

General Principles to Support the Development of Community Plans and Local Development Plans in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland Environment Link

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Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) is the networking and forum body for non-statutory organisations concerned with the environment of Northern Ireland. Its 70+ Full Members represent over 90,000 individuals, 262 subsidiary groups, have an annual turnover of £70 million and manage over 314,000 acres of land. Members are involved in environmental issues of all types and at all levels from the local community to the global environment. NIEL brings together a wide range of knowledge, experience and expertise which can be used to help develop policy, practice and implementation across a wide range of environmental fields.

NIEL is also a member of the Space & Place Consortium which is delivering a £15 million lottery funded project supporting communities to connect people by reclaiming and transforming derelict and neglected spaces and places, allowing local people to improve their environment and be more active in decision making and planning processes.

These comments are made on behalf of Members, but some members may be providing independent comments as well. If you would like to discuss these comments further we would be delighted to do so.

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NIEL commends the District Council in developing a comprehensive Plan and we welcome the opportunity to make comment.

Introduction

The environment is our health and wellbeing. It's our economic foundation. It's our food and water. It's our heritage and history. It's our children's future. Crucially, it's for everyone, equally, bringing a sense of community cohesion and shared enjoyment.

NIEL is calling for creativity and energy to realise the potential that exists in Northern Ireland's environment to enrich our society. The environment can deliver for health, through spaces and places that people want to be active in. It can deliver for the economy through tourism, cultural heritage, and a clean green image that attracts inward investment. It can deliver for education through encouraging engagement with the natural world and applied sciences. It can deliver for our future wellbeing and security. Most of all, our environment is something for people to enjoy - our land and landscape, our unique historic environment, rich freshwater network and our enviable coastline and marine habitat - and we believe that this is the best way to ensure its preservation.

Considering the environment provides the essential goods and services upon which our future prosperity depends, it is encouraging to see recognition given to the environment. However, we feel that the environment could feature more prominently as the environment is the key vehicle for delivering across the full spectrum of local government responsibilities, such as improved health, better education, well-being, community prosperity and resilience. A failure to protect and invest in the environment will lead to the continuation of a prevailing paradigm which treats the environment, economy and society as competing rather than complementary issues. This will result in the further depletion of key environmental assets at the expense of long-term well-being and prosperity.

There are a number of environmental themes that should be covered throughout the Plan.

Climate change – mitigation and adaptation

Climate change is one of the most challenging global issues facing Northern Ireland and requires response from all parts of government to both mitigate and adapt to ensure the resilience of Northern Ireland.

The timeline of extreme weather and its impacts on Northern Ireland over the last decade demonstrates that we need to take resilience and adaptation to climate change seriously. Community resilience in relation to flooding and extreme weather events is essential. This is particularly important given the correlation between flooding vulnerability and economic disadvantage, as noted in the UK CCRA (2012). Climate related resilience is key to well-being, and these inter-related concepts (resilience, flooding, extreme weather events) are worthy of further mention.

Environment and the Economy

A more holistic approach to economic prosperity is required through promotion of heritage as a mainstream economic driver, the adoption of circular economy principles, and the establishment of a Natural Capital Asset Index (essentially, a composite measure of the wealth that nature gives us). Northern Ireland's available natural resources represent what we have 'in the bank', in terms of nature and what the environment delivers for society. We need to protect that long-term investment, ensuring that society 'lives off the interest' rather than eating in to, and depleting, our irreplaceable 'Natural Capital'.

We support focus on an economy that works for communities, and that is entirely compatible with principles of genuine sustainability (something that goes far beyond traditionally perceived 'environmental sustainability'). The economy exists to enhance the wellbeing of the people of Northern Ireland, and not only for the private benefit of few. This should be reflected in decision making.

Prosperity is inextricably linked to the health of our Natural Capital. A Natural Capital Index should be developed as well as a 'Roadmap' with practical actions to effectively implement natural capital accounting and help inform better decision making at local level.

The Historic Environment

Cultural assets such as the historic environment and heritage provide a unique opportunity to harness community-led regeneration and enable resilient and sustainable societies. The social impact of our culture assets and historic environment in particular, not only positively impacts on the confidence, capacity and quality of life of diverse communities but impacts specifically on health & wellbeing, social cohesion & shared space, social enterprise and tourism. Heritage-led regeneration and the historic environment enables opportunities to increase this unique tourism offer in terms of sense of place, while supporting innovation and economic development. *Tourism NI Annual Visitor Attraction Statistics 2015*¹ highlighted over 25% of the 17.5million trips made to local visitor attractions were to historic properties and sites. NIEA's *Study of the Economic Value of Northern Ireland's Historic Environment*² recognised the significant growth potential in heritage-related jobs. NIEL recommends that the economic potential of both the natural and built environment is explored and supported, following the success of Scotland's example as a nation that has coupled their environment and heritage with jobs, prosperity and broader community benefit. One example, from the Space & Place programme³, in which NIEL is a consortium partner, has led to a derelict building in Camlough being developed as a centre for people with brain injury, which now provides services across the district council area.

Environment and Health

The environment is an untapped resource that can significantly contribute to health outcomes and in turn provide considerable financial savings to government, relieving pressure on public services (for example, the natural environment provides opportunities for physical activity contributing to the weekly levels recommended by the Chief Medical Officers and the World Health Organization to maintain good health and reduce the prevalence of a range of conditions including diabetes, heart disease and cancer).

- There is compelling evidence that regular and sustained contact with nature can:
- Maintain good health & Aid recovery from illness
- Alleviate stress and improve mental wellbeing
- Enhance social interaction and support community cohesion
- Improve quality of life for older people
- Improve children's health and wellbeing

¹ <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/annual-tourism-statistics-publications>

² http://www.nienvironmentlink.org/cmsfiles/policy-hub/files/documentation/Built/study_of_the_economic_value_of_ni_historic_environment_may_2012.pdf

³ <http://www.spaceandplaceni.com/projects>

In recognition of this, NIEL would like to see:

- Promotion of the understanding of how a healthy environment is essential to human health and wellbeing
- Better use, management of, and access to, our natural and historic environment for wider community wellbeing
- Enhanced collaboration between health and environment sectors, to explore preventative health-care models that make economic savings
- Development opportunities for delivering health and wellbeing outcomes through environmental action; for example, the introduction of innovative approaches such as 'Green Prescriptions'
- Full implementation of the NI Outdoor Recreation Action Plan
- Realisation of the multiple benefits of Green and Blue Infrastructure Networks (for example, Connswater Community Greenway and Comber Greenway) across Northern Ireland.

Environmental Education

We encourage explicit recognition around the role that environment and heritage can play in formal and informal education to give children the best start possible in life. UK and international research has demonstrated that outdoor and environmental education has multiple benefits for children. Environmental education has been shown to:

- Improve academic performance across the curriculum including numeracy, literacy and STEM activities
- Encourage children to transfer and apply skills learned in the classroom, and gain skills to tackle future environmental issues facing Northern Ireland
- Increase equality of opportunity for children from all backgrounds
- Improve discipline in the classroom
- Bring inherent health and wellbeing benefits to children.

Other Comments

The Plan should outline how the Council intends to engage and collaborate with other councils and Central Government on locally important issues which have regional significance. For example, climate change adaptation or Natural Capital Accounting.

NIEL is particularly supportive of the alignment of the draft plan with certain aspects of the Programme for Government and community planning will benefit from PFG commitments such as the proposed adoption of a natural capital index and forum⁴.

The Council is responsible for the protection and enhancement of the internationally significant natural and built heritage. The Plan needs to reflect the importance of these assets and the role of the planning system in providing adequate protection. A more in-depth analysis of the natural and built heritage assets, and how they may be used to improve quality of life through regeneration, investment and protection would be beneficial.

⁴ Natural Capital can be defined as the stock of natural assets which include geology, soil, air, water and all living things⁴. These natural assets, provide the life support systems upon which we all depend.

Conclusion

Our sector is committed to continuing to work with local authorities to refine their community plans while assisting with the development of local development plans to reflect the importance of the environment in delivering future prosperity and well-being. Our sector can also act as a key partner to help deliver many of the aspirations outlined in the Plan.