

Submission to the AERA Committee's call for evidence on the Climate Change Bill

The response is being submitted by **The Gathering which is an open collective of individuals, communities, grass-roots based campaign groups and activists.**

The Gathering embodies a dynamic repository of skills, knowledge, expertise and creativity gathered from our lived experiences in pursuit of environmental and ecological justice.

Climate change is the most important issue facing this, or any other, generation. It is imperative that politicians show strong leadership. The arguments in favour of a Northern Ireland Climate Change Bill are supported by the most up-to-date science, economics, and ethics. Strong climate legislation is good for people, good for the economy, and good for the planet. It is essential if Northern Ireland is to take advantage of the inevitable move to a low-carbon global economy.

1. Policy Objectives

In order to have a good chance of staying below a 2°C temperature rise, the planet as a whole is limited to around 800 billion tonnes of CO₂ (GtCO₂). If we are to stay below 1.5°C, the preferred target in the Paris Agreement, we cannot emit more than about 400GtCO₂. If we were to burn all of the known reserves of fossil fuels, it would produce around 2,600GtCO₂. In other words, almost all of the known reserves of fossil fuels must remain in the ground.

Northern Ireland's per capita emissions are higher than the UK average, accounting for 4% of the UK's total emissions. In addition, Northern Ireland's emissions are falling significantly lower than the UK average, achieving just 18% reduction compared to the UK's 44%. If Northern Ireland is to do its fair share in tackling climate change, there is simply no room in the carbon budget for new fossil fuel infrastructure or exploitation, and we must make a rapid transition to a zero-carbon, or near zero-carbon, society as soon as possible.

It is important to get the trajectory of emissions reductions right. That means making rapid and steep cuts early. Ambitious emissions reductions legislation is needed in order to set the framework within which policies and plans can be written to ensure the required emissions reductions trajectory is achieved.

Northern Ireland remains the only part of the UK or Ireland with no binding greenhouse gas reductions targets. The UK Government's target of net zero by 2050 is inadequate, and basing a Northern Ireland target on it is multiplying the inadequacy. Net zero by 2045 is achievable, and with more ambitious measures, net zero earlier than 2045 is possible. Research from the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research demonstrates Northern Ireland could have a zero-carbon energy system by 2042.

The Climate Change Bill recognises the interconnectedness of climate impacts and other environmental problems. The proposed guaranteed environmental protections are welcome.

Northern Ireland is a small country, with a small population. It should be possible to be flexible, agile, and ambitious.

2. Declaration of a Climate Emergency

The declaration of a climate emergency is a key element of the Bill. The Assembly has declared a climate emergency, but that declaration will lapse when the current mandate ends. A declaration, included in the Bill, will produce a sustained political and legal drive for action on climate change across multiple Assembly mandates. The Bill allows for the Assembly to rescind the declaration when the best available evidence suggests the emergency has passed. Additionally, acknowledgement of the Rights of Nature should be embedded within the Bill and subsequent legislation.

3. Net Zero target

Scientifically, the greenhouse gas emissions reduction trajectory is the most important element of any emissions reductions plan. The Climate Actions Plans, included in the Bill, will drive the reductions trajectory. A net zero target, however, will provide the policy impetus for the Climate Action Plans. Politically, a net-zero target is important. The target included in the Bill, net-zero by at least 2045, is achievable and will create a stronger driver than a later target, or a lesser emissions reduction.

4. Climate Action Plans

The proposed Climate Action Plans are a key element of the Bill. The 2045 net zero target establishes the direction of travel, but the Climate Action Plans will set out the route. If we are to keep global temperatures below dangerous levels we must make rapid cuts in emissions out to 2045 based on strict carbon budgets. The Climate Action Plans will set those emissions cuts. Without the guidance set by the Climate Action plans there is a real risk Northern Ireland's response to the climate emergency will remain unfocused and inadequate.

5. Office of the Climate Commissioner

The proposed independent Climate Commissioner will ensure Ministers and departments introduce policies and plans to reduce emissions. Without the scrutiny of the Commission, it is likely Northern Ireland will continue to lag behind.

It is crucial that the Climate Commissioner is independent of Government and free to be critical of departmental plans and policies. The Commission must be able to speak freely without fear of funding cuts, Ministerial gags, or political interference.

6. Sectoral Targets

Emissions reductions for specific sectors built into the Climate Action Plans will be crucial to driving effective and targeted emissions reductions policies. The sectors listed are the most

significant contributors of greenhouse gas emissions, so it makes sense to make particular reference to them in the Bill.

The precise details of the Climate Action plans will depend on the Carbon Budget and departmental priorities. All sectors will have to make cuts if it is to be fair and just. However, some sectors may be able to make cuts sooner, while others may have a long tail. The Climate Change Bill doesn't specify which sectors will make what levels of cuts by when. The Bill sets an over-all target for the whole of Northern Ireland. The decisions how to allocate greenhouse reduction cuts will a matter for future Assemblies in the coming decades, based on the best available evidence, Departmental plans and policies, technical and technological developments, and take-up rates by people, businesses, and public bodies.

Care should be taken, however, to avoid some sectors being given a de facto immunity from greenhouse gas reduction requirements, while others are forced to carry an unreasonably disproportionate burden. Policies and plans may offer transitional support to some sectors less able to make early cuts, but it would be wholly unjust to allow some sectors to continue to grow and produce increasing emissions while others have to make dramatic cuts.

7. Resource implications

There may be resource implications for Departments in drawing up Climate Action Plans, drafting climate compliant policies, and directly funding low-carbon projects. However, departments already draft plans and polices and directly fund projects. Departments will simply prioritise drafting plans and projects, and funding projects, that are consistent with the objective of the Bill rather than those that aren't.

8. Access to specialist advice

The Climate Change Committee is a recognised expert body and its advice should be sought and taken into account. The advice and recommendations from the Committee may be limited by UK Government policy, however, so consideration should also be given to scientific research, technical and technological developments, and policies of other countries, particularly Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Northern Ireland is a devolved nation with responsibility for climate change policy and action. We should not be fettered by the changing, and possibly conflicting, policies of whichever Governments happen to be in power in Westminster over the next few decades.

9. Responsibility on Public Bodies

Public bodies must play a key leading role to ensure the required greenhouse gas emissions reductions are achieved. Public bodies often have large estates that could be used for the benefit of the public, such as renewable energy generation, allotments, community tree nurseries, or hubs for community transport schemes. Public bodies also have large budgets and significant positive procurement potential that could be used to stimulate the market in low-carbon technologies, or directly fund low-carbon projects.

Climate change is an overarching issue that affects all Government departments. Responsibility doesn't lie with a single department. To reflect this, we would like to see the

creation of a dedicated Department for Climate Change, with all climate related responsibilities focused on in this portfolio. Failing this, climate responsibility should lie with the Executive. It is best placed to ensure a co-ordinated response to the climate emergency.

10. Transboundary considerations

Climate change and environmental damage don't respect borders. Northern Ireland shares an island with the Republic of Ireland. Transboundary impacts must be included if our move to a low-carbon society is to be fair.

11. Rural Impact Assessment

It's important to evaluate the potential impacts on rural communities to ensure the Bill doesn't have a disproportionate impact. The impact assessment shouldn't be limited to rural communities though, and the potential positive impacts should also be considered fully. The Bill offers significant opportunities for job creation in low-carbon technologies, infrastructure, and services, the potential to cut people's bills, improving health and well-being, and dealing with inequalities. Limiting the impacts assessment to rural communities, and more specifically the farming sector, will not produce a full and detailed evidence base on which to make planning and policy decisions.

12. Additional information

A Northern Ireland Climate Change Bill has widespread support amongst the environmental activists, local community campaigns and citizens who support and are part of The Gathering and we are eager to see ambitious progress being made to meet climate targets.

Additionally, there is also widespread support for a progressive Climate Change Bill among the NGO sector and most parties within the Northern Ireland Assembly. It has made significant progress through the Assembly. That process should not be derailed or delayed.

Northern Ireland must have a just transition to a low-carbon future. It won't be enough to replace energy generation with low-carbon technologies, develop smart grids, and introduce livestock feed that reduces methane from animals if we disproportionately use finite resources, externalise our pollution to distant parts of the planet, or further disadvantage the poor, vulnerable and marginalised. Such a path may reduce our emissions, but it wouldn't be just.

Non-regression from established environmental standards is a vital part of a just transition. It would be counter-productive to introduce measures to protect the environment by reducing greenhouse gas emissions if ecological decline is accelerated and the health impacts of a degraded environment worsen.

We have an imperative to make swift and dramatic greenhouse gas emissions cuts due both to our current emissions and the legacy of our historic emissions. We can no longer



prevaricate. Introducing a Northern Ireland Climate Change Bill, with strong greenhouse gas reduction targets, is the right thing to do.

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