

# Sustainable Futures through Democratic Design:

Towards Community-led Democratic  
Localism in Rathlin Island

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## Executive Summary

This report summarises learning from activities that took place on or in relation to Rathlin Island, Northern Ireland, through a funded academic project exploring the island's sustainable futures using the lens of democratic design. Rathlin Island has a history of experimentation in relation to democratic involvement of citizens in public policy, including appreciative inquiry and visual minuting, which the report summarises. As an island, Rathlin reveals in sharp focus some of the challenges facing all societies about how to negotiate sustainability transitions while also maintaining a viable economy and equitable, liveable community.

Building on this, between 2023-25, a team of academics and practitioners in the Future Island-Island (FI-I) project funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)'s Green Transition Ecosystem programme, were supported to come together to explore, develop, examine and make sense of the possibilities for sustainable futures for Northern Ireland, through the lens of Rathlin Island as a place-based collaborator and teacher. This was carried out in close dialogue with the Rathlin Development and Community Association, the body that represents the Rathlin community and lobbies for improvements to services and infrastructure.

The team carried out analysis of the current disjointed policy context and worked with island residents through a structured deliberative process, or democratic mini-public, to explore the future of the ferry service they are utterly dependent on, paying attention to how this process was designed and facilitated.

The project's learnings are firstly on the level of process – how to do democratic deliberation and policy design with a small community on an island, rooted in their world, perspectives and priorities. Secondly, the report shares policy implications relevant to Rathlin's Island's sustainable futures of relevance to policy officials and decision-makers with responsibility for Rathlin's future in the Northern Ireland Executive and the UK Government and beyond.

It concludes with recommendations related to the future ferry service for Rathlin and to democratic design towards sustainable transitions, both intended to share insights with wider publics.

In summary, this report lays out an approach to doing democratic localism in which lived experience, local expertise and co-design are central to democratic policy development, cutting across traditional silos of government.

Report from Future Island-Island project, Work Package 5:  
Green Policy Design

September 2025

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Photographs of Rathlin courtesy of Katrina Newell

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## Challenges facing democracy and the opportunity to learn from Rathlin Island

**Lucy Kimbell, Brian Dixon, Brian Morgan, Katrina Newell and Justin Magee**

At a time of pressing environmental and social issues, from the cost of living crisis to reducing carbon emissions, there are numerous challenges facing democracy and public policy. These include distrust in public institutions, disengagement from political and democratic processes and a growth in misinformation. Into this setting, design – with its focus on people’s lived experience, local knowledge, co-design, creativity and practical experimentation in context – is increasingly visible as offering useful approaches to address such issues.

Such generalisations about the challenges facing democracy also have specific regional or local aspects. Northern Ireland (NI) struggles with significant issues around its governance. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 led to a new political and social settlement and ended decades of violent conflict in Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom (UK). While generally considered a success, it has also produced an operating model that led to five out of the ten years between 2015 – 2025<sup>i</sup> with no agreed government in place, resulting in, in effect, government by the Civil Service. In such settings, collective action has significant policy impact.<sup>ii</sup>

At another scale, there are rural, urban and island communities where politics and democracy have other specificities, shaped by geography, proximity and heritage. On a small island, for example, politics plays out differently when everybody knows everybody, on a shared landmass surrounded by water and reliant on ferries. Such circumstances mean that people must rely on one another and work together.

In this context, this report offers an opportunity to learn from activities that took place on or in relation to Rathlin Island, Northern Ireland, through a funded academic project exploring the island’s sustainable futures through the lens of democratic design. Rathlin Island has its own history of experimentation in relation to democratic involvement of citizens in public policy, which the report summarises. Building on this, between 2023-25, a team of academics and practitioners in the Future Island-Island (FI-I) project funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)’s Green Transition Ecosystem programme, were supported to come together to explore, develop, examine

and make sense of the possibilities for sustainable futures for Northern Ireland, through the lens of Rathlin Island as a place-based collaborator and teacher. This was carried out in close dialogue with the Rathlin Development and Community Association (RDCA),<sup>iii</sup> the body that represents the Rathlin community and lobbies for improvements to services and infrastructure.

To explore Rathlin’s sustainable futures using approaches rooted in democratic design, the authors describe how they carried out analysis of the current policy context and worked with island residents through a structured deliberative process – a Democratic Mini-Public (DMP) –to explore the future of the ferry service they are utterly dependent on, paying attention to how this process was designed and facilitated. Also presented are a range of broader policy-related insights drawn from across the wider body of FI-I work packages.

Its learnings are firstly on the level of *process* – how to do democratic deliberation and policy design with a small community on an island, rooted in their world, perspectives and priorities. Secondly, the report shares learnings about *Rathlin’s Island’s sustainable futures* of direct relevance to policy officials and decision-makers with responsibility for Rathlin’s future in the Northern Ireland Executive and the UK Government and beyond. This includes insights related to the wider sustainability context in which FI-I and its multiple work packages were positioned. It concludes with recommendations related to the future ferry service for Rathlin and to democratic design towards sustainable transitions, both intended to share insights with wider publics.

In summary, this report lays out an approach to doing democratic localism in which lived experience, local expertise and co-design are central to democratic policy development, cutting across traditional silos of government. While focussed on exploring sustainable futures for one small island, these insights are of wider relevance to other contexts with shared geographies and heritage, whether islands or in rural areas or urban Belfast.

## Introducing Rathlin Island

**Justin Magee, Lucy Kimbell, Brian Morgan, Katrina Newell and Brian Dixon**

Rathlin is the only inhabited island off the coast of Northern Ireland (NI), within the United Kingdom (UK) with a growing, deep rooted permanent population of approximately 160 people (141 in the 2021 census). There are also daily influxes of up to 800 visitors varying across seasons totalling approximately 50,000 a year. Linking to this, the local economy includes tourism, hospitality, retail, marine-related industries, farming and the creative industries, with three significant funded projects totalling £14.4m.<sup>iv</sup> It is also a Special Protected Area<sup>v</sup> to protect breeding and wintering of migrating birds, with a distinct biodiversity.

Given these characteristics, the island reveals in sharp focus some of the challenges facing all societies about how to negotiate sustainability transitions while also maintaining a viable economy and equitable, liveable community. Residents, public services and businesses based on or serving the island are all reliant on a ferry to Ballycastle on the mainland for deliveries, the flows of people, products and services and for secondary school pupils to travel to and from school.

Islands like Rathlin throw up particular opportunities to think about democracy and policy development. In general terms, islands exhibit a tendency towards “despotic” governance coupled with an informality of processes. Here issues of power become central.<sup>vi</sup> People living on Rathlin, just like many other islands all over the world, tend to discuss important matters informally<sup>viii</sup> in contrast to common practices of policy development rooted in formal procedures.

In terms of governance, the RDCA has responsibility for articulating priorities for policy and public services, within an overall framework and ongoing dialogues with the NI Government. The RDCA is a voluntary membership organisation and charity which brings together and represents the Rathlin community. While Rathlin Island falls within the jurisdiction of Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, its unique island context means that the RDCA has become the primary conduit for representing the island’s interests. The next section shows how its community has a sustained tradition of democratic innovation to enable responding to the challenges it faces.





## Innovation in governance on Rathlin

**Katrina Newell, Brian Morgan and Brian Dixon**

Rathlin Island offers a rich example of democratic innovation in governance, where sustained, community-led processes have reshaped decision-making, strengthened relationships, and influenced policy development. These practices have been creatively and consistently documented through a series of "visual minutes" produced between 2014 and 2023. Commissioned by the RDCA, the Department for Infrastructure, and the LIFE Raft Project, and illustrated by specialist consultancy More Than Minutes, the visual minutes are grounded in a longer trajectory of strategic engagement and local advocacy.<sup>ix</sup>

### Foundations for Participatory Planning (2010–2014)

Prior to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, foundations for more structured and strategic engagement with government had been developing on Rathlin Island<sup>x</sup>. During the period of Direct Rule<sup>xi</sup>, Rathlin had limited or no access to politicians, decision-makers, policy-makers, or budget holders. The island community was effectively left to manage on its own, with little attention from statutory authorities. Residents felt that the local council largely overlooked the island's needs and, as a result, the RDCA committee had to be proactive – raising its voice, advocating strongly, and persistently campaigning to ensure the island's concerns were heard.

Individuals with links to both Rathlin and central government played a pivotal role in amplifying the voices of islanders and helped create channels of communication to what would later become the Northern Ireland Executive. In 2010, Conor Murphy – then Minister for the Department for Regional Development (DRD), Northern Ireland<sup>xii</sup>, which oversaw the ferry service as part of its public transport responsibilities – recognised the call within the community for a more coordinated multi-departmental response to the Island. He proposed the creation of a Rathlin policy that would reflect this reality, leading to the introduction of the Rathlin Island Policy (2010), co-developed with RDCA and Community Places.<sup>xiii, xiv</sup>

A Ministerial Forum was established, chaired by the DRD Minister and included senior officials and island representatives, leading to the island's first Action Plan (2010–2012).

The Rathlin Policy is a distinctive, co-produced framework that sets strategic priorities for Rathlin as Northern Ireland's only inhabited island. To the best of the authors' knowledge, it is the only single-island policy across the UK or Ireland – an important distinction that speaks to both its uniqueness and its tailored approach to place-based governance.

The policy is not intended to function as a static directive, but rather as a living framework shaped by collaboration between the Northern Ireland Executive, the RDCA, and other public and civic stakeholders. In principle, it provides a mechanism to enable responsive action in key areas such as ferry infrastructure, housing, healthcare, broadband, renewable energy, cultural heritage, tourism, and the environment. It is implemented through a three-way partnership, regularly reviewed via a Ministerial Forum. It is held in person on the island on an annual basis, with ongoing monitoring and reporting.

The Rathlin Island Policy's significance lies not only in its scope but also in its method: it arguably exemplifies democratic localism in practice through its centring of lived experience and local knowledge, which seeks to support adaptive, community-led governance for a sustainable island future.

The Action Plan, Policy and Forum have been complimented by the RDCA's own work. At the time of the development of the Action Plan, it was advancing its own strategic agenda through the development of a new five-year strategic plan and the delivery of a National Lottery-funded programme. Together, these two strands – one governmental (the Rathlin Island Policy and Action Plan), one community-led (the RDCA Five-Year Strategic Plan) – would eventually converge, laying important foundations for the more collaborative planning approaches that followed.

Born out of the community, co-designed with what became Department for Infrastructure, the Rathlin Policy (2010) and its current Action Plan (2016) has brought senior civil servants from most NI Departments to an annual Rathlin Forum, chaired by successive DfI Ministers. Slowly building relationships, when possible, has been a key to the Forum's advantage. Two DfI civil servants have provided consistent partners and conduits for the island, often providing access to Departments beyond the normal for small rural communities.

The Rathlin Policy was ahead of similar policies in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, although it is a "permissive" rather than obligatory policy with no dedicated funding. On occasion, the Policy can be counterproductive when agencies and statutory bodies assume Rathlin is secure under its wing and needs no further attention.

The strength of Rathlin's democratic community is seen in the longevity of the RDCA, the voluntary

body that advocates and organises for the community. Almost all residents over the age of 16 are members, and the RDCA, formed in 1978, is now a Charity. Democracy relies on trust and the willingness to participate and the RDCA experiments with models to increase more effective participation, such as Participatory Budgeting, and the Rathlin Citizens Panel described in this document.

The community experiences the challenges and priorities that are common to most small islands, including security for an effective ferry service, housing, health, quality employment, sustainable energy and environmental stewardship. The small population means the demands are high on those who are active, risking burn-out and the frustrations of slow processes. Nevertheless, the island has a stable and slowly growing community that remains committed together to opportunities for sustainable development for Rathlin and for the world beyond our shores.

**David Quinney Mee, RDCA Community development worker, August 2025**







## Origins of Appreciative Inquiry and Visual Minuting (2014)

The roots of a locally-driven, democratic approach to governance can be seen in 2014, when the RDCA initiated an internal strategic planning process using Appreciative Inquiry supported by specialist consultancy Appreciating People.<sup>xv</sup> Twelve islanders were trained in Appreciative Inquiry, conducted interviews, and shared insights at a community-wide event, which enabled inclusive discussion and collective reflection. The island's first two visual minutes were produced – *Rathlin 2020: Our Island* and *Rathlin 2020: Our Vision*. These illustrated outputs made insights visible and accessible, offering a creative, democratic tool for community voice and engagement.

## Visual Minutes in Policy and Action Planning (2016–2020)

The impact of these internal processes soon extended outward. In 2016, as the Rathlin Island Action Plan (2013–2015)<sup>xvi</sup> was due for review, the RDCA proposed a new, more collaborative process grounded in their earlier Appreciative Inquiry experience. This involved sessions with island residents and the Ministerial Forum, resulting in two further visual minutes: *Ministerial Forum – Working the Rathlin Policy (Part A)*, and *Community Voice – Rathlin Policy Review (Part B)*. These outputs not only captured key themes and opportunities but represented a shift to a more collaborative way of working, marking a turning point in how policy was co-created on the island. Data from the sessions informed the creation of the Revised Rathlin Island Action Plan (2016 – 2020)<sup>xvii</sup> and a 35-page implementation plan developed by the Northern Ireland Department for Infrastructure.<sup>xviii</sup>

## Environmental Futures and Sustainability (2020–2023)

Since then, democratic innovation on Rathlin has continued to evolve. More recent visual minutes<sup>xix</sup> incorporated themes such as doughnut economics, climate adaptation, and sustainable development. In 2023, the *Climate Smart Rathlin* visual minute captured outcomes from sessions with both island residents and the Ministerial Forum, providing the foundation for a forthcoming Climate Action Plan. In each case, the visual minutes served not just as records, but as participatory tools that supported shared understanding, recognition, and alignment between the community and institutional actors.

## Learning from Rathlin's Visual Minutes

The visual minutes provide a unique lens into the island's governance journey. They reflect the evolution of co-design and governance relationships, beginning with internal community collaboration, growing into strategic co-production with government, and expanding into multi-stakeholder sustainability initiatives. In so doing, they capture the changing nature of co-design relationships and highlight how participatory processes can deepen over time.

These illustrated records surface recurring priorities – such as the central role of the ferry service, the need for sustainable energy infrastructure, and the development of the East Lighthouse – and help connect these locally grounded concerns to wider policy frameworks. By making such priorities visible, visual minutes helped translate community aspirations into actionable strategies.<sup>xx</sup>

More than a record of what was said, the visual minutes convey the tone, spirit, and values underpinning participatory dialogue across community and institutional actors. This makes them powerful tools for reflection, translation, and connection across diverse contexts including community, government, and academia.

The process of analysing the visual minutes as part of the Future Island-Island project played a crucial role in developing a contextual understanding of what had already taken place on Rathlin. It revealed that a significant journey of co-design had been unfolding for more than a decade. This deep engagement with what had come before was not only essential for the project's credibility, but also for building respectful relationships and trust.

Rathlin's approach, particularly the use of Appreciative Inquiry and visual minutes, enabled inclusive, dialogic participation grounded in lived experience and knowledge. These tools not only amplified community voice but also helped reshape institutional relationships – demonstrating principles of civic design, where participatory methods influence governance trajectories.

Visual minutes served as a discursive tool within these processes: capturing change, legitimising local knowledge, and enabling relational shifts between community and institutional actors.

Rathlin's experience shows that democratic innovation is not a one-off intervention, but a cumulative, evolving practice. Visual minutes have supported this by capturing change, legitimising local knowledge, and fostering relational shifts between communities and institutions. They offer evidence of how participatory governance can be meaningfully embedded – bridging policy and place through sustained, community-led innovation.



# Innovation in policy and democracy: The growing use of design approaches

Lucy Kimbell, Karl O'Connor, Brian Dixon and Brian Morgan

Although usually associated with government, policy analysis is often carried out by a range of organisations including civil society organisations, universities, think tanks, businesses, trade bodies and others. Sometimes policy 'design' is merged into the term policy 'analysis' (as ex-ante analysis), understood as the generation of options for new policy. In this project, academics engaged with residents, businesses and the RDCA in ways that foregrounded design to explore policy design and to work democratically with a focus on Rathlin's sustainable futures.

This fits into a wider context in which there is a growing interest in bringing design approaches into policy development across the policy cycle – an idealised representation of how public policies are made and delivered.<sup>xxi</sup> Such work sits alongside other innovations in public policy development, including co-production,<sup>xxii</sup> and mission-oriented government<sup>xxiii</sup> emerging within the UK, the Republic of Ireland and wider EU structures.

When deployed across the policy cycle, design tends to leverage its emphasis on human-centred perspectives, co-creation and practical experimentation, evident in contemporary design thinking, service design and policy design. Such developments are evident in academic studies,<sup>xxiv</sup> communities of practice such as the cross-government UK Policy Design Community<sup>xxv</sup> and government initiatives such as the UK Public Design Evidence Review published by the Cabinet Office in July 2025.<sup>xxvi</sup>

A second area where design research and practice are increasingly visible is in democratic localism. As argued by democratic theorist Michael Saward, political science relies on a "first order" approach and focus on existing creations ("what was made") to develop theories and models.<sup>xxvii</sup> Saward posits that by progressing to "second-order" analysis, focusing on methodology ("how it was made, and what it was made with") it becomes more beneficial to exploring potential future creations. Paying attention to the practice of design becomes important when you pay attention to both what is designed (e.g. a locally based democratic forum), and how it is designed.

Democratic localism implies the centring of communities within local and regional decision-making and policy-making processes. As a general principle, emphasis is placed on citizen participation and, within this, ensuring robust processes of deliberation.<sup>xxviii</sup> Alongside the strengthening of communities, democratic localism advocates argue that it can support the long-term sustainability of democracy generally by providing a foundation for formal democratic institutions.<sup>xxix</sup>

As an approach, it is seen to rely on three key components:

1. citizen empowerment, which refers to the development of the abilities and skills to participate in democratic dialogue;
2. the promotion of civic dialogue, whereby in their everyday experience citizens are afforded regular opportunities to discuss matters of concern;
3. and the promotion of solution-orientated research, where experts and citizens work together to identify solutions to problematic situations.<sup>xxx</sup>

This in turn links to the related area of democratic innovation, which investigates the ways in which democratic processes can be enhanced through novel strategies for citizen participation and deliberation.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Within these two broader contexts, the Rathlin research project summarised in this report seeks to connect design both with policy development and democracy, to support and enable sustainable futures for the island and its residents. In the next sections we map out the broader policy context relating to Rathlin's sustainable futures and then turn to describing the specific experiment in democratic design carried out as part of this academic research.

# Policy analysis of sustainable futures in relation to Rathlin Island

Gillian Steel, Lucy Kimbell, Malcolm Beattie and Edwar Calderon

The current policy landscape relevant to Rathlin's sustainable futures as an island linking to the larger island of Ireland is complex and multi-layered. Policy relating to Rathlin exists at different levels of governance including the island's own RDCA, the local council of Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, the Northern Ireland Executive and the UK Government as well as in relation to the Irish Government and the European Union. In our analysis of policy relating to sustainable futures for Rathlin, we carried out desk research to identify policy documents on themes relevant to the Future Island-Island project including sustainability, waste management, innovation and the economy. Our criteria were publicly available documents, published in the past 10 years relating to the policy context and relevant to sustainable futures for Rathlin Island.

Appendix 3 includes a table summary of 28 documents we identified relating to Rathlin's sustainable futures and to Northern Ireland more broadly. These documents provide a comprehensive overview of various sustainability-related strategies and policies specific to and/or relevant to Northern Ireland. These documents and the policies they advocate are aligned with broader U.K. and Northern Ireland government sustainability goals, community needs, and economic opportunities. As a document of central importance to developing all these the *United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2015)* is included. We also included others pertaining to the Republic of Ireland with respect to cross-border sustainability aspirations in relevant fields including arts, culture, heritage and tourism. Below we highlight some of the main themes we identified.

## Economic growth and tourism

The *10x Economy Northern Ireland's Decade of Innovation* of the N.I. Department of Economy (2023) places a focus on innovation in transitioning to a greener, sustainable economy. This is articulated through the document's emphasis on the importance of place, a focus on improving broadband connectivity and supporting small businesses. In *Growing Greener Experiences Together: The Sustainable Tourism Toolkit*

(2022) published by Tourism Northern Ireland, sustainable tourism, innovation, and inclusive growth are intertwined. The more recent ten-year *Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland (2025)* published by the N.I. Department for Economy establishes a similar vision and mission for the growth of the tourism sector in Northern Ireland, with a focus on economic growth. With Rathlin's proximity to the border of the Republic of Ireland, that Government's *Tourism Policy Framework 2025-30 (2024)* may be relevant to potential cross-border partnerships. Its framework aims to ensure the Republic's tourism sector thrives while balancing economic growth, environmental and social well-being.

## Environmental sustainability

Also relevant to Rathlin Island's reliance on tourism and its unique environmental challenges are the *Draft Environment Strategy for Northern Ireland (2024)* and the *Environmental Improvement Plan (2024)*. These documents outline goals for air, water, and land quality, biodiversity conservation, and waste management. In terms of waste management, plans like the *North West Region Waste Management Group's Plan (2015, amended 2024)* and DAERA's *Waste Management Plan (2019)* focus on recycling targets, infrastructure needs, and legislative updates, all of which are pertinent to Rathlin's waste management concerns. The U.K. Government's *Introducing a Deposit Return Scheme for England, Wales and Northern Ireland (2021, updated 2023)* document is relevant for Rathlin's position as a tourist destination. Managing the disposal of waste (specifically, one-use plastic drinks bottles) is difficult to regulate in a population of visiting tourists who may not share the island residents' neighbourly values.

## Climate action

Connecting to Rathlin Island's renewable energy potential, the *Northern Ireland Climate Action Plan (2024)* and related reports emphasise transitioning to net-zero emissions, promoting green jobs, and integrating young people's voices into climate strategies. *Northern Ireland Environmental Statistics Report (2024)* published by the U.K. Department



of Environment Agriculture & Rural Affairs has a focus on the quality and ecological condition of Northern Ireland's inland and coastal waters connecting with Rathlin Island's vulnerability to climate-related flooding.

### Rural development

On the island both land-based agriculture and sea farming play a role, with the latter becoming a significant part of the island's economy. There is also an acknowledgement that island farming presents particular challenges. According to Rathlin farmer Liam Faul "...simple problems on mainland farms can be big problems on island farms".<sup>xxxii</sup> The report of the Northern Ireland Inquiry *Lay of the Land* (2019) emphasises the key role of sustainable farming practices. It outlines goals including the transitioning of Northern Ireland's food, farming, and countryside systems towards a more inclusive, resilient, and environmentally sustainable future. Alongside this the *Rural White Paper Action Plan* (2017) and other strategies address the direct impact on community and economy of transport links, access to services, and sustainable development in rural areas like Rathlin.

### Arts and culture

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland's *Strategic Plan* (2024) advocates investment in the arts to foster cultural growth and address climate change. The report emphasises the importance of environmental sustainability and the role of the arts in addressing climate change, by for example, engaging audiences in conversations about climate change, climate considerations in investment and funding programmes and through organisational sustainability of creative businesses.

### Mental health and well-being

There is growing awareness of the links between environmental changes and mental health and well-being.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Mental health organisations have raised awareness of levels of climate anxiety and foregrounded the roles of communities in policy making processes in relation to climate, such as the UK-based Climate Psychology Alliance.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In order to respond to this emerging issue, Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful and digital education company Twinkl, funded by the N.I. Department of Environment Agriculture & Rural Affairs (DAERA), have developed and delivered climate change education programmes for pupils at key stage 3 and beyond, aimed at improving knowledge of climate change, empowering pupils to channel 'eco-anxiety' into positive climate action as well as the new qualification.<sup>xxxv</sup>

In summation, Rathlin Island's sustainable future is influenced by policies at multiple governance levels, including; local, regional, Northern Ireland, U.K., Republic of Ireland, and EU frameworks. The policies captured for this report cross key thematic strands relevant to sustainability including waste

management, innovation, economy, tourism, environmental sustainability and rural development. But in addition the role of the arts and culture sectors in addressing climate change and fostering cultural growth, alongside the impact of climate anxiety on mental well-being, are also acknowledged. The island's reliance on tourism, its environmental vulnerabilities, and logistical challenges in farming and day to day life including reliance on the ferry underscore its particular challenges and the need for tailored policies in a **complex policy landscape**. This suggests the potential to go beyond traditional divisions between 'economic' or 'cultural' policy domains to work across departmental boundaries and develop policy in ways that are holistic and cross-cutting.





## Engaging with the Rathlin Island community in democratic policy design

**Brian Morgan, Lucy Kimbell and Brian Dixon**

Drawing reference from the wider field of practice and research known as “democratic innovation”, our project initiated and resourced a Democratic Mini-Public (DMP) on Rathlin Island in 2025. A now well-established tool in democratic governance, DMPs are formed from the selection of groups of citizens through a civic lottery. Once assembled, they support evidence-informed and inclusive public deliberation on complex issues.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Such processes, characterised by their focus on informed participation and reflective dialogue, possess several features that distinguish them from traditional forms of public engagement: purpose and structure; inclusivity and empowerment; expert involvement; and impartiality and transparency.<sup>xxxvii</sup> A democratic forum needs to be put together in a way that is best for that context/situation – a design task (beyond the delivery of a process) in which “everything matters”.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Resulting from months of dialogue between Ulster University doctoral candidate Brian Morgan and island residents, a plan formed to convene a DMP on Rathlin, financially supported by a Future Island-Island grant, as a seconded placement with its own delivery budget. One of the first tasks to facilitate the Rathlin-based DMP was to engage members of the community through an open call via the RDCA. In contrast to many initiatives which are government-defined, emphasis was placed on establishing a community-defined DMP on its own terms, co-led by Morgan, a regular visitor who moved onto the island for several months in 2025. This DMP was renamed by participants as the Rathlin Citizens Panel, which proceeded through eight meetings over 2025 involving 10 adult island residents selected by lottery. The reserve list included 11 more residents, in the event any original member was unable to continue.

A second task was to establish a set of democratic principles, following democratic theorist Michael Saward’s guidelines for democratic design.<sup>xxxix</sup> The Rathlin Citizens Panel agreed these principles at their introductory session, deliberating and voting on the 40 or so principles in Saward’s framework (see Table 2).

**Table 2:** Democratic design principles selected by Rathlin Citizens Panel, 2025

Democratic Design principle	Votes
Accountability	5
Social justice	5
Openness	4
Empowerment	4
Sustainability	4
Co-decision	4
Self-government	4

A third task was to determine the focus for the DMP. Whilst initial discussions were around the island’s Climate Action Plan (then being drafted), The RDCA Committee concluded this was too wide-ranging for meaningful discussion. Further discussion resulted in the Committee agreeing on the question, “What would the ideal ferry service look like for Rathlin in the future?” This was selected because the ferry is a major issue for the community, shaping the practicalities of island-life, as people with families, jobs, livestock, businesses, reliant on tourism and flows of energy and other resources on and off the island.

A next task was determining the themes and contributors for each session, resulting in an open-ended plan shown in Table 3. Materials used in the sessions were designed specifically for the island’s context drawing on local knowledge. This co-creation which meant that trust, buy-in and a sense of co-ownership were secured – often difficult, but so necessary for this community.

Each session was placed in position due to the particular set of circumstances on the island at the time, with reference to the ferry. As an example, in Session 6, the ‘sensing’ was enhanced by the Panel deliberating on a boat; it gave space, time and feeling to the important work of reflecting on the final recommendations. In further iterations, the community on the island can not only move the sequencing of each block but also adjust the method in each one to be contextually relevant.

**Table 3:** Rathlin Citizens Panel assemblage, 2025

Section 1	Section 2	Section 3	Section 4	Section 5	Section 6	Section 7	Section 8
Introductory	The Past	The Now	Imagine	The Future	Sense the End	Play	Hand it Over

This is the emerging democratic innovation theory of assemblage, applied in the Rathlin context. Assemblage theory offers a framework to study democratic innovations, revealing how diverse participatory elements coexist, interact, and embed to promote context-sensitive inclusivity.

The result of this design process was a new democratic infrastructure that was fit for this community and place;

a designed artefact co-created with the island residents, which 10 residents directly participated in and experienced first-hand. It is also something the community could use, re-use, adapt and develop as the Panel moves onto other questions and issues. The process was richer, slower, and more open-ended than other processes reported in the literature and has the potential for transferability to other settings.





# The ferry as a lens exploring Rathlin's sustainable futures

Brian Morgan

## A brief history of Rathlin's recent ferry service<sup>xliii</sup>

Ever since people have travelled across the water of Rathlin Sound between Rathlin island and the island of Ireland, islanders and other coastal inhabitants would either have had their own vessels – or would have shared ownership for use amongst small groups or families. Most of the time, fish was sold in Ballycastle. People from Rathlin, therefore, relied on 'unofficial' passenger ferries – often provided by these local boat owners. People would be taken ad hoc; whenever they asked/needed – usually without a payment, as part of ongoing exchanges amongst community members.

The 'Mail boat' that ran from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until the 1960s/70s was more popular for passengers as it was crossing at set times. It ran for many years this way, until the regular ferry service began in earnest (when mail would start to come that way). The 'relief' boat that serviced the lighthouse was also good in this respect – it intermittently serviced the lighthouses up until the 1970s, so could be relied upon to an extent.

The St. Martin was the first co-operatively owned passenger boat, co-owned by a few of the Rathlin families. Passenger demand was still low in the 1970s/80s, with circa 1000 passengers per year.

The Iona and the Venture then became the main islander operated shared ownership boats for many years, responding to an increasing demand. The crews of Iona & Venture eventually came together and produced a feasibility study on a more regular service. Even though they instigated this feasibility process, the Scottish ferry provider CalMac won the ensuing contract (circa 1996) with the Canna boat brought in as a result. This meant that the islanders' boats were sold, with the Venture now an AirBnB off Cork; the Iona sank off Mayo.

Despite this offshoring of ownership, CalMac were well thought of. They trained up locals and then offered the old crews of Iona/Venture employment. This operation ran for nearly 10 years. A consensus is that CalMac looked after their employees, and workers were well unionised. CalMac were also able to 'switch in' staff from elsewhere when needed (this was positive in that these staff were knowledgeable and willing to share it).

The downsides of this provision were that the Canna was slow – and that the passenger lounge was very small (only holding 15 people) so that it became an unpleasant journey in bad weather.

A new tender was offered out in 2006 by the Department for Regional Development (now DfI). The O'Driscolls – a family run ferry provider from Cape Clear, Cork, whom had run similar services elsewhere – won this and started operating from May 2008 (operating as Rathlin Island Ferry Ltd). They met the brief by supplying a temporary passenger ferry called the St Sorney. This was later replaced by the Rathlin Express in 2009 alongside a cargo provision (the Canna) until this was replaced by the Spirit of Rathlin in 2017.

The Rathlin Express was eventually well liked by island residents generally. Described as warm, with nice seating, only a 20-minute journey, yet sturdy. The Spirit was also generally thought of as OK; it did the job. The office staff were well informed and went out of their way to help, having good links with island residents. A much-missed perk of this provider was that businesses were able to hold accounts with them; a very pragmatic solution for farmers, being able to pay when cashflow allowed.

However, it transpired that working for this company became much less attractive for the workers. Eventually, in 2022 there was a strike – mainly over low pay and lack of training. In Jan 2023, the O'Driscolls filed for bankruptcy. The much-loved Rathlin Express went to Iona in Scotland.

The Spirit continued to operate as the ferry cargo service, as it is owned by NI Government's Department for Infrastructure. Dunaverty Ltd took over at very short notice (with ownership including ex-civil servants). However, many island residents express concerns over a lack of transparency around both the operations and the awarding of this contract (whilst also acknowledging the 'emergency' nature of the situation). A lack of continuity amongst designated officers – the 'civil service churn' – has left island residents feeling that there have been communication gaps and decisions made that are unaccounted for.

At the same time, Dunaverty brought in The Kintra II. This was a replacement for the Rathlin Express in that it is a quick passenger vessel – but it is not a like-for-like replacement that has satisfied many people on the island. This service continues to the present.

It is fair to say that relations have been stretched in recent times; people on island with fond memories of CalMac and the O'Driscolls experience the Dunaverty service as more 'tickboxy', with no substantive relationship (between island/provider) to speak of in comparison. Maybe because of the way the current contract is set up – to 'temporarily' fix the emergency that arose – there seems to be no incentive to make things better.

Sitting behind the contract, the civil service is deemed by island residents to be another layer of opaqueness. The island residents express frustration with a perceived 'just enough' culture that seemingly gets communicated.

The tender process was originally scheduled to be initiated by DfI in March 2025. Of course, it is unknown who may be bidding. It would be a surprise if Dunaverty did not bid as current providers – and an improved-looking passenger vessel can be seen in port at Ballycastle.

It is also clear that there will be an island-led bid; details remain to be seen but there is evidently a wealth of experience amongst island residents about the intricacies of this crossing and service. There is a willingness to utilise this.

At present, there are legal issues delaying the tender contract progress. No further details have been officially given. It should be noted, however, that the Department (and its Commissioner) have a deadline of January 2026 – an extension has already been awarded, which means this deadline is binding (as it stands) for a new service to begin.



## Exploring Rathlin's ferry futures through a democratic mini-public

When the RDCA steered the subject matter of the DMP away from our project's original suggestion of focussing on their Climate Action Plan (which remains in draft) to a deliberation on the future of the ferry, this seemed a little disappointing from a researcher's point of view. It felt like we were avoiding a 'serious' dialogue and entering something akin to a focus group sometimes seen during a procurement process.

What is clear now is that the focus on the ferry embodies the very pragmatic nature of the island and its residents. There is learning here for democratic design practitioners as well as for the NI Government and other stakeholders whose political decisions shape affairs and life on the island. The ferry – a crucial topic for an island – became a device to enable dialogue; by focussing on the ferry, it was possible to deliberate on many other topics of importance.

It should be noted that – although on a much smaller scale – the ferry, for the island, is akin to other almost untouchable subject matters explored through citizens assemblies that tackled the issue of abortion<sup>xliii</sup> or same sex marriage<sup>xliv</sup> in the Republic of Ireland in the 2010s. For Rathlin, the ferry is a hot topic, with deep personal connections, including through direct involvement such as employment or delivering the service and complex, evolving histories. Given such varied histories and deep reliance on the ferry, divergent views among residents and businesses on the island perhaps do not always surface. The RDCA was very keen, therefore, for the topic of the ferry to be tackled through the DMP.

Through discussion in the DMP sessions, these aspects of the ferry were revealed as significant:

- **The ferry as a conduit, enabler or gatekeeper of other policies.** Discussing the ferry led to discussions of education, health, disability, housing, employment, transport, development, demonstrating complex inter-dependencies between them. Focusing on a 'smaller' issue makes it more engaging and directly relevant for participants in the DMP. The 'device' of the ferry allowed people to ground these discussions in a way that allowed them to surface, share and make sense of their own lived experience.
- **Negotiating tensions about ownership of the ferry.** The history of the ferry services includes a tension between people on each side of the water about where the ferry 'belongs.' This is not just Rathlin/Ballycastle tension but also includes officials in Coleraine and Belfast. The DMP participants strongly supported the idea that the ferry should remain in the Rathlin port overnight – symbolic of anxieties of ownership and control.

- **Framing the ferry: Lifeline vs. Tourism.** In the deliberations, members of the DMP (also echoed by many other residents on the island) referred to the ferry as a 'lifeline'. It's not just a means of transport for the tourist trade which is possibly how some civil servants in the NI Department for Infrastructure see it.

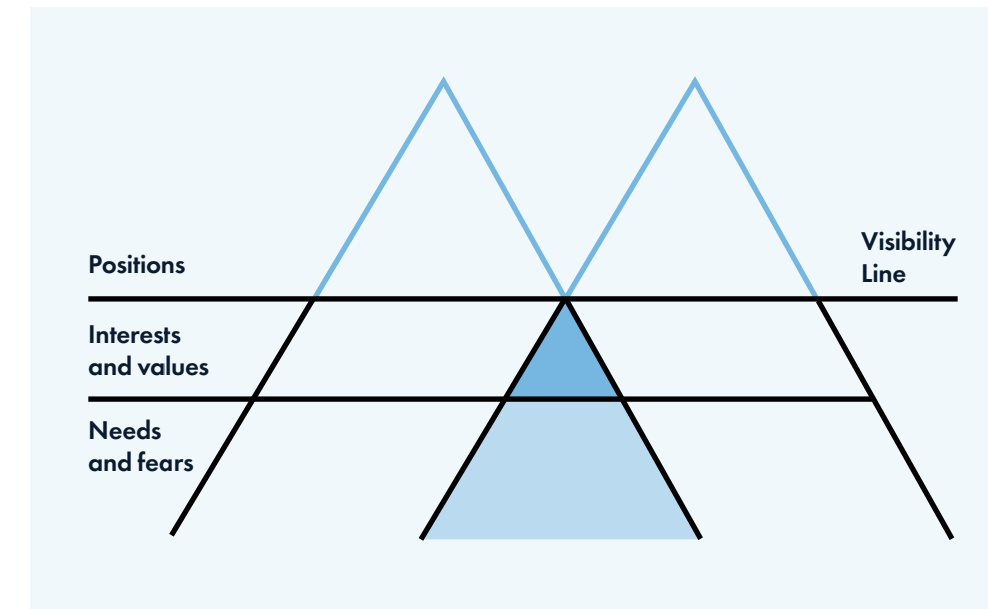
A number of key insights emerged through the structuring and delivery of the DMP process on Rathlin.

First, early political buy-in is essential to establishing a successful DMP. As noted above, the Rathlin Policy is an 'shortcut' that is effective for the island to progress its vision and to achieve its priorities through direct engagement with political leaders in the NI Government. Due to this unique opportunity, the DMP was able to effectively convey its aspirations to power holders and decision-makers from an early stage, with contact continuing throughout (indeed, face-to-face meetings were held with both Ministers in place during the DMP process). The inception of the DMP,<sup>xlv</sup> often the most difficult stage, was made easier by this.

Second, transparency is especially key. On this point, Demos, a think tank, quoting Sir Kier Starmer has noted that the "fight for trust is the battle that defines our political era".<sup>xlvi</sup> This goes to the core of designing democratic processes when on a small island such as Rathlin. The implication is that democratic processes need to be designed differently when such day-to-day proximity is foregrounded as on an island. For example, a sortition process run behind closed doors, using algorithms would not work on an island. Instead, for the Rathlin DMP, we created an update on a *kleroterion*<sup>xlvii</sup> (a device used in ancient Greece that ensured random selection of citizens). Residents were invited to attend a ceremony where the random selection was carried out in public, by the public themselves. This fostered not only curiosity around the DMP itself but also trust.

Third is the need for setting rules in a participatory manner. The Rathlin DMP took as its orientation, Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR is a collaborative research model that partners with people whose lives are affected by the issues, involving them in designing, conducting, and sharing the research to drive socially just change.<sup>xlviii</sup> With Rathlin, the degree of involvement for participants means that the community was in control – the researcher was supported by the RDCA. This, unusually (as DMPs are often led by government), meant that time was spent by participants at the start of the process for them to set their own rules/questions and articulate the democratic values by which the process would run.

**Figure 1:** PIN Diagram (Positions, interests, needs)  
**Source:** Oliver Escobar



Fourth, embedding listening is a key activity. Participants in the Rathlin Citizens Panel agreed that it would work if they listened to one another and further developed their skills in deliberation. To enable this, I invited the Head of Involve (the UK-wide charity which promotes participation in democracy) in Northern Ireland, Rebekah McCabe,<sup>xlix</sup> to brief the group on deliberative practice, as opposed to normal forms of debate and dialogue. This included the PIN diagram, originally created by Andrew Acland, as outlined by a researcher specialising in democratic innovation Oliver Escobar.<sup>l</sup> Escobar adapted Acland's model, shown in **Figure 1**, to illustrate communication during disagreements:

- Above the surface are *positions*, the only things typically expressed. When communication becomes rigid, this leads to frustration and entrenched stances.
- Below the surface lie hidden *interests and values* and *needs and fears*. Understanding these deeper dimensions helps parties grasp each other's perspectives and find common ground.
- The "visibility line" separates these dimensions, shifting with communication patterns.
- The "hidden common ground" (the blue triangle) represents shared underlying elements that can lead to unforeseen solutions.

The model advocates for communication that explores these deeper meanings to build understanding, which was the intention for the Rathlin Citizens Panel.

An intriguing aspect to emerge in the Rathlin DMP was that, in contrast to Acland's diagram, the Rathlin Panel felt that they were starting from a position of agreement (with one red triangle, rather than the two in the diagram). This assumption of being in agreement was, perhaps predictably, less evident as the process progressed. There was strong convergence early on as the process focused on the current provision. The Panel members began to realise that there was much less convergence when we moved into the future. Their needs and fears, interests and values came into play to a greater extent when facing the future scenarios, even when they set off with a mindset of "all agreeing". This suggests that the process will get to needs and fears no matter how the assemblage is constructed.



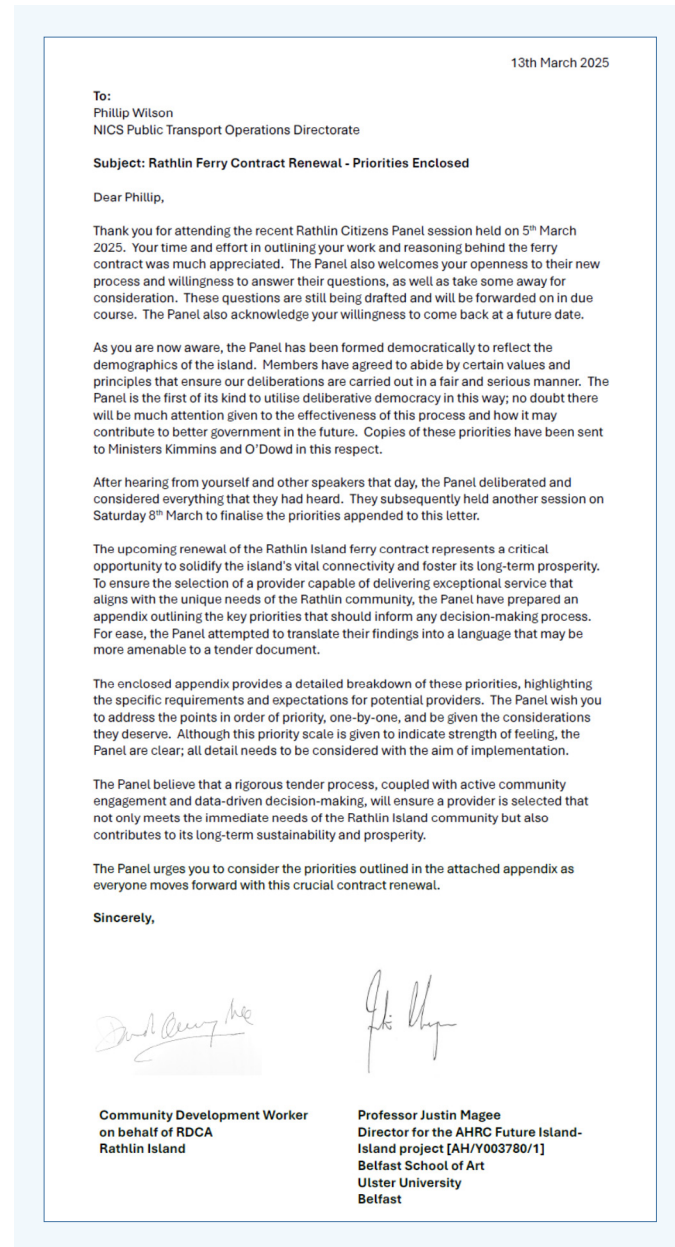
## Towards recommendations for Rathlin's ferry futures

Noting that the DMP's process/assemblage (see Table 3) was constructed in way that reflected both outside and on-island pressures and sensitivities, there was a deadline in early March 2025 (set by the commissioner of the ferry service) that drove the DMP to make prioritised recommendations on the current service delivery. This was not ideal for this DMP process, given deliberations had just started. However, it focused the panel members' activities and provided impetus.

During the deliberation, participants found out that the tender process was subject to delay. Nevertheless, the panel not only provided twelve recommendations, but prioritised them using a form of 'dotmocracy'<sup>li</sup> utilised in participatory budgeting (an innovation twice enacted on the island, through the 'Grugach's Gold' process that disperses funds from the Manor House and Co-op businesses). Furthermore, these were 'translated' into a language familiar to those who work in procurement, for ease of use. These were sent with a cover letter co-signed by the RDCA and Ulster University, as shown in Figure 2. The letter outlines the recommendations and gives them a priority. It demonstrated that the Panel had considered not only what issues they feel important for the contract, but the weight of feeling.

Because of the early involvement of the (then) Minister for Infrastructure, John O'Dowd MLA, the Panel felt that it was felt important to the DMP participants to also inform him of progress. He had just moved portfolio, so the new Minister, Liz Kimmins MLA, was also included. That letter is shown in Figure 3.

The second letter elicited a response, jointly, from the Minister (and former Minister), which said: *"It is important that we engage with key stakeholders regarding the services we provide. I welcome the input from Rathlin Citizens Panel and have asked my officials to consider these when preparing contract documents"*.



**Figure 2:** Joint letter to the NI Executive from the RDCA and Ulster University, March 2025.

Due to the ongoing delay in the process, it is not clear how this will be materialised. Work has continued with the Panel and the list of recommendations has now grown to 16, including some which are more future focused relating to issues beyond the current service.

These were finalised on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2025 and are set out below in Section 9.1. The Panel again gave weight of feeling to the recommendations, this time through a blind vote. This mechanism was put into place to eliminate any confirmation bias that may have been present. It is perhaps unsurprising that all 16 recommendations have been endorsed and ratified through a similar blind community vote (since the Panel have spent some time deliberating them), albeit with mildly varying levels of agreement.

On 29th August 2025, the DfI announced that the Ferry's tendering process would be extended until July 2027. This extends the timelines of delivery and will allow for a longer term consideration of the DMP's recommendations.

One of the major critiques of DMPs is that the recommendations are often not acted on.<sup>li</sup> Rathlin's DMP, being a community-led mini-public, will be particularly susceptible to this since the community is asking other entities to respond to their recommendations, over which the community does not have control. However, as explained in this report, the nature of the island's relationship with the NI Government being founded on the bedrock of the unique Rathlin island Policy, will enable the RDCA to continually monitor progress and hold relevant departments to account on delivery of these recommendations.

Beyond the DMP, further policy work was undertaken with colleagues operating in other contexts within the wider FI-I project.



**Figure 3:** Letter to the NI Executive from Ulster University, March 2025.

# Policy implications from the Future Island-Island project

## Malcolm Beattie

Through a series of workshops and dialogues with academics in the other FI-I work packages, we gathered insights with relevance to policy development and delivery. These are summarised in four sections.

### 1. Current policy and practice have not kept pace with the green agenda

Both the **Circular Materials** project and the **Repair Stories** project illustrate the disconnects between extant policy/practice and the rapidly developing field of green transitions with all its potential to contribute to climate and related environmental targets.

The **Circular Materials** project (Work Package 1) led by Professor Justin Magee (Belfast School of Art, Ulster University) with Jonny Weir and Stephen McGilloway (product and industrial designers from BIGSmall, Belfast) focused on the management of waste such as silage wrap and ocean plastics, which are a particular challenge on Rathlin, given the remote location and associated costs of waste disposal. The project aimed to create a circular economy by repurposing waste into reusable materials. The project looked at options for waste management, categorising ocean waste, the application of 3-D printing, the design and introduction of solar-powered compacting bins, and wind-proof bin covers. It also highlighted gaps in current service provision, and the case for interventions such as: the development of a Circular Materials Strategy; the creation of a right to repair; the enabling of return schemes; and introduction of incentives to drive recycling of waste such as silage wrap.

The **Repair Stories** project (Work Package 1) with Professor Ian Montgomery (Dean of Sustainability & Corporate Social Responsibility at Ulster University) and Dr Patrick Dunlop (Senior Lecturer within the School of Engineering at Ulster University) investigated Rathlin's repair and reuse culture, to inform repair strategies for wider application. Islanders are adept at repair and recycling, keeping materials for reuse, backed up by a community spirit and a rich tradition of bartering and payment-in-kind. The project highlighted the island's repair culture and associated behaviours and how these might inform behavioural change in a wider context. It also brought into sharp relief significant gaps in current policy, for example, once an item enters

a council recycling centre, it is automatically classified as waste, even if it is still in working condition, which is at variance with the drive to Reuse, Repair and Recycle. The classification of unused electronics as waste, fails to recognise the potential to reclaim precious metals used in their manufacture.

Both the **Circular Materials** and **Repair Stories** teams highlighted the immediate need to articulate these gaps and anomalies and explore how these insights from engagement with the Rathlin community might be deployed to inform the updating of government policy and practice to drive a step change in reuse, repair and recycling in Northern Ireland.

### 1. Initiatives that are replicable and scalable in a wider context, with potential to contribute to public policy outcomes

The **Digital Stories** project (Work Package 2) with Dr Jessica Bates (Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at Ulster University) and Dr Henry Melki (Lecturer in Animation and VFX at Ulster University) focused on the application of digital and AI technologies to enable virtual access to the island's hard to reach places, its unique ancient artefacts, and its oral history. The oral histories project gathered and documented stories from the island, focusing on self-reliance and sustainability, to allow the incorporation of historical and cultural knowledge into the design of green transitions ecosystems. The project also involved the creation of 'digital twins' of key island artefacts (such as the Brockley Axe<sup>[iii]</sup>) and locations, and digital footage of underwater topography, with the objective of enabling remote access to these resources and places, thereby reducing the environmental impact of tourism. The digital artefacts have potential for sharing in collaboration with museums etc. in Northern Ireland. These methods can be widely replicated in similar settings and have many applications in the creation of digital twins of items and places of historical importance.



The **Imaginarium** project (Work Package 4) with Nina Liebhaver (Research Associate in Sustainable Design & Education, Belfast School of Art) Dr Meabh McCaffrey-Lau (Digital Education and Inclusion Specialist), Dr Rachael Singleton (Behavioural Scientist and Lecturer at Ulster University Business School) and Maira Rahme (Service Design lead at Big Motive, Belfast) focused on engaging 180 teenagers in place-based education and creative design technologies. The objective was to make education meaningful and purposeful by focusing on issues of relevance, in this case it addressed climate change and 'islandness' (being part of a small, remote, disconnected community). It aimed to build creative and problem solving skills, foster community engagement by considering challenges of electronic waste, the impact of tourism and landscape degradation. In collaboration with Education Authority Youth Services Teams, the project involved teenagers from Rathlin and demonstrates the value of interventions tailored to place and subject. The project is an exemplar, replicable in other locations to empower young people to be agents for change in their communities. The work aligns with goals around economic development, environmental sustainability, and improving outcomes for children and young people. However, there is a perceived gap in how learning from the project is recognised and whether it might be adopted into the education system with the associated adjustments both to the curriculum and education practice.

The **Collaborative Curriculum** project (Work Package 4), with Professor Raffae Folli (Research Director in Modern Languages & Linguistics at Ulster University) and Professor Tom Jefferies (Professor in the School of the Natural and Built Environment at Queen's University), focused on sustainability education, postulating that children should be at the centre of climate policy and action, since they have the longest lifespan to experience the impacts of climate change and the greatest potential to drive transformative change.

Through workshops with primary school children on Rathlin, led by student architects, focused on designing interventions to reduce carbon footprints and pollution, thus promoting long-term generational thinking. The project aims to develop toolkits and professional development programmes that support the integration of sustainability education in the primary sector with student architects' final projects. While the extant curriculum enables environmental education, implementation activities can be outdated and lack teacher engagement, suggesting there is an opportunity to refresh the curriculum and ensure teachers have the necessary knowledge, time, and resources to deliver transformative environmental education of this nature effectively.

The 2020 Northern Ireland New Decade New Approach Deal<sup>[iv]</sup> strategy cited the importance of citizen and community engagement and co-design in the Programme for Government and espoused an annual Citizen's Assembly. **The Rathlin Citizen's Panel** (Work Package 5) led by Brian Morgan (PhD Researcher at Belfast School of Art, Ulster University) described in this paper, through a process of deliberative democracy, gathered the collective views of citizens in relation to a live and vital local issue (the contract for the Rathlin Ferry service) and then shared these with the NI Government. Learning from this project serves as an exemplar of how community engagement, as envisaged in the NDNA Deal, might be organised, promoting both inclusive policy-making, learning from lived experience on the ground and accountability.



## 1. Initiatives that have potential to drive economic development

The **Rathlin Wool** project (Work Package 3) led by Professor Alison Gault (Belfast School of Art, Ulster University) and Anna Duffy (Lecturer in Printed Textile at Belfast School of Art), focused on the organic waste ecosystem and the potential uses for the waste wool generated from the island's 300-500 sheep. The team examined the quality of Rathlin wool, demonstrated natural dyeing and weaving and created and sold material made from local wool, with plans to improve wool quality and thus potentially increase its commercial value. In addition to high-quality wool for clothing, wool products were developed that could replace man-made materials used in fishing (ropes/netting), acoustic baffling, kelp seeding and peatland/wetland recovery. This has raised the potential for commercialisation of Rathlin wool in a similar way to Donegal Tweed. The opportunity appears to exist for the development of a wool industry, which could contribute to increased tourism, job creation and business development, all of which consistent with a transition to an environmentally compliant local economy.

The **Regenerative Design Ecosystems** project (Work Package 3) with Dr Rebecca McConnell (Research Fellow, School of Natural and Built Environment at Queen's University) and Dr Sean Cullen (Lecturer in the School of Natural and Built Environment at Queen's University) looked at the creation of a place-based, resilient and connected design ecosystem where newly qualified creative/design graduates are matched with real-world regenerative design challenges posed by local businesses. The project organised a three-day Regenerative Design Residential workshop on Rathlin for 20 design fellows to engage with 10 local businesses to address real world problems, like those carried out by the UK Design Council and the international Ellen MacArthur Foundation. The aim is to evaluate the outcomes and make the case for investment in creative fellowships to drive place-based innovation. The overall objectives are to allow businesses to have access to creative/design skills and thus contribute to regional business development and address the 'brain-drain' by allowing participating graduates to make their mark locally, rather than leave Northern Ireland for employment.

## 2. Current policies that have impeded progress or are at variance with the green transition agenda

The **Rathlin Wool** project team highlighted two examples where existing policies are problematic for potential innovations:

- The EU's categorization of wool as a Category 3 waste product, due to past foot-and-mouth disease outbreaks, has created traceability requirements for wool merchants, which adds cost to the commercial value of wool. This raised the opportunity to reposition wool as a non-waste product and highlight its potential for sustainable applications.

- The Product Environmental Footprint (PEF) methodology is a standardized framework for assessing and communicating the environmental impacts of products and services throughout their entire life cycle. There are ongoing discussions and efforts at the EU level to address issues with the PEF methodology, which currently favours synthetic fibres over natural fibres like wool.

The **Circular Materials** project team cited as problematic single-use medical devices, which are designed and manufactured for a single patient during a single procedure and are then discarded. These are not intended to be reprocessed or reused on another patient, and the practice, at face value, is wasteful and appears at variance with the green transitions agenda.



# Recommendations: Towards sustainable futures through democratic design

## Recommendations relating to Rathlin's ferry to support sustainable futures

### Brian Morgan

The process of the Rathlin Citizens Panel generated 16 recommendations finalised in July 2025 about the future ferry service for the island. These recommendations are summarised in **Table 4**.

These recommendations clearly show that the Panel members see the ferry service as a public resource which is accountable to island residents and tied to the community's future sustainability. Aspects of the service delivery, which in other contexts might be considered to be part of a specification to be determined by the operator, form part of the recommendations. For example, the resident islanders share their perspective on sustainable fuel sources. Recognising the reliance too on connections with the world beyond the island, the residents ask for opportunities for direct employment, using their local knowledge. The recommendations also make clear the relational aspects of the service – what's it like for residents to interact with the ferry service for example when booking tickets and for these experiences to be inclusive, for example

accessible for people with disabilities, and meeting the needs of different groups of ferry users such as children going to school. The ferry is seen not just a boat on which people are shipped, a bit like cargo, to and fro across the water; regular ferry users rely on it as their lifeline, not just a means of transport and their particular needs as people moving cargo or going to school need to be taken into account in the design of the service. Another recommendation tied to future sustainability is one that asks for transparency about implementation of a tourist levy in ticket prices. As with other tourist destinations such as Venice, residents want tourists visiting the island to contribute to mitigating the infrastructural, waste and environmental burden their visit generates – and for these funds to reach the island. In summary, what is revealed in this list of recommendations is a set of reasonable expectations for the future ferry operator to have built into its contract that are based on lived experience, dependency and democratic values of fairness and equity.





Recommendation	Description
High-Speed Ferry Service	The Contractor shall provide a high-speed passenger ferry service, comparable (at a minimum) to all capabilities of the previous fast ferry (Rathlin Express service circa 2022), ensuring equivalency in aspects such as service reliability, accessibility (to meet DDA requirements), Medivac, seakeeping, and weather protection for passengers.
Community Engagement Framework	<p>The Contractor shall establish a formal community engagement framework, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A minimum of four (4) scheduled meetings per year between the ferry service provider and the Rathlin Island community, through a forum &amp; agenda agreed with the community. A traffic light system should be adopted to ensure accountability of actions.</li><li>• Implementation of customer satisfaction surveys and complaints processes that ensure anonymity for people.</li><li>• To include performance monitoring of all aspects of the service, which should be available for all to review.</li></ul> <p>In addition; Department for Infrastructure to engage the MCA in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Integration of local knowledge and expertise into the tender selection process, particularly input into the scoring matrix for the suitability of the proposed fast ferry vessel by tenderers.</li></ul>
Dry Docking Contingency	The Contractor shall provide a like-for-like replacement ferry during dry docking periods (from Day 1), maintaining equivalent passenger/vehicle capacity and disability access standards.
Local Employment	In line with the Rathlin Island Policy, the Contractor shall demonstrate positive social and economic benefit to the island, including direct benefits such as the employment of local Rathlin Island residents. This is important as a mainstay of reliability and local knowledge for the contract holder.
Rathlin Harbour	Department for Infrastructure will develop a feasibility study on traffic management (vehicle and pedestrian) in and around Rathlin Harbour.
Weather Resilience	<p>Department for Infrastructure shall ensure compliance with future weather condition contingencies in the design and operation of both ferries, guided by data and climate forecasting provided by NICS.</p> <p>We would also recommend that NICS provide an accountable officer on climate forecasting, for the RDCA to liaise with.</p>
Ferry Terminal public space	The Contractor shall provide a functional space at the Ferry Terminal to better accommodate island needs, such as the provision of accessible toilet facilities and secure storage for personal goods.
Overnight Docking	The Contractor shall dock both ferries on Rathlin Island during overnight periods. This would also ensure biosecurity compliance.
Cargo Capacity	The Contractor and Department shall commit to reinstate the cargo capacity of the vehicle ferry service to previous levels (there has been a substantial reduction) through an expert vessel stability consultee.

Table 4: Rathlin Citizens Panel recommendations regarding the ferry service, 2025

Recommendation	Description
Schedule Optimisation	<p>The Contractor shall develop and implement an optimised ferry schedule (following agreed consultation exercises already in place). This should include frequency and timings, that specifically addresses the needs of all the island's demographics.</p> <p>This will be regularly addressed through the community consultation framework outlined in Recommendation 2.</p>
Online Booking System Enhancement	The Contractor shall implement a comprehensive online booking system that enables multiple bookings, editing capabilities, and user-friendly functionalities.
Customer Service Provision	The Contractor shall provide high-quality customer service, including dedicated staff to handle telephone inquiries and address customer concerns in a clear and simple manner.
Future Fuels	<p>DfI should consider options on alternative fuels for the ferry, in order to help Rathlin meet its future aims regarding Net Zero.</p> <p>This would be done in partnership with the island – so that any potential benefits can be considered (such as storage options/upgrades on the harbour, etc)</p>
Tourist Levy	<p>A clear channel should be established regarding any income taken from ferry tickets by relevant authorities. An audit should be supplied (each financial year) in a transparent way on income received from ferry operations. Similarly, any money spent on operations/development should be outlined. Moving forward, a conversation about the utilisation of these funds should be established between all parties and the island.</p> <p>It should be noted here that there is a similar issue running concurrently here, that CCG could be transparent with. That is, the newly instigated car parking charges at the ferry terminal.</p>
Young People	<p>The young people on the island require facilities that would make their daily trips to school much easier. We recommend that space is set aside in Ballycastle (by future providers), for the specific needs of schoolchildren. A combination of working space (with tables) and adequate storage space for bags/books etc, lockable/secure.</p> <p>Furthermore (linking back to Recommendation 4), it is recommended that in future the contractor have an obligation to engage/inform young people of potential career options in the industry – with apprenticeships for island youngsters seen as a positive development in future.</p>
Policy/Legal Developments	<p>It is recommended that work be developed alongside NICS to help the island with future policy issues regarding the island needs – policy that is currently ‘policed’ by the ferry operations.</p> <p>At this moment in time, as an example, there are two issues that have potential for legislative input (whether that is bye-laws, legal statements etc) – car/campervan traffic on island and biosecurity issues.</p>



## Recommendations relating to democratic design to support sustainable futures

**Lucy Kimbell, Malcolm Beattie, Brian Morgan, Brian Dixon, Katrina Newell, Justin Magee**

Drawing on the experience of and insights from this academic-led research project, we make the following recommendations to the Northern Ireland Executive and to other public administration bodies.

1. Establish capabilities to engage and empower communities (including businesses and organisations) to participate in democratic decision-making and policy development processes

Our project engaged with a local community and its governance body through a democratic design process. Emphasis was placed on learning from lived experience, co-creation and local knowledge. Though small-scale the impact appears to have far-reaching. This initiative aligns with wider global trends where national, regional and local level governments been building design capabilities for the development of public policy and service delivery. Examples include the UK Government, the Republic of Ireland and the EU Policy Lab as well as Northern Ireland through its Public Sector Innovation Lab. Notably, the Cabinet Office's [Public Design Evidence Review](#) published in July 2025 pointed to the importance of leadership and enabling a culture of learning to achieve the benefits associated with implementing public design, which is aligned with the Northern Ireland [New Decade New Approach](#) strategy.

**The NI Executive should** organise, resource, promote and learn from activities to develop, embed and sustain public design capabilities in Northern Ireland, with a focus on the local.

This could look like:

- Initiating and resourcing citizen jury processes rooted in local settings to enable place-based deliberation on topics determined by communities through an inclusive, participatory, creative process
- Support and resource communities to co-develop and test responses to challenges they face and share learning through peer learning networks supported by academics, civil society and businesses

- Active involvement of civil servants and local government officers in the cross-UK Policy Design Community, enabling local authorities to work with Design Council, participation in conferences such as Service Design in Government
- Co-creating a shared vision with input from communities, academics, civil society and businesses to build capacity and sustained leadership for public and democratic design in Northern Ireland

1. Map out policies to identify anomalies and conflicts inhibiting delivery

Our project lightly reviewed existing policies relating to sustainable futures and identified several areas where existing policies are inconsistent or get in the way of action. The policy context for Northern Ireland is fragmented given its geography and history. In some policy areas, there are multiple stand-alone policies in play which can result in anomalies, inconsistencies and conflicts making it hard to develop and deliver coherent and effective responses, initiatives and programmes. For example, Northern Ireland is subject to the UK Climate Act 2008; the Irish Climate Act 2021 as well as the Northern Ireland Climate Act 2022.

**The NI Executive should** organise cross-departmental activity to:

- Map all the policies relevant to driving the green transitions agenda to expose anomalies and conflicts through desk research, interviews and workshops
- Organise and facilitate collaborative workshops bringing together people from different departments and regional and local government including specialists, academics, businesses, civil society and others to contribute to share their insights on policy gaps, inconsistencies and conflicts
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the current ecosystem in delivering the outcomes associated with current strategies, reports, legislation and initiatives



1. Operationalise missions to collaborate, test and learn and make best use of resources

Our project's practical design-led research with the community on Rathlin can be understood as demonstrating a mission-based approach to governance. The NI Executive Programme for Government for 2024-2027, *Our Plan: Doing what Matters Most* prioritises 'Planet' as one of the Executive's three missions. Alongside building design capabilities, mission-oriented government<sup>iv</sup> offers a complementary and potentially transformative means of shifting current policy making approaches to coordinate and enable a process of positive change that builds on the expertise and assets of a wide range of organisations. The Cabinet Office's mission-driven [Test, Learn and Programme](#) launched in late 2024 with a second phase in 2025 provides an example of a framework and resources for people to learn and develop new ways of doing things in places.

**The NI Executive should:**

- Enable active participation in current developments in the UK and other governments using mission-based approaches
- Organise and facilitate a series of collaborative workshops bringing together people from different departments and regional and local government including specialists, academics, businesses, civil society and others to understand barriers and enablers for operationalising mission-driven innovation in government
- Collaborate with schools within the curriculum and outside of it to involve children and young people in gathering information, co-creating ideas, developing and testing solutions related to sustainability challenges



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We would also like to thank and acknowledge the ongoing professional support during the project from project manager Cali Plahe, and support team Cheryl O'Connell, Uchenna Kanu Okoro at Ulster University, Island support team Marianne Green and Hazel Watson and other colleagues involved in the other work packages including Principal Investigator Professor Justin Magee.

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# Appendix

## Appendix 1: About the Future Island-Island project

This report is produced as part of a wider project entitled *Future Island-Island* project (FII) funded by the AHRC's Green Transition Ecosystem programme (2023-25) led by Professor Justin Magee at Belfast School of Art, Ulster University. The overall aim of the FII project was to accelerate green transitions in Northern Ireland, relating to product waste management, digital heritage, organic waste and education, specifically:

- To co-design a green transition: through discovery, synthesis and mapping societal attitudes and behaviour via community engagement and interaction modelling.
- To stimulate a green digital industry ecosystem: through the applied design of NetZero adaptation demonstrators that empower citizen decision-making, deepen knowledge through immersive experiences and influence behaviours.
- To model nested green circular ecosystems for the region that provides business growth and legacy leading to new service or product innovations.

Within the wider FII project, the co-authors came together as a team in Work Package 5 of FII, with the aim to support pathways to policy impacts with two objectives,

1. to analyse the current policy landscape relevant to the FII project; and
2. to co-generate, explore and develop policy recommendations with residents and stakeholders associated with Rathlin.

## Appendix 2: Methodology

This is a summary of the approaches taken by the report authors to carry out research summarised in this report.

### Analysis of visual minutes

- Katrina Newell carried out a close examination of the 'visual minutes', commissioned by Rathlin Development and Community Association, the Department for Infrastructure and the LifeRAFT Project: a set of illustrated documents

- produced by illustrators from More Than Minutes (<https://www.morethanminutes.co.uk>) over a decade from 2014 to 2023. documenting meetings, events and projects on the island which are published online.

- Newell conducted 11 interviews with 10 people associated with the production and use of the visual minutes, which enabled the creation of a narrative analysis of policy making in relation to the island between 2009 and now.

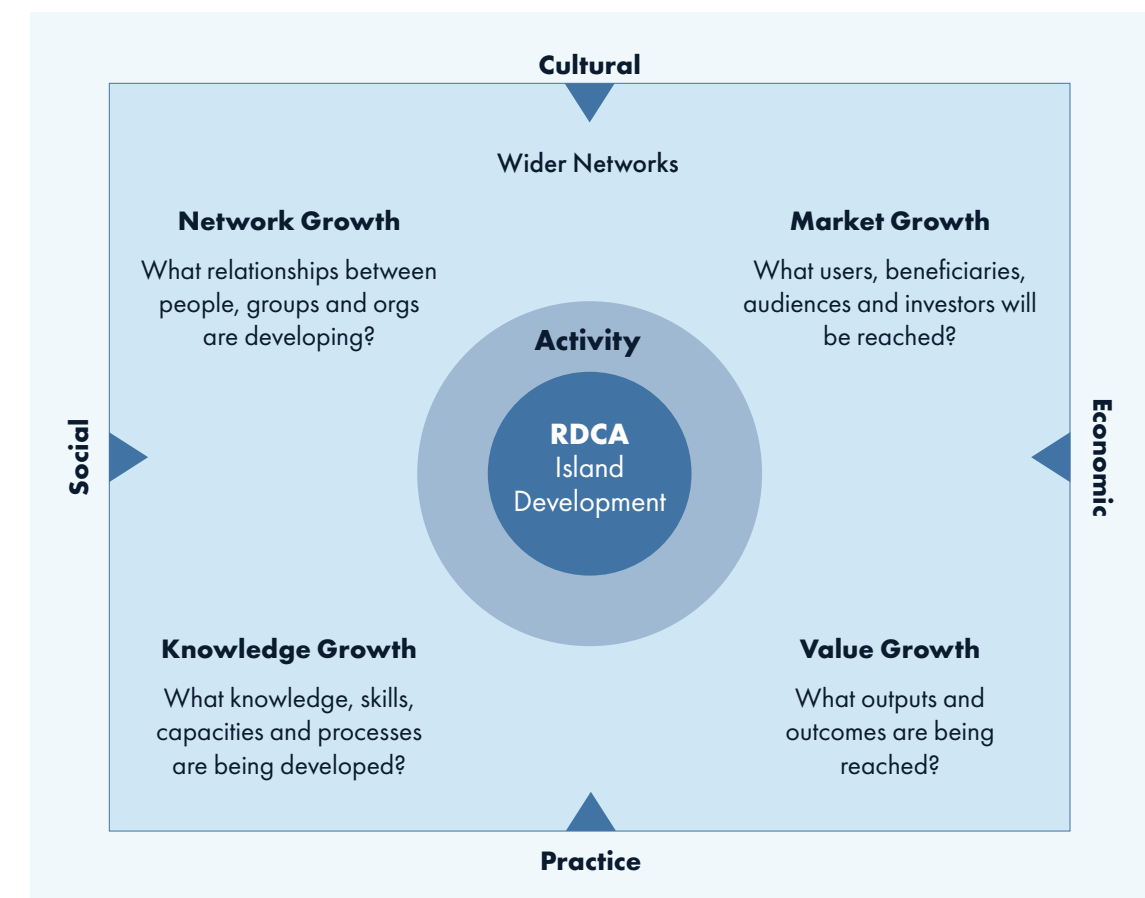
### Policy analysis and policy learning from the wider FII project

To carry out the policy analysis, the authors carried out three main steps. First, Gillian Steel conducted desk research identifying and reviewing reports associated with policy produced by a range of organisations related to sustainable futures for Rathlin Island, building on a list and selection process developed by Edwar Calderon and Lucy Kimbell.

Second, Malcolm Beattie carried out a series of dialogues with academic researchers involved in the FII project using a method developed by Michael Johnson, summarised briefly here. Actor-network mapping is a visually-mediated method based on actor-network theory that enables the mapping of people and things, and the relationships between them, as complex networks of activity. This approach applied a Creative Growth Model (Johnson et al., 2019), which identifies four axes of stakeholder interests in contexts of creative and cultural development:

- *cultural* (the diversity of external and shared interests),
- *practice* (the internal ways of working),
- *social* (the inputs from people and things that are brought together)
- and *economic* (the outputs from activities delivered).

In March 2025, a series of eight Miro-mediated, in-person actor-network mapping sessions were delivered at Ulster University's Belfast campus, each lasting about two hours, with selected Co-I(s) and practitioners delivering projects



within each WP. Participants were asked to describe the work delivered and relationships developed to date (internally on the map) and the potential growth and interests to be delivered or developed in future (externally on the map). The co-construction of the maps collected an holistic, detailed overview and live sense-making of WP activity. This supported the co-analysis of circular economies and ecosystems towards sustainable solutions on Rathlin, to evaluate and inform strategic development and policy implications for Future Island-Island projects.

Third, Malcolm Beattie carried out a series of interviews with all of the project Work Package leads, and asked them to complete a brief survey summarising policy implications of their team's research in their work package.

### Fieldwork

The authors carried out approximately 75 individuals and group trips to Rathlin between October 2023 and August 2025, including informal meetings and discussions with approximately 100 people, the majority of whom are resident on the island or working there.

### Research through design: Democratic Mini-Public

Brian Morgan led a deliberative project on Rathlin held between February and August 2025. Data produced as part of the DMP process were: fieldnotes produced by Morgan, artefacts or creative outputs of sessions; and a summary report produced by Morgan after each meeting and disseminated to participants.



Appendix 3: Policy reports consulted

Title of document	Produced by	Date of publication	Type of organisation	Geographical scope	Topics covered	Type
Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland. Ten Year Plan.	Department for Economy (DfE)	2025	N.I Government department	N.I.	Tourism	Strategy
Draft Environment Strategy for Northern Ireland	Department of Environment Agriculture & Rural Affairs (DAERA)	2024	N.I Government department	N.I.	6 strategic environmental outcomes envisioned to be adopted by Ireland's first Environmental Improvement Plan.	Strategy
North West Region Waste Management Group - Plan, plus Addendum	North West Region Waste Management Group	2015	A voluntary coalition of councils in Northern Ireland	N.I.	Waste management.	Plan
Waste Management Plan for Northern Ireland	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs	2019	N.I Government department + executive agency	N.I.	Waste Management.	Plan
The Path to Net Zero Energy - Secure, Affordable, Clean - Energy Strategy for Northern Ireland	Northern Ireland Executive	2021		N.I.	Growing Green economy, doing more with less, strategies fro decarbonising and acheiving net zero by 2050.	Action Plan
Draft Circular Economy Strategy for Northern Ireland	Departmertn for Economy (DfE)	Jan-23	N.I Government department	N.I.	What the C.E is, why it is needed and how its principals can be implimented in businesses.	Draft strategy for public consultation
Introducing a Deposit Return Scheme for England, Wales and Northern Ireland - Government Response	DEFRA contributions from DAERA & Welsh Government	2023	U.K Government department + N.I Government department and Welsh Government	England, Wales and N.I	Bottle return scheme.	Response document with plans
A 10x Economy - Northern Ireland's Decade of Innovation	Departmertn for Economy (DfE)	2023	N.I Government department	N.I.	A vison for inclusive growth that will create better jobs, and achieve net-zero carbon emissions.	Strategic vision
Rathlin Island Action Plan 2016-2020	Department for Regional Development (DfRD)- Now Department for Infrastructure (DfI)	2016	N.I Government department	Rathlin Island	Sustainable growth, community involvement, and improved services.	Development plan
Rathlin Island Policy	Department for Regional Development	2010	NI government department	Rathlin Island	Rathlin Island Policy, focusing on the development, sustainability, and environmental protection of Rathlin Island and its community.	Strategy Document.
Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011	U.K Government	Ammended in 2023	U.K Government	N.I.	Planning Act for Northern Ireland 2011 - doc details it's functions, regulations, and controls.	Legislative
Regional Development Strategy - 2035	Department for Regional Development (DRD)	2012	N.I Government department	N.I - also considers cross-border collaboration with RoI and East-West linkages with Scotland, Wales, and England.	Balanced regional growth and sustainable development.	Strategy
Regional Enterprise Plan-North West to-2024	Department of Enterprise trade and employment (DETE)	2022	Government of Ireland	RoI	Actions, and initiatives to drive enterprise development, economic growth, and job creation in the N.W Ireland.	Strategy
Causeway Coast Glens Bourough Council Local Development Plan 2030 Preferred Options Paper	Causeway Coast & Glens Bourough Council	2018	Local Council in N.I.	Causeway Coast Glens Bourough.	Balancing development needs with environmental protection.	Plan - Preferred Options Paper - public consultation doc
Rural White paper Action Plan	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD)	2017	N.I Government department	Rural areas in N.I	Sustainable development in rural areas.	Plan



Title of document	Produced by	Date of publication	Type of organisation	Geographical scope	Topics covered	Type
Review of Waste Mangement in Northern Ireland	Comptroller and Auditor General - N.I Audit Office	2024	Independent public sector audit body.	N.I.	Waste Management.	Review
Second Cycle NORTHERN IRELAND FLOOD RISK MANAGEMENT PLAN 2021–2027	Department for Infrastructure (DfI)	2021	NI Government department	N.I.	Flood risk management.	Plan
GREEN JOBS TASKFORCE: Report to Government, Industry and the Skills Sector.	Green Jobs Task Force	prepared for COP26 in Nov 2021	Independent Advisory Group	UK - relevant to devovled systems of N.I	Green Jobs.	Report
The Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland	DEARA	2024	N.I Government.	N.I.	Environmental Improvement.	Plan
Northern Ireland Climate Action Plan 2024-25	Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA)	2024	N.I Government.	N.I.	Development of NI's first Climate Action Plan.	Plan (these are to be produced every 5 years)
Developing Northern Ireland’s First Climate Action Plan - The Voice of Young People.pdf	Department of Environment Agriculture & Rural Affairs (DAERA)	Around 2023.	N.I Government	N.I.	Feedback and insights from young people in N.I re climate action.	Report - summary of a consultation process.
2024-25 Climate Change Action Plan	Department for Communities N.I (DfC)	2024	N.I Government department	N.I.	Responding to climate change and fulfilling obligations under the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland).	Plan
Growing Greener Experiences Together The Sustainable Tourism Toolkit	Tourism Northern Ireland	2022	N.I Government agency.	N.I.	Environmental sustainability of tourism in NI.	Toolkit
Government of Ireland - Tourism Policy Framework 2025-30	Government of Republic of Ireland - Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media	around 2025	Irish Government	Rol	Environmental sustainability of tourism in The Republic of Ireland.	Policy Framework
Lay-of-the-Land - Report of the Northern Ireland Inquiry.	RSA Food, Farming and Countryside Commission	2019	Initiative of Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce established to rethink the future of food, farming, and rural communities in the U.K	N.I.	Sustainabiliy of farming practices.	Report
Northern Ireland Environmental Statistics Report	Department of Environment Agriculture & Rural Affairs (DAERA)	2024	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA).	N.I.	Covers seven key environmental indicators and public attitudes towards environmental issues in Northern Ireland.	Report
Arts Council of Northern Ireland’s Strategic Plan	Arts Council of Northern Ireland.	2024	Arts and Culture Organisation- part of Department for Communities(DfC).	N.I.	Advocating for increased government investment in the arts and supporting artists to foster a thriving cultural sector.	Strategy Plan
United Nations Sustainability Development Goals Report 2024	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), with contributions from UN agencies, international organizations, regional commissions, and experts from civil society and academia.	2024	Global Intergovernmental.	All global regions.	highlights need for action to achieve SDGs by 2030. 17% of targets on track, with progress hampered in over one-third of areas due to C-19, conflicts, climate change, economic inequities.	Report
Climate CALM programme	Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful, funded by DAERA	2025		N.I.	Climate Anxiety.	informational and instructional document concerned with generating community agency.



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