



# DAERA

Department of Agriculture,  
Environment and Rural Affairs

[www.daera-ni.gov.uk](http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk)

## MONITORING THE CONDITION OF OUR NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Presented to the Northern Ireland Assembly pursuant to Schedule 2 to  
the Environment Act 2021



Department of  
**Agriculture, Environment  
and Rural Affairs**  
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*Sustainability at the heart of a  
living, working, active landscape  
valued by everyone.*



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## 1. Monitoring the Condition of Our Natural Environment

In accordance with paragraph 5(1) and (2) of Part 1 of Schedule 2 to the Environment Act 2021 this statement sets out the kinds of data to be obtained about the natural environment for the purposes of monitoring whether the natural environment, or a particular aspect of it, is improving. This includes progress towards achieving any targets or interim targets, in accordance with the Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland.

The Environment Act 2021 defines the natural environment as:

- a) plants, wild animals and other living organisms;
- b) their habitats;
- c) land, air, water.

This statement responds to the requirements under Schedule 2 to the Environment Act 2021, and will be periodically reviewed and updated, as needed.

DAERA, in partnership with its arm's length bodies, publishes a broad range of statistics and data on the environment. The statistics aim to provide a window on the world across the areas covered by DAERA's policy and delivery remits and to inform the judgements and decisions made by the public, by organisations and by government. A selection of these are published annually through the [Northern Ireland environmental statistics report | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs \(daera-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/northern-ireland-environmental-statistics-report)

Our approach to publishing statistics is guided by the UK Statistics Authority's Code of Practice for Statistics. Compliance with the Code ensures government statistics have public value, are high quality and are produced by people and organisations that are trustworthy.

The monitoring data that will be used will be collected by DAERA, partner organisations, other natural science organisations and through citizen science, for example national monitoring programmes and data from local and biological recorders, including those managed through the Centre for Environmental Data and Recording (CEDaR). It is important that the data should be kept as comparable as possible with other UK jurisdictions to enable effective reporting against the UK's international obligations and facilitate joint working on environmental metrics.

Monitoring may additionally collect data on the onsite and offsite pressures affecting the condition of our natural environment and the effectiveness of measures to address them. Where possible, data may also be collected at other spatial scales such as at a unit, catchment or wider landscape level.

Our designated sites (Special Areas of Conservation, Special Protection Areas, Areas of Special Scientific Interest, Ramsar sites) represent the best of our biodiversity and are important refuges for many species of conservation concern. Increasing the extent and effectiveness of our protected areas will be a key priority going forward. Robust monitoring and assessment will be a critical tool for achieving this goal, by providing the information needed to make informed decisions. Monitoring will also need to

measure the environmental status of habitats and species outside of designated sites / more protected areas.

Monitoring should tell us about the extent, distribution, condition, diversity, connectivity and overall ecological health of our natural environment and its component parts; any management measures which are in place and whether they are effective; and what onsite or offsite drivers are causing poor or declining condition of the natural environment.

This helps to identify the correct management measures needed in any given area, and the action needed outside that area, where measures should be carried out, and who the responsible party is for carrying out remedies. It also helps to assess whether any existing remedies are working to improve the condition of the natural environment.

## 2. Draft Environment Strategy

Northern Ireland's first overarching Draft Environment Strategy was approved by the former DAERA Minister, Edwin Poots MLA, and announced to the NI Assembly on 24 March 2022. A final Environment Strategy can only be finalised and formally published once it has been approved by the NI Executive.

Once approved, it is intended, subject to Executive agreement, that a new Environment Strategy will be adopted as Northern Ireland's Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) under Schedule 2 to the Environment Act 2021.

The current draft strategy is underpinned by six proposed Strategic Environmental Outcomes (SEOs) which are based around the DAERA core vision of *sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone*.

The proposed SEOs are:

- Excellent air, water, land & neighbourhood quality
- Healthy & accessible environment & landscapes everyone can connect with & enjoy
- Thriving, resilient & connected nature and wildlife
- Sustainable production & consumption on land and at sea
- Zero waste & highly developed circular economy
- Net zero greenhouse gas emissions & improved climate resilience and adaptability

Under each proposed SEO are sets of proposals to improve our environment. Each set includes:

- A summary of the current position in respect of the relevant environmental issue, including an indication of performance against targets where appropriate;
- The steps that, subject to approval, departments intend to take to improve the environment;
- Specific goals or outputs relating to the actions set out in the proposal;
- The intended / desired future outcome(s) which will in turn contribute to the achievement of the SEOs.

### **3. Environmental Targets**

While the Environment Act 2021 creates a power to set long-term, legally binding environmental targets across a range of measures, these apply to England only. It will be for the NI Assembly to decide what targets should be set down in legislation to apply in Northern Ireland.

There are, of course, existing targets in some areas, for example, the Assembly recently set a 70% recycling target for 2035 in the NI Climate Change Act.

The draft Environment Strategy also contains long, medium and short-term targets which, should the Executive agree the strategy, will be detailed further in the strategies and action plans which will sit under the umbrella of the strategy.

Measurable long-term environmental targets, with interim milestones, are important to drive forward progress. They can galvanise efforts from government, statutory agencies, landowners/managers and others in pursuit of shared objectives.

Targets need to be developed through a process that allows for relevant evidence to be properly gathered and tested. We have acknowledged that gaps exist in some areas. This will require significant resources and we are not able to set out a comprehensive monitoring programme at this point. Resource constraints will remain a factor in how quickly the Department can address these gaps.

However, the Environment Act 2021 sets out a process for taking forward this work and, in a number of areas, monitoring data is already available. DAERA's partners in the environmental NGO sector have also been invaluable in helping inform target development. They have provided bespoke guidance on evidence processes and best available evidence.

Schedule 2 to the Environment Act 2021 requires that DAERA must always have an Environmental Improvement Plan in place. This sets out the steps that DAERA, or any other NI Department, intends to take to improve the natural environment, including measures needed to meet its long-term and interim targets.

#### **4. Environmental Improvement Plan: Annual Progress Report**

Monitoring of progress toward the ambitions and goals of the Environmental Improvement Plan will be set out through an Annual Progress Report.

The report will consider whether the natural environment (or particular aspects of it) have improved over the reporting period. The report will describe what has been done to implement the Environmental Improvement Plan, taking account of progress made towards achieving any relevant long-term and interim targets.

To inform this assessment, the Annual Progress Report will draw upon evidence from appropriate sources such as periodic statistical publications and scientific literature from across DAERA, wider government, and non-governmental organisations. Such evidence will be appraised on an annual basis to meet identified needs, where other sources are not available.

For example, when there has been insufficient time to collate sufficient data to robustly describe environmental change towards the goals of the Environmental Improvement Plan. In those instances, additional evidence will be considered to support a qualitative assessment of progress in policy delivery for annual reporting.

Monitoring progress is a key tool for assessing the effectiveness of policy measures and interventions for protected areas and other aspects of the natural environment, as defined by the Act.

Given the breadth of the draft Environment Strategy targets and vision for the natural environment, a comprehensive review of existing environmental monitoring and data sets should be undertaken. This would identify monitoring gaps and evidential needs in order to define and implement an appropriate monitoring framework. DAERA intends to address this but must acknowledge that it is subject to resource constraints.

Monitoring will make the best use of existing and new technologies where appropriate and will also make best use of national and local data sets. However, the limitations of such technologies and data sets will mean that some degree of on-site monitoring will always be required.