

**Friends of  
the Earth**

**Northern Ireland**

# Newsletter

Issue 17 Autumn 2008

Friends of the Earth inspires solutions to environmental problems which make life better for people



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## Sammy Wilson



Courtesy of the DUP

**Sammy Wilson MP,  
MLA is the  
Environment  
Minister.**

**Environment Minister Sammy Wilson is a self proclaimed climate change sceptic, a view that is contradicted by the official position of his department. How will the Minister handle this conundrum?**

Sammy Wilson makes no secret of his hostility to green issues. He opposed the creation of an independent Environmental Protection Agency, describing the NGO campaign as 'frenzied'; has consistently supported reform of the planning system to facilitate development; is staunchly pro-nuclear; and opposes action to tackle global warming. His website lists a number of issues of concern – the environment isn't one of them.

Mr Wilson's contrarian views on climate change are well known. His suggestion that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) doctored its reports prompted Neil Adger, a lead author in the IPCC and professor at the School of Environmental Sciences at the University of East Anglia to say,

"Anyone who disputes these facts is either a fool or is seeking deliberately to mislead for political or other purposes. The IPCC is the most rigorous science available - on its evidence every country, province and indeed individual needs to act now - anything else is a dereliction of our duty of care to ourselves and our future."

So, what scientific qualifications does Mr Wilson have that enable him to dismiss decades of research and thousands of peer-reviewed papers on climate change with such confidence? Sammy Wilson was educated at Methodist College in Belfast, and graduated in Economics and Politics from Queen's University. After completing his teacher training he began teaching at Grosvenor Grammar School, becoming Head of Economics.

Mr Wilson supported Friends of the Earth's Big Ask campaign, calling for a UK Climate Change Bill. His party colleague, former Environment Minister Arlene Foster, steered a consent Bill through the Assembly which opted Northern Ireland into the Climate Change Bill. He has since back-tracked on his support and has suggested he will not vote for the Bill when it comes before Parliament later this year. Whether or not his party is performing a U-turn on its support for the Climate Change Bill remains to be seen.

The Department of the Environment continues to take the lead on tackling climate change but Ministerial demands to write climate sceptic briefings can only precipitate a crisis of morale in the Department. It is unclear if the DOE is becoming *de facto* climate sceptic, but officials must be somewhat confused. What is clear though, as the scientific evidence mounts and international consensus grows on the need to take action on climate change, Mr Wilson will look increasingly irrelevant.

On a positive note, the Minister did reject an application by Tesco to build an out-of-town shopping centre near Banbridge. The development was not in line with planning policy. Mr Wilson has also been supportive of PPS14. Perhaps the Minister has a green streak after all.

## Activist round-up

**Local groups and activists have been busy over the last few months.**

This year's Island Gathering, Friends of the Earth's all-island conference, took place on 17 and 18 May. For the second year in a row the event was held at the Tí Chulainn Cultural Centre in Mullaghbane. As well as the usual mix of workshops and plenary, this year delegates enjoyed an after-dinner speech from writer and broadcaster Malachi O'Doherty; and a panel discussion chaired by BBC Radio Ulster's Seamus McKee and featuring the Belfast Telegraph journalist David Gordon. Political cartoonist Ian Knox also exhibited examples of his work.

Congratulations to the Independent Traders Association of Banbridge, who successfully blocked the building of an out-of-town Tesco at

the Outlet shopping centre. Banbridge and Mourne Friends of the Earth gave their support to the campaign, hand-delivering a letter on the issue to the Environment Minister.

The North Down and Ards group have been giving away water butts to readers of the County Down Spectator. The competition was funded by Glen Water and the fifty winners can now collect rainwater in their back gardens.

A big thanks to everyone who took part in street campaigning over the spring and summer, on issues like biofuels and climate change. Public engagement like this can greatly influence decision-makers, as well as raising our profile.



**Good Morning Ulster presenter Séamus McKee chaired a lively panel discussion at this year's Island Gathering.**

Courtesy of Declan Allison/Friends of the Earth

## News in Brief

#### **Using the planning system**

The Environmental and Planning Law Association is holding a seminar on Thursday 25 September on, wait for it, environmental and planning law. This event is ideal for anyone who wants to learn more about how they can use the law to protect the environment and their democratic rights. Contact Niall Bakewell on 9089 7592 for more information.

#### **Members' evening**

On Thursday 20 November we will be hosting another evening for our members and activists. This will be an opportunity to meet our new Executive Director and Managing Director Andy Atkins and James Whiting, and hear about the work of Friends of the Earth. Niall Bakewell,

our Activism Co-ordinator, has the full details.

#### **Sound the Alarm**

This year's Sound the Alarm on climate change will take place on Saturday 6 December. The details are still to be finalised but we plan to build on the success of last year's event. Put it in your diaries now.

#### **New car club**

Ireland's first pay-by-the-hour Car Club, WhizzGo, has launched in Belfast. WhizzGo encourages its members to leave the car at home and travel into Belfast by bicycle or public transport - while retaining the flexibility of having a car available when they need one. Go to [www.whizzgo.co.uk](http://www.whizzgo.co.uk) for more information.

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# Environment failed by devolution

**Friends of the Earth's Northern Ireland Director, John Woods, examines the difficulties of working with a dysfunctional government.**

At the last Assembly elections, every political party bar one supported the introduction of an independent environmental protection agency. Yet in June this year, the then Environment Minister announced to the Assembly that no such body would be created. Seven out of eight parties in the Assembly representing two thirds of its membership are in favour of an EPA. Three out of the four parties in the Executive are in favour. The average voter in the street might legitimately wonder why the Assembly has ignored the clear mandate to create a new body to protect our environment.

On one level the answer is simple: the party that was against the EPA was the one with the environment portfolio and it simply chose not to bring forward the necessary legislation. Fair enough, it might be argued; Ministers can hardly be forced to do something that is neither party policy nor in the agreed Programme for Government (and presumably the EPA was not included due to opposition by the Environment Minister's party).

But at the same time the workings of the Assembly and the Executive also mean that the two largest parties can exercise a veto over any action by the Assembly. Thus even if Environment was the responsibility of a pro-EPA party, any proposals could be vetoed by either the DUP or Sinn Féin. And apparently the DUP would have been prepared to exercise that veto if another party had been responsible for Environment, and this despite the fact that the veto was designed for use on sensitive issues where cross-community support would be essential. Environment is not such an issue.

So we have a form of democracy that has failed to reform environmental governance despite a clear democratic mandate for such change. The DUP put a block on progress and disappointingly Sinn Féin as their partner in Government failed to use its power and influence to remove that blockage. A political system that allows either of two parties of a multi-party coalition to block change is a recipe for inactivity and discord. Those that favour the status quo will be happy with this while those that think we need reform to environmental or any other laws will be deeply frustrated.

**A POLITICAL SYSTEM THAT ALLOWS EITHER OF TWO PARTIES OF A MULTI-PARTY COALITION TO BLOCK CHANGE IS A RECIPE FOR INACTIVITY AND DISCORD**

This is democracy that can only be described as dysfunctional, a dysfunction that manifests itself in the continued deterioration of our environment under a weak and compromised system of regulation.

In more conventional democracies the electorate can choose to change the Government at the next election. Critically, in Northern Ireland we have no equivalent of the official Opposition at Westminster. It is left to a small number of MLAs outside the coalition, NGOs and the media to fulfil the role of an opposition. But what they can't do is perform the main role of opposition: to offer an alternative Government.

# Planning policy no threat to rural communities

**New research shows that rural communities have little to fear from PPS14, the controversial planning policy that restricts new housing in Northern Ireland's countryside.**

That's the conclusion of a report from Queen's University for Friends of the Earth that shows that the vast majority of Northern Ireland's rural population lives within a short distance of existing settlements where new development is permitted.

The mapping exercise carried out by Queen's researchers shows that 60 per cent of the rural population live within easy walking distance (1 mile) of an existing town, village or hamlet; 87 per cent live within 3 miles by road; 82 per cent within 5 minutes drive; and 98 per cent within 10 minutes drive.

The report's authors, Dr Manoj Roy and Dr Geraint Ellis, wrote, "Our analysis suggests that there is little basis in the claim that PPS14 will

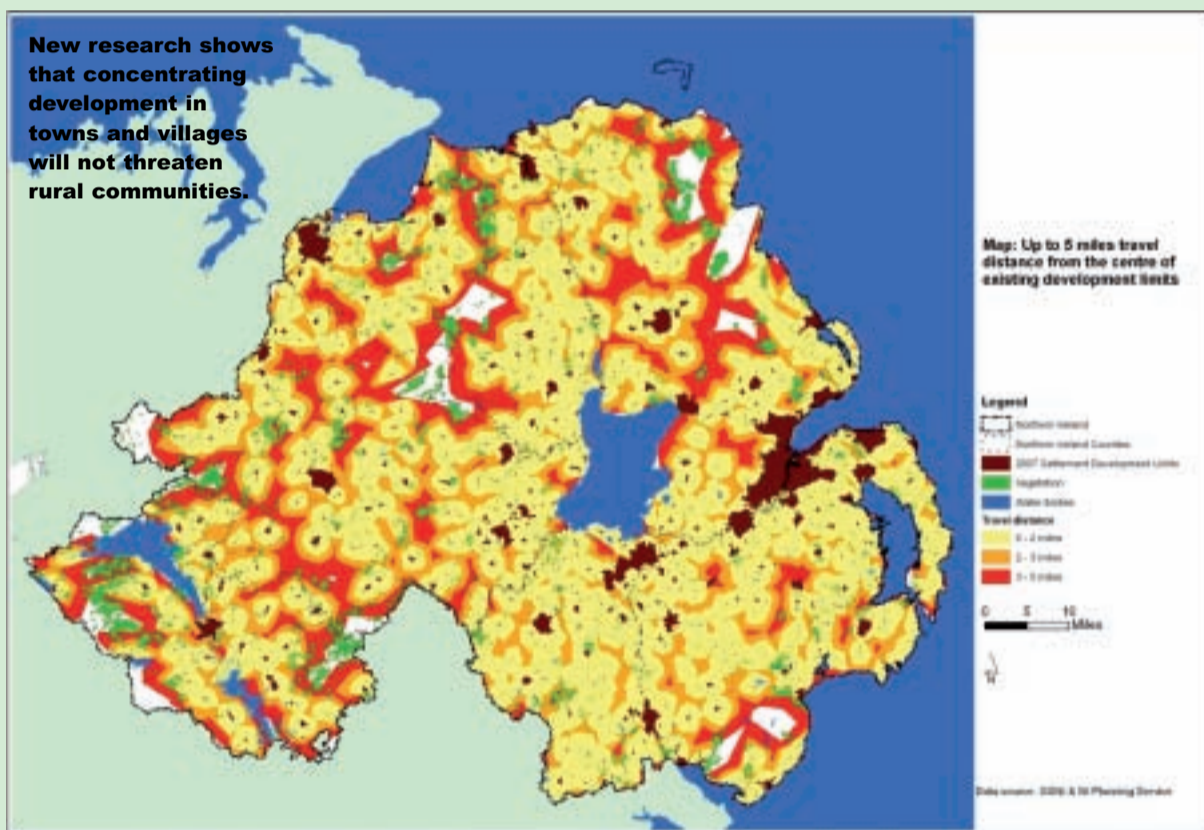
undermine the social and economic structure of Northern Ireland's rural areas." This is in contrast to concerns expressed by a range of rural groups and political representatives that stopping rural people from building in the open countryside would be devastating for their communities.

John Woods, Northern Ireland Director of Friends of the Earth, said, "This research shows that there have been unnecessary levels of anxiety about the effects of PPS14 on rural communities. It will be possible for them to continue to thrive if new building is directed towards existing settlements. It also means that relaxations to the policy currently being considered by the Executive, the Emerging Findings, are not necessary. There is no justification for relaxing rules on abandoned

dwellings or allowing 'clachans' to be built outside existing development limits."

The Queen's report concludes that PPS14 in its current form enables the Environment Minister to both "protect the countryside from unnecessary development while not constraining the social and economic development of Northern Ireland's rural communities."

John Woods added, "Good policy depends on good evidence, something that has been lacking in the debate on PPS14. We very much hope that this new evidence will influence the decisions of the Executive on an issue that is of great significance to everyone in Northern Ireland, urban and rural dwellers alike."



# Political dealing on rural planning policy

**As Lisa Fagan explains, fears are growing that the countryside will lose out in a deal to break the Executive log-jam.**

In June, Sinn Féin hesitated to nominate Martin McGuinness to the post of deputy First Minister, and there has not been an Executive meeting all summer. Behind this lies a host of unresolved issues: the devolution of policing and justice; water charges; the Maze stadium; education reform; the Irish language; and development in the countryside. Green campaigners fear a further weakening of Draft Planning Policy Statement 14 (PPS14) as part of a deal to resume Executive business.

Published in March 2006 under direct rule, PPS14 introduced a presumption

against development in the countryside. Friends of the Earth welcomed the policy because it limits bungalow blight, and encourages new housing within reach of the mains sewer and public transport network. The policy prompted an outcry from farmers, developers and the GAA, however. Among the political parties, the most vociferous opposition came from the SDLP and Sinn Féin.

The local parties promised to review PPS14 once devolution was restored. A judicial review brought by Omagh District Council resulted in the transfer of PPSs from DRD to DOE. In October 2007, the then Environment Minister Arlene Foster established a Subcommittee to review PPS14 and its Emerging Findings were published in March 2008. They propose a series of exemptions to the policy. Although the

nationalist parties are represented on the Subcommittee (by Michelle Gildernew, Conor Murphy and Margaret Ritchie) they maintain that Emerging Findings does not go far enough and are holding out for more.

Surprisingly, Sammy Wilson is a supporter of PPS14, insisting it will not be relaxed beyond Emerging Findings. His support pre-dates his ministerial appointment, suggesting it may be sincere. Nonetheless, the DUP stance conveniently strengthens their negotiating position, allowing the party to relax PPS14 in exchange for Sinn Féin's agreement to resume Executive business. Northern Ireland's countryside, its water quality and scenic landscapes may shortly be traded in a shady political deal.

## EPA defeat

**Arlene Foster's refusal to establish an independent Environmental Protection Agency dismayed green groups and delighted the Ulster Farmers' Union. Lisa Fagan analyses why environmentalists won the argument but lost the campaign.**

Mrs Foster's decision is a tragedy for the environment and a triumph for elements in her party who wished to claim the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) for the DUP. The farming lobby group was alone in opposing an EPA and has long been associated, in the public mind at least, with the Ulster Unionist Party.

The EPA campaign was backed by business leaders, consumer champions, rural representatives, angling associations, respected environmentalists and all the main Assembly parties, bar the DUP. It was supported by a robust evidence base: 51 reports spanning the period 1962-2008 criticised the arrangements for protecting our environment and called for reform. Most notable perhaps is Tom Burke's Review of Environmental Governance.

Green groups were angered by Mrs Foster's admission on *Hearts and*

*Minds* that her party had not given evidence to the Review of Environmental Governance because it had already decided to oppose independent regulation. Throughout her tenure as Environment Minister, Mrs Foster maintained she had an open mind on the agency question.

Mrs Foster may be hoping that her decision will be remembered by the farmers of Fermanagh/South Tyrone come election time. Her main rival for the Westminster seat, Michelle Gildernew, is in a strong position to win favour with farmers because she is the Stormont Agriculture Minister. The DUP may have calculated that siding with the UFU in the matter of an EPA would give them an electoral advantage in this predominantly rural constituency.

That the DUP should prevail in a matter on which the other three Executive parties had pledged their

support illustrates the shortcomings of the current arrangements. Nonetheless, much of the blame lies with Sinn Féin. Although the party is generally more pro-environment than the DUP, its main interest lies in securing progress on its traditional issues. It has proved unwilling to secure better environmental protection in exchange for its priority causes.

Environment and Heritage Service was rebranded and relaunched on 1 July as the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA). Friends of the Earth described the exercise as cynical and cosmetic. One glimmer of hope is the promised review of NIEA in 2011. All eyes will be on the rebadged organisation pending this review. Friends of the Earth will press to have the review accelerated so it coincides with the anticipated reduction in the number of Government departments and the reform of local government.

Courtesy of Declan Allison / Friends of the Earth



**Has Northern Ireland's environment been sacrificed on the altar of political ambition?**

## Peak oil

**Rising fuel costs require us to develop alternatives to fossil fuels to satisfy our energy needs. But not all alternatives are environmentally benign. How do we avoid jumping from the frying pan into the fire?**

Peak oil is the term used to describe the point at which half of the world's oil reserves are used up. From that point production begins to drop, demand exceeds supply, oil prices go up and it becomes too expensive or technically difficult to extract.

According to some oil industry specialists, oil production has already peaked, or will peak in the next few years. Speaking to an oil industry conference in Houston, John Hess, CEO of oil giant Hess Corporation said, "Given the long lead times of at least 5 to 10 years from discovery to production an oil crisis is coming and sooner than most people think. Unfortunately, we are behaving in ways that suggest we do not know there is a serious problem."

Reducing our dependency on oil would enhance fuel security protecting against global price

increases. It would also help us meet our targets for reducing carbon emissions and stimulate low-carbon economic activity.

**THE TWIN DRIVERS OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND PEAK OIL MEAN WE NEED TO WEAN OURSELVES OFF OUR DEPENDENCY ON FOSSIL FUELS OF ALL TYPES**

Commenting, Friends of the Earth campaigner Declan Allison said, "It is vital that the response to peak oil does not result in more environmental damage. Coal, nuclear, biofuels and GM all have serious environmental and social problems associated with their use. Instead of rushing to adopt these damaging energy sources we should be finding ways to cut our energy demands. The Transition Initiatives movement is setting practical and innovative examples of what can be done – examples the Assembly should be taking heed of."

He continued, "The Assembly has responsibility for energy policy. The only viable solution to a future energy gap, and the only one MLAs should be considering, lies in energy efficiency, demand management and renewables. The twin drivers of climate change and peak oil mean we need to wean ourselves off our dependency on fossil fuels of all types and begin the switch to a low carbon economy in the next few years."

## Economic opportunities of a low-carbon future

**The urgent need to cut carbon emissions is often portrayed as a threat to the economy. But Friends of the Earth's submission to the Programme for Government points to economic opportunities that the construction, engineering and agricultural sectors should take advantage of.**

Conventional economic policy dictates that Northern Ireland must maximise development in order to catch up with the UK and Ireland following decades of civil strife. If Ireland and the UK built successful economies on the back of road building, airport expansion, and competing on the global market then the Assembly must pursue these same policies.

This approach does not take account of the changed economic climate

which global warming will usher in. Successful businesses in coming decades will be ones that trade in low-carbon, climate friendly goods and services. Northern Ireland's traditionally strong industries are well placed to take advantage of this growing market – a market that is worth over 1000 billion according to a 2007 EU report.

In construction, opportunities exist to pioneer low and zero carbon building materials and techniques. The Carvill Group is developing Northern Ireland's first eco-village. Woodbrook, on the outskirts of Lisburn will be powered by a central Combined Heat and Power unit and the homes will have an Ecohomes 'very good' rating.

There is also a lucrative market for the supply and installation of insulating materials. To stimulate this market the Assembly could instigate a

programme for insulating homes and fitting domestic renewables. Such a programme could produce significant cuts in our carbon emissions, tackle fuel poverty and provide long-term jobs – a win-win-win situation.

Northern Ireland's engineering sector is pioneering climate-friendly technologies. Not content with assembling wind-turbines, Harland and Wolff is now developing wave and tidal power generators. Wrightbus, based in Ballymena, is manufacturing fuel efficient hybrid buses which are used around the globe.

Agriculture offers significant opportunities for cutting emissions and boosting its economic viability. Organic farming produces fewer emissions and the produce attracts a price premium. Independent shops and producer retailing, such as farm shops and home delivery schemes,

enable farmers to reach customers directly without the energy inputs associated with our well-travelled supermarket food.

The climate change imperative means it would be short-sighted to try to

emulate the economic model which has created the climate crisis we're facing. Instead, the Assembly should seize this opportunity to leap-frog ahead of the competition and establish a truly sustainable low-carbon economy.



**Woodbrook ecovillage: the village is powered by biomass Combined Heat and Power.**

Courtesy of the Carvill Group.