



# Assessing Administrative Burdens as Barriers to Implementation of Ireland’s Climate Action Plan

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## What did the research aim to address?

This research assessed how administrative burdens<sup>1</sup> act as barriers to implementation of climate action plans. While effective policy design receives significant attention, less is known about hidden implementation obstacles such as unclear guidance, complex paperwork and delays. These burdens can discourage participation, particularly among resource-constrained groups. The project is relevant to policymakers, public service administrators and civil society groups seeking to improve policy uptake, equity and climate action delivery. It addresses a key knowledge gap by identifying where administrative burdens occur and how they affect behaviour and access. Using an innovative mixed-methods approach, the project combined behavioural science with environmental policy to screen climate actions, audit three priority schemes, gather stakeholder insights and test behavioural impacts through surveys and experiments. It is one of the first studies globally to apply these tools to environmental policy implementation.

## What did the research find?

Administrative burdens were most pronounced at key implementation stages of climate schemes, where they delayed progress and discouraged participation. Three of Ireland’s climate action schemes were analysed in depth: the Afforestation Scheme 2023–2027, the Solar for Schools Programme and the Shared Island Sports Club EV Charging Scheme. Burdens included long delays, unclear timelines and overly complex processes, which were especially onerous for volunteers, landowners and schools with limited capacity. A

nationally representative survey and behavioural experiment showed that complex documents and poorly designed systems reduced comprehension and engagement, particularly for those with lower digital and administrative literacy levels. Stakeholder interviews highlighted systemic barriers, including excessive paperwork, poor communication and limited staffing. These findings fill a gap in climate policy research by showing how behavioural and administrative design affects implementation. The project produced three policy briefs and a stakeholder insights paper, and applied a novel “sludge audit”<sup>2</sup> method adapted for environmental policy, offering the first practical evidence to guide administrative burden reduction in Irish climate delivery..

## How can the research findings be used?

The findings offer a practical evidence base for reducing administrative burdens in climate policy, improving accessibility, equity and scheme uptake. We demonstrated how government departments and agencies can apply the “sludge audit” method to assess and streamline processes. The research also recommends clearer communication with applicants and targeted process improvements to reduce delays and confusion. These insights could inform future revisions of Ireland’s Climate Action Plan. More broadly, the findings are particularly relevant to policymakers designing schemes, public servants overseeing delivery and researchers evaluating programme performance. Ultimately, the research supports more user-centred policy design to help Ireland achieve its climate targets more effectively.

1 Administrative burdens, also known as “administrative frictions” in the academic literature, are onerous personal experiences of policy implementation, such as complex application forms, unclear guidance, long waiting periods or excessive effort required to learn about a programme. In the context of the climate and environment, administrative burdens can deter environmental scheme participation, slow progress towards environmental targets and impact resource-constrained groups that already suffer disproportionately in terms of environmental degradation. Interest in administrative burdens is increasing worldwide as governments and international organisations aim to understand how burden reduction initiatives can improve processes.

2 In parallel to research on administrative burdens, research on behavioural public policy has begun investigating “sludge”, defined as “unnecessary frictions that make it harder for people to do what they want”. Sludge is broader than administrative burdens, as it occurs in both public and private sectors (e.g. hard-to-cancel subscription plans rely on sludge to retain customers) and is closely linked to “nudging” and behavioural economic insights that humans are different from the perfectly rational agents that exist only in economics textbooks. Thus, small and supposedly irrelevant factors, such as administrative burdens, can have large behavioural effects. Rather than nudging people towards more desirable or sustainable choices, sludge can be detrimental to people’s preferences or best interests.

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