

# Development of a strategic Programme for Government (PfG)

*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 natural and built environment of Northern Ireland. Its 60 Full Members represent 190,000 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 happy to do so.

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## **Responding to the development of a strategic Programme for Government (PfG)**

- **NIEL welcomes the opportunity to engage with the PfG team**

NIEL welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the development of the next Programme for Government for April 2021 and beyond. There are a few key principles NIEL would like to be included in the next PfG, as outlined below. We would welcome the opportunity to engage with the PfG team in the course of the development of the next PfG.

- **The Sustainable Development Goals need to be the foundation of future PfGs**

In principle, NIEL supports the outcomes based approach and the existing outcome set but we believe that the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) should be used as the foundation for the next and future Programme for Government to ensure NI develops a sustainable, resilient, low and ultimately zero carbon, green economy.

- **Investing in a green recovery will create significant jobs and cross societal and cross departmental benefits notably in the health sector**

NIEL believes that investing in a sustainable, resilient, low and ultimately zero carbon, green economy will help to create a bigger, better and more resilient ('future proofed') economy that is better able to meet the demands of a changing society. This is a view that has been endorsed by many prominent organisations. For example, this is supported by the findings of the United Nations UNEP Green Economy Report (GER)<sup>1</sup> that

*"Greening the economy not only generates growth and in particular gains in natural capital, but it also produces a higher growth in GDP and GDP per capita. Under the GER modelling exercise, a green investment scenario achieves higher economic growth rates than a business as usual scenario within 5-10 years"*

The case for developing a green economy was made in the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee in its "A Green Economy"<sup>2</sup> report which said

*"The whole economy needs to be green and traditional sectors of the economy will need to be transformed"*

The CBI and its members describe the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic as a real opportunity to build back better and pivot towards the low-carbon, sustainable, and net-zero aligned economy that we know we need<sup>3</sup>. Amongst other things the CBI called for government action to: *"Accelerate the deployment of low-carbon electricity generation and investment in grid system flexibility"* and *"Deliver jobs and energy savings by retrofitting homes and buildings to be more energy efficient and switch to low-carbon heating."*

In June 2020 the UK Climate Change Committee<sup>4</sup> recommended five clear investment priorities in the months ahead for building a resilient economy, the first one of which was investing in improving the energy efficiency of homes. The five priorities identified by the CCC were:

1. Low-carbon retrofits and buildings that are fit for the future
2. Tree planting, peatland restoration, and green infrastructure
3. Energy networks must be strengthened
4. Infrastructure to make it easy for people to walk, cycle, and work remotely
5. Moving towards a circular economy.

In Northern Ireland in May 2020, 40 individuals and/or organisations signed an open letter to the First and Deputy First Ministers<sup>5</sup> calling for a more resilient economy which is better adapted to threats from climate change. Recent opinion polls have shown there is overwhelming support for change with 91% of the public saying they don't want things to go back to how they were<sup>6</sup>.

The job creation opportunities that are likely to be created by this type of green investment as we plan our recovery from the pandemic are significant. The low carbon and renewable energy (LCRE) economy in NI already is significant<sup>7</sup>, generating £2 billion in 2017 - £1.2 billion directly and £800 million indirectly and approximately 11,700 FTE jobs with an even 50/50 split between direct and indirect jobs. This is a very significant contribution, but we can build on this. For example, according to the National Grid<sup>8</sup> the UK will need to recruit over 400,000 jobs to build the net zero energy workforce and reach net zero by 2050, of which 13,700 jobs will be needed in NI. Research by the Institute for Public Policy and Research<sup>9</sup> (IPPR) has concluded that greater investment in a green recovery and clean, low-carbon jobs could create 1.6 million new jobs over the next decade, of which over 40,000 could be in Northern Ireland. It is important to recognise that many of these jobs will be in sectors other than the environment sector because there is the opportunity to generate benefits across the community and across departments by win-win options, in line with what the draft PfG 2016-21 was described as aiming to do. For example, closing the huge gaps in social care and in health care could create up to 700,000 jobs by 2030. Jobs in these areas fulfil pressing social needs and at the same time are in line with a low-emission economy as this also facilitates a shift away from resource-intensive growth towards localised service sector growth which can lead to less overall energy demand. The area where the next greatest number, over half a million (560,000), of those 1.6 million jobs could be created is in energy efficiency, which is currently the responsibility of the Department for the Economy, though this policy would also be relevant to the Department for Communities which is responsible for fuel poverty, DAERA which is responsible for climate change, the Department of Finance which is responsible for building regulations and also the Department of Health in terms of the positive impacts on physical and mental health of taking people out of fuel poverty. The IPPR also found that without government intervention, unemployment could rise by more than 2.1 million to almost 10% of the workforce<sup>10</sup>. This is a clear demonstration of how setting the right policies can drive economic development and job creation.

Similarly investing in active travel offers positive outcomes not just for the environment through reducing transport emissions but also for the physical and mental health of people, especially in terms of reducing particulates and other air pollutants, which in turn has very positive economic benefits. This is illustrated by the findings of Cycling UK<sup>11</sup> that the average economic benefit-to-cost ratio of investing in cycling and walking schemes (active travel) is 13:1. By comparison, according to UK Department for Transport Road Investment Strategy: Economic analysis of the investment plan<sup>12</sup> the benefit-to-cost ratio for bypasses and link roads is 2:1. On top of that, greenways can also offer opportunities for enhancing biodiversity.

NIEL would like to see greater use of options that link to multiple PfG outcomes thereby offering cross sectoral and cross departmental benefits such as health benefits. For example, research<sup>13</sup> which looked at the entire population of England below retirement age between 2001-05 (40,813,236 people) found that populations that are exposed to the greenest environments also have lowest levels of health inequality related to income deprivation, concluding

*“The implications of the study are clear: environments which promote good health may be key in the fight to reduce health inequalities.”*

- **The importance of protecting biodiversity in developing resilience and protecting health**

The role of biodiversity in the green recovery must be a key part of the response to the coronavirus pandemic, especially as regards developing resilience to other potential pandemics. For example, the greater use of natural capital and ecosystem services rather than hard engineering options should be a foundation of future policies, particularly in relation to water management. A good example of the benefits of using ecosystem services is South West Water's Upstream Thinking project which works in eleven catchments across Devon and Cornwall, including in the Exmoor National Park, and aims to improve water quality, at source, by improved land management techniques to reduce soil and chemical run off in the upper reaches of rivers. According to SWW<sup>14</sup>, Upstream Thinking has a potential 65:1 payback ratio over 30 years if it delays or even avoids capital expenditure for building and operating traditional treatment works.

Reducing our negative impact on biodiversity must also be an essential part of our attempts to reduce the potential development of future pandemics. This was made clear by the OECD which said, in its policy response to the Coronavirus pandemic<sup>15</sup>

*"The pandemic is inextricably intertwined with global environmental issues such as biodiversity loss, climate change, air and water pollution, and waste management, both in terms of its origin and the implications for environmental outcomes and the future well-being of societies around the world."*

In fact the OECD has stated<sup>16</sup>

*"Human pressure on biodiversity increases the risk of infectious disease."*

*"Protecting biodiversity is vital for avoiding the next pandemic."*

*"Integrating biodiversity considerations into the COVID-19 recovery is not only important for avoiding future pandemics; it is also vital to economic resilience and human well-being."*

The OECD goes on to say<sup>17</sup>

*"Close to three-quarters of emerging infectious diseases in humans come from other animals. Land-use change and wildlife exploitation increase infectious disease risk by bringing people and domestic animals in close proximity to pathogen-carrying wildlife, and by disrupting the ecological processes that keep diseases in check."*

The OECD report refers to research by Loh et al<sup>18</sup> which found that land-use change resulting from agricultural expansion, logging, infrastructure development and other human activities is the most common driver of infectious disease emergence, accounting for approximately one third of all emerging disease events. According to this research land-use change, agricultural industry change, and international travel and commerce are globally the top three drivers of zoonoses (diseases that are transmitted from (other) animals to humans).

The OECD report also refers to a study<sup>19</sup> on the ecology and economics for pandemic prevention, with a particular focus on Covid 19, which found that the annual net prevention cost of limiting the spread of zoonoses by investing in combatting deforestation, improving management of global wildlife trade, ending the wild meat trade in China and improving disease surveillance in wild and domestic animals, which would substantially reduce the risk of another pandemic, was \$17.7 to \$26.9 billion. This compares to the estimated total disease damages of between \$8 and \$15.8 trillion (\$8,000 to \$15,000 billion) which includes the estimated \$5.6 trillion loss in GDP due to Covid -19.

Based upon those figures, there would appear that in addition to the environmental, health and social arguments, there is a very strong economic case for investing in such preventative measures.

- **Gaps in coverage**

As regards gaps in coverage, in addition to the need for a more central role for the SDGs, NIEL believes there needs to be a better linkage between outcomes and indicators as there is a risk that what is measured and how it is measured can give an inaccurate and potentially misleading picture of the situation on the ground. For example, one of the indicators for Outcome 2 is the % of protected area under favourable management. As outlined in the NI Environmental Statistics Report 2020<sup>20</sup>, while the area of land based protected areas under favourable management increased significantly in 2019/20 that was only to 13.7% from an incredibly low level of 0.18% reported in 2016/17<sup>21</sup>. The proportion of marine protected areas under favourable management in 2019/20 was also low at 4.5%<sup>22</sup>, the same level as reported in 2017/18<sup>23</sup>. As such, while the figures for terrestrial protected areas shows improvement, overall the picture is still one of an inadequate level of protection. This is illustrated by the fact that even amongst our protected ASSIs, 35% of the features in ASSIs are in unfavourable condition<sup>24</sup>. According to the statistics on freshwater quality standards released in August 2020<sup>25</sup>, 95% of NI's lakes are now failing Water Framework Directive quality standards with only one lake out of twenty one in Good condition in 2019 compared to five out of twenty one lakes in Good condition in 2015. This is poor but maybe not unexpected, given that in 2019, an official UK report<sup>26</sup> on Special Areas of Conservation in NI said that as regards freshwater pearl mussel,

*“the lack of juvenile recruitment and an ageing population will almost certainly lead to the future extinction of this species from NI, unless there is a fundamental improvement of their current habitat”.*

As such, while the indicator for outcome 2 might suggest that biodiversity is doing well and even improving in NI, if only one of our lakes is in good condition and one of our supposedly most protected species, the freshwater pearl mussel, is at risk of extinction then it is clear that the reality is somewhat different. This clearly illustrates the need for indicators that give an accurate representation of what is happening on the ground.

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- <sup>2</sup> House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee A Green Economy Twelfth report of session 2010-12 Volume 1 HC1025 <https://www.parliament.uk/documents/TSO-PDF/committee-reports/cmenvaud.1025.pdf>
- <sup>3</sup> Achieving Net-Zero the government decisions needed to deliver a green recovery <https://www.cbi.org.uk/media/5579/cbi-green-recovery-roadmap.pdf>
- <sup>4</sup> Climate Change Committee Reducing UK emissions: 2020 Progress Report to Parliament <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/reducing-uk-emissions-2020-progress-report-to-parliament/>
- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.nienvironmentlink.org/news/40-orgs-call-for-Green-Recovery>
- <sup>6</sup> Food, Farming and Countryside Commission and the Food Foundation 2020 survey [https://foodfoundation.org.uk/covid\\_19/rsa-and-food-foundation-survey-shows-changes-in-citizen-attitudes-to-the-food-system/](https://foodfoundation.org.uk/covid_19/rsa-and-food-foundation-survey-shows-changes-in-citizen-attitudes-to-the-food-system/)
- <sup>7</sup> ONS Low Carbon and renewable energy economy, UK 2017 see Table 3 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/bulletins/finalestimates/2017#how-do-we-measure-the-low-carbon-economy>
- <sup>8</sup> National Grid Building the net zero energy workforce January 2020 <https://www.nationalgrid.com/document/126256/download>
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- <sup>10</sup> Ibid page 24
- <sup>11</sup> <https://www.cyclinguk.org/campaigning/views-and-briefings/cycling-and-economy>
- <sup>12</sup> UK Department for Transport Road Investment Strategy: Economic analysis of the investment plan [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/411417/ris-economic-analysis.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/411417/ris-economic-analysis.pdf)
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- <sup>14</sup> <https://www.tononline.co.uk/features/moorland-project-delivers-multiple-benefits->
- <sup>15</sup> OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19) Making the green recovery work for jobs, income and growth <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/making-the-green-recovery-work-for-jobs-income-and-growth-a505f3e7/>
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- <sup>17</sup> Ibid
- <sup>18</sup> Loh, E. et al. (2015), “Targeting Transmission Pathways for Emerging Zoonotic Disease Surveillance and Control”, *Vector-borne and Zoonotic Diseases*, Vol.15/7, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1089/vbz.2013.1563> or <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4507309/>
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- <sup>21</sup> DAERA Environmental Statistics Report 2019 [https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/ni-environmental-statistics-report-2019\\_1.pdf](https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/ni-environmental-statistics-report-2019_1.pdf)
- <sup>22</sup> DAERA Environmental Statistics report 2020 <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/ni-environmental-statistics-report-2020.pdf>
- <sup>23</sup> DAERA Environmental Statistics Report 2019 [https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/ni-environmental-statistics-report-2019\\_1.pdf](https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/ni-environmental-statistics-report-2019_1.pdf)
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- <sup>25</sup> <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/Water%20Framework%20Directive%20-%20Statistics%20report%20-Lake%20Quality%20Update%202020.pdf>
- <sup>26</sup> UK's 2019 Article 17 report <https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/article-17-habitats-directive-report-2019/>