

# NESC Note on Just Transition to the Carbon Budget Working Group<sup>1</sup>

## Executive Summary

There is both a commitment to just transition in Irish climate governance and some early embedding to policy, but no one approach to apply it to the carbon budget process. What a just transition means in practice for policy and governance has been the key focus of recent NESC work to make an abstract concept more concrete. To inform the Working Group, two presentations and a draft note were prepared which drew on NESC's previous work on just transition, most recently on agriculture and land use. Reflecting just transition considerations in the carbon budget narrative and as part of analysis around the potential impacts of the final carbon budget will both be important.

NESC points to some caveats in the concept and use of just transition but also its potential value as part of a social and economic lens to consider equity and fairness in the transition away from fossil fuels. It argues that a bespoke approach is needed for Irish climate policy, finding that no one-size fits all approach exists from research into international practice. EU and national policy makers are still grappling with what this broad, holistic approach to just transition might look like in practice. Ireland has a just transition framework as part of the Climate Action Plan and is establishing a Just Transition Commission (Government of Ireland, 2024a; Government of Ireland, 2024b). The carbon budget process and the work of the Climate Change Advisory Council is an essential part of the climate governance system in Ireland including in how it embeds the just transition framework.

This Note observes that there is no template to apply just transition and no standard indicators to assess or monitor it. It outlines the potential value of principle-based considerations reflecting the four principles in the Government's just transition framework. Suggested areas that could be considered include how **the outputs/outcomes** around the carbon budget – the written reports – frame,

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<sup>1</sup> This has been prepared by Dr Jeanne Moore and Niamh Garvey from the NESC Secretariat and does not represent the views of the Council.

communicate and provide context to how the budget is discussed in terms of a just transition. In addition, the extent to which the data and analysis that support an integrated, structured and evidence-based approach to identify and plan Ireland's response includes the kinds of evidence that supports thinking around fair and equitable outcomes, and to reflect on how can just transition principles be considered in **the process** of the carbon budget work- the modelling, scenario analysis and deliberations. The Note concludes by identifying some questions to inform the carbon budget process and outputs.

Over time, more metrics on just transition may be developed that can help to further embed the concept in the carbon budget process. It is also worth reflecting on how to make room for different perspectives and views on what a just transition is and how it can be assessed, acknowledging it is an emerging and contested space.

# NESC Note on Just Transition to the Carbon Budget Working Group<sup>2</sup>

## 1.1 Purpose of this Note

As a Member of the Working Group, in September 2023, NESC presented insights from the report on Just Transition in Agriculture and Land Use (NESC, 2023a). Discussion among the Working Group at that time focused on the recommendations for agriculture and land use and how they could have value to the group. A second draft note was prepared as a prompt for a further discussion in April 2024, focused on what bringing a just transition lens to the carbon budget process might mean in practice. That note has been revised here to reflect both presentations and is intended as a prompt for discussion, outlining questions posed to the Working Group but also for the Climate Change Advisory Council's deliberations.

The first two sections (1.2- 1.4) of this Note set the context, Ireland's principle-based approach to just transition and NESC's work on just transition in agriculture and land use. This is included just to help to frame considerations for the carbon budget process and further discussion in Section 1.5 and 1.6.

The submission is structured as follows:

- Section 1.2: The concept of just transition is still evolving and to a certain extent, broadening in scope in how it is discussed and applied, and is not without contestation. Some brief reflections on this context are outlined.
- Section 1.3 outlines how principles are used in relation to just transition in Ireland.
- Section 1.4 outlines key conclusions from NESC's report on just transition in agriculture and land use.
- Section 1.5: This outlines that for this carbon budget process, consideration of a just transition can be considered through a principles-based approach.
- Section 1.6 sets out key questions to prompt further discussion.

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## 1.2 Context

A just transition approach has its roots in the trade union movement, and the principles, developed by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and endorsed internationally, are formally enshrined in the preamble of the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC, 2015).

What a just transition means in practice for policy and governance has been the key driver of the body of NESC work on this area. The NESC (2020) report *Addressing Employment Vulnerability as Part of a Just Transition in Ireland* and supporting research and papers were a response to a request in Future Jobs Ireland 2019 and the Climate Action Plan for NESC to identify steps that could be taken to address the vulnerability arising from the transition to low carbon and more digital and automated future. It should be noted however that just transition is a broad and often thinly defined and weakly theorised concept. NESC's work sought to highlight the critical role of a just transition approach as part of a low carbon transition—and defined it as fair, equitable and inclusive both in process and in outcomes (NESC, 2020; Moore, 2020). There is increasing recognition internationally by the OECD and the IEA, for example, of the importance of both process and outcome- for example, the IEA's (2024) people-centred approach with a focus on equity and fairness for the energy transition. Just transition has become a useful social and economic lens to consider equity and fairness in the transition away from fossil fuels.

The need for a bespoke approach for Irish climate policy, with no one-size fits all approach was evident from research into international practice. The work of the ILO, IPCC and international approaches in Germany, Australia and Scotland informed this. Case studies undertaken for NESC by Mercier (2020) outlined its application in regional transitions away from coal-based employment but also referenced the development of a national economy-wide focus in Scotland, with example of the Just Transition Commission.

The NESC (2020) report emphasised actions to achieve a high-quality jobs economy, proactively addressing employment vulnerability and a participative and place-based approach. The Council's recommendations included: the need to identify and protect the most vulnerable; devise and deploy supports; make place-based interventions and investments; establish a social dialogue and deliberative process; and develop a shared vision and mission-oriented actions.

Key learning from this work included:

- the value of joint problem-solving and collaboration;
- the importance of early information on skills demand/availability;

- to incentivise training and upskilling;
- to seed funding for small enterprises to help them avail of larger resources;
- to reward enterprises that undertake transition strategies early/on a voluntary basis;
- to target funding to intended impacts; and
- to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach in the design of responses and supports at local level.

Since then, understanding of just transition has broadened to include wider equity, justice and wellbeing considerations.<sup>3</sup> The European Environment Agency’s briefing on just transition for sustainability transitions points to the increasing emphasis on the dimensions of justice (EEA, 2024). ‘Leaving no-one behind’ in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) referenced also in discussions of just transition has brought increasing focus to it as an approach to deliver decent work, social inclusion, human rights (IHREC, 2023), public participation also wider societal benefits for all. There is a broadening to consider how the transformative shift away from fossil fuels can bring improvements in health, wellbeing, equality and inclusion. This emphasises benefits as much as risks. There is increasing coalescing around the need to reflect distributive, procedural, recognitional and restorative justice elements in a just transition (for example, see Abram et al, 2022; Denton et al, 2022 for reflections on the concept. This is also reflected in Irish discussions (IHREC, 2023; O’Neill, 2022) and work undertaken by the Climate Change Advisory Council by Dekker, which outlines that ‘just transition is inclusive by design; this is where distributional justice and procedural justice meet’ (Dekker, 2020: 7).

However, there are different interpretations and criticisms of the concept, and it is at times a disputed concept. Similarly to other areas with a focus on equality, equity, social inclusion and justice, just transition is contested at times for example, for not being transformative or participative enough, or for being too costly in its application or value in a particular region or sector (e.g. NESC, 2023a; Stark et al, 2023: Doorey and Eisenberg, 2022).

Observing this shift, it would be fair to say that governments and the EU are still grappling with what this broad, holistic approach to just transition might look like in

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<sup>3</sup> The recent EPA ICCA Volume 4 report pointed to the need for transformational change, identified as a fundamental, system wide reorganisation across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms and goals, and valuing the climate, the environment, equity and wellbeing within decision making’ (Moriarty et al, 2023: 3).

practice. This is within a European political context in which just transition sits as part of debates on the future social and green policy direction (e.g. recent joint letter to Ministers EEB, 2024). However, there are developments across many fronts that are increasingly drawing on just transition so that it seems set to be more firmly embedded to climate policy and governance. Further, despite the lack of a blueprint, governments are developing national just transition approaches, with Ireland building on its just transition framework and establishing a Just Transition Commission, expected this year. It is expected to provide evidence-based, independent advice to the Government on the just transition implications of policy development for the Climate Action Plan and will make recommendations to Government on how policy can further the just transition (Government of Ireland, 2024b).

The UN just transition work programme is underway which will include consideration of ‘just and equitable transition, which encompasses pathways that include energy, socioeconomic, workforce and other dimensions, all of which must be based on nationally defined development priorities and include social protection so as to mitigate potential impacts associated with the transition’ as well as a focus on the workforce, opportunities, challenges and barriers to sustainable development poverty eradication (UNFCCC, 2023:2).

A further aspect to note is that just transition intersects with the concept of climate justice, often applied to ‘between’ countries, rather than ‘within’. But this distinction is increasingly blurry. Robins describes these as the transformational twins of climate action: climate justice and the just transition (Robins, 2023). As climate action deepens and increases in pace, a focus on a just, fair, equitable approaches both at home and internationally in climate policy and practice is likely to align the outward looking climate justice largely focused on fairness in mitigation efforts and finance, and a focus on just transition nationally, focused on fairness in the process and outcomes of the transition. Kian Mintz-Woo’s reflections on the moral considerations of the carbon budget process presented to the Working Group also considered equity principles as well as climate ethics principles (Mintz-Woo, forthcoming). Unlike just transition, applications of climate justice have taken a more quantitative form in terms of country-specific analysis of historic emissions and determining a ‘fair share’ of common but differentiated obligations under the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC, 2015).

### **1.3 Just Transition Principles in Ireland**

In an Irish context, considering climate strategy and policy, the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 places responsibility with the

government to have regard to a just transition to a climate neutral economy, in so far as practicable (Government of Ireland, 2021). The Climate Action Plan builds on the Act to develop a principles-based approach to a just transition in Ireland. There has been a national and a targeted (regional) approach in Ireland to protecting the most vulnerable such as workers impacted by the energy transition (e.g. the Midlands) (Government of Ireland, 2024a).

The Climate Action Plan since 2019 set out a national just transition framework that is a principles-based approach. The four just transition principles set out in the framework are:

- i. An integrated, structured, and evidence-based approach to identify and plan our response to just transition requirements;
- ii. People are equipped with the right skills to be able to participate in and benefit from the future net-zero economy;
- iii. Costs are shared so that the impact is equitable and existing inequalities are not exacerbated; and
- iv. Social dialogue to ensure impacted citizens and communities are empowered and are core to the transition process (Government of Ireland, 2019).

This framework remains under development and there are not many concrete applications of principles to practice. One example is that carbon tax policy measures consider the distributional impacts. The Government has committed to using approximately one-third of all additional carbon tax revenues to 2030, on targeted measures to ensure that the carbon tax increases are progressive (Government of Ireland, 2023b). The forthcoming Just Transition Commission will provide the institutional focus to deepening this understanding and practice.

## **1.4 Just Transition in Agriculture and Land Use**

Following from the principles-based approach to a just transition used in the Climate Action Plan, NESC's work on a just transition in agriculture and land use brought an inclusive process and a focus on the costs, benefits and opportunities of the transition so that they are equitably shared and the most vulnerable are protected (NESC, 2023a). It sought to apply just transition principles to inform recommendations for delivering just transition in practice. It provided a sectoral approach to just transition which is increasing across other sectors internationally for example, transport (EC, 2023), private finance (LSE, 2024); regions as well as other/multiple transitions, rural, digital and circular.

The final report outlines the Council’s recommendations for further action. The project process included establishing a stakeholder group and engaging directly with farmers in an 18-month project. It recognised the work should reflect characteristics that make it different to just transition in other sectors, such as energy. It was a sector with both individual farmers and small businesses, geographically dispersed rather than specific region, regional differences. Furthermore, there were cultural and social significance of land and agricultural practices and the agriculture and land use system was complex with multiple transitions and in a context of uncertainty. It explored how to achieve existing targets in a way that is socially inclusive, economically viable and environmentally sustainable. It took as a key signpost that agriculture can increasingly be part of the solution. In doing so, the report set out that what was being discussed was not a transition out of agriculture but a transition into making optimal use of land.

The approach used was to consider existing practices and measures to reduce emissions in agriculture and land use – these included those in the Teagasc MACC curve and those outlined in the Climate Action Plan (Teagasc, 2023; Government of Ireland, 2023a). It examined mitigation measures from social, economic and environmental perspectives, including farmer attitudes to barriers and enablers for wider uptake. The measures were categorised into three types- measures that were low cost or cost-beneficial (‘low hanging fruit measures’); those that were ‘uncertain’ due to social or cultural issues or where there were policy barriers or uncertainty; and ‘hard to do measures’ where there were potentially high costs and, for some farmers, potentially high levels of income reduction and loss of livelihood.

An integrated framework of interventions was developed to support the wider uptake of mitigation measures embedded in just transition principles. The report emphasised that to deliver necessary climate mitigation, efforts to deliver measures would be needed across all three categories. There were many inputs from the Agriculture Working Group and the NESC Council process, evidence from across the sector and literature which informed these recommendations, but the just transition principles provided a framework.

Table 1 (in Section 1.6) outlines examples of the Council’s recommendations and how they align to the just transition principles set out in the Climate Action Plan, most recently in 2024 (Government of Ireland, 2024). These reflect both process and outcome-focused actions, which if taken would help to increase social dialogue with farmers and wider stakeholders, scale up skill development to align with environmental objectives, work to develop a strategy for effort sharing, equipping farmers and advisory services with skills and support and contribute to further



targeted just transition resourcing, research and processes for agriculture and land use.

In overall terms, the sectoral analysis brought further clarity to the development of just transition in practice, including detailed policy recommendations aligned with each of the four just transition principles. A new NESC project on the energy transition will draw on this work to consider aspects of the energy sector. This ‘principles to practice’ approach is also being applied in the private sector, as part of measuring progress (e.g. SSE, 2023).

## **1.5 Approaches to Just Transition**

There is no template to apply just transition to the carbon budget process. O’Neill’s international review found no examples of it in practice but more broadly cites Scotland’s use of just transition principles which are to guide the climate policy process (O’Neill, 2023). However, O’Neill notes that there are principle-based considerations which characterise justice approaches in climate justice (more comparative, internationally focused); to just transition (typically regional/sectoral but increasingly national). Principles of fairness and solidarity have been defining principles of the European Green Deal shaping the development of just transition funding and targeted supports to particular regions.

With greater international and European focus by the IPCC, OECD and the EC, it is likely that a just transition approach will further develop and deepen and coalesce around a common approach and metrics. ‘The framing of policies to align with fast and low-cost mitigation without paying sufficient attention to social and economic resilience creates its own potential risks and can enhance social vulnerability rather than address it’ (Denton et al-IPCC, 2022:1748). Over time, this may progress from a broad principled approach to one that is more concretely defined in terms of measures and outcomes, including considerations of resilience and vulnerability in the framing of climate policy.

While there is academic interest in how considerations of fairness, justice, equality, equity and how this could be monitored using metrics and be further aligned to policy, there are few metrics of just transition and none that could be applied yet nationally.

Some metrics to note include the Transitions Performance Index (TPI) from the European Commission developed as a way of monitoring progress towards achieving its policy priorities, outlined in earlier NESC work (Cahill and Fitzgerald, 2023; EC, 2022). Ireland’s score places it as the third highest ranking globally behind Switzerland and Denmark for the TPI index as a whole and is classified as a ‘transition

leader' on social transition. However, while useful to note, this does not include a just transition metric or focus as the concept is used here.

There is also a comparative just transition metric, the Just Transition Score, developed by the Social Progress Imperative. In 2022, Ireland has a score of 67.4 which is comparatively low to other European countries. It has quite complex and evolving methodology which uses consumption-based CO<sub>2</sub> emissions as well as other environment and social metrics (SPI, 2023). The World Benchmarking Alliance includes a corporate just transition approach and is developing indicators (World Benchmarking Alliance, 2023). We would treat both these with caution but useful to be aware metrics are being developed.

In discussion, members of the Carbon Budget Working Group raised the question of carbon budget distribution and the extent to which emissions per capita would be a measure to use for just transition. Further research would be needed to examine if this would be useful or add value to the future work of the CCAC in carbon budgets, but there is no advice or evidence to draw from currently.

In summary, there are currently no standard indicators to assess or monitor a just transition in Ireland- there is work underway to develop indicators in Ireland led by DECC. OECD work has identified the need for common understanding and metrics on just transition among business and governments (OECD, 2023). Internationally, the Scottish Just Transition Commission is also engaging in work on indicators/monitoring.

## **1.6 For Further Consideration**

This Note has drawn on our work to date, particularly on some of the analysis in the work on agriculture and land use. We think these are areas that can help to focus discussion on how just transition can be reflected in the Working Group and discussion by Climate Change Advisory Council in relation to carbon budgets. Considering a just transition approach at this moment in time is, in our view, best served with reference to careful consideration as to how this carbon budget process and outputs have due regard to just transition principles.

In the context of recognising that the Working Group's task is often a technical one where just transition may not have direct relevance but will do for the Council, we suggest some relevant aspects for consideration of just transition for their deliberations.

Firstly, there is a need to provide perspectives on the context, potential impacts and benefits – the narrative- around the carbon budget and we think it is important to discuss and engage with just transition considerations.

Secondly, our view is that the carbon budget and the work of the Climate Change Advisory Council is an essential part of the overall climate governance system in Ireland including the just transition framework. As such, given the roll-out of just transition principles in climate governance and policy, there is a need for the Council to consider what the role of the carbon budget process and outputs will be in support of this within the overall governance of transition. Each part of the governance framework provides a key role and function, and so just transition will be reflected in different ways. For example, some, such as the National Dialogue on Climate Action (NDCA) have an outward/public facing role where some principles, focused on social dialogue will be prominent; other principles, such as ‘integrated, structured, and evidence-based approach to identify and plan our response to just transition requirements’ may be more pertinent to institutions engaged in monitoring, analysing or reporting on progress, which in turn might support what is communicated with the public in institutions such as the NDCA (Government of Ireland, 2024b). There is both a commitment to and an emerging embedding of just transition in climate governance but no single way to do that for the carbon budget process.

Some broad questions that can help to inform further discussion outlined in Table 1. The key question is how should the carbon budget process and outputs reflect just transition principles and enhance just transition delivery?

One yardstick to consider is how **the outputs/outcomes** around the carbon budget work – the written reports - frame, communicate and provide context to how the budget is discussed in terms of a just transition and to provide data and analysis that support an integrated, structured and evidence-based approach to identify and plan Ireland’s response – including the kinds of evidence that supports thinking around fair and equitable outcomes.

Another is to reflect on **the process** of how it does this- in terms of transparency, accessibility and who is involved in the discussion. In considering the role and activities of the Working Group and the Council, how can just transition principles be considered in the process- the modelling, scenario analysis and deliberations. It is not suggested here that just transition principles are applied to determination of what the carbon budget amount is, but rather in the process of deliberation informing the modelling, in its analysis and wider considerations of impacts. A just transition lens can provide a wide discussion and framing of the underlying assumptions and

priorities made ahead of scenario modelling as well as their implications to provide for the greatest opportunities as well as mitigating risks.

Column three in the table below suggests specific questions to consider that stem from the principles outlined in Climate Action Plans. Working through these questions will help the Council to deliberate on what they see as core and peripheral to a just transition approach for this process and point where there are areas that require further reflection or analysis. These are presented by way of prompts and are not a definitive list.

**Table 1: Just Transition Considerations**

<b>Just Transition Principles</b>	<b>Selected NESC recommendations on Just Transition in Agriculture and Land Use that may be relevant to the Carbon Budget Process</b>	<b>Considerations in Carbon Budget Process</b>
<p><b>1. Social dialogue to ensure impacted citizens and communities are empowered and are core to the transition process</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recommends wide stakeholder engagement based on clear, consistent, coherent communication.</li> <li>• Recommends use of inspiring narratives, communicating benefits as well as costs of transition.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will the carbon budget process and final reporting result in transparent, clear, accessible data and analysis appropriate for support other institutions in effective communication and supporting social dialogue and engagement? Will the benefits as well as costs be communicated?</li> <li>• To what extent will final reporting by the CCAC convey a narrative that includes framing around just transition: identifying potential costs and impacts, opportunities and benefits in a clear, accessible and constructive way?</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. An integrated, structured, and evidence-based approach to identify and plan our response to just transition requirements</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recommends comprehensive, multi-level oversight (targets, plans, timeframes, monitoring and reporting).</li> <li>• Recommends pro-active, forward-looking and responsive governance (identifying impacts, vulnerability, modelling social, economic, environmental; data at local scale).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can we specify what the evidence is related to just transition considerations: specifically, equity of impact, effort-sharing, enabling people to benefit from opportunities, that will support evidence-based transition?</li> <li>• What evidence is known or planned?</li> <li>• What are the gaps or limitations?</li> <li>• Can and if so, how will the gaps be addressed?</li> </ul>

<p><b>3. Enabling People to Benefit from the Opportunities of Transition<sup>4</sup></b></p> <p><b>People are equipped with the right skills to be able to participate in and benefit from the future net-zero economy</b></p>	<p>Recommends:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More research on the opportunities and implications of transition.</li> <li>• Further work to reduce uncertainty around diversification options.</li> <li>• Work on accounting for nature should be accelerated.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there research, modelling and data on both opportunities and costs of transition?</li> <li>• Will the work consider analysis for both opportunities and protections for vulnerable groups?</li> <li>• How will the work discuss and attempt to reflect negative externalities, 'invisibility of nature' (ecosystem services) in costs and benefits?</li> </ul>
<p><b>4. Costs are shared so that the impact is equitable and existing inequalities are not exacerbated</b></p>	<p>Recommends:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research, data, evidence and monitoring of distributional impacts to support effort-sharing.</li> <li>• More robust screening of policies and measures to avoid unintended consequences.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are the models and the evidence from the Working Group considering the full range of distributional impacts – including demographics, geographical location, sectors/sub-sectors, and wider environment (water, air, biodiversity) – to inform mitigating the costs?</li> <li>• Does the analysis include transparent consideration of effort-sharing between sectors, within sectors, and across regions?</li> </ul>

## 1.7 Conclusion

This Note has outlined reflections on how considerations of a just transition might be approached in relation to the carbon budget process and outputs. It draws on recent NESC work that has sought to inform policy considerations of a just transition in Ireland. It remains a fluid and developing concept, but we observe that it is both deepening in climate policy and practice over time as well as widening to be applied to other societal challenges related to but broader than the low carbon transition.

While knowledge and governance around realising a just transition in practice in policy is still developing, with no single adopted approach to it, we think that a focused reflection on just transition principles in the carbon budget setting process is important. We suggest articulating reflection on just transition the narrative and as part of analysis around the potential impacts of the final budget is important. Having a clear and transparent account of this process and how it is considered at key points

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<sup>4</sup> In the Just Transition in Agriculture and Land Use, our consideration of the principle of enabling people to benefit from the opportunities of transition was wider than a focus on developing skills.

in the discussion is integral to ensuring fairness and equity issues are reflected in the process and advice of the Council. Over time, more metrics on just transition may be developed that can help to further embed the concept in the carbon budget process. It is also worth reflecting on how to make room for different perspectives and views on what a just transition is and how it can be assessed, acknowledging it is an emerging and contested space.

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