

**REPORT ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 2015 NORTHERN IRELAND BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY
'*VALUING NATURE*'**

December 2016

Introduction

The current Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy was only published as recently as July 2015. However, since then two important developments have taken place.

First, the number of Government Departments in Northern Ireland has been reduced. Of most significance for the Biodiversity Strategy is the creation of the new Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA). As it has taken over the environmental functions of the old Department of the Environment, DAERA becomes responsible for the Strategy.

The second important development is the vote in favour of the United Kingdom leaving the European Union. It is still too early to say exactly what impact this will have in the long term. However, in the short to medium term at least, it is clear that there will be no change in the levels of environmental protection that currently exist.

It is against this background of administrative change and ongoing political developments that this first report on the implementation of the Biodiversity Strategy is published. The Wildlife and Natural Environment (Northern Ireland) Act 2011 requires DAERA to publish such a report not later than five years after the Act came into operation and then once in every period of five years.

The Department is also committed to carrying out a review of the Biodiversity Strategy following the publication of this report. The creation of the new Departments has dated the text of the Strategy somewhat, and it has also led to the loss of a number of functioning web-links. It is likely that the review will lead to the Strategy being updated and reissued to maintain its relevance as a readable working document.

However, in the meantime, this report considers what the Biodiversity Strategy has achieved to date. In particular, it looks at progress on actions with target dates up to December 2016, as well as those which are ongoing. Actions with target dates beyond December 2016 are outside the scope of this report.

The table that follows looks at each relevant action in turn. They are numbered in accordance with their original numbering in the 2015 Strategy document. Most of the actions belong to Government, but the Department is grateful to the RSPB and the National Trust for updates on the actions which fall to them to deliver.

Number, Owner, Action	Report on Implementation
No 2 – DAERA <i>Publish an Agricultural Land Use Strategy which includes a commitment to balanced environmental outcomes.</i>	Target Date: December 2016. The independent Expert Working Group on Sustainable Land Management will publish their Sustainable Land Management Strategy for Northern Ireland Agriculture before the end of 2016. This strategy will outline a series of detailed recommendations which aim to ensure that the targets identified in ‘Going for Growth’ are achieved in a sustainable way, leading to improved environmental outcomes on farm. Following completion of the report, DAERA will consider how best to implement these recommendations.
No 4 – DAERA <i>Publish the Rural Development Programme.</i>	Target Date: September 2015. The Rural Development Programme was approved by the European Commission on 25 th August 2015. The Programme and its associated documents, which include the Equality Impact Assessment and the Strategic Environmental Assessment, were subsequently published on the DAERA website.
No 7 – Department for Infrastructure <i>Finalise Flood Risk Management Plan based on River Basin Districts.</i>	Target Date: December 2015. Flood Risk Management Plans for Northern Ireland were finalised and published by Rivers Agency, on target, in December 2015 following a six-month consultation process. The Plans, along with the associated Environmental Report, Strategic Environmental Assessment, Habitats Regulations Assessment and a Summary of Measures, have been published on the Department for Infrastructure’s website. As required by the Floods Directive, the Plans were reported to the European Commission in March 2016.
No 10 – DAERA <i>Expand woodland cover from 8% to 12% of Northern</i>	Target Date: Ongoing to 2015. In 2015/16 Forest Service (FS) fell short of its key target to establish 100 hectares of new woodland. It paid £1.01m to 1,150 landowners to encourage 54 hectares of new planting and to

<p><i>Ireland land area.</i></p>	<p>maintain 3,700 hectares of plantations established in previous years. 96% of new planting consisted of broadleaved species and 50 hectares was new native woodland. Payments came from the Rural Development Programme (RDP) which is part funded by the European Commission under transitional arrangements following the closure of the 2006-13 RDP and the opening of the 2014-20 RDP. FS supported two owners in reinstating three hectares of woodland affected by tree disease with alternative tree species. In November 2015, the then Minister launched three new forestry grant schemes and, by the year's end, FS had received applications for 333 hectares and issued approval letters for 243 hectares of new planting. The FS business plan for 2016/17 set a target of 200 hectares of new woodland planting by 31st March 2017.</p>
<p>No 12 – DAERA <i>Publish a Marine Plan for consultation to assist the management of Northern Ireland's waters.</i></p>	<p>Target Date: November 2015. There has been unavoidable slippage with this action. A draft Marine Plan is now on target to be published by March 2017.</p>
<p>No 13 – DAERA <i>Develop a programme of measures to achieve Good Environmental Status (GES) as required by the Marine Strategy Framework Directive.</i></p>	<p>Target Date: December 2015. The programme of measures to deliver Good Environmental Status was developed by December 2015, and the UK package was presented to the Commission on schedule. The UK approach was that no new legislative measures were required to deliver MSFD as all of the required legislation was already in place. The package included details of all the existing measures which will deliver GES.</p>
<p>No 14 – DAERA <i>Implement the programme of measures to achieve GES as required by the Marine Strategy Framework</i></p>	<p>Target Date: December 2016. The programme of measures continues to be implemented under existing legislation. An ecologically coherent network of marine protected areas is on schedule to be delivered by December 2016 through the designation of New Marine Conservation Zones. This will add nationally important sites to the existing network of European Protected Areas.</p>

<p>Directive.</p>	
<p>No 16 – RSPB <i>Deliver peatland and wetland habitat restoration around the Lough Neagh Basin “Futurescape” through support for “Rebuilding the Countryside Programme” for 2015/16.</i></p>	<p>Target Date: March 2016.</p> <p>The delivery of peatland and wetland restoration around Lough Neagh during 2015/16 was focused primarily on the RSPB’s nature reserve areas at Portmore Lough and at Lough Beg. These two reserve areas were the focus of wet grassland restoration, while also leading to the development of wider partnership working towards landscape-scale conservation in the area. This included reaching an agreed approach for the Newferry peat extraction site, north of the Lough Beg ASSI. The RSPB targeted this 150 hectare area given its close proximity to the Lough Beg ASSI / Natura 2000 site. It has been agreed that the peat extraction company will begin restoration of this site during 2016, and continue to do so towards finally exiting the site in a way that leaves its hydrology and site levels in the appropriate condition to facilitate long-term peatland / wetland management.</p> <p>Lough Beg and Newferry also form part of a cultural and tourism vision for the Lough Beg landscape, located close to the new Seamus Heaney HomePlace in Bellaghy, a facility that aims to attract 35,000 visitors annually. This represents opportunities to sustainably manage the peatland and wetland landscape that inspired the poet. The support provided by NIEA through Rebuilding the Countryside during 2015/16 has enabled the RSPB to work at a strategic partnership level with Mid Ulster District Council and others to identify the most appropriate approach to be taken within sensitive landscapes, while aiming to provide a quality visitor experience. This is working towards a sustainable concept plan to attract visitors to view the peatland and wetland at Lough Beg ASSI and Toners Bog (Moneystaghan Bog ASSI) both having been referred to by Seamus Heaney.</p> <p>The RSPB continued to oversee the sustainable management of wet grassland at Lough Beg and called for a joined up approach towards having this landscape maintained through the Environmental Farming Scheme when it eventually opens in early 2017. Having spent the past five years working in partnership with farmers across the Lough Beg ASSI, and working in a new and innovative way that grouped these farmers together under one management plan between 2010 and 2015, the RSPB has provided a ready-made mechanism for the EFS Group Option to be applied, and is seeking to have this implemented as soon as the new scheme becomes available.</p> <p>The RSPB’s work at Lough Beg in the past five years has increased the number of breeding waders from 51 pairs in 2011 to 127 pairs in 2015, thus restoring an ASSI feature from unfavourable towards favourable condition. The RSPB seeks a collective working together to</p>

	<p>ensure that this restoration work is maintained long-term. Its activities during 2015/16 are all part of a landscape-scale vision for at least 1000 hectares of wetland in the Lough Beg area.</p> <p>The RSPB's vision extends further into the Lough Neagh area, where it is taking similar approaches from its nature reserve at Portmore Lough and extending towards the Montiaghs Moss ASSI/SAC. It is also targeting the peatlands and wet grasslands of south-west Lough Neagh where it works at a strategic partnership level with NIEA to support on-the-ground partnership working through a new and innovative landscape partnership scheme which was given the go-ahead in March 2016. The Lough Neagh Landscape Partnership Scheme, led by the Lough Neagh Partnership, will target 500 hectares of peatland and wet grassland within and close to the Lough Neagh ASSI in the next five years, with the support of the RSPB as a lead partner.</p>
<p>No 18 – DAERA <i>Review the implementation of the Sustainable Development Strategy to identify recommendations for the effective mainstreaming of sustainable development in Executive Departments.</i></p>	<p>Target Date: December 2016.</p> <p>The review has been completed and, as sustainability has been built into the Programme for Government, it is considered that a Sustainable Development Strategy is no longer required.</p>
<p>No 19 – DAERA <i>Complete the MCZ designation process.</i></p>	<p>Target Date: December 2016.</p> <p>The Department consulted on proposals for four Marine Conservation Zones in December 2015 and is working towards the publication of the designation orders in December 2016.</p>
<p>No 20 – DAERA <i>Complete the SAC and SPA designation programmes.</i></p>	<p>Target Date: December 2016.</p> <p>The Department has consulted on two additional SPAs which will complete the SPA programme – notification of East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine Special Protection Area and re-notification of Carlingford Lough (extension). The consultation period ended on 14 April 2016. A matrix of</p>

	<p>responses is being prepared and ministerial approval to formally classify the two sites will be sought shortly. It is hoped that the process will be completed by the end of December or early in 2017.</p> <p>The Department is also working on marine SACs. Red Bay candidate SAC was submitted by the UK Government to the EC for consideration in August 2010, and it was adopted by them as an SCI in November 2011. The Maidens candidate SAC, together with the Skerries and Causeway SAC were submitted in September 2012 and both adopted in November 2013. The Department intends to proceed with the formal designation of these sites as SACs by November 2017.</p> <p>The UK already has two SACs for harbour porpoise – the Skerries and Causeway in Northern Ireland and the Inner Hebrides and Minches in Scotland. Earlier this year, consultations on a further six possible SACs for harbour porpoise were undertaken throughout the UK. Consultation reports on five, including the North Channel in Northern Ireland, were received on 28th September. Ministers in each Administration are considering the reports, and it is expected that decisions on the next steps will be made in November 2016.</p>
<p>No 22 – DAERA Maintain a risk-based programme of ASSI designation.</p>	<p>Target Date: Annually.</p> <p>This is ongoing. Two sites were designated in 2015-16, and the Department is working on proposals for designation in 2016-17. These will be part of the risk-based approach and in line with resourcing priorities, given the need to provide data and information to inform the successful INTERREG bids and Environmental Farming Scheme development which will target restorative management on protected sites. It is expected that a small number of sites will be designated in the current financial year.</p>
<p>No 23 – DAERA Develop habitat maps for all cross-border sites.</p>	<p>Target Date: December 2016.</p> <p>A suite of management plans and associated habitat maps is to be delivered for a selection of SACs in Northern Ireland and the border counties in the Republic of Ireland (and Western Scotland) through INTERREG VA. Selected SACs put forward project applicants rather than being required to cover all cross-border SACs. Stage 2 assessment of projects is complete. There has been a delay in issuing letters of offer due to funding issues post-referendum.</p>

<p>No 29 – DAERA Consider the outcome of the consultation on Biodiversity Offsetting carried out by Defra and decide on the way forward in Northern Ireland.</p>	<p>Target Date: June 2016. While the Defra consultation on biodiversity offsetting has been completed and a consultation summary published, DAERA officials are still considering the degree to which the concept might be applied in a Northern Ireland context.</p>
<p>No 31 – DAERA Contribute to an all-Ireland pollination plan 2015-2022.</p>	<p>Target Date: December 2015. The all-Ireland pollinator plan was published in September 2015 and has a broad range of actions and activities to enable Ireland to be pollinator friendly. The actions outlined in it are being embedded in other initiatives such as development of the new Environmental Farming Scheme. The Department has been supporting the Saving our Magnificent Meadows scheme and the Don't Mow, Let it Grow road verge scheme (both HLF-funded). Both promote existing species-rich habitats as havens for pollinators.</p>
<p>No 32 – DAERA Report on progress on the Invasive Species Strategy Implementation Plan and undertake a review of its associated actions.</p>	<p>Target Date: December 2016. The Department is on target to deliver the first report to the Assembly by the end of 2016. On completion of the review, actions will be amended and updated to reflect the aims of DAERA and to take account of any legislative provisions as a result of Regulation (EU) 1143/2014 on invasive alien species which came into operation on 1 January 2015.</p>
<p>No 33 – DAERA Develop and introduce new legislation to prevent the introduction of invasive species with a high impact on biodiversity.</p>	<p>Target Date: March 2016. Regulation (EU) 1143/2014 on the prevention and management of invasive alien species came into operation on 1 January 2015. The EU Regulation imposes strict restrictions on a list of species known as 'species of Union concern'. While the EU Regulation came into force on 1 January 2015, the list of species to which the Regulation applies did not come into operation until 3 August 2016. The Department is working closely with colleagues from Defra and the other Devolved</p>

	<p>Administrations to introduce subordinate legislation to fulfil its obligation to implement the requirements of the EU Regulation.</p> <p>The target date of March 2016 was not met as the Department is still working through policy issues with Defra and the other Devolved Administrations before the legislation can be finalised. Also, the legislation could not be enacted before the Union list was adopted.</p> <p>It is planned to introduce the subordinate legislation by early 2017 in line with the rest of the UK.</p>
<p>No 35 – DAERA <i>Report on progress on implementation of the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Plan.</i></p>	<p>Target Date: Annually.</p> <p>The latest greenhouse gas (GHG) inventory was published in June 2016, taking account of data up to 2014. Northern Ireland’s GHG emissions were estimated to be 20.3m tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (MtCO₂e). This is a long-term decrease of 17.4% compared to the 1990 baseline.</p> <p>The most recent GHG projections, based on the 2013 data and published in December 2015, indicates that Northern Ireland will achieve a GHG emissions reduction of 34.1% (excluding LULUCF) by 2025, which is broadly on course with the former PfG target.</p> <p>The new PfG for 2016-2021 includes the indicator ‘increase environmental sustainability’ with a measure ‘greenhouse gas emissions’. A cross-departmental delivery plan has been drafted for the GHG emissions measure, and it will go out for public consultation. Northern Ireland continues to work to achieve GHG emissions reductions in all sectors, in accordance with UK, EU and international legislation and agreements.</p>
<p>No 38 – DAERA <i>Develop actions within Prosperity Agreements, where appropriate, that enhance biodiversity.</i></p>	<p>Target Date: Annually.</p> <p>NIEA have sought to optimise both environmental and economic outcomes for businesses through the Prosperity Agreement (PA) Programme. The first agreement, signed in August 2014 with Linden Foods/Linery, includes a commitment to work with farmers to help access biodiversity initiatives and to promote uptake along their supply chain.</p> <p>In February 2016 an agreement was signed with Coca-Cola HBC in which they commit to examining options to contribute to wider biodiversity. This year they will carry out a biodiversity site audit in partnership with NIEA at their Knockmore production site, from which further actions will be explored. Coca-Cola HBC area also committed through the agreement to working with Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council on the development of a local biodiversity action plan.</p>

	<p>Through the PA with Lafarge Cement, signed in March 2015, a biodiversity charter and biodiversity action plan are being developed in 2016 for their Cookstown site. Lafarge have also met with Ballinderry Rivers Trust and Woodland Trust in 2016 to examine options to contribute to the Upper Ballinderry River catchment management and wider biodiversity.</p> <p>Discussions are ongoing with a number of other organisations to develop PAs, and these have actions which continue to deliver key commitments on biodiversity as one of the lead objectives. Further development of the PA programme in the coming years will help to recognise the value of natural capital.</p> <p>The PAs run over three years and therefore progress against the commitments varies depending on where in the cycle the company is and the nature of the agreed action. All plans are subject to review and the ongoing programme will contain further specific and defined actions which contribute to enhancing biodiversity.</p>
<p>No 41 – DAERA(under review) <i>Outdoor learning established and embedded into teacher training programmes.</i></p>	<p>Target Date: December 2016.</p> <p>DAERA has identified actions or programmes in which a number of different organisations are involved which work together to meet the target of establishing outdoor learning. These organisations include Sport NI, the Environmental Education for Sustainable Development Forum, Open Air Laboratories (OPAL), Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful, the Field Studies Council and the RSPB.</p> <p>However, further work is required to ensure that Outdoor Learning becomes embedded into Teacher Training Programmes. DAERA will work with interested parties to ensure that this is achieved. It is hoped that the next report on the implementation of the Biodiversity Strategy will signal that this action has been completed.</p>
<p>No 42 – National Trust <i>Develop a Land, Outdoors and Nature Strategy for Northern Ireland.</i></p>	<p>Target Date: December 2016.</p> <p>While a public Land, Outdoors and Nature Strategy has not yet been published, the National Trust in Northern Ireland has been progressing delivery of their Land, Outdoors and Nature Programme as part of the wider National Trust's <i>Playing Our Part</i> strategy launched in 2015. By December 2016, the following actions will have been progressed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completion of land condition assessment for all National Trust land in Northern Ireland

	<p>based on a national common standard; and</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The undertaking of an exercise to set clear long-term objectives for its land using the national methodology, <i>Land Choices</i>. By December 2016, a pilot will have been completed at three sites in Northern Ireland. <p>In addition, the Trust is in the process of mapping priority habitats across its land and developing metrics nationally to measure how its land delivers for nature.</p>
<p>No 44 – DAERA <i>Publish guidance to assist public bodies to comply with the Biodiversity Duty.</i></p>	<p>Target Date: December 2015. A guidance document '<i>The Biodiversity Duty – Guidance for Public Bodies</i>' was published in May 2016, and it is available on the DAERA website. It will be kept under review and updated as necessary.</p>
<p>No 54 – RSPB <i>Survey of priority species on RSPB nature reserves.</i></p>	<p>Target Date: Annually. The annual monitoring programme for priority species on all of the RSPB's nature reserves was completed. All records have been vetted, submitted and recorded on the RSPB's Annual Report Monitoring System.</p>
<p>No 55 – DAERA <i>Undertake protected site monitoring.</i></p>	<p>Target Date: Ongoing. Monitoring of features of interest on our protected sites is undertaken on an ongoing basis. As the number of protected sites and interest features increases, the quantity of monitoring required increases. Ongoing monitoring of protected sites by Department scientists is supplemented by outsourcing of monitoring by specialists and through work undertaken by partner organisations with support of Environment Fund resourcing – for example, ornithological monitoring and monitoring of key invertebrate species.</p>