



Mullingar Sustainable Energy Community (SEC)

 Mullingar, County Westmeath

Mullingar Sustainable Energy Community was formed in 2018, supported by the Mullingar Chamber of Commerce. The group is in contact with other communities supported by the SEAI (Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland). Recently, a visit to a community-run windfarm in Templederry, County Tipperary, was hosted by Community Power. This inspired the community to see what they could achieve.

Mullingar Sustainable Energy Community is developing a 5MW community-owned solar farm on a former landfill site. The feasibility of the latter is currently being explored, supported by a €30,000 grant from LEADER via Westmeath Community Development (WCD).



Interview Questions and Responses

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

The SEAI were offering grants and free energy audits to communities in 2018. SEAI informed the Chamber of Commerce in Mullingar that the community required an SEC, which was set up with support from SEAI, alongside a subcommittee to drive projects.

The SEC and subcommittee have been key in collectively agreeing objectives for projects, based upon a Masterplan which was undertaken with consultancy support.

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

Members of the Mullingar SEC sub-committee wanted something concrete to focus upon and to realise a more sustainable community. The sub-committee felt the solar farm is tangible and a specific target, with members collectively agreeing.

County Westmeath has a history of developing wind farms, there have been attempts to get turbines in and there were major complaints regarding onshore wind turbines, therefore solar was the preferred route.

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?

The 5MW solar project received little objection from the community. This was enabled by stories in the local press which have helped build a consensus, following public events delivered by Mullingar SEC.

In parallel, the SEAI acted as mentors, have been supportive and helped Mullingar SEC gain consensus with the community and within the sub-committee by outlining the clear potential benefits of solar to Mullingar.



Funded through the Just Transition Fund and the Carbon Tax Fund

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

Gerard's background is in the IT sector nationally and internationally, working as a project manager. His role is sharing information, organising meetings and driving grant applications. Alongside Gerard, there are key individuals supporting the project management.

There is a WhatsApp group with around 20 people from the Mullingar SEC to regularly share project updates and organise meetings. The sub-committee meets around once a month and undertake ad hoc meetings.

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

If the project obtains planning permission and grid connection, the Mullingar SEC would then apply for RESS funding via the SEAI. The project then becomes serious and project management becomes more critical.

The SEAI has informed Mullingar SEC that funding for project management is in the next phase and the project will require a full-time project manager.

How did you identify a funding need?

The Mullingar SEC found it difficult to originally identify capital funding for projects. In response, they discussed this with key contacts at Claremorris Energy Co-operative, as they have secured funding for a solar project.

The Energy Masterplan for Mullingar, undertaken by consultants, identified funding from financial institutes and community lending organisations, however the interest rates were too high. The identification of funding from the Just Transition Fund came via support from the SEAI.

How have you managed the process of bidding for funding?

Gerard's background in project management enabled the Mullingar SEC to carefully manage the bidding process and develop funding applications.

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

The Mullingar SEC procured specialist consultants to develop a feasibility study for the 5mw solar farm, supported by a €30,000 LEADER grant from Westmeath Community Development Company. The procurement was undertaken through an open e-tender process.

The SEAI and Westmeath Community Development Company supported Mullingar SEC in designing and launching the open procurement process. Members of the Mullingar SEC with a strong business and financial background, had the capacity to assess the tenders.

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

The key difficulty faced by the Mullingar SEC sub-committee was to be brave enough to engage with the community directly, and share the challenges with financing and planning permission, in order to get the Mullingar community on board.

The Mullingar SEC now have some models for costs which were developed with support from the SEAI and internal members. This was a key piece of information for getting the community on board.

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

The Mullingar SEC are taking a long-term approach and have remained true to their original vision. As an SEC, they are aiming to launch other projects such as housing retrofit.

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

The biggest learnings from developing the 5MW solar project are:

- Securing grid connection and engaging EirGrid to understand the best location to connect. This has been a challenging process. The Mullingar SEC have been 3 years trying to get the grid connection.
- Securing land at a good price as there are large costs associated with grid connections.
- Identifying and securing funding from sources such as LEADER.
- Mullingar SEC have registered to be a cooperative with 13 members, all contributing €100 each.

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

Deciding to establish a concrete and tangible project is important for a community. The solar farm will give Mullingar SEC the licence to develop more projects and have credibility to do other projects.

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

The SEAI coordinators are the most important sources of information for project development.

The Mullingar SEC have also been working with other SECs from across Ireland to better understand the concept, design and funding stages. For example, talking to Claremorris Energy Co-operative.

Key contact

Ger Keena, Mullingar Sustainable Energy Community (SEC)
ger@knotdee.com

Links

Website for latest project update story: <https://mullingarsec.ie/2023/01/leader-grant-for-mullingar-solar-park-feasibility-study/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/MullingarSEC/>