

**ZERO WASTE ALLIANCE IRELAND IS FUNDED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF CLIMATE, ENERGY  
AND THE ENVIRONMENT THROUGH THE IRISH ENVIRONMENTAL NETWORK**

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## **IRISH ENVIRONMENTAL NETWORK WINTER CONFERENCE**

**Sunday 07 December 2025**

### **Report to the Board and Members of Zero Waste Alliance Ireland**

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

On 27 November 2025, we were delighted to hear about the Winter Conference being organised by the Irish Environmental Network (IEN), to which all IEN members and Public Participation Network (PPN) members were invited.

The conference would be held in the Midlands Park Hotel, Portlaoise, and the intention of IEN was that it would provide an opportunity for national and local groups from across the country to meet, make contacts, learn from speakers on a variety of topics requested throughout the year, and enjoy a festive dinner together.

The invitation stated that a small number of rooms would be made available in the hotel for the night of Saturday 06 December, for representatives of IEN member groups who would be travelling to Portlaoise during the previous evening, and would find it convenient stay overnight. This invitation was most welcome; and even though it was initially intended that only two people from each group would attend, the invitation was extended to more than two representatives.

Zero Waste Alliance Ireland members who attended, availed of the offer of an overnight stay in the Midlands Park Hotel, and participated in the conference were:

Ollan Herr, Vice-Treasurer and expert on wastewater treatment;

Janine Boscheinen, currently an intern with ZWAI and a member of Architects for Future;

Jack O'Sullivan, Vice-Chairman and a member of the County Westmeath Public Participation Network and Strategic Policy Committee on Environment, and a member of the Castlepollard Town Team; and,

Dalia Smelstoriūtė-O'Sullivan, family member of ZWAI.

All of us are extremely grateful to IEN, and especially to Alanagh Tennanty, Office Coordinator, and to Catherine O'Toole, Development Officer, for the opportunity to participate in this special event, to meet with other environmental NGO representatives, to renew old friendships, to make new contacts, and to engage in wide-ranging discussions and conversations.

## **2. PROGRAMME**

- 9:30 a.m. Refreshments and Registration
- 10:00 a.m. Welcome
- 10:10 a.m. Creative Networking Event
- 11:00 a.m. Strategic Planning for the Environment, a workshop with Oisín Coghlan, former CEO of Friends of the Earth Ireland, now an independent consultant working with IEN, to help shape the work of the IEN.
- 12:00 Break and snacks; time to meet and mingle.
- 12:50 p.m. Laois Public Participation Network Climate Action Project, with Dan Bergin, Laois PPN. Dan will describe 25 Years of the Abbeyleix Bog Project.
- 12:50 p.m. Moral & ethical dilemmas of using AI in your organisation, Rosi Leonard, Friends of the Earth.
- 13:50 p.m. Establishing and developing a volunteer network in your organisation, Stuart Garland, Volunteer Ireland.
- 14:50 p.m. Close.
- 15:00 p.m. Dinner.

## **3. CREATIVE NETWORKING**

There was a very good attendance, the hotel conference room being filled with representatives of many environmental NGOs from all around Ireland. Seating was initially in cabaret style or banquet style, at round tables evenly spread out throughout the space.

The networking event began at 10:10 a.m. with an introduction to the day, and continued immediately by people at each table introducing themselves to each other, to establish connections. Questions on the projection screen such as “What makes your heart sing”, made us feel more connected.

Participants also circulated around the room and grouped ourselves according to our responses to two questions: firstly, were the organisations which we

represented more national or more regional/local; and, secondly, which area of sustainability are each of us more concerned about (climate, nature, recycling, other). This very good exercise gave all of us a better understanding of the diversity of the environmental groups participating in the event.

It became clear that all of us have important work to do, and that we are actively concerned about many environmental and closely associated problems including: climate, nature, the need for recycling/reusing, sustainability, the circular economy, public transport, the built environment, poverty, inequality and social exclusion. The networking exercise also helped to show the interconnected nature of all these environmental issues.



**Figure 1. Irish Environmental Network Contact Card**

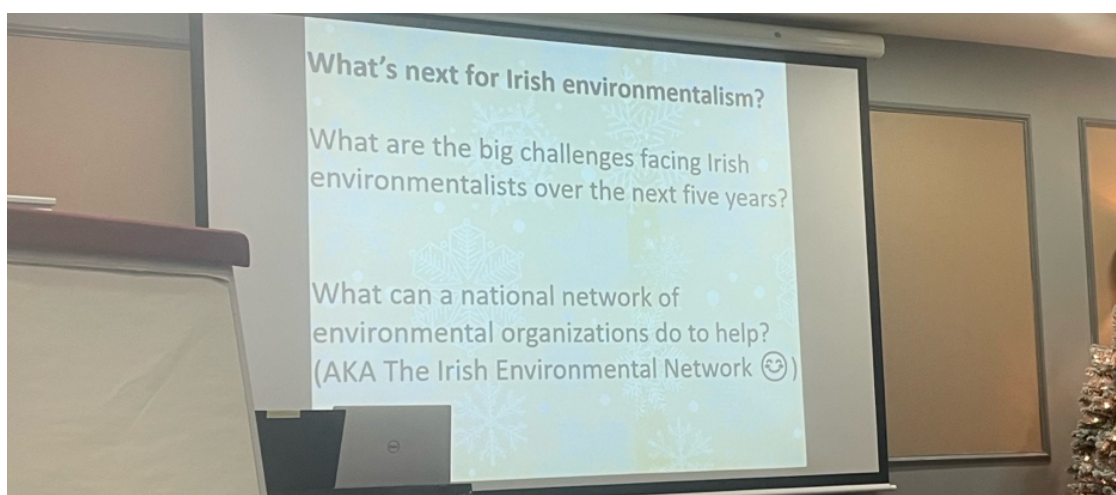
Participants were asked to complete “contact cards” which were distributed, to help us connect with other NGOs. Motivation to complete these cards was

increased by awarding prizes at the end of the event to people who had filled their cards with names of contacts they had made, the winners being chosen randomly.

#### 4. WORKSHOP ON STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, LED BY OISÍN COGHLAN

The first workshop began by asking two questions:

- **What are the big challenges facing Irish environmentalists over the next five years?**
- **What can a national network of environmental organisations do to help?**



**Figure 2. Workshop Questions**

After 20 minutes' discussion, all participants were asked to present the results from each table; and we could see similar answers, from all eight tables. Major challenges facing Irish environmentalists were, for example: the lobbying power of large-scale intensive agriculture ("Big Ag"), an increasing amount of divisions in society, environment fatigue, the rise of fascism and extremism, late stage capitalism, greenwashing, the deliberate spread of disinformation, the European Unions' current shift away from nature protection and towards "competitiveness", and more.

The second question was also very thought-provoking, and led to discussions about connections between environmental groups, why we would like to become more connected, and how we can better learn from each other's experiences, knowledge, and mistakes. Facilitating such connections is a challenge, as all of the NGOs are geographically spread around the country. While connections can be made and maintained via remotely held meetings, it is also essential to have in-person gatherings. On the whole, it was agreed by participants that together we can be stronger, find solutions faster and raise our motivation.

Before the mid-day break in the programme, participants at each table used large sheets of paper (provided), on which we noted briefly our most recent successes as NGOs. It was very motivating and uplifting to realise our own successes and also to read the successful actions of others.

## **6. 25 YEARS OF THE ABBEYLEIX BOG PROJECT**

Dan Bergin, Laois PPN, described 25 Years of the Abbeyleix Bog Project, which began in the year 2000 as a local action group, which has currently a lease on the bog, held in trust for the community.

He described the history of the bog, a typical example of one of the many raised bogs in the midlands. After the last ice age, the bog began to form in a lake-filled post-glacial depression; so that 10,000 years of peat accumulation led to a depth of 9 metres of peat being formed. In other words, approximately one metre of peat was formed every 1,000 years.

This process was disrupted in the 19th century when the peat began to be used for fuel, and the bog was partially drained to make access easier and to build a railway line across it. In the 1980s, the 500-acre bog was compulsorily purchased from the Vesey family by Ireland's semi-state energy company Bord na Móna, after which more intensive drainage works were undertaken during the following decade to facilitate industrial peat removal.

In the year 2,000, a 100-member local action group – AREA or the Abbeyleix Residents for Environment Action – succeeded in halting further damage to the bog by Bord na Móna; and there followed a long campaign of around 9 years to help save the bog. Around 2009, attitudes in Bord na Móna began to change, and agreement was reached under which the bog was leased to the local community for a period of 50 years. However, before a lease could be signed, Bord na Móna were asked to close approximately 32km of drains.

The lease allows the local community to manage Abbeyleix Bog with a primary focus on conservation, and the Abbeyleix Bog Project Company, CLG, was formed to manage the lease.

When the bog was surveyed in 2009, the depth of peat was found to be only 8 metres, and only 1.12 ha of active raised habitat remained. Under careful management by the Abbeyleix Bog Project group, the area of active raised bog increased to 3.19 ha in 2014, and to 13.78 ha. in 2020. Active bogs remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere while degraded bogs act as carbon emitters; and the carbon emissions from Abbeyleix Bog were reduced from just over 400 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> annually in 2009, to 209 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> annually in 2020.

This success story attracted a great deal of interest and many questions from participants. Dan Bergin, in reply to questions, told the meeting that there are other examples of bogs which have been, or are being, successfully restored,



and he mentioned Tyrrellspass, Iomera Bog and Girley Bog. In Tullamore, another local group is helping to restore a bog, with help from the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

One of the recent problems faced by the Abbeyleigh Bog Project group is the rising cost of insurance, primarily the result of a nearby quarry operator taking a legal action on spurious grounds against the group. This type of lawsuit is known as a “*Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation*” (SLAPP), i.e., a legal action intended to intimidate, silence, and burden environmental objection groups with the high cost of a legal defence, and generally has a chilling effect on environmental protection campaigns. In the Abbeyleigh case, insurance costs were increased in one year from €350 to €6,000 !

## 7. LAOIS PUBLIC PARTICIPATION NETWORK

The County Laois Public Participation Network Climate Action Project was described to us, also by Dan Bergin.

The County Laois PPN is the main link through which organisations in Laois can interact with Laois County Council and participate in policy-making structures and committees of the Council. There are 25,000 PPN groups nationally.

Activities carried out by PPN groups and other local organisations include:

- European Mobility Week;
- World Bee Day;
- Community Climate Action Fund (which were informed has €500,000);
- Sustainable Gardening Workshops;
- Foraging Workshops;
- Systems Innovation for Sustainable Enterprises and Communities (SISEC);
- Portlaoise Biodiversity Action Plan: 30,000 trees planted;
- Laois Action Plan

It was a very insightful presentation, and gave us encouragement that PPN groups around the country can continue their important work of connecting NGOs and citizens with local authorities, and with each other, and helping to protect the environment.

## 8. VOLUNTEER IRELAND

The next presentation was given by Stuart Garland, who is the Learning and Capacity Building Manager with Volunteer Ireland, and who manages the National Volunteer Management & Leadership Training Programme.

He informed us that in 2024 there are 22,521 people volunteering in Ireland, in 11,195 organisations, and in that year these volunteers gave 422,908 hours of their time. The United Nations General Assembly has proclaimed 2026 as the **International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development** (IVY), thereby promoting and recognizing volunteerism as a significant force for sustainable development, and **International Volunteer Year 2026**, invites us to celebrate and recognise the incredible contributions of volunteers everywhere.

A national volunteer strategy 2026 will also be launched: <https://knowledge.unv.org/international-volunteer-year>.

One important change about which Stuart informed us is the shift from formal to an informal volunteering. Other changes include alteration in public perception about environmentalists, and the increases and decreases in the numbers of people volunteering in Ireland. For example, in 2019, 38% of the population were active as volunteers, but this proportion dropped to 28% in 2024, most likely because of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Currently there are more than one million volunteers in Ireland, and there is a high demand for volunteering opportunities. We were also informed that more than 700,000 of these people volunteer regularly. We have 214 different nationalities in Ireland, the number of non-Irish nationals is 703,700, and 450,000 people suffer from dyslexia, and 43% of our population have mental health disorders. These are amazing figures, and show how our social make-up has changed.

Stuart Garland also made very clear that we need to adapt the ways in which we communicate with volunteers. It is important to try to make the volunteer's experience very good in our NGO (no matter how long or short the volunteer stays). Even small actions such as liking our posts on Social Media are a help. We also need, as organisations, to reduce the barriers to potential volunteer entrants; for example, we should ask people less about their skills, and more about their motivation for joining an organisation.

He suggested that we should become more flexible, adapting to the fast world in which of all of us are living: *"The question isn't whether volunteering can be similarly flexible, but instead about how to do it well."*, said Stuart Garland.

### **Brainstorming session: Why do people volunteer?**

Responses included: to gain more knowledge, to make more personal connections, improving a person's CV, passing on your knowledge and experience, mentoring younger people, helping others, helping the community.

### **Brainstorming session: Why do people not volunteer?**

Responses included: mobility issues, time-consuming, no results visible, not having "enough" skills, don't want to take responsibility, ...

At the end of the discussion, Stuart Garland showed a projection which stated that "*Volunteering should be like a date and not a marriage*".



**Figure 2. Volunteer Ireland definition of volunteering**

The event closed at 14:50 pm.

## **9. FINAL THOUGHTS**

The conference provided an excellent opportunity to connect, stay up-to-date and gain more motivation; and it was encouraging to learn about so many engaging and active groups and projects in Ireland.

All the tips and tricks we gained there will help us to move forward with our own goals at Zero Waste Alliance Ireland. Furthermore, we made several more contacts, and were able to continue building our own ZWAI network.

Janine Boscheinen, Intern

08 December 2025

Jack O'Sullivan, Vice Chairman