

Northern Ireland Assembly News – December 2020

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

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N.B. The NI Assembly will close for Christmas Recess on 19 December 2020 to 10 January 2021. First Plenary Sitting – 18 January 2021

Executive Committee Business

Draft Alien and Locally Absent Species (Aquaculture) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (NI) 2020 (14 December)

Members [debated](#) a motion: *That the draft Alien and Locally Absent Species (Aquaculture) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.*

The draft regulations ensure that secondary legislation relating to the use of alien and locally absent species in aquaculture continues to operate effectively at the end of the transition period in a way that ensures that Northern Ireland remains legally compliant. The purpose of the regulations, which the proposed SR amends, is to ensure that there is adequate protection of aquatic habitats from the risks that are associated with the use of alien and locally absent species in aquaculture while contributing to the sustainable development of the aquaculture industry. While facilitating beneficial introductions, the proposed introductions of alien species and locally absent species to Northern Ireland are assessed using a risk-based approach in order to prevent interaction with indigenous species and damage to our native ecosystems. While ultimately the motion was passed with broad support within the Chamber, 11 MLAs voted against the motion.

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Answers to Written Questions

Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Updated Biodiversity Strategy Delayed (8 December)

The Minister [revealed](#) that while in a previous response, he highlighted that a first draft of the Biodiversity Strategy was anticipated to be complete by late 2021, this timescale is dependant on a number of factors, including agreement of new post 2020 international targets; the level of detail and support from other Departments and a wide range of organisations in developing strategic objectives. Also, the range and timing of other initiatives which will have a bearing on the strategy and the internal resources available for developing the document. Once a draft is developed, it will require formal consultation with all stakeholders; detailed scrutiny including the AERA Committee and, as the strategy is cross cutting, Executive agreement. Given the above, it may be the beginning of 2022 before DAERA will be in a position to publish a final Biodiversity Strategy for the period up to 2030. Therefore, unfortunately, it is not possible to provide you with an exact date for finalising a new strategy at this time.

Ash Dieback Disease (1 December)

DAERA surveillance and monitoring of ash dieback disease since 2012 has confirmed that the disease is affecting trees in the wider environment across all local council areas in Northern Ireland. The Minister [provided](#) a table summarises for the period 2017 to 2020, findings of ash dieback that have been confirmed across a range of single trees and groups of ash trees, by council area.

Unsold Clothing Suitable for Reusing or Recycling (4 December)

The Minister [stated](#) that he was committed to working towards reducing the volume of textiles and clothing sent to landfill and incineration and officials are working on a number of initiatives in this area. The waste hierarchy, prioritises waste prevention, reuse, and recycling ahead of landfill and incineration and legislation is in place to support this. The transposition of the new Circular Economy Package, (agreed by the AERA committee on 19 November 2020) will add further requirements to ensure that waste which has been separately collected for preparing for reuse or recycling is not incinerated, except where incineration delivers the best environmental outcome. It will also require that steps be taken to ensure the amount of municipal waste landfilled is reduced to 10% or less by 2035, providing added impetus to make sure as many resources as possible are being moved further up the waste hierarchy. Officials have been involved with the development of a textile-focussed UK-wide initiative. The Waste and Resources Action Programme Textiles 2030 will deliver a UK national roadmap, convening the fashion and textiles sector around priority actions and targets with circularity at the core. The initiative will seek to reduce consumption and environmental impact of textiles, as well as stimulating circularity in the sector. The 2030 ambition of the project is to ensure

all products are designed with circularity in mind, more circular raw material is in new products than linear raw material and more products are sold for re-use in the UK than new. Locally, funding has been approved for the delivery of a targeted behaviour change campaign designed to reduce waste from textiles and to help normalise purchasing, re-use and re-purposing behaviours with regard to textiles. Funding has also been approved to assist the launch of the Northern Ireland Resource Network which provides support to organisations, social enterprises and charities working within the reuse and repair sector.

Replacement for the Basic Payment Scheme (4 December)

The Minister [stated](#) that he was working to develop a tailored support regime that will help farmers to become more productive and to maximise the sustainable returns they can achieve from the assets at their disposal. These assets include the environmental assets on the farm and therefore the delivery of environmental outcomes will form a major part of the overall support framework going forward.

Support/Development of Organic Agriculture (4 December)

The Minister [outlined](#) the current and DAERA offers support to farmers for conversion and management to certified organic farming standards through the Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS). After three tranches of the EFS since 2017, DAERA is supporting 631 hectares under the Organic Conversion option and 2,506 hectares under the Organic Management option. DAERA also liaises with Organic NI, which is the sector's producers group, in relation to organic farming issues. DAERA previously funded the Organic Action Plan Group (NI), which oversaw delivery of an action plan to grow and develop the organic sector. However, growth of the sector will be dependent on market demand for organic produce.

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Minister for Communities

Home insulation/ Energy Efficiency Schemes and Fuel Poverty Climate Change (7 December)

The Minister [explained](#) that the Affordable Warmth Scheme is the Executive's main fuel poverty scheme. It provides a range of energy efficiency improvement measures which include cavity and loft insulation as well as new and replacement heating systems and windows where appropriate. Recent changes to the eligibility criteria increase the income threshold from £20,000 to £23,000 and removing disability benefits from the calculation of income will increase the number of households eligible for support. This Scheme is delivered in partnership between the Department, all eleven local Councils and the Housing Executive. The Boiler Replacement Scheme also provides a grant of up to £1,000 to eligible households towards the cost of replacing old and inefficient boilers over 15 years old. The Housing Executive recently commissioned research into the cost of retro-fitting housing to improve energy efficiency standards here. The research findings will help to inform future policy, but the common challenge for all providers remains the availability of funding to facilitate works to deliver improved energy efficiency standards. A new Fuel Poverty Strategy, which is in the early stages of development, will align with the new Energy Strategy and associated Energy Efficiency Strategy and Clean Air Strategies.

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Minister for the Economy

Offshore/ Marine Technologies and Renewable Electricity Generation (9 December)

The Minister [stated](#) that work is already ongoing to assess the potential contribution of offshore and marine technologies. Her Department is currently working with The Crown Estate, through its Key Resource Areas initiative, to identify the potential for fixed and floating offshore wind development in NI waters. The first report under this initiative, looking at technical aspects, was published at the end of November. The initial results were 'promising' but this is only the first step in a process that will also have to take account of the economic and environmental characteristics of the identified areas. In relation to marine technologies, the Department are already aware of the potential through the two tidal projects at Fair Head and Torr Head which were granted rights to develop in 2012. How best to accelerate these projects and encourage more developments of this nature will be considered as we develop a new Energy Strategy.

Roll-out of Smart Meters (2 December)

The Minister for the Economy gave an [update](#) on the roll-out of smart meters to domestic premises. The roll-out of smart metering is being considered through the development of the new Energy Strategy for NI. The Energy Strategy Options Consultation is due to be published in March 2021.

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Minister for Infrastructure

Future Hydrogen Fuel Provision (3 December)

The Minister [stated](#) that her Department has sought to ensure that hydrogen technologies are at the forefront of the introduction of alternative fuels. This includes representation on the Steering Committee of the GenComm project which provided the platform for the successful bid for funding for the introduction of refuelling infrastructure and 3 Hydrogen Buses for the Translink fleet; commitment of a further £50m to deliver 100 zero emission Translink buses, twenty of which could be powered by Hydrogen Fuel Cell technology; NI Water is currently undertaking a pilot project to assess the advantages of using elevated levels of oxygen in a simulation of the treatment of wastewater. A small electrolyser is currently being commissioned as part of this project, which will split water in to oxygen and hydrogen. The results of the pilot will help to inform the commissioning of a 1 MW electrolyser, and associated storage and refuelling equipment, to be based at a major wastewater treatment works. The overall purpose of this project will be to demonstrate any potential benefits from the use of oxygen at scale to enable plant efficiency and in relation to the use of green hydrogen in decarbonising transport. Initially, the focus will be on NI Water's vehicle fleet, but the company will also seek to identify partner organisations to demonstrate the adoption of hydrogen in everyday vehicle use. The Minister added that she was also considering how we could build on work to date to provide further electrolyser and refuelling capacity to support the introduction of other zero emission heavy vehicles which may not be suited to using battery technology. The hydrogen future could also bring solutions for ferry operations and rail services, where electrification by overhead power lines is not economically viable.

Consistency in Environmental Impact Assessment Public Registers

The Minister for Infrastructure was asked what steps she will take to provide greater consistency across local councils in the information recorded and available in Environmental Impact Assessment public registers. She [replied](#) that Since the transfer of planning powers to local government in April 2015 councils, in their role as local planning authorities, are the decision-makers for the vast majority of applications for planning permission. The Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (NI) 2017 ("the 2017 EIA Regulations") set out the obligations which apply consistently across all councils in relation to assessing the potential environmental impacts of development proposals submitted to them. Regulation 44 of these regulations specifies information which all councils must include in the publicly available Planning Register which they are statutorily required to maintain. This information includes, for example, EIA screening determinations, scoping opinions and copies of environmental statements.

Funding committed to improving walking and cycle routes (1 December)

The Minister [stated](#) that she has allocated £20 million capital funding for blue / green infrastructure in 2020/21. The key elements of that funding are to support communities through transformation, promoting active travel and shaping our places to live in the new normal in support of the COVID 19 recovery. She has committed £11million from the blue/green fund towards Active Travel projects in 2020/21. This includes the £5million for the Covid Revitalisation programme, to help reimagine and reshape our towns and city centres; £1.4 million for six worthy Greenway projects that are ready for construction in 2020/21; up to £1 million for various pop-ups and pilots and approximately £3.5 million for a programme of cycle and footways delivered by my own Department. In addition, she recently announced £160,000 for an extension of the recently opened Blaris Greenway. Funding has also been made available to roll out the 20mph speed limit scheme to some 100 schools.

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Oral Answers to Questions

Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Illegal Dumping (7 December)

Minister Dodds (deputising for Minister Poots) [outlined](#) the steps are being taken to strengthen legislation and expedite proceedings in response to illegal dumping. She stated that responsibility for dealing with illegal dumping is shared between the local councils, which deal with low-level waste offences, and the NIEA, which deals with large-scale waste criminality and hazardous waste. While there are no plans at present to strengthen the legislation around illegal dumping, officials are working with councils to consider the effectiveness of the existing legislation and explore how they can work together to make best use of the powers that it provides. That may create opportunities to deal more quickly and effectively with lower-level offending on a local level through fixed penalty notices rather than being reliant on court proceedings, the timings of which are outside NIEA control.

Impact of Gorse Fires (7 December)

Minister Dodds (deputising for Minister Poots) [stated](#) that Gorse fires or wildfires have a significant impact on the environment and are a risk to life and property. Semi-natural habitats often affected by such fires include heathland and blanket bog. Many of these areas are important nature conservation sites. Indeed, between 2010 and 2019, 64 wildfires were recorded in areas of special scientific interest. Impacts ranging from gradual change in species composition arising from surface burns to complete loss of vegetation and seed banks in severe, deep burns. In surface burns, the shift in vegetation composition can be undesirable, such as increases in gorse or bracken. In deep burn, the impacts can lead to long-term erosion due to lack of vegetation cover. The impact on wildlife include the loss of foraging areas and the destruction of the nests and eggs of important breeding birds such as hen harriers. The damage caused to habitats and species can take many years to recover, and some may be lost for ever. Such fires also threaten life, property, forestry, agricultural land, public water supplies and other public utilities. They impact on emergency response services at the cost of millions of pounds to the public purse. Most wildfires are the result of human activities and are preventable. 2020, was the worst year for wildfires since 2011. To May of this year, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service had to deal with over 600.

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Minister for Infrastructure

NDNA Update (1 December)

The Minister provided an [update](#) on her Department's commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach' (NDNA). Her Department is progressing Executive flagship projects on the A5 and A6 along with other key infrastructure projects including the A1 junction safety programme, the iconic Narrow Water bridge and York Street interchange. 'NDNA' also recognises that significant investment is required in our sewers, pumping stations and upgrades to waste water treatment works. Progressing action on that, in November her Department launched a public consultation on Living with Water in Belfast, which is the strategic drainage infrastructure plan for Belfast. North/South infrastructure projects in 'NDNA' were discussed at the October North/South Ministerial Council transport sectoral meeting.

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Ammonia Emissions (15 December)

The Minister for Infrastructure was asked what discussions she has had with the Agriculture Minister in relation to a review of the planning application process to ensure planners have appropriate guidance on ammonia. She [replied](#) that she had written to the Minister about the ongoing ammonia and nitrates deposition issues particularly as they affect the planning system. She had highlighted the need for DAERA to urgently revise its current operational protocol on ammonia-emitting projects, which is used as the basis for DAERA's advice to planning authorities in its role as a

statutory consultee. She also asked for an update on the current position with the ammonia strategy and how, in the interim, NIEA can provide the advice needed to enable planning applications for ammonia-emitting development that are currently on hold to be determined. Finally, the Minister committed her Department to assisting DAERA in taking forward work on its proposed ammonia strategy, which is to include a review of the operational protocol.

Belfast Bicycle Network: Update (15 December)

The Minister [stated](#) the bicycle strategy, published in August 2015, set out the objective of building a comprehensive network for the bicycle. One of the elements of that was to develop bicycle networks for the main urban areas in NI. The intention was that the first would be for Belfast. A public consultation on the draft Belfast bicycle network was completed in 2017. Following consideration of the many responses a consultation report was published in 2018, during the period when the Assembly was suspended. There was general support for the idea of a network but the consultation highlighted the need to look more closely at the north and west of the city, where levels of cycling were lower and where there was less walking and cycling infrastructure. Her Department engaged Sustrans to carry out further work on an active travel feasibility study for north and west Belfast in 2019. A final report for those two areas was provided to the Department earlier this year. Some work has been undertaken to revise the proposed network in light of that, and the Minister has asked officials to ensure that a final document is ready for publication in the new year.

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