



A Joint Response from Northern Ireland Marine Task Force (NIMTF) and Fresh Water Task Force (FWTF) on: [DfI Equality Impact Assessment – Budget 2023/2024](#)

Submitted: 4th August 2023

The Northern Ireland Environment Link Working Groups, NIMTF and the FWTF would like to thank the Department of Infrastructure (DfI) for the opportunity to respond to their consultation “Equality Impact Assessment – Budget 2023/2024”.

We understand that this is a financially difficult time, and this is exacerbated further in the absence of a Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly. However, in a time when our 496 local water bodies, both fresh water and marine, are not achieving Good Environmental Status^{1,2} due to a number of factors such as morphology, fish populations, macrophytes, chemicals or ubiquitous, persistent, bio accumulative toxic (uPBT) substances^{1,2}; it is incredibly disappointing to see this equality impact assessment highlight possible future impacts occurring on water and wastewater services such as ‘Reduction/Cessation of wastewater treatment’. Northern Ireland has legal obligations to maintain good water quality under the Water Environment (Water Framework Directive) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017³ and The Water (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019⁴. There are also environmental obligations to protect designated sites such as Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs), Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs). As well as these designations, there are guidance set out by COP27 – the United Nations Climate Change Conference in 2022 – and the outcomes of COP15 – A United Nations Biodiversity Conference – both of which the UK has signed up to. COP15 sets out targets to address overexploitation, pollution, fragmentation and unsustainable agricultural practices – exploring the need for financial investment away from environmentally degrading practices⁵. COP27 followed on from this, with the theme of nature recovery, where the UK highlighted the importance of tackling biodiversity loss⁶ alongside the 2030 Strategic Framework^{1,2}. In addition, in February 2020 the NI Assembly⁷ formally recognized that Northern Ireland is facing a biodiversity crisis and a climate emergency. Accounting for all of this and due to the importance of the marine and freshwater environments, both NIMTF and FWTF oppose this proposal give the negative impact on the environment, water quality and human health, especially in relation to protected habitats and species.

Equality Impact Assessment – Budget 2023/2024

It appears that proposals to allow inadequately treated sewage to be disposed into waterways were developed in response to the proposed cutback in the overall budget for DfI of £167 million⁸. Proceeding with this proposal would push our waters into further decline in meeting this target.

¹ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/NI%20Water%20Framework%20Directive%20Statistics%20Report%202021.pdf>

Under the DfI's Section 75 of the Draft Equality Action Plan screening of the proposal: "The cessation of wastewater treatment would result in the discharge of screened raw sewage at coastal wastewater treatment works (WwTW)." As stated by DfI within its consultation, it is responsible for '100km of fluvial (river) and 26km of coastal flood defences, 364km of culverts and associated infrastructure⁸.' These proposals would see the percentage population estimated by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) being served compliant WwTW decrease from 99.23% to around 25%⁹. This potential outcome puts the health of Northern Ireland's environment and people at greater risk and is completely unacceptable to the NIMTF and FWTF.

Environmental Impacts

Northern Ireland is home to 21 lakes, 450 rivers, 25 transitional and marine and 75 groundwater bodies², with interconnections between marine and freshwater bodies, meaning degradation in river systems has implications for the health of our seas. The proposal to reduce or cease wastewater treatment would have further negative impacts such as creating slicks of sewage resulting in algae blooms that starve freshwater systems of oxygen and result in the death of freshwater species and have large-scale impacts on designated rivers, lakes and our drinking water. For example, given that the Lough Neagh catchment drains 43% of the land area of Northern Ireland, as well as some border areas in the Republic of Ireland, one could expect it to be just one of the sites impacted by any increase in the levels of inadequately treated wastewater being dumped into our waterways¹⁰. Lough Neagh supplies around 40% of the population with drinking water, and is also an Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI)¹¹, a RAMSAR site¹² and a Special Protection Area (SPA)¹³, making it one of the most designated and important areas for nature conservation in NI. An increase in pollution from inadequately treated wastewater would affect Lough Neagh and so constitute a breach of our legal responsibilities in relation to managing our protected areas and our drinking water.

Our local seas sustain 50% of all NI biodiversity¹⁴ and provide a myriad of ecosystem services such as food provision, carbon sequestration and recreational benefits. There are five Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs)¹⁵, and a number of ASSIs¹⁶, Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and SPAs¹⁷ in NI waters and it is vital that our seas remain productive and healthy.

² https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1148323/2030-strategic-framework-for-international-climate-and-nature-action.pdf

³ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2017/81/contents/made>

⁴ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2019/112/contents/made>

⁵ <https://www.cbd.int/doc/c/abb5/591f/2e46096d3f0330b08ce87a45/wg2020-03-03-en.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/cop27-key-outcomes-and-next-steps-for-the-uk/>

⁷ <https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/report.aspx?&eveDate=2020-2-3&docID=292480>

⁸ <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/infrastructure/dfi-resource-budget-outcome-report-eqia.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/infrastructure/s75-screening-cessation-of-wastewater-treatment-final-22-may-23.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/articles/lough-neagh-levels#:~:text=Numerous%20rivers%20flow%20into%20Lough,in%20the%20Republic%20of%20Ireland>

¹¹ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/protected-areas/lough-neagh-assi>

¹² <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/protected-areas/lough-neagh-and-lough-beg-ramsar-0>

¹³ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/protected-areas/lough-neagh-and-lough-beg-spa>

¹⁴ <https://www.afbini.gov.uk/sites/afbini.gov.uk/files/publications/%5Bcurrent-domain%3Amachine-name%5D/marine%20biodiversity.pdf>

Marine ecosystems and habitats such as kelp beds and seagrasses can be negatively impacted by wastewater contamination, potentially reducing both marine biodiversity and the ocean's ability to store carbon in 'blue carbon habitats' which can play a key role in mitigating the impacts of climate change. Similarly Salmonid species, – including those that rely on both freshwater and marine environments to survive, require oxygen rich water. Phosphorus is a limiting factor for algal growth in freshwater environments, whilst nitrogen is the limiting factor in marine; and so an increase in phosphorous due to a reduction in wastewater treatment could result in an increase in algal growth, potentially including toxic blue green algae. Blue green algae can pose a risk to pets and to humans¹⁸ and so to tourism. According to AFBI, since 2017, NIW have improved their removal efficiency of phosphorus from wastewater treatment plants to 1.2mg/l, well below the regulatory limit of 2mg/l¹⁹. This shows the importance of wastewater treatment in regulating the limiting factor of algal blooms that prevent communities accessing water for recreation and health; but also contribute to environmental health decline. This shows how much progress has been made within Northern Ireland with improvements to treatment in water quality provided by NIW, thus the proposal to discharge untreated sewage into waterbodies would reverse all of this progress.

In Northern Ireland, 42% of the public view pollution as the greatest threat to biodiversity²⁰. It is therefore shocking that measures such as those being proposed could be a possible option in Northern Ireland, given the catastrophic impacts this situation would create for both biodiversity and people in Northern Ireland. In addition the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) have clarified that they were not informed on the outlined proposals²¹. Under the Water (NI) Order 1999²², NIEA is responsible for maintaining appropriate control on wastewater treatment and NIEA has said it “will take appropriate enforcement action for any non-compliance.” The Water Environment (Water Framework Directive) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017 aims to achieve a good status for all water bodies by 2027². Releasing untreated sewage and wastewater directly into our water bodies will breach numerous pieces of legislation set out by central and devolved Governments. Should any NIW action(s) be in breach of the Water (NI) Order 1999, it could be prosecuted for each breach and could have its licence revoked by the Utility Regulator. Any measures to reduce wastewater treatment would therefore result in further reduction in our vital freshwater and marine ecosystems and should be avoided.

Nature-based Solutions

The NIMTF and FWTF are behind nature based solutions offering a cost-effective means of improving water quality and so should play a more prominent role in the management of our freshwater and marine resources, so it was disappointing to see that nature-based solutions were not mentioned within the Equality Impact Assessment. Nature-based solutions value available ecosystem services by preserving a sustainable connection to the environment. It is noteworthy that NIW's 2021-2046 strategy²³ states that NIW aims to improve water quality at source and acknowledges that while investment in treatment works and chemical works can remove the problem that “the sustainable long term solution is to work in partnership with land owners and other stakeholders to manage the source waters using catchment management.”

¹⁵ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/protected-areas/type/mcz>

¹⁶ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/protected-areas/type/assi>

¹⁷ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/protected-areas/type/spa>

¹⁸ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/news/north-coast-bathing-waters-situation-improves-caution-still-advise>

¹⁹ <https://www.afbini.gov.uk/sites/afbini.gov.uk/files/publications/RePhoKUs%20report%20October%202020x.pdf>

²⁰ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/ni-environmental-statistics-report-2023.pdf>

This approach would facilitate greater use of nature based resources, something that has already been tried and tested across Northern Ireland in numerous projects; from 2013, RSPB, NIEA and NIW collaborated on a project called the Garron Plateau Bog Restoration²⁴ under the ‘Cooperation across Borders for Biodiversity’ (CABB) INTERREG VA project umbrella; with the goal of preserving biodiversity, reducing peat erosion but also improving the quality of drinking water that would be used for abstraction by NIW. The Living With Water Programme (LWWP)²⁵ began in 2021, setting out a Plan which aims to deliver a long-term approach to drainage and wastewater management that will protect from flooding whilst providing a cleaner and greener environment across the Greater Belfast area. Another project within the marine environment comes from restoring habitats such as native oyster reefs to increase biodiversity and reduce pollution levels. Ulster Wildlife have a programme to achieve this within Glenarm²⁶ in 2023 through a native oyster nursery which is the second one placed; the former located within Bangor in 2022 – both projects funded by the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and Wilson Resources. An influx of untreated sewage would conflict with these pre-existing projects which are helping to better manage our water bodies and contribute to achieving Good Environmental Status. Within the wider UK, there is a greater focus on the potential of seagrass²⁷ and saltmarsh²⁸ for numerous ecosystem services across biodiversity, carbon capture, flood management, reducing excess nutrients and more importantly to this scenario – improving water quality.

An influx of untreated sewage would conflict with these pre-existing projects which are helping to better manage our water bodies and contribute to achieving Good Environmental Status. Ecosystem services need to be highly considered at the development stage of policy planning to include nature-based solutions, but can only be achieved if we have appropriate and legally obligated controls to our wastewater management. They have a greater likelihood of being the cheaper, more sustainable alternative in the long-run in comparison to hard infrastructure being implemented.

Impact to Public Health

The DfI consultation states

‘Having access to good water and wastewater infrastructure is essential for citizens across Northern Ireland’

‘Manufacturing, farming, tourism and recreation need fit for purpose water and wastewater infrastructure to operate and grow our homes, schools, hospitals and businesses.’

‘Delivery of safe, clean drinking water underpins the public health and economy of Northern Ireland.’

²¹ <https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/environment-agency-not-advised-proposed-27198237>

²² <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1999/662/made/data.pdf>

²³ <https://www.niwater.com/our-draft-strategy/files/assets/common/downloads/northern%20ireland%20water%20-%20our%20draft%20strategy%202021-2046.pdf>

²⁴ <https://www.niwater.com/garron-plateau-bog-restoration-project/>

²⁵ <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/topics/living-water-programme>

²⁶ <https://www.ulsterwildlife.org/news/new-glenarm-nursery-set-release-800-million-oyster-larvae-boost-biodiversity-and-clean-local>

²⁷ https://www.naturebasedsolutionsinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Developing_UK_Seagrass_Carbon_Code_Summary_2023.pdf

²⁸ <https://www.wwt.org.uk/uploads/documents/2023-01-30/wwt-blue-carbon-route-map-2023.pdf>

²⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/sewage-in-water-a-growing-public-health-problem>

In June 2022, a joint opinion piece²⁹ by Professor Chris Whitty, Chief Medical Officer for England, Jonson Cox, Ofwat Chair and Emma Howard Boyd, Environment Agency Chair highlighted how sewage within water was identified as a growing public health problem. The report stated,

“No-one expects river water to be of drinking standard, but where people swim or children play, they should not expect significant doses of human coliforms if they ingest water. Raw sewage from storm overflows and continuous discharge of waste containing viable organisms from sewage treatment works is an increasing problem. This is a serious public health issue for government and regulators and the water companies are not doing enough. The public health dangers are in addition to the ecological and environmental impact which forms the basis for much regulation²⁹.”

A 2022 report by the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee labelled England’s rivers as a dangerous ‘chemical cocktail’ of sewage, agricultural waste and plastic³⁰. A report by the Environment Agency in England and Wales addressed the environmental inequalities within water quality, explicitly highlighting the overlooked factor: *‘Those people who live near to or use river environments are likely to have a broader view of water quality than simply its chemical or biological quality and tend to consider aesthetic factors such as litter or smells as very significant. It is therefore important to give appropriate weight to the aesthetic impacts of water quality, particularly as the aesthetic (and recreational) values of river corridors are known to produce many of the positive health and quality of life benefits identified in the literature on green space (Lucas et al. 2004)³¹. Talbot et al. (1987)³² notes that the knowledge that nature is present near one’s home can be a powerful factor in residential satisfaction³³’.*

Those who are from low-income neighbourhoods, vulnerable (children, elderly and disabled), politically unstable and marginalized populations risk being disproportionately affected by a lack of wastewater treatment³⁴. A reduction in the level of water treatment would result in an increase to the carrying capacity of waterborne diseases and a greater negative visual impact of unscreened wastewater which would affect not only the environment, but also the overall quality of life for all residents within proximity of the contaminated water.

Northern Ireland’s marine and rural communities depend on industries such as fishing, tourism and agriculture which heavily rely upon clean water for a myriad of aspects of everyday life – therefore this would be a detriment to communities further exacerbating socio-economic inequalities. Further reports which highlight the inequalities to individuals who are vulnerable to the impacts to clean water is the ‘Disability Programmes and Policies: How does Northern Ireland measure up?’³⁵

³⁰ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/8460/documents/88412/default/>

³¹ Lucas, K., Walker, G., Eames, M., Fay, H., and Poustie, M., 2004. Environment and social justice rapid research and evidence review. London: Policy Studies Institute.

³² Talbot, J.F., Bardwell, L.V., and Kaplan, R., 1987. The function of urban nature: uses and values of different types of urban nature settings. *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, 4, 47–63.

³³

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/291068/scho0507bmru-e-e.pdf

This proposal goes against previous public investment which led to improvements for the community, with the potential for it to remove the accessibility of waterbodies from public usage. The majority of large scale projects have taken place across Northern Ireland in recent years to restore water quality in both marine and freshwater environments; as well as terrestrial environments such as peatland restoration – and any reduction in or cessation of the treatment of wastewater would undermine that valuable work and threaten the health of our environment and public health – in particular those who are vulnerable, as outlined within the Equality Impact Assessment.

Wider Implications

According to the DfI Equality Impact Assessment:

“In light of the extremely challenging financial position the department has already taken decisions to reduce expenditure and raise revenue below amongst other options not related to environmental accessibility:

- *Increasing Rathlin Ferry fares*

Rathlin Island is a significant site for wildlife, designated as an SPA, SAC and MCZ for species such as seabirds. It is crucial that access to this remote site is not curtailed due to financial pressures as this will adversely impact not only eNGO’s needing to undertake vital conservation work on Rathlin, but also the public’s access to natural places, which is important for both interactions with the wonders of our natural environment and public health.

Not all those working across different sectors (public, industry, NGOs, etc) will be in agreement with the above decisions that have already been taken to try and reduce the £167m shortfall. For example, increasing public spend for services which the public highly depend on if this proposal goes through. The environment and public will be harmed through this on multiple levels; an example that members of the public are paying for a service not being provided by their provider.

Furthermore, the proposal to reduce wastewater treatment could have implications for the Republic of Ireland³⁴ particularly in relation to our international river and marine basis. In the ‘Linking the Irish Environment report’ the Irish Environment Network (IEN) and Northern Ireland’s Environment Link (NIEL) made a number of recommendations as to how NI and RoI should work together³⁴, including:

- *The Irish and UK governments (in the absence of a devolved government in Northern Ireland) should develop a joint political or legal commitment on the environment*
- *The impact of environmental aspects of the NI Protocol/Windsor Framework should be monitored closely by both the UK and Irish Governments.*

³⁴ <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/infrastructure/dfi-draft-equality-action-plan-april-2023.pdf>

³⁵

<https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/UNCRPDmonitoringimplementationFullReport0112.pdf>

³⁶ <https://ejni.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Linking-the-Irish-Environment-Final-Report-24-May-2023.pdf>

- *The UK and Irish governments must ensure the full potential of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement as a level for ensuring the environment on the island of Ireland is fulfilled.*
- *Development of rights to a healthy environment and rights of nature.*
- *Provision should be made for adequate, ring-fenced funding from the UK and Irish Governments for both short and long-term all-island collaboration on environmental issues.*
- *The UK and Irish governments should ensure continued and enhanced support for sustained, collaborative research on all-island/cross-border environmental matters.*

In conclusion, both the NI Marine Task Force and NI Fresh Water Task Force are strongly opposed to any consideration of reducing and stopping wastewater treatment in NI. We appreciate the difficult budgetary position for the Department for Infrastructure but this is not an option that should even be considered or 'on the table'. A proposal to reduce or stop wastewater treatment, if implemented, would cause significant deterioration of water quality in our rivers and seas, threatening nature, climate, public health and the economy, in particular tourism. This proposed policy has the potential to increase the required long-term costs far higher than the short-term costs associated with properly managing the treatment of wastewater; and should not be considered solely in light of Section 75 – the whole policy needs to be considered in its entirety. Overall, it is vital that in this nature and climate crisis, government and public bodies must comply with the legislation put in place to protect biodiversity and communities.

For further information, please contact Robert Walsh, NI Marine Task Force Officer on Robert.walsh@nimtf.org

On behalf of:

The Fresh Water Task Force (FWTF):

Friends of the Earth NI
 Northern Ireland Environment Link
 Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)
 SWAN Ireland
 Surfers Against Sewage
 Ulster Angling Federation
 Ulster Wildlife
 Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust
 Rivers Trust
 National Trust
 Woodland Trust
 Northern Ireland Marine Task Force (NIMTF)

The Northern Ireland Marine Task Force (NIMTF):

Ulster Wildlife
 Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)
 National Trust
 Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust
 Northern Ireland Environment Link
 Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful
 Friends of the Earth
 Irish Whale and Dolphin Group
 Marine Conservation Society
 WWF