

# SERVE Social Case Study for Retrofitters/Contractors

Case Study No.3

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Tipperary Energy Agency

Fiona Cloherty



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## **Case study basic information:**

Name of contractor/company:

The subject of the third case study is BER Assessor Donal Cleary.

Address/location:

His company's name is Ollyville Ltd, based in Borrisokane in North Tipperary.

Year of starting/founding:

Donal has been involved with the SERVE project for the entire span of the initiative. His company was founded eight years ago (2003). At present he is the sole employee.

Type of services offered:

Donal describes the services offered as Energy Assessment, Architectural services, Site Management; Surveying and Setting-out.

Market coverage:

Donal rates his market coverage as regional in that his work takes him to Counties Limerick, Offally, Clare and Tipperary. Currently however Donal's work base is primarily in Tipperary and Limerick.

Being a BER Assessor Donal would not have worked as joint contractor on any SERVE projects as his is an independent profession. A large part of his work included liaising with contractors, North Tipperary County Council and the Tipperary Energy Agency.

Works implemented so far in households:

Pre and post retrofit/upgrade BER Assessments.

## **Level of engagement with the SERVE project:**

In his work with the SERVE project he would have preformed sixty ‘pre’ and 43 ‘post’ retrofit BER Assessments. He notes that not all houses that had ‘pre’ Assessments necessarily had ‘post’ Assessments. This difference is accounted for by prospective clients choosing not to continue with upgrades.

Although Ollyville may be considered one of the smaller firms associated with the SERVE project Donal maintains that:

*‘For the past couple of years it has directly and indirectly accounted for up to 40% of his business.’*

Donal also maintains that the level of unforeseen but requisite involvement with clients, over and above simply performing the assessments kept him:

*‘Involved directly with clients and potential clients and made me more aware of client’s difficulties with energy upgrades.’*

## **Opinion on the benefits of SERVE:**

Impact on reduction of energy consumption:

Given that customers had to undertake a range of both mandatory and additional retrofit measures Donal estimates that realistically the reduction in energy consumption may be as much as 30%, but this would vary depending on house type:

*‘.....Obviously it depends on the house type, but on the whole about 30%’*

Help to local economy/creation of new employment:

Donal’s opinion is that new companies may have formed as a result of SERVE, but only indirectly. It is more likely that pre-existing companies took on extra staff. However he does note that the market is now very competitive.

*‘...Any existing companies took-on more people....it’s been getting more competitive the whole time.’*

Environmental protection:

The fact that many people replaced highly inefficient boilers, as well as implementing cleaner technologies, such as wood burning stoves, has to have had positive environmental consequences in terms of emissions alone, according to Donal. When asked to speculate whether environmental concerns ranked highly with SERVE customers he concluded that they lagged far behind financial concerns.

Other benefits:

Because SERVE both demanded and enabled a comprehensive, high spec retrofit Donal feels that a very tangible benefit for the customers has been the increased level of comfort they now have in their homes.

*‘Another thing that needs to be focused on, aside from the financial, is comfort in your own home. That you’re sitting by the fire not sitting on top of it.’*

The level of auditing of works carried out, prior to signing-off, brought educational gains for all involved in terms of increased quality control. Donal appreciated the practical approach to problem solving and the fact that the auditor's had first hand practical knowledge of the types of problems that can crop up. The rapport between the contractors, assessors, the TEA and North Tipperary County Council that typified this working model, was commended.

*'It (auditing) keeps everything tidy.....it's handled as a check.....the people we were dealing with in TEA..... it was a practical approach, and once you have that any of us can handle it.....they knew what they were talking about.....'*

### **Opinion on issues/problems with SERVE:**

Access to information for consumers (for example, regarding companies performing retrofitting) and/or contractors:

Donal accepts that the information prospective clients would need is there and accessible. However he claims the list itself has drawbacks in that it is very extensive offputting and baffling for customers. He also maintains that culturally Irish people 'do things by word of mouth' and that because of this SERVE clients asked him to recommend contractors to them, rather than choosing from an extensive list.

Adequate amount of grants/subsidies to motivate homeowners:

Donal thinks that without the combination of both the SERVE and SEAI grants the adequacy of the financial package for clients could be termed 'borderline' at best, especially in light of the amount of measures required and the up-front financial outlay.

Any technical problems (unforeseen):

The only technical problems Donal encountered were in relation to houses that had had some upgrades done in the previous decade or so (such as dry-lining). These upgrades were not up to current standards and to get those people through ‘the system’ was more difficult. It also increased their long term spending on their house.

*‘The people who had nothing done with their house –it suited them best.’*

Other issues:

As well as being a benefit (because measures could be chosen to suit the particular house) the number of measures required in SERVE was also a drawback. Some people found the amount and type of works required off-putting, especially the heating controls. Donal estimates that in his experience 15-20% of people who disengaged from SERVE did so because of the heating controls/plumbing element of the package.

Donal priced his services quite keenly to get work through SERVE. However the scope of the work evolved and broadened to a point where the price did not always cover the time he invested in explaining both the SERVE scheme paperwork and the measures/technologies involved. Even though people attended public meetings where everything was outlined, and received information packs, because Donal was their first port of call as a BER Assessor, he would in a lot of cases have to go through the measures and the paperwork with the homeowners. He maintains that if he had not ‘handheld’ 50% of (his) potential SERVE customers through the paperwork, they would have opted-out.

*‘You were often seen as a representative from the Council and from the TEA, even though you weren’t,..... and spending a few hours explaining that (the scheme) and you were almost having to project-manage for them as well in a lot of cases.....’*

Added to this is Donal's impression that people don't value the BER as anything other than a certificate that enables them to draw down the grant. It had no technical relevance for them other than this.

*'.....50% of them (customers) at least, are not concerned by what grade their house received just so long as they get an assessment that gets them across the line for this (grant).'*

### **Opinion of homeowner's knowledge of Renewable Energy (RE) and Energy Efficiency (EE) technologies:**

Opinion on a scale of 1 (worst) to 10 (best).

Donal rates homeowner knowledge of both RE/EE technologies at 5. The level of knowledge about regulation specification insulation for attics and walls is still pretty poor.

*'There's still a bit of a problem getting people to understand the technical side of things.....what they think is good (insulation), isn't really good.'*

He maintains that renewables are irrelevant and out of reach for the majority of people because of the expense. People should understand and implement comprehensive house insulation first and then be approached about/engage with renewable. He goes on to say that the main motivator for uptake of these technologies is financial rather than concern for the environmental or sustainability. He highlighted an educational/awareness raising need to this end. He expands on this by saying people tend to shy-away from renewables like solar, wind and wood pellet boilers.

Opinion on whether lack of homeowner knowledge is an issue/problem for increased utilisation of RES/EE technologies in Ireland:



Not only is lack of homeowner knowledge a barrier to increased utilisation of RE/EE technologies in Ireland Donal has noticed it is responsible for a growing trend where people use inappropriate technologies/measures that may be futile in the attempt to make a home warmer and cut fuel bills.

To illustrate this point he explains that he recently visited a house where the homeowner had gone to the expense of getting a solar water heating system and external insulation (without SERVE grant assistance). At the beginning of his assessment he went to the attic to find there was no insulation there whatsoever. He also found that the homeowner had no idea of the significance of attic insulation.

This highlights a chasm in homeowner's knowledge of the most basic/effective (and least expensive) measures to take, whatever their motivation. It may also show the importance of getting independent advice before dealing with contractors and the advantage of the prefetrofit BER Assessment required in the SERVE initiative.

*'...You've got a long way to go before you can think about renewables. You want to get your house wrapped up first and get it right.'*

#### Other issues:

Donal estimates that 50% of people who have had heating controls installed through SERVE are not using them to their full potential to gain maximum fuel efficiency. He admits that as with mobile phones and computers, there will always be those who do not, nor ever will, utilise the device to its maximum. Although they understand the thing in principle they either cannot or will not come to grips with the heating consul. In some instances the complexity of heating controls, perceived or otherwise, deterred people from opting for that measure even if it was appropriate for their dwelling.

*'.....when you say "upstairs and downstairs separate, hot water separate", they go along with it but the amount of people who can use the programmer properly after- I'd say it's less than 50%.'*

Donal also feels that post retrofit ventilation is an area that needs addressing as there appears to be a grey area in the implementation of relevant legislation and regulations.

## **Opinion of the future of RES/EE in the residential sector in Ireland:**

### General opinion:

Donal feels that current building regulations should take care of current and future builds in respect of EE and RE. The area of refurbishment is one where Donal recognises a need to educate both builders and DIY enthusiasts.

*‘There are a lot of people who don’t realise how far regulations have come, how far standards have come.’*

Education for homeowners is a strategy Donal offers for the benefit of the EE and RE sector. To educate people on the basics (EE), let them feel the benefits of comfort and smaller bills and then promote renewables.

### Identified main barriers:

Donal identifies the main barrier as being financial. Even with the SEAI grants that are available, Donal maintains that there are a lot of people who cannot afford basic insulation measures for their houses.

### Identified main drivers:

Donal cites the desire for a warmer home (in light of the previous two winters in Ireland); the availability of grant for insulation and upgrades, and the increasing cost of oil as the principal drivers for the uptake of these technologies.

*'Financial and comfort as well.....the comfort factor is huge.'*

Opinion on what should be done immediately/ in the near future to facilitate increased RE/EE application:

Affordability is a major issue for those considering using these technologies. Donal highlights a section of the population who may not be able to afford the entire cost of the works, but who can afford the difference between the overall cost of the works and the grant they will receive on completion of works.

For example external insulation costs €6000, the grant assistance is €4000 and if the household can gather €2000 it appears that the work is 'do-able'. However, contractors insist on being paid upfront and the grant cheque arrives some weeks after completion. This means that even though the overall sum is available (albeit fragmented), the option still remains beyond the reach of many.

To counter this Donal wonders whether there might be some means of moving forward the grant payment, or paying it directly to the contractor, so it can be coupled with the homeowner's to finance the work at the beginning. He does admit that regulation of quality with such an arrangement would be difficult but claims the industry itself (contractors) is trying to tackle the issue through private contracts with customers.

*'.....The contractors won't do the work without the money being paid because they're afraid the grant won't come through.....if they (government) had a system to pay out the grant before the work is done, or some kind of (payment) guarantee was in place that the contractor was definitely going to get that (payment).....'*

Other comments:

Donal again stressed the need for education to increase the awareness of the benefits of upgrading houses.

*‘There are people who can afford it but can’t get their heads around seeing that the initial outlay will have a payback in X amount of time.’*

### **Overall satisfaction with the SERVE project:**

Do you think SERVE had a measurable positive impact

1. For contractor personally:

See below.

2. For the RE/EE contractors in general:

Donal thinks personally, and for contractors in general, the experience was very educational. It was instrumental in raising awareness of the benefits of complete, targeted retrofits and of the various house types and what was required to upgrade them.

*‘The fact that you had to get the assessor out there beforehand.....and you were letting people know what was suitable for their house; and that’s the most important part of all of this, that you’re getting done what is suitable for your house.’*

Other comments:

Donal rates his satisfaction with the project as ‘quite good’ and was grateful for the experience and work at the time. He maintains that the working principle of comprehensive retrofitting was good.