

COVID-19: Thinking Globally and Acting Locally - Achieving a Sustainable Recovery for NI

We are facing a range of crises, including COVID-19, biodiversity loss and climate breakdown. We believe that the best way to overcome these is to put the environment at the heart of our recovery. There are a number of actions which will help counter many of these problems. In the following 3 sections we have set out : 1) some ideas that will help with our economic recovery; 2) some broader proposals which will underpin and provide long-term resilience; and finally 3) a series of tests to check on the environmental sustainability of proposals .

1. The need for a Green Stimulus

Despite its stunning landscapes and scenery Northern Ireland has suffered from significant environmental depletion. The State of Nature 2019 reports that 1 in 6 species in Northern Ireland are threatened with extinction. World leading economists, businesses and health care professionals are telling us that a green recovery will deliver greater economic benefits and provide a healthier, fairer society. There is also a mandate from society at large with 91% of the public saying they don't want things to go back to how they were¹, and more specifically in Northern Ireland, 74% now want new laws to protect nature after experiencing the COVID-19 emergency.

All economies will need a boost to help recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. But we need to revive and rebuild our economy in an environmentally sustainable way. The distribution of stimulus funds at all levels of intervention including that provided to private business, must be conditional on consistency with the delivery of environmental improvement and helping to meet our international obligations. Efforts to kick-start our economy must resist any temptation to cut environmental regulation - that will lead to long-term costs to the public purse to address the corresponding environmental damage. A green stimulus will support Northern Ireland in creating green jobs, mitigating and adapting to climate change, improving flood mitigation, clean up our air and drinking water, deliver access to nature for everyone and improve public health and wellbeing.

Large scale environment and conservation projects

There are many environmental risks which pose threats to people's livelihoods and economy – drought, flooding, climate change, pollution. A resilient recovery will safeguard the economy against high-impact environmental shocks, and will support nature-dependent sectors like farming, tourism and fishing. Projects could be targeted at:

- Delivering a step change in protected area management, and joining up networks of sites
- Creating new habitats and sites for nature and people
- Tree planting (in appropriate locations)
- Peatland improvement and carbon sequestration
- Harnessing people-power – the environmental NGOs in Northern Ireland have a combined membership of more than 200,000 people; a new Nature conservation corps/service funded by government could deliver these large scale projects, provide people with skills/jobs and help drive economic recovery. This could be seen as a green workforce employability scheme (plus volunteering opportunities) to meet current unemployment needs, including by providing new training for young people (16-24) as well as retraining for those recently unemployed.
- The nature conservation sector could provide a number of 'shovel ready', high impact, fundable projects to pump prime the initiatives mentioned above
- Environment hub – a number of environmental NGOs are interested in creating a physical hub in NI, where organisations can share office accommodation, develop new linkages and provide visitor services.

¹ Food, Farming and Countryside Commission and the Food Foundation 2020 survey

Implementation of a Green New Deal for Northern Ireland

Despite support from all main political parties, the commencement of a Green New Deal has never been progressed. As we rebuild our economy, it is time to revisit and revive this opportunity to boost economic growth while cutting emissions, lowering energy costs, and boosting local employment. We require a cross-departmental unified vision in the form of an all-encompassing Green New Deal the content of which should be based upon the [six key principles set out by the UK Committee on Climate Change](#) to rebuild whilst delivering a stronger, cleaner and more resilient economy. We must have a focus on actions which promote both Adaptation and Mitigation efforts.

Over a decade ago and in response to the previous recession, as a member of the NI Green New Deal Group (a cross-sectoral initiative led by CBI, ICTU, NICVA, UFU, IoD and SDC), NIEL and our partner organisations were campaigning for:

- Refurbishment of tens of thousands of existing homes each year with full insulation and renewable energy, including the thousands of homes that fail to meet the Decent Homes Standard and thus making significant inroads into fuel poverty.
- Transformation of the energy performance of public and commercial buildings through energy efficiency measures and making ‘every building a power station’.
- The need to ‘decarbonise’, regionalise and localise the supplies of both electricity and heat through large-scale renewables, micro-generation and using fossil fuels more efficiently.
- Creation and employment of a ‘carbon army’ of high- and lower-skilled workers to implement this vast systematic reconstruction programme creating thousands of new jobs.
- Transformation of our transport system to be fit for purpose in the coming era of high oil and carbon prices by providing a real public transport choice for everyone.
- Creation of thousands of ‘green collar’ jobs in the £3,000 billion world market for Low Carbon Environmental Goods and Services.
- Development of a wide-ranging package of financial innovations and incentives to assemble and leverage the very large sums needed to implement such a programme, based on collaboration and partnership between the public sector, the private sector, other stakeholders and the public.

The Natural Health Service

Our green spaces produce health and wellbeing benefits, but these aren’t shared equally. We know that children from deprived backgrounds are much less likely to spend time outdoors than those from affluent areas. People who live in nature-deprived areas are more likely to face chronic ill-health and live shorter lives. We could undertake a whole range of initiatives to improve everyone’s access to green spaces such as:

- Invest in active transport through green and blue infrastructure planning new places and spaces through engagement
- A programme to enhance and create more urban parks
- Increase countryside access for everyone
- Develop stronger links between environment and health, focusing on ‘social prescribing’
- Provide access to land for Sustainable Community Use and One-Planet Development

Our Historic Environment

The Historic Environment sector in Northern Ireland has recently published ‘Heritage Delivers’, setting out how the conservation of our human past can help drive our future well-being and economy. The historic environment is a key part of our tourism economy, and crucial to our sense of identity. There are many opportunities to utilise this precious resource in our recovery. Projects could include:

- Sustainable tourism – tourism has become a crucial part of the NI economy, and has suffered more than most from the pandemic. We should aim to create a more sustainable tourist product, rooted in authentic experience where visitors get to experience a broader range of NI’s heritage
- Revitalising historic buildings – we have a wealth of under and dis-used buildings – these should not be ‘redeveloped’, but be re-purposed to drive economic growth. Prosperous places have retained their sense of character and uniqueness. **A Resilient Future**

2. A Resilient Future

Our economy **will** recover from the Covid Crisis, but we should use this opportunity to make lasting changes which will help our society and economy become more resilient. The following set of proposals would create the solid base for development and growth.

Implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The UN SDGs set universally applicable goals that would integrate the environmental, social, and economic dimensions of Sustainable Development. As we, through the UK government, have signed up to delivering the SDGs, any NI Recovery Strategy must help deliver on our commitment to their implementation. Through utilisation of the SDG approach this would ensure that, as a minimum we would maintain legal commitments in areas such as public health, environmental protection and social equality while strengthening our resilience to future pandemics.

Introduce a Northern Ireland Well-Being of Future Generations Act

Such an Act would help create a NI that we all want to live in, now and in the future and ensure all sections of Northern Ireland society are working towards the same vision by putting well-being goals in place. Central to this would be the appointment of ‘Future Generations Commissioner’ to make sure public bodies are working towards well-being goals. In doing so we can ensure that planning for the future is given legislative footing, so that the natural and cultural resources needed for life are unimpaired and remain so for future generations.

Introduction of a NI Climate Change Act

The global response to the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated what is possible in times of crisis and threat to human health and well-being. We have seen transformational change across all sectors and all countries of the world in response to COVID-19. We should harness and undertake a similar approach to Climate Change. NI is the only administration in the UK not to have domestic legislation to tackle climate change and is also the only part of the UK where emissions are increasing. We need a Climate Change Bill in Northern Ireland as a matter of urgency with commitments to achieving net-zero emissions and planning for climate change.

Introduction of a Northern Ireland Environment Strategy

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, the health and well-being benefits of nature have been clearly demonstrated. We need to increase space for wildlife and people. A Northern Ireland Environment Strategy is required which: Places the health and well-being of people and nature at the heart of the recovery by increasing access to nature-rich green space for everyone, as well as restoring and protecting our wild places on land and sea and; Invests in nature-based projects, incentivises walking and cycling, and supports sustainable food, farming and fishing.

Introduction of a NI Agriculture Bill and a Sustainable Food Strategy

Unfortunately, the provisions relating to Northern Ireland within the UK Bill are not currently time-bound. As a result, we continue to run the risk of further environmental damage if we continue indefinitely to operate a ‘business as usual’ approach. As new agricultural legislation across the UK is facilitating a transition towards sustainable agricultural policies and address environmental issues, we cannot afford to be left behind. We need a bespoke sustainable agriculture and land management policy which will deliver for nature, farming and climate. This could include:

- Re-localising supply chains
- Increasing consumption of fresh, seasonal and local produce
- Highlight the health benefits of sustainable food
- Assist in sustainability of rural communities
- Ensuring high standards of production
- Aim for net-zero by 2040
- Prevent low-quality imports

Urgent Introduction of a NI Environment Bill

The UK Environment Bill grants the UK and devolved governments powers to develop post-Brexit environmental law and governance mechanisms. In response, we should develop an Environment Strategy for NI to function as a long-term environmental improvement plan and commit to underpinning this strategy by time-bound targets that sufficiently cover terrestrial, air, water, and marine environments. There is a clear risk of a Governance gap in NI; the sector continues to advocate for an Independent Environmental Protection Agency.

Development and Implementation of the UK Fisheries Bill in Northern Ireland

The seas around NI provide multiple resources and services such as food, transport, recreation and health & well-being. But our marine environment is in trouble with many recent global, UK and NI-wide assessments showing stark declines in biodiversity and ecosystem functioning. If we are to achieve healthy and productive seas, our fisheries management system needs an ambitious overarching vision which acknowledges that economic prosperity is underpinned by a thriving natural environment. To achieve this, our fisheries legislation and resources must implement an ecosystem-based approach and the principle of maximum sustainable yield. These goals need to be encompassed within a legally underpinned, ambitious and well-resourced framework, with SMART indicators and targets. Thriving commercial fish stocks are only possible when supported by a healthy marine environment. To achieve this, we also need robust action towards achieving Good Environmental Status of our seas, implementation of an ecosystems based Marine Plan and the completion of an ecologically coherent network of well-managed Marine Protected Areas.

A Cross-Departmental Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development

This strategy should lead to a systemic change in teaching and access to environmental education for all age groups and encourage long-term attitudinal and behavioural change in relation to our interaction with the environment. It should include ambitious targets for outdoor learning. Environmental organisations spend a lot of resource delivering learning outcomes; one of these programmes (Our Bright Future) has created 3 policy asks based on feedback from young people: More time spent learning about nature; More support for entering the environmental profession; More attention paid to the needs of young people.

Creation of a NI Environmental Citizens Advisory Panel

A resilient, successful future has to be based on engagement with people. We propose creation of a panel of citizens to improve citizen participation in the design and review of environmental policies and strategies.

The East/ West, North/ South Challenge

Environmental standards and the strength of our economy in a post-Brexit, post Covid-19 world will be inextricably linked. If we are to achieve a sustainable economic recovery based upon environmental improvement, we will need to input into the design and implementation of UK environmental frameworks and structures created to replace EU mechanisms post-Brexit. Similarly, as the island of Ireland and its surrounding seas represent a single biogeographic unit with shared land and sea borders, an island-wide environmental response is required as the protection and management of the environment, from our rivers, seas, air, waste and wildlife, requires cross-border collaboration and affects all citizens.

3. Tests for Growth Proposals

NIEL is one of the 4 Environment Links across the UK. The Links have been discussing how the 4 countries will respond to the crisis, and we have started looking at ways to test whether proposals fit with a sustainable future. This is early days, but the following are being considered:

- Policies should be based on sound evidence, must reduce carbon emissions, and must enhance social capital.

The policies, taken together as a package, should contribute to all of these additional 4 tests, while each individual policy should contribute to at least one:

- Reduce pollution
- Improve adaptation to climate change
- Reduce the consumption of natural resources
- Improve biodiversity and ecosystem services

Next Steps

The environment sector in Northern Ireland is now working to progress these proposals by developing a range of projects to help drive our economic and social renewal. We hope to share these in the coming weeks.

NIEL 21/07/20

Appendix

What are green jobs?

The Valuing our Environment report concluded that economic activities related to the environment in Northern Ireland contributes £573m to the regional economy which support 32, 750 full time equivalent jobs².

Green jobs should:

- Improve energy and raw materials efficiency
- Limit greenhouse gas emissions
- Minimize waste and pollution
- Protect and restore ecosystems
- Support adaptation to the effects of climate change

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) defines Green Jobs based on their environmental impact rather than environmental dependence: 'Green jobs are decent jobs that contribute to preserve or restore the environment, be they in traditional sectors such as manufacturing and construction, or in new, emerging green sectors such as renewable energy and energy efficiency'.³

Meeting objectives for climate and the environment now requires mainstreaming of environmental considerations across employment overall. We can continue to identify Green Job opportunities through

² <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/doe/valuing-our-environment-summary-report.pdf>

³ http://www.ilo.int/global/topics/green-jobs/news/WCMS_220248/lang--en/index.htm

investments in Green Recovery, which are likely to be concentrated in sectors such as construction, energy, transport, agriculture, and nature conservation.

The Future Generations Commissioner for Wales (May 2020)⁴ proposes investment in 5 areas:

- Housing: improved the energy efficiency new low carbon affordable housing
- Transport and comms: improving digital connectivity, active travel, public transport
- Skills and training: to support the transition to a better future, creating new green jobs
- Nature: support for large-scale habitat and wildlife restoration, creation and connectivity throughout Wales, including for natural flood defences, the new national forest, land use management and agriculture supporting secure local food chains
- Industries and technologies of the future, supporting businesses that will help Wales to lead the low carbon revolution and lock wealth and jobs into local areas with investment in the foundational economy

Vivid Economics (2020)⁵ suggests five areas for investment:

- Green building: 85,000 jobs in retrofitting buildings + 7,000 installing heating/cooling
- Nature and biodiversity: no job estimate
- Clean energy: especially offshore wind – 28,000 jobs
- Carbon capture and storage: 30,000 jobs
- Electric vehicles: mostly job substitution from petrol/diesel vehicles

⁴ <https://futuregenerations.wales/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2020-05-22-Wellbeing-economy-Supplementary-Budget-Statement.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.wwf.org.uk/updates/uk-investment-strategy-building-back-resilient-and-sustainable-economy>