PROJECT PROGRESS REPORT

Connecting Communities with Peatlands

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Connecting Communities with Peatlands Project Progress Report

Introduction

Connecting Communities with Peatlands (CCWP) is a Just Transition and Carbon Tax Fund project led by Irish Rural Link (IRL) and the Community Wetlands Forum (CWF). It aims to provide community transitioning support to community groups across Ireland's Midlands. The project remit spans eight counties: Kildare, Westmeath, Laois, Offaly, Longford, Roscommon, North Tipperary, and East Galway (Figure 1).

The main aims of the project are:

• Build capacity based on local leadership & through supports provided by agencies and institutions
• Empower communities to manage their own resources
• Provide a networking platform for community-led conservation groups through sharing knowledge, ideas, research and best practice
• Support the protection, management, and wise use of peatlands and other wetland types for sustainable communities

Figure 1 Project remit

This document is an overview of the work completed by the Connecting Communities with Peatlands project covering Qs 1 & 2 of 2023. It highlights the success of the pilot Mentoring Programme and the eight recommendations from the review process to improve the programme in the future. This report also demonstrates the benefits of study visits to community-led and community-supported peatland projects as they provide communities and local and regional authorities to network with one another, but also showcases the achievements of such projects and the benefits of community involvement in peatland conservation.

Figure 2 Interpretation and Conservation Planning Course. Credit: Eugene Dunbar

Targets

Table 1 displays the original project plan deliverables and target dates alongside the actual date the target was met or is due to be met (refer to Mid Project Report for details regarding delays).

Deliverables 2023	Project Plan Target Date	Actual date
5 regional/ cluster or individual community workshops	30 November 2022	30 June 2023
5 General training/capacity-building workshops	30 November 2022	30 June 2023
2-3 New clusters of community groups	30 November 2022	30 June 2023
JT project Review report	31 December 2022	31 July 2023
JT Action Plan for 1st September	31 December 2022	31 July 2023
Capacity building / training plan for 2023	31 December 2022	31 July 2023

Table 1

In Q1 and 2, the project delivered six general training/capacity-building workshops, going above the target of five. The project also delivered four regional/cluster or individual community workshops alongside four study visits to four different peatland projects in the region. The project also supported a community bog festival to attain speakers for the event and the project coordinator was emcee at the event in June 2023.

The Pilot Mentoring Programme was reviewed with the support of Office Training Solutions in Q1. More details are provided in the section 'Pilot Mentoring Programme'. Learnings were extracted from this process which have informed the new Peer-to-Peer Mentoring Programme which launch July 2023.

Further details of the events, trainings and workshops are described in the following chapters.

Figure 3 Site visit to Carrownagappul Bog, Mountbellew. Galway

Community Engagement

The number of individuals that have engaged with the project in Qs 1 and 2 of 2023 is estimated from registration numbers for training and workshop events, study visits, webinars, the number of people on our mailing list, and the number of people who have watched the online video resources.

Training/workshop	Numbers registered
3 day intensive interpretation and conservation planning training	7
Build you Bog Knowledge Webinar: How to Restore a Bog	49
Build Your Bog Knowledge Webinar: Introduction to Citizen Science	47
Night Walk on Clara Bog with Dark Skies Ireland	16
4 Study Visits	76, plus 20 school children
Future Proof Your Community Group follow up session	4
Advanced Facebook training	6
Advanced Instagram training	6
Canva training	9
Managing Visitor and Public Behaviour on sensitive Sites training	8
Total view of Build Your Bog Knowledge Webinars since 2022	834
Know your Bog submissions	4
Mailing List	173
TOTAL	**1,259**

Table 2

The project coordinator also attended and presented at the launch of the Newtownforbes Biodiversity and Heritage Trail in County Longford for World Wetlands Day on 1st February and supported the Clara Heritage Society to deliver their Bog Trotters Festival 22-25th June by identifying speakers for the event, and also emceed at the event.

Capacity Building training

The project has met its targets for capacity building in Qs 1 & 2 by delivering six capacity building trainings both in person and online: interpretation and conservation planning, Future Proof Your Community Group, Advanced Facebook training, Advanced Instagram training, Canva training, and Managing Visitor and Public Behaviour on Sensitive Sites.

Interpretation and conservation planning training course

The project coordinator engaged with a trainer with expertise in interpretation planning for natural heritage. Dr. Deborah Benham was hired to deliver an interpretation training course for peatland communities and one-to-one mentoring over the course of two months.

The first training session took place in early November 2022 in Mountbellew, Co. Galway and was scheduled to run over two days. The second day of training had to be postponed

until the second session in January 2023 as a number of people became unavailable for the second day of training.

A residential experience was organised for the second session in Q1 of 2023 to ensure participants' commitment to the course. This entails two nights' accommodation and three days of training. The course was opened up to new groups, and those who could not attend the initial training in Q4 2022. A half-day session encompassing Day One of the training was provided for newcomers, and the second day of training, plus a visit to a local peatland project took place over the remaining days. Training content can be found in Appendix 1.

The trainer continued to follow up with course participants with one-to-one mentoring sessions. Groups set plans to implement the interpretation planning skills they learned during the course. Participants were asked to complete an evaluation of the course, and told us what they found most useful:

> *"I definitely found learning new ways of looking at human effects on the greater word, and looking into how we as tour guides/facilitators can try and limit disruption on the habitats in new ways very helpful. It's not really something I had thought about."*

> *"I found the best practice principles of design and delivery very helpful... I felt that the course was very useful in helping me gain a better understanding of the importance of "framing" and "language" in design and delivery."*

Figure 4 Study Visit to Cloonlarge Bog Loop, Kilteevan, Co. Roscommon. Credit: Carl Proctor

"The importance of the introduction period when meeting a group prior to going on a walk/talk. Asking relevant questions can make life easier by knowing one's audience. Also the necessity of good communication. Steps in planning an appropriate walk for different audiences."

Participants also highlighted that the residential experience allowed them to connect and open up with fellow participants,

"This was the ideal setup to be able to spend time with other participants and to be so engaged as to open up in a way that does not often happen…"

The project coordinator will follow up with the groups in Qs3 and 4 of 2023 with the aim to identify any necessary supports and to identify what actions they took following the training course.

Future Proof Your Community Group

The suggested next steps were taken to progress the outcomes of the initial workshop in December 2022. A report was circulated to community representatives for review and comment and a group was established to co-design, plan and guide the intended Gathering.

In March, another session was held with facilitator Derek O'Donnell to imagine the gathering or community event. It's intended to host an event for members collaboratively between the Community Wetlands Forum and the Connecting Communities with Peatlands project. The aim of the event is to inspire volunteers and community groups, attract new members, and reinvigorate the volunteers in the member groups. The focus of the day is to raise awareness of the work members do, to ignite the passion and dedication to their peatland projects, and to celebrate them and their achievements.

No date is set for this event as there is significant planning and preparation involved. It is hoped to host this event in Q1 2024 for World Wetlands Day. In the meantime, community groups will be supported through training in succession planning.

Figure 6 Inspecting the moth trap, Cloncrow Bog Study visit, Tyrellspass, Co. Westmeath

Figure 5 John Lusby, Birdwatch Ireland speaking at Carrowbehy/Caher Bog Study Visit, Gorthaganny, Co. Roscommon

Advanced Facebook and Advanced Instagram Training

Sandra Hennessey, a consultant from Be Dynamic, was hired to deliver training to community groups on the use of Facebook and Instagram for beginners. The training took place online over two 2.5 hour sessions in February 2023. Social media is an excellent and free tool available to community groups to engage with their community and to highlight their work and achievements locally as well as to raise awareness of their local bog.

Participants' feedback on the training was positive overall. All respondents said that they learned something new from the training. The training covered scheduling of posts, how to use AI to make it easier to write posts for social media, and the importance of posting consistently across your platforms.

Canva Training

On the back of the social media training, the participants were introduced to Canva and wished to learn how to use it. Sandra Hennessey facilitated again with a 2.5-hour online workshop. Canva is a free and easy to use graphic design tool that can be used for making posters, signage, social media posts, leaflets, etc. Participants found the training useful and have been using Canva since to make social media posts and posters for their own projects on a budget.

Managing Visitor and Public Behaviour on Sensitive Landscapes: an interpretive approach

Participants in the interpretation and conservation training course were keen to learn more about managing public and visitor behaviour on peatlands, as were other groups we engage with. Deborah Benham was approached to deliver an online workshop on the subject of 'the authority of the resource' and how best to use it to reduce harm to protected sites.

This is another tool community groups can use to protect vulnerable bird and plant species on their bogs, while educating their visitors and the public on the importance of protecting these habitats. This will ensure that groups are prepared for an increase in numbers and have the tools to engage with visitors who may, unknowingly, cause damage to the bog.

Figure 5 Study Visit to Carrowbehy/Caher Bog, Gorthaganny, Co. Roscommon

Study Visits

Four study visits were hosted by four different community groups with peatland projects around the JT region in Q2. There were three aims of the study visits.

1. Facilitate the exchange of knowledge, best practices, and experience between the host group and attendees
2. Provide a networking opportunity for host group and attendees
3. Illuminate the effectiveness of community-led and / or community-supported peatland projects for transition and sustainable community development

The study visit hosts were:

- Cloughjordan Community Development Association – Scohaboy Bog and Sopwell Woodland (SAC)
- Kilteevan Tidy Towns – Cloonlarge Bog Loop (Lough Ree SAC)
- Gorthaganny Development Committee – Carrowbehy/Caher Bog (SAC)
- ETHOS – Cloncrow Bog (NHA), Tyrellspass Village Trail

Host organisations invited local authority staff, members of their groups, local National Parks and Wildlife Service rangers, and we invited people of interest in the Just Transition area, including CWF members and CCWP project participants, as well as people working in the environmental, tourism, conservation and community development sectors. The study visits were advertised in local newspapers and on CCWP social media platforms. The Cloonlarge Bog Loop was covered by the Roscommon Herald twice, and Cloncrow Bog was covered by the Westmeath Examiner.

A factsheet for each site was developed to provide attendees with a written case study featuring the history of the bog and the community groups' peatland project. Each factsheet outlines the project work to date, the achievements of the community peatland project, the benefits to the wider community, the challenges they face, and their goals for the future of the project. These factsheets are available for download on the Community Wetlands Forum website.

A companion blog on the CWF website was also posted highlighting the benefits of community-led or community-supported peatland projects in the transition process for sustainable development, citing the projects on the study visit. The blog can be read here.

Figure 6 Study Visit to Cloonlarge Bog Loop, Kilteevan, Co. Roscommon

Attendees were asked to complete an evaluation form following the study visit they attended. We received 13 responses. The majority of respondents said they attended because they were interested in learning about community peatland projects and benefited most from hearing from the stakeholders and experts involved with the projects. All respondents said they would attend another study visit if organised. Participants were asked to share a positive outcome from attending the study visit:

"Great to meet project leaders and wonderful to witness first-hand the work completed…[I] learned so much."

"Making connections with like-minded community activists."

"Gained insight into the work other CWF members were involved with."

"Learning the depth of the bog and how that impacts the environment was eye opening."

"Talking with experts increasing my knowledge…"

The feedback from attendees confirms that the study visits met their objectives in facilitating the exchange of knowledge, best practice, and experiences, as well as providing a networking opportunity and illuminating the work of the host projects.

Review of Pilot Mentoring Programme

A review of the Pilot Mentoring Programme was carried out by Office Training Solutions. Mentors and mentees were asked to complete a survey (Appendix 2), the results of which were compiled by OTS and shared with the project coordinator. Feedback from mentor and mentees was honest and gave a clear insight into the mentor and mentee experience of the pilot. The majority of mentees felt that the programme met their expectations, but improvements were needed:

"The programme was too short."

"Difficult to have meetups with mentor during the week"

"Running this programme during the winter months can be difficult as shorter days and difficult to get people out onto bogs"

"Increase the amount of time mentor and mentee should make contact."

Figure 7 Entrance to the Lilliput Way, Cloonlarge Bog Loop

Mentees felt that they had mostly or partly achieved the goals they had set out in their application forms for the programme, but that six months was a short period of time to achieve them. Mentees shared what was most effective for them from the experience:

"It gave use direction when we needed it."

"Our group has gained considerable knowledge, and without the programme, we would be chasing out tails."
"We got to reignite our motivation…"

A review session with the mentors took place in March and the outcome resulted in eight recommendations for the programme.

These are:

1. Develop a <u>mandatory</u> *Mentee Induction workshop*.

2. Investigate the possibility of an *open-ended flexible Mentoring Programme*.

3. Schedule *Mentor Standardisation Meetings*

4. Develop a *Mentor Skills Matrix* detailing current mentors' skills and knowledge to support multiple mentors per mentee.

5. Revisit the *Pre NEC-Phases of Mentoring* to ensure mentoring sessions are structured.

6. Include an *onsite mentor visit* as part of the allocated mentor visits.

7. Develop a *Mentee Evaluation Debriefing Workshop* to include progression routes for mentees as appropriate.

8. Capture *testimonials* from the evaluation process to support recruiting new mentors and mentees.

These recommendations were taken on board and are currently being applied to the mentoring programme. The improved Peer-to-Peer Mentoring Programme was launched in Q3 2023 and will be reported on in the end-of-year report.

Figure 8 Study visit, Scohaboy Bog, Cloughjordan, Co. Tipperary

Seminars and Webinars

Build you Bog Knowledge Series

Elements of Stream Two of the training framework (see Appendix 3) are being delivered via a seminar series titled 'Build Your Bog Knowledge'. This is an extension of the previous online series in 2022 that covered topics in Stream One of the framework. The series is also informed by feedback from participants who participated in the previous webinar series.

In November 2022, we hosted a seminar titled 'How to Restore a Bog…Part One'. Part Two of this talk took place via webinar in Q1 of 2023 with presentations from community-led restoration projects. This session was recorded and is available on the Connecting Communities with Peatlands YouTube Channel.

The most recent instalment of the series took place in Q1, Introduction to Citizen Science with Oisin Duffy from the National Biodiversity Data Centre. There was great interest in this webinar as Oisin showed how to record biodiversity, and discussed the different campaigns and the best time of year to record for different species. This webinar was recorded and is available on the YouTube Channel.

Night Walk on Clara Bog with Dark Sky Ireland

In Q1 we partnered with Dark Sky Ireland to deliver a walk and talk at Clara Bog to highlight the importance of dark skies for biodiversity and to explore the possibility of night-time tourism on the bog. The Dark Sky Ireland team presented a talk at the Clara Bog Visitor Centre before we toured the boardwalk at night on Clara Bog.

The focus of the talk was how to improve the darkness of our skies, and the impact of bright artificial light on animal species in the area. The walk included aspects of astronomy and biodiversity, and has encouraged the Clara Heritage Society to plan for Dark Sky friendly lighting in the town of Clara over the Christmas period.

Social Media

Twitter	January- June 2023
Tweets 63	Tweet impressions 41.6K
Engagements 1,921	Retweets 199
New followers 148	Total follows 754

Table 3

Facebook		January- June 2023	
Facebook Page Reach 6,781		Page visits 741	
Page New Likes 35		Paid Reach 248	
Paid impressions 2,443			

Table 4

Instagram	August- December 2022
Instagram Reach 1,580	Profile Visits 273
New Followers 196	

Table 5

YouTube	January - June 2023
Subscribers 12	Total view of videos 397

Most views on one video 98	

Table 6

Conclusion

The Connecting Communities with Peatlands project has delivered on the majority of its targets for Qs 1 and 2 of 2023. The project has reached its targets relating to regional workshops as well as capacity building training courses for communities and supporting communities to network with one another.

This report has highlighted the success for the pilot Mentoring Programme and the requirements to improve the programme before relaunching. The eight recommendations from the review process were adopted and have been applied to the improved Peer-to-Peer Mentoring Programme. A review and report of the programme will be carried out before year-end and included in the December report.

The benefit of the study visits to community-led or community-supported peatland projects is evident in this report. The study visits connected people from across the sectors that have an interest in peatland projects. This enabled the host community to showcase their project to a wider audience and their achievements to local and regional authority representatives. Building relationships with such officials has the potential to open new opportunities for their projects. Similarly, the networking and learning experiences for attendees from other peatland projects was invaluable. The study visits also attracted interest from local people and tourists who were interested in learning more about peatlands.

The Connecting Communities with Peatlands project continues to achieve its overall objectives of building community capacity, empowering peatland projects, providing a networking platform to share know-how, skills and best practice, and supporting communities to protect and manage their bogs.

Figure 9 Serenade on the bog by the Song Club, Cloncrow Bog

Appendix 1

Interpretation and Conservation Planning Training Course Content

Session one of the course content included the following:

Day One

Introduction to interpretation & interpreters

- Benefits of interpretation in conservation & stewardship

- Interpretive principles

- Role of interpretive guides

- Personal and site goals

Carpool to local bog

Visit interpretation centre, short tour from local representative

Bog based activity

Day Two

- Reflect on site based activity

Developing interpretation and guiding skills

Knowing your resource & telling its stories

Engaging with your audience

Programme design skills (1)

Short activity with your meaningful object

Day Three

Programme design skills (2)

Programme design skills (3)

- Closing session

Appendix 2

Mentor Survey

As we are now at the end of the pilot Mentoring Programme in order to assist in its' review, we are keen to access your feedback as a mentor.

With this in mind could I ask for 10 to 15 minutes of your time to answer the questions on this survey.

The combined responses to these questions will help measure the overall perception of the Mentoring Programme and assist in achieving the review objectives i.e.,

- Highlight what has worked well on the Mentoring Programme

- Identify benefits and barriers of the Mentoring Programme

- Recognise support needs of mentors and mentees.

- Explore the impact the Mentoring Programme has had on mentees

- Recommend required adjustments to the Mentoring Programme to enhance impact.

Please be as honest in your responses and rest assured all your responses will be held in the strictest confidence and used only for the purpose of improving the Mentoring Programme moving forward.

1. How would you rate your overall experience with the mentor program?
   <u>Response options</u>: not good, average, good, very good, excellent
2. Please comment on your scoring of previous question.
3. How participative was your mentee[s] in their mentoring programme?
   <u>Response options</u>: not at all participative, not so participative, somewhat participative, very participative, extremely participative.
4. Please comment on your scoring of previous question.
5. What was most effective about the mentor programme?
6. What are the things [if any] you felt could be improved on the mentor programme?
7. What did you see as the main barriers [if any] to the success of the mentor programme?
8. What do you need [if anything] to support you to be an effective mentor?
9. Any other Comments?

Mentee Survey

As we are now at the end of the pilot Mentoring Programme in order to assist in its' review, we are keen to access your feedback as a mentee.

With this in mind could I ask for **10 to 15 minutes** of your time to answer the questions on this survey.

The combined responses to these questions will help measure the overall perception of the Mentoring Programme and assist in achieving the review objectives i.e.,

- Highlight what has worked well on the Mentoring Programme

- Identify benefits and barriers of the Mentoring Programme

- Recognise support needs of mentors and mentees.

- Explore the impact the Mentoring Programme has had on mentees

- Recommend required adjustments to the Mentoring Programme to enhance impact.

 Please be as honest in your responses and rest assured all your responses will be held in the strictest confidence and used only for the purpose of improving the Mentoring Programme moving forward.

1. Did your mentoring programme meet your expectations?
   <u>Response options</u>: not at all, somewhat, very much
2. Please comment on your scoring of the previous question.
3. As a mentee what do you see as the key benefits of the mentoring programme?
4. What changes have you made/actions have you taken as a result of being mentored?
5. Please comment on your scoring of the previous question.
6. What was most effective about the mentor programme for you as a mentee?
7. What are the things [if any] you felt could be improved on the mentor programme?
8. What did you see as the main barriers [if any] to the success of the mentor programme?
9. Looking at your application how would you rate your achievement of the goal[s]/outcome[s] you listed for the mentoring programme;
   <u>Response options</u>: not achieved to any extent, partly achieved, mostly achieved, totally achieved
10. Please comment on your scoring of the previous question.
11. What is the key knowledge and/or skills/ you gained from your mentor to assist achieve your goal[s]/outcome[s]?
12. Any other Comments?

Appendix 3

Stream 1: Knowledge and understanding of wetlands (local and global context)
Natural sciences
Wetland habitats; types of wetlands; wetlands in the context of the wider landscape
Flora – species identification in relation to the main plant groups (algae, mosses, liverworts, lichens, clubmosses, sedges, grass, rushes, herbs, etc.)
Fauna – species identification in relation to the main animal groups (invertebrates, birds, mammals, reptiles, etc.)
Other species: Fungi
Hydrology, hydrogeology
Soils, geology
Understanding the water/soil/vegetation nexus with respect to wetlands
Climate regulation and the important role of wetlands, particularly peatlands (fens and bogs)
Local to global context of wetlands; local to global conservation measures
Palaeoecology; evolution of wetlands; context in geological time
Land use/historical use context (links with management)
Ecosystem services: provisioning (food, medicine), regulating (GHG), supporting, cultural (physical and monetary values)
Natural Capital accounts and accounting: site (habitat) extent and condition; risk register, etc.
Stream 2: Conservation or site management planning
Appreciation / Interpretation (links with natural sciences and management):
Heritage – natural and built, cultural
Archaeology
Folklore, storytelling
Art – visual, spoken, written, drama, dance, photography, etc.
The role of social media
Education / Interpretation
Terminology (glossary) – jargon buster (how to translate science into understandable pieces)
Interaction – how to organise and deliver events, walks, talks, etc.
How to survey and monitor wetland habitats and species (links with natural sciences)
Linking with established education providers
Learning through creative interaction
Interpretation – targeting users and audiences
Recreation / Interpretation
Health and well-being
Access
Boardwalks, gates, stiles, fencing, etc.
Signage

Restoration/ Conservation
Planning for restoration: What are we trying to restore and why? Community engagement? Statutory body engagement? Timeframes?
Funding streams for restoration
Practical restoration: designing, building and maintaining dams
Water (hydrological management) management – inputs and outputs
Planting (surface stabilisation)
Fencing
Predator Control
Dealing with invasive species
Infrastructure provision
Appropriate Assessment screening and / or Natura Impact Statements (NIS)
Stream 3: General management / stewardship
Developing a site management plan (links with the full list below)
Ownership of the wetland area (land register, title, rights, etc.)
Pressures / threats to the site; surrounding land-use
Insurance/liability in relation to group activities and the wetland site
Leases/licences in relation to the wetland site (understanding land title)
Health and safety
Fire management plan
Flood management plan
Pest/disease management plan
Legislation/policy (Wildlife Act, Birds and Habitats Directives, Planning and Development Act, planning, signage, etc.) – global, national, regional, local
Governance – group and site governance
Funding / potential revenue streams / managing finance
Linking in with international, national, regional and local development plans and events/calendars
How to co-ordinate a technical advisory group
Stream 4: Enabling community groups
Leadership (social and collective)
Conflict resolution / negotiation
Mentoring
Group intelligence
Appreciative Inquiry or strength-based management
Group motivation
Training the trainer
Establishing a common vision, purpose (vision, mission, values, goals, etc.)
Developing a site management plan (links with general management above)
Succession planning
Facilitation of workshops, events, meetings, etc.