

# Climate and City Resilience Committee

Thursday, 13th March, 2025

## MEETING OF THE CLIMATE AND CITY RESILIENCE COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor R-M Donnelly (Chairperson);  
Aldermen Copeland and McCoubrey; and  
Councillors Anglin, Bower, R. Brooks,  
T. Brooks, Bunting, Collins, Doherty, M. Donnelly,  
P. Donnelly, S. Douglas, Flynn, Hanvey,  
Long, Lyons, Magee and Walsh.

In attendance: Mr. J. Tully, Director of City and Organisational Strategy;  
Ms. D. Caldwell, Climate Commissioner;  
Ms. A. Diver, Climate Programme Manager;  
Ms. B. Roddy, Project Support Officer (Climate); and  
Mrs. L. McLornan, Committee Services Officer.

### **Apologies**

An apology for inability to attend was reported from Councillor Brennan.

### **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of 16th January, 2025 were taken as read and signed as correct. It was reported that those minutes had been adopted by the Council at its meeting on 3rd February, 2025.

### **Declarations of Interest**

No declarations of interest were recorded.

### **Presentation - SONI (System Operator for NI)**

The Chairperson welcomed Mr. G. Carlin, Director of Networks and Innovation, Mr. R. Davison-Kernan, Senior Engineer, and Mr. J. Fullwood, Project Manager, all SONI, to the meeting.

Mr. Carlin explained that SONI was Northern Ireland's electricity Transmission System Operator and that it was responsible for the safe, secure supply of electricity in Northern Ireland. From its control centre in Belfast, it ensured that power flowed from where it was generated to where it was needed.

Together, the representatives from SONI outlined that, as SONI enhanced the electricity grid, it was leading the way for a more secure and sustainable energy future. The Committee was advised that SONI also operated the all-island wholesale electricity market through the Single Electricity Market.

The Committee was presented with an overview of “Energising Belfast”, to deliver a cleaner and more secure energy future for the City. They outlined plans to upgrade the electricity distribution network around Belfast by 2050, which would require an estimated £117million of potential investment.

The Members were advised that the project would provide the capacity for the additional demand created by the expected increases in electric vehicles and heat pumps. It would also support future investment in housing and job creation by facilitating the Belfast Agenda targets of the city being home to 66,000 more people and 46,000 additional jobs by 2035.

In response to a Member’s question regarding hydrogen as an alternative to electric vehicles, Mr. Carlin confirmed that SONI was agnostic to the technology but that it modelled future demand and anticipated a significant increase over the next 15 years. Mr. Davison-Kernan added that, although hydrogen was an alternative fuel for larger vehicles, the production of green hydrogen also involved large amounts of electricity.

A number of Members asked questions regarding the locations of the new substations. The representatives from SONI explained that the route would form the second phase of the project. The Committee was also advised that SONI had a dedicated landowner engagement team and that the route would be subject to statutory consultation.

In regards to a Member’s question about funding for the project, the representatives explained that they would apply, via the Utility Regulator, to ensure that the project was value for money.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for their presentation and they retired from the meeting.

### **Update on the Retrofit Delivery Hub**

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

#### **“1.0 Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues**

**1.1 To provide an update on progress by the Belfast Retrofit Delivery Hub.**

#### **2.0 Recommendation**

**2.1 The Committee is asked to note:**

- i. Progress made in delivering retrofit training and information sharing including a Galway City Retrofit Twinning Visit to Belfast.**
- ii. Efforts to progress an area based cross tenure retrofit project, exploring procurement mechanisms to attain economies of scale and optimising access to funding and community support.**
- iii. That two significant retrofit programmes are under development including a NIHE £14M programme of**

deep retrofit to 400 homes in NI with 120 in the Belfast City Council area by NIHE and a proposed NIFHA scheme for the shallow retrofit programme of around 4,000 homes.

- iv. The findings from a survey of two properties in Belfast that estimates significant costs associated with retrofitting solid wall properties.
- v. The challenges posed to retrofit in terms of the supply chain of construction materials and skills gaps in the required sectors.
- vi. The challenges and opportunities around a proposed low carbon heating grant and potential implications of a future Minimum Energy Efficiency Scheme.

### 3.0 Hub Update

Progress on the work of Belfast Retrofit Delivery Hub was last reported to this committee in August 2024. Since then, a significant amount of collaborative work has taken place under the Hub's remit to share information, and work to engender action and progress. Work over the last five months can be divided into 5 themes:

- Skills gaps and supply chains
- Partnership retrofit programmes
- Data building
- Information sharing
- Cross tenure area based retrofit pilot project

#### 3.1 Skills gaps and supply chains

Discussions through Belfast's retrofit twinning project (Euro Cities programme) between Belfast and Galway City Councils highlighted that large scale, government funding packages for home retrofit on their own do not deliver progress, noting lengthy backlogs in delivery of funded works. This has been caused by shortages in skilled workers and materials, partly due to major retrofit programmes in GB competing and effectively 'poaching' resources from each other and from Ireland. A round table on-line event was held with Retrofit Hub members and stakeholders from Galway to explore the issues and hear of research into the construction skills gap in the Republic of Ireland. One of the Hub's co-chairs (from CITB) recently convened a Green Skills Working Group of behalf of Department for Energy with a report due for publication shortly.

- 3.2 Delivery of the priority projects from the LAEP such as low carbon district heating, solar PV installations and retrofit will generate significant demand for construction and specialist skills and materials. This has prompted work by the Climate Team to work with Economic Development to assess market readiness in terms of skills and supply chains in order to identify any gaps and capacity building required.

3.3 Retrofit Programmes currently under development

The NI Housing Executive (NIHE) and the NI Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) collectively represent all social housing in NI with both working on large scale retrofit programmes and keeping Hub partners involved and updated. Two significant retrofit programmes are currently under development by NIHE (includes approximately 120 homes in the Belfast City Council area) and NIFHA which represents 20 housing associations with almost 19K homes in the Belfast area.

3.4 Data building

Domestic retrofit programmes depend on high quality data about housing stock. Belfast's Local Area Energy Plan (LAEP) has collated high quality data about the energy performance of homes and any existing retrofit measures, allowing the identification of the properties and areas at greatest risk of fuel poverty and that could benefit most from retrofit. These data are in the process of being mapped into Electoral District Areas and city-wide reports, which will allow the Council and its retrofit partners to work strategically to identify areas for potential retrofit projects.

- 3.5 LAEP data currently capture financial and carbon data, helping to inform the financial case for projects but doesn't yet capture the full benefits such as health issues avoided and wider societal impacts. The Climate Team is exploring a number of tools used by other UK and EU cities to carry out wider cost benefit analysis which could demonstrate the full value of projects such as domestic retrofit and district heating.

- 3.6 High quality data is available for most of the city's domestic building types but one significant gap has been the private rental sector which contains substantial numbers of older, city centre type homes with solid walls. These can be challenging to retrofit as walls are one of the greatest areas of energy loss and insulating solid walls can be expensive and disruptive for tenants. The Hub was keen to get accurate data specific to Belfast's common housing stock, up to date locally based costings with detailed measures for both

simple or shallow interventions as well as more complex or deep retrofit. Detailed surveys of two typical solid wall rental properties were commissioned, with the main finding being that in solid wall, older properties, even the use of a deep retrofit approach could fail to attain an A level of EPC rating for properties. The two properties studied attained no higher than a move from an E or a D rating to attain a rating of C even with over £80K of retrofit measures.

### **3.7 Training and Information sharing**

Sharing information and capacity building is central to the Retrofit Hub and in October of 2024, the Climate Team facilitated a series of retrofit events to share information with Hub partners and external agencies:

#### **3.8**

- **Introduction to Retrofit' training for Elected Members** - following a request by members of the Climate and City Resilience Committee in June 2024, an Introduction to Retrofit Course was run by the Climate and City Regeneration teams in October 2024. Eight elected members attended the interactive session with excellent feedback from attendees. The course was based on a similar course aimed at the general public that was delivered in partnership with SERC in April 2024. With both courses now designed and tested, there are opportunities for delivery at a wider scale.

#### **3.9**

- **Community led net zero and retrofit programmes meeting** – convened groups and organisations that are working on fuel poverty and net zero retrofit across the city, including UP2030, Mount Vernon Sustainable Energy Community and the Dept for Communities. Groups shared information on community led retrofit/fuel poverty programmes and highlighted that significant community-led work is taking place across the city but is often done in isolation.

#### **3.10**

- **Public sector low carbon retrofit programmes meeting** – Hub programme leaders from QUB, the Belfast Trust, Belfast City Council and Mott MacDonald outlined major low carbon retrofit programmes being developed and successfully rolled out on public estate, sharing methodologies and data to encourage replication.

#### **3.11**

- **Galway City Retrofit Twinning Visit to Belfast** – Belfast City Council hosted a three day visit from Galway City Council and their community based energy team.

Retrofit Hub members were particularly keen to learn about the Galway Warm Home Hub who outlined their community embedded one stop shop approach. This was very well attended by community energy/ fuel poverty groups and Dept for Communities. Galway visitors met with Belfast social housing providers to explore how they rolled retrofit out at scale across their stock.

3.12

- Consultation on low carbon heating grants - lack of government retrofit funding is recognised by the Hub as the single biggest barrier to rolling out retrofit at scale. In light of this it welcomed a consultation by the Dept for Communities in November 2024 on a potential grant scheme for householders around low carbon heating, with an indicative timescale of 2027 for launch. Hub members took part in the consultation with key responses including: a fabric first approach is critical with a call for a precursor fabric first grant scheme; rather than focusing almost exclusively on ASHPs, it should support the roll out of low carbon district heating and hybrid heating technology; additional funding support is required for workforce development; and the need to build consumer awareness and confidence with support for public awareness campaigns.

3.13

- Potential Minimum Energy Efficiency Scheme – Hub members have highlighted that the NI Housing Supply Strategy 2024-2029 includes setting standards for EPC ratings for lettable accommodation, with an outline timescale of 3 years for legislation to come into force. This could mean that only domestic properties of a (to be determined) EPC level could be let, which would put pressure on landlords to raise the energy performance of their stock. The Hub agreed the need for clarity of commitment by The Executive along with early notice and clear lead in times to allow landlords to prepare and avoid any large scale rapid divestment of housing stock.

3.14

- Cross Tenure Area Based Retrofit Pilot Project  
A key output from the Hub's work to date has been support for the establishment of a cross tenure, area based retrofit pilot. Retrofit programmes typically take a 'worst first' approach, targeting homes with the poorest thermal efficiency and greatest risk of fuel poverty and these are frequently areas with a combination of social housing, private rental and owner occupiers. Whilst building types in a given area

tend to be similar, ownership and funding can be complex and challenging. The Retrofit Hub Steering Group has reviewed cross tenure case studies from the UK and Republic of Ireland to explore critical components, with funding emerging as the single biggest challenge. Whilst some grant programmes may emerge in 2027, current funding pots for homeowners and landlords are very limited with many not eligible for financial support.

3.15 The Steering Group is focusing on identifying how the limited funds available might be optimised to minimise any shortfall in areas of greatest fuel poverty need and retrofit potential. Work is focusing on procuring works to attain economies of scale, optimising access to and uptake of available funding and community support to optimise engagement by householders.

3.16 Next Steps

- Establish a task and finish group to explore existing and potential funding sources as well as mechanisms for an area wide, cross tenure domestic pilot project.
- Work with partners' procurement experts to develop an approach to cross tenure procurement for a pilot project establishing roles, risk and process.
- Explore how the current grant funding could better support retrofit in the private rental sector and identify any changes that may be required to allow landlords to access funding.

Financial and Resource Implications

None at this point

Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment

None known."

During discussion, the officers offered to run a further workshop for Members on Retrofitting at a future date.

A Member requested that a report on the skills shortages be submitted to a future meeting.

After discussion, the Committee adopted the recommendations within the report.

Restricted Item

The information contained in the report associated with the following item was restricted in accordance with Part 1 of Schedule 6 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

Resolved – That the Committee agrees to exclude the members of the press and public from the meeting during discussion of the following item as, due to the nature of the item, there would be a disclosure of exempt information as described in Section 42(4) and Schedule 6 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

Members were also reminded that the content of 'restricted' reports and any discussion which took place during closed session must be treated as 'confidential information' and that no such information should be disclosed to the public as per Paragraph 4.15 of the Code of Conduct.

**Update on implementation of  
Low Emission Vehicle (LEV) Strategy**

The Director of City and Organisational Strategy provided the Committee with an update on the implementation of the LEV strategy.

He outlined the background to the strategy and explained that it comprised a pragmatic and sequenced approach to bringing the work forward, with the initial phase focusing on how the Council would maximise the use of its land assets across the city to bring forward necessary Electric Vehicle infrastructure.

The Members were advised of the progress which had been made to date, including the establishment of a cross-departmental Working Group.

During discussion, the Director confirmed that engagement with the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) and Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) was ongoing and that it was his intention to bring a list of proposed sites to the Area Working Groups.

During discussion, the Project Support Officer (Climate) informed the Committee that officers had received helpful procurement advice from Cenex regarding maintenance, availability and what apps to use. Cenex was a not-for-profit organisation that provided independent, expert advice and services to Local Authorities and other organisations.

A number of Members asked the Director for further clarification in regards to the type of chargers which would be provided and issues with faulty or broken chargers.

In response to a further Member's question, the Director agreed to ensure that the EV spaces within the City Hall would be clearly marked.

After discussion, the Committee noted:

- that a cross departmental LEV Task and Finish Working Group had been established, and was currently progressing Step 1 of Operationalising the Strategy - Land Assets Assessment (Council sites).



- that the 'EV charging point network' project had been added to the Capital Programme as a Stage 1 Emerging Project, and had been ratified by the Council. As part of project development, the EV charging point network delivery timelines and costs would be developed.
- the indicative timescales and noted that timescales were dependent on Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) processes; and
- that the Council had been approached by Cenex to host an EVI Roadshow event at the City Hall in May 2025 (date TBC).

Chairperson