Landscape Institute
People, place and nature

Consultation on Northern Ireland's Draft Nature Recovery Strategy

Landscape Institute Response

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Questions & Responses

Introduction

The Landscape Institute welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the Draft Nature Recovery Strategy for Northern Ireland to 2032.

The Institute supports the overall direction of the draft strategy and the intention to provide a strategic framework for halting and reversing biodiversity loss. The proposed objectives cover the right broad areas and provide a useful basis for more coordinated action across policy and delivery.

What matters most, however, is whether the strategy can translate that ambition into practical and sustained change on the ground. In the Landscape Institute's view, this will require a stronger emphasis on landscape-led delivery[1], with nature recovery more clearly linked to land management, spatial planning, water, climate resilience and the long-term condition of the wider landscape.

This response places particular emphasis on the need to support action beyond designated sites, strengthen the practical framework for delivery, and recognise the contribution that well-managed landscapes can make to biodiversity recovery, environmental resilience and wider public benefit.

The Nature Recovery Strategy is a central to achieving a multi-functional outcome from the management of land and natural resources benefiting all local communities in Northern Ireland. Supporting the delivery of food security, sustainably produced, the restoration of nature and building resilience to the future extremes of climate change. The Landscape Profession is equipped to help deliver the Strategy.

The comments below respond to the consultation questions in turn and reflect the views of Landscape Institute members working in Northern Ireland.

Question 6 (Please note Questions 1-5 are on organisation details etc...)

Do you agree with the five strategic objectives in the draft Nature Recovery Strategy?

Response: Yes
The Landscape Institute supports the five strategic objectives set out in the draft Nature Recovery Strategy. Together, they provide a sensible and broadly comprehensive basis for nature recovery in Northern Ireland, covering protection and restoration, reduction of pressures, nature-friendly management, mainstreaming across government and society, and the evidence needed to guide action.

That structure is welcome and reflects the reality that biodiversity recovery will not be secured through site protection alone, nor through a series of disconnected policy measures. Delivery will depend on sustained coordination across land use, planning, agriculture, water, climate and public policy, supported by mechanisms capable of operating at the scale of whole landscapes rather than individual sites.

Given the extent of agricultural land use in Northern Ireland, the success of the strategy will depend heavily on the condition and management of the farmed landscape. The objectives would therefore be stronger if they more clearly acknowledged the relationship between nature recovery, sustainable land management and climate resilience. An effective strategy will need to support land managers to improve biodiversity outcomes while maintaining productive and economically viable systems.

[1] A landscape-led approach to development – The Landscape Institute

The objectives would also benefit from a clearer commitment to landscape-led delivery[2]. In practice, this means shaping action around the characteristics and capacity of particular places, and integrating decisions on land use, water, habitat restoration and long-term management. This would give stronger expression to the role of spatial planning and help translate the strategic objectives into more practical and coherent action on the ground.

Overall, the five strategic objectives provide a sound framework. Their value would be increased by a stronger focus on implementation across the whole landscape and by clearer recognition of the links between nature recovery, land management and long-term resilience

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Question 7

Do you believe that the proposed new actions for Strategic Objective 1, when considered with existing targets, will deliver Well Protected Nature and Accelerated Restoration?

Response: No.

The proposed actions are a useful step, but they are unlikely, in their current form, to deliver the scale of change required for well protected nature and accelerated restoration.

A central weakness is that the emphasis remains too closely tied to protected sites, when the condition of the wider landscape will be just as important in determining whether nature recovery is achieved. Protected areas are essential, but they cannot function in isolation. Their long-term resilience will depend on the ecological condition of surrounding farmland, river catchments, urban green infrastructure and other connected landscapes.

The strategy would be stronger if it set out more clearly how restoration will be delivered at a landscape scale. What is needed is a more landscape-led approach[3] to restoration, supported by spatially targeted action, better integration with land use planning, and a clearer framework for linking habitat restoration, species recovery, water management and climate resilience. The proposed Land Use Framework and Living Map could play an important role here, but at present the strategy does not yet show clearly enough how these tools will guide decisions on the ground.

There is also a delivery gap in relation to those managing the majority of the land. Progress will depend heavily on the extent to which farmers and other land managers are supported to take part in restoration. That means more than setting broad policy direction. It requires practical, accessible and locally relevant guidance, informed by the character of place, land capability, soils, hydrology and existing habitat patterns.

Restoration will only proceed at pace if land managers can see how it connects with viable land use, resilient farming systems, and long-term environmental conditions. Without that, Strategic Objective 1 is unlikely to deliver the scale of restoration the strategy is seeking.

Question 8

Are there any additional actions that you would like to be included with Strategic Objective 1?

Response:
Yes.

Strategic Objective 1 would be strengthened by additional actions that address some of the underlying conditions affecting nature recovery across Northern Ireland, particularly soil health, grassland management and the practical application of landscape-scale planning.

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[2] A landscape-led approach to development – The Landscape Institute
[3] A landscape-led approach to development – The Landscape Institute

One important addition would be the development of a Soil Health Action Plan. Soil condition has a direct bearing on biodiversity, water regulation, nutrient cycling and climate resilience, yet it is not given sufficient prominence in the draft actions. A clearer focus on soil health would help support restoration outcomes across both protected sites and the wider countryside.

There is also a strong case for more explicit action on grassland management. Given the extent of improved grassland in Northern Ireland, the strategy should do more to encourage the transition towards more diverse and ecologically resilient systems. This would help support biodiversity recovery while also contributing to better soil structure, water retention and longer-term resilience in the farmed landscape.

A further area for development is the use of spatial tools to guide delivery. The proposed Living Map and Land Use Framework have the potential to be valuable, but their purpose should be more clearly defined in relation to implementation. Used well, they could support a more landscape-led approach by bringing together information on soils, habitats, geology, hydrology and local environmental conditions, and by helping land managers and decision-makers identify where restoration effort is likely to have the greatest benefit.

These additions would make Strategic Objective 1 more practical and better suited to the conditions that will shape delivery across Northern Ireland.

Question 9

Do you have any other comments about Strategic Objective 1?

Response:
The LI welcomes the proposal to explore options for supporting the establishment of a conservation traineeship scheme but would wish to see this principle both strengthened and widened in scope. Examples would include promoting relevant education and training initiatives and qualifications and ensuring that decision-making and regulating bodies retain appropriate skills and expertise, such as landscape professionals, to advise on and support delivery of the strategic objectives.

Strategic Objective 1 will only succeed if it is understood as applying to the whole landscape, not solely to designated sites. Protected areas remain essential, but their condition and long-term resilience are closely tied to what happens beyond their boundaries.

Where the surrounding landscape is under ecological pressure, protected sites can become fragmented and increasingly difficult to restore or maintain in favourable condition. That underlines the need for a broader approach which improves ecological function across farmland, river catchments, settlements and coastal areas, rather than concentrating effort too narrowly on those places already recognised for their importance.

A stronger emphasis on whole-landscape recovery, supported by nature-friendly land management and better coordination across sectors, would provide a firmer basis for improving ecological connectivity, strengthening resilience and delivering the stated aim of bigger, better managed and more connected nature across Northern Ireland.

Question 10

Do you believe that the proposed new actions for Strategic Objective 2, when considered with existing targets, will deliver Reduction of the Pressures on Biodiversity?

Response: Yes.

The proposed actions under Strategic Objective 2 address a number of the main pressures contributing to biodiversity loss and are an important part of the overall framework for nature

recovery. Action on pollution, invasive species, air quality and climate impacts will all be necessary if habitats and species are to recover in a meaningful and sustained way.

It is particularly important that the strategy identifies nutrient pollution, air pollution and wider land use pressures as significant factors in biodiversity decline. Reducing these pressures will be essential not only for the condition of protected sites, but for the wider ecological health of Northern Ireland's landscapes, rivers, wetlands and coastal environments.

The effectiveness of this objective will depend, however, on how well it is carried through into related areas of policy and delivery. Pressures on biodiversity do not sit neatly within one strategy. They are closely bound up with agricultural practice, catchment management, spatial planning and climate policy. Progress will therefore rely on coordinated implementation across departments and agencies, alongside practical measures that can be taken forward by those managing land and water.

There is also a strong case for ensuring that action to reduce pressures is framed in a way that supports long-term resilience. Measures to improve water quality, reduce emissions and manage land more sustainably should contribute not only to the reduction of harm, but to the restoration of healthier ecological systems over time. This would make Strategic Objective 2 more effective as a foundation for recovery, rather than simply a set of measures to limit further decline.

Question 11

Are there any additional actions that you would like to be included with Strategic Objective 2?

No additional actions are proposed at this stage.

At this stage, the main need is effective implementation, backed by adequate resourcing and clear monitoring. This is particularly important in relation to nutrient management, ammonia emissions, water quality, and climate adaptation, where the challenge is less one of policy intent than of consistent delivery and follow-through.

The effectiveness of Strategic Objective 2 will depend on whether these existing commitments are translated into measurable improvement on the ground. Clear responsibility, coordination across policy areas and ongoing monitoring will therefore be essential.

Question 12

Do you have any other comments about Strategic Objective 2?

Response: Yes
A further point is that Strategic Objective 2 should be read not simply as a set of measures to reduce harm, but as a necessary foundation for recovery. Unless the main pressures on biodiversity are tackled in a sustained and coordinated way, the ambition set out elsewhere in the strategy will be difficult to realise.

Particular attention will need to be given to nutrient pollution, ammonia, land management pressures and climate-related impacts, all of which continue to affect ecological condition across Northern Ireland. These are not separate issues. They interact across catchments, landscapes and habitats, and they need to be addressed in a way that reflects those connections.

Delivery will also depend on whether the measures proposed are practical, clearly communicated and capable of being implemented by those managing land and water. A strategy of this kind will only be effective if policy requirements are supported by clear guidance, appropriate incentives and a consistent approach across departments. That will be important not only for biodiversity outcomes, but for maintaining confidence and securing long-term engagement in rural areas.

Question 13

Do you believe that the proposed new actions for Strategic Objective 3, when considered with existing targets, will deliver Sustainable Use of Biodiversity through Nature-friendly Policies and Practice?

Response: Yes.

The proposed actions under Strategic Objective 3 are broadly in the right place and recognise the need to embed biodiversity considerations within the use and management of land and natural resources, rather than treating nature recovery as a separate exercise. That is an important principle, particularly in a context where the condition of the wider working landscape will be central to long-term success.

The proposed expansion of the Farming with Nature package is especially significant. Given the extent of agricultural land use in Northern Ireland, agri-environment schemes and related support mechanisms will play a major role in determining whether biodiversity can recover beyond designated sites. Their effectiveness will depend on whether they are practical, accessible and capable of supporting action at a meaningful scale, including across whole farms, catchments and landscapes.

This objective would also be strengthened by a clearer sense of how nature-friendly practice will be carried through into day-to-day decision-making. Sustainable use depends not only on policy direction, but on the design of schemes, the quality of guidance provided and the extent to which environmental aims are aligned with viable land use. That applies across farming, forestry, fisheries and the planning and stewardship of green and blue infrastructure.

Green and blue infrastructure should be seen as part of the same delivery framework. In both urban and rural settings, these networks can support biodiversity, improve ecological connectivity and provide wider benefits for climate adaptation, water management and public health. Recognising that more clearly would strengthen the objective and help embed nature recovery more consistently in the management of places and landscapes.

Question 14

Are there any additional actions that you would like to be included with Strategic Objective 3?

Response: No additional actions are proposed at this stage.

The main issue now is whether the measures already identified can support delivery on a meaningful scale. In practice, this will require approaches that encourage collaboration between land managers and enable biodiversity recovery to be achieved across larger areas, rather than through isolated interventions. This will be particularly important if Strategic Objective 3 is to deliver lasting change across the wider working landscape.

Question 15

Do you have any other comments about Strategic Objective 3?

The success of Strategic Objective 3 will depend on how far environmental objectives are built into agricultural and wider land management policy, rather than being considered separately from them. If biodiversity is to be integrated into routine land management, it needs to be reflected in scheme design, practical guidance and the way outcomes are rewarded.

The proposal to explore a requirement to introduce biodiversity net gain within the planning system is welcomed in principle, but the lessons from the English experience of BNG should be learnt and

an improved tool delivered in NI. Delivery of Strategic Objective 3 would also be promoted further by extending this to cover a broader definition of Environmental Net Gain and delivering blue green infrastructure assets.

For those managing land, the practical framework matters as much as the policy intention. Clear signals, workable requirements and appropriate financial support will all be needed if this objective is to be taken up at the scale required. This is particularly important in Northern Ireland, where the wider farmed landscape will have a decisive influence on biodiversity outcomes.

Well-designed schemes can do more than support isolated improvements. They can encourage decisions that strengthen habitat condition, improve ecological connections and support more resilient land use over time.

Question 16

Do you believe that the proposed new actions for Strategic Objective 4, when considered with existing targets, will deliver Nature Valued and Mainstreamed Across All of Government and Society?

Response: Yes.

The proposed actions under Strategic Objective 4 are an important part of creating the wider policy conditions needed for nature recovery. If biodiversity is to be addressed seriously, it has to be reflected more consistently in the way policy is developed, funding is directed and decisions are made across government.

The inclusion of actions on biodiversity duty reporting, nature restoration targets, finance and natural capital is therefore welcome. Together, these measures could help move biodiversity from the margins of policymaking into a more central position, where environmental implications are considered earlier and more systematically.

This matters because the drivers of biodiversity loss are not confined to one sector. Decisions on land use, infrastructure, agriculture, water, development and public spending all have a bearing on ecological outcomes. A more consistent and transparent approach across government would help ensure that action in one area does not undermine progress in another.

Better recognition of the public value of healthy, well-managed landscapes would also help support this shift, by making it easier to account for the benefits nature provides and the costs of allowing environmental decline to continue. This would usefully include a public information campaign to inform and promote the potential social and economic benefits of biodiversity and nature-based solutions at all scales from domestic to corporate.

Question 17

Are there any additional actions that you would like to be included with Strategic Objective 4?

Response: No additional actions are proposed.

The main priority should be to ensure that the actions already identified are implemented in a way that genuinely embeds biodiversity considerations across government decision-making, funding, and policy delivery.

Question 18

Do you have any other comments about Strategic Objective 4?

Strategic Objective 4 will only make a difference if biodiversity is treated as a shared responsibility across government, rather than remaining concentrated within environmental policy. This will require clear leadership, consistent coordination between departments and a stronger expectation that nature is considered in mainstream decision-making.

This is particularly important in relation to land use, agriculture, infrastructure, development and public investment, where decisions taken for other purposes can have significant consequences for biodiversity. A more joined-up approach would help ensure that action in these areas supports nature recovery, rather than adding to the pressures the strategy is intended to address.

Question 19

Do you believe that the proposed new actions for Strategic Objective 5, when considered with existing targets, will deliver Building Strong, Integrated Evidence and Knowledge to Enable Action and Reporting for Nature?

Response: Yes.

Strategic Objective 5 is essential to the credibility of the strategy as a whole. Stronger evidence, better monitoring and more accessible data will all be essential if action is to be well targeted, progress properly assessed and policy adjusted over time in response to what is working.

Improved habitat mapping, biodiversity monitoring and research should help provide a clearer picture of ecological conditions across Northern Ireland and support more informed decisions on restoration, management and investment. This is particularly important where resources are limited and action needs to be directed to the places where it can achieve the greatest benefit.

The value of this objective will depend not only on the quality of the evidence gathered, but on how far it is integrated into practice. Data and research need to be capable of informing decisions on the ground, including those taken by public bodies, practitioners and land managers. If delivered well, this objective should provide a stronger basis for action, reporting and long-term accountability across the strategy.

Question 20

Are there any additional actions that you would like to be included with Strategic Objective 5?

Response: No additional actions are proposed at this stage.

The priority should be to ensure that the evidence and data generated through this objective are accessible, usable, and capable of informing decisions in practice. This applies not only to government and research bodies, but also to practitioners, land managers, and local decision-makers, who will need clear and relevant information if the strategy is to inform action in practice.

Question 21

Do you have any other comments about Strategic Objective 5?

The value of Strategic Objective 5 will depend on whether the evidence base is not only strengthened but used consistently to guide action. Robust monitoring, shared data and a clearer picture of ecological conditions will all be important in supporting more informed decisions and more effective collaboration across sectors.

It will be especially important to present evidence in a form that supports practical delivery, rather than strategic reporting alone. Information on habitats, land use, water, soils and ecological

condition should help inform priorities on the ground, not simply reporting at a strategic level. A more integrated approach to evidence and knowledge would therefore strengthen both implementation and accountability across the wider strategy.

Question 22

Are you aware of any other existing targets for nature recovery that may help deliver for SO1–SO5 that you feel have been omitted from this draft strategy?

Soil health should be much more clearly recognised in the strategy. It is fundamental to nature recovery and long-term environmental resilience, yet it is not given sufficient prominence in the draft. Soil condition affects biodiversity, water infiltration and storage, nutrient cycling, carbon sequestration and the wider health of landscapes. Without healthier soils, it will be difficult to secure lasting progress in habitat restoration, species recovery or the ecological condition of the farmed countryside.

A stronger focus on soil would also connect the strategy more directly to the realities of land management in Northern Ireland. Decisions about grassland management, nutrient use, drainage, grazing and cultivation all have direct implications for soil condition and, in turn, for biodiversity outcomes. Giving soil a more explicit place within the strategy would help bridge the gap between high-level ambition and the day-to-day practices that will shape success on the ground.

Recognising this more clearly would strengthen delivery across the strategy as a whole, not only within individual objectives as soil condition underpins the wider health, function and resilience of the landscape.

Question 23

Do you agree with the conclusions of the Equality and Disability Screening Assessment of the draft Nature Recovery Strategy?

Response: Yes.

The Landscape Institute agrees with the conclusions of the Equality and Disability Screening Assessment.

Clear and accessible communication will be important if the strategy is to support meaningful participation and engagement across different communities. This includes ensuring that information is presented in formats that are easy to understand and use, so that the aims of the strategy, and the implications for people and places, are more readily accessible.

There is also value in making the contribution of land managers and rural communities more visible within that communication. A better understanding of the public benefits associated with environmental stewardship would help support wider awareness of the role these groups will play in delivering the strategy.

Question 24

Do you agree with the conclusions of the Rural Needs Impact Assessment of the draft Nature Recovery Strategy?

Response: Yes.

The Landscape Institute agrees with the conclusions of the Rural Needs Impact Assessment.

Rural communities will be central to the delivery of the strategy, not least because much of the action needed for nature recovery will depend on the way land and water are managed across the wider countryside. Recognising that reality is essential if the strategy is to be workable in practice.

Its success will therefore depend on policies and delivery mechanisms that reflect the practical conditions of rural land management and support viable rural economies. Measures that are clear, proportionate and capable of being applied in real-world settings are more likely to secure long-term engagement and more effective outcomes for nature.

About the Landscape Institute

The Landscape Institute (LI) is the chartered body for the landscape profession. We are an educational charity that promotes the art and science of landscape practice.

The LI's aim, through the work of our members, is to protect, conserve, and enhance the natural and built environment for the public benefit.

The LI provides a professional home for all landscape practitioners including landscape architects, landscape managers, landscape planners, landscape scientists, and urban designers.

About LI policy and research

The LI undertakes research, builds networks, and provides policy advice to local and national policymakers, regulators, and stakeholders. We seek to demonstrate how landscape and green infrastructure can deliver maximum benefits for society, the environment, and the economy.

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