

13th June 2024

Mr Colum Eastwood,
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BT48 7DB

NI Environment Link
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Re: Northern Ireland environmental priorities for the 2024 UK General Election

Dear Mr Eastwood,

I am writing to you in advance of the UK General Election on behalf of Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) the networking and forum body for non-statutory organisations concerned with the natural and built environment of Northern Ireland. Our membership represents some 190,000 individuals and 262 subsidiary groups with a combined annual turnover of £70 million and responsibility for over 314,000 acres of land.

While we recognise that most environmental responsibilities are devolved to the NI Assembly there are a number of issues that require action by the UK government for which we would like to encourage your leadership and seek your support. In 2020, the NI Assembly declared a climate emergency and confirmed we are facing a biodiversity crisis. It is clear that we need additional financial support to address these issues through resourcing of three key areas:

(1) Protecting biodiversity

DAERA's draft 2019 NI Environment Strategy reported "concerning trends in abundance indicators for a suite of species in NI and widespread loss, degradation and fragmentation of habitats." According to the Natural History Museum and RSPB, in 2020 NI got a ranking of 12 (out of 240 countries and territories, where a ranking of 1 is the lowest biodiversity intactness and 240 the highest) in a Biodiversity Intactness Index. It is important that NI fully contributes to the UK wide 30x 30 target to designate at least 30% of the UK's land and seas for nature conservation. In order to do so NI will require additional financial support from the UK government.

(2) Improving the quality of our freshwater resources

According to the Water Framework Directive report published in December 2021 by DAERA, none of the 496 rivers, lakes and transitional and coastal water bodies in Northern Ireland, including designated rivers and lakes, achieved Good Environmental Status. The explosive growth of toxic blue green algae in Lough Neagh and other rivers and lakes in 2023 illustrates how a series of historic and current failures now threatens an entire ecosystem. A co-ordinated long term and sufficiently resourced action plan is now urgently required.

(3) Tackling climate change by reaching net zero

NI must ensure that the targets in the Climate Change Act (NI) 2022 are met. However, only 3% of the UK government's spending on energy security and net zero is devolved to NI so it is essential that there is appropriate funding from the UK government to ensure we in NI can achieve our legally binding net zero targets. The UK's responsibility for funding measures to achieve net zero was highlighted by the UK Climate Change Committee who stated in 2021 that many of the actions to reduce emissions will likely be paid for at UK level and/or socialised across the whole of the UK.

The scale and nature of the three challenges outlined above will require additional investment and policy change. The funding provided by the UK government will be a key factor in NI's efforts to tackle those challenges. We hope that all our MPs and political parties will support our call for increased funding for these issues.

If you would like further information on any of the above issues please get in touch.

Best wishes for the election.

Yours sincerely,



Stephen Aston, Chair – Northern Ireland Environment Link

Cc: Sir Keir Starmer