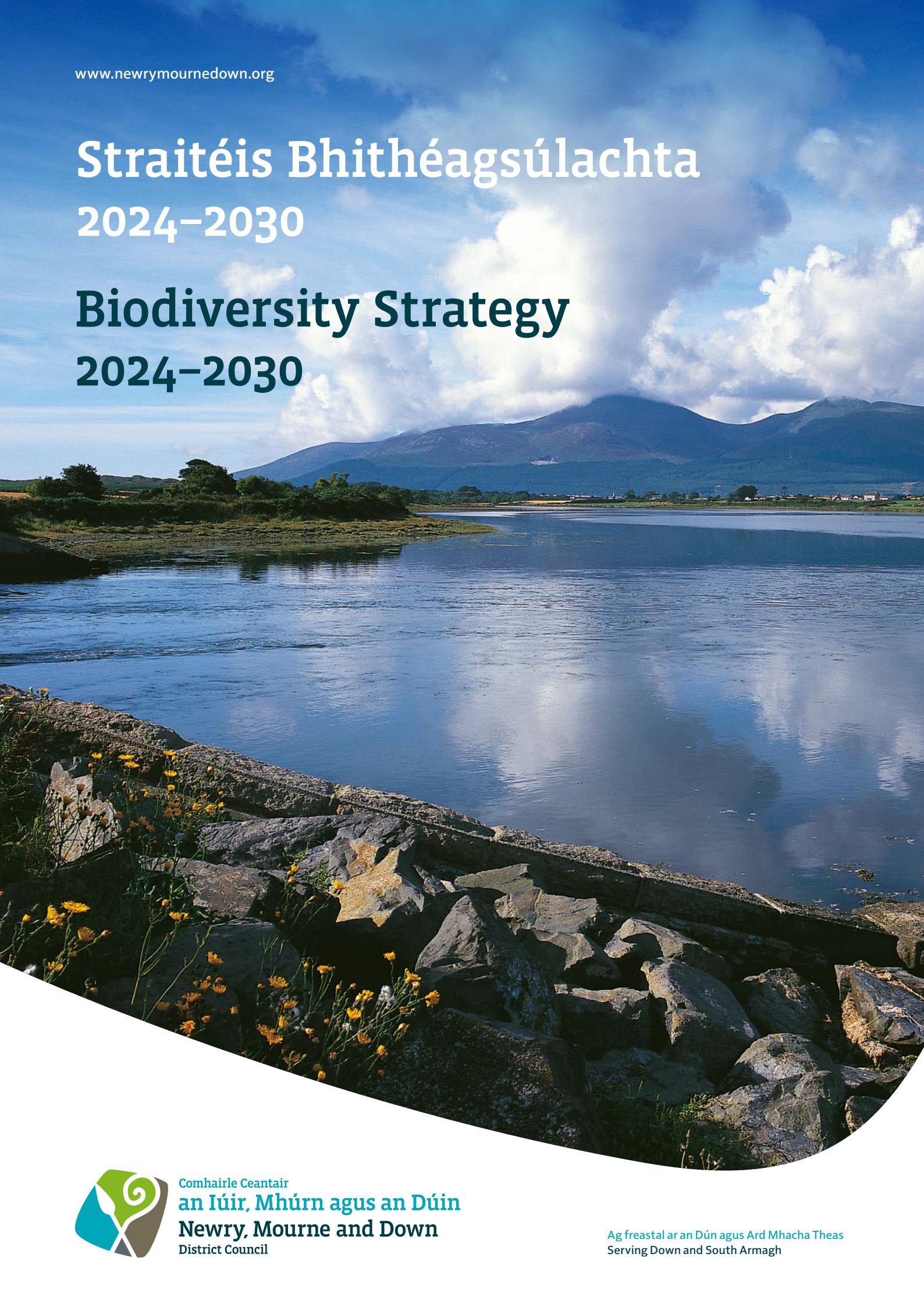


Straitéis Bhithéagsúlachta 2024–2030

Biodiversity Strategy 2024–2030



Comhairle Ceantair
an Iúir, Mhúrn agus an Dúin
Newry, Mourne and Down
District Council

Ag freastal ar an Dúin agus Ard Mhacha Theas
Serving Down and South Armagh

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Biodiversity is vital for our survival, and we depend on it for the very basics of life.

Biodiversity is not just in crisis globally, but also on a local level. Species are disappearing faster now than ever before in human history. Urban development, intensive agricultural practices, invasive species and climate change are some of the main drivers of biodiversity loss in Northern Ireland.



Newry, Mourne and Down is a district renowned for its scenic beauty, bounded on the east by Strangford Lough and Carlingford Lough and on the west by Slieve Gullion and Slieve Croob, with the picturesque Mountains of Mourne in the centre.

This Biodiversity Strategy and associated internal Action Plan will guide the protection and enhancement of biodiversity across Newry, Mourne and Down over the next 6 years to 2030. The internal action plan will focus mainly on Council managed estate, but opportunities for partnership working will be explored and developed. This strategy does not sit in isolation. It compliments several other key strategic commitments made by the Council.

The aims of the Biodiversity Strategy are simple:

- To conserve and enhance the rich biodiversity of the district for both current and future generations.
- Educate and raise awareness of the importance and variety of biodiversity found within the Newry, Mourne and Down district area.
- Encourage local ownership of Newry, Mourne and Down district's biodiversity.

Through the delivery of **five thematic action plans**, we aim to improve our environment and work towards fulfilling our duty for biodiversity and take positive action in mitigating against and adapting to climate change.



What is Biodiversity and why is it important?

Biodiversity is the total variety of all living organisms including plants and animals, and the habitats in which they live. Biodiversity is vital for our survival and we depend on it for the very basics of life.

The ecology of planet earth supports all life by providing 'Ecosystem Services'.

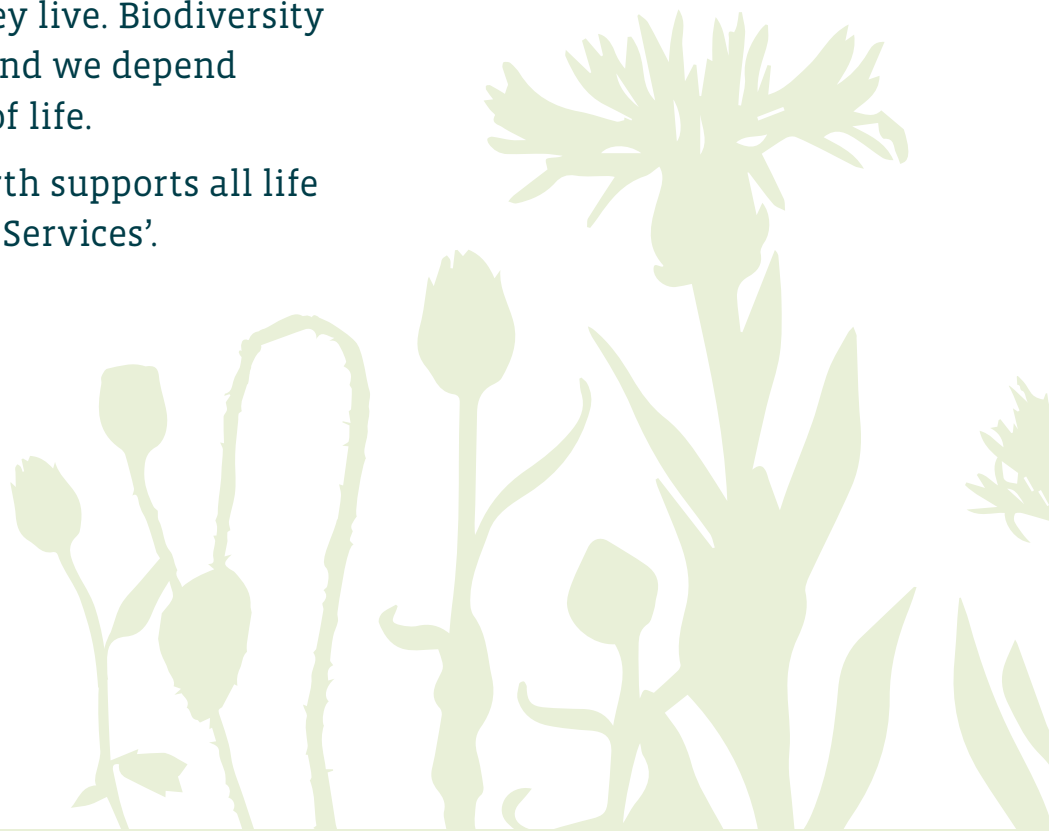
These services can be divided into four categories;

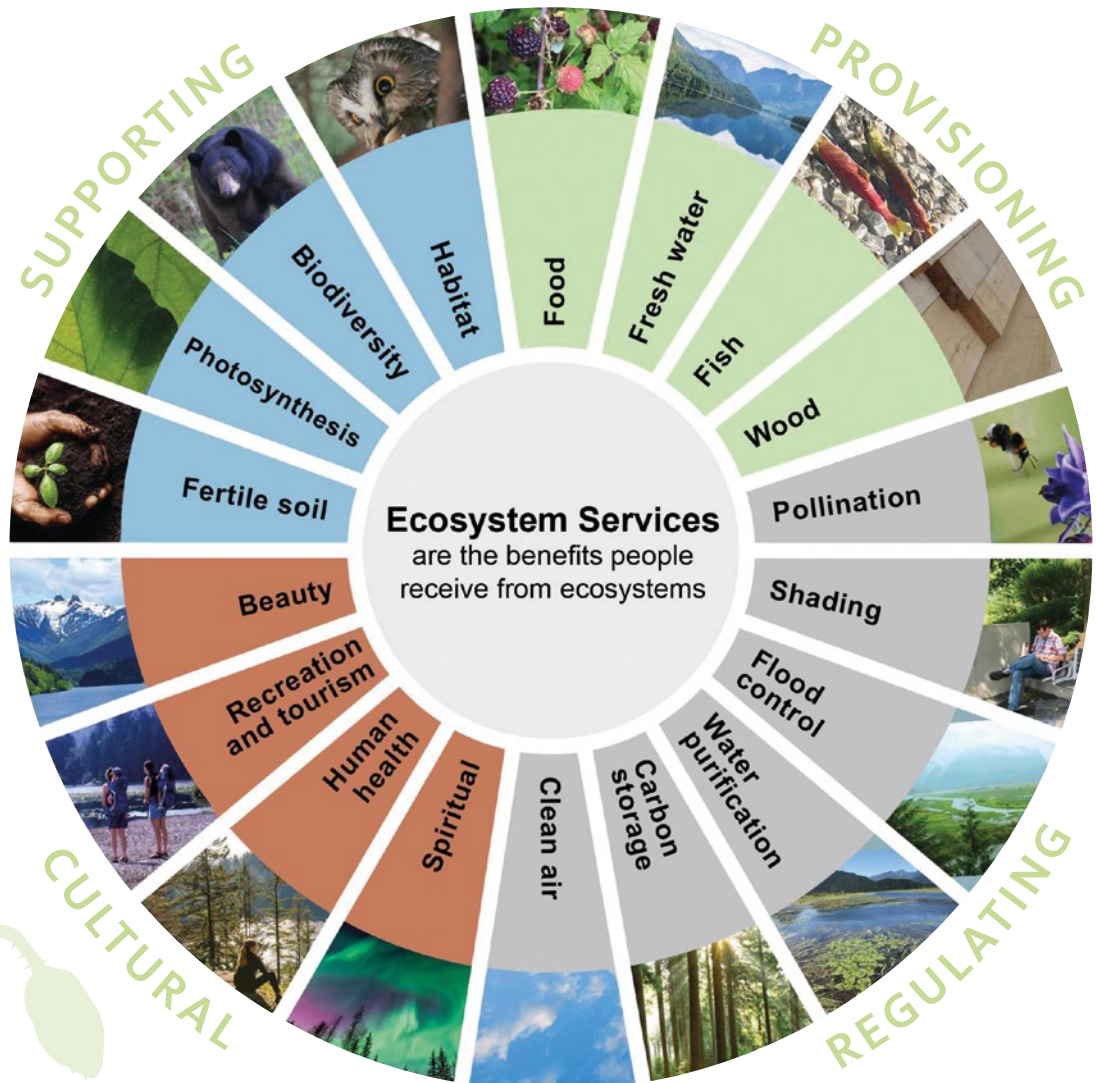
Supporting

Supporting services are those which are necessary for the production of all other ecosystem services. They differ from other services as their impacts on humans are indirect or occur over a long period of time. Examples of supporting services include the production of atmospheric oxygen (through photosynthesis), primary production, soil formation and retention, nutrient cycling, water cycling and provisioning of habitat.

Provisioning

Provisioning services are the products that are obtained from ecosystems, such as: genetic resources, food, water, fuel, bio-chemicals, fibre, natural medicines, pharmaceuticals, and building materials.





ABOVE: sustainablesolutionsllc.net - ecosystem-services

Regulating

Regulating services are the benefits obtained from the regulation of ecosystem processes. These include climate regulation, water regulation and purification, air quality maintenance, erosion control, waste treatment, regulation of human diseases, biological control, pollination, and protection from extreme weather and climatic events.

Cultural

Cultural services are nonphysical benefits that humans obtain from ecosystems through spiritual enrichment, recreation, and aesthetic experiences. Cultural services include cultural diversity, spiritual and religious values, educational values, sense of place, cultural heritage values and tourism for example.

Threats to Biodiversity

Biodiversity is in crisis globally, within the Island of Ireland as a whole and locally. Species are disappearing faster now than ever before in human history. How we use the land and sea is one of the main driving forces behind the loss of our biodiversity.





Habitat loss and fragmentation

The loss and fragmentation of natural habitats is one of the greatest threats to biodiversity worldwide. On land, a constant pressure across the whole of the UK and Ireland is that from baseline loss of habitat from conversion of land that was natural or semi-natural – to development, urbanisation, or inappropriate management.



Many species dependant on these habitats have declined as a result. The abundance indicator for farmland bird species shows a decrease in abundance on average of 43% between 1996 and 2021. In particular, woodland birds have declined on average, in the last 10 years (State of Nature Report 2023).

In Newry, Mourne and Down District approximately 720 acres of land within the Mourne Mountains were impacted by a wildfire in 2021. The fire left large areas of burnt and charred plants and grassland including sphagnum mosses and heather. Many animals and invertebrates perished in the smoke and fire, including ground-nesting birds and the common lizard. Fire can significantly increase a landscape's vulnerability to flooding and erosion events. The Forever Mournes Partnership¹ are working to make the landscape more resilient and able to adapt to the changing climate and drier, hotter summers. The work will help burnt areas to recover through careful conservation grazing, re-wetting and heathland restoration and monitoring of wildlife.

TOP LEFT: Grey Squirrel, Breffni Martin
FIREFIGHTER IMAGES: The National Trust

¹The Forever Mournes Partnership established in June 2023 is made up of representatives from National Trust, Mourne Heritage Trust, Woodland Trust, and Northern Ireland Water, with NI Environment Agency, Newry, Mourne and Down District Council and Forest Service as Associate members.

Invasive species, pests, and diseases

Non-native invasive species are a major threat to biodiversity. Invasive species continue to be introduced to the UK and Ireland through accidental and deliberate releases, stowaways in imported goods or escapees from gardens and large estates. The number of invasive species has increased in freshwater, terrestrial and marine biomes in the last decade in line with ongoing trends since 1970 (State of Nature Report 2023). Some native invasive species such as bracken and gorse for example, can also cause problems for important habitats. Key invasive plant species already affecting Newry, Mourne and Down District include *Rhododendron ponticum*, Japanese knotweed, Himalayan balsam, Giant hogweed and Cherry laurel, all surveyed in the Ring of Gullion Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), with potentially many more on the horizon. Alien invasive riparian plants such as Giant hogweed reduce the abundance and diversity of native plant species. They can also exacerbate flooding along watercourses by obstructing waterflow following high rainfall. After winter dieback, they leave riverbanks exposed to erosion.

Several plant and animal diseases also threaten our wildlife, including the ongoing impacts of ash dieback and sudden oak death for example. The lack of a functioning traceability system and local origin policy on the island of Ireland threatens local species and habitats. The recent outbreak of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) is the most serious the UK has ever recorded. The breeding season of 2022 saw a wide number of bird species affected, especially seabirds, and several individuals of various mammal species believed to have eaten infected birds. In total over 70 bird and mammal species have been affected (State of Nature Report 2023).



Pollution

The by-products of our everyday lives often become pollutants in the natural environment. Pollutants can take the form of plastic waste or litter, chemicals in water, soil or air, and even light and noise pollution. One of the most damaging forms of pollution is nutrient enrichment of sensitive habitats. Eutrophication has led to major losses of internationally important inter-drumlin fens and currently no river or freshwater lake in Northern Ireland has 'good' overall ecological and chemical status (State of Nature Report 2023). Fertilizers (chemical and from farm waste) contribute to biodiversity loss by altering soil composition, promoting the growth of invasive species, and contaminating waterways, which can disrupt aquatic ecosystems and harm wildlife.

Northern Ireland produces 12% of the UK's ammonia emissions, mostly from agriculture, while only representing 6% of the land area, resulting in harm to our drinking water costing the taxpayer millions extra each year. Ammonia also poses a serious threat to the heathland vegetation in our upland habitats, particularly sensitive species such as lichens, mosses, and heather. Pollution from domestic sewers is also on the rise and during heavy storms results in extra nutrients and raw sewage being washed into our rivers, seas, and lakes. Persistently high and increasing levels of nitrogenous air pollution are a major pressure on plants and lichens in Northern Ireland. Ammonia levels above the critical ecological threshold for bryophytes and lichens across the entire country and above the critical threshold for vascular plants across over a third of the land area (State of Nature Report 2023). Legislative controls have resulted in some progress towards reducing harmful emissions and there are some signs of recovery in fish stocks for example.

Pesticides and herbicides pose a significant threat to biodiversity by disrupting ecosystems, harming non-target species, and contributing to the decline of pollinators like bees and butterflies.

TOP LEFT: Flytipping
LEFT: Red Kite

²Lough Neagh: How do we solve the algae problem? - BBC News

³Untreated sewage: Some 20m tonnes spilled every year - BBC News



Climate change

Sometimes people think of climate change as a problem that exists elsewhere in the world. However, the effects of climate change can be seen across the UK and NI. Research indicates that climate change is affecting biodiversity at a faster rate than ever before. Certain habitats and species are more vulnerable than others, for example coastal habitats are showing the effects of sea level rises. Occurrences of extreme weather and flooding are also becoming more common, impacting humans and biodiversity.

In February 2020 a Climate Emergency was declared by the Northern Ireland Assembly. Newry, Mourne and Down District Council had already declared a climate emergency in October 2019 and agreed to develop a Climate Adaptation Plan to cope better with the effects of climate change across the district.

The new Climate Change Act (NI) 2022 sets a target of at least 100% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 (i.e., net zero emissions by 2050). The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) is required to produce 5-year Climate Action Plans (CAPs) to set out policies and proposals on how the emissions targets will be achieved.

CAPs must include annual greenhouse gas emissions targets as well as air quality, soil quality and biodiversity targets. Newry, Mourne and Down District Council will consider these policies and proposals when working towards our net zero target.

DAERA has drafted a Green Growth Strategy, which sets out the vision and framework for tackling the climate crisis.



RIGHT: Agricultural maintenance on farmland, Andrew Mackin

Overexploitation and Habitat Degradation

Unsustainable use of our landscapes for human consumption depletes wildlife populations and threatens species with extinction, habitats with degradation and soils with erosion and depletion. Human activities such as pollution, deforestation, intensive agriculture, and urbanisation can degrade habitats, reducing their suitability for native species and their resilience to climate change and other external anthropogenic threats. Peat extraction, for example, poses a severe threat to biodiversity due to its destructive impact on fragile ecosystems.

The loss of biodiversity will have huge consequences for the residents of Newry, Mourne and Down, with adverse effects on our food supply, our drinking water and climate stability, impacting our finances and our health and wellbeing.



Legislation & policy

Biodiversity: It's Our Duty

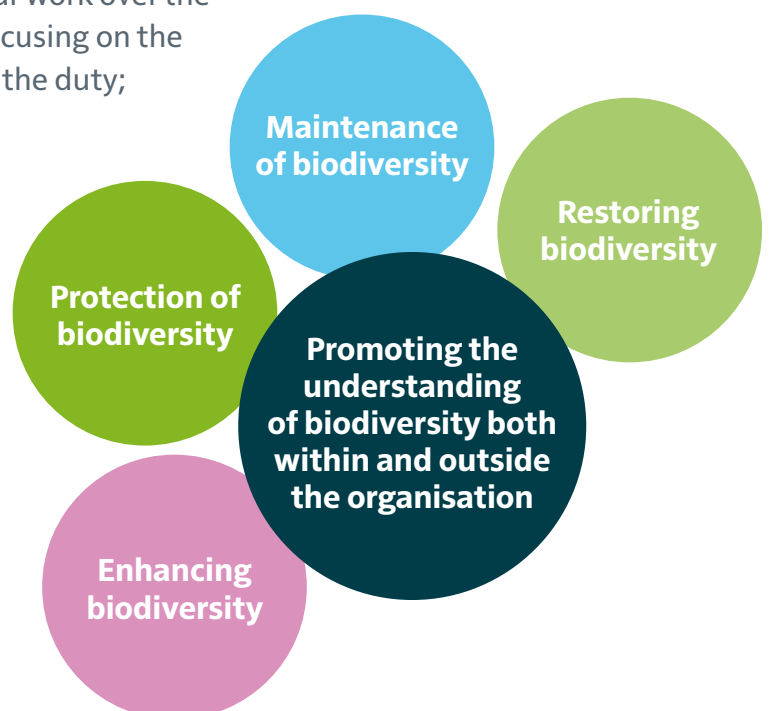
The principle legislation for the conservation and protection of wildlife in Northern Ireland is the Wildlife and Natural Environment (WANE) Act (Northern-Ireland) 2011. The WANE Act replaced the Wildlife Order (NI) 1985 and brought with it a statutory duty for biodiversity for all public bodies.

“It is the duty of every public body, in exercising any functions, to further the conservation of biodiversity so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions.”

Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern-Ireland) 2011

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council is working to embed biodiversity across all relevant operations, ensuring that we play our role in enhancing biodiversity through our everyday functions.

With the development of this Biodiversity Strategy, the Council hope to guide our work over the coming years, focusing on the five key areas of the duty;



Links to other Strategies, Policies and Plans

This Biodiversity Strategy considers a range of national, regional, and local policies and plans to ensure it does not sit in isolation.

The key commitments are outlined as follows:

International

COP15 – Governments from around the world met at the 15th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in December 2022 in Montreal, Canada. Here they agreed on a new set of goals to guide action through to 2030 on nature across the world. The Global Biodiversity Framework adopted at COP15 aims to ensure that nature’s ecosystem services are valued, maintained, and enhanced. And by 2050, the shared vision of living in harmony with nature is fulfilled. COP16 will take place in Cali, Colombia from 21st October – 1st November 2024 and will review the state of implementation of the Global Biodiversity Framework.

COP28 – The COP28 United Nations Climate Change Conference held in Dubai was the biggest of its kind and marked the conclusion of the first ‘global stocktake’ of the world’s efforts to address climate change under the Paris agreement. Results have shown that progress has been too slow across all areas of climate change action – from reducing greenhouse gas emissions, to strengthening resilience to a changing climate and

in getting the financial and technological support to vulnerable nations. Countries responded by calling on governments to speed up the transition away from fossil fuels to renewables such as wind and solar power in their next round of climate commitments. COP29 will be held in Azerbaijan in November 2024 and will build momentum on the progress made at COP28.

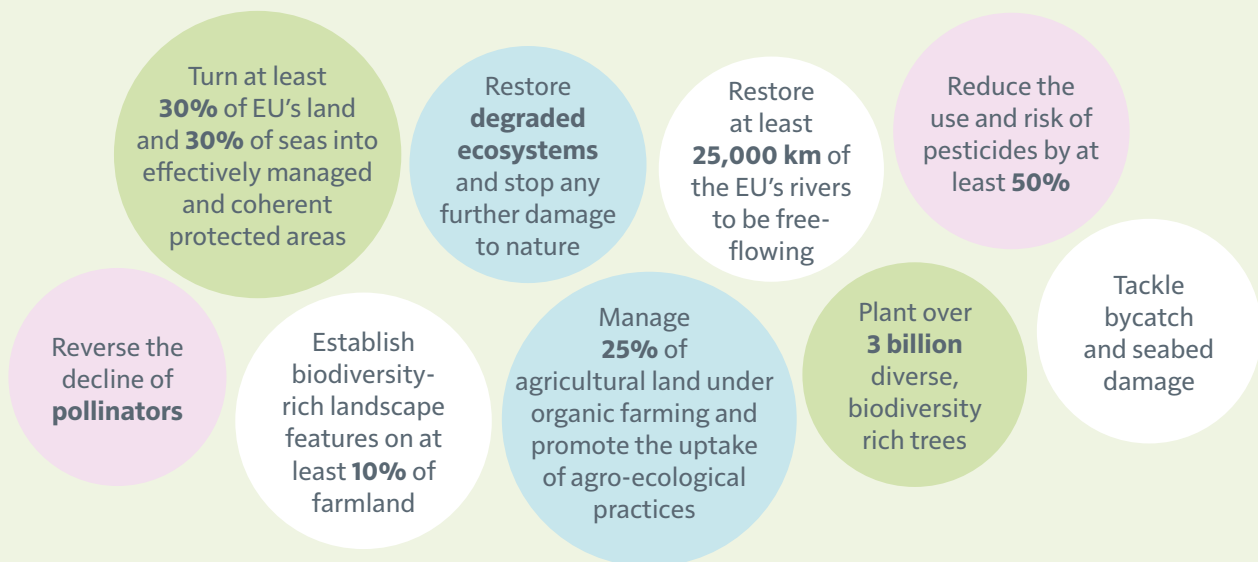


National

EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 – is a comprehensive and long-term plan to protect nature and reverse the degradation of ecosystems. The strategy aims to assist with the recovery of Europe’s biodiversity by 2030.

The 2030 Biodiversity Strategy builds upon and goes beyond the existing EU Birds and Habitats Directives and the EU Natura 2000 Network of protected areas.

It sets ambitious EU targets and commitments for 2030 to achieve healthy and resilient ecosystems. For example:



Nature Positive 2030 report

In order for the UK to meet its 30 by 30 commitments set out in the Global Biodiversity Framework, its five statutory nature conservation bodies came together to produce the Nature Positive 2030 report. The report looks at best practice across the UK and presents solutions that can be scaled up to achieve change.



All- Ireland Pollinator Plan 2021-2025

The All-Ireland Pollinator Plan is a framework bringing together different sectors from local authorities, to farmers, schools, gardeners, and businesses, to try to create a landscape where pollinators can survive and thrive.

One third of our bee species are threatened with extinction from Ireland. This is because we have drastically reduced the amount of food and safe nesting sites that support them. Newry, Mourne and Down District Council is an official partner of the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan and is committed to improving our district for pollinators.

Regional

Draft Environment Strategy for NI

The draft Environment Strategy is an overarching document setting out Northern Ireland’s environmental priorities for the coming decades and forms part of the Green Growth agenda. The strategy links a number of proposed actions and targets to improve our environment to the relevant Sustainable Development Goals set out by the United Nations.

Biodiversity Strategy for NI (pending)

The Biodiversity Strategy for NI to 2020 has been reviewed and consultation has begun on a new Nature Recovery strategy. It is hoped that the Strategy will be out for public consultation by the end of 2024.

The Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022

The Climate Change Act (NI) 2022 sets a target of at least 100% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) is required to produce 5-year Climate Action Plans (CAPs) to set out policies and proposals on how the emissions targets will be achieved. CAPs must include annual greenhouse gas emissions targets as well as air quality, soil quality and biodiversity targets.

Green Growth Strategy

The draft Green Growth Strategy is the Northern Ireland Executive’s multi-decade strategy to 2050, balancing climate, environment, and the economy in Northern Ireland. It sets out the long-term vision for tackling the climate crisis.

NI Peatland Strategy 2021 – 2040

The Northern Ireland Peatland Strategy provides a framework for conserving intact semi-natural peatlands and restoring degraded semi-natural peatlands. It identifies the ecosystem services provided by healthy peatlands, including climate regulation and adaptation, specialised biodiversity, good water quality, flood alleviation and an historical archive. Peatlands also provide a unique landscape for recreation and education. A cross-sectoral group, the Northern Ireland Peatland Partnership will provide oversight and ensure delivery of the strategic objectives and actions contained within the strategy.

Wildfires in NI – Draft Strategic Way Forward

This framework aims to tackle the threat and impact of wildfires. It is driven by 5 strategic goals including partnership working and building resilience into those landscapes and habitats most susceptible to wildfire.

Delivery of these goals is based around 6 Strategic Themes:

- Governance
- Engagement
- Land Management
- Response
- Policy, Legislation and Enforcement
- Evidence.

BELOW: Moneyscalp Wood, Bryansford



Local

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council recognises the importance of a healthy environment reflecting the region's natural diversity of terrestrial and aquatic habitats and ecosystems. This is evidenced by the role that biodiversity plays across many of our Council plans.

Draft Corporate Plan 2024-2027

Of the eight strategic outcomes listed in the draft corporate plan, those specific to the environment are:



Protect and enhance our environment to secure a sustainable future.

- Key actions under this objective include the development and implementation of the Biodiversity Strategy, a Climate Change and Sustainable Development Strategy, a Local Climate Change Adaptation Plan, and a Tree Strategy for Council.

Support regenerative tourism opportunities which promote our culture, heritage, and environment.

- A key action of this objective includes implementing the Mourne Gullion Strangford UNESCO Global Geopark Masterplan, which acts as a blueprint for responsible tourism, conservation, and education.

Deliver sustainable services.

- A key action of this objective involves accurate data collection to better inform actions related to sustainability and climate change.

Living Well Together – A community plan for Newry, Mourne and Down to 2030

The first community plan for Newry, Mourne and Down district describes a vision of “a place with strong, safe and vibrant communities where everyone has a good quality of life and access to opportunities, choices and high-quality services which are sustainable, accessible and meet people’s needs”.



The positive outcomes of the community plan relevant to the environment include;

- All people in Newry, Mourne and Down enjoy good health and wellbeing.
- All people in Newry, Mourne and Down benefit from a clean, quality, and sustainable environment.

Performance Improvement Plan 2024-2025

The Council's performance improvement objectives aim to enhance the sustainable quality of life for ratepayers and local communities.

Objectives with relevance to the Biodiversity Strategy are;

1. We will support the health and wellbeing of local people by improving our leisure facilities and services.
3. We will improve the cleanliness of our district by addressing littering, fly tipping and dog fouling incidents.
4. We will improve our sustainability and reduce our impacts in relation to climate change.



Biodiversity loss can have significant direct human health impacts if ecosystem services are no longer adequate to meet social needs. A diverse and healthy environment is crucial to human well-being at present and in the future.

Local Development Plan

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council has commenced work on a Local Development Plan (LDP) which will support economic and social needs in the district in line with regional strategies and policies, while providing the delivery of sustainable development. The unique, diverse natural environment within the district plays a vital role as a tourist attraction and contributes towards economic development. It is important however that any future developments are subject to rigorous independent environmental impact assessment and adhere to the precautionary principle. The objectives and policies of the LDP when finalised, will seek to protect, conserve, and enhance our environment.

Local Climate Adaptation Plan

Climate change is the long-term shift in average weather patterns across the world and is arguably the most serious threat we face today to our way of life. Newry, Mourne and Down District Council declared a climate emergency in October 2019. A Climate Change Symposium 'Our Climate – Our Challenge' was held on 12 March 2020 at Killeavy Castle. This high-profile event brought together a range of internationally renowned expert speakers as well as councils and community organisations from across the UK and Ireland who have demonstrated best practice in dealing with climate change and who have achieved practical solutions and carbon reductions on the ground. Leading on from this, council agreed to develop a local climate adaptation plan to mitigate the impacts their operations have on the climate. Working with Climate NI, the process is led by a Cross-Departmental Officer Working Group. The plan will include positive action to reduce our impacts on climate change (Mitigation) and increase our resilience to deal with its impacts (Adaptation).



In addition to the aforementioned documents, the **Biodiversity Strategy** will also compliment several other action plans and strategies (many of which are currently being drafted).

These include the Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy, Open Spaces Strategy, Ring of Gullion AONB Management Plan, the Strangford Lough and Lecale AONB Management Plan, the Mourne AONB Management Plan, The Mourne, Gullion and Strangford UNESCO Global Geopark 4-year Business Plan and 10-year Master Plan, Marine Protected Area Management Plans for Carlingford Lough, Murlough and Strangford Lough, and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council Tree Strategy. Special Area of Conservation Management Plans for Slieve Gullion and Eastern Mournes, and Down and Armagh Forestry Plans.

Moving forward with action for Biodiversity

The **Biodiversity Strategy** and associated internal **Action Plan** will guide the protection and enhancement of biodiversity across Newry, Mourne and Down District over the next 6 years to 2030.

The realistic, achievable plan will focus mainly on Council managed estate, but opportunities for partnership working will be explored and developed.



Newry, Mourne and Down District Council manage a diverse range of green space across the district. Mapping of Council maintained areas is still being carried out, as more areas are added to the Council register. Managed assets include forest parks, coastal areas, play and amenity areas, graveyards, playing fields, rights of way and many buildings, structures, and monuments.

Green spaces and open areas are places in which biodiversity can thrive, if managed appropriately. Managing our green spaces for biodiversity will increase their ability to capture and store carbon. They also provide recreation for people and offer health benefits associated with connecting with nature.



This Biodiversity Strategy will continue with the aims of our previous Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAPs), which are:

- To conserve and enhance the rich biodiversity of the district for both current and future generations.
- Educate and raise awareness of the importance and variety of biodiversity found within the Newry, Mourne and Down district area.
- Encourage local ownership of Newry, Mourne and Down district's biodiversity.

To ensure Council meets our biodiversity commitments and delivers on the biodiversity duty, we will focus action on 5 key themes.

These over-arching themes will allow for biodiversity management options to be implemented across a range of habitat types. The themes will be:

THEME 1	Protecting our Priority Habitats & Species
THEME 2	Trees and Woodland
THEME 3	Pollinators
THEME 4	Invasive Species
THEME 5	Raising Awareness and Education

Protecting our Priority Habitats and Species

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council is the third largest council area within Northern Ireland comprising approximately 11% of the total land area and over 100 miles of coastline. The district is renowned for its scenic beauty and contains many sites rich in wildlife and designated for their nature conservation value.

3rd
largest

council area within
Northern Ireland

100
miles

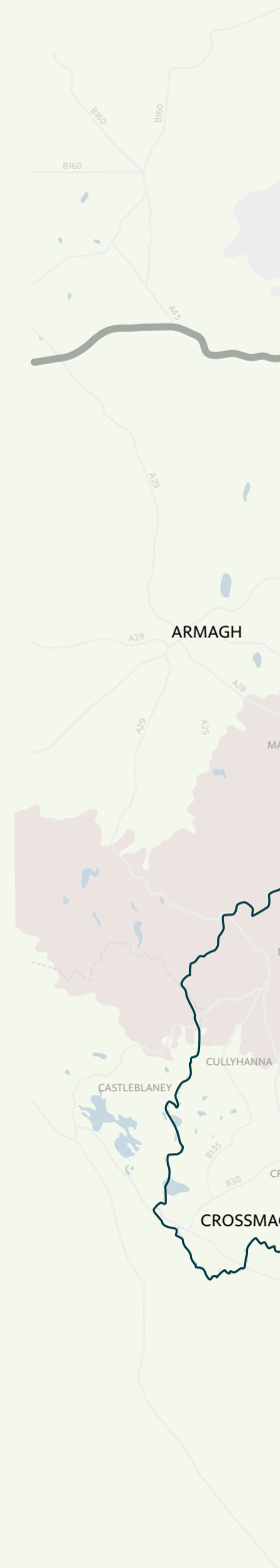
of stunning
coastline

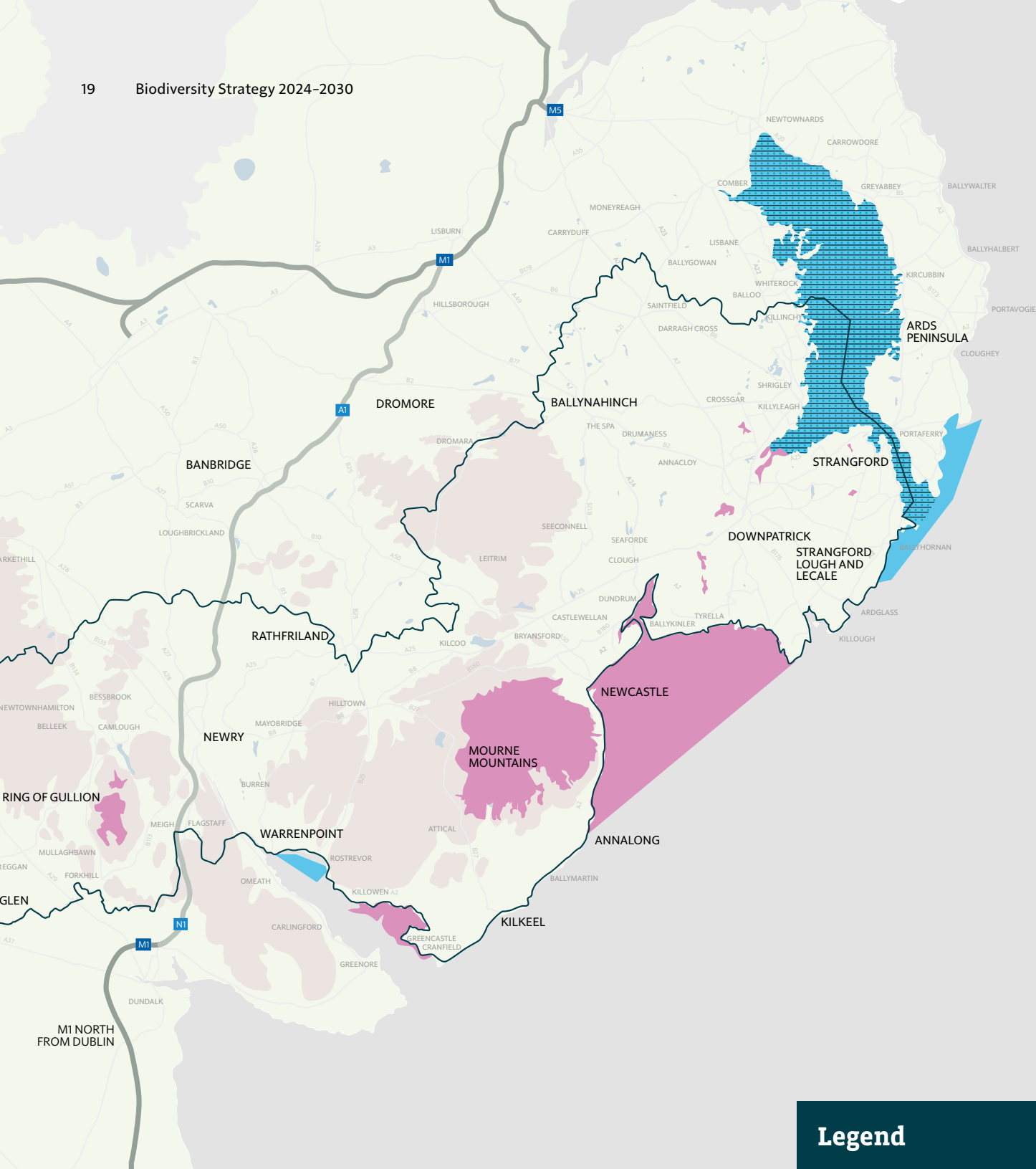
11%

of the total
land area of NI

90

protected sites for
nature conservation





There are over 90 designated sites of regional, national, and international importance in the Newry, Mourne and Down area containing a range of important habitats and species (Appendix 1).

Most of these sites are in private ownership. Newry, Mourne and Down District Council work with a variety of organisations and stakeholders to help protect and conserve these important sites.

Legend

-  **RAMSAR**
-  **SPA**
Special Protection Area
-  **SAC**
Special Area of Conservation
-  **MCZ Inshore**
Marine Conservation Zone

Protecting our Priority Habitats and Species

Biodiversity action across the district

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council has worked in partnership with other stakeholders to implement biodiversity action since the Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP) process began in 2007. A biodiversity steering group consisting of representatives from governmental departments, environmental organisations, and local community groups, led the development and implementation of LBAPs within the council area.



Partnership working with other councils North and South of the border has allowed a more landscape scale approach to biodiversity action. Newry, Mourne and Down District Council has acted as the lead partner on large Interreg funded, cross border projects such as 'Action for Biodiversity' (2010-2013), ASCENT⁴ (2016-2019), and 'CANN' ⁵(2017-2022). These projects have delivered significant outcomes for biodiversity, protecting priority habitats such as peatlands and wetlands.

Other Heritage Lottery Funded (HLF) projects such as 'Biodiversity Games' and 'Bee-licious' have also achieved targets for biodiversity recording and pollinators and highlighted the benefits of partnership working.

Dragons in the Hills, a project to improve our knowledge of the conservation status of our three native amphibians and reptiles: common frog, common lizard and smooth newt in the Mourne Gullion Strangford UNESCO Global Geopark, was awarded £100,000 from HLF. The project mapped their distribution and encouraged land managers to create and connect important habitat features, increasing the amount of suitable areas for these important species.

LEFT: Newry, Mourne and Down District Council representatives at the CANN closing conference.

⁴Ascent – Ascent (ascent-project.eu)

⁵CANN Project – Collaborative Action for the Natura Network (seupb.eu)



ABOVE: Common lizard © Ronald Surgenor
LEFT: A bat recording event organised
through the Biodiversity Games project.

Protecting our Priority Habitats and Species

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs)

The Ring of Gullion (ROG) and Strangford and Lecale AONB management plans also work in partnership with a variety of organisations and stakeholders to protect and conserve the landscape character and natural, built, and cultural heritage of the areas.

The Ring of Gullion Landscape Partnership scheme was part of the Heritage Lottery Fund's programme to conserve and enhance some of the region's most treasured landscapes. Led by Newry, Mourne and Down District Council, a £1.4 million programme aimed to engage people with the ROG AONB and surrounding landscape. Actions ranged from trail construction to storytelling and from interpreting the history of Newry canal to enhancing the areas rich biodiversity.

Another successful project in the area was ASCENT, which worked to address the environmental challenges facing seven northern European upland areas. Donegal County Council acted as lead partner, working collaboratively with Newry, Mourne and Down District Council, Mourne Heritage Trust and Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust in Northern Ireland, as well as partners in Finland, Norway and Iceland. The project worked to tackle the degradation, erosion, and loss of biodiversity at our upland sites using innovative tools and techniques.



Ring of Gullion
Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



**Strangford
& Lecale**
Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



RIGHT: Ring of Gullion, Alan Hopps



Protecting our Priority Habitats and Species

Strangford Lough and Lecale AONB is a coastal area containing unique and very different priority habitats and species to that of ROG. Species such as seals, dolphins, whales and basking shark have all been spotted in the lough.

The 'Share the Shore' project advises visitors of how to enjoy our coastal sites without causing harm to wildlife. Every autumn and winter thousands of over-wintering birds come to our shores from colder climes, for example Light-Bellied Brent Geese from Canada. They arrive with their young, tired, and hungry and need to rest and feed. They only have a small window to feed on the shore when the tide goes out. It is important that they are not forced to take flight unnecessarily as this causes them to lose a lot of energy and valuable feeding time. Share the shore reminds visitors to keep dogs on leads away from the feeding and roosting birds.

The coast care project worked with True Harvest seeds to help protect and conserve the important habitats and species of the coastline of the Strangford Lough and Lecale AONB. Volunteers assisted in making seed collections of threatened species, which were then grown on and replanted back into their areas after some habitat management. Surveying these habitats regularly will help to ensure these important habitats remain in favourable condition for future generations.

The management teams of the Ring of Gullion, Mourne, and Strangford and Lecale AONBs have also teamed up with the Woodland Trust to work with local farmers and encourage them to sign up for a farm plan project. The project focuses on the use of green infrastructure and management changes as an essential part of farming production.

UNESCO Global Geopark

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council has recently established a UNESCO Global Geopark. The Mourne Gullion Strangford UNESCO Global Geopark (UGGp) land boundary follows the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council administrative boundary. The marine part of the geopark encompasses the Marine Protected Areas (MPA) bordering the land part of the park: Murlough Bay MPA, Strangford Lough MPA and Carlingford Lough MPA. Within this unique landscape, organisations, communities, and individuals are united in their commitment to harness the full potential of this asset while honouring the rich heritage that defines the character of the area. The UNESCO Global Geopark brand will use the shared geological heritage of the three areas as a mechanism for sustainable tourism: generating economic benefits, providing recreational opportunities and increasing awareness of the natural capital of the entire area. (Appendix 2)



**MOURNE
GULLION
STRANGFORD**
Geopark



RIGHT: Brent Geese,
Strangford Lough and Lecale Partnership (SLLP)





Newry, Mourne and Down District Council will continue to work in partnership with other organisations and groups to promote, protect and improve biodiversity within the district.

Our next steps

- ▶ **Continue to deliver** the Ring of Gullion and Strangford and Lecale AONB Management Plans.
- ▶ **Continue to work in partnership** with stakeholders to deliver the Mourne Gullion Strangford UNESCO Global Geopark Masterplan.
- ▶ **Access funding streams** such as PEACEPLUS to deliver biodiversity and conservation action across the district.
- ▶ Choose one **‘flagship species or habitat’** per year to promote through awareness raising campaigns or practical action.

Trees and Woodlands





Trees and woodlands are some of our most valuable natural assets. Not only do they provide us with the air that we breathe, but they are also home to many species of plants and animals, some of which are threatened or vulnerable. Other ecosystem services of trees include carbon sequestration, flood alleviation, soil stability, natural play areas and many more.

A variety of woodland types can be found within Newry, Mourne and Down District.

Oakwood

Oakwoods are characterised by the predominance of either sessile oak or pendunculate oak, with downy birch in the canopy layer. The understory species consist of holly, hazel and rowan. Priority species associated with Oakwoods include red squirrel, common pipistrelle bat and song thrush.

Rostrevor Wood SAC is a wonderful example of an ancient oakwood, known to be at least 250 years old and a possible remnant of the original forest which once covered the region.

Coniferous woodland consists of areas planted with non-native species such as Sitka spruce, Norway spruce and Larch. While such woodlands harbour relatively few plant and animal species when compared to native woodlands, they can be important for priority species such as pine marten and red squirrel. Coniferous woodland can be found across the district, including Council managed forest parks such as Slieve Gullion and Castlewellan.

Mixed Ashwood

Mixed ashwoods occurs in small, isolated stands throughout the district. While ash is the dominant tree species, other species such as oak, downy birch, wild cherry, rowan, holly, hazel and hawthorn can all be present. Such woodland often has a rich diversity of plants in the ground layer including scattered ferns as well as carpets of bluebell, opposite-leaved golden saxifrage and wood sorrel.

Ash trees across Ireland and the UK are under threat of a disease called ash dieback, caused by the fungus *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*. It will kill up to 80% of ash trees, changing the landscape forever and costing an estimated £15 billion to manage (Woodland Trust). The loss of ash trees from our landscape will have a devastating impact on the biodiversity of our woodlands, as well as a major loss in connections between habitats as we lose hedges and individual trees outside of woods. Newry, Mourne and Down Council will continue to monitor ash trees on land we manage for disease and potential health and safety implications.

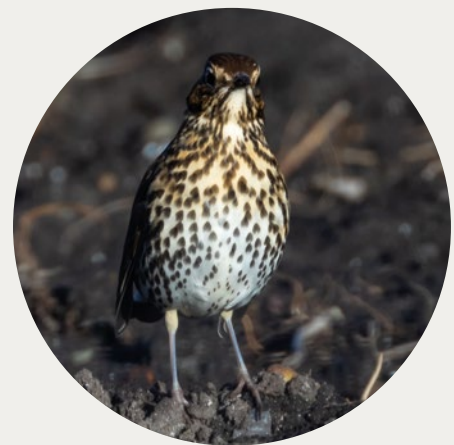
In Newry, Mourne and Down, mixed ashwoods can be found on Fathom Mountain and in the Newcastle valleys.

Trees and Woodland

Wet Woodlands

Wet woodlands occur on poorly drained land or areas that are waterlogged, such as around lake shores, along streams, on hill-side flushes and on fens and cutover bogs. Typically, wet woodlands are dominated by willow, alder or downy birch. There is normally a varied herb layer consistent with this habitat. The high humidity present beneath the tree canopy also favours the growth of a variety of mosses and liverworts. Priority species associated with wet woodland include song thrush, spotted flycatcher and common pipistrelle bats.

Wet woodland has developed undisturbed in Hollymount Forest National Nature Reserve (NNR) near Downpatrick since 1745, where yellow flag Iris and other wetland plants dominate the ground under the dense canopy of alder and willow trees.



Parkland

Parkland is a special type of woodland that is uncommon in Northern Ireland. They are designed landscapes associated with significant houses or demesnes. Parkland includes old or veteran trees where the land has often been converted to other uses such as arable farming and amenity land and where the surviving trees are of nature conservation interest. It generally contains some of the oldest and largest trees in Northern Ireland. Veteran trees can support cavity-nesting birds such as great tit, blue tit, spotted flycatcher, and barn owl for example, as well as roosting common pipistrelle bat and brown long-eared bat. Overall, Parkland is threatened or in declining condition.

Examples of parkland in Newry, Mourne and Down district include Creggan Poet's Glen and Mourne Park outside Kilkeel, which has recently been opened to the public.





Threats to our woodlands

Our trees and woodlands face a challenging combination of pressures, including:

- Climate change
- Inappropriate development
- Inappropriate harvesting methods
- Pollution
- Attack from deadly tree disease and pests

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council understand the importance of planting native trees and hedgerows. They are vital in tackling climate change and reducing biodiversity loss, acting as homes and natural corridors for wildlife. The Council is currently finalising a Tree Strategy for the district, which aims to direct future woodland planting and management. Newry, Mourne and Down has only 5.58% woodland cover. The tree strategy aims to increase woodland cover across the district in line with the 13% by 2030 target. Council is aware of the importance of conserving and protecting existing old, large trees. Where these trees need to be replaced, Council will replant larger, standard varieties where possible.

“Northern Ireland ranks badly as one of the least-wooded regions in Europe, with just 8.7% woodland cover compared with the European average of 37%. In addition, almost 60% of our woodland is in the form of recent conifer plantations.”

Woodland Trust, 2021

target to increase
woodland cover to
13%
by 2030

Trees and Woodland

Planting Schemes

The council will continue to work in partnership with businesses, community groups and schools to plant native trees and hedgerows within Newry, Mourne and Down District Council. Ring of Gullion AONB, recently joined by Strangford Lough and Lecale AONB, have done a yearly give away of at least 10,000 free trees for biodiversity since 2015. Another project saw Newry, Mourne and Down District Council work with ABP Newry to plant 2000 native trees across the district as part of the food group's environmental targets.

Native Tree Nursery at Castlewellan

Building on from the volunteer run native tree nursery at Tí Chulainn in Mullaghbawn, Newry, Mourne and Down District Council has relocated the nursery to Castlewellan Forest Park, where a permanent member of staff will be there to lead the project. The Council will continue to work with volunteers to collect, plant and nurture native trees to distribute locally for planting.

BELOW: Hawthorn Hill, Danielle Begley





Trees are our history and our future. They define our landscape. Newry, Mourne and Down District Council are committed to protecting and expanding our trees and woodlands.

ABOVE: Castlewellan Tree Nursery

Our next steps

- ▶ **Continue** to develop the native tree nursery at Castlewellan Forest Park.
- ▶ **Implement** actions in the Council Tree Strategy, including; Replacement of old, diseased trees, and ensuring a minimum of 90% native species are used across all tree planting schemes.
- ▶ **Work** with local community groups, businesses and other stakeholders on creation of new woodlands across the district.
- ▶ **Continue** with annual public tree giveaway coordinated by the AONB's teams and Geopark staff.

Pollinators

It is almost impossible to over-emphasise the important role that pollinators play in nature. Pollinators include species such as bumblebees, solitary bees, hoverflies and other insects.

All Ireland Pollinator Plan (AIPP)

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council are formal partners of the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan (AIPP). The All-Ireland Pollinator Plan for 2021-2025 is a five-year road map that aims to help bees, other pollinating insects, and our wider biodiversity.

Insects are pollinators of 80% of all plant species in Europe, including most fruits, many vegetables, and some biofuel crops (DEFRA). In Ireland, the pollination services provided for 'free' by wild pollinators have an estimated value of €900 million to the Irish economy (EPA, research 291). In the UK (and globally) £690 million of crops are pollinated annually by bees, moths, butterflies, hoverflies, flies and beetles (The Wildlife Trusts).

Newry, Mourne and Down district council has been working with DfI Roads to plant native wildflowers at suitable roadside verges across the district. These sites will become part of our rewilding sites and we aim to continue to work in partnership to deliver action for pollinators and other invertebrates.

Rewilding Newry, Mourne and Down

Newry Mourne and Down District Council began a new initiative in 2020 to 're-wild' areas across the district. This project involves improving Council owned greenspaces for wildlife by either changing the grass mowing regime or through planting native wildflowers, shrubs and trees.

By leaving areas of grass uncut, plants already present in the soil have the chance to grow and bloom, providing food and shelter for important pollinators and other wildlife. This method has been carried out in some of our larger parks such as Kilbroney Park in Rostrevor and Islands Park in Newcastle.





Our next steps

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council will continue to improve our district for pollinators and other invertebrates.

“If the bee disappeared off the surface of the globe, then man would have only four years of life left.”

Albert Einstein

- ▶ **Continue** to meet targets for the AIPP by improving Council greenspaces for pollinators.
- ▶ **Reduce** the frequency of amenity grassland cutting per year at selected sites, particularly during No Mow May.
- ▶ **Continue** to work in partnership with DfI and others to deliver action for pollinators.

Invasive Species

Invasive alien species are defined as non-native animals, plants, or pathogens whose introduction or spread has been caused by human activity. In some cases, invasive species arrive here accidentally, on our vehicles or belongings, but in many cases, they have been intentionally introduced, as plants in our gardens, or as pets.

Invasive species pose a significant threat to our native wildlife and the functioning of our ecosystems. The estimated annual cost of invasive species to the economies of Ireland and Northern Ireland is over €261 million.

(Kelly et al., 2013 report)

Legislation

The Wildlife Order (NI) 1985 requires all landowners to prevent the spread of key Invasive Alien species on their land. Article 15 of this legislation states it is an offence to introduce, grow in the wild, allow to escape into the wild, any species of plant listed under Schedule 9, part II of the order. Listed species include Japanese Knotweed, Himalayan Balsam and Giant Hogweed.

The Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, introduced new provisions and amended the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 to reflect the increasing significance of protecting Northern Ireland's biodiversity.

The Invasive Alien Species (Enforcement and Permitting) Order (NI) 2019 brought further sanctions for the introduction and control of Invasive Alien Species. A list of 66 Widely Spread Species of Union Concern is included within the Order, which landowners are legally obliged to put management measures in place for. Species listed include grey squirrels and giant hogweed. More information on each species and their distribution can be found on the Invasive Species Northern Ireland website www.invasivespeciesni.co.uk



Our next steps

- ▶ **Continue** with control and removal of known invasive alien plant species from Council owned/managed sites.
- ▶ **Highlight** invasive species week in May every year, raising awareness among the public of key problem species and how to treat them.
- ▶ **Apply for external funding** to trial alternative methods for weed and invasive species control.

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council have surveyed and mapped Invasive Alien Species on our managed estate using Geographical Information Systems (GIS) to assist with ongoing management and eradication. A full survey of Invasive Species in the Ring of Gullion AONB was carried out by INVAS Biosecurity in 2016 and an action plan is currently being delivered. The Woodland Trust surveyed Delamont on behalf of Council in 2021 and produced a woodland restoration management plan, which includes the removal of invasive rhododendron and cherry laurel. The Council have also liaised with DfI Roads Service and collated their invasive species records across the district to form a better picture of problem areas.

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council will continue to eradicate and control invasive alien species across our managed estate with the aim of reducing their impact on our native biodiversity.

Raising awareness and education

Raising awareness of the importance of biodiversity and a healthy environment both internally within Council and externally among schools and the local community is a key element of the Biodiversity Strategy.



Biodiversity Education at Schools

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council delivers biodiversity education to local schools through the Council Biodiversity Officer and the Ring of Gullion and Strangford and Lecale AONBs team.

Eco-Schools programme

Every school in Newry, Mourne and Down District Council area is registered with the Eco-Schools programme. The programme, coordinated by Keep NI Beautiful, provides an ideal way for fostering environmental awareness in the entire school, linking to many curriculum subjects. The primary aim of the Eco-Schools programme is to educate and empower young people to make positive decisions and become change-makers for an environmentally sustainable world.

The Council provides support to schools, on request, when undertaking action for topics under the Eco-Schools programme. There are eleven Eco-Schools topics, one of which is Biodiversity. Other relevant topics include climate action and outdoor learning.



Educating the public on biodiversity issues

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council use interpretation panels, information leaflets, workshops and training days to educate members of the public and relevant stakeholders about key environmental issues.

WiSe Training Scheme

WiSe is the UK's national training scheme for minimising disturbance to marine wildlife. The waters around our district are home to a fantastic variety of marine wildlife, whether visible from the shore or from a boat. However, these wild animals are vulnerable to disturbance if not encountered in a wildlife safe way. Strangford and Lecale AONB staff coordinate WiSe training days for relevant stakeholders, including boat operators and recreational users of the lough and our marine and coastal habitats.

Events and Awareness Raising

The Council runs a series of biodiversity and environmental themed events throughout the year hosted by the Biodiversity Officer, Ring of Gullion and Strangford and Lecale AONB teams, as well as the tourism department.

Events include big butterfly counts, bat walks, coastal activities, and red squirrel days. Other 'citizen science' events, where members of the public undertake scientific work, are organised in partnership with professional scientists and organisations such as CEDaR (Centre for Environmental Data and Recording). Training members of the public in species ID and recording is a vital tool in monitoring populations and deciding on whether action is needed to recover or control the species.

Raising awareness and education

Promoting Biodiversity

Biodiversity is promoted through the Council website, eLearning platform, internal council newsletters and emails. Press releases and social media channels are used to highlight specific events as and when they occur.

The use of interpretation panels and signage to raise awareness of a particular project, habitat, or species, is another vital tool in educating the public about biodiversity.



LEFT: Castlewellan Bioblitz event poster
BELOW: Looking at species under the microscope





When people connect with nature and understand the role it plays in improving our health and wellbeing, they are more inclined to want to protect it.

ABOVE: Castlewellan Bioblitz

Our next steps

- ▶ **Continue** to run an annual programme of Council led Biodiversity related events and encourage public participation in nationwide citizen science wildlife projects.
- ▶ **Continue** to provide biodiversity educational visits/workshops to schools on request as part of their Eco-Schools programme.
- ▶ **Continue** to educate the public and relevant stakeholders about wildlife disturbance through use of interpretation panels, leaflets and training workshops.

Monitoring and Reporting

Monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the **Biodiversity Strategy** and associated **Action Plan** is extremely important.



Newry, Mourne and Down Council recognises the need for adapting to changes in the wider strategic and legislative environment relating to biodiversity.

The internal Action Plan associated with this strategy will be reviewed and updated as appropriate in response to new strategies and legislation developed.

Performance outcomes including numbers of native trees planted and hectares of species rich meadow created and maintained for example, will be reported on annually, both internally and externally to relevant stakeholders. Council will also review the resources required to deliver on our actions annually and seek external funding and support when required. Actions will also be updated as and when additional partnership and funding opportunities arise.

LEFT: Camlough from Gullion

Appendices



Appendix 1

Designated Sites

There are over 90 designated sites of regional, national, and international importance in the Newry, Mourne and Down area containing a range of important habitats and species.

Special Protection Areas (SPAs)

In 1979, UN member states including the United Kingdom, adopted The Birds Directive which aimed to protect all European bird species. These sites deemed important for breeding, overwintering and migrating birds are designated as Special Protection Areas (SPAs). There are three SPAs designated in the district: Carlingford Lough, Killough Bay and Strangford Lough.

Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)

In 1992 the European Union also adopted a directive on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild flora and fauna, often called The Habitats Directive. This required all member states, including the UK, to designate a series of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) to protect some of the rarest or seriously threatened habitats and species in a European context. There are eleven SACs within the district including Lecale fens, Murlough and Rostrevor wood.

Sites designated under both directives for their conservation interest are often known as 'Natura 2000' sites. In 1995, the EU Habitats Directive was transposed into 32 Northern Ireland legislation as the Conservation (Natural Habitats etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995 (as amended). This legislation provides protection for our most vulnerable

habitats and species. Despite the UK exiting the EU, the level of protection to our habitats and species in the wider countryside and in our protected areas will remain unchanged.

Ramsar Sites

Ramsar sites are wetlands of international importance, listed under the Ramsar convention, where signatories are required to conserve such areas through the highest form of protection. A wetland is defined as an area of marsh, fen, peatland, or water, whether natural, or artificial, permanent, or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish, or salt and including areas of intertidal marine water. There are four Ramsar sites in the district, including Turmennan and Killough Bay.

Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs)

ASSIs are sites of special interest designated under the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002 (as amended). ASSIs are areas of land that have been identified through a scientific survey as being of the highest degree of conservation value, based on their flora, fauna and geological or physiographical features. They have a well-defined boundary and by and large remain in private ownership. There are sixty-two ASSIs within the District. Habitats range from species rich grasslands at Levallymore and Tullyratty, to fens at Turmennan and Ballycam, heathland at Slieve Gullion and the Eastern Mournes and running and standing freshwater at Shimna River and Lurgan Lough.

Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs)

Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) are designated under the Marine Act (Northern Ireland) 2013. The designation of MCZs seeks to safeguard vulnerable or unique habitats and species of national importance in the Northern Ireland inshore region (within 12 miles of the coast). MCZs form part of the NI Marine Protected Network (Marine SPA, SAC, Ramsar and ASSI). There may be circumstances where MCZ sites fully or partially overlap with other designations, but this will be to protect different features. There are currently two MCZs designated within the District, Strangford Lough and Carlingford Lough.

Appendix 2

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council’s biodiversity work in the Geopark and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

This section provides information on the management for Ring of Gullion and Strangford & Lecale Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and Strangford Lough, Murlough, and Carlingford Lough Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) within the Mourne Gullion Strangford Geopark through Newry, Mourne and Down District Council’s Environment Fund.

The various partnerships involved are committed to achieving measurable environmental outcomes. The focus is on fulfilling environmental obligations outlined in various strategies, policies, and legislation. Newry Mourne and Down District Council deliver the actions for this environment fund for The Ring of Gullion and Strangford & Lecale AONBs, along with the Strangford Lough, Murlough, and Carlingford Lough MPAs.

Our Objectives:

Enhancing Wellbeing Through Healthy Landscapes:

1. Creating environments that contribute to the overall wellbeing of communities.
2. Establishing places where people aspire to live, work, and visit.

Positive Sub-regional Environmental Impact:


1. Implementing initiatives with positive environmental effects at a sub-regional level.
2. Contributing to the overall health and vitality of the areas we manage.

Community Involvement and Support:

1. Securing substantial funding from two local authorities to support our initiatives.
2. Engaging volunteers in project delivery to foster a living, working landscape cherished by all.

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