

## Achieving a Just Transition in Northern Ireland

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The Northern Ireland (NI) Climate Change Act (2022) sets ambitious emissions reductions targets for NI to achieve net zero emissions by 2050. Alongside this is a commitment to realising this goal via a 'Just Transition', defined here as 'one which includes decent work for all, social inclusion and the eradication of poverty' (Ní Lochlainn, 2020). Yet, since the law's enactment, limited attention has been paid to the social dynamics of this momentous shift that are required across all sectors of human activity, and even less to the implications of equality legislation in the unique Northern Irish context. With climate change mitigation and adaptation approaches generating political tension across Europe, can NI find innovative and fair approaches to ensuring its attempts to decarbonise rest on popular support and do not exacerbate existing inequalities?

Focusing specifically on the Just Transition aspects of the Act, this Policy Brief considers their background, legislation, and implementation. It also reflects discussion at an ARK policy roundtable event on 15 October 2024. The roundtable was conducted under the Chatham House Rule and participants included representatives from the community, voluntary and statutory sectors, government departments, private sector, and academia. In advance of the roundtable participants received a briefing paper summarising relevant research and the policy context and were invited to consider several questions. These included the nature of the Act's Just Transition elements, as well as their implementation and resourcing, alongside their equality dimensions.

### Considering a Just Transition in Northern Ireland

Prior to the enactment of the Climate Change Act in 2022, several reports explored the challenges of and opportunities for a Just Transition in NI. A report on mapping the process in relation to energy noted the importance of considering both energy production and consumption, with a particular need to focus on low-income households (Centre for Sustainability, Equality and Climate Action, 2021). A similar report highlighted the vulnerability of carbon-intensive sectors to the decarbonisation imperative, particularly agrifood and some manufacturing (Ní Lochlainn, 2020).

Several documents from this period focused on routes to net zero for Belfast (Gouldson *et al.*, 2020), and the importance of including youth and economic dimensions for the city to become truly resilient to climate change (Belfast City Council, 2020). In terms of the opportunities presented by decarbonising the Northern Irish economy and society, the Draft Green Growth Strategy was published by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) for consultation in 2021 (DAERA, 2021a), alongside an Equality Impact Assessment (DAERA, 2021b). Similarly, a short briefing considered the potential of a Just Transition Bond to support the retrofitting of NI's public housing stock (Curran, 2022), as one example of innovative climate finance. Overall, these and other works laid the foundation for the inclusion of the Just Transition concept in NI's climate legislation.

## Legislating for a Just Transition in Northern Ireland

The Climate Change Act (2022) Northern Ireland received royal assent in June 2022. Table 1 summarises the key Just Transition elements of the Act. In short, with an initial 48 per cent net emissions reduction target by 2030, the legislation mandates successive five-year carbon budgets, supported by corresponding Climate Action Plans (CAP), and underpinned by both sectoral plans and public body reporting. The Act also places a duty on DAERA to establish a Just Transition Commission

for Northern Ireland with implementation and advisory responsibilities, and requires The Executive Office (TEO) to create an independent Northern Ireland Climate Commissioner with reporting and oversight roles. While regulations for climate change reporting by public bodies came into force in May 2024 (Climate NI, 2024), much of the implementation of the remainder of the legislation has been delayed by political dysfunction and associated challenges.

**Table 1: Key Just Transition elements of the Climate Change Act (2022) NI**

Section(s)	Sub-section(s)	Summary
13	4	Sectoral plans to support a Just Transition by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) creating green jobs &amp; careers;</li> <li>b) supporting those in carbon-intensive sectors;</li> <li>c) suitable infrastructure &amp; investment;</li> <li>c) tackling division &amp; inequality</li> </ul>
14 - 22	All	Department-led sector-specific plans to be developed & published: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Energy, electricity consumption &amp; industrial processes – Department for the Economy</li> <li>- Infrastructure, Transport &amp; Active Travel – Department of Infrastructure</li> <li>- Agriculture, Fisheries &amp; Waste Management – DAERA</li> </ul>
23	2 - 3	Carbon budgets must include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) 16-week public consultation</li> <li>ii) social, economic, financial &amp; rural impact assessments</li> <li>iii) consultation with relevant NI bodies &amp; departments</li> <li>iv) due regard to the Republic of Ireland Climate Change Advisory Council &amp; the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change</li> </ul>
26	1	Social considerations of carbon budgets to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>poorer communities; rural communities; public health;</li> <li>the socioeconomic aspects of agriculture</li> </ul>

Section(s)	Sub-section(s)	Summary
30	3	Just Transition to support the following 11 objectives: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. creating sustainable jobs</li> <li>2. supporting agriculture &amp; other carbon-intensive sectors</li> <li>3. providing low-carbon infrastructure &amp; investment</li> <li>4. engaging with stakeholders to create &amp; maintain consensus</li> <li>5. creating good, well-paid jobs for current workforce</li> <li>6. contributing to a resource-efficient economy</li> <li>7. supporting those most affected, but least equipped to adapt</li> <li>8. reducing poverty, social deprivation &amp; inequality</li> <li>9. eliminating gender inequality</li> <li>10. supporting rural socioeconomic needs</li> <li>11. considering future generations</li> </ol>
31	1	Establish a Just Transition Fund for Agriculture
35	1 – 2	Each Climate Action Plan to establish impacts & support for workers, employers & communities, particularly small businesses
37	1 - 5	DAERA to establish a Just Transition Commission to implement & advise on Just Transition elements & principles, with representation from at least seven groups: agriculture; fisheries; academia; trade unions; youth groups; civil society; environmental groups
42	1 – 8	Mandating of climate change reporting by public bodies
50	1 – 5	The Executive Office to establish the Northern Ireland Climate Commissioner to report on & oversee the Act's operation

Participants at the roundtable agreed that the legislation and the statutory obligations that accompanied the Act were an important foundation for a Just Transition. The requirement for DAERA to set up a Just Transition Commission was seen as a strength, but was felt by some to be dependent on the role and power of the Commission. A range of challenges were discussed and foremost among these were concerns about political will and commitment, the achieving of consensus in a mandatory coalition and the difficulties of inter-departmental working. Concerns were raised about whether there would be attempts to reform or dilute the legislation or to delay implementation. Given the cross-cutting response required, some participants felt that addressing the siloed working of departments was important. A question posed related to the

tensions and points of conflict between and within departments and the extent to which they can talk to each other about these.

There was agreement that good evidence is important to policy making and evaluation and, while there is a dearth of data and evidence in NI, there is potential to learn from experiences in Britain and in the Republic of Ireland and tailor that learning to the NI context. The point was made that policy on climate change and a Just Transition needs to be considered in the context of other social policies such as addressing poverty, rural proofing and economic growth. Some participants argued, for example, that failure to effectively address the extent of fuel poverty in NI and the reliance on oil for home heating jeopardised the potential for a Just Transition.

Evidence suggests that political will is fundamental to achieving progress and there was some concern about the extent of political commitment in NI. While the draft Programme for Government 2024 - 2027 lists 'Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment' as one of nine short-term priorities, and 'Planet' as one of four longer-term 'missions' (NI Executive, 2024), it does not include the indicators necessary to monitor progress. The point was made that decisions about the powers and remit of the Just Transition Commission would be one indication of the extent of political commitment. Participants discussed where there were clear opportunities for policy progress, including the evident political consensus on addressing fuel poverty.

Achieving a Just Transition requires acknowledging that there will be 'winners and losers' in terms of burden adjustment, which will inevitably result in conflict. The question was therefore posed as to whether we could utilise and apply learning from our peace process and post-conflict experiences, including the idea that 'challenging' does not equate to 'unachievable'.

## Implementing a Just Transition in Northern Ireland

Despite the delays in implementation, several recent reports have added to the discussion on achieving a Just Transition on the path to net zero in NI. Most significantly, the UK's Climate Change Commission advisory report in 2023 pointed out that the 'extremely-stretching legal target' in the Act was not matched by 'policy ambition' at the scale required to achieve it (Climate Change Committee, 2023). The result was a 17 per cent gap in the 2050 emissions reductions target under the 'Balanced' pathway, and a seven per cent shortfall via the 'Stretch Ambition' pathway. To address these shortfalls and maintain progress towards the net zero goal, the report recommended 'significant near-term action' across all sectors, including: a 12 per cent reduction in livestock numbers by 2030; a massive increase in electric vehicles and their charging infrastructure;

implementation of energy efficiency measures and electrification of heating for domestic, business and industrial properties; deployment of large-scale renewable energy generation and storage; rapid afforestation; consideration of engineered removals of emissions through anaerobic digestion (AD) and Direct Air Capture (DAC); and planning for closing the emissions gap in both pathways.

In terms of public opinion on a Just Transition, research by the Consumer Council found that 78 per cent of 1,000 respondents in NI supported renewable energy generation, and a similar proportion supported government grants for the decarbonisation of domestic and commercial heating (Consumer Council, 2023). However, cost was frequently cited as a barrier to adopting electric and/or renewable technologies. Similarly, more recent research of 1,000 NI residents demonstrated that while 80 per cent of these respondents supported renewable energy projects, 47 per cent did not want net zero policies to negatively impact their finances (Cavendish Consulting, 2024). Tellingly, only 11 per cent of those surveyed felt that NI will reach net zero by 2050. To this end, the recent – and first – Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland provides some clarity on the timeframe for the implementation of the remainder of the Act (DAERA, 2024). These include: publishing a nature-based solutions plan; legislating emissions reductions targets for 2030 and 2040 by December 2024; agreeing and legislating the first three carbon budgets; completing development of the 3rd NI Climate Change Adaptation (NICCAP3) programme for climate change adaptation; establishing the Just Transition Commission; publishing the first NI Carbon Action Plan (CAP); and progressing work on an emissions Trading Scheme (ETS). It also notes that the TEO will submit the first draft of regulations for the establishment of the NI Climate Change Commissioner to the Assembly by December 2024. Also forthcoming is the Department for Communities' Fuel Poverty Strategy, due for publication by early-mid 2025 (Department for Communities, 2024).

At the roundtable, the view was expressed that we need to move beyond legislation, and to think about what the theory of change is. This includes reducing the expectations that government alone can solve the problems, whilst recognising that government can create an enabling context. It was suggested that universities, among other groups, could be more involved in developing and trialling technological and governance solutions. While it was accepted that technological innovation is important, there is a need to ask others what solutions they have. Attention was drawn to the importance of a ‘democratic transition’ – involving ordinary citizens in debate and policy making and there was strong consensus on this point. Underpinning this is a recognition that the costs of climate change and the costs of a Just Transition are not equally borne, and so how the story of a Just Transition is communicated is vital. It was stressed that many people’s problems are very immediate (e.g. struggling to pay bills) and that managing current challenges and stressors can, in the short term, make it hard to visualise the longer-term impact of policies or changes. One participant identified the need for a ‘democratisation of worry’, giving the example that young people could rightfully say ‘what has this got to do with me?’ if their families are ‘struggling to get to the end of the week’. Talking about the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals will not mean much to many people. However, such discussions could be framed in a way that resonates with their own priorities – affordable housing, poverty, quality of jobs and better public transport, for example. Linked to this is the need to clearly communicate that the status quo is not just, and to involve citizens in conversations about how a more just and equal society could be achieved. There was a suggestion that the language used around climate change could change so that it explains and suggests opportunities for social justice.

It was argued that while governments have talked about a climate emergency, the language or the pace of change has not reflected the urgency needed. Comparison was made with the response to the COVID-19 pandemic which demonstrated

how governments could mobilise political support, expertise, and resources quickly and at scale. There was some discussion about the usefulness of framing Just Transition in the language of human rights and adopting language such as the right to life, the right to safe clean water and the right to an adequate standard of living.

A thread running through the discussion at the roundtable was the importance of localism and the need for policies and strategies to be developed in partnership with communities. The point was made that opposition from local communities to windfarms rested on the point that their area was being industrialised although they were not getting the benefits. However, there are examples of community innovation and grassroots initiatives which have proved sustainable. Lessons from these suggest that local people need to have more say in how a Just Transition can be achieved and be able to have direct benefit from initiatives. Many participants at the roundtable felt this was often lacking. There were examples of decisions being made about ‘return’ to local communities which involved only a small number of stakeholders and which did not reflect wider community priorities or needs. A positive example was given of a rural housing estate which was powered by its own wind turbine, meaning that the impact on residents was positive and direct. This is one small example but the potential of this kind of approach where there are clear co-benefits was recognised.

Achieving the shift in energy production from fossil fuels to renewables on the scale needed was considered to be challenging, with progress to date being slow. But it was suggested that NI could learn from the experience of other jurisdictions. A key issue identified by some was how the production of energy can be democratised to ensure that the transition is not a case of going from large, urban, male-dominated fossil fuel companies to large, urban, male-dominated renewables companies.



It was strongly argued that a transition that exacerbates social and economic inequalities will not be sustainable, and so how new policies are resourced is a critical issue. Costs and benefits need to be shared equitably and should avoid penalising low-income households. There was consensus that people would need more support as new technologies were introduced. It was felt that developments could be framed in the context of rebalancing the regional economy, including addressing the current urban focus.

## Resourcing a Just Transition in Northern Ireland

There was some agreement among roundtable participants that much more attention needs to be given to the best ways to finance the Just Transition. There was a view that NI has been struggling to make progress and, while some aspects of this are not unique to the region, others, including the instability of government and deficits in planning policy, are. NI was also seen not to have benefited from incentive schemes in the same way as other jurisdictions. The outcome of this is that NI now needs to move at pace. The question was posed as to whether NI has the capital, the land, and the trained people to do this and to identify and maximise opportunities and gain the support of citizens. Local Energy Scotland was cited as an example of the huge opportunity when it comes to offshore wind. Some participants questioned whether the public opposition to such approaches is as great as is sometimes suggested by politicians, with reference made to polling in the Derry and Strabane areas which showed support for new windfarms. However, for support to be sustained and expanded the benefits would have to be appropriately distributed, while at the same time acknowledging that not all people in a locality can benefit from wind turbines directly.

Here again, the conversation turned to the importance of citizen participation (as distinct from community and voluntary sector participation) in decision-making processes and the challenges of achieving a broad representation of input. It

was contended that if existing methods were not working (for example regarding the involvement of young people) then these were not the right approaches. Some participants advocated for the use of democratic engagement platforms such as Citizens' Assemblies. The advantages of these approaches included breaking down inter-generational silos and building on the inter-generational consensus which often existed. Ultimately it was argued that if procedural injustices were not addressed, the risk of policies failing at a later stage would increase. How the issue of a Just Transition is framed and the language used was a recurring theme. For example, discussion of how Just Transition policies could create a more sustainable NHS would help the public see the tangible benefits.

Other points were made about wasted opportunities, such as credit unions and local government pension schemes not investing in green energy. It was also suggested that the recently-established national energy company, GB Energy, could provide opportunities for community-led-and-owned renewable energy generation in NI. The enterprise has set aside £2.4 billion for community energy projects.

## Equalising a Just Transition in Northern Ireland

The legacies of the conflict in Northern Ireland continue to permeate its social, economic, and political contexts (Gray *et al.*, 2023). They have also shaped its environment, as well as action on the environment, including on climate change (Hwang, 2022). Yet several recent reports have highlighted the importance and the opportunities of addressing post-conflict and environmental themes in tandem (Belfast City Council, 2024; Hanson & Walsh, 2024). Beyond this broader focus on good relations and the environment, including climate action and a Just Transition, are the statutory requirements under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998). These require public bodies to 'have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity' between those

of differing religious belief, political opinion, race, age, marital status, sexual orientation, sex, ability status and dependency status (Equality Commission Northern Ireland, 2010). However, aside from the Draft Green Growth Strategy and Belfast's Climate Plan, none of the documents reviewed earlier in this Policy Brief mention either 'Good Relations' or 'Section 75'. In implementing an equal Just Transition in Northern Ireland, there is therefore a need to consider how these factors may influence the pathway to net zero.

How to amalgamate these equality dimensions was seen as a substantive challenge by roundtable participants. This was partly related to the poor implementation of Section 75 obligations and inadequate equality impact assessments which, among other things, do not take an intersectional perspective. That socio-economic status is not a category of Section 75 was identified by some as an important deficiency given the centrality of poverty issues in NI. However, it was pointed out that it would be possible to have legislative change on this if the need was accepted. The need for robust rural-proofing was also highlighted. While Section 75 is an equality of opportunity rather than an equality of outcome tool, the point was made that positive actions to address inequalities could be the result of equality impact assessments if these were done properly. The increasing attention being given to the importance of gender budgeting was also seen as an opportunity to achieve a more efficient and transparent use of resources. A case was made that an equality impact assessment process should underpin the work of the Just Transition Commission although this necessitates improved data and evidence. Finally, there was discussion and some agreement that the precedent of, and approach to, addressing conflict and its legacy in NI could be applied to addressing climate- and Just Transition-related conflicts.

## Conclusions

This Policy Brief has outlined the background, legislation, implementation, and resourcing of the NI Climate Change Act (2022), focusing especially on the Just Transition elements. In addition, it has suggested that NI's unique post-conflict context be considered in these discussions. There was consensus at the roundtable about the importance of the framing of a Just Transition and securing citizen involvement to ensure procedural justice. While a move away from fossil fuels raises concerns about job losses in some industries, more could be done to highlight the potential of job creation in clean energy. At the roundtable there was also optimism about the innovation coming from communities and from some funders, although the precarity of community and voluntary sector funding was argued to be undermining this.

Overall, while the Act, and its Just Transition components, is commendably ambitious, it is complex and subject to the governance vagaries of NI's political climate. Furthermore, it will require significant investment from multiple sources to implement it quickly, well and fairly. Getting this right is essential for the future of Northern Ireland: 'without demonstrable equity in the benefits and burdens of any lower carbon transition, there is a real danger for social backlash and citizen resistance' (Centre for Sustainability, Equality and Climate Action, 2021).

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