

# Working Group on the Climate Crisis

Tuesday, 21st September, 2021

## MEETING OF THE WORKING GROUP ON THE CLIMATE CRISIS

- Members present: Councillor Smyth (Chairperson);  
Alderman Copeland;  
Councillors Baker, Bunting, de Faoite, and  
Hutchinson.
- In attendance: Ms. D. Caldwell, Climate Commissioner;  
Mr. R. McLernon, Resilience Co-ordinator;  
Mr. J. McKearney, Project Support Officer; and  
Mr. G. Graham, Democratic Services Assistant.
- Also attended: Professor J. Barry, Queens University Belfast; and  
Ms. J. Berman, Climate Northern Ireland Manager.

### **Apologies**

No apologies were reported

### **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of 23rd June, 2021 were taken as read and signed as correct.

### **Declarations of Interest**

No declarations of interest were reported.

### **Introductions and Overview of the All Party Working Group**

The Chairperson provided the Members with an overview of the work and issues pertinent to the Working Group and welcomed both officers and the external participants to the meeting. He reminded the Members that the Council had declared a climate emergency in October, 2019 followed by the publication of a Resilience Strategy and Climate Plan in 2020.

He thanked the officers for their work in securing efforts to deal with the climate emergency and, in particular, Councillor de-Faoite for his efforts in making the case for the formulation of a Working Group to raise awareness in regard to Climate Change.

The Chairperson outlined the three strands of the Resilience Strategy, culminating in a delivery plan for the city and highlighted the areas of work which would be required to be addressed, if the Council were to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2050. He referred to the threats facing the city if climate change was permitted to continue unabated and of the need to collaborate with other stakeholders, including the local community, to ensure support for the initiatives necessary to achieve the required reduction in carbon emissions.

## **Introduction to the Belfast Climate Commission**

Professor Barry provided the Working Group with an overview of the background, remit and membership of the Belfast Climate Commission. He stated that the Commission formed part of the Place Based Climate Action Network (P.C.A.N.). and was part of a network of Climate Commissions, throughout the U.K, focussed on action to achieve its climate change objectives. The Professor stated that P.C.A.N's mission was to secure public/private/civil society organisations to mobilise finance in order to provide public support and funding for its climate change objectives.

The Members were advised that P.C.A.N. had developed the Belfast Net Zero Road Map and provided an overview of that organisation's structure. He stated that the Climate Commission comprised fourteen core Commissioners, from a range of backgrounds, supported by a number of Working Groups. He referred to the fact finding and statistical formulation work, undertaken by the Commission, to help inform evidence based policy and of the need for leadership to make difficult but informed decisions, if the extreme effects of Climate change were to be avoided.

The Professor stated that while many U.K, authorities had declared climate emergencies, few had followed up with appropriate climate action to mitigate against the potential impact of climate change. The Chairperson, on behalf of the Working Group, asked how the Council might engage with the local community to ensure that ownership of the climate emergency was galvanised. The Professor suggested that academic institutions might play a positive role in that regard and, in so doing, suggested that the relevant issues be broken down into District Electoral Areas (D.E.A's.). He suggested that, by focussing on Local geographical areas, local communities could identify more closely with the climate issues pertinent to their local environment. He suggested that public bodies could make better use of their land by planting more trees including the creation of community gardens, for example, to engage with the public and encourage local communities to embrace climate adaptation measures.

The Members were informed of the physical and psychological benefits of promoting green and blue spaces, including the economic benefits in terms of the creation of green jobs associated with the development of a green economy and a sustainable future. He highlighted the benefits of retro fitting public housing stock which could make a considerable contribution towards the elimination of fuel poverty.

The Working Group noted the information provided by Professor Barry and thanked him for his detailed and informative presentation.

## **Belfast Net Zero Road-Map**

The Climate Commissioner provided the Working Group with a presentation outlining a range of scenarios should global temperatures rise above 1.5 degrees centigrade and the cuts required, in respect of global emissions, to achieve that target. She highlighted the importance of cities in terms of the emissions produced, and why urban authorities had such an important role in delivering policies to tackle climate change. The Commissioner stated that, in terms of our carbon budget allocation, Northern Ireland would exceed its carbon target by 2030.

The Members were informed that the carbon road map had identified the key areas where carbon reduction could make a significant difference and could assist in helping the province reach its 84% reduction target by 2050. The areas identified within the road map

included buildings, industry and transport. The Commissioner stated that the road map highlighted the investments required to achieve the necessary reduction in emissions, including the benefits and financial returns made on those investments. The Working Group was informed that investing in home insulation provided the greatest economic and carbon reduction benefit in terms of its financial and environmental returns.

The Commissioner reported that, the next steps set out in the carbon road map were to develop a comprehensive Climate Action Plan for the City incorporating science-based targets to widen the scope, to include scope three emissions and to report back on a regular basis and progress in achieving carbon reductions against its specified targets. She stated that the Council was endeavouring to secure a budget to support the development of a Carbon Action Plan for the City, in tandem with the Resilience and Sustainability Board and the Climate Commission.

In response to a question from a Member in regard to the retro-fitting by the Housing Executive of its current housing stock, the Commissioner stated that a number of retrofit pilot projects were being undertaken by that organisation and that additional funds had been made available by the Department for the Economy to support vulnerable households to retrofit their homes.

The Working Group noted the information provided by the Climate Commissioner and thanked her for her detailed presentation.

### **PCAN work on Local Climate Action**

Professor Barry provided the Working Group with an overview of the work which had been undertaken, on behalf of the U.K 100 organisation, to assess developments which had taken place, on a U.K basis, to deal with the current climate emergency. He referred specifically to a report which attempted to analyse trends on local climate action initiatives throughout the U.K. and which sought to determine what specific actions had been implemented, successfully, to halt the pending climate emergency,

The Working Group was informed that the research undertaken had revealed that, while three in every four councils across the U.K. had declared a climate emergency, only 62% of those surveyed had initiated climate action plans to deal with that emergency. He stated that, of those councils which had taken action, an emphasis had been placed on climate mitigation, with relatively little resources targeted at climate adaptation measures. He reminded the Working Group that advice on climate mitigation and adaptation measures could be provided by both P.C.A.N. and the Climate Commission to assist with that process. He reinforced the importance of shared learning, on climate change measures, using the experience of other U.K. authorities and climate commissions.

The Professor referred to some of the barriers which research had indicated prevented concerted action to tackle climate change including, amongst other things, resources and a lack of coordination between central, regional and local government. The Members were informed of some potential actions which could be undertaken to finance climate adaptation and mitigation measures, including the raising of financial bonds which could be converted into green bonds, providing a financial return for potential investors.

The Working Group was informed that the task of dealing with climate change required a combined effort, at all levels, and referred to the model of community wealth generation, whereby large public bodies could pool their resources together to achieve significant climate gains. The professor referred specifically to central procurement by organisations citing, by way of example, health and social care trusts, local authorities and academic institutions such as Queen's University. The professor referred to a further piece of research commissioned

by Dr Becky Willis and funded by P.C.A.N. which identified a range of personality traits and leadership skills required to deliver climate action. The research indicated that, in a number of local authorities, including Belfast, there appeared to be a functional gap between stated intent and functional policies to achieve the required climate goals. The research recognised also that local authorities in Northern Ireland did not have the same statutory powers as authorities in Great Britain and, therefore, there existed barriers in regard to the impact that local authorities could have on Climate mitigation and adaptation measures.

The Professor stressed the importance of Northern Ireland developing alternative forms of green energy, given its over reliance on fossil fuels for domestic heating and for the generation of traditional energy, namely electricity. He cited also the high proportion of the population engaged in agriculture and, in particular, beef and dairy production with the associated high levels of methane gas produced from that industry

A Member raised the issue that the majority of statutory powers, involving climate mitigation and adaptation measures, resided with the Northern Ireland Assembly. He referred also to the problem of communicating effectively with the local community to reinforce the fact that the climate emergency impacts directly on citizens everyday lives. The professor, in response, acknowledged the statutory limitation in respect of local government powers, he pointed out however to the electoral mandate of communication, with the local community, in terms of the green economy and future job opportunities associated with developing green industries and initiatives. The Working Group was informed of the planning opportunities available to the Council, in terms of promoting green growth and highlighted specifically the potential to link spatial planning with energy planning.

The Climate Commissioner suggested that, in her opinion, a significant way to make progress in the reduction of emissions could involve data capture, whereby organisations were compelled to publish data on their carbon emissions. She suggested that scope 3 data analysis would assist with that process and referred to the investment opportunities to provide the necessary financial resources to develop a green economy, estimated at £9.6 billion. The Professor informed the Working Group of a number of additional measures which could be developed to encourage the green economy, including pension scheme investments and the creation of a dedicated team within local government, adequately resourced, to place the climate change at the top of the Council's corporate agenda.

The Chairperson requested that a climate training course for Members might prove beneficial. In response, the Climate Commissioner stated that, if there was sufficient support for such a training initiative, she would endeavour to deliver an appropriate training course via the Climate NI initiative.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Working Group, thanked Professor Barry for his detailed and informative presentation and he departed from the meeting.

### **Just Transition Committee**

The Chairperson requested that, as part of a wider review of future Council Committees and given the importance attached to the declaration of a climate emergency, in consultation with party Group Leaders and Chief officers and subject to the approval of the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee, that a Just Transition Committee be constituted to deal with the emerging climate emergency.

After consideration, the Working Group agreed unanimously that, subject to the necessary approval, that the Council give consideration to the establishment of a Just Transition Committee to deal effectively with the critical issues associated with climate change.

**Date of Next Meeting**

The Working Group agreed that its next meeting be held on Wednesday, 6th October at 5:15 pm.

Chairperson