made more tangible and specific by referring to the electricity grid.

The electricity grid is a key enabler of renewable energy. Many 50kw+ community energy projects in rural areas are facing barriers in terms of high costs of connecting to the electricity grid, or such connections being completely refused. The electricity grid needs investment which will enable and facilitate rural community owned renewable energy projects. Communities can partner with ESB networks to facilitate more local storage of energy, through community owned energy storage projects, which reduces the burden on the grid and enhances local energy security and resilience. Re-structuring parts of the grid as microgrids, so they can be effectively islanded and run off locally generated and stored renewable energy in the event of storms and other disruptions, is a key area to examine. The design of grid investment should be focused on supporting local community owned renewable energy generation and energy storage and meeting local energy needs locally.

We call for the inclusion of a priority area

- **To invest in the rural electricity distribution grid to facilitate access to the grid for locally owned and community owned renewable energy generation and storage projects, and to facilitate energy security and resilience in the face of extreme weather events**

Barriers to community owned renewable energy projects

100% community owned energy projects have high potential for empowering local communities in the energy transition, facilitating local energy sharing, improving local energy security and resilience, and retaining finance for re-investment within the local community.

While community energy projects are prevalent in other countries, Ireland has only one 100% community owned 50kw+ energy project (Templederry wind farm) due to the barriers that are in the way of such projects in Ireland. The following barriers need to be addressed:

- need for **better consultation and communication** between government agencies and energy communities on the design and implementation of policy and supports
- the high costs of, and barriers to, **grid connection** from ESB networks for community energy generation projects
- the **length of processes** involved, requiring planning permission processes to be completed before grid connection processes are started, and the issue of SRESS/RESS supports obtained at the beginning of the process expiring before grid connection is granted, which causes communities who have invested much time and finance in projects, being prevented from going live with their projects
- **lack of clarity** and back tracking on policies, procedures and support mechanisms. For example, the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) announced an enabling grant in 2022 but then did not approve any community owned projects for the grant, despite communities undergoing lengthy feasibility studies, investing substantial time and effort and meeting all the requirements. Communities planned projects on the basis that this grant would be available, but are now unable to proceed without this grant.
- **removal of curtailment payments** from the new SRESS scheme (which were included in the previous RESS scheme), which reduces the financial viability of projects

While the the “Our Rural Future” document would be at a higher level so would not need to have this level of detail, we would urge the inclusion of the following priority area

- **Removing barriers to 100% community owned renewable energy generation and storage projects, including ensuring processes are clear, timely and consistent, up-front financing, and electric grid access**