

Good Practice in Policy Integration of Nature-Based Solutions:

Ireland National Strategy and guidance for local authorities on integrating NbS into rainwater management plans (2024)

Short description

The Irish government Department for Housing, Local Government and Heritage published in 2024 a national strategy to promote nature-based management of urban rainwater and urban surface water discharges. It is a non-statutory road map of potential actions which may assist in the implementation of nature-based solutions to surface water management in settlements. The Irish government also published a **guidance for local authorities** in 2024 on producing a Rainwater Management Plan (RMP). The advisory **Local Authority Waters Programme (LAWPRO)** published a complementary and more technical guidance in 2025 for planners, developers and developer agents.

Key messages

- 1) The **national planning framework integrates NbS** addressing flood risk and water quality, and advice is being provided to local authorities on how to integrate NbS for rainwater management into local plans. More pilots, learning, and training are needed for **urban planners to see NbS as a necessity rather than an extra**, to recognise the economic benefits, and to acknowledge the scale of intervention needed to adapt to climate change. Successful proof of concept projects are very important.
- 2) Government's **promised large scale funding opportunities** to mainstream NbS for zero pollution urban water management have not yet been announced, but dedicated funding for getting NbS into existing projects is developing capacity and proofs of concept locally.
- 3) **Capacity building, training and knowledge sharing** has been a major factor in the success of the strategy so far and is encouraging further efforts in capacity and knowledge building. However, the **lack of a systematic national monitoring framework for NbS** means lessons learned are not being shared.

Description of policy

National strategy for NbS for urban water management

As envisaged by the Irish **National Water Action Plan 2024**, the Irish government Department for Housing, Local Government and Heritage published in 2024 a **national strategy to promote nature-based management of urban rainwater and urban surface water discharges** [1]. The strategy is described as a non-statutory road map of potential actions which may assist in the implementation of nature-based solutions to surface water management in settlements. It is designed to support the City and County Development plans in the implementation of nature-based solutions to surface water management through water sensitive urban designs. The strategy is overseen by a Steering Committee chaired by the Water Section of the Department of Housing, Local Government, and Heritage (DHLGH).

The strategy is supported by national policy changes that mainstream NbS:

- NbS are integrated into the national planning framework (with NbS standards for residential developments and urban roads), and water sector planning.
- NbS are a priority in the national water action plan, the climate adaptation framework.

Government guidance on rainwater management

The Irish government published a **guidance for local authorities** in 2024 on producing a Rainwater Management Plan (RMP) [2]. Rainwater Management Plans are intended to integrate spatial planning and rainwater management across public and private land and urban land uses, including roads, streets, open spaces, recreational areas, and private land. The guidance is intended to help local authorities integrate nature-based solutions in their Rainwater Management Plan, including an explanation of the issues that need addressing, what

information and data can be used, and what outputs should be planned. The Department of Housing also updated the government design standards for road layout guidance to integrate NbS for drainage management. The advisory **Local Authority Waters Programme (LAWPRO)** published a complementary and more technical guidance in 2025 for planners, developers and developer agents [3]. It integrates Strategic Flood Risk Assessment into the planning approach.

Images



Herbert Park, Dublin, Ireland (source : Valerie Lierra, Unsplash)

| Scale and Location | Type of Policy Instrument |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> National (for implementation at local authority level) Republic of Ireland | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> PLANNING INSTRUMENT - national strategy (non-statutory) national planning guidance INFORMATION / EDUCATION INSTRUMENT - guidance for local policy makers (government endorsed) |
| Network Nature Themes | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Zero Pollution Sustainable Urban and Regional Transformation Climate Mitigation, Adaptation and Resilience | |
| Policy Good Practice Criteria | |
| NbS mainstreamed in policy text and/or NbS are a central component of policy response | <p>The national strategy aims to promote NbS in urban water management, as stated in its title. This aim is reinforced by the integration of NbS wording and specific interventions into the national planning framework and standards and water sector planning. The guidance provided to local authorities describes how to implement NbS in detail. NbS are also identified as a priority in the national water action plan and the climate adaptation framework.</p> <p>As these policy changes are recent (2024 and 2025), evidence that NbS have become a central component of city policies is still sparse. However, Dublin already pioneered NbS for water management and sustainable urban drainage systems have been mandatory in all new developments in Ireland since 2005.</p> |
| Societal challenges are addressed and human wellbeing outcomes are identified | <p>Ireland's existing drainage infrastructure and urban watercourses are under increasing pressures from urban population growth, densification of existing urban areas, and the need to improve water quality and achieve zero pollution. Urban run-off is one of the top causes of water pollution. Ireland needs to comply with the EU Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive standards [16], and next year the higher standards</p> |

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| | <p>agreed under this Directive will apply. The increasing risk of flooding and extreme rainfall events due to climate change exacerbates the situation. Climate change presents an extreme challenge to the provision of water services: more intense rainfall and storm events are increasing flooding risk and power interruptions, which will cause more frequent sewer flooding and pollution incidents, impacting on public health and the environment.</p> <p>Rainwater management planning aims to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manage flood risk - reduce likelihood and severity of flooding • Improve water quality - capture pollutants carried by rainwater runoff and avoid polluting sewage water overflows that occur when rainwater exceeds the capacity of urban drainage systems • Promote groundwater recharge • Help deliver a sustainable water supply • Benefit biodiversity and green networks • Contribute to health and wellbeing by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Providing enhanced amenity benefits ◦ Providing natural cooling in urban areas ◦ Improving air quality • Contribute to sustainable mobility by prioritising pedestrians, cyclists and other active and sustainable travel modes <p>The guidance on rainwater management planning [2] lays out how interventions can be planned to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance the visual character of streets and public spaces • Increase space for cyclists and pedestrians in the street • Be designed for safety, allowing safe access and egress • Increase space for nature and create green corridors <p>It states that careful consideration must be given to how the flood storage spaces will be used and function for multiple community benefits, as they will function as flood storage for very limited periods of time. Their design should also allow for quick and easy restoration to their main function after flood events.</p> <p>The guidance for local authorities [2] mentions several expected human wellbeing outcomes from the planning, without however specifying how to assess and measure these outcomes. The department of housing plans to do further work to integrate human wellbeing outcomes into the national strategy [6]. The national NbS strategy [1] sets a target for Health Impact Assessments to be carried out for all community development plans, including rainwater management plans, Local Authority Climate Action Plans (LACAPs), and urban nature plans.</p> <p>Dedicated budget and/or funding stream</p> <p>The national NbS strategy does not have dedicated funding but envisions a National Adaptation Budget to be in place by 2027 and the revision of current public expenditure and project appraisal tools to support and promote urban NbS. The National Adaptation Framework (NAF) published in 2024 sets a framework funding mechanism including the Climate Action Fund, the National Development Plan (2021-2030) Strategic Outcome 8, the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund, and the Strategic Investment Fund Climate Investment Strategy [4].</p> <p>Funding for urban NbS has been included as a priority for Ireland's Infrastructure, Climate, and Nature Fund from 2026-2030 [5]. This fund is expected to provide up to €3.15 billion to support designated environmental projects from 2026 to 2030. However, the details of what will be funded are not yet available.</p> <p>Two small-scale funding streams currently fund urban water NbS research and pilots:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The department of housing has a funding stream managed by LAWPRO specifically for integrating NbS into existing projects [6]. Funding on the project scale provides a proof of concept, which helps to justify future funding on a larger scale. • The national Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) Water Services Innovation Fund (WSIF) funds the Nature Based Solutions Research and |
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| | <p>Innovation Programme (to end 2026) [7]. This project undertaken by the Irish national water utility (Uisce Éireann) in partnership with the University of Galway investigates integrated constructed wetlands for wastewater treatment.</p> |
| Indicators of impact and evaluation framework | <p>Monitoring is carried out at project level but is yet to be integrated into the national strategy due to the need for adaptability to different scenarios [6]. Limited funding is available for monitoring and evaluation, but approaches are being built up from local projects [6].</p> <p>The guidance for cities [2] recommends that cities set up regular monitoring and define milestones that can be assessed through monitoring. However, it does not specify impact indicators or evaluation techniques.</p> <p>The national NbS strategy [1] sets out clearly stated and measurable actions to be taken in the short (by the end of 2027), medium (by the end of 2035) and long (by the end of 2045) terms. Performance will be monitored against these targets. The strategy is overseen by a Steering Committee chaired by the Water Section of the Department of Housing, Local Government, and Heritage (DHLGH), which will produce annual progress reports.</p> |
| Inclusivity and stakeholder engagement | <p>The national NbS strategy [1] was developed with stakeholder input: the work on the strategy commenced in 2021 with a scoping exercise that included consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, including all local authorities, relevant state agencies and professional bodies.</p> <p>The strategy implementation envisions stakeholder engagement through the delivery setup:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The LAWPRO community water officer (CWO) network is the primary deliverer of the NbS strategy, which creates an opportunity for communities to become key delivery partners in NbS implementation and support the national drive to deliver NbS. <p>At the same time, the water policy and climate adaptation policies establish local support and engagement networks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the national water action plan (RBMP) envisions the resourcing and establishment of Catchment Community Fora to ensure the delivery of Local Catchment Management Plans in the 46 Hydrometric Areas in Ireland. There is an opportunity to integrate NbS delivery into the core of these local processes. • dedicated climate adaptation officers are funded by the government in each local authority, and four Climate Action Regional Offices (CAROs) provide support, offer training and run awareness campaigns on climate adaptation. <p>The guidance [2] recommends local authorities to engage stakeholders in the development of rainwater management plans using a range of activities. The guidance specifies a minimum of two workshops (with appropriate notification to stakeholders), both early in the process and when the draft plan is developed. It also recommends addressing ownership and long-term maintenance of the NbS interventions during stakeholder engagement processes to encourage communities to take up a role in ongoing care and management.</p> |
| Consistency within policy mix | <p>The Irish policy context has mainstreamed nature-based solutions during the past few years ensuring a consistent policy mix, including the national water action plan, climate adaptation policy, spatial planning, and national building guidelines.</p> <p>The Irish National Water Action Plan 2024 (Ireland's 3rd River Basin Management Plan RBMP for the period 2024-2027) [8] prescribes the use of nature-based sustainable drainage features as the primary method of managing rainwater, in line with the EU Water Framework Directive, the recast EU Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive, the Irish National Planning Framework, and the national Climate Action Plan. The national water action plan is consistent with NbS mainstreaming as it requires sustainable urban drainage and acknowledges the need to move towards a more nature-based approach to urban rainwater management. It requires the Irish national water utility (Uisce Éireann) to put in place a research and innovation programme on nature-based solutions for small wastewater treatment plants.</p> |

NbS are now embedded in Ireland's national climate adaptation planning approach:

National Adaptation Framework (NAF) (2024) [4]

This statutory plan adopted in June 2024 provides the national implementation framework for climate adaptation, as required by the Irish Climate Act. It recognises that nature-based solutions offer a sustainable and cost-effective means of adapting to climate change, and their significance in building resilience and safeguarding communities and sectors against the unpredictable challenges of a changing climate. It requires consideration of NbS in local and sectoral climate action plans.

Irish spatial and land-use planning now specifies use of NbS:

Irish National Planning Framework (2025) [9]¹

The revised framework approved in April 2025 includes a national planning objective to:

- *'Support the management of stormwater, rainwater and surface water flood and pollution risk through the use of nature-based solutions and sustainable drainage systems, including the retrofitting of existing environments to support nature based solutions.'* (National Policy Objective 79)
- *'Support the implementation by Uisce Éireann, Local Authorities and other parties with drainage responsibilities of Integrated Wastewater and Drainage Management Plans on a prioritised risk basis in accordance with the requirements of the RBMP and EU Water Directives.'* (National Policy Objective 81)

National planning guidance and standards

- Sustainable Residential Development and Compact Settlement Guidelines (SRDCSG) [11] recommend that Surface Water Management Plans be prepared (including Nature-based Solutions to drainage) for 30 or more residential units, 3000m² of mixed-use development and/or where public realm improvements are proposed (in combination with the Landscape Report/Masterplan). The preparation of local plans and the preparation and consideration of individual planning applications should: promote urban greening and nature-based solutions (including sustainable drainage systems and slow-the-flow initiatives) for the management of urban surface waters in all new developments and retrofitting in existing areas to ensure that the benefits of ecosystem services are realised. Planning authorities should adopt a nature-based approach to urban drainage that uses soft-engineering techniques and native vegetation (including the protection of the riparian zone) to minimise the impact on natural river processes.
- **Design Manual for Urban Roads and Streets (DMURS)** published jointly by the Department of Transport and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage [12]. The use of DMURS is mandatory for all roads authorities and applies to all roads and streets in urban areas (Circular RW 6/2013 and PL 17/2013). The DMURS defines and encourages Sustainable Urban Drainage (SuDS) systems and is accompanied by an Advice Note on NbS for urban drainage. The updated advice note 5 provides road layout guidance to integrate NbS for drainage management, which is a new development for urban road planning.

The Irish roads and transport sector should now mainstream NbS, including the national Department of Transport, the National Transport Agency (NTA), Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), and local authorities as the implementing local roads authorities.

¹ NB the previous national planning framework also promoted nature-based solutions in the following national planning objectives: *Integrating sustainable water management solutions, such as Sustainable Urban Drainage (SuDS), porous surfacing and green roofs, to create safe places.* (National Policy Objective 57). *Integrated planning for Green Infrastructure and ecosystem services will be incorporated into the preparation of statutory land use plans.* National Policy Objective 58). Source: [10]

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| | <p>The Irish water sector is now required to mainstream NbS:</p> <p>Water sector strategic plan and standards</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Irish national water utility (Uisce Éireann) is currently revising its Water Service Strategic Plan to 2050 (WSSP 2050) to replace the 2015 plan [13]. The draft plan defines four strategic objectives, including <i>Strategic objective 2) protect and restore our environment</i>; including the aim to meet the environmental objectives of the Water Framework Directive, achieve climate resilient drainage in towns and cities; and promote nature-based solutions. Uisce Éireann technical standard for storm water overflows revised in 2024 [14] states: '<i>Before design and upgrade of a storm water overflow (SWO), consideration shall be given to preventive measures aiming at avoiding the entry of unpolluted rain waters into sewage collecting systems, including measures promoting natural water retention or rainwater harvesting, and measures increasing blue-green infrastructure solutions such as Nature Based Sustainable Urban Drainage System (SuDs).</i>' <p>Local authorities are now being encouraged to produce local rainwater management plans and integrate NbS into their local climate adaptation plans and other town plans:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The National Water Action Plan 2024 encourages the development of local rainwater management plans [8]. All 31 Irish Local Authorities have recently adopted Local Authority Climate Action Plans (LACAPs), which include adaptation measures, as required by the Irish Climate Act [15]. The national NbS strategy [1] sets the target to explore with the Climate Advisory Regional Offices (CAROs) how they can specifically promote urban climate adaptation and resilience measures using nature-based solutions in local authority plans, and to produce new guidance for the next round of plans in 2029. Local authorities will be required to draft Built Environment/ Urban Adaptation Plans for towns above 10 000 population. |
| Knowledge development and transmission | <p>The national strategy [1] proposes actions for education and training:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduce urban NbS training materials into existing training modules: Local Authorities National Training Group; Climate Advisory Regional Offices (CAROs); third level (professional) colleges. Develop continuous professional development courses. <p>The Department of Housing is supporting the private sector to run workshops and free, recorded webinars for engineers [6]. Various trainings and information materials for NbS for rainwater management have been developed during the last three years, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engineers Ireland, Irish Planning Institute and the Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland: Online series of seminars on DMURS and Nature Based Solutions (2021 to 2023). Local Authorities Water Programme Office (LAWPRO): hosted a series of online webinars (2019 to 2022). <p>Ireland has also made progress in training and building capacity for the integration of NbS in policy more widely [6]:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Department of Housing supports the creation of courses for relevant professions (engineers, architects, landscape designers, city planners, ecologists) with the goal of getting the five professional bodies on the same page about NbS, facilitating collaborations and development. The Department of Housing is collaborating with CARO (Climate Action Regional Offices) to develop training for the local authority sector, with training tailored to different levels: from chief executives to those on the ground doing the work. The regional offices are training town regeneration officers and providing workshops to help them integrate NbS into their town planning. In a |

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| | <p>whole day workshop, the officers are helped by experts to think about how to integrate NbS into their town.</p> <p>The Local Authorities Water Programme Office (LAWPRO) was provided with two additional staff in 2025 to provide specialist support to local authorities in adopting international best practice on nature-based surface water management within planning and infrastructure project delivery [1]. LAWPRO also runs an annual national conference on NbS that features practical approaches to protecting urban, rural, coastal and riverine environments and workshops aimed at engineers, planners, landscape architects, and others interested in city development, climate adaptation, etc [17].</p> <p>The Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR) has an oversight role in relation to the legal and regulatory planning framework and assesses development plans. National staff have received training in NbS and provide guidance to the regional and local planners about how to integrate NbS into spatial planning [6].</p> |
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Success Factors/Uptake/Impact

- **Statutory guidance gives competence to prioritise NbS in urban planning:** The new emphasis on NbS in the national planning framework, plus the national strategy, local guidelines and planning standards, provide an enabling framework for local authorities to use NbS instead of traditional approaches to urban planning, without being legally binding. The new framework therefore gives the local authority powers to choose NbS, without requiring the local authority to enforce legal standards that people do not yet know how to meet [6].
- **Building staff capacity, training and support:** The government's recognition of the importance of training and additional capacity has been a major factor in the success of the strategy so far and is encouraging further efforts in capacity and knowledge building [6]. There has been very high attendance at the webinars and training courses (webinars attended by thousands), with modules tailored to different sectors and professions [6]. The training fits alongside the support for an increasing number of construction projects on a small scale that provide stakeholders with a proof of concept. Training is essential for the proof of concept to be successful. The two dedicated staff provide essential engineering and construction support to local authorities [6].
- **Capacity to integrate NbS into local urban planning in future:** The training and support network are building the capacity of town planners to integrate NbS into local urban plans. The local climate adaptation plans were adopted before the NbS guidance and strategy mainstreaming NbS were finalised, so they are unlikely to influence NbS adoption. However, the rainwater management plans and NbS pilot projects will provide local evidence of the effectiveness of NbS, making it more likely that NbS will be integrated into the next update of the climate plans.

Barriers and Challenges

The strategy and the accompanying guidance identify a series of challenges that local authorities face. The Local Authorities Water Programme Office (LAWPRO) carried out surveys of a wide range of practitioners between 2019 and 2022 to clarify the reasons for the ongoing difficulties being encountered in the implementation of a nature based sustainable approach to urban rainwater management [3]. The areas identified in the surveys as requiring further support are partially addressed by the new strategy and guidance, but still leave some barriers and challenges as follows:

- **Need for integrated governance and local champions:** Nature based rainwater management features are more complex than concrete and asphalt and do not fit readily into the structure of Local Authority maintenance units and capabilities. The national strategy [1] and guidance [2] address this barrier to a certain extent but do not really help cities to achieve the cross-sectoral integrated governance approach needed to plan for NbS or provide legal levers. Local authority staff lack confidence and knowledge to implement NbS unless there is leadership from a local champion.
- **Lack of local authority capacity:** The guidance [2] assists local authorities who do not have enough own capacity to develop the plan to issue tender briefs for public procurement of services to design or implement the plan. However, the local authority must have sufficient capacity (both competence and money) to assess and fund the tendered projects, and funding - though available - is limited.
- **NbS are not viewed as a requirement:** In new projects, NbS are still seen as a positive addition, but not as a fundamental requirement [6]. The public funding source provided by the department of housing is allocated in blocks per calendar year—which is a challenge because the positive effects of NbS are not always visible on such a short time scale [6].
- **Struggle to establish and prove economic value of NbS and give confidence to engineers:** without a clear measure of the economic benefit of NbS projects, it is difficult to justify the amount of funding they

require, meaning that even where NbS are included, they are the first things to get cut when funding is tight [6]. The government guidance [2] recommends a cost-benefit analysis of rainwater management planning is carried out but does not provide guidance on how to assess economic viability and sustainability or effectiveness and resilience compared to grey infrastructure alternatives. In contrast, the LAWPRO guidance [3] provides case studies which are visualised comparisons between NbS based planning and conventional approaches.

Further challenges are the need for:

- **Multi-stakeholder and interdisciplinary collaboration:** Rainwater management planning requires a long-term planning vision and collaboration between different areas of expertise (spatial planners, hydrologists, urban designers, landscape architects, ecologists, engineers). The ownership and responsibility for drainage in the urban area is divided across several stakeholders including Uisce Éireann, Local Authorities, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, private entities and others. Multistakeholder cooperation can be difficult to progress in a timely and cost-efficient manner as it requires the alignment of interests and funding mechanisms of all parties involved.
- **Development of NbS standards, assessment tools, and evidence of effectiveness of NbS:** There is a need to develop new tools and standards to enable policy decisions in favour of NbS options. For example, the opportunities for NBS deployment for wastewater treatment are currently restricted by the standard for settling Emission Limit Values (ELVs) based on effluent concentration limits, and because there is still a limited application of NBS solutions for wastewater treatment in Ireland [6]. Current systems of project appraisal used in Ireland, including cost-benefit analysis, are not yet enabling the adoption of nature-based solutions, as they focus narrowly on engineering options and do not take an ecosystem approach [6].

Potential for Replication / Upscaling

The rainwater management planning guidance [2] targets the plan at the appropriate scale but also leaves flexibility to the city to apply the planning at different scales. The local authority can choose to make the rainwater management plan part of their statutory land-use plan (County or City Development Plan), which gives the RMP statutory backing for zoning and the definition of specific land use objectives for certain areas, allowing the use of land for NbS [2]. The LAWPRO guidance [3] advises on how to make NbS a conditioned requirement for the granting of planning permission. As Ireland is striving to comply with EU requirements as regards to investing in water infrastructure and wastewater treatment [16], this is an opportunity to mainstream NbS into all urban development.

The Irish national water plan to 2027 and the other policy revisions to mainstream NbS set ambitious objectives to tackle the challenges of flooding and water pollution. Enablers and incentives are in place in the policy framework, but more pilots, learning, and training are needed for urban planners to see NbS as a necessity rather than an extra, and to recognise the economic benefits [6].

More Information & Sources

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Contacts

Department of Housing and Local Government Water Advisory Unit wau@housing.gov.ie
 Local Authority Waters Programme (LAWPRO) – info@lawco.ie