

Screening Report

Strategic Environmental Assessment Determination on the implementation plan to draft Northern Ireland Peatland Strategy

1.1 Introduction

This document constitutes DAERA's Screening Report for a determination as to whether its draft Peatland Strategy Implementation Plan should be subject to Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) under the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2004.

1.2 Programme Background

A Northern Ireland Peatland Strategy has been developed and is being finalised in readiness for an incoming Minister and Executive. As part of the process an implementation plan is being drafted which engages the SEA process.

In Northern Ireland, peatland habitat can be divided into three broad types: lowland raised bogs, blanket bogs and fens and these habitat types cover approximately 12% of the land area. For many decades, our peatlands were viewed as barren and unproductive places, but in reality, supported many economic activities and provided ecosystem services. Currently, most of our peatlands have been degraded to some degree, releasing carbon rather than storing it. However, there is now an increasing focus on peatland conservation and restoration and an appreciation and understanding of the benefits they provide. Without ambitious action to protect and restore peatlands, it is unlikely that our shared climate change, sustainable development and biodiversity conservation goals can be reached.

1.3 Programme Purpose and objectives

Peatland restoration will be an important means of restoring our environment to a condition that is healthy and which will contribute to meeting our biodiversity targets and our Net Zero commitments. The goal of the Peatland Strategy implementation

Plan is to set in place targets for peatlands in Northern Ireland to be conserved or under restoration management, becoming healthy, functioning ecosystems before 2050 and the ecosystem services that they provide are acknowledged and appreciated, in line with the DAERA vision of “Sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone”.

1.4 Legislative Background

The European Directive 2001/42/EC '*on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment*', known as the Strategic Environmental Assessment or SEA Directive, applies to certain types of plans and programmes, such as land use and spatial planning, to ensure that environmental effects of such plans and programmes are considered during their preparation.

The SEA Directive is transposed into law in Northern Ireland through The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2004.

The aim of the Directive as set out in Article 1 is '*to provide for a high level of protection of the environment and to contribute to the integration of environmental considerations into the preparation and adoption of plans and programmes with a view to promoting sustainable development*'.

There are a number of stages in the SEA process as set out in the legislation:

- Screening - determination of whether a particular plan, programme or modification is likely to have significant environmental effects. Consultation on said determination with consultation body.
- Scoping – determining the scope of the SEA with the relevant consultees on the level of detail of the SEA.
- Reporting – an assessment of the likely effects of the plan on the environment and the preparation of environmental report and publication.
- Consultation - Consultation with the general public and consultation body.

- Post-consultation - post adoption procedures. Publication of the Environmental Report taking into account feedback from consultation.
- Monitoring - Monitoring of the plan.

The Peatland Strategy also highlights DAERA's legal obligations. DAERA is responsible for:

- Compliance with the Habitats and Birds Directives and implementing legislation in Northern Ireland relating to the Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs) system, to ensure that steps are taken to avoid deterioration of habitats and species of community importance.

1.5 Purpose of the Strategic Environmental Assessment Screening Report

1.5.1 The objective of Strategic Environmental Assessment is to provide for a high level of protection of the environment and to contribute to the integration of environmental considerations into the preparation and adoption of plans and programmes with a view to promoting sustainable development.

1.5.2 The purpose of this document is to undertake a screening assessment that meets the requirements of the European Legislation, applied in NI through the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2004.

1.5.3 Under the legislation, Responsible Authorities must carry out screening to determine whether plans or programmes are likely to have significant environmental effects. Annex II of the Directive sets out the criteria for determining if significant effects are likely.

2 Assessment Methodology

2.1. Methodology

Responsible Authorities must carry out screening to determine whether plans or programmes of the types covered by Article 3(3) and 3(4) of the Directive are likely to have significant environmental effects, and whether a SEA is required. The criteria for the screening process are set out in Annex II of the Directive and transposed through Schedule 1 of The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2004.

In accordance with Regulation 9 of the NI regulations 'the responsible authority shall apply the criteria specified in Schedule 1 to the plan, programme or modification under consideration, and shall prepare a report on whether the authority considers that the plan or programme, is likely to have significant environmental effects'.

The Screening report will provide a high-level overview of the Strategy to provide context for the screening process. The plan will then be screened against the criteria set out in Annex II of the Directive to determine the need for a SEA. The criteria are:

The characteristics of plans and programmes, having regard, in particular to:

- The degree to which the plan or programme sets a framework for projects and other activities, either with regard to the location, nature, size and operating conditions or by allocating resources;
- The degree to which the plan or programme influences other plans and programmes including those in a hierarchy;
- The relevance of the plan or programme for the integration of environmental considerations in particular with a view to promoting sustainable development;
- Environmental problems relevant to the plan or programme;
- The relevance of the plan or programme for the implementation of community legislation on the environment (e.g. plans and programmes linked to waste management or water protection).

Characteristics of the effects and of the area likely to be affected, having regard, in particular to:

- The probability, duration, frequency and reversibility of effects;

- The cumulative nature of the effects;
- The transboundary nature of the effects;
- The risks to human health or the environment;
- The magnitude and spatial extent of the effects (geographical area and size of the population likely to be affected);
- The value and vulnerability of the area likely to be affected due to: special natural characteristics or cultural heritage, exceeded environmental quality standards or limit values, intensive land use;
- The effects on areas or landscapes which have a recognised national, community or international protection status.

2.2. Draft Peatland Strategy

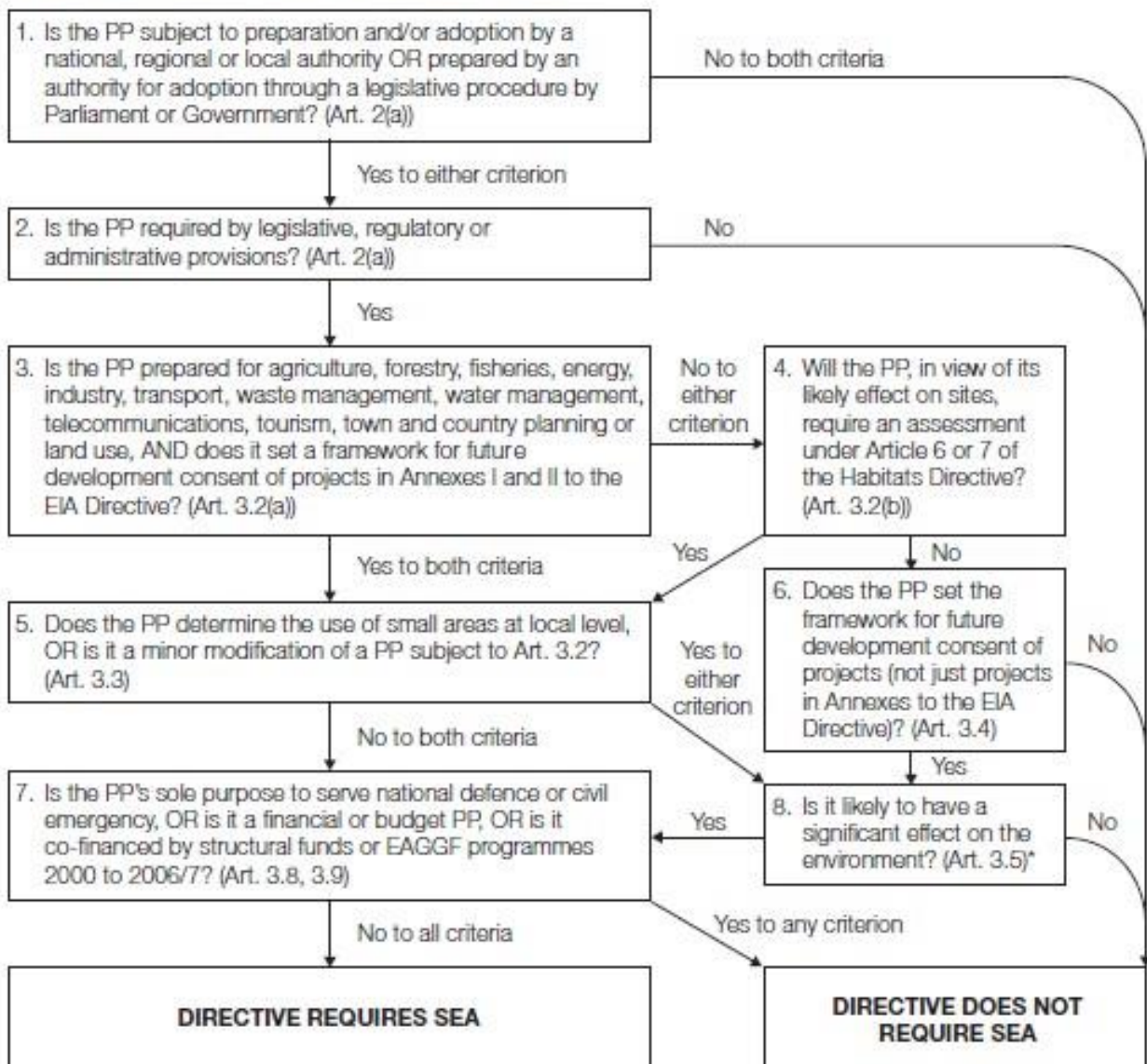
The key aim of the draft implementation plan under the Peatland Strategy is the conservation, restoration and management of intact peatland, degraded peatland and peatland soils which could be restored or managed to support greater carbon storage and nature recovery, whether publicly or privately owned, to meet climate action goals as advised by the Climate Change Committee

3. Environmental Screening

3.1 Screening Checklist

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) Practice Guide provides a checklist based on the SEA Regulations to help determine whether SEA is required. This guide has been used as the basis on which to assess the need for SEA as set out below.

This diagram is intended as a guide to the criteria for application of the Directive to plans and programmes (PPs). It has no legal status.



The table below sets out the questions identified in the diagram above and provides answers and reasons with regards to the draft Peatland Strategy.

Establishing the need for SEA	Answer	Reasons	Next Step
1 Is the PP subject to preparation and/or adoption by a national, regional or local authority OR prepared by an authority for adoption through a legislative procedure by Parliament or Government? (Art 2 (a))	Yes	The draft implementation plan will be adopted by DAERA when finalised.	Proceed to Question 2
2 Is the PP required by legislative, regulatory or administrative provisions? (Art 2 (a))	Yes	The draft implementation plan main action to restore NI Peatlands is contained within the NI climate action Plan.	Proceed to Question 3
3 Is the PP prepared for agricultural, forestry, fisheries, energy, industry, transport, waste management, water management, telecommunications, tourism, town and county planning or land use, AND does it set a framework for future development consent of projects in Annexes I and II to the EIA Directive? (Article 3.2(a))	Yes	The draft implementation plan will impact primarily on the agriculture and forestry sectors and land use.	Proceed to Question 5
5 Does the PP determine the use of small areas at local level, OR is it a minor modification of a PP subject to Article 3.2? (Article 3.3)	No	The draft implementation plan proposes landscape scale restoration.	Proceed to Question 7
7 Is the PP's sole purpose to serve national defence or civil emergency, OR is it a financial or budget PP, OR is it co-financed by structural funds or EAGGF Programmes 2000 to 2006/7? (Article 3.8, 3.9)	No		

3.2 The characteristics of plans and programmes, having regard, in particular to:

a) The degree to which the plan or programme sets a framework for projects and other activities, either with regard to the location, nature, size and operating conditions or by allocating resources.

The draft implementation plan sets in place a series of measures to conserve, restore, manage peatland areas within Northern Ireland. These will include –

- Restoration practices, including rewetting and deforestation, of a significant proportion of Northern Irelands peatland resource.
- Reducing grazing on peatlands.
- Reviewing the practice of peat extraction – both commercially and domestic

These actions will affect all areas of Northern Ireland.

b) The degree to which the plan or programme influences other plans and programmes, including those in a hierarchy.

The draft implementation plan will have an influence on future agricultural plans and programmes as these will need to take into account the need for NI to restore and conserve its peatland resource. The peatland strategy will influence and be influenced by various strategies – e.g. Environment Strategy, Nature Recovery Strategy, Forestry Strategy, Climate Action Plans and Future Environmental Farming policies. Implementation of strategy actions will also impact NI water quality, providing cleaner water for treatment. Peatland restoration must ensure that archaeological features are protected.

c) The relevance of the plan or programme for the integration of environmental considerations in particular with a view to promoting sustainable development.

Delivery of the draft implementation plan will protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, which will halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.

d) *Environmental problems relevant to the plan or programme.*

The draft implementation plan aims to put in place management practices to manage our peatland resource for biodiversity and to assist Northern Ireland's climate ambitions in reducing carbon emissions.

e) *The relevance of the plan or programme for the implementation of Community legislation on the environment (e.g. plans and programmes linked to waste management or water protection)*

The draft implementation plan is focused on improving nature, specifically the biodiversity of peatlands and the ecosystem services that they provide. Protecting peatlands long-term will assist Northern Ireland to meet international biodiversity targets and will also help Northern Ireland meet carbon reduction targets that will be included in the forthcoming Climate Action Plan.

3.3 Characteristics of the effects and of the area likely to be affected, having regard, in particular, to –

a) *The probability, duration, frequency and reversibility of the effects.*

Delivery of Peatland restoration through the draft implementation plan will have a long term positive impact on the Northern Ireland environment.

b) *The cumulative nature of the effects.*

Delivery of peatland conservation will decrease land use carbon emissions and will ultimately lead to our peatland resource becoming a nature based solution to remove carbon from the atmosphere. Healthy upland areas will provide cleaner raw water for processing at water treatment works, along with retaining water after predicted heavy

rainfall due to climate change, mitigating flood risks. Restoration of our peatlands will also increase biodiversity and provide habitat for birds and pollinators.

c) *The transboundary nature of the effects.*

Delivering on the draft implementation plan will have positive effects on peatland areas that are cross border, including climate mitigation, flood alleviation and biodiverse habitats.

d) *The risks to human health or the environment (e.g. due to accidents).*

Poorly planned restoration activity has the potential to cause landslips. This potential should be mitigated via proper evidence gathering and planning.

e) *The magnitude and spatial extent of the effects (geographical area and size of the population likely to be affected).*

The draft implementation plan will have impacts across Northern Ireland. There is currently estimated to be 242000ha of peatland, spread across all counties, however the bulk is in the North and West.

f) *The value and vulnerability of the area is likely to be affected due to:*

i) special natural characteristics or cultural heritage;

ii) exceeded environmental quality standards or limit values;

or

iii) intensive agricultural land-use.

Peatland restoration will need to be sensitive to known, or not yet known, sites of cultural heritage to ensure their protection. Management of peatlands for nature will ultimately lead to changes in stocking densities for grazing which will have an economic impact on the productive value of agricultural land.

g) *The effects on areas or landscapes which have a recognised national, Community or international Protection status.*

Peatland restoration, management and conservation will have a beneficial effect on protected sites.

4.0 Conclusion

The assessment in Section 3 concluded, based on the screening check and review against the environmental criteria as set out in Annex II of the SEA Directive, that a Strategic Environmental Assessment will be required.

The next stage will be to complete a SEA scoping to determine what significant effects may arise and what topics will be included within the SEA report.