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Pilot Roadmap

Blue Economy

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Introduction

The Western Development Commission (WDC) is the statutory regional development agency for Ireland's Western Region, working to support balanced regional growth, enterprise development and sustainable economic opportunity across counties including Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Mayo, Roscommon, Galway and Clare. Through its role in regional policy, innovation and EU project delivery, the WDC has developed strong expertise in helping rural and peripheral regions respond to economic and environmental challenges while unlocking the value of natural assets.

The Blue Economy Pilot led by the WDC focuses on the blue economy and the sustainable use of marine and freshwater resources in Ireland's Western Region. This pilot recognises the region's deep connection to the Atlantic Ocean, coastal communities and rich marine biodiversity. It explores how sectors such as fisheries, aquaculture and coastal enterprises can evolve through a Nature Positive lens - creating jobs and economic value while protecting habitats, improving water quality and strengthening ecosystem health. In doing so, the pilot positions natural capital not as a constraint to growth, but as the foundation for future prosperity in coastal and rural communities.

WDC complements other actors in the region that deliver support to rural coast communities and businesses, including universities, cultural and innovation bodies, and government funded marine research and regulatory bodies. The Pilot engaged participants who are immersed in the practical regional realities, while also contextualising evidence and policy recommendations at European level on sustainable blue growth, biodiversity restoration and resilient regional economies.

Vision

By 2050, the Blue Economy will be fully nature-positive, guided by evidence-based policies grounded in expertise, scientific knowledge, and measurable data.

Environmental, social, and economic priorities will be integrated within a holistic policy framework that places ocean health at the center of sustainable development. Government investment in Nature-Based Solutions will have enabled large-scale ocean regeneration, creating a performance-driven Blue Economy where measurable environmental impact unlocks capital, generates sustainable revenue, and finances the long-term health of marine ecosystems.

Coastal communities will play a central role in this transformation, with strong local ownership and participation shaping projects and ensuring social and economic benefits are shared.

Blue-Green education will be inclusive, mainstream, and lifelong, equipping citizens with the knowledge and motivation to support development that works with nature.

As a result, by 2050 working with and for nature will be a first-choice career path for many young people, supported by high-quality, well-paid jobs that contribute to both environmental restoration and societal wellbeing. Informed and empowered citizens will actively demand nature-based approaches to development, ensuring that thriving oceans, resilient communities, and sustainable economic prosperity advance together.

Baseline

During the Baseline workshop, the stakeholders have identified different challenges. For each one, they provided details on the state-of-the-art of the challenge, giving an overview of the baseline (policy, technology, social adaptation, finance, etc.). Here below each challenge is reported.

1. Policy is very disconnected from businesses and NBEs

- Clear need for policy to become more streamlined, particularly when it comes to licensing and having one organisation responsible for aquaculture.
- Need for better communication pathway for policy development and consultation process so people can remain better informed and engage with the process more effectively.
- Clear need for policies to be nature-centric rather than nature-damaging.
- Clear need for policies to work cohesively together rather than competing against each other.

2. Nature Positive Finance

- Need for government funding for Nature based Solutions.
- There needs to be more incentives and guidance for businesses to become NPE.
- Quasi Funding model with Public Partnerships included.
- Performance-based Blue Economy where NbS are rewarded, regeneration generates revenue with ocean health financed.
- Lack of accounting for natural capital in Ireland.

3. Education, including R&D

- Need for Blue and Green education to become inclusive, mainstream, lifelong and available for foundational learners.
- In schools, there needs to be more marine topics in the curricula.
- Problem of Blue & Green jobs being low paid.
- Gap highlighted in practical skills, and no real pathway between training and actual job security/retention.

4. Society

- Sense of ‘blue blindness’ in Ireland – as an island nation. Societal change. Why have we turned our backs on the ocean?
- Disconnect between blue economy and other sectors e.g. food systems, education systems – why is there not more integration and Blue Economy / NbS across all sectors.
- Need for thriving coastal communities, ocean health rewarded and financed.

Pathways

1. Value ecosystem services

Objective	To establish a baseline on value of ecosystem services for every bay/local community & develop communication with QR code at site.
Expected Outcome	The establishment of a clear baseline for the value of ecosystem services in each bay and coastal community, creating the evidence needed for informed planning and investment. Over time, this would support formal governance structures, legislative reform and incentive schemes that reward the protection and enhancement of marine and coastal ecosystems.
Plans	• By 2030: establishment of a task force to collate data, formalise and establish accountability, establishing targets and reporting. • By 2050: baseline assessment completed and Draft Heads of Bill done to change legislation; formalised structures on payment/incentives on ecosystem services.

2. Tax incentive / Blue Economy Investment

Objective	To develop a tax incentive and blue economy investment.
Expected Outcome	The creation of a targeted tax incentive and investment framework that stimulates private and public capital into Ireland's Blue Economy. Over time, this would mobilise significant funding - up to €10 million by 2050 - supporting at least 10 businesses to grow, innovate or transition towards more nature-positive marine and coastal practices.
Plans	• By 2030: BIM funding scoping. • By 2050: 10 Mln of € mobilised, 10 businesses supported/benefitted by the measures.

3. Collaboration between policy groups

Objective	To enhance cross collaboration between policy groups through a targeted programme of site visits / learning trips.
Expected Outcome	Improved coordination and shared understanding across policy groups through structured site visits and learning exchanges, leading to clearer alignment on priorities for the Blue Economy. Over time, this would result in agreed, cross-government objectives embedded in departmental delivery frameworks, supported by a shared evidence base and common targets for long-term economic and environmental outcomes.
Plans	• By 2030: Mapping stakeholders, reassessment of baseline; Assessing priorities; actual list of deliverables. • By 2050: objective priorities that all Government Departments must deliver on e.g. increase GDP.

4. Nature Positive Finance

Objective	To develop a baseline of scoping of current industry finance.
Expected Outcome	Development of clear, evidence-based understanding of current industry finance flows and investor appetite within the Blue Economy, providing a structured baseline for decision-making. Over time, this would enable the identification and articulation of concrete nature-positive investment opportunities, supporting the mobilisation of new capital into the sector by 2050.
Plans	• By 2030: Strong knowledge of current investor appetite • By 2050: clear breakdown of opportunities to bring in new investors

5. Teaching Natural Capital Accounting Approaches

Objective	To develop natural capital accounting approaches.
Expected Outcome	Integration of natural capital accounting into mainstream economic and planning frameworks, enabling more accurate valuation of environmental assets in decision-making. Over time, this would expand from pilot learning and research programmes into a nationally embedded approach, supporting both higher education and secondary education systems in building long-term capacity and awareness.
Plans	• By 2030: pilot programme with a pioneering accounting school in the region, with blue-green module. • By 2050: national rollout and secondary schools.

6. R&D in the blue economy

Objective	To have one institution responsible for driving pure R&D and applied R&D in the blue economy.
Expected Outcome	Establishment of a single, dedicated institution providing coordinated leadership for both pure and applied research in the Blue Economy, ensuring stronger innovation alignment and reduced fragmentation. Over time, this would evolve into a sustained national innovation ecosystem supporting nature restoration delivery, open-source technology development, citizen science, and just transition initiatives that accelerate practical, scalable solutions across marine and coastal sectors.
Plans	• By 2030: one institution responsible for driving pure R&D and applied R&D in the blue economy. • By 2050: Continuity and adapt. Nature restoration plan implementation and inclusion of action steps; funding on open source, transparency for tech; link with farmer tools and more tech easy updates and rollouts. Tech festival like BT Scientists for Blue Green; just transition supports; citizen science training with tool, awards/badges.

Summary

The WDC, in collaboration with Óir na Farraige, convened two stakeholder workshops on 23rd and 24th February 2026 to support the development of a dedicated roadmap for the Blue Economy in Ireland's Western Region.

Designed as a 1.5-day immersive engagement process, the workshops combined on-site learning, facilitated discussion and collaborative planning. This approach moved beyond traditional consultation methods by grounding strategic conversations in the realities of coastal enterprise, marine ecosystems and community development. A total of 22 stakeholders participated, representing public bodies, marine and coastal businesses, NGOs, community organisations and wider sector interests.

The programme began with an immersive site visit to DK Connemara Oysters, where participants experienced the oyster farming journey from seed to plate and viewed innovative technology such as the Oyster FlipFarm system. This practical setting provided a valuable reference point for later discussions, demonstrating how innovation, environmental stewardship and commercial opportunity can coexist within the Blue Economy.

The workshops focused on visioning for a Nature Positive Blue Economy and establishing current baselines, opportunities and priorities for action (Annex 5).

Engagement throughout was strong, with high levels of participation, open dialogue and a clear willingness to collaborate across sectors. Discussions were energetic and solutions-focused, producing tangible outputs and a shared sense of momentum. Participants recognised the value of a Nature Positive approach in balancing marine economic activity with ecosystem restoration, biodiversity protection and long-term coastal resilience.

Several important insights emerged through the roadmapping process. While there was strong appetite for partnership and coordinated action, participants also identified fractures within the system, including fragmented governance, disconnected initiatives and gaps in supports needed to enable early-stage transition.

Stronger alignment between agencies, communities and industry was seen as essential, alongside clearer indicators, targeted supports and practical demonstration projects. Overall, the workshops were viewed very positively and delivered benefits beyond the formal outputs alone.

New relationships were formed, trust was strengthened across stakeholder groups and participants left with a stronger shared understanding of common challenges and opportunities. The process demonstrated a clear willingness to work collectively towards a more resilient and Nature Positive future for Ireland's coastal and marine economy.

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