

# County Biodiversity Areas

Frequently Asked Questions



An tIonad Náisiúnta  
Sonraí Bithéagsúlachta  
National Biodiversity  
Data Centre



An Chomhairle Oidhreachta  
The Heritage Council



# Introduction

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Ireland faces a well-documented biodiversity crisis. Most habitats and many species are in poor condition, and areas formally protected by designation only cover a minority of the country. Ireland has committed - under the EU Biodiversity Strategy, the Global Biodiversity Framework and the National Biodiversity Action Plan (2023–2030) - to halting and reversing biodiversity loss..

However, to act effectively at county level, local authorities need consistent tools to identify and protect ecologically significant areas in the wider countryside. The proposed **County Biodiversity Areas (CBA)** methodology aims to fill that gap.

**The Heritage Council** is the appropriate body to lead this work. Sitting at the intersection of ecology, planning policy and local government, the Heritage Council has long-established relationships with local authorities across Ireland and is in a unique position to develop guidance that planning authorities can rely on. It can produce a methodology that is scientifically robust and capable of withstanding scrutiny during development plan adoption (see below for more) and subsequent planning decisions.



# What is a County Biodiversity Area (CBA)?

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A County Biodiversity Area is a site that makes a significant contribution to the ecological network of a county or city. They provide an evidence-based approach to identifying the most important features for nature at county or city level, to help local authorities meet their existing obligations under national planning law and policy.

CBAs are not a new statutory designation. Under Section 50 of the Planning and Development Act 2024, every local authority must prepare a strategy for natural heritage aligned with the EU Biodiversity Strategy and the National Biodiversity Action Plan, which includes features of ecological significance. National Policy Objective 85 of the **National Planning Framework** and the **2022 Development Plans Guidelines** for Local Authorities reinforce this obligation.

With this in mind, many county and city councils have already adopted objectives in their development plans to undertake such work.

## Why are CBAs needed?

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Only a small proportion of Ireland is legally protected as Special Protection Areas, Special Areas for Conservation and Natural Heritage Areas/proposed Natural Heritage Areas. There is currently no standard, science-based method for identifying sites of local or county importance, outside these nationally and internationally important areas. This makes it difficult for planners to assess development impacts accurately or to avoid delays later in the planning process.

The CBA approach aims to provide a consistent, transparent framework that supports more efficient decision-making while protecting biodiversity. Once areas of county importance for biodiversity are clearly identified and illustrated, this will ensure that delays are avoided down the line at application stage. It will also inform zoning for housing, infrastructure and renewable energy locations, indicating likely constraints for all stakeholders early in the process.





## How are CBAs identified?

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Identifying County Biodiversity Areas is a two-step process.

1. National ecological datasets are analysed to produce a candidate list of sites that meet one or both of the following criteria:
  - **Criterion A:** The site supports a habitat type listed under Annex I of the EU Habitats Directive.
  - **Criterion B:** The site includes at least 1.0 hectare of semi-natural habitat: wetland, broadleaf or mixed native woodland, or species-rich dry or wet grassland.

Sites that are already designated as SPAs, SACs, NHAs and identified as proposed NHAs are excluded from the analysis.

2. Qualified ecologists visit candidate sites to confirm the presence of the habitat identified and map their boundaries accurately.

The criteria used to identify sites are based on established scientific guidance already widely used in Irish planning and environmental practice.

# What do CBAs mean for planning and land use?

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The Heritage Council provides the method and candidate list, but local authorities ultimately decide whether to include CBA sites in their county or city development plans.

However, once included, CBAs become a material consideration in planning decisions. They do not impose new restrictions beyond those set in the development plan, but their recognised ecological value must be considered when applications are assessed.

Local authorities will also play a key role in engaging with landowners and developers as the methodology is applied county by county.



# How are development plans made, and when can the public get involved?

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County development plans are County or City Council documents approved by elected councillors every ten years, following several formal public consultation stages:

1. The local authority issues a notice to review an existing plan and publishes an issues paper, inviting submissions from the public and prescribed bodies.
2. Informed by these submissions, the City or County Council Chief Executive reports to elected members who issue strategic directions before the draft plan is prepared.
3. The draft is placed on public display for at least ten weeks, during which anyone can make submissions.
4. The Chief Executive makes a further report based on submissions; councillors may direct amendments.
5. Any material alterations undergo a further round of consultation before the final plan is adopted by the elected members of the Council.
6. The Office of the Planning Regulator reviews the plan for compliance with national planning policy.

This means that when CBAs are proposed for inclusion, farmers, landowners, environmental groups and the public can comment or seek changes through a transparent statutory process.

Policies relating to CBAs will also undergo Strategic Environmental Assessment like all other plan policies.



# Where are we now?

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The Heritage Council, working with the National Biodiversity Data Centre (NBDC), the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and in consultation with Waterford City and County Council, is running a pilot research project in Waterford to develop the CBA methodology. The desktop stage is complete and field verification work is now being commissioned. This work will take place in summer and autumn 2026.

# What happens next?

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The Waterford pilot will help us to produce a standardised, peer-reviewed methodology that any local authority can replicate. The goal is to create a consistent national approach, allowing all counties to identify ecologically important places reliably and transparently – in a way that is reliable in planning decisions.

Findings will be published and the full methodology made publicly available.

Local authority Heritage and Biodiversity Officers and their colleagues in the Planning Departments of local authorities will be central to national rollout and community engagement.



# Who we are

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**The Heritage Council (An Chomhairle Oidhreachta)** is Ireland's statutory body for the identification, protection and enhancement of national heritage, established under the Heritage Act 1995. Natural heritage sits at the heart of the Council's mandate alongside built and cultural heritage. It is also a prescribed body under the planning and development regulations.

Under the 2018 amendment to the Act, the Heritage Council has a specific role to support and advise public authorities, local communities and individuals. Through its network of local authority Heritage Officers across Ireland's 31 local authorities, it acts as a bridge between national policy and local delivery.

## Members of the Technical Working Group

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The CBA project is a collaborative initiative, guided by a Technical Working Group that brings together data specialists, ecologists and local authority staff.

- **National Biodiversity Data Centre (NBDC):** The primary scientific and data partner, the NBDC provides national biodiversity data, spatial analysis and technical infrastructure for desktop stage.
- **National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS):** Ireland's statutory nature conservation authority ensures scientific alignment with Ireland's obligations under the *EU Habitats and Birds Directives* and provides data, legal and policy expertise.
- **Local Authority Staff:** Biodiversity Officers and Planning Ecologists provide a direct link to the day to day constraints the local authorities operate under

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