Panel Discussion Event

Overcoming Barriers to the Clean Energy Transition in Northern Ireland
Re-thinking Policy, Planning, and Participation

Date: Wednesday, 25th March 2026

Time: 14:00 – 17:00 hrs

Venue: Peter Froggatt Centre (Room 02/018)
Queen's University Belfast

The energy sector in NI is a significant contributor of greenhouse gas emissions accounting for 47% of total emissions, where electricity generates 14% of emissions, domestic transport contributes 18%, and buildings and product-uses account for 15%. In Belfast, buildings account for 50% of emissions and transport is responsible for 20% of the city's total emissions. To address these energy-related emissions, the *Energy Strategy for Northern Ireland: The Path to Net Zero Energy* was introduced in 2021. It outlines 3 key interim targets for 2030 on NI's pathway to net zero carbon by 2050. The 5-year Climate Action Plans provide the roadmap to achieving these targets. Yet, as we approach 2030 – a milestone year for achieving the energy decarbonisation targets – NI is significantly off-track in meeting its clean energy targets.

As the recent progress report by the NI Comptroller and Auditor General on NI's Energy Strategy reveals, despite a budgetary spending of £107 million on energy-related activities since 2020, NI has only made 1% progress on the first target which aims for energy savings of 25% from buildings and industry by 2030. On the second target which aims for 80% electricity generation from renewable sources by 2030, NI is approx. 35% short. And finally, compared to the third target's aim of growing the size of NI's low carbon and renewable energy economy to over £2 billion by 2030, it currently stands at £1.58 billion. Given these findings, the report concludes, the

expenditure of £107 million cannot be considered “an efficient use of resources and represent good value for money”.

In fact, NI’s progress towards decarbonising energy has not only stalled, but reversed. According to the most recent data from NISRA on Electricity Consumption and Renewable Generation in NI, 2025 was the *third* consecutive year that electricity generated from renewable sources recorded a downward trend. From a peak of 51% renewable generation in 2022, last year recorded 44.2% electricity generation from renewable sources which marks a decline of 0.3% compared to the same period in 2024. Delayed and weak policy implementation, a lack of oversight in monitoring and evaluation of progress towards emissions targets and an insufficient pace of expansion of critical grid infrastructure are undermining NI’s ability to meet its clean energy targets.

It is in this context that the current panel discussion holds a particular urgency and relevance as NI faces the very real prospect of missing its energy transition targets not only for 2030 but also for 2050. It is clear from the data that Northern Ireland will need to make significant and rapid changes going forward if we are to meet our clean energy targets by 2030. This multistakeholder panel discussion invites experts in energy transition from the public sector, industry, and academia to share their insights and think-through ways of overcoming the barriers to energy policy implementation and actionable ways forward for meeting Northern Ireland’s clean energy targets, with a special focus on Belfast city.

The event will consist of two panel sessions of 1 hour each including time for audience Q&A at the end of each session.

Panellist Bios

Panel 1: Energy Transition Barriers in Policy, Planning, and Participation

Brian Smyth
Councillor, Climate Emergency Committee, Belfast City Council

Cllr. Brian Smyth is a Green Party Councillor and the party group leader in Belfast City Council, first elected in 2019 and again in 2023. On council he has helped shaped Belfast's resilience strategy as the chair of the climate working group, pushing for practical climate action, greener urban planning and investment in green infrastructure and skills.

He has campaigned for energy efficient social housing and large-scale retro fitting and has consistently argued that tackling the cost of living and housing crises must go hand in hand with decarbonisation.

David Rooney
Prof., School of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering, Queen's University Belfast

Professor Rooney has expertise in a range of areas relating to renewable-energy systems and their integration into society and businesses. He has over 250 scholarly outputs in areas spanning materials for fuel cell and battery applications, anaerobic digestion, gas separation, catalysis and circular economy.
His work is used to advise business and government on Net-Zero pathways and technologies. Most of his recent work focuses on the opportunities for evolving rural economies to avail of the opportunities which lie at the agritech-renewable energy and manufacturing interfaces.

Diane Emerson

Director, UKIMEA Climate and Sustainability Leader

Diane Emerson leads work addressing major global challenges including climate change, nature recovery and social inequality, with a strong focus on sustainability and resilience.

She is highly client facing, advising leading UK organisations and government across energy, transport, water, finance and property. Diane is also a Chartered Environmentalist, contributing to global decarbonisation and sustainability debates, and as a Member of the Belfast Climate Commission, she plays an active role in shaping the city's response to the climate emergency.

Tiziana O'Hara

Convenor, Community Energy NI (CENI)

Tiziana O'Hara, as the convenor of Community Energy NI (CENI), brings together organisations and individuals to strengthen the collective voice for community-owned energy and to push for the conditions that allow it to grow.

She serves as Director of the Northern Ireland Co-operatives Forum (NICE) and Drumlin Wind Energy Co-operative, two flagship community energy co-ops that show how local ownership can deliver real benefits for communities.

Through her role as a Co-operative Development Practitioner at Co-operative Alternatives, Tiziana has supported and trained many groups exploring or establishing co-operatives, including emerging community energy initiatives, helping them move from early ideas to viable, community-owned enterprises.

Stephanie Dunlop
Corporate Affairs & Policy Manager, SSE Ireland

Stephanie Dunlop is Corporate Affairs and Policy Manager at SSE Ireland, where she works at the intersection of energy policy, public affairs, and market development across Ireland and Northern Ireland. Her role focuses on providing strategic insight on the evolving energy policy landscape, with particular emphasis on renewable energy deployment, policy-level system integration, and delivery risk.

Stephanie is a former U.S. diplomat, having led on economic policy and engagement in Hong Kong and Macau, and supported high-level U.S. Government delegations. She holds an MA in Diplomacy and International Political Economy.

Panel 2: Actionable Pathways for Meeting NI's Clean Energy Targets

David Surplus
Co-Founder, B9 Energy

David Surplus is a Chartered Marine Engineer and former Lloyd's Register Surveyor who moved from offshore oil and gas into renewables 34 years ago to form the B9 Energy group of companies.

B9 has developed ten onshore wind farms, Northern Ireland's largest AD plant, six landfill gas projects, commercial and domestic solar PV, and hydrogen-based Power-to-X projects. The company is now focused on GW scale e-methanol synthesis for fuelling the ro-ro freight ferry sector.

Jacqueline Gibson

Director NI, International Synergies

Jacqueline Gibson is the NI Director for International Synergies, successfully leading the world's longest running resource matching program. She coined the term 'Industrial Symbiosis' and through her work has been instrumental in saving companies money, protecting the environment, contributing to the global circular economy and ultimately guiding them along their journey to Net Zero.

Her background spans Sustainability Consultancy with Manchester United Football to leading Green Building standards with Graham Construction, to helping Blenheim Palace and it's 10,000 acre estate to declare Carbon Neutrality by 2027. She also helped Belfast Harbour adopt One Planet Living principles on City Quays Gardens and helped the harbour become the first UK or Irish port to publish an ESG strategy.

Amanda Slevin

Director of Centre of Sustainability, Equality, and Climate Action (SECA), Queen's University Belfast

Dr Amanda Slevin is an environmental sociologist and educator who combines her academic skills with over 25 years' practical experience in community work to contribute to socio-ecological transformations.

As a Co-Founder and Co-Director of Queen's Centre for Sustainability, Equality and Climate Action, Amanda holds QUB's first cross-University Lecturer position and she works between the School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics, and the School of Biological Sciences.

Since joining QUB in 2018, Amanda had made numerous contributions to multi-level climate action, energy and sustainability transitions. For example, as Chair of the Climate Coalition Northern Ireland, Amanda facilitated collaborations between cross-party, cross-community MLAs, civil society groups and independent legal experts to co-develop NI's first Climate Change Bill, which led to NI's Climate Change Act (2022). Amanda also undertakes energy-related research and she is Principal Investigator of the Department for the Economy funded study entitled 'Community Energy: Principles, Practices & Policies for a Net Zero Northern Ireland.'

Peter Nockemann

Prof., School of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering, Queen's University Belfast

Professor Nockemann is Professor of Inorganic and Materials Chemistry at Queen's University Belfast, based in the QUILL Research Centre. His research spans sustainable energy storage - including iron-based redox flow batteries - and critical metal recovery from electronic waste. He is co-founder and non-executive director of Ionic Technologies, a start-up commercialising sustainable technologies for rare earth recovery from end-of-life permanent magnets.

His work sits at the intersection of fundamental chemistry, circular economy, and clean energy, aiming to secure the critical material supply chains that underpin the energy transition.

Event Programme

TIME	SESSION
14:00 – 14:15 pm	**Welcome and Opening Remarks** by Dr. Dipali Mathur
14:15 – 15:15 pm	**PANEL 1: "Energy Transition Barriers in Policy, Planning, & Participation"** Panellists: Cllr Brian Smyth (Climate Emergency committee), David Rooney (School of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering, QUB), Diane Emmerson (Director, ARUP), Tiziana O'Hara (Convener, Community Energy NI coalition), & Stephanie Dunlop (Corporate Affairs & Policy Manager, SSE Ireland) *Moderator: Dr. Dipali Mathur* Q.1. What are the three most significant barriers to NI's progress in meeting its energy targets? Q.2. Do you see NI's slowing progress towards its energy goals as a policy problem, a planning/implementation problem, a participation and behaviour change problem, or a combination of the three? Q.3. Do you think Belfast/NI's energy decarbonisation policies interfere with or are obstructed by other key policy areas (e.g. housing/infrastructure, biodiversity and land-use policy, jobs (livelihoods), etc.)? If yes, what are the three other strategic policy areas that are in misalignment with decarbonisation targets? **Audience Q&A (15 mins.)**
15:15 – 15:45 pm	**TEA BREAK**
15:45 – 16:45 pm	**PANEL 2: "Actionable Pathways for Meeting NI's Climate Targets"** Panellists: David Surplus (Co-founder, b9 Energy), Jacqueline Gibson (Director, International Synergies NI), Amanda Slevin (School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics, QUB), Peter Nockemann (School of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering, QUB) *Moderator: Prof. John Barry*

	Q.4. While decarbonising electricity is relatively easy, transport, buildings and industry present bigger challenges. At a time when backtracking on climate commitments is gaining ground, what would be required for NI to decarbonise hard to abate sectors at scale and pace going forward? Q.5. What are the biggest challenges to the adoption of energy transition policies in your sector? In your view, what are the 3 things your sector can do for a faster energy transition going forward? Q.6. What are the 3 systemic shifts that are required right now for NI to be able to meet its 2030 energy decarbonisation targets? **Audience Q&A (15 mins.)**
16:45 – 17:00 pm	**Thanks & Closing Remarks** by Prof. John Barry

This event has limited capacity. Please register your interest by clicking on this link or scanning the QR code below:

This event is organised by

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Professor of Green Political Economy
Queen's University Belfast

With special thanks to **CONNECT Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin** for sponsoring the event and the **Centre for Sustainability, Equality and Climate Action (SECA), Queen's University Belfast** for hosting the event.