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Administrative frictions in Ireland's Shared Island Sports Club EV Charging Scheme

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Summary

The Government of Ireland has established targets to facilitate the country's low-carbon transition, including targets to increase use of electric vehicles (EVs), as part of their Climate Action Plans[i]. In February 2023, Ireland's Department of Transport launched the Shared Island Sports Club EV Charging Scheme, offering funding for the installation of EV chargers at sports clubs across the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. However, barriers to participation can arise through frictions present in the application process, which can make a sports club's application experience burdensome. The purpose of this policy brief is to measure the type and size of these frictions in the Sports Club EV Charging Scheme and provide recommendations to reduce those frictions. An audit of the scheme led to the development of a journey map, illustrating the typical steps a sports club takes to apply for funding for EV charger installation. A qualitative analysis of stakeholder interviews informed the evaluation and the quantification of administrative frictions present in each step of the journey. The audit identified excessive waiting periods, poor communication, and uncertainty in the scheme's progress as key administrative barriers in the scheme. To address these obstacles, this brief recommends the improvement of communication through monthly correspondence to sports clubs, the establishment of clear timelines, and the provision of information for the remaining phases of the scheme.

Context

As part of its national Climate Action Plan, the Government of Ireland aims for 30% of vehicle sales to be electric vehicles (EVs) by 2030[i]. However, the number of new EV vehicle registrations decreased in 2024 to 14% of all new registered vehicles in Ireland down from 18.7% in 2023[ii]. To help achieve its EV target, the Government invested €100m for EV charging infrastructure from 2022 to 2025 through the National Development Plan[iii]. This includes the Sports Club EV Charging Scheme launched in February 2023, which provides charging infrastructure at sports club facilities in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland as part of the Government's Shared Island initiative[iv].

Figure 1 summarises the roles and responsibilities of relevant actors in the Shared Island Sports Club EV Charging Scheme, as of December 2024. The scheme is led by the Government of Ireland's Zero Emission Vehicles Ireland (ZEVI) initiative, but administered by the Government's agency responsible for government and EU funding, Pobal, who manages the application process and communicates with sports club applicants to the scheme. In addition to designing the scheme, ZEVI is responsible for the appointment of the charge point operators for the sports clubs[v]. The National Governing Bodies of Sports forms the initial relationship between Pobal and sports clubs by contacting their member clubs to gauge interest in the scheme and conduct a preliminary screening to ensure minimum requirements are met.

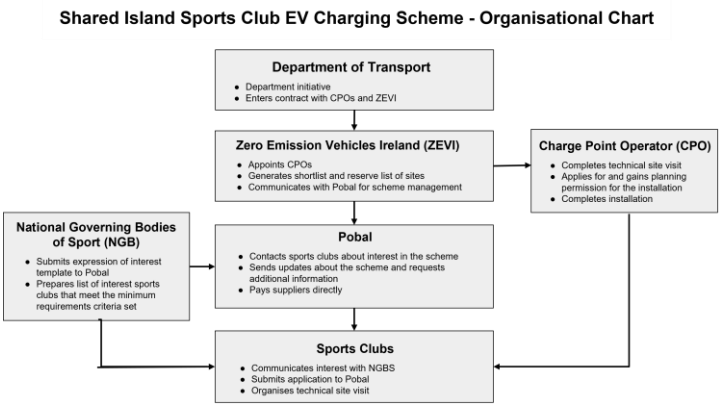

Figure 1. Summary of the roles and responsibilities of relevant actors in the Shared Island Sports Club EV Charging Scheme.

Figure 2 presents a timeline describing how the scheme progressed until December 2024. Beginning in February 2023, the National Governing Bodies of Sport contacted member sports clubs to gauge interest and eligibility for the scheme. Interested sports clubs then submitted the 'minimum requirements checklist' to the application portal in April 2023, which included photographs of their site, confirmation of the club's Meter Point Reference Number, and a signed "Letter of Undertaking," confirming that the club understands and will abide by the Terms and Conditions of the scheme. Technical site visits by charge point operators took place in May-June 2024 to assess site feasibility, resulting in 227 sports clubs across the island of Ireland deemed eligible for charge point installation[vi]. Thus far, applicants for the scheme have been in the application process for nearly two years waiting to receive grants to install EV chargers at their sports club. However, the scheme has yet to deliver any charge point installations. The initial expected completion date of the scheme was October 2024, but this has since been moved to the end of 2025, at which point all sports club EV charge point systems were expected to be installed and grant payments completed[vii].

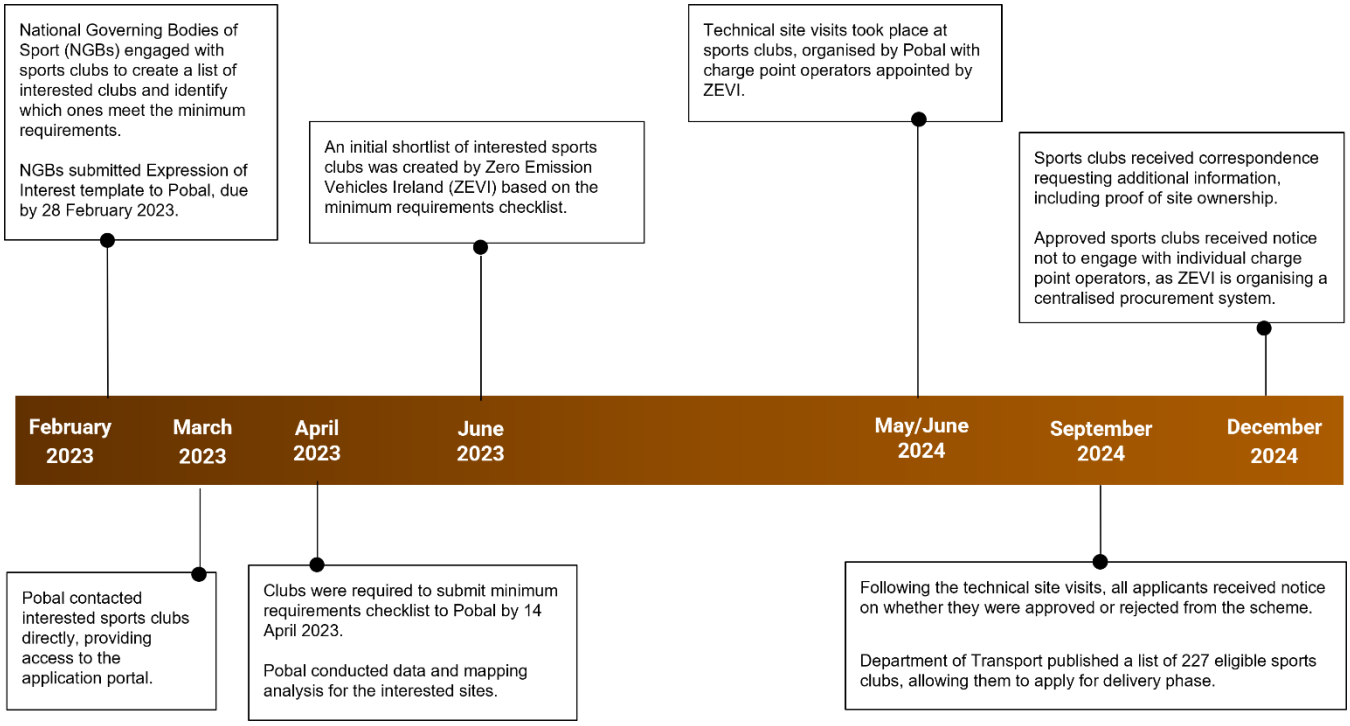

Figure 2. Timeline of the application process for the Shared Island Sports Club EV Charging Scheme since it was launched in February 2023, based on analysis from December 2024

Assessing frictions in environmental policy implementation

Policymakers worldwide are increasingly paying attention to administrative frictions and making friction reduction a central aspect of efforts to improve citizen services[viii]. Administrative frictions can hinder access to necessary information (resulting in search costs), complicate the evaluation of a decision's benefits and costs (evaluation costs), make it more difficult to implement decisions (implementation costs), and lead to frustration, stress, and other negative feelings (psychological costs). These frictions can also cause delays through waiting times and other inefficiencies (time costs)[ix]. Assessments of administrative frictions, or "Sludge Audits", can help identify and gauge their baseline presence within a policy or scheme[x]. Sludge, in this context, refers to unnecessary or unjustified frictions that make it harder for people to do what they want to do[xi]. One way to support future engagement in climate action schemes is to reduce any administrative frictions present in the application process, thus making an applicant's experience of policy implementation less onerous, resulting in higher participation. Similar audits by the authors have been conducted on Ireland's afforestation scheme[xii] and solar for schools programme[xiii] as the first sludge audits within a national climate action plan.

Methodology

The methodology followed a three phase sludge audit procedure to measure the presence of administrative frictions in the Shared Island Sports Club EV Charging Scheme. In phase one, a behavioural journey map was used to demonstrate the typical steps a sports club undertakes as part of the scheme. Since the scheme had not reached the delivery phase at the time of this assessment and the remaining phases of the scheme may be revised before implementation, this audit only evaluated the first half of the user journey until the point in which the sports club applicant receives a decision about their application. In phase two of the methodology, an evaluation of the extent of administrative frictions in each step of the journey generated a fine-grained assessment of administrative frictions in the process, using assessment criteria developed by the New South Wales Behavioural Insights Unit[xiv]. The third phase consisted of an assessment of the process through qualitative analysis. All three phases were informed by semi-structured interviews with eight stakeholders, six of which were sports clubs who qualified for the scheme, following a semi-systematic interview guide[xv].

Analysis

Six stages to install EV chargers at sports club facilities

In creating the journey map for sports clubs navigating the Shared Island Sports Club EV Charging Scheme, six distinct stages were identified, each comprising one to four steps as presented in **Figure 3**. At the time of publication, applications were stalled for over three months at the end of Stage 3 (Application Decision), as applicants waited for the delivery phase of the EV charge point installation process. For this reason, stages four (Installation) through six (Maintenance) are labelled as 'proposed' stages in **Figure 3** and may be subject to revision as the scheme progresses. Within the sludge audit, each step within the first three stages of the scheme was assigned a "sludge score" to quantify their administrative frictions.

Figure 3 presents stages and steps in orange where administrative frictions were perceived as very difficult. Of the twelve steps within stages 1-3, only two steps received a sludge score of 3 or higher (difficult to very difficult). Specifically, within Stage 3 (Application Decision), steps 3.3 (technical site visit) and 3.4 (receive application decision) received higher sludge scores, due to extensive, ongoing waiting periods. Step 3.3 (technical site visit) received a sludge score of 3, due to the excessive time costs and implementation costs associated with completing the step. Meanwhile, step 3.4 (receive application decision) earned a sludge score of 4. This step also struggles with long waiting periods and poor communication, which leads to the sports club experiencing time costs and psychological costs.

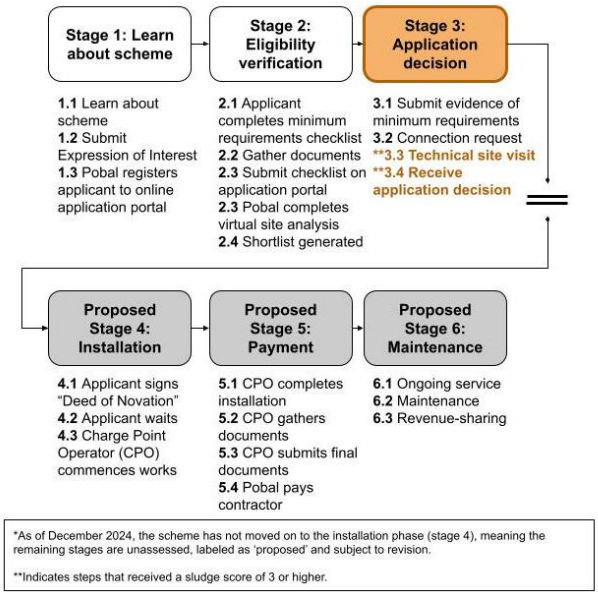

Figure 3. Journey map of applicants participating in Ireland's Shared Island Sports Club EV Charging Point Scheme, as of December 2024, with stages and steps in orange indicating areas where administrative frictions were perceived as very difficult.

Stages in grey were not assessed in this sludge audit because the scheme had only reached stage 3 by the end of the audit period (December 2024).

Proposed stages 4, 5 and 6 may be revised as the scheme progresses.

Low friction due to strong outreach activities and clear application requirements

The scheme's approach of using the National Governing Bodies of Sport as the initial point of contact with the sports clubs reduced search costs and proved to be innovative and efficient. Sports club applicants generally felt the application was easy to complete through the 'minimum requirements checklist' format described above. In addition, stakeholders felt that the documentation requested in Pobal's checklist was clearly elaborated and not time-consuming to source.

Excessive wait times demotivate sports club volunteers

At the time of this analysis, applicants for the scheme had been in the application process for nearly two years awaiting grants to install EV chargers at their sports club, with no completion date in sight. Many of these clubs operate mainly through volunteers, who engage with this scheme as part of their club's voluntary sustainability strategies. Engagement with the EV charging scheme and delays within the scheme put additional pressure on already resource constrained organisations and could undermine future participation in EV charge point grant programmes and other shared island initiatives.

Additional requests for information reduce engagement

At the end of 2024, sports clubs were contacted to provide additional site details, including proof of ownership, before installations can commence. These additional requests require involvement of a solicitor and cost around €1,000, which led to at least one applicant in this audit withdrawing from the scheme. That applicant expressed frustration and confusion over the need for solicitor engagement when their club has never needed this in other grant schemes run by Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) or the Sports Capital and Equipment Programme. Such emerging requests, requiring new and costly information, can have a negative impact on applicant engagement and retention.

Lack of proactive communication causes frustration

Applicants to the scheme revealed that a lack of proactive communication from ZEVI and Pobal was a significant source of frustration, with many months passing without correspondence on progress with their applications or the scheme in general. However, a few applicants felt that Pobal communicated as often as possible, though progress at institutional levels continued to lag. Applicants generally indicated Pobal was responsive when sports club members contacted them with an inquiry, even when that inquiry could not be answered by Pobal due to uncertainties in the scheme.

Uncertainty in the scheme creates reputational risk

This audit revealed that uncertainty regarding charger installation was a principal source of friction for sports clubs participating in the scheme. Sports club representatives were unsure whether the scheme will move forward or if it will still follow the initial scheme design as outlined in **Figure 3**. As the scheme continues to stall, it is perceived as disorganised and poorly designed by stakeholders. This presents a reputational risk, not only to the Shared Island Sports Club EV Charging Scheme, but to other government sports club and climate action schemes. Furthermore, stakeholders indicated that uncertainties about charge point operator procurement and geographical spread are causing delays in charger installation, with charge point operators concerned about potential financial losses for chargers installed in more rural areas.

Image source: Wikimedia commons

Policy Recommendations

1. Establish and communicate timelines for the remaining phases of the scheme

Establishment of timelines, clearly communicated to sports clubs, would reduce administrative friction. An example of establishment and communication of such timelines can be seen in the recent Farmer's Charter, in which the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine committed to six-to-nine-month timelines for all forestry licence decisions[xvi].

2. Provide information on implementation of remaining phases of the scheme

Communicating the implementation plans for remaining phases of the scheme as a journey map, similar to **Figure 3**, could reduce administrative friction for applicants, especially as they decide whether to continue with the scheme.

3. Provide regular communications from scheme administrators to applicants

Interviews revealed that communication from scheme managers requires improvement, particularly with respect to the timeliness of communications. Monthly email updates on the scheme's progress (even in the instance of no progress) from Pobal or ZEVI to participating sports clubs would reduce the frictions experienced by applicants. Similar schemes rely on partnerships with state bodies experienced in communicating and working with applicants.

A successful example can be seen in the Department of Education's Solar for Schools programme and their collaboration with the SEAI to provide access to their expertise and resources [xiii]. ZEVI currently collaborates with the SEAI to operate the Electric Vehicle Home Charger Grant scheme and the Electric Vehicle Apartment Charger Grant scheme, offering funding to install residential EV chargers, so precedent has been established for a similar collaboration in the Shared Island Sports Club EV Charging Scheme.

4. Further evaluation of the Shared Island Sports Club EV Charging Scheme

This audit identified issues in the application process and communication within the Shared Island Sports Club EV Charging Scheme as key administrative frictions to applicant sports clubs. Of most concern was the apprehension stakeholders expressed over the remaining stages of the scheme, which are perceived as technically challenging for both applicants and the scheme administrators, specifically in relation to organising the charge point operator contracts, completing installation of the chargers, and resolving long-term maintenance arrangements. Stakeholders indicated that the remaining stages of the scheme may be redesigned to address these challenges. We recommend that any redesign also considers the financial burdens for sports club applicants, adopting set timelines for charger installations, and providing regular communication of scheme progress to applicants.

Conclusion

This brief presents one of the first "sludge" audits aimed at identifying administrative frictions that hinder progress toward climate action targets. Although the assessment revealed that initial steps in the Shared Island Sports Club EV Charging Scheme contain low or very low friction, the audit highlighted prolonged waiting periods, inadequate communication, and uncertainty as significant administrative challenges in the scheme.

As volunteers, citizens, and sports clubs demonstrate commitment and passion for climate action initiatives, it is critical that schemes are designed to minimise friction and maximise engagement in the clean energy transition. One benefit of this scheme being in its early stages is the opportunity to learn from the successes of other schemes in reducing administrative frictions, for example in addressing timelines in the Farmer's charter or communication in SEAI's collaboration with the Department of Education for the Solar for Schools scheme.

In spite of problems with the scheme, there are also opportunities to learn from its administration. For example, the scheme demonstrates that collaboration between state bodies and organisations, such as the National Governing Body of Sport, can improve efficiency within a scheme and could be applied to other programmes to maximise efficiency and engagement. The audit undertaken in this study could also be applied to other climate action schemes to identify process improvements that ease participation and enhance the likelihood of meeting climate goals.

Acknowledgements: This work is part of the research project assessing "Administrative Burdens as Barriers to Implementation of Ireland's Climate Action Plan" (ABICAP), (EPA project 2022-CE-1149) funded under the EPA Research Programme 2021-2030. The EPA Research Programme is a Government of Ireland initiative funded by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications. The authors acknowledge the input of the members of the project steering committee for this brief, especially Desmond O'Mahony and Anne Mason. We are also grateful to the New South Wales Government Behavioural Insights Unit, who provided access to their Sludge Finder Too. Ethics approval for this research was confirmed by UCD's Office of Research Ethics on September 7, 2023 (Reference: LS-LR-23-208-Lades).

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