

Clean and green: Young people's attitudes to environmental goals

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The future of the environment is of critical importance in the 21st century. On one hand, accelerating climate change and biodiversity loss threaten the future of all life on earth, including in Northern Ireland (NI) (Gilbert et al., 2023). On the other hand, there is an increasing awareness of the positive economic and social benefits that nature and the climate provide for human beings, and therefore of the importance of safeguarding the environmental systems that underpin human flourishing (Ulster Wildlife Youth Forum, 2022).

To address environmental degradation and promote improved social and economic connections with the natural world, the NI Environmental Improvement Plan sets out six strategic outcomes, or goals (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs [DAERA], 2024). These address waste, nature and wildlife, climate change, access and sustainability, as well as the quality of air, water and land. However, there are gaps in understanding how people in NI may relate to environmental goals, whether those in this plan or otherwise.

Drawing on data from the 2024 *Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT)* survey, Hayward and Hanson (2025), for instance, considered adult, but not youth, attitudes to climate change in NI, and found lower levels of belief or support than in the rest of the United Kingdom (UK) or Republic of Ireland. A 2021 survey by the Belfast Climate Commission Youth Working Group found that 52% of 1,200 young people in Belfast were very or extremely concerned about climate change (cited in Belfast City Council [BCC], 2024). Ulster Wildlife's Youth Forum's *Youth Manifesto for Nature and the Environment* (2022) called for greater action on climate change and biodiversity loss, as well as for more environmental employment and education schemes for young people. Given that today's children and teenagers will be living and dealing with the consequences of environmental action or inaction for longer than most adults, their attitudes to the goals set to safeguard their environmental future are vitally important.

In this Research Update, young people's attitudes to environmental goals in NI are considered. It draws on data from two surveys undertaken by ARK in NI: 2,129 respondents to the 2025 *Young Life and Times (YLT)* survey of 16-year-olds and 4,191 respondents to the 2025 *Kids' Life and Times (KLT)* survey of 10/11-year-olds, or Primary 7 (P7) age. It first considers the personal environmental goals of children and young people, before assessing their opinions on the six strategic outcomes of the NI Environmental Improvement Plan. Lastly, focusing on YLT, the willingness of 16-year-olds to engage in a range of pro-environmental behaviours is explored. Where relevant, it also compares these 2025 results with similar 2006 YLT data on environmental attitudes (Devine, 2007).

Young people's environmental goals

In 2025, both YLT and KLT asked respondents about their personal environmental goals for NI, though in slightly different ways. In KLT, children were asked 'What would you like Northern Ireland's environment to look like in the future? Type the first three words that come to mind.' Similarly, in YLT, the question posed was 'Thinking about the future, what do you think the environment in Northern Ireland will be like in 25 years' time?'. The results from both surveys were combined and words with at least 100 mentions included in a word cloud (Figure 1).

'Clean' was the most frequently mentioned operative word (n=787), followed by 'green' (n=370), and 'happy' (n=300). This personal vision overlaps particularly with the first two goals of the NI Environmental Improvement Plan: excellent air, water and land quality; and healthy and accessible environment and landscapes. It may also be indicative of the relevance, immediacy and publicity, among young people in NI, of pollution by plastic and in Lough Neagh compared to the perception of a more distant threat posed by climate change.

Attitudes to environmental goals

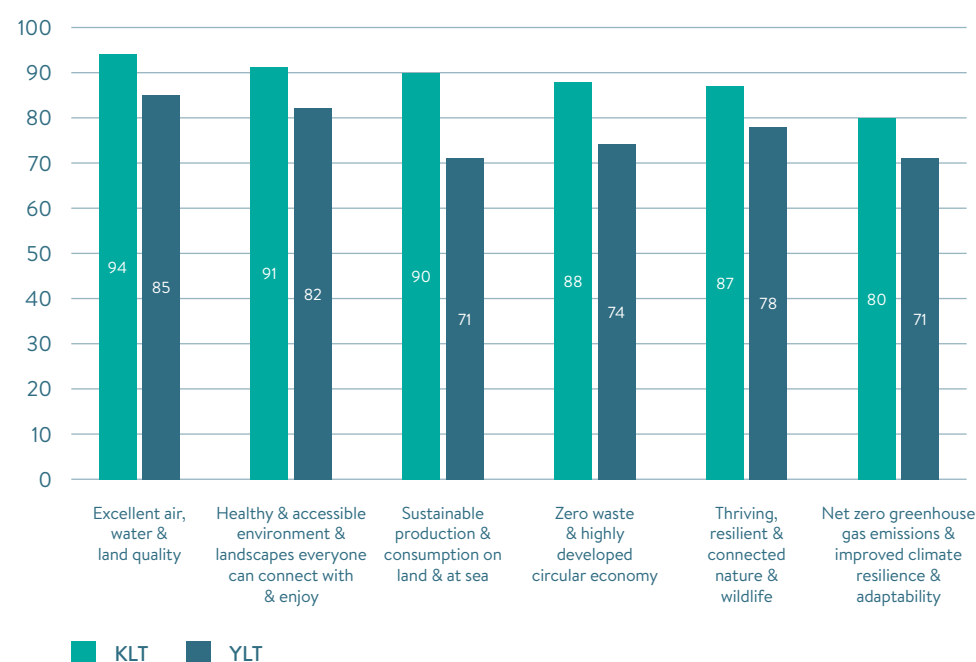
KLT and YLT respondents were asked how important or unimportant they felt that the six strategic environmental outcomes in the NI Environmental Improvement Plan were (Figure 2). In YLT, the wording for the six goals was used verbatim, with an explanatory sentence on the circular economy added ('a system where we continuously use and re-use resources'). In KLT, each phrase was rephrased into more age-appropriate language (see the KLT2025 questionnaire on the KLT website for the exact wording).

In both surveys, 'excellent air, water & land quality' was the goal with the highest proportion of respondents saying it was 'very important/important', followed by 'healthy and accessible environment & landscapes everyone can connect with & enjoy'. Similarly, with KLT and YLT respondents, tackling climate change was the goal with the

Figure 1: Environmental goals for Northern Ireland, YLT and KLT



Figure 2: Attitudes NI Environmental Improvement Plan strategic outcomes. KLT and YLT respondents choosing very important/important (%)



lowest proportion of respondents saying it was 'very important/important', in both cases 14 percentage points below the goal they felt to be most important. However, there were differences in how important respondents viewed the goals relating to sustainability, circularity and biodiversity. In all instances, however, a higher proportion of KLT respondents

considered them very important or important compared to their older YLT peers. Overall, the data may indicate that young people in NI give more emphasis to what they consider as 'local' environmental issues, such as water and plastic pollution, compared to perceived 'global' ones like climate change.

Table 1. Attitudes to NI Environmental Improvement Plan strategic outcomes. KLT and YLT respondents choosing very important/important, by gender and family affluence (%)

	KLT					YLT				
	Gender		Family Affluence			Gender		Family Affluence		
	Female	Male	Not well-off	Average	Well-off	Female	Male	Not well-off	Average	Well-off
Excellent air, water & land quality	95	94	91	94	96	86	84	82	86	85
Healthy & accessible environment & landscapes everyone can connect with & enjoy	93	90	88	91	93	84	78	75	82	85
Sustainable production & consumption on land & at sea	91	90	87	91	91	73	69	71	71	74
Zero waste & highly developed circular economy	88	88	84	87	91	76	70	69	74	77
Thriving, resilient & connected nature & wildlife	88	86	83	87	89	82	72	76	79	79
Net zero greenhouse gas emissions & improved climate resilience & adaptability	79	82	75	80	85	71	67	66	73	73

When attitudes to the Plan's strategic outcomes were considered by gender and family affluence some interesting differences emerged (Table 1). With the exception of zero waste and climate change in KLT, females ranked the goals as more important than males. In fact, addressing climate change in KLT was the only goal in which boys were more supportive than girls. Overall, the gender gaps were noticeably larger amongst YLT respondents; a similar male/female split was also referred to by Hayward and Hanson (2025) with adult attitudes to climate change in NI.

Family affluence also shaped attitudes towards the NI Environment Improvement Plan's six goals, although

how family affluence was measured differed slightly between KLT and YLT. Nevertheless, in both surveys, respondents from well-off backgrounds almost always considered the goals to be more important than those whose family affluence was average, and in all instances they assessed them to be more important than respondents from less well-off backgrounds. For KLT, the differences between the less well-off and well-off were widest in relation to the circular economy (7%) and climate change (10%), while for YLT they concerned health/accessibility (10%), as well as circularity (8%).

Devine (2007) found that respondents of the 2006 YLT survey considered

'litter', 'using up natural resources', 'loss of plants, animals and habitats', and 'waste management' as the top four of nine environmental issues. Ozone, air and noise pollution were the least important, while climate change and water pollution were in the middle. As with the results from 2025, local environmental issues took precedence over global ones. Devine observed that females were much more likely than males to be concerned about litter and waste management, with other gender differences mostly being small. However, in contrast to 2025, the 2006 results showed that 16-year-olds from less well-off households were more likely than their peers from average or more well-off households to consider environmental issues as very important.

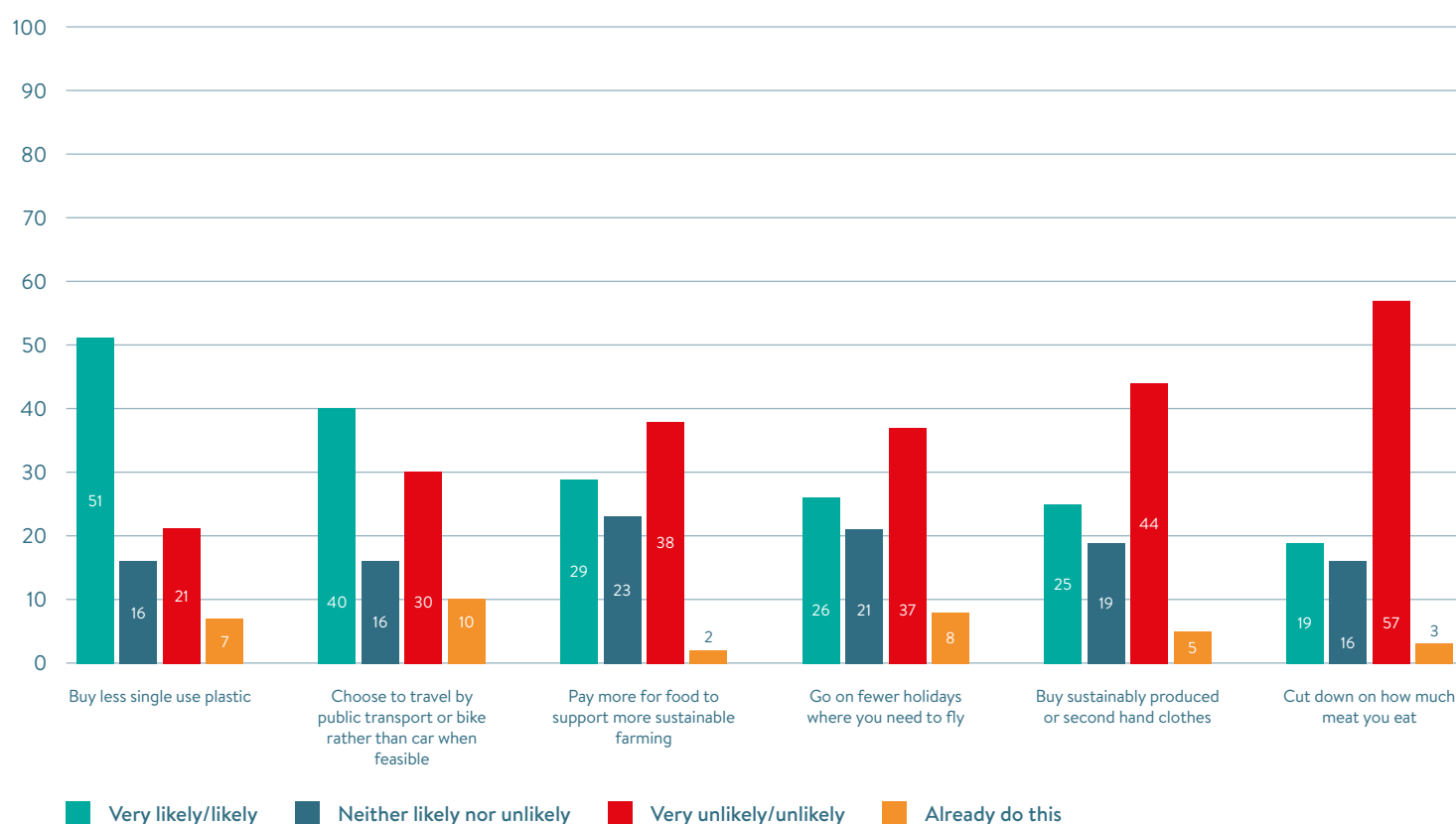
Attitudes to pro-environmental behaviours

In YLT 2025, to explore the connections between environmental goals and actions, respondents were asked about their likelihood of undertaking six pro-environmental behaviours (Figure 3). These included the use or consumption of plastic, transport, food, holidays, clothes and meat.

For two of the behaviours, namely, 'buy less single use plastic' and 'choose to travel by public transport or bike rather than car when feasible', more 16-year-olds considered implementing them than those who didn't. These actions, along with going on fewer holidays involving flying, were also the ones that respondents were most likely to carry out already. For four

of the six behaviours, more young people considered it very unlikely/unlikely that they would adopt them than considered it very likely/likely that they would do so. Respondents were least likely to say that they would cut down on their meat consumption, with a thirty-eight percentage point difference between very likely/likely and very unlikely/unlikely.

Figure 3: Likelihood of taking pro-environmental behaviours among YLT respondents (%)



There were also interesting patterns when the results were considered by gender, family affluence and religion (Table 2). Females were more likely than males to consider taking each of the pro-environmental behaviours, with this difference being most evident in relation to meat consumption. Similarly, YLT respondents from average or higher affluence households being more likely to implement three of the actions than those from lower affluence households: less single-use plastic; more public transport and cycling; paying more for sustainable food. For clothes consumption, however, there was almost no difference between the three categories.

In relation to reducing meat consumption, 16-year-olds from less well-off families were slightly more likely to consider this, in comparison to those from both well-off and average affluence households. In addition, for holidays involving flying this same lower affluence group were noticeably more likely to choose 'likely' or 'very likely' than those from more well-off or average affluence families. Interestingly, 15 per cent of respondents from less well-off households already went on less holidays by plane, compared with 5 per cent of those from well-off backgrounds. Cost is likely to be an important factor for lower-income households when considering some

of these choices, while status may be important for those from higher-income backgrounds, especially in relation to holidays. The analysis by religion revealed an additional pattern. With the exception of paying more for food to support more sustainable farming, Protestants were notably less likely to consider adopting any of the actions than Catholics or those with no religion.

Table 2. Likelihood of undertaking pro-environmental behaviours. YLT respondents choosing very likely/likely by gender, family affluence and religion (%)

	Gender		Family Affluence			Religion		
	Female	Male	Not well-off	Average	Well-off	Catholic	Protestant	No religion
Buy less single use plastic	53	47	48	49	58	52	47	51
Choose to travel by public transport or bike rather than car when feasible	41	38	35	39	46	42	33	42
Pay more for food to support more sustainable farming	32	26	20	28	35	28	31	30
Go on fewer holidays where you need to fly	26	25	31	28	23	28	18	30
Buy sustainably produced or second hand clothes	28	20	25	25	26	24	22	28
Cut down on how much meat you eat	23	13	21	19	20	22	14	18

Devine (2007) asked 2006 YLT respondents whether their own actions could make a difference to each of the nine environmental issues considered. The positive responses were highest for litter and waste management and lowest for climate change and biodiversity loss. The 2006 findings are echoed somewhat in the 2025 data presented here - in the importance of minimising single-use plastics. As with the importance of 'clean' and 'excellent air, water & land quality' as goals in the previous two sections of this Research Update, this may indicate a stronger conceptual link between aspirations and actions relating to pollution and litter, than in relation to actions to address climate change or biodiversity loss.

Conclusion

Environmental goals continue to be important to children and young people in NI in 2025, though the different wording, focus and absence of data from P7-aged children makes an exact like-for-like comparison with the 2006 YLT data impossible. Yet the gap between the relative importance of what are considered 'local' environmental issues, like clean air, water and land, compared to what may still be perceived as 'global' ones, like climate change, appears to have widened compared to almost two decades ago. Making a clearer connection between the global and the local, especially in relation to climate change adaptation, mitigation and transition, will be important for increasing awareness of and support among younger generations for this particular environmental goal in NI.

Multiple reports and sources have highlighted the need for simultaneous and synchronised action on climate, nature and water in NI (Gilbert et al., 2023; Hayward and Hanson, 2025). Some have considered the perspectives of young people on these issues (BCC, 2024; Ulster Wildlife Youth Council, 2022), which will strongly shape their environmental future. For the first time, many of these goals have been formalised in the NI Environmental Improvement Plan and its six strategic outcomes (DAERA, 2024). Whether institutional or individual, the challenge is to turn aspiration into implementation, so that the clean and green environmental vision of young people in NI, outlined in this Research Update, is turned into a reality available to everyone.

Key Points:

- 'Clean' and 'green' were the most frequently mentioned words when 10/11- and 16-year-olds were asked about their personal environmental goals for NI.
- In KLT and YLT, 'excellent air, water & land quality' was considered the most important goal from the NI Environmental Improvement Plan's six strategic outcomes, while tackling climate change was considered the least important.
- In both surveys, females and those from more affluent households almost always considered these six goals as more important than males or those from less well-off households did.
- When considering six pro-environmental behaviours, 16-year-olds were most likely to consider buying less single-use plastic and least likely to consider reducing meat consumption.
- Males, those from less affluent households and Protestants were generally less likely to consider implementing these actions.

References

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The Young Life and Times (YLT) survey is carried out annually and records the opinions of 16-year olds in Northern Ireland on a range of issues. YLT is a joint project of Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, and provides an independent source of information on what young people think. In total 2,129 16-year olds took part in the 2025 YLT survey. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/ylt

The Kids' Life and Times survey is also a joint initiative between the two Northern Ireland universities, and provides an independent source of information on what children think about the issues affecting their lives. In 2025, 4,191 10/11-year-olds completed the survey in school. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/klt



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