



## **Opening statement to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate Action**

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### **Opening Statement**

A Chathaoirligh and members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to contribute to your consideration of how Ireland can meet its decarbonisation goals in the transport sector. I am an Associate Professor in the School of Law and Government at DCU specialising in climate change governance. In my opening remarks, I would like to focus in particular on how the transport sector in Ireland is governed, and how this shapes our approach to decarbonisation.

Governance institutions are key enabling factors for decarbonisation across economy and society, but they can also serve as barriers to progress. The international literature on governance of low carbon transition points to the importance of top down direction from government, but also—and importantly—mechanisms to facilitate bottom-up innovation and experimentation.

The enactment of a strengthened Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill promises to significantly enhance Ireland's climate change governance arrangements, but its focus is predominantly at an economy- and society-wide level. It is important also to unpack how specific sectors of economy and society are governed, and how those arrangements help or hinder the transition to a net zero carbon future.

In research commissioned by the National Economic and Social Council that I undertook with my former DCU colleague Dr. Laura Devaney, we sought to understand better how governance structures enable or constrain decarbonisation of the transport sector in Ireland. We identified

three key sets of challenges facing the transport sector in pursuing a pathway to zero carbon, and set out ways to overcome each of these challenges.

The first challenge concerns how the transport system operates. The system is inherently complex, characterised by tensions between public and private, rural and urban, and the role of special interests. There are also complex external interactions with broader policy objectives and systems, including planning, health and education. To overcome these challenges, transport governance should be built upon the following principles:

- We need to **adopt collaborative, adaptive and reflexive approaches to policymaking** that enable input from a diverse range of public, private, and civil society actors whose voices are not sufficiently heard at present.
- We should **support bottom-up approaches to decarbonising transport** that take into account geographical and technical variations, including different requirements in rural and urban settings.
- Furthermore, **transport should be understood as a social practice**. This means going beyond a technical view of transport as an infrastructural problem to be solved, and taking account of social, cultural, and governance forces that shape our mobility choices.

The second challenge we identified is that climate action as a priority is not yet sufficiently embedded in transport policy and planning. Contestation between different players has shaped the development of a carbon-intensive transport system to date. In order to address this, the following steps should be prioritised:

- **Transport policymaking should be aligned with international sustainable mobility** thinking that promotes an ‘Avoid, Shift, Improve’ (ASI) framework for both passenger and freight transport. I welcome the fact that the Committee’s work is guided by this framework.
- **Government needs to do more to provide a clear and unambiguous commitment to decarbonisation.** The forthcoming Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill is a significant step in this direction, but we should not fall into the trap of thinking that one piece of legislation can do all the heavy lifting by itself.
- In this regard, the **mandates of transport governance institutions should be revised** to include a statutory commitment to prioritise decarbonisation as their central goal, and the **public sector should do more to lead by example**.

The third key challenge we identified is that our system of transport decision-making is deeply fragmented, with authority spread widely among multiple institutions. A variety of institutional remedies could help to advance decarbonisation:

- **Focused taskforces** can combine insights from public, private, academic, and civil society actors around specific transport challenges to unblock policy barriers.

- **Forums for peer learning** can enable villages, towns and cities across Ireland to learn from each other to scale up innovative decarbonised transport solutions.
- **Deliberative forums for stakeholder and citizen participation** can enhance transparency and moderate the impact of lobbying by special interests.

None of these solutions by themselves are a silver bullet, but together they can provide a governance framework for the transport sector that adequately addresses the climate crisis.

Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to your discussions today. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.