

A Common Purpose for Our Environment

This 'Common Purpose' is our response to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs public discussion document on an Environment Strategy for Northern Ireland (September 2019). It is the result of a collaborative discussion between a range of sectors, networks and organisations held at NICVA in November 2019. The aim of the Common Purpose is to set out a brief number of key actions and principles which we (the signatories) believe are required to create an Environment fit for current and future generations.



Our environment, which is essential to our future health, well-being and prosperity, has never been under more pressure: our biodiversity is in decline, our air and the quality of the water in our rivers and lakes remains poor, and climate change is impacting upon all areas of life.

We need an ambitious long-term Environment Strategy to help reverse this decline and then, critically, set Northern Ireland on a new path of renewal and environmental regeneration.

We believe that:

Our environment is our health and wellbeing, our food and water, our heritage and history, our wildlife, our children's future and our economic foundation. Crucially, it's for everyone, equally, bringing a sense of community cohesion and shared enjoyment.

Our environment provides spaces and places for people to be active in; supports our economy through tourism, cultural heritage and inward investment; and provides educational opportunities.

Our land and landscape, unique historic environment, rich freshwater network and our enviable coastline and marine habitat provide a wealth of riches for our people and

visitors to enjoy. We believe that an ambitious environment strategy for Northern Ireland is the best way to ensure its preservation.

The Environment Strategy for Northern Ireland must:

- Have clear lines of accountability. All government Departments and public bodies should be included in the design not just of the strategy but the crucial actions that need to be clearly set out within it; and they should have a proactive duty to implement it and be held accountable for the impacts of decisions taken.
- Be independently monitored with robust mechanisms to hold government to account.
- Have statutory footing and binding targets that are clear, measurable and ambitious and in line with the SDGs. Effective environmental governance is essential for any framework of environmental policy; a strategy that is not backed up in law with effective enforcement mechanisms is essentially no more than a wish list.
- Be matched by appropriate and significant additional direct investment to enrich our environment and land/sea resource and a commitment that future public payments are directed towards delivering public benefits.

In addition, we believe it is fundamental to the future of Northern Ireland that:

- A Northern Ireland Environment Bill is created to give the Environment Strategy a binding, legal footing.
- Creation of an Independent Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Northern Ireland remains the only part of these islands without an EPA. We need an EPA to ensure independent and robust monitoring and appropriate mechanisms to hold government to account.
- Introduction of a NI Climate Change Act. Given the implications of Climate Change for all aspects of NI society and our massive over-dependence on imported fossil fuels despite our abundant local sources of renewable energy, NI urgently requires a Climate Change Act. It should include an action plan with short, medium, and long-term targets for GHG emissions reduction and renewable energy generation.
- Mainstreaming of UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). All future Departmental Strategies/ Policies (including the Programme for Government) must help deliver on our commitment to implementation of the UN SDGs and include: specific NI indicators; Compulsory incorporation into the local council community plans; Appointment of SD champions in each government department; and the Executive Office should be responsible for implementation/reporting.
- A NI 'Well-being of Future Generations Act. Based on the Welsh example, this Act would improve the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of NI by encouraging cross-departmental cooperation; and improve partnership

working with people and communities to undertake long-term planning to prevent problems through a more joined-up approach. It would help create a NI that people will want to live in, now and in the future.

- Creation of a NI Environmental Citizens Advisory panel. Such a Panel would improve citizen information, engagement and participation in the design of environmental policies and strategies that affect NI. As the island of Ireland and its surrounding seas represent a single biogeographic unit, consideration could be given to the future development of an all-island Environment Plan and a cross-border environmental advisory panel tasked with exploring an island-wide response to environmental issues that affect all citizens.
- Sustainable agri-food Sector Support. A growth strategy to support sustainable small-scale farming should be developed with provision of incentives for farmers/landowners to support environmental initiatives such as combatting climate change and restoring nature in our countryside. Farming subsidies should provide an incentive for farmers to farm in a way that helps protect the environment. This should be progressed through a 'Public Money for Public Goods' approach.
- A Cross-Departmental Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development is developed. This strategy should lead to a systemic change in teaching and access to environmental education for all age groups and encourage long-term attitudinal and behavioural change in relation to our interaction with the environment. It should include ambitious targets for outdoor learning.

If you wish to sign up to this Common Purpose please email info@nienvironmentlink.org, providing name of organisation and contact details.