

Longford County Council Biodiversity Action Plan

Discussions Paper

Background:

Biodiversity comes from “biological diversity” and is a term used to describe the variety of species of living organisms in an area. Biologically diverse ecosystems are more resilient when faced with both sudden and gradual changes which may result from climate change, storm events, pollution, and invasion from alien invasive species.

Globally, and nationally there has been a decline in biodiversity and in 2019 the Irish Government declared a biodiversity crisis due to the continued decline of biodiversity in Ireland.

There are over 31,000 species of flora, fauna, and fungi in Ireland of which more than half are invertebrates, with the next most numerous groups being the invertebrates, followed by fungi, plants, and vertebrates.

Biodiversity and ecosystems provide people with several ecosystem services such as improved water quality, improved air quality, flood control, food production, climate control, nutrient cycling, crop pollination, pest control, and physical and mental health benefits.

Other benefits from biodiversity include the discovery of and development of medicines such as pain killers and antibiotics, engineering ideas, and adhesive and material development.

Biodiversity faces many risks at a local, national, and global level that have contributed to an overall loss in biodiversity, extinctions, and habitat loss. As ecosystems are diverse connected webs, any losses can lead to unforeseen trophic cascades, which in turn can lead to further species losses. This then has the effect of reducing the benefits of ecosystem service that we in turn benefit from.

To halt and reverse the decline of biodiversity it is essential to employ a whole of ecosystem approach. While individual species conservation can achieve success in the short term, species require healthy functioning habitats to maintain long term stable populations, particularly in the case of sudden events or changes that can impact suddenly on species populations.



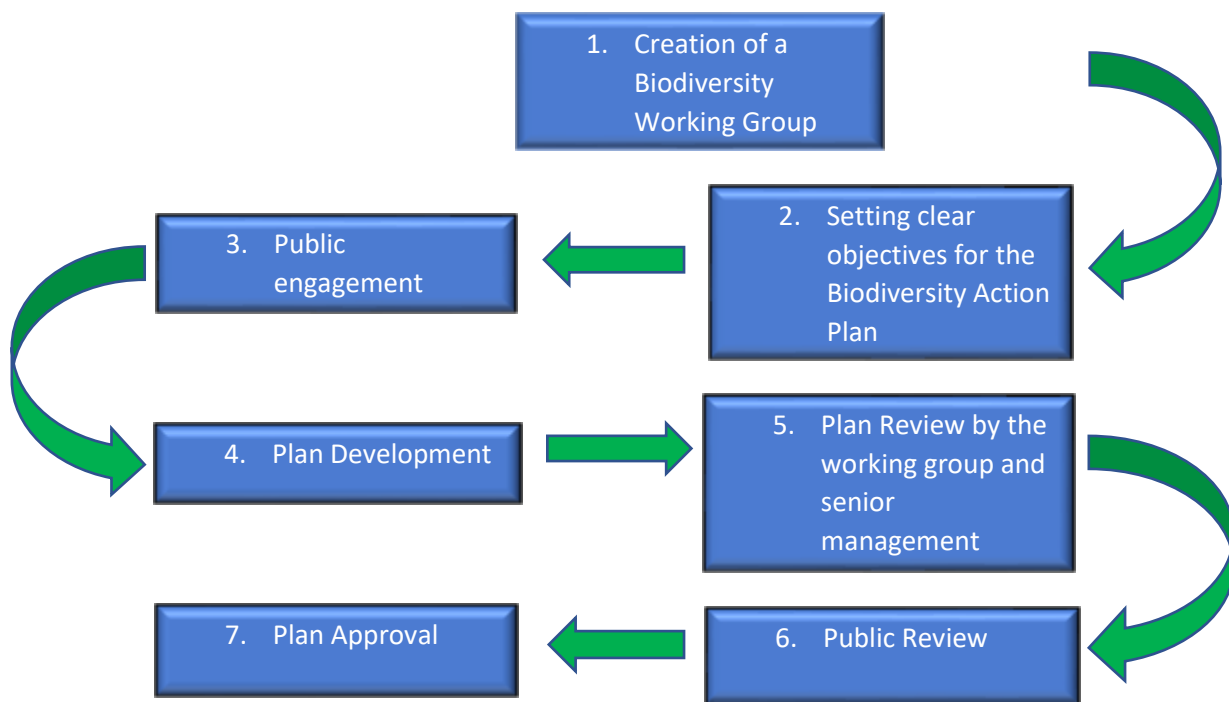
Photo: Lapwing flying over mute swans on Lough Ree

Biodiversity Acton Plan:

The fourth national biodiversity action plan contains an action for all local authorities to develop their own Local Biodiversity Action Plan by the end of 2026. The National Biodiversity Action Plan also sets out an action for biodiversity officers to be appointed in each Local Authority; the Heritage Council has worked with Local Authorities and funded the rollout of the Biodiversity Officer Programme.

The Longford Biodiversity Action Plan will be a document setting out the overall objectives for conserving and enhancing biodiversity. It will also aim to achieve the aims in the National Biodiversity Action Plan that the Local Authority has responsibility for. The actions within the plan will drive the delivery of the objectives as well as the measuring of the success of the plan. The local biodiversity action plan will help to direct the council's response to the biodiversity crisis.

The steps for the creation of the biodiversity action plan are:



Funding the plan:

The biodiversity officer programme in the local authorities is funded by The Heritage Council. The development of the Local Biodiversity Action Plan will be undertaken by the biodiversity officer and the biodiversity working group.

Costs associated with the development of the plan, such as appropriate assessment, SEA, and public consultation events will be funded by The Heritage Council under the Local Biodiversity Action Plan grant with Longford County Council providing at least 25% match funding.

Biodiversity Working Group:

The biodiversity working group will develop the local biodiversity action plan for County Longford and then then will help to implement the actions within, and assess the success rate of, the local biodiversity action plan. The biodiversity working group is made up of relevant stakeholders within the County of Longford, and from within the County Council.

The members of the biodiversity working group are:

- Adam Mulvihill – Biodiversity officer with Longford County Council (Position funded by The Heritage Council)
- Sue Moles – NPWS – conservation ranger for Longford County
- Enda O’Hart – Teagasc – Organics Advisor
- Mark McCorry – Bord na Mona – Head of Ecology and Bog Rehabilitation
- Katie Smirnova – Hedgerows Ireland – Campaigns Officer
- John Connolly – Coillte – Operations Manager
- Larry Mitchell – Swift Conservation Ireland
- Luke Kenny – LAWPRO – Community Water Officer
- Martina Needham – Longford County Council, County Librarian
- Máiréad Ní Chonghaile – Longford County Council, Heritage Officer
- Gary Brady – Longford County Council, Climate Officer
- Cllr Paraic Brady – Elected Member Granard Municipal District
- Cllr Uruemu Adejinmi – Elected member Longford Municipal District
- Cllr Martin Skelly – Elected member Ballymahon Municipal District

Longford’s Biodiversity:

Longford county contains numerous habitat types and land uses that are important to the biodiversity within the county. These habitat types include peatlands, lakes, rivers, turloughs, woodlands, hedgerows, and grasslands.

The county contains 8 Special areas of conservation (SAC), 4 Special Protection Areas (SPAs), 6 Natural Heritage Areas (NHAs), and a further 16 proposed Natural Heritage Areas. These sites are designated due to special interests for wildlife. In the case of SACs, these sites are designated for their importance as habitats as listed on Annex I of the EU Habitats Directive or for their importance to species listed in Annex II of the Habitats Directive. SPAs are designated under the EU Birds directive due to their importance as habitats for listed rare and vulnerable species of birds, regularly occurring migratory species, and wetlands of international importance.

The 8 SACs in Longford consist of 5 bogs, 2 lakes and a turlough, highlighting the importance of wetlands and peatlands as habitats in the county.

The 4 SPAs in the county consist of 3 lakes and a bog, again highlighting the importance of wetlands and peatlands in the county.

Other important habitats that occur in Longford include woodlands, hedgerows, lakes, rivers, turloughs, grasslands, and farmland.

Peatlands:

Peatlands in Ireland can be broken down in to three types; raised bogs, blanket bogs, and fens. Peatlands are important habitats for a diversity of flora and fauna as well as being important carbon sinks and stores. Bogs and Fens also soak large amounts of water and release it slowly, making them good natural flood defences.

Peatlands are home to a wide variety of plants and animals. Important species found in bogs and fens include sphagnum mosses, sundews, bog asphodel, bladderwort, dragonflies, otters, foxes, curlew, and hen harrier amongst many other plants and animals.

Healthy raised bogs are continually cycling large volumes of water and due to this a range of the plants are specialist and not found in other environments.

Surface water pools offer habitat for various fly and midge larvae, which are consumed by our carnivorous plants’ sundew and bladderwort. Bird species are the most obvious wildlife sights when visiting our bogs and fens and these include whooper swans, curlew, red grouse, snipe, golden plover, and several raptors.

Two of Ireland's three amphibian species, the common frog, and the smooth newt, have been recorded in peatlands in County Longford.

Ireland's only reptile species, the viviparous lizard has also been recorded on the bogs of Longford. This elusive species is unlike most reptile species found throughout the world in that it gives birth to live young rather than laying eggs and it tends to be found in damp habitats.

Longford contains untouched raised bog, man modified raised bog, man modified fens, and machine harvested raised bog. Bord na Mona are restoring many of the bogs they own.

Freshwater:

Longford is bordered to the west by the River Shannon and the associated lakes, Lough Ree and Lough Forbes. Lough Gowna in the northeast of the county forms a part of the border with County Cavan. The River Camlin, the River Inny, and the Royal Canal also form significant freshwater habitats within the county.

The rivers and lakes of Longford are important habitats for invertebrates and fish and further support adjacent habitats for birds, insects, plants, and mammals. Lough Ree forms an important habitat for otters, lapwing, little grebe, whooper swan, coot, golden plover, teal, shoveler, and several other species.

The River Shannon and its associated lakes attract tourists to the area through angling and cruising the river. These activities rely on healthy ecosystems along the water course.

The Camlin River is an important fishery for the recruitment of trout into Lough Ree. The Camlin flows into the Lough Forbes Complex SAC (the same area is also the Ballykenny-Fishertown Bog SPA). This SAC contains active raised bog and alluvial forests that form important habitats for a variety of flora and fauna including black alder, ash, sphagnum mosses, and whooper swan.



Photo: Lough Ree taken from the Limestone shore at Lanesborough.

The river Inny flows into 3 SPAs in Longford, one at Lough Kinale and Lough Derragh another at Glen Lough, and finally into Lough Ree (which is also an SAC). These sites are important sites for pochard, tufted duck, whooper swan, little grebe, lapwing, teal, and several other bird species as well as otters in Lough Ree.

Glen Lough, on the border of Longford and Westmeath is an important freshwater habitat for wintering whooper swan, with an estimated 1% of the total global population visiting the site. Other important species that use this freshwater SPA include mute swan, teal, and shoveler.

Woodlands:

There are a variety of woodlands in Longford, consisting of both privately owned and state-owned forests. These forests consist of semi-natural woodlands and commercial woodlands. Hedgerows form another important part of the woodlands of the county and as well as being habitats themselves, they often offer corridors between two or more habitats for wildlife.

Woodlands in the county are home to a variety of native bird species from Europe's smallest bird, the goldcrest, to the largest songbird species on the planet, the common raven and plenty in between. Raptors such as sparrowhawks and kestrels can be spotted in Longford's woodlands and buzzards can be seen soaring above woodlands and adjacent open territory.

Other woodland fauna such as red squirrel, pine marten, badger, red fox, red deer, and a variety of bat species have all been recorded in forests in county Longford, highlighting the importance of woodland habitats to local wildlife populations.

Woodlands are also home to an array of fungal species from the microscopic mycorrhiza that can encourage nutrient sharing among trees, to fungi that are pathogenic to trees, and fungi that act as decomposers. Fungi are an important part of woodland habitats that help in decomposition, nutrient cycling, carbon sequestration, and are a food source to animals such as fox, mice, slugs, and insects.

Woodlands are species rich habitats that can assist in storing carbon, controlling climate, protection from weather events such as flooding from heavy rains, and protection of soils from erosion. Hedgerows offer further biodiversity hotspots, as well as being corridors that offer food and shelter between areas of larger habitats.



Photo: Scarlet Elf Cup fungus in Newcastle Wood, Ballymahon

Farmlands:

Agricultural lands form a significant portion of the land use in Co. Longford. A variety of farming methods are used and mixed farms are common where crops and animals are both produced. Agricultural lands hold huge potential for biodiversity gains, with corridors between habitats existing through hedgerows on farms, potential for invertebrate populations in soils and dung beetles, and associated food sources for bird and mammal populations.

Programmes such as ACRES offer payments for taking defined measures for the improvement of biodiversity. These actions include, but are not limited to, installing barn owl nest boxes, coppicing hedgerows, laying of hedgerows, planting traditional orchards, ryegrass seed for winter bird food, tree planting, and winter bird food plots. These measures, along with others in the scheme, provide a great opportunity for the improvement of biodiversity in the area, as well as nationally.

In addition to these schemes Longford is home to many organic farmers. This type of farming practice does not use synthetically produced pesticides, herbicides, or fertilisers and so it is better for pollinators, dung beetle, other insects, worms, and all animals that feed on or otherwise rely upon these animals.

Community Areas:

Longford contains many community areas in the towns of the county. These areas largely consist of parks and green areas in estates. Community areas in county Longford present a huge opportunity for biodiversity actions to be taken and to include community groups and the public at large in the improvement of Longford's biodiversity and habitats.

These community areas may offer the potential for actions such as no-mow may, meadow development, native tree planting, pollinator habitat development, pond development, bat friendly lighting, and others.

These areas can help to create corridors for wildlife. Pollinators in particular often do not travel far for food and shelter and so it can be important to have many habitats close to each other. Protecting and enhancing these species will also have knock on effect for mammals, bird, and floral species.

Other opportunities for these areas will include educational and awareness events as these are the areas that the public are likely to use and likely to encounter our various floral, fauna, and fungi. These education and awareness opportunities have the potential to drive further public interest in the protection and enhancement of Longford's and Ireland's biodiversity.

Threats:

We are living through a period of significant biodiversity decline. There are recognised threats to biodiversity that have an impact at a local and national level. Our local biodiversity is facing pressures which is resulting in declines in species richness and species abundance. The pressures on habitats and species can come from a variety of sources such as urban and domestic wastewater pollution, infrastructure development, the spread of invasive species, agricultural practices, and forestry.

These main threats being faced for biodiversity both nationally and locally in Longford include:

- Climate change
- Habitat loss and fragmentation
- Invasive alien species
- Pollution
- Disturbance to wildlife by human activity
- Overexploitation

Public Consultation:



We want to know your ideas, concerns, and priorities for biodiversity in County Longford. Information and ideas accumulated during public consultation will help to shape and inform the Local Biodiversity Action Plan.

Please make your submissions by email or in writing to the contacts below:

Email: amulvihill@longfordcoco.ie

Postal address: Biodiversity Officer,
Longford County Council,
2 Church Street,
Longford,
N39 W1X7