

Minutes

All Party Group on Climate Action

21 September 2022 | 1:00 pm – 2:00 pm

At: Room 274, Parliament Building (Hybrid)

Members in attendance: Kate Nicholl MLA (Chair), John Blair MLA, Steve Aiken MLA, Harry Harvey MLA, Gerry Carroll MLA, Philip McGuigan MLA, Mark H Durkan MLA, Cllr Roisin Lynch, Cllr Simon Lee, Cllr Brian Smyth, Cllr Eddie Thompson, Cllr Maeve O'Neill, Cllr Michael Henderson, Cllr Martin Gregg.

In attendance: Nichola Hughes, David Surplus, Aiden Campbell, Fiona Cole, Kate Livingstone, Luke McKeown, Joseph Doherty, Colin Nugent, Tanya Hedley, John Bennett, Emma Adair, Rachael Singleton, Anne Artt, Andy Frew, Michelle Farmer, Karine McGuckin, Emma Bill, Bob Hanna, Ian Montgomery, Robert McCreery, Heidi Clarke, Eimear Montague, Joseph Ireland, Neil Harrison, Stephanie McEvoy, Elaine Smith, Michael Boyd, Declan Allison, Tom Woolley, Marie-Louise Gaile, Jason McKeown, Heather Young, Christine Watts, Cathy Burns, Mark Jones, Louise Breslin, Amy Holmes, Wayne McMeekin, Robert Jervis-Gibbons, Liam McNally, Tommy, Lisa Wilson, Patrick Thompson, Lesley Veronica, Colette Stewart, Anne Ford, Lisa Wilson, Joseph Kilroy, Rebecca Cluclow, David Thompson, Catherine McArdle, Daithi McKay, Mark Palmer, James Orr, Michelle Hill.

Attendees: 69

Apologies: Paula Bradshaw MLA, Eoin Tennyson MLA, Peter McReynolds MLA, Cllr Anne Forde, Cllr Terry Andrews, Cllr Donal McPeake.

1	Opening Remarks
1.1	<p>Kate Nicholl (KN), Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting.</p> <p>She noted that the Department for Economy had notified the Group at short notice that they would not be attending to provide a briefing on the Energy Strategy, despite having agreed to attend previously. She noted this was the third time that department officials had failed to turn up to deliver the briefing. She informed the group that she had written to the Minister's office to voice her disapproval and urged them to reconsider. She expressed her thanks to Aiden Campbell from Rural Communities Network for stepping in at short notice to speak about the energy and cost of living crisis.</p> <p>Steve Aiken (SA) proposed the Chair writes to the Minister to express the Group's displeasure and to cordially invite the Minister for Economy to outline the reasons for not attending.</p> <p>Action: KN to write on behalf of the All Party Group to the Minister for Economy requesting the reasons why a briefing on the Energy Strategy has not been provided.</p>
1.2	Apologies
	Apologies were recorded.

2	Meeting Admin
2.1	Minutes of meeting on 22 June 2022
	Minutes of the meeting on 22 June were approved: proposed by Harry Harvey (HH); seconded by John Blair (JB).
3	Energy and Cost of Living
	<p>KN welcomed Aiden Campbell to the meeting and invited him to set the scene for today's energy discussion by reflecting on the key issues affecting rural communities in relation to the energy crisis.</p> <p>AC highlighted the worsening problem of fuel poverty for rural communities in Northern Ireland. Key points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About 80% of rural homes run on home heating oil. The price of 500 litres has more than doubled from an average of £231 last September to £526 this September, with the average annual bill having gone up by nearly 150%. • People in rural communities may be less likely to shop around and remain loyal to their local oil provider and that oil buying clubs don't cover all rural NI and some are now closed to new members as they all rely on volunteers to price and collate orders. • Houses in rural areas are often older and are less well insulated. There are also more older people in rural communities living on fixed incomes with 12% of pensioners living in absolute poverty. • Rural households depend on cars for transport so the rise in petrol and diesel prices is another pressure on household budgets because for most rural communities there is no public transport alternative available. • Some people will be forced heat only one room using an open fire (wood, coal or turf) but the price of coal has also doubled since last year. Though it might be cheaper, most of the heat from open fires escapes up the chimney. • More people are going to go cold in their homes this winter they need help now to stay warm. <p>Contact: Aidan Campbell aidan@ruralcommunitynetwork.org</p> <p>KN thanked AC for his informative briefing. She invited questions from the group.</p> <p>JB asked if there has been much contact between DAERA's Rural Affairs division and Rural Communities Network?</p> <p>AC said that RCN had engaged in the DAERA Rural Development Framework consultation and fed back views on the importance of rural connectivity and mobility, including high-speed broadband, public transport (including bus services and light railway infrastructure) but that resourcing would be a political decision, acknowledging funding was most likely to come from UK Shared Prosperity Fund. He noted that the rural uplift element of that fund would not apply to Northern Ireland.</p> <p>HH noted that as well as fuel prices, the cost of second-hand vehicles is soaring, making owning and running a car more challenging for rural households. He asked if RCN still operate community transport services.</p> <p>AC said they do through Community Transport NI. He said community transport networks need to be part of a broader solution to combat isolation on a whole population basis. Rural households need access to a well-funded public transport network, connected with bicycles and cars to complete their journeys.</p> <p>GC asked why there is a lack of insulation in rural houses?</p>

	<p>AC said energy efficiency improvements, in particular fit-for-purpose insulation, should be prioritised as 'low-hanging fruit' and the cheaper solution to fuel poverty and to set money aside for this purpose. He noted there is only government support currently available for vulnerable households via the Affordable Warmth Scheme but there should be a government backed scheme for the rest of the population to improve the thermal efficiency of our homes.</p> <p>GC asked if there is a NI home condition audit that accurately detailed the state of the housing stock, including insulation?</p> <p>AC said he wasn't sure but that it should be the responsibility of DfC.</p> <p>SA noted the opportunities that green hydrogen as an energy carrier may present rural communities. He asked if RCN have had any discussions yet with rural councils and / or the Ulster Farmers Union about more future energy infrastructure and distribution models that lend themselves to rural networks?</p> <p>AC noted that Councils are mostly focussed on the decarbonisation of their fleet vehicles and the role hydrogen might play in that. He said they should be thinking about the potential for hydrogen at a population level, for example for community transport hubs the zero-carbon infrastructure needed to support them.</p> <p>AC also noted that community transport organisations are lobbying HMRC to increase the 45p per mile fuel allowance, as many volunteers are out of pocket. He agrees it would be a good idea to link green hydrogen solutions to community transport infrastructure planning but that this would need dedicated resourcing.</p> <p>KN thanked AC for attending.</p>
4	<p>Power-to-X Project</p>
	<p>KN welcomed David Surplus (DS) from B9 Energy Storage to the meeting and invited him to provide a short briefing on the Ballylumford Power-to-X Project.</p> <p>DS introduced himself, his company and provided a short overview of the Power-to-X Project which has recently been launched. Key points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • B9 Energy Storage, on behalf of a project consortium comprising Mutual Energy, Islandmagee Energy and Net Zero Technology Centre, has been awarded £986,000 funding as part of the Department of Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) Longer Duration Energy Storage (LODES) innovation competition. • The objective of the project is to produce demonstrably green hydrogen and oxygen from renewable energy sources such as wind and solar. The project will deploy a 20MWe electrolyser at Ballylumford to provide longer duration electrical balance for wind energy that would otherwise be curtailed. • The hydrogen will be distributed in a dedicated transmission pipeline and stored underground in a local salt cavern system for later use as carbon free fuel in both the transport and power generation sectors. The latter application will involve firing trials of a relocated 20MWe Open Cycle Gas Turbine (OCGT) typically used for electricity generation on oil and gas platforms and oil refineries. They expect to see successful fuel switching reach >70vol% H2 blend in natural gas. • Further firing trials of the OCGT module, operating in the part loaded conditions increasingly seen during wind farm curtailment episodes (inefficient), will be carried out with oxygen being added to combustion air to assess the benefits of Oxygen Enhanced Combustion on OCGT fuel efficiency. This technique could have a significant impact on reducing carbon intensity levels of the Electricity

Market.

- Results from the project will help inform future electrolyser deployment at GW scale, allow curtailment free connection of offshore wind farms at Ballylumford and help define effective security of supply solutions for the net zero era.

Contact:

David Surplus d.surplus@b9energy.co.uk

KN thanked **DS** for his contribution and invited questions from the group.

HH enquired how and where the electrolyser parts are sourced and whether NIE would be increasing grid capacity for renewables?

DS said they would be purchased on the open market, noting costs are still high as there isn't yet mass production happening. He said there is not enough time, money or copper to upgrade the NI electricity grid sufficiently to distribute all of the renewable energy coming online and that we have to make do with the grid that we have. The challenge will be getting hydrogen direct to the end user, but that NI has a modern gas network that is compatible with hydrogen transmission pressures.

SA asked if the project is in discussions with Caterpillar to manufacture electrolysers?

DS said they have not had direct discussion with Caterpillar yet but there is interest in converting their engines to make them compatible with Hydrogen.

SA noted that all the political parties at Stormont are against the sea cavern gas storage project at Islandmagee. He asked to what degree the Power-to-X project is reliant on those works happening.

DS said the sea cavern project is for seasonal energy storage. The Power-to-X project is focussed on energy storage for everyday use. He noted that 50% of our energy consumption is for heating, which is a huge challenge, the salt caverns would allow a reserve for winter heating but ultimately it is a political decision.

JB noted that the Islandmagee gas storage project raises serious environmental and biodiversity concerns and that it will be subject to community consultation and lengthy legal challenges. He asked if the industry is looking at alternative solutions?

Nichola Hughes (**NH**) asked if heat pumps are a viable heating solution, particularly for off-grid properties?

DS said that there are grid capacity issues that may limit heat pump deployment, however they may be suitable for rural homes in combination with micro-renewables. He said they would be part of the solution.

AF noted that if salt cavern gas storage is ruled out, that underground storage of heat produced by wind energy and heat pumps can be an option that is also available to rural areas.

KN thanked **DS** for attending.

5	AOB
5.1	Date and format of future meetings
	KN confirmed that future APG meetings will be on the third Wednesday of the month, every other month and they will continue to run as hybrid meetings to maximise involvement from external stakeholders. Next meeting: Wednesday 16 November (1pm - 2pm).

5.2	Stakeholder Consultation Event
	<p>KN outlined plans to hold a stakeholder consultation event on Thursday 27 October in the Long Gallery to gather views from stakeholders on what the priorities for the APG should be. The findings of the consultation will feed into a workplan that will guide and inform the content of future APG meetings. She encouraged all stakeholders to attend.</p>
5.3	Linking with local councils
	<p>KN set out her intention to formally link the APG on Climate Action with All Party Working Groups on Climate Change within Councils and use it as a way of driving progress simultaneously at both national and local level.</p> <p>Action: KN to write to the Chair of each Council working group setting proposals on how Councillors on the regional APG can keep their respective Councils up to date and informed on discussions in this forum.</p>
5.4	Superbloom at Stormont
	<p>KN noted the Superbloom of wildflowers at the Tower of London this summer, and given the clear biodiversity, tourism and educational benefits that come from this type of initiative, she proposed writing a letter to the Minister of Finance to consider a similar initiative on the lawns surrounding Parliament Buildings.</p> <p>JB noted that the Commission also own some of the land inside the perimeter fence, and to check whether a letter should also be written to the Assembly Commission.</p> <p>The motion was proposed by: Gerry Carrol (GC); Seconded by John Blair (JB).</p> <p>Action: KN to write to the Minister of Finance to explore the feasibility of a Superbloom at Stormont.</p> <p>Cllr Brian Smyth (BS) asked if the APG could invite the Department of Infrastructure to explain their road verge mowing policy, as it disrupts biodiversity and threatens pollinator numbers.</p> <p>Action: KN to write to DfI to provide information on the Department’s mowing policy in the context of protecting and conserving nature.</p> <p>There were no further items of business.</p>
6	Summary and close
	<p>KN thanked everyone for attending.</p> <p>The date of the next meeting is Wednesday 16 November (1 pm - 2pm) and the Stakeholder Workshop will take place on Thursday 27th October (1.30pm – 4pm).</p> <p>Meeting closed at 14.05.</p>