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Executive Committee Business

Draft Renewables Obligation Closure (No. 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 (27 June)

[\(Full Debate\)](#)

The Minister for the Economy sought and gained approval: *That the draft Renewables Obligation Closure (No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 be approved.* The Northern Ireland renewables obligation (NIRO) has been instrumental in increasing renewable deployment in Northern Ireland from just 3% renewable electricity consumption in 2005 to just over 25% today. In March of last year, the former DETI issued a consultation on the proposed closure of the NIRO. This resulted in closure of the NIRO to non-wind technologies in autumn 2015. On 30 September 2015, a further consultation was issued on closure for onshore wind projects of all sizes from 1 April 2016. Responses to the consultation raised a number of valid arguments that there are differences between the large- and small-scale wind industries and that the two should not be treated in the same manner. In acknowledging these differences, and in order to provide legislative certainty, the NIRO closed to large-scale onshore wind on 1 April 2016. A further supplementary consultation on NIRO closure to small-scale onshore wind was issued on 24 March and closed on 9 May. In addition to and in line with the provisions for large-scale onshore wind, the consultation proposed exceptions to closure in the form of grace periods for projects that could meet certain specific criteria. All the closure options were set against the backdrop of the Department of Energy and Climate Change taking powers in the Energy Act to make regulations restricting the tradeability of NIRO certificates (NIROCs). Ultimately, that means that GB suppliers could not use NIROCs to meet their renewables obligation. Subsequently, the market for such non-redeemable NIROCs would be limited to Northern Ireland. The most likely impact is a reduction in the value of NIROCs and hence the viability of renewables projects, both new and existing and wind and non-wind. Some 126 responses were received from a range of stakeholders, with over 93% of those who indicated a preference chose closure on 30 June 2016. The Minister has decided therefore that the NIRO should close to new small-scale onshore wind-generating stations on 30 June 2016, meaning that projects that can demonstrate that they have an accepted grid connection offer, relevant planning permission and evidence of land rights as of 30 September 2015 will be able to accredit their stations up to 31 March 2017. In some cases, if projects can meet further grace period eligibility criteria, they can seek accreditation up until 31 March 2019.

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Answers to Written Questions

Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Coastal Erosion (24 June)

[AQW 797/16-21](#)

The Minister was asked whether her Department has any plans to review its policy on coastal erosion. She replied that no department currently has overall responsibility for strategic coastal erosion risk management. DAERA does, however, have a specific role as the marine licensing authority and in nature conservation protection. It is this role that they will consider any construction/development proposals up to the high water mark. It is also legally obliged to consider enforcement action where there is non-compliance with the relevant legislation. The Minister stated that the challenge for us all is to manage the natural process of coastal erosion in a more strategic and co-ordinated way and that is the reason why she established and chaired a Coastal Management Forum in her previous role as the Minister for Regional Development. Although her remit has changed the Minister was look forward to continuing to co-chair the Coastal Forum and to ensuring that its good work is continued.

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Native Tree Species (24 June)

[AQW 619/16-21](#)

The Minister outlined how her Department's plans to plant more native tree species. Forest Service encourages landowners to plant both native and non-native trees in the right place, through a mixture of grant aid, advice and regulation. The Forest Expansion Scheme's second tranche is planned to open in July 2016 and will encourage planting of woodlands of 5 hectares and greater,

including new native woodland. Grant support for planting small woodlands will be offered also through the Department's Environmental Farming Scheme as a stand-alone option for native woodland less than 5 hectares. The Environmental Farming Scheme is planned to open for applications later this year. She added that when Forest Service and other woodland owners come to harvest mature coniferous woodland to supply industry with timber, the UK Forestry Standard requires that the forests are regenerated with a proportion of native broadleaf trees or shrubs and this will gradually increase the proportion of native tree species in these forests.

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Assessment of the Challenge Fund

[AQO 72/16-21](#)

Over £4.6 million of Carrier Bag Levy revenue has been issued through the Challenge Fund since its inception in 2011 and almost 600 environmental projects have been completed across the breadth of Northern Ireland. The programme enabled schools and communities, at a grass roots level, to become engaged in the enhancement of our shared environment through the delivery of local environmental projects. These have included a diverse range of projects that have helped wildlife, created green spaces, provided learning experiences and cleaned up the local environment. The Fund has been run annually and the majority of the previous Funds were launched in September or October of the financial year. This provided a short focused timeframe for project delivery to be completed within the financial year. The Minister noted that the former DoE did not launch a 2016/17 Fund prior to the formation of DAERA. The Minister intends to review the estimated 2016/17 carrier bag levy income against existing commitments, the outcome of the June Monitoring round and wider departmental budgetary pressures and priorities to assess the feasibility of launching a 2016/17 Challenge Fund this year.

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Representing both the agricultural and environmental sectors

[AQO 70/16-21](#)

The Minister stated that bringing together agriculture and environmental responsibilities under the same Departmental umbrella creates a unique opportunity to maximise positive environmental outcomes whilst supporting the agri-food sector. She added that a clean, healthy environment is good for Northern Ireland business as it can add value to local produce and increases the competitiveness of Northern Ireland businesses in the marketplace. She believes that DAERA is well placed to explore solutions to the challenges and take forward opportunities, to optimise the needs of both agriculture and the environment. For example, the Going for Growth report recommended the development of a land management strategy which outlines how best to support productive agriculture while improving environmental performance. Another key component is the development of a new Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS), which will be delivered under the Rural Development Programme. The primary objectives of EFS are to protect and enhance biodiversity and water quality through changes in agricultural and land management practices. NIEA regulates emissions to air land and water and will enforce legislative requirements to ensure environmental protection, including prosecution where appropriate. However, the Agency seeks to prevent pollution or other problems arising, by providing guidance and advice to all those they regulate. The Minister also stated that she is also exploring a new Environmental Advisory function within DAERA to help industry, and farmers, to deliver profitably and sustainably.

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Climate Change Bill

[AQO 74/16-21](#)

The Minister was asked whether she plans to introduce a Climate Change Bill. She replied that legislation to help address climate change is already in place in the form of the UK Climate Change Act 2008. The Act sets an *'ambitious' long term target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80% over 1990 levels by 2050 across the UK. Northern Ireland is making good progress on reducing its emissions.* The latest Greenhouse Gas Inventory, published last week, shows a reduction of 17.4% from 1990 levels. Updated projections, published in December 2015, show that we are broadly on track to achieving the PfG target set by the previous Executive of a 35% reduction by 2025. The Minister stated that therefore she will keep the need for local legislation and other measures which might help reduce our greenhouse gas emissions under review. She concluded that *our continued progress, without a NI Climate Change Act, shows our commitment to tackling one of the most serious global challenges that we face.*

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Departmental Priorities

[AQW 404/16-21](#)

The Minister outlined her departmental priorities in the 2016-2021 Assembly mandate. Her list of priorities include: Working with the industry and the Department of the Economy to implement the Executive's response to the 'Going for Growth' initiative; Implementing the Rural Development Programme 2014-20; Working with stakeholders on a range of environmental issues including sustainable agriculture land use, Climate Change, Waste handling and Air Quality; Promoting a fair system which allows local fishermen to derive a viable living from the sea while conserving fish stocks and the marine environment; and Improving animal health and welfare and enhancing plant health. In the near future the Minister intends to publish a DAERA Strategic Plan which will provide further details of her Department's key priorities and objectives.

Minister for the Economy

New Renewable Energy Strategy (10 June)

[AQW 8/16-21](#)

In relation to the creation of a new renewable energy strategy, the Minister stated that the future of renewable energy will be considered in the context of the review and refocusing of the Strategic Energy Framework. The Department hopes to issue a public consultation on the review later this year. A Refocused Energy Strategy will then be published as soon as practicable thereafter covering the 2015-20 timeframe.

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Minister for Infrastructure

Permitted Development Rights for Mineral Exploration (17 June)

[AQW 418/16-21](#)

The Minister explained that he has decided to propose a change to the current legislation on permitted development rights for mineral exploration by removing such rights for oil and gas exploration. In the future, exploration for oil and gas will require the submission of a planning application and will be subject to the full rigours of the planning process, including environmental impact assessment and public consultation. The Minister intends to consult on the legislative change in due course.

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Oral Answers to Questions

Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Deciduous Woodland (20 June)

[AQO 62/16-21](#)

Forests now cover 8% of Northern Ireland, and the Minister outlined how DAERA plans to increase deciduous woodland. The Department has two schemes. The first is delivered by Forest Service, which plans to reopen the forest expansion scheme in July 2016 and aims to plant woodlands of five hectares or more. The first tranche of the scheme received applications for over 330 hectares of new woodland. DAERA issued offers for over 250 hectares and have received claims for 184 hectares, including 108 hectares of deciduous broadleaf woodland. The second scheme is managed by the DAERA to support the planting of smaller native broadleaf woodlands and will open as part of the environmental farming scheme. The rural development programme budget is sufficient to pay for 1,800 hectares of new planting, and allows for up to 100% of eligible costs.

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Dump: Mobuoy Road, Campsie

[AQT 41/16-21](#) Topical Question 1

The Minister was asked for an update on the illegal "super dump" at Mobuoy Road, Campsie. She replied that of most concern is the protection of the River Faughan, which forms the western boundary of the site and is designated as an area of special scientific interest and a special area of conservation. The key priorities for DAERA are to protect the water quality and the public water

supply in the river and to ensure that any site clean-up provides value for money. Three feasible remediation options have been shortlisted, namely excavation and disposal, containment and on-site treatment, with preliminary costs ranging from £20 million to £140 million. Work is ongoing to detail the options further, and she expects a full report of the remediation options for her consideration in December 2016. In the meantime, she has tasked her officials to ensure short-term measures are in place to protect the environment and human health. NIEA has been successful in securing £400,000 to launch phase 1 of a small business research initiative (SBRI) competition, in partnership with Innovate UK, to stimulate the development of innovative remediation treatments for waste illegally deposited at Mobuoy Road and mitigation of its impact on the surrounding environment. The project has received £400,000 from the Northern Ireland Executive's pilot SBRI challenge fund. The outcomes of the competition will further inform the remediation strategy for the Mobuoy site.

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Coupled Payments/Areas of Natural Constraint Scheme

[\(AQT 46/16-21\)](#) Topical Question 6

The Minister was asked whether she intends to implement the recommendations of the consultation carried out by the former DARD, which were to top-slice the basic payment scheme to fund either coupled payments or areas of natural constraint. She replied that she had listened carefully to the views of farming stakeholders and there was little support from them to use funding from pillar 1 to operate a future areas of natural constraint (ANCs) scheme, either by top-slicing or by transferring moneys to pillar 2. The Minister does not believe there are any convincing arguments to introduce coupled support schemes in Northern Ireland during the current CAP period. Therefore, she does not intend to top-slice the basic payment scheme to fund either coupled payments or an areas of natural constraint scheme under pillar 1 of the CAP. Furthermore, she does not intend to introduce a pillar 1 to pillar 2 transfer to fund an areas of natural constraint scheme in pillar 2 under the rural development programme. For ANCs, the options are not new moneys but would operate by redistributing pillar 1 moneys from the disadvantaged area and lowland to the severely disadvantaged area, reinforcing the existing redistribution in that direction, arising from the move to a flat-rate payment scheme.

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