

Climate ACTION PLAN

For councils in Northern Ireland

A 43-point plan
to tackle the climate
and nature emergencies

Foreword

The news in 2019 was dominated by coverage of the climate and nature crises, and the risks they pose to our lives.

Since then, our lives have been dominated by the health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and more recently the cost-of-living crisis. But the climate and nature crises haven't gone away. Acting on them can't be put on the back burner.

Fortunately, many of the measures needed to deal with the climate and nature emergencies will also tackle inequalities and benefit our health. These include:

- Improving our housing so that everyone can afford to keep warm in winter and buildings can withstand rising summer temperatures.
- Increasing good-quality cycling and walking infrastructure to improve health and reduce carbon emissions and air pollution.
- Increasing the amount and quality of urban green spaces to restore nature, benefit wellbeing and provide connecting corridors for wildlife.

Due to the sheer scale of the inequalities that exist, inequalities that are at risk of increasing as energy bills and food prices rise, a joined-up approach to tackling these crises is vital. For example:

- People who are most marginalised – both in Northern Ireland and across the world – have done the least to cause climate breakdown but are the most affected by its impacts.
- People on lower incomes, and particularly people of colour, suffer most from the lack of green space in our towns and cities. The same communities are also more likely to face fuel poverty and suffer more from air pollution, despite being less likely to own a car.
- Young people's future is most at risk from climate breakdown and the decline of nature, and they've been disproportionately impacted by the economic impact of COVID-19, with high levels of unemployment.


While Northern Ireland's councils don't have as much authority as their equivalents in England, Scotland, Wales or the Republic of Ireland, they still have responsibility for many areas where there's potential to influence climate-focused action.

This 43-point plan will help councils address the climate and ecological emergencies at the same time as tackling inequalities and boosting local economic recovery in a way that's green and fair.

What our council will do:


Putting climate and nature at the heart of decision making

Our goal is to ensure that the climate and nature emergencies are a dealbreaker in all our decisions so that we can drastically cut emissions over the next 10 years, and that inclusive engagement with citizens ensures that the changes made are sustainable. We will...

1	Check whether all our decisions would help to meet national and local net zero carbon targets, improve air pollution, and protect and restore nature, as well as deliver on COVID-19 recovery.	
2	Identify councillors and a committee or working group as Climate and Nature Champions, who are required to publish an annual independent and audited public report on progress in meeting climate change and nature targets.	
3	Use additional decision-making approaches for complex or contentious choices, such as representative citizen assemblies or citizens' juries, participatory mapping and budgeting etc.	
4	Set interim and measurable targets for a just recovery plan to rapidly grow the green economy, including upskilling, and achieve climate and nature restoration goals.	
5	Align all council statutory and non-statutory plans, policies and guidance with respective carbon reduction pathways and nature restoration plans, including areas such as procurement and infrastructure development.	
6	Review and improve how we involve citizens in our existing decision-making processes, with a plan to move to a fully participative system.	


Raising money

Our goal is to have sufficient resources to invest in the changes needed to restore nature and meet climate goals, so that our council can reap the dividends and deliver our fair share of reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. We will...

7	Introduce a workplace car parking levy and/ or similar initiative to fund and encourage sustainable transport, particularly measures that allow people to travel safely to work.	
8	Raise money using bonds for low-carbon infrastructure, particularly measures that speed up carbon emissions reductions and increase resilience to the pandemic, such as energy efficiency and converting roads or car parks to public green space.	
9	Use planning fees, developer contributions and other mechanisms to fund climate actions and nature restoration projects.	


Protect the most vulnerable

Our goal is to ensure that people most vulnerable to the effects of climate change are properly supported and protected. We will...

10	Identify the most vulnerable people in neighbourhoods most at risk of extreme weather events and fuel poverty, and with the least good-quality green space. Target climate change, nature and pandemic adaptation policies, actions and spending to these people and areas.	
11	Ensure that the voices of the most vulnerable communities are also represented in council decision making and council-citizen deliberations.	


Buildings

Our goal is to ensure all homes are well insulated to a minimum of EPC level C, to eradicate fuel poverty as fast as possible. We will...

12	Retrofit council-owned properties with heat pumps and high levels of insulation where possible, starting with homes most at risk of fuel poverty.	
13	Require through Local Plan policies that new housing development is zero carbon by 2025, including incorporation of renewable energy in the development, using low-carbon materials, and building to extremely high energy efficient standards (higher than current national standards) using the Passivhaus standard or similar.	
14	Enforce compliance with energy efficiency standards set by Building Regulations and with Local Plan policy during construction and renovation, and ensure verification of energy efficiency performance on completion.	

Transport


Our goal is to significantly and rapidly increase the proportion of people that travel by cycling, e-bikes and walking, as well as public transport when safe to do so, in order meet the World Health Organisation's air pollution standards and climate goals. We will...

15	Enable a rapid shift to electric vehicles by installing electric vehicle charging points on council-owned properties.	
16	Develop and promote active travel schemes, such as bike hire, loans for bikes and safe walking routes.	
17	Promote car-sharing, and encourage and facilitate working from home and decentralising the workspace to reduce the need for people to travel.	

18	Deliver a rapid transition of the council's own fleet to electric vehicles.	
19	Require an electric vehicle or bike to be used for deliveries to the council, and encourage greener deliveries across the area by setting up an area-wide distribution centre.	
20	Introduce differential charges for parking permits or other car-related charges in council-operated off-street parking areas.	
21	Reduce the need to own and use a car by requiring that the location and design of new developments be accessible by safe cycling and walking routes and by good-quality public transport, and be situated close to key services.	

Energy

Our goal is to enable and support the growth and use of renewable energy, ensure energy isn't wasted, and prevent the development of new fossil fuel extraction. We will...

22	Significantly grow renewable energy generation by identifying suitable areas in the Local Plan and/ or by issuing a new Supplementary Planning Document.	
23	Switch street lighting to well-designed and well-directed LED lights.	
24	Reduce energy used by the council in our own estate, including leisure centres, civic amenity sites and cemeteries, and where possible use the council estate to generate energy for the broader community.	
25	Require the installation of renewable energy such as solar thermal, photovoltaic panels (PV) or heat pumps in council developments and within private and public sector developments.	
26	Support the development of renewable energy and energy storage with priority given to community-owned schemes.	
27	Oppose fracking and other fossil fuel extraction, new fossil fuel infrastructure and the use of gas extracted through fracking in council-owned properties.	
28	Lobby the Northern Ireland Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee (NILGOSC) to divest from fossil fuels, including any pension funds, and invest in renewable energy projects instead.	

Waste

Our goal is to be a sustainable consumption and zero-waste area, where all waste is minimised, recycled, or reused as part of a circular economy approach. We will...

29	Aim to send no waste to landfill or incineration.	
30	Use food waste according to the food waste hierarchy of prevent, reuse, recycle. Ensure remaining non-recyclable biodegradable waste is used to generate biogas, with priority given to community-owned anaerobic digestion facilities.	
31	Adopt circular economy waste policies in relevant plans and contracts.	
32	Promote community sharing and reuse to reduce waste and unnecessary consumption.	
33	Ban the use of single-use plastic in council offices and premises.	

Influencing others

Our goal is to be a sustainable consumption and zero-waste area, where all waste is minimised, recycled, or reused as part of a circular economy approach. We will...

34	Use influence with Local Enterprise Agencies to ensure all their decisions are in line with the rapid growth of the green economy, climate reduction pathways and nature restoration plans.	
35	Provide support to small and medium-sized enterprises to access funds and expertise, so they can continue to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and contribute to carbon pollution reduction, nature restoration and the growth of the green economy.	
36	Use influence with others, for example with schools, to ensure their buildings are zero-carbon, the environment is central to teaching and their purchasing is green.	

Land use and nature

Our goal is to ensure everyone has access to nature in nearby green spaces and to restore nature, including to help draw down carbon pollution from the atmosphere. We will...

37	Double tree cover on council-owned land using appropriate native species, update local planning strategies to significantly increase tree cover across the local authority area, and ensure existing trees are properly protected in order to store carbon, support nature, improve soils and water quality, aid flood protection and deliver mental health benefits.	
38	Protect existing local green spaces, the green belt and locally designated nature sites, and ensure public access to local authority-owned green spaces.	
39	Manage council-owned land and road verges to increase biodiversity and draw down carbon pollution, including through reduced pesticide use and increased planting of wildflowers.	
40	Develop new good-quality green spaces in areas which fall short of recommended minimum levels (2 hectares of green space within 5 minutes' walk), particularly in areas where people are particularly vulnerable to heatwaves and have less access to nature.	
41	Produce a nature and ecosystem restoration plan to reverse and restore habitats, species, and ecosystem quality and function.	

Campaigning

Our goal is to make our voice heard by the UK government and secure increased devolution to the local level and increased democratic control. We will...

42	Work with other local authorities, government departments and agencies, NGOs and other allies to secure more regulatory powers, fundraising powers and finance to deliver a just and sustainable transition to a low-carbon future, and join forces with others to push for a national Climate Action Plan that's commensurate with the climate and nature emergencies.	
43	Develop a just recovery plan to ensure that we build back better and emerge from multiple crises people are facing – climate, ecological decline, poverty, and physical and mental ill-health.	

Local Authority Bonds

Our goal is to make our voice heard by the UK government and secure increased devolution to the local level and increased democratic control. Local council incomes come primarily from the district rate, with additional funds coming from central funds for specific projects, and fees and charges for services, such as planning fees. There should also be scope for local authorities to make investments in their areas of responsibility by raising bond finance securitised against the district rate.

At a minimum, such bonds could be used to invest in energy efficiency and renewable energy options for the local authority estate, such as council offices, leisure centres and civic amenity sites. However, the council could also use funds raised by such bonds to pay for any projects within its remit. This would produce very rapid returns for the ratepayer, as the pay-back period for some of these measures would be as little as 2-3 years.

Section 76 Agreements

Section 76 of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 allows local authorities to make agreements with landowners or developers as a condition of planning consent. The agreement can specify how the land should be used and what activities may be carried out, or require payment to the council. Councils can use Section 76 Agreements to raise funds for climate mitigation and adaptation or community development projects.