

# Sonairte – the National Ecology Centre

## Strategic Plan 2021-2026



**Sonairte**  
Visitor Eco-Centre and Gardens

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## Forward: achieving the vision

### A new strategic plan for Sonairte 2021-2026

**Sonairte** is a middle Irish word meaning strength, and solidity of purpose. Metaphorically it refers to the upwelling of new life in the Springtime and is associated with Imbolc, when offerings were traditionally made to earth and sea.

Standing as it does where the waters of the River Nanny reach the Irish sea, that symbolism seemed to perfectly fit the new National Ecology Centre when its founders were searching for a name in the 1980s. At that time terms like ecology and environment were rarely heard, barely registering on the consciousness of most individuals, businesses, and governments. Nonetheless it was clear to anyone watching the news media and educating themselves about science, economics, and politics, that the time was coming when environmental education would move centre stage and be recognised as critical to the survival of our planet and its inhabitants, including the human race.

### Working for the environment

Since the 1980s the world has changed. Children now teach their parents about the importance of protecting the environment and take to the streets to protest about the climate crisis. Almost everyone says that they are willing to contribute to its mitigation, though they may resist sacrifices that affect them personally. COVID-19 has not only forced people to find new ways of connecting, but it has raised awareness of the wildlife that lives beside us and has walked back into our cities. We have all learned that, faced with a common threat, we must work as a community.

In the years since Sonairte was founded many other environmental groups have developed in Ireland that were not present at that time. Some are focussed very narrowly – they protect a single species or a single aspect of the environment – others have a wide remit. Far too often in our society, concepts such as environment, heritage, and climate crisis are experienced as very abstract. The situation is urgent, so we need to make those abstract concepts concrete. We need a place where everyone, young and old, rich, and poor, whatever their background, can see practical connections with nature and the environment in action.

Sonairte is resolved that in the 2020s, when issues of the environment, the climate crisis and biodiversity crisis have reached tipping point for planetary survival, we will be at the forefront of environmental education, working in the context of sustainable food production systems, promoting and protecting biodiversity, and forming positive links to our local and wider community to demonstrate that the needs of the planet and its people go hand in hand and that a just transition is not just possible but necessary.

Sonairte remains unique in building upon national and international research, environmental education, and campaigning in a practical physical space facilitating engagement with an ordinary local community.

This Strategic Plan is designed to build that community and empower it to adopt sustainable practices and principles that work with and not against the natural environment, our common habitat.

We are pleased to present the Sonairte Strategic Plan 2021-2026 which sets out our goals, priorities and high-level strategic actions for the period 2021-2026. It sets down key performance indicators (KPIs) for each sector. The Plan has been prepared in consultation with staff, volunteers and a range of stakeholders and represents our response to the opportunities and challenges facing the organisation and our planet over the next 5 years.

It builds upon the courage, vision, and commitment of our founders – Anna Doran, Thomas Simpson, Trevor Sargent, Luk van Doorslaar among others; and our many volunteers, staff and trustees since who have given their time and passion to building Sonairte as a force for positive change.



Dr Kim Reilly  
Chairperson



Ms Teresa Stack  
Director



Mr Thomas Simpson  
Director



Mr Michael O'Dowd  
Director



Ms Geri Reilly  
Director



Ms Susan Wogan  
Secretary



## Apple Blossom



## Section 1: Vision Mission Values & Charitable purpose

### Our Vision

Our Vision is to be community hub, enabling people to live more sustainably to address the twin environmental crises the world currently faces - the climate crisis and the biodiversity crisis.

### Our Mission

Our Mission is to be an educational centre which will protect and increase understanding of the natural environment, and will educate the public and schools in ways of conserving the environment.

### Our Values

Our Values are to be professional, responsive, efficient, accountable and ethical through striving to attain excellence in all our activities and by working in partnership with other organisations and stakeholders to meet our charitable purpose.

### Our Charitable Purpose

Our charitable purpose is:

- to provide education in all aspects of ecology
- to promote sustainable living through learning and cooperation
- to promote sustainable development
- to promote organic, ecological and sustainable farming practices
- to promote environmental awareness and nature conservation
- to promote appropriate and sustainable technologies
- to promote the use of genuinely renewable resources
- to promote intercultural exchange
- to promote reconciliation
- to promote fair trade





Sonairte's orchards date back to 1750.  
Our 2 acre walled garden contains  
27 varieties of old fruit trees.

Preserve our heritage today,  
improve our environment for tomorrow.





## Section 2: Operational Environment

### Introduction

The earth's environment is facing unprecedented challenges. At the global level dangerous impacts from climate change are already visible. In 2018 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issued a stark warning of the devastating impacts of the climate crisis <sup>1</sup>. In the last four decades, global wildlife populations have fallen by 60% as a result of human activities, and almost three quarters of the Earth's surface has been changed by humans, squeezing nature into an ever decreasing corner of the planet. 1 million species are at risk of extinction <sup>2</sup>. The 2019 **Eat Lancet report** <sup>3</sup> showed that a radical transformation of the global food system is urgently needed if we are to feed a growing population without destroying our planet.

At European Union level efforts to address these global challenges are the focus of the **EU Green Deal** <sup>4</sup>, underpinned by policies such as the **Farm to Fork Strategy** <sup>5</sup> and the **EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030** <sup>2</sup>. The EU Framework funding programme **Horizon Europe** <sup>6</sup>, due to launch in January 2021 addresses the environment in 4 of the 5 Mission areas, reinforcing the importance of state funding to address key societal and existential challenges <sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> IPCC Special Report- Global warming of 1.5°C, IPCC, October 2018.  
[https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/06/SR15\\_Full\\_Report\\_Low\\_Res.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/06/SR15_Full_Report_Low_Res.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 - Bringing nature back into our lives. European Commission, May 2020. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:a3c806a6-9ab3-11ea-9d2d-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:a3c806a6-9ab3-11ea-9d2d-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF)

<sup>3</sup> Summary Report of the EAT Lancet commission – Healthy diets from sustainable food systems. EAT Lancet Commission, 2019.  
[https://eatforum.org/content/uploads/2019/01/EATLancet\\_Commission\\_Summary\\_Report.pdf](https://eatforum.org/content/uploads/2019/01/EATLancet_Commission_Summary_Report.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> A European Green Deal - Striving to be the first climate-neutral continent  
[https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en)

<sup>5</sup> Farm to Fork Strategy - For a fair, healthy and environmentally friendly food system. European Commission, May 2020.  
[https://ec.europa.eu/food/sites/food/files/safety/docs/f2f\\_action-plan\\_2020\\_strategy-info\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/food/sites/food/files/safety/docs/f2f_action-plan_2020_strategy-info_en.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Missions in Horizon Europe. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/horizon-europe/missions-horizon-europe\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/horizon-europe/missions-horizon-europe_en)

<sup>7</sup> Mission-oriented research & innovation in the European Union - A problem-solving approach to fuel innovation-led growth. Mariano Mazzucato, February 2018.  
<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/5b2811d1-16be-11e8-9253-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>



In Ireland the **National Climate Change Advisory Council Annual Review 2020** <sup>8</sup> notes that Ireland will not meet its 2020 targets and will require huge efforts to meet its existing 2030 targets. National GHG emissions reduced by 0.1% from 2017 to 2018 largely due to progress in the Electricity sector, other sectors have not delivered emissions reductions on the scale required. The Environmental Protection Agency **State of the Environment Report 2020** <sup>9</sup> scorecard identified two policy areas - Climate and Nature - as showing "very poor/significant environmental and/or compliance challenges to address".

For Climate "*Continuing high emissions result in a 'very poor' current assessment, despite progress on renewable energy, ambitious climate action and adaptation plans and strategies, and new governance structures (e.g., the Climate Action Regional Offices) 2020 emissions reductions targets will not be met without relying on purchasing credits or allowances*". For Nature, the report notes "*Overall, current assessment is very poor. Deteriorating trends dominate, especially for protected habitats, with 85% of EU protected habitats having an unfavourable status. The picture for EU protected species is mixed, but 15% are in decline, with freshwater species most at risk. Agricultural practices are a key pressure. Habitat changes point towards a deteriorating trend in overall biodiversity. Some species, such as the curlew and some freshwater species, are under threat; measures are needed to halt their decline*".

More than half of Ireland's bee species have undergone substantial declines in their numbers since the 1980s. The distribution of 42 species has declined by more than 50% and 30% of Irish bee species are threatened with extinction, six species are critically endangered, 10 are endangered and 14 species are vulnerable <sup>10, 11</sup>.

The Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine (DAFM) **Ag Climatise** <sup>12</sup> report (December 2020) sets out a roadmap for the primary agriculture sector to become climate neutral - but has been criticised as inconsistent with environmental policy and for its focus on stabilising methane emissions from the national herd using technological approaches and prioritising net reductions in the agricultural sector's overall emissions by reducing emissions of nitrous oxide associated with fertiliser use. The importance of sustainability is noted throughout

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<sup>8</sup> Climate Change Advisory Council Annual Review. CCAC, September 2020.  
[http://www.climatecouncil.ie/media/CCAC\\_AnnualReview2020FINALWEB.pdf](http://www.climatecouncil.ie/media/CCAC_AnnualReview2020FINALWEB.pdf)

<sup>9</sup>State of the Environment Report 2020. EPA, November 2020/  
<https://www.epa.ie/pubs/reports/indicators/irelandsenvironment2020.html>

<sup>10</sup> Irelands Red Lists – a National Standard. National Biodiversity Data Centre, 2013.  
<https://www.biodiversityireland.ie/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/Irelands-Red-Lists-a-national-standard1.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://pollinators.ie/record-pollinators/bees/bee-declines/>

<sup>12</sup> Ag Climatise - A Roadmap towards Climate Neutrality. DAFM, December 2020  
<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/07fbe-ag-climatise-a-roadmap-towards-climate-neutrality/>

**Food Wise 2025**<sup>13</sup> and will likely be of increasing importance in the next Agri-Food Strategy 2030, currently in preparation.

### Themes Challenges and Opportunities

Sonairte can be an important conduit for positive change. While there is an opportunity for Sonairte to build on its heritage of environmental activism there is also the challenge of remaining relevant and accessible to a new generation. The following themes underpin this plan:

#### *Community*

We will engage in conversations about the role of individual citizens and citizen groups in promoting a healthy environment and will encourage individuals and groups to involve themselves more closely in the protection of the natural environment through involvement in the work of Sonairte and through independent action. We will ensure that Sonairte is well-run, healthy, relevant, responsive, and efficient, and that the voices of those who engage with us are heard as we work to implement this plan.

#### *Sustainability*

All of our actions, from sourcing the food and drink in our café to developing our garden, eco-shop, site and educational offerings, will be examined to ensure that they support sustainability, with the primary focus being on climate change and biodiversity.

#### *Education*

We will actively ensure that all Sonairte's activities are presented in such a way that they help those engaging with us to learn how, by simple actions, they can make a positive contribution to the mitigation of the climate crisis and the preservation of the natural world.

#### *Communication*

We will use all modern means of communication, from face-to-face conversation and traditional formal teaching to social media and web-based learning, to facilitate our educational role. We will be open and clear in all forms of communication both internally and externally. We will at all times show respect to our fellow workers and to others.

#### *Excellence*

We will promote fact-based understanding of the climate and biodiversity crises, supported by clear scientific evidence, will promote citizen engagement in responding to these crises.

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<sup>13</sup> Food Wise 2025 – a 10-year vision for the Irish agri-food industry. DAFM, 2015.  
<https://www.skillnetireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/FoodWise2025.pdf>



## Covid-19 - A New Challenge

Coronavirus has shown how vulnerable our globalised supply chains can be to disruption (e.g., FAO, 2020) <sup>14</sup>. Conversely it has also shown how resilient our systems and communities can be. Many businesses and charities have been severely impacted by Covid-19 and Sonairte is included. Most of Sonairte's income generating enterprises were impacted due to Covid-19 and the centre closed to the public on 14th March 2020, re-opening on a limited basis on 25th July with the eco-shop, garden and nature trail open, however other enterprises remained closed due to social distancing. The centre again closed to the public on October 20<sup>th</sup>, reopening on 5<sup>th</sup> of December. It is likely that we will face several months of rolling lockdowns before returning to normal.

## Sectoral Challenges

*Governance and Management* - key challenges will relate to reporting requirements and compliance requirements related to the Charities Governance Code; as well as compliance with relevant oversight bodies such as Organic Trust and the Department of Agriculture.

*EcoShop* - key challenges will be dealing with COVID-19 related impacts and setting up and promoting online sales systems.

*Café* - key challenges will be re-opening and re-establishment of the café, dealing with COVID-19 related compliance requirements, and staffing.

*Energy Park* - key challenges will be managing the re-opening and relaunch of the Energy Park.

*Garden and Nature Trail* - key challenges will be maintaining and improving infrastructure on the trail while protecting biodiversity.

*Community Spaces* - key challenges will be re-opening and re-establishment of our hired community spaces, upgrading of facilities as needed and dealing with COVID-19 related compliance requirements.

*Education and Public Engagement* - key challenge will be staffing and recruitment of volunteers and other staff with expertise and commitment in this area.

*External Funding* - key challenge will be maintaining and growing our external funding in an increasingly competitive environment.

*Advocating and Influencing at National and EU level* - key challenge will be staffing and recruitment of volunteers or other staff with expertise and commitment in this area.

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<sup>14</sup> COVID-19 and the risk to food supply chains: How to respond? FAO, March 2020.  
<http://www.fao.org/3/ca8388en/CA8388EN.pdf>



**We love bees at Sonairte!**





## Section 3: Sectors

### 1. Governance & Management

We will actively participate in environmental networks, committees, and lobby groups to educate public representatives and inform policy. We will actively recruit new Directors who share our passion for Sonairte's vision and bring expertise in environmental science, community engagement and good governance. We will ensure that all our policies are specifically targeted to a sustainable and healthy future for Sonairte and are regularly updated to reflect changing circumstances. We will ensure good governance and compliance with all necessary requirements including the charities regulator, health and safety, child protection Department of Agriculture, Organic Trust, and others. We will ensure our staff and volunteers receive appropriate training. We will investigate ways to fund paid long-term staff in key roles (Manager, Café Manager, Bookkeeper, Head Gardener, Education and Public Engagement Officer) for example through the Community Services programme.

#### *Key performance Indicators:*

**KPI 1** – At least 1 application to the community services programme or similar.

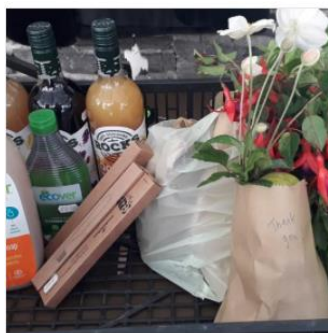
**KPI 2** – At least one new Director by 2026, with at least 40% representation of each gender on the Board.

**KPI 3** – We will ensure compliance with the Charities Regulator Code and the SORP.

**KPI 4** – We will ensure that at least 2 staff have current PHECC and fire warden training; that at least has Designated Liaison Person training and all who require it have current HACCP training.

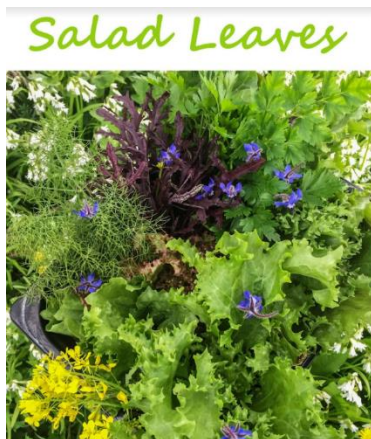
### 2. Eco Shop

We will continue to grow the number and range of eco-friendly products we stock in our shop and review the environmental impacts of our suppliers and our delivery mechanisms, including examining models for improving the environmental impact of the shop, such as developing an e-commerce ordering system and delivery schemes for a wider range of produce. We will promote and grow sales from our second hand pre-loved shop, educating our customers on the environmental impact of fast fashion. We will promote and grow sales from our Zero Waste Refill station, educating our customers on recycling and plastic reduction.



*Key performance Indicators:***KPI 1** – Online ordering and delivery system**KPI 2** – Increase annual Eco Shop income by at least 3x compared to 2019 by 2026**3. Café**

We will work towards a flexible and changing menu linked to the fresh seasonal produce of the garden, with menus promoted regularly on Facebook, Instagram and the website. We will build education into the food we share, with explanations of the environmental impact of plant-based and animal-based diets and the benefits of organic food made available in the café and shop. We will prioritise producing delicious healthy vegan and vegetarian food, informed by current best knowledge in nutritional science and sustainable food production.

*Key performance Indicators:***KPI 1** – Recruitment of a cook skilled in vegan/ vegetarian cookery.**KPI 2** – Increase annual Cafe income by at least 2x compared to 2019 by 2026.**4. Energy Park**

We will upgrade the Sonairte Energy park, upgrading the green renewable energy technology demonstrations, and making it relevant to today. We will re-open the upgraded Energy Park, making it an enjoyable and educational visitor experience and using it as an opportunity to reach out to our local community and local media. We will demonstrate and educate about renewable energy including solar, wind and wave and renewable energy powered vehicles. We will provide a charging point for electric cars. We will apply to become a Sustainable Energy Community and will host workshops for our community on how they can avail of SEAI grants and become more energy efficient.

*Key performance Indicators:***KPI 1** – Application to become a Sustainable Energy Community submitted.**KPI 2** - At least one solar power, one wind power, one wave power and one electric vehicle exhibit.



**KPI 3** – At least 1 workshop per year on SEAI grants and energy efficiency schemes.

**KPI 4** – Electric car charging point.

## 5. Garden and Nature Trail

We will continue to develop more sustainable practices in our organic walled garden in line with best current scientific knowledge. We will grow our commercial sales through the Eco Shop, local markets and will expand our Veg Box delivery scheme. We will ensure compliance with Organic Trust and DAFM best practise including well testing and produce microbiological safety testing. We will also develop the garden as an education resource through the creation of demonstration areas for composting and a variety of different kinds of garden that can be accessible to different kinds of visitors with different spaces available. We will improve signage and engage community groups in projects to develop and learn about the garden's wildlife and biodiversity. We will develop a regular programme of gardening courses throughout the year including both FETAC accredited and amateur gardening and will re-invigorate our participation in the SEED programme.

The nature trail gives us the opportunity to showcase a diverse and developing ecosystem in action and we will work to improve access and the variety of educational uses of the trail. We ensure safe access to all areas for families with young children. We will develop a strategy to control invasive species, especially where they are damaging native plants and the heritage structures. We will renew signage to explain both the ecology and the heritage aspects of the trail. We will explore the use of guided foraging to supplement garden sales and the café menu, and for courses. Foraging by non-staff should be discouraged since there are several edible species in vulnerable numbers and foraging for some plant species could lead visitors into danger.



This image shows the 6<sup>th</sup> century Rath at Sonairte as it might have looked. The townland of Ninch has a rich history dating back to 3000 BC where the River Nanny would have been an important resource and route inland.



*Key performance Indicators:*

**KPI 1** – At least 6 gardening courses per year.

**KPI 2** – At least 1 community group event in the garden per year.

**KPI 3** – Increase garden income by at least 2x compared to 2019 by 2026.

**KPI 4** – At least 1 SEED programme booking per year.

**KPI 5** – Annual well water test and produce microbiological safety test.

**KPI 6** – At least 2 hosted foraging or heritage or other events on the trail per year

## 6. Education and Public Engagement

We will develop an active programme of fee-paying events and courses, working across all age groups, from pre-school, primary and secondary school, third level and formal life-long learning. This will include informal garden, food and environment themed courses for the community and encouraging use of our garden and nature trail through supervised berry-picking, foraging and other seasonal courses. We will develop our on-site educational capacity through the construction of demonstration gardens, upgrading our energy park and bee museum, improved signage and informational resources for tours and improved staff training. We will appoint a suitably qualified education and public engagement officer to lead the development of an up-to-date programme in sustainability education for community stakeholders of all ages.



**KPI 1** – Recruitment of an Education and Public Engagement officer.

**KPI 2** – Increase earned income from courses, workshops and events at least 5x compared to 2019 by 2026.

## 7. External Funding

We will develop a coherent long-term plan for fundraising, including external competitive grant funding, donations and legacies, sponsorships, philanthropy. We will use external grant funding to grow the prestige and expertise within Sonairte, targeting projects that allow staff costs and staff recruitment where possible. We will apply for both national and EU including Horizon Europe funding. We will promote our Sonairte Eco-Friends scheme to attract greater community involvement and support for our objectives. We will grow and elaborate on our existing partnerships with the Irish

Environmental Network, EU Voice, Meath Partnership, World Wide Global Schools, LEADER and will develop others.

**KPI 1** – Increase external competitive grant funding at least 2x compared to 2019 by 2026.

**KPI 2** – At least 1 application to the European Solidarity Corps.

**KPI 3** – At least 1 Horizon Europe application as partner or case study.

**KPI 4** – Increase the number and value of Sonairte Eco Friends at least 3x compared to 2019 by 2026.

## 8. Community Spaces

We will evaluate and work to optimise the use of our space, from the garden and nature trail to the Long Hall exhibition/event space, the yoga studio and other available office or workshop space, to promote community engagement sustainability education, exercise and both physical and mental wellbeing in line with our mission. We will upgrade our booking systems and meeting facilities.



**KPI 1** – Improved booking procedures and facilities.

**KPI 2** – Increase income from room bookings by at least 3x compared to 2019 by 2026

## 9. Advocacy and influencing policy at national and EU level

We will professionalise and grow our ability to advocate and influence in areas related to our mission. We will maintain and grow our network of memberships - currently we are members of the IEN, MEN, pillar groups, Boyne Valley Garden Trail, the Irish Organic Trust, Irish Development Education Association (IDEA) and the Wheel. We will explore IFOAM and TP Organics platform membership. We will seek to grow the expertise of our staff and volunteers through recruitment, internships and by participating in the European Solidarity Corps. We will advocate for the environment using our twitter and LinkedIn social media accounts and will respond to invited national and EU level consultations wherever possible.

**KPI 1** – IFOAM membership.

**KPI 2** – Evaluate membership of TP Organics

**KPI 3** – At least 1 hosted degree level horticulture intern or 1 MSc level graduate intern to be hosted each year.

**KPI 4** – At least 2 hosted European Solidarity Corps volunteers.

**KPI 5** – At least 2 consultation responses per year.





Sonairte  
The Ninch  
Laytown  
Co. Meath  
December 2020

