

ENERGY SAVING TRUST

Response to the

Strategic Investment board

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland

April/May 2022

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Energy Saving Trust welcomes the opportunity to respond to the draft Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI). We believe the ISNI can help plan the infrastructure needed to grow the economy, protect the environment, and to benefit and improve the wellbeing of people throughout Northern Ireland. We support the long timeframe of the ISNI, which will help secure the investment required to support positive and sustainable growth across a range of sectors. We strongly welcome the fact that the ISNI is aligned to other Executive Strategies’ principles such as the Green Growth Strategy, the Energy Strategy, the Environment Strategy and the recently adopted Climate Change Bill. This alignment can ensure support for each of the underlying Strategies and will help provide the collaboration needed across Government and stakeholders to achieve outcomes and objectives.

Within the Energy Saving Trust we believe this consultation offers an opportunity for the energy sector to articulate how investment could provide transformational change. In context of future investment, a ‘step change’ is needed if we are to achieve Net Zero by 2050. The Energy Saving Trust believes the social and economic effects of investment are long-lasting, create jobs and will enable innovation to drive real change across the construction industry. Most importantly, it will help to reduce fuel poverty, improve our energy resilience, and enhance our hopes of addressing climate change.

QUESTION 1 Do you agree with our vision for infrastructure? If not, what would you change?

We agree that the vision for infrastructure describes how we will address the significant challenges of transitioning our economy and society to a future based on clean energy, while taking advantage of the opportunities arising from rapid technological advancement. We particularly welcome the recognition that the first challenge outlined, and first objective set outlines the need to respond to the climate emergency and achieve net zero through decarbonising our economy and society.

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QUESTION 2 Do you agree with our assessment of the challenges that we will face with our infrastructure over the next 30 years? If you disagree, why? And what do you think are the challenges and why

Energy Saving Trust agrees with the challenges outlined and welcomes the considerable level of consultation that has been undertaken in identifying them; however, since this engagement the extent of the impact of the cost-of-living crisis, and in particular rising energy prices, have become more apparent. It is critical that resources are focused on reducing fuel poverty and preventing more people from falling into fuel poverty – and one of the most effective ways of doing this is by reducing the amount of energy needed to heat a home. ([Poor UK households may have to spend half their income on energy, says charity | Household bills | The Guardian](#)). Both initial challenges “Responding to the climate emergency” and “Our changing population” reflect a need for a just transition and a “step change” in investment in energy efficiency across all sectors.

QUESTION 3 Do you agree that these five key investment objectives address the challenges? If not, what would you consider to be the key investment objectives?

Yes

QUESTION 4 Are these the investment priority areas we need to focus on to decarbonise our economy and society? If not, what are the investment priority areas that will help decarbonise our economy.

In general Energy Saving Trust would support the investment priorities listed and agree that the climate emergency is urgent, and swift action is needed to progress towards a decarbonised future. The impressive progress made in rolling out renewables in Northern Ireland over the past decade is encouraging with 49% of our energy generated from renewable sources in 2020.

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Northern Ireland clearly has challenges, with (68%) 65,000 homes heated by oil boilers, higher levels of fuel poverty than elsewhere in the UK, high reliance on personal vehicles and an under-developed electric vehicle (EV) infrastructure.

Energy Generation and distribution

Energy Saving Trust would support investments towards electrification as in terms of investment renewables are very cost effective. According to the Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), onshore wind and large-scale solar PV are cost competitive with combined cycle gas turbines, and cheaper than all other fossil fuel generators. Offshore wind is fiercely competitive and was already projected to become cheaper than all forms of fossil fuel generators by 2025 in 2020 prices.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/911817/electricity-generation-cost-report-2020.pdf

A recent research paper [Value of demand flexibility for managing wind energy constraint and curtailment - ScienceDirect](#), using the Northern Ireland electricity network as a case study outline how currently wasted wind energy could save fuel poor households up to £220 per annum, with system operators having potential savings of 78% on constraint payments and a typical 20MW wind farm earning £20,000 annually from avoided curtailment. Conclusions developed also clearly identify the need for network operators to perform network investments necessary to facilitate the adoption of low carbon heat.

Energy Saving Trust supports the decarbonisation of the gas grid where this is practicable, however despite Northern Ireland's relatively new infrastructure which offers great potential, significant challenges both in the incorporation of slurry biogas and hydrogen mixes remain. Regarding hydrogen, the above paper outlines how "The cost of replacement fuel such as green hydrogen, used in full or mixed with fossil fuel to reduce carbon intensity, will be greater than if renewables were used for direct electric heating" "as given the current economic structure the wind to heat efficiency of heat pumps is six times that of hydrogen". In addition the recent Utility regulator consultation for Gas distribution Price Control [gd23-dd-main-document_0.pdf](#) in Northern Ireland stated "While we are currently working with the gas industry to facilitate the injection of biomethane into the network, the route to fully decarbonised gas is uncertain".

The recently released IPCC report [IPCC_AR6_WGIII_FinalDraft_FullReport.pdf](#) also outlines how "Electrification is expected to be the dominant strategy in buildings as electricity is increasingly used for heating and for cooking. Electricity will help to

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integrate renewable energy into buildings and will also lead to more flexible demand for heating, cooling, and electricity. District heating and cooling offers potential for demand flexibility through energy storage and supply flexibility through cogeneration. Heat pumps are increasingly used in buildings and industry for heating and cooling. The ease of switching to electricity means that hydrogen is not expected to be a dominant pathway for buildings”.

Considering these uncertainties in respect of decarbonising gas, long term investment strategies need to be adaptable to investigative outcomes.

Sustainable travel

We fully support the travel hierarchy approach to transport policy. Energy Saving Trust plays a significant part in supporting the UK’s transition to a zero-emission transport system. We promote ultra-low emission vehicles (ULEVs) and the development of charging infrastructure, fuel efficiency and active travel by working with businesses, local authorities, national government fleets, private drivers and supply chains. Funded by the UK’s Department for Transport and Office of Low Emission Vehicles (OLEV), Energy Saving Trust helps to deliver the UK Government’s Road to Zero strategy and also delivers a wide range of services under an innovative programme for Transport Scotland.

COVID-19 forced many of us to spend more time closer to home and to work from home. Bringing services closer to people’s homes can reduce the number of trips taken by car – tackling emissions, encouraging active travel and strengthening local communities and economies. For all of these reasons it is welcome to see discussion of 15-minute neighbourhoods in the consultation document. Numerous projects (see: <https://www.sustrans.org.uk/for-professionals/infrastructure/an-introductory-guide-to-low-traffic-neighbourhood-design/>) have demonstrated that to ensure the benefits of low carbon transport infrastructure are realised, it is vital to invest in community and workplace engagement and training to shift habits, grow awareness of local routes and build confidence in active travel. While the following will require cross-departmental collaboration we feel that the Northern Ireland Executive should consider:

- Creating work hubs to support local people and businesses in better-connected ‘15-minute neighbourhoods’
- Invest in workplace training and engagement to build confidence in active travel.

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- Set a target of 50% of journeys being made by active travel or low-carbon public transport by 2030 with more robust data collection in place to enable this.

Creating a seamless and linked up transport system should be a priority so that people can readily move from one low carbon form of transport to another. To help achieve this, when undertaking maintenance and improvement works to transport hubs and public buildings it should be a priority to improve links between low-carbon transport modes to create a more integrated service. New housing or service developments should be easily accessible by public transport and active travel options, with new shared work hubs created to service smaller towns reducing the need to commute into larger towns or cities.

The discussion elsewhere in the Northern Ireland energy strategy of a one-stop-shop is welcome and in time this should be expanded to also provide impartial and expert transport advice to support citizens and businesses to move towards more sustainable modes of transport. Recent research undertaken by the Behavioural Insights Team and the Transport Research Laboratory (see: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/914111/driving-and-accelerating-the-adoption-of-electric-vehicles-in-the-uk.pdf) found that while access to adequate infrastructure played a crucial role in promoting the adoption of EVs, awareness raising, access to accurate information, and affordability were fundamental prerequisites. Home Energy Scotland provides active travel advice. This has proven popular and has had a significant positive impact on those consumers who have engaged with the service.

On active travel, Energy Saving Trust propose that the Northern Ireland Executive offers grants and loans to support the purchase of e-bikes and eCargo bikes. They enable first and final mile carbon reductions and open cycling, for both personal and business use, to people who might not otherwise be able to use this mode of transport. They are also able to make longer journeys more possible through active travel while being able to replace van use in urban areas for businesses. Energy Saving Trust delivers several ebike and e-cargo bike schemes on behalf of the Scottish Government and the UK Department for Transport. We would be happy to share details of these successful programmes with SIB or any other interested party if this would be useful.

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The Bicycle Strategy for Northern Ireland represents a positive approach but has seen progress slow in recent years. When introduced in 2015 the 25-year plan sought to build an extensive network of bike lanes, support those who chose to cycle, and promote cycling as a suitable mode of transport for everyday use. This programme should be re-evaluated and enhanced with priority given to increasing the incentives for more Northern Ireland citizens to engage in cycling through subsidies for traditional, and ebikes, ideally through grants, or interest free loans.

Decarbonise our Assets

Energy Saving Trust strongly supports the introduction of energy efficiency standards across tenure types both housing and Non domestic buildings. The setting of energy efficiency standards for particular tenure types elsewhere in the UK (e.g. social housing in Wales through the Welsh Housing Quality Standard, similar standards also operate in Scotland) has driven significant improvements in the energy efficiency of these properties while upskilling relevant supply chains.

A business-as-usual approach will not be sufficient to ensure the delivery of the EPC improvements required to meet net zero. A legally binding energy efficiency standard, that applies at a number of trigger points, such as at sale or new tenancy for owner-occupied and privately-rented housing, would be an effective mechanism to drive up minimum standards and to ensure that as many homes as possible are brought up to a minimum EPC C standard (with additional benefits for going further where possible). This is an approach already in place in England and Wales and will soon be implemented in Scotland too through Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards (MEES).

We recognise that regulation alone may not deliver the improvements required and so there is also a pressing need for the Northern Ireland Executive to significantly ramp up the support it provides to households to undertake retrofit work. This should happen as soon as possible (before any regulatory requirements kick in) to ensure that business-as-usual rates of voluntary improvement are not only maintained but increased considerably. This is important not only because it will help to increase installation rates but also because the more successful the voluntary approach the less need there will be for regulation to apply extensively.

We also think that, as early as possible, householders should be made aware that regulation is coming. A long lead-in time for regulation will be important to allow people to anticipate and respond before the regulations take effect. It will therefore be important to communicate as soon as possible to the private sector that regulation is

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on its way, what the standards will be, how these will develop over time and when they are likely to apply. This would also help to make it clear how people are able to go beyond initial regulated standards. A framework of incentives could be considered to encourage this.

Social housing should be an early priority. Although NIHE homes have higher SAP ratings on average than other tenure types and in fact average a low EPC 'C', change may be easier in this sector and offers a quick win. Many social housing buildings are controlled by a few large entities who have pre-existing schedules of maintenance work which can have energy efficiency improvements readily incorporated. There is more oversight of this sector from central government and social landlords have a duty of care to their tenants, further incentivising action. Taking action in this area would also stimulate the local supply chain and build capacity for action in other sectors later on. MEES for other tenure types will prove more logistically challenging to set and enforce but would have a greater impact on overall energy efficiency and rates of fuel poverty. Our view is that MEES should be announced as soon as possible to cover all tenure types in order to drive change at the scale and pace required. Setting standards and providing the necessary support to meet them will not only reduce energy use and emissions and help the housing sector play its part in decarbonisation, for many households currently living in poorly insulated housing which is expensive to heat it will mean no longer being in fuel poverty and being able to live comfortably in their homes.

We believe that building regulations can play an important role in reducing emissions from the building sector. Low carbon homes can and are being built now at comparable cost to more traditional buildings. This is an important consideration for the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) Order 1979 (as amended) which states "the standards set can only be those which 'can reasonably be expected to be attained'". The Climate Change Committee has undertaken a considerable amount of research into this area, finding that:

- i) Building to ultra-high energy efficiency and a heat pump adds between 1 to 4 percent (<https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/the-costs-and-benefits-of-tighter-standards-for-new-buildings-currie-brown-and-aecom/>) to build costs (depending on the build type), a cost will fall as supply chains adjust, delivers lifetime savings for occupants and avoids future retrofit costs. In 2019, two of the UK's largest housebuilders, Barratt and Persimmon testified (<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmbeis/1730/173009.htm#footnote-061>) to a Westminster select committee that they were

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confident of being able to bring down the additional cost of the proposed 2016 zero carbon homes standard quickly. In practice, Exeter City Council, despite its small scale, has already found that it can build Passivhaus homes (homes that require almost no heating) on sites of 100+ units at no additional cost ([see: https://www.uk100.org/publications/power-shift](https://www.uk100.org/publications/power-shift)).

- ii) Retrofitting homes at a later date will cost 4-5 times more than integrating these measures at the new build stage
- iii) Electric heat pumps will result in lower lifetime costs for the occupant even where the increased upfront cost of the measure is passed through to house-buyers.

In addition, there is evidence that supply chains can adjust rapidly to the necessary changes. Barratt and Persimmon, (in the [same](#) Westminster committee) confirmed that higher standards could viably be delivered within 18 months.

It will be important to ensure that any standard incorporates the most efficient fabric standards. Energy efficiency is the most effective long-term guarantee of a housing stock that uses less energy. Strong ‘fabric first’ standards lock in energy saving and make dwellings much cheaper to heat (because less heat is needed) and more comfortable to live in. They also reduce system costs as there is less demand on the grid.

The current proposed standards seek to follow the standards set elsewhere (mainly in England). While we understand the desire to go with what works and has been tested elsewhere, we see no reason why Northern Ireland cannot set its own path and be a leader in suitable areas. This is an especially important consideration given that the advice from the CCC is that by 2025 at the latest “no new homes should connect to the gas grid” and “instead should have low carbon heating systems such as heat pumps and low-carbon heat networks” ([see: https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/uk-housing-fit-for-the-future/](https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/uk-housing-fit-for-the-future/)).

We have been engaging with similar discussions around standards in England, Scotland and Wales. Two key considerations from our response to the Future Buildings Standard (England) (<https://energysavingtrust.org.uk/report/our-response-to-the-future-buildings-standard-consultation/>) that are relevant here are:

- Energy: ‘Future-fit’ buildings are ones in which energy use has been minimised from the outset. Prioritising relative metrics like primary energy (PE) and carbon dioxide

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(CO₂) focuses on impact *now* rather than lifetime impact. This can mask high energy requirements which could be a drain on tomorrow’s decarbonised grid. For this reason, we think Energy intensity (kWh/ m²) would be a better lead metric than either PE or CO₂. Energy intensity is a stable metric (the energy demand of the building will stay the same unless improvements are made) whereas both PE and CO₂ are relative metrics (meaning that an assessment based on either of these will improve as the electricity grid decarbonises). By 2030, the grid is likely to be very low carbon. With a low carbon grid and an increasing electrification of heat, the focus will be on the total energy demand of buildings and extent to which loads can be shifted to periods of the day when the electricity grid is less busy (and therefore electricity is cheaper). A further disadvantage of relative metrics like PE and CO₂ is that they are confusing for end-users, making it harder to compare properties. The same design of homes for example, would be rated differently if built in a different year because the carbon intensity of the grid will differ. To drive appropriate action here, we support the use of two metrics:

- Energy Use Intensity (kWh/m²/year) to capture all operation energy (‘at the meter’ rather than regulated energy use)
 - Space heating and cooling (this supports the decarbonisation of heating).
- Heating: we do not support an approach where gas/oil heating and PV can be substituted for heat pumps/low carbon heating or where short-term CO₂ savings from building services can be traded for lower fabric efficiency. Instead, we would prefer an ‘energy hierarchy’ approach where the first priority is to reduce energy demand as much as possible. The next step is to supply heating as efficiently and in as low carbon a manner as possible before finally offsetting residual demand/emissions by onsite renewables such as PV.

SIB and the Executive may also wish to consider some of the existing building standards around component performance and how these also apply to significant extensions or changes of use of existing buildings. For example, in Wales, the Welsh Government have recently consulted on Parts L and F of the building regulations and explored this approach as well as changes to ‘consequential improvements’ that are additional retrofit measures triggered by the undertaking of significant work (e.g. extensions of conversions) on an existing home.

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Developing a Circular economy

Energy Saving Trust would support the priority given to investment in the circular economy, especially to furthering progress made in recycling rates with specific focus on behavioural change.

We welcome ongoing work by the Department of Economy to develop a strategic framework for a circular economy in Northern Ireland with industry hopefully delivering based on rapid implementation through effective policy and government action.

Clear baselines are required, with resource handlers providing data on where we are currently, and a vision of where we need to move to. This vision will lead to unlocking innovation, aspiration and supporting communication in this area.

QUESTION 5 Are these the priority areas we need to focus on to strengthen our essential services? If not, what do you think are the investment priorities that will strengthen our essential services?

Yes

We agree that these are the correct priorities.

QUESTION 6 Are these the investment priority areas we need to focus on to enhance our communities and places? If not, what do you think are the investment priorities that will enhance our communities and places?

Energy Saving Trust would support the need to regenerate our high streets and note “the town centre first approaches” outlined in the consultation being undertaken in both Scotland and Wales.

We are particularly focused on sustainable transport solutions and await publication of a new EV infrastructure action plan in line with the Energy Strategy Action plan. [Energy Strategy - Path to Net Zero Energy - Action Plan | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/energy-strategy-action-plan) We look forward to responding to any relevant consultation in due course.

A recent IPPR report <https://www.ippr.org/files/2020-07/transforming-the-economy-after-covid19-july2020.pdf> into the potential of a green recovery, highlighted that

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various forms of low carbon transport projects appeared particularly promising ventures for achieving a job-focused green recovery.

In our recent consultation response to the Senedd Finance committee, we highlighted the benefits of green transport infrastructure. It was noted that In Wales, 80% of commutes are made by car, the highest proportion in Great Britain, while the majority of trips in Wales are short, illustrating that significant opportunities exist to rebalance this situation and accelerate the transition towards zero carbon transport.

<https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2020-11/supporting-information-transport-data-and-trends.pdf> We outlined that in the first instance, better provision of services (including ‘work hubs’ for remote working) close to people’s homes and situated within their communities would reduce the number of trips that would need to be taken by car when offices reopen. Encouraging these “15 or 20 minutes neighbourhoods” has several co-benefits including the regeneration of towns and suburbs, improvements in physical and mental health because of more active travel, and more cohesive communities. Coupled with this, the Northern Ireland Executive should build on the positive steps already underway and enhance active travel infrastructure provision so that choosing to walk or cycle is safe and easy, becoming the natural choice. To ensure the benefits of infrastructure are realised, numerous projects [An introductory guide to low traffic neighbourhood design - Sustrans.org.uk](https://www.sustrans.org.uk) have demonstrated that it is vital to invest in community and workplace engagement and training to shift habits, grow awareness of local routes and build confidence in cycling.

QUESTION 7 Are these the investment priority areas we need to focus on to build a strong, competitive and connected region? If not, what do you think are the investment priorities that will help build a strong, competitive and connected region?

Energy Saving Trust would agree with the priorities listed; however, we feel that utility investment is a priority if we are to transition our economy to Net Zero by 2050. Continued growth of both onshore and offshore wind will be key. In the next decade, SONI have shown that Northern Ireland expect to grow onshore wind capacity to 2.4GW (growth of approximately 1,100MW over the period), roughly twice as much clean energy as was available in 2020. [Shaping-Our-Electricity-Future-SONI-Plain-English-Consultation-Report.pdf](#) [Shaping-Our-Electricity-Future-SONI-Plain-English-Consultation-Report.pdf](#). This transition to clean electricity will be challenging but will

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help deliver investment and jobs. It will support economic recovery after the pandemic and create the potential for investment across the region.

Recent publication of the Path to net Zero outlines "creating a flexible, resilient and integrated energy system" as one of the strategic aims. Key to this will be a robust infrastructure, storage in terms of hydrogen or batteries, enabling flexible access to low carbon energy when renewable production is low and data and digitisation which ensures access to real time data for system operators. [Energy Strategy - Path to Net Zero Energy | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

Facilitating these utility improvements will not be inexpensive with estimated costs varying based on the options taken.

QUESTION 8 Are these the investment priority areas we need to focus on to maximise the benefits from emerging technologies? If not, what do you think are the investment priorities that will maximise benefits from emerging technologies

Yes

We agree that these are the correct priorities.

QUESTION 9

How should we prioritise between maintaining or upgrading existing assets and new aspirations?

Energy Saving Trust recognise the inherent difficulties in balancing future priorities between maintenance or upgrading existing assets. Decisions invariably must be made based upon knowledge of effective Asset Management/maintenance costs and/or solid business cases upon which effective decisions can be taken.

With the introduction of Medium-Term Infrastructure Finance Plan (MTIFP) approaches capital budget allocations can be made more easily with consequential improved coordination of projects and efficient use of resources.

QUESTION 10

How should we communicate with consultees on projects that present affordability

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challenges, and thus may require alternative funding and financing to be utilised?

We would support at a basic level existing proposals being published on the Executive’s ISNI Information Portal, enabling the construction industry and its supply chain to plan ahead successfully, however where external investment is concerned then consultation may involve others such as venture capitalists, interest groups etc.

Programmes in this category require to be effectively managed throughout with maximum openness and transparency.

QUESTION 11

Do you agree with the proposed prioritisation criteria? If no, then what changes would you suggest?

Energy Saving Trust would support the prioritisation criteria used.

QUESTION 12

What level of engagement should we have with consultees on project milestones and delivery progress once a project has been programmed for delivery

Energy Saving Trust supports the position that infrastructure investment must be based on principles of fairness and sustainability. Where proposals have adequately displayed that they meet the criteria for inclusion then ongoing and meaningful engagement is appropriate with clear unambiguous indications of the proposal’s viability. We welcome proposed engagement within the accountability and oversight structures which will continue with the establishment of a wide-reaching forum, facilitated by SIB, to provide ongoing feedback, identification of needs/gaps and reassessment of priorities and enable ongoing engagement with industry and relevant stakeholders.

QUESTION 13 Do you agree that the proposals we have set out will adequately measure progress and impact? If no, then how should we measure progress and impact?

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Proposals as set out will measure progress and impact. As indicated in the consultation planning processes have been a barrier to some longer term planned projects and a sustainable spatial planning framework that is robust and consistently applied will be of benefit.

QUESTION 14

Do you agree that the proposed accountability and oversight structures will support successful delivery? If no, then what other proposals should we consider?

We would agree with proposals which are comprehensive.

QUESTION 15

Do you agree with the process and the findings of the draft EQIA and Rural Needs Impact

Assessment (RNIA)? If no, then please explain why.

Yes

QUESTION 16

Are there any other issues or inequalities that have not been highlighted in the draft EQIA or

RNIA that you believe need to be noted? If yes, then please explain what they are.

No

QUESTION 17

Are there any other comments or suggestions that you think are relevant to help us develop

and deliver the Investment Strategy?

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Northern Ireland is well-placed to benefit from the next, green, industrial revolution. We have a nation abundant in natural resources such as wind, waves, and the tides as well as world-leading academic institutions and private sector firms poised to capitalise on them. As we recover from the economic and public health crises, we should keep the climate crisis at the forefront of our minds and remember that investing in warm homes, clean transport, and green energy will be good for the economy and society as well as for the climate.

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