

Minutes

All Party Group on Climate Action

28 May 2021 | 10:00 am – 12:30 pm
at Virtual

Members in attendance: Rachel Woods MLA (Chair), John Blair MLA, Nichola Mallon MLA, Cllr Roisin Lynch, Cllr Terry Andrews, Cllr Donal McPeake, Cllr Siobhan Currie, Cllr Simon Lee, Cllr Billy Webb, Cllr Martin Gregg, Cllr Stephen Dunlop

In attendance: John Barry, Nichola Hughes, Jim Mairs, Amanda Slevin, Angus Kerr, Adrian Blythe, Brian Rankin, Catherine Blease, David Morrow, Declan Allison, Dermot O’Kane, Ian Montgomery, Ian Gordon, Johnny Stewart, Joseph Ireland, Karen Phillips, Kate Livingstone, Laura Michael, Margaret McMahon, Mark Whittaker, Maura Fox, Neil Galway, Sandra Adams, Sharon Clements, Simon Kelly, Tim Gilpin

Attendees: 37

Apologies: Andrew Muir MLA, Cllr Robert Irvine, Cllr William Clarke, Neale Blair

1	Opening Remarks
	Rachel Woods MLA (RW), Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting and extended her thanks to Minister Nichola Mallon for taking time out of her schedule to join the meeting. RW noted that the meeting would be looking at the issue of sustainable land use, in the context of the planning system.
1.1	Apologies
	Apologies were recorded.
1.2	Chair’s Business
	RW provided an update on activities since the previous meeting and noted consultations open at the moment.
2	Meeting Admin
2.1	Minutes of meeting on 30 April 2021
	Minutes of the meeting on 30 April were approved: proposed by Cllr Terry Andrews, seconded by Cllr Roisin Lynch.
3	National and Local Planning Levers for Ambitious Climate Action
	RW welcomed Minister Nichola Mallon (NM) and invited her to provide opening remarks. The Minister gave an overview of regional planning policy and how the Department for Infrastructure is supporting the climate and energy transition. Dermot O’Kane (DOK) then delivered a presentation on local policy interventions in Belfast and ideas on how to strengthen regional planning policy.

Slides available [here](#).

A detailed Q&A followed.

NM acknowledged a tension exists between building in the open countryside and sustainable development objectives. People here have a strong affinity to developing their own homes in rural locations, a balance is needed and it isn't easy to get the balance right. Local Development Plans are an opportunity to resolve this and DfI are looking at PPS21 'Sustainable Development and the Countryside', in order to get this balance right.

NM noted a large volume of commuter traffic going to and from Belfast that is highly polluting and unnecessary. DfI is looking at a combination of using working from home flexible policies and rural hubs for the NICS workforce, as a way of reducing private car journeys for work. The Executive Office has set up a Covid Taskforce and rural transport issues will form part of their work.

Cllr Stephen Dunlop (**SD**) asked what Councillors can do to raise the standards of new development, within the context of planning, without infringing on Council's statutory role to enforce building regulations (which are quite low in Northern Ireland).

Angus Kerr (**AK**) stated that there is nothing in regional planning policy framework that prevents local councils from advocating for higher energy and environmental standards in new development. This is something the Department is actively trying to encourage through the Local Development Plans.

DOK noted that planning and building control functions are now co-located in the same department in councils and can be complimentary in this regard. Planning can be used to advocate for higher sustainability standards through design techniques (e.g., SuDS, tree planting, insulation), and building control can provide the necessary technical specifications and monitoring functions to enforce these.

John Barry (**JB**) asked if there will be rigorous carbon assessments of LDPs and related planning decisions. **AK** stated that whilst LDPs are subject to sustainability assessment, and sustainable development is a driving principle of regional planning, LDPs are not required to have a detailed carbon audit or assessment. **DOK** stated that a core objective of the Belfast LDP is addressing climate change.

Cllr Siobhan Currie (**SC**) noted Fermanagh and Omagh District Council's intention to require consideration of sustainable drainage options for all development on a catchment-wide basis (not just on flood plains), constituting a shift in focus towards flood prevention. **SC** asked if there is currently an oversight body for SuDS in Northern Ireland?

DOK noted that NI Water provides oversight for large and medium scale 'hard' SuDS. He acknowledged the cumulative value of small-scale 'soft' SuDS in flood attenuation but argued that these measures may not require technical oversight and enforcement in the same way that hard engineered solutions do but agreed that clarity from the Department would be helpful on this.

AK said this is an area that DfI is actively looking into and acknowledged that small scale 'soft' SuDS are outside of NI Water's remit.

Cllr Simon Lee (**SL**) asked if the recently announced all-island review of rail infrastructure would look at increased investment in rural and local rail provision, particularly west of the River Bann?

	<p>AK said this was not part of his role but that he would find out the scope of this review. He noted that LDPs can provide opportunities for sustainable travel locally, by seeking to protect and conserve existing travel corridors.</p> <p>RW asked how the Belfast LDP deals with the issue of rural development and private car lock-in?</p> <p>DOK noted that the 15-minute city principle is well established within local planning, and that it also applies to rural villages and towns. He said serious questions must be asked about housing need in rural locations. The new Belfast LDP takes a stricter approach to rural development but acknowledged this is easier to implement in a city as critical masses can be achieved more easily.</p> <p>RW asked if a local council brings forward a very ambitious LDP in respect to climate change, would it be open to potential judicial review and if so, what legislation would councils be assessed against?</p> <p>AK responded that it would be the Planning Act, however this scenario is very unlikely if local planning policies are consistent with regional planning policy and if planners follow the right procedures. DfI has set an ambitious agenda, with sustainable development a core principle of the regional planning policy framework. There is plenty of scope within the current legislative and policy framework for councils to go further and bring forward ambitious local planning policies in relation to climate change and sustainable development. This is something the Department is strongly advocating in its engagement with council planning departments.</p> <p>RW asked if DfI is involved in the creation of a Peatland Strategy with DAERA and if they have plans to end licencing for peat extraction. AK said that DfI will be supporting DAERA in developing a Peatland Strategy but didn't have any details on licencing for peat extraction. AK noted that the new Northern Ireland Planning Portal is still under development. The Department is aiming to launch the portal early 2022.</p>
4	<p>Presentation: Taking Back the City: An overview of emerging progressive planning practices</p>
	<p>RW welcomed Dr Neil Galway (NG) from Queens University Belfast, who delivered a presentation on emerging progressive planning policies, with examples of best practice planning practices from around the world.</p> <p>Contact details: E: n.galway@qub.ac.uk</p> <p>Slides available here.</p> <p>Q&A followed.</p> <p>SC noted a tension in Enniskillen, for example, between demand for town centre parking, disability access, and sustainable travel objectives. How can councils resolve these issues?</p> <p>NG noted that the dominance of cars in urban centres has led to the demise of rural towns and villages, observed through the loss of local shops, post offices and banks. Too much housing in the open countryside has damaged the vitality of villages and market towns, as people are prepared to drive to out of town supermarkets where there is ample parking.</p> <p>The planning system can be used to promote higher urban densities and make active travel and public transport a viable option. By encouraging more housing in villages</p>

	<p>and town centres, and de-prioritising cars in urban centres, this will benefit local shops and businesses in the long term.</p> <p>The parking issue is a highly emotive subject. One potential solution is to build an evidence base to underpin decision making in this area. Most market towns have high levels of relatively inexpensive parking within 100m of the main thoroughfare, so a case for less on-street parking can be made based on data around supply and demand. Research has shown that people are more likely to stay longer in more attractive, socially pleasing settings. The presence of cars in town centres puts people off staying for long periods of time, which limits spending. Councils can look to increase urban densities where there are existing services, so that active travel and public transport become viable alternatives.</p>
5	Item for Discussing: Divesting from Fossil Fuels
	<p>SC noted that Fermanagh and Omagh District Council are among several councils to have engaged with NILGOSC, requesting a divestment from fossil fuels, however progress is slow and NILGOSC has cited their fiduciary duty to stakeholders to maximise their return on investment as the main priority.</p> <p>RW has been looking into divestment of the NI Assembly Members' Pension Scheme (NIAMPS) and noted that the Department of Finance manages the NICS pension fund. The All Party Group could call for divestment of all three of these funds from fossil fuel industries. RW noted the success of campaign group Market Forces in getting a commitment from the UK Primate Minister to end investment in domestic and overseas fossil fuel activities.</p> <p>Cllr Terry Andrews moved that the Group invites a representative from NILGOSC, NIAMPS and the Department of Finance to speak to the APG on their strategies to divest from fossil fuels. This was seconded by Cllr Siobhan Currie.</p>
6	Item for Noting: Who owns geothermal heat?
	<p>Joseph Ireland (JI) provided a brief overview of progress on geothermal heat research and development in Northern Ireland, noting that geothermal energy featured in the DfE Energy Strategy Preferred Options Paper. JI noted the potential application of the technology, and that it would be of particular importance as a future rural heat resource, but that it needs greater ownership and further funding and investment.</p> <p>JI cited the acceleration of the industry in both the Netherlands and Germany, who are developing geothermal energy strategies and de-risking private sector investment by providing significant levels of state funding.</p> <p>JI called for strong policy and regulation to allow growth of the geothermal industry, and the need for it to be sufficiently weighted in the new Energy Strategy. He also called for support from the Department for Infrastructure. A new Geothermal Working Group is being established by DfE. DfI will be invited to sit on this group.</p>
7	AOB
	No further business.
8	Summary and close
	<p>RW summarised the action point from the meeting:</p> <p>To request representatives from NILGOSC, NIAMPS and the Department of Finance to speak to the APG at a future meeting on their strategies to divest from fossil fuels</p> <p>The next APG meeting will take place on Friday 25 June at 10:00am and will focus on the circular economy. RW thanked members for attending. Meeting closed at 12:15.</p>