

New ambitious plan to save our bees creates a buzz

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Today, we are delighted to launch a new All-Ireland Pollinator Plan for 2021-2025. This is the second phase of this very successful project, a new five-year roadmap that aims to help bees, other pollinating insects and our wider biodiversity. Our new plan is even more ambitious than the last – with more partners coming together to deliver even more actions this time around.

Leading the way

In publishing the first All-Ireland Pollinator Plan in September 2015, Ireland became one of the first countries in Europe to address pollinator declines. One-third of our 98 wild bee species are threatened with extinction from the island of Ireland. The All-Ireland Pollinator Plan aims to reverse these declines in order to ensure the sustainability of our food; avoid additional economic impacts on agriculture; and protect the health of the environment.

Wild bees and other insects are declining because we've drastically reduced the areas where they can nest and the amount of food our landscape provides for them. Since 2015, the Pollinator Plan has focussed on ensuring that everyone understands what pollinators need; and what simple, evidence-based actions anyone can take to help provide them with food, shelter, and safety. Freely available resources have been developed for all sectors – from farmers to councils, transport authorities, communities, businesses, schools, sports clubs and gardens.

The All-Ireland Pollinator Plan is voluntary, but provides an important framework to guide initiatives across the island. It is a shared plan of action. By working together, we want to bring about a landscape where bees and other insects can survive and continue to provide us and future generations with their vital ecosystem services.

The success of the first phase took everyone by surprise. Across all sectors, organisations, groups, and individuals have engaged with the Plan and have taken actions to help. The seeds of change are everywhere, with patches of pollinator-friendly habitat being restored in almost every corner of the island. There are more native flowering hedgerows, providing a network of wildlife corridors. Many people have embraced the 'don't mow, let it grow' approach and species-rich meadows are reappearing in parks, on roadside verges, while tightly cut lawns are being replaced by wildlife lawns, dappled with clover and dandelions. Towns and villages have adopted pollen and nectar-rich planting regimes. There are community orchards, and pollinator-friendly railway stations, campuses, schools and gardens.

A lot done, more to do

At the end of phase 1, all 81 actions contained in the first Plan have been completed. Pollinators are better off than they were five years ago, but they are still in difficulties and we need to do more. The new plan has more than doubled our goals – with 186 actions to help biodiversity.

In the next phase, we want to encourage the restoration of more land for pollinators and other biodiversity. We will celebrate farmland biodiversity and improve awareness of how farmers can help. We will encourage more councils to manage their land in a way that better integrates people and biodiversity. We will encourage new sectors to get involved, such as hospitals and nursing homes. We will focus more on helping rare species that are at risk of disappearing, like the Great Yellow Bumblebee. We will try to grow and support the networks of people helping across all sectors.

Everyone can help, and we will encourage more people to pledge their garden for pollinators, creating pitstops for hungry bees right across our landscape.

In the next phase, we also want to engage more widely and with new audiences. We will try to better explain how helping pollinators brings much wider benefits, particularly to our own health and wellbeing. We will cement Ireland's position as a world leader, by establishing a 'Pollinator Trail' that identifies and celebrates excellent examples of restored pollinator habitat right across the island. The new Plan will support beekeepers in keeping healthy honey bees; but also, better stress that it is our *wild* bees that are in trouble, and that we need to halt those declines and create a balanced system with a range of pollinator types. We will ensure the Plan remains dynamic and effective, by identifying new research priorities so that our universities can continue to grow the evidence-base to best support the initiative.

We know that the Plan will ultimately only be a success, if we can halt the declines in wild bees, hoverflies, and other insects; and if in 10, 20, or hundreds of years from this island is buzzing with healthy and stable pollinator populations, providing us with the services on which we are so dependent. Importantly, the new Plan calls for a long-term monitoring scheme that will allow us to properly track those changes in our wild insects.

The need for permanent change

"We don't want this to be a short-term, 'trendy' initiative. It is about fully normalising a better way of managing our whole landscape to permanently support our struggling biodiversity," said Dr Úna FitzPatrick from the National Biodiversity Data Centre, who chairs the Plan steering group and oversees its implementation. "We know that for the Plan to continue to be successful, it needs to be built on trust in the experts running the programme; acknowledgement of all the efforts being made; and clear demonstrations that the actions we are taking together are making a difference and are having a positive impact."

Prof Jane Stout, Professor in Botany at Trinity College Dublin, who co-chairs the group, added: "Restoration of biodiversity across farmed, natural and urban landscapes is crucial for sustainable livelihoods and humanity's well-being. Actions to protect pollinators across all these landscapes, as outlined in the Plan, can help restore other elements of biodiversity, and result in multiple benefits for nature and for people. For example, pollinators are important for maintaining plant populations that sequester carbon, and protect against flooding, and some pollinators help control pest populations and recycle waste. And ultimately, pollinators help to ensure the people of Ireland have healthy natural systems to enjoy, promoting our mental and physical health."

A Plan built on Partnerships

The All-Ireland Pollinator Plan is voluntary. It was developed by a 16-member steering group who provide oversight, with implementation coordinated by the National Biodiversity Data Centre. Responsibility for delivering the 186 actions contained in this new Plan is shared out between 64 partner organisations, which include the Department of Agriculture, Food & the Marine, Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Heritage Council, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Bord Bia, Northern Ireland Environment Agency, Office of Public Works, GAA, An Taisce Green-Schools, Federation of Irish Beekeepers' Associations, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, National Trust, RSPB, Teagasc, Tidy Towns, Translink, Ulster Farmers' Union. The Plan does not have a project budget. Instead, those organisations who have committed to taking action, agree to fund those actions themselves.

For the second phase, the National Biodiversity Data Centre will continue to provide oversight and management of the implementation. The Centre is a programme of the Heritage Council. The National Parks and Wildlife Service have committed to funding a full-time project officer to support the Plan. The Department of Agriculture, Food & the Marine have also committed to funding a full-time project officer to support implementation of the farmland actions. Bord Bia have agreed to provide funding to support the growing network of business supporters and ensure the actions they take are evidence-based and effective.

“Having so many organisations voluntarily sign up to this new Plan signifies its importance, and that the will is there to make it succeed” said FitzPatrick. She added, “As we look forward to the next five years, we thank everyone who has already engaged. It has shown that by working together we can make changes for the better”.

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