



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Climate Change (No. 2) Bill:
Department of Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs

14 October 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Climate Change (No. 2) Bill:
Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

14 October 2021

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Philip McGuigan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Clare Bailey
Mrs Rosemary Barton
Mr John Blair
Mr Harry Harvey
Mr William Irwin
Mr Patsy McGlone

Witnesses:

Mr Colin Breen	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr Anthony Courtney	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Ms Arlene McGowan	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): I welcome, via StarLeaf, Colin Breen, the director of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs' environmental policy division, and Arlene McGowan and Anthony Courtney, who are also from the environmental policy division. I ask the officials to brief the Committee.

Mr Colin Breen (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you, Deputy Chair. Can everybody hear me?

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): Yes.

Mr Breen: Thank you. Good morning. First, I wish to pass on my condolences to Declan and his family at this time.

I thank the Committee for the opportunity to provide a briefing on the Climate Change (No. 2 Bill). I do not intend to cover the content of the Bill in great detail in my opening remarks. The key aspects and provisions of the Bill remain unchanged from the previous briefings, including the detailed policy briefing in March. They have been summarised in the written briefing provided, and the Committee Clerk has provided an overview and summary of the Bill in advance of the launch of the Committee's call for evidence.

In short, the Bill is a tight and focused piece of legislation containing the key elements necessary to address climate change. It sets a target of an at least 82% net reduction in greenhouse gases by

2050, with interim targets in 2030 and 2040; provides powers to set carbon budgets; contains reporting requirements on the targets, adaptation programmes and carbon budgets, including a requirement to set out the proposals and policies for meeting each carbon budget; places requirements on the UK Climate Change Committee (CCC) to provide independent scrutiny; and provides a power to bring forward future legislation on climate change reporting by public bodies. Finally and importantly, it places duties on all Departments to take action to meet the targets and carbon budgets set under the Bill.

First, I will deal with the headline target. I know that critics will cite the Paris agreement and the most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report as evidence of a need for NI net zero above all else. I just want to highlight the point, however, that, in the Paris agreement, food security is an explicit theme. Article 2.1 of the agreement cites the importance of protecting food production while reducing emissions. The current evidence for Northern Ireland suggests that shrinking our agri-food sector would simply move production elsewhere, effectively offshoring carbon emissions. When developing the legislation, I had to take that evidence into account.

Furthermore, the most recent IPCC report reaffirms and makes it clear that we should keep temperature rises as small as possible in order to limit global warming, but the report very much frames that as a global challenge to be tackled in a way that considers local circumstances. Pushing our emissions to another part of the world, in my objective opinion, is not really the best way in which to follow what the evidence says. It would be highly damaging to our economy to pursue an NI net zero target for no global benefit to reducing emissions. The costs of pursuing that unevidenced target have been estimated at tens of billions of pounds more than a Northern Ireland-equitable UK net zero contribution. That money is unlikely to be provided by a UK net zero fund, as it is beyond what is recommended to us for net zero. Again, as an official, I have to advise and protect the public purse. Importantly, the CCC has confirmed that the IPCC report is entirely consistent with the scientific basis for the UK net zero target and its independent advice to Northern Ireland.

I will briefly address some of the points that members have raised in previous correspondence, briefings and debates. The first relates to the power to amend targets. At Second Stage, a number of Members raised concerns and called the powers in clause 4 "sweeping". I want to be clear: those concerns are unfounded. That is a common provision across climate change legislation to allow for flexibility. I note that that was mentioned in the Research and Information Service (RaISe) briefing. It is, however, important to emphasise that robust preconditions are attached to even using those powers, and those are set out in clause 31. The targets can be changed only as a result of significant developments in UK or international law or developments in scientific knowledge or technology that is relevant to climate change or if advice from the Climate Change Committee indicates that it is appropriate to change the targets. It is highly unlikely that such developments or advice would indicate that a less stringent target would be appropriate.

It is standard in Northern Ireland legislation that the power be provided to an individual Department. Use of the power, however, is subject to Executive and Assembly approval. A Minister could not change the targets without the support of the Executive and the Assembly and without robust evidence to support doing so. Similar powers in climate change legislation in other parts of the UK have been used to introduce more ambitious targets. The intention is that the power will be used similarly to increase target levels when the advice shows that it is appropriate to do so; indeed, the Minister confirmed that at Second Stage.

Some Committee members have asked why there are no transboundary provisions in the Bill. I emphasise that climate change is a global challenge that knows no boundaries. Northern Ireland, however, as part of the UK, has to contribute to UK efforts to reach net zero emissions, as is required under the UK Climate Change Act 2008. That certainly does not prohibit us from working further with the Republic of Ireland on common policies and approaches, as we already do. There is nothing in the Executive Bill that prohibits us from working on climate change with our counterparts in the South as well as those in the UK and, indeed, well beyond these islands. It is important to highlight the fact that there are no transboundary provisions in climate change legislation in the rest of the UK or in the Irish Act and that the transboundary provisions in the private Member's Climate Change Bill are limited to taking into account the transboundary element of carbon and nitrogen flows when setting carbon budgets and nitrogen budgets. As an official, I think that it would be good to understand the benefits that that will have in tackling climate change. Certainly, if we can understand the aim, we can look at a compromise amendment. I noticed that the Minister mentioned this morning that he is open to sensible amendments.

It has become clear this morning that the next important issue is delivering a just transition. Although the Bill does not refer to the term "just transition", the targets are based on the CCC's balanced pathway that aims to reach UK net zero while delivering a just transition. I believe that a balanced pathway is more important than a list of high-level just transition principles in the Bill that will not ensure a just transition. They are difficult to interpret and measure for intent, meaning and effect. For example, principles in the private Member's Climate Change Bill state:

"support jobs and growth of jobs that are climate resilient and environmentally and socially sustainable ... create work which is high-value, fair and sustainable;"

During our deliberations, we asked, "What does that mean? How can it be measured, or how do we prove that it has been met?". Those are the sorts of questions that we always consider when drafting and scrutinising legislative provisions. That does not mean that it cannot be addressed or worked through via other appropriate mechanisms. The Committee has just heard the Minister say that a just transition is at the heart of the green growth strategy. One of the aims is to establish a just transition commission. When developing the Bill, our thinking was that it did not need to be delivered through primary or other legislation, as has been the case with the Scottish Just Transition Commission. Again, as the Minister said, we are not opposed to reasonable legislative amendments, and we are certainly open to looking at compromises.

As you are aware, the Minister met Clare and her team. Officials have met several times since then for detailed negotiations. Ultimately, I aim to get the best outcome, which is a fully operable Climate Change Act delivered in this mandate. I believed that we had the beginnings of a compromise that would involve incorporating elements of the private Member's Bill into the Executive Bill. The intention would be that the private Member's Bill is not moved to the next stage in order to maximise the effective use of our limited resources in the Department, the Committee and the Assembly's plenary sittings. The Minister wrote to Clare on 17 September seeking her agreement. As he has just said, he has not had a response.

The Minister has been clear, and, as an official, I have to be clear that I am not in favour of maximum science-led ambition. The evidence does not support a target that is not based on sound evidence. As officials, we cannot recommend a target that will cost Northern Ireland tens of billions of pounds. We hope to provide a draft copy of the impact assessments to the Committee. We are looking into that. It is not normally the case, but it may be important for the Committee to see the impact assessments.

Thank you for listening. We are ready for questions.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): Thank you, Colin. Your last point was about the CCC, and you said that your targets are based entirely on the CCC's advice. What other sources of advice and expertise did the Department consult when appraising the potential emission targets for the North?

Mr Breen: There is no other advisory body providing that level of evidence. We looked at the other UK jurisdictions and the Irish Act. Unfortunately, that does not amount to evidence. As I said, we looked at the Paris agreement and the IPCC report. The Climate Change Committee has confirmed that its advice is consistent with the IPCC report. Essentially, the Climate Change Committee, as the statutory advisory body, looks at evidence from a wide range of sources and summarises that for us. That is how the process works.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): OK. Fair enough. On the transboundary issues, I paraphrase, but you said that you could not see what the issue would be. However, if you were a farmer along the border and had land in the North and land in the South, as quite a few farmers and businesses do, there would be a big issue if there were two different types of legislation and targets. There is obviously a specific issue for farms and businesses straddling the border.

There is also a potential issue for the agriculture sector across the North working to different targets, legislation and specifications in a sector that is very much based on all-island integration. Did you look at the potential financial damage to the agriculture sector? What assessments of financial damage and other damage to the industry did you look at on the impacts of climate change?

Mr Breen: On the first question, you may have misunderstood. I was talking about the transboundary provisions in the private Member's Bill. I fully see the importance of working on transboundary issues, and we already do that. It was about understanding what provisions would appear in legislation that could bolster that. In the private Member's Bill, the only provisions are to take into account the

transboundary elements of nitrogen and carbon budgets. The question was this: what does that achieve? The question was not "What does transboundary working achieve?". Obviously, transboundary working achieves a lot, and we do a lot of it. The issue was around what the provisions do. I am talking about it purely in legislative terms and not in terms of working widely across these islands and well beyond. I am certainly not saying that I am opposed to any of that.

What we try to do with every provision in legislation is to look at what the intent and effect of that would be. With the transboundary provisions as drafted, we cannot understand what the intent and effect would be. There is an intent to work more closely on a transboundary level, but that goes on without legislation. The Irish Act has not included that, and nor have the Scottish, English or Welsh Acts. We were closely following all those, but we are by no means opposed to transboundary working.

If that would help with a compromise and we could get an amendment in that would satisfy any concerns, we are completely open to that. The thing that I really want is one good operable, affordable Bill that we can bring forward in this mandate and start to really tackle climate change.

I do not see differing targets as an issue, and I do not fully understand it. Different regions work at their maximum target. The difference between the North of the island and the South of the island is that we have a pathway, and we have explained what we will do. The Irish Act is an objective as opposed to a target. I believe that Dr Muinzer mentioned that in his presentation to you. I see everybody doing the maximum.

I have stated before that, with the similarities between the North and the South, if the South can get to net zero by 2050, I do not believe that the North will have any issue in getting to net zero. The evidence does not suggest that at present, and the outgoing Teagasc president made a speech in which he questioned whether agriculture in the South could get anywhere close to the level of emissions reductions by 2030 that had been suggested.

I cannot read my writing here. Philip, can you repeat the final question?

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): What are the negative impacts on agriculture in particular as a consequence of climate change?

Mr Breen: The impacts between the 82% target and the net zero target are not any different. The only difference between the 82% target and the net zero target is that the remaining 18% of Northern Ireland emissions form part of the UK net zero to be reduced. That equates to roughly 0.73% of UK emissions. That difference will not impact Northern Ireland. It is about the global collective effort to tackle climate change. I am not saying that as an "us and them" or a whataboutery type of thing. That difference is, in global terms, 0.0073% of emissions. Without a collective global challenge in which everybody does the maximum rather than simply shifting emissions elsewhere, we will never get to a proper stage. The impacts of climate change are worrying, but the difference between a target of at least 82% and a net zero target for Northern Ireland will not save Northern Ireland or the world from climate change. It is about everybody playing their optimum part, being brought along and buying into targets. I think that the Committee is getting a briefing from the agri-food sector. I do not feel that it has bought into a net zero target. It is a big part of the solution. I really want to see a compromise. As an official, my advice has to be to follow the evidence. That target would be too costly. Regardless of who my Minister is, I would be giving the same advice and saying the same thing. We cannot stand over a net zero target for Northern Ireland at this time. However, as part of a compromise, we have suggested that we should ramp up discussions around ambition in the target, more regular reviews, getting more evidence and pursuing net zero as soon as is practicable while still being based on science and evidence. That is where I see a real compromise for all of us. It is about marrying the targets. I do not think that any of us wants to go against science and evidence. The figures in the KPMG report were fairly shocking. You have to balance the overall impact of climate change with the impact on the economy. Going for UK net zero will have the same outcome as Northern Ireland playing more of a part in UK net zero by going for NI net zero and possibly having to shift its food production to some other part of GB or far beyond.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): Colin, you probably misinterpreted my question. I was not asking so much about the difference between the 82% and net zero; it was more about what you said about the agriculture industry not having bought into net zero. There are lots of assessments and details of what moving towards net zero or 82% means, but I am asking you for an assessment of what happens to the potential of our agriculture industry and businesses from the impact of climate change. People will buy in only if they realise that increased flooding and droughts will have a very

real impact on the nature of our land and what it can be used for as a result of climate change. I am specifically asking about an assessment of the dangers that it will pose to our agriculture sector and beyond.

Mr Breen: I think that we are on the same page, Philip. If we do not start acting very quickly, that will have a devastating impact on agriculture and all our lives. Equally, however, it appears that pursuing an un-evidenced target at this time will have a devastating impact on Northern Ireland agriculture. The only solution that I can see is that we bring everybody along with us. The first stage of that is about getting an agreement where everybody is happy to be brought along, getting a target that everybody can buy into and then ramping up ambition as people start to progress. All the other jurisdictions — Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales — started with legislation and lower targets. Then, as work began, they started to ramp up the targets when they saw that things could be done. We are lagging behind GB. Part of that is because we do not have our own legislation. Continuing to argue over the target does not help us to tackle climate change. Equally, doing nothing is not an option. The evidence-based target that we are proposing is the best outcome for Northern Ireland to tackle climate change and protect rural communities and, generally, to protect the budget for Northern Ireland. On the basis of current evidence, the figures are frightening on what it would cost to go for that extra bit, which does not seem to assist the overall UK net zero or the global challenge, if we simply offshore our carbon and move food production somewhere else.

That assessment is based on all the evidence. There is a fundamental "head versus heart" here. The heart, obviously, says that net zero is the only way to go, but, unfortunately, as an official, I am not really allowed a heart. I have a head. I look at all the figures and provide them on the basis of evidence. That is all that I can do. There are not many personal feelings here, but my one big personal feeling is this: try to get a compromise. I have been working hard to get one, because it is the best way for us to deliver legislation in the frighteningly short time that is left of the mandate.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): OK. Colin, I do not want to hog the meeting, and I have a list of members who want to come in.

Mr Blair: Colin, I thank you and your colleagues for the information that we have been given today. Your explanation thus far has covered some of what I was going to ask. I will try to drill down a bit further on the absence of specific targets and cross-sectoral targets and on the apparent movement of some targeted responsibilities to the green growth strategy, which sits separately from the legislation. Whether on just transition, cross-sectoral targets or interdepartmental responsibilities, if a Department consistently failed to meet the requirements of the carbon budget, to whom would it answer for its responsibilities? What actions could be taken? By whom and how would that be done, particularly if it is not in the legislation to begin with?

Mr Breen: Our legislation is new in that it sets a duty for all Departments to produce policies and work towards meeting the targets. That has never been done in Northern Ireland legislation. We had to discuss it with the Attorney General. It is the only legislation in Northern Ireland that puts duties on all Departments. Within government, there are no fines as such, but that duty placed on a Department opens up a number of avenues such as, I imagine, judicial review. However, it is more likely to be about departmental reputation.

If a Department has not undertaken or delivered on its duty as set out in the Climate Change (No. 2) Bill, it will be made quite clear in the reporting that the Department has not done that. It will be abundantly clear to the Assembly, the Executive, this Committee and, indeed, any member of the public reading those reports that the Department has not discharged its duties. That is one of the big compromise positions that I spoke about. The private Member's Climate Change Bill does not place a duty on anyone to do anything in pursuit of the targets. That concerns me, as an official. Regardless of what happens, that needs to be in there. We spent time and had wrangling with an awful lot of legal people to get that in, because it was so novel. Maybe the Committee needs a separate briefing on how that would work. You raise an important point. We are certainly working on that.

With regard to cross-sectoral targets, other legislation does not set individual sectoral targets. That is usually done through action plans, strategies etc so that no sector can say, "That is all we have to go for". It is about giving everybody optimum ambition within a balanced pathway. The CCC is clear on that as well, as are the people developing the green growth strategy. We were aware that sectoral targets will be placed. I do not like to compare the two Bills, but the Climate Change Bill does not set sectoral targets. It states that sectoral targets should be set through the climate action plans.

We have different wording for climate action plans, if you like. I like the term "climate action plan". All the reporting in the Climate Change (No. 2) Bill is essentially a climate action plan, although it focuses purely on climate change itself, as in carbon emissions reductions. That is probably one of the big differences between the two Bills.

You are concerned about the Bill not placing duties on Departments; I think that that is your question. I assure you that our Bill has a very novel provision to do that.

Mr Blair: I think, Colin, that you covered — I am grateful to you for it — the specifics of putting some of the target responsibilities into the green growth strategy. I suppose that that avoids naming in legislation organisations whose names might change. I understand that. However, is it to be confirmed, then, that that is why some of this has gone into the green growth strategy?

Mr Breen: The confirmation is that sectoral targets are not usually a feature of climate change legislation. We do not feel that it would give the best benefit.

Both Bills are in the legislative process. I have no control over those any more. That is for all of you in Parliament Buildings. Any amendment could come forward, but our thinking is that we should work towards a target together, with everybody feeding into it, rather than saying: "You need to do this; you need to do that". With all the changes in technology, who knows what will happen that could end up with more being done by any one sector? This gives us maximum flexibility, and that is really what we are looking for: flexibility in the Bill. Whatever version of the strategy and the climate action plans come forward, they will have much more to do with sector-specific targets or ambition, or even more of a balanced pathway in a sector. You have to remember that, in many cases, sectors cut across Departments as well.

Mr Blair: I appreciate that, Colin. Thanks for that answer.

Mr Breen: Thank you, John.

Mr Harvey: Thank you, Anthony, Arlene and Colin. Your presence is much appreciated. You mentioned interim targets at 2030 and 2040. Will you enlighten us about those interim targets?

Mr Breen: I will ask Anthony to remind me what the two percentage figures are.

Mr Harvey: You are on mute, Anthony.

Mr Breen: We cannot hear him. Arlene, do you have the two figures to hand?

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): You are on mute as well, Arlene.

Mr Harvey: Listen, I will not put you under pressure, Colin —

Mr Breen: Harry, the figures are 40-something and 60-something, but I cannot remember the exact figures off the top of my head. I should be able to; I am embarrassed not to remember, because I spent long enough looking at them. Hopefully, Anthony and Arlene will let me know.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): Nick, the Committee Clerk, has the figures, if he wants to provide them.

The Committee Clerk: The interim target for 2030 is that the Northern Ireland greenhouse gas emissions account should be at least 48% lower than the baseline. For 2040, it is at least 69% lower than the baseline.

Mr Harvey: OK. Thank you very much.

The figure of 0.0073% equates to 18%. For our agri-food sector, would the difference between 82% and 100% be the difference between surviving and being non-existent?

Mr Breen: The 0.0073% is the global emissions difference, and 0.73% would be the UK emissions difference. The UK advisory body is basically advising that net zero will be achieved for the UK without

Northern Ireland reducing by that extra 0.73%. The evidence would certainly suggest — the KPMG report strengthened that — that us pushing that extra for no global benefit would decimate the agriculture sector, with an 80% reduction in cows, I believe. The agri-food sector will be able to give you better figures.

Overall, I am looking at it more in terms of the extra costs of doing so to the Northern Ireland economy. From our impact assessments, that is in the tens of billions of pounds over the life of our legislation. That is not small change. The HMT principles, which were first brought up in one of the RalSe briefings, would suggest that none of that money will come from the Treasury, because that is Northern Ireland or one of the devolved Administrations going beyond what is recommended or advised on a UK level.

Mr Harvey: At 82%, we can still produce high-quality food. We do feed the UK and lots of others. The worry would be that, if that was not happening, it would have to be offset, and then you would have carbon leakage and all. It would seem to make a little more sense. Thank you.

Mr McGlone: Thank you, Colin, for your time again. You used the phrase "balanced pathway". It is clear from your presentation that you have given a lot of thought to the aspects of that. How would you see that balanced pathway taking shape? What are the key elements of the balanced pathway? There is a lot of detail about dates and times. It is not times, as such, that I am interested in, but how that balanced pathway would meet the global temperature target of 2°C above pre-industrial levels. How do you see all that coming together and fitting in? What are the key elements of that balanced pathway in achieving that target as opposed to a date or time target?

Mr Breen: The balanced pathway is essentially looking at all the ways in which different sectors can reduce emissions to get to UK net zero and for Northern Ireland to get to at least 82%. The key in all of it is electrification of our lives. The key driver is electrification of transport, heat, buildings etc. That is the single biggest factor in the balanced pathway. It is quite clear in the CCC diagram of the balanced pathway that that is the biggest chunk. Maybe we should send the Committee a copy of the graph.

In every balanced pathway, there are always residual emissions left in terms of agriculture. Indirect fermentation of methane — that, in crude terms, is cows burping and farting — will always remain. Technological advancements such as feed additives may help with that, but in every pathway some of that remains. To offset those emissions, there is carbon capture and storage, and then ordinary natural carbon sequestration. The advice is that carbon capture and storage would be too costly to implement in Northern Ireland, so we would benefit on a UK-wide basis from that being put in areas with more land and better capacity to store that carbon. That is the reason for looking at it on a UK-wide basis.

How the balanced pathway will help to stop global temperatures rising too much will be what the UK's nationally determined contribution to getting to net zero by 2050 will be. The IPCC and the Paris agreement say that we need to get to net zero by 2050. As things move on and as the technology advances, we will start, I think, to become a carbon sink. It is about every country playing its part and doing the maximum that it can to meet that temperature goal. I see Northern Ireland having a success story of getting the legislation through, getting everybody bought in, reducing emissions and showing that the economy can still be protected while doing so.

There is a bit of a danger of going too far too fast, in that it would cost us more, lose the will and become a case study of why emissions should not be tackled too quickly. Globally, that would look poor. That is very much my personal opinion and is not based on evidence.

Overall, we need everybody around the world to act. The UK is responsible for 1% of emissions reductions. The UK, therefore, will not do anything alone. Northern Ireland, on its own, will not do anything. It is about showing that people can buy in and that there are real opportunities in all this. The green growth strategy, in particular, highlights the opportunities. We have been focusing too much on the challenges and the dangers, but there are opportunities. I have to advise, on the basis of the scientific evidence, that the opportunities lie in following a balanced pathway.

Mr McGlone: Bear with me while I take you back for a minute, please, Colin. Earlier, the Minister referred to — we all know it and see it every day of our lives — the increasing and exorbitant cost of fuel and the consequences of that for the supply chain and so on. If it is pushed any further, it may take us faster to the tipping point where people look at alternatives. I bring you back to the electrification issue. How does that translate practically to on-farm situations, for example? What

measures need to be put in place and what alternatives considered? If ordinary fuels, as we know them — those that produce carbon — are so exorbitant that they are priced out of the market, we may arrive at the point economically of a just transition. The transition point could be brought upon people. What needs to be done? What practical measures need to be taken to bring about that change in electrification on-farm? What alternatives need to be considered by those in the farming business?

Mr Breen: I hold up my hands and say that I am no expert on some of that stuff. Our food and farming colleagues may have something to say on it. Electrification has to happen in tandem with electricity coming from renewable sources, be they hydrogen, biomethane, wind or other renewable energy sources. Electrification in conjunction with fossil fuels only compounds the problem: that will not work. On-farm, heat and power will come from electrification. Heavy machinery is the difficult one, and I do not have the answer for it. At present, the situation is similar to that in the aviation industry: the number of batteries that would be needed to power those big, heavy machines would probably not make it worthwhile at the minute. There may be a solution, however. We have hydrogen buses, so there may be a solution on-farm with hydrogen rather than batteries. I have probably said enough; I am probably digging myself a hole that I do not fully understand.

Mr McGlone: That is grand. I appreciate your honesty. Chair, maybe we can come back to that and get a bit more evidence, as Colin suggests, from his colleagues working in the food and drinks sectors, who may have some ideas on the subject. They have probably encountered it as well. May I make the suggestion that the Committee considers that at some stage, please? Thanks very much in the meantime, Colin.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): OK. Thanks, Patsy.

Mr Irwin: I thank Colin and his team for their presentation on this very important issue. I am also a great believer in listening to the experts. We are not experts on many issues, so we should listen to them. I have been a farmer all my life, so I know the issues on the ground.

It is vital that the Committee takes heed of the Climate Change Committee's report and reads KPMG's very stark report on the consequences of going for net zero by 2045. Colin, you said that the Paris agreement makes it clear that there should be protections for food production. Can you expand on that a wee bit?

Mr Breen: Likewise, I am not an expert. All that we are doing is analysing the evidence that we got and providing our assessment of it. The evidence, at this time, is clear that NI net zero is not credible. That is why we come forward and explain that.

Article 2(1) of the Paris agreement cites the need to protect food security while reducing emissions. Simply moving food production elsewhere does not protect food security because, in a crisis, people look after their own people first, in many cases. If there was limited food left, we would have more security by producing it indigenously than offshoring it. We also have good carbon footprint standards for our food and less distance for our food to travel if we are producing it locally. Those are all the positives in terms of food security, whilst also keeping global emissions down to a minimum.

There are concerns about certain regions, let us say, cutting down large swathes of very old forest in order to produce more beef. That is something that concerns me, and I would not like to see my local butcher giving me beef from there as opposed to our local beef.

Mr Irwin: Do you accept that this Committee has a huge responsibility in getting this right?

Mr Breen: We all have a huge responsibility. I have done my part as best I can in providing the evidence and drafting a Bill that is based on that evidence. I really want a compromise so that we can have the maximum plenary time to discuss one Bill and to get everybody on board with that one Bill. I cannot advise against a target over and above what we have put in, but, at the same time, I cannot stop anything like that happening in the Assembly; that is not my role. The Committee certainly has a big responsibility to look at all this, as members are doing, so that the Committee report can say, "Here is what the evidence suggests, and here is what we think". I very much look forward to seeing those Committee reports. That is about all that I can say on that.

Mr Irwin: Thank you, Colin. I hope that the Committee listens to the expert advice.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): William, every one of us on the Committee understands how important this is and understands our own role in ensuring that we get it right. That goes without saying.

Mrs Barton: A lot of the questions that I had in mind have been asked. The Bill allows DAERA to impose reporting duties on public bodies following consultation. Why has a general duty on public bodies not been included in the Bill?

Mr Breen: That decision was taken after legal advice. We placed the duties on the Departments because this is an Executive Bill, but, when you are placing a duty on other public bodies, it is good practice to consult them in order to co-design that duty and to make sure that it is fit for purpose. That was the sole reasoning behind not placing a duty directly on public bodies. With the limited time frame for the development of the legislation, we did not have time to consult on that provision. That was the best outcome that we could see, in conjunction with our legal experts.

Mrs Barton: That is OK, thank you.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): Again, Clare's internet connection does not allow her to join or to ask questions, so she has sent a few questions via WhatsApp for me to ask on her behalf.

You said that the North reducing food production is a threat to food security. You have talked about that a couple of times. Clare is asking this: can the Committee have sight of the evidence on which you base that comment?

Mr Breen: I do not think that it is evidence as such. It is a simple question of supply and demand. If we do not supply it, there is still demand and somebody else will supply it. We are largely exporting to GB, and that has been taken into account in the overall UK net zero pathways. It is not a matter of evidence; it is a matter of the common laws of economics. I have been asked that question before, and I have given the same answer.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): This is my own point: economic markets change, and I am thinking that there is no way that we will be consuming the same type of foods in the same quantities in 2045 or 2050. There is an obvious conclusion to draw from that. The markets that are best prepared for the evolution of the market will thrive more than those that are strictly sticking to something that they think will be the same in 30 years' time when it quite clearly will not be.

Mr Breen: I completely agree with you, Philip, on everything you said. The issue in Northern Ireland, as I am sure that you will know, is that the nature of our land is such that it is largely good only for grassland, grazing of livestock and the like. Diets will change, and the farming sector still has an awful lot to do in the balanced pathway; it is not business as usual by any means. In the balanced pathway, an area is built in for behaviour change and consumers eating less meat. I saw a story recently that said that, in the last decade, I think, about 20% less red meat has been consumed when compared with a decade ago. It is important to recognise that one of our strengths in Northern Ireland is producing livestock. We are still only producing animal proteins for 10 million people, so, regardless of how much diets change, unless there is some insane level of shift, there will still be the requirement for several millions of people to be eating animal protein in 2045. I completely agree with everything you say, but I probably disagree that Northern Ireland agriculture or a major part of the Northern Ireland economy needs to be damaged at this stage.

The Minister has spent a lot of money on the protein crop scheme, so people in Northern Ireland are looking at changes. Those take time, and my feeling is that the best way to bring forward that change and to let people start planting and growing protein crops is for us to have a target that they all buy into. That change will then happen organically rather than it being forced.

I will beat the same drum again: I really want a compromise in which that all happens and everybody gets brought along. I do not want anybody feeling that there is a lack of ambition. I do not want anybody feeling that there is too much ambition and that it will ruin their lives. A compromise is ideal, and I cannot see any better issue for compromise than climate change, which does not respect parties, borders or anything else. We can all show a genuine commitment to working together, because we will have to work together very hard over the next 25 or 30 years and well beyond to tackle this.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): Clare has made another point. You mentioned that Scotland does not have just transition in its primary legislation. She is pointing out that it does, in section 35 of the Scottish —.

Mr Breen: Sorry, that was not my point. My point was that the Just Transition Commission was not established in legislation in Scotland. Yes, I am aware that there are just transition principles in the Scottish legislation. Indeed, if we were to look at a compromise, we would certainly look at those just transition principles to see what the intent was and what the outcome has been. We would work with officials in Scotland — we work in a transboundary manner all over these islands — to see what can be gained from them.

My point was that the Just Transition Commission, which is being set up under green growth, was set up in Scotland without legislation. I am sorry if that point was not correctly understood.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): That is fair enough. This is the last point that Clare wanted to make to you. A lot of stock is put on the CCC's advice, but the CCC gave a tailwind scenario of the North setting a 95% target. Following on from that, the question that she asks is this: why did you not go beyond 82% and set the 95% target?

Mr Breen: We set a target of "at least 82%". That is the balanced pathway. I believe that we could look at that tailwind scenario after we start to see real action, but we need to get started on this. The tailwind scenario assumes that an awful lot of things will go in our favour. At present, we do not even have legislation in our favour. We looked at that, but, at the minute, the balanced pathway is our recommendation. The tailwind scenario involves ambition and a bit of luck.

Yes, we put huge emphasis on the CCC advice. It is important to say that a lot of people put huge emphasis on the IPCC advice, but some of the authors of the IPCC report work for the Climate Change Committee as well. I think that we are all on the same page, but we have slightly different desires as to how we get there. I say again that a compromise should look at all that. Rather than a huge amount of Committee time being spent scrutinising two Bills and doing two reports, we could all come together. I noted the Minister's very positive comments around compromise, getting sensible amendments and all the rest.

Ultimately, the CCC is the established independent expert. It was established for Northern Ireland by the Executive. It is the body that provides us with advice, and we should listen to that advice.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): OK, Colin. I will leave it there. I thank you, Arlene and Anthony for coming along and giving that presentation. There is no doubt that we will have you back to discuss the same subject. Once again, thank you very much.

Mr Breen: Thank you very much, Philip, and thank you very much to the Committee. It was great to present today.