

# BOYNE VISION

*A consultation on the Future of the River*

*Boyne*

## SUMMARY

Photo by Mog Downey

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## Glossary of Terms

**Agricultural Sustainability Support and Advisory Programme (ASSAP)** - A free support and advisory service to farmers and participation is voluntary. Its aim is to improve water quality through working with farmers.

**Birds Directive (BD)** - The Birds Directive (Directive 79/409/EEC) was adopted in 1979. It is one of the first pieces of environmental legislation to be adopted by the EU. It was amended in 2009 ([Directive 2009/147/EC](#)) and requires all Member States to protect all wild bird species and protect and restore their habitats.

**Catchment** - an area of land around a river, lake or other body of water.

**Habitats Directive** - The Habitats Directive (Council Directive 92/43/EEC) was adopted in 1992, thirteen years after the Birds Directive. Like the Birds Directive, the Habitats Directive requires all Member States to establish a strict protection regime for species listed in Annex IV, both inside and outside Natura 2000 sites. The Habitats Directive aims to protect over a thousand species, including mammals, reptiles, amphibians, fish invertebrates, and plants, and 230 characteristic habitat types.

**Hydromorphology** - Hydromorphology is the study of physical form, condition and processes within a surface water body, that create and maintain habitat.

**LAWPRO** – Local Authorities Waters Programme.

**Riparian Corridor** – A riparian corridor is a unique plant community consisting of the vegetation growing near a river, stream, lake, lagoon or other natural body of water.

**Special Area of Conservation (SAC)** – This is an area of prime wildlife conservation in a country, considered to be important on a European as well as Irish level.

**Special Protection Area (SPA)** - Ireland is required under the terms of the EU Birds Directive (2009/147/EC) to designate Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for the protection of:

- Listed rare and vulnerable species
- Regularly occurring migratory species
- Wetlands especially those of international importance

**Water Framework Directive (WFD)** - Since 2000, the WFD has been the main law for water protection in Europe. It applies to inland, transitional and coastal surface waters as well as ground waters. It ensures an integrated approach to water management, respecting the integrity of whole ecosystems, including by regulating individual pollutants and setting corresponding regulatory standards.

## Introduction

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In Autumn 2022, Development Perspectives (DP) and the Centre for Freshwater and Environmental Studies (CFES) in Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) came together to submit a proposal for the Boyne Rivers Trust (BRT) to consider in relation to the call for tenders, which they had previously released. The purpose of that tender was

**“To develop a community and stakeholder led consultation process that will inform the future direction and priorities for the protection and sustainable uses of the Boyne catchment”.**

The tender was successful and the work got underway in early 2023. This document is a summary of the final report.

### Background and context

***“The Boyne Rivers Trust was set up in October 2021 as a not for profit organisation. The aim of the trust is to enable and empower the communities in the Boyne catchment to develop community led activities and projects that will help make the rivers in the catchment thrive once again”. (Boyne Rivers Trust, 2023)***

In 2022, the Boyne Rivers Trust applied for Leader funding through Meath Partnership to carry out the Boyne Vision project. Funding was awarded in November 2022 and a contribution to the cost of the project was also provided by the Local Authority Waters programme (LAWPRO).

At a policy level, the Boyne catchment is one of five catchments chosen to pilot a proposed Catchment Management Plan process coordinated by LAWPRO, including a community catchment fora, while we also await the 3rd river basin catchment management plan.

In a recent development, an historic announcement was made by the Government in October 2023, designating the Boyne Valley (Brú na Bóinne) as Ireland’s 7th National Park. This landmark decision will unlock a wealth of opportunities for the protection and conservation of the area’s nature, rich biodiversity, and its invaluable heritage and cultural attributes.

Finally, the context this vision creation takes place in, has a contentious backdrop, which involves planning that has been provided by Meath County Council to a meat processing plant in the Boyne catchment near Stackallen.

## **Executive Summary**

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194 people took part in this community and stakeholder led process between the 10th of May and the 19th of September 2023. This number is broken down into 101 people completing the questionnaire, 82 people participating in the focus group sessions and 8 interviews were undertaken with 11 people. The primary research consisted of a mixed methods approach, which was completed in parallel to a comprehensive secondary research of existing information and data that is available and relevant.

The research team and BRT utilised traditional media, social media, public participation networks and their respective contacts and networks to help spread the word about the opportunity to participate in the Boyne Vision. Local authority waters programme (LAWPRO) and the respective County Councils were also supportive in helping encourage public engagement with the process. The public engagement and interest in the process was high, right across the catchment. Having the upper catchment included in this report makes it more inclusive and comprehensive in its findings and recommendations.

Attempts were made to involve all interested and relevant stakeholders to make the report robust, valid and reflective of the range of views and opinions that exist publicly regarding the Boyne and its catchment. The team is confident that the Boyne Vision report is an accurate capture of the pulse of the people in the Boyne catchment. We are also aware that there are many temporal variables involved that could sway views such as flooding or prominent news coverage etc.

### **Methodology**

The methodology used in the Boyne Vision was set out during the tendering process and consisted of a mixed methods approach. Primary research and secondary research was conducted in parallel over the lifetime of the project. The primary research involved a questionnaire, focus group sessions and 1-1 interviews. This process of using 3 research methods helped build a more valid and rigorous picture of what people in the catchment have as their Boyne Vision.

The secondary research examined a range of documents, which explored the same themes as the primary research. The sources of this research are referenced throughout this report.

### **Primary Research**

As mentioned previously, the primary research involved a questionnaire, five focus groups sessions and eight 1-1 interviews with selected stakeholders.

### **Questionnaire**

The questionnaire built on the themes agreed in advance with the Boyne Rivers Trust. To begin with, a pilot questionnaire was developed and disseminated to a small number of people who then responded in order to iron out any challenges or difficulties that may emerge. This piloting stage was key as it helped the researchers identify the usability of the data returned.

The questionnaire was distributed using Google forms and was disseminated through the Boyne Rivers Trust, Development Perspectives and the Centre for Freshwater and Environmental Studies. 101 completed surveys were the final number for consideration in the Boyne Vision report.

### **Focus Group**

Five focus group sessions were organised between the 10<sup>th</sup> of May and the 12<sup>th</sup> of June. The format for each session was repeated to allow for consistency in analysis and reporting. Each of the sessions was promoted via traditional and social media alongside efforts made by the Boyne Rivers Trust, Development Perspectives and the Centre for Freshwater and Environmental Studies in Dundalk Institute of Technology.

### **Interviews**

Eight interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach. Seven out of the eight interviews were done on a 1-1 basis while one of the interviews involved 4 people (Save the Boyne campaign group). The interviewees were selected on the basis of their involvement in a strategic stakeholder group. Diversity and inclusion was also considered as criteria when approaching interviewees.

## Findings

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**1. Engagement** - The primary research that was conducted during this process points to a palpable interest and engagement amongst the population within the Boyne catchment not only with the Boyne itself but also with the issues and challenges it faces. The return rate on the questionnaires, the participation rate in the focus groups and the views of the interviewees all signal an engaged and motivated citizenry in the catchment. In terms of quantity and quality, engagement was high.

**2. Views and values** - The dominant view of the Boyne is positive with people commenting on the beauty, history and value of the Boyne. Notwithstanding this, there are also views pointing to the decline and pollution of the Boyne. These views are not contradictory. This is augmented by the realisation that “Universalism” is the value most associated or triggered when reflection on the Boyne is encouraged. The identification of “Universalism” as the dominant value within the group that participated in this research is revealing. In order to have a healthy and thriving Boyne, this value needs to be triggered and amplified further by the stakeholders that are involved in the Boyne Vision. By extension, those entities contributing to the pollution of the River would probably not share “Universalism” as their dominant value.

**3. Water quality** is by some distance the priority theme which people want to focus and action on. The residents of the Boyne catchment want a healthier, cleaner Boyne that meets the standards called for in the Water Framework directive.

Water quality emerges from the secondary research as the priority issue as well. The secondary research points to and examines the detail of water quality and the pressures that cause issues and challenges within the Boyne catchment.

***“Agriculture is the most significant pressure in water bodies within the Boyne Catchment that are not meeting WFD targets” (Boyne Vision, 2023: 24).***

The role agriculture plays in the low/poor water quality of some parts of the Boyne is a key consideration. Attempting to build trust and relationships with the Agriculture sector as a means to address water quality challenges is a starting point but doesn’t go far enough as evidenced in the existing water quality standards and evidence.

**4. Multi-stakeholder and collaborative approach** – The focus groups and interviews both point to the need for far more to be done in this area. It is the view of those participating in this process that stakeholders operate too much within their own sphere of activity and do not

collaborate enough. Where this collaboration does happen it is often tokenistic and doesn't have the required depth. The questionnaire also refers to a need for a coordinated approach within its own findings. A collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach is required but it needs to be one based on actions and evidence. Recognition of sectoral self-interest and potential conflicts of interest are crucial considerations. Power dynamics and analysis plays an important part in creating genuine collaborative, inclusive and equitable spaces. It is clear that there is a perceived but distinct lack of leadership in relation to the management of the Boyne catchment.

The community catchment fora envisaged for the Boyne catchment may go some way to addressing this point as does the work, which the Boyne Rivers Trust is currently engaged in. However, caution is urged in this regard as community voice and involvement is required for this finding to be met.

From a policy perspective, the secondary research points to the importance of ***“public participation”*** on page 34 of this report.

**5. Accountability, responsibility and implementation of existing legislation** - In summary, participants in the focus groups felt that duty bearers and policy makers have not taken their responsibilities seriously enough. This resonated with some of the interviewees who commented ***“The watchdog needs to develop teeth” (Boyne Vision, 2023: 19).***

Negative perceptions of the planning process are held by some participants who felt that far more scrutiny and accountability is required. One interviewee when talking about accountability or lack thereof said, ***“The lack of accountability - I think it's done deliberately” (Boyne Vision, 2023: 19)*** while another stated ***“local authorities must be held accountable for their actions” (Boyne Vision, 2023: 19).***

In terms of the questionnaire, ***“Governance and planning” (Boyne Vision, 2023: 10)*** was identified as a challenge. This finding is visible across the three methods of primary research making it robust and triangulated.

**6. Enforcement – Polluter pays principle** – It was clear from the focus groups that there was a desire to have much stronger enforcement measures in place. This resonated with some of the interviewees while not with others. Some of the interviewees felt strongly that current incentives to encourage environmentally friendly action just simply weren't working anymore while others felt that this was important. The role of ASSAP and its potential serves as an illustration of the divergence of opinion within the interviewees. The questionnaire revealed that ***“enforcement”*** emerged as an important action and part of the vision that is needed in the Boyne catchment.



**7. Education** – This figures as an important opportunity within the questionnaire and a crucial action identified by the interviewees. Education is also the 4<sup>th</sup> highest priority requiring action in the focus groups. Broadly speaking, more and deeper educational opportunities are needed for all residents within the Boyne catchment in order to understand and value the River. One interviewee captured the tone quite well when they said “**Water literacy and public participation is really important**” (Boyne Vision, 2023: 18). This view of education is one where active learning / experiential learning is encouraged and that people and residents are involved in problem based learning. Voice, agency and action emerge as a priority in the focus groups as well. This speaks to the aforementioned active and problem based model of education that is being called for. There is a range of educational providers both in the formal and non-formal sector that provide a latent capacity, which can contribute positively to the understanding and knowledge of the Boyne catchment. This capacity can be leveraged much further though with tangible suggestions made in the recommendations section.

**8. Population Increase** - From 1991 to 2022, the population increases in the 10 largest urban centres in the Boyne catchment has increased dramatically. “**The total population of the catchment has increased exponentially increasing pressure on the catchment and associated ecosystem** (Boyne Vision, 2023: 35 - Table 5).

This information is very valuable and shines a light on planning and development processes across the catchment. This information, although mentioned in the primary research, didn't figure as a substantial challenge.

When further planning and development is considered, Sustainable Development needs to be at the forefront of the calculus made when planning decisions are made by local authorities. Historically, this has not been the case. Ensuring that any future stress that the Boyne experiences is kept minimal is crucially important. The River has a carrying capacity that has physical and scientific limits. Those boundaries are not changed by wishful thinking.

**9. Access** - Improving access to the River featured in the actions identified in the questionnaire. It also featured as a priority in the focus groups. This was also echoed during the interviews with one interviewee stating “**Access to the river and countryside isn't there**” (Boyne Vision, 2023: 19). Generally speaking, research participants felt that it was bizarre that there was very limited access to the River for leisure activities.

The existing low level of public access to the River currently is not conducive to building a positive relationship between residents and the river. There may be some resistance with increasing access by particular stakeholders and vested interests however this resistance has been addressed in other catchments successfully.

**10. Overall state of the Boyne** – the secondary research section of the Boyne Vision report goes into detail that is related to this finding. However, in summary

***“The Boyne Catchment remains under pressure with 51% of water bodies At Risk of not achieving ‘good status’ and failing to meet the WFD objectives” (EPA Catchments.ie, 2022).***

The status of the Boyne is clear and this resonates with the public opinion and view as expressed in the Boyne Vision. Informed action is now required on multiple levels by various stakeholders to improve the status in the short to medium term. This is very achievable as we know from an evidential point of view what needs to be done and we have the tools and resources to do it.

**11. Congruency** - The research methods employed in the Boyne Vision returned data and information that was congruent across the methods utilised. The findings of the questionnaire, focus groups and interviews largely chimed with each other. The body of the primary research was also validated by the extensive secondary research undertaken. The views and opinions of the participants engaged in the research overlap significantly with the data, information and research which already exists. Where relevant, divergences are pointed out.

## Recommendations

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**1. Engagement** - The existing engagement, interest and commitment of some stakeholders and residents in the catchment is a strong starting point for ramping up future action and implementation of water quality and biodiversity initiatives. The first recommendation is to augment the existing positive public engagement with the Boyne through celebratory activities based on the value of universalism. The Boyne River Keepers in Canada - <https://www.boynerverkeepers.ca/> is an instructive example of what can be done in this regard. Supporting the Kayakers who utilise the Boyne, having a family picnic day along the banks of the river or organising an annual “Boyne” walk(s) are all activities that could build on the existing levels of engagement.

**2. Views and values** - Communications (written and visual) issued by the BRT regarding the Boyne Vision should evoke “Universalism” as its dominant value and theme. This means moving away from seeing the river as a resource but as a living entity that those within the catchment have an interconnection with and dependence on. Seeing the river as something other than a living organism makes pollution more likely in the future. The “Rights of Nature” is instructive in this regard as a direction of travel for all of the stakeholders who interact with the river. Any educational activity suggested or conducted also needs to amplify and trigger the same value(s). It is very important for the BRT to deepen their own understanding of how values work and how important they are in creating future behaviour and action.

**3. Dominant theme – Water quality** - The recommendation on this point comes in two parts, mitigation and adaptation.

***Nutrient losses from rural diffuse and point sources must be addressed and land management improved, in order to meet the WFD targets.***

**Mitigation** - In terms of mitigation, increasing the frequency and level of monitoring is important as is the reporting of that data to relevant authorities. Citizen science can play a role here however, the body of emerging and existing data needs to be acted on. BRT could leverage or contribute resources to such efforts. The establishment of a community catchment forum might also include a peer accountability and problem-solving system.

Existing relationships with the agriculture community need to be nurtured and built on and the ASSAP programme is key in that regard, however, it is clear that this programme is not enough in its current form as illustrated and evidenced by the current water quality. Extra resourcing

for the ASSAP programme is an option that requires further consideration. BRT could advocate for this action.

Local authorities have a clear responsibility to reduce and minimise planning that allows for pollution of the Boyne. BRT can help ensure that the local authorities carry out this function properly by ongoing communication and contribution to the creation and review of relevant development plans.

Land use policy is an area that the BRT can contribute to at a local, regional and national level. Rethinking and diversifying land use throughout the Boyne catchment is a key consideration and recommendation. BRT could convene spaces where land use policy is discussed by various stakeholders as well as joining forces with other river trusts to work on land use policy positions.

Using the Bathing Water Directive's water quality designation, the analysis shows that a one-level improvement in water quality leads to 3.13 more visits (+6.67%), whereas a one-level deterioration leads to 9.77 fewer annual visits (-20.83%). (Börger et al, 2021)

**Adaptation** - Riparian corridors along the Boyne could play a part in improving water quality particularly in more problematic areas. Tree planting across the catchment is also beneficial for biodiversity and habitats as well as water quality issues. BRT could play a lead role through the instigation of riparian corridors and tree planting more generally.

**4. Multi-stakeholder and collaborative approach** – Three recommendations have emerged for the BRT to consider

- Develop and build on relationships with the Environmental pillars of the Public Participation Networks of the local authorities that are relevant to the Boyne catchment. This is an important connection to community and voluntary groups across the catchment.
- Make contact and build relationships with the climate action and biodiversity officers of the respective local authorities.
- Play an active role in the soon-to-be-established Boyne community catchment forum.

**5. Accountability, responsibility and implementation of existing legislation** - This recommendation is for duty bearers and statutory stakeholders to consider, however, we would urge the BRT to reflect the need for accountability, responsibility and implementation of existing legislation when working in policy spaces. Statutory stakeholders in particular need to build trust with the wider public who feel they have not met their responsibilities. Governance and planning were considerations that raised their heads repeatedly throughout the Boyne

Vision. Good governance principles need to be adhered to when it comes to water management and planning.

**6. Enforcement – Polluter pays principle - Reporting on pollution** - Clear public reporting mechanisms regarding water quality/pollution incidents (once off or ongoing) need to be identified with results and rationale disseminated. The transparency of these processes is key from a trust perspective. Any future community catchment forum activity needs to address the scrutiny and accountability of such measures.

In simple terms, the pollution of the Boyne needs to stop. BRT could host a “See it, say it” campaign related to pollution.

**7. Education** – This is divided into three sections and the first one is particularly relevant for the BRT;

**Educational mapping** – Map the Education providers across the catchment that are active across the formal and non-formal educational sectors. This will include primary and secondary schools, further education institutes, adult and community education provision, youth work provision, local authority staff with an educational remit (Biodiversity officers / Climate Officers / Active travel officers), Education and Training Board staff (Adult education officer’s / Community education officers / Youth work officers). This mapping could also include relevant LAWPRO actions and detail NGOs that are active within the catchment. This mapping will provide a picture of the existing capacity that can be leveraged for future action.

**Educational funding** - Provide a small scale funding through a bespoke scheme for NGOs / Schools / Adult Education / Community Education providers within the catchment. This could be supported by Partnership Companies, County Councils, LAWPRO and Education and Training boards.

**Educational projects** – BRT has already begun rolling out projects that contribute to the Boyne Vision. Future projects that have an educational remit could be considered. Intergenerational learning could provide a valuable lens to look at educational projects in the Boyne catchment.

**8. Citizen Science** - This needs to be incubated across the catchment and also addresses recommendation 3. The Centre for Freshwater and Environmental Studies in DkIT and the Water Institute in Dublin City University (DCU) are important knowledge and skills hubs in this regard. Building on the relationship between the BRT and these Higher Education Institutes is important. Building a publicly accessible body of evidence that people can contribute and relate to brings people closer to data and information.

**9. Access** - This recommendation is divided into two parts; creating access points to the river and lobbying for access points to the river, which will have implications regarding property rights and land use policies.

The BRT could build access points to the river especially in urban areas – pontoons can be easily installed in a number of urban centres. Kilometre markers (River facing) could be installed along the banks of the river. This will help build public engagement with the river. Rural access points are also required. Stackallen is one point where river access is possible, however the fencing that currently exists doesn't make physical access to the river ramp easy. Rights of way need to be made clear to ensure that there is no unnecessary conflict between private landowners and the public who view the river as a commons to be enjoyed by all.

**10. Strategy** – The BRT now has a strong body of evidence (The Boyne Vision) to inform their next steps. A short, medium and long term strategy can now be developed on the basis of this consultation process. This could include the position of BRT within the Rivers Trust Network and what this positionality could lead to or help leverage. This strategy can then inform operational plans and applications for future funding and support.

**11. Climate Change** - The Boyne Vision is a short to medium term public consultation on the future of the River Boyne. In that context, although the Climate crisis did not feature prominently, we feel it is a variable that must be considered carefully. The flux that this climate variability will bring is unknown, however modelling suggests the likelihood of catchment flooding is going to increase across the country (Fealy et al. 2018).





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