Network Nature – written by Auriane Flottes de Pouzols afdepouzols@ieep.eu
IEEP (05/2026)

Good Practice in Policy Integration of NbS

Ireland - Offaly County Biodiversity Action Plan 2025 to 2030

First draft [18 June 2026] / Final approved version [06 October 2026]

Short description

The Offaly County Biodiversity Action Plan 2025-2030 outlines objectives, strategies and actions to protect and enhance biodiversity within County Offaly aligned with the Offaly Climate Action Plan 2024 – 2029. The plan identifies nature-based solutions (NbS) as key actions for climate and biodiversity objectives and promotes the use of NbS in local authority projects to build resilience. The plan supports collaboration between local authorities, communities, landowners, agencies and NGOs to deliver 53 actions.

Key messages

1) the Biodiversity Action Plan contributes to a coordinated approach to environmental management and sustainable development at the county level, including an integrated approach to biodiversity and climate action. Despite the relatively limited power of local authorities, it provides a key opportunity to integrate NbS in the next Offaly County Development Plan (2028–2034) – a statutory policy.
2) It achieves synergies between biodiversity and climate objectives through practical actions to improve project procurement and cross-departmental working. The plan supports cross-departmental working, which shows how biodiversity can be integrated into housing, roads, regeneration, climate and planning functions.
3) To enable the uptake of NbS projects, the Offaly County has hosted staff training on NbS.

Description of policy

County strategy to achieve biodiversity objectives aligned with climate action plan

The Offaly County Biodiversity Action Plan provides a framework for the protection, conservation and management of biodiversity within County Offaly for the period 2025 to 2030. The plan outlines a series of strategic objectives and actions designed to enhance biodiversity across the county while supporting wider environmental and climate goals. The plan complements the Offaly Heritage Plan 2023 - 2027 [1], aligns with the Offaly Climate Action Plan 2024 – 2029 [4], supports the Offaly County Development Plan 2021 – 2027 [6], and the Offaly Corporate Plan 2024 – 2029 [8]. The design and implementation of the Biodiversity Action Plan is a response to Ireland's Fourth National Biodiversity Action Plan (2023–2030), which requires government departments and local authorities to develop Biodiversity Action Plans [2]. Ireland's National Biodiversity Action Plan identifies NbS as key actions for climate: "*By 2025, NbS are contributing to national climate ambitions"*.

The Offaly County Biodiversity Action Plan defines five strategic objectives for surveying and monitoring, delivering biodiversity actions, managing invasive species, building resilience, and engagement, implemented through 53 actions. Strategic objective 4 promotes the use of NbS in local authority projects to build resilience. Action 36 states "Promote the use of Nature Based Solutions (NbS) in local authority projects".

The plan was developed by Offaly County Council in collaboration with the Biodiversity Working Group of the County Offaly Heritage Forum and adopted by the Offaly County Council in January 2025. Offaly County Council acts as the primary coordinating body responsible for overseeing the implementation of the plan. The Biodiversity Officer plays an important role in supporting the delivery of actions, facilitating partnerships and monitoring progress. Approximately €130,000 per year is currently available to support the implementation of the plan.

Images

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Tullamore Wetlands, County Offaly, Ireland (source: Offaly County Council)

Scale and Location	Type of Policy Instrument
• Regional – county of Offaly in Province of Leinster (predominantly rural county of around 83,000 people on 2000 km^2) • Republic of Ireland	PLANNING INSTRUMENT – county level strategy (non-statutory Local Authority Biodiversity Action Plan)

Network Nature Themes
• Biodiversity and Ecosystem Restoration • Climate adaptation, mitigation and resilience • Zero pollution

Policy Good Practice Criteria	
NbS mainstreamed in policy text and/or NbS are a central component of policy response	Strategic Objective 4 ("Building resilience") states that the county will promote the use of NbS in local authority projects. The plan encourages departments within Offaly County Council, including roads, housing, regeneration and planning sections, to consider NbS when designing and implementing projects. NbS referenced in the plan include the protection and restoration of peatlands and wetlands, improved management of hedgerows and forest landscapes, and the use of green infrastructure measures such as ponds, green roofs and wildlife-friendly planting. These measures are expected to contribute to ecosystem restoration and biodiversity conservation while also supporting climate adaptation and environmental resilience.
Societal challenges are addressed and human	The Offaly Biodiversity Action Plan addresses the environmental challenges of habitat loss and fragmentation, climate change, and the pressures of invasive alien species and pollution. These pressures are recognised as significant threats to biodiversity within County Offaly and require coordinated

wellbeing outcomes are identified	responses at the local level. The plan responds to these challenges through its five strategic objectives, which aim to improve knowledge of biodiversity, strengthen habitat protection, address invasive species, enhance ecological resilience, and promote public awareness. Offaly County contains a large share of Ireland's peatlands, including many sites that were under active peat production until recently. The plan recognises the importance of peatland restoration as an NbS. It has extracted from the National Biodiversity Action Plan 2023-2030, outcome 2C – the conservation and restoration of peatlands – as a relevant action for local authorities. It will quantify its impact by the number of programs and policies that incorporate NbS. The plan's actions for biodiversity conservation are expected to "facilitate and secure biodiversity's contribution to people". However, the plan does not define explicit health or well-being targets or indicators. The plan mentions that measures such as wetland restoration, habitat management and green infrastructure can support improved water quality, climate resilience and access to nature. It identifies actions that indirectly contribute to improving people's quality of life. These include the development of management plans for parks and wetlands, the promotion of biodiversity within social housing developments, the creation of community gardens and initiatives to raise public awareness of biodiversity.
Dedicated budget and/or funding stream	The plan indicates that approximately €130,000 per year is currently available to support implementation. The budget is expected to vary over time. Funding sources include Offaly County Council's internal biodiversity budget, allocations from the Irish Heritage Council, and grant funding accessed through the National Parks and Wildlife Service's Local Biodiversity Action Fund (LBAF), which is administered by the Irish government Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. The total annual budget breakdown is as follows: - €30,000 core biodiversity budget, which is mainly used as leverage to access additional funding elsewhere; - €30,000 for invasive species management (new ring-fenced allocation as of 2026); - up to €20,000 from the Heritage Council (subject to successful application), funding community-led projects, events and outreach such as World Wetlands Day and Biodiversity/Heritage/Hedgerow Week activities; - up to €100,000 from LBAF (subject to successful application), funding a range of County Biodiversity Action Plan priority actions; in 2026, these include county-wide wetland and semi-natural grassland surveys and habitat improvement works for pollinators. There is no ring-fenced budget for NbS; they are not funded from a single dedicated pot. Instead, they are expected to be embedded across different departments, such as roads, housing, climate and regeneration, where individual projects may find their own funding route.
Indicators of impact and evaluation framework	Implementation of the Biodiversity Action Plan is overseen by an implementation group, with the Biodiversity Officer providing regular progress updates to the Offaly Heritage Forum. The implementation group meets four times a year and consists of the different county departments (Climate Action Team, Planning, Roads, Housing, Community, MD Offices, Corporate Services sections & others), bridging across silos.

	The plan includes provisions for monitoring and evaluation, however it does not establish a detailed quantitative framework covering environmental, social and economic indicators. The indicators for the 53 actions are designed to track progress: the success of achieving the strategic objective on NbS will be measured through the number of NbS projects that are completed. Progress will also be communicated through the Offaly County Council Annual Report. A mid-term review of the plan is scheduled for 2027 to evaluate progress in delivering the 53 identified actions.
Inclusivity and stakeholder engagement	Stakeholder engagement and inclusivity are at the core of the biodiversity action plan, as strongly encouraged in Ireland's Fourth National Biodiversity Action Plan (2023–2030). The plan was developed through consultation with a range of stakeholders, including statutory agencies, community groups, environmental organisations and members of the public. A discussion paper was prepared to identify key issues and priorities, and public consultation on the draft plan was conducted through online platforms, libraries and stakeholder meetings. Many of the actions outlined in the plan are designed to be delivered in partnership with stakeholders. These include local communities, landowners, schools, non-governmental organisations and relevant public authorities.
Consistency within policy mix	The plan positions the local actions within national and international policy commitments for biodiversity conservation and restoration, and also climate and water policy: *Local:* The Action Plan was developed after the Offaly County Development Plan (2021–2027) was published. The development plan is a statutory document that sets the planning framework for the seven years, including maps that show the zoning objectives for all land in the local authority area. The development plan includes policy CAEP-64, which establishes a framework for strategic green infrastructure planning covering sustainable water management, biodiversity protection, and cultural/natural heritage conservation. However, the plan does not explicitly adopt or reference an NbS approach as an overarching planning principle. The revised version of the development plan in 2027 will include NbS requirements and local design standards. The plan reflects objectives from the Offaly Climate Action Plan 2024–2029, including Action BE2.3: "to increase the use of NbS and enhance biodiversity in all developments." [4]. This action is significant as it operationalises biodiversity within the local climate framework through concrete, measurable interventions. BE2.3 is supported by a set of targeted measures that integrate biodiversity into planning, housing and infrastructure delivery. These include piloting biodiversity-inclusive design in social housing (eg. Green roofs and walls, sustainable drainage systems and habitat features such as nest boxes), systematically incorporating NbS and sustainable urban drainage systems into capital works and promoting green infrastructure such as bioswales and permeable surfaces in new developments. In relation to water, the plan could support a more ambitious catchment-scale approach and strengthen local implementation of water-quality objectives. This is particularly relevant given that water management is a key gap in Offaly, with no overarching surface water management plan currently in place and responsibilities dispersed across multiple sections and agencies without a coherent framework. Strengthening links with national mechanisms such as LAWPRO could help address this fragmentation and support more coordinated delivery.

	National: the plan falls under Ireland's Fourth National Biodiversity Action Plan (NBAP) 2023–2030, which provides the strategic framework for biodiversity governance and calls on local authorities to implement targeted conservation and restoration measures. The NBAP explicitly highlights the role of NbS in climate policy, stating that "by 2025, NbS are contributing to national climate ambitions." The Action Plan aligns with spatial planning policy under the National Planning Framework, in which National Policy Objective 17 supports the use of NbS and sustainable drainage systems to manage stormwater, reduce flood risk and improve water quality, including through the retrofitting of existing built environments. *EU*: the plan emphasises how county-level interventions - including peatland restoration, wetland management and hedgerow enhancement - contribute to achieving the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 [9] targets while strengthening ecosystem services, climate adaptation and ecological resilience. The plan will help the county contribute to Ireland's national goals under EU legislation as follows: • Birds [10] and Habitats [11] Directives – ensuring that Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs) are protected and monitored. Offaly County has 18 SACs and 6 SPAs. It also has 7 Natural Heritage Areas plus 51 potential Natural Heritage Areas, which are of significance for wildlife and habitats but have not been statutorily proposed or designated. • EU Water Framework Directive [13] – promoting integrated and sustainable water management. Offaly will improve water quality by contributing to the targets to restore at least 25,000 km of rivers into free-flowing rivers by 2030 and to reduce nutrient fertiliser use by at least 20% by implementing the current Irish water pollution legislation and developing nutrient management plans. EU Nature Restoration Regulation [12]: The plan was completed before the Irish National Restoration Plan (NRP) was developed; therefore, the plan does not fully align with the NRP. However, the next version of the local plan for the period 2030-2035 will be more aligned. *Global*: the plan refers to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as overarching frameworks, with a priority on SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities and SDG 15 – Life on Land.
Knowledge development and transmission	Strategic Objective 5 of the Biodiversity Action Plan focuses on awareness raising, education and knowledge development. The plan includes actions aimed at increasing awareness of biodiversity and providing training for local authority staff, community groups and the public. Knowledge sharing is further supported through collaboration between stakeholders, public reporting and communication of progress in implementing biodiversity actions. Public engagement activities include biodiversity-awareness campaigns, community events, educational programmes, and collaboration with schools and local organisations. Offaly County Council's Climate Action Team has established the NbS EduWORLD [3] initiative in collaboration with schoolteachers, providing accessible learning materials and resources to support the integration of nature-based solutions (NbS) into education. The initiative was funded through Horizon Europe. In addition, the Climate Action Team, in partnership with Trinity College Dublin, hosted a half-day workshop for internal staff on NbS in business.

	Internal staff training is a key enabler of NbS uptake. The Biodiversity Officer organises at least one NbS training workshop annually, in collaboration with the Climate Action Team. Over the past three years, these sessions have typically involved one to two representatives from relevant Council sections, including Housing, Roads, Regeneration, Climate, Environment, Area Offices and Facilities. Training has been delivered by Engineers Ireland and the Local Authority Waters Programme (LAWPRO), now the River Basin Management Service (RBMS), which has a national remit and actively promotes NbS across the local-authority network. The RBMS also supports community engagement, catchment science and the promotion of NbS in Ireland. These activities help shift practice away from conventional hard-engineering approaches by improving awareness of NbS as credible and viable delivery options among technical and operational staff. They also strengthen the internal capacity and confidence needed to incorporate NbS into routine planning, infrastructure, regeneration and land-management decisions.

Success Factors/Uptake/Impact

- Although nature-based solutions are not presented as the central focus of the Biodiversity Action Plan, they are embedded across several strategic objectives and actions, creating implicit entry points for NbS implementation.
- The plan adopts a collaborative approach across council departments and external stakeholders, which helps to ensure that biodiversity considerations are integrated into planning and operational processes and creates institutional space for NbS uptake. The role of the dedicated biodiversity officer at county level is key for creating the institutional base that allows the plan to be implemented across local government.
- This collaborative process also supports community participation, positioning biodiversity actions - including NbS - as a locally owned and deliverable agenda rather than a purely technical exercise.
- By linking county-level actions to wider biodiversity, climate and sustainability commitments, the plan increases the policy relevance and legitimacy of NbS interventions at the local level. Ireland's national planning standards set standards for NbS - which address flood risk and water quality- are particularly significant in day-to-day practice. These standards already have cultural and working relevance for local-authority staff (engineers, technicians and others) who plan and oversee NbS projects, and are often seen as more tangible and trusted than individual actions in a County Biodiversity Action Plan. They also provide additional support when seeking funding or political approval for NbS, helping to shift decisions away from grey infrastructure towards nature-based approaches.
- These initiatives will help embed biodiversity considerations and nature-based solutions into planning, infrastructure development and land management, which should enable biodiversity priorities and nature-based solutions to be more systematically integrated into the next County Development Plan (from 2027).
- Training and awareness-raising play a key enabling role by supporting a shift from hard-engineering mindsets towards recognising NbS as credible and viable delivery options, both within the council and among the public.
- This is reinforced through education and engagement activities, which help build acceptance of less conventional measures such as wildflower areas, reduced mowing, and more natural water management approaches.

Barriers and Challenges

- The main challenge is not usually direct disagreement with biodiversity goals, but the difficulty of delivering biodiversity and climate objectives together in practice.
- There is often a mismatch between policy ambition and implementation capacity, especially where national guidance does not clearly explain how to avoid trade-offs between climate and biodiversity. Irish local government is not well resourced and lacks decision-making power compared to local governments in other EU countries [7], so that there is a risk that decisions about developments at local level may be made by higher government authorities and sectors without consideration of local priorities. This is illustrated, where Bord na Móna's transition from peat extraction to energy has not been accompanied by a publicly available long-term land-use or biodiversity plan for its extensive holdings, creating uncertainty for local planning and increasing the risk that key decisions are made at higher levels without full consideration of local priorities.
- Renewable energy and active travel are two areas where climate priorities can come into tension with biodiversity protection, particularly when projects affect bogs, hedgerows, riverbanks or other sensitive habitats.

- A broader challenge is the continued dominance of engineering-led approaches, which can make it harder to mainstream NbS unless there is a strong policy and funding push.
- Limited resources remain a major constraint: even relatively small projects can take a lot of staff time to design, coordinate and deliver.
- In rural areas, landowner relationships can be difficult and highly variable, especially where access is needed or where biodiversity measures are perceived as inconvenient or intrusive.
- Some biodiversity-friendly measures also face public perception issues, such as concerns that longer grass, darker spaces or less manicured landscapes are untidy, unsafe or poorly maintained.
- The implementation of the Nature Restoration Regulation may add pressure in the future, especially if monitoring framework lack robust indicators to track progress.
- In relation to water, the plan could support a more ambitious catchment-scale approach and strengthen local implementation of water-quality objectives. This is particularly relevant given that water management is a key gap in Offaly, with no overarching surface water management plan currently in place and responsibilities dispersed across multiple sections and agencies without a coherent framework. Strengthening links with national mechanisms such as LAWPRO could help address this fragmentation and support more coordinated delivery.

Potential for Replication / Upscaling

- The Offaly biodiversity plan is a useful example of how county-level biodiversity planning can achieve synergies between biodiversity and climate objectives through practical actions to improve project procurement and cross-departmental working. The plan supports cross-departmental working which shows how biodiversity can be integrated into housing, roads, regeneration, climate and planning functions.
- The plan could serve as a model for how local authorities can translate national biodiversity targets into practical actions, especially where there is a strong link with the county development plan.
- Offaly's experience suggests that staff training and internal awareness-raising are important conditions for uptake, and these could be scaled through peer learning across counties.

More Information & Sources

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Contact

Ricky Whelan, Oifigeach Bithéagsúlachta, Biodiversity Officer, Heritage and Conservation Team - email: rwhelan@offalycoco.ie