

NESC Sustainable Futures Workshops Report 2026



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Chapter 1: Purpose and Scope

This report summarises the proceedings and outputs from two workshops held by NESC in June and July 2026 on Sustainable Futures. It focuses on presenting the workshop format, with a brief background followed by a summary of the contributions by participants. The last section draws out some common themes and ideas that emerged from the discussions across the two events.

These workshops were undertaken as part of a NESC project on climate action and our sustainable future. The project explores the state of play in Ireland's transformation and what additional efforts are needed for success. As part of that project, the lack of a 'positive narrative' or tangible vision for transition was identified as a potential systemic barrier to transformation. The Sustainable Futures workshops sought diverse perspectives on what a desirable sustainable future could look like and explored different types of content or material that could potentially address the systemic barrier.

This report represents the views of the participants of the workshop only, it does not attempt to treat the workshops as statistically representative samples, nor does it evaluate facilitation performance.

The NESC Secretariat wish to extend our thanks to everyone who gave of their time, experience, and expertise to join us in our workshops with particular thanks to Dublin Storyslam who assisted in the design and facilitation of the workshops.

Chapter 2: Workshop Design

2.1 Location and Stakeholder Selection

Dublin was the first workshop location selected as it is the location of a large variety of representative organisations across sectors, who could take both a national and local perspective. It is also the location of NESC offices, where the event was hosted. Athlone was selected for its rural town characteristics, its large rural hinterland and good transport links. Through the two locations, we hoped to gather a broad and diverse range of inputs.

The National Economic and Social Council consists of representatives of business and employer's organisations, trade unions, agricultural and farming organisations, community and voluntary organisations, environmental organisations, Government, and independent experts. The stakeholder selection for the workshops sought to replicate this cross-sectoral model, while additionally seeking representation from stakeholders from across subsectors of society who may have diverse lived experiences of the environment, sustainability and associated policy. Invites were sent to public participation networks in Dublin, Leitrim, Westmeath, Roscommon, Tipperary and Offaly. The invite was also shared directly with local organisations and individuals, and was shared with the Wheel network and on the catchments.ie website. There were 29 participants in total with 20 female and 9 male participants. Unfortunately we were not able to secure the participation of young adults in the 18-25 years age bracket despite reaching out to relevant youth focused organisations and individuals. The workshop format did not allow for the inclusion of children on this occasion. While we did not record the ages of participants, it was observed that the Dublin group had a younger age profile than the Athlone group. It was noted that the Dublin group was majority female while the Athlone group was evenly split between men and women.

A variety of life experiences were present across the two workshop groups. Participants included academics, policy makers, community activists, interested citizens, people in business, people from faith communities, environmental activists, innovators, people born in Ireland and people born abroad, rural people and city people.

2.2 Workshop Format

NESC is currently undertaking a project to provide advice to government on additional efforts required to achieve systems change to meet climate and sustainability goals. Lack of a tangible vision or 'positive narrative' was identified as a potential systemic barrier to transformation and public engagement with climate transition. The purpose of the workshops was to engage a diversity of views on what a positive vision for a sustainable future could look like. Storytelling was used as a tool to open up consideration among participants of transition as a process over time that will include challenges to be overcome and to generate ideas for how such challenges can be overcome.

The agenda for the workshop was anchored around a high level and brief introduction to systems thinking and how the workshop fit into systems thinking on sustainability. This was followed by an icebreaker session, then a breakout session on a 2050 vision and finally after lunch, a session and breakout group with Dublin story slam to develop stories about successful transition. The design of these elements is described in more detail in the sub sections below. A copy of the agenda is in the appendix.

2.2.1 Icebreaker

As the workshop would be quite demanding of participants in asking them to step away from current realities, it was important to first acknowledge those realities before starting the main exercises. Participants were asked in plenary to introduce themselves and give their current thoughts and feelings on climate action and sustainability, whether those were positive or negative. Participants were given an opportunity to write their thoughts on post-it notes which were collected and form the basis for the recorded results in section 3.1.

2.2.2 Visions for the future

The aim of this exercise was to prompt participants to imagine what they think the result of a successful transition would look like in Ireland. Participants were split into breakout groups for this work. Participants were split based on where they were seated. In the Dublin workshop, with plenary taking place around one large roundtable, participants sitting beside each other were split into different groups by numbering participants 1, 2, 3. In Athlone where seating was arranged cabaret style, whole tables were assigned to one of the two breakout groups.

As sustainability is a broad concept, participants were asked to base their visions for a sustainable future around what the future would look like for particular individual personas.

Participants were handed two sheets, a scenario sheet (included in appendix 1) and a persona sheet (included in appendix 2). The persona sheet offered nine different very high level characters, providing only detail on their age, where they lived, their occupation and if they had children. This was the first introduction to the personas. The information provided related to the characters status in 2026. Breakout groups were asked to pick a persona and imagine their life and surroundings in 2050. The scenario sheet gave a broad outline of the world these characters would find themselves in Ireland in 2050, where a successful and fair transition had occurred, limiting climate change to below two degrees Celsius and supporting a rich biodiversity. The scenario sheet also included questions with the aim of prompting discussion, without dictating or guiding it, as follows;

- Think about **where they live and their home**. What is the evidence of a new sustainable world around them? What looks different? What looks the same? What do they have more of? What do they have less of? Does anything look or feel different?
- Think about their **daily life**; their education or work, their nutrition, their utility bills, how do they get around or access the services they need? What do they do more of in 2050, what do they do less of?
- Think about the **government**. Has the role of government changed? What does the government do more of, what does government do less of? What is this person's influence on government and how does that happen?

- Think about their **wellbeing**. Life's ups and downs still happen in a sustainable world but this person is happy to live where they are in Ireland – think about why?

2.2.3 Stories

The assistance of Dublin Storyslam was procured to design and facilitate the story part of the workshops which took place in the afternoon. Participants were introduced to the potential for storytelling to connect with people and to communicate. The key elements of stories were discussed and participants were brought through 'warm up' exercises telling stories from their own experience. Finally, participants were organised into breakout groups to choose a character from the morning vision session to develop their story of change from 2026 to 2050. In Dublin, the afternoon breakout groups were split differently than the morning. In Athlone, based on reflections on the Dublin workshop, the decision was taken to stay in the morning breakout groups for the afternoon sessions. At the end of the breakout session, a rapporteur from each group shared their story in the closing plenary session.

Figure 1: Participants sharing stories



Chapter 3: Workshop Results

3.1 Icebreaker

During the icebreaker, participants were asked to introduce themselves and to reflect on their feelings towards sustainability – how hopeful or concerned they felt. Contributions from participants spanned the range from optimism and hope to pessimism and despair.

Positive

No participant across the two workshops expressed unreserved optimism or positive feelings. However, many expressed they were still hopeful, seeing the ‘glass half full.’ Many could point to experiences of participating in or organising positive initiatives in their locality or sector which gave them hope. Some mentioned active support by government for action on climate and sustainability. One participant pointed to trends in building and construction being positive. One participant mentioned being reassured, even positively surprised, by the dedication and integrity of sustainability professionals they met in business. One noted that when costs and health benefits align, big shifts can occur. The growth in second hand clothing as a mainstream option was noted by a number of participants. Another participant noted how making a small change can make you feel part of the bigger solution. One participant said they were ‘Ultimately hopeful for the future and what a true fair transition to climate neutrality can do for lives and livelihoods.’ A participant stated they were grateful to live in Ireland because of our care for the environment compared to other countries. Another participant found a positive in the growing awareness across the world of the need for climate action, though also noted it was not growing fast enough. A participant was encouraged by the prospect of a healthier, cleaner, greener, more equal and inclusive future.

Negative

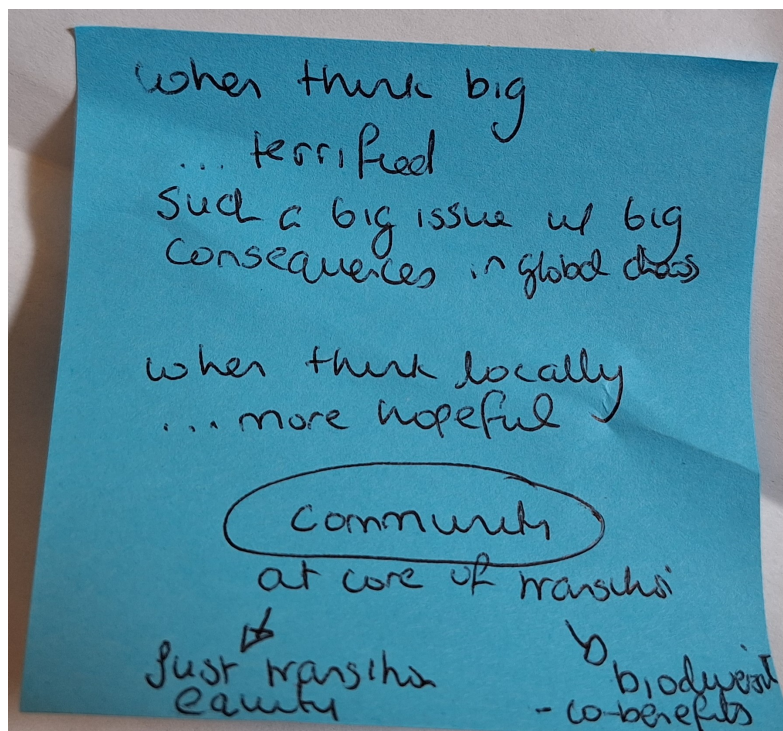
A number of participants mentioned ‘temporary despondency’ or ‘despair’ when they thought about climate change and sustainability. The weather at the time of the workshops, with unusually warm weather in Ireland and temperatures in excess of 40 degrees Celsius and wildfires being experienced in Europe was a source of despondency for participants. One was ‘concerned and frustrated that ambition and good intent is not supported by the systems we live and work in.’ Another participant mentioned mixed messages and changing policies leading to confusion and frustration, particularly in the agriculture and land use sector. The behaviour gap was a source of frustration with people wanting to take action but not feeling able to do so. Data centres were mentioned as a concern for climate and sustainability. Some participants mentioned the frustration of ambition running up against politics. A participant mentioned an unfortunate shift in agenda with a focus on competitiveness and security. One participant noted that people can’t stop buying. Another participant said we are ‘running to stand still.’

Mixed feelings

Many participants mentioned mixed feelings ‘when think big – feel terrified...such a big issue with big consequences in global chaos. When think locally, more hopeful.’ One participant described themselves as a despairing optimist while another said they were despondent but hopeful. Another participant said ‘on one hand it can sometimes feel like a slow moving task

with leaders focused only on big ticket items i.e. energy while other areas left out (like food) but when you get down in the weeds there are so many amazing people doing amazing work!' Similarly another contribution stated 'Despondent but hopeful, big ticket items are being looked at but social aspects are being avoided.'

Figure 2: A participant's thoughts on transition

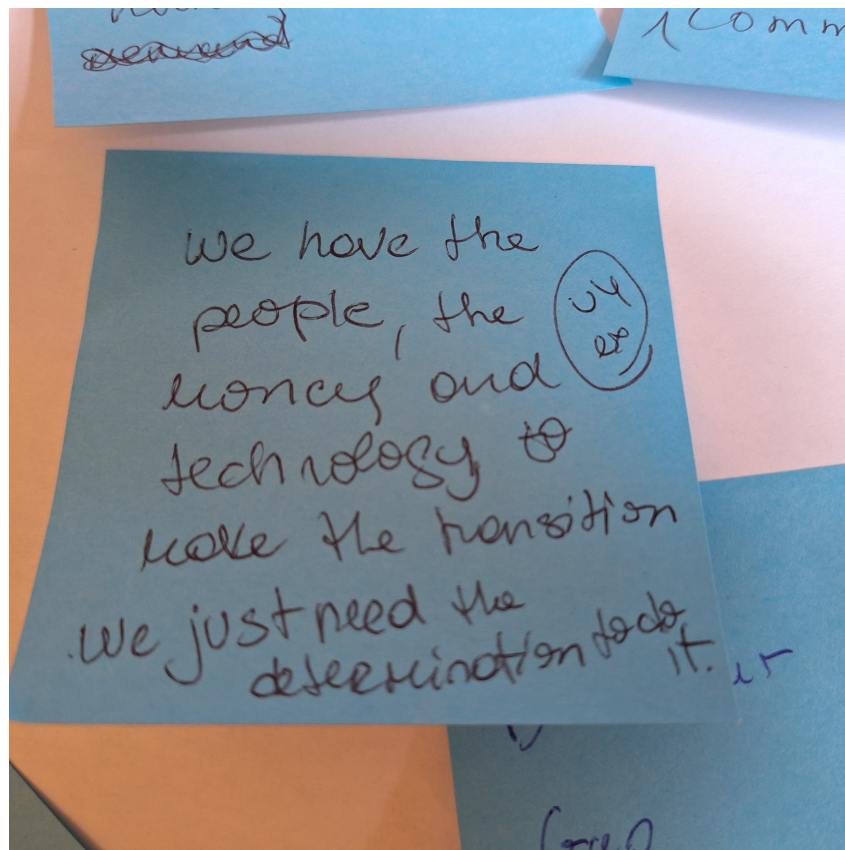


Looking forward

Regarding the future, one participant suggested that the challenge is getting over the fear of change. Another participant put forward that 'Ireland has people, money, technology, but is not making changes. It is about the message people are getting.'

One participant suggested speeding up inclusion in implementation was crucial. Another participant said that the people they worked with wanted to see change but were held back by systems. It was suggested by a participant 'sustainability will always be slow... The smallness builds a foundation... Slow work facilitates the fast work. The social incremental builds support for the big scale' and that 'We need to press go on things that work.'

A number of participants suggested that community was at the core of transition and that local action can create change. One participant suggested that 'Co-creation and inclusion, storytelling and connecting people' would all be important for the transition. One participant said that 'people don't see the need to reduce. When people get creative, then they will want to do it.' Another participant was feeling 'motivated' and said that 'overall I feel a hopeful positive message is the way to encourage wider uptake nationally. There's a lot more to do.'

Figure 3: A participant's call to action

3.2 Visions for the Future

The following presents the visions of the future that participants developed based around six personas that were selected in the workshops. Note that 'Jack' was selected as the persona by three groups (listed a, b and c). We group the contributions following how most breakout groups organised their vision: under the headings of home life, daily life, government and wellbeing.

3.2.1 Persona 'Mairead', Co. Kildare

In 2026, Mairead is a 44 year old teach with three children aged 14, 10 and 6. She is a homeowner, with a home of BER B.

In 2050: Mairead is now 68 years old.

Success for Mairead means living in a society where her voice matters and is heard. She has access to what she needs and lives in a cleaner, healthier, and more equal society. It is a cleaner healthier environment and she has what she needs to be secure. Her family is well. She has a say in her local community.

By 2050, Mairead has considered downsizing and moving from a rural area to a more urban setting. This would allow her to live somewhere more walkable, with better access to medical facilities and public transport. Her children no longer live with her. They had the choice and ability to move out. She is retired and supported by an adequate pension, while her children may not have a pension, there may be universal income.

Mairead remains active in her community. She volunteers in a local school and participates in a community garden that helps feed older people and provides food for schools in the area. She also is easily able to visit her grandchildren, who live in Ireland. While occasionally visiting her family in America less frequently due to the cost being high due to a new carbon tax. Long distance international travel is limited by a system of credits you have to save up over the years to have sufficient to travel. Additional credits can be earned by being extra sustainable or volunteering.

The successful future for Ireland includes less traffic, making both rural and urban areas safer. Transport systems are powered by green energy, and health services are accessible across the country, including the option for GP visits to take place online.

There is a greater biodiversity because nature has been taken more seriously. More green areas are available, encouraging physical activity and wellbeing. Ireland produces all the energy it needs domestically, and local food production has increased, while still allowing for some imports.

Development is more compact and centralised, with services concentrated in accessible areas. Communities are more cohesive, and the circular economy plays a stronger role. Citizens have more influence over decision making, including through more citizens assemblies.

Land use has changed significantly to support wellbeing. There has also been major investment in upskilling the population to help deliver these changes. Housing is designed to be multi-generational, and decisions are led by science. Government is more decentralized and society is more equal overall.

Figure 4: Life in 2050 for persona 'Maired'

Maired. Co. Kildare

Age in 2050: 68

cleaner, healthier environment, has what she needs to be secure
her family is well. She has a say in her local community. S.E.E. RICH LIFE

LIVES

- Children not living with her — they all live in cost rental housing → so it is affordable
- Considering downsizing but hasn't yet. → to more urban setting — walkability, shop; GP. Community; engaging in courses — life long learning.
- House is not cluttered and has solar panels; Rainfall collection system
- One stop shops: — walk/cycle/EV. — public transport
- Less financial burden
- Cohesive community — neighbours from Med!
- Rural community is well served by transport — Rully EV, self driving cars — car sharing service.
- Roads are safer — less traffic
- More greenways; blueways.

GOVERNMENT

- Government has reversed the bio-diversity emergency. → led by science
- Housing design: sustainable; multi-generational. → STRONGER SCIENCE to lead body.
- More compact growth →
- Regulated screen use
- Ireland really builds up skills for sustainable areas
- Ireland is food secure itself — it still exports/imports but is ok more self-sufficient
- Significant land use change.
- Circular economy + bioeconomy
- Citizens have more influence. CAr → policy link
- Create all our own energy ← wind solar PV
- More participation by people — local authorities, more power
- Does export water??
- More devolved, local government: effective plants
- Have invested in nature/heritage

DAILY LIFE

- She is retired → time to give energy + skills to ingratiate
- Supported by a pension / universal income
- She is active in the community; engaging in courses — life long learning.
- She is engaging in lots of outdoor activities → river swimming → Taw Chai
- Local food — produces some herself; buys local eg apples
- She does voluntary in the local school. Community garden (links with retirement home next door) — planned use of technology; independence. if it is a forest school; outdoors rep. screening environment focused.

WELLBEING

- GP services available online → less need to travel.
- Overall people are happier
- Good health service — no waiting lists
- Life is more enjoyable — less striving
- Generally better health TECHNOLOGIES.
- due to less pollution.
- more exercise swimming in river
- overall society is more equal.
- She visits her grandchildren who are mostly in Ireland; one is abroad — Maired can visit them sustainably because flights are sorted (fuel or other fair share)

? nostalgic — locally, conversing, multi-g... what lost...

3.2.2 Persona 'Jack', Bray, Co.Wicklow (a)

In 2026 Jack is 25 years old, a self-employed van driver with one child, Barry, aged 1. He is renting with his partner in a BER E home.

In 2050, Jack is 49 years old and his son Barry is 25 years old.

Jack is part of a strong community in Bray. He is now renting a BER B++ apartment with a nice view of the windmills. He has security of tenure and accessed retrofit supports to upgrade the fabric of his apartment. The apartment no longer has damp and is light and airy. Compact living is now desirable. There is a community garden on the roof of the apartment complex. The neighbourhood is safe with fewer cars. Bray seafront has increased biodiversity and there are allotments available for the community.

Jack developed a bad back from his van driving days but has immediate access to good healthcare now. His van is now gone. He now uses an electric cargo bike for delivery. For bigger deliveries, he has a share in an electric van. He works a 20 hour week, with access to a universal basic income and so has more time to engage in community life. Jack has lower bills because of income/reduced energy costs from solar generation on the apartment building.

Jack finds food more expensive than it used to be but he recognises it is closer to the true cost of food production as he knows the farmers supplying a lot of the food. Also, Jack is able to afford it now because of universal basic income and his other bills are low. He buys some food from cooperatives in bulk purchases. There is a community supported agriculture model. The local agriculture community has set up a subscription service for locals to supply their produce. He is able to enjoy organic food because the supply chain is better supported by government. Ireland is more self-sufficient in food in 2050 as farming has diversified a lot. A happier farming community produces more diversified food with much more horticulture than in 2026. The balance of trade in food is rebalanced compared to 2026.

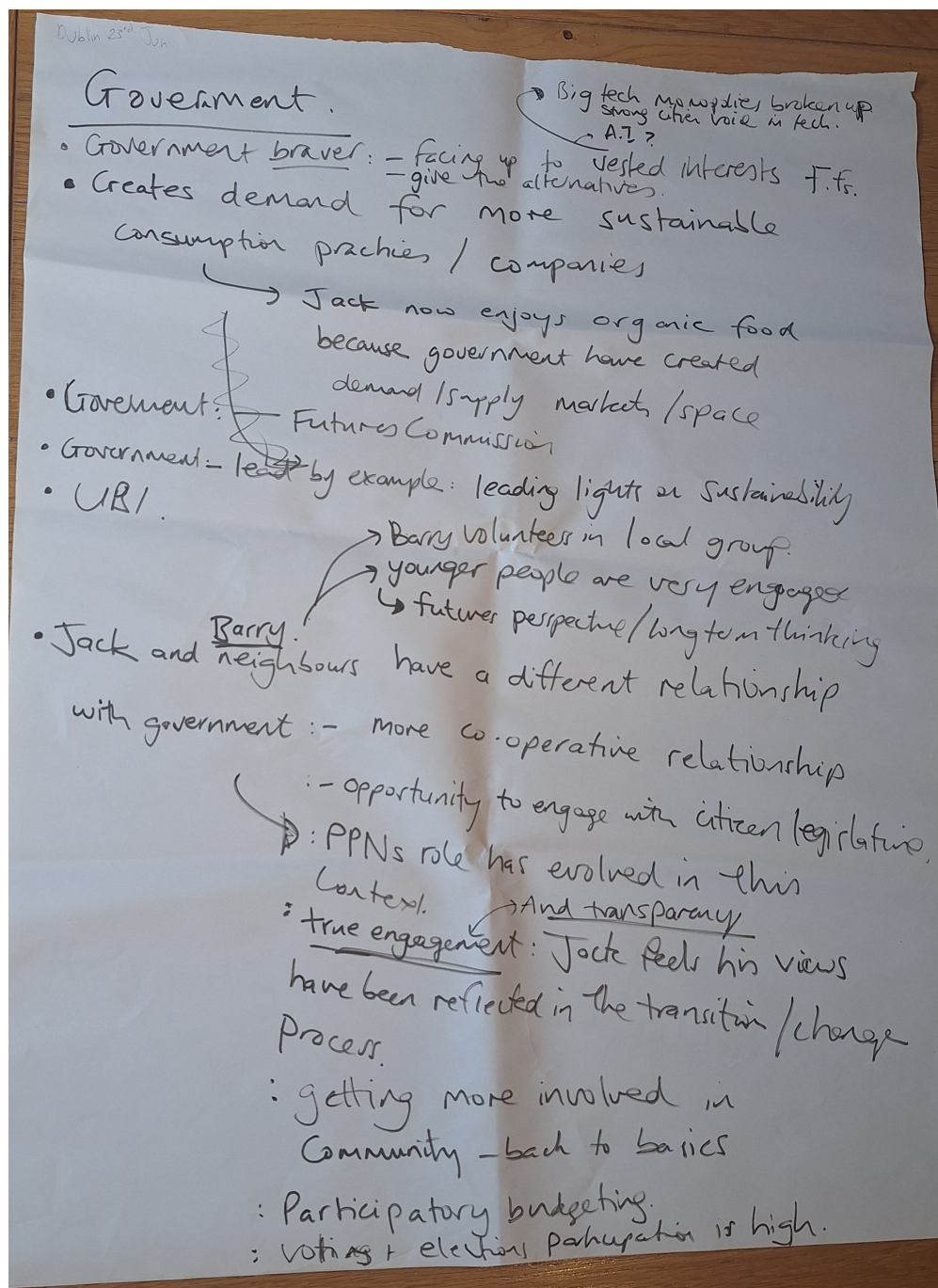
Jack's son Barry is on an exchange year in Chile. His exchange student from Chile is living close by to Jack and they meet often. Jack is able to go on holidays more often, normally around Ireland or Europe. Travel beyond Europe is rarer and much more expensive. Overall, Jack is spending less time driving, more time cooking and more time in nature and feels healthier for it.

Government is braver and has faced up to vested interests like fossil fuels. Government facilitates sustainable alternatives and creates demand for more sustainable consumption practices and production. There is now a Futures Commission and government is a leading light on sustainability. There is a strong futures perspective and long-term thinking. Younger people are very engaged in politics and government. Voting and election participation are high. Jack's son Barry volunteers in a local group.

Jack, Barry and their neighbours have a different relationship with government. It is more cooperative. There is more engagement and transparency. Jack feels his views have been reflected in the transition/change process. The public participation networks role has evolved in this context. There is an opportunity to engage with citizen legislation and participatory budgeting. People are getting more involved in their communities, 'back to basics.'

Jack feels happy to live in Ireland because when things are bad, people are taken care of – e.g. his father with Alzheimer's is in a good facility, well cared for. There is dignified healthcare. He has trust in government and systems. People have a shared understanding of the truth. There is good social cohesion. Jack has loads of friends of all ages/stages in his community including through his volunteering work. He feels healthier with better food, a better environment and he is getting more exercise.

Figure 5: Relationship with government in 2050 for persona 'Jack'



3.2.3 Persona 'Michael', Co. Offaly

In 2026 Michael is a 60 year old farmer aged 60; farmer, two grown kids (living in Galway and Dublin). He is a home owner with a BER rating of F.

For 2050, the group decided to consider another Michael who is a farmer and 60 years old in 2050.

Michael runs a mixed farming system with some animals, tillage and a circular farm economy with no imports of fertiliser or chemicals. He also employs agroforestry techniques and sees and supports more biodiversity on his farm. The family farm model is sustainable and represents an attractive livelihood and lifestyle. Because land speculation no longer exists, the land is worth less than it used to but that is not a concern. One of his children has expressed interest in taking over the farm in future years. So Michael is no longer worried about corporations coming in and taking over the farm. His income is secure and market based with returns from sale of produce and from nature and carbon credits. The farm is very active as Michael also hosts some education programmes on the farm. With all the activity going on, Michael is glad to be able to employ some people to help on the farm. It allows him time to look after himself physically and mentally.

Michael lives well. His house is energy and water independent. He has renewable energy and he collects rainwater. Getting to meet people is easier as there is a good local links bus service. Even if the bus is slow, people have more time so they don't mind. Michael meets with a lot of people each week. He is open to new relationships. He is a member of a local theatre group. Local democracy is stronger and Michael participates in it. The community is more diverse than it used to be but people are also more accepting. The community is vibrant and the local village has many active businesses and community groups. It is a social hub. Michael also meets people through apprenticeship and educational programmes on his farm. Michael is paying more taxes but he sees where it goes and there are more services, so he doesn't mind.

Figure 6: Life in 2050 for persona 'Michael'

RURAL Dublin June 23rd

Michael:
Aged 60
Farmer

- supplies to agri culture
- mixed farming system
- secure income / market based
- Nature + carbon credits

Energy independent house + water

collects rain water + manages water usage.

Family Farm model is sustainable

- ability for child to return

Good public transport - rural link bus

Community based shared living facility nearby

looking after himself - physically + nutritionally - positive mental health.

not just about work

active member of theatre group.

can employ people on the farm

more contact with people outside of Ireland - diverse + accepting community

good local democracy + participates

Social Hub.

RUNS educational programmes on farm with schools + research

Some animals, tillage, circular farm economy

No imports of fertiliser or chemicals

agro forestry.

less worry but the farm is less valuable property - which is irrelevant

sustainable continuous generations on the farm expected.

Opportunities for apprenticeships

more vibrant town centre

Local shops - energetic

Range of businesses + young people.

Open to Relationships 😊

more acceptance of slow brands that is sustainable.

paying more taxes but getting social services
Focus on well-being

3.2.4 Persona 'Jack', Bray, Co. Wicklow (b)

In 2026 Jack is 25 years old, a self employed van driver with one child, Barry, aged 1. He is renting with his partner in a BER E home.

For 2050, the group decided to transplant Jack's characteristics forward so that he is still 25 years old.

All homes in Bray now have solar and/or wind energy. Jack's home is electrified. He is still renting but it is a stable tenure with protections in place. Apartment buildings can have shared solar generation now. There is more state housing with updated rules. There is much less property owned by hedge funds or pension funds. There are no derelict properties in Bray with building use being managed for the town. So Bray town centre looks a bit different now. There are more nature based solutions preventing urban runoff. There are wild green verges and more urban trees to provide vital shading in summer and support biodiversity. There is less concrete around and homelessness is a thing of the past. The water quality around Bray is excellent due to an effective urban waste water treatment plant and the town has good flood defences in place. Water supplies are carefully managed and the community is reconnecting with nature. Weather these days is warmer, and there is more intense rainfall when it comes. The town has prepared itself for extreme events like storms and floods and extreme heat.

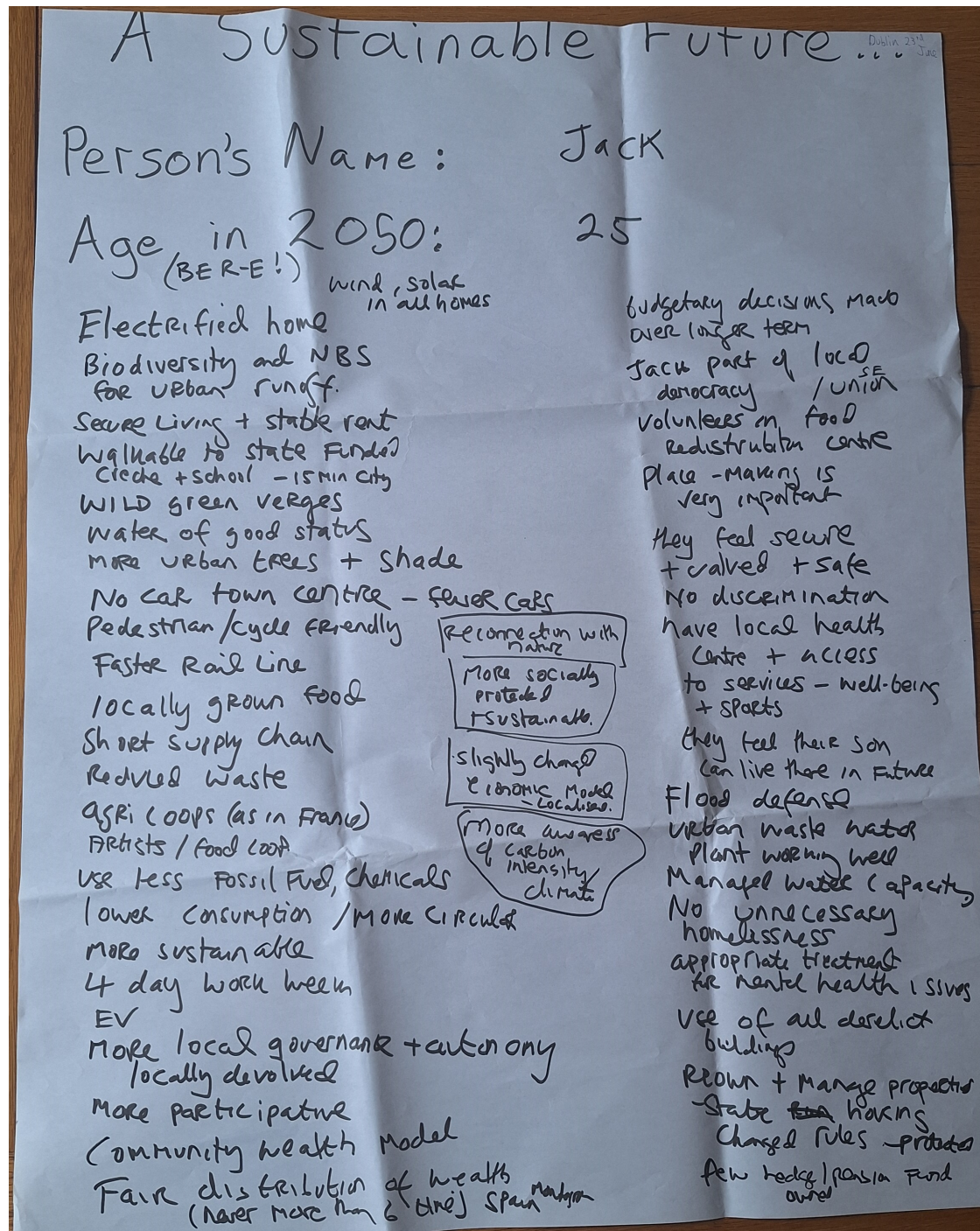
Bray follows the ideal of a 15 minute city with everything people could want close and easy to access. There is a better rail link with Dublin and a state funded creche and the school are a short walk away from Jack. He has access to health and sports facilities in his local area. Bray is more pedestrian and cycle friendly now so there are no cars in the town centre and fewer cars around Bray generally.

Locally grown food is available to buy in Bray. There are agricultural co-ops for food provision similar to earlier models in France and these encourage a circular economy and cooperation between food producers and artists. There are less fossil fuels and chemicals involved in the food production and supply chains are shorter. Overall chemical use day to day and in products is much reduced compared to 2026. People consume less and waste less. They are more conscious of carbon intensity and climate impacts.

Government is more local in 2050 and more participative. Power has been devolved locally. Budgetary decisions are made over the long term. A community wealth model is followed in Bray and there is an effort to have a fairer distribution of wealth. The economy is more localised. Jack participates in local democracy and also volunteers in the local food redistribution centre.

Jack thinks Bray is a great place to live because the value of 'place-making' has been recognised by government and the community for years now. He is happy for his son Barry to grow up there. His family feels safe and secure because they know that protections and support are available to them. There is better support for physical and mental health. Nobody will end up in jail due to health issues. Homelessness and drug addiction have been largely reduced. There is no discrimination. Jack is working a 4 day week and it is enough because life is more sustainable now.

Figure 7: Life in 2050 for persona 'Jack'



3.2.5 Persona 'Ana', Co. Westmeath

In 2026, Ana is aged 22 years old. She works in office administration on a short term contract. She lives with her parents in a BER D home and commutes over one hour to work.

In 2050, Ana is aged 46.

Ana lives in her own home now. She built a radical sustainable house on a small holding. The home is built with eco-architecture and biotecture techniques using reclaimed materials like old car tyres filled with rammed earth. Planning permission was straightforward. There are regulations now around certain materials ensuring a circular economy is normal practice. These materials are easy to access and affordable now and now fall under European standards. Her house is part of a clachán which is a small traditional cluster of rural housing which creates a lovely community. Her home is warm and comfortable and incorporates plants including green walls. She gets energy from her solar panels on the roof and some further solar panels in her fields which have the additional benefit of providing shade for sheep in the summer months. Ana's sustainable farm has been supported by an expanded ACRES scheme.

She is now married with young children. Still her house has only one car, an EV. Her kids participate in a cycle bus to school. There is public transport nearby and rural roads are safer for cycling now. Ana enjoys cycling her electric bike. Farmers have been incentivised to give space for safe bike routes. Even her local rural town has better train service now so the one car is not always being used. Life is a bit more affordable now as she has almost no energy bills. In addition to her own energy production, she has access to local energy sharing which has been greatly enabled by legislation.

Ana's local community is thriving. More government has been decentralised. Wealth is maintained within local communities and there is local decision making on how funds are used. More people are living in her rural area, including migrants. Fair representation is ensured in decision making. There are many social enterprises like local repair cafés and swap cafés. There is a community bureau and a local disaster response committee. This is linked to the tidy towns committee which has grown to take on new tasks. It plays a role in biodiversity, community education, and giving courses on new business models and sustainability. People are encouraged to be entrepreneurial and sustainable. People are more aware of climate change and its impacts. Climate change deniers no longer have a platform. Climate insurance is very common. More funding is available to support things like community energy as large companies are taxed more.

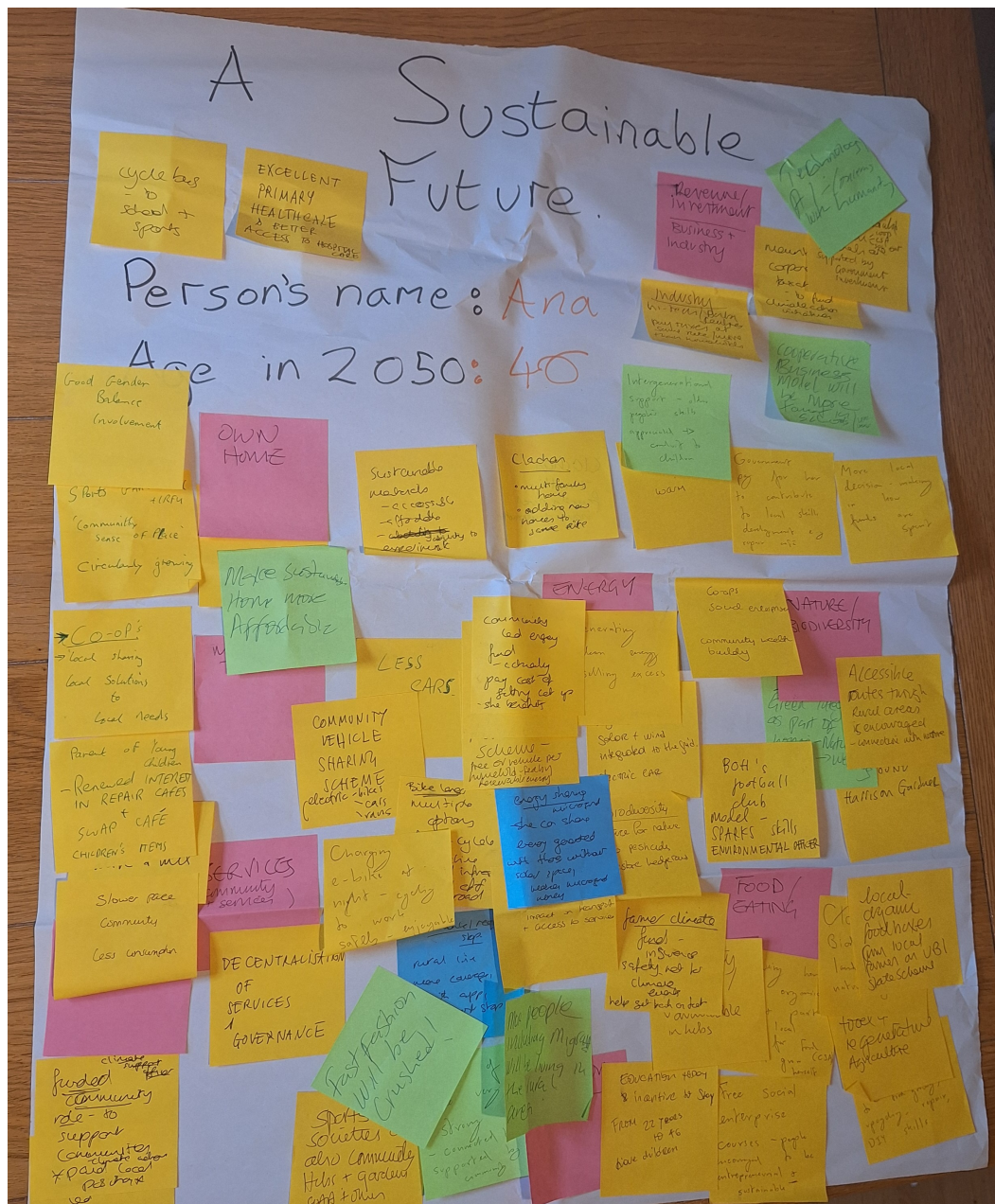
Fast fashion no longer exists. People are interested in materials that last longer. Textiles are from grown biological materials. Farmers receiving a universal basic income provide organic food boxes at a lower cost in a scheme supported by the state.

Ana has benefited, in her home and on her farm from local courses showing people how to be sustainable with free courses on food growing and basic diy skills. She grows a lot of food herself now but is also part of a community scheme to have access to purchase the food she can't grow herself. It all supports the circular economy. Students are encouraged to share the learning with their friends and neighbours. There is a strong community support element. There

is greater respect for biodiversity and pesticides are no longer used in the community or on her farm. Nature is being regenerated. People are living more in tune with the natural world.

Resilience is very important in Ana's life and in her community. Education is big part of that. Skills are passed between generations ensuring that skills and knowledge are not lost. There is greater intergenerational connection. People have a strong sense of belonging in their local area and the meitheal spirit is alive and well. Sports are very strong in Ana's community including GAA, football and rugby. Sports clubs practice the circular economy with sports equipment being shared, reused, repaired and passed on. Some sports clubs act as community hubs and support community gardens. Life is generally good. The four day work week is normal now and people have greater work life balance. There is a good healthcare system.

Figure 8: Life in 2050 for persona 'Ana'



3.2.6 Persona 'Jack', Bray, Co. Wicklow (c)

In 2026 Jack is 25 years old, a self-employed van driver with one child, Barry, aged 1. He is renting with his partner in a BER E home.

In 2050, Jack is 49 years old and his son Barry is 25 years old.

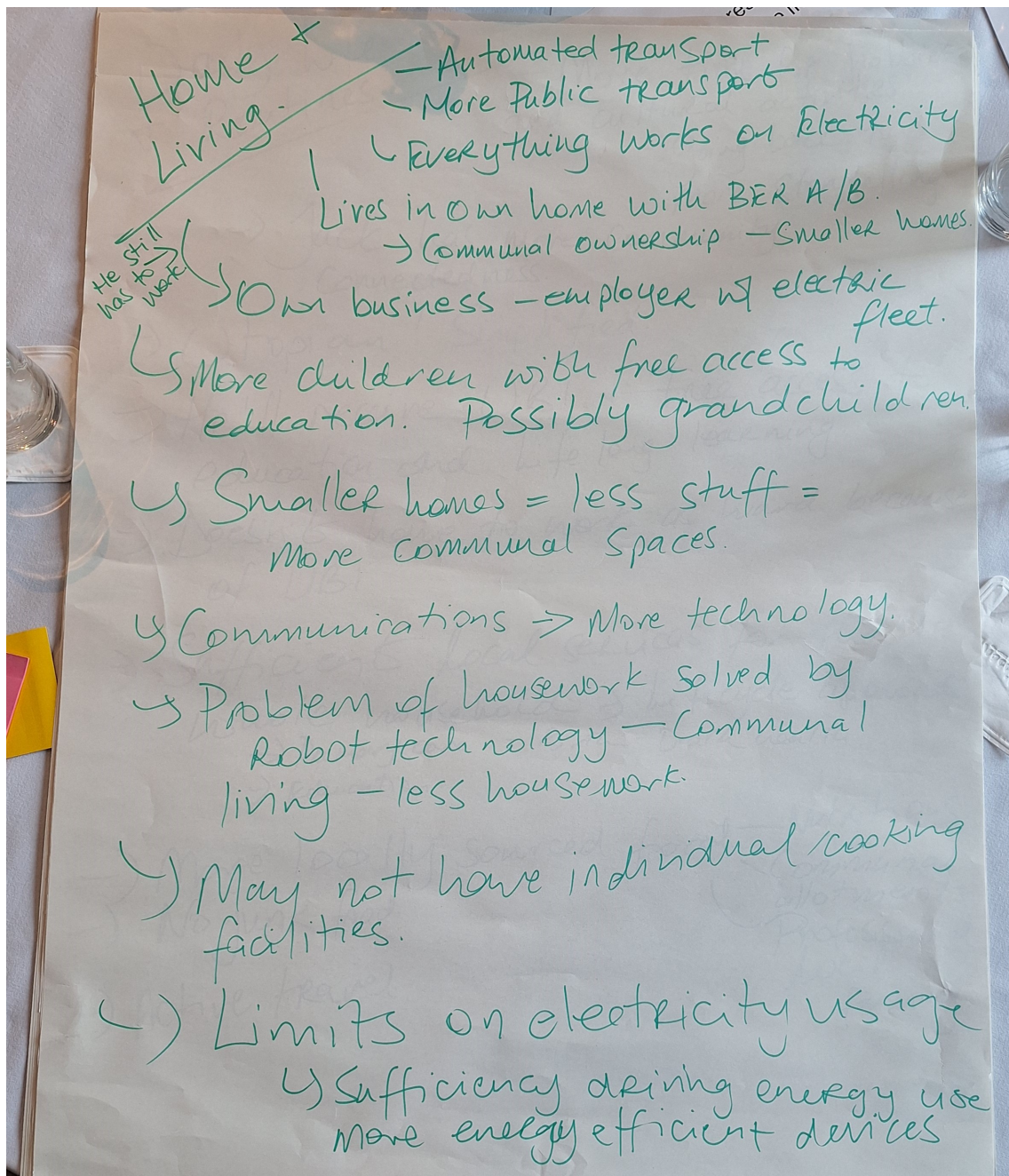
In some respects life in 2050 is very different for Jack and his community. Jack is delighted to already be a grandfather. Jack's home is small but everybody's homes are generally smaller because there are more community and communal resources. There's a fully fitted communal kitchen in Jack's locality if anyone is hosting a special event or even a dinner party. So his own kitchen is fairly basic, just the daily essentials. His house doesn't need so much storage space anymore because of the local library of things. Everything in the house works on electricity. He even has a cleaning robot that helps with the housework! There are limits on consumption of things like electricity but because of greater efficiencies, it doesn't feel restrictive.

Jack is still working with vans but now has a fleet of electric vans and employs people to drive. Even with his position, Jack receives the universal basic income. It means he doesn't have to work as hard and so has more time for hobbies and cultural activities like going back to storytelling. There are communal allotments in Bray now where Jack gets a lot of his food. Of course, there are still professional farmers in the locality. Active travel is broadly used. There is also more public and automated transport options.

Local government is more important now and politics has moved on from five year election cycles dictating planning and decision making. People are more educated on government and politics. There are more in person meetings on issues like citizens assemblies and more local democratic places. Jack has modelled public participation to his son Barry who is now active in youth leadership in the locality.

Jack's life is good now as he is healthy. He is eating more nutritious food and is less stressed because he has more time and no material worries. There is a great healthcare system available – more local healthcare provision and better access to mental health support and services. Jack enjoys the greater biodiversity and green space in his local area and listening to the birds sing.

Figure 9: Home and living in 2050 for persona 'Jack' (c)



3.3 Stories

Storytelling can help to communicate in an engaging and accessible way how a situation came to be, and in the context of sustainable futures how challenges were overcome to achieve sustainable outcomes. Stories might help reframe transition from a disruptive or disjointed change to a process of change. In the workshop, participants developed stories to describe how the personas from the visions of the future moved from their lives in 2026 to their sustainable futures in 2050. These stories can help uncover what elements, conditions and/or supports might assist people through the transition. Reflecting on the stories developed in this workshop will help shape NESC's advice to government on reinvigorating the climate and sustainability transition.

Across the two workshops, we had five breakout groups work on developing a story. Storytelling, especially from imagination can take time and due to time pressures and other specific circumstances, not all groups managed to develop a full story. By chance, this resulted in only having stories for male 'personas.' We reflect on this result in the next chapter. However, the lens of developing a story spurred interesting and valuable discussion in all the breakout groups.

Figure 10: Participants hear an introduction to storytelling by Dublin Storyslam



3.3.1 Jack's story (a/b)

Jack is a young guy in 2026. He's 25. He is a van driver, self-employed. He has one young child. So he's very family oriented. He's hard working. He doesn't want too much change – he's a young dad. Therefore he's tired, exhausted, stressed. He has rental precarity and he has job insecurity which is not making it better. However, being newly a parent means that he is making new connections with families in the area.

The international fuel crisis in 2026 has affected his ability as a van driver to work and he becomes unemployed. It is upsetting and stressful being unemployed without being able to provide for his young family. It is one of the ultimate challenges around. While it was extremely stressful, he had space and time to think about alternative business models and new ways of doing things. At the same time that free time has given him the opportunity to connect with his community and he's working on a community garden with a community energy group. The garden has become a central hub in this community where his children have also grown up. So the children grow up with this experience of being in touch with nature, being able to grow their own food, knowing where food comes from.

Through the community energy group he learns about the changes in regulatory control of electric vehicles and a national pilot scheme has come, in giving him access to electric vehicles. He pilots a cargo bike renewable energy delivery system. He works with his community garden, delivering food, and with his community energy groups to enable his new business model to emerge. By 2050 he's had three children and they're all part of this group, part of the community garden and the energy collective in the area. His value family values are strong. He's still hard working, but he's moved from a more individualist perspective to a more of a community perspective.

He's very socially embedded in his local community where he has friends, but he also has, due to a massive expansion in affordable or sustainable housing, access to secure rental, which has reduced the stress that he experienced in his 20s. Now that he's in his 50s, he is able to enjoy the time with his family, who themselves are now starting to have families again. He has a strong sense of place in the location.

3.3.2 Barry's story

Barry is Jack's son, and so he's about 26 years old in 2050 and has recently come home from Australia. He was there for two years when he got a phone call from his parents that changed his plans. His parents were talking about how sad it was that he was so far away and that Jack's dad, Barry's grandfather, was doing really bad with his Alzheimer's. Barry's parents had to spend a lot of time and energy helping him. Jack said to Barry 'look, it's OK, don't worry about us,' but Barry was really worried. At the same time, Barry was kind of sick of Australia. He'd been there for two years on a scheme where you can go and learn on the job with the solar industry in Australia. He worked on solar farms all around Australia. He'd learned a huge amount. He thought it's OK, maybe I'll just come home. So he kind of hung up the phone and thought that's it. Even though the programme was five years long, he came back a bit early and he was able to transfer his training credits back to Ireland and continue his apprenticeship there in Ireland.

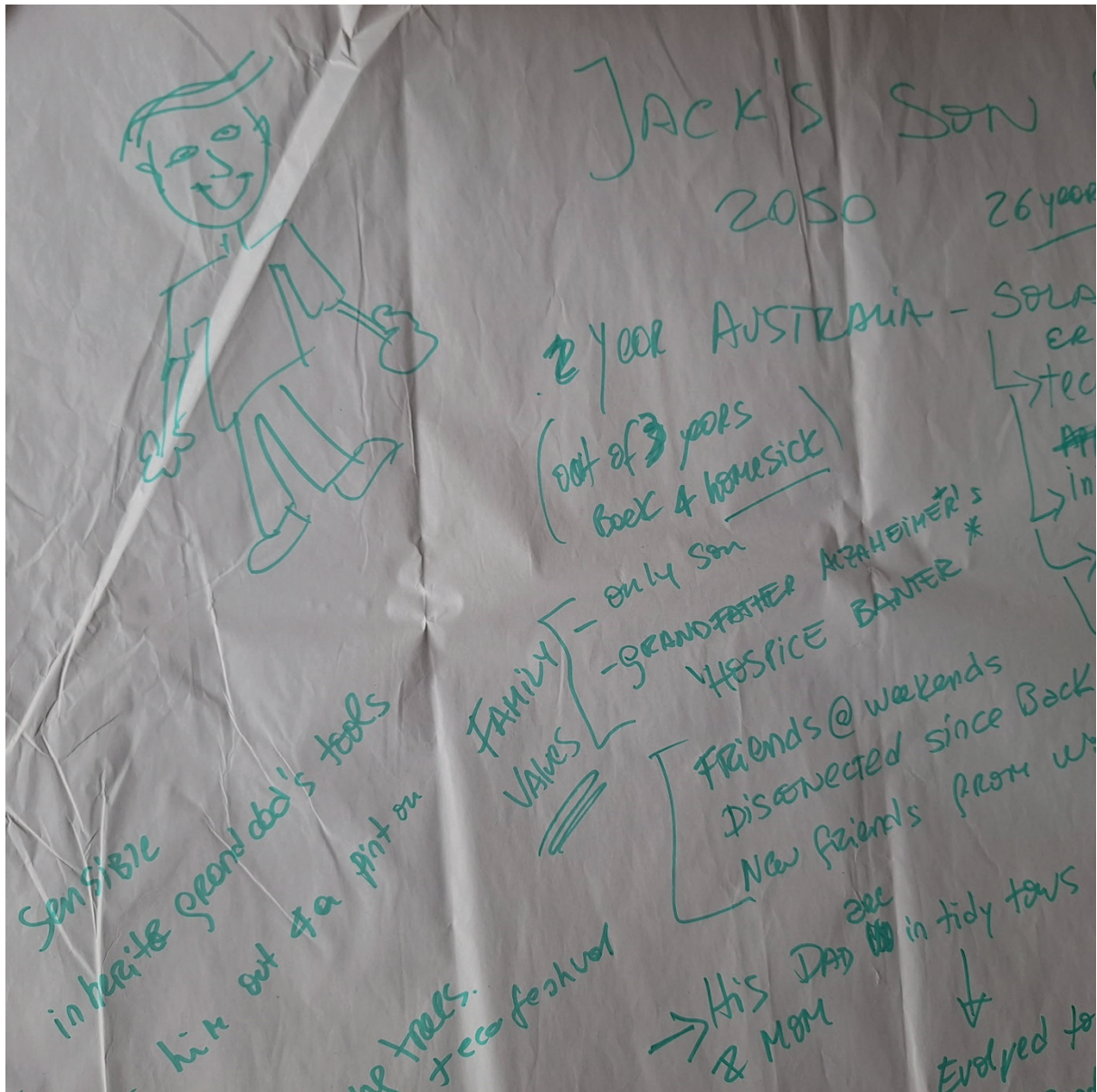
He flew home back and moved into the box room with his parents and thought this will be grand. On getting home, he discovered that Ireland has evolved and so he kept on with the solar transformation and the energy transformation. He was able to take what he learned in Australia and get a good job at home. He saved money and was able to help his dad Jack buy an electric van. He felt like he had more prospects.

However, on moving back to Ireland, he also realised a lot of his old friends had moved on. He starts spending more time with his granddad who has Alzheimer's. He takes him out of the nursing home on Sundays for a 'sneaky pint.' He hears his granddad's old stories and is loving reconnecting with him. He would have missed out on that in Australia. Coming back home from Australia, having grown up a bit, he wants to give back. He starts volunteering, planting native trees. He feels more connection to the land and to the Irish language as well. He decides to go on holiday in Ireland. He has his friends in the nursing home but he wants to get friends his own age again. He decides to do a working holiday, planting trees – it's like an eco-festival where you can volunteer and have loads of craic with people your own age. He meets a new girlfriend there, Caroline. This is a big change for him because he was a bit of a 'bit of a lad' when he moved to Australia but he has grown up a lot. He's ready to take life more seriously.

Barry is helping his mum and dad out in the local tidy towns committee. But summers are getting increasingly hot and Irish people are not used to it. But Barry learned a lot about how to cope with high temperatures in Australia. Barry and Caroline and some other volunteers set up a local cooling centre, the local pub, and bring the local nursing home residents there. Tidy towns over the years evolves into a crisis-ready group, being able to respond to local community needs like preventing older people from dying due to overexposure to heat and other crises that can happen.

Barry feels really like he's really managed to bring something back to his community and bringing his knowledge and sharing it but also learning from the older generations, from my friends and most importantly, really building friendships and have a bit of craic as well, which is what he really wanted when he came back.

Figure 11: Segment of storyboard for persona 'Barry'



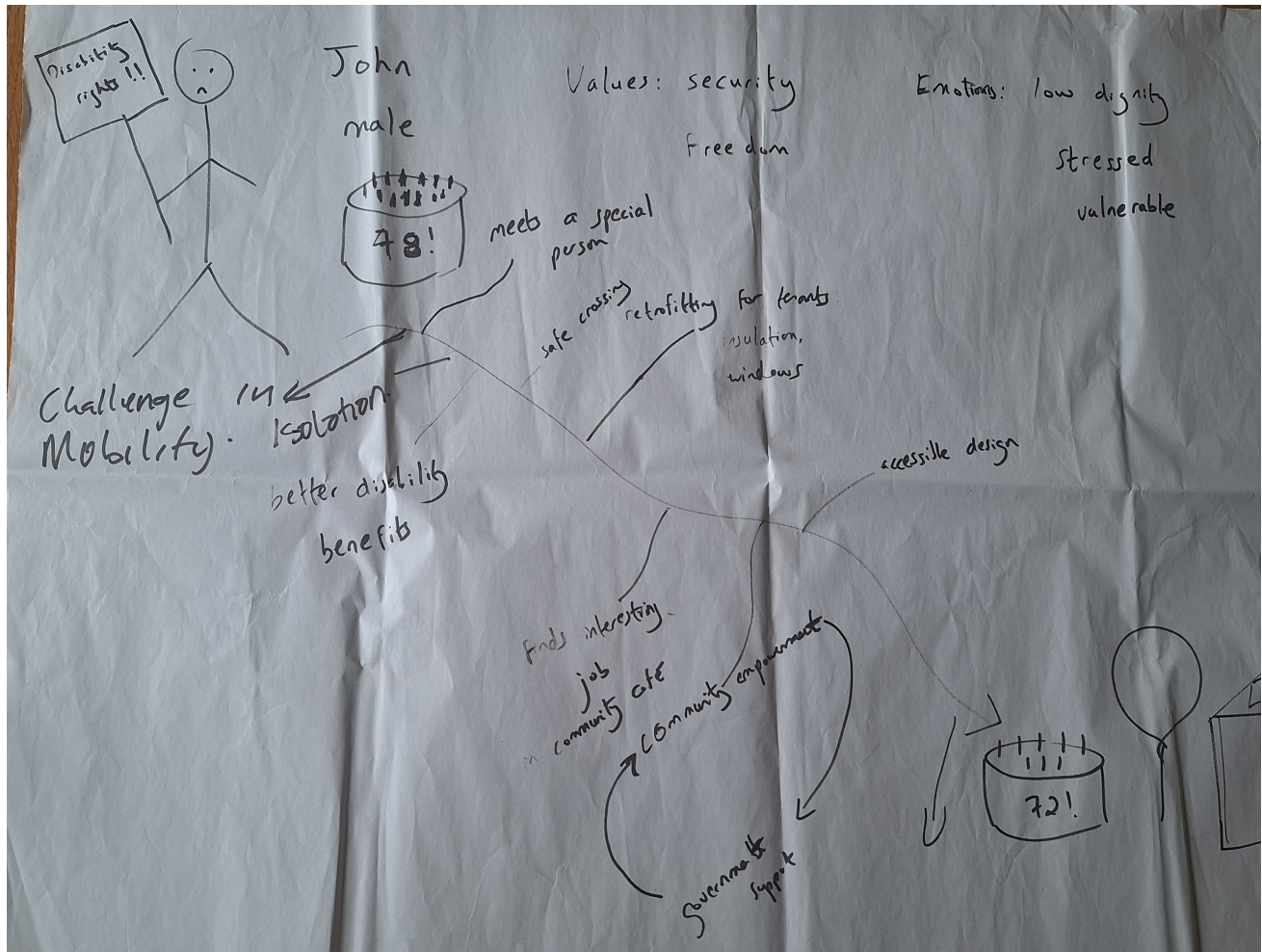
3.3.3 John's story

So John is a 48 year old man who has a mobility problem. He has some disability and at the beginning of our story in 2026, he's not the happiest person. He's all by himself in a rather chilly apartment with a not very high BER rating and he's very isolated and he can't even get across the street easily because there's no safe place to cross. He's feeling quite isolated, feeling quite stressed, vulnerable, and not feeling like he has a very dignified life. He would love to find ways to feel more secure and more free.

He does manage to get out sometimes. And one day he's out and about wandering and he starts getting into a chat with somebody in the park and they actually spark it off really well. Over time, they meet up more and eventually they decide they are made for each other. He is delighted to be in a relationship - they galvanise each other and give each other some strength and some momentum. They start to form a movement to advocate for disability rights, but within the ecological transition, because they both say, we all have to live on the planet. They wanted better living conditions but they also are aware about the environment as well and that you need to do things to help with the environmental challenge. They advocate and they form a community movements with other people. This empowers the community and they successfully pressure the government for more support. The support further strengthens the community and positive feedback loop happens where the support and community just get stronger and stronger. All kinds of interesting opportunities start popping up. A community café opens in the area and John gets the job in the community café. It's very empowering for him because he gets to meet lots of people. That's really stimulating and interesting.

The stronger community has much more say on the design of the streetscapes in the town and they demand accessible design. John becomes able to cross the road much more easily. There's also better retrofitting support for people who are in a rental situation. So John is able to get good insulation, proper windows, with no more draughts. So all of this means that by the time he hits 72 years old in 2050, he's a much happier, more stable person with lots of friends and with his partner, and then a really nice, comfortable flat. And he wakes up in the morning and he's all warm and comfortable and happy, and all those friends come to celebrate his 72nd birthday with a nice big cake and some balloons. And he's a much happier person than he was 26.

Figure 12: Storyboard for persona 'John'

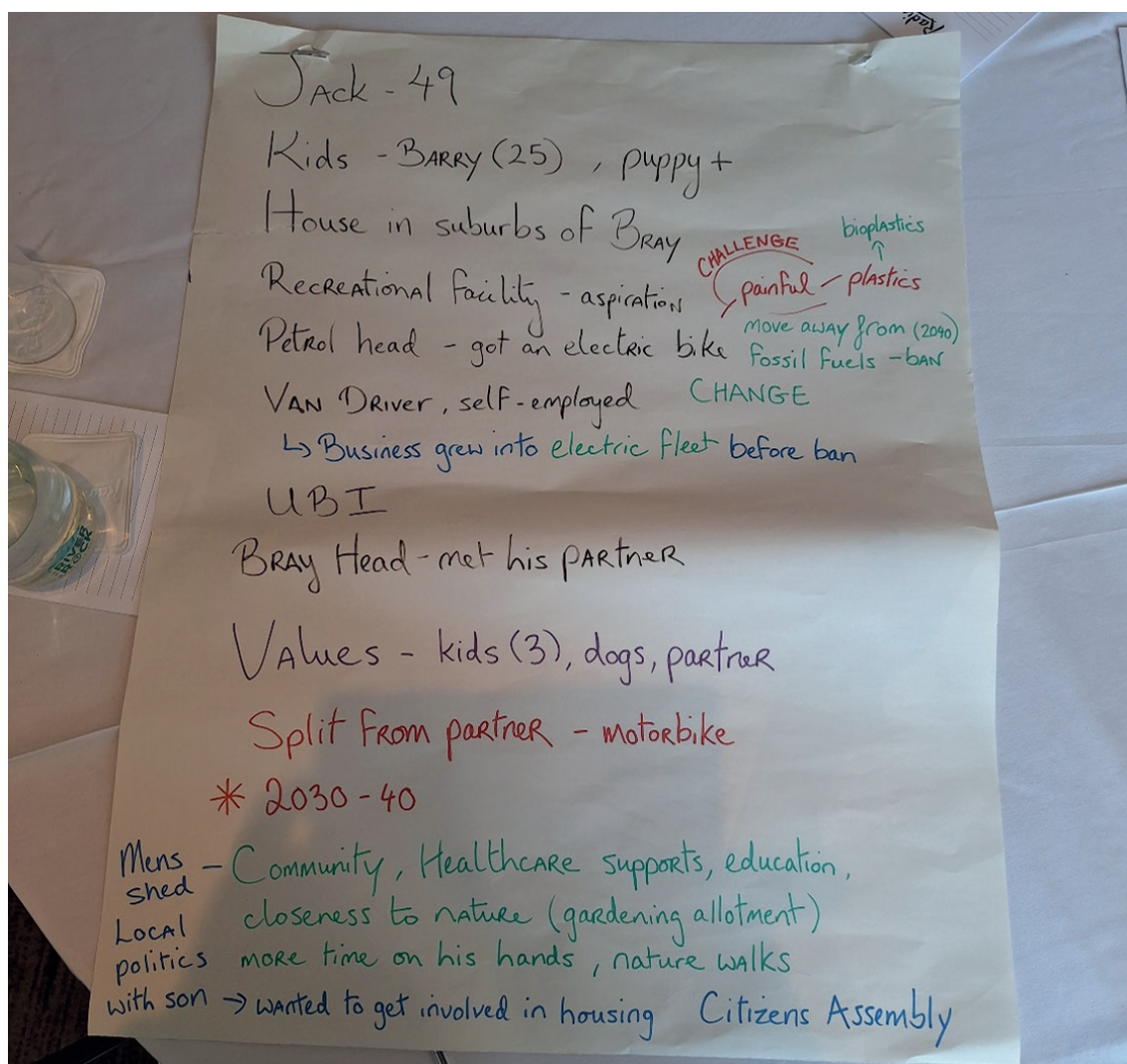


3.3.4 Jack's story (c)

Jack had once described himself as a lifelong 'petrol head' who had a strong interest in cars. He felt at a loss when petrol vehicles were phased out. It was really hard for him, but he gradually adapted. He invested in an electric van for his business and he ultimately found renewed purpose and success through this adaptation. He also maintained social connection through holding on to old cars and meeting people who shared that interest.

Jack had real affection for his dog, and as he grew older he found himself slowing down, spending more time gardening and reconnecting with nature.

Figure 13: Elements of a story for persona 'Jack'



3.3.5 Mairead's story

This breakout group did not complete a story. But valuable discussion was had by the participants some of whom had a long and storied experience in climate and environmental activism. The group discussed what could be the difference that leads to the necessary steps being taken for successful transition. Many ideas raised were discounted by different members of the group who raised their own negative experience trying similar things. Some felt that change would only happen when climate change got worse, that only a disaster could create the conditions for systems change. There was a sense that the conversation needed much more time to tease out the points raised. One person remarked that the most important thing about Mairead's story was that it needed to be authentic and real. So these challenges needed to be acknowledged and publicly shared as opposed to trying to ignore or downplay them.

The group suggested that change could be achieved by different environmental groups coming together at a national level to collectively take action and demand climate action from their leaders. There was also a suggestion, agreed among the participants, that the support for environmental groups needs to be commensurate with funding for others like Bord Bia and this would be essential to achieve the required change. There was also the comparison of the money now being invested in AI versus what is invested in climate action. It was remarked that when the banking system had to be saved, money was found but when it comes to climate, normal rules have to be followed.

Community gardens were discussed as an important ingredient of change. It was not a plan to feed the village but rather seen as a place and activity that creates community connection, connection to the land and the natural world. While the room was pessimistic on the big picture, everyone was very confident about steps they can take to look after their own community. Feedback from one participant in this group suggested that though they did not complete a story, the discussion was important to have.

Chapter 4: Reflections

The objective of the workshop was to engage with a diverse group of people and draw on creative processes to imagine a positive vision for the future and explore the story of how we get there. Through their generous contribution of time, participants articulated positive futures and explored the stories by which individual personas made the journey to 2050. This chapter includes reflections on the methodology and resulting themes from the workshop that will contribute to NESC's ongoing work on the climate and sustainability transition.

The results of this workshop are not statistically representative and indeed, the participants could be fairly described as self-selecting. Nevertheless, the results of the workshop and the discussions that occurred provide interesting insights and ideas and prompt areas for further exploration and/or development. A lot of exercises were fitted into each workshop and so, where participants gave their attention has some weight. In the sections that follow, we outline direct feedback received from participants, some notes on lessons learned regarding the employment of these workshop methods and finish with some final reflections on the results of the workshops.

Figure 14: Breakout group on vision



4.1 Reflections on the Workshop Process

4.1.1 Feedback from participants

In both workshops, at the end of the day participants were provided with a printed feedback sheet. The sheet presented participants with a list of statements and the opportunity to tick the box whether they strongly disagreed, disagreed, undecided or ambivalent, agreed or strongly agreed with a series of ten positively framed statements regarding the content and logistics of the workshops. In total, thirteen feedback sheets were received. All respondents were complementary on the logistics besides some comments on the high temperature on the day. All participants agreed or strongly agreed that the morning sessions were useful and they felt

able to contribute. Twelve out of thirteen agreed or strongly agreed that the afternoon session was useful and they felt able to contribute with one respondent being undecided or ambivalent on that matter. Eleven out of thirteen agreed or strongly agreed that they understood the purpose of the workshop, with two being ambivalent or undecided on the matter.

One respondent in each of the two workshops took the opportunity offered on the feedback sheet to add further comment. One said 'Overall a really enjoyable day. Positive networking but positive reflection and forward thinking.' The other said 'I had no idea how the workshop was planned. Better than academic discussion; very creative, inspirational.'

4.1.2 Lessons learned

Methodologically there were some small differences on the day in the Dublin and Athlone workshops that could have influenced respective outcomes. One of the workshops had a delayed start which compressed the time available for the icebreaker exercise leading to a less rich discussion at this point. Frustrations and despair with progress were not as deeply explored in the morning session for that workshop. This potentially impacted the story telling session where participants in one group found it hard to put aside negative experiences.

Separately, there was a difference in how the breakout groups were formed across the two workshops. Varying the breakout groups over the day in one workshop potentially led to greater comfort in the plenary setting and in committing to the imaginative exercises as all participants had had the opportunity to interact with each other. In the other workshop, sticking with the same breakout groups throughout the day allowed for very deep and meaningful conversations within those breakout groups but perhaps less comfort in developing something imaginative to bring back to the larger plenary setting.

The outcomes of the vision and story exercises skewed towards more focus on male characters despite male characters representing only four out of the nine adult characters offered in the persona sheet. An effort was made in the persona sheets to avoid clichés or stereotypes and also to present diverse options. However, it is possible that the breakout groups chose those characters, or even locations, they could most relate to. Jack from Bray was particularly popular! If repeating this exercise, further consideration would be required on how to encourage more diversity, or to simply restrict choices of different breakout groups to achieve greater diversity in the output.

4.2 Reflections to Shape NESC's Work

These workshops were undertaken as part of a NESC project on climate action and our sustainable future. The project explores the state of play in Ireland's transformation and what additional efforts are needed for success. As part of that project, the lack of a 'positive narrative' or tangible vision for transition was identified as a potential systemic barrier to transformation. The Sustainable Futures workshops sought diverse perspectives on what a desirable sustainable future could look like and explored whether different types of content or material, specifically storytelling, could potentially address the systemic barrier. Reflections on the workshop outcomes will inform NESC's ongoing work to develop advice to government on the climate action and a sustainable future.

It is worth noting some common themes and issues that emerged across the various visions and stories explored in the workshops.

With a simple prompt to consider how government would change in 2050, all the visions and stories included more devolved decision making or an increased role for local government with more genuine participation by communities in budgeting and decision making. More local democracy and better participation in local decision making feature in all visions.

The scenario sheet was 365 words long with nutrition and land-use receiving one mention each and no mention of food or gardens. Nevertheless five of the six visions describe communal gardens, access to allotments, education on growing your own food and/or access to more locally produced food. The other vision was centred around a farmer employing agroforestry techniques and mixing tillage and livestock. These aren't a vision of self sufficiency in food but rather a vision for food systems that support greater community and land connection along with better physical and mental health. Food systems, particularly regarding the consumer experience, have not received a great amount of attention in Ireland's climate action efforts. Community gardens are not mentioned in the 2025 Climate Action Plan, though community gardens could be to food and agriculture what community renewables are to energy i.e. increasing local resilience, enhanced understanding and a gateway to greater public action on climate.

The scenario sheet only mentioned international communities, yet each vision and scenario had a strong role for communities and community based organisations like Tidy Towns, energy communities and sports clubs like GAA. These were linked to human connection, learning and cooperation opportunities and improved mental health and resilience. Community was seen as a powerful support for weathering transition. Many of the Athlone workshop participants saw this as nostalgic, reaching back to an idyllic past. However the sense in the Dublin workshop was that this was something new bringing together old knowledge and skills with new energy. It was a way to bring a much desired renewed intergenerational connection.

A lot of climate efforts in government are focused on technology change. For the workshop participants, technology is definitely part of the picture but their focus was much more on the human experience and continued human relationships as we progress through transition. Measures currently seen as radical, like a four day work week, or universal basic income were seen as key attractions of a future sustainable life. Participants saw them as enablers for more sustainable lifestyles, giving people more time to spend on their community, relationships and sustainability measures and reducing the compulsion to consume.

Most visions mentioned some limits on or generally lowered consumption. A couple of visions suggested lower consumption of materialistic goods. One vision mentioned limits on electricity consumption even though due to efficiencies it was not felt as onerous. The elimination of fast fashion also appeared in another vision. Limitations on international flights with a kind of rationed or cap and trade regulated access was mentioned in one vision. Smaller homes coupled with greater provision of communal and community resources was part of another vision.

Preparedness for extreme events and resilience to climate change featured in many stories. But the emphasis and starting point was protection of people, not assets or systems.

As their story became richer and more personal, many participants appeared increasingly invested in the character and their journey. Rather than imagining change as something abstract or policy driven, behavioural change became grounded in everyday experiences, relationships and gradual adaptation. One participant reflected that they had entered the workshop believing that something catastrophic would have to happen before society would change its behaviour. By the end of the storytelling process, they shared that nurturing the character's story had made that change feel much more possible. Another participant commented that engaging in both the visioning and storytelling exercises had felt as though 'the shackles had been taken off.' They spoke about enjoying the opportunity to be creative and curious, and how much they 'enjoyed thinking like that.' It seems that anchoring the transition to a character, or to a lived human experience might make the transition more accessible and less daunting. This is worth exploring further.

As stated at the outset, the workshops were not designed to be statistically representative, and the outputs should be read as a structured account of perspectives generated through a common participatory process in two different settings. Nonetheless, the consistency of several themes across both locations, and of the contrasts where they arise, provide useful direction for the development of policy thinking on the climate transition and sustainability. The insights and priorities captured here will feed into the National Economic and Social Council's forthcoming work on climate change and the Council's own recommendations.

Appendix 1: Workshop Agenda

10:30am	Tea/Coffee/registration	
10:45am	Welcome & Introduction to NESC work, purpose of the day	Gemma O'Reilly, NESC
10:55am	Icebreaker	Niamh Garvey, NESC
11:20am	Introducing Systems Thinking and the Morning Breakout Group Task	Gemma O'Reilly, NESC
11:35am	Breakout Group Exercise: Envisioning a Sustainable Future	
12:30pm	Report back & discuss	Gemma O'Reilly, NESC
1:00pm	Lunch	
2pm	Story telling as a tool for transformation Plenary and breakout group work	Sarah Lynch, Dublin Storyslam
3.40pm	Sharing transition stories Plenary session	Sarah Lynch, Dublin Storyslam
4.00pm	Reflections on shared stories	Group Discussion Led by Gemma O'Reilly, NESC
4:30pm	Close	

Appendix 2: The Scenario

Congratulations! It's 2050 and Ireland has achieved a transition to sustainability, living within planetary boundaries while supporting the social foundation for people living within Ireland. In fact the world as a whole has managed to limit climate change to under two degrees Celsius and Ireland was a leading light in this. Ireland's success in transition is known globally for achieving its energy and land-use transformation not only through a just transition to net zero but also enhancing wellbeing while supporting a thriving natural world. Deprivation is a thing of the past in Ireland while the industry and entrepreneurial sectors are in good health. Social cohesion is high. Ireland is well respected globally and has many friends across all countries (including the most vulnerable) due to the technical assistance it provides abroad on sustainability and moreover due to Ireland's commitment to not export environmental problems but rather address them at home and through ethical trade with countries and communities internationally.

Group Work: Pick one character from the persona sheet. What does life look like for this person in 2050?

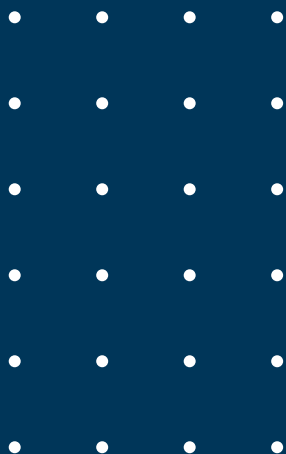
- Think about **where they live and their home**. What is the evidence of a new sustainable world around them? What looks different? What looks the same? What do they have more of? What do they have less of? Does anything look or feel different?
- Think about their **daily life**; their education or work, their nutrition, their utility bills, how do they get around or access the services they need? What do they do more of in 2050, what do they do less of?
- Think about the **government**. Has the role of government changed? What does the government do more of, what does government do less of? What is this person's influence on government and how does that happen?
- Think about their **wellbeing**. Life's ups and downs still happen in a sustainable world but this person is happy to live where they are in Ireland – think about why?

Pick a **rapporteur**. **Report back to plenary** on what are the important changes this person experiences/sees/feels in 2050? Are there any important things that stay the same? Remember that successful transition is usually about both addition and subtraction.

Appendix 3: Pick One or Two Personas, Imagine Their Life in 2050

The information below relates to the people as they are today. **They will be 24 years older in 2050.** The children mentioned in the sheet below are also options to choose for the exercise. See the Scenario Sheet for context on life in 2050.

	Young	Middle aged	Older
Urban - City	Dublin City Centre Seena 26yo - IT sector Arrived in Ireland 3 years ago No kids Renting, apt BER C	Dublin Cabra John 48 yo - disability payment No kids Renting, BER D	Dublin Liberties Micheal 56 yo - widower, social welfare Social housing/rental, BER F
Semi-urban /town	Bray Jack 25yo – Van driver, self employed One kid (Barry 1yo) Renting with partner BER E	Ashbourne Sarah 38yo - carpenter 2 kids - Marc (4yo) - Rosa (2yo) Home-owner, BER D	Gorey Mary 69yo: retired factory worker 3 kids grown – 2 outside ireland, other at home. Home-owner, BER B.
Rural	Rural, County Westmeath Ana 22yo - office admin, short term contract No kids Live with parents BER D, commutes 1hr+	Rural, County Kildare Mairead 44yo - teacher 3 kids - Cillian 10yo - Sinead 14yo - Molly 6yo Home-owner, BER B	Rural, County Offaly Michael 60yo - Farmer 2 kids grown, living and working in Galway city and Dublin. Home-owner, BER F



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