

Northern Ireland Assembly News – February 2020

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

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Private Members' Business

Motion: Climate Emergency (3 February)

Members [debated and resolved a motion](#): That this Assembly recognises that we are facing climate breakdown and a biodiversity crisis, declares a climate emergency; and calls on the Executive to fulfil the climate action and environmental commitments agreed in the New Decade, New Approach agreement by commencing, as a matter of urgency, a review of the Executive's strategies to reduce carbon emissions in respect of the Paris Accord and the need to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial temperatures by 2100 and to ensure that targets are met; and further calls upon the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to begin immediately work to establish an independent environmental protection agency based on models of best practice, that will be appointed within 12 months.

In response to the motion the Minister stated that he was writing to the Committee on Climate Change, asking it to provide advice and assistance on what we need to do in Northern Ireland to reduce our emissions so that we can contribute equitably to the net zero target. On receipt of its recommendations, I will bring the Committee's advice on what we do on climate change to the Executive to agree a way forward. Decisions on any new cross-cutting approaches will naturally require Executive support.

In relation to biodiversity, he stated that any decision on a fundamental structural change to the NIEA is a matter for the Executive, but a robust economic appraisal of the costs and benefits of having an independent agency will be necessary to inform that decision properly. He added that he remained open to the idea of an independent environmental protection agency, and that is something that we will look at. You can read the full debate [here](#).

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Answers to Written Questions

Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Bovine TB (6 February)

Given the impact Bovine TB is having on the bovine population, the Minister provided an update on the current status of the disease and how he plans to tackle issue. Read his update [here](#).

Update – Review of Environmental Farming Scheme (7 February)

The Minister provided an update on the review of the Environmental Farming Scheme. See the update [here](#).

Permitted Ammonia levels for individual farm businesses/ Current Emissions Level (6 February)

The Minister provided an update on the [current Ammonia Emission levels](#) as well as [clarity](#) on permitted ammonia levels for individual farm businesses.

Completion of designation of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (4 February)

The Minister [stated](#) that on the basis of an earlier review, approximately 50 potential ASSIs remain to be designated. However, this requires periodic review to ensure the designated network adequately safeguards our most valuable nature. This, in addition to other competing work pressures, means it is not possible to provide a completion date for the programme.

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Growth of Organic Agriculture (4 February)

The Minister [outlined](#) how DAERA assists the growth of the organic sector through support for the conversion and management of land to certified organic standards through the Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS). After two tranches, the EFS is supporting conversion of 510 ha of land, and management of 2,200 ha of land, to certified organic standards under the Organic Conversion and Management options respectively. Growth of organic agriculture will depend on market demand for

organic produce. Organic NI is the representative group for local producers, which was formed in 2013, and DAERA will continue to liaise with Organic NI on development of the sector.

Importance of peatlands for the carbon storage and large-scale peat extraction (3 February)

The Minister gave his [assessment](#) of the importance of peatlands for the storage of carbon and [explained](#) why DAERA permits large-scale peat extraction.

Supplementary Guidance for Anaerobic Digestion/ Compliance with the Habitats Directive and Waste Management Plan for Northern Ireland (3 February)

The Minister was asked whether (i) the Supplementary Guidance for Anaerobic Digestion (published in 2013) is compliant with the Habitats Directive; and (ii) this been incorporated into the Waste Management Plan for Northern Ireland. He [replied](#) that the draft Supplementary Planning Guidance for Anaerobic Digestion was published for consultation and it remains in draft. If the draft guidance is finalised, the Department for Infrastructure will ensure that all relevant regulatory requirements will be considered. Notwithstanding the above, all planning applications that engage the requirements of the Habitats Regulations should be assessed against the relevant legislative provisions. The Waste Management Plan for Northern Ireland provides a moment-in-time review of waste management in Northern Ireland. It references this guidance in relation to planning considerations by local councils.

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Minister for Infrastructure

Strategic Plan for Greenways (8 February)

The Minister provided an [update](#) on Exercise, Explore, Enjoy: A Strategic Plan for Greenways, which has shortlisted three projects for detailed study.

Update on progress of the Bicycle Strategy for Northern Ireland (8 February)

The Minister outlined her commitment to advancing opportunities for communities through active travel and desire to work to enhance safer, cleaner travel that connects our communities and enhances lives. She added that her Department has been operating under severe budget constraints for some years and priority has had to be given to the delivery of the Executive flagship projects. Over the coming weeks she will carefully consider how best to deliver on her active and sustainable travel ambitions. Once the Budget process provides clarity on the resources available she will be able to firm up her objectives for cycling.

Review of Old Minerals Permissions (6 February)

The Minister [outlined](#) (i) why her Department hasn't enacted the legislation on the Review of Old Minerals Permissions; and in light of the precautionary principle (ii) how old extraction sites are allowed to operate outside of modern-day environmental standards.

Introduction of North/ South Glider route (5 February)

A North-South Glider route is one of the projects identified for inclusion in the Belfast Region City Deal. The Minister [explained](#) that the next stages will require close working across all departments and with the other Belfast Region City Deal partners, including to reach agreement on funding and on which projects are most capable of delivering the City Deal objectives. To that end, her officials are working closely with the councils and other partners to take forward a feasibility and options appraisal which will help identify route options. This should be completed by the end of this year.

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Belfast Transport Hub Extension (4 February)

The Minister provided an [update](#) on the Belfast Transport Hub extension and replacement of Great Victoria Street railway station. The project is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2025.

Departmental Land Suitable For Tree Planting (4 February)

The Minister [stated](#) her recognition of the multiple benefits that woodland creation can provide for society, including public access for health and well-being, carbon sequestration, increasing biodiversity and landscape improvement. Her Department's environmental procedures in respect of major road projects promote the incorporation of native species trees and plants. There are plans to

plant 114,000 trees as part of the A6 Randalstown – Castledawson dual carriageway project and a further 150,000 trees in association with the A6 Derry – Dungiven scheme, both of which are currently under construction. In addition, Translink is currently developing a Carbon Strategy which will include the identification of land suitable for all types of planting including trees, hedgerows and wildflowers to protect and enhance biodiversity and investigate how this could be used to offset carbon. As the second biggest landowner in the province with 11,000 hectares, NI Water has been working with the Woodland Trust and has plans to engage with Forestry Service.

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Oral Answers to Questions

Executive Office

Brexit: Executive Subcommittee (3 February)

The First Minister answered a series of questions on the Brexit Executive Subcommittee. The First Minister and deputy First Minister have tabled proposals on the subcommittee to Executive colleagues which has agreed to the establishment of the subcommittee and approved its terms of reference. In summary, the subcommittee will support the Executive by providing a forum for collective discussion and consideration of the implications of EU exit on Northern Ireland in relation to influencing negotiations. It will also agree Northern Ireland policy positions and devolved responsibilities for consideration and decision-making by the UK Government and Joint Committee, as well as developing proposals to maximise our influence and any opportunities arising from the withdrawal agreement, including the Northern Ireland protocol. It will also commission an assessment of the impact on the institutions and on relationships North/South and east-west. All parties on the Executive have representation while other Ministers can be invited to attend should items of particular interest to their portfolio be discussed. See the First Ministers full answers [here](#).

Civic Advisory Panel (17 February)

The deputy First Minister [outlined](#) progress in relation to the appointment of a compact civic advisory panel. The panel will be reconstituted through a public appointments process, which will be scheduled for completion within the six-month period as required by the New Decade, New Approach deal. There will be an important role for the panel in advising the Executive on approaches to engagement on complex policy issues. An important initial task is, therefore, to review the existing remit of the compact civic advisory panel and to design a specification for the role of panel members to set out the qualities and experience we will be seeking from potential candidates. In the light of the panel's remit to convene one citizens' assembly each year, we will also look at good practice elsewhere.

Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Air Pollution (3 February)

The Minister outlined his plans to tackle the growing threat of air pollution, given the clear evidence that it is at dangerous levels across Belfast. In his response he cited addressing one of the blockades to the movement of vehicles, which is at the Westlink/M2 interchange, would be hugely beneficial, as well as support for more electric cars on the road. Read his full response [here](#).

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Minister for Communities

Historical Sites: Protection (3 February)

The Minister [outlined](#) her Department's responsibilities and legal standing in the protection of historical sites. Her Department's relevant powers and responsibilities are set out in two pieces of legislation: the Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects Order 1995; and the Planning Act 2011. Under the legislation, they have a duty to maintain 190 state care monuments and to facilitate access where possible. Her Department is responsible for compiling a schedule of historic monuments, and there are currently approximately 2,000 scheduled. Scheduling provides additional protection through the requirement for scheduled monument consent before carrying out any alterations to these monuments. Her Department is responsible for drawing up a list of buildings of

special architectural or historical interest. Currently, we have around 8,900 listed buildings. Making alterations without listed building consent is an offence.

Minister for the Economy

Mineral Prospecting (24 February)

The Minister gave her assessment of trends in local mineral prospecting. Northern Ireland currently has 12 active mineral-prospecting licences: 10 for base metals, mainly zinc, copper, lead, iron, cobalt and baryte; one for diamonds; and one for rock salt. In 2009, following the publication of data from a major geological survey, the Tellus project, the number of licences peaked at 42. Those 42 licences covered 73% of the land mass of Northern Ireland, compared with around 16.6% today. After that 2009 peak, subsequent years saw a steady decline in the number of licences until 2014, when numbers stabilised, and they have remained relatively consistent — between 10 and 20 — ever since. As a reserved matter, consent to explore for gold and silver is given by the Crown Estate and does not require a mineral-prospecting licence from her Department. However, of the 12 licences currently in place from her Department, nine also have options from the Crown Estate to explore for gold and silver.

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