Recent Policy in the Run-Up to COP26

COP26 is the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP), to be hosted by the UK in Glasgow in partnership with Italy, in November 2021.

The Summit will bring together delegates from all over the world to discuss a coordinated approach to tackle climate change. It will be an opportunity to highlight issues or demonstrate progress, as well as discussing the implementation and completion of the historic Paris Agreement, which saw the commitment of world leaders to tackling climate change at the COP21.

COP21 – The Paris Agreement

The Paris Agreement is the first universal and legally binding international treaty on tackling climate change. It was adopted under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) by 196 Parties at COP21 in Paris, in December 2015.

The aim of the treaty is to strengthen the global response to climate change by limiting global warming to less than 2°C, ideally 1.5°C, compared to pre-industrial levels. It should increase the ability of different countries to deal with the impacts of climate change. It requires the best efforts of individual countries – nationally determined contributions (NDCs) – which are to be strengthened over time.

After ratification, the UK is bound by the agreement, to make efforts towards the aim of global warming reduction. As part of the agreement, there are no legally binding emission reduction targets, however, individual countries produce their own targets. In December 2020, the UK published its latest NDC, in which the UK committed to reduce economy-wide greenhouse gas emissions by at least 68% by 2030, compared to 1990 levels.

Sectors to be covered in the NDC include; energy (including transport); industrial processes and product use; agriculture; land-use, land-use change and forestry; and waste. Within each sector are more in-depth strategies. For example, the UK plans to move away from a linear economy and towards a more circular economy. The Resources and Waste Strategy sets out details of how England plans to do this. As for where the bioeconomy come in, biobased practises can be utilised over multiple sectors but particularly in the waste sector – use of natural resources efficiently and the minimisation of waste is at the heart of biobased technologies.

Progress

In 2017, greenhouse gas emissions were down by 21.6% on 1990 levels in the EU28, and in 2018 were down 23.2%. The target for 2020 emission reduction was 80% on 1990 levels. Within just the UK, greenhouse gas emissions were down 39.4% on 1990 levels in 2018.[i]

In addition, the EU's nationally determined contribution (NDC) under the Paris Agreement is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40% by 2030 compared to 1990, under its wider 2030 climate and energy framework. All key EU legislation for implementing this target was adopted by the end of 2018.

Recent Developments – Energy White Paper

The UK has been making progress in policy and regulation; although it has been hampered by the Covid-19 global pandemic, the Government committed to "build back better, build back greener and

build back faster in the Covid-19 economic recovery plan, released last summer. It is hoped this could be the catalyst for a greener and more sustainable future across the economy. In November 2020, the UK released its Ten Point Plan, which laid out 10 key points for stimulating a green industrial revolution by harnessing a variety of low carbon technologies. It plans to bring together policy and investment, both public and private, to take advantage of a variety of low carbon technologies, while providing green jobs and securing economic growth.

The following month in December, the UK released its Energy White paper, which provides more detail on the plans for the energy sector going forwards, building on the Ten Point Plan. The bioeconomy can play a major role in some of the steps outlined.

Changes to the energy system in the UK has already made great steps towards emissions reduction, in particular through increased uptake of low-carbon and renewable electricity generation. Building on these developments is key. The gas grid currently has less green options. Biomethane is currently the only green gas commercially produced in the UK. Biomethane will be supported through a Green Gas Levy and as a result the Green Gas Support Scheme, expected to launch in 2021 and with the potential to treble the amount of biomethane in the grid between 2018 and 2030.

A particular focus is on carbon negative technologies like bioenergy with carbon capture and storage (BECCS). The benefit of carbon negative technologies is that they allow breathing room for hard-to-decarbonise sectors, like aviation and agriculture. The White Paper recognises that BECCS will play a role in the future energy system. Perhaps when current support for electricity from biomass expires in 2027, BECCS is a more long-term application for support.

Future Focus

In June 2019, the UK committed to Net-Zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. Prior to COP26, the UK plans to publish its all-encompassing Net Zero Strategy, outlining a plan for net zero emissions. In addition, specific plans are expected to be published in the coming year, such as the Buildings and Heat Strategy, the Industrial Decarbonisation Strategy and the Hydrogen Strategy. Further consultation is also expected prior to the introduction of the Green Gas Support Scheme (GGSS) in Autumn 2021, for which BEIS are currently developing the details ahead of an announcement on the scheme design and operation in the coming months Looking further ahead, where biomass can best be utilised, including in the energy sector, will be reviewed and put together in the Biomass Strategy due for 2022.

It is becoming very timely for businesses to develop and implement future decarbonisation strategies, to reduce their reliance on fossil fuels, improve their carbon footprint and reduce emissions to air. At the same time, Defra's Resource and Waste Strategy continues to be acted upon, with further consultations and activity expected through this year on waste collection plans and future standards for plastics and packaging. Alongside reviewing alternative energy sources, businesses must therefore also consider waste management strategies, seeking to reduce, reuse or recycle their waste where possible in line with the waste hierarchy.

[i] Publications Office of the EU. EU energy in figures. Statistical pocketbook 2020.