

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM CHULTÚR, OIDHREACTH AGUS GAELTACHT

JOINT COMMITTEE ON CULTURE, HERITAGE AND THE GAELTACHT

Dé Máirt, 2 Iúil 2019

Tuesday, 2 July 2019

The Joint Committee met at 2.00 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Éamon Ó Cuíy,	Maura Hopkins,
Niamh Smyth.	Marie-Louise O'Donnell,
	Fintan Warfield.

I láthair / In attendance: Deputy Eamon Ryan.

Teachta / Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: Níl aon leithscéalta faighte agam ó éinne. Molaim do dhaoine a bhfóin phóca a mhúchadh. I ask people to switch off their mobile phones as they interfere with the sound system and with the broadcasting of the meeting. I propose we go into private session to discuss some housekeeping matters. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 2.10 p.m. and resumed in public session at 2.15 p.m.

Bird Population in Ireland: BirdWatch Ireland

Chairman: Today we will discuss what is happening to the bird population in Ireland and related matters with representatives of BirdWatch Ireland. I welcome Ms Oonagh Duggan, assistant head of policy and advocacy; Mr. Brian Caffrey, assistant head of surveys and monitoring; and Dr. Anita Donaghy, assistant head of species and land management.

Before I ask the representatives of BirdWatch Ireland to address the meeting, I draw their attention to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to this committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons, or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her, them, or it identifiable. I also advise them that their opening statements and any other documents they have submitted to the committee may be published on its website after the meeting.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

Cuirfimid tús leis an gcomhrá. Tá sé de phribhléid agam iarraidh ar an Uasal Duggan a cur i láthair a dhéanamh. I invite Ms Duggan to begin her presentation.

Ms Oonagh Duggan: Gabhaim míle buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach agus le na baill. I thank the committee for inviting us here today to talk about how Ireland's birds are faring. The primary objective of BirdWatch Ireland is the conservation of wild birds and their habitats and biodiversity. Our organisation is the largest independent nature conservation charity in Ireland with 15,000 members, a network of 25 branches nationwide, and more than 1,500 volunteer surveyors who contribute thousands of hours of survey time to collecting information on our wild birds. We are a science-based organisation and our staff include internationally recognised experts. We are the Irish representative of BirdLife International, the world's largest conservation partnership, and we collaborate with a wide range of stakeholders to achieve our goals. Today we will outline the conservation status of Ireland's wild birds, the pressures and threats they are facing, what we are doing to help, and what else needs to be done.

The Dáil declared a biodiversity and climate emergency on 9 May 2019 and called for bio-

diversity loss to be addressed by a citizens' assembly. This indicates that, as a nation, we recognise that urgent action is needed to protect and safeguard our environment into the future. This year is BirdWatch Ireland's 50th anniversary. In the past 50 years Ireland has seen dramatic changes to its landscape and to its biodiversity. Birds are key indicators of the health of our environment and they face many challenges. Significant changes are evident in bird populations, most sadly for the worse. There are some good news stories, but the trends for some key species groups are very worrying.

With our mild climate and vast, abundant wetlands, Ireland attracts thousands of migrant waterbirds every winter. For the past 25 years, we have monitored their populations through the Irish Wetland Bird Survey, I-WeBS, funded by the National Parks and Wildlife Service and co-ordinated by BirdWatch Ireland, with help from our volunteer network. Each year, approximately 11,000 volunteer hours are contributed to the survey by irreplaceable, skilled individuals who care about, and want to protect their local birds and wetlands. Our most recent I-WeBS survey analyses show that Ireland has lost in the region of 500,000 waterbirds, almost 40%, in less than 20 years. In detail, the analysis shows that over half of the 15 wader species that regularly winter here have declined. For example, the number of wintering lapwings has decreased by 67% in less than 20 years. Mallard – a duck so familiar to everyone that it is often overlooked – has declined by over 40% in the past 20 years. Habitat loss, climate change and cumulative impacts represent the main pressures on and threats to our wintering waterbirds, and urgent action is needed to protect areas important for them and to maintain this diversity of species.

Farmland in Ireland has changed dramatically in the past 50 years. The Countryside Bird Survey, a BirdWatch Ireland-led citizen science-based survey, funded by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, has been running since the late 1990s and monitors the most common breeding birds in the Irish landscape. Results indicate that although many common species, such as goldfinch and blackcap, are stable or increasing, about a quarter of familiar farmland birds, such as stock dove, swift, greenfinch, stonechat and kestrel are exhibiting serious declines.

More detailed knowledge of longer-term trends in all bird populations comes from another volunteer-based survey, the Bird Atlas, the most recent of which was completed in 2011. Bird atlases allow us to monitor change over the longer term and are particularly important in highlighting declines indicative of dramatic changes in the Irish landscape. The atlas shows that our once biodiversity-rich farmland landscape has become less hospitable for wildlife as agricultural methods and technologies have intensified. This is clearly reflected in the almost complete extermination of farmland birds such as the corncrake. Once widespread, corncrakes are now confined to the most marginal areas of the west and north west as late-cut hay meadows have been used for multiple-cut silage. Similarly, severe declines have been recorded in most of our breeding waders, including the curlew, the lapwing and the snipe. These species, once widespread and familiar to many farmers because they nest in damp pastures, traditional hay meadows and bogs, are disappearing. Curlew is one of the most severely impacted and is now on the verge of extinction, with only about 150 pairs remaining of the 5,000 pairs that nested here in the 1960s and 1970s. Once, not long ago, the famed cry of the curlew was literally the sound of wild Ireland. However, most of the curlew's former strongholds have fallen silent.

The main reason for the declines of many farmland birds is habitat loss - the widespread drainage of wetlands and damp pastures and the more intensive management of agricultural grasslands through reseeded and increased fertiliser use. Other factors include industrial-scale extraction of peat bogs and afforestation of habitats. Remaining populations of many farmland

species, particularly ground-nesting birds, are now much more isolated, and are affected by predation. The loss of mixed and arable farming has also affected species such as the yellow-hammer and the skylark. This resulted in the extinction of the corn bunting in Ireland in 1991.

While agri-environment schemes such as GLAS, through which farmers are incentivised to work the land in an environmentally friendly way, have gone some way towards maintaining or, in certain cases, improving bird habitats on farmland, such schemes do not go far enough. Activities such as inappropriate hedge-cutting and the burning of scrub and upland habitats are detrimental to our native wildlife and affect our carbon stores. The changes to the Wildlife Act contained in the Heritage Act, passed last year, have sadly weakened the protections afforded to breeding birds of uplands and hedgerows and must be repealed. Water quality in lakes and rivers affected by nutrient run-off and other inputs can reduce the number of invertebrates, which in turn has a knock-on effect on birds living in these aquatic habitats, such as the dipper, the kingfisher and the grey wagtail.

Raptors are apex predators at the top of the food chain and hence can be affected by a range of changes and pressures in the environment. There have been several positive conservation success stories, such as the return, through reintroduction, of species such as the eagle and the red kite. Buzzard and peregrine falcon populations are recovering in the Irish landscape after almost disappearing. Unfortunately, however, many of the issues that have caused the declines and extinctions of birds of prey are still present in the countryside. The illegal killing of birds of prey, through shooting and indiscriminate poisoning, remains prevalent and affects a wide range of species. To tackle these wildlife crimes, there is a need for greater emphasis on investigation and enforcement of the legislation, including better resourcing of the National Parks and Wildlife Service and greater collaboration with An Garda Síochána. Raptors can also be exposed to other poisons that are legally used, such as rodenticides, which are targeted at controlling rats and mice.

The barn owl is a red-listed species of conservation concern and its population has declined dramatically, largely due to land-use changes and the intensification of agriculture, which has caused the reduction in the extent and quality of habitats available to it. Hen harrier populations have also declined for similar reasons. Much of its upland nesting habitat has been lost to the planting of non-native conifer plantations

There are many species of birds that coexist with humans, living among us in our cities, towns and villages. We often refer to these as “urban birds”. The swift population has undergone a 50% decline in the past 20 years. Factors include the loss of nest sites in the fabric of our older buildings, where access to the roof space and gaps in masonry have housed their nests for generations. The demolition, renovation and retrofitting of old buildings displace nesting swifts by removing the vital access they once had. Once a swift loses its nest site, it can mean many lost breeding seasons before the monogamous pair finds new suitable nest sites and can breed again. Other impacts include climate change and, in particular, the decline in insects, which the swift solely relies on for food.

A familiar visitor to Dublin from Arctic Canada is the brent goose. Ireland hosts a high percentage of the global population of this species. They are threatened by the squeeze for space, which is far greater in our capital than anywhere else in the country due to the rate of development. Brent geese need permanent short grassland swards, such as playing pitches, to graze in the lean months of the winter. Such sites which are disappearing in our capital.

Ireland supports internationally or even globally important populations of a number of sea-

birds. Puffins and kittiwake are globally threatened and have declining populations in Ireland, whilst the black-headed gull and herring gull are on the Irish red list due to a dramatic decline in breeding numbers in recent decades. Climate change is probably the most serious threat to seabirds. As the oceans warm, their food sources change. Other serious threats include sea level rise, oil pollution and the increasing abundance of ingested plastics in the seabird diet, in addition to fatal entanglement in discarded fishing gear and non-sustainable fisheries practices.

BirdWatch Ireland staff have been involved in active conservation projects for terns, including the roseate terns on Rockabill, which is located off the coast near Skerries. This has been a profoundly successful project and shows what can be achieved with the input of resources. In the last 30 years, the number of roseate terns has increased from 152 breeding pairs of to 1,597.

What is being done to address declines of bird populations? BirdWatch Ireland uses many tools to further conservation efforts, including large-scale EU-funded conservation projects. Nationally funded work includes long-term management, protection, and research on and monitoring of several important species groups. Our advocacy and awareness-raising work seeks to influence decision makers to improve policies that affect bird populations and engage with the public on the issues facing birds and their habitats. There are other actions happening all around the country, supported by the Government and concerned members of communities, which is heartening. It is clear that Irish people care deeply about their natural heritage, as witnessed by the green wave that has taken hold in recent times. However, we will need to take further significant action if we are to protect bird life and nature on our island.

Ireland is in the midst of a biodiversity crisis. Saving biodiversity in Ireland is the responsibility of all of Departments and sectors, and all stakeholders have a part to play in this regard. The Government must ensure that sectoral policies cohere with the policies and legal obligations to protect and conserve biodiversity. Tackling the chronic historic cuts to funding to protect biodiversity is essential. Now is the time to bolster this funding to ensure that we can continue to avail of the ecosystem services that nature provides. Full implementation of the national biodiversity action plan is a must before it expires in 2021. In addition, we must act to stem the worst impacts of climate breakdown, including using nature-based solutions for climate action.

The farmed landscape supports some of our most threatened and declining species. One of our most important messages to the committee is that Government policy must urgently recognise and reward sustainable and low-intensity farming systems that are supporting birds and other biodiversity. The policy direction of Food Wise 2025 is contrary to this in practice and this does not bode well for biodiversity, for the climate or for farmers on marginal land. Ireland's climate ambition relies heavily on forestry but forestry policy to date represents a significant pressure and threat to biodiversity, with insufficient safeguards for high nature value farmland, ground nesting birds and other wildlife.

In respect of our vast marine area, Ireland needs to fully implement the Common Fisheries Policy and the marine strategy framework directive. We cannot protect what we do not measure. Funding is needed for additional bird survey coverage to fill gaps in our knowledge of bird species' distributions and abundances. This will require professional co-ordination and survey, with support from citizen scientists.

Birds are the indicators of the health of the environment. Conservation of wild birds and their habitats will bring wider benefits to biodiversity, communities and our economy but there is a huge challenge ahead and that can only be met by political will, policies that work with na-

ture instead of against it and a significant increase in funding to save our words and biodiversity.

Chairman: Tá an-chuid eolais ansin agus beidh an leagan níos faide den ráiteas tosaigh sin ar fáil ar shuíomh gréasáin an choiste. The longer version of what Ms Duggan has read out will be available on the committee's website. It was very informative and there were many interesting facts there. I hope they go beyond this room, which is the idea of this engagement.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: I thank Ms Duggan and her colleagues for coming in. I do not know whether I am happy or depressed to have heard what Ms Duggan just said. I will ask a number of questions and I invite any of the witnesses to answer them. They might give partial answers here but they might give more specific answers because I know they have to run through something for seven or eight minutes, which does not really allow the witnesses to stop and really go into these matters. Who is really listening to BirdWatch Ireland? Is there anybody listening? Who is seriously listening to BirdWatch Ireland? I know the witnesses are seriously listening to themselves because without all those volunteers, ornithologists and people interested in birds involved in its organisations, it would not even be out the door.

How does BirdWatch Ireland feel that the Government's announcement of the natural environment emergency, which was a major announcement, will help it? What is the practicality of that? Since that announcement, have there been promises and what are those? It is one thing to announce an emergency but it is another thing to announce pillars around what will be done about it and how the different aspects of it will be tackled.

This next matter is a bugbear of mine and the Chairman will know this. Does BirdWatch Ireland think there is a case now, which BirdWatch Ireland should be making, along with all our natural environment bodies, for a Department of natural environment? In other words, the stage should not be shared with culture or language, which are also important, but we have come to the stage where a Department of natural environment is as important as a Department of Finance because it has so many leaves of our lives in it. What does BirdWatch Ireland think about that?

There seems to be a lot of advice for farmers. There is never a lot of advice for industry and for construction. Why is attention not being paid to those? I know there is an intensification of farming but there is also an intensification of building and that affects our seabirds. Is there advice for those companies? Is BirdWatch Ireland involved in such communication?

There was one sentence in the opening statement that is an example of something I would like the witnesses to explain. One of my favourite species of birds in the whole world are swifts because they are such geniuses. Education plays a huge part in this with young people because they have more of a sense of what is in the air than we possibly had. In its opening statement, BirdWatch Ireland stated "The most important action which could be taken by government is to ensure that sectoral policies are coherent with the policies and legal obligations to protect and conserve biodiversity, including our wild birds and their habitats." That is so convoluted. What does BirdWatch Ireland mean by that?

That is about all. I thank the witnesses but we should have more from them and we need to hear more from BirdWatch Ireland at this level all the time. Members of the committee run in and out of here from attending meetings about finance, insurance, education and needs but we need to hear from the witnesses far more. BirdWatch Ireland needs to demand that it is here just as much as the other groups that seem to be in all the different committees because everything it is saying has a part to play in every committee, not just this committee, but also the Joint Com-

mittee on Education and Skills and the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine. BirdWatch Ireland has so much to say. One of the most important things Ms Duggan said was that the birds will tell us how healthy our environment is. It is all in that sentence. I want to see BirdWatch Ireland more, so the witnesses should think about how they can come into the Houses more. It is as important for them to speak to every committee, including the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach, and all of these committees where everybody runs the issue of health into them. BirdWatch Ireland has as much of a right to be there and as great a part to play.

That could be easily done, especially in this climate. We need a Department of natural environment. Maybe that will set the witnesses off or drive them crazy but they might answer some of those questions. They are points of discussion as opposed to questions.

Ms Oonagh Duggan: On the first part of the Senator's question on who is listening, the people are listening. If we look at our members, our branches and the wider community, people are listening, they are seeing what is happening to the natural environment and they are concerned.

If the Senator recalls, we worked on a campaign against the Heritage Bill 2016 for a couple of years and 35,000 people signed a petition saying "No" to that legislation. This was before the green wave started and to me, that was an indication that there was a group of people out there who are really concerned about the environment. Those people are tapping into the likes of BirdWatch Ireland and other environmental non-governmental organisations, NGOs, and seeing what we are doing. They are the people who are really listening. More and more, information is being fed up through the political system and politicians are hearing on their doorsteps more that nature is important to the people. We have seen that with the declaration of the climate emergency in the Dáil on 9 May. While it could be seen by some that it is easy to just say this and it might be asked what will happen next, it is an important acknowledgement of where we are and it is something for us to build on and to keep bringing back to the Oireachtas committees and in our other representations.

I was disappointed that part of the declaration of the emergency was the call for the Citizens' Assembly to address the issue of biodiversity loss. That was not taken up in the round of citizens' assemblies that was announced by the Government about two weeks ago. That was disappointing to say the least. We have written to the Taoiseach and others to remind them that they have said in the Dáil that this is going to happen but it is not on the list, and to ask them when it will happen.

We hope to see that happen because it is very important to channel this insight and the care that many people in Ireland have for the natural environment into a conversation that would put some structure on how Government responds. The Senator is right that BirdWatch Ireland should be speaking at more committee meetings. It has to seep into everybody's conversation. The convoluted sentence about policy coherence the Senator mentioned means that we could convey that when new buildings are being built, there would be swift blocks. Birds use buildings and we need to think about how we can get swift bricks into new buildings. We need to think about the impact it will have if a building is planned to go beside the special protection area for birds and that it may not be a great idea. It is to have a thinking process before the planning process. That could expand into agriculture and other areas.

There are people listening and the Government is starting to listen. There have been significant efforts to help with biodiversity loss; just not enough. The problem is that sometimes

the left hand is doing one thing and the right hand does not know what is going on and there is policy incoherence.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: What does BirdWatch Ireland think of the idea of a Department of natural environment?

Dr. Anita Donaghy: It would be very important to move that forward. It would give recognition to the feeling that this nation cares about the environment. We need to step up our efforts if we are serious about protecting what we have left of biodiversity and give more weight and emphasis to the actions that need to be undertaken, the knowledge that needs to be spread. Only by creating a Department dedicated to protection of the environment will we do that. The National Parks and Wildlife Service does an excellent job but it is a tiny section in a large Department and it does not have a voice. It is important that the natural environment is given a greater voice within the Government. For some species there are very stark choices, particularly in respect of intensive agriculture. We cannot have intensive agriculture and retain some of these farmland species that are important to us, such as curlew, lapwing, corncrake etc. There must be a much greater recognition of that if we value these species. While we value farmers and everything they do and the importance of that industry, the farmland birds and the biodiversity associated with farmland is fast disappearing. To tackle that we need a Department that is much stronger and able to engage at a much higher level with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. Introducing such a Department would be a very beneficial and important step for this Government to take.

Senator Maura Hopkins: Dr. Donaghy has mentioned that further measures need to be taken to have a robust GLAS that values biodiversity. What additional measures should be put in place in the next Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, negotiations for GLAS? I live in the west and so am quite familiar with the challenge of non-native Sitka spruce there and in the north west. Dr. Donaghy says it is having an impact on biodiversity. What is necessary in order to have a better forestry policy? I know there is talk of more diversification in types of trees but what input does BirdWatch Ireland have into forestry policy? There is a review of the forestry policy in County Leitrim. What is BirdWatch Ireland's input into the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, which instigated that review because of the farmers' concerns about biodiversity but related to other issues?

Dr. Anita Donaghy: There are a few key points that we would like to see for GLAS in the new CAP, one of the most important being specialist advice to farmers who are implementing measures for farmland birds and other biodiversity. There are some good options for that in GLAS but there is not nearly enough guidance for farmers. Farmland birds sometimes have quite complex requirements and through testing of the various schemes undertaken, we have seen that the provision of specialist advice to farmers can greatly increase the results from these schemes in terms of biodiversity. The biodiversity return is far higher where the farmer has access to specialist ecological advice.

Another point would be longer-term management agreements. This could be difficult to implement in respect of the CAP cycles we are dealing with now. Most agri-environment schemes last for five years. If that is compared with the forestry scheme where the returns on investment are far longer term, that is an option that farmers sometimes take because of the long-term security compared with GLAS, which offers a much shorter return. Very often, to implement change at the farm level that will really have a positive impact on biodiversity it is necessary to have much longer-term agreements because it can take many years to reverse some of the damage done as a result of the intensification of agriculture. Longer-term agreements,

landscape scale agreements, co-operative payments for farmers who are working together to deliver biodiversity at the landscape scale would also be very important, as would the new eco-scheme that is being talked about as part of the next CAP agreement. Some actions need to be undertaken by all farmers because some will reduce nutrient levels. The burden cannot just fall on a few farmers to implement those actions. All farmers, even the most intensive ones have contributions that they can and should make to get what is essentially public money.

We have engaged through the curlew task force with the forestry division of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine on guidelines for assessing applications for forestry. Some good work has been done in the Department, for example, the forestry division has introduced new guidelines to protect curlew sites but that is the only action. We would want to see a greater and wider application of measures to protect birds from afforestation.

Ms Oonagh Duggan: In respect of forestry, we have produced a report entitled Greening Irish Forestry. We met with the Irish forest service a few weeks ago to discuss some elements of that report with it. We would like to see some of the things in it happen, such as better ecological assessment of forestry plantations going into farmland that is not at a tourist site or a special area of conservation. A survey could be done to identify whether it was an important species-rich grassland that needed to be saved, and whether there were ground nesting birds other than curlew there. Then we get a good baseline and can make a decision on whether it is worth putting trees on it. We are losing semi-natural grasslands in this manner that are high nature value. Recently, Teagasc published a high nature value farmland map that has a finer resolution. We will be able to see where it is documenting these sites.

There is a push for increases in broadleaf trees in the forest stock and what is planted. Predominantly it is still non-native Sitka spruce type of forestry, which is not great in many respects. We would like to see a lot more native woodland, with the right trees in the right places with the right management and continuous cover forestry, not forestry that will just be clear felled. There would probably be a lot more community buy-in with that type of forestry. Community-led woodlands would be a really good idea. The Senator asked about the Leitrim report and the review. BirdWatch Ireland was interviewed as part of that and we await the outcome of the report. It was just for Leitrim. A mid-term review of forestry was supposed to be undertaken that would include ecological aspects but I do not know what has happened in this regard. The forestry programme will run until 2020 and we hope to be fully involved in contributing to the next policy.

Senator Maura Hopkins: I have a question on the specialist advice to farmers. Who is best placed to give it? We know that the GLAS scheme is at full capacity and 50,000 farmers are signed up to it. It is important that all farmers engage and that is a well made point. Has there been progress on the curlew sites? It is a species that is hugely endangered. Have the witnesses seen progress in terms of the specific curlew sites?

Dr. Anita Donaghy: What does the Senator mean by progress?

Senator Maura Hopkins: An increase in numbers.

Dr. Anita Donaghy: Nationally with regard to afforestation or in general?

Senator Maura Hopkins: In general.

Dr. Anita Donaghy: It is too early to say. The National Parks and Wildlife Service has implemented the curlew conservation programme, which has a network of staff throughout the

country in key hotspots and for which Ireland has implemented several projects. We work with other partners through the curlew European innovation partnership, EIP, which is a Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine project. I am part of an INTERREG project in the north west of Ireland where curlews are the focus of some of our work on key sites.

To be honest, the problems facing the curlew are so massive and widespread, and so much needs to be done at different levels, it is too early for us to say whether we are making sufficient progress. There are some small wins at some sites and as we implement conservation actions on the ground we are learning things about how to protect them. The numbers are very small with fewer than 150 pairs, and even the genetic diversity of the population means it is a massive challenge to turn it around. There is an enormous way to go before it will be out of trouble.

The Senator also asked who is best placed to give the advice to farmers. It is ecologists. We have worked with Teagasc advisers on some of the results-based programmes and we are trying to implement some relatively simple ways in which agriculture advisers can be trained up to deliver advice but really we need ecologists and people who understand the birds. Obviously the farmer understands the land and is very well placed to assist and deliver actions. Working with the farmers is very important. People who understand the birds and their requirements are really what is needed. We need a network of specialised ecologists working with the Department and the farmers. We saw this on the Burren scheme. This is what needs to be replicated in the hotspots throughout the country.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I thank the witnesses for their presentation. The Department is preparing the architecture policy for the State. The most recent one brought us up to 2018. With regard to the comment on birds and buildings it might be wise to tie in with the Department. It is not nearly finished.

Birds are very much indicators of the health of the environment and the losses have ripple effects, not just here at home but internationally, and human interaction is obviously the main contributor to the loss of bird life, through the use of chemicals or pesticides, changes in temperature and other losses in biodiversity. The main point of despair during this Oireachtas term was the passing of the Heritage Act, of which the witnesses are well aware. We worked with BirdWatch Ireland on it. I welcome the call to repeal the Act. We have not had that call yet. There were a number of high-profile cases during the 2019 nesting season regarding hedgerow cutting, some of which were conducted by public bodies. How prevalent is hedgerow cutting during the nesting season? Is it going unreported?

Ms Oonagh Duggan: Hedge cutting during the bird breeding period between 1 March and 31 August is the top complaint we receive at BirdWatch Ireland. The complaints can be about roadside hedge cutting or sometimes the clearance of infield hedgerow. People get very upset about it because it is very obvious, particularly when driving along in the countryside. The Wildlife Act has provisions to allow for hedge cutting for road safety reasons and this is really important. We are all road users and we need to use the road safely. This is important to keep in mind. When we communicate with people and discuss this we ask whether people are aware of the provisions in the Wildlife Act. Sometimes we feel this reason is used to cut hedgerows where there might not be an obvious road safety concern. It is tricky. It is used and possibly abused a little.

With regard to whether hedge cutting is unreported, we receive a lot of reports. I do not have a figure in front of me but we have seen a huge increase in people's concerns about hedge cutting in recent years. It ties in with the general sentiment that people are concerned about

what is happening with the environment between the extreme weather events of last year, the impact of climate change and marine plastics. There is a big coming together. A tipping point has been reached whereby people just want to see more nature and not less. It is very difficult for the National Parks and Wildlife Service to get a conviction for hedge cutting done during the breeding period because people have to be caught in the act of doing it. We really must commend the cases that have been taken by the National Parks and Wildlife Service in recent months because it is difficult work to get them across the line. They are really positive.

Senator Fintan Warfield: It is the number one complaint received by BirdWatch Ireland.

Ms Oonagh Duggan: It is, yes.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I enjoyed reading about the success in the conservation of the roseate tern on Rockabill Island. I know it is only one of many really important interventions and conservation efforts. The white-tailed eagle was also mentioned. The reintroduction of the golden eagle in Glenveagh National Park has been really important. I know that was difficult. Is there enough focus on conservation and managed reintroduction of bird species on the part of the Department?

Mr. Brian Caffrey: Obviously it is nice to see those positive conservation stories. Bird-Watch Ireland's stance calls for more of that. We have mentioned the colossal declines in species which we have not yet lost but which are on the brink of extinction, such as the corncrakes and the curlew. The corn bunting went extinct in the 1990s, which is not that long ago. We would like to see investment pumped into saving these species before we lose them. A lot of money can be spent trying to reintroduce them when they are gone and that obviously has its place, but so many species are in such trouble at the moment. We really need to pump investment into saving them.

Senator Fintan Warfield: Lastly I would like to ask about the birds directive. How effective has it been in protecting those birds? I know we derogate from some aspects of the directive. Are we compliant and could we be doing more?

Dr. Anita Donaghy: I wish to comment on that. The birds directive has certainly been very important in protecting annex I species and creating the special protection areas, SPAs. The annex I species are those particularly important species recognised at European level. The designation of the SPA network, the Natura 2000 network and the special areas of conservation, SACs, has been extremely important in Ireland and has really protected some of our key hotspots. The birds directive has been incredibly important in that respect.

One problem is that species of national importance are not addressed through the birds directive. That is a massive gap. I refer to the lapwing, the curlew, the redshank and other species on the red list of birds of conservation concern in Ireland. They have been identified by the Government as priorities in the prioritised action framework. However, because they are not annex I species no special sites have been designated for them. That is one of the reasons these species are hugely declining. They are among the most rapidly declining of all our breeding birds. Without any system to designate sites for species that are nationally important, rather than just internationally important, we will continue to face the loss of farmland species in particular, such as the lapwing, curlew and redshank. Sites have not been designated for these species even though the Government recognises they are a very high priority. That has been a failing of the birds directive. Does Ms Duggan wish to add anything?

Ms Oonagh Duggan: The derogation process is part of the birds directive but it needs to be better implemented in Ireland. It must be done by the letter of the law. We are falling short in that regard right now. However it is part of the birds directive and we support all parts of the birds directive.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I thank the witnesses. That is very helpful.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I am not a member of the committee, but when I saw BirdWatch Ireland's presentation I wanted to be present. It is a hugely important review of where we are in this country. As Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell said, our bird populations are the canary in the mine where our wider environmental challenges are concerned. This indicator screams that there is a huge problem in our sea areas, forests, wetlands, urban areas and farmland. A bleak but very important picture has been portrayed here today. I thank the witnesses for coming in and providing it.

Regarding how we can turn this around, I was watching earlier questions on the monitor. The response to climate change has to be co-ordinated with the response to the biodiversity crisis. The Joint Committee on Climate Action has highlighted the restoration of wetlands as a means by which we could store carbon. A reduction in the use of pesticides, a return in the insect population, whose decline is one of the hazards the witnesses mentioned, and the resulting increase in soil fertility would also improve the carbon storage capabilities of that farmland. Greater diversity in farming is another measure that the Joint Committee on Climate Action has recommended, because over-reliance on monocultural beef and dairy production at scale is a high-risk farming strategy at this point. They are just two examples. The use of marine protected areas could also have benefits in restoring more natural ecosystems to our sea areas. This would not only be good for bird life but also for the capacity of those seas to store carbon and manage a fast-changing environment.

It is interesting to examine the whole-of-Government climate action plan which was published last week. Action No. 110 calls for mapping land to measure the response to climate change and to biodiversity. The witnesses mentioned the example of Teagasc's map of areas that might be suitable for curlews----

Ms Oonagh Duggan: The Deputy refers to high nature value farmland.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: That has been mapped. Are the witnesses aware of any other mapping exercises that show where we should plant continuous cover forestry, restore wetlands, allow heath lands to be grazed or protect certain heath lands? Has any mapping work been done apart from the Teagasc map of high nature value farming, or is that a project we will have to undertake in the State both for climate reasons and biodiversity reasons?

Ms Oonagh Duggan: The Natura 2000 network has been mapped. The natural heritage areas have also been mapped but suffer from a lack of sufficient protection. Local authorities in some counties have undertaken mapping of wetlands. Some ecosystem services mapping has been carried out by the National Parks and Wildlife Service. A national habitat map was on the cards for a while but I am not sure where that stands. That would be an important feature. That information could be overlaid to show what the gaps and what else we need to do, but I am not totally involved in that area.

Dr. Anita Donaghy: We have carried out a bird sensitivity mapping project, which was partially funded by the wind energy sector, to identify areas of importance for birds. It was not

intended to create no-go areas for wind energy development. Rather it highlighted areas where there are particular concentrations of important birds which are sensitive to wind farm development. That is one mapping project that we have. We have called for a forestry sensitivity mapping project. We have done some work towards that, but it really needs to be completed. It is a very important point that we need much more of this kind of mapped spatial information as a guide to developers, county councils and local authorities. Mapping projects of this kind are a very important tool. We have not done enough of them.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Dr. Donaghy is right. All of this must be done. The climate action plan calls for this mapping exercise to be done by the end of the year. That can be done in conjunction with the revision of the Common Agricultural Policy provisions so that farmers are paid when we designate wetland areas for restoration. At the same time we must change our entire forestry support model so we stop supporting clear-fell single-species monoculture forestry and start putting everything into the more diverse forestry environment the witnesses have mentioned. That will require the National Parks and Wildlife Service to be resourced properly because it is a huge project and my experience is that the service's numbers are very limited. Will the witnesses comment on that? Have they any sense of the scale of resources that might be needed in the National Parks and Wildlife Service? Do they find that it is able to respond quickly or is it constrained by a lack of resources?

Dr. Anita Donaghy: We had a discussion earlier. Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell touched upon the need for a separate Department of natural-----

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: Environment.

Dr. Anita Donaghy: That would be very helpful in increasing the status of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, which is a very small and poorly resourced organisation. Obviously, it is working very hard and is under enormous pressure. We would definitely say that its budget needs to be expanded greatly to allow it to meet the challenges we have set out in this document.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I represent an urban constituency. We are doing our bit in terms of putting in swift boxes and so on, but do the witnesses have any other advice for us? It seems that our urban environment is often very diverse and rich in flora with all the gardens we have. Is there anything the witnesses would recommend to householders in urban areas? What can we do? Strangely enough, the urban bird population is probably the least threatened because it is probably the most stable and diverse environment, but is there more we could do in an urban context to restore bird populations?

Mr. Brian Caffrey: There are a number of things we can do. One could say that birds are faring relatively well but in saying that, some species have been affected by larger-scale things like climate change regardless of whether they are in urban or rural areas. Those populations appear to be impacted. We can all play our part, as the Deputy notes, through things like putting up nest boxes, particularly for species that need them most such as swifts, which are on the amber lists, spotted flycatchers and other species that are in decline. It involves tailoring specific bird boxes for species that need help. There is a significant and growing body of research that shows that feeding birds in our gardens provides a very important resource to help the survival rates of birds over the winter and helps sustain bird populations.

Pollinators constitute a hot topic at the minute, and within our gardens we can all do a bit to plant more pollinator-friendly plants. This, from the ground up, has a significant impact be-

cause one of the things we see with regard to our bird populations is a tremendous shift to the north west with regard to some species, especially those that come from south of the Sahara to migrate here such as swallows, swifts, cuckoos, martins and warblers, which we think is very much driven by climate change. At a lower level, the significant decline in insect populations may be one of the factors there. These are significant challenges and we can all chip in and do our bit at community level and in our homes and gardens.

Ms Oonagh Duggan: Would it be okay if I added to that?

Chairman: Okay.

Ms Oonagh Duggan: With regard to what we can do, it is important to consider that most of our largest cities are in coastal areas and there are significant populations of people close to areas with significant populations of water birds. For example, in Dublin Bay, there are a lot of mud flats and a lot of wintering water birds that travel a long way to spend the winter in Ireland. It is very important to consider the impact of disturbance on water birds. We are concerned about the cumulative impacts of development in terms of disturbance and other impacts on these species. For example, it can involve putting one's dog on a leash when a flock of terns is roosting on Sandymount strand in August, remembering that these birds travel a long distance and are trying to save their energy to return to their breeding grounds to be able to be in good breeding condition. When they are spending energy fleeing from a dog, person or activity that is disturbing them, which can have an impact on a wider scale. It is important for people to enjoy nature and to observe their interactions with wild birds but also to keep their distance.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: In terms of biodiversity and protecting nature, local authorities play a role and could play a major role. At the moment, the most obvious role involves heritage officers running biodiversity schemes and programmes and providing education in schools and hands-on practical experience for the next generation. Do the witnesses feel more could be done by local authorities? Is enough being done apart from work by heritage officers? Obviously, planning departments are meant to be aware of protecting the environment and what is appropriate for the landscape. What are the witnesses' views on the role of local authorities in protecting the environment and biodiversity?

Mr. Brian Caffrey: I might start with that point. We would work very closely with the heritage officer network. Heritage officers do tremendous work but the resources and budgets they have are tiny, which hamstrings them with regard to what they can achieve. One of the first things I would say is that they do great work given the resources and capacity they have, but these are so limited. Only a small number of counties have biodiversity officers. We could certainly consider rolling this out.

Ms Oonagh Duggan: The Deputy is right. Local authorities play a very important part in protecting biodiversity. I know many of them have taken up the pollinator plan and have started to initiate that in their local areas, which is great because it will also help with birds. If places are allowed to let grass grow a bit longer, that will be good for insects and the bird population. It would be great if each local authority had an ecologist who could review planning applications. We find that sometimes there is a gap here that could be filled in terms of the ecological expertise in reviewing planning applications and giving that local advice.

Chairman: I have a number of questions.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: I would like to ask Deputy Eamon Ryan, who is here

today, what he thought of my idea of a Department of the natural environment. I know he leads the Green agenda. "Agenda" is the wrong word.

Chairman: He can answer that one outside.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: I just wanted to know what he thought about it because it is a very realistic prospect if we are serious.

Chairman: I agree with the Senator, but at the moment we are putting questions to Bird-Watch Ireland. I have a number of questions.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: So Deputy Ryan is not allowed to answer that.

Chairman: He can if we have time. We must be out of here by 3.45 p.m.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: I meant it in respect of the conversation. I did not mean it-----

Chairman: I understand and I am not trying to cut it down.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: I want to get an answer anyway.

Chairman: We will get that answer in a few minutes. I thank the witnesses-----

(Interruptions).

Chairman: Tiofaidh mé ar ais chuig an Teachta. Níleamar críochnaithe. Tá mé ag iarraidh mo cheisteanna féin a chur ar dtús báire.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Sorry. Shíl mé go raibh-----

Chairman: No. The figures the witnesses gave us were very stark but there were uplifting tales of success. Can lost species be reintroduced? We saw what happened with eagles and the witnesses mentioned the corn bunting. Is it that we do not have enough resources to do both? One involves concentrating on those at risk, which is the red list mentioned by the witnesses. I do not know how many birds are on that list. On the other hand, do we have the wherewithal at this stage to reintroduce lost species? I agree with the witnesses regarding the need for swift bricks in all public buildings and all buildings of a certain size in this city.

I spoke to a bird watcher yesterday who was concerned about how low the insect level is to date this year. He noticed that it was lower this year than it was previously. I do not know whether the witnesses heard that elsewhere.

A question I have been asked, and which has come up with other people, relates to seagulls. Some people regards seagulls as pests. There are different species of seagulls. I do not know which is most common. Will the representatives dispel or confirm the myths about seagulls? Are they a danger to smaller species of birds? What impact do they have? What can we do to protect at-risk seabirds?

There were a few mentions of the need for additional funding. The committee's job is usually to put forward ideas but we also need to know how much different projects will cost. For example, increased funding for the National Parks and Wildlife Service was mentioned. Is this funding needed for a specific programme of public education or for the reintroduction of differ-

ent species to different habitats and the protection of those that have been reintroduced?

Has BirdWatch Ireland been involved with Bord na Móna's future plans as the latter withdraws from peat extraction? It is supposed to be reinstating bogs it has eradicated. Has BirdWatch Ireland appealed to Bord na Móna to reintroduce the many different habitats that have disappeared from the countryside?

Mr. Brian Caffrey: I will start with the issue of reintroductions. As has been seen, it has been possible to reintroduce some species of birds of prey. Our partner in the UK, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, has also reintroduced species. It is certainly possible but these reintroductions are hugely expensive. We do not have the money to protect the species involved, which are suffering declines of 40%, 60% or 80%. Although it is possible as a very last measure, we are supportive of all efforts being made to protect the species we have in the first instance.

Research which came out of Germany approximately one year ago shows that the insect populations in nature reserves that had been monitored over a period of 20 years had declined by approximately 70%. The most recent data on various insects in Ireland, which was gathered by the National Biodiversity Data Centre, shows quite significant declines in population. We are seeing the same results here. That will have a serious impact throughout the food chain.

In some parts of the city and other parts of the country, gulls are moving into urban areas and are nesting. This is certainly an issue in some cases but we need to remember that the herring gull, which is one of the species about which we are talking, is on the red list. It is on the same list of species as the curlew and the corncrake. Their natural sites in coastal areas have been decimated over the past 20 or 30 years. We need to find out how these populations are changing and what the numbers are like. We need to do some proper scientific surveys and monitoring of these gull nesting sites in urban areas before we start talking about what comes next in terms of management.

Dr. Anita Donaghy: If I may add to the discussion on reintroduction, one of the problems is that the landscape needs to be there to support a recovering population. Very often, that is a major challenge for us. When habitat loss has been severe enough to cause populations to become extinct in the first place, it would be madness to attempt reintroductions to those landscapes, which are very poor and which will not be able to support them. The landscape must be restored before we look at bringing the birds back.

The Chairman mentioned Bord na Móna. We have quite a close working relationship with the latter, particularly in the context of curlew populations. Its land holdings support just under a fifth of the national curlew population. It has been quite supportive. It has attempted to protect curlews wherever they are found on its holdings. Bord na Móna should be commended in that regard. It has definitely taken action in respect of curlew populations. We are working on several projects in the north west with regard to the restoration of peatlands. We are working with the National Parks and Wildlife Service on drain blocking projects on some big sites in the north west. There has been quite a lot of work done on raised bogs but we are now trying to look at restoration programmes for blanket bogs.

The Chairman also inquired about funding. He asked what is needed. We would all say that the proper resourcing of the National Parks and Wildlife Service is extremely important. The funding of education programmes is also massively important. It is one of the ways in which people learn to appreciate their environment more. More ecologists are needed within the

Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in order that our agriculture schemes can be made more friendly to wildlife. That is one of the most important things to deliver with regard to farmland birds.

Ms Oonagh Duggan: On funding, it is very difficult to give a figure by way of answer to the Chairman's question about how much is needed. A report was carried out by the National Parks and Wildlife Service on its financial requirements and different potential funding opportunities. We could provide that report to the committee.

Chairman: That would be useful.

Ms Oonagh Duggan: Additional funding through the Department of Communications, Climate Action and the Environment, which provides some core funding for non-governmental organisations such as ours to carry out work, is very important. We would also like to see a separate fund through which NGOs could access matching funding for measures such as Leader projects. When it comes to Leader and other big projects, we are often constrained in tapping into large-scale funding because we cannot provide matching funding. It should not be too difficult to overcome such funding constraints, but they must be overcome.

Chairman: We will take that on board. I call Deputy Ó Cuív. We have 15 minutes before we have to evacuate.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Níl an coiste eile ag tosú go dtí 4 p.m. I thank the representative from BirdWatch Ireland. I have a few points or questions. In looking around the country the biggest change one sees is that, while there is uniformity in that all areas have changed, there are different changes in different areas. In areas being farmed very intensively, farming and land-use methods are very aggressive. There are high levels of monocultural production of whatever is being farmed, which is grass and grazing animals in most cases. In certain areas, one sees big large swathes of tillage. It is quite interesting that in the west of Ireland it is not a question of the intensification of farming; the opposite seems to be the biggest change. What are the big changes I see when I drive around? The first is that a great deal of land is not being farmed at all. It has actually gone wild with bushes, scrub and whatever. The second is that farming is totally monocultural. Where any farming is taking place, it is purely for the purpose of growing grass. Even 30 years ago, many farmers sowed a few acres of oats or some other crop. They grew vegetables, potatoes or whatever, so they were tilling the soil. How have the changes in farming practices, which are not all towards intensification, affected bird populations of different types? Have some been affected more than others?

That leads to my second question. I note the reference in the document I have before me to GLAS. If we were to try to recreate a more mixed approach to farming, especially in monoculture areas, with a little tillage or whatever and by significant grants under an environmental scheme, would that help to recreate the diversity of the past? If I understand what our guests from BirdWatch Ireland are saying, whatever was happening gave rise to far more diversity than is the case now. If much of that is down to farming habits, then we have to look at how they have changed. It has not all moved towards intensification. Some has changed in exactly the opposite direction towards de-intensification and monocultural farming. We have gone from intensive farming with every parcel of land being used in a multipurpose fashion down to half the land going wild and the other half with only grass. As part of a prospective scheme, could there be something to encourage a little tillage in order that people might grow vegetables, potatoes and so on? Does BirdWatch Ireland believe that would have an impact? Would it create something akin to what we had in farming practices going back 50, 60 or 70 years?

Obviously, some birds are vulnerable in areas where farmers are going right into the hedges in a way they could not do before the introduction of the mechanisation relating to intensification. Does BirdWatch Ireland have suggestions for how that issue could be dealt with and how farmers could be incentivised? There were meant to be nature areas, I understand, for tillage, but I wonder how that worked.

Reference was made to the curlew. I think I mentioned this to the BirdWatch Ireland deputation previously. Where I live there would have been curlews nesting on the islands and lakes. I am told one of the problems we face is mink, because mink can swim while foxes cannot. We never find foxes on an island. How have species introduced to the wild affected native populations of birds, especially those that nest in the grass and those vulnerable to animals such as mink and animals of prey that go to places where other animals cannot go? From what I hear on Raidió na Gaeltachta, on islands such as Inisbofin, Inishturk and so on the corncrake appears to have mounted something of a comeback. I know good programmes have assisted that. Where do the numbers stand as regards the corncrake? Have we analysed the cause? One of the questions was about the actions taken that have had a positive effect. I was told, either correctly or incorrectly, that there are reasons for the demise of the corncrake in places where there is no problem of over-mechanical harvesting where the corncrake would have been. It was not simply mechanical harvesting because that was not the problem on uninhabited islands but, apparently, it was the lack of farming and the lack of any activity. This goes back to my first point. The humans created circumstances for some of these birds that were friendly to them. The interaction between humans acting in certain traditional ways and the birds created what we had in the 19th century and the early 20th. How much do we have to positively recreate that? Letting the place go wild is not the simple answer to getting some of these birds back.

Dr. Anita Donaghy: I will go back to the beginning when the Deputy made a couple of points about the changes in the west and north west, where we have marginal areas that have effectively been abandoned and farming does not happen there any more.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The point is that wherever farming is done, it is pure cattle and sheep. Other elements of farming would have been strong in every farm. Every farm would have had some of them.

Dr. Anita Donaghy: That is certainly one of the issues we referred to in the longer document. We discussed the loss of mixed farming and the fact that farms would all have been lower-intensity and more diverse in the past. Everyone would have had a little patch of oats and there would have been some grazing. That mixture allowed for an environment rich in wildlife. Inputs were far lower and management was far more sympathetic to wildlife. Hay meadows were cut late and there were no multiple cults of silage, for example. All of those things would have been important in producing an environment rich in wildlife. Gradually, different elements of mixed farms have been lost. The loss of our small patches of arable land has been significant for species such as the yellowhammer, the skylark and the corn bunting. One reason we have lost the corn bunting is the loss of mixed farming. The vast majority of yellowhammers now are in the east, where the larger more intense arable farms are found. It has definitely been significant.

The abandonment of farming is a reflection of the lack of supports for low-intensity beef and sheep farming. The money is to be made in dairy, as committee members know. There is not enough support for low-intensity beef farming. Yet, that is the kind of farming that supports the curlew and some of the other farming birds. If we are really serious about retaining these farming birds, then we need to give more supports to farmers who have far lower-intensity farming

systems that are friendlier to wildlife. There is no doubt about that. My colleagues may want to add something on that issue.

Deputy Ó Cuív referred to mink. We are sure mink are having a serious impact on a wide range of ground-nesting birds, but it is not only mink. Mink have been reintroduced. They are a non-native species but some of our native species are equally devastating, including foxes, otters and pine martens. All these species are having a severe impact on ground-nesting birds like the curlew or the lapwing. These birds are declining rapidly and we are really concerned. We have to address these issues by tackling predation and controlling some of these species. Some of our members do not like it, but in a way we have to take measures to protect species on the verge of extinction. Under a European innovation programme that we are running with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in south Lough Corrib in Galway, we are working with farmers to train them in techniques to control these predators. This is an area where there are vulnerable populations of ground-nesting birds. It does not arise everywhere; it is only in a small number of key hotspots where this needs to be done. We are not shirking that issue.

Deputy Ó Cuív asked about the corncrake. The number of corncrake we have comes to approximately 150 pairs. It has been 20 years since corncrake conservation programmes was initiated by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Then the National Parks and Wildlife Service took it over. The population has fluctuated up and down but it has not really changed all that much. There has not been wide-scale recovery of corncrake populations. They are becoming more and more marginalised and confined the islands mentioned by Deputy Ó Cuív. We find that the numbers on the mainland are going to continue to go down. They are still found on islands where there is still some low-intensity farming but they are also found on islands where the farming has more or less disappeared. We really know what needs to be done. It is not a particularly complex problem. We know what needs to be done to allow corncrake populations to recover and increase. There are not enough resources being put in to do it. That is the bottom line. Perhaps my colleagues might wish to add something to these points.

Ms Oonagh Duggan: On Deputy Ó Cuív's question on intensive farms needing to do their bit, I want to let him know about a project in Cork, which is the Biodiversity Regeneration In a Dairying Environment, BRIDE, project, where Donal Sheehan and other farmers in the Bride Valley with intensive dairy, beef and other farms are trying to set aside up to 10% of their intensive land in order to help biodiversity. This is European innovation project as well and they are doing really good work. The farmers there are lining up to get involved because they want to do a bit more. That is really inspirational. If he is ever down that way, I would strongly advise stopping in because it is great to see such a project.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I have just one further question. We are heading towards 2020, so we will start all over again with these new schemes. Under WTO rules one cannot pay farmers for production. That may be right or may be wrong but that is the way it is.

It would be very desirable if there was much more co-operation between farming organisations and the groups represented here today to come up with environmental schemes which would do more for the environment than the present schemes. It would also reward the farmers because they cannot live on scenery. Reward the farmers and make it profitable for them to stay in business and do a type of farming that maximises the protection of nature, which is not a non-farming practice and which is where we are heading. It is a type of farming that is compatible with good nature projects. GLAS and the agri-environment options scheme are too confined when it comes to dealing with environmental issues and do not really reward for positive action. Putting it at its simplest, the easiest way to get money under those schemes is to do

very little because one will not be penalised and will be much less vulnerable to penalties. We need to have this debate now rather when these schemes are on top of us.

Dr. Anita Donaghy: I agree entirely with the Deputy. We work very closely with the Irish Natura and Hill Farmers Association and are partners with it in several projects. We share the Deputy's opinion that these low intensity farming systems need to be protected. It is not current Government policy, which is all towards intensification and expansion of the dairy industry. We are doing our best to get our voice heard but at the moment, Government policy is unfortunately not with us.

Chairman: We are literally out of time.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: The Chairman promised me that I could ask that question.

Chairman: I told the Senator that she could ask him afterwards.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: The question was whether we should have a Department of natural environment.

Chairman: He does not have time to answer it now.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: BirdWatch Ireland seems to think so and I am interested in what Deputy Ó Cúiv might think of this.

Chairman: I know the Senator is as she has said that. I need to bring the meeting to a close.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: That is just ignorant.

Chairman: I dtús báire ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Uasal Caffrey, an Uasal Duggan agus an Dr. Donaghy. We heard a very stark message today about human activity endangering birds. Two weeks ago we heard about bees. The human population is endangering our own ecosystems. What I heard today was a call for action by us. I hope people are listening to this debate and hear the stark facts and figures which were given. I hope that when the witnesses come back we will hear good news from them and that the Minister will look at the funding proposals that are made to him for work that needs to be done.

Gabhaim buíochas leo arís. Cuireann sé sin scor leis an mbreathnú ar an ábhar seo inniu agus ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis na hionadaithe ar fad ó BirdWatch Ireland as an gcúnamh a thug siad don choiste inniu agus as freastal ar an gcruinniú inniu agus tá an cruinniú ar athló *sine die*.

The joint committee adjourned at 3.45. p.m. *sine die*.