

Protecting, Enhancing and Restoring Natural Places:

An Environmental Mission Statement for Infrastructure Development and Management



Department for
Infrastructure

An Roinn

Bonneagair

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FOREWORD FROM THE PERMANENT SECRETARY

The Department for Infrastructure is responsible for public services in relation to water and transport and has oversight of planning in Northern Ireland. In practice, this means that the Department is responsible for managing £32bn of public assets that impact on everyone's day to day lives.



Clearly the way in which we deliver infrastructure services can have a significant impact on the natural environment. This means that in our thinking and in our service delivery we should seek to maintain, restore or enhance the natural environment as part of our core activities.

While there are good examples of this in practice such as the development of sustainable drainage systems or the introduction of zero emission buses, now is the time for a renewed focus - on what we do well to protect and enhance the natural environment - and on what we can do better. This document sets out how we will meet this challenge. This is not a change to existing policy; rather it is a guide to help us to make better decisions and, in taking those decisions, to explain why we are taking a particular course of action.

The 'why' behind the decisions we take is as important as the actions we take. Sometimes the decisions we make when designing flood defences or roads - for example, to dig up or cut down existing habitat - can seem counterintuitive but these are never decisions we take lightly. There should always be a sound rationale for the decisions we make, based on scientific research and data and we will continue to improve how we communicate with those most affected.

As a Department, we are fully committed to challenging our existing practices and embracing new ways of working which will benefit and enhance the natural environment. This does not mean we will always get it right. But this mission

statement offers a renewed focus on how we can keep environmental issues at the forefront of our minds. We need to make sure that we carry this focus through all our work - from major works right through to smaller projects.

While there is no denying the challenges of competing priorities and constrained funding, we must challenge ourselves to keep looking for different and new solutions which will help protect the environment, not just for today, but for generations to come.

DR JULIE HARRISON

1. INTRODUCTION

Purpose

- 1.1 Globally governments have committed to, and legislated for, measures which will protect the environment and respond to the climate crisis we are facing. It is therefore vital that we develop policies and deliver infrastructure services in a way that places environmental considerations at the heart of everything that we do.
- 1.2 We are fully committed to challenging our existing practices and embracing new ways of working which will benefit our natural environment.
- 1.3 We will strive for continuous improvement in managing environmental issues, including the proper management and monitoring of waste, the reduction of pollution and emissions, compliance with environmental codes of practice, training for staff, and the monitoring of environmental performance.
- 1.4 This document sets out how we will meet this challenge. This is not a change to existing policy; rather it is a guide to help us to make better decisions and in taking those decisions to explain why we are taking a particular course of action.

Structure

1.5 *Protecting, Enhancing and Restoring Natural Places - An Environmental Mission Statement for Infrastructure Development and Management* is structured as follows:

- Section 2 – Where We Are Now
- Section 3 – Where We Want To Get To
- Section 4 – How We Will Get There
- Section 5 – What Does This Mean
- Section 6 – Working With Others
- Section 7 – What Happens Next

2. WHERE WE ARE

Context

- 2.1. The Department for Infrastructure is responsible for the maintenance and development of vital infrastructure in Northern Ireland. Through our delivery of water, transport and planning services, the Department is required to manage and protect £32bn of public assets that:
 - improve people's quality of life;
 - reduce our impact on the planet by living sustainability and decarbonising key services; and
 - build prosperity by driving inclusive productivity.
- 2.2. Concern about the environment is not new, however, responding to the climate crisis we face has necessitated a new urgency in respect of how we manage environmental protection. Over the last few years, key legislative arrangements have been put in place by the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Assembly, including the Environment Act 2021 and the Climate Change (NI) Act 2022. This has brought environmental protection and climate change considerations into sharp focus.
- 2.3. The recent legislation has provided clarity on what Environmental Protection means, placed statutory obligations on us, set targets and introduced principles for us to follow in carrying out our day-to-day operational activity.
- 2.4. This requires us to re-evaluate our existing priorities and strike a balance between how we deliver the infrastructure necessary to meet future needs and promote green growth, while still protecting the natural environment.
- 2.5. Infrastructure investment can help mitigate the effects of climate change. It helps manage flood risk and through the promotion of sustainable forms of transport can reduce emissions.

What we do well

- 2.6. We already have some well-established practices and procedures which historically have been designed to value the environment, reduce emissions and prevent any unnecessary damage to fragile ecosystems.
- 2.7. In areas where the natural environment is impacted upon to facilitate infrastructure works, care is taken to minimise the impact on the local environment and wildlife as much as possible. This includes:
- a) ensuring that, for plans or projects which are likely to have a significant impact on the environment, we fully comply with the Strategic Environmental Assessment Regulations and other environmental regulations and legislative requirements;
 - b) giving careful consideration to alternative construction methods and design to determine optimum solutions to minimise impacts while delivering major infrastructure projects;
 - c) carrying out extensive public consultation before work begins, to ascertain the views of interested parties which can further inform the design process and influence outcomes;
 - d) building suitable adaptation arrangements into major infrastructure projects; for example, through landscaping areas or building in sustainable drainage systems;
 - e) employing suitably qualified staff to provide expertise in environmental protection, developing internal guidance manuals and providing training for staff; and
 - f) following recognised environmental codes of practice.
- 2.8. We have been formally recognised through the attainment of a number of Excellent CEEQUAL Awards, which celebrate high environmental, economic and social performance on projects within the civil engineering industry.
- 2.9. In respect of emissions and air quality considerations, we have made progress in decarbonising the transport sector, developing actions to support the use of

alternative fuels for public transport and in the provision of charge point infrastructure for electric vehicles.

- 2.10. We have worked closely with Translink to ensure that its operations are as environmentally friendly as possible through, for example, the introduction of zero emission buses.
- 2.11. We are also working with NI Water on its ambitious plans to contribute towards a flourishing natural environment. This includes targets to plant one million trees within its land holding, help to increase Northern Ireland's renewable energy generating capacity and investigate alternative fuel sources, including hydrogen production.
- 2.12. We have launched the Living With Water Programme which aims to protect against flooding, enhance the environment and help to grow the economy. This is being achieved by working in partnership with drainage providers, and others, to implement blue/green drainage infrastructure and employ natural flood management measures both of which can lead to environmental improvements.
- 2.13. From an Active Travel perspective, we have worked with partners to deliver an Active Schools Travel Programme, produce plans for new greenways and develop the Comber and Blaris Greenways as walking and cycling routes. We know we need to do better and have been thinking about better ways to support the move to walking, wheeling and cycling when resources continue to be a challenge.
- 2.14. In our oversight of the regional Planning System role, we have implemented an Environmental Governance Work Programme to build capacity and competence in Environmental Impact Assessment practice for all council planning authorities as well as statutory consultees.

Things we could do better

- 2.15. While we have long established environmental protection measures in place, it is accepted that on some occasions we do not always get it right. This includes how we plan, design and carry out works which impact on our irreplaceable natural resources.
- 2.16. This may, in part, be due to the business case process we use to evaluate options and decide on a particular course of action. Historically, there has always been a requirement to include environmental impacts in the decision-making process, ensuring the economic costs and benefits are quantified and monetised where possible. However, it is often difficult to place a monetary value on such factors, and as such they are often accounted for within the non-monetary analysis.
- 2.17. We also recognise that when it comes to making decisions to dig up, cut down or alter existing natural environments in our cities, towns and countryside, why we do things is just as important as how we do them. Despite having very proactive communications on some of these issues, we need to develop and explore messaging and information approaches to communicate the rationale, mitigations and benefits of what we do as an environmentally considerate Department.
- 2.18. We also need to explore new ways of carrying out our functions, managing constrained budgets and dealing with competing priorities.
- 2.19. We know we need to deliver more blue/green infrastructure which complements our natural environment and creates spaces where people can walk, wheel and cycle allowing them to enjoy quieter, clean corridors for recreation and active travel encouraging them to get out of their cars.
- 2.20. To deliver this, and our plans for transport decarbonisation, we need to constantly re-evaluate priorities and ensure that resources are targeted and delivery focused and that all our actions are aligned to our commitments and statutory responsibilities in respect of environmental protection, as well as our other statutory duties.

3. WHERE WE WANT TO GET TO

- 3.1. We want to take a holistic approach to our thinking and our delivery.
- 3.2. Environmental considerations should be at the forefront of everything we do and policies and procedures across the Department and its delivery partners need to be aligned to ensure consistency of approach. This will help in fostering a new understanding of environmental protection.
- 3.3. We want to work in a way which promotes green growth and strikes a balance between the requirements of the natural world with the needs of a growing population and the consequential requirement for infrastructure enhancements.
- 3.4. We want to create the conditions, through the regional planning system, where councils secure the delivery of environmentally, as well as economically sustainable, development at a local level through their local development plans (LPDs) and development management processes.
- 3.5. As a society, we need a long-term approach which focuses on digitisation and better use of data, reducing the need or distance to travel, behavioural change, modal shift, transport decarbonisation, and measures which will help us adapt to the effects of climate change. The challenge is in weighing these and moving from theory to delivery in a way that recognises we are not starting where we would like to be.
- 3.6. In doing so, we must ensure that all our actions are consistent with the aims of the Climate Change Act which sets legislative targets and commitments for the years 2050, 2040 and 2030 to reduce greenhouse gas emissions as quantified by a system of carbon budgeting periods.
- 3.7. We have an opportunity to lead by example in demonstrating environmental good practice and we will embrace it.

4. HOW WILL WE GET THERE

- 4.1. To keep a focus on improvement, we are considering how best to utilise our policies, thinking about what we do in a different way and refining our day to day practices.
- 4.2. The Environment Act 2021, the Northern Ireland elements of which the NI Assembly approved in February 2022, outlines five key principles which are internationally recognised as successful benchmarks for environmental protection and enhancement when making policy or carrying out operational activity.
- 4.3. These five principles are a useful framework that we can apply to our work in DfI to ensure that we consider the environmental impacts of our actions.
- 4.4. The principles are:
 - *The integration principle*

This is the overarching principle that environmental protection should be integrated into the making of policies. This means that we should look for opportunities to embed environmental protection and/or enhancement into all our policies, not just those directly related to the environment.
 - *The prevention principle*

This principle means that we should aim to prevent environmental damage either before it has occurred through policy design, or to contain existing damage.
 - *The rectification at source principle*

This principle states that environmental damage should, as a priority, be addressed at its origin to avoid the need to remedy its effects later. This should result in approaches that are more cost-effective, efficient, and equitable in the long-term. Where it is not possible to address environmental damage at source, efforts should be made to contain or limit the environmental harm as much as possible.
 - *The polluter pays principle*

This means that, where possible, the costs of pollution should be borne by those causing it, rather than the person who suffers the effects of the resulting

environmental damage, or the wider community. In cases where pollution cannot be avoided or is caused by accident, the polluter pays principle can be used to restore or redistribute the costs of environmental damage. Applying this principle will help to incentivise individuals or groups to avoid causing environmental damage and encourage sustainable practices.

- *The precautionary principle*

This principle is to assist the decision-making process in the face of a lack of scientific certainty by clarifying that where there are threats of serious or irreversible environmental damage, a lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.

- 4.5. We believe that by using these principles while developing or implementing policy and guidance, or carrying out operational duties, environmental considerations will be given a new focus across the Department. We therefore intend to ensure that we embed these principles as we plan and deliver our work.
- 4.6. DAERA is currently developing an environmental principles statement which will give further guidance on the interpretation and implementation of these principles which we will take into account, however we feel that it is important that we start to use these principles to guide us in the interim.
- 4.7. It will however be important that a proportionate approach to the environmental principles is applied to ensure that we can still deliver the infrastructure needs of a growing population and economy. DAERA is developing a 'green growth' test which will assist with these considerations, and we will incorporate this test into our processes once available.
- 4.8. In evaluating business cases for proposed projects, we intend to explore how we can more accurately measure the economic value of environmental protection actions and ensure that those measures form the foundation of any business case and are, in future, seen as an integral part of the costing process.

- 4.9. This process will also provide a rationale for our decision making which can then be used to inform stakeholders and interested parties as to why we have agreed to certain course of action.
- 4.10. We also need to consider how the Climate Change Act has altered the landscape in respect of how we allocate our resources. The Climate Change Act not only places obligations on the Department in terms of reducing emissions, it also requires the Department to develop sectoral plans for transport which set a minimum spend on active travel from the overall transport budgets of 10%. We will therefore need to re-evaluate our priorities and budget allocations across the Department and put in place new governance arrangements to ensure that these commitments are met.
- 4.11. This will also help facilitate more holistic decision making across the Department. In doing this, we recognise that we are constrained by available budgets and that this may mean that some areas of work will reduce or cease.
- 4.12. Looking more widely, we also need to ensure that our policies and actions are consistent with the aims of other departments. We will therefore put in place arrangements that will allow us to collaborate with each other on matters relating to climate change. This will be particularly important as we develop the Climate Action Plan required by the Act.
- 4.13. We have been working with other government departments on a range of green strategies and as a result we have committed to a number of outcomes as outlined in Section 6. We will continue this engagement and will review our input into these strategies to ensure that it is consistent with this statement.
- 4.14. In respect of our role and responsibility for providing the strategic framework and direction for the regional Planning System, we intend to review our regional policy, the Strategic Planning Policy Statement, to ensure that it is fit for purpose to enable council planning authorities to fulfil their statutory environmental obligations, support the Climate Change agenda and ultimately secure the delivery of

sustainable development through their Local Development Plans and decisions on planning applications.

5. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN

- 5.1. In simple terms, this means we will think before we take any action. We want to make better decisions in relation to the environment and the environmental principles provide us with a framework to do this. Considering these principles will help us make the best choices, while balancing a range of factors.
- 5.2. Our first step should always be to seek to enhance the environment by building in additional environmental actions where possible. This could include:
- sustainably managing stormwater to help reduce flood risk and pollution, through the use of open spaces and watercourses to enhance the environment which can also promote recreational opportunities.
 - working with relevant conservation bodies to identify opportunities to provide environmental enhancements when undertaking river maintenance to improve geomorphology of the river corridor.
 - Including planting/re-wilding as part of major road schemes.
- 5.3. Where we cannot enhance, we should as a minimum, strive to do no harm. This includes timing our activities to reduce the effect on relevant species when planning our works, for example, works in coastal areas where overwintering birds may be affected or tree cutting outside of the nesting season.
- 5.4. Where this is not possible, we should seek to mitigate the effects of our actions by either taking steps to offset the impact of our actions or taking action to reduce the negative effects of climate change. This could include:
- changing land use to plant more trees,
 - introducing sustainable drainage systems,
 - reviewing planning policy,
 - switching fuels,
 - using carbon counting to measure how we can quantify what we are doing to inform future policy; and
 - reviewing the use of alternative weed control.

- 5.5. The implementation of the polluter pays principles may mean that we will have to introduce charges which will act as a deterrent to environmental damage however this will be subject to future Ministerial direction.
- 5.6. Adopting the above approach will mean that all our decisions will be based on the following hierarchy:



Examples of this in practice

- 5.7. Through the planning and delivery of capital works schemes, unavoidable environmental impacts will be identified and appropriate mitigation measures incorporated into designs e.g. compensatory planting.
- 5.8. A recent example of this is the planting regime for the A6 Dungiven to Drumahoe Dualling scheme which includes the provision of wildflower seeding for approximately 200,000m² over a number of locations throughout the 25.5km project. The seed mixture will consist of 60% Irish Native Wildflowers and 40% Ornamental Grasses and will include important native plants for pollinators.

- 5.9. We are committed to continuing the promotion of pollinator-friendly management of the strategic road network in NI and to reviewing environmental policies to promote pollinator-friendly practices and to encourage their inclusion on road schemes, where we can.
- 5.10. We are currently in the process of updating our environmental suite of documents to provide the most up to date, practical guidance to staff involved in the operation, maintenance and development of the infrastructure assets we manage to ensure it is in line with good environmental practice.

6. WORKING WITH OTHERS

6.1. We want to work with others to develop environmental strategies, and with organisations in a range of sectors that are delivering research and providing innovative solutions to practical problems.

Energy Strategy

6.2. We collaborated with the Department for Economy to publish the Energy Strategy in 2021 and its accompanying action plan in 2022.

6.3. As part of the Energy Strategy we committed to:

- publish a Local Transport Strategy that will outline policies and measures to reduce the number of journeys made by private car and increase modal shift. This will need to be considered alongside the development of the sectoral plans required under the Climate Change (Northern Ireland) Act 2022.
- deliver an Electric Vehicle (EV) Infrastructure Action Plan which was produced at the end of 2022.
- work on an all-island basis to develop the infrastructure for alternative fuels such as hydrogen and biomethane, for the harder-to electrify sectors including HGVs. Building on our existing capabilities in this area, we will work with partners to support vehicle and refuelling technology trials.
- identify and prioritise measures that inform technology choice and incentivise transport operators to move towards a zero emissions fleet and support demand management and behavioural change to incentivise optimisation of resources used to move people and goods.
- review how we measure carbon emissions from transport to assist with decarbonisation plans and monitor progress.
- review permitted development legislation for low carbon heat installations to ensure it is up to date and fit for purpose.

Green Growth Strategy

- 6.4. The draft Green Growth Strategy is the overarching framework for the development of other relevant environmental strategies and contains ten potential Executive Commitments in terms of its delivery. The intention is that this Strategy will be signed off at a future Executive meeting should the Assembly return. These commitments include embedding green growth as central to all policy and budgetary decisions as a way to deliver sustainable economic growth. It reflects much of the wider UK Net Zero Strategy and is based on five key principles which include decarbonisation as well as respecting our planet by restoring and protecting our natural capital.
- 6.5. A key commitment in the draft strategy is achieving UK net zero Green House Gas Emissions by 2050, as set out in the Climate Change Act (NI) 2022.
- 6.6. It sets out the long-term vision and a solid framework for tackling the climate crisis in the right way and addresses 4 key themes:
- Climate Action
This involves reducing greenhouse gas emissions to zero, or as close to zero as possible and offsetting any remaining emissions by increasing the ability of environment to capture carbon (e.g. through forestry). The UK Government has committed to Net Zero by 2050.
 - Investing in Innovation, Technology and Skills
Introducing smart infrastructure and innovative technologies, making better use of our data and analytics will contribute to reducing our carbon footprint. It will provide better evidence-based decision making and policies and will be essential in the collection of data and carbon accounting. Developing a low carbon, skilled workforce with more people working in jobs that contribute to climate action and a clean environment.
 - Clean Environment
Clean environment i.e. clear air and water, more sustainable land use; improved habitats and greater biodiversity.

- Ensuring a Just Transition

Any transition made must be managed fairly and be just. This involves moving to a more sustainable economy, in a way that is understood to be equitable and well managed.

- 6.7. The strategy will be delivered through a Climate Action Plan, which will set out the actions to meet sector-specific greenhouse gas emission targets leading to a cleaner environment, more efficient use of our resources within a circular economy and green jobs. The first Climate Action Plan is required to be laid before the Assembly by December 2023 and we are working with DAERA and other departments on its development.

Clean Air Strategy

- 6.8. Following consultation, we have been engaging with DAERA to develop a final draft Strategy. There is significant overlap between transport decarbonisation actions and measures which are likely to be agreed/developed to meet Local Transport Strategy/Transport Sectoral Plans and those that will benefit air quality. Also, air quality targets are to be included as part of the Climate Action Plan required by the Climate Change Act.
- 6.9. Five action points have been agreed for the Department as follows:
- we are committed to increasing opportunities for Active Travel and will continue to work in partnership with key stakeholders in the public and private sectors to develop active travel infrastructure, support modal shift and encourage walking, wheeling and cycling as an attractive alternative to the private car.
 - we will continue to work with government, consumers, energy providers, industry and EV drivers to consider NI's EV Infrastructure requirements and help set out a clear action plan to deliver a fit for purpose, modern EV charging network.
 - we will work in conjunction with DAERA to examine the benefits of developing a low emission zone framework to help Departments and local

Councils consider transport related actions to improve local air quality, noise reduction and carbon emission reductions.

- DVA will inspect vehicles to assess compliance with vehicle emissions systems and appropriate action will be taken where modifications are identified.
- As part of the development of a Climate Action Plan for NI, we will explore the benefits of procuring and commissioning traffic counters at a selected number of air quality monitoring sites, for the purposes of gathering data in relation to traffic volumes and to gauge their suitability for the purposes of noise mapping.

Environment Strategy

- 6.10. The draft Environment Strategy is designed to set out a vision for the future of NI's environment and the Executive's role in dealing with the challenges we face. It is intended to be a key document in setting out NI's environmental priorities for the coming decades.
- 6.11. DAERA also intends to adopt the final version of the Strategy as NI's first 'Environmental Improvement Plan' under the Environment Act 2021. The intention is that this Strategy will be signed off at a future Executive meeting should the Assembly return.
- 6.12. Following the finalisation of this strategy, it is the intention that interim targets will be set out in the Environmental Improvement Plan, which will be reviewed at least every five years.
- 6.13. The Environment Strategy is still currently in development and we continue to liaise with DAERA on several proposed actions incorporating Planning; Active Travel; Rivers; Transport; Living with Water Programme; and Water and Drainage policy.

Biodiversity Strategy

- 6.14. Last year, DAERA shared plans for a two stage co-design process intended to develop a Biodiversity Strategy which builds on the themes and targets which were agreed in the Environment Strategy.
- 6.15. We are committed to providing input into the development of proposed SMART strategic targets or other sectoral targets which may be achievable for consideration at Ministerial level. The strategy is still currently in development and we continue to liaise with DAERA on several proposed actions incorporating Transport, Rivers, Planning, Living with Water and Active Travel.

Innovation

- 6.16. The Department is also working collaboratively with academia and other partners to share expertise and explore innovative new ways of working and emerging infrastructure and technology opportunities around decarbonisation, flood alleviation, carbon reduction in terms of materials, engineering approaches and demand management alongside digital solutions which will reduce emissions across a broad range of the Department's functions.

7. What Happens Next

- 7.1. This Environmental Mission Statement for Infrastructure outlines the approach we will take to bring a renewed focus on what we can do better in terms of keeping environmental concerns at the heart of future decision making.
- 7.2. It will be used to help guide our work. It also provides a pathway to ensure that we carry this environmental focus through all of our activities- from major works right through to our smaller projects.
- 7.3. We are committing to take a bold step, utilising our policies and strategies, to challenge ourselves to find solutions which will help protect our environment, not just for today, but for generations to come.



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