

## National Landscape Forum 2023 Report

Had it only been a gathering in the attractive setting of Mount Congreve House and Gardens of 70 or so participants, 30 of whom, electrified the room with their diverse presentations, the National Landscape Forum 2023 on the 28/29 September would have been judged a success. The crescendo of happy energy-laden conversation at coffee and lunch breaks was its own verdict on each day's deliberations, reinforced by enthusiastic, constructive subsequent feedback. But the landscape forum has always had aims and objectives relating to policy, strategy and action. In 1995 it was that early call for a National Landscape Policy, today the forum embraces the total landscape as shaped and shared by the human race.

The presentations ranged widely - from the foundations laid on Thursday by **Eamonn McAneaney's** sweeping overview of the evolution of Waterford's urban landscape to **Dr. Emily Shakespeare's** assessment of 'Deep Place' via Killrossanty's local landscape biographies; from **Pere Sala's** enticing, encouraging vista of the achievements of the Landscape Observatory of Catalonia to **Dan Sinnott's** outline of the current uncertain future of Ireland's National Landscape Strategy; from **Ruth Minogue** and **Laura Kearney's** update on how our fragmented landscape character assessment process might find a way out of its current tangled maze to **Willy Cumming's** clear explanation of the 'building blocks' of the National Landscape Strategy; from my own millennial time-line of evolving landscape-awareness and landscape value understanding/appreciation that explains the 'deep landscape' reasoning behind the struggle for a National Landscape Strategy to **Ray Sinnott's** blow by blow account of the difficulties faced in achieving the recent 'big house' reinvention of Mount Congreve House and Gardens; from **Dominic Walsh's** explanation of landscape in a regional context to **Dr. Amy Strecker's** challenge on landscape, heritage and Irish Law; from **Jack Workman's** wake-up take on the seemingly almost impossible planning task of addressing the green energy transition to **Dr. Karen Ray's** gentle but forceful tale of the turbines that might have revolved above the tranquil, spiritual waters of Gougane Barra; from **Sinead Mercier's** consideration of energy, legislation and landscape strategy to **Paula Barrett's** in-depth exploration of the soft colour landscape palette of island, bog and breen.

On Friday presentations ranged from **Sarah Prosser's** Landscape tapestry weave of people, place and local economy to **Gretta McCarron's** 'written in water' river catchment approach linking communities and landscapes into a coherent tracery from spring to sea; from **Bernadette Guest's** 'report from the coal-face' on landscape in the planning process epitomised by the demise of ancient beech trees to **Yvonne Grace's** outline of other non-native trees that may yet be ancient and common in our warmer future landscape; from **Dr. Jane Russell O'Connor's** exploration of how people see and sometimes don't see seascapes/mountainscapes to **Dr. Una Fitzpatrick's** difficult tale of biodiversity that we may see or not see in our

future landscape; from **Karen Foley's** case that evolving landscapes left to take shape without design oversight risk being shapeless and diverse-less to **Aidan ffrench's** philosophy of tree care and connection, with parks being linked to form urban forests; from **Dr. Sharon O'Brien's** conversations between fields and their farmers to **John Briggs** asking have we reached a stage where science risks researching the soul out of landscape; from **Andrew Doherty's** virtual boat trip along the tidal highways and byways of the River's Suir, Nore and Barrow to **Des Gunning's** elaborated explanation of where precisely we [the forum participants] were located on the day; from **Gary Graham's** door-stepping gardens large and small to **Michal Slawski's** Green City conference advance notice; from **Catherine Keena's** hedgerow management 'virtual walk' to **David Eagar's** hard question as to whether we in Ireland have yet to agree on what is a 'balanced' landscape.

This 'whistle-stop' overview fails to do justice to the quality, erudition and commitment of the 30 or so forum speakers. LAI hopes to make the presentations available in condensed form in due course.

The other forum successes included The Irish Landscape Institute 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 'on tour' Exhibition on view at the SETU Granary Campus, Merchants Quay, Waterford and further local landscape awareness-raising with **Luke Currall** organising a 'landscape and art' evening event on Wednesday at Waterford's impressive Gallery of Art – where a full house enjoyed presentations from artists **Carmel Cleary, Paula Barrett, Caoilfhionn Hanton**, from artists/poets **Molly, Mike & Samuel** concluding with my own narrative contribution. To cap the NLF outreach, the sixth class pupils of Gaelscoil Philib Barún in Tramore were invited to illustrate their understanding of landscape, the resulting images which were exhibited at the forum providing a fascinating insight into how our next generation perceives landscape today.

Perhaps, the greatest achievement of NLF 2023 is that LAI after many frustrating months if not years and just three days before the forum reconnected with the official in the Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage who is charged with responsibility for the implementation of the National Landscape Strategy and Dan Sinnott, Principal Officer, Built Heritage Policy bravely accepted an invitation to participate in the forum at very short notice.

Throughout the forum presentations and participant interventions there was a clear recognition that our landscape is going to continue to change as it has always done, but probably more rapidly than ever before. There was an understanding that the National Landscape Strategy 2015 was intended to provide the basis for building an integrated framework across central and local government to inform and guide a sustainable process of landscape protection, management and planning that would safeguard and even enhance landscape quality whilst accommodating such profound change. However, in terms of a game of 'snakes and ladders' there was a feeling in the room that whilst we as a civic society went up a short 'good governance' ladder back in 2015 when we launched the NLS 2015-2025, we have

since slid down a 'poor governance' snake. We are not quite back at start, but it would appear that the task ahead is now even more formidable than in 2015. The Irish state cannot afford to play such games of chance. The requisite resources must be invested into the NLS as a matter of extreme urgency, the National Landscape Forum 2023 demonstrated, as each forum has done since 1995 that very many landscape players, stakeholders and concerned citizens value their landscape and are more than willing to work with the authorities to ensure its responsible protection, management and planning. The state does not own the landscape or the National Landscape Strategy, but they have the power to decide whether it lives or dies! Our politicians and others who bemoan delays in our planning and development process would do well to ask questions about the State's own performance in delivering the necessary infrastructure for an efficient, effective, balanced and sustainable process before they shift the blame onto frustrated concerned citizens.

During the forum LAI carried out a survey among participants on how they viewed the priority status of the 6 NLS objectives and the 18 associated actions. From 28 returns the majority indicated that all 6 objectives were of high priority. It was not a large poll and it was an interested audience, but it does represent a call for comprehensive implementation action.

***Postscript:*** *The NLF Forum 2023 could not have taken place without a 'meitheal beag' of enthusiastic LAI volunteers, generous sponsors including Bioregional Weaving Lab, Waterford, Irish Landscape Institute, Waterford City & County Council, Bord Bia, Southern Regional Assembly & MKO Planning & Environmental Consultants and the good people of the 2023 forum host - Waterford City and County. It is hoped that the forum will continue to convene on an annual basis throughout the island of Ireland provided funding challenges can be overcome!*

*This report was prepared by Terry O'Regan, LAI founder/coordinator*