

# Nature Recovery Networks for Northern Ireland -Policy Brief

November 2021

*This briefing has been produced by The Landscape Partnership<sup>i</sup> and should be read in conjunction with other documentation available at <https://www.ulsterwildlife.org/nature-recovery-networks>*

## Introduction

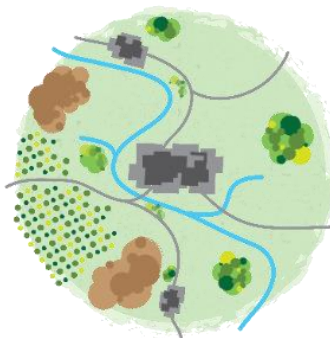
Northern Ireland is facing a nature and climate crisis. Ranking 12<sup>th</sup> worst out of 240 countries for biodiversity loss<sup>ii</sup>, it is clear we need a step change in how we manage the natural environment across Northern Ireland. **One of the key actions needed is the protection, creation, restoration, enhancement, and connection of places for nature through Nature Recovery Networks (NRNs), as recognised by the UK’s five statutory nature conservation bodies recent Nature-Positive 2030<sup>iii</sup> report.** To realise this ambition across Northern Ireland, we need collective and bold action; bringing together expertise, creating a statutory requirement for nature’s recovery, and supporting this through long-term funding. **By legislating for and adequately financing NRNs in Northern Ireland, we could put nature onto the path of recovery, and deliver far-reaching benefits to society.**

## Why Nature Recovery Networks?

Current decision-making around biodiversity conservation and tackling climate change has largely been piecemeal and focused on individual sites and initiatives. To effectively address the nature and climate crises in Northern Ireland, we need transformative solutions which go beyond simply conserving existing habitats and species, to actively restoring nature at a landscape scale. This should include the introduction of Nature Recovery Networks (NRNs) as a key delivery tool. Working with the principles of **More, Bigger, Better and more Joined-up<sup>iv</sup>** spaces for nature, NRNs could reconnect fragmented habitats, create new space for wildlife, and provide a vast range of benefits for people through ecosystem services.

There is strong political and public support<sup>v</sup> for nature’s restoration in Northern Ireland. Members of the NI Assembly have declared a Climate Emergency<sup>vi</sup> and pledged to halt and reverse the decline of nature<sup>vii</sup>, and the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has endorsed the target of protecting 30 percent of Northern Ireland’s land and seas by 2030<sup>viii</sup> (also known as the ‘30 by 30’). But this ambition must be translated into real actions to benefit nature, through introducing new laws to better protect nature, and ensuring stronger oversight of environmental law<sup>ix</sup>. Given statutory targets, long-term funding, and the technical tools and expertise, we could create a nature positive future, in addition to carving a green path for recovery from the global pandemic.

Where we are now:  
A FRAGMENTED LANDSCAPE



Where we need to get to:  
A THRIVING, CONNECTED LANDSCAPE



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## What do we need to turn NRNs into a reality in Northern Ireland?

For NRNs to be successful in helping restore nature and provide for people, they must be:

- 1) underpinned by a legally binding commitment;
- 2) adopted by the NI Executive and implemented across all policy and decision-making;
- 3) developed in collaboration with stakeholders and experts;
- 4) well-resourced and regularly monitored, with data made publicly available, and
- 5) subject to review.

**The nature recovery agenda needs to be intrinsically integrated with the climate change agenda and vice versa, involving transformative regional and local efforts to drive positive change across landscapes and the countryside.** Efforts to restore nature must focus on both quality and quantity of habitats, with our core designated sites - including Special Protection Areas (SPAs), Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs) - forming a core part of the wider landscape management. The NI Executive must, therefore, commit to having at least 30% of Northern Ireland effectively managed for nature by 2030<sup>x</sup>, to act as a core backbone for NRNs, as well as making the wider landscape more permeable for wildlife<sup>xi</sup>. This ambition must be delivered by embedding nature recovery into future Agri-Environment Schemes<sup>xii</sup>, the planning system, and more broadly across the Executive, supported by adequate financing and robust monitoring and oversight. Consideration must be given to the role of land-managers and other stakeholders, as well as the impacts of the introduction of NRNs on them. Those involved in the delivery of NRNs need to be rewarded appropriately and the transition towards the new way of doing things to be fair.

To put Northern Ireland’s nature into recovery we need a commitment to:

- **The development of a National Nature Recovery Network, with associated framework of guidance, principles, monitoring and accountability**, designed in collaboration with key stakeholders and local communities
- **Implementation across the NI Executive and all public authorities**, by ensuring that
  - Future policy and strategies facilitate both nature’s recovery and adaptation and mitigation to climate change simultaneously by prioritising opportunities to create, restore, and enhance habitats through decision-making.
  - Action is taken at all levels of government to contribute towards the creation and implementation of a National NRN (NRRN), supported by local strategies and networks to integrate and specify decision-making at a local scale (e.g. through Local Biodiversity Action Plans and ensuring local planning processes<sup>xiii</sup> and development creates net gain for biodiversity).
- **Introduction of, and duty for public authorities to meet statutory nature recovery targets<sup>xiv</sup>** that are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound), covering priority areas of water (freshwater and marine), air quality, biodiversity, resource use and waste, soil health and quality, aiming to achieve healthy and natural terrestrial, freshwater and marine environments.
- **Achieving 30% of land effectively managed for nature by 2030<sup>1</sup>** (30 by 30) as an essential backbone of NRNs.
- **Cross border cooperation<sup>xv</sup>**: as part of the single biogeographic unit on the island of Ireland, cooperation across local authority and national borders will be key.
- **Investment in Blue and Green infrastructure** is prioritised in the emerging **Green Growth Framework<sup>xvi</sup>** as a delivery mechanism for NRNs<sup>xvii</sup>.



- **Ensuring the Post-CAP Future Farm Payments Framework** uses NRNs to prioritize where and how land should be managed for nature and climate by providing for land managers the tool to make habitats bigger, better and more connected through managing, restoring and recreating habitats at local, regional, and national scales.
- **Adequate long-term funding** for evidence gathering, development of NRNs (national and local scale), stakeholder engagement, management, monitoring, and oversight of NRNs must be sufficiently resourced. This will include reviewing existing funding sources, and exploring new opportunities considering how to better prioritise nature’s recovery. For example we must:
  - Enable robust oversight and enforcement of environmental legislation and policy by sufficiently resourcing key bodies involved in delivering NRNs, such as DAERA/NIEA, Local Authorities and any future independent Environmental Protection Agency.
  - Equip public authorities to carry out development and implementation of NRNs, facilitating collaboration across departments, local authority areas and with other stakeholders.
  - Ensure existing and future public expenditure and procurement do not incentivise action in conflict with nature’s recovery
  - Using the NRN-framework to inform DAERA’s Environment Fund to explicitly tackle the main drivers of biodiversity loss.

With ambitious action across the NI Executive, Assembly, and Local Authorities, as well as from land-managers, industry, non-governmental organisations and communities, NRNs could help to renew our countryside, towns and cities; benefitting nature’s recovery, while reconnecting places and people. Therefore, we call on everyone, across political and public spheres, to champion nature’s recovery and NRNs, to achieve a nature positive future for Northern Ireland.



## References

- <sup>i</sup> <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/An%20Introduction%20to%20the%20NGO%20Landscape%20Partnership%2018%20%28low%20res%29.pdf>
- <sup>ii</sup> <https://www.rspb.org.uk/globalassets/downloads/about-us/48398rspb-biodiversity-intactness-index-summary-report-v4.pdf>
- <sup>iii</sup> <https://jncc.gov.uk/our-role/the-uk/nature-positive-2030/>
- <sup>iv</sup> Lawton, J. H., P. N. M. Brotherton, V. K. Brown, C. Elphick, A. H. Fitter, J. Forshaw, R. W. Haddow, et al. 2010. “Making Space for Nature: a review of England’s wildlife sites and ecological network. Report to Defra.”
- <sup>v</sup> <https://community.rspb.org.uk/getinvolved/b/steppingupnorthernireland/posts/new-poll-shows-strong-public-support-for-a-green-recovery>
- <sup>vi</sup> Motion to Declare Climate Emergency, Northern Ireland Assembly February, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020  
<http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/plenary/details.aspx?tbv=0&ptv=0&mcv=0&mtv=0&sp=0&spv=-1&per=1&it=0&pid=2&sid=p&pn=0&ba=1&doc=290756%20&fd=03/02/2020&td=03/02/2020>
- <sup>vii</sup> RSPB NI and Asthma UK & British Lung Foundation NI’s pledge to protect nature and improve public health.  
<https://twitter.com/RSPBNI/status/1450464026207604738>
- <sup>viii</sup> <https://niassembly.tv/question-time-agriculture-environment-and-rural-affairs-tuesday-25-may-2021/> (circa 26 minutes in)
- <sup>ix</sup> <https://community.rspb.org.uk/getinvolved/b/steppingupnorthernireland/posts/new-poll-shows-strong-public-support-for-a-green-recovery>
- <sup>x</sup> The Northern Ireland Environment Link briefing on 30 by 30 can be accessed at  
<https://www.nienvironmentlink.org/cmsfiles/30-x-30-land-NI-3.pdf>
- <sup>xi</sup> See for more information on ‘Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures’ (OECMs) at  
<https://www.iucn.org/commissions/world-commission-protected-areas/our-work/oecms>
- <sup>xii</sup> See for example the three new schemes introduced as part of the future Environmental Land Management Scheme in England <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-land-management-schemes-overview>
- <sup>xiii</sup> See for example e.g. the [Scottish the Planning Blueprint for Green Infrastructure](#).
- <sup>xiv</sup> 80% of the respondents at our April webinar-series agreed that legally binding targets are needed for nature’s recovery in Northern Ireland.  
[https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLL4kR1FHxvcE897uMJZnNtL2dt1Y\\_WT3b](https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLL4kR1FHxvcE897uMJZnNtL2dt1Y_WT3b)
- <sup>xv</sup> The [All Island Pollinator Plan](#) is a great example of successful cross-border cooperation.
- <sup>xvi</sup> See <http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-draft-green-growth-strategy-northern-ireland>
- <sup>xvii</sup> See for example DAERA Innovation Strategy (<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/daera-innovation-strategy-launched>), making reference to the Green Growth Agenda

