



Future Agri-Environment Schemes for Northern Ireland Issues and Options

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Introduction

Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) have produced the following paper which outlines proposals on the design of future environmental payments in Northern Ireland. NIEL is a networking and forum body for non-statutory organisations consisting of 65 full members which represent over 120,000 individuals, 262 subsidiary groups, have and manage over 314,000 acres of land. This document has been prepared by our Sustainable Land Use Working Group and endorsed by our wider NIEL membership.

DAERA have launched their consultation on the Future Agricultural Policy Proposals, which includes a range of measures to address the agricultural sector's impact on and guardianship of air and water quality, soil health and biodiversity, while making its fair contribution to achieving net zero carbon targets. Amongst these measures is the Farming for Nature package, which sets out to replace the current agri-environment schemes over time. This document aims to provide guidance on how future schemes should be implemented...

The work follows the publication of "Farming for the Future: A Vision for Sustainable Land Management" which sets out the high-level asks for future policy to deliver for people, nature and climate. The Vision also explores how this can be achieved, through an agricultural transition which re-purposes existing levels of public money, placing public goods at the core of payments. Following on from this document, we need more detailed understanding of what should be retained and improved in the design of future agri-environment schemes, as well as to identify any opportunities to expand schemes.

Importance of Agri - Environment Schemes

As Northern Ireland develops domestic agriculture policies to replace the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), there must be a greater focus on securing environmental objectives and outcomes through sustainable land management. Environmental schemes should sit at the heart of a future policy, with a clear focus on the delivery of environmental public goods. This is vital to help meet domestic commitments towards the recovery of the natural environment, tackle climate change, provide good value for money and justify long term funding for agriculture and land management. A greater focus on the delivery of environmental outcomes through land management can also help meet other agricultural policy objectives such as increasing farm business resilience (investment through agri-environment schemes can provide an income independent of market volatility, thereby building resilience against external shocks); contribute to improvements in productivity (through the restoration of functional biodiversity such as pollinators and soil biota) and help secure a fair return to farmers and other land managers for the delivery of environmental public goods.

We believe, a strong focus on delivering environmental public goods is not a choice between productivity and sustainability, but an opportunity to maintain our capacity to produce food and other commodities by restoring the natural resources that farming and land management depends upon. Investing in the delivery of environmental public goods can help deliver a number of public policy priorities, meet international and national environmental commitments and secure a more resilient, profitable future for the agriculture sector.

The Environment Sector and Agri-Environment Schemes

NIEL members have practical experience in Agri-environment scheme design and delivery, from the original onset of the Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme, the NI Countryside Management Scheme and the recent Environmental Farming Scheme. This work has involved scientific research on the effectiveness of scheme options, policy analysis and on the ground advisory work with farmers in a range of different landscapes. As such, NIEL are well placed to identify the key criteria which have

enabled success, but also where improvements to future schemes can be made in order to deliver improved environmental outcomes at the required scale, secure farmer buy in and deliver value for money from environmental land management. It is the culmination of the environment sector’s experience of the design and delivery of Agri-environment schemes that is the basis upon which we have set out the following issues and options to be considered in the design of future schemes.

Evidence to support the design of future Environment Schemes

The evidence suggests that a well-designed and well implemented scheme, supported by effective regulatory standards and advice, can provide a practical and cost-effective means of delivering environmental objectives. The following section considers the key lessons learned from the existing evidence base, and how these could influence the design of future schemes.

Intervention for future environmental land management

To restore our natural environment new schemes operating under a future agri-environment framework will need to be able to tackle both widespread environmental issues such as declines of farmland biodiversity, diffuse air and water pollution and highly targeted issues such as the restoration of priority habitats or recovery of a range of restricted species. Examples of targeted and widespread environmental objectives are listed below:

Widespread environmental objectives	Targeted environmental objectives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Recovery and maintenance of widespread species and communities ▶ Protection and recovery of soils ▶ Nature based solutions to support climate change mitigation and adaptation ▶ Landscape restoration (e.g., drystone walls) ▶ Improvement to and maintenance of water quality and use ▶ Opportunities for recreation, access, and connection to nature (e.g., connected permissive paths and signage, open farm days and educational visits) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Management and enhancement of protected sites including Areas of Special Scientific Interest, and the European Protected sites Network ▶ Management, restoration, and recreation of priority habitat (peatland, ancient and long-established woodland) to enhance biodiversity and deliver wider societal benefits ▶ Recovery of rare, threatened and range restricted species ▶ Strategic natural flood risk management

Considering the variety of environmental interventions needed, NIEL broadly favours a future policy and funding structure which includes payments for both broad and comprehensive interventions and more complex and targeted ones, such as results-based payments. We recommend that DAERA continues to upscale the approach it piloted under the current Environmental Farming Scheme, with a Wider scheme focused on delivering widespread environmental objectives, Higher scheme focused on priority species, habitats and protected sites, and Group schemes which have delivered effective landscape-scale collaboration. Furthermore, commitments have been made in Northern Ireland to establish networks of good wildlife and habitat management. Future agri-environment schemes will be a key tool for delivering these networks with “bigger, better and more joined-up sites” for nature. A key driver for this will be the further development of the Nature Recovery Networks.

Factors hampering success in the past

Agri-environment schemes have developed positive outcomes for the environment, including the recovery of declining species¹², improvements in the condition of priority habitats such as blanket bog, species rich wet grassland, purple moor grass and rush pasture³, and improvements in ecosystem services, including water quality⁴, both in Northern Ireland and across the UK. However, in our experience a number of factors have limited the effectiveness of agri-environment schemes, either because they depress uptake or do not secure the required environmental change. These include:

- ▶ Choices that allowed applicants to select the easiest and least effective management options ⁵
- ▶ A predominance of low value for money options insufficient to drive the degree of environmental improvement required ⁶
- ▶ Poor targeting ⁷
- ▶ Lack of flexibility to tailor land management and land use change
- ▶ Low payment rates that fail to drive necessary levels of uptake
- ▶ Perception of looming penalties and inspections
- ▶ Lack of training, advice and guidance; and
- ▶ Issues around timescale regarding monitoring and evaluation ⁸.
- ▶ Insufficient budgetary allocation - for NI to meet current environmental objectives through environmental land management, research estimates that an eight-fold increase in funding is required compared to current spending.

¹ Colhoun, K. Mawhinney, K. McLaughlin, M. Barnett, C. McDevitt, A.M. Bradbury, R.B. & Peach, W. (2017) Agri-environment scheme enhances breeding populations of some priority farmland birds in Northern Ireland, *Bird Study*, 64:4, 545-556, DOI: 10.1080/00063657.2017.1415296

² Arnott, A., Riddell, G., Emmerson, M. *et al.* Agri-environment schemes are associated with greater terrestrial invertebrate abundance and richness in upland grasslands. *Agron. Sustain. Dev.* **42**, 6 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13593-021-00738-4>

³ Emmett B.E. and the GMEP team (2017) Glastir Monitoring & Evaluation Programme. Final Report to Welsh Government - Executive Summary (Contract reference: C147/2010/11). NERC/Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (CEH Projects: NEC04780/NEC05371/NEC05782) Available from: www.gmep.wales/sites/default/files/GMEP-Final-Report-2017.pdf

⁴ Jones, J.I, et al (2017) Do agri-environment schemes result in improved water quality, *Journal of Applied Ecology*, 54 (2), pp 537-546

⁵ Boatman, N. 2013. Evaluating the impacts of limiting free choice in management option selection by Entry Level Stewardship applicants. Natural England Commissioned Reports, Number 117

⁶ GHK (2012), Dynamic Deadweight in Environmental Stewardship: Towards a better understanding of the added benefits of the scheme. Final Report for Defra

⁷ Emmett, B.E. et al. (2017). (2017) Glastir Monitoring & Evaluation Programme. Final Report to Welsh Government. Contract reference: C147/2010/11. NERC/Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (CEH Projects: NEC04780/NEC05371/NEC05782)

⁸ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency: Ex-post Evaluation of the 2007-2013 Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme (NIRDP), December 2016

Building Blocks of a successful Agri-environment Scheme

Evidence demonstrates that environmental land management schemes can deliver substantial benefits for wildlife and ecosystem services, especially when carefully targeted and supported by good quality advice. Various factors have limited the success of previous schemes, it will be important to learn from these whilst building upon successes. Following years of practical trials and scheme monitoring across the UK, we believe it is possible to identify the key criteria associated with success as:

Evidence based interventions	For individual species, good evidence exists for interventions which have succeeded in reversing species declines. For groups of species, (insects, seed breeding waders etc. there is an extensive body of evidence demonstrating the key interventions to deliver success. In terms of wider ecosystem service delivery, a large body of research highlights the role that the management, restoration, and creation of habitats including peatland, semi-natural woodland and grassland can play in supporting the provision of ecosystem services such as carbon storage, flood alleviation and improved water quality. The lessons learned from these examples should form the basis of new schemes, with interventions based on quantifiable evidence of what has worked in the past. While welcome the assessments of habitat, there is also a realisation of the limitations and need for further research, particularly with some landscape-scale interventions such as semi-natural habitat.
Scale of Action; Farm Scale	There is clear evidence to suggest that devoting 5-10% of lowland farmland to agri-environment options has significant positive impacts on wildlife abundance on the farm ⁹ . Much of this evidence has been brought together to develop packages or ‘bundles’ of measures designed to provide a variety of resources needed to enhance environmental quality at the farm scale. Packages such as these have featured in agri-environment schemes in GB. The package approach has delivered measurable improvements in wildlife and offers a blueprint for broadly accessible payments with the appropriate level of targeting and flexibility. In N. Ireland the current Environmental Farming Scheme Wider Scheme has not adopted the package approach, with farmers allowed to apply relative free choice to the number and type of options being applied on their farm. Furthermore, the scheme is currently limited as a result of a funding cap, meaning that for many it is difficult to implement habitat options on 10% of the land. Future broadly accessible schemes should be based on scientific evidence regarding the required quantity and quality of habitats needed to result in on farm biodiversity and delivery of other environmental outcomes.
Defined and measurable environmental outcomes	Agreements with a clear focus, are often more successful. Not all national and local objectives can be secured on a single farm or land holding. A farm level audit can help identify key assets, risks, and opportunities to support the selection of appropriate outcomes and management interventions. To ensure “the right outcomes in the right place, delivered in the right way’. A clear focus on outcomes is important, however it is crucial not to break the link between these outcomes and the management measures needed to achieve them. A new scheme should provide flexibility to apply tailor evidence-based management measures and results-based approaches at the farm or holding level. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation are crucial is also crucial.

⁹ Bright, J.A. et al. (2015). Higher-tier agri-environment scheme enhances breeding densities of some priority farmland birds in England, *Agriculture, Ecosystems and Environment*, 203, pp69–79

<p>Scale of Action; Landscape Scale</p>	<p>Achieving many environmental outcomes such as species recovery or improving water quality requires landscape scale action. A recent study suggested that to reverse the current decline in the Farmland Bird Index (FBI) 20-35% of the population FBI birds in each landscape would need to be subject to agri-environment management. Already, several landscape scale schemes are being operated in Northern Ireland, through DAERA's Environmental Farming Group Pilot. Although in the relatively early stages of the pilot successes are being delivered through targeting the right management interventions, in the right landscape area, with skilled advisers and enthused farmers drumming up the required level of uptake. This model provides a good foundation to deliver schemes focused at delivering environmental outcomes at a landscape scale across Northern Ireland.</p>
<p>Targeting</p>	<p>Effective targeting is widely recognised as being a key factor in successful environmental land management. Schemes can be targeted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Geographically, for example to a catchment to secure improvements in water quality or the introduction of specific cattle to landscapes to aid habitat recovery. ▶ By outcome or theme, offering management measures designed to achieve specific environmental objectives such as the farm wildlife packages (such as including recommendations for site-specific tailored grazing dates) ▶ By beneficiary, selecting applicants with a good track record of environmental delivery. <p>A combination of these different approaches is often required within scheme design. The targeted application of research-based management measures¹⁰ has achieved outstanding successes with success achieved through effective targeting coupled, with expert trusted advice. Good quality baseline data and inventories at a farm, landscape and national level underpins quality targeting, these exist for birds and range-restricted species and priority catchments for diffuse pollution. Effective targeting and associated support are not added costs, rather a key mechanism to improve delivery and achieve environmental outcomes. Planners' professional judgement alongside input from farmers, practitioners and relevant stakeholders should be used to inform management plans aimed at benefitting the target species of habitat on each individual farm or site and agreement holders supplied with these specialist plans.</p>
<p>Trusted and quality advice</p>	<p>Evidence indicates that incentives are more effective if supported by advice from a trusted source. This reinforces three decades of experience with environmental land management policy, whereby a high degree of continuity in advice provision is central to building the trust necessary to secure the best environmental outcomes. Research has also found that advice is highly effective in improving the quality of results and by extension value for money¹¹.</p>
<p>Engagement and experience</p>	<p>Ultimately farmers and land managers determine whether an environmental land management agreement will achieve its target outcomes. Scheme design must be practical and intuitive and individual agreements should clearly set out expected</p>

¹⁰ Boatman N, Ramwell C, Parry H, Jones N, Bishop J, Gaskell P, Short C, Mills J, Dwyer J. 2008. A review of environmental benefits supplied by agri-environment schemes. A report to the Land Use Policy Group by the Central Science Laboratory & the Countryside & Community Research Institute. Contract FST20/79/041.

¹¹ Lobley M, Saratsi E, Winter M, Bullock JM. (2013) Training farmers in agri-environmental management: the case of Environmental Stewardship in lowland England. *Int. J. Agric. Manag.* 3, 12–20. (doi:10.5836/ijam/2013-01-03)

	<p>outcomes at a farm or land holding level. Experienced and motivated farmers and landowners deliver better environmental outcomes¹². Therefore, new schemes should value the experience of farmers and land managers, encourage uptake and peer-to-peer learning, possibly even rewarding experienced farmers who share their knowledge with neighbours. However, this should not override scientific evidence or environmental priorities. It is important to strike the right balance between empowering and enthusing farmers and land managers and maintaining a focus on priorities for environmental land management.</p>
Monitoring and evaluation	<p>Investment in monitoring and evaluation is essential in understanding the effectiveness of policy interventions and to drive constant improvements in design and delivery and importantly ensure good value for money. In the future, there may be opportunities for farmers, advisers, and citizens to participate in the monitoring process to improve engagement and promote awareness. However, this will not replace the need for independent expert monitoring and reporting. Monitoring of the Environmental Farming Scheme has not taken place in the first four years of the scheme being in operation. The lack of monitoring up until this point in time makes it difficult to assess the effectiveness of interventions and whether they are achieving their intended outcomes, compared to a baseline scenario. In the future, monitoring should be built into the design of schemes, to ensure that it takes place from the outset. Particular habitats require tailored monitoring, scheme management plans are often agreed on insufficient data and/or out-of-date mapping. In terms of monitoring, a timescale issue may also arise as many outcomes are only delivered after the 5-year agreement. Therefore, monitoring needs to continue after the scheme ends.</p>
Flexibility	<p>In securing environmental outcomes from land management, it will be important to adapt and improve management interventions according to local conditions. When co-developed with advice from experts with sound knowledge, flexibility can facilitate innovation, help respond to a changing environment, engage farmers, and ensure better environmental delivery¹³. More can be done to ensure that flexibility is inbuilt into the design of future schemes, to ensure that local land management is tailored to delivering the specific objectives it is required to meet. No two areas are the same and scheme agreements should be sufficiently flexible to ensure that management achieves the outcomes it is required to meet. For example, rather than adopting a one size fits all approach to stocking rates based on habitat, farm plans can be adapted based on the specific needs of the site in question, provided that interventions are informed by expert advice. Flexible schemes would allow farmers to increase existing options or add additional ones as confidence grows within the wider scheme. There should be scope to increase the area of land under these options.</p>

¹² McCracken, M.E. et al. (2015) Social and ecological drivers of success in agri-environment schemes: the roles of farmers and environmental context, *Journal of Applied Ecology* 2015, 52, 696–70

¹³ Meye, C et al. (2015). Design rules for successful governmental payments for ecosystem services: Taking agri-environmental measures in Germany as an example, *Journal of Environmental Management* 157, (1), Pp 146-159

Future Payments: Payments for Results vs Payments for Actions

There is a growing interest in the role of Results-Based Agri-environment Payment Schemes (RBAPS), in which farmers and land managers receive payments for the environmental outcomes they deliver. This approach has emerged following the long-term criticism of overly prescriptive approaches based on undertaking specified actions and not on the environmental improvements delivered. Trials of the RBAPS approach across Europe have highlighted a range of advantages, however, risks and limitations remain that could hinder successful roll out at a national level. Below we consider the role of RBAPS and whether they could completely or partially replace the need for actions-based payments.

Benefits of a results-based approach

Under RBAPS farmers and land managers are paid to deliver a specific environmental result or outcome. Farmers and land managers can choose how to adapt the management of their land, livestock, and crops to deliver the desired results. Perceived benefits of the RBAPS approach are:

- ▶ Farmers are given greater flexibility to use their management skills and the knowledge of their land to deliver results that are locally tailored and deliver the levels of heterogeneity required. Initially many farmers and land managers may lack some of the necessary skills to deliver the land management change, however with the correct levels of advice and support this is likely to change over time. Under these schemes, it is in their best interest to learn and transition from the status quo.
- ▶ Paying farmers and land managers by results could incentivise better integration of environmental delivery into a farming system or business. Even encouraging agreement holders to select the best location on the farm for the environment rather than the least productive from an agronomic perspective.
- ▶ Removing management prescriptions could drive higher uptake. Farmers and land managers have often resented more prescriptive schemes, and this has acted as a disincentive to participate¹⁴. Whilst this may be true, if designed without appropriate safety measures RBAPS do increase the risk, as agreement holders cannot guarantee the receipt of payments, despite having invested in land management changes.
- ▶ RBAPS may increase the buy-in of farmers and land managers, contributing to a culture shift, increasing knowledge of holding-level environmental needs, and interest in and ownership of the results¹⁵.
- ▶ RBAPS potentially enables Government to ‘purchase’ more precise environmental results, which would increase the ecological effectiveness of the scheme. In addition, there would be no requirement to pay if the agreement holder did not deliver the agreed results.
- ▶ Given the obvious potential within RBAPS, there is a need for stronger push to upscaling the results-based approach in NI. The Future Agricultural Policy Proposals will see the majority of payments moving towards agri-environment as part of this transition period. With successful pilots undertaken in ROI, GB, and Europe¹⁶ there is an opportunity to put RBAPS at the centre of future policy.

Key challenges of a results-based approach

While there are many advantages of results-based payments, limitations must not be overlooked. Potential concerns around RBAPS include:

¹⁴ Vickery, J.A., Bradbury, R.B., Henderson, I.G., Eaton, M.A., Grice, P.V., 2004. The role of agri-environment schemes and farm management practices in reversing the decline of farmland birds in England. *Biological Conservation* 119, 19–39.

¹⁵ European Commission. Results-based agri-environment schemes. Online. Available from: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/rbaps/index_en.htm [Accessed: 18/01/2019].

¹⁶ [Country infos / Result Based Payments Network \(rbpnetwork.eu\)](#)

- ▶ To date, many of the RBAPS have been small scale pilots, both in terms of the geographic area covered and the results delivered. Therefore, there is a challenge in determining how these pilots can be scaled-up to enable results-based or outcomes-based payments to become a major component of an Agri-environment scheme. There are, however, examples of where upscaling has been successfully achieved. The Burren project¹⁷ served as a foundation for many pilots across Ireland and Europe which cover larger areas (i.e. Hen Harrier¹⁸).
- ▶ RBAPS are heavily reliant on access to good quality evidence, and the ability to identify clear and measurable indicators for success. These indicators are critical as they form the basis of the necessary controls and verification to release payments. Currently it has only been possible to successfully identify indicators for a handful of outcomes such as easily identifiable carnivores and birds and proxies for habitats such as species rich grassland. This is clearly a work in progress and further investment is needed to build a sufficient evidence base. This may prove particularly challenging for complex outcomes such as slow to recover habitat such as peatlands. How these indicators are monitored is just as critical. There are, however, projects aiming to overcome these issues, such as the LIFE Integrated Project ¹⁹ from which lessons can be learnt.
- ▶ In some instances, a complete shift to a results-based approach could be problematic. Such as in the case of protected species or sites, farmers and land managers are required to receive consent for undertaking management and there are some management measures that are not permitted because they are deemed damaging. In these circumstances, it may be necessary to make payments conditional on avoiding set management measures (e.g., application of fertilizer or use of heavy machinery) or indeed in certain circumstances following set management actions.
- ▶ RBAPS come with a much higher level of contractual risk for farmers and land managers, as without appropriate safeguards payments cannot be guaranteed. It is important not to overlook this potential for increased risk to farmers and land managers. One way of mitigating this risk is to ensure the results are within the control of the farmer/ land manager.
- ▶ There is a risk that RBAPS overlook the research demonstrating the management interventions necessary to deliver change. Over the past 30-year researchers, eNGOs, farmers, planners etc. have developed and tested management interventions to ensure they are effective and practical to deliver. It is important that they build on this knowledge base for the develop future RBAPS.

Potential Hybrid Approach to Land Management Payments

We would argue that it is possible to combine the benefits of a results based and an actions-based approach. Many of the results-based payments trials to date have taken a hybrid approach, with, one payment linked to management actions and a further payment for securing the target agreed result(s). This approach helps reduce contractual risk. Over time the balance between the two payments approaches could shift, with an increased emphasis on results-based payments as the evidence base improves and the associated risks reduce.

Scheme Type	Payment Basis	Payment Verification
Pure results-based No management actions are either specified or required	Solely based on results, measured using one or more environmental indicators	The observation of the extent to which results have been achieved
Management-based Management actions form the basis of scheme design	Wholly based on having carried out specific management actions	Observation of whether management actions have been carried out

¹⁷ <http://burrenprogramme.com/the-programme/our-approach/>

¹⁸ <https://www.rbpnetwork.eu/country-infos/ireland/rbaps-project-7/>

¹⁹ LIFE Integrated Project - Wild Atlantic Nature, <https://www.rbpnetwork.eu/news/new-eu-life-projects-in-ireland-set-to-further-test-and-develop-results-based-payments-approach/>

<p>Hybrid results-based Management actions or restrictions form part of the scheme</p>	<p>Partly based on results, measured using one or more environmental indicators</p>	<p>Observation of results and/or whether management actions have been carried out</p>
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Results-based approaches have the potential to improve the efficacy of environmental land management schemes. Results based, and actions-based approaches should not be seen as mutually exclusive but different tools which can be used together to ensure schemes deliver environmental outcomes and provide the right balance of flexibility and certainty for farmers/land managers and Government.

Programmes of pilots and trials could provide an effective means of ironing out some of the issues associated with RBAPS and looking for ways to combine results and actions. As part of a transition period from current schemes to the next, there are opportunities to trial different approaches to agri-environment schemes and the payments associated with them. This could include Results Based Pilots to determine what role they could play in meeting specific environmental priorities.

Future payments and an effective regulatory baseline

Future payments should incentivise and reward farming and land management practices and activities that go above and beyond regulatory standards and requirements. We believe an effective regulatory baseline should ensure that:

- ▶ All farming and land management enterprises – whether in receipt of public money or not – must comply with relevant regulatory standards as established by EU retained/domestic laws e.g., in relation to the environment, animal welfare, food safety.
- ▶ Effective inspection and enforcement regimes are essential to ensure compliance with regulatory standards. Intentional and/or repeated non-compliance with such standards should result in fines and penalties. Elsewhere, in Wales for example, a scorecard approach has been adopted, to help inform farmers of areas where improvement or action is required. Similarly, a scorecard approach could be adopted here incentivise whole farm habitat restoration (RoI).
- ▶ Farmers and land managers in receipt of public payments, who do not comply with regulatory standards should face reductions or withdrawal of payments, proportionate to the risk and degree of damage arising from non-compliance.
- ▶ Payments incentivise and reward farming and land management practices and activities that go above and beyond regulatory standards and requirements, in line with the polluter pays principle.
- ▶ Payments secure key policy objectives and value for money, by delivering additionality.
- ▶ Advice and training help improve knowledge and understanding or compliance with regulatory standards.
- ▶ A transition period addresses systemic non-compliance, during which funding and financing should be made available to meet baseline good practice and regulators should establish a ‘polluter responsibility’ to take this up.

Transition and piloting new approaches

A predefined transition period is essential in setting a clear direction of travel from our current policies to the next. We recognise that our vision represents a significant change to existing practices and that getting there will not happen overnight. However, there is an urgent need for change, we must move with purpose whilst allowing enough time to plan and adapt. To this end, a pre-defined and time limited transition period is essential to provide the certainty and stability that the farming sector will need to plan for the future. A clear transition period is also essential in ensuring that agriculture and

land use policy can rise to the challenges we currently face. Failure to do so, will result in drift and stagnation, neither of which are in the interests of farming, people, nature or climate.

We suggest a transition period of five years in which Direct payments would be gradually phased out and replaced by new environmental schemes as the principal means of agricultural support. Within the transition period, the onus should be on piloting new approaches to environmental support. This would include pilots for outcomes-based schemes, as well as group-level pilots and more novel approaches, including payments for results and other potential support mechanisms. With our considerable experience in the design and delivery of agri-environment schemes in Northern Ireland, the environment sector is committed to working in partnership with Departmental officials, farmers, and land managers to deliver a future agri-environment scheme more in tune with current farmer, environmental and wider societal needs. A key way of taking this forward is to ensure that there is eNGO and practitioner representation on all relevant DAERA EFS working groups.