

NIEL Environmental Hustings Report



22nd April 2016

Lough Neagh Discovery Centre

Oxford Island

May 2016

A report by Northern Ireland Environment Link

Northern Ireland Environment Link is the networking and forum body for organisations interested in the natural and built environment of Northern Ireland.

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Political Representatives

The logo for the Alliance party, featuring the word "Alliance" in a black serif font on a yellow rectangular background.

Trevor Lunn



Edwin Poots



Danny O'Neill



Cathal Boylan



Alan Love



Alastair Patterson

All parties represented at the Assembly during the previous mandate (2011-2016) were invited to attend our Environmental Hustings for the 2016 elections.

Environmental Hustings 2016

Approximately 60 people representing environmental groups from across Northern Ireland came together at an environmental hustings event on the 22nd April 2016 to challenge the political parties to outline their green credentials in advance of the May 2016 Assembly Elections.

The event was organised by Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) as a follow up to the publication of their 2016 sectoral “Priorities for the Environment 2016-21”. The hustings event provided an opportunity for Northern Ireland's political parties to answer questions and set out their policies with regard to Northern Ireland's environment.

With environmental organisations representing well in excess of 100,000 members, delegates were keen to hear what environmental commitments and assurances the political parties could give if their party were returned to serve in the next Assembly.

Party spokespeople were questioned on a range of issues and their responses have formed the basis of this report which we hope will assist voters with environmental concerns in making their electoral choices.

Format

The event commenced with an introduction by the Chair. The spokespeople from each political party were invited to make a brief (2 minutes) opening remark before responding to questions from the floor from delegates on environmental issues.

The order for first response was rotated between the political parties for each question.

The responses in this report were recorded on the day and have been approved by the speakers as representing the views expressed at the event.

Health

Gary McFarlane, CIEH:

Do the candidates think that the current structures for funding the health sector are sustainable? Would the candidates support the concept of resources designed to prevent ill health and secure wellbeing for health and wellbeing being channelled OUTSIDE the conventional health service (given that the health service cannot in fact significantly address the wider determinants of health and wellbeing)?

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Key word is prevention. The health service deals with the cure, but the cost of providing the health service is rising in each, so unless we can stop people coming into the system it becomes unsustainable. We should encourage people through GPs to get into the environment and have an active lifestyle.



The health sector is sustainable in principle, with fairer taxation. But broadly agree with the approach of the question. Access to green space in NI is the worst in the UK. We need a Bill increase access to green space, because we know from the science that biodiverse green space correlates with wellbeing.



Public health is critically important. Prevention is always better than cure. People using the outdoors for an active lifestyle needs to be encouraged. If access to the countryside is to be increased, measures need to be put in place to protect landowners.



How does the environment sector as a group tie in with the health service? I would support ways of connecting a more cross-sectoral approach to health. I support the idea of using what we have in the environment to promote health.



The current structures are not sustainable, but government needs to revamp its priorities. Health and the environment are very closely interlinked. We must not put burdens on farmers in term of access to the countryside.



Health and wellbeing is a major issue. I am not sure if the current structures are fully sustainable, and more work needs to be done in this area. Access to open green spaces is something that can certainly help our health and wellbeing. The UUP manifesto includes a number of things around health and wellbeing and connecting that to our wider environment. The introduction of exercise prescription schemes in GP to encourage physical activity is something that should be explored.

Supplementary question:

Jonna Monaghan, Belfast Healthy Cities:

There are significant inequalities in relation to health and place in Northern Ireland. For example, childhood obesity varies from 19% in the South Eastern HSC Trust area to 23% in the Western HSC Trust area. How will candidates work to reduce inequalities and ensure access to healthy places for everyone in Northern Ireland?



There should be equality of access to healthcare for everyone. You mentioned obesity, and access to outdoors and getting people active would help towards the solution.



Something that holds people back is an excessive application of health and safety regulation.



How do we tie what is good in the environment to the health budget and policies. Schemes like allotments are important in treating mental health and other issues.



Travelling on a bus from Sandy Row to Malone, and life expectancy increased by 9 years. Health inequality and educational underachievement go hand in hand, so you need to treat the problem at source. Working with schools through things like breakfast clubs – no fizzy drinks, no crisps or sweets in the school. That can make a transformational difference to the lives of children and young people.



Some colleagues of mine work with children to bring them into nature. One such girl came from Liverpool and she stepped into the scenery of Northern Wales and was completely overwhelmed by the scenery. This is about reversing the 'extinction of experience', and is about good urban planning but also we need to have explicit access to the environment and countryside in NI.

Supplementary question:

Anne Madden, Sustrans:

We know traffic-free Greenways are beneficial to the environment, our health and the economy. For these reasons a Greenway Strategy is being developed for Northern Ireland. Are you committed to the funding of Greenways over the next decade?



The Greens are committed to that, wholeheartedly. There has been a lot of work in Belfast with regard to cycling, but that need to extend beyond Belfast to more rural areas. We support a £25 per person investment in infrastructure.



In terms of public health, we want as many people as possible to have the opportunity to get out there and walk and cycle. We will seek to assist with that. IN terms of funding, it is hard to give cast iron commitments at this stage, because going into the development of the PfG, health and education will be our priorities.



It is up to a Minister to prioritise their funding. Make sure you ask the right question in the right way – does this have long-term gains in terms of health, for example?



I am all for greenways. I have slight reservations about the comber greenway because it was a lost opportunity to introduce light rail and relieve congestion in that area. Greenways are a low capital opportunity of encouraging people to get out and be active. Urban greenways are also great for nature.



I am in support of greenways and the further establishment of them. It is always difficult to prioritise funding, but we are supportive.

Land and Landscape

Pete Mullin, Landscape Institute:

With a limited land area and increasingly competitive demands on this resource, does your party agree that there is a need here for a national landscape / land use strategy as in Scotland and Republic of Ireland? If so, what will you do to ensure that this is put in place?



The UUP are on record as supporting the Land Strategy for Northern Ireland. It is important to work with the Landowners in developing any such strategy.



We have an overwhelmingly urban electorate. The rural electorate is very small. We cannot allow an urban electorate that sees the countryside as a museum set aside for their pleasure to dominate the countryside while ignoring the views of those who live and work in it. Use of the countryside needs to be thought about carefully and sensitively.



I support the principle of a Land Use Strategy. We have the SPPS and Local Development Plans coming up, we have designations. There are existing opportunities for engaging over these issues as well.



I am sympathetic to the Land Use Strategy. I think there are opportunities for things like increased soil testing, and supporting environmental measures in agricultural. We have an opportunity to better utilise our land.



I agree with the need for the Strategy. For example, urban and urban fringe environments are among our most biodiverse – having a Strategy that recognises that value is important and is something that is missed in current policy and legislation.



Current protections are not sufficient, and we would support the idea of a Land and Landscape Strategy, including the development of Shoreline Plans. Not to discount what is already there, but to bring it together in a cohesive way.

Heritage

Philip MacDonald, NI Archaeology Forum:

In the light of the new Community Planning Powers in Councils, what is your party's position on how our natural and historic environment can be integrated to play a greater role in our communities?



There is a need to ensure that Community Planning is used to further our natural and built environment. It would be easier with Community Regeneration powers as well. Planning guidance should exist to spread best practice in local councils, using our natural environment to promote shared communities, opening up our neighbourhoods to everyone.



I agree that there needs to be integration. All developments should be required to provide access to green space for the reasons already outlined. I would be keen to defend community-led initiatives. Lots of these initiatives have been devastated by cuts to the third sector.



A lot of archaeological digs are taking place on sites that are being developed. We do have a fantastic means through new technology to better identify where archaeological assets lie. I would like to see us using these assets better in terms of tourism. No one is bringing all of this together to best utilise it.



The built heritage has a major part to play, especially in our tourism product. We have an opportunity under Community Planning to get people in the door so that they can influence things. I have concerns about funding for protection of built heritage, so that we can use it as the tourism product.



Community Planning powers in Local Councils are a good move. We support local referenda on controversial planning issues. Local people can get left out of the equation.



Our built heritage is extremely important – we all have places that are important to us, and they must be preserved. They are part of our identity. There is concern about protecting funding for this, and we need to look at that.

Neighbourhood

Carmel Fyfe, Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful

We spend £100,000 a day to keep our streets free of dog fouling and litter. Tourism accounts for over 5% of our GDP and is growing. However, the filthy environments many encounter are slowing that much needed economic boost from visitors. Can the panel members tell us how their parties plan to support measures that will build a society that takes its responsibilities as seriously as it values its rights, in order to help our economy?



That is a shocking figure. We need to ensure that there are severe penalties in place to deter people.



The key is enforcement. We will not park our cars on double yellow lines because of enforcement. We should have enforcement for acts like littering. Education obviously comes into it – teaching the idea of looking after your own local environment. But enforcement is the key.



We have Clean Neighbourhoods, Environmental Better Regulation, the Marine Litter Strategy, Eco-Schools – lots of good ideas. We need proper implementation of these things, and strong partnership working with councils, and enforcement.



I do not think this is an issue of enforcement, though enforcement is a necessary part – it is an issue of education. The countries that are cleanest have been educated from the youngest years that littering is not appropriate. Our education process needs to drive these messages home.



Education has a huge part to play. We have the legislation but it is not being equally implemented across councils. When we get access to places, we actually clean things up. Schemes like the Big Spring Clean are important for getting communities involved in cleaning up our environment.

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This is a question of education versus enforcement. I don't think you'll solve it by enforcement. Education has worked, to a large extent, in the case of dog fouling. You need enforcement as a long stop, but that won't solve it – it is too difficult to catch culprits.

Economy

Stephen Aston, NIEL Economics of Nature Working Group

Research increasingly suggests that traditional linear models of economic growth are inherently unsustainable. Do you agree that we need a more holistic approach to prosperity than GDP, and if so, how would your party define that?

Alliance

GDP measures economic growth, but not sustainability or wellbeing. Finding out how to measure those is a challenge for the next government. The next PfG will be outcome based, and there will need to be indicators to measure the progress of government. We need a more nuanced approach to measuring progress than what we have used in the past.



There are lots of things we can measure – happiness, social mobility, income and equality. Money correlates with happiness only to a very low threshold, and then it is all about fairness. A prosperous society is a fair society.



GDP is a particularly blunt instrument for measuring economic growth. There is a range of other things that need to be taken into account including sustainability. We need to continue to invest in finding sustainable ways of supporting manufacturing and business. The economy is critical, but we will only have a sustainable economy if we can find a way to utilise our natural resources in way that can allow us to do that for centuries ahead.



The idea of the circular economy is something that should be explored. We need to look at waste as a commodity – we can't keep consuming and consuming and growing. These things need to be looked at. STEM has a major part to play in education and how we address these issues in the future. In terms of the economy, the built heritage as a tourism product is important, and we can get ideas from this sector.



GDP is not the be all and end all. Prosperity is to live in a free and democratic society.



GDP is important, but we feel that other measures need to be put in place for wellbeing. Whatever we do must be sustainable. Wellbeing measures such as life satisfaction is extremely important. The satisfaction of health, family life, social life – we need to look at all these areas in making Northern Ireland work.

Future

Jennifer Fulton, Ulster Wildlife

Can you describe the environmental legacy you would like to leave to your grandchildren and how are you going to make sure that this happens?



The legacy we need to leave for our grandchildren is a countryside in excellent condition. We need to look at Climate Change. Targets set by the last Executive have not been fully met. We need to achieve our targets this time. Global warming is the big issue.



Yes, we need to protect our environment. I couldn't disagree more on the issue of global warming – I disagree with the science. We have to remember that our grandparents left us quite a good environment. We should not ruin our economy by trying to cut carbon dioxide emissions.



I fully support the protection of our green and blue infrastructure. I think we need to introduce a Climate Change Bill with clear and achievable targets. There are others things too like the Wellbeing for Future Generations Bill. We have a responsibility to protect the environment, and if it takes legislation to do it, then so be it.



We want to have clean air by reducing the amount of coal fire and oil powered power station, using other sources to generate electricity. We want to have clean water by investing in sewerage infrastructure, and in working with farmers and business to make sure waste is properly dealt with. Our grandparents' generation destroyed our river courses through the linen mills, and farming practices were less environmentally aware. But there is much better education now.



We would seek to implement a Climate Bill. You can be a climate sceptic and still support all the things that that would entail – for example, clean and safe transport, clean energy. I would like to see restoration of habitat too.



Maximum use of renewable energy will translate into cleaner air. Clean water, clean seas. Access to the countryside. Safe food. Climate change is a global problem, and Northern Ireland can play its part and perhaps lead the way in dealing with the problem and reversing the trend.

Supplementary question:

Jane McCullough, Climate Northern Ireland

Given the importance of Climate Change impacts on future health and wellbeing, where does your party stand on the introduction of a Climate Bill for Northern Ireland?



We are supportive of a Climate Change Bill coming in. Getting health and wellbeing right is linked to looking after the environment.



The UK Climate Change Act is, in my party's opinion, a futile attempt to mitigate the unlikely consequences of an unproven hypothesis. We do not need to be worrying about climate change – climate change happens all the time. We do not need a Climate Change Act. We do need to look after our environment. We are barking up the wrong alley in reducing carbon – we are impoverishing ourselves.



Yes, we would support a Bill. We need to bring everything together rather than leave it to one Department.



We have had the UK Climate Change Act for some years now, and I would challenge as to what has been the tangible benefit of it. Legislation is not the magic bullet. Good policy is better and more efficient response in dealing with things as they happen.



We support a Climate Bill of some kind. You don't have to buy into the idea that climate change is man made to want the products of that legislation. The Executive needs to stop doing things like cutting funding to renewables. This is the only part of the UK where all subsidies for renewables have been cut. Mature industries like oil and gas are subsidised, so we need to push back against that hard.

Education

Alyn Jones, Alliance Youth Works, Education for Sustainable Development Forum:

There is growing evidence here and around the world that outdoor and environmental education has benefits for our children's health, wellbeing, social and academic development across the curriculum in numeracy, literacy, and the STEM activities that are vital for the future of NI. It has also been shown to be beneficial in improving classroom discipline. We suggest that interaction between the Department of Education, and the new DAERA is essential to develop outdoor environmental education. What will your party do to ensure that this link between children's positive development and the outdoors is nurtured and optimised?

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The thrust of the question is correct. The value of outdoor education is widely recognised, and there is terrific work being done at primary level. Maybe academic pressures take over at secondary level. The question of interaction between the two Departments in the incoming mandate is very valid.



I agree with the need for Departmental interaction. Steven Agnew's Children's Bill is an example of such an interaction. I am keen to see that extra curricular outdoor pursuits do not disappear at secondary level. We need to reverse what is called the 'extinction of experience' in the academic world. We don't need much of the outdoors in our experience to make a big difference.



Primary schools do a tremendous work in terms of environment. I do think that there is probably a tailing off at the start of secondary school. I welcome the introduction of the GCSE on environment and land use. Recognition of the environment in an academic forum is something that is very positive, and we could see further development of that in the STEM subjects. The environment is key to sustainable economy and agriculture.



I think the Eco-Schools programme is very good. There is a gap between primary school and university – the secondary school gap. The link between the two Departments is key. We can do our bit to look at the curriculum. We as a party will put forward your positions, and we have an open door policy for anyone who wants to come and do that.



I am fully behind putting a strong emphasis on STEM subjects. Environmental education links the various sciences together. Humans are part of the environment, and what we do is part of the environment, and that needs to be reflected in education.



Getting our children outside and involved in outdoor activities is one of the greatest ways that they can learn. Get children outside and off electronic devices, and they will learn more.

Nature

Joanne Sherwood, RSPB:

Our nature is in trouble. 'Response for Nature' was endorsed by 14 local conservation organisations and delivered a stark warning that the pressures on nature are increasing – including habitat loss, climate, pollution, over-exploitation of natural resources and invasive non-native species. What specific measures will your party put in place in the next Assembly to ensure that we begin to reverse these declines?



Valuing nature is one of the key things in the UUP Manifesto. We have such diverse countryside – we need to value it. Certain safeguards need to be put in place to protect it.



We should be doing everything we can to preserve habitats. Urban areas have a large part to play in this – urban gardens are often more suitable for birds than rural areas.



We do have to value nature, but we can't do it without looking at the Land Use Strategy. We also need to make sure that the Birds and Habitats Directive is fully implemented. We need to work with farmers too, to support them in halting decline.



I don't absolutely agree that nature is in trouble, though I think there are many challenges facing it. Many things happening are good for nature. We do need to work in the Assembly to establish good policy to support nature. The PfG will be established in the first 2 weeks after the election, and how do we make the environment key to the PfG and ensure links with other things like education?



In terms of specifics, we have a network of MCZs now, but we need to make sure they are enforced. Invasives can be distracting, but we need to make sure we focus on wider issues and make sure that we have explicit protection for pockets of land.



Our manifesto has a significant section on nature and biodiversity. At the moment we don't have proper control over our bee population, and there is a problem with imported bees.

Freshwater

John Martin, RSPB, Freshwater Task Force:

Given the strong economic argument for implementing the Water Framework Directive (benefits are estimated at £197.6 million to £283.7 million between now and 2021), and the evidence showing that it is a clear win/win for society, how will your party seek to implement the WFD for the benefit of NI within the next assembly term?



We have said in our manifesto that we want to implement the WFD and ensure maximum opportunity to protect wetlands. We need to get serious about investing in our water and sewerage infrastructure. ICE rated our water infrastructure as grade C, which means it requires attention, and our waste water infrastructure is grade D, at risk. We need to take action on these things.



We need to implement the WFD. Some of the recommendations of the WFD are to do with reducing nitrogen and phosphorous, and we can and are making progress with respect to working with animal feed and agri-industry. Water is a serious thing and we need decent infrastructure in place.



In terms of the WFD, there has been significant investment in water and sewerage infrastructure over the last two Assemblies. It is part of our manifesto commitments to continue to invest in infrastructure. It is also about working with those who are producing nutrient-rich materials – largely agriculture. There is much more we can do to ensure that those nutrients are well utilised for the benefit of agriculture and not to the detriment of the environment.



DRD have introduced the Long Term Water Strategy, and it is in support of the WFD. A lot of work has been done in terms of water and sewerage. We need to support people to achieve targets. It will take a lot of cost to achieve the WFD, and we want to review that on an annual basis.



The problem with the WFD is that it is biology-led, and not looking at the other factors in a chaotic system. The WFD is a one size fits all EU Directive, and we can do much better at a UK and NI level.



We need more investment in infrastructure. We have some of the most polluted waterways in Europe. We need to implement the WFD. We need to look at the problem of septic tanks discharging into our waterways.

Supplementary question:

Gary Houston, Ulster Angling Federation:

Freshwater is an important resource with multiple benefits for society, including recreation and tourism activities such as angling, canoeing, sailing and swimming. What are the panel members going to do to reverse the decline in our freshwater quality and safeguard these important activities?



We need to take the advice of the WFD, in terms of preventing effluent getting into rivers. But we need to go further than that in terms of reintroducing species and specifically stock rivers and marine systems. It is also about educating the public and commercial fishermen.



3 main sources of pollution – the water services themselves, agriculture, and industry. We need to make progress on all 3, but there are opportunities to work with polluters to improve practices.



We get quarterly updates on incidents. It is about holding people to account, but we need to work along with farmers and NI Water to improve practises.



We need to be looking strongly at sources of pollution. Enforcement must be carried out and there must be proper penalties for those who are guilty and persistently pollute.



We do need to invest in infrastructure – one of our main bodies that deal with the treatment of sewerage should not be one of our main polluters. We need to clean up our waterways to boost our hospitality and tourism sectors.

Marine

Rebecca Hunter, NI Marine Task Force:

Research has suggested that the Natural Capital of our marine environment is proportionally worth more than English or Scottish seas – for example, an effective network of Marine Protected Areas may be worth up to £54.5 million per annum to the Northern Ireland economy. How will your party prioritise the value of healthy seas in policy decision making?



Marine systems have been in decline for decades. The Assembly took a good step forward with the Marine Act. There is more to be done, and we all have a collective responsibility to tackle the responsibility in the next mandate.



We need to coordinate very closely with the industries that use the sea – shipping and fishing. It is vital that control of our own waters is returned to the UK. We are hamstrung by Directives – our marine resources are vital and we should have our own legislation protects and encourages proper use.



We fully support the Marine Act and the introduction of the MCZs. We now need a proper management plan to look after them, and for our coasts as well. Perhaps we need a Marine Strategy of some form.



Legislation in and of itself is not the answer. It is about the implementation of appropriate policy. It is about carrying out our duties under the WFD, it is about ensuring that good science is used to manage sustainable fisheries, and how we use our marine assets for producing renewable energies. NI could produce enough renewable energy to export to the rest of the UK in due course.



The case of MCZ is overwhelming, and can be an economic case. We need to enforce their protection, and that will ultimately benefit our economy.



We have a tremendous resource in our marine environment, and we support the designation of MCZs based on scientific evidence.

Supplementary question:

Howard Platt, NI Marine Task Force:

Over 50% of Northern Ireland's biodiversity is found within our seas. How will your party ensure that our seas are healthy in the future and that they will meet our EU obligations for Good Environmental Status under the Marine Strategy Framework Directive by 2020?



We need to take this on board and deal with it. We as a party are committed to doing that.



The EU Directives are one size fits all. We need to take responsibility in NI for our own environment. EU Directives can be a box-ticking exercise. We need our own legislation.



We need to fully implement our Marine Act, but we need to look a biodiversity through the strategy or a Bill.



We in NI are so privileged because it doesn't matter which part of the coastline you go to, it is stunning. We need to make sure we are not pumping waste into it, investing in our sewerage infrastructure. The amount of waste that gets into our sea is something we need to continue to work on. We need to ensure protection of MCZ and perhaps expand on them in the future.



It is mainly about enforcement. There are only a few boats on the coast that can enforce protection. That needs to change. Community engagement is very important – communities can be involved in policing areas. There are not enough boats to cover our coastline. We do need local legislation, but sometimes international legislation is necessary – for example, mackerel swim all the way to Iceland so we need to have international arrangement to manage that.

Governance

Diane Ruddock, National Trust:

In light of regulatory failure seen in recent years, what radical changes in governance will you and your party make to ensure the confident, transparent and funded delivery of NI's environmental obligations?



The first is an Independent Environmental Protection Agency. I think that is essential for Northern Ireland. We need to implement binding and stringent carbon emission targets. We need to develop a Climate Change Act for Northern Ireland.



Creating an Independent Environment Protection Agency. We also need a Climate Change Bill. Also, we need to work on efficiency – making Government Departments work together is important too.



NIEA is largely independent in its day-to-day running and management, but there is a degree of public accountability, which is always important. In terms of radical, perhaps ensuring that the Departments work more closely together to implement policy. Bringing the Departments together will present opportunities in itself. Within DAERA we would propose a wall between environment and agriculture, ensuring the independence of the people carrying out the environmental work.



We have fought long and hard for an Independent Environment Agency. The reality is that NIEA is going to be swallowed up in a bigger Department. I have major concerns about not having a dedicated Department of Environment. We need the Independent Agency, and the Climate Bill (which we may get), but we also need the people in this room involved in decision-making in the new DAERA.



Many years ago one of the criticisms of DoE was that it was poacher and gamekeeper because the same Department was responsible for water quality and sewerage disposal. That changed, but now the Department of the Environment is being subsumed inside the Department of Agriculture. It is a poacher and gamekeeper situation again. We do need an Independent Environment Protection Agency.



The UUP have had concerns about the performance of the NIEA. I am getting to grasp the gravity of some of the environmental issues facing NI. In relation to the full Independent Environment Agency, I do feel that it needs some Departmental controls. But we do need to review its full role and full scope, and we need to engage with stakeholders.

Questions from the floor

Albert Keys, Erne Rivers Trust:

We have a dam on the Erne River. We were the most successful salmon fishery in Europe before they put the dams on. They spent a million on investigating how to get salmon back in the Erne, and nothing has been implemented. When are we going to see civil servants implementing things?



We agree that not enough is being done. There can often be will from the top to do things, but that can be lost in inefficiency and duplication of effort. What is required is more directed funding to do the job that is needed. There is a lot we can do in terms of stopping waste products getting into our rivers and seas.



A lot of good things have happened, but there is a lot more to do. There is always more to do. There have been massive steps to improve things over the last Assembly.



We have the Marine Litter Strategy. Clearly there is an issue here for civil servants. We as politicians build working relations, but ultimately if things are not working it comes back to the industry. In terms of what we would do, we need to hold people to account when people are not doing their jobs.



We have to go forward and properly enforce existing legislation.



It is sad to hear stories of the lack of fish in Lough Erne. Research was done, and there was no deliverables following it – that's wrong. There has to be targets set. You have to measure something. Ministers need to be held to account.

James Orr, Friends of the Earth:

Does the panel agree that exploratory drilling for oil and gas in Northern Ireland, as currently proposed by the DoE, should require planning permission? I say that because many people need planning permission to build a porch in their house, yet at Woodburn Forest, in a water catchment, directional drilling using chemicals, in a public amenity, does not require planning permission or environmental consent.



Planning permission should be needed.



Planning permission should be needed, though I would encourage that we exploit our underground resources.



Yes.



It is irrational, if there are assets in Northern Ireland, that we don't seek to utilise them. Importing gas from Russia and oil from the Middle East is not particularly sensible if we have resources available. It should be done correctly, and all due processes should be followed. Every step should be taken to ensure that the environment is not damaged as a consequence. If that is done through planning permission, fine, or if through some other form of regulation. If there are substantial oil reserves in Northern Ireland, we should be looking at how we utilise that resource.



Yes. The resource of fossil fuel in Northern Ireland is tiny, and the exploitation of it is a moot point and will not get us anywhere in respect to energy security.

Jim Greg, Six Mile Water Trust

The EU has been mentioned. Will an exit from Europe result in a weakness to our environment protection?



I would think so, yes. We need coherent legislation. Environmental issues are not restricted to national boundaries.



No. We should apply environmental legislation which is appropriate to Northern Ireland rather than slavishly applying legislation which is Europe wide.



Yes. I don't believe we would get the financial support to work with our farmers to protect the environment.



We are perfectly capable of making our own legislation on the environment. We must leave Europe.



I fear that there would be issues in having these things dealt with, with an exit from Europe.

Colum Delaney, RSPB

Nature is not very high on the political agenda, and I was recently at an event where I listened to a presentation from an OFMDFM official reporting on an omnibus survey about the big issues facing society. He said that only 7 people had mentioned the natural environment. If your party is re-elected to the Executive, will you guarantee that you will talk to your negotiators to make sure that nature and the environment is not left out when it comes to the big decisions in the PFG?



Nature and the environment need to be taken on board. If we as the UUP, after the discussions around the PFG, decide to go into the Executive, we will take that in with us.



We will not be taking our seats at the Executive regardless of how many are elected. But apart from that, yes, nature and the natural environment must take a reasonable priority. Not the top priority, but a reasonable priority.



Yes, we will be taking this forward. Not only in terms of protection but, after today's discussion, it has a lot to contribute.



I'm backing Bob.



We will not be on the Executive, but we will provide vocal and effective opposition. Our record on the environment speaks for itself.

Jonathan Bell, Open Government Network

I would be interested to know where the parties stand in relation to party political funding. I think that is a vital issue in restoring faith in the institutions and trust in the elected representatives.



The Greens have led the way on that. We do not accept corporate donations from anyone, and we publish all of our donations above £500, and we encourage all parties to follow that level of transparency.



It is not an issue at all. We are very happy to publish donations.



We have no problems in terms of publishing donations.



Yes, being a national party, we publish all our donations.



Political parties need funding and finances to be able to operate. But it has to be done in a proper and structured manner. We have no issue with publishing whatever ways we are funded.



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