

Delivering a Green Recovery

Proposals for Funding for Nature Based Projects, a Green Jobs Scheme and Investing in Nature for Health

These proposals were developed in partnership between RSPB NI and the NI Environment Link Green Recovery Working Group

Introduction

The recession caused by the COVID-19 crisis has brought increasing unemployment and impacted negatively on job opportunities for young people. At the same time, we are facing a nature and climate crisis, and there is an urgent need to invest in new solutions that reverse biodiversity loss and move us towards net zero carbon emissions.

To address these crises, we need to invest in the protection and restoration of nature and the environment, and to build a green workforce that can respond to growing employment opportunities in the green economy.

This briefing builds on [RSPBNI's Five Point Plan for a Green Recovery](#) setting out more detailed proposals for kick-starting a Green Recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. The fourth point in the Five Point Plan, around a Green New Deal for NI has three parts – green recovery funding, a green jobs scheme and the delivery of nature-based projects. In Part 1&2 of this briefing we provide more detail on our proposed **Green Recovery Fund to deliver large-scale nature-based projects** and a **Northern Ireland Green Jobs Scheme (NIGJS)** to address current unemployment needs and deliver key environmental outcomes. In Part 3 we provide further detail on how we can invest in nature to support healthier communities.

11 organisations have proposed 70 projects that could be delivered with government investment of approx. £90million. The projects would create the equivalent of 1217 one year jobs (FTE) or 320 jobs (FTE) per year for five years¹.

Approx. £1.6 million per annum could establish a Green Jobs Scheme with 50 participants initially

¹ Half of the projects will also create a number of jobs in contracting and specialist consultancy, the cost of which is included in the overall figure.

PART 1: A Northern Ireland Green Jobs Scheme (NIGJS)

Background

A Northern Ireland Green Jobs Scheme would enable unemployed people to find paid work, as well as training people for future careers in nature conservation, at the same time as boosting Northern Ireland's response to the nature and climate crises. A workforce of young people in particular, could help the Northern Ireland Executive deliver on a number of strategic policy priorities, including biodiversity targets and environmental restoration, tree planting targets, climate targets as well as other societal challenges such as youth unemployment, skills gap, social disadvantage and mental and physical health.

Even before the pandemic, a research report by Our Bright Futures (Nash, 2020)² stated:

There is a growing skills and labour gap in the environment sector [across the UK] and there is a shortage of secure employment opportunities for young people, particularly for those from a disadvantaged background. This is a rare opportunity for the environment sector to make a major contribution to tackling these challenges through the development of high-quality routes into work for young people that enhances their job prospects and delivers solutions to the climate emergency.

The need for a youth focussed employment and training Scheme has become even more pressing as a result of the pandemic. The Labour Force Survey shows that young people have been hardest hit by unemployment as a result of the recent economic downturn. The youth unemployment rate for 16-24 year olds in Northern Ireland is now estimated at 8.2% and the Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) predicted that youth unemployment in Northern Ireland will rise further throughout 2021.

Now, more than at any other time, there is a need to invest in both the next generation and the environment through improving the skills required to support the transition to a low carbon economy and in doing so reinforce the foundations upon which much of our wealth, health and wellbeing depend.

NIGJS Duration and Eligibility

The NIGJS would be open to everyone who is unemployed but with a particular focus on young people (16-24). It would employ people and equip them with the essential skills, training/retraining and experience of the workplace. It would enable people to take a hands-on role in delivering improved outcomes for nature and the environment, whilst providing an essential first step for young people onto the career ladder and new opportunities for those recently unemployed.

Scheme participants could work on a range of existing conservation projects and activities focused on tree-planting, invasive species removal, peatland restoration, nature reserves management, path repair, species monitoring and data collection, horticulture and supporting environmental

² <https://ourbrightfuture.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Support-for-young-people-to-work-in-the-environmental-sector-research-report-FINAL.pdf>

education. The Scheme could also become an essential delivery mechanism for 'shovel ready' projects delivered through a Northern Ireland Green Recovery Fund (See Part 2).

Standard contracts would be 12-months, with an option for 24-month part-time contracts to make the Scheme accessible to people in a wider range of circumstances. The Scheme could be delivered by partnerships of NGOs, local authorities and others, including the private sector. For stability and simplicity, we propose that participants serve the duration of their contract with one delivery partner who will have an agreed programme of one or more projects on which they work throughout the year.

Delivery and Oversight

We are proposing two possible options for delivering the Northern Ireland Green Jobs Scheme.

Option 1: The coordinating unit could be part of an existing government Department, such as DAERA. Organisations would apply to government for funding to recruit participants to work on specific conservation projects and activities.

Option 2: Government could tender for a lead organisation to apply to coordinate a Scheme within the sector. This would follow the model of Teach First, which receives approximately £31-£36m in annual funding from Government to deliver 1,200-1,500 teacher training opportunities each year.

Under Option 2, an organisation could be resourced to coordinate the Scheme and allocate participants to relevant organisations. While in the longer term the organisation could attract complementary funding, it is vital that in the early years the organisation is fully funded by Government to ensure it can deliver the jobs rapidly, set up the training standards and provide a high quality and reputable Scheme.

The coordinating organisation would report into an NIGJS oversight body. The oversight body would include a mixture of government and non-government actors, youth and diversity experts, employment experts, and education and skills professionals. The oversight body would provide strategic direction and advise on issues, such as conservation activities, recruitment, communications, skills and training and budgets.

Recruitment

The Scheme would provide opportunities to a wide range of people, including those who might otherwise struggle to move into the job market.

Delivery partners would be incentivised to recruit a good mix of ages, of graduates and school leavers, as well as gender and ethnic diversity. Partners who could deliver more roles for particularly challenged individuals would be compensated to allow them to provide the additional management support and coaching needed.

The recruitment would be done by the delivery partners, who would build relations with job centres and do local advertising, near to the place of work.

Training and Skills Development

The NIGJS would provide a rich learning environment for employees, providing on-the-job training and offering opportunities for individuals to attain technical qualifications.

Successful skill, knowledge and positive behaviour development for the Scheme participants will be a core focus of the initiative. Participants will develop transferable core skills to enhance their employability as well as a variety of technical skills suitable for further work in a range of sectors such as forestry, construction, etc.

It is recommended that a training and support fund of £2,000 is assigned to each NIGJS employee. The Learning and Development functions of the delivery partners may also need to be strengthened to deliver the training.

Skills development will include:

- Core transferable skills, such as effective communications, digital and IT skills, data analysis, team working, accountability, problem solving and project management.
- Environmental skills, such as general understanding of ecosystems, habitat and species management, climate change and the green economy, as well as project specific skills, like tree planting and care, tool and in some cases heavy equipment use, invasive species ID and control, environmental monitoring / data collection and flood protection. The on-the-job skills could be supplemented by relevant LANTRA qualifications (e.g. Conservation on the Farm or Safe Use of Pesticides, Practical Horticulture, Fire Safety Awareness, First Aid).
- Employability and entrepreneurship skills would come at the end of the year long scheme and in addition to CV writing skills and research skills, will also include leadership (including in some cases management of volunteers) and entrepreneurship skills so that the graduates of the scheme are able to adapt to the new green economy.

Developing transferable skills and providing practical experience will equip scheme participants for a range of future careers in the new green economy. The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) could be a key partner delivering relevant training and skill development.

Costs

The outcomes delivered by the Green Jobs Scheme would depend on the scale of the proposed Scheme. Our initial proposal is to deliver a three-year scheme with 50 participants per annum, provided the required funding and support for participating organisations is made available.

Our initial proposal is to deliver a three-year scheme with 50 participants in the first year. This would require approx. £1.6 million per annum.

This figure is based on conservative estimations provided by eight NGO's under a 'business as usual' scenario. The number of participants that could be catered for across the entire sector is likely to be much higher. The Green Recovery Fund for nature-based projects would also increase the number of participants that each organisation could accommodate and broaden the types of works the participants could be involved in.

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Item	Cost	No. of positions
Participant salary (National Living Wage, 35 hours per week, inc. 5% pension and NI contributions)	£16926 + £1970 = £18,896	50 (£1,428,250)
Overheads per participants	£5669	
Training	£2000	
Activity Costs (IT, travel etc.)	£2000	
Full time Supervisor for every 7 participants (inc. contributions)	£27,000 + £5,400 = £32,400	7 (£42,100)
Overheads @30% of salary	£9,700	
Two regional coaches	£27,000 + £5,400 = £32,400	2 (£64,800)
Full-time Scheme coordinator (inc. contributions)	£40,000 + £8,000 = £48,000	1 (£62,400)
Overheads @ 30% of salary	£14,400	
Total	£1,597,550	

Table outlining Green Job Scheme Costings based on 50 participants

The costs account for each NIGJS participant being paid the National Living Wage. It also includes the cost of supervisor salaries (to be based in the host organisation) at a ratio of one supervisor to every 7 participants, one regional coordinator to oversee the Scheme and two regional coaches to provide pastoral care and provide training to ensure employees are ‘work ready’. Our calculations also include a 30% contribution to delivery partner overheads such as insurance, human resources, senior leadership, management and planning.

To ensure success and swift implementation, the NIGJS needs to be properly funded, including investment in delivery partner organisations. Organisations could not participate in the NIGJS within existing organisational capacity. The environmental sector has been hard hit by Covid-19. Unless partner organisations have their overheads and supervisory costs covered (as a minimum), the Scheme could weaken the sector rather than strengthen it.

While it is our preference to create a bespoke Green Jobs Scheme as outlined above, the Department for Communities proposed Jobstart Scheme (offering job placements for 16-24 year olds) presents an opportunity for piloting a Green Jobs Scheme in Northern Ireland. A specific environmental strand would enable environmental organisations to participate in Jobstart. If voluntary and community sector organisations are to avail of Jobstart, existing resource constraints with the Charity sector must be recognised and additional support and resource provided (such as funding to cover overheads and staff time for managing participants etc). Once successfully piloted, we would like to see a separate bespoke multi-year Green Jobs Scheme delivered at scale.

PART 2: A Green Recovery Fund to deliver large-scale nature-based projects

The critical role of investing in nature-based projects to re-build our economy is stressed in the landmark Dasgupta [review of the economics of biodiversity \(February 2021\)](#):

‘ecological solutions (often referred to as Nature-based solutions) have the potential to provide multiple benefits. Restoring ecosystems by ecological means can not only address biodiversity loss and climate change, they also deliver wider economic benefits. They have frequently been found to be more cost-effective than engineered solutions and have far

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fewer unexpected consequences. They also create employment...Recent research suggests that ecological investments such as afforestation, parkland expansion, and restoration of rural ecosystems should have high priority as part of COVID-19 recovery stimuli (p71-72).

A Green Recovery Fund should cover all aspects of environmental protection and enhancement, such as nature restoration, tackling pollution, enhancing energy efficiency, increasing renewable energy, improving sustainable transport infrastructure, improving the provision of, and access to, green space and creating a circular economy.

As a start, eleven organisations from across the environment sector in Northern Ireland, ranging from councils, to environmental charities, landscape partnerships and heritage trusts, have developed a list of nature-based Green Recovery projects. The projects are framed around a number of opportunity areas: restoration of peatland, blue carbon, woodland and wet grassland habitats for nature and climate; health and well-being ranging from new/improved access to greenspace to creation and delivery of a health and environment plan; connecting and empowering communities; maximising green infrastructure and conservation action for our priority species.

The projects will individually and collectively deliver benefits beyond critical biodiversity outcomes including climate regulation, improvement of water quality, reduction in flood risk, and increases in mental and physical health and wellbeing. Investing in well-designed nature-based projects creates jobs, provides opportunities for volunteering, green tourism, and delivers statutory responsibilities for designated habitats and landscapes.

A detailed compendium of the projects is attached, showing the scale of opportunity. Some of the projects can be described as shovel-ready – ready to go within 6 months – whilst others have included both development and delivery phases, and others are requests for match-funding to unlock national and international funding sources.

A summary of the benefits that could be unlocked through Green Recovery Funding, as well as examples of proposed projects are given below.

Climate and Nature

Protection and restoration of natural habitats (native woodland, peatland, wet and species-rich grassland, saltmarsh, seagrass, kelp, shellfish beds) has the ability to address the climate crisis through carbon storage and sequestration, as well as delivering for biodiversity and for a range of other societal benefits such as flood protection, pollination, and improved air, water and soil quality. Protecting and expanding high-quality habitat also helps to mitigate against the impacts of climate change for both habitats and species, and the ecosystem services they provide. Our projects to benefit nature and climate include:

- Peatland and heathland restoration on designated and undesignated peatland sites across NI (Pettigo Plateau, Montiagh's Moss, Garron Plateau, The Argory, Divis, Slieve Donard); specialist machinery for restoration of peatland and other habitats; machinery storage and a peat-free compost enterprise.
- Blue carbon habitat restoration and enhancement activities in 'blue carbon' habitats - seagrass, kelp, shellfish beds, saltmarsh

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- Lough Neagh Wetlands Restoration Programme – restoration, protection and conservation of wetland habitats including wet grassland, wet woodland and peatland around Lough Neagh.
- Riparian woodland restoration project. Initial focus on the River Faughan (ASSI/SAC) catchment to restore the existing riparian woodlands, many of which are ancient, and planting of new woodlands to increase connectivity and resilience.
- Local provenance tree nursery for NI - a large-scale, professional nursery focussing on growing trees of NI / Irish provenance trees to meet the target of 18m trees in the Forest for our Future Programme launched by DAERA in 2020. The nursery would ensure local provenance stock, provide employment and skills development, and reduce biosecurity risk from imported trees.
- Shifting Shores Programme - Coastal climate change adaptation strategies developed in collaboration with affected communities, managed realignment projects, monitoring, research.
- Waterways Project (Dundalk, Carlingford and River Fane catchment) – sustainable catchment management to improve water quality through a programme of advisory, monitoring, riparian planting and restoration of natural processes

Health and well-being

The environment sector has the ability to deliver on health and well-being through new and improved access to its own sites and to greenspace across NI in both rural and urban settings, and deliver for nature and health at these own sites through social prescribing. Our projects to benefit health and well-being include:

New and improved access

- Making Northern Ireland’s most prized landscapes accessible – a strategic assessment of outdoor access infrastructure (walking trails, way marking and signage, car parks, passing bays, viewpoints, toilets etc) needed across NI's AONBs, to inform a targeted programme of capital works and upgrades.
- Improved access and visitor experience at the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust site at Castle Espie
- Creation of new access at RSPB NI’s Harbour Meadows in Belfast
- Enhancing Lough Neagh - new bird hides at strategic points around Lough Neagh to build on the existing recreational and rural heritage tourism assets

Natural environment and health

Production of a Natural Environment and Health Strategic Plan for Northern Ireland by NI Environment Link. The Plan would focus on creating local pathways to value the role of the natural environment in the prevention, and early intervention, in health problems (particularly mental health) and on improving access to nature and local food to address health inequalities.

Initial actions would include:

- Development of partnerships between statutory health, voluntary, community and environment sectors.

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- Provide training and capacity building for further delivery by eNGOs and other partners
- Social prescribing pilots in selected urban and rural communities
- Expansion of the Sustainable Food Places Programme across NI

More significant resources will be required for delivering the wider plan (McKinney, 2020).

Connecting and empowering communities

Connecting and empowering communities to do more for nature and climate is important for long-term sustainability. There is a need for expansion and creation of new community hubs to provide venues for community engagement (activities, volunteering – both residential and non-residential, training and skills development), and youth initiatives to build environmental skills and help young people take action. Our projects to connect and empower communities include:

Community conservation hubs

- NI Eco-hub, Belvoir Forest – creation of a cross-sector conservation centre providing activity and visitor space for the local community and a shared office
- Creation of conservation workforce residential accommodation on Rathlin Island, at Glenwherry on the Antrim Plateau, and in the Fermanagh lakelands, to deliver conservation action in and for the community
- Expansion of existing accommodation in Aghalee to deliver conservation action at Portmore Lough Nature Reserve and Lough Beg Nature Reserve

Youth initiatives

- Nature Skills Traineeship – piloting of a nature conservation traineeship to provide the next generation of conservationists with the skills needed to secure employment in the sector
- Youth Action for the Environment - building capacity amongst young people to take action for nature

Green and blue infrastructure

Green recovery funding could unlock a huge opportunity for eNGOs to work with government, businesses, householders and other stakeholders to maximise all land in urban and suburban areas for the benefit of nature, climate and communities, providing a range of additional benefits in the form of flood protection and improvements in air quality. Our projects to create blue and green infrastructure include:

- Nature and Climate capacity building programme for SMEs, Govt Departments, councils, housing associations and other bodies (accredited/non accredited provision).
- Northern Ireland's largest urban nature reserve - a pilot project to maximise publicly and privately owned land in urban and suburban settings for communities, climate and nature – developing a model for best practice, advisory and roll-out
- Piloting a paid for business advice model to businesses – providing advice on maximising their built and natural heritage for nature, climate and communities
- Delivery of actions outlined in the Strangford Lough Blueways project

Priority Species

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The [UK State of Nature Report 2019](#) confirmed that the abundance and distribution of the UK's species has, on average, declined since 1970. Northern Ireland holds species found nowhere else in the UK, including the Irish Hare, Irish Damsel fly, Irish Whitebeam, Cryptic Wood White and Pollan. We are bound under national and international legislation to keep common species common and protect and restore species that are most at risk. Management of the habitats that species rely on is vital, but they also need bespoke conservation actions, research and monitoring. Our projects to benefit species include:

- Conservation action to secure populations of our globally threatened species – corncrake on Rathlin and curlew on the Antrim Plateau, Lough Erne and Lough Neagh
- Investigations resource for birds of prey to end illegal killing of red kites and other raptors
- A Seabird Restoration Strategy for restoration of seabird populations across NI
- Match funding for the EU LIFE Raft project to eradicate rats and ferrets from Rathlin Island to restore our puffin population and bring back Manx shearwater
- Data collection on priority species where we have gaps in knowledge, to enable us to inform and target conservation action
- Research to determine the feasibility of re-introduction to NI of the locally extinct chough
- Priority Species, and Lepidoptera Engagement, Officers carrying out a range of activities to benefit NI priority moth and butterfly species - training and workshops in identification and conservation management, community engagement, and direct conservation action through recruitment and engagement of volunteers
- Species recovery volunteer network – development of volunteer-led programmes to carry out species recovery work (monitoring, community talks, species protection, tracking etc).

The sum of our Green Recovery project compendium has the capacity to create **1217 one year jobs (FTE) or 320 jobs (FTE) per year for five years** in both 'high skilled' and 'less skilled' employment requiring project managers, conservation scientists, hydrologists, tourism specialists, GIS specialists as well as contractors - similar to what you would get in a traditional large-scale infrastructure project. Additional jobs would be created through multiplier effects, and in tourism and recreation, as nature investments attract more people to visit nature sites and surrounding areas. Delivery of these projects will also create opportunities for participants of the Green Jobs Scheme.

PART 3: Environment for Health

The Fifth point in our Five Point Plan for a Green Recovery stressed the importance of investing in nature to support healthier communities. This section provides further detail around how this can be achieved. We make proposals in three key areas: 1. Policy – Overarching legislation; 2. Mental Health and Access; 3. Sustainable Food and Diet.

During lockdown, the importance of natural spaces has come into sharp focus. A recent RSPB survey found that:

- 76% of people felt that nature has been an important source of comfort or relief,
- 81% felt that visiting nature makes them happier and 77% felt that nature has been important for their general health and happiness.
- 75% of those surveyed in May 2020 appreciated access to local green spaces since the crisis began.

Research conducted by Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland highlighted an unprecedented rise in the use of the outdoors during lockdown. The importance of greenspace and trails to people's health, wellbeing and connection with nature was clearly apparent:

- 84% felt physical health benefits from being outdoors
- 90% reported benefits related to mental health and wellbeing from being active in the natural environment
- 79% agreed that time outdoors made them feel closer to nature

There have been downsides to this increased access (e.g. litter and damage to some areas) but the benefits of nature to human health and wellbeing are more clearly understood and documented than ever. This gives a strong impetus to take action to increase and improve the capacity for people to engage with nature.

But our dependence on nature goes far beyond this. The natural environment provides clean air, pure water and the soil that supports the production of all of our food and sustains all life. Nature can help protect us from, and increase resilience to, the extreme weather events occurring due to climate change. Human health is directly related to the state of the environment, and numerous studies have shown that health inequalities parallel environmental problems. Ensuring that the environment supports health and well-being is critically important.

It is becoming ever more apparent that people must care for their environment and use its assets responsibly if we are to minimise the climate, biodiversity and pollution crises. We depend upon the green and blue infrastructure, from local parks to global oceans. The many benefits that the environment brings to health, wellbeing and economic prosperity should be fully recognised in all aspects of government policy and practice. We are stewards of our environment, we need it to prosper and be able to support our health, economy and society.

Policy – Overarching Legislation

The pandemic has shown us that we need to make lasting changes which will help our society, economy and environment become more resilient in the long term. This requires a number of policy developments:

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- **Implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):** Any NI Recovery Strategy must help deliver on our commitment to their implementation, maintaining legal commitments in areas such as public health, environmental protection and social equality while strengthening our societal resilience.
- **Introduction of a Northern Ireland Well-Being of Future Generations Act** and appointing a ‘Future Generations Commissioner’. This would help create the legislative footing for an NI that we all want to live in, ensuring all sectors are working towards the same well-being goals.
- **A new Outdoor Recreation Bill for NI:** The development of a new, fit-for-purpose legal framework for access to the countryside that would provide and expand access for the purpose of recreation. The National Outdoor Recreation Forum (NORF) recommends that this Bill would include the following components:
 - **Right of access on publicly owned land** – with exemptions for operational, public safety and security reasons
 - **Core path networks** – to meet the needs for all recreational users
 - **Permissive path agreements** – to replace reliance on the Recreation and Youth Services Order
 - **Access to open country** – to establish outdoor recreation areas on open land
 - **Public rights of way** – supported by public path creation orders
 - **Duty of care** – giving clarification of occupiers’ liability as it applies to recreational users.
- **Development and Implementation of a Walking strategy:** Walking is highly cost-effective and demonstrates that prevention really is better than cure. A cross-departmental Walking Strategy would enable a society where everyone benefits from walking as part of their everyday journeys, enjoys walking in the outdoors and which has easy access to places well designed to encourage walking. ([ORNI, 2021](#)).

To deliver the above requires cooperation and coordination between central and local government. Work has been carried out at national level as exemplified by the Carnegie Trust’s [Embedding Wellbeing in Northern Ireland](#). The Department for Infrastructure and Department for Communities joint working with Belfast City Council on the [Bolder Vision for Belfast](#) also demonstrates the importance of a multi-level approach to address issues ranging from climate resilience to health and quality of life.

We recognise that the implementation of policy and legislation will take time, so we have also identified actions that can be delivered immediately. There are a range of benefits that could be unlocked through Green Recovery Funding for a Natural Environment and Health Strategic Plan for Northern Ireland, as set out below.

Mental Health and Environmental Access

It is widely documented that human mental health and well-being emerges from a complex interplay between genetic, psychological, social and lifestyle factors and environmental exposures. NI citizens want to see action being taken, ([RSPB, 2020](#)), and this is particularly important in Northern Ireland where rates of anxiety and depression are around 25% higher ([HSCB, 2021](#)).

Investing in our natural environment by creating high quality natural places and urban green spaces will improve mental and physical health and provide cost savings for the NHS. This is especially important in areas of high deprivation. We want to enable a society where everyone benefits from nature, walking, outdoor activity and easy access to well-designed green spaces as part of their everyday life and journeys, which also encourages a sense of community and social cohesion.

Improved access to existing green spaces: Lockdown illustrated the importance of greenspace and trails to people’s health, wellbeing and connection with nature. Conversely, it also highlighted barriers to people getting outdoors, such as lack of access to close-to home off-road trails and greenspace, particularly in deprived and rural areas, ([ORNI, 2021](#)). Access to existing green spaces in NI needs to be improved to address these barriers and to meet this now well-documented need.

More green spaces and promoting usage: Ensuring children have access to green space and time in nature has been shown to build lifelong mental resilience ([National Trust, 2012](#)) and reduce the likelihood of being overweight ([Department for Health, 2012](#)). For all ages, a growing body of evidence confirms the positive relation between human-nature experiences and increased psychological well-being. Harm from environmental stressors is reduced, physical activity is encouraged and there is a reduction of risk factors and burden of some types of illnesses ([IEEP, 2020](#)). Access and usage could be improved through implementation of:

- **Council-wide Community Trail Plans:** Develop and implement a plan for natural green connectors and corridors across cities, towns and landscapes, connecting communities and people to green spaces. All Councils could be mandated to develop and implement a Community Trail Plan.
- **Improving Green Infrastructure for Active Travel:** To promote walking as a preferred mode of transport for all short journeys and the beginning and end of most journeys. The [2019 Travel Survey for Northern Ireland](#) showed that that overall, 19% of journeys were taken on foot or bicycle, a similar level to that recorded over the previous 5 years. A future increase in Active Travel would lead directly to environmental benefits such as reduced traffic emissions as well as health benefits for participants.
- **A NI-wide ‘Walking for All’ initiative:** The Walking For All programme is ‘shovel-ready’. The Greenbook Economic Appraisal concluded that ‘there is strong evidence to indicate a need for a flagship NI-wide led walking programme with sufficient scale and scope to contribute to addressing a number of issues facing society, such as levels of physical inactivity and social isolation’.

Improving mental health through nature-based treatments

Nature-based treatments are non-medical, socially supported solutions, offering a cost-effective approach to addressing prevalent mental health problems. Nature-based solutions present a platform that can fully integrate biodiversity, climate and health challenges and develop approaches with significant positive economic and societal benefits.

- **Social prescribing pilots in selected urban and rural communities:** Environmental activity interventions would be developed and offered as options to individuals participating in

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formal social prescribing initiatives such as those being delivered by the SPRING project (through the members of the Healthy Living Centre Alliance in Northern Ireland) and potentially by the new Multi-Disciplinary Teams in GP Practices. The social prescribing model is established and proven and can be expanded upon in NI.

Sustainable Food and Diet

The UN recognises food as one of the defining issues of the 21st century. Without action, the world risks failing to meet the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement. Putting sustainable food at the heart of a robust green recovery plan can improve our health, address the increase in food poverty, support our agri-food sector and enhance biodiversity in Northern Ireland in the aftermath of Covid-19.

Effective food governance and strategy is a vital component in building a resilient and sustainable food and farming sector. We are asking for:

- Expansion of cross-sectorial education programmes and training
- Development of Sustainable Food Places programme to join up existing work streams and encourage greater collaboration
- Adoption of Future of Food framework, taking a right to food approach
- Accelerating investment in sustainable, low carbon, nature friendly farming and production methods
- Improving public procurement to source more fresh, seasonal, local produce
- Relevant authorities to sign the [Glasgow Food and Climate Declaration](#)

Community Growing and Access to Publicly Owned Land

What if everyone had access to nutrient dense, affordable food grown according to nature-first principles? There is a convergence of motivations around land for community growing: Communities want space to grow because of recent shocks to the food supply chain (Covid19 panic buying and Brexit insecurity); councils have an increased awareness of demand from communities, some have strategies or policies which require them to increase community growing. The recent increase in interest in the urban farm concept shows how community thinking has developed. However, the enthusiasm and energy of potential Community Growing groups is often frustrated because of lack of process for Community Asset Transfer within the statutory landowner organisation.

- **Establish a Community Asset Transfer process:** In order to promote community growing the process of Community Asset Transfer must be established within statutory bodies. With a process in place, land, such as within parks or unused public areas, could be managed by communities either by title transfer or peppercorn lease arrangement.

Conclusion

Funding large scale projects covering all aspects of environmental protection and enhancement would enable the Northern Ireland Executive to create employment opportunities, up-skill the workforce for a sustainable future, and deliver a Green Recovery from the Covid-19 crisis.



A Green Recovery Fund would enable the delivery of nature-based projects, as well as enabling eNGO's to undertake more substantial developmental work to design major strategic projects. These projects could provide benefits for climate regulation, improvement of water quality, reduction in flood risk, job creation, tourism and improved mental and physical health and well-being.

A well-funded, NIGJS could provide an important delivery mechanism for aspects of the projects delivered through the Green Recovery Fund. At the same time, it would provide young people and those recently unemployed with paid employment, as well as the skills and experience they need to secure future environmental jobs in a green growth focussed economy. It would enable a generation of young people to work in jobs that benefit both the environment, the individual and wider society. At a minimum, the proposed Jobstart Scheme, should be established by the NI Executive to enable environmental organisations in the voluntary and community sector to pilot a Green Jobs Scheme.

The Covid-19 pandemic has reinforced the connection between public health and a healthy environment. There is clear public support for improving our environment and improving access to it - for everyone. Our experience over the past year has emphasised the need for new approaches to sustainable food and increased community participation. Most of all it has highlighted the importance of a high quality, local and accessible environment for our physical and mental health.

A strong, stable and growing environmental sector will be required to help deliver the government's green growth ambitions. The sector will need ongoing and increased government support to grow capacity and expand the work being delivered.