

**Minutes of the Climate & Biodiversity Action Strategic Policy Committee held on 22<sup>nd</sup> February, 2024 at 10.30am**

**PRESENT:** Cllr. Lourda Scott (Cathaoirleach)  
Cllr. Rory O'Connor  
Cllr. Peir Leonard  
Cllr. Mark Barry  
Justin Ivory, PPN Representative  
Sharon Jackson, PPN Representative  
Gary McKenzie, Business/Chamber Representative  
Tom Shortt, Agricultural Representative  
Michael Storan, Construction industry Federation Representative

**IN ATTENDANCE:** Breege Kilkenny, Director of Services  
Jackie Carroll, Senior Executive Officer  
Mark Costello, Climate Action Co-ordinator  
Jim Callery, Climate Action Officer  
Marc Devereux, Senior Engineer  
Deirdre Burns, Heritage Officer  
Hannah O'Kelly, Biodiversity Officer  
Julie Sammiller, Community Climate Action Officer  
Declan Keogh, Regional Energy Manager  
William Halligan, Energy Officer  
Paul Brophy, Executive Technician  
Nicole Keogh, Assistant Staff Officer

**APOLOGIES:** Cllr. Dermot O'Brien  
Kate Dolan, Comhairle na n'Óg  
Ken Sweeney, Coillte

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Prior to the commencement of the meeting, Cllr Lourda Scott praised Wicklow County Council on being awarded the overall 'Council of the Year Award' at the recent LAMA Awards. JCarroll outlined the success in more detail and declared it a testament to the great work of Wicklow County Council and its staff.

**1. To note the Minutes of the Meeting of the 6<sup>th</sup> December, 2023**

Minutes noted – proposed by Cllr O'Connor and seconded by Cllr Leonard. Quorum reached.

**2. Matters arising from the Minutes**

No matters arising.

### **3. Circular LG2 of 2015 Ethics Framework**

Members were advised that the non-elected members of the Strategic Policy Committee were sent the Ethics Declaration for acceptance.

### **4. Climate Action Plan**

MC delivered a presentation on the Climate Action Plan (CAP) which was adopted on 8<sup>th</sup> of January. It contains 135 actions in total, 23 of which relate to the Arklow Decarbonisation Zone. The CAP will bring a greater focus on climate actions to all sections of Wicklow Local Authority.

MC advised that after today's meeting, the actions will be sent to relevant staff for their attention and follow up.

3 actions to be specifically delivered in 2024 were outlined; 1) Fleet Management 2) Organisation of Climate Action Committee and 3) Formulation of Heritage Plan.

MD continued to present on the processes and methods by which the objectives of the CAP will be achieved.

### **5. Biodiversity Officer Update, national context, our Biodiversity Plan.**

HO'K introduced herself as the new Biodiversity Officer and highlighted her background in Biodiversity, Ecology and Conservation.

HO'K delivered a presentation outlining her role as Biodiversity Officer and her two primary objectives as part of the Local Authority Biodiversity Officer Programme of a) implementation of the County Biodiversity Forum and b) creation of the Biodiversity Plan.

The County Biodiversity Forum will include stakeholders from various groups, networks and associations across the county. HO'K invited any suggestions on prospective members from the attendees.

HO'K outlined that applications for funding have already been submitted for 2024 and that this funding is to cover both new projects (National Mayfly project) and existing projects (Wicklow Barn Owl Project / Woodland Bat Monitoring/ Coastal Erosion projects). Projects relating to Wicklow County Council owned land across the county will also be examined, i.e. Clermont.

HO'K outlined that the last Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) expired in 2015 and that a draft of the new BAP is to be completed by the end of 2024. Its main aims and objectives need to be in keeping with EU, National and Local Policies, including the recently adopted Climate Action Plan and upcoming Heritage Plan.

BK welcomed HO'K to the role of Biodiversity officer and highlighted how her knowledge and skills will be a valuable asset. In terms of the Biodiversity Forum, BK believed that the Agricultural Sector must be included as they would make a valuable contribution.

#### Questions/Comments –

JI wanted to clarify with HO'K that the woodland bat project that was mentioned in the presentation was in actual fact the second pilot programme in the County and not the first as stated. HO'K thanked JI for the information.

PL asked if it would be possible to create a shared platform for all the biodiversity plans (national and local level) that the public could use as a reference point. JI responded that the National Biodiversity Data Centre have an existing platform for this very purpose.

PL queried whether there is a possibility for the council to come on board with bridge funding and platforms to promote social engagement, as she believed there is a gap between the science and work on the ground.

HOK stressed that through her 20 years' experience she has discovered that communication is a vital component to successful projects.

TS noted that it is very important that the Agricultural Community be brought on board. They have received negative coverage from the media but a lot of positive work has taken place. TS invited HO'K to meet with local farmers to involve them in the discussion. HO'K agreed.

LS agreed with TS comments re the Agricultural Community. LS noted the great potential that the creation of the biodiversity forum would have, as there seems to be a disconnect between funding and action being taken in neighbouring towns and villages. LS called on all elected members to play a role in bridging this gap and therefore suggested that they might be a suitable potential member of the Forum, as would a representative from the municipal district offices.

LS asked where does Coastal Biodiversity fit into this framework and will it be covered under actions of the Biodiversity Action Plan. HO'K confirmed that it will be covered under the actions and that a distinction will be made between coastal erosion and coastal ecology. Ongoing ecological work at Brittas has the potential to be used at other locations, i.e. Bray Head. It is hoped that 'Conservation Ambassadors' will be hired to engage within the public on the fragility of the dunes and their ecosystems on Brittas Bay during the summer months, a project which also has the potential to be used as a template for other locations.

BK highlighted that Wicklow County Council are possibly the first to run a project like the one in Brittas Bay, where biodiversity solutions are being used rather than just hard engineering.

## **6. Presentation in relation to Coastal Erosion and the relevant actions within the Adopted Plan**

DB, Heritage Officer, delivered a presentation on works in Brittas Bay. The works commenced 5 years ago through both the Heritage and Biodiversity Plans and will now also continue through actions outlined in the Climate Action Plan.

Brittas Bay is very important for its sand dune habitat and sets a precedent along the East Coast of Ireland. 35HA of land are under the council's ownership in Brittas Bay and it is facing huge pressure from both recreational and climate impacts.

Thus far actions have included Grazing and Mowing projects, Baseline Record Assessments, Community Engagement Programmes, Branding projects, management, interpretation and promotional campaigns.

Objectives for the future include work on invasive species, awareness and engagement, rebranding and the formulation of a steering group which would be hugely beneficial to help organise any works going forward. The lack of set funding for projects like this is one of a few challenges that need to be faced.

DB outlined that the projects at Brittas Bay are a great way to show Wicklow as a leader and as an exemplar in the area of Biodiversity Conservation and Coastal Erosion management.

BK thanked DB for all her hard work as this has been her brainchild from the start.

ROC asked whether it was possible to try and allocate some funding from Brittas Bay at budget time as it is a huge project.

MC delivered a second part to the presentation. He outlined that there are two actions in the CAP regarding Biodiversity; 1) engaging with other Local Authorities re coastal erosion management which is currently underway and 2) incorporation of Nature Based Solutions for coastal erosion management at Brittas Bay which has been outlined by DB.

In response to a query, MC stated that communication between Clean Coasts (Sinead Keogh) and the Climate Action Team is active.

MC continued his presentation highlighting the coastal erosion projects that are ongoing in 1) Brittas Bay 2) Greystones North Beach 3) Arklow (Seabank to Kilmichael Point) 4) ECRIPP Project 5) Greystones to Wicklow Greenway.

Questions/Comments–

PL thanked MC for the presentation and noted that Ireland needs to plan and fund for future generations. She would like to examine more nature based solutions as options rather than using the revetment system that is being proposed at the moment.

PL suggested that a timeline or a graph depicting the actual and the protected erosion of our coastline should be created alongside a timeline or a graph of the actions in place, so that gaps can be identified and addressed.

Reviewing the beach bye-laws is also an item that PL suggested needs to be examined.

BK addressed PL's concerns and agreed that studies do need to be carried out to assess the long term effects of the works. She stated that Irish Rail have been advised as to the Council's concerns re the implementation of only hard engineering solutions. BK advised the members that Irish Rail is planning on attending a council meeting in March or April to discuss their proposed works.

MD affirmed that the language coming from the CABA SPC members need to stress the importance of nature based solutions alongside Irish Rail's proposed hard engineering ideas. Wicklow County Council cannot act as a roadblock to this project as the work is important.

Jl agreed that Nature Based Solutions are important and that the OPW have a record of dealing with hard engineering solutions. He is concerned that this work may detract from the positive nature based projects at Brittas Bay. MD responded that the OPW have altered their approach and are supportive of nature based solutions and have stated this in dealings with ECRIPP.

MD asked the members of the SPC to indicate that it is a policy of the SPC group that Nature Based Solutions be put forward as part of the solution. This was confirmed by LS and other members. LS admitted the importance of hard engineering in some instances but stressed the importance of Nature Based Solutions to be incorporated wherever possible.

Jl felt that works on the proposed Greenway should be halted until the issues with the ECRIPP works have been resolved. MD confirmed that the Greenway team have been involved with the ECRIPP talks and that they also have concerns. No route for the Greenway has been decided upon as they will need to await the outcome of the ECRIPP project.

BK commented that the Greenway falls under the remit of the Roads Directorate and it is not within the SPC's power to call a halt to a project that was backed by the council.

TS queried whether nature based solutions at this stage would be a case of too little too late and whether there was any evidence to suggest they can improve things. MD replied that ARUP carried out a study, which showed that Groins would be both beneficial and sustainable option but Irish Rail were not in agreement. A cost issue with the groins led to the idea being shelved.

TS asked if it would be worthwhile to move attention away from the coasts and examine other possibilities. MD highlighted that there were talks held about moving the railway inland but this would have had a significant impact on the community and the environment.

PL asked if there is a consultation process available to the public on the ECRIPP project. MD confirmed that communication is built into the tender over the 1 year contract timeline.

PL queried whether there was any impact identified from the wind farms. MD stated that this will need to be considered but that the contractors have a wealth of experience in this area of work.

## **7. Various Policies from Climate Action Plan and Timeframes**

MC delivered a short presentation outlining numerous policies that will be addressed as part of delivery of the Climate Action Plan. These projects include SuDS policy, Glyphosate policy, Wicklow Heritage Plan, Landscape Development Guidelines, Green Public Procurement, Green Events Policy, Tree Management policy, Wicklow Biodiversity Action Plan, Invasive Alien Species, Dark Sky reserve, Light assessment, Green infrastructure mapping and pollinator friendly and green infrastructure guidance.

## **8. Tree Policy**

JC delivered a presentation on the implementation and progress of the Tree Policy.

JC highlighted

- 1) Mapping Actions - used for mapping of green infrastructure and to investigate ecological networks. UCD students are using the mapping tool also for their research.
- 2) County Development Plan (CDP) 2022 – more actions included in the CDP and existing actions reviewed and strengthened. Tree Protection orders increased from 64-73.
- 3) Awareness – Seminars held, tree Award in the 2023 Tidy Towns and Sustainable Development Awards. Social Media and Website campaigns.
- 4) Tree Planting – 18 tree grants awarded in 2023. 64 groups received tree saplings in 2023 as part of National Tree Week. Tree planting demonstration in Clermont in March 2023
- 5) Hedgerow Survey - baseline information recorded on extent and condition. Links will be made with Biodiversity Action Plan and a habitat action plan will be organised
- 6) Bray Head Conservation Plan – adopted in October 2023 by Bray MD, with plans to enhance exiting woodland areas, remove invasive species and promote tree planting
- 7) Tree Survey – Bray has already been surveyed and works to identify trees in need of surveying has taken place in Arklow MD.

Questions/Comments –

PL commented how she would like to receive feedback from Municipal District Engineers as she doesn't believe they have the resources to follow up on the aforementioned actions. PL stated that trees that have been planted in Arklow are increasing wildlife and biodiversity but follow up on maintenance is lacking.

Jl agreed with PL that maintenance of urban trees in particular is an issue, with members of the public cutting the trees themselves. He believed that the public do not see that the protection of trees is a priority for the Council.

JCallery shared JI's belief that better practice needs to be put in place for future proofing of planting, working with the public and the municipal districts.

JCallery felt that in relation to Hedgerows, that working with the farming community is important but work needs to be done on protecting existing hedgerows, not just creating new ones. JI shared that AIPP (All Ireland Pollinator Plan) have great resources available on hedgerows.

TS noted that 2000km of hedgerows have been planted on farms every year for the last 4 years and that at the moment there is a supply shortage of plants.

PL asked if the council are measuring the amount of trees planted. JC responded that the Council do not have that information and trying to identify a way of collating that data effectively to get an accurate picture would be difficult.

JI suggested that AIPP have a mapping system that could be used, however JCallery felt it would not be suitable to get a general picture of the work that is being done.

## **9. Glyphosate Policy**

MC presented and reported that the Council is committed to reducing or eliminating the use of all pesticides. MC held meetings with the District Engineers in this regard.

An overview of the policy and what it allows for, the staff requirements and its objectives were shared.

It was reported that a number of districts are not using glyphosate and those that are have to submit a business case each time it is used. The Climate Team have requested that the business case applications are sent to them for information purposes.

Communication between Wicklow and other Local Authorities is ongoing to identify alternative methods of weed control that does not include pesticides, for example, Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council are using Gas – no Flame technique.

It was highlighted in response to a query that Wicklow are currently using 5 Weedex machines (one machine in each district). These machines will get a good trial period now coming into spring and summer months. The Weedex machines are just one alternative that is being looked at. It was re-iterated that communication lines with other local authorities will remain open to examine other methods of weed control.

Meetings with Municipal Districts will be more regular and it was confirmed that adjudication for Tidy Towns (including our own Tidy Towns programme) already includes inspection for use of Glyphosate.

TS shared that the EU have renewed Glyphosate Licence for the next 10 years.

## **10. Community Climate Action Fund**

JS delivered a presentation on the 4 stages of her plan for the delivery of the Community Climate Action programme (CCAP).

The 4 stages were outlined as

- 1) Awareness
- 2) Information Sharing
- 3) Engagement and Support
- 4) Submission

JS outlined that the CCAP was launched on the 6<sup>th</sup> December and the closing date for applications is March 6<sup>th</sup>.

An evaluation panel to adjudicate on the applications is being organised at the moment.

Projects that are being submitted as an application need to align with national and international policies and plans and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

Question/Comments –

Jl queried whether Wicklow County Council would accept applications for funding of feasibility studies, like Kildare County Council will. JS responded that this would depend on the evaluation committee and any project that is successful in its application for funding would need to be one that WCC would be happy to partner with and endorse.

## **10. Any Other Business**

- **Energy office – SEAI Mentor Assessment**

WH, Energy Officer, reported that a meeting was held with the SEAI Public Sector mentor recently to track Wicklow County Councils progress on Energy Efficiency. Wicklow was assessed under 4 headings and our total energy decarbonisation leadership score was confirmed as 69%.

BK commented that this was a national comparative study and that the assessor mentioned that we are top of the class and far beyond the progress of other Local Authorities.

DK, Regional Energy Manager, confirmed that Louth County Council will officially be welcomed to the Mid-East Energy Unit (MEEU) next month. BK welcomed the introduction of Louth and believed they will be an excellent addition to the existing unit.



BK declared that she will be sad to lose the Energy Section in an upcoming section reorganisation and thanked the Energy team for their hard work and dedication.

DK thanked BK for all her commitment and hard work on getting the MEEU set up and running and for having the forethought of looking not just toward the 2030 targets but also the 2050 targets.

The SPC members thanked BK for all her good work on Energy.

PL queried whether it would be possible at the next SPC Meeting to capture what is coming in for energy retrofit in terms of social housing stock, i.e. funding and resources.

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BK wanted to take this opportunity, as it is the final CABA SPC before the local elections, to thank all the members and she hopes to see everyone again after the elections in June.

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BK also advised the attendees that the Tidy Tows, Estates and Sustainable Development Awards presentation night is due to take place at 6pm on March 4<sup>th</sup> in Clermont.

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The Cathaoirleach of the SPC, Cllr LS thanked everyone for all their hard work and hoped to see everyone again after the elections.

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This concluded the business of the meeting.