

18th July 2024

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Hilary Benn MP,
Secretary of State
Erskine House
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RE: Meeting to Discuss Environmental Priorities for Northern Ireland

Dear Secretary of State,

Firstly, in my capacity as Chair of Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL), I want to congratulate you on your appointment as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. We very much look forward to meeting and working with you in the future. By way of introduction, NIEL is the networking and forum body for non-statutory organisations interested in the environment of Northern Ireland. Our 69 full members represent 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 Northern Ireland, there are a number of issues that require action by the UK government for which we would welcome your support. To this end the NIEL Board of Trustees have asked me to write to you to request a meeting to discuss three key areas:

- **Improving the quality of our freshwater resources** – The well documented issues with toxic blue green algae in Lough Neagh are indicative of the wider challenge in this area. Indeed in 2021 a DAERA report highlighted that **none** of the 496 rivers, lakes and transitional and coastal water bodies in Northern Ireland, achieved Good Environmental Status. This 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.
- **Tackling climate change by reaching net zero** - Following implementation of the Climate Change Act (NI) 2022 NI must ensure that the targets outlined in the legislation are met. However, to achieve this sufficient funding will be required from the UK Government. Currently only 3% of the UK government spending on energy



security and net zero is devolved to NI and there is a recognition that if we are to meet the challenging targets for net zero then this will have to be supported at a UK level.

- **Protecting biodiversity** - You will be aware that various reports have indicated that NI's biodiversity is in crisis. NI is ranked 12 worst out of 240 countries in a Biodiversity Intactness Index and according to DAERA, 36% of features in our terrestrial and marine protected sites are in unfavourable condition. If NI is to reverse this trend and fully contribute to the UK wide 30x 30 target for nature conservation then it will require additional financial support from the UK government.

We would like to meet with you at your earliest possible convenience to discuss the scale and nature of these challenges and how we can work with you to realise the additional investment and policy change that is required.

Yours sincerely,



Stephen Aston, Chair – Northern Ireland Environment Link