



Submission to

**Climate Change (No. 2) Bill – Call for
Evidence and Views**

September 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UNISON NI welcomes the long-awaited introduction of climate legislation in Northern Ireland. The Bill sets some important technical objectives in relation to emissions targets. However, UNISON is concerned to note that the Bill does not identify achieving a fair and just transition to a zero-carbon economy as an objective. Indeed, the Bill makes no reference to a just transition throughout – either for workers or vulnerable groups across society. The legislation would benefit from a mix of both technical and socioeconomic objectives.

UNISON believes that the emissions targets contained in the Bill must go further. Rather than settling for a reduction of at least 82% by 2050, Northern Ireland should aim higher from the outset by setting a net-zero target. Achieving net zero by 2050 (at the latest) will undoubtedly be challenging, but it is urgently necessary.

UNISON does not support the Bill's powers to amend targets, and suggests a non-regression principle instead. Carbon budgets make distant targets more realisable and achievable in practice. However, any adjustments to carbon budgets ought to be prohibited. This will only encourage backsliding on commitments that are too important to be compromised.

The Bill includes some effective ways of monitoring progress, though independent reviews on departmental performance should also be mandated. Close and sustained engagement with the UK Climate Change Committee will be important. There is also a role for specialised *regional* independent oversight, in the form of an NI Committee on Climate Change, Climate Commissioner or Ombudsman.

UNISON believes that the responsibilities on all Government Departments set out in the Bill are appropriate. Adaptation reporting duties for major public bodies

should be made mandatory, as is the case in Scotland. The Bill must also specify what constitutes a major public body.

UNISON notes the costs associated with the Bill and agrees that significant investment in infrastructure and low-carbon technologies will be necessary. However, the Bill contains little or no provision increased funding in public services. Public investment has a crucial role to play in both mitigation and adaptation strategies. The climate crisis is a public health crisis, and the resources allocated to the Health and Social Care sector should reflect this.

In addition to making use of the advice provided by the UK Climate Change Committee, the Department should use of the wealth of advice from other sections of society. This should include women's groups, migrant groups, youth organisations and trade unions. Climate breakdown impacts on the interests of these groups in unique and specific ways.

UNISON does not think that, in its current form, the Bill adequately addresses transboundary issues relating to climate change, which are largely absent. The Bill does not reflect on the impacts coming from nearby jurisdictions. The geographic, economic and social characteristics of the island of Ireland demand that the two jurisdictions work effectively together to tackle climate change.

The Bill must prioritise the principles of just transition to protect both population and planet from the impacts of climate breakdown.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 UNISON is the leading trade union in Northern Ireland representing over 45,000 members and is the largest trade union in the UK with over 1.3 million members. Our membership includes public service workers in health and social care; the education and higher education services; the library service; local government; youth justice; private companies providing public services; and the community and voluntary sector. 84% of our membership in Northern Ireland are women.

1.2 As a public services union, UNISON is concerned about the effects of climate breakdown across the public service workforce. UNISON represents a clear majority of healthcare workers in the Health and Social Care (HSC) system. The impact of climate breakdown – and specifically extreme weather events – will have a significant impact on the physical and mental health of the population, leading to increased pressure on the already short-staffed and underpaid HSC workforce. UNISON members across other sectors, including education and the community and voluntary sector, will also experience the effects of environmental change, including pollution, extreme weather and floods.

1.3 Half of UK carbon emissions are work-related¹. UNISON and other trade unions therefore have a significant role to play in ensuring a just transition to a zero-carbon economy. It is hoped that this transition will create around two million jobs in the UK². However, this cannot come at the expense of workplace safety, workers' conditions and livelihoods.

¹ TUC (2021) [Go green at work: the union effect](#)

² Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (2020) [Government launches taskforce to support drive for 2 million green jobs by 2030](#)

1.4 UNISON has a duty to protect the health and interests of its members. 82% of UNISON NI members are women and 80% of people displaced by climate change are women³. The transition to a zero-carbon economy must also tackle material disadvantage, oppression and economic inequality. As the largest organisation of black and migrant workers in Northern Ireland, UNISON is keenly aware that minority groups receive less help coping with the effects of climate breakdown and their voices are ignored at multiple stages in the policymaking progress⁴. The proportion of workers under 26 who join UNISON grows each year. It is these young people who will bear the brunt of climate policy that is unfit for purpose. Any climate legislation that is passed must respect the human rights of workers across all sections of society, and must adhere to principles of non-discrimination and equality.

1.0 BILL OBJECTIVES

2.1 As the only part of the UK without region-specific legislation, a climate change bill will be an important step in setting goals and targets to tackle climate change. The objectives of this Bill are important and largely technical – specifying emissions targets, a system of carbon budgeting and reporting obligations.

2.2 UNISON acknowledges the importance of setting technical objectives, but is concerned to note that the Bill does not identify achieving a fair and just transition to a zero-carbon economy as an objective. Indeed, the Bill makes no reference to a just transition throughout – either for workers or vulnerable groups across society. It is not only possible but imperative that the Bill identifies both technical *and* socioeconomic objectives.

³ Women’s Environmental Network (2021) [Feminist Green New Deal](#)

⁴ For more detail, see Minority Rights Group International (2008) [The Impact of Climate Change on Minorities and Indigenous People](#)

2.3 UNISON believes that the Bill is likely to meet its objectives as stated. However, as outlined above, objectives relating to a just transition should also be included in the Bill. This Bill is the appropriate place for such objectives, as technical objectives should be created with the interests of the health and wellbeing of the population in mind.

2.4 UNISON suggests that any just transition objectives should be underpinned by the principles outlined by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), which include:

- Socially responsible and green investment
- Low-carbon development strategies
- Provision of decent work and social protection for those whose livelihoods, incomes and employment are affected by the need to adapt to climate change

2.0 EMISSIONS TARGETS

3.1 UNISON believes that the emissions targets contained in the Bill **must go further**. The Bill's targets have been set based on advice provided by the UK Committee on Climate Change (CCC). There is reason to believe that this advice may change in future; the UK Climate Change Act 2008 set a target of 80% reduction in carbon emissions by 2050. Following expert advice, secondary legislation amended this target to at least 100% in June 2019. Similarly, Wales has an 80% target by 2050 under the Wales Environment Act 2016 – but the Welsh Government has since committed to net zero by 2050 following the latest advice from the CCC.

3.2 UNISON believes that the Bill's targets are **achievable, yet unambitious**. Time is running out to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, as per

the 2015 Paris Agreement. Reaching and sustaining net zero global greenhouse gas emissions will halt anthropogenic global warming in the decades to come. It is essential that every nation pulls its weight to reach global net zero targets, and that every region of the UK and Ireland takes national net zero targets seriously. In 2019, Northern Ireland reduced its greenhouse gas emissions by 18% compared with 1990. The average rate of reduction in the UK was 44%⁵. It is time for Northern Ireland to stop being a laggard and begin taking its climate obligations seriously.

3.3 Rather than settling for a reduction of at least 82% by 2050, Northern Ireland has an opportunity to commit to a more ambitious target of net zero by 2050 from the start. Setting such a target would bring Northern Ireland in line with Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland. In his letter to Minister Poots, Lord Deben of the CCC noted that, "There is no purely technical reason why Net Zero is not possible in Northern Ireland"⁶. Political feasibility must never be confused for or take precedence over technical and scientific achievability.

3.4 The CCC also noted that an advantage of a net zero target is that it removes uncertainty and the temptation for sectors to lobby for a greater share of the remaining emissions – up to 18%, given the Bill's target of at least 82% reduction⁷. A common net zero emissions target across these islands would also provide clarity and consistency in public communications, and convey the appropriate sense of urgency.

3.5 UNISON believes that the timescales to deliver the Bill's emissions targets **are achievable**. It is also commendable that the Bill features specific interim targets for 2030 and 2040. However, **it is important to note that delivering net zero by**

⁵ NISRA (2019) [Northern Ireland Greenhouse Gas Emissions](#)

⁶ CCC (2020) [Lord Deben CCC Letter to DAERA Minister](#)

⁷ Committee on Climate Change (CCC) (2019) [Net Zero: The UK's contribution to stopping global warming](#)

2050, while challenging, is *also* achievable and urgently necessary. A net zero target is the only target that recognises the gravity of the situation in which we find ourselves.

3.0 POWER TO AMEND TARGETS

4.1 UNISON **does not** support the Bill's power to amend targets, as we believe the temptation to lower our climate ambitions should be avoided at all costs. Due to potential pressure from the agri-food sector, emissions targets may decrease (become less ambitious) rather than increase (and thereby become more ambitious).

4.2 By contrast, UNISON supports the principle of non-regression as it relates to climate legislation. Put simply, non-regression stipulates that environmental regulation and standards should not be undermined. Instead, all subsequent law reform and policy should reflect stronger ambitions over time. Non-regression will not only ensure that Northern Ireland contributes to national climate obligations but will protect current and future generations⁸.

4.3 Non-regression in the context of international environmental law is fast becoming an emerging norm. France and Ecuador are among the countries that have incorporated the principle of non-regression into climate regulation. Incorporating a non-regression clause into Northern Ireland's own climate legislation gives us the opportunity to be innovative in our legislation, and to ensure that commitments cannot be rolled back. This will bring significant benefits for the health of our workers, population and the planet, making our public services stronger and more resilient.

⁸ See Greener UK Coalition (2018) [Briefing on non-regression in the Environment Bill](#) for more context on both non-regression and progression.

4.0 CARBON BUDGETS

5.1 UNISON **strongly supports** carbon budgets. Carbon budgets help to make more distant and ambitious targets more achievable and actionable. They should form part of a wider climate accountability strategy that includes independent advice and regular, open progress reporting.

5.2 UNISON believes the proposed carbon budgets are an effective way of delivering on the emissions targets. However, as stated above, UNISON believes that these targets should be more ambitious from the outset.

5.3 UNISON **does** not believe it is appropriate for DAERA to adjust a carbon budget by carrying it forwards or backwards, as per Clause 15 of the Bill. In 2019, Lord Deben of the CCC wrote to Claire Perry MP, UK Minister of State for Energy and Clean Growth. Lord Deben stated that the carry forward of any surplus emissions “undermines the integrity of the framework for emissions reduction under the Climate Change Act”⁹. UNISON agrees with this assessment, and notes that any carbon budgets that are set should be appropriately ambitious and well-informed by evidence and independent advice. Northern Ireland must aim to *at least* meet carbon budgets – and, ideally, to outperform them. Placing reliance on statistical revisions is likely to loosen budgets and encourage backsliding.

6.0 PROGRESS REPORTING

6.1 UNISON believes that the Bill includes **some** effective ways of monitoring progress, including regular interim progress reports and final statements on

⁹ CCC (2019) [Carry-forward of surplus emissions: Letter from Lord Deben to Claire Perry](#)

carbon budgets. Northern Ireland Departments must report on their adaptation and mitigation progress at regular intervals. Further transparency and accountability should be achieved by mandating independent progress reviews, to be carried out by an independent body at either regional or national level.

7.0 INDEPENDENT OVERSIGHT

7.1 UNISON believes that the UK CCC could and should have a vital and important role to play in independent oversight. However, we also suggest that the Bill includes provisions to establish Northern Ireland's own Committee on Climate Change. A local committee would bring the added benefits of monitoring and reporting on progress. The Committee could work closely with the UK CCC in order to share research and insight. This local, independent oversight role could also be filled by a single person, e.g. a climate commissioner or ombudsman.

8.0 RESPONSIBILITIES ON GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS AND PUBLIC BODIES

8.1 UNISON believes that the responsibilities on all Government Departments set out in the Bill are appropriate.

8.2 UNISON **welcomes** climate change reporting duties on specified public bodies following consultation with the organisation or entity concerned. Such duties would bring Northern Ireland in line with legislation in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, which provides for a general climate change duty on public bodies to achieve targets and objectives.

8.3 UNISON believes, however, that it is important that these adaptation reporting duties for major public bodies are made **mandatory**, as is the case in Scotland. The Bill must also specify what constitutes a major public body.

9.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

9.1 UNISON notes the costs associated with the Bill, and agrees that significant investment in infrastructure and low-carbon technologies will be necessary.

9.2 However, UNISON notes with concern that there is little or no reference to increased funding in public services. Public investment has a crucial role to play in both mitigation and adaptation strategies.

9.3 More than a decade of austerity has hit public services hard. There is an inherent tension between the need for significant amounts of public investment and existing limited public spending policies. The Bill takes into account the costs of investment in low-carbon technologies and retrofitting, as well as the costs of staffing and monitoring the Bill's progress. Disappointingly, there appears to be no recognition of the need for serious investment in our health system in order to effectively handle impacts such as extreme weather events and the effect of pollution on human health. The climate crisis is a public health crisis, and the resources allocated to the Health and Social Care sector should reflect this.

10.0 ACCESS TO SPECIALIST ADVICE

10.1 UNISON **does not** think it is appropriate that the CCC is the sole source of expertise provided for in the Bill. The CCC will undoubtedly play a very important role in providing advice to help inform any proposed change to carbon budgets or emissions targets. However, it is essential that the Department makes use of

the wealth of advice from other sections of society, including women's groups, migrant groups, youth organisations and trade unions. Climate breakdown impacts on these particular groups in unique and specific ways, and many local organisations are already undertaking work in the area of climate justice¹⁰. Engaging with these organisations and listening to their expert advice will help ensure a just transition for people across all sections of society, including the most vulnerable.

10.2 In addition to civil society organisations, UNISON believes that the Department could make use of advice from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to help shape climate policy. The Bill would also benefit greatly from the input of the Republic of Ireland's Climate Change Advisory Council (CCAC) (see paragraph 11.3 below). This will help to ensure a strategic and joined-up approach to legislation and targets across the island.

11.0 TRANSBOUNDARY CONSIDERATIONS

11.1 UNISON **does not** think that, in its current form, the Bill adequately addresses transboundary issues relating to climate change, which are largely absent. The Bill does not reflect on the impacts coming from nearby jurisdictions, preferring instead to focus on target emissions within Northern Ireland.

11.2 UNISON **strongly believes** that there should be a transboundary approach to climate change. The New Decade New Approach (NDNA) agreement committed the NI Executive to bring forward a Climate Change Act. As part of NDNA, the Irish Government stated its intention to encourage all-island cooperation and coordination to fight climate breakdown. The geographic,

¹⁰ See, for example, the work of the [Environmental Justice Network Ireland](#), the [Women's Policy Group NI](#), the [NI Commissioner for Children and Young People \(NICCY\)](#), [Friends of the Earth NI](#), the [Irish Congress of Trade Unions](#).

economic and social characteristics of the island of Ireland demand that the two jurisdictions work effectively together to tackle climate change.

11.3 In a letter to Minister Poots earlier this year, the CCC encouraged Northern Ireland to work more closely with the Republic of Ireland's Climate Change Advisory Council¹¹. To ensure strategic cohesion on an all-island basis, the Bill should identify the CCAC as one of the bodies that will help shape climate policy in Northern Ireland. The North-South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council could also play a key role in ensuring a joined-up approach to environmental policy.

12.0 ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

12.1 UNISON **strongly believes** that the Bill should set out a clear pathway to achieving a just transition for workers across all sections of society, as well as the wider Northern Ireland population. There is currently no reference to a just transition or, indeed, to a green new deal, nor is there any acknowledgement of the impacts of climate breakdown on either vulnerable groups of society or, indeed, society at large.

12.2 UNISON welcomes the introduction of climate change legislation for Northern Ireland. The Bill contains some worthy and important objectives, and also begins to outline how these objectives might be achieved. However, UNISON believes that meaningful sustainability can only be achieved through truly transformative social, political and economic change. This Bill errs too heavily on the side of caution in terms of objectives and is rather narrowly focused on technical issues such as emissions targets. Although the technical elements are

¹¹ Climate Change Committee (2021) [Letter: Economic costs of setting and delivering a 2050 emissions target for Northern Ireland](#)

indeed extremely important issues to consider in any response to climate breakdown, the impacts that society faces in the coming years require much broader reflection. UNISON believes that the Bill fails to acknowledge that tackling climate change requires system change. A problem of this scale demands ambitious thinking to safeguard our public services, people and planet from the worst effects of climate breakdown.

For further information, please contact:

Rebekah Corbett – Local Organiser (Research & Development) –

r.corbett@unison.co.uk

Telephone – 07817120739

UNISON, Galway House, 165 York St, Belfast, BT15 1AL