

Waterford's Renewable Energy Defecit



Last week, we travelled to an energy conference in neighbouring Tipperary from which one major conclusion emerged: Waterford is considerably behind the curve ball when it comes to enacting a renewable energy strategy. By sheer coincidence, during last Thursday's plenary meeting of Waterford City & County Council's Adam Wyse (FF) felt that our local authority was "a little asleep at the wheel" when it came to rolling out renewable energy projects. He referred to a €50 million project in another of our neighbours, Cork, which had generated 40 jobs during its construction phase. "This doesn't have to be from private sources," said Cllr Wyse, who suggested that the use of a Council-owned landbank or potentially using stretched of the Waterford Greenway, could generate up to €2 million annually for City Hall.

In contrast, Tipperary has made significant strides with wind energy through a mixture of developer, community inspired and farmer-led initiatives and has established itself as a leading light (no pun intended) in the delivery of wind and solar energy. As the use of peat for energy diminishes (North Tipp is synonymous with the Bord na Móna Littleton energy peat station, which will cease peat harvesting by 2030), the county appears to be well informed on the need to convert to renewables, and how to embrace such a message. What's different in Tipperary, generally anyway, is an increased level of citizen involvement in energy development, and while the withdrawal of the DunoAir project outside Carrick-on-Suir generated considerable coverage in these pages, the renewable message is, it would be appear, being largely taken on board across the boundary.

There's an onus on Councillors in all counties to brief themselves fully on renewable energy projects. The near automatic compulsion to side with a vocal local minority when a planning application is lodged by an energy provider appears on some occasions to be politically expedient: local representatives ought to thinking outside electoral cycles too. Their grandchildren may well come to appreciate those who demonstrate some prudence when it comes to the develop of wind, solar and tidal energy projects. Councils should also develop large scale retrofitting of homes and businesses alike and ought to purchase electric vehicles in a bid to show how they are putting in place practices which ought to be common place in 15 to 20 years time.

Of course, local concerns should be taken into account but locals should also at the very least, listen to what such potential energy providers have to say for themselves. That should be a two-way process. Engagement, as opposed to top down thinking, must form a key element in the formation and development of our country's future energy grid. Areas such as Upperchurch Drombane in North Tipperary (15km from Thurles, 50km from Limerick) are upgrading properties to reduce energy costs through retrofitting and other measures and the feedback thus far has been positive. Grant aid is coming into the area and the more houses that are engaged in the project will serve to further reduce costs. They now have a community energy company that can buy and sell power and surely that can only be viewed positively? Counties like Tipperary have, on the whole, had a successful experience when it comes to renewables and are willing to share their knowledge in the future. Waterford's chief decision makers ought to crane an ear across the Suir and get up to speed.