

Kennedy A

This is my response to the consultation on the Draft Programme for Government (PFG) 2011-2015.

I am concerned that the Draft PFG lacks an overall vision and is light on key commitments for the natural environment. I believe that the Assembly needs to show the spirit and vision that is needed to make Northern Ireland a leader in sustainability and an example of what local democracy can achieve.

There is an intense focus in the PFG upon growing the economy but this should not be at the expense of the natural environment. Indeed, a healthy environment directly contributes towards a healthy economy - sustainable tourism and creation of the jobs needed to deliver a low carbon economy, are just two examples.

Whilst there are some good things in the Draft PFG, such as a revised Biodiversity Strategy and an Invasive Species Strategy, the document fails to put in place measures to help deliver them. In addition, there a number of significant gaps in the document that must be filled. I ask that the following targets are included in the PFG:

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- The creation of an independent environmental protection agency. This would act as a champion for sustainability and environmental protection, and prevent costly indecision and slow action on safeguarding our environment which leaves Northern Ireland taxpayers repeatedly exposed to the risk of enormous fines for breach of EU environmental law.
- A Northern Ireland Marine Act which ensures a framework for healthy seas and protection for a range of marine species.
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- Increased funding for rural development to allow all farmers to be brought into agri-environment schemes. These are one of the main ways of halting biodiversity decline and they also provide a range of other benefits including helping support rural communities by providing financial support to farmers and creating significant socio-economic benefits.

Finally, I want the Assembly to 'Step Up for Nature' by halting biodiversity loss by 2016 through a strengthened Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy and adequate resources to secure the delivery of biodiversity targets. Many of the recommendations above will help achieve this important target.

Yours sincerely A Kennedy

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