

Independent Advisory Committee on Nature Restoration

Meeting 4: 28th May 2025

Venue: Gibson Hotel Dublin 1

Time: 11am – 3.40pm

Attendees: See Annex I

Meeting report

The fourth meeting of the Independent Advisory Committee (IAC) on Nature Restoration took place on 28th May 2025. The chairs of the Interdepartmental Working Groups (IWGs) on Cities & Towns and the Sea provided updates to the IAC on their ongoing work against the background of the requirements of the Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR) and the proposed approaches to tackling the challenges in their respective ecosystem areas. The Committee also continued its discussion on potential priorities for decision making, the core principles and the vision for the National Restoration Plan (NRP) to underpin the development of their recommendations to the Minister.

1. Minutes / Governance / Matters Arising

The Chair suggested the Terms of Reference be amended to provide for a specific substitute for each participant. Given that the IAC is independent and its core objective is to produce recommendations for the Minister on the NRP, the Chair stated that the IAC should set its priorities and pursue its work streams independently of the IWGs. She proposed that Coillte and Bord Na Móna present to the IAC in the next two months and for increased engagement with stakeholders representing urban ecosystems. The Chair noted that the IAC report is separate to the NRP template and a draft is to be submitted to Minister in March 2026. Additional support will be made available to assist with the drafting in the coming weeks. Subject to the Minister's agreement the IAC report will be published at a later stage as part of the overall plan. The work on the NRP template will inform the IAC recommendations. NPWS agreed to give a presentation on the NRP template at the next IAC meeting on 30th June. The template is to be completed by the end of the year.

NPWS provided an update on the Interdepartmental Working Group (IWG) on Finance. The group will be convened on the 17th June and letters requesting relevant

Departments and state agencies to nominate IWG members will issue shortly. A prospective IWG Chair will be confirmed in the coming days.

The record of the discussions of the third IAC meeting was discussed and in relation to the discussion on prioritisation criteria it was noted that Ireland's legal obligations to protect Natura 2000 sites need to be emphasized. A committee member noted that they raised three specific questions following a presentation on the role of public lands which were not recorded in the minutes of the meeting. The Chair clarified that the intention is not to provide detailed minutes of each meeting that clearly identify individual contributions but to summarise key points raised during the discussion and focused in particular on outcomes and next steps. A proposal was tabled to summarise the substance of the issues raised which was accepted. The meeting report will be amended to reflect this agreement.

2. IWG Chair Presentations:

- The Chair of the IWG on Cities and Towns provided the IAC with an overview of ongoing work to satisfy the NRR's requirements in relation to urban ecosystems in support of a paper submitted to the Committee for information. Work completed to date has focused on determining the scope of the regulation, mapping requirements and appropriate datasets. Meeting the regulation's short-term targets in urban ecosystems will be challenging due to the fact that the geospatial tools suggested for use by the Commission and alternatives available in Ireland such as the National Landcover Map are not granular enough to capture the range of urban greening measures including green walls and roofs. In addition, housing demand and socioeconomic development trends have resulted in significant urban greenspace loss, which – based on current planning policy and projects in the pipeline – is set to continue. It was noted that there is a time lag between changes to planning law and practice and measurable impacts on the ground. At the same time the new planning act enables planning cycles to be updated more quickly.

It was noted that while balancing the needs of housing and nature restoration is challenging, the IAC's recommendations will focus primarily on the need for nature and biodiversity restoration. It was also noted that the NRR contains legally binding targets that Ireland must meet. It was discussed that local authorities have a critical role to play with local biodiversity officers embedded in processes and developments being planned and implemented in some of Ireland's larger towns

and cities and already require many aspects included in the NRR for urban greening and tree cover in their planning application systems. It was agreed that the Committee will request a presentation from the CCMA following up on some of these points. The Chair noted in relation to the use of mapping data tools that in the current absence of a regularly updated National Landcover Map the IAC is in a position to recommend regular updates to align with the requirements of the NRR. The Chair also suggested that the IWG on Cities and Towns be represented and present their work at the Urban Leaders' Forum planned for 10th September.

- The Chair of the IWG on the NRR at Sea provided the IAC with an overview of ongoing work to satisfy the regulation's requirements in relation to marine ecosystems. While the geographical scope of the Art. 5 NRR is large, an extensive seabed mapping programme and existing relevant reporting streams on the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD), Water Framework Directive and Habitats Directive are in place which should enable the definition of the baseline and the distribution of pressures. This reporting defines restoration objectives, what monitoring is required and what measures must be implemented. Ireland has a marine strategy which includes spatial protection measures, seafloor integrity restoration areas related to existing pressures and work on nature-based solutions in coastal areas. While progress has been made on reducing pollution, the effects of climate change have become more noticeable. The focus is therefore on the restoration measures required to achieve the NRR targets, existing knowledge gaps and unmapped areas. Discussions are required around reducing pressures, including in fishing areas. Next steps for the IWG will include engaging with the fisheries sector, noting that any related measures put forward must be developed in tandem with the Common Fisheries Policy.

When asked a question from the Committee, the chair of the IWG on the NRR at Sea noted that progression of the MPAs would greatly assist in the work towards meeting the NRR targets. The Chair of the IAC noted that while the IWG is conducting its own stakeholder engagement, liaising with the group on the IAC's engagement would be very helpful to progress the work of the Committee.

- On behalf of the Chair of the IWG on Land, NPWS provided the IAC with a brief overview of ongoing work to satisfy the regulation's requirements in relation to terrestrial ecosystems. It was noted that two papers have been submitted to the committee on rivers and connected floodplains under Art. 9 NRR and on

indicators for agricultural ecosystems under Art. 11 NRR. A national barrier inventory has been established, a barrier removal programme managed by Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI) is in place and a barrier mitigation funding scheme was launched in May. Work is still required to ensure that the definitions and measures in the inventory and the programme align with the NRR and to ensure that floodplains are taken into account, which has possible implications for drainage practices. In relation to Art. 11(2) NRR DAFM have completed an assessment and are proposing to focus on Grassland Butterfly Index (GBI) and high-diversity landscape features.

It was noted that IFI's work focuses on a set of fish species which may need to be widened for the NRR. Similarly, the links to Art. 4 NRR habitats should be taken into account when defining appropriate measures. Regarding links of Art. 11(2) NRR to pollinators, the possible impact of future measures was considered hard to quantify as the future of the ACRES programme is unclear after the end of the current CAP period. Stronger links were recommended between the GBI and Art. 10 NRR pollinators. In the context of funding the CAP and biodiversity objectives after 2027 it was noted that convening the IWG on Finance is critical to progress some of these discussions.

3. Criteria for Prioritisation in decision making:

An update was provided on the latest set of criteria based on feedback received at the last IAC meeting.

It was noted that issues raised in relation to the interpretation of Art. 4 NRR and their implications regarding the prioritisation of restoration have been tackled separately. It was suggested that more emphasis is required on Natura 2000 sites to ensure that Ireland complies with its obligations under existing legislation. Consideration should be given to weighting and codifying the criteria and scoring habitats against them.

The Chair noted that if the IAC needs to make decisions on IWG proposals, a narrative may be required to support decision making. It was suggested that a clearer picture of the condition and the ownership (private vs public ownership) of habitats is required as well as clearer targets for all habitats to inform the prioritisation approach. This approach should also take into account the overall 2050 targets to ensure consideration of all habitat groups. A habitat template has been developed and work is ongoing to complete this process. NPWS will be requested to provide more detailed information on land ownership to determine what can be achieved on state lands.

Committee members will consider further amendments to a suggested prioritisation document to be presented and discussed at a future meeting.

4. Principles & Vision for NRP

The Chair presented the updated principles and vision for the NRP based on feedback received. Changes were suggested to the text and integrated directly into the document for circulation in advance of the next meeting.

As part of the discussion it was noted that the plan will recognise the fundamental role that land owners, farmers, fishers, foresters and communities play in protecting nature. The connection to culture and heritage was highlighted, noting that people are part of nature and all members of society should have access to a clean, healthy and safe environment. The overall objective should be to ensure all terrestrial ecosystems including agriculture, forest, marine and urban areas are flourishing. It was noted that including views gathered at the first Leaders' Forum on protection and conservation is essential.

5. Update on other Stakeholder Engagement Planning & Events

The Chair informed the IAC of planned Leaders' Forum events:

- The Education for Nature Restoration Leaders' Forum is now scheduled for 23rd June. 70 participants have registered so far.
- The Farming for the Future Leaders' Forum will take place in July at a venue to be determined. It is expected that stakeholder in attendance will include DAFM, Teagasc, the forestry sector, relevant IWG members etc.
- Thematic Leaders' Forums on Land, Marine and Urban are scheduled for September and October with the first session on urban ecosystems scheduled for 10th September.
- An Rft for the Community Conversations has been issued and it is hoped that a contract will be in place in the summer.

6. Review of Actions from Meeting

The Chair proposed that the IAC should determine the pace of their work. It was suggested that presentations be sought from Coillte, Bord Na Móna, the CIEEM and local authorities.

Dates were agreed for the next IAC meetings: 30th June, 29th July, 29th August, 24th September, 22nd October, 19th November and 17th December. Coillte will attend the IAC meeting in July.

Annex I – IAC Meeting 4 Attendees

- Dr Aoibhinn Ní Shúilleabháin, Chair
- Mr David Kerr
- Mrs Norah Parke
- Professor Tasman Crowe (remotely)
- Mr Paul O'Brien
- Ms Linda Lennon
- Mr Coilín O'Reilly
- Mr Colm O'Donnell
- Ms Marina Conway
- Mr David Flynn
- Dr Micheál Ó Briain
- Mr Fintan Kelly
- Mr Paul Smyth
- Ms Áinle Ní Bhriain, Director for International and EU Affairs, NPWS
- Dr David Fenner, NPWS
- Mr Marcus Maginniss, NPWS