



NI Assembly AERA Committee request:

NILGA views on the UK Climate Change Committee recommendations for Northern Ireland

24th February 2021

Executive Summary

NILGA views the development of a Climate Bill for NI as a positive opportunity for change. Further to substantive discussion, NILGA voted by substantial majority to support the UKCCC recommendation of an at least 82% reduction on 1990 levels by 2050 and were strongly supportive of the interim target suggested by the UKCCC of 48% reduction for all greenhouse gases by 2030, heeding the Stern Report's warnings of the "cost of inaction".

NILGA also highlights the Key Recommendations from the "Local Authorities and the Sixth Carbon Budget" Report and looks forward to working closely with the Committee as policy and legislation develop.

Derek McCallan, Chief Executive

1.0 INTRODUCTION

NILGA, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, is the representative body for district councils in Northern Ireland. NILGA represents and promotes the interests of the 11 Northern Ireland district councils and is supported by all main political parties. The Association welcomes the opportunity to participate in the discussion around a new Climate Change Bill for Northern Ireland and associated policies, and we trust that the views outlined below will be considered as policy is developed and finalised. Our members view this as a positive opportunity for change.

The following policy positions were developed jointly by the NILGA Executive Committee and the Association's all council Wellbeing Policy & Learning Network in a series of meetings in January 2021, working closely with Climate Northern Ireland and Sustainable NI.

Any queries in relation to this document should be forwarded to Karen Smyth at NILGA (k.smyth@nilga.org).

2.0 INITIAL COMMENTS

NILGA strongly welcomes robust and results oriented discussion on targets, as a precursor to the production of a Climate Change Bill for Northern Ireland. This legislation is urgently needed, alongside relevant and properly resourced monitoring, and demonstrable accountability.

At this stage, the NI Assembly and several councils have declared a 'climate emergency', all councils are working proactively on climate action and Belfast City Council is in the process of appointing its own Climate Commissioner. It is widely accepted, including by local government, that effective actions to mitigate and adapt to climate change need to be put in place as soon as possible to prevent further, irreversible damage.

NILGA concurs with the aim of a Climate Change Bill as expressed by DAERA in their recent Discussion Document, i.e., that it *“would be to create a framework addressing multiple aspects and issues of both climate change mitigation and adaptation in a holistic, overarching manner in order to deliver our commitments to the Paris Agreement and to the UK’s net zero emission target.”*

NILGA is keen to assist the Department and the Committee in meeting the target of producing the necessary legislation by March 2022 and *will be keen to materially participate* in all relevant forthcoming stages of the policy development process and legislative passage.

We are at a crucial point in time for our environment and it is important that we get the forthcoming Bill and accompanying policies right, that we involve everyone who needs to be involved, that it is given the required priority, and that it is adequately resourced.

3.0 VIEWS ON THE UKCCC and DAERA COMMUNICATIONS

3.1 2050 Targets

The recent Discussion Document published by DAERA noted that Northern Ireland’s New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) Agreement states “the Executive will introduce legislation and targets for reducing carbon emissions in line with the Paris Climate Change Accord”.

NILGA notes the findings of the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report¹, released in 2018, on what it would take to keep global temperatures from rising more than 1.5 degrees Celsius, a goal of the Paris climate agreement. The report explained that countries would have to cut their anthropogenic carbon dioxide emissions, such as from power plants and vehicles, to net zero by around 2050. To reach that goal, it said, CO2 emissions would have to start dropping "well before 2030" and be on a path to fall by about 45 percent by around 2030.

Northern Ireland is part of a developed nation in a relatively affluent part of the world. Our neighbouring jurisdictions are all striving to ensure that they reach net zero by 2050, exploring what they need to do to ensure this target is met. The UK government has committed to reaching net zero by 2050, Scotland is committed to reaching net zero by 2045 (with interim targets), with Wales and the Republic of Ireland currently re-examining their existing targets to ensure they reach as close as possible to net zero by 2050.

The members of NILGA and its 11 member councils are keen to ensure that Northern Ireland plays its part, to the best of its ability, in working towards this common international goal. Indeed, NILGA is particularly keen to ensure that we, as a region, fully embrace the post Covid-19 recovery opportunity for Northern Ireland, in exercising its historic engineering prowess and innovation, to be an exemplar in low carbon energy efficiency. This economic opportunity could stimulate NI's economic green growth and create jobs and opportunities for many of its citizens if pump-primed in an appropriate manner.

In light of the above, and cognisant of our demonstrable regional and local successes in meeting waste management and renewable energy targets (we believe that Northern Ireland can excel – meeting and exceeding targets well ahead of time), the options presented by the Department provoked a meaningful and heartfelt debate within NILGA on the best way forward for Northern Ireland. Our members would like to ensure that the approach set in train by the Department is aspirational, whilst realistic and achievable.

It will be imperative that a guiding principle for change is that there is a 'just' transition.

NILGA believes that timescales are long enough to ensure that farmers and other large emitters are supported onto a more economically, socially and environmentally advantageous trajectory.

¹ https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2018/07/SR15_SPM_version_stand_alone_LR.pdf

NILGA acknowledges, as indeed the Department itself has acknowledged, that 'kicking the can down the road' is likely to be far more expensive in the longer term. The Stern report is extremely clear on the issue of costs. Strong early action is more effective in halting climate change than delayed action, and the economic costs of climate inaction **dwarf** the economic costs of climate action (Stern Report, 2008). We also know that it is not just the particular level of GHG emissions in a single year which affects climate change, rather it is the total amount emitted over a number of years, which remain in the atmosphere.

NILGA supports a target of at least 82% reduction on 1990 targets being set, with efforts focussed on leadership, research and development in decarbonisation technologies that will assist the carbon-heavy sectors of our economy to change their practices; for example, in agriculture, by changing animal feeds and fertilisers used, and employing breeding technology to reduce the amount of methane produced by livestock².

Meeting this target is not outside Northern Ireland's capabilities, but would require a deliberate change in agri-food policy, which historically has promoted unsustainable growth in livestock numbers leading to an acute ammonia problem. NILGA believes that a rethink is required; we trust that the Committee, the NI Executive and the Assembly as a whole, will work assiduously to support the farming sector and other key sectors through transition.

A sustainable agri-food policy that encouraged broader diversification within farming and availability of a wider variety of locally grown vegetables and fruits - that aspired to greater food self-sufficiency - would further reduce the carbon footprint created by the constant movement of foods globally.

NILGA strongly believes that the Committee, and the Department, with the agri-food, haulage and retail sectors, must look urgently at issues of food security and supply chains.

NILGA would urge the NI Executive to work as a collective – using the new PfG outcomes and cross cutting ethos - to address other key issues specifically affecting Northern Ireland's ability to decarbonise and is keen to ensure that the Department sets interim targets, giving businesses and investors better information and more certainty upon which, they can base their investment decisions. The Scottish approach of setting annual reductions targets is

² University of Adelaide. "Potential for reduced methane from cows." ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, 8 July 2019. www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/07/190708112514.htm

something that should be considered, particularly to enable a proactive approach to be taken over the coming ten years.

Northern Ireland must demonstrate leadership on climate action. NILGA welcomes the relationship that the Department has established with the UK Climate Change Committee and we believe that this relationship will only increase in value in future, as we develop our regional and local approach. We look forward to participating in the ongoing conversation, with farming and other sectors. Decarbonisation must be viewed as integral to everything we do as a region.

**Further to extensive debate on the options presented, NILGA members voted, with the majority of members favouring a target of at least 82% reduction on 1990 levels. Around 25% of the members involved in the vote believed that NI should be more aspirational and focussed on achieving 'net zero'.*

*The importance of climate policy being taken forward with an **at least 82%** reduction is emphasised.*

NILGA asserts that the aim is to exceed this target, with proper assistance for key partners like councils and the agricultural community from the outset.

3.2 Interim Targets

Detailed consideration needs to be given to setting interim targets and what these should be. Recognising the need to frontload this work, we welcome the uplift in the target suggested by the UKCCC of 48% reduction for all greenhouse gases by 2030, which closely aligns with the IPCC recommended figure. NILGA believes Northern Ireland can and should aspire to international best practice, but we need a system that is realistic, practical, and with inbuilt accountability.

To achieve any sort of progress on decarbonisation in Northern Ireland, a massive culture change is going to be required, not only in relation to our societal reliance on the car, and fossil fuel heating, but within and surrounding the agri-foods sector, as articulated above. It is of course the case that the Northern Ireland economy has a reliance on agriculture, but this is the source of a major part of our Greenhouse Gas emissions. If we are to ensure the economic sustainability of the agri-food sector, we must ensure its environmental sustainability. This will require the sector to be visionary and the Department to be supportive.

Similar to the Scottish Act, the forthcoming Bill should include safeguards to prevent 'backsliding'. It is also important that these targets are backed up by robust evidence from a

funded strategic climate change research programme for NI, alongside an independent expert advice body to provide guidance to the NI government.

Both the strategic research programme and the interim targets must consider the link between GHG reduction policies and climate adaptation, to avoid net-zero strategies causing lock-in of climate risks which would cause environmental, economic or social vulnerability.

Consideration and inclusion of nitrogen and ammonia reduction will also be vitally important, although it is understood that this issue is being considered currently in the Clean Air Strategy discussion document; we look forward to publication of a forthcoming Ammonia Strategy document.

As with our waste management targets, it will be helpful to consider where 'quick wins' can be made, with a focus on high impact change and use of a carbon budgeting system. Proposed changes need to be well communicated and made as easy as possible for people. Clear, sectoral targets should be set to deter any 'allowance grabbing' of carbon budgets.

3.3 “Local Authorities and the Sixth Carbon Budget”

We would also highlight the Key Recommendations from the “Local Authorities and the Sixth Carbon Budget” report:

- The Sixth Carbon Budget can only be achieved if Government, regional agencies and local authorities work seamlessly together.
- Four key things are needed to achieve this vision of collaborative delivery:
 - Framework: An agreed framework for delivery for Net Zero incorporating local and national climate action
 - Financing: Appropriate long-term financing to support local authorities in delivering Net Zero
 - Flexibility: Local operational flexibility around how local areas address climate change
 - Facilitation: coherent policy and powers for the facilitation of delivery.

We cannot let progress on decarbonisation slip. Northern Ireland needs front-loaded, ambitious, sectoral targets with agreed consequences for failure to achieve. Our local actions will be globally scrutinised and future generations will, retrospectively, laud and uphold a transformative approach.

Since climate change, similar to sustainable development, is such a cross cutting issue, NILGA would strongly welcome a collaborative cross-departmental approach per the forthcoming PfG, to how key issues are tackled and resourced. We acknowledge the progress that has been made so far, however we would urge the Committee to acknowledge that progress will require the improvement of the capacity of government departments and public bodies, across the board. Adequate resourcing will be required for this.

For climate change to be properly addressed, the forthcoming Bill must be ambitious with firm targets and independent scrutiny capable of influencing further change. NILGA would re-emphasise the need for Place-based Climate Action, and incentivisation and support for this. We are keen to explore nature-based solutions, such as those articulated in council green/blue infrastructure plans, and note with interest the inclusion of biodiversity gain and conservation covenant policies in the current UK Environment Bill. We would also be keen to see the Department take forward the outcomes of the recent UK Citizens Assembly report.

4. CONCLUSION

NILGA and councils are ready, willing and with additional capacity and resources will be able to work substantively with wider government, business and the public to begin to meet these challenges. Policy enablement will require sustained central and local government and societal collaborative proactivity over a considerable period of time, with long term generational benefits for the environmental & economic wellbeing of our community.

NILGA is keen to continue discussions with the Committee on this issue, and to ensure material involvement by this Association and wider local government on the realisation of the goals required.

Disclaimer: *The Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) endeavours to ensure that the information contained within our website, policies and other communications is up to date and correct. We do not, however, make any representation that the information will be accurate, current, complete, uninterrupted or error free or that any information or other material accessible from or related to NILGA is free of viruses or other harmful components. NILGA accepts no responsibility for any erroneous information placed by or on behalf of any user or any loss by any person or user resulting from such information.*