



IWDG 3 Year Plan (2021-2024)

To increase engagement with IWDG members and the public, to share our knowledge and enthusiasm and to promote our conservation actions and priorities.

Strategic Plan of the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group

To be reviewed annually

**December 2021
Revised September 2022**

IWDG 3 Year Plan (2022-2024)

The Irish Whale and Dolphin Group (IWDG) was established in December 1990 and is an All-Ireland group *“dedicated to the conservation and better understanding of cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) in Irish waters through study, education and interpretation”*. In December 1999, the IWDG were granted charitable status (CHY 11163) and became a Limited Company in October 2000. Since 2000, the IWDG has grown into a credible, effective NGO with a growing membership and increasing influence on government policy and actions. In June 2001 the IWDG published its first five-year development plan to cover the period 2001-2005. Four more plans followed covering the period 2006-2021. These plans have led to reviews of IWDG Structures and Procedures, resulting in significant changes to its operation and Articles of Association. A number of protocols for good governance were adopted by the IWDG and incorporated into the Standing Orders. IWDG have appointed new officers to key positions in 2013 and their contribution is essential for successful delivery of the current plan. IWDG will review current protocols and procedures and revise accordingly.

This is the sixth IWDG Plan, and this current plan will direct the IWDG through to 2024. This plan is very important as the IWDG is going through a period of transition as the IWDG has expanded considerably over the past few years, especially its *Consulting* wing. The IWDG are committed to developing capacity in Ireland to ensure conservation policies, surveys and recording can be maintained in the long term and the necessary experience be sourced in Ireland. In the third plan (2013-2015) we wished *to use the data generated by the recording schemes to support and develop conservation policies and actions*. The priorities for the plan (2016-2019) was to *encourage and empower new people to get involved in the IWDG, to increase participation in IWDG recording schemes and establish and use the Shannon Dolphin Centre in Co Clare* and in the last plan to *increase engagement with IWDG members and the public, to share our knowledge and enthusiasm and to promote our conservation actions and priorities*.

The main theme in the current plan is to improve communication within the IWDG and externally. To ***engage members, and the public, to encourage advocacy as a positive influence on new marine policies affecting whales and dolphins and their habitats.***

Proposals and Actions have been prioritised using:



New, or existing, members wishing to get more involved with the IWDG can look at this plan and see how they can contribute to the plan, which will be reviewed annually.

1 IWDG Structure

IWDG have made significant changes to its structure with the appointment of a range of officers to deliver the work programme contained in the IWDG plans. Standing Orders will be updated regularly to reflect any new changes.

1.1 Officers

The IWDG will continue to support existing officers. The Science Officer position has been filled to cover this 3-year period. A detailed work programme for the Science Officer in collaboration with the Education & Outreach officer will help the group achieve goals in conservation, research and education. A Social Media officer/Digital content creator was put in place in 2021 and manages regular posts for social media along with creative content for campaigns.



- Continue to support Science officer and Education & Outreach officer

1.2 Communications

The website is the main source of communication **between IWDG and its members**. The reporting scheme is integrated with this and the most recent sightings and strandings are visible on the home page.

Relevant news articles are posted to the website and shared on social media to entice **viewers (existing and non supporters and members alike)** to visit the website and potentially become a supporter or member.

The reach on the groups's social media channels (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) have grown and we will continue to create engaging digital content but we will look carefully at how effective this type of communication is and how it is meeting our objectives.

Monthly Ezine and Blubber Bulletin broadcasts will be used to **keep members informed**.

Regular in-person and online meetings are used for **internal communication** in addition to emails and new chat tools will be explored such as Slack. A combination of Monthly **officers** online meetings and emails to officers@iwdg.ie are used for discussing ongoing work and plans. Regular online board meetings are held throughout the year for **director** communication in addition to the directors@iwdg.ie group email. An annual conference, Whale Tales will be held to confer with **members** and invited **guests** in areas of interest, **government** and non-government to call for action to achieve our objectives.

Communications with government agencies such as the NPWS, Marine Institute, EPA and IFI and relevant departments is achieved through tendered contracts, project meetings, workshops and submissions.

High

- Continue to keep iwdg.ie up to date and relevant
- Investigate effective communication using engaging Digital content with focussed calls-to-action
- Continue to provide regular Monthly Ezines
- Keep active communication with core group of officers and directors
- Continue engagement with government agencies

1.3 Local Groups

IWDG have identified the development of Local Groups as a priority. Some groups exist already (North Kerry, Clare, Galway, Donegal, Northern Ireland, Mayo, Sligo). Local groups in Dublin and Louth were established in 2020, Cork was established in 2021 and a group in Wicklow was established in 2022. Plans are in place to create a South Kerry local group during the second half of 2022. The addition of these new local groups have enabled the IWDG to have a more focused and meaningful coverage around the Irish coastline.

However, to improve engagement in Waterford, Sligo, Dublin and Louth an emphasis on training is needed moving forward.

A guide to establishing and running a Local IWDG Group needs finalising. The guide contains a discussion on the relationship between local groups and the IWDG but this will develop as the network grows. A key role of an Outreach and Education Officer will be to support local groups.

High

- Continue support for the Development of a Network of Local Groups.
- Target 1-2 per annum that require limited support from HO

2 Promotion and Fundraising

The IWDG requires additional funding streams to ensure resources exist to deliver this plan. Increasing membership has been identified as an important contributor to this objective as well as increasing core funding and sponsorship, especially for specific conservation actions. Currently IWDG Consulting provides most funds to run the IWDG and our funding streams need to be diversified.

Core Sponsors, Inis have also supported the Shannon Dolphin Project and will continue to support the group for the foreseeable future. Support can also be given through services such as IT services and social media advice.

High

- Create 1 fundraising appeal through Social Media for each project each year

2.1 Increase IWDG Membership

IWDG membership has grown significantly since the new website was put in place 4 years ago. It continues to grow slowly and steadily. IWDG Membership Officer manages the membership database and provides a personal experience for members. Potential still exists to promote membership further and increase retention of new members. In order to achieve this IWDG should:

High

- Inform members and supporters of the work of the group in a meaningful way with a call to action to support us by becoming a member.
- Promote the unique benefits to membership such as Flukes magazine, membership of local groups, Celtic Mist summer surveys, discounts on courses, invitation to attend annual Whale Tales conference.
- Make the membership database easier for the membership officer to use as membership grows

2.2 Core and Corporate Sponsorship

Core funding is an important source of finances. Currently we receive core funding from the Department of Environment through the Irish Environmental Network (IEN) and from *Inis* as our Core Sponsor. Corporate sponsorship could be a much more important source of support, though historically we have not been very successful. The partnership between IWDG and Apple Computers has been very successful. IWDG will identify and seek additional corporate sponsorship.

High

- Attempt to engage one additional core funder during life of this plan
- Develop a multi-layered sponsorship approach.
- Research funding from LEADER, the Heritage Council, FLAG and other agencies each year.

2.3 Maintain IWDG Consultancy Services

IWDG established IWDG Consultancy in 2015 to manage and promote its commercial contracts including the provision of MMOs, EIAs and Marine Mammal Risk Assessments. It has established a web presence (<http://consulting.iwdg.ie>) and profits are now a major

contribution to IWDG funds at a time when funding from government or private sources is poor.

It is important to maintain IWDG Consulting to ensure this important revenue stream continues and retain some independence from state funding.

High

- Explore legal structure and relationship with the IWDG to ensure compliance with charitable status



2.4 Celtic Mist

IWDG re-launched *Celtic Mist* as a research vessel in 2012 followed by a second major refit during the winter of 2017-18. *Celtic Mist* is a valuable asset to promote the IWDG while supporting research and conservation. Floating Classroom, a two week educational event run in May each year has been very successful. *Celtic Mist* needs to be utilised more and IWDG will:

- Support Floating Classroom each year in collaboration with other IEN members
- Train more skippers and crew
- Develop training protocols for Marine Biologists who will subsequently support members in developing their surveying techniques
- Develop survey techniques for members.
- Improve recording and integration into the existing sightings database and explore reporting options.
- Participate in key maritime events
- Undertake one overseas research expedition during life of this plan

High



3 Education and Outreach

The IWDG needs to develop a Communication Strategy to tie in with an Education Programme. A number of protocols have been developed in recent years but IWDG needs to increase its profile amongst the public and especially with younger people.

3.1 E-zine and Annual Report

The IWDG produces monthly news e-zines to members and subscribers and its magazine Flukes, twice a year. The IWDG also produces an Annual Report which is available to members on the Members Section of the website. IWDG will continue to support this outreach.

High

- Produce monthly ezines to members and subscribers
- Publish Flukes twice a year
- Broadcast a monthly Blubber Bulletin

3.2 Promotion

IWDG will draft a list of national and local events, which IWDG should attend each year over the life of this plan. This will ensure good coverage and good use of resources.

Medium

3.3 Vlogs

IWDG has many stories to tell and has the opportunity to tell them through video logs (vlogs), especially with the strong visual background that whales and dolphins provide. Currently Tony Whelan of Canola Pictures is contracted to the IWDG and produces series such as Who We Are.

Medium

- Continue to produce high quality vlogs to promote our work and tell IWDG Stories.

3.4 School Visits

There is a lack of awareness of Irish whales and dolphins throughout the island of Ireland. IWDG produced the first dedicated resource for primary schools (Ireland's Blubber Book) as a first step to increase young people's knowledge of whales and dolphins in Irish waters.

In person and virtual workshops along with collaborative efforts with organisations such as the Natural History Museum and the explorers programme have enabled the IWDG to reach a broader audience.

Medium

- Create supplementary educational resources for the IWDG website.
- Continue the Transition Year programme which will allow young people the opportunity to get actively involved with the IWDG.

3.5 Irish Language

IWDG respects the Irish language and wishes to ensure all relevant and important literature and some resources are available through Irish.

Medium

- Continue to produce the Irish language version of major press releases by the IWDG and translate publications where appropriate.

3.6 IWDG Resources

IWDG printed resources are becoming more limited as we turn to more digital media. However, we need to maintain a certain level of these resources. Over the course of the last plan we printed an ***Offshore Windfarm Policy*** document and updated our laminated guides.

- IWDG will produce a publication **Whales and Whale Watching in Ireland**. A compendium of stories by whale watchers drawn from the ranks of IWDG, sharing their experiences from around this island and beyond, illustrated by William Helps and the very latest information and trends on the key locations and times of year to experience some of the best whale watching in the North Atlantic. This publication will be aimed at a general wildlife audience and for anyone with a passion for observing marine megafauna.
- Guidelines for Sustainable Wildlife Watching
- Deep-sea Mining Policy Document
- The Large Whale Stranding Protocol was produced in 2020 and a handy 1 page ‘Code of Conduct for Watercraft encountering Whales and Dolphins’ was produced and distributed.

Medium

4 Cetacean Stranding and Sighting Scheme

The co-ordination of an All-Ireland cetacean stranding and sighting scheme continues to be a core function of the IWDG. IWDG will continue to support these schemes to ensure as much data is collected on cetacean strandings and sightings in Ireland, and that these data are validated and stored and made available to support relevant research, conservation and welfare issues. Better participation in recording schemes is essential and the Shannon Dolphin Centre in Kilrush, Co Clare provides a very useful resource.

4.1 Increase participation in recording schemes

- Identify areas with poor coverage to target resources
- Develop and support the Stranding Network which can

- Coordinate the stranding response for live strandings and
- support individuals to gather samples for dead strandings
- Organise day and weekend courses and events around coast through the Local Group networks
- Promote the newly developed IWDG Reporting App (May 2021)
- Maintain and develop the current relationship with the National Biodiversity Data Centre

High

4.2 Irish Cetacean Genetic Tissue Bank

The Irish Cetacean Genetic Tissue Bank was established in 2006 through collaboration between the IWDG and the National Museum of Ireland (Natural History). Tissue samples from over 1000 individual animals are now stored and students from around Europe are regularly requesting access to these samples. The scheme has been re-invigorated in recent years with provision of new dedicated staff at the museum. The IWDG will continue to support and develop the Irish Cetacean Genetic Tissue Bank.

Low

- Provide access to publications that have accessed material from the tissue bank

5 Research

IWDG believes that research is important to support conservation initiatives and policy. A strong scientific base to IWDG activities has been essential to build a credible and respected organisation. IWDG research over the next three years should be focused on supporting Conservation Actions and new Policy initiatives, including the roll-out of MPAS, while complementing the Cetacean Sighting and Stranding Schemes.

5.1 Ferry Surveys

Re-establish (post-covid) and maintain three survey routes on ferries across the Irish Sea: Dublin - Holyhead (Irish Ferries), Belfast – Cairnryan (Stenaline) and Rosslare - Pembroke (Irish Ferries).

- Conduct a review of all IWDG ferry survey data
- Maintain and update the IWDG Ferry Surveys Facebook Group to keep surveyors informed
- Source funding to upgrade ferry survey equipment incl. laptops and binoculars

Medium

5.3 WhaleTrack

WhaleTrack is a high profile long-term IWDG project. Efforts will be made to secure multi-annual funding from a core sponsor. Giving IWDG members unique access to research cruises has proven very popular. A continuation of this model would be optimal. Further, engaging with third level institutes will be beneficial as postgraduate or post-doctoral researchers with research deliverable deadlines can provide additional impetus required to drive this project.



Medium

- Populate the Irish Humpback Whale Photo-ID database onto bespoke software to improve access to data for conservation management.
- Populate the Irish Fin Whale Photo-ID database onto bespoke software to improve access to data for conservation management
- Support post-graduate research on large whales to add value to IWDG data

5.4 Photo-ID Catalogues

Photo-ID is a powerful technique in improving our understanding of the movements, behaviour and site faithfulness of whales and dolphins. To date IWDG have substantial photo-id catalogues of bottlenose dolphins, fin and humpback whales as well as smaller ones on other species. IWDG have recently taken ownership of the bottlenose dolphin images collected since 2000 and formally held by the Shannon Dolphin and Wildlife Foundation resulting in one of the longest running bottlenose dolphin photo-id studies in Europe (since 1993).

IWDG have built a database on *FinBase* for all photo-ID data from the ***Shannon Dolphin Bottlenose Dolphin Population*** and the ***Coastal Bottlenose Dolphin Population*** in order to be a useable scientific resource. IWDG will continue to collect high quality photo-id images suitable for photo-id and to encourage these images to be sent to the IWDG.

IWDG will:

Medium

- Continue to monitor the resident bottlenose dolphin population in the Shannon Estuary.
- Continue to maintain the coastal bottlenose dolphin catalogue on *Finbase*

6 Conservation

The IWDG will continue to use our good reputation and the wealth of data and information collected by our researchers and Citizen Science recorders, to support conservation actions and policies. The IWDG will prioritise using the data collected by our recording schemes to inform and develop conservation actions over the lifetime of this plan.

High

6.1 Fisheries Management

IWDG have been involved in fisheries management issues in Ireland for many years. IWDG are represented on the Celtic Sea Herring Management Advisory Committee (CSHMAC) and have prepared submissions for fisheries consultation including a policy document. IWDG are concerned with unregulated fishing of sprat which is a critical food source for large whales

- Lobby government to manage sprat stocks by gaining the relevant data to set effective quotas
- Initiate a conversation about sprat fishing and the importance of sprat in coastal ecosystems.
- Continue to be represented on the CSHMAC.

High

6.2 Marine Protected Areas

In autumn 2019, the department initiated a process aimed at expanding Ireland's network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in the coming years. In 2022 the IWDG joined with a group of Ireland's leading environmental non-governmental organisations (eNGOs) to call for at least 10% of Irish waters to be designated as 'Fully Protected' by 2025 and at least 30% within Marine Protected Areas by 2030. The IWDG has good data to identify potential areas, which are important for whales and dolphins.

High

- IWDG will work with Fair Seas to work towards achieving at least 10% of Irish waters to be designated as 'Fully Protected' by 2025 and at least 30% within Marine Protected Areas by 2030.
- IWDG will update our MPA mapping tool with new datasets to identify important areas for cetaceans for potential MPA designation
- IWDG will prepare site descriptions for proposed MPAs for Cetaceans based on best available data.
- IWDG will aim to contribute to MPA pilot schemes to identify issues of concern constraint MPA process

6.3 Policy submissions

IWDG are consulted on Government and Local Authority policy from time to time, e.g. MSFD. These consultations may be stakeholder specific or part of a wider public consultation.

- IWDG will continue to comment on relevant policy consultations that are likely to have an impact on the conservation of cetaceans in Irish waters.
- IWDG will seek to have the Government's Cetacean Action Plan reviewed and updated by 2024.
- IWDG will seek to have the 'NPWS Guidance to Manage the Risk to Marine Mammals from Man made Sound Sources in Irish Waters' reviewed and updated.

High

6.5 Events

The IWDG run an annual conference combined with their AGM conferring with members and guests on the broad spectrum of work that the IWDG are involved with.

Medium

- WhaleTales Annual Meeting
- Organise a series of special events to celebrate 30 years of Shannon Dolphin Project during 2023

7 Welfare

IWDG strives to preserve the welfare of Irish cetaceans in accordance with globally accepted research and protocols. IWDG first published a comprehensive Welfare Policy document in 2014, and reprinted Face to Face with a Beached Whale in 2017 - both outlining key areas of relevance to the welfare of Irish cetacean populations. Priority action areas identified for further work over the next three years are:

- Update best practice guidelines for whale watching tourism in Irish waters
- Expand the network of veterinarians trained in humane cetacean euthanasia
- Establish Ireland's own cetacean disentanglement protocol

7.1 Training in live stranding response

IWDG have been running training courses in live stranded cetacean response for many years. IWDG have whale pontoons and recently developed dolphin stretchers with local groups which have been very successful. IWDG should continue to organise this training and organize four live stranding courses per annum. Ideally, at least one course should be carried out in each province, per annum.

- Promote the Large Whale Stranding Protocol
- Implement a training course specifically for veterinarians on live stranding response, including welfare assessment and humane euthanasia
- Collaborate with UCD's School of Veterinary Medicine to introduce cetacean physiology and anatomy into the veterinary curriculum

Medium

7.2 Disentanglement training

Entanglement in fishing gear, especially surface pot ropes is an increasing global issue. With a growing humpback whale population in Irish coastal waters, the risk of entanglement is high and increasing.

Medium

- Prepare an Entanglement Database to track incidences and record important information
- Organise a disentanglement workshop and exercise with key partners to prepare better for such events