



An tSeirbhís Páirceanna Náisiúnta
agus Fiadhúlra
National Parks and Wildlife Service



MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING
between
COILLTE
and
The National Parks and Wildlife Service

Date Issued: 17th September 2024



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INTRODUCTION

This Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Coillte and National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) establishes the framework and process for partnership, collaboration, and enhanced cooperation in areas of collective responsibility and shared interest, leading to greater efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of nature projects and the respective work programmes of both organisations.

It is envisaged the MOU will benefit biodiversity in Ireland by empowering the parties to address shared challenges and maximise shared opportunities in relation to nature restoration on the Coillte estate. As a priority, this work will include key Annex 1 habitats, such as raised and blanket bog, heaths and wetlands, lakes and rivers, and for species and species groups such as Freshwater Pearl Mussel, Hen Harrier, Merlin and breeding waders.

The MOU is timely given the increased focus on the need to deliver site-specific conservation objectives in the Natura 2000 network, to co-design and co-deliver necessary conservation measures, to address negative findings against Ireland in the European Court of Justice, to seize opportunities for nature restoration, to progress the national commitment to implement the Nature Restoration Law, to utilise both new and existing funding opportunities, and to design an ambitious National Restoration Plan and deliver on its targets.

Coillte is a key player in the restoration of natural ecosystems across its estate, such as forests, uplands and peatlands. Coillte has recently launched its long-term strategic vision to deliver the multiple benefits of forestry, for climate, nature, wood and people. For nature and climate, this ambitious strategy aims to deliver goals to develop enhanced habitat management, the protection of rare and threatened species and implementing actions such as Continuous Cover Forestry, increasing tree species diversity, rewetting suitable peatlands, managing invasive species and creating new native forest habitats. Coillte's vision, specifically its ambitions for nature and climate, align very well with site specific conservation objectives for a range of Annex habitats and species, specifically to support the delivery of the 4th National Biodiversity Action Plan.

Through greater collaboration and alignment of strategic goals, both NPWS and Coillte together can utilise their collective land bank, resources and expertise to deliver positive projects aimed at protecting, enhancing and restoring important ecosystems.

1.0 THE PARTIES

1.1 NPWS

The NPWS is an Executive Agency within the Department of Housing Local Government and Heritage, with primary responsibility for nature conservation, wildlife protection and the presentation and preservation of our National Parks and Nature Reserves.

The NPWS has a broad scientific remit, including the monitoring of habitats, species and designated sites, and undertaking scientific research. It has significant policy-advisory and policy-making functions in relation to nature and biodiversity.

The NPWS has a wide range of operational responsibilities including the management of 8 National Parks, 74 Nature Reserves, and a variety of other State lands accessible to the public. The NPWS manages a range of EU programmes, alongside thousands of conservation measures across the designated area network and National Parks.

The NPWS is the principal coordinator of the National Biodiversity Action Plan and is a statutory consultee in relation to planning matters, including county and regional development plans. It is the lead Agency in drawing up the National Restoration Plan for Nature. Other responsibilities include regulatory and licencing functions, administering grant schemes to support farm-plans, conservation measures, actions for biodiversity, as well as invasive species control measures and the prevention, investigation and enforcement of wildlife crime.

1.2 Coillte

Coillte manages 440,000 hectares of forested land, which is 7% of Ireland. Coillte's purpose is to manage the state forests on behalf of the people of Ireland. Our mission is to balance and deliver the multiple benefits of our forests to society, for Climate, Nature, Wood, and People.

Coillte is Ireland's prime supplier of wood and wood products and is also Ireland's largest provider of outdoor recreation. Coillte manages over 90,000 hectares of the forest estate primarily for nature and carries out biodiversity restoration projects at scale. It is Coillte's ambition to extend the percentage of the estate managed primarily for nature from the current 20%, to 30% by 2025. Coillte also develops wind energy projects and produces panel-boards, and is part of a wider forestry sector, that supports 12,000 jobs and contributes €2.3bn to the economy annually.

2.0 PURPOSE OF MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

2.1 Summary of MOU:

Coillte and NPWS recognise the benefit to be gained from co-operating in the delivery of legislative responsibilities and our respective missions. Coillte and NPWS already collaborate on a range of levels and initiatives:

- Senior Management Liaison Group
- Policy Matters (e.g. Deer Forum)
- Operationally (e.g. Fire Management)
- Nature Projects (e.g. Life Insular, Wild Western Peatlands, SNaP)

The purpose of the MOU is to further progress and deepen this collaboration specifically in relation to developing principles and best practice on nature restoration for the benefit of conservation objectives and important habitats. Both parties affirm their commitment to cooperate and coordinate on common work areas in the interest of enhanced sustainability, environmental stewardship, nature restoration, and climate action in Ireland. This commitment will facilitate the exchange of information and data, which will help support our respective responsibilities and provide a platform for promoting best practice in areas of common interest.

This memorandum does not override the statutory duties and powers of either organisation, rather it expresses a convergence of will between all the parties, indicating an intended common line of intent and action to ensure the best possible service is delivered and the best possible outcomes are achieved.

2.2 Objectives of MOU:

- 2.2.1. Establish a collaborative framework covering activities to the benefit of biodiversity in Ireland by promoting conservation principles and collaborative working between Coillte and NPWS.
- 2.2.2. Identify partnerships in areas of mutual interest and responsibility of the parties in the context of relevant legislative frameworks.
- 2.2.3. Establish a platform for professional exchange to share information and best practice and foster co-operation, co-ordination and collaboration on specific projects and initiatives.

- 2.2.4 Establish clear working groups and governance structures which facilitate further partnership and cooperation and allow for regular reviews of the effectiveness of the MOU.
- 2.2.5 The parties commit to the co-development and co-implementation of agreed site management plans, for nature restoration projects, supported by costed operational plans with clearly identified sources of funds. Further, the development of scientific best practice and best practice implementation in the management of sites will be documented and, where appropriate, shared externally.

3.0 AREAS FOR PARTNERSHIP & COLLABORATION

Coillte and NPWS will seek to further enhance existing levels of engagement and develop new collaborative arrangements which contribute to the aims of both parties.

3.1 Basis for Collaborative Working

In order to maximise the efficient use of valuable resources, NPWS and Coillte agree to:

- 3.1.1. Bilateral Cooperation: Continue bi-lateral cooperation at senior levels in both organisations to ensure that common goals and potential areas of opportunity are managed effectively.
- 3.1.2. Network of Experts: Endeavour to develop and maintain a network of designated contact personnel to liaise, exchange information and collaborate at appropriate levels within both organisations.
- 3.1.3. Guidelines & Best Practice: Where appropriate, develop and agree relevant redesign guidelines for biodiversity and conservation objectives relevant to the lands subject to the 'areas of partnership and collaboration'.
- 3.1.4. Habitat Assessments: Where appropriate, cooperate closely in the assessment of natural habitats and species that require restoration, and where required collaborate on relevant environmental monitoring, to ensure that work programs of both organisations can be effectively assessed.
- 3.1.5. Policy and Regulation: Where appropriate, the parties will commit to engage further with key stakeholders such as the Forest Service (DAFM) and Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI) to share information and influence best practice and related policies.
- 3.1.6. Scientific Research: Where appropriate, promote scientific & technical cooperation through commissioning mutually beneficial research projects.

3.2 Areas of Partnership and Collaboration

3.2.1. Biodiversity Enhancement and Restoration:

The Coillte “Forest Estate Strategic Land Use Plan” (FESLUP) identifies the ambition to protect and restore existing biodiversity areas and enhance our knowledge of the biodiversity on our estate to help identify management plans to address issues around riparian buffers, water courses, invasive species and rare and threatened species.

Coillte’s approach to this is to map and manage habitats of ecological value as biodiversity areas, riparian buffers and other biodiversity features, and to prioritise these sites for focussed, nature-oriented management actions. A primary aim of mapping and managing biodiversity areas is to support the conservation of rare and threatened habitats and species. The assessment and mapping of biodiversity areas is based on the use of scientific data, where available, and ecological assessments. This knowledge is combined with practical silvicultural and land management expertise to develop appropriate management plans to deliver the nature objectives.

The parties agree to develop principles, supported by Coillte’s existing biodiversity and nature programs, to identify areas for restoration and enhancement including areas of rare and threatened species.

3.2.2. Forest Redesign and Peatland Restoration:

The Coillte “Forest Estate Strategic Land Use Plan” (FESLUP) outlines Coillte’s ambition to identify strategically important forested and peatland areas that can be redesigned for the purposes of mitigating climate change or enhancing and restoring valuable habitats. Many of these potential areas that are suitable for forest redesign, are in or linked to areas that are designated for nature, such as SAC and SPA. Therefore, there are opportunities in the forest estate to meet both Coillte’s long-term strategic forestry objectives and NPWS nature restoration and conservation objectives. The parties will collaborate to identify principles for effective forest and peatland restoration, and identify potential specific projects and initiatives to progress both parties’ restoration ambitions.

3.2.3. Develop Conservation Objectives:

The parties will work collaboratively to explore and develop conservation objectives for protected habitats and species on the Coillte estate. The aim will be to utilise the expertise and experience of both organisations, to develop best practices to meet specific conservation objectives.

3.2.4. Support Operational Forest Management:

The parties agree to support the development or improvement of agreed operating procedures across a number of areas including fire management, deer management and general good ecological management of water and other receptors in both parties' estates.

3.2.5. Research and Information Data Sharing:

NPWS and Coillte will endeavour to share data as appropriate and permissible, to facilitate and support enhanced sustainability, environmental stewardship, nature restoration, and climate action in Ireland.

3.2.6. Funding and Resourcing:

Co-delivering nature conservation and restoration projects to the high standard to which the parties aspire, will require the commitment of significant financial and human resources over a prolonged period of time. The parties agree to work together to source funding for the capital and current expenditure associated with the collaborative projects. The parties will explore public, private and blended finance options within existing and emerging nature finance sectors. The parties agree to create a project fund that is sufficient to service the capital and current expenditures associated with the collaborative project over a rolling multi-year period (time horizon to be agreed) and thereby create the conditions necessary to attract, develop and retain the capacity and capability required for the delivery of the nature conservation and restoration projects to the highest standards.

3.3 Platform for Professional Exchange & Operational Liaison

3.3.1. Senior Management Liaison Group:

Coillte and NPWS will continue to collaborate through the Senior Management Liaison Group, which will meet four times per year and will oversee the work of the Working Group and Subgroups, to ensure the working groups are effectively progressing the implementation of the MOU.

3.3.2. Coillte - NPWS Working Group:

A working group made up of operational and technical representatives from both parties, at appropriate management levels, will be set up to drive the implementation of this MOU. This group shall be known as the 'Coillte - NPWS Working Group' and will meet at least four times per year to share information, and plan and track the implementation of projects related to this MOU. It is envisaged that the 'Coillte - NPWS Working Group' may split into subgroups based on thematic areas to cover, Property Management, Operations, Peatland Restoration, Biodiversity Enhancement to focus on the implementation of particular areas. The relevant experts from both parties may be asked to attend or contribute to joint meetings or delivering the work of subgroups.

3.3.3. Slieve Bloom Nature Programme:

The parties agree that the 'Coillte - NPWS Working Group' will initially develop projects focused on the areas of collaboration in the Coillte estate in the Slieve Blooms. The 'Slieve Bloom Nature Programme' is presented in more detail in Annex 1.

4.0 REVIEW ARRANGEMENTS

- 4.1 This protocol is not intended by either party to be legally binding. A failure by either party to meet their responsibilities under the terms of this agreement will not constitute a breach of contract.
- 4.2 The 'Senior Management Liaison Group' will review the overall working of the memorandum, agree specific areas of partnership, and review the delivery of any relevant actions. The Chair will be taken alternately by the Director General representing NPWS and the Managing Director representing Coillte.

5.0 EFFECTIVE DATE AND SIGNATURES

- 5.1 This agreement is effective from 17th September 2024 and jointly owned by:

Niall O'Donnchu, Director General, NPWS

Signed:_____

Date:_____

Mark Carlin, Managing Director, Coillte Forest

Signed:_____

Date:_____

ANNEX 1: SLIEVE BLOOM NATURE PROGRAMME

Under section 3.3.3 of the MOU the parties have agreed to prioritise specific collaborative works in the lands owned by Coillte and NPWS in the Slieve Blooms.

The scope of the work will include the following:

- To identify a set of objectives that will support the aims of the Hen Harrier Threat Response Plan (HHTRP) and other bird conservation objectives, while also being cognisant of sustainable forest management principles;
- To share current and best available survey data on the nesting and foraging locations of hen harrier and merlin, and to combine this with Coillte data to agree criteria for the selection of sites;
- To identify strategically important habitats within forest areas managed primarily for nature, for the purpose of supporting the conservation of hen harrier and merlin;
- To engage and agree a set of broad management goals and prescriptions for the areas identified;
- To develop a costed operational plan to deliver the agreed goals and prescriptions;
- To identify the regulatory challenges that may hinder or prevent implementation of the joint operational plan, and to develop shared solutions to those challenges, and to engage with third party stakeholders where required to resolve the challenges;
- To collaborate on suitable funding measures required to support delivery of the shared operational plan;
- To meet quarterly to maintain, monitor and review progress.

The Senior Management Liaison Group will appoint a Sub-Group to be tasked with delivery of this plan which will be represented by the relevant experts from both organisations, as well as regional staff from both organisations.