

RE: Cork County Climate Action Plan Pre-Draft Consultation

19 May 2023

To whom it concerns,

Cork Chamber represents 1,200 members together employing 100,000 people throughout the city, metropolitan area and county. Our vision is to be a world-leading Chamber of Commerce, delivering on a progressive economic, social and sustainability agenda at the heart of a vibrant business community. Our direction is guided by our formal pledge to uphold the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals five of which have been identified by the Chambers Ireland network.

Cork Chamber would like to thank the Council for undertaking this consultation in such a timely manner in preparation of the Climate Action Plan for Cork County. Throughout this process we urge the Council to take the bold leadership that has never been more urgent to address the planetary health crisis, radically decrease greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs), mitigate the risks associated with climate change, put in place the tools and systems to increase climate resilience and climate justice and reverse biodiversity loss while delivering socio-economic benefits to the community.

We would like to offer a series of observations, comments and advice in the preparation of the Climate Action Plan that we ask are fully considered. We remain at the Council's disposal for any additional insights from our in-house expertise and members.

Yours Sincerely,



Conor Healy
CEO

A Just Transition

A just transition must be at the heart of this climate action plan, accounting for all cohorts, industries and sectors in Cork County. Without a just transition, real progress will not be made and those not considered will remain disadvantaged from a socio-economic perspective risking Cork's reputation for talent and investment. Climate justice should be integrated and considered throughout all actions and targets, and across economic, social, climate and infrastructural policies and strategies to reduce unintended negative consequences.

Data Sources

Cork County Council's Overall Emissions

The baseline evidence report accounts for Cork County Council's GHG emissions only by source i.e., electricity, heat and transport. Transparency of data is essential to enabling real climate action and we urge the Council to measure and include its overall emissions contribution to Cork County.

Building Energy Ratings

The Irish Government has committed to retrofitting 500,000 homes to a BER B2 or cost optimal equivalent standard by 2030. In light of this target and the alluded actions within the Council's baseline evidence report including optimising the energy efficiency of the residential housing stock and existing commercial and public sector buildings, it is important to give the full context of Cork County's building stock. The building energy rating of buildings in Cork County should be included in the baseline evidence so that appropriate and realistic targets, timelines and actions can be set for retrofitting the building stock.

Agriculture

The agri-food industry plays a key role in the social and economic fabric of Cork County, accounting for 8.3% of total employment and 530,000 hectares of land, as highlighted in the baseline report. It is also the largest contributor of sectoral carbon emissions and electricity carbon emissions, and methane and nitrous oxide emissions.

The Macroom Decarbonisation Zone (DZ) includes the highly productive Golden Vale dairy farmland. Considering the extent to which agriculture contributes to overall GHG emissions, it is vital to include specific data on agricultural production within the DZ including total land area, overall carbon emissions contribution, carbon emissions contributions by energy use, and methane and nitrous oxide emissions contributions.

Biodiversity

Climate change and biodiversity are interlinked, whereby climate change is driving biodiversity loss and climate action will require action to significantly enhance biodiversity. The recognition of biodiversity within the baseline report is welcome but we cannot underestimate the important nature of biodiversity to limiting climate change. Our natural ecosystems and the biodiversity within them are natural carbon sinks. In a Cork context our forests, peatlands, waterways and ocean habitats play a key role in sequestering carbon. Biodiversity is also intrinsically linked to food production and transitioning to more regenerative systems of agriculture.

We are cognizant that measuring biodiversity can present logistical challenges, especially within our waterways. However, we urge that a more holistic picture of the state of biodiversity in Cork County be included in the report through data collection. Biodiversity will look after us as long as we look after biodiversity.

Action Areas

Partnerships

Partnerships across private sector, public sector, and academia should be formed to ensure plans are robust and implementable as seen across Danish Municipalities Climate Action Plans¹. The climate crisis is not bound by local authorities so the solutions cannot be either.

Renewable Energy

Cork has significant opportunities to decarbonise electricity and industry through the deployment of renewable energy. Cork Harbour has the capacity to become an unparalleled hub for floating offshore wind energy in the Celtic Sea, presenting an opportunity for a new industrial sector to emerge in the region. It presents an unparalleled opportunity, not just for electricity generation, but for the creation of green hydrogen.

We advise that specific actions for advancing the renewable energy industry in Cork be mapped out, aligning with the Port of Cork, the Phase 1, 2 and 3 wind auctions and the upcoming National Industrial Strategy for Offshore Wind.

The Built Environment

Addressing emissions from the built environment poses numerous challenges, from financing and skills shortages to split incentives. With an old and energy inefficient housing stock, these roadblocks need to be cleared. Actions addressing these challenges, through support and grant schemes and 'green' tax reliefs for residential and commercial buildings, will be key to taking climate action in Cork County.

Agriculture and the Marine

It is essential that the agri-food industry and farmers are supported to transition to more sustainable low-carbon practices. A number of opportunities exist for farmers to begin this transition.

Mobilising Cork's anaerobic digestion resources, while ensuring principles of sustainability and circularity with regards to feedstock selection, is an obvious solution to enhancing the industry's sustainability, reducing GHG emissions, providing an additional source of revenue to farmers, while decarbonising industrial heat and transport.

The immense value of creating better and more sustainable organic fertilizers in the form of digestate further illuminates the potential awaiting the nation in transitioning to a circular bioeconomy. By utilising and capitalising on currently under-utilised and often wasted resources, Cork can make its mark globally as a leader in the bioeconomy. Please see Cork Chamber's Anaerobic Digestion report², which extensively deals with this topic.

¹ <https://www.c40.org/news/first-dk2020-cap-launch/>

² https://www.corkchamber.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/10793-Anaerobic-Digestion-report_final.pdf

Regenerative agriculture, which goes a step beyond sustainability and reducing emissions, takes a holistic approach focusing on strengthening the health of the ecological system as a whole. Regenerative agriculture has five main principles: improving soil health, increasing biodiversity, carbon sequestration, humane treatment of livestock and farmworkers, and improving the overall ecosystem. By focusing on soil health, biodiversity, and incorporating a polyculture in agricultural practices, fewer inputs including fertiliser are required.

A number of policy, legislative, financial and behavioural barriers exist, delaying the uptake of such practices. Partnering with organisations such as Teagasc to carry out communication and information campaigns and create programmes to engage the agri-food industry in Cork would be beneficial towards supporting the industry in their transition.
