

**The Union of Students in Ireland Written Submission to the**  
**Call for Expert Evidence - Climate Action Plan 2021**

**May 2021**

**The Union of Students in Ireland (USI)**

The Union of Students in Ireland (Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn) is the national representative body for third-level Students’ Unions in Ireland. Founded in 1959, USI now represents more than 374,000 students in Further and Higher Education Colleges across the island of Ireland. The goal of USI is to work for the rights of students and a fair and equal post-secondary education system in Ireland. USI is a full member of the European Students’ Union (ESU) which represents students from 46 National Students’ Unions in 39 countries, and a member of Eurodoc, the European Council for Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers.

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Call for Expert Evidence - Climate Action Plan 2021. The Union of Students in Ireland are proud members of Stop Climate Chaos and One Future Ireland and supported the Stop Climate Chaos webinar series ahead of the Climate Conversations - Climate Action Plan 2021. We have broken this submission into key areas of focus:

* Development of Consultation Process
* Design of the Consultation and Participation
* Implementation of Consultation Process
* Voice of Young People and Students
* Public Participation Networks (PPNs)
* Next Steps

1. **Development of Consultation Process**

Students and young people have been leaders in the call for climate action and address the impending climate crisis. With many young people leaving their classrooms and taking to the streets across Ireland and the globe. Young people and students see the imminent danger that will come if we continue to ignore our duty and role in addressing the climate crisis. USI welcomes the Government's commitment to creating a Climate Action Plan, which will set out actions that must be taken in order meet the commitments as set out in the in the Programme for Government, including making sure we achieve our 2030 targets, prepare for climate neutrality no later than 2050, and make Ireland a leader in responding to climate change. USI welcomes the commitment to climate action across Government departments within each departments Statement of Strategy.

Yet, with these commitments the consultation process and areas of focus are lacking. This long awaited and much needed climate dialogue and consultation process is an important move for this island. In recent years we have seen massive shifts in Ireland to address the inaction to stop the imminent climate crisis including the approval of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021[[1]](#footnote-28819) and the significant of the historic victory for climate justice in Ireland with the success of Climate Case Ireland which saw the people of Ireland holding the Government accountable for its role in knowingly contributing to dangerous levels of climate change. Yet, in 2021 we are still not seeing meaningful engagement and collaboration between the Irish Government and civil societies and climate activists and enthusiasts. At the beginning of this process we saw little to no engagement with youth and environmental organisations. Youth and environmental organisations would welcome the opportunity to be co-creators and supporters of this process to ensure meaningful and comprehensive engagement with the Irish population across all generations.

In 2018, it was acknowledged with the Climate Change Advisory Council, Annual Review 2018 that “Ireland is not on a pathway to achieve a low-carbon, climate-resilient and sustainable economy and society by 2050. Major new initiatives are required if Ireland is to meet its objectives on climate change.”[[2]](#footnote-5831) Now, in 2021 we are beginning to consider the means in which we can reach this target by 2050. Given the impending climate crisis the involvement and input of civil society organisations would have been beneficial in supporting this consultation and reaching across all areas of Irish society.

1. **Design of the Consultation and Participation**

Since the launch of the consultation process meaningful engagement with civil societies and representative organisations have been ongoing. USI welcomes the engagement from the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications officials over the last few weeks with member of Stop Climate Chaos which has been constructive and cooperative with an aim to enhance the consultation process. We acknowledge the scale of this consultation within this limited timeframe yet the consultation in order to be meaningful needs to demographics across Irish society not only a small cohort of people.

Although welcomed and important, the period for the consultation is not adequate enough for the aims of the process. USI recognise that this consultation aims to gain a broad overview of the populations concerns and areas of focus for the Climate Action Plan. Yet, not having a meaningful consultation defeats the purpose of engaging with the public on such an important issue such as climate change. The climate crisis is one of the most complex and challenges issues of our time and we need to ensure that we have substantial and worthwhile public discourse on the issue. This monumental work requires change at local, national and international level, economy and society-wide action and therefore needs more than five weeks to consultation all areas of society.

Given the short consultation period and means of gathering peoples understanding and concerns around climate action in Ireland it is unclear whether this consultation reached the hardest to reach groups in Irish society who will be most impacted by climate change. USI and Stop Climate Chaos have concerns that this consultation has not given sufficient time to actively listen to those in the hardest to reach groups in order to gather how climate action could address issues of immediate concern for them including energy poverty, poor transport infrastructure, unemployment and many others.

1. **Implementation of Consultation Process**

As an organisation, the Union of Students in Ireland represent over 374,000 students across the island of Ireland. A major issue for students and young people is the impending climate emergency and crisis. In May 2019, Ireland became the second country in the world to declare climate emergency this important statement by the political leaders of this state was an important move in Ireland’s commitment to addressing the climate crisis. Despite this declaration, within this consultation a number of demographics were excluded, and the consultation insufficiently heard representation from a range of societal perspectives and voices in particular young people and students. The questions asked within the consultation focused primarily on personal means to address climate action yet did little to gather people's thoughts on local and national means to address climate change across this island. Meaningful climate action must not be just seen as an individual and personal action, each of us play an important role but we need to ensure national and government action is driving climate action across Ireland in order to meet our we achieve our 2030 targets, prepare for climate neutrality by 2050, and make Ireland a leader in responding to climate change.

Given the means in which the consultation was conducted it lacks the inclusion of evidence-based research which would frame what climate action entails. With a focus on individual behavioural changes which are taken out of context and aimed mainly at those with the means to change their individual impact due to their financial means, distracts from the more fundamental, Government-led, structural and systemic changes and policies needed to reduce emissions quickly and fairly and met our climate targets. Prior to engaging with the PPNs a greater emphasis on information sharing ahead of the decision making and consultation process is needed to ensure that participants are adequately informed ahead of engaging in the process. Considering this consultation, it is vital as target audience within the PPNs may not be consistent contributors to climate dialogue. Engagement and discussion with the general public is vital but the lack of information across the diversity of issues affected by climate change means they will not be in a position to make informed decisions on the structural and systemic changes and policies needed to reduce emissions and meet our climate targets.

1. **Voice of Young People and Students**

Research undertaken by Students Organising for Sustainability International found that 90% of the students who completed their survey international survey were concerned about the effects of climate change and agree that governments from across the world should do whatever it takes to address climate change.[[3]](#footnote-23932) Yet, the questions within the consultation were focused largely on those who owned homes and vehicles, with little focus on the issues which concern students and young people who have been leaders in the climate movement both in Ireland and globally. USI would have welcomed to have been involved in the development of this process and ensured the consultation had questions suited to a younger age cohort. Particularly those in rented or purpose-built student accommodation with little ability to make structural changes or retrofit their homes. Alongside the questions within the consultation with inability for those under the age of 16 to engage in the process outside of those within the Comhairle na nÓg network.

Despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, more than 1 million young people around the world urged world governments to prioritise measures to protect against the ravages of the climate crisis in January ahead of the Climate Adaptation Summit. Young people have led the way in addressing the inaction on climate changes for many years. As a group, young people and students will be most impacted by the inaction on climate change. The youth voice cannot continue to be ignored, youth voices have become more pressing than ever as young people, who are acutely aware that their futures are threatened by the accelerating global warming and climate inactive by global governments. Young people are continuing to demand action towards a more just, equitable, and climate-resilient society and we need to ensure all consultations regarding climate action place a significant emphasis on the voice and concerns of young people and students.

1. **Public Participation Networks (PPNs)**

Within this consultation there was a focus on engagement with Public Participation Networks (PPNs) these networks provide a good means to begin conversations at a local level. Yet, USI have a number of concerns with this manner of gathering input on local concerns on climate action. The number of people engaged with this PPNs in comparison to the local population is low and therefore does not provide a significant basis to ascertain the local collective response or experience of climate action. These networks also need to be supported and resourced with an expert advisory committee who have the means to provide appropriate context with is scientifically abreast of the latest climate action research. USI would welcome a similar means of collecting local concerns as the model set by the Citizens’ Assembly.

USI alongside Stop Climate Chaos have concerns that PPNs only include the community and voluntary sector organised into three separate pillars while other critical stakeholders are absent from the PPN process, including farmers, businesses, and students and young people. If greater PPN involvement was sought at the preliminary stage it would have allowed for the incorporation of their experience and knowledge of the participation process, while also having specific engagement and focus with the groups that often don’t engage in Public Participation Networks (PPNs) including farmers, businesses and young people. Young people as a demographic have a particularly unique role as for many, they may live between their home residence and student accommodation or private rented accommodation which would enable them to make twice the impact in an individual capacity and therefore would have been vital to include within this consultation.

1. **Next Steps**

The Union of Students in Ireland and the youth movement at large are particularly conscious of the impending climate crisis and continue to demand change. By 2050, with a projected increased global population of 9.6 billion, we would need the equivalent of almost 3 planets worth of resources to sustain our current way of living, if our consumption and production patterns remain the same.[[4]](#footnote-3661) A Global Methane Assessment released by the Climate and Clean Air Coalition (CCAC) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) found that human-caused methane emissions can be reduced by up to 45 per cent within this decade. Such reductions would avoid nearly 0.3°C of global warming by 2045 and would be consistent with keeping the Paris Climate Agreement’s[[5]](#footnote-25849) goal to limit global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius within reach.[[6]](#footnote-28287) We have some time to act and reverse the years of damage to the environment, but we need a whole of Government and whole of society approach in order to enact meaningful change and meet our climate targets.

*Climate Change Education*

Young people have a good understanding of the climate crisis and will be the cohort most impacted by our collective inaction over the coming years. As stated by UNESCO Education is an essential element of the global response to climate change. Education supports people understanding and addresses the impact of global warming, increases ‘climate literacy’ among young people, encourages changes in their attitudes and behaviour, and helps them adapt to climate change related trends. [[7]](#footnote-25213) Research undertaken by Students Organising for Sustainability shows that there is a very strong student demand for education to be repurposed in this way. With 92 percent of the respondents in their recent research agreeing that sustainable development should be universally taught and promoted by colleges across the globe. Alongside this, 85 percent conveyed that they would like to learn more about sustainable development, and 73 percent outlined that it should be actively incorporated into and promoted by all courses.[[8]](#footnote-31041) The value of climate education can be seen from the success of UNESCO Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development (2015-2019) in which Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) was recognised as a key component of quality education and a crucial enabler for sustainable development globally. [[9]](#footnote-19073) A large volume of work has been undertaken in Ireland around Education for Sustainable Development including the development of the ‘Education for Sustainability’, the National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland, 2014-2020[[10]](#footnote-10454) launched in July 2014 and the subsequence review, the National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland Report of Interim Review and Action Plan for Q4 2018-Q4 2020[[11]](#footnote-22184) which identified eight priority action areas to advance the Education for Sustainable Development agenda in Ireland:

* Leadership and coordination
* Data collection and baseline measurement
* Curriculum at pre-school, primary and post primary
* Professional development
* Further Education and Training
* Higher Education and Research
* Promoting participation by young people
* Sustainability in action.

The Union of Students in Ireland look forward to submitting a written response to the Joint Public Consultation on a National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) to 2030 and engaging with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Department of Education and Department of Environment, Climate and Communications in developing Ireland’s Education for Sustainable Development agenda.

*Climate Dialogue*

This consultation is vital to engage the public in dialogue around climate action and ensure local communities are aware of the local, national and international relevance of climate change. The most recent OECD Environmental Performance Review of Ireland[[12]](#footnote-5706) found that Ireland’s 2020 targets are out of reach and any positive changes of effects of COVID-19 which reduced emissions are temporary. It also found that environmental pressures are likely to intensify due to population growth, increasing urban scrawl, road traffic and livestock and our public spending on climate related research and development among lowest of the OECD countries. This report had a number of recommendations with a focus on the importance of climate dialogue to fully implement the measures in the Climate Action Plan in all sectors in a timely fashion.

*Youth Engagement*

“We are the first generation that can end poverty. We are also the last generation that can slow global warming before it is too late.” – UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, 2015. As stated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child[[13]](#footnote-9941), every person under the age of 18 has the right to participate in the decision-making processes that impact them and engagement in decisions surrounding climate action are vitally important. Research undertaken by Students Organising for Sustainability International found that when asked to identify the word that best describes their feelings about climate change and their future, 75 percent outlined they are worried.[[14]](#footnote-533) Young people understand their social responsibility and within the same research 90 percent of respondents said they would be willing to accept a salary sacrifice to work in a company with a good environmental and social record. This demonstrates that young people are accurately aware of this personal responsibility in addressing climate change but also need their governments, employers and economy and society at large to also play their role in reversing climate change and meeting our climate targets.

The Union of Students in Ireland and other youth organisations have undertaken a large amount of work in supporting youth participation and engagement with climate conversations and decision making. We need to ensure youth voices and concerns are influential in discussions and decision making around climate action.

**Conclusion**

USI is committed to working closely with the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications and all sectoral stakeholders to ensure the development of a purposeful climate action plan with is inclusive of all areas of Irish society and ambitious to meet our climate targets and address the climate crisis nationally and globally.

USI wishes to see the voice of young people and students featuring more centrally in the development of Climate Action Plan in order to see a more ambitious means to meet our climate targets and achieve the actions outlined within the Climate Action Plan. In order to achieve this, it is vitally important that Irish society are aware of their individual impact while also demanding fundamental, Government-led, structural and systemic changes and policies which is needed to combat climate change.

Finally, in providing this written submission to the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications, USI would be happy to be involved in further conversations relating to the development of the Climate Action Plan, and would welcome the opportunity to meet with Department officials to discuss the contents of this submission.

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