

## Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031 Consultation Response Document

<b>Personal details</b>	
Name	<b>Jill Eagleson</b>
Email address	<b>jill@nienvironmentlink.org</b>
Are you responding on behalf of an organisation?	<b>Yes</b>
Organisation <i>(if applicable)</i>	<b>Northern Ireland Environment Link</b>
<b>Vision and Founding Principles</b>	
Do you agree the vision set out will improve outcomes and quality of life for individuals with mental health needs in Northern Ireland?	
Fully Agree / Mostly Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Mostly Disagree / Fully Disagree <i>(delete as applicable)</i>	
Please add any further comments you may have	
<p>NIEL welcomes the opportunity to respond to this draft Mental Health Strategy. The Draft Strategy states that ‘We have listened to stakeholders through the process of co-producing this draft Strategy...’ and goes on to say that ‘We have also heard how co-production and co-design must become the standard at every stage of policy and service design...’ NIEL would also welcome the opportunity to be consulted with further, to provide input to the future Mental Health Strategy on behalf of members, as the organisation representing the environmental NGO sector in Northern Ireland.</p> <p>In order to realise a ‘vision for Northern Ireland as a society which promotes emotional wellbeing and positive mental health for everyone across their lifespan’, there must be recognition that human health and wellbeing is interdependent on the health of our environment.</p> <p>We need a joined-up approach to address the challenges of supporting and promoting good mental health and environmental health. Research on <a href="#">Mental Health and the Environment</a> echoes this, ‘In recent years, evidence on the interplay between mental health and the environment has grown significantly, and the COVID-19 crisis, with its</p>	

foreseeable and unforeseen socio-economic implications, adds a more urgent need for policy- and decision makers to identify and implement win-win solutions to both challenges.'

NIEL welcomes the recognition of the need for 'collaboration and integration, working together with and supporting...partners in the voluntary and community sector' and is keen to explore partnership working between the health, voluntary, community and environment sectors. Partnership working is key to implementing win-win solutions to the challenges of supporting and promoting good mental health and environmental health.

We would like to see a theme or sub-theme of the strategy dedicated to '**supporting and enhancing the role of nature and the natural environment to help prevent and treat poor mental health**'. Inclusion of this strategic theme will ensure the natural environment gets the attention and investment required to deliver improved mental health outcomes in Northern Ireland. It will also ensure cross-Departmental buy-in to help deliver on key aspects of the strategy

We propose two key areas the draft Strategy (within the new strategic theme proposed above) should focus on developing solutions to environmental and health challenges:

### **1. More Green and Blue Space and Improved Access**

Especially important in maintaining wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic, the clear link between engaging with outdoors and mental health and wellbeing has been shown in NI, ([ORNI, 2020](#)). People in Northern Ireland who are very satisfied with their life walk more frequently. This has been evident during lockdown restrictions, with people who spent more time outdoors reporting the greatest mental health and wellbeing benefits.

- Just over half of visits taken to the outdoors during November and December 2021 (56%) were motivated by one or more factors which can be related to improving mental health or wellbeing. Over 4 in 5 participants (86%) reported that visits made them feel calm and relaxed and/or refreshed and revitalised.
- A relationship between frequency of outdoor recreation and wellbeing was also recorded in the 2013/14 Health Survey for Northern Ireland [8]. This survey found that those people who walked most frequently in the last 4 weeks on average also recorded the highest levels of life satisfaction, ([ORNI, 2021](#)).

Investing in our natural environment by creating high quality natural places and urban green and blue spaces will improve the mental and physical health of the nation and provide cost savings for the NHS. This is especially important in areas of higher deprivation. We want to see a society where everyone benefits from nature, walking and outdoor activity as part of their everyday life and journeys, a society where everyone has easy access to green and blue spaces, which also encourage a sense of community and social cohesion. This is a way to 'invigorate and energise our communities and organisations, to promote a culture change that will bring about real improvements for the population in Northern Ireland.'

To deliver the above will require cooperation and coordination between central and local government, inter-departmental and inter-agency working.

### **2. Nature Based Treatments and Social Prescribing**

We want to see a society where good mental health is promoted and supported through nature-based treatments. Nature-based treatments are non-medical, socially supported

solutions, offering a cost-effective approach to addressing prevalent mental health problems. They present a platform that can fully integrate biodiversity, climate and health challenges, with significant positive economic and societal benefits.

We propose that the established and proven social prescribing model in Northern Ireland is expanded upon. Local pathways to environmental activity interventions should be developed and offered as options to individuals participating in 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.

Do you agree the founding principles set out provide a solid foundation upon which to progress change?

Fully Agree / Mostly Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Mostly Disagree / Fully Disagree  
*(delete as applicable)*

Please add any further comments you may have

**Theme 1: Promoting wellbeing and resilience through prevention and early intervention**

Do you agree with the ethos and direction of travel set out under this theme?

Fully Agree / Mostly Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Mostly Disagree / Fully Disagree  
*(delete as applicable)*

Please add any further comments you may have

**1. More green and blue spaces and improved access**

The draft strategy rightly acknowledges that human health is closely linked to the conditions in which people live and the social determinants of health. However, the role of the environment and ecosystem services in supporting human health and wellbeing and the importance of access to nature should be given much more recognition, especially in improving quality of life and preventing illness.

Green and blue spaces can positively influence mental health through mitigation, by reducing harm from environmental stressors such as air pollution, noise and heat. Nature-based experiences can have restorative effects, for example through stress recovery and attention restoration. Nature also improves mental health through instoration, where green and blue spaces encourage physical activity and facilitate social cohesion.

Access to nature is vital for child, adolescent, older adult and community mental health and wellbeing. Ensuring children have access to green space and time in nature has been shown as a way to build lifelong mental resilience ([National Trust](#)). Outdoor play in green spaces may positively affect children's socio-emotional development, helping to establish social cohesion, this may also spread to the parents. The use of green spaces for social cohesion has been found to be of equal importance to the elderly, ([IEEP](#), 2020).

Blue elements of green-blue space are equally important. Scientific literature demonstrates good evidence of positive associations between inland blue space exposure and mental health ([Gascon](#), 2017, [Pasanen](#) 2019, [White](#), 2020), and that mental health, especially for psycho-social wellbeing, can be improved via investment in blue space, ([Britton](#), 2020).

Evidence also points to a significant economic savings potential to public care budgets of better integrating mental health benefits into urban planning, especially when tailored to areas with poor exposure and access to green and blue spaces. Biodiversity conservation is an objective in itself, but it is also the fundamental requirement for functioning ecosystems to ensure the delivery of ecosystem services, such as mental health and well-being, in the spaces which we live and work every day.

The draft strategy goes some way in recognising this by saying, 'The natural and built environments in which we live, work, visit and play can impact profoundly on our wellbeing. Surroundings that are well-planned, designed and maintained may help prevent, and support recovery from, mental illness. Prevention of mental health problems and early intervention when they occur is both possible and cost-effective.' The Connswater Community Greenway is provided as an example of a green space that has provided 'opportunities for individuals and communities to look after their own emotional wellbeing and mental health.'

However, in order to deliver on the related outcome under this theme of, 'Wider awareness of how mental health can be impacted by every day decisions and strategic policy directions outside the health and social care sector,' there needs to be related actions. We propose that the following actions to deliver more green and blue space and better access are implemented:

- **Access to green and blue space as a standard for local authorities:** Restoration and creation to deliver more, larger and better-connected healthy green and inland blue space with public access. Multi-benefit green and blue space to be a requirement of all new build developments, together with a national retrofit programme where green spaces and wetlands are created in existing developments.
- **Council-wide Community Trail Plans:** Develop and implement a plan for natural green and blue connectors and corridors across cities, towns and landscapes, connecting communities and people to green and blue spaces. All Councils to 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. Increasing Active Travel would lead directly to environmental benefits such as reduced traffic emissions as well as health and wellbeing 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'.

The many benefits that the environment brings to health, wellbeing and economic prosperity throughout the lifespan must be fully recognised in all aspects of government policy and practice. To deliver the above will require cooperation and coordination between central and local government, inter-departmental and inter-agency working.

Do you agree with the actions and outcomes set out under this theme?

Fully Agree / Mostly Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Mostly Disagree / Fully Disagree  
(delete as applicable)

Please add any further comments you may have

## **Theme 2: Providing the right support at the right time**

Do you agree with the ethos and direction of travel set out under this theme?

Fully Agree / Mostly Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Mostly Disagree / Fully Disagree  
(delete as applicable)

Please add any further comments you may have

### **2. Nature Based Treatments and Social Prescribing**

Fitting with the draft Strategy's vision for mental health services that put 'the person and their needs at the centre and ensuring people have access to the support that they need, at the right time and in the right place' are Nature Based Treatments and Social Prescribing. The established and proven social prescribing model in Northern Ireland should be expanded upon, with local pathways to environmental activity interventions developed and offered.

The draft Strategy rightly also seeks 'to address the physical wellbeing of mental health patients.' When outdoor activity and access to nature becomes a part of everyday life, positive physical health and healthy living is encouraged, improving the physical wellbeing of mental health patients also. More green and blue spaces and improved access will encourage this, whilst social prescribing initiatives will actively work to build lifelong connections with nature and people, improving mental health, wellbeing and resilience.

Specific wetland-based nature-based mental health interventions conducted by [The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust](#) have demonstrated this latter point, producing significant improvements in anxiety, stress and emotional wellbeing via a 6 week programme of wetland engagement, ([Maund](#), 2019). Over shorter periods, WWT have also demonstrated that just 10-minute exposures in urban wetlands are enough to produce improvements in mood, and these effects especially pronounced in people that self-report elevated stress ([Reeves](#), 2020).

Working with NIEL and the environment sector to develop and implement Nature Based Treatments and Social Prescribing should be built into actions to improve community mental health when 'refocusing services around the GP Federations to ensure a person-centred approach, working with statutory and community and voluntary partners to create local pathways within a regional system.' We propose that as well as fully integrating the 'community and voluntary sector in mental health service delivery across the lifespan

including the development of a protocol to make maximum use of the sector's expertise,' that the environment sector is included also.

Do you agree with the actions and outcomes set out under this theme?

Fully Agree / Mostly Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Mostly Disagree / Fully Disagree  
(delete as applicable)

Please add any further comments you may have

### Theme 3: New Ways of Working

Do you agree with the ethos and direction of travel set out under this theme?

Fully Agree / Mostly Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Mostly Disagree / Fully Disagree  
(delete as applicable)

Please add any further comments you may have

Do you agree with the actions and outcomes set out under this theme?

Fully Agree / Mostly Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Mostly Disagree / Fully Disagree  
(delete as applicable)

Please add any further comments you may have

### Prioritisation

If you had to prioritise the actions set out above, which top 5 actions would you take forward (with 1 being the most important to you, and 5 being the 5th most important to you)?

1

2

3

4

5

Finally, is there any one key action which you feel is missing from the draft Strategy?

As per our response above we would recommend the following actions:

1. **More green and blue space and improved access:** To strengthen the environment and ecosystem services in supporting human health and wellbeing and to increase and improve access to nature. Delivered upon through cooperation and coordination between central and local government, inter-departmental and inter-agency working.

**2. Nature Based Treatments and Social Prescribing:** The established and proven social prescribing model in Northern Ireland is expanded upon, with local pathways to environmental activity interventions developed and offered. Delivered upon through the collaboration, integration and partnership working of health, voluntary, community and environment sectors.

**Impact Assessments/Screenings**

Do you agree with the outcome of the Impact Assessment screenings?

Fully Agree / Mostly Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Mostly Disagree / Fully Disagree  
(delete as applicable)

Please add any further comments you may have

Do you agree with the Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA)?

Fully Agree / Mostly Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Mostly Disagree / Fully Disagree  
(delete as applicable)

Please add any further comments you may have

Thank you for taking the time to respond to the consultation.

Please submit your completed response by **5pm on 26 March 2021** using the details below:

**E-mail:**

[mentalhealthstrategy@health-ni.gov.uk](mailto:mentalhealthstrategy@health-ni.gov.uk)

**Hard copy to:**

Department of Health  
Adult Mental Health Unit  
Room D4.26  
Castle Buildings  
Stormont  
Belfast  
BT4 3SQ

*Please note:* To allow for the full 12 week consultation period required, responses relating to the **EQIA** will be accepted after the close of the main consultation, but must be received by 5pm on Monday 12 April 2021.