


Nature & People are Grand!

Visioning our journey to 30X30 in Northern Ireland



April 2025



On the 6th of February 2025 a group of 55 people met for a one day workshop in Belfast to think together about what it would be like if 30x30 was achieved in Northern Ireland and how the wider stakeholder community could work together to get there.

This report offers a summary of the knowledge, expertise and experience that was shared and deliberated on that day. The conversations people had suggested a plethora of actions that could help move towards a future where people and nature were thriving together. These collectively identified actions informed the action plan at the end of this report.

There is now the opportunity for the wider stakeholder community to come together and think about prioritisation of actions and the roles that different individuals, organisations and institutions can play in this process over the coming months and years.

The title of the report was taken from a post it note at the end of a timeline to 2050 that participants created to map out a route to their 30x30 vision and beyond - reflecting the sense of optimism, positivity and motivation to action that characterised the day.

Nature
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Process Summary

This document outlines the development of a draft, collectively generated plan for achieving the 30x30 target in Northern Ireland.

Introduction: The document begins with an introduction to the 30x30 target, which is part of the Kunming & Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) which the UK has signed up to under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). It highlights the urgency to act and the opportunity for stakeholders in Northern Ireland to engage in the process.

Engagement, Convening & Facilitation Process:

An independent contractor designed a 6-step process to inform the work, convene stakeholders, capture data, and translate their perspectives into a co-developed vision and action plan. This process included key informant interviews, collaborative workshop design and a one-day workshop.

Workshop Design and Outputs: A detailed stakeholder mapping exercise identified various categories of stakeholders, including national environment agencies, local government, farmers, landowners, marine resource users, and more. The workshop saw participation from 45 people supported by 10 volunteer facilitators. It was designed to engage stakeholders in identifying

productive ways to support progress towards 30x30 in NI.

Participants worked in small groups to imagine the future if 30x30 had been achieved and discussed environmental, social, and economic aspects of that vision. They reflected on the challenges and barriers that might stand in the way of achieving it and finally focused on key considerations around the design and delivery of 30x30, finishing the day by constructing a time line for action.

Research Outputs: The pre-workshop research and workshop provided an opportunity for co-creation of a vision for 30x30 in Northern Ireland. Six shared aspects of the vision emerged from participant discussions, including a clean, thriving environment, an enabling policy environment, effective policy delivery, a healthy nature-based economy, nature-friendly societal attitudes, and effective engagement.

Participants reflected on the landscape they perceive themselves to be operating in, identifying barriers and challenges related to governance, economy, society, and policy and highlighting opportunities and solutions for overcoming these challenges. These suggest actions that could be taken to progress towards 30x30.



Recommended Action

An immediate need is to establish an effective governance structure for the 30x30 process. If a productive co-working structure could be quickly established to harness momentum and enable constructive work across government and the wider stakeholder community it would help to drive progress towards 30x30.

Once process governance is established, there is a suite of recommendations that have emerged from this phase of work which can be considered and prioritised. Based on the shared sense of the need for collective and collaborative working, actions are presented as an unprioritised list as prioritisation would be best done collectively and with consideration of different stakeholders' strengths, responsibilities and capacities.

It is recommended that action is needed around the following priority needs in order to make progress:

- The need to prepare the ground and enable **productive communication and co-working** across responsible, affected, interested and motivated stakeholders in government, civil society and across communities.
- The need for **leadership** that is inclusive and holistic and which empowers and enables the wider stakeholder community.
- The need to reframe **communication** about environmental issues to make it more widely relatable.
- The need to mainstream **alternative economic narratives** and move away from framing which perpetuates growth vs. nature.
- The need to begin talking about the emergent network and generating widespread interest around the policy that is grounded in **real world examples**.
- The need to **diversify the funding model** and prioritise longer term funding streams
- The need for **data** coordination and management.
- The need to **enable wider society** to contribute to the evidence base.
- The need to improve **environmental literacy** specifically with regard to protected areas and nature restoration and the need to develop green skills to support transition.
- The need for people to have improved **access** to quality natural spaces in order to promote nature connectedness
- Finally, recognising that the process is at a different stage in the marine environment, there is a need to consider **best practice in future management and monitoring**.



Introduction

As a signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the United Kingdom took part in the negotiations and agreement on the Kunming & Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) in 2022 which includes a target to ensure that 30% of terrestrial, freshwater and marine and coastal habitats will be effectively protected and managed by 2030.

The target, agreed in December 2022, is as follows:

"Ensure and enable that by 2030 at least 30 percent of terrestrial, inland water, and of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, are effectively conserved and managed through ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, recognising indigenous and traditional territories, where applicable, and integrated into wider landscapes, seascapes and the ocean, while ensuring that any sustainable use, where appropriate in such areas, is fully consistent with conservation outcomes, recognizing and respecting the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities, including over their traditional territories."

The Nature Positive 2030 Evidence report collaboratively developed by the four nature agencies in Great Britain and Northern Ireland forefronts the importance of achieving 30x30 for the whole of the United Kingdom. However, devolution allows the four countries of the UK to develop their own plans and implementation strategies to meet targets under the GBF which are appropriate to their unique circumstances.

The Northern Ireland Environment Improvement Plan (EIP) includes commitments to 30x30, recognises that there is some way to go to achieving it and sets out some milestones to "halt and reverse biodiversity loss, achieve favourable conservation status for Northern Ireland's priority habitats and species and to deliver resilient, functioning ecosystems capable of providing nature-based solutions to climate change."

The recently published 'Blueprint for Halting and Reversing Biodiversity Loss: The UK's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan for 2030' also acknowledges that will require both individual and collaborative efforts to achieve the ambitious targets of the GBF – including 30 x 30.

This creates an opportunity for stakeholders in Northern Ireland to engage with the question of what 30x30 could contribute to future thriving for people and nature in this place, what designations and governance structures might work here, who needs to be involved in the design and delivery of 30 x 30 and how momentum can be built to move towards this ambitious vision.

Recognising this opportunity and mindful of the urgency to act, Ulster Wildlife – with funding from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs – set out to convene a facilitated and participatory conversation to co-develop a vision for reigniting progress towards 30x30 in NI.

The intention of this work was to bring together a community of stakeholders from diverse sectors with a material interest in protection and management of land, freshwater, coast and sea in NI who could bring with them a combination of energy, motivation, insight, resource, ideas, experience and knowledge to piece together a plan. The process was professionally facilitated and included a series of key informant interviews, collaborative workshop design and a co-facilitated, one-day workshop. All the data from this process was analysed and underpins the content of this report.

The Engagement, Convening & Facilitation Process

An independent contractor designed a 6-step process to inform the work, convene a diverse set of stakeholders, capture data on both their different perspectives and areas of commonality and translate their collective and deliberated perspectives into a co-developed vision and an expression how they could work together.



1 Developing an understanding of the context in NI and needs from this project. Stakeholder mapping and analysis. Issues mapping.

2 Meetings and interviews with key informants from diverse sectors including eNGOs, farming, marine organisations, AONB staff, academics and national government agencies.

3 Recruiting a team of 10 local stakeholders to support workshop facilitation.

4 Co-development of a detailed workshop plan reflecting stakeholder & issues mapping and data from interviews.

5 Full day participatory and deliberative workshop with a group of 55 people including 10 volunteer facilitators.

6 Write up and analysis of all participant contributions during the workshop and the key informant interviews to develop a vision and inform recommendations for future action.

Who was involved?

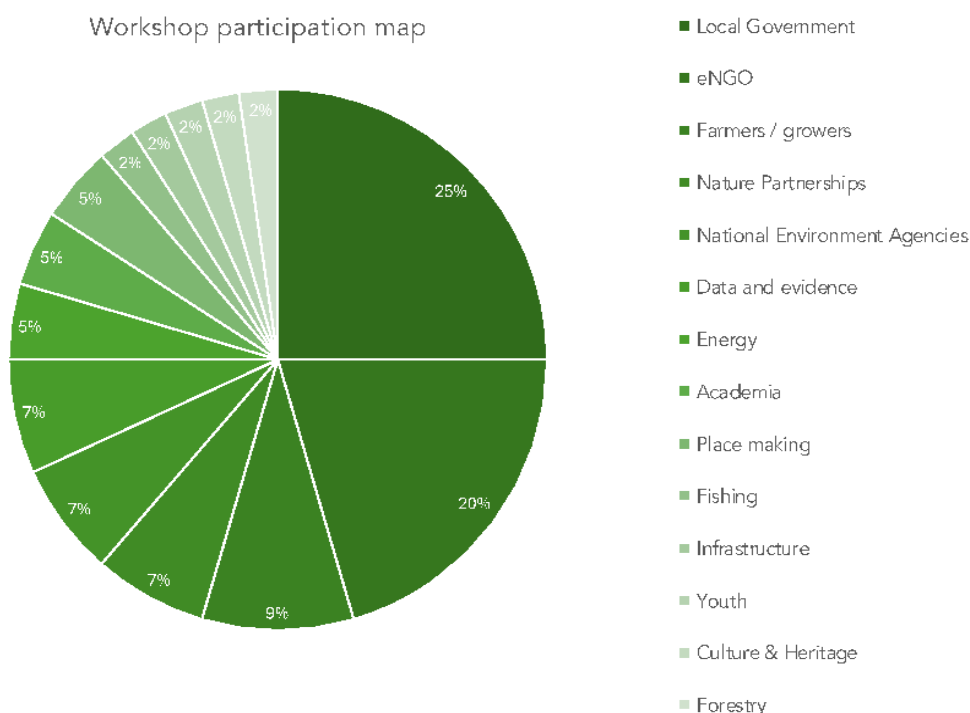
A detailed stakeholder mapping exercise was undertaken during the onboarding phase. Stakeholder categories identified included national environment agencies, local government, farmers, landowners, farming organisations, fisheries organisations / marine resource users, angling organisations, rural businesses, placemaking, environmental organisations, culture and heritage organisations, nature partnerships, energy, infrastructure, protected area managers, youth organisations, data and evidence managers and academics / researchers. This mapping exercise yielded a list of over 90 organisations and individuals who were sent information about the workshop, invited to share information in their networks and to register up to 2 people per organisation best suited to participate in the event. Sixty-seven people registered their interest in attending the event. This included strong representation from environmental Non-Governmental Organisations (eNGOs), local government, national environment agencies and nature partnerships, but also included representation from a variety of other stakeholder groups.

On the day, 45 people participated in the workshop supported by a team of 10 volunteer facilitators. The facilitation team was led by an independent contractor and included staff members from Ulster

Wildlife, NI Environment Link, Queens University Belfast, NI Marine Task Force and Ring of Gullion AONB. Participation on the day was diverse with at least some representation from most of the stakeholder groups targeted. The largest group was from **local councils** (*Derry City & Strabane District Council, Antrim & Newtownabbey Council, Armagh Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council, Mid Ulster District Council, Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, Ards and Down District Council, Belfast City Council, Derry City & Strabane District Council, Armagh Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council, Lisburn Castlereagh Council, Ards and North Borough Council*) followed by a range of **eNGO's** (*Buglife, Butterfly Conservation, Ulster Wildlife, Rivers Trust, National Trust, RSPB, The Woodland Trust*) and **farming / growing representatives** (*Ulster Farmers Union and the Nature Friendly Farming Network*).

Landscape/Nature Partnerships were represented by Belfast Hills and The Sperrins AONB and **national environment agencies** by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and the Forest Service. **Other stakeholders** represented on the day included the Office of Environmental Protection (OEP), representatives from data and evidence organisations, renewable energy, academia, placemaking, fisheries and angling, the Department for Infrastructure, culture and heritage organisations and youth organisations.

Workshop participation map



The Workshop

The workshop was designed as a forward-looking exercise in identifying a productive way for diverse stakeholders to engage in and support progress towards 30 x 30 in Northern Ireland. The morning session began with an introduction to the concept and its regulatory origin from Ulster Wildlife. This was followed by a short virtual presentation from Christian Christodoulou-Davies, NatureScot's Project Manager for 30x30 outlining the approach that has been taken in Scotland. This was offered as an example of how progress is being made in another setting and to get participants thinking about what a process could look like in Northern Ireland.

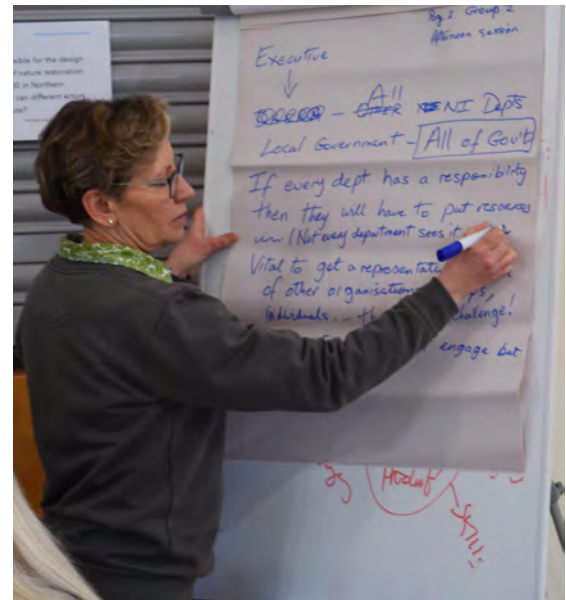
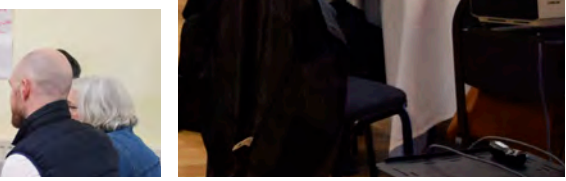
Participants were then invited to work in small groups to imagine what it would be like in 2040 if 30x30 had been achieved. They discussed environmental, social and economic aspects of a possible future. They also explored the commonalities and differences across different groups and closed the morning by reflecting on the potential challenges and barriers to achieving their vision in the unique context of Northern Ireland.

After lunch participants were invited to shift their attention to thinking in more detail about some of the key considerations around the design and delivery of 30x30. To kick off this session, Dr Jonny Hanson from Queens University Belfast shared a reflection on the role of nature in just transition and the unique qualities of people in NI which make them well placed to navigate complex challenges.

All participants were given time to consider each of five themes that emerged from the pre-workshop interviews. Each theme was framed as a question for participants to consider. A team of two facilitators worked with participants to capture their views, ideas and concerns around each question.

- 1. What sort of places should be included in the 30% of land and sea that is protected in Northern Ireland?**
- 2. Who is responsible for the design and delivery of nature restoration through 30 x 30 in Northern Ireland? What can different actors do to contribute?**
- 3. How does the idea of 30 % of land and sea in Northern Ireland being protected need to be communicated for it to matter to people and for them to support it or buy in to it?**
- 4. What are the potential sources of funding / resources to support transition to 30 % of land and sea in Northern Ireland being protected?**
- 5. What knowledge and evidence should we be drawing on to inform decisions about nature recovery and 30x30? What is available? What are the gaps?**

The final session brought together all the thinking on the day inviting participants to work together in one of three small groups (marine, terrestrial, governance) to begin piecing together a 'roadmap' for action towards 30x30 reflecting their shared vision, unique operating environment and key areas of focus considered in the afternoon.



Photo's: Sue Ranger

Research Outputs

The pre-workshop research and workshop design provided an opportunity for the co-creation of a vision for 30 x 30 in Northern Ireland and a current situation analysis. From this it was possible to capture some immediate next steps and longer-term actions.

It was acknowledged, both in pre-workshop interviews and on the day, that there are key areas of uncertainty that limit people's ability to fully visualise what 30 x 30 could look like and how we might navigate there. There is, for example, not yet clear guidance on key questions around the current levels of habitat protection, leadership, governance, designation types and designation criteria. However, what was very clear through engagement with the workshop was that there is an abundance of interest and a willingness to collaborate among stakeholders. Participants on the day generously embraced the opportunity to consider what might be possible – demonstrating a tolerance for ambiguity and a bias to action.

**An enabling
policy
environment**



**A thriving
& diverse
natural
environment**



**Effective
policy
delivery**

**A healthy,
resilient,
nature-based
economy**



**Nature
friendly social
attitudes**

**Effective
engagement &
involvement**

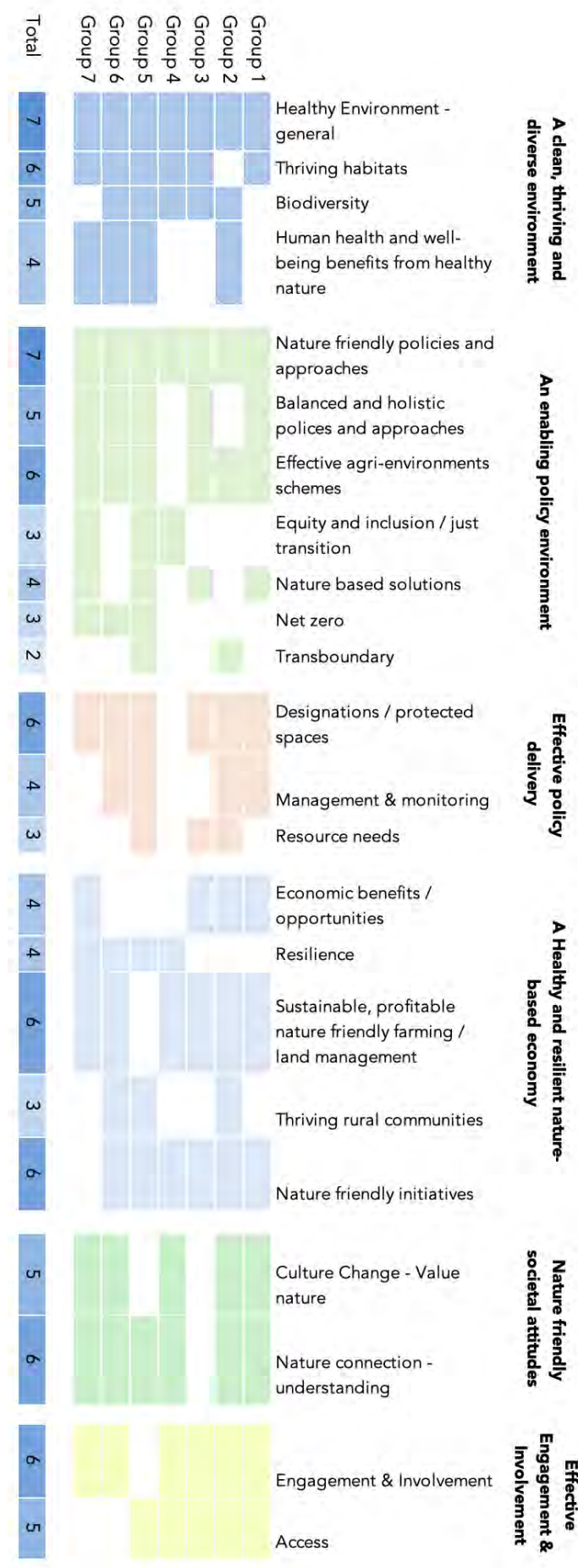
An Ambitious Collective Vision

After participants in the workshop had spent time generating a vision for 30x30 in Northern Ireland, they were invited to have a look at what other groups had come up with and identify commonalities. This exercise, supported by thematic analysis of the notes captured during the visioning session, revealed **six shared aspects** of participant's vision for 30x30 in NI.

During the vision session participants were divided into 7 groups. The hexagons opposite are coloured according to the number of groups that discussed themes under each of these aspects of the vision. The lighter tone suggests that slightly fewer groups raised themes under this aspect of the vision.

Several themes were grouped under each of these aspects of the vision. The following graphic provides a visual summary of these themes under the seven headings. While only 'healthy environment – general' and 'nature friendly policies and approaches' came up in all seven groups, there was a good deal of commonality across the group visioning exercises allowing development of a collective vision narrative based around these seven aspects.

Summary of key themes under the six aspects of a 30x30 vision that emerged from analysis of participant discussions. Cells are coloured to indicate which of the seven small groups raised each of the themes and aspects of the vision.



The Collective Vision Narrative

The following narrative around the six aspects of participants' discussions is derived from the notes captured by facilitators on the day. It does not provide a verbatim account of what people said but is rather intended to give an impression of the scope and tone of participant's conversations. It gives a sense of the collective vision and hopes of participants in both the interviews and the workshop.

A clean, thriving and diverse environment

Northern Ireland has clean air, clean water, good soil health and more 'wildness' where the pressures on nature have been removed. Diverse **nature is thriving on land and at sea** with progressive forestry practices, connected, mixed woodland habitats full of healthy native trees and a wide variety of plants and animals, healthy fresh waters including rivers flowing freely and supporting abundant life and seabed habitats teeming with life. The **success of restoration and recovery efforts** has made a significant contribution to the health, diversity and resilience of habitats. Stewardship of places with the whole interconnected web of life in mind rather than individual species has seen an **increase in biodiversity**. This thriving extends to the **human communities** who would flourish and live **healthier and happier** lives alongside vibrant and resilient nature.



Vision sheet created at the workshop

An enabling policy environment

It has been possible to achieve a **systemic shift** away from prioritising economic growth over the wellbeing of people and nature. Instead of using Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a measure of the flourishing of NI, the government prioritises and celebrates well-being and **green growth** which recognises the mutual and reciprocal benefits of sustaining a healthy environment and embraces the value of nature and nature-based solutions. They have effectively harnessed relevant frameworks like Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services. In this policy environment, there is a **holistic and integrated land use strategy** which effectively balances biodiversity, carbon capture, development and productivity and attaches importance to the role of protected areas within that mosaic. To make this work, government departments have **broken out of siloed working** and collaborate between local and national government and across environment, agriculture, planning, infrastructure, forestry and fisheries departments to oversee a durable network of protected areas for the benefit of nature and people.

With nature as a connecting thread through government it is possible to better **balance** social, economic and environmental considerations in this process. People are considered as part of the system and are **empowered** to contribute to shaping a nature friendly future because it benefits them in the long run. Policies recognise that the land and seascapes of NI have been formed by prolonged interactions between humans and ecosystems – forming **interdependencies around food, livelihoods and health and well-being** that need to be maintained. Central to achieving this balance on land are equitable **Agri-environment policies and schemes that are fit for purpose** – enabling and rewarding long term, positive practices and avoiding perverse outcomes. Schemes that ensure food security while supporting farmers to transition to sustainable practices and enabling them to adapt and change to contribute to 30% of land being protected in the long term. It has also been possible to develop effective transboundary working between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and policy and decision-makers are able to adopt a **‘bigger picture’ approach** which recognises NI’s contribution to global biodiversity targets. There is a sustained **commitment to decarbonisation and halting climate change.**

Effective policy delivery

30% of land, sea and inland water in Northern Ireland is effectively conserved and managed in a connected network of protected sites.

The development of an integrated land use strategy and map removed uncertainty and identified opportunities for meeting this ambitious target. This means there is now a full suite of protected areas across urban, rural, coastal and marine areas. Alongside adding to sites protected under **existing designations** (MPAs, ASSI's, SAC's, RAMSAR and SPAs) the government embraced the idea of **other effective area-based conservation measures (OECM)** and successfully designed and implemented criteria to enable inclusion of important, but **previously excluded sites**.

This enabled fresh consideration of the potential for recovering and protecting **previously overlooked land** including, but not limited to publicly owned spaces, eNGO owned land, brownfield sites, waterways, blue carbon habitats, forestry and connecting, marginal land like field edges and hedgerows to be included in 30x30. The role of agri-environment schemes has been maximised for caring for and supporting the 30by30 network. The network is in excellent condition, safeguarding rich and well-functioning ecosystems where **native nature is thriving**, and **invasive species have been controlled**. This is made possible through **highly effective and sustained monitoring** and **adaptive management** and **integrated management** under different designations.

The protected area network is **properly financed** – meaning the true cost of designation, monitoring and adaptive management, including effective data management, has been recognised and met. In addition to sufficient funding there has been **skills development and training** to ensure that landowners and managers, sea users and other stakeholders with an interest in looking after protected sites are properly equipped to support delivery of 30x30.

The Collective Vision Narrative

A Healthy and resilient nature-based economy

The rural economy and urban and rural communities are thriving and have adopted or returned to business models and practices that are nature friendly, profitable and resilient to environmental change. The rich tradition of family farming and fishing is recognised and respected and there is a **positive relationship of mutual learning** between food producers, researchers, conservationists and policy makers which is enabling areas of particular importance to nature and people to be identified and protected.

There is a **shared commitment to innovation** with living labs and tech solutions to data collection and monitoring. **Economic benefits are being realised** because of a shift to nature friendly ways of working and producing quality food and farms are profitable because sustainably produced products like organic veg and grass-fed beef are realising higher prices in growing markets. There is a move towards **buying and selling local** – reducing food miles and carbon emissions and reconnecting communities with local food producers. **Sustainable, low impact or regenerative farming** has become the norm, and farmers are voluntarily and enthusiastically engaged in the conversation about halting biodiversity loss. They have embraced the idea of allowing for a bit **more 'messiness' in the countryside** for the benefit of biodiversity – it is not uncommon to see wilder meadows and rough field margins. Many farmers have switched to smaller livestock, nature friendly fertilisers and reduced ammonia release and been **motivated to engage with setting up OECMs**. This **transition has been properly supported** by policy and allowed farmers to achieve balance between safeguarding biodiversity, producing food and capturing carbon. While some jobs have been lost, **people have been supported to retrain into new, secure, green jobs**. The agricultural landscape is characterised by **polyculture rather than monoculture** and diversity and sustainability are favoured over big business in policy and practice.

The wider landscape is also supporting a diversity of **new nature-based businesses and initiatives** have been successfully established. Agri-ecotourism has become established alongside increased opportunities for recreational activity in natural settings. **Eco-villages** have sprung up and local

communities are supporting **community gardens** and **pollinator friendly initiatives** in communal urban spaces and rural areas. **Businesses are investing** in improving natural spaces as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives. In urban areas there has been a marked improvement in the quality of accessible green and blue spaces and investment in **Nature-based Solutions** (NbSs) such as Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS) has become the norm when it comes to new developments.

Effective Engagement & Involvement

There is much more **connectivity and collaboration** across different parts of society which is enabling more grassroots involvement in halting biodiversity loss and protected areas. There is more **positive and meaningful communication** between landowners and other stakeholders and communities which enables conversations and co-development of policies and plans. The **generational experience and knowledge** of farmers, fishers and others is considered respectfully alongside traditional scientific data and evidence which makes work between landowners and managers, land users, regulators and wider society more **meaningful and productive**. This has made it possible to achieve **effective co-management plans and processes** that benefit people, protected spaces and nature more generally. This has, in turn, **increased public confidence and buy-in** to effective and sustainable land management and protected areas as part of the wider land- and seascape. **People have access to more space** and spend more time outdoors learning, enjoying and **cultivating a sense of belonging**. Improved local connectedness has increased the number of **people who feel motivated and empowered to get involved and act in their local area**. As more diverse people can access and engage with quality natural settings there is **more equity and inclusion and benefits from nature are experienced more widely**. Bringing a diversity of views and values to the table improves the quality of policies and plans, the level of buy-in and the number of **citizens actively involved in this space**.



Nature friendly societal attitudes

There has been a **seismic shift in societal attitudes** and behaviours and people deeply value their natural surroundings. **Improved access, outdoor experiences and education** have successfully provided the next generation with opportunities to reconnect with nature and develop their knowledge and understanding of the reciprocal relationship between people and nature. There is a **thriving sector fostering ongoing connection and engagement** through access, interpretation and education – in schools and conservation organisations but also on farms.

This is leading to a **growing sense of responsibility, ownership and belonging** across society. Rather than seeing nature as a means to an end or thinking about what nature can do for people, **they recognise the rights and value of nature** in and of itself. They **celebrate wildness and messiness** and have a newfound respect for weeds! People are more connected with food production and understand the nature and importance of sustainable production. They **understand and appreciate the working land and seascape** and **seek out locally produced food** whenever possible rather than relying on imported produce.



A Collective Assessment of the Operating Environment

To develop a route map for short to medium term action that could be taken to move towards this collective vision for 30x30 in NI it was important to understand the landscape that stakeholders perceive themselves to be operating in.

The morning session established a shared, positive vision which recognised that achieving 30x30 would only be possible through collective effort. The intention of the reflective session which followed was therefore not to criticise or apportion blame for the lull in progress, but to pragmatically consider what might need to shift or change to revitalise progress and empower and enable motivated, interested and responsible stakeholders to move forward.

Numerous **barriers and challenges** were raised during the pre-workshop interviews and during the reflective session at the workshop where participants were invited to think about what needed to be surfaced in a collective 'reality check'.

These could be roughly divided into considerations related to:

- Governance
- Economy
- Society
- Policy

Each of these areas of challenge were addressed as part of the themed discussions in the second part of the workshop and so each is presented here as a combination of the **perceived challenge** and **potential opportunities or solutions** identified by the group during the themed discussions in the second half of the workshop and by interview participants.

Each section ends with a reflection on the implications for possible future action and these points are then picked up in the Action Plan at the end of the report.

Reflection questions

Opportunities & solutions	Challenge
1. Who is responsible for the design and delivery of nature restoration through 30 x 30 in Northern Ireland? What can different actors do to contribute?	Governance
2. What are the potential sources of funding / resources to support transition to 30 % of land and sea in Northern Ireland being protected?	Economy
3. How does the idea of 30 % of land and sea in Northern Ireland being protected need to be communicated for it to matter to people and for them to support it or buy-in to it?	Society
4. What sort of places should be included in the 30% of land and sea that is protected in Northern Ireland?	Policy
5. What knowledge and evidence should we be drawing on to inform decisions about nature recovery and 30x30? What is available? What are the gaps?	Policy

Governance

Governance Barriers & Challenges

The 30x30 target includes a requirement that conservation and management of protected sites is achieved through equitable governance which recognises and respects the rights of local communities. The United Nations defines governance as “*all processes of governing, the institutions, processes and practices through which issues of common concern are decided upon and regulated.*” Considerations around governance in this case should therefore be distinguished from ‘government’. While there was a broadly shared understanding that the Government of Northern Ireland, and DAERA in particular, have the statutory responsibility to lead and oversee the delivery of 30x30 to fulfil commitments under the GBF, there was discussion about the complex and multi-dimensional nature of governance of protected areas at different levels and participants considered governance in its broad sense in their conversations.

Governance Context

There was widespread recognition of the lasting impacts of **past governance** on the operating environment today.

“NI is a complex, post-conflict society – everything is coloured by a sectarian lens. This makes difficult things even harder, and the government is stuck in the middle.”

The **social and political history** of the country has enduring impacts on people’s views, values and behaviours which should not be forgotten when developing governance structures, strategies and delivery plans for 30x30. For example,

“There is a social side to this – the history of land means that people will fight for their land, fight to own their own land. Farmers are really tied to their land - it doesn’t tend to change hands - farmers will keep land even if they are not farming it. Having a designation on your land is like having a new landlord.”

National Government

At the level of **national government**, there was a shared appreciation of the challenges to progress resulting from more recent political instability and

the repeated collapse of the NI Executive until the most recent re-establishment in February 2024. Participants and interviewees shared a perception that this disruption had led, amongst other things, to short termism, ageing and outdated policies, a huge policy development backlog, mounting, shifting and sometimes competing priorities and a reluctance or apprehension to push for the ambitious, long term, cross cutting change policies needed to address key environmental challenges, including commitments under the GBF. One participant reflected that ‘*fear is a barrier to change and how / what we prioritise*’. This was related to a sense that environmental issues, like biodiversity loss, are not prioritised and that there is no cross-party buy-in to tackling environmental issues and no international accountability. One participant suggested that the government was not taking responsibility for the future. Within this very difficult broad context, some stakeholders expressed a sense of hopelessness or a sense that challenges felt too great to address. There was however also a measure of **optimism** that the new Executive and DAERA Minister had the potential to model leadership and support accelerated action and that the time was right to harness shared interest and urgency across government and civil society to jump start progress to 30x30.

National Government Departments

At the **departmental governance** level many participants raised siloed working as one of the principal stumbling blocks to progress towards 30x30 – with a lack of coherence and linkage across government departments and limited insight into the relevance of environmental protection to departments outside of DAERA or even across the different agencies within the department. People reflected that it can be challenging to balance priorities within DAERA which could hinder progress towards a protected area network.

“When people hear ‘nature’ they think - oh that’s for NIEA and not other parts of DAERA.”

“Nature is pitched against productive farming. Not framed as something that’s beneficial. Any management or restriction is sold as for nature rather than for the health and well-being of farmers - nature becomes the enemy.”

Given the enormity of the task of halting biodiversity loss and its relevance to the broader

remit of DAERA linked to sustainable fishing, forestry, sustainable food production, food security and rural community thriving and resilience there was a perception that there is a mismatch between the nature of the problem that needs to be addressed and the way government departments perceive responsibility should be apportioned. This lack of joined up thinking could be contributing to a sense of overwhelm for the people tasked with delivering against GBF targets like 30x30. There was a strong sense that it was **neither possible nor fair for any one agency to be expected to deliver this policy in isolation** and that DAERA should be working in concert and with other departments.

Local Government

There was a feeling that **local councils** were not currently able to play enough of a role. Participants recognised a tendency to get stuck on central government when thinking about big issues like nature restoration, but that a role should be established for local governments to maximise their potential to contribute.

Local Action

In terms of **on the ground conservation governance** structures participants perceived a lack of collective and collaborative working which was resulting in a sense of fragmentation of protected sites and approaches and a lack of coherence. Once again there was a sense that work is happening in silo's and needs to be more holistic – considering the NI land and seascape as a whole. This would require a **shift in how civil society organisations, community groups and individuals working on protected areas organise**.

While there is potential for collaborative partnership delivery to enable and accelerate progress, this would require a **change in governance structure in conservation** which recognises the need for systemic action that matches the interconnectedness of ecosystems. Marine, land and freshwater should be a connected discussion. There were suggestions of bringing together expert working groups with a long-term vision to steer direction and support and enabling civil society organisations and landowners and managers to take on delivery of protected area strategies – to share the load and work in a more joined up way. Participants felt that this could increase efficiency, accelerate progress and unblock the process by giving a broader range of actors the autonomy to implement strategies. They also felt this could also

help address the need to maintain momentum and follow through from policy to strategy to delivery and review.

It was acknowledged that there are issues around **trust and effective communication** between some stakeholders which need to be addressed for on the ground governance structures to function more effectively.

That said it was also **fully acknowledged that constructive engagement across the whole stakeholder community from government to local communities is essential**.

"All individual sites should be designated with full consultation - and it is government's responsibility to undertake that rigorous work and consultation. There are now similar reports emerging that have been prepared with more resource and data."

Implications for Action

1. There is a shared recognition of the need for collective and collaborative working to meet the challenge of 30x30, but there are challenges to inclusive, collective and collaborative working at all levels of governance.

2. There is an urgent need for work to prepare the ground and enable productive communication and co-working across responsible, affected, interested and motivated stakeholders in government, civil society and across communities.

3. There is a need to establish the role of Local Councils in delivery of 30x30.

4. There is a need for skills development and training to ensure that landowners and managers, sea users and other stakeholders with an interest in looking after protected sites are properly equipped to support delivery of 30x30.

Governance Opportunities & Solutions

Question: Who is responsible for the design and delivery of nature restoration through 30 x 30 in Northern Ireland? What can different actors do to contribute?

Collective and collaborative working

There is a huge opportunity to design and implement 30x30 in a fair and inclusive way.

People emphasised the importance of 'Viability of rural communities' and 'not leaving anyone behind' – this interest in equity lays the foundation for open, honest and trusting relationships to emerge and benefit the process. But **addressing any conflicts between stakeholders is imperative**, as these disputes can be detrimental to progress. Finding common ground and implementing solutions that resonate deeply with all parties involved will lead to meaningful and lasting environmental stewardship.

One interviewee flagged the European Innovation Partnership (EIP) Farm Walks approach which aims to "to facilitate knowledge exchange and showcase innovative practices among farmers, researchers, and other stakeholders" as a useful model to grow mutual understanding across parts of the stakeholder community. This sort of model favours positive and constructive working and could be applied in a diversity of settings and help to underpin equitable engagement in the process.

"Fences and fines, fortress conservation is not going to work in NI. Our environment has been co-created between nature and people and can't be disentangled."

Participatory and collaborative approaches can be less comfortable for some parts of the stakeholder community and time will need to be invested in building trusting and comfortable working relationships. This is a long-term investment because these relationships, once built, need to be sustained. That said, the atmosphere of the workshop was very positive, and people demonstrated empathy for the position of others and an appetite for just transition.

The need to recognise the lasting influence of the past in designing and delivering a 30 x 30 network was highlighted, with some participants sharing a view that it is important to surface socio-cultural issues and consider the ways in which they intersect with nature restoration policies. This need was also

acknowledged during the workshop.

"We can't avoid historical motivations in dealing with land. Because so many people own or are connected to land this has to be a wide and inclusive conversation. Land is more divided on community lines and that needs to be acknowledged."

"We need to talk about the cultural context if we are going to achieve 30x30. This means bringing people from different backgrounds together."

There was a commonly held view that **equity, diversity and inclusion should be integral to the process**. Participants acknowledged that there would be trade-offs and that some individuals might be disadvantaged as a result of implementing 30x30. They emphasised the importance of honesty and transparency regarding any potential losses and suggested that those most at risk should be included in the process from the beginning. Additionally, there was a strong consensus on the need to understand how key stakeholders, like farmers, could be supported and enabled to help achieve the 2030 target and sustain the protected area network in the long term.

"Farmers need to be involved and encouraged to think about the options that are available. We need to understand what they need to facilitate 30x30."

"We must take a 'carrot' approach with landowners. It must work financially so there have to be rewards."

Participants stressed **the importance of involving key stakeholders while also diversifying the conversation, avoiding 'the usual suspects'**. They believed inclusion was not only right but also valuable for the new perspectives and ideas it would bring.

"Anyone who wants to be in should be in. Some stakeholders will identify themselves. Don't rule anyone out. If people are willing, then open the door. Don't just stick to what you know - you want new faces in the room."

"We need a broad range of stakeholders – by being inclusive you are connecting more people and communities to nature."

In response to the need to **reduce siloed working in national government**, participants felt that there should be a holistic approach to meeting environmental targets which included both local and national government and brought together a cross-departmental structure able to collectively mobilise resources.

"If every department has a responsibility, then they will all have to put resources in. Not every department sees it as their responsibility now."

While people felt that statutory accountability for delivering 30x30 rests firmly with DAERA, there was a **widely shared view that progress would be accelerated if agencies within DAERA and departments beyond recognised their roles and took responsibility for relevant elements of the work**. The Northern Ireland Environmental Improvement Plan, published in late 2024, was flagged as a very useful cross departmental Executive document. In it the government recognises the need for improved environmental governance and indicates that there is going to be an internal review of environmental governance which may go some way towards addressing this need. Interviewees and participants also suggested that the creation of an independent Environmental Protection Agency should be favourably considered.

Enabling & empowering the wider stakeholder community

Recognising that there are deeply ingrained reasons why government departments work as they do, there was a keenness to avoid stasis while waiting for top-down change and to focus on where action is possible. Some individuals expressed the need for a **new model**, citing successful co-design in Northern Ireland with Marine Protected Areas as an example that could be applied to terrestrial areas and inland waters. From that example, it was suggested that a **combination of top-down and bottom-up governance** would be appropriate. Other examples mentioned include the Civic Forum Dialogue model and Group Water Schemes in the Republic of Ireland, and Labour Market Partnerships funded by the Department for Communities as effective models for connecting stakeholders and government.

There were several suggestions for **taking advantage of existing capacity, activity**

and momentum. These included the idea of establishing a multi-stakeholder 30x30 Forum and working towards the government resourcing and 'devolving' some responsibility to communities and civil society organisations already working on relevant landscape and nature restoration projects.

Participants noted the **importance of working at the community level**, in addition to improving top-down governance structures. They suggested engaging with existing community organisers, such as Gaelic Athletic Association clubs (GAA). They indicated that while nature restoration might require top-down policies, it should be implemented at the community level. That there should be a 'central top structure' and 'a localised model for action delivery'.

"People in NI are very parochial – they like their patch and would probably want to be involved in looking after it. At the delivery stage community organisations need to be involved."

"People powerless in policy but can manage their patch."

It was suggested that **inclusion should be accompanied by agency** and that efforts were needed to include the disaffected and disengaged. A good understanding of existing community level governance structures could also avoid local voluntary actions being 'undone through statutory interference'.

Recognising the potential of local government

The Local Development Plans in **local councils** were identified as a potential starting point for local consideration of 30x30. People agreed that **local governments have significant potential to contribute due to their appropriate scale of operation**, but clear direction and perhaps stronger legislation might be needed to enable them. Effective communication between local and national scales was seen as essential. Participants felt that **local government could effectively act as a bridge between central government and local communities, filtering down policies and filtering up community feedback**. There was a suggestion that there was potential for co-developed local nature recovery strategies, like those being developed in England. They also said that there was a need to de-silo local government staff.

"Local government officers can be quite siloed - climate change, biodiversity, outdoor rec etc. - it would be good to connect and have them working together more and meeting within their councils."

There was a suggestion that the 30x30 Forum model could be replicated at the local level.

"If the working group structure was replicated at the local government level it would enable dialogue between government and communities. We could reinvigorate the council biodiversity forum."

Implications for Action

1. Establish a 30x30 Forum: Opportunity mapping of existing stakeholder groups. Could look something like the old NI Biodiversity Forum - bringing together government, local councils and other sectors to set the parameters for how things can go forward. Look at existing groups that have worked in the past and perhaps could be rebranded - they were a great way of bringing people together in the past.

2. Ensure equity, diversity & inclusion EDI principles continue to underpin the process: Participants at the workshop were positive and constructive – people listened to one another and engaged respectfully with others, demonstrating the potential for inclusive and productive coworking on this issue. The willingness to engage openly in equitable, inclusive and diverse conversations is a huge opportunity for this process. Building on the stakeholder mapping, analysis and engagement that was done in preparation for the workshop could yield an even more diverse and inclusive community of people.

3. Enable Knowledge Exchange: Invest time in building positive, trusting working relationships across the stakeholder community. Enable knowledge exchange and hands on learning to break down barriers within the stakeholder community.

4. De-siloing 30x30: This is a whole society issue and that should be mirrored in how the government works to meet the target. Until holistic governance structures are established, supportive stakeholders can collectively make the case for joined up working.

5. Explore innovative governance models: There is an appetite for action across the stakeholder community. Exploring new and existing successful governance models at all levels in the system may yield insights into different models that would work in NI. In the short term, models which focus on identifying where there is capability, resource and momentum and are designed to allow it to be channelled to support action could accelerate progress and empower stakeholders.

6. Review and consider its recommendations of the internal environment governance review: Specifically in relation to 30by30 once it becomes available.

7. Establish a role for Local Councils: Local councils have a real role to play. It is easy to get stuck on central government, but it's important to recognise the contribution local government can make.

“Anyone who wants to be in should be in. Some stakeholders will identify themselves. Don’t rule anyone out. If people are willing, then open the door. Don’t just stick to what you know - you want new faces in the room.”



Economy

Economic Barriers & Challenges

People perceived a preoccupation with economic growth to be a major stumbling block to achieving 30x30. They saw this as resulting in unhelpful prioritisation of production and productivity over sustainability and conservation.

"The whole economic system is fundamentally flawed - billions invested in destroying and deterioration of the environment - pennies to protect it."

In this operating environment they felt that sustainability is frequently pitted against economic growth and narratives of sustainable profitability are drowned out.

Linked to this was a sense that funding for policies like 30x30 was not a priority as other needs – like education, health and jobs – took centre stage. The result of under investment manifests in a litany of lack – lack of funding, lack of capacity, lack of resources, lack of connectivity, lack of coordination and a lack of long-term planning.

Perhaps linked to current governance structures, the potential impacts of investment in nature appear to be siloed. There was a sense that greater recognition of the potential benefits of investment in a healthy environment to human health, job creation and thriving rural economies, fostered through improved connectivity across government departments, civil society organisations and communities, could underpin more strategic and impactful funding strategies.

There was particular concern around the lack of long-term funding strategies and financial support systems. Participants saw a mismatch between short term economic policies and the sustained commitment needed for nature restoration.

Implications for Action

1. There was a shared sense that a lack of resource (funding and capacity) was a significant barrier to progress and that, at least in part, that lack of resource was linked to persistent narratives around environmental and economic thriving being in conflict in an operating environment that prioritises profit.

2. There is a need to mainstream alternative narratives which communicate the potential for 'green growth' and plural benefits to society from a healthy environment. Narratives that might cultivate an appetite for investment in nature among a broader range of investors (private and public) who may not be motivated by traditional conservation framing.

3. There is a need to align the duration of funding with the time needed to secure nature recovery.

Economic Opportunities and Solutions

Question: What are the potential sources of funding / resource to support transition to 30 % of land and sea in Northern Ireland being protected?

Participants reflected that **diversifying funding streams** for environmental work presents myriad opportunities. They recognised that traditional government funding, while crucial, is often insufficient and stretched, making it imperative to explore alternative sources of finance. At the same time, and linked to thinking around more holistic governance, they felt **public money could work harder for public good** if funds from various government departments were pooled in some sort of 'green fund'. They felt this approach would not only maximize the impact of public funds but also ensure a coordinated and sustained effort towards achieving ambitious Sustainable Development Goals and GBF targets including 30x30. This would also help support understanding about mutual thriving for people and nature.

"Long term is key - even if phased in different funding streams."

Longer-term government funding commitments were seen as essential – some suggesting the need for a 50-year plan. This was particularly strongly emphasised in discussions around funding for Agri-environment schemes. It was suggested that they would require at least 25-year terms to be effective, ensuring that farmers are properly resourced, and that nature restoration and conservation interventions are effective and sustainable. It was suggested that farming incentives should focus on sustainable practices and profitability rather than single farm payments.

"Farming incentives are key to achieve behavioural change and make businesses profitable."

Philanthropists and some large grant-making organisations were flagged as potential sources of funding (e.g. NLHF, PeacePlus, the Community Investment Fund and Shared Island), but this again raised concerns about the limitation of short-term funding to address long term challenges. It was also felt that the impact from projects funded through sources like this was limited because lots of people are going after lots of little pots rather than

combining their resources to go after bigger pots of funding which could be longer term and take a more joined up, landscape scale approach. It was suggested that some sort of 'environmental task force' could come together to help **coordinate a more collaborative and strategic approach** and support development of funding bids.

Alongside these more traditional funding routes, they explored a wide range of other potential options. Linked to the need for more compelling narratives around green growth and benefits to society, many of these other strands would require **improvements in environmental literacy** across all government departments, public bodies, businesses and wider society suggesting a need for funding for targeted environmental education.

One promising approach that was raised was to **engage private investors through innovative mechanisms** such as carbon codes for peatland, woodland, and grassland restoration, which provide financial incentives for carbon sequestration. It was also suggested that engaging **insurance companies** and **pension funds** in biodiversity projects could provide substantial financial support while aligning with their risk management objectives. There was a suggestion that there was a need for **Public Private Partnerships** (PPP) to fund large scale river and wetland restoration.

Ethical corporate contributions were perceived to offer a significant untapped resource. For example, by embedding social value clauses in contracts related to development projects, businesses could be encouraged to invest in environmental sustainability as part of their corporate social responsibility. Participants suggested that offshore wind projects, for instance, could contribute through offsetting mechanisms linked to nature preservation through the all-Ireland levy. It was felt that approaches like this could foster a culture of environmental stewardship among companies, aligning their financial success with the health of the planet.

There was some discussion around the potential of public land to contribute to 30x30 if there was a **new funding model for bodies like NI Water and Forest Service** which require investment in managing some of their land holding for biodiversity. People suggested that drawing inspiration from international models, such as Norway's allocation of public benefits to environmental work, France's nature-based solutions

in railway management and Sweden's 'right of way' for power lines, could provide valuable insights.

There were also suggestions about how **wider society** may be able to contribute for example through the introduction of water charges for soft infrastructure and small charges on products in supermarkets to generate funds dedicated to environmental initiatives – following on the plastic bag levy model.

There was also discussion around low or no cost avenues to progressing work including by encouraging volunteering or even incentivising members of the public to engage in restoration activities like pulling Himalayan Balsam – with participants receiving a nominal 'Balsam Bounty' for each plant removed. Such community-driven contributions could instil a sense of shared responsibility and collective action towards environmental conservation.

There was also discussion around the economic opportunities in the growth of the green/blue economy and **more, better, longer-term jobs**. It was suggested that the Social Value Act could be a route to creating apprenticeships and other opportunities to grow these green/blue jobs.

Implications for Action

1. Change the narrative: By debunking the myth of growth vs sustainability, it may be possible to overcome barriers to engage funders beyond the usual suspects.

2. Pool resources: A longer term and more holistic government funding base could be established by departments pooling their resources to address shared environmental challenges.

3. Think outside the moneybox: Developing an innovative funding mosaic could help to secure sustained and sustainable funding for long term nature recovery initiatives.

4. Dream of a new economy: An assessment of the potential of the nature-based economy linked to 30x30 could support wider engagement from business owners and investors.

5. Mainstream blue/green jobs: The Social Value Act could be a route to creating apprenticeships and other opportunities to grow these green/blue jobs.

6. Work in concert: Subverting the idea that eNGOs and other relevant civil society organisations are in competition for funding and nurturing a culture of collaboration could leverage larger, more holistic funding pots.

Bringing together an Environmental Funding Task Force across civil society organisations could help to reorganise and revolutionise the funding model for conservation in NI.

7. Explore the non-monetary economy: There are examples of low or no cost options for delivery e.g. volunteering.



Who is responsible for delivering 30x30 in NI?

“Everyone. This is a society wide task. Someone needs to take a lead. But this is a job for everyone.”

Society

Societal Barriers & Challenges

When asked who was responsible for delivering 30x30 in NI, one interviewee said,

"Everyone. This is a society wide task. Someone needs to take a lead. But this is a job for everyone."

This idea that there needs to be **widespread engagement with nature recovery** for 30x30 to be a success was frequently expressed. However, participants also shared a view that there can be a **lack of awareness about environmental issues** among ordinary people and that getting wider society engaged with delivery of policies like 30x30 is a significant and ongoing challenge. They suggested that there was a **gap in understanding about how protecting areas for nature was relevant to ordinary people**.

One participant suggested that there might be an element of 'wilful ignorance' which may be linked to a **societal aversion to change** which was raised more than once. It was suggested that there was a sense of fear among people trying to navigate sustainability issues like fast fashion and cheap food in the face of **rising living costs**. Sustainability will mean making major lifestyle changes for individuals and will have impacts on the vested interests of business and government. The bigger shifts that will be required can get in the way of people engaging with specific policies or projects. One participant suggested that 'defeatism' gets in the way of change – 'We won't change, so why try?' There was also a recognition of the **disconnect between people and nature** and a lack of value for nature in and of itself and for what it contributes to people's health and well-being. There was a sense of segregation between land and people.

Linked to this is a recognition that **communication about environmental issues and projects is not currently landing** and being understood by key audiences. Participants felt that the language used by environment professionals (e.g. 'biodiversity', 'sustainability', '30x30', 'nature recovery') is not widely understood and too is freely used. The concepts behind these words need to be made more accessible. Some terms appear straightforward but are subject to a variety of interpretations – for example 'well managed' can mean different things to different people. There is an urgent need to develop and use a shared language.

"So that the same language and understanding is shared across national and local government and other sectors."

Participants agreed that there was a need for **fundamental changes in societal mindsets** and that one route to this change is through education and awareness raising. The idea of taking people on a **journey from appreciation to awareness, connection and behaviour change** was what was needed. Development of skills and education is ongoing, but people feel it is not sufficiently resourced. It was also suggested that **education is not the only route to re-connection** and that there was a need for experience – **more time in nature, more access to nature, placements, hands on training programmes and opportunities to embrace nature**.

Implications for Action

1. There was a recognition that parts of wider society may be 'looking away' from environmental issues and the value of nature out of a sense of overwhelm and powerlessness to change.

2. There is a need to reframe communication about environmental issues to make it relatable and relevant to more diverse audiences. If people are to come to willingness to make significant lifestyle changes to protect nature, 'exceptionalism' or the sense that 'it doesn't apply to us' needs to be overcome.

3. There is a need to develop a shared language that resonates across the wider stakeholder community and supports shared understanding.

4. There is a need to develop a clear pathway for people to get actively involved. Actions for everyone.

5. There is a need to improve access to nature to allow people opportunities to reconnect and experience benefits from time in healthy natural settings.

Societal Opportunities and Solutions

Question: How does the idea of 30 % of land and sea in Northern Ireland being protected need to be communicated for it to matter to people and for them to support it or buy-in to it?

The disconnect

The participants at the workshop recognised a need for **focussed action to re-connect people with nature** and to clearly communicate the benefits of diverse, thriving ecosystems to ordinary people. There was a great deal of **expertise in the room** with many people routinely involved in communication and messaging about the environment – but there were **questions about how effective current approaches have been**. There were also case studies highlighted where communications had been the undoing of policy implementation.

As mentioned above, there was significant concern about disconnection between people and nature in NI, particularly when it comes to the marine environment which is *'over the horizon, so people don't give a hoot!'* People talked about the **importance of improved access** to the natural environment and how the **connection that would flow from that may establish a route to deeper and more impactful engagement**. The AONB Local Biodiversity Officers and Recreation Officers were seen as a useful touchpoint with members of the public – helping to make the connection.

Using existing connections

In contrast, a couple of interviewees shared reflections that suggest **there is a deeply held underlying connection to land**. While they said that this is particularly so among people who live on the land, own and manage it – it also goes beyond those groups to wider society who derive benefit from the time they are able to spend in natural spaces. This was illustrated with a story:

"People are very connected to the land - land they own and land they use. For example, when parking charges were introduced at a site where people go walking there was an uproar – "You want to charge us for walking on our mountain!!!?" During COVID people were all

over the Mournes - so there is demand."

This subset of **the population who already feel connected** could provide an opportunity for building common ground across stakeholder groups, but also for learning and amplification of environmental stories about mutual benefit. Workshop participants shared the view that **meeting individuals where they are** and understanding what triggers their emotion is essential. Engaging with those who are already connected can provide valuable **insights into routes to connection and the language of connection** that is most likely to resonate with other members of their community.

"The messenger matters as much as the message."

Achieving the difficult values shift

There is a **critical need for a societal shift to value and care for the environment**. It was suggested that indifferent, supportive and opposing audiences all need to be reached – recognising a diversity of motivations and needs. While many do not yet understand the urgency, awareness needs to grow rapidly and this will, once again, require collective action transcending departmental boundaries. Including **people normally excluded from discourse about natural resources** was seen as important; it was also acknowledged that **other pressures and concerns** mean that engagement can be more challenging for some people than others. For example, low-income families are thought to be among those most at risk from the effects of environmental degradation but may also have the most to gain from nature recovery. It was suggested that **social research and behavioural science could offer valuable strategies** to understand how best to influence change effectively across different demographics.

There is already a shared understanding of the challenges of engaging wider society in dialogue and action on generalist, big picture environmental issues. People felt it was important for **communication to be tailored to individuals' real-world experiences**. Making protected sites relatable is crucial. Simple campaigns like *'No Mow May'* were cited as ways that people have been enabled, first hand, to see what happens when you give nature a bit of time and space. This understanding can make spatial protection more personal and relevant and could be the difference between people feeling inclined to get on board

and feel integral to the process. People suggested a need for **simplifying key messages** and **avoiding fear-based communication**. Messaging should aim to achieve a balance between positivity and shining a light on benefit and not shying away from the consequences of inaction. At the same time, it was flagged that there was a **need for honesty and transparency about the people who may lose out** because of protecting sites. Respectfully acknowledging the short-term impacts that will be felt in pursuit of long-term benefit.

"What are potential benefits? What are the implications of not doing it? Show the benefits - point out of negatives. A lot of people become disenfranchised if no benefit is seen."

"We should not be afraid."

The challenge of **ecoanxiety** among young people was flagged as something that could cause overwhelm and perhaps stand in the way of young people taking action and feeling a sense of agency.

People felt that **awareness raising should include clear routes to action**. The Public Participation Networks in the Republic of Ireland were offered as a useful model – PPNs are independent structures established in each Local Authority area to facilitate community participation in local government decision-making and policy input. Another suggestion was using the Group Water Scheme Model to develop community-led freshwater restoration hubs.

Changing the language

It was recognised that the **challenge of communication** and engagement is made even more **complex because of the diversity of stakeholders** but some key approaches were suggested as being important no matter what the audience. There was quite a bit of discussion around the **importance of language** and concerns about people communicating in ways that work 'in their bubble' but don't connect with others.

In addition to technical terms like 'biodiversity', 'ecosystem services' and 'sustainability' which had been mentioned previously, there can be **unanticipated emotional responses to language**. An interviewee reflected on their response to words like 'protection' and 'restoration' of nature, feeling they perpetuated an 'us and them' nuance - suggesting that there is an antagonist - someone

that has damaged nature and that it needs protecting from them – raising feelings of guilt and blame. 'Nature friendly' was suggested as a positive alternative way of describing pro-environmental behaviour. It was agreed that **communication that instils a sense of pride and possibility** rather than blame and shame was more constructive and engaging. Once again suggesting the need for mindful and informed communication and the **potential for drawing on social research to refine and target communications**.

Shared messages

To foster better communication about protected areas, it is **essential for the stakeholder community to coalesce around shared key messaging that demonstrates the relevance and urgency of action**. With governmental bodies, civil society organisations and local communities 'speaking the same language' there is a better chance of developing a coordinated and unified approach. It is crucial to develop an accessible shared communications plan that is clear and actionable.

People felt that **communication should be about the importance of nature and what nature does for people in the places where they live**, not just the 30x30 concept as a whole. People need a simple and clear expression of the important contribution this policy is making to biodiversity and climate targets and how that is relevant to them 'in their wee village'.

"Clarifying the rationale behind the 30x30 initiative is important. The significance of the number 30 might not be universally understood."

Education and beyond

As is often the case, there was a **focus on formal education as a channel** for improving understanding and engagement. There was concern about the lack of focus on environmental literacy in schools which people thought was possibly linked to a lack of youth engagement in the environmental sector. There is a need for more targeted and strategic learning at all levels of the formal education system. Of course, not all learning happens in schools, colleges and universities and learning continues to be needed throughout life. **There is a need to completely shift the idea that education is only for the young**. In a dynamic and changing environment there is a need for everyone to deepen their understanding.

"Not just the young people, the decision-makers need to be on the train."

Positive vibes

Finally, people felt it was important to **celebrate successes** and **identify positive champions and advocates** for nature who could help maintain positive energy and keep the issue fresh.

Implications for Action

1. Get Comms heads together: There are many people already involved in environmental communications, but it is not having the desired impact. There is an opportunity to pool experiences and engage with contemporary research around effective framing which may help to make messaging more impactful.

Develop a shared comms plan for nature restoration aligning voices so that messages are shared and coherent.

2. Evidence based Comms: It would be worth investing in social research to better understand audiences and devise effective framing for 30x30.

3. Capitalise on shared values: Deep connection to land is shared across different stakeholder groups – sometimes groups assumed to have opposing views – a focus on shared value in communications could create the basis for building constructive working relationships.

4. Go to the people and be generous with your learning: Invest time in building relationships, listen and share back with the wider community working on 30x30 what you learn about messages that resonate.

5. Democratise connection: There is an opportunity to learn from members of the community who already feel connected to nature and to amplify their stories. This is a way of democratising nature connection. It is something that can be felt in different ways by anyone who is open to it. Hearing about what healthy nature means from community peers rather than environmental organisations can be impactful.


6. Partner with grassroots: Increase awareness of 30x30 among non-environmental civil society organisations – e.g. workshops on 30x30 and why it will benefit communities.

7. Be specific: There is a need to improve environmental literacy specifically with regard to protected areas and nature restoration. Create resources targeting the specific need.

8. Connect with the Youth: There needs to be more of a youth focus. Working with youth groups to develop people's understanding of the need for nature recovery.

9. Every day should be a school day: Environmental Education should encompass all levels of education from nursery and school to university, apprenticeships & teacher training. But also think beyond formal education. What do people need to experience or understand to change their behaviour?

10. What's in it for me?: Provide learning opportunities around the value of 30x30 for local communities to get them on the pathway to contributing - helping local communities to be the change.

A photograph of a brown rabbit standing in a field of green grass and yellow wildflowers. The rabbit is facing right, looking slightly away from the camera. It has long, upright ears and long white whiskers. The background is a soft-focus field of similar vegetation.

“People are very
connected to the land -
land they own and land
they use.”

Policy

Policy Barriers & Challenges

Participants described significant barriers to progress related to needing more clarity around the policy framework that will underpin the identification, designation, monitoring and management of protected sites in the 30x30 network. While there was a shared recognition of the need for collaborative work there was also a **hunger for the government to take the lead so that efforts could be holistic, coordinated and cohesive.**

People felt that the result of what they perceived to be weak environmental legislation, and a lack of effective enforcement action related to existing sites was holding back progress towards a protected area network that was all in favourable condition making action even more urgent.

"Existing designated sites - like ASSI's - are in unfavourable condition. The SAC we help to manage is in unfavourable condition. There are no prosecutions, there is no one to investigate damage."

A need for guidance

Given some of the existing challenges, people felt there needed to be a **shift from the status quo** to allow consideration of different designation types, flexible designations and voluntary arrangements and different ways of working to get the job done.

They highlighted some **priority gaps** that urgently need to be filled. Stakeholders were essentially calling for urgent development of a guidance framework which will facilitate collective action. They expressed a need for:

- Clear guidance on how 30x30 is being interpreted by the Northern Ireland Government.
- Up to date information about the existing extent and condition of protected areas.
- Clear expression of the ecological drivers. What else do we want to protect and why? What state is it in? What state do we want to restore it to?
- Clear guidance on the criteria for inclusion in 30x30 – what sort of places will qualify? Will a pipeline approach be adopted for sites that are not yet in favourable condition?
- Clear guidance on the criteria for different

designation types – particularly around any new designation types (OECMs)

- Clear guidance on the evidence likely to be needed to underpin establishment of the 30x30 network
- An overview of what relevant data exists and where it can be accessed.
- Guidance of the process and requirements for data collection and submission to ensure consistency.

There was particular emphasis on a need for **clarity at the interface of planning, Agri-environment schemes and protected area policy.**

Following identification and designation of sites needs would include:

- Guidance on protected area governance – What sort of governance structures are anticipated for different designations?
- Criteria for monitoring and processes for data management and sharing.
- Clear communication and agreement on appropriate enforcement measures.
- Guidance on how the effects of climate change would be considered in network management / development.

These points are **particularly relevant to the marine Protected Area network** which has largely already been designated. Particularly given the timescale, continued uncertainty is not helpful.

It is very **important to start talking about existing sites as part of the 30x30 target** so that people can have practical, real-world examples of what these places might look like and what the rest of the network could comprise of. Effectively conveying the benefits to the public and seeking quick wins to build momentum is imperative, though there is a risk of focusing on areas easier to manage rather than those most beneficial for nature.

Data and evidence

The second area of challenge is around **use and accessibility of data**. People recognise that there are data gaps but share a feeling that data on protected sites and priority sites is fairly well advanced (as seen on the Natural Environment Map Viewer – and anticipated on the NIEA Living Map which is due to be launched) and that it should be

possible to make progress on piecing together the 30x30 network.

"At what point is enough data collected that informed decisions can be made? We can make decisions based on the data we have but decisions need to be reviewed as data is updated."

The other issue is around data access – where data that has been gathered, they are not always accessible nor widely shared. People felt that there needed to be more data linkages between different government departments and other organisations so that a much more complete range of environmental data could be accessible, centralised and well maintained. There were also questions about the quality and comparability of data.

It was recognised that 38% of NI's seas are already under some sort of designation, so the data challenges for the marine are more around tracking recovery and assessing effective management than identifying sites to make up the network.

Implications for Action

1. Creating a clear framework: While there is action that can be taken to support relevant policy development, only so much is possible without the necessary policy framework in place.

2. A little pressure: There is a need to establish how collective effort across the wider stakeholder community can help to accelerate progress towards having clear policies and targets in place. This could be in the form of support or advocacy.

3. Start talking about the network as a real thing: There is a need to begin talking about the emergent network and generating widespread interest around the policy.

4. Good data: There is a tension between enough data being available to make a start and not enough data being accessible to those who need it. There is a need for data coordination and management.

5. The needs in the marine environment are different as the focus is less on designation and more on effective management.

Policy Opportunities and Solutions

Question 1: What sort of places should be included in the 30% of land and sea that is protected in Northern Ireland?

Linked to the slowing of policy development that participants attributed to political instability in recent years, there are several highly relevant plans and strategies that are all being released or about to be released which will, no doubt, help to provide more clarity and momentum around the high-level intention and direction of travel. As this information becomes available, the wider stakeholder community will need to respond and adapt as needed.

The opportunity to learn

In the meantime, the slight lag in progress has a silver lining. Scotland, Wales and England are all progressing towards 30x30 and there is the **potential for the NI process to learn from their experience** and perhaps avoid unnecessary delays going forward.

There was an interested and positive response to the presentation from NatureScot about the co-development process they have undertaken. There was a sense of stakeholder openness to innovative / new approaches and designations and people reflected that there is a **real opportunity now for productive dialogue and a 30x30 network that reflects the unique context in NI**.

In the spirit of **thinking creatively** in the absence of clarity on what sort of places would be included in the 30x30 network. Participants, unprompted, developed a diverse range of ideas that, on reflection, mirror the requirements set out in the official target. They talked about 'areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services'; areas that are ecologically representative and well connected; official protected area designations and OECSs as well as areas integrated into wider landscapes, seascapes and ocean. They felt it could be useful to have an audit of land in NI.

"What's actually there and what could it be used for? What areas would be best for one land use or the other?"

It was suggested that there should be a **spectrum of approaches** to protection (like the environmental

land management schemes (ELMS) in England) which range from strictly protected sites (ASSI's, SACs, MPAs and SPAs) to traditional areas of priority (like peatlands and woodlands) in OECSs and then more integrated landscape management for nature (e.g. AONBs).

"There should be a spectrum of approaches from totally protected, large sites, like Knepp in England, to areas that are damaged but improving."

Start with what you have

It was suggested that priority habitats had already been identified and were shown on the NIEA Map Viewer, but some suggested that this was a starting point as data was not necessarily up to date and accurate. They also felt there were some assessment gaps, for example around soil and invertebrates. People also mentioned habitats that had not necessarily seen much designation – like species rich hay meadows – suggesting that the priority habitats should be expanded.

"The coastline - intertidal - is very rich but no one ever talks about it. There are significant mudflats and rocky shores owned by DAERA or the Crown Estate?"

There was a shared sense that **existing protected areas** (e.g. ASSI's, SACs and SPAs) should form the 'backbone' of the network, providing a good foundation to build on. Some people felt that there **may be a need to designate more sites under these designations** and felt that where there were sites known to be high value for nature the government should just get on with that process. **Others were strongly opposed to more designations** of this kind, feeling that they have not been effective and there is not a case to create more. An alternative would be to **expand existing sites or add 'nature positive zones' around them as buffers**.

"There should also be more designations or expansion of already designated sites because designation has prevented habitat loss and a lack of designation risks loss and damage. As an example of a site where expansion may be an option – [] bog is designated, but the surroundings – despite being extremely nature rich, with curlews and marsh fritillaries etc. – are not. They have no protection. So, expanding the designation would be good – or there could*

be some sort of buffer zone around designated sites."

"I am concerned about the management of already designated sites. There is a sense that current designations don't really work. Why are we designating more? I would challenge the idea of more designations just for the sake of meeting targets. I have a lack of faith in the effectiveness of designation"

There was also some concern over the **lengthy and time-consuming process required to make these sorts of designations**. This was one of the reasons people gave for needing new designation types like OECMs.

The opportunity to innovate

People felt there was a need for a **more bespoke approach to protected areas** that could be more responsive to specific sites.

In discussion about possible alternatives to existing designations people were able to think creatively. There was ongoing conversation about the potential of land under long-term, properly resourced Agri-environment schemes to qualify as OECM and contribute to 30x30.

"I think we need some sort of Agri-environment scheme that is grander and better than anything we've had before to achieve 30x30. We need a bespoke, widespread Agri-environment scheme that will make it possible to incentivise protection in NI – this may need to be a long-term agreement."

"They must be fair & reliable so that farmers don't think they're going to go into a scheme, and it'll be 5 years and then the Minister changes or someone goes, "We'll just put a line through that." And they have already taken some land out of production or changed production - it needs to be something they can take comfort in that is reliable, but that doesn't tie them in for so long that they're thinking 'When I'm not here anymore and my grandchildren are stuck with this. What if it's not working anymore?"

There was **pragmatism about how a mosaic of protected and profitable land could be achieved** and a sense that there was a need to be **realistic about the trade-offs** that may be needed. While agriculture and OECMs can in theory co-occur,

areas of land within the 30x30 scheme would have to be managed for biodiversity and not agricultural output. Areas prioritising nature, not food. Raising questions about sustaining sufficient food production.

"We may well need to intensify even further in some areas to give other areas more breathing space. Some land is fertile and high yielding – use it to make other things possible. We have to be pragmatic."

There were suggestions that **co-location** of protected sites should be considered in the marine environment. This could open possibilities in areas that are already quite congested.

"The waters around NI are already a busy space. [Fishing] Industry have suggested co-siting of offshore wind and MPAs."

People suggested that **marginal, unused or abandoned land** could also present opportunities, particularly for connectivity, and that brownfield sites, hedgerows and field margins could all add value.

"This is where abandoned land and perhaps wetlands could be of value. Target what's less contentious and provides the biggest benefit. We lose valuable habitats because there are no incentives to keep them. E.g. ponds are drained because there are no incentives to keep them, and they prevent other types of land use e.g. keeping cattle."

There was an interest in looking at potential in previously unconsidered or overlooked places.

"We should look at our islands - e.g. Strangford & Lough Neagh. Some of these are still quite intensively used, but they needn't be."

Along with having **rivers and buffer strips along their banks** people suggested the potential of looking at land alongside permanent infrastructure like **railways and power lines** and **small scattered bits of woodland** as connecting corridors.

People were keen to see a network that was **ecologically representative and well-connected**, recognising the added value this would bring.

"Bigger bang for the buck from the network. Not just about individual sites."

Another type of land that sparked conversation was **public land outside protected areas** – for example land owned by central government, local councils, the Forest Service and NI Water. People felt that there should be a land use plan for publicly owned land and that public bodies should be held to a biodiversity duty. This represents a large land holding which the government could commit to improving and managing for nature where possible.

"We could move towards native woodland rather than coniferous plantations. Forestry currently presides over a monoculture / ecological desert. Policy could change that. A significant change to forestry policies away from coniferous to native woodlands could, in time, mean we produce higher quality timber."

Also related to **refreshed forestry practice**, people suggested that opportunities for long term systemic change should be considered. For example, if broadleaf woodland was planted now, perhaps by 2100 NI could be ready to start a crop rotation system.

Participants raised the potential of **land owned by large eNGO's** like The Woodland Trust, National Trust and the RSPB, suggesting that 'not all eNGO sites are actually protected.

'eNGOs should be obliged to sign up.'

At the local level, the potential to **improve protection of Sites of Local Nature Conservation Importance (SLNCIs)** was identified as worth exploring. While they were not considered to currently meet the requirements to qualify for 30x30, there was a discussion about the potential to address that. SLNCIs are not widely known, but they have been mapped and can be viewed on an online map viewer. Some people felt that it may be easier to get local buy-in to sites at this scale. **Local Nature Reserves** were also raised as were **Fields in Trust**, which are protected from future development, but not currently necessarily managed for nature. People also suggested **sites of political / cultural significance** which could be rich in biodiversity like shipwrecks. There was also a suggestion that protection of **contested waters** (like Lough Foyle) could also promote peace and cooperation.

There was some discussion about the potential for **Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)** to contribute, but a shared view that they are not currently effectively managed for biodiversity in their entirety, which would perhaps disqualify them. While they may not qualify in their entirety they are likely to hold areas of interest within them.

Among the suggestions for **areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services** there were calls for widely recognised priority habitats like ancient and long-established woodlands and peatlands to be protected. There was a particularly strong feeling that peat extraction should be stopped immediately.

"170,000 cubic metres of peat (a lot) is still being extracted each year and yet the government is giving eNGO's money to restore it. It's a nonsense."

Uplands were seen to present the best opportunity for larger areas to be designated. **Inland waters** were seen as having huge potential to contribute to the network of high biodiversity value sites. By focussing on wetlands and water corridors whole catchments could benefit and riparian corridors could contribute to connectivity.

"49% of water in NI flows into Lough Neagh - could create buffers that would be a great asset for wildlife and have benefits for water quality at the same time."

Finally, participants suggested that the 30x30 network would be a **dynamic** one responding to change over time.

'What is in the 30% at the start doesn't need to be in forever - the area of land and sea protected could shift over time.'

Question 2: What knowledge and evidence should we be drawing on to inform decisions about nature recovery and 30x30? What is available? What are the gaps?

People raised several **existing data sources** that they felt could be very useful in identifying areas important for biodiversity. These included habitat network maps, which show the potential for bigger, better, more connected sites, the NI Countryside Survey, Natural Capital Map NI, NI Coastal Observatory, NI Greenspace maps, AFBI Soil Nutrient Health Scheme (SNHS), The Centre for Environmental Data and Recording (CEDaR) and Ordnance Survey data.

However, they felt there were **gaps when it came to private land**, once again underlining the need for landowners and managers to be closely involved and should be invited to share information about the habitats on their land. They recognised the importance of utilising local, generational

knowledge as evidence and felt this may not have been used to its full potential in the past.

They pointed out that **government and council land** had not yet been mapped and that there were large data gaps in the marine environment, considering that marine data is more difficult to capture compared to terrestrial.

People believe that **digital is the future** and mentioned an aspiration to have access to real time data. They appreciated tools like the Natural Environment Map Viewer and the much anticipated NIEA Living Map, which was seen as an extremely useful tool which should be built on and added to. There was support for investment in ensuring it is kept up to date.

Participants repeatedly stressed the **need for environmental data to be accessible** or open source and for it to be somehow coordinated and cohesive. This could also address issues of standardised data.

People felt that **existing data was too fragmented**. As is often the case, datasets have been gathered over time in different ways by different people with varying methods, resources and interests. Participants felt that there was merit in creating a **directory of existing data**, which some people suggested should be centrally held. They thought this would enable the whole community of stakeholders to identify data gaps and identify where they may be able to contribute to the evidence base. This could also lead to **harmonisation and more consistent and reliable data going forward**. Where different organisations hold data on the same or similar habitats and species, the potential for setting up data sharing agreements should be explored and, where possible, datasets should be brought together. Open-source data should also be explored. Establishing more of a shared understanding of data would require better channels of communication.

Recording schemes and citizen science projects were raised as a potential route to gathering more primary data and it was also suggested that volunteers may be one way of ensuring that databases are well maintained.

In terms of gathering **primary data from wider society**, the census was held up as an example of effective research communication, design and accessibility.

Implications for Action

1. Harness energy: There is currently energy to progress towards 30x30 in the wider stakeholder community, but there are key policy gaps that are hindering progress.

2. Learn from others: There is an immediate opportunity to share a deep dive into approaches to 30x30 in other parts of GB and beyond to learn from that to develop a 30x30 network that reflects the unique context in NI. Individuals and organisations with expertise and knowledge in this area should come together to pool learning and share insights with the wider stakeholder community.

3. Opportunity to innovate: While the idea of more formal designations may be contentious, people are ready to think creatively about the network and potential contributing sites – there is an opportunity for constructive co-working to increase the chances of buy-in and collaboration.

4. Making the most of existing data: There is a lot of relevant environmental data in existence, but some is not accessible and there is no central coordination and maintenance to make that data work as hard as it can to contribute to nature recovery.

5. Future data: Could the NIEA Natural Environment Map Viewer be the place to bring together even more data and make it visible to the stakeholder community?

6. Enable wider participation: Need to enable wider society to contribute to the evidence base. E.g. by establishing a mechanism for capturing local, generational knowledge & mobilising volunteers through recording schemes, citizen science

“There will therefore clearly need to be ecological drivers. What do we want to protect? What state is it in? What state do we want to restore it to? Restoration needs to be scientific and rigorous.”



“At the start of the journey we need a bit of visioning otherwise we fall into the trap of doing the same things and expecting a different outcome. What is the new vision for the NI economy which is not about destroying the environment. We need money to live, but this is not working. Maybe we need a new economic vision - move away from taking out a lot of resources”



Developing a Plan for 30x30

In the absence of all of the policy building blocks for establishing a protected area network that protects 30% of NI land, inland water and sea being in place right now, this plan leans into the tolerance for ambiguity and a bias to action that was evident in the workshop. It aims to map out what actions are immediately possible to begin to build momentum and draw in stakeholders that have not yet been willing and / able to engage.

This report maps in detail some immediate action that would facilitate establishment of a productive coworking structure to harness momentum and enable collective work towards 30x30. Following this there is a draft, unprioritized action plan which could form the basis for medium to long term action planning. This represents a suite of work around a few themes that emerged from the workshop held in February 2024.

Immediate Action

Establish an interim 'Engine Room'

The workshop demonstrated a shared appetite for action among the wider stakeholder community and the potential to make use of that momentum. **Stakeholders can begin to organise immediately.**

To develop the infrastructure to enable stakeholders to continue to work together over the coming five years, a **small, short-term task and finish group** should be established to mobilise the wider community, including government, to establish a multi-year, multi-stakeholder 30x30 Forum. They may only need to meet a few times to undertake this preparatory work.

This 'Engine Room' will be the 'energy' that keeps things moving in the first few months and convenes a wider group to work together in the longer term. A potential starting point for recruiting this group would be for NIEL and Ulster Wildlife to approach the group of volunteer facilitators who supported delivery of the workshop. There were a few members of staff from UW in that group, so it may be useful to reach out to a handful of other motivated stakeholders. **The Engine Room should include representatives of government, civil society and community organisations.**

It would be helpful for them to draft a plan for the governance and resourcing of the longer-term forum. Developing a draft plan will be critical to getting to the point of being able to engage a wider group in ongoing dialogue about 30x30. **The Engine Room should work to develop a draft expression of the scope and purpose of the Forum so that people know what they are being invited to engage with.** This should be a living expression that will evolve with the work of the group.

At the point where the 30x30 Forum is first convened a decision can be made about whether the Engine Room has a role within the Forum governance structure or whether it is dissolved and replaced with something new.

Questions that the Engine Room may begin to address could include:

- Who will take the lead in convening the 30x30 forum (initially & in the longer term)? NIEL? DAERA?
- Does it need independent facilitation?
- What governance model could be adopted for the 30x30 forum? Will it have a chair? Collaborative Engine Room? Working groups?
- Will there be an underpinning 'layer' of sectoral working groups / convening points that feed into this national group?
- How will decision-making happen?
- How big is it? Who participates?
- How often will the forum meet, communicate?
- Is it one group or a collective with the group as its centre where progress is shared and solutions found?
- Could the Engine Room build on the stakeholder mapping and analysis carried out in preparation for the first workshop to build a comprehensive 30x30 stakeholder map and contact database.
- Who's missing? How can any missing voices be drawn in?
- Are there other views and voices that need to contribute to the vision? Who hasn't engaged in this process so far? How can they be engaged?
- Are there key audiences that need to be engaged and included? Is there a need to capture more nuance from key audiences and deepen engagement with key groups (farming, forestry, fishing, rural businesses, government departments) than was possible through the workshop.
- Will the Forum need buy-in / engagement from government across depts – who can facilitate that? Are government departments beyond DAERA represented on the 30x30 Forum or is the forum the governance structure that bridges between wider government and delivery?
- Who decides on the programme of work?
- Does it need funding? How much? Where could the money come from? – What can happen without direct funding? What needs to be financed? What other resource needs are there (skills, capabilities, time) Who can help and where will the resource come from?
- Could possible funders (public & private) be approached immediately?
- Monitoring and Evaluation – what needs to be measured to track whether the 30x30 Forum is effective? What does success look like? How can the whole stakeholder community keep an eye on progress?
- What happens in 2030? Could the 30x30 Forum continue to function as a multi-stakeholder Protected Area Forum?

Convene the 30 x 30 Forum

A good starting point for convening would be to invite the group who registered their interest in the 30x30 Workshop to consider participating in the 30x30 Forum and adding anyone identified through additional stakeholder analysis work by the Engine Room. The core contact list is currently held by Ulster Wildlife suggesting they may be well positioned to convene at least the first 30x30 Forum meeting.

The Forum could initially respond to overcoming some of the challenges and barriers to progress that were identified during the interviews and workshop. Perhaps framed a series of 'readiness to act dialogues' addressing challenges / needs and harnessing opportunities. Once this initial work is done – the Forum can design a workplan that responds to the changing needs of the process as it develops.

Tasks that the emergent 30x30 Forum may decide to focus on in the first 6 months to a year could include:

Relationship building: Key learning from the workshop was the need to establish and maintain strong and trusting relationships across the stakeholder community – between government, civil society organisations and communities. Time should be invested in designing Forum activities to support the development of positive, productive co-working relationships.

Higher level visioning: While the workshop developed a vision for 30x30 there was a need identified for more broader, systemic visioning. The recently published Environmental Improvement Plan perhaps provides the bones of this for the wider stakeholder community to consider.

Collectively refining the situation analysis: Refining and communicating a 'baseline' allowing a shared understanding of where we are now, what is already happening and what still needs to be initiated to achieve 30x30. This should include DAERA sharing progress on the policy gaps identified (p.30).

Prioritisation and responsibility: Participants at the February 2025 workshop surfaced a wide range of actions that could support progress to 30x30. This list of actions is expansive, but unlikely to be comprehensive and participants did not get to the point of prioritising actions or assigning responsibility for delivery. This work of owning,

“In the end, multiple stakeholders will need to be involved – While DAERA and NIEA need to drive this thing they will also need the eNGOs, Farming communities and others.”

developing and prioritising the Action Plan is work that needs to be done collectively, building on the progress made at the first workshop.

Co-design an ongoing co-development process:

Agree on the governance structure of the Forum and how that relates to the wider stakeholder community building on the draft developed by the Engine Room. While there is a precedent for DAERA to lead on co-design processes, it may be valuable to consider the suitability of other models as well.

Fleshing out a participatory process: If the workshop in February 2025 is seen as the first step in a participatory process to support delivery of 30x30 in NI, what do the next convening points need to be? The Forum needs to plot a course, made up of a framework of regular conversations, activities and meetings spanning the period from 2025 to 2030, which will be facilitated through the Forum and keep government & stakeholders engaged in dialogue about the design and delivery of 30x30.

Design mechanisms to keep track of collective action from the outset: Having agreed that the delivery of 30x30 in Northern Ireland will be a collective effort, the 30x30 Forum will need to develop an accessible system for keeping track of action and keeping an eye on interdependencies.


It could be useful to develop and maintain a collective Action Plan and Action Library. The workshop generated a number of priority actions needed (detailed in the unprioritised action plan below). There is also likely to be a range of relevant activity already underway that needs to be captured. This could form the starting point for a co-created, detailed and prioritised 30x30 Action Plan – to be constantly reviewed and refined by the Forum as progress is made.

The Action Library would be a way for the wider stakeholder community to access information about progress against the plan. Both the Plan and the Library would be dynamic and accessible. Having this collective account of need and action would allow the Forum to identify tasks or 'work packages' and identify which member/s of the stakeholder community might be best placed to progress tasks or work packages. Where a coalition or group of stakeholders will be working together on a task or work package there should be a clear lead who will

take responsibility for coordination and reporting.

The concept of a shared Action Library suggests that participants can 'withdraw' or take ownership of a task, make progress and report back – returning that task, fully or partially completed, cataloguing activity to date and providing an overview of what needs to happen next. This would allow any newcomers to quickly be brought up to speed and explore their potential role. It could also address the need for reporting from the Forum to the wider stakeholder community and build a collection of catalogued actions and resources that could be of use to others on the 30x30 journey.

The Action Plan and Library, or progress tracker, could be centrally held and collectively maintained by the Forum. They could take the form of simple Excel spreadsheets or something more accessible and collaborative depending on the needs and abilities of the group (e.g. Padlet, Slack)



“There would be a sense of national pride if NI was seen to be leading the way in nature protection and restoration.”

A Draft Action Plan for 30x30

NOTES:

- This is an unprioritised list because prioritisation would be best done collectively.
- The intention is for this draft Action Plan to be a foundation for a more detailed and comprehensive plan to be developed, refined and maintained by the 30x30 Forum.
- The 'Wider Stakeholder Community' includes government stakeholders, but this plan recognises that some actions must be delivered by government.
- Where participants at the workshop suggested a specific action, it is included. Where the challenges and opportunities raised by participants needed to be reframed as actions, that has been done by the contractor.

Organising within the Stakeholder Community

The proposed actions in this section address the identified need for work to prepare the ground and enable productive communication and co-working across responsible, affected, interested and motivated stakeholders in government, civil society and across communities to begin.

Wider Stakeholder Community

Convene the Engine Room: Develop a shared position on a governance structure for the 30x30 Forum which will best support delivery of this policy and collectively work to make it inclusive and effective.

Establish the 30x30 Forum and refine and agree the governance structure

Design an engagement process (series of regular meetings, workshops, events) that spans the relevant timeframe (2025-2030).

Build on stakeholder mapping, analysis and engagement to make the group as diverse and inclusive as possible – avoiding 'silos' and convening just 'the usual suspects.'

Invest time in building positive, trusting working relationships across the stakeholder community.

Enable knowledge exchange and hands-on learning to break down barriers within the stakeholder community – e.g. creating a programme of field visits, like farm walks, to allow members of the stakeholder community to develop their understanding and build confidence and relationships with people they may not otherwise have met.

Establish and resource a strong core to build and maintain strong cross sectoral relationships and a positive operating environment.

Establish and communicate a constructive and enabling culture around 30x30 work which invites diverse participation from government, civil society and communities

Establish how collective effort by the wider stakeholder community can help to accelerate progress towards having clear policies and targets in place. What support is possible? What pressure is needed?

Leadership and Cross-departmental Working

The proposed actions in this section address the identified need for leadership that is inclusive and holistic and which empowers and enables the wider stakeholder community.

Government

Actively engage with the 30x30 Forum, demonstrating leadership and providing a framework for effective collaborative support from the wider stakeholder community.

Provide information to fill identified policy gaps to lead and enable action.

- Clear guidance on how 30x30 is being interpreted by the Northern Ireland Government.
- Up to date information about the existing extent and condition of protected areas.
- Clear expression of the ecological drivers. What else do we want to protect and why? What state is it in? What state do we want to restore it to?
- Clear guidance on the criteria for inclusion in 30X30 – what sort of places will qualify? Will a pipeline approach be adopted for sites that are not yet in favourable condition?
- Clear guidance on the criteria for different designation types – particularly around any new designation types (OECMs)
- Clear guidance on the evidence likely to be needed to underpin establishment of the 30x30 network
- An overview of what relevant data exists and where it can be accessed.
- Guidance of the process and requirements for data collection and submission to ensure consistency.
- Provide clarity at the interface of planning, Agri-environment schemes and protected area policy.
- Guidance on protected area governance – What sort of governance structures are anticipated for different designations?
- Criteria for monitoring and processes for data management and sharing.
- Clear communication and agreement on appropriate enforcement measures.
- Guidance on how the effects of climate change would be considered in network management / development.

A Draft Action Plan for 30x30

Leadership and Cross-departmental Working (contd.)

Government (contd.)

Identify routes to new enabling approaches to interdepartmental working around 30x30 which allow the environment to be centred in broader policy decisions. This could, for example, require sustained cross departmental dialogues.

Establish an All-Party Group for Biodiversity to promote and enable cross party engagement and buy-in.

Assess linkages to the potential introduction of an iEPA (independent Environmental Protection Agency)

Support alignment of the work of the 30x30 Forum with the Environmental Improvement Plan and other existing or emergent strategies (e.g. Peatland Strategy, Nature Recovery Strategy, Freshwater Restoration Strategy, Agriculture Act, Land use Strategy)

Explore opportunities for government to resource and 'devolve' responsibility to civil society organisations already working on landscape and nature restoration for delivery of 30x30.

De-silo local government staff – enable more cross and inter council working on nature restoration

Develop an instrument to give greater protection to Sites of Local Conservation Importance (SLNCIs).

Designate areas that are already recognised as high value for nature

Designate more Local Nature Reserves

Develop a vehicle to designate public land for OECM

Develop a vehicle to designate private land for OECM

Framing & Communication

The proposed actions in this section address the identified need to reframe communication about environmental issues to make it relatable and the need to mainstream alternative economic narratives.

Wider Stakeholder Community

Convene communications professionals across the stakeholder community to share knowledge and learning and explore framing research to enable best practice in using messaging most likely to make environment / nature restoration communications more relevant to more diverse audiences.

Invest in social research to better understand audiences and devise effective framing for 30x30. Go to people – invest time in building relationships, listen and share what you learn about messages that resonate.

Leverage existing strong connections among some people to inform communications which will resonate with local views and values. This can be done through existing and primary social research into nature connection in NI. It could be particularly useful to explore connection in underexplored communities – e.g. fishers and farmers.

Develop and agree a framing which communicates the potential for 'green growth' and plural benefits to society from a healthy environment.

Tailor communications to individuals' real-world experiences. Making protected sites relatable is crucial.

Agree and consistently use shared and inclusive language – e.g. 'nature' instead of 'biodiversity', 'nature friendly' instead of 'sustainable'.

Consistently avoid fear-based communications.

Co-develop a comms plan for nature restoration aligning voices across the wider stakeholder community so that messages are shared and coherent.

Develop a comms pack for 30x30 which will enable more harmonious communication about the need for and benefit of nature restoration.

Share the outputs of this work widely – equipping less well-resourced organisations and community groups to engage and benefit.

A Draft Action Plan for 30x30

Bringing the Protected Area Network to Life

The proposed actions in this section address the identified need to begin talking about the emergent network and generating widespread interest around the policy that is grounded in real world examples.

Government

Provide clear guidance on which existing designations will be included in 30x30 to provide the wider community with clarity on which existing places they can talk about within the context of 30x30.

Wider Stakeholder Community

Begin using real world examples in communication about 30x30 to support public understanding of how protected areas will exist in the landscape and seascape

Finance

The proposed actions in this section address the identified need to diversify the funding model and prioritise longer term funding streams

Wider Stakeholder Community

Alternative narratives should be designed to cultivate an appetite for investment in nature among a broader range of investors (private and public) who may not be motivated by traditional conservation/ restoration framing.

Develop a diverse funding mosaic building on the ideas generated in the workshop. Prioritise funding streams most likely to be longer term.

Prioritise and approach potential new funders – potential for engaging with fundraising and development staff across the stakeholder network to enable ambitious, holistic collaborative applications.

By working together and avoiding competition and replication civil society organisations could leverage more, longer term funding. Establish a cross organisational 'Environmental Funding Task Force' to coordinate a more collaborative and strategic approach and support development of funding bids.

Invest in an assessment of the potential of the nature-based economy linked to 30x30 to support wider engagement from business owners and investors.

Invest in targeted environmental education – specifically around the role of nature in prosperity.

Engage funders with the 30x30 Forum.

Finance (contd.)

Government

Explore routes to de-siloing biodiversity funding and pooling resources across government departments to allow for more holistic interventions to support nature restoration – recognising links between the environment, human well-being and economic thriving. (Green Fund)

Work cross-departmentally to develop long-term Agri-environment schemes that ensure that farmers are properly resourced, and that nature restoration and conservation interventions are effective and sustainable.

Explore the potential of the Social Value Act as a route to creating apprenticeships and other opportunities to grow these green/blue jobs.

Develop a new funding model for land owning public bodies like NI Water and the Forest Service which required investment in managing some of their land holding for biodiversity.

Data and Evidence

The proposed actions in this section address the identified need for data coordination and management.

Government

Conduct a rapid audit of existing data and potential data sources could add depth to the evidence base underpinning 30x30 and highlight data gaps.

Address barriers to the accessibility of key data.

Explore the potential for the Natural Environment Map Viewer to accommodate a wider range of data

Develop a plan for central coordination and maintenance of government databases to ensure that available data can be used to support nature recovery.

A Draft Action Plan for 30x30

Data and Evidence (contd.)

The proposed actions in this section address the identified need to enable wider society to contribute to the evidence base.

Wider Stakeholder Community

Develop mechanisms for capturing local, generational knowledge in a way that would make it useful in supporting the identification, management and monitoring of the 30x30 network.

Mobilise volunteers through recording schemes and citizen science schemes focussed on relevant habitats and species.

Share existing data.

Environmental Education & Training

The proposed actions in this section address the identified need to improve environmental literacy specifically with regard to protected areas and nature restoration and the need to develop green skills to support transition.

Wider Stakeholder Community

Consider the need for targeted and strategic learning at all levels of the formal education system and in wider society. Shift the idea of learning only being for the young and that some sectors of society – like policy and decision makers – are exempt.

Tailor education programmes to enhance understanding where it can be most impactful within the timeframe of this policy

Design skills development and training programmes to ensure that landowners and managers, sea users and other stakeholders with an interest in looking after protected sites are properly equipped to support delivery of 30x30.

Access

The proposed actions in this section address the identified need for people to have improved access to quality natural spaces in order to promote nature connectedness.

Wider Stakeholder Community

Advocate for and enable public access for public good - Working with private landowners and government to provide nature access where possible.

Government

Consider access to land in the designation & management of protected areas - particularly public land e.g. land belonging to Local Councils Health Trusts, Educational Institutions etc.

Public access for public good - incentivise and enable private landowners to provide nature access where appropriate and possible.

Effective management of the MPA Network

The proposed actions in this section address the identified need to recognise that the process is at a different stage in the marine environment where the focus is not on designation, but effective management.

Government

Complete designation process - eventually to include Highly Protected Marine Areas

Complete management plans for designated sites within the MPA network

Resource and implement management plans for inshore and offshore sites

Establish and maintain effective monitoring and enforcement

Develop a robust review system that captures any benefits of the MPA network - feeding into the appropriateness review of the network

Review NI priority species

Fill any remaining species and habitat data gaps

Address the need to understand cumulative impact on species

Establish a Marine Recovery Fund - if features are damaged there is a mechanism in place to support

Identify sites of opportunity in terms of the Marine Recovery Fund so that it can be effective

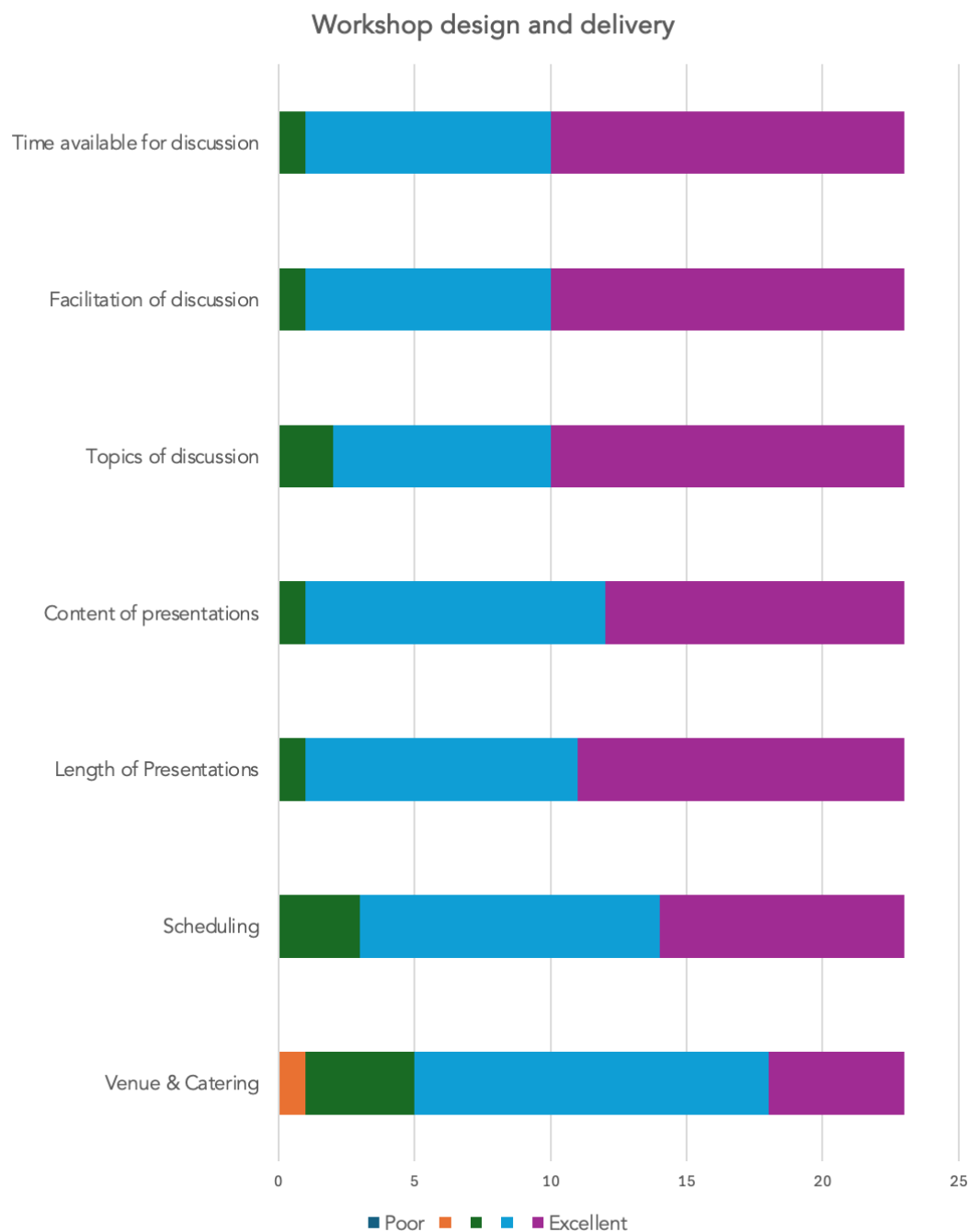
Complete relevant plan and strategies - Fisheries Management Plans, Mammal Conservation Strategy

Explore the potential for longer term 'big picture' thinking and management – e.g. Integrated freshwater to marine - source to sea management, transboundary migratory links, global migration links

Assess the relevance of global migration links to marine species and habitat protection in NI.

Workshop Feedback

Following the workshop, participants were invited to complete a feedback form which invited them to share their views on the workshop and their experience on the day. **Twenty-three participants completed the form.** Responses from those people suggested that they had a broadly positive and constructive experience.



Participants were also asked whether they felt that everyone who needed to be in the room was there. The most common response (18 of the 23 responses) to this question was that people would have liked to see **more government representation** (central government, DAERA, wider government departments).



Participants who did not complete a feedback form on the day were invited to provide feedback via e-mail, but no further feedback forms were received.

Further Reading & Resources

Great Britain

Nature Positive 2030 (2022)

<https://data.jncc.gov.uk/data/6de7bf27-055e-4407-ad29-4814e1613d90/nature-positive-2030-evidence-report.pdf>

UK National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (2025)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-national-biodiversity-strategy-and-action-plan>

UK Green Investment Strategy 2023

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/643583fb877741001368d815/mobilising-green-investment-2023-green-finance-strategy.pdf>

Report prepared for Defra: Best Practice in Delivering the 30x30 Target Protected Areas and Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures

https://www.30x30.solutions/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/TNC_UKDEFRA_30x30_BestPractices_Report.pdf

Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland Environment LINK paper on 30x30 (2021)

<https://www.nienvironmentlink.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/30-x-30-Land-for-Natures-Recovery-NI2.pdf>

Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland (2024)

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/environmental-improvement-plan-northern-ireland>

OEP report on the drivers and pressures affecting nature in Northern Ireland

<https://www.theoep.org.uk/report/drivers-and-pressures-northern-ireland#:~:text=The%20report%20finds%20that%20the,of%20pollution%20having%20an%20impact>

Ulster Wildlife - Downloadable Nature Networks Resources

<https://www.ulsterwildlife.org/nature-recovery-networks>

Just Transition in Northern Ireland

<https://www.qub.ac.uk/News/Allnews/featured-research/researchjusttransitionnorthernireland.html>

England

Gov.uk - 30x30 on Land in England - Confirmed Criteria and Next Steps

[https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/criteria-for-30by30-on-land-in-england/30by30-on-land-in-england-confirmed-criteria-and-next-steps#:~:text=and%2Dnext%2Dsteps,Introduction,Summit%20\(%20COP15%20\)%20in%202022.](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/criteria-for-30by30-on-land-in-england/30by30-on-land-in-england-confirmed-criteria-and-next-steps#:~:text=and%2Dnext%2Dsteps,Introduction,Summit%20(%20COP15%20)%20in%202022.)

Wildlife & Countryside LINK 30x30 Progress report

<https://wcl.org.uk/30-by-30-progress-report.asp>

Natural England Blog

<https://naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/2023/12/11/30-by-30-a-boost-for-nature-recovery/>

Scotland

NatureScot - 30x30 Explained

<https://www.nature.scot/professional-advice/protected-areas-and-species/30-30-and-nature-networks/30-30-explained>

NatureScot - Framework for 30x30 in Scotland

<https://www.nature.scot/doc/framework-30-30-scotland>

Framework for Nature Networks in Scotland

<https://www.nature.scot/doc/nature-networks-framework>

NatureScot - 30x30 and nature networks in Scotland

<https://www.nature.scot/professional-advice/protected-areas-and-species/30-30-and-nature-networks>

Scottish Environment LINK - Protecting 30% of Scotland's Land for Nature

<https://www.scotlink.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/30-by-30-March-Digital.pdf>

Wales

Wales Environment LINK

[30x30: Land and Sea for Nature's Recovery in Wales](#)

Biodiversity deep dive: recommendations (2022)

<https://www.gov.wales/biodiversity-deep-dive-recommendations-html>

Wales Biodiversity Partnership - Protecting 30% of Wales' Land, Freshwater and Seas by 2030
<https://biodiversitywales.org.uk/30-by-30-in-Wales#:~:text=The%20Welsh%20Government%20has%20committed,biodiversity%20loss%20and%20climate%20change>

Welsh Government Progress Statement
[Welsh Government: Written Statement on Progress \(2024\)](#)

Republic of Ireland

EU Nature Restoration Regulation
https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/nature-restoration-regulation_en

EU Biodiversity Strategy
https://environment.ec.europa.eu/strategy/biodiversity-strategy-2030_en

RoI Commitment to 30x30
<https://www.npws.ie/news/minister-o'brien-announces-ireland's-formal-pledge-protect-30-marine-areas-2030>

Gov.ie - Investment in Marine Protected Areas
<https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-housing-local-government-and-heritage/press-releases/minister-noonan-announces-25-million-investment-for-the-development-of-protected-areas-for-marine-biodiversity/>

FairSeas - Sustainably Financing Ireland's Marine Protected Area Network (2023)
https://fairseas.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/FS_finance_summary_v2.4.pdf

Irish Environmental network - High-Level Recommendations for Funding Nature Restoration in Ireland
<https://ien.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Funding-Nature-Restoration-in-Ireland-FINAL-REPORT.pdf>

Advisory Committee for Ireland's Nature Restoration Plan
<https://www.npws.ie/news/ministers-announce-membership-advisory-committee-ireland's-nature-restoration-plan>
Leaders Forum on Nature Restoration (2025)
<https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-housing-local-government-and-heritage/press-releases/minister-osullivan-opens-the-first-leaders-forum-on-nature-restoration/>

Global

Convention on Biological Diversity
<https://www.cbd.int>

The Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF)
<https://www.cbd.int/gbf>

GBF Target 3 - 30x30 Explained
<https://www.cbd.int/gbf/targets/3>

The 30x30 Solutions Toolkit
<https://www.30x30.solutions>

High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People
<https://hacfornatureandpeople.org>



“People experience nature differently and we need to normalise different ways of using and enjoying nature and guiding responsible behaviour whilst encouraging access and engagement. No pressure, just a gentle chat. Challenging people’s thinking rather than reinforcing our existing ideas.”



Mike Snelle

Facilitated and reported by Dr Sue Ranger, an independent social researcher, facilitator and creative sustainability practitioner.

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Why Freestater? The Free State in South Africa is where I grew up and I believe in the power of enabling people to speak freely about the things that really matter to them when considering how we collectively address social and environmental challenges.