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Dear First Minister,

Re: Urgent Executive Approval required for the Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland

On behalf NIEL's members, I want to express our deep concern about the lack of progress with the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) and the resulting delay in the transformative change urgently required to protect, enhance and restore nature across Northern Ireland.

The Department for Agriculture, Environment, and Rural Affairs (DAERA) was due to have published the EIP on 25th July 2023, as required by Schedule 2 of the Environment Act 2021¹ - the provisions of which were approved by the Northern Ireland Assembly on 22nd February 2022². The failure to publish means that NI, and DAERA specifically, continues to be in breach of its environmental obligations.

Whilst the previous collapse of the Assembly, and a resulting lack of Executive approval, has been previously cited as a reason by the Department for not publishing the EIP, it is now almost three months since the return of the Assembly, but the EIP has still not been given Executive approval or published by DAERA, which the OEP described as "deeply regrettable"³. Notwithstanding the budgetary pressures which we are all aware of, looking after our natural environment is important to the long-term resilience of NI's environment, economy and people.

The EIP would set out steps DAERA and other departments will take to significantly improve the natural environment.⁴ DAERA would also monitor and report annually on the EIP, obtain and report on data needed to monitor the EIP, and review and amend as necessary on a five-yearly basis.

¹ Environment Act 2021 - <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/30/contents/enacted>

² <https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/report.aspx?&eveDate=2022/02/22&docID=368499>

³ <https://www.theoep.org.uk/index.php/report/failure-meet-ni-eip-deadline-deeply-regrettable>

⁴ Environment Act 2021, Schedule 2, Improving the Natural Environment: Northern Ireland
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/30/schedule/2/enacted>

According to research by the Natural History Museum and RSPB, NI got a ranking of 12 (out of 240 countries and territories, where a ranking of 1 is the lowest and 240 the highest) in a Biodiversity Intactness Index, which indicates how much nature is left from a pristine state, for the amount of nature it has left⁵. Furthermore, according to DAERA's 2023 environmental statistics report, just 38% of our protected habitats are in favourable condition⁶ - illustrating the shocking state of our most fragile and ecologically important sites for nature. As the OEP said in a letter to the AERA Minister in March 2024

“This is not simply a matter of lawfulness and good administration. It is also essential for driving delivery of the steps needed to tackle the environmental challenges that face Northern Ireland. The lack of a long-term ambitious integrated strategy risks further environmental and societal costs such as those seen at Lough Neagh, which will be paid for by generations to come.”⁷

The need for an EIP has never been greater. There is no time for further delay. The EIP should be approved and published as a matter of urgency.

As a cross cutting issue, action on an Environmental Improvement Plan requires urgent cross-party leadership and joint efforts across departments and as a Minister and member of the Northern Ireland Executive, we are asking that you now call for and support the passage of the EIP through the Executive approval process to facilitate publication and commencement of transformative action for the natural environment.

Yours sincerely,



Stephen Aston – Chair NIEL

⁵ <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/our-science/data/biodiversity-indicators/about-the-biodiversity-intactness-index.html>

⁶ Northern Ireland Environmental Statistics Report 2023, page 43 - <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/ni-environmental-statistics-report-2023.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.theoep.org.uk/sites/default/files/reports-files/OEP%20letter%20to%20Minister%20Muir%2027%20March.pdf>