

# The National Parks and Wildlife Service Strategic Plan

2023-25



**NPWS**

An tSeirbhís Páirceanna  
Náisiúnta agus Fiadhúlra  
National Parks and Wildlife  
Service



Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland





Image: Glendalough, County Wicklow





## Contents

Foreword from Minister Darragh O'Brien	01
Foreword from Minister Malcolm Noonan	02
Director General's Foreword	03
Introduction	05
NPWS Management Committee	07
NPWS Mission	09
NPWS Values	10
NPWS Key Strategic Goals	11
NPWS Core Areas of Focus	12
Directorates	13
Scientific Advice and Research	15
Nature Conservation	17
National Parks and Nature Reserves	19
Licencing, Legislation and Guidance	21
Wildlife Enforcement and Nature Protection	23
Engagement, Corporate and Specialist Supports	25
People and NPWS	27

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[npws.ie](http://npws.ie)

**Front Cover Image:** The Colleen Bawn Rock, Muckcross Lake, Killarney National Park, County Kerry



## Foreword from Minister Darragh O'Brien

I am delighted, together with my colleague Minister of State Malcolm Noonan, to publish the first Strategic Plan for the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). This is an important milestone for this Organisation. It is appropriate, as it continues its process of reform and renewal, to now set out its values and mission, as well as the strategic goals for the protection of Ireland's nature.

The NPWS plays an important role in protecting nature and supporting biodiversity and that role is growing and becoming increasingly more important as we seek to address the climate and biodiversity crisis and deliver on our national and international commitments in this area. We have an ambitious vision for our National Parks and Nature Reserves and for nature conservation and protection. It is vital that we have a resilient and effective NPWS

to develop and lead on policy, provide the scientific advice and data required and deliver a complex range of functions and services that is required on a day to day basis.

I wish to acknowledge the huge contribution of the National Parks and Wildlife staff and thank them most sincerely, for their tireless hard work and dedication to ensure the protection of Ireland's natural heritage. I also wish to thank those who contributed to the development of this Plan through participation in the public consultation process.

The Plan has its origins in the Strategic Action Plan developed under the Programme for Government which reviewed the remit, status and funding of the NPWS. That independent, multi-phase review informs this Strategic Plan and sets out a clear pathway to build on these positive

developments to ensure that the NPWS is fit for purpose and can deliver on its core mandate in the coming years and decades. It will make the NPWS a more resilient, more effective organisation, fit to meet the challenges of the twenty first century.

This successful delivery of this Plan is important for all of us. I look forward to working with the NPWS, under the leadership of Niall Ó Donnchú, colleagues in Government, communities and heritage organisations, to ensure that the resources and policies are in place to implement this Strategic Plan.

**Darragh O'Brien TD**

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage





## Foreword from **Minister Malcolm Noonan**

The publication of the first National Parks and Wildlife Service Strategic Plan is a significant moment for the organisation and puts in place a coherent, ambitious Plan to improve nature and biodiversity in Ireland for the period to 2026.

When the Dáil declared a biodiversity and climate emergency in 2019, I knew that my most important task as Minister for Heritage and Electoral Reform would be to demonstrate leadership on nature and create a positive legacy for the future.

This work was started from a difficult place: the majority of our EU-protected habitats are in unfavourable conservation status with almost half declining further, a third of wild bee species are close to extinction, 60% of birds are Red- or Amber-listed, 30% of species are of inadequate or bad status, 30% of our semi-natural grasslands have been lost in the last ten years. This, in the context

of long-standing resource challenges and a need for organisational renewal, was a stark challenge.

My priority, as it has always been, is the protection, conservation and restoration of Ireland's biodiversity. To achieve this, Ireland requires a properly resourced, staffed and equipped National Parks and Wildlife Service. The Strategic Action Plan supports that objective and empowers the NPWS to play its part in our collective response to the biodiversity emergency, both at home and on the international stage. I welcome this Plan as a clear expression of how NPWS intends to drive the change required to halt and reverse the declines outlined above.

The forthcoming Nature Restoration Regulation will present further opportunities and challenges to Ireland, the NPWS and our stakeholders. The proposed Regulation provides an opportunity for transformative

change in relation to achieving nature restoration in Ireland and the EU as a whole, which I strongly welcome.

Finally, and most importantly, I would like to echo Minister O'Brien's recognition of and thanks to the dedicated staff of the NPWS all across the country who have contributed so much, often under challenging circumstances, to the organisation and to nature and wildlife in Ireland. I look forward to working closely and collaboratively with the NPWS's staff and stakeholders on the implementation of this Plan.

**Malcolm Noonan TD**

Minister for Heritage and Electoral Reform



## Director General's Foreword

It gives me great pleasure to present the first Strategic Plan for the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

As a country entering our second century of nationhood, we stand at a point of inflection on how we serve nature. Business as usual is not an option. The necessity for a changed relationship with nature is self-evident. The National Parks and Wildlife Service is at the forefront of our country's response to our nature crisis and biodiversity imperatives.

We cannot work alone. In championing a better engagement with nature, our dedicated team will work in partnership with citizens, landowners, communities, NGOs, businesses, agencies, researchers and all our stakeholders. In addition, we, with them, will deliver better outcomes for nature.

Our mission is readily understood. **Protect Nature.** Two words we want to see whenever the possibility of a trade-off

with nature arises. Moreover, two words we wish to see wherever a concession to or of biodiversity arises. This calls for new thinking, creativity, openness and a new paradigm of nature as a societal good. A loss for nature is a loss for society. Support for nature does not mean not supporting something else. NPWS is not in the zero sum business.

Our Strategic Plan grounds us in the business of partnership, collective effort and collegiality on nature and in sharing all of nature's gains with all sectors of society.

Le gach dea ghuí.

**Niall Ó Donnchú**

Director General







Image: Cronin's Yard, County Kerry



## Introduction

Ireland's National Parks and Wildlife Service has a proud history. It carries a complex range of responsibilities. These range from significant policy and advisory functions, to operational responsibilities in the National Parks and Nature Reserves, conservation, compliance, licensing, nature and biodiversity and as a statutory consultee on planning. This first Strategic Plan for the National Parks and Wildlife Service sets out the core mission and values of the NPWS, together with our key strategic priorities for 2023-2025.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service 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.

This Strategic Plan has been informed by a public consultation process. The views of members of the public and private sector organisations were heard and many of the views expressed are reflected in this Plan.

It is clear from submissions that our Parks and Nature Reserves are places of learning, reflection and recreation and are held in high esteem by those who visit them. It is clear too that the challenges facing nature are understood by our stakeholders and this Strategic Plan is reflective of that too.

The Strategic Plan also reflects the findings and recommendations of recent reviews established to advise on the structure and renewal of the organisation to ensure that it is fit for the immense challenges of protecting nature and biodiversity in the years ahead. The Strategic Plan is grounded in the new Directorate structure of the NPWS while also acknowledging the crosscutting nature of the challenges we face in delivering on our mission, which is to **Protect Nature**.

The NPWS has been sustained through decades by truly dedicated and expert people. For them, the past and current members of the NPWS team and their colleagues and our stakeholders, the 2022 'Strategic Action Plan for the Renewal of

the National Parks and Wildlife Service' represents a step-change in momentum, building on the work of many years, and the very significant gains for the organisation in recent budgets. Implementation of the Action Plan for the renewal of the NPWS is a key priority for the organisation, with the full support of Minister O'Brien, Minister of State Noonan, and Government. The end-result will be an NPWS that is more resilient, more stable, with a stronger identity of its own, better able to drive and lead change. This Strategic Plan sets a clear ambition to Protect Nature, support our staff, improve communication and it puts a much stronger focus on delivery for nature and for the public.







## NPWS Management Committee

The 2022 Action Plan fundamentally changes the NPWS internal structure to six new directorates clustered around functional responsibilities:

- Scientific Advice and Research
- Nature Conservation
- National Parks and Nature Reserves
- Engagement, Corporate and Specialist Supports
- Licensing, Legislation and Guidance
- Wildlife Enforcement and Nature Protection

Each is headed up by a Director, reporting to the Director General. Collectively, the Director General and the Directors form the NPWS Management Committee.





## NPWS Management Committee Members

**Niall Ó Donnchú**  
Director General



**Ciara Carberry**  
Director of Nature  
Conservation



**Suzanne Nally**  
Director of Wildlife  
Enforcement and Nature  
Protection



**Malachy Corcoran**  
Director of Engagement,  
Corporate and Specialist  
Supports



**Dr Andy Bleasdale**  
Director of Scientific  
Advice and Research



**Sorcha de Brúch**  
Director of Licensing,  
Legislation and Guidance



**Catriona Ryan**  
Director of National Parks  
and Nature Reserves



**Áinle Ní Bhriain**  
Director of International  
and EU Engagement





# NPWS Mission

The mission of the NPWS is to **Protect Nature**

Image: Torc Waterfall, Killarney National Park





## NPWS Values



A deep love of nature, and a commitment to its care and safeguarding.



Partnership, teamwork and excellence, and a well-grounded pride in our professionalism and scientific integrity.



A strong identity and a trusted voice for nature.



Transparency and accountability in our decision-making.



Excellence in the service we deliver to the public.



## NPWS Key Strategic Goals

### Overall key strategic goals for the organisation in 2022-2025 are:

- Provide excellent scientific advice, to the NPWS, the Minister and the Government to support the protection of nature.
- Drive, support and manage excellence in nature conservation in Ireland.
- Safeguard nature and help prevent wildlife crime through enhanced supports, operations, policies, education and awareness.
- Manage our national parks and nature reserves for nature conservation as well as for education and public access for the enjoyment of nature.
- Deliver a strong, effective legislative basis for nature protection.
- Develop and deliver excellent internal and external engagement and strong corporate governance and business supports.
- Support nature protection through excellent EU and international engagement.

In developing these strategic goals, the NPWS knows that it exists in a complex environment; this includes the multiple stakeholders and operators in the wider environmental protection and enhancement arena. NPWS will collaborate and cooperate with these stakeholders. Notwithstanding the considerable time that NPWS staff currently devote to supporting cross sectoral and interdepartmental initiatives and working groups, NPWS is acutely aware of the need to further develop and deepen these relationships over the lifetime of this Plan. In addition, many environmental NGOs do invaluable work. Citizens and landowners are our country's first responders to nature, and its ultimate guardians, Organisations including the Heritage Council, the Office of Public Works (OPW), the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Uisce Éireann, the Marine Institute, Waterways Ireland, Inland Fisheries Ireland, Coillte, Bord Na Móna, An Garda Síochána,

the National Biodiversity Data Centre, the Universities and Local Authorities and Government Departments are each essential to the nature challenge.





## NPWS Core Areas of Focus

- Support nature-related decision-making at all levels of Irish society through enhanced and user-friendly guidance, sharing of best practice, advice, support and enforcement.
- Foster community and societal engagement with nature and biodiversity, through effective communication, engagement and volunteerism.
- Enhance NPWS leadership, workforce excellence and build capacity.
- Expand and develop NPWS infrastructure and facilities.
- Deliver organisational transformation as set out in the NPWS Strategic Action Plan.



# Directorates



Image: Derryclare Lough, Connemara, Galway







## Scientific Advice and Research

Provision of scientific advice and evidence; centralised function for applied research and analysis within NPWS

### Strategic Goals Over the Next Three Years

- Build the scientific evidence base to inform national approaches to nature conservation, protection and restoration.
- Provide the necessary scientific underpinning to fulfil obligations under the Nature Directives, to underpin site designation and to inform ongoing management.
- Provide scientific and technical inputs to assist in the delivery of the EU Biodiversity Strategy and Nature Restoration Regulation in an Irish context.
- Lead on development, evaluation and implementation of policy and strategies relating to biodiversity, including the National Biodiversity Action Plan.

### Strategies

- Enhance staff resources to support the provision of appropriate and high quality scientific advice, to inform national policy.
- Collaborate with the wider research community to develop best practice approaches to nature conservation and restoration.
- Develop programmes and agreements in collaboration with research institutions and universities to support the development of scientific expertise in line with the strategic goals of the NPWS.
- Develop processes and standards for improved collection, storage, dissemination and use of scientific data.

### Key Programmes, Projects and Initiatives

- Optimise resourcing the Directorate by the end of 2024.
- Informed by the independent International Comparator Review, enhance, as appropriate the staffing resource over the lifetime of this Plan to meet current and future challenges.
- Publish the National Biodiversity Action Plan by the end of 2023, and lead on its delivery over the lifetime of this Plan.
- Progress a series of agreements with universities in 2023 and over the lifetime of the Plan to initiate applied and policy relevant postgraduate research.
- Publish Site Specific Conservation Objectives for all our Natura 2000 sites by the end of 2024.
- Continue to fulfill all monitoring and reporting obligations required under the Nature Directives.





**Dr Andy Bleasdale**  
Director of Scientific  
Advice and Research



# Nature Conservation

Conservation measures and incentives, peatlands conservation and restoration, Waterways Ireland and Shared Island/North-South capital projects

## Strategic Goals Over the Next Three Years

- Implement an effective, transparent and evidence-based approach to designation of protected sites in Ireland, in accordance with national and international obligations to Protect Nature.
- Develop and roll out a comprehensive programme of conservation measures across Ireland's Natura network.
- Support initiatives to protect and safeguard Ireland's natural heritage, inside and outside designated sites.

## Strategies

- Develop and implement an effective system to link conservation objectives with the necessary measures to deliver those objectives, including, where appropriate, via management plans for sites.
- Operate a significant programme of incentives and supports for conservation measures at Natura sites.
- Foster effective and trusted links with stakeholders to support more effective and collaborative approaches to nature protection.
- Develop an intuitive and user-friendly technical mechanism for the recording of information about Ireland's Natura network, including a comprehensive database of objectives and measures at Special Protection Areas and Special Areas of Conservation.

## Key Programmes, Projects and Initiatives

- Designations Programme – to complete formal designation of existing and new Natura sites within statutory timelines.
- Engagement and Awareness -engage with landowners and communities and work to improve public awareness and support for protections at designated sites and in the wider countryside.
- Conservation Measures Programme – to provide practical supports for a comprehensive programme of conservation measures at Natura sites.





**Ciara Carberry**  
Director of Nature  
Conservation

# National Parks and Nature Reserves

Operational management of our National Parks and Nature Reserves including visitors, facilities and site management, while prioritising nature conservation

## Strategic Goals Over the Next Three Years

- Support sustainable tourism and public access for recreational and educational needs, while ensuring the enhanced protection and preservation of the natural environments of all our National Parks and Nature Reserves.
- Ensure best practice in visitor facilities and in their maintenance and management, including in relation to interpretation, safety and accessibility.
- Deliver an education programme of excellence, consistent across all sites.
- Ensure protection of nature conservation value of parks and reserves through promotion of sustainable use and prevention of potentially adverse uses.

## Strategies

- Develop National Park management plans to incorporate both visitor management and nature conservation.
- Deliver conservation management programs for habitats and species within our National Parks and Nature Reserves including incorporating actions from the National Biodiversity Plan, Species Action Plans and Threat Response Plans.
- Develop a focused education and awareness programme that is consistent across all sites.
- Facilitate a work environment that fosters excellence in standards and customer engagement.

## Key Programmes, Projects and Initiatives

- Implement new Management structure for National Parks by Q2 2023.
- Publish National Park management plans with full public consultation and appropriate environmental assessments and approved for final publication by Q4 2024.
- Update and develop key visitor facilities and interpretation at National Park sites.
- Approve national education and awareness programme.
- Work with colleagues to ensure appropriate professional, training and development programmes at all levels of the Agency.





**Catriona Ryan**  
Director of National Parks  
and Nature Reserves

Image: Burren National Park, County Clare



## Licensing, Legislation and Guidance

Ecological assessments, licensing (wildlife), legislation including Wildlife Acts, co-ordination of judicial review cases

### Strategic Goals Over the Next Three Years

- Review and recast of Wildlife Act and Birds and Habitats Regulations, and associated guidance.
- Targeted approach to provision of observations and advices on ecological aspects of work and building capacity for providing ecological advices and assessments within the Department.
- Increased efficiency of licensing process, and delivery of high quality customer service in delivery of licences issued under the Wildlife Acts, EC Birds and Habitats Regulations and EC (Licensing and Inspection of Zoos) Regulations.

### Strategies

- Review of existing guidance, regulations and legislation to assist in prioritising areas of legislation and or guidance to be updated.
- Delivery of assessment and advisory service on ecological issues.
- Development and roll out of e-Licensing for all wildlife licences.

### Key Programmes, Projects and Initiatives

- Review of regulations, delivery of Wildlife Amendment Bill 2016, commencement of wider review of Wildlife Act and Birds and Habitats Regulations.
- Establishment of Departmental Ecological Assessment Unit.
- e-Licensing to be rolled out incrementally throughout 2023, with a view to being in place for a range of licences in 2024.





**Sorcha de Brúch**  
Director of Licensing,  
Legislation and Guidance

# Wildlife Enforcement and Nature Protection

Enforcement and site protection, wildlife crime

## Strategic Goals Over the Next Three Years

- To develop policies and strategies for the prevention, detection and enforcement of breaches of international, EU and national nature legislation.
- Ensuring effective wildlife enforcement action in respect of illegal activities.
- Creating and maintaining an effective network to co-operate and co-ordinate a consistent approach to wildlife crime and nature protection.
- Increase awareness of the importance of Ireland's wildlife and habitats and the need for its protection, the impacts of wildlife crime and how to stay within the law.
- Ensure the enhanced protection of nature in nature reserves and the wider countryside for the enjoyment of all through sustainable management, accessibility and maintenance practices.

## Strategies

- Provide information and guidance, schemes, operational support and training to ensure effective compliance of nature legislation.
- Strengthen relationships with other key enforcement and regulatory authorities, agencies and stakeholders and undertake review of existing protocols in place between NPWS and other organisations.
- Develop a focused education and awareness nature protection and wildlife crime programme.
- Maintain controls in place for financial schemes and for NPWS in its role as regulator of the Enhanced Decommissioning, Rehabilitation and Restoration Scheme to support a Just Transition.
- Continued implementation of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) regulations through the CITES Management and Scientific Authorities.

## Key Programmes, Projects and Initiatives

- Review the existing wildlife crime (including CITES) and nature conservation priorities, assess and identify any new or emerging priorities and development of subsequent tactical responses.
- Identify and progress operational supports, training and guidance needs for wildlife crime enforcement and nature protection by Q4 2023.
- Develop a central database which records incidents of wildlife crime, as well as the details of prosecutions.
- Put in place a public portal for the reporting of wildlife crime incidences by Q4 2023.
- Review of RAPTOR protocol by Q4 2023
- Undertake a review of deterrence and on improving the enforceability of wildlife laws (ongoing).





**Suzanne Nally**  
Director of Wildlife Enforcement  
and Nature Protection

## Engagement, Corporate and Specialist Supports

Stakeholder engagement, IR, communications, secretariat to NPWS MB, ICT, Finance, Procurement advice and co-ordination

### Strategic Goals Over the Next Three Years

To develop, over the period of this plan, the capacity to:

- Deliver excellent support and service to the staff of NPWS and to external stakeholders through the provision of the full range of services within its remit.
- Enhance internal communications across all Directorates and staff in NPWS.
- Progress the Heritage ICT modernisation programme and improve our data integration and sharing.
- Ensure that the NPWS acts in line with best practice corporate governance standards at all times.
- Prepare for Ireland's Presidency of the EU Council in 2026.
- Increase Ireland's representation at International Nature and Biodiversity fora.
- Streamlining of system for provision of observations on developments.

### Strategies

- Provide the necessary resources to deliver on the ambition in the strategic goals.
- Develop protocol and training to assist staff in complying with best practice governance standards.
- Strengthen relationships with other EU Partners and member states.
- Develop Ireland's engagement across a range of Multinational Environmental Agreements.
- Drive Implementation of the NPWS Renewal Programme.

### Key Programmes, Projects and Initiatives

- Develop a communication strategy across all communication channels for internal and external communications.
- Enhance engagement with all stakeholders including the scheduling of regular conferences, seminars, workshops and so forth.
- Prepare an annual conference to facilitate staff engagement, learning and development across the Agency.
- ICT improvement projects under the ICT modernisation programme.





**Malachy Corcoran**

Director of Engagement, Corporate  
and Specialist Supports



**Áinle Ní Bhriain**

Director of International  
and EU Engagement



## People and NPWS

### The NPWS Team

- Investing in our people
- Working together
- Sharing knowledge
- Learning and development

### Civil Society and Community Organisations

- Better engagement
- Capacity-building
- Working in partnership
- Volunteerism

### Stakeholders

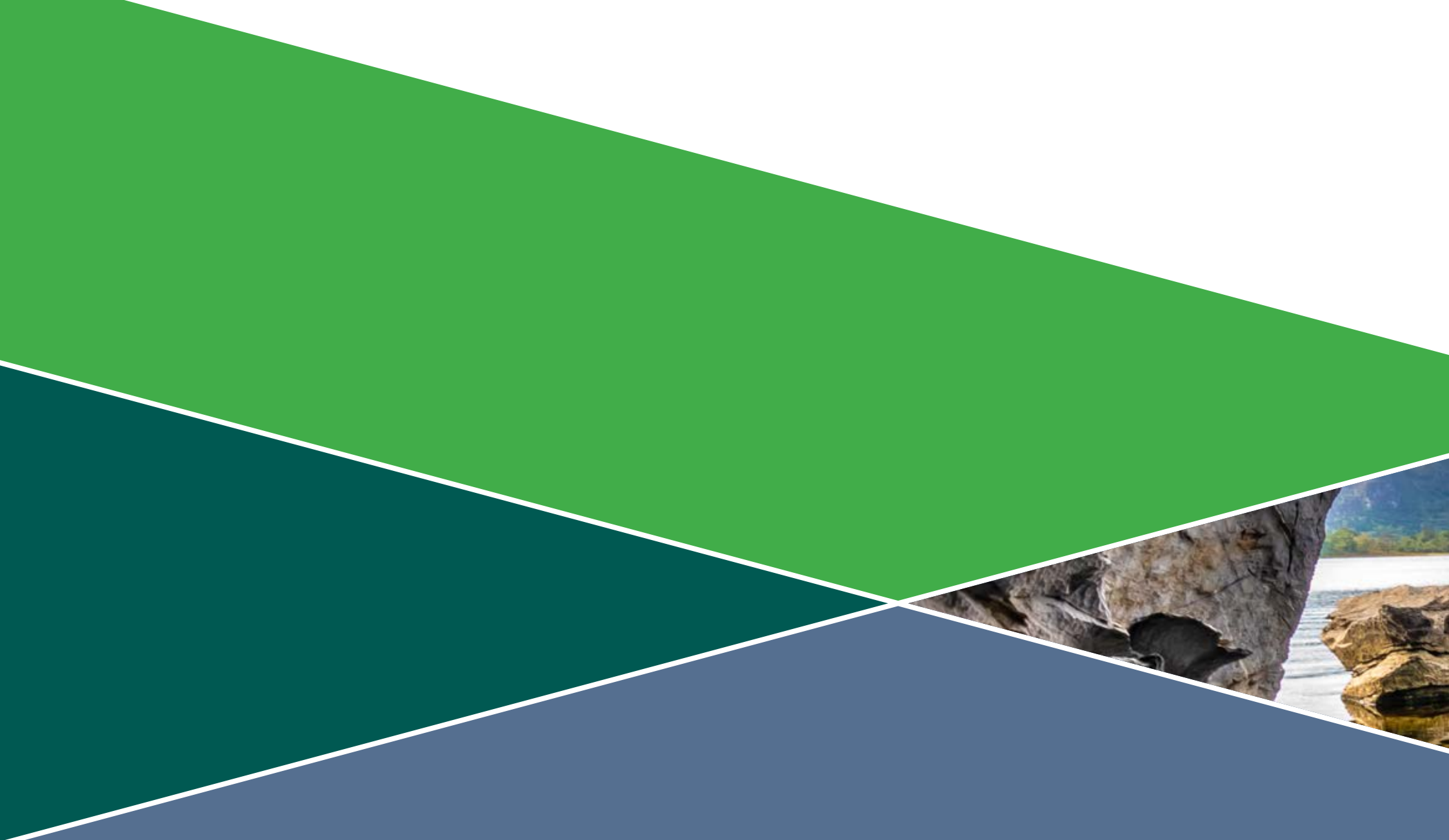
- Communication and engagement
- Shared priorities
- Managing data for our shared future







Image: Mount Errigal, County Donegal



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