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Draft NI Environment Strategy Response from Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland

Welcome for draft Environment Strategy

Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland (ORNI) welcomes the draft Environment Strategy setting out Northern Ireland's environmental priorities for the coming decades – and the opportunity to regularly engage in the codesign approach by which it has been achieved. Alongside the Green Growth Strategy outlining actions to tackle climate change and reduce greenhouse emissions, we see this Strategy as an important step in putting the needs and opportunities associated with our environment 'up the agenda' and stimulating the cross departmental working that is required to meet those.

Scope of Response

ORNI is a not-for profit organisation who make it easier for people to responsibly enjoy the natural environment, with the vision of 'a more active and healthy society appreciating the outdoors'. Therefore, we very much welcome the focus on this area within the Strategy as the importance of increasing people's access to, participation in, and connection with the environment cannot be underestimated in delivering real improvements to peoples' health and well-being.

We welcome and agree with the broad thrust of the Strategy and recognise that all elements between the Strategic Environmental Outcomes (SEOs) are interlinked. However, given our remit and expertise, our comments add most value to SEO 2: 'Healthy and accessible environments and landscapes everyone can connect with and enjoy'. Within this SEO, our focus is primarily on Section 8 'Connecting People to the Environment: Outdoor Recreation and Natural Space Provision'. Over the course of the Strategy formation, we have engaged via policy forums (e.g., Northern Ireland Environment Link) and appreciate that our eNGO partners are better placed to provide input on other aspects.

ORNI recognises the immense challenge to redress a deteriorating environment and believes that the draft Environment Strategy misses the target in terms of tackling the overall nature and climate emergencies. While we very much support the actions laid out under SEO 2 Section 8, we firmly urge that the final version of the Strategy has clear and ambitious targets, as well as the legislative framework to ensure that all actions outlined are delivered.

SEO 2: Healthy and accessible environments and landscapes everyone can connect with and enjoy

ORNI welcomes this SEO and strongly support its inclusion in the final version of the Environment Strategy. We are encouraged by the recognition that the environment 'is key to our well-being, both in an economic sense and in terms of our general physical, mental and social health – as individuals and as a society' (pg. 33). Research from the [December 2021 report derived from the People in the Outdoors Monitor for Northern Ireland \(POMNI\)](#) shows that in the past 12 months, 7 in 10 adults visited the outdoors for leisure at least once a week (71%).

The most common activities undertaken were short walks (<2 miles or an hour), dog walking, spending time playing with children and running (61%, 30%, 17% and 11% respectively). Outdoor recreation participants gain a wide range of benefits – most notably over three quarters (78%) state that time outdoors is good for their wellbeing, making them feel calm and relaxed and/or refreshed and revitalised. The physical health benefits of spending time outdoors are also important with two in three taking visits for exercise, health, or fitness reasons (67%). However, while outdoor recreation is clearly beneficial for most of the NI population, levels of participation are not equal across the population. 8% of the population never spend leisure time outdoors. Population groups less likely to take regular visits include unemployed people, people with a long-term illness or disability and older age groups. Women are also less likely than men to visit at least once a week.

ORNI also strongly endorses the recognition that engaging people with the environment will be 'crucial to the delivery and success of the Environment Strategy' (pg. 33). The [People, Nature and Health report \(2021\)](#) revealed that nature connection was a key motivator (41%) for people engaging with the environment and that those who visit the outdoors more have *greater* concern for the environment and undertake *more* pro-environmental behaviours. This strong link between connecting people with their environment and increasing people's concern and care for the environment will be crucial to achieving all SEOs outlined in the Strategy.

The draft Strategy rightly states that the key to nature engagement is increasing access to it 'through the provision of quality natural spaces and opportunities for outdoor recreation and learning – and engaging people and organisations with the processes and interventions that will improve our environment in the coming years and decades' (pg. 33). Within this context, our feedback to Section 8 'Connecting People to the Environment: Outdoor Recreation and Natural Space Provision' is intended to constructively maximise the outputs of the Strategy.

Section 8. Connecting People to the Environment: Outdoor Recreation and Natural Space Provision

ORNI strongly welcomes the evidence-led approach that underpins this Outcome. The array of outdoor recreation benefits to society such as 'improving health and well-being, protecting the environment, tackling inequality, growing and greening the economy, increasing active travel, and enhancing education and learning' (pg. 35) are backed up by robust data ([People, Nature and Health 2021](#)). However, what is also rightly stated, is that 'there is fragmented provision of varying quality and accessibility of walking, cycling and equestrian routes and green spaces across NI' (pg. 35). The crux of our feedback relates to this pertinent matter.

While we **fully welcome and support all the Actions and Targets in Section 8**, we urge that the following suggestions are taken on board to strategically and effectively tackle the 'fragmented provision' of outdoor recreation opportunities:

- Rather than ‘Update Outdoor Recreation Action Plan for NI’ (pg. 36), ORNI recommends that a new Outdoor Recreation Strategy is developed rather than the current Action Plan being refreshed. The rationale for this is three-fold:
 - Outdoor recreation has changed vastly since the previous Plan was developed in 2013 and a refresh will not adequately reflect this
 - Wider cross-departmental involvement is required – and is more achievable now as outdoor recreation is ‘up the agenda’ across government departments
 - Good practice from Scotland and Republic of Ireland demonstrates the importance of effective cross-departmental involvement to maximise outputs.
- Under the ‘Develop Community Path Network and Places Plans’ Action (pg. 36) we strongly urge that all Councils be mandated and resourced to develop and implement a Community Trail Plan. Without a clear mandate this Action may not be realised.
- Under the Action to ‘Expand off-road network of both local community paths and regionally significant NI wide routes’ more clarification is needed on what is meant by ‘regionally significant’. We would recommend that the focus here should be on long distance routes which deliver for the local population but also provide a reason to visit NI. On a smaller matter, we urge that the Strategy consistently adopts the word ‘trail’ rather than using ‘path’ and ‘trail’ interchangeably which can lead to confusion or be conflated with roadside pavements.
- In addition to ‘Implement “Exercise-Explore-Enjoy: A Strategic Plan for Greenways” & “Making Belfast an Active City: Belfast Cycling Network 2021”’, we strongly recommend that the development of a National Walking Strategy is included within the Environment Strategy. This has been enormously effective elsewhere, for example Scotland published its [National Walking Strategy](#) in 2014 and this resulted in a 15% increase in recreational walking by 2017. Walking is highly cost-effective and demonstrates that prevention really is better than cure. The challenge now for the Northern Ireland Executive is to put this into practice by developing and implementing a cross-departmental Walking Strategy. The vision of this Strategy would be to enable a society where everyone benefits from walking as part of their everyday journeys, enjoys walking in the outdoors and which has easy access to places well designed to encourage walking.
- ORNI also encourages that a new Action is added to develop programmes to encourage responsible use of the outdoors included (e.g., #RightSideofOutside campaign). This is of particular relevance given the well reported issues caused by increased in engagement with the outdoors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

ORNI fully welcomes and support all the outcomes outlined in the Future Vision/Outcome of Section 8 and recommends two small amendments:

- Under the outcome that all ‘Landowners and managers are enabled to provide informal outdoor recreation on their properties without significant disruption to their business’ (pg. 37), we urge that this reads ‘... provide informal and formal...’ as land access can be either. ORNI welcomes that a review of the provision of access to the natural environment is currently ongoing. The findings of this review (to which ORNI has already [published a response to the initial consultation](#)) will be a key step in the successful delivery of this outcome. In addition, ORNI is engaging with DAERA regarding the consultation on [‘Future Agricultural Proposals’](#), a key concern is the current lack of reference to a programme that

would allow farmers / landowners to receive financial payment for facilitating permissive access.

- The Target of ‘Every child aged 4-11 spending 1+ hours in nature rich setting each month’ is incredibly low, particularly as **one hour per day** is the recommendation of the [UK’s Wildlife Trusts](#), who have called for every child in the UK to spend one hour outside in nature, every day. This recommendation is based on a large study that investigated the effects of regular outdoor activities on children's wellbeing. This is backed up [The People and Nature Survey for England: Children’s Survey](#) that shows the positive role of nature in supporting children’s well-being, with eight in ten (83%) of children interviewed agreeing that being in nature made them very happy. Therefore, we would urge for this Target to more aspirational.

Section 11. Sustainable Settlements

While we welcome the Actions and Targets in Section 8, unfortunately **the connection between research and the recommendations is less apparent** than in previous sections. Our feedback is intended to strengthen the Section by providing some research-led amendments.

With the focus on many of the Actions and Targets centered on cities and towns, ORNI has a responsibility to also champion the need for rural interventions. Removing the current narrow focus on urban centres is crucial for the NI context as the [POMNI data \(Dec 2021\)](#) reveals that access to greenspace and off-road trails is not equal across NI and tends to be lower for residents of rural areas than those who live in urban areas. For example, in response to a question about whether local paths and trails were ‘within easy walking distance’, 79% of urban residents agreed this was true, compared to only 57% of rural residents.

The same research reveals that the availability and quality of local greenspaces and trails influences frequency of visits to the outdoors with a clear correlation between frequency of time spent outdoors and the perceived proximity of places to visit. While around a quarter of the population (27%) stated that their nearest green or blue space was with a 5-minute walk of their home, a similar percentage stated that their nearest place would take more than 20 minutes to reach on foot (20%). This is more likely to be the case for rural areas, leading to people being forced to walk on dangerous roads or drive considerable distances to safe off-road trails and greenspaces with public access.

To address this disparity the following amendments to the Section are recommended:

- Under the Target to ‘Work across Government to promote the Greenway network encouraging walking and cycling’ (pg. 41), we would also strongly urge that the wording is changed to ‘... promote the Greenway network and Community Trails encouraging walking and cycling’. This would facilitate more safe and accessible connectors in rural areas between people and their environment. Currently 33% of expenditure for outdoor visits is on ‘fuel for your vehicle’ as many must travel by car to go for a safe walk or cycle. This also leads to a lot of emissions of greenhouse gases that could be reduced by the provision of more local Community Trails.
- Include the ‘Implementation of Community Trail Plans’ alongside ‘Greenways and Bicycle Plans; Development of Transport Plans and use Blue/Green Infrastructure Fund to promote health and wellbeing’ (pg. 42). Action Travel is not just about how we get people to work but also about getting people to outdoor recreation venues more sustainably. This is often

overlooked, but a pre-Covid [Travel Survey](#) showed that there were as many miles travelled for 'leisure and other' journeys as there were for 'commuting and business' (31% of the overall share each). Car journeys for recreational purposes are more than likely to have increased during the pandemic as it has brought long-term changes to how and where we work and exercise.

While we welcome and support the outcomes in the Future Vision/Outcome of Section 11, **we again urge that rural communities are not forgotten**. The disproportionate emphasis on urban centres shows poor alignment with previous sections – SEOs within the Strategy should overlap and complement one another. For example:

- Under the vision/outcome of 'Better connected communities and city centres through greenway and cycling networks', ORNI strongly urges that Community Trails are included. In rural areas, Community Trails provide safe walking and cycling opportunities within easy walking distance and connect communities to their green space(s) and to each other. This would lead to a more active and healthy society appreciating the outdoors closer to home, more sustainably and more equitably.

Section 12. Historic Environment

We would encourage that Community Trails are also included in Section 12 as they would serve to provide local communities with sustainable access to the built heritage. This would enable the vision of 'Resilient communities which gain physical, educational and well-being benefits from the historic environment' and 'An historic environment which is sustainable connected and managed as a vital part of our diverse environment' (pg. 44). DAERA provided part funding to recently launched [Arney Battlefield Trail and Nixon Hall Trail](#) in County Fermanagh, these Community Trails provide an exemplar case study of how sustainable access to built heritage can be achieved.

SEO 3: Thriving, resilient and connected nature and wildlife

Section 15. Natural Capital

ORNI agrees that valuing Natural Capital is important, particularly as understanding the value and benefits that flow from nature will help to encourage more efficient, effective, and sustainable use of our environment. Therefore, we fully support the development of a robust Natural Capital accounting framework and urge that the value of outdoor recreation benefits and access to quality green and blue space are included within such accounting. This will enable better consideration of the role of nature in our economy and our well-being and underpin other cross-cutting NI strategies and programmes. Our own [Social Return on Investment](#) research demonstrated that Community Trails provide on average a 14:1 return on investment across physical health, wellbeing, environmental and learning benefits.

The Greenspace Layer NI should be used to determine the amount of publicly accessible greenspace and off-road trails as well as measure progress towards the Target within the Strategy of '90% of the population within a 5-minute walk of quality green/blue space'. This authoritative map will also be available for government departments and agencies, Councils, and eNGOs to inform infrastructure planning, gap analysis, resource allocation, site suitability assessments and demographic analysis (e.g., health and deprivation etc).

Final comments

ORNI welcomes the broad thrust of the draft Environment Strategy and particularly the research-led recommendations contained in Section 8 'Connecting People to the Environment: Outdoor Recreation and Natural Space Provision'. We hope that our comments above add value and shape the final version to ensure that there are robust measures in place to improve the environment, and particularly to increase people's access to it and the many health and wellbeing, social, economic, and environmental benefits we gain from it.

Our final comments are to urge the final version includes:

- More detail than in this draft version
- Legally binding targets with additional policy/legislation
- Targets that are specific, measurable, and time bound.