



Inis Meáin community-owned wind turbine

 Aran Islands

This community owned energy co-operative on the Aran Islands brings residents and businesses of the three islands together to become self-sufficient in locally generated renewable energy. The non-profit Cooperative was set up in 2012 and has a board of 12 elected members who meet for an Annual General Meeting.

The co-operative is currently working towards developing a 100% community owned wind turbine on Inis Meáin and has received a grid connection offer for 650kW. This has the potential to produce significant benefits and to enable make transition to clean energy, while strengthening the local economy and sustaining the population. The co-operative is undertaking a detailed feasibility study with SEAI Technical Advisors – Plan Energy.



Interview Questions and Responses

How did you as a community agree the key objectives that you wanted your project to deliver?

The communities on the Aran Islands are self-sufficient, however the communities have never been self-sufficient in energy due to lack of natural resources and the co-operative saw an opportunity to benefit from new renewable energy technology under community ownership. Therefore, the board of the co-operative collectively agreed to pursue the development of a community owned turbine to achieve self-sufficiency of energy on Inis Meáin, one of the Aran Islands.

How did you decide upon a single project idea that could deliver against those objectives?

The co-operative wanted to establish a self-sufficient energy community and a community owned project was key to enable this objective. There was existing infrastructure and grid connection from a previous wind turbine on Inis Meáin which collectively convinced the board to pursue this single project idea.

Although the co-operative identified wind as an obvious opportunity, the co-operative is open to pursuing other forms of energy such as solar, wave and tidal, if it enables local community energy ownership.

Describe the process by which you achieved consensus around objectives and projects. Has that consensus held or does it remain challenged by some in the community? If so, how are you dealing with that?

Consensus has been gained with the communities under 10 collectively agreed objectives, which includes community energy and therefore pursuing a community-owned wind turbine aligned with these objectives. These objectives have also been revised after 10 years with input of wider community development co-operatives on the Aran Islands and from community members in an open forum.



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How did you approach planning and project management around your selected idea?

The project manager is directly appointed by the co-operative who is highly skilled and collaborates with 5 members of a subcommittee responsible for managing the community owned turbine project, which report to the Aran Islands Energy Co-operative Board. In parallel, the SEAI has supported the project by providing consultants, Plan Energy, free of charge to the Aran Islands Energy Co-operative as a registered SEC (Sustainable Energy Community).

How has that stood the test of time through the project? Have you had to revise your plans. How have you managed that process?

The SEAI provided a consultant who is developing the feasibility study on behalf of the co-operative which is still ongoing. The SEAI and co-operative have oversight of the consultants' work on an ongoing basis, however the future plan for the project is dependent upon the outcome of the feasibility study. Revising plans for the project will be collectively agreed at board level.

How did you identify a funding need?

Funding construction of community owned renewable energy projects can be secured from private or charitable sources. However, accessing funding to undertake feasibility studies to obtain planning permission stage was the key need for the co-operative.

How have you managed the process of bidding for funding?

The co-operative's project manager and board directors support the bid writing applications to secure funding and support from organisations such as the SEAI. This is a collaborative process requiring a subcommittee to report to wider board directors for approval before submission.

Did you have a need for specialist expertise for your project? If so how did you handle that and approach experts?

The SEAI created a panel of consultants and the SEAI have connected the co-operative with the consultants to undertake the feasibility study. This service is only made available to communities which are registered SECs (Sustainable Energy Communities).

What have been the hardest difficulties to overcome and how did you overcome them?

The first difficulty is generating community buy in. The co-operative hosted several public meetings at a local hall which involved selecting the turbine site and created guiding principles for selection.

The second is enabling a grid connection and exporting energy to the national grid. There was an existing connection to the shoreline and to the Irish mainland, this had to be inspected and requires repair work of around €30,000 – €40,000. Funding for this repair will be sourced following the feasibility study.

The third is ensuring enough grid capacity to take the export. Following an EirGrid assessment the max capacity is 650kw although the overall target is 2–3MW.

The fourth is securing planning permission, although there was a previous onshore turbine, the EU has designated further restriction on the environment and landscape. Therefore, there may be additional barriers to overcome to secure permission.

The co-operative is working with relevant government agencies to understand the barriers in greater depth and how to overcome them. The co-operative are open to adapt its focus upon a different renewable power such as wave or tidal or create community owned solar on buildings.

Has the community managed to stay true to the original project vision? If not, why not? If it has, how has this been achieved?

It has been difficult to stay true due to potential planning permission barriers and the outcome of the feasibility study will shape future decision-making on the project.

What have been the biggest learnings from the delivery of your project?

The key learnings for developing a community owned turbine and wider energy projects include:

- Being prepared to learn and adapt to issues which have appeared
- Willingness to learn and to potentially adapt to other forms of energy if one form of energy is not practical.
- Only pursuing projects which are feasible and have received external judgement and expertise.

What decisions, or elements of organisation have been the most important in the delivery of your project?

Establishing very high standards of governance is key and to establish trust with the community and have long-term support. The board have an item on the agenda which discusses governance, how to run the meetings, handling decision making, consulting local community members and providing transparent communication channels.

The objectives of the co-operative have to align with the community as a whole by enabling a self-sustaining community, creating clean energy related employment, improving standards of living, reinvesting into infrastructure and improving quality of living.

What were the most important sources of advice and guidance for your community as you moved through the different phases of the project?

Networking has been key to source key sources of advice and guidance. The key organisations include:

- The SEAI, which the co-operative consider has having a strong working and personal relationship.
- University of Galway.
- Údarás na Gaeltachta.

Key contact

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Links

Website: <https://www.aranislandsenergycoop.ie/>

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