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***National Landscape Strategy for Ireland 2015-2025***

Ireland, in common with thirty-eight other countries, has signed and ratified the Council of Europe's *European Landscape Convention* (ELC). The Convention came into effect on 1 March 2004. It obliges Ireland to implement certain types of policy changes and objectives concerning the management and protection of the landscape. The document "*National Landscape Strategy for Ireland 2015-2025*" will assist Ireland in meeting its obligations under the Convention.

Ireland has already taken steps to implement the Convention. For example the ELC definition of 'landscape' was included in the Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2010. This Act also requires the inclusion of a mandatory objective in local authority development plans and in regional planning guidelines to develop landscape policies in accordance with Government or Ministerial policies or objectives relating to identification, assessment, protection, management and planning of landscapes.

**Background to the development of the National Landscape Strategy for Ireland 2015-2025**

Following approval by Government a National Landscape Strategy Issues Paper was published by the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht in September 2011 and was advertised for public consultation. 77 submissions were considered by an expert Steering Group and formulated into a Draft National Landscape Strategy. The Steering Group was comprised of members of key sectoral Departments, related organisations and stakeholders.

Following approval by Government, the Draft National Landscape Strategy was published for public consultation in July 2014 as part of the screening process for Strategic Environmental Assessment and Appropriate Assessment. 95 submissions were received. All submissions were assessed and are publically available on the Department's website. The final document "*National Landscape Strategy for Ireland 2015-2025*" reflects the submissions received.

The National Landscape Strategy will be used to ensure compliance with the ELC and to establish principles for protecting and enhancing the landscape while positively managing its change. It will provide a policy framework to achieve balance between the management, planning and protection of the landscape. It is not about the preservation or "freezing" of the landscape at a particular point in its continuing evolution. Implementation of the Strategy will be effected primarily through the land-use planning process, which has a long tradition of managing change and seeking a sustainable balance between conflicting demands.

The National Landscape Strategy has six core objectives with associated actions derived from the ELC. The core objectives are to:

- Recognise landscape in law
- Develop a National Landscape Character Assessment
- Develop landscape policies
- Increase landscape awareness
- Identify education and training needs
- Strengthen public participation

These objectives are broad and flexible – they encompass recognising, assessing and raising our awareness of the landscape, as well as the development of specific landscape policies and educational, research and training tools. The Strategy also envisages an active role for the public in perceiving and assessing the landscape.

There are nineteen associated actions – four related to planning, five dealing with public awareness and the remaining on education, research and implementation.

## **Implementation**

It is intended that the Strategy will be implemented, over a ten-year period, in two overlapping phases. During the first phase, the primary focus will be on acquiring knowledge, on constructing a national knowledge base that will allow us to identify, understand, characterise and assess the Irish landscape. This National Landscape Character Assessment will identify its unique traits, how it has been shaped and the manner in which it is changing. It will underpin and assist in the achievement of greater consistency in decision-making across the country when dealing with landscape issues. Fundamentally, it will enable the public and others to be more informed when participating in issues that affect the landscape and ensure that the correct choices are made. It is intended that preparation of the National Landscape Character Assessment will commence in 2017, and will continue over a two year period.

This National Landscape Character Assessment will be supported by appropriate guidelines outlining how the landscape should be assessed at local level, and how particular values should be assigned to specific landscapes. This objective data will – it is intended - underpin effective spatial planning, land use policies and ensure that our approach to landscape management and change is sustainable.

It is anticipated that the two phases for implementation of the National Landscape Strategy may be summarised as follows:

### **Phase One – years 1 to 4**

- Research and preparation
- National Landscape Character Assessment
- Issue Landscape Character Assessment guidelines
- Review

### **Phase Two – years 4 to 10**

- Review existing regulatory systems
- Introduce LCA nationwide
- Implement supporting objectives
- Monitor and review

## **Raising awareness**

The Strategy will take time to implement and become part of our everyday public discourse but we are fortunate that much work has already been done by local communities, local authorities, the educational institutions, NGOs and by central government. Creative initiatives such as the Burren Beo project have been internationally recognised, while the work of the Wicklow Uplands Council, illustrates how people, places and policies can coalesce to provide a sustainable future through consensus and partnership. Ireland's six State owned National Parks and 66 nature reserves, all

managed by the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs, bring much needed economic stimulus and employment opportunities to rural communities.

The proper protection, management and enhancement of our landscape can only be a positive thing bringing with it significant ecological, social, health and economic benefits. The challenge, which this Strategy embraces, is to understand the broad and distinctive values of our landscape, and to integrate and harmonise its management and protection with often unseen and unappreciated, social and economic benefits.

As a nation, we have an idealised – indeed even romantic concept - of what constitutes Ireland's landscape. Ireland's dramatic rural landscape, rugged coastline, lush green fields, ancient ruins and thatched cottages – these are the compelling images of Ireland which attract so many foreign visitors to our shores. When one thinks of Ireland's landscape, it is not its cities or towns that spring readily to mind. The urban landscape, and in particular the historic urban landscape, is a critically important, and often underappreciated part of the shared landscape of our lives. The UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (2011) is an important document and will assist us during implementation of the National Landscape Strategy.

But Ireland's landscape is so much more than scenic views, sandy beaches, misty vales and picturesque villages. The *European Landscape Convention* defines landscape in a way that goes well beyond the sublime or the beautiful. The Convention includes not only those landscapes that are considered outstanding but also everyday and degraded landscapes whether urban or rural, coastal or mountain. Our landscape is not only the physical rendition of natural characteristics such as terrain, soil or ecology but also a testimony to past and current human activity. It expresses the choices we make both individually and as a society.

The overarching objective of the National Landscape Strategy, which gives effect to the European Landscape Convention, is to protect, manage and plan for our landscape in such a way that takes account of the past, the present and the future. It does not mean, and never has meant, that our landscape should be frozen at a particular point in its evolution. It continues to be a living dynamic force in our everyday lives, and intrinsic to Ireland's identity as an island nation. More than ever we need to understand, sustainably manage and protect our landscapes. It is to be hoped that implementation of the National Landscape Strategy for Ireland will provide us with the critical tools to help us to achieve this ambition.

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The *National Landscape Strategy for Ireland 2015-2025* is freely available to download in PDF format from the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs website at:

<http://www.ahrrga.gov.ie/heritage/built-heritage/national-landscape-strategy/>