



Global Action Plan

Submission to Meath County Council on the Draft Climate Action Plan 2024-2029

January 2024

Global Action Plan welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of a holistic and strategic Climate Action Plan for Meath, and congratulates Meath County Council on the quality of the draft Plan, as presented to the public for consultation.

In our submission to the draft Action Plan, we want to highlight a number of areas that may help strengthen the Council's commitments:

- The importance of climate action at all levels of society;
- The reasons why community climate action has been lagging to date;
- The importance of linking climate action and social inclusion;
- The potential of community gardening.

In addition, we want to extend, by way of this submission, an invitation to Meath County Council to partner with us in a programme that can help address these four important issues.

1) The urgency and importance of action at all levels

At Global Action Plan, we believe that Ireland must do its utmost to urgently reduce the level of greenhouse gases we emit, and make transformational changes to the way we organise our society, ranging from energy generation and industry, to how we plan and manage cities, transportation and food systems. What we need is radical change at all levels: individuals, communities, companies and countries. We need to change the rules, change our habits and change our mindsets.

To achieve the required change at all levels of society, Global Action Plan helps people understand the extent of their own personal contributions to our unsustainable lifestyles, and we support people in devising strategies to reduce their own impact. These actions are important in themselves, and they also inspire others to make the changes that we so urgently need.

Ireland is, per capita, one of the worst climate polluters and a large part of our national greenhouse gas emissions is related to how we have chosen to live our lives. The decisions we make at home contribute directly to our poor climate track record as a country: how we heat our homes, how we cook, what we eat, how we travel, and the products we buy.

In that context, we appreciate the mentions in the draft strategy of measures to reduce the Council's own footprint. We notice, however, an absence of measures aimed at **training Council staff and management**, which we consider to be an important prerequisite for the success of the strategy.

We also notice, with some concern, that the section on community resilience includes a detailed list of actions aimed at providing new hardware for communities. This, however, does not amount to a complete strategy to increase community resilience, and we would encourage Meath County Council to articulate more clearly how it can promote and support **more empowered and active local businesses and citizens groups**.

Global Action Plan also welcomes the recognition in the draft strategy that local authorities have a central role to play in shaping Ireland's response to climate change: as an actor delivering climate actions in areas within its own remit, but also as an agent of change, influencing, facilitating and advocating for action by others. It is very positive to see this role highlighted, and linked to the wider political and **policy context**, as defined by the various international and national agreements and pieces of legislation.

2) Unleashing community potential for change

While the section on Community & Resilience is welcome, we feel this section can be significantly strengthened, by greater emphasis on the encouragement and development of **local, informed climate actions**.

There is a wealth of information indicating that people in Ireland are worried about the climate crisis. They believe action is necessary and are willing to do their part, but there are practical reasons why this awareness does not translate into action: For instance, media coverage focuses on stories of doom and gloom, with little perspective of hope offered, contributing to an environment of fear and a belief that a transition to a post-carbon society will involve costs, sacrifice and a loss of freedom.

This belief, coupled with the relative lack of visibility of existing climate action initiatives, can lead people to think that the rest of society does not share their climate concerns, or that personal climate action is meaningless until such time that "others" have changed their behaviour first.

The draft Climate Action Plan must **address the barriers people experience** in trying to tackle climate change. Such barriers relate not only to funding and knowledge, but also to values, emotions and perceptions of disempowerment.

The Action Plan must address the '**spiral of inaction**' that results from the a combination of factors:

- People do not see enough other people take action;
- People feel their concerns are not widely shared, as climate is not a topic regularly brought up in public and private discussions;
- People believe that climate change is not going to affect them in the here and now, but that it is a future or remote problem;

- People worry about the financial costs and practical inconveniences of transitioning to a more low-carbon lifestyle;
- People are unsure which actions will have the greatest impact on their carbon footprint.

This combination of factors is detrimental to people's wellbeing and their willingness to try and take action to tackle climate change in their own communities and homes - and in the process they end up reinforcing the misperception that others don't care about climate change.

Yet we know that this 'spiral of inaction' can be reversed: When people see that others care about the environment, and when they hear their friends and peers talk about climate change, they will understand that their own concerns are more widespread than they assumed, and they will be more likely to feel that their own efforts do matter. And as more people share knowledge on climate action, more people will demand sustainable practices and products, and the prices of alternatives to our current carbon-intensive products will begin to come down. The 'spiral of inaction' will then have turned into **a self-reinforcing 'virtuous cycle' of informed and effective climate action.**

We recommend strengthening the Draft Action Plan by **explicitly addressing the barriers to change that people experience**, and presenting proposals on how the Council can help unleash the power of the virtuous cycle.

Potential strategies in this context could include, for instance:

- Public communications strategies that emphasise what needs to change, who needs to change, and why, but also - crucially - the extent to which change is already happening;
- Highlighting the many encouraging examples being set by businesses, citizens groups and local authorities all over Ireland, as templates and inspiration for local action;
- Framing climate action as a positive step that individuals and groups can take to realise greener, fairer and more liveable communities. Change is disruptive, but the focus of the discussion should not be the disruption itself, but on the advantages arising from it;
- Acknowledging that climate action is a journey, where each step matters, both for its own climate impact and for its potential to inspire others. No solution in itself is going to be sufficient, just as no solution will work without action at other levels. The key is not to search for perfection, but to encourage multiple actions, even if imperfect;
- Working with communities to encourage them along their climate action journey, by providing safe and nurturing spaces to deconstruct problems from a local and global perspective, and exploring challenges, barriers and opportunities;
- Supporting communities to develop tangible community action plans;
- Connecting communities with initiatives locally and nationally, to promote knowledge sharing and mutual inspiration.

3) Climate Action, Just Transition and Social Inclusion

Sadly, the draft Action Plan makes no reference at all to 'Just Transition'. In our view, **the Action Plan is likely to fail unless it explicitly lists actions to be taken to address the issues referred to under the 'Just Transition' concept.**

Climate change requires societal change at all levels, but it equally requires specific and deliberate action and policy initiatives to ensure that the costs of the transition, as well as the benefits of the changes, are spread equitably across society, with those most affected by climate change and those least able to shoulder the burden of change are protected and supported.

We would recommend prioritising further reflection on how the Council's Climate Action Plan can contribute to 'Just Transition', 'Just Resilience' and Social Inclusion.

Just Resilience refers to the need to scale up activities in response to the extreme weather events and other impacts of climate change that are already being experienced in Ireland. Crucially, these impacts are not only those directly related to extreme weather patterns - although much of the public discourse in Ireland focuses on those. Many communities in Ireland, due to their geographical location or socioeconomic status, are particularly vulnerable to the secondary effects of climate change, such as increases in the costs of food and insurance, changes in the impacts of diseases, additional occupational health constraints, changes in employment opportunities, and increases in inward migration.

The effects of these changes in society are not distributed equally across Irish society, nor are the required skills and resources to manage and respond to the changes available to all.

In Ireland, many people and communities do not feel that they can realistically shape climate mitigation and adaptation policies, responses and investments, and without targeted action, they will not benefit from the actions taken to adapt to global warming.

This is why Global Action Plan advocates for greater emphasis on **Inclusion and Engagement** as a critical element of the Climate Action Plan. We consider that the objective of ensuring that the most vulnerable and marginalised communities are included and supported in all policy and funding processes should be a crucial consideration for the Council's strategy, and deserves to be backed up by a much more detailed and relevant set of actions.

4) Community gardening

The draft Action Plan makes no reference to developing an allotments and community gardens strategy for the County. In our view, this means that the draft Action Plan misses a major strand, and ignores the fact that an effective response to climate change requires a fundamental rethink of many aspects of our society, including the use of land and the systems for food production, food distribution and food marketing.

Effective climate action requires, for instance, changing approaches to gardens and public green spaces in the context of more extreme rainfall, promoting **community rain gardens**, discouraging hard paving in private gardens (as recently flagged by Dublin City Council), and retrofitting water butt installations, as key elements of any adaptation and mitigation strategy.

In addition, we wish to highlight the many benefits of **community gardens**, as evidenced by research on the two community gardens that GAP operates in the Dublin area.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) also has highlighted urban agriculture initiatives, such as community gardening, as an important factor in strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Similarly, the Report of the Citizens’ Assembly on Biodiversity Loss recognises that “urban environments have an enormous role to play in the conservation and restoration of biodiversity” and the value of green spaces to populations living in urban environments.

Furthermore, there is a wealth of evidence from academic studies that such green urban spaces have other benefits, not only in terms of food production, health and biodiversity, but also in relation to social inclusion, solidarity, and mental health.

It is therefore disappointing to see that Meath County Council has not identified a role for itself in supporting allotments and community gardens throughout the County. We suggest amending the draft action plan, and we offer our experience and expertise to the Council in this regard.

5) An invitation to partner with Global Action Plan

Global Action Plan (GAP) Ireland is an environmental organisation supporting sustainable communities across Ireland. **GAP aims to inspire people to become ‘change makers’.**

We equip individuals and communities with knowledge and skills to develop solutions to the environmental and climate crises. We believe that all of us can make a difference, through the choices we make. And that is why we focus on assisting people, helping them discover their power to affect change, and enabling them to develop tangible actions that lead to lasting behaviour change



Global Action Plan has three main programmes: a Schools programme, a Community programme, and a Business programme.

- In our Primary and Secondary Schools programme, we deliver a broad range of **in-school workshops** on Environmental and Climate Action themes, and we provide **teacher training**. In addition, we provide an extensive **outdoor education programme** for schools, engaging students to understand and appreciate nature in their local parks and green spaces. We also partner with schools in organic gardening

programmes, either in our community gardens in Dublin or within the grounds of the school itself.

- Our Community programme focuses on grassroots organisations in towns and villages throughout Ireland. The programme consists of several strands, including:
 - **Climate action training for outdoor staff in local authorities** (such as we have delivered in Dublin, Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown, Fingal, Galway, Leitrim and South Dublin);
 - a **Community Climate Adaptation and Mitigation Training** programme for communities in Co. Dublin;
 - **Joint workshops with Council staff** in Dublin City, Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown, Fingal and South Dublin, on the roll out of their Community Climate Action funding schemes;
 - our flagship **Action On Community Transformation** programme, which helps community groups link local concerns with global challenges.

In addition, we run extensive social regeneration and inclusion programmes, in areas such as Ballymun and Corduff in Dublin. Centred around GAP's **Green Living and Sustainability Community (GLAS) community gardens**, these programmes bring people of all ages and abilities together to promote tangible lifestyle changes as well as greater well-being and community engagement. Both gardens also have an extensive outreach programme, where citizens learn about biodiversity, the impacts of Climate Change and how to reduce waste, energy and water.

- Informed by demand from large and small companies, our Business programme is made up of a range of tools to provide practical support for staff learning and engagement. We provide bespoke **in-house corporate workshops**, covering a range of issues, including topics such as the Sustainable Development Goals, off-setting carbon, global citizenship and understanding the climate crisis; and our employee engagement opportunities include skills based volunteering options, **team building** activities in our community gardens and employee-giving schemes. Finally we deliver bespoke **digital Climate Challenges** to businesses.

During 2023, we hosted the first ever **National Climate Competition for Businesses**, along with a special competition for companies in the Irish Funds Industry. We also facilitated in-house climate competitions for large companies, including AIB, and for a wide range of community groups (through the Irish Aid funded "Climate Heroes" programme).

In recent years, we have partnered with organisations such as AIB, Deloitte, Google, H&MV, Intel Ireland, Patagonia, Paypal and Vodafone through this programme.

Perhaps one of the most important programmes from the point of view of Meath County Council is **our annual "Climate Heroes" competition**.



The **Climate Heroes Challenge** (www.climateheroes.ie) for community groups all over Ireland provides a unique combination of encouragement, education and real life climate impact, offering participants a menu of 40 climate smart activities, based on the four main areas of individual greenhouse gas emissions: Transport, Food, Consumption and Energy.

Funded by Irish Aid at the Department of Foreign Affairs and organised by Global Action Plan, the 'Climate Heroes' competition sees local groups across the country try to minimise their carbon footprints. It is a unique combination of entertainment, education and real-life climate impact. Using aggregated climate data and Life Cycle Assessment analysis per activity, the challenge provides a gamified, research-based platform that aims to engage people and create awareness about the big difference that small actions can achieve. The online Challenge is supported by a series of workshops that build participants' competencies for global citizenship and climate action.

Results from last year's Climate Heroes Challenge showed that those areas where the Local Authority had taken an active role in the Challenge - such as Kilkenny, Fingal and Dublin City - produced the highest scores.

We welcome the fact that Meath County Council aspires to strong leadership for the actions set out in the draft action plan.

Global Action Plan is hereby offering to assist the Council in these areas, for instance by offering some of its thematic workshops for Council staff, and by making its extensive employee engagement experience available to the Council.

We also also look forward to working with Meath County Council on a range of initiatives including our "Climate Heroes" programme for community groups (www.climateheroes.ie) and our Climate Competition for Businesses (www.climatecompetition.ie), **both of which will run in April 2024.**