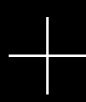


In partnership



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# How can private finance be a lever for green housing and energy in Belfast?

Riley Thorold and Josie Warden

# Acknowledgments

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## Introduction

**I**n a participatory roundtable in May 2021, the RSA, Octopus Group and Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) brought together key stakeholders from Belfast and further afield to explore options and strategies for delivering systemic impact in the city's housing and energy systems through private investment.

The aims of the session were to:

- Explore challenges and opportunities for private finance to be a lever for change in Belfast.
- To identify a set of priority areas where next steps could be taken in Belfast.
- To identify opportunities for Belfast to inspire and inform work in other UK cities.

The paper that follows summarises the discussion from that event, paired with the findings of some supplementary desk research. It outlines some of the distinctive local challenges and opportunities for green housing and energy and specifies some priority next steps for pursuing this agenda in Belfast.

## Background

Approximately 20 percent of the UK's total greenhouse gas emissions come from its housing stock and all the signs indicate housing will be one of the most challenging and complex elements of the UK's energy transition. Fuel poverty remains stubbornly high, and a range of financial and non-financial barriers deter ambitious local energy and housing projects.

Belfast, with its long-time dependence on carbon and imported energy, faces particularly acute challenges, exacerbated by an ageing housing stock. Northern Ireland has the highest weekly household expenditure on energy, the highest domestic energy use and the lowest per capita public spend on energy schemes of any UK nation. Currently 68 percent of householders in Northern Ireland still use home heating oil and a relatively new natural gas network only connects 25 percent of dwellings. Up to 50,000 homes will need to be retrofitted each year – three times the current level – to meet the NI Department for the Economy's carbon reduction targets.

The recent launch of Belfast's climate plan, the establishment of the Belfast Climate Commission, the potential for a forthcoming ambitious NI energy strategy and the prioritisation of energy efficiency by the NIHE and Northern Irish housing associations suggest real momentum is possible on the transition to net zero emissions across homes and buildings. However, the route to financing this transition is unresolved: NIHE forecasts suggest that upgrading the 586,000 eligible dwellings in Northern Ireland to SAP (standard assessment procedure) band B will cost a total cost of £9.2bn – a mean cost of £15,600 per dwelling.<sup>1</sup>

New national investment streams, changing sentiment in the private sector and the growth in environmental, social and governance (ESG) investing have the potential to contribute to this shift. Indeed, there is a growing confidence that sufficient green finance is already available for clean energy and housing in the UK. However, this investment has traditionally gone towards project portfolios aggregated on a technology basis. There is a growing acknowledgement that the UK transition to net zero will require a more integrated approach to technology adoption and project development in local places.<sup>2</sup> Scaling up private investment in local housing and energy projects requires a shift from project-by-project appraisal and single technology portfolios to more systemic place-based programmes – hence the decision to contextualise this work in Belfast, a UK 'core city' where there is demonstrable energy for ambitious change.

- 1 Building Research Establishment and the Northern Ireland Housing Association (2021) [Cost of carbon savings in Northern Ireland's housing stock.](#)
- 2 Billington, P, Smith, CA and Ball, M (2020). Accelerating the Rate of Investment in Local Energy Projects. Available at: [www.uk100.org/sites/default/files/publications/UK100\\_Accelerating%20the%20Rate%20of%20Investment%20in%20Local%20Energy%20Projects.pdf](http://www.uk100.org/sites/default/files/publications/UK100_Accelerating%20the%20Rate%20of%20Investment%20in%20Local%20Energy%20Projects.pdf)

# A review of the challenges and opportunities for harnessing private sector investment in Belfast and Northern Ireland housing and energy systems

**T**hese opportunities and challenges were identified through stakeholder interviews and literature review prior to the roundtable, then sense-checked for accuracy and built upon during the roundtable. They include specific and more general issues which stakeholders recognise may influence potential for private sector investment in this area.

## Challenges

### General challenges in Belfast

- **Belfast has a long-time dependence on carbon and imported energy.** Across NI, 68 percent of households use oil<sup>3</sup> and the gas network serves 300,000 homes. Despite Belfast being the only local council in NI where gas has a higher penetration than oil in the residential building stock, oil reliance is still high.
- **Belfast has an ageing housing stock, largely owned by NIHE, and demand for houses in the centre of Belfast remains relatively low.**
- According to the Sixth Carbon Budget for NI, **NI is not expected to achieve net zero based on the balanced pathway model,**<sup>4</sup> however, this is Climate Change Committee's (CCC) preferred scenario (as recommended for the UK in the CCC's Sixth Carbon Budget).
- **Fuel poverty is high across Northern Ireland.** Fuel poverty in Northern Ireland was reported as 22 percent of households for the year 2016<sup>5</sup> - it is unrealistic to expect consumers to foot the bill for energy efficiency measures.

3 Northern Ireland Housing Executive (2019). Available at: [Home Energy Conservation Authority Annual Progress Report](#).

4 Climate Change Committee (2020). The Path to Net Zero. Available at: [www.theccc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/What-the-Sixth-Carbon-Budget-means-for-Northern-Ireland.pdf](http://www.theccc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/What-the-Sixth-Carbon-Budget-means-for-Northern-Ireland.pdf)

5 National Energy Action (2019). Action for Warm Homes Northern Ireland. Available at: [www.uregni.gov.uk/files/uregni/media-files/NEA%20NI%20Response\\_0.pdf](http://www.uregni.gov.uk/files/uregni/media-files/NEA%20NI%20Response_0.pdf)

# Review of challenges and opportunities

## **Demand-side challenges<sup>6</sup> – the absence of well understood, ‘risk-free’, ‘quick-fix’ finance solutions**

- **Upfront costs, long payback periods and an absence of clear signals from the market** can deter private investment, especially at the development stage of projects.
  - According to the Northern Ireland Affairs UK Select Committee, “the closure of the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation in 2016 without a replacement, and the lack of long-term policy clarity, have been detrimental to investor confidence”. ABO Wind told the Committee their investment plans were “being kept under review until further policy clarity was offered by the Northern Ireland Executive” and RenewableNI suggested this was “likely to lead to a hiatus of renewable energy development in the coming years”.<sup>7</sup>
- **Lack of experience and capacity gaps in local financial sectors** can also result in higher capital costs for renewable projects.
- **NIHE’s current funding model makes it difficult to draw in private finance** (it is currently funded by Department for Communities).

## **Supply-side challenges – barriers to securing an ‘investment-ready’ project pipeline**

Supply-side refers to the presence or absence of an investment-ready project pipeline.

- **A lack of resources, skills, power or capacity may inhibit local project promoters – city councils, housing associations, businesses – from setting-up, and implementing ambitious sustainable energy or housing projects.**
  - District councils in NI (like Belfast City Council) have limited responsibility for housing as they do not own housing stock; social housing is held by the NIHE and housing associations and district councils have only had planning powers since 2015. Therefore, as suggested by Arup in its research into the Future of Energy Efficiency Policy in Northern Ireland, district councils may lack experience of: (i) implementing energy efficiency in the social housing stock and (ii) sustainable construction.<sup>8</sup>
  - DfE is considering a move towards greater use of heat pumps (mainly off the gas grid) as opposed to boiler refitting, and NIHE is currently trialling hybrid heat pumps. But participants in this roundtable suggested that this transition will require a more strategic upskilling programme and rapid development in supply chains.

6 Demand-side refers to the issues from the perspective of investors seeking finance solutions.

7 Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee (2017). Electricity sector in Northern Ireland. Available at: [publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmniaf/51/5108.htm](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmniaf/51/5108.htm)

8 Department for the Economy, Arup (2021). Research into the future of energy efficiency policy in Northern Ireland. Available at: [www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/research-future-energy-efficiency-policy-northern-ireland](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/research-future-energy-efficiency-policy-northern-ireland)



- **The diversity of building fabric and housing tenure in NI** add considerable complexity to domestic retrofitting programmes.
- **There are inadequate incentives for the uptake of renewable projects** in Northern Ireland. For instance:
  - Unlike in England and Wales, local authorities in Northern Ireland are unable to impose reasonable requirements for compliance with energy efficiency standards.<sup>9</sup>
  - Northern Ireland chose not to participate in the Contracts for Difference (CfD) scheme, which replaced the old Renewables Obligation (RO) in the rest of the UK, leaving NI as the only part of the UK not to have a support mechanism for the renewables industry.
  - There is no Renewable Energy Credits (RECs) scheme in Northern Ireland.
  - Since the Renewable Heat Incentive Scandal<sup>10</sup> in Northern Ireland, which surfaced in 2016, there has been no Renewable Heat Incentive (or feed-in tariff) in Northern Ireland. Roundtable participants pointed out that these incentives will likely come in the next couple of years with the upcoming Northern Ireland Energy Strategy.
- **There is a fragmentation of infrastructure, ownership and authority**, preventing more systemic solutions and the facilitation of integrated investment across different sectors, including housing and energy.
  - The NI Department for Communities has legislative authority for domestic energy efficiency programmes and grants, fuel poverty and wider housing policy, while responsibility for the strategic vision for energy lies with the Department for the Economy. Northern Ireland Housing Executive is the Home Energy Conservation Authority (HECA) for NI and leads on reporting and identifying where energy efficiency progress is possible. The Utility Regulator promotes sustainable energy and development through regulation.<sup>11</sup>
  - Oil used for heating (used in 68 percent of NI homes) currently falls outside NI energy governance.<sup>12</sup>
- The adoption of new technologies and changes to domestic energy production and consumption will require significant community buy-in, resident participation and public awareness around the need and options for change.

9 Ibid.

10 For more information see: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renewable\\_Heat\\_Incentive\\_scandal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renewable_Heat_Incentive_scandal)

11 Lowes, R and Mitchell, C. University of Exeter Energy Policy Group (2021). Energy governance for the Northern Ireland energy transition. Available at: [geography.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/schoolofgeography/images/researchgroups/epg/Energy\\_governance\\_for\\_the\\_Northern\\_Ireland\\_energy\\_transition\\_final\\_published.pdf](https://geography.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/schoolofgeography/images/researchgroups/epg/Energy_governance_for_the_Northern_Ireland_energy_transition_final_published.pdf)

12 Ibid.

# Review of challenges and opportunities

- Research with 12 focus groups with a range of householders undertaken in 2018, suggested that most people in NI were unaware of the existing energy efficiency provisions available, including Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme (NISEP).<sup>13</sup>
- Roundtable participants highlighted public engagement and buy-in as an essential area for continued action.
- **Cities need to insulate projects from the ebbs and flows of politics and policy** to provide consistency and certainty for project promoters and investors. Parties in NI parliament are in disagreement about the right approach to green transition and despite £10bn in UK government support for net zero programmes being indicated, national policy and regulation has been inconsistent.
- **There will need to be investment in the grid to accommodate the growth of heat pumps.** The strategic development of heat networks in areas may also be a strategic function the Regulator might need to manage in the shorter term.

## Opportunities

### **General opportunities in Belfast**

- **The Belfast Climate Commission - one of three city-based climate commissions across the UK established to “translate climate policy into action ‘on the ground’ to bring about transformative change” - was launched in 2020.**<sup>14</sup> This acts as a forum for leadership, advice, evaluation, networking, advocacy and research.
- **The forthcoming NI Executive Energy Strategy and the prioritisation of energy efficiency by the NIHE** suggest real momentum is possible on the transition to net zero emissions across homes and buildings.
- **A new net zero carbon roadmap for Belfast was launched on Tuesday 15 December 2020** with the Belfast Resilience Strategy, marking the publication of the city’s first climate action plan. Currently two climate bills are passing through the local assembly.
- A study by Arup for the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) in 2014 showed that **for every £1 spent on improving the energy efficiency of 60,000 homes in fuel poverty in NI, between £4 and £15 of social value would be delivered.**<sup>15</sup>
- Many councils have been willing to engage with their residents on the changes that will be required of them to transition to net zero, as evidenced by a recent spate of citizens’ assemblies, citizens’ juries, participatory budgeting and other innovative engagement processes. The use of a consumer working group as part of the NI government’s energy strategy work is an encouraging development, as are proposals for a NI-wide Build Back Better citizens’ assembly.

<sup>13</sup> Arup (2021). Op cit.

<sup>14</sup> For more information, see: [www.belfastclimate.org.uk/](http://www.belfastclimate.org.uk/)

<sup>15</sup> Arup (2021). Op cit.

## **Demand-side opportunities<sup>16</sup> – new finance solutions and shifts in investor sentiment**

- **On-lending, co-lending structures, loan syndication, subordinated debt, convertible grants and loans and other debt-based instruments**, can help local finance institutions gain access to capital and expertise.<sup>17</sup>
- **Investors and banks are increasingly buying into the Just Transition and net zero agendas.** Some providers of debt are now happy to get lower returns on super-energy-efficient housing. The ESG-risk lens can help investors understand how green infrastructure may be a lucrative, as well as an ethical, investment.
- DfE have suggested that “**bank-led products such as green mortgages or low-interest loans for energy efficiency investments could be delivered** through a market-led approach and intervene at key points when homeowners are buying, re-mortgaging or improving their properties”.<sup>18</sup> In Germany, Commerzbank’s Green Mortgage grants an interest discount for domestic buildings whose final energy consumption is less than 75 kWh per square metre of usable area.<sup>19</sup> Roundtable participants noted that engaging with homeowners during key transition moments, such as moving home, will be essential to take up of opportunities.
- Pension funds are increasingly eager to invest in real assets and the prospective Renewable Heat Incentive, expected with the upcoming NI Energy Strategy, could offer the long-term dependability required by pension funds.

## **Supply-side opportunities<sup>20</sup> – promising projects, programmes, policies and governance**

- **NI has the opportunity of a renewable wind sector** which is providing nearly 50 percent of the overall NI energy generation per year, with a curtailment opportunity (up to 15 percent last year, even greater than Scotland). This provides an export opportunity for NI, potentially to the EU via the Integrated Single Energy Market (I-SEM). The upcoming SPIRE 2 pilot project is also investigating how energy storage devices can allow more renewable energy (primarily wind energy) to be integrated into the power grid.
- **Belfast is home to the UK’s first bespoke offshore wind terminal at Belfast Harbour** (for the installation and pre-assembly of over 100 wind turbines), giving it a significant competitive advantage in wind energy bidding processes.

16 Demand-side refers to the issues from the perspective of investors seeking finance solutions.

17 International Renewable Energy Agency (2016). Unlocking renewable energy investment: The role of risk mitigation and structured finance. Available at: [www.irena.org/-/media/Files/IRENA/Agency/Publication/2016/IRENA\\_Risk\\_Mitigation\\_and\\_Structured\\_Finance\\_2016.pdf](http://www.irena.org/-/media/Files/IRENA/Agency/Publication/2016/IRENA_Risk_Mitigation_and_Structured_Finance_2016.pdf)

18 Department for the Economy Northern Ireland (2021). [Energy Strategy for Northern Ireland: Consultation on Policy Options](http://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/economy/energy-strategy-for-ni-consultation-on-policy-options.pdf). Available at: [www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/economy/energy-strategy-for-ni-consultation-on-policy-options.pdf](http://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/economy/energy-strategy-for-ni-consultation-on-policy-options.pdf)

19 For more information, see: [www.commerzbank.de/en/nachhaltigkeit/markt\\_kunden/privatkunden/1/gruenebaufi/green\\_baufi.html](http://www.commerzbank.de/en/nachhaltigkeit/markt_kunden/privatkunden/1/gruenebaufi/green_baufi.html)

20 Supply-side refers to the presence or absence of an investment-ready project pipeline.

# Review of challenges and opportunities

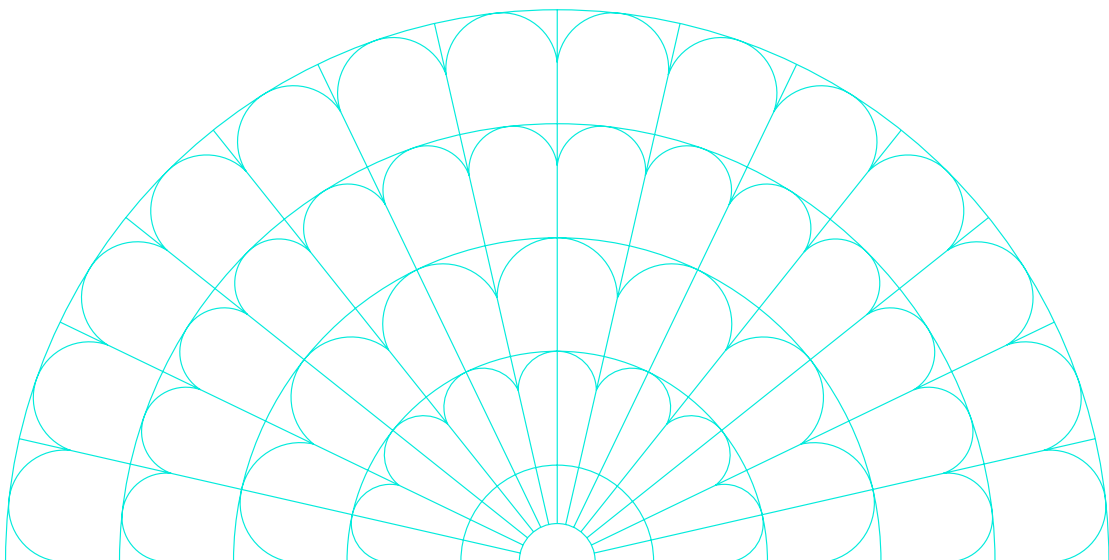
- **The Belfast housing stock is largely owned by the NIHE, providing a single lever to deliver change at scale.** With £270m annual spending power and the ability to aggregate dwellings and test new innovations at scale, NIHE is well-placed to drive sustainable growth and attract investment from more risk-averse funds (eg pension funds). The landlord aspect of NIHE is set to be reclassified as a mutual, allowing it to borrow, as housing associations can, to invest in its stock and build new homes.
- **The Community Planning Partnerships, established in each NI district** to identify long-term priorities for improving the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of their place, could support the development of green housing and energy projects at the local level, particularly in Belfast where senior decision-makers have bought into the process.
- **Local authorities are increasingly looking for opportunities to secure longer-term funding streams and innovative sources of financing.** These include:
  - Some local authorities are exploring the opportunities provided Community Municipal Investments (CMI) – “bonds or loans issued by councils via an investment crowdfunding platform to both local residents and public investors more broadly”.<sup>21</sup> The majority of UK investors are interested about CMI, and Energy Revolution Research Centre value the UK-wide potential to raise finance from them at 0.1 percent demand at £2.4bn.<sup>22</sup>
  - Asset sales and land development through land value capture.
  - The Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund provides loans at lower than market rates for capital expenditure.
  - Local authorities have large pension funds that could be diverted from fossil fuels into green energy and housing projects.
  - Using carbon offset payments to fund green energy and housing projects.
- The DfE consultation on policy options for the Energy Strategy paper raises the **potential for “attracting inward investment to Northern Ireland through extending the Contracts for Difference scheme”**<sup>23</sup> to Northern Ireland.
- **The growth of local energy generation** schemes across the UK might imply that NI district councils have an important future role in energy generation, involving, for instance, the development of heat networks or the deployment of heat pumps (alongside the Housing Executive). Heat pumps were identified in the workshop as a particularly effective and efficient way of moving away from a reliance on oil, with several participants arguing that it will be insufficient simply to move people from oil onto gas.

21 Billington, P, Smith, CA, Ball, M. (2020). Op cit.

22 Tingey, M, and Webb, J. (2020). Net zero localities: ambition & value in UK local authority investment. Energy Revolution Research Centre, Strathclyde, UK. Available at: [www.energyrev.org.uk/media/1440/energyrev\\_net-zero-localities\\_202009.pdf](http://www.energyrev.org.uk/media/1440/energyrev_net-zero-localities_202009.pdf)

23 Department for the Economy Northern Ireland (2021). Op cit.

- Belfast City Council is **developing proposals for new low carbon and hydrogen training academies**. An Energy Skills Forum, proposed by the Department for the Economy, would help to identify skills gaps and training opportunities in the clean energy sector.
- **NIHE owns a large amount of land that could be suitable for new builds**. NIHE is currently piloting a new build scheme to test the feasibility and cost of modern construction methods. There is the potential to make use of NIHE's land by encouraging housebuilders in Northern Ireland to build ultra-energy efficient new homes to lease to the NIHE, who would then rent to local people.
- One roundtable participant suggested that **Energy Performance Certificates (EPCs) are an underutilised lever which could be made to work harder** in Belfast and Northern Ireland. For example, EPC data could be used to estimate heating costs in NI and EPC scores of properties for sale or rent could be communicated more effectively.



## Key insights from the roundtable discussion

There was a general agreement in the roundtable that sufficient green finance is already available for ambitious clean energy and housing programmes in Belfast. The growth of ESG investing and changing sentiment in the private sector, including from traditionally risk-averse funds, holds real potential for rapid change. However, accessing this capital will require concerted and consistent activity in Belfast, to create an attractive and enabling environment for green finance.

During the roundtable there was a strong degree of consensus around several key opportunities. These 'action areas' were considered important for creating an environment in which finance opportunities can be converted into reality.

- 1 The need to engage residents in this agenda.
- 2 The need to shift narratives.
- 3 The need for cross-system dialogue and collaboration.
- 4 The need for urgency and action.



### Community engagement is key to moving forward

Since interventions will need to take place within and across households, affecting individuals and communities, participants were united in affirming the need for ongoing citizen engagement and compelling public communications around Belfast's green energy and housing agenda, in order to help overcome pessimism, misinformation and uncertainty among the public. Three valuable types of engagement were identified during the roundtable:

- **Public engagement in policymaking:** energy and housing policy shaped solely by industry may fail to account for the diversity of interests, perspectives and incentives in the community, leading to ineffective and unpopular outcomes. The NI Energy Strategy consumer working group and proposals for a NI citizens' assembly were both raised as positive developments.
- **Public engagement in energy solutions:** resident participation in the delivery of public goods was also raised, to refer to individual micro interventions relating to household energy use (enabled, for instance, by a smart meter rollout or Octopus Energy's Agile tariff), community-wide participation in energy schemes or crowdfunding for renewable projects.
- **Public engagement as a communications challenge:** some participants suggested credit unions might be well placed to communicate with residents about available loans for energy efficiency measures and many pointed out the need for a clearer articulation of the individual, social and environmental value of energy efficiency measures. This relates closely to the second insight on shifting narratives.

## Key recommendation:

Build on the pathways initiated by the Energy Strategy consumer working group and proposal for a NI citizens' assembly and identify further opportunities for public deliberation and engagement in energy and housing solutions. Householders are likely to engage in more depth with hyper-local discussions than city or national conversations. Given the complexity of the issues, many and multiple routes to engagement will be most effective, and need to come from multiple messengers, such as local authorities, housing associations, credit unions, VCSE sector organisations and others.



## **Switching the narrative**

Key to positive citizen engagement on the issues of housing and energy will be ensuring the narratives and language used are suitable and salient to the public. The narratives we use should seek to empower and engage, however – as more than one participant argued – the narratives currently used can often end up demoralising or disinteresting people. Participants proposed several narrative shifts, falling broadly into three categories:

- **Adopting a more urgent narrative to impress upon citizens the importance of the conversation and demonstrate how their actions can help contribute towards solutions.** This included:
  - 'Can we afford to' to 'can we afford not to'.
  - 'Climate change' to 'climate emergency'.
- **Associating green housing and energy with other public goods which resonate with the public.** For example:
  - Highlighting the value of green energy/housing in terms of job creation.
  - Shifting focus from upfront costs of retrofitting to the health benefits of decarbonisation.
  - Highlighting the economic benefits of Just Transition in Belfast – ie cutting fuel poverty and delivering higher standards of living.
- **Avoiding the disempowering language of 'consumption' which does not engage people in their multi-faceted roles as citizens.** For example:
  - Shifting from individuals as 'consumers' to individuals as 'demand owners'.
  - Shifting from 'communities of energy consumers' to 'communities of energy producers'.

## Key recommendation:

Ensure that energy and housing goals are communicated to align with key public goods which resonate with the public: education, skills and jobs, wellbeing and health.

# Key insights from the roundtable

## 3

### **Convening cross-sector collaboration and dialogue**

There was a recognition within the group that shifting domestic energy use in Belfast will require coordination across government departments (DfE and DfC), vertical tiers of government (UK government, NI executive and Belfast City Council), between organisations (Utility Regulator and NIHE, to name just two) and sources of funding and finance, and across whole sectors (including energy, housing and finance).

It will require a more strategic approach to investment than is currently taken, across a number of different stakeholders and organisations, including the finance sector, and will require the creation of more integrated solutions to housing and energy challenges.

The need to 'package up' attractive projects for investors can itself be a clarifying and constructive process, helping stakeholders in Belfast combine solutions, aggregate assets and agree common approaches. Starting the conversation with the 'financial imperative' can help to focus people's minds on practical, place-based 'propositions' as opposed to high-level strategy.

A shared challenge, it was noted, can only be solved through shared solutions. Our roundtable, as one participant commented, was only the first step of coordinating key stakeholders in Belfast. It was recommended that future meetings bring together a wider group including a larger contingency from the finance sector.

### **Key recommendation:**

Continue to regularly convene multiple stakeholders across business, investment, government, communities and civil society to align strategies and identify opportunities for collaboration.

## 4

### **Starting by starting**

Many participants highlighted the urgency of action. This is a shared challenge, and as such, 'risk-averseness in the face of uncertainty' is not an option - project promoters need to 'fail fast and learn', embracing a spirit of open experimentation, evaluation, and learning around the practicalities of deploying new technologies and energy efficiency schemes in different contexts.

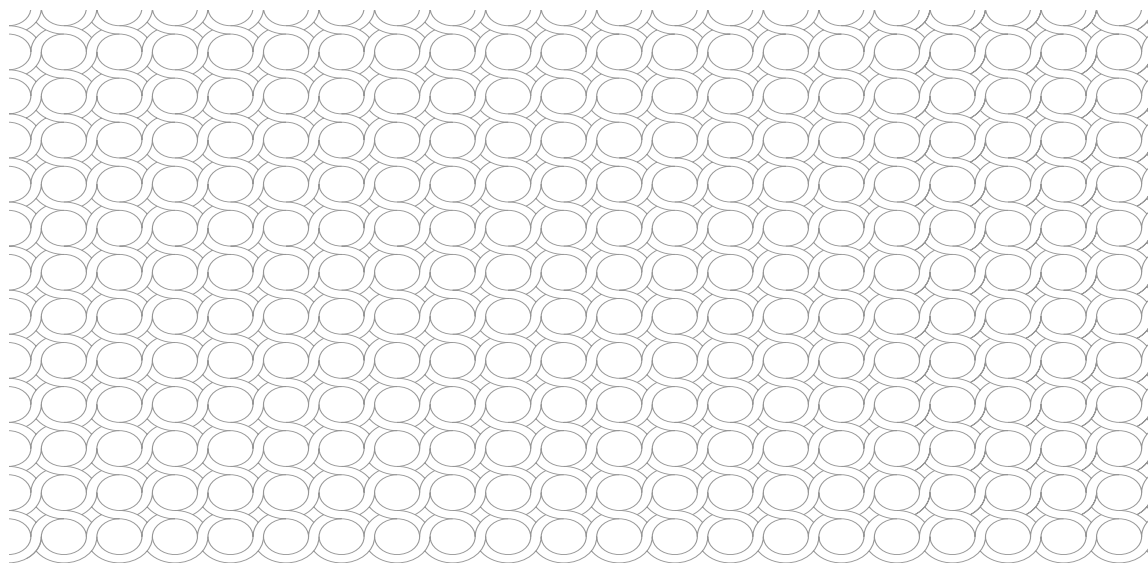
NIHE is already leading several important pilots, including wind curtailment experiments in County Tyrone and the deployment of hybrid heat pumps and solar PV (photovoltaic) in County Fermanagh and by spring 2022, DfE will put in place a pilot domestic retrofit scheme. Participants flagged several additional areas where well designed pilots could help catalyse change:



- **Piloting hyper-local retrofitting schemes.** Surveying the building fabric and property tenure of neighbourhoods to identify specific, place-based retrofitting solutions on a scale at which residents are more likely to engage. One participant flagged Kirklees Council's 'street-by-street' approach to retrofitting as a potential prototype for this.<sup>24</sup>
- **Piloting agile tariffs in Northern Ireland.** Octopus Energy's Agile tariff can significantly reduce a household's energy bill and allows residents to take control of their own power use. Octopus Energy is not currently active in NI, but tariffs similar to Octopus' Agile tariff would have significant impact in NI. Flexible demand schemes could address network constraints in Northern Ireland, creating capacity for more wind energy in the grid.
- **Piloting community energy schemes.** With strong community networks, exceptionally good wind profiles and latent capacity for large-scale rooftop PV programmes, participants thought there was great potential in NI for community-owned energy schemes (with the possibility of reinvesting profits in local retrofitting). Green ISAs were raised as a potential finance source for local energy generation projects (central government are exploring options for this, according to one participant).

## Key recommendation:

Take a shared approach to the challenge by creating mechanisms where insights and learnings from multiple interventions and pilots, undertaken by different stakeholders, can be shared and collective insights pooled.



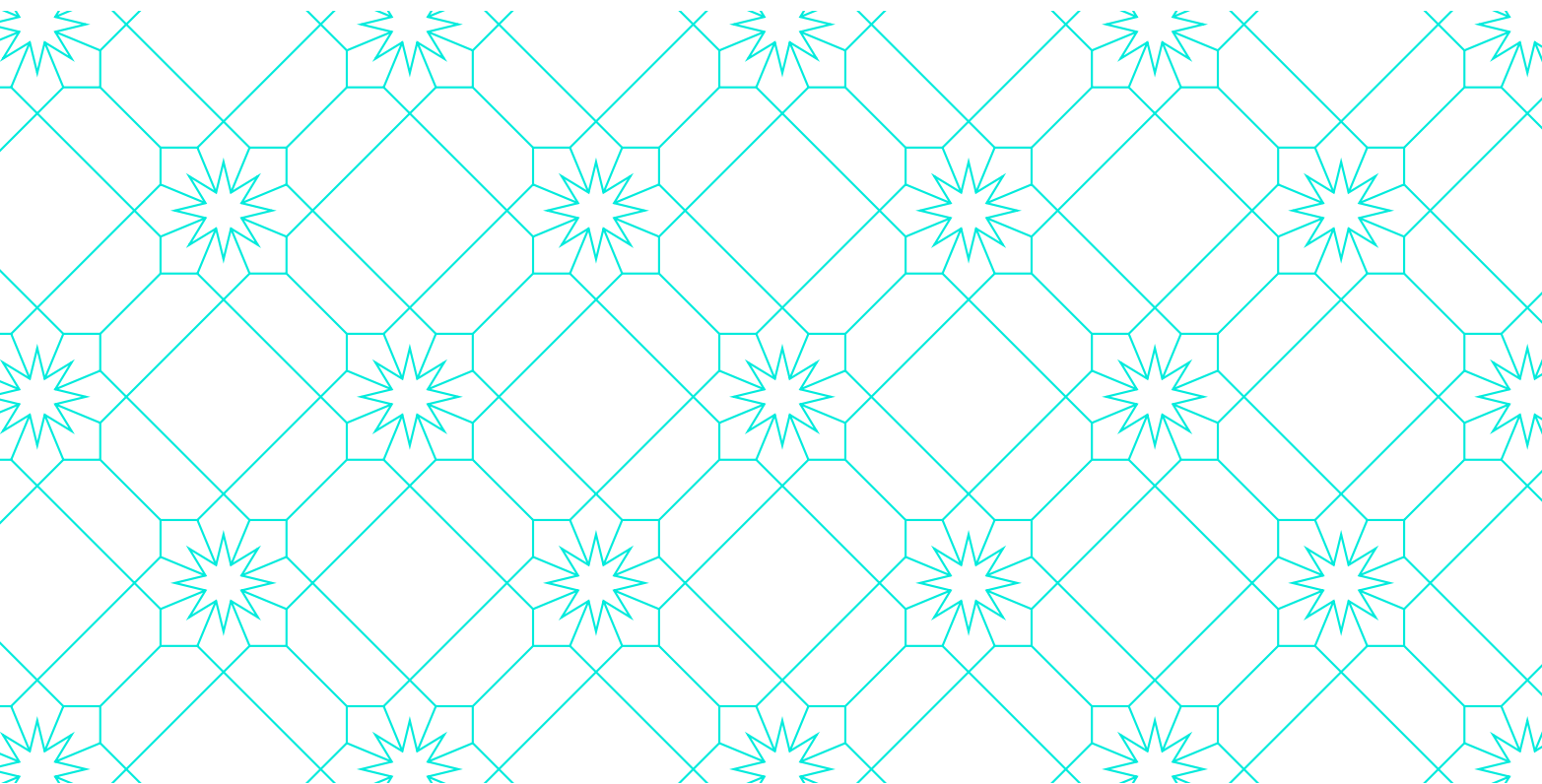
<sup>24</sup> For more information, see: [www.betterhomesyorkshire.co.uk/kirklees](http://www.betterhomesyorkshire.co.uk/kirklees)

## Conclusion

**D**uring the roundtable, there was clear consensus on the need for ambitious green housing and energy programmes in Northern Ireland. Belfast, it was argued, should lead by example, serving as a 'test-bed' from which other UK cities can draw inspiration and learning. This was met with widespread support from participants.

Each of the four action areas identified in the discussions require commitment and activity from multiple stakeholders, within the city and beyond. The energy and commitment for change was palpable in the discussion and with key milestones such as the NI Energy Strategy fast approaching and new sources of private finance being made available for green solutions, the time is ripe for potentially transformative change in Belfast's housing and energy systems.

Further work is essential to continue to convene across the breadth and depth of organisations and institutions working on the challenges of housing and energy in the city. The complexity of the challenges faced means that solutions will be emergent, requiring participation and expertise from across the system. We hope we can look back on our roundtable as a small but significant step in support of this work and towards Belfast realising this potential.



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