

## Minutes

### All Party Group on Climate Action - AGM

29 January 2021 | 10:00am

at Virtual

**Members in attendance:** Rachel Woods MLA, John Blair MLA, Andrew Muir MLA, Kellie Armstrong MLA, Pat Catney MLA, Jim Wells MLA, Cllr Billy Webb (ANBC), Cllr Brian Smyth (BCC), Cllr Terry Andrews (NMDDC), Cllr Donal McPeake (MUDC), Cllr Eddie Thompson (ANDBC); Cllr Martin Gregg (LCCC), Cllr Michael Henderson (LCCC), Cllr Peter McReynolds, Cllr Roisin Lynch (ANBC), Cllr Mary Durkan (DCSDC), Cllr Siobhan Currie (FODC), Cllr Robert Irvine (FODC)

**In attendance:** Nichola Hughes (SNI), Jonathan Bell (RSPB NI), Jim Mairs (LANI), Anna Kernahan (Fridays for Future), Catherine Hunter (MEABC), Charlotte Daly (FODC), Christine Watts (NI Assembly), Emma Finley (DAERA), Ian Gordon (Action Renewables), John Barry (QUB), John Martin (RSPB NI), Johnny Stewart (Weber Shandwick), Joseph Ireland (QUB), Kate Livingston (Alliance Party), Margaret McMahon (FODC), Clare McKeown (BCC), Geraldine Noe (BITCNI), Ricky Bamford (Green Party), Andrew Frew (NIHE), Ian McCurley (Woodland Trust)

**Apologies:** Justin McNulty (MLA); Cllr Kathryn McNickle (ANDBC); Cllr Jill Macauley (ABCBC); Karen Smyth (NILGA), Leo Strawbridge (DCSDC), Ian Montgomery (Ulster University), Ciaran Fox (RSUA)

<b>1. Welcome</b>
Rachel Woods MLA (RW), Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting. Noted that it was the group's AGM. Apologies were recorded.  RW welcomed today's speaker Jonathan Bell from RSPB NI.
<b>2 Minutes of meeting on 11 December 2020</b>
<b>RW</b> provided an update on activities since the previous meeting, noting Minister Harghey had responded to the APG's letter in which she highlighted a cost implication if passive house design standards were mandatory in the social housing sector. RW noted information received from the Passive House Association of Ireland, stating that future low-carbon retrofit liability would be more than five times the cost of building to the required standard today (i.e. an additional £4,800 required to build a three-bed passive house today, compared to £26,300 to retrofit the same house to this standard in the future). RW noted that these points would be raised in her response to the Minister, and that DoF and DfC will be invited to a future APG meeting to provide an update on the ongoing review of building regulations and energy efficiency standards.  The minutes were accepted as a true record of the meeting, proposed by Cllr Terry Andrews and seconded by Jim Wells MLA.

<b>3</b>	<p><b>Governance</b></p> <p><b>RW</b> gave a brief summary of the group's activities in 2020 and expressed her thanks to the Vice-Chair and Secretary. John Blair (JB) thanked RW for her dedication to the APG and the excellent work carried out last year in her role as Chair.</p> <p>Nichola Hughes (<b>NH</b>) chaired the election of office bearers and called for nominations to the positions of Chair, Vice-Chair and Secretary. The appointments were:-</p> <p><b>Chair:</b> Rachel Woods. Proposed by Jim Wells MLA. Seconded by John Blair MLA, Andrew Muir MLA, Kellie Armstrong MLA, Pat Catney MLA, Jim Wells MLA.</p> <p><b>Vice-Chair:</b> John Blair. Proposed by Pat Catney MLA, seconded by Rachel Woods MLA, Andrew Muir MLA, Kellie Armstrong MLA, Pat Catney MLA, Jim Wells MLA.</p> <p><b>Secretary:</b> Nichola Hughes. Proposed by John Blair MLA. Seconded by Rachel Woods MLA, Andrew Muir MLA, Kellie Armstrong MLA, Pat Catney MLA, Jim Wells MLA.</p> <p>RW took over as Chair.</p>
<b>3</b>	<p><b>Presentation: Nature Based Solutions to Climate Change</b></p> <p><b>RW</b> welcomed Dr Jonathan Bell (JB), Head of Land and Sea Policy at RSPB NI. Slides available to download <a href="#">here</a>.</p> <p>Contact details:  E: <a href="mailto:Jonathan.Bell@RSPB.ORG.UK">Jonathan.Bell@RSPB.ORG.UK</a>  T: 028 9049 1547</p> <p><b>RW</b> thanked JB for his presentation and welcomed the approaches outlined. She noted that Ulster Wildlife is mapping blue carbon habitats under the Challenge Fund, and enquired what the next steps would be and whether NIEA is doing any additional work to support data collection and mapping of these important habitats?</p> <p><b>JB</b> noted that RSPB NI are feeding into an Ulster Wildlife workshop on this soon and that the project will culminate in the release of a report with recommendations at the end of March. JB wasn't aware of any statutory bodies undertaking work in this area.</p> <p>A link was shared to the upcoming Food, Farming and Land Convention on 9 – 10 February in the chat: <a href="https://www.foodfarmingland.co.uk/convention21">https://www.foodfarmingland.co.uk/convention21</a></p> <p>Jim Wells (<b>JW</b>) asked what pressure can be put on government to limit the planting of non-native coniferous trees like the sitka spruce, which can be detrimental for biodiversity?</p> <p><b>JB</b> noted that such plantations are largely driven by commercial interests for timber, and he noted that whilst they do sequester a lot of carbon dioxide in the early growth period, native broadleaf species sequester more carbon dioxide over the long term i.e. on a whole-life basis, and are more beneficial for nature and biodiversity, and they should therefore be prioritised. <b>JB</b> also noted the importance of planting the right kind of tree in the right place, to maximise ecological and social benefits and that trees shouldn't be planted on peat or deep peat.</p> <p>John Martin (<b>JM</b>) highlighted issues with sitka spruce and other aggressive conifers</p>

spreading to neighbouring land and that the cost of removing them can be significant. The Forestry Service is promoting a range of species in rural development policy and environmental grants, but there needs to be a greater emphasis on prioritising slower-growing native broad leaf species, otherwise commercial interests will prevail.

Kellie Armstrong (**KA**) noted her constituency area has one of the longest coastlines in NI and blue carbon habitats are of significant interest but noted shoreline management falls between DAERA and DfI. She asked if there were any commercial opportunities for sea kelp, for example, that might provide opportunities for better coastline management and help support the local economy?

**JB** agreed that shoreline management falls between two departments and echoed views for a more cohesive and coordinated approach. He noted that this was an area both RSPB and National Trust are looking at and will continue to lobby on.

John Blair (**JB**) noted he had brought a motion to the AERA committee on nature friendly farming and that sector representatives would be providing evidence to the committee soon. He noted the importance of dealing with the sustainability and resilience of farming as a sector, alongside the need for climate action. **JB** also noted the important role of local councils in nature recovery and carbon sequestration as they are both landowners and planning authorities. He recommended the group convene a meeting with councils to look at the theme of sustainable land use further.

**JB** said he would be happy to accommodate this request. **JM** added that RSPB would be responding to Mid and East Antrim Borough Council's and Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council's modifications to their LDP Draft Plan Strategies, which are currently out for consultation.

Pat Catney (**PC**) reminded the group about the RSPB Big Garden Bird Watch taking place this weekend and encouraged members to get involved:

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/activities/birdwatch/>

Siobhan Currie (**SC**) thanked JB for his presentation and his offer to support decision makers in land zoning and sustainable land use decisions. She noted that farmers are custodians of the land and recognises the importance of involving the farming community in policy decisions and making sure they are part of the solution to climate change. She enquired if there was a map available that outlined the location and state of health of peatlands in Northern Ireland?

**JB** said no, data availability is currently poor.

RW thanked **JB** for his presentation and noted that it was an important issue that the group will continue to champion and will revisit at a future APG meeting.

#### **4 Consultations**

RW noted an influx of departmental and non-departmental consultations recently including (NB: this is not an exhaustive list):

- DAERA Climate Change Bill for NI (closes 1 Feb)
- DAERA Environmental Plans, Principles and Governance for Northern Ireland (closes 26 Feb)
- DAERA Clean Air Strategy for NI (closes 25 Feb)
- DfI Living with Water in Belfast Consultation (closes 29 Jan)
- SDLP consultation on Environment and Nature Restoration Bill (closes 8 March)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sinn Fein Private Members Bill on banning single use plastics</li> <li>• Sinn Fein Private Members Bill on banning fracking</li> </ul> <p><b>RW</b> noted that will be an extremely busy legislative period. She said it presents an opportunity to improve environmental standards but recognised the importance that issues like air and climate and biodiversity are not treated in isolation, policy making must be properly co-ordinated, to ensure complementarity. She reminded Members that one of the reasons the APG had been set up was to encourage a more joint up approach in tackling the climate and ecological crisis, and to promote solutions that have multiple benefits.</p> <p>RW invite members and observers to raise any issues or comments about the consultations considered most relevant to this group.</p> <p><b>JM</b> noted that the next Investment Strategy for NI and Programme for Government are important opportunities that the group may wish to feed into.</p> <p><b>SC</b> noted that FODC had echoed Sustainable NI’s response to the DAERA discussion document on a Climate Change Bill for Northern Ireland, adding an extra point specifically on the importance of working in partnership with local farming communities to design climate change policy solutions, recognising that they are a key ally and that just transition principles should be observed.</p> <p><b>KA</b> stressed the importance of a joint-up government, noting that DfC are reviewing the Local Government Order and powers conferred upon local councils in the Local Government Act. She said this could be an opportunity to lobby for more powers and duties for local authorities to take into account nature recovery and climate change in community planning.</p> <p><b>RW</b> noted that she had received a communication from Dolores Kelly MLA about Sinn Fein’s consultation on a Private Members Bill on Nature Recovery and the Environment. RW moved to invite Dolores to the next APG to present her Bill, which Members endorsed.</p>
<b>5</b>	<b>AOB</b>
	<p><b>RW</b> noted that DAERA had secured support from Strategic Investment Board to assist the Department in developing the Executive’s Green Growth Strategy and Delivery Framework, and also that a Green Growth Stakeholder Forum had been established.</p> <p><b>RW</b> also updated Members on a question she had asked the Minister of Finance, about the unallocated £100m City Region Deal complimentary fund and whether any of the funding would be used for green recovery activities. The Minister said that this was being looked at and some of the programmes already identified for City Region Deal funding had green elements included. RW agreed to circulate this response, noting it may be of interest to city region deal working groups within councils.</p> <p><b>RW</b> summarised the key action points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invite Dolores Kelly MLA to present on her Nature Restoration and Environment Bill at the APG in March</li> <li>• Invite the Minister of Finance and Minister for Communities to a future meeting of the APG to revisit the issue of buildings, sustainable land use and use of council policy levers such as planning and community planning</li> </ul>
<b>6</b>	<b>Date of Next Meeting</b>

	The next meeting will be held on 26 March 2021 at 10.00 am and will explore community energy issues and opportunities.
<b>7</b>	<b>Close</b>
	RW thanked members for attending. Meeting closed at 11.20.