

# Written Ministerial Statement

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## Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

### APPROVAL AND PUBLICATION OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPROVEMENT PLAN

*Published at 3pm on Friday 27 September 2024*

**Mr Muir (Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** This statement sets out the statutory basis, proposed actions and outcomes of Northern Ireland's (NI) first Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) which, following Executive approval, I am publishing later today.

#### Background

I made the finalisation of the EIP one of my key priorities when I assumed office in February 2024 and I have been discussing with stakeholders and Executive colleagues the need for its expeditious publication since then. While it has taken longer than I had hoped, I am grateful for the input from Executive colleagues during this approval process, and I believe we now have an EIP which provides a coherent response to the local and, in many cases, global challenges of environmental degradation and climate change.

The genesis of the EIP was the draft Environment Strategy for NI, development of which commenced in 2018, following publication of the UK Government's document, 'A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment' (which primarily applies to England). In the absence of NI ministers, a Public Discussion Document (essentially a call for evidence) was issued in September 2019. The Discussion Document generated around 2,500 responses, indicating the level of public interest in such a policy initiative.

On foot of that call for evidence, a draft Environment Strategy, which was always intended to become NI's first EIP, was prepared and, with Executive approval, issued for public consultation in November 2021. The consultation on the draft strategy closed in January 2022 and received 336 responses.

The preparation and publication of an EIP is a statutory duty placed upon the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) by Schedule 2 to the Environment Act 2021 (the Act), which came into force in July 2022 following Assembly approval of the draft Environment (2021 Act) (Commencement and Saving Provision) Order (Northern Ireland) 2022 in February 2022.

The Act also sets out a number of statutory requirements in respect of the process and content of the EIP:

- it defines an EIP as "...a plan for significantly improving the natural environment" - it is not enough that it protects the environment, it must be designed to make it better;
- the EIP must set out – (a) the steps that DAERA intends to take to improve the natural environment, and (b) any steps that any other NI department intends to take to improve the natural environment;
- the EIP may also set out steps that any NI department intends to take to improve people's enjoyment of the natural environment;
- in preparing an EIP, DAERA must consult such other Northern Ireland departments as it considers appropriate;
- DAERA must prepare and publish annual reports on implementation of the EIP which, (a) describe what has been done to implement the EIP, and (b) consider whether the natural environment has improved during the reporting period;
- the EIP must be reviewed no later than 5 years after publication and, if necessary, renewed;
- the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) must also prepare and publish annual reports on implementation of the EIP, within 6 months of the DAERA report.

The commencement of the relevant provision afforded DAERA a statutory 12-month window in which to publish an EIP. Unfortunately, that window fell wholly within a period during which the devolved institutions were not fully operational and regrettably the statutory deadline for publication of 25 July 2023 could not be met due to the limitations on decision making by civil servants in the absence of ministers.

It is well recognised that NI faces a wide range of environmental challenges including habitat and species loss, greenhouse gas emissions, climate change, waste management, the development of a circular economy, soil quality, air quality, water quality (including the particular problems affecting Lough Neagh), waste and environmental crime. The Assembly has passed a number of motions over the years attesting to these challenges, including the most recent, on 13 May 2024, which declared an ecological and biodiversity crisis and acknowledged the complex characteristics of biodiversity and ecological breakdown in Lough Neagh.

However, the EIP does not exist in isolation. It is part of our broader commitment as an Executive to make life better for the people of Northern Ireland through an ambitious draft Programme for Government for 2024-2027, 'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most', the consultation for which launched on 9 September 2024. Our Plan sets out three Missions:

- **People** - Working to support everyone at all stages of their life to ensure they have the chance to succeed by improving life opportunities.
- **Planet** - Harnessing the potential of a green growth economy while ensuring we provide an equitable transition to a sustainable and affordable society as we take responsibility for decarbonising our economy and society.
- **Prosperity** - Improving our economic productivity while making sure that we have an economy that works for everyone and our story continues to be an inspiration to others.
- Cross cutting commitment to : **Peace**: To make sure that everyone feels the benefit of a growing economy, improved environment, and fairer society.

The publication of the Environmental Improvement Plan is one of a number of Executive commitments within Our Plan to ensure we protect our environment and tackle climate change in a fair and balanced way.

For a high-level EIP to be meaningful, it is essential that it is ambitious in terms of its breadth and depth, and that it focuses on positive outcomes for the big environmental issues facing us that will make a difference to the lives and well-being of current and future generations.

The EIP, which has been approved by the Executive, outlines a coherent and effective set of interventions that can deliver significant improvements in the quality of the environment across all of the above environmental challenges. Enhancing our environment matters, as a healthy environment is interlinked with our health and well-being. Long term planning is essential to influence and deliver the necessary protection and enhancement of our natural and cultural capital and to ensure its long-term future for those generations who will inherit it from us.

### **Content of the EIP**

My officials have worked with key stakeholders, including other departments and external bodies, to develop a set of 6 Strategic Environmental Outcomes, all of which align with the DAERA core vision of, "Sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape, valued by everyone", and link to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals namely:

- Goal 1: No Poverty
- Goal 2: Zero hunger
- Goal 3: Good health and well-being
- Goal 4: Quality education
- Goal 5: Gender equality
- Goal 6: Clean water and sanitation
- Goal 7: Affordable and clean energy
- Goal 8: Decent work and economic growth
- Goal 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
- Goal 10: Reduced inequalities

Goal 11: Sustainable cities and communities  
Goal 12: Responsible consumption and production  
Goal 13: Climate action  
Goal 14: Life below water  
Goal 15: Life on land  
Goal 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions  
Goal 17: Partnerships for the goals

The Strategic Environmental Outcomes are set out below, along with some of the specific actions that will contribute to their achievement:

### **1. Excellent air, water & land quality**

This Strategic Environmental Outcome covers key elements of our environment including: air quality; water quality; land quality; and local environment quality. For many people, these environmental issues represent their day-to-day experience of 'the environment' - from the air they breathe, to the quality of their drinking water and the condition of their local neighbourhood.

Improving air quality in NI will, amongst other initiatives, be achieved through the development of an Ammonia Strategy and Clean Air Strategy. The creation of higher water environment standards which support biodiversity and contribute to health and well-being will be underpinned by a new Nutrients Action Programme and River Basin Management Plans, and the introduction of phosphorus and nitrogen balance targets for the agricultural sector. In the marine environment, we will complete the review of NI bathing waters, develop an NI Marine Strategy and develop and apply ecological modelling frameworks that integrate catchment management with coastal water quality & shellfish production. Local environment quality will be enhanced by the publication of the first NI Litter Strategy and the continued support for community-based civic pride initiatives.

### **2. A healthy & accessible environment & landscapes everyone can connect with & enjoy**

This outcome aims to ensure households have access to natural space and visit the outdoors at least once a week. It aims to ensure our children and young people are provided with opportunities to learn about, actively engage with, and positively shape the natural environment. I want to see sustainable cities, towns and village centres which are thriving places for people to do business, visit, socialise, shop, be creative and use public services as well as being great places to live. Some of the actions that will support delivery of this outcome include: a landscape policy/legislation review, followed by a Landscape Strategy; and continue to support the international Eco-Schools programme, in which we are world leaders.

### **3. Thriving, resilient and connected nature & wildlife**

The aim of this outcome is to see biodiversity loss in NI halted and reversed and to be replaced with healthy, functioning, thriving and resilient nature and ecosystems. Negative engagement with the environment is increasingly causing impacts to health, well-being and future sustainability, I believe, however, we can positively impact nature as we engage with it, protecting, maintaining and enhancing a clean and healthy environment as we live, work and play. We can achieve this by protecting, managing, restoring, extending and connecting our natural ecosystems and the species that rely on them.

The NI Peatland Strategy will set the long-term vision for peatland protection, restoration & maintenance, complete a review of NI's terrestrial protected sites and develop and implement nature recovery plans.

NI needs a healthy marine area which is managed sustainably for the economic, environmental and social prosperity of present and future generations, supported by the development of a number of strategies and plans, including: a Seabird Conservation Strategy for NI; a revised NI Inshore Marine Protected Areas Strategy; a Blue Carbon Action Plan for NI to help address the Climate Emergency; and NI Marine Invasive Species Action Plans.

There is a recognised need for a comprehensive Natural Capital (NC) and ecosystem framework for NI, clearly identifying linkages to key strategies and plans, including the Biodiversity Strategy and Climate Action Plan.

#### **4. Sustainable production & consumption on land & at sea**

We must use the Earth's limited resources in a sustainable manner while minimising impacts on the environment. This is something that applies across all sectors - including industry, agriculture and energy. This outcome covers a wide range of areas, including the future of agriculture, energy, productive and sustainably used seas, producer responsibility, reducing single use plastic, chemicals and antimicrobial & disinfectant contamination.

We are developing actions and enabling measures as part of the Farm Support and Development Programme. DfE's Energy Strategy for Northern Ireland, 'The Path to Net Zero Energy', provides a pathway to 'net zero carbon and affordable energy'.

There needs to be an increase in the recycling of goods and packaging after use by consumers and an increase in levels of separately collected waste electricals for re-use and recycling – specific actions will include the introduction of a Deposit Return Scheme for drinks containers and considering reform of producer responsibility for Waste Electrical & Electronic Equipment.

The volume of single use plastic cups and food containers must decrease – I intend to bring forward regulations that will enable restrictions on the sale or supply of ten common single-use plastic items and require clearer labelling of products that contain single use plastic.

Development of resistant microorganisms that cause simple infections to become untreatable by current antimicrobials (AM) is one of our biggest and most imminent threats. The UK has a National Action Plan to fight antimicrobial resistance (AMR) and NI has adopted a five-year action plan with the same aim (2019-2024).

#### **5. Zero waste & a highly developed circular economy**

This outcome aims to reduce overall demand for raw materials, reduce waste generation and create things that retain value throughout their entire life cycle. The Circular Economy is an economic system which reduces overall demand for resources, retains the value of resources and seeks to regenerate our natural ecosystems. Through a Circular Economy system, we can create places where people have greater access to products, businesses can thrive by becoming more resource efficient and we can improve the health of natural ecosystems.

DfE's draft Circular Economy Strategy for NI sets out a clear vision that NI will have an innovative, inclusive and competitive economy where business, people and planet flourish, with responsible production and consumption at its core. The aim is to adopt a circular model and reduce our material footprint, to live responsibly, build resilience and exploit new opportunities.

We are supporting this outcome by developing a new NI Waste Management Strategy, revising the current NI Waste Management Plan and introducing a Deposit Return Scheme for Drink Containers. Since the introduction of the Food Waste Regulations (NI) 2015, over one million tonnes of biodegradable waste have been diverted from landfill, positively impacting the levels and quality of waste recycling. We will continue to build on this good work by working with delivery partners to develop behaviour change campaigns, continue education & awareness raising initiatives to encourage the removal of as much food waste as possible from residual household waste streams and continue to work with food redistribution charities to use NI's food surplus to help feed some of the most vulnerable members of society.

#### **6. Net zero greenhouse gas emissions and improved climate resilience & adaptability.**

This outcome focuses on key requirements in the Climate Change Act (NI) 2022, including NI reducing its greenhouse gas emissions. I will publish NI's first Climate Action Plan to set out our approach to meeting the first carbon budget through a set of policies and proposals for emissions reductions. The Climate Action Plan will also establish a pathway towards the interim targets for 2030 and 2040 and the overall net zero by 2050 target.

#### **Review and Monitoring of Progress**

Publication of this EIP is a hugely important step, from both legislative and environmental perspectives, but it must be backed up by delivery. Robust governance arrangements will be put in place to ensure that: (a) there is proper accountability for the implementation of the EIP; (b) we

comply with our statutory duties to report on progress on an annual basis; and (c) that we take appropriate measures to review and (if required) renew the EIP on a 5-yearly cycle.

With regard to reporting, as outlined above, DAERA has a statutory duty to prepare, publish and lay before the Assembly annual reports on the implementation of the EIP. The actions and targets will be monitored on a regular basis to ensure DAERA and other relevant departments are doing what the EIP requires them to do, and allow corrective action to be taken, where necessary. That will allow us to address the first part of the reporting requirement – that we describe what has been done to implement the EIP.

The second reporting requirement – that we consider whether the natural environment, or particular aspects of it, have improved during the reporting period – requires the development of an outcome indicator framework. My officials have been developing this framework for some time and once completed it will allow a robust assessment to be made of the extent to which the environment is improving. It is likely that in some areas relevant data does not yet exist to support such an assessment. Where that is the case, appropriate monitoring and reporting arrangements will be established to ensure data gaps are closed, further enhancing DAERA's ability to produce legally compliant and statistically robust annual progress reports.

The Office for Environmental Protection (OEP), established under the Environment Act 2021, is an independent oversight body that protects the environment by holding Government and other public bodies to account. One of its statutory functions is to monitor and report on DAERA's environmental improvement plan, within six months of DAERA's annual report. DAERA must then respond to the OEP's report, addressing any recommendations made.

There will, of course, be costs associated with many of the actions set out in the EIP. Further development of detailed delivery plans will enable more focused consideration of the prioritisation and costing of the actions within the EIP, in the context of the budgetary situation.

Through this plan we have set out our ambitions to transform and improve our environment. It's time to think big and it's time to move fast.