

Meeting with the Joint Oireachtas Committee

on Environment and Climate Action

Tuesday 14 November 2023 @ 11am

Cathaoirleach, Committee Members, my name is Andy Bleasdale, and I am the lead official within the National Parks and Wildlife Service with responsibility for the coordination and agreement of the National Biodiversity Action Plan for Ireland.

I am joined by colleagues from the Department:

- Niall Ó Donnchú, the Director General of the NPWS;
- Ciara Carberry, Head of the Nature Conservation Directorate of NPWS;
- Dr Deirdre Lynn and Dr Claire Cooper, also from the Scientific Advice and Research Directorate of the NPWS.

We have prepared a written statement, to accompany a powerpoint presentation which will animate some of the points made in the statement.

The role of NPWS

The NPWS is an executive agency of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage tasked with the following:

- providing scientific advice relating to nature conservation including undertaking extensive habitat and species surveys;
- the designation of protected areas;
- the management of national parks and nature reserves;

- the implementation of conservation measures;
- safeguarding and enforcement of legislation;
- engagement across government, EU, at global level and with wider society

The structure of the NPWS is presented in the accompany slide, and Ciara Carberry and I are the NPWS Directors for Nature Conservation and for Scientific Advice and Research, respectively.

Where does the obligation for a National Biodiversity Action Plan come from?

The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, which the EU and its Member States signed up to at COP15 in December 2022, contains goals and targets to protect and restore nature that are expected to guide National Biodiversity Action Plans all over the world in the coming years.

The main mechanism by which Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity implement its Global Biodiversity Framework is through the development and implementation of National Biodiversity Action Plans.

Policies relevant to the National Biodiversity Action Plan

NPWS lead on the development of the National Biodiversity Action Plan for Ireland.

The Plan will be an umbrella policy that also takes account of EU and international biodiversity strategies and policies and relevant national policies such as the Common Agricultural Policy Strategic Plan, the Climate Action Plan and the River Basin Management Plan, among others.

This will be Ireland's 4th Plan, and it has been the subject of significant effort over the last 2 years, with the support, advice and input of a cross Departmental Biodiversity Working Group and a Biodiversity Forum comprising external experts and other stakeholders.

The plan will be published in Quarter 1 2024.

The ambition of Ireland's 4th National Biodiversity Action Plan

This National Biodiversity Action Plan 2023-2030 strives for a “whole of government, whole of society” approach to the governance and conservation of biodiversity. The aim is to ensure that every citizen, community, business, local authority, semi-state and state agency has an awareness of biodiversity and its importance, and of the implications of its loss, while also understanding how they can act to address the biodiversity emergency as part of a renewed national effort to “act for nature”.

This National Biodiversity Action Plan 2023-2030 builds upon the achievements of the previous Plan. It will continue to implement actions within the framework of five strategic objectives, while addressing new and emerging issues. The objectives are underpinned by 194 actions linking to SMART targets and supported by indicators.

The Plan will be updated in 2027 to reflect progress on the development of a National Restoration Plan, which is also required under the Nature Restoration Regulation.

Each entity responsible for actions within this Plan will provide an annual update on progress and contribute to an Interim and Final Review of the Plan. A report on progress will be provided to the Senior Officials Group on the Environment and Climate Change and, as appropriate, to relevant Cabinet Sub Committees.

The Minister will bring a progress report on the NBAP to Cabinet at least once a year.

Recommendations of the Citizens Assembly on Biodiversity Loss and the links with the NBAP

The NPWS welcomes the recommendations arising from the CABL. NPWS have been working and continue to work with colleagues across government to progress action for biodiversity. This has resulted in many of the CABL recommendations being echoed in the current draft of the 4th NBAP, including:

- The preparation of a National Restoration Plan
- An action for the NPWS to seek to establish a Strategic Nature Fund to support and escalate the implementation of long-term measures to support biodiversity conservation and restoration
- Actions to expand the Marine Protected Area Network
- Actions to improve engagement and communications (NPWS communications officer, LIFE engagement officers, LAWPRO)
- Actions to support local action, including a roll out of Biodiversity Officers to all Local Authorities
- Actions to support business via the Business for Biodiversity Platform

- Actions that will reduce the use of pesticides, escalate outcome based agri-environment schemes and prepare a national IAS management plan
- Actions to improve monitoring and data collection including ongoing support for the National Biodiversity Data Centre
- An action that will put the NBAP on a statutory footing with more transparent reporting and governance structures

Recommendations that require further discussion and development

There are some CABL Recommendations that are beyond the remit of NPWS and that will need the involvement of other Departments, actors and stakeholders

- A review of fiscal policies to ensure we are not subsidising activities that may harm biodiversity and are considering innovative ways to finance the restoration agenda e.g. through tax breaks, green loans, levies, public-private-partnerships
- Embed natural capital accounting into national accounts and ensure this is fully considered by the Land Use Review
- Further consideration of biodiversity in planning policy including an exploration of the concept of Net Gain
- Ensure there are sufficient courses and/or apprenticeships to build a market of ecologists and restoration practitioners
- National oversight for the implementation of Nature-Based Solutions that would support our climate objectives
- Create biodiversity roles in Departments such as DFAT, DECC, DFIN & DoT to recognise the interlinkages between the climate and biodiversity agendas

Site Designation in an Irish Context

Ireland's natural heritage is an integral part of our national identity. Conserving nature requires the harmonisation and integration of a range of policies, strategies, plans and programmes. Designation and conservation of certain key sites is also required under both European (Birds and Habitats Directives) and national laws.

There are a number of different ways in which this is achieved. The strongest protections apply at sites which are significant on the European stage. There are more than six hundred of these in Ireland currently, and all are protected under the Nature Directives. These European sites are found all over the country, and in our marine waters, but with a concentration along the West coast. These are our Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), and Special Protection Areas (SPAs). There are also important designations for sites that are significant nationally. On land, these are designated as Natural Heritage Areas (NHAs), and protected under our national legislation, rather than any European law. A range of other protections exist, such as Nature Reserves, National Parks, and as Committee members will be aware, there are important plans underway to designated Marine Protected Areas under new legislation.

The EU Habitats Directive is transposed into Irish law by the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011. This Directive lists certain habitats and species that must be protected within SACs.

Under the Birds Directive, SPAs are designated for the protection of listed rare and vulnerable bird species, regularly occurring migratory species and wetlands, especially those of international importance.

NHAs are areas protected under the Wildlife Act 1976 (as amended). They are areas considered important at a national level for the habitats present, or which hold species of plants and animals whose habitat needs protection, and where protection of the site will make a significant contribution to the conservation of one or more species or habitats which are considered vulnerable, rare or endangered nationally.

Additional Sites of Conservation Importance

As I mentioned, certain other forms of protection may be afforded to sites as set out below:

National Parks –These are lands owned and managed by the State and which host a suite of natural, cultural, historical and archaeological values.

Nature Reserves - Areas of importance for wildlife, which are protected by under the Wildlife Acts.

A high level assessment of conservation status In Ireland

According to the 2019 Article 17 Report on the implementation of the EU Habitats Directive, 85% percent of Ireland's **habitats** assessed are in an "Unfavourable Conservation Status". 46% of habitats are now recorded to be in decline, with only 2% of habitats are reported as improving. These ongoing declines are reported in our grasslands, peatlands and marine environments. Over 70% of habitats are reported to be impacted by pressures related to agricultural practices.

These assessment results are similar to the EU average. Habitats were listed on the Directive because they were perceived to be threatened at EU

level. Therefore it is no surprise that many habitats are in unfavourable condition.

Almost 60% of species listed on the Habitats Directive in Ireland were recorded as having “Favourable Conservation Status” in 2019. Ireland is the stronghold for many of these species and we have healthy populations of many listed mammals and plants.

21% of Breeding Birds assessed 2019 Article 12 Report on the implementation of the EU Birds Directive are reported to be declining. Approximately 60% of **birds**, commonly occurring in Ireland, are now on the red or amber conservation lists, and include the Corncrake and Hen Harrier. Breeding waders are perhaps the most threatened group of birds in Ireland. Most of the species included in this group rely heavily upon farmland for their survival, including Curlew, Lapwing, Redshank and Snipe.

The pressures causing the ongoing declines in habitats and birds are being prioritised through the CAP Strategic Plan, which addresses pressures related to grazing and water pollution, and through a suite of interventions through EU and national funding sources.

Summary

Without prejudice to the whole-of-government response to the report and recommendations of the Citizens’ Assembly on Biodiversity Loss, the NBAP includes many actions that will address the recommendations arising from this Assembly.

We are encouraged by the level of engagement across government and across society to prepare an ambitious NBAP. It represents our collective response to the biodiversity emergency and a national recognition of the importance of Nature in our everyday lives.

We look forward to a positive and constructive engagement today on this very important topic.