**Report of CWF Development Officer at AGM 2024**

I began my role as CWF Development Officer, contracted to Irish Rural Link in July 2022. Since then, the Community Wetlands Forum has gone from strength to strength, with new members joining, and funding increasing year on year. It has been a pleasure to work alongside Aoife Kirk, project coordinator of the Connecting Communities With Peatlands project, and the CWF Steering Group and Board.

A decision was taken by the steering group of the CWF in late 2022 to formally proceed with the establishment of a new CLG structure for the Community Wetlands Forum, establishing it as an independent company. This work has been led out by the Board of Directors of the CWF, with support of the steering group and its members. It has been a pleasure to play my role in this transition, in particular, through my work in organising the Ministerial launch of the new CLG in December 2023 and the coordination of the development of the new strategic plan, which is being launched today.

As with any significant change or transition, it has not been without its challenges, particularly in terms of the interim period while new structures and modes of operating have been put in place. However, the Board has impressively and diligently steered the organisation to its new status in quick time, and in a highly professional manner. This has not been an easy task, and is a major undertaking for a voluntary Board, and the many hours of work involved, are testimony to the great affection and dedication that the members of the CWF have for the organisation and what it means to them. The Board have provided management and HR support, and I am pleased that new ways of working, including reporting structures are working well, notwithstanding the fact that this work of the Board remains voluntary. From a staff perspective, it would be important that the Board is increased in size and strengthened, in order to ensure continuity and a spread of workload. The implementation of the Strategic Plan and the ensuing operational plan will likely further clarify and consolidate the working relationship between the Board and staff, and the division of responsibilities.

So far in 2024, the theme has been one of consolidation and steady growth. As Development Officer, I have organised one members meeting in February 2024, as well as a study trip and networking workshop in Newtownforbes on 3rd of February, to mark world wetlands day. I have continued to work with and facilitate the development of the artists sub group within the CWF, a group of artists, and creative practitioners whose work offers a cultural and creative response to wetlands and our interaction with them. In facilitating networking and promotion of artists within the CWF, I launched a webinar series “Creativity for the Wetlands: Arts Connecting people and wetlands” on 1 February, the eve of World Wetlands Day, with Tina Claffey. This has been well received, and I look forward to the continued development of this innovative sub group. I have also liaised with the Board in overseeing the membership application process, consolidating our existing membership base, and putting in place a new system for prospective and new applicants. Today’s workshop in Ballydangan, highlights the interest that there is in the Community Wetlands Forum and our model, and the potential to work collaboratively with other organisations and players to ensure communities are empowered to protect, manage and act as stewards over local wetlands, in partnership with others. Such an approach really drive positive and much needed social and environmental change, however, from our perspective, it must be managed carefully, and we ought to be aware of the demands that may be placed on us from various quarters. The interest in the CWF has also been evident in terms of invitations and requests to speak at events, and features in the media. This year, I have been invited to and spoken at meetings and events of Ramsar Ireland, Cork Nature Network and Teagasc Signpost series, as well as participating in the “Ours to Protect” feature on Radio Nova. The CWF and its members have also featured in a number of national media outlets.

Over the summer, I look forward to organising a workshop for members which will look at issues connected with leases, ownership, and access to wetland sites for community led projects. In the coming weeks, I will also be contacting all members and having conversations about their current plans, needs and expectations from the CWF.

Today’s AGM marks an important milestone for the new CLG, and I look forward to playing a part in the continued success of the organisation.