

Environmental Improvement Plan

Annual Progress Report
September 2024-September 2025



Department of
**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**

An Roinn

**Talmhaíochta, Comhshaoil
agus Gnóthaí Tuaithe**

Department o'

**Fairmin, Environment
an' Kintra Matthers**

www.daera-ni.gov.uk



Alternative Formats

On request, we can arrange to provide other formats of this document such as:

- Large Print
- Braille
- Other languages

To request an alternative format, please contact us:

Email: OEP.Comms@daera-ni.gov.uk

Text Relay: If you have a hearing difficulty you can contact the Department via:

- Text Relay using the Next Generation Text Service (NGTS).
- Making a call from a textphone dial 18001 + number.
- Making a call from a telephone dial 18002 + number.

Post: Environmental Principles and OEP Liaison Branch
Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Clare House
303 Airport Road West
Sydenham Intake
Belfast
BT3 9ED



Contents

Foreword from Minister Muir	5
Executive Summary	8
Introduction	24
SEO 1 - Excellent Air, Water & Land Quality	27
SEO 2 - Healthy and Accessible Environment & Landscapes Everyone Can Connect With & Enjoy	44
SEO 3 - Thriving, Resilient & Connected Nature & Wildlife	64
SEO 4 - Sustainable Production & Consumption on Land & At Sea	80
SEO 5 - Zero Waste & Highly Developed Circular Economy	101
SEO 6 - Net Zero GHG Emissions & Improved Climate Resilience & Adaptability	110
EIP Strategic Outcomes - Indicators	115
SEO 1 - Excellent Air, Water & Land Quality	126
1. Air Quality	126
2. Water Resources: Quality and Quantity	135
3. Marine and Coastal Water Resources: Quality and Quantity	143
4. Local Environment Quality	155
SEO 2 - Healthy and Accessible Landscapes Everyone Can Connect with & Enjoy	159
5. Connecting People to the Environment: Landscapes, Seascapes & Natural Beauty	159
6. Connecting People to the Environment: Outdoor Recreation & Natural Space Provision	162
7. The Next Generation	166
8. Sustainable Settlements	166
9. Historic Environment	168
SEO 3 - Thriving, Resilient & Connected Nature & Wildlife	174
10. Protecting Nature on Land	174
11. Protecting Nature at Sea	192
12. Natural Capital	197



SEO 4 - Sustainable Production & Consumption on Land & At Sea	199
13. Future Agricultural Policy	199
14. Energy	213
15. Productive & Sustainably Used Seas	215
16. Producer Responsibility	226
17. Reducing Single-Use Plastic (SUP)	228
18. Chemicals	229
19. Antimicrobial & Disinfectant Contamination	233
SEO 5 - Zero Waste & Highly Developed Circular Economy	240
20. Circular Economy	240
21. Waste Management	248
SEO 6 - Net Zero GHG Emissions & Improved Climate Resilience & Adaptability	261
22. Climate Change	261
Conclusion For EIP APR	266
Glossary	268



Foreword from Minister Muir

I am pleased to present Northern Ireland's (NI) first Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) Annual Progress Report (APR), covering the period September 2024 to September 2025. This report marks an important milestone in strengthening environmental governance and delivering on the commitments set out in the Environment Act 2021 (the Act). It provides a clear, evidence-based assessment of the actions taken across government to protect, restore and enhance our natural environment, and sets the foundation for more ambitious delivery in the years ahead.



NI's natural environment is one of our greatest assets. It sustains our health, wellbeing and economy, and it shapes the landscapes and seascapes that define who we are. Our soils, rivers, coastlines and wildlife underpin our food systems, support tourism and recreation, and sustain our communities. Yet these assets face increasing pressures, from nutrient pollution and biodiversity loss to the impacts of climate change. These challenges are complex, interlinked and long-standing. They require collective action, long-term planning, and sustained commitment across all parts of government, industry, and society.

Over the past year, we have made steady progress. The implementation of the Outcome Indicator Framework (OIF) is a significant achievement, providing for the first time a consistent and transparent means of monitoring environmental change across all six Strategic Environmental Outcomes (SEOs). We have strengthened the evidence base that underpins our policy decisions, published the Third Cycle River Basin Management Plan (RBMP), expanded our air quality and ammonia monitoring networks, and supported thousands of farm businesses through the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme (SNHS). We have set NI's first three carbon budgets in law alongside a new emissions reduction target for 2040 and progressed the development of and consultations on NI's first draft Climate Action Plan (CAP), the third NI Climate Change Adaptation Programme (NICCAP3) and the establishment of a Just Transition Commission. The NI Peatland Strategy was published in September 2025 which has set the long-term vision for peatland protection, restoration & maintenance. We have also progressed consultations on other major policy areas including the Ammonia Strategy (AS) for NI and the revised Nutrients Action Programme (NAP). Alongside these, we have seen improvements in bathing waters, restoration of peatlands and protected habitats, and growing engagement from communities, schools, and businesses in shaping a greener future.

However, this report also makes clear that substantial challenges remain. Water quality continues to be impacted by nutrient pollution and underinvestment in infrastructure. Nature recovery must accelerate if we are to halt and reverse biodiversity decline by 2030. Many of



our environmental systems, particularly rivers, lakes and our priority habitats, have suffered cumulative pressures over decades and will take time to recover. The situation in Lough Neagh is a stark reminder of the urgent need for coordinated action and robust implementation of environmental laws. Achieving the improvements we seek will require sustained investment, sharper cross-departmental delivery, and a renewed focus on protection, prevention, regulation, and long-term resilience.

This is the time for delivery. We will finalise and implement the Clean Air and Ammonia Strategies, publish and implement the Nature Recovery Strategy (NRS), and strengthen measures to protect our terrestrial, freshwater, and marine environments. We will embed sustainability into farming and fisheries, drive forward circular economy (CE) reforms, and mobilise green finance to unlock investment at scale. Above all, we will work across government, with partners and communities, to ensure that every action we take moves us closer to a nature-positive, climate-resilient NI.

Environmental improvement and recovery are a shared endeavour, and the benefits, from clean water and thriving biodiversity to climate resilience and enhanced wellbeing, will be shared by all. I invite everyone, farmers, businesses, district councils, schools, and citizens, to join us in this national effort. The choices we make today will shape the environment we pass on to future generations. Let us make those choices count.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. Muir', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Andrew Muir MLA

Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs



Executive Summary





Executive Summary

NI's first EIP, published in September 2024, set out a statutory framework to restore and sustain the natural environment for future generations. This APR provides the first assessment of delivery against that vision. It demonstrates progress across all six SEOs, while acknowledging the scale of the challenge and the need for accelerated action to meet legally binding targets under the Act and international commitments, such as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KM-GBF).

The EIP is structured around six SEOs: Excellent Air, Water and Land Quality; Healthy and Accessible Landscapes; Thriving, Resilient and Connected Nature; Sustainable Production and Consumption; Zero Waste and a CE; and Net Zero Greenhouse Gas Emissions (GHG) with Improved Climate Resilience. Together, these outcomes provide a framework for tackling the interlinked crises of biodiversity loss, climate change, and pollution.

This report is structured in two sections. The first section outlines the implementation of the EIP, detailing the actions undertaken to enhance the natural environment and promote its sustainable enjoyment. The second section presents the Outcome Indicators, a set of measures selected to assess whether the natural environment has improved during the reporting period as a result of EIP actions.

SEO 1 - Excellent Air, Water and Land Quality

Over the reporting period, The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) has taken significant steps to improve air, water, and land quality across NI. DAERA has advanced efforts to reduce pollution, restore degraded environments and embed environmental protection into policy and practice through the development of targeted strategies including the Clean Air Strategy, the AS and the Third Cycle RBMP which was published in June 2025. There are numerous plans in place to progress towards improving water body status including NAP, Farming with Nature (FwN), and the Lough Neagh Action Plan (LNAP).

There have been challenges in progressing some actions. Work to develop the Clean Air Strategy has been impacted by delays due to staffing, competing resource priorities and reprioritisation of policies and work streams within DAERA. Achieving Good Ecological Status for all water bodies by 2027 remains unlikely due to natural recovery timescales, ongoing excess nutrients, and underinvestment in wastewater infrastructure. Work towards publishing NI's first Litter Strategy has been paused due to resource constraints and a reprioritisation of departmental efforts in line with Ministerial priorities. The strategy is now expected to be developed during the 2027-2030 period.



Despite these challenges DAERA has maintained momentum across key areas. Progress has been supported by strong collaboration with the NI Environment Agency, Department for Infrastructure (DfI), district councils and by partnerships with environmental Non-Government Organisations (eNGOs) such as Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful (KNIB). Collaborative programmes such as the SNHS, Sustainable Catchment Programme, and Adopt-a-Spot have engaged thousands of stakeholders, from farm businesses to community volunteers, in practical environmental action. Work to improve air, water and land quality will require collective action across government, the public and private sectors and wider society.

The actions under **SEO 1** directly support Programme for Government (PfG) priorities around Lough Neagh, public health, environmental sustainability, and community wellbeing. They also reflect DAERA's commitment to evidence-based policy, long-term planning, and environmental leadership. By continuing to invest in strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, and monitoring, DAERA is laying the foundation for excellent air, water, and land quality, that benefits both current and future generations.

SEO 2 - Healthy and Accessible Landscapes

DAERA and its partners have made progress toward creating a healthy, accessible environment and landscapes that everyone can enjoy. There have been challenges across **SEO 2** and delays have affected some actions. Development of a Landscape Strategy and an Outdoor Recreation Strategy have been delayed due to resource constraints and competing departmental priorities. Work is currently underway to identify the necessary resource to support the continued development of revised fit-for-purpose outdoor recreation legislation. The issue of heritage at risk remains a notable challenge as condition survey data continues to show a decrease in the percentage of listed buildings rated as 'Very good/Good' or 'Average'.

However, achievements within **SEO 2** during the reporting year demonstrate meaningful progress in enhancing NI's natural spaces and improving accessibility. In 2025, 118 Green Flags and 16 Blue Flags were awarded, bringing the total to 134. This marks a major step forward in enhancing the visibility, quality, and accessibility of NI's natural spaces. Progress on inclusive recreation through the 'Changing Places Action Plan' and the launch of the People in the Outdoors Monitor NI - [POMNI and Outscape's geospatial](#) mapping work all contribute to a more connected and accessible outdoor environment.

Education and engagement have also advanced through the development of a Community Trail Network, expansion of the Eco-Schools initiative, and the launch of the myEARTH digital hub. **Theme 9 - Historic Environment (HE)** has seen notable progress in sustainability, urban regeneration, and heritage policy, with Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) standards applied to major projects and a new HE policy



nearing public consultation with hope that it will be published around the beginning of the new financial year. The development and implementation of the related Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme Framework is also notable.

Together, these efforts demonstrate a coordinated and impactful approach to environmental improvement, education, and sustainable development across NI, laying a strong foundation for continued progress in the coming year.

SEO 3 - Thriving, Resilient and Connected Nature

Significant progress has been made under **SEO 3**, with notable achievements across most themes. Key successes include publication of the Blue Carbon Action Plan in Spring 2025 with development and consultation completed on 3 further marine nature recovery strategies - the Seabird Conservation Strategy for NI, the NI Inshore Marine Protected Area (MPA) Strategy and the Elasmobranch Strategy for NI. Work to finalise these strategies is now underway. The Peatland Strategy was launched, setting a long-term vision for restoration. This along with the forthcoming Living Map, which is due to be completed by March 2026, set a strong foundation for continued success.

Further progress has been made within the Natural Capital theme as detailed habitat maps have been developed and published for 40 Special Areas of Conservation (SAC). The 4th NI Countryside Survey 2022 is well progressed, and the first report is due to be published in Spring 2026. This will provide vital information on changes to habitats and the natural environment across NI and will provide key Natural Capital data.

However, challenges remain, actions such as achieving the 30x30 land target and improving [Areas of Special Scientific Interest \(ASSIs\)](#) condition have been delayed due to resource constraints and competing priorities. These are complex work programmes and will require cross-DAERA/Departmental governance and structures to enable comprehensive and integrated policies and action to address the drivers of biodiversity loss. Similarly, Natural Capital work requires additional capacity and policy development to embed biodiversity values into decision-making. The Invasive Species Action Plans were also not advanced during the reporting period due to resource constraints, but these have now been allocated, and work has now commenced. Finalisation of the Seabird Conservation Strategy for Ministerial consideration has been impacted by capacity and resource challenges. A lack of uptake of grant funding by landowners remains the overriding obstacle to higher rates of planting to increase NI woodland cover.

Despite these challenges, the progress made sets a strong platform for continued success in restoring nature, enhancing resilience, and delivering a nature-positive future for NI.



SEO 4 - Sustainable Production and Consumption

Significant progress has been made across **SEO 4**, with achievements across agriculture, energy, marine resource management, Producer Responsibility (PR), and pollution reduction reflecting a commitment to sustainability. Within agriculture, the roll-out of a range of new actions and enabling schemes marks a major step toward improving environmental sustainability and resilience in farming. In the energy sector, the publication of the Offshore Renewable Energy Action Plan (OREAP) and delivery of geothermal and low-carbon heat demonstrator projects shows strong progress toward decarbonisation and energy security.

The development of the Plastic Pollution Plan for NI (PPPNI) marks a key step toward reducing plastic waste. In parallel, legislative frameworks for Packaging Extended Producer Responsibility (pEPR) and the Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) have been established, reinforcing CE principles. Marine initiatives have advanced through the development of Fisheries Management Plans (FMP) and the statutory review of the Joint Fisheries Statement (JFS), informed by robust scientific evidence and targeted data improvements. These actions will enable sustainable stock management and enhance accountability across the sector. Progress has also been made in chemical regulation, with new legislation enabling the elimination of Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs) by the end of 2025 and steps taken to manage Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs). In relation to work on Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR), whole genome sequencing capacity has been established, supporting improved monitoring and risk assessment.

However, there have been challenges which have impacted progress across **SEO 4**. The FwN Package is not being rolled out as quickly as planned across all land types in NI due to resource challenges and delays in business case development. Progress has improved over recent months and plans are in place to build on the transition scheme that opened in 2025 to increase habitat and improve biodiversity. Capacity and resourcing issues may hinder ability to meet key milestones in **Theme 15**, particularly in the development of FMPs. Internal staff reallocation and a bid for further staff resource is underway to mitigate a risk of delay. Evidence gaps in the inshore fisheries sector also continue to pose a challenge. Work has not progressed as planned on Single Use Plastic (SUP) Directive implementation due to legislative challenges, but a delivery plan (DP) has been put in place to progress. The development of an AMR digital platform with public facing elements has been put on hold due to a lack of resource.

Despite these challenges, the achievements across **SEO 4** provide a strong foundation for advancing environmental protection and resource efficiency. Continued implementation of these measures will support long-term environmental resilience and the transition to a



sustainable future. Continued collaboration, innovation, and investment will be essential to ensure NI transitions to a resilient, low-carbon economy while safeguarding its natural environment for future generations.

SEO 5 - Zero Waste and Circular Economy

SEO 5 sets a clear direction for NI's transition to a resource-efficient society. Through the development of the Waste Management Strategy and Circular Economy Strategy, efforts are advancing to reduce waste, increase recycling, and embed circular principles across sectors. Progress in waste management includes the near completion of The Waste Management Strategy and the Waste Management Plan. Meanwhile, the CE theme has gained momentum through public engagement, research, and the refinement of proposals to promote sustainable production and consumption.

Challenges remain, particularly around resource constraints and the time required to develop and implement strategies. However, alternative delivery models and new indicators are being developed to track progress more effectively. Together, these efforts support broader environmental goals, including reduced emissions, improved land and water quality, and sustainable economic growth. **SEO 5** contributes directly to PfG priorities and reflects a commitment to innovation, collaboration, and leadership in sustainability.

SEO 6 - Net Zero and Climate Resilience

NI's approach to climate change is grounded in collaboration, statutory commitment, and long-term strategic planning. With DAERA leading on environmental policy and coordination, and The Executive Office (TEO) supporting governance through the establishment of the NI Climate Commissioner, the delivery of climate actions reflects a whole-of-government effort. The development of the CAP and the third Climate Change Adaptation Programme has involved extensive stakeholder engagement, ensuring that the approach is inclusive, evidence-based, and aligned with broader PfG priorities.

Looking ahead, the focus will be on accelerating the implementation of these plans and on continuing to deliver measurable progress toward net zero by 2050. The most recently published statistics, which were published in June 2025, indicate that NI emissions continue to fall, with emissions in 2023 being 31.5% lower than the 1990 baseline. Continued monitoring, cross-sector collaboration, and public engagement will be essential to maintaining momentum and ensuring that climate actions remain responsive to emerging challenges. Guided by the PfG's emphasis on resilience and a commitment to innovation and continuous improvement, NI is well-positioned to lead a fair and effective transition to a low-carbon, climate-resilient future.



Looking Ahead

The reporting period demonstrates tangible progress across all SEOs, particularly in air quality, catchment management, marine protection, public engagement, and delivery of key climate change statutory requirements. Yet considerable challenges remain in meeting statutory targets for biodiversity and water quality. Accelerated action, enhanced resourcing, and strengthened governance will be essential to deliver a nature-positive, climate-resilient NI by 2030.

Outcome Indicator Framework (OIF)

As mentioned above the second section within the report will focus on the OIF. Under Schedule 2 of the Act, DAERA must assess whether NI’s natural environment, or specific aspects, has improved, using appropriate data. To enable this, officials developed an OIF aligned with the six SEOs in the EIP. Indicators were selected using the RACER methodology (Relevant, Accepted, Credible, Easy, Robust) and linked to departmental strategies. DAERA worked collaboratively with other departments and the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) to ensure consistency and coherence in monitoring and reporting.

RAG	Indicator Trend Status
	Environment has improved
	Environment has little or no change/ Unable to determine
	Environment has declined
	No data available/ being developed
	No indicator available

Ref	Indicators	Status	Summary Assessment
Strategic Environmental Outcome 1			
Theme 1 - Air Quality			
1a	Annual mean roadside levels of nitrogen dioxide as measured in micrograms per cubic metre ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$) at ten sites across NI.		Clear downward trend in NO_2 emissions represents an improvement in air quality, which has the potential to lead to public health and habitat improvements.
1b	Annual mean urban background levels of $\text{PM}_{2.5}$ as measured in micrograms per cubic metre ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$) at five sites across NI.		Very slight increase in $\text{PM}_{2.5}$ emissions likely to have little or no impact on public health or the environment.



Ref	Indicators	Status	Summary Assessment
1c	Air Pollution Trends Report 2024: Critical load and critical level exceedances in the UK; National Ammonia Monitoring Network Report.		<p>The Trends Report 2024 shows that, overall, the percentage of land area exposed to concentrations of NH₃ that exceed critical levels (1 µg per m³) has increased by 3.9% between the 3-year moving average time periods 2002-2004 (baseline) and 2020-2022 (most recent data).</p> <p>Data from the National Ammonia Monitoring Network for 2022-24 is currently being reviewed pending reissue.</p>
Theme 2 - Water Resources: Quality and Quantity			
2a	Annual mean nitrate concentrations (groundwater)		In the most recently published data, the majority of groundwater nitrate concentrations were consistently below 25 mg NO ₃ /l. Difficulty exists assessing like for like trend based on averaged data when site turnover is considered. Where sufficient data exists for individual locations, trend was assessed over time. Data collected both before and after the review are broadly comparable.
2b	Soluble Reactive Phosphorus (SRP) in rivers		Statistically, no change in water quality between the 2019 baseline and 2024. However current SRP levels are higher than the lowest recorded level in 2012. Phosphorus levels fluctuate yearly but have steadily increased since 2012.
2c	Annual mean nitrate concentrations (rivers)		Monthly average nitrate concentrations in NI rivers have been mostly decreasing or stable, largely due to the high baseline in the 1990s. Recent observations in some catchments report an increase in concentration.
Theme 3 - Marine and Coastal Water Resources: Quality & Quantity			
3a	Dissolved Inorganic Nitrogen (DIN) Enrichment		DIN enrichment appeared relatively stable over the period 2015 to 2017. Enrichment values then steadily increased from 2017 onward. Overall, nutrient (DIN) enrichment in transitional and coastal waters increased from 13% in 2017 to 62% in 2024. The indicator suggests increased nutrient loads to transitional and coastal waters; key sources of nutrients include agriculture and urban inputs.



Ref	Indicators	Status	Summary Assessment
3b	Bathing water data (<i>Escherichia Coli</i> & Intestinal <i>Enterococci</i> levels)		Of the 33 identified bathing water sites, 24 met the 'Excellent' standards, a further five met the 'Good' standards, three are 'Sufficient' and only one bathing water failed to meet the minimum standard. Three sites have improved in classification since 2024.
3c	Marine Litter (recorded using OSPAR methodology to show changes in volume and types of litter present)		The decrease in the number of litter items recorded is welcome, yet most of these items are plastic based with a noted increase in smaller pieces of plastic is of concern. The fluctuations shown over the past 13 years are down to extreme weather events or in the case of 2021 the easing of Covid restrictions.
3d	Transitional & Coastal Water Classification Statistics.		Ecological status has suggested no overall improvement over the past few years, however, an increase in the number of failing quality elements indicates deterioration. High nutrient DIN levels were responsible for many water bodies failing to achieve good ecological status. Failure to achieve good chemical status was due to the widespread occurrence of legacy chemicals (uPBTs) as well as some pesticides and herbicides. The main sources of nutrients and pollutants to transitional and coastal waters are direct wastewater discharges and diffuse agricultural inputs.
Theme 4 - Local Environment Quality			
4a	LEAMS Indicator		The LEAMS scores reported in the annual Cleaner Neighbourhood Reports shows that the level of littering has remained around the same level since 2022.



Ref	Indicators	Status	Summary Assessment
Strategic Environmental Outcome 2			
Theme 5 - Connecting People to the Environment: Landscapes, Seascapes & Natural Beauty			
5a	Number of Green/Blue flag sites	 	There was an increase in 14 new Green flag sites from 104 in 2024 to 118 in 2025.
Theme 6 - Connecting People to the Environment: Outdoor Recreation & Natural Space Provision			
6a	Increase the % of households that have publicly accessible quality natural space >2ha and off-road trails within 400m	 	There was a small decrease from 47.9% in 2024 to 47.8% in 2025 across NI. The rural figure has stayed static at 19.3%.
Theme 7 - The Next Generation			
7a	No Available Indicator	 	Although there is currently no indicator for the Next Generation theme, this is actively being explored. DAERA is considering the development of indicators.
Theme 8 - Sustainable Settlements			
8a	Percentage of journeys under two miles people choose to make by walking or cycling	 	The latest data available for this indicator shows that the measure has remained relatively static over the period 2017-2021, highlighting the need for continued targeted interventions to encourage active travel.
Theme 9 - Historic Environment			
9a	The Condition Survey of Listed Buildings	 	This trend demonstrates that progress is not moving in the right direction and highlights the need for targeted action to reverse this decline.
Strategic Environmental Outcome 3			
Theme 10 - Protecting Nature on Land			
10a	NI Woodland Cover	 	502 hectares of new woodland has been created during the reporting period. The Tree Planting Action Plan has been commissioned to seek to increase annual planting rates necessary to remain green in future years.



Ref	Indicators	Status	Summary Assessment
10b	Peatland Conserved/ Restored		In 2025 works to help restore 453 hectares of peatlands were completed with the assistance of DAERA Funding. Other peatland restoration projects continue to be progressed including through funding from the DAERA Environment Fund; Shared Island Funds and PEACEPLUS.
10c	Condition of Features within Terrestrial ASSIs (includes freshwater sites)		The most up-to-date figures for the 2024/25 reporting period highlight that 54% of all features, both terrestrial and marine, are in favourable condition, 38% are in unfavourable condition, 2% are unfavourable-recovering and less than 1% are destroyed. There has been no appreciable improvement in the past 6 years.
10d	Wild Bird Population in NI		The latest NI Wild bird indicator published in 2025 provides information on change for 56 bird populations in Northern Ireland from 1996 to 2023. The indicator shows that overall, wild bird abundance in Northern Ireland is at a similar level to that in the mid-1990s when BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) surveys started.
10e	Area of land (or % land area) protected for nature		Metric currently under development.
10f	Area of land exposed to damaging levels of ammonia (NH ₃) in the atmosphere		Most of NI ammonia sensitive habitats continue to exceed critical levels leading to continuing environmental damage.
10g	Exceedance of damaging levels of nutrient nitrogen deposition on ecosystems		Most of NI Nitrogen sensitive habitats continue to exceed critical loads leading to continuing environmental damage.
Theme 11 - Protecting Nature at Sea			
11a	Condition of Marine Protected Areas Network		Currently 87% of inshore MPA features are in favourable condition as per the NI Environmental Statistics report 2024. Largely, the condition of marine features has remained unchanged since 2023, Assessment of change in feature condition is carried out over a 6-year reporting cycle, so not all data will be available within this past year.



Ref	Indicators	Status	Summary Assessment
Theme 12 - Natural Capital			
12a	No Available Indicator		At this stage, the indicator is not yet applicable; however, there is potential for the development of a Natural Capital index or indices once the Natural Capital inventory and framework have been established.
Strategic Environmental Outcome 4			
Theme 13 - Future Agricultural Policy			
13a	Net GHG in Agriculture		Indicator has shown an annual decrease of 1.6% from 5708.69 KtCO ₂ e in 2022 to 5615.16 KtCO ₂ e in 2023.
13b	Net GHG Land Use, Land Use Change & Forestry (LULUCF)		Increase of 0.2% from 2145.14 KtCO ₂ e in 2022 to 2148.88kT in 2023.
13c	NI Phosphorus Balance		The NI agricultural sector is operating at a significant phosphorus surplus. This has caused a build-up of soil Phosphorus levels and over 40% of fields are now above the agronomic optimum. This has resulted in diffuse phosphorus losses to rivers and lakes which are the main cause of poor water quality across Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland agricultural phosphorus surplus increased from 10.9kg/ha in 2023 to 13.0kg/ha in 2024.
13d	NI Nitrogen Balance		The NI Nitrogen level since 2021 has shown an overall decrease. However, it increased from 117.3kg/ha in 2023 to 135.6kg/ha in 2024.
13e	Ammonia Emissions from NI Agriculture		Slight increase in ammonia emissions from agriculture in NI from 2022 to 2023, from 30.62 kt to 30.81 kt.
13f	Condition of Features (Protected Sites)		There has been little or no change in the proportion of protected site features in favourable condition in recent years, with a slight decrease from 55% to 54% between 2023/24 and 2024/25.



Ref	Indicators	Status	Summary Assessment
13g	Wild Birds		The latest NI Wild bird indicator published in 2025 provides information on change for 56 bird populations in Northern Ireland from 1996 to 2023. The indicator shows that overall, wild bird abundance in Northern Ireland is at a similar level to that in the mid-1990s when BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) surveys started.
Theme 14 - Energy			
14a	Greenhouse Gas emissions from Energy related sectors		GHG emissions from energy-related sectors has shown a steady decline from 1990 to 2023 (60% decrease in GHG emissions).
Theme 15 - Productive & Sustainably Used Seas			
15a	For commercial offshore stocks		Offshore stocks remain under pressure, with continued or increased restrictions for several species. No clear net improvement in the natural environment for this theme over the past year. Some variability exists (e.g. whiting improved after benchmarking), but persistent constraints remain for cod and other demersal species.
15b	For commercial inshore stocks		Inshore stock assessments show mixed results, with some species able to sustain higher landings and others requiring reductions. Trends vary by species and area, supporting a precautionary and adaptive management approach. No clear overall improvement or decline.
Theme 16 - Producer Responsibility			
16a	Packaging recycling rates		The first set of data is expected in the second half of 2026. This will provide a baseline to inform future analysis of packaging recycling rates.
16b	% of full net costs contributed by packaging producers		As the scheme only commenced in April 2025, and the first producer invoices were issued in October 2025, the first full set of data is not expected until the second half of 2026.



Ref	Indicators	Status	Summary Assessment
16c	Increase of recycling of drinks containers from 70-90% by 2030		Data will be provided by the DRS Deposit Management Organisation following the commencement of the scheme in 2027, with first data being available from 2029.
Theme 17 - Reducing Single-Use Plastic (SUP)			
17a	Reduction in littered SUP items		Exploring option to refine existing Marine Litter or Cleaner Neighbourhood Reports to provide more specific data.
Theme 18 - Chemicals			
18a	Number of registered holders of firefighting foam stockpiles containing PFOA inspected		On target - 10 holders of PFOA with 9 already visited, last inspection planned for Q4.
18b	Number of pieces of equipment containing PCBs above the legal threshold registered with NIEA		PCB register- 191 as of 17/12/2025 across 7 holders (largest is Northern Ireland Electricity). Target met.
Theme 19 - Antimicrobial & Disinfectant Contamination			
19a	Monitor AMR through 300 annual abattoir samples and passive surveillance.		Annual AMR Monitoring on track. Baseline results available for 2023; trends will be possible after subsequent years' testing results are available.
Strategic Environmental Outcome 5			
Theme 20 - Circular Economy			
20a	Material Footprint		Based on estimates produced by the University of Leeds (UoL), published by DfE in December 2025, NI's material footprint was estimated at 20.6 tonnes per capita (tpc) in 2022, representing an increase from 18.3 tpc in 2021. This increase follows a recent low point of 16.2 tpc recorded in 2020, which coincided with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.



Ref	Indicators	Status	Summary Assessment
20b	Carbon Footprint		Carbon footprint emissions per capita increased slightly from 11.7 tonnes of CO ₂ e (tCO ₂ e) in 2021 to 11.9 tCO ₂ e in 2022, based on the UoL methodology. While there has been an increase since the low point of 10.9 tCO ₂ e in 2020, emissions remain well below pre-2010 levels. Recent increases may be linked to post-pandemic recovery, which highlights the need to address consumption patterns in order to see sustained improvements in the indicator.
Theme 21 - Waste Management			
21a	Waste generated from Households		Current trend shows a slight increase in waste arising, both overall and when considered per capita and per household. This indicates that more action is required in relation to waste prevention and reduction in consumption. The expansion of PR may also have a positive impact in future.
21b	Recycling levels <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Municipal waste sent for recycling • Household waste sent for recycling 		Recycling levels appear to be stagnating. Indicating that further interventions are required.
21c	Municipal Waste landfilled		Landfill rates have dropped dramatically, which is a key target, However, consideration needs to be given to the environmental impacts of energy recovery which has increased significantly, including the associated waste movements.
Strategic Environmental Outcome 6			
Theme 22 - Climate Change			
22a	Total Greenhouse Gas Emissions in NI		The net figure of 18.2MtCO ₂ e in 2023 represents a 7.1% decrease compared with 2022. The longer- term trend showed a decrease of 31.5% compared with the 1990 base year.

The table above provides a high-level overview of each of the indicators within the OIF and what trend they are indicating for the environment.



Conclusion

This first APR under NI's EIP marks a turning point in environmental governance. It confirms that strong foundations are in place, governance structures, evidence frameworks, and partnerships, while recognising that environmental pressures remain severe and interconnected. The next phase must focus on delivery: turning strategies into measurable improvements in water quality, biodiversity, and climate resilience.

Achieving statutory targets will require accelerated action, cross-government collaboration, innovation, and shared responsibility across all sectors. A healthy environment underpins public health, economic prosperity, and social wellbeing. By investing in nature-based solutions, supporting green growth, and embedding environmental principles in decision-making, NI can create a nature-positive, climate-resilient future. The challenge is significant, but the direction is clear.



Introduction





Introduction

[The Environment Act 2021](#) establishes a comprehensive legislative framework for the protection and enhancement of the natural environment, introduced in response to the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union (EU). The Act was designed to ensure that key environmental safeguards such as those relating to water quality, air pollution, and biodiversity remain robust and enforceable in the post-Brexit context. Under Schedule 2 of the Act, a statutory duty was conferred upon DAERA to prepare and publish an EIP for NI.

The EIP sets out the steps DAERA, and other NI departments intend to take to significantly improve our natural environment. It also contains steps that NI departments will take to improve people's enjoyment of the natural environment. The plan sets out a long-term strategic vision for restoring and sustaining the natural environment for future generations. NI's first EIP was formally approved by the NI Executive and subsequently published on 27 September 2024, marking an important milestone in environmental governance.

The EIP outlines a comprehensive set of strategic objectives including improved air, water, and land quality, biodiversity restoration and climate resilience which align closely with the environmental priorities articulated in the NI Executive's [Programme for Government \(PfG\) 2024-2027 - Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most](#). The alignment between the EIP and the PfG reflects a shared commitment across departments to deliver sustainable outcomes that improve public wellbeing and environmental integrity.

To facilitate a robust assessment of whether measurable improvements in environmental quality have occurred, or not, during the reporting period, DAERA has developed an initial OIF. This framework comprises a suite of evidence-based indicators designed to monitor and evaluate environmental change over time. Each indicator is explicitly aligned with one or more of the six SEOs set out in the EIP, thereby ensuring coherence between policy objectives and performance measurement. In its initial iteration, the framework prioritises indicators for which reliable and accessible data are currently available, providing a sound evidential basis for annual reporting and continuous policy refinement.



Strategic Environmental Outcomes

The EIP is structured around six SEOs, which collectively articulate the long-term vision for a healthier, more sustainable environment in NI.

These outcomes are:

SEO 1 - Excellent Air, Water & Land Quality

**SEO 2 - Healthy and Accessible Landscapes Everyone
Can Connect With & Enjoy**

SEO 3 - Thriving, Resilient & Connected Nature & Wildlife

**SEO 4 - Sustainable Production & Consumption on Land
& at Sea**

SEO 5 - Zero Waste & Highly Developed Circular Economy

**SEO 6 - Net Zero GHG Emissions & Improved Climate
Resilience & Adaptability**



SEO 1 - Excellent Air, Water & Land Quality





SEO 1 - Excellent Air, Water & Land Quality

Introduction

Clean air, water, and land are the foundational elements of a healthy environment and a thriving society. They are essential to human health, biodiversity, climate resilience, and economic sustainability. In NI, these environmental components are deeply interconnected, what affects one often impacts the others. The quality of the air we breathe, the water we drink and the land we live and work on depends on nature and shapes our daily lives and long-term wellbeing. Clean air refers to air that is free from harmful pollutants such as particulate matter (PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀), nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), sulphur dioxide, and ammonia (NH₃). Poor air quality can lead to respiratory and cardiovascular illnesses, damage ecosystems and reduce agricultural productivity. In NI, agriculture is the main source of ammonia emissions, which contribute to nitrogen deposition and threaten sensitive habitats. Addressing air pollution is therefore both an environmental and public health imperative and supports biodiversity goals under **SEO 3**.

Clean water encompasses both surface and groundwater that meets ecological and chemical standards. It supports biodiversity, agriculture, recreation and drinking water supplies. However, nutrient pollution-particularly from phosphorus and nitrogen - continues to degrade rivers, lakes, groundwaters, and coastal waters. Tackling this challenge requires integrated catchment management, improved farming practices and robust monitoring and regulation. These efforts also contribute to **SEO 4** by promoting more sustainable agricultural systems.

Land quality refers to the health and productivity of soils, the cleanliness of local environments and the absence of contamination. Healthy soils are vital for food production, carbon storage, and flood mitigation.

Through **SEO 1**, DAERA aims to significantly improve the quality of NI's air, water, and land by reducing pollution, restoring degraded environments, and embedding environmental protection into policy, planning and practice.



1. Air Quality

Overview

Air quality is a vital component of NI's environmental health and wellbeing, it affects human health, biodiversity, and climate resilience. Ground level deposition and/or run off from some airborne pollutants can occur onto land and into water bodies respectively, thus necessitating an approach to management that includes all three media. Air pollution - particularly from transport, agriculture, and domestic heating - remains a significant challenge, requiring coordinated action across sectors and government departments.

This theme focuses on improving the quality and robustness of traffic data to support air quality modelling and projections. The action aligns with wider environmental and public health objectives and supports evidence-based policy and planning.

This theme supports other SEOs, including **SEO 3**, due to the impact of pollutants on sensitive habitats, and **SEO 6**, through the interrelated nature of air quality and climate mitigation and adaptation.

Links to Other Strategic Drivers

The Air Quality theme aligns with several wider strategic frameworks and legislative drivers beyond the EIP. These include the Programme for Government (PfG), which prioritises public health and environmental sustainability, and the [draft Climate Action Plan 2023-2027](#) (CAP), which addresses emissions reduction and resilience and contains an air quality target.

Links to other strategic drivers include the [Clean Air \(NI\) Order 1981](#), [the Environment \(NI\) Order 2002](#), the [World Health Organisation global air quality guidelines](#) and the [Local Air Quality Management \(LAQM\) regime](#). [The Cancer Strategy for Northern Ireland 2022-2032](#) also recognises the health impacts of poor air quality. Specific air quality limits, targets, and objectives for NI are contained within the [Air Quality Standards Regulations \(NI\) 2010](#), the [Air Quality Regulations \(NI\) 2003](#) and the [Air Quality Strategy for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland 2007](#). NI also contributes to UK wide emissions reduction commitments through [The National Emission Ceilings Regulations 2018 \(NECR\)](#).



Actions and Targets

Table 1. Air Quality Actions

Action Number	Action	Status
1A	Improve traffic data on which to base modelling and projections	Complete or introduced as an ongoing Business as Usual (BAU) action
1B	Secure NI Executive approval to launch a consultation on the Clean Air Strategy	Progressing to new timeline
1C	Continue funding improvements in local air quality and explore further funding available.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
1D	By March 2025: Develop an AS to deliver reductions in ammonia emissions from agriculture.	Progressing to new timeline
1E	By March 2025: Develop a new Operational Protocol to assess the impacts of air pollution on the natural environment.	Progressing to new timeline
1F	Develop improved monitoring and data collection to allow us to measure the impacts of energy decarbonisation policies on air quality	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
1G	Integrate Farm Business Support Schemes with AS	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
1H	The draft AS will include proposals to support and collaborate with the agriculture sector in achieving sustained and tangible reductions in ammonia emissions.	Progressing to new timeline

There are eight actions associated with this theme (**1A - 1H**), focusing on ambient air quality and ammonia emissions (see Table 1). Ownership of these actions lies with DAERA except for **Action 1A**, which sits with the Dfl. Four actions in this theme are complete or BAU and four actions are currently progressing to a new timeline.

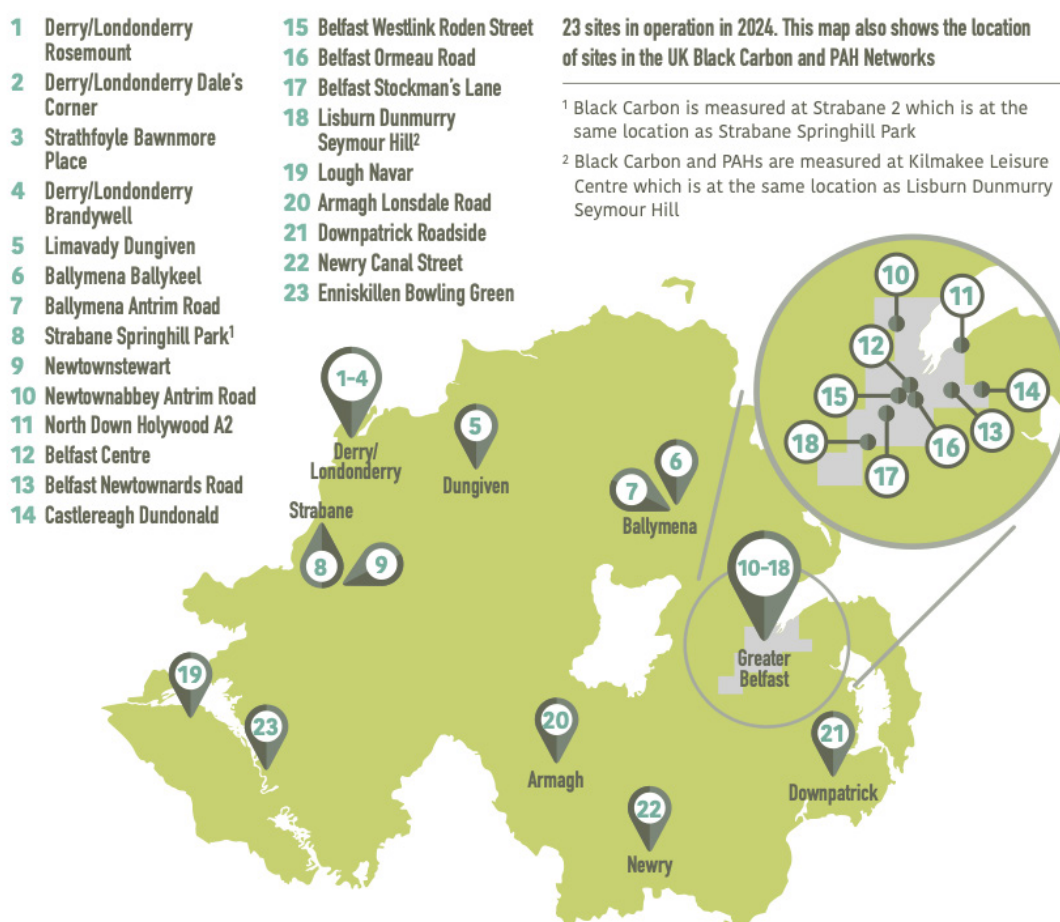
Achievements

Notable achievements to date include the continued operation and expansion of NI’s air quality monitoring network. There are currently 23 air quality monitoring stations operating in NI. Each automatic monitoring site is equipped with continuous monitoring equipment for one or more of the pollutants for which automatic methods are used (PM10, PM2.5, black carbon, nitrogen oxides, ozone, sulphur dioxide and carbon monoxide), and/or a non-automatic



sampler for polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons. Data from the continuous monitoring sites are communicated rapidly to the public via the website www.airqualityni.co.uk and the NI Air app, which can be downloaded free of charge from <https://www.airqualityni.co.uk/stay-informed>. Notifications are issued online when levels are forecast to, or reach 'High' levels as defined by the Daily Air Quality Index. Public health alerts are also separately issued via the DAERA/ Department of Health Air Aware SMS service.

Figure 1:



Source: Air Quality Report NI (2004)

Link: [air-pollution-in-northern-ireland-2024-issue1-screen-optimised-6915a501b21ee582301440.pdf](https://www.airqualityni.co.uk/air-pollution-in-northern-ireland-2024-issue1-screen-optimised-6915a501b21ee582301440.pdf)

Monitoring of NO₂ at ten roadside sites has shown a gradual reduction in emissions, with 2024 levels averaging 25.9 µg/m³ - an improvement from 2023 and well within legislative limits.

Air quality has also been assigned to **Theme 6** of the PEACEPLUS Programme under investment area 6.1: Strategic Planning and Engagement. This investment area supports sustainable and structural cross-border cooperation. The funding figure for the Clean Air



project is €6.5M. According to the terms of PEACEPLUS, work will be focused on NI and the border counties of Ireland. DAERA and the Department of Climate, Energy, and the Environment (DCEE) along with the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) developed the Clean Air project call. The project will have three broad sub-areas and will run until 31 May 2029.: -

- Air pollution from solid fuel burning.
- Transport-related air pollution; and
- Ammonia pollution in agriculture and effects on biodiversity/sensitive ecosystems.

Further consultation on the mandatory measures in the proposed Ammonia Strategy (AS) is taking place as part of the Public Consultation on the review of the NAP and the AS will be finalised following this. Development of a new Operational Protocol to Assess the Impacts of Air Pollution on the natural environment is progressing, subject to consideration of any additional evidence.

Consideration of further support to help farmers invest in Low Emission Slurry Spreading Equipment is part of the ongoing development work for the new Sustainable Farming Investment Scheme to help farm businesses improve their environmental performance.

Development of an improved monitoring and data collection to allow us to measure the impacts of energy decarbonisation policies on air quality has been completed for year 2024/25. This is ongoing for year 2025/26 but further expansion and improvement is possible to provide improved data on a greater variety of pollutants at more locations.

Challenges and Delays

Work to develop the Clean Air Strategy was prioritised but there have been delays due to staffing, competing resource priorities and reprioritisation of policies and work streams within DAERA and other NI Civil Service (NICS) departments with interdependencies.

Future Focus and Plans

Looking to the future, there will be continued funding to improve the NI air quality monitoring network and maintenance/improvement of the current Automatic Urban and Rural Network monitoring network in NI (no reduction in monitoring which is outside of DAERA's control). Funding will continue for the additional 25 monitors in NI established in 2019 and added to the [National Ammonia Monitoring Network](#) (NAMN) in 2022. There will be public consultation on the draft Clean Air Strategy with an aim to secure NI Executive approval to publish the finalised Strategy.



Actions due to commence in 2026 include the implementation of the AS and a new Operational Protocol once finalised. The expected outcome from implementation of the AS is that NI agriculture meets the [UK's National Emissions Ceiling Regulations](#)' ammonia emission reduction target to 2030 and is put on a pathway to the 2050 target of ammonia emissions being reduced to a point where critical loads of nitrogen deposition and critical levels of ammonia are not being exceeded at any designated sites.

The new Operational Protocol is being developed, informed by science and evidence, to support and deliver DAERA's statutory obligations relevant to safeguarding our natural environment. DAERA is also working on the development of a pilot programme of site-specific actions to reduce ammonia emissions around designated sites.

Dfl will continue to monitor and maintain the traffic data network as part of ongoing operations. By June 2026, Dfl will have developed and added an Air Quality module application to the Dfl bespoke NI Transport Emissions Model (TEM). Dfl have developed their strategic Transport Models to better evaluate future patterns, volumes of movements, and transport emissions across the network through the input of localised data. Smart sensor technology is being installed at specific locations on a cordon to understand the volume of traffic and active travel movement at locations. This pilot and its smart sensor technology are related to understanding how movements in/out of Belfast City across all modes varies/behaves throughout the day and the seasonal variations. This will assist the Department in better monitoring and evaluation of the city centre performance during busy periods and whilst it is not an air-quality specific intervention, it may inform future monitoring techniques and support improvements in the provision of traffic data.

2. Water Resources: Quality and Quantity

Overview

This theme addresses the dual challenge of improving water quality and ensuring sustainable water levels & flows across NI. It focuses on improving water quality in rivers, lakes, groundwater, and coastal & transitional waters, while ensuring sustainable water supply and resilience against climate impacts, such as drought and flooding.

This theme directly supports **SEO 1** linking closely to **Theme 3 - Marine and Coastal Waters: Quality and Quantity** in a Source- to-Sea approach in managing River Basin Districts. It contributes to **SEO 3**, in relation to aquatic and freshwater-dependent ecosystems; **SEO 4**, through water efficiency and **SEO 6** via drought planning and flood management.



Links to Other Strategic Drivers

This theme supports key strategic commitments including the PfG priority to protect Lough Neagh and the Environment; the [DAERA 2025-26 Key Pledge 2](#): To deliver improvements to water quality, including through implementation of the [Lough Neagh Action Plan \(LNAP\)](#) and other related interventions. This relates to priority 2 ‘Protecting and restoring our terrestrial and marine environment’ including commitment 9 (Working with other departments, we will continue to drive forward implementation of the Executive-agreed LNAP) and 13 (Following and informed by public consultation, we will bring forward for Executive approval a revised NAP 2026 - 2029 that properly reflects and responds to the statutory obligations placed on DAERA). [The Northern Ireland Environment Agency’s \(NIEA\) 2025-26 Strategic Priorities of Environmental Regulation, Protection & Enforcement, Water Quality and Nature Recovery](#). Finally, The [RBMPs](#) statutory objectives are set out in [Water Environment \(Water Framework Directive\) Regulations \(NI\) 2017](#).

Actions and Targets

Table 2. Water Resources Quality and Quantity Actions

Action Number	Action	Status
2A	2024: Publish final RBMP setting out actions to achieve Good Status in our water bodies.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
2B	By March 2024: Commission a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of the next NAP: Launch public consultation on SEA Environmental Report by December 2024	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
2C	By 2031: achieve the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources including water & soils	Progressing to EIP target
2D	By 2027: 100% of waterbodies at Good Ecological Status (surface water) & Good Chemical Status (groundwater)	Progressing to new timeline
2E	By 2025 introduce Phosphorus and Nitrogen Balance targets for the NI agricultural sector, with a phased reduction to 2033 targets	Progressing to new timeline
2F	RBMP Programme of Measures by 2027: - Reduce phosphorus and nutrient content of concentrate feed - Reduce use of chemical fertilisers - Minimised and correct use of pesticides	Progressing to EIP target



Action Number	Action	Status
2G	By 2025 deliver independent advice and capital grant support to address pressures on water quality in five priority agricultural catchments, through the Sustainable Catchment Programme	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
2H	By end of 2027 provide soil sampling, analysis, run off risk maps and nutrient management training for farmers throughout NI who are participating in the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme (SNHS)	Progressing to EIP target
2I	By end of 2028, reduce the amount of phosphorus applied in chemical fertilisers by 50% on 2023 levels, through improved nutrient management on farms and recycling of organic nutrients.	Progressing to EIP target

There are nine strategic actions (**2A to 2I**) associated with the Water Resources Quality and Quantity theme (see Table 2). Ownership of these actions lies with DAERA and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA). Three actions in this theme are complete, four are progressing to EIP target, and two are progressing to a new timeline.

Achievements

The publication of the Third Cycle RBMP in June 2025 marked a significant milestone. The Sustainable Catchment Programme is operating in five priority sub-catchments with £1.4m of capital funding available. The environmental consultancy RPS was commissioned to undertake the SEA for the NAP, and a consultation was launched on 1 May 2025. NIEA enhanced its protection for NI’s important river SACs, updating its conservation advice to accompany the Conservation Objectives for: Cladagh (Swanlinbar) River, Owenkillew River, River Faughan & Tributaries, River Foyle & Tributaries, River Roe & Tributaries, and the Upper Ballinderry River, in line with the most up to date, available data and evidence.

Good progress has been made with the SNHS with over 18,000 farm businesses in NI having received soil analysis results and run off risk maps for their fields. Training on interpretation of the soil analysis results and how to produce a nutrient management plan has been completed by over 7,000 farm businesses out of the 22,000 farm businesses participating in the SNHS.

Phosphorus content of concentrate feed has been reduced to as low as possible. This is highlighted in the NAP Review and consultation documentation launched in May 2025. The reduced use of chemical fertilisers is linked to proposed measures in the revised NAP.



Challenges and Delays

Several challenges have impacted delivery of actions. The development of a standardised soil health indicator (**Action 2C**) to measure the sustainability and efficient use of soil as a natural resource will be a complex process. Research is underway to work towards having an indicator and a baseline by 2031.

The 2027 target, objectives for water bodies (**Action 2D**), is highly unlikely to be achieved due to natural timescales required for recovery once appropriate measures have been implemented. Likely timescales are decades and resources and investment are required.

There are numerous plans in place to progress towards improving water body status. Examples include NAP, [FwN](#) and the LNAP. Other actions around sewage and wastewater rest with the DfI. Funding for water, especially sewage provision, needs to be considered by DfI. Next steps linked to the implementation of the revised NAP include engagement with stakeholders followed by a further consultation period. The revised NAP will require NI Executive approval.

There is ongoing monitoring of water quality through regular Water Framework Directive (WFD) Regulations monitoring programmes which are used to produce Water Classification Statistics for NI. A limited groundwater monitoring network is in place. A draft updated groundwater classification is planned for 2026, and funded research projects are underway focusing on groundwater chemical status.

Future Focus

Looking to the future, work on preparing for the Fourth Cycle RBMP is underway. An eight-week Call for Evidence 'Impacts on the Water Environment' was open from April to June 2025 and a six-month timeline consultation was published in July 2025 running to January 2026. DAERA has completed a driver-pressure-state-impact-response analysis for the Significant Water Management Issues (SWMI) report, as per recommendation seven of the ['A review of implementation of the Water Framework Directive Regulations and River Basin Management Planning in Northern Ireland'](#) by the OEP.

DAERA teams have been reorganised to give a renewed focus to a Source-to-Sea approach. Work to improve water resources, especially the water quality of NI's waterbodies will require collective action across government, the public and private sectors, and wider society.



3. Marine and Coastal Water Resources: Quality & Quantity

Overview

Marine and coastal waters are among NI's most valuable natural assets, supporting biodiversity, recreation, tourism, and climate resilience. This theme aims to protect and improve water quality in transitional (estuarine), coastal waters and in our whole marine area. It contributes to **SEOs 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6**.

Links to Other Strategic Drivers

This theme aligns with several strategic drivers, including [KM-GBF](#) and the restoration and protection of marine and coastal areas for biodiversity, with targets set for 2030. It also supports the Convention for the [Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic \(OSPAR\) North-East Atlantic Environment Strategy \(2030\)](#), which includes targets for protection, conservation, and restoration to achieve biologically diverse and healthy seas. The World Health Organisation (WHO) [Sustainable Development Goal 14 \(Life below Water\)](#) relates to conserving and sustainably using oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development.

The WFD provides the driver for achieving Good Status (both ecological and chemical) in our transitional and coastal waters (out to 1 nautical mile from baseline). The Marine Strategy Regulations 2010, provide the driver for the achievement of Good Environmental Status in our marine area. This theme aligns with a number of core policies within the Marine Plan for NI - Biodiversity, MPAs, Coastal Processes and Coastal Change, Invasive Alien Species, Noise and Vibration, Marine Litter, Water Quality, Co-Existence and Land, Sea and Transboundary Interaction, and [The Climate Change Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2022](#) which covers the use of nature-based solutions that enhance biodiversity.

These improvements will be achieved through a Source-to-Sea approach under the WFD and link closely with **SEO 1, Theme 2 - Water resources: Quality and Quantity**. There is also a close link with **SEO 3, Theme 11 - Protecting Nature at Sea**.



Actions and Targets

Table 3. Marine and Coastal Water Resources: Quality & Quantity Actions

Action Number	Action	Status
3A	By end of 2026: Complete the Review of NI Bathing Waters, including possible extension of bathing season.	Progressing to EIP target
3B	By 2028: Develop & apply ecological modelling frameworks that integrate catchment management with coastal water quality & shellfish production for Dundrum Bay, Carlingford Lough, Belfast Lough (and other emerging areas as appropriate) to advance management measures for water quality improvement.	Progressing to EIP target
3C	By 2030, develop a NI Marine Strategy to achieve Good Environmental Status in our local seas, aligning with the UK Marine Strategy and regional approaches.	Progressing to EIP target
3D	By 2030, to have protected our Bathing Waters and Sensitive Areas including Shellfish Water Protected Areas (SWPAs) from storm sewage discharges and reduce impacts of agriculture on such areas.	Progressing to EIP target
3E	Ongoing implementation of the UK Marine Strategy Programme of Measures and work with UK Government Administrations to agree an updated Programme.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
3F	Targeted investment in sewage infrastructure & treatment works, and wider catchment solutions, through application of integrated ecological modelling frameworks.	Progressing to new timeline
3G	By 2025: Implement Shellfish Water Protected Area Action Plans and review those for sites not meeting objectives.	Progressing to new timeline
3H	By 2028: Develop an Underwater Noise Action Plan to support sustainable fisheries targets and protecting nature at sea, including establishment of a long-term monitoring programme.	Progressing to EIP target
3I	By 2030: Maintain at least Sufficient status for all Bathing Waters, with 70% achieving Good or Excellent status throughout the bathing season	Progressing to EIP target



Action Number	Action	Status
3J	By 2030: Manage all SWPAs to ensure that they meet their ecological and chemical objectives under the Water Environment Regulations 2017 and meet at least Class B under the EU Hygiene Regulations. SWPAs must also make progress towards the WFD microbiological guideline standard of $\geq 75\%$ of samples contain ≤ 230 E. coli in the shellfish flesh and intervalvular liquid.	Progressing to new timeline

Marine and coastal improvements are being delivered through 10 actions under **Theme 3** (see Table 3). DAERA has responsibility for these actions, and they were prioritised around the most pressing deadlines and links with public health - bathing water and blue green algae issues. Lough Neagh has been a key Ministerial priority - so action progressed furthest reflects this. In this theme, one action is complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action, six are progressing to EIP target and three are progressing to a new timeline.

Achievements

The main achievement within this theme is the publication of the UK Marine Strategy Programme of Measures on 29 January 2025. Significant progress has also been made in improving bathing water quality. In 2024, 82% of bathing waters met Good or Excellent status. Catchment modelling and work on an Underwater Noise Action Plan are underway and on schedule to meet EIP targets.

A project plan has been agreed in respect of conducting a Review of Bathing Waters by the end of 2026, and this review has been initiated in November 2025 through a co-design workshop. A Bathing Water Quality Dashboard was released in June 2025 as the first stage in improving communication of bathing water data.

Catchment modelling is progressing with priority being given to Lough Neagh modelling. This may impact on some of the coastal modelling work, but this is not clear at this stage. An Event and Duration Monitoring pilot is planned with NI Water for 2025-26 with regard to protecting bathing and shellfish waters from storm discharges. Work has also been initiated on an Underwater Noise Action Plan.

Challenges and Delays

There are some areas of concern which have been challenging within this theme. The underfunding of wastewater treatment and sewerage systems will continue to impinge



on transitional and coastal water quality. Another key issue centres around nutrients from agriculture. Reduction in nutrient losses to transitional and coastal waters is reliant on the revised NAP and in ensuring that the [Sustainable Agriculture Programme \(SAP\)](#) also contributes to reducing nutrient losses to the water environment.

Transitional & Coastal Classification Statistics indicate that high nutrient, dissolved inorganic nitrogen (DIN) levels were responsible for many water bodies failing to achieve good ecological status. Failure to achieve good chemical status was due to the widespread occurrence of legacy, ubiquitous, persistent, bio accumulative, toxic (uPBTs) chemicals as well as some pesticides and herbicides. The main sources of nutrients and pollutants to transitional and coastal waters are direct wastewater discharges and diffuse agricultural inputs.

There is a fundamental issue with the progression of the [Shellfish Water Action Plans 2019](#). These are highest priority in failing areas such as Belfast Lough but are linked to the NI Water capital works programme which is reliant on funding for the Living with Water Programme (LWWP). DfI announced in 2025 that the LWWP would be funded within the existing resource baseline on an annual basis. This means that many of the bigger strategic elements required to improve water quality are not funded.

The commitment to an overall Litter Strategy was deprioritised because of resourcing pressures and therefore the approach on Marine Litter is 'business as usual'.

Future Focus

For the water quality elements of this theme, a Source-to-Sea approach will be essential in addressing the issues, and it is critical that there is a joined-up approach between **Theme 2** and **Theme 3**. Similarly, the primary source of marine litter is from land-based activities, and an overarching Litter Strategy will be essential in making further progress. DAERA teams have been reorganised to give a renewed focus to a Source-to-Sea approach. New resources have also been made available to tackle water quality through the LNAP.

4. Local Environment Quality

Overview

The actions in **Theme 4** focus on improving local environmental quality by instilling communities with civic pride and aim to bring about a societal behavioural shift where littering is socially unacceptable, to create cleaner communities. Improving environmental wellbeing is a key policy aim for community planning. Community Planning Partnerships operating in the 11 council districts provide a strong network of statutory and Community & Voluntary Sector organisations which can support education and behavioural change.



Links to Other Strategic Drivers

The Local Environment Quality theme supports broader strategic goals beyond the EIP. It complements initiatives such as the [DRS](#), [Extended Producer Responsibility \(EPR\) Scheme](#), and [Single Use Plastic \(SUP\) legislation](#), which aim to reduce waste and promote responsible consumption. These drivers reinforce the importance of clean, safe, and attractive public spaces in enhancing quality of life and environmental stewardship, which aim to reduce waste and promote responsible consumption.

Actions and Targets

Table 4. Local Environment Quality Actions

Action Number	Action	Status
4A	Publish NI’s first Litter Strategy by 2027.	Not progressing - workplan in place
4B	2025: Adopt-a-Spot: A network of 500 groups engaging 300,000 volunteers.	Progressing to EIP target
4C	Continued grant support to improve local environment quality & civic pride.	Progressing to EIP target

There are three actions (**4A to 4C**) associated with the Local Environment Quality theme (see Table 4). Ownership of these actions lies with DAERA. Two actions in this theme are progressing to the EIP target, and one is not progressing but has a workplan in place.

Achievements

The Adopt-a-Spot programme has demonstrated strong community engagement and environmental impact. By the end of June 2025, 1,175 Adopt-a-Spot sites were active, and 156,329 volunteers engaged in practical environmental action. The Adopt-a-Spot target of 500 groups has been achieved, and KNIB is confident it will meet the 300k volunteer target figure by the end of 2025. [The Environment Fund](#) continues to provide grant support to KNIB and other organisations to deliver programmes, including [Eco-Schools](#), [‘Live Here, Love Here’](#) & [Adopt-a-Spot](#) to promote a sense of civic pride and encourage environmental responsibility. These efforts contribute to cleaner, healthier communities and support long-term behavioural change to promote a sense of civic pride and encourage environmental responsibility. These efforts contribute to cleaner, healthier communities and support long-term behavioural change.



Challenges and Delays

Work towards publishing NI's first Litter Strategy (**Action 4A**) has been paused. This delay is due to resource constraints and a reprioritisation of departmental efforts in line with Ministerial priorities. The strategy is now expected to be developed during the 2027-2030 period.

One of the top two environmental concerns for people in NI over the last 4 years has been 'Illegal dumping of litter & waste' (NI Environmental Statistics Report, DAERA). The Litter Strategy will be an all-encompassing strategy incorporating the linkages between terrestrial and marine litter leading to a reduction in the pollution that harms wildlife and ecosystems, promoting civic pride, encouraging individual environmental responsibility, and improving community well-being through cleaner public spaces.

Future Focus

Looking ahead, DAERA will continue to support community-led environmental action through the Adopt-a-Spot programme and related initiatives. The development of the Litter Strategy remains a priority for the next planning cycle, and its implementation will be key to reducing pollution, protecting wildlife, and enhancing public spaces.

Conclusion For SEO 1:

Over the reporting period, DAERA has taken significant steps to improve air, water, and land quality across NI. DAERA has advanced efforts to reduce pollution, restore degraded environments and embed environmental protection into policy and practice through the development of targeted strategies including the Clean Air Strategy, AS and the Third Cycle RBMP which was published in June 2025. There are numerous plans in place to progress towards improving water body status including NAP, Farming with Nature (FwN), and the LNAP.

There have been challenges in progressing some actions, work to develop the Clean Air Strategy has been impacted by delays due to staffing, competing resource priorities and reprioritisation of policies and work streams within DAERA. Achieving Good Ecological Status for all water bodies by 2027 remains unlikely due to natural recovery timescales, ongoing excess nutrients, and underinvestment in wastewater infrastructure. Work towards publishing NI's first Litter Strategy has been paused due to resource constraints and a reprioritisation of departmental efforts in line with Ministerial priorities. The strategy is now expected to be developed during the 2027-2030 period.

Despite these challenges DAERA has maintained momentum across key areas. Progress has been supported by strong collaboration with NIEA, DfI, district councils and by partnerships with eNGOs such as KNIB. Collaborative programmes such as the SNHS, Sustainable



Catchment Programme, and Adopt-a-Spot have engaged thousands of stakeholders, from farm businesses to community volunteers, in practical environmental action. Work to improve air, water and land quality will require collective action across government, the public and private sectors and wider society.

The actions under **SEO 1** directly support PfG priorities around Lough Neagh, public health, environmental sustainability, and community wellbeing. They also reflect DAERA's commitment to evidence-based policy, long-term planning, and environmental leadership. By continuing to invest in strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, and monitoring, DAERA is laying the foundation for excellent air, water, and land quality, that benefits both current and future generations.



SEO2 - Healthy and Accessible Environment & Landscapes Everyone Can Connect With & Enjoy





SEO2 - Healthy and Accessible Environment & Landscapes Everyone Can Connect With & Enjoy

Introduction:

NI's landscapes, seascapes, and natural spaces are among our most treasured assets. They shape our identity, support our wellbeing, and connect us to nature, heritage, and each other. Yet despite their value, many people still face barriers to accessing and enjoying these spaces. **SEO 2** focuses on strengthening these connections by ensuring that everyone can benefit from a healthy, inclusive, and accessible environment. The themes within **SEO 2** reflect a commitment to protecting the places we value, enhancing opportunities for outdoor recreation, and fostering a deeper relationship between communities and the natural world. It supports physical and mental health, social inclusion, and environmental stewardship, while promoting meaningful engagement with nature and heritage.

5. Connecting People to the Environment: Landscapes, Seascapes & Natural Beauty

Overview

NI's stunning range of landscapes and seascapes are a vital resource, valued for their scenic, ecological, and historical qualities which contribute to NI's distinctive identity which must be protected and help people reconnect with place.

Action 5E focuses on DfI and local government's cooperation with DAERA, to assess and address potential implications for the planning system when introducing new environmental policy.

Links to Other Strategic Drivers

Theme 5 aligns closely with **Theme 6** of the EIP, which focuses on outdoor recreation and natural space provision. Together, these themes promote access to nature and support community wellbeing. It contributes to the PfG priorities for environmental sustainability, public health, and inclusive access to natural spaces. The Tourism Strategy for NI recognises that the quality of NI's natural environment and cultural offering makes the region ideally placed for the further development of tourism attractions and experiences.



Actions and Targets

Table 5. Connecting People to the Environment: Landscapes, Seascapes & Natural Beauty Actions

Action Number	Action	Status
5A	Complete a landscape policy/ legislation review by 31 March 2027	Not progressing - workplan in place
5B	By 2025: 110 internationally awarded Green & Blue sites.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
5C	Subject to policy/ legislation review publish a Landscape Strategy by 31 March 2027	Not progressing - workplan in place
5D	Develop a rolling multi-year Landscape Action Plan by December 2025.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
5E	The DfI and local government will work co-operatively with DAERA in its role as the statutory nature conservation body for NI, on any potential implications for the planning system when bringing forward any new environmental policy.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action

There are five actions (**5A to 5E**) under **Theme 5** (see Table 5). Ownership of these actions lies with DAERA, NIEA and DfI. In this theme two actions are complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action, one is progressing to the EIP target and two are not progressing but have workplans in place.

Achievements

The completion of **Action 5B** marks a significant achievement in enhancing the visibility and quality of NI’s natural spaces. In 2025, 118 [Green Flags](#) and 16 [Blue Flags](#) were awarded, bringing the total to 134. The Green and Blue Flag awards reflect international recognition of environmental standards and public accessibility. This success supports the EIP’s goals of connecting people to nature and contributes to broader efforts to improve environmental quality and civic pride. Development of a rolling multi-year Landscape Action Plan is underway and is progressing towards the target date in the EIP of December 2025.

Action 5E is ongoing and forms part of BAU for DfI Planning, which continues to engage with DAERA on emerging environmental policy. Engagement is maintained as required, ensuring statutory consultee responsibilities are fulfilled. In the last 12 months, two district councils have



adopted Local Development Plan (LDP) Strategy documents for their area. Draft Plan Strategy documents have been published for public consultation by Newry and Mourne District Council and Ards and North Down Borough Council.

Challenges and Delays

Actions 5A and 5C relating to a Landscape Strategy have been delayed due to resource constraints and competing departmental priorities. While progress has been limited, a DP is in place and foundational work is underway. NIEA has developed a landscape action plan to ensure actions to promote our landscapes continue to be progressed as a new Landscape Strategy is developed. A legislation review is required and options on how to resource this are currently being explored as part of a DP. The aim is to complete the actions by end of 2026, subject to resources becoming available.

Action 5E - LDP programmes are set by district councils and agreed with DfI. Timelines are impacted by the time required for evidence gathering and resource availability within district councils.

Future Focus

For **Action 5E** to maintain and strengthen engagement as further LDPs are published. To consider developing more formal indicators to track the effectiveness and timeliness of consultee responses and to continue to support district councils in evidence gathering and resource planning to facilitate timely LDP delivery.

6. Connecting People to the Environment: Outdoor Recreation & Natural Space Provision

Overview

Theme 6 is an integral part of **SEO 2**, with the landscapes themselves, both urban and rural, providing the canvas within which outdoor recreation occurs. Outdoor recreation is part of the Natural Capital provided by our landscapes and settlements and a way in which we connect with, learn about and develop a relationship that inspires us to take positive action for them and the whole environment, including **Theme 9 Historic Environment (HE)** and **Theme 7 The Next Generation**. This theme also links to **SEO 1** and **SEO 3**.

The actions within this theme cover several areas, including increasing the proximity of citizens to quality, accessible green and blue space, and development of science and evidence. It also includes the development of the legislation, strategy, policy, co-ordination, and funding to deliver and action to engender responsible outdoor recreation behaviour, understanding and action for the environment.



This theme also contains actions concerned with delivery of greenways and active travel networks, and increasing awareness and accessibility of community transport and outdoor spaces.

Links to Other Strategic Drivers

Other strategic drivers include the [Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands \(NI\) Order 1985](#), [Commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity \(Kunming-Montreal GBT\)](#) and [WHO Sustainable Development Goals](#) including Good Health & Wellbeing, Sustainable Cities & Communities, Life on Land and Life Below Water. The PfG and PfG Wellbeing Indicators including Cleaner Environment and Healthier Lives and associated central government strategies and policies and local government Community Plans.

NI's eleven district councils develop community plans in partnership with statutory bodies and local communities to improve social, economic, and environmental well-being. These plans include environmental actions aligned with regional sustainability and climate goals.

Community Planning Partnerships work with statutory partners such as the Education Authority, DAERA, NI Housing Executive, and Health Trusts to deliver priorities. The plans align closely with PfG outcomes and the EIP's six SEOs. The Draft Obesity Strategy is also a strategic driver for this theme. There is also collaboration with DAERA and transport operators.

Actions and Targets

Table 6. Connecting People to the Environment: Outdoor Recreation and Natural Space Provision Actions

Action Number	Action	Status
6A	By 2028: Develop a Community Trail Network & Green/Blue Places Plan in all district council areas	Not progressing - workplan in place
6B	By 2028: development of revised/new fit for purpose outdoor recreation legislation.	Not progressing - workplan in place
6C	Progress the implementation plan for the Strategy for Sport and Physical Activity for the next 10 years and beyond.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
6D	Improve quantity, quality & accessibility of existing natural spaces, parks, recreational routes, and marine & freshwaters.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
6E	Increase the offroad network of both local community trails and regionally significant NI wide routes including recreational walking, cycling and horse riding.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action



Action Number	Action	Status
6F	Publish an Outdoor Recreation Strategy.	Progressing to new timeline
6G	By 2026: Review and update the Outdoor Recreation Action Plan (ORAP) for NI	Progressing to new timeline
6H	Increase the facilitation/provision of recreation facilities on government owned land	Not progressing - workplan in place
6I	Annual increase in % of households that have publicly accessible quality natural space >2ha within 400m and at least one site >20ha in size within 2km	Not progressing - workplan in place
6K	Increase grants to support development of new and improved outdoor recreation trails and accessible natural spaces, and programmes to encourage people to understand and sustainably use these places responsibly.	Progressing to new timeline
6L	Continue the People in the Outdoors Monitor (POMNI) 3-yearly population level survey of outdoor recreation use & engagement with the natural environment	Progressing to EIP target
6M	By 2027: Create a consolidated and expanded geospatial map of all publicly accessible natural space and trails incorporating Accessible Space Standards for NI.	Progressing to EIP target
6N	By 2025: Develop a 'Changing Places Action Plan' for a regional network of inclusive outdoor recreation locations to increase the accessibility of outdoor recreation for people with special needs or disabilities	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
6O	Ensure by 2024 that the 'Active Living - No Limits' Disability Sport Action Plan is fully aligned to the Active Living Strategy.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
6P	Form partnerships between relevant Departments, District Councils, and other bodies to encourage and develop an inclusive outdoors	Not progressing - workplan in place
6Q	Implement 'Exercise-Explore-Enjoy: A Strategic Plan for Greenways' & 'Making Belfast an Active City: Belfast Cycling Network 2021'	Progressing to EIP target
6R	Increase awareness of accessible community transport schemes and accessibility of natural outdoor spaces and facilities to reduce barriers to access and participation in outdoor sport and recreational opportunities	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action



Action Number	Action	Status
6S	Continue communication and education to engender responsible use and behaviour by those enjoying the countryside, trails, and natural spaces.	Progressing to EIP target
6T	The DfI and local planning authorities will work co-operatively with DAERA, in its role as a statutory consultee in the planning system, to inform LDP and the determination of planning applications	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action

There are 19 actions in this theme and ownership lies across DAERA, Department for Communities (DfC) and DfI (see Table 6). Several pieces of work were already underway where external partners were able to commence with grant investment and oversight from NIEA. These were prioritised as the outcomes will underpin or inform delivery of other actions, including key science and evidence actions. In this theme seven actions are complete or have been introduced as an ongoing BAU action, four are progressing towards the EIP target date, three are progressing to a new timeline and five are not progressing but have workplans in place.

Achievements

A significant achievement has been the development of GreenspaceNI ([GreenspaceNI Public Dashboard](#)) - a consolidated and expanded geospatial map of all publicly accessible natural space and trails created by Outscape. Additional work is being carried out to expand the data to include detail about accessibility and the quality of the green space and to add blue space through DAERA Environment Fund and DfI investment. A Sustainable Trails Development Guide to help create safe, accessible community trails has been published by Outscape through DAERA Environment Fund and Sport NI investment.

The POMNI is a 3-yearly population level survey of outdoor recreation use & engagement with the natural environment. The updated survey was agreed in late 2024 and the omnibus survey commenced in January 2025.

Major greenways (e.g. Carlingford Greenway) are substantively complete, and construction is ongoing for the Newtownards to Bangor Greenway. DfI continues to engage with all district councils to understand and support long-term ambitions for greenway delivery. There is ongoing support for community transport services in urban and rural areas, and continuous engagement as a statutory consultee in LDP and planning applications.

Review of the ORAP was initiated through the Strategic Outdoor Recreation Group (SORG) with DAERA coordination and DAERA Environment Fund and SportNI grant to Outscape.



Outscape is undertaking a scoping of potential mechanisms for funding access through a voluntary scheme for private land.

A 'Changing Places Action Plan' for a regional network of inclusive outdoor recreation locations to increase the accessibility of outdoor recreation for people with special needs or disabilities (**Action 6N**). This has been completed through the DAERA Environment Fund and Sport NI grant aid to Outscape.

Communication and education to engender responsible use and behaviour by those enjoying the countryside, trails and natural spaces (**Action 6S**) is being delivered by investment provided through the 23-28 tranche of the DAERA Environment Fund - particularly through Outscape, KNIB, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty bodies alongside other eNGOs and district councils.

The [Active Living No Limits \(ALNL\) Action Plan](#) concluded in 2022 and members of the ALNL forum have agreed that a new standalone Action Plan would not be developed and rather agreed actions would be incorporated into the Delivery Action Plan (DAP) for the Active Living Strategy. Representatives from the ALNL forum are now members of the Strategic Implementation Group (SIG) for the Strategy as a mechanism for this. The ALNL forum are currently working on agreement of a list of actions to be incorporated into the wider Action Plan through the SIG (**Action 10O**).

The SIG is responsible for the development of the DAP for the Active Living Strategy. The group is chaired by Sport NI with representatives from government departments, district councils, Arm's Length Bodies (ALB), and the wider sports sector. Work is ongoing by the group to finalise and agree the DAP which will be a living document and evolve throughout the lifetime of the Strategy.

Challenges and Delays

A significant number of actions have not been commenced due to other pressures and are awaiting recruitment competitions to fill vacancies and new posts needed to deliver this work. Many of the actions are inter-related and will need to be developed together for effective progress to be achieved. Despite this, progress has been made where possible which will contribute towards the delivery of certain actions.

For **Action 6I**, although the action has not yet been delivered, a [GreenspaceNI](#) map has been created. The GreenspaceNI map has been created as a baseline of the location of the spaces and routes. While there has been limited investment through DAERA Environment Fund to eNGOs and district councils for some improvements, together with additional funding from National Lottery Heritage Fund & Community Fund, and Peace Programmes, other actions including coordination, action plans, legislation development and targeted funding programmes will be required collectively to deliver any substantial improvement.



Staffing bids have been approved with vacancies now awaiting recruitment competitions. Once filled, focus will be on **Actions 6P, 6G, 6A and 6K** to progress delivery on improving the indicator. These actions will then contribute towards the delivery of **Actions 6D, 6E and 6H**.

We are currently working to identify resource to continue to develop revised/new fit for purpose outdoor recreation legislation (**Action 6B**). The Outdoor Recreation Strategy will follow on from the ORAP for NI. DAERA resource is required to progress fully.

Dfl does not currently measure the increase in awareness of community transport schemes as promotion and awareness-raising are the responsibility of service operators. The planning consultee process is ongoing and subject to external factors such as council timelines and resource availability.

Future Focus

In the coming year NIEA will seek to fill a number of EIP related access vacancies to initiate the establishment of a new SORG, develop a new ORAP, coordinate measures to increase access provision on government owned land, and funding mechanisms to support development of Council Community Trail Network Plans and the development of new trails and open space provision. NIEA will also seek clarity around the opportunities within the SAP to support farmers who provide access provision, and to seek to ensure farmers providing access are not penalised in relation to farm payment eligibility.

Dfl will continue to support greenway projects, maintain and strengthen support for community transport; consider developing indicators to better capture the impact of actions on accessibility and participation; continue to work with planning authorities and DAERA to integrate recreation and access into planning decisions. Completion of the Newtownards to Bangor Greenway is expected by end of 2025/26.

7. The Next Generation

Overview

The actions within **Theme 7** focus on engaging and educating the next generation with the knowledge, skills, and behaviours to drive environmental change. Children and young people need access to the natural environment to improve and enhance the quality of the communities in which they live, learn and play. The actions aim to foster environmental awareness, leadership, and experiential learning, ensuring that young people are actively involved in shaping a sustainable future.

Links to Other Strategic Drivers

The Next Generation Theme aligns with the [NI Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030](#).



Actions and Targets

Table 7. The Next Generation Actions

Action Number	Action	Status
7A	Engage with our children and young people to provide them with opportunities to learn about, actively engage with, and positively shape the natural environment	Progressing to EIP target
7B	By 2024: Champion a group of '30 under 30' environmental leaders	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
7C	By 2030 every child spends time in the natural outdoors at least once a week.	Not progressing - workplan not developed
7D	Implement the Education for Sustainability Strategy and Action Plan.	Progressing to new timeline
7E	2025: 500 Adopt-a-Spot Groups and 300,000 volunteers engaged in practical environmental programmes.	Progressing to EIP target
7F	2025: 160,000 pupils and students actively engaged in Eco-Schools.	Progressing to EIP target
7G	2025: 50% of schools will have an Eco-Schools Green Flag.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
7H	Develop an online hub for Education for Sustainability information accessible to all.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
7I	Build change-makers through the development of training and learning programmes for teachers and leaders, including young people to build their confidence and capacity to deliver experiential learning for the environment, sustainability, and climate	Progressing to EIP target
7J	Programmes supporting the environment and biodiversity including Climate Change exhibitions, Seed Libraries, Wildflower Planting, Community Gardening Clubs and Migratory Bird projects will be developed and implemented in a range of libraries by 31 March 2024	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action

There are 10 actions (**7A-7J**) in **Theme 7** (see Table 7). Ownership lies with DAERA, NIEA and the DfC. Four actions have been completed, four are progressing towards the EIP target, one is progressing to a new timeline, and one is not progressing, with no workplan in place.



Achievements

Theme 7 has progressed well, and the Eco-Schools initiative continues to expand, with 50% of schools now holding Green Flag status and participation expected to reach 160,000 students by the end of 2025. Eco-Schools deliver ongoing training, support, and resources to teachers across NI. Resources and teacher clinics have also been developed across Eco-School topics, specific training and resources about climate change are available to Youth Leaders, enabling young people outside of school to access quality reliable information.

The Education for Sustainable Development Forum members worked together to engage with our children and young people to provide them with opportunities to learn about, actively engage with, and positively shape the natural environment. In June 2025, [myEARTH](#), a new online digital hub for environmental knowledge and action was launched to empower people to take action towards tackling the climate and biodiversity crises.

Change-makers were built through the development of training and learning programmes for teachers and leaders, including young people to build their confidence and capacity to deliver experiential learning for the environment, sustainability, and climate. With funding from DAERA's Environment Fund, KNIB delivered the 30-Under-30 Environmental Leaders Programme, 70 Forest Schools leaders were trained and several eNGOs ran Youth Rangers training programmes, environmental youth forums and AQA Award Scheme accredited training for facilitating nature-based activities for wellbeing were delivered.

Action 7J, 'Development of programmes supporting the environment and biodiversity including Climate Change exhibitions, Seed Libraries, Wildflower Planting, Community Gardening Clubs and Migratory Bird projects will be developed and implemented in a range of libraries' has been completed.

Challenges and Delays

There are actions taking place within NI which are encouraging and promoting children to spend time in the natural outdoors at least once a week (**Action 7C**), but its progress is not presently being co-ordinated due to capacity issues. Staffing capacity to assist with co-ordination should be in place during 2026/27.

The Education for Sustainability Strategy and Action Plan (**Action 7D**) is being implemented through the Education for Sustainable Development Forum in NI. However, it has been noted that the Strategy and Action Plan does not have defined timeframes within which actions should be completed. Additional departmental capacity is being sought in 2026/27 to help define timeframes and to assist with the co-ordination and implementation of the Strategy and Action Plan.



Future Focus and Plans

Looking ahead, the focus will be on completing the remaining actions, expanding the reach of environmental education programmes, and ensuring inclusion of education for sustainability within the revised curriculum. Continued engagement with schools, youth groups, and educators will be essential to sustaining progress and embedding environmental learning across all levels of society.

8. Sustainable Settlements

Overview

Sustainable Settlements supports the idea of more town centre living, which reduces emissions and increases vibrancy of the centres in the evenings as well as the days. This theme focuses on promoting sustainable settlements through active travel, greenway networks, integration of natural features in housing, and ensuring the planning system supports appropriate housing supply.

Links to Other Strategic Drivers

Increasing and maintaining housing supply to build sustainable communities aligns with the Housing Supply Strategy as an objective within this strategy focuses on a Fair Path to Low Carbon Housing. The actions align with the PfG, climate and health objectives, and statutory planning responsibilities. Community Planning Partnerships provide a critical platform for aligning housing supply, regeneration, and climate resilience objectives. Through collaborative planning, councils and DfC have worked to integrate sustainable drainage, active travel networks, and biodiversity enhancements into LDPs. These efforts support PfG Wellbeing Indicators on 'Sustainable Cities and Communities' and 'Healthier Lives.'

The [NICS Collaboration Test and Learn Initiative](#) demonstrates how place-based collaboration can deliver social value and environmental outcomes, and future reporting should capture these examples to illustrate the role of Community Planning in achieving EIP targets. The NICS Collaboration Test and Learn evaluation (July 2024) made recommendations for relationships and engagement specifically:

- The need to develop clear pathways for local area engagement; and
- Where possible, work with existing partnerships in the local area, harnessing local intelligence, skills, and knowledge.



Actions and Targets

Table 8. Sustainable Settlements Actions

Action Number	Action	Status
8A	Build and strengthen the resilience of our villages, towns, and cities to create places where people want to live and work, to visit and invest by progressing 15 Public Realm, Environmental Improvement and Revitalisation schemes in our towns/cities by the end of March 2024.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
8B	Develop and support sustainability and Green Growth by ensuring that BREEAM is applied to all major Urban Regeneration Capital Projects and meet the good or better rating.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
8C	Work across Government to promote the Greenway network encouraging walking and cycling and reducing car dependency.	Ongoing BAU action
8D	Join up investment approaches in places including in regeneration, community assets, and all parts of our housing economy, maximising social value and adopting a people centred approach to investment in our towns and cities.	Progressing to EIP target
8E	Implementation of Greenway, Bicycle Plans and Development of Transport Plans and to promote health and wellbeing, better cities and towns and sustainable transport.	Implementation of active travel delivery plans ongoing. Transport Plans being developed.
8F	Ensure scheme designs are climate resilient, water management such as attenuation of storm water run-off and address air quality issues through the use of soft landscaping.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
8G	Integrate existing, and incorporate new, natural features into housing development to support quality of place, biodiversity and water management, and address climate change mitigation and resilience.	Progressing to EIP target
8H	Ensure the planning system, including LDP, helps support the delivery of the appropriate supply of housing, reflecting the changing nature of need and demand with consideration to wider policy influences including adaptive reuse and climate change.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action



Action Number	Action	Status
8I	Work in new and different ways with local Councils and Community Planning Partnerships to realise opportunities to increase and maintain housing supply and help create sustainable and inclusive urban and rural places. This will include capturing the lived experiences of those affected by different life challenges.	Progressing to new timeline

There are 9 actions (**8A-8I**) within **Theme 8** (see Table 8). Ownership of these actions lies with DfC and Dfl. Within this theme five actions have been completed or introduced as an ongoing BAU action, two are progressing towards the EIP target and two are progressing to a new timeline.

Actions are ongoing and forming part of BAU work for Dfl and partners. Dfl’s statutory consultee engagement in planning is a continuous process. Greenway and active travel schemes are delivered in partnership with district councils and through interdepartmental working groups. Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) policy and legislation are being developed by the Sustainable Drainage Directorate.

Achievements

There have been a number of achievements within **Theme 8**. A programme of Public Realm and Revitalisation schemes continues to be progressed (**Action 8A**), with climate initiatives such as SuDS included where it is practicable. Sustainability and Green Growth was supported with the [BREEAM Infrastructure](#) being applied to all major Urban Regeneration Capital Projects and this continues year on year.

DfC has engaged extensively with local government through conferences, meetings, and direct officer to officer engagement to realise opportunities to increase and maintain housing supply. This work includes detailed engagement on the opportunities presented by [LDPs](#) and how DfC can facilitate the delivery of sustainable communities. To date we have provided guidance and support on a number of specific housing areas (e.g. commuted sums, mixed tenure).

NICS Collaboration Test and Learn Initiative is in progress in three pilot areas to explore a more efficient and effective collaborative delivery model for place-based interventions. An evaluation of Phase two has broadly concluded with recommendations anticipated to be presented to NICS Board. Phase three has recently commenced and consideration to rolling out to additional areas is underway.



DfI is represented on the Outdoor Tourism Inter Departmental Working Group, with a key focus on promoting greenways. Several Belfast Cycling Network DP schemes have been completed with Belfast City Council; most short-term schemes are progressing for delivery by end of 2025.

The Active Travel DP for NI has completed public consultation; the response report has been shared with the DfI Minister and Infrastructure Committee for comment. A 12-week public consultation on draft SuDS Policy for new housing developments launched on 22 September 2025.

The planning system's statutory consultee process is ongoing, supporting the delivery of appropriate housing supply and reflecting changing needs. Over the past 12 months, two Councils have adopted Plan Strategy documents and a further two councils have published draft documents for consultation.

Challenges and Delays

For DfI the progress on some schemes depends on the timing and extent of Committee comments and council resource availability. SuDS policy implementation is contingent on legislative progress and consultation outcomes. The planning consultee process is ongoing and subject to external factors. LDP programmes are set by Councils and agreed with DfI. Timelines are impacted by the time required for evidence gathering and resource availability within councils.

Future Focus

DfI is to complete and publish the Active Travel DP by end of 2025/26. To continue to deliver greenway and active travel schemes in line with published active travel DPs. The Regional Strategic Transport Plan will be prepared and ready for consultation in 2026. To progress SuDS policy and legislation following consultation, and to maintain and strengthen statutory consultee engagement to support housing supply and sustainable development. Continued engagement with district councils on their LDP programme.

9. Historic Environment

Overview

The HE includes all aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and place over time. It includes all surviving physical remains of past human activity, whether visible, buried or submerged, and deliberately planted or managed flora. There are over 17,000 heritage assets on the [NI Sites and Monuments Record](#), and over 9,000 listed buildings.

Condition surveys have shown that the overall condition of the assets is declining, and there is growth in the number of entries on the [Heritage at Risk register](#). To achieve the SEO of a healthy and accessible environment that everyone can connect with and enjoy, it is important that this part of our environment is well cared for and appreciated.



The HE contributes to several of the aims of the PfG. It can help to grow a globally competitive economy by attracting tourism and investment. It contributes to specialist skills development and helps with green growth as a repository of embodied carbon which can be reused. It can also be reused for sustainable housing and, if well maintained, it contributes to safer communities and is an important resource for learning about our history. There are proven wellbeing benefits from visiting historic sites as well. Most historic monuments are located on farmland and are often, in addition, key repositories for nature.

Links to Other Strategic Drivers

The HE theme aligns with the development and implementation of the [Heritage Culture and Creativity Programme \(HCC\)](#). The HE contributes to a number of the aims of the PfG and the Historic Environment Division (HED) have developed activities and events at their State Care Monuments which seek to support PfG delivery. DfC have also worked with DAERA to ensure heritage assets are included in Marine Plan and the SEA for the draft Fisheries and Water Environment Bill.

Actions and Targets

Table 9. Historic Environment Actions

Action Number	Action	Status
9A	Develop and implement a Culture Arts and Heritage Strategy which embeds environmental outcomes.	Now called the Heritage Culture and Creativity Programme. This is progressing to EIP target
9B	Update condition surveys and ensure appropriate actions are planned as a result of them.	Progressing to EIP target
9C	Continue to provide a focus on supporting owners and communities to identify sustainable uses and management of heritage assets for current and future generations.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
9D	Integrate marine and aquatic HE considerations into all decision-making processes and assessments of environmental impacts.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
9E	Continue to work across the HE sector and with communities to increased resilience and progress actions which support delivery of PfG outcomes and key strategies.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action



Action Number	Action	Status
9F	Work with councils to inform LDP and development management decisions which align with treaties and best practice to conserve, protect, enhance, and realise the value of our HE; alongside management of licensing and consenting regimes which also support this.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
9G	Work with DAERA to ensure heritage assets have been included within the NI Marine Plan and by 2025 within the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966.	Progressing to EIP target
9H	Progress research on the specific climate change challenges and opportunities for heritage assets, and use this as the basis for advice, guidance, and action.	Progressing to EIP target
9I	Ensure that Government Departments and their ALBs lead by example, as required by the Protocol for the Care of the Government Historic Estate.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action

There are 9 actions (**9A-9I**) included in the HE section of the EIP (see Table 9). DfC have responsibility for these actions, and all are complete, introduced as an ongoing BAU action, or progressing towards meeting the EIP target.

Achievements

All of the actions within **Theme 9** have been progressed. The most important of these is the proposed policy on the HE. This has been the focus of much effort over the last year and is approaching the stage where it can be shared for comment as part of a public consultation. Once these comments have been considered a final policy is expected to be published around the start of the new financial year. The HE Policy has been subjected to a SEA, and this will be published alongside a public consultation in Spring 2026.

DfC published data on the condition of listed buildings (**Action 9B**) on 2 May 2025 ([Survey on the Condition of Listed Buildings | Department for Communities](#)). Research into owner attitudes to heritage in their care was also published on 16 May 2025 ([Market failure in heritage | Department for Communities](#)). DfC held an Owners' Forum in February 2025 where architects responded to requests from owners for advice and guidance in the management of historic buildings. DfC also publishes advice on its website. This, and the information on condition, will be used to contribute to a detailed business case to consider an appropriate level of government support for the HE in future years. Research was also carried out in partnership with the National Trust on climate change challenges for the HE (**Action 9H**) in 2024/25. You can find out more here: [Heritage and Climate Change | Department for Communities](#).



HED has also worked in partnership with the Peatland Collaborative Network and DAERA to develop guidance and has delivered training on the importance of the HE in peatland restoration as part of the Peatland Strategy.

HED has developed activities and events at their State Care Monuments which seek to support PfG delivery (**Action 9E**). Other ways of supporting these are being developed. Substantial work has been undertaken with district councils as they have sought to develop and refine planning policies for the HE over recent years. DfC's team of archaeologists and architects also respond to statutory consultations from district councils on proposals which might impact the HE. Though not yet meeting the statutory target that all planning responses should be within 21 days or as otherwise agreed, response rates have dramatically increased from 37% to 73% in the last year.

A marine archaeologist from HED is currently seconded to DAERA Marine and Fisheries to support the integration of cultural heritage into marine planning and fisheries policy. This collaboration has enhanced interdepartmental coordination and embedded expert curatorial advice into marine planning and licensing. Heritage considerations are now reflected in the Marine Plan, supported by updated spatial datasets of scheduled monuments, wrecks, and underwater cultural heritage, displayed on DAERA's [Marine Mapviewer](#). This ongoing partnership promotes sustainable management of NI's marine HE in line with UK marine policy and legislation.

Regarding **Action 9I**, 'Ensure that Government and its ALBs lead by example in the care of heritage assets in line with the NI Executive approved [Protocol for the Care of the Government Historic Estate](#)'. All government departments and ALBs report to the HED on a two-year basis. Most data were submitted by June 2025, and HE is currently compiling an overall report. This will be submitted for scrutiny to the Communities Committee of the NI Assembly in advance of publication.

Challenges and Delays

The issue of heritage at risk remains a notable challenge. The 2023/24 condition survey data in particular shows that 61.3% of listed buildings were rated as 'Very good/ Good' or 'Average', a 16 percentage point reduction on the 76.9% that achieved this rating in 2013/14, This was itself a drop of 9 percentage points on the 85.7% of listed buildings with a 'Very good/Good' or 'Average' rating in 2004/05 (assessed to a slightly different statistical standard), data from the owners' survey shows a direct link between condition and the value that owners place on heritage assets within their care. It also highlights barriers that owners face, such as the availability of skilled tradespeople, and appropriate materials.

This research will inform a detailed business case to consider an appropriate level of government support for the HE in future years. It will also inform decisions on skills



development and other means of helping owners and the public to carry out work and to value heritage assets. DfC is also developing a specific policy document on heritage at risk. This will summarise the issue, potential solutions, the efforts currently underway to tackle this and will set out clear actions on the way forward. As a subset of the overarching HE policy, this will be published after a final HE policy has been published and will take into account its final, agreed, policy direction.

Future Focus

Looking to the future there are many areas to focus on, such as Publication of a HE policy and development of a business case considering funding for the HE. A Heritage at Risk strategy will be put into development. Opportunities will be pursued to improve access and delivery of PfG outcomes at Monuments in State Care. Development of work to improve availability of Heritage Skills will be undertaken and a report on Protocol for Care of Government Historic Estate will be published.

Conclusion for SEO 2:

DAERA and its partners have made progress toward creating a healthy, accessible environment and landscapes that everyone can enjoy. There have been challenges across **SEO 2** and delays have affected some actions. Development of a Landscape Strategy and an Outdoor Recreation Strategy have been delayed due to resource constraints and competing departmental priorities. Work is currently underway to identify the necessary resource to support the continued development of revised fit-for-purpose outdoor recreation legislation. The issue of heritage at risk remains a notable challenge as condition survey data continues to show a decrease in the percentage of listed buildings rated as ‘Very good/Good’ or ‘Average’.

However, achievements within **SEO 2** during the reporting year demonstrate meaningful progress in enhancing NI’s natural spaces and improving accessibility. In 2025, 118 Green Flags and 16 Blue Flags were awarded, bringing the total to 134. This marks a major step forward in enhancing the visibility, quality, and accessibility of NI’s natural spaces. Progress on inclusive recreation through the ‘Changing Places Action Plan’ and the launch of the [People in the Outdoors Monitor](#) and Outscape’s geospatial mapping work all contribute to a more connected and accessible outdoor environment.

Education and engagement have also advanced through the development of a Community Trail Network, expansion of the Eco-Schools initiative, and the launch of the myEARTH digital hub. **Theme 9** has seen notable progress in sustainability, urban regeneration, and heritage policy, with BREEAM standards applied to major projects and a new HE policy nearing public consultation with hope that it will be published around the beginning of the new financial year.



The development and implementation of the related HCC Programme Framework is also notable.

Together, these efforts demonstrate a coordinated and impactful approach to environmental improvement, education, and sustainable development across NI, laying a strong foundation for continued progress in the coming year.



SEO 3 - Thriving, Resilient & Connected Nature & Wildlife





SEO 3 - Thriving, Resilient & Connected Nature & Wildlife

Introduction:

NI's natural environment is rich in biodiversity, landscapes and ecosystems that sustain life and support our wellbeing. Yet this environment is under increasing pressure from human activity, climate change, pollution, and habitat loss. **SEO 3** focuses on reversing biodiversity decline and restoring the health and resilience of nature across our land, rivers, and seas. It recognises that thriving ecosystems are essential not only for wildlife, but also for climate resilience and the overall quality of life for people and communities.

SEO 3 sets out a wide-ranging framework of actions and targets aimed at protecting, restoring, and connecting nature. The goal is to create a nature-positive future where ecosystems are thriving, connected and resilient, and where people and wildlife benefit together from a healthy natural environment.

10. Protecting Nature on Land

Overview

Protecting nature on land is central to **SEO 3**. This theme also contributes significantly to **SEO 1**, **SEO 4**, and **SEO 6**. It underpins the Natural Capital chapter of the EIP and is closely linked to statutory obligations under biodiversity and nature conservation legislation. It aligns with targets in the [draft CAP](#), [Peatland Strategy](#), draft NRS, and the PfG. Increasing woodland cover is one of DAERA's priorities. The current forestry strategy, NI Forestry - A Strategy for Sustainability & Growth, sets out the long-term objective to increase woodland cover, currently 8.6%, to 12% of the NI land area by 2050. All forest expansion is committed to meeting the UK Forestry Standard (UKFS) which underpins forestry policy and sustainable forestry management within which conservation and enhancement of biodiversity is an essential element.

This aim aligns with the Climate Change Committee recommendations regarding the level of afforestation necessary to contribute towards achieving emissions reduction targets.

Links to Other Strategic Drivers

This theme is directly connected to DAERA's long-standing statutory duties and broader strategic drivers for biodiversity and nature conservation. It aligns with biodiversity targets and peatland restoration targets under the draft CAP and the NICCAP3 and contributes to the



environmental objectives of the draft Green Growth Strategy. The actions within this theme are essential for meeting obligations for the natural environment under the Act and international biodiversity frameworks. The PfG highlights biodiversity as a key indicator of environmental health and community wellbeing, while the NICS Corporate Plan emphasises the need for evidence-based policy, cross-departmental collaboration, and sustainable land management.

The actions are linked to DAERA’s statutory obligations with respect to biodiversity, wildlife, protected sites, priority habitats and species etc, [Conservation \(Natural Habitats, etc.\) Regulations \(NI\) 1995](#) (as amended), [The Environment \(N Ireland\) Order 2002](#), [The Wildlife \(NI\) Order 1985](#) and [Wildlife and Natural Environment Act \(NI\) 2011](#). It also links to commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity (Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework) to 2030 and the associated UK National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, as well as the [Bern Convention](#).

Increased afforestation aligns with EIP Themes 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, and 12.

Actions and Targets

Table 10. Protecting Nature on Land Actions

Action Number	Action	Status
10A	By 2030: At least 30% of land and freshwater protected, connected and managed for nature.	Progressing to new timeline
10B	Increase NI woodland cover to at least 9% (124,000 hectares) by 2030.	Progressing to EIP target
10C	Develop and put into operation a Nature Recovery Plan to support nature recovery and climate resilience.	Progressing to new timeline
10D	By 2026: Develop measures to support delivery of 30x30 and other KM-GBT targets.	Progressing to new timeline
10E	All semi-natural peatlands are conserved or restored to healthy, functioning ecosystems by 2040.	Progressing to EIP target
10F	By December 2024: Publish the NI Peatland Strategy to set the long-term vision for peatland protection, restoration & maintenance to 2040, which will assist in mitigating against climate change.	Completed



Action Number	Action	Status
10G	By end of 2024: Publish conservation management plans & habitat maps for 40 of our terrestrial and freshwater ACs to set out the necessary conservation measures required to achieve favourable condition and inform effective management for these key areas for biodiversity.	Completed
10H	By March 2025: Complete the first stage of 'Islands to Networks', a review of NI's terrestrial protected sites to establish what is needed to complete the protected site network as part of broader goals to protect 30% of land for biodiversity.	Completed
10I	By end of 2024: Develop a new 'NRS 2032' which will set the direction for NI's contribution to the UK's commitment to the International Global Biodiversity Framework, designed to halt & reverse the loss of biodiversity, and restore degraded ecosystems, habitats & species, and build climate resilience.	Progressing to new timeline
10J	Develop action plans to address specific pressures on nature including nutrient pollution, wildfires, invasive species, and climate change by 2026.	Not progressing - workplan in place
10K	By 2026 develop and implement nature recovery plans and programmes, including nature-based solutions, for protected areas, priority habitats and species, nature recovery networks and Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs).	Progressing to new timeline
10L	DAERA will work in conjunction with other government departments, authorities and stakeholders to align policies and programmes to enhance protection for nature and ecological connectivity, deliver biodiversity gain and support landscape scale ecosystem restoration.	Ongoing BAU action
10M	By 2030: 95% of the features underlying the designation of ASSIs to be in, or approaching, favourable conservation condition.	Progressing to new timeline
10N	By 2027: Review our terrestrial biodiversity monitoring and evidence needs and devise and implement a comprehensive mapping, monitoring and evidence programme and platform to support conservation action, and biodiversity reporting and Natural Capital accounting.	Progressing to new timeline



Action Number	Action	Status
10O	Deliver the 'Forests for our Future' Programme including associated conservation and protection measures for long established semi-natural woodland and habitats of conservation concern.	Progressing in line with draft CAP requirements.
10P	Review our existing protected site network and its effectiveness in safeguarding priority habitats and species and contributing to ecological and climate resilience, to inform the completion of our designation programme and meeting our 30x30 and other related commitments.	Not progressing - workplan in place
10Q	Develop funding mechanisms to support stakeholder action to meet 'nature positive' by 2030 objective including partnership and Green Finance solutions for nature recovery and nature-based solutions.	Not progressing - workplan in place
10R	By 2030: Create or commence restoration of 20,000 ha of wildlife rich habitat outside the protected site network (to support nature recovery networks and nature-based solutions).	Not progressing - workplan in place
10S	Publish the first Living Map of NI by 2024 (habitat/land cover model).	Progressing to new timeline
10T	Develop and agree a framework for delivering the 30x30 target and Nature Recovery Networks, incorporating key areas for Nature-based Solutions for climate action, and implement through a range of delivery mechanisms and conservation programmes.	Progressing to new timeline
10U	Publish a suite of annual biodiversity indicators to report on progress against biodiversity targets, and to meet Environment Act, Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 and NICCAP, and draft Green Growth Strategy reporting requirements.	Not progressing - workplan in place

There are 21 actions (**10A-10U**) within **Theme 10** (see Table 10). Ownership of these actions lies with DAERA and NIEA. Four actions are complete or BAU, three are progressing to EIP/draft CAP target, nine are progressing to a new timeline and five are not progressing but have a workplan in place. A number of pieces of work were already underway and were prioritised as the outcomes will underpin or inform delivery of other actions.



Achievements

Progress has been made within **Theme 10** with the completion of three actions (**10F, 10G, 10H**). The [Wildfires in Northern Ireland Strategic Framework 2025-2030](#) was published on 8 October 2025 which informs the agreed road map for the development of an accompanying Action Plan in 2026. Work is underway on a strategic cross-border invasive species programme. Work to deal with nutrient pollution is heavily reliant on ambitious NAP measures and progress with AS and Site Nitrogen Action Plans/action.

Work has commenced on the restoration of peatland habitat (**10E**), with a draft CAP target to restore 10,000ha by 2027. Peatland restoration will require significant upscaling to maintain the trajectory toward conserving or restoring NI's semi-natural peatland habitats by 2040. Significant investment and resource will be required long-term.

Work is underway towards the features underlying the designation of ASSIs to be in, or approaching, favourable conservation condition target (**Action 10M**). This includes consents/statutory ASSIs [Habitat Regulations Assessment \(HRA\)](#) advice to protect sites from new damage, and preparation of HRA guidance to improve the quality of assessments to protect sites. An initial DP has been prepared; however, a more detailed, programme-scale DP will be required, along with a strategy for effective site stewardship, cross-DAERA/Departmental governance, extensive stakeholder engagement, and alignment with appropriate mechanisms and incentives for effective habitat management. These steps are necessary to deliver on OEP recommendations from their review of NI's terrestrial and freshwater protected sites.

Some initial work has been carried out on developing funding mechanisms to support stakeholder action to meet the 'nature positive' by 2030 objective - [DAERA Nature Recovery Fund](#), securing PEACEPLUS monies for nature recovery and working in collaboration with Republic of Ireland colleagues using Shared Island Funds.

The [All-Ireland Pollinator Plan 2021-2025](#) was successfully implemented and will be followed by an expanded and enhanced All-Ireland Pollinator Plan for 2026-2030, to be funded through the Shared Island Fund, National Parks and Wildlife Service, National Biodiversity Data Centre, the Department for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) and DAERA.

Work towards publication of the first Living Map of NI (**Action 10S**), a national scale habitat map of NI, is progressing well and is due to be completed by March 2026.

Delivering Forests for Our Future continues to be prioritised in line with EIP requirements

The Forest Expansion Scheme and the Small Woodland Grant Scheme both re-opened for applications to enable tree planting in the 2026 planting season.



Since the launch of Forests for our Future in 2020 about 4 million trees have been planted, creating nearly 2,000 hectares of new woodland, by 31 March 2025. The Tree Planting Action Plan, (announced by the Minister in October 2025) aims to identify actions that will make land available for tree planting and to successfully encourage landowners to afforest. Development of the Plan will involve engaging directly with key stakeholders to identify innovating ways to encourage landowners to plant trees on land that has long-established cultural and economic ties with agriculture. This plan will be drafted by April 2026. It will highlight key actions to deliver the 12% forest cover by 2050 in support of forestry's contribution to net zero targets.

Woodlands including ancient and long-established woodlands are protected under the [Forestry Act \(NI\) 2010](#), and the [Environmental Impact Assessment \(EIA\) \(Forestry\) Regulations \(NI\) 2006](#).

Additionally, where woodlands are situated in ASSIs or SACs protection is afforded under the Environment Order (NI) 2022 and the [Conservation \(Natural Habitats, etc.\) Regulations \(NI\) 1995](#).

Furthermore, district councils have powers for the protection of individual trees and woodlands through the issuing and enforcement of Tree Preservation Orders. They also have responsibility for planning decisions regarding proposed tree removals for development purposes.

In 2024/25 DAERA supported the creation of 427 hectares of new woodlands through the Forest Expansion Scheme and the Small Woodlands Grant Scheme. In addition, Forest Service afforested 75 hectares of land under its management.

Funding approval is in place to deliver targets set out in the first Carbon Budget period. The Strategic Outline Case to enable future afforestation grants is being progressed.

Challenges and Delays

There are significant concerns around a lack of progress on the 30x30 target (**Action 10A**) and the ASSI condition target (**Action 10M**). These are complex work programmes, rather than one-off actions, and will require cross-DAERA/Departmental governance and structures to enable comprehensive and integrated policies and action to address the drivers of biodiversity loss, put effective management in place across these protected areas, and develop appropriate incentives for bespoke land management to support nature recovery and nature-friendly farming. FwN will be key if it is sufficiently targeted and designed to restore nature on farmland.

Initial work has commenced on developing a framework and criteria for 30x30 (**Action 10T**) and a dedicated team will be established. However, delivery mechanisms and conservation programmes will need wider Departmental consideration and clear policy direction.



Significant investment and resource are required to ensure progress on **Action 10E** - All semi-natural peatlands are conserved or restored to healthy, functioning ecosystems by 2040 - continues post 2027 CAP target.

These actions both relate to mandatory statutory obligations (including draft CAP/NICCAP targets) and are the subject of OEP scrutiny and investigation. Acute staffing issues (vacancies) and competing pressures, as well as the risk of poorly aligned environmental and agricultural policy will mean meeting these targets will be very challenging.

The draft NRS is currently being finalised (**10I**) for public consultation. Although it is progressing to a new timeline, it is hoped that the strategy will be finalised, approved, and published by the end of 2026.

Action 10P is captured in the Protected Areas - 30x30 and habitat restoration DP but has not yet commenced. This will build on the initial phase of the protected sites 'Islands to Networks' review (**Action 10H**) and on evidence from the forthcoming NI Habitats Regulations Report on the conservation status of Annex 1 habitats, Annex 2 species, and bird species (to be published in January 2026) and the next phase of the UK Special Protected Areas (SPAs) Review - Phase 3 N Ireland Implementation Report (which is currently the subject of the current OEP SPA and Wild Birds Investigation). A new Principal Scientific Officer (PSO) led Nature Recovery Areas team is being established to develop and take this work forward, including the 30x30 framework, evidence, and DP.

Action 10B A lack of uptake of grant funding by landowners remains the overriding obstacle to higher rates of planting being achieved, as they seek to balance afforestation with competing opportunities arising from other land uses.

Future Focus

There are significant dependencies on other policy areas and programmes, including support for nature-positive practices and incentives for land management that recognise the specific biodiversity value of different fields and landscapes, as well as the role each plays in restoring nature, enhancing ecological connectivity, and delivering nature-based solutions. Investment is needed to improve understanding and awareness within DAERA and other departments/public bodies, of NI's biodiversity and their statutory obligations to protect and restore it in the discharge of their functions.



11. Protecting Nature at Sea

Overview

The aim of this theme is to restore and protect marine biodiversity through the creation of healthy ecosystems that support wildlife, enhance natural resilience, and connect habitats across the region. This is achieved through monitoring, marine planning and delivery of actions within key strategies, all underpinned by statutory requirements. It also contributes to **SEOs 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6**.

Links to Other Strategic Drivers

There are links to a range of strategic drivers - the KM-GBF: restoration and protection of marine and coastal areas for biodiversity with targets for 2030, [OSPAR North-East Atlantic Environment Strategy \(2030\)](#): includes targets related to protection and conservation, restoration to achieve biologically diverse and healthy seas. Sustainable Development Goal 14 (Life below Water): related to conserving and sustainably using oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development, The [Marine Strategy Regulations 2010](#): commitment within the UK Marine Strategy (MS) part 3 to develop a new MPA Strategy and action plan to restore blue carbon habitats. NI Marine Plan: Action 11 aligns with several core policies (Biodiversity, MPAs, Coastal Processes and Coastal Change and Invasive Alien Species) and the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022: use of nature-based solutions that enhance biodiversity.

Actions and Targets

Table 11. Protecting Nature at Sea Actions

Action Number	Action	Status
11A	By 2030: 30% of seas protected, ensuring an ecologically coherent & well managed MPA network.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
11B	By 2025: Develop & implement NI marine invasive species action plans.	Progressing to new timeline
11C	By 2030: Nature-based solutions to coastal erosion, where appropriate, will be implemented in collaboration with the Coastal Forum and new policy development.	Progressing to new timeline



Action Number	Action	Status
11D	<p>By 2030: 85% of designated features in the MPA network to be in favourable condition, with 10% of the remainder in recovering condition*.</p> <p>* MPAs are considered to be 'recovering' once all pressures which the features are sensitive to, are reduced or removed.</p>	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
11E	By 2030: Key marine priority habitats and species are in recovery.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
11F	By 2024: Integrate KM-GBF commitments relating to biologically diverse and healthy seas, and climate change into DAERA strategies.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
11G	By 2024: Develop and consult on a Seabird Conservation Strategy for NI to protect marine biodiversity.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
11H	By 2024: Develop and consult on a revised NI Inshore MPA Strategy in partnership with stakeholders to protect marine biodiversity.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
11I	By 2024: Develop and consult on an Elasmobranch Strategy for NI to protect marine biodiversity.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
11J	By 2024: Develop and consult on a Blue Carbon Action Plan for NI to help address the Climate Emergency.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
11K	By 2026: Develop and publish management measures for NI Offshore MPAs in partnership with stakeholders.	Progressing to new timeline
11L	By 2028: Develop and implement effective NI MPA management and restoration plans, including (i) additional designations to ensure ecologically coherent network, (ii) implementation of management measures.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
11M	By 2028: through a number of draft actions within the review of the MPA Strategy for NI, DAERA will increase climate resilience within the MPA network and increase protection of carbon storage habitats.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action



There are 13 Actions (**11A-11M**) under this theme (see Table 11), and responsibility for these actions lies with DAERA. Ten actions in this theme are complete or have been introduced as an ongoing BAU action and three actions are progressing to a new timeline.

Prioritisation of actions was based around statutory deadlines, building in the need for the co-design approach adopted for the development of the marine nature recovery strategies: [Seabird Conservation Strategy](#), [Elasmobranch Conservation Strategy](#), [Blue Carbon Action Plan](#) and a reviewed Inshore [MPA Strategy](#) were all publicly consulted on in 2024.

In 2022 the then DAERA Minister gave an oral statement to the Assembly where he outlined his priority to develop a Blue Carbon Action Plan and to review the MPA Strategy by 2024. Given the co-design approach to be implemented and the time taken to set up these groups, it was decided to focus on these first. Focus was also given to developing the Seabird and Elasmobranch conservation strategies due to calls from stakeholders and evidence indicating substantial declines in populations (in particular Seabirds).

Other actions were not advanced at that time due to resource constraints; however, these have now been allocated, and work has commenced (**Action 11B - Invasive Species Action Plans**). Furthermore, some actions, such as those requiring recovery of features by 2030 will be progressed through the implementation of action plans associated with each of the marine nature recovery strategies, once published. Resource has been identified to lead this area of work and a workplan will be developed once resource is in place.

Achievements

There have been several notable successes under **Theme 11**. NI has already achieved **Action 11A** by having 38% of the NI inshore area designated as MPAs (or 35.5% if including the NI offshore area). **Action 11D** which aims for 85% of features in favourable condition, has already been surpassed, with 87% currently meeting this standard. Looking ahead, the designation of new areas and the application of further management measures are expected to push the percentages for both **Actions 11A and 11D** even higher than their current levels.

Publication of the Blue Carbon Action Plan in Spring 2025 and a new Marine Nature Oversight Group has been convened in August 2025 and will support the delivery of the actions within the marine conservation strategies. The expansion of the native Oyster restoration project by Ulster Wildlife into the next stage (seabed deployment) is due to take place in November 2025.

Actions 11G, 11H, 11I, 11J were all completed by 2024, work is now underway to finalise the strategies (**Actions 11G, 11H and 11I**) for publication by Spring 2026 and implementation to commence.



Delivering the four marine nature recovery strategies (**Actions 11G, 11H, 11I, and 11J**) within agreed timeframes will set the direction for DAERA and key stakeholders over the next five years. Implementation of objectives and actions can now progress in partnership with the recently awarded [PEACEPLUS](#) projects: the Coastal Monitoring and Adaptation Planning Project (CMAP), the Multi-disciplinary Ocean Sensing for Adaptive International Conservation Project (MOSAIC), and A Changing Climate Impact Monitoring and Assessment Toolbox for Irish Seas (ACCLIMATISE).

Challenges and Delays

Finalisation of the Seabird Conservation Strategy (**Action 11G**) for Ministerial consideration currently has capacity and resource challenges. Efforts are underway to mitigate these issues through the restructuring and re-prioritisation of existing resources. This will also enable the implementation of a revised NI Inshore MPA Strategy (**Action 11H**) once this has been published.

Future Focus

Looking ahead, the plan is to publish **Actions 11G, 11H, and 11I**, followed by the implementation of their associated action plans, along with **Action 11J**. Work will also progress on consulting for **Action 11K** and subsequently publishing the related management measures. A draft consultation package is being developed to propose a prohibition on anchoring within the [Outer Belfast Lough Marine Conservation Zone \(MCZ\)](#), aimed at preventing further damage to the designated feature. If implemented, this measure is expected to support the recovery of the feature, thereby contributing positively to the relevant condition indicator.

A re-prioritisation of resources is required to ensure implementation of **Actions 11H and 11J**. This resource will also coordinate the delivery of the other actions. Exploration of resource requirements is underway to enable the future MPA designation programme to commence to meet the target date of 2028 (**Action 11L**). The recently convened Marine Nature Recovery Oversight Group will support the delivery of the EIP actions, with the Seabird and Elasmobranch advisory groups also set to reconvene following the publication of the two strategies.

Next year, it is expected that there will be improvements in MPA feature condition, arising from the regulations to prohibit mobile bottom fishing introduced in 2023. Progress resulting from other actions is expected to become more evident in the following years, as the relevant strategies are scheduled for publication in early 2026, with initial implementation to begin thereafter. Implementing these actions will lead to direct improvements in the condition of the MPA network, thereby supporting the overarching theme. Additional actions (**11J and 11M**) aim to explore areas beyond the current network, potentially leading to new designations that further reinforce the theme of protecting nature at sea.



12. Natural Capital

Overview

Theme 12, Natural Capital and the associated assessment and incorporation of biodiversity and ecosystem service value in policy and economic decision making, underpins **SEO 3**. It is closely aligned with, and reliant on, actions and targets under **Theme 10 ‘Protecting Nature on Land’**. It incorporates, values, and informs outcomes from **SEO 1**, **SEO 4**, and **SEO 6**.

There are 7 actions within this theme, related to developing a robust and comprehensive evidence base (allied to **Theme 12** actions to enhance biodiversity monitoring, and provision of data and evidence) and suitable Natural Capital and ecosystem assessment framework, which will require input and evidence from NIEA Freshwater Quality, and DAERA Marine and Fisheries Division (MFD) marine conservation teams, as well as Digital Services Division (DSD) for platform development.

Links to Other Strategic Drivers

Natural Capital has links to the draft CAP, Land Use Land-Use Change and Forestry (LULUCF), biodiversity targets, nature targets and indicators in NI Climate Change Adaptation Plan 3, draft NRS (Adoption of a Natural Capital approach and accounting/assessment, is directly linked to the KM-GBF Target 14: Ensure the full integration of biodiversity and its multiple values into policies, regulations, planning and development processes, poverty eradication strategies, SEAs, EIAs and, as appropriate, national accounting, within and across all levels of government and across all sectors), Peatland Strategy, draft Green Growth Strategy, PfG, and proposals for a land use strategy/framework.

It is also an important approach to inform business cases for conservation and pollution measures, and underpinning appropriate incentives for nature-friendly practices, as per KM-GBF Target 18: Reduce Harmful Incentives by at Least \$500 Billion per Year and Scale Up Positive Incentives for Biodiversity.

Embedding and mainstreaming biodiversity and Natural Capital are considered vital to meeting DAERA's statutory obligations with respect to biodiversity, wildlife, protected sites, priority habitats, and species etc., Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) Regulations (NI) 1995 (as amended), The Environment (N Ireland) Order 2002, Wildlife (NI) Order 1985, Wildlife and Natural Environment Act 2011, Wildlife (NI) Order 1985. Commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity (Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework), Ramsar Convention, Bern Convention.



Actions and Targets

Table 12. Natural Capital Actions

Action Number	Action	Status
12A	Review Natural Capital evidence base and establish needs to inform a Natural Capital assets framework for NI.	Progressing to new timeline
12B	By 2027: Scope and develop a robust Natural Capital and ecosystem assessment framework for NI for government departments and public bodies, etc.	Not progressing - workplan in place
12C	By 2027: Enhance our Natural Capital reporting, data, and habitat mapping systems to make Natural Capital and ecosystem datasets more readily available and integrate into Natural Capital accounting and reporting systems (Natural Capital and ecosystems assessment platform).	Progressing to new timeline
12D	Enhance our evidence on the extent, condition, functioning and connectivity of NI ecosystems, using a range of earth observation, survey methodologies, and land cover assessments.	Progressing to new timeline
12E	Publish a Natural Capital policy position for NI to define NI Natural Capital/ecosystem assessments approach, in line with KM-GBF target 14.	Not progressing - workplan in place
12F	Consider extension to Cultural Capital, connecting to work by HM Treasury & the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS).	Progressing to EIP target
12G	Consider and integrate biodiversity values into all decision-making processes at all levels.	Progressing to new timeline

There are 7 actions (**12A-12G**) associated with this theme (see Table 12). Responsibility for these actions lies with DAERA, NIEA and DfC. One action is progressing to the EIP target, four are progressing to a new timeline and two are not progressing but do have a workplan in place.

Achievements

Work is underway to review and develop an inventory of key biodiversity and Natural Capital data sets and make these spatial data sets available publicly. The development of the first



Living Map of NI (habitat/land cover map) is progressing well and is due to be completed by March 2026. Detailed habitat maps have been developed and published for 40 of our SACs.

The Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) is supporting the preparation of a Natural Capital inventory for NI (terrestrial and freshwater) as the basis of our Natural Capital work programme and framework. The 4th NI Countryside Survey 2022 is progressing well, and its first report is due to be published in Spring 2026. This will provide vital information on changes to habitats and the natural environment across NI and will provide key Natural Capital data.

Challenges and Delays

There are concerns about the available capacity and skill sets needed to advance key work packages at sufficient pace. These are essential to inform conservation action, guide spatial prioritisation for nature recovery and nature-based solutions, and enable the mainstreaming of nature and biodiversity into policy and economic decision-making - critical steps to halt and reverse biodiversity loss.

Initial work on Natural Capital inventory for N.I. is underway through a work programme with JNCC but will require more capacity within NIEA, DAERA and a dedicated Natural Capital programme to be in place. A key element will be the development of clear Natural Capital policy, aligned with the Environmental Principles Policy Statement (EPPS). It is hoped that this will be taken forward through the draft NRS, to embed Natural Capital accounting ([DoF Green Book guidance](#)) and considerations across all government departments and public bodies.

Since the EIP was published the DfC HED has met with the DCMS and monitored its progress. It is still at early evidence gathering stage with the Arts Council, Historic England and others being funded to carry out research. A framework which might be utilised by cultural and heritage organisations has not yet been developed. At this stage there has been no engagement between DfC and those carrying out Natural Capital work within DAERA. It is considered that, at present, things are not sufficiently developed to commence such work. Significant investment has been made in England and Wales in carrying out and assessing research into cultural and heritage capital. No such investment has been made in NI and, while this is appropriate during the current period when NI is operating a watching brief, should a decision be made to adopt the approach here, then more resources will need to be applied.

Future Focus

Looking to the future, sustained effort is required to set up the necessary teams and programme structures and to establish clear policy positions and implementation to embed a Natural Capital approach and framework for NI.



There are significant dependencies with other policy areas and programmes, including efforts to support nature positive practices and incentivise nature positive land management approaches that recognise the specific biodiversity value of different field/landscapes. Each area has an important role to play in restoring nature, improving ecological connectivity, and enabling effective nature based solutions. Investment is needed to improve understanding and awareness within DAERA and other departments/public bodies, of NI's biodiversity and their statutory obligations to protect and restore it in the discharge of their functions.

DfC will continue to engage with DCMS about Cultural Capital and monitor progress in England and Wales.

Conclusion For SEO 3:

Significant progress has been made under **SEO 3**, with notable achievements across most themes. Key successes include publication of the Blue Carbon Action Plan in Spring 2025 with development and consultation completed on 3 further marine nature recovery strategies - the Seabird Conservation Strategy for NI, the NI Inshore MPA Strategy and the Elasmobranch Strategy for NI. Work to finalise these strategies is now underway. The Peatland Strategy was launched, setting a long-term vision for restoration. This along with the forthcoming Living Map, which is due to be completed by March 2026, set a strong foundation for continued success.

Further progress has been made within the Natural Capital theme as detailed habitat maps have been developed and published for 40 SACs. The 4th NI Countryside Survey 2022 is well progressed, and the first report is due to be published in Spring 2026. This will provide vital information on changes to habitats and the natural environment across NI and will provide key Natural Capital data.

However, challenges remain, actions such as achieving the 30x30 land target and improving ASSI condition have been delayed due to resource constraints and competing priorities. These are complex work programmes and will require cross-DAERA/Departmental governance and structures to enable comprehensive and integrated policies and action to address the drivers of biodiversity loss. Similarly, Natural Capital work requires additional capacity and policy development to embed biodiversity values into decision-making. The Invasive species Action Plans were also not advanced during the reporting period due to resource constraints, but these have now been allocated, and work has now commenced. Finalisation of the Seabird Conservation Strategy for Ministerial consideration has been impacted by capacity and resource challenges. A lack of uptake of grant funding by landowners remains the overriding obstacle to higher rates of planting to increase NI woodland cover. Despite these challenges, the progress made sets a strong platform for continued success in restoring nature, enhancing resilience, and delivering a nature-positive future for NI.



SEO 4 - Sustainable Production & Consumption on Land & at Sea





SEO 4 - Sustainable Production & Consumption on Land & at Sea

Introduction:

NI's economy and environment are deeply interconnected. How we produce, consume, and manage resources has a direct impact on our natural world, our climate, and our long-term prosperity. **SEO 4** focuses on creating a more sustainable approach to production and consumption, one that supports economic growth while protecting the environment and ensuring responsible use of natural resources.

Sustainable production and consumption refer to the responsible use of resources throughout the entire lifecycle of goods and services - from extraction and manufacturing to use and disposal. It means producing in ways that minimise environmental harm, reduce emissions, and preserve ecosystems, while consuming in ways that avoid waste and promote efficiency. On land, this includes sustainable farming, energy generation and land use. At sea, it involves responsible fisheries, aquaculture, and marine planning that balance economic activity with ecological health.

Through **SEO 4**, DAERA aims to reshape how NI produces and consumes goods on land and at sea. The goal is to embed sustainability across all sectors, reduce environmental pressures, and support a resilient economy. This means aligning production systems with environmental goals, supporting innovation and green growth, and ensuring that natural resources are used responsibly and efficiently.

13. Future Agricultural Policy

Overview

Theme 13 Future Agricultural Policy (FAP) is being implemented through the continued roll out of SAP to deliver improved environmental sustainability, enhanced productivity, stronger resilience, and an effective functioning supply chain.

Links to Other Strategic Drivers

This theme underpins **SEO 4** and closely aligns with and informs **SEO 1**, **SEO 2**, **SEO 3**, and **SEO 6**.



Actions and Targets

Table 13. Future Agricultural Policy Actions

Action Number	Action	Status
13A	Roll-out of the new Actions and Enabling Schemes through the SAP began from 2024 to deliver the 4 key outcomes.	Progressing to EIP target

Theme 13 contains one action (**13A**) for which responsibility lies with DAERA. This action is progressing to the EIP target.

Achievements

A range of new Actions and Enabling Schemes have been rolled out through the [Sustainable Agriculture Programme](#) (previously the Farm Support and Development Programme) to deliver the 4 key outcomes. The following schemes were launched in 2024 - Pilot Protein Crop Scheme (continuation); Beef Carbon Reduction Scheme Year 1; SNHS Zone 3; Farming for the Generations Pilot Scheme.

The following schemes were launched in 2025 - Beef Carbon Reduction Scheme Year 2; Farming for Sustainability - Knowledge; Farm Sustainability Transition Payment Scheme (FSTP); Dairy Carbon Networks; Suckler Cow Scheme Year 1; SNHS Zone 4; FwN Transition Scheme Year 1; Horticulture Pilot Scheme, Farming for Sustainability - Innovation.

Challenges and Delays

The [FwN](#) package is not being rolled out as quickly as planned across all land types in NI. Stakeholders are keen to establish a scheme that enables farmers to transition from Environmental Farming Scheme Higher agreements, ensuring continued protection of designated sites and priority habitats. The reasons for these delays are due to staff resource challenges and delays in business case development. Progress has improved over recent months and plans are in place to build on the transition scheme that opened in 2025 to increase habitat and improve biodiversity. In addition, plans are in place to open strands in 2026 that will deliver environmental benefit on designated and priority habitats and on a landscape scale through group collaboration. These are dependent on business case cover and legislation being in place which will be challenging due to the timeframe.



Future Focus

The continued introduction of SAP schemes in accordance with the published timeline is subject to business case and legislative cover.

The following are planned for 2026 - Farm Sustainability Payment Scheme; Beef Carbon Reduction Scheme Year 3; Sustainable Farming Investment Scheme; Suckler Cow Scheme Year 2; FwN Transition Scheme Year 2; Carbon Foot printing Project; Bovine Genetics Project - data collection; FwN Landscapes and Priority Habitats; Farming with the Generations Full Scheme; Supply Chain Scheme.

14. Energy

Overview

The Executive's Energy Strategy - [The Path to Net Zero Energy \(2021\)](#) sets out a vision to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2050 and become self-sufficient in affordable, renewable energy. It outlines a roadmap to deliver a 56% reduction in energy-related GHG emissions by 2030. The majority of energy-related emissions come from burning fossil fuels for electricity, heating, and transport.

Decarbonising energy is not just about changing how we power our homes and businesses - it is fundamental to protecting the natural environment. Moving away from fossil fuels reduces air pollution, improves water and soil quality, and helps safeguard biodiversity by mitigating climate change impacts. The Energy Strategy is being implemented through annual Action Plans, driving the transition to renewable heat and power. Careful use of natural resources such as wind, solar, and geothermal heat will be critical to this transition.

The Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 reinforces this ambition with a legally binding target: at least 80% of electricity consumption in NI must come from renewable sources by 2030. Achieving this will require expanding renewable generation and upgrading the grid to handle higher levels of clean energy.

Delivering renewable heat through low-carbon technologies will further reduce reliance on fossil fuels, cutting emissions that harm ecosystems and human health. With heat accounting for around 43% of NI's total final energy consumption, consumers must be equipped with the right information and advice to actively participate in the energy transition.

Links to Other Strategic Drivers

There are links to the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 and the UK wide Climate Change Act 2008. Links with **SEO 6**. Links with EIP **Theme 16** Productive & Sustainably Used Seas **Action 16E By 2030: Support the development of offshore renewable energy while protecting our marine environment.**



Actions and Targets

Table 13. Future Agricultural Policy Actions

Action Number	Action	Status
14A	Develop an action plan to deliver at least 1GW of offshore wind from 2030.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
14B	Develop and commence delivery of a geothermal demonstrator project.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
14C	Develop and commence delivery of low carbon heat demonstrator projects.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
14D	Launch an energy decarbonisation information, advice, and support service to consumers.	Progressing to new timeline

There are 4 actions within this theme, and all are under DfE ownership.

Achievements

The action plan to deliver at least 1GW of offshore wind from 2030 was developed, consulted on, and [The Offshore Renewable Energy Action Plan](#) was published on the DfE Website in February 2025.

The action to develop and commence delivery of a geothermal demonstrator project has been completed ([GeoEnergy NI](#)).

The Development and delivery of low carbon heat demonstrator projects was completed with an outcome published in 2024. A variety of demonstrator projects are ongoing with partner organisations. ([Energy Strategy Action Plan 2022 - Action 15 Report Update](#)).

Challenges and Delays

Following a public consultation on an energy ‘one stop shop’ in 2023, progress has focused on information and advice rather than the service as a whole. DfE has recently established a Consumer Engagement Working Group (CEWG), chaired by the Consumer Council NI, to bring together key stakeholders to coordinate and support energy consumer awareness, understanding, and education during the energy transition.



Future Focus

Delivery of the Energy Strategy will continue to accelerate decarbonisation across the energy sector, supporting NI to meet the 2030, 2040, and 2050 targets set out in the Climate Change Act. Actions to reduce energy-related emissions will continue to be implemented through annual Energy Strategy Action Plans, providing strong governance and accountability for continuous progress. These plans will remain closely aligned with energy-related policies and proposals in the draft CAP, ensuring that short-term actions contribute to achieving five-year carbon budgets and long-term net zero goals. By maintaining this structured approach, NI can deliver a coordinated transition away from fossil fuels and toward a cleaner, more sustainable energy system.

15. Productive & Sustainably Used Seas

Overview

Theme 15 is central to the EIP, it aims to ensure that marine resources are used productively while safeguarding the long-term health and resilience of the marine environment. This is achieved through science-based fisheries management, marine planning, and support for the blue economy, all underpinned by statutory requirements and regular progress reviews.

This theme directly delivers on **SEO 4** and also supports and is interdependent with **SEO 1** e.g. water quality objectives for aquaculture (**Action 15H**) and links to agri-environment policy and wastewater infrastructure. **SEO 3** e.g. actions to restore fish stocks and protect marine habitats. **SEO 6** e.g., supporting offshore renewables (**Action 15E**) and climate adaptation for coastal habitats (**Action 15G**).

Links to Other Strategic Drivers

This work is closely aligned with broader strategic drivers such as the Fisheries Act 2020 and UK JFS: Statutory basis for developing and implementing FMPs for both offshore and inshore stocks. The NI Marine Plan: **Action 15B** aligns marine spatial planning with climate and energy policy, and the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. The Offshore Renewable Energy Policy is also a strategic driver. Annual International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) advice (offshore) and Agri-Food & Biosciences Institute (AFBI) assessments (inshore) also underpin management decisions and FMP development.



Actions and Targets

Table 15. Productive & Sustainably Used Sea

Action Number	Action	Status
15A	By 2030: Ensure that all fish stocks are recovered to and maintained at levels that can produce their maximum sustainable yield (MSY), within constraints of climate change.	Progressing to EIP target
15B	By December 2024: Publish an adopted Marine Plan for NI.	Progressing to new timeline
15C	By November 2025, review and report on the UK JFS and FMPs in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Fisheries Act 2020.	Progressing EIP target to new timeline
15D	By December 2024: develop & consult on FMPs for NI Inshore and Irish Sea Demersal & Pelagic stocks.	Progressing to new timeline
15E	By 2030: Support the development of offshore renewable energy while protecting our marine environment.	Progressing to EIP target
15F	Implementation of DAERA funding programmes to support sustainable growth of the blue economy, transition to a low carbon blue economy and the protection and enhancement of blue carbon habitats and the wider marine environment.	Progressing to EIP target
15G	Ongoing evaluation of climate change scenarios and understanding of potential impacts to coastal habitats, fisheries, and aquaculture, including adaptation actions required.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
15H	Delivery of water quality objectives to support the aquaculture industry.	Progressing to new timeline

This theme comprises of eight actions (**15A-15H**), which fall into two broad categories.

Actions 15A, 15C, 15D Sustainable Fisheries Management - developing and implementing FMP for Irish Sea pelagic, demersal, and non-quota shellfish stocks and statutory reporting on progress.

Actions 15B, 15E, 15F, 15G, 15H enabling Policy and Environmental Conditions - marine planning, supporting offshore renewables, funding for blue economy growth, climate adaptation, and water quality improvements for aquaculture. These actions collectively address



stock sustainability, marine spatial planning, climate adaptation, and economic development, ensuring that marine resource use is both productive and environmentally responsible.

Not all actions proceeded at the same pace, and work was prioritised around statutory deadlines, critical path dependencies, and evidence updates. The highest priority (statutory and time bound delivery) was given to FMPs for Irish Sea pelagic, Irish Sea demersal and NI non-quota shellfish. Pre consultation drafting and consultation planning has been progressed to meet the statutory publication date of 31 December 2026.

The JFS/statutory review and reporting was also prioritised. Preparatory work, drafting, and approvals were sequenced from August to October 2025 to meet the November 2025 duty. The report will contain actions up until end of November 2025 but will be published in April 2026 - this is a UK wide report. Legal/statutory deadlines and compliance risk dictated the need to prioritise these areas. FMP duties under the Fisheries Act 2020 and the JFS (**Actions 15A, 15C, 15D**), and Marine Plan adoption milestones (**Action 15B**) carried the most immediate compliance exposure.

Publishing FMPs is foundational to achieving MSY recovery/maintenance by 2030 and to implementing evidence led measures in fisheries (**Actions 15A, 15D**). Evidence signals requiring a timely response to 2025 ICES updates (e.g. herring advice reissue; whiting benchmark) and AFBI assessments shaped short term management options and justified keeping FMP work at the front of the queue. Where drafting/engagement was already well advanced, e.g. FMPs, it was more efficient to maintain momentum rather than reallocate scarce specialist capacity mid-stream.

Workplans are in place for constrained areas. Additional resourcing plans is being progressed to support the delivery of actions. Detailed plans have been developed for high level commitments.

Achievements

Notable progress has been made in several areas. The FMPs have advanced (**Actions 15A, 15D**), drafting and pre consultation development for Irish Sea pelagic, Irish Sea demersal and NI Non-Quota Shellfish FMPs have progressed, informed by 2025 ICES advice (e.g. cod zero catch; reduced advised catches for plaice/haddock/sole; whiting benchmark) and AFBI inshore assessments (evidence on crab/lobster/scallop status). These FMPs are the primary mechanism to restore/maintain stocks at sustainable levels, delivering the most direct environmental gains in the theme.

The statutory JFS review is on track (**Action 15C**). Evidence gathering, drafting and approvals have been sequenced to meet the reporting period to the November 2025 duty, strengthening



accountability and adaptive management across NI fisheries policy. Targeted evidence improvements to close data gaps have been a focus (supports **Actions 15A,15D**). Proposals include recreational crab/lobster registration and catch reporting and inshore monitoring for <12m vessels, enabling more precise management and enforcement while maximising limited analytical capacity. DfE also published a public consultation on the SEA for the OREAP and identification of recommended renewable energy zones.

Challenges and Delays

Despite these achievements, several challenges have impacted progress. Capacity and resourcing issues may hinder ability to meet key milestones, particularly in the development of FMPs (**Actions 15A, 15D, linked 15C**). The benefits of delivering the FMPs will be to provide a primary mechanism to restore/maintain commercial stocks at MSY, protect ecosystems and the fishing economy, and clear compliance with the Fisheries Act 2020/JFS. The original statutory dates for publishing FMPs have changed. Amendments to the statutory UK JFS have moved the statutory dates for publishing to 31 December 2026. The EIP has a target date of 31 December 2024 based on original JFS targets. Internal staff reallocation to Sea Fisheries Policy and a bid for further staff resource is underway to mitigate a risk of delay. Pre-consultation drafts have advanced using the latest evidence.

Evidence gaps in the inshore fisheries sector (data to underpin FMP measures) also poses a challenge. To address the absence of recreational catch data for crab/lobster lack of positional data for <12m vessels in NI inshore waters, policy, systems, and funding are required.

In October 2025 DAERA launched a consultation on additional measures in regard to the recreational fishing for crabs and lobsters. These measures included proposals for a registration system, the tagging of pots/creels and catch reporting.

DAERA has agreed on a policy which will require all under 12 metre fishing vessels to have vessel monitoring systems operating when conducting fishing activity in NI waters. The successful roll out of this policy, which is ready to move to design and implementation phase, will be crucial in addressing the spatial evidence gap that currently exists for many fishing vessels in the NI fleet. Closing this gap would allow for higher confidence in stock status through targeted management and evidence-based policy for shellfish species of economic importance to the local fleet such as crabs, lobsters, and scallops. It will also provide for more effective enforcement and better evaluation of FMP outcomes.

Action 15B The Marine Plan Energy policy is being updated to align with requirements of the Energy Act 2022 and being prepared for the NI Executive and Secretary of State (SoS) with agreement by December 2025. The Marine Plan for NI remains in draft to ensure it is consistent



with the requirements of the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. The draft Marine Plan has been considered by the AERA Committee and will be published once agreed by the NI Executive and SoS for the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra).

Future Focus

Current indicators show no clear improvement, with offshore stocks remaining under pressure and inshore results are mixed. To achieve better outcomes, it's essential to prioritise finalising FMPs to enable stronger, evidence-based management and to incorporate additional evidence once available, e.g. inshore monitoring, recreational catch reporting, for more targeted action and integrate climate adaptation into fisheries controls, given rising sea temperatures. Improvement is needed, especially offshore. The focus should remain on statutory enablers, better data, and adapting to climate and water quality challenges.

Key actions to commence or accelerate would be consultation and publication of FMPs for offshore and inshore stocks to move forward, with public consultation by March 2026 and publication by December 2026. Implementation of inshore monitoring and recreational catch reporting is planned, improving data for management.

DAERA's intent is to progress consultation on the environmental assessment and use of strategic compensation measures for offshore wind projects.

16. Producer Responsibility

Overview

EPR is aligned with the environmental principle of 'polluter pays'. This means producers of products are made financially responsible for those products right through to the post-use stage. This can result in a significant transfer of costs from the public purse for waste management, to the producer.

PR aligns with **SEO 4** as it supports resource efficiency (using resources in a sustainable manner while minimising the impacts on the environment). Resource efficiency encourages better product design, reduction in resources used to make products and an increase in a product's recyclability so materials can be used again. It also encourages the reuse and repair of products such as electricals. Resource efficiency supports the reduction in energy consumption used across the different stages in a product's life cycle.

PR includes various product types which are used widely across different economic sectors e.g. packaging used in agriculture and marine environments. It also supports the reduction of SUPs as it encourages products to become more recyclable. Also under PR, the introduction



of the [DRS](#) in NI from October 2027 will see single use drinks containers collected through this system increase the recyclability of these items. The introduction of DRS will also aid in the reduction in littering as drinks containers will have a monetary benefit to the consumers when returned through the system. This reduction in litter aligns with “Reducing Single-Use Plastic” and benefits the NI’s environment including marine.

PR also aligns with **SEO 5** as it encourages the reuse and repair of products and materials used to make them and aids the achievement of increased recycling rates as obligated producers will pay less fees for products they place on the market that are more recyclable. Further reform of the current PR system for Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) is planned for 2026/27. DRS will also contribute to increased recycling levels for in scope drinks containers.

Links to Other Strategic Drivers

PR supports increased recyclability of products and is linked to The Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 draft CAP which includes a requirement to recycle at least 70% of waste by 2030. It is also linked to the [Waste and Contaminated Land \(NI\) Order 1997 \(WCLO\)](#) which contains a target of 65% recycling of municipal waste by 2035 and interim targets of 55% by 2025 and 60% by 2030. Although both documents are yet to be published, PR will be central to both the new Resources and Waste Management Strategy for NI and the forthcoming CE Strategy, with ongoing collaboration to ensure alignment with the EIP targets and actions.

Actions and Targets

Table 16. Producer Responsibility Actions

Action Number	Action	Status
16A	By March 2024: Contribute to development of UK wide consultation on reform of PR for Waste Electrical & Electronic Equipment.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
16B	By 2031: Increase overall recycling of packaging to 76%.	Progressing to EIP target
16C	From 2025: Phase in new UK wide EPR Scheme for packaging.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
16D	From 2025: at least 80% of full net costs of packaging contributed by producers.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action



Action Number	Action	Status
16E	From 2027: Introduce a DRS for Drink Containers.	Progressing to EIP target
16F	By end of 2025: Work in partnership with other UK administrations to undertake stakeholder engagement and evidence gathering for End-of-Life Vehicles.	Progressing to new timeline
16G	BY 2030: Increase recycling of drinks containers from 70% to 90%.	Progressing to EIP target

There are 7 actions contained within this theme (see table 16). All are completed/BAU actions or progressing to the EIP timeline, with the exception of **Action 16F**.

Achievements

There have been three main achievements in the PR theme.

Legislation was introduced for pEPR with [The Producer Responsibility Obligations \(Packaging and Packaging Waste\) Regulations](#) being made in December 2024 enabling the scheme to launch. The scheme administrator for pEPR, PackUK, was appointed in January 2025 and the pEPR scheme went live in April 2025. Payments to district councils were confirmed for 2025, based on fees collected from obligated producers.

Legislation was also introduced for DRS, which facilitated the subsequent appointment of a Deposit Management Organisation (DMO) to begin the operation delivery of the scheme to an agreed implementation date of October 2027.

A UK wide SI amending the existing WEEE Regulations came into force in August 2025 ([The Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment \(Amendment, etc.\) Regulations 2025](#)), delivering two key WEEE priorities, namely regulation of online marketplaces and the creation of a WEEE category specific to vapes.

Challenges and Delays

At present, there are no notable concerns or delays for the PR Theme, although it is acknowledged that more work is required as the schemes develop to ensure delivery against their primary objectives.

DAERA continues to work in partnership with other UK administrations on future approaches to End-of-Life Vehicles (ELVs), including future legislative proposals which could include certain waste provisions on the treatment of ELVs. Further consideration will be needed on the impact on any obligations placed on industry and the regulatory impact in NI.



Future Focus

Now that the implementation phase of pEPR has commenced, fees will be collected from obligated producers and payments will be made to councils. Future development will enhance the scheme performance, helping deliver further environmental and economic benefits. This will include the introduction of fee modulation, based on a Recycling Assessment Methodology to incentivise the use of recyclable packaging, and greater analysis of the performance of councils in managing packaging waste to ensure objectives are being met.

The appointed DMO will continue the operational phase of DRS establishing the necessary facilities, infrastructure, and logistics for successful implementation.

17. Reducing Single-Use Plastic (SUP)

Overview

Reducing SUP aligns with **SEO 4** as the aim is to reduce the consumption of common plastic products which are used only once and then discarded, often as litter. This theme also aligns with all the other **SEOs** as actions will improve land and water quality, reduce litter, promote a CE, and reduce emissions from production.

Links to Other Strategic Drivers

Although both documents are yet to be published, the new Resources and Waste Management Strategy for NI and the CE Strategy, will be added as future strategic drivers for the reduction in SUP. There is ongoing collaboration in the development of those strategies to ensure alignment with the EIP targets and actions. The Windsor Framework is also a driver for legislation as there is a requirement to transpose articles 2-7, 14 and 17 of the [Single Use Plastics Directive \(EU\) 2019/904](#). Two actions have been identified that will contribute to the achievement of this theme:

Action 1: Implementation of the SUP Directive

Action 2: Development of a Plastic Pollution Plan for NI (PPP NI)



Actions and Targets

Table 17. Reducing Single-Use Plastic Actions

Action Number	Action	Status
17A	By December 2024: Legislate for beverage containers and bottles to have lids and caps that will remain attached to reduce commonly littered bottle caps.	Progressing to new timeline
17B	By December 2024: Prepare regulations to enable the NI Assembly to restrict the sale or supply of ten common single-use plastic items.	Progressing to new timeline
17C	By December 2024: Prepare regulations to enable the NI Assembly to implement clearer labelling of products that contain SUP to allow customers to make informed choices.	Progressing to new timeline
17D	By December 2024: Prepare regulations to enable the NI Assembly to set a requirement for 25% average recycled content in PET bottles by 2025 and 30% average recycled content in all beverage bottles by 2030 to reduce the amount of virgin plastic that is used in manufacture.	Progressing to new timeline
17E	By December 2024: Develop a proposal for a consumption reduction plan and targets to be achieved by 2026 for SUP takeaway cups and food containers to reduce unnecessary waste & tackle plastic pollution.	Progressing to new timeline
17F	By October 2024: A consultation on the Plan to Eliminate Plastic Pollution has been developed and is currently progressing through internal review ahead of submission to Minister for consideration on the way forward.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
17G	By December 2024: Introduce NI legislation to restrict the supply and sale of wet wipes containing plastic to help tackle plastic & micro-plastic pollution.	Progressing to new timeline

There are 7 actions within this theme (see Table 17). One action (**17F**) has been completed, and the rest are progressing, albeit to new timelines.

Achievements

Draft legislation has been developed to restrict the sale and supply of wet wipes containing plastic, with NI Executive approval confirmed.



A Plan to Eliminate Plastic has been reviewed by the DAERA Minister, and a new working title of [The Plastic Pollution Plan for NI \(PPP NI\)](#) has been approved. The PPP NI was issued for public consultation on 2 July 2025 and closed on 24 September 2025. Responses received will be considered in the development of a final plan, which will be published in due course.

Challenges and Delays

The SUP Directive implementation will deliver a positive environmental benefit for NI and contribute to a CE. Work has not progressed as planned due to legislative challenges; however, a DP is in place to progress. A consumption reduction plan for takeaway SUP cups will be implemented once the legislation is in place.

Work is progressing on the introduction of legislation at a slower pace due to legislative challenges, though not yet at an implementation stage a workplan is in place to deliver.

Future Focus

Legislation to restrict the sale and supply of wet wipes containing plastic will be laid, with the coming into force date set to provide an 18-month transition period to allow retailers time to deplete existing stock and adopt plastic-free alternatives many of which are available on the market.

Metrics are not yet available, however, while legislation is progressing, work will also be taken forward to develop suitable indicators, with a focus on consumption reduction.

Work to finalise the PPP NI will continue. The responses received from the public consultation will be analysed to produce a Summary of Responses, which will in turn be considered in the development of the final plan.

18. Chemicals

Overview

Theme 18 has five EIP actions which sit within **SEO 4**. These mainly relate to commitments under the Stockholm Convention on POPs and PCBs. There are also actions which require collaboration with staff in the Environment Agency for England relating to development of a prioritisation and early warning system for chemicals of emerging concern (PEWS), the Chemicals Regulatory Strategy Tool (CREST), and the UK Chemical Strategy.

Links to Other Strategic Drivers

The actions under this theme are linked to targets originating from the Stockholm Convention on POPs. The Stockholm Convention is a global treaty with an objective to protect human health and the environment from POPs.



Actions and Targets

Table 18. Chemicals Actions

Action Number	Action	Status
18A	To fulfil commitments under the Stockholm Convention on POPs as outlined in the UK’s most recent National Implementation Plan.	Progressing to EIP target
18B	Eliminate the use PCBs by 2025, in line with commitments under the Stockholm Convention.	Progressing to new timeline
18C	To work with staff in the Environment Agency for England on the developed of a prioritisation and early warning system for chemicals of emerging concern (PEWS) and the Chemicals Regulatory Strategy Tool (CREST), which extends to NI.	Not progressing - workplan not developed
18D	Substantially increase the amount of POPs material being destroyed or irreversibly transformed by 2030, to make sure there are negligible emissions to the environment.	Progressing to new timeline
18E	Contribute to the development of the UK Chemical Strategy to ensure it takes account of NI’s unique position in relation to chemical legislation included in Annex II of the Windsor Framework.	Not progressing - workplan in place

There are 5 actions (**18A-18E**) in **Theme 18** (see Table 18) and responsibility for these lies with DAERA.

Achievements

The main achievement within **Theme 18** is the introduction of the Environmental Protection (Disposal of PCBs and other Dangerous Substances) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2025 which came into effect in June 2025. This has allowed for the registration of qualifying pieces of equipment which are required to be disposed of by the end of 2025. Further work has commenced to identify holders of Perfluorooctanoic Acid (PFOA) containing firefighting foams, who will be inspected during the next year and provided with advice and guidance for compliant methods of disposal. DAERA is also continuing to fulfil its reporting requirements for EU POPs Regulations.

An online PCB registration system went live in July 2025, which allows holders of qualifying PCB equipment to register them with DAERA. DAERA staff will engage directly with



registered holders to eliminate the use of PCBs in equipment by the end of 2025 and ensure the environmentally sound waste management of liquids containing PCB and equipment contaminated by PCB by 2028.

Challenges and Delays

Collaboration with staff in the Environment Agency for England on the development of PEWS for chemicals of emerging concern and the CREST (**Action 18C**) is ongoing as resources allow.

Work is ongoing on identifying the best approach to substantially increase the amount of POPs material being destroyed or irreversibly transformed by 2030, and a comprehensive dataset is expected to be available next year. This should allow for a wider ranged reporting in year 2. NIEA Industrial Pollution and Radiochemical Inspectorate (IPRI) hold a Stockpile Inventory of PFOA Fire Fighting Foam, however the ban of use in NI does not take effect until December 2025. The waste POPs team is in the process of tracking the movement of PFOA Firefighting Foam, listed on the Stockpile Inventory, for disposal at the end-destination. As this process is not yet completed, we do not hold a validated or complete dataset for this material. The registry for PCBs is in the process of being compiled by IPRI as holders are required to register by 31st October 2025 and the ban takes effect from 31st December 2025.

Progress has not been made in relation to the development of the UK Chemical Strategy (**Action 18E**) as this work is currently paused by Defra.

Future Focus

Given the status of the UK chemical strategy, it may be necessary to readdress how this target will be progressed. For **Action 18A** further progress should be reported on next year regarding identification of holders of PFOA containing firefighting foams along with guidance issued and potential their disposal. Elimination of the use of PCBs by 2025 (**Action 18B**) should be completed within the next reporting period.



19. Antimicrobial & Disinfectant Contamination

Overview

Antimicrobial & Disinfectant Contamination is within **SEO 4, Sustainable Production & Consumption on Land and at Sea**. This theme is aligned to **SEO 1 Theme 1 Excellent Air, Water & Land Quality; Theme 2. Water Resources: Quality & Quantity, and Theme 3. Marine and Coastal Water Resources: Quality & Quantity**.

Drug-resistant infections arise when the microbes (including bacteria, fungi, viruses, and parasites) that cause them change over time, developing the ability to resist the drugs designed to kill them. The result of this genetic adaptation is that many antimicrobial medicines - like antibiotics - are becoming less effective at treating certain infectious illnesses. AMR is accelerated when microbes are exposed to antimicrobials and certain other 'resistance-driving' chemicals such as pesticides and heavy metals. When AMR emerges the resistance genes can spread between microbes. Resistant microbes can spread between humans, animals and through our shared environment, impacting the health of humans and animals.

Links to Other Strategic Drivers

UK and NI AMR actions are directed by the UK 5-year national action plan for AMR [Confronting Antimicrobial Resistance 2024 to 2029](#). The UK's second 5-year national action plan setting out ambitions and actions for the next 5 years in support of the 20-year vision of ensuring AMR will be controlled and contained by 2040. DAERA and the Department of Health (DoH) have produced a NI specific AMR Implementation Plans to deliver NI actions in line with UK National Action Plan 9 strategic outcomes organised under 4 themes (**Theme 1 - Reducing the need for, and unintentional exposure to, antimicrobials, Theme 2 - Optimising the use of antimicrobials, Theme 3 - Investing in innovation, supply and access, Theme 4 - Being a good global partner**). One Health (OH) Action will be taken across all sectors (human health, animal health, agriculture, and the environment).

The approach has been to select the available AMR indicators from AMR monitoring data as an indirect measure of Antimicrobial & Disinfectant Contamination which has some limitations. This makes comment on environmental improvement a challenge as any improvement in AMR levels is likely to be long term rather than immediate. The selected target of NI AMR monitoring has been developing since 2021 and is thus only providing a baseline in 2023. UK monitoring has been ongoing for ten years and is just starting to show declines in AMR trends as sales and usage has also declined across most veterinary sectors.



AMR Statutory Obligations - The Windsor Framework requires NI to monitor and report on AMR in zoonotic and commensal bacteria (2021-2027) under Commission

Implementing Decision (EU) 2020/1729 and to collect and report veterinary antimicrobial sales and on farm use data (2023 onwards) under Regulation (EU) 2019/6 veterinary medicinal products.

Actions and Targets

Table 19. Antimicrobial & Disinfectant Contamination Actions

Action Number	Action	Status
19A	Monitor AMR through 300 annual abattoir samples and passive surveillance.	Progressing to EIP target
19B	Development of AMR digital platform with public facing elements by 2024.	Not progressing - workplan in place
19C	Collect AM Sales and Usage data from 2023 for specified food producing animals: dairy, beef, sheep, poultry, and pigs.	Not progressing - workplan not developed
19D	Develop whole genome sequencing capacity in AFBI by August 2024.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action

There are four actions within this theme (see Table 19). Responsibility for these actions lies with DAERA.

Achievements

Actions 19A and 19D have been prioritised, whole genome sequencing has been required to investigate and determine the risk posed from emerging AMR of public and animal and health concern.

Challenges and Delays

Theme 19 has been impacted by a lack of resource and conflicting priorities. **Action 19B** on the development of an AMR digital platform with public facing elements has been put on hold due to a lack of resource. **Action 19C** regarding collection of Antimicrobial (AM) Sales and Usage data from 2023 for specified food producing animals: dairy, beef, sheep, poultry and pigs have been delayed as Medicines is a reserved matter and is impacted by ongoing UK and EU negotiations around implementation of Regulation (EU) 2019/6 veterinary medicinal products in NI.



The UK veterinary sector has used Sales and Usage monitoring to drive reductions in AM use across a number of sectors and thus reduce environmental AM contamination. Reducing exposure to antimicrobials is a key method of minimizing AMR development. NI Data on AM Sales and Use as required by the EU across all animal sectors by 2029 would provide quantitative assessment of AM stewardship across all the different animal sectors and allow direction and monitoring the effectiveness of mitigation actions against AMR. This would be expected to drive usage reductions and thus reduce environmental antimicrobial contamination. Discussions are ongoing within the UK to progress implementation of this EU requirement. Policy and Legislative developments are expected in this area during 2026 to allow progress on this target.

Future Focus

The future focus will be on the expansion of indicators with a focus on direct antimicrobial contamination indicators through the inclusion of NIEA Antibiotic monitoring under the WFD Surveillance Programme. There will also be development of NI AM sales and use data indicators that may be used when data recording commences to monitor the existing target. This additional indirect measure of potential **Theme 19. Antimicrobial & Disinfectant Contamination** would be a useful addition to the current more long-term indirect AMR indicator.

Looking to the future, the next cycle of UK Responsible Use of Medicine in Agriculture (RUMA) Targets (Target Task Force (TTF) 3) will be developed and launched in November 2025. The TTF has brought together to define this third cycle, evidence and insights gained over the last decade that will be used to help further evolve the new set of targets. These TTF targets and Companion Animal targets will be included as the new animal medicine use targets in the UK Antimicrobial Resistance National Action Plan (AMR NAP) 2024-2029 to address AMR through reducing antibiotic use in all animal sectors.

Conclusion For SEO 4:

Significant progress has been made across SEO 4, with achievements across agriculture, energy, marine resource management, PR, and pollution reduction reflecting a commitment to sustainability. Within agriculture, the roll-out of a range of new actions and enabling schemes marks a major step toward improving environmental sustainability and resilience in farming. In the energy sector, the publication of the OREAP and delivery of geothermal and low-carbon heat demonstrator projects shows strong progress toward decarbonisation and energy security.

The development of the PPP NI marks a key step toward reducing plastic waste. In parallel, legislative frameworks for pEPR and the DRS have been established, reinforcing CE principles.



Marine initiatives have advanced through the development of FMPs and the statutory review of the JFS, informed by robust scientific evidence and targeted data improvements. These actions will enable sustainable stock management and enhance accountability across the sector. Progress has also been made in chemical regulation, with new legislation enabling the elimination of PCBs by the end of 2025 and steps taken to manage POPs. In relation to work on AMR, whole genome sequencing capacity has been established, supporting improved monitoring and risk assessment.

However, there have been challenges which have impacted progress across **SEO 4**. The FwN Package is not being rolled out as quickly as planned across all land types in NI due to resource challenges and delays in business case development. Progress has improved over recent months and plans are in place to build on the transition scheme that opened in 2025 to increase habitat and improve biodiversity. Capacity and resourcing issues may hinder ability to meet key milestones in **Theme 15**, particularly in the development of FMPs. Internal staff reallocation and a bid for further staff resource is underway to mitigate a risk of delay. Evidence gaps in the inshore fisheries sector also continue to pose a challenge. Work has not progressed as planned on SUP Directive implementation due to legislative challenges. Resources have been put in place to move this forward. The development of an AMR digital platform with public facing elements has been put on hold due to a lack of resource.

Despite these challenges, the achievements across **SEO 4** provide a strong foundation for advancing environmental protection and resource efficiency. Continued implementation of these measures will support long-term environmental resilience and the transition to a sustainable future. Continued collaboration, innovation, and investment will be essential to ensure NI transitions to a resilient, low-carbon economy while safeguarding its natural environment for future generations.



SEO 5 - Zero Waste & Highly Developed Circular Economy





SEO 5 - Zero Waste & Highly Developed Circular Economy

Introduction

NI is committed to transitioning towards a circular economy (CE, an economic system that values resources and reduces waste. **SEO 5** focuses on eliminating unnecessary waste and embedding CE principles across society, industry, and government. This outcome recognises that our current linear model of production and consumption, where materials are used once then discarded, is unsustainable. Instead, it promotes a system where products and materials are reused, repaired, recycled, and kept in circulation for as long as possible, and nature is regenerated.

The EIP sets out a comprehensive framework of actions and targets to support this transition. These actions are closely linked to other SEOs. Reducing waste and improving land cleanliness and promoting a circular bioeconomy directly supports air, water, and land quality (**SEO 1**), while promoting resource efficiency in sustainable production and consumption complements efforts under **SEO 4**. Minimising pollution and waste also contribute to biodiversity protection (**SEO 3**), and reducing emissions from waste management supports climate mitigation goals under **SEO 6**.

Through **SEO 5**, DAERA and DfE aim to create a resource-efficient society in which waste is minimised, materials are valued, and CE principles are embedded in everyday life. The goal is to support innovation, reduce environmental pressures, and build a more resilient and inclusive economy for future generations.

20. Circular Economy

Overview

The CE theme is a key part of **SEO 5**, which aims to eliminate waste and achieve a highly developed CE. This theme focuses on transforming how resources are produced, consumed, and reused, with the goal of reducing environmental impact and supporting sustainable economic growth.

Reporting on this theme has been based around the development of the CE strategy, which is currently being finalised. This theme was originally divided into 4 subcategories-**Actions 20A-20D** for reporting purposes based on the draft CE Strategy. The CE Strategy recognises the need for more responsible and sustainable production and consumption practices, which will help reduce emissions across industry and society.



The transition to a CE will not only be measured through our two indicators, material footprint and carbon footprint but also through multiple indicators, such as waste to landfill and others which are currently under consideration and development.

Links to Other Strategic Drivers

The CE theme aligns closely with the waste management theme of **SEO 5** and its ambitions to reduce waste, increase recycling, introduce a DRS, and the potential ban of biodegradable waste to landfill. Delivery of these actions will support greater circularity of resources and will help change the behaviours of citizens and businesses, adopting more circular practices of production and consumption. Other strategic drivers such as the draft CAP and waste reduction targets will be important in transitioning to a CE.

Actions and Targets

Table 20. Circular Economy Actions

Action Number	Action	Status
20A	By 2050 we will have reduced our annual material footprint to 8 tonnes per person.	Progressing to EIP target
20B	Raise awareness of CE and increase circular thinking.	Progressing to EIP target
20C	Draft CE strategy outlines 12 proposals for change which will create more sustainable production and consumption patterns in NI. (*Exact number will be reflected in the final strategy)	Progressing to EIP target (Proposals for Change have been refined to 10)
20D	Examine options for a delivery unit, in partnership with DAERA, to translate the proposals for change into action plans.	Not progressing - workplan not developed

There are 4 actions within this theme which are all owned by the Department for the Economy (DfE).

Achievements

Progress has been made across several actions. Awareness-raising efforts have been particularly successful, with new research publications and updates to the DfE website helping to build public understanding of CE principles. The Continuous Household Survey for 2025/26 now includes CE questions, and headline carbon footprint estimates were published in August 2025 and material footprint estimates published in December 2025. DfE also engaged



with the Consumer Council for NI to better understand consumer attitudes to the CE. These developments support **Action 20B** and contribute to building a robust evidence base.

Action 20A has a long-term target date and the strategy acknowledges difficulties in measuring progress given current gaps in data. It also caveats the target, recognising the material footprint (MF) is likely to increase in the short to medium term because of the resource needs to support the energy transition and upgrades in infrastructure. It could take 5-10 years before the MF starts to decrease, so DfE is looking at developing additional indicators and considering targets to measure progress in the short to medium term. For **Action 20C**, as the draft strategy has been developed, this has been refined from 12 to 10 proposals for change.

Challenges and Delays

Developing the CE Strategy (**Action 20C**) has required significant time and resources and is subject to Ministerial and NI Executive approval. **Action 20D** is not progressing, it was included in the draft CE strategy but has been removed from the latest version. To secure collaboration across all NI Executive departments, DfE is currently considering an alternative approach involving the development of departmental CE pathways and implementation plans, along with establishing an advisory panel of stakeholders. DAERA has separate monitoring arrangements in place for their CE related actions.

Future Focus

Given the macroeconomic nature of both material and carbon footprint and the scale of system change required to improve the metrics, progress is not going to be seen in the short term. Therefore, it is necessary to explore and develop additional indicators which will help to track progress in the short to medium term, which is currently being progressed.

Action 20A: Based on estimates produced by the University of Leeds (UoL), published by DfE in December 2025, NI's MF was estimated at 20.6 tonnes per capita (tpc) in 2022, representing an increase from 18.3 tpc in 2021. This increase follows a recent low point of 16.2 tpc recorded in 2020, which coincided with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Action 20B: Subject to successful completion of the approval process including NI Executive, DfE will publish the CE Strategy. It will also develop and publish a CE animation on various platforms including social media to help increase circular thinking and will continue to update their website on the CE.

Action 20C: This high-level target relates to publication of the CE Strategy, which is currently being progressed. DfE is also progressing towards delivery/implementation including in areas relating to public procurement, potential clusters, skills development, and potential sources



of funding. DAERA is also progressing areas related to the resources and waste management elements.

Action 20D: This is not progressing. DfE is currently considering an alternative approach involving the development of departmental CE pathways and implementation plans, along with establishing an advisory panel of stakeholders. In the absence of the above DAERA continue to progress and monitor the actions within the draft CE Strategy for which they are responsible. This is reflected in the reporting against waste management, PR and reducing single-use plastic in this report.

21. Waste Management

Overview

Waste management is a central component of **SEO 5** of the EIP, which aims to achieve zero waste and a highly developed CE. DfE plans to publish a CE Strategy for NI once approved by the NI Executive which has a key focus on eliminating waste and promoting sustainable production and consumption practices. This theme focuses on reducing the volume of waste generated, increasing recycling rates, and improving the quality of recovered materials. These efforts contribute to reducing GHG emissions, promoting sustainable resource use, and supporting green job creation.

The Waste Management theme includes six key actions, covering strategy development, waste prevention, landfill reduction, and recycling targets. To support this a fair and predictable regulatory environment is necessary, including appropriate waste fees and charges, and having consistent data to both monitor waste and track movement across jurisdictions.

Links to Other Strategic Drivers

This theme is closely linked to other strategic drivers and policy frameworks. It supports the PfG's goals for environmental protection, public health, and economic resilience by reducing emissions and promoting resource efficiency. There is a designated Waste sector within the draft Climate Action Plan, with clear targets in the first carbon budget. Additionally, the theme complements the draft CE Strategy, which seeks to reduce material and carbon footprints and promote sustainable production and consumption practices. Actions such as the potential ban on biodegradable waste to landfill and the development of digital waste tracking systems also align with UK-wide initiatives and regulatory reforms.

These actions are supported by legislative frameworks such as the [Climate Change Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2022](#) and [The Waste and Contaminated Land Order 1997](#) and the approach taken aligns with the PfG and the NICS Corporate Plan's commitment to environmental sustainability and cross-sector collaboration.



The theme also aligns with [DAERA Business Plan 2025/26: Key Pledge 9](#) - We will have published and will be working to implement a new Waste Management Strategy to help build a low carbon CE, and with NIEA Key Priority 1: Environmental Regulation, Protection & Enforcement.

Actions and Targets

Table 21. Waste Management Actions

Action Number	Action	Status
21A	By December 2024: Consult on new Waste Management Strategy to gather views on the future of waste management in NI.	Progressing to new timeline
21B	2024: Launch a consultation on a potential ban on biodegradable waste to landfill to prepare sound options for reducing emissions & furthering climate action.	Progressing to new timeline
21C	Review and revise the current NI Waste Management Plan by 2025.	Progressing to new timeline
21D	Achieve 65% of municipal waste recycled by 2035, with interim targets of 55% by 2025 and 60% by 2030 to protect our environment.	Progressing to EIP target
21E	By 2035, send no more than 10% of municipal waste to landfill to move waste up the waste hierarchy.	Progressing to EIP target
21F	Achieve a 70% recycling rate by 2030.	Progressing to EIP target
21G	From 2027: Introduce a DRS for Drink Containers. (DUPLICATE - Previously reported under SEO 4)	Progressing to EIP target
21H	Complete a review of, and update, current fees & refunds policy for Trans-frontier Shipment of Notifiable Waste	Progressing to new timeline
21I	NI to contribute to meeting Sustainable Development Goal 12.3 - to halve UK per capita food waste by 2030. Measures will include: (1) Work with delivery partners to develop behaviour change campaigns. (2) Continued education & awareness raising initiatives to encourage the removal of as much food waste as possible from residual household waste streams. (3) Continue to work with food redistribution charities to use NI's food surplus to help feed some of the most vulnerable members of society.	Progressing to EIP target



Action Number	Action	Status
21J	Consistent approach to data collection across NI regarding Fly-tipping and illegal waste disposal.	Progressing to new timeline
21K	Scoping of a fly-tipping app to improve data recording.	Progressing to EIP target
21L	Develop process for improved data recording.	Progressing to new timeline

This theme contains 12 actions with ownership shared between DAERA and NIEA (see Table 21). All actions are progressing to their original EIP target dates or now working to an amended timeline.

Achievements

Following completion of the “Rethinking our Resources” public consultation, DAERA has developed a Departmental Response which, once approved by the NI Executive, will be published to set out recommendations for waste collection and recycling reforms in NI, aimed at improving both the quality and quantity of recycling and reducing the volume of residual waste.

The current Waste Management Plan has been reviewed, which has helped inform the new draft Waste Management Strategy, which is nearing completion in preparation for a public consultation.

Through the Household Waste Recycling Collaborative Change Programme (HWRCCP), DAERA continues to provide a funding mechanism for Councils to transform kerbside recycling and household recycling centre infrastructure and services, aimed at improving environmental outcomes and helping to realise the economic potential of recycling. In the last year DAERA provided payments of £811,000 bringing the total funding committed through the programme to £8.262m.

Challenges and Delays

Action 21B: This action has been delayed due to resourcing issues, which have now been resolved to enable this work to move forward to a new timeline.

Action 21H: Transfrontier waste shipment fees is progressing as part of a wider NIEA fee review that is almost complete - any subsequent update of the fees through legislation in 2026 will go beyond the end of the 2025 target date. This action is therefore progressing to a new timeline.



Action 21J: discussions are ongoing to determine the most appropriate approach to address this action.

Action 21K: Initial consideration suggests that the creation of a fly-tipping app would not be feasible, meaning it is unlikely to progress.

Action 21L: has no EIP target date but it is delayed and as a Defra led UK wide project it is now due to be in place by October 2027.

Alongside the Departmental Response, guidance will be provided to local councils, to support implementation of recommendations aimed at establishing a consistent approach, which can improve public messaging. Whilst that has not advanced as hoped, DAERA has funded The Waste and Resources Action Program (WRAP) to carry out various public engagement campaigns alongside district councils to support behavioural change.

Although it is hoped that DAERA recommendations will be implemented through guidance and direct engagement, in collaboration with councils and industry, should legislation be required, this brings further challenges to timelines and increase the risk of failing to meet targets.

Future Focus

There is considerable potential to improve both the quality and quantity of recycling in the non-household municipal (NHM) sector, which refers to businesses, industries, and other non-profit-making organisations.

A consultation on the new Waste Management Strategy is planned, which will help inform the final document, in advance of publication in 2026, subject to Executive approval.

More work is required in consideration of restricting biodegradable waste going to landfill. There are a number of steps to complete, including a public consultation, however it is important that wider impacts are considered, including waste exports and potential infrastructure challenges.

DAERA has commissioned a report looking at waste arising up to 2050, including infrastructure requirements, which is a key concern in relation to treating future waste levels, however, improvements in recycling and reductions in contamination also present opportunities to enhance reprocessing facilities to benefit the CE. The scope for developing consistent information around fly tipping in NI will also be considered. While the target does make specific reference to a fly-tipping app initial work has suggested that this may not be feasible, so in the interests of efficiency, work on that element is unlikely to proceed. However, DAERA will continue work to enhance capabilities in tackling environmental crime.



Tracking waste movements is also critical and work is ongoing across the 4-nations to develop and implement the first phase of mandatory Digital Waste Tracking across the UK.

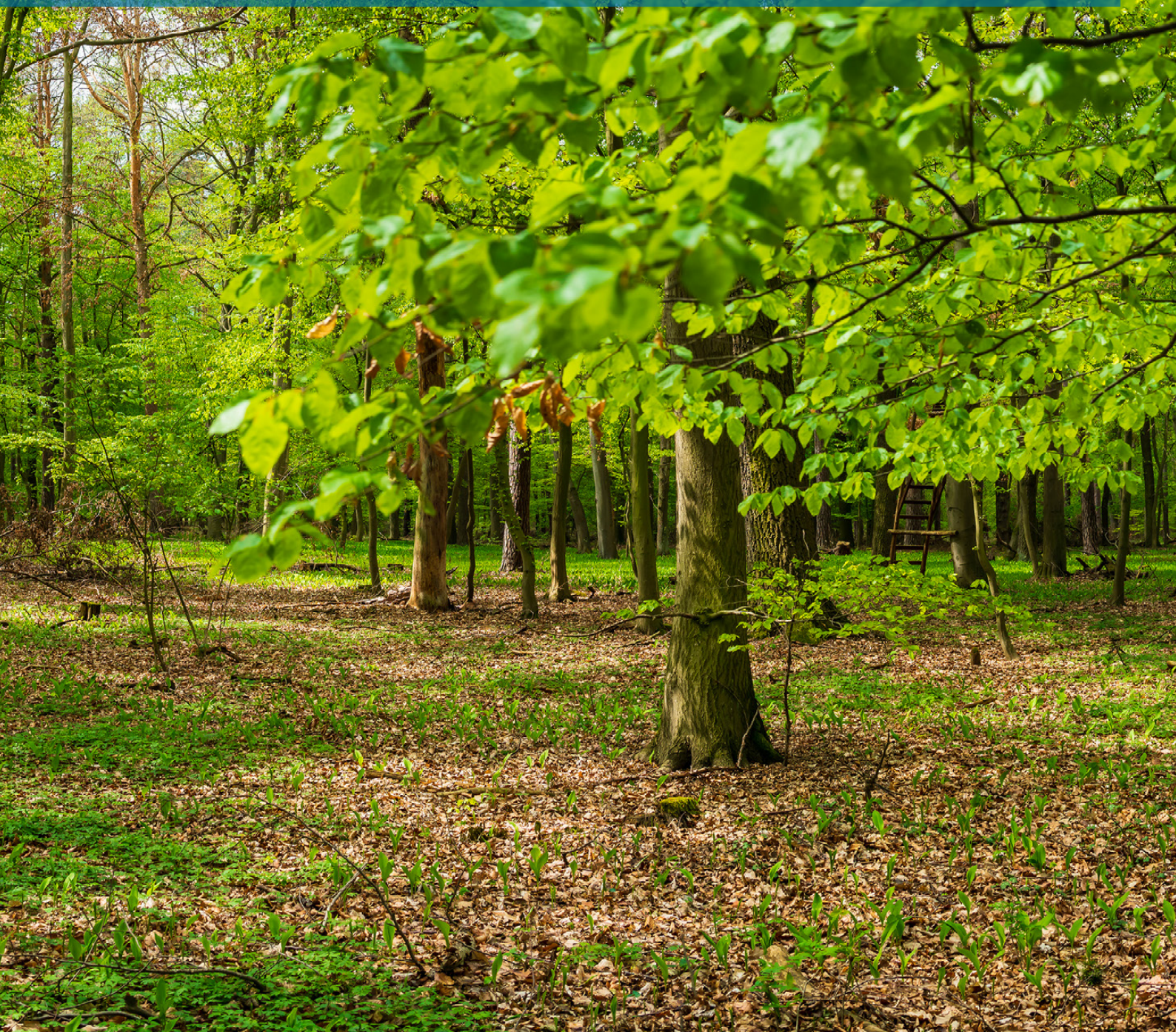
Conclusion For SEO 5:

SEO 5 sets a clear direction for NI's transition to a resource-efficient society. Through the development of the Waste Management Strategy and CE Strategy, efforts are advancing to reduce waste, increase recycling, and embed circular principles across sectors. Progress in the Waste Management theme includes the near completion of The Waste Management Strategy and the Waste Management Plan. Meanwhile, the CE theme has gained momentum through public engagement, research, and the refinement of proposals to promote sustainable production and consumption.

Challenges remain, particularly around resource constraints and the time required to develop and implement strategies. However, alternative delivery models and new indicators are being developed to track progress more effectively. Together, these efforts support broader environmental goals, including reduced emissions, improved land and water quality, and sustainable economic growth. **SEO 5** contributes directly to PfG priorities and reflects a commitment to innovation, collaboration, and leadership in sustainability.



SEO 6 - Net Zero GHG Emissions & Improved Climate Resilience & Adaptability





SEO 6 - Net Zero GHG Emissions & Improved Climate Resilience & Adaptability

Introduction

SEO 6 focuses on achieving Net Zero GHG Emissions and Improved Climate Resilience and Adaptability. This outcome recognises the urgent need to reduce emissions across all sectors and to prepare society, the economy, and the environment for the impacts of climate change. Net zero means balancing the amount of GHGs emitted with the amount removed from the atmosphere. Climate resilience and adaptability refer to the ability of systems, natural and human, to anticipate, absorb, and recover from climate-related shocks and stresses such as severe weather events.

The EIP sets out a comprehensive framework of actions and targets to support this transition. These actions are closely linked to other SEOs, reducing emissions supports air, water, and land quality (**SEO 1**), while nature-based solutions contribute to biodiversity and ecosystem resilience and also in aiding emissions reductions (**SEO 3**). Promoting low-carbon energy and sustainable production complements efforts under **SEO 4** and reducing waste and improving resource efficiency supports CE goals (**SEO 5**). Climate adaptation measures also enhance community wellbeing and environmental protection under **SEO 2**.

Through **SEO 6**, DAERA aims to lead NI's transition to a low-carbon, climate-resilient future. The goal is to reduce emissions in line with statutory targets, embed climate adaptation across all sectors, and ensure that the transition is fair, inclusive, and informed by science and evidence. This means building a society and economy that are not only sustainable but also prepared for the challenges and opportunities of a changing climate.

22. Climate Change

Overview

Climate change is a global issue that is affecting NI in several ways, including indirectly by global food shortages, water scarcity, and energy insecurity through the prices we pay for our food and fuel. Local impacts also include flash flooding, regional extreme weather events, and seasonal upsurges in algal blooms. **SEO 6** focuses on mitigating the impacts of climate change by lowering emissions and through taking action to adapt to and build resilience to the impacts of climate change. Climate change links to all the **SEOs**, and action in this area can deliver co-benefits for some of the other **SEOs** and vice versa.



The majority of the 8 actions in this theme relate to delivering on the requirements of the NI and UK Climate Change Acts, through delivering legislation, establishing new oversight bodies, publishing plans and programmes around mitigation and adaptation, and continuing to develop and expand the UK Emissions Trading Scheme (UK ETS).

Links to Other Strategic Drivers

In NI, the key strategic drivers for climate change action are the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 and the UK wide Climate Change Act 2008. The NI Act includes a net zero target by 2050 and a range of requirements around the development and implementation of action plans to reduce emissions across all of our key sectors.

Actions and Targets

Table 22. Climate Change Actions

Action Number	Action	Status
22A	Agree, and set in new legislation, NI’s first three carbon budgets.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action.
22B	By December 2024: Make new legislation to ensure GHG emissions reduction targets for the years 2030 and 2040 are in line with the Climate Change Act’s net zero by 2050 target.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action
22C	By March 2025: Complete the development of the third NI Climate Change Adaptation Programme (NICCAP3) setting out actions for climate change adaptation.	Progressing to new timeline as set out in the NI Executive’s Programme for Government 2024-2027.
22D	Establish a Just Transition Commission to oversee the implementation of the just transition elements of the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 & to provide advice to NI departments on just transition matters, to help ensure that NI’s pathway to net zero is fair for everyone.	Progressing to EIP target
22E	Publish a Nature-based Solutions Plan to enhance ecological and climate resilience.	Not progressing - workplan not developed



Action Number	Action	Status
22F	Publish NI's first CAP to set out NI's approach to meeting the first carbon budget through a set of policies and proposals for emissions reductions. The CAP will also establish a pathway towards the interim targets for 2030 and 2040 and the overall net zero by 2050 target.	Progressing to new timeline
22G	Working with the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) and the governments of Scotland and Wales, acting jointly as the UK ETS Authority, work to further developments to the UK ETS in line with UKG & DA net zero objectives.	Progressing to EIP target
22H	First draft of Regulations to establish a NI Climate Change Commissioner to be laid in Assembly by December 2024 TEO.	Complete or introduced as an ongoing BAU action

There are eight actions within this theme, and seven of these have been progressed (see Table 22). DAERA has ownership of seven and the remaining one, **Action 22H**, sits with TEO. Responsibility for climate change actions, however, is shared across multiple departments, with DAERA leading on agriculture and environmental policy and coordination. The draft CAP and NICCAP3 have been developed with input from stakeholders across government, civil society, and the public, ensuring that actions are informed, inclusive, and aligned with broader strategic goals.

Development of the third NI Adaptation Programme (**Action 22C**) was slightly delayed due to competing pressures across several departments, but significant progress has still been made on this, with a consultation completed and analysis of responses published in October 2025. Work is now progressing to seek NI Executive agreement to the updated draft NICCAP3 in line with the PfG commitment.

As most of the actions are statutory requirements, prioritisation was not applied. Rather efforts were made to deliver within statutory timeframes where possible or, where this was not possible, to deliver the actions as quickly as possible subject to due process and approvals from Ministers, the NI Executive and the NI Assembly.

Achievements

Two of the actions have been completed through the passing of legislation setting NI's first three carbon budgets and a 2040 emissions reduction target (**Actions 22A, 22B**). Regulations to establish the NI Climate Commissioner (**Action 22H**) were made on 8 April 2025 and came into force on 9 April 2025.



The completion of the development of the third NICCAP (**Action 22C**) is progressing to a new timeline and is at an advanced stage with a consultation having been completed. The establishment of the Just Transition Commission (**Action 22D**) is progressing to the EIP target as is continuing development of the UK ETS. A consultation has also been completed on a draft of NI's first draft CAP (**Action 22F**).

Challenges and Delays

Work has not yet commenced on a Nature-based Solutions Plan (**Action 22E**) but will rely on other EIP actions on biodiversity, ecosystem and natural capital mapping and monitoring as evidence to identify key areas of the landscape which provide ecosystem services and nature-based solutions to particular challenges (e.g. flooding in towns), to be protected and managed as part of 30x30 framework. This will need to align with land use framework, LULUCF, NICCAP3, Peatland Strategy and woodland planting programmes and associated teams within DAERA.

Future Focus

A change in approach is not considered necessary.

Conclusion For SEO 6:

NI's approach to climate change is grounded in collaboration, statutory commitment, and long-term strategic planning. With DAERA leading on environmental policy and coordination, and TEO supporting governance through the establishment of the NI Climate Commissioner, the delivery of climate actions reflects a whole-of-government effort. The development of the draft CAP and the third Climate Change Adaptation Programme has involved extensive stakeholder engagement, ensuring that the approach is inclusive, evidence-based, and aligned with broader PfG priorities.

Looking ahead, the focus will be on accelerating the implementation of these plans and on continuing to deliver measurable progress toward net zero by 2050. The most recently published statistics, which were published in June 2025, indicate that NI emissions continue to fall, with emissions in 2023 being 31.5% lower than the 1990 baseline. Continued monitoring, cross-sector collaboration, and public engagement will be essential to maintaining momentum and ensuring that climate actions remain responsive to emerging challenges. Guided by the PfG's emphasis on resilience and a commitment to innovation and continuous improvement, NI is well-positioned to lead a fair and effective transition to a low-carbon, climate-resilient future.



EIP Strategic Outcomes - Indicators





EIP Strategic Outcomes - Indicators

Introduction:

Schedule 2 to the Act requires DAERA to consider whether the natural environment has, or particular aspects of it have, improved while having regard to and obtaining appropriate data. *“The Department must make arrangements for obtaining such data about the natural environment as the Department considers appropriate for the purpose of monitoring whether the natural environment is, or particular aspects of it are, improving in accordance with the current EIP.”*

To assess environmental improvement, it was necessary to develop an OIF using a range of credible and robust indicators across the policy areas contained within the EIP.

Indicators were chosen using the widely accepted RACER (Relevant, Accepted, Credible, Easy, Robust) evaluation methodology and aligned with key departmental strategies.

Officials worked closely with colleagues across DAERA and other departments, as well as the OEP (which is also required to report on EIP progress) to ensure consistency and coherence.

Outcome Indicator Framework:

RAG	Indicator Trend Status
Green	Environment has improved
Yellow	Environment has little or no change/ Unable to determine
Red	Environment has declined
Grey	No data available/ being developed
Black	No indicator available



Ref	Indicators	Status	Summary Assessment
Strategic Environmental Outcome 1			
Theme 1 - Air Quality			
1a	Annual mean roadside levels of nitrogen dioxide as measured in micrograms per cubic metre ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$) at ten sites across NI.		Clear downward trend in NO_2 emissions represents an improvement in air quality, which has the potential to lead to public health and habitat improvements.
1b	Annual mean urban background levels of $\text{PM}_{2.5}$ as measured in micrograms per cubic metre ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$) at five sites across NI.		Very slight increase in $\text{PM}_{2.5}$ emissions likely to have little or no impact on public health or the environment.
1c	Air Pollution Trends Report 2024: Critical load and critical level exceedances in the UK; National Ammonia Monitoring Network Report.		The Trends Report 2024 shows that, overall, the percentage of land area exposed to concentrations of NH_3 that exceed critical levels ($1 \mu\text{g per m}^3$) has increased by 3.9% between the 3-year moving average time periods 2002-2004 (baseline) and 2020-2022 (most recent data). Data from the National Ammonia Monitoring Network for 2022-24 is currently being reviewed pending reissue.
Theme 2 - Water Resources: Quality and Quantity			
2a	Annual mean nitrate concentrations (groundwater)		In the most recently published data, the majority of groundwater nitrate concentrations were consistently below $25 \text{ mg NO}_3/\text{l}$. Difficulty exists assessing like for like trend based on averaged data when site turnover is considered. Where sufficient data exists for individual locations, trend was assessed over time. Data collected both before and after the review are broadly comparable.
2b	Soluble Reactive Phosphorus (SRP) in rivers		Statistically, no change in water quality between the 2019 baseline and 2024. However current SRP levels are higher than the lowest recorded level in 2012. Phosphorus levels fluctuate yearly but have steadily increased since 2012.



Ref	Indicators	Status	Summary Assessment
2c	Annual mean nitrate concentrations (rivers)		Monthly average nitrate concentrations in NI rivers have been mostly decreasing or stable, largely due to the high baseline in the 1990s. Recent observations in some catchments report an increase in concentration.
Theme 3 - Marine and Coastal Water Resources: Quality & Quantity			
3a	Dissolved Inorganic Nitrogen (DIN) Enrichment		DIN enrichment appeared relatively stable over the period 2015 to 2017. Enrichment values then steadily increased from 2017 onward. Overall, nutrient (DIN) enrichment in transitional and coastal waters increased from 13% in 2017 to 62% in 2024. The indicator suggests increased nutrient loads to transitional and coastal waters; key sources of nutrients include agriculture and urban inputs.
3b	Bathing water data (<i>Escherichia Coli</i> & Intestinal <i>Enterococci</i> levels)		Of the 33 identified bathing water sites, 24 met the 'Excellent' standards, a further five met the 'Good' standards, three are 'Sufficient' and only one bathing water failed to meet the minimum standard. Three sites have improved in classification since 2024.
3c	Marine Litter (recorded using OSPAR methodology to show changes in volume and types of litter present)		The decrease in the number of litter items recorded is welcome, yet most of these items are plastic based with a noted increase in smaller pieces of plastic is of concern. The fluctuations shown over the past 13 years are down to extreme weather events or in the case of 2021 the easing of Covid restrictions.
3d	Transitional & Coastal Water Classification Statistics.		Ecological status has suggested no overall improvement over the past few years, however, an increase in the number of failing quality elements indicates deterioration. High nutrient DIN levels were responsible for many water bodies failing to achieve good ecological status. Failure to achieve good chemical status was due to the widespread occurrence of legacy



Ref	Indicators	Status	Summary Assessment
			chemicals (uPBTs) as well as some pesticides and herbicides. The main sources of nutrients and pollutants to transitional and coastal waters are direct wastewater discharges and diffuse agricultural inputs.
Theme 4 - Local Environment Quality			
4a	LEAMS Indicator		The LEAMS scores reported in the annual Cleaner Neighbourhood Reports shows that the level of littering has remained around the same level since 2022.
Strategic Environmental Outcome 2			
Theme 5 - Connecting People to the Environment: Landscapes, Seascapes & Natural Beauty			
5a	Number of Green/Blue flag sites		There was an increase in 14 new Green flag sites from 104 in 2024 to 118 in 2025.
Theme 6 - Connecting People to the Environment: Outdoor Recreation & Natural Space Provision			
6a	Increase the % of households that have publicly accessible quality natural space >2ha and off-road trails within 400m		There was a small decrease from 47.9% in 2024 to 47.8% in 2025 across NI. The rural figure has stayed static at 19.3%.
Theme 7 - The Next Generation			
7a	No Available Indicator		Although there is currently no indicator for the Next Generation theme, this is actively being explored. DAERA is considering the development of indicators.
Theme 8 - Sustainable Settlements			
8a	Percentage of journeys under two miles people choose to make by walking or cycling		The latest data available for this indicator shows that the measure has remained relatively static over the period 2017-2021, highlighting the need for continued targeted interventions to encourage active travel.



Ref	Indicators	Status	Summary Assessment
Theme 9 - Historic Environment			
9a	The Condition Survey of Listed Buildings		This trend demonstrates that progress is not moving in the right direction and highlights the need for targeted action to reverse this decline.
Strategic Environmental Outcome 3			
Theme 10 - Protecting Nature on Land			
10a	NI Woodland Cover		502 hectares of new woodland has been created during the reporting period. The Tree Planting Action Plan has been commissioned to seek to increase annual planting rates necessary to remain green in future years.
10b	Peatland Conserved/ Restored		In 2025 works to help restore 453 hectares of peatlands were completed with the assistance of DAERA Funding. Other peatland restoration projects continue to be progressed including through funding from the DAERA Environment Fund; Shared Island Funds and PEACEPLUS.
10c	Condition of Features within Terrestrial ASSIs (includes freshwater sites)		The most up-to-date figures for the 2024/25 reporting period highlight that 54% of all features, both terrestrial and marine, are in favourable condition, 38% are in unfavourable condition, 2% are unfavourable-recovering and less than 1% are destroyed. There has been no appreciable improvement in the past 6 years.
10d	Wild Bird Population in NI		The latest NI Wild bird indicator published in 2025 provides information on change for 56 bird populations in Northern Ireland from 1996 to 2023. The indicator shows that overall, wild bird abundance in Northern Ireland is at a similar level to that in the mid-1990s when BTO/JNCC/ RSPB Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) surveys started.
10e	Area of land (or % land area) protected for nature		Metric currently under development.
10f	Area of land exposed to damaging levels of ammonia (NH ₃) in the atmosphere		Most of NI ammonia sensitive habitats continue to exceed critical levels leading to continuing environmental damage.



Ref	Indicators	Status	Summary Assessment
10g	Exceedance of damaging levels of nutrient nitrogen deposition on ecosystems		Most of NI Nitrogen sensitive habitats continue to exceed critical loads leading to continuing environmental damage.
Theme 11 - Protecting Nature at Sea			
11a	Condition of Marine Protected Areas Network		Currently 87% of inshore MPA features are in favourable condition as per the NI Environmental Statistics report 2024. Largely, the condition of marine features has remained unchanged since 2023, Assessment of change in feature condition is carried out over a 6-year reporting cycle, so not all data will be available within this past year.
Theme 12 - Natural Capital			
12a	No Available Indicator		At this stage, the indicator is not yet applicable; however, there is potential for the development of a Natural Capital index or indices once the Natural Capital inventory and framework have been established.
Strategic Environmental Outcome 4			
Theme 13 - Future Agricultural Policy			
13a	Net GHG in Agriculture		Indicator shown an annual decrease of 1.6% from 5708.69 KtCO ₂ e in 2022 to 5615.16 KtCO ₂ e in 2023.
13b	Net GHG Land Use, Land Use Change & Forestry (LULUCF)		Increase of 0.2% from 2145.14 KtCO ₂ e in 2022 to 2148.88kT in 2023.



Ref	Indicators	Status	Summary Assessment
13c	NI Phosphorus Balance		The NI agricultural sector is operating at a significant phosphorus surplus. This has caused a build-up of soil Phosphorus levels and over 40% of fields are now above the agronomic optimum. This has resulted in diffuse phosphorus losses to rivers and lakes which are the main cause of poor water quality across Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland agricultural phosphorus surplus increased from 10.9kg/ha in 2023 to 13.0kg/ha in 2024.
13d	NI Nitrogen Balance		The NI Nitrogen level since 2021 has shown an overall decrease. However, it increased from 117.3kg/ha in 2023 to 135.6kg/ha in 2024.
13e	Ammonia Emissions from NI Agriculture		Slight increase in ammonia emissions from agriculture in NI from 2022 to 2023, from 30.62 kt to 30.81 kt.
13f	Condition of Features (Protected Sites)		There has been little or no change in the proportion of protected site features in favourable condition in recent years, with a slight decrease from 55% to 54% between 2023/24 and 2024/25.
13g	Wild Birds		The latest NI Wild bird indicator published in 2025 provides information on change for 56 bird populations in Northern Ireland from 1996 to 2023. The indicator shows that overall, wild bird abundance in Northern Ireland is at a similar level to that in the mid-1990s when BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) surveys started.
Theme 14 - Energy			
14a	Greenhouse Gas emissions from Energy related sectors		GHG emissions from energy-related sectors has shown a steady decline from 1990 to 2023 (60% decrease in GHG emissions).



Ref	Indicators	Status	Summary Assessment
Theme 15 - Productive & Sustainably Used Seas			
15a	For commercial offshore stocks		Offshore stocks remain under pressure, with continued or increased restrictions for several species. No clear net improvement in the natural environment for this theme over the past year. Some variability exists (e.g. whiting improved after benchmarking), but persistent constraints remain for cod and other demersal species.
15b	For commercial inshore stocks		Inshore stock assessments show mixed results, with some species able to sustain higher landings and others requiring reductions. Trends vary by species and area, supporting a precautionary and adaptive management approach. No clear overall improvement or decline.
Theme 16 - Producer Responsibility			
16a	Packaging recycling rates		The first set of data is expected in the second half of 2026. This will provide a baseline to inform future analysis of packaging recycling rates.
16b	% of full net costs contributed by packaging producers		As the scheme only commenced in April 2025, and the first producer invoices were issued in October 2025, the first full set of data is not expected to the second half of 2026.
16c	Increase of recycling of drinks containers from 70-90% by 2030		Data will be provided by the DRS Deposit Management Organisation following the commencement of the scheme in 2027, with first data being available from 2029.
Theme 17 - Reducing Single-Use Plastic (SUP)			
17a	Reduction in littered SUP items		Exploring option to refine existing Marine Litter or Cleaner Neighbourhood Reports to provide more specific data.
Theme 18 - Chemicals			
18a	Number of registered holders of firefighting foam stockpiles containing PFOA inspected		On target - 10 holders of PFOA with 9 already visited, last inspection planned for Q4.



Ref	Indicators	Status	Summary Assessment
18b	Number of pieces of equipment containing PCBs above the legal threshold registered with NIEA		PCB register- 191 as of 17/12/2025 across 7 holders (largest is Northern Ireland Electricity). Target met.
Theme 19 - Antimicrobial & Disinfectant Contamination			
19a	Monitor AMR through 300 annual abattoir samples and passive surveillance.		Annual AMR Monitoring on track. Baseline results available for 2023; trends will be possible after subsequent years' testing results are available.
Strategic Environmental Outcome 5			
Theme 20 - Circular Economy			
20a	Material Footprint		Based on estimates produced by the University of Leeds (UoL), published by DfE in December 2025, NI's material footprint was estimated at 20.6 tonnes per capita (tpc) in 2022, representing an increase from 18.3 tpc in 2021. This increase follows a recent low point of 16.2 tpc recorded in 2020, which coincided with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.
20b	Carbon Footprint		Carbon footprint emissions per capita increased slightly from 11.7 tonnes of CO ₂ e (tCO ₂ e) in 2021 to 11.9 tCO ₂ e in 2022, based on the UoL methodology. While there has been an increase since the low point of 10.9 tCO ₂ e in 2020, emissions remain well below pre-2010 levels. Recent increases may be linked to post-pandemic recovery, which highlights the need to address consumption patterns in order to see sustained improvements in the indicator.
Theme 21 - Waste Management			
21a	Waste generated from Households		Current trend shows a slight increase in waste arising, both overall and when considered per capita and per household. This indicates that more action is required in relation to waste prevention and reduction in consumption. The expansion of PR may also have a positive impact in future.



Ref	Indicators	Status	Summary Assessment
21b	Recycling levels <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Municipal waste sent for recycling • Household waste sent for recycling 		Recycling levels appear to be stagnating. Indicating that further interventions are required.
21c	Municipal Waste landfilled		Landfill rates have dropped dramatically, which is a key target, However, consideration needs to be given to the environmental impacts of energy recovery which has increased significantly, including the associated waste movements.
Strategic Environmental Outcome 6			
Theme 22 - Climate Change			
22a	Total Greenhouse Gas Emissions in NI		The net fig of 18.2MtCO ₂ e in 2023 represents a 7.1% decrease compared with 2022. The longer- term trend showed a decrease of 31.5% compared with the 1990 base year.



SEO 1 - Excellent Air, Water & Land Quality





SEO 1 - Excellent Air, Water & Land Quality

1. Air Quality

Indicator 1a: Annual mean roadside levels of Nitrogen Dioxide (NO₂) as measured in micrograms per cubic metre (µg/m³) at ten sites across NI.

Overview of Indicator

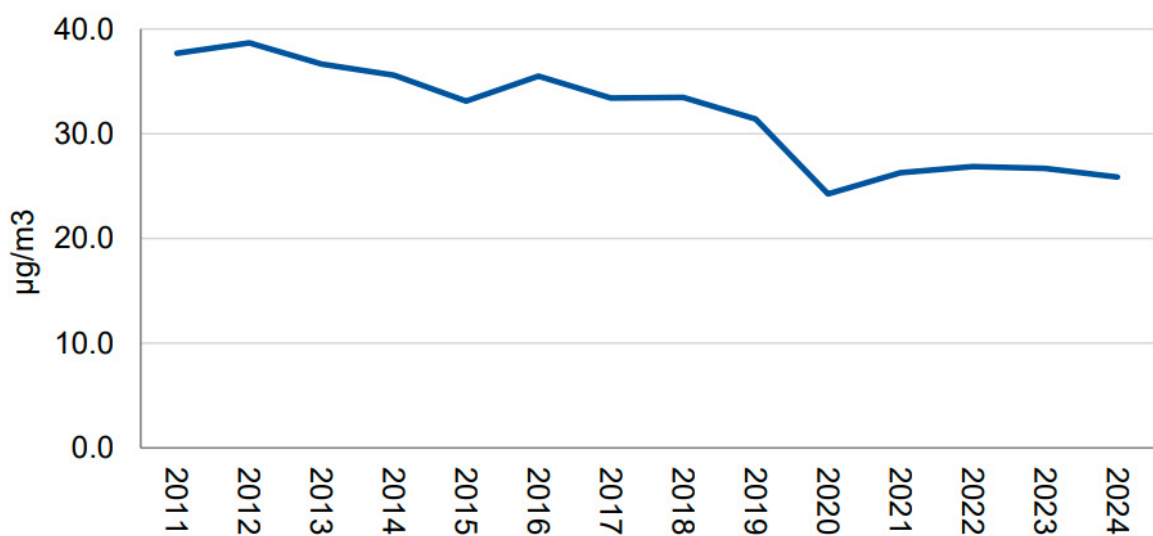
NO₂ is a key pollutant primarily produced by road traffic. Ten well-established roadside monitoring sites across NI have been selected to track annual mean NO₂ levels. These sites are currently used as an indicator within the PfG Wellbeing Framework and are expected to provide the long-term data necessary for ongoing EIP reporting.

The indicator monitors annual mean roadside concentrations of NO₂, measured in micrograms per cubic metre (µg/m³), at the ten selected sites. Monitoring at all ten locations has been in place since 2011, ensuring a consistent and reliable dataset for trend analysis.

Environmental Trends

From 2011 to 2019, NO₂ levels demonstrated a gradual downward trend. A notable dip occurred in 2020, with levels falling to 24.3 µg/m³, coinciding with the implementation of Covid-19 restrictions. Between 2021 and 2024, NO₂ concentrations have remained relatively stable.

Figure 2: Annual mean concentration of Nitrogen Dioxide (NO₂), 2011 - 2024, 10 sites



Source: DAERA Link: [NI Environmental Statistics Report 2025](#)



This indicator is used as a wellbeing framework indicator in the latest PfG 2024-2027. The ten sites included to produce the average statistic shown above are: Armagh Lonsdale Road, Belfast Newtownards Road, Belfast Ormeau Road, Belfast Stockman’s Lane, Belfast Westlink Roden Street, Castlereagh Dundonald, Derry Dale’s Corner, Downpatrick Roadside, Newtownabbey Antrim Road, North Down Holywood A2.

Figure 3: Annual mean concentration of nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), 2011-2024, 10 sites

2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Year
37.7	38.7	36.7	35.6	33.1	35.5	33.4	33.5	31.4	24.3	26.3	26.9	26.7	25.9	Unit: µg/ m ³

Source: DAERA Link: [NI Environmental Statistics Report 2025](#)

The 10 roadside monitors for indicator 1a are well established and the clear downward trend in NO₂ emissions represents an improvement in air quality, which has the potential to lead to public health and habitat improvements.

Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment

DAERA continues to progress the development of NI’s first Clean Air Strategy, which aims to reduce harmful emissions, including NO₂. There is ongoing cross-departmental collaboration with DfI to address NO₂ emissions from transport sources. This includes efforts to promote active travel as a sustainable alternative, contributing to long-term emission reductions.

In parallel, DAERA continues to work closely with Defra and the Devolved Governments to explore UK-wide policy measures where appropriate, with the shared goal of reducing NO₂ emissions. Additionally, collaboration with DCEE in Ireland remains a priority in tackling transboundary NO₂ pollution.

A significant milestone has been the awarding of a €6.5 million cross-border air quality project under the PEACEPLUS Programme. This project includes a dedicated work package focused on improving data and evidence related to air pollution from road transport.

Furthermore, there is continued funding for air quality monitoring and expansion of the network through the Local Air Quality Management Grant.

Developments, Delays, or Successes

Current work on the actions outlined above is progressing as planned, with no significant delays or notable developments to report at this stage.



Implementation and Future Action

The reported progress demonstrates that whilst NO₂ levels at the ten roadside monitoring sites were lower in 2024 compared to 2023 the level of reduction was minor. Further policy development is required and DAERA officials will continue to develop a Clean Air Strategy for NI, working with other Departments to deliver tangible actions to reduce NO₂ levels further.

DAERA will consider the data and evidence resulting from the PEACEPLUS Clean Air Project with regards to the work package relating to transport pollution to inform future policy development to reduce NO₂ emissions.

Potential Data Gaps

Low data capture can occur at individual monitoring sites due to equipment malfunctions or repairs, which may limit the availability of data used to assess trends for air quality. Additionally, the temporary removal or relocation of monitoring equipment can further reduce data capture. DAERA works closely with district councils to minimise any disruption at monitoring sites.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

Ongoing consideration will be given to increasing the number of NO₂ roadside monitors in the network leading to improved coverage for NI.

Indicator 1b. Annual mean urban background levels of fine Particulate Matter (PM_{2.5}) as measured in micrograms per cubic metre (µg/m³) at five sites across NI.

Overview of Indicator

PM_{2.5} is a key pollutant produced from domestic solid fuel burning. The five sites chosen are urban background monitors for PM_{2.5} across NI and are situated close to built up housing areas where domestic solid fuel burning can be an issue. It is anticipated that these sites will have the necessary longevity to produce the data required for ongoing EIP reporting. Trends should indicate if energy and solid fuel burning policies and changes in behaviour are leading to a reduction in PM_{2.5} levels in NI with the potential to improve our health and the environment.

Environmental Trends

In 2024, the mean PM_{2.5} level for the five urban background sites in NI was 7.0 µg/m³. This was a slight increase from the mean level of 6.8 µg/m³ in 2023. This small increase in emissions may be attributed to a variety of sources including combustion of fuels, secondary formation from aerosols, transboundary sources, and natural sources. For comparison, the annual



average at the five urban sites for 2024 is well within the NI legislative limit value of 25 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ and the non-statutory WHO Interim Target 4 of 10 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ but falls short of the ultimate WHO air quality guideline level of 5 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$.

The five urban background monitors for indicator 1b are not as well established with only two full years' worth of data and is not enough to establish any clear trends.

Figure 4:

2024 Annual Average ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$)	2023 Annual Average ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$)
7.0	6.8

Source: DAERA **Link:** [Northern Ireland Air - Data Selector](#)

*Annual average is calculated from hourly average of five sites (excluding missing values).

**To note that Newtownstewart monitoring site has only been monitoring $\text{PM}_{2.5}$ since 10/03/2022, therefore annual reporting data for this indicator can only be provided from 2023 onwards.

As monitoring at one of the five sites has only been in place since March 2022, a full calendar years' worth of data is only available for the years 2023 and 2024.

Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment

Continued progress is being made in the development of NI's first Clean Air Strategy, aimed at reducing harmful emissions, including $\text{PM}_{2.5}$.

An air quality target is being developed within the draft CAP which will allow DAERA to engage with other departments and key delivery organisations in exploring the feasibility of introducing new regulations. These regulations would aim to implement more stringent annual average limits, targets, and objectives for $\text{PM}_{2.5}$ and PM_{10} in alignment with Interim Target 4 of the WHO's 2021 Air Quality Guidelines - 10 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ for $\text{PM}_{2.5}$ and 20 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ for PM_{10} .

DAERA continues to collaborate with Defra and the Devolved Governments to consider UK-wide policy approaches, where appropriate, to reduce $\text{PM}_{2.5}$ emissions. In parallel, ongoing cooperation with DCEE in Ireland supports efforts to address transboundary $\text{PM}_{2.5}$ pollution.

A €6.5 million cross-border air quality project has been awarded under the PEACEPLUS Programme, which includes a dedicated work package focused on improving data and evidence related to air pollution from solid fuel burning.

Continued funding is being provided for air quality monitoring and expansion of the monitoring network through the Local Air Quality Management Grant.



Developments, Delays, or Successes

As with indicator 1a there are no notable developments, delays, or successes to report currently.

Implementation and Future Action

The reported progress demonstrates that while PM_{2.5} levels at the five urban monitoring sites were slightly higher in 2024 compared to 2023, the increase was minimal. This highlights the need for ongoing policy development. DAERA officials will continue to develop a Clean Air Strategy for NI, working in collaboration with other departments to deliver tangible actions aimed at further reducing emissions.

DAERA will consider the data and evidence resulting from the PEACEPLUS Clean Air Project, particularly the work package focused on solid fuel burning, to inform future policy development aimed at reducing PM_{2.5} emissions.

Ongoing consideration is being given to increasing the number of urban background PM_{2.5} monitoring sites for this indicator, with the goal of improving coverage across NI.

Potential Data Gaps

Strabane Springhill Park achieved a data capture rate of 35% in 2023. Newtownstewart monitoring site has only been recording PM_{2.5} since 10 March 2022; therefore, annual reporting for this indicator is available only from 2023 onwards.

Low data capture at individual monitoring sites may occur due to equipment malfunctions or maintenance activities, which can restrict the availability of data for assessing PM_{2.5} trends. Furthermore, temporary removal or relocation of monitoring equipment can contribute to reduced data capture.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

Consideration will continue to be given to expanding the number of PM_{2.5} urban background monitoring stations to enhance coverage across NI.

Indicator 1c. Air Pollution Trends Report 2024: Critical load and critical level exceedances in the UK; National Ammonia Monitoring Network Report.

Overview of Indicator

The indicators for the EIP **Actions 1D, 1E, 1G,1H** are the annual Air Pollution Trends Report of Critical load and critical level exceedances in the UK, and the United Kingdom Eutrophying &



Acidifying Pollutants (UKEAP) NAMN Report. Through these reports there is good availability of existing indicator data for this theme from both a critical load and level perspective and a national monitoring perspective. These indicators provide measures of trends in ammonia emissions and their impact at designated sites which are relevant to the actions noted above and will capture the impact of the implementation of the AS and new Operational Protocol across NI. The Air Pollution Trends Report covers data from 2003 up to the current reporting period with a 3-year time lag.

Utilisation of data from the Air Pollution Trends Report enables progress to be identified more rapidly than relying on improvements to the conservation status of habitat features.

The UKEAP NAMN Report provides data from a network of ammonia monitoring sites across NI. In June 2025 notification was published on the reissuing of 2022 and 2023 ALPHA® data in the UK National Ammonia Monitoring Network and is awaited.

Annual Air Pollution Trends Report on Critical Load and Critical Level Exceedances in the UK - The most recent report presents data on exceedances of critical levels and critical loads for the period 2003 to 2021. For NI, the current status indicates that in 2021:

- 92.6% of land area was exposed to ammonia concentrations above the critical level set to protect lichens and bryophytes ($1 \mu\text{g m}^3$);
- 12.2% was exposed to concentrations above the critical level set to protect higher plants ($3 \mu\text{g m}^3$);
- 98.8% of sensitive habitats were exposed to ammonia concentrations above $1 \mu\text{g m}^3$;
- 92.1-96.5% of sites were exposed to concentrations above $1 \mu\text{g m}^3$; and
- 5.3% of SACs, 6.2% of SPAs, and 9.2% of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) exceeded the $3\mu\text{g m}^3$ critical level.

The UKEAP NAMN Report provides monthly measurements of atmospheric NH_3 at sites across NI on an annual basis. The NAMN has operated since 1993, initially with three monitoring sites in NI. In 2019, the network was expanded to include 25 additional sites, which have been part of the NAMN since 2022. Data for 2022 and 2023 is currently in the process of being reissued following recalibration, and trends will be evaluated once this process is complete.

Environmental Trends

Metrics for the past year are not yet available; however, the Air Pollution Trends Report 2024 indicates a slight decline in the percentage of NI's land area where ammonia concentrations



exceed the critical level of 1 micrograms per cubic meter ($\mu\text{g m}^3$) between 2018 and 2022, and similarly a decline for areas exceeding the 3 $\mu\text{g m}^3$ critical level between 2019 and 2022. Despite these reductions, the proportion of land exceeding these thresholds remains significantly higher in NI than in any other UK country.

With regard to indicators for EIP **Actions 1D, 1E, 1G, and 1H**, no clear improvement in these specific aspects of the natural environment has been observed to date. However, given that the AS and the new Operational Protocol are still to be finalised, this outcome is not unexpected.

Figure 5: Percentages of the area of nitrogen sensitive habitats in the UK where ammonia concentrations exceed critical levels of 1 $\mu\text{g m}^{-3}$ by country.

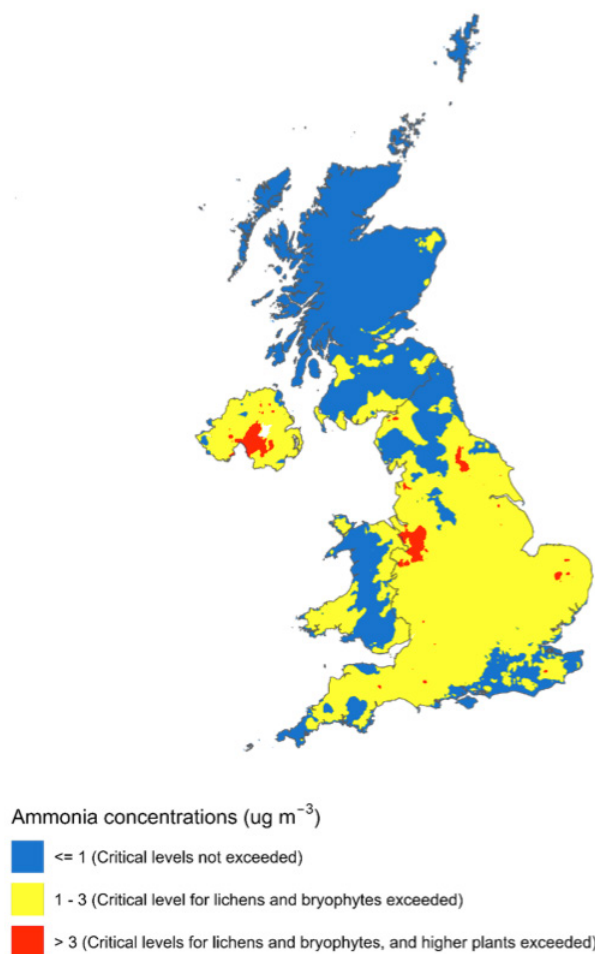
Years	England	Wales	Scotland	NI	UK
N-sensitive habitat area (km ²)	25813	9347	53530	3898	92588
2002-2004	55.9	19.3	2.7	74.8	22.3
2003-2005	56.3	19.7	2.5	74.5	22.2
2004-2006	55.9	18.8	2.5	73.0	22.0
2005-2007	59.3	20.7	2.8	77.9	23.5
2006-2008	59.2	19.6	3.0	77.3	23.4
2007-2009	60.4	20.2	2.9	78.8	23.9
2008-2010	59.5	20.4	3.0	78.7	23.7
2009-2011	66.8	28.0	3.9	86.6	27.4
2010-2012	63.0	23.7	3.4	81.9	25.4
2011-2013	63.7	24.3	3.5	81.8	25.7
2012-2014	56.8	19.3	2.6	76.6	22.5
2013-2015	62.1	23.0	3.3	80.9	24.9
2014-2016	64.6	25.2	3.6	85.1	26.2
2015-2017	67.7	27.0	4.2	88.6	27.8
2016-2018	71.5	33.3	5.2	94.6	30.3
2017-2019	71.9	33.2	5.4	94.5	30.5
2018-2020	70.2	33.4	4.8	94.5	29.7
2019-2021	59.5	24.2	3.3	86.9	24.6
2020-2022	53.0	21.2	2.5	84.4	21.9
Change from 2003-2021	-3.0	+1.9	-0.3	+9.6	-0.4

Source: Air Pollution Trends Report 2024

Link: [2509291027_Air_Pollution_Trends_Report_2024_V3.pdf](#)



Figure 6: CBED 1 km x 1 km mean ammonia concentrations for 2019-21



Source: Air Pollution Trends Report 2024

Link: [2509291027_Air_Pollution_Trends_Report_2024_V3.pdf](#)

Based on the Air Pollution Trends Report on critical levels and loads of ammonia, the data indicates environmental deterioration. The report indicates that 92.6% of NI was exposed to ammonia concentrations above the critical level set to protect lichens and bryophytes ($1 \mu\text{g m}^{-3}$) in 2021. This is linked to Defra Indicator A7: Area of land exposed to damaging levels of ammonia (NH_2) in the atmosphere.

Furthermore, the report also notes that 96.9% of nutrient-sensitive habitat areas in NI are exceeding the recommended nutrient-nitrogen critical load, which relates to Defra Indicator A6: Exceedance of damaging levels of nutrient nitrogen deposition on ecosystems.

The NAMN data from the 2023 report is currently undergoing a revalidation process; therefore, changes in ammonia levels cannot yet be evaluated.



Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment

Actions currently underway include the development of the AS and the new Operational Protocol for NI. Consultation on the Environmental Report for the proposed AS and new Operational Protocol to assess the impacts of air pollution on the natural environment, closed on 24 May 2025. At the time of writing this report, stakeholder responses are being reviewed and taken into consideration.

Additional consultation on the proposed mandatory measures within the AS was conducted as part of the NAP consultation, and responses to this are also being analysed. Following completion of these processes, the Strategy and Protocol will be progressed towards publication and implementation.

Developments, Delays, or Successes

Data from the NAMN for 2023 and 2024 is being reviewed and reissued by the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology and the revised data is due to be published soon. This data will provide information on the trends in local levels of ammonia emissions during this time period and will provide additional insights for the EIP.

An ongoing programme is in place to review existing indicators and explore the potential for additional indicators as part of the DAERA-commissioned research programme on ammonia. This work is led by AFBI in collaboration with the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (UKCEH).

Implementation and Future Action

Consideration is being given to transboundary cooperation on monitoring the impact of ammonia emissions on habitats.

Potential Data Gaps

The reported progress reinforces the importance of finalising the AS and the new Operational Protocol for NI, as well as developing the proposed spatially targeted mechanism to achieve reductions in ammonia emissions at designated sites.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

The UK NAMN data for the full 28-site NI network for 2023 and 2024 has not yet been made available due to a validation issue identified by the UKCEH.

Overall Assessment of Outcome Indicators for Air Quality

In respect of the indicators for Air Quality, when the outcomes are viewed together a better assessment can be made of the impact of the actions on the natural environment due to the



interlinkages between the indicators. Going forward, this will facilitate a better understanding of the impact of the EIP actions and the overall aim of the theme more generally.

Future Focus for Air Quality

Continued funding to improve the NI air quality monitoring network and maintenance/improvement of the current Automatic Urban and Rural Network (AURN) monitoring network in NI (no reduction in monitoring which is outside of DAERA's control).

Continuation of funding for the additional 25 ammonia monitors in NI established in 2019 and added to the NAMN in 2022. Public consultation on the draft Clean Air Strategy with an aim to get NI Executive approval to publish the finalised Strategy.

Actions due to commence in 2026 are the implementation of the AS and new Operational Protocol once finalised. The new Operational Protocol is being developed, informed by science and evidence, to support and deliver the DAERA's statutory obligations relevant to safeguarding our natural environment.

DAERA is working on the development of a pilot programme of site-specific actions to reduce ammonia emissions around designated sites. The expected progress from implementation of the AS is that NI agriculture meets the UK's NECR ammonia 2030 emission reduction target and is put on a pathway to the 2050 target of ammonia emissions being reduced to a point where Critical Loads of nitrogen deposition and Critical Levels of ammonia are not being exceeded at any designated sites.

2. Water Resources: Quality and Quantity

Indicator 2a. Annual mean nitrate concentrations (groundwater)

Overview of Indicator

Annual mean nitrate concentration in groundwater has been selected as an indicator of general groundwater chemical status. Regional monitoring of nitrate concentrations in groundwater in NI commenced in 2000 and continues to the present day. The Water (Amendment) (NI) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 ensure that the WFD, as transposed, maintains the groundwater quality standard of 50 mg NO₂/l set by the Groundwater Daughter Directive (2006/118/EC).

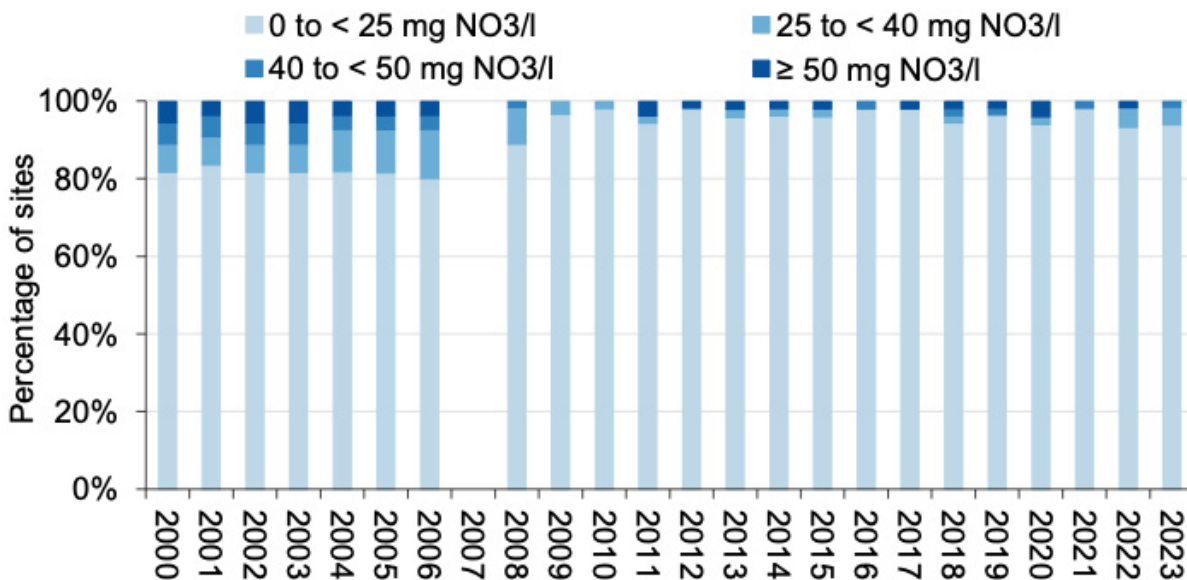
The regional network of monitoring sites was reviewed in 2007/2008, and the nitrate groundwater monitoring programme resumed in 2008.



Environmental Trends

In 2023 (most recently published data) nitrate concentrations were monitored at 65 groundwater sites across NI giving an average concentration of 5.14 mg NO₃/l. At 61 of the 65 groundwater monitoring stations (93.85%) in 2023, groundwater nitrate concentrations were consistently below 25 mg NO₃/l. Difficulty exists assessing like for like trend based on averaged data when site turnover is considered. Where sufficient data exists for individual locations, trend was assessed over time. Data collected both before and after the review are broadly comparable.

Figure 7: Annual mean nitrate concentrations (in groundwater), 2000 - 2023



Source: NIEA [Link: NI Environmental Statistics Report 2025](#)

Note: no figures for 2007 as a major review of the network was undertaken during that period.

Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment

NIEA is working on a communication plan and call to action to expand the groundwater monitoring network across NI. This would result in increased data availability allowing targeted action plans to be developed to improve groundwater quality. European System of Accounts 2010 (ESA10) funding has been secured to research specific factors affecting groundwater status in a number of catchments.

Developments, Delays, or Successes

NIEA relies on third parties to assist in providing monitoring points which can be withdrawn/ decommissioned. NIEA continues to work towards expanding the groundwater monitoring



network across NI. This creates difficulty in assessing like for like trend based on averaged data. Individual sites trend can be assessed over time.

Implementation and Future Action

Increased data collection and assessment will provide a greater picture of current status of the groundwater environment. This will facilitate targeted action plans improving the environment in line with key targets and indicators.

Potential Data Gaps

NIEA undertake a groundwater monitoring network to assess annual mean nitrate concentrations in groundwater bodies. The existing network is currently not able to provide a complete dataset as monitoring is not available in all groundwater bodies (currently 47 of 75 with active monitoring) and is wholly dependent on third party owned infrastructure. Since 2008 monitoring data for around a third of groundwater bodies has been unavailable due to insufficient infrastructure. A draft updated classification is planned for 2026. Annual mean nitrate concentrations trends are assessed where sufficient data exists. Research has begun to assess specific factors affecting groundwater status in a number of catchments.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

Increased stakeholder engagement is planned, utilising the NIEA communications team with the aim of increasing awareness of groundwater issues and expanding the current monitoring network.

There are no plans to amend or replace the existing nitrate indicator. Long-standing datasets are well established, and monitoring will continue to track trends over time.

Indicator 2b. Soluble Reactive Phosphorus (SRP) in rivers

Overview of Indicator

SRP is a nutrient which is closely linked to plant growth in the freshwater environment. However, when present in rivers in elevated concentrations, it can lead to eutrophication and can impact overall ecological status. The annual average of SRP can provide an assessment of the nutrient status of our rivers and is an indicator in the latest PfG 2024-2027.

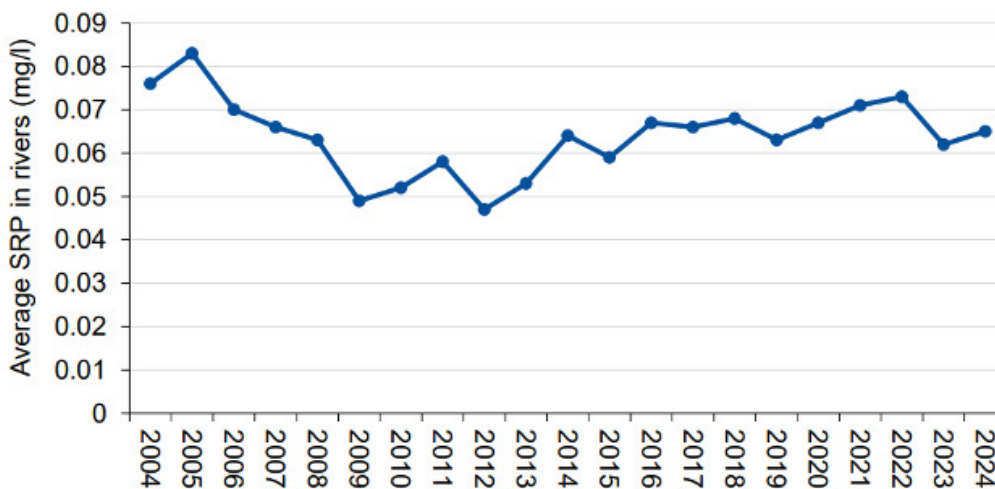
Environmental Trends

The annual figures are compared to a baseline figure of the SRP level in 2019. In 2024 SRP was measured at 93 surveillance rivers across NI giving an average concentration of 0.065 mg/l of phosphorus. Statistically this figure indicates that there has been 'no change' to water



quality based on the change between the baseline figure (2019) and the latest data point (2024). However, this SRP level was 0.018 mg/l more than the lowest figure reported in this time series, 0.047 mg/l in 2012. Phosphorus levels in rivers can fluctuate between years but have been steadily increasing since 2012 and since 2016 levels have consistently remained above 0.06 mg/l. In the five years following the implementation of the NAP in 2007, an improvement in water quality occurred with a downward trend (a decrease) in SRP levels. However, improvements achieved in the period have all but been reversed by the increasing SRP levels since 2012.

Figure 8: SRP in rivers, 2004 - 2024



Source: DAERA Link: [NI Environmental Statistics Report 2025](#)

Note: Due to restrictions imposed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, river monitoring was affected with samples not taken in April and May and limited numbers taken in March and December of 2020. Reduced sampling in summer 2023 due to staffing resource pressures.

Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment.

Robust action, as set out in Third Cycle RBMP, is required to address nutrient pollution from agriculture and improve controls on wastewater discharges, the main sources of SRP. The 2024 NAP Review is currently out for consultation with additional actions proposed to reduce phosphorus from agricultural activities.

The introduction of The Phosphorus (Use in Agriculture) Regulations (NI) was subsumed into the 2019 NAP Regulations and has contributed to a reduction in phosphorus from agricultural activities, in conjunction with ongoing improvements in domestic wastewater treatment through investment by NI Water. However, from the low of 0.047 mg/l reported in 2012, levels of SRP in the 93 Surveillance Rivers have increased to 0.065 mg/l in 2024.



Developments, Delays, or Successes

At the time of writing there are no notable developments, delays, or successes relating to the indicator.

Implementation and Future Action

The planned publication of the SWMI consultation was issued in December 2025, alongside the continued implementation of the Programme of Measures and the preparation of the Fourth Cycle RBMP.

Potential Data Gaps

Occasional gaps in the dataset do occur. The percentage change against the 2019 baseline generally showed an upward trend, with the exception of 2023, which recorded a decrease. However, due to resourcing pressures, monitoring in some regions was interrupted between June and September 2023. This is likely to have affected the results, as these months typically record the highest SRP levels.

Measures have been implemented to resolve this issue through the reallocation of staff resources and the prioritisation of monthly sample collection at surveillance monitoring stations. These actions have ensured continuity of surveillance monitoring, minimised delays in data reporting, and maintained compliance with statutory reporting requirements. The approach safeguards the integrity of trend analysis and supports timely assessment of water quality status.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

Monitoring of SRP will continue at 93 surveillance river sites across NI to assess the effectiveness of measures identified to improve water quality. There are currently no plans to revise or introduce new indicators for SRP, as the existing long-standing datasets provide a robust basis for trend analysis. Ongoing monitoring will ensure continuity in assessing changes over time.

Indicator 2c. Annual mean nitrate concentrations (rivers)

Overview of Indicator

Elevated nitrate, alongside phosphorus, can have an impact on the ecological quality of surface waters through the process of eutrophication. This occurs when excess nutrients cause an increase in the growth of algal and plant populations, damaging the quality and uses of waters as well as the ecology.



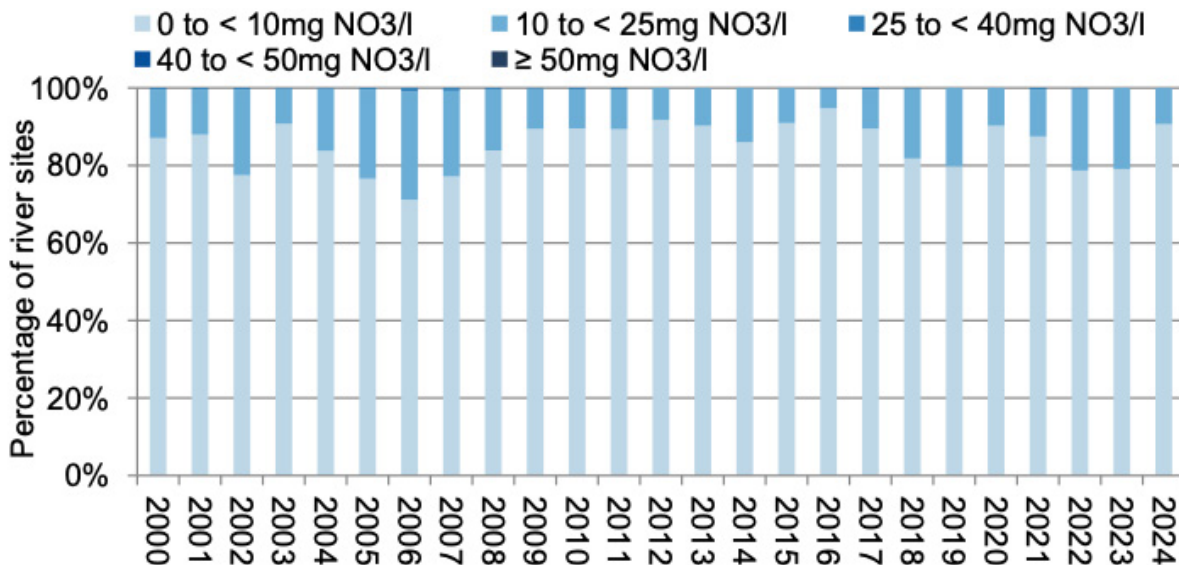
The Nitrates Directive (91/676/EEC) (the Directive) is currently implemented in NI through the 2019-2022 NAP contained in the NAP Regulations (NI) 2019 and subsequent amending regulations. The annual mean nitrate concentration from samples collected monthly at river sites across NI is assessed against quality bandings in order to identify different levels of nutrient enrichment which may lead to eutrophication. NI must monitor surface waters for nitrate pollution against a mandatory standard of 50 mg NO₃/l. In addition, a guide standard for surface waters is operational where 90% of samples should be less than 25 mg NO₃/l. Three additional classes (0-1.99mg/l, 2-9.99mg/l and 10-24.99mg/l), as well as an intermediate class from 40-50mg/l is also included. The annual mean nitrate concentration is one of the indicators published annually in the NI Environmental Statistics Report.

Environmental Trends

Data on nitrate concentrations has been collected since 2000 and was first published in the NI Environmental Statistics Report in January 2013. In 2024, 100% of sites reported an annual mean concentration of less than 25mg NO₃/l. In the period 2000 to 2011, over 99% of sites had an annual mean concentration of less than 25 mg NO₃/l. In the period 2012 to 2016, all rivers that were monitored for nitrate had an annual mean concentration of less than 25 mg NO₃/l.

In 2022 and 2023, 99.6% and 99.8% of sites respectively had an annual mean concentration of less than 25mg NO₃/l. During this two-year period there was also a notable increase in the percentage of sites reporting an annual mean nitrate concentration in the 10 to < 25mg/l category, suggesting observationally that levels were rising in some river catchments. This trend is also being reflected in transitional and coastal waters.

Figure 9: Annual mean nitrate concentrations (in rivers), 2000 - 2024



Source: NIEA Link: [NI Environmental Statistics Report 2025](#)



Note: Due to restrictions imposed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, river monitoring was affected with samples not taken in April and May and a limited number taken in March and December of 2020. Due to staff resourcing issues, fewer samples were collected at some river monitoring stations between June and December 2023.

The most recent long term seasonal trend analysis carried out over the 31-year period, 1992-2023 showed that the monthly trends in average nitrate concentrations in rivers in NI were predominantly decreasing or stable. The downward trend is primarily a result of the extremely high baseline in the 1990s. However, there has been analysis from the most recent 2020-2023 NAP report into the proportion of surface water sites having concentrations above 10 mg/l NO₃, and this is increasing. The upward trend in the levels of nitrate concentrations in rivers within specific catchments in more recent years is a cause of concern.

Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment.

Robust action, as set out in Third Cycle RBMP, is required to address nutrient pollution from agriculture and improve controls on wastewater discharges, the main sources of nitrate. The 2024 NAP Review was issued for consultation with additional actions proposed to reduce nitrate from agricultural activities. A key objective is to promote efficient management of livestock manures, manufactured fertilisers and other nutrient-containing materials spread onto land to reduce environmental impacts.

Developments, Delays, or Successes

At the time of writing there are no notable developments, delays, or successes relating to the indicator

Implementation and Future Action

The planned publication of the SWMI was issued in December 2025, alongside the continued implementation of the Programme of Measures and the preparation of the Fourth Cycle RBMP.

Potential Data Gaps

Monitoring was impacted in 2020 by restrictions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2023, river sampling was disrupted due to resourcing pressures. While occasional data gaps can occur for operational reasons, extended interruptions can significantly affect the reliability of conclusions drawn from monitoring, even in subsequent years. Measures have been implemented to resolve this issue through the reallocation of staff resources, minimising delays in data reporting, and maintaining compliance with statutory reporting requirements.



The approach safeguards the integrity of trend analysis and supports timely assessment of water quality status.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

Monitoring of nitrate concentrations will continue in rivers across NI to assess the effectiveness of measures identified to improve water quality and ensure continuity in assessing changes over time. There are currently no plans to revise or introduce new indicators for rivers, as the existing long-standing datasets provide a robust basis for trend analysis. Ongoing monitoring will ensure continuity in assessing changes over time.

Overall Assessment of Outcome Indicators for Water Resources: Quality and Quantity

The 2024 Water Classification Statistics for NI Report, published in February 2025, indicates that water quality is stagnating. For rivers, the largest category of water bodies, ecological status declined from 31% to 29%.

When occasional data gaps occur due to factors such as the Covid-19 pandemic or resourcing pressures, these interruptions can affect trend analysis. Actions have been taken to mitigate these issues and improve data continuity.

Future Focus for Water Resources: Quality and Quantity

Improving water resources, particularly the quality of NI's waterbodies, will require coordinated action across government, the public and private sectors, and wider society. Work on the Fourth Cycle RBMP is underway. An eight-week Call for Evidence on 'Impacts on the Water Environment' ran from April to June 2025, followed by a six-month timeline consultation launched in July 2025 and scheduled to conclude in January 2026.

In line with recommendation seven of the OEP's review of the WFD implementation, DAERA has initiated a driver-pressure-state-impact-response (DPSIR) analysis to inform the SWMI report. Additionally, DAERA teams have been reorganised to strengthen a Source-to-Sea approach.



3. Marine and Coastal Water Resources: Quality and Quantity

Indicator 3a. Dissolved Inorganic Nitrogen (DIN) Enrichment

Overview of Indicator

The DIN enrichment indicator is calculated as the proportion by which DIN values either exceed or fall below the relevant good standard as set out in the WFD (Classification, Priority Substances and Shellfish Waters) Regulations (NI) 2015.

By expressing DIN concentrations as a function of the relevant thresholds, a standardised enrichment value is obtained for all water bodies irrespective of their type and normalisation procedure. An overall percentage DIN enrichment indicator is calculated as the mean enrichment value for all water bodies for a particular year. An enrichment value close to zero indicates that DIN values are, on average, close to the good threshold; values above zero indicate excess nutrients overall. This indicator is not designed to provide an assessment of nutrient status, but rather an indication of overall trends and whether nutrient values are increasing (worsening) or declining (improving).

Developed in 2025, this indicator represents a new metric and forms part of the NI Environmental Statistics Report. Research is ongoing into integrated nutrient indicators to enhance understanding of nutrient dynamics. The DIN enrichment indicator provides an overview of nutrient enrichment in transitional and coastal waters, which are influenced by both diffuse sources, such as catchment runoff, and point sources, including direct discharges.

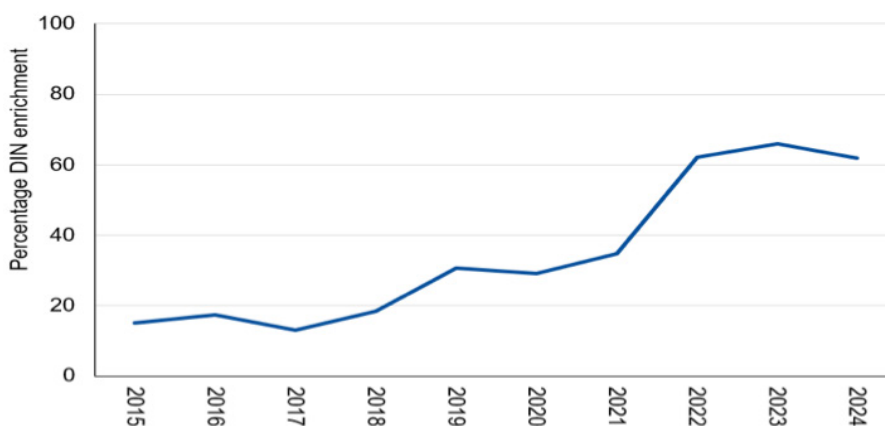
Environmental Trends

DIN enrichment in transitional and coastal waters appeared relatively stable over the period 2015 to 2017. Enrichment values then steadily increased from 2017 to 2023. Enrichment values declined slightly from 2023 to 2024 with a DIN enrichment value of 62%.

The indicator suggests increased nutrient loads to transitional and coastal waters; key sources of nutrients include agriculture and urban inputs.



Figure 10: DIN enrichment in Northern Ireland transitional and coastal waters 2015-2024



Source: DAERA Marine and Fisheries Division **Link:** [NI Environmental Statistics Report 2025](#)

Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment.

This data is essential for identifying SWMI, which guide Programmes of Measures (POMs) in RBMPs and support nutrient and eutrophication assessments under relevant regulations. Measures such as the NAP and wastewater treatment upgrades are expected to reduce nutrient inputs, reflected by a decline in the DIN enrichment indicator. While climate variability and algal blooms may influence results, sustained reductions in nutrient inputs should lead to measurable improvements. Success will depend on implementing actions within RBMPs, particularly changes in agricultural practices through NAP and SAP, alongside continued enhancements to wastewater treatment infrastructure.

Nutrient enrichment exceeded 60% over the period 2022 to 2024. Overall, nutrient (DIN) enrichment increased from 13% in 2017 to 62% in 2024.

Developments, Delays, or Successes

At the time of writing there is no notable developments, delays, or successes relating to the indicator.

Implementation and Future Action

It is concerning to see nitrogen (as DIN) increasing in our transitional and coastal waters. It is critical that this is tackled through a Source-to-Sea approach. An increase in nitrates has also been observed in rivers.

Potential Data Gaps

At present there are no gaps in the data.



Proposals for future data/indicator development

At present, there are no proposals for new data collection or indicator development.

Indicator 3b. Bathing water data (*Escherichia Coli* & Intestinal *Enterococci* levels)

Overview of Indicator

Monitoring and assessment of bathing water data, specifically *Escherichia coli* and Intestinal *Enterococci* levels, has played a key role in maintaining healthy and accessible landscapes across NI since the introduction of the Bathing Water Regulations in 2008. Faecal contamination in bathing waters is determined by monitoring these indicators, and there are currently 33 identified sites. At the end of each bathing season, waters are classified as Excellent, Good, Sufficient, or Poor based on the previous four years of data. These results are published to enable the public to make informed decisions about where to access and enjoy outdoor bathing. The assessments also provide an important measure of the health of our natural assets and help inform actions required to improve them.

DAERA also leads and works with an Interagency Blue-Green Algae Group to address the emerging issue of blue-green algae at some bathing sites. The impact of these blooms on overall trends remains unknown at present.

Environmental Trends

Through excess nutrient inputs (particularly nitrates and phosphates) the water quality in Lough Neagh has deteriorated and led to blue-green algae blooms in the Lough. The blooms not only negatively impact the water quality at Rea's Wood (a freshwater bathing site) but also travel along the Lower Bann River and can on occasion impact upon North Coast bathing sites.

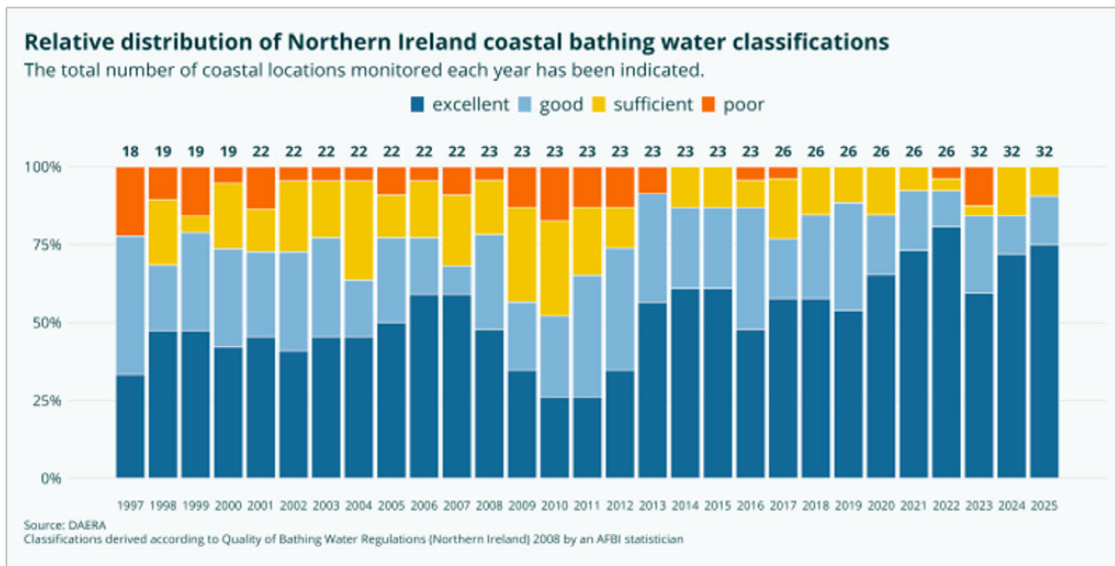
DAERA leads on the delivery of the Interagency Blue-Green Algae Monitoring Protocol, working with other public agencies and local district councils, to ensure timely advice is provided to the public and bathing water operators. Further actions to reduce nutrient inputs and pollutants are occurring through Initiatives like the LNAP, NAP and catchment-based strategies under RBMPs. The DAERA Small Business Research Initiative (SBRI) is a funding programme to encourage the development of innovative, scalable technologies that address pressing issues such as nutrient pollution, sustainable agriculture, and water quality.

The annual classification uses the samples taken over four years to build an assessment of typical water quality and is a good way to compare bathing water locations. The number of identified bathing sites was expanded in May 2025, with the incorporation of seven new sites,



which means there are now a total of 33 identified sites. For the seven new sites, known as candidate sites during 2023 and 2024, assessment was conducted using the available 3 years of sampling data. 24 sites met the ‘Excellent’ standard, a further 5 met the ‘Good’ standard, 3 are ‘Sufficient’ and only 1 bathing water failed to meet the minimum standard and was classified as Poor. Three sites moved up a class between 2024 and 2025, one to Excellent and two to Good. The presence of blue-green algae in Lough Neagh has had a negative impact upon NI’s only freshwater bathing site, Rea’s Wood, which was also the site classified as Poor. Blue-green algae have also temporarily impacted upon some of our North Coast bathing waters but has not impacted classification.

Figure 11:



Source: DAERA Internally Developed Graphic

Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment

DAERA is working in partnership with DfI, NI Water, NIEA, and district councils to address key issues such as misconnections, agricultural runoff, and the upgrading of NI Water infrastructure, alongside initiatives to raise public awareness and implement preventative measures. A further Bathing Water Review is currently being drafted to address points raised by the OEP and drive continued improvement.

DAERA also leads and collaborates through the Interagency Blue-Green Algae Group to tackle the emerging issue of blue-green algae at certain bathing sites. In addition, it hosts the biannual *Better Beaches Forum* in partnership with multiple organisations and community groups. The Forum aims to enhance public awareness and engagement at bathing water sites, focusing on improving water quality, beach cleanliness, facilities management, signage, and ensuring timely communication with the public and media.



Developments, Delays, or Successes

At the time of writing there are no notable developments, delays, or successes relating to the indicator.

Implementation and Future Action

At present there is nothing to add for this indicator in terms of implementation and future action.

Potential Data Gaps

DAERA has initiated a bathing water review, which will include a public consultation. This may lead to increased public expectations and resource demands, such as requests for additional designated bathing waters and an extension of the current bathing season (1 June - 15 September).

In parallel, actions are being taken in collaboration with other departments and government bodies to identify sources of *Escherichia coli* and Intestinal *Enterococci* contamination. This work aims to address pollution sources more effectively and improve bathing water quality.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

At the time of writing this report there are no plans to develop any future indicators. However, *Escherichia coli* and Intestinal *Enterococci* are currently being monitored outside the designated bathing season to assess year-round bathing water quality and evaluate the potential for extending the bathing season in the future.

Indicator 3c. Marine Litter

Overview of Indicator

The indicator used is Beach Litter Surveys carried out under OSPAR Marine Litter monitoring and Assessment criteria. The UK is a signatory to the OSPAR Convention for the protection of the marine environment of the North-East Atlantic. As a signatory, the UK supplies annual data on beach litter. NI submits data into the OSPAR Celtic Seas region. The surveys show the change in the amount of beach litter being recorded over the last 10 years. This also shows the trends of specific types of waste and how these have changed over that period.

Marine litter is monitored by assessing the amount of litter present on a 100-metre section of beach in accordance with OSPAR guidelines, a process that has been in place since 2012. The current status indicates a decline in litter, with the number of items recorded dropping from 513 per 100 metres in 2023 to 341 in 2024, representing a 33% reduction. The trend



over the past year is downward, showing a reduction in litter, and recent years have generally demonstrated a steady decrease, although occasional anomalies occur during severe weather conditions. At present, no new metrics are being applied, but research is underway to develop methods and metrics for accurately monitoring the occurrence of microplastics in the marine environment.

Environmental Trends

The marine environment has deteriorated due to an increase in smaller plastic fragments recorded in beach litter surveys. These fragments often result from the breakdown of larger plastic items or spills of plastic pellets, both of which pose significant environmental risks. Small plastic pieces can enter the food chain, being ingested by marine life, and may act as carriers for harmful chemicals. Their presence also indicates the likely presence of microplastics, which further exacerbate ecological impacts.

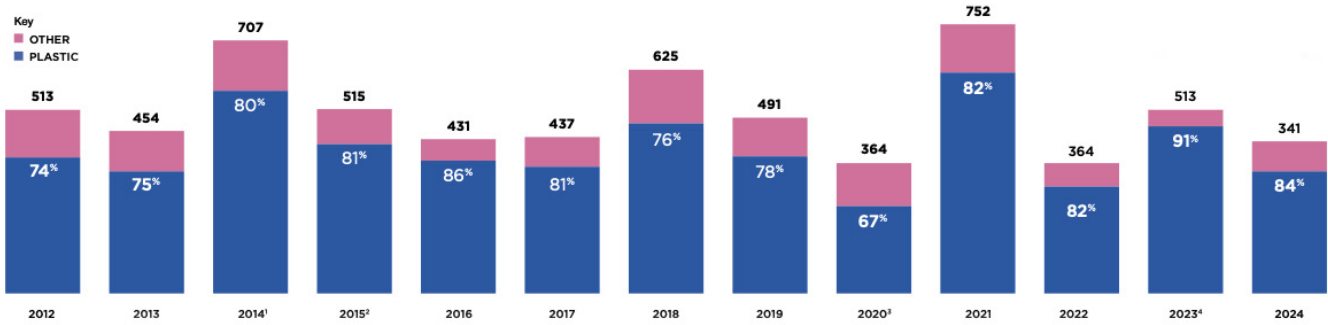
While the rise in plastic waste may suggest a reduction in other types of beach litter, a potential improvement, the overall level of marine litter remains significant. External factors such as storms can cause unpredictable spikes in litter levels, complicating trend analysis. Over the past decade, plastic presence in marine litter has increased, with a notable rise in smaller fragments, indicating the breakdown of larger items. Conversely, the decline in larger plastic pieces suggests that recycling policies and public campaigns are reducing the introduction of new plastic litter into the marine environment, a positive development.

However, it is not possible to confirm significant progress in reducing marine litter overall. External influences, including extreme weather events, COVID-19 lockdowns (which reduced monitoring), and the surge in 2021 following the lifting of travel restrictions, have caused fluctuations. Historical peaks occurred in 2014 and 2018, followed by declines in subsequent years. The increase in smaller plastic fragments represents a deterioration in environmental status and highlights the long recovery times expected to achieve Good Environmental Status for the litter quality element.

The amount of beach litter detected has decreased from 513 items per 100m of beach to 341 items per 100m of beach in 2024, a decrease of 33%. There has been a noted decrease of plastic in percentage terms from 91% to 84%. The volume of plastic in beach litter has decreased by 7% indicating that there is less plastic type-based litter being detected in the beach surveys. This suggests that current measures aimed at reducing plastic as a form of litter are working.



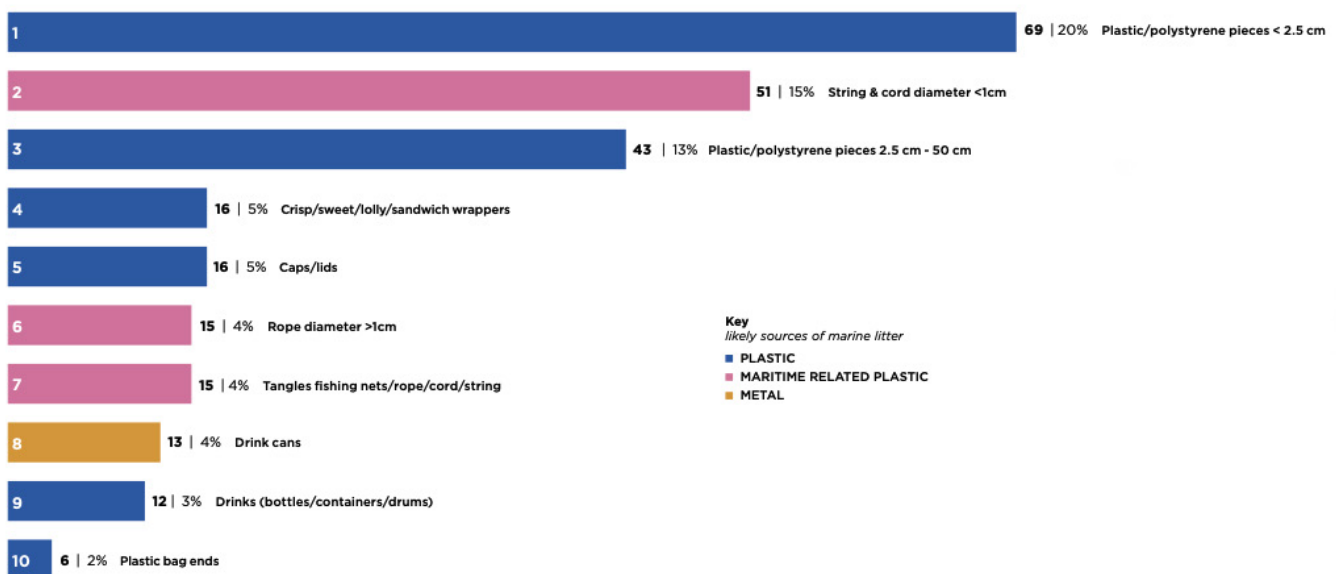
Figure 12: Volume of litter and the plastic percentage of that volume over the past ten years



Source: KNIB Link: [KNIB Marine Litter Report 2024.PDF](#)

- 1 One off events, such as the winter storms of 2014, can skew the data. It can also be influenced by very good weather, or if there has been a recent clean up.
- 2 Surveys were not carried out in NI during the period Spring-Autumn 2015.
- 3 Surveys could not be carried out in NI during the period Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions in line with Public Health guidelines.
- 4 Surveyors recorded a significant spike in small plastic pieces found on Rathlin in Summer 2023. This unusual occurrence led to the overall jump in percentage of plastic items found on our shores in 2024.

Figure 13: Breakdown of the average number of items per 100m of beach with a breakdown of the top ten types of waste present



Source: KNIB Link: [KNIB Marine Litter Report 2024.PDF](#)

Note: In 2024, the methodology for collecting and recording heavy duty gloves was under review and new data will be available in next year’s report.



Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment

DAERA will continue to monitor marine litter in accordance with OSPAR guidelines. This approach enables the detection of trends in both the quantity and types of litter, providing valuable insights into how future policy development can further reduce historic litter and prevent new litter from entering the natural environment.

Developments, Delays, or Successes

The increasing volume of smaller plastic fragments is a significant concern, as it indicates that larger pieces are breaking down into smaller particles. Over time, these fragments will further degrade into microplastics, which are far more difficult to detect. To address this emerging challenge, new methods for testing and recording such particles will need to be developed and implemented in the future.

Implementation and Future Action

Although the downward trend in the volume of marine litter detected on beaches is encouraging, continued monitoring is essential to assess the impact of the proposed Joint Litter Policy, covering both terrestrial and marine environments, which is expected to be developed during the 2027-2030 period. As more than 90% of marine litter originates from land, having a single overarching policy is critical. In addition, the detection and recording of microplastics will remain a priority, with new methods being tested and developed for future deployment.

Potential Data Gaps

Gaps in reported data have now been addressed, with both 2023 and 2024 results published on 11 November 2025. The next challenge will be to report on microplastics once reliable measurement methods have been developed.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

A combined Litter Strategy addressing both land-based and marine litter is scheduled for publication by the end of 2027. This integrated approach is expected to help reduce the overall litter problem. Microplastics remain a major concern, and greater emphasis will be placed on developing reliable methods to detect and measure their presence in the natural environment. Potential approaches include the use of beach core samples to identify microplastics on shorelines and the examination of tissue samples from deceased marine wildlife. However, no action can be taken until approved and standardised methods are developed and agreed upon.



Indicator 3d. Transitional and Coastal Water Classification Statistics.

Overview of Indicator

This indicator assesses the ecological, chemical, and overall status of NI's transitional (estuarine) and coastal waters under the Water Environment Regulations (NI) 2017. The assessment is based on monitoring data collected on a variety of quality elements that reflect the ecological status. These include flora (phytoplankton, macroalgae, angiosperms) and fauna (zoobenthos, fishes) as well as supporting physico-chemical (dissolved oxygen concentration, DIN) and hydromorphological components, specific pollutants, and high impact invasive species. Chemical status is assessed through monitoring of priority substances in water and biota. To facilitate comparison, chemical status was assessed based on a) priority substances excluding newly identified substances and legacy chemicals (uPBTs), b) priority substances including new chemicals but excluding uPBTs, and c) priority substances including new substances and uPBTs. Overall surface water status is determined by combining the results of ecological and chemical status results.

Environmental Trends

While ecological status has suggested no overall improvement over the past few years, an increase in the number of failing quality elements indicates deterioration. High nutrient DIN levels were responsible for many water bodies failing to achieve good ecological status. Failure to achieve good chemical status was due to the widespread occurrence of legacy chemicals (uPBTs) as well as some pesticides and herbicides. The main sources of nutrients and pollutants to transitional and coastal waters are direct wastewater discharges and diffuse agricultural inputs.

The quality elements driving classification relate to nutrients (DIN) and specific pollutants such as herbicides and pesticides which suggest agricultural pressures although urban (wastewater) inputs also affect water quality. This data contributes toward the identification of SWMI, which determines POMs required for RBMPs. The data also contributes toward nutrient and eutrophication assessments under the Urban Waste Water Treatment Regulations and the NAP Regulations. Implementation of measures under these initiatives aim to improve the ecological and chemical status of transitional and coastal waters.

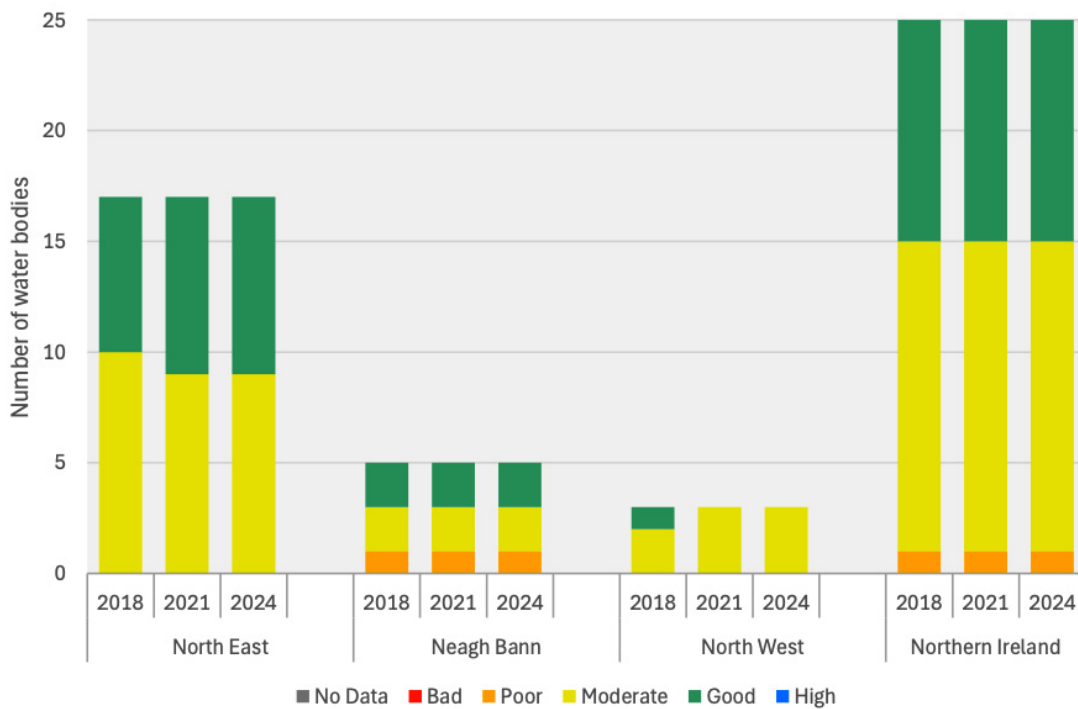
Ecological status is based on a range of quality elements, including biological and physico-chemical components. Numerous factors can influence these quality elements, which makes causal factors difficult to identify.



The use of multiple quality elements provides an integrated measure of status, which should reflect improvement due to the implementation of programmes of measures. Response to measures, however, may take time to show improvement.

Classification statistics have been available since 2015.

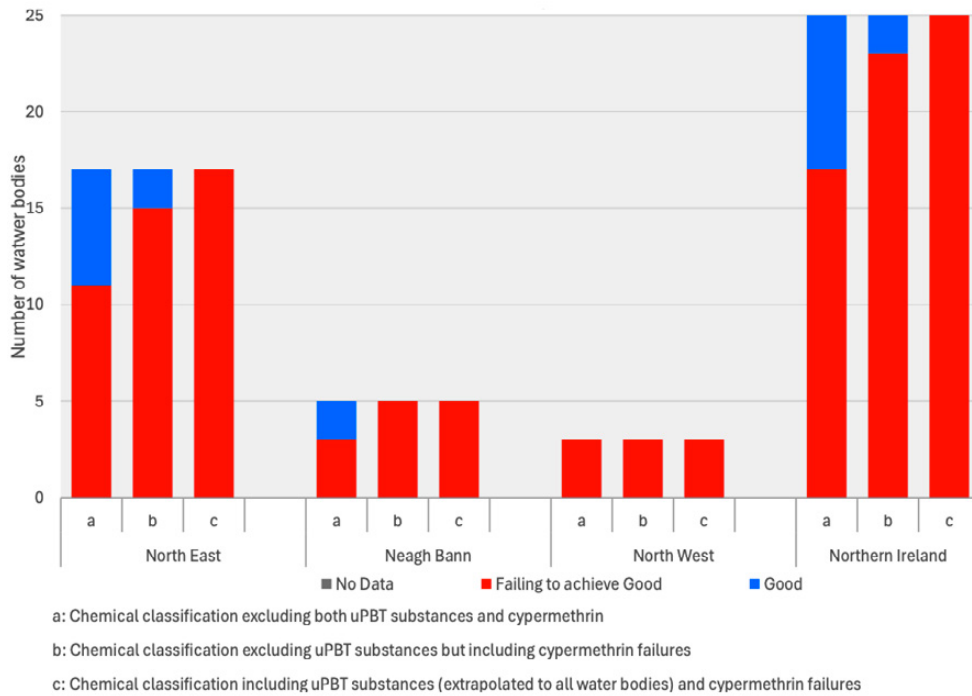
Figure 14: Transitional & coastal water body ecological status 2018, 2021 & 2024



Source: NIEA Link: [NIEA - WMU - ICP - NI Water Classification Statistics Report 2024.pdf](#)



Figure 15: Transitional and coastal water bodies chemical status 2024 displaying all 3 subgroups



Source: NIEA Link: [NIEA - WMU - ICP - NI Water Classification Statistics Report 2024.pdf](#)

No improvement in ecological status has been observed since 2018. Ten water bodies (40%) achieved good ecological status, 56% were at moderate status, and 4% were at poor status. Based on priority substances excluding newly identified substances and legacy chemicals (uPBTs), 44% of water bodies achieved good chemical status in 2018, this increased to 88% in 2021 but declined to 32% in 2024. This is possibly a reflection of improved monitoring over the period 2018-2024. Chemical status based on priority substances including new chemicals but excluding uPBTs showed that 32% of water bodies achieved good chemical status in 2021 but declined to 12% in 2024. Chemical status based on priority substances including new substances and uPBTs showed that all water bodies failed to achieve good chemical status. This is due to the widespread occurrence of legacy uPBT chemicals.

Overall surface water status for transitional and coastal waters, based on ecological status and chemical status showed that 40% of water bodies were at good status in 2018 but declined to 100% at less than good status in 2021 and 2024. This is due to the presence of legacy uPBT chemicals.

Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment

An indicator of ecological condition has been developed, which is based on biological and physico-chemical elements but excludes chemical pollutants.



Developments, Delays, or Successes

At the time of writing there are no notable developments, delays, or successes relating to the indicator.

Implementation and Future Action

Direct wastewater discharges and diffuse agricultural inputs remain as pressures affecting the ecological and chemical status of NI's transitional and coastal waters.

Potential Data Gaps

DIN appears to be a major factor responsible for many water bodies failing to achieve good ecological status. A DIN enrichment indicator has been developed to assess overall trends and whether nutrient values are increasing (worsening) or declining (improving).

Proposals for future data/indicator development

Currently, there are no proposals for new data collection or indicator development.

Overall Assessment of Outcome Indicators for Marine and Coastal Water Resources: Quality and Quantity

Existing bathing waters are performing reasonably well, with all but two sites meeting the target classification of Good or Excellent status. This reflects the continued prioritisation of bathing water quality in water quality improvement programmes. The addition of seven new sites is a positive development, driven by growing interest in open-water swimming; however, it introduces new water quality challenges that will be addressed through future Programmes of Measures under the Water Framework Regulations.

Litter remains a significant challenge. While there is evidence of improved plastic recycling, current data show an increase in smaller plastic fragments, consistent with the breakdown of larger plastics over time. This highlights the need to refine the litter metric, as smaller plastics can have greater ecological impacts, including ingestion by seabirds and entanglement.

Persistent 'forever chemicals' remain a concern across all water environments, with particularly stringent Environmental Quality Standards in marine waters. Rising nitrogen levels (DIN) in transitional and coastal waters are a cause for concern and must be addressed through a comprehensive Source-to-Sea approach. Similar upward trends in nitrate concentrations have also been observed in rivers, reinforcing the need for nutrient management measures.



Future Focus for Marine and Coastal Water Resources: Quality and Quantity

A Source-to-Sea approach will be essential for addressing water quality issues within this theme, ensuring strong alignment with Theme 2 (**Water Resources: Quality and Quantity**). Similarly, as marine litter primarily originates from land-based activities, an overarching Litter Strategy will be critical to achieving further progress. To support these objectives, DAERA has reorganised teams to strengthen the Source-to-Sea approach and allocated new resources to tackle water quality through the LNAP.

4. Local Environment Quality

Indicator 4a. LEAMS Indicator

Overview of Indicator

LEAMS (Local Environmental Audit & Management System) is a method of measuring litter and other indicators such as dog fouling in NI, Scotland and Wales and is published in the annual [Cleaner Neighbourhoods Report](#). LEAMS scores take account of how clean or littered a transect is: scores closer to 100 indicate better performance. Under the LEAMS system, 66 is the point at which performance is considered acceptable.

The LEAMS scoring system remains a credible indicator of the cleanliness of our streets across NI and has been used since 2016/17, providing reliable information and highlighting trends in littering levels and other environmental quality trends across NI. Consideration is underway to include specific SUP items in future surveys to measure the impact of the new SUP legislation. The consistency of litter found on our streets has remained almost the same between 2022 and 2024.

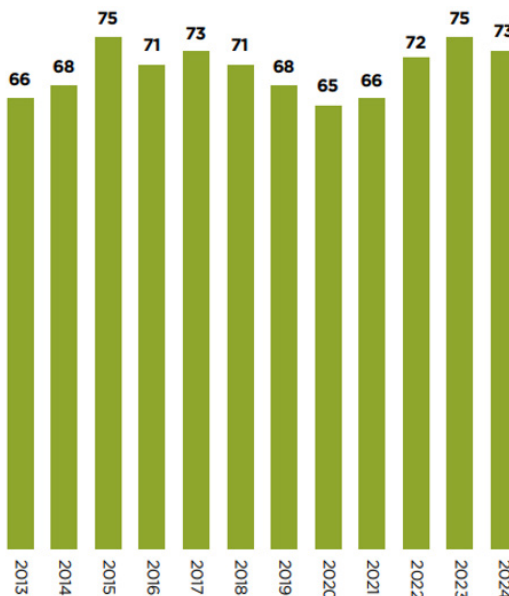
Environmental Trends

LEAMS scores reported in the annual Cleaner Neighbourhoods Report have varied very little since 2022. Littering is not getting worse, but collectively there remains more to do to improve the natural environment.

The LEAMS score in the most recent 2024/25 Cleaner Neighbourhoods Report was 73% and shows that littering has remained mostly unchanged since 2022 (change must be over 3% to be considered statistically significant). Annual reviews are carried out on data collected to ensure it is relevant and appropriate. Liaison is ongoing within DAERA to include specific SUP items in future surveys to measure the impact of the new SUP legislation.



Figure 16: The table below refers to annual LEAMS scores for NI from 2013-2024 (as reported in the CNS report.)



Source: KNIB Link: [Cleaner Neighbourhoods Report](#)

This year’s report is based on 1,100 transects. Samples informing this report have been collected from all NI councils. These 1,100 surveys give a good representation of NI, with a margin of error of +/- 3%. 2 The percentage reflects the number of transects surveyed where dog fouling was present. 3 For quality assurance purposes, in 2023, grades A and B+ (high passes) have been presented together.

LEAMS is an alternative method of measuring litter and other indicators which is used in NI, Scotland, and Wales. Unlike the pass/ fail ‘Performance Indicator’ LEAMS scores are generated by assigning a value to each grade (A=3 B=2 C=1 D=0), and then calculating the average value of all the grades assigned. This average is presented as a percentage of the total available points for the transects surveyed. It differs from the Performance Indicators, in that LEAMS scores take account of how clean or littered a transect is, rather than just whether it is a pass or fail. Scores closer to 100 indicate better performance. It is easier to set a target under the LEAMS system; 66 is the point at which performance is considered acceptable, as it equates with an average grade B.

Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment

KNIB delivers a range of DAERA-funded programmes aimed at tackling litter across NI, including Adopt-a-Spot, Eco-Schools, and the Big Spring Clean. In addition, KNIB manages initiatives such as the Green Flag Award for Parks, which supports environmental protection and enhances spaces for the benefit of local communities and wildlife.



Developments, Delays, or Successes

The LEAMS scores reported in the Cleaner Neighbourhoods Report demonstrate sustained improvement compared to pre-2022 levels. However, continued efforts are required to further enhance environmental quality and reduce littering across NI.

Implementation and Future Action

Littering remains a significant societal challenge in NI that requires action at multiple levels. Continued education, combined with strong community engagement and support, will be essential in driving further improvements and fostering long-term behavioural change.

Potential Data Gaps

At present, there are no identified data gaps, and all required information is available and up to date.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

KNIB conducts annual reviews of the format and content of data collected through the Cleaner Neighbourhoods Surveys to ensure it remains accurate, relevant, and fit for purpose.

Emerging initiatives such as the DRS, EPR Scheme, and new Single-Use Plastic legislation are expected to influence littering levels and may impact future LEAMS indicators.



SEO 2 - Healthy and Accessible Landscapes Everyone Can Connect with & Enjoy





SEO 2 - Healthy and Accessible Landscapes Everyone Can Connect with & Enjoy

5. Connecting People to the Environment: Landscapes, Seascapes & Natural Beauty

Indicator 5a. Number of green/blue flag sites

Overview of Indicator

Green Flag sites set the benchmark for quality in NI's parks and green spaces, providing a standard against which others are measured. The scheme not only recognises excellence but also encourages wider adoption of high environmental standards, promoting best practice in recreational green areas.

The Blue Flag concept originated in France in 1985, initially awarded to coastal municipalities meeting strict sewage treatment and bathing water quality criteria. Over time, it has evolved into a global symbol of environmental awareness and sustainable tourism, inspiring good practice among visitors, local communities, and site operators. Today, the Blue Flag is awarded not only to beaches but also to marinas and even individual boats, reinforcing its role as a benchmark for environmental excellence.

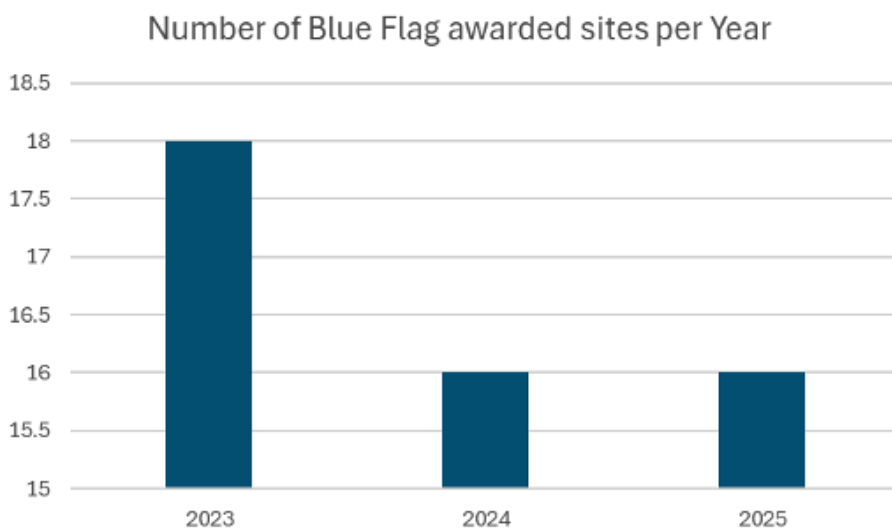
At present in NI, there are 134 internationally awarded Green and Blue Flag sites, made up of 118 Green Flag sites and 16 Blue Flag sites. The increase in internationally awarded sites shows an increased level of engagement and drive toward high-quality management of green and blue spaces.

Environmental Trends

Blue Flag site numbers have remained relatively steady in the last 3 years, showing a commitment from district councils to continue to invest in the high-quality management of blue spaces. There are a limited number of beaches/marinas in NI which meet the high criteria to apply for the award, therefore maintaining this number is a positive representation of the investment to meet international standards. The increase of Green Flag site numbers in recent years shows a growing commitment from both district councils and communities to protect and improve local green spaces.

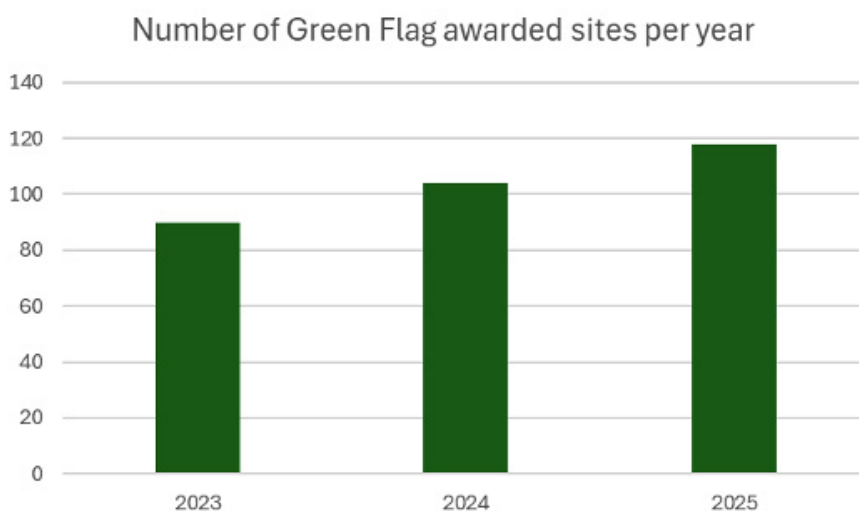


Figure 17:



Source: KNIB Link: [Blue Flag Award | Keep NI Beautiful](#)

Figure 18:



Source: KNIB Link: [Green Flag Award Keep NI Beautiful](#)

The increase of awarded green spaces from 104 in 2024 to 118 in 2025 resulted in 14 new green spaces working to achieve at least the benchmark standard of green space management that the Green Flag represents.

The maintenance of the natural environment across all awarded sites has improved or remained unchanged. Many awarded sites across NI already maintain a high level of environmental management so opportunities to improve are more marginal, however



many sites use the Green Flag programme as a platform to drive important environmental improvements.

All sites participating in the Blue Flag programme continue to drive environmental improvements year on year whilst complying with the baseline criteria of the programme which is already set to a high standard.

Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment

The Green and Blue Flag programmes mean that sites in NI have the opportunity to achieve the benchmark environmental management standard set out by these internationally recognised awards.

KNIB provides ongoing support to assist sites achieve these standards by conducting in person assessments of each awarded site and providing annual reports to site operators. KNIB also share best practice around improving the management of these spaces.

In 2024 KNIB partnered with Field Studies Ireland to offer a free nature wellbeing course to all Green Flag participants. The programme was designed to support a connection to local nature through place-based learning and outdoor education.

Developments, Delays, or Successes

KNIB successfully surpassed the target of 110 internationally awarded Green and Blue Flag sites, with a total of 134 sites being awarded in 2025.

Implementation and Future Action

All existing sites need support and guidance to continually improve their spaces beyond the benchmark standard set out by these awards, to enable meaningful improvements to the natural environment year on year. For example, the Field Studies Ireland course initially offered to Green Flag sites has now been offered to all Blue Flag operators free of charge and will be delivered in September 2025.

Having successfully surpassed the target of 110 internationally awarded Green and Blue Flag sites, KNIB will now focus on engaging with current Green and Blue Flag operators, to discuss meaningful support to drive additional improvements at the sites.

Potential Data Gaps

At present, there are no identified data gaps, and all required information is available and up to date.



Proposals for future data/indicator development

KNIB is considering options about using the programmes to offer district councils and other community-based organisations further support to drive improvements to the natural environment, which could in turn drive development of the data/indicator.

6. Connecting People to the Environment: Outdoor Recreation & Natural Space Provision

Indicator 6a. Percentage of Households with Access to Quality Natural Space >2ha and off-road trails within 400m

Overview of Indicator

Connecting people with nature is key to a thriving environment. Connection with nature during time spent outdoors is aligned with greater care and concern for biodiversity, landscapes and the environment and increased pro-nature conservation behaviours.

Outdoor recreation in nature brings additional benefits to society including improving health and well-being (exercise, social engagement, and mental well-being), increasing active travel, growing, and greening the economy, tackling inequality and enhancing education and learning. However, access to, and participation in outdoor recreation is not equal across society.

This Accessible Natural Space Indicator is designed to:

- Measure and monitor progress in expanding accessible natural space; and
- The data supports planning (e.g. housing, infrastructure, transport), gap analysis, resource allocation, site assessments, and demographic analysis (e.g. health and deprivation etc.).

The data is accessible and visually engaging and published on Spatial NI (for stakeholders) and OutmoreNI (for consumers). Annually it will monitor where new areas of accessible natural space and trails have been created or new links to these, increasing the percentage of the population with access. It will also show where access has been lost. All district councils have included the need to increase outdoor recreation provision within their Community Plans. Positive examples developed through Community Planning partnerships demonstrate progress toward this local ambition. These include:



- [Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon](#) - Connected Community Plan & Place Plans: these include actions for green spaces, active travel, and biodiversity enhancement.
- New trail networks in [Newry, Mourne and Down](#).
- [Causeway Coast & Glens](#) - Development of greenways and sustainable tourism.

Open space strategies and outdoor recreation plans have been drawn up for a number of regional areas including district councils and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

This indicator is also used as a Wellbeing Framework Indicator in the latest PfG 2024-2027.

Environmental Trends

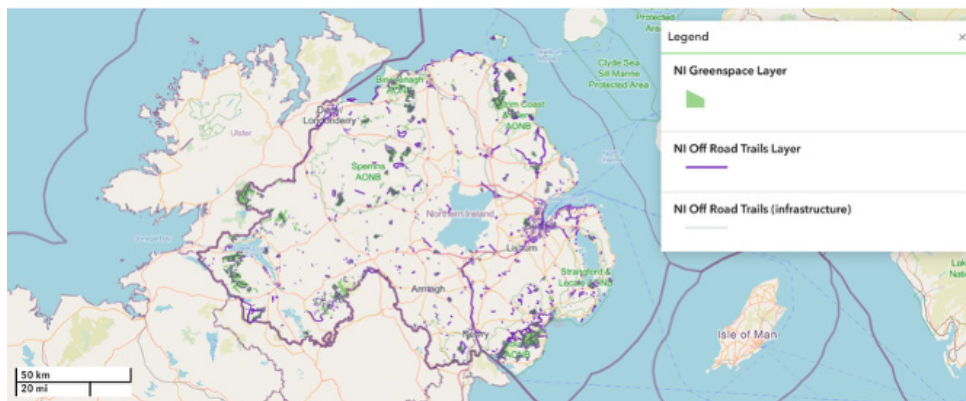
The indicator shows that the percentage of households with accessible natural space within 400 metres has decreased since the comparison year 2023. 47.8% of households are within 400m of green space >2ha, and off-road trails in 2025.

The GreenspaceNI Map for April 2025 records 86,012ha of green space over 2ha and 3,187km (1,980 miles) of off-road trails. The results from the April 2025 analysis found that:

- 47.8% of households are within 400m of greenspace >2ha or off-road trails. This is a decrease of 0.1% from 2024 (47.9%). The 2023 baseline was also 47.9%.
- 74.7% of households are within 1km of green space >2ha or off-road trails. This is a decrease of 0.1% from 2024 (74.8%). This was unchanged from the 2023 baseline of 74.8%.
- 84.3% of households are within 2km of green space >20ha or off-road trails. This is similar to 2024 and the 2023 baseline.

Access for rural populations also remains static, with 19.3% of rural households within 400 metres of greenspace or off-road trails, unchanged between 2024 and 2025.

Figure 19

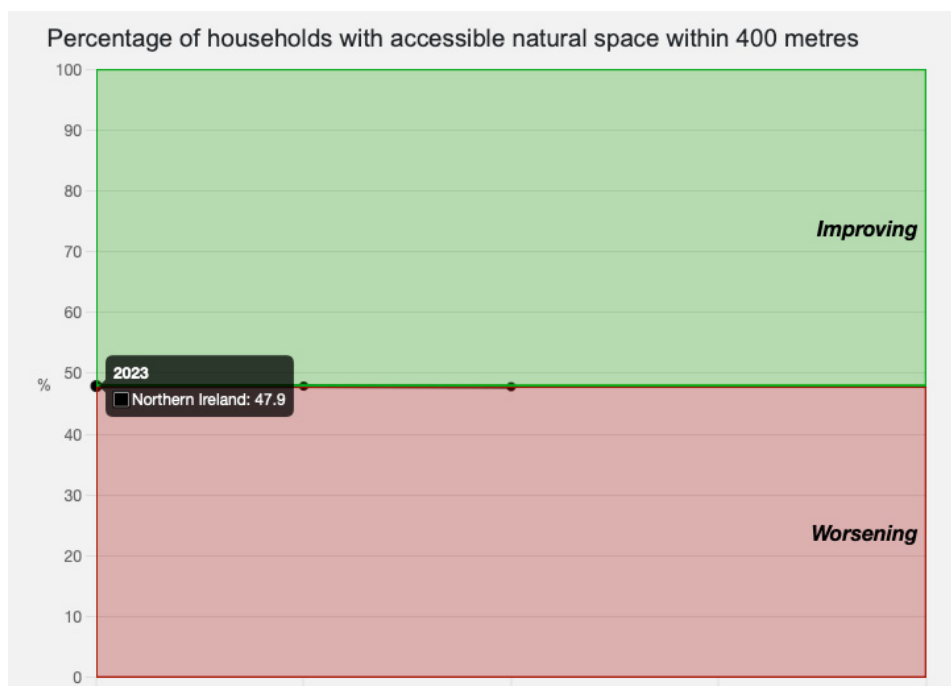


Source: Greenspace NI **Link:** [GreenspaceNI Public Dashboard](#)



This is a collated map of all accessible natural space spanning two hectares or more, as well as off-road trails throughout NI. It encompasses natural spaces accessible to the public with permission from the landowners, including urban and rural parks, forests, beaches, and off-road trails. The GreenspaceNI Map has been developed by harmonising, combining, and enhancing datasets provided by data suppliers. These include Ordnance Survey of NI; DAERA; Outscape; all 11 district councils; DfC; National Trust; NI Water; NI Housing Executive; Sustrans; Woodland Trust; Ulster Wildlife; and Waterways Ireland.

Figure 20: Percentage of households with accessible natural space within 400 metres



Source: Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

Link: [PfG Wellbeing Framework - Outdoor recreation](#)

Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment

Several Environment Fund grants have been awarded to support the creation of new paths and areas of accessible green space, contributing to improved outdoor recreation opportunities across NI. As part of this investment, three newly constructed trails have been included in the 2025 statistics, further expanding the network of off-road routes available to the public.

In addition, an initial draft review of the ORAP has been completed by Outscape. This review is intended to inform consideration of the next steps required to progress activity and ensure continued development of outdoor recreation infrastructure and strategy.



Developments, Delays, or Successes

The indicator figure can fluctuate due to changes in accessible green spaces and paths. Improvements occur when new spaces, trails, or connecting links are created, while closures or the development of new housing without accessible areas can lead to deterioration. Action will be required to increase this figure.

Progress has been delayed in several key areas, including the establishment of a new SORG, development of an updated ORAP, implementation of coordinated measures to improve access on government-owned land, and the creation of Council Community Trail Networks. These delays are primarily due to limited staffing resources and the lack of available scientific staffing lists.

Additionally, there has been no advancement on the proposed access legislative review, which is widely regarded as a critical step in overcoming barriers to significant improvements in this indicator.

Implementation and Future Action

In the coming year, DAERA will seek to fill several EIP access-related vacancies to enable progress on key priorities. These include the establishment of a new SORG, development of an updated ORAP, implementation of coordinated measures to improve access on government-owned land, and the creation of funding mechanisms to support new trail development. Additionally, work will focus on advancing Council Community Trail Network Plans.

NIEA will also seek clarity on opportunities within the SAP to support farmers who provide public access. This will include ensuring that farmers offering access are not penalised in relation to farm payment eligibility, thereby encouraging wider participation in access provision.

Potential Data Gaps

It is possible that not all green spaces and routes have been captured on the GreenspaceNI Map. Access providers and members of the public are therefore encouraged to identify and report any access routes or accessible green spaces that may not yet be recorded. This ongoing engagement will help ensure the map remains comprehensive and up to date, supporting accurate monitoring and planning.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

Options are currently being considered to enhance the GreenspaceNI Map by incorporating additional information on the accessibility and quality of green spaces, as well as the inclusion of accessible blue spaces.



7. The Next Generation

Indicator 7a. No Indicator Available at Present

Overview of Indicator

Although there is currently no indicator for the Next Generation theme, this is actively being explored. DAERA is considering the development of indicators for this section of the EIP in collaboration with KNIB, DAERA's delivery partner for initiatives such as Eco-Schools and the Adopt-a-Spot campaign. These indicators would help measure engagement and impact among younger generations in fostering environmental stewardship.

8. Sustainable Settlements

Indicator 8a. Percentage of Journeys Under Two Miles Made by Walking or Cycling

Overview of Indicator

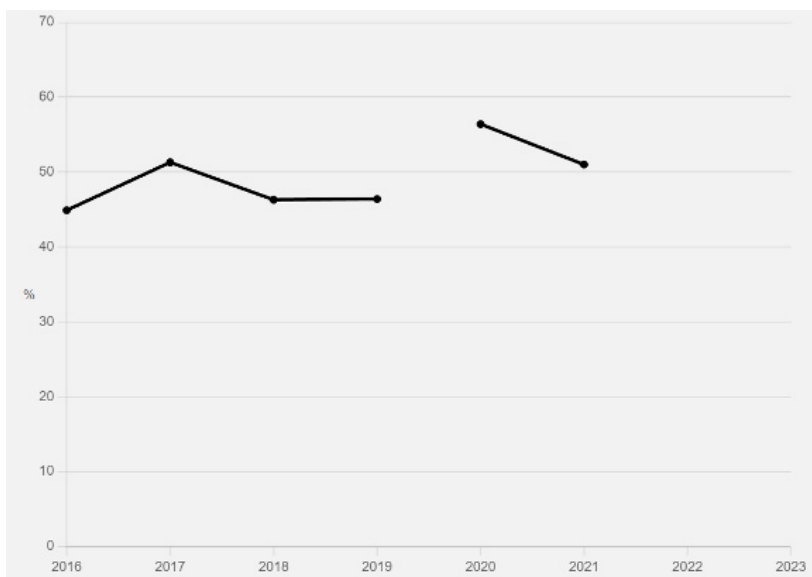
This indicator measures the percentage of journeys under two miles made by walking or cycling, supporting efforts to promote sustainable travel and reduce emissions. It aligns with the Active Travel indicator within the Healthier Lives domain of the PfG Wellbeing Framework, reinforcing the link between active travel, improved public health, and environmental outcomes.

Environmental Trends

The latest data available for this indicator is from 2021, and analysis shows that the measure has remained relatively static over the period 2017-2021. This suggests limited progress in increasing the proportion of short journeys (under two miles) made by walking or cycling, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to encourage active travel.



Figure 21: Percentage of Journeys under two miles made by walking or cycling



Source: Travel Survey for NI **Link:** [tsni-in-depth-report-2021-tables.xlsx](#)

Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment

Work is ongoing on the majority of short-term schemes within the Belfast Cycling Network DP, with the Active Travel DP currently being finalised with a view to publication by the end of 2025/26. The Carlingford Greenway has been completed and officially opened in September 2025, while construction is ongoing for the Newtownards to Bangor Greenway. In addition, DfI officials continue to engage with all district councils to understand their long-term ambitions for delivery of greenways.

Developments, Delays, or Successes

At present, there are no identified data gaps, and all required information is available and up to date.

Implementation and Future Action

Looking ahead, priorities for the coming year include finalising and publishing the Active Travel DP, continuing delivery of schemes within the Belfast Cycling Network, and strengthening collaboration with district councils to align long-term ambitions. These actions aim to enhance connectivity, promote active travel as an attractive mode of transport for shorter journeys, and support wider environmental and health objectives. Implementation will remain guided by the overarching strategy and DPs, ensuring sustained progress toward creating sustainable settlements and promoting healthier lifestyles.



Potential Data Gaps

The implementation of improved active travel networks remains a long-term strategic DfI priority. Implementation will continue in line with the overarching strategy and associated DPs.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

The latest Travel Survey for NI data for 2022 and 2023 is expected to be published before the end of the current financial year.

9. Historic Environment

Indicator 9a. The Condition Survey of Listed Buildings

Overview of Indicator

The chosen indicator for this outcome is the condition research on listed buildings, which is conducted every ten years to a high level of statistical confidence. This data provides a strong indication of the impact of activity in this area. While not based on a statistical survey, the Heritage at Risk NI (HARNI) register offers an annual measure of progress and is published as an official statistic in the NI Environmental Statistics Report each May.

The indicator delivers a clear statistical snapshot of the condition of NI's listed buildings. The survey is based on a random statistical sample and includes additional information on building type, location, and ownership categories. The 2024 survey also assessed condition relative to established climate change indicators, creating an important link with NICCAP3, Annex IV: People and the Built Environment.

Environmental Trends

The Condition Survey of Listed Buildings is conducted every ten years rather than annually. It is a statistical survey of approximately 9,000 listed buildings in NI, based on a random sample. The current methodology has been in place since 2014, following a similar survey in 2004 that included internal condition recording. A new survey is scheduled for 2034 to repeat the exercise. Between 2014 and 2024, there has been a c.16 percentage point decline in the proportion of listed buildings rated 'Very good/good' or 'Average', highlighting a concerning decline in the Historical Environment (HE).

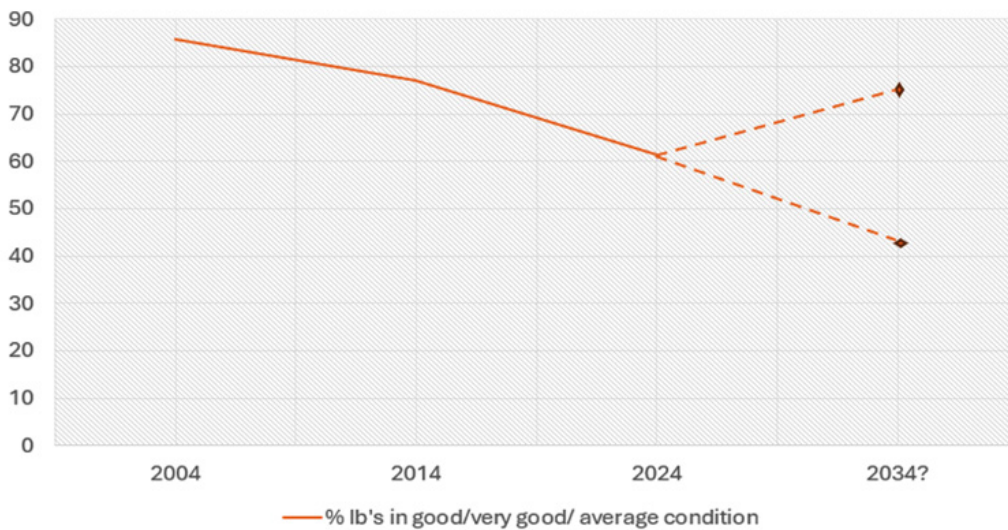
Recent data from the Heritage at Risk register reinforces this concern. Between March 2023 and March 2024, the number of buildings on the register increased from 1,037 to 1,111. This suggests that the condition of historic assets is deteriorating. Overall, the indicator



demonstrates that trends are moving in the wrong direction, conditions are worsening, and this decline appears to be accelerating.

Although Heritage at Risk data is not based on a systematic survey and therefore lacks statistical precision, it has shown a marked increase since 2019 (during the Covid period). This may indicate a longer-term trend and could also reflect improved recording practices.

Figure 22: NI Listed buildings in average or good condition

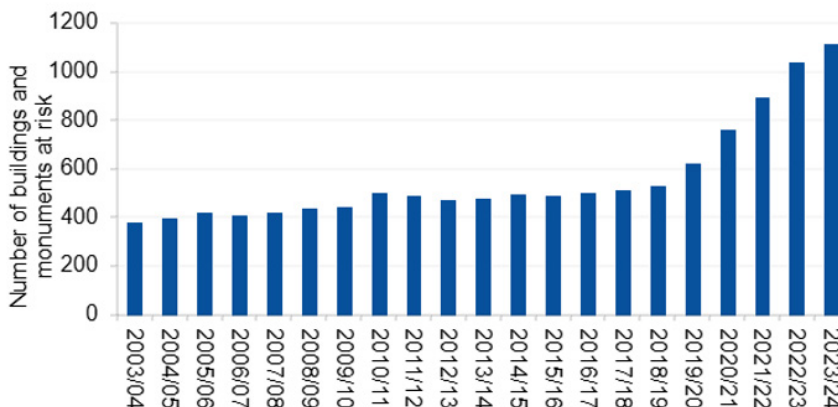


Source: Historic Environment Division

Link: [Survey on the Condition of Listed Buildings | Department for Communities](#)

Graph represents the decline in the condition of listed buildings from 2004-2024. The dashed lines are future predictions to 2034 based on whether underinvestment is continued or reversed.

Figure 23: NI Number of buildings and monuments at risk



Source: NI Environmental Statistics Report (Table 7.3)

Link: [ni-environmental-statistics-report-2025-data-tables.xlsx](#)



The natural environment is intrinsically linked with the built environment, although the Condition Survey of Listed Buildings does not directly measure or evaluate impacts on nature. At a basic level, carbon emissions from buildings affect the natural environment, while sustainable building materials, such as thatch, are derived from it.

Statistical evidence from the latest survey indicates a deterioration in the HE. The headline finding shows that 61.3% of listed buildings were rated as 'Very Good/Good' or 'Average' representing a 15.6 percentage point reduction compared to the baseline survey in 2014/15 (76.9%). This also reflects an 8.8 percentage point decline from the figure reported in the Boyd Report (2004/05), although caution is advised in making direct comparisons between reports for different time periods due to changes in the data sample.

This trend demonstrates that progress is not moving in the right direction and highlights the need for targeted action to reverse this decline.

Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment

In respect of the HE, this data, along with a survey of owners to understand why sufficient investment is not being made, will inform a business case looking at the potential to stimulate investment in this area.

Developments, Delays, or Successes

DfC is developing a Heritage Policy for NI for the first time. This will be subject to public consultation in the coming months, following the SEA which is currently underway. DfC has also supported stakeholders to develop a publication, Heritage Delivers 2025, using statistics and case studies to increase public awareness of the benefits of the HE and the risks that it faces, which is due to be published in the New Year.

Implementation and Future Action

The reported progress indicates a decline in the condition of listed buildings. Both the HE policy and the five-year Business Case to Stimulate Investment in the HE, which are currently being developed, aim to reverse this trend. The Business Case, scheduled for development in the coming year, will prioritise innovative solutions that deliver multiple PfG objectives.

A key area of focus will be research commissioned to explore revitalising town centres by reusing vacant historic buildings, thereby addressing the housing shortage while preserving heritage assets. This approach seeks to integrate heritage conservation with wider social and economic priorities.



DfC continues to provide timely responses to consultations on the HE and is actively pursuing opportunities to improve access and deliver outcomes aligned with the PfG at Monuments in State Care. In addition, efforts are being made to improve the availability of heritage skills, which are essential for the conservation and maintenance of historic assets. A report on the Protocol for the Care of the Government Historic Estate has also been published, providing guidance on best practice for managing publicly owned heritage properties.

Potential Data Gaps

Several factors are influencing the growing number of heritage assets at risk. The state of the economy is a major contributor. The economic downturn following the 2008 financial crash had a significant impact on NI's economy, and subsequent challenges such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis have added further pressure. These conditions have affected decisions to invest in or maintain existing properties.

The decline of high street retail, driven by the rise of online shopping, has resulted in many historic commercial properties becoming vacant. Similarly, restructuring within the banking sector has led to the closure of numerous bank buildings as services move online. Public houses and other hospitality venues have also closed in some areas due to economic viability issues, leaving additional historic buildings unused.

Rising inflation and interest rates have increased the cost of construction and repair work, while property market values have not risen at the same pace - particularly for buildings already in poor condition. This widens the "heritage deficit," the gap between the cost of repair and the market value of a structure, creating a strong disincentive for investment. In addition, the availability of skilled contractors with expertise in heritage conservation is limited, and owners often lack access to specialist advice and guidance. Statutory heritage protections, whether real or perceived, can also act as barriers to investment and reuse.

The reported condition data is collected at ten-year intervals, making it difficult to isolate the short-term impact of policy changes. To address this gap, Heritage at Risk data is used as a proxy measure. However, this data is based on monitoring and awareness by staff and contractors rather than a comprehensive survey and therefore lacks statistical accuracy. There are currently no proposals to change this approach.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

The Condition Survey will be repeated in 2034, ten years after the last survey, in line with previous research cycles. Heritage at Risk recording is an ongoing task, and there are currently no plans to refine the existing approach.



There are also no plans to improve or refine this indicator. While it does not report on the condition of monuments or underwater archaeology, the overall indicator provides a clear picture of the health of the HE. This will be supplemented in annual reporting by data on monuments where available. All scheduled monuments are visited on a five-year cyclical basis, and their condition is recorded. In addition, condition reporting on all 186 Monuments in State Care is carried out regularly.



SEO 3 - Thriving, Resilient & Connected Nature & Wildlife





SEO 3 - Thriving, Resilient & Connected Nature & Wildlife

10. Protecting Nature on Land

Indicator 10a. Northern Ireland Woodland Cover

Overview of Indicator

This indicator demonstrates the area of woodland in NI. Increasing woodland is a priority for DAERA. The current forestry strategy, [NI Forestry - A Strategy for Sustainability & Growth](#), sets out the long-term objective to increase woodland cover.

Environmental Trends

The extent of woodland cover in NI has increased during the reporting period. Figure 24 shows the extent of new planting of both conifer and broadleaf species in 2024/25. This represents an increase of 502 hectares on the previous year. Figure 25 demonstrates the area of woodland in both public and private ownership.

This expansion has strengthened carbon sequestration capacity, created new woodland habitats, and enhanced biodiversity as part of a broader nature recovery network. It has also contributed to flood mitigation, improved water quality, and is recognised and safeguarded as an essential component of the natural environment, valued by all citizens across NI.



Figure 24: Area of new planting by forest type, UK, 2020/21 to 2024/25

thousand hectares

Year ending 31 March	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	UK
Conifers					
2020/21	0.18	0.08	6.94	0.07	7.27
2021/22	0.27	0.18	6.34	0.09	6.88
2022/23	0.26	0.47	5.53	0.07	6.33
2023/24	0.43	0.28	8.72	0.04	9.47
2024/25	0.68	0.28	4.55	0.12	5.64
Broadleaves					
2020/21	1.87	0.21	3.72	0.22	6.02
2021/22	1.98	0.44	4.14	0.45	7.01
2022/23	2.87	0.72	2.66	0.38	6.63
2023/24	4.11	0.36	6.32	0.39	11.18
2024/25	5.08	0.56	3.91	0.38	9.94
Total					
2020/21	2.05	0.29	10.66	0.28	13.29
2021/22	2.26	0.62	10.48	0.54	13.89
2022/23	3.13	1.19	8.19	0.45	12.96
2023/24	4.55	0.64	15.04	0.43	20.66
2024/25	5.77	0.84	8.47	0.50	15.58

Source: Forestry Commission, Forestry England, Scottish Forestry, Forestry and Land Scotland, Welsh Government, Forest Service, grant schemes

Link: [Forestry Statistics 2025](#)

- Notes:
1. Private sector new planting figures are based on grant-supported new planting and (where possible) with estimates for areas planted without grant aid.
 2. Figures for grant-aided planting relate to areas for which grants were paid during the year.
 3. Estimates for areas planted without grant aid are believed to be underreported and, as a result, the reported figures are likely to underestimate the true level of planting activity. For England, woodland planting funded by sources other than the Countryside Stewardship Woodland Creation Grant, the Woodland Carbon Fund and the HS2 Woodland Fund include planting supported by the Woodland Trust, by the Environment Agency, by Natural England, by the Community Forest Trust, by the Northern Forest and land acquired by the National Forest Company.
 4. The planting season lies both sides of 31 March, and the weather can cause planting to be advanced or delayed. 5. Includes woodland formed by natural colonisation (where known).



Figure 25: Area of woodland by ownership, UK, 2021 to 2025

Ownership/ year	thousand hectares				
	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	UK
Public sector woodland					
2021	214	115	467	62	858
2022	214	115	469	62	860
2023	214	115	469	62	859
2024	214	115	468	62	859
2025	214	115	468	62	860
Private sector woodland					
2021	1,107	195	1,009	55	2,365
2022	1,116	195	1,019	55	2,387
2023	1,120	196	1,027	56	2,399
2024	1,125	197	1,033	56	2,412
2025	1,130	198	1,041	57	2,427
Total woodland					
2021	1,321	310	1,476	117	3,223
2022	1,330	310	1,488	118	3,247
2023	1,334	311	1,496	118	3,258
2024	1,339	312	1,501	118	3,271
2025	1,345	313	1,510	119	3,286

Source: Forestry Commission, Forestry England, Scottish Forestry, Forestry and Land Scotland, Welsh Government, Natural Resources Wales, Forest Service, National Forest Inventory

Link: [Forestry Statistics 2025](#)

- Notes:
1. Public sector: Forestry England, Forestry and Land Scotland, Natural Resources Wales, Forest Service (NI). NRW estimates only relate to the WGWE.
 2. Private sector: all other woodland. Includes woodland managed by NRW outside the WGWE, other publicly owned woodland (e.g., owned by district councils) and privately owned woodland.
 3. Figures for England, Wales and Scotland are based on data obtained from the National Forest Inventory (NFI) and adjusted for new planting, but at present no adjustment is made for woodland recently converted to another land use. Further information on how the figures have been estimated is available in Chapter 10: Sources & Methodology.
 4. NI figures are obtained from the NI Woodland Register.
 5. There may be a delay between changes in woodland ownership occurring and the changes being reflected in the statistics. 6. Areas on 31 March.



Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment

Forest Service, within DAERA, continued to deliver the 'Forests for our Future' Programme with the aim of planting 18 million trees or 9,000 hectares of new woodland between 2020 and 2030. Forest Service supported landowners to plant trees and manage existing woodlands by providing grant aid towards the cost of the work. The creation of new woodlands was grant aided through the Small Woodland Grant Scheme and the Forest Expansion Scheme.

Developments, Delays, or Successes

Since the launch of Forests for our Future in 2020, about 4 million trees have been planted, creating nearly 2,000 hectares of new woodland by 31 March 2025. The Tree Planting Action Plan, (announced by the Minister in October 2025) aims to identify actions that will make land available for tree planting and to successfully encourage landowners to afforest. The Plan will highlight key actions to deliver the 12% forest cover by 2050 in support of forestry's contribution to biodiversity and net zero targets. A Strategic Outline Business Case is in development to enable future afforestation at increased rates over the second carbon budget period.

Implementation and Future Action

Forest Service has a 2025-26 Business Plan target to create 600ha of new woodland by (i) supporting landowners to plant new woodland through forestry grant schemes and (ii) acquiring land for afforestation on public forest estate by 31 March 2026.

Potential Data Gaps

An exercise to establish the scale and scope of woodland creation delivered by schemes outside of those funded by Forest Service will be developed to establish if there is a data gap.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

At present, there are no proposals for new data collection or indicator development.

Indicator 10b. Peatland Conserved/Restored

Overview of Indicator

Peatland habitats currently cover approximately 12% of NI's land area; however, the majority are in a degraded condition, resulting in reduced biodiversity and significant carbon emissions - estimated at around 2 million tonnes annually.

Restoring peatlands to functioning ecosystems not only mitigates carbon emissions but also provides a nature-based solution for carbon sequestration. In addition, peatland restoration



supports the wider commitment to protect 30% of land and sea by 2030, contributing to climate resilience and biodiversity recovery.

Environmental Trends

In 2025, works to help restore 453 hectares of peatlands were completed with the assistance of DAERA Funding. Other peatland restoration projects continue to be progressed including through funding from the DAERA Environment Fund; Shared Island Funds and PEACEPLUS. Whilst there is currently limited collation of peatland restoration data across Northern Ireland, the natural environment has improved.

Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment.

The first NI Peatland Strategy was published on 17 September 2025. This sets out a framework to restore, conserve and manage peatlands over the next 2 decades.

Developments, Delays, or Successes

DAERA is currently developing mapping to identify peatland areas, and this can be used to prioritise sites (pending landowner buy in).

Implementation and Future Action

Peatland restoration continues to upscale in NI. Funding is currently provided until 2028 which aims to deliver circa 12,000ha of peatland restoration. This upscaling is providing capacity building in the sector, which needs to be maintained with future committed funding streams.

Potential Data Gaps

Recording of restoration activity requires consistency of approach. There is a further requirement to develop an evidence base to determine the scale which the interventions have improved the peatlands that have been restored.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

DAERA is developing a comprehensive mapping and database system to record restoration activities. To ensure the effectiveness of these interventions, an extensive and well-supported monitoring framework is required. The delivery of these actions under the Peatland Strategy will depend on the availability of DAERA staff resources, and staff bids are currently being prepared to support this work.



Indicator 10c. Condition of Features within Terrestrial ASSIs (includes freshwater sites)

Overview of Indicator

Identifying and protecting areas of special nature and Earth Science (geological) interest has been a cornerstone of nature conservation action on land in NI over the last 50 years. Areas which are particularly important for certain species, habitats or their Earth science significance have been formally designated in accordance with a number of pieces of national and international legislation.

Protected sites have specific qualifying features of interest. A site will have at least one feature of interest, and some sites have multiple features. To comply with the parent legislation, regular monitoring of, and reporting on, the features is required, to assess the condition of the site features. The condition of the features thus provides a measure of the health of our best natural assets and informs actions required to improve them. Protected sites condition has been a primary indicator for the state of biodiversity (including for NI Environmental Statistics Report and PfG). It is a key biodiversity indicator for the current PfG 2024-2027 'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most'.

Environmental Trends

The data does not present a positive picture of the condition of our biodiversity and most important places for nature. The trend is stable, with most of our habitat features in unfavourable condition. The time intervals of monitoring (6-year monitoring cycle) and the time it takes for the condition of some features to improve with the correct intervention, means that improving the status can be a slow process. Unless we address the drivers of biodiversity loss, put effective management in place across these protected areas, and develop appropriate incentives for nature-friendly farming, making progress on this target will be very challenging.

The data will be derived from annually published statistics on condition of reported features within Protected Sites. As this indicator is for terrestrial features including fresh water, further analysis is required to separate marine related data from the figures.

Table 5.2b in the Environmental Statistic report provides the recently published data for all feature types.



Figure 26:

Feature Type	Number of Features	Number of Features in Favourable Condition	Proportion Favourable %
Habitats			
Bogs	53	7	13%
Coastal	52	20	38%
Fen, marsh & swamp	89	26	29%
Freshwater	58	17	29%
Grasslands	103	63	61%
Heathlands	42	4	10%
Inland Rock	16	11	69%
Marine	46	40	87%
Woodlands	80	2	3%
Habitats Total	539	190	35%
Species			
Birds	369	231	63%
Fish	9	4	44%
Fungi	14	8	57%
Invertebrates	156	76	49%
Marine Mammals	7	4	57%
Non-Vascular Plants	35	19	54%
Terrestrial Mammals	11	9	82%
Vascular Plants	70	37	53%
Species Total	671	388	58%
Earth Science			
Earth Science	204	190	93%
Earth Science Total	204	190	93%
Total	1,414	768	54%

Source: NIEA & DAERA Marine and Fisheries Division

Link: [NI Environmental Statistics Report 2025 Data Tables](#)

The data suggests at best an unchanged picture, though there has been a slight decline in the average percentage condition of protected features across the range of habitats and species. However, there are considerable differences across habitat types.

Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment

On Land - NIEA is continuing to work with landowners and other stakeholders to ensure that management of protected areas is in place. In 2024/25, the area of terrestrial protected sites under management in NI was recorded as at least 25,710ha. A range of initiatives and delivery mechanisms, which include potential funding, have been identified to help achieve favourable condition for terrestrial sites. This includes the continuation of the Environmental Farming Scheme Higher Level agreements which commenced in early 2018 and the Management of Sensitive Site (MoSS) programme which delivers bespoke and targeted management, in partnership with landowners, to work towards favourable condition of ASSI features. NIEA continue to provide support to the two INTERREG VA Habitats projects delivering a series of conservation management plans and conservation actions for a range of cross border sites.



NIEA is working with district councils to protect priority habitats and species advising on development control and new area plans. It is developing working examples on the most effective way of measuring Natural Capital to ensure that the full benefits of natural assets are realised which will ultimately inform business cases and more nature-positive policy development.

NIEA is working with DAERA's grant-aid budget and external EU and Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) funding to manage designated sites and priority habitats and species. In 2023 we saw the role out of a new Environment Fund cycle which incorporates various environmental improvement projects many of which are focused on protected sites. During 2024/25 as part of the Strategic Strand of the Environment Fund, 40 Letters of Offer were issued to applicants totalling over £10.1m and close to £0.3m to support 12 projects under the Water Quality Challenge Fund.

A Peatland Challenge Fund Competition for 2024/27 was launched in May 2024, under the EF grant programme, with financial support for this fund from the Irish Government's Shared Island Fund Initiative.

Developments, Delays, or Successes

There has been a delay in developing the necessary strategy and framework for effective habitat management and protection measures, as set out in the OEP Protected Sites Review. This will need to be addressed by an integrated programme across DAERA, and the filling of key vacancies to take this work forward.

Implementation and Future Action

The evidence indicates that current progress is insufficient. This is linked to the 30x30 target for protected areas which will require measurement and reporting of management effectiveness, 'Management Effectiveness of Protected and Conserved Areas' (MEPCA).

Potential Data Gaps

Work continues to address any gaps in monitoring of protected site features and examining other methodologies for condition assessments and reducing monitoring burden.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

Condition statistics are published annually in the NI Environmental Statistics Report, and we would anticipate this to continue being the case with publication in May 2026 also including the refined breakdown to reflect this indicator.



Indicator 10d. Wild Bird Population in Northern Ireland

Overview of Indicator

An indicator on change in wild bird populations is currently based on the 56 most widespread wild bird species. NI's wild bird population is monitored as part of the UK British Trust for Ornithology (BTO)/ Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) /JNCC Breeding Bird Survey, which is undertaken annually at almost 4,000 sites (1km grid squares) across the UK. 128 sites were covered in NI during 2023, an increase in coverage over 2022.

The Breeding Bird Survey is not designed to cover marine species and hence only terrestrial and freshwater species, or populations of those species (e.g. Cormorant), are included in the indicator. There is further population trend analysis by habitat.

Environmental Trends

Most recent analysed data reflect trends up to and including 2023. The data is best looked at as a time-trend series as there are variable fluctuations year on year. The indicator shows that overall, wild bird abundance in NI is at a similar level to that in the mid-1990s when the Breeding Bird Survey started.

Following an initial increase, a steady, shallow decline has been occurring since the mid-2000s, but the smoothed index value in 2023 is still 3% higher than in 1996. There is a sustained decline in species associated with farmland and a more modest increase in woodland species. It is important to note that the 56 species on which these trends are derived are mostly generalist species rather than those with more specialised ecological requirements.

Figure 27: Wild bird populations in Northern Ireland, 1996 - 2023, 56 species

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001*	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Index (1996 = 100) Unsmoothed	100	119	112	103	136		117	128	106	130	131	124	117	121
Index (1996 = 100) Smoothed	100	110	116	119	122	123	123	124	124	126	127	126	124	122
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020*	2021	2022	2023
Index (1996 = 100) Unsmoothed	117	115	111	109	114	113	105	112	98	106		92	95	85
Index (1996 = 100) Smoothed	120	118	116	114	113	112	110	107	104	101	99	99	100	103

Source: BTO & NIEA

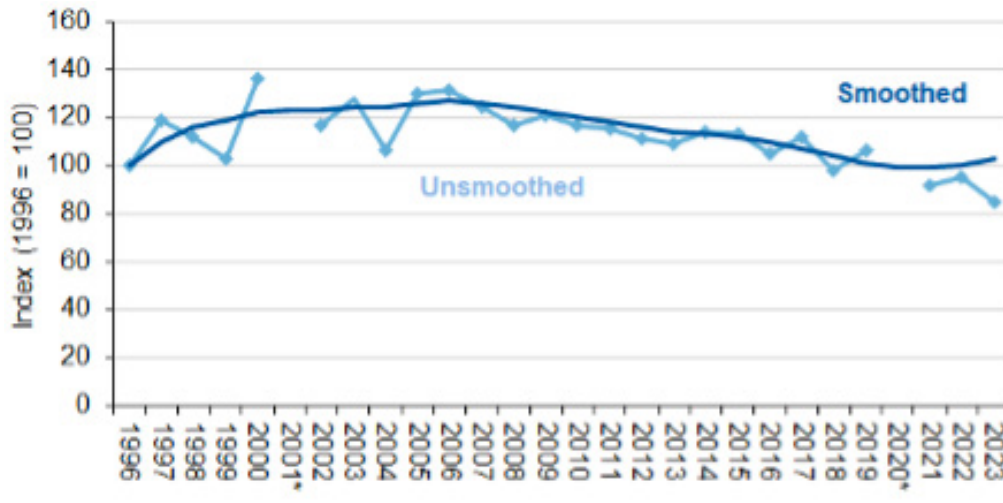
Link: [NI Environmental Statistics Report 2025](#)

Note: Smoothed species population trend calculated using the British Bird Survey protocol of a smoothing spline to reduce the effect of annual fluctuations.

*No unsmoothed index values for 2001 or 2020 due to foot-and-mouth outbreak and Covid-19 impacts on data collection.



Figure 28: Change to wild bird populations in Northern Ireland, 1996 - 2023, 56 species

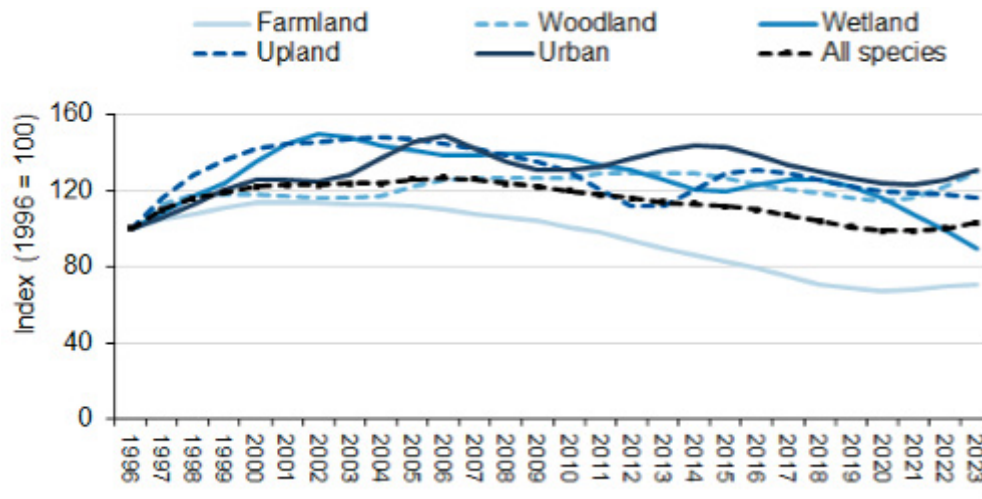


Source: NI Environmental Statistics Report

Link: [NI Environmental Statistics Report 2025](#)

No unsmoothed index values for 2001 or 2020 due to foot-and-mouth outbreak and Covid-19 impacts on data collection.

Figure 29: Wild bird populations in Northern Ireland by species type, 1996 - 2023



Source: NI Environmental Statistics Report

Link: [NI Environmental Statistics Report 2025](#)



Figure 30: Wild bird populations in Northern Ireland by species type

Farmland species (17)	Woodland species (20)	Upland species (8)	Urban species (5)	Wetland species (6)
Goldfinch	Blackbird	Buzzard	Collared Dove	Mallard
Greenfinch	Blackcap	Cuckoo	House Martin	Moorhen
Jackdaw	Bullfinch	Curlew	House Sparrow	Snipe
Kestrel	Blue Tit	Grey Wagtail	Swift	Sedge Warbler
Lapwing	Chiffchaff	Hooded Crow	Pied Wagtail	Heron
Linnet	Chaffinch	Meadow Pipit		Cormorant
Reed Bunting	Coal Tit	Raven		
Rook	Dunnock	Wheatear		
Skylark	Goldcrest			
Starling	Great Tit			
Whitethroat	Lesser Redpoll			
Woodpigeon	Long-tailed Tit			
Yellowhammer	Robin			
Grasshopper Warbler	Spotted Flycatcher			
Mistle Thrush	Sparrowhawk			
Maggie	Siskin			
Swallow	Song Thrush			
	Treecreeper			
	Wren			
	Willow Warbler			

Source: NI Environmental Statistics Report

Link: [NI Environmental Statistics Report 2025](#)

Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment.

While there are range of activities being taken forward through the Environmental Farming Scheme and e-NGO projects funded through the Environment Fund, there is a predominant focus on protected sites. The OEP is investigating DAERA in relation to the Special Protection Area network and for alleged non-compliance with the wild bird provisions in the Habitats Regulations, and consideration of a much more comprehensive range of actions will be required.

Developments, Delays, or Successes

There has been a modest increase in the species poll on which this indicator is based, allowing some generalised breakdown by habitat.

Implementation and Future Action

Future actions will be considered following the OEP’s current investigation.

Potential Data Gaps

At present there are no gaps in the data.



Proposals for future data/indicator development

Wild bird statistics are published annually in the NI Environmental Statistics Report, and we would anticipate this to continue being the case. Publication in May 2026 will also include ongoing work by the BTO to strengthen the underlying dataset (i.e. Increase number of species).

Indicator 10e. Area of land (or % land area) protected for nature

Overview of Indicator

Work is ongoing to develop a reliable way of calculating ranges of Protected Areas and areas that will contribute to the Global Biodiversity Framework Target 3.1 Coverage of protected areas and OECMs that encompass terrestrial and freshwater habitats. Data is currently published detailing the legally confirmed areas of Protected Sites. However, agreement on definitions of what constitutes the various site types that can contribute to this indicator require agreement and accurate recalculation derived from more contemporary mapping methodologies.

Indicator 10f. Area of land exposed to damaging levels of ammonia (NH₃) in the atmosphere

Overview of Indicator

This indicator tracks changes in the amount of land area (%) exceeding the lower critical level threshold for NH₃ of 1 microgram per cubic metre ($\mu\text{g per m}^3$). Excess NH₃ in the atmosphere leads to direct toxic effects on vegetation, with very low concentrations causing damage to the leaves and surfaces of sensitive plant species such as lichens and bryophytes (mosses and liverworts) which are an integral part of many habitats across NI. Agriculture is the main source of NH₃ emissions to the atmosphere.

Environmental Trends

Data relating to the most recent time period, 2020- 2022, indicated that 92.6% of NI land area exceeded 1 $\mu\text{g m}^3$. Overall, the percentage of land area exposed to concentrations of NH₃ that exceed critical levels (1 $\mu\text{g per m}^3$) has increased by 3.9% between the 3-year moving average time periods 2002-2004 (baseline) and 2020-2022 (most recent data).

The percentage of land area exceeding 1 $\mu\text{g per m}^3$ has shown a decreasing trend since reaching its peak in the time series of 96.1% in 2016-2018. The area of land exposed to damaging levels of NH₃ in the atmosphere has increased (a deterioration) over the long- and medium-term assessment periods. There has been a decrease (improvement) in the short term.



Assessment time periods:

Short term 2015 - 2017 to 2020 - 2022,

Medium term 2010 - 2012 to 2020 - 2022,

Long term 2002 - 2004 to 2020 - 2022.

Figure 31: Percentages of the UK land area where ammonia concentrations exceed critical level of 1 $\mu\text{g m}^3$

Years	England	Wales	Scotland	NI	UK
2002-2004	83.8	42.6	10.0	88.8	56.9
2003-2005	83.9	43.4	9.1	88.6	56.7
2004-2006	83.3	42.1	9.4	87.9	56.3
2005-2007	85.4	45.1	10.3	89.9	58.1
2006-2008	85.4	43.7	10.8	89.7	58.1
2007-2009	86.0	44.5	10.4	90.3	58.4
2008-2010	85.5	44.3	11.0	90.3	58.3
2009-2011	89.3	53.1	13.6	93.3	62.1
2010-2012	87.4	48.7	12.1	91.6	60.2
2011-2013	87.8	49.3	12.1	91.6	60.4
2012-2014	84.0	42.8	9.4	89.6	56.8
2013-2015	87.2	47.7	11.7	91.2	59.8
2014-2016	88.4	50.4	12.6	92.7	61.0
2015-2017	89.8	52.5	14.0	93.9	62.5
2016-2018	91.4	59.0	16.3	96.1	64.8
2017-2019	91.5	58.8	16.8	96.0	65.0
2018-2020	90.8	59.0	15.5	96.0	64.2
2019-2021	85.3	49.4	10.9	93.6	58.8
2020-2022	80.6	45.2	8.1	92.6	55.0
Change from 2003-2021	-3.2	+2.6	-1.9	+3.9	-1.9

Source: Air Pollution Trends Report 2024

Link: [2509291027_Air_Pollution_Trends_Report_2024_V3.pdf](#)

Data is presented using 3-year moving average time periods. A 3-year moving average is used to smooth out inter-annual variability due to the influence of weather on atmospheric chemistry.

Data relating to the most recent time period, 2020- 2022, indicates that 92.6% of NI land area is experiencing ammonia concentrations which damage sensitive plant species which are key features in our ecosystems. This represents 1% reduction from the 2019-2021 reporting period.

Overall, the percentage of land area exposed to concentrations of NH_3 that exceed critical levels (1 $\mu\text{g per m}^3$) has increased by 3.9% between the 3-year moving average time periods 2002-2004 (baseline) and 2020-2022 (most recent data).



Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment

Providing greater protection for protected habitats, from new development, through the adoption of the Interim Framework for the assessment of air pollution impacts in December 2023. Continuing to scope Site Nitrogen Action Plans to support strategic reductions at site level to meet conservation objectives but this is linked to final publication and implementation of the AS.

Developments, Delays, or Successes

The introduction of the Interim Framework for the assessment of air pollution impacts on protected habitats in December 2023, replacing the earlier Operational Protocol which was found not to comply with environmental law by the OEP. There has been a delay in the finalisation and implementation of the AS and strategic reduction measures to address excessive ammonia emissions affecting N Ireland's biodiversity and landscapes.

Implementation and Future Action

There has been a marginal reduction in the proportion of NI land area affected by damaging levels of ammonia emissions/concentrations (from 93.6% to 92.6%). Significant effort and robust and targeted measures will be required to bring about improvement, given the extent of the excessive pollution. The roll out of the AS and targeted, site-specific measures to tackle pollution sources are urgently needed to shift this indicator.

Potential Data Gaps

At present there are no gaps in the data.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

At present, there are no proposals for new data collection or indicator development.

Indicator 10g. Exceedance of damaging levels of nutrient nitrogen deposition on ecosystems

Overview of Indicator

This indicator shows changes in the percentage of sensitive habitats exceeding the internationally agreed thresholds for harmful effects (critical load) of nutrient nitrogen deposition. The damaging nutrient nitrogen comes predominantly from NI emissions of ammonia (NH₃) (mainly agriculture), but partly from ROI and UK emissions of NH₃ and nitrogen oxides (NO_x), and long-range transport of these air pollutants.



The 11 nitrogen-sensitive habitat types included in this indicator are acid grassland, calcareous grassland, dwarf shrub heath, montane, bog, managed coniferous woodland, acidophilous oak woodland, other broadleaved woodland, mixed woodland, dune grassland, and saltmarsh. In total, these habitats amount to approximately 3990 square kilometres.

The first component of this indicator is determined by calculating the area of sensitive habitat exceeding the internationally agreed critical load thresholds. The second component of this indicator measures the magnitude of the nutrient-nitrogen exceedance, above the critical load thresholds. It is also known as Excess Nitrogen or Average Accumulated Exceedance.

Assessments of nutrient nitrogen deposition are undertaken and published annually using 3-year moving average data. The most recent time series from 2020 - 2022 indicates: 96.9% of nutrient-sensitive habitat area in NI is exceeding the recommended nutrient-nitrogen critical load; Average excess nutrient-nitrogen, above critical load thresholds, is 11.4kgN/ha.

Environmental Trends

Area of sensitive habitat exceeding critical load thresholds - the percentage area of sensitive habitats in NI where nutrient nitrogen deposition exceeded critical loads remained at 100% from 2002-2004 to 2019-2021 (3-year moving average time periods). In the most recent time period, 2020-2022, the percentage area fell to 96.9% - the lowest value in the time series so far.

There has been little, or no change observed in exceedance of damaging levels of nutrient nitrogen deposition on ecosystems over the medium and long-term assessment periods. There has been an improvement (decrease) in the short-term.

The magnitude of the nutrient-nitrogen exceedance (expressed as average accumulated exceedance, or excess nitrogen) across NI has ranged from 11.36 - 16.41 kg N/ha/year since the beginning of the time series (2002 - 2004). In the most recent time period 2020 - 2022, the magnitude of exceedance fell to 11.36 kg N/ha/year - the lowest in the time series so far.

Overall, there has been a decrease (improvement) in the short, medium, and long-term. Excess nitrogen fell by 19%, from 14 kg per hectare per year (kg/ha/year) in the 3-year moving average time period 2002-2004 to 11.4 kg/ha/year in 2020-2022.

Assessment time periods:

Short term 2015 - 2017 to 2020 - 2022,

Medium term 2010 - 2012 to 2020 - 2022,

Long term 2002 - 2004 to 2020 - 2022

Exceedance of damaging levels of nutrient nitrogen deposition in NI, 2002-2004 to 2020-2022:



Figure 32: Nutrient-sensitive habitat area in Northern Ireland and percentage area of habitats where nutrient-nitrogen critical load is exceeded, by deposition dataset year. Results for 2004 can be supplied on request

Years	Acid grassland	Calcareous grassland	Dwarf shrub heath	Bog	Montane	Coniferous woodland (managed)	Other broadleaved woodland	Beech woodland	Acidophilous oak woodland	Scots Pine woodland	Mixed woodland	Dune grassland	Saltmarsh	All
Habitat area (km ²)	448	10	957	848	6	490	608	0	131	0	424	68	0	3990
2002-2004	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	NA	100.0	NA	100.0	100.0	61.7	100.0
2004-2006	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	NA	100.0	NA	100.0	100.0	61.7	100.0
2005-2007	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	NA	100.0	NA	100.0	100.0	61.7	100.0
2006-2008	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	NA	100.0	NA	100.0	100.0	61.7	100.0
2007-2009	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	NA	100.0	NA	100.0	100.0	61.7	100.0
2008-2010	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	NA	100.0	NA	100.0	100.0	61.7	100.0
2009-2011	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	NA	100.0	NA	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2010-2012	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	NA	100.0	NA	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2011-2013	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	NA	100.0	NA	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2012-2014	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	NA	100.0	NA	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2013-2015	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	NA	100.0	NA	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2014-2016	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	NA	100.0	NA	100.0	100.0	61.7	100.0
2015-2017	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	NA	100.0	NA	100.0	100.0	61.7	100.0
2016-2018	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	NA	100.0	NA	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2017-2019	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	NA	100.0	NA	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2018-2020	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	NA	100.0	NA	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2019-2021	99.9	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	NA	100.0	NA	100.0	100.0	61.7	100.0
2020-2022	98.6	95.3	98.1	98.6	97.4	97.7	95.5	NA	93.8	NA	96.3	61.1	24.5	96.9
Change 2003-2021	-1.3	-4.7	-1.9	-1.4	-2.6	-2.3	-4.5	NA	-6.2	NA	-3.7	-38.9	-37.3	-3.1

Source: Air Pollution Trends Report 2024: Critical Load and Critical Level exceedances in the UK
Link: [Air Pollution Trend Reports 2024](#)

Excess deposition of nutrient Nitrogen in NI, 2002 - 2004 to 2020 -2022:

Figure 33: Excess Nitrogen in Northern Ireland: Average Accumulated Exceedance for nutrient-nitrogen (in kg N ha⁻¹ year⁻¹) by country and deposition dataset year.

Years	Acid grassland	Calcareous grassland	Dwarf shrub heath	Bog	Montane	Coniferous woodland (managed)	Other broadleaved woodland	Beech woodland	Acidophilous oak woodland	Scots Pine woodland	Mixed woodland	Dune grassland	Saltmarsh	All
2002-2004	7.78	6.04	12.50	11.60	16.99	15.71	20.64	NA	15.91	NA	17.84	7.72	0.22	14.00
2003-2005	7.26	5.38	11.92	11.10	16.17	14.95	19.85	NA	15.21	NA	17.10	7.27	0.08	13.37
2004-2006	8.02	6.33	12.61	11.89	17.05	15.76	20.34	NA	15.81	NA	17.76	7.69	0.26	14.07
2005-2007	8.58	6.65	13.19	12.37	17.91	16.82	21.83	NA	17.04	NA	19.01	8.20	0.55	14.91
2006-2008	8.37	7.01	12.98	12.51	16.62	17.49	21.85	NA	17.39	NA	19.36	7.96	0.59	14.99
2007-2009	8.44	6.93	13.06	12.38	17.47	17.00	21.45	NA	16.99	NA	18.94	8.10	0.53	14.82
2008-2010	8.77	7.27	13.35	12.77	17.56	17.42	21.86	NA	17.45	NA	19.40	8.16	0.73	15.19
2009-2011	9.74	7.93	14.09	13.78	17.65	18.82	23.53	NA	18.94	NA	20.93	8.61	1.31	16.33
2010-2012	9.26	7.14	13.69	13.31	17.32	18.10	22.70	NA	18.27	NA	20.19	8.30	1.19	15.76
2011-2013	10.01	8.08	14.07	14.15	17.30	19.39	22.89	NA	19.02	NA	20.93	8.48	2.00	16.41
2012-2014	9.56	7.48	13.65	13.53	17.17	18.18	21.38	NA	17.72	NA	19.56	8.33	1.75	15.56
2013-2015	8.72	7.30	12.83	12.98	15.14	17.59	21.22	NA	17.42	NA	19.17	7.78	1.41	14.99
2014-2016	7.74	6.35	12.08	12.10	14.22	16.13	20.34	NA	16.34	NA	18.01	7.37	0.88	14.03
2015-2017	6.99	5.63	11.68	11.27	14.29	15.05	20.06	NA	15.65	NA	17.30	7.24	0.46	13.40
2016-2018	8.40	6.37	13.13	12.35	16.40	16.52	22.04	NA	17.12	NA	18.97	8.50	0.98	14.87
2017-2019	9.18	6.99	14.18	12.96	18.18	18.08	24.64	NA	18.94	NA	21.00	9.54	1.34	16.22
2018-2020	9.04	6.80	14.06	12.76	18.79	17.87	24.51	NA	18.85	NA	20.89	9.58	1.34	16.07
2019-2021	6.88	5.36	11.97	10.99	15.80	15.46	21.56	NA	16.52	NA	18.32	7.94	0.41	13.83
2020-2022	5.19	3.97	9.82	9.19	11.11	12.58	18.33	NA	13.46	NA	14.98	3.99	0.03	11.36
Change 2003-2021	-2.59	-2.07	-2.68	-2.41	-5.89	-3.13	-2.31	NA	-2.45	NA	-2.86	-3.72	-0.19	-2.64

Source: Air Pollution Trends Report 2024: Critical Load and Critical Level exceedances in the UK
Link: [Air Pollution Trend Reports 2024](#)



Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment

Providing greater protection for protected habitats from new development through the adoption of the Interim Framework for the assessment of air pollution impacts in December 2023. Continuing to scope Site Nitrogen Action Plans to support strategic reductions at site level to meet conservation objectives but this is linked to final publication and implementation of the AS.

Developments, Delays, or Successes

The introduction of the Interim Framework for the assessment of air pollution impacts on protected habitats in December 2023, replacing the earlier Operational Protocol which was found not to comply with environmental law by the OEP.

There has been a delay in the finalisation and implementation of the AS and strategic reduction measures to address excessive Nitrogen deposition affecting protected habitats.

Implementation and Future Action

There has been a small reduction in the proportion of nitrogen-sensitive habitats affected by damaging levels of nitrogen deposition (from 100% to 96.9%). Significant effort and robust and targeted measures will be required to bring about improvement, given the extent of the excessive pollution. The roll out of the AS and targeted, site-specific measures to tackle pollution sources is urgently needed to shift this indicator.

Potential Data Gaps

At present there are no gaps in the data.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

There are no proposals at this stage. DAERA will continue to engage with Defra and the UKCEH on the provision of timely data for this indicator.

Overall Assessment for Protecting Nature on Land

The initial set of indicators do not paint a positive picture of the state of nature on land (ASSI condition, wild birds) or the pressures acting upon it (ammonia emissions, nitrogen deposition) and show that nature continues to be in a precarious state - due to agricultural pollution and land management, development, invasive species, climate change.

These indicators demonstrate inadequate actions or measures to halt biodiversity loss and ecosystem decline in NI, reducing climate and ecological resilience, and nature's ability to support society and mitigate against climate impacts.



Future Focus for Protecting Nature on Land

Sustained effort is required to set up the necessary teams and programme structures to support these targets that are key to meeting the requirements of the Act, as well as the Environment Order and Habitats Regulations (in particular 10A and 10M).

There are significant dependencies with other policy areas and programmes, including efforts to support nature positive practices and incentivise nature-positive land management approaches that recognise the specific biodiversity value of different field/landscapes. Each area has an important role to play in restoring nature, improving ecological connectivity, and enabling effective nature based solutions.

Investment is needed to improve understanding and awareness within DAERA and other departments/public bodies, of N Ireland's biodiversity and their statutory obligations to protect and restore it in the discharge of their particular functions.



11. Protecting Nature at Sea

Indicator 11a. Condition of Marine Protected Areas Network

Overview of Indicator

Identifying and protecting areas of conservation concern and climate change mitigation has been a cornerstone of nature conservation action at sea in NI over the last 50 years. Areas which are particularly important for certain species, habitats or geological significance have been formally designated in accordance with a number of pieces of national and international legislation. Protected sites have specific qualifying features of interest, which include many types of habitats, species, and geological features. A site will have at least one feature of interest, whilst some sites have multiple features. To comply with the parent legislation, regular monitoring of and reporting on the features is required to assess the condition of site features. The condition of the features thus provides a measure of the health of our best natural assets and informs actions required to improve them.

Reporting is carried out on a 6-year cycle, however yearly reports on condition are provided via the NI Environmental Statistics report <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-environmental-statistics-report-2025>. Not every feature is surveyed and reported on annually, however.

Monitoring of feature condition uses the Common Standards Methodology, developed by JNCC and implemented across the UK to ensure consistency in how biodiversity and geodiversity features are evaluated. Sites are monitored periodically to track changes and inform management decisions where required. Feature condition is a direct measure of the theme - protecting nature at sea is most clearly demonstrated through MPAs and their current condition.

The indicator does not consider decisions that are made to protect features that lie outside the MPA network such as priority habitats and species under the Wildlife and Natural Environment Act 2011 or measures associated with other themes (e.g. SEO 1, SEO 4 and SEO 6) leading to other protection mechanisms that are not primarily nature based but can contribute to the overall health of the marine environment. This is of particular relevance given the anticipated impacts from offshore wind development siting and increasing spatial pressures, which may lead to the displacement of fishing and other marine activities.

The MPA Network is made up of individual MPAs that together conserve biodiversity and ecosystems more effectively than they could do on their own. This indicator monitors the condition of the overall network based on the condition of each feature of a designated site (some sites have multiple features) and reports whether the feature is in favourable or



unfavourable condition. Where condition is assessed as unfavourable, then management measures may be required to remove impacting pressures.

[The Marine Act \(NI\) 2013](#) required DAERA to establish a network of MPAs in the NI inshore region that, together with other MPAs designated by other UK administrations, contributes to the conservation and improvement of the marine environment in the UK marine area.

Environmental Trends

The assessment of changes in marine feature condition is carried out over a six-year reporting cycle, which means that not all data will be available within the past year. Overall, the condition of marine features has largely remained unchanged. However, new fisheries management measures introduced in 2023 may potentially lead to improvements in condition at the next scheduled assessment.

For 2024, the trend remained consistent with previous years. According to the NI Environmental Statistics Report 2024, 87% of marine features were recorded as being in favourable condition.

Although the condition of marine features has largely remained unchanged, recent regulatory measures may influence future assessments. In January 2023, new fisheries regulations were introduced, prohibiting the use of mobile demersal fishing gear and, in some sites, restricting the use of static fishing gear. These measures may potentially lead to improvements in condition that may be observed during the next assessment cycle.

Furthermore, the MPA Strategy for NI's inshore region (2025-2030), specifically **Action 11H**, signals a strategic shift in departmental priorities—from the establishment of MPAs to their active management. This transition aims to improve ecological coherence across the MPA network and is anticipated to result in continued improvements in site condition as DAERA works collaboratively with partners to implement necessary management measures.

DAERA is also using the MEPCA Indicator (developed by OSPAR) to assess effective management within our MPAs network.

The data will be derived from annually published statistics on condition of reported features within Protected Sites. As this indicator is for marine features, further analysis is required to disaggregate terrestrial and freshwater related data from the figures.

Table 5.2b in the NI Environmental Statistics report provides the most recently available data for all feature types.



Figure 34: Condition of features (Quantity) within Terrestrial ASSIs & Marine ASSI/SAC/ SPA & MCZ designations, for the six-year rolling period ending March 2025 (including carryover from previous cycles)

Feature Type	Number of Features	Number of Features in Favourable Condition	Number of Features in Unfavourable Recovering Condition	Number of Features in Unfavourable Condition	Number of Features in Destroyed Condition	Number of Features Not Assessed
Habitats						
Bogs	53	7	8	38	0	0
Coastal	52	20	4	28	0	0
Freshwater	58	17	0	33	0	8
Grasslands	103	63	2	35	1	2
Heathlands	42	4	1	35	0	2
Inland Rock	16	11	0	1	0	4
Marine	46	40	3	3	0	0
Fen, marsh & swamp	89	26	0	60	2	1
Woodlands	80	2	14	58	0	6
Habitats Total	539	190	32	291	3	23
Species						
Birds	369	231	0	138	0	0
Fish	9	4	0	4	0	1
Invertebrates	156	76	0	56	0	24
Fungi	14	8	1	4	0	1
Marine Mammals	7	4	0	3	0	0
Non-Vascular Plants	35	19	1	10	0	5
Terrestrial Mammals	11	9	0	1	0	1
Vascular Plants	70	37	1	24	0	8
Species Total	671	388	3	240	0	40
Earth Science						
Earth Science Total	204	190	0	12	2	0

Source: NIEA and DAERA Marine & Fisheries Department

Link: [NI Environmental Statistics Report 2025 Data Tables](#)

Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment

Fisheries prohibitions have been introduced across nine inshore MPA sites to safeguard marine ecosystems and ensure the sustainable management of these areas. This measure represents a significant step in protecting biodiversity within NI’s coastal waters.

A public consultation is currently being drafted on a proposed byelaw to prohibit anchoring within the Outer Belfast Lough MCZ. The purpose of this byelaw is to protect the designated features of the site and maintain its ecological integrity.

The Marine and Fisheries Division will provide support to three PEACEPLUS projects, delivering a series of conservation management and actions for a range of cross-border habitats and species. In addition, the Division is working closely with district councils to protect priority habitats and species through established groups such as Co-Fish, the Rathlin Island Forum, and the Strangford Lough Management Partnership. A collaboration with AFBI is ongoing to deliver the Mapping Offshore NI (MONI) project, which will assist with enhancing the Natural Capital of our marine region.



DAERA published the Blue Carbon Action Plan in April 2025, outlining its approach to protecting and restoring blue carbon habitats. These habitats offer nature-based solutions to mitigate climate change.

Further strategic documents are in development, including the MPA Strategy for the NI Inshore Area (2025-2030), as well as Elasmobranch and Seabird Conservation Strategies. These are scheduled for submission to the Minister in early 2026.

Developments, Delays, or Successes

A prohibition on the use of mobile bottom contact fishing gear came into effect on 1 January 2023 across nine inshore MPAs. This measure removes a significant pressure from the benthic protected features within these sites. As a result, it is anticipated that the condition of these features will improve over the next reporting cycle, covering the period 2026-2031.

In addition, a public consultation is currently being drafted on the introduction of a proposed byelaw to prohibit anchoring within the Outer Belfast Lough MCZ, which will further enhance the protection of the designated features within the site.

Implementation and Future Action

The MEPCA Indicator developed by OSPAR will now be used to assess effective management in our protected area network.

Potential Data Gaps

The key priorities for the incoming year include completing survey work that was missed in previous years. This will enable full condition assessments to be carried out for Strangford Lough and Rathlin Island.

In terms of indicators, one significant aspect that may currently lack an appropriate measure is activity outside the MPA network. There is potential to develop an indicator that captures progress across broader marine themes, contributing to the action under **SEO 3**. This objective commits to developing a NI Marine Strategy by 2030 to achieve Good Environmental Status in local seas, aligning with the UK Marine Strategy and regional approaches.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

Condition statistics are published annually in the NI Environmental Statistics Report, and this practice is expected to continue. The next publication, scheduled for May 2026, will include a refined breakdown to reflect this indicator, ensuring greater clarity and alignment with reporting requirements. At present, there are no proposals to enhance existing indicators. The primary



focus for the upcoming year will be on completing survey work that was missed in previous years. This will enable comprehensive condition assessments for outstanding MPAs.

The indicator has shown no substantial change in recent years, with the favourable condition status remaining at 87% since 2022. This is largely because many of the EIP actions are still at the pre-implementation stage, meaning that any associated benefits are not yet apparent in the data.

Furthermore, the current indicator focuses exclusively on the MPA network. While MPAs account for 38% of NI's inshore region, this approach does not capture how actions from other themes also contribute to **SEO 3**. This broader perspective is essential for achieving Good Environmental Status under the UK Marine Strategy descriptors for biodiversity and food webs.

As part of the MPA Strategy for the NI inshore region (2025-2030), one proposed action is to explore the potential contribution of OECMs to the broader MPA network. OECMs are geographically defined areas that, although not formally designated as protected areas, are governed and managed in ways that deliver positive and sustained long-term outcomes for the in-situ conservation of biodiversity. These areas often provide conservation benefits as a secondary outcome of other management objectives, such as cultural, spiritual, or socio-economic uses. By incorporating OECMs, the MPA Strategy aims to extend its scope beyond traditional MPAs to include sites that effectively conserve biodiversity, even when conservation is not their primary purpose.

Overall Assessment of Outcome Indicators for Protecting Nature at Sea

The current indicator remains positive, with 87% of the MPA network assessed as being in favourable condition. However, some individual features continue to be in an unfavourable condition, highlighting the need for further investigation to identify underlying causes and implement measures to prevent continued decline. Given the existing limitations in surveying marine features, adopting a risk-based approach may provide a more practical and effective solution.

Future Focus for Protecting Nature at Sea

Next year, several actions are scheduled to commence or accelerate. These include the publication of **Actions 11G, 11H, and 11I**, followed by the implementation of associated action plans for each, as well as **Action 11J**. Consultation for **Action 11K** will also take place, leading to the subsequent publication of management measures. In addition, a draft consultation package is being developed to propose a prohibition on anchoring within the Outer Belfast Lough MCZ. If implemented, this measure is expected to prevent further damage to the designated feature and support its recovery, thereby contributing positively to the relevant condition indicator.



Future plans will consider changes in circumstances, such as resource availability and progress on dependencies. A re-prioritisation of resources will be required to ensure the implementation of **Actions 11H** and **11J**, with this resource also coordinating the delivery of other actions. Work is underway to explore resource requirements for enabling a future MPA designation programme, which is necessary to meet the target date of 2028 for **Action 11L**.

Resource planning will be supported by the recently reconvened Marine Nature Recovery Oversight Group, which will support the delivery of EIP actions. Additionally, the Seabird and Elasmobranch advisory groups are set to reconvene following the publication of the two strategies.

Improvements in MPA feature condition are anticipated as a result of the regulations introduced in 2023 to prohibit mobile bottom fishing. Progress from other actions is likely to become more evident in subsequent years, as the relevant strategies are scheduled for publication in early 2026, with initial implementation beginning thereafter.

The expected progress is significant as it directly contributes to the overall ambition of this theme. Implementing these actions will lead to direct improvements in the condition of the MPA network, reinforcing the commitment to marine conservation. Furthermore, additional actions, such as **11J** and **11M**, aim to explore areas beyond the current network, potentially resulting in new designations that strengthen the overarching goal of protecting nature at sea.

12. Natural Capital

Indicator 12a. Natural Capital

Overview of Indicator

At this stage, the indicator is not yet applicable; however, there is potential for the development of a Natural Capital index or indices once the Natural Capital inventory and framework have been established. Such an index would provide a valuable measure of ecosystem extent, health, and resilience, offering insight into the overall condition of Natural Capital within NI's marine environment. This indicator would be closely linked to emerging biodiversity indicators and other environmental outcome indicators as a measure of Natural Capital/ecosystem extent, health, and resilience.

Sustained effort will be required to establish the necessary teams and programme structures, as well as to define clear policy positions and implementation plans to embed a Natural Capital approach and framework for NI effectively.



SEO 4 - Sustainable Production & Consumption on Land & at Sea





SEO 4 - Sustainable Production & Consumption on Land & at Sea

13. Future Agricultural Policy

The SAP is designed to support the development of an industry that is environmentally sustainable, ensuring responsible stewardship of air and water quality, soil health, and biodiversity. At present, data for these indicators in relation to the SAP is not yet available. Any data currently presented reflects changes to the indicator without intervention.

Indicator 13a. Net GHG in Agriculture

Overview of Indicator

GHG such as carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane (CH₄), nitrous oxide (N₂O), and F-gases released into the atmosphere contribute to global warming and climate change.

The agricultural sector produces emissions from livestock, agricultural soils, stationary combustion, and off-road machinery. These emissions are affected by the number of livestock, the quantity of fertiliser applied to land, and the intensity of activity.

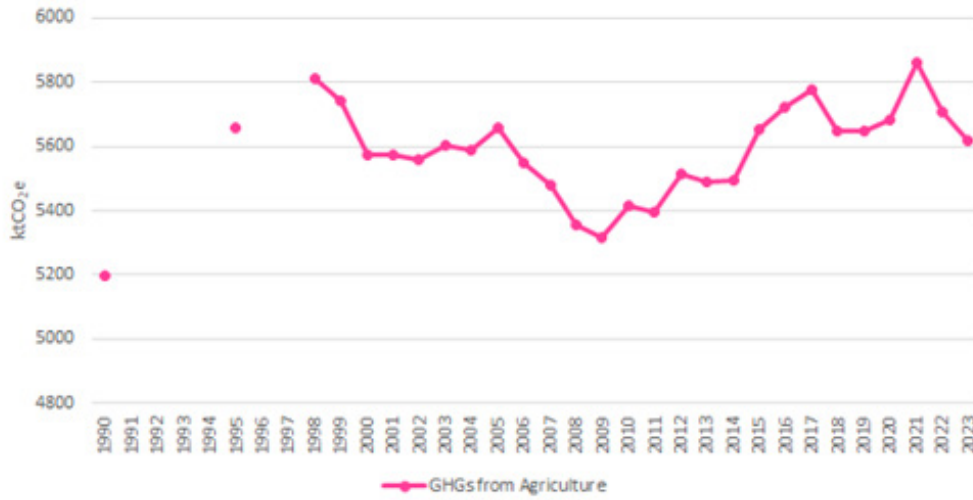
In NI, agricultural practices accounted for approximately 30.8% of total GHG emissions in 2023.

Environmental Trends

Net Green House Gases from Agriculture have increased by 8.0% to 5615.16 KtCO₂e in 2023 from the baseline (1990, 5198.75 KtCO₂e) but have shown an annual decrease of 1.6% from 5708.69 KtCO₂e in 2022.



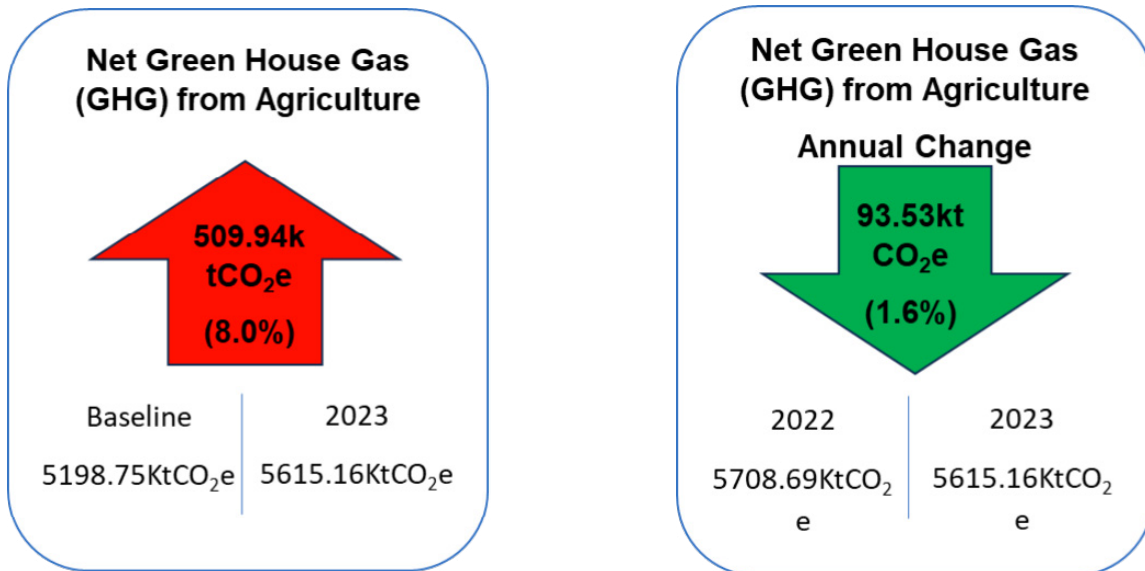
Figure 35: Northern Ireland GHGs from Agriculture KtCO₂e



Source: Northern Ireland Greenhouse Gas Inventory

Link: [Northern Ireland greenhouse gas inventory 1990 - 2023 statistical bulletin | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

Figure 36:



Source: SAP Monitoring and Evaluation Branch, DAERA

Link: [Northern Ireland greenhouse gas inventory 1990 - 2023 statistical bulletin | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)



Indicator 13b. Net GHG Land Use, Land Use Change & Forestry (LULUCF)

Overview of Indicator

SAP aims to achieve environmental sustainability by addressing the industry’s impact on, and guardianship of, air and water quality, soil health, and biodiversity, while ensuring it makes a fair contribution toward achieving net zero carbon targets. To measure the sector’s performance annually, net GHG emissions from NI land use, LULUCF will serve as a key indicator.

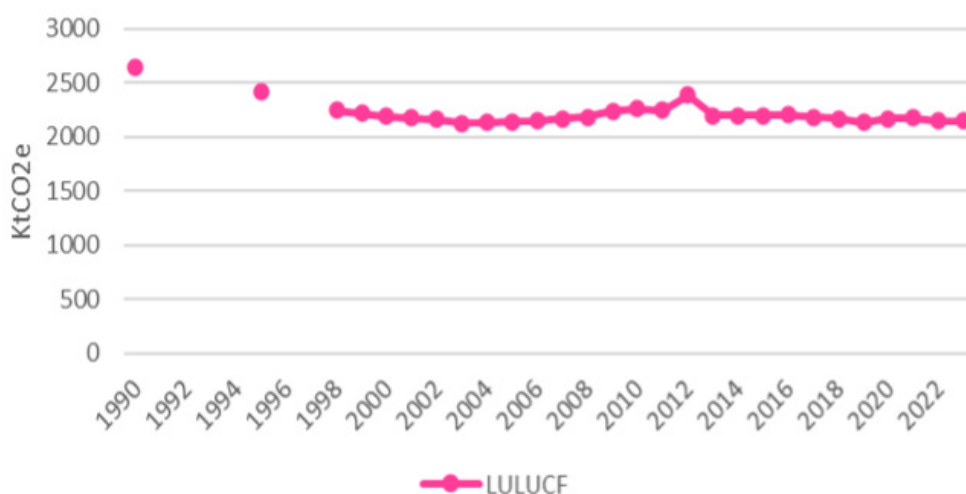
GHGs, such as CO₂, CH₄, N₂O and Fluorinated and other gases emitted into the atmosphere contribute to global warming and climate change. This indicator is a measure of the Net GHG emissions from NI LULUCF.

LULUCF emissions cover sinks and sources of emissions resulting from how land is used, changes in how it is used and forestry practices. Sinks remove GHGs from the atmosphere whilst sources emit GHGs. Emissions are affected by deforestation rates and land management.

Environmental Trends

Net GHGs from LULUCF has decreased by 18.7% from the baseline (1990) of 2642.54kt CO₂e to 2148.88 ktCO₂e in 2023 but has shown an annual increase of 0.2% from 2145.12 ktCO₂e in 2022.

Figure 37: Northern Ireland LULUCF Greenhouse Gas Emissions (ktCO₂e)

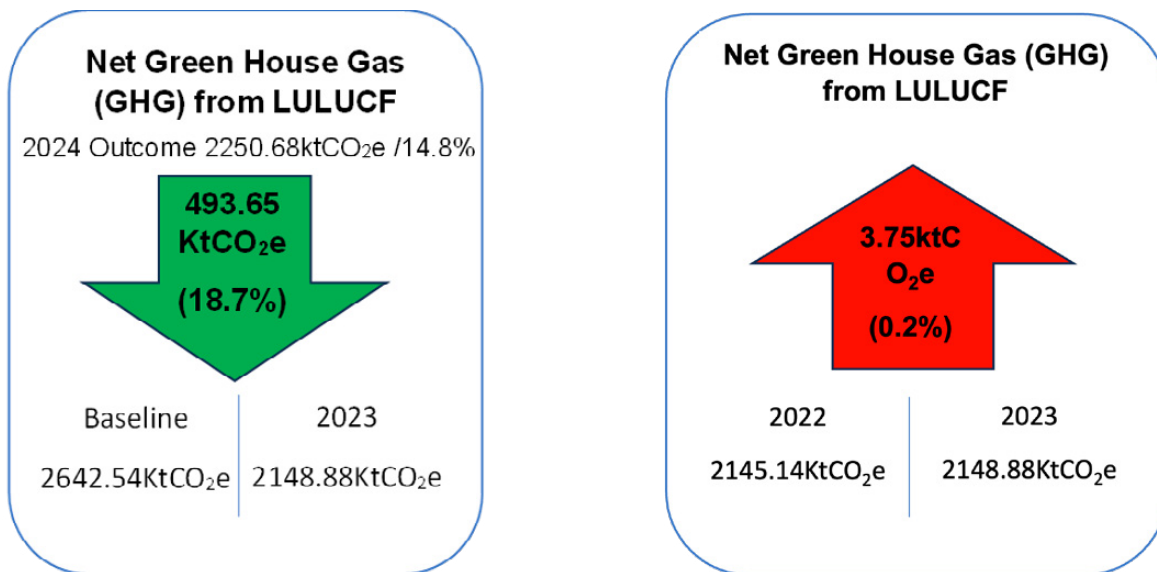


Source: Northern Ireland Greenhouse Gas Inventory

Link: [Northern Ireland greenhouse gas inventory 1990 - 2023 statistical bulletin | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)



Figure 38:



Source: SAP Monitoring and Evaluation Branch, DAERA

Link: [Northern Ireland greenhouse gas inventory 1990 - 2023 statistical bulletin | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

Indicator 13c. NI Phosphorus Balance

Overview of Indicator

Phosphorus (P) balance is an agricultural sector measurement which provides an indication of the phosphorus surplus (or deficit) for the sector. This indicator is calculated at the NI level using the farm-gate approach (i.e., agricultural sector P inputs less P outputs) and is expressed on a per hectare basis (kg P per hectare per year). Phosphorus is added to the NI agricultural sector through inputs (feed, fertilisers) and removed through outputs (livestock, livestock products e.g. milk, eggs, crops).

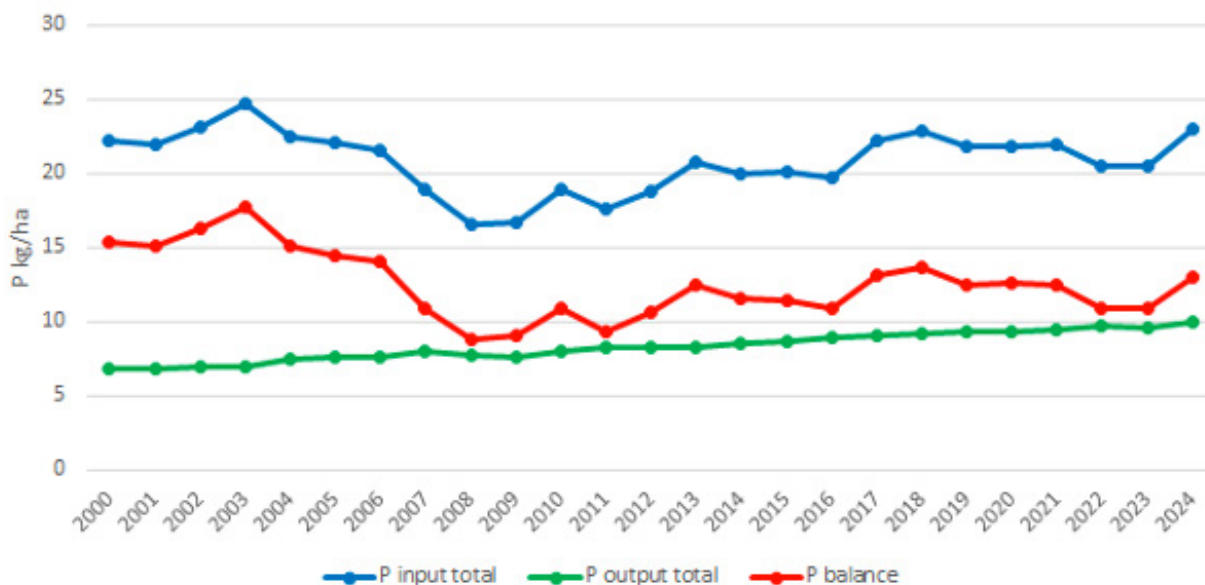
In addition to providing an indication of the phosphorus surplus (or deficit), the balance also provides trends on the sources of phosphorus inputs and outputs to the agriculture sector over time. This indicator is solely based on calculating inputs and outputs of phosphorus and not on soil sampling. Within the phosphorus balance methodology, the agricultural land is defined as the total area of crops and grass (excluding rough grazing).

Environmental Trends

Phosphorus balance has increased by 4.1% to 13.0kg/ha from 12.5kg/ha at the baseline (2019-2021). It also shows an annual change of 18.9% from 10.9kg/ha in 2023 to 13.0kg/ha in 2024.



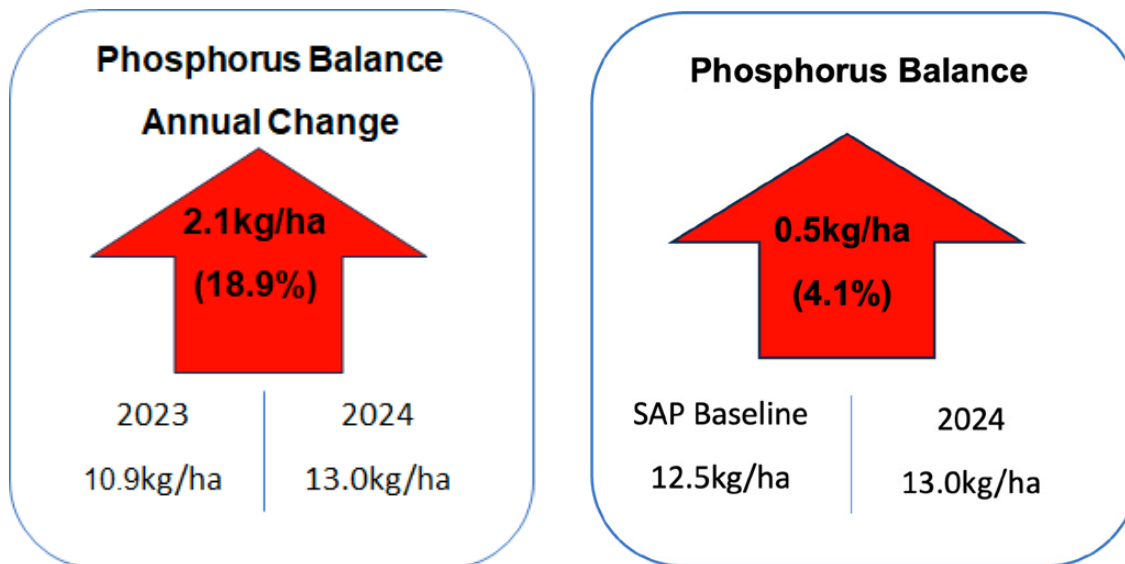
Figure 39: Phosphorus input, output and balance 2000 - 2023 (kg/ha)



Source: Nutrient Balance Statistics, DAERA

Link: [Northern Ireland carbon intensity indicators 2024](#)

Figure 40:



Source: SAP Monitoring and Evaluation Branch, DAERA

Link: [Northern Ireland carbon intensity indicators 2024](#)



Indicator 13d. NI Nitrogen Balance

Overview of Indicator

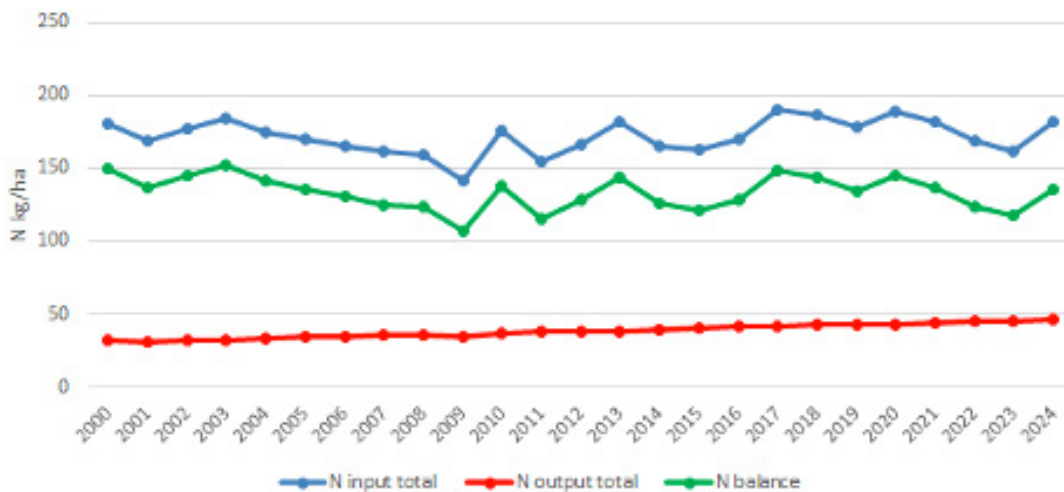
Nitrogen (N) balance is an agricultural sector measurement which provides an indication of the nitrogen surplus (or deficit) for the sector. This indicator is calculated at the NI level using the farm-gate approach (i.e. agricultural sector N inputs less N outputs) and is expressed on a per hectare basis (kg N per hectare per year). Nitrogen is added to the NI agricultural sector through inputs (feed, fertilisers) and removed through outputs (livestock, livestock products e.g. milk, eggs, crops).

In addition to providing an indication of the nitrogen surplus (or deficit), the balance also provides trends on the sources of nitrogen inputs and outputs to the agriculture sector over time. The nitrogen indicator is based solely on calculating inputs and outputs of nitrogen and not on soil sampling. Within the nitrogen balance the agricultural land is defined as the total area of crop and grass (excluding rough grazing).

Environmental Trends

Nitrogen balance decreased by 2.5% to 135.6kg/ha from the baseline (139kg/ha, 2019-2021) but has an annual increase of 15.6% from 117.3 kg/ha in 2023.

Figure 41: Nitrogen input, output and balance 2000 - 2024 (kg/ha)

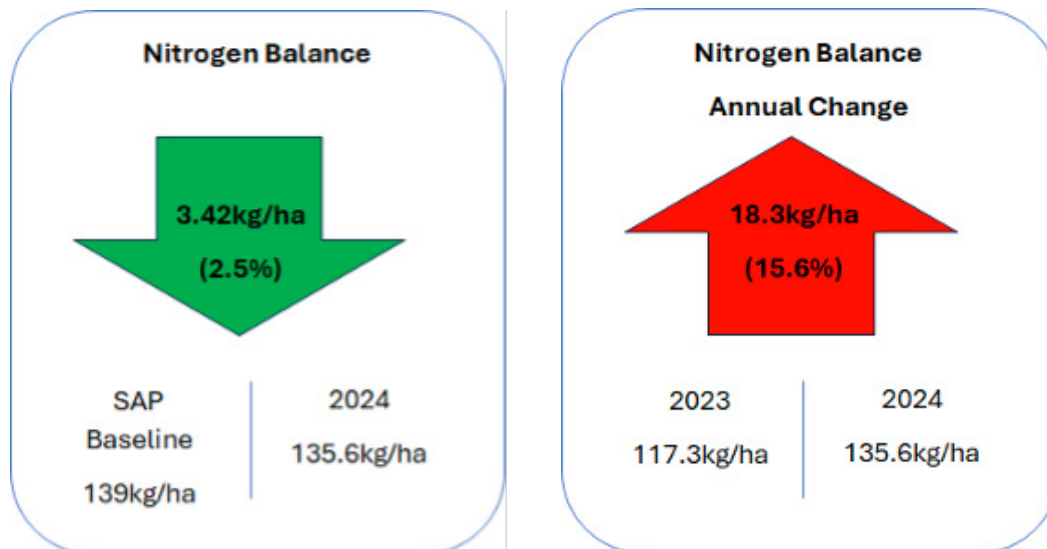


Source: Nutrient Balance Spreadsheet, DAERA

Link: [Northern Ireland carbon intensity indicators 2024](#)



Figure 42:



Source: SAP Monitoring and Evaluation Branch, DAERA

Link: [Northern Ireland carbon intensity indicators 2024](#)

Indicator 13e. Ammonia Emissions from NI Agriculture

Overview of Indicator

Ammonia emissions from agriculture in NI will serve as an indicator to measure the sector’s performance annually. Ammonia (NH₃) is a gaseous compound containing nitrogen, released primarily from animal manures and nitrogen-based fertilisers. While the deposition of nitrogen compounds can promote the growth of certain plant species, it can also have significant negative impacts on species adapted to low nitrogen concentrations. In nitrogen-sensitive areas, deposition encourages nitrogen-tolerant species to dominate, outcompeting sensitive species and leading to biodiversity loss, soil acidification, and changes in ecosystem structure and function. At extreme levels, nitrogen deposition can cause localised physical damage to plant species.

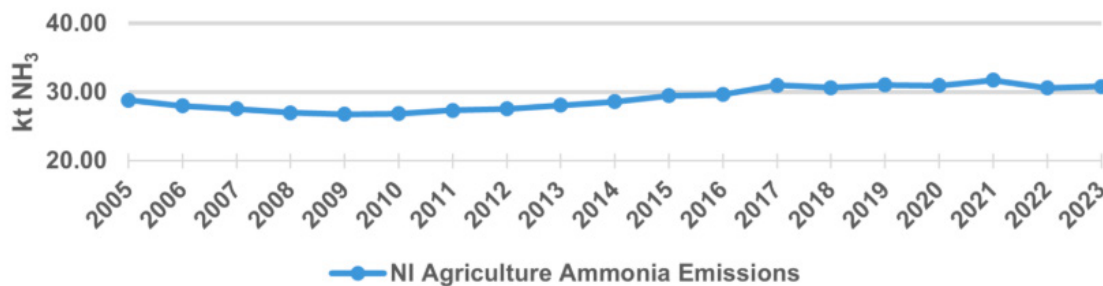
Under the NECR 2018 the UK is required to reduce ammonia emissions by 16% compared to emissions in 2005 by 2030. The Update on the Proposed AS, published in February 2025, sets out the 2030 target for NI in detail, using data from the National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory, to quantify the reduction in ammonia emissions from agriculture required to meet the NECR 2030 target. The Update on the AS shows that the NECR 16% reduction in the 2005 baseline agricultural ammonia emissions in NI equates to 2023 emissions reducing by 21%.



Environmental Trends

At present, data for this indicator in relation to the SAP is not yet available. Any data currently presented reflects changes to the indicator without intervention.

Figure 43: Annual Ammonia Emissions from NI Agriculture 2005 - 2023 (kt)



Source: Air Pollutant Inventories for England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland: 2005-2023

Link: [Air Pollutant Inventories for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland: 2005-2023 | National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory](#)

Indicator 13f. Condition of Protected Site Features

Overview of Indicator

There are currently significant gaps in available data, and appropriate performance indicators for monitoring and reporting biodiversity on agricultural land do not yet exist.

To address this, condition of protected sites, specifically their features, will be used as an interim indicator while further indicators are developed. Although this indicator will be reported annually, it will only track trends; no formal assessment or evaluation can be undertaken at this stage. A baseline cannot be established until specific outcomes have been defined.

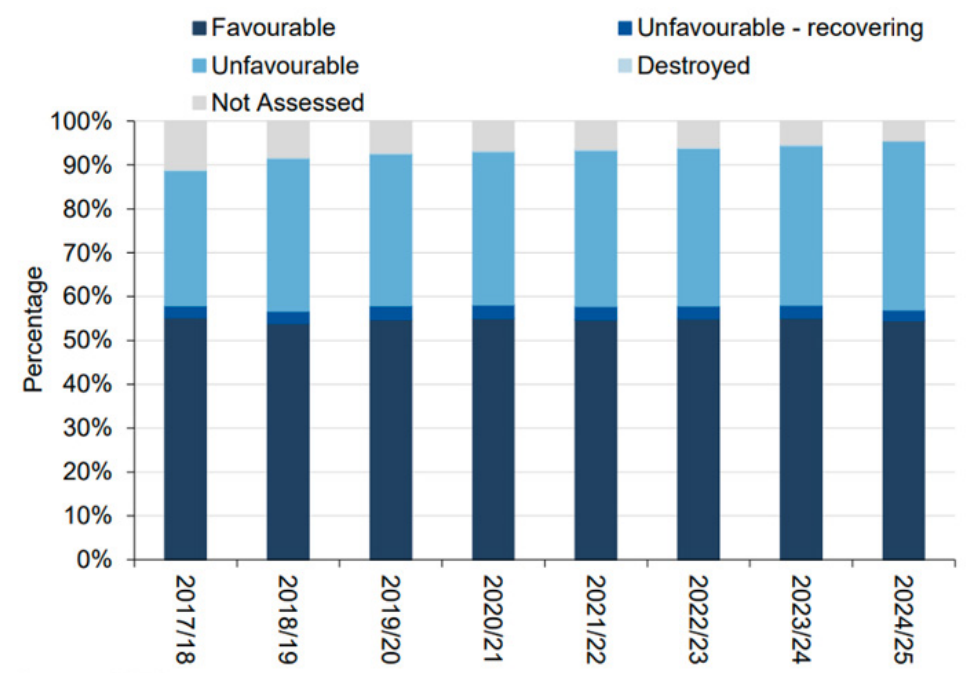
The condition of protected sites features indicator is measured and reported annually by DAERA. This indicator assesses the condition of all protected sites, reporting both the number and percentage of features in favourable condition. The monitoring process involves evaluating the condition of qualifying features within each protected site. This process, known as Condition Assessment Monitoring, follows the UK Common Standards Monitoring (CSM) approach to ensure that monitoring in NI is focused and consistent with methods used across the UK. Currently, data for this indicator in relation to SAP is not yet available. Any data presented will reflect changes to the indicator without intervention.



Environmental Trends

The proportion of site features in favourable condition has decreased slightly from 55.1% in 2023/24 to 54.3% in 2024/25.

Figure 44: Condition of Features within Marine and Terrestrial protected sites, 2017/18 - 2024/25



Source: Northern Ireland Environment Statistics Report

Link: [Northern Ireland Environmental Statistics Report 2025](#)



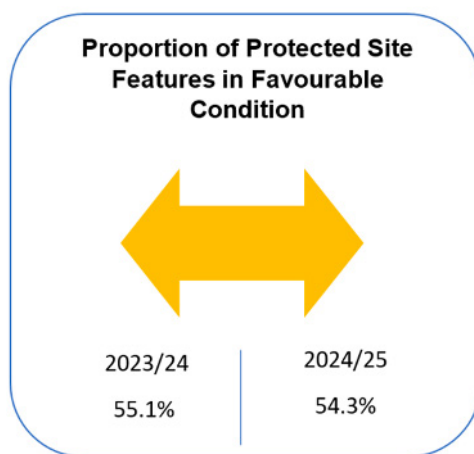
Figure 45: Condition of features within Terrestrial and Marine protected sites by type of feature, year ended March 2025

Feature Type	Number of Features	Number of Features in Favourable Condition	Proportion Favourable %
Habitats			
Bogs	53	7	13%
Coastal	52	20	38%
Fen, marsh & swamp	89	26	29%
Freshwater	58	17	29%
Grasslands	103	63	61%
Heathlands	42	4	10%
Inland Rock	16	11	69%
Marine	46	40	87%
Woodlands	80	2	3%
Habitats Total	539	190	35%
Species			
Birds	369	231	63%
Fish	9	4	44%
Fungi	14	8	57%
Invertebrates	156	76	49%
Marine Mammals	7	4	57%
Non-Vascular Plants	35	19	54%
Terrestrial Mammals	11	9	82%
Vascular Plants	70	37	53%
Species Total	671	388	58%
Earth Science			
Earth Science	204	190	93%
Earth Science Total	204	190	93%
Total	1,414	768	54%

Source: NI Environmental Statistics Report

Link: [NI Environmental Statistics Report 2025](#)

Figure 46:



Source: SAP Monitoring and Evaluation Branch, DAERA

Link: [Northern Ireland Environmental Statistics Report 2025](#)



Indicator 13g. Wild Birds

Overview of Indicator

The Programme aims to support the development of an industry that is environmentally sustainable, ensuring responsible management of air and water quality, soil health, and biodiversity. However, there are currently significant gaps in available data, and suitable performance indicators for monitoring and reporting biodiversity on agricultural land have not yet been established.

To address this, wild birds will be used as an interim indicator until these data gaps are resolved. Although this indicator will be reported annually, it will only reflect trends; no formal assessment or evaluation can be undertaken at this stage. A baseline cannot be established until specific outcomes have been defined.

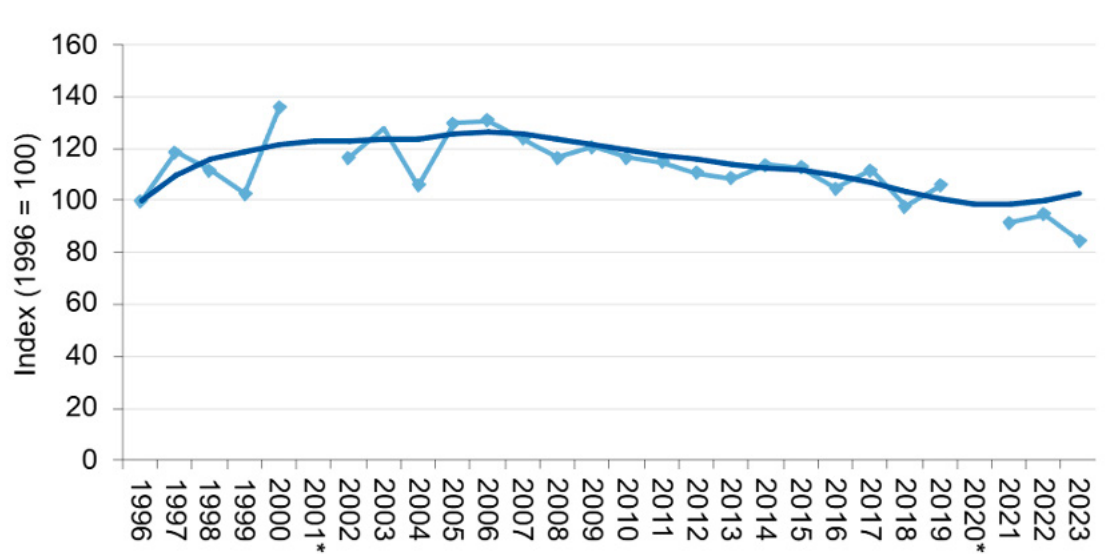
NI's wild bird population is monitored as part of the UK (BTO/JNCC/RSPB) Breeding Bird Survey. At present, data for this indicator in relation to SAP is not yet available. Any data presented will show changes to the indicator without SAP intervention.

Environmental Trends

The dataset on wild bird populations in NI covers 56 species and spans from 1996 to 2023. The most recent data available is from 2023, as the trend for the last year cannot be reported due to a data lag. In 2023, data was collected from 128 sites (1 km grid squares) across NI, and the wild bird index - based on all 56 species - stood at 103, using 1996 as the baseline year. Farmland is the major wild bird habitat in NI, and bird numbers in this habitat have declined by 29% over the past 27 years. This indicator will serve as an interim measure until existing gaps in monitoring data are addressed. While it will be reported annually, its purpose is limited to tracking trends only, and no formal assessment or evaluation can be undertaken at this stage.



Figure 47: Wild bird populations in Northern Ireland, 1996 - 2023, 56 species

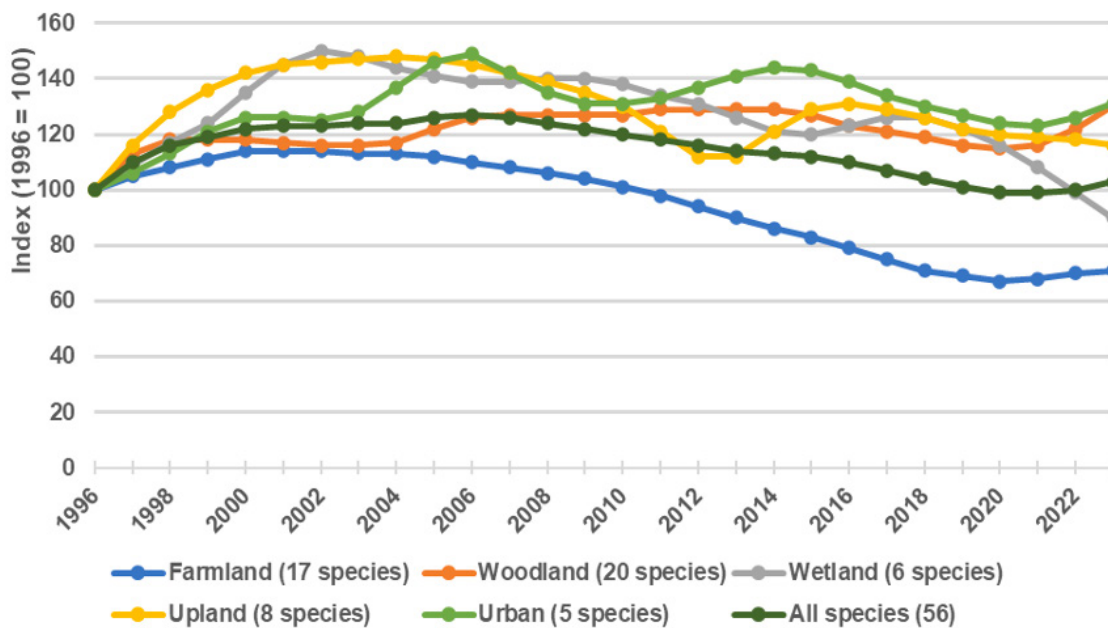


Source: NI Environmental Statistics Report

Link: [NI Environmental Statistics Report 2025 Data Tables](#)

*No unsmoothed index values for 2001 or 2020 due to foot-and-mouth outbreak and Covid-19 impacts on data collection.

Figure 48: Wild bird populations in Northern Ireland by habitat type, 1996 - 2023



Source: TBCNI Environmental Statistics Report, 2025

Link: [NI Environmental Statistics Report 2025](#)



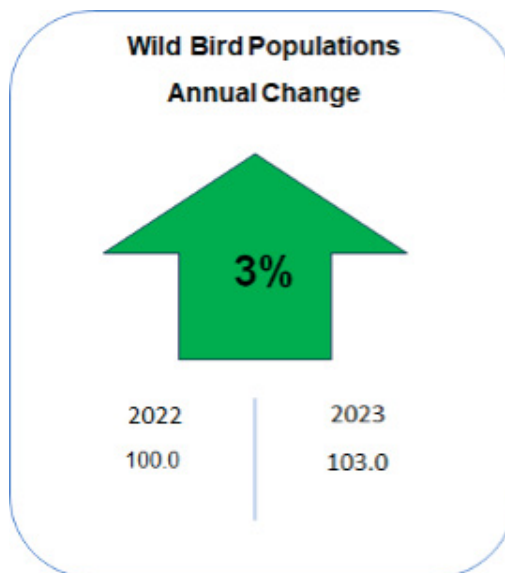
Figure 49: Wild bird species in Northern Ireland by habitat type

Farmland species (17)	Woodland species (20)	Upland species (8)	Urban species (5)	Wetland species (6)
Goldfinch	Blackbird	Buzzard	Collared Dove	Mallard
Greenfinch	Blackcap	Cuckoo	House Martin	Moorhen
Jackdaw	Bullfinch	Curlew	House Sparrow	Snipe
Kestrel	Blue Tit	Grey Wagtail	Swift	Sedge Warbler
Lapwing	Chiffchaff	Hooded Crow	Pied Wagtail	Heron
Linnet	Chaffinch	Meadow Pipit		Cormorant
Reed Bunting	Coal Tit	Raven		
Rook	Dunnock	Wheatear		
Skylark	Goldcrest			
Starling	Great Tit			
Whitethroat	Lesser Redpoll			
Woodpigeon	Long-tailed Tit			
Yellowhammer	Robin			
Grasshopper Warbler	Spotted Flycatcher			
Mistle Thrush	Sparrowhawk			
Magpie	Siskin			
Swallow	Song Thrush			
	Treecreeper			
	Wren			
	Willow Warbler			

Source: NI Environmental Statistics Report

Link: [NI Environmental Statistics Report 2025 Data Tables](#)

Figure 50:



Source: SAP Monitoring and Evaluation Branch, DAERA

Link: [Northern Ireland Environmental Statistics Report 2025](#) | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs



Overall Assessment of Outcome Indicators for Future Agricultural Policy

The indicators in relation to future agricultural policy show a mixed picture. A particular area of concern is the phosphorus balance which increased by 18.9% from 2023 to 2024 and ammonia emissions for agriculture, which increased from 30.62 kt to 30.81 kt. from 2022 to 2023.

As discussed above, as the Sustainable Agriculture Programme is not in full delivery the indicators do not reflect any intervention under the programme. Additionally, due to data lags in the programme indicator data, impact from SAP actions on programme indicator data will not be visible for a period of years following their implementation.

SAP aims to achieve environmental sustainability by addressing the industry's impact on, and guardianship of, air and water quality, soil health, and biodiversity, while ensuring it makes a fair contribution toward achieving net zero carbon targets.

The continued introduction of current SAP schemes in accordance with the published timeline is subject to business case and legislative cover.

- Farming for Sustainability - Innovation November 2025

Planned for 2026:

- FSTP
- Beef Carbon Reduction Scheme Year 3
- Sustainable Farming Investment Scheme
- Suckler Cow Scheme Year 2
- FwN
- Transition Scheme Year 2
- Carbon Foot printing Project
- Bovine Genetics Project -data collection
- FwN Landscapes and Priority Habitats
- Farming with the Generations Full Scheme
- Supply Chain Scheme



14. Energy

Indicator 14a: Greenhouse Gas Emissions from Energy related sectors

Overview of Indicator

The Energy Strategy - Path to Net Zero Energy sets a target to cut energy-related emissions by 56% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels, in line with the Climate Change Committee's Sixth Carbon Budget. This advice supports NI's first carbon budget, which requires an average annual reduction (AAR) in GHG emissions of 33% from the 1990 base line, during 2023-2027. Energy-related emissions primarily arise from the combustion of fossil fuels for heat, power, and transport.

GHG emission estimates for NI are produced from the [UK National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory \(NAEI\)](#) which is compiled and maintained by a consortium led by Ricardo Energy and Environment. Data are collated from national energy statistics, government departments, private companies, and businesses. The focus of the inventory is on 'by source' emissions, which are allocated to the source sector in which they occur. 'End user' emissions, where energy supply emissions are allocated to energy users, are also available.

GHG data are disaggregated to provide estimates of emissions for the devolved administrations and are published on an annual basis. DAERA provides a summary of the GHG emissions for NI in an annual report: [NI Greenhouse Gas Emissions 2022](#) and publish the emissions data by sector and gas type in a suite of accompanying tables. Emissions are reported for seven GHGs: CO₂, CH₄, N₂O, hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), perfluorocarbons (PFCs), sulphur hexafluoride (SF₆), and nitrogen trifluoride (NF₃).

GHG emissions were categorised into National Communication (NC) sectors until 2021. Of the nine NC sectors, six are energy related. These are: Energy Supply, Business, Transport, Public, Residential, Industrial Processes.

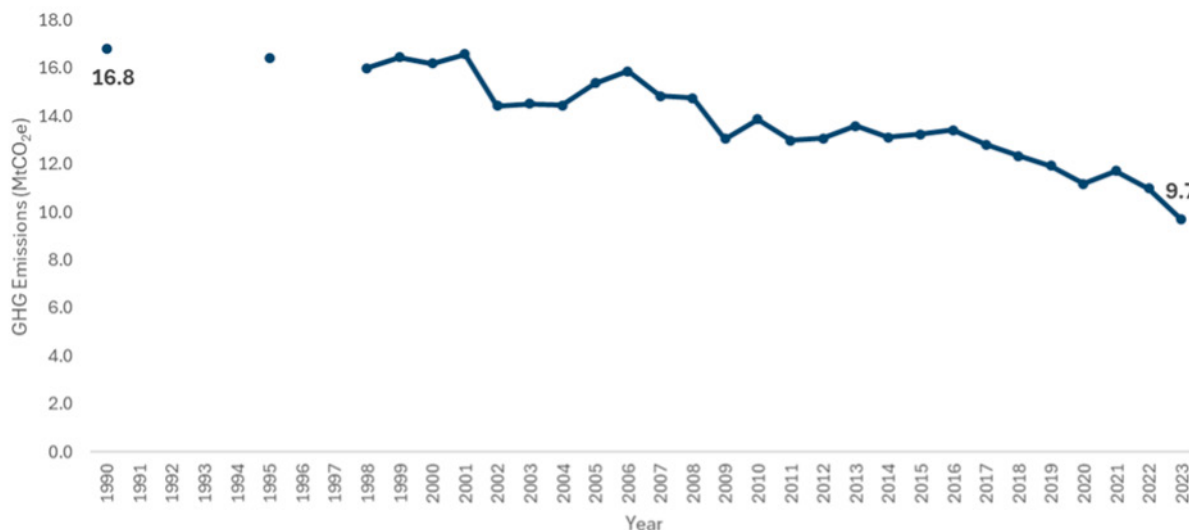
Environmental Trends

GHG emissions were categorised into National Communication (NC) sectors, which describe emission sources, until 2021. Of the nine NC sectors, six are energy related. According to the latest [Greenhouse Gas Inventory for NI](#), the total GHG emissions from energy-related sectors was 9.7 MtCO₂e in 2023, which is a decrease of 42% from the base year figure of 16.8 MtCO₂e. Energy-related GHG emissions declined by 12% over the year 2022 to 2023, which amounts to a decrease of 1.3 MtCO₂e.



[The Climate Change Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2022](#) specifies the baseline for GHG emissions in Section 7 (1). The base year for CO₂, CH₄ and N₂O is 1990 and for fluorinated gases it is 1995. For reporting within this document, 1990 refers to base year data for all types of gas.

Figure 51: Greenhouse gas emissions (MtCO₂e) for energy-related sectors in Northern Ireland, 1990 (base year) to 2023



Source: DAERA

Link: [Northern Ireland greenhouse gas inventory 1990 - 2023 statistical bulletin | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment.

The transition to clean energy will not only make energy more affordable and secure, it will also deliver environmental benefits. Integrating sustainability into energy policy will deliver cleaner air, climate resilience, and long-term protection of natural resources, ensuring that the energy transition benefits both people and the environment.

Developments, Delays, or Successes

None have been identified at this stage.

Implementation and Future Action

At present, there are no proposals for new data collection or indicator development.



Potential Data Gaps

GHG emissions are available from the 1990 base year (excluding 1991 to 1994, 1996 and 1997). The GHGs which make up the GHG Inventory are CO₂, CH₄, N₂O and 1995 values for fluorinated gases, collectively they are known as Carbon Dioxide equivalent (CO₂e) and are specified in the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

DAERA officials sit on the National Inventory Steering Committee that is designed to improve the robustness of GHG estimates. This is twofold with work considered at a UK level as well as a specific stream which is focussed on Devolved Administration inputs.

15. Productive & Sustainably Used Seas

Indicator 15a. For commercial offshore stocks

Overview of Indicator

ICES annual assessment advice sheets provide scientific guidance for the management of fish stocks, including those relevant to NI's commercial offshore fisheries. ICES is a long established international scientific advisory body. This scientific advice provides an indicator of stock development against management standards and informs the setting of Total Allowable Catches (TACs) and other management measures, with the latest advice issued in 2025 for application in 2026.

ICES purpose is to deliver independent, science-based advice to governments and regulatory bodies such as the UK and EU, regarding the status of fish stocks and recommended catch limits. This information supports sustainable fisheries management and contributes to the protection of marine ecosystems.

For NI, the advice covers commercially significant offshore species such as cod, haddock, whiting, plaice, sole, nephrops and herring. Each advice sheet includes details on stock status, indicating whether a stock is overfished or within sustainable limits. It also outlines catch limits under various management approaches, presents trends in biomass and fishing mortality rates over time, and highlights uncertainties, including data limitations and level of confidence in the assessments. These stock assessments form a critical part of the work that DAERA is committed to delivering in terms of the statutory FMP for Irish Sea Pelagic and Irish Sea Demersal stocks.



Recent trends show continued pressure on stocks, resulting in zero-catch advice for cod, reduced catch advice for several species, increased advice for whiting following benchmarking, and a downward revision for herring. Over recent years, persistent constraints have remained for cod and other demersal species, although some variability has occurred, such as improvements in whiting after benchmark assessments. While the metrics themselves are not new, changes in assessment methods, such as benchmarking, require several years to establish new trends. Plans for improvement include ongoing collaboration with ICES to enhance data quality, and future FMPs will specify further evidence improvements.

Environmental Trends

The Irish Sea Pelagic and Irish Sea Demersal FMPs are documents prepared and published under the Fisheries Act 2020. These plans set out policies designed to restore commercial offshore stocks to sustainable levels or maintain them at such levels, and to contribute to their long-term recovery and sustainability. They represent evidence-based action plans that underpin the delivery of sustainable fisheries, ensuring that resources are managed responsibly for current and future generations.

ICES advice remains the primary evidence base informing offshore FMP policy decisions for **Theme 15** relating to fish stocks.

The most recent stock assessments published by ICES for Irish Sea herring recommended a decrease in landings for both 2025 and 2026. For the six commercial offshore fish species within the scope of the Irish Sea demersal stock, ICES has advised an increase for whiting and reduction in landings for sole, plaice, haddock, and herring. Cod continues to be subject to zero Total Allowable Catch (TAC) advice.

ICES advice for 2026:

- Cod: When the MSY approach and precautionary considerations are applied, there should be zero catch in 2026.
- Haddock: An error in the assessment has been identified, and the advice will be reviewed in 2026. In line with the established protocols the advice is downgraded to be more precautionary resulting in an advised catch of no more than 586t, a 69% reduction on 2025 advice.
- Whiting: The stock was benchmarked in 2025 with revised catch and survey data and now includes recreational removals. When the MSY approach is applied, total removals in 2026 should be no more than 200 tonnes. This was previously zero.



- Plaice: When the MSY approach is applied, catches in 2026 should be no more than 614 tonnes, a 59% reduction (from 1 504 t) on 2025 advice.
- Sole: When the MSY approach is applied, catches in 2026 should be no more than 545 tonnes -10.5% reduction (from 609 t) on 2025 advice.
- Herring: When the MSY approach is applied, catches of herring in the Irish Sea in 2026 should be no more than 2,935 tonnes.

ICES reissued its 2025 advice for Irish Sea herring in June 2025 following the correction of an index error, revising the headline advice downwards. The 2026 advice for herring is also lower than in recent years. Cod remains under zero-catch advice for 2026, unchanged from previous years. Whiting has seen an improvement, with the 2025 benchmark and data revisions resulting in a 2026 total removals recommendation of no more than 200 tonnes, representing an increase compared to previous zero-catch advice. For plaice, haddock, and sole, ICES has advised reduced catches for 2026.

Over recent years, there has generally been a downward trend for several Irish Sea demersal stocks, with persistent restrictions for cod and reductions for plaice, haddock, and sole. However, there has been stock-specific variability and occasional uplifts where evidence allows, such as the recent increase for whiting following its benchmark assessment.

Nephrops advice for 2026 has been published with an overall decrease for the catches within the Irish Sea advised (Western Irish Sea -35%, Eastern Irish Sea +2%). Nephrops advice has previously remained relatively steady. These trends provide important signals that underpin the design of FMP policies aimed at achieving sustainable exploitation.

Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment

Two draft FMPs are currently being developed for commercial offshore stocks: the Irish Sea Pelagic plan, which covers herring, and the Irish Sea Demersal plan, which covers Nephrops, cod, haddock, whiting, sole, and plaice. These plans are being prepared ahead of planned consultations early in 2026. They set out the strategic direction for managing Irish Sea herring and Irish Sea demersal fisheries sustainably within ICES division 7.a North of 52°30'N. The approach aligns with the objectives of the Fisheries Act 2020 and meets the requirements set out in the JFS.

Developments, Delays, or Successes

The annual stock assessments are prepared by ICES in sufficient time to allow consideration by relevant stakeholders. However, concerns have been raised regarding the last two



assessments produced for Irish Sea herring, highlighting issues that require attention to maintain confidence in the advice provided.

Implementation and Future Action

The publication of the FMPs for Irish Sea Pelagic and Irish Sea Demersal stocks in NI is a statutory requirement under the Fisheries Act 2020 and the JFS. These plans are essential for ensuring the sustainable management of key commercial offshore stocks.

The final versions of these FMPs are scheduled for publication in 2026. This process will allow stakeholders to provide input and help shape the policies that underpin sustainable fisheries management.

The annual stock assessments published by ICES for the species within the scope of these FMPs will play a critical role in supporting their development and subsequent implementation. These assessments provide the scientific evidence base necessary to inform policy decisions and ensure that management measures are aligned with sustainability objectives.

Potential Data Gaps

In March, ICES wrote to Defra and the Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (DG MARE) to highlight that the Herring Assessment Working Group (HAWG) had identified an error in the survey index provided and used in the 2024 assessment for Irish Sea herring, which informed the advice for 2025. This error necessitated a reissue of the advice originally published in November 2024 for 2025, with the revised advice released on 5 June 2025. The updated recommendation represented a considerable downward revision, reducing the headline advice by approximately 40%, from 5,223 tonnes to 3,206 tonnes. The NI pelagic fleet hold the majority of this fishing quota for this stock.

The Irish Sea herring advice for 2026 is also considerably lower than in recent years, at 2,935 tonnes. This reduction is based on findings from the latest scientific survey, which recorded fewer juvenile herring. Defra has confirmed that it will continue to engage with ICES to help ensure that similar errors do not occur in future assessments.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

Plans for indicator development include proposed benchmarking for Irish Sea herring, and continued liaison between UK fisheries authorities and ICES to strengthen data quality assurance, following the herring index error identified in 2024/25. These collaborative efforts aim to ensure the accuracy and reliability of future assessments.



FMPs will set out specific evidence improvement actions, including enhanced surveys, sampling, and bycatch data collection. These measures are intended to improve the precision of future stock assessments and support more effective management decisions, enhance future assessments, and management precision.

Indicator 15b. For commercial inshore stocks

Overview of Indicator

The annual stock assessments prepared by AFBI for species such as crab, lobster, and scallop provide an indication of the state of these fisheries in relation to their future sustainability. These assessments form a critical component of the work that the DAERA is committed to delivering in terms of the statutory FMP for non-quota shellfish stocks. FMPs are a statutory requirement under the Fisheries Act 2020 and are evidence-based action plans developed in collaboration with the fishing sector and other stakeholders. Their purpose is to ensure the delivery of sustainable fisheries for current and future generations.

The assessments monitor the status of inshore shellfish stocks, including crab, lobster, and scallop, using landings and survey data. This is part of an established annual programme undertaken by AFBI. The latest assessments show mixed results, with some stocks able to sustain higher landings while others require reductions. Trends over the past year indicate species- and area-specific variation, with both increases and reductions recommended.

In recent years, results have been variable, supporting a precautionary and adaptive management approach. Core metrics are well established; however, new data streams, such as recreational catch reporting and inshore monitoring, will require two to three years to establish trend baselines once implemented. Plans to improve, include introducing recreational catch reporting and inshore vessel monitoring, with formal upgrades to be incorporated through the new FMP.

Environmental Trends

A healthy and resilient marine environment provides the foundation for a prosperous seafood sector and thriving coastal communities. The sustainable use and conservation of the sea remain central to the fisheries management approach, ensuring that marine resources are protected while supporting economic and social benefits.

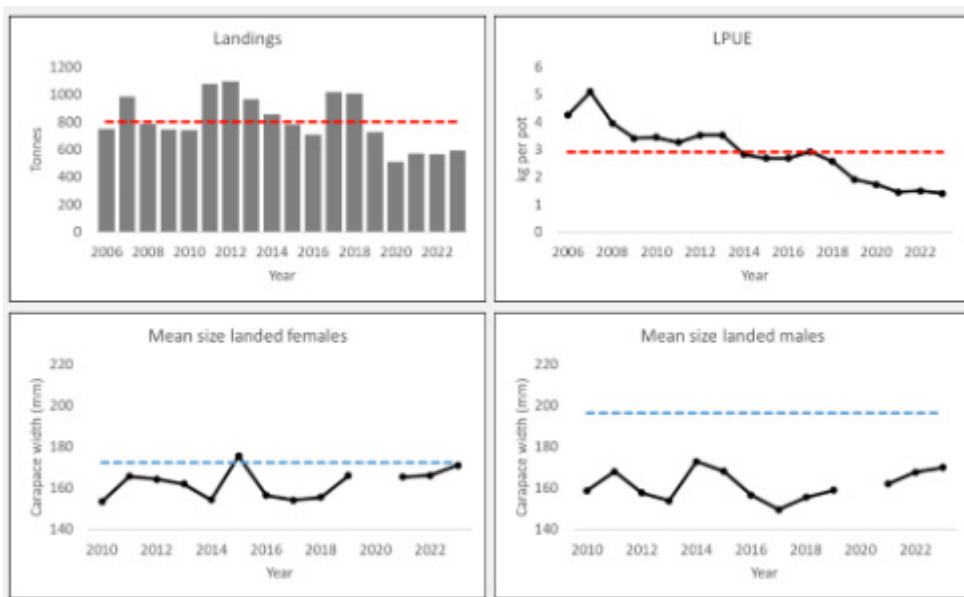
The draft FMP is scheduled for public consultation later in 2025, ahead of its final publication in 2026. The subsequent implementation of the measures set out in this FMP will deliver sustainable fisheries for current and future generations while simultaneously contributing to the improvement of the natural marine environment.



The assessments for crabs and lobsters are based on landings per unit effort, while length-based indicators are used for scallops during the annual surveys. The most recent stock assessments published by AFBI for the five commercial shellfish species within the scope of the FMP recommended that some species could sustain an increase in landings compared with the mean landings of the previous three years, while a reduction in landings was advised for others.

Over the past year, AFBI’s latest assessment cycle reflected species-specific variation, with recommendations for both increases and reductions depending on local stock dynamics and survey signals. In recent years, trends have varied across species and fishing grounds, reinforcing the need for a precautionary and adaptive management approach. This approach will be formally codified in the forthcoming Non-Quota Shellfish FMP.

Figure 52:



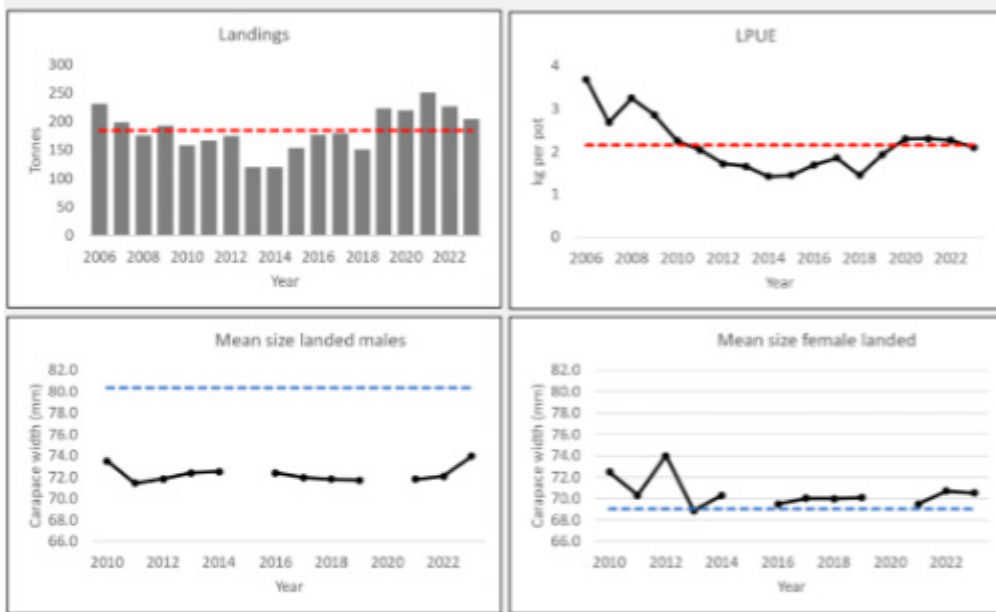
Source: AFBI Advice Sheets 2025

Link: [AFBI Advice Sheets 2025](#)

Brown crab in ICES rectangles 37^E3, 37^E4, 38^E4, 39^E3 and 39^E4. Summary of the stock assessment. Landings, Landings Per Unit Effort (LPUE) and length-based indicators. Red dashed line represents average over time period. For the length-based indicator, the solid black line indicates mean size crab landed. The dashed blue lines indicate L_{opt}.



Figure 53:

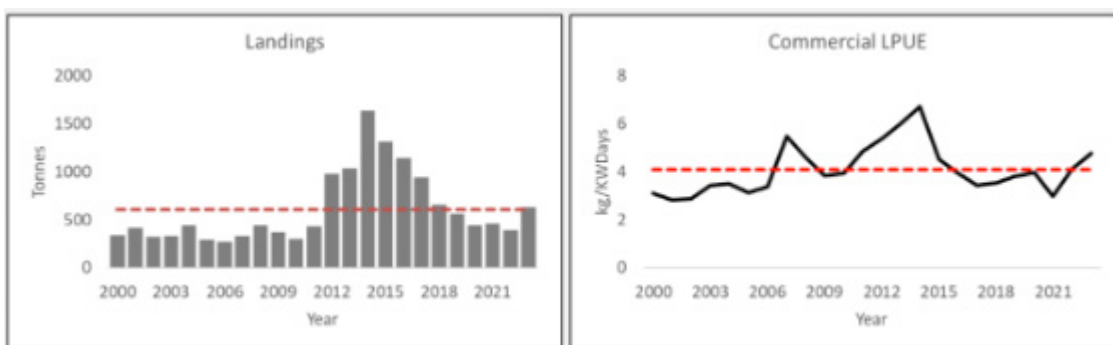


Source: AFBI Advice Sheets 2025

Link: [AFBI Advice Sheets 2025](#)

Velvet crab in ICES rectangles 37^E3, 37^E4, 38^E4, 39^E3 and 39^E4. Summary of the stock assessment. Landings, Landings per Unit Effort (LPUE), length-based indicators. Red dashed line indicates time series average. For the length-based indicator the solid black line indicates mean size crab landed. The dashed blue lines indicate L_{opt} .

Figure 54:



Source: AFBI Advice Sheets 2025

Link: [AFBI Advice Sheets 2025](#)

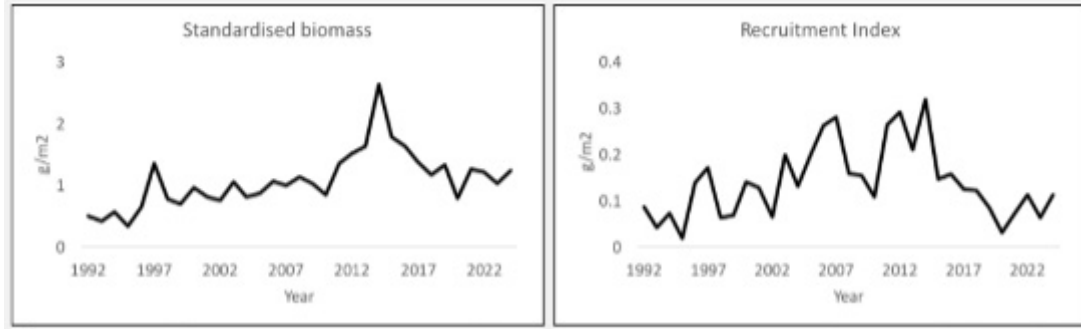
King scallops in ICES rectangles 37^E3, 37^E4, 38^E4, 39^E3 and 39^E4 (excluding Clyde fishery). Landings and LPUE. Red dashed line indicates time series average.

A survey has examined trends in scallop stocks within NI waters from 1992. The survey Index



(standardized biomass caught during the survey) increased in 2024 but is still down from a peak in 2014 (Fig 2). The recruitment index (standardised catch of scallops below 106mm) also increased in 2023.

Figure 55:

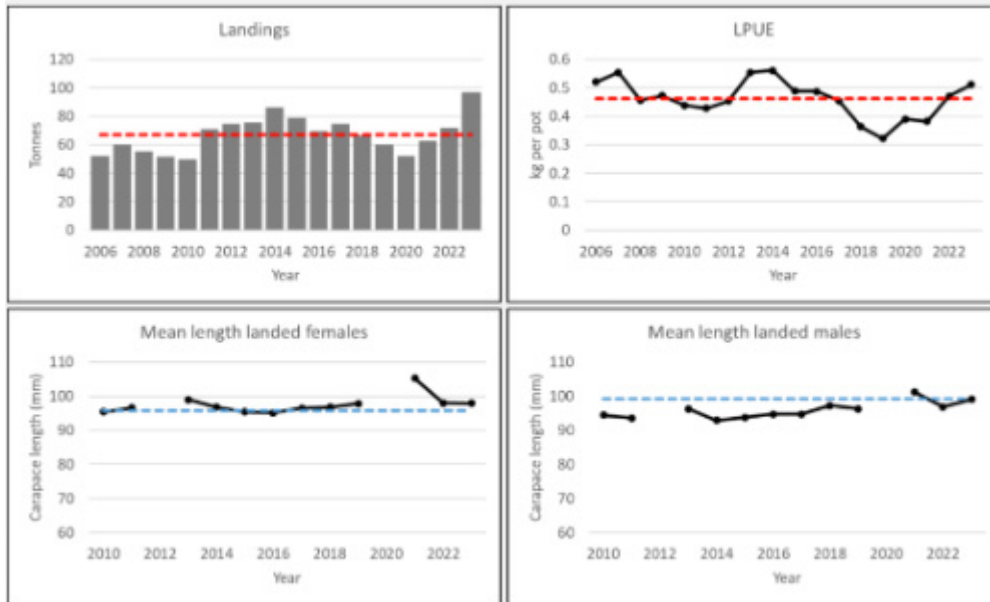


Source: AFBI Advice Sheets 2025

Link: [AFBI Advice Sheets 2025](#)

King scallop survey in ICES rectangles 37^E3, 37^E4, 38^E4, 39^E3 and 39^E4 (excluding Clyde fishery). Summary of the stock assessment. Standardised biomass and recruitment index.

Figure 56:



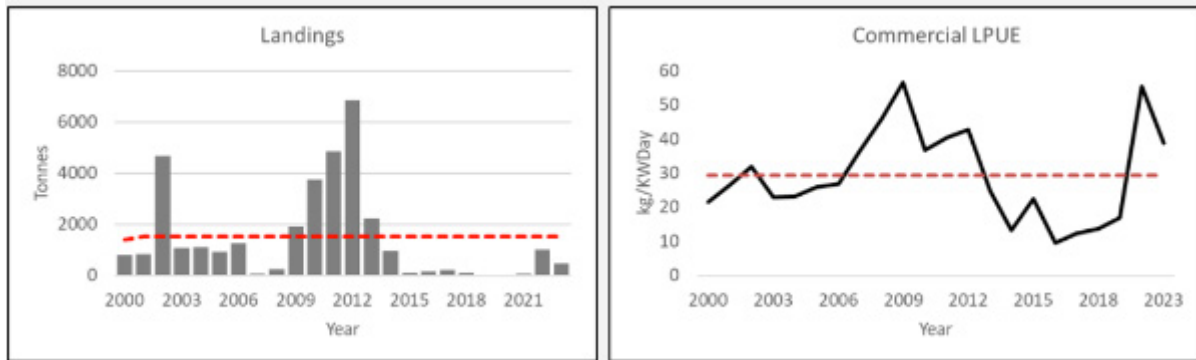
Source: AFBI Advice Sheets 2025

Link: [AFBI Advice Sheets 2025](#)

Lobster in ICES rectangles 37^E3, 37^E4, 38^E4, 39^E3 and 39^E4. Summary of the stock assessment. Landings, Landings per Unit Effort (LPUE), length-based indicators. Red dashed line represents average over time period. For the length-based indicator, the solid black line indicates mean size lobster landed. The dashed blue lines indicate L_{opt}.



Figure 57:



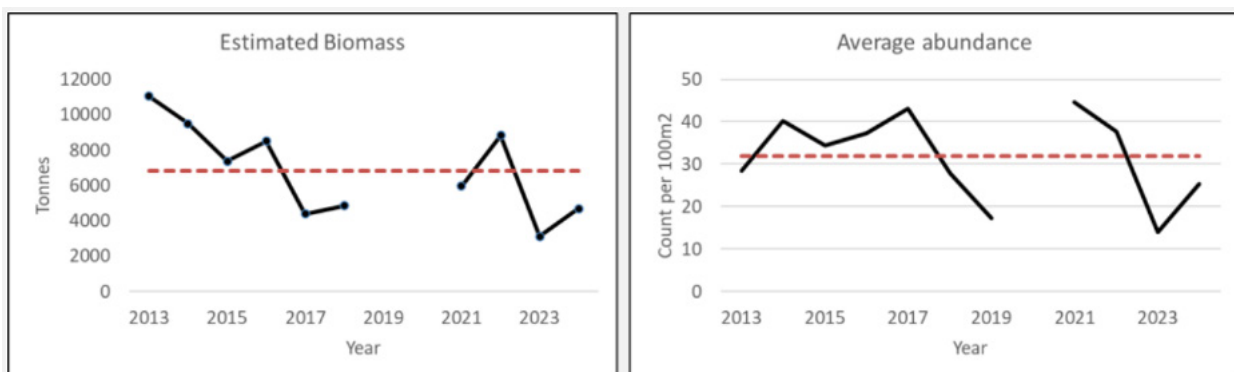
Source: AFBI Advice Sheets 2025

Link: [AFBI Advice Sheets 2025](#)

Queen scallops in ICES rectangles 39^{E3} and 40^{E3}. Summary of the stock assessment. Landings, LPUE. Red dashed line represents average over analysed time period.

A survey has examined trends in queen scallop stocks within 39^{E3} and 40^{E3} since 2013. The survey is based on Under Water Towed Video (UWTV) counts and fishing catches. No survey was possible in 2020 due to Covid-19 restrictions. In 2019, due to vessel breakdown, fishing tows were not possible. Following a decline in the survey estimated biomass in 2023, an increase was recorded during the 2024 survey. Average abundance (count per 100m²) from UWTV counts also showed an increase in the 2024 survey, following a decline in 2023. While biomass and abundance generally follow similar trends, they don't always match exactly. For example, in 2017 estimated biomass decreased but abundance increased. This is due to a higher estimated proportion of pre-recruits (<40mm) which have a lower biomass.

Figure 58:



Source: AFBI Advice Sheets 2025

Link: [AFBI Advice Sheets 2025](#)

Queen scallop survey in ICES rectangles 39^{E3} and 40^{E3}. Summary of the stock assessment. Estimated biomass and abundance. Red dashed line represents average over analysed time period.



Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment.

A draft FMP is currently being developed for non-quota stocks, including crabs, lobster, and scallops, in preparation for a planned consultation later in 2025. This plan will incorporate a range of measures designed to ensure the long-term sustainability of these stocks, supporting the delivery of a healthy and resilient marine environment.

Developments, Delays, or Successes

No delays as annual stock assessments are prepared by AFBI in good time for consideration by DAERA.

Implementation and Future Action

The publication of the FMP for non-quota shellfish in NI is a statutory requirement under the Fisheries Act 2020 and the JFS. This plan is a key instrument for ensuring the sustainable management of inshore shellfish stocks. The final version of the FMP is scheduled for publication in 2026, following a public consultation later in 2025. This consultation will provide stakeholders with the opportunity to contribute to the development of measures that will safeguard the long-term sustainability of these fisheries.

The annual stock assessments published by AFBI for the species within the scope of this FMP will play a critical role in supporting its development and subsequent implementation. These assessments provide the scientific evidence base necessary to inform management decisions and ensure that the plan delivers on its objectives for sustainable exploitation.

Potential Data Gaps

There is currently no data available to measure the impact of recreational fishing for crabs and lobsters on the respective stocks. To address this gap, the development of the FMP for non-quota shellfish stocks will consider the introduction of a registration system for recreational fishing for crabs and lobsters, accompanied by a requirement to submit catch data.

The development of the FMP will also consider the implementation of a policy requiring under-12-metre fishing vessels to have operational monitoring systems when conducting fishing activity. This measure would help close an existing evidence gap by providing positional data for vessels operating in the inshore waters of NI, where such information is currently unavailable.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

Proposals are being developed to collect data that will help gauge the impact of recreational



fishing for crabs and lobsters. While core metrics such as landings per unit effort and length-based indicators are already established, two new evidence streams are being considered for future iterations, subject to approval: recreational crab and lobster catch reporting through a registration and returns system, and inshore monitoring for vessels under 12 metres. If these measures are implemented, a minimum of two to three annual cycles will be required to establish trend baselines for meaningful assessment. The Non-Quota Shellfish FMP consultation and publication pathway will be used to formalise evidence improvements and future management responses.

Overall Assessment for Productive & Sustainably Used Seas

When considered together, the offshore indicators provided by ICES and the inshore indicators from AFBI show no clear net improvement in the natural environment for this theme over the past year. Offshore stocks remain under pressure, with continued or increased restrictions for several species, while inshore results are mixed and vary by species and area.

These indicators present a consistent picture: stock sustainability continues to be challenging offshore and variable inshore. While key actions under the EIP, such as FMPs, the Marine Plan, and safeguards for renewables have progressed, most remain at the pre-implementation stage. As a result, benefits are not yet visible in the data.

Current indicators do not fully capture the cumulative impact of all **Theme 15** actions, particularly in areas such as marine planning, aquaculture water quality, and renewable energy development. However, the foundations for delivery are in place, positioning this theme for future gains as new measures take effect.

Several external factors also influence these outcomes. Climate change and rising sea temperatures have introduced significant challenges, with record-high sea surface temperatures (SST) and marine heatwaves around the UK and Ireland in 2023/24 increasing physiological stress, shifting species distributions, and affecting recruitment and survival rates. These changes impact ICES advice and AFBI assessments, as evidenced by the June 2023 North-East Atlantic heatwave and continuing record SSTs into 2024/25. Research commissioned by DAERA indicates that the Irish Sea ecosystem is highly sensitive to temperature, with warming trends likely to constrain fish community structure and productivity, suppressing recovery of some demersal stocks even under cautious fishing activity.

Warmer seas also increase the likelihood and extent of harmful algal blooms, influencing operational monitoring and precautionary closures that affect landings and survey comparability year to year. Dependencies on wastewater and nutrient reductions further affect aquaculture-enabling waters. Spatial pressures are intensifying as offshore renewables and



marine protection measures alter fishing footprints, concentrating effort into smaller zones. International factors such as UK-EU quota negotiations, fuel and operating costs, and labour availability also shape fleet behaviour and effort, which interact with stock status indicators.

Finally, changes in evidence and methodology, such as ICES updates to benchmarks and advice reissues, and inshore data gaps relating to recreational removals and under-12-metre vessel tracking, affect indicator robustness and comparability. Workplans are in place to address these gaps through FMPs and enhanced monitoring.

Together, these factors explain why indicators may show mixed or delayed responses despite progress in delivering **Theme 15** actions, particularly where warming seas and external system constraints counteract management gains.

Future Focus for Productive & Sustainably Used Seas

Current indicators show no clear improvement, with offshore stocks continuing to face pressure and mixed results observed for inshore fisheries. To achieve better outcomes, it is essential to prioritise the finalisation of FMPs to enable stronger, evidence-based management. Additional evidence, such as data from inshore monitoring and recreational catch reporting, should be incorporated as it becomes available to support more targeted action. Furthermore, climate adaptation measures will need to be considered for integration into fisheries controls in response to rising sea temperatures.

Improvement is particularly needed offshore. The focus should remain on statutory enablers, enhanced data collection, and adapting to challenges posed by climate change and water quality.

16. Producer Responsibility

Indicator 16a. Packaging recycling rates

Overview of Indicator

The new pEPR scheme commenced in April 2025, and data is not yet available, but recycling rates attributed to this scheme will be available from 2026.

Data will be provided by the scheme administrator, PackUK. Under the new system, packaging recycling rates will be measured by individual material types, such as plastic, paper, and cardboard.

The Report Packaging Data system, introduced in 2023, measures packaging placed on the market. The first set of data is expected in the second half of 2026. This data will inform



packaging recycling rates and the percentage of full net costs contributed by packaging producers under pEPR, using 2025 figures when they become available. The volume of packaging placed on the market will also provide an indication of the influence of pEPR on packaging design, as it is hoped unnecessary packaging is eliminated and more recyclable materials are utilised.

The pEPR scheme only commenced in April 2025 and will be phased in over the coming years, delivering increasing environmental benefits as implementation progresses.

Indicator 16b. % of full net costs contributed by packaging producers

Overview of Indicator

Data will be provided by the pEPR scheme administrator, PackUK. At present, data is not available as the scheme only commenced in April 2025, and the first producer invoices were issued in October 2025.

The Report Packaging Data system, introduced in 2023, measures packaging placed on the market. This information will be used to inform packaging recycling rates and the percentage of full net costs contributed by packaging producers under pEPR, using 2025 figures when they become available.

The pEPR scheme only commenced in April 2025 and will be phased in over the coming years. The Report Packaging Data system was introduced in 2023, with the first data expected in the second half of 2026.

Indicator 16c. Increase of recycling of drinks containers from 70-90% by 2030

Overview of Indicator

The DRS will introduce a new indicator designed to measure the increase in recycling rates for drinks containers from 70% to 90% by 2030. This indicator is currently under development.

DRS has not commenced yet and is currently in the operational planning phase. Data for the indicator will be provided by the DRS DMO once the scheme commences in 2027, with first data being available from 2029.

Overall Assessment of Outcome Indicators for Producer Responsibility

The pEPR scheme commenced in April 2025, and indicators will become available from the second year of the scheme. The introduction of the DRS in October 2027, along with its associated indicators, will further support the assessment of PR.



PR, and particularly the implementation of the DRS, will have a direct impact on Action 17: Reduction in Littered Single-Use Plastic Items. In addition, PR measures will impact recycling rates and waste generation under Action 21: Waste Management.

17. Reducing Single-Use Plastic (SUP)

Indicator 17a. Reduction in littered single use plastic items

Overview of Indicator

The KNIB Cleaner Neighbourhoods Report, funded by the Environment Fund, is in year 3 of a 5-year business case. This could provide useful data on SUP items collected, serving as a baseline pre and post implementation of the SUP Directive. The 2022-23 report details littered plastics such as cutlery, stirrers, straws, and coffee cups.

Since 2012, KNIB has run a programme that collects information about litter on beaches around NI. The Marine Litter Report 2022 (published October 2023) found plastic and polystyrene fragments as the largest contributor to marine litter, along with bottles, containers, caps, and lids.

Work is progressing to transpose the SUP Directive which is not yet at implementation stage. Work is ongoing to identify indicators which will determine the impact of the SUP Directive pre and post implementation.

Data measurement for Indicator 17 is reliant upon inclusion in data collection for indicators 4 (LEAMS indicator: Cleaner Neighbourhood Report) and 3c (Marine Litter: Marine Litter Report). There are plans to improve this indicator by providing a further breakdown in the list of products reported.

The indicator 17a “reduction in littered SUP items” will provide evidence of the impact of several actions in the SUP Directive and the PPPNI. It is anticipated the introduction of bans of SUP vapes and wet wipes containing plastic will have a positive impact on the reduction of litter SUPs.

It is also anticipated that the upcoming introduction of EPR for packaging and DRS will contribute to a reduction in littered SUPs going forward.

Future Focus for Reduction in littered single use plastic items

Three reports, funded by DAERA, have been identified which could potentially provide quantitative data required to determine impact pre and post implementation of the SUP Directive:



The KNIB Marine Litter Report - the current draft report should include data broken down into categories that include some SUP items collected from the marine environment as litter.

There may be scope to identify the 10 SUP items in the next report, which will cover 2024 and could serve as a baseline pre-Directive, establishing an approach that could be carried forward for future years reporting.

The KNIB Cleaner Neighbourhoods Report - this could also provide useful data on SUP items collected, both as a baseline pre-Directive and to track the reduction of those items post implementation

The 2024 Waste Composition Analysis - undertaken by WRAP on behalf of DAERA, this is planned for completion by 31 March 2026. The previous Report was completed in 2017. It is anticipated that the 2024 report will be broken down into waste categories/streams but with limited detail, for example, figures for some SUP items won't be available. This is due to the nature of the waste collection on an industrial scale. Baseline data for certain SUP items may be possible, but unlike Marine Litter or Cleaner Neighbourhood Reports, future reports cannot provide specific data for all 10 items.

18. Chemicals

Indicator 18a. Number of registered holders of firefighting foam stockpiles containing PFOA inspected

Overview of Indicator

PFOA is a man-made chemical belonging to the PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkylated substances) group, historically used in certain firefighting foams, particularly Aqueous Film Forming Foams (AFFF), due to their effectiveness in suppressing fires involving flammable liquids. Due to its persistent, bio-accumulative, and toxic nature, PFOA is classified as a POP and is subject to restrictions and bans under the UN Stockholm Convention. In NI, all PFOA use, and PFOA-containing foams will be fully banned from 3 December 2025. An internal database will be utilised to record the number of tonnes of PFOA containing firefighting foam registered to be taken out of use.

NIEA holds a register of holders of PFOA containing firefighting foam stockpiles and inspections are due for completion by 31 March 2026. Once items have been registered, holders will have to take these items out of use and send for destruction by appropriate waste management techniques. They will then be required to deregister items, providing documentary evidence that appropriate disposal has been completed.



Annual and triennial reporting in accordance with Article 13 of Regulation (EU) 2019/1021 - for each reporting period, the Defra SoS must compile information on the application of the POPs Regulation, including information on enforcement activities, infringements and penalties, and summary information compiled from stockpile notifications. It is required that this information is integrated with information available in the context of the UK Pollutant Release and Transfer Register (PRTR), the production and placing on the market data, summary information from the release inventories and summary information on the presence in the environment of the dioxins, furans and PCBs, and information on the use of derogations under the waste management provisions in Article 7(4) of the POPs Regulation. The Defra SoS must then prepare a report for each reporting period (each 3-year period starting in 2019). This report covers the period covering 2022, 2023 and 2024.

Environmental Trends

The environment remains unchanged, as this legislation aims to take PFOA-containing firefighting foams out of use by December 2025, preventing future contamination of land, groundwater, and surface or marine waters.

Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment

Potential holders of PFOA containing firefighting foams were contacted by NIEA and required to complete and submit stockpile notification forms.

Implementation and Future Action

Stockpile holders will be inspected in 2025, and compliance assessment reports will be completed. Holders will have to take these items out of use and send for destruction by appropriate waste management techniques. Advice and guidance will be provided to ensure appropriate disposal. They will then be required to deregister items, providing documentary evidence that appropriate disposal has been completed. It is envisaged a publishable compliance report will be written once this process is complete.

Potential Data Gaps

Gaps in the data exist where sites are on a planned inspection programme for this year.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

At present, there are no proposals for new data collection or indicator development.



Indicator 18B. Number of pieces of equipment containing PCBs above the legal threshold registered with NIEA

Overview of Indicator

PCBs are POPs, banned from use under the UN Stockholm Convention on POPs. PCBs are a group of substances that are harmful to the environment and human health and are recognised as a threat to the environment due to their toxicity, persistence, and tendency to build up in the bodies of animals. They are a subset of the synthetic organic chemicals known as chlorinated hydrocarbons; this includes any chemical substance of the biphenyl molecule that has been chlorinated to varying degrees.

In the UK, closed uses of PCBs in new equipment were banned in 1981, when nearly all UK PCB synthesis ceased, but closed uses in existing equipment containing in excess of 5 litres of PCBs were not stopped until December 2000. PCBs were used as dielectric filler liquids in some types of electrical equipment such as transformers, switchgear, capacitors and in the starter units of fluorescent lights and fractional horsepower motors.

This indicator is a useful measure to highlight the remaining contaminated equipment in NI, and it facilitates NIEA engagement with holders to ensure appropriate disposal plans are in place to prevent PCB escape to the environment.

An online registration system has been deployed to establish the number of pieces of equipment containing PCB over the threshold registered to be taken out of use. This will also facilitate engagement with the regulator, NIEA. Once items have been registered, holders will have to take these items out of use and send for destruction by appropriate waste management techniques. They will then be required to deregister items, providing documentary evidence that appropriate disposal has been completed.

Guidance has been directly issued to potential holders of PCB-containing equipment, either via IPRI inspectors to industrial sites covered under Pollution Prevention and Control (PPC) or Control of Major Hazards Regulations (COMAH), or via NI Electricity (NIE) to users of High Voltage (HV) network who may possess relevant electrical equipment.

Environmental Trends

The nature of the environment - land and water remains unchanged as this legislation is designed to take contaminated equipment above the legal threshold out of use to prevent its future escape onto the land, with the potential for contamination to groundwater, surface water, and marine waters. No assessment can be completed in the first reporting period.



Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment

An online registration system has been launched which will enable holders to register pieces of contaminated equipment with NIEA. This will facilitate engagement with the regulator.

Guidance has been issued directly to potential holders of PCB-containing equipment, either via IPRI inspectors to industrial sites covered under PPC or COMAH, or via NIE to users of HV network who may possess relevant electrical equipment.

Queries have been responded to, requesting additional information (e.g. transformer oil testing certificates indicating PCB percentage) where necessary. NIE has confirmed the NI Fluid Filled Cable network is PCB-free.

Regular liaison occurs with UK regulators through fortnightly PCB meetings and with industry via Energy Networks Association (ENA) meetings to share updates and resolve issues.

Implementation and Future Action

Once items have been registered, holders will have to take these items out of use and send for destruction by appropriate waste management techniques. They will then be required to deregister items, providing documentary evidence that appropriate disposal has been completed. The PCB Registration System will provide NIEA with details of registered holders of PCB contaminated equipment above the threshold value. NIEA will be able to target advice and guidance to those holders, to ensure that the PCB contaminated waste is appropriately disposed of. This will be tracked by requiring documentation to be provided as evidence of proper disposal before the holder can de-register their equipment.

Potential Data Gaps

The PCB Registration System was launched in July 2025 and therefore is in its infancy. Holders of PCB contaminated equipment were required to register by 31 October 2025, after which the data set will be complete.

Overall Assessment of Outcome Indicators for Chemicals

As this is the first reporting return, no assessment can be completed at this time.

Future Focus for Chemicals

Action 18E - Given the status of the UK chemical strategy, it may be necessary to readdress how this target will be progressed.



Action 18A - further progress should be reported on next year regarding identification of holders of PFOA containing firefighting foams along with guidance issued and potentially their disposal.

Action 18B - (Eliminate the use of PCBs by 2025, in line with commitments under the Stockholm Convention) should be completed within the next reporting period.

19. Antimicrobial & Disinfectant Contamination

Indicator 19a. Monitor AMR through 300 annual abattoir samples and passive

Overview of Indicator

EU AMR Monitoring in healthy pigs at slaughter 2023 - Caecal contents from healthy broilers at slaughter were sampled for Indicator Commensal and ESBL/ AmpC/ carbapenemase -producing *Escherichia coli*, *Campylobacter jejuni* & *Campylobacter coli*, in accordance with the specific monitoring described in Decision 2020/1729/EU and the guidance and protocols produced by the EU Reference Laboratory for AMR in Denmark. Slaughter samples were collected from NI pig slaughter plants processing more than 60% of NI domestic pig throughput in the previous year. 294 samples received were suitable for isolation. AMR Testing (Minimum Inhibitory Concentration) to detect early levels of resistance to 15-25 antibiotics used in human treatment was completed on all or a selected number of isolates as per EU Requirements. This indicator provides a sensitive indication of the AMR to antibiotics used in human treatment found on the NI pig farms within the survey.

A proportion of data to provide the NI element of UK AMR monitoring was published in November 2024 as part of the UK Veterinary Antibiotic Resistance UK VARSS report - [Veterinary Antimicrobial Resistance and Sales Surveillance 2023](#). The full NI dataset was published along with the EU AMR monitoring by EFSA in March 2025. It can be found [here](#).

Passive Surveillance: AMR testing from diagnostic samples from sick animals submitted to AFBI by NI vets published alongside similar GB passive surveillance in UK Veterinary Antibiotic Resistance and Sales Surveillance Report VARSS 2023.

This indicator is controlled by EU legislation and harmonisation with UK surveillance, but the scope has expanded since EU sampling commenced in 2021. This has allowed inclusion of additional bacterial species in ongoing monitoring i.e. Enterococcus species (an important bacteria of human concern in sepsis) and has baseline surveys of LA MRSA (Livestock Associated Methicillin resistant Staphylococcus aureus) in 2025 pig sampling and planned



EU baseline survey of AMR in aquaculture survey in 2027 as a sentinel for AMR in the aquatic environment as well as in seafood.

The approach has been to select the available AMR indicator from AMR monitoring data as an indirect measure of Antimicrobial & Disinfectant Contamination which has some limitations. This makes comment on environmental improvement a challenge as any improvement in AMR levels is likely to be much longer term to any more immediate environmental improvements in contamination. The selected target of NI AMR monitoring has been developing since 2021 and is thus only providing a baseline in 2023. UK monitoring has been ongoing for ten years and is just starting to show declines in AMR trends as sales and usage has also declined across some veterinary sectors. Direct indicators of Antimicrobial & Disinfectant Contamination should be considered and may be shortly available from the NIEA through monitoring of antibiotics in water under the WFD Surveillance Programme.

Environmental Trends

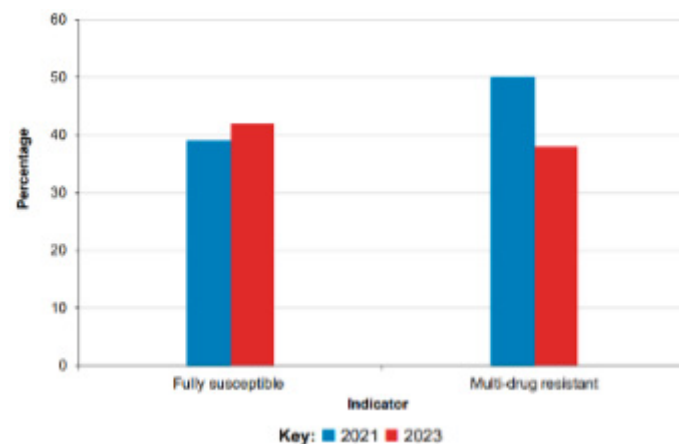
Before 2021, NI reported AMR monitoring as part of the UK dataset. Since then, NI has been required to report as an EU Member State and is building capacity to comply fully with CID 200/1729 (Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2020/1729 focuses on the monitoring and reporting of AMR in zoonotic and commensal bacteria). Complete trend reporting will only be possible once more data is available.

In 2023, DAERA completed its second year of pig monitoring at abattoirs. While comparisons with 2021 are possible, they should be treated cautiously as sampling methods have evolved. Current results serve as a baseline for AMR in NI pigs.

AMR monitoring in animals provides baseline results for 2023; trends will emerge after further testing. These indicate farm-level AMR but may not directly measure **Theme 19 (Antimicrobial & Disinfectant Contamination)**, for which other measures may apply.



Figure 59: Percentage of fully susceptible and multi-drug-resistant Salmonella isolated from healthy pigs at slaughter (n=97 in 2023)



Source: UK Veterinary Antibiotic Resistance and Sales Surveillance Report

Link: [UK-VARSS 2023](#)

Salmonella is an important cause of foodborne disease in people and can cause disease in animals. The UK has been monitoring AMR in Salmonella obtained from pig caecal samples since 2021. Prior to this (2015-2019), Salmonella was isolated from carcass swabs. The prevalence of Salmonella in gut contents is much higher than on carcasses and so the results presented here offer a better reflection of AMR in Salmonella in healthy pigs at slaughter. A total of 97 Salmonella isolates were tested. There are many serovars of Salmonella and their differences impact on overall resistance trends. The most prevalent serovars identified included: *monophasic S. Typhimurium* (29%), *S. Derby* (29%), *S. Panama* (14%), *S. Typhimurium* (9%) and *S. Kedougou* (5%). Full susceptibility to the panel of antibiotics tested increased to 42% in 2023 from 39% in 2021 (Fig. 3.11). Within individual serovars, 89% of the *S. Derby* isolates and 80% of the *S. Kedougou* isolates were fully susceptible. The number of Multi-Drug-Resistant isolates decreased to 38% in 2023 from 50% in 2021. The 2023 results should be treated as developing a baseline for AMR in NI pigs in NI.

Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment.

The UK has a National Action Plan to combat AMR, and NI has adopted a five-year Implementation Plan (2024-2029) with the same objectives.

Before 2021, NI reported AMR monitoring as part of the UK dataset. Since then, NI has been required to report as an EU Member State and is working toward full compliance with CID 200/1729. Complete trend reporting will only be possible once sufficient data is available.

In 2023, DAERA completed its second year of abattoir monitoring in pigs. While comparisons with 2021 are possible, they should be treated cautiously as sampling methods have evolved. Current results serve as a developing baseline for AMR in NI pigs.



Developments, Delays, or Successes

Baseline results in 2023, trends will be possible after subsequent testing years.

Implementation and Future Action

Looking ahead, the third cycle of RUMA Targets, TTF3 will be developed and launched in Autumn 2025. These targets will form part of the UK AMR National Action Plan 2024-2029, aiming to reduce antibiotic use across all animal sectors. In shaping TTF3, the group will draw on evidence and insights from the past decade to refine and strengthen the targets. The updated UK 5-year AMR Action Plan and revised Veterinary Medicines Regulations (VMRs) will also guide the strategy, framing its challenges and opportunities.

Evidence shows current stewardship measures are effective, with long-term reductions since 2014 and improved resistance metrics confirming that efforts to cut unnecessary antibiotic use, strengthen regulation, promote stewardship, and encourage prevention (biosecurity, vaccination) are working.

Potential Data Gaps

The VARSS reports sales of antibiotics in the pig sector, not the actual usage at farm sector. Sales data can overestimate or underestimate the usage, which makes it hard to see precisely which farms or production stages (sows, piglets, finishers) are driving the increase.

ACTION: Mandate or incentivise farm-level antibiotic usage recording.

Data is also aggregated nationally, so we lack regional variation that is specific to NI. There may also be differences by production type (indoor vs outdoor, integrated vs small scale) etc.

ACTION: Break down results by region if possible and require reporting by production type.

The surveillance coverage of resistance monitoring uses *E.coli* from healthy pigs at slaughter, which misses clinical isolates (from sick pigs). It may underrepresent young piglets (the group most often treated with antibiotics) and it doesn't fully capture resistance dynamics on farm or in the environment (slurry, water, soil).

ACTION: Include clinical isolates from sick pigs (via vet labs) in routine resistance reporting. Also, pilot AMR gene monitoring in slurry, soil, and water.

There is a limited pathogen spectrum. The focus is on commensal indicator bacteria (*E.Coli*, *enterococci*). The data on key pig pathogens (e.g. *Actinobacillus pleuropneumoniae*, *Streptococcus suis*, *Brachyspira*) are sparse or absent, despite being major drivers of antibiotic use.



ACTION: VMD Develop data-sharing agreements with commercial labs to standardise AMR reporting across UK.

VARSS notes that younger animals tend to have high resistance levels, but surveillance is weighted to slaughter-age pigs. This creates a blind spot in piglets and weaners, the group most exposed to antibiotics.

ACTION: Add piglet and weaner samples to resistance surveillance, not only slaughter-age pigs.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

The UK's AMR National Action Plan for 2024-2029 includes several surveillance indicator-related commitments. The RUMA TTF is due to develop a new cycle of targets, TTF3 in Autumn 2025. These are expected to use updated data and insights to refine indicators for antimicrobial use and resistance in livestock sectors. Further work is ongoing to develop antibiotic use reporting mechanisms in NI and UK wide with a focus on Ruminant Data collection through the Ruminant Roadmap Initiative.

Overall Assessment of Antimicrobial & Disinfectant Contamination

AMR monitoring in animals provides baseline results in 2023, and trends will be possible after subsequent testing years. Antimicrobial & Disinfectant Contamination and AMR are OH in their nature. The current targets focus on AMR monitoring on the animal elements of the theme, but plant sector and human use of antimicrobials and disinfectants will contribute to the environmental contamination and thus development and transmission of AMR. Direct monitoring of Antimicrobial & Disinfectant Contamination may be a useful addition to the theme with the additional benefit of exploring the wider OH contamination and allow all inputs to be addressed.

NIEA monitoring of antibiotics in water under the WFD Surveillance Programme is due to recommence in late 2025. This may be an indicator to be explored as a direct measurement of antibiotic/disinfectant contamination from wider OH sources above. A 2019/2020 baseline study was completed downstream of Wastewater treatment works, bathing waters and associated rivers. Cyanobacteria contamination in Lough Neagh and other NI waterways may influence AMR transmission in aquatic environments.

Future Focus for Antimicrobial & Disinfectant Contamination

Expansion of indicators to focus on direct antimicrobial contamination indicators through inclusion of NIEA Antibiotic monitoring under the WFD Surveillance Programme as possible target and indicator.



Development of AM sales and Use data indicators that may be used when data recording commences to monitor the existing target. This additional indirect measure of potential **Theme 19**. Antimicrobial & Disinfectant Contamination would be a useful addition to the current more long-term indirect AMR indicator.

Looking to the future, the next cycle of RUMA TTF3 will be developed and launched in Autumn 2025. These will be included as the new animal medicine use targets in the UK AMR NAP 2024-2029 to address AMR through reducing antibiotic use in all animal sectors. As the TTF is brought together to define this third cycle, evidence and insights gained over the last decade will be used to help further evolve the new set of targets. The new UK 5-year National Action Plan for AMR 2024 to 2029 and updated VMRs will also be important references to help frame and shape the journey, challenge, and opportunities of the TTF3 strategy. Development of AM sales and Use data indicators that may be used when data recording commences to monitor existing target.



SEO 5 - Zero Waste & Highly Developed Circular Economy





SEO 5 - Zero Waste & Highly Developed Circular Economy

20. Circular Economy

Indicator 20a. Material Footprint

Overview of Indicator

This indicator supports SEO 5 and aligns with the future vision of a low-carbon, resource-efficient society in which resources are valued and reused, putting them back into the economy and preventing waste, alongside other strategic visions.

Material footprint measures the global extraction of raw materials required to satisfy NI's consumption demand, reflecting environmental pressure across supply chains and reliance on finite virgin materials. DfE has identified material footprint as a key metric as it helps measure consumption patterns and their associated environmental impacts.

Scientific research has indicated that sustainable levels should be between 6-8 tonnes per person.

NI material footprint estimates are available from 2001 to 2022 using University of Leeds (UoL) methodology, where the latest data was published by DfE in December 2025. NI's material footprint was estimated at 20.6 tonnes per capita (tpc) in 2022, representing an increase from 18.3 tpc in 2021. Continued production of material footprint estimates for NI are therefore dependent on the availability of this data.

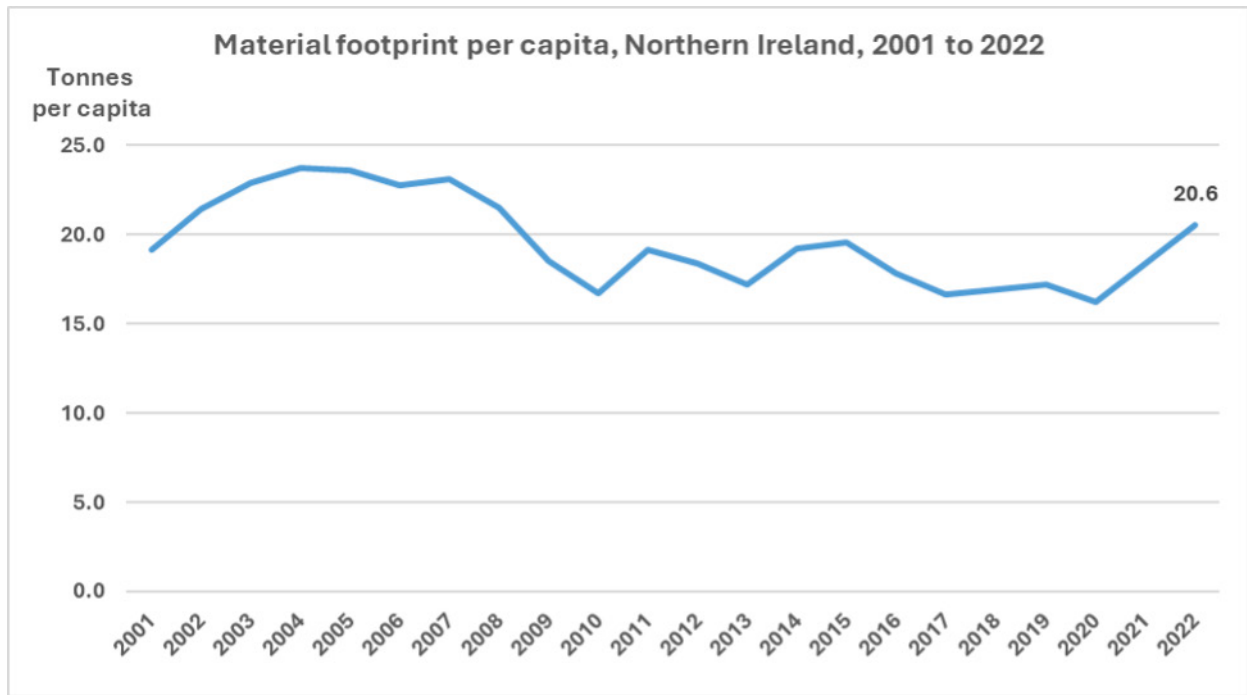
Material footprint is included in DfE's Business Plan 2025-2026 as a supporting indicator for the decarbonisation priority, alongside the headline measure of CO₂ emissions per capita.

Environmental Trends

The latest UoL data, to 2022, shows a reversal of the general downward trend from 2015 to the low point in 2020 of 16.2 tonnes per capita (tpc). Material footprint per capita in NI peaked in 2004 at 23.7 tpc. A notable decline occurred between 2007 and 2010, from 23.1 to 16.7 tpc, with the figures fluctuating in future years to a low point of 16.2 tpc in 2020. The lowest recorded level in 2020 likely reflects the impact of COVID-19 on the economy and possible changes in household consumption patterns. Since then, the material footprint has risen to 20.6 tpc in 2022, suggesting a rebound in consumption patterns and a decline in terms of environmental impact. The 2022 data is the most recent available.



Figure 60: Material footprint per capita, Northern Ireland (2001 to 2022)



Source: [Material Footprint in Northern Ireland 2001-2022](#)

Figure 61: Estimates for Northern Ireland’s material footprint per capita

Year	Material footprint per capita, tonnes
2001	19.2
2002	21.4
2003	22.9
2004	23.7
2005	23.6
2006	22.7
2007	23.1
2008	21.5
2009	18.5
2010	16.7
2011	19.1
2012	18.4
2013	17.2
2014	19.2
2015	19.5
2016	17.8



Year	Material footprint per capita, tonnes
2017	16.7
2018	16.9
2019	17.2
2020	16.2
2021	18.3
2022	20.6

Source: [Material Footprint in Northern Ireland 2001-2022](#)

Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment

DfE is currently in the process of finalising a Circular Economy Strategy for Northern Ireland and progressing towards delivery/implementation of its proposals for change including in areas relating to public procurement, potential clusters, skills development and potential sources of funding.

The CE strategy aims to improve resource efficiency and promote reuse and repair across businesses and wider society, reducing demand for virgin materials and lowering the material footprint. These are intended to improve consumption patterns by reducing the demand for virgin materials, which could in turn will help lower NI's material footprint.

While this will support the transition towards a more circular economy, it is expected that there will be long-term positive benefits to the natural environment. It will also remain challenging to link specific interventions to measurable impacts on the environment given that the transition to a circular economy will require a whole systems change and the fact material footprint is a macroeconomic indicator.

Developments, Delays, or Successes

The overview of the material footprint metric suggests that although some long-term progress has been made in reducing environmental impact since the peak in 2004, recent increases may be linked to post-pandemic recovery. This highlights the need to address consumption patterns in order to see sustained improvements in the indicator.

Implementation and Future Action

Upon publication of the CE strategy, work will focus on the implementation of the proposals for change and working with key stakeholders across government, industry and society. Future priorities will focus on designing out waste, keeping products and materials in use at their highest value for as long as possible, and regenerating nature.



Securing investment and stakeholder buy-in will influence the pace and scale of delivery of the proposals for change. The transition to a circular economy requires a whole-of-government approach, alongside industry and society, to adopt more sustainable consumption patterns to achieve long term reductions in material footprint.

Potential Data Gaps

The continued production of material footprint estimates for NI is dependent on the ongoing availability of UoL data.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

DfE continue to explore these estimates further, including scope for improvements and ensuring regular updates to NI data.

Indicator 20b. Carbon Footprint

Overview of Indicator

This indicator supports **SEO 5** and aligns with the future vision of a low-carbon, resource-efficient society in which resources are valued and reused, putting them back into the economy and preventing waste, alongside other strategic visions.

While it is necessary to monitor and reduce emissions generated within NI's geographical boundaries (territorial emissions), it is equally important to understand the emissions associated with goods and services consumed here, regardless of where in the world those emissions occur. These emissions are commonly referred to as consumption-based emissions or the carbon footprint. The Climate Change Committee (CCC) also considers it important to examine emissions across the entire economic supply chain.

DfE has identified carbon footprint as a key metric as it helps measure consumption patterns and their associated environmental impacts. Tracking these emissions can support the assessment of progress towards a more circular economy, which delivers environmental improvements by reducing waste and pollution.

NI carbon footprint estimates are available from 2001 to 2022 using the UoL methodology. The latest data was published by DfE in August 2025 and is included in both DfE research output and UoL's Local Authority Consumption Accounts. Carbon footprint emissions per capita increased slightly from 11.7 tCO₂e in 2021 to 11.9 tCO₂e in 2022. Continued production of carbon footprint estimates for NI are therefore dependent on the availability of this data.

Carbon footprint is included in DfE's Business Plan 2025-2026 as a supporting indicator for the Decarbonisation priority, alongside the headline measure of CO₂ emissions per capita.



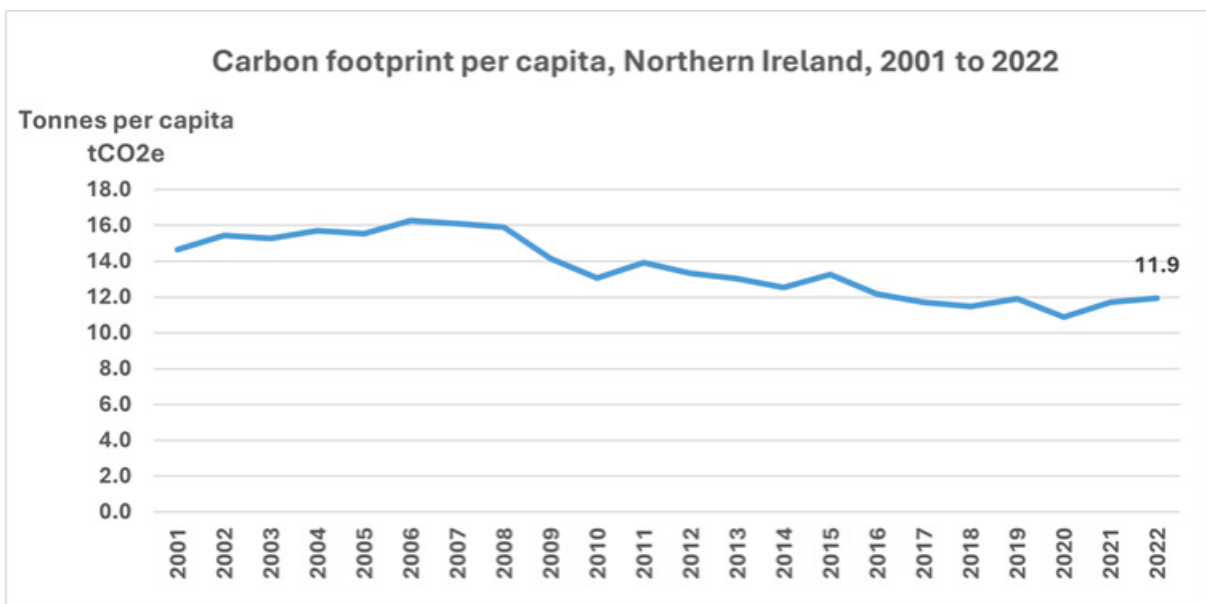
Environmental Trends

The latest figures represent a small reversal of the recent downward trend that reached its low point in 2020, though emissions remain well below pre-2010 levels.

Carbon footprint per capita peaked in 2006 at 16.3 tCO₂e. A notable decline occurred between 2008 and 2010, followed by a continued downward trend in subsequent years. The lowest recorded level in 2020 (10.9 tCO₂e) likely reflects the impact of COVID-19 on the economy and changes in household consumption patterns. Since then, consumption-based emissions have risen slightly to 11.9 tCO₂e in 2022, suggesting a rebound in consumption patterns and a decline in terms of environmental impact. The 2022 data is the most recent available.

Overall, the long-term decline in carbon footprint emissions per capita since 2001 indicates an improvement in environmental impact. This improvement reflects changes at a global level, including NI, because the emissions occur where products and materials are produced across the entire supply chain.

Figure 62: Carbon footprint per capita, Northern Ireland (2001 to 2022)



Source: ([Research Bulletin 25/1 | Indicators to Monitor Decarbonisation and the Circular Economy](#))



Figure 63: Estimates for Northern Ireland’s consumption-based carbon footprint (Totals and per capita)

Year	Carbon footprint, million tonnes CO ₂ e emissions (MtCO ₂ e)	Population estimate	Carbon footprint, tonnes per capita (tCO ₂ e)
2001	24.7	1,688,838	14.6
2002	26.2	1,697,534	15.4
2003	26.0	1,704,924	15.3
2004	26.9	1,714,042	15.7
2005	26.9	1,727,733	15.5
2006	28.3	1,743,113	16.3
2007	28.3	1,761,683	16.1
2008	28.3	1,779,152	15.9
2009	25.3	1,793,333	14.1
2010	23.6	1,804,833	13.1
2011	25.2	1,814,318	13.9
2012	24.3	1,824,603	13.3
2013	23.9	1,831,677	13.0
2014	23.1	1,843,186	12.5
2015	24.6	1,854,943	13.3
2016	22.7	1,866,042	12.2
2017	22.0	1,875,178	11.7
2018	21.6	1,886,259	11.5
2019	22.6	1,898,519	11.9
2020	20.7	1,900,523	10.9
2021	22.3	1,904,564	11.7
2022	22.8	1,910,543	11.9

Source: ([Research Bulletin 25/1 | Indicators to Monitor Decarbonisation and the Circular Economy](#))

Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment

DfE is currently in the process of finalising a Circular Economy Strategy for Northern Ireland and progressing towards delivery/implementation of its proposals for change including in areas relating to public procurement, potential clusters, skills development and potential sources of funding.

The CE strategy aims to improve resource efficiency and promote reuse and repair across businesses and wider society, reducing demand for virgin materials and lowering the material footprint. These are intended to improve consumption patterns by reducing the demand for virgin materials, which could in turn will help lower NI’s consumption-based emissions.



While this will support the transition towards a more circular economy, it is expected that there will be long-term positive benefits to the natural environment. It will also remain challenging to link specific interventions to measurable impacts on the environment given that the transition to a circular economy will require a whole systems change and the fact carbon footprint is a macroeconomic indicator.

Developments, Delays, or Successes

The overview of the carbon footprint metric suggests that although long-term progress has been made in reducing environmental impact, recent increases may be linked to post-pandemic recovery. This highlights the need to address consumption patterns in order to see sustained improvements in the indicator.

Implementation and Future Action

Upon publication of the CE strategy, work will focus on the implementation of the proposals for change and working with key stakeholders across government, industry and society. Future priorities will focus on designing out waste, keeping products and materials in use at their highest value for as long as possible, and regenerating nature.

Securing investment and stakeholder buy-in will influence the pace and scale of delivery of the proposals for change. The transition to a circular economy requires a whole-of-government approach, alongside industry and society, to adopt more sustainable consumption patterns to achieve long term reductions in carbon footprint.

Potential Data Gaps

The continued production of carbon footprint estimates for NI is dependent on the ongoing availability of UoL data.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

DfE continues to explore these estimates, including publishing additional breakdowns, identifying opportunities for improvement, and ensuring regular updates to NI data.

Overall Assessment of Circular Economy Indicators

Carbon and material footprint indicators should be considered together when assessing progress towards a circular economy. While complementary, they capture different dimensions: carbon footprint reflects emissions across the entire supply chain, whereas material footprint measures global resource extraction associated with consumption. When both indicators show an improvement, this may signal a shift towards more sustainable production and consumption practices, critical for addressing resource scarcity, inequality, and waste generation.



These indicators are helpful in evaluating the cumulative effect of actions under the circular economy theme. However, due to the three-year data lag and early stages of the transition, measurable impacts are unlikely to be visible until 2029/2030 at the earliest. The data time lag will make it difficult to attribute future actions with associated impacts and even then, causation will be challenging due to the metric's macroeconomic nature and should be factored into any assessment of progress. The dual-indicator approach also supports alignment with broader strategic objectives, including resource efficiency and net zero.

Delivering a circular economy requires a whole systems approach, recognising that no single metric or intervention can achieve the scale of change required. In the short term, both material and carbon footprints may increase due to issues such as infrastructure upgrades, for example improvements to energy, water, and waste systems, which are inherently resource and carbon intensive. These developments are essential for achieving long-term net zero goals but may in the short to medium term affect environmental metrics. Such short-term trade-offs should be acknowledged when interpreting progress.

DfE will develop a circular economy monitoring framework to identify and define a broad set of indicators. As this work progresses, more granular or lower-level indicators are expected to emerge, which may offer better insights into the direct and cumulative impact of EIP actions. Once developed, these indicators could be incorporated into the EIP monitoring framework to strengthen its evidence base.

Future Focus for Circular Economy Indicators

Given the macroeconomic nature of material and carbon footprint, and the systemic changes required to substantially improve these metrics, progress will not be immediately visible in the short term.

As the circular economy transition progresses and the monitoring framework and data landscape evolves, additional and/or alternative indicators and targets may become available to provide a more comprehensive picture of progress. Work will also continue to identify and develop additional indicators that will help measure delivery against economic, social and environmental outcomes and may enable a closer analysis of the impact of interventions on the environment.

Subject to NI Executive approval, DfE will publish the Circular Economy Strategy and commence delivery/implementation of the strategy.

It is expected that annual updates will be published for both carbon footprint and material footprint going forward, using the UoL estimates as the primary data source for monitoring these measures and progress against the material footprint target.



21. Waste Management

The outcome indicators used in relation to waste management are:

21a. Waste Generated from Households (Waste Arisings)

21b. Recycling Levels

- Municipal Waste sent for Recycling
- Household Waste sent for Recycling

21c. Municipal Waste Landfilled

- Landfill Rates
- Biodegradable Waste to Landfill
- Energy Recovery

The information has been taken from the [NI Local Authority Collected Municipal Waste Management Statistics Annual Report 2024/25](#). The report presents finalised and validated information on the quantities of local authority collected (LAC) municipal waste collected and managed in NI over the 2024/25 financial year, as well as trend data over previous years. It provides information on the quantities of waste arising, sent for preparing for reuse, dry recycling, composting, energy recovery and sent to landfill.

Indicator 21a. Waste generated from Households (Waste Arisings)

The information has been taken from the NI Local Authority Collected Municipal Waste Management Statistics Annual Report 2024/25.

Overview of Indicator

The total quantity of LAC municipal waste arisings is a key performance indicator. It is based on well-established and robust data reported by district councils and waste management groups and analysed by Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). It's primary reporting function is to monitor efforts to reduce consumption and prevent waste. The overall figure brings together totals from five categories (preparing for reuse, dry recycling, composting, energy recovery, and landfill), allowing further analysis and identification of areas for improvement.



Household waste arisings include materials collected directly from households via kerbside collections, material taken to bring sites and civic amenity sites as well as several other smaller sources. The remainder is non-household waste such as rubble/soil and commercial/industrial waste.

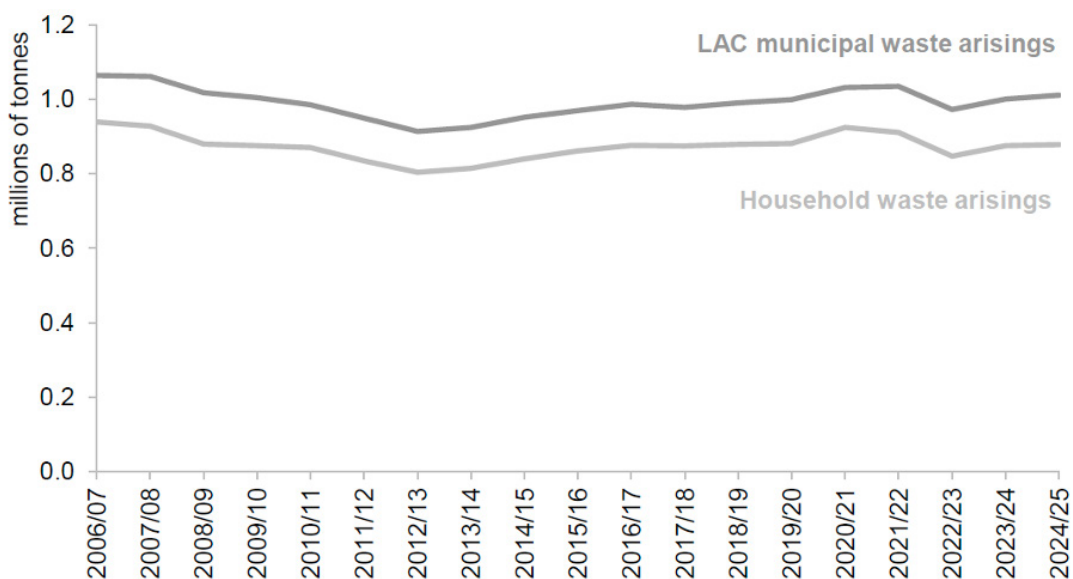
Factors affecting waste arisings, the majority of which is household waste, include individual household behaviours, the advice and collection services provided by councils, the state of the economy and the weather conditions during the year.

Environmental Trends

Although this detail is available quarterly, given seasonal variations, comparisons are based on annual figures, which provide a more rounded approach when monitoring progress. Since 2006/07 household waste has usually accounted for 86-90% of total waste collected by district councils each quarter, apart from April to June 2020 when Covid-19 restrictions resulted in a larger than normal proportion of household waste being collected. While both sets of data are presented, given the high percentage make up of household waste, it is unsurprising that annual variances follow the same pattern.

In 2024/25, NI's councils collected 1,010,410 tonnes of waste. This is 1.0% higher than in 2023/24 when 1,000,681 tonnes were collected. The tonnage of waste collected at kerbside decreased by 1.1% during 2024/25 compared to the previous year, whilst waste collected at civic amenity sites increased by 5.4%.

Figure 64: Waste arisings Northern Ireland, 2006/07 to 2024/25



Source: NIEA, LPS

Link: [Northern Ireland local authority collected municipal waste management statistics | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)



Figure 65: LAC waste arisings Northern Ireland, 2006/07 to 2024/25 - annual figures

Unit: Tonnes

2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
1,064,090	1,061,108	1,017,215	1,004,020	985,176	949,491	913,546	924,412	951,423	969,157

2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
985,994	977,817	990,233	998,985	1,031,169	1,034,637	971,936	1,000,681	1,010,410

Source: NIEA

Link: [LAC Municipal Waste Data Tables: 2023-24](#)

Since 2006/07 household waste has accounted for 86% to 90% of total waste collected by councils. In 2024/25 household waste accounted for 86.9%.

Figure 66: Household waste arisings Northern Ireland, 2006/07 to 2024/25 - annual figures

2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
938,726	928,122	879,846	875,062	870,254	834,149	803,624	814,764	839,569	860,786

2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
875,965	874,257	879,163	880,842	924,224	910,847	846,822	875,443	877,988

Source: NIEA

Link: [LAC Municipal Waste Data Tables: 2023-24](#)

Household waste arisings fell from 938,726 tonnes in 2006/07 to a low of 803,624 in 2012/13, a 14.4% decrease. From then until 2021/22, total arisings showed a generally increasing trend. A reduction in arisings was recorded in 2022/23 but increased by 3.4% in 2023/24 before a further increase of 1.0% to 877,988 tonnes in the latest year.

When considering waste arisings, it is also important to put overall figures in the context of changing population numbers. Both figures showed a minor decline in household waste collected in 2024/25, with 455 kg per capita compared to 456 kg in 2023/24, and 1,114 kg per household, decreasing from 1,118 kg in 2023/24.

Assessment of Indicator data

Current trend shows a slight increase in waste arising overall, with a minimal decline per capita and per household. This indicates that more action is required in relation to waste prevention and reduction in consumption. The expansion of producer responsibility may also have a positive impact in future.



Proposed changes to recycling and waste collections may also help drive improvement as that would provide an opportunity to take a consistent approach with central messaging to drive behaviour change.

Indicator 21b. Recycling Levels

Overview of Indicator

This indicator measures material sent from households for recycling. Improved recycling rates across both households and businesses are necessary in delivering against targets set in NI's legislation. The Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 incorporates several actions for the decarbonisation of the waste sector and in particular sets out a clear requirement of achieving at least 70% of waste recycled by 2030. In addition to this requirement, amendments made in 2020 to the WCLO introduced new municipal recycling targets - for households, and businesses who produce waste like households. The WCLO requires NI to achieve a 65% recycling rate for municipal waste by 2035. The household waste annual recycling rate is included as an indicator for the current PfG 2024-2027 'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most'.

It is worth noting that figures and references to recycling includes waste sent for preparing for reuse, dry recycling, and composting. This has been the case from 2012/13 onwards, when waste sent for preparing for reuse was added, in line with the rest of the UK. Although the overall impacts were relatively small, adding 0.1 - 0.3 percentage points to the rates, this has resulted in a noticeable break in the timeline in some reporting.

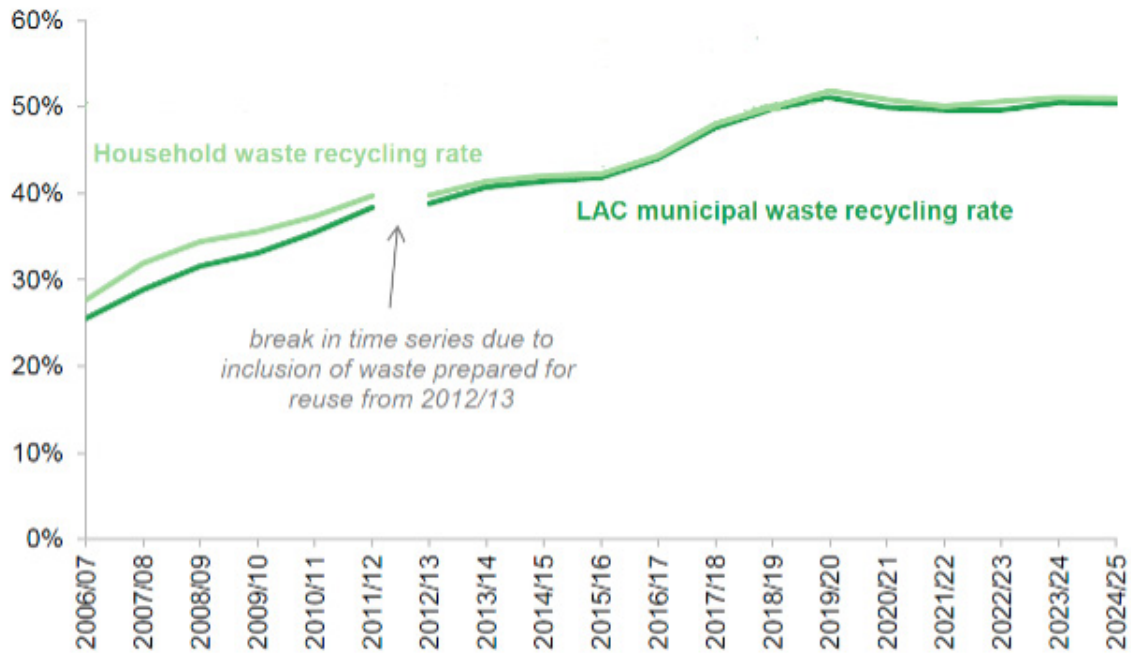
Environmental Trends

Municipal Waste sent for Recycling

In 2024/25, the LAC tonnage of waste sent for preparing for reuse, dry recycling and composting was 509,578 tonnes. The recycling rate was 50.4%, similar to the recycling rate recorded in 2023/24.



Figure 67: Waste sent for preparing for reuse, dry recycling and composting Northern Ireland, 2006/07 to 2024/25



Source: NIEA, LPS

Link: [Northern Ireland local authority collected municipal waste management statistics | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

Household Waste sent for Recycling

In 2024/25, household waste sent for recycling was 447,965 tonnes. (preparing for reuse 2,750 tonnes; dry recycling 206,509 tonnes; and composting 238,500 tonnes).

Figure 68: Waste sent for preparing for reuse, dry recycling and composting Northern Ireland, 2023/24 and 2024/25 (Percentage of overall total)

Unit: Tonnes	Household waste preparing for reuse			Household waste dry recycling	Household waste composting	Household waste preparing for reuse, Household waste preparing for reuse, dry recycling and composting
2024/25	2,750 (0.6%)			206,509 (46.1%)	238,706 (53.3%)	447,965
2023/24	2,513 (0.5)	199,053 (44.5%)	245,500 (55%)	447,067		

Source: NIEA

Link: [LAC Municipal Waste Data Tables: 2024-25](#)



Figure 69: Percentage of household waste sent for preparing for reuse, dry recycling and composting Northern Ireland, 2006/07 to 2024/25

Recycling Rate %

2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
27.7%	31.9%	34.4%	35.6%	37.3%	39.7%	39.8%	41.4%	42.02%	42.2%

2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
44.3%	48.1%	50.0%	51.9%	50.9%	50.1%	50.7%	51.1%	51.1%

Source: NIEA

Link: [LAC Municipal Waste Data Tables: 2024-25](#)

The household waste recycling rate (including preparing for reuse and composting) was 51.1% in 2024/25, similar to the household waste recycling rate recorded in both the two previous years. The proportion of household waste sent for preparing for reuse was 0.3%, dry recycling made up 23.5% and composting was 27.2%, all similar to the previous year.

Assessment of Indicator data

Recent trends indicate that recycling rates are stagnating, supporting proposals for further interventions, as it appears highly unlikely that upcoming interim recycling targets will be met. The significant improvement in recycling rates seen in earlier years shows the potential for positive impacts from interventions in household collections.

Given the ambition of longer-term recycling targets, it is unlikely that this could be achieved from changes to household collections alone. Therefore, it will be necessary to include business and industry in future plans for improvement. However, improved data will be necessary to establish the current position and track future progress.

Composting continues to account for over half of overall recycling, highlighting that more can be done in relation to dry recycling, including greater consideration of the quality of the material collected and its end destination, to meet wider ambitions to support local reprocessing, reducing waste movements and enhancing Circular Economy opportunities.

Although municipal waste streams data may not be the most appropriate to fully assess the level of reuse, figures of less than 1% are a concern considering the desire to move materials higher up the waste hierarchy and maximise resources.



Indicator 21c. Municipal Waste Landfilled

Overview of Indicator

This indicator measures the proportion of LAC Municipal Waste arisings sent to landfill, it is based on NISRA analysis of data from local authorities and waste management organisations and will therefore be considered robust. The EU Circular Economy Package (CEP), transposed into domestic legislation in December 2020 by The Waste (Circular Economy) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2020, introduced the target that 10% or less of the total amount of municipal waste generated (by weight) by 2035 could be sent for landfill.

The data provided is further analysed to highlight the percentage of LAC municipal waste landfilled which was biodegradable. This is a key consideration, as the EIP includes actions to consult on options to restrict biodegradable waste to landfill, as this is seen as a key contributor to GHG emissions in the waste sector.

Additional detail is also provided on energy recovery rates, to allow this to be considered alongside landfill rates. Figures reported are derived from material sent for energy recovery via incineration/gasification. Anaerobic digestion is not included in the figures, as these have been accounted for under the recycling section since the vast majority of the tonnage of waste undergoing this process eventually ends up as a compost.

Environmental Trends

The long-term trend has seen the household waste landfill rate fall from 72.3% in 2006/07 to a low of 14.0% in 2024/25, with biodegradable waste following a similar pattern.

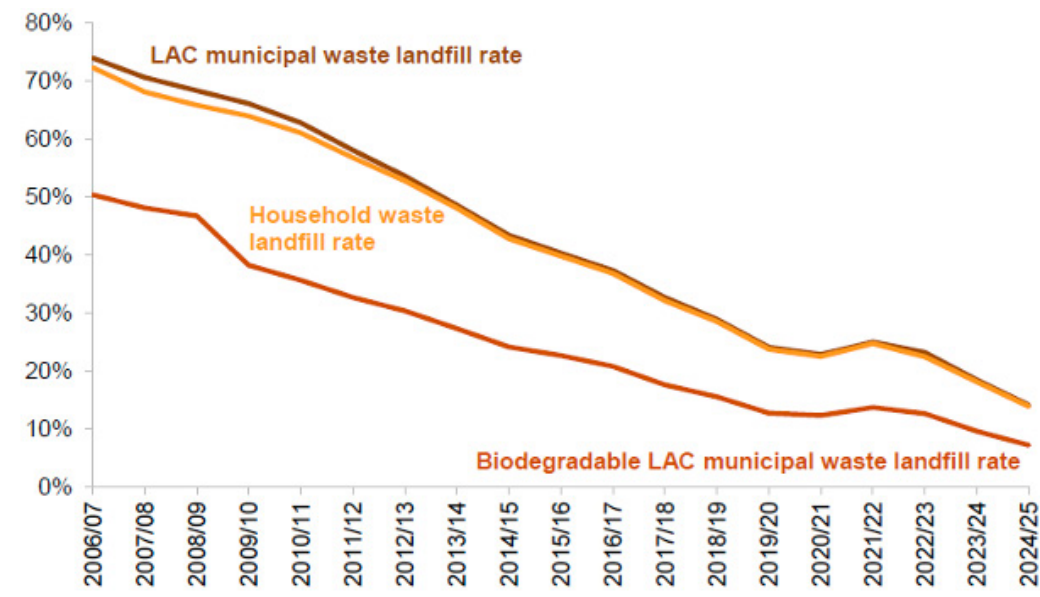
Landfill Rates

The quantity of waste sent to landfill decreased by 22.8% from 183,748 to 141,836 tonnes between 2023/24 and 2024/25. This produced a landfill rate of 14.0% for 2024/25, 4.3 percentage points lower than the 18.4% recorded in 2023/24 and the lowest rate ever recorded. The volume of waste sent to landfill has fallen by 37% in the last two years.

The landfill rate for household waste also recorded its lowest value in 2024/25 at 13.8%, a decrease of 4.2 percentage points from 18.0% in 2023/24.



Figure 70: Waste sent to landfill Northern Ireland, 2006/07 to 2024/25



Source: NIEA, LPS

Link: [Northern Ireland local authority collected municipal waste management statistics | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

Figure 71: Annual local authority collected municipal waste send to landfill (Percentage of local authority collected municipal waste landfilled)

Unit: (Percentage)

2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
786,951	749,228	694,904	663,697	618,531	551,472	489,437	448,990	412,755	390,256
74.0%	70.6%	68.3%	66.1%	62.8%	58.1%	53.6%	48.6%	43.4%	40.3%

2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
367,484	319,212	285,905	240,220	234,956	257,900	225,000	183,748	141,457
37.3%	32.6%	28.9%	24.0%	22.8%	24.9%	23.1%	18.4%	14.0%

Source: NIEA

Link: [LAC Municipal Waste Data Tables: 2023-25](#)

Biodegradable Waste to Landfill

While the volume of biodegradable waste has continually fallen, following a similar pattern to landfill waste in general from 2006/07 to 2024/25, the percentage make-up has not reduced significantly in that time period.



Figure 72: Annual biodegradable local authority collected municipal waste sent to landfill (% of LAC municipal waste landfilled which was biodegradable)

Unit: Tonnes (Percentage)

2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
535,736	510,205	475,080	383,329	350,725	309,792	276,723	251,951	229,099	218,898
68%	68%	68%	58%	57%	56%	57%	56%	56%	56%

2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
204,380	171,295	153,323	126,286	126,404	141,390	121,925	95,425	71,828
56%	54%	54%	53%	54%	55%	54%	52%	51%

Source: NIEA

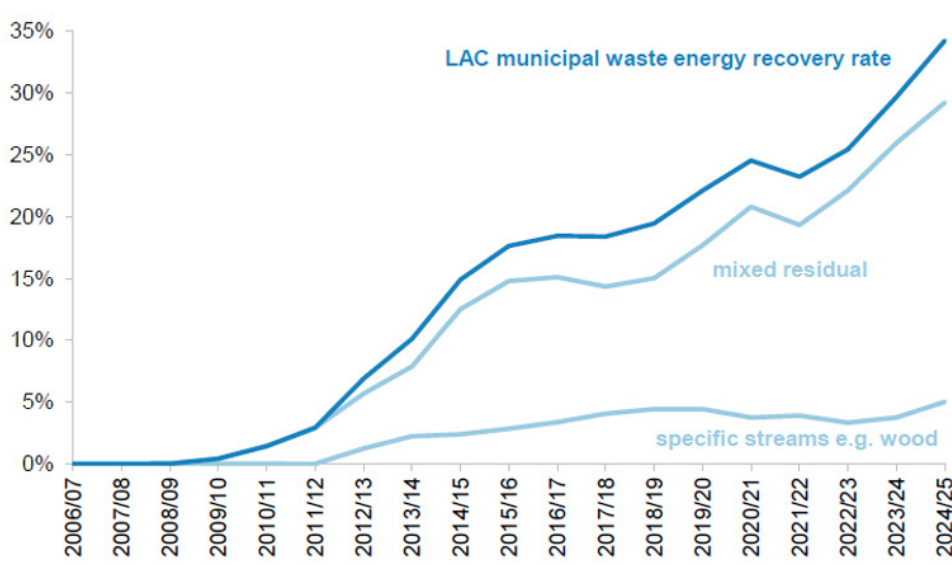
Link: [LAC Municipal Waste Data Tables: 2024-25](#)

NI’s councils sent 71,828 tonnes of biodegradable waste to landfill during 2024/25, which was 51% of all waste sent to landfill. During the previous year, 95,425 tonnes of biodegradable waste was sent to landfill, which was 52% of all waste sent to landfill.

Energy Recovery

There was zero, or very small quantities, of waste sent for energy recovery before 2009/10. Strong growth followed from 2010/11, with the energy recovery rate increasing from 0.4% in 2009/10 to 34.3% in 2024/25.

Figure 73: Waste sent for energy recovery via incineration Northern Ireland, 2006/07 to 2024/25



Source: NIEA, LPS

Link: [Northern Ireland local authority collected municipal waste management statistics | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)



In 2024/25, 346,138 tonnes of waste arisings were sent for energy recovery. This produced an energy recovery rate of 34.3%, higher than the 29.7% recorded in 2023/24.

The majority of energy recovery is derived from mixed residual waste; this is combustible residual waste collected from the kerbside and from civic amenity sites and processed into refuse derived fuel (RDF) at material recovery facilities.

A smaller proportion is from specific streams, mostly wood but also includes furniture, carpets and mattresses, mostly collected from civic amenity sites.

Assessment of Indicator data

There has been a significant reduction in waste being landfilled, most notably in the last 2-3 years, which must be recognised as a positive step to improving the natural environment. The falling trend corresponds with an increase in energy recovery, reflecting that private operators and councils have transitioned to this method of dealing with their residual waste.

Therefore, when assessing environmental impacts, it is important to consider emissions from the energy recovery process as well as the associated waste movements, but also the alternative source of energy provided. As the end destination for much of the refuse directive fuel is outside of NI, any future policy changes in importing countries, together with market volatility, are potential risks, particularly given the high percentage of waste being processed in this way.

Whilst the volume of waste being sent to landfill has fallen dramatically, the percentage of which was biodegradable has remained concerningly high, still accounting for over half of the overall total. This trend indicates that little has changed in behaviours and action is needed to remove biodegradable waste from the residual waste stream, which is of particular concern given its contribution to GHG emissions.

Overall Assessment of Outcome Indicators for Waste Management

Summary Points

NI's councils collected 1,010,410 tonnes of waste during 2024/25 which was 1.0% higher than the amount collected in 2023/24. During 2024/25, half (50.4 percent) of the waste collected by councils was sent for recycling which was similar to the recycling rate reported in 2023/24.

Household waste accounted for 86.9% of all LAC waste during 2024/25. The recycling rate for household waste was 51.0% whilst the landfill rate for household waste was 13.8%.



The landfill rate for waste collected by councils was 14.0% in 2024/25, a fall from 74.0% in 2006/07 and 18.4% in 2023/24. In 2024/25, over one third (34.3%) of waste arisings were sent for energy recovery. This compares to 29.7% in 2023/24 and 0.4% in 2009/10.

There were 71,828 tonnes of biodegradable waste sent to landfill during 2024/25, a decrease of 24.7% from the quantity reported in 2023/24 (95,425 tonnes). However, this remains over half of the total volume of waste landfilled.

Overall Assessment

There have been significant improvements in waste management, however, recent trends suggest stagnation and the need for further intervention to meet legal targets and to further ambitions to enhance the Circular Economy in NI. Actions within the EIP will help address the current challenges, however, the pace of change may be slower than hoped as some, such as packaging EPR have only recently been introduced, others including the DRS are still to be implemented, with other plans yet to be agreed.

Reporting of waste data in some forums continue to make comparisons to targets that have been superseded, with a 50% recycling rate often being cited as an achievement, and landfill rates being viewed in isolation. However, The Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 and amendments to the Waste and Contaminated Land (NI) Order introduced much more ambitious targets which will require significant improvements to be made. The new Waste Management Strategy will bring these targets together, which should provide a clearer focus and set future direction for both the waste sector, private industry and the public. Recommendations for waste and recycling reforms have been developed by DAERA which, once approved, will be supported by guidance and messaging to help implementation.

Data Gaps/ Indicator Development

DAERA currently participate in a UK four nation working group focussing on developing the statistics available for various waste works streams. The aim is to enhance metrics for monitoring and support future policy making with more comprehensive data than is currently available. There remain some data gaps in relation to NHM Waste, which is largely waste from businesses.

An important step will be to define what is to be included in the waste recycling 70% target set in the Climate Change Act. Improved data will be needed to identify the contributions required from the household, business, commercial and industrial (C&I) sectors.

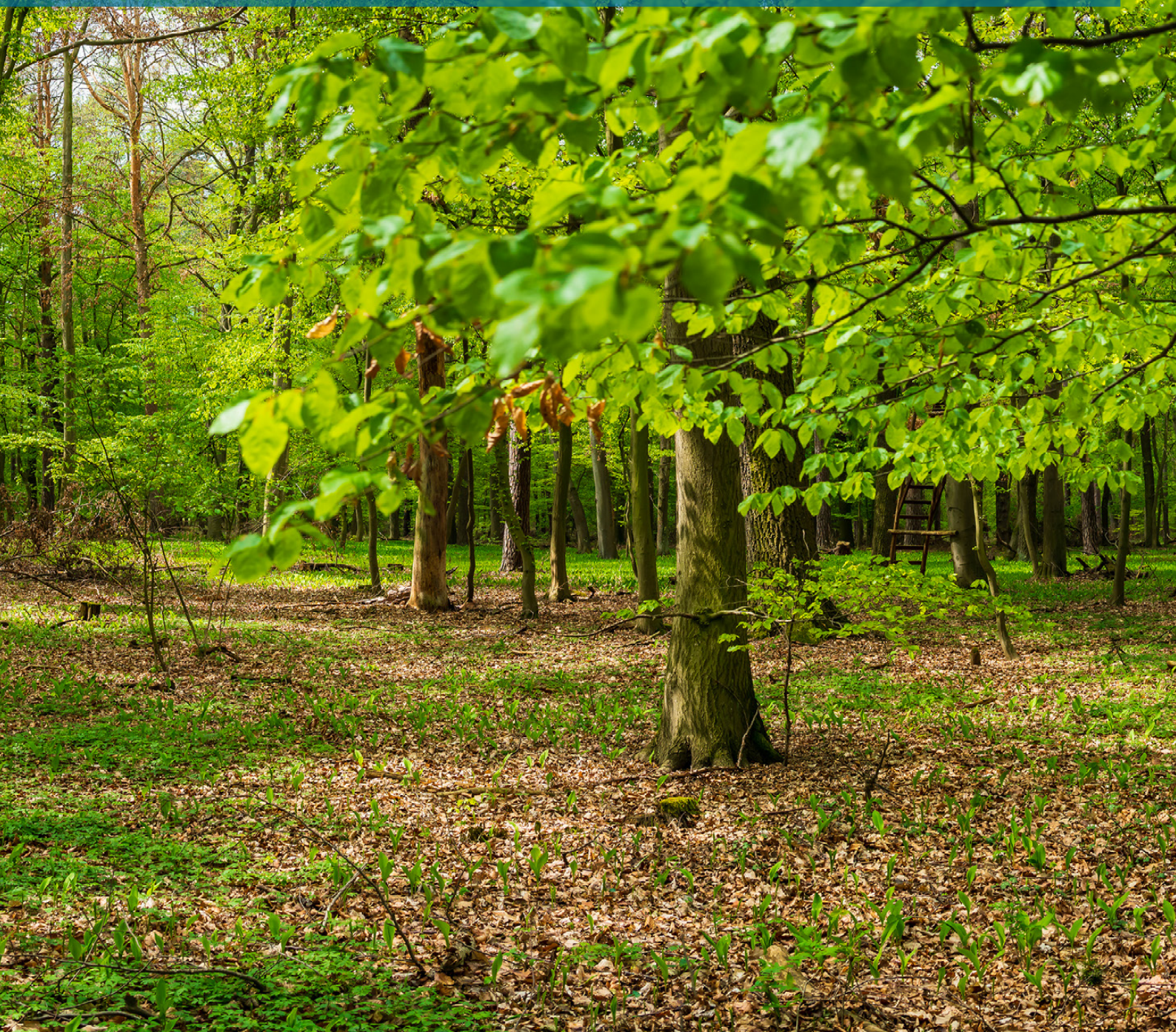


Future plans include:

- An up-to-date waste compositional analysis to determine the composition of household waste in NI.
- Through waste composition analysis, establish overall and sectoral baseline non-household waste compositions and arisings.
- A reporting framework to capture non-household waste and recycling performance data, including end destinations for materials.
- For industrial sectors outside the scope of NHM waste, gather baseline data on commercial & industrial arisings, composition and recycling performance.
- Undertake a review of construction & demolition waste data to identify improvements in how it is captured, the treatment routes utilised and the overall composition of C&D waste



SEO 6 - Net Zero GHG Emissions & Improved Climate Resilience & Adaptability





SEO 6 - Net Zero GHG Emissions & Improved Climate Resilience & Adaptability

22. Climate Change

Indicator 22a. Total Greenhouse Gas Emissions in Northern Ireland

Overview of Indicator

The indicator for this theme is the Total GHG Emissions in NI. This is a longstanding robust indicator of progress in reducing emissions with annual reports produced around this at a NI level for many years. The focus of the indicator is on mitigation and reducing emissions and therefore it does not cover adaptation which is recognised as more challenging in terms of having robust long-standing indicators.

The statistics are published within the NI GHG Inventory which reports annual emissions from 1990 (base year) to the latest year (2023) and forms part of the UK GHG Inventory, which is produced to fulfil both European Union Monitoring Mechanism (EUMM) and United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) meeting international reporting requirements under the Kyoto Protocol and UNFCCC. Compiled in line with International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) guidance, it provides emissions data at both NI and sectoral levels using the Territorial Emissions Statistics methodology. For the purposes of accounting in the GHG Inventory, the 1990 base year refers to emissions from CO₂, CH₄, and N₂O and 1995 for fluorinated gases, collectively referred to as the 1990 base year.

In 2023, emissions were 18.2 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent (MtCO₂e) - a 31.5% reduction since 1990 and 7.1% lower than 2022, continuing a positive downward trend in recent years. This inventory is a key indicator of progress in reducing GHG by scale and sector.

Environmental Trends

The most recent GHG Inventory published in June 2025, provides NI's GHG emissions for 2023. In 2023, NI's net GHG emissions, were estimated to be 18.2 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent (Mt CO₂e). This was a decrease of 7.1% compared to 2022.



Figure 74: Greenhouse gas emissions by gas, change in Mt CO₂e

Northern Ireland; base year (1990), 2022, 2023

Sector	Base year	2022	2023	Change base year to 2023	Change 2022 to 2023
Carbon dioxide	18.3	12.4	11.2	-7.1	-1.2
Methane	6.4	5.6	5.5	-0.9	-0.1
Nitrous Oxide	1.9	1.4	1.3	-0.5	0.0
'F-gases'	0.0	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.0
Total	26.6	19.6	18.2	-8.4	-1.4

Units: MtCO₂e

Source: DAERA

Link: [NI GHG Statistics 1990-2023](#)

Figure 75: Greenhouse gas emissions by gas, percentage change

Northern Ireland; base year (1990), 2022, 2023

Sector	Base year	2022	2023	% of total emissions 2023	% change base year to 2023	% change 2022 to 2023
Carbon dioxide	18.3	12.4	11.2	61.5%	-38.9%	-10.0%
Methane	6.4	5.6	5.5	30.2%	-13.4%	-1.9%
Nitrous Oxide	1.9	1.4	1.3	7.3%	-29.1%	-2.5%
'F-gases'	0.0	0.2	0.2	1.0%	711.4%	-4.5%
Total	26.6	19.6	18.2	100%	-31.5%	-7.1%

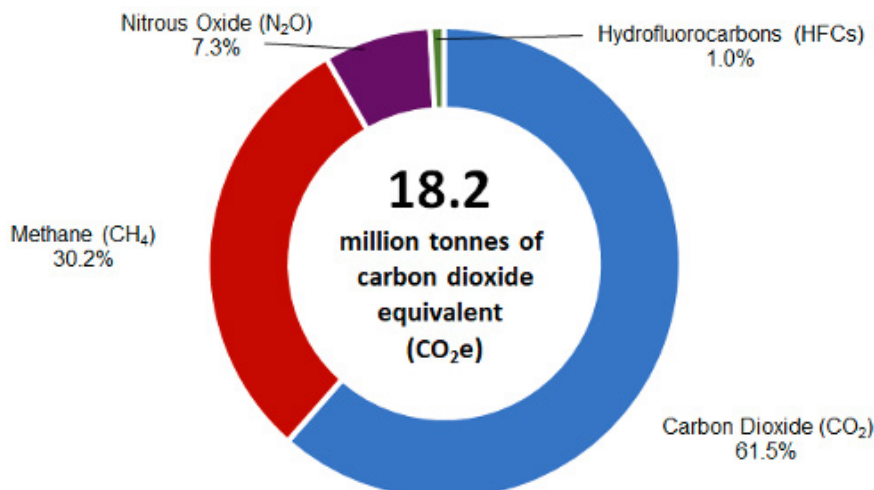
Units: MtCO₂e

Source: DAERA

Link: [NI GHG Statistics 1990-2023](#)

Figure 76: Greenhouse gas emissions by gas type*

Northern Ireland; 2023



This doughnut chart was based on the following data table.



								Units: ktCO ₂ e
Sector	CO ₂	CH ₄	N ₂ O	HFCs	PFCs	SF ₆	NF ₃	All gases
Agriculture	290	4,252	1,073					5,615
Buildings and product uses	2,323	47	29	123	0			2,521
Domestic transport	3,831	2	32	42				3,908
Electricity supply	2,116	3	6					2,124
Fuel supply	0	4	0					4
Industry	1,097	4	7	13	0	7	0	1,127
Land Use Change	1,538	472	139					2,149
Waste	2	716	46					763
Grand Total	11,196	5,500	1,332	178	0	7	0	18,212
% of all gases	61.5%	30.2%	7.3%	1.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100%

Source: Greenhouse Gas Inventories for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland: 1990 - 2023

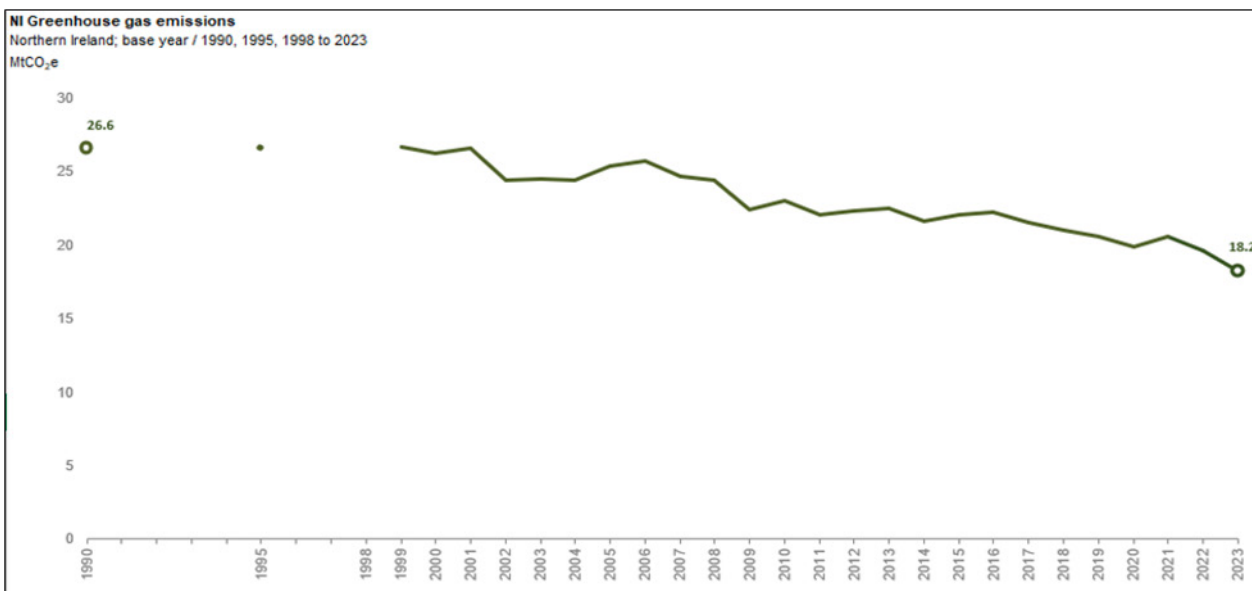
Link: [NI GHG Statistics 1990-2023](#)

Emissions are reported for seven greenhouse gases: CO₂, CH₄, N₂O, hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), perfluorocarbons (PFCs), sulphur hexafluoride (SF₆) and nitrogen trifluoride (NF₃)

*Note that there are zero amounts of PFC and NF₃ as well as a minimal amount of SF₆ recorded in NI and, as such, these gases are not included in the chart above.

Figure 77: NI Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Northern Ireland; base year / 1990, 1995, 1998 to 2023



Source: Greenhouse Gas Inventories for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland: 1990 - 2023

Link: [NI GHG Statistics 1990-2023](#)



- In 2023 NI's net GHG emissions were estimated to be 18.2 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent (MtCO₂e). This net figure is a result of an estimated 20.1 MtCO₂e total emissions, offset by 1.9 MtCO₂e of emissions removed through sequestration.
- The net figure of 18.2 MtCO₂e in 2023 represents a decrease of 7.1% compared with 2022. The longer-term trend showed a decrease of 31.5% compared with the 1990 base year, (The base year is 1990 for CO₂, CH₄, and N₂O, and 1995 for the fluorinated gases).
- In 2023, Agriculture was the largest emitter, responsible for 30.8% of emissions. Domestic transport followed as the second largest contributor, responsible for 21.5% of overall emissions. The buildings and product uses sector, along with the LULUCF sector, contributed 13.8% and 11.8% respectively. Additionally, the Electricity Supply sector accounted for 11.7% of emissions.

Based on the most recent data, emissions are continuing to reduce. This will have a positive impact from a climate change mitigation perspective which in turn can deliver positive benefits for the natural environment. Given the nature of the data which feeds into the GHG Inventory, it is difficult to pinpoint the impact of specific actions in terms of the change in indicator. However, between 2022 and 2023, all sectors, with the exception of Fuel Supply and LULUCF, showed decreases in emissions. The largest decreases in terms of tonnes of CO₂ equivalent were in Electricity Supply (0.9 Mt CO₂e), Buildings and product uses (0.4 Mt CO₂e) and Agriculture (0.1 Mt CO₂e) sectors.

Actions Taken to Improve the Natural Environment

NI established its first set of three legally binding carbon budgets covering the period 2027 - 2037 through the Climate Change (Carbon Budgets 2023-2037) Regulations (NI) 2024. The first carbon budget, 2023-2027 sets a target of a 33% AAR in GHG from the 1990 base year, the second carbon budget sets a target of a 48% AAR from the 1990 base year, and the third carbon budget sets a target of a 62% AAR from the 1990 base year. The interim target for 2030 is to achieve an at least 48% reduction from the 1990 base year and the 2040 target is to achieve an at least 77% reduction from the 1990 base year. The percentage target of 77% in the Act was set by the Climate Change (2040 Emissions Target) Regulations (NI) 2024.

Developments, Delays, or Successes

In 2023, emissions were 18.2 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent (MtCO₂e) - a 31.5% reduction since 1990 and 7.1% lower than 2022, continuing a positive downward trend in recent years.



Implementation and Future Action

The continued reduction in GHG is necessary to achieve carbon budgets, which will be driven by the development and implementation of successive CAPs.

Potential Data Gaps

To support the development of both CAP2 and future CAPs, work is ongoing to enhance and integrate modelling to provide a more robust, holistic assessment of GHG reduction impacts and policy effectiveness. This will map existing models and methodologies, analyse available data, and identify data streams to support the assessment of GHG reduction, along with an understanding of environmental, social, and economic impacts.

Proposals for future data/indicator development

DAERA officials sit on the National Inventory Steering Committee that is designed to improve the robustness of GHG estimates. This is twofold with work considered at a UK level as well as a specific stream which is focussed on Devolved Administration inputs.



Conclusion For EIP APR

This APR marks a pivotal moment in NI's environmental journey. It reflects the first full cycle of reporting under the EIP and signals a clear shift toward integrated, long-term environmental governance. The progress outlined in this report demonstrates that the foundations for change are being laid: governance structures are strengthening, evidence frameworks are in place, and partnerships across government, industry, and communities are beginning to deliver tangible outcomes. These developments matter because they create conditions for sustained improvement, ensuring that environmental priorities are embedded in decision-making and aligned with wider social and economic goals.

The report also highlights the scale of the challenge. Environmental pressures remain significant and deeply interconnected. Water quality, biodiversity decline, and climate resilience are not isolated issues; they are symptoms of systemic pressures that require coordinated responses. Meeting statutory targets and international commitments will demand accelerated delivery, sharper cross-departmental collaboration, and a willingness to innovate. It will also require a cultural shift: embedding environmental principles into everyday decisions, from how we plan infrastructure to how we produce and consume goods. This is not a short-term task; it is a generational endeavor that calls for persistence, adaptability, and shared responsibility.

Looking ahead, the emphasis must move decisively from planning to implementation. Strategies and frameworks now need to translate into measurable improvements in environmental quality and resilience. This means prioritising actions that deliver the greatest impact, ensuring resources are targeted effectively, and maintaining transparency in reporting progress. It also means recognising that environmental improvement is not solely a government's responsibility. Success will depend on collective effort, businesses adopting sustainable practices, communities engaging in local action, and individuals making choices that reduce environmental harm. Every sector has a role to play, and every action contributes to the wider goal of a nature-positive, climate-resilient NI.

The benefits of this transition are clear. A healthy environment underpins public health, economic prosperity, and social wellbeing. Cleaner air and water, thriving biodiversity, and resilient landscapes are not optional extras; they are essential to the quality of life and the sustainability of our economy. By investing in nature-based solutions, supporting innovation, and fostering collaboration, NI can position itself as a leader in environmental stewardship and green growth. This is an opportunity not only to meet legal obligations but to create a legacy of resilience and prosperity for future generations.



In conclusion, this report provides a strong foundation for the work ahead. It shows that progress is possible, but it also makes clear that the pace and scale of action must increase. The next phase will be critical: turning ambition into delivery, ensuring that environmental improvement is embedded across all sectors, and maintaining focus on outcomes that matter most for people and nature. The choices we make now will shape the environment we pass on to future generations. By working together, government, industry, communities, and individuals, we can deliver the vision of a healthy, sustainable, and resilient NI. The challenge is significant, but the direction is clear, and the time for decisive action is now.



Glossary

Acronym	Full title
AAR	Average annual reduction
ABS	Area Based Scheme
ACCLIMATISE	A Changing Climate Impact Monitoring and Assessment Toolbox for Irish Seas
AERA	Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
AFBI	Agri-Food & Biosciences Institute
AFFF	Aqueous Film Forming Foams
ALB	Arm's Length Bodies
ALNL	Active Living No Limits
AMR	Antimicrobial Resistance
AMR NAP	Antimicrobial Resistance National Action Plan
APR	Annual Progress Report
AS	Ammonia Strategy NI
ASSIs	Areas of Special Scientific Interest
BAU	Business as Usual
BREEAM	Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method
BTO	British Trust for Ornithology
C&I	Commercial and Industrial
CAP	Climate Action Plan
CD&E	Construction, Demolition, and Excavation
CE	Circular Economy
CEP	Circular Economy Package
CH ₄	Methane
CMAP	Coastal Monitoring and Adaptation Planning Project
CO ₂	Carbon Dioxide
COMAH	Control of Major Hazards Regulations
CPtN	Connecting People to Nature
CREST	Chemicals Regulatory Strategy Tool
DAERA	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
DAFM	Department for Agriculture, Food and the Marine
DAP	Delivery Action Plan



Acronym	Full title
DCEE	Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment
DCMS	Department for Culture, Media, and Sport
Defra	Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs
DESNZ	Department of Energy Security and Net Zero
DfC	Department for Communities
Dfi	Department for Infrastructure
DIN	Dissolved Inorganic Nitrogen
DMO	Deposit Management Organisation
DOH	Department Of Health
DP	Delivery Plan
DRS	Deposit Return Scheme
DSD	Digital Services Division
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
EIP	Environmental Improvement Plan
ENA	Energy Networks Association
eNGO	Environmental Non-Government Organisations
EPSS	Environmental Principles Policy Statement
EPR	Extended Producer Responsibility
EU	European Union
EUMM	European Union Monitoring Mechanism
FAP	Future Agricultural Policy
FMP	Fisheries Management Plans
FSTP	Farm Sustainability Transition Payment
FwN	Farming with Nature
KM-GBF	Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework
GHG	Greenhouse Gas
HARNI	Heritage at Risk NI
HCC	Heritage Culture and Creativity Programme
HE	Historic Environment
HED	Historic Environment Division
HLF	Heritage Lottery Fund
HRA	Habitat Regulations Assessment
HV	High Voltage



Acronym	Full title
HWRCCP	Household Waste Recycling Collaborative Change Programme
ICES	International Council for the Exploration of the Sea
IPCC	International Panel on Climate Change
IPRI	Industrial Pollution and Radiochemical Inspectorate
JFS	Joint Fisheries Statement
JNCC	Joint Nature Conservation Committee
KNIB	Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful
LAC	Local Authority Collected
LDP	Local Development Plans
LWWP	Living with Water Programme
LNAP	Lough Neagh Action Plan
LULUCF	Land Use Land-Use Change and Forestry
MCZ	Marine Conservation Zone
MEPCA	Management Effectiveness of Protected and Conserved Areas
MF	Material Footprint
mg NO ₃ /l	milligrams of nitrate per litre
mg/l	milligram per litre
MOSAIC	Multi-disciplinary Ocean Sensing for Adaptive International Conservation Project
MoSS	Management of Sensitive Site
MPA	Marine Protected Area
MSY	Maximum Sustainable Yield
N ₂ O	Nitrous oxide
NAMN	National Ammonia Monitoring Network Report
NAP	Nutrient Action Programme
NECR	National Emission Ceilings Regulation
NHM	Non-Household Municipal
NI	Northern Ireland
NICS	Northern Ireland Civil Service
NICCAP3	Northern Ireland Climate Change Adaptation Programme
NIE	Northern Ireland Electricity
NIEA	Northern Ireland Environment Agency
NISRA	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency



Acronym	Full title
NO ₂	Nitrogen dioxide
NO ₃	Nitrate
NRS	Nature Recovery Strategy
OECM	Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures
OEP	Office for Environmental Protection
OH	One Health
OIF	Outcome Indicator Framework
ORAP	Outdoor Recreation Action Plan
OREAP	Offshore Renewable Energy Action Plan
OSPAR	The Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East
PCB	Polychlorinated Biphenyls
pEPR	Packaging Extended Producer Responsibility
PEWS	Prioritisation and Early Warning System for chemicals of emerging concern
PfG	Programme for Government
PFOA	Perfluorooctanoic acid
PM2.5	Fine particulate matter
POMNI	People in the Outdoors Monitor Northern Ireland
POP	Persistent Organic Pollutant
PPC	Pollution Prevention and Control
PPPNi	The Plastic Pollution Plan for Northern Ireland
PR	Producer Responsibility
PRTR	UK Pollutant Release and Transfer Register
PSO	Principal Scientific Officer
RBMP	River Basin Management Plan
RDF	Refuse Derived Fuel
RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
RUMA	Responsible Use of Medicine in Agriculture
SACs	Special Areas of Conservation
SAP	Sustainable Agricultural Programme
SEA	Strategic Environmental Assessment
SEOs	Strategic Environmental Outcomes
SEUPB	Special EU Programmes Body



Acronym	Full title
SIG	Strategic Implementation Group
SNHS	Soil Nutrient Health Scheme
SORG	Strategic Outdoor Recreation Group
SoS	Secretary of State
SPA	Special Protected Areas
SRP	Soluble Reactive Phosphorus
SSSIs	Sites of Special Scientific Interest
SST	Sea surface temperature
SuDS	Sustainable Drainage Systems
SUP	Single Use Plastics
SWMI	Significant Water Management Issues
SWPA	Shellfish Water Protected Areas
TEO	The Executive Office
The Act	The Environment Act 2021
TTF	Target Task Force
UKCEH	United Kingdom Centre for Ecology and Hydrology
UKEAP	United Kingdom Eutrophying & Acidifying Pollutants
UKFS	United Kingdom Forestry Standard
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UoL	The University of Leeds
uPBT	ubiquitous, persistent, bio accumulative, toxic chemicals
VMRs	Veterinary Medicines Regulations
WCLO	Waste and Contaminated Land (NI) Order 1997
WEEE	Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment
WFD	Water Framework Directive
WHO	World Health Organisation
WRAP	Waste and Resources Action Program
$\mu\text{g m}^3$	Micrograms per cubic meter

All enquiries to:

Environmental Principles and OEP Liaison Branch
Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Clare House
303 Airport Road West
Sydenham Intake
Belfast
BT3 9ED

Email: OEP.Comms@daera-ni.gov.uk

www.daera-ni.gov.uk



Department of

**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**

An Roinn

**Talmhaíochta, Comhshaoil
agus Gnóthaí Tuaithe**

Department o'

**Fairmin, Environment
an' Kintra Matthers**

www.daera-ni.gov.uk