



Tionól Reigiúnach Oirthir agus Lár-Tíre  
Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly

# European Union Just Transition Fund Programme

Strategic Environmental Assessment Non-Technical Summary

**Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly**

RSK Project no: 604200



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## RSK GENERAL NOTES

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# CONTENTS

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<b>1</b>	<b>WHAT IS THE ENVIRONMENTAL REPORT AND WHY HAS IT BEEN WRITTEN?</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>WHAT IS THE JUST TRANSITION PROGRAMME?</b> .....	<b>2</b>
2.1	Background .....	2
2.2	Programme Priorities .....	2
<b>3</b>	<b>WHAT IS THE CURRENT STATE OF THE ENVIRONMENT IN IRELAND?</b> .....	<b>6</b>
3.1	Current State of the Environment .....	6
<b>4</b>	<b>HOW HAS THE PROGRAMME BEEN ASSESSED?</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES?</b> .....	<b>14</b>
5.1	Assessment of Alternatives .....	14
5.2	Reasons for Selection of Chosen Strategic Alternative .....	15
<b>6</b>	<b>WHAT ARE THE LIKELY ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF THE PROGRAMME?</b> .....	<b>17</b>
6.1	JTF1 - Generating Employment for Former Peat Communities by Investing in the Diversification of the Local Economy .....	17
6.2	JTF2 - Supporting the Rehabilitation and Restoration of Degraded Peatlands and Regeneration and Repurposing of Industrial and Cultural Heritage Assets .....	17
6.3	JTF3 - Providing Former Peat Communities with Smart and Sustainable Mobility Options to Enable Them to Benefit Directly from the Green Transition .....	18
6.4	Overall Effects of the Programme .....	18
6.5	Cumulative Effects with Other Plans and Programmes .....	19
6.6	Transboundary Effects .....	19
<b>7</b>	<b>WHAT ARE THE KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MITIGATION OR ENHANCEMENTS?</b> .....	<b>20</b>
7.1	Minimising Adverse Effects .....	20
7.2	Environmental Enhancements .....	20
<b>8</b>	<b>HOW WILL EFFECTS BE MONITORED?</b> .....	<b>22</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT?</b> .....	<b>23</b>

## Tables

Table 2.1:	Priorities and Actions of the Programme .....	3
Table 6.1:	Overall Effect of the Programme on the Strategic Environmental Assessment Objectives .....	18

# 1 WHAT IS THE ENVIRONMENTAL REPORT AND WHY HAS IT BEEN WRITTEN?

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RSK has been instructed by the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly to carry out a Strategic Environmental Assessment of the European Union Just Transition Fund Programme (Hereafter referred to as 'the Programme').

Strategic Environmental Assessment is a systematic process for evaluating the environmental consequences of proposed plans or programmes to ensure environmental issues are fully integrated and addressed at the earliest appropriate stage of decision making, with a view to promoting sustainable development. The process of Strategic Environmental Assessment was introduced under European Directive 2001/42/EC12 on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment (Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive), and came into force in 2001.

The Directive requires the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly, as the programming authority, to assess the likely significant effects of its plans and programmes on: *"the environment, including on issues such as biodiversity, population, human health, fauna, flora, soil, water, air, climatic factors, material assets, cultural heritage including architectural and archaeological heritage, landscape and the interrelationship of the above factors"* including *"secondary, cumulative, synergistic, short, medium, and long-term, permanent and temporary positive and negative effects"*.

In Ireland the enabling legislation is the European Communities (Environmental Assessment of Certain Plans and Programmes) Regulations 2004 (SI 435/2004), as amended in 2011 by SI200/2011, and the Planning and Development (Strategic Environmental Assessment) Regulations 2004 as amended in 2011 (Irish SI 436/2004 and SI 201/2011). Hereafter collectively referred to as 'the Strategic Environmental Assessment Regulations'.

The Environmental Report evaluates the likely environmental effects of implementing the Programme as per the requirements of the Directive and the Strategic Environmental Assessment Regulations. This includes an assessment of realistic alternative approaches and options, as well as suggested mitigation and enhancement measures to prevent, reduce and offset any significant adverse effects on the environment of implementing the Programme.

The Environmental Report has been issued into statutory consultation by the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly and is available to view and comment on by other interested organisations and members of the public in parallel with the consultation period for the Programme. This Non-Technical Summary is a concise summary version of the Environmental Report.

## 2 WHAT IS THE JUST TRANSITION PROGRAMME?

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### 2.1 Background

The European Union Just Transition Fund is a newly established fund under the framework of European Union cohesion policy and is being rolled out across all Member States. The purpose of the Fund is to assist the most negatively affected territories in transitioning to a low carbon economy and society, in an effective and fair manner.

The European Union Just Transition Fund is a new European Cohesion Policy Fund. Ireland is set to receive up to €84.5 million under the European Union Just Transition Fund over the period 2021-2027 to assist communities in territories that are most negatively affected by the green transition. With the Government of Ireland's match funding using Exchequer resources, up to €169 million will be available. In line with the objective of achieving European Union climate neutrality by 2050, the European Green Deal has proposed a Just Transition Mechanism.

Through the European Union Just Transition Fund, the European Commission will provide funding to Member States, which have identified the territories expected to be the most negatively impacted by the green transition. The European Union Just Transition Fund will support the economic diversification and reconversion of the territories concerned. This means investing strategically in areas and activities such as small and medium-sized enterprises, the creation of new enterprises, research and innovation, environmental rehabilitation, clean energy, up- and re-skilling of workers, job-search assistance and the transformation of existing carbon-intensive installations.

The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 sets Ireland on the path to a 51% reduction in emissions by the end of this decade and to net-zero emissions no later than 2050. Work is currently underway by the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly and the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications on developing the Programme for approval by the European Commission, so that Ireland can secure access to its European Union's allocation of funding.

### 2.2 Programme Priorities

To achieve the specific objective of the European Union Just Transition Fund, the Programme will address the investment needs via the three complementary priorities listed below. These are each cross-cut by the key objectives of supporting research, upskilling and reskilling through investments which build on regional strengths to address the socio-economic challenges deriving from the transition process in the Territory and facilitate the transition towards climate-neutrality:

- **JTF1: Generating employment for former peat communities by investing in the diversification of the local economy** by supporting productive investments in enterprise, some and medium-sized enterprises and community actions, focusing on sectors and activities which can address the economic challenge of the transition.
- **JTF2: Supporting the rehabilitation and restoration of degraded peatlands and regeneration and repurposing of industrial heritage assets** to enable the

transition towards climate-neutrality while also facilitating the diversification and modernisation of the economy of the Territory.

- **JTF3: Providing former peat communities with smart and sustainable mobility options to enable them to benefit directly from the green transition** by supporting clean, green mobility to build regional attractiveness and support economic development.

The Programme priorities and actions have been summarised in Table 2.1 below.

**Table 2.1: Priorities and Actions of the Programme**

Priorities	Types of Actions
<p><b>Specific objective: JSO8.1.</b> Enabling regions and people to address the social, employment, economic and environmental impacts of the transition towards the Union's 2030 targets for energy and climate and a climate-neutral economy of the Union by 2050, based on the Paris Agreement</p>	
<p><b>JTF1. Generating employment for former peat communities by investing in the diversification of the local economy</b></p>	<p><b>1.1 Foster the economic diversification of the territory by supporting productive investments in micro-enterprises, Small and Medium Size Enterprises and economic stakeholders in key sectors,</b> such as sustainable tourism and the bioeconomy, and by providing support to businesses to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop new/expand existing services and products.</li> <li>• Develop the digital capabilities of small and medium-sized enterprises /businesses to make the most of opportunities offered by digitalisation.</li> <li>• Foster entrepreneurship, productivity, competitiveness, internationalisation, clustering and network development.</li> <li>• Enable small and medium-sized Enterprises and businesses to set-up, modernise, diversify and expand in the European Union Just Transition Fund Territory.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>1.2 Support the implementation of bottom-up local and regional economic strategies</b></p> <p>The EU JTF will support local authorities and local stakeholders in implementing economic and community objectives and actions of economic strategies which are developed through collaboration involving local and regional stakeholders and are adopted through democratic processes. The targeted strategies are Local Economic and Community Plans and Regional Enterprise Plans. This action may:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build on achievements of the National Just Transition Fund and on regional strengths as identified in the Smart Specialisation Strategy for Ireland.</li> <li>• Encourage the development of transformative projects in association with the local authorities and local stakeholders.</li> <li>• Supporting the transition towards a climate-neutral economy by supporting the diversification of the economy of the Territory in line with bottom-up local and regional and economic strategies.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>1.3 Support research, development and innovation activities to contribute to the development of the green and circular economy</b></p> <p>The European Union Just Transition Fund will support investments in research, development, innovation, cooperation and demonstration activities that contribute to the development through structuring (aligning relevant partners) and mobilisation (development of multi-actor engagement to enable knowledge exchange and innovation) of the circular economy of the Territory, including the bioeconomy. This would include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support for Research, Development and Innovation activities and fostering the transfer of advanced technologies, including through living labs.</li> <li>• Support to multi-actor cooperation for mobilising, supporting and enhancing the circular economy, including through waste prevention, reduction, resource</li> </ul>

Priorities	Types of Actions
	<p>efficiency, reuse, repair and recycling, including Research, Development and Innovation for sustainable higher value products for new circular, resource-efficient biobased industries.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support the building of multi-sectoral engagement based on the principles of a circular economy and bioeconomy to consider the material flow (the territorial metabolism) as a resource which supports goals for ensuring food and nutrition security, managing natural resources sustainably, reducing dependence on non-renewable, unsustainable resources, limiting, and adapting to climate change and strengthening European competitiveness and creating jobs, welfare, and prosperity.</li> <li>• Support enabling communication, coordination and alignment with education, training, and skills activities to support activities and productive investments in relevant actors in the circular and bioeconomy including cooperative organisations, some and medium-sized enterprises and industry for the development of new business models, value chains, technologies, products and services.</li> </ul> <p>If relevant, actions in the field of clean energy could also be supported as they could be linked to actions in the field of bioeconomy.</p>
<p><b>JTF2. Supporting the rehabilitation and restoration of degraded peatlands and regeneration and repurposing of industrial heritage assets</b></p>	<p>Under this priority, the Programme will support a set of actions for the rehabilitation and restoration of degraded peatlands and regeneration and repurposing of industrial heritage assets that will no longer be used for the extraction, transport and processing of peat.</p> <p><b>2.1 Rehabilitation and restoration of degraded peatlands</b></p> <p><b>2.2 Research, knowledge transfer and monitoring activities on rewetting measures and overall land management improvements for farmed peat soils</b></p> <p><b>2.3 Regeneration and repurposing of industrial heritage assets that will no longer be used for the extraction, transport and processing of peat.</b></p> <p>The actions supported will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preparation measures such as feasibility and design studies including environmental assessments and rehabilitation plans.</li> <li>• Stakeholder engagement activities which could include landowner negotiations (including compensation payments or land purchase)</li> <li>• Implementation of measures to enable and monitor restoration and enhanced rehabilitation of degraded peatlands across multiple project sites. Project sites may be located within Special Areas of Conservation.</li> <li>• Implementation of regeneration and repurposing measures to include investments in the upgrade of existing industrial heritage assets for amenity and investments in new amenity assets such as, but not limited to, walking trails, cycle paths, signage/notice boards, seating, boardwalks and bog bridges.</li> <li>• Research on rewetted soils to identify suitable land management practices to maintain low Green House Gas emissions and support biodiversity while farming under wet conditions. Example activities may include rewetting of drained organic rich soils under grass/agriculture.</li> <li>• Education, awareness-raising and community engagement activities presenting the benefits of the restoration measures to the wider public</li> </ul>

Priorities	Types of Actions
<p><b>JTF3. Providing former peat communities with smart and sustainable mobility options to enable them to benefit directly from the green transition</b></p>	<p>As part of this priority, the European Union Just Transition Fund Programme will enhance sustainable and clean mobility in the Territory by supporting actions focusing on the decarbonisation of transport to provide clean transport solutions to the people working in, studying in and visiting the European Union Just Transition Fund Territory. Factors such as range anxiety, stretched resources and uncertain travel patterns following the pandemic, and rapidly changing technology, mean that the barriers to transport operators in the Territory taking advantage of zero carbon fleets are very high. By introducing relatively simple measures, the move to cleaner public transport for all can be accelerated in the European Union Just Transition Fund Territory. This will include the following type of activities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decarbonisation of public local rural bus route(s) including scoping, installation of electric charging points, and purchase of electric buses.</li> <li>• Support to private bus operators in the territory to move to electric vehicles including consultancy support and support for specific aspect of the electrification upgrade</li> <li>• Installation of publicly available fast and high-powered charge point infrastructure at community centre sites, including consultancy support, support to infrastructure work (civil and electrical work) and purchase of necessary equipment and related installation measures</li> </ul>

## 3 WHAT IS THE CURRENT STATE OF THE ENVIRONMENT IN IRELAND?

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Ireland has an attractive natural landscape that includes a wealth of biodiversity and a significant range of ecological sites of international and national importance. There are several nature conservation designations in Ireland. These are designated as either statutory (protected by law) or non-statutory (a material planning consideration), and can be of international, national or local importance. It has a considerable coastal area and unique mountain ranges. Additionally, Ireland has a rich natural heritage.

### 3.1 Current State of the Environment

#### Ecology and Nature Conservation

##### *Strengths and Opportunities*

- Ireland has established 439 Special Areas of Conservation covering approximately 1.35M ha, 154 Special Protected Area covering 5.894 km<sup>2</sup> of marine and terrestrial habitats as well as 45 Ramsar sites.
- Ireland has also committed to establishing Marine Protected Areas to protect biodiversity.
- Around 75 raised bogs have been designated as Natural Heritage Areas.
- Over half of Ireland species are in favourable condition.
- Ireland has a high proportion of Europe's remaining peatlands.
- Ireland has undertaken Red List assessments of the threat of extinction plant, non-marine vertebrate and invertebrate groups, and most were found to be not considered threatened by extinction.
- Bird population increased over a 22-year period and 25% of species have stable population trends.
- 85% of seabirds, over a 16-year period, were increasing in numbers.

##### *Weaknesses and Threats*

- Most recent assessment showed that 91% of the 58 habitats assessed have unfavourable conservation status.
- Notable proportion of Ireland's biodiversity is in a vulnerable state.
- Agriculture has been identified as a key contributor to the declines in conservation status, mainly impacting habitats.
- Climate change is expected to have negative impacts on habitats, various species as well as increasing ocean acidification and increasing invasive species.
- Peatlands are under threat of degradation due to habitat change and human exploitation.
- Certain animals including 30 species of bees, European eel, Arctic char, and natterjack toad were assessed to be under a threat of extinction.
- Countryside Bird Survey identified that over a 22-year period 14.6% of assessed species have declined.
- Over a 16-year period, 15% of assessed seabird species are stable or decreasing in numbers.

- Over a 32-year period, 21% of assessed seabird species have decreased in numbers.

## Health and Quality of Life

### *Strengths and Opportunities*

- Life expectancy at birth within Ireland has increased for males.
- Ireland has the highest self-perceived health status in the European Union.
- Persons aged 15 years and over reported having none to minimal depression.
- Percentage of people with long-standing illness or health condition that will last for >6 months has decreased.

### *Weaknesses and Threats*

- 37% of the surveyed population are overweight and 23% are obese.
- People reported more weight gain since Covid-19.
- Two in five aged 75 and older report being limited by health problems.
- Restrictions associated with Covid-19 affected approximately one in every five persons by increased psychological distress.
- Approximately 25% of population are expected to experience a mental health issue at some point in their life.
- The Midland region reported highest levels of respondents dealing with a long-term condition at 31% of those aged 15 and over.
- Hospital activity has been extensively affected by the pandemic, with total discharges and Emergency department attendances falling.

## Population and Socio-economics

### *Strengths and Opportunities*

- Population of Ireland has grown to 5.1 million.
- Population within the Programme Territory is projected to increase.
- In Ireland nearly 63% of 25-34 year olds have attained a tertiary education in 2021.
- Within the Programme Territory, Clane-Maynooth and Athlone are marginally above average for Deprivation Index.
- Percentage of Irish people living in consistent poverty has decreased by 1.1%.
- The number of unemployed persons in Ireland is down to 2.9% for persons aged 25-74.

### *Weaknesses and Threats*

- Relative to Ireland, the Programme Territory is more rural, has a lower population density and experiencing loss of job opportunities.
- The attainment rate for upper secondary graduates is below average compared to other countries, with the Midland and Border regions being particularly low in tertiary education attainment.
- Within the Programme Territory, the municipal districts with the highest levels of deprivation are Carrick-on-Suir, Longford, Granard and Edenderry.
- Children remain the most vulnerable to poverty age group.

- Regional-level data on unemployment show that the Midlands Region has a higher unemployment rate than the State.
- 7.5% of the workforce in the Programme Territory work in the primary sector (agriculture, peat harvesting, forestry and fishing), 3% higher than in Ireland as a whole.
- Areas dependent on agriculture are also most at risk of energy poverty.
- The total number of homeless individuals has increased.
- The gap between the highest and lowest value of per capita disposable income increased.

## **Soil and Land Use**

### ***Strengths and Opportunities***

- Ireland has a notably diverse geology that is prospective for a wide range of mineral deposits.
- Irish raised bogs are the most important remaining in Europe, whilst Ireland is the most important country in Europe for blanket bog.
- Measures in Ireland's National Energy and Climate Plan 2021- 2030 include commitments to phase out peat for power generation by 2028.
- Irish soil quality is satisfactory overall, attributed to the late introduction to the industrial revolution.
- The average farm size in Ireland has increased by a small percentage.
- Agri-environment schemes encourage farmers and landowners to manage their land to benefit the environment by integrating sustainable environmental management into the everyday workings of the farm.
- Forest cover in Ireland has grown and is now at its highest level in over 350 years.

### ***Weaknesses and Threats***

- There has been significant damage to peatlands within the Programme Territory due to peat extraction, agricultural improvement together with the associated drainage and burning.
- The loss of peatlands impacts climate change as it prevents carbon sequestration and reduces the available carbon stock as, when drained, peat oxidises and carbon dioxide is released.
- Only 10% of the original raised bog and 28% of the original blanket peatlands are suitable for conservation.
- There is increasing pressure on soil, particularly from land use changes, intensification of agriculture, erosion and overgrazing, afforestation, industry and urbanisation.
- In Ireland there is very little specific legislation or policy mechanism to protect soils, apart from habitat based legislation, and to deal with the remediation of contaminated soils.
- Ireland experienced reduction of farms and a small decrease in total agricultural land use since 2012.
- Green Low-Carbon Agri-environmental scheme stopped submissions of new applications since 2017.

## Water

### *Strengths and Opportunities*

- Ireland has an abundant supply of fresh water, a key resource in economic, amenity and aesthetic terms.
- The Catchment Assessment Team are planning to carry out Local Catchment Assessments to identify which activities in peat are impacting water quality, to enable appropriate mitigation actions to be implemented.
- Measures to address wastewater discharges are being implemented.
- All local authority wastewater discharges must now be authorised and conditions may be imposed in order to protect the environment.
- Impact of Ireland's Nitrates Action Programme and the Nitrates Derogation will be evaluated to protect surface water and groundwater from pollution.
- Significant work has been undertaken to assess the level of risk associated with flooding in Ireland.
- Ireland's third River Basin Management Plan is currently in the public consultation stages, including actions to improve overall water quality and achieve 'good' ecological status.
- The levels of seriously polluted river water have fallen from in the last 30 years.
- Majority of bathing water sites surveyed had good water quality and almost all had sufficient water quality.
- The number of seriously polluted river water bodies has started to decline since 2016.
- There had been an increase in the proportion of samples showing low volumes of nitrates in watercourses.

### *Weaknesses and Threats*

- Water quality in Ireland has deteriorated over the past two decades.
- Main pressures impacting water quality in Ireland include agriculture, wastewater discharges, physical impacts on habitats including excess fine sediment and pressures from forestry activities.
- The main pollutants in waterbodies are nutrients (nitrogen and phosphorus), sediment, pesticides and faecal indicator organisms.
- Peat extraction for commercial or domestic purposes, and drainage of peatlands has been identified as a significant pressure for waterbodies.
- Climate change is likely to have an impact on groundwater flooding, affecting the severity, frequency and duration of flood events.
- The percentage of unpolluted river water decreased and the proportion of moderately polluted river water increased.
- Many wastewater treatment plants are in need of an upgrade in terms of the capacity and nature of treatment.
- Approximately 43% of rivers are in unsatisfactory quality.

## Air Quality

### *Strengths and Opportunities*

- In the Air Quality Index rankings 2021, Ireland perceived as a 'good' average.

- Ireland continues to be compliant with the European Union air quality standards for most pollutants such as particulate matter, nitrogen dioxide, ozone, and others.
- Power generation emissions are declining due to reduced coal and peat use across all sectors.
- There is an overall reduction trend in emissions between 1990 and 2019.

#### ***Weaknesses and Threats***

- A number of World Health Organisation guidelines were exceeded in urban areas in 2019.
- There are localised air quality issues in smaller towns and villages associated with pollutants such as nitrogen oxide and particulate matter.
- Wood and peat burning is emerging as a potentially significant contributor to Particulate Matter levels.
- Ireland has higher than average per capita emissions of methane and nitrogen oxide from any of the European Union member states.
- Ammonia emissions have increased, predominantly due to emissions from agriculture.
- Ammonia, nitrogen oxide and non-methane volatile organic compound emissions exceeded the emission ceilings from the National Emissions Ceiling Directive, although nitrogen oxide is predicted to meet the 2030 emission reduction targets.

## **Climate Change**

#### ***Strengths and Opportunities***

- There has been a tendency for a longer agricultural growing season, which could allow for an increased productivity (e.g. crop yields) and new planting opportunities in agricultural and forest settings.
- Ireland is committed to halving its greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and reaching net zero by 2050 at the latest.
- Energy related carbon dioxide emissions (including international aviation) fell by over 11% in 2020, due to public health measures to combat Covid-19.
- Ireland succeeded in meeting the European Union target for renewable energy share in transport in 2020.

#### ***Weaknesses and Threats***

- The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Special Report confirmed that the international community has a limited window for real action to reduce emissions.
- Greenhouse gas emissions have increased since 1990 by 11.4%.
- Carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels accounted for large proportion of all greenhouse gases emissions.
- Greenhouse gases from agriculture represent 37.5% of all greenhouse gas emissions in 2021.
- Ireland set two further targets in renewable energy share in electricity and renewable energy share in heating and cooling, nationally missing both of these targets.

## Material Assets

### *Strengths and Opportunities*

- Valuable natural resources of commercial importance include natural gas, peat, copper, lead, zinc, silver, barite, gypsum, limestone, dolomite.
- Exploration has been undertaken in the last few years for platinum group metals minerals, rare earth and speciality minerals, nickel and chromite and diamonds.
- Ireland is on track to meet the 2020 recycling target for municipal waste.
- Ireland achieved an overall packaging recycling rate and is exceeding the current Packaging Directive recycling target.
- Wind is the largest source of renewable energy accounting for 56% of all renewable energy in 2020.
- Oil use decreased by 16.5%, the largest annual reduction observed to date which can largely be attributed to reduced transport energy use during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Ireland has improved energy security through an increase in domestic gas production, as oil use in decreased.

### *Weaknesses and Threats*

- Ireland had the sixth highest level of municipal waste generated per capita in the European Union in 2015.
- Packaging Directive sets plastic packaging recycling targets of 50% for 2025 and 55% for 2030, which is challenging as only 28% of plastic packaging was recycled in 2019.
- Ireland remains heavily reliant on export markets, particularly for recycling.
- Ireland did not meet its European Union 2020 overall renewable energy target.
- In 2020, fossil fuels accounted for 86% of Ireland's total primary supply of energy, with oil being the dominant energy source.

## Historic Environment

### *Strengths and Opportunities*

- Ireland has two UNESCO World Heritage Sites: Brú na Bóinne situated in county Meath and Skellig Michael located on an island off the southwest coast.
- There are almost 1000 individual monuments at 768 locations under state care. There are 150,800 recorded monuments on The Record of Monument and Places.
- Ireland has national heritage plan 'Heritage Ireland 2030', which has the purpose of informing protection, conservation, promotion and management of Ireland's heritage for the next decade.
- One of the key objectives advancing national heritage is promoting the sustainability of rural communities by developing policies and programmes for sustainable rural communities and the landscapes that they inhabit, thus mitigating climate change.

### *Weaknesses and Threats*

- Pressure from urban change, road building, construction of houses and other developments, access to uplands and wetlands, concentration and intensification of commercial farming, scrub encroachment and extensive afforestation on

traditional rural landscapes, exploitation of peatlands and marginalisation of built heritage within national and European Union environmental conservation measures.

- Vulnerability of Ireland's built and archaeological heritage to impacts of climate change.
- Public consultation identified concerns over built heritage including tourism, derelict structures, demolition of structures, lack of care of historic structures, decline in traditional crafts.

## **Landscape**

### ***Strengths and Opportunities***

- There are six National Parks in Ireland, one of which is within the Programme Territory.
- The National Landscape Strategy was published in 2015 which will be used to ensure meeting criteria from European Landscape Convention.
- Ireland's land use is predominantly agricultural, however the countryside has become increasingly important for forestry, recreation and tourism.
- Key objective of National Landscape Strategy is to improve in decision making across the country when dealing with issues of landscape.

### ***Weaknesses and Threats***

- Extensive new housing, major roads and other infrastructure projects are resulting in urbanisation and landscape fragmentation.
- Ireland has no areas designated as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
- Urbanisation and landscape fragmentation may affect Ireland's tourist economy, as scenery is the most important reason why people visit and holiday in Ireland.
- Commitment to prepare 'State of Landscape Reports' have not yet been implemented which makes it difficult to plan important strategic infrastructure.

## **Natural Capital**

### ***Strengths and Opportunities***

- A number of studies to date have identified the value or importance of freshwater systems, marine systems and animal pollination.
- The Irish Natural Capital Accounting for Sustainable Environments research project aims to identify sustainable solutions through investments in natural capital, restoration of the degraded areas and altering management practices and incentive schemes.
- The scenery is seen as the reason why people visit Ireland.

### ***Weaknesses and Threats***

- There is still difficulty in giving a value to non-market and non-use values for human health, well-being and society.
- Progress relating to ecosystem evaluation in Ireland has been limited, due to the research projects assessing ecosystems with frameworks which are lacking cohesion in relation to one another.

## 4 HOW HAS THE PROGRAMME BEEN ASSESSED?

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The Programme has been assessed against a number of Strategic Environmental Assessment objectives designed to cover the broad range of environmental issues facing the programme area:

- **Ecology and Nature Conservation** – Protect, enhance and manage biodiversity assets and ecosystems
- **Health and Quality of Life** – Improve health and quality of life
- **Population and Socio-economic Factors** – Support the growth of business and enterprise and enhance life opportunities
- **Soil and Land Use** – Protect and enhance soil quality and encourage sustainable land use
- **Water** – Protect, enhance and manage water resources and flood risk
- **Air Quality** – Reduce air pollution and ensure continued improvements to air quality
- **Climate Change** – Minimise contribution to climate change and adapt to its predicted effects
- **Material Assets** – Safeguard natural resources and increase recycling rates
- **Historic Environment** – Protect, enhance and manage archaeological and cultural heritage
- **Landscape** - Protect, enhance and manage the character and quality of the landscape
- **Natural Capital** – Encourage multifunctionality of greenspace and facilitate access and connection to the natural environment

These objectives are used within high level and detailed assessment matrices to ascertain the magnitude of likely impacts, the sensitivity or value of the receiving environment (including people and wildlife) and the resultant significance of effects of the priorities of the Programme.

Assessments of alternatives to the Programme have been undertaken, along with an assessment of likely cumulative effects of the Programme itself and accounting for likely in-combination effects with other plans and programmes. Opportunities for improvement and measures to address possible effects have also been identified.

## 5 WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES?

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Consideration of alternatives is a key feature of the Strategic Environmental Assessment process as defined by the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive and the Strategic Environmental Assessment Regulations. In practical terms, it refers to possible alternative mechanisms for delivering the Programme, and the assessment of the impacts of each of these options against the Strategic Environmental Assessment objectives.

The Just Transition Fund has a single specific objective which is set out in regulation. It states that the Just Transition Fund shall support the specific objective of enabling regions and people to address the social, employment, economic and environmental impacts of the transition towards the European Union's 2030 targets for energy and climate and a climate-neutral economy of the European Union by 2050, based on the Paris Agreement.

Three strategic alternatives have been assessed against the Strategic Environmental Assessment objectives. A 'Do Nothing' approach has also been assessed to understand the effect on the objectives in the absence of the Programme.

### 5.1 Assessment of Alternatives

#### **Alternative 1: The Programme as Proposed**

Alternative 1 comprises the programme as currently proposed. This programme was developed on the basis of in-depth engagement with the European Commission, national and regional stakeholders, and potential delivery partners and beneficiaries to complement the Territorial Just Transition Plan as well as other national and European Union funded programmes.

This alternative has a strong beneficial effect anticipated on population and socio-economics due to 58% of funding under the Programme directed at JTF1: Generating employment for former peat communities by investing in the diversification of the local economy. Beneficial outcomes are anticipated for most of the Strategic Environmental Assessment objectives due to the cross cutting nature of providing funding for the regeneration of peatlands. JTF3 may have beneficial effects on air quality and climate change with the effects on the remaining Strategic Environmental Assessment objectives likely to be neutral.

Uncertain effects are anticipated on a number of Strategic Environmental Assessment objectives including ecology and nature conservation, soil and land use, water, air quality, historic environment, landscape and natural capital as JTF1 may involve construction activities associated with businesses diversifying and expanding. This may lead to habitat loss or disturbance, soil compaction, water pollution, dust and emissions, changes to the site and setting of historic assets and potential loss of landscape quality and character. JTF2 could also lead to uncertain effects on ecology and nature conservations due to the possibility of disturbance through increased visitor numbers to peatlands.

#### **Alternative 2: Reallocation of Resources**

Alternative 2 addresses the same Specific Objective as Alternative 1. The difference is that it proposes an alternative budget allocation, split more evenly across the three priorities.

Some funding from JTF1 would be reallocated to JTF3 while the funding under JTF2 would remain similar. This would mean that the beneficial effects of peatland restoration under JTF2 would still remain under Alternative 2. Less funding would be directed toward economic diversification of the Territory and support for the implementation of economic strategies under JTF1 reducing its beneficial effects on the population and socio-economic objective. However, this may lead to less requirement for business expansion and reduce the risk associated with new building development. Increased funding for JTF3 under Alternative 2 may see a higher number of traditional buses replaced with electric buses and a higher uptake of electric vehicles due to the provision of publicly available high and fast power charging points which would have beneficial effects on air quality and climate change.

### **Alternative: 3 Alternative Actions**

Alternative 3 addresses the same specific objective as Alternatives 1 and 2. The key difference is that it proposes four priorities as set out in the Draft Territorial Just Transition Plan. These priorities and actions are drawn primarily from the recommendations of the Structural Reform Support Programme analysis commissioned by the European Commission.

Alternative 3 has a strong population and socio-economic focus with JTF1, JTF2 and JTF4 supporting the modernisation of business, creating employment opportunities, enhancing skills profile and enhancing the potential of the region as a place to live and work. Resulting in beneficial effects on the population and socio-economic objective.

Alternative 3 would see a small number of actions associated with peatland restoration and funding for EU LIFE Projects. In comparison to Alternative 1, it would lack the beneficial effects resulting from large scale regeneration and restoration of peatland on Strategic Environmental Assessment objectives such as soil and land use, water, climate change, material assets.

### **Alternative: 4 'Do Nothing'**

This alternative assumes that the EU JTF is not allocated within the Programme Territory and assesses the impact on the Strategic Environmental Assessment objectives in the absence of a Just Transition Fund Programme.

The 'do nothing' scenario preforms worst overall. Strong adverse effects are anticipated as many people would be left unsupported in the transition to a climate neutral economy. Without significant financial support and employment opportunities made available to rural communities, this would likely lead to increased joblessness, deprivation and poverty, and continuing population decline in rural areas.

Adverse effects are also anticipated on health and quality of life, ecology and nature conservation, soil and land use, water, climate change, material assets historic environment, landscape and natural capital. This is mainly due to the lack of funding for the regeneration of peatlands and the beneficial effects that are present in Alternatives 1 and 2.

## **5.2 Reasons for Selection of Chosen Strategic Alternative**

Alternative 1 provides a strong socio-economic funding stream which is aligned with the European Union Just Transition Fund regulation. JTF1 will help to generate employment for former peat communities and increase diversification in the local economy. It also supports

the regeneration and repurposing of peatlands which is of key importance in the mitigation of climate change, combating soil degradation, biodiversity loss, water quality and flood regulation. Overall this alternative supports a balanced approach which will achieve the aim of the European Union Just Transition Fund.

Therefore, the priorities included in the Alternative 1 for the Programme have been taken forward and presented for public consultation.

## **6 WHAT ARE THE LIKELY ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF THE PROGRAMME?**

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### **6.1 JTF1 - Generating Employment for Former Peat Communities by Investing in the Diversification of the Local Economy**

JTF1 will support the diversification of the economy by funding small and medium-sized enterprises/Businesses and supporting implementation of the economic strategies would help to facilitate growth of Irish business and enterprises and generate employment. This could also help support the post-covid economy recovery. Moderate beneficial effects are therefore predicted on the socio-economic objective.

It is not possible to rule out that the construction of new premises or facilities may take place as a result of business diversification or expansion. Depending on the location, size and extent, the construction of new premises or facilities could have local adverse effects on ecology, landscape, soil, water, air quality, historic environment and by extension natural capital. Such building developments are likely to be subject to controls through the project design and planning process and relevant regulations to act to ensure that any effects are not significant. Minor adverse effects are predicted on the ecology, soil and land use, water, air quality, historic environment, landscape and natural capital objectives.

Minor beneficial effects are predicted on the health of quality of life objective as there may be indirect beneficial impacts on wellbeing from increased economic opportunities, increased wages and skills.

### **6.2 JTF2 - Supporting the Rehabilitation and Restoration of Degraded Peatlands and Regeneration and Repurposing of Industrial and Cultural Heritage Assets**

The main focus of funding is to facilitate the restoration of peatlands, the standard for which shall be agreed with the National Parks and Wildlife Service. This will have significant beneficial effects on water through filtering and slowing the flow of water through the landscape, improving water quality and reducing flooding. Peatland restoration will enhance the quality and landscape character of the area and also improve public access to open space. Restoration within existing Special Areas of Conservation will help to maintain and enhance these designated sites. Moderate beneficial effects are therefore predicted on water, climate change, material assets, landscape and natural capital. Major beneficial effects are anticipated on soil and land-use.

Under this priority, industrial and cultural heritage assets that will no longer be used for the extraction, transport and processing of peat will instead be used to create ecological corridors, trails and green & blue infrastructure networks for walking, cycling, water and/or other recreational activities. Increased tourism and recreational use may cause disturbance to priority species, important habitats and designated sites, although, with sound planning and mitigation this is unlikely to outweigh the beneficial effects that will result from the restoration and rehabilitation of peatlands. Major/moderate beneficial effects are therefore predicted on ecology and nature conservation.

Repurposing of existing industrial and cultural heritage for amenity use could help to preserve assets and increase appreciation of these assets, this was assessed to have negligible beneficial effects on historic environment. Neutral effects are anticipated on air quality.

### 6.3 JTF3 - Providing Former Peat Communities with Smart and Sustainable Mobility Options to Enable Them to Benefit Directly from the Green Transition

This Priority will support the decarbonisation of public local rural bus route(s) including the purchase of electric buses and the installation of publicly available fast and high-powered charge point infrastructure at community centre sites.

The high level matrix assessment found that upon balance this priority would likely have a neutral effect on most of the Strategic Environmental Assessment objectives. The installation of publicly available charging points could facilitate the uptake of electric vehicles, this alongside additional electric buses added to some fleets may have beneficial effects on air quality and climate change.

Construction activities under this priority have been assessed to be small in scale and in built up locations that serve as community centres such as libraries. This type of development would not usually trigger an Environmental Impact Assessment and therefore is unlikely to cause significant effects. Any construction activity resulting from funding under JTF3 would need to adhere to local planning regulation and assessment where necessary.

### 6.4 Overall Effects of the Programme

The overall effects of the Programme on the Strategic Environmental Assessment objectives are summarised in Table 6.1 below.

**Table 6.1: Overall Effect of the Programme on the Strategic Environmental Assessment Objectives**

Strategic Environmental Assessment Objectives		Overall Effect of the Programme on Strategic Environmental Assessment Objectives
1	Ecology and Nature Conservation	Beneficial
2	Population and Socio-economics	Beneficial
3	Health and Quality of Life	Beneficial
4	Soil and Land Use	Beneficial
5	Water	Beneficial
6	Air Quality	Neutral
7	Climate Change	Beneficial
8	Material Assets	Beneficial
9	Historic Environment	Neutral
10	Landscape	Beneficial
11	Natural Capital	Beneficial

## **6.5 Cumulative Effects with Other Plans and Programmes**

While significant adverse effects primarily associated with other programmes cannot be discounted, the Programme is considered to support the identified Strategic Environmental Assessment objectives and therefore it is not anticipated to lead to significant adverse effects either singularly or in combination with other plans and programmes.

## **6.6 Transboundary Effects**

The Programme covers the JTF Territory, which does not border Northern Ireland. However JTF2 may also extend to include the restoration and rehabilitation of peatland sites adjacent to the Programme Territory, which may be closer to the Northern Ireland border.

However no significant adverse transboundary effects are anticipated because the few potentially adverse effects predicted were due to localised small scale impacts of projects funded under the Programme which are no more than minor adverse significance.

Projects funded under the Programme will need to comply with cross jurisdiction environmental legislation. Projects flowing from the Programme must act in accordance with EU and national environmental assessment requirements and legislation, specifically Appropriate Assessment and Environmental Impact Assessment, within the jurisdiction of which they fall.

## 7 WHAT ARE THE KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MITIGATION OR ENHANCEMENTS?

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### 7.1 Minimising Adverse Effects

No significant adverse effects are identified and therefore there is no requirement for mitigation.

Nevertheless the following recommended measures are identified in the detailed matrix assessment in order to reduce the potential for adverse, non-significant, effects in respect of JTF1 which was found to have potential minor adverse effects on ecology and nature conservation, soil and land use, water, air quality, historic environment, landscape, and as a result, natural capital.

New building developments which may result from funding under JTF1 will be subject to controls through project design, the planning process and relevant regulations that act to ensure any effects are not significant. Existing consenting mechanisms and where relevant Environmental Impact Assessment at the project level prior to work being undertaken can reduce the potential for adverse effects.

However, as this assessment is limited by the level of project information available at this stage, a project level environmental appraisal should be undertaken prior to making a final decision regarding the funding of projects. Funding should not be granted to projects that are likely to result in adverse effects without adequate mitigation measures.

Environmental protection wording has been incorporated into the Programme which demonstrates its commitment to environmental protection through high level principles for economic activities arising out of investments associated with the Programme. The Programme encourages relevant development proposals that aim to protect and enhance the environment and promote the circular economy.

Although overall beneficial effects are predicted from JTF2 due to peatland restoration, it is acknowledged that increased visitor numbers to peatland areas could have some adverse effects, particularly on sensitive sites such as Special Areas of Conservation. A requirement of funding could be to include measures to reduce potential visitor disturbance such as:

- Appropriate signage and information boards to raise awareness of sensitivities of the site;
- Clearly marked paths and routes;
- Requirement to keep dogs on leads;
- Restricting access to more sensitive areas within sites; and
- Having a warden at the more sensitive sites.

### 7.2 Environmental Enhancements

The following potential enhancement measures are recommended. These are intended to improve the overall performance of the Programme with a focus on the environment based objectives. The adoption of these recommendations is not a mandatory part of the Strategic Environmental Assessment process and hence it is for Eastern and Midland Regional

Assembly as the plan-making body to decide on the extent to which they should form part of the final Programme.

### **Inclusive Recreational Facilities**

Measures related to the use of restored peatland sites for recreation is already included in the programme. The importance of accessible outdoor recreational spaces for mental and physical health is widely acknowledged in research. It is recommended that these sites are designed in a way that is inclusive with provision made for those users who may experience barriers, such as the elderly and people with disabilities. This may include such features as:

- Accessible car parking spaces;
- Wide, level pathways with walking surface materials that do not become soft or slippery when wet;
- Ample rest areas, particularly on longer walking routes; and
- Clear signage, using symbols to convey information wherever possible

## 8 HOW WILL EFFECTS BE MONITORED?

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Article 10 of the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive requires the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly, as the Managing Authority, to monitor significant environmental effects of implementing the Programme. Monitoring should commence as soon as the Programme is adopted, with annual reporting carried out over its lifespan.

As noted in Section 6, no significant adverse residual environmental effects are anticipated although it is noted that there are some uncertainties as specific project details and the location thereof, funded through the Programme are currently unknown. Therefore, it is desirable that monitoring be carried out to validate the predictions and to allow detection of any unforeseen environmental effects not identified through the Strategic Environmental Assessment process.

It is suggested that proposals for funding under the Programme should include an environmental section which asks the applicant to outline their potential environmental impacts, mitigation (if required) and specific project related monitoring proposal expressing how they plan to monitor the beneficial, adverse or unforeseen environmental effects arising from the proposed project. This information should then be taken into account when determining if a project is granted funding.

Taking into account the requirement to monitor environmental effects and other regulatory requirements, Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly proposes the following measures to assess and monitor the environmental and social impact of the Programme.

- A Programme Monitoring Committee will be set up and meet at least once yearly to examine and make recommendations on all issues affecting programme implementation, progress in achieving milestones and targets and measures taken to address issues.
- A Programme evaluation plan, will be submitted to the Programme Monitoring Committee by Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly within a year of Programme approval and a mid-term evaluation carried out in 2025 to track progress made in achieving milestones for output indicators delivered.
- A number of results indicators have been set for each of the Programme priorities which will allow East Midland Regional Assembly to track progress and results of the Programme.
- Most of the indicators to be used to monitor the progress and results of the Programme are European Union Just Transition Fund common indicators. However, the Programme will also use two programme-specific output indicators and three programme-specific result indicators to better monitor the progress of actions under JTF1, JTF2 and JTF3.

## 9 WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT?

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The Environmental Report, including this Non-technical Summary, is being presented for public and statutory consultation for a period of four weeks.

The Environmental Report has been issued to the relevant Consultation Bodies in Ireland and made available to other interested parties to facilitate determination of the likely effect of the European Union Just Transition Fund Programme, as currently drafted, on the environment.

Once the Programme has been adopted, a Strategic Environmental Assessment Statement will be produced to provide information on how the Environmental Report and consultees' opinions were taken into account in deciding the final form of the Programme.