

Independent Advisory Committee on Nature Restoration

Meeting 3: 28th April 2025

Venue: Custom House

Time: 11am – 3.10pm

Attendees: See Annex I

Meeting report

The third meeting of the Independent Advisory Committee (IAC) on Nature Restoration took place on 28th April 2025. Following a presentation by Dr David Styles on research on the role of public lands completed as part of the second phase of the Land Use Review, the IAC discussed the development of criteria for prioritisation in decision making, a report on the Leaders' Forum, the suggested IAC report structure and the latest developments in stakeholder engagement.

1. Minutes/Governance/Matters Arising

The minutes from the previous meeting were agreed, noting that more detail might be provided in future around key issues of note.

The Chair clarified the process by which papers are submitted to the IAC. Questions should be submitted via the secretariat who will seek responses from the Interdepartmental Working Groups (IWGs) to be provided for the following IAC meeting. It was suggested that the creation of a separate mailbox for the IAC should be considered.

2. Land Use Review Phase 2: The Role of Public Lands

Dr David Styles provided an overview of research completed on the role of public lands against the background of the soon to be published report on Phase 2 of the Land Use Review. A core question is how to leverage the 8.5% of land that is owned by the state to achieve key national objectives by considering relevant land use change. This is complicated by issues including a lack of clarity in some organisations' mandates and the existence of detailed information on ownership – in particular in rural areas – by the Land Development Agency register. The draft report recommends developing a database of land in public sector ownership, improving the transparency around official mandates to support relevant organisations in taking action to meet national targets and

increasing the use of scorecards as used for example by the ACRES scheme. Land use change including carbon capture by restoring peatlands has a significant role in meeting climate targets. While NPWS, Bord na Mona and Coillte currently have restoration measures in place, the OPW should be enabled to increase rewetting for climate mitigation purposes. A significant expansion of afforestation – including commercial forestry – is also needed to achieve national targets but this is complicated by land prices and licensing. Local authorities have big land banks, but these are often earmarked for development. Nonetheless, comprehensive biodiversity plans should be in place for this land.

It was noted that an ambitious peatland restoration plan should include removing peatland forests which is complicated by the difficulty of obtaining planning permission for deforestation. Given their mandates, semi-state agencies need to be provided with economic incentives to restore public lands. This and other regulatory barriers such as habitat protections involve complex trade-offs exacerbated by the limited availability of public land. In reply to questioning from the Committee, Dr Styles agreed that ambitious peatland restoration and rewetting are critically important, including measures aimed at restoring afforested peatlands. He also supported the idea that having biodiversity restoration and climate action as core objectives for Coillte and Bord Na Móna would be helpful, and suggested a stocktake for biodiversity and climate on public land to achieve targeted goals.

3. Criteria for Prioritisation in decision making

Professor Tasman Crowe gave an overview of possible prioritisation criteria which will enable the IAC to recommend appropriate courses of action to the Minister on the basis of the available scientific evidence and stakeholder engagement outputs. The current list is not exhaustive – not included in the current list to any significant extent are the cultural, amenity and health benefits, not least due to issues of measurement and valuation. The cost of restoration has also been omitted so far as this will vary in terms of species and habitats but cost constraints will play a role.

The Chair noted that the final list of criteria must ensure that flexibility is retained as biodiversity is complex and nuanced. Any decisions made must be linked back to the final set of agreed criteria. It was noted that the prioritisation process must take into account existing legal requirements such as the Birds and Habitats Directives and it was suggested that societal benefit should also include housing, net zero emissions and related factors. A differing interpretation of the EU Nature Restoration Regulation's

(NRR) target requirements was raised which would have an impact on prioritisation due to reduced scope to offset along habitat groups. NPWS will clarify this matter. IAC members will review the draft prioritisation criteria in advance of the next meeting. It was suggested that the IWGs should provide worked examples using various habitat types.

4. Leaders' Forum Report

The discussion revolved around the use of the conclusions of the report on the Leaders' Forum on 25th March as a basis for agreed principles, an overall vision of the plan and the identification of key risks, challenges and enablers. These elements will form a core piece of the IAC's recommendations to the Minister on the development of the National Restoration Plan (NRP). It was noted that the debate at the Leaders' Forum extended beyond the bounds of the NRR which highlighted the challenge of focusing on the elements required to implement the law and managing stakeholders' expectations. Next steps will see the results of the report presented to the stakeholders on 21st May as part of an online feedback session to ensure that there is agreement on the conclusions. Upcoming Leaders' Forums and the IAC Subcommittee on Stakeholder Engagement will determine additional questions for stakeholders to build on the first Forum.

4.1. Agreement on Principles

The intention is to advise the Minister that the NRP should be drafted according to an agreed set of principles. It was noted that it is currently not clear whether a whole-of-Government approach is currently being taken to the development of the NRP. Given the importance of sharing data across Departments it was suggested that contacting the Department of the Taoiseach might be warranted to facilitate this. The Chair proposed that contacting the Cabinet Subcommittee on the Environment in the first instance would be more useful at the appropriate moment. Suggestions were made to boost the ranking of financial support, consider farming as part of our cultural heritage, ensure the inclusion of a requirement to enshrine clear targets and measures designed to achieve the NRR's objectives and those of existing legal commitments in the NRP. The following ranking of existing principles was proposed:

- legislative foundation
- whole-of-government approach
- scientific evidence base
- stakeholder input

- maximising benefits for nature and society.

It was suggested that these principles must be underpinned by local decision-making and empowerment. It was also noted that political will and long-term financing are essential to provide farmers and landowners with certainty. It was highlighted that the IAC's recommendations should include elevating biodiversity to the same level of importance as climate policy to boost its standing. The following edits were agreed: including a line on closing the knowledge gap "in line with the requirements of the NRR"; substituting "participatory" for "deliberative democracy" and removing "co-design". Stronger links to the vision statement were also suggested. IAC members are requested to review the principles by the next meeting to progress agreement.

4.2. Alignment on Vision

The Chair proposed that the IAC's vision will correspond to the ideal outcome but will leave flexibility given the ownership of the NRP by the Minister and the State as final decision-makers. It was noted that it is essential to ensure that the vision is ambitious and legally sound. In this context the voluntary nature of restoration in a general sense under the NRR was questioned given the breadth of application of the regulation and existing commitments under other EU legislation. The Chair requested clarification from the Secretariat on this matter which NPWS should be in a position to provide once the Minister has approved PQ 20610/25 on the use of state lands. IAC members are requested to review the vision by the next meeting to progress agreement.

5. Discussion of proposed outline of IAC Report

It was suggested that the Vision should precede the principles in the final report. This should be followed by the recommendations from the IAC and the results of stakeholder engagement with the completed template forming the last part of the report. Additional reports will be included as appendices. A presentation on the NRP template was requested which will NPWS will provide to the IAC as soon as possible.

6. Update on Stakeholder Engagement Planning & Events

The Chair stated that further Leaders' Forums are being planned but the tendering process has not been completed. A tender for the Community Conversations has been prepared and NPWS are hoping to commence events over summer. A Leaders' Forum on education will take place on 24th June in DCU and IAC members are encouraged to attend.

7. AOB

In the absence of the availability of a suitable room in the Custom House, the Secretariat was requested to arrange for suitable accommodation in an easily accessible hotel.

Annex I – IAC Meeting 3 Attendees

- Dr Aoibhinn Ní Shúilleabháin, Chair
- Mr David Kerr
- Mrs Norah Parke
- Professor Tasman Crowe
- Mr Paul O'Brien
- Mr Colm O'Donnell
- Ms Marina Conway
- Mr David Flynn
- Dr Micheál Ó Briain
- Mr Fintan Kelly
- Mr Eamon Carroll
- Ms Áinle Ní Bhriain, Director for International and EU Affairs, NPWS
- Dr Rebecca Jeffrey, NPWS
- Dr David Fenner, NPWS
- Mr Marcus Maginniss, NPWS

Apologies:

- Ms Linda Lennon

Absent:

- Mr Coilín O'Reilly