

Background

Lough Neagh is the largest freshwater lake in Britain or Ireland. It is both a natural treasure and a battleground for environmental and political struggles. Rich in mythology, it is home to unique species like the Pollan, Dollaghan trout, and PGI-protected eels, while also supplying over 40% of Northern Ireland's drinking water¹. However, decades of pollution from intensive farming, wastewater, and septic tanks have pushed the lough into crisis, with toxic algal blooms worsening with climate change.

In 2024, Stormont introduced the Lough Neagh Action Plan, promising tighter wastewater controls, farming support, and real-time water monitoring². Yet, political opposition has delayed or watered down key measures.³ Nonetheless, the protection of Lough Neagh remains a high priority in the new Programme for Government, published in March 2025.⁴

The Lough Neagh Partnership is the primary organisation with responsibility for the sustainability of the Lough, but more than twenty organisations, including government departments, councils, charities and other agencies have some degree of responsibility for Lough Neagh's management. Since the blue-green algae reemerged with a vengeance in the summer of 2023, there have been attempts at improved collaboration between these duty bearers, but concerns have been raised about the transparency and openness of meetings, the management of conflicts of interest, and the absence of any meaningful public engagement on the Lough's future.^{5, 6}

A local Development Trust was established in 2015 to bring the Lough into community ownership, and conversations have also taken place regarding public acquisition, as well as a self-ownership model enshrined by a Rights of Nature approach. However, the ownership of the Lough is considered out of the scope of the current DAERA action plan.⁷

Scientists warn that without urgent intervention, restoring the Lough could take decades, while campaigners call for bolder action, such as banning sand extraction which is scarring the bed of the Lough, and moving away from intensive agriculture. Meanwhile, the owner of the bed, banks, and soil of Lough Neagh, the Earl of Shaftesbury, has hinted

¹https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-03/programme-for-government-2024-2027-our-plan-doing-what-matters-most_1.pdf

²<https://ejni.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Lough-Neagh-A-case-study-in-environmental-justice-31.01.25-1.pdf>

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<https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/earths-corr-dup-ministers-holding-29396474>

⁴<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/Lough%20Neagh%20Report%20and%20Action%20Plan.pdf>

⁵<https://ejni.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Lough-Neagh-A-case-study-in-environmental-justice-31.01.25-1.pdf>

⁶<https://ejni.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Lough-Neagh-A-case-study-in-environmental-justice-31.01.25-1.pdf>

⁷<https://ejni.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/EJNI-Briefing-Sept-23-Lough-Neagh-Future-Ownership.pdf>

at transferring ownership to a charity or trust, raising fresh questions about the future of this iconic and embattled lake.⁸

How can deliberative democracy help?

Amidst a myriad of issues, different parties are scrambling to find solutions, and significant investment is being made in finding technological fixes.⁹ While welcome, investment in solutions in a context of distrust and disagreement can cause more harm than good. Lough Neagh's crisis is not just an environmental emergency – it is a governance challenge, complicated by fragmented responsibilities, political resistance, and a lack of public engagement. Addressing these issues demands a democratic response that brings people directly into decision-making. Deliberative democracy – through citizens' assemblies, juries, or other participatory processes—offers a way to build consensus, unlock political will, and create legitimate, long-term solutions for the lough's future.

Without public involvement, Lough Neagh's future risks being shaped by short-term political pressures and institutional inertia. By embedding deliberative democracy into decision-making, Northern Ireland can take a more inclusive, transparent, and sustainable approach to safeguarding this vital natural resource for generations to come.

A Citizens' Assembly on the Future of Lough Neagh could bring together a representative group of people from across NI, Ulster, or the river catchment area, to hear expert evidence, explore the complexities of ownership, pollution control, and sustainable land use, and develop recommendations that reflect informed but impartial public interest. Given the competing priorities – environmental protection, agricultural livelihoods, economic development, and community ownership, such a process would help balance different perspectives, break political deadlock, and build the legitimacy needed for bold, fast, and sustained action.

Deliberative methods could also improve governance structures, ensuring greater transparency, accountability, and collaboration among the more than 20 organisations with responsibility for the lough. A standing citizens' panel or participatory governance board could provide ongoing public input into decision-making, helping to manage conflicts of interest, and oversee the implementation of the public recommendations, ensuring that efforts to restore the lough remain ambitious and accountable. Public deliberation would also help ensure that any transfer of ownership reflects the needs and aspirations of local communities and wider society.

The Lough Neagh Action Plan makes reference to working collaboratively and to public involvement, but its lack of specificity and the non-existent record of deliberative engagement by the NI Executive generally suggests a less rigorous approach. Without a

⁸ <https://nickashleycooper.substack.com/p/thoughts-on-lough-neagh>

⁹ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/news/ps450k-initiative-launched-explore-solutions-tackle-blue-green-aglae-0>

clear, collective demand for meaningful citizen engagement, DAERA will fall back on outmoded and insufficient consultation approaches that will increase public frustration, further damage trust, and make any solution harder to implement.¹⁰

The people of Northern Ireland have been promised a citizens' assembly. New Decade New Approach committed the incoming Executive to at least one per year. That was in 2020. None has ever been commissioned, nor has any progress seemingly been made towards that goal, leaving Northern Ireland as the only part of these islands that hasn't created a deliberative forum for citizens to feed into the defining issues of our time. DAERA Minister Andrew Muir is on record calling for the implementation of the NDNA commitment in 2021, commenting that "Citizens' Assemblies have a proven track record for engaging local people to provide real solutions to some of the biggest issues in society,"¹¹ His party's 2022 Assembly Election Manifesto also committed to "establishing citizens' assemblies to inspect policies tackling the climate emergency and make recommendations" as part of their commitment to green governance and just transition.¹²

Since then, despite a barren democratic landscape in Northern Ireland, the practice of deliberative democracy, especially on issues related to climate change, have continued to flourish elsewhere while NI falls further behind. The UK Parliament and Scottish Government have both commissioned Climate Assemblies.^{13, 14} Major nature NGOs RSPB, National Trust and WWF convened the People's Assembly for Nature to build a UK-wide public mandate for how to respond to the nature crisis.¹⁵ Ireland has had a Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss.¹⁶ On a smaller scale, deliberative processes have explored options for river management, and held space for interspecies council, giving important voice to more than human beings who are typically ignored in decision making.^{17, 18}

Now is the time for the NI Executive to deliver on its promise to the people of Northern Ireland. Without public involvement, decisions about Lough Neagh risk being shaped by closed-room trade-offs between competing interests rather than long-term ecological well being and the public good. A deliberative approach would not only help navigate complex trade-offs but also build public trust in the restoration process. By giving communities a direct voice in shaping solutions, Northern Ireland can move beyond short-term fixes and develop a shared, sustainable vision for the lough – one that balances environmental recovery, economic realities, and public ownership in a way that centres the voice of the lough itself, and that stands the test of time.

¹⁰ <https://www.pivotalppf.org/our-work/pivotal-platform/121/creating-climate-citizens-how-daera>

¹¹ <https://www.allianceparty.org/muir-virtual-citizens-assembly>

¹² https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/apni/apni-2022-04-27_nia-man.pdf

¹³ <https://www.climateassembly.uk/>

¹⁴ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-climate-assembly-research-report-process-impact-assembly-member-experience/>

¹⁵ <https://peoplesplanfornature.org/peoples-assembly-nature>

¹⁶ <https://citizensassembly.ie/previous-assemblies/citizens-assembly-on-biodiversity-loss/>

¹⁷ <https://consult.environment-agency.gov.uk/environment-and-business/rethinking-water-citizens-juries-information-page/>

¹⁸ <https://moralimagination.substack.com/p/article-in-ends-report-government>

About this Workshop

In this workshop, we want to shift the conversation away from a debate (a win/lose battle between competing interests) about the Future of Lough Neagh towards a more compassionate and generative deliberation that honours the Lough and the more-than-human lives it supports. We intend for this workshop to provide a deeper understanding of deliberative democracy, how it has been used elsewhere, and to advocate for its use in Northern Ireland.

The format of the workshop will move from reconnection with the Lough into an energising practice around the role of curiosity in deliberation, before hearing from a panel of ‘democracy elders’ – people from across these islands who have played a part in making decisions about the natural world more deliberative and democratic¹⁹. Participants will be invited into dialogue with the panel, with the goal of exploring possible pathways towards a deliberative response to the challenges facing Lough Neagh, and everything that touches it.

We will follow up this even with a short report outlining possible routes to the commissioning of a citizens’ assembly on the future of Lough Neagh.

¹⁹Discussion here of the difference between and elder and an expert:
https://denby.substack.com/p/experts-vs-elders?utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web