

**Northern Ireland Environment Link
(NIEL) briefing to the British Irish
Parliamentary Assembly:
13th October 2016**



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Present: Patrick Casement, Chair NIEL; Craig McGuicken CEO, NIEL; Sean Kelly, Parliamentary and Development Officer NIEL; Joanne Sherwood Director RSPB NI;

NIEL is the networking body for non-statutory organisations concerned with the environment of Northern Ireland. 70+ Full Members, with more than 100,000 members, bring together a range of knowledge and expertise across a wide range of environmental fields.

NIEL: Key Messages on Implications of Brexit

- Environmental legislation must not be weakened and the level of environmental protection should be just as good if not better than that currently afforded.
- Future land management policies must meet the public's desire for a countryside rich in nature while supporting farmers to make a living, produce food and deliver environmental goods and services from the land they hold.
- State of Nature Report 2016 (NI) - outlines that the intensification of agriculture has had the biggest negative impact on wildlife, over the past 40 years. This biodiversity loss is not a failing or a criticism of farmers, but of the farming system that they are dependent on for their livelihoods. Whilst agriculture has undoubtedly had a negative impact on nature, there are some good news stories and we believe that farmers and improved agricultural policies are part of the solution.
- Brexit offers the opportunity to streamline and improve the effectiveness of future agricultural policy to deliver greater public good, providing food security whilst protecting our natural heritage for future generations.
- Unique challenges associated with the NI/RoI Land Border - as NI has a land border with another Member State, many environmental problems have a cross border dimension. Indeed, the island of Ireland needs to be considered as a single biogeographic unit. It is important that effective mechanisms exist to resolve and manage cross border environmental issues post Brexit.
- What is required is a win:win solution that delivers for both the environment and farming. The new policy framework needs to provide a sustainable future for agriculture whilst protecting the environment, using public money to deliver multiple benefits for tax payers thereby improving the return on investment.

The Value of the Environment Sector in Northern Ireland

- Estimated around 900 FTEs
- Volunteer workforce of over 350,000
- Manages over 314,000 acres of land for public benefit
- Spends over £20m per annum in the NI economy
- Leverages in between £3 and £7 for every £1 invested in core funding
- Over 100,000 members in NI

We believe that the environment underpins our health, well-being and economy. Most of all, our environment is something for people to enjoy - we believe that increasing peoples access to the environment is the best way to ensure its preservation.

Through EU legislation, a wide range of environmental protection has been set out, and it is essential that following Brexit NI maintains a high level of environmental protection. The EU has also provided high levels of investment in the environment, and again, it is essential that this level of support is continued.

The Value of the Agricultural Sector in Northern Ireland

- Agriculture and the agri-food industries are key economic sectors in NI accounting for 1.4% of total Gross Value Added compared to an overall UK figure of 0.6%; also supporting 3.4% of total employment compared to the UK figure of 0.6%.
- In 2015, income from the agricultural industry in NI totalled £185m, of which £135m originated from CAP payments. £38,746,490 was invested in Pillar 2 measures with the aim of restoring, preserving and enhancing ecosystems related to agriculture and forestry.
- Public funds through CAP (Pillar 1) has helped to keep people on the land avoiding large scale land abandonment but has not delivered progress in terms of halting biodiversity loss or achieving the protection and restoration of natural capital and ecosystems.

An initial assessment by NIEL of the opportunities and risks from developing our own agri-environment policy and funding is provided in Appendix 1.

The Challenges of Brexit

Regardless of which camp people fall into, nature and the environment is something which unites us. This should be our starting point.

- Economic issues have dominated discussions of post-Brexit negotiations and triggering of Article 50, to date little discussion of the environment, environmental protection or sustainable development.
- The challenges for the NI environment such as Biodiversity loss, Climate Change, Air and Water Quality remain the same now as before the UK voted to leave the EU.
- Continued Legislative protection for habitats and species - Depending on the trading option chosen by the UK, much of the current suite of EU environmental legislation may still apply, with the exception of the Nature Directives and the Bathing Water Directive. A priority for the UK/NI government moving forward should be to effectively address this gap through future proofing domestic legislation to ensure the UK/devolved regions protect their natural heritage and effectively deliver on global agreements including biodiversity and climate change.
- EU environmental directives have been the major driver to environmental protection and improvement in Northern Ireland. European funding for environmental improvement in NI has been largely aligned to the objectives outlined within these Directives and is provided through a range of funds including; LIFE, Interreg and Agri-

environment measures under the CAP. The Brexit vote has therefore introduced a number of uncertainties around the continuity of legislative and long-term funding support for our environment post Brexit.

- The environmental NGO sector plays a key role in helping government to meet its national and international environmental obligations. A key aspect is our ability to lever additional funds from EU sources to meet these commitments. An alternative mechanism is required to help support the NGO sector to meet these international obligations.
- The recent review of the Nature Directives had the highest response ever seen in Europe with more than 500,000 responses and was broadly in favour of retaining the Directives in the current state.

Other Areas of Uncertainty:

- Environment cuts across national boundaries and in the absence of EU membership will there be an opportunity/mechanism to work at an international level to address common problems?
- Many Environmental Directives have been underpinned by national legislation that also facilitates other International agreements beyond the EU level in areas such as halting Biodiversity loss, the Aarhus Convention etc. This national and other international legislation will also need to be reviewed.
- Certain measures with the Going for Growth Strategy (particularly in relation to research) and the corresponding Sustainable Agriculture Land Management Strategy may be reliant upon EU funds.
- Brexit provides an opportunity to develop bespoke agricultural policy for the UK which effectively integrates agriculture and environmental needs and priorities. This could however lead to different environmental standards in different parts of the UK.
- There is a danger of environmental protections being eroded in a 'race to the bottom' as the UK seeks to undercut EU production and attract businesses to UK advertised as a 'low regulation' zone.
- Even if lower standards are not the result, there may be lack of enforcement of comparable environmental standards by UK agencies. Not only does Northern Ireland not have an independent Environmental Protection Agency but there is also an issue around the capacity of DAERA, given the recent Voluntary Exit Scheme.

Environmental NGOs intend to work with government to ensure the best outcomes for our environment, whatever the mechanisms or political situation. Many environmental organisations have the experience and expertise to offer assistance in the time ahead and look forward to working on a local regional and inter-regional basis to meet these environmental challenges.

Appendix 1

Opportunities from developing our own agri-environment policy and funding

- Brexit provides a once in a life time opportunity to develop bespoke agricultural policy for the UK which effectively integrates agriculture and environmental needs and priorities
- The flexibility for the UK to design a policy mechanism that is strategic and long term, effectively recognising the need for land management systems to deliver multiple benefits for society
- Provides the option of streamlining administration to reduce costs and deliver better value for money
- Policy tools could more effectively integrate capacity building to underpin the policy implementation and maximise impact. This provision exists within the current CAP, however is not fully utilised
- The policy design process could integrate EU standards associated with any future trade agreement (where relevant) and build on international best practice
- It could effectively recognise the multiple 'public goods' that can be delivered by land managers as custodians of our natural heritage and natural resources – e.g. water quality, soil condition, natural capital, carbon storage, public access - through investment of public funds targeted to achieve specific outcomes
- It could continue to support a viable and sustainable agricultural industry by recognising the role of land owners as 'custodian of the countryside' whilst addressing the current 'silo mentality' that exists with respect to food production
- Deliver improved value for money for the UK tax payer

Risks from developing our own agri-environment policy and funding

- Inadequate budget made available which limits delivery of key environmental outcomes, therefore the policy will not have a meaningful and positive impact
- Ineffective targeting of resources – historically there has been competition between Pillar 1 & Pillar 2. NI was the only region of the UK that did not apply the discretionary reallocation of money from Pillar 1 to Pillar 2 CAP
- Competition between targeted habitat management, restoration and wider countryside measures e.g. hedge and tree planting. There is a tendency to look for simple options rather than addressing priority environmental needs
- Poor cross sector integration of government policies – e.g. encouraging intensification to the detriment of the environment

- Lack of momentum caused by a policy vacuum which could cause significant biodiversity decline as new mechanisms are put in place
- Funding uncertainty which will limit investment in both agriculture and the environment and could result in habitat loss due to intensification, land abandonment or inappropriate management
- Restructuring of the industry caused by loss or reduction of income support payments which could cause land abandonment or limit uptake of Pillar 2 measures
- Lack of capacity within the industry which will limit the effectiveness of policy mechanisms