



The Role of Ireland's Sustainable Energy Communities in the Just Transition

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Dr. Jeanne Magnetti, School of Law & Government, Dublin City University, Laurie Reilly, School of Law & Government, Dublin City University, Dr. Louise Fitzgerald, School of Law & Government, Dublin City University, and Prof. Jennie C. Stephens, ICARUS Climate Research Centre, Maynooth University

Abstract

In Ireland, Sustainable Energy Communities (SECs) have a distinct structure and role within the larger movement towards a more just and sustainable energy transition. Beyond their technical impact in advancing energy efficiency measures and contributing to household-level emissions reductions from energy, their social impacts have received less attention. Despite misalignment in current policy structures that hinder the scale and potential of community-led energy action in Ireland, recent community-engaged research on SECs highlights the meaningful social impacts they are having in their localities.

This short paper is based on longer policy report that contained the findings of our multi-step community-engaged research project that included a systematic review of 231 scholarly sources, over 80 survey responses, 35 interviews and 4 workshops involving 20 participants in Ireland. This paper explores the social innovations of SECs and reveals untapped potential of SECs. The paper concludes with recommendations to address the acute policy challenges and harness the full capacity of community energy in Ireland to advance a more just and equitable energy transition.

Introduction

The precarity of Ireland's energy system has become a widespread concern in response to data centre expansion, fuel cost protests, the high cost-of-living, and worsening climate vulnerabilities (Daly, 2026; EPA, 2025). Energy injustices and energy policies that benefit privileged households while excluding those most vulnerable is a recognised systemic problem in Ireland (Singh and Caulfield, 2026). The need to

transition away from fossil fuel reliance towards more renewable-based energy systems has become increasingly urgent as Ireland struggles to respond to multiple, intersecting crises including the climate emergency, geopolitical instability, fluctuating global fossil fuel markets, and a cost-of-living crisis (ESB, 2025; O'Brien, 2026; O'Connell & FitzGerald, 2025; SEAI, 2023; White & Wilson, 2026). Structural vulnerabilities in Ireland's infrastructure and a sustained dependence on imported fossil fuels exacerbate energy affordability, energy security, and the overall resilience of Ireland's energy system (Varal and Tovar Reaños, 2026; Halligan, 2025; SEAI, 2026a). Furthermore, the expansion of energy-intensive data centres in Ireland is increasing fossil fuel demand and overall energy consumption, while they also limit any progress made from energy efficiency and renewable deployment gains (Lynch et al., 2026; Stephens, 2026; Zhao et al., 2026).

A prevailing feature of Ireland's energy transition efforts has been the preference for large-scale commercial renewable energy projects rather than community-owned projects (Ó Maonaigh et al., 2025; Walsh, 2018). Local resistance to these large industrial-scale renewable projects centre around concerns of disproportionate and unfair impacts to the community and local areas, a mistrust of corporate interests, and an overall lack of direct benefits (Ó Maonaigh et al., 2025; Fitzgerald and Ó Maonaigh, 2026; Walsh, 2018). Within this context, it has been recognised that meaningful community engagement, decentralised energy processes, and trust building with local actors are essential foundations to advance an inclusive transition (Bertheau et al., 2020; Eisen & Glick, 2024; Prasad et al., 2025).

In this context, this piece explores the Sustainable Energy Authority Ireland (SEAI) Sustainable Energy Communities (SEC) programme. The SEAI introduced the SEC programme in 2015 to assist communities in developing sustainable local energy systems through knowledge sharing, guidance, and peer learning opportunities (SEAI, 2025). SECs act as local, trusted intermediaries that can improve awareness and adoption of grants for retrofit schemes and renewable energy technologies, facilitate relationship building, and can drive behavioural change at the local level.

However, our empirical evidence shows that SECs - who are tasked with aiding the acceleration of their local energy transition - operate without adequate resources and within a policy framework that hinders, rather than enhances, their ability to scale up and succeed (Magnetti et al., 2026 – see: About this research). The existing policy framework facilitates a grant-based system that is fragmented, financially restrictive and administratively burdensome. Community-owned renewable energy projects are

further constrained by regulatory and infrastructural barriers. In addition, the reliance on largely volunteer-led initiatives restrains SECs' ability to create greater impacts.

A reform of current funding models, embedding community energy and energy democracy in energy policy design, and enabling trust-building and local networks for decentralised initiatives are crucial policy interventions for addressing these issues. Furthermore, a paradigm shift is needed to distribute power from profit-seeking commercial interests to communities, including those in rural and peripheral areas.

2. What are Sustainable Energy Communities and why are they important to the energy transition?

There are multiple names and definitions of energy communities internationally, including 'citizen energy communities', 'renewable energy communities' and 'energy cooperatives', which emphasise open and voluntary participation, community and citizen-led energy ownership, community benefits, and energy efficiency or renewable energy initiatives at community levels (Ahmed et al., 2024; Rescoop EU, 2019).

An unusual characteristic of Irish community energy policy is the separation between two programmes; Renewable Energy Communities (RECs) and Sustainable Energy Communities (SECs), the latter of which has grown rapidly with over 900 registered SECs that are set up to primarily support local engagement for energy efficiency and retrofitting adopting smart energy solution, as well as small-scale renewables where feasible (SEAI, 2026b). Renewable Energy Communities, in contrast, are citizen-led initiatives that focus on community ownership of renewable energy production, sharing or selling, "aiming to deliver environmental and social benefits in the first instance, over profit". (Government of Ireland, 2025). There is some overlap with the two programmes, as at least one least one shareholder or member of a REC must be registered as a SEC. However, out of all registered SECs, only 3 per cent of RECs are engaged in renewable energy generation (Moore, 2025).

While the European Union's Renewable Energy Directive II (REDII) envisages energy communities as asset-owning energy market participants, SECs are the dominant form of energy communities in Ireland (SEAI, 2025b). However, the impacts of energy communities extend beyond local energy generation, as these organisations are uniquely positioned to build public acceptance for renewable energy adoption, drive behavioural changes, help alleviate local energy poverty, foster civic participation, and create local resilience (Magnetti et al., 2026, Ó Maonaigh et al., 2025). Furthermore,

our research found that the REC vs. SEC distinction dissolves somewhat when you talk with SECs on the ground – many of the SEC members we spoke to want to own their own renewable energy projects but face significant barriers in realising this.

3. What are the main barriers faced by SECs?

Restrictions to community-owned energy and local energy sharing:

Community-owned renewable energy and collective energy self-consumption in Ireland remains underdeveloped due to limited access to finance, administrative challenges, a lack of access to the grid and the absence of enabling policy frameworks for community ownership and energy sharing (Watson et al., 2020; Ó Maonaigh et al., 2025; Magnetti et al., 2026). These acute challenges to community-owned renewable energy in Ireland is best evidenced by the fact that there is only one fully community-owned renewable energy generation development and utility company in the country; Templederry in Co. Tipperary. This community-led renewable energy development has been operational since 2012, yet no other community has been able to successfully replicate this project, despite substantial SEC interest across the country (Magnetti et al., 2026). As SECs in Ireland are formally structured as separate from ‘renewable energy communities’ who develop or own energy generation assets, this diverges from international best practice which regards energy ownership as a central component of effective energy communities (Ahmed et al., 2024; Tarhan, 2022; Taylor & Taylor, 2022).

Volunteerism and a grant-based framework:

Existing policies place disproportionate responsibility on largely volunteer-led groups that simultaneously restricts SECs’ abilities to scale and to deliver more inclusive outcomes. An overreliance on volunteerism makes time constraints, a lack of internal expertise, and administrative incapacity particularly challenging and restrains SEC operations and activities. Financially, current government policy promotes a grant framework from which SECs can apply to finance their activities. This creates a funding environment that is often short-term, project-specific, and heavily reliant on competitive application processes. In addition, these grants are often inflexible and so may not cover core or operational costs. This can prevent or limit SECs from using these grants for basic operational costs or for employing staff. These policy frameworks ultimately restrict an SEC’s ability to scale, limiting their ambitions, range of activities and long-term planning capacity.

Limited inclusivity and participation:

As local community organisations, SECs are often assumed to be inherently inclusive and ideally placed to engage marginalised groups (Bode, 2022; Hanke et al., 2021). However, many SECs find it difficult to reach underrepresented groups or households who have difficulty affording or accessing adequate energy services (Magnetti et al., 2026). SEC members have cited that a lack of data, direct networks or contacts and privacy concerns have impacted their ability to implement initiatives targeted at vulnerable members of the community (Ibid). These challenges limit citizen participation and inclusion in Ireland's energy transition.

4. Social Impacts of SECs in Ireland

Despite a lack of enabling policy frameworks, financial resources and an overreliance on volunteerism, SECs in Ireland are making significant impacts in their local areas and developing innovative workarounds (Magnetti et al., 2026). The following section highlights the important role that SECs currently play in building trust in renewable energy practices, facilitating renewable and retrofitting grant adoption, creating greater awareness.

Trust and awareness raising

Our empirical evidence (see: About this research) shows that the trust-building and relationship-building role of SECs in their communities to create acceptance and behavioural change around renewable energy and the transition is powerful and understated (Magnetti et al., 2026). SEC members who are active in their local community are perceived as non-threatening, trusted and accessible ambassadors for renewable energy and sustainability practices, particularly in contexts where prior initiatives such as cycle lanes and commercial wind turbines were controversial.

A perception of policy heavy-handedness or risks to communities were best solved by "cozier" or friendlier approaches. As we show in Magnetti et al. (2026), many SEC members believe their role is to "show people the potential" rather than "tell people what to do". Showcasing seemingly small-scale successes such as solar panels on community buildings or the spread by word-of-mouth of the reduced energy costs from retrofitting projects have become important trust-building signals that help to shape local narratives in communities around renewable energy and efficiency. This growing community trust was also reported to have a multiplier effect, where these

small-scale initiatives have built confidence and momentum for wider adoption and scaling.

Small-scale SECs' efforts such as improving the energy efficiency and thermal comfort of community buildings have had significant social impacts for the community, particularly for older persons and vulnerable members of the community who use these centres. Increases in thermal comfort and reduced stress about energy costs significantly contribute to Ireland's Roadmap for Social Inclusion with regards to its commitment to "ensure that all people can live with confidence that they have access to good quality healthcare, housing, energy and food" (O'Connell & O'Reilly, 2026).

SECs' awareness-raising role has helped to counter misinformation about grants for energy-poor households; some households were concerned they would have to pay back grants, that deep retrofits were too disruptive, that heat pumps do not actually reduce energy bills, or that the waiting list for fully funded retrofit grants is too long. SEC activities such as running energy clinics, helping households fill in applications forms, and sharing examples of local success stories were key to tackling misinformation.

Trust and relationship-building have been further galvanised by SEC partnerships with universities, schools, clubs and community groups such as Tidy Towns, which have expanded outreach and fundraising capabilities, as well as links with family resource centres and nonprofits which improved access to marginalised groups.

Social Innovations

In response to financial and regulatory constraints, some SECs have created innovative workarounds to reduce administrative barriers, enable better procurement processes, reach vulnerable households, and bring community wealth.

Some energy communities have run competitive procurement programmes and contracting procedures to reduce the costs of installations with local suppliers making solar and retrofit installations more affordable for communities and helping households navigate uncertainty around dealing with contractors. 'Meitheal' projects - community-led initiatives that involve households, local businesses or community group facilities to collectively apply and purchase solar panels or energy retrofit programmes - have had demonstrable successes nationwide in terms of cost reductions, facilitating energy access and enabling larger-scale renewable technology adoption or retrofits.

To combat restrictive financing for operational and core costs, some SECs found funding sources beyond the grants provided by their County Council or the SEAI and have received financing from universities' research projects, EU programmes, heritage council grants, Pobal funding and local Credit Union financing. In certain cases, this has enabled SECs to access discretionary or core funding, allowing SECs to employ staff or engage more effectively with communities, including hard-to-reach households or energy-poor households.

For more detailed information on current SEC social impacts and innovative practices to deliver on locally led energy projects, the ACHIEVE project has a toolkit on Measuring the Social Impact of Sustainable Energy Communities and a Best Practice Community Guide (See: About this research).

5. Policy recommendations

Notwithstanding the multiple policy, regulatory and structural challenges, SECs in Ireland are making a notable difference to local grant uptakes for energy retrofits and solar photovoltaics (PV) installations which are reducing household and community building energy bills and aiding decarbonised energy consumption (SEAI, 2025b; Magnetti et al., 2026). Furthermore, our research shows that SECs are already making meaningful social impacts in their local community and to Ireland's energy transition in terms of building trust, public acceptance, awareness, and inclusivity.

The findings from this community-engaged research showcase the untapped potential of SECs and suggest a few specific policy priorities to enable them to scale their efforts and further advance the energy transition in Ireland.

1. Reform SEC funding models

To increase the transformative potential of SECs, the funding structures could be fundamentally redesigned to end the current retrospective funding and grants-based system that creates a short-term, competitive environment with high upfront costs and limited long-term capacity. New funding mechanisms could provide flexible, multi-annual, and upfront financial support. Shifting from reimbursement-based and project-specific schemes would allow communities to plan and action long-term projects, as well as their ability to access low-income households and marginalised groups. Core funding is essential for the hiring of staff or to fund discretionary community activities, reducing the overreliance on volunteers and improving

communities' capacity to scale. Area-based or neighbourhood-level funding approaches should be incentivised to move beyond individualised, household-based retrofit scheme programmes as a way to reduce administrative burdens, achieve economies of scale, and facilitate more equitable participation.

2. Prioritise community-owned renewable energy and embed energy democracy principles

Community-owned renewable energy and energy sharing are crucial components for decentralising Ireland's current energy system while accelerating and expanding local economic and social benefits. This will require substantial regulatory reforms to overcome structural barriers and embed a broader policy shift towards greater energy democracy. 'Energy democracy' is a social movement and framework that concentrates on the distribution of energy infrastructure ownership, as well as economic and political power (Stephens et al., 2018). Energy democracy recognises communities as active co-producers and decision-makers within the energy system.

Direct government interventions should include capital supports or state-backed guarantees for community energy projects to reduce financial risk for communities, as well as mandates for energy system operators to support community energy connections. Long-term price certainty and capacity-building supports will help local community energy projects who face higher upfront costs, risks, and difficulties in accessing commercial finance, compared to private developers. Enabling policy mechanisms for virtual sharing and peer-to-peer energy trading will allow greater accessibility and participation within communities, particularly for renters who don't have the ability to install rooftop solar or other technologies.

3. Enable trusted relationships for diversity and inclusion

More tailored supports for SECs to engage in targeted community outreach is critical to ensure more equitable local energy transitions. SECs have an important role in building trust, local leadership and participation through their local knowledge and embeddedness in the community but may lack internal networks to reach vulnerable or disengaged households. Building connections with local organisations, NGOs, and targeted outreach to marginalised or vulnerable groups can accelerate uptake of renewable energy technologies and retrofit schemes, while deepening community participation. Specific funding, guidance and partnership programmes can enable local

mobilisation and targeted engagement, helping to ensure that the benefits of the energy transition are more widely distributed.

4. Shift the paradigm towards communities

A fundamental change in policy approach is needed to distribute the concentrated position and power of profit-seeking commercial interests in energy systems towards communities. Evidence shows policy and regulatory systems are significantly more favourable to industrial-scale commercial renewable energy projects over smaller scale community-led energy action (Ahmed et al., 2024; Tarhan, 2022; Taylor & Taylor, 2022). Ireland's dependence on imported fossil fuels is further exacerbated by increased energy demand from the ever-rising number of data centres which compound challenges to fossil fuel phaseout and limit the impact of renewable energy deployment and energy efficiency gains in the country (Stephens, 2026; O'Neill, 2025). Where renewable energy infrastructure is being deployed, it is often in rural and peripheral areas without resulting in direct and sustainable local benefits such as reduced energy costs, reductions in energy poverty or community wealth. This raises questions of energy democracy and justice.

A paradigm shift is required that moves beyond the focus on technological fixes that can be provided by commercial projects at scale and instead embeds principles of energy democracy and the role of communities within policy design. Practical application of these principles should include the prioritisation of public interest for renewable energy that facilitates community energy and participation, as well as stronger regulation of data centres in Ireland that are in line with Ireland's carbon budgets.

About this research

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