

# **Independent Advisory Committee on Nature Restoration**

**Meeting 6:** 29 July 2025

**Venue:** Custom House Dublin 1

**Time:** 11am – 3.30pm

**Attendees:** See Annex I

## **Meeting report**

The sixth meeting of the Independent Advisory Committee (IAC) on Nature Restoration took place on 29<sup>th</sup> July 2025. The Committee received presentations from Coillte, the County and City Management Association (CCMA), the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM), updates on the progress of the Interdepartmental Working Groups and an overview of the template for the National Restoration Plan (NRP) as related to the IAC recommendations.

The Committee also continued its discussion on potential priorities for decision-making, the core principles and the vision for the NRP and received an update on stakeholder engagement and future events.

### **1. Minutes, Governance review of work to date**

Minutes of previous meeting were agreed. In the context of the recent revision of the National Development Plan concerns were raised about the funding for the implementation of the NRP. It was agreed that this issue would be discussed in more detail at the next meeting and representatives of the FIWG would provide an update for the Committee on the group's ongoing work. A debate on funding could include discussions on the new EU budget, which will commence from 2028. It was noted that, as the future budget of the Common Agricultural Policy may be under pressure, additional funding sources are required to underpin the implementation of the NRP. In line with the current development of an EU roadmap, mechanisms such as nature credits may also be examined by the Committee.

### **2. Presentations:**

#### **Coillte**

Mark Carlin, Gary Healy & Aileen O'Sullivan presented Coillte's current strategy and its nature restoration policies. Coillte's land holdings total approx. 440,000 hectares which are

managed to deliver multiple benefits. 20% (90,000 hectares) of Coillte lands are included in the Natura 2000 network. Coillte estimate that 5% of their Natura 2000 lands are not under forest cover.<sup>1</sup> In addition to five-year strategies, a longer term vision for forestry of up to 100 years is required to ensure that benefits for climate, nature and people are maximised.

Coillte have introduced new approaches to measure quantities of carbon in forests and are planning to redesign up to of 30,000 hectares of what they classify as non-performing forests to convert them to semi-natural wilderness and enable peatland rewetting. Given the size of the estate, the plan considers that Coillte can deliver 20% of national afforestation requirements under the Climate Action Plan. Other measures could also assist in achieving national climate targets, e.g. increasing the proportion of timber-framed houses from 20-25% to 80% as is the case in Scotland. Coillte has also set up funds to purchase land and plant forests, native and mixed forests. The committee was updated on this, including a project in Derryclare in Galway.

Coillte use a Bioclass methodology to map their estate with the target of increasing the area managed for nature from 20% to 30% of the total estate. This has allowed Coillte to divide the estate into themes to improve the management of biodiversity. 44,000 hectares will be mapped by the end of 2025. Work is being carried out to re-establish Annex I oak woodlands on sites such as Ballygannon forest, blanket bog restoration and work on Special Protected Areas for birds such as the hen harrier. The intention is generally not to turn areas managed for nature into Annex I habitats. The results of native woodland restoration work to date have been mixed which highlights the importance of careful site selection.

Key challenges and enablers for afforestation were outlined:

1. *Regulation:* The regulatory landscape needs to be streamlined. Existing change of use planning requirements for nature restoration must be improved.
2. *Collaboration:* Information sharing is essential and is improving, especially with NPWS and Inland Fisheries Ireland.
3. *Resources:* Investment needed in skills and equipment. Nature restoration is labour intensive so there is a need to develop a pool of specialised contractors by attracting people to the forestry sector.
4. *Biotic threats:* Invasives and overgrazing remain a constant threat. A strategic national approach to managing deer populations must be put in place.

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<sup>1</sup> Natura 2000 data were not available on the day of the meeting and were supplied by Coillte in response to a follow up query.

5. *Funding market mechanisms*: Delivery is a challenge given lack of funding and capacity – all funding mechanisms must be explored.

### Discussion

In response to questions from the Chair Coillte agreed it would be useful for the Committee to follow up on a deer strategy and for Cherry Laurel to be added to the list of invasive species.

It was noted that the NRL includes legally binding targets to restore and re-establish Annex I habitats and that the size of Coillte's land holdings mean it has a key role in achieving these targets. Coillte noted that, while engagement with NPWS on relevant issues is ongoing, focussing on Annex I habitats risks ignoring other areas of high value for nature given the extent of the Coillte land bank. Coillte also noted a Knowledge Development Innovation on Forestry that they are liaising with DAFM with to build national knowledge and skills base around forestry. Discussions noted, however, that while Annex 1 habitats were to be a core focus of NRL work to 2030, restoration work beyond that would include more than Annex 1 habitats.

It was noted that the BioClass methodology does not appear to readily align with existing frameworks to map habitats utilised by NPWS or others.

On finance, public v private finance was discussed, with Coillte (and Bord na Mona) identified as key players in delivering the NRP. If private investment were to be made attractive, proper accreditation for nature credits would be critical. Security of long term funding is key to attracting in specialist contractors to carry out much of the work required and in order to properly support nature restoration, the development of contractor knowledge and skills must be supported. The issue of ring fencing for nature restoration the Coillte dividend payable to D/PENDR was identified as a suitable proposal.

Coillte noted that their next strategy will include the targets set out in the NRL. The importance of building on existing interagency cooperation was stressed. Coillte are to revert to the IAC with information on the percentage of Coillte land that is in Natura 2000.

Committee requested that the draft recommendations for delivering the Art 12 indicators within existing forestry types that were not included in the presentation be sent. Secretariat will follow up on this request.

Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM)

Kevin Collins and Milda Drambauskaite of the DAFM Forestry Inspectorate presented on Forest Ecosystems. A paper on the approach to fulfilling the requirements of Article 12 NRL has been submitted to the Interdepartmental Working Group (IWG) on Land. Most forests are privately owned. The Forestry Inspectorate will liaise also on Article 8 NRL regarding urban ecosystems.

The National Forest Inventory is refreshed in 5 year cycles, most recently in 2022, and provides baseline data and a tool for monitoring.

The Climate Resilience Reforestation Scheme (CRRS), which is limited to one 12ha application per individual owner per year, is currently at the pilot stage but is attracting significant interest. It has proven challenging to be strategic in the targeting of schemes, which are demand led by nature. Existing programmes are not delivering on native woodland targets, as they do not provide adequate incentives. The Climate Resistance Scheme for example replaces conifers with native woodland but the time lag on growing natives versus growing conifers is restricting take up of the scheme.

Some of the concerns that were discussed in the Coillte presentation around funding, training and perceived over-regulation of the sector were echoed. Ultimately, and for a number of reasons, landowners are not currently seeing forestry as an attractive option and this needs to be addressed. NRL targets will be difficult to achieve under the current licensing regime and a change of approach is required, including a tiered licensing system.

#### County and City Management Association (CCMA)

Coilín O'Reilly (Chief Executive), Liam Carr and Anita Sweeny of Carlow County Council (CC) gave a presentation on Local Authorities (LAs) and the NRP. There are 31 LAs providing hundreds of different services, with lots of work being done in the areas of the environment, energy and climate. Each LA has a biodiversity officer. Shane Casey, Biodiversity Officer for Carlow County Council provided material for the presentation.

Mr. O'Reilly noted the alignment of the county plan with the NBAP and referenced the importance of Heritage Council funding for nature work. The Hare's Corner Project was presented as a good practice example. 150 applications have been received by Carlow CC under the project in 2025. The budget for the project is €36k and local communities have been very engaged in its progress. Carlow CC stressed the importance of empowering local communities to lead in this area. Carlow CC are also working with IFI to remove artificial barriers and 3,000

have been removed to date. There is a strong appetite among LAs to commit to nature restoration work if adequate funding is provided.

A discussion took place on the presentation. The issue of the use of LA owned lands for the NRP was raised – there are possibilities in some of the larger LA owned parks but this is limited in scale. On the issue of what LAs would like to see in the IAC report, the impact of Hare’s Corner was cited as a good example of the benefit in empowering local communities rather than imposing demands. LAs should employ their own specialist ecologists and national grant funding that is simple to secure and administer should be made available for locally run schemes.

Anita Sweeney (Senior Planner) spoke of the role of planning at local authority levels in supporting nature restoration. The National Biodiversity Action Plan (NBAP) must be taken into account in developing LA level strategy as well as national planning guidelines. This work feeds into LBAPs, ensuring consistency.

UPDATE: The National Biodiversity Data Centre (NBDC) provided the following information on data sharing arrangements with local authorities on foot of a query raised in discussions on this agenda item. Provision exists for data exchange between the NBDC and LAs in the planning code. Up till now, resource issues have hindered this from being fully realised. NBDC have appointed a full time LA Data Liaison Officer to correct this, who takes up the role in a few weeks.

UPDATE: Planning Division of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage provided the following information on planning requirements during rewetting of lands on foot of a query raised in discussions on this agenda item. The issue is being looked at by Planning Division in the context of ongoing DAFM engagement on agricultural planning. In essence, planning for rewetting depends on scale and location. RE Environmental Impact Assessments, an EIA is currently mandatory for drainage and/or reclamation of wetlands where more than 2 hectares of wetlands are affected. Anything below 2 hectares is screened for EIA.

#### CIEEM Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management

Liz O’Reilly and Rob Rowlands from CIEEM presented a briefing paper on Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) in Urban Environments. CIEEM is an organisation with chapters in the UK and Ireland and 622 members across the 32 counties of Ireland.

BNG targets are now a legal requirement in the UK for new developments. There is an opportunity for the NRL to dovetail into existing planning vehicles such as the National Planning Framework and Compact Development Guidelines. BNG can operate as a vehicle offering balance during a period of heavy investment in development, e.g. by providing for a market mechanism in urban ecosystems or via the Refarm System, which offsets biodiversity loss by paying farmers to compensate for this loss elsewhere.

The CIEEM position on BNG in Ireland is currently less developed, with activities only ramping up. A briefing note was published at the end of 2023, which was presented to the committee, and a survey is currently being conducted.

#### Overview of the work of the Interdepartmental Working Groups (IWGs)/Presentation on Template

David Fenner (NPWS) outlined the IWGs' ongoing progress to meet upcoming tight deadlines. A draft planning tool has been developed to assist with the completion of ecosystem work streams by end of October. This will enable the Finance Interdepartmental Work Group (FIWG) to enhance its ongoing work by examining possible funding mechanisms. The FIWG have a specific remit – to analyse existing funding mechanisms, to determine the level of funding required to meet the measures recommended by the IWGs, and to propose possible alternative funding mechanisms to bridge the remaining funding gap. Separate to this, the FIWG will carry out work to assist in determining potential costs and benefits of the NRP proposals.

The next article coordinators' meeting is scheduled for 9 September.

#### NRL template as related to the IAC recommendations

Hannah Hamilton presented a first draft of possible IAC recommendations based on the NRP template. The discussion on the draft will be continued at future IAC meetings which will set time aside to continue work on the draft recommendations.

### **3. Brief update on other Stakeholder Engagement Planning & Events**

- Reflections were provided on the Farming for the Future of Nature Restoration Leaders' Forum
- An update was provided on the planning for the Marine Ecosystems Leaders' Forum on 3 September
- An update was provided on the planning for the Urban Ecosystems Leaders' Forum which will be held in Dun Laoghaire on 10 September and would benefit from IAC member's participation
- There is to be NRP engagement at the Ploughing Championships in September
- A Land Leaders' Forum has been scheduled for 16 October

## 5. Review of Actions from Meeting

- The FIWG is requested to present at the next IAC meeting
- IAC members are requested to examine the draft recommendations and work will continue on the draft at the next meeting
- A photo to be taken of the Committee membership at next meeting
- A Sub Committee has been established on alternative funding mechanisms to determine common ground. Paul O'Brien will lead on drafting a possible IAC submission to the draft EU Roadmap on Nature Credits consultation which closes in late September. A discussion on this may be included in the agenda of the next meeting

## 6. AOB

An NRL website ([www.restorenature.ie](http://www.restorenature.ie)) will be launched on 31 July. All IAC meeting reports and reports from Leaders' Forums will be published there in due course.

## **Annex I – IAC Meeting 6 Attendees**

- Dr Aoibhinn Ní Shúilleabháin, Chair
- Eamon Carroll

- Dr Micheál Ó Briain
- Marina Conway
- Prof Tasman Crowe
- David Flynn
- Fintan Kelly
- Paul O'Brien
- Colm O'Donnell
- Norah Parke
- Linda Lennon
- Coilín O'Reilly (remotely)
- Hannah Hamilton
- Graham Hopkins, NPWS
- Dr Rebecca Jeffrey, NPWS
- Marcus Maginniss, NPWS
- Áinle Ní Bhriain, NPWS
- Dr David Fenner, NPWS
- Kevin Collins, DAFM
- Mark Carlin, Coillte
- Gary Healy, Coillte
- Aileen O'Sullivan, Coillte
- Liz O'Reilly, CIEEM
- Rob Rowlands, CIEEM
- Liam Carr, Carlow County Council (remotely)
- Anita Sweeney, Carlow County Council (remotely)