



Wise in 5: Geodiversity and Geodiversity Charters

Wise in 5 is a snapshot comparative guide to a public policy issue across the nations of the UK and Ireland. It helps you be PolicyWISE (Wales, Ireland, Scotland, England) in 5 (it takes just five minutes to read).

This briefing was published October 2024. It includes a summary of the latest policy developments across the nations, as well as related research from PolicyWISE, The Open University and PolicyWISE's university partners.

PolicyWISE creates neutral and constructive spaces for policy professionals and academics across the nations to develop relationships, respect and knowledge. We support and nurture a common culture of developing and sharing insight, knowledge, ideas and context from across the nations in a comparative and collaborative way.



	Geodiversity Charter published	Charter review date set	Charter drawn up by Forum covering various sectors	Charter drawn up by government agencies and departments
England	+		+	
Northern Ireland	+	+		+
Republic of Ireland				
Scotland	+	+	+	
Wales				
Key		+ Yes		

Wise in 5: Geodiversity and Geodiversity Charters

Overview

Geodiversity is a counterpoint to biodiversity, focusing on the non-living elements of nature: rocks, landforms, dynamic processes, soils and water in the landscape. It can be seen to provide geosystem services that benefit society, such as regulating surface and underground water flows, supporting a variety of habitats, providing raw materials, inspiring artworks and helping us to understand Earth's history. Put simply, geodiversity is the literal and metaphorical bedrock on which all forms of life exist.

Ideas of geodiversity are much less used and familiar than those of biodiversity. Since the influential [Millennium Ecosystem Assessment](#) reports of the early 2000s there has been a significant scientific focus on conservation and ecological research for biodiversity. The term 'biodiversity' has also filtered through to become a familiar part of public and policy conversations, giving biodiversity a significant '[voice](#)'. However, ecosystems also include the elements and processes of [non-living](#), or abiotic nature, represented by the term 'geodiversity'. Ecosystems develop as a result of the myriad interactions between plants, animals, soils, water and bedrock and it is widely recognised that geodiversity [underpins](#) biodiversity. There is significant evidence, however, that this holistic understanding of 'nature' is often overlooked or [taken for granted](#) by researchers, decision-makers, policymakers and the wider public.



Geodiversity is the natural range (diversity) of geological (rocks, minerals, fossils), geomorphological (landforms, topography, physical processes), soil and hydrological features. It includes their assemblages, structures, systems and contributions to landscapes.

UK Nature Conservation and Geodiversity

In the United Kingdom nature conservation is predominantly a devolved responsibility. England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have their own national strategies for biodiversity and the environment. However, the devolved administrations are brought together and advised by the [Joint Nature Conservation Committee](#) (JNCC) which works to co-ordinate action, create partnerships, share best practice and provide a robust environmental evidence base across the UK.

Geodiversity Charters have developed, within this devolved structure, as processes and instruments to help [counteract](#) the lack of recognition and integration of geodiversity within policy and practices. They were born out of the [UK Geodiversity Action Plan \(UKGAP\)](#) published in 2011 and they outline commitments and strategies focused on conservation, public engagement, education and the sustainable use of geodiversity. In their development they reflect regional priorities, governance and conservation frameworks but they all aim to:

- raise the profile and understanding of geodiversity
- see geodiversity better integrated into policy, practice, guidance and decision-making
- contribute to sustainable resource management and natural heritage protection
- celebrate the contribution of geodiversity to sense of place, identity, well-being, knowledge and cultural expression

Nation by Nation

Scotland

The [Scottish Geodiversity Forum](#) launched the world's first [Geodiversity Charter in 2012](#) and provided a [template](#) for subsequent charters to follow.

The Forum described itself as open to local geoconservation groups, interested individuals, Geoparks, industry and education sectors, related governmental and non-governmental organisations, and so co-ordinated a wide range of views and contributions. It presented a vision which was that:

“Scotland’s geodiversity is recognised as an integral and vital part of our environment, economy, heritage and future sustainable development, to be safeguarded and managed appropriately for this and future generations”.

The Charter set out areas of activity to help achieve this vision; encouraging actions from individuals, communities, landowners, developers, industry, business, local authorities, public agencies and government departments.

At its publication the Charter was time-limited for five years, with outreach [updates](#) periodically published to share best practice and ideas. The 2017 review added new signatories, new case studies and new emphases for [Charter 2017 – 2023](#). Policy connections were made with the [international context](#) for the recognition of geodiversity and the economic contribution of tourism, largely based on Scotland’s geodiversity, was [recognised](#). It supported the [Scottish Biodiversity Strategy](#) in which ‘Landscape and Geodiversity’ has become one of the key ‘[assessment topics](#)’. It also emphasised the importance of engagement with Scotland’s Local Authorities, often resulting in geodiversity audits and local [Geodiversity Action Plans](#).

Scotland’s Geodiversity Charter is now hosted on [NatureScot](#), Scotland’s nature agency. Along with organisations such as the [Scottish Geology Trust](#), they are part of the ‘community of interest’ that is working to draft a new Charter for 2024–2030 which seeks to foreground the role of geodiversity in climate change mitigation and in delivering for biodiversity.

Northern Ireland

The current [Northern Ireland Geodiversity Charter](#) was published in 2021 with the vision that geodiversity is recognised as a vital part of sustainable development and that it be safeguarded and managed appropriately for the benefit of current and future generations of Northern Ireland citizens. In Northern Ireland the Charter has also gone through a review cycle,

with the first publication covering [2017–2020](#) and the current version covering 2021–2024. These Charters were authored by the [Geological Survey of Northern Ireland](#) (GSNI) as part of the [Department for the Economy](#), with support from the [Northern Ireland Environment Agency](#).

Northern Ireland’s [first Charter](#) followed the template set by the Scottish example but with local variation and case studies. It celebrated the near 1-billion-year geological history of the province and its place as the home to the [Giant’s Causeway](#), a geological World Heritage Site. The link between people and place through geodiversity was described as particularly strong, inspiring poetry, music, art and literature. Provisions for environmental protection were set out within Northern Ireland’s specific legislative context, with 148 sites designated as [Areas of Special Scientific Interest](#) (ASSI), wholly or in part, due to their Earth science interest for example.

The 2021–2024 Charter developed a more distinctive approach, connecting its main themes to specific outcomes for the people of the province. A role for geodiversity in terms of sustainable development, economic infrastructure, social well-being and supporting important biodiversity was laid out. The challenges of COVID-19, climate change and the EU-EXIT were acknowledged, yet seen as opportunities for the geosciences. The Charter’s policy context drew on the [Draft Programme for Government Framework](#), giving impetus to five key outcomes as the aims of the Charter and providing case studies for each. These outcomes linked geodiversity more directly to measurable social, economic and environmental benefits whilst developing a more cross-sector approach.

Northern Ireland’s Geodiversity Charter is now due for review and redrafting is expected for 2025.

England

The ‘Geodiversity Charter for England’ was published by the [English Geodiversity Forum](#) and launched at a Westminster MP briefing opened by Lord de Mauley in October 2014. The English Forum and Charter followed those in Scotland and Northern Ireland in outlining a shared ambition for geodiversity by encouraging action, raising public awareness and advocating policy inclusion. There was also an emphasis on promoting and sharing best practice within geoconservation, both for itself and as a means of enhancing habitats for biodiversity.

Amongst the Charter supporters were three specific area geodiversity partnerships, including the [London Geodiversity Partnership](#) which worked for the inclusion of geodiversity in connection to development plans and proposals in [The London Plan 2021](#). These partnerships demonstrate the importance of locally based activity and networking for the inclusion of geodiversity into local level policy and decision-making.

The English policy context of the time is set out in the Charter with reference to various protections for geodiversity, such as the National Planning Policy Framework (2012) and the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981). [‘The Natural Choice’](#) 2011 White Paper had recently been published, advocating a more integrated and cross-sector approach to the environment. However the English Charter was not time-limited for review and is now, to some degree, disconnected from the new national policy context. This has significantly changed since 2014 as a result of the EU-EXIT, the publication of [‘A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment’](#) in 2018 (known as 25YP) and the subsequent [Environmental Improvement Plan](#) (EIP) in 2023.

Wales

Much of the early work on overall charter development was done in Wales and the drafting of a Welsh Charter was planned in the winter of 2020. GeoConservation Cymru-Wales were leading the co-ordination of geoconservation groups, [National Museum Wales](#), [Natural Resources Wales](#) and others, to prepare the Charter for submission to the Welsh Government and seeking to align the draft Charter to Welsh policies such as [‘Future Wales – The National Plan 2040’](#), the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 and the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 . Work on co-ordination and drawing up a Charter has stalled and so Wales currently remains without a Charter. However the unique geodiversity of Wales, its valuable role in society and in combatting climate change was highlighted by Natural Resources Wales to mark the inaugural UNESCO [International Geodiversity Day](#) in October 2022 .

Republic of Ireland

The Republic of Ireland celebrates its unique geodiversity through the work of the [Geological Survey Ireland](#) (GSI) and has had discussions about a Geodiversity Charter. The GSI has a long history, having been founded in 1845, and is now a division of the [Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications](#). Over recent years the GSI has overseen an extensive geoheritage programme which is publishing [County Geological Heritage Audit Reports](#). These are capturing the detail of geodiversity county-by-county and helping to select sites for protective designation as a County Geological Site (CGS) or within a Natural Heritage Area (NHA). The GSI are also involved in the three UNESCO Global Geoparks in Ireland promoting sustainable development in geologically important landscapes, including the [Cuilcagh Lakelands Geopark](#) which is the first transnational Geopark and shared between the Republic and Northern Ireland in the north-west of the island. Discussions about a Geodiversity Charter for Ireland were included within [The Geological Society of London’s Geoconservation Commission](#) annual gathering in 2018 in Dublin with contributions from the GSI and other interested parties. Although welcomed as a proposal, a Charter for Ireland has not been drafted to date.

Within the work of the GSI The Republic of Ireland’s [European and EU connections](#) remains evident. At the national policy level EU membership means that European environmental directives and policies still [apply and guide](#) work both on land and in marine environments. In developing the framework for valuing the country’s geodiversity the GSI has been guided by its membership of [ProGEO](#), which began as a European voice for geoconservation and which now has members worldwide.



Wise up – 5 policy points to takeaway

Five key points from what we've learnt above, which could be considered as part of further policy development and delivery in any or all of the nations.

1. Geodiversity Charters can provide a focal point for individuals and organisations involved in geosciences, geoheritage and geoconservation to refer to and to gain support from. The process of Charter creation itself co-ordinates a wide range of views and experiences of those working in, with and for non-living nature; amplifying the voice for this aspect of 'nature'.
2. There would be benefit in each of the UK nations and Ireland learning from each other in understanding how geodiversity can be better integrated into policy at differing levels and in ways of developing public engagement with the geosciences.
3. The discourse around Charter development and reviews shows that geodiversity and the geosciences can become part of policy and activity focused on sustainable development, climate change action and nature recovery. This broadens their appeal, complimenting traditional areas of activity such as protected sites, landscape scenery and extractive resource industries.
4. In Wales interested and affected parties have the opportunity to build on significant work already done to bring a Welsh Geodiversity Charter to fruition and gain social, economic and environmental benefits, such as those already seen in Scotland and Northern Ireland.
5. There would be benefit in a review and updating of the English Geodiversity Charter. Overall the setting up of review cycles and processes helps maintain the usefulness and contribution of Charters to policy discussions.



This briefing was led by Elaine Hooton, Postgraduate Researcher at the School of Environment, Earth and Ecosystem Services, The Open University with support from the PolicyWISE team.



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The Open University has been awarded £1m in funding from Dangoor Education to establish and run PolicyWISE. The funding has supported the launch of PolicyWISE in 2023 and our development over the following four years.



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Wise in 5

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