

1.6 IRELAND: CASE STUDY 2. ARAN ISLANDS ENERGY COOPERATIVE

Case study report for Ireland: Community owned energy project from initiation to completion
Comharchumann Fuinnimh Oileáin Árann Teoranta

1 Introduction

Comharchumann Fuinnimh Oileáin Árann Teoranta (CFOAT or Aran Island Energy Co-Op) is a community based, not-for-profit Energy Cooperative representing the 3 Aran Islands, County Galway.

2 Description of community

CFOAT has just under 100 shareholders as of January 2019 and 12 elected directors. It has a manager who is full-time employed. Its aims are to drive the transition on the Aran Islands to carbon neutrality. Part of this challenge is to insulate all the buildings to a high standard, replace oil and coal with heat pumps, solar pv and battery storage, promote electric vehicles, and tap the sources of green energy on the islands to produce enough power to make the islands self-sufficient. Aran aims to develop its own micro-grid with a 'spríoc-dáta' of 2022.

3 Renewable Energy Project

The Better Energy Communities (BEC) scheme funded by the Sustainable Energy Authority Ireland (SEAI) has been the backbone of funding for retrofitting of buildings on the islands and we have drawn from it since 2012. More recently, we have become partners in a number of European projects (RESPOND, GEOFIT, SEAFUEL) and this is opening up other possibilities, developing the islands as a research laboratory, and providing extra funds. Up to 50% of the buildings on the islands have had some retrofitting done. A large number of heat pumps have been fitted, as well as solar PV. The number of electric cars on Inis Mór is now at 10. Barriers to further development are mainly related to planning restrictions, e.g. for a wind turbine or solar pv farm. Other barriers include the availability of good contractors who are willing to take contracts on the islands, where they experience a lot of extra hassle with boat times, weather, etc.

4 Ownership structure and financial model used

CFOAT is registered as a cooperative. Its rules prevent it from distributing any profits to shareholders. Membership is open to all residents and businesses located on the 3 islands. Grant aid comes from SEAI and from European funding (Interreg, H2020). CFOAT is a Sustainable Energy Community (SEC) and receives a lot of support through this network. It is also engaged with National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG), Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT), Trinity College Dublin (TCD), and other institutions that provide a lot of assistance and support. In the future, it is the aim of CFOAT to have at least 50% ownership of the major sources of RE on the islands. It hopes

to use the profits from these ventures to fund other RE related activities and through that to build up the local economy and create sustainable employment.

5 Implementation Process

CFOAT grew out of Comharchumann Forbartha Árann (Aran Development Co-Operative). At first, it was a project within this Comharchumann (Co-Operative) (1990 – 2003). Then it became a sub-committee of the Comharchumann (Co-Operative) (2003 – 2012). Finally, in 2012 it registered as an independent co-operative in its own right. However, CFOAT still regards itself as connected and working together with the Comharchumann (Co-Operatives) on all 3 islands.

6 Project results: Lessons learnt & post-project benefits

CFOAT strongly recommends the structure we have created for other communities also. It works very well for us. Every resident of the Aran Islands has the opportunity of becoming involved and belonging as a shareholder. The benefits will be for the whole community and there is no opportunity for private gain. When we were given a standard set of rules for a cooperative from the Cooperative Society of Ireland, we tweaked these rules to suit ourselves, so our rules are not standard, but adapted to our particular situation and goals.

The most important thing for us was the setting of clear goals. We have a set of Aims and Objectives which are just one page long and have 10 points. We return to these all the time and they keep us on the straight and narrow. At no point in our 7 years of existence have we needed to change these. They provide us with cohesiveness and also with inspiration.

The other important lesson is the value of constant communication with our shareholders and with the Aran island communities in general. We are still working on improving this, but we see it as most important, not just from the point of view of information, but also of education. The energy transition requires a new way of thinking, changes to our behaviour, and offers positive opportunities to those who can spot them.

We use every form of communication possible, including, posters, newsletters, email, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and regular interviews and announcements on Raidió na Gaeltachta.

We also believe that could achieve more if we had more support from public sector bodies, local authorities or local development committees that are responsible for the management of local development on the Aran Islands. These groups should be allocated specific funding for RE projects in order to have a more structured supportive approach that would benefit energy communities both technically and financially.

Contact: Aisling Nic Aoidh, Udaras na Gaeltachta, a.nicaoidh@udaras.ie