



Community Water Development Fund Assessment

2024



An Roinn Tithíochta,
Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreachta
Department of Housing,
Local Government and Heritage

Local Authority
Waters Programme 
vibrant communities | catchment assessment | healthy waters

LAWPRO – Community Water Development Fund Assessment 2024

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Glossary of Terms

Abbreviation/Term	Definition
ASSAP	Agricultural Sustainability Support and Advisory Programme
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CCSF	Catchment Capacity Support Fund
CFI	Community Foundation Ireland
CFI	Community Foundation Ireland
CHGS	Community Heritage Grant Scheme
CHGS	Community Heritage Grant Scheme (Heritage Council)
CWCF	Community Water Catchment Fund
CWDF	Community Water Development Fund
CWO	Community Water Officer
CWRF	Community Water Response Fund
DAERA	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (Northern Ireland)
DHLGH <i>The Department</i>	Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
FLAG	Fisheries Local Action Group
HCF	Heritage Capacity Fund (Heritage Council)
HCF	Habitats and Conservation Fund (Inland Fisheries Ireland)
HOSF	Heritage Organisations Support Fund
IFI	Inland Fisheries Ireland
LAWCO	Local Authorities Waters Community Office
LAWPRO	Local Authority Waters Programme
LAWSAT	Local Authorities Water Support and Advisory Team
LEADER	Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale Links Between Actions for the Development of the Rural Economy
LIFE	L'Instrument Financier pour l'Environnement
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NIECE	Network for Ireland's Environmental Compliance and Enforcement
NPWS	National Parks and Wildlife Service
OPW	Office of Public Works
RBMP	River Basin Management Plan
RTI	Rivers Trust Ireland
WFD	Water Framework Directive

1 Introduction and Background

1.1 Genesis

The Community Water Development Fund (CWDF) has been the sole direct investment in public participation in catchment-level engagement to protect and improve the quality and availability of water resources. As such,

*'it is considered critical for the successful management of Ireland's water resources through the River Basin Management Planning process; the achievement of the objectives of the WFD; and ultimately, securing healthy rivers, lakes, coasts, and groundwaters.'*¹

As a publicly funded programme², the work at hand is to examine inputs, outputs, and outcomes of the public investment to ensure value for money and positive natural water quality improvements.

In December 2023, the Department announced a new Lawpro Catchment Support Fund (CSF), and consideration of this fund now forms part of this review's (revised) objectives.

1.2 Review Requirements

LAWPRO (Local Authority Waters Programme) is seeking a review of the effectiveness of the CWDF in line with Action No. 36 of the draft Third National River Basin Management Plan. The critical elements of this include the following: -

- a) Recognising that the river basin might serve as a locus for different sectors (e.g., biodiversity, climate action), a review of other or new funding streams is sought to examine the potential for a level of cohesion among public bodies, all of which invest funding from the public purse.

The task here is to examine synergies with identified funding streams, make recommendations on how LAWPRO can influence and align with other complementary schemes to help achieve greater water quality outcomes, and explore ways to co-exist with different funding streams operating in the same space.

- b) Explore if other funding streams build capacity and sustain community environmental gain in the longer term, e.g. by funding core costs. The focus is whether the investment is best used now in resourcing a series of (many) one-off or in terms of capacity funding to support local groups to implement linked short-term projects. The recent announcement of a new CSF to begin in 2024 focuses on this objective to consider its optimum use in the context of existing LAWPRO offerings and to anticipate community capacity-building at the catchment level. The new CSF has the capacity to engage in longer-term and multi-faceted approaches to improving water quality using complementary schemes, and coordinating among agencies with different mandates now becomes possible with the advent of this scheme.
- c) A review of CWDF projects, including an expanded analysis of types and scale of projects delivered to date with €2.5m of CWDF public investment. The review must focus on the fund's structure and recommendations that might increase water quality outcomes and the River Basin Management Plan (RBMP) delivery. It must also examine the governance and effectiveness of the set-up and running grants (capped at €3,000 per annum) for Rivers Trusts / Catchment Associations.

¹ <https://www.catchments.ie/public-involvement-in-governing-our-waters>.

² Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH).

- d) Examine constraints and capacity gaps and make recommendations for the CWDF. Linking with (b) above, the question of whether key fund dimensions should be adapted to include core funding, different eligibility criteria, different timelines or other considerations is explored.

1.3 Context: Related Evaluations and Reports

The CWDF is referenced first in the 2016-2017 Annual Report, but only to the extent that a business case had been made for it. Reporting on the fund is found in each subsequent Annual Report.

The first external evaluation was conducted after four years (2018-2021). The terms of reference of this evaluation were restricted to the Open Call and not the other funds deemed necessary to support specific activities. The RPS Evaluation is one of at least four reviews and evaluations conducted on the organisation or particular projects. The three most relevant to this work are as follows.

1.3.1 Review of CWDF – Open Call 2018-2021 (RPS:2021)

Though the report notes other funds related to CWDF, the review deals solely with the Open Call for the four years to 2021, thereby covering the programme's early history. Noting that the overall fund is designed to support the active involvement of communities to *'progress water-related benefits and initiatives that deliver benefits locally and meet the objectives of the RBMP'*, the review sets out the co-funding model between the State and community, whereby the fund would contribute to the overall cost of the project.

The issue of Open Call demand versus supply was noted early in the review, with the ratio of funding in 2021 (35 per cent) representing an increase of just five per cent since 2018. Average grant awards decreased slightly to just over €2,400 in 2021, representing less than half the average grant amount requested. Adequacy of financing is referenced to the extent that the funding and technical support do not match the 'level of interest' and that, coupled with the limited capacity of many groups, constrained the potential to deliver high-impact projects.

The review notes other complementary funding streams dealt with in this review but notes that CWDF is the only fund *'specifically focused on the delivery of WFD objectives'* and that continued support is essential *'to increase community participation in water resource management'*.

Among the recommendations made in the 2021 CWDF Review are ones to ensure that communities are valued and supported towards successful project implementation through: -

- Development of Toolkits
- Pre-Application Workshops
- Support to Long-Term Strategies
- Increased Funding Allocation
- A renewed and clear set of objectives
- The development of the full potential of the application portal

For LAWPRO, there are suggestions to promote the fund through the Climate Action Agenda, to ensure transparency in the assessment process, to add another layer of approval, to promote the Blue Dot and Priority Action Area Programmes positively and to measure the impacts of the project in a meaningful way.

1.3.2 Community Funded Behavioural Change Initiatives: (ESRI:2022)

Community Funded Behavioural Change Initiatives: Water Quality in Ireland (ESRI:2022)

The core objective of this assessment was to *'seek a single encompassing metric'* to measure behavioural change initiatives with a secondary aim to *'evaluate the effectiveness to foster community engagement that supports environmental management at community level'*.

The key research finding helps consider the current work: the report notes that *'higher levels of funding are associated with a higher level of engagement with stakeholders both in planning and implementing projects'* (2022: P11).

Similar evidence emerged from the Resilience Pilot Project Evaluation (see 1.3.3 below). Reporting on the two pilot catchment capacity-funding investments, the findings note significant multiplier effects regarding stakeholder engagement and the scope and duration of activities.

Separately, applicant organisation profiles in the ESRI study yielded interesting results relevant to the CWDF. The data shows that almost one-third of respondent organisations (174) were over 30 years in operation, and a third had been in operation for over a decade. An interesting inference is that two-thirds of the respondent organisations had operated longer than LAWPRO. The remaining third of respondents started operations after 2010.

Membership size is also asked as part of the survey. The results here are positive regarding group size, with over fifty per cent of respondents indicating twenty-one members or more and over forty per cent indicating ten to twenty members. While it is possible to examine the capacity of operations from membership size, such attempts should be qualified by questions in terms of *'active'* members and whether there is paid staff capacity.

Superficially, however, it is possible to suggest that most organisations applying to CWDF show considerable longevity and membership depth to indicate reasonable capacity for sustainable practice.

1.3.3 Resilience Pilot Project Evaluation – March 2023 (Resilience: 2023).

The two-year pilot initiative to address catchment capacity to facilitate more substantial projects was launched in 2020 with sliding-scale funding supporting two Rivers Trusts in Limerick and Donegal to hire Project Officers. The investment, agreed upon by the Department after negotiations with LAWPRO and Rivers Trust Ireland (RTI), was designed to test the capacity to deliver at scale in terms of implementing catchment-related objectives of the national RBMP and engaging the community participation dynamic that is central to the Water Framework Directive (WFD).

The evaluation noted that the sliding-scale funding model was almost unique in the context of community support and ultimately found that it served to undermine water quality objectives of the public investment by creating constant pressure to achieve replacement core funding to maintain sustainable staffing and operations, that had created a sense of expectation in the community.

The Resilience *'Pilot'* Projects and the funded Project Officer position demonstrated added value with significant multiplier effects in terms of financial returns, project scope, community engagement and agency collaboration scope.

Regarding financial sustainability, Resilience Projects generated an extra €1.80 for every €1.00 with a broad range of successful applications to the LEADER Local Action Group, IFI, Local Authorities, OPW, Heritage Council and Skillnets. Significantly, the fund facilitated parity of esteem within the agency infrastructure, increasing the capacity to contract at a sub-commercially viable level for small instream and riparian works.

The review found that Resilience Projects demonstrated a capacity to engage with geographic and stakeholder communities and achieved significant voluntary capacity to realise projects at scale and engage in public awareness and community education. Perhaps the most crucial engagement breakthrough

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occurred (in tandem with Teagasc /ASSAP) with the farming community, where commitment to the local community facilitated amelioration activities.

A further key finding noted significant collaboration with other agency stakeholders, including Local Authorities, IFI, Teagasc, and the LEADER Local Action Group, with high levels of satisfaction at agency levels with the *'boots on the ground capacity'* of sub-catchment groups that had already been vetted for capacity to deliver.

1.4 Policy Environment

The Water Quality in Ireland Report 2016-2021, published by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in October 2022, assesses the quality of Ireland's rivers, lakes, estuaries, coastal waters, and groundwaters.

The report shows satisfactory water quality in just over half of rivers, lakes, estuaries, and coastal waters. However, the overall ecological health of these surface waters has declined across all water body types since the 2013-2018 assessment. This means these water bodies are less able to support healthy ecosystems for fish, insects, and plants.

The report highlights that since the 2019 assessment, the number of monitored water bodies in satisfactory condition has declined by: -

- One per cent in rivers.
- Three per cent in lakes.
- Sixteen per cent in estuaries.
- Ten per cent in coastal waters.

The main pressures on diminishing water quality are agriculture, physical changes such as land drainage and dredging, forestry activities, and discharges from urban wastewater.

A further EPA assessment for 2022, published in 2023, found no significant change in overall quality and that current action is ineffective, with more needing to be done to reach WFD objectives of good status in all waterbodies by 2027.

1.4.1 LAWPRO and WFD Implementation

The European Union Water Framework Directive (WFD) was passed into Irish Law in 2014 and gave effect to a three-tier structure relating to governance, technical implementation, and regional/local coordination. LAWPRO operates as a national WFD local authority shared service, which a recent review terms the *'engine room'* of implementation (Crowe, 2021: P9), enabling obligations placed on Local Authorities by the regulations to be delivered in a coordinated manner.

LAWPRO is a relatively young organisation. The entity that emerged as LAWPRO has increased from eighteen staff in 2016 to a current resource of almost ninety staff after the merger of the Local Authorities Waters Community Office (LAWCO) and the Local Authorities Water Support and Advisory Team (LAWSAT) in 2019.

LAWPRO has a coordinating role at multiple levels: among communities, local and regional authorities and then among the policy and technical oversight bodies, with many significant and long-standing regulatory, oversight, technical, representative and implementation bodies. In these terms, it is helped by a somewhat unique structure combining a dual catchment science and communities support team mandate to provide the science to community bodies that can offer the voluntary inputs crucial to implementing amelioration measures at a local level.

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The relative newness of the organisational profile is striking; the 2022 annual report is the fifth such report, with the 2016/2017 report issued through LAWCO. The programme has been hosted under the joint leadership of Tipperary and Kilkenny County Councils as a local authority shared service.

Regarding organisational development models, the research literature would liken LAWPRO's development stage somewhere between '*forming*', a stage at which '*good ideas and intentions abound, but there is not enough unity*', and '*stability*'. Activities consistent with the forming stage were observed in the Resilience Evaluation process, and it is interesting to consider if the same development stage still applies.

2022 LAWPRO Annual Report

The Table of Contents of the 2022 Annual Report (published in 2023) shows that LAWPRO had evolved towards a stage of '*stability*' or '*norming*'. Whereas previous reports were faithful to a more traditional script with all section headings reflecting reportable themes (2020: thirteen standard annual report sections), this and the 2021 report are presented with just five sections. Many elements of the work programme and individual programme pieces, accorded individual section status, have been brought together in Chapter 5 with the bold heading: *Innovation, Initiatives and Highlights*. Sub-sections in this chapter identify sixteen different elements, listed below, and a review of these provides some evidence of the scope of operations, as follows: -

- Innovations, Initiatives and Highlights
 - Draft River Basin Management Plan for Ireland 2022-2027: Consultation Findings
 - Community Water Development Fund
 - Local Awareness Initiatives
 - Capacity Building
 - Irish Rivers Trust's Resilience Pilot Project – 2019-2022
 - Communities Caring for Water Conference
 - National Heritage Week and Water Heritage
 - International Water Days
 - Tidy Towns Special Awards
 - GAA Green Club Programme
 - Blue Dot Catchments Programme: Q5 River Engagements
 - Waters of LIFE
 - Nature Based Solutions
 - Citizen Science
 - Citizen's Assembly on Biodiversity Loss
 - Lough Ennell Catchment Management Plan

Immediately evident by the initiative's title is that LAWPRO operates at the EU (LIFE Programme), national, and local levels. The science and community dynamic is also evident, with, for example, local awareness initiatives and Communities Caring for Water Conference featured alongside Citizen Science and the Blue Dot Catchments Programme. The extent of reach into the building blocks of many communities, particularly in Rural Ireland, through the GAA and SuperValu Tidy Towns, shows how deeply embedded LAWPRO is at the community level, a significant achievement for an organisation that is so young.

Other chapter headings relating to organisational structure suggest characteristics such as clear role and responsibility definition, well-defined policies and procedures, relative clarity of direction and consistency in priorities.

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This is partly due to the authority invested in those previous iterations of Natural Waters governance, funded by the Department and operated within the County Council structure. It also relates to clear evidence, though the number of evaluations and reviews, of it being a *Learning Organisation* committed to self-assessment through programme and organisation reviews.

This assessment, the third of the CWDF, might be said to represent this commitment. Recognition of an organisation trusted with its mandate is also seen in the launching of a new Catchment Support Fund, an outcome of the successful Resilience Pilot Project operated by LAWPRO.

National and International Networks

The scope of representational involvement among National and EU networks further indicates how rooted LAWPRO has become in the sector.

The Directors report in the 2022 report outlines key national-level engagements with extensive outreach into key sectors inputting into what is distinguished as the '*natural water management*' including the new Common Agricultural (CAP) Strategic Plan, the EPA, and Local Authorities (NIECE network), Regional Management (RWEMC) and Operations Committees (ROC), and the National Technical Implementation Group (NTIG).

At EU and national level, it is evidenced by advisory and collaboration roles with the European Innovation Partnership Steering Committees and LIFE Project Steering Committees. The 2022 report notes LAWPRO's involvement in eighteen national working or technical groups with mandates relating to drinking water, climate change, farming, water research, riparian zones, and pesticides, among others.

1.5 Community Water Development Fund

The CWDF disburses small grants to community groups to fund a range of water-related interventions to encourage community members to make behavioural changes that support the management of water resources, ultimately protecting and improving water quality.

The CWDF is the prime engagement tool to facilitate water quality works at the local catchment level, with a recognition that communities and local champions play a vital role in protection and enhancement. In the 2022 Annual Report, it was reported that 202 applications were received to the value of €1.03m, for which 182 funding awards were made for a total of €510,000 or almost fifty per cent of the total sought.

Similar data trends are evident from previous years, and these have been captured in the RPS evaluation (2022), citing data from 2018 to 2021.

As with that report, the Annual Report confirms that most applications came from Tidy Towns, residents' associations, community development, and environmental groups.

Rivers Trusts: Community Catchment Groups - Overhead Expenses Support: A further fund has been developed aimed at capacity building at the community catchment level through the funding of eighteen Rivers Trusts/ Community Catchment Groups with expenses grants from a total €26,000 to help offset insurance and audit fees as significant operational costs.

Feasibility Studies/ Capital Grants: Two small funding pots have been in place for several years to meet specific needs or address funding barriers at a point in time.

Local Awareness Fund: This is a local fund available to Community Water Officers to support local low cost (<€500) initiatives, with most of the funding going to public information and engagement activities.

2 Summary Findings

This section combines financial data from LAWPRO and an interim survey of the 2023 Open Call to develop a narrative on the status of the fund from the perspective of projects that have been funded.

2.1 CWDF Open Call: Formative (mid-contract) Survey

LAWPRO distributed a mid-term survey targeted at funded projects in Summer 2023 and drew a total of 135 responses to questions relating to: -

- Grant Amount awarded by income bands
- Stage of project
- Finishing Date Deadline compliance
- Suggestions for future calls

From the survey responses, it is possible to clarify profile data, particularly concerning grant amount, and at the same time, to get a sense of community perceptions concerning the fund and suggestions for improvement.

2.1.1 Grant Amounts Awarded by Grant Income Band

Data regarding grant income bands is shown below and identifies that most respondents (72.6 per cent) indicate grant awards of between €1,000 and €5,000 (Band C). The €5,000 to €10,000 income band (B:14.8 per cent) is next, with the lowest income band (less than €1,000) accounting for just over eight per cent of projects. Projects with a value greater than €10,000 (Band A) account for less than five per cent of all projects.

Table 1 - Projects by Grant Income Band

Band	Grants	Total	Proportion	Not Started	In Progress	Complete
A	Greater than €10,000	6	4.4%	16.7%	83.3%	0.0%
B	Between €5,000 and €10,000	20	14.8%	15.0%	85.0%	0.0%
C	Between €1,000 and €5,000	98	72.6%	14.3%	80.6%	5.1%
D	Less than €1,000	11	8.1%	9.1%	36.4%	54.5%
Total		135				

2.1.2 Project Stage

In terms of project stage, most projects indicated being underway at the stage of completing the interim survey. Perhaps not surprisingly, the lowest grant income band shows the highest rate (55 per cent) of completions. Equally, the highest grant income had a greater proportion of projects that had yet to start, which may not be surprising.

2.1.3 Projects to €4,000

Further analysis of grant income bands based on actual grants awarded offers a more nuanced overview of grant amounts. For example, within the €1,000 to €5,000 band (almost three-quarters of projects), it is instructive to note that almost eighty-five per cent of projects operate with grant amounts from €1,000 to €3,000.

Table 2 - Projects to €4,000

Actual Grant Amount	Number of Projects	Proportion of Total
<€1,000	12	8.6%
€1,000	31	22.1%
€2,000	38	27.1%
€3,000	18	12.9%
€4,000	13	9.3%

Furthermore, over eighty per cent of all projects were awarded a grant allocation of less than €4,000. It is worth noting that among the remaining projects, eleven are at the highest income band of €10,000 and above, somewhere between twenty and twenty-five per cent of the entire funding allocation for the year.

2.1.4 Average and Median Grant Award

Interestingly, the average grant award (€3,626) for the 135 respondent projects responding to the survey is €1,100 more than the median grant award (€2,500). Median grant income, similar to the average for all projects receiving up to €6,000 (€2,401), is perhaps more realistic as this average holds for the vast majority (87 per cent) of all projects.

2.2 CWDF 2023: Fund Distribution Trends

Within CWDF, several funds have emerged since LAWPRO began operating, and the distribution pattern of these funds is set out below. The total fund was just under €677,000 from the Department.

Table 3 - 2023 CWDF by Amount and Number of Projects

Fund Type	Amount Distributed	Number of Projects	Average per project
Local Awareness Fund	€40,586	77	527
Open Call	€523,521	156	5,935
Feasibility Studies	€11,103	2	5,552
Capital Projects	€41,137	4	10,284
River's Trusts/ Catchment Associations*	€60,239	36	1,673
Totals	€676,586	275	2,460

(*capacity rather than project funding)

The Open Call is the primary funding component, with seventy-seven per cent of the total fund distributed to fifty-seven per cent of projects. The lower incidence of projects is in keeping with the pattern of the fund. The Local Awareness Fund (LAF) is designed to distribute micro-funding locally, with the pattern showing the second highest number of projects (28 per cent), realising just six per cent of the total fund. The average (527) is more than €1,000 lower than the next lowest average.

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Examination of the Open Call also sees funding distributed to Feasibility Studies and capital projects. Though the funds have been in place for some time, their existence is based on contextual factors that no longer hold, and these categories should now be assumed into the overall fund.

Support for the Rivers Trust/Catchment Associations comprises nine per cent of the fund that is distributed among thirteen per cent of projects. The fund contributes towards overhead and insurance costs for these groups with an average distribution of almost €700. The fund is well-placed, and the only question is whether it is distributing enough in an era of ever-increasing costs.

The issue of insurance cost poses a sustained challenge for community and voluntary sector sustainability, particularly for those operating outdoors or water-based activities. Reports as far back as 2019 (Irish Times) indicate survey findings that almost half of community groups had experienced premium rises over the previous three years, with groups such as community centres and tidy towns organisations facing risk of dissolution.

That this situation has not been resolved is evidenced by the recent commission (2023) of BDO Consulting Group by the Department of Rural and Community Development to conduct research examining trends within the public liability insurance market and the impact of these trends on organisations across the community and voluntary sector.

2.3 CWDF 2023: The Open Call Fund

The Open Call Fund has existed since 2018 and operates as an annual call to support communities in progressing water-related objectives and initiatives. It is possible to show funding patterns over the six years of operation using data provided in the RPS Evaluation (2022) and LAWPRO records.

Table 4 - Open Call Applications and Grant Amounts (2018-2023)

Total Applications	Applications Amount €	Open Call	Funds Distributed €	Projects Funded	Average Grant per project €	Average Request Per Application €	Average Award per application €	Proportion of Successful Applications
104	620,089	2018	185,800	69	2,693	5,962	45%	66%
151	765,665	2019	180,428	105	1,718	5,071	34%	70%
145	663,904	2020	230,248	118	1,951	4,579	43%	81%
195	1,095,430	2021	380,000	155	2,452	5,618	44%	79%
202	1,046,130	2022	513,774	182	2,823	5,231	54%	90%
156	928,701	2023	523,521	142	3,687	5,935	62%	91%
953	5,119,919		2,013,771	771	2,554	5,399	47%	81%

The Open Call Fund has distributed just over €2m in six years, though the pattern shows ever-increasing funding amounts, so distribution for 2022 and 2023 made up almost fifty-two per cent of the total fund. Nine hundred and fifty-three applications have been received over the six years, and while the trend here has also seen increased numbers, there was a drop-off in 2023, due in part to a temporary decrease in CWO staff levels and perhaps, to more effective targeting of the fund. It is also evident that the average grant award (62 per cent) for 2023 is the highest in the six years. It would be favourable to improve this differential so that amounts applied for will be realistic to the projects being implemented, thus avoiding the danger of application inflation where project promoters bid higher in seeking to receive close to the projects actual cost.

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The average grant in 2023 was the highest at almost €1,000 more than the next highest (2022), and the average grant awarded per application (2023: 62% per cent) though not ideal is significantly above the six year average (47%).

It has to be acknowledged that as a relatively new fund, there will be an initial period where the fund will attract a wide range of interest. It is probable that the number of applications also represents the scale of work required at a local level and that demand patterns would no doubt increase as the fund increases.

A total of seven hundred and seventy-one projects have been funded over the fund's life, with 2022 showing the highest number of projects (182). It remains to be seen whether the 2023 trend of fewer projects with higher average grants represents better targeting that will continue. Certainly, the high point of application amounts (2021) has decreased steadily as the proportion of successful applications has increased, so 2023 shows the highest proportion of successful applications (91 per cent) with fourteen unsuccessful among 156 applications. This is a welcome trend as it suggests that fund information transferring to communities is being applied more appropriately and that the quality of applications has increased.

2.3.1 Governance and Financial Management

It is worth noting that Tipperary County Council distributes funds on behalf of LAWPRO and that all funds distributed are subject to the Local Authority spending code. LAWPRO employs a fund manager and has recently brought in two additional administration support staff to process applications and funding requests and prepare payment orders and accompanying documentation. The increased support infrastructure has proved necessary in the context of the new CSF fund.

In terms of fund governance a number of internal and external processes (for amounts above 10,000 euro) ensure a rigorous, impartial process to assess applications. Internally, the early stages are taken up with ensuring project eligibility and that all documentation is in order before proceeding to internal and external project assessment. Initial assessment is conducted by the Funding Management unit and Community Water Officers. The final internal step is assessment by a panel of Catchment Scientists. An External Panel is engaged to assess applications in excess of ten-thousand euro, or in terms of technical examination of river restoration type projects. A further assessment to ensure appropriate geographic spread and project mix is conducted before final sign-off by the Management Team.

2.4 Open Call Funding 2023: Exploration of Survey Comments

Each respondent organisation was allowed to provide suggestions for CWDF improvement, and more than 120 comments were received. The nature of these comments is shown below, beginning with those grant income bands with the lowest number of respondents; low response levels mean the findings are illustrative rather than necessarily representing income band trends. Only one grant income band carries what might be termed a representative sample, showing over 100 responses.

It should also be noted that a significant proportion of comments provide little by way of suggestion, either positive affirmations of LAWPRO or referencing '*no comment*'.

2.4.1 Comments for the Grant Income Band €10,000+

Of the six comments pertaining to the €10,000+ grant band, five indicate no suggestions, though half of these include a positive comment on the scope of the fund. The one suggestion relates to timing with a call for extensions for tree planting projects, where root trees are not lifted until the end of November.

2.4.2 Comments for the Grant Income Band to €1,000

Among twelve comments, six indicate no suggestions, even though one includes a note on being happy with the programme. Three positive comments concerning the programme express gratitude in the main and indicate satisfaction with LAWPRO. Regarding suggestions, one comment calls for an earlier grant decision and one calls for a survey of development needs among applicants. The other comment concerns awareness/education not being offered as a category.

2.4.3 Comments for the Grant Income Band €5,000 to €10,000

Eight of twenty comments indicate no comment or similar. Funding remains an issue for projects in the €5,000 to €10,000 income band in seven of twelve comments. For each, the fund amount and timing are issues. As one comment notes, would a track record of delivering projects be of equitable assurance to part fund the project. Another comment simply suggests the need for more funding.

Positive comments about LAWPRO and the online digital processes make up most of the remaining comments. Interestingly, in this, the second highest income band, the same concerns about post-project payment and grant amounts dominate the feedback.

2.4.4 Comments for the Grant Income Band €1,000 to €5,000

Almost one hundred comments relate to this survey grant band, although fifty per cent of these indicate no suggestions. Of those that comment, almost 20 per cent are directed positively to the programme or LAWPRO, with little further suggestion.

Of what might be termed practical suggestions, more than one-third relate to funding, and the main thrust of these comments reflects concern at the level of grant funding against amounts that have been applied for. A clear call here is to define the grant allocation (funding bands) or to be clear about what the value of a typical award is likely to be.

The other concern referenced several times relates to having to spend the project grant before submitting claims for payment; some respondent groups indicate that the capacity isn't there to cover costs or the interest rates from having to borrow.

Timing is the other topic that dominates the discussion, with several comments noting that project implementation might be more effective with decisions in January and project termination towards the end of the year. Different project types may require more timely processes to meet optimum implementation dates. For some project types (e.g. invasive species control), once-off funding is a real challenge as complete amelioration is a multi-year process. In cases like this, reassurance in terms of multi-year funding would help.

Several comments contain suggestions concerning local networking with calls to connect projects at the local or catchment level. For some, this would open the potential for shared learning from experience; this message is also reflected in comments for funding for training to increase the capacity of groups to carry out training.

3 A Crowded Space

This section considers CWDF in relation to national funding streams with similar objectives.

The terms of reference call for a review of grant funding distributed from other sources that may include activities like those funded through CWDF. Such a review would establish if there is potential for greater cohesion among public bodies.

3.1 Overview of Similar Funding Mechanisms

An initial review of the funding environment in which CWDF is situated is shown in the following sub-sections. In all, six project-focused funds have been selected as being relevant to CWDF, including a grant fund administered from the heritage side of the Department. The Heritage Council's Community Heritage Grant Scheme (CHGS) is a project-oriented fund with interesting points of comparison with the CWDF. Four other funds, administered by IFI, LEADER, Community Foundation Ireland (CFI) on behalf of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, and funding provided at the Local Authority level are also individually examined.

Capacity funding, often termed '*core funding*', is explored below, of which the Heritage Organisations Support Fund (HOSF) is the most relevant example. In this model, funding is targeted at organisational support with provision for funding staff. In Northern Ireland, the Environment Fund is administered by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and has a staffing element. This fund has a vital core funding element but significantly different jurisdictional characteristics and a much-extended implementation period (five years) limit potentially relevant to the CWDF and the CCSF.

Definitive aspects of the six project-oriented funds are shown below under the comparable thematic elements of fund objective, fund characteristics and project type. These will be examined to find points of comparison and difference.

3.1.1 Fund Comparison: Funding Objectives

Funding objectives describe the high-level core aim of the particular fund. They are the first point of reference for applicants in assessing whether the fund in question is relevant to their work.

The following table shows the stated funding objectives for six project-related funds, including CWDF. Comparison of fund objectives is a first step in establishing whether a common purpose exists within the overall aims; this can be augmented when looking at funding types where project activities are detailed. It is considered that this approach might be helpful before considering the funding environment and whether it is appropriate to consider seeking an integrated model to ensure the most effective and efficient distribution of public funds at a community level.

The CWDF aims to improve water quality and raise public awareness through project support funding. The Heritage Council's CHGS is designed to support capital projects, which would limit the scope for comparison. However, the two offer common characteristics in terms of activities.

The IFI Habitats and Conservation Fund (HCF) would seem to have a narrower focus. In this regard, little commonality is evident from the objectives, even if there is clear evidence in practice of community-level links.

Table 5 – Summary Comparative Fund Objectives

Name of Fund	Fund Objective
Community Water Development Fund CWDF	Supports projects to improve water quality and/or raise public awareness of the value of good water quality and how to improve it. Aims to build community capacity in water-related challenges, working together to improve water quality.
Community Heritage Grant Scheme CHGS	Supports capital projects that improve access and inclusion to heritage sites and apply good heritage practices to manage places, collections, or objects (including buildings). The scheme also supports the purchase of essential equipment.
IFI Habitats and Conservation Grant HCG	Specific to salmon and sea trout and the Midland fisheries.
LEADER Programme (CAP)	The LEADER Programme provides resources to stimulate rural economic and social development.
Community Foundation Ireland/National Parks and Wildlife Service: Support for Biodiversity Action	Aims to enhance biodiversity by combining the expertise of qualified ecologists with the skills, experience and enthusiasm of local community groups.
Local Community Heritage and Biodiversity Grant Scheme	Generally supports actions delivered by Local Authorities through their Heritage and Biodiversity Plans. Supports the aims and objectives of Local Authorities concerning heritage and biodiversity issues.

Analysis

The LEADER Programme, the Community Foundation Ireland/National Parks and Wildlife Service (CFI/NPWS) Support for Biodiversity Action, and the Local Community Heritage and Biodiversity Grant Scheme all share certain similarities with the CWDF. The focus of the CFI/NPWS and Local Authority schemes reflects the national policy prioritisation of habitat restoration that is evident in the major new national Nature Restoration Plan designed to bring Ireland closer to the ambition of the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030.

There is no clear evidence from looking at the funding objectives of a particular crossover, which is probably appropriate as easy comparison might lend itself to queries of duplication of effort.

3.1.2 Fund Comparison: Fund Characteristics

While the comparison of fund characteristics provides little value in common activities analysis, it is helpful in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency. The table below sets out the funding characteristics regarding the source, funding amounts and averages, matching funding requirements, funding strands within funds, and drawdown protocols. It is evident from previous sections that communities have vulnerabilities regarding many of these properties.

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Table 6 - Summary Comparative Fund Characteristics

Name of Fund	Source	Per Project Funding	Total Funding	Core Funding	Project Funding	Match Funding	Funding Strands	Drawdown of Funds
Community Water Development Fund CWDF	DHLGH	Banding: €25,000 €5,000 to €10,000 €1,000 to €5,000	€675,586	No	100%*	Not a condition, but 5% helpful. Voluntary Labour (€14 per hour).	Open Call, Feasibility Studies, Capital Works.	In arrears.
Community Heritage Grant Scheme CHGS	DHLGH	€2,000 to €15,000	€1,610,113	No	80%	20% (Voluntary Labour valued at €14 per hour).	Main Fund.	Two payment stages (in arrears).
IFI Habitats and Conservation Grant HCG	IFI		€1m: Strand 1 €500,000: Strand 2	No	100%	Partial: only feasibility studies or development plans.	Salmon and Sea Trout Rehabilitation. Conservation and Protection Fund/ Midland Fisheries Fund.	
LEADER Programme (CAP)	EU/ National Rural Development Programme - CAP		Per LEADER Local Action Group 75% to 90% Grant aid	No	75-90%	10 to 25%	ST 3a: Support to encourage protection and sustainable use of water resources, protection, and improvement of local bio-diversity and development of renewable energy.	Payment Stages
Community Foundation Ireland/National Parks and Wildlife Service: Support for Biodiversity Action	CFI/NPWS	Up to €13,000	€325,000	No			Formulate a Local Action Plan or post Plan works for those with a plan.	
Local Community Heritage and Biodiversity Grant Scheme	Local Authorities	€200-€1,000 (Cork City Council)	Per local authority	No		Yes (not stated)	No.	In arrears.

Analysis

Fund size is an indicator of funding scope, and it is clear that CWDF is at the lower end of the scale, with its sister fund in the Department (Community Heritage Grant Scheme) distributing funds of €1.5m, and the fund distributed by IFI (€1m) is also in this bracket.

Per-project funding is a further consideration, and here there is less discrepancy in the range of funding. Indeed, CWDF shows the largest project fund among four comparable projects. Three funds, including CWDF, have funding levels up to €15,000, and each fund has the capacity for small-scale grants of less than €5,000.

Per-project funding is the clearest indicator of project scope at the community level. In 2023, CWDF distributed funds (€676,586) to 275 different projects for an average distribution per project of €2,457 in five different programme strands. The main 'Open Call' Fund aligns most closely with the Community Heritage Grant Scheme. This fund of over €500,000 was distributed to 142 projects at an average of €3,687. Data available for the CHGS (Heritage.ie) suggests that approximately 145 projects were granted an

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average of just over €11,100 from a total fund of €1,610,113. This is to the high side of the funding range of €2,000 to €15,000, whereas the Open Call average is at the lower end of the CWDF funding range. CFI/NPWS funding (€325,000), the lowest among relevant funds, had a per-project capacity of €13,000 and could fund up to 27 projects at maximum scale and over 50 projects at mid-range.

The requirement for match funding is almost universal among grant funders, though, in this regard, LAWPRO's decision not to make it a condition is significant. Match funding requirements are generally up to 25 per cent, although voluntary inputs for CWDF and CHGS can be used to a nominal value of €14 per hour. It is logical that funds directed towards community engagement and action achieve a return in terms of voluntary input, which is surely an indicator of community buy-in to water quality improvement.

Regarding funding strands, CWDF is alone in having five different strands. From this, it seems that other funds are more tightly focused. For a relatively young programme, multiple strands are not unusual, as various types of support requests emerge in the early years of the initiative. For clarity and transparency, it may be appropriate to streamline these strands.

Drawdown of funds, with the typical requirement to claim in arrears after the expense has been incurred, has attracted significant negative feedback for the financial pressure it places on voluntary projects. This viewpoint is common across the community and voluntary sector, a situation acknowledged in *'Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities: A Five-year Strategy to Support the Community and Voluntary Sector in Ireland'* (Department of Rural and Community Development).

Regarding LAWPRO's fund management function, it is worth reflecting on a section in the Strategy: Why this strategy is needed (2019: P19) under which several support dimensions are considered. It is appropriate for LAWPRO to consider itself part of the Robust Supporting Infrastructure (2019: P19) to provide a framework for supporting community well-being, resilience, and capacity to respond to emerging challenges, for which addressing natural water quality using community resources may be said to be in its infancy.

Regarding current funding arrangements, the Strategy notes that the practice is to fund organisations for the *'additional marginal service provided'* rather than the actual cost of delivering the service, resulting in *'providing public-funded services at a loss'* (2022: P21). The report goes on to note the threat to sustainability that this situation causes, which might also be added to the deflection of voluntary resources to mandatory match-fundraising or the ongoing stress of trying to keep the *'head above water'*.

3.1.2 Fund Comparison: **Projects Funded by Type**

The type of projects funded through the six project funding streams is shown in the table below. It distinguishes between four theme categories: land-based works, in-stream works, studies and surveys, and community engagement.

Table 7 – Fund Comparison by Project Type

	Land-Based Projects	In-Stream Works	Studies and Surveys	Community Engagement
Community Water Development Fund CWDF	Bank work, bogs, species, clean up, rain gardens, tree planting	Citizen Science (sampling), leaky dams, fish passage, gravel installation, drain blocking.	Feasibilities, reports and plans.	Water literacy, education, and awareness,
Community Heritage Grant Scheme CHGS	Bank work, fencing, riparian work, invasive species		Efficacy research and feasibilities.	Match funding to Local Authority and OPW projects.
IFI Habitats and Conservation Grant HCG	Tree Planting, Riparian Diversity work, rain gardens, rain harvesting, breeding boxes, invasive species.	Fish passage works, wetlands.	Feasibility studies and community catchment planning.	Outdoor diversity classrooms.
LEADER Programme (CAP)	Conservation works, surveys and reports, and conservation plans.		Digital Heritage Resources, Community-led surveys, audits, and reports.	Community-led surveys, audits, and reports.
Community Foundation Ireland/National Parks and Wildlife Service: Support for Biodiversity Action	Invasive species, improving habitats, tree planting, bird counts, hedgerow and bog restoration,		Biodiversity Local Action Plans, Invasive Alien Species Plans, Surveys, and Pollinator Plans.	Seed-saving training, biodiversity training, and awareness campaigns.
Local Community Heritage and Biodiversity Grant Scheme	Biodiversity activities.			Public talks and meetings, exhibitions, information leaflets, etc. Training and community events.

Riparian Projects

In terms of riparian projects that have been funded, there is a significant level of shared activity among the six projects, even if the project scope differs. Funds directly supporting riparian works include CWDF, IFI Habitats and Conservation Grant and LEADER, but all engage in some of the activities related to riparian work, including clean-ups, fencing, tree and shrub planting, and bank restoration. The proliferation of invasive alien species is addressed directly in four funds (CWDF, IFI Habitats and Conservation Grant, LEADER, and CFI/NPWS Support for Biodiversity Action).

Biodiversity activities are directly addressed in CFI/NPWS and Local Authority funding. Biodiversity-related activities are common in all projects, including rain gardens, bird counts, hedgerow and bog restoration, and the provision of breeding boxes.

In-Stream Works

In-stream works appear to be a feature of three of the six funds examined. CWDF supports Citizen Science, discussed under Research below, and works on dams, fish passage and drain blocking. This relates clearly to IFI’s support of fish passage improvement and gravel installation. Similarly, LEADER Programme funding can be used for fish passage works and wetlands improvement.

Studies and Surveys

With its team of thirty-five catchment scientists, LAWPRO is a driver of knowledge-based assessment and action at the catchment level. Catchment teams carry out scientific assessments of local catchments to gain knowledge on inputs into the watercourse and ameliorating actions to improve water quality. Through the CWDF, communities can also engage through funded feasibility studies, reports, and plans.

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Citizen Science links community and science, providing much-needed voluntary labour to conduct informed sampling over time to monitor water quality. IFI has a similar technical offering that funds efficacy research and feasibility studies. Similarly, with LEADER Programme funding, the focus is on feasibility studies and catchment planning.

With the Community Heritage Grant Scheme, funding is directed towards digital heritage resources and community-led surveys, audits, and reports. The types of projects funded through CFI/NPWS are broadly directed towards biodiversity activities, with Local Action Plans a core funding feature. Invasive species plans, surveys and pollinator plans have all been supported through this fund.

Community Engagement

There is widespread acceptance, reflected in the WFD and articulated in national policy, that community involvement is central to improving water quality. A core function of LAWPRO is to engage with communities, providing leadership and oversight to connect strong community interest and volunteer capacity with technical expertise and knowledge to achieve objectives related to water quality. Through CWDF, engagement activities relating to water literacy, education and awareness are sought to build up community knowledge of the importance of water quality.

Each of the five comparison funds has a similar task profile. Local Authority funding is the closest match regarding awareness, the dissemination of publications, training, and support for community events. Through the CFI fund distributed on behalf of NPWS, the type of funding relates to awareness training (train-the-trainer) and beyond awareness to seed-saving and biodiversity training. Regarding the Community Heritage Grant Scheme, the funding is also directed towards surveys, audits, and reports with the proviso that it is community-led (though with the engagement of an ecologist).

LEADER Programme funding can be directed towards outdoor diversity classrooms, which may be seen as an immersive education experience. The incidence of such education increased significantly with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and has remained an important part of the curriculum, particularly in primary and second-level education. For IFI funding, activity can support match-funding with Local Authority projects.

3.2 Overview of Community Capacity Funds

A key issue identified in *'Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities: A Five-year Strategy to Support the Community and Voluntary Sector in Ireland'* relates to the impact of funding many one-off, short-term projects compared to increasing local capacity to operate different projects on a multi-annual basis in a sustained effort to address water quality outcomes.

3.2.1 Catchment Support Fund

The Department provided an answer by creating the Catchment Support Fund to commence in 2024, based on the recent Pilot Resilience Project and subsequent review and recommendations. Although the new development is outside the original scope of this work, the question of facilitating catchment community capacity to engage in longer-term and multi-faceted approaches represents a significant change from the typical project-only oriented funding, even if it reflects WFD principles and guidelines concerning community empowerment.

3.2.2 Heritage Organisations Support Fund

The Heritage Council's Heritage Organisations Support Fund (HOSF) was previously the Heritage Capacity Support Fund. This is the most relevant capacity fund and is aimed at Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) by providing funding towards core costs (salaries, rent, and rates), resilience (strategic or business

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planning), or training and skills development costs. There is a clear provision in the recent call for proposals for hiring new or contract staff.

A core aim of the fund is to *‘develop and strengthen skills, processes and resources needed to survive, adapt, and thrive in the uncertainty of recent times’* (2023: P3 HOSF Application Guidance Document).

As with LAWPRO, this fund is directed solely to community organisations, and applications are to include the submission of a detailed work plan reflecting national heritage policy. Funding levels were anticipated at the €30,000 to €60,000 level, representing an immediate indicator of funding at scale.

Reflecting the more significant stake involved in disbursing significantly higher levels of public funding, the call included a requirement to choose at least two of six prescribed outcomes (resilience, environmental sustainability, heritage involvement, heritage improvement, higher skill levels, and improved quality of life). A further requirement sought details of actions to meet outcomes, with a list of indicative actions having been included in the guidance.

Funding scale is again evident, with a three-stage application assessment process including internal review and shortlisting, external review panel, and final Heritage Council Board approval.

Community capacity building also features in the Government’s current strategy for the community and voluntary sector *‘Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities: A five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland’*.

3.3 Overview of Related Funds with Wider Focus

In setting a future direction for LAWPRO funding streams, it is important to factor in funds of relevance whose scope is more comprehensive than community. Two major national funds relating to climate action and nature protection reference global environmental challenges that are now factored into almost all economic, social, and environmental policies and practices in Europe and internationally.

Climate Action Fund

The Climate Action Fund was established to support projects that help achieve national climate and energy projects with a commitment of €500m in government funding up to 2027. Of particular relevance in this context is the Community Climate Action Fund, which supports projects and capacity building.

Building Low-Carbon Communities is one strand for distribution through Local Authorities to support urban and rural community-level engagement in considered and structured projects to address one or more of five themes, of which local climate and environmental action might be viewed as the most relevant among others that include community energy, travel, shopping and recycling, and food and waste.

Climate education, capacity building and learning-by-doing is the second strand of the fund that sees funding addressed through open calls and creative climate action funds to engage the public on climate change through the creative and cultural sectors.

Climate and Nature Fund

The Climate and Nature Fund was launched in 2023 to pay for climate action, and nature restoration projects will focus primarily on capital projects to help cut fossil fuel use, retrofit public and private housing stock, and help businesses decarbonise and restore nature across the country beginning in 2026.

4 LAWPRO Funding Strategy

4.1 Summary

LAWPRO has established itself at the forefront of facilitating community-based action strongly guided by expert catchment knowledge. The full extent of this focus will be realised when Catchment Management Plans are completed for each of the major catchments in the State. These will then inform community actions to improve natural water quality. In the interim, the intermediary role played by Community Water Officers is a crucial resource for community groups to ensure that plans and actions contribute to positive water quality outcomes. The key is that LAWPRO provides the robust supporting infrastructure to support communities to engage positively with local waterways, thereby enhancing individual and community well-being, resilience, and capacity to respond to emerging challenges.

The dichotomy between supporting many small projects from a robust supporting infrastructure or supporting capacity at the catchment level to coordinate multi-faceted approaches and multiple programmes that reflect local catchment or sub-catchment needs has been addressed. For the first time, LAWPRO support includes a provision to achieve both objectives through the existing Community Water Development Fund (CWDF) and a new Catchment Support Fund (CSF).

In terms of suggesting a path forward for LAWPRO to position CWDF and CSF into the future, it is instructive to consider issues and recommendations set out in the current national strategy for supporting the community and voluntary sector (*Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities: A five-year strategy to support the Community and Voluntary Sector in Ireland, 2019-2024*).

The strategy recommendations address the capacity funding question by seeking to scope and develop a sustainable funding model based on a multi-annual funding approach used in Northern Ireland to good effect.

Similarly, the Strategy suggests appropriate cost recovery models and references the costs of compliance and relevant overhead and administration costs. This echoes feedback from across the sector concerning the ever-increasing imposed compliance requirements concerning administration, reporting and policy adherence.

Core funding, long called for across the sector, had been tested with the Pilot Resilience Project and is now being further developed with the new Catchment Support Fund. This reflects another recommendation regarding providing such funding (in the medium term) for community and local development.

4.2 CWDF: Learning from the Past

Three previous evaluations have been reviewed in this document, and their findings are reflected in findings from the mid-programme review survey carried out on the 2023 CWDF implementation.

LAWPRO is well-regarded by project promoters. There are many positive comments about the organisation and almost no negative comments on the overall performance of the fund or funder. This is a considerable achievement in a relatively short period, and the reach of LAWPRO into community organisations is a significant asset for the future.

In the most recent (internal) review, the comments that warrant the most attention relate to funding and timing. Regarding funding, the focus is on grant amount versus amount requested, post-project drawdown, and the timing of awards concerning the optimum time for project implementation. These comments are valid. LAWPRO might further explore some of these themes in terms of addressing

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concerns. As a mechanism, payment in arrears does not help communities. It places financial prerequisites on groups committed to positive action concerning water quality. It is worth considering a two-stage funding process whereby a proportion (up to 50 per cent) is paid when the contract is signed and the remainder at project completion, as it is now.

This assessment is the fourth of the CWDF throughout its relatively short history. It takes place in a period of progressive change for LAWPRO with the announcement of a fund to help build capacity at catchment and sub-catchment levels. Within this assessment, the emphasis has been internal, assessing the fund's progress and external, examining other national funds targeted in similar geographic and thematic areas as CWDF.

In keeping with a progressive learning culture, LAWPRO has made significant changes relating to previous assessment work, the more significant of which are shown below: -

- **Match-funding:** the requirement for match funding has been curtailed significantly, and it is now, appropriately, a situation of it being achieved in the form of voluntary inputs, which demonstrate community engagement in water quality.
- **Pre-application steps:** the Funding Lead has addressed calls for a streamlined process with the ongoing development of an application portal that includes a community-oriented, informative webinar that addresses all the application requirements and shows sample projects from previous years.
- **Best practice:** LAWPRO continues to disseminate high-quality, accessible publications to inform communities about best practices.

Ongoing challenges remain concerning fund sufficiency, fund timing, and payment in arrears. At an organisational level, the different funds create the potential for confusion in relation to categories. However, there is evidence of efforts to reduce some of these challenges. For example, in some cases of larger funding amounts, a particular case can be made to access payment stage funding before project completion. Similarly, some targeting has taken place concerning Blue Dot and priority action areas.

4.3 The *Smart Village* Approach

The findings from Section 3 of this report suggest that there is overlap across the five community implementation funds distributed at the national or county level. The European Commission, through the LEADER Programme, has been advocating the *Smart Village* approach for rural development. One consideration identified in the research is strategically aligning different funds into a common framework so that communities might have a single proposal to submit rather than chasing similar projects with separate funders. In LEADER's case, the Local Action Group (often the Local Community Development Committee of the Local Authority) is seen as a potential '*broker*' through which strategic funds might be better directed.

The term '*Smart Village*' has been adopted widely before being adequately explained. It has been confusingly used in terms of digitalisation and climate action. However, the full meaning also embraces multi-funded and integrated approaches to local development.

Within the broad spectrum of climate action and nature-based solutions, it is appropriate to adopt some sort of cohesion so that funding is optimally distributed to effect the best local project implementation. In the case of the funds outlined in this document, it would seem that common sense would be well served by adopting some principles of cohesion. It is in LAWPRO's interest to talk to other funders to ensure that the focus of CWDF is best directed among the mix of funds to achieve a *Smart Village* effect.

4.4 Capacity Support Funding Considerations

Capacity fund guidelines are perhaps best assessed by considering key elements noted in the most recent call for proposals concerning the HOSF. The call notes that funding is provided for core costs, specifically regarding salaries, rent, and rates. These costs are not generally eligible in typical project funding streams. Resilience initiatives are also funded, coincidentally sharing a name with the pilot initiative that pointed towards the new LAWPRO capacity fund. This fund is targeted at strategic business planning; however, a broader focus has been adopted for the LAWPRO fund to include key relationship development and, training and skills development.

Other positive properties of the HOSF model should also be considered. Funding should be pitched at a scale to achieve significant outcomes in several areas. The typical award noted in the HOSF is between €30,000 and €60,000. The higher level of this fund would seem appropriate to reflect recommendations in the Resilience model. Other functions of the fund might draw less support.

The HOSF model also seeks actions to achieve a set of outcomes. These outcomes reflect the six thematic priorities to be delivered through an appropriate scale of resources and measured against an agreed set of targets.

Inclusion of an external review panel is appropriate to both CWDF and CSF should remain a priority as the fund parameters are being defined, together with internal processes that have emerged over the course of the CWDF and that are subject to Departmental review on an annual basis.

4.5 Community Water Development Fund

Determining how the CWDF strategically positions itself into the future should consider the different funding streams that emanate from policies in associated realms with the potential to impact the river basin or catchment level. If the catchment area is viewed as the locus of inputs related to various policies and funds, it stands to reason that knowledge of the scope and impact of these funds can help determine the future of CWDF.

5 Recommendations

The CWDF represents a successful and ambitious investment plan to facilitate communities and community activists to engage fully with the important work of ensuring a constant local focus on addressing issues that impact local (natural) water quality.

The fund is respectful of local autonomy and, at the same time, seeks to ensure best practice concerning the researched knowledge at the heart of good scientific practice. The dual Community Water Officer-Catchment Scientist focus would seem to strike the right delicate balance between top-down or external scientific knowledge and grassroots, community-based local knowledge based on the transmission of local knowledge through generations of local practice and tradition.

Fund managers have adapted policy and practice over time to ensure greater user-friendly functionality and information, application, and reporting processes in fund administration and management. While further improvements are possible, communities need to observe that their feedback from previous evaluations and annual internal reviews is seen to have been considered in making changes. The important priority of public funding in this regard should be to match accountability levels with the funding scale while ensuring that all funds distributed adhere to the public spending guidelines.

For the fund itself, it is clear that its administration has evolved to adapt to policy and practice issues over time. Many demand-based disbursement funds emerge in this manner and are subject to fund allocations that meet particular conditions over time. Now, with the benefit of six years of learning, it should be possible to address potential issues of transparency where funding pots created at one time lose the rationale over time and hence their created purpose.

5.1 Recommendation 1: Realigning Funding Categories

It might be appropriate to realign the funding structure so that all fund disbursement is assigned to one of three fund categories: -

1. Local Awareness and Events Scheme (LAES)
2. Community Water Development Fund (CWDF)
3. Catchment Support Fund (CSF)

Realignment is particularly important in terms of CWDF for it will ensure that other project related funds (feasibility and small capital grants) can be integrated into the new fund.

5.2 Recommendation 2: Realigning Funding Levels and Controls

In addition to fund category realignment, it is worth simplifying fund levels and associated controls. This will address situations where similar amounts were disbursed in different categories with different controls.

Table 8 – Project Funding Levels and Controls

Funding Level	Fund Category	Internal Control	External Control
Up to €2,500	CWOF	Senior Community Water Officer/ Funding Manager	Tipperary County Council
€2,501 to €10,000	CWDF	Funding Manager/ Regional Manager	Tipperary County Council
€10,001+	CWDF/ CSF	Funding Manager/ Regional Manager/ Director	Tipperary County Council External Evaluation Panel

The realigned funding streams are suggested to represent all of the funding types administered through LAWPRO, through which all current funding allocations should be directed. Each fund will continue with separate application, spending, and reporting requirements commensurate with the project scale.

5.2.1 Local Awareness and Events Fund (LAEF)

This local fund has emerged to allow Community Water Officers to address local needs, particularly concerning local information, awareness events, and publications. The CWOF has been successful and should be formalised so that all funds to a maximum (€2,500) should be distributed locally. Though the funding administration requirements should match the scale of funding, the Public Spending Code should be adhered to concerning invoice submission.

5.2.2 Community Water Development Fund (CWDF)

The CWDF should be project-related and include small-scale capital funding. It should encompass the funds currently administered through the Open Call, Feasibility Studies, and Capital Projects. The open call element should remain in place, as should targeted measures relating to Blue Dot Programme, Citizen Science and Priority Areas for Action. This centrally administered fund is suggested to operate from a certain threshold to distinguish it from the Local Awareness and Events Fund.

€2,500 is the initial minimum threshold suggested, to be reviewed after two or three years.

5.2.3 Catchment Support Fund (CSF)

The Catchment Support Fund was established during this review, and suggestions made here reflect the Resilience Pilot Project Review recommendations. The funding goal should be unambiguously directed at community capacity-building. Rivers Trusts/ Catchment Groups set-up costs are relevant here. This capacity building approach invites questions of whether communities of interest should be included.

While the term catchment may be interpreted as local, there is an argument to be made about the work of communities of interest in terms of natural water quality. NGOs, including Rivers Trusts Ireland and networks such as Icatch currently address many and potentially all local catchments and In terms of transparency, it is suggested that any funds distributed to such bodies up to now should be directed to the new fund.

5.3 Recommendation 3: Match Funding

The evaluation team broadly agrees with the LAWPRO approach based on the premise that it is welcome but not required. It is important to ensure that this premise is not inadvertently used as a ‘soft’ selection criteria when submitting similar projects with one indicating match funding. The current approach is based on community feedback and previous evaluation work.

The community should generally be contracted for ‘boots on the ground’ voluntary capacity, social good commitment, and member expertise. It is not inappropriate that material costs directly associated with

the agreed work should be paid for by the entity, in this case, the State through LAWPRO, that is looking for the work to be done.

Time spent in achieving match finance would better be used in doing the project work and in this regard it is important to treat voluntary inputs as match funding for which records should be maintained. This fulfils an important function of LAWPRO in relation to community engagement.

5.4 Recommendation 4: CWDF - Adequacy of Funding

Application Data indicates that grant amounts are, on average, significantly less (47%) than amounts requested. This situation is not ideal, for it invites inflated application figures based on the (not unreasonable) principle that almost fifty per cent will not be paid. There should be enough information from previous programmes to establish actual cost guideline amounts for most likely activities (allowing for inflation).

In Section 3 it was shown that the average disbursement in terms of CWDF is significantly below that for the Community Heritage Grants. Given geographic and thematic scope it would be preferable to increase the range and average disbursements. The systems are in place and the new focus on management plans at catchment level will provide further impetus for action at local level. It is important that funding levels are increased to match the scale of activity required.

5.5 Recommendation 5: Outcomes

Management Plans are to be published for each of the forty-six catchments in the State, and it is recommended that community-level (local) actions will be included in and governed by the strategies set out in these plans and will thus contribute to catchment level water quality improvements. In the interim, it is important that at each funding level, appropriate Community Water Officer and Catchment Science expertise is available to ensure that the funding accords with the National River Basin Management objectives.

5.6 Recommendation 6: Fund Coordination Initiatives

It is clear from reviewing the focus of many project-related funds operating in the community space that funders distribute to a similar pattern of objectives, actions, and terms.

To secure the highest quality outcomes, the funders must coordinate and recognise each other's expertise in ensuring appropriate outcomes. For example, projects in the heritage space distributed through another funder should reflect Heritage Council expertise, while projects that directly affect natural waters (rivers, lakes, seas) should reference LAWPRO expertise.

Discussions have taken place with other funders, and this work must be continued so that, where possible, coordination agreements can be put in place between funds with similar elements.

5.7 Recommendation 7: Catchment Support Fund

The Resilience Pilot Project review identified several outcome areas with measurable objectives concerning additional capacities associated with this fund, including: -

1. Coordination over the *'last mile'*, where community input might be crucial in engaging with local industry and farming communities. This dynamic was observed in the Resilience Pilot Project and

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should be sought in all contracts, recognising the unique parity-of-esteem status that comes with catchment-level recognition.

2. Coordination through agency, interagency and community crossover was observed by Agencies as being of considerable benefit at a local level that could be provided by catchment groups.
3. Volunteer engagement through skilled voluntary input is critical in achieving local objectives at capacity. This is particularly the case where sub-commercial works can be taken on by catchment groups supported by relevant authorities.
4. A significant multiplier effect was observed in the Resilience Pilot Project through multiple projects, and this should be a benchmark for all successful applicants.
5. Further recommendations were made concerning optimum governance and operations models for sustainable catchment management.

These and other considerations have been encompassed in a new terms of reference for the Catchment Support fund and as it is in the initial stages of operation these and the programme guidelines should be reviewed as part of an assessment of the first year of the CSF programme.

Appendix

A1 Community Water Development Fund 2024

Summary extract from Guidelines for Community Water Development Fund 2024

The Community Water Development Fund aims to fund projects that will bring about improvements in water quality and/or raise public awareness of the value of good water quality and how to improve it. It aims to build community capacity in water related challenges, working together to improve water quality.

The Fund is administered by the Local Authority Waters Programme on behalf of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. The Fund is open to eligible applicants in the Republic of Ireland only.

The Fund will help meet the objectives of the River Basin Management Plan for Ireland and the EU Water Framework Directive. It is listed as having a key role to encourage communities to get involved. There is a new Draft River Basin Management Plan 2022 - 2027 being developed at present.

A1.1 Eligible Applicants

The funding scheme is open to: -

1. Not-for-profit Community and Voluntary Groups.
2. Rural and Urban Networks.
3. Environmental Non-Government Organisations.
4. Clubs, Associations, or other appropriate bodies located in the Republic of Ireland only.

Individuals may NOT apply.

Only one application may be submitted per eligible organisation.

A1.2 Contact

Applicants must contact their Local Community Water Officer (CWO) before submitting their application form.

A1.3 Eligible Projects

Projects must demonstrate direct water quality actions and/or water quality awareness benefits and must fall into at least one of the categories listed below.

-
- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| • Bank Stabilisation | • Litter Clean Up |
| • Bog Restoration | • Raingarden |
| • Citizen Science | • Rainwater Planter |
| • Drain Blocking | • Reports/Plans |
| • Feasibility Studies | • Signage/Water Literacy |
| • Fencing | • Tree Planting |
| • Fish Passage | • Water Butt |
| • Gravel Installation | • Weir Removal |
| • Hard Surface Removal | • Wetland |
| • Invasive Species | • Woody Debris |
| • Leaky Dam | • Education/Awareness Programme of Events |
-

Water Quality Actions

Including Restoration, Habitat Conservation, and Nature Based Catchment Solutions. *Examples include:* -

- Riparian management/tree planting, planting of native species/hedgerows, de-tunnelling, etc.
- Creation of habitat near river, lake, wetland
- Fish passage projects
- Removal of invasive species and biosecurity planning

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- Silt trapping or ‘*Slow the Flow*’ Natural Flood Retention Measures (e.g. the addition of large woody debris to drains)
- Pollution management/prevention measures (e.g., wetlands, buffer zones)
- Flood management measures (e.g., Swales, attenuation ponds)
- Preparation of River restoration plans / feasibility studies
- Wetlands to promote wildlife and reduce pollution and flooding
- Rain gardens and Nature Based Surface Water Management
- Match funding towards a relevant project partially funded under another scheme e.g. LEADER, FLAGS.

Water Quality Awareness

Community led awareness initiatives with a water-based theme. Examples include:

- Water conservation initiatives such as rainwater harvesting on roof of buildings
- Coastal river or lake stewardship project e.g. adopt a “*local water body*” project
- Local waterbody awareness initiatives such as biodiversity/nature/demonstration days or workshops
- Citizen Science projects and surveys (including purchase of specialist equipment)
- General amenity (e.g. outdoor biodiversity classroom)
- Innovative techniques for monitoring water quality and biodiversity
- Planting of native wildflowers and vegetation in habitat restoration projects
- Bespoke breeding boxes for birds and mammals
- Leaflet/booklet about nature, biodiversity or local waterbody
- Development of digital/social media tools
- Training workshop
- Targeted surveys
- Conservation plans
- Biodiversity signage
- Local pollution prevention initiatives
- Match funding towards a relevant project partially funded under another scheme e.g. LEADER, FLAGS.

Non-Eligible Projects and Activities

The Community Water Development Fund will not formally fund activities involving: -

- Projects that solely benefit an individual
- Teaching/staffing in schools
- Travel and transport costs except in exceptional circumstances
- Equipment, unless directly associated with the project
- Income generating projects
- Overheads, ongoing running costs
- Insurance
- Accommodation and subsistence
- Staff costs

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A1.4 Funding

Category	Description	Assessment Criteria	Max Rate of Grant Aid
1. Large scale projects	Projects should be at a catchment scale, promote an integrated catchment approach and be led by local communities. Priority will be given to projects in Blue Dot/high status objective areas or Priority Areas for Action.	Status of waterbody (1-5) Community/landowner/public body engagement (1-5) Actions Proposed (1-5) Potential impact on catchment (1-5) Ability to finance and manage the project (1-5)	€25,000
2. Medium scale projects	Priority must involve some capital works. Priority will be given to projects in Blue Dot/high status objective areas or Priority Areas for Action.	Status of waterbody (1-5) Community/landowner/public body engagement (1-5) Actions proposed (1-5) Benefit to Community (1-5) Ability to finance and manage the project (1-5)	€5,000 to €10,000
3. Small scale projects	These projects will provide 'community gain' or benefit relevant to good water stewardship. Priority will be given to projects in Blue Dot/high status objective areas or Priority Areas for Action.	Status of waterbody (1-5) Community/landowner/public body engagement (1-5) Actions proposed (1-5) Benefit to Community (1-5) Ability to finance and manage the project (1-5)	€1,000 to €5,000