

# Protecting Nature, Empowering Communities

**Community Foundation Ireland: Biodiversity Briefing Paper**



## Who We Are

Community Foundation Ireland is a leading philanthropic hub, connecting donors to those on the ground taking positive action to drive social change in communities all over Ireland.

People, place, planet are priorities for Community Foundation Ireland in advancing our equality mission. This mission of equality for all in communities where people and nature thrive shapes how we work with donors, how we invest and how we make grants.

The Foundation focuses on three connected and interwoven priorities:

- **People**, creating a fairer, more inclusive future where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.
- **Place**, building resilient communities that can respond to challenges and seize opportunities.
- **Planet**, restoring nature and safeguarding the environment for generations to come.

The Foundation engages with a wide range of donors to share learnings and mobilise resources to ensure strategic giving where every euro delivers maximum impact. Our team are deeply connected with communities, helping them respond to urgent needs whilst also stepping back to look at the bigger picture of making lasting change. This on-the-ground practical knowledge is coupled with deeper dives into issues, often by commissioning research that can inform system-wide solutions. This ensures that we offer donors expert and specialised information, guidance and support to ensure that their philanthropic giving is guided by real insight and evidence. This ensures that donations are directed to where they can have the greatest impact in communities all over Ireland.

The Foundation has received almost €200 million in donations since 2000 from a wide range of donors, including individuals, families, trusts and foundations and corporates. Grant-making has supported over 17,000 charitable and community-based initiatives across Ireland and further afield.

With an Endowment Fund of approximately €60 million, the Foundation has the capacity to co-invest alongside donors or proactively address urgent community challenges, often those that have yet to attract wider attention and action.

## Nature In Crisis

Our wildlife, plants and nature are in crisis.

Biodiversity loss has reached critical levels in Ireland and globally, with species and habitats declining faster than ever before. This threatens the ecosystems that sustain human life and wellbeing, and undermines food and water security, economic stability and social equity and demands urgent, coordinated action at every level of society. Ireland's natural infrastructure is the essential basis of built infrastructure and the economy.

Community Foundation Ireland recognised early that philanthropy could play a unique role in supporting the growth of a resilient ecosystem and amplify the impact of other forms of investment. Our equality mission cannot be achieved without working to address this crisis. Our work with communities demonstrates that the crises in the areas of biodiversity and climate are not only environmental emergencies, but also social justice emergencies as they deepen inequality and significantly impact those most vulnerable.

We are now delighted to present our Biodiversity Briefing Paper, giving a comprehensive overview of our wide breadth of biodiversity grant-making and the impact that it has had since 2019, informed by independent evaluation. This paper outlines the impact of this funding, which totals **€6.3 million over the last five years**. It demonstrates how donor-led philanthropy can catalyse measurable benefits while strengthening community capacity, fostering collaboration, and building resilience for future generations. This briefing paper is rich in data and insights, and includes case-studies that reflect a shared commitment on the part of our donors to support communities to become stewards of their natural environment.

## **Philanthropy's Unique Role in Positively Impacting Nature**

Philanthropy has played a unique role in taking action to address the biodiversity crisis by supporting organisations, both at a small, grassroots community level and at a national level. It has acted as catalyst – providing flexible, timely and strategic support that has enabled organisations to innovate, collaborate and scale solutions for nature restoration to deliver real impact that contributes to our national biodiversity targets.

The Foundation has demonstrated clear leadership in this area, partnering with communities, landowners and experts to support impactful, nature-based solutions. With the support of our donors and our endowment fund, biodiversity grant-making has expanded rapidly and to date we have invested over €6.3m into practical conservation projects, species protection initiatives, community education, policy advocacy and long-term ecosystem restoration.

This investment supports a wide range of grassroots community groups, place-based and national organisations, reflecting the Foundation's belief that meaningful change requires both local action and systemic solutions.

Donors have played a critical role in advancing the nature agenda, by engaging with the Foundation's strategic giving vehicles such as Donor-Advised Funds and philanthropic advisory services. Through open grant rounds and targeted funding directed by the Foundation, this collaboration has enabled projects that have strengthened community action, supported national policy goals and built public awareness.

## *Our Approach*

At Community Foundation Ireland, we take a deliberate, connected, and collaborative approach to driving change. Working alongside a broad network of partners, we deliver interventions that address urgent needs while enabling long-term, strategic impact.

### **PLACE-BASED INSIGHTS AND ACTION**

We are deeply rooted in local communities, with connections to over 5,000 charitable and community partnerships across Ireland and beyond. Through our pioneering partnership with the National Parks and Wildlife Service, and donors, we have enabled over 300 community groups to implement local biodiversity action plans, many in collaboration with expert ecologists. This programme has delivered tangible benefits, including meadow restoration, pollinator protection, and invasive species control.

### **CONVENOR**

As a community foundation, we play a key role in bringing stakeholders together - non-profits, experts, ecologists, donors, and national partners - to ensure effective, coordinated action.

### **CAPACITY SUPPORT**

We provide funding and support to strengthen the capacity of expert civil society organisations that are critical to Ireland's efforts to protect and restore nature, for example, funding for staff training, equipment, and other hard-to-fund expenses. Many of these organisations focus on habitat restoration, invasive species removal, increasing breeding success for threatened bird and through education and community stewardship, they empower thousands of people to engage in biodiversity action.

### **EXPERT GOVERNANCE AND DUE DILIGENCE**

We uphold the highest standards of governance, including robust due diligence, financial controls and conflict-of-interest management.

### **LONG-TERM COMMITMENT**

Based on the international model, community foundations have been shaping change for more than 100 years. Our endowment fund model ensures sustained impact over the long term for generations to come.

## **Delivering Real Impact for Communities and Nature**

Community Foundation Ireland's leadership on one of the biggest challenges of our time has delivered real impact in communities all over Ireland, ensuring that on-the-ground conservation is reinforced by national-level impact.

Impact is focused on three strategic areas:

- **Grassroots and Community-Led Initiatives**
- **National Organisations and Strategic Partners**
- **Place-based Initiatives**

**Grassroots and community-led initiatives have delivered significant benefits in communities all over Ireland.**

Independent evaluation has illustrated the ways that our programme for Community Biodiversity Action plans has protected biodiversity while building local knowledge. This programme, run in partnership with the National Parks and Wildlife Service and supported by a number of Foundation donors, has seen funding support of over €2.5m towards the creation and implementation of local biodiversity plans and has significantly benefitted grantee organisations, many of which are small, voluntary groups. It has increased their effectiveness as advocates for nature, deepened their understanding of the environmental sector, improved their engagement with public policy-making and helped them to grow the number of volunteers and members involved in the work.



## Impact Highlights – Community-Level Grants

Significant on-the ground action has taken place as a result of this funding and independent research demonstrates that these plans are steering towards the most impactful measures for biodiversity and maximising the potential for positive impact. Positive biodiversity impact has included:

- pollinator planting (67%)
- meadow creation (40%)
- hedgerows (38%)

There was a focus on managing invasive species and protecting species such as pollinators, plants, birds, butterflies and moths.

**Critically, over a third of these plans include collaborations with farmers.** With the agricultural sector creating a large percentage of Ireland's emissions, it is crucial to create pathways for farmers to consider biodiversity protection as part of their work and to build a sense of pride and ownership in that process.

**One-third of the plans included sites are part of the Natura 2000 Network**, the network of 623 sites across the country that are designated as Special Areas of Conservation under the Habitats Directive or Special Protection Areas under the Birds Directive, considered to be among our most important places for nature.

**Data-sharing has also played an important role**, with almost 80% having been shared with the National Biodiversity Data Centre and thus contributing to our understanding of areas of key biodiversity loss and protection across Ireland.

Grassroots organisations are often closest to the land and species they protect. They bring deep local knowledge, volunteer energy, and strong community trust. Surveys amongst the grantees have demonstrated strong impact amongst these groups as a result of funding of the local community plans:

- **Knowledge** - 99% reported improved understanding of habitats, with 93% around species knowledge. Better habitat and species understanding of species means communities can protect biodiversity with confidence.
- **Awareness** - 74% reported community attitude change, creating stronger support for conservation.
- **Advocacy** - 75% engaging with public policy, 90% better understanding of environmental organisations, ensuring local voices influence decisions.
- **Capacity** – 50% grew volunteer base, 30% improved governance, many reported the grants as a powerful catalyst for future funding,

## Impact Highlights – National Grants

With philanthropic support, national organisations have been able to deliver practical biodiversity actions while also growing Ireland's body of data on biodiversity. Across the voluntary, academic, and NGO sectors, grant-making has supported organisational resilience and capacity. Strong expert civil society organisations play a critical role in empowering thousands of people to engage in biodiversity action, education and community stewardship, in habitat restoration, and invasive species removal.

Independent evaluation showed that the Foundation and its donors supported 100 projects between 2019 and 2024 with total grant-making of €2.18m. Philanthropic funding has acted as a catalyst - providing the **flexible, timely and strategic support** that allows these organisations to innovate, collaborate and scale solutions for nature recovery.

Direct projects have delivered **tangible ecological results**, including increased breeding success for threatened birds such as Lapwing, alongside habitat restoration and invasive species removal. Smaller grants have delivered outsized impacts by **empowering thousands of people to engage in biodiversity action**, education and community stewardship. Examples of projects supported have included tree training and recording programmes, a Biodiversity Ambassador Programme, and a Seed Guardian Network, a knowledge-sharing initiative for young farmers.

**Scientific research** is vital in the effort to tackle biodiversity loss by building the evidence base for action and trialling innovative ideas and approaches. Philanthropic funding enabled research at Trinity College Dublin for the ReFarm project, looking at the use of private finance to make farming for nature a sustainable and scalable solution to the biodiversity and climate crises.

Donors also supported the All-Ireland Climate and Biodiversity Research Network (AICBRN) to tackle climate and biodiversity crises through collaborative, evidence-based solutions. Fragmented expertise and limited coordination have hindered progress, but philanthropy changed that. A targeted grant from Community Foundation Ireland and Sunflower Charitable Foundation mapped research capacity and gaps, producing the landmark *Climate and Biodiversity Solutions Report*. This work informed policy, strengthened collaboration, and secured further investment for the new Climate+ Rapid Response Policy Unit and the Co-Centre for Climate, Biodiversity and Water, driving integrated, science-led action on an all-island basis. Strategic giving has transformed AICBRN from informal collaboration into a catalyst for systemic impact across the island.



## SPOTLIGHT

### Taughmaconnell Community Centre & Community Biodiversity Action Plan

The Taughmaconnell Community Centre, in Roscommon, led by local farmer Liam Kildea, is a powerful example of how a small biodiversity grant can become a transformational experience for a local community.

The group received €5,000 in January 2023 to hire ecologist Linda Gilsenan to develop a plan for an area known as 'The Rocks'. Her survey found this area to be incredibly rich in biodiversity, with a karst landscape similar to the Burren. She brought on other environmental specialists, including the NPWS, for additional study. Their work further highlighted the uniqueness of the area.

Liam won Biodiversity Farmer of the Year at the FBD Better Farming Awards, with his passion and knowledge acknowledged, along with his position of 'leader in the local community'. This followed two further grants through the Biodiversity Fund in 2024 and 2025, focused on deeper surveys, work with local farmers, and virtual fencing projects.

In May 2025, they were successful in their application to the European Innovation Partnership (EIP) and the 'Karst Farming Network', a wider organisation of farmers in South Roscommon, received a grant of €1.6million. This would enable them to use old and new farming technologies to conserve the unique, species-rich karst grassland through a results-based programme for farmers.

The Foundation-funded plan was widely quoted in their application stating that without the original €5,000 grant it was highly unlikely the EIP application would have been successful. Liam's enthusiasm, drive, and networking abilities as key factors in their ongoing success, along with the patience, understanding, and faith shown in Taughmaconnell by the Foundation.



## SPOTLIGHT

### Salmon Watch Ireland - Building Awareness & Engagement

*This funding has been a ‘game-changer’ as it has supported scaling up operations, building organisational capacity, and reaching thousands more people with its message.*

Salmon Watch Ireland



Since 2004, Salmon Watch Ireland (SWIRL) has championed the protection of Ireland’s wild Atlantic salmon through science-based advocacy, community engagement and policy reform.

Atlantic salmon face severe threats from overfishing, habitat loss, pollution, climate change, and open-cage farming. These pressures endanger ecosystems and cultural heritage, yet public awareness and policy responses remain limited. A €60,000 grant from the Farmleigh Fund enabled SWIRL to scale operations, employ staff and launch a national campaign. Key achievements include:

- Publishing *Saving the Irish Salmon – A Policy Statement 2025*
- Hosting the National Salmon Conference
- Legal challenges to salmon farming licences
- Advocacy for pollution monitoring and enforcement

#### Impact

Over 5,000 people engaged directly, with 10,000 more reached indirectly. SWIRL’s advocacy gained national media coverage and influenced policy. The Athlone conference was hailed as “a turning point” for salmon conservation.

Philanthropy has been the catalyst for transformation. Without support from Community Foundation Ireland, SWIRL could not have mobilised communities or challenged harmful practices. As one participant said: “*Saving salmon means saving our rivers – and our future.*”



## SPOTLIGHT

### Hometree - Restoring Ireland's Native Forests

Philanthropy has been pivotal in enabling Hometree to scale its impact. Flexible, unrestricted funding strengthened governance, staffing, and infrastructure—allowing the charity to respond to challenges, seize opportunities, and invest in its people for hands-on conservation and restoration.

Ireland is Europe's most deforested country, with only 1% of its original forest cover remaining—threatening biodiversity, climate resilience, and cultural heritage. Hometree addresses this by restoring native habitats, increasing genetically resilient tree supply, and fostering inclusive environmental education.

Founded in 2014 as a community garden in West Clare, Hometree now leads national efforts in afforestation, rewilding, and the restoration of Ireland's rare temperate rainforests. Its mission: rebuild resilient ecosystems and reconnect people with nature. To date, Community Foundation Ireland has provided over €480,000 in funding.

#### Impact

Strategic grants enabled Hometree to hire key staff, expand operations, and develop its Native Tree Nursery—doubling output to 35,000 trees in 2024/25, with a target of 90,000 next season. To date, Hometree has planted 140,000 trees, manages 550 acres, and supplies thousands more for community-led projects. Funding also supported inclusion programmes, volunteer training, and events like the Ardnaculla Summer School, positioning Hometree as a national leader in ecological restoration.



## SPOTLIGHT

### AXA Parks Fund – Biodiversity Across the Island

When AXA first set out to develop the AXA Parks Fund, its top priority was to support local areas and the people in them who serve as pillars of the community. Through the partnership with Community Foundation Ireland, the remit of the Fund was enhanced to include biodiversity protection as a key element of the programme as well. AXA had recognised the importance of access to green spaces and nature for community wellbeing and mental health, particularly during COVID-19 when people's experiences of the pandemic varied significantly based on whether they had access to spaces like parks, gardens, and nature trails. In adding in a biodiversity element, we ensured that community green spaces benefitted both people and planet. Under these criteria, projects would only be eligible for funding if they demonstrated a clear objective to protect or enhance local biodiversity.

The programme distributed over €800,000 to over 80 projects across the island, all focused on community engagement and access to green spaces serving as vital habitats for local flora and fauna. Projects included the planting pocket forests in urban areas, pollinator corridors and native trees in parks, and walkways on sand dunes that allowed community access without damaging these fragile ecosystems.

*“We faced some challenges, particularly weather related with our trees. In June we had to water the trees locally to ensure their survival, but we succeeded! The local community really appreciate the work that has gone into the area and the walkway is very well used. One of the biggest highlights was the Project Day at Ballyglunin Station. Children from Crumlin and Annagh NS were very proud to display their projects on the biodiversity in the local area, they put in an incredible amount of work and the display attracted a huge crowd.”*

**Ballyglunin Community Development Company, Co. Galway**



# Place-based Initiatives at the Heart of Biodiversity and Environmental Action

*Protecting place can often be at the heart of donors' motivations to support climate and biodiversity projects.*

## SPOTLIGHT

### Mayo Sustainability Fund

Driven by the vision of a donor, the Mayo Sustainability Fund responds to the needs and challenges of local sustainability-focused groups, with philanthropic support. Informed by a scoping study commissioned by Community Foundation Ireland in partnership with the Sunflower Charitable Foundation, the study draws on the experience of local groups.

Through the study and a special convening in Mayo, the local groups identified key challenges as limited knowledge of funding sources, lack of flexible and long-term funding, a need for peer learning and deeper community engagement. Both Foundations and a range of other donors activated the fund to address these challenges.

Projects currently supported include Mayo Dark Skies, Inishturk Community Club, Belleek Woods Enhancement Committee, Edible Landscape Project, Leave no Trace, Birdwatch Ireland, Irish Whale & Dolphin Group, amongst others. This story not only highlights the power of philanthropy to connect people, place, and purpose but also provides proof of concept for other counties and regions to follow.





## SPOTLIGHT

### ReFarm – Farmers Leading in Biodiversity Actions

ReFarm Ireland is pioneering a nature-positive farming model by leveraging private finance to make biodiversity-friendly practices sustainable and scalable. Supported by Community Foundation Ireland and a €150,000 donor contribution, the initiative has recruited key staff and engaged 35 farmers across 19 counties, all with proven expertise in conservation. These farmers have received online training, briefing materials and direct engagement with the ReFarm team, with many participating in networking events at Trinity College Dublin and Kildare.

Beyond farmers, ReFarm is fostering collaboration among researchers, businesses and policymakers through webinars, consultations, and national conferences. The team has engaged with State agencies, government committees and technology providers, ensuring alignment with Ireland’s climate and nature restoration goals. Media coverage on national radio and broadsheets has amplified its impact.

Funding has also enabled the ReFarm Burren pilot, where 15 farmers are using innovative “virtual fencing” technology to enhance biodiversity on their land. This approach empowers farmers to create more space for nature while participating in a groundbreaking model funded by private investors.

ReFarm offers a fresh, action-oriented solution to address biodiversity loss and climate challenges, positioning Irish agriculture as a leader in nature-based innovation.





## SPOTLIGHT

### Burrenbeo Trust – Connecting People and Place

Burrenbeo Trust's story is a testament to what's possible when communities are empowered and philanthropy steps in to support meaningful, grassroots change.

Burrenbeo Trust is a non-profit based in the Burren, a unique heritage landscape in western Ireland. Since 2008, it has connected people to their local environment through education, conservation, and community engagement. Burrenbeo believes that when people feel connected to their place, they are more likely to protect it. Its programmes include guided walks, festivals, school initiatives and biodiversity projects that foster stewardship and sustainability.

Ireland faces biodiversity loss, climate change, and community fragmentation. However, those who want to act can often lack resources or knowledge. Burrenbeo bridges this gap with programmes that educate and empower communities. However, sustaining and expanding these efforts requires reliable funding.

#### The Role of Philanthropy

Community Foundation Ireland, with donors like the Sunflower Charitable Foundation, has enabled Burrenbeo to grow its flagship Heritage Keepers programme—a national initiative helping schools and communities explore local heritage and take action. Funding supported webinars, teacher training, mentoring, networking events, and a new website, expanding reach nationwide.

#### Impact

In 2024, 82 schools and groups participated, creating projects like wildlife ponds and heritage trails. Over 4,750 people engaged directly, 30,000 indirectly. Philanthropy has been the catalyst, turning ideas into action and creating a national movement for environmental stewardship.



## **Working Together to Support Impactful Biodiversity Action - Conclusion**

This briefing paper has spotlighted some of the key areas of the Foundations work in biodiversity, in partnership with hundreds of communities, farmers and ecological experts.

Behind the headline figures it tells the story of how philanthropic partnerships at local and national level have joined together to work to save our most critically endangered plants, animals and habitats. From local awareness raising and community actions, to saving our riverbanks, coasts and forests, we acknowledge and welcome the leadership of our donors for their ongoing support and our partners, for identifying and promoting pioneering efforts to address the crisis in nature.

Together we are empowering communities to drive practical, long-term biodiversity action.

If you would like more information on this area of work, or recommendations for further projects to support, please get in touch.