

Energy Transition Summit

Keeping the route to Ireland’s net-zero

With climate change an ever-growing issue, we faces stiff challenges but also huge opportunities in transitioning towards a green economy, writes **Quinton O'Reilly**

It was only the second Energy Transition Summit held so far. Still, for those who gathered in Croke Park on Thursday, September 26, it carried the air of an institution bringing together the best and brightest across multiple disciplines.

Ivan Yates, entrepreneur and broadcaster, welcomed everyone in attendance in his role as summit chair and set the stage by mentioning that whatever choices are made, “our population is growing by one million every decade, we’ve seen the housing demand that creates . . . whatever renewables we have, our energy demands are going to grow by 50 per cent.”

John Gibbons, climate change journalist and commentator, delivered a sobering opening address and spoke about the ever-shrinking window the globe has for dealing with climate change.

Highlighting both the positives – the cost of solar going down and how much the global community achieves when it is focused – and the challenges, he said we needed to remember what was a “much neglected ecological domain”.

In 2009, we breached three of our nine planetary boundaries; this year seven have been breached,” he explained. “What’s critical to understand is it’s happening everywhere. We had floods and heatwaves before; they just never happened with the intensity and widespread nature we’re experiencing.”

Following this was the first panel discussion on achieving a net-zero emissions future. It featured Dr. John Reilly, head of renewable energy for Bord na Móna, John Finnegan, principal officer for the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC), Sinéad Mercier, lecturer in planning and environmental law at the Sutherland School of Law in UCD, and Teresa Fallon, manager of distribution markets and system operation design at ESB Networks.

Fallon mentioned that long-term battery storage would be “game-changing for the distribution network.” She said the aim was to achieve 20 to 30 per cent demand-side flexibility by 2030, and that the first flexible generator connector would be coming onstream in October.

“That’s a first for ESB networks and a whole new way of operating our network,” she said. “It’s about getting that flexibility built into our control room, alongside designing a new smart metering system.”

Mercier emphasised the importance of committing to an objective and sticking to it when you wanted people to be on the same page.

“You can’t be oxymoronic in your approach,” she said. “A choice has to be made; you can’t have the demand for renewables increase alongside the demands for fossil fuels. One action has to



Front Row: Bevin Cody, strategy, innovation and electrification manager, ESB Networks; Teresa Fallon, manager, distribution markets and system operation design, ESB Networks; Sara Brooks, co-chief executive, Zoa; Rodney Doyle, managing director, energy transition, KPMG. Back Row: John Reilly, head of renewable energy, Bord na Móna; Padraig Fleming, biomethane programme manager, Gas Networks Ireland; Stephen Gallagher, director of strategy and low-carbon solutions, SSE Energy Solutions; Angela Larkin, general manager and project director for Ireland, Ocean Winds; Shay Cloherty, managing director, iQuest & Business Post; Ivan Yates, conference host; Chris Collins, country president Ireland, Schneider Electric and Phil Hemmingway, director of decarbonisation, CRU

Pictures: Maura Hickey

be taken by the state, and they have to choose one.”

Next was a talk from Rodney Doyle, managing director of energy transition at KPMG, on how to deliver on the energy transition.

Speaking of the importance of having complete visibility of the electric grid, he said every platform that generates electricity was an important data point.

“If you have individual turbines out in the sea, or platforms out in the sea, every point out is a data point, and that data is massively empowering,” he said. “This is one of the things we can do to move forward. [With data] do you understand enough of your assets? The performance of the grid? Can we optimise maintenance cycles and reduce outages, and can you optimise how you operate in the market?”

Before the coffee break, there was time for one more panel discussion on powering the future and charting the course for Ireland’s energy transition.

Discussing these successes and challenges experienced were Angela Larkin, general manager and project director for Ireland at Ocean Winds, Chris Collins, country president of Ireland at Schneider Electric, Phil Hemmingway, director of decarbonisation at CRU, and Stephen Gallagher, director of strategy and low-carbon solutions at SSE Energy Customer Solutions.

Collins said an essential element to consider was how to better use the energy we were producing today and focus on reducing energy waste in the country, while Gallagher stated that for operations like Electric Vehicle (EV) charging, the distribution network must be accessible, and commercially viable to encourage early adoption.

Helping customers in the transition

Once the networking was done and dusted, the audience had the choice of three different streams to attend.

The first was on the consumer transition and how to engage and empower them on their journey.

This was chaired by Connall Bolger, chief executive of the Irish Solar Energy Association, who made way for the first keynote delivered by Bevin Cody, strategy, innovation and



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Philip Hannon, policy director, Liquid Gas Ireland (LGI); Aidan Long, communications and strategic engagement manager, Asthma Society of Ireland; Ivan Yates, conference host; Lucy Gaffney, executive director, Business for Biodiversity and Conor Cooney, technical director, AECOM

electrification manager at ESB Networks.

Following that was a panel discussion on making it easier for consumers to make sustainable choices. This included Caoimhe McWeeney, vice chair, Eurelectric Retail Market Design Working Group and vice chair, Electricity Association of Ireland’s (EAI) Retail Committee, Dr Paddy Finn, chief executive and technology officer at Viotas Sara Brooks, Co-chief executive at Zoa, and Vince Harney, chair of the energy task force of CEPI (European Real Estate Association) and vice chair of the Sustainability Group of the Society of Chartered Surveyors in Ireland.

Next up was John Mullins, chairperson at EnergyCloud Ireland, who delivered a presentation on tackling energy poverty, before the stream finished up with a case study from Mark McGranaghan, a fellow of Electric Power Research Institute (EPRI), who spoke about innovations empowering citizens and fostering energy secure communities.

Stream two focused on energy storage and had Yates chairing it. The keynote talk came from Oliver Schmidt, founder chief executive of dvp.energy, clean energy expert, and author of *Monetizing Energy Storage*, who discussed identifying the most competitive technologies to en-

gineer, before finishing up with Padraig Fleming, biomethane programme manager at Gas Networks Ireland, who spoke about biomethane.

Stream three was on accelerating cleantech innovation and was chaired by Dr Shirley Gallagher, chief operating officer of Second Life Battery Services Ltd, who made way for several spotlight sessions. The first was on whether AI was the silver bullet to accelerate the clean energy transition.

This was delivered by Dr. Barry Hayes, School of Engineering and Architecture/MaREI, the SFI Research Centre for Energy, Climate and Marine at UCC.

The second spotlight session was on the transition to hydrogen, delivered by Paul McCormack, chief executive of Hydrogen Ireland.

This led to a look into carbon capture and storage, delivered by Cathal Fitzgerald, chairman of Arigna Group, before moving into airborne wind energy, which Katja Bessonova, communications specialist at BlueWise Marine, presented.

There was time for a panel discussion on how best to accelerate clean energy innovation and saw Justin Jacober, chief executive of Urban Volt, Mark Peters, co-founder and managing partner at WakeUp Capital, Raj Lyons Chohan, chief executive of AffinityEV, and Tracy O’Rourke, founder and chief executive of Vivid Edge take part.

Greatest challenge of the 21st century

The afternoon saw all attendees return to the same space for the remaining talks and discussions.

The first was a panel discussion on how best to finance the transition to greener energy. It included Laura Stakelum, founder of Stakelum Consultancy; Lisa Ryan, professor of energy economics at the School of Economics and the Energy Institute at UCD; and Paul O’Donnell, partner of Schroders Greencoat LLP.

When asked for a critical takeaway for the audience, Ryan mentioned the importance of incentives and the barriers there but stated that the more significant issue related to skill sets.

“The skills in those areas like retrofitting are not forthcoming,” she said. “We don’t have enough electrical engineers coming through, so I would like to see more awareness coming across all the sectors about the opportunities available through this. All the mainstream disciplines and trades need to get involved and work together [to help address this].”

Following this was an informative presentation on public engagement in energy infrastructure projects delivered by Carol Tallon, chief executive of Property District. Stressing that public consultation wasn’t a tick-box exercise, she said that communities should be seen as willing and strategic resources, and proper engagement was critical.

“We know the buzzwords around inclusive decision-making; the reality is that’s not happening,” she said. “When you’re holding your public consultations, it is not enough to say who’s in the room; we need to question who’s not in the room. “Engaging with your community is not about conflict avoidance; it’s about conflict management. It’s about understanding, listening and being brave enough to internalise what you are being told.”

There was a final panel discussion on equity in the energy transition which saw Aidan Long, communications and strategic engagement manager of Asthma Society of Ireland, Conor Cooney, technical director of AECOM, Lucy Gaffney, executive director at Business for Biodiversity, and Philip Hannon, policy director of Liquid Gas Ireland (LGI) share their thoughts.

Aidan Long touched upon another element of climate change: it’s the biggest health crisis in the world. He said asthma can develop at any point in a person’s life.

“The link to the clean transition is the importance of clean air; it’s not just a climate crisis but a health crisis too,” he said. “The *Lancet* called climate change the most significant health threat in the 21st century, so there’s a huge threat to public health in air pollution, but it’s also a great public health opportunity.

Closing the summit for another year, Yates mentioned that while there was a lot of work to do, the day showcased the “enduring optimism about the green transition” as both Ireland and the world tackle what is the biggest issue of the century.



Lisa Ryan, professor in energy economics, School of Economics and the Energy Institute, UCD; Paul O’Donnell, partner, Schroders Greencoat LLP and Laura Stakelum, founder, Stakelum Consultancy



Katja Bessonova, communications specialist, BlueWise Marine; Mark Peters, co-founder and managing partner, WakeUp Capital; Shirley Gallagher, chief operating officer, Second Life Battery Services Ltd; Justin Jacober, chief executive, Urban Volt; Tracy O’Rourke, founder and chief executive, Vivid Edge and Raj Lyons Chohan, chief executive, AffinityEV



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