

Economy 2030: An Industrial Strategy for Northern Ireland

Comments by
Northern Ireland Environment Link

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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 represent over 90,000 individuals, 262 subsidiary groups, have an annual turnover of £70 million and manage over 314,000 acres of land. Members are involved in environmental issues of all types and at all levels from the local community to the global environment. NIEL brings 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.

These comments are made on behalf of Members, but some members may be providing independent comments as well. If you would like to discuss these comments further we would be delighted to do so.

Dr Jonathan PW Bell
Northern Ireland Environment Link
89 Loopland Drive
Belfast, BT6 9DW
P: 028 9045 5770
E: jonathan@nienvironmentlink.org
W: www.nienvironmentlink.org

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Introductory Comments

NIEL welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Draft Industrial Strategy for Northern Ireland and we applaud the intent behind this first iteration.

Considering the environment provides the essential goods and services upon which our future prosperity depends, the reference to the environment and sustainability is encouraging. However, we are strongly of the view that if the strategy is to deliver long-term economic prosperity then the environment and the concept of sustainable development needs to be reflected more prominently, particularly at the outset of the strategy. A failure to do so will result in the continuation of a prevailing paradigm which treats the environment, economy and society as competing rather than complementary issues. A short-term 'economy at all costs' approach which jeopardises environmental quality, represents false economy in the longer term. We are therefore calling for a holistic approach to economic prosperity which utilises our natural and built heritage in a way that does not erode our finite environmental resources.

Vision and Pillars for Growth

Our primary concern is that the wording of the current vision does not include sustainable development or future generations. While we acknowledge short-term economic imperatives, the strategy must seek to build the foundations of long-term prosperity with sustainable development at its core. This should be explicitly articulated at the outset of the strategy and incorporated in the overarching vision. The vision could be reworded as follows: 'To be a sustainable and globally competitive economy that works for everyone both now and in the future'.

The priorities and targets under the pillar - 'driving inclusive sustainable growth' – reflect a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the relationship between sustainable development and economic prosperity. As they stand, the priorities and targets are focussed on sustaining economic growth. They offer no recognition of environmental constraints and risk promoting a short-term 'economy at all costs' approach.

The strategy should facilitate a truly sustainable way forward for Northern Ireland to find a balance between economic growth and sustainability and the inherent tension between short-term growth and the long-term prosperity of future generations.

Circular Economy

It is encouraging that the strategy includes a commitment to work with DAERA to produce a circular economy strategy. It is imperative that the circular economy agenda is pursued on a cross-Departmental and cross-sectoral basis which shifts thinking away from the current focus on waste management towards a more holistic appreciation of material management which cuts across all pillars of government.

A circular economy strategy requires a complementary roadmap and action plan to identify medium and long-term priorities and actions to facilitate the transition from a linear to a circular economy.

The move towards a circular economy, with associated research and innovation, can provide new market opportunities. Northern Ireland should aim to become a market leader in re-use industries to deliver business growth, jobs, reduced waste to landfill and lower greenhouse gas emissions.

NIEL sits on the SIB Circular Economy Working Group. This group possesses considerable expertise and would welcome involvement in progressing the circular economy agenda.

Natural Capital

Complementary to the circular economy is the concept of natural capital. In recognition that our prosperity is inextricably linked to the condition of our natural heritage, the draft Programme for Government incorporates natural capital commitments. Northern Ireland's available natural 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'.

The draft strategy recognises the importance of protecting 'valuable ecological assets'. We would encourage further explanation and recognition of this, through explicit reference to 'natural capital'. A short section on natural capital is required to align the strategy with wider government terminology and priorities.

Prosperity through Heritage Based Tourism

While a separate tourism strategy has been proposed, the importance of investing in, and supporting heritage based tourism growth should be clearly articulated in the industrial strategy. We support actions that build Northern Ireland's clean green image as a contributor to inward investment, recognising the economic and tourism potential inherent in our natural and historic environment. Unfortunately the system of planning and environmental regulation have not been in-keeping with achieving this vision. For example, speculative development, illegal landfilling, and lack of landscape designations continue to undermine environmental and landscape quality which directly impact on prosperity and well-being. In this context, a whole of government approach is required to create the conditions and structural arrangements for a more prosperous society.

A vibrant, innovative, economy is not always about new development. Economies can flourish through, for example, promoting the heritage legacy of an area, or through positively (and sensitively) utilising natural and cultural heritage assets. There is significant evidence emerging that **greenspace** and **healthy environments** act as an **attractor of inward investment** to an area, going beyond tourism to the development of other businesses. For example, Falkirk Council's highly regarded Greenspace Strategy has economic development as a central goal¹. Economic development and place-making is crucial to this strategy, and progress is being made and recognised in this area.

¹ See the Falkirk Greenspace Strategy here <https://www.falkirk.gov.uk/services/environment/environmental-policy/green-network/docs/Falkirk%20Greenspace%20-%20A%20Strategy%20for%20our%20Green%20Network.pdf?v=201408251105>, and its success shown here

Research has shown that economic growth is strongest in places with a rich historic environment². Without historic fabric, places lose their distinctiveness and hence their competitive advantage. Ignoring potential economic and social value inherent in our natural and historic environment represents a missed opportunity – we need creativity and investment to unlock that potential, and the environment sector is open to working with government to maximise the opportunities that exist.

There is also significant growth potential in heritage-related jobs – this was recognised in NIEA’s *Study of the Economic Value of Northern Ireland’s Historic Environment*³. This potential has not been realised since the publication of that report, and NIEL recommends that the economic potential of both the natural and built environment is explored and supported, following Scotland’s example as a nation that has coupled environment and heritage with jobs and prosperity.

Other Comments

We welcome recognition of the energy trilemma and the importance of clean, green energy to the economy and quality of life. While some progress has been made, Northern Ireland has not benefited from the levels of ambition, investment and strategic direction required to encourage a wholesale shift towards cleaner energy. An ambitious programme to cut consumption of fossil fuels can create thousands of new jobs, improve health and well-being by improving air quality and help secure indigenous energy supply, as well as providing Northern Ireland with a distinctive competitive advantage through a low carbon economy. A failure to invest in energy infrastructure and reduce dependency on fossil fuels now will have serious economic consequences in future.

The strategy should more clearly recognise the interdependency between the agri-food sector and the environment. It should align with other key strategic documents, such as the Going for Growth Strategy and the associated Sustainable Agricultural Land Management Strategy. The success of the agri-food industry and the quality of the environment in Northern Ireland are inextricably linked. Prioritising growth of the agri-food industry at the expense of the environment will jeopardise the sustainability of the industry while eroding the many other benefits that the environment provides to society.

The strategy refers to Northern Ireland becoming ‘world class’. While we appreciate the desire to find aspirational terminology, it is a subjective term which does not lend itself to assessing future performance. It would be preferable to identify alternative terminology or at least provide a clear definition and set of criteria against which performance can be judged.

<http://www.keepsotlandbeautiful.org/sustainability-climate-change/sustainable-scotland-network/news/falkirk-council-win-top-prizes-in-green-apple-awards/>

² <https://www.hlf.org.uk/investing-success-heritage-and-uk-tourism-economy>

³ http://www.nienvironmentlink.org/cmsfiles/policy-hub/files/documentation/Built/study_of_the_economic_value_of_ni_historic_environment_may_2012.pdf

Conclusion

Our sector is committed to continuing to help refine the strategy to reflect the importance of sustainable development and environmental excellence in delivering future prosperity and well-being. Our sector can also act as a key partner to help deliver many of the aspirations outlined in the strategy (for example, circular economy) and we would welcome participation in the industrial strategy partnership.