

Response to Proposals for Taking Forward NI Climate Change Legislation

Department of the Environment

January 2016

Belfast Healthy Cities is pleased to have the opportunity to comment on the discussion paper Proposals for Taking Forward NI Climate Change Legislation.

Belfast Healthy Cities would be pleased to provide further evidence on any of the points noted, should that be helpful.

Introduction

Belfast Healthy Cities is a partnership organisation seeking to improve health and wellbeing by identifying ways to tackle inequalities in health and create healthy urban environments. The organisation's key role is to fulfil the requirements of Belfast as a World Health Organization (WHO) Healthy City and to act as a link between the city and WHO Europe. Within the city, the key roles for Belfast Healthy Cities are to facilitate intersectoral collaboration, and to work with partners to share evidence, build capacity and test new concepts and ways of working. Core partners include Belfast City Council, Public Health Agency, NIHE and Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. Key partners also include DHSSPS, DOE, DSD, QUB, and UU.

Context of response

The Healthy Cities approach is based on the social model of health, which emphasises that health is the outcome of wider social and physical living conditions. In Phase VI (2014-18) of the WHO European Healthy Cities Network, the programme is reflecting Health 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) Europe public health strategy, which recognises the strong influence of environmental conditions in determining health outcomes, stating that 'climate change will have long-term consequences on the environment and on the interactions between people and their surroundings.'¹

Climate change and health is a sub theme within the Healthy Urban Environments (HUE), which is one of the core themes for Belfast as a WHO Healthy City in Phase VI (2014-2018). A key element of this programme is building capacity on the health impacts of climate change. As part of this, Belfast Healthy Cities provides the secretariat to a regional Climate Change and Health Partnership, which is chaired by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The role of the

¹ Health 2020. A European policy framework and strategy for the 21st century, 2013, WHO. Available at <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-policy/health-2020-the-european-policy-for-health-and-well-being>.

partnership is to build capacity and share information among organisations in the health sector on the links between climate change and health.

Current evidence indicates that early health impacts include mental health problems associated with flooding, while global climate change will also have an impact upon some of the other fundamental determinants of health, including air quality and access to food. Climate change will also have an impact on health inequalities, as vulnerable groups and individuals typically have fewer resources to deal with crises when they arise and often suffer longer-term effects on health. They may also be more likely to experience the negative impacts of climate change disproportionately.

This response is made in the light of this context.

General Comments

Belfast Healthy Cities agrees that there is a need for Northern Ireland legislation to address climate change.

From a health perspective, climate change legislation supports setting and monitoring of emission reductions, which can both protect people and communities from the impacts of climate change and incentivise alternatives that not only drive change towards a low carbon region, but also deliver long-term benefits for health.

Legislation can also support work to reduce health inequalities, particularly through incentivising alternative transport and energy options and ensuring accountability in relation to monitoring impacts.

Setting interim and long term targets

In a review of social determinants of health, Professor Sir Michael Marmot observed that reducing health inequalities and reducing the effect of climate change require similar approaches; long-term, sustained action aiming not only to improve the health of some people in the immediate future, but also to achieve substantial and enduring results over time.²

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes a focus on reducing emissions and improving air quality, as research shows would have the benefit of improving population health and reducing mortality. Health 2020 projects that 'reducing total carbon dioxide emissions in the EU from 3876 million tonnes in 2000 to 2867 million tonnes in 2030 would effectively halve the number of years of life lost from the health effects of air pollution³. It would be helpful to highlight the health benefits arising from reduced emissions within legislation.

² Review of social determinants and the health divide in the WHO European Region: Final Report, 2013 (Updated 2014), WHO. Available at http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/251878/Review-of-social-determinants-and-the-health-divide-in-the-WHO-European-Region-FINAL-REPORT.pdf.

³ Health 2020. A European policy framework and strategy for the 21st century, 2013, WHO. Available at <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-policy/health-2020-the-european-policy-for-health-and-well-being>.

The legislation should be used to set and deliver ambitious medium and long-term targets. Evidence from Scotland suggests that targets and carbon budgets can be an enabling mechanism to drive change towards a low carbon economy⁴ and as such are to be welcomed.

Governance and Accountability

Accountability will be essential to ensure effective implementation of the legislation and real change in the region. Belfast Healthy Cities believes that an analysis of existing mechanisms is needed as a basis for decisions regarding a specific Northern Ireland Committee on Climate Change. Access to expertise across a range of fields will be essential for an effective mechanism, and consideration should be given to how best access this expertise in a timely and efficient way. .

Belfast Healthy Cities notes the important role of the cross-departmental working group on climate change and agrees that powers within the legislation to request specified public bodies on actions will strengthen the currently voluntary reporting system. Potentially it will create better data, but also give visibility to the cross cutting nature of climate change and promote the model of cross-departmental working on key issues.

Cross-sectoral collaboration between sectors is also important. Belfast Healthy Cities agrees that different agencies may provide expertise on emissions reduction and economic protection and recommends the exploration of new relationships and ways of working in the formulation of robust accountability mechanisms.

⁴ High Level Carbon Assessment of the Draft Budget 2010/11, Scottish Government 2009. Available at <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2009/09/17102339/10>