

Committee for Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs

16 February 2021

Ref: Climate Change committee advice for NI in relation to the 2050 emissions reduction target

Dear Stella,

In response to your request for a short written brief on both letters on this subject.

- We accept the views of the Climate Change Committee, an independent statutory body, and its explanation of the at least 82% reduction figure in GHG emissions from 1990 levels for Northern Ireland by 2050. It is clear that even achieving this reduction will be a challenge, given our low starting point. We acknowledge the response from DAERA that this is “evidence-based advice” and will not “limit the ambition to achieve much higher emissions reductions”. It is important that Northern Ireland’s unique economic, environmental and societal circumstances are considered to ensure a just transition to net zero. However, these should not be used as ‘get out clauses’ for taking action and increasing our ambition along with other UK regions.
- While the Northern Ireland Assembly declared a Climate Emergency last February, we still await Climate Change legislation which has been passed in all the other devolved regions. While DAERA aims to deliver legislation within the term of the current Assembly mandate, as required under the New Decade: New Approach Agreement, time is very tight. There is just over a year left in which to pass this legislation. Meanwhile a Private Members Bill, with cross-party support, has been tabled with the Assembly. We support this Bill which contains many of the aims and policies raised in DAERA’s recent discussion paper on such a Bill. We understand it is important to get the legislation right but it is time for action.
- **Transport is the second largest emitter of greenhouse gases in Northern Ireland at 23%.** While many sectors have cut their emissions, transport has increased. We have a serious amount of work to do to decarbonise transport and critically change people’s behaviour to reduce their dependence on the car. The targets set out on Pg. 12 Table 1.2 on Transport must be achieved. The combustion engine in most of our cars now has a lifespan of less than a decade. We need a huge push to create the infrastructure for vehicles to go electric but as much effort must be made to enable active travel, which is much less expensive.

- The percentage reduction in the amount we use cars of up to 11% is achievable but our efforts to get modal shift to sustainable transport over the past decade does not bode well. 71% of all journeys are by private car in Northern Ireland and as little as 1% by cycle - these figures have remained static for a decade.¹
- **Fuel poverty** (ref Pg. 14) – Just over one third of all journeys in Northern Ireland are less than two miles long and a half of these journeys are taken by car, according to the NI Travel Survey. Many journeys are accessible by foot and cycle. We believe in the ‘3 five 10 plan’ to place walking, cycling and public transport at the heart of transport policy.² The price of electric cars remains out of the reach of most people. Unless there are greater subsidies we could see a worse case for fuel poverty and people unwilling to let go of their diesel vehicles. This may compound existing inequalities in society and could lead to greater transport poverty. This is one example that illustrates the importance of a just transition to zero carbon emissions.
 - Whilst policy has primarily focused on electric vehicles, the UK Government’s new Decarbonising Transport Plan presented a vision where: “Public transport and active travel will be the natural first choice for our daily activities. We will use our cars less and be able to rely on a convenient, cost-effective and coherent public transport network.”
- ‘The role of **individual behaviour change** (ref Pg. 17) is important, but Government has a role in guiding people to make the right choices.’ We agree with this statement. It is important to promote alternative modes of transport but there needs to be the infrastructure to **enable** this. The DfI’s Northern Ireland Bicycle Strategy, for example, sets out the need for a three pillar approach: Build; Support; Promote.³
 - For this to happen we need more cross-departmental working e.g. the Active School Travel Programme, is funded jointly by the Public Health Agency and DfI to achieve change. It has consistently strong results on modal shift.⁴
 - Consumer and business choices (ref. Pg. 21). We believe the pandemic has had a profound effect on workplaces and even revolutionised commuter travel. It is essential that the surge in walking and cycling is capitalised on and there is more support for employers to encourage a healthier commute.
- Per person **surface transport emissions** (ref Pg. 24) are actually higher in Northern Ireland than the UK average. As stated earlier, private car use is the overwhelmingly dominant mode of transport in Northern Ireland. The car will remain an important part of the transport mix and for many people in Northern Ireland, especially in rural areas, it is currently the only option. However we must seek to reduce car use where possible. We urgently need to stop all new housing developments in areas, or at densities, that do not make walking, cycling and public transport viable and therefore

¹ [From headline report of N.Ireland Travel Survey 2017-19](#)

² <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/news/hazzard-announces-3-five-10-approach-support-walking-cycling-and-public-transport>

³ [Changing Gear – the Northern Ireland Bicycle Strategy, DfI](#)

⁴ In the school-year 2018-19, the number of children walking, cycling and scooting to school at participating schools increased from 35% to 53%. At the same time, the number of pupils being driven to school fell from 58% to 41%. More information at [Sustrans webpage](#)

lock in car dependency. The pandemic has only highlighted the importance of our call for a **20-Minute Neighbourhood**.⁵ These are places where everyone can thrive without using a car; where most services and amenities are within a 20-minute journey on foot or cycle. As stated at end of the document 'Planning frameworks are another useful lever over infrastructure that **needs to be well aligned** to objectives for emissions reduction in devolved administrations (e.g. through encouraging walking, cycling and use of public transport...)'.

- **Devolution** (ref Pg. 41) We support the statement that '**Devolved administrations must implement effective policies to make it easy for people to walk, cycle and use low-carbon public transport.**'
 - Also agree that 'Electric vehicle charging infrastructure must also be expanded across all parts of the UK to ensure that the electric vehicle switchover works for all road users.' However, electric vehicle infrastructure investment should not supercede the necessity to increase funding for active travel. Northern Ireland has the lowest per capita spend on walking and cycling in the UK and RoI. The culture within the Department for Infrastructure is still 'roads' first.
 - In terms of value for money, high specification cycling schemes cost £1.3 million per kilometre on average; whereas road schemes cost around £50 million per kilometre.
 - Analysis by the Department for Transport (DfT) shows that there is a return of £10 for every £1 invested in active travel.⁶
 - Agree that there needs to be better communication and public engagement of climate risks and the options and choices available to reduce emissions across the UK. Necessary to get message home to people in Northern Ireland that we are not living in a protected bubble but will feel the full impact of climate change – especially if we do nothing.

- **Leadership role** (ref Pg. 42) Effective policies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland can set the standard for the rest of the UK. We are behind the rest of the UK in implementing policies to tackle climate change. This is not helped by the precarious nature of our devolved government. The lack of progress caused by the Assembly being suspended for over three years is borne out by the numerous strategies that have sat on shelves e.g. the Bicycle Strategy for Northern Ireland; the Northern Ireland Greenways Strategy; the Belfast Bicycle Network Plan. We must hasten our resolve, we cannot afford not to.

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⁵ [20-Minute Neighbourhood, Sustrans](#)

⁶ [Finding the Optimum, Department for Transport, 2014](#)