



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

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 all of Ireland 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 the representatives of IEN member groups who would be travelling to Portlaoise during the previous day or 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, who availed of the offer of an overnight stay in the Midlands Park Hotel, and who 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, with Amy Dugdale and Catherine O'Toole.

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 at the Creative Networking Event, with Amy Dugdale and Catherine O'Toole; 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 circular tables spread evenly throughout the conference room.

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 shown on the projection screen, such

as “What makes your heart sing”, and our replies to these and other questions, made us immediately feel more connected with each other.



Figure 1. Irish Environmental Network Contact Card

Participants were asked to complete “contact cards” (Figure 1) 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.

Participants also circulated around the room and we 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 (for example, 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.

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

This workshop, facilitated by Oisín Coghlan, an experienced environmental advocate, working as a consultant with IEN, was structured around questions such as:

- What's next for Irish environmentalism?
- What do local environmentalists need from national NGOs?
- How do we maximise our collective impact?

This session explored where attendees saw themselves in the environmental space in Ireland, and where our areas of interest overlapped, our conversation began by considering the work of IEN for the next five years. As part of a review and planning process, we want the strategic questions we grapple with to be informed by input and discussion between local environmental activists and representatives from IEN member organisations around the country.



Figure 2. Workshop Questions

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?**

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

Garry Lutteral, a member of the Abbeyleix Bog Project, gave an illustrated presentation of the 25 year history of this community-led conservation project, which began in the year 2000, initiated by a local action group, which now has a lease on the bog, held in trust for the community.

Garry 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, located to the south of Abbeyleix town, 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.

On 24 July 2000, 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; leading to a 9-year campaign of talks and discussions to help save the bog. Around 2009, attitudes in Bord na Móna began to change, and an 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. Other activities and objectives include restoration of damaged areas of the bog, increasing the biodiversity of the area, undertaking ecological surveys, monitoring the hydrology of the bog, controlling the spread of invasive species, providing education and the provision of recreation areas, including a boardwalk across part of the bog.

Future work planned includes further restoration, biodiversity initiatives, a greater focus on education, continuing control of invasive species, and a renewed focus on the health and wellbeing benefits of the bog, and of nature generally.

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 CO₂ annually in 2009, to 209 tonnes of CO₂ annually in 2020.

This success story attracted a great deal of interest and many questions from participants. Garry Lutteral, 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 Abbeyleix 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 type of legal action intended to intimidate, silence, and burden environmental objection groups with the high cost of a legal defence, and which generally has a chilling effect on environmental protection campaigns. In the Abbeyleix case, insurance costs were increased in one year from €350 to €6,000 !

7. LAOIS PUBLIC PARTICIPATION NETWORK

The County Laois Public Participation Network (PPN) Climate Action Project was described to us by Dan Bergin. The key aims of the project include engaging with a large and diverse community network, empowering local communities, and fostering collaboration with community groups and key stakeholders such as Laois County Council. Together, these efforts were intended to support and strengthen positive climate action initiatives across County Laois.

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; and,
- Laois Action Plan.

It was a very insightful presentation, and gave us great 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. THE ENVIRONMENTAL AND MORAL DILEMMAS OF USING AI IN OUR ORGANISATIONS, ROSI LEONARD AND COLM O'NEILL

Colm O'Neill told us that modern computing is always on, is capable of providing almost infinite storage, streaming to multiple devices, and the trend is always upwards. Increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI) has completely undermined the intentions of several high tech companies to become sustainable, and this is due to the "*computational technique of brute-force testing in AI training runs, or systematically gathering more data and using more computational cycles until a better result is achieved.*"

Huge computational power is required to develop and use AI, making it impossible for developers and users to achieve decarbonisation of their activities;

in other words, AI is becoming a significant contributor to global warming. The situation in Ireland has been described in a book “From the Bog to the Cloud – Dependency ad Eco-Modernity in Ireland”, by Patrick Bresnihan and Patrick Brodie (Bristol University Press, 2025).

Colm asked the questions: is AI damaging our trust in facts, and is it damaging our democracy and society? And, most important: whether we should use AI, and if so, can it be used in an ethical way? AI is a neoliberal dream ! He explained that both the process of developing AI and its implementation can be a vehicle for imposing hierarchies of labour and knowledge that ultimately serve to exploit and subordinate workers around the globe.

Even if some of the vague promises about AI’s future possible “*sustainability gains can eventually be squeezed from this tech bubble, it will still result in a classic environmental racism story – positive impacts will not be equally shared with the communities and nations that bear the bulk of the technology’s environmental burdens*”. Colm pointed out that the concept of “green growth”, which underpins green or eco-capitalist policies such as emissions trading, and lies at the core of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), is based on a Western economic theory, rather than an ecological rationality.

In fact, the increasing use of technology cannot and does not diminish resource use, and all the evidence points to the opposite conclusion – as technology increases, more of the Earth’s resources are used at an increasing rate.

Colm O’Neill’s presentation outlined where AI will make a massive positive difference (medicine etc), but also illustrated the negative effects of its use (for example, data centres must use potable water to cool banks of computers). His presentation sparked off discussion and debate on what is a legitimate use of AI and which uses constitute a waste of resources. Another issue discussed was the number of data centres in Ireland; should we permit more of them, and what should they contribute to society in the form of taxes, energy generation, useful heat, etc.

His presentation included a link to the Climate Justice Universities Union website and a useful bibliography of recently published papers on the topic of AI.

9. ESTABLISHING AND DEVELOPING A VOLUNTEER NETWORK IN OUR ORGANISATIONS, STUART GARLAND

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, the number of people who suffer from dyslexia is 450,000, 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 change and 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 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.

10. FINAL THOUGHTS

The Irish Environmental Network Winter Conference was a very appropriate event for Zero Waste Alliance Ireland attendance; for not only is ZWAI a member of IEN, but the discussions at the conference covered many topic which included a significant number of our aims and objectives.

For example, ZWAI has been concentrating on the objectives of ensuring that Ireland's government agencies, local authorities and other organisations will develop and implement environmentally sustainable resources and waste management policies, especially resource efficiency, waste reduction and elimination, the promotion of re-use, repair and recycling, and the development and implementation of the Circular Economy, while advocating that updated or new policies are implemented in a fair and just manner.

Our recent membership of the Climate Action Network has also strengthened our conviction that addressing climate change is an all-embracing and urgent activity which brings together much of our work as an environmental organisation. The IEN Winter Conference underscored the connections between many different environmental issues, and showed how environmental NGOs need to address these multiple issues in a collaborative way – an objective which we in ZWAI are attempting through sharing information, maintaining contact and working with other environmental organisations in Ireland, in other European Union member states and through membership of international organisations.



Figure 3. Some of the ZWAI members who attended the Irish Environmental Network Winter Conference: Dalia Smelstoriüté-O'Sullivan (left), Jack O'Sullivan (centre), and Janine Boscheinen (right).

In one of our recent presentations at the National Sustainability Summit (Dublin, February 2023),¹ we drew attention to global instability and unsustainability, and we suggested that our civic societies and organisations should recognise that a simplistic understanding of the world in which we live is no longer fit for purpose. Key tasks which should inform the work of environmental NGOs (such as ZWAI) and national networks such as IEN, include addressing the power dynamics in the current world order; asking tough questions about development, prosperity, wealth accumulation and widespread poverty; critically evaluating the structure of economic models; examining the nature and the roles of some Irish national, EU and global organisations which dominate and perpetuate the status quo; and examining the nature and power dynamics of our political systems.

¹ <https://www.zwai.ie/resources/2023/the-national-sustainability-summit-one-earth-for-all-a-plea-for-sustainability/>

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On the whole, 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. What we learned will help us to move forward with our own goals at Zero Waste Alliance Ireland; we made more contacts, and were able to continue building our own ZWAI network.

Janine Boscheinen, Intern

Jack O'Sullivan, Vice Chairman

08 December 2025