

Minutes of Meeting through teams of Climate Change and Biodiversity

Strategic Policy Committee held on 25th October 2023

I Láthair:

Baill: Cllr. Alastair Mc Kinstry, Cathaoirleach
Cllr. Martina Kinane
Cllr. Noel Thomas
Mr. John Hynes
Mr. Henry Walsh
Mr. Peter Butler
Ms. Mags Sheehan

Oifigigh:

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

Apologies: Cllrs. Gabriel Cronnolly and Joe Sheridan

1. Confirmation of the Minutes of Climate Change and Biodiversity SPC meeting held on 22nd September 2023

The Cathaoirleach thanked staff for the comprehensive minutes from the previous meeting of the group. He enquired if anyone had any comments to make before approving them. The minutes were proposed by the Cathaoirleach and seconded by Ms. Magaret Sheehan.

2. Ms. Ryan shared a presentation on the update of the Climate Action Plan. Ms Ryan explained the various stages in developing the Climate Action Plan. The evidence base and stakeholders' engagement is completed, and a workshop occurred last month. There were 700 actions to begin with and this is now reduced to 95. After agreement the next stage will be the public consultation. Once actions are agreed it will be circulated to plenary members. The text and actions will be sent to the translator and designer. Ms Ryan gave information on a webinar to be held for Councillors on Friday 27th October at 10am. This will give local representatives an opportunity to discuss the actions. The draft plan will go on public display for 4 weeks on the 10th of November 2023. Six weeks is required for AA and the cut-off point is 22nd December 2023. On the 11th of December to the 8th of January 2024, a submissions report will be prepared, and any changes required

will be made to the draft plan/SEA/AA. On the 8th of January 2024, the updated draft plan and submissions report will be circulated to Plenary members and under new legislation they are required to approve, or modify and approve, within 6 weeks, i.e., 19th February 2024. On the 19th of February 2024 there will be a Plenary meeting to adopt or modify the plan. Actions were circulated last week, and two changes were made based on comments from members of SPC, Directors and Staff Members. The two additional actions are listed below:

- Seek national guidance on the development of Carbon Budgets and Accounting for actions/objectives in Galway County Council plans such as the County Development Plan to ensure consistency with the sectoral carbon targets.
- Seek national guidance on long-term multi-decade sea level rise and consider as part of long-term land use planning, including in the development of the next iteration of the County Development Plan.

A further slight amendment was made to the rewording of Action AD 1.1 – Collaborate with OPW in assessing the likely impacts of climate change including sea level rise and coastal erosion on the built environment. Prioritise for further assessment and seek funding/support to mitigate the risk.

Ms. Ryan spoke about the Community Climate Action Fund, and she stated that it is expected to open in November 2023. Once the Department finalises documents they will then need to be translated in to Irish. This is a requirement for Galway County Council so additional time will be needed. The information will be disseminated when completed with the assistance of the PPN.

EV Charging Strategy

Ms. Ryan spoke about the EV strategy and stated that she spoke to Bryan Cannon, Director of Service, Donegal County Council. A working group was established with Local Authority's in the Northwest Region and Clare County Council. A funding proposal was submitted to ZEVl but they advised that they are unable to fund staff directly but will provide funding for project management assistance. The Regional Working Group are aiming to have a strategy developed by the end of Q2, 2024. Ms. Ryan also gave an update in relation to the Just Transition Area. Applications under the Just Transition Area EV Charging Programme have been submitted by Galway County Council for Mountbellew Square, the Leisure Centre in Tuam, Glenamaddy Town Centre and Aughrim Interpretive Centre. An update will be available at the next SPC in relation to what applications have been approved in relation to EV Chargers and their locations. The Cathaoirleach commented that the decision-making process is essentially the current EV policy, and that the SPC be updated on how the decisions were made at the next meeting.

Mr. Walsh commented on built up areas asking if existing housing were at risk in the city and county. Ms. Ryan stated that Galway City is outside our jurisdiction but there are coastal and inland areas at risk in the County. An area of particular concern which has been raised by SPC on several occasions is the coastal areas near Oranmore and Town Island. Engineers in the County Council have collaborated with OPW, and flood risk maps have been completed for the County where the buildings at risk can be identified. This will form part of a National Strategy of areas at risk as sea levels rise and coastal erosion takes place. Funding will be sought to mitigate the risk.

Mr. Walsh asked further questions on the implications for existing buildings and existing developments if OPW highlight them as high risk. He questioned if people will be denied planning for an extension to their existing home. Ms. Ryan replied that this will be a national decision but members of the public that are concerned about the risk to their own property will need to seek support. Mr. Walsh raised his concern regarding the 50-year risk and the 100-year risk. He was concerned that homeowners may be unable to secure insurance on their private houses. Ms. Ryan stated that the Flood Risk Assessment prepared for the County Development Plan are in accordance with national guidance. The Cathaoirleach said the OPW completed a 100-year risk and a 1 in 1000-year risk. He stated that this methodology does not work very well with climate change. Statistics are based on past flooding, and it does not consider the rising sea level. He stated that the worst-case scenario from science is approximately 5 metres but could be between 8 and 15 metres, but there is no timeframe for this. He pointed out that this is not an issue for the OPW as they are a technical agency and therefore it is a Local Authority issue when completing our County Development Plans. He stated that there is not sufficient guidance at national level, and this should be sought.

Cllr. Kinane said that Galway County Council need to strengthen their relationship with OPW and tackle the issues at hand. Cllr. Kinane used Renville Point as an example stating that it is falling into the sea and that if the issue is not dealt with there will be no issue there as it will be gone. Mr. Walsh clarified that he is not objecting to anything Cllr. Kinane is doing but wanted to raise the issue that once the OPW gets involved there will be serious implications for existing buildings.

The Cathaoirleach sought agreement from the committee members for the draft Climate Action Plan to be referred to the full Council before the commencement of public consultation. This was agreed upon.

Ms. Ruane acknowledged the work of Ms. Ryan and Ms. Mooney and the team for the excellent, high-quality work done within a short time frame. The Cathaoirleach also thanked Ms. Ryan, Ms. Mooney, Ms. Joyce, and Ms. Ruane for all the work that is done behind the scenes.

Ms. Ryan noted that full agreement of Council is not a requirement of the process at this stage. The meeting on Friday 27th October is for information and discussion purposes only. The full council will have the opportunity to adopt and/or modify the draft Plan on the 19th February 2024.

Mr. Butler requested clarification on the time frames for the consultation on the draft Climate Action Plan. Ms. Ryan replied that there are legal requirements in two pieces of legislation, under which there is a requirement of a minimum of 4 weeks for the Climate Action Plan and 6 weeks for the AA. Ms. Ryan stated that extensive consultation has taken place prior to this.

- 3. Members of the PPN Green Recovery Group have received advice and support from members of the All-Island Rights of Nature Network, and from other council areas, regarding a Rights of Nature motion and have requested the SPC to adopt the motion and put it forward for adoption by Galway County Council, as has happened in the North and a number of other County Councils in the South.**

Cllr. Kinane enquired as to who are the PPN green recovery group to which Mr. Butler replied that the PPN green recovery group members are people who have a particular interest in the biodiversity element of the SPC. There are 4 or 5 groups referred to as Biodiversity groups. Mr. Butler explained that both himself and Ms. Sheehan represent the PPN.

The Cathaoirleach advised that there is a proposal to acknowledge the Right to Nature as a formal right. A campaign has been launched at national and international level. The Cathaoirleach explained how the campaign aims to update our constitution to protect and to develop what the Rights of Nature. Under the motion proposed, the Council would hold workshops over the coming 6 months and work with local communities and stake groups to explore what Rights of Nature would mean for the County and Council and how it could be incorporated into our plans and policies. The Cathaoirleach to send the wording of the motion to Ms. Flynn.

Ms. Ruane referred to the principle of protecting nature and Rights of Nature and she said it very much enshrined in the SPC. She explained that more time was needed to consider and assess this, and she will report back at the next SPC. Ms. Ryan also agreed with this.

Cllr. Thomas expressed his concerns in relation to the Right to Nature. He stated that protections are already in place in our County Development Plan and added that there must be a balance. He believes that members of the public and communities are going to be affected and that clear definitions must be put in place as to what the document entails. The Cathaoirleach agreed with Cllr. Thomas and repeated that holding workshops will be the next step. It needs to be fleshed out in more detail. Cllr. Kinane agreed with Cllr. Thomas.

Mr. Butler stated our constitution is changing and that nature should be included. He believes that the motion is not asking for a change to the County Development Plan but just proposing workshops to start discussions on the Right to Nature.

Ms. Sheehan stated that we have a responsibility to listen to the citizens assemblies, both adult and younger people assemblies.

Cllr. Thomas looked for an example of what the Rights of Nature are. The Cathaoirleach stated that it is features of nature such as rivers which have a right to exist, for example that they are kept clean and that there is protection against pollution. The Cathaoirleach suggested that the workshops will be very beneficial when the Climate Action Plan is finalised. He suggested a meeting with Martina Finn to discuss in more detail. Cllr. Thomas questioned how the rights will be introduced and used Lough Corrib as an example of one of the most protected waterways in the country. He stated that Oughterard has a relatively new treatment system in place that discharges into the river. The EPA completed a report, and the Council were only required to build to a secondary standard, and he did not believe that this was acceptable. Cllr. Thomas also referred to the new plant in Spiddal which is going to be discharged into the ocean and this is to a tertiary standard. He questioned as to where the rights of the water are in relation to these proposals. He also referred to hedgerows and their Rights to Nature and used the whitethorn bush as an example stating they have a right to flower and a right to produce fruit in Autumn. The Cathaoirleach repeated that workshops will have to take place in the coming months to discuss further.

Ms. Ruane thanked everyone for their comments and stated more consideration will have to be given to the workshops taking place. Ms. Ruane asked if each Local Authority were asked to examine the Rights of Nature to which Cathaoirleach replied that there is a campaign to raise awareness within the Local Authorities sectors. Mr. Butler commented that we have a Wildlife Act, we have planning regulations that require Environment Impact Assessments and stated that if there is no legislation then there is no obligation on the Local Authority to act but it is important to listen to the activists. The workshops are very important to give every person the right to express their ideas and have their opinions heard. Mr. Butler stated that Donegal County Council have adopted the motion to discuss the topic. The Cathaoirleach proposed that over the next 6 months the County Council would develop workshops on the topic. The priority now is the Climate Action Plan. The Cathaoirleach proposed to invite Martina Finn to next SPC meeting to give a presentation and discuss in more detail. Mr. Butler agreed that further discussion is required, and he agreed with the proposal for workshops to take place. Ms. Joyce was also in agreement with Martina Finn to attend the next SPC meeting to discuss the Right to Nature.

4. Biodiversity Update

Ms. Joyce gave a brief update on the projects that have taken place to date since her appointment in May 2023. This coincided with the awarding of funding under streams from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Heritage Council. Ms. Joyce spoke about the increase in funding for the Local Biodiversity Action fund. She stated that Galway County Council was allocated the maximum funding by the NPWS in May 2023 which is supported by match funding by Galway County Council. The funding drawdown is in November 2023. Ms. Joyce spoke about the LBAF Projects including the Connemara Blue Dot in partnership with LAWPRO, Rhododendron Management with FORUM Connemara, Galway Bay I-WeBS Monitoring in partnership with Galway City Council and Birdwatch Ireland, Working with Nature 2023, NE Galway Wetlands Restoration Feasibility Study, Invasive Alien Species Treatment, Invasive Alien Species Survey (South Connemara), Quagga Mussel Study (UCD and eight other Local Authorities), Connemara Bogs Natural Heritage Awareness (Birdwatch Ireland), Barn Owl Booklet (BirdWatch Ireland), Monitoring the Alpine Newt (UCD and two other Local Authorities) and Invasive Algae *Nitellopsis Obtuse* (UCD and five other Local Authorities).

Ms. Joyce also spoke about the Heritage Stewardship Fund, which was awarded to Galway County Council by the Heritage Council. This fund has been used to secure the National Tree Map for County Galway. Ms. Joyce spoke about the success of the two Orchard Management Workshops held in Headford Community Orchard in association with the Headford Environmental Group. It was delivered by the Irish Seed Savers Association during Biodiversity Week in May 2023. Ms. Joyce spoke about the support Galway County Biodiversity office has provided to communities by running workshops and events, providing advice, promoting, and partnering on events around the country for example, Mountbellew BioBlitz, Connemara Sea Week, 3 Sustainable Gardening Workshops which took place in Loughrea, Lawrencetown and Tuam. Additional events included the Dragonfly Identification Workshop at Bridgit's Garden, Rosscahill. Ms. Joyce outlined her plans for 2024 which include: Biodiversity and Heritage Plan 2024 – 2030, Deliver on Climate Action Plan Tasks, Secure Local Biodiversity Action Fund and Heritage Council grants, Community Group Support, Staff Support and Training, Biodiversity Week 2024 (18th – 26th May 2024) and Heritage Week (17th – 24th August 2024).

Cllr. Thomas thanked Ms. Joyce for her trojan work and raised a question in relation to the alpine newt and he asked if it was posing a huge issue. He enquired if they are affecting

our own native newt. Ms. Joyce replied that there is a location in County Galway, which remains confidential now. Ms. Joyce stated that our native newt is being displaced and they are already under existing pressure through the deterioration of wetland habitats. Mr. Butler asked if the newts have any natural predator or if they are toxic to other animals to which Ms Joyce replied she was unsure but would investigate it further. Ms. Joyce stated that each organisation has different priorities and she herself has an interest in invasive species. She will encourage and recommend an eradication programme be carried out. Mr. Butler spoke about the amount of goodwill by people towards conservation, biodiversity and Climate Action and offered his assistance if required. Ms. Joyce expressed her thanks and confirmed she will liaise with him.

The Cathaoirleach referred to the quagga mussel and asked if they were in Lough Corrib or elsewhere and asked are they expanding. Ms. Joyce replied that the distribution and concentration of quagga mussel in the Shannon basin are astounding and have shown densities of many thousand per square meter in places. Ms. Joyce stated that the Corrib is particularly at risk as the quagga mussel can attach to boats or leisure craft so any movement of boats between water bodies poses a risk. The Cathaoirleach requested Ms Joyce to keep him informed.

5. AOB

No issues raised.

Ms. Flynn confirmed the dates for the next SPC meeting and confirmed that they will be circulated to all; 14th February, April 24th, July 24th, and October 23rd, 2024. The Cathaoirleach requested that the next SPC meeting be held in person.

CHRIOGHNAIGH AN CHRUINNIU ANSIN


CATHAOIRLEACH ALASTAIR MCKINSTY

