

Niamh French, 2nd Year Geology

The Charity:

[Friends of the Earth](#) are part of an international community dedicated to protecting the natural world and the wellbeing of everyone in it. They lead campaigns, provide resources and information, and drive real solutions to environmental problems.

The Project:

I worked with Friends of the Earth in Belfast carrying out independent research and writing up reports for the charity. The environmental legislation in Northern Ireland is far behind the standard elsewhere in the UK and the environmental laws that do exist are often poorly enforced. Ultimately, Friends of the Earth NI aims to establish:

- An independent environmental protection agency (like the Environment Agency in England)
- A planning system that respects local communities and the importance of a healthy environment
- Stronger environmental laws
- A Climate Change Act that cuts pollution and creates clean jobs

I have learnt that the work of an environmental charity is varied, from conducting research to awareness-raising to legal cases to hosting conferences to running training workshops, and blocking heavy machinery from entering the sites of poorly managed extractive projects. Underlying all of these tasks is the principle of empowering people to make positive change. I learned about the wider network of people working extremely hard to better Northern Ireland's environment. It was very fulfilling to work with people who had turned their frustration into productivity. The environment does not follow boundaries of Nationalist or Unionist communities, and so environmentalism has brought people together from both sides of the sectarian divide.

I know how important it is for charities to speak the languages of law, business and government in order to protest effectively. Much of the work the charity does and supports are legal cases. Local people often have to go to court against multi-national corporations without lawyers because they cannot afford them, and so they have to know all of the documentation associated with a project inside out. This involves learning a huge amount about environmental science, industry standards and the law, often while working an unrelated full-time job. This has shown me how useful it is to have a range of people with specialist skills and knowledge working for charities.



Highlights:

- Meeting communities that have been negatively impacted by mining here who have joined together and dedicated huge amounts of their spare time to improving enforcement of environmental law.
- Showing FoENI staff how to use geological information to support communities that may be threatened by poorly regulated mining in the future.
- Protesting at an illegal quarry site

