

Edwin Poots MLA
Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Dundonald House
Upper Newtownards Road
Ballywiscaw
Belfast BT4 3SB

Climate Change Committee
1 Victoria Street,
Westminster, London,
SW1H 0ET
w theccc.org.uk

24th March 2022

Dear Edwin,

My Committee has followed the progress of climate legislation through the Northern Ireland Assembly closely. Now that the Climate Change Bill has been passed, I write to highlight the implications of the new legislation and to offer the Climate Change Committee's full support in its achievement.

Our assessment of feasible pathways for the UK led us previously to recommend that Northern Ireland should aim for an 82% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. We assessed that to be the appropriate contribution to the UK's Net Zero 2050 target, reflecting the specific circumstances in Northern Ireland. The new target of Net Zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 goes well beyond our recommendation, but we commend the ambition. The priority is now to deliver the statutory goal.

Northern Ireland's first carbon budget period, 2023 to 2027, starts in less than 10 months. The implication of the new 2050 target is that Northern Ireland must outperform all of five of the Net Zero Pathways that my Committee developed for our advice on the 6th UK Carbon Budget, requiring a major step-up in policy and rapid progress over the 2020s.

It may be instructive to consider the implications of our previous advice. These might now be considered minimum requirements under the new legislation:

- **Energy generation.** Deployment of new renewable electricity generation is required at scale, with appropriate energy storage and decarbonised back-up solutions (e.g. gas turbines burning hydrogen manufactured from low carbon sources) to allow the carbon-intensity of electricity generation across the Irish electricity system to fall to around 50gCO₂/kWh by 2030, on the way to fully phasing out unabated fossil-fired generation by 2035. Demand for electricity will grow, perhaps doubling by 2050, given the crucial role of electrification to replace fossil fuels. Production or imports of hydrogen from low carbon sources will also be important, for use in industry, electricity generation and more widely.
- **Surface transport.** By the end of this decade, or 2032 at the latest, every new car and van sold in Northern Ireland should be zero-emission. This implies substantial investment to expand the electric vehicle charging infrastructure in Northern Ireland, and major scale-up of plug-in vehicles' share of new vehicle sales from the current 11% to 100% within a decade.

Enabling an increased proportion of journeys made by walking and cycling will be important to improve public health and air quality alongside reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Rail services should also be largely electrified, with the proportion of diesel trains falling to below 15% by 2050, from the current 87%.

- **Buildings.** Concerted action will be required to decarbonise Northern Ireland's buildings over this decade. All newly-constructed homes should be zero-carbon as soon as practicable, with no requirement for later retrofit. Substantial improvement is also required in the energy efficiency of existing buildings. By 2028, all heating appliances being installed should be zero-carbon in properties off the gas grid, representing around 75% of homes in Northern Ireland. For those properties on the gas grid, all heating appliances should be zero-carbon by 2033. This has implications for supporting infrastructure, including the necessary strengthening of electricity networks. It is unlikely to be compatible with further extension to the Northern Ireland gas grid.
- **Agriculture.** Reductions in methane emissions are given special protections in the new legislation, but very significant reductions in emissions from Northern Irish agriculture are still necessary. This will only be achieved through widespread adoption of low-carbon farming practices and with better farm productivity. CCC pathways rest on a reduction in meat and dairy consumption of around 20% by 2030, which in turn leads to healthier diets and lower emissions from livestock. Farmland freed-up by this change can be turned towards greater carbon sequestration.
- **Land use.** Around 240,000 hectares of Northern Irish land are peatland, the majority of it degraded – over 85% of total peat area was classified as degraded in 2019. In order to increase land use sink capacity, land use must shift fundamentally: by 2050, more than half of peatland in Northern Ireland should be restored peatland. Afforestation will also need to increase substantially; average tree-planting rates from now to 2030 need to increase from 226 hectares per year over the last decade to 2,500 hectares per year by 2035.

The achievement of these outcomes would represent radical progress towards decarbonising Northern Ireland, but still more is required to close the gap to a credible pathway to Net Zero by 2050. The potential to bridge that gap has been significantly inhibited by the clause in the Bill that limits methane reductions to 46% against 1990 levels (i.e. the reduction in our Balanced Pathway – see Figure 1). This limit removes a key option in our most ambitious 'Tailwinds' scenario to go even further in reducing livestock emissions. Since most other sectors reach nearly zero emissions, bridging the gap from our 82% pathway to Net Zero can only be achieved through additional greenhouse gas removals.

Many of the opportunities to reduce emissions in the 2020s (e.g. renewable generation, electric vehicles, phase-out of oil boiler installation) were already expected to be cost-neutral or cost-saving compared to continued high-emitting behaviour, even before the recent fossil fuel price spike, but in most cases they will require greater upfront capital investment than existing high-carbon solutions. Encouraging that low carbon investment, while ending any infrastructure choices that lock-in fossil fuel use, is now the central policy challenge.

We welcome the ambition of the new Bill. With strong policies across the economy, rapid progress can be made in this decade. However, Northern

Ireland is already playing catch-up with the rest of the UK in many areas. The new targets will quickly lose credibility if the policy focus does not shift quickly to implementation and success is seen in delivery of outcomes.

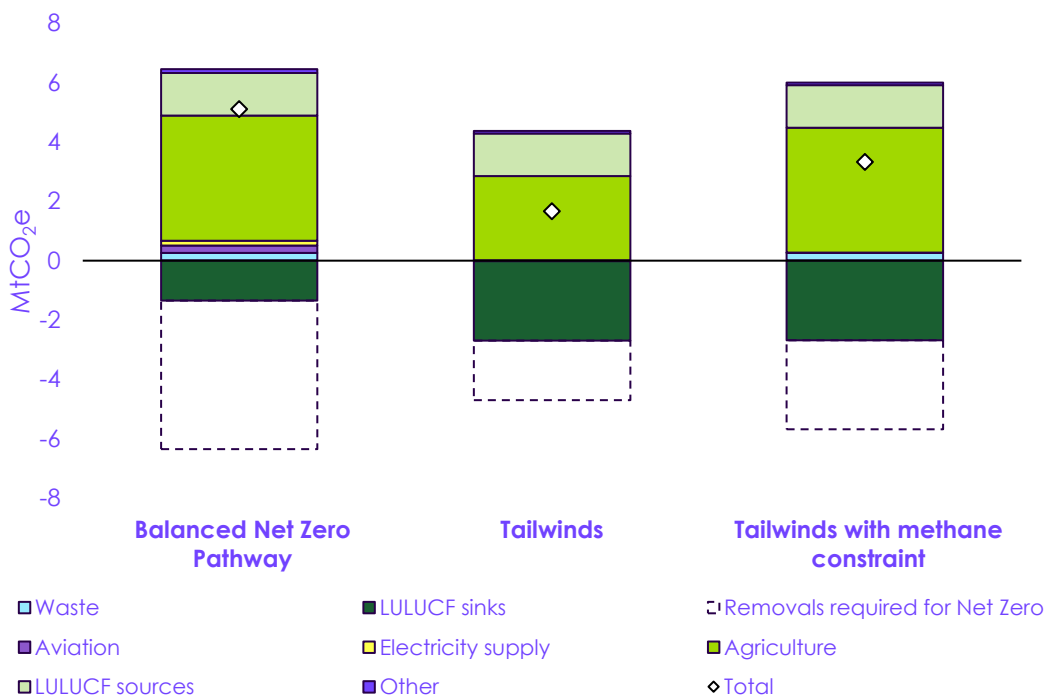
My Committee stands ready to assist the Northern Irish Executive and the new Climate Commissioner as the new climate policy programme is prepared.

Yours sincerely,



Lord Deben
Chair, Climate Change Committee

Figure 1 Greenhouse gas removals required to reach Net Zero in Northern Ireland by 2050



Source: CCC analysis