

Minutes of Meeting through teams of Climate Change and Biodiversity

Strategic Policy Committee held on 26th February, 2024 (via teams)

I Láthair:

Baill: Cllr. Alastair Mc Kinstry, Cathaoirleach
Dr Evelyn Francis Parsons
Cllr. Martina Kinane
Cllr. Joe Sheridan
Cllr. Noel Thomas
Mr. Henry Walsh
Ms. Mags Sheehan

Oifigigh:

Ms. Eileen Ruane, Director of Services
Ms. Tina Ryan, Climate Change Co-Ordinator
Ms. Maria Flynn, Administrative Officer
Ms. Rosina Joyce, Biodiversity Officer
Ms. Rebecca Mooney, Climate Action Officer
Mr. Dave O'Loughlin, Executive Engineer
Ms. Colette Kennedy, A/Assistant Staff Officer
Ms. Sabina O Connell, Assistant Staff Officer

1. Confirmation of the Minutes of Climate Change & Biodiversity SPC meeting held on 25th October 2023.

The Cathaoirleach thanked all staff involved in ensuring that the Climate Action Plan was adopted on Monday last and enquired if anyone had any comments in relation to the previous meeting. The Cathaoirleach looked for clarification as to what GCC is doing to support EV chargers in advance of the development of the Regional EV Charging Strategy. He also asked for information on the charging points that have been agreed to or not agreed to at this stage and under what conditions. The Cathaoirleach reference both planning and support for community climate action proposal; in deciding what to allow/support there is a de facto EV plan in place in which the Council decides yes/no for funding requests. What are the conditions that the Council use to decide on same. There is a wind park in Connemara whereby SSE Electricity support community groups and if a battery box could be placed on an Electric Vehicle charger on a community project it would be good for storing energy that would otherwise be lost. He also enquired as to whether

policy or planning would be needed for EV charger batteries for Community groups and requested a response prior to the next meeting in April.

Ms Ruane agreed and enquired from Ms Ryan if there was an update on the just transition piece regarding community chargers. Ms Ryan confirmed that she has an update on her presentation but will be leaving this item open on the agenda until such time as there is more definitive information available. Ms Ruane confirmed that she would link in with Planning in relation to the query.

The Cathaoirleach requested that a meeting be organised in advance of the April SPC meeting to discuss the Rights of Nature proposal. Ms Ruane agreed with this. The Cathaoirleach also proposed that the SPC in April be in person. Ms Ruane added that the hybrid capability is now available in room G01 so that may also be an option if the Council Chamber was not available.

Cllr. Parsons thanked everyone involved for their great work in getting the Climate Action Plan over the line. Cllr. Parsons pointed out that communities must come first, and we must take account of the concerns that communities have when they are living close to structures that interfere with their enjoyment and quality of life. Cllr. Parsons enquired about the costings of the EV Chargers when a group is submitting a Climate Action Fund application. Ms Ryan replied that this would depend on the location and stated that some companies might be more competitive if they are placed in a location where their money may be recouped quicker. Ms Ryan went on to say that some companies were offering free installation in places where there would be high usage therefore communities should engage with the individual companies to receive prices. Three quotations are required where possible for applicants applying for the Community Action Fund. In some cases, this may not be possible, but Communities must show that they have requested quotations from three different companies. Ms Ryan added that some locations may be suited for going under the ZEV1 programmes for example the sports facility programme that was open to applications last year within the Just Transition area. ZEV1 will engage with one supplier to install and maintain the EV chargers.

The minutes were proposed by the Cathaoirleach and seconded by Ms. Mags Sheehan.

2. Biodiversity Update

1. Biodiversity Update

Ms Joyce gave an update on the projects that have taken place to date this year. Ms Joyce firstly spoke about Ireland's 4th Biodiversity Action Plan 2023 - 2030 which was launched at the end of January 2024 and stated that this is the first time there was a statutory national Biodiversity Action Plan. She explained that this is being supported by legislation and funding and she described the plan as more of an "Impact Plan" than an Action Plan. Ms Joyce outlined the main objectives of the plan, highlighting some of the specific actions that have been listed to be delivered by local authorities. She also stated that this plan takes a "whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach", with responsibility falling on everyone to preserve and restore biodiversity in Ireland.

Ms Joyce informed the members about the funding applications that were submitted in Q1 2024, to the Heritage Council for the Development of the Galway County Heritage and Biodiversity Plan and to the National Parks and Wildlife Services for the Local Biodiversity Action Fund. Maximum funding has been applied for. Ms Joyce spoke about one project

called the Hare's Corner which will be launched next month in partnership with Burrenbeo Trust. Ms Joyce informed that she will be working with landowners, community groups, schools and clubs helping them to take practical measures to support biodiversity. Measures include, installing a pond, planting a small woodland or mini orchard, creating plans for nature or plans for peatland. This project is in partnership with Burren Beo, who have successfully run this programme in County Clare and Mayo. Ms Joyce spoke about the Galway Heritage and Biodiversity Plan 2024 – 2030 and she stated that we are examining public pre-draft consultation. A meeting will take place with the Heritage and Biodiversity forum on the 11th of March 2024.

Ms Joyce spoke about the events, engagement and campaigns have taken place in Q1 2024. These included meeting with students, teachers, and parents at the BT Young Scientist & Technology Competition, giving several talks to community groups and secondary school and organising events for World Wetlands Day and National Tree Week. A bi-lingual booklet celebrating the Connemara Blue Dots was launched on the 2nd of February at Scoil na bhForbacha and Ms. Joyce thanked Máirtín O'Donnchadha, the Irish Officer and LAWPRO staff for their support with organising the event. Ms Joyce also spoke about a staff workshop showcasing the recent acquisition of the National Tree Map dataset and demonstrating how the data can be used to assist staff with their roles and duties.

Ms. Joyce stated that a new ESKER Box has been secured by Galway County Council from the Heritage Council. The ESKER (Environmental Science Kits for Ecological Recording) Box contains a range of varying field equipment, from insect collection nets to magnifying glasses and the full set of swatches from the National Biodiversity Data Centre to allow for the correct identification of species. This kit is available from the Library Service, free of charge and will support groups and educational outings in discovering more about their local biodiversity.

Ms Joyce informed the members about National Biodiversity week which is taking place from 17th – 26th May 2024 and National Heritage week from 17th to 24th August 2024 where communities can engage and plan.

The Cathaoirleach thanked Ms Joyce for her excellent presentation and asked if definitive timetables can be sent out for all the meetings arranged.

Cllr. Parsons commended Ms Joyce for her enthusiasm and incredible work and commented that the data available will be useful to so many biodiversity projects and she enquired if the data could be used to mark the ash trees where ash dieback is present. Ms Joyce replied by stating the species identification was not captured in this data set. However, this data would provide baseline data on tree coverage throughout the county and if similar data was acquired in future years this could be used as a comparison. It may be possible that AI and other advances in technology may be able to identify species in future surveys. Ms Joyce thanked Barry Doyle, Brídín Feeney and Anthonin Lize and all the GIS team in the IT Department for all their assistance with the National Tree Map dataset and for developing the dashboard. Cllr. Kinane enquired about the tree planting programme on wetlands. Ms Joyce explained that if community groups are looking for advice on tree planting projects the guidelines will be useful for them. Ms Joyce spoke about the new funding available through the Heritage Council which may suit community groups to get funding for tree planting projects.

The Cathaoirleach added that there is a group in the University working with the Environment Protection Agency.

Cllr. Sheridan thanked Ms Joyce for her presentation and spoke about the issue of Ash dieback in the Tuam Municipal and the 200 incidents of tree weakening that occurred after the last red alert storm in January. He questioned if there was an avenue for data collection through our outdoor maintenance team to track hotspots of Ash dieback to be preventative rather than wait for emergency cases. Ms Joyce advised that Paul Connolly, Area Engineer for Tuam will be attending the National Tree Map workshop on Monday next with the GIS team to discuss how the data can be used to maximise the benefit to local area offices.

Ms Ryan added that the severe weather management system team developed by GIS services can record tree falls. The Cathaoirleach added that it may be useful to track what gaps are in the data for example and he mentioned local authorities in Germany as an example. Ms Joyce added that next Monday's meeting is a meeting specifically for National Tree Map data and it would not focus on birds.

Mr Walsh thanked Ms Joyce for her wonderful ambitious presentation and commented on the threat to the whitethorn and the imported diseases seen here through the rise in using non-native plants. This would be avoided if more native plants are using in planting. Mr. Walsh queried if there is insufficient planning on the grounds in terms of supporting our native nurseries and he hoped that the specialists in that area can manage this. He stated that the changing weather has seriously damaged native nurseries. It takes them a long time to recover from this and he believed our native nurseries were not adequately supported.

Although they are commercial entities it is important to make it attractive so that they can stay in business.

Ms Joyce agreed with Mr Walsh regarding the importation of diseases and added that measures are being put in place to direct and encourage people to use native provenance trees to protect the genetic biodiversity of our tree stock. Mr Walsh also stated that Ash dieback is very frustrating for many farmers at present and that it is an imported disease through importation of ash trees. Ms Joyce agreed that nurseries need to be supported but advised that providing support for commercial nurseries is not within her remit as a Biodiversity Officer in the Local Authority. It is her intention to raise awareness in a local setting she added.

The Cathaoirleach agreed with Mr Walsh that the relationship with farmers has been damaged when the long-term funding was removed, and farmers had made commitments to biodiversity on their lands. This needs to be raised at a higher level.

3. Climate Action and Coastal Erosion Update

Ms Ryan began by confirming that the Climate Action Plan was adopted last Monday the 19th of February and publication stage is now in progress for 30 days from date of adoption. Implementation will be the next stage. Ms Ryan explained that lots of work has already taken place in this area which has been captured within the plan. A meeting will take place with the senior management team where the actions will be assigned to the various teams to build within their plans. Ms Ryan spoke about the number of issues raised at last Monday's meeting, some of which are outside the remit of the Climate Action Plan. The issues were not raised through the public consultation process but will be taken

on board and it is the intention to engage in all these areas. Ms Ryan spoke about the Priority Actions and what she will be looking to prioritise over the next coming months:

- Support the Climate Action Steering Group, Climate Action Team, and Energy Team.
- ISO50001 Energy Management Certification. Identify the energy uses with the Local Authority. A Data Management system will be put in place to record the energy use of the building.
- Retrofit programme for Galway County Council buildings – At present Galway County Council are working under the Pathfinder programme, this has gone for regional tender but unfortunately no bids received but it will go back out for local tender.
- Fleet Management Strategy – targets will not be made for 2030 unless extensive works are done on the fleet.
- Establish network of stakeholders. The Chief Executive wants Galway County Council to ensure we maximise funding streams and to support existing projects including LEAP, CONNECTED, Cities4Forests. Ms Ryan highlighted the Galway Partner Forest Programme where the team worked with students at the ATU and produced fabulous outdoor furniture from timber which came from sustainably managed woodland. Ms Ryan emphasised the importance of supporting communities to manage the forests and maintain them into the future. The outdoor furniture will be installed in Clifden as part of the public realm upgrades and some pieces may be placed in the County Buildings to raise awareness of same. Training will be rolled out to staff in the Galway County Council in April on the methodology when purchasing timber on how to identify the different types of timber, where it is coming from and to ensure it is sustainable.

Ms Ryan spoke about the importance of the feasibility study for potential areas for District heating and identifying potential active travel areas in our towns and villages and work with the active travel team. Ms Ryan also spoke about the energy retrofits to social housing, the transportation modelling for local towns and villages and the development of the walking and cycling strategy. Ms Ryan spoke about another issue raised as part of the public consultation on the plan – bike sharing schemes, mobility hubs, bike libraries and carpooling. Ms Ryan informed the meeting that the aim is to have the Regional EV Strategy developed by Q2, 2024 and pointed out that the mapping of the four applications submitted for Mountbellew, Tuam, Glenamaddy and Aughrim will take place in March 2024 after which we will be advised whether the sites will be funded. Ms Ryan spoke about the decarbonisation zone and informed that the communities are ready to get working on these actions. Meetings took place with the communities and a more established stakeholder group will be formed now that the plan is adopted. GFI, the local energy agency, will help support group approaches for energy assessments and retrofit. Ms Ryan spoke about the potential of community energy facilities such as community owned solar farm, this is another action that the community want to progress as quickly as possible. Under The clean energy for EU islands initiative the EU and island secretariat invited submissions for the 30 islands for 2030 programme, applications were supported for Aran Islands and Inishbofin and both applications were successful. Technical support will be provided over the next 3 years to identify suitable sites for community owned facilities and to look at the technical aspects for planning the developments.

Ms. Ryan explained that emissions from ferry and air travel are a big part of the emissions challenge for the decarbonisation zone on the Aran Island. Another project which has potential is composting on Inis Meain and Inis Oirr, which is already in place on Inis Mor. Ms Ryan spoke about another important issue in relation to Adaptation and this action

has been worked on in the SPC workshop in relation to looking at coastal erosion and concerns raised in relation to Renville and Cave in Clarinbridge. Ms Ryan informed the members that she spoke to the DOS in the Roads and Transportation Section and as advised previously the Chief Executive has committed a resource which will include coastal erosion, and this is being developed as part of the Strategic workforce review and confirmed that no staff have been appointed to date. Ms Ryan stated the Director also mentioned the report on the Inter-Departmental Group on the development of a National Coastal Change Management Strategy. This gives a road map for dealing with future coastal change – enhancing governance and capacity building, understanding the risk, and identifying potential technical risk management options and developing management responses to coastal change. Ms Ryan spoke about the types of action that can be taken in response to coastal change which can be varied from no active intervention, where coastal defences are maintained (hold the line), where there is managed realignment and managed retreat and lastly defences that are built out at sea (advance the line). Ms Ryan added that it is good to see the strategies been developed on a national basis as it will support the actions set out in the plan. Ms Ryan spoke about the National Adaptation Framework and stated that the Chief Executive is on the National Adaptation committee. KPI's and collaborations will need to be strengthened.

Ms Ryan spoke about Community and Partnerships in relation to our Climate Action Fund and stated that training, information and support programmes for individuals, community event organisers will be developed. Ms Ryan highlighted works that took place over the last few months, for example, celebrating the biodiversity event in Newbridge, Community Health, and wellbeing event in Gort, an information event in each of the Municipal Districts, libraries, presentations at the PPN plenary and a stand in Comhairle na nÓg. Ms Ryan thanked Denise Feeney and Rebecca Mooney for all their work. Ms Ryan spoke about the Community Climate Action Fund and the public engagement which coincided with engagement on the draft Plan. Under Strand 1 there is €726,000 for communities in the county and an additional 3 million nationally of the Shared Island Fund where communities can link with communities in Northern Ireland and submit applications. At present there are 76 applications at draft stage and 6 applications fully complete. Ms Ryan stated that the Community Climate Action Fund is 100% project funding, with 25% upfront funding, the applications can be submitted using the online portal (Submit.com), the project must be completed in 18 months from letter of offer and the closing date is the 29th of February 2024. Ms Ryan stated that there will be an evaluation committee internally, the geographical distribution of the projects will also be looked at and the contribution of the projects to climate action. Ms Ryan stated that the final approval will be made by the Minister of the Environment, Climate and Communications. Ms Ryan spoke about the times lines and confirms that they will be evaluated over the next couple of months and then submitted to the Department with the hope that letters of offers will be issued by late summer.

Cllr. Kinane thanked Ms Ryan for her presentation and acknowledged that it was great to see some movement in relation to coastal erosion but expressed her disappointment at the lack of movement in real time in relation to the issues of coastal erosion. Cllr. Kinane enquired if the member of staff has yet to be appointed or has it to be advertised as Cllr. Kinane was of the opinion following OPW visit 3 years ago that appointment of staff was to take place to which Ms Ruane replied that this is very much a priority. Cllr Kinane stated that there was one small positive from storm Debi in that Minister Patrick O Donovan agreed to take short term measures to get a survey undertaken of the coastline and that €180,000 will be allocated to Galway County Council to conduct a

study of the coastline from Oranmore to Kinvara. Cllr. Kinane stated that the survey will take 18 months to complete and will not address the short-term concerns for businesses in Clarinbridge that experienced devastating flooding again earlier this year. Immediate action is required she added. Cllr. Kinane asked if a letter could be sent by this SPC to ensure that the study will be undertaken off the coastline from Oranmore to Kinvara and to ensure that Tawin Island, Renville, Cave and Clarinbridge are not overlooked to which Ms Ruane asked if Ms Flynn could draft a letter from the SPC to Mr Pender in relation to the areas of concern mentioned by Cllr. Kinane.

Ms Ryan replied that she agrees with Cllr. Kinane and acknowledges her frustration in terms of the coastal risk and will keep her updated on the matter. Ms Ryan confirmed that there is a Climate Adaptation budget for roads and funding applications can be submitted through the Roads Department to which Cllr. Kinane replied that funding has been received and the roads have been restored but when the next storm hits it will be washed away and thence the need for long term solutions.

The Cathaoirleach reiterated similar for the west of the county and stated that works are ongoing at present in Inis Mór where an engineer is presently looking at the erosion of a graveyard into the sea and he stated that the works will need to be done quickly and may need be co-ordinated with the NPWS. The Cathaoirleach requested clarification regarding the staffing issue and asked if there was a shortage of staffing skills or if funding was the issue. Ms Ruane replied that strategic workforce plan is almost completed, and this will give an overview of staffing requirements. The staffing resources in this area for the whole county needs to be determined she added.

Cllr. Parsons enquired about the position of the National Cycleway at present and asked if it is possible to receive an update as there appears to be very little movement. Cllr. Parsons enquired about the area from Athlone to Ballinasloe which is predominately on public lands and appears to have little issues with it and stated that it could be an ideal just transition project if taken on its own rather than the entire project to which Ms Ryan replied that it would be ideal to look for just transition funding. Cllr. Parsons also enquired if anyone has been appointed to the Just Transition activator role and if not, when will appointment take place and are deadlines been missed.

Ms Ruane replied that she will follow up on it. Cllr. Parsons enquired if Pollboy landfill or Kilconnell landfill are suitable for community owned solar farms (their slopes look like they would be ideal sites) and district lighting projects and further enquired as to where the funding will come from to which Ms Ryan replied that she will speak to the Manager at the landfills. Cllr. Parsons stated that funds were put aside years ago from the Landfill Remediation Fund but additional may be required for different phases of remediation. Cllr. Parsons also enquired about the just transition projects and asked for clarification on the digitisation for Aughrim Interpretation Centre. Ms Ryan replied that she will follow up with the relevant contacts as she herself is not familiar with it.

The Cathaoirleach requested a follow up on the district heating and enquired as to what areas are included to which Ms Ryan replied that there is a district heating map of Ireland being produced identifying potential suitable locations which includes towns like Tuam, Ballinasloe, Loughrea and other towns. Ms. Ryan added that she wants to see how this can be progressed and supported by the council. The Cathaoirleach enquired about the staffing issues of the active travel team to which Ms Ruane replied that Paula Higgins has assigned staff in that area.

The Cathaoirleach stated that we need to consider long-term planning for sea level rise. We are locked in to 8-20m of rise and this necessitates the council planning a retreat strategy as part of the County Development plan. The ICHEC (Irish Centre for High-End Computing) is leading a project called TRANSLATE for Met Eireann on climate projections for all public sector planning, including the OPW and its flood planning. Part of this work is updating the OPW guidelines. Current OPW guidelines of 1m rise by 2100 are based on global modelling (including ICHEC's previous work) in 2013; this is out of date and in current work in the UN IPCC reports expert guidance gives 2m rise by 2100; peer agencies such as Environment England are using this to set a 2.5m risk level for UK local authorities, and we are likely to recommend similar.

The Cathaoirleach enquired if an operational update could be obtained from the Director of Services regarding the flood sea level rise issue and coastal erosion.

The Cathaoirleach asked the members if there were any items under AOB. No items presented.

Meeting concluded with next meeting to be in person in GO1 on 24th April 2024 which will be the final meeting before the local elections.

CHRIOGHNAIGH AN CHRUINNIU ANSIN



CATHAOIRLEACH ALASTAIR MC KINSTRY