

DARD

Estate Management Strategy 2011-2021

Consultation

Comments by

Northern Ireland Environment Link

7 November 2011

Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) is the networking and forum body for non-statutory organisations concerned with the environment of Northern Ireland. Its 55 Full Members represent over 100,000 individuals, 262 subsidiary groups, have an annual turnover of £60 million and manage over 266,000 acres of land. Members are involved in environmental issues of all types and at all levels from the local community to the global environment. NIEL brings together a wide range of knowledge, experience and expertise which can be used to help develop policy, practice and implementation across a wide range of environmental fields.

These comments are agreed by Members, but some members may be providing independent comments as well. If you would like to discuss these comments further we would be delighted to do so.

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General Comments

NIEL welcomes the opportunity to comment on the DARD Estate Management Strategy consultation. We believe that DARD has the opportunity to become an exemplar project in terms of demonstrating to all other NI government departments how the highest environmental sustainability standards can be achieved through the design and implementation of an effective estate management strategy.

In order that the Strategy becomes truly environmentally sustainable we would suggest the *Sustainability and Carbon Reduction* section of the document is significantly strengthened by inclusion of the following points:

Carbon Reduction

In addition to participation in the Government's Climate Change Programme, Public Sector Energy Campaign and the Carbon Reduction Commitment Energy Efficiency Scheme, DARD, like all NI Government Departments should be committed to achieving a carbon neutral estate. As well as being a target in the current Programme for Government, the target to have a carbon neutral government estate by 2015 is one of the key recommendations of the Environment Committee's report on their Inquiry into climate change. The 2008–2011 PfG also committed the Northern Ireland Executive to collectively reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25% on 1990 levels by 2050. Having a carbon neutral government estate would help meet this target. Rapid progress will be needed if these targets are to be achieved. We believe that an important means of achieving this target will be to amend government purchasing policy to buy green or renewable products, particularly energy. One advantage of amending purchasing policy is that it can be done fairly quickly. We believe that by buying green products the NI administration can make significant progress towards a number of targets, while helping the NI economy.

Biodiversity Duty

Given that the DARD estate consists of approximately 78,000 hectares of land, spread across Northern Ireland. The majority of this land is planted as forest with the remainder being largely used for agriculture, education, and scientific purposes, it is surprising that the Strategy makes no mention of the Wildlife and Natural Environment Act 2011, nor more specifically, the Biodiversity Duty contained within it. This Act outlines the additional responsibility of all Departments to promote and embrace nature conservation when carrying out their daily tasks. The Act highlights the important role that all Government Departments, including DARD, can take in furthering the conservation of biodiversity when undertaking their functions. There is now a requirement for all departments to protect and maintain biodiversity on their own lands and those they have influence over; and to look for opportunities to enhance or restore biodiversity, or provide an educational input to others about biodiversity. The duty also extends to all activities carried out by a public body including the provision of grant aid to other bodies and/or individuals where there is a relevance to biodiversity. In meeting this statutory duty, public bodies must take account of the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy published by the Northern Ireland Executive and the lists of priority species and habitats published and maintained by NIEA.

The 2011 Act and Biodiversity Duty should therefore be enshrined within DARD and all other departmental estate management strategies. Assistance in meeting this statutory duty should be sought from DOE who are currently compiling a Biodiversity Duty guidance document designed to assist public bodies through their work in developing policies, strategies and functions; administering the planning system; managing their land and buildings; developing infrastructure; engaging with business and the public; conducting

research and managing information; making decisions about procurement; and implementing economic, environmental and social programmes.

Ecosystems Services

The natural environment delivers a wide range of goods and services upon which we depend. The recently published [Northern Ireland National Ecosystem Assessment](#) (NI NEA) report groups these benefits into 4 categories, namely:

- **Provisioning:** the products obtained from ecosystems such as food, fibre and fresh water, renewable energy, fuel;
- **Regulating:** the benefits obtained from ecosystem processes such as pollination and control of the climate and water;
- **Cultural:** the non-material benefits obtained from ecosystems; for example through spiritual or religious enrichment, cultural heritage, recreation and tourism or other aesthetic experience; and,
- **Supporting:** ecosystem functions that are necessary for the production of all other ecosystem services, including soil formation and the cycling of nutrients and water.

The NI NEA report represents a baseline assessment of the state of our ecosystems and the services they provide, looks at changes past and future and provides recommendations on how we can manage our environment in ways which provide social and economic benefits to all of Northern Ireland's residents and visitors. The report should therefore be utilised by DARD in order that it maximises the ecosystems services derived from the management of the 78,000 hectares within its estate. The report can assist DARD in making management decisions to enhance ecosystem health and resilience while delivering on its departmental objectives. Among the key recommendations listed within the report are:

- **The NI NEA should inform policy and decision-making** to ensure long-term sustainable management of ecosystems and delivery of their services. This requires legislation, guidelines, planning policies, designations, restrictions, fiscal drivers, education and awareness. Public, private and voluntary sectors benefit from and impact on ecosystems and their ability to deliver services.
- **A fully integrated cross-departmental and intersectoral approach is needed.** Work of all central government departments and agencies and local government impact upon and are in turn dependent upon the environment. Although there has been a lack of integration of policies and their delivery in Northern Ireland, it is increasingly recognised that the principles of sustainable development are key to ensuring that ecosystem services are maintained and optimised in the long term, both on land and at sea.

We would therefore strongly advocate that the work undertaken by the NI NEA and all the recommendations it makes in terms of managing our environment are fully adopted by all government departments both within their high level documents (including estate management strategies) and core activities.

As stated earlier, NIEL believes that by adopting our suggestions in relation to carbon reduction, biodiversity and ecosystem services, DARD as a major landowner has the opportunity to become an exemplar project in terms of demonstrating to all other NI government departments how the highest environmental sustainability standards can be achieved through the design and implementation of an effective estate management strategy.