

Wicklow County Development Plan submission from West Wicklow Environmental Network

Introduction

West Wicklow Environmental Network was established in autumn 2019 to provide a platform for individuals and groups throughout West Wicklow with a shared interest in protecting the environment, natural heritage, sustainable development and climate action to come together, communicate, share knowledge and experience, contribute towards policy change at local level and at government level, promote green events and create environmental awareness within West Wicklow.

West Wicklow Environmental Network has held three well-attended network meetings, formed a committee and registered with County Wicklow Public Participation Network. This submission is based on issues raised by members at network meetings.

Submission

- As the first county to declare a “biodiversity and climate change emergency” in April 2019, Wicklow County Council now has the opportunity to lead the way in showing how these vital considerations can be carried through in the new County Development Plan, and in the Council’s own actions across a range of activities.
- Wicklow County Council, where they have care of Green Open Spaces should better manage these spaces now with biodiversity in mind i.e. creating bee-friendly areas, planting native flowers suitable for bees. They should, where possible, always keep trees as they are vital in providing and supporting habitat for insects and birds. Not cutting existing mature trees can be more beneficial to the environment than planting new trees or shrubs and this needs to be recognised now before contracts are given for tree maintenance and constant cutting.
- With a “biodiversity and climate change emergency” declared, Wicklow County Council can now create what is needed for the biodiversity to flourish on council-owned land. All unused council land can and should simply be given back to nature. Wicklow has an opportunity to lead the way with this initiative. The ‘All Ireland Pollinator Plan’ is a great start but in a ‘biodiversity emergency’ like the one declared by the council we need to go a step further also.
- Please start with the non-profit ‘We are the Ark’ set up by one-time Wicklow resident Mary Reynolds. The time has come to move away from garden centre ornamental plants, to stop using herbicides and pesticides and to start to give this land back to nature. Just like in the ‘All Ireland Pollinator Plan’ any council land given over to this cause will need its sign saying ‘This is an Ark’ with the website details underneath for people who are curious. It is a meaningful and positive step the council can make now and it is easily achievable to stop the purchase and planting of ornamental garden centre plants, most of which are treated with chemicals and are not what the local biodiversity and wildlife need to thrive, they

need local native plants. Wicklow County Council should when planting consider edible landscapes i.e. Hedges that could provide food for foraging and also birds. Where possible plant organic nut or fruit trees that can be of benefit for humans and animals alike.

- The Council can and should lead the way with a ban on glyphosate and other such substances now. We need to give as much land as we possibly can back to nature as we have all taken too much and this is an initiative we can get onboard with. The We Are The Ark website has an entire section for 'Public Land' with steps and information to implement the mission. Please visit the website 'www.wearetheark.org' for further information.
- The landscape in Wicklow is heavily planted with extensive commercial monoculture conifer plantations. Our old wonderful native woodland in Glendalough and Clara Vale should obviously be preserved and protected now and for the future but it should also serve as an inspiration for other land in Wicklow. We need to take back land in Wicklow for native woodland for a multitude of reasons - to reduce water pollution and soil erosion, increase carbon storage, increase biodiversity, improve recreation experiences and for our heritage. Wicklow County Council should lobby Coillte and the government to change Coillte's mandate and to plant more native trees rather than conifer plantations that don't support biodiversity or create suitable habitat for our insects or birds that need it now. Coillte is a major landowner in Wicklow, owning approximately 14% of our land area (a higher proportion than any other county). Coillte, and the wider statutory sector, need to show leadership to private landowners in terms of how land can be managed in a way that works for nature and delivers more of the ecosystem services that we all depend upon.
- Wicklow County Council should where possible and requested to by residents in built-up areas consider providing allotments to residents. Growing our own food can help us be more sustainable and also is beneficial to our own health. It also reduces food mileage and therefore our carbon footprint.
- A huge part of living sustainably is sustainable development and having sustainable homes. Social housing built now and retrofitting of old stock should have renewable energy heating systems.
- Wicklow County Council should strive to provide broadband to rural homes in the county. Working from home is better for the environment by reducing the traffic on the roads and our carbon footprint and also is family friendly and helps us live sustainably in our communities. We can contribute more to our communities if we are spending less time in our cars and more time in our communities.
- The West Wicklow Environmental Network notes that there are very few electric car charging points on the West Wicklow side of the county. More charging points for electric cars would make it possible and more attractive for people to transition to electric cars thereby reducing their carbon footprints. Other councils such as Fingal

County Council have led the way by installing electric charging points at train stations and on public streets. It would be great if Wicklow County Council could follow their example. With other important simple actions, it would really make us the 'Green Garden County'.

- Wicklow County Council should work with other agencies to ensure enforcement of legislation to prevent illegal hedge-cutting and hedgerow removal, to address off-road vehicle damage on the Wicklow Mountains, to protect our rivers and lakes and prevent the spread of invasive species.

Other measures important to the network that need to be considered:

- Protection and restoration of damaged peatlands so as to reduce emissions and improve carbon storage.
- Forests to be securely fenced off from sheep and cattle, waterways also to be protected from livestock, with riparian zones as corridors for wildlife and recreation.
- Farmers encouraged to farm with nature, to diversify, to grow organic plant produce and to protect biodiversity and water.
- Encourage tourists and individuals to enjoy but also respect our natural environment with awareness initiatives and positive signage
- Greenway habitats and other walking / cycling trails need to be adequately protected and kept 'Green 'with no herbicides and pesticides and less strimming and cutting.
- The use of blue-rich LED lighting should be avoided so as to mitigate the impact of light pollution on biodiversity.
- Planning should enable the development of community-based walking trails so that Wicklow residents have opportunities for healthy physical activity without having to use their cars.
- The options for food and snacks for visitors to Glendalough in the upper car park are completely limited to only heavily fried foods such as chips, burgers, ice cream and other extremely unhealthy options for our tourists and children who visit. With consumer awareness and eating habits shifting and with a lot of health-conscious outdoor loving people visiting this wonderful world-renowned heritage site we are lucky to have in Wicklow, surely other options, including plant-based options can be provided instead of or alongside the current offerings by the company in charge of this car park.

If you have any queries on this submission please contact us on westwicklowen@gmail.com