RSPB NI is seeking a future where people and nature flourish. The scale of the current environmental challenges and their urgency necessitate an ambitious and strategic approach focused on outcomes.

RSPB NI believe delivering for these challenges will lead to a greener economy and better health and wellbeing for the people of Northern Ireland.

The timeline of the next Northern Ireland Assembly term (2022-2027) will take us through this decade towards 2030, when many nature and climate targets are due to be met, so this next Assembly mandate could not be more important.

This presents a once in a generation opportunity to set Northern Ireland on a sustainable pathway to become a world leader in tackling the climate crisis, recovering species and delivering a greener and more prosperous future for everyone.

**Tackling the nature crisis**

**Environmental governance and targets for nature recovery are essential**

**Environmental Governance**

Securing robust and independent environmental governance in Northern Ireland is essential. All parties should support the operation of the Office for Environmental Protection in Northern Ireland. In addition to supporting the full implementation of the Office for Environmental Protection to oversee public authorities, an independent Environmental Protection Agency must also be established to uphold the law and give the environment and citizens a voice.

**Targets in law for nature**

Legislate to tackle the extinction crisis and for nature’s recovery: place a legal obligation on this and future Northern Ireland Executives to act for the recovery of nature on land, in freshwater and at sea, underpinned by interim and long-term binding targets.

**30% of land protected by 2030**

Mandate and fund the improved protection of sites and species: effectively managed, robustly monitored, and resilient sites should be the foundation of nature’s recovery. In addition to improving the condition of the current sites network, new protected areas should be created where necessary so that at least 30% of land and 30% of sea is protected for nature by 2030.

**Nature networks**

Deliver on the ambition of the DAERA endorsed ‘Nature Positive 2030’ report by safeguarding nature across Northern Ireland through ecological networks: the restoration and creation of habitats should be supported and funded on a wider landscape and seascape scale; creating better, bigger, and more joined up space for nature.
Tackling the climate crisis

We need strong leadership from the Executive to address the nature and climate emergency

| Priority 1 | Ensure Nature-Based Solutions are prioritised in the Assembly’s first Climate Action Plan |
| Priority 2 | Develop and deliver a ‘Nature for Climate fund’ to create ‘green jobs’ and restore nature |
| Priority 3 | Provide adequate funding to the new Climate Commissioners Office |
| Priority 4 | Set up a Just-Transition Commission to plot a clear path to net zero for Northern Ireland |
| Priority 5 | Ensure renewable energy is developed in harmony with nature |

Establish a new Department for Climate

Given the cross-cutting scope of the climate and nature emergencies and the need for clear and unambiguous climate leadership, we would urge our political leaders to establish a new Climate Department and Minister. This would allow one Minister to provide dedicated focus, ensure coherence across the Executive, and demonstrate a new urgency to tackle the climate crisis.

Nature for Climate fund

Deliver a programme of large-scale nature-based projects to help restore nature, tackle climate change and create jobs, as well as providing other essential services such as naturally protecting drinking water supplies and helping manage flood risk. A Nature for Climate fund should be established to realise this ambition. This will create jobs, restore nature at scale and tackle climate change. The new Fiscal Commission which has been established to carry out a review of increasing fiscal powers to Northern Ireland, should also undertake a review of how to unlock finance to fight climate change and recover nature in Northern Ireland.

Expand renewable energy in harmony with nature

Ensure strategic spatial planning of onshore and offshore wind to avoid deployment in environmentally sensitive places, allowing wind power to drive down emissions in a way which is in harmony with nature. Introduce measures to boost the uptake of nature-friendly solar and onshore wind, including participation in the Government’s ‘Contracts for Difference’ auction scheme as recommended by the Committee on Climate Change. This includes diverting subsidies from unsustainable sources to support these renewables, as well as investment in energy efficiency and demand management measures.

Green Recovery

A genuine commitment to environmental protection and enhancement must be at the core of the Green Growth Strategy and investment in the delivery of large-scale nature-based projects must be prioritised. The Northern Ireland Investment Strategy must prioritise investment which achieves a carbon neutral, nature positive economy. We urge the Northern Ireland Executive, when developing the Green Growth Strategy and planning future budgets to ensure all public spending, policies and programmes are nature and climate proofed, and that the allocation of public funding is fundamentally repurposed in the face of the nature and climate crisis.
Sustainable land use

Deliver a new Agriculture Act

Introduce a new Agriculture Act at the start of the next Assembly to set a legal framework for future sustainable farming and land management in Northern Ireland. This new legislation must be based on the principle of ‘public money for public goods’ to provide a clear purpose for financial assistance in the future. This should ensure that the majority future investment is redirected towards enabling farmers and other land managers to transition to sustainable land management that will restore and protect nature, tackle climate change, and produce food and other commodities sustainably. Shifting to a truly sustainable, nature positive food system can help tackle a range of interconnected societal challenges, including the nature and climate emergencies, whilst promoting local produce.

Protection of peatlands

It is important that the new Peatland Strategy must deliver large-scale funding and restoration of peatland across Northern Ireland if it is to succeed. It should also seek to end the use, import, export and sale of peat compost by 2025 at the latest and a complete and enforced phasing out of all peat extraction in Northern Ireland. Government must lead the way in this regard by issuing an immediate ban on peat extraction on publicly owned land. This should be followed by the phase out of commercial peat extraction on privately owned land with a clear end date of 2025. There is also a role for commercial and government led forestry planting. Government should bring forward a strategy which should deliver the removal of forestry from areas of deep peat and the restocking of forestry on peatland sites should be halted completely.

Seas

Create an urgent recovery plan for our seas

Protect and restore our seabird populations, supported through the delivery of an ambitious Seabird Conservation Strategy which is fit for purpose, appropriately funded, and delivers targeted action to halt and reverse seabird declines. It is vitally important that we complete the designation of an ecologically coherent network of well-managed Marine Protected Areas that protect and restore Northern Ireland’s marine biodiversity. Alongside this, the development and implementation of a Marine Plan for Northern Ireland which follows the principles of an ecosystem-based approach to better manage our activities at sea, will provide a holistic approach.

Northern Ireland must also embed and implement the eight fisheries objectives of the UK Fisheries Act 2020 into the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966 via an ambitious joint fisheries statement and fisheries management plans to deliver sustainable fisheries alongside protecting and restoring the marine environment. Northern Ireland must also identify, protect and restore blue carbon features and habitats, which contribute to the capture and storage of blue carbon, while ensuring a resilient and healthy marine environment for the future.
Prioritising net gain from development

No more nature loss from development

Develop enabling primary legislation which stipulates a requirement for all new development to deliver and permanently secure net gains for biodiversity, in order to account for the cumulative impacts of development on nature.

The new system must ensure that the mitigation hierarchy is adhered to (avoidance of harm first, mitigation if this is not possible and compensation as a last resort). It should not result in the weakening of existing environmental protections for designated sites and species, and it should not facilitate the trading of biodiversity against any other environmental benefits - biodiversity net gain must be secured first.

It should also contribute to the delivery of strategic local, national and international ecological networks (including through Local Nature Recovery Strategies) and should be inclusive and equitable to the people affected by the development.

It must also stipulate that irreplaceable habitats and wildlife are not permitted for offsetting elsewhere – they are by their very nature irreplaceable.

The new system should also seek to provide additional conservation outcomes.

All this must be set within a context where decision making is transparent and founded on decisions that deliver reliable net gains and best practice management.

Planning and development

Future-proof our planning system

The next Assembly term needs to provide a robust and well-resourced planning system, with access to expert ecologists and strategic planners ensuring improved strategic spatial planning for nature. A review of regional planning policy should also be brought forward to ensure that it remains fit for purpose amid the nature and climate emergency, where the need to reconcile the challenge of increased low carbon infrastructure development and threats to biodiversity has never been more urgent. Legislation on climate change must ensure that all new homes are built to zero carbon standards by 2025 and are nature positive to help meet the current and future challenge of emission reductions and the nature emergency.

Take a tougher stance against wildlife crime

It is vitally important that we halt all illegal persecution of wildlife by enforcing the law on illegal killing and disturbance, and resource those responsible for monitoring and tackling wildlife crime.

For more information visit rspb.org.uk/ni or contact Daithi.McKay@rspb.org.uk
Artwork from 'Our Bird Table' by RSPB NI Artist of the Year winner Matthew McManus, Age 6