

ENERGY, INFRASTRUCTURE &
NATURAL RESOURCES

Climate Change Bill

- *what it means for Northern Ireland*

Climate change is a crisis that is going to have a significant impact on our lives in the next decade. In 2020, the Northern Ireland Assembly declared a climate emergency.

The Climate Change Bill (“the Bill”) introduced recently is a positive move forward in dealing with the challenge of global warming. Until now, Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK without its own climate legislation. Recent developments means that NI finally has a plan to improve its impact on the environment and demonstrates a previously lacking commitment to protecting and preserving the environment.

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What is the Climate change bill?

The Bill was drafted by the Climate Coalition NI which is made up of a variety of stakeholders including academics, scientists, legal professionals and environmental NGOs. The Bill sets out an action plan on how to address and mitigate the climate crisis in NI and was brought forward to the NI Assembly as a Private Member’s Bill by Clare Bailey, leader of the Green Party. 10 March 2021 deadline

Main aims of the Bill

The Bill aims to combat the climate emergency that the world now faces and one of the most significant proposals outlined is to establish a legally binding net-zero carbon target for Northern Ireland, to be achieved by 2045. The Bill also envisages the establishment of a Northern Ireland Climate Office and requires the Executive Office to bring forward a Climate Action Plan within three years of the Bill becoming law and then a new plan every five years thereafter. This Action Plan is intended to include targets to reduce energy consumption and make energy usage cleaner for the environment.

Impact the Bill will have on Northern Ireland

It is no great secret that Northern Ireland is heavily reliant on fossil fuels. It is intended that the Bill will lead to a reduction of energy usage and carbon emissions across the board. In the not so distant future we

will also inevitably see an increase in electric vehicle ownership and there may be grants and government support for improvements to homes and commercial properties for energy reduction purposes.

Approximately 50% of Northern Ireland’s electricity is currently generated from renewable sources, the majority of which is wind energy. We should expect to see more renewable energy projects in the near future as the focus grows on achieving the climate change targets. In fact, last week it was announced that a review into planning policy for renewable energy projects is taking place. Making the announcement, Nichola Mallon, the Minister for Infrastructure, noted that she intended to engage with the public and local communities in Northern Ireland in an attempt to ensure that “[her] department’s regional planning policy remains up to date, robust and fit for purpose” whilst also promoting and facilitating renewable and low carbon energy development.

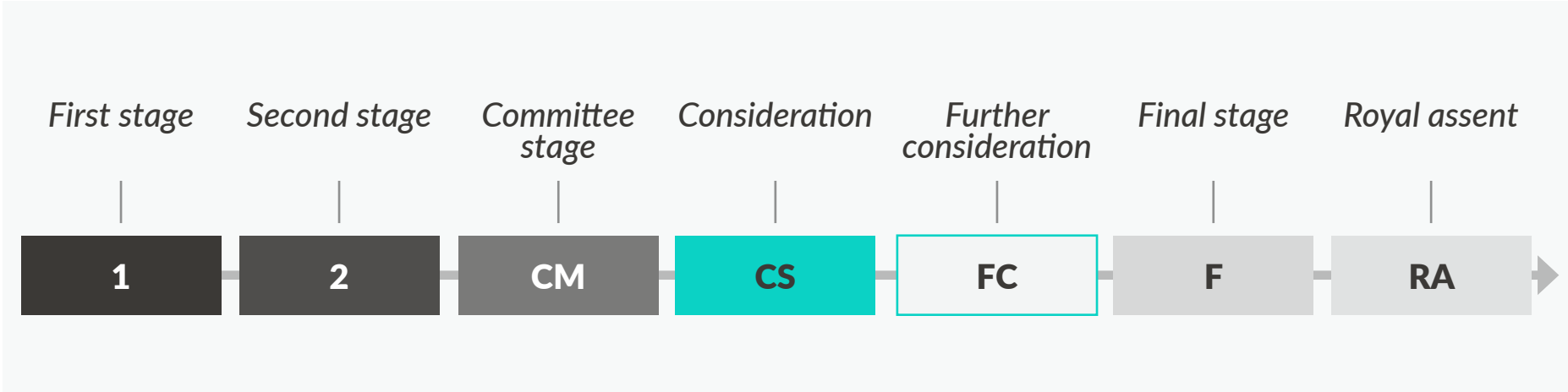


How the process operates

In order for the Bill to pass and become law, a few stages must be completed, as outlined in the diagram below:

The first review stage has already been completed with the introduction of the Bill for Assembly consideration being made in an astonishing 57 seconds and the release of an official report on 22 March 2021. It is worth noting that the majority of parties in the Assembly have expressed their support for the Bill, therefore, it is likely to pass to the next stage.

The second stage in the process is a full debate on the details of the Bill. This is yet to be scheduled but should happen in the near future.



Opposition to the Bill

Both the DUP and the TUV have declined to support the Bill. The DUP have voiced concerns that the Bill is not realistic and will have a significant impact on the farming community, especially given how economically reliant Northern Ireland is on the agriculture sector. However, it is worth noting that 27% of carbon emissions in Northern Ireland stem from agriculture (most of which is methane from cattle) and there are many within the farming industry that want to introduce more sustainable practices but feel that they don't have the governmental economic incentives they need in order to do so.

The Minister for Agriculture and Environment, Edwin Poots, has declared his intention to propose his own alternative bill which he describes as "fit for purpose, achievable and ambitious." It is thought that this alternative bill will be less optimistic with regards to its carbon emission targets and is likely to draw on advice

from the UK's Committee on Climate Change which has suggested that an 82% reduction in emissions by 2050 would be a fair contribution for Northern Ireland, as opposed to the net-zero carbon strategy currently envisaged.

Conclusion

Despite the vocal opposition expressed in response to the Bill, it seems certain that the Bill will pass to the next stage. It is clear that tackling climate change and the threat it poses to our society is, and will most certainly remain, challenging. Legislating in respect of the future of energy is a necessary step to combat global warming.

We consume more energy per person in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the UK and are the only region without targeted legislation. We need guidance and support in this area in order to effect change and the passing of the Climate Change Bill would be a historic step in Northern Ireland and will hopefully have a monumental impact on both the local and global environment as well as wider society.



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