

The Northern Ireland Marine Taskforce (NIMTF) is a coalition of non-government environmental organisations – it includes RSPB, Ulster Wildlife, Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, National Trust, Friends of the Earth, Marine Conservation Society, Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful, Irish Whale and Dolphin Group, Surfers Against Sewage, Shark Trust, Causeway Coast & Glens Heritage Trust and Northern Ireland Environment Link. The NIMTF has the support of approximately 100,000 local people. We are working towards healthy, productive and resilient seas for Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland Marine Task Force response to: [Consultation on the Draft Budget 2026-2029/30](#)
Submitted: 20th February 2025

NIMTF thanks the Department for Finance (DfF) for the opportunity to respond to the Consultation on the Draft Budget for 2026-2029/2030.

It is incredibly positive to see this consultation considering for the first time in over a decade a multi-annual, long-term budget which will help forward plan for delivery of many projects to make real change across the sectors of the NI Executive. As NIMTF highlighted within our previous response to the Draft Budget for 2025-2026¹, we welcomed the acknowledgement of ‘Our natural environment is under significant pressure and urgent action is needed to tackle what the public increasingly see as joint climate and biodiversity crises.’

NIMTF understands that planning for multi-year budgets are complex and requires a high level of forecasting to be able to best prepare for subsequent years and plan financially in accordance. It is much simpler to plan single, in-year budgets, but this creates uncertainty for long-term projects such as marine restoration work which needs to be achieved.

Northern Ireland is the 12th worst out of 240 regions for biodiversity loss², with many species in decline or endangered as highlighted within the State of Nature Report 2023³ and Seabirds Count (2023)⁴; key statistics highlight that globally the abundance of oceanic sharks and rays has declined by 71% since 1970, with a third of all sharks, rays and chimaeras now threatened with extinction⁵. At least 44% of the UK’s seagrasses have been lost since 1936⁶, with more recent data indicating losses of 92% for seagrass meadows, 86% for saltmarsh and 95% for oyster reefs⁷. The latest JNCC seabird census, Seabirds Count (2023) shows declines across 62% of breeding seabird species in the UK, with specific declines in Northern Ireland including the Atlantic Puffin by 70% and Roseate Tern by 75%⁸.

1 <https://nimtf.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/nimtf-response-draft-budget-2025-2026-finance.pdf>

2 RSPB (2021) Biodiversity loss - The UK’s global rank for levels of biodiversity loss

3 <https://stateofnature.org.uk/countries/northern-ireland/>

4 <https://www.bto.org/our-work/science/publications/reports/nis-report/northern-ireland-seabird-report-2023>

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<https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/55830845#:~:text=The%20number%20of%20oceanic%20sharks,now%20classified%20as%20critically%20endangered>

Additionally, there are also statistics aligned with environmental pressures which must be reduced to ensure we are achieving ocean recovery: Overall, 17,573 litter items were detected on the beaches surveyed in 2024. 84% of the litter found on Northern Ireland's beaches is made from plastic⁹. Northern Ireland still faces a significant litter and plastics problem, which is endangering marine ecosystems and harming our wildlife.

To turn the tide on these critical statistics, it is important that adequate and multi-year budgets and investment are available moving forward to ensure marine recovery can be achieved alongside tackling the climate and biodiversity crises.

1. Do you agree with the prioritisation of funding within the 2026-2029/30 draft Budget?
Yes, but it needs to go further

Budget Announcements (UK)

It is critical when considering any budget where additional allocations are coming from. Last year, an additional £12.5 million Resource and £1.6 million Capital DEL was announced within the 26th March Chancellor's Spring Statement (12th March 2025)¹⁰. The Treasury also announced an additional £146 million with respect to National Insurance Contributions (NIC)¹¹. Finally, an additional \$0.4 million Capital DEL was updated from the Autumn Budget (2024) through consequentials¹².

Whilst the above was welcomed in 2025-2026, none of the above were included within the specific budgets allocated to Departments.

For 2026-2029/30, the Autumn Budget (2025)¹³ came with some announcements to be aware of and to consider:

- Eligibility increase for enterprises
- Private investment and public investment challenges
- £8k of ISA allowance for investment
- Adjustments to electricity prices
- Internal industrial processes to be built
- £370 million additional funding for the NI Executive - over the spending review
- £70 million for businesses
- Pay-per-mile for EVs

Some of the above are subject to change depending on policy direction, but should also be factored in as only applying to a small section in relation to this multi-year budget.

PeacePLUS

PeacePLUS funding provides a critical, core commitment between the EU and the UK, with the programme coming to a closure within 2025-2026, however there are still existing commitments

under the 2021-27 PEACE PLUS programme, which provided a £1 billion net gain to the programme area for projects up to 2029. Within this figure for the marine a combined total of €24,794,328.34 has been committed for project delivery of the following areas¹⁴:

- Coastal Monitoring and Adaptation Planning (CMAP)
- A Changing Climate Impact Monitoring and Assessment Toolbox for Irish Seas (ACCLIMATISE)
- The Multi-disciplinary Ocean Sensing for Adaptive International Conservation Project (MOSAIC)

These core projects will ensure the delivery of significant contributions to data collection for important, endangered and/or declining species; develop monitoring tools, strategies and action plans and address challenges in managing a dynamic and more resilient marine environment in the face of climate change which fully incorporates society through citizen science.

It is important that a mix of public and private investment for Northern Ireland is sought to ensure that we can continue to deliver for nature and where areas we are not delivering on can be addressed with additional investment.

Irish Government Funding

It is welcomed to see not only continued investment by the Irish Government, but an increase overall per annum when including the Shared Island Funding and the A5, upping from £78.9 million Capital DEL per annum (2025 - 2026)¹⁵ to ~£131.65 million per annum (2026-2029/30)¹⁶. This continued level of investment is critical in addressing transboundary challenges such as enforcement and long-term monitoring programmes to progress marine recovery in areas such as Lough Foyle to Carlingford Lough, especially in terms of enabling DAERA and Loughs Agency to carry out their operational functionings which have suffered in terms of available investment into these areas.

DAERA Allocations and Specifics

NIMTF are pleased to see that this year the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) has the highest earmarked allocations for Resource DEL than any other across the NI Executive (Annex B). However, when we consider Annex A (Proposed Departmental Budget Outcome), DAERA (£674.3 million) is the 6th lowest out of 9 sectors, which puts it higher than Infrastructure (£654.9 million), Finance (£284.6 million) and The Executive Office (£217 million) when looking at 2026-27, given that for the majority of Departments, there is a slight increase in allocation for each subsequent year until 2028-29.

6 <https://www.zsl.org/news-and-events/news/planting-healthier-ocean>

7 https://www.blumarinefoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Seagrass-policy-report_V4-2.pdf

8 <https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/seabirds-count/>

9 <https://keepnorthernirelandbeautiful.knib.app/keepnorthernirelandbeautiful/documents/009659.pdf>

10 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/spring-statement-2025-speech>

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<https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/official-report/written-ministerial-statements/departments-of-finance-public-expenditure-final-budget-2025-26/>

Infrastructure Allocations and Specifics

NIMTF notes that Department for Infrastructure (DfI)'s allocations which have been earmarked, where relating specifically to the marine environment are in the case of NI Water and the associated borrowing which is required to address the wider issue of the NI Executive's Programme for Government 2024 - 2027¹⁷, where water pollution has been acknowledged as a core component within the current mandate. NIMTF welcomes allocations for NI Water and are aware that a financial review into the spending by NI Water was carried out, with a report finalised in July 2025¹⁸.

It is critically important that funding is still provided to NI Water to continue wastewater treatment, ensuring that there is not a limit to wastewater treatment as had previously been proposed. Whilst there is an identified funding gap to the total requirements of what NI Water have requested, it is important that NI Water assess how the use of Nature-based Solutions (NbS) can be utilised to help reduce costs in the long-term for NI Water and for DfI.

Measures must also be taken to reduce the load of pollutants and the attendant cost of their removal through effective regulation. By allocating funding to this area, we can reduce the pressure on wastewater treatment works by addressing issues at the source, rather than further down the pipeline and this would support policies such as the developing Water, Sustainable Drainage and Flood Management Bill¹⁹, alongside the Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems in New Housing Developments²⁰ - which both the Freshwater Task Force (FWTF) and NIMTF responded to²¹ - Significant Water Management Issues²² and the River Basin Management Plan current and future reporting cycles²³, which both FWTF and NIMTF responded to the 4th timeline²⁴.

2. What services should be prioritised in the 2026-2029/30 Budget?

NIMTF responded to the previous draft Budget with priorities which mostly remain the same. As has been highlighted within Question 1, the NI Executive's Programme for Government 2024 - 2027¹⁷ outlines core areas for this current government's mandate, with a particular focus on improvements to water quality as a fundamental aspect of improvements to health of the environment. NIMTF would recommend that all core areas within the current mandate remain a priority, but would propose the following be included for the remaining duration of the mandate:

- 30by30 Obligations
- Fisheries Management Plans
- Shoreline Management Plans

12 <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2022-2027/2024/pfsu/4724.pdf>

13 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/budget-2025-document/budget-2025-html>

14 <https://www.seupb.eu/latest/news/almost-eu25m-peaceplus-funding-awarded-marine-and-coastal-management>

15

<https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/official-report/written-ministerial-statements/department-of-finance---public-expenditure-final-budget-2025-26/>

30by30 Obligations

However, as we have highlighted within Question 1, we are now 4 years to meeting the objectives of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF)²⁵ in designating and ensuring management measures are in place for 30% of our land and 30% of our seas by 2030. This draft budget will provide some extent to the work into analyses and metrics which outlay the pathways to practical actionable delivery. In NI, there are obligations under the following legislative pieces:

- Marine Act (Northern Ireland) 2013²⁶
- Blue Carbon Action Plan 2025 - 2030²⁷
- Marine Protected Area Strategy Review²⁸ (to be published on 25th February 2026)
- Nature Recovery Strategy²⁹ (in development)
- Seabird Conservation Strategy and Action Plan³⁰ (in development)
- Elasmobranch Conservation Strategy³¹ (in development)
- Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) 2024³²

UK Obligations:

- UK Marine Strategy³³
- Joint Fisheries Statement³⁴
- UK Marine Policy Statement³⁵

The Environment LINKS UK (comprised of Wildlife and Countryside LINK, Scottish Environment LINK, Wales Environment LINK, Northern Ireland Environment LINK and NIMTF) produced a report summarising progress towards achieving 30by30, published at the end of 2025³⁶, highlighting that further work needed to be carried out across the relevant devolved nations to meet these national and international obligations. For Northern Ireland in particular, challenges are associated with monitoring and enforcement programmes.

Alongside existing work being delivered under the Peace PLUS programmes, there is also the Atlantic Coast Programme which aims to deliver a series of marine restoration work for seagrass meadows and kelp forests to connect across all four nations³⁷. Northern Ireland's pioneering Blue Carbon Action Plan 2025 - 2030²⁷ sets prioritisation to blue carbon habitats, notably seagrass and kelp. Given the upscalability to include potential avenues for Northern Ireland, resourcing for the delivery of partner projects outside of Peace PLUS, Environment Fund (2023 - 2028) and Marine Environment and Fisheries Fund (MEFF)³⁹ which are dedicated specifically for the marine would be welcomed to ensure effective delivery. Effective delivery under this area would consider community and stakeholder engagement, ecological feasibility and technology alongside implementation and enforcement.

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https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2026-01/Minister%20of%20Finance%20WMS%20-%20Proposed%20Draft%20Budget%202026%20to%2029-30_0.pdf

17

https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-03/programme-for-government-2024-2027-our-plan-doing-what-matters-most_1.pdf

By ensuring long-term, ring-fenced funding is available for project delivery and enforcement, national and international objectives are more likely to be met relating to the 30by30 targets and objectives.

Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs)

NIMTF welcomes the priority of farms and fisheries within the current budget allocations for DAERA, knowing that investment within the fishing sector is critical given that there are objectives to meet under the Joint Fisheries Statement and the modernisation of the Fisheries and Water Environment Bill. By 2027, NI will have produced several FMPs which cover our Non-Quota Shellfish (NQS), Intertidal Hand-Gathering of Shellfish, Pelagic and Demersal type fisheries to ensure an ecosystem-based approach⁴⁰. One of the difficult challenges in their success will be the level of enforcement which can address the lack of best practice shown. NIMTF has raised the need for Inshore Vessel Monitoring Systems (I-VMS), Remote Electronic Monitoring with cameras (REM)⁴¹ within the development of FMPs to ensure a consistent ecosystem-based approach is taken. The delivery of a Bycatch Mitigation Action Plan falls under the UK Bycatch Mitigation Initiative, which when fully funded and implemented will be used to support meeting bycatch-related actions within the FMPs.

NIMTF would like to see dedicated, ring-fenced funding for the implementation stage of FMPs to ensure that FMPs can be a potential delivery mechanism for achieving GES, to meet the objectives of the Joint Fisheries Statement (JFS).

By investing in our fisheries, it is also possible to ensure that a just transition is able to take place. This will ensure that we are able to meet the objectives of the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022⁴², where all sectors and departments must play their part in reducing their CO₂ emissions within each of the Climate Action Plans (CAPs). NIMTF have provided a response to the first CAP⁴³ which discusses that investment into greenhouse gas emission reduction methods through the use of Nature-based Solutions will have reduced costs in comparison to hard engineering - e.g. hard infrastructure such as sea walls and groynes, etc.

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<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-07/independent-review-of-northern-ireland-water-final-report.PDF>

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<https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/2022-2027/infrastructure/legislation/bills-primary-legislation/water-sustainable-drainage-and-flood-management-bill/>

20 <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/consultations/sustainable-drainage-systems-suds-new-housing-developments>

21 <https://nimtf.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/final-fwtf-nimtf-joint-suds-consultation-response.docx.pdf>

22 <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/consultations/significant-water-management-issues>

23 <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/topics/river-basin-management>

24 <https://nimtf.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/final-fwtf-nimtf-rbmp-timeline-consultation-response.docx.pdf>

25 <https://www.cbd.int/gbf>

26 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2013/10/contents>

27

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-04/Northern%20Ireland%20Blue%20Carbon%20Action%20Plan%202025%20-%202030.pdf>

Shoreline Management Plans (SMPs)

Within our response to the first CAP which discusses that investment into greenhouse gas emission reduction methods through the use of Nature-based Solutions will have reduced costs in comparison to hard engineering - e.g. hard infrastructure such as sea walls and groynes, etc. By establishing work under the first outlined priority '30by30' and implementing actions of the Blue Carbon Action Plan 2025 - 2030²⁷, NI will be able to further reduce down costs through the restoration of species and habitats to provide ecosystem services. However these will require finances for departmental enforcement to ensure that measures which are put in place are effective. NIMTF sits on the Marine Nature Recovery Oversight Group and we are assessing progress towards achieving and completing the actions within published strategies and policies.

3. Are there services that no longer need to be delivered or can be reduced in 2026-2029/30?

NIMTF would recommend that services do not be reduced, but would continue to advocate for a cross-departmental budget where departments which are jointly responsible for a task share their available resources in order to tackle issues - e.g. DAERA and DfI addressing water pollution; or DAERA and Department of Economy (DfE) and the development of offshore renewable energy developments.

4. Should further opportunities for full cost recovery be explored?

NIMTF recently gave evidence to the AERA Committee on Thursday 9th October 2025⁴⁴ on the topic of charges for marine licenses under the Administrative and Financial Provisions Bill⁴⁵. Within this briefing document, NIMTF discussed that whilst this would be welcomed, it should not be set so high that it is pricing delivery partners out of the ability to practically deliver on workstreams associated with core strategies and action plans such as the Blue Carbon Action Plan 2025 - 2030²⁷, draft Offshore Renewable Energy Action Plan (OREAP)⁴⁶ and the draft MPA Strategy Review (2024)²⁸.

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<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-northern-ireland-marine-protected-areas-mpas-strategy-review>

29 <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/consultations/draft-nature-recovery-strategy>

30

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-seabird-conservation-strategy-and-action-plan-northern-ireland>

31 <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-elasmobranch-conservation-strategy-northern-ireland-daera>

32

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/Environmental%20Improvement%20Plan%20for%20Northern%20Ireland.PDF>

33 <https://moat.cefas.co.uk/summary-of-progress-towards-good-environmental-status/>

34 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/joint-fisheries-statement-jfs>

35

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a795700ed915d042206795b/pb3654-marine-policy-statement-110316.pdf>

36 https://www.wcl.org.uk/assets/uploads/0/WCL_04_30x30Report2025_DIGITAL.pdf

37 <https://www.mcsuk.org/your-ocean-magazine/summer-2025/atlantic-coast-programme-preview/>

38 <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/environment-fund-2023-2028>

NIMTF would request that the Department also take the time within these public consultations to explain terminology which the public might not understand, such as ‘full cost recovery’. By not doing this it has the potential to create confusion, or complete dismissal of the question and could under-represent society’s views. We would recommend providing examples to society within the consultation documents for successful ‘full cost recovery’ projects so that society can forge a greater understanding:

- Carrier bag levy⁴⁷
- Water charges
- Rates charges⁴⁸
- Marine Recovery Fund (UK)⁴⁹
- Marine Licensing Fees⁵⁰
- Deposit Return Scheme⁵¹

5. Have you any other views?

NIMTF would like to thank DfF for the opportunity to respond to this multi-year budget, the first of it’s kind in over a decade. As we have outlined previously in this response, multi-year budgets set in the long-term are part of a best practice toolkit to ensure that marine recovery can be achieved for nature and society.

For further information, please contact the NIMTF Officer, Robert Walsh on robert.walsh@nimtf.org.

40 <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/fisheries-policy>

41 <https://www.mcsuk.org/news/what-is-remote-electronic-monitoring/>

42 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2022/31/contents/enacted>

43 <https://nimtf.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/climate-action-plan-2023-2027-nimtf-response.pdf>

44 <https://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/committee-37132.pdf>

45

<https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/legislation/2022-2027-mandate/primary-legislation-bills-22-27-mandate/administrative-and-financial-provisions-bill/>

46 <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/offshore-renewable-energy-action-plan-oreap>

47 <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/carrier-bag-levy>

48 <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/services/rates-calculator>

49 <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/marine-recovery-fund>

50 <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/marine-licensing-northern-ireland-application-fees-2025>

51 <https://defraenvironment.blog.gov.uk/2025/01/31/introducing-the-deposit-return-scheme-for-drinks-containers/>