

## Northern Ireland Assembly News – April 2021

*51 MLAs have signed our Charter to Protect and Restore Nature – [see here for more information](#)*

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## Ministerial Statement

### Wildfire in the Mourne Mountains (26 April)

In his [statement](#) the Minister said that there is no question that there has been extensive and widespread damage to wildlife and the environment. The area affected is the eastern Mournes special area of conservation and area of special scientific interest. It is of significant biological and geological interest due to the size, quality and diversity of the habitats in the area and the presence of particular plant and animal species. It is likely that it will take decades to recover from and there will be a long-term loss to our biodiversity. He added that over the coming months, the NIEA will ensure that there is a full assessment of the biodiversity loss and the necessary recovery action and that enforcement and legislation must be strengthened to deal with the problem. He concluded that *'Wildfires are rarely natural. They are almost always started either deliberately or by reckless burning of inflammable vegetation or material. We need to think about all the measures that can be put in place to deter people from starting such fires.* In 2020, NI Fire and Rescue Service responded to over 1,000 wildfires.

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## Answers to Written Questions

### First Minister and deputy First Minister

#### Sustainable Development Goals and the PfG (28 April)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister [outlined](#) how they are incorporating delivery of the UN Sustainable Development Goals into the Programme for Government and how they are working to increase public awareness and understanding of the goals. Work is progressing on the development of a new Outcomes Framework to provide strategic direction for the Programme for Government being brought forward by the Executive. A public consultation on a draft Outcomes Framework was concluded on 22 March 2021. It is intended that the Framework should provide a firm basis for the development of cross-cutting and impactful action plans to deliver against a vision of societal wellbeing which is aligned to and supports the UN SDGs. Performance against the Outcomes contained in the PfG Framework will be reported on in a timely manner through PfG monitoring webpages that will also demonstrate linkages to and progress towards the achievement of the SDGs. A PfG communications plan will be established which will provide further opportunities to promote awareness and understanding of the SDGs.

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### Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

#### NIEA – Complaints of Illegal Dumping (2 April)

The Minister [provided](#) detailed tabular information in relation to (i) the number of complaints received by NIEA in relation to illegal dumping and landfill; (ii) how long it takes for a complaint to be fully investigated; (iii) what enforcement action has been taken; and (iv) how much it has cost his Department to clear up the waste, broken down by local council area, in each of the last three years.

#### Timeline for Draft Environment Strategy (1 April)

The Minister [stated](#) that business units across DAERA are in the process of supplying relevant input to the draft Environment Strategy. Officials are also currently engaging with senior contact points in other Departments to secure input on what measures those Departments are and will be taking to improve the natural environment. Subject to Executive approval, it is intended that the draft Strategy will be published for consultation this spring, with the final Strategy being published this autumn. The Minister added that he was committed to ensuring that we take the time necessary to deliver a comprehensive and ambitious Strategy which will play a key role in shaping our environment in the coming decades.

### **Update - Environmental Farming Scheme (14 April)**

The Minister [revealed](#) that following four Tranches, there are currently over 5000 farmers participating in the scheme, 4,161 in the Wider element and 898 in the Higher, with approximately £65 million of National and EU co-funded monies committed to delivering the scheme aims. Against our key outcome target for EFS Higher of 60,000 ha of environmentally designated land and priority habitat under favourable management, DAERA currently have some 50,410 ha of Higher land under agreement. Through EFS Wider, commitments include some 486km of Planting New Hedgerows and 214 Ha of Provision of Winter Feed Crop for Wild Birds. DAERA have also protected 2,800km of watercourses from access by livestock. Once Tranche 4 is fully delivered, EFS will have supported the planting of approximately 680,000 native trees. Tranche 5 EFS Higher will open for applications on 29 April with the Wider element opening this summer. Tranche 6 is planned to open in 2022.

### **Potential of Seaweed to Cut Methane Emissions (15 April)**

The Minister was asked for his assessment on the potential merits of introducing seaweed into cows' diets to cut methane emissions. He [replied](#) that DAERA is working in partnership with the Agri-Food and Bioscience Institute (AFBI) who have been conducting their own research into the use of seaweed as a mitigation for methane emissions caused by the process of fermentation within ruminants. AFBI are currently working closely with several EU partners on a project to investigate local seaweeds for feed additives for cattle and sheep under NI farming conditions. Officials are aware of the findings from the research carried out elsewhere, while the findings look very positive in terms of seaweeds ability to partially counteract methane emissions from cows, more work is required to establish if there would be enough supply of seaweed available to make this a viable option for mitigating methane emissions. One other potential downside is that research shows that seaweeds contain inorganic elements and heavy metals such as iodine, bromine, arsenic and other bioactive organic compounds. At high levels these may cause toxicity in animals and humans. Chronic excess iodine intake from consumption of kelp meal in dairy cows can lead to iodine-enriched milk, and this may lead to excess iodine consumption in humans where iodine intake is already sufficient. DAERA officials continue to work in partnership with the agri-food industry to minimise the sectors' environmental impact.

### **Update - Joint Fisheries Statement/ Fisheries Bill (26 April)**

The Minister provided an [update](#) on the Fisheries Statement and Fisheries Bill. The Fisheries Act 2020 sets out the UK's fisheries objectives and requires the UK fisheries administrations acting jointly to prepare and publish a Joint Fisheries Statement (JFS) for consultation. The draft JFS will set out the joint fisheries policies and how they will meet the fisheries objectives. Officials are currently working with their counterparts in the fisheries administrations in England, Scotland and Wales on drafting the text of the JFS and the preparatory work on statutory assessments and consultation exercises. Drafting of the JFS and associated assessments will continue until Autumn 2021. Devolved Ministers will be asked to agree the draft before consultation. Thereafter, the Department must specify a period of scrutiny of the draft JFS by the Assembly, and lay a copy of the consultation draft before the Assembly. The draft JFS will be brought to the attention of the AERA Committee during this period. The public consultation on the JFS is planned from late December 2021 to early March 2022, for a 13 week period. The JFS must be published by 23 November 2022.

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## **Minister for the Economy**

### **Economic Recovery Action Plan - Role of the Natural Environment (29 March)**

The Minister for the Economy [stated](#) that 'Building a Greener Economy' is one of the 4 pillars of her Economic Recovery Action Plan. The actions under this pillar outline her intention to promote a greener economy and future through development in areas such as clean energy, energy efficiency and green innovation. Furthermore, 'they recognise that a sustainable and environmentally responsible recovery will not only benefit the natural environment, but create opportunities to build resilience; increase productivity; create jobs and strengthen our competitiveness'.

## Minister of Finance

### Nature Based Solutions (29 March)

The Minister of Finance was [asked](#) what categories of nature-based solutions his Department is considering for future investment. He replied that the new social value policy will set out how the imperative of reducing carbon emissions will be integrated into procurement. The Minister is working with the Procurement Board to develop an enhanced social value model which will look to reduce carbon emissions through the performance of government contracts both with the main contractor and associated supply chains. This will include a target of developing procurement strategies and specifications that:

- Deliver additional environmental benefits in the performance of the contract including working towards net zero greenhouse gas emissions.
- support environmental protection and improvement.
- encourage supply chains that minimise carbon emissions.
- encourage companies to employ low or zero-carbon practices and/or materials.

He added that he was a member of the Inter-Ministerial Group on Green Growth which is overseeing the development of a Green Growth Strategy on behalf of the Executive and that his officials are also liaising with colleagues in other Departments on related cross-departmental issues which include the development of an Energy Strategy with the Department for the Economy, and 'Future Generations' work on carbon reduction planning with DAERA. Ultimately it will be for the Executive and individual Ministers to decide how this wider strategic framework will help inform future investment priorities including nature-based solutions.

### New Social Value Policy – Procurement Board (20 April)

The Minister of Finance provided an [update](#) on the new social value policy being developed by the Procurement Board. The Board is currently considering an enhanced social value policy which is linked to PfG outcomes. This policy will address a number of specific social, economic and environmental areas such as: Employment, training and skills; Building ethical and resilient supply chains; Equal opportunity and employment practices; Climate change; and Wellbeing; and will allocate a minimum weighting of the award criteria to social value when assessing bids. An innovation lab is planned for 5 May to discuss and finalise the new policy. The Minister said he would update the Assembly as soon as this is agreed by the Executive.

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## Minister for Infrastructure

### Update - Establishment of Infrastructure Commission (2 April)

The Minister [stated](#) that she established a Ministerial Advisory Panel on Infrastructure in August 2020 to consider how an Infrastructure Commission for Northern Ireland might support more effectively the long-term planning and development of relevant infrastructure here. The Panel undertook a short, sharp exercise and presented a report on their findings in the autumn. The Minister has shared the report with Executive colleagues, the Infrastructure Committee and the Speaker and has also published the report on the Department's website. Since then, the Minister has been engaging with Executive colleagues to consider how we might establish an Infrastructure Commission to support the long-term planning and delivery of infrastructure particularly in the context of our Covid recovery.

### Windfarm Provision in NI (31 March)

The Minister for Infrastructure was asked to detail (i) the processes used to cumulatively assess the provision of windfarms in NI; and (ii) at what stage would it be considered an over saturation for the

relevant local environment. She [replied](#) that (i) Under the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) and Planning Policy Statement 18: Renewable Energy, applications for wind energy development are required to demonstrate that the development will not have an unacceptable impact on visual amenity or landscape character, and that the development has taken into consideration the cumulative impact of existing wind turbines. The supplementary planning guidance 'Wind Energy Development in Northern Ireland's Landscapes' is also taken into account in assessing all wind turbine proposals. This document identifies landscape characteristics that may be sensitive to wind turbine development and provides guidance on the landscape and visual analysis process, and the indicative type of development that may be appropriate. Information on landscape and visual impact and an assessment of cumulative impacts are generally prepared by the applicant and submitted to accompany a planning application, for example as part of an Environmental Statement. The Planning Authority will evaluate that information, carry out a site visit and reach its own consideration of the proposal. (ii) A planning application for a particular windfarm could be refused on the grounds that it would result in unacceptable adverse impact on visual amenity and landscape character by reason of the cumulative effects of the development in addition to other existing wind farms in the locality. However, as each landscape is unique and has different characteristics, it is not possible to stipulate the stage at which a local environment could reach saturation point. Each proposal is considered on its own individual merits taking into account all material planning considerations, including planning policy.

#### **Viability - Current NI Railways Network (30 March)**

The Minister [stated](#) that prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, NI Railways carried almost 16 million passengers per year. In the five years prior to Covid, the passenger growth on the rail network has grown in excess of 26%, and with the introduction of new train carriages, and infrastructure projects such as the new North West Hub, she is confident that our rail infrastructure will play a key role in our green climate agenda, providing sustainable mass transit options.

#### **Expansion of Rail Network and Viability of Routes (8 April)**

The Minister [stated](#) that she had huge ambitions for our rail network and was keen to do all that she can to explore how we can progress rail improvements to better connect communities, businesses and address regional imbalance while tackling the climate crisis. Her Department is currently bringing forward the Transport Plan for the Regional Strategic Transport Network (RSTNTP) and, amongst other measures, this will consider improvements to our rail network. This will include examining how best to optimise the existing network through increased frequency of services and reduced journey times, whilst also looking at the practicalities of expanding the network. The Draft RSTNTP is scheduled for full public consultation in late 2021. In addition she has: commenced a new feasibility study to get the Phase 3 upgrade of the Derry to Coleraine railway back on track; commissioned a separate study to explore the option of halts and associated park and ride facilities at Strathfoyle, Eglinton/City of Derry Airport and Ballykelly; agreed to provide financial assistance for a feasibility study to examine whether the former track bed between Portadown and Armagh is suitable for restoration; engaging with, and make representations to, the British Government to honour the commitments made in New Decade New Approach to 'turbocharge infrastructure' including a high speed rail link between Belfast, Dublin and Cork; and reached agreement with the Transport Minister, Eamon Ryan TD, to extend the feasibility study into high speed rail between Derry-Belfast-Dublin-Cork to a Strategic All Island Rail Review that will allow us to consider our rail connectivity across the island.

#### **Recycled Aggregates in Construction Works (19 April)**

The Infrastructure Minister was asked how recycled aggregates are included in construction works undertaken by her Department. She [replied](#) that the general approach within the construction industry is to recycle material when possible, rather than sending it to land fill. For example, 40 thousand cubic metres of existing bituminous surfaces were recycled, along with 2 million cubic metres of excavated material, was reused as fill on the A6 Dungiven to Drumahoe scheme. The use of recycled aggregates is permitted on highway projects provided they meet the

physical and chemical properties set out in Specification for Highway Works in the Manual of Contract Documents for Highway Works. These requirements ensure that the materials selected for use: Can effectively perform their intended function, within the structure of the road; Will not pose an environmental hazard; and Will not present a significant health and safety risk. Reuse and recycling of material is also promoted within the internal DfI Roads Environmental Manual.

### **Street Lighting in Rural Areas (26 April)**

The Minister was asked whether she has any plans to revise the criteria applied to applications for street lighting in rural areas. She [replied](#) that to ensure objectivity and consistency her Department uses two main criteria when considering the provision of street lighting in rural areas: The density of housing within a community, including public buildings with significant night time use and Road safety, where street lighting would contribute to a reduction in the number of night-time collisions. These criteria serve to balance the demand for more rural lighting against the unwelcome effects of increased urbanisation of the countryside, the environmental impact of night sky light pollution on people, wildlife and flora and the financial costs of providing and maintaining additional public lighting installations. She added that given that the current policy provides a good balance between safety, environmental and financial needs, there are no current plans to change this policy which also reflects the policy adopted by previous Ministers.

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## **Oral Answers to Questions**

### **Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs**

#### **Agricultural Policy – Update (13 April)**

The Minister was asked ([Question 2](#)) for an update on the development of a future agricultural policy. He replied that DAERA is now at an advanced stage in the development of a draft policy framework portfolio, which he hopes to publish in the coming months. The framework has been defined around the four key outcomes of increased productivity, improved resilience, environmental sustainability and improved supply chain functionality. As that work continues in the years ahead, he stated that DAERA will continue to engage with our farmers, land managers and environmental stakeholders to co-design new agricultural policies. In response to a supplementary question, he added that he has asked officials to work up a bid to be made to the Department of Finance for the significant investment and support for the farming community to engage, where they can, in activities that will significantly reduce the carbon footprint and increase carbon capture. However, he further added that he did not think that we would be able to introduce an agricultural Bill during the lifetime of this Assembly, which runs to May 2022.

#### **Islandmagee Gas Storage Project - Update (13 April)**

The Minister stated ([Question 4](#)) that he had received a portfolio of documents on the Islandmagee gas storage proposals and he was also considering review documentation for the other two DAERA licences that were issued back in 2014 - a water discharge consent and a water abstraction licence. As the documentation is comprehensive it will therefore take some time to be considered fully. He added that while he recognised that the proposed development is unpopular with some local residents, that in itself does not mean that it is controversial under the legislation on Executive referral. He concluded that he was considering the option of Executive referral.

#### **Climate Change Bill: Consultation (13 April)**

The Minister stated ([Topical Question 3](#)) that DAERA have been taking advice from the Climate Change Committee from which he recently received a letter that the committee's "*analysis has not produced a scenario for the UK net zero in 2050 that sees Northern Ireland reach net zero in the same year. We are not therefore able precisely to calculate the costs of Northern Ireland reaching net zero, but they will almost certainly be higher than those of the 82% reduction target by up to £900 million a year by 2050. If engineered removals technologies are used, the context of a net zero 2050 target for the whole of the UK is also important*". The Minister has set it out that his Bill will set targets to

reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 82% by 2050 and added that ‘a larger reduction in output from the Northern Ireland livestock sector would be required, compared with the rest of the UK. Even our most stretching tailwind scenario, which entails a 50% fall in meat and dairy production in Northern Ireland by 2050 and significantly greater levels of tree planting on the land that is released, is not enough to get Northern Ireland to net zero emissions by 2050’. Without a corresponding reduction in the consumption of such produce, this would simply shift emissions overseas.

### **Carbon Sequestration (13 April)**

In response to a question ([Topical Question 4](#)) on the importance of carbon sequestration in our soil, hedgerows and trees etc, the Minister stated that we have significant opportunities for carbon storage in our peatlands, but that will involve wetting those peatlands. As a consequence, the farms that are closest will most likely lose the ability to graze their lands, certainly for as long as they are currently able to. Therefore, those farms need to be adequately compensated. The opportunity to tap into a new single farm payment scheme to do that. He also wants to look at the opportunity of having more structured management of our hedgerows adding that if we bring a requirement into the single farm payment scheme that farms have a structured plan for their hedgerows, it will enable and encourage them to grow those hedgerows for longer periods.

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### **Minister for the Economy**

#### **Energy Governance for the NI Energy Transition (13 April)**

The Minister for the Economy was asked ([Question 1](#)) for her assessment of the finding in the 'Energy governance for the Northern Ireland energy transition' research report, conducted by the University of Exeter's energy policy group and funded by the Executive, that her Department's statutory duty to promote the gas industry creates a risk of asset stranding. She replied that ‘The finding in the University of Exeter report is solely the opinion of the authors and is based on a small number of interviews’. She added that it is correct that there is an obligation on the Department and the Utility Regulator to promote the natural gas industry to facilitate significant carbon reduction as businesses and households switch to gas from more polluting fossil fuels. Looking forward, her Department’s consultation on policy options for a new energy strategy states that our gas networks, which are more modern than those in Great Britain and are expected to be able to accommodate zero-carbon gas without requiring extensive upgrades, can have an ongoing role to play in contributing to net zero carbon energy. Consideration is being given to how biogas and hydrogen injections to the gas grid could be facilitated to ensure that our gas network remains a valuable asset on the energy decarbonisation pathway to 2050.

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