NORTHERN IRELAND ENVIRONMENT LINK

PRIORITIES FOR THE ENVIRONMENT 2016-21

WHAT’S IMPORTANT TO YOU?
Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) is the networking and forum body for non-statutory organisations concerned with the environment of Northern Ireland. Its 70+ Full Members bring together a wide range of knowledge, experience and expertise which can be used to help develop policy, practice and implementation across a wide range of environmental fields.

**WHAT’S IMPORTANT TO YOU?**

The environment is our health and wellbeing.

It’s our economic foundation.

It’s our food and water.

It’s our heritage and history.

It’s our children’s future.

...and crucially, it’s for everyone, equally, bringing a sense of community cohesion and shared enjoyment.

These are the things that really matter to us, and they can be delivered through a valued, resilient, healthy environment.

That’s the vision of Northern Ireland Environment Link
SUMMARY

This document is calling for creativity and energy to realise the potential that exists in Northern Ireland’s environment to enrich our society.

The environment can deliver for health, through spaces and places that people want to be active in. It can deliver for the economy through tourism, cultural heritage, and a clean green image that attracts inward investment. It can deliver for education through encouraging engagement with the natural world and applied sciences. It can deliver for our future wellbeing and security.

Most of all, our environment is something for people to enjoy - our land and landscape, our unique historic environment, rich freshwater network and our enviable coastline and marine habitat - and we believe that this is the best way to ensure its preservation.

Partnership (between government, businesses, communities, NGOs, universities) is crucial to delivering these benefits. The issues cut across different sectors and areas of life and we can only make progress if we work smartly and efficiently together.

Key asks are:

- Promote access to our natural and historic environment as part of the reform of healthcare, including the use of ‘Green Prescriptions’
- A Land Strategy for Northern Ireland which enables landowners, individuals and communities to make the best use of our land and landscapes
- Develop a more holistic approach to economic prosperity through promotion of heritage as a mainstream economic driver, adoption of circular economy principles, and the establishment of a Natural Capital Index for Northern Ireland
- A Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill for Northern Ireland, ensuring that planning for the future, including climate change and environmental governance, is given legislative footing
- Implementation of the Northern Ireland Long Term Water Strategy
- Government commitment to delivering the Environment Sector’s ‘Response for Nature’ including greater focus on improving children’s connection to the environment
NIEL is your link to the voluntary environmental sector in Northern Ireland. We have produced this paper to inform political parties of our policy priorities. These priorities have been identified and approved by our member organisations and working groups. They represent a set of clear, realistic and achievable priorities to maximise the benefits of the environment to Northern Ireland.

NIEL hopes that this paper will be part of an ongoing dialogue with political parties in Northern Ireland in the build up to the 2016 elections and beyond.
Northern Ireland Environment Link is calling for:

- Better use, management of, and access to, our natural and historic environment for wider community wellbeing
- Promotion of the understanding of how a healthy environment is essential to human health and wellbeing
- Enhanced collaboration between health and environment sectors, to explore preventative health-care models that make economic savings
- Development opportunities for delivering health and wellbeing outcomes through environmental action; for example, the introduction of ‘Green Prescriptions’
- Full implementation of the NI Outdoor Recreation Action Plan
- Clear active travel targets for Northern Ireland, involving schools and workplaces
- Realisation of the multiple benefits of Green and Blue Infrastructure Networks (for example, Connswater Community Greenway and Comber Greenway) across Northern Ireland

The National Health Service is under severe pressure, with budget stress growing year-on-year. We need to find other ways to address the health problems of the population. There is a rapidly growing body of research that recognises the links between a healthy environment and healthy people. This is already recognised in the NI Executive’s Strategy, Making Life Better, which frames the environment as a key determinant of health and wellbeing:

“health is affected more by economic, social and environmental factors than by anything else”.

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1 YOUR HEALTH AND WELLBEING

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- A Land Strategy for NI, which enables landowners, individuals and communities to make the best use of our land and landscapes, respecting the views of communities, striving for environmental excellence, and making best use of our land’s multi-functionality
- Maximisation of the tourism potential of our landscapes for the NI economy
- Development of effective and sustainable arrangements for protection and enhancement of our most prized landscapes (AONBs and others) and world class geodiversity
- Preservation of, and promotion of access to, our historic landscapes

Land is one of Northern Ireland’s most important assets. It provides the benefits upon which people depend and is a crucial source of our future wellbeing and prosperity. However, the benefits we get from our land are under increasing pressure from societal demands and global change, such as pressure for energy and food production, the need to provide high quality habitats and the requirement to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change. How such issues are managed will impact on our land’s ability to contribute positively to human wellbeing and prosperity. A Land Strategy would provide an overarching framework to help manage these competing demands.
Northern Ireland Environment link is calling for policy development that will:

- Encourage communities to show their pride through positive practical action that improves communities, removing litter and graffiti, maintaining and enhancing greenspace and tackling dilapidation
- See enforcement applied equitably across all eleven councils, ensuring local environmental quality (air, noise, litter, dog-fouling)
- Create a society that takes its responsibilities as seriously as it values its rights

The local environment is a key factor in building community cohesion, making it a crucial element in the delivery of the NI Executive’s Strategy, Together: Building a United Community. While no individual or single discipline has all of the answers to complex social issues, part of the solution to overcoming divided communities will be found in addressing environmental improvement. Well-designed and maintained shared green space in urban areas is known to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour, contributing to the establishment of stable societies. As people feel more comfortable and take more pride in their own neighbourhoods, their confidence in their identity increases.
Northern Ireland Environment Link is calling for policy development that:

- Explicitly recognises the relationship of environment and prosperity, producing a Natural Capital Index for Northern Ireland
- Tackles the consumption issue (which is ethical as well as environmental) and works towards a circular economy for Northern Ireland
- Ensures a holistic approach to the circular economy, including smart regulation, market-based instruments, research and innovation, incentives, measures of performance, and information exchange
- Builds Northern Ireland’s clean green image as an attractor for inward investment, recognising the economic and tourism potential inherent in our natural and cultural heritage
- Demonstrates that Northern Ireland remains committed to delivering our targets for emissions, waste, recycling, and energy efficiency

Economies around the world are largely linear systems which rely on finite resources. However, there is a better way. Northern Ireland can show itself to be a leader in developing a low-carbon, innovative circular economy. The environment and the economy can deliver prosperity for society, hand-in-hand. Northern Ireland’s available natural and cultural resources represent what we have ‘in the bank’, in terms of nature and what the environment delivers for society. We need to protect that long-term investment, ensuring that society ‘lives off the interest’ rather than eating in to, and depleting, our irreplaceable ‘Natural Capital’.

WHAT’S IMPORTANT TO YOU?

YOUR ECONOMY

Northern Ireland Environment Link is calling for policy development that:
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- A Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill for Northern Ireland, ensuring 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.

- A Climate Bill, setting clear targets for climate change mitigation, and also adaption to the unavoidable impacts of climate change, introducing ‘climate-proofing’ across public policy.

- A strategic approach to future energy supply, with Northern Ireland seizing the opportunity to make greater use of our own renewable energy resources and move away from our dependence upon increasingly costly fossil fuel energy.

We live in a dynamic world and Northern Ireland needs to plan for the future now. True planning for the future will result in a Northern Ireland that is prosperous, resilient, healthier, more equal, cohesive, and globally responsible.

In future-thinking, the concept of intergenerational equity is crucial – why should our children and their children suffer because we haven’t acted to plan for a better future today?
Northern Ireland Environment Link is calling for:
- Continued development of the Eco-Schools programme recognising schools as beacons of sustainability within their communities
- A joint Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, and Department of Education ‘Environmental Education Strategy’ for Northern Ireland, which promotes an expectation of outdoor learning and fieldwork both within the curriculum and through lifelong learning
- A minimum requirement set for outdoor education time for every child

UK and international research has demonstrated that outdoor and environmental education has multiple benefits for children, sometimes in surprising ways. More than that, schools can be seen as drivers of sustainability at the heart of their communities, promoting a culture of ‘learning together’. Engaging adults in informal lifelong learning using the outdoors also brings a range of benefits. Environmental education has been shown to:

- Improve academic performance across the curriculum including numeracy, literacy and STEM activities
- Encourage children to transfer and apply skills learned in the classroom, and lets them gain skills to tackle future environmental issues facing Northern Ireland
- Increase equality of opportunity for children from all backgrounds
- Improve discipline in the classroom
- Bring inherent health and wellbeing benefits to children and adults alike
Northern Ireland Environment Link is calling for:

- An Historic Environment Strategy for Northern Ireland, recognising heritage as a mainstream economic driver
- Closer links between management and use of cultural, built and natural heritage for their mutual benefit
- Maximising potential of links between heritage and tourism
- Realisation of the opportunity presented by heritage-led development and regeneration of space and place for community benefit
- Recognition of the value of heritage to local communities through the promotion and delivery of the Community Planning agenda
- Provision of heritage expertise to Councils from central government and the voluntary sector

Research has shown that economic growth is strongest in places with a rich historic environment. Without historic fabric, places lose their distinctiveness and hence their competitive advantage. Our wonderful landscapes have been shaped by man’s imprint over millennia. We do ourselves no favours by ignoring potential economic and social value inherent in our heritage. We need creativity and investment to unlock the potential.

*If heritage is to be sustained it needs to be valued. Protecting heritage cannot be done by legislation alone – value is by use, not by certificate!*
Northern Ireland Environment Link is calling for:

- Government commitment to delivering the Environment Sector’s ‘Response for Nature: Northern Ireland’ report
- The resourcing and full implementation of ‘Valuing Nature’, the Biodiversity Strategy for Northern Ireland
- Funding for the Environmental Farming Scheme to be protected until 2020, including advisory support for farmers in halting biodiversity decline

Biodiversity, the rich variety of all life on earth, brings multiple benefits to society as an integral part of our ecosystems. For example, biodiversity contributes to food production, health and wellbeing, climate regulation, and provides a vast array of products we use on a daily basis. We need a long term plan for restoring nature, now.

The Environment Sector’s ‘Response for Nature’ states that nature needs:

- Decision-makers who recognise that restoring nature is a key solution to some of our most pressing social, economic and environmental problems
- Fully implemented and developed nature legislation
- The delivery of a network of special places for nature
- Improved management of the wider landscape to make room for people and nature
- Strong institutions for nature (particularly in the formation of the new Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)
- An improved connection between children and nature
- The provision of incentives that work for nature
- People to work together for nature
Our network of rivers and lakes provides society with numerous benefits including:
- Landscape and aesthetic value
- Drinking water
- Water for bathing/sanitation
- Water for food production
- Hydroelectric power generation
- Water purification and waste removal
- Nutrient cycling
- Recreation
- Flood control and climate regulation

However, we fail to manage our freshwater environment in a way that reflects its true value. The freshwater environment is a complex system that cannot be managed in a piecemeal fashion.

NIEL therefore supports the Long Term Water Strategy for NI (led by DRD, but with Cross-Departmental input), which maps out the sustainable management of our water environment to 2039 in order to deliver the European Commission’s 2012 Blueprint to Safeguard Europe’s Water Resources (reflecting the Water Framework, Urban Waste Water Treatment, Bathing Water, Floods, and Drinking Water Directives).

Northern Ireland Environment Link is calling for:
- The resourcing and full implementation of the Northern Ireland Long-Term Water Strategy (including improvements to drinking water supply and demand, flood risk management and drainage, environmental protection and improvement, and water and sewerage services)
Northern Ireland Environment Link is calling for:

- Effective implementation of the Northern Ireland (2013) Marine Act
- The designation of new Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) that result in a well managed Ecologically Coherent Network of Marine Protected Areas
- A Northern Ireland Marine Plan with an Ecosystems approach
- Full and effective implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive and achievement of Good Environmental Status for Northern Ireland
- A sustainable and applicable Fisheries Act
- The Development of an Inshore Fisheries Management Act
- Effective Shoreline Planning for Northern Ireland

As well as providing direct economic returns (fishing, power, raw materials) the Northern Ireland sea area provides a wealth of ecosystem services which depend on intact, healthy, and diverse habitats.

The economic benefit gained by Northern Ireland through an effective Marine Protected Area network is estimated to be in the region of £4.6 million per year. We need to manage and protect our marine waters appropriately to allow them to flourish and realise their full economic and social potential.
Northern Ireland Environment Link is calling for:

- Openness and transparency at all levels of government, promoting effective participative systems of governance that engage people’s creativity, energy and diversity.
- More joined-up delivery between Government and the NGO sector, including a stable and secure funding process for the bodies that protect and manage Northern Ireland’s natural and cultural heritage. A relatively small investment in the environment sector would lead to significant savings across government.
- An independent review of environmental governance in NI, which government implements.
- Environmental responsibilities to have appropriate weight across the new Departments in 2016.
- Clear mechanisms of working between central and local government around environment, planning, engagement and enforcement. This should include meaningful co-operation between local and central government for the development and delivery of both Community Plans and the Programme for Government.

Successful government strives to create opportunities for all members of society to make meaningful contributions to decision-making, and seeks to broaden the range of people who have access to these opportunities. This has particular resonance in environmental matters – as we said in our introduction, the environment is for everyone, equally.
WHO WE ARE

T: 028 9045 5770
info@nienvironmentlink.org
89 Loopland Drive, Belfast, BT6 9DW

@EnvironmentNI

nienvironmentlink.org