Community-Led Retrofit Scheme Saves Energy and Creates Jobs

With help from a local community development organisation, a voluntary group near Thurles, Co. Tipperary, successfully completed an insulation scheme for 22 houses, leveraging €40,000 from the local community, and one of the first community groups to be awarded funding (€88,000) under the Better Energy Communities grant from Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI).

A New Model
In what could be a new model for delivering household energy efficiency projects, Drombane Upperchurch Energy Team oversaw energy efficiency work on a total of 22 houses, a mix of sheltered and private houses, which received a grant of between 40 and 100%. Work carried out included: attic, cavity and external wall insulation; new stoves, condensing boilers and heating control upgrades.

Impressive Savings and Payback
According to local Energy Officer Marcella Maher Keogh, yearly savings are very impressive: “A dormer bungalow getting attic, cavity wall and external insulation, new CFL bulbs, boiler and heating controls will save €800 per year (total cost €7,793.02 - six year pay back). While a 2 storey house getting attic, cavity wall and external insulation, and new CFL bulbs will save €560 per year (total cost €8,170.62 – 8.5 year pay back). With a 40% SEAI grant on the works from the community scheme, the cost to the homeowner is much reduced.”

The 22 houses are now saving an average of 20% on energy costs. If similar work were carried out on the other 400 houses in the parish, a €200,000 saving could be achieved within Drombane and Upperchurch alone.

Need for National Retrofit Programme
Michelle Putti, social programmes manager with local development company North Tipperary LEADER Partnership (NTLP) pointed out that: “NTLP has supported this community initiative since 2010, through the Local and Community Development Programme. This project demonstrates the employment and financial potential of local insulation schemes. Imagine these savings and jobs multiplied out to every community in Tipperary, indeed nationwide. Since the beginning of the downturn, the whole country has been waiting for a National Retrofit Programme. The skills are there.”

Using Local Assets
Drombane/Upperchurch Energy Team completed Phase 1 of their project in October 2011 with the completion of a household Energy Survey – the survey found that over €1 million is spent on home energy in the parish. Phase 2 involved setting up a community insulation scheme. A key driver of the
The project was Marcella Maher Keogh, an architectural technician and a BER Assessor, employed as Community Energy Officer by NTLP from March 2012 under the Jobbridge programme. From the Energy Office in Drombane, free energy advice was made available. Tenders for Tipperary-based BER assessors, and SEAI-registered insulation contractors were advertised. Local company LeeTherm secured the contract to carry out the insulation work.

**Tight Deadlines**
Financing the project proved a huge challenge. SEAI's Pilot Scheme “Better Energy Communities,” required the Energy Team to pay for all costs upfront. A local Voluntary Housing Group contributed €10,000 towards the scheme. Local householders contributed 60% of the costs. According to NTLP community worker Gearóid Fitzgibbon: “The Energy Team co-ordinated all of the work. SEAI awarded the scheme an energy Grant of €88,000 on November 1st. Everything had to be completed by November 28th. With great cooperation from the contractor LEETHERM, the deadline was met. The SEAI grant was finally paid out to the community on December 28th.”

Local activist Con Harrington thanked all those who had assisted the project: Energy Team Volunteers Noel Byrne and Martin O’Donoghue. Seamus Hoyne, Paddy Phelan, Paul Kenny of Tipperary Energy Agency, staff of North Tipperary LEADER Partnership, LIT TIPPERARY, and especially Ken Lee of LEETHERM.

**D.I.Y. Approach to Fighting Recession**
In conclusion Marcella added: “Drombane/Upperchurch is a community which is taking the lead with this energy initiative. As well as saving people money and creating jobs, this can be a first step in making the community energy independent. We want to show other rural communities the benefits of a do-it-yourself approach to fighting the recession, and reducing Ireland’s bill of 6 billion euro per year for imported fuel.”

The Energy Team is now looking for volunteers to help put together another more ambitious phase of the community insulation scheme. An Organising Meeting is planned in the coming weeks. Anyone interested should contact Noel Byrne on 085-1491397 or Martin O’Donoghue on 087-4125964.

**ENDS**
For further information, call Gearóid Fitzgibbon, of North Tipperary LEADER Partnership on 085-7409023 or email gfitzgibbon@ntlp.ie

**Photos:**
*Top:* L-R: Tony Quinn, Jim Nolan, and Ned Hennessy, residents of Drombane Voluntary Housing.
*Centre:* Some of the houses in Drombane where energy efficiency work was carried out.
*Bottom:* Members the group behind organising the Community Insulation scheme: L-R: Noel Byrne (Energy Team volunteer), Gearóid Fitzgibbon (NTLP Community Worker), Ken Lee (LeeTherm contractors), Con Harrington (Energy Team volunteer), Michelle Putti (NTLP Social Programmes Manager), Michael Bell (Senior Engineer Tipperary Energy Agency), Marcella Maher (Community Energy Officer), Martin O’Donoghue (Energy Team volunteer).