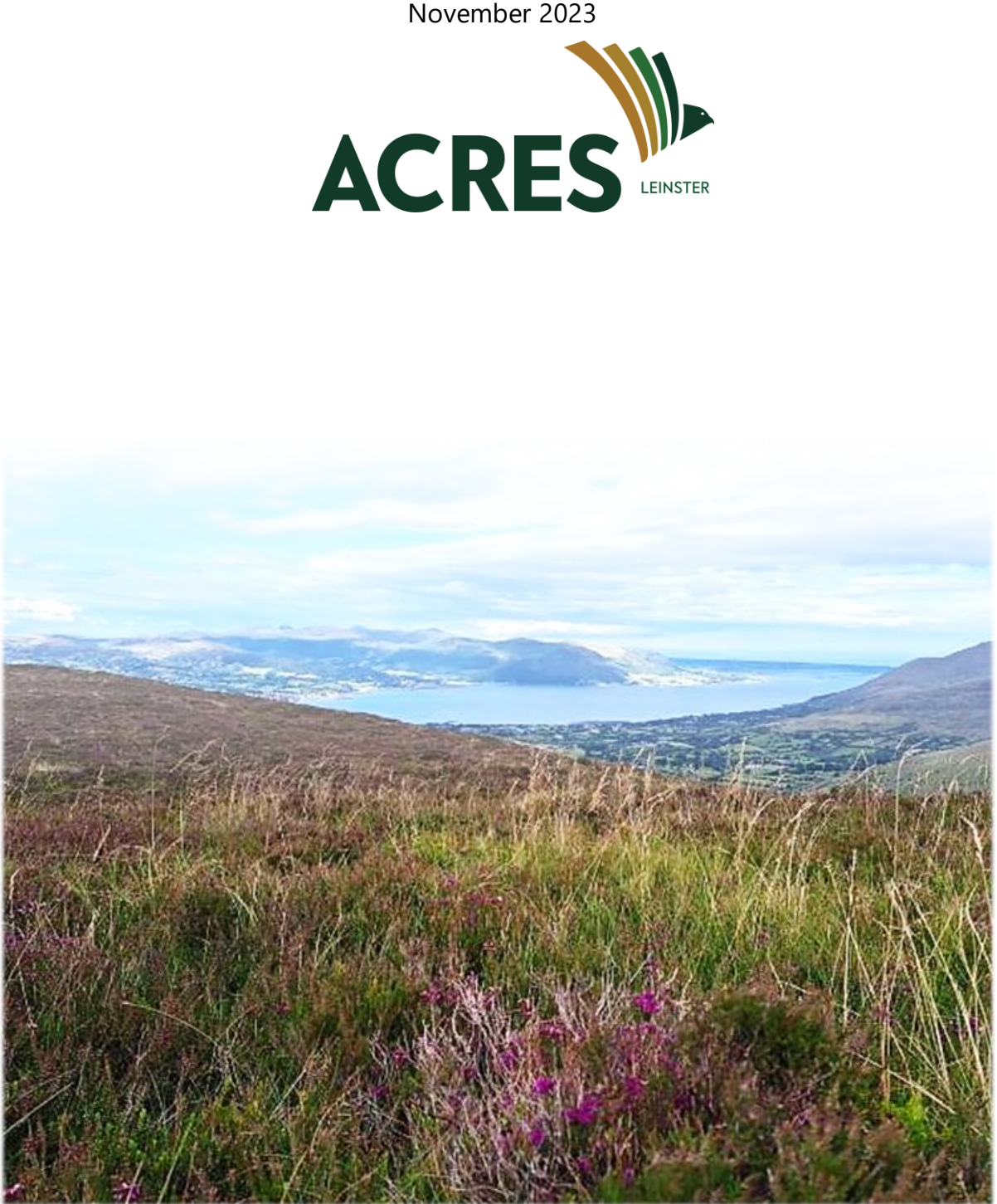


ACRES LEINSTER Cooperation Project

Local Action Plan 1.0

Synthesis Report

November 2023



Preface

The Hen Harrier Project (HHP) Ltd was awarded the contract for the management of the Co-operation Project (CP) area of ACRES Leinster (originally called East South-East). Work began in May 2022 and since then focus has been on building the human, physical and IT infrastructure required to deliver the ACRES Co-operation project model. HHP staff worked closely with the Dept. of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the other CP project teams to develop the scorecards and scorecard guidance used for habitat assessment and the specifications for Non-Productive Investments (NPIs) and Landscape Actions (LAs) that form the basis for the results-based approach.

The HHP team drafted a Local Action Plan for the Leinster CP. This is the first stage of a process which will identify scheme objectives down to individual field level. The first stage was compiled from existing relevant datasets. The next stage of the process is to identify the pressures that potentially affect each objective at a local level. This, in turn, will be followed by an examination of the drivers behind those pressures and ultimately by a plan for what the participating farmers, the project team, and other agencies can *realistically* do to address the identified pressures. This plan will evolve constantly in response to changes in the baseline data, farmer management practices, increased threats or any other information that becomes available. While our team completed the first stage, the subsequent stages will only be accomplished with the engagement of local stakeholders. The most important of these are the participating farmers whom we depend on for local knowledge and to deliver effective responses at field, farm and local levels.

The CP teams support the scheme and its participants by providing general and bespoke support to improve field scores, assisting with targeting of actions and through the delivery of specialist training and by bridging the gap between govt departments and research bodies and the farmer who manages the land. They will take on some of the regulatory burden associated with doing actions in NATURA 2000 sites and help co-ordinate action by farmers and other land managers where this is required to achieve landscape-level goals. The role of the CP team extends beyond direct engagement with the participating farmer. To deliver the scheme's objectives, the teams will also engage the broader community in support of what farmers are working to achieve.

The teams will be public facing and it should be clear to everyone what the local objectives are and their strategy for supporting the participating farmer. The Local Action Plan provides an insight to the key natural resources in a CP zone and guides the rollout of the scheme by the CP team.

The Local Action Plan is a component of the overall ACRES approach. ACRES CP operates across eight zones within a national framework. The Terms and Conditions and Specifications for the broader ACRES Scheme, along with the specifications for Non-Productive Investments and for Landscape Actions provide this framework a national level. The design of the screening processes for actions within ACRES and the Appropriate Assessment for ACRES itself are also managed at a national level. They apply equally to all eight CP zones. Within this national framework there is considerable room for tailoring the scheme to meet local objectives. This can be done with consideration to local farming systems and an awareness of local constraints. The Local Action Plan sets out how the CP team will make use of this flexibility.

The Local Action Plan is a living document. It is intended to continually evolve throughout the operational period of the ACRES CP scheme. The evolution of the plan will be responsive to changing circumstances, baselines, and understandings about how best to address local challenges. The plan aims to help all parties to understand the objectives of ACRES CP and how the scheme's structures can support farmers as they work to achieve those objectives.

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Overview of the ACRES CP scheme

Ireland's new agri-environment climate measure (AECM) is known as the Agri-Climate Rural Environment Scheme ('ACRES'). This scheme includes a co-operation approach, available to farmers in defined high priority geographical areas. High priority geographical areas were identified using a series of nature priority and high-status objective waterbody spatial layers. Co-operation Project (CP) areas were determined by grouping these high priority geographical areas (Figure 1), and CP teams have been assigned to each of these CP areas to enable the roll-out of the scheme at a local level.

Within the CP areas, all forage land is divided into fields and assigned scorecards based on the habitat type by CP teams according to three main habitats: Grassland, Peatland and Woodland/Scrubland. Each field is assigned a scorecard which is used to assess its ecological integrity depending on the objective of that field. All scorecards also score hydrological integrity and/or evidence of threats and pressures. Fields are to be scored three times throughout the duration of the five-year scheme. An annual payment is made according to the most recent score, which incentivises the maintenance or improvement of the fields being farmed. Ten scorecards are available in ACRES CP (Table 1).

Table 1: Full list of the ten scorecards available in ACRES CP, including their objective and their frequency of application in ACRES Leinster CP.

Scorecard	Objective	Frequency
Peatland	Peatland habitats, upland birds,	Common
Grassland	Semi-natural grassland habitats, pollinators	Common
Rough Grazing	Hen harrier, Barn owl, small birds and mammals	Common
Scrub/Woodland	Scrub/woodland habitats	Common
Coastal	Coastal habitats such as dunes and saltmarshes	Occasional
Low Input Peat	Wet grassland habitats	Not applicable
Breeding Wader	Snipe, Curlew, Redshank and Lapwing	Not applicable
Chough	Cliff habitats, chough	Not applicable
Winterage	Dry calcareous grassland on winterage sites	Not applicable
Corncrake	Corncrake, hay meadows	Not applicable

All scorecards are designed to deliver for biodiversity, carbon sequestration, water quality, soil quality, flood resilience and fire resilience

Actions designed to improve the field score are available to farmers in each year of their contract following the baseline score assessment in 2023 (or 2024 for tranche 2 participants). These actions include a list of Non-productive Investments (NPIs)* and Landscape Actions (LAs)**. All scorecards and actions in ACRES CP aim to achieve the underlying principle of the new AECM framework of "the right measure in the right place".

*The full suite of Non Productive Investments (NPIs) can be viewed on the DAFM website: <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/f5a48-agri-climate-rural-environment-scheme-acres/#non-productive-investments>

** Landscape Actions were under development and a list was not available at the time of report publication.

Background of the CP Team

The Hen Harrier Programme (HHP) Ltd manages the CP teams for the ACRES Breifne, ACRES Leinster and ACRES Munster/ South Connacht Co-operation Project (CP) zones. The operational structure to support the rollout of the ACRES scheme in these areas makes use of local teams supported by a shared administrative and technical support unit.

This structure allows for a locally focused delivery model for services to participants. The local teams can focus on supporting the ACRES CP programme in their area. Each team has access to a company-wide range of expertise including an Archaeologist, a Drone Data Acquisition Co-ordinator, and Data Analyst, along with external specialists contracted in as required. This enhances the range and depth of skills available to the team. The structure also allows for the sharing of resources between the teams as required.

All project staff directly involved in supporting participants in the ACRES Leinster CP area are based in Blessington, Co. Wicklow (Table 2). Blessington has good transport links to facilitate service provision to all parts of the CP area.

Table 2: Composition of the ACRES Leinster CP Team.

ACRES Leinster CP Team	Staff name	Leinster region
Manager	Padraig Cronin	All areas
Deputy Manager	Kristina Feeney	All areas
Team Lead	Brian Dunne	Dublin/Wicklow
Project Officer	Shane Dunne	Cooleys/Blooms/Blackstairs
Project Officer	Hugh Gryspeerdt	Dublin/Wicklow/Blackstairs

*Please refer to Fig. 1 overleaf for a spatial overview of the Leinster regions.

Location and Geographical features of the Leinster CP

The ACRES Leinster CP area is situated in the province of Leinster and covers an area of approximately 967 km². The number of first tranche applicants in the ACRES Leinster CP is c. ~660, covering an area of c. 43,593 ha of farmland. The CP extends from the Cooley Mountains in Co. Louth southwards to the Blackstairs Mountains and Saltee Islands in Co. Wexford, encompassing the Wicklow and Dublin Mountains and the Slieve Bloom Mountains in Co. Laois and Co. Offaly. Typical farm enterprises include sheep farming (predominantly hill farming), with smaller areas of suckler stock. Operationally, the CP area has been divided into four regions (see Fig. 1).

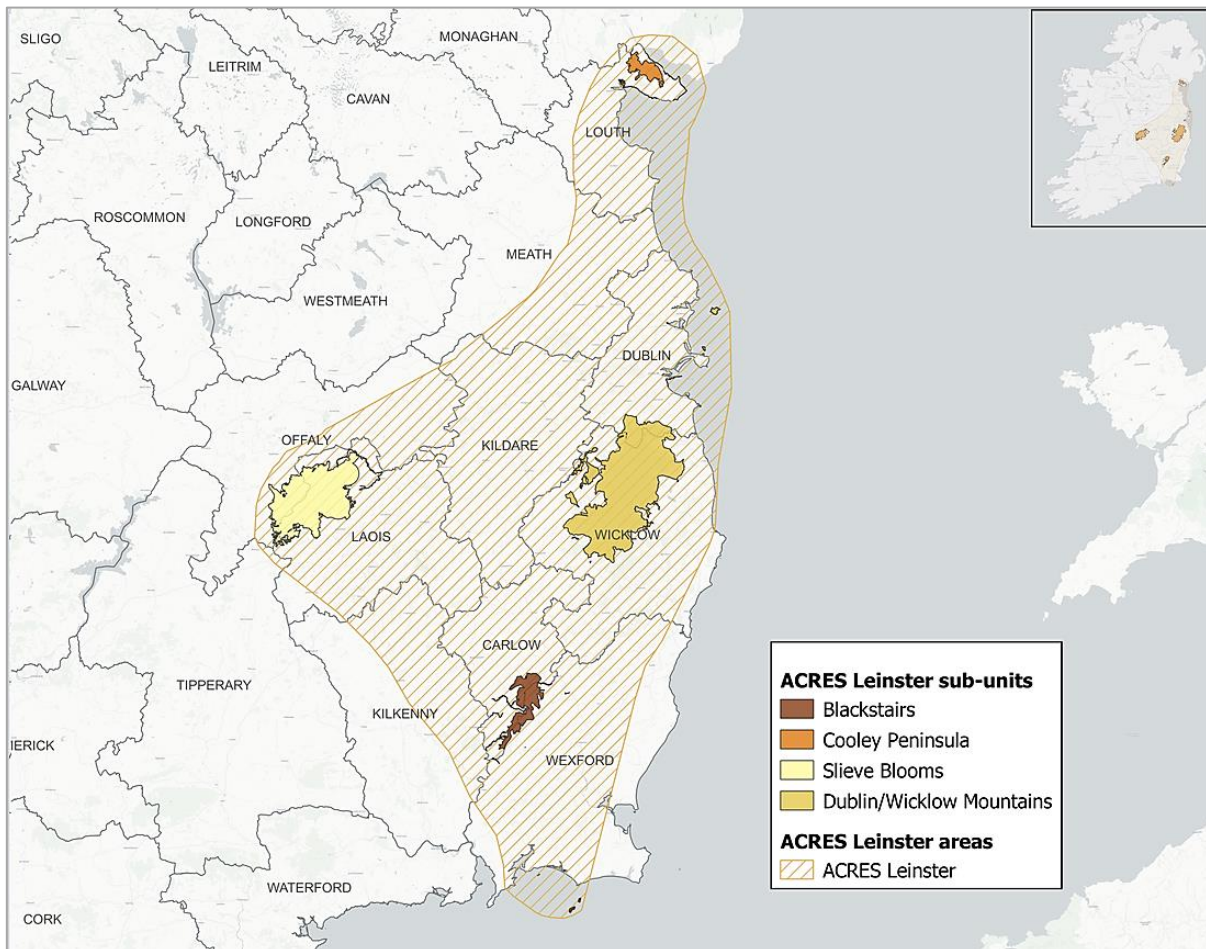


Figure 1: Map illustrating the geographical extent of the ACRES Leinster CP area and the operational regions.

Habitats and Species

The CP is predominantly comprised of extensive upland areas (mainly commonage) and more intensively farmed lowlands and valleys, with pockets of extensively farmed areas (Fig. 2). The farmland habitats include significant areas of blanket bog, heath, wet and dry grassland, and woodland. Notable species include Peregrine (a bird of prey) in the Cooley Mountains and Red Grouse in the Dublin/ Wicklow Mountains, Slieve Blooms and Blackstairs Mountains.

Figure 2: Field images of some of the High Nature Value farmland habitats in the Leinster CP: extensive areas of blanket bog (top); heath (middle); areas of dry grasslands, (bottom).



Natura 2000

Nineteen Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) overlap the CP, of which nine are coastal sites, four are upland/mountain sites, two are freshwater sites, two are peatland sites, and one grassland and woodland site, respectively. Fourteen Special Protection Areas (SPA) overlap the CP also, of which 10 are coastal sites, two are upland/ mountain sites, and two are freshwater sites.

Mountains and Commonage

Notable mountains include the Cooley Mountains, the Wicklow and Dublin Mountains, the Slieve Bloom Mountains and the Blackstairs Mountains. Commonage land accounts for c. 33,273 of the 43,593 ha (76%) of farmland in the Leinster CP under ACRES contract. These are dominated by peatland habitat, with some areas of grassland and minor pockets of scrub habitat.

Catchments and Rivers

The CP covers eight water catchments: Newry, Fane, Glyde and Dee; Liffey and Dublin Bay; Ovoca-Vartry, Slaney and Wexford Harbour; Barrow; Nore; Lower Shannon. A network of rivers and streams extends c. 1,152 km within the CP, including notable rivers such as the Barrow, Liffey, Slaney, Nore, Blackwater and Dodder. The CP comprises a number of sparse waterbodies, including 45 small lakes or loughs and one major reservoir (Pollaphuca Reservoir), covering an area of c. 2,292 ha.

Islands

Three large offshore islands include Lambey and Ireland's Eye in Dublin Bay and the Saltee Islands situated approximately five kilometres off the coast of Kilmore Quay, Co. Wexford.

Land use

Land use in the Leinster CP is predominantly upland hill farmland with more intensively farmed foothills and valleys along the edges of the CP. There are pockets of semi-natural woodland, small lakes and loughs, and streams throughout. Significant areas of peatland and coniferous and mixed woodland habitat occur throughout. A breakdown of the land cover (using Corine Land Cover 2018) is provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Land cover percentage breakdown of the Leinster CP, using Corine Land Cover (2018).

Land Cover Class Description	% Cover
Peat bogs	26
Moors and heathland	20
Coniferous forest	17
Pastures	13
Transitional woodland-shrub*	9
Land principally occupied by agriculture, with significant areas of natural vegetation	6
Natural grasslands	3
Water bodies	2
Broad-leaved forest	2
Mixed forest and other classes combined	2

*The Transitional woodland-shrub class is predominantly composed of coniferous forest within the Leinster CP.

Regional Threats and Pressures

The Leinster CP faces a number of demographic and environmental challenges, from farm succession to water quality and other threats to habitats. Notable land use pressures include afforestation, farmland abandonment, farmland intensification, and rising urbanisation and recreation pressures.

Average farmer age ranges from 58 to 59 in Counties Louth and Dublin (above the national average of 57), to 56 across Counties Offaly, Laois and Wexford. The most northerly areas of the CP are therefore farmed by participants with some of the highest age profiles in the country. This highlights an aging demographic and uncertainty of farm succession in the medium term. This can lead to farm abandonment or afforestation, resulting in the loss of High Nature Value (HNV) farmland.

River water quality is generally favorable; recent Water Framework Directive status data indicates 5% of river length within the CP has 'High' status, 84% has 'Good', 10% has 'moderate', and 1% has 'Poor' or 'Bad' status. Potential threats to water quality in the Leinster CP include excess nutrients and sediments, contributing to eutrophication. These excess nutrients and sediments can originate from either point sources, such as farmyards; or from diffuse sources, such as the spreading of fertilisers and manures. Land management can also place pressure on water bodies, including the alteration of watercourses, drain maintenance and new drainage, causing changes in volume and flow of water. These can arise from the two predominant land uses in the CP; agriculture, and forestry.

Other notable threats include the fragmentation of woodlands, such as the removal of hedgerows and treelines. This is exacerbated through the extensive loss of the Ash tree as a result of Ash Dieback disease. Grazing pressure and burning on sensitive habitats such as peatlands has resulted in reduced vegetation in places, causing exposed soil and hampering the revegetation and recovery of damaged sites. Damaged and degraded peatlands lead to the decomposition of peat and become an important source of carbon emissions. Invasive non-native species are a significant pressure affecting many areas of the CP, including dense areas of rhododendron and self-sown conifers on peatlands and grasslands. Other common invasive species include Japanese Knotweed and Cherry Laurel.



Conservation and Nature Objectives

Objective setting

The geographical outline of the ACRES CP zones was developed using a series of nature priority and high-status objective waterbody datasets. Additional objective datasets were identified through consultations with stakeholders. Using this information, a preliminary list of objectives was determined for the Leinster CP.

The preliminary list was simplified and condensed. This was performed by examining each objective from the list and combining them into groups where possible. Table 4 provides a list of the 12 conservation and nature objectives relevant to the Leinster CP.

Most of the objectives (particularly targeted habitats, e.g., Peatland, Semi-natural Grassland and Woodland) will benefit from high field assessment scores; the scorecard results will therefore incentivise or reward a higher objective delivery. Other objectives will benefit directly from certain actions, for example the 'Geese and Swans on grassland' Landscape Action will benefit the Geese and Swans objective, and the Barn Owl/ Kestrel box will benefit the Barn Owl and Kestrel objective, etc.

Table 4. Conservation and nature objectives for the Leinster CP including a brief description of each.

Objective	Description
Water Quality <i>Includes Margeritifera sensitive areas, ASSAP Priority Areas for Action, High-Status Objective Waterbodies (Blue Dots), Areas with known significant agricultural phosphorous and nitrogen pressure (Water Framework Directive Significant Pressures)</i>	Areas under this objective may be susceptible to high nutrient loads or have species that are sensitive to poor water quality. Actions promoted in these areas could contribute towards improving or maintaining water quality. Scale: WFD River Sub Basin units.
Peatland <i>Includes:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Peatland scorecard fields - Natura 2000 sites with peatland habitat qualifying interests - Natural Heritage Areas with peatland habitat qualifying interests - Mapped raised bogs 	Areas under this objective are peatland habitats or have peatland qualifying interest. Actions promoted in these areas could include peatland restoration, etc. Scale: 1:5000 and field-scale.
Semi-Natural Grassland <i>Includes:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Grassland scorecard fields - Irish Semi-natural Grasslands Survey - Natura 2000 sites with semi-natural grassland qualifying interests 	Areas under this objective are grassland habitats or have semi-natural grassland qualifying interests. These areas could be prioritised for grazing management actions, etc. Scale: landscape and field-scale.
Barn Owl and Kestrel <i>Based on Birds Directive Art. 12 distribution data.</i>	Areas under this objective have a high likelihood of Barn Owl and Kestrel. These areas could prioritise targeted action such as the Barn Owl/Kestrel Nest box etc. Scale: 10 km grid squares (limited to <250 m elevation and excluding a 500 m buffer zone around major roads).

<p>Red Grouse <i>Includes:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Natura 2000 sites with Red Grouse,</i> - <i>Birds Directive Art. 12 distribution data</i> </p>	<p>Areas under this objective have a high likelihood of Red Grouse. The actions promoted in these areas could include specialist wildlife support, targeted grazing, etc. Scale: 10 km grid squares (limited to >250 m elevation).</p>
<p>Raptors <i>Includes Hen Harrier, Peregrine, and Merlin.</i> <i>Based on Birds Directive Art. 12 distribution data.</i></p>	<p>Areas under this objective have a high likelihood of raptors. The actions promoted in these areas could include wild bird cover on grassland habitat or specialist wildlife support on peatland habitat, etc. Scale: 10 km grid squares.</p>
<p>Geese and Swans <i>Includes:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Geese and Swans,</i> - <i>Barnacle and Brent Geese,</i> - <i>Whooper Swan.</i> </p>	<p>Areas under this objective have a high likelihood of this group of waterfowl species. Actions promoted in these areas could include Geese and Swans. Scale: 1 km grid squares + unknown (appears to be high resolution)</p>
<p>Archaeology <i>Includes zones of archaeological/ cultural heritage interest developed by the project archaeologist. These can include sites post 1700 that are not included in the Sites and Monuments Record.</i></p>	<p>Areas under this objective contain archaeological interests where archaeology actions could be prioritised. Scale: not defined, encompasses clusters of monument points.</p>
<p>Woodland <i>Includes:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>woodland scorecard fields</i> </p>	<p>Areas under this objective are woodland or scrub habitats where woodland and tree related actions could be prioritised.</p>
<p>Marsh Fritillary <i>Includes:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Grassland scorecard fields</i> </p>	<p>Areas under this objective include grassland fields that are suitable for this species. Actions may be developed over the course of the scheme for these fields.</p>

Objective mapping

To enable the CP Team to visualise the objectives, a GIS layer was compiled. Maps representing the objectives listed in Table 4 were created and capture the complexity of overlapping layers. This allows CP teams and stakeholders to determine the priority objective(s) at a broad scale and thus promote the right action in the right place. It also facilitates an understanding of where multiple management issues may need to be addressed.

Cultural Heritage

The archaeological profile of the Leinster CP area is varied. It includes a small but significant concentration of megalithic tombs at the northern end of the Dublin/Wicklow mountains, and it surrounds the internationally important early medieval monastic complex at Glendalough, Co Wicklow. Further afield, a concentration of hut sites and cairns at Dranagh Mountain in the Blackstairs provides clear evidence of upland settlement activity at levels of intensity rarely seen elsewhere.

The ACRES CP contracted farms in the Leinster area have a total of 875 known archaeological sites and monuments upon them, and their associated Zones of Notification cover 851 ha. A total of 16 structures listed by the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage (NIAH) are found on contracted land in Leinster, many of which are listed as Protected Structures by their respective local authorities (Table 5).

Table 5. Summary of cultural heritage sites and zones in the Leinster CP.

Leinster CP– cultural heritage summary			
Leinster CP Zone		Leinster CP Contracted Land (CP & non-CP*)	
Sites and Monuments	959	Sites and Monuments	875
Zones of Notification	683 ha	Zones of Notification	851 ha
NIAH Structures	98	NIAH Structures	16

*Some ACRES CP farmers have farmland outside of the CP zone which can be eligible for archaeology related Non-Productive Investments and Landscape Actions.

There are 32 orthostatic monuments of probable Bronze Age date (incl. standing stones, stone rows, stone circles), 17 *fulachta fiadh*, 81 ringforts (incl. raths and cashels), 135 enclosures, 85 hut sites, 110 barrows, 75 cairns of various types, and 33 charcoal-production sites. The NIAH sites include farmhouses, outbuildings, stables, monuments, and a forge.



Local Action Plan and CAP Strategic Plan

Contribution to environmental policy and plans

In the selection criteria and geographic definition of the Leinster CP zone, a series of nature priority and high-status objective waterbody datasets were used. Additional objective datasets were identified through consultations with stakeholders, which further increased the environmental and biodiversity ambition for the CP. Relevant ones are listed below:

Water Framework Directive: High status water was an important priority in defining the geographical extent of the Cooperation Projects, and in the consideration of objectives in the Leinster CP. The related actions implemented in the identified water quality objective areas are therefore expected to strongly impact on maintaining and improving the water quality of these areas. Participant and community outreach and support operations by the CP Team will help disseminate the importance of meeting the objectives of the Water Framework Directive.

The Bird and Habitat Directives: Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs) were an important priority in defining the geographical extent of the Cooperation Projects, and in the consideration of objectives in the Leinster CP. Many of the Leinster CP objectives are therefore expected to strongly impact on maintaining, improving, and complementing the conservation status of these sites. Participant and community outreach and support operations by the CP Team will help disseminate the importance of the conservation and protection of the Natura 2000 network.

National Biodiversity Action Plan: Ireland's 4th National Biodiversity Action Plan is currently under review, however several high-level NBAP objectives will be complemented by the Leinster CP objectives. Some examples include (but are not limited to):

- The implementation of targeted actions will build on existing conservation measures for protected areas (Objective 2: Meet Urgent Conservation and Restoration Needs).
- Targeted actions will also promote nature-based solutions as a fundamental part of action for climate and biodiversity (Objective 4: Embed biodiversity at the heart of climate action).
- Additionally, field assessment data across the CP will help strengthen long-term monitoring programmes that will underpin and strengthen future decision making (Objective 5: Enhance the Evidence Base for Action on Biodiversity).

Monitoring

To ensure that monitoring activities are appropriate to the needs of the participating farmers and support the delivery of local objectives, a detailed monitoring plan will be implemented. The Monitoring plan will focus on:

- Design of a monitoring campaign for quality control and risk assessment to detect anomalies within the data collected from field assessments. In turn this will help to identify recurring errors and design an appropriate response- such as training and mentoring needs for advisors.
- Following the progress of the scheme to determine if landscape level objectives are being achieved over the lifespan of ACRES.
-

- Obtaining data required to inform the targeting and screening processes for NPIs and LAs where this cannot be obtained from other sources.
- Identifying possible improvements to the specifications for NPIs and LAs by following the short to medium-term impact of delivered actions.
- Identifying specialist training needs for participating farmers and third parties, for example Agricultural contractors, and the development of courses to meet these needs.
- Informing the design of possible responses to issues of local concern, for example Invasive species, and the need to involve third parties to deliver co-ordinated responses to these.

Monitoring is separate from the inspection process. ACRES Leinster staff have no role in the inspection process and monitoring activities will be designed to identify opportunities to improve the delivery of the ACRES scheme both at CP and individual farm level. This contrasts with inspections which are carried out by Dept. of Agriculture, Food, and the Marine staff which are a regulatory requirement designed to determine compliance with the scheme itself.



Stakeholder involvement

Engagement with stakeholders will occur throughout the scheme. At a contract level the relationship is between the Dept. of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the CP Team. As part of this process the CP Team will engage with national level stakeholders within the structures created by DAFM.

At a regional level, structures will involve local stakeholders in the continued development of the ACRES Co-operation approach. The structures to deliver this will exist at two levels. We will have an ACRES Leinster Steering Group and a number of Local Area Partnerships.

There will be one Steering Group formed for ACRES Leinster CP which will serve as a forum for reporting on the progress within the CP and examine future proposed amendments to the Local Action Plan. It will also assist with the targeting strategy for NPIs and LAs and enable the coordination of actions with external organisations.

Multiple Local Area Partnerships will be formed with an aim to achieve a minimum of 300 farmers per partnership group. These groups will have a focus on identifying opportunities and challenges and contribute to the targeting and coordination of actions at a local level. They will also contribute towards the selection of topics and actively participate in the delivery of open days and specialist training events



Summary

The ACRES Cooperation Project (CP) scheme was rolled out in eight geographic zones and involves a flexible adaptation at a local level through the Local Action Plan (LAP). This synthesis report provides a distillation of the complete LAP produced for the Leinster CP zone.

The Leinster CP, faces various challenges, including demographic shifts, water quality concerns, and threats to habitats. The LAP outlines the broad conservation and nature objectives and engages local stakeholders, primarily farmers, in achieving those objectives and addressing identified pressures and challenges. The Leinster CP team will provide support by offering tailored assistance, targeting actions, reducing regulatory burden and providing specialised training.

The LAP aligns with national environmental policies, its objectives will contribute to water quality, biodiversity, and climate action goals. A comprehensive monitoring plan will ensure data quality, track scheme progress, and inform improvements. The LAP also outlines how stakeholder engagement will occur at local and national levels through steering groups and area partnerships.

The full Local Action Plan document contains more detailed characterisation of the Leinster CP zone and includes detailed local objectives maps and the methodologies used in their development. It is available to view [here](#).

<https://acresireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Local-Area-Plan-Breifne-Leinster-MSC-June2023.pdf>