

Electric Vehicle Summit 2019



Niall Hogan, head of ESB ecars; Richard Bruton, Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, and Sarah Murphy, managing director, Business Post Events



Frans-Anton Vermast, strategy adviser and International Smart City Ambassador, Amsterdam Smart City, addresses the Summit
Pictures: Maura Hickey

We are reaching a tipping point

Electric vehicles are now a viable mode of transport for individuals, yet the real challenge is convincing them to make the leap, writes **Quinton O'Reilly**

The progress of electric vehicles (EVs) means they are a viable mode of transport for the public, yet the real work is more than just a straight swap from combustion to electric.

At the Electric Vehicle Summit in Croke Park, attendees heard about the many different areas that need to be addressed like charging spaces, infrastructure and policies.

There were also mixed feelings among car manufacturers about whether the figure of 950,000 EVs on Irish roads by 2030 could be achieved. While many felt that such a figure was completely unrealistic – at current rates, it would require only EVs to be sold between now and 2030, a jump from the 8,000 initially expected by 2020 – there was room for optimism as many of the concerns around EVs such as range, variety of cars and charge times no longer apply.

Despite these advancements, the big challenge is convincing the public that the world is ready for EVs – something that's easier said than done.

Joachim Brandt, head of electric and autonomous vehicles at Gernserv Limited, said that while there's growing awareness among the public of electric vehicles and the benefits they bring, the leap from knowing about them to buying one is significant.

"From talking to consumers, there's more awareness to get away from fossil cars, but the second sentence they say is, 'I don't think it works for me right now'," he said. "The second thing is we have to realise the car manufacturers have to do a transition from petrol or diesel to electric, so the supply chain is a big [issue]. It's not a case of creating gigafactories, they have to mine for the raw materials needed and create a supply chain . . . that takes a long time and you're looking at a timeframe of ten years for that."

One big way to convince people to buy an EV – something that was echoed by many of the speakers at the summit – was how people's

perceptions change when they drive one.

It's why initiatives like 24-hour test drives are going to play a role in educating the public, giving them a glimpse into what electric cars can really do and busting myths like range anxiety.

"People can read everything that they can, but until they physically drive the car, they won't truly get the EV experience," said Lynne Aherne, sales manager for Renault Ireland. "Anyone you talk to once they've driven an EV, has a completely different perception of it."

"Once they make it back around to the school and to the dealership 24 hours later and there's only a small amount gone on the dial, it goes a long way to getting rid of that range anxiety, but until they drive it, they're just not going to see the benefits."

Yet it is something of a chicken-and-egg situation: individuals are concerned that there aren't enough charging points in cities and the countryside and so are reluctant to purchase an EV. If there aren't enough EVs, then there'll be a reluctance to set up more charging points.

While the number of EVs in Ireland is still small – there are about 12,000 electric vehicles and plug-in hybrids on Irish roads – the ESB hopes to shift the tide by rolling out a €20 million investment programme to meet the growing demand for on-street charging facilities.

That investment means people will have to pay to use its charging network, something that prompted an unusual response from EV owners.

"It's really interesting that EV owners' response to the fact that ESB [announced the new charge] has been very supportive," said environmental scientist Dr Cara Augustenborg. "I can't think of any other service in Ireland that people have gotten for free and they're welcoming paying for it – which just goes to show how bad the infrastructure is."

Addressing this concern, the head of ESB ecars, Niall Hogan, mentioned that while



Jonathan McCrea, TV and radio broadcaster and founder of Whipsmart Media; Eamon Ryan, leader of the Green Party; Alan Murphy, team leader, Smart Dublin; Dr Cara Augustenborg, Irish-American environmental scientist, climate change lecturer, writer and activist; and Simon Acton, chair, Irish EV Owners Association



Nikolas Soulopoulos, senior analyst, Advanced Transport, BloombergNEF; Tim Smedley, sustainability journalist and author of 'Cleaning the Air'; and Thorsten Sobe, Head of eMobility, SHARE NOW



Aidan McClean, chief executive, UFODRIVE, Joachim Brandt, head of electric and autonomous vehicles, Gernserv Limited; Jonathan McCrea, TV and radio broadcaster and founder of Whipsmart Media; and Mike Keane, general manager, Electrifi



An ESB charge point for electric vehicles



André Caldeira Ribeiro, commercial director, Efacec Electric Mobility

it was not meeting the needs of EV owners fully, it was taking the necessary steps to meet demands.

One action is replacing many of the older chargers that have been around for almost ten years, having replaced 30 in the past fortnight and plans to replace another

40 by Christmas. "That [update] will make a big difference," he said. "That part of the network is still free to use so we're not asking customers to pay for that until the quality of the network is such that we're happy to stand over it."

Hogan said that there would

be a charge for those who continue using a charging point after their car has been fully charged. However, it would not be a revenue generator, but a way to ensure availability of charge points by encouraging drivers to move on – they already receive alerts through an app telling them that charging

is complete.

A common and unavoidable theme of the day concerned the climate crisis and the role EVs can play in alleviating it.

While the clear message was that EVs are a piece of the puzzle and not a silver bullet, the advancements they can

make can have an impact on other areas of society.

There was broad agreement that EVs, alongside other initiatives and policies, could help go a long way towards addressing pollution and other environmental problems.

"Are electric vehicles the answer to climate change?"

They are not the answer, but part of the answer," said Hogan.

"We have a plan supported by government, we think it will make a difference to customers, and we hope . . . it will support and encourage demand for EVs."

With the different car manufacturers agreeing that infrastructure and long-term planning are the key elements to making EVs commonplace, those responsible would do well to look towards Amsterdam for inspiration.

Talking about the steps and missteps Amsterdam took in becoming a true smart city, Frans-Anton Vermast, strategy adviser and international smart city ambassador at Amsterdam Smart City, said how the core of any strategy should always be the people living in the region.

"It's important that in every smart city, you realise that the citizen is the customer," he said. "The city is not your customer, so you have to make residents central in everything you do."