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# TOWARDS A **LAND STRATEGY** FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

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January 2015

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The European Landscape Convention was adopted by the Council of Europe on the 20 October 2000 and came into force in the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, in 2006. It promotes the protection, management and planning of European landscapes. A number of jurisdictions in the UK and Ireland have progressed a strategic approach to land and land use. In January 2014, the Minister for the Environment launched a first draft of Northern Ireland's Landscape Charter noting 'landscapes are its hidden

treasure, something often recognised by others who visit' and inviting every section of society to sign up to principles around why our landscape matters. The report referred to in this briefing builds on best practice elsewhere to suggest how the aspirations of the Charter can be made good. It can also inform the ongoing creation by DARD of an Agricultural Land Use Strategy. The report ultimately calls for a comprehensive Land Strategy for Northern Ireland.

## A VISION FOR NORTHERN IRELAND LAND

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*Land and landscapes managed to deliver well-being and prosperity, respecting the views of communities, groups and individuals, striving for environmental excellence, and taking advantage of the multiple functions of land.*

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## INTRODUCTION

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The Northern Ireland Land Matters Task Force (LMTF) unites organisations seeking to see the sustainable management of Northern Ireland's limited, but important, land space. This briefing presents a summary of a report commissioned from the James Hutton Institute and Queen's University Belfast to initiate a conversation on the positive contribution a Land Strategy could make. The report provides specific recommendations including suggested vision, rationale and set of principles for such a strategy.

## CONTEXT

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Land is a finite resource, under strain from ever-increasing societal demands and conflicting land use priorities. The James Hutton Institute's experience of helping to develop the Scottish Land Use Strategy (Scottish Government, 2011) informed initial thinking, which was revised through stakeholder consultation to reflect the particular needs and aspirations of Northern Ireland. The report is not an exhaustive overview of land related issues. Rather, it examines some of the key topics that a land strategy should consider and a number of key challenges that it should seek to address.

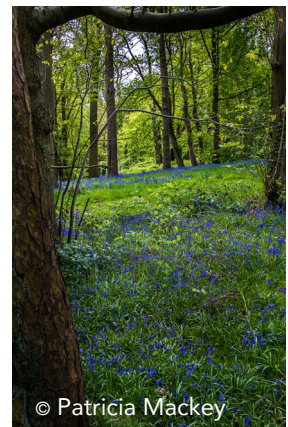
## RATIONALE

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Land is undoubtedly one of Northern Ireland's most important and distinctive assets; it provides the goods and services upon which human existence depends (food, water and energy for example) and represents the source of future societal well-being and prosperity. Land serves multiple functions as it is used for agricultural production, recreation and enjoyment, housing, employment, energy production and carbon sequestration to name only a few.

Our unique landscape gives physical/visual and experiential expression to a rich cultural heritage and legacy of human interaction. Land, perhaps more than any other feature or resource, is subject to a multitude of policies and regulations emanating from different tiers of government (Global - Europe - UK - Northern Ireland – local authorities). Between and within these tiers, policies do not always exist in harmony. In fact, there are often clear conflicts.

An integrated approach aimed at the harmonisation of policy is required. A strategic approach to land management will help alleviate land use conflicts and ensure that land continues to provide goods and services to society while minimising adverse impacts on the natural resource (land) base. The report recommends a Northern Ireland Land Strategy to support the Programme for Government, sitting above the suite of sectorial policies and alongside other strategic documents such as the Strategic Planning Policy Statement. A Land Strategy cannot, and should not, determine actual land use in specific localities; this should be shaped locally by communities, groups and individuals. Rather, it represents an overarching framework to ensure local and regional policy, decision-making and resource allocations contribute to fulfilling the strategic needs of Northern Ireland. At a time of local government reform, it would provide direction and facilitate appropriate consistency across the new Council areas.



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## GENERAL PRINCIPLES

The report identifies 10 guiding principles that should inform decision making:

- A)** Land should be recognised as multi-functional and opportunities for deriving multiple benefits should be encouraged and incentivised.
- B)** Regulation should protect essential public interests whilst avoiding placing an onerous burden on businesses and landowners.
- C)** Where land is highly suitable for a key primary function (e.g. food production, flood management, tourism and recreation, carbon storage), this function should be recognised in decision-making.
- D)** Different ecosystems provide different benefits, albeit they are not discrete entities existing in isolation from each other. It is important to recognise that decisions by individual land managers can have implications at a broader scale which can affect delivery of those benefits.
- E)** Decisions regarding land use and management can have dramatic impacts on landscape quality and character, including its cultural history and endowment; decisions must therefore respect the vulnerability of landscapes to change and the deep cultural sensitivities around land.
- F)** The opportunities and threats posed by climate change must be central to decisions about how land is used in order to contribute effectively to climate change adaptation and mitigation.
- G)** Derelict, vacant or underused land represents a missed economic, social and environmental opportunity, and in some cases an environmental hazard; its utilisation and/or stewardship should be prioritised and incentivised whilst respecting that some land has inherent value in its undeveloped nature.

- H)** Where agreed, responsible access to land and provision of green and historic spaces and places for outdoor recreation should be encouraged to deliver health & well-being and opportunities for tourism.
- I)** There is a need for greater awareness of, and engagement from, wider civil society in land-related matters; this will promote a broadly based and inclusive approach to policy and decision-making.
- J)** Adequate designations, management arrangements and resources should be provided to protect and enhance Northern Ireland's most precious landscapes and sustainably develop their potential to deliver economic and social benefit.

## PRINCIPAL RECOMMENDATION

*To progress the planning, development and implementation of a Land Strategy for Northern Ireland from 2016, for implementation in 2020.*

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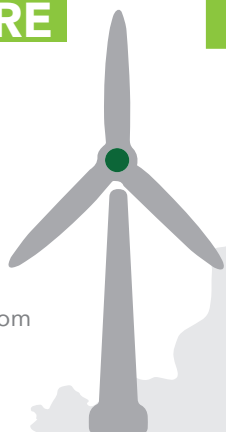
## LAND A PRECIOUS RESOURCE UNDER PRESSURE

### ENERGY

The total %  
of electricity  
consumed from  
**INDIGENOUS  
RENEWABLE  
SOURCES**  
has increased from

**1.5%**  
IN 2001/2 TO  
**19.5%**  
IN 2013/14.

The vast majority (over 90%) of  
renewable electricity generated within  
NI is generated from wind sources.



In 2014, approximately  
**35%** of Northern Ireland  
farmland was managed  
under agri-environment  
scheme agreements.



### FORESTS AND WOODLANDS

in 2013/14,  
there were  
**290  
HECTARES**  
of new plantings.



### NI POPULATION

**EXPECTED TO  
GROW BY 8%  
TO 1.98 MILLION  
BETWEEN NOW  
AND 2031.**



### WATER

**JUST UNDER  
30%** ▽  
**OF ALL RIVER  
WATER BODIES**  
in Northern Ireland  
are **DEEMED TO BE IN  
'GOOD ECOLOGICAL STATUS'**

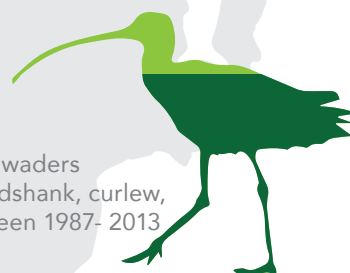


**BETWEEN  
2011/12 AND 2012/13**  
the number of annual  
housing completions has  
**INCREASED BY  
28%**



**83%  
DECLINE**

in breeding waders  
(lapwing, redshank, curlew,  
snipe) between 1987- 2013



Data Source: Northern Ireland Environmental  
Statistics Report (DoE, 2014)

The following organisations contributed to the debate  
and development of this scoping report:



For more information on the proposed  
Land Strategy and information on the  
LMTF contact:

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