



Irish Rural Link
Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann

Irish Rural Link Submission to the Heritage Strategy

28th February 2019

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Community Development**

*An Roinn Forbartha
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Introduction

Irish Rural Link (IRL) represents the interests of locally based rural groups in disadvantaged and marginalised rural areas by highlighting problems, advocating appropriate policies, sharing experiences and examples of good practice. It has a membership of nearly 600 rural community groups dedicated to sustainable rural development and represents rural communities at a local, national and European level.

IRL welcome the opportunity to make a submission on the new Heritage Strategy 2030. As an organisation, dedicated to the sustainability of rural communities, Irish Rural Link is acutely aware of the importance of natural heritage to communities across the country and the value communities place on their local heritage.

Ireland is surrounded by natural heritage and this must be protected and promoted in the new Strategy. With so many new communities and new citizens now living in Ireland, there must be an opportunity for these communities and the young people of these communities to learn about their heritage and culture and allow them incorporate this into Irish heritage.

What is the most important thing Heritage Ireland 2030 needs to deliver?

There are a number of items that need to be delivered in Heritage Ireland 2030. The following are some that IRL believe must be included in the strategy:

- Heritage Ireland 2030 must deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's), in terms of sustainable communities, climate action, inclusive communities and many more. Ireland were one of the key promoters of the SDG's and every effort must be made to achieve all of the goals.
- Heritage Ireland 2030 must highlight the importance of heritage to communities and how it can bring communities together. With the marketing of Ireland as a tourist destination and the different marketing for each region such as, Ireland's Ancient East and Irelands Hidden Heartlands, our built and natural heritage plays an important role in these with many of our heritage sites being tourist attractions. It is important however, that these heritage sites are protected from increased visitor numbers.
- Ireland is rich in peatlands and wetlands and these must be integrated into our natural heritage and included in the new Heritage Strategy. With the reduction in peat harvesting and Bord na Mona committed to ceasing peat harvesting by 2030, there is an opportunity to restore the damaged bogs and recognise them as

heritage sites, while at the same time help Ireland achieve its climate action targets. The Community Wetlands Forum (CWF) was established under the umbrella of IRL in 2013. It is made up of community groups who engage with people in their local community on the restoration and conservation of peatlands and wetlands in their area.

Community Wetlands Forum

The Community Wetlands Forum (CWF) was established under the umbrella of Irish Rural Link in September 2013. The initiative came from community groups involved in wetland conservation who were developing the idea of wetlands as assets for their communities, as well as work undertaken by Irish Rural Link on behalf of communities affected by the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC). Since its establishment, the Community Wetlands Forum has continued to grow its membership, with 14 community groups now part of the forum and new groups interested in joining all using the model of community engagement to develop similar projects in their areas. The forum is also attended by representatives from Government Agencies and third level institutions. The Forum also has a rep on the LIFE Raised Bog Restoration Steering Group, NRN Biodiversity Sub-Committee and Irish RAMSAR.

The main aim of the CWF is to provide a representative platform for community-led wetland conservation groups based on the principles of community development namely empowerment; participation; inclusion; self-determination; and partnership. In support of the main objective, CWF also has the following objectives.

1. To promote wetlands, including peatlands, as important places of biodiversity and conservation, which support community integration, well-being and other services.
2. To facilitate the sharing of knowledge, ideas, experience and organisational methods between members.
3. To grow the network by encouraging new community groups who are in the process of developing community wetlands or who wish to establish such initiatives to join CWF.
4. To facilitate regular Community Wetlands Forum meetings where all stakeholders in wetland conservation can participate as equal partners.
5. To share the latest research and best practice in wetland conservation and management, and facilitate access to national and international expertise, similar networks, and funding opportunities.
6. To maximise linkages with other relevant plans, programmes, and strategies.

The rationale supporting a Wetlands Community Forum is based on the development of wetlands using the tools of community development as a means of ensuring that all actions taken have the full support of the community. It means that the community become engaged in acquiring a greater knowledge of the value of wetlands and can use this to their own benefit. It also means that the community

become involved as early as possible and that the necessary local stakeholders are included. It also gives communities a sense of ownership over their local wetland/Peatland.

In May 2017, the Community Wetlands forum launched its Strategic Plan 2017-2020. The aim of the Strategic Plan is to guide the Community Wetlands Forum in its support of community wetland groups, improving outcomes in a mutually beneficial approach that is collaborative and inclusive. CWF now have a part-time Development Officer to implement its strategic Plan.

- As mentioned, Ireland have welcomed many new communities and citizens over the past number of years. There must be inclusion of these new communities and supports in place that they are able to keep their heritage and for young people who may have moved here as very young children or were born here to learn about their culture and heritage and share this with others. It would also be a good way for Irish people to learn about other cultures and the different cultures in their community.
- Engagement at all levels will be an important element of the Heritage Strategy 2030 – Government, Local Government and communities. Heritage officers in each Local Authority are a valuable resource and IRL and the CWF have good engagement with these officers. They must play a key role in driving the Strategy and ensuring that actions are implemented in their local authority area.

What do you think of the vision for Heritage Ireland 2030?

- The consultation document has stated
“Access to heritage and opportunities to engage with it make and important contribution to our cultural, economic and social development”
Environment must also be included here. With so much emphasis on the protection of environment and with the SDG’s it is important that this is included. Our environment is also part of our natural heritage and plays a key role. It is as relevant as culture, economy and society.
- In terms of the three themes that will support the vision, community engagement should be included in the title of the ‘Community and Heritage’ theme and it needs to be at the core of the theme. Communities must be a key partner under the ‘Heritage Partnerships’ theme.
The theme on ‘Leadership’ must be included at local level and leadership in communities encouraged. Getting people involved in their local heritage, especially new people who have moved into the area will be an important part of

this. The majority of people involved in community groups are volunteers and this must be recognised.

What are the biggest challenges facing our heritage?

- The Heritage Strategy 2030 cannot be a standalone document and must build on measures outlined in *Project 2040, 'Realising our Rural Potential: Action Plan for Rural Development'* and the new *'National Energy and Climate Plan'*. The SDG's must also be a key component in the delivery of the Strategy.
- One of the biggest challenge is getting people involved in their local heritage. This can be particularly true in rural areas, where getting new people involved in groups can be difficult. The Strategy must have support from whole of Government and cross party.
- Implementing the strategy – an implementation plan that is outcome focused will be needed to ensure that the real changes are made and are seen on the ground.
- Funding must be ring-fenced for this strategy and protected before it is published. This will ensure that measures and actions will be able to be implemented.

What do you think of the draft objectives in the document? Is there something important missing?

- The opening statement for Theme 1: National Leadership and Heritage – *'Our heritage is central to our national identity and underpins our culture, economy and society'*
This must include our natural environment. Leadership at local level and in the community is also needed and supports for communities and volunteers to drive leadership will be important.
- Policy and regulatory framework must have a bottom up approach and engage with communities at a local level.
- Draft Objective 5 – *'Better care of our built and natural heritage through investment from the economic return that it generates for society'*.
Peatland conservation must be included in this and the heritage around our peatlands. With Bord na Mona to cease peat harvesting by 2030, there will be many bogs, especially in the Midlands region that are at risk of being left idle. Conserving these bogs will be important to ensure they are not used as a dumping ground. They can be included as part of the heritage in an area.

- *‘Investment in heritage training at all levels’*. Community groups must have access to training. The majority of these groups are made up of volunteers and accessing training can be difficult. Making it easier for groups to access training would give people confidence and can encourage other people to get involved in a local group.

What changes are happening right now that might impact on our heritage?

- For many rural areas and in rural towns and villages there is an ageing population. Younger people are migrating to larger urban areas to access employment. Volunteers are the cornerstone to the protection and promotion of local heritage. If the population isn’t there to carry this on or younger people not available to do this in an area there is a risk that the heritage of that area will be lost.
- The loss of local knowledge. The ageing population can also mean that local knowledge can be lost with the passing of a person in an area. It is important that younger people in the community are encouraged to get involved and learn about the history of their local area and traditions for that area.
- The development of the Heritage Strategy must be cognisant of Climate change and the impact this will have on our built and natural heritage. It can impact on buildings and the natural landscape but also on our natural species and wildlife. However, this strategy is an opportunity to develop and renew our heritage. As mentioned Irish Rural Link work with the Community Wetlands Forum in the promotion of conservation of peatlands on SAC sites. With peat harvesting due to end by 2030, there is an opportunity for more of our bogs and wetlands to be rewetted and restored and become a bigger part of our heritage.
- The SDGs must be part of the Heritage Strategy and those involved in protection of heritage must be aware of these. The use of rainwater and the move away from peat compost is needed by Tidy Towns committees and Heritage groups. The water restrictions in Summer 2018 highlighted the need for groups to explore more environmentally ways for the upkeep of their towns and villages.
- Ireland has welcomed many new communities and citizens into the country over the years and continue to do so. The new Heritage Strategy 2030 must integrate these communities and their culture and heritage. They must be able to hold onto their culture and be able to pass it on to their children. Their children that were born here must have the opportunity to learn about their culture and heritage outside their home through cultural events and share this with Irish people. They must also have the opportunity to learn about Irish culture and heritage.

How can we work better together and engage all our communities under Heritage Ireland 2030?

- Supporting communities involved in Heritage and in promoting culture and our natural environment is essential. The majority of community groups involved in their local Heritage group, tidy towns and environment are volunteers. Irish Rural Link are aware of the difficulties community groups have in accessing funding and match funding to develop local heritage. Too often the application process for funding can be laborious for the groups and can put them off applying. Other barriers such as insurance cost and getting insurance as well as tighter regulations around health and safety and governance makes it more difficult to get people involved.
- Getting younger people involved in their local heritage and keeping them involved is particularly difficult in rural areas. This is mainly due to younger people having to move away from home to access college and employment. It is important to get young people involved so that older people can pass on their knowledge to them.
- The development of apprenticeships for the retention and development of traditional heritage skills as mentioned in the consultation document would allow young people access employment in this sector and remain in their local area. They could then have more of an opportunity to get involved in their local community group.
- The CWF model of engaging with communities is one that could be replicated across all community groups – empowering people to participate in their community. Engagement from Local Government, Heritage officers is needed and the experience by CWF and IRL is that they are supportive and engaging.

How can we ensure Heritage Ireland 2030 delivers?

- It is important that an implementation plan is developed along with the strategy outlining actions with clear timeframes and the stakeholder with lead responsibility also stated.
- This strategy needs a whole of Government approach and cross party approach so that it continues to 2030 regardless of the Political Party in Government.
- Engagement with community groups throughout the lifetime of the Strategy will be important to ensure that the Strategy is delivered.
- We welcome that a Steering Group of stakeholders will be established. This must have a wide range of stakeholders and IRL and the CWF would like to be

considered to be a stakeholder on this steering group. We believe this would be important as it would give community groups and those who are involved on the ground and opportunity to input on how the strategy is being implemented and what is working/not working.

Irish Rural Link the Organisation

Irish Rural Link (IRL), formed in 1991, is a national network of organisations and individuals campaigning for sustainable rural development in Ireland and Europe. IRL, a non-profit organisation, has grown significantly since its inception and now directly represents over 600 community groups with a combined membership of 25,000.

The network provides a structure through which rural groups and individuals, representing disadvantaged rural communities, can articulate their common needs and priorities, share their experiences and present their case to policy-makers at local, national and European Level.

Irish Rural Link is the only group represented at the national social partnership talks solely representing rural communities' interests.

'Our vision is of vibrant, inclusive and sustainable rural communities that contribute to an equitable and just society'

Irish Rural Link's aims are:

- To articulate and facilitate the voices of rural communities in local, regional, national and European policy arenas, especially those experiencing poverty, social exclusion and the challenge of change in the 21st century.
- To promote local and community development in rural communities in order to strengthen and build the capacity of rural community groups to act as primary movers through practical assistance and advice.
- To research, critique and disseminate policies relating to rural communities including issues such as sustainability, social exclusion, equality and poverty
- To facilitate cross-border networking between rural communities

'Our mission is to influence and inform local, regional, national and European development policies and programmes in favour of rural communities especially those who are marginalised as a result of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas.'

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