

Evening Echo

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Pension issue is a national disgrace

THE levy on pensions of private sector workers is a disgrace. Worse still, the failure by government to commit to ending it is a scandal.

We were told it would end in 2015, four years after its introduction. This week however, the Secretary General of the Department of Finance, John Moran, was asked about it and was unable to offer any assurance the levy would go.

What the levy is doing is taking a significant amount of hard-earned cash out of ordinary people's pension pots. Not scrapping it within four years, as promised by Finance Minister Michael Noonan, when he introduced it, is a horrific betrayal. In fact he increased the levy for this year. It has gone up from 0.6% to 0.75%, which is taken in June of every year on the value of pension assets. It is believed that it will raise more than the property tax. According to IBEC, a working couple will have €2,500 taken from their retirement savings this year alone. The irony of all of this is that the people who are in charge of imposing and implementing this levy, namely ministers and senior civil servants, have no need to worry about pension pots. They are all generously provided for out of the tax revenues of the State — in other words, the very people who are being crucified by the levy are funding the lavish pensions of those in charge of it — while they must also try to fund their own retirement. This is a grave injustice and will eventually lead to a lot of trouble for the State.

It is time to seriously address the pensions timebomb. No State pension should be more than €30,000 per annum. There should be a national pension pot, administered by the State for all citizens, into which everyone should be required to pay. This might eliminate the need to postpone or even cut the very modest pensions which ordinary citizens can expect to get.

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CORMAC WALSH of the Energy Co-Operatives Ireland Ltd says that communities should come together to form their own energy co-operatives

LIKE all EU countries, Ireland has pledged to produce 40% of its electricity using renewable means by 2020. Currently, 18% of our electricity (1,740mw) is produced by green generation technologies. But more is needed over the next six years. The question is: How much will be owned by foreign investment fund-managers and how much will be kept in the hands of those living among these developments?

Semi-State companies and business play an important part in reaching the 2020 goals. But communities also need to take a leading role. In the next few years, Bord na Móna hopes to build 1gw of generation on cut-away bogs in the Midlands, hopefully, far from neighbouring properties, minimising disturbance.

There are plans elsewhere from developers to build sensitively located wind farms. These will all help towards generating the 3,800mw of power we need to reach that magic 40% renewable energy.

Community initiatives, though, are also crucial. Only they can ensure developments match the wishes of host communities and that benefits are locally distributed.

In the past, communities came together as co-operatives to create local businesses. In the 19th century, agricultural co-ops helped farmers overcome the challenges of mechanised transport and the industrialisation of agriculture. Credit unions provided capital to families and entrepreneurs throughout Ireland in the 20th century when banks were often seen unfair on smaller borrowers. Today, energy co-ops help local communities minimise environmental risks and maximise the employment and financial benefits of renewable energy.

Last year, in a noticeable success, Tipperary saw the connection of a 4.6mw wind farm to the grid by the Templederry Community Wind Farm. This ambitious project started back in 1999 and raised considerable financial backing from a range of sources including shareholder equity and LEADER funding amongst others. Although not a co-op, Templederry could be a model for future community groups who could choose the co-op route.

In the Aran Islands, Comharchumann Fuinneamh Oileáin Árann, an energy co-op created by the local community in 2012 in partnership with Energy Co-ops Ireland, set itself on course to achieve energy self-sufficiency by 2022. Its first two projects under the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland Better Energy Communities Scheme increased energy-efficiency in homes and public buildings. It has now installed domestic-scale micro-generation and aims to expand its operations next year.

Fuinneamh's next step includes working on a medium-scale wind-energy turbine to supply electricity to homes and businesses on the island. It also hopes to attract new sustainable industries, creating new jobs. All this will be carried out using the co-operative model, activating local innovation and building-in local control over developments.

Any new renewable energy co-op could take the Fuinneamh as its template. Creating a strong community team, identifying a pilot project — like a community heating scheme, building energy upgrades or residential micro-generation. Then, drawing on expert assistance, it would recruit council, Government

Working together is key to energy mission



Communities following steps done by community groups on the Aran Islands could lead to energy co-operatives distributed throughout the country.

and commercial support. Finally, it should carry out a feasibility study on a generation project, choosing a technology suited to the local environment.

Communities following these steps could lead to energy co-operatives distributed throughout the country, each specialising in a technology and a business model that best suits its own aims, retaining ownership and control over the energy environment.

A co-op provides the best legal system for a community energy project. Energy Co-ops Ireland (www.energyco-ops.ie) can guide you through the process of setting up a co-op step-by-step, but here is an outline of what's involved:

- Gather a core group: A founding committee of eight is needed.
- Appoint a chair and secretary. The chair should be an energetic consensus builder. The

secretary should have business experience and an eye for detail.

- Agree the aims and objectives of your co-op.
- Establish membership rules: Who can join, how much will shares cost?
- Carry out a study on current energy usage and possible local energy resources in your community.
- Choose the best start-up projects: Consult with outside experts on this.
- Publicise a membership drive in your community, explaining your plans and looking for feedback.
- Energy Co-Operatives Ireland Ltd is holding a public information meeting in Westport, Co. Mayo, on establishing renewable energy co-ops on Friday, see www.energyco-ops.ie for more. Duncan Stewart will speak at the event.