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First Revision to the National Planning Framework Consultation,
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An Taisce Submission on the Draft First Revision to the National Planning Framework

An Taisce welcomes the opportunity to review the Draft First Revision to the National Planning Framework and wishes to make the following submission. This follows on from our engagement with the Planning Advisory Forum on the review of the current version of NPF, the Issues Paper on the key focuses for the revision, and the stakeholder forum on the environmental assessments for the revised NPF. It also follows on from An Taisce's extensive engagement with the preparation of the original NPF in 2016-2018.

1. Introduction

The National Planning Framework (NPF) is the central national planning policy to guide development in Ireland to 2040. It plays a fundamental role in how we shape our communities and our environment and in how we address the crises we currently face in climate, biodiversity loss, housing provision, etc.

The Draft First Revision to the National Planning Framework has made a number of improvements on the original 2018 NPF, however, in An Taisce's view, there are multiple areas that require significant further revision. We would draw particular attention to two critical and overarching issues that are unresolved:

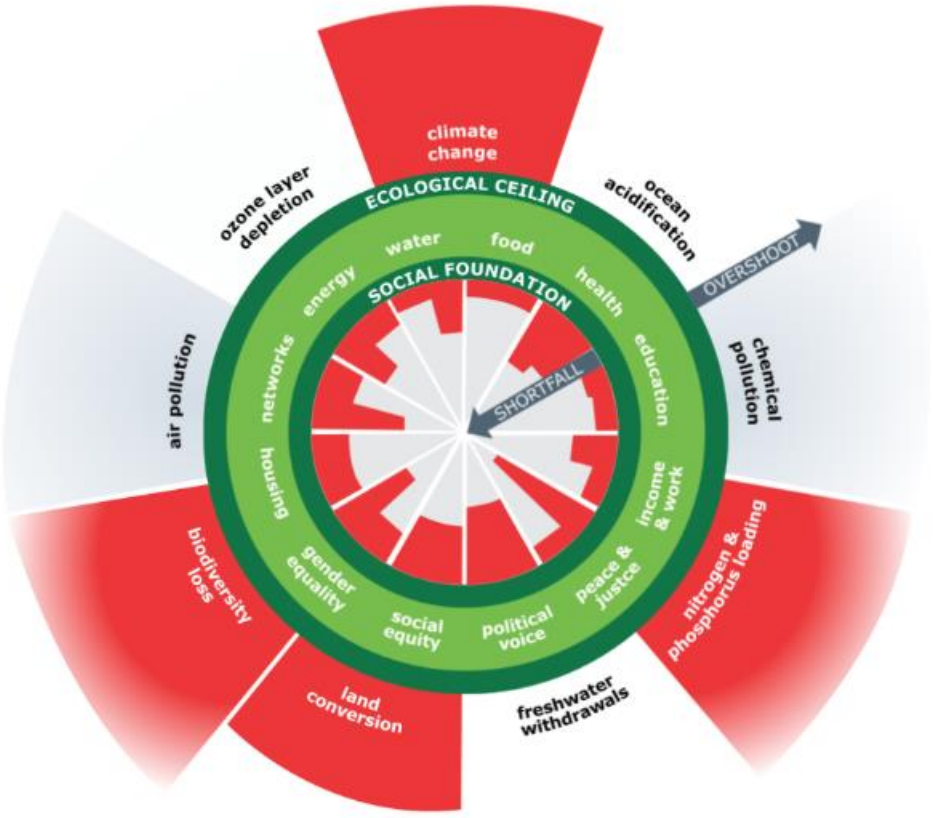
1. The Draft Revised NPF has not effectively or adequately reconciled most areas of the plan with our climate obligations. There is a very high level of ambition needed for the NPF, Ireland's apex spatial planning policy, to play its crucial role in achieving compliance with our legally binding emissions reduction obligations. This not evident in the Draft.

2. The Draft Revised NPF has failed to provide a meaningful implementation plan with detailed targets and timelines. As a result, many of its important, though often vague, objectives will likely remain aspirational.

1.1 Fundamentally Rethinking the Premise of the NPF

The philosophy underpinning the Draft Revised NPF remains predominantly one of furthering economic growth. It is An Taisce's considered view that, in the context of our current global environmental challenges, this needs to be fundamentally rethought. The NPF should set out the framework for a planning and land use system that provides public goods to meet societal needs and works in the long-term public interest to secure wider social and environmental wellbeing. People have a right to live in places that provide them with opportunities to live a good life, individually and collectively, while remaining within the limits of justice, intergenerational equity and environmental sustainability.

We therefore recommend that the Doughnut Economics framework developed by Kate Raworth be used to redevelop the premise of the NPF. It would require that development and growth as provided for in the NPF ensures that everyone has the societal essentials (housing, food, energy, education, health, water, employment, justice and equity, etc.) while remaining within our planetary and ecological boundaries (climate, biodiversity, water quality, air quality, etc.).



The Doughnut Economics framework as developed by Kate Raworth

1.2 Public Participation

We would highlight that Draft Revised NPF must subject to the fullest possible application of Aarhus Convention rights and obligations.

The public consultation on the Draft Revised NPF ran over the summer holiday period from 10th July to 12th September. Consultations that are run over holiday periods are less effective as fewer people are able to engage effectively, if at all. It is regrettable that the consultation period in this case was not extended at least till the end of September to better facilitate broad and meaningful participation with the Draft Revised NPF.

The publication of the tracked changes version of the Draft Revised NPF was very welcome as it assists significantly in highlighting the proposed changes to the NPF. In the future, we recommend that tracked changes versions of policies be made much more evident on consultation webpages.

It also does not appear that the Irish language version of the Draft was ever made available online on the NPF revision page.

2. Key Issues

2.1 Climate Breakdown

Climate change both profoundly impacts and is profoundly impacted by all areas of planning and development. Achieving a rapid, equitable transition to a decarbonised society is of paramount importance. As the primary national planning policy, it is imperative that the NPF take a lead role in delivering that transition.

While the consideration of climate and decarbonisation in the Draft Revised NPF is an improvement in many ways from the original NPF, the Draft Revised NPF is still replete with contradictory objectives which, on the one hand, advocate the decarbonisation of society but, on the other hand, promote the development of airports, motorways, data centres etc., which are carbon and energy intensive infrastructures. These contradictions need to be addressed in the final Revised NPF.

2.1.1 Ireland's Legally Binding Climate Obligations & Level of Ambition Needed in the Revised NPF

The Draft Revised NPF makes repeated reference to:

> "*a legally binding target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 51% and increase the share of electricity generated from renewable sources to 80% over the decade (2021 – 2030), and to achieve net-zero emissions no later than 2050*".

We would highlight, however, that emissions in Ireland are actually subject to the following two sets of legal obligations:

- National level: Compliance with a series of five-year carbon budgets and corresponding sectoral emissions ceilings per the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 (as amended) (hereafter referred to as the Climate Act). The first two carbon budgets are currently set at 295Mt for 2021-2025 and 200Mt for 2026-2030 based on a 2018 baseline; and

- European level: A 42% reduction in national Emission Sharing Regulation (ESR) emissions by 2030 based on a 2005 baseline.

Per the Climate Act, it **is on-time compliance with all carbon budget tonnages that is legally binding**, *not* 2030 targets. The reduction of 51% by 2030 compared to a 2018 baseline was the benchmark that the Climate Change Advisory Council (CCAC) was required to use to set the first two carbon budget levels. Once those budgets were set and agreed by Government, the obligation to consider the 51% reduction by 2030 was discharged - compliance with each carbon budget is the legal obligation now.

This matters because, in the absence of immediate course adjustment and urgent measures, both the CCAC and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) project a failure to comply with the first budget and indeed with the second budget as well. Per the Climate Act, any overshoot of a carbon budget must be carried forwarded into the next budget period, thereby reducing that budget. The EPA's latest emissions reports project that we will fail to stay within the limits of Carbon Budget 1.[1] Therefore, Carbon Budget 2 for the 2026-2030 period will have to be reduced by the amount of any overshoot that occurs in Carbon Budget 1 for 2021-2025. Currently, EPA projections[2] estimate that this overshoot of Budget 1 will be within a range of 26 $MtCO_2e$ for the With Existing Measures (WEM) scenario to 19 $MtCO_2e$ for the With Additional Measures (WAM) scenario.[3] Therefore, once the exceedance is applied, the 2026-2030 budget will be smaller and actually lie in the range of 174-181 $MtCO_2e$.

The projected overshoots of Carbon Budget 1 (2021-2025) and Budget 2 (2026-2030) mean that the actual emissions reduction required by 2030 will in all likelihood be substantially higher than the often-cited 51%. This has very significant implications for the increased level of ambition needed in the Revised NPF to ensure that planning and development in Ireland allows, supports, and facilitates compliance with the carbon budgets.

Yet there is a very significant and fundamental failure throughout the Draft Revised NPF to reconcile the plan, including the supporting analysis, National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs), National Policy Objectives (NPOS), etc., with the carbon budgets and the Climate Action Plan. The reality of climate change and the need to ensure our fair share contribution to emissions reduction per the Paris Agreement mean that all of our activities and development must now take place within the constraints of our emissions reduction requirements. In Ireland, that primarily comes in the form of the legally binding carbon budgets. To achieve carbon budget compliance, the sum of all emissions from all of the activities within a sector has to remain within the sectoral emissions ceiling. This will require a serious rethink of how we as a society prioritise our activities and development. This, of course, has a significant impact on the NPF.

An Taisce submits that a detailed reconciliation of the Draft Revised NPF against the carbon budgets is therefore required.

[1] https://www.epa.ie/publications/monitoring--assessment/climate-change/air-emissions/EPA-GHG-Projections-Report-2022-2050-May24--v2.pdf
[2] Ibid.
[3] It is worth noting that this apparent improvement on the 2023 EPA budget exceedance projections is primarily a result of timeseries changes in the Agriculture, Forestry and Other Land Use sector as opposed to improved effectiveness in emissions mitigation policy.

2.1.2 Climate Act Obligations on Public Authorities

Section 15(1) of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 (as amended) places obligations on relevant bodies, including Government Departments, Local Authorities, An Bord Pleanála, etc.:

> "*15(1) A relevant body shall, in so far as practicable, perform its functions in a manner consistent with—*
> *(a) the most recent approved climate action plan,*
> *(b) the most recent approved national long term climate action strategy,*
> *(c) the most recent approved national adaptation framework and approved sectoral adaptation plans,*
> *(d) the furtherance of the national climate objective, and*
> *(e) the objective of mitigating greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to the effects of climate change in the State."*

We would also highlight s.6(B)(13) of the Climate Act, which stipulates that:

> "*A Minister of the Government shall, in so far as practicable, perform his or her functions in a manner consistent with a carbon budget that has effect under subsection (7) or (11), as the case may be*" (meaning the carbon budgets applying to any given budget period).

In the finalisation of the Revised NPF, compliance with Section 15 and other Climate Act obligations needs to be demonstrated.

2.2 Protecting Biodiversity and Restoring Nature

Biodiversity loss cross-cuts all sectors and areas, in the same way that climate breakdown does, and addressing the biodiversity loss crisis thoroughly will require fundamental societal and policy shifts. Ireland needs to establish a new relationship with nature as we face the sixth, and for the first time human-caused, great extinction in global species.

Biodiversity and healthy ecosystems are essential to mitigate against climate change, yet climate change is irrevocably damaging those same systems and species. Failure to protect our biodiversity will inevitably lead to an ecological tipping point, whereby our natural systems will no longer function as a mitigant for climate change, and we will have lost our main means of combating our rising carbon levels.

The 2019 report on "The Status of EU Protected Habitats and Species in Ireland" (prepared every six years as required by Article 17 of the EU Habitats Directive)[4] illustrates the poor condition of Ireland's biodiversity. Out of Ireland's 59 European protected habitats, 85% were assessed as being in unfavourable conservation status and 46% suffering from ongoing declines. This situation has remained largely unchanged since Ireland's initial assessment in 2007. Bird declines are accelerating, and monitoring of wintering waterbirds by BirdWatch Ireland have found that numbers have declined by almost 40% since the mid-1990's.[5] Insect species, including crucial pollinators, are also facing similar declines.

[4] Habitats Directive Article 17 Report Summary 2019: https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/publications/pdf/NPWS_2019_Vol1_Summary_Article17.pdf
[5] BirdWatch Ireland (2019) Ireland's Wintering Waterbirds down by 40% in 20 years https://birdwatchireland.ie/irelands-wintering-waterbirds-down-by-40-in-less-than-20-years/

Nor are our waterways faring well. Ireland is in the midst of an ever-worsening water quality crisis, with the EPA consistently highlighting the deteriorating situation. Half of our rivers and lakes are considered polluted, and the EPA have highlighted the 'alarming declines' in our estuaries, ⅔ of which are now considered polluted. The pressures on are our waterbodies are myriad, but the top four pressures relate to how we are managing our land and our infrastructure. They are, in order of magnitude, agriculture, hydromorphology, forestry and urban wastewater. In addition, we are continuing to see a loss of our pristine river water bodies – there are now just 20 pristine river sites, down from over 500 sites in the late 1980s. The EPA's latest water quality report indicates that Ireland has not made any significant improvements in water quality trends in 2023.[6]

Our planning system is the key mechanism for both guiding and permitting development in Ireland and is also one of the main systems through which environmental law is applied. As such, it has very tangible impacts on biodiversity. Indeed, analysis by the European Environment Agency on foot of Member States' Habitats Directive Article 17 reports indicate that many of the key pressures and threats facing protected habitats and species fall under the ambit of the planning system and the related regulations. These include development, construction and use of residential, commercial, industrial and recreational infrastructure and areas; extraction of resources (minerals, peat, non-renewable energy sources); energy production processes and related infrastructure development; and development and operation of transport systems.[7] The Revised NPF therefore has a very clear role to play in protecting and enhancing biodiversity.

In light of that, we consider it to be a major omission that there is still no National Strategic Objective on biodiversity protection and nature restoration in the Draft Revised NPF. While some of the themes of the ten NSOs are related to biodiversity, we consider that the scale of the biodiversity crises and the extent to which the state of our biodiversity is influenced by planning warrants it a standalone NSO on protecting biodiversity and restoring nature.

The Draft Revised NPF has been updated to include many more references to biodiversity protection and discusses alignment with the new National Biodiversity Action Plan and EU Nature Restoration Law. However, specific and targeted objectives and measures on reversing biodiversity loss need to be included, and the relevant recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss[8] should be incorporated. The Draft Revised NPF could also better integrate ecosystem *restoration*, going beyond protection, into planning policy and forward planning.

We note NPO 1:

> *"Ensure that all plans, projects and activities requiring consent arising from the National Planning Framework are subject to the relevant environmental assessment requirements including SEA, EIA, SFRA and AA as appropriate."*

Compliance with the relevant EU Directives governing these assessment types is an ongoing problem, including in the development management process. A detailed implementation plan is needed here. The Water Framework Directive (WFD) should be added to this list as development consents that may impact water quality and the achievement of WFD obligations require assessment under Article 4 of the WFD.

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[6] EPA (2024) Water Quality in 2023: https://www.epa.ie/publications/monitoring--assessment/freshwater--marine/water-quality-in-2023.php

[7] Dashboards available here: https://www.eea.europa.eu/themes/biodiversity/state-of-nature-in-the-eu/article-17-national-summary-dashboards/main-pressures-and-threats

[8] https://citizensassembly.ie/wp-content/uploads/Report-on-Biodiversity-Loss_mid-res.pdf

See section 7.8 of this submission for additional recommendations.

2.3 Realising Sustainable Settlement and Transport Objectives

The pattern of low-density, suburban, car-based sprawl which has characterised much of the development of the last number of decades is entirely unsustainable. It is crucial that the NPF drive the provision of better designed and higher density urban areas and neighbourhoods with active and public transport connectivity to services, employment, and amenities. It is essential that we create communities of a high urban design standard that provide high quality affordable housing options, easy access to essential services, a high-quality public realm while breaking dependence on private car journeys and addressing our emissions reduction obligations. An Taisce therefore welcomes the enhanced focus in Draft Revised NPF on compact growth in cities, towns and smaller settlements.

However, we consider that Draft Revised NPF has failed to adequately address the large implementation gap between the ambitions of the compact settlement policies and their realisation on the ground.

Successive national spatial strategies have sought to achieve balanced regional development and compact settlement patterns. Yet the defining pattern of settlement development has still generally been of a sprawling, uncoordinated nature where land has been developed in a 'leapfrog', low-density pattern. This type of land use has diminished the liveability of areas, created places that lack adequate public facilities, critical infrastructure and services, and have generated car dependency for long commutes.

Section 2.6 of the Draft Revised NPF acknowledges this ongoing problem:

> *"The fastest growing areas continue to be at the edges of and outside our cities and towns, meaning:*
>
> - *A constant process of infrastructure and services catch-up in building new roads, new schools, services and amenities and a struggle to bring jobs and homes together, meaning that there are remarkably high levels of car dependence and that it is difficult to provide good public transport;*
> - *A gradual process of run-down of city and town centres and established suburban areas as jobs, retail and housing move out, leaving behind declining school enrolments, empty buildings and a lack of sufficient people to create strong and vibrant places, both day and night;*
> - *The most development takes the form of greenfield sprawl that extends the physical footprint of our urban areas, and when it is the principal form of development, works against the creation of attractive, liveable, high quality urban places in which people are increasingly wishing to live, work and invest, and*
> - *A significantly higher carbon footprint than the EU average, in part due to higher transport and energy demand, mostly based on fossil fuels, that has worked against achieving agreed climate action targets."*

The following images highlight an example from Rathnew, County Wicklow of the above-mentioned type of car-based, edge-of-town developments. These developments are continually being permitted, while the historic town centres decline and attract dereliction. This in spite of a myriad of national and local policies supporting compact growth and the creation of walkable and cyclable places.



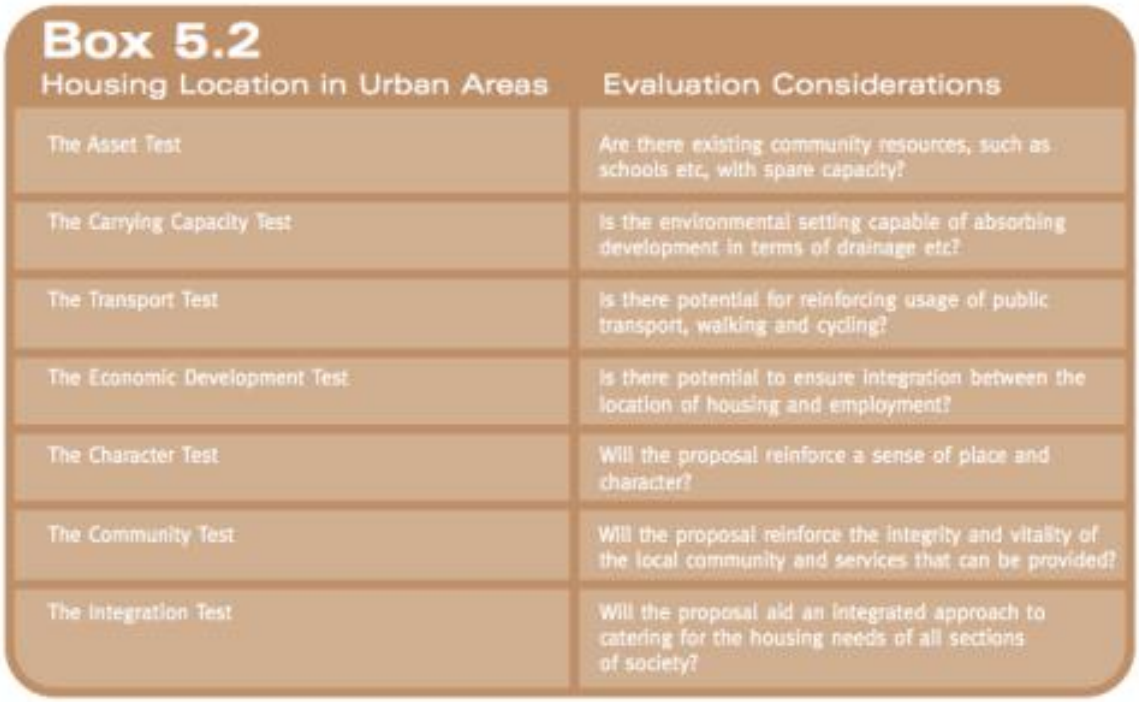
Junction at the edge of Rathnew, Wicklow in 2019. Image from Google Street View.



The same junction at the edge of Rathnew, Wicklow in 2021, now with an unsustainable example of car-based edge-of-town development that increases car dependence and degrades town centres. Image from Google Street View.

To begin to realise its compact settlement policies on the ground, we submit that the Revised NPF should include a requirement that all new residential development in urban and built up areas be no more than a 15-minute walking distance from basic services and infrastructure e.g. public transport services with adequate capacity, supermarkets, childcare facilities, schools, post offices, medical facilities, recreational facilities, high quality green and open spaces, etc. Active and public transport infrastructure must be in place in and around the development, linking it to services, employment centres and other neighbourhoods. Regional and local plans should be charged with determining such services and locations, and where there is a deficit, they must be upgraded in tandem with housing development. These simple principles, rigorously enforced, are possible and would go a long way in achieving the objectives of smart, compact growth.

To facilitate the inclusion of such a policy, An Taisce recommends that the Draft Revised NPF be amended to incorporate and enhance the seven location test standards for new housing in urban areas as outlined in the National Spatial Strategy 2002 (see chart below). These standards required that planning authority decisions for new housing developments be conditional on integration with existing communities, affordability and mix of housing types, walking and cycling access to local services and schools, transport access to employment locations, and availability of recreation facilities.



Box 5.2

Housing Location in Urban Areas	Evaluation Considerations
The Asset Test	Are there existing community resources, such as schools etc, with spare capacity?
The Carrying Capacity Test	Is the environmental setting capable of absorbing development in terms of drainage etc?
The Transport Test	Is there potential for reinforcing usage of public transport, walking and cycling?
The Economic Development Test	Is there potential to ensure integration between the location of housing and employment?
The Character Test	Will the proposal reinforce a sense of place and character?
The Community Test	Will the proposal reinforce the integrity and vitality of the local community and services that can be provided?
The Integration Test	Will the proposal aid an integrated approach to catering for the housing needs of all sections of society?

The seven location test standards from the 2002 National Spatial Strategy

We strongly recommend that these standards be updated and strengthened with detailed criteria fleshed out for each. A National Policy Objective should be included requiring new residential developments in urban and built up areas to meet these standards.

With regard to the consideration of one-off housing in the countryside, we consider that the Draft Revised NPF has not improved on the 2018 NPF and will not be able to curtail further unsustainable spread of one-off dwellings. There are no caps placed on the number or proportion of houses that can be accommodated in the open countryside or policies to prevent further unsustainable ribbon development patterns. We would highlight NPO 29 here, which remains unchanged in the Draft Revised NPF:

> *"Ensure, in providing for the development of rural housing, that a distinction is made between areas under urban influence, i.e. within the commuter catchment of cities and large towns and centres of employment, and elsewhere:*
>
> - *In rural areas under urban influence, facilitate the provision of single housing in the countryside based on the core consideration of demonstrable economic or social need to live in a rural area and siting and design criteria for rural housing in statutory guidelines and plans, having regard to the viability of smaller towns and rural settlements;*
> - *In rural areas elsewhere, facilitate the provision of single housing in the countryside based on siting and design criteria for rural housing in statutory guidelines and plans, having regard to the viability of smaller towns and rural settlements."*

This NPO does not set any targets to curtail further one-off housing spread. This, combined with the weak targets for directing new development to built-up areas, undermines the overall sustainable settlement strategy, undermines the service basis of smaller towns and villages, exacerbates traffic generation and car dependence, and undermines the needed modal shift to sustainable travel.

Unless these issues and the issues of the compact settlement implementation gap are resolved in the finalisation of the Revised NPF, unsustainable settlement patterns will continue to dominate.

2.3.1 Linking Land Use and Transport

Despite the now widely recognised need to reduce car dependence and facilitate a modal shift in transport, there is an ongoing systemic failure to ensure that new residential developments are *actually* linked to safe cycling and walking routes to schools, local services, employment centres, recreation areas, and enhanced public transport. This renders these areas unsafe for walking and cycling to schools, local services and amenities. Residential schemes often include strong walking and cycling permeability within the boundary of the site itself, but they are frequently located on the fringes of cities and towns at a significant remove from existing transport links or services (grocery stores, health facilities, etc.). They also often lack permeability with surrounding areas and are often sited in areas with very limited existing public transport routes and capacity or pedestrian and cycling infrastructure.

Therefore, although a new residential development may provide high quality foot and cycle permeability around the dwellings, these often terminate or become disconnected immediately outside the site boundary, discouraging residents from using active travel modes outside of the development itself and thereby increasing car dependence.

Furthermore, despite the abundance of national, regional and local policies (including the NPF) stipulating that all new development should promote compact settlement and have easy access to transport links as well as safe walking and cycling routes, large residential planning applications are rarely, if ever, refused on the basis of not having these elements. The fact that compact growth and sustainable mobility policies are not translating to better planning applications and decisions highlights the serious implementation failures regarding those policies. This must be addressed in the Revised NPF.

An Taisce broadly supports the addition of the objectives on "Transport Orientated Development" (TOD), pending the insertion of a formal definition of TOD. We would stress the need for this type of development to be properly permeable for active travel modes; and additionally, that these developments include well located, high quality, secured, sheltered and high capacity bicycle parking facilities so as to encourage more intermodal trips in which cycling plays a part. The definition of TOD should not facilitate any fast-tracking planning procedures like the now scrapped Strategic Housing Developments.

We strongly recommend that detailed and specific targets and timelines for achieving a modal shift towards public and active transport be included. Without this, the effectiveness of the NPF in achieving its sustainable transport objectives The investment prioritisation commitment of a 2:1 ratio between new public transport infrastructure and new road infrastructure needs to continue.

See additional detailed transport recommendations in section 8 of this submission.

3. Planning for Diverse Rural Places

3.1 Rural Towns

The expanded consideration of the need for town centre regeneration and the need to address vacancy and dereliction are welcome. However, the objectives aimed at addressing this require further detail and targets to be effective.

3.2 Heritage

We welcome the addition of NPO 26: *"Enhance, integrate and protect the special physical, environmental, economic and cultural value of built heritage assets, including streetscapes, vernacular dwellings and other historic buildings and monuments, through appropriate and sensitive investment and conservation",* though without more detailed targets it risks remaining aspirational.

See section 8 of this submission for further heritage-related recommendations.

3.3 Rural Economy

We note and welcome the revisions to National Policy Objective 31 (additions bolded):

> "*Facilitate the development of the rural economy,* ***in a manner consistent with the national climate objective****, through supporting a sustainable and economically efficient agricultural and food sector, together with forestry, fishing and aquaculture, energy and extractive industries, the bio-economy and diversification into alternative on-farm and off-farm activities, while at the same time noting the importance of maintaining and protecting* ***biodiversity and*** *the natural landscape and built heritage which are vital to rural tourism*."

However, we consider that they are aspirational, and unless they are rigorously applied, their implementation will be undermined by the approaches to agriculture, forestry, etc. promoted elsewhere in the Draft Revised NPF, which essentially allow environmentally damaging business-as-usual practices to continue.

3.4 Agriculture

We note the addition of NPO 34:

> *"Support the agri-food industry in promoting Ireland's continued food security in a manner that ensures economic, environmental, and social sustainability while ensuring progress in achieving targets in the National Climate Action Plan and the River Basin Management Plan."*

Though NPO 34 references Ireland's "continued "food security, we would highlight that Ireland is not in fact food secure currently – for example, we are reliant on imports for the vast majority of our fruits and vegetables at the expense of our indigenous tillage and horticultural sectors. We would also highlight that the current agricultural system is *already* undermining economic, environmental and social sustainability and not meeting climate and water quality targets and obligations. NPO 34 as written allows the continuation of business as usual and provides no effective policy to address this.

We would also note that Food Vision 2030 has been heavily criticised by environmental organisations and climate scientists for failing to limit climate, air, and water pollution resulting from agriculture, in line with Ireland's legal commitments.

We recommend that an additional NPO be added to support farmers to transition to a more community-centred, sustainable and resilient food system model that supports Ireland in remaining within its environmental limits, including in terms of climate and water quality. Such an NPO should support the scaling up of local and indigenous nature-friendly food production, especially in cereals and pulses for human consumption as well as fruit and vegetables.

3.5 Forestry

While there is no standalone NPO on forestry, the forestry section of Chapter 5 states:

> *"As the quality of land is often a determining factor in the land-use decision-making process, lower quality land that currently presents challenges for economic agriculture may represent a resource that might be used for afforestation."*

We note, however, that the lower quality land reference above often represents some of the best areas for high nature value farmland. It also often corresponds with areas that are very important for ground nesting birds, species rich grassland, and peaty soils that should not be afforested because of their carbon sequestration potential.

Both this section of Chapter 5 and the forestry section of Chapter 9 reference the carbon sequestration potential of forestry. Chapter 9 states that: "*Irish forestry is a major carbon sink and afforestation is the most significant mitigation option that is available to Ireland's land use sector".* However, we submit that the Draft Revised NPF needs to acknowledge that afforested lands are in fact becoming a carbon source rather than a carbon sink. As such we would question the assertion that afforestation is the most significant mitigation option available to Ireland's land use sector, especially given that Ireland has a vast amount of degraded peatlands that could be restored.

We recommend that the Revised NPF supports a move towards a continuous cover forest management system that prioritises native species.

We note the reference to the benefits of "close to home woodlands". While this may be the case for biodiverse woodlands in many areas, this section of Chapter 5 should also recognise the "close to home" impacts of monocultured sitka spruce plantations in areas such as Leitrim where they are contributing significantly social isolation and mental health issues.

3.6 Tourism

We welcome the enhancement of the environmental sustainability commitments in NPO 35 on tourism development, but strong implementation is required.

Future tourism should be as car-free as possible. A new tourist model is required based on longer area-based stays accommodated in locations to a level commensurate with the capacity of the host environment rather than high volume car trips and drive-through tourism. This should include a strong focus on the enhanced promotion and development of safe greenway cycling routes, attractive walking and hiking routes, and other activities for all ages and abilities. There also is a need to better integrate sustainable transport integration with tourism including:

- Increasing the access to public transport, walking and cycling options from key tourist destinations and accommodation hubs;
- Increasing and improving the options for car-free, long-stay trips;
- Locating new accommodation and tourist facilities in areas with existing services, infrastructure and transport links to amenities; and
- Making driving routes, such as the Wild Atlantic Way, less focused on private car use and more accessible for public transport, walking and cycling.

We therefore recommend that NPO 35 be revised further to promote long-stay tourism and the integration of tourism planning with sustainable settlement and transport planning per the points above.

4. People, Homes and Communities

4.1 Wellbeing

Our current sprawling and dispersed development patterns are directly negatively impacting our health and wellbeing. Sprawl is associated with high levels of driving which contributes to air pollution, which causes morbidity and mortality. Such high levels of car dependency and long commutes also contribute to sedentary lifestyles and the associated with physical and mental health consequences. Additionally, increased vehicle miles travelled and increased car dependency heightens the chances of road traffic accidents, fatalities and injuries.

We therefore welcome the enhanced recognition in the Draft Revised NPF of the links between spatial planning and health and wellbeing as well as importance of well-connected places, active travel, etc. and planning spaces for people of all backgrounds, stages of life and abilities. However, for the positive health and wellbeing impacts of such objectives to actually be realised, implementation of the NPF policies and objectives regarding compact settlement, integrated land use and transport planning, etc. is crucial. We would again highlight the lack of specific targets in this regard and the need for the final Revised NPF to include these.

4.2 Reconciling Home Construction with Climate Obligations

Despite the increased climate focus of the Draft Revised NPF, there is no critical assessment of how the level of home construction needed to address our serious housing crisis can be facilitated while staying within the limits of our emissions reduction obligations. There is no mention of this in Chapter 6, and there is no attempt to integrate the climate ambitions articulated in Chapter 9 into the Draft Revised NPF's consideration of housing.

The emissions impact of the significant levels of construction required to address the housing crisis is not reflected in the Draft Revised NPF beyond a limited reference in Chapter 9 to low carbon building and the emphasis on reuse of buildings as a climate mitigation measure. There is no reference to mandatory life-cycle carbon measurement or mandatory measurement of embodied carbon in construction, which are needed to drive material changes in what we build and how we build it.

Similarly, no reference is made to the policy gaps that block a reconciliation of housing and climate goals, including regulatory barriers to the use of plant-based materials like timber and hempcrete. Ultimately, this means we will continue to have a disconnect between massive infrastructural development and climate planning without a roadmap for reconciliation in solutions and no detail on improving materials and construction methods.

5. Realising our Island and Marine Potential

Chapter 7, including notably section 7.2, focuses on developing the maritime economy without acknowledging the importance of protecting the marine ecosystem. It must be recognised that a healthy ocean ecosystem is absolutely fundamental for any economic or social benefits. Without a healthy ecosystem we cannot have a thriving economy or tangible social benefits. This economy-

centred approach is based on a flawed conceptual bias in treating sustainability, or the overarching environment, as a consideration to think about only after quantitate economic targets are adopted.

5.1 Ongoing Incoherence in Marine Planning Policy

The Draft Revised NPF's enhanced recognition of the crucial links between terrestrial and marine planning is welcome, particularly given that the marine planning regime came into force after the publication of the original NPF.

The current legislative and policy framework for marine planning remains incoherent and is not yet plan-led or ecosystems-based. It also remains inconsistent with crucial EU Marine Directives, including the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) and the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive (MSPD). Both Directives recognise the fundamental importance of marine biodiversity and therefore require that an ecosystems-based approach be taken towards marine planning and activities. Such an approach would make ecological considerations fundamental in decision making and recognise that any benefits gained from human activities in the marine area are entirely dependent on having and actively supporting a thriving marine ecosystem.

The Marine Spatial Planning Directive requires Member States to make Maritime Spatial Plans to delineate what activities will take place, where in the marine area they will occur and at what intensity. Ireland's National Marine Planning Framework (NMPF), which is supposed to be a Maritime Spatial Plan under the Marine Spatial Planning Directive, does not constitute what can be meaningfully described as a plan for the purposes of the Directive – it does not actually provide a spatial plan for where marine activities will take place, what those activities will be, and what the level of intensity of those activities will be across their distribution. The Marine Spatial Planning Directive also requires an ecosystems-based approach to be taken in Maritime Spatial Plans, but the National Marine Planning Framework also does not provide any spatial assessment of ecological sensitivities and potential sensitivities in relation to human activities.

Irish law has provided for the creation of Designated Maritime Area Plans (DMAPs) to cover specific regions of Ireland's marine area. DMAPs must be consistent and aligned with the National Marine Planning Framework and need to be developed in the same way and to the same standard as a Maritime Spatial Plan under the requirements of the Marine Spatial Planning Directive. However, even if DMAPs were done in full compliance with the Marine Spatial Planning Directive, they cannot fix the issues with the National Marine Planning Framework's non-compliance - the problems with the National Marine Planning Framework cannot be incrementally fixed with individual DMAPs. This leaves the EU-required ecosystems-based approach still compromised.

Compounding these issues, there is an ongoing failure to provide for Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) as required by the Marine Strategy Framework Directive. Designating MPAs at the start of marine spatial planning processes is key to a truly ecosystems-based approach. Very regrettably, the long-awaited MPA legislation has still not been published as of mid-September 2024. Despite the target of 30% of the marine area to be protected by 2030, less than 10% our waters have been designated as protected areas while multiple offshore development proposals move forward.

In order for the Revised NPF to effectively integrate terrestrial planning with marine planning, these issues must be resolved.

5.2 Ports

Increased recognition is needed regarding the inextricably linked nature of shipping and associated land-based transport, particularly the need for sustainable land transport links to and from ports. This

is not reflected in the Draft Revised NPF. A policy is needed to require the development of sustainable terrestrial transport to and from ports and to ensure compliance with the TEN-T regulations. The Draft Revised NPF focuses almost exclusively on the expansion of Ireland's port network and shipping industry for the purpose of economic growth, however, there is no assessment of the sustainability of such proposals.

See the comments on National Strategic Outcome 4 for further recommendations.

5.3 Coastal Environment and Planning for Climate Change

The expanded recognition in section 7.4 of the impacts of climate change on Ireland's coast and coastal communities is welcome. However, NPOs 53-55 are vague and lack detailed targets and measures to ensure implementation.

5.4 Offshore Renewable Energy

Offshore renewable energy is an important component of Ireland's transition to a decarbonised energy system. See section 5.1 above on the ongoing issues with the marine planning policy system. To ensure strong integration between terrestrial and marine policy so that we can effectively develop offshore renewable energy while protecting marine and coastal ecosystems, these issues must be resolved.

6. Working with Our Neighbours

We note NPO 65:

> *"In co-operation with relevant Departments in Northern Ireland, ensuring effective management of shared landscapes, heritage, water catchments, habitats, species and trans-boundary issues in relation to environmental policy."*

This NPO remains vague and ineffectual. All of these areas come under EU legal protection through a range of continually improving Directives with targets and timetables. The Marine Strategy Framework Directive, the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive and the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive have specific transboundary provisions. Similarly, the Air Quality Directive, Water Framework Directive, Waste Framework Directive, and Birds and Habitats Directives provide the necessary protection to Ireland's environment on a transboundary basis. However, the EIA and Water Framework Directives are the only ones discussed in section 8.5.

We submit that much more detailed is required in this section to address transboundary environmental impacts with Northern Ireland. This particularly necessary in a post-Brexit world where the United Kingdom has sought to downgrade environmental protection policies. As stated in section 2.2 of this submission, compliance with the EU environmental Directives is already a problem for Ireland in isolation, making it even more of a challenge in a transboundary context.

7. Climate Transition and Our Environment

Please see section 2.1 of this submission for overarching commentary on climate and the NPF. The expansion of Chapter 9 in the Draft Revised NPF is welcome, however, as is the case in the rest of Draft, targets and timelines to help ensure implementation are lacking. As previously stated, there is a very significant and fundamental failure throughout the Draft Revised NPF to reconcile the plan,

including the supporting analysis, National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs), National Policy Objectives (NPOS), etc., with the carbon budgets and the Climate Action Plan.

We note NPO 67:

> *"The planning system will be responsive to our national environmental challenges and ensure that development occurs within environmental limits, having regard to the medium and longer-term requirements of all relevant environmental and climate legislation and the sustainable management of our natural capital."*

NPO 67 is very ambitious, yet there is very little in the Draft Revised NPF to actually ensure that we do remain within environmental limits. Indeed, the legally binding and clearly delineated limits imposed by the carbon budgets have not been integrated throughout the NPF. There is not even acknowledgement in Chapter 9 that adherence to carbon budgets is legally binding.

The following bolded addition has been made to NPO 70:

> *"Reduce our carbon footprint by integrating climate action into the planning system in support of national targets for climate policy mitigation and adaptation objectives, as well as targets for greenhouse gas emissions reductions* ***as expressed in the most recently adopted carbon budgets."***

While the recognition of carbon budgets is welcome here, a) they are not targets, they are legally binding, and b) there is no detailed plan for how this will actually be accomplished.

7.1 National Land Use Review

Land-use patterns must be fundamentally reconfigured to mitigate and adapt to climate change and resource depletion while sustaining and enhancing our communities. We would highlight here that the National Land Use Review is still incomplete. Phase 1 of the review, which was completed in 2023, gathered evidence regarding land types across the country and their environmental, ecological and economic characteristics. Phase 2, which will focus on the development of policies, measures and actions on foot of the Phase 1 evidence, began in October 2023, and, to An Taisce's knowledge at the time of writing, is still incomplete. It is unclear if the findings of Phase 1 have been utilised in developing the Draft Revised NPF.

The entire NPF as the top tier planning policy both strongly influences and is influenced by land use decisions and land use policy. Understanding existing land uses in Ireland in-depth and developing policies and measures around optimal future uses will have wide ranging and significant impacts on planning at all levels, not least on the NPF.

The Land Use Review is mentioned in Section 9.2 of the Draft Revised NPF, but there is no discussion of how the findings of Phase 2 of the review will impact the NPF. It is acknowledged that the NPF review had to occur at this point due to the current statutory requirements of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended). However, from an effective policy making perspective, not having a completed land use review prior to revising the NPF, and indeed having no indication in the Draft Revised NPF of how the completed review will impact the NPF, appears in many ways putting the cart before the horse. We recommend that the final version of Revised NPF provide some clarity on this.

7.2 Biomethane

Regarding biomethane, Chapter 9 states: "*Biomethane is a carbon-neutral renewable gas made from farm and food waste through a process known as anaerobic digestion*." However, we would highlight that biomethane cannot be automatically labelled as carbon neutral, a renewable gas or be assumed to contribute to climate mitigation due to the environmental risks associated with fugitive methane losses, the use of chemical fertiliser to produce silage and the ammonia emissions which can result from applying the by-product of the anaerobic digestion (AD) process, namely digestate, as fertiliser.

It must be determined that proposed feedstocks are sustainable in the first instance and that their production will not exacerbate ongoing issues with greenhouse gas emissions, water quality deterioration, etc.[9] The emissions that contribute to the production of feedstocks must be considered, as they can significantly negatively impact biomethane's overall contribution to climate mitigation. AD predicated on increased grass or energy crop production has the potential for significant adverse impacts to climate and water quality as a result of the increased levels of fertiliser input needed to grow the energy crops. With regard to the use of slurry, intensive cattle farming is also a major emitter of greenhouse gases. Any use of slurry for bioenergy production should not be reliant upon or drive further bovine agriculture intensification.

An Taisce would highlight that numerous scientifically reported field assessments show that anaerobic digesters suffer from significant fugitive emissions problems via methane leaks. The effect of the leakage of this potent greenhouse gas may greatly reduce or even negate the potential climate benefits of using biogas in place of fossil fuels.[10,11,12,13,14,15,16]

Regarding end uses, the mixing of biomethane with fossil gas for injection into the grid will exacerbate infrastructural lock-in to fossil fuel use in the medium to long term which is incompatible with our emissions reduction legal obligations and supporting policies. Supplying biomethane to local off-grid industrial users would be a preferable option, provided it is used for electricity generation and is not mixed with fossil gas.

To ensure that the Revised NPF is actually aligned with our emissions reduction obligations, these issues require much more critical consideration than they are currently given in Chapter 9. As currently drafted, the biomethane section does not accurately reflect the scientific evidence regarding biomethane's contribution to emissions mitigation. We would refer the Department to An Taisce's submission on the Draft National Biomethane Strategy for further detail and relevant scientific references.[17]

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[9] Beausang, C., McDonnell, K., Murphy, F., 2021. Assessing the environmental sustainability of grass silage and cattle slurry for biogas production. Journal of Cleaner Production 298, 126838. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S095965262101057X?via%3Dihub

[10] Scott, A. and Blanchard, R., 2021. The Role of Anaerobic Digestion in Reducing Dairy Farm Greenhouse Gas Emissions. Sustainability, 13(5), 2612. https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/5/2612

[11] https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_environment_and_climate_action/submissions/2022/2022-07-05_opening-statement-dr-ciara-beausang_en.pdf

[12] Grubert, E. 2020. At scale, renewable natural gas systems could be climate intensive: the influence of methane feedstock and leakage rates. Environmental Research Letters, 15, 084041. https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/ab9335/pdf

[13] Bakkaloglu, S., et. al., 2021. Quantification of methane emissions from UK biogas plants. Waste Management, 124 https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0956053X21000167

[14] https://ens.dk/presse/ny-rapport-om-metantab-fra-danske-biogasanlaeg

[15] Scheutz, C. and Fredenslund, A.M., 2019. Total methane emission rates and losses from 23 biogas plants. Waste Management, 97. http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0956053X19304842

[16] Vergote, T.L.I., et. al., 2020. Monitoring methane and nitrous oxide emissions from digestate storage following manure mono-digestion. Biosystems Engineering, 196. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1537511020301240

[17] https://www.antaisce.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=53ff5e4f-4685-4245-bd1f-bfc609c2c979

7.3 Built Environment

The analysis on the retrofitting does not address the review by Climate Change Advisory Council nor research by the Irish Green Building Council/UCD which showed that current policy of construction without radical change in what we build and how we build it will double emissions in that sector and erode any energy gains from the retrofit scheme. A key criticism of the retrofit scheme, which remains the core component of delivery of energy efficiency in built environment, is that it does not prioritise lower socio-economic groups and does not use low-carbon materials. The retrofit plan is heavily focused on insulation and is dependent on carbon intensive materials. Another major weakness in the retrofit plan is that it is not achieving the rollout of renewables, crucially rooftop solar installations, as part of retrofitting and instead prioritising insulation and heat pump installation. These issues should be considered in more detail in Chapter 9.

See also the comments in section 4.2 of this submission regarding reconciling the level of housing construction needed with our climate obligations.

7.4 Renewable Energy

We welcome the increased focus on renewable energy in the Draft Revised NPF. The inclusion of the new Regional Renewable Electricity Capacity Allocations has the potential to improve the rollout of renewable energy by improving strategic planning for renewables at a higher spatial level. We would highlight, however, that all planning and development of renewables, including at a regional level, must:

- be done sustainably;
- be fully compliant with our national, European and international legal obligations; and
- recognise the intertwined nature of the climate and biodiversity crises by avoiding particularly ecologically sensitive areas and fully assess and mitigate potential ecological impacts.

We would also recommend that detail be provided on how the Regional Renewable Electricity Capacity Allocations will achieve their targets in light of the slow progress to date in rolling out renewables developments.

The potential for locating renewable energy projects on post-industrial peatlands is highlighted in Chapter 9, which states the following:

> *"Accordingly, a careful balance will be required between the realising the potential for renewable energy development to meet sectoral emissions targets, and the management of the potential for environmental impacts in terms of the protection and restoration of nature and cultural heritage in peatlands".*

We recommend that this paragraph also recognise the carbon sequestration potential of peatlands. Where renewables developments are proposed on post-industrial peatlands, it needs to be ensured on a case-by-case basis that the climate value of the renewables project is assessed against the carbon sequestration potential of restoring the peatland.

7.5 Just Transition

The equitable and united transition as a society towards decarbonisation and away from fossil fuels and emissions-intensive industries is essential. Ensuring a just transition should therefore be a guiding

principle in forward planning and in the Revised NPF. A just transition model is needed to plan and deliver a package of complementary interventions to secure livelihoods while shifting rapidly to sustainable methods of energy and food production, transport, etc.

We consider that the Draft Revised NPF requires more focus on ensuring a just transition, and that the just transition section in Chapter 9 be expanded to include more sectors in addition to peat harvesting.

7.6 Carbon Capture and Reliance on Technology

The development of carbon capture and storage at significant scale and in any immediate timeframe is very uncertain. The Revised NPF should focus on rapid and deep emissions reductions in the electricity sector via transitioning away from fossil fuel use and not rely on uncertain technology such as carbon capture and storage.

7.7 Water Management and Flooding

It is welcome that the Water Framework Directive is now mentioned in this section. The management of surface and ground water in accordance with the provisions of the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) and Groundwater Directive will be one of the most crucial challenges in the coming years. Ireland faces a serious uphill battle in achieving 'good' status in all water bodies by 2027 as required by the WFD.

Article 4 of the WFD of requires the assessment of projects that may impact water quality to determine whether the project may cause a deterioration of the status of a surface or ground water body or if it may jeopardise the attainment of good surface or groundwater status, of good ecological potential, or good surface or ground water chemical status. Article 4 assessments are still not widely done as part of the planning process, and therefore the Draft Revised NPF should include an objective to require such assessments and provide guidance to planning authorities in that regard.

The latest River Basin Management Plan, Water Action Plan 2023, has now been published. Relevant measures should be incorporated to the Revised NPF at the amendment stage alongside a specific, targeted objective on achieving WFD compliance.

The addition of the section on nature-based solutions is welcome.

7.8 Biodiversity

We welcome the expansion of the section on biodiversity, and the introduction of the National Biodiversity Action Plan and the recently passed EU Nature Restoration Law. However, yet again, there is little to actually drive and ensure implementation.

Regarding NPO 83:

> *"In line with the National Biodiversity Action Plan and the European Union Nature Restoration Law, and best available scientific information, regional and local planning authorities shall support the preparation of the National Restoration Plan,"*

we submit that "and implementation" should be inserted after "preparation".

Regarding NPO 85:

> *"In line with the objectives of the National Biodiversity Action Plan, planning authorities should seek to address no net loss of biodiversity within their plan making functions,"*

we submit that "should seek to" should be replaced with "shall".

Please see section 2.2 of this submission for more commentary on biodiversity in the Draft Revised NPF. We would reiterate our recommendation for a standalone NSO on biodiversity protection and nature restoration.

7.9 Natural and Cultural Heritage

The inclusion of cultural heritage in this section is welcome, as are the additions to National Policy Objective 87 (bolded): "*Conserve and enhance the rich qualities of natural, cultural* ***and built*** *heritage of Ireland in a manner appropriate to their* ***cultural and environmental*** *significance*." We recommend the inclusion of further detail on how this will actually be implemented and achieved and lead to greater protection of built and cultural heritage.

Please also see An Taisce's comments below on NSO 7, which are relevant here.

7.10 Water Quality

The subsection on water quality in section 9.5 rightly includes significant consideration of wastewater treatment. We welcome the addition of:

> "*In plan-making and decision-making within the planning system, decision makers should consider both the capacity of the receiving environment to accommodate the development of water and wastewater infrastructure in line with statutory environmental legislation, and the potential to align planned growth with existing water and wastewater infrastructural capacity, to the extent feasible*"

However, improving our water quality goes far beyond wastewater management, which is currently the fourth most significant pressure behind agriculture (impacting over 1000 waterbodies), hydromorphological damage (physical changes to habitat conditions), and forestry according to the EPA's latest water quality report.[18] 1648 waterbodies (34%), the majority of which are rivers, are at risk of not meeting their Water Framework Directive objectives.

The consideration of water quality in Chapter 9 requires significant revision and much more detail on the pressures on water quality and on how these impact and are impacted by planning.

7.11 Air Quality

This section rightly recognises the impacts of poor air quality on human health and that transport patterns and a reliance on certain fuel types for heating are key drivers of poor air quality. Reducing transport-related air quality problems requires strong implementation of NPF objectives around sustainable mobility and the integration of land use and transport planning – yet these remain without detailed targets, undermining the potential for implementation.

[18] EPA (2024) Water Quality in 2023: https://www.epa.ie/publications/monitoring--assessment/freshwater--marine/water-quality-in-2023.php

We recommend that this section also consider air pollution from agricultural sources, specifically ammonia. Ireland has consistently breached the limits set by the EU National Emissions Ceiling Directive (2016/2284/EU) with regard to ammonia.

8. National Strategic Outcomes

The sections below provide our comments and recommendations in relation to the 10 National Strategic Outcomes. In some cases, the relevant topics have already been addressed elsewhere in this submission, and this is referenced below where needed. The numbering of the NSOs reflects that in Chapter 10.

National Strategic Outcome 1 – Compact Growth

See section 2.3 of this submission for more detailed comments and recommendations on compact growth.

National Strategic Outcome 2 – Enhanced Regional Accessibility

We submit that the All Island Strategic Rail Review needs to be more fully inscribed into the Revised NPF. A future all island rail network needs to be prioritised in the NPF and then also in a review of the National Development Plan. As the Review has now been finalised, all reference to the "Draft All Island Strategic Rail Review" with "All Island Strategic Rail Review" throughout the document.

Regarding the Rail Review, NSO 2 states:

> "*To strengthen public transport connectivity between cities and large growth towns in Ireland and Northern Ireland with improved services and reliable journey times, based on the findings of the Draft All-Island Strategic Rail Review."*

We recommend that the following point be added:

> "*The improvement in public transport services needs to include high quality public transport interchanges including conveniently located, secure, bicycle parking facilities (and provided at a high capacity at busier stations).*"

NSO 2 states the following regarding inter-urban roads: "*Maintaining the strategic capacity and safety of the national roads network including planning for future capacity enhancements*". There needs to be a shift away from "planning for future capacity enhancements", meaning road capacity increases. The Climate Action Plan 2024 includes the following target: "*20% reduction in total vehicle kms relative to 2030 BAU scenario*" (page 261). The emphasis in the Revised NPF needs to be on very significantly increasing rail capacity and not continuing to invest in roads to increase capacities and thereby induce further demand in road traffic and the related emissions.

Regarding the following objective: "*Advancing orbital traffic management solutions, including the Galway Ring Road and the Cork City Northern Transport Project",* both of these projects are focused on expanding road capacity which is incompatible with plans to decarbonise our transport system. We submit that the references to the "Galway Ring Road" and the "Cork City Northern Transport Project" should be removed.

Regarding the objective to:

> "*Develop a safe and connected cycle network between cities, towns and key tourist destinations to reduce the carbon impact of transport, promote a healthy and inclusive society and promote economic growth*",

we recommend that the following text also be added: "*These networks should include both the National Cycle Network[19] and the NTA's CycleConnects[20]*".

We note here that 45% of all train journeys in The Netherlands start with a cycling trip.[21] Ireland needs to emulate these high cycling rates to stations, which mean that there will be less pressure on land for car parking spaces.

There also needs to be national plan to provide crystal clear sign-posting to all bus and train stations within towns and cities. There are too many examples of Irish towns and cities where it is very difficult to find the train station – one example is Carrick-on-Shannon. There needs to be a simple sign-posting system indicating the distance (in metres) and the estimated walking and cycling times so as to encourage walking/cycling and rail trips.

National Strategic Outcome 3 – Strengthen Rural Economies and Communities

See recommendations in sections 2.3 and 3 of this submission.

National Strategic Outcome 4 – High Quality International Connectivity

In light of our climate obligations, we submit that NSO 4, and the Draft Revised NPF more broadly, has not adequately dealt with the issue of aviation emissions and the need to develop alternatives to flying.

We note that Section 8.1 of Draft Revised NPF on connectivity between Ireland the European Union states the following:

> *"Ireland's direct links with other EU Member States by both air and sea and subsea energy connections are increasingly important, given their advantages in terms of resilience and ease of movement across internal borders. As a result, ports and airports facilitating faster transit times between Ireland and the EU need to be effectively connected into our land-based transport systems."*

However, no consideration is given in Chapter 8 or in NSO 4 to research and development of low-carbon high speed passenger ferries between Ireland and Britain as well as between Ireland and the continent. This should be included.

We also submit that there needs to be an explicit reference to creating seamless connectivity between rail (plus other public transport services) and ports with the goal of making sail-and-rail a much easier, smoother and more affordable intermodal transport journey so that those that are currently flying have an attractive and viable alternative option. To start with, the journey from Dublin to Holyhead (and on, for example, to London) should be greatly improved so as to improve the journey time and overall experience.

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[19] https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/34846-national-cycle-network/

[20] https://www.nationaltransport.ie/planning-and-investment/transport-investment/active-travel-investment-programme/cycleconnects-irelands-cycle-network-active-travel/

[21] https://2020.nsannualreport.nl/annual-report-2020/our-activities-and-achievements-in-the-netherlands/doortodoor-journey/travelling-without-barriers).

National Strategic Outcome 5 – Sustainable Mobility

An Taisce generally supports the revisions to the NPF under this NSO. We would propose the following two additions:

1. There needs to be an explicit reference to the provision of high quality interchanges to allow, for example, for intermodal journeys involving bikes and bus and/or rail.
2. The severance which the M50 created between close-by residential areas needs to be resolved by the provision of high quality direct walking and cycling bridges – and including when the Metrolink bridge is being provided over the M50.

We would also reiterate the need for specific targets and timetables for delivering sustainable mobility objectives. Without a detailed implementation plan, we will continue to fall short on achieving a modal shift away from car use.

National Strategic Outcome 6 - A Strong Economy Supported by Enterprise, Innovation and Skills

The Draft Revised NPF's section on Data and Digital Innovation under NSO 6 states the following regarding data centres:

> *"Ireland is very attractive in terms of international digital connectivity, climatic factors and current and future renewable energy sources for the development of international digital infrastructures, such as data centres. These factors help to underpin Ireland's international position as a leading location for ICT, which contributes to wider synergies in the economy as indigenous and multinational enterprises develop linkages and benefit from the potential of regional clustering."*

This presents an entirely uncritical view of data centres as a key component of digitisation with no mention of the significant climate and energy security implications. The mentions of renewable energy and waste heat cycling in the 2018 NPF, albeit weak and not critically looking at the capacity for further data centre energy use, have now been removed. Data storage is undeniably essential in our increasingly digital society, but, like everything, it must be done within the limits of our planetary boundaries and legally binding carbon budgets.

The extremely rapid growth in the storage of electronic data is a major climate and resource consumption issue for Ireland. This proliferation of data centres has largely gone unchecked in Ireland, as has their power consumption, which increased 400% between 2015 and 2022, by 31% between 2021 and 2022 alone and 20% between 2022 and 2023. As of 2023 data centres consumed 21% of Ireland's total metred electricity. This is up from 5% in 2015 and 18% in 2022, and it represents more electricity use than all urban households in Ireland combined. This significant energy use is not discussed at all in Chapter 9.

The increase in emissions associated with further data centre expansion is incompatible with the achievement of Ireland's legally binding carbon budgets under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 (as amended) and our EU emissions and renewable energy obligations and targets.

Progress towards renewable energy targets has been significantly diluted by the ongoing proliferation of high energy demand developments, data centres particularly. The higher the total electricity demand, the more renewable capacity is needed. Therefore, the more energy intensive

developments, like data centres, that come onstream, the more difficult it will be to reach that target. Despite an increase in overall renewable energy capacity, we are not making significant progress towards achieving our targets. Indeed, SEAI figures show that the share of renewables has not increased since 2020, largely due to the impact of data centres.[22]

An independent national review of current and projected data centre energy demand is urgently required, focusing on compliance with the legally binding constraints of the carbon budgets. Such a review should inform a new national policy and regulations on the level of future data centre development, if any, that can be accommodated while achieving compliance with our national, European and international emissions reduction obligations. A moratorium on all further data centre development, not just in currently grid-constrained areas, should be put in place until such a policy is enacted. The moratorium would need to be continued if data centre development cannot be accommodated within the constraints of our legally binding carbon budgets.

The Draft Revised NPF has entirely failed to address any of these issues, and, as drafted, will allow business-as-usual expansion of one of Ireland's most energy and emissions-intensive sectors.

National Strategic Outcome 7 – Enhanced Amenities and Heritage

Cultural and built heritage are integral parts of international, national and local identity. The experience of heritage, local distinctiveness and sense of place is also a key part of wellbeing.

NSO 7 and the Draft Revised NPF more generally would benefit from more detailed on how heritage protection will be achieved via planning. For instance, NSO 7 states that: "*We will conserve, manage and present our heritage for its intrinsic value and as a support to economic renewal and sustainable employment.*" However, the Draft Revised NPF requires further detailed consideration on how this will actually be realised.

The enhanced recognition in the Draft Revised NPF of the need for conservation and adaptive reuse of our vacant heritage building stock is welcome. For example, we support the relevant additions in NPO 68 (bolded below):

> *"Support the circular and bio economy including in particular through greater efficiency in land and materials management,* ***promoting the sustainable re-use of existing buildings and structures, while conserving cultural and natural heritage, the*** *greater use of renewable resources and by reducing the rate of land use change from urban sprawl and new development".*

There remains an ongoing issue of the endangerment of our heritage buildings and Protected Structures. Cases are consistently arising across the country where Protected Structures and buildings in Architectural Conservation Areas are suffering abandonment; maintenance neglect; loss of major architectural features; and exposure to theft, vandalism, and arson. The Draft Revised NPF should include consideration of this alongside its consideration of adaptive reuse. This should include an objective for improved monitoring of buildings at risk of endangerment.

The NPF needs be informed by the National Landscape Character Assessment, the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage, and the associated inventory of Historic Gardens and Designed Landscapes in considering preferred location for infrastructure, urban expansion and other development. Alignment of the Revised NPF with the European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological

[22] https://www.businesspost.ie/politics/irelands-renewable-energy-still-at-2020-levels-says-seai/

Heritage (Valletta Convention) and other international conventions for the protection of archaeology and cultural landscape needs to be ensured.

Land use policy (in addition to the determination of specific planning applications) needs to give explicit consideration to potential impacts on the setting of Protected Structures and Architectural Conservation Areas in urban areas, to historic gardens and designed landscapes particularly where providing the setting of major country houses, and to the historic and cultural environment generally.

Historic urban centres are an irreplaceable social, cultural and economic asset which should not be compromised by high rise or other inappropriate development. The policies in the NPF to curtail sprawl in favour of urban development needs to ensure the protection of historic centres from excessively high development. High density does not necessarily mean high rise.

National Strategic Outcome 8 – Transition to a Low Carbon and Climate Resilient Society

See sections 2.1 and 7 of this submission. We would reiterate the crucial point that there is a significant and fundamental failure throughout the Draft Revised NPF to reconcile the plan, including the supporting analysis, the National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs), the National Policy Objectives (NPOS), etc., with the carbon budgets and the Climate Action Plan. The reality of climate change and the need to ensure our fair share contribution to emissions reduction per the Paris Agreement mean that all of our activities and development must now take place within the constraints of our emissions reduction needs. In Ireland, that comes in the form of the legally binding carbon budgets. To achieve carbon budget compliance, the sum of all emissions from all of the activities within a sector has to remain within the sectoral emissions ceiling. This will require a serious rethink of how we as a society prioritise our activities and development, and this has a significant impact on the NPF. **A detailed reconciliation of the Draft Revised NPF against the carbon budgets is now therefore required.**

National Strategic Outcome 9 – Sustainable Management of Water and Other Environmental Resources

We note the removal of the following text from NSO 9:

> *"Climate change will also have significant future effects on the availability or water sources and on the capacity of water bodies to assimilate wastewater discharges through lower water levels in rivers and lakes in longer and drier summer periods. The impact of climate change on the water cycle and the resultant impact on water services and flooding therefore need to be considered in settlement strategies."*

This remains an extremely relevant consideration for future planning, and we recommend that this paragraph be reinstated. It should also include reference to the impacts of climate change on Water Framework Directive compliance and on the ecological health of our waterbodies.

Relatedly, we note that the planning system, not just water services, has a key role to play in the priority objective for "*adapting water services to withstand the impact of climate change and of such weather related events*". Planning decisions must take into account the impact of water demand and wastewater treatment in a drought and flood-prone future as a result of climate change.

We submit that the priority objective on:

> *"Substantial State investment, through Uisce Éireann and the Rural Water Programme, to improve compliance with public health and environmental standards, with particular reference to the River Basin Management Plan for Ireland"*

should be amended to "ensure" rather than "improve" compliance, which is insufficient given the current deteriorated state of our water quality. We also recommending inserting "and the legal requirements of the Water Framework Directive" after "River Basin Management Plan for Ireland".

Regarding the statement that:

> *"Uisce Éireann's investment priorities are evidence-based and plan-led supporting the strategic approach outlined in the National and Regional Water Resource Plans as well as other focused plans such as the National Wastewater Sludge Management Plan",*

we would highlight the need for transparency in the investment priorities as well as being evidence-based and plan-led. To date Uisce Éireann has not adequately publicly explained the rationale for prioritising certain projects over others.

National Strategic Outcome 10 – Access to Quality Childcare, Education and Health Services

We recommend that further consideration under NSO 10 be given to the links between these objectives and the NPF's objectives around sustainable settlement and mobility, which are a key part of access to quality childcare, education and health services. See section 2.3 of this submission for further recommendations on integrating settlement and transport planning and comments on NSOs 2, 4, and 5.

An Taisce's Green Schools and Safe Routes to School programmes engage with schools on sustainable travel and encourage a shift away from the car as a means of travel and have been successful initiatives seeing very positive results. The planning system needs to play a major role to further encourage walking, cycling and public transport use in journeys to school. NSO 10 includes a provision for:

> *"additional investments in the schools sector to keep pace with demographic demand and to manage increasing building and site costs so that new and refurbished schools on well-located sites within or close to existing built-up areas, can meet demographic growth and the diverse needs of local populations."*

The future provisions of schools need to be linked in the most direct manner possible with active travel infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists, and such infrastructure needs to be upgraded around existing schools. Public transport access needs to be considered in relation to new schools and upgraded where needed.

Our settlement patterns also have significant impacts on mental wellbeing. Dispersed housing can be socially isolating, particularly for the aging population. Housing within strong vibrant communities with convenient transport links and good public services (health care, libraries, etc.) will contribute to continued independence and social involvement rather than social isolation and loneliness. The way we shape our built environment can play a role alleviating feelings of isolation. Our settlement patterns have resulted in a physical move to locations out of main town and city centres. This has resulted in the decline of areas, loss of trade, footfall and vitality. In order to create socially cohesive communities, it is imperative that the Revised NPF address the revitalisation of our rural towns and

villages and city centres, which will play a key role in providing independence for the aging population and improving mental health for all.

Continued provision of one-off housing will further deteriorate the fabric of our rural towns and villages and result in problematic access to vital health services (ambulance, hospitals).

9. Implementation

In the absence of rigorous application of policy, the divergence between policy and practice results in unsustainable, economically inefficient, structurally weak and spatially dispersed development patterns. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that the Revised NPF moves beyond general and often vague objectives and towards robust targets, actions and measures to achieve the tangible implementation of the plan's objectives and policies. The success or otherwise of the forthcoming Revised NPF can only be judged against quantifiable and implementable criteria which are subject to ongoing monitoring. This will be fundamental in creating a sustainable and healthy future for Ireland that supports the wellbeing of both people and environment.

The implementation of the Revised NPF needs to be legally effective, based on measurable targets, and be subject to corrective action if targets are not being met or need to be updated. This cannot be overemphasised. Apart from the population, regional distribution and urban location targets, very few NPF objectives contain specific targets. The most serious omissions are in relation to a modal shift in transport and to climate mitigation, both of which are quite relevant to compact growth.

We would highlight that the success of the NPF in achieving the implementation of its objectives and policies will depend in many ways on a rigorous and legally compliant Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and the setting of specific targets and indicators therein.

As An Taisce has highlighted throughout this submission, the Draft Revised NPF is seriously deficient in setting out measurable targets and effective implementation mechanisms. This needs to be rectified in the final version.

The final Revised NPF should also include details on how it has addressed and dealt with all recommendations in the Expert Group Report of August 2023[23] and with the OECD report on enhancing delivery of the National Planning Framework.[24]

10. Strategic Environmental Assessment

The Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Directive 2001/42/EC requires that an environmental assessment is carried out of certain plans and programmes which are likely to have significant effects on the environment, including the National Planning Framework. The compliance of the SEA Environmental Report for the Draft Revised NPF with the requirements of the SEA Directive needs to be assessed and validated.

The SEA needs to identify, address and make concrete proposals for mitigation of climate impacts, reversal of biodiversity loss, deterioration in quality of life and general resource management sustainability to meet quality of life and wellbeing objectives. Failure to carry out an effective SEA

[23] https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/269769/2849f227-34e6-46da-82ff-6775c8fcb646.pdf
[24] https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/urban-rural-and-regional-development/towards-balanced-regional-attractiveness-in-ireland_3df116ad-en;jsessionid=8SQmgvXQofL8OynxO-a5jw_K_PRd-AhYSBCi55zd.ip-10-240-5-78

and put adequate monitoring and remedial action in place would expose Ireland to legal action at national and EU level.

Importantly, Article 10 of the SEA Directive sets out provisions for the monitoring of a plan or programme subject to SEA and the obligation for remedial action where unforeseen adverse effects arise:

1. *Member States shall monitor the significant environmental effects of the implementation of plans and programmes in order, inter alia, to identify at an early stage unforeseen adverse effects, and to be able to undertake appropriate remedial action.*
2. *In order to comply with paragraph 1, existing monitoring arrangements may be used if appropriate, with a view to avoiding duplication of monitoring.*

The provisions of Article 10 are not just for monitoring but, notably, for the remediation of unforeseen adverse effects. Section 8.12 of the 2001 European Commission SEA guidance[25] states that:

> "*Unforeseen adverse effects is better interpreted as referring to shortcomings of the prognostic statements in the environmental report (e.g. regarding the predicted intensity of the environmental effect) or unforeseen effects resulting from change of circumstances*."

An Taisce considers that a proper interpretation of Article 10 of the SEA Directive requires that the SEA monitoring process be based on quantitative, audited data and that qualitative data be provided on an ongoing basis during the lifetime of the plan or programme. This is needed to ensure that, following the required baseline assessment in the SEA, ongoing monitoring or auditing can identify unanticipated changes, allowing remediation to be carried out. Producing monitoring for its own sake would not be an adequate transposition of Article 10 of the Directive. It is only by auditing this ongoing monitoring data and clearly measuring any effects that the identification of any "unforeseen adverse effects", as defined by Article 10, can be achieved and remediation can begin.

An Taisce has previously made a formal legal complaint to the European Commission regarding the systemic failures in Ireland to comply with Article 10 of the Directive.

It is also worth noting that if ongoing monitoring was being carried in accordance with the provisions of Article 10, it would contribute very significantly to the general availability of environmental and ecological data in Ireland. Having such an extensive and dynamic database of ecological information would contribute greatly to environmental protection efforts and to ensuring effective spatial and strategic planning within environmental constraints. There would also be significant co-benefits for the Environmental Impact Assessment, Appropriate Assessment and other environmental assessment process.

10.1 SEA for the First NPF Cycle

Section 7 of the SEA Statement[26] for the original 2018 NPF provided for monitoring to be carried out and coordinated by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (the then Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government). Section 8 of that SEA Statement states:

> "*It is envisaged that monitoring and reporting of environmental impacts, both positive and negative, resulting from implementation of the National Planning Framework will continue over the course of the lifetime of the plan.*"

[25] http://ec.europa.eu/environment/archives/eia/pdf/030923_sea_guidance.pdf
[26] https://www.npf.ie/wp-content/uploads/SEA_Statement.pdf

We would highlight that it is an **unambiguous legal requirement** that monitoring and reporting of the environmental impacts be carried out over the lifetime of the plan **and** that remedial actions be taken where unforeseen negative impacts are identified.

To date, the monitoring data and reports relating to the first six years of the NPF have not been published. Nor have any reports regarding unforeseen adverse effects and resulting remedial action. Section 9.2.3 of the SEA Environmental Report provides very little detail on this. These data would have been very useful in guiding the overall NPF review, and it is regrettable that they are not publicly available. An Taisce would highlight that as part of our engagement with the Planning Advisory Forum, we repeatedly raised the issue of SEA monitoring and the need for the monitoring data and reports from the NPF first cycle to be published to help inform the NPF review.

10.2 SEA for the Revised NPF

The SEA Environmental Report for the Draft Revised NPF fails to define adequate objectives, targets and indicators, and the specific measures in the SEA monitoring programme are not fit for purpose (e.g. there are no modal share travel targets). If the NPF is to meet the legal requirements of the SEA Directive it must identify an effective level of environmental objectives with commensurate mitigation targets. The SEA needs to identify, assess and make concrete proposals for the mitigation of emissions and climate impacts, reversal of biodiversity loss, and water quality deterioration, protection of human health, protection of cultural heritage and landscape, general resource management sustainability, etc. Without these, it would be exposed to legal action at national and EU level.

We consider that SEA Environmental Report should be updated with more clearly identified and timetabled and targeted mitigation measures, effective monitoring proposals in all areas, and a legal implementation regime to take remedial action where adverse effects are identified through monitoring.

It is acknowledged and welcomed that that the draft monitoring programme proposed in Table 9-4 of the SEA Environmental Report is more detailed than the programme in the 2018 NPF SEA (Table 7-1). However, most of the targets still remain vague. Crucially, the implementation of this monitoring programme must actually be active *throughout* the second cycle of the NPF. Any identification of unforeseen adverse effects must trigger rapid remedial action. This cannot wait until the next NPF revision.

Crucially, we also note that the SEA does not contain analysis of the carbon emissions associated with the Draft Revised NPF. There is no assessment of these against the legal requirements of the national carbon budgets and sectoral emissions ceilings. We consider that this analysis should underpin the entire NPF and should be provided before the SEA and Revised NPF are finalised.

We would also highlight that there is a high likelihood that amendments to the Draft Revised NPF on foot this public consultation will be material and will require material changes to the SEA Environmental Report. This would trigger the requirement under the SEA Directive for a further period of public consultation.

We note Recommendation 9 from the NPF Expert Review Group's report:[27]

> *"The revision of the NPF should consider the establishment of a dedicated unit which would monitor implementation of the NPF annually. The unit should be mandated to*

[27] https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/269769/2849f227-34e6-46da-82ff-6775c8fcb646.pdf

require all relevant Departments and relevant organisations (e.g., Local Authorities and Uisce Éireann) to report progress and report publicly on their performance against clear metrics, both investment (including the NDP) and impact metrics. The monitoring unit should also identify challenges in the implementation process."

If such a unit is established, we recommend they also be tasked with ensuring that the required ongoing SEA monitoring and the remediation of unforeseen adverse effects is carried out in accordance with the provisions of Article 10 of the Directive.