

Minutes of Meeting of Climate Change and Biodiversity Strategic Policy Committee held on 24th April, 2024 (Co. Building)

I Láthair:

Baill: Cllr. Alastair Mc Kinstry, Cathaoirleach
Dr Evelyn Francis Parsons
Mr. Henry Walsh
Ms. Mags Sheehan
Mr. Peter Butler
Cllr. Gabriel Cronnelly

Oifigigh:

Ms. Eileen Ruane, Director of Services
Ms. Tina Ryan, Climate Action Coordinator
Ms. Maria Flynn, Administrative Officer
Ms. Rosina Joyce, Biodiversity Officer
Ms. Ava Haverman (student)
Ms. Rebecca Mooney, Climate Action Officer
Ms. Denise Feeney, Community Climate Action Officer
Mr. Dave O'Loughlin, Executive Engineer
Ms. Helen Hallinan, Assistant Staff Officer
Ms. Sabina O Connell, Assistant Staff Officer
Mr. Enda Gallagher, Senior Executive Engineer
Ms. Paula Higgins, Senior Executive Engineer
Ms. Kasia Garvey, Executive Engineer

Apologies: Cllr. Noel Thomas
Cllr. Martina Kinnane
Cllr. Joe Sheridan
Mr. John Hynes

Presentation from Martina Finn – Rights of Nature – Pre-Meeting

The Cathaoirleach Cllr. Mc Kinstry welcomed everyone to the SPC meeting and introduced Jen Fisher and Martina Finn and stated that they would be giving a presentation on Galway County Public Participation Network (PPN) Motion on Rights of Nature. All attendees watched a short film of approximately 10 minutes and Ms. Finn and Ms. Fisher spoke briefly on it. They explained that the PPN which is the voice of 3000 people in groups right across the country

has 3 main aims: (1) Representation to co-ordinate how the community in Galway is represented and make sure the voice of the community is heard. (2) Education makes our members stronger; and provide training and capacity building. (3) Information keeps our members informed about local developments and share information with the network. Rights of Nature is seen as a way of re-thinking our relationship with nature – from one of dominance to one of sharing, caring, respect and interdependency. Adopting a Rights of Nature lens is deemed vital now as our laws, policies and environmental systems are developed to protect the environment and reduce the rate of loss, and not to halt the loss in the first place or restore long term damage. Ms. Finn and Ms. Fisher showed the members a chart with the vision of Ireland's Children and Young People's Assembly on Biodiversity Loss and their calls to action. The Citizens Assembly Report to Government contained 159 recommendations to dramatically transform Ireland's relationship with nature. A longer version of The Rights of Nature film has been shown to communities in 4 different locations during March and positive feedback was received. They concluded with advising members that the PPN believe that it is vital that a Rights of Nature motion is adopted urgently to identify what local actions can be taken to preserve our environment for future generations. Ms. Fisher added that the Citizens Assembly recommendation is already part of the works programme for the national Biodiversity Plan. Passing the motion sought this would give inspiration on a local level. Derry and Strabane and Donegal have already come on board with this motion.

Cllr. Mc Kinstry thanked both Jen Fisher and Martina Finn for their presentation. Eileen Ruane thanked them also and added that the workshops that they spoke about in their presentation would be worthy of exploring further. Cllr. Parsons acknowledged the motion as being very worthwhile but queried reasoning behind motion as biodiversity is already embedded into the County Development Plan. She also noted that the Environmental Justice Principal aspect would need exploration. The Cathaoirleach requested Ms. Finn and Ms. Fisher to leave the meeting informing them that the SPC members would be discussing the other items on the agenda for SPC Climate Change and Biodiversity meeting. The Galway County PPN Linkage group (GRWG) requests the draft Motion on Rights of Nature, proposed by Martina Finn, seconded by Jen Fisher and Megan Flynn-Dixon, be adopted by Galway County Council Climate Change and Biodiversity SPC.

The Cathaoirleach stated that the term of this SPC members will end in June with the election and as this is the final meeting before that, a decision will be required in relation to this motion if it is to be brought before the council. Mr. Butler commented that this is an opportunity for dialogue, which is necessary between the local authority and civil society. By passing the motion the council are not giving a commitment to change the County Development Plan, it just allows for dialogue between Local Authority and the public. Mr. Butler gave example of how humans can destroy nature, years ago he spent time glamping in Lough Ellen and now it is severely damaged.

The Cathaoirleach agreed with a call for dialogue as he explained similar pieces of work are happening at national level and stated that he would be in favour of local dialogue to align with national debate. Cllr. Parsons asked for clarification as to what is the kernel of the PPN request. Mr. Butler re-iterated that it is a call for dialogue. He added that there is piecemeal legislation in place and that if the local authority committed to perhaps two workshops, some of those ideas would feed into other plans which the local authority has in place. Cllr. Parsons added that all the council's plans have a biodiversity dimension to them so that she couldn't see any additional problem in having dialogue with PPN.

Mr. Walsh stated that Mr. Butler had summed up the Right of Nature presentation very well. This he stated is a move towards proactive involvement by all. The farming community he continued want to improve but presently agriculture is struggling economically, and the legislation in place often has negative rather than positive affects on farming community. The financial wellbeing of farmers is important, and they are trying to play their part in relation to biodiversity. Best practice is now an acceptable phrase within the agricultural sector and best practices develop and improve through knowledge. Everyone must accept responsibility and without knowledge through dialogue from the top to the lowest in the chain, farmers will remain the weakest link. Everyone Mr. Walsh continued needs to be included in dialogue to improve our methods of doing things and to assist in adjusting to different ways of thinking. Farmers he added, may be property owners but ultimately the power is going out of the sector. Dialogue should be inclusive to achieve balance as everyone wants to play their part and dialogue is the way forward.

Mr. Butler added that to improve everyone needs to be on the same wavelength, not in combat with each other. Co-existence is necessary between the various groups in society. The Cathaoirleach agreed that the farming community needs to be supported and dialogue is important for economical sustainability for farmers. A mutual designed approach is required in this area with a commitment to work closely with the agricultural sector. The Cathaoirleach recommended that this SPC group start dialogue and open conversations and report to the next council.

Ms. Joyce stated that we need to focus on the wording of the proposed motion bearing in mind what we can realistically deliver. She pointed out the need to have conversations, workshops, and discussions but as a local authority we need to be clear on what is within our remit and what we can achieve. She noted here is only one Biodiversity Officer, and the main role of the local authority in this area is to raise awareness. It was also noted that many of the actions identified by the Citizens Assembly initially require action at a national level. There is opportunities Ms. Joyce acknowledged in the rights of nature motion, but the council need to be very careful to ensure that opportunities are not lost.

Mr. Walsh noted wording in proposed motion and that it had mentioned property rights without due consideration of landowners, farmers, owners of bogs and back gardens and livelihoods and recommend it should include "people" in the first line. Mr. Walsh agreed to speak to his group in relation to proposed rewording. The Cathaoirleach agreed that dialogue is necessary to obtain more information. In particular, the council could hold community workshops over the coming months to prepare a report and to come to council for consideration embedding "Rights of Nature".

Cllr. Cronnelly said that we need to be proactive rather than reactive. Our key role in the council is awareness. Ms. Sheehan said we need to facilitate dialogue with all stakeholders, and she believed that too much emphasis at this point was being centred on the wording of the proposed motion. She raised further concerns that unless this is pushed forward by this SPC group to the full Council she was worried that it may be put on delayed by the incoming SPC group. Ms. Joyce stated that we could have a role in raising awareness as part of our remit within the national picture/framework. The motion would need to go to the plenary by 10th May and the Cathaoirleach recommended that we need to set up online teams meeting to finalise wording and decide whether to bring it forward to the full council or to the SPC. He concluded by stating that we need to strive to correct the balance in nature before it is further exploited, however in doing this we have to support the agricultural community. The wording of the proposed motion was discussed. It was not finalised and a decision was made to have an additional meeting the following week.

Biodiversity Update

Ms Joyce gave her presentation on Biodiversity Update and stated that Biodiversity Office received confirmation of funding for 12 LBAF projects from NPWS. She showed the funding breakdown on a chart for the different projects. The Hare's Corner is a funding scheme to support landowners and community groups across Co. Galway in undertaking nature-positive measures on their lands. Hare's Corner project got a phenomenal response from local landowners and various groups. There was Pre-Draft Public consultation in 6 different areas to discuss the Heritage and Biodiversity Plan 2024-2030. Wishing Tree Project was a huge success and is an interesting way of engaging with children in the communities.

Biodiversity week will raise awareness of our natural heritage right across Co. Galway from 17th May to 26th of May outlining the various Biodiversity events, such as Dawn Chorus and Wildflower Walk. Galway County Council will be delivering a suite of diverse conservation and awareness-raising projects in the coming months. The process of developing the Galway County Heritage and Biodiversity Plan is well underway and through communities it will translate into a robust plan which will serve us well for years to come. Ms Joyce thanked the members of the SPC for their support and vision for Biodiversity.

Ms. Joyce offered a special word of thanks from Marie Mannion to everyone and advised that the bigger picture is always in focus in relation to biodiversity. She also mentioned that Galway County Council are again this year hosting a beach event at Trá Doilin on 24th May @11.30am which was a great success last year. Ms. Joyce invited the members to attend.

National Transport Agencies Walking and Cycling Index – Presentation by Paula Higgins, Senior Executive Engineer, Active Travel

Paula Higgins and Kasia Garvey gave a presentation on Walking and Cycling Index 2023 including a short film on how walking and cycling impacts people's lives. It began by showing Wayne Wraptor, Consultant Specialist living in Galway city as he describes wheeling as not only a hobby but his lifestyle. The survey was carried out in various areas and 1100 adults participated in interviews and 5500 surveys completed. Difficulties in certain areas were identified. Information on the interviews is available on the National Transport Agencies (NTA) website.

This Walking and Cycling Index report showed high levels of walking, wheeling, and cycling already. 93% of all residents walk or wheel and 60% of residents walk or wheel at least 5 days a week. 28% of all residents' cycle and 20% of residents cycle at least once a week. Every day, walking, wheeling, and cycling in the Galway Metropolitan Area take nearly 29K cars off the road. If these cars were in a traffic jam, it would tail back 138Km equivalent to the distance from Eyre Square to Sligo.

The physical benefits of walking alone prevent 49 early deaths annually. Residents want to walk, wheel and cycle more. 53% of residents would like to walk or wheel more and 42% would like to cycle more. 32% would like to take public transport more. 72% of residents would like to see more government spending in walking and wheeling in their local area. 77% of residents would like to see more government spending in cycling in their local area. 79% of residents would like to see more government spending in public transport in their local area.

79% of residents support building more cycle paths physically separated from traffic and pedestrians even when this would mean less room for other road traffic. 84% of residents support the creation of more 20-minute neighbourhoods which are neighbourhoods where it is easy for people to meet most of their everyday needs in a 20-minute return walk or wheel. for example, having local shops, schools, green space, and public transport options. What would help people walk or wheel more? 76% of residents are for better footpath accessibility like level surfaces, 75% of residents are for nicer places along streets to stop and rest, like more benches, trees, and shelters and 73% voted for wider footpaths. What would help people cycle more? 70% more traffic free cycle paths away from roads, like through parks or along waterways. 69% more cycle paths along roads that are physically separated from traffic and pedestrians. Going forward Active Travel has numerous projects such as Oranmore Village to Oranmore Train Station, Safe Routes to School Programme (SRTS) in Oranmore, Barna and Claregalway and Oranmore Active Travel Scheme.

The information received through the interviews and surveys carried out will help justify where funds are allocated. There are 7 schemes in the pipeline and more information can be obtained by emailing activetravel@galwaycoco.ie.

Update on Flood Protection

Enda Gallagher gave his presentation on Flood Protection. He gave the members a quick summary of the 4 types of flooding, Pluvial, Fluvial, Coastal and Groundwater. Pluvial flooding is usually localized flooding and Area Offices deal with these issues. Fluvial flooding occurs because of intense or sustained rainfall across a catchment that exceeds the capacity of a rivers channel. This type of flooding affects main rivers and ordinary watercourses. A recent example completed in County Galway is the Dunkellin FRS and costed €9M. Coastal flooding is the 3rd type and Storm Debi on 13th November 2023 is a prime example. An estimated 40 residential and 27 commercial premises were affected in 7 locations over 15km from Oranmore to Kinvara. There is an allocation of €108k from OPW which will allow for study of the area and provide recommendations for property protection, where feasible. Enda presented a Report from the Inter-Departmental Group on National Coastal Change Management Strategy. A range of approaches included:

Do nothing, Hold the line, Managed realignment, Managed retreat and advance the line.

Mr. Gallagher showed photographs of the aftermath of Storm Debi and during the peak of Storm Debi. Groundwater flooding is common in areas of karst limestone, estravelles and swallow holes which are found on the west coast. There is a lack of channels / rivers to widen. Enda went through the different stages of a project from stage 1 to stage 5. He mentioned that South Galway Scheme is only at Stage 2 of public consultation as it takes time managing the environmental issues and environmental surveys which need to be redone if out of date. Channels are dug as an extraction route of ground water flooding. These channels will never go below the 2m and will not be disturbing the habitat. The extraction route of ground water is a problem, and we are monitoring that. Geological Ireland and GSI have been a huge help with gathering information since 2015-16. Dunkellin started in 2012 and finished in 2020. There is a lack of Environmental Engineers which slows up the process of these projects. Enda briefly spoke about Coole Park Flood Risk Assessment Summary, and he stated that some of the facts such as the main roads route through the study area, namely the M18, R458 (old N18) and Kiltartan to Kinvara Road (L4506 and L4509) are at risk of closure for over 7, 34 and 99 days respectively. The Limerick-Athenry Railway line at risk of flooding at Castletown >25 days and the community at Rinrush are at risk of being cut-off > 3months. The

emerging preferred scheme will cost approximately €30 million. This will involve 16km of channel works. For the design 1% AEP flood event, this will alleviate flood risk to residential and non-residential properties. We need to ensure the main roadways and important strategic access routes are accessible. It will also provide access to communities' cut-off by flooding, alleviate flood risk to farm buildings, farmland, important heritage, and cultural sites.

Funding for maintenance of schemes is an issue for Galway County Council. They have not received funding yet. The Clifden scheme has been referred to the OPW. Mr. Gallagher added that environmental issues are key drivers in every scheme. Technology has advanced in the last 15 years, and drones and images from National Surveillance agency is used.

Mr. Walsh enquired if 80% is around environmental challenges to what extent do flood schemes affect the Turlough features. Mr. Gallagher explained that species, habitats, and flora are surveyed. In most cases the channels created don't interfere with the habitats as the channels tend to be higher up in the turloughs.

Mr. Walsh made the point that if channels are not impacting on habitats that a lot of time and money is invested for no apparent good reason with many delays. He referenced Lough Funshinagh which he stated is no longer acting as a turlough. Mr. Gallagher agreed that a lot of OPW capital is being spent and without maintenance monies being allocated it is impacting negatively on engineering decisions.

Cllr. Parsons added that the cost in Ballinasloe was 20 million but estimated at 8.5million. Mr. Gallagher explained that an estimate is initially given but as works commence and progress is made the costs increase. A lot of engineering expertise is required for all the schemes. There are so many schemes in progress around the country and there are only four ground Investigation Consultants in the country. This means progress is very slow. Exploration techniques are required on the Clifden scheme.

Confirmation of Minutes and Matters arising from Climate Change and Biodiversity Strategic Policy Committee Meeting held on 26 February 2024

The Cathaoirleach requested removal of the last line regarding the university on previous minutes. The minutes were proposed by the Cathaoirleach and seconded by Mr. Henry Walsh. Cllr. Cronnelly sought information on the Flag Grant for South Galway, this had been raised at earlier SPC meetings and Kieran Coyne was to follow up on the issue. No further update has been forthcoming. This issue is to be raised with Mr. Coyne for an update. The Cathaoirleach proposed that we postpone the rest of today's meeting as meeting at this point had over run. He suggested that we finalise the meeting on teams next week. He thanked everyone for coming and thanked all groups for their presentations.

Continued Minutes of Meeting via Teams of Climate Change and Biodiversity

Strategic Policy Committee held on 30th April, 2024

I Láthair:

Baill: Cllr. Alastair Mc Kinstry, Cathaoirleach
Mr. Henry Walsh
Mr. Peter Butler
Cllr. Noel Thomas

Oifigigh: Ms. Tina Ryan, Climate Action Coordinator
Ms. Rosina Joyce, Biodiversity Officer
Ms. Helen Hallinan, Assistant Staff Officer

Climate Action and EV Strategy update

The Cathaoirleach welcomed everyone to the meeting and stated that there were 3 topics left on the agenda for discussion today.

1. Wording on the motion for Rights of Nature
2. Update on current action on Climate Change
3. EV Strategy update

Ms. Ryan showed the proposed text and did a recap, and the final wording was discussed. Cllr Thomas queried what is the Rights of Nature about as he said it is very vague. Mr. Butler clarified that it is about dialogue and discussion between the council and the different groups and how best to preserve the environment that we live in. Ms Joyce stated that we need to stay in line with the national level. There was further discussion, and everyone agreed on the final wording on the motion.

The Cathaoirleach proposed the wording on the motion. Mr. Butler indicated that he intended to second it but then there was further discussion. Cllr. Thomas recommended that we hold off on this motion for now. Ms Joyce requested that it be brought forward to the new SPC that will be established later in the year, adding that the Biodiversity Plan is currently being developed. Everyone agreed that it would be discussed when the new SPC is in place,

Proposed Wording to discuss with next SPC after adoption of Biodiversity Plan:

Council notes the legal and social movement globally for the 'Rights of Nature' aiming to strengthen protections for people, place, and planet.

Council recognises that 'Rights of Nature' can help catalyse an innovative rethinking about how to create regenerative, circular, economies while also making human and other living communities safer, stronger, and more resilient.

Council recognises that there is already significant protection for nature that exists in our various level plans, objectives, and other strategic frameworks.

Council will work with national government to determine what form of civic interaction could take place to explore what rights of nature mean for the people and economies of the region and to investigate how Rights of Nature could be expressed in its various level plans, objectives, and other strategic frameworks. Council asks for a report to come to Council on embedding 'Rights of Nature' as a keystone concept into Council's operational practices, planning processes and long-term decision making.

Climate Action and EV Strategy update presentation by Tina Ryan

The Climate Action Plan was adopted in February and published in March in both English and Irish. Ms. Ryan thanked Ms. Sheehan and members of the SPC and noted that they had significant media coverage in relation to the publication.

Ms. Ryan spoke about the Priority Actions and explained that an Energy Review was recently completed for direct council emissions. The total emissions for 2022 was 4,500 tonnes. There was a general downward trend in emissions with the main sources 42% electricity, 37% transport (fleet) and 21% thermal heating of our buildings. Expenditure was €2.6m in 2022 which equates to 2% of the Annual Budget.

To support meeting targets, we need to bring in ISO 50001. Implementation of Data Management System is necessary and will support ISO. Ms. Ryan stated that we have 2 major programs, SEAI Pathfinder Program and SEAI EXCEED Program. Four buildings have been put forward for retrofit under the SEAI Pathfinder Program and tender for Design Team is to be published in coming weeks. SEAI EXCEED Program has 2 Galway County Councils leisure centers under consideration and Design Stage anticipated to commence in coming weeks.

There are 2 Priority Actions under the Community and Partnerships theme which involves training, information and support programme for individuals, community groups and community event organisers. Green Recovery Group Energy Masterplan Dissemination Sessions were held with SEAI in each MD in Tuam, Ballinderreen, Laurencetown and Lackagh. The SEAI gave information, and the Housing Section gave information in relation to grants for derelict homes. The Climate Unit provided information on a retrofitting case study and received good feedback. There were Information events on Business, Energy and Housing Supports in Clifden and Loughrea.

Support Community Action and Administer Community Climate Action Fund

Ms. Ryan stated that we have a fund of 726k for Climate Action Grants and there are 55 applications received and there are some interesting projects. There was huge interest in the Grant funding. The Climate Unit are evaluating the applications currently and they will be putting them forward to the Department. and There will be no decision until in September. When the grants are allocated, the groups have 18 months to carry out the work.

Greenway

An update was also provided in relation to the SPC Query regarding update on the National Cycleway and in particular Athlone to Ballinasloe. Framework documents were published on eTenders on the 2nd of April and the closing date is the 10th of May. It is anticipated that the Framework will be established by June 2024. It will now be delivered as two separate schemes: Scheme 1 Galway to Portumna and Scheme 2 Portumna to Athlone.

EV Update

As per previous update, there is a working group with Local Authorities in the North-West Region and Clare County Council preparing a Regional EV Strategy. Within the Just Transition

Area, there are 4 applications submitted by GCC for Mountbellew Square, Leisure Centre Tuam, Glenamaddy Town Center and Aughrim Interpretive Centre.

Ms. Ryan noted the previous SPC query regarding planning applications for EV chargers in the County and advised that the response from Planning is that, in line with the County Development Plan, they aim to support and facilitate the switch to EV through support for the roll-out of EV charging points at appropriate locations. They have included requirement for infrastructure to enable the installation of recharging points at larger developments. There haven't been any standalone applications for EV charging.

The Cathaoirleach asked what is the status of EVs? Ms. Ryan replied that suitable locations were identified under the Easy Go proposal but that there were concerns about procurement and the absence of a Regional Strategy. Ms. Ryan explained that the process for procuring EV infrastructure is much more comprehensive as a national contract is supported by ZEV. Cllr. Mc Kinstry said that we need to fill in blackspots for EV charging and that he has been raising this issue for four years. He added that financial costs should not be the issue. Cllr. McKinstry stated that we need to have EV chargers installed in blackspots as soon as possible; delaying installations while we on the perfect policy is unacceptable. He added that public have serious concerns about this, and we need to be rolling out EV charging points. Cathaoirleach Mc Kinstry asked if ZEV plans include non-public transport for example ferries to Aran Islands. He stated that there needs to be much larger energy supplies for small ferries in comparison to a car. He stated the need for very large-scale chargers for trucks, buses in Moycullen, Clifden, Loughrea, Oranmore and other towns. He asked is the electric grid sufficient in these areas and we need clear answers from ZEV. Ms. Ryan replied that these are valid and important questions. She will make a note of them and asked the Cathaoirleach if he wants to put his concerns in writing with more detail and she will pass it to the Director of Emergency, Operations and Infrastructure and Operations Oversight and put it on the agenda for the next SPC.

The Cathaoirleach stated that we need definite annual targets in relation to the actions in the plan. He would follow up on this and ask if it is possible to progress. Ms. Ryan replied that she will follow up with Ms. Eileen Ruane and she asked the Cathaoirleach if he was thinking the plan should be changed or is it annual targets that are set out. The Cathaoirleach replied that we need to explain the targets and how it fits in with the national plan, for example, kms of cycle lanes. He added that meeting national targets highly depends on actions at local level, and we don't know what the local plan will deliver. We must demonstrate what we can do.

Mr. Walsh stated that in relation to the EVs if the hydrogen is dismissed, he would like to see the documentation on that. The Cycling/Walking presented by Ms. Kasia Garvey was very interesting, but he was extremely disappointed that flights neutralised emissions reductions and it was quite shocking that everything could be undone by one short flight. We must face the challenges that greenways and the right to cycleways cause. We must take into consideration private ownership and sometimes bureaucracy can cause more obstruction. Solar panels also bring a layer of restriction, and the way forward is to bring people together for discussion.

The Cathaoirleach informed the meeting that it appears that the HGV industry has decided batteries rather than hydrogen are more likely to be used: truck builders have pulled out of H2 research and are closing their H2 filling stations in the UK. Hydrogen may be used for storage or aviation and manufacture of ammonia and fertiliser. Ms. Ryan gave example of her own annual carbon footprint of 4.5 tonnes after a housing retrofit and how a flight to New York would add 1 tonne. The advice is that we should aim to live on 2 tonnes or less. She added that we will assess where definite targets can be set for our actions.

Community Owned Energy

Ms. Ryan also provided a response in relation to Cllr. Parsons previous query on whether Pollboy landfill or Kilconnell landfill are suitable for community owned solar farms and district lighting projects and where the funding will come from. An initial appraisal report was carried out for a community solar project at Kilconnell in 2023 and the main obstacle to the development is that there is insufficient capacity in the electricity network. Upgrading of same would not be feasible at this time. Findings from report commissioned for solar for Pollboy in 2017 found that due to the type of gas infrastructure solar would not be cost effective.

The Cathaoirleach thanked all the SPC members and wished them the best of luck with the upcoming local elections.

CHRIOGHNAIGH AN CHRUINNIU ANSIN

CATHAOIRLEACH ALASTAIR MC KINSTRY