

# **Networking Community Collaboration for Environmental Stewardship (NCCES)**

**Shared Island Citizens Assembly  
Iosas Centre | 20th September 2025**



## Introduction

The Shared Island Citizens Assembly was the culmination of a number of workshops exploring how communities can work together to preserve the natural environment which spans the border region. This was part of a project entitled '*Networking Community Collaboration for Environmental Stewardship (NCCES)*', a collaboration between RAPID Rural Area Partnership Derry and Inishowen Development Partnership which ran between October 2024 and October 2025.

The overall aim of NCCES project was to utilise the shared appreciation for nature and biodiversity felt by communities across the border regions of Derry and Strabane and Inishowen/Donegal as a driving force for collaboration and for relationships based on common interests to flourish. It brought both citizens and community organisations from across the border regions together through a series of education workshops and study visits to learn more about local biodiversity and the environment. The Citizens Assembly was the final event in the project and took place on Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> September 2025 at the IOSAS Centre in Muff, Inishowen. The aim of this event was to explore the possibility of a shared network that could jointly contribute to nature conservation and supporting biodiversity in the future in the North West.

## About the Shared Island Citizens Assembly

The Assembly event began with an informal networking event over lunch in the restaurant of the IOSAS Centre (White Oaks), before moving to the conference centre on the grounds. Andrew Ward, Joint CEO of Inishowen Development Partnership, welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced the speakers. The first talk was given by Julie Corry, Biodiversity Officer for Donegal County Council, followed by Rachel Bain, Biodiversity Officer for Derry and Strabane District Council and finally by Karin Dubsky, founder of Coastwatch Ireland. After the presentations a World Café structured dialogue was facilitated by local eNGO the Inishowen Rivers Trust, to explore the audience's thoughts and opinions on priority species and habitats, local knowledge and working together. The presentations were closed by Philip O'Kane, CEO of RAPID and the group moved outdoors for a guided walk by artist Brendan Farren in the Peace Garden of the IOSAS Centre discussing the development of the garden and the use of natural building materials.



**Figure 1: Andrew Ward, Joint CEO of Inishowen Development Partnership addressing the participants**

## **Julie Corry, Biodiversity Officer, Donegal County Council**

Julie Corry, the Biodiversity Officer for Donegal County Council, outlined her goal of developing a Biodiversity Action Plan, with a key focus on ensuring that biodiversity considerations are fully integrated into council plans and policies. As part of this initiative, she took a proactive approach last year by initiating pre-development workshops, engaging the community early in the process to ask for their input on what they wanted to see in the plan. Now, there is a biodiversity working group to help shape the plan and to identify partnership projects.

Additionally, Julie discussed several ongoing initiatives, including the development of a new methodology for woodland bat surveys and the undertaking of biodiversity audits. These audits aim to identify data gaps that could inform and lead to future conservation projects.



**Figure 2: Julie Corry, Biodiversity Officer for Donegal presenting at the Shared Island Citizen Assembly**

### **Rachel Bain, Biodiversity Officer, Derry and Strabane District Council**

Rachel Bain, the Biodiversity Officer for the Derry and Strabane District Council, spoke about her role as a Biodiversity Officer, which involves working within a Green Infrastructure team and providing advice on capital projects and relevant legislation. Her work also includes engaging with communities and various groups, as well as participating in cross-border collaborations.

She referenced ongoing initiatives, including a project focused on monitoring invasive species. As part of this project, 40 sites will be surveyed to identify areas where invasive species are present. Following the survey, a three-year programme will be implemented to manage and control these species across the identified sites.



**Figure 3: Rachel Bain, Biodiversity Officer for Derry and Strabane District Council presenting at the Shared Island Citizen Assembly**

### **Karin Dubsky, Coastwatch Ireland**

Karin Dubsky, founder of Coastwatch Ireland, spoke about Coastwatch's coastal surveys. In the past, data collected through citizen science initiatives was not formally accepted by government agencies for integration into biodiversity reports. However, this has now changed and citizen science is now regarded as a valuable and effective way to gather fine resolution data on many different themes. Today, members of the public can actively participate by going online to the Coastwatch website (<https://www.coastwatch.org/>) and booking a survey area. During their walk along the designated stretch of coast, participants can record and submit observations of wildlife, such as animals and plants, contributing valuable data to ongoing environmental monitoring efforts.

Karin noted that over the years, as coastal surveys were carried out, a significant amount of litter was consistently found along the shoreline. However, the introduction of a deposit return scheme for plastic bottles in the Republic of Ireland, where consumers pay a deposit when purchasing plastic bottles and can reclaim it by recycling them has had a positive impact. This initiative, which also allows the deposit to be used as credit in selected Irish stores, contributed to a noticeable improvement in the quantity of litter recorded on our shores. In Autumn 2024, a total of 554 coastal unit surveys were completed and the Republic of Ireland recorded the lowest average amount of plastic litter along its coasts since the surveys began.





**Figure 4: Karin Dubsky, founder of Coastwatch, presenting at the Shared Island Citizen Assembly**

## World Cafe Discussion

To gather the perspectives of the various individuals and groups present at the event, a World Café-style session was organised. A total of 44 people participated in the discussion, some as independent individuals and others representing 19 different groups (See Appendix A for list of groups in attendance). Participants were divided across six tables (Figure 5), each comprising representatives from both the North and South of Ireland, to encourage a diverse and balanced discussion.

The discussion was led by 2 staff members from the Inishowen Rivers Trust (IRT), project officers Trish Murphy and Micheala Gallagher.



**Figure 5: Participants of the Shared Island Citizens' Assembly engaging in discussions during one of the questions.**

Participants were asked to respond to three questions (Figure 6), which were introduced one at a time. Each question was allocated 10 minutes for discussion. The third question encouraged participants to consider how collaboration could be fostered through an effective cross-border approach to working together.

Each participant had the opportunity to write down their thoughts and suggestions on post-it notes, which were then placed on a large sheet at their table or they could write directly on the sheet (Figure 7). Groups were also encouraged to develop ideas collectively. As the discussions progressed, members of the Inishowen Rivers Trust moved from table to table, listening and taking note of key points in order to create a summary.

At the end of the 10 minute discussion period, the IRT staff shared a brief overview of the ideas they had heard. The sheets were then collected, and the next question was introduced.

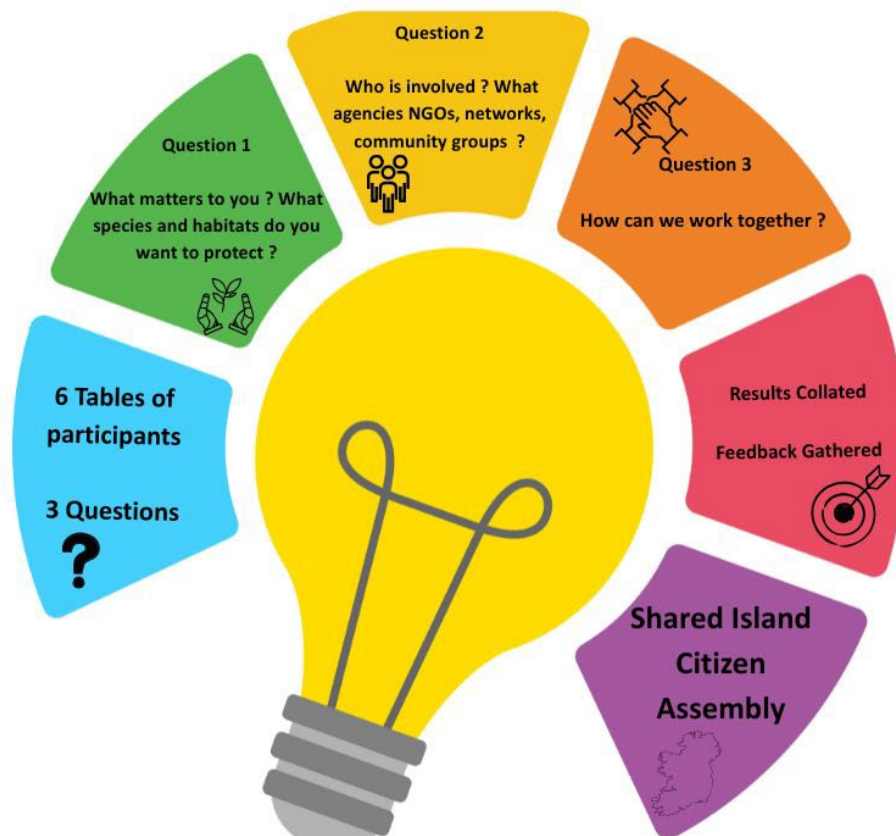
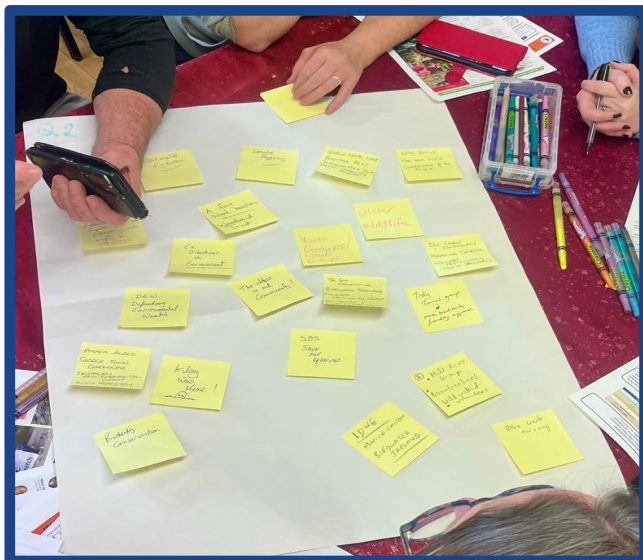


Figure 6: Process of Shared Island Citizen Assembly



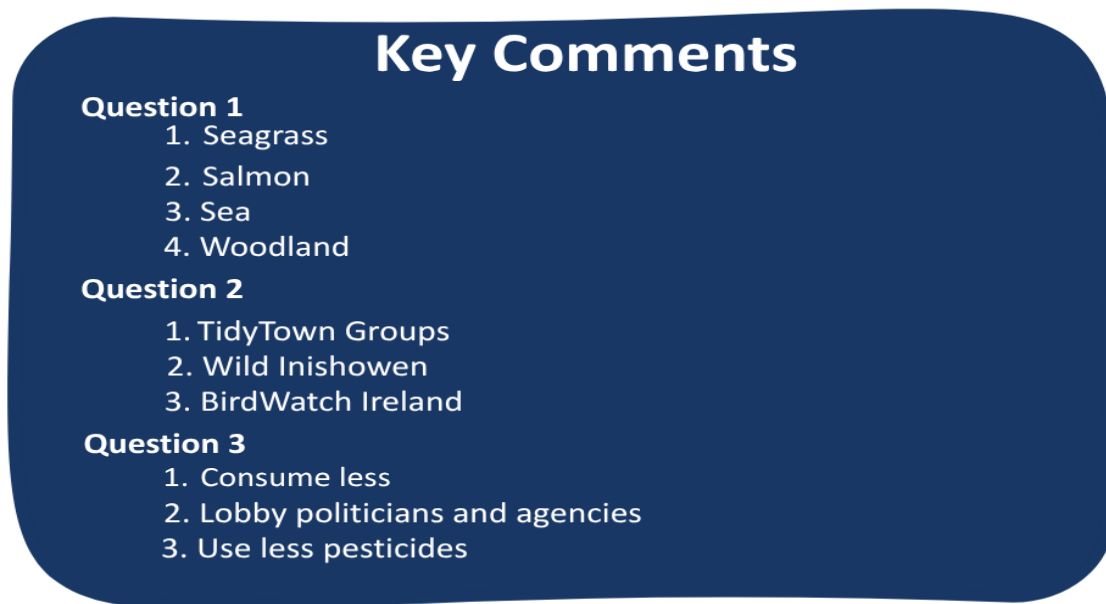
“We need an independent environmental protection agency”

Figure 7: An example of comments of Question 2 from one of the tables.



## Workshop Results

All comments from each table were collated, and word clouds were created to visually represent the responses. Additionally, the comments were grouped into categories to highlight the key themes that emerged during the discussions. In total, 272 comments were collected over a 45 minute period. Several key points were consistently raised and collectively agreed upon across multiple groups, reflecting a strong level of shared concern and interest. The key outputs of the discussion are summarised in Figure 9.



**Figure 8: The most frequent comments made for each question.**

### **Question 1: What matters to you?**

**What species and habitats do you want to protect? What do we need to urgently protect?**

All comments from each table in response to Question 1 were compiled into a word cloud, shown in Figure 10. This figure represents all species and habitats mentioned by participants across the groups. Salmon and seagrass emerged as key concerns, with four out of the six groups specifically mentioning both, highlighting their significance to the participants. Overall, the word cloud illustrates that a wide variety of species and habitats are valued, reflecting a strong collective interest in their protection.

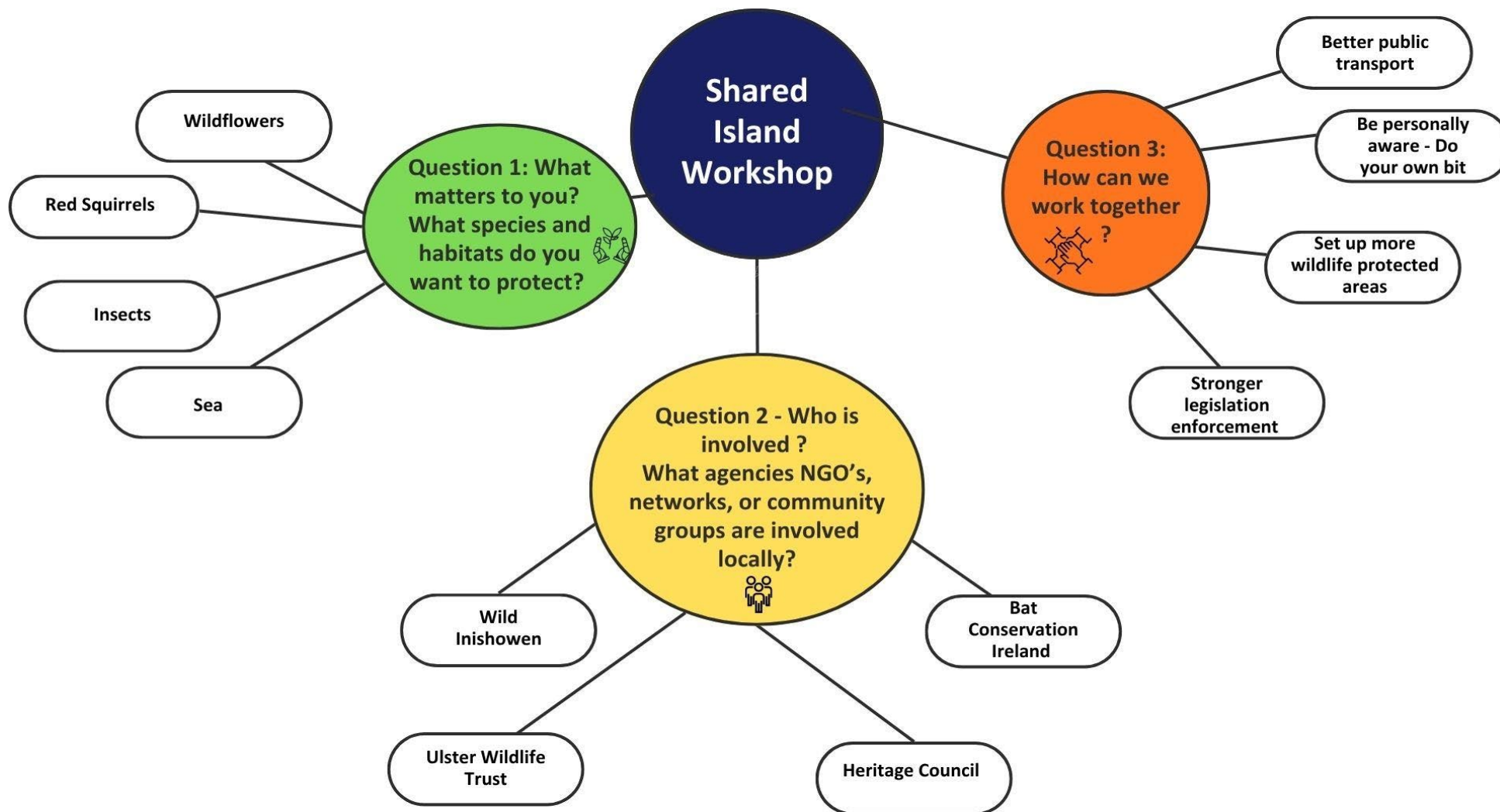


Figure 9: Mindmap of comments from each question discussion



There were 17 comments related to habitats (31%). The most frequently mentioned habitats were woodland and sea, each referenced three times across the six groups. Figure 11 presents a word cloud containing only the habitat related terms.

**Table 1: Comments categorised into 3 categories from Question 1.**

<b>Question Category</b>	<b>Comments</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Plants and Fungi</b>	Wildflowers Seagrass Mature Trees Wood Fungi Mosses Native Fruit Native Nuts Slime Mould	
<b>Animal Species</b>	Swans Wild Geese Buzzards Native Oyster Salmon Insects Pollinators Mussels Bats Trouts Native Bees Butterflies Rabbits Hares Dolphins Frogs	Newts Lizards Squirrels Hedgehogs Birds Red Squirrels Lamprey Pine Marten Badgers Spiders Corncrakes Curlews Eels Freshwater Pearl Mussels
<b>Habitats</b>	Soils Lawns Agricultural land Saltmarshes Peatlands Native Grassland Hedgerows Rivers Riverbanks Floodplains Sea Waterways	Intact Mudflats Woodland Wetlands Sand Dunes Meadows





**Figure 11: Word cloud of habitat comments from Question 1**

A number of statements were also made by some participants in relation to plants, species and habitats. The importance of caring for even the smallest species was a comment that emerged:

**“Protect the tiny things first, they will support the rest”**

The importance of protecting all species and habitats was strongly emphasised throughout the discussion:

**“Why pick one ? They are interlinked”**

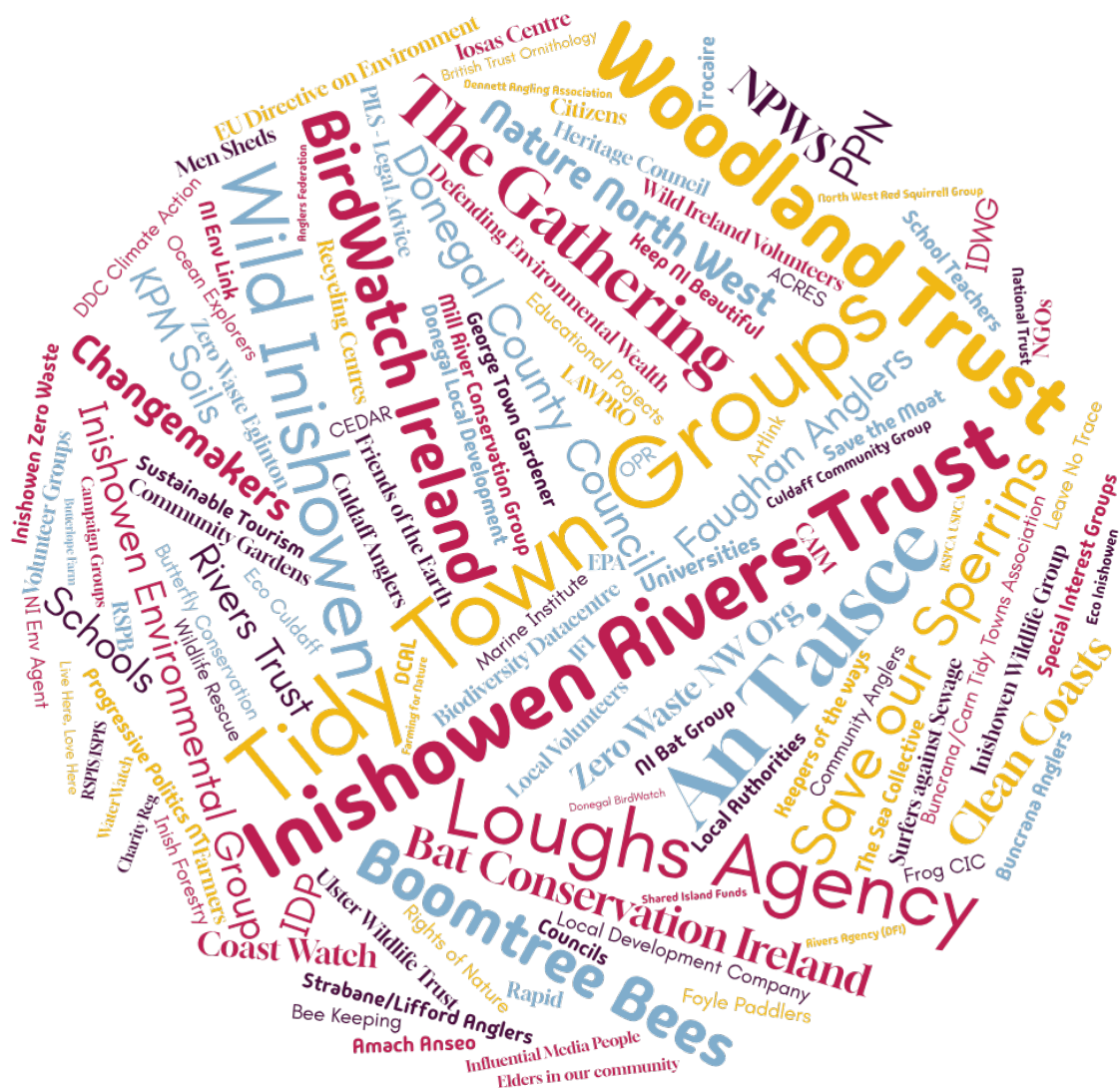
and

**“All whole ecosystem, remove species, resulting effects”**

The importance of long-lasting solutions:

**“Habitat restoration and support in the long term e.g. corncrake life”**

### What agencies NGO's, networks, or community groups are involved locally?



**Figure 12: Word cloud of comments from Question 2 - Who is involved? (Agencies NGO's, Networks, Community Groups)**

A total of 91 organisations were specifically named by participants, with an additional 29 comments referencing other organisations or general groups, as shown in Table 2. A word cloud of the specifically named organisations is presented in Figure 13, highlighting which organisations were most memorable and frequently mentioned across the groups.

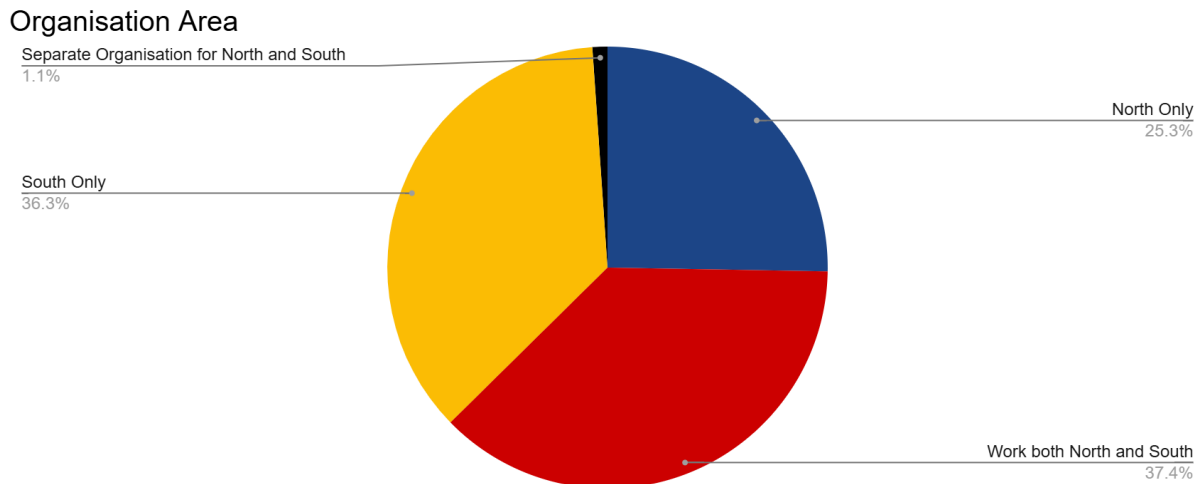
**Table 2: Categorised Comments from Question 2 – Named Organisations and Other organisation types.**

Specifically named organisations	
<p>           Donegal County Council            Derry and Strabane District Council            Woodland Trust            Inishowen Rivers Trust            CAIM            Save our sperrins            The Gathering            An Taisce            Trocaire            PILS (legal advice)            Bat Conservation Ireland            BirdWatch Ireland            Surfers against Sewage            Butterlope Farm            Frog CIC            Dennett Angling Association            Save the Moat            Loughs Agency            Live here, Love here            Zero Waste Eglinton            North West Red Squirrel Group            NatureNorthWest            Boomtree Bees            KPM Soils            The Sea Collective            Culdaff Community Group            Wild Inishowen            Inishowen Zero Waste            Farming for Nature            Keeper of the Ways            Wild Ireland Volunteers            IWDG            LAWPRO            Amach Anseo         </p>	<p>           George McDermott, Buncrana Town Gardener            Inishowen Environmental Group            Inish Forestry            Butterfly Conservation            Zero Waste North West            Foyle Paddlers            Eco Inishowen            IDP            Buncrana Tidy Towns            Carndonagh Tidy Towns            Friends of the Earth            Green Schools            Inishowen Wildlife Group            EPA            IFI            DCAL            OPW            Rivers Agency (DFI)            Men Sheds            NI Bat Group            Mill River Conservation Group            IOSOS Centre            Marine Institute            Ocean Explorers            Leave no Trace            Community Gardens (Clonmany, Moville, Carndonagh)            British Trust for Ornithology            RSPCA/USPCA            PPN            Coastwatch            Wildlife Rescue            Changemakers         </p>

DDC Climate Action Anglers Federation Strabane/Lifford Anglers The Rivers Trust Clean Coasts RSPIS/ISPIS Water Watch ACRES RSPB Rights of Nature Group Keep NI Beautiful National Trust	National Biodiversity Data Centre NI Environment Agency (NIEA) NI Environment Link (NIEL) Rapid CEDAR Ulster Wildlife Trust Donegal Trust Development Eco Culdaff Donegal Birdwatch NPWS Artlink Heritage Council
<b>Other Comments or types of organisations</b>	
NGOs Volunteer Groups Charity Regulators Campaign Groups We need an independent environmental protection agency NGOs are very supportive but limited number of staff Special Interest Groups Angling - Buncrana Angling - Culdaff Angling - Faughan Influential Media People Progressive Politics? School Teachers EU directive on Environment Defending Environmental Wealth Elders in our community Tidy Town Groups Recycling Centres Local Authorities Universities Bee Keeping Community Anglers	Local Development Companies Shared Island Funds Sustainable Tourism Educational Projects Citizens Farmers Local Volunteers







**Figure 14: Areas where organisations are active expressed as a percentage of the total number of organisations named.**

As seen in Figure 14 above, 37.4 % of the organisations listed work in both the North and the South. 36.3% of the organisations work only in the South with 25.3% of the organisations listed working only in the North. Out of the 91 specifically named organisations, 1.1% had a separate organisation for the North and the South.

A number of statements were also made that reflect the opinions of participants emerging from question 2. Groups commented:

Why having enough assistance matters:

**“NGOs are very supportive but limited number of staff”**

The impact of taking the proper approach:

**“More biodiversity friendly approach”**

### **Question 3: How can we work together?**

Question 3 asked the groups how we can all work together to help protect our species and habitats. A total of 101 comments were collected from the six groups. Three of the six groups highlighted the importance of increased lobbying of politicians and agencies, as well as the role of individual actions in driving change. Several suggestions appeared multiple times, including using The Gathering as a platform for greater collaboration, reducing pesticide use, phasing out fossil fuels, reducing consumption, and increasing environmental education in schools. Table 3 shows examples of some of the comments made by the groups during the discussion for question 3. Please refer to Appendix B for all comments made.

**Table 3: Comments made by participants during the discussion of question 3**

<b>“Important to have a transboundary / cross border organisation - people have the same concerns - climate heritage and reduction in wildlife”</b>	<b>“Do we want to set up a new network to protect and restore nature?”</b>
<b>“A lot of groups and networks - may not need another”</b>	<b>“Use the Gathering – cross border - collaborate/merge”</b>
<b>“Use less pesticides”</b>	<b>“Lobby politicians and agencies”</b>
<b>“Be personally aware - do your own bit”</b>	<b>“Empowering local people or youth through outreach and education programmes”</b>

## Discussion

There is a clear consensus within the group that protecting and conserving the environment including its species and habitats is a top priority. Responses to question 1 highlighted this, with participants naming 55 different species and identifying 17 distinct habitats they wish to see protected. Particular interest was shown in the conservation of Salmon and Seagrass. Notably, Seagrass serves as a critical nursery habitat for juvenile fish, offering both shelter and a source of food during their early stages of development. Therefore, implementing protection of Seagrass may also directly support the survival and development of a number of marine fish species. Additionally, the sea was one of the most commonly mentioned habitats among participants. Implementing stronger protection measures in marine environments could contribute to the conservation of a wide range of species.

The species suggested by the groups for question 1 provides a valuable starting point for organisations or groups of organisations to focus their efforts. One possible approach is to form a group made up of people from areas where Seagrass is prevalent or species such as Salmon. These individuals can share their local knowledge and identify specific challenges facing these species in their regions. This local knowledge is crucial and should be valued. This collaborative approach between communities with Salmon or Seagrass can help develop a long term conservation strategy with realistic, area specific goals and targets. A group or committee could be set up to collate the information gathered from the local people of different areas. This committee can then come up with ideas and projects on how to help these areas and the species and habitats present there.

The results of question 2 indicated which organisations have a higher profile or are more well known than others. For example, Tidy Towns was mentioned by all but one group. Several other organisations were also named multiple times. Groups well integrated into the community could serve as valuable partners for raising awareness and building a network of engaged individuals who could aid in the protection of particular species and habitats. Collaboration between these organisations may be an effective way to involve the public to harvest more detailed local knowledge. Over a third of the organisations mentioned operate across the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. These existing

organisations could gather more comprehensive information on species and habitats on both sides of the border at a local level. This local knowledge can be used to support targeted conservation efforts for the specific areas and species identified.

Question 3 highlighted a wide range of ideas from participants on how to support the protection of species and habitats. Many suggested lobbying politicians and relevant agencies as a potential strategy, while others emphasised the importance of individual actions to help the environment. This combination reflects a strong commitment to conservation at both community and individual levels.

Some groups suggested that we may not need another organisation to develop a network for all the groups involved. Notably, half of the groups mentioned 'The Gathering' as a cross border group already in existence and with strong ties with organisations on both sides of the border. Using an existing organisation that is already cross-border could serve to bring more people together through a dedicated event to discuss their local environments and develop shared strategies to protect species such as Salmon and Seagrass at local, cross border, and broader levels. This could then lead to protecting more species and habitats as defined by the group.

Alternatively, a potential outcome suggested by the groups is the establishment of a new organisation dedicated specifically to the results of this workshop. This new entity could be built from the ground up with a strong focus on achieving measurable outcomes to protect the listed species and habitats. It could also collaborate with some of the existing organisations mentioned above, both to raise awareness of its mission and to coordinate efforts for greater impact.

## Recommendations

1. The first step would be to convene the participants for a follow-up meeting to discuss the outcomes of the Citizen Assembly. A key point of discussion should be whether the participants believe a new group should be formed to act on the assembly's findings, or if an existing organisation would be better placed to take this work forward. As mentioned above, The Gathering was a frequently mentioned cross border group which may be able to take on the results of the assembly workshop to work and collaborate on both sides of the border.
  - a. A committee could be established to build connections with existing organisations and explore opportunities for collaboration. This group would be responsible for reaching out to relevant environmental, community, and conservation organisations to share the outcomes of the Citizen Assembly workshop. The aim would be to assess whether any of these organisations are interested in supporting or taking the lead on a project based on the workshop's findings. By partnering with established groups, the initiative could benefit from their experience, networks, and resources, potentially accelerating the implementation of protection measures for the key species and habitats identified.
2. If the participants decide that a new group should be established, an initial committee could be formed from those who express interest in advancing the outcomes of the workshop. This committee would take the lead in shaping the direction of the group, building on the energy and ideas generated during the workshop.
  - a. From this wider group, a smaller Core Committee would be appointed to carry out more specific tasks. This Core Committee would be responsible for organising and facilitating future meetings, fundraising, keeping accurate records and minutes, and reaching out to



other relevant organisations and stakeholders to explore opportunities for partnership and collaboration. Their work would be instrumental in developing the group's profile and building a network of support.

- b. The Core Committee would also be tasked with overseeing the formal establishment of the new group. Operating under the mandate of the full committee, it would guide the group through its initial phase until it is ready to elect its first full board of directors or trustees. This will mark a key milestone in transitioning from an informal working group to a structured organisation capable of delivering on its goals.
    - c. Building strong and respectful relationships from the outset will be essential to the group's long-term success. With a range of views, experiences, and priorities likely to be represented, it is important that all voices are heard and that decisions are made transparently and inclusively. A solid foundation built on mutual respect and open dialogue will help ensure the group is ready to take meaningful action on the protection of species and habitats identified during the workshop.
3. If a new group is formed, one of the first priorities will be to define its focus and scope. This will help ensure that efforts are well coordinated and aligned with the interests and priorities expressed during the workshop.
  - a. Since Salmon and Seagrass were the most frequently mentioned topics in Question 1, these two species should serve as initial key points of discussion. Their ecological connection where Seagrass serves as a nursery and feeding ground for young fish such as Salmon further strengthens the case for prioritising their protection.
  - b. However, participants also identified a wide range of other species and habitats they believe require urgent attention. The group will need to consider whether to concentrate its efforts solely on Salmon and Seagrass, which may allow for a more targeted and manageable approach in the early stages, or to adopt a broader conservation strategy that includes additional species and habitats mentioned during the workshop.
  - c. This decision will shape the group's aims, collaborations, and potential projects going forward.
4. Once a clear focus and scope have been established, suitable projects and potential sources of funding can be identified.
  - a. If the group chooses to focus specifically on supporting Salmon and Seagrass conservation, project development can be tailored to these areas. This would include potential collaborations with relevant organisations, such as Coastwatch, for activities like habitat and species surveys. Funding opportunities would then be sought from sources that prioritise marine and riverine ecosystems.
  - b. Alternatively, if the group adopts a broader conservation strategy, this would allow for a more diverse range of projects. A wider scope could also open access to different funding streams that support biodiversity and environmental protection efforts.
  - c. From these projects, public facing volunteer events can be organised to help raise awareness and encourage community involvement. These events could include activities such as educational talks, citizen science surveys, and hands-on conservation work.

## Acknowledgments

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## Appendix A

### Full list of groups that attended event

	Group
1	Woodland Trust
2	Friends of Carnagarve Forest
3	Culdaff Tidy Towns
4	Inishowen Development Partnership
5	Rapid
6	KPM Soils
7	DEW
8	NW Red Squirrel Group
9	NatureNorthWest
10	Inishowen Rivers Trust
11	Coastwatch
12	Zero Waste North West
13	Save our Sperrins
14	Queens University Belfast
15	Boomtree Bees
16	Donegal Climbing
17	Derry and Strabane District Council
18	Big Green Art
19	Donegal County Council

## Appendix B

### Full list of comments from participants from question 3 - How can we work together?

Use the Lough Foyle Coastwatch project as a catalyst for an umbrella group - cross border, water flows everywhere
Gareth Lamrock + Coastal Kidz involved on North Ireland side of Foyle
Guardians of the Foyle
Need umbrella group to bring everyone together
To do stuff, not keep talking, reporting
Need environmentally informed funders
Move collaboration between the community groups support each other
Do we want to set up a new network to protect and restore nature
Important to have a transboundary/crossborder - people have the same concerns - climate heritage and reduction in wildlife
Protect everyone's life - both sides of border - don't duplicate - twice the damage
Transboundary Agency - wider than Loughs Agency
e/g pollution incidents - depending on each others resource, affects both sides
e/g asphalt plant - Donegal Co - had not informed Derry and Strabane
e/g Dalradian
Planning/Development - shadows Citizens Environment Network, Biodiversity
air/water/soil - need protection and don't recognise borders
wildlife biodiversity - depends on shared resource
All statutory agency/duties +function - knowledge share at least, raise awareness, emergency disaster planning and response
MSP - marine spatial planning - biodiversity - ecosystem based management
Community and Citizen groups - Rapid Alert system (WhatsApp)
Rights of Nature wants to use Lough Foyle
Respect culture
Take back the power
Funding is centred
Look at what there is already
Linking with friends in statutory agencies



Supports for voluntary/actions/local orgs who are delivering
more cross border collaborations
key stakeholders - ensures support/engagement
a lot of groups and networks - may not need another
more forum - to bring us together rather than a network - themed gatherings
who controls funding
how do we build new energy, bring new people
the great turnip foanna ,macey - the work that reconnects active hope
use the gathering - crossborder - collaborate/merge
example of Inishowen Rivers Trust - how it started, aka volunteers, people love their local water, now supported by agencies/ paid employment
problem of corporate - people's voices ignored
love air earth water, kindle the fire in each other embrace nature in every way
Irish language heritage and culture - examines culture too, respect your culture environment and language
Challenge the power,
Public claiming power, funding is about control, stand up
Legal personhood for the Foyle system - rights of nature
Waste issues - regional plans for zero waste policies
Knowledge sharing and transfer
Mainstreaming environmental concerns in political platforms
Manifestos for more than human rights and environmental care
can we produce a manifesto to hand to our politicians and share with public/electorate
shared campaigning resources(like on info, presentations, data, strategies)
Easements and cooperative agreements for catchment care
Conflict resolution and interpersonal issues - how to keep solidarity and care for the long struggle
Collaborate - share - educate
keep plugging away
letting people know
awareness - county level, ocean literacy, environmental literacy
to make PPN work more effective

connectivity
support ecocide prevention (defending environmental wealth)
more efficiency
Citizen empowerment
Local authority - signposting, more involvement, local support, full resource, admin for group to sort red tape and governance
empowering local people of youth through outreach and education programmes
more green areas, less cements and tarmac pavements
run off treatment
Lough Neagh
less intensive farming
better farm management
plant the right trees in the right places
better public transport
energy efficiency, storage capacity
stop raw sewage release
increase reservoir capacity
restore wetlands, peatlands, forests, bogs
use less pesticides
stop consuming
reduce packaging
ban insecticides
stop burning fuels
insulate better
a fleet of floating islands made of traditional materials that are solar powered with graduated filters to oxygenate the water and clean it up directed by lot monitoring devices around and within the lake harvesting of algae
stop felling trees
don't use Roundup etc
lobby politicians and agencies
take personal actions
create an environmental protection agency with teeth

stronger legislation enforcement
set up organisations
promote sewage treatment
Become vegan
set up more wildlife protected areas
stop herbicide/pesticide use
Individual actions
be personally aware - do your own bit
stop burning fossil fuels
Consume less
less pesticide use
Hassle our politicians at every opportunity
lobby politicians and agencies
more education in schools
How do we link to the gathering
The gathering is cross border

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