

Minutes

All Party Group on Climate Action

11 December 2020 | 10:00am

at Virtual

Members in attendance: Rachel Woods MLA, Andrew Muir MLA, Jim Wells MLA, Kellie Armstrong MLA, Dr Steve Aiken MLA, Cllr Kathryn McNickle (ANDBC), Cllr Donal McPeake (MUDC), Cllr Roisin Lynch (ANBC), Cllr Siobhan Currie (FODC), Cllr Mary Durkan (DCSDC)

In attendance: Nichola Hughes (SNI), Allison Miller (SNI), Andrew Frew (NIHE), Anna Kernahan (Fridays for Future), Arlene McGowan (DAERA), Charlotte Daly (FODC), Christine Watts (NI Assembly), Geraldine Noe (BITCNI), Johnny Stewart (Weber Shandwick), Leo Strawbridge (DCSDC), Robert Clements (NIHE), Shauna Doherty (Ulster University), Linda Hyland (DfE), Barry McCarron (SWC), Paul McCormack (BMC), Ciaran Fox (RSUA), Clarke Bailie (NIHE), Peter Roberts (NIHE), Andy Kennedy (NIHE), Karen Trehame, Rick Treacy, Judith Gray, A Blythe, Sean Maxwell, David Morrow, Chris Martin, Ricky Bamford (Green Party), Amanda Slevin (QUB), Catherine Hunter (MEABC), Kate Livingston (Alliance Party), Alexandra Gibson, Brian Rankin, Sinead Mclvor (Green Party), Paul Isherwood (NIHE), Justin Cartwright (CIH), Scott Howes (KNIB), Joanne Sherwood (RSPB NI), Donna Knowles (DfC), Ian McCurley (Woodland Trust), Ian Gordon, Malachai O'Hara, Clare McKeown (BCC), Patrick Thompson (NIFHA), David Cowdrey (MCS), John Ross, Stephen Jones (Climate NI), Phillip Wright (UU), Colin McCrossan (SIB), Heidi Clarke (SIB), Arlene McGowan, Daithi McKay (RSPB NI), Anita McConway (Radius Housing), Jaqueline Gibson (Belfast Harbour), Colin Breen (DAERA), Natalie O'Rourke (DfC), Anne Menary (DfC), Iain Greenway (DfC), Yvonne Curran (DfE)

Apologies: John Blair MLA, Phillip McGuigan MLA, Pat Catney MLA, Cllr Billy Webb (ANBC), Cllr Robert Irvine (FODC), Cllr Terry Andrews (NMDDC), Cllr Peter McReynolds (BCC), Cllr Martin Gregg (LCCC), Natalie O'Rourke, Steven Agnew (Renewables NI), Jim Mairs (Landlord Association NI), John Barry (QUB), Joseph Ireland (QUB), Cara Cash-Marley (Groundwork NI)

1. Welcome
Rachel Woods MLA (RW), Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies were recorded.
RW welcomed the speakers, Barry McCarron, Paul McCormack, Ciaran Fox, Clarke Bailie and Andy Kennedy.
RW noted the updates on departmental activity regarding climate change. The CCC launched the 6 th UK carbon budget on Wednesday (8 Dec). Headline, NI has been advised to cut its carbon emissions by at least 82% by 2050, to help the UK achieve its Net Zero ambitions, so we have much to do. In November RSPB NI, published a Five Point Green Recovery Plan for Northern Ireland, which has been well received.

Note a request from RSPB NI to present to the group on the topic of nature-based solutions in the New Year, very much welcome this and hope members are agreeable. Department for the Economy to review its policies around petroleum licencing and has been engaging with the environment sector to seek views on this.

DAERA Minister has launched a consultation paper on a Northern Ireland Climate Change Bill. Also discussion document highlighting three specific elements of the UK Government Environmental Bill currently in Parliament on Environmental Plans, Principles and Governance for Northern Ireland – post Brexit.

Minutes from 19 August and 28 October meetings were accepted as a true record. August minutes proposed by Kellie Armstrong and seconded by Siobhan Currie. October minutes proposed by Jim Wells and seconded by Kellie Armstrong.

2 Presentation 1

RW welcomed Barry McCarron to discuss low carbon retrofit and construction methods and Paul McCormack to present on the decarbonisation of home heating.

Presentation 1a:

Dr Barry McCarron, Acting Head of Business Development at South West College: Low carbon Retrofit and Construction Methods. Slides available to download [here](#)

Contact details:

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T: (028) 6634 2301

Discussion

Barry McCarron (BMcC): Highlighted the five Passive House Principles: 1) High levels of insulation, 2) Thermal Bridging, 3) Triple-glazed windows, 4) Mechanical heat recovery system, 5) Airtight ventilation system

Presentation 1b:

Paul McCormack, Interreg North West Europe GenComm: Decarbonisation of home heating. Slides available to download [here](#).

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Discussion

Jim Wells (JW) queried the total cost of carbon of Passive House projects and if a Lifecycle Carbon Analysis had been carried out for the new Enniskillen campus. Barry McCarron (BMcC) explained that Passive House Standard deals with operational energy only but that the Standard is moving towards addressing embodied carbon. The Erne Campus has achieved the BREEAM Outstanding Standard. Highlighted two key considerations when building: 1) Should you be constructing a new building? 2) Material selection – going down the road of green materials, embodied carbon will be addressed more and more. JW Commented on the need to take in to account the whole-life environmental cost of interventions.

Kellie Armstrong (KA) enquired about the issue of mould in homes and asked BMcC what the five principles of Passive House design were once again. Noted mould is prevalent in buildings, so retrofitting to current standards is not necessarily a solution.

Commented that she previously worked for CHS and queried if there is any research on health implications for people living in an airtight home. Kellie also highlighted our unique situation in NI, an abundance of wind and water, would encourage use of tidal energy (KA advocate, coming from Strangford constituency). Question for Paul McCormack (PMcC) if we should be considering NI Water as one of our biggest energy users to actually produce hydrogen?

BMcC responded to the query about airtightness of buildings, mould and health, his PhD research results were overwhelmingly positive in favour of the use of Passive House design standards and links with positive health outcomes. Mould and condensation can be an issue, he highlighted that if you make a building airtight it must always be accompanied by some form of mechanical ventilation and mechanical balanced heat recovery (must be fitted correctly) to ensure good indoor air quality. Important point in retrofitting, natural ventilation is incompatible with making a building airtight. Again, he stressed the five principles of the Passive House Certification Standard:

1. Low U-Values
2. Airtightness
3. Thermal bridge free
4. Triple glazing
5. Mechanical ventilation (with over 75% heat recovery)

KA Equated this scenario as having air conditioning fitted in a car for cold air and then driving with the windows open. BMcC agreed with this analogy. An airtight envelope should not be feared, if all five principles are observed.

Paul McCormack (PMcC) answered KA, Energia and other energy providers are working with NI Water to explore opportunities to reduce their carbon footprint in the first instance. Tender out at the moment looking at electrolysis at a water treatment plant as part of the GenComm project. With French partners GennComm is looking at waste water treatment and whether electrolysis can be used to produce electricity and clean the water at the same time. Some Water Waste Treatment plants in England are already doing this.

RW read out Catherine Hunter's (CH) question for BMcC. Enquired what opportunities there are for funding to retrofit the Council estate? BMcC noted this is key in terms of reducing carbon emissions and lowering costs in government and public buildings however there isn't much funding available, despite Westminster providing a fund for English public authorities. Highlighted Councils active in this area; Norfolk, Norwich, Exeter, Glasgow, Manchester and Birmingham. They are embracing the Passive House standard for retrofit and new build works. Recent council examples in the UK:

<https://ukphc.org.uk/ukphc20-programme#18Nov> and
https://www.passivhaustrust.org.uk/guidance_detail.php?gld=42 and
https://www.passivhaustrust.org.uk/other_publications.php and
<https://www.passivhaustrust.org.uk/guidance.php>

UK Passive House Conference link, Passivhaus and Net Zero:

<https://ukphc.org.uk/ukphc20-programme#18Nov>

Andy Frew (AF) noted a lot of wasted wind energy (17%) that hot water cylinders could accept, importance of using technology already in homes. Wind energy is expanding and commented that the plants to produce hydrogen are quite expensive to run all the time. Queried if there was any complementarity in heating water, probably at night and building hydrogen plants that need more constant power.

Amazon example, building windfarms creating spare wind energy on the grid.

PMcC noted the GenComm project is looking at how to maximise energy opportunities from wind energy curtailment e.g. production of hydrogen and using it as a convenient energy storage medium. He noted that communities are currently at the end of the grid at the moment, and the need to be at the start i.e. energy producers.

AF noted that producing hydrogen is four times more expensive than using electricity directly. Rural communities have oil tanks, suggests using that energy first where it's most efficient. In rolling out the supply of energy and displacing imports, it's more cost effective to use the technologies we have already.

BMcC indicated that fossil fuel is too easy to access. Need hybrid solutions to maximise all opportunities, there is no silver bullet. Integrated solutions are required rather than one-offs. (Shared a link: hydrogen combined with energy efficient homes -<https://mk0ukphcy5noe4o692q.kinstacdn.com/wp-content/uploads/UKPHC20-Chris-Twinn-Can-Hydrogen-Help.pdf>)

RW Thanked Barry McCarron and Paul McCormack for their presentations and both speakers indicated they would be happy to answer further questions.

3 Presentation 2: Policy levers for decarbonisation of the housing stock

RW welcomed Ciaran Fox, Director of The Royal Society of Ulster Architects (RSUA) and Chair of the Climate NI Steering Group to give a presentation on the Decarbonisation of NI Housing Stock - Potential Policy Levers. Slides available to download [here](#).

Contact details:
 E: Ciaran@rsua.org.uk
 T: 028 9032 3760

RW thanked Ciaran for his presentation and welcomed the approaches outlined. Very interested in the concept of a Low Carbon Neighbourhood Authority. Explained this would be particularly appropriate for terraced housing in densely populated in town centres, in areas with high rates of fuel poverty. Enquired whether such an authority is established in other jurisdictions.

A detailed discussion and Q&A followed.

Ciaran Fox (CF) commented that the Strategic Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) has a wide-ranging role and is looking at neighbourhood energy approaches. Concern is that if there isn't an authority for local energy, it will fall between too many departments. Explained that terraced housing heating choices are complicated, if for example one resident has just installed a new gas boiler, they won't necessarily want to participate in any new area-based community heating scheme. Need to look at collective issues for example land use, connectivity, the role of alleyways. Outlined that a neighbourhood approach to energy and climate action a big challenge, but could be very effective with a cross-departmental approach.

Kellie Armstrong (KA) Dept of Finance considering amendments to planning permission and planning regulations at present. Questioned if there is currently an appetite within the Department to initiate the innovative changes proposed. CF noted the Building Regulations Team within DoF is in a difficult situation, currently going into the New Year with a lack of clarity on the law regarding building standards. New

regulations are due next year, but likely to fall short of proposed standards in England. On the planning side, led by Dfl, he gets a sense there is no appetite for change. Planning changes don't come quickly. In terms of area-based planning process, the low-carbon agenda needs to be considered now and neighbourhood retrofits need to be planned in advance, not easy to do after a development is built. There is a window of opportunity to address these issues through the planning system, but is concerned there is a lack of ambition in Northern Ireland. In terms of the role of local planning authorities, in England, local authorities are asking developers to go above and beyond minimum building regulations on energy efficiency and renewable energy / heating technologies. Councils have the option to do this here, but it isn't commonly used.

KA Questioned whether the responsibility for energy in buildings should be shifted out of Department of Finance (DoF) into the Department for Infrastructure (Dfi) so it's all in one place. CF indicated that whilst this may help, the real issue is that it is under-resourced and has been for years.

Justin Cartwright (JC) congratulated Ciaran on his presentation. Queried the point on public spend effectiveness, like the Affordable Warmth Scheme, vital for tackling fuel poverty, however there is no consideration of reducing carbon. Questioned opportunities for considering low carbon aims when tackling fuel poverty. CF noted that a caring element drives policy here. There is positive support for those who are most vulnerable in terms of heating. The focus however is on energy, without consideration of carbon and addressing the root cause of fuel poverty in terms of the building fabric. Agreed carbon needs to be factored in and hasn't been a priority to date.

Andy Frew (AF) highlighted the need for higher building standards to increase economy of scale and reduce costs for the much larger energy retrofitting sector (relative to new build). He noted builders will never pay over the odds for improvements if they don't have to e.g., external wall insulation.

CF: addressing new build is easier, we can quickly design and build to new standards, retrofitting our existing buildings is the big challenge. It presents lots of questions, heating source, considerations for mould, who will do the work, who takes responsibility if mould or air quality problems develop. RSUA to issue a paper on this soon. Recognised the need for quality control and that someone needs to be responsible for signing off the work.

AF highlighted that architects need to be trained in retrofitting. CF agreed. RW recognised politicians need to be driving this forward, having these conversations now and driving policy ideas in this area.

David Cowdrey (DC) enquired whether building regulations should be introduced to require zero carbon heating options from the outset, to avoid expensive retrofit down the line. Off the shelf solutions already exist like heat pumps. Should there be zero carbon options in new planning regulations?

CF: Net zero energy buildings legislation needs to be implemented. The likelihood is that in ten years we'll need to retrofit buildings put up today, as current building regulations aren't good enough.

RW thanked Ciaran Fox for his informative presentation and for highlighting important issues to members, and thanked everyone for their questions. RW noted that more time could be allocated at a future meeting to explore these matters

	further.
4	<p>Presentation 3: Decarbonising the social housing stock – challenges and opportunities</p> <p>RW introduced an update from the social housing sector from NI Housing Executive (NIHE and colleagues from other housing associations. RW highlighted the importance of this issue and referenced the Minister for Communities recent statement to the House regarding the future of NIHE and social housing stock in NI. Apologies noted on behalf of Jim Mairs of the Landlords Association who could not attend the meeting, his comments will be read out following the presentations.</p> <p>Clarke Bailie (CB), Chief Executive of NIHE indicated the organisation takes this issue extremely seriously. Listening to others has highlighted how much work needs to be done. NIHE focus has been on improving the fabric of buildings ('fabric first'), this includes their own stock and privately owned stock. Recognised that many of their customers are on low incomes, have health issues and are in fuel poverty. Access to affordable heat is vital.</p> <p>Introduced NIHE Chair, Professor Peter Roberts (PR) who has a long-standing personal and academic interest in the field of climate change and housing, which is shared at board level.</p> <p>Peter Roberts (PR) noted this is a board-led activity, working in tandem with Clarke, his colleagues at NIHE and a wide range of partners across NI. NIHE can play a major role in tackling climate change proactively, through mitigation measures and active stock management. Wider evidence demonstrates NI is similar to other places. Sustainability Research Institute, who conduct the Mini Stern Reviews, acknowledges housing is a key sector for NI, along with transport and public buildings in order to hit our climate change targets. We need to go beyond our own organisation and in partnership with local councils, planning and community planning systems.</p> <p>Need to consider things like aspect orientation, layout and location and ensure access to active and public transport and ensure homes are sized and laid out appropriately, so people can live and work at home sustainably. Finally, he noted that we need to stop adding to the carbon burden. Houses in 2018-19 were being built to SAP B and C, the requirement of building regulations. This is simply not good enough, we are not dealing with the fuel poverty issue and adding to the climate burden. Will need to retrofit these houses in 5, 10, or 15 years' time. Currently retrofitting is costing £21k per unit, and with building cost inflation currently running at almost 10%, will need to pay another £30k in five years' time to retrofit these houses further. This is not good value for money for the public purse. Would urge NI Audit Office to look at this issue and the cost of not raising building regulations to SAP A or immediately, and zero carbon within five years. NIHE is committed to work on its own stock and support others to look at theirs, strong case for social housing to become a field leader and set examples of good performance.</p> <p>CB handed over to Andy Kennedy to present.</p> <p>Presentation: Decarbonisation of Social Housing: Challenges and Opportunities Andy Kennedy, Assistant Director, Asset Strategy, NIHE. The slides are available to download here.</p> <p>Contact details: E: Andy.Kennedy@NIHE.GOV.UK</p>

Discussion

John Ross (JR) discussed legacy issues relating to defective insulation causing mould and damp. He noted the importance of insulating cavity walls correctly and separating the external and internal walls (no thermal bridges).

Andy Kennedy (AK) clarified the implication is not that everything is caused by condensation, tenant behaviour also can play a role. Noted Adrian Blythe had responsibility for the NIHE retrofit pilot in Newry (at NIHE)

Adrian Blythe (AB) indicated that there was a good baseline across the social housing stock, as there are cavity walls to start with. Noted a need to review ventilation, insulation and heating as a comprehensive approach.

RW enquired whether NIHE could adopt Passive House design standards for all new builds going forward, or whether it would require Ministerial direction. CB indicated there was an aspiration to do this, however they need direction from the Department who set the standard for new builds and funding the implications of this. Momentum building towards this. PR indicated the longer the move from SAP B to SAP A and preferably to Passive House Standard is delayed, the greater the costs to the public and private purse above RPI or CPI inflation as building labour and material costs increase. More expensive for our children and grandchildren's generations. The delay will also contribute to fuel poverty for current occupants.

RW Proposed to MLAs to write to the Department as an All Party Group to establish their plans around Passive House and other issues. Will circulate draft for agreement.

Action 1: write to the Department of Communities as an All Party Group on plans for embedding Passive House design standards into new build properties.

Patrick Thompson (PT) Federation of Housing Associations echoed NIHE's concerns about fuel poverty and the cost of retrofit. Currently 55,800 properties across 20 associations. Currently social housing has slightly better energy efficiency standards than other tenures, but highlighted the costs in bringing them up to standards required to meet climate targets. Significant logistical issues in retrofitting, people are decanted from their properties for a period and cost. Highlighted concerns around the supply chain and capacity if everyone attempted to retrofit at the same time, risk of certain technologies becoming obsolete. Also need to consider housing targets, if houses are too expensive to retrofit and are taken out of supply, this would contribute to the waiting list for houses.

AK commented on the need to consider the measures and the costs for each type of property - both traditional and non-traditional. Adrian Blythe is currently looking at this with Andy Frew's team. £1.6bn doesn't include decant costs.

Ciaran Fox (CF) highlighted the age profile of NIHE stock, if assessment was only on energy performance, conclusion could be to demolish and rebuild most of the current stock, important that the assessment looks at the move towards net zero carbon. AK noted carbon is factored into the assessment process.

RW noted that some of this work could be industry and community led, as they can adapt transformational change a lot sooner than government. Not about changing

things in 30 to 40 years' time, we need to lay the groundwork now.

Kellie Armstrong (KA) noted that NIHE has huge budgetary issues to address – the corporation tax issue and huge retrofitting costs looming. New buildings have no issue with VAT. Enquired whether there had been any discussions with the Department, or Treasury, to stop millions going out of NIHE's budget in corporation tax. CB responded that NIHE can reclaim virtually all VAT but exemption on Corporation Tax (CT). If money collected in rent is not spent within the financial year, then NIHE is liable for CT. The issue has been referred to the Treasury by the current Minister. PR noted if the status changed, they wouldn't get back the £80m+ already paid in CT. This year, NIHE paid more in CT than Amazon and Starbucks combined.

Action 2: Write to the Minister for an update on the status of NIHE Corporation Tax.

Brian Rankin (BR) said it is critical not to address climate change in isolation from other societal issues. We must not introduce measures that increase energy costs and drive fuel poverty in the wrong direction. Consider new building regulations and a standard, based on dwelling emission rates that is carbon based.

Jim Wells (JW) noted that a lot had been packed into the meeting. Brilliant. Could have had it split over three sessions. Rachel Woods (RW) agreed, noting it was a joint meeting of the APG on Climate Action and APG on Housing. Read out comments from Jim Mairs (Landlords Association):

- There are no simple solutions, no miracle cure
- Strongly advocate insulation, but it must be done to very high standards i.e. the right kind of insulation in the right properties, otherwise it could create ventilation issues and lead to damp/mould in certain properties
- Retrofit programme will probably require significant grant aid
- Phasing out gas boilers unrealistic at present, should be kept under review
- Little alternatives to oil heating for rural properties at present
- Is concerned that that the noise, odours and traffic associated with anaerobic digesters and onshore wind turbines adversely affect local residents.

Anna Kernaghan joined the meeting briefly from a youth climate strike at Belfast City Hall, to mark the five-year anniversary of the Paris Agreement, the group joined Anna in a minute silence.

RW summarised actions / next steps:

- A letter will be sent to the Department for Communities from the All Party Group. The issue of the Corporation Tax status will also be included.
- Need to have a one-off AGM in January (inaugural meeting 24 January 2020). Accepted RSPB NI's request to speak to the group.
- Proposal to continue to meet on the last Friday of the month. Meeting dates proposed: 29 January, 26 March, 25 June, 24 September and 10 December 2021.
- RW thanked Nichola Hughes (NH) for her fantastic support as secretariat. NH to forward the recording of today's meeting, presentations and minutes
- RW wished everyone a good Christmas.

5	Date of Next Meeting
	The next meeting will be held on 29 January 2021 at 10.00 am.
6	Close

Meeting closed at 12.10. Meeting recording available [here](#).