



Special EU Programmes Board (SEUPB)

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Non-technical Summary

PEACE PLUS Programme 2021-2027

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RSK



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Author	<u>Nisha Rehm, David Horrocks, Poppy Grange</u>	Technical reviewer	<u>Rob Edwards</u>
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1 WHAT IS THE ENVIRONMENTAL REPORT AND WHY HAS IT BEEN WRITTEN?

RSK has been instructed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) to carry out a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of the PEACE PLUS Programme 2021 - 2027. PEACE PLUS is a new cross-border European Union (EU) funding programme supporting peace and reconciliation and economic and social development in Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland. It will build on and replace the predecessor programmes of the 2014-2020 PEACE IV and INTERREG VA.

SEA is a systematic process for evaluating the environmental consequences of proposed plans or programmes to ensure environmental issues are fully integrated and addressed at the earliest appropriate stage of decision making, with a view to promoting sustainable development. The process of SEA was introduced under European Directive 2001/42/EC¹² on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment (SEA Directive), and came into force in 2001.

The requirements of the SEA Directive are transposed into Northern Irish domestic law through the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2004 (SR 280/2004). Hereafter referred to as 'the Northern Ireland Regulations'.

In Ireland the enabling legislation is the European Communities (Environmental Assessment of Certain Plans and Programmes) Regulations 2004 (SI 435/2004), as amended in 2011 by SI200/2011, and the Planning and Development (Strategic Environmental Assessment) Regulations 2004 as amended in 2011 (Irish SI 436/2004 and SI 201/2011). Hereafter collectively referred to as 'the Ireland Regulations'.

The Environmental Report describes the outcome of the SEA. This involves an evaluation of the likely environmental effects of implementation and non-implementation of the PEACE PLUS Programme, including an assessment of realistic strategic alternative approaches. The Report also suggests measures to minimise potentially adverse environmental effects of implementing the programme, along with suggested environmental enhancement measures

The Environmental Report has been written to accompany the programme and has been issued to the statutory consultation bodies for viewing and comment by other interested organisations and members of the public for a period of eight weeks. This Non-technical Summary is a concise summary version of the Environmental Report.

2 WHAT IS THE PEACE PLUS PROGRAMME?

2.1 Background

The cohesion policy (or regional policy) of the EU provides a framework for financing a range of projects and investments designed to encourage economic growth in EU Member States, their regions, and third countries.

As a North-South Implementation Body SEUPB is sponsored by the Department of Finance (DOF) in Northern Ireland and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) in Ireland. SEUPB has a statutory role in the management of EU funding programmes in the programme area. The existing programmes in relation to the EU's 2014-2020 programming period are: PEACE IV in Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland (Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Louth, Monaghan and Sligo) and the INTERREG VA Programme which includes the same area plus the west of Scotland.

For the next programme period of 2021 to 2027, SEUPB is developing a single successor programme, known as PEACE PLUS, which will cover Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland. Projects in other regions may also be eligible if they are focused on providing benefits to the programme area. 'PLUS' represents the inclusion of wider economic, social and environmental activities within the scope of the programme.

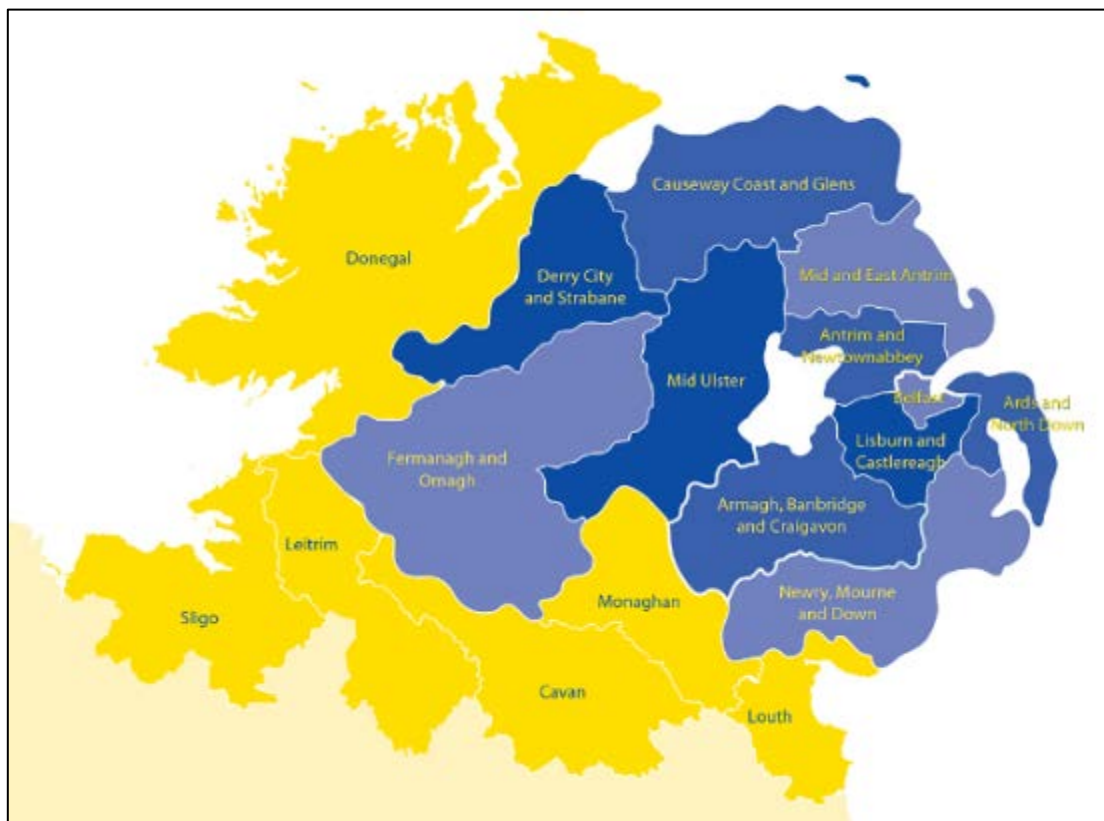


Figure 2.1: Programme Area

2.2 Themes

The overall objective of the PEACE PLUS Programme will be to build prosperity and peace within the programme area to ensure that the Programme leaves a lasting legacy. The Programme will have two interlinked core objectives; firstly to maximise the opportunities and address the needs arising from the peace process in order to boost economic growth and stimulate social and economic regeneration. Secondly, it will promote social inclusion, particularly for those at the margins of economic and social life.

The programme development process has involved engagement with a Programme Development Steering Group made up of key community representatives. An extensive Stakeholder Engagement process was also carried out which has involved 16 public events taking place, with over 1,000 people in attendance.

This process has led to the development of six themes to deliver on the core objectives set out above. These are defined below, with a brief description of the proposed Investment Areas under each.

Theme 1: Building Peaceful and Thriving Communities

Theme 1 aims to optimise engagement and participation across all communities and sectors and thus, ensure the maximum contribution to peace and reconciliation in the Programme area.

Theme 1 involves four proposed Investment Areas:

- **Investment Area 1: Co-designed Local Community Peace Action Plans** will enable and empower local community partnerships, led by the Council, to select and deliver priority projects on a cross community basis; which will result in improved local services and facilities; and make a significant and lasting contribution to peace and reconciliation.
- **Investment Area 2: the Empowering Communities** will empower community, voluntary and statutory organisations at all levels across the Programme area to contribute to the creation of a more peaceful and prosperous society. The Programme will develop the institutional capacity of community, voluntary and statutory organisations to embed and promote peace and reconciliation practice and services.
- **Investment Area 3: the Building Positive Relations** will promote positive relations characterised by respect, where cultural diversity is celebrated and people can live, learn and socialise together, free from prejudice, hate and intolerance. This programme will provide support for projects which transcend local boundaries and have the potential to achieve significant peace and reconciliation across Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland.
- **Investment Area 4: the Re-imagining Communities** is a transformative re-imagining programme, which will create new significant shared spaces for use by all communities; or increase the shared usage of existing facilities. It will result in an increased number of individuals and groups utilising shared spaces and accessing shared services. It will create a more cohesive society through an increased provision of transformative shared space and services, which will support and embed peace and reconciliation.

Theme 2: Delivering Economic Regeneration and Transformation

This theme recognises that the Programme area experiences low levels of entrepreneurship and innovation generally. This situation contributes to a high ratio of low to high paid jobs and comparatively higher levels of unemployment.

The theme proposes four Investment Areas:

- **Investment Area 1: SME Development and Transition** aims to enhance sustainable growth and competitiveness of SMEs and job creation in SMEs, including by productive investments. This IA aims to build upon existing investment to support SMEs to: operate at scale through cross border collaboration; engage in commercially led innovation; effectively transition to engage in the low carbon, circular economy; deliver productivity improvements or transition to the latest digitisation tools; and strengthen capacity for maximum engagement in a post Brexit, post COVID-19 economic landscape.
- **Investment Area 2: Innovation Challenge Fund** will support high level, commercially focused research, development and innovation within key Programme area growth sectors, resulting in increased productivity, higher export levels and sustainable employment. It will deliver major change innovation projects, which result in lasting local and national economic and social benefit.
- **Investment Area 3: Programme Area Skills Development** will support area-based approaches, designed to address key skills gaps, which will result in increased productivity and employment and higher levels of cross border labour mobility. The Programme will enable cross community and cross border collaboration between education and training-based collaborations which will reduce duplication and maximise the capacity to address existing and emerging skills gaps. It will encompass the opportunity for up skilling, reskilling, training and job placement opportunities.
- **Investment Area 4: Smart Towns and Villages** will provide greater access to and awareness of telecommunications. An area-based approach will be adopted to the creation of Smart Towns and Villages. This proven model utilises a social innovation led approach to maximise the potential of Information Communications Technology (ICT) to deliver improved social and economic outcomes in target areas; particularly those of a rural nature. The Programme will also incorporate measures for the transformation of vacant spaces and facilities within town and village centres for communal recreational and social usage.

Theme 3: Empowering and Investing in our Young People

This theme focuses investing in our young people as it is essential to ensure the long-term peace and prosperity of the Programme area. Whilst the current generation of young people has not experienced direct conflict to the extent their parents and grandparents did, they live with the legacy of the conflict.

The theme supports three Investment Areas:

- **Investment Area 1: Shared Learning Together Programme** will provide direct, sustained contact between children from all backgrounds through collaboration between early childhood settings, schools and youth organisations, to promote good relations and enhance children's skills to contribute to a cohesive society.
- **Investment Area 2: the PEACE PLUS Youth Programme** will seek to enhance the capacity of children and young people to form positive and effective relationships with others of a different background, develop their confidence and future potential and contribute towards the creation of a more cohesive society. The PEACE PLUS Youth Programme is a targeted capacity building Programme for young people aged 14-24 years, who are disadvantaged, excluded or marginalised, have deep social and emotional needs and are at risk of becoming involved in anti-social behaviour, violence or

paramilitary activity. The Programme is outcomes focused across a number of key areas including good relations, personal development, citizenship and employability.

- **Investment Area 3: Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing** will enhance the capacity of children and young people to form positive and effective relationships with others of a different background and make a positive contribution to building a cohesive society.

Theme 4: Healthy and Inclusive Communities

Three Investment Areas are identified:

- **Investment Area 1: Collaborative Health and Social Care** builds upon existing and new cross community and cross border collaborative approaches to health and social care delivery models (within specified treatment areas), to deliver an increased number of episodes of care.
- **Investment Area 2: Rural Regeneration and Social Inclusion** will support social, economic and environmental projects which contribute to sustainable regeneration, social inclusion and the creation of healthy and thriving communities in rural areas. By adopting a strengths-based approach, the programme will contribute to the creation of a more balanced society, in which our rural communities thrive.
- **Investment Area 3: Victim and Survivors** aims to create a more cohesive society through an increased provision of services. The PEACE IV Programme currently supports an integrated, outcomes based, community led support programme for victims and survivors. This has improved the lives of many victims and survivors in the Programme area and beyond, including cross community and cross border interventions. The Victims and Survivors Programme provides an opportunity to learn from and build upon this work, to provide additional support to victims and survivors. The proposed areas are as follows: Further development of the health and wellbeing case worker network model; Advocacy support programmes (Truth, Justice and Acknowledgement); Sector training and development; Research including new co-designed and action based approaches; and Further development of the resilience program.

Theme 5: Supporting a Sustainable and Better Connected Future

This theme recognises that our natural environment is one of our most important assets and its enhancement and protection is critical to the future economic and social development:

- **Investment Area 1: Biodiversity, Nature Recovery and Resilience** presents an opportunity to build upon current INTERREG VA Programme by continuing to promote cross border co-operation and facilitating the recovery of additional protected habitats and priority species. Investment will be directed towards further delivery of conservation actions proven to redress biodiversity loss and preserve these important environmental, social and economic assets.
- **Investment Area 2: Marine and Coastal Management** will enable a cross border approach to the protection of the marine and coastal environment from natural and anthropological threats; safeguarding this irreplaceable natural asset and resulting in economic, social and cultural benefits to the Programme area.
- **Investment Area 3: Water Quality and Catchment Management** will enable a cross border collaborative approach to the management and improvement of water quality in selected cross border water bodies. In line with the Water Framework Directive, this will be demonstrated by an improved classification over time. The Programme will promote sustainable water management. It will improve freshwater quality in cross border river basins and result in an increased percentage of cross border freshwater bodies in cross border river basins with good or high quality.
- **Investment Area 4: Water Quality Improvement Programme** will result in an improvement in the water quality of three specific transitional water bodies: Lough Erne,

Lough Melvin and Donegal Bay through cross border collaboration. In addition, raw drinking water quality will be improved through the reduction of pollutants, including those of an agricultural nature.

- **Investment Area 5: Geothermal Energy Demonstration Programme** will build the knowledge, skills and capacity required to develop a policy framework and encourage investment in the geothermal technology sector. Associated cross border collaboration to achieve the replacement of fossil fuels by indigenous renewable energy in the heat sector, will result in a reduced reliance on fossil fuels and enhanced energy security. It will deliver economic, social and environmental benefits across the Programme area.
- **Investment Area 6: Enhanced Sustainable Travel Connectivity** will increase connectivity in the form of sustainable public transport. It will involve significant investment in sustainable rail stock. The improvement of the rail service linking the two capital cities and the smaller adjacent urban centres of Portadown, Newry, Dundalk and Drogheda can exploit this dynamic to its full potential, providing spin-off agglomeration and wider economic and environmental benefits, including contributing to the long-term development of a zero emissions rail network. Investment in transport will be a catalyst for regeneration and economic growth, in particular on the economic corridor between Belfast and Dublin, including the border counties in both Northern Ireland and Ireland.

Theme 6: Building and Embedding Partnerships and Collaboration

This final theme aims to tackle legal and administrative obstacles to cross-border collaboration. It includes two Investment Areas:

- **Investment Area 1: Strategic Planning and Engagement** will support the engagement of strategic stakeholders, targeting legal and administrative obstacles to cooperation in relevant sectors. The funding will focus on enabling joint development and management of strategies; cooperation capacity building; and identification of solutions to reduce obstacles to cross-border cooperation.
- **Investment Area 2: Maintaining and Forging Relationships between Citizens** will put in place mechanisms to finance smaller projects that make a strong contribution to the social and civic cohesion on a cross border basis .

3 WHAT IS THE CURRENT STATE OF THE ENVIRONMENT IN NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE BORDER COUNTIES OF IRELAND?

Northern Ireland is a region of the United Kingdom (UK) that shares a land border with Ireland. In the most recent mid-year population estimate (2019) issued by NISRA its population was 1.89 million. The population of Northern Ireland was therefore approximately 2.8% of the total population of the UK for the same period (66.65 million).

The Border Counties of Ireland is made up from the geographical area of counties Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Louth, Monaghan and Sligo. It encompasses an area of 12,156 km², from the Atlantic Ocean to the west to the Irish Sea in the east. Much of the region is rural, characterised by its scenic quality and access to countryside based recreational activities. The population of the border counties is approximately 406,700 representing approximately 8% of the national population of 4.91 million.

3.1 Current State of the Environment

Ecology and Nature Conservation

Strengths and Opportunities

Northern Ireland

- Large area of land of international and national nature conservation value
- Increase in the number of marine protected sites over the last ten years and well as the area of sites under favourable condition
- Large proportion of the UK and EU blanket peat resource
- Large area of freshwater habitats
- Over half of Areas of Special Scientific Interest habitat features are in favourable condition

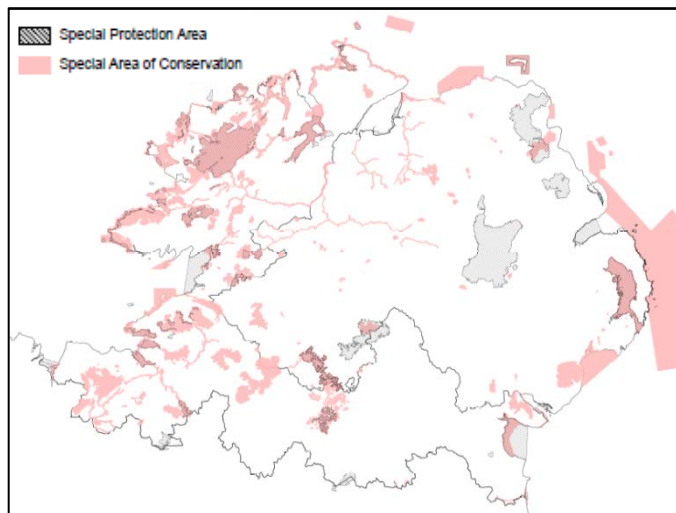


Figure 3.1: Natura 2000 Sites

Ireland

- Large area of land and sea of international and national nature conservation value
- Has a high proportion of Europe's remaining peatlands
- Over half of the Habitat Directive-listed species are in favourable condition and many are demonstrating stable or improving trends
- Many assessed seabird species are increasing

- Ireland's ecosystems have recently been mapped as part of a first step towards framework for a National Ecosystem Assessment

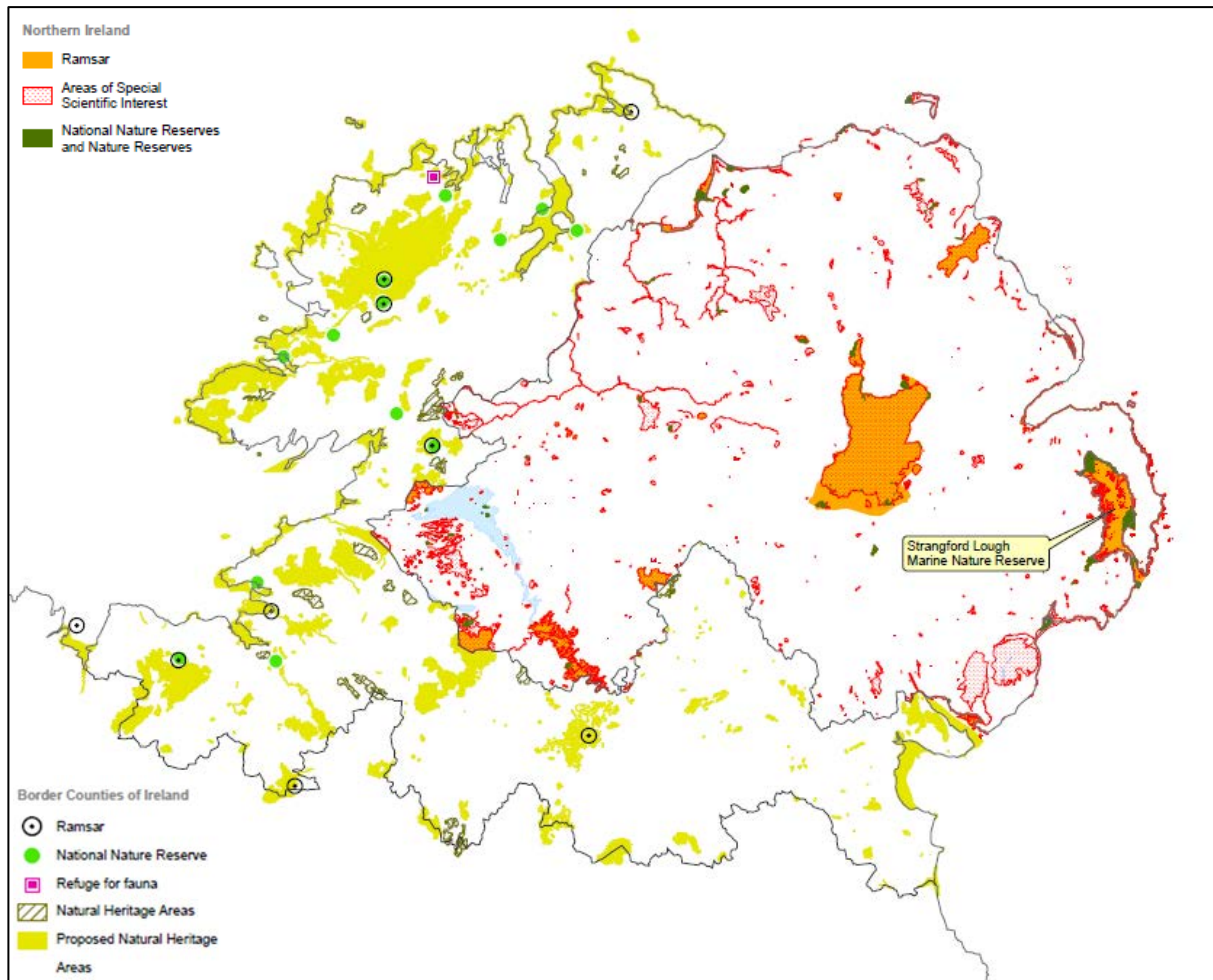


Figure 3.2: Other Designated Nature Conservation Sites

Weaknesses and Threats

Northern Ireland

- Continued loss of semi-natural habitat by agricultural conversion and building
- Number of habitats and species in unfavourable condition
- Declines in Biodiversity Action Plan habitats and priority species
- The lack of data on the current status of peatland and amount of lowland raised bogs which has been lost or altered due to peat extraction, forestry and drainage
- Threats from agricultural intensification, over- and/or under-grazing, pollution, the spread of invasive species, the spread of urban development and associated infrastructure and climate change

Ireland

- Unfavourable condition of habitats and species in protected sites due to unsustainable agricultural and fishing practices

- Continuing declines in species and habitats within protected areas
- Continuing decline in species and habitats outside of protected areas
- Threats facing areas outside of protected areas
- Threats on terrestrial, coastal and marine habitats through man-made pressures
- Potential impacts of climate change
- Increasing problems of pests, diseases and invasive species

Health and Quality of Life

Strengths and Opportunities

Northern Ireland

- The majority of Health Survey Northern Ireland respondents rated their own general health as very good or good
- The availability of health services compare favourably compared to other parts of the UK
- Bringing people together in rural areas to partake in active community engagement can lead to improvements in physical and mental health

Ireland

- Many people in the border counties rate their own health as very good or good
- The availability of health services compares favourably to the UK

Weaknesses and Threats

Northern Ireland

- High levels of obesity and overweight
- Expected rise in mental health illnesses
- Most of the country outside of urban areas is deprived in terms of proximity to services
- Impacts of Covid-19
- Many people do not get enough physical activity

Ireland

- High levels of obesity, particularly among the older population
- Impacts of Covid-19
- High levels of mental health illnesses amongst the population
- Although the number of people achieving the minimum level of activity recommended by the National Guidelines is increasing, it is still low

Population: Socio-economics

Strengths and Opportunities

Northern Ireland

- Rural communities have a strong sense of local identity with SME businesses embedded within these playing a positive role in the community
- Increase in economic activity rate in 2020 (prior to Covid 19)
- Economic activity rate remains above the wider UK average rate

- Education attainments are rising

Ireland

- Increase in education levels

Weaknesses and Threats

Northern Ireland

- Access to local rural transport services can be limited
- Employment rate is lower than the UK average

Ireland

- The percentage of people living in consistent poverty has been rising
- The unemployment rate has been rising, which may be partly due to Covid-19

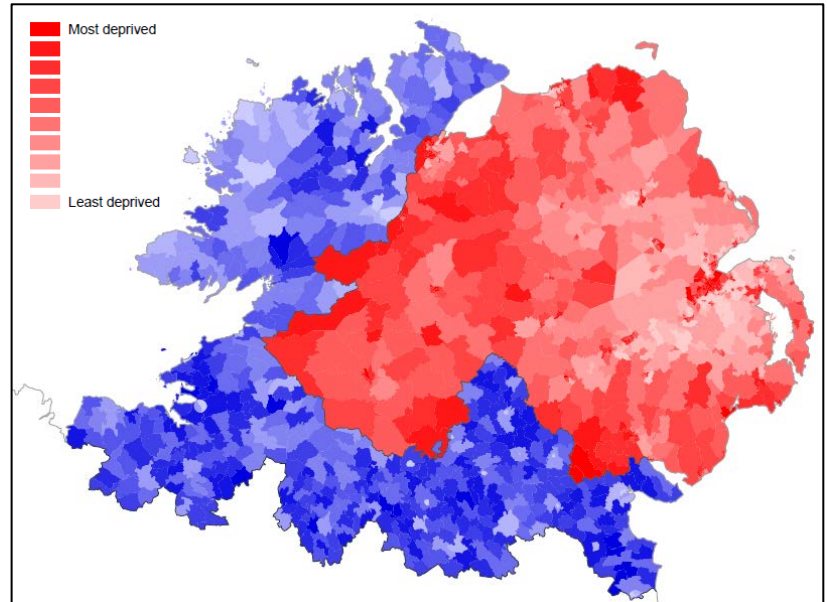


Figure 3.3: Deprivation Rankings for Northern Ireland and Ireland (Border Counties)

Soil and Land Use

Strengths and Opportunities

Northern Ireland

- Significant natural resources such as carbon rich soils (including substantial peatland) and high-quality grassland cover available to capture carbon
- Good proportion of land under agri-environment schemes
- Increase in new woodland planted
- One of the most geologically diverse regions in the world

Ireland

- The most important country in Europe for blanket bog
- Soil quality is good overall
- Forest cover is now estimated to be at its highest level in over 350 years
- Notably diverse geology that is prospective for a wide range of mineral deposits

Weaknesses and Threats

Northern Ireland

- The majority of peatlands are classified as unfavourable condition, degraded or modified
- Lack of agricultural activity on land currently classified as less favoured which increases the risk of land abandonment

- Absence of nutrient management plans on livestock farms which has likely contributed to the eutrophication of nearby watercourses
- The lowest level of tree cover in the UK or EU member state
- Legacy of land affected by contamination, often arising from its past industrial use

Ireland

- Increasing pressure on soil, particularly from land use changes, intensification of agriculture, erosion and overgrazing, afforestation, industry and urbanisation
- Has a number of contaminated land sites

Water

Strengths and Opportunities

Northern Ireland

- Increase in salmonid river lengths meeting the standards set by the Freshwater Fish Directive
- Majority of surface waters meet the relevant standard for nitrate pollution
- Concentration of groundwater nitrates are generally low
- Compliance of Waste Water Treatment Works against the numeric conditions of their Water Order consent has continued to improve
- Drinking water quality remains at the highest level of compliance
- Many monitored bathing waters meet the 'excellent' or 'good' standard
- Ten areas have been designated as shellfish water protected areas for the protection of shellfish growth and production

Ireland

- A relatively abundant supply of fresh water, which constitutes a key resource in economic, amenity and aesthetic terms
- The levels of seriously polluted river water has fallen
- Most of surveyed bathing water sites had good water quality or sufficient water quality
- Most of groundwater bodies and coastal waters are of satisfactory quality

Weaknesses and Threats

Northern Ireland

- Decrease in river water quality
- More than half of lakes are classified as 'moderate' or worse in terms of water quality
- The compliance rate for private sewage and trade effluent has decreased
- Increase in flooding and coastal erosion is predicted with climate change

Ireland

- Increase in number of slightly, moderately and seriously polluted rivers
- Only half of lakes and less than half of estuaries are found to be of satisfactory water quality
- Impact on water quality from agriculture and waste water discharges and impacts to the physical habitat conditions from excess fine sediment (hydromorphology), and from forestry activities

- Risk of increase in flooding predicted due to climate change

Air Quality

Strengths and Opportunities

Northern Ireland

- Air quality has improved considerably over the last few decades
- Monitoring data from 2018 determined that EU limit values, target values and corresponding Air Quality Standard objectives have been met by a number of pollutants
- Annual mean nitrogen dioxide and particulates concentrations have fallen

Ireland

- Air quality is generally good in comparison with other European states
- Monitoring of key pollutants in 2018 shows that Ireland continues to meet the EU air quality standards for most pollutants
- There has been an overall reduction in emissions between 1990 and 2018

Weaknesses and Threats

Northern Ireland

- Continued exceedance of nitrogen dioxide, ozone and benzo[a]pyrene concentrations at some monitoring sites
- Increasing ammonia emissions from agriculture

Ireland

- Localised air quality issues associated with nitrogen dioxide and particulates
- Wood and peat burning contribution to particulate emissions
- Increasing ammonia emissions from agriculture and non-compliance with the National Emission Ceilings Directive emission target
- Nitrogen oxide and non-methane volatile organic compound emissions non-compliance with the National Emission Ceilings Directive emission targets
- Challenge in meeting more stringent World Health Organisation and European Economic Area air quality reference guidelines

Climate Change

Strengths and Opportunities

Northern Ireland

- Total greenhouse gas emissions have reduced since 1990
- Electricity generation is changing with the closure of coal fired power stations in line with UK government policy to end coal-fired generation in the UK by 2025
- Electricity consumption from indigenous renewable energy sources has increased

Ireland

- Total greenhouse gas emissions have been decreasing due to increased energy efficiency and increased share of renewables

Weaknesses and Threats

Northern Ireland

- Higher than average share of UK emissions considering its share of UK population
- Greenhouse gas emissions due to the agricultural sector are disproportionately high compared to other UK and EU nations and over reliance on cars
- A number of changes taking place as a result of climate change such as changes in growing, breeding and migration seasons and weather patterns

Ireland

- Higher greenhouse gas emissions compared to EU28 average
- Due to miss greenhouse gas targets set for period 2013-2020 and is projected to miss 2021-2030 target as well mainly due to industry, agriculture and transport
- Increase in flooding and coastal erosion is predicted with climate change

Material Assets

Strengths and Opportunities

Northern Ireland

- Significant natural resources such as water, carbon rich soils and high quality grassland, whilst natural resources are also available for renewable energy generation e.g. wind, hydro, marine, biomass and solar.
- Extensive deposits of economically valuable minerals
- Municipal waste has decreased over the years
- Recycling rates continue to improve

Ireland

- Significant natural resources such as water, carbon rich soils and high quality grassland, whilst natural resources are also available for renewable energy generation.
- Significant mineral deposits
- Landfill disposal has fallen sharply
- Recycling rates increased since the early 2000s
- On track to meet its EU 2020 targets for municipal and construction waste

Weaknesses and Threats

Northern Ireland

- Municipal waste generation has increased over the last few years

Ireland

- Recycling rate for municipal waste has slightly declined
- Challenge in meeting the revised Packaging Directive's more ambitious plastic packaging recycling targets
- Heavily reliant on export markets, particularly for recycling

Historic Environment

Strengths and Opportunities

Northern Ireland

- Rich heritage of archaeological sites, monuments, buildings and ship wreck sites, with many scheduled or listed
- Large number of historic parks, gardens and demesnes (manorial estates) which have been an important feature of the countryside for three centuries
- Ten areas of particularly distinctive historic landscape character have been designated
- Significant number of Conservation Areas and Areas of Townscape/Village Character

Ireland

- Two UNESCO World Heritage Sites
- Rich heritage with a number of monuments recorded and under state care and protected structures registered
- New national heritage plan is currently being developed

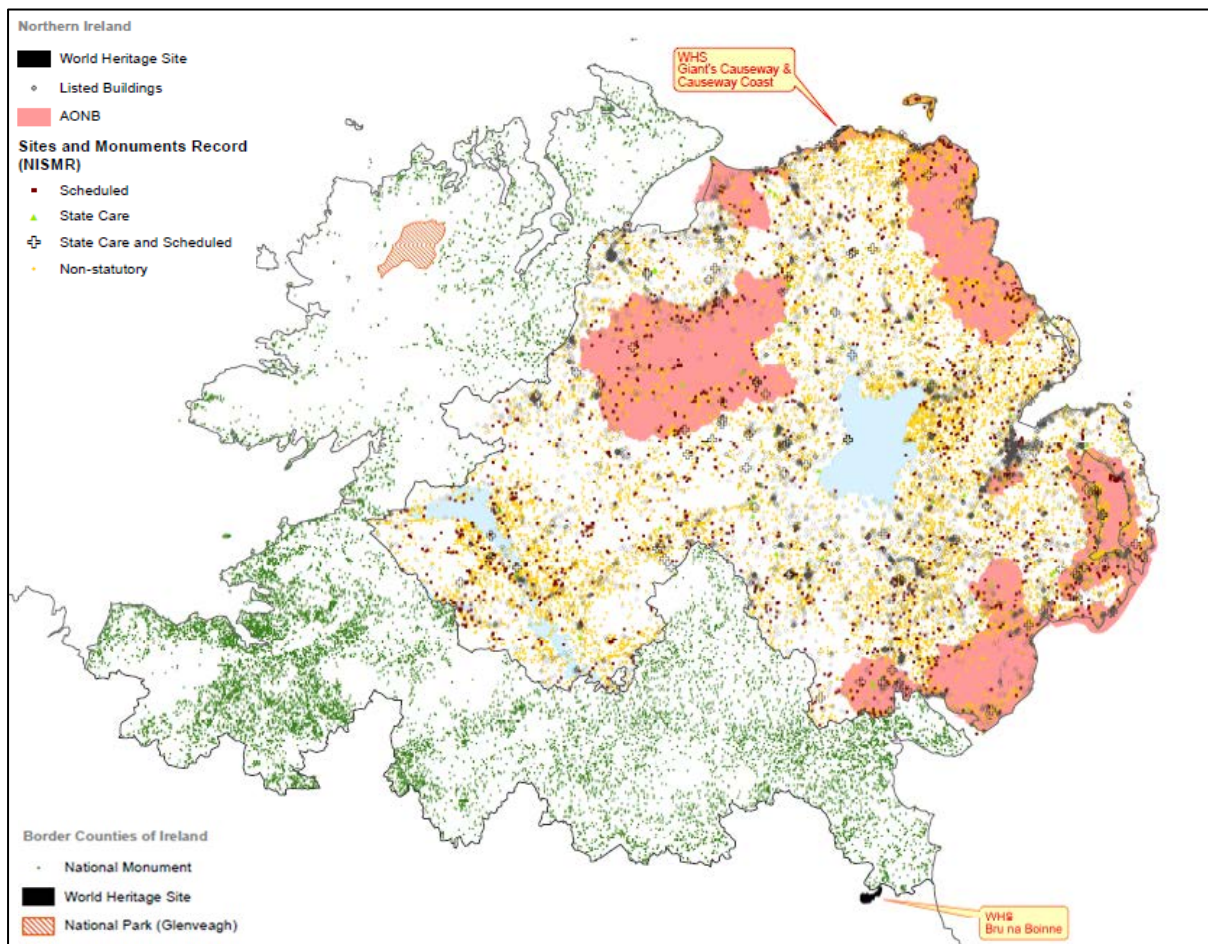


Figure 3.4: Statutory Designations - Landscape & Cultural Heritage Sites

Weaknesses and Threats

Northern Ireland

- Number of listed buildings and structures at risk has increased
- The historic environment is facing pressure from economic regeneration and climate change

Ireland

- Vulnerability of built and archaeological heritage to impacts of climate change

Landscape

Strengths and Opportunities

Northern Ireland

- Numerous protected area designations and major rural tourism attractions
- Eight areas designated as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty making up 20% of its total land
- 130 landscape character areas and 24 seascape character areas have been identified
- Has very specific historic landscape characteristics, such as ancient administrative townland boundaries and historic parish boundaries

Ireland

- There are six National Parks designated and recognised as nationally important landscapes (one within the border counties)
- Increase in forestry land cover since 1990
- The National Landscape Strategy was published in 2015 ongoing to 2025 which will be used to ensure compliance with the European Landscape Convention
- Draft Regional Seascape Character Assessment identified distinct seascape character types and regional seascape character areas

Weaknesses and Threats

Northern Ireland

- Landscapes have been strongly affected by rural development, particularly single dwellings and their associated infrastructure, and windfarms / single turbines, as well as by agricultural intensification
- There are no National Parks

Ireland

- Grassland land use has decreased since 1990
- Landscapes have been affected by housing and infrastructure development, agricultural intensification, forestry and decline/ loss of natural and cultural features

Natural Capital

Strengths and Opportunities

Northern Ireland

- Majority of coastline is protected and has great biodiversity value as well as critical natural defences against storms, floods and erosion
- Grassland and peatland are excellent carbon stores if managed appropriately
- Open space and outdoor recreation are increasing being recognised for their benefits to health and quality of life
- High quality natural and cultural landscapes and authentic surroundings demonstrates the potential to increase the contribution tourism makes
- Social use of both state and non-state woodland is increasing

Ireland

- Preliminary map of Green Infrastructure assets revealed strong green infrastructure in western counties, uplands and coastal areas, with the water network providing widespread opportunities for connecting features
- A number of studies are being carried out to identify the value of natural assets, those carried out to date have identified the value or importance of freshwater systems, marine systems and animal pollination etc.
- The marine environment is hugely important to the bio-economy, transport, tourism and recreational sectors
- Natural assets, including landscape and cultural heritage, are a significant draw for tourists
- Three UNESCO Global Geoparks, while other tourism initiatives such as the Wild Atlantic Way, Irelands Ancient East, and Irelands Hidden Heartlands have focused on nature, heritage and scenic related tourism (pre-Covid-19).

Weaknesses and Threats

Northern Ireland

- Lack of access to publicly available woodlands

4 HOW HAS THE PEACE PLUS PROGRAMME BEEN ASSESSED?

The PEACE PLUS Programme has been assessed against a number of SEA objectives designed to cover the broad range of environmental issues facing the programme area:

- **Ecology and Nature Conservation** – Protect, enhance and manage biodiversity assets and ecosystems
- **Health and Quality of Life** – Improve health and quality of life
- **Population and Socio-economic Factors** – Enhance life opportunities and promote strong community cohesion
- **Soil and Land Use** – Protect and enhance soil quality
- **Water** – Protect, enhance and manage water resources and flood risk
- **Air Quality** – Reduce air pollution and ensure continued improvements to air quality
- **Climate Change** – Minimise contribution to climate change and adapt to its predicted effects
- **Material Assets** – Conserve and enhance resources and reduce waste production
- **Historic Environment** – Protect, enhance and manage archaeological and cultural heritage
- **Landscape** - Protect, enhance and manage the character and quality of the landscape
- Natural Capital

These objectives are used within high level and detailed assessment matrices to ascertain the magnitude of likely effects, the sensitivity or value of the receiving environment (including people and wildlife) and the resultant significance of effects of the Investment Areas identified under each theme of the Programme.

Assessments of alternatives to the Programme have been undertaken, along with an assessment of likely cumulative effects of the Investment Areas within the PEACE PLUS Programme itself and accounting for likely in-combination effects with other plans and programmes. Opportunities for improvement and measures to address possible impacts have also been identified.

5 WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES?

With European funded programmes such as the PEACE PLUS Programme, constraints on what practical alternatives exist are often restricted by the need to comply with pre-determined criteria set at a European level. This can have the effect of limiting the alternatives that are available to the programme makers.

Six strategic alternatives have been assessed against the SEA objectives:

- **Alternative 1** – Do Nothing or ‘Zero’ Option
- **Alternative 2** – Continue with the PEACE IV and INTERREG VA Programmes 2014-2020
- **Alternative 3** – Draft Proposals as at June 2020
- **Alternative 4** – Other Relevant Specific Objectives not put Forward in the June 2020 Proposals
- **Alternative 5** – Proposal as Presented in December 2020 - February 2021
- **Alternative 6** – Other Relevant Specific Objectives not put Forward in the December 2020 - February 2021 Proposal

Alternative 1 generally performs the worst in terms of assessment against the SEA objectives because the absence of a programme would be to the likely detriment of the population (incorporating both socio-economic and health), ecology, water and natural capital objectives.

Alternative 2 scores positively against the population related objectives of socio-economics and health and quality of life but it would lose some of the more innovation, environmental improvement and green enterprise related objectives. The existing INTERREG programme also includes a greater element of support for capital works, which dependent on exact locations and targeting presents an increased risk of adverse effect on ecology, water and landscape in particular.

Alternative 3, 4, 5 and 6 all perform similarly, representing only relatively subtle shifts in the respective programme objectives. The main feature between these scenarios is Alternative 4’s more overt support for sustainable energy and transport related infrastructure. This presents greater scope for climate and air related benefits, but increases the potential for indirect impacts on other objectives including ecology, water and landscape.

Alternative 6 presents a balance between other alternatives, the most distinguishing feature being the greater focus on renewable energy and smart energy systems. Whilst this may lead to enhanced performance under the climate SEA objective in particular, some of the other benefits identified under Alternative 3 – 5 may be lost as a result. Overall, the performance of this alternative is not assessed as significantly different to other alternatives but the balance of the scoring by objectives varies to reflect the areas of focus.

Alternatives 3 and 5 by comparison are less overtly climate-focused (although Alternative 5 in particular does include some climate related objectives), but have a greater emphasis on the opportunities presented by environmental engagement as a means of delivering the over-arching themes.

Alternative 5 represents the selected chosen strategic alternative. This is on the basis of SEUPB’s analysis and community engagement activities which suggests it provides the optimum blend of priorities to maximise performance in terms of supporting and maintaining the peace process whilst also seeking opportunities to support and improve local environments within the programme area.



Therefore, the Policy Objectives and Specific Objectives included in the Alternative 5 for the PEACE PLUS programme is presented for public consultation.

6 WHAT ARE THE LIKELY ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF THE PEACE PLUS PROGRAMME?

As a predominantly community focused programme, all PEACE PLUS themes are found to have a generally beneficial effects on the community focused SEA objectives of health & quality of life and socio-economic.

In addition, Theme 5 *Supporting a Sustainable and Better Connected Future* is assessed to have beneficial effects on the non-population related objectives. This is due to its support for nature and nature based community activities, marine, coastal and water management and reducing greenhouse gases through sustainable transport and geothermal energy development.

Theme 4's Investment Area 2: *Rural Regeneration and Social Inclusion* is considered to have the potential for negligible adverse effects on ecology because the creation of green infrastructure, including cycle and walkways, and the resultant increase in public access could result in disturbance to species and damage to habitats, depending on where it is located. However, local planning controls and associated regulations relating to Natura 2000 sites and protected species provide a means of assessing impacts on ecology at a local level and hence it is unlikely that there would be significant negative effects at the programme level.

Theme 5's Investment Area 6: *Enhanced Sustainable Travel Connectivity* supports existing initiatives around improving cross-border rail services including for track upgrades and rail improvements. required to facilitate the improving rail services. Depending on the extent of work required and their location, the works could have local impacts on ecology, landscape, soil and water and by extension natural capital. Such works are likely to be subject to controls through the project design and planning process and relevant regulations to act to ensure that any effects are not significant. Negligible adverse effects are predicted on soils, water and landscape and minor / negligible adverse effects on ecology and by extension natural capital.

Overall the PEACE PLUS Programme is considered to have significant beneficial effects on the health and quality of life and socio-economic objectives and beneficial effects on the other non-population objectives. No significant adverse effects are predicted.

Cumulative Effects with Other Plans and Programmes

Whilst significant adverse effects primarily associated with those other programmes cannot be discounted, the PEACE PLUS programme is considered to support the identified SEA objectives and therefore it is not anticipated to lead to significant adverse effects either singularly or in combination with other plans and programmes.

Transboundary Effects

The PEACE PLUS Programme covers Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland and therefore by its nature, the effects of the programme are transboundary. There is also potential for effects to extend further than these two geographic areas because the programme is not strictly limited to the administrative borders of the programme area.



However no significant adverse transboundary effects are predicted because the few potentially adverse effects predicted were due to localised small scale impacts which are no more than minor or negligible adverse significance.

7 WHAT ARE THE KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MITIGATION OR ENHANCEMENTS?

7.1 Minimising Adverse Effects

No significant adverse effects are identified and therefore there is no requirement for mitigation. Nevertheless the following measures are identified in order to reduce the potential for adverse, non-significant, effects:

- Theme 4 Investment Area 2: *Rural Regeneration and Social Inclusion*:
 - New green infrastructure created or enhanced under this investment area should be sensitively located and public access to sensitive sites avoided
 - Any potentially adverse effects will be minimised through compliance with legislation, and standard survey and mitigation procedures as part of the planning application process
- Theme 5 Investment Area 6: *Enhanced Sustainable Travel Connectivity*:
 - Any potentially adverse effects associated with track upgrades and renewals will be minimised through incorporation of environmental constraints assessment into the scheme targeting process, accompanied by standard survey and mitigation procedures as part of the planning application process.

Following the consultation process it has been clarified that funding of green infrastructure under Theme 4 Investment Area 2 will be minimal and that Theme 5 Investment Area 6 will focus on rolling stock, with no track upgrades funded through the PEACE PLUS programme.

Accounting for the mitigation measures discussed above, the PEACE PLUS Programme is not anticipated to have any significant adverse residual effects on the identified SEA objectives.

7.2 Environmental Enhancements

The following potential enhancement measures are recommended. These are intended to improve the overall performance of the programme with a focus on the environment based objectives. The adoption of these recommendations is not a mandatory part of the SEA process and hence it is for SEUPB as the plan-making body to decide on the extent to which they should form part of the final programme.

- Promotion of environment related volunteering activities in cross-community and cross-border engagement programmes
- Support for environment, sustainability and climate themed education programmes
- Improving the condition of designated sites – tighter targeting of the programme objectives to direct activities funded under the programme to support the wider policy objective of improving the condition of protected habitats.
- Greening of shared spaces – direct funding towards environmental improvements

8 THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

The consultation version of the Environmental Report was presented for public and statutory consultation over the period 10 March 2021 to 12 May 2021, at the same time as the draft PEACE PLUS Programme.

Consultation responses relating to the SEA and/or environmental aspects of PEACE PLUS Programme were received from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) in Northern Ireland and the Environment Protection Agency (EPA), Department of Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC), Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) and Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) in Ireland as well as various public stakeholders.

Since completion of the public consultation exercise in May 2021, the key Themes and Investment Areas have remained the same. Minor changes were made to Theme 5 Investment Area 4. In the process of consultation and post consultation it has been clarified that the Green Infrastructure in Theme 4 Investment Area 2 will be minimal and the PEACE PLUS programme will not fund rail tracks in Theme 5 Investment Area 6, but will focus on rolling stock.

9 WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Once the PEACE PLUS Programme has been adopted, an SEA Statement will be produced to provide information on how the Environmental Report and consultees' opinions were taken into account in deciding the final form of the programme. This will also set out recommended measures to monitor the environmental impact of the programme.