

# Working Group on the Climate Crisis

Monday, 31st January, 2022

## MEETING OF THE WORKING GROUP ON THE CLIMATE CRISIS

Members present: Councillor Smyth (Chairperson);  
Alderman Copeland; and  
Councillors de Faoite, Hutchinson and  
McReynolds.

In attendance: Ms. D. Caldwell, Climate Commissioner;  
Ms. C. McKeown, Sustainable Development Manager;  
Mr. R. Connelly, Policy, Research and Compliance Officer;  
Mr. R. McLernon, Resilience Co-ordinator; and  
Mr. G. Graham, Democratic Services Assistant.

### **Apologies**

Apologies were reported on behalf of Alderman Dorrian and Councillor Baker.

### **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of 6th October 2021 were taken as read and signed as correct.

### **Declarations of Interest**

No declarations of interest were reported.

### **Just Transition - London School of Economics**

Mr. B. Curran, Grantham Research Institute - London School of Economics, attended in connection with this item and was welcomed by the Chairperson.

Mr. Curran provided the Working Group with an overview and definition of just transition, its objectives and outcomes necessary in the delivery of a net-zero emissions economy. He stated that just transition placed people and social outcomes at its central core, providing them with support mechanisms, including financial support to enable transition from a reliance on fossil fuels to more sustainable forms of energy which required social and behavioural transformation.

The Members were informed of the challenges which lay ahead, including the re-training of employees from fossil-based industries and providing them with the necessary employment skills required for an emerging green economy. He referred to the potential impact, on a regional basis, in the transition to a zero-base emissions economy and highlighted the work that the Institute had undertaken in engaging with both government and large financial institutions, to reinforce their role in providing the necessary financial support to ensure that a just transition economy was achieved.

Mr. Curran emphasised that Just Transition was about the development of opportunities and ensuring that those opportunities were shared equitably, amongst all social groups and communities, while limiting risk. He stated that a just transition required to be managed and was estimated that it could create one hundred million jobs world-wide. The Members were informed of the potential risks associated with the transition to a just transition economy, including stranded assets, communities, and entire geographical areas. The Working Group was reminded that, at the COP 26 conference, a declaration in support of the conditions for a just transition had been signed with the EU and sixteen governments. The Members were informed that the policies to achieve that objective were now in place and that it was necessary to move to the implementation phase. Mr. Curran reinforced the need to ensure that lower income families were protected from the impact of climate change and that the negative social outcomes were identified and remedied.

The Members were informed that just transition, as identified by Lord Stern, was predicated on three key areas, namely place, people and space. Mr. Curran stated further that Northern Ireland faced additional challenges, including a higher reliance on fossil fuels, a large agricultural sector and the need for an extensive retrofit of its extensive public housing stock. He emphasised the importance of providing the right mix of financial and policy support to scale up and minimise the risks of climate change, to vulnerable communities, in the delivery of a just transition.

Mr. Curran referred to the opportunities to encourage investment in renewables in Northern Ireland stating that the offshore wind energy market had matured and had attracted considerable financial capital. He reported that it was important to develop and encourage investment in new and emerging technologies and highlighted the need to focus on energy efficiency programmes. The Members were informed of the tangible benefits, to Northern Ireland, associated with a just transition economy, including opportunities to reduce fuel poverty, the creation of quality green jobs and the health benefits associated with clean air and healthier lifestyles.

The Working Group was informed that, at the COP 26 conference, a sovereign green bond was issued to encourage investment in green technologies and that, since October 2021, £16 billion had been raised in support of that bond issue. Mr Curran stated that other innovative projects might be possible, including opportunities for the Housing Executive to raise both public and private finance in connection with the retrofit of its housing stock and the possibility of raising a local just transition bond, in connection with the implementation of specific green projects.

The Chairperson enquired as to how local authorities and Belfast City Council, in particular, could secure investment in respect of local just transition bonds, given its restrictions on capital raising powers. In response, Mr. Curran suggested that the Council could explore the opportunities to build community engagement partnerships which might include local enterprises, churches, and universities. The Working Group was informed by Ms. K. Arbuckle, NI Community Energy, that such partnerships did exist currently and that she would provide the Working Group more detailed information in the matter, as part of her presentation.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Steering Group, thanked Mr. Curran for his detailed and informative presentation and reinforced the need to endorse and develop community energy as a means to encourage investment and deliver the net-zero emissions target agreed at COP 26.

### **NI Community Energy Co-operative**

Ms. K. Arbuckle, Ms. T. O'Hara, Ms A. Forde, and Mr. R. Davison, NI Community Energy Co-operative, attended in connection with this item and were welcomed by the Chairperson.

Ms. Arbuckle stated that Community Development Projects in Northern Ireland were much less developed than in other parts of the UK and Ireland. The Members were informed that the main reason for this under development was a lack of policy support and investment. Ms. Arbuckle referred to a number of projects which were in operation currently, including Drumlin Wind Energy and Edenderry Village Energy. The Working Group was provided with a definition of community energy which she hoped would be adopted by the Council and highlighted the benefits from community energy projects namely - economic, social and environmental.

Ms. Arbuckle referred to the economic cycle associated with community energy, in that the return on investment provided additional finance to be reinvested, in new energy projects in addition to the provision of lower cost energy for the community energy partnership. Ms. O'Hara stated that community energy was focussed on ownership and referred to the opportunities for the Council to engage with local community energy projects. She stated that, for community energy projects to become more established in Northern Ireland, the Council could offer support, by providing solutions to many of the barriers, including policy, legal and financial, which restricted the expansion of community energy projects currently.

The Working Group was provided with a number of UK examples where public bodies had transferred some of its assets to be developed, as part of local community projects. Ms. O'Hara provided examples of how the Council might act as a facilitator in regard to the promotion and expansion of local community energy projects, including the opportunity to encourage demonstrator projects, providing them with the resources and support to ensure their viability and success.

Ms. Forde provided the Members with an overview in regard to the establishment and work undertaken by Drumlin Wind Energy. She stated that the cooperative had been established to create a range of community owned wind turbines and that it had secured a membership of approximately one thousand members, under a share ownership programme, with profits being redirected back into the community. The Members were informed that the education of young people on climate change, through schools and colleges, was a key objective of the cooperative which was self-financed through its community fund. Ms. Forde outlined an example where NICE had a partnership, with local schools, to provide PV renewable energy for the school buildings. The Working Group was informed of the benefits which additional funding, provided by the Council, could make in terms of an education programme on climate change, within Belfast schools, to assist with the education of young people in the renewable sector.

Mr. Davison provided the Working Group with information in regard to the establishment of the Edenderry Cooperative which aimed to utilise a range of water-based heat pumps and solar panels to develop community based green energy generating capacity. He stated that, as part of a feasibility study, discussions had taken place between DfE and DAERA to progress the Edenderry just transition development project which included the development of a range of local EV charging points within the village. Mr Davison stated that, whilst the project was at an early feasibility stage, the project was developing at pace and that it was anticipated that a community share offer, to potential investors, would be possible in the near future.

Ms. Arbuckle informed the Members that subsidies for the installation of Solar PV panels were now no longer available. She stated that there were opportunities to finance similar projects through other revenue streams and provided the Members with a list of current Belfast community solar PV projects which were operating successfully, throughout the city. Ms. Arbuckle referred to some of the obstacles which required to be addressed in order to expand the network of solar projects namely, securing connection to the electricity grid and securing planning permission in regard to the erection of solar PV panels. She referred also to research being undertaken in regard to battery storage facilities. Ms. Arbuckle highlighted the potential for collaborative working between the Council and NI Community Energy Cooperative, to overcome many of the barriers being faced by community energy projects, including the possibility of working together to develop other similar schemes. Ms. Arbuckle stated that the Council might wish to consider including community energy within its community action plan.

In response to a question from the Chairperson in regard to the most appropriate form of green energy for Northern Ireland and Belfast, Ms. Arbuckle stated that there were a range of community energy options available, including EV charging, hydro, solar and wind and that the energy source used was often geared towards the specific requirements of the area, including the proposed development project under consideration.

A Member suggested that some of the community energy projects, which had been presented, might be suitable for the development site at the North Foreshore both, in terms of providing local community employment and the production of clean renewable energy. The Working Group stated that it wished officers to address the issue of community energy generation projects to be considered by the newly expanded Brexit Committee with its modified Terms of Reference.

The Sustainable Development Manager referred to a number of legal issues which had been raised previously, in terms of the long-term licensing or leasing of Council assets, for the purpose of PV installation. She stated that the long-term leasing of an asset could be regarded as the disposal of an asset and consequently, the Council could be obligated to obtain best value for money by testing the commercial market for its use. She stated further that the process had acted as an inhibitor in the development of those projects. Ms. Arbuckle provided the Working Group with an assurance that, in terms of roof solar panels, there was no restriction in connection with the Council being tied into a closed, long-term lease agreement and that the solar panels could be removed, from any Council owned asset, without any financial penalty. The Sustainability Manager suggested that Legal Services be consulted in any future green energy projects, involving Council assets, to ensure compliance with its policies and legal obligations.

The Working Group noted the information provided and agreed, subject to confirmation by the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee, that a site visit be undertaken to Edenderry Village, to view the development site associated with the community energy proposals for the village. The Working Group expressed their gratitude to the presenters for their detailed and informative presentations. The Members expressed their hopes that the issues of climate change and future green energy projects would be given the priority attributed to them, given that the issues under discussion had now been elevated to a Council committee decision making forum.

### **Update on BCC Climate Plan**

The Climate Commissioner provided an update on the progress which had been made on the completion of the Council's climate plan. The Members were informed that evidence continued to be collected to ensure that Council investments, in green energy developments, provided the greatest return and had the maximum benefit, in the reduction of the Council's

emissions. The Climate Commissioner reported that, following completion of the sustainability review, the Council's emissions baseline was being finalised, prior to its publication. She reported that the next stage of the process involved an energy audit of five Council buildings.

The Members were informed that eighty-five per cent of Council generated emissions (scope 1 and 2) came from its buildings with the remainder attributable mostly to its fleet. The Climate Commissioner reported that it was proposed that the terms of reference, in regard to the Council's climate risk assessment, would be presented to the programme board, in the near future, in order to map out those areas of the city which presented the greatest risk to council assets including, the identification of mitigation measures to reduce that risk.

The Members were informed that, within the Council's climate fund, fifteen climate pilot projects had been approved and that a number of other potential projects were being explored. The Climate Commissioner stated that additional external resources would be required to manage and monitor delivery of the climate action plan, including the need to establish accountability and delivery mechanisms, at departmental level, to ensure that Council departments were accountable for their emissions profiles and monitoring programmes.

The Climate Commissioner highlighted the importance attached to the development of a comprehensive investment plan which was required to upgrade Council owned assets and ensure their compatibility with future emissions targets.

A Member voiced concerns in regard to ensuring that climate mitigation actions were communicated, in a clear and concise manner, so that the public were supportive of future climate mitigation measures. He cited the recent adverse publicity created by the Department for Infrastructure's flood defence project, on the Stranmillis Embankment, and the need for the development of a climate communications strategy to avert a similar occurrence. The Member voiced his concern that his proposals, regarding the future development of Beechvale Farm, had not been progressed and suggested that appropriate horticultural apprenticeship schemes be developed to encourage both interest and employment, for young people, in the emerging green economy.

Noted.

### **All Party Working Group on Climate Change and Brexit Committee Merge**

The Climate Commissioner highlighted her concerns in regard to the resource impact on her team in servicing a Committee, as opposed to a Working Group, and the fact that the issue of broader city resilience (to other shocks and stresses such as a public health emergency, cyber-security, energy crisis etc.) might not be given the same level of priority, given that the focus of the Committee was weighted in terms of climate change. She highlighted her concerns that changes in the Committee reporting mechanisms could impact adversely in determining the allocation of resources in the prioritisation of climate resilience and mitigation measures. The Resilience Coordinator stated that the Committee had the authority to modify its terms of reference to include climate resilience as part of its portfolio.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Working Group, noted the information provided and thanked the reporting officers and staff of Democratic Services in supporting the requirements of the Working Group throughout its tenure.

Chairperson