

**JANUARY 2022**



**Rural  
Community  
Network**

## **Climate Change Bills update**

In previous editions of Policy Link, we have tracked the progress of the two Climate Change Bills through the legislative process. The first Climate Change Bill is the Private Members' Bill sponsored by Green Party leader Claire Bailey MLA and supported by all parties except the DUP. The second Climate Change Bill is an Executive Bill brought by Minister Edwin Poots. The key difference between the two Bills is that Bill number 1 proposes a target of net zero carbon for Northern Ireland by 2045, and Bill number 2 proposes a reduction in carbon of 82% by 2050.

Both Bills have been subject to a Call for Evidence process initiated by the Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs Committee ([link](#)). On 20 January the Committee completed its scrutiny of Climate Change Bill 2 - the report is available [here](#). It will now progress to further consideration stage in the Assembly. The Committee has also completed its report on Climate Change Bill 1 - available [here](#). Climate Change Bill 2 (the Minister's Bill) is now at Consideration Stage and has jumped ahead of Bill 1 as Executive Bills take priority in scheduling over Private Members' Bills. The No. 2 Bill was scheduled for Consideration by MLAs on Tuesday 1 and Wednesday 2 February and an extensive list of amendments were proposed by MLAs which can be read [here](#). The Assembly voted to amend the Minister's Bill so a net zero target for 2050 was inserted. The Minister has stated in media interviews that he will seek further amendments to the Bill to shape it to his original policy intentions and that he fundamentally opposes the net zero target. The final wording of the Bill may change considerably throughout this Stage depending on the level of support amongst MLAs for the various amendments.

By our next edition of Policy Link the outcomes of both Climate Change Bills should be clearer.

## Welfare mitigations package loopholes closed

Welfare mitigations in Northern Ireland were extended for a further 3 years in November 2021. Legislation was introduced which will ensure welfare mitigations remain in place which will compensate people who would have seen their benefits reduced due to the Bedroom Tax. It will also close loopholes in social security legislation which would have meant a reduction in benefits to over 600 families (due to the imposition of restrictions on payments to families under the benefit cap). The enhanced level of support means that thousands of people will benefit over the next three years from a package of over £120M. This is welcome as the cost of living crisis with energy bills soaring and the price of many basic foodstuffs is increasing by much more than the official inflation rate of around 5%, click [here](#) for article on increase in basic foodstuffs.

## Independent Review of Welfare Mitigations

Communities Minister Deirdre Hargey MLA has also commissioned an Independent Advisory Panel to Review Welfare Mitigations in NI. The Panel is chaired by former Chief Commissioner of the Human Rights Commission Les Allamby. The panel includes a range of people with experience of the social security system or of providing support to people who access benefits. The Minister has asked the Panel to produce a report by the end of February 2022. The commitment to an Independent Review of Welfare Reform Mitigations was a commitment in the New Decade New Approach deal and the Panel is working to complete its review. Panel Chair Les Allamby said:

“With the loss of the extra £20 a week in Universal Credit, the end of the furlough scheme and the increase in fuel prices, the need for social security mitigations to go towards keeping people out of poverty remains as important as ever.”

## Energy Strategy and Action Plan Published

The Energy Strategy was launched by Economy Minister Gordon Lyons in December. RCN responded to the Department’s consultation on Policy Options for the Energy Strategy which closed in July and can be viewed [here](#). In it we stressed the additional challenges of de-carbonising home heating and transport in rural communities and the need for just transition principles to underpin the Strategy. The Energy Strategy can be read [here](#). The key aims of the Strategy are:

- On energy efficiency: to deliver energy savings of 25% from buildings and industry by 2030;
- Renewables: meet at least 70% of electricity consumption from a diverse mix of renewable sources by 2030; and
- Green economy: double the size of our low carbon and renewable energy economy to a turnover of more than £2billion by 2030.

Some of the headline objectives are:

- Invest in green innovation and low carbon technologies;
- Substantially increase funding and support for retrofitting buildings;
- Develop and deliver a Local Transport Strategy;
- Phase out fossil fuel heating oil; and
- Adopt policies that facilitate active consumers and energy communities.

The Strategy contains some far-reaching headline objectives with the potential to have a big impact in rural communities. A 22 point Action Plan emerging from the Energy Strategy was published by the Minister on 20 January click [here](#) to view. Some of the initial actions include:

- Deliver £10m of funding through a new Green Innovation Challenge Fund;
- Consult on a renewable electricity support scheme in 2022 for delivery in 2023;
- Develop an action plan to deliver 1GW of offshore wind from 2030;
- Develop and commence delivery of low carbon heat demonstrator projects; and
- Publish an EV infrastructure action plan.

If these objectives are achieved, as well as de-carbonising they could make a big difference to households suffering from fuel poverty which has rocketed over the past six months with the increase in energy bills but that's in the medium to long term. For people who can't afford to heat their homes right now immediate intervention is needed and the Executive has introduced two schemes to try and help households in fuel poverty with their fuel bills (see article below).

Environmental campaigners have raised concerns about the references to hydrogen technology in the Energy Strategy that will trial carbon capture technologies to enable the production of "blue hydrogen" which is derived from gas. This is a direct contradiction with the policy aim to reduce carbon as carbon capture has proved to be hugely expensive and campaigners fear will encourage the development of fracking which brings huge environmental damage.

## Fuel Poverty Payment Schemes Announced as Bills Rocket

The Communities Minister Deirdre Hargey MLA has announced two schemes in January to help households who are hardest hit by the spiralling costs of energy. The first scheme announced was the Emergency Fuel Support Scheme which provides a top up of £100 to households which can be spent on gas, oil, or electricity if the household is at risk of being cut off. There is a range of qualifying criteria which households must meet to qualify for this scheme and applications can be made online or by telephone. Applications are open until the end of March 2022 but only a set number of applications are accepted each day. This has led to frustration from people who have been trying to apply. Details of eligibility and the application process are available from the Bryson House website [here](#).

A further Energy Payment Support Scheme will make a one-off payment of £200 to approximately 280,000 households. There is no need to apply for this scheme as payments will be made automatically to people who were accessing any of the following qualifying benefits during any part of the week Monday 13th December to Sunday 19th December 2021 inclusive:

- Pension Credit;
- Universal Credit;
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance;
- Income-based Jobseekers Allowance; or
- Income Support.

However, there is a need for the NI Assembly to fast track the legislation needed to allow these payments to be made. If legislation can be passed quickly it will provide some much-needed respite for the poorest households. However, this is only a short-term measure as inflation continues to rise and energy costs and basic food prices are predicted to continue rising well into 2022. For further information on this scheme click [here](#).

## Environment Strategy response

RCN responded to the DAERA consultation on an Environment Strategy for Northern Ireland which closed in January. The Environment Strategy can be viewed [here](#). Our response is available [here](#). In our response we were critical of the absence of targets and actions for the strategic environmental outcomes identified. The strategy includes much discussion on the need for development and implementation of action plans, strategies, and management plans but relatively few actual targets have been set and only a few tangible actions are identified.

Environmental organisations in NI have also been critical of the Strategy which contains more unambitious targets than comparable strategies in other devolved administrations. DAERA officials charged with developing the Strategy were questioned by MLAs at the AERA Committee. MLAs on the Committee were critical of the unambitious targets within the Strategy and raised questions in relation to air pollution targets, targets to increase tree cover and how the Environment Strategy would “read across” to other strategies the NI Executive was bringing forward.

See links below for further media coverage of the issues.

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/jan/18/northern-ireland-environment-plan-weak-flawed-dirty-corner-europe>

<https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/northern-ireland-officials-told-environment-22743786>

## Housing Supply Strategy Consultation

The Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey MLA, has launched a draft Housing Supply Strategy consultation. The consultation document is available [here](#) and responses to the consultation must be submitted by 9<sup>th</sup> February. Minister Hargey launched the consultation by setting out her vision for the construction of 100,000 homes across all tenures over the next 15 years. The Minister also stated that she wants at least one third of the 100,000 total to be social homes. The consultation follows a Call for Evidence on housing supply strategy which RCN responded to last year which can be read [here](#) highlighting the importance of ensuring social housing is provided in rural settlements to meet housing need.

The consultation document acknowledges that our housing supply challenges are:

“Substantial and deep-rooted, as illustrated by increasing levels of housing stress and homelessness, the widening gap between housing requirements and new housing supply and the growing affordability and accessibility problems facing both first-time buyers and renters.”

The strategy then asks consultees to address key questions such as:

- How do we supply the right number and type of affordable homes in the right places to meet housing need?
- How can we prevent homelessness and reduce housing stress as well as providing the right types of support and services for those in most need?
- How can we improve the quality, efficiency, and design of homes?
- How can the construction of new housing and retrofitting of existing homes help us meet carbon reduction targets?

RCN has long campaigned for more social housing in rural settlements as the rural target for new social homes in rural communities has been missed in 6 of the last 7 years. We welcome the launch of the consultation and hope to see a strong commitment to social and affordable homes in rural communities over the next decade.

## DfC consultation on Intermediate Rent

RCN responded to the Department for Communities policy proposals on an Intermediate Rent Model available [here](#). The Intermediate Rent Model proposed by the Department aims to offer a subsidised rent to households who cannot afford to buy a home on the private market but are ineligible for social housing. Intermediate Rent aims to support households for up to 5 years by offering homes at a discount rent (the consultation suggests Intermediate Rent may be 80% of rent in the private rented sector). In theory, this should allow these households to save towards a deposit for a mortgage whilst providing them with decent housing and a secure tenancy. RCN responded to the consultation informed by views from our Rural Residents' Forum and South Tyrone Empowerment Programme whose staff work to ensure that people know their housing rights and support people in tackling exploitation in the private rental market in mid Ulster.

The main concern we have is that the Model proposed may mean that tenants will still be forced to pay a significant proportion of their income in rent. In many rural communities in areas of high housing demand in council areas such as: Mid Ulster/Armagh Banbridge, Craigavon/Newry Mourne & Down/Causeway Coast & Glens rent on a family home in the private rented sector can average between £600-£800 per month. A 20% discount will still mean this level of rent costs £480-£640 per month, an annual outlay of £5,760-£7,680.

For those households at the bottom of the suggested income eligibility band for Intermediate Rent i.e., earning £18,000 per annum any annual rental costs over £4,500 represents more than 25% of their household income. So, in these higher demand areas the Intermediate Rent Model proposed may not meet the policy intention to reduce housing costs below the 25% of overall income target.

Our response to the consultation can be read [here](#).



## Review of strategic planning policy on renewable/low carbon energy

The Department for Infrastructure is currently consulting on a Review of Strategic Planning Policy on Renewable and Low Carbon Energy available [here](#). The Department is seeking views from stakeholders on planning policy in relation to the siting of renewable and low carbon energy. This links to the Energy Strategy and Action Plan which sets a target of meeting at least 70% of electricity consumption needs from a diverse mix of renewable sources by 2030. The short issues paper seeks views on the following specific planning matters:

- Energy targets & strategic planning policy;
- Locational considerations;
- Siting new wind farms in perpetuity;
- Wind turbines & amenity considerations;
- Decommissioning and site restoration for new development;
- Solar farms and agricultural land;
- Co-locating renewable, low carbon and supporting infrastructure;
- Re-powering existing wind farms; and
- Emerging technologies and other issues.

RCN is concerned that the policy may be altered to allow new wind farms to be sited in “perpetuity” bearing in mind how renewable technology may change and the need to engage with communities on how they may be impacted. The key issue of locational considerations asks for views on a more strategic approach for the siting of wind and solar farms.

The review closes on 9 February 2022.

## FICT report launched

The Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition report was finally published in December following a long delay. The Commission had been launched 5 years ago and consisted of a 15-member panel made up of seven political appointees and eight non-political. It engaged in a widespread consultation exercise across NI to examine controversial issues related to the display of flags and emblems and other expressions of identity, culture and tradition. The 168 page report is available to read [here](#) and contains around 45 recommendations. It also contains an Annex titled “Where Challenges Remain” setting out the areas within the Commission’s remit where it was unable to come to a consensus view.

The panel could not agree on recommendations to tackle many of the disputes around flags and emblems displayed on lampposts or other street furniture. The report included detailed ideas for flags protocols but was unable to make solid recommendations as there was no agreement amongst members on how legislation could be developed. There is no political agreement between the NI Executive parties on how to progress the recommendations in the report. The commission was able to agree some recommendations around bonfires, but it is unclear whether any of the recommendations will be implemented. What is clear is that there will be no movement on these issues in this Assembly mandate as political agreement on the next steps does not currently exist. Whether any future NI Executive will re-visit the recommendations in the report remains to be seen.

## Department of Finance budget consultation

The Department of Finance is currently seeking views on the draft budget for Northern Ireland. The consultation can be accessed [here](#)

This is the first time in many years that the NI Executive has presented a three-year draft budget instead of a single year budget. In theory, this should mean more flexibility to award funding towards projects and services that will take longer than one year to complete. In previous one year budget cycles funding could only be allocated up until the end of a particular financial year.

Finance Minister Conor Murphy MLA stated that the Executive continues to face significant financial challenges with pressures most acutely felt within the health and social care service. His foreword to the Budget consultation continues that the Executive has agreed that its top budget priority is health. However, due to an uplift in the Health and Social Care budget all other Departments will see reductions in funding so extra resources can go towards health and social care and difficult choices will need to be taken.

The consultation closes on 7 March 2022.

## Call for Views: TEO Equally Safe: Violence Against Women and Girls

### Strategy and DOH/DOJ Domestic Abuse and Sexual Abuse Strategies – Deadline 7<sup>th</sup> March 2022

There is an open call for views on two extremely important strategies that are currently being developed. This includes the [‘Equally Safe: Strategy to Tackle Violence Against Women and Girls’](#) and the [Department of Health and Department of Justice Domestic Abuse and Sexual Abuse Strategy](#).

Both strategies are particularly important given the extremely high levels of violence against women, particularly rural women. You are invited and encouraged to share your views on issues that could help inform their content, actions, and overall direction of the two strategies:

*“We want to build on work that has already been undertaken on domestic and sexual abuse, recognising that anyone can be affected, that this is everyone’s business and that responsibility for tackling these issues is shared by all. This is not simply a private matter.*

*On the Equally Safe Strategy, a Strategy to tackle Violence Against Women and Girls, this is intended to tackle violent and abusive behaviour directed at women and girls precisely because they are women and girls. This strategy will reach more widely to include other acts and threats of gender-based violence that result in, or may result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, whether occurring in public or in private life, in the physical world or online.”*

There are several ways to respond to these surveys or get involved in this work:

- Two online surveys available for those aged 16 and above; one for the [general public](#) and one for [victims with lived experience](#) of domestic and sexual abuse,
- Submitting additional evidence through a written response (similar to the Women’s Policy Group response) via Citizen Space.
- Attend an online public engagement event or stakeholder focus group.

More information on all of the above is available [here](#).

## Women – The Women’s Policy Group NI wants to hear your views on addressing Violence Against Women and Girls in Northern Ireland

The Women’s Policy Group (NI) is asking women to complete this short [survey](#) to gather views on issues relating to the development of a Violence Against Women and Girls strategy for NI.

Statistics show that Northern Ireland is the most dangerous place in Europe to be a woman, with three times more murders of women than England or Wales, yet Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK or Ireland without a strategy to tackle Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). This is an issue that can be particularly bad for rural women, with greater levels of under-reporting and increased barriers to accessing support.

After years of women’s sector lobbying, the Executive Office is finally starting to develop a strategy, and we are asking for the views of women to inform our written response. We want to ensure that the lived experiences and views from women shape this strategy so that it is as robust and enforceable as possible.

If you are a woman based in Northern Ireland, please share your views with us in this short survey. All responses are completely anonymous.

Complete the survey below (approx. 5-15 minutes long):  
<https://bit.ly/3GMszu9>

Survey deadline – **Monday 14<sup>th</sup> February 2022 at 12pm.**

Please note, this survey mentions various types of violence and abuse against women which some may find distressing. [Here](#) is a list of support organisations in case you need to reach out for support.

This survey has 27 questions in total. Only the tick box questions require responses. All other questions are optional. You are welcome to share

your own experiences if you feel comfortable and these responses will be kept fully anonymous. While this survey is completely anonymous, we ask some demographic questions at the beginning to ensure we are reaching a wide and diverse group of women

. Rachel Powell Women's Sector Lobbyist WRDA



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