



ANNUAL REPORT 2025

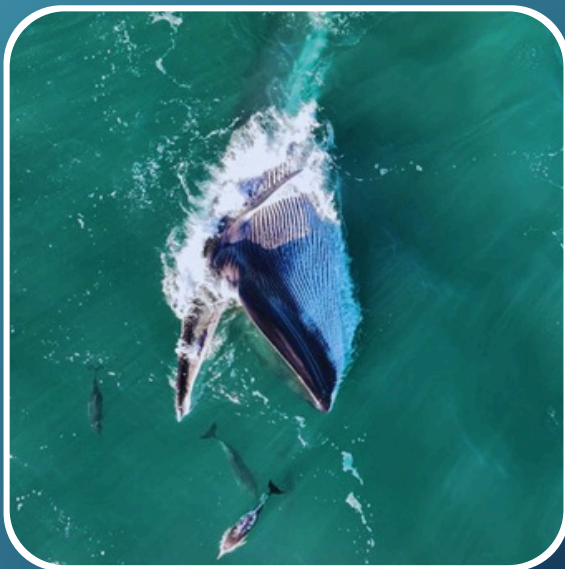


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OUR VISION AND STRATEGIC CONTEXT



The Irish Whale and Dolphin Group's work is guided by a clear mission, vision and set of values, supported by the IWDG Strategy 2023–2028. This strategy sets out the organisation's long-term direction and priorities for advancing evidence-based cetacean conservation in Irish waters.

This section provides strategic context for the work described throughout this Annual Report. Operational activities in 2025 are reported in detail within officer and programme sections that reflect how work is delivered across the organisation.

Mission Statement

"The conservation and better understanding of cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoise) in Irish and other waters through increasing awareness, research, education, welfare activities and collaboration."

Vision and Values

Vision

We will lead evidence-based cetacean conservation for Ireland.

Core Values

- Science-Based Advocacy
- Engagement
- Visibility

Overview of the 2023–2028 Strategic Objectives

Stakeholder Engagement

Increase IWDG's strategic dialogue with key marine stakeholders to foster understanding and collaboration.

Policy and Advocacy

Proactively advocate for policy changes that enhance marine conservation, including MPAs, sustainable fisheries, and protection against harmful activities.

Science and Knowledge Generation

Maintain IWDG's reputation as a science-based organisation by advancing our recording schemes, research, and academic partnerships.

Public Awareness and Education

Expand our reach and influence by engaging the public, educators, and students through outreach events, communications, and citizen science.

Sustainable Funding

Develop diversified and resilient income streams to sustain IWDG's long-term activities, including strategic fundraising and financial planning.

STATEMENT FROM THE BOARD



In 2022, around the time I was appointed Chair of the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group, the Board set out to develop a new strategy for the organisation. Five strategic pillars were defined. They were:

- 1. Increase stakeholder engagement;**
- 2. Proactively advocate to governments for policy and action;**
- 3. Generate and interpret new knowledge, including citizen science;**
- 4. Bring public opinion with us;**
- 5. Build a sustainable funding model to enable IWDG's activities.**

We are now half way through the five-year implementation period of this strategy so it is an appropriate time to take stock of how well we are doing.

Engagement with key stakeholders, including the offshore energy industry, fisheries and the ports, as well government and NGOs has seen a very pronounced upturn. We now have two full time Policy Officers who have led this engagement to the point where these vitally important relationships are on a much stronger footing than they were in 2022.

We have clearly had a strong impact in our advocacy to the Irish government and distinct progress has been made towards the development and implementation of new national policies that positively impact on cetaceans and their habitats. Our involvement with European projects and partners contributes to the evolution of European policy on a number of key issues, an example of which is the reduction of 'ship strikes', i.e. the number of whales lost to collisions with ships.

IWDG is creating new knowledge. This includes scientific publications on subjects such as the impact of dredge disposal on harbour porpoises in Dublin Bay and humpback whale movement patterns based on citizen science data. This data has been collected from our sightings and strandings schemes, which go from strength to strength, thanks largely to citizen scientists. These include members, their families and those who are in the early stages of interacting with IWDG. Many of these enthusiastic and dedicated people do not have a scientific background but IWDG supports them with training courses, as well as by means of technological innovations, such as our new sightings app.

Membership subscriptions will never bring in enough revenue to fund the diverse range of activities that IWDG undertakes. Our revenues from consultancy continue to facilitate our growth but more sustainable and diverse sources of funding remain a priority.

In summary, we are on track with our goals of increasing stakeholder engagement and influencing government policy. IWDG also has some excellent tools for collecting data with the support of citizen scientists.

However, our efforts to encourage society, in its broadest sense, to reflect upon the ocean environment and the needs of its largest species, can never be enough. We must strive to reach into discussions over dinner tables, water coolers and play grounds, in every corner of this island. Here we need to do more. Similarly, our continued existence depends on new sources of revenue and, here, more innovative approaches are greatly needed.

I have served long enough in my role as Chair of IWDG and it will be to the benefit of this amazing organisation, as well as its highly competent and ever-enthusiastic officers, employees, contractors, volunteers and members if one of my esteemed colleagues on the Board now takes over the reins.

Meanwhile, I will not fade into the background but intend to stay on the Board, where I will lead the effort to find a replacement for Celtic Mist, which sadly has reached the end of its useful life with us. I strongly believe that a new research vessel is essential for meeting our strategic objectives of gathering data through citizen science, as well as being our ambassador in ports around the country. I look forward to the day when a member of the public, with little or no exposure to marine mammals, sees our new vessel for the first time and says “Aaah, that’s what the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group is all about. Now, I want to join them.”

Dr Patrick Hartigan
Chairman

A MESSAGE FROM OUR CHIEF EXECUTIVE



Welcome to our annual report – an opportunity to reflect on a busy year for the IWDG. 2025 marks a half-way stage in delivery of our 5-year strategy. Our stated long-term goal is to “achieve healthy populations of cetaceans in a thriving ecosystem and healthy seas, with synergies with Ireland’s coastal communities”

It might take us a lot longer than 5 years to achieve this but it's important to remind ourselves why we work hard for the IWDG and the whales, dolphins and porpoise that live in our oceans.

The strategy has five pillars and we try to align our day to day work with these targets as requested by the board. Behind these targets and measures are real people doing real work and plenty of small, medium and large wins. Here is our review of the year we share these with you, our members, supporters and constituents. Some wins are obvious and immediate, refloating a live stranded dolphin. Some are less obvious; incorporating new conditions to a large infrastructure planning application. All contribute to achieving our aims and goals.

During 2025 we have built stronger relations with fellow IEN members, to be a bigger part of the eNGO community. We find ourselves now to be one of the bigger eNGOs in Ireland with a high degree of credibility and influence both in planning and policy and media circles. At a time when mis and false-information is rampant it is important there is a source of information, based on evidence, that people can trust. Our vision is to “lead evidence-based cetacean conservation for Ireland”.

IWDG continues to invest in people, our strongest tool to improve the health of our seas and the whales, dolphins and porpoises that try to live there. We have taken on two new staff members to head up our MPA advocacy and IWDG outreach. We continue to try and influence the bigger pressures increasing on our inshore waters: Offshore renewables and coastal developments while promoting the benefits of well-managed effective marine protected areas. The IWDG wants to be “sitting around the table” when big decisions are being made that could have a strong impact on our cetacean habitats.

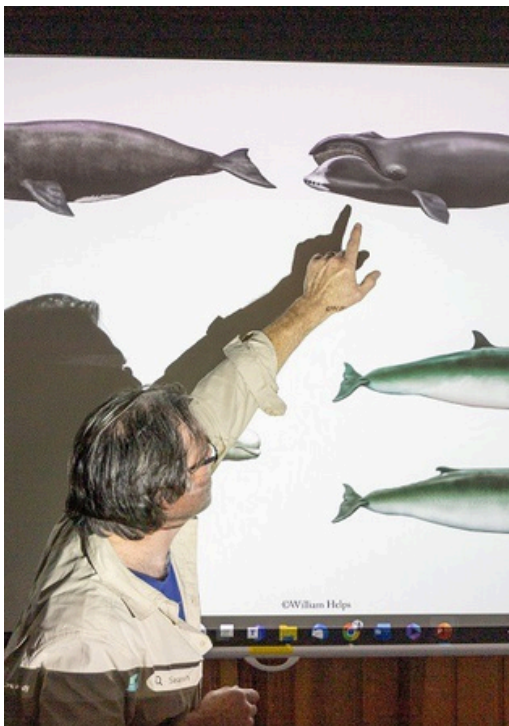
While some of these issues are big, sometimes overwhelming and sometimes we might feel ineffective, we can only do the best we can with what we have. We mustn't lose sight of the human condition, and IWDG tries to present a positive approach both to our work and our officers. At our latest Whale Tales in Belfast we were reminded to keep having fun and retain a bit of madness.

In the year ahead we need to try and steer our large social media audience to more tangible support, use our data and experience to have a positive impact on policy and planning, build relationships with like-minded organisations off this island as we cannot work in isolation, and most of all keep believing we can have a positive impact and continue to represent our “clients” – the whales, dolphins and porpoises that live or visit Irish waters.

Thank you to all those involved with the IWDG, the Board, Officers, Members and supporters for another good year for the IWDG.

Dr Simon Berrow
Chief Executive Officer

OUR YEAR IN NUMBERS



SCIENCE

40%

of humpback sightings in Donegal Bay
Evidence of changing distribution

2,525

cetacean & basking shark sightings validated

400+

strandings recorded nationwide

STRANDINGS DATA

Supporting welfare response and investigations

WELFARE

55

live stranding events involving 125 animals

117

people trained in live stranding response

62

new responders joined the network

76%

of reported live strandings are attended by IWDG responders



ENGAGEMENT

500+

attendees on 14 Whale Watch sites nationwide

51

participants on Residential Species ID courses

193

students engaged through Floating Classroom

100+

attendees at Whale Tales 2025



POLICY

ORE INFLUENCE

Evidence-based input on noise and habitat protection

MARINE SPATIAL PLANNING ROLE

Expert input to MSP and DMAP processes

MPAs

Strengthening the basis for future designated areas

NATIONAL AND EU ADVOCACY

Active role in Fair Seas and EU consultations

ORGANISATION

3

new staff recruited

500k+

Grant funding secured in 2025

31

Funding applications successful out of 42

11k

received of National Lottery Good Causes Award



OUR IMPACT

This section outlines the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group's impact during 2025, demonstrating how our work delivers against the five objectives of the IWDG Strategy 2023–2028.

Together, these areas show how IWDG applies science, field experience and collaboration to achieve practical conservation outcomes for whales, dolphins and porpoises in Irish waters. Detailed reporting on programmes, projects and officer responsibilities is provided in the sections that follow.

SCIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE GENERATION

These activities reinforced IWDG's role as a trusted source of long-term cetacean data, supporting research, conservation planning and evidence-based decision-making in Irish waters.

IWDG Recording Schemes

- 2,525 validated cetacean and basking shark sighting records were processed from Irish waters in 2025. While this represents a reduction in 2024, reporting remained geographically broad and transitioned successfully to the IWDG website following the removal of the reporting app.
- IWDG continued to curate and manage over 30 years of national sightings data, responding to 11 formal data requests from researchers, agencies and industry under established SOPs.
- Whale Track Ireland highlighted continued shifts in humpback whale distribution, with Donegal Bay accounting for almost 40% of Irish humpback sightings, reinforcing evidence of changing habitat use.
- Irish humpback and fin whale photo-id data continued to support international collaboration, contributing to overseas catalogues, scientific publications and conference presentations.
- Over 400 cetacean, basking shark and sea turtle stranding reports were validated and managed by IWDG during 2025, supported by an expanding national Stranding Network and trained volunteer responders.
- New training resources and protocols were introduced, improving data quality and consistency, particularly for high-value photographic evidence and welfare indicators.
- Targeted recruitment and training strengthened coverage in key stranding hotspots, reducing response pressure on long-standing volunteers and improving coordination.

- Strandings data supported post-mortem investigations, welfare decision-making and ongoing research into threats such as bycatch, entanglement and Unusual Mortality Events.

WELFARE AND CONSERVATION ACTION

These actions strengthened Ireland's national capacity to respond to live cetacean strandings, improving welfare outcomes through trained responders, veterinary oversight and coordinated response.

- 55 live stranding events were recorded across the island of Ireland, involving 125 cetaceans, making it the busiest year to date for live strandings. IWDG responders attended 76% of all live stranding events, supported by the Emergency Hotline, which received 203 calls relating to animals in difficulty.
- Five live stranding training courses trained 117 people, including NPWS staff, veterinarians and volunteers, with 62 new responders joining the Stranding Network. Veterinary engagement expanded significantly, including the first year of CVE accreditation for IWDG live stranding training and growth of the IWDG veterinary network to 29 professionals nationwide.
- IWDG's Live Stranding Response Programme received national recognition, winning the National Lottery Good Causes Award (Heritage Category), with prize funding reinvested directly into volunteer safety, training and specialist equipment.

PUBLIC AWARENESS AND EDUCATION

Together, these activities increased ocean literacy and supported pathways from public engagement to citizen science, training and conservation action.

- IWDG delivered extensive public engagement across the island of Ireland through Whale Watch Ireland 2025 (Biodiversity Week), Heritage Week events, Floating Classroom, Whale Tales 2025, community talks, webinars, radio interviews and outreach activities, reaching diverse coastal and inland audiences.
- Floating Classroom 2025 engaged 193 students from five schools in Galway, providing hands-on learning experiences that introduced primary school students to cetacean biology, research methods and marine conservation in an accessible and age-appropriate way.
- Whale Tales 2025, held in Belfast, attracted strong membership and stakeholder participation, more than 100 people participated over the weekend, rebuilding IWDG's presence in Northern Ireland and creating space for dialogue between researchers, policymakers, volunteers and the public, strengthening cross-border understanding and collaboration.

- Residential Whale Watching Weekend Courses were delivered in 2025 through two courses involving 51 participants, around half of whom joined IWDG as a direct result. The courses combined field observation, species identification and conservation learning.
- Whale Watch Ireland, delivered as the flagship event of National Biodiversity Week (16–25 May 2025), marked its 23rd year in 2025. The all-island event comprised free, guided land-based whale watches at 14 sites across 14 coastal counties, spanning all four provinces.
- The Annual Stranding Network Meeting was delivered in Kilkee, Co. Clare, with around 30 volunteers and partners attending training and research updates to support consistent, evidence-based stranding responses.
- The Marine Mammal Stranding Workshop, held at Dublin Zoo, brought together veterinarians, scientists, responders and agencies to advance collaboration towards a coordinated national post-mortem framework for stranded cetaceans.

POLICY AND ADVOCACY

These actions strengthened the integration of cetacean conservation into marine policy, planning and regulatory processes, ensuring science-informed consideration of impacts at national and EU levels.

- IWDG delivered evidence-based policy and advocacy input across offshore renewable energy (ORE), marine spatial planning, fisheries and coastal infrastructure in 2025, with a strong focus on mitigating underwater noise and safeguarding key cetacean habitats.
- The group made major submissions to An Coimisiún Pleanála on Phase I offshore wind developments, and engaged with MARA and the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (DCEE) on geophysical and geotechnical survey licensing, maritime planning and offshore infrastructure.
- IWDG remained actively engaged with Government departments, statutory agencies and advisory groups at national and EU level, contributing expert input to Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) and Designated Maritime Area Plan (DMAP) processes.
- IWDG data and scientific expertise contributed to the designation of six Important Marine Mammal Areas (IMMAs) in Irish waters, strengthening the independent evidence base for future Marine Protected Areas (MPAs).
- As a core partner in Fair Seas, IWDG supported continued advocacy for robust MPA legislation, engaging with policymakers nationally and internationally to advance Ireland's commitment to protect 30% of marine waters by 2030.

Formal submissions and public consultations in 2025 supported this work, including engagement on:

- Offshore renewable energy Environmental Impact Assessment Reports and associated infrastructure applications to An Coimisiún Pleanála
- Maritime Usage Licence applications to the Maritime Area Regulatory Authority (MARA)
- Marine Spatial Planning policy and National Designated Maritime Area Plan development to DCEE
- Fisheries management consultations, including forage fish and inshore trawling matters to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM)
- Marine Strategy Framework Directive monitoring and conservation assessments
- Port and coastal infrastructure developments with potential underwater noise or habitat impacts
- EU-level consultations and policy processes relating to marine biodiversity and offshore renewables

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND ORGANISATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY

These efforts strengthened IWDG's organisational resilience, ensuring the capacity, credibility and community support needed to deliver long-term cetacean conservation.

- IWDG maintained a large and active membership base in 2025, supported by a wide range of courses, outreach and engagement opportunities.
- Membership growth and retention were supported through live stranding training, residential whale watching courses, Floating Classroom, Whale Tales 2025, winter webinars and regional outreach, providing multiple pathways for involvement across Ireland.
- Volunteer capacity was further strengthened through targeted training and skills development, supporting a resilient national network capable of contributing to research, welfare response, education and advocacy.
- Engagement in Northern Ireland was strengthened through cross-border events, training and renewed participation in recording and outreach activities, supporting an all-island approach to cetacean conservation.
- Investment in community engagement, volunteer capacity and core infrastructure contributed to organisational resilience, supporting IWDG's long-term sustainability through a strong supporter base aligned with the organisation's mission and values.



Killer whale "Aquarius", Dingle Bay, Kerry, 18 June 2025. Photo: Nick Massett, Whale Track Ireland

GOALS AND OUTCOMES

1. SIGHTINGS

Sighting Report Management

Introduction: Core function as sightings officer is the validation of cetacean and basking shark sighting records reported to IWDG via either of 3 methods:

1. Website www.iwdg.ie
2. IWDG Reporting App
3. Hard copy sheets that are still being completed by hand and posted to IWDG for land based effort (timed) watches.

A significant amount of time is spent promoting the sighting scheme to members of the public, boat operators and agency staff, and being available to assist where necessary on matters such as species identification and how to accurately record both casual and effort related sightings. A range of events are delivered each year such as public talks, whale watch trips, All-Ireland Whale Watch day and weekend Residential courses in support of the IWDG Sighting Scheme. Strong connections are maintained with a number of media outlets where the sightings officer is the main IWDG spokesperson on matters relating to marine mammal sightings and when required, strandings.

Goal: Manage the IWDG Sighting scheme and increase its reach by encouraging the widest possible participation, both in terms of the number of reports, type of reports (casual V effort) and their geographic spread, ensuring it remains relevant to the next generation of biological recorders. Use the sighting scheme to support more targeted projects such as WhaleTrack Ireland and to encourage members to become more involved in local biological recording of cetaceans and basking sharks i.e.

Outcome: During 2025 IWDG validated and processed 2,525 unique cetacean and basking shark sighting records from all Irish waters, representing a 14% reduction on 2024. The most likely explanation for this decline was the removal of the IWDG reporting app before the start of the busy summer reporting period, which resulted in most reports being sent via our main reporting platform on www.iwdg.ie

Data Access and Reporting

Introduction: With recording schemes that date back over 30 years, IWDG is uniquely placed to report on the current status of cetaceans, especially those that inhabit our inshore waters. This can be achieved by providing raw sightings data, metadata, by contributing to a variety of publications and by presenting findings at relevant webinars and conferences at home and abroad.

Goal: Fulfil reporting obligations by contributing to publications both internal and external to IWDG on a regular basis: e.g. IWDG Ezine for supporters and members, IWDG website and social media platforms, Marine Times paper, the bi-annual Biodiversity Ireland magazine, and periodically to a range of scientific publications and Mammal Atlas.

Outcome: IWDG provided 11 sets of sightings data based on data requests SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures) to a range of researchers, commercial entities and interest groups in both jurisdictions, covering a number of species.

Collaboration

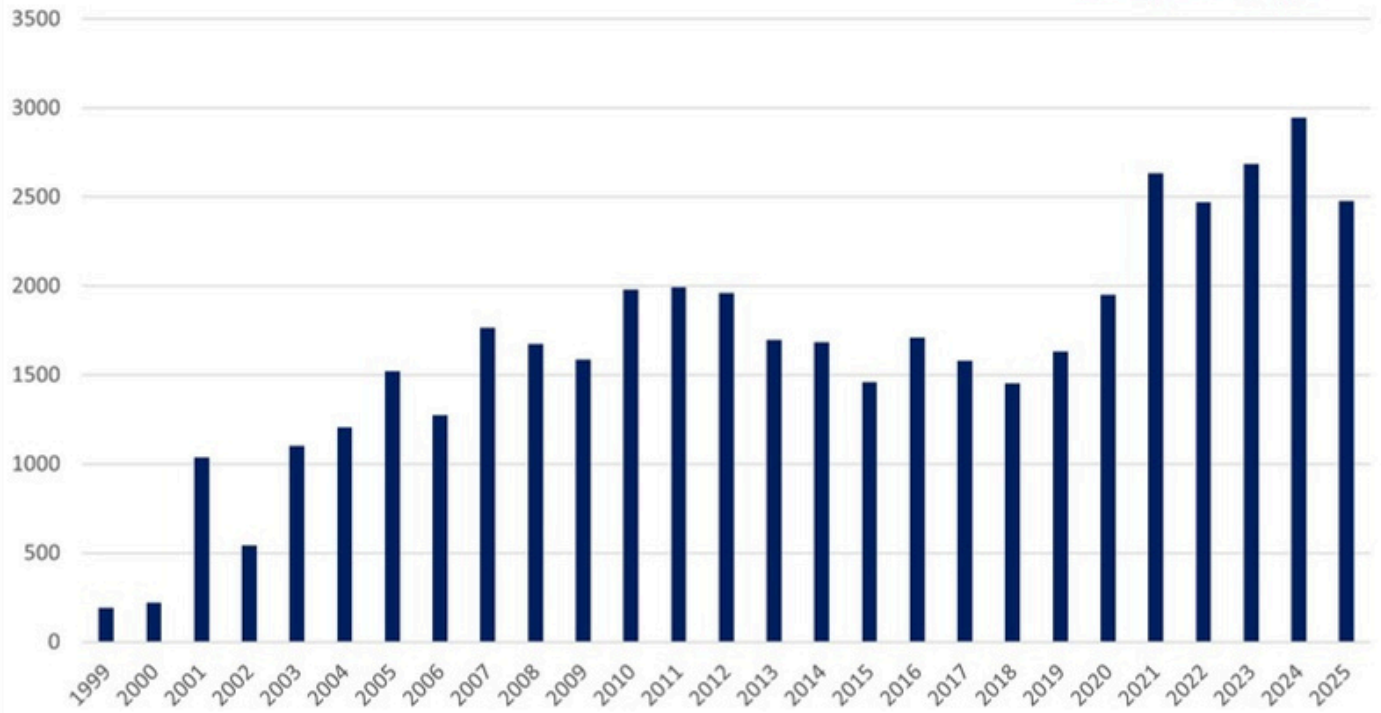
Introduction: Collaboration with key partners, both domestic and overseas is essential in the study of highly mobile marine mammals that may only be seasonally resident or transiting through Irish waters. IWDG works closely with a broad range of research organisations, researchers, NGOs, government agencies, civil society groups and commercial operators who can assist our work, and we theirs.

Goal: Strengthen and expand partnerships opening up new opportunities for sharing data and expertise.

Outcome: In January 2025 IWDG delivered a one day “Code of Conduct” workshop with partners at NPWS, in Killarney Library for 21 marine tour boat operators, which was attended by 40+ people from Counties Cork and Kerry. In May IWDG presented at the Climate Ambassador Webinar series with Louth County Council. In November IWDG delivered a one day sightings workshop at the Portrush Coastal Zone in association with CEDaR (Centre for Environmental Data and Recording) in Northern Ireland to encourage the increased reporting of cetaceans in Northern Ireland. IWDG in turn provides validated sightings data periodically to CEDaR. Internationally, IWDG worked with the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust in Scotland on the movements of a shared group of killer whales from the Scottish West Coast Community Group. Collaboration is ongoing with various overseas humpback research groups including the North Atlantic Humpback Whale Catalogue and IWDG forged stronger ties with US based right whale researchers at both the Centre for Coastal Studies and the New England Aquarium in Boston as a result of the July 2024 North Atlantic Right whale from Donegal Bay being matched to the Boston area on 19th November 2025. This significant match attracted a lot of transatlantic media as well as publications in the Irish Naturalists Journal and a poster to be presented at the 26th Biennial SMM conference by the Society of Marine Mammalogy due to be held in Puerto Rico in October 2026.

Sighting Summary 2025: <https://iwdg.ie/2025-sightings-review/>

All Sightings 1999-2025



All cetacean sightings, 1999–2025. Source: IWDG Sightings Scheme Database

Ramore Head, Co. Antrim, during the IWDG/CEDaR Reporting Workshop, 7 November 2025. Photo: Pádraig Whooley, IWDG



Portrush Coastal Zone Course, 7 November 2025



2. STRANDINGS

Stranding Report Management

Introduction: The core function as strandings officer is the validation of cetacean, basking shark and sea turtle stranding records reported to IWDG via the following four methods:

- Website www.iwdg.ie
- IWDG Reporting App
- Social media
- E-mail

The Strandings Officer spent the majority of her time coordinating with stranding network volunteers in order to collect as much high quality data from each stranding as possible. When volunteers are unable to go to strandings, IWDG follows up with the reporters who often have more images than they submit via the website/app, and of much higher quality. This also allows for positive interactions with reporters who are often curious about their findings, and encourages them to continue to report to the IWDG and spread the word to report to us.

Goal one: To continue to increase the quantity and quality of the data collected by the Stranding Network. To go beyond recording baseline data (i.e. species, length, gender, location, date of stranding) and create a database of high quality images of target areas to identify potential signs of bycatch/entanglement, and assess nutritional condition and unique lesions.

Outcome: The IWDG applied for the NPWS Small Recording Grant in order to create a series of training videos on how to collect data from various species. The funding also covered an online training session on species identification and how to collect data from a stranded cetacean and sea turtle. A new protocol was put into place for joining the stranding network, which requires new volunteers to watch all training videos, and complete an online form in order to join.

Goal two: To increase the reach and size of the Stranding Network, particularly in stranding hotspots, and decrease the amount of time spent coordinating volunteers when visiting strandings. In some areas, the burden of visiting strandings always seems to fall upon the same people. I had hoped to increase the size of the stranding network in order to take the pressure off those few individuals by recruiting new volunteers (especially with the ever increasing number of strandings). IWDG also hoped to find a better way to organise visits to stranded cetaceans, as I was often contacting multiple people individually. Individuals often did not communicate when they were able to visit a stranding, resulting in some duplicated effort.

Outcome: The stranding network has grown in areas where it needed more coverage, particularly in smaller counties such as Louth. When people offer to visit a stranding, but say they have no experience, I direct them to the new training videos on the IWDG website, which encourages others to also view the videos. I also encourage new volunteers to join those with more experience for learning opportunities. A few key new people have really stood out in 2025 and started sending in high quality data which was fantastic.



Taking a skin sample, common dolphin, Ballyvaughan, Co. Clare
Photo: Csilla Trungel



Common dolphin, live-stranded and subsequently died, Ballyvaughan, Co. Clare. Photo: Csilla Trungel



First animal recovered under the ATU project, a common dolphin from Inis Oírr, Co. Galway. Photo: Laoise Ní Chléirigh



Loggerhead turtle, Belmullet, Co. Mayo

3. WELFARE

Live Stranding Network

2025 was a significant and demanding year for the Live Stranding Network, marked by a high volume of live strandings, multiple complex cases requiring veterinary input, an Unusual Mortality Event (UME) involving deep-diving species, and continued outreach and equipment development. The Live Stranding (LS) Coordinator remained responsible for volunteer tasking, responder safety guidance, welfare decision support, data collection from live animals, and post-event reporting.

In 2025, 55 live stranding events were recorded across the island of Ireland, involving 125 cetaceans, 105 of which were common dolphins. Of these, 52 events occurred in the Republic of Ireland, involving 121 animals, while three events in Northern Ireland involved four cetaceans. IWDG responders were in attendance at 76% of all live stranding events, and the IWDG Emergency Hotline received 203 calls relating to live strandings and animals in difficulty. IWDG continued to work closely with British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR) in Northern Ireland, with several Northern Ireland-based IWDG volunteers responding to strandings in collaboration with BDMLR.

The largest mass stranding in 2025 involved 28 common dolphins live-stranded together in Ballyvaughan, Co. Clare, with a further eight common dolphins live-stranding at the same location the following day. Mayo recorded 33 live-stranded animals, with Kerry recording 16 animals, reflecting continued pressure in known hotspot areas.

Other notable live strandings during 2025 included the beaked whale Unusual Mortality Event, a sperm whale, a pilot whale, and a pygmy sperm whale. Euthanasia continues to present significant challenges, including limited availability of veterinarians willing or experienced in euthanising cetaceans, differing responses of deep-diving species to sedation, and uncertainty around responsibility for veterinary costs when euthanasia is required for protected species. In 2025, IWDG voluntary veterinarians assisted with euthanasia in two cases, while private veterinary practitioners euthanised two cetaceans on welfare grounds following calls from members of the public or NPWS. While the IWDG veterinary network continues to grow, the scale of Ireland's coastline means gaps in local availability remain, which was evident during a live stranding of a pilot whale that was clearly unwell and suffering, where no veterinarian was available locally to carry out euthanasia.

Goal one: To increase the number of trained Live Stranding Responders around Ireland by delivering live-stranding training courses, engaging local authorities and NPWS, and recruiting new volunteers into the Live Stranding Network.

Outcome: Five live stranding courses were delivered around Ireland in 2025, targeting people with watersports experience or marine-based work backgrounds, who are familiar with coastal conditions and already have appropriate personal safety equipment. The courses were held in Kerry, Galway, Mayo (Killala and Blacksod) and Louth. 117 people were trained (including NPWS staff and veterinarians), and 62 people signed up to the IWDG stranding network.

Goal two: Improve responder safety, confidence and welfare decision-making

Outcome: Live stranding training content continued to evolve in 2025, incorporating updated risk assessments and welfare guidance. In September 2025, 11 local responders in the Blacksod Bay area completed an RLSS Water Smart course, learning how to read beach conditions, tides, and risk-assessing local beaches. Ongoing mentoring, debriefing and post-event follow-up supported responders' wellbeing during challenging events. An online webinar funded through the NPWS small recorders grant, reiterated to responders about safety, the tasking process, and response flow when responding to live strandings.

Goal three: Increase veterinary engagement and integration into live stranding response to strengthen veterinary involvement, veterinary cetacean education, assist with welfare decision-making and post-mortem investigation through training, professional engagement and structured communication.

Outcome: 2025 marked the first year that the IWDG Live Stranding Training Course received Continuous Veterinary Education (CVE) accreditation from the Veterinary Council of Ireland, enabling veterinarians attending the course to receive 5.5 CVE credits. Nine veterinary practitioners trained with IWDG during the year. Veterinary involvement directly supported multiple complex cases, including euthanasia decisions, post-mortem examinations and advice during live strandings. The voluntary IWDG Veterinary WhatsApp group expanded further to a total of 29 veterinary professionals and facilitated real-time knowledge sharing between the Live Stranding Coordinator and veterinary professionals during active cases.

Goal four: To respond effectively to complex live-stranding events, including Unusual Mortality events (UME).



Live-stranded common dolphin, Mullet Peninsula, Co. Mayo, April 2025
Photo: Evonne Meers



Live-stranded common dolphin, Mullet Peninsula, Co. Mayo, April 2025. Photo: Evonne Meers



Mass-stranded common dolphins, Ballyvaughan, Co. Clare, December 2025. Photo: Csilla Trungel

Outcome: Ireland was part of an UME in 2025, when in a two week period, beaked whales were stranding or live-stranding in Ireland, UK, Holland, Germany, Sweden and others. Ireland had two True's beaked whales, a mother and calf pair live strand on Lacken backshore, Co. Mayo (near Killala) and two Sowerby's beaked whales live-stranded in Helvic, Co. Waterford, with a third Sowerby's beaked whale found in the area in the following days. The DDRIP project had finished, but collaboration with the IWDG Veterinary network, NPWS, and Waterford local authority, resulted in one of the Sowerbys being transported to Cork RVL for post-mortem. The True's beaked whale, was visited by Dublin Zoo Vet/IWDG volunteer vet Frank O'Sullivan who performed a gross post-mortem on site and recovered the head to UCD where unerupted teeth were found in the lower jaw. Frank also performed a gross post-mortem on the site of the second Sowerby's beaked whales. Following on from these events, IWDG collaborated with and joined the ASCOBANS working group for Unusual Mortality Events. These cases highlighted a recognised gap in post-mortem capacity, specifically the absence of ear perfusion and analysis for investigating potential acoustic trauma, which should form part of future capacity development. IWDG created social media posts on these events, to educate the public on why live-stranded deep-diving whales are out of habitat and not suitable for refloating.

Goal five: Improve access to appropriate equipment and logistical capacity for live strandings.

Outcome: Fundraising and successful grant applications by Mayo IWDG and local Erris business sponsors enabled the purchase of Ireland's first dedicated live stranding rescue trailer in late 2025, primarily serving the Blacksod Bay/Mullet Peninsula hotspot. Additional IWDG-designed rescue slings for common dolphins were ordered in late 2025 for distribution to the busiest live-stranding counties. Cork IWDG member Denis O'Regan connected with the University College Cork engineering department with the aim to develop a rescue trolley. Denis' requirements, our LSC experience, and collaboration with UCC engineering lecturers and students resulted in a newly designed rescue trolley which would incorporate the new IWDG CD sling. This was manufactured by UCC and is undergoing testing by Denis. These developments significantly improved readiness for both single and multi-animal live stranding events.

Goal six: Increase public awareness of what they should or should not do if they encounter a live stranded animal. Social media posts to highlight the do's and don'ts.

Outcome: Public engagement continued through hotline interactions, social media, radio interviews. Callers were provided with clear guidance, reassurance, and follow-up where appropriate. Social media posts about live-strandings balanced the successful with the fatal ones.

Explaining the decision making in response to individual events, taking into consideration out-of-habitat animals, health and welfare of the animals involved and addressing any questions on social media, in a friendly but factual way.

Goal seven: Increase community outreach and awareness of the work of IWDG's Live Stranding programme/work

Outcome: In 2025, community outreach and awareness of IWDG's live stranding work was supported through targeted talks, presentations, and radio interviews. Four radio interviews were given, Midwest Radio, Clare FM, Erris FM and RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta.

Presentations were delivered at local community events in Mayo, including The Whales and Dolphins of Erris (Eachléim), as well as at national and regional events such as the Kildare Wildlife Conference, GEAI in Leitrim and the Annual Stranding Network Meet. Outreach also included an online NPWS "Sandwich Session" to NPWS staff by Stephanie Levesque and Gemma O'Connor, which focused on stranding trends and on live stranding response, welfare decision-making and why live-stranded animals are also of welfare concern, with the story of Sandy Salmon live-stranding and her subsequent calves, being told. This was attended by 33 NPWS personnel.

Goal eight: To increase the Live Stranding Coordinator's dedicated time so the Live Stranding Response Programme can be developed into a resilient, well-run system, improving responder experience and knowledge, strengthening veterinary involvement, and ensuring trained responders can confidently step in to cover the emergency hotline and support live stranding coordination when needed.

Outcome: 2025 was the busiest year to date for the Live Stranding Response Programme, with the highest number of live stranding events recorded and a greater than 110% increase in live-stranded common dolphins compared to 2024. This significantly increased operational demand on the Live Stranding Coordinator, volunteers and veterinary support.

Throughout the year, the Live Stranding Coordinator's funded time remained limited relative to the scale and complexity of live stranding response required. The DAFM Animal Welfare Grant continued to support approximately five hours per week, constraining the time available for programme development beyond reactive response. Efforts to secure additional external or corporate sponsorship to increase coordinator time were unsuccessful.

From summer 2025, IWDG provided core organisational funding to support an additional five hours per week, bringing the coordinator's time to approximately ten hours.

This enabled progress in responder training, veterinary engagement, equipment development, and the introduction of clearer internal structures and procedures. In December 2025, DAFM confirmed an increase in Animal Welfare funding for 2026, bringing baseline support close to covering approximately ten hours per week. While this represents a significant improvement, additional core IWDG funding is still required to fully support the role.

National Recognition of our Live Stranding Response programme

In 2025, the work of IWDG's Live Stranding Responders received national recognition through the National Lottery Good Causes Awards. IWDG was selected as a county finalist in the Co. Clare Heritage category for its Live Stranding Response work. Following this, Live Stranding Coordinator Gemma O'Connor and live stranding responder Catherine Meenaghan travelled to Dublin to be interviewed by a panel of judges at National Lottery headquarters, chaired by Daithí Ó Shea. IWDG subsequently went on to win the national Heritage category, receiving €10,000 in prize funding.

The awards event was attended by IWDG officers Gemma O'Connor and Csilla Trungel, who nominated the group, along with live stranding volunteers from Mayo, Kerry and Cork, representing Ireland's busiest live-stranding counties. The award was presented by Éanna Ní Lamhna on behalf of the National Lottery. The €10,000 prize money is being reinvested directly into the live stranding volunteer effort, supporting additional training and equipment to strengthen response capacity and volunteer safety across Ireland.



Photo (random order): The IWDG Live Stranding team receiving the National Lottery Good Causes Award. Cian Murphy (National Lottery Chief Executive); Louise Overy, Kieran Caulfield, Catherine Meenaghan, Tabitha Overy, and Frances Gallagher (IWDG Live Stranding Responders); Gemma O'Connor (IWDG Live Stranding Coordinator); Jack Chambers (Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation); and Csilla Trungel (IWDG Communications and Coordination Officer).

4. IWDG PROJECTS

SHANNON DOLPHIN PROJECT

Project Summary: Monitoring this population of bottlenose dolphins using Photo ID.

Goal one: Complete dedicated surveys throughout the known range of the Shannon Dolphins. Increasing coverage in Brandon and Tralee Bays, particularly along the Clare Coast up to Doonbeg. A minimum of 10 RIB surveys to cover the outer estuary and known hotspots such as Loop Head. Complete four weeks of Celtic Mist Surveys. Complete as many tour boat surveys as possible with a target of 20 from each of the two ports (Carrigaholt and Kilrush).

Outcome: Two of the four weeks scheduled for Shannon Dolphin surveys onboard Celtic Mist were completed in 2025. The September legs were cancelled due to inclement weather. The Carrigaholt tour boat surveys recommenced in 2025 after a five-year gap, with 17 trips completed, compared to 22 completed on the Kilrush tour boat. A total of seven transects and four RIB surveys were conducted in 2025. This low effort was due to logistics, availability of crew and inclement weather. The poor weather conditions in August and September resulted in a shorter than normal field season, as the last tour boat trip was completed in mid-August.

New Calves: The shorter season also meant that we didn't capture all newborns for the 2025 season, with only three new additions to the population, compared to the typical 7-10 new individuals.

Shannon Dolphin Strandings: In July, a report of a fresh, dead stranding of a bottlenose dolphin was reported from Stradbally, Brandon Bay, Co. Kerry. The SDP Officer attended this stranding and completed an in-situ post-mortem examination (PME). The individual was matched to the SDP catalogue as WHO46. This adult female had given birth to her first known calf in 2023, 933. At approximately two years old, this dependent calf is highly unlikely to have survived with the mother. The cause of death was determined from this examination to be bycatch: Peracute Underwater Entrapment due to the amputated tailstock, pulmonary and hepatic congestion, gas bubbles in the mesenteric blood vessels and evidence of recent feeding. James Barnett of The Cornwall Pathology Team and Dr. Jim O'Donovan of the Regional Vet Lab in Cork provided case history oversight and both agreed with MD's findings and cause of death. A poster abstract of this case study was presented at the European Cetacean Society yearly conference in Dundee, Scotland in April 2026. This is the first PME of bottlenose dolphin matched to the SDP catalogue and confirms that fisheries interactions are a threat to conservation status for this population.

Goal two: Recruit and manage SDP internships for marine science students and recent graduates

Outcome: A single intern was recruited for the 2025 field season. Ailbhe Power began her internship at the start of May and extended it until the end of September. She completed 95% of the Kilrush tour boat surveys and 76% of the Carrigaholt tours. She also worked on adding all field data to the master excel and quality control of the 2024 data.



Post-mortem examination of Shannon dolphin, Brandon Bay, July 2025
Photo: Ailbhe Power, Mags Daly and Stephen Comerford, IWDG



Shannon bottlenose dolphin, Croí and calf
Photo: Mags Daly



Last images of Shannon bottlenose dolphin, catalogue no. WHO46, and her calf. Photo: Mags Daly



Shannon bottlenose dolphin, catalogue no. 892, coming over for a look. Photo: Mags Daly IWDG

WHALE TRACK IRELAND

Project Summary: Monitoring humpback and fin whales in Irish coastal waters using Photo Identification and engagement with IWDG local groups and Citizen Scientists.

Goal: Curate the Irish Humpback and fin whale Photo ID catalogues, which have been the IWDG's primary tool for tracking these most iconic of our large whales since 1999. Develop, grow and share our catalogues with overseas research platforms such as the North Atlantic Humpback Whale Catalogue and Happy Whale, as well as national catalogues to determine tropical breeding areas, higher latitude feeding areas and migration routes between these areas. Enter data sharing arrangements with students, and research partners both within and outside Ireland, to further our knowledge of these iconic species whilst in Irish waters. To establish if humpback whales continued to demonstrate range expansion outside of the Irish Southwest hotspot areas of Counties Cork and Kerry. Collaborate with PhD Candidate Miguel Blasques Hervas on his study of humpbacks to assist in the publication of papers in the scientific literature.

Outcome: 2025 could turn out to be something of a watershed year for humpback whales in Irish waters. In terms of numbers of sightings, the past two years were very different with 150 sightings in 2024/5 compared with 104 in 2025/6, an almost 30% decline. This can't easily be explained by "weather", as the main summer/autumn reporting period in 2025 held reasonably fine. The southwest which has consistently been the most productive humpback region over the past two decades has once again had to cede top place to the northwest, as Donegal Bay produced almost 40% of all Irish humpback sighting records in 2025/6. This is now the second in the past three years this has happened and if repeated in 2026/7, would confirm the trend.

Full story on link below:

<https://iwdg.ie/iwdg-whale-track-project-update-and-funding-opportunity-2026/>



Humpback whale photo-ID fluke montage to 2025

DEEP DIVING AND RARE SPECIES INVESTIGATION PROGRAMME(DDRIP)

Project Summary: The Deep Diving and Rare species Investigation Programme (DDRIP) was an initiative by the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group (IWDG) to investigate strandings of rare and deep-diving cetaceans along the Irish coast, particularly beaked whales. With an increase in reports of these strandings and potential Unusual Mortality Events (UME), DDRIP aimed to conduct post-mortem examinations to determine causes of death, gather vital ecological and anatomical data, and assess potential offshore environmental pressures.

Goal: To carry out at least five post-mortem investigations on fresh specimens, of which at least three to be carried out in a laboratory setting. We hoped to carry out at least five post mortem examinations, of which three would be in a laboratory setting in order to have additional testing carried out by the Regional Vet Labs (primarily bacteriology and histology), giving us more information about the health of the animal.

Outcome: Due to a lack of suitable strandings in the third and final year of DDRIP, only three animals were recovered for post mortem examination; one True's beaked whale, one Risso's dolphin, and one narwhal. This was the second case of a new species for Ireland being examined under DDRIP, the first of which was a dwarf sperm whale which stranded in May 2022. Samples from the project have already been accessed for various research projects.



FERRY SURVEYS PROGRAMME

Project Summary: The IWDG Ferry Surveys Programme monitors cetaceans on the Irish Sea from Rosslare to Pembroke and Dublin to Holyhead with Irish Ferries, and from Belfast to Cairnryan with Stenaline. Monthly surveys are conducted on each route.

Goal: To conduct monthly ferry surveys on 3 routes across the Irish Sea to provide long-term monitoring data on cetacean relative abundance. Maintain the Dublin and Rosslare survey routes and re-establish the Belfast – Cairnryan Route.

Outcome: Surveys continued on the Rosslare – Cherbourg and Dublin – Holyhead routes with Irish Ferries. The Belfast – Cairnryan route remains in hiatus due to a lack of volunteers. Dave Wall talked at the IWDG AGM in Belfast highlighting the surveys and a call for volunteers, to which we received a number of responses. It is hoped to reassess the possibility of re-starting the surveys in Spring 2026. A training course for ferry surveys is also scheduled for April 2026, to help build capacity across the surveys. In 2025 we also secured new laptops and GPS aerials to replace the extremely aged laptops in use on the surveys.

EU OCEAN

Project Summary: The OCEAN Project (Operator-Centred Enhancement of Awareness in Navigation) ran from October 2022 to September 2025 and has now concluded. Its focus was on enhancing operator awareness in navigation to reduce the frequency of severe accidents such as collisions and groundings, to preserve the lives of marine mammals, and to mitigate the risks posed by floating obstacles. A device independent mobile reporting app was the IWDG deliverable.

Goal: This final phase of the OCEAN project is focused on dissemination i.e. sourcing suitable events and audiences to demonstrate the app illustrating how it could work in a real world situation.

Outcome: The IWDG delivered a working OCEAN app and associated project documentation late 2024 as expected. Dissemination was key in this final year and a video was created to illustrate the workings of the app and a very successful webinar **“Minimising Ship Strikes on Whales: the OCEAN Approach”** was delivered in collaboration with other OCEAN partners aimed at those potential users interested in whale conservation and management. Trea and Simon attended ECS in the Azores in May hosting an OCEAN stand with interactive media demonstrating the app and the associated infrastructure. A poster was also presented illustrating the key elements of the app and its place within the OCEAN infrastructure.



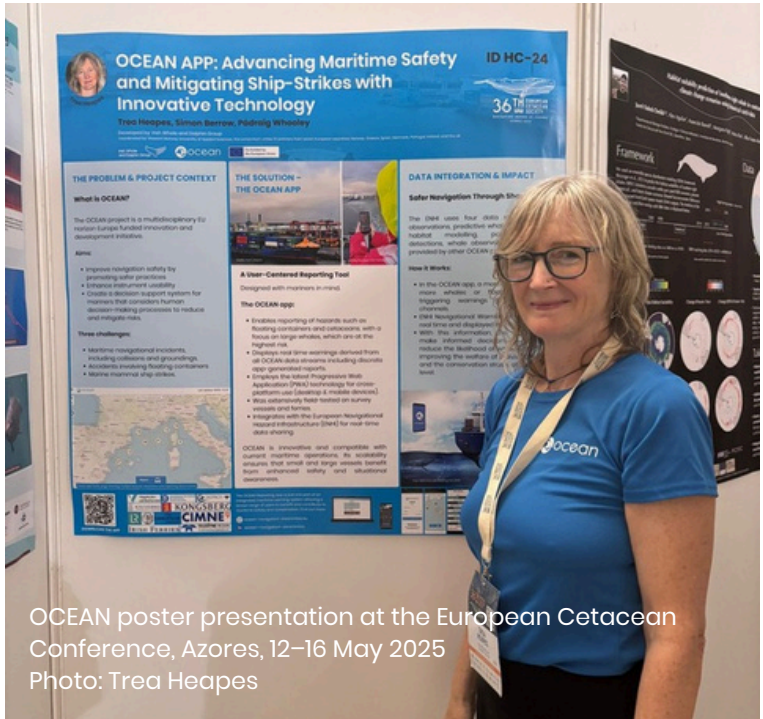
Final OCEAN Conference, Lisbon, 18–19 September 2025
Photo: OCEAN project



Final OCEAN Conference, Lisbon, 18–19 September 2025
Photo: OCEAN project



OCEAN stand at the European Cetacean Conference, Azores, 12–16 May 2025
Photo: Trea Heapes



OCEAN poster presentation at the European Cetacean Conference, Azores, 12–16 May 2025
Photo: Trea Heapes

OCEAN APP: Advancing Maritime Safety and Mitigating Ship-Strikes with Innovative Technology

Trea Heapes, Simon Berrow, Pádraig Whooley

36TH EUROPEAN CETACEAN SOCIETY

Supported by Horizon Europe funded innovation and development initiative.

THE PROBLEM & PROJECT CONTEXT

What is OCEAN?

The OCEAN project is a multidisciplinary EU Horizon Europe funded innovation and development initiative.

Aims:

- Improve navigation safety by promoting safer practices
- Enhance instrument usability
- Create a decision support system for mariners that considers human decision-making processes to reduce and mitigate risks

Three challenges:

- Maritime navigational incidents, including collisions and groundings
- Accidents involving floating containers
- Marine mammal ship strikes

THE SOLUTION – THE OCEAN APP

A User-Centered Reporting Tool
Designed with mariners in mind.

The OCEAN app:

- Enables reporting of hazards such as floating containers and containers, with a focus on large whales, which are at the highest risk
- Displays real time warnings derived from all OCEAN data streams including discrete app-generated reports
- Employs the latest Progressive Web Application (PWA) technology for cross-platform use (desktop & mobile devices)
- Was extensively field-tested on survey vessels and ferries
- Integrates with the European Navigational Hazard Infrastructure (ENHI) for real-time data sharing

OCEAN is innovative and compatible with current maritime operations. Its scalability ensures that small and large vessels benefit from enhanced safety and situational awareness.

DATA INTEGRATION & IMPACT

Safer Navigation Through Shared Data

The ENHI uses four data streams: report observations, predictive whale presence from habitat modelling, passive acoustic detections, whale observations from space provided by other OCEAN partners.

How it Works:

- In the OCEAN app, a mariner reports one or more whales or floating containers, triggering warnings through multiple channels
- ENHI Navigational Warnings are pushed in real time and displayed in the OCEAN app
- With this information, the mariner can make informed decisions in order to reduce the likelihood of whale ship strikes improving the welfare of individual whales and the conservation status at population level

MINIMISING SHIP STRIKES ON WHALES: The OCEAN Approach

FREE WEBINAR

6 MAY
13:00 – 14:00 CET

The final conference hosted within the European Maritime Safety Authority (EMSA), Lisbon was attended by Trea and Simon where they presented deployment scenarios showing how the app could be used in a micro-system with the European Hazard Infrastructure (ENHI) or as part of a larger-scale or in-depth monitoring project with acoustic buoys, satellite monitoring and habitat modelling feeding in more information to the infrastructure. All the components of the OCEAN project are TRL6, which means, they have been demonstrated in the field but aren't installed in an operational environment.

ATLANTIC WHALE DEAL

Project Summary: Atlantic Whale Deal will test innovative technologies to mitigate ship strikes. Ships and whales co-occur across coastal and open sea areas, requiring transnational cooperation between multiple stakeholders to prevent collisions and biodiversity loss. The project aims to develop solutions to reduce ship strikes, thus enhancing carbon sequestration, given the whales' pivotal role in ecosystem functioning. The proposal was successful and IWDG will be responsible for testing the effectiveness of thermal imagery to detect whales in Irish waters using ferries as platforms of opportunity as well as providing expertise for integrating datasets and harmonising existing methods.

Goal: The Atlantic Whale Deal project aims to mitigate ship strikes and protect marine biodiversity through innovative technologies and transnational cooperation. The project will develop detection and localisation techniques, risk maps, and interactive tools to reduce ship strikes and acoustic contamination. Stakeholder involvement and support are vital for the success of the project.

Outcome: Ten weeks of offshore survey effort was completed throughout 2025, totalling 550 hours and 20 minutes of visual and thermal camera observation. This consisted of 3 surveys, the Blue Whiting Acoustic Survey, the Western European Shelf Passive Acoustic Survey and the Acoustic Monitoring from Ireland to Gibraltar Oceanic waters Survey, and spanned from the Faroe Islands down to the Mediterranean Sea. The surveys were completed in collaboration with the Marine Institute of Ireland, the Atlantic Technological University in Galway and Havstovan Marine Institute of the Faroe Islands. A total of 2,254 cetaceans were seen and 14 different species identified. 46 large whale sightings were recorded, including fin whales, minke whales, sei whales and sperm whales.

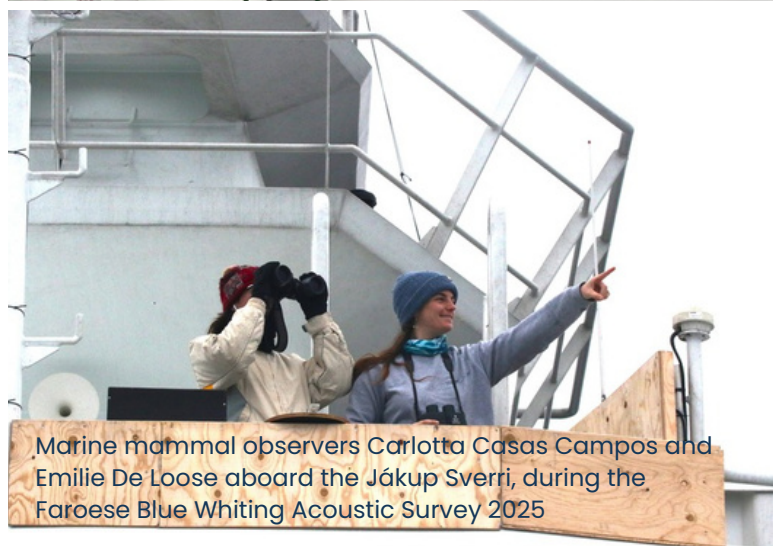
The processing of this and last year's thermal images has begun with promising results regarding the Sea.AI Sentry thermal camera hardware capabilities. Of the 56 whales seen (including 2024) by observers, 16 were captured on the thermal camera resulting in 52 captured blows.



The marine mammal observer team for the Acoustic Monitoring from Ireland to Gibraltar Oceanic Waters Survey aboard the RV Celtic Explorer, led by Dr Maria Perez Tadeo
Photo: Second Officer Paul Murphy



Northern bottlenose whale photographed during the Faroese Blue Whiting Acoustic Survey 2025
Photo: Emilie De Loose



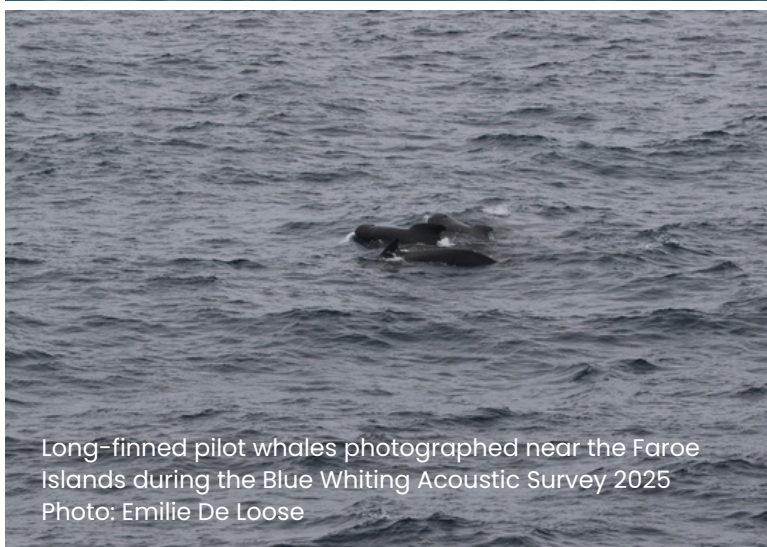
Marine mammal observers Carlotta Casas Campos and Emilie De Loose aboard the Jákup Sverri, during the Faroese Blue Whiting Acoustic Survey 2025



Common dolphins photographed during the Western European Shelf Passive Acoustic Survey 2025
Photo: Emilie De Loose



Breaching white-beaked dolphin photographed during the Western European Shelf Passive Acoustic Survey 2025
Photo: Emilie De Loose



Long-finned pilot whales photographed near the Faroe Islands during the Blue Whiting Acoustic Survey 2025
Photo: Emilie De Loose



Blow of a large whale as seen on the Sea.AI thermal camera (left: RGB view; right: IR view)



Pod of common dolphins photographed during the Western European Shelf Passive Acoustic Survey 2025
Photo: Emilie De Loose

The result of the initial analysis was proposed to be presented at the upcoming European Cetacean Society Conference. The overall project, specifically the Blue Whiting Acoustic Survey in the Faroe Islands was presented during the Whale Tales conference.

The IWDG was represented by Dr. Simon Berrow in the June mid-term meeting hosted by UCD in Dublin where the continuation of the project was discussed at length. Further online meetings and discussions led to the conclusion that an extension of 5 months (end date moved from November 2026 to April 2027) would be beneficial. The IWDG intends to participate fully in the extension if granted by the European Commission.

In November of 2025 AWD project officer Emilie De Loose joined the Universidad de La Laguna team in Tenerife, Spain for two weeks. The team regularly sat down to discuss the next steps as the thermal camera footage has now been delivered from the Sea.AI team to the AWD team. Three additional days of ferry survey data were collected and thermal camera protocol compared.

The IWDG has helped facilitate the finalisation of two key deliverables for work package two (2.2.1 whale density mapping and 2.2.2 ship traffic mapping) as well as participate in the creation of a short documentary for the project. Further steps have been taken regarding the continuation of work package 4 through the use of Bayesian Belief Network models.

FAIR SEAS

Project Summary: The IWDG is a core partner of Fair Seas, a coalition of Irish environmental NGOs established in 2021 to advocate for the designation and effective management of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in Irish waters. Fair Seas brings together NGOs, community groups and policy specialists to promote science-led marine protection, meaningful stakeholder engagement and the delivery of Ireland's commitment to protect at least 30% of its marine area by 2030. The coalition consists of IWDG, Birdwatch Ireland, Coastwatch, the Sustainable Water Network (SWAN), the Irish Wildlife Trust (IWT), Streamscapes and the Irish Environmental Network (IEN). Fair Seas is funded by Oceans 5, Becht Foundation, Blue Nature Alliance and Wyss Foundation.

The Fair Seas partnership supports IWDG's policy and advocacy priorities by translating IWDG science and field programmes into targeted communications, stakeholder engagement and political advocacy focused on Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and wider marine governance.

In 2025, this included supporting IWDG participation in key national and EU policy moments, amplifying IWDG field evidence (notably the Celtic Mist programme aligned to Fair Seas Areas of Interest), and delivering public-facing engagement that connected cetacean conservation with Ireland's emerging MPA framework.

Goal: The Fair Seas and IWDG partnership strategy aims to strengthen the evidence base and policy momentum for effective MPAs in Ireland, ensuring that whales, dolphins and porpoises, and the habitats they depend on, are reflected in MPA legislation, designation processes and future management, while maintaining constructive engagement with decision-makers and stakeholders.

Outcomes: During 2025, IWDG contributed to Fair Seas' MPA advocacy through a combination of policy engagement, communications and public outreach. Key examples include:

1. National policy engagement and political briefings, including contribution to an Oireachtas briefing in the Dáil AV room (June 2025) and participation in continued Ministerial and departmental engagement on MPA legislation and marine governance.
2. EU-level engagement, including participation in EU Ocean Week and meetings with Irish MEPs in Brussels (October 2025), and submission work related to Ireland's EU priorities and Presidency planning.
3. International advocacy and profile-building, including IWDG/Fair Seas participation at the United Nations Ocean Conference (Nice, June 2025) as a platform to reinforce Ireland's MPA commitments and connect with the Irish delegation.
4. Public communications and ocean literacy, including authored/led blogs and online content (including an International Women's Day blog and later blogs tied to major policy moments), webinars and targeted social media outputs supporting Fair Seas' MPA messaging.
5. Connecting field evidence to advocacy, including supporting the Fair Seas-IWDG narrative around the Celtic Mist survey programme (surveying Fair Seas Areas of Interest across multiple seasons) with 2025 survey reporting and planned launch activity continuing into early 2026.
6. Youth and community engagement, including Fair Seas participation (with IWDG involvement) in Galway's Youth Climate Justice Assembly, IWDG's floating classroom and other public-facing events that broadened the coalition's reach into new audiences (e.g. Billie Eilish's concert eco-village stand).



Ocean Week 2025, Brussels, 13-19 October 2025



Ocean Week 2025, Brussels, 13-19 October 2025



3rd United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC3) in Nice from June 9 to 13, 2025



International Conference on Basking Sharks in Galway August 29-31



Floating Classroom 2025, Galway



Summer Survey Cruise 2025 – Focus on MPAs

NATURA 2000 SURVEYS

Project Summary: IWDG won funding from the NPWS for two projects aimed at improving the conservation status of species of interest in Special Areas of Conservation (SAC).

Goal: contribute to better management of harbour porpoise and bottlenose dolphins in designated SACs

Outcome: Passive acoustic monitoring and visual surveys for harbour porpoise were carried out in Kenmare River SAC which recently had harbour porpoise added as a qualifying interest while a long-term monitoring strategy for bottlenose dolphins in the Lower River Shannon SAC was produced and presented at a well-attended online webinar with industry and planners.

MARINE BIODIVERSITY AND OFFSHORE RENEWABLE ENERGY – MARÉIRE

Project Summary: MARÉIRE is a collaborative research, policy and advocacy project delivered in partnership by the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group (IWDG), the Irish Environmental Network (IEN) and BirdWatch Ireland, and funded by the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment through the IEN. The project focuses on addressing the interaction between offshore renewable energy development and marine biodiversity, with the aim of supporting climate action while ensuring robust protection of marine ecosystems.

Goal: To advance evidence-based research, policy analysis and advocacy on offshore renewable energy and marine biodiversity; to identify and prioritise key knowledge gaps affecting decision-making; and to support coordinated, science-led engagement with policymakers, regulators and stakeholders.

Outcome: Key outputs in 2025 included publication of the report “Identifying knowledge gaps on the impact of offshore renewable energy on biodiversity at sea”, delivery of a national workshop attended by environmental NGOs and academic researchers to prioritise research needs, and delivery of a public webinar series on ORE and marine biodiversity. MARÉIRE also administered targeted research grants to support studies addressing identified evidence gaps. The project strengthened cross-sector collaboration and positioned IWDG as a leading contributor of marine mammal expertise within national ORE policy discussions.

LIVE STRANDING RESPONSE AND COMMUNITY OUTREACH – CO. MAYO

Project Summary: This one-year Mayo-based project focuses on enhancing the Live Stranding Response Programme in the Blacksod Bay / Mullet Peninsula area, one of Ireland's most significant live stranding hotspots. Over the five-year period 2021–2025, 34% of all live-stranded common dolphins in Ireland occurred in the Blacksod Bay / Mullet Peninsula area, compared with 25% in Brandon Bay, the next most significant hotspot over the same period.

Due to the high frequency and complexity of live stranding events in the region, the project combines strengthened local response capacity with community education and outreach. It builds on IWDG's existing Live Stranding Response and Floating Classroom education programmes, and includes responder support, water safety awareness, school visits, and talks and training events delivered in collaboration with local search and rescue (SAR) agencies.

The project is funded by the Mayo Sustainability Fund – Project Plus Programme, a philanthropic sustainability fund established for County Mayo, delivered in partnership with Community Foundation Ireland and the Sunflower Charitable Foundation.

Goal: To strengthen live stranding response capacity in the Blacksod Bay hotspot, increase community awareness and understanding of the whales, dolphins and porpoises that use the area and appropriate public response to live strandings. The project aims to develop and deliver practical response improvements tailored to local conditions, with learning from this high-pressure operational environment helping to inform wider best practice over time.

Outcome: The project began in Q4 2025, with 11 local IWDG responders trained in water safety through completion of an RLSS Water Smart course, delivered by Declan O'Connor of Tonn Nua Surf School(an RLSS Beach Lifeguard Trainer). The IWDG Floating Classroom programme was adapted for local primary schools, with a strong visual focus on cetaceans found around Mayo, suitable for delivery from Junior Infants to 6th class in either Irish or English, with first school visits scheduled for January 2026. A local IWDG responder will help deliver the school programme. Additional equipment needed for local responders was also purchased, such as additional IWDG-designed rescue slings for common dolphins.

As Mayo represents one of Ireland's busiest live stranding hotspots, outputs developed through this project may also inform best practice elsewhere in Ireland, while remaining firmly focused on delivering local benefit.



Deep-diving True's beaked whale dies following live stranding at Kilcummin Backstrand, Co. Mayo

WHAT IS THE HEALTH STATUS OF WILD STRANDED DOLPHINS

Project Summary: This is a joint project between the IWDG Live Stranding Response Programme and UCD school of veterinary medicine, delivered together by Gemma O'Connor Live stranding coordinator, and IWDG member / UCD assistant professor in veterinary public health, Ana Vale. The project was successfully crowdfunded on [experiment.com](#). It uses non-invasive sampling during live-stranding events in our two national live stranding hotspots, to better understand the population of dolphins we ordinarily would not have the opportunity to sample as the hotspots are mainly healthy animals that have become beached alive due to navigational errors rather than poor weakened health. This offers a rare opportunity to get an understanding of the health of the wider dolphin population.

Goal: The goal of this project is to build a baseline understanding of the health status of live stranded dolphins by integrating simple health assessments, blow sampling, and opportunistic faecal sampling into live stranding response. Weighing dolphins will also be done for those being translocated to deeper water, part of the normal live stranding response in the two national hotspots. This information will help inform welfare decisions during live strandings and contribute to longer-term dolphin conservation.

Outcome: There was a delay to the project start due to fund transfers from [experiment.com](#), but the first non-invasive blow samples were collected from May 2025 on the Mullet peninsula and sent to UCD. Once a larger number of samples are collected, analysis will begin.

5. CONSERVATION

IWDG supports its conservation work with the best available evidence or international practice. To this end we generate empirical data through our recording schemes and support research. We act, where possible, to respond to potential conservation threats to cetaceans within the Irish EEZ, by raising awareness of, and pursuing further information on, such threats. We also input consultation calls and policy submissions across a range of areas.

EVIDENCE-BASED CONSERVATION

Goal: The aim is to apply empirical data from sightings, strandings, and photo-ID to identify key areas and pressures affecting cetaceans in Irish waters. IWDG seeks to support both national and international conservation initiatives through data-sharing and expert collaboration. A further goal is to ensure that our field-based research aligns with broader marine protection efforts, such as the development of Marine Protected Areas and biodiversity action plans.

Outcome: The continuation of research on the Shannon dolphin population provides meaningful data to support the protection of cetaceans in areas that come under pressure from anthropogenic pressures. The research shows that by continually monitoring and advocating for the well-being of cetaceans in an environment like the Shannon Estuary, we have evidence to support the viability of MPAs as a concept in Ireland.

IWDG is working closely with the Department of Climate, Energy and Environment (DCEE) and the Marine Institute to incorporate IWDG cetacean sightings data into a spatial analysis of Ireland's EEZ. This is to inform the designation of suitable sites for both offshore renewable development and marine protected areas as part of the National Designated Maritime Area Plan

CONSERVATION THROUGH COLLABORATION

Goal: To apply empirical data from IWDG recording schemes—including sightings, strandings, and photo-ID—to identify key areas and pressures affecting cetaceans in Irish waters. To support both national and international conservation initiatives through data-sharing and expert collaboration. To ensure field-based research contributes to wider marine protection strategies such as Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and biodiversity action plans.

Outcome: IWDG's collaboration with the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) has ensured that robust, long-term cetacean data directly informs national conservation planning and policy. Data derived from IWDG's sightings, strandings, and photo-identification programmes have contributed to species assessments, threat evaluations, and the identification of key habitats within Irish waters.

In 2025, this collaboration was further strengthened through targeted, field-based survey work, including dedicated bottlenose dolphin surveys along the West Connacht coast and harbour porpoise surveys in Roaringwater Bay. These projects generated new baseline data on distribution, occurrence, and habitat use in areas of high conservation interest, addressing key evidence gaps for coastal cetacean species.

This evidence base has supported NPWS in meeting national and EU reporting obligations, including under the Habitats Directive and the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, and has informed marine spatial planning initiatives, proposed Marine Protected Areas, and wider biodiversity action plans. Through these partnerships, IWDG continues to strengthen the integration of empirical research into decision-making, improving the effectiveness of conservation measures for cetaceans within the Irish EEZ.

CONTRIBUTING IWDG DATA AND EXPERTISE TO IRISH MARINE SPATIAL PLANNING (MSP) POLICY AND STRATEGY

Goal: To maintain IWDG representation on the Irish Government's Marine Spatial Planning Advisory Group, actively participate in the Group discussions, and make submissions on MSP for cetacean and marine conservation in Ireland. Also to maintain a watching brief on MSP developments in Irish waters and remain up-to-date on MSP best practice for cetaceans in Europe and globally.

Outcomes: IWDG are invited to build on our work with the MSP Advisory Group by contributing to a series of workshops organised by DCEE in 2026 which will determine the National Maritime Area Development Plan (DMAP) for offshore renewables initially, and leading to the designation of MPAs.

SUPPORTING MARINE PROTECTED AREA DEVELOPMENT WITH DATA

Goal: Our objective is to collect and interpret data that supports the scientific basis for designating and managing MPAs in Irish waters. We also aim to identify and address critical research gaps that hinder the recognition and protection of important habitats for key life stages such as feeding, breeding, and migration.

Goal: In 2025, IWDG continued to support MPA development through the systematic collection and analysis of field data, with a particular focus on areas of high biodiversity value. The Celtic Mist survey programme played a key role in this work, surveying multiple regions identified as Fair Seas Areas of Interest during the summer field season. These surveys generated empirical data on cetacean distribution, species occurrence and relative density in areas under active consideration for future marine protection.

A STUDY OF RISSO'S DOLPHINS IN IRELAND

Goal: Support new research on Risso's dolphins – a species poorly understood.

Outcomes: Risso's dolphins are only patchily distributed in Ireland with islands such as the Blaskets, Saltees and Inishboffin, recognised as hotspots. Reported group sizes are rarely very big and although there are no abundance estimates for Risso's dolphin in Irish waters it's unlikely that more than a few 100 individuals occur here regularly. IWDG is supporting the new Irish Risso's Dolphin Study, led by Siún ní Cheallaigh, to build knowledge on this important Irish species.

WORKING WITH LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Goal: Build strategic relationships and partnerships at the local level through actions on the ground.

Outcomes: IWDG delivered three projects under the Local Biodiversity Action Fund, administered through Local Authority Biodiversity Officers. Projects in Clare, Kerry and Mayo were delivered.



Fin whale and common dolphins, Donegal Bay, 28 September 2025. Photo: J. Batt

6. RESEARCH

Introduction: IWDG is an evidence-based organisation and a primary data holder. We use research to support evidence-based opinions and collect empirical data through our stranding and sightings schemes, through projects such as Whale Track Ireland and the Shannon Dolphin Project and from our research platform Celtic Mist.

Goal one: Add value to IWDG data by supporting third-level students

Outcome: IWDG had nine data requests during 2025, three targeting harbour porpoise and two for strandings data. Donegal Bay was the area of interest for two data requests. One commercial request (ORE) was refused. In addition IWDG supplied basking shark data to four studies.

Goal two: Support PhD students to build a better understanding of cetaceans in Ireland

Outcome: For the third year IWDG supported a PhD student in ATU Galway (Miguel Blásquez) on humpback whales. Miguel graduated in 2025 and has published another paper on his work (see publications). IWDG also are partners in a PhD on harbour porpoise in Dublin Bay. ATU-Galway candidate Cilia Koostrata is funded by Dublin Port and is accessing the long-term acoustic dataset to build a better understanding of harbour porpoise behaviour and inform the impacts of dredging and spoil disposal on harbour porpoise.

Goal three: Build on knowledge of the habitat use of the Shannon Dolphins to influence planning

Outcome: IWDG continued to deploy CPODs in the Shannon to build on a long term acoustic dataset and explore habitat use upriver. These data are important to enable full engagement with the planning and environmental assessments of proposed large scale infrastructure developments in the Lower River Shannon SAC

7. POLICY

OFFSHORE RENEWABLE ENERGY (ORE)

Introduction: The development of ORE in Irish waters remains a key area of interest and a focus of effort. The Group continues to support the broad aims of Government and the state agencies in developing ORE to decarbonise our energy systems, reduce our fossil fuel dependency and achieve our national targets under the Climate Action Plan (2023).

There are currently five Phase I windfarm applications in the planning system with An Coimisiún Pleanála and all are in the Irish Sea. One application for a site off Connemara, Sceirde Rocks, has been withdrawn. The Group has welcomed the transition from the Phase I developer-led system to a State-led system of Designated Maritime Area Plans (DMAPS) for ORE projects, which began with the designation of the South Coast DMAP off the Waterford Coast in 2024. An ORESS 2.1 auction took place in 2025 with ESB/Orsted winning the rights to develop a 900 MW windfarm at the Tonn Nua site in the South Coast DMAP.

DCEE are now expanding the DMAP approach to marine spatial planning (MSP) under the amended Maritime Area Planning Act (2021) to encompass the entirety of the Irish EEZ, with work ongoing to identify suitable ORE sites for both bottom-fixed and floating technologies. The Department's intention is to further adapt the Act to allow the designation of MPAs using DMAPs to reach the 30% target by 2030.

The development of ORE in Irish waters and the requirement to designate MPAs have driven an unprecedented focus on the marine space. The need for high-quality data-driven marine spatial planning is evident, and the task at hand is to avoid or reduce as much as possible impacts on the marine environment from new industrial activity. A balance must be found to turn back the tide of climate change through renewable energy generation while protecting vulnerable species and habitats.

Goal: That the IWDG will be considered a willing and active stakeholder by all actors in the development of ORE and will be the “go-to” NGO for consultation in relation to whales, dolphins and porpoises and the broader marine environment. That our in-house expertise on the engineering challenges of ORE development and their potential interaction with sensitive marine species, in particular in relation to underwater noise, will be recognised by industry and government.

That our opinions will be considered and that we will influence decision-making through all stages of ORE development. To build relationships with ORE developers, relevant Government departments, and other NGOs to maintain the relevance of the IWDG and promote the views and opinions of the Group throughout the roll-out of offshore wind. To maintain involvement in the ORE planning process through participation in stakeholder engagement exercises; making submissions as required on projects and plans; and commenting on EIA scoping reports and foreshore license applications for site investigation surveys.

Outcome: IWDG involvement in the development of ORE in Irish waters was expanded in late 2024 by securing funding from DCEE through the Irish Environmental Network (IEN) giving rise to the MARÉIRE project, a partnership of IWDG, the IEN and Birdwatch Ireland. MARÉIRE advances and leads research, policy and advocacy efforts in relation to marine biodiversity and offshore renewable energy and seeks to find a balance between mitigating the climate crisis and protecting biodiversity through research and advocacy. Key outputs from MARÉIRE in 2025 include the report "Identifying knowledge gaps on the impact of offshore renewable energy on biodiversity at sea" which led to a workshop attended by eNGOs and academics to identify areas of study to close the knowledge gaps. The project also ran a series of webinars and administered research grants.

IWDG made a number of submissions on ORE and ORE-related topics in 2025, including two major submissions to ACP on Phase I projects. Another was made to ACP on port development in Cork Harbour, and all three concentrated on issues around underwater noise affecting cetaceans during construction. Eirgrid, who are responsible for offshore substations and cable connections for the Tonn Nua site, had a preliminary consultation to which IWDG also contributed. Comments were made on Maritime Usage License (MUL) applications to the Maritime Area Regulatory Authority (MARA) on three geophysical and geotechnical surveys, two for international cables and one for work on the River Shannon. Submissions were also made to DCEE on the Maritime Planning Policy Statement and on National Territory Mapping; to the European Commission on non-price criteria draft legislation; and to the Department of Defence on Maritime Security Strategy.

Presentations were given on ORE, MSP and underwater noise related topics at a number of events, conferences, workshops and webinars. IWDG ran an international workshop at the 2025 European Cetacean Society conference on mitigation for noise during ORE construction and standards for baseline data collection. The work of the IWDG in these areas was also presented at a seminar in ATU, Whale Tales in Belfast, and at a number of webinars organised by IWDG and others.

A number of national and international conferences were attended including European Maritime Day in Cork, the Conference on Wind Energy and Wildlife Impacts in France, the European Cetacean Society conference in the Azores, and the Wind Energy Ireland Offshore Conference in Dublin, among others. These all provided opportunities to stay up-to-date with the latest developments in science, technology and policy, and to build networks across Government, industry, NGOs and agencies.

The expertise held in the IWDG on ORE and the interactions with cetaceans is in demand and briefings were given to e.g. NPWS, DCEE, the Marine Institute, industry, MEPs, TDs, academics and journalists on various topics. IWDG also attended the NPWS Marine Leaders Forum, sat at DCEE MSP Advisory Group meetings, met several times with Timmy Dooley, Minister of State with special responsibility for fisheries and the marine, and met with Commissioner Kadis, European Commissioner for Fisheries and Oceans.

Outlook: Work will continue to maintain the Group's influence in the area of ORE and MSP, but with an immediate focus on two areas. DCEE will be holding workshops with stakeholders, including IWDG, in Q1 2026 leading to site selection for ORE, and forming part of the new National DMAP. The Marine Institute is the responsible body for spatial analysis, including all environmental layers, and the Group is making the IWDG cetaceans sightings database and our expertise available to the process. This data-driven approach is welcome and should result in best outcomes for whales, dolphins and porpoises. Work will also continue on the crucially important new guidance for underwater noise, expected to be opened for consultation in 2026. Proposed bottom-fixed ORE construction in the coming years will, without adequate mitigation, impact severely on cetaceans in Irish waters. The technology exists to greatly reduce impacts, and the IWDG will carry on making representations to State agencies to have mitigation made a legal requirement for offshore development.

MARINE PROTECTED AREAS (MPAs)

Introduction: The long-awaited legislation to enable the designation and effective management of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in Irish waters remained delayed through 2025. During the year, Government messaging and timelines continued to shift, with public statements indicating the Marine Protected Areas Bill was at an advanced stage of drafting in mid-2025.

In November 2025, Government confirmed a change in approach: rather than progressing a standalone MPA Bill, Cabinet approved the preparation of a General Scheme for the Maritime Area Planning (Marine Protected Areas) (Amendment) Bill, which will amend the Maritime Area Planning Act 2021 and use the DMAP system as the mechanism for MPA designation and management.

In parallel, the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment's Strategy 2025–2028 included a commitment to provide for the statutory designation and management of MPAs.

Goal: The objective is that robust national legislation will be published, rather sooner than later, and enacted to provide a clear legal basis for the designation and effective management of an ecologically coherent MPA network in Irish waters, aligned with Ireland's 30% by 2030 commitment and underpinned by meaningful stakeholder engagement, clear conservation objectives and workable governance structures.

Outcome: While no MPA legislation was enacted in 2025, the IWDG maintained sustained engagement and advocacy through its role as a core partner of the Fair Seas coalition. Actions during the year included:

Supporting policy engagement during major legislative developments, including Fair Seas' direct engagement with Ministers and officials as the Government progressed the amendment route via the Maritime Area Planning framework.

Contributing to public communications and evidence-based advocacy to maintain momentum for timely and effective legislation, including coalition commentary during periods of uncertainty on the legislative route and timelines.

Strengthening the connection between IWDG field evidence and MPA advocacy through continued alignment of IWDG programmes with Fair Seas priorities, including the multi-year Celtic Mist survey focus on Fair Seas Areas of Interest to support MPA discussions.

FISHERIES

Introduction: The development of Offshore Renewable Energy (ORE) and the designation of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) continue to be divisive issues in coastal communities, with elements of the fishing sector at times at odds with other stakeholders. The Seafood ORE Working Group remains the primary forum for structured dialogue to date.

Of particular concern to IWDG is the continued unregulated fishing of forage fish by pair trawlers in inshore waters, including sprat, anchovy, pilchard and sandeel, given their ecological importance within the marine food web.

Goal: IWDG is working to break down suspicion and mistrust between elements of the fishing sector and the environmental NGO community, building constructive relationships, particularly with the inshore fleet, and supporting improved communication between environmental representatives and fishing stakeholders.

Outcome: In 2025, IWDG successfully secured funding through the Environmental Pillar Marine Hub to strengthen coordination among environmental representatives participating in the Regional Inshore Fisheries Forums (RIFFs).

The Irish Environmental Network (IEN) is represented on the RIFFs through nominated members of the IEN community acting as environmental representatives. With Marine Hub support secured, IWDG will host a series of online coordination meetings in advance of RIFF meetings during 2026. These sessions will improve communication and consistency by enabling representatives to share regional experiences, identify recurring fisheries and conservation issues, and agree common positions before formal engagement.

Key issues expected to be addressed include offshore renewable energy impacts, fisheries management plans (including brown crab and cockles), seal–fisheries interactions, vessel tracking, forage fish management, and communication gaps between the environmental sector and fishing communities. This initiative will strengthen the quality and consistency of environmental input into regional fisheries governance processes.



Fin whale and common dolphins, Helvick, Co. Waterford, 2 January 2025. Photo: Marcin Benasiak

8. EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

Work on this project began in earnest with the appointment of a new Education and Outreach Officer in June. While there was a steep learning curve for the new officer, attending public events such as the IOLN regional meeting in Omeath, County Louth, a Whalewatch at Dún na mBó, County Mayo, Cromane Rowing Club's Water Safety Day and the Native Species Weekend at Fota Wildlife helped him develop his outreach skills. All of these events involved engaging with the public, including members and would-be members of the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group, engaging stakeholders and bringing public opinion with us.

Events following this included participation in the live stranding training course at Salthill, Galway, public engagement at Electric Picnic in partnership with fellow IEN member organisations and offering assistance at the Residential Whale Watching Weekend Course in Leap, County Cork. These involved direct engagement with IWDG members, colleagues in the eNGO space and members of the public also. This engagement was very positive, promoting awareness and better understanding of cetaceans and their habitats, as well as leading to some new memberships.

Awareness was also promoted through radio interviews, podcasts and webinars with Raidió na Gaeltachta, Clare FM, Raidió Chorca Baiscinn, Near FM's 'Balance with the World' podcast and Burren Beo Trust. Each interview delivered information about the work of IWDG, our citizen scientists, our volunteers and how non-members can get involved and further informed about whale and dolphin conservation.

EVENTS

Throughout 2025, IWDG continued to deliver and participate in a range of events designed to engage members, local communities and the wider public with cetacean conservation, marine biodiversity and citizen science. These activities provided opportunities to share our work, encourage participation and strengthen connections with communities across Ireland.

1. Heritage Week – Shannon Dolphin Centre and Loop Head

Goal: To engage the public with IWDG's heritage, research and conservation work through activities at the Shannon Dolphin Centre and a public whale watch at Loop Head during Heritage Week.

Outcome: The first such event under Outreach in 2025 was our open days during Heritage Week in August. That week, from Monday to Friday the Shannon Dolphin Centre in Kilrush held open days; visitors were given tours of the Centre and an opportunity to explore our collection of bones and artefacts, as well as our interactive touch-screen kiosk. The week finished off with a beautiful sunny whalewatch at Loop Head with sightings of ~15 common dolphins, ~8 bottlenose dolphins and 1 minke whale.

2. Floating Classroom

Goal: To promote ocean literacy and engage young people with Ireland's marine environment through hands-on educational activities.

Outcome: Our annual education event where IWDG sails Celtic Mist to a coastal community in Ireland and promotes ocean literacy there by engaging as many local school-going children as possible. This year the event was run in Galway City and saw participation of 193 students across 5 different schools. A weekend event was run for adults which adapted Floating Classroom presentation for a more mature audience and included an informative talk by Fair Seas about Marine Protected Areas, along with a screening of the short film 'Fair Seas: the Atlantic Northwest'.

3. 'MAYBE DICK' Sculpture Unveiling

Outcome: Towards the end of the year following the donation of the art piece 'Maybe Dick' to the Shannon Dolphin Centre in Kilrush, a special evening was held to officially unveil the four-metre-long sculpture and add it to our collection. The sculpture, along with its 42 teeth adorned with intricate scrimshaw images, resembles a sperm whale's lower jaw, and many friends of the late artist Keith Payne and of IWDG came to honour the former's life and legacy. A wonderful evening was had with over 20 participants exploring our centre's other artefacts also.

4. Winter Webinars

Goal: To provide IWDG members with greater insight into the organisation's work and create opportunities for direct engagement with the IWDG team through a series of member-exclusive webinars.

Outcome: In December 2025 our first 'Winter Webinar' was delivered; 'Designing Ireland's Future Seas: MPAs, Policy and the DMAP Framework'. This was the first in a series of member-exclusive monthly webinars over the winter period that show and explain exactly what we do as a group, from policy to research to consultancy to conservation and giving our members a chance to ask their questions to our team. The webinar was received enormously well with circa 100 registered attendees and circa 55 live attendees. A very lively Q&A session ran 20 minutes over time with very interesting and intelligent questions put and expertly answered.

5. Whale Tales 2025

Goal: To re-establish and strengthen IWDG's presence in Northern Ireland by delivering an accessible education and outreach event that brought together members, researchers, IWDG officers, policymakers and the public while advancing cross-border collaboration, volunteer engagement and conservation awareness.

Outcome: WT25 successfully attracted strong engagement with around 100 people attending the main event on Saturday and approx 70 participants taking part in the opening night on Friday. Held in Belfast from 7–9 November, the event brought together IWDG members, marine researchers, Northern Ireland agency staff, policymakers, and the wider public, creating valuable opportunities for learning, networking, and exchange.

Through a series of 18 short presentations and storytelling sessions, the event increased awareness of IWDG's work, highlighted the importance of robust data collection and citizen science, and showcased ongoing cross-border projects. Importantly, Whale Tales 2025 helped rebuild momentum for IWDG in Northern Ireland, supporting renewed engagement from long-standing contributors, encouraging new involvement, and contributing to the development of new officers and collaborative initiatives across the island.

Reflection: <https://iwdg.ie/highlights-from-whale-tales-2025/>

6. Residential Whale Watching Weekend Courses

Goal: To encourage existing members to become more actively involved in IWDG's sighting scheme, by immersing them over the weekend in a series of indoor presentations covering a wide range of related topics, combined with land watches and a pelagic whale watch trip out from Baltimore. IWDG sightings officer

Outcome: IWDG Sightings Officer delivered a further two residential weekend courses at the CECAS, Centre of Excellence for Climate Action & Sustainability in Leap, West Cork, on 23–25 May and 12–14 September 2025. They were attended by a combined 51 participants, c.50% of whom became new IWDG members on completion of the course. Despite poor weather over both weekends, which resulted in the forced cancellation of the pelagic boat trip and some headland watches, this great venue enables us, to a certain extent, to weatherproof the weekend with more time being spent presenting topics indoors and with invited guest local speakers. The courses again were run at a profit for IWDG and we are mindful that in delivering these events at this venue people are supporting not just one charity, but two.

There is a question mark surrounding our continued delivery of these courses at this venue in 2026 as Green Skibbereen who have the lease from the religious order may not be in a position to renew their tenancy in 2026. So going forward we may be looking for a new venue and if this is the case then our priority will be to deliver at least one of these weekends in the northwest, reflecting the movements of our large whales and the great interest in the area.

7. WHALE WATCH Ireland

Goal: Support National Biodiversity Week and National Heritage Week by delivering engaging public events during these weeks.

Outcome: The main event delivered during National Biodiversity Week 16–25 May 2025 was IWDG's all-island Whale Watch day. Now in its 23rd year, Whale Watch Ireland 2025 comprises free, guided land-based whale watches, which this year was planned for and delivered at 14 sites in 14 coastal counties, throughout the four provinces.

The main objective of Whale Watch Ireland is to raise awareness of the 25 species of cetaceans recorded to date in Irish waters, and to promote their conservation by highlighting public participation in our successful recording schemes, which encourage members of the public to report sightings and strandings to the IWDG. This event continues to be one of the largest in the Irish wildlife calendar.

For full results and images from this event see:

<https://iwdg.ie/whale-watch-ireland-2025-results/>



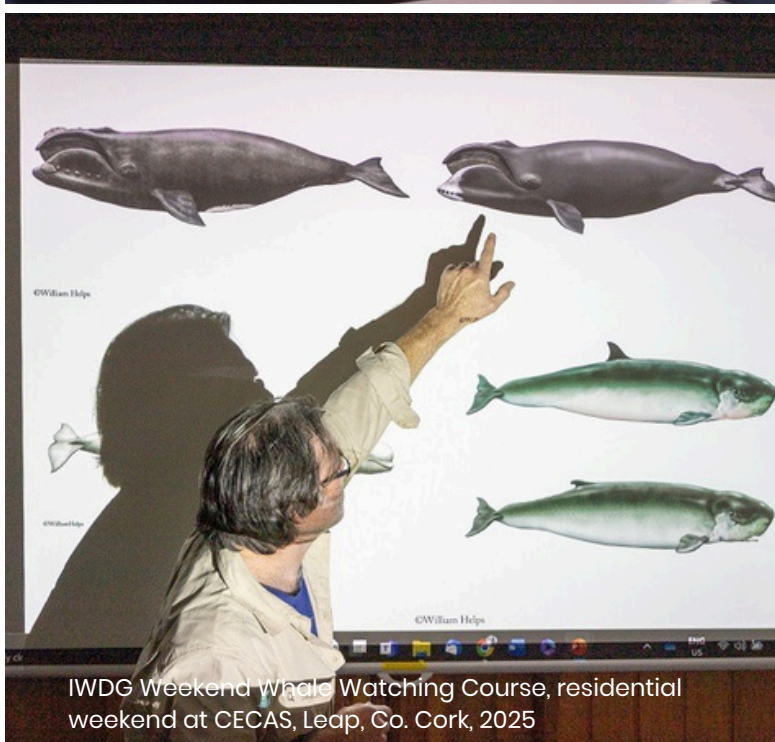
Whale Watch Ireland 2025



ESB Moneypoint Power Stations 40th Anniversary Celebration Open Day 2025



Salthill Live-Stranding Training Course, Co. Galway, Aug. 2025



IWDG Weekend Whale Watching Course, residential weekend at CECAS, Leap, Co. Cork, 2025



Mayo Local Biodiversity Action Fund Watch at Dun na mBó Co. Mayo, July 2025



Heritage Week 2025: Whale Watch and Species ID Session at Loop Head Lighthouse. Photo: Karoly Torok

8. Annual Stranding Network Meeting

Goal: To provide training, knowledge-sharing, and networking opportunities for IWDG volunteers and partners through the annual Stranding Network Meeting, ensuring they remain equipped with up-to-date science, research findings, and best practices in stranding response.

Outcome: Around 30 volunteers and partners attended the annual Stranding Network Meeting in Kilkee, Co. Clare. Participants received updates on stranding trends and live responses, learned about recent research carried out using samples from the stranding scheme. Mags Daly of IWDG discussed the results from the third year of the DDRIP project, and Ana Vale, a veterinarian at the UCD School of Veterinary Medicine, discussed her work with IWDG on a study which aims to assess the health of live stranded dolphins in Ireland using non-invasive sampling, and evaluate their suitability for release.

Seán O'Callaghan, a PhD candidate at ATU-Galway (ATU) talked to us about his PhD on the size structure of Northeast Atlantic sperm whales over the past century, from the southern nursery grounds up to their northern high latitude foraging grounds, for which stranding data has played a key role.

Georgia Novak is also a PhD candidate based in ATU, investigating the life history and conservation of common dolphins and harbour porpoises in Irish and UK waters. She discussed her project which focuses on developing indicators to assess population status, temporal trends in mortality and survival and the insights gonads can provide into reproductive activity.

Finally, ATU lecturer Dr Katie O'Dwyer, spoke to us about her work exploring parasite biodiversity and how parasites interact with their hosts, examining both host defences and parasite strategies for infection and transmission.

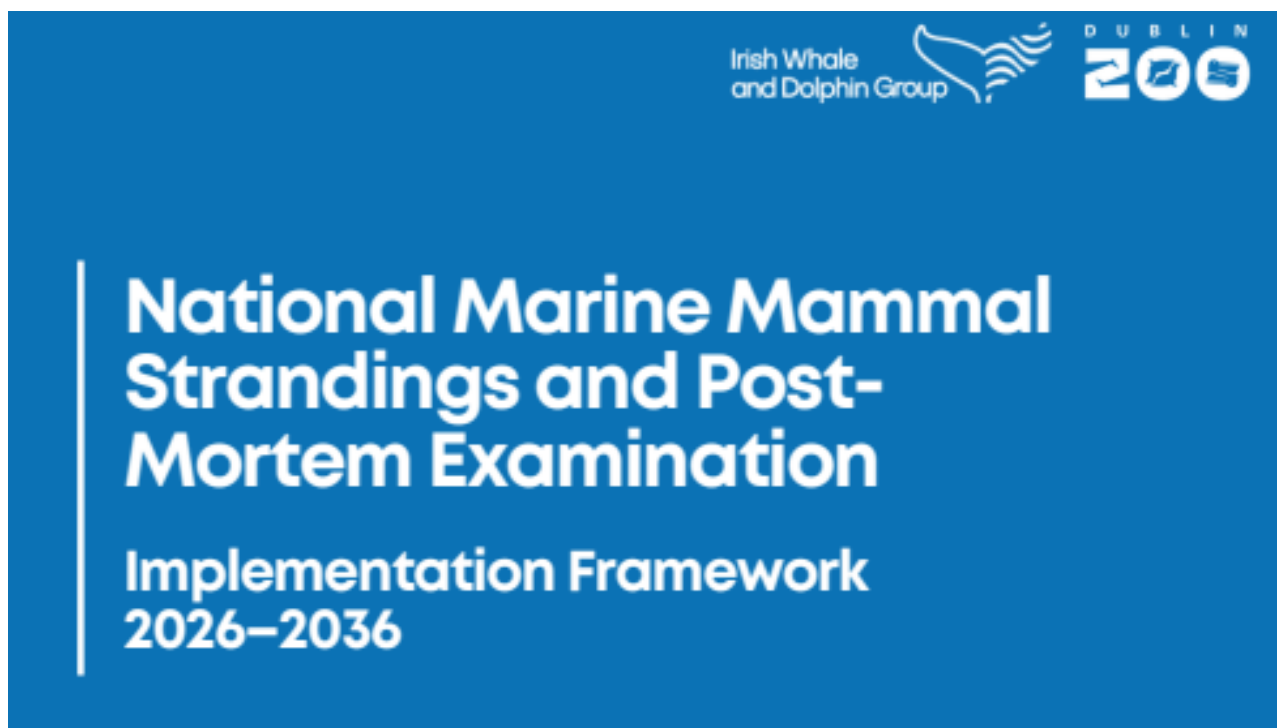
9. Marine Mammal Stranding Workshop – Dublin Zoo Workshop

Introduction: An excellent workshop titled “Enhancing Marine Mammal Stranding Response in Ireland: Informing Marine Ecosystem Health Through a Collaborative and Standardised Framework” organised by Dublin Zoo veterinarian Frank O’Sullivan, with planning support from Gemma O’Connor on behalf of IWDG, was held in Dublin Zoo December as part of its wider conservation commitments.

The workshop brought together a fantastic mix of participants, including veterinarians from private practice, state services and third-level institutions including, DAFM Veterinary Laboratories, UCD and ATU, Dublin Zoo conservation vet team and staff, scientists, the Natural History Museum, volunteer responders and the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). Discussions focused on how Ireland can progress towards a long-term, coordinated post-mortem programme for stranded cetaceans.

Simon Berrow of IWDG provided a background to attempts to deliver post-mortem examinations in Ireland which dates back to 1991 when the IWDG first supported demonstration PMs in RVLS in Sligo and Cork. The workshop was addressed by Rob Deaville and James Barnett from the Cetacean Strandings Investigation Programme (CSIP) (England), Andrew Brownlow from the Scottish Marine Animal Stranding Scheme (SMAS), and Emma Neave-Webb of the International Whaling Commission (IWC). Ana Vale (UCD & IWDG member) highlighted the importance of a One Health approach, as we share this planet and what's good for marine mammals is good for humans too.

Outcome: Key outcomes from the workshop included agreement to prepare a white paper to present to the government to help mobilise state resources and involve stakeholders to coordinate and deliver a national post-mortem programme with embedded research and reporting needs. Participants also agreed to explore the potential benefits of Ireland joining ASCOBANS, to engage and harness more volunteers from veterinary science and the wider public, and to communicate not only the important work of IWDG but also the science and findings from post-mortems that reveal so much about the marine ecosystem and environment



IRISH LANGUAGE ENGAGEMENT

Introduction: As part of IWDG's commitment to inclusivity and cultural heritage, we aim to integrate the Irish language into our outreach and education initiatives. This section will highlight efforts to engage Irish-speaking communities, provide bilingual resources, and promote the use of Irish in marine conservation education.

Goal: To expand the use of the Irish language in IWDG's outreach and education programmes, ensuring greater accessibility and engagement with Irish-speaking communities.

Outcome: Many strides were made in 2025 integrating the Irish language into our work and our community engagement.

The most notable achievement was IWDG's attendance at 'Focail na Farrage' in Brussels in October. Science officer Jack O'Callaghan represented our group as a panelist at this joint event by Fair Seas and Conradh na Gaeilge an Bhruiséil, discussing the interconnectedness of our language and all things marine.

The translation and delivery of the Irish language 'Ireland's Coastal Whale Trail' poster, AKA 'Conair Chósta na gCéiticeach' was another large achievement of 2025. These new posters are very versatile and, in being uniquely and thoughtfully catered to the Irish speaking community, encourage education about whales and dolphins in Irish waters as well as conversation on marine biodiversity and conservation in that language.

IWDG reached out and responded to Irish language media on several occasions throughout 2025:

- Raidió na Gaeltachta

An Saol ó Dheas x2: Shannon Humpback; Whale Watch Ireland.

Iris Aniar x1: Information on how we respond to live strandings.

- TG4

Nuacht TG4 x1: Basking Shark statue reveal + sharks at Loop Head.

Nuacht Cúla4 x1: Piece organised on Floating Classroom but this fell through.

Materials as Gaeilge were prepared for Floating Classroom in Galway and emphasis was placed on full Irish / bilingual Celtic Mist visits in all communications with schools. Gaelscoils unfortunately did not grasp this unique opportunity and English speaking schools were not confident to choose the bilingual version.

During and after Seachtain na Gaeilge, two species profile videos were released on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok of the Harbour Porpoise and the Bottlenose Dolphin.

MEMBERSHIP AND MERCHANDISE

We continued to increase engagement with IWDG members and the public, sharing our knowledge and enthusiasm to promote our conservation actions and priorities.

Goal one: To retain existing members and grow our membership.

Outcome: IWDG Membership for 2025 has steadily increased to over 1,100 members. There is no going back now with the momentum of the public's understanding of the linking of the part they play as a citizen scientist, the care and better understanding of cetaceans.

Deciding to become and commit to remain a member is influenced by Sightings, Strandings, IWDG training courses events, Social media posts and long read Blog articles on our website, radio interviews, attendance at field events, sailing, Meitheal maintenance on the Celtic Mist and the energy, passion, integrity and availability of the IWDG staff to listen, talk and educate its members and the public over the course of each month in 2025.

The strength of the 'call to action' for strandings and sightings on the 12 local groups WhatsApp group gives memberships a purpose, a skill set and ownership of their membership in their own coastal area and makes the decision to renew and remain a member an easy decision.

The increased opportunities, collaborations and alliances with other organisations such as Fair Seas, Banner Glow and other coastal community groups has also helped to increase membership.

A review and new strategy for the membership plans and IT WooCommerce was discussed in December to make it more user-friendly and efficient going forward as membership increases and as postage costs increase making it a better experience for the user and processing of orders online, anticipating increase in postage costs in Feb 2026. This will take time to implement and communicate to the members.

The IWDG subscribers ezine was used as a communication tool to encourage all our subscribers of the ezine to join the group as a member. This is ongoing.

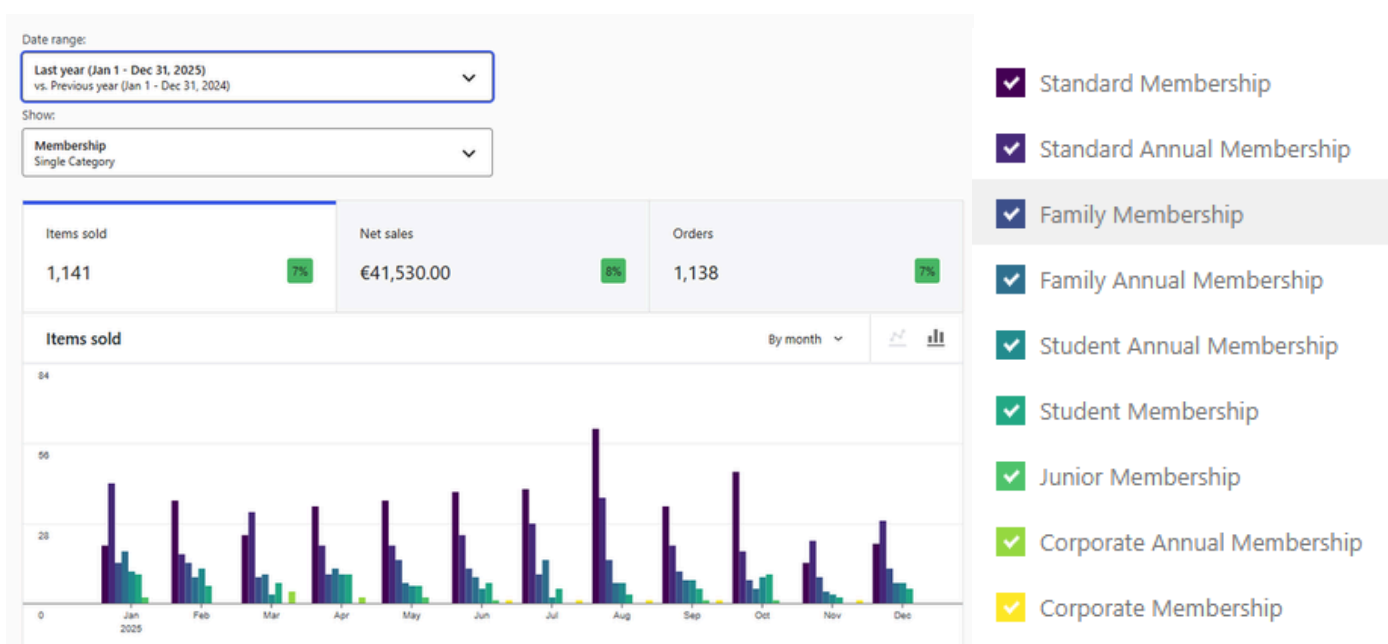
Goal two: To provide best-effort ethically sourced IWDG branded products for purchase by the public to promote the brand, raising awareness and raising funds.

Outcome: IWDG continues to use SPAILPÍN, a clothing screen printing company in Galway. For 2025, a new batch of organic clothing was screen printed for our Whale Tales event in Belfast, using both Irish and English in the Logo and tagline.

The Irish version is very popular and as an All Ireland group and a new Northern IWDG Officer now in place it is important to our members to wear IWDG clothing to feel part of the group and raise awareness.

A 100 euro Gift Card was introduced as another option to be used to redeem a gift membership or merchandise to make the decision easier for the customer at the end of 2025.

New families of the Shannon Dolphins were printed as Adoption Pack options to give better value and highlight the linkages and time series of the Shannon Dolphin stories. The Shannon Dolphin Centre was not open to the public in 2025 but the centre is due to open to the public in May 2026 and this will help with sales as customers have the opportunity to buy in person.



IWDG membership items sold, 2025 vs. 2024. Source: Website analytics

LOCAL GROUPS

Introduction: The IWDG recognises that in order for members to actively participate in IWDG activities, primarily the sighting and stranding schemes, that they need support, guidance and a mechanism to meet other like-minded members in their area.

To enable this, local groups have been created. Local groups also make it easier for the Education and Outreach programme to identify and address member needs more effectively as members now have a mechanism to request information and or training from the IWDG Education & Outreach (E&O) Officer who is the point of contact for members within the group.

Goal: The overarching goal is to grow and support the Local Group Network by enhancing communication channels, providing consistent updates on events and training opportunities, and ensuring that each group feels supported in their regional efforts. IWDG also aims to strengthen the Northern Ireland Local Group, building further engagement and representation at marine conservation meetings and events across the island. Additionally, the Shannon Dolphin Centre should serve as a central hub for education and outreach, inspiring individuals of all ages to learn more about cetaceans—especially the Shannon Dolphins—and take an active role in conservation initiatives.

Outcome: One of the roles assigned to the new E&O officer was keeping contact with our twelve local groups. Throughout the year newly joined members and those renewing their memberships were made aware of their nearest local group and gave permission for their phone numbers to be added to a relevant local group WhatsApp channel.

These online channels kept members informed and in touch with others in their county and were used by IWDG to inform the stranding network of carcasses in their areas, to rally up (trained) live stranding volunteers, to find volunteers to assist at various outreach events throughout the year, and to keep members informed of IWDG events happening in their area.

Our volunteer members have been a great asset to us this year during difficult live strandings, collection of carcasses for post mortem and especially during outreach events such as Floating Classroom.

DOLPHIN CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE

Goal: to explore the potential for a Dolphin Centre of Excellence on the Wild Atlantic Way in line with recommendations made by Failte Ireland.

Outcome: IWDG received funding from LEADER to contract consultants to prepare a feasibility study and business plan to identify potential and a pathway. Study to be completed in Q2 2026.



IWDG research vessel Celtic Mist during the 2025 summer survey cruises. Photo: Eva Lambert, IWDG

9. CELTIC MIST



Celtic Mist is the IWDG's research vessel, serving as a vital platform for marine conservation efforts. It provides opportunities for researchers, members of the IWDG, and citizen scientists to participate in various initiatives aimed at studying and protecting marine wildlife, particularly whales and dolphins, along Ireland's coastlines. The vessel plays a key role in IWDG's mission by facilitating fieldwork, monitoring marine biodiversity, and fostering greater public engagement in conservation efforts through hands-on participation and education.

EDUCATION, RESEARCH AND ENGAGEMENT AT SEA

Goal one: To raise public awareness of and foster connections with marine wildlife, particularly whales, dolphins, and porpoises in Irish waters. Increased awareness of and connection with cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) and the marine environment in general through education and first-hand experience on the water. By offering opportunities for people to participate in research trips aboard vessels like Celtic Mist, the IWDG allows individuals to observe cetaceans in their natural environment. These experiences, combined with educational outreach, deepen public knowledge of cetaceans and highlight the importance of protecting these species and their habitats. This hands-on approach is crucial in fostering a connection between people and marine conservation efforts in Irish waters.

Outcome: The Celtic Mist research programme delivered high-quality, standardised cetacean survey data across the 2025 field season, supported by a committed and well-trained volunteer and professional crew. Through a structured model of mentorship and mixed experience levels onboard, participants developed practical skills in cetacean survey methodology, data collection, and marine safety, building long-term capacity within the IWDG volunteer community. Collaborative survey legs with Fair Seas and other partners strengthened the link between field-based scientific evidence, public engagement, and marine policy advocacy, ensuring that data collected directly inform efforts to protect Ireland's marine biodiversity, including the development of a coherent network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). Collectively, the programme enhanced scientific understanding of cetacean distribution and habitat use in Irish waters while fostering a skilled, motivated, and engaged community committed to marine conservation.

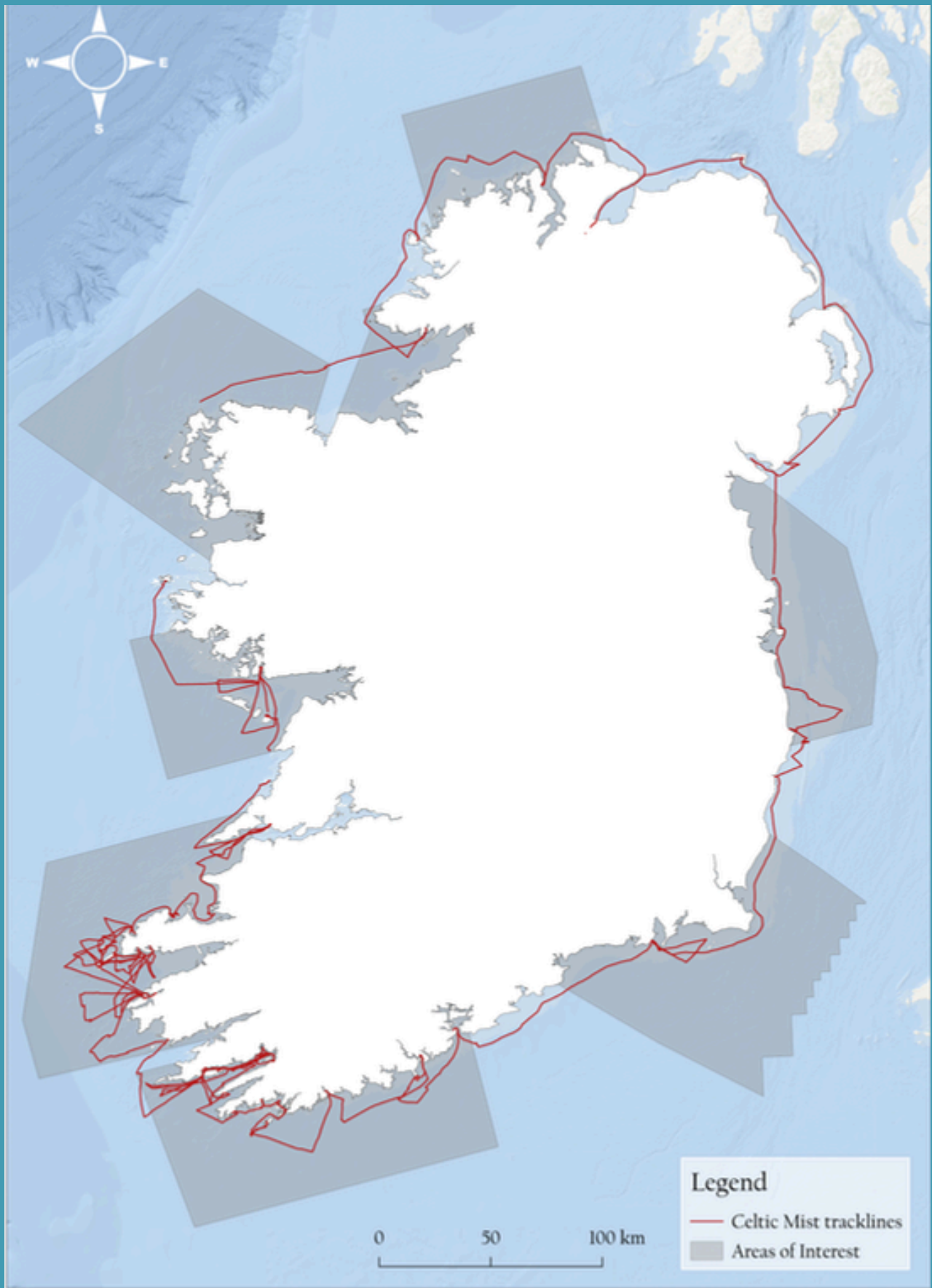
Goal two: Ensure the Celtic Mist remains in optimal condition to support ongoing research and conservation efforts.

Outcome: Celtic Mist maintenance is enacted through professionals and volunteer work. An initial assessment of the vessel is carried out early in the off-season and through this a list of tasks is compiled. Where specific skilled work or supplies are required, engineers, metal workers, carpenters, chandlers, etc. are employed. IWDG also runs coordinated meitheals which bring together a team of staff, members and volunteers to engage in tasks such as sanding, anti-fouling, painting, cleaning and general maintenance. In 2025 two successful meitheal weekends were organised, as well as a week-long effort by a smaller core volunteer group, and longer, ongoing efforts by skilled individuals. Accommodation and sustenance was provided by IWDG at the meitheals. 25 – 30 people volunteered their time and skills in one capacity or another, giving an estimated 800+ volunteer-hours over this period. A new RHIB was procured and replaced the older one on board.

RESEARCH SURVEYS

Goal: Robust data collection on board our research vessel. Following on from new protocols implemented in 2022 the scientific programme onboard expanded and a new seasonal field biologist will ensure consistency in the data collection. The surveys this year have been specifically designed to survey Areas of Interest (AoI) identified by IWDG and the Fair Seas campaign which warrant consideration for a future MPA network.

Outcome: During the 2025 field season, the Celtic Mist completed eleven survey legs between May and September, covering a total distance of 3,379 km (1,822 nautical miles) and achieving near-complete circumnavigation of the Irish coastline. The survey effort was explicitly designed to target Fair Seas Areas of Interest, with coverage of all eight coastal AOIs identified for potential Marine Protected Area designation. Across the season, observers recorded 348 sightings comprising an estimated 2,047 individual animals, representing eight species of cetaceans and pinnipeds, alongside a small number of unidentified cetacean records. The most frequently recorded species was common dolphin (185 sightings), followed by minke whale (49 sightings) and grey seal (43 sightings). Data collected through standardised, effort-based protocols provided robust information on species distribution, relative density and species richness within candidate MPA areas, directly strengthening the scientific evidence base supporting future marine spatial planning and MPA development.



Map showing the 2025 survey effort within the designated Area of Interest (AoI), where focused surveys were successfully undertaken during the R.V. Celtic Mist summer survey cruises

FLOATING CLASSROOM

Goal one: It is the overall aim of the Floating Classroom initiative to improve ocean literacy among primary school students using Celtic Mist as a platform. Students improve their knowledge about whales, dolphins and porpoises, the threats they face and conservation measures in Irish waters. This workshop aims to equip learners with relevant knowledge about biodiversity and the interdependence of all organisms within the marine ecosystem. This helps the learner to better understand the concept and importance of conservation work. It also helps them to consider their place within the ecosystem and to become better stewards for the natural world, especially our oceans (Sustainable Development Goals 4, 14).

Outcome: Floating Classroom travelled to Galway City in late September 2025 where there was a variety of schools, both English and Irish-speaking, in relatively close proximity to Kilrush where Celtic Mist would subsequently be lifted.

The event was coordinated and facilitated by the Education and Outreach Officer with help from a team of volunteers from the Galway local group. Overall, we engaged close to 250 people this year including 193 students from 5 local schools and from the Galway Sea Scouts.

Students were given a tour of Celtic Mist, her deck, her cabin, her galley, her berths and her bow head before sitting down to a Floating Classroom presentation. This presentation highlighted the importance of the ecosystem and interdependence of species using whales and dolphins as a flagship species. Students learned the difference between a whale and a fish and the difference between a baleen whale and a toothed whale. Questions were answered, games were played and information was successfully delivered and retained after the event as reported by some teachers. Members of the Galway public also visited the Floating Classroom as our event coincided with the Docklands Festival organised by the Galway Hooker Sailing Club. A joint event by IWDG and Fair Seas was hosted in the Galway City Museum where a longform version Floating Classroom presentation was given to roughly 25 attendees. This was followed by talk by Fair Seas about MPA legislation and Areas of Interest for designation and management. A screening of the short film 'Fair Seas: the Atlantic Northwest' and a tour of Celtic Mist was held to finish off a successful informative afternoon.

Additionally, Celtic Mist was used for a skipper and mate training/familiarisation weekend in April and the practical aspect of an IWDG Marine Mammal Observer course in September, both within the Shannon Estuary. About 125 people sailed on Celtic Mist throughout the summer, a number which includes skippers, volunteers, IWDG staff, Shannon Dolphin Interns and IWDG members; 15 of those on the MMO training course.

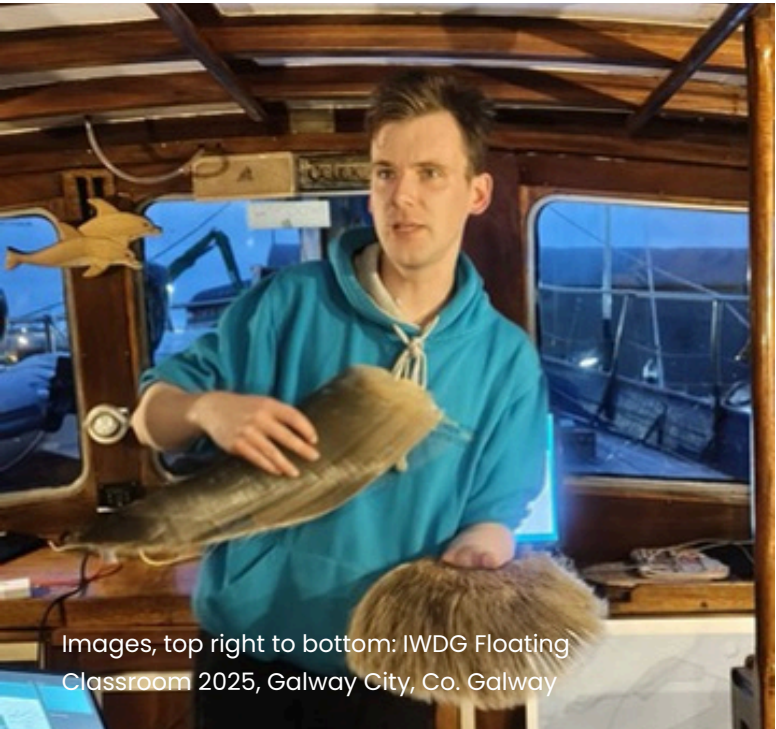
Six official ports were visited across five counties with many more overnight stops in small bays and marinas. Open days and educational events were held on board, as was the IWDG initiative 'Floating Classroom' which saw children from multiple schools based around the Kilrush area visit the vessel and learn about vessel safety, Irish waters and the animals within.

Goal two: Ensure the Celtic Mist remains in optimal condition to support ongoing research and conservation efforts.

Outcome: Extensive maintenance of the vessel was carried out over winter, including refits, de-rusting, painting, deep-cleaning and repairs. Particular attention was paid to the skippers cabin where leaks were addressed with a partial overhaul of the ceiling area and a rebuilding of the steps into the wheelhouse. This was achieved through continuous work by competent volunteers including electricians, carpenters, welders and skippers. Some volunteers conducted daily work for an extended period, and some joined for intensive weekends. The volunteer efforts were complimented by paid professionals where necessary. These efforts were overseen by experienced IWDG personnel and meant Celtic Mist was fit and ready for sailing on schedule.



Molly ? and Léa Delhaise from IWDG Galway Local Group
volunteering at IWDG Floating Classroom 2025, Galway
City, Co. Galway



Images, top right to bottom: IWDG Floating
Classroom 2025, Galway City, Co. Galway



10.COMMUNICATIONS

Introduction: To enhance public awareness, stakeholder engagement, and internal coordination through a comprehensive communication strategy aligned with the IWDG's broader conservation mission.

ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION

In 2025, IWDG strengthened its communications to support advocacy, stakeholder engagement and public understanding of marine conservation issues. Building on internal review and organisational learning, activities focused on consistency, clarity and strategic coordination across public, digital and policy facing channels.

An overarching Communications Strategy (2025-2028) was developed to provide a structured approach to IWDG's outreach, stakeholder engagement, and internal coordination. This strategy was informed by key reviews of past reports and workshops, identifying strengths such as stakeholder engagement and evidence-based advocacy, while addressing challenges like funding constraints and the need for enhanced digital communication. The strategy sets clear objectives for public awareness, policy engagement, citizen science, and internal communication while implementing evaluation metrics to measure its effectiveness.

We are working to improve stakeholder relationships by disseminating the new IWDG Corporate Partnership Guide, to attract new corporate sponsors and build partnerships with key industries and organisations.

The IWDG Social Media Policy was revised to make our external communications clearer and more consistent. Issues like misunderstandings and the sharing of sensitive topics, such as offshore wind energy projects and sprat fishing, showed us the importance of balancing advocacy, accuracy, and public engagement. The new policy sets clear guidelines for sharing accurate and consistent messages, introduces protocols for discussing sensitive environmental topics constructively with stakeholders, and outlines best practices for dealing with misinformation. This ensures our communications align with IWDG's mission and conservation goals.

Engaged young audiences through education initiatives such as the Floating Classroom 2025, which provided hands-on experience to over 160 primary school students, and outreach at major events like Electric Picnic 2025.

GROWING OUR AUDIENCES

In 2025, IWDG continued to expand its reach and engagement, connecting with a wide audience across media, digital platforms, and community initiatives. Media coverage increased to 875, with IWDG featured in national and regional outlets, raising awareness of key conservation issues. Website traffic, which increased by 117% from 2023 to 2024, decreased by approximately 3% in 2025.

Social media engagement increased significantly in 2025, with IWDG content generating over 5.7 million views across Facebook and Instagram, all achieved through organic reach. Video performance was particularly strong, with nearly 500,000 three-second views, close to 19,000 one-minute views, and a total watch time of almost 119 days, indicating sustained audience interest rather than passive scrolling. Content interactions rose sharply, reaching over 56,000 engagements, reflecting a substantial increase in likes, comments, and shares.

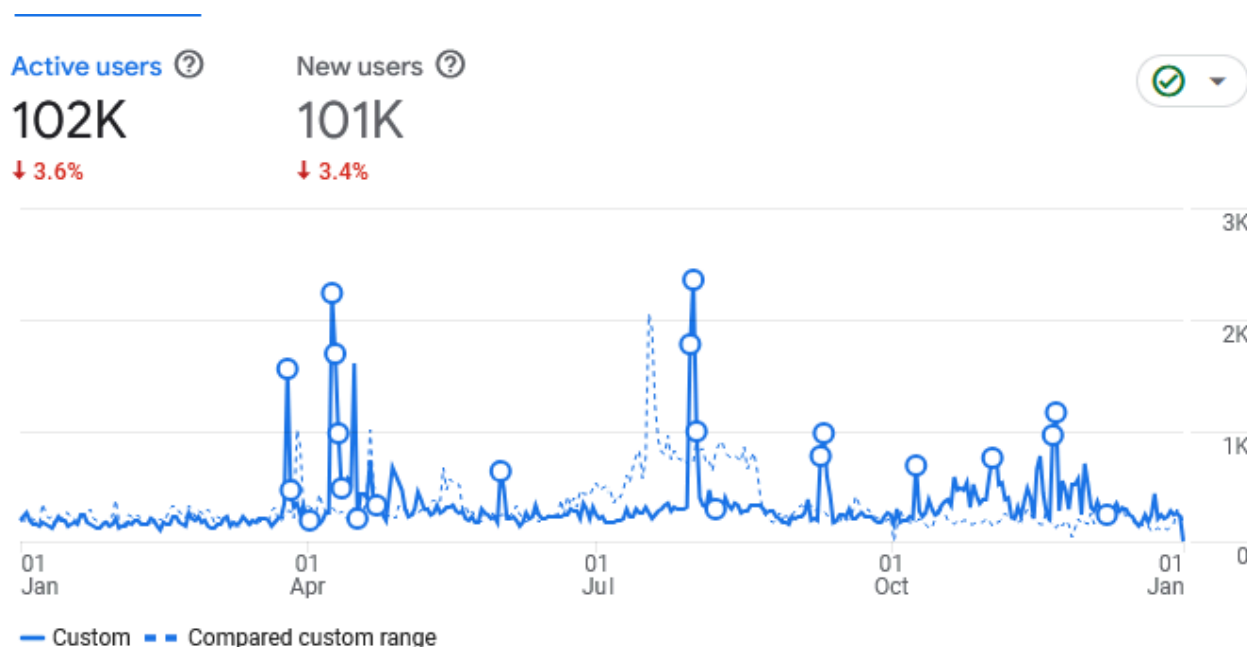
Instagram performance also showed marked growth, with 753,000 views, a 131% increase in reach, and a 100% increase in content interactions compared to the previous year. This growth demonstrates the effectiveness of IWDG's visual storytelling and platform-specific content in reaching new audiences and deepening engagement with existing followers.

In February 2025, IWDG established a new LinkedIn presence to extend its reach to professional audiences, including policymakers, researchers, environmental organisations, and potential partners. From February to December 2025, the page generated 31,709 impressions, all through organic reach, alongside 903 reactions, 21 reposts, and 9 comments, demonstrating steady engagement despite the platform being newly established. Activity peaks during key campaign and communications periods highlighted the platform's potential for amplifying policy-relevant content, organisational updates, and cross-sector collaboration.

Email communications also performed strongly in 2025 following IWDG's transition to Brevo for email marketing. Across 30 campaigns, messages were sent to 98,687 recipients, achieving a 58.4% average open rate and a 3.7% click-through rate, both indicating high levels of interest and engagement among members and supporters. Unsubscription levels remained low at 0.33%, suggesting that content remained relevant and well targeted. Overall, the improved efficiency and performance of email communications supported IWDG's outreach and engagement objectives by ensuring timely dissemination of information, promoting events and campaigns, and encouraging ongoing participation in conservation activities.

WEBSITE

There was an overall decrease in traffic to the site when you compare 2025 to 2024 but we had a huge increase in traffic from 2024 over 2023.



Google Analytics: Active users, 2025 vs. 2024

For instance in 2025, the daily average was 309 users and 440 sessions and in 2024, the daily average was 315 users and 433 sessions. So overall, down around 3.5%.

Why was this the case?

Well, in 2024, we had 106K users visiting the site, that's a huge number of visitors to a non-commercial website. The 2025 figures show 102K users, down 4000. We have to look at user engagement and behaviour to get better insights into these figures.

The top pages continue to be the home page and our news page with our articles attracting thousands of users. But although the number of views of these pages was down, the number of active users was up. But this was not the case for all pages such as our species and members pages which were about the same.

But, yes user engagement was down overall and there was no one Traffic Source in particular, the decline was seen across all major traffic sources. Organic Search, Direct, and Organic Social all experienced significant drops in user engagement. Both mobile and desktop traffic saw a decrease in engagement. Something to invest some time into for 2026 perhaps.

☐	Total	271,639 100% of total	102,029 100% of total	2.66 Avg 0%	0s Avg 0%
☐	1 Irish Whale and Dolphin Group	75,955 (27.96%)	24,191 (23.71%)	3.14	0s
☐	2 News Irish Whale and Dolphin Group	9,886 (3.64%)	5,857 (5.74%)	1.69	0s
☐	3 My account Irish Whale and Dolphin Group	6,243 (2.3%)	946 (0.93%)	6.60	0s
☐	4 Species Irish Whale and Dolphin Group	5,832 (2.15%)	3,656 (3.58%)	1.60	0s
☒	5 Sail With Us Irish Whale and Dolphin Group	5,784 (2.13%)	3,472 (3.4%)	1.67	0s
☐	6 Deep-Diving True's Beaked Whale Dies After Live Stranding at Kilcummin backstrand, Co. Mayo with her calf Irish Whale and Dolphin Group	4,702 (1.73%)	4,302 (4.22%)	1.09	0s
☐	7 About Us Irish Whale and Dolphin Group	4,516 (1.66%)	2,629 (2.58%)	1.72	0s
☐	8 Membership Irish Whale and Dolphin Group	3,910 (1.44%)	2,848 (2.79%)	1.37	0s

Top website pages, 1 January–31 December 2025. Source: Google Analytics

Page title and screen class	Views	Active users	Views per active user	Average engagement time per active user	Event count All events	Key events All events	Total revenue
SHOW ALL ROWS							
Total	271,639 vs. 266,891 ↑ 1.78%	102,029 vs. 105,835 ↓ -3.6%	2.66 vs. 2.52 ↑ 5.58%	0s vs. 0s ↓ -79.07%	535,041 vs. 531,971 ↑ 0.58%	0.00 vs. 0.00	\$0.00 vs. \$0.00
1 Irish Whale and Dolphin Group							
Jan 1 - Dec 31, 2025	75,955 (27.96%)	24,191 (23.71%)	3.14	0s	156,064 (29.17%)	0.00 (-)	\$0.00 (-)
Jan 1 - Dec 31, 2024	79,672 (29.85%)	37,206 (35.15%)	2.14	0s	178,331 (33.52%)	0.00 (-)	\$0.00 (-)
% change	-4.67%	-34.98%	46.63%	-59.36%	-12.49%	0%	0%
2 News Irish Whale and Dolphin Group							
Jan 1 - Dec 31, 2025	9,886 (3.64%)	5,857 (5.74%)	1.69	0s	19,564 (3.66%)	0.00 (-)	\$0.00 (-)
Jan 1 - Dec 31, 2024	12,702 (4.76%)	3,600 (3.4%)	3.53	0s	20,724 (3.9%)	0.00 (-)	\$0.00 (-)
% change	-22.17%	62.69%	-52.16%	-57.61%	-5.6%	0%	0%
3 My account Irish Whale and Dolphin Group							
Jan 1 - Dec 31, 2025	6,243 (2.3%)	946 (0.93%)	6.60	0s	7,110 (1.33%)	0.00 (-)	\$0.00 (-)
Jan 1 - Dec 31, 2024	6,363 (2.38%)	1,071 (1.01%)	5.94	0s	7,364 (1.38%)	0.00 (-)	\$0.00 (-)
% change	-1.89%	-11.67%	11.08%	0%	-3.45%	0%	0%
4 Species Irish Whale and Dolphin Group							
Jan 1 - Dec 31, 2025	5,832 (2.15%)	3,656 (3.58%)	1.60	0s	9,116 (1.7%)	0.00 (-)	\$0.00 (-)
Jan 1 - Dec 31, 2024	5,814 (2.18%)	3,827 (3.62%)	1.52	0s	9,340 (1.76%)	0.00 (-)	\$0.00 (-)
% change	0.31%	-4.47%	5%	-84.76%	-2.4%	0%	0%
5 Sail With Us Irish Whale and Dolphin Group							
Jan 1 - Dec 31, 2025	5,784 (2.13%)	3,472 (3.4%)	1.67	0s	11,198 (2.09%)	0.00 (-)	\$0.00 (-)
Jan 1 - Dec 31, 2024	4,910 (1.84%)	2,931 (2.77%)	1.68	0s	9,341 (1.76%)	0.00 (-)	\$0.00 (-)
% change	17.8%	18.46%	-0.56%	-92.97%	19.88%	0%	0%
6 Deep-Diving True's Beaked Whale Dies After Live Stranding at Kilcummin backstrand, Co. Mayo with her calf Irish Whale and Dolphin Group							
Jan 1 - Dec 31, 2025	4,702 (1.73%)	4,302 (4.22%)	1.09	0s	13,355 (2.5%)	0.00 (-)	\$0.00 (-)
Jan 1 - Dec 31, 2024	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0.00	0s	0 (0%)	0.00 (-)	\$0.00 (-)
% change	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
7 About Us Irish Whale and Dolphin Group							
Jan 1 - Dec 31, 2025	4,516 (1.66%)	2,629 (2.58%)	1.72	0s	5,817 (1.09%)	0.00 (-)	\$0.00 (-)
Jan 1 - Dec 31, 2024	4,441 (1.66%)	2,999 (2.83%)	1.48	0s	7,023 (1.32%)	0.00 (-)	\$0.00 (-)
% change	1.69%	-12.34%	16%	-81.75%	-17.17%	0%	0%
8 Membership Irish Whale and Dolphin Group							
Jan 1 - Dec 31, 2025	3,910 (1.44%)	2,848 (2.79%)	1.37	0s	5,198 (0.97%)	0.00 (-)	\$0.00 (-)
Jan 1 - Dec 31, 2024	3,571 (1.34%)	2,631 (2.49%)	1.36	0s	4,865 (0.91%)	0.00 (-)	\$0.00 (-)
% change	9.49%	8.25%	1.15%	-86.8%	6.84%	0%	0%
9 Lorenzo de Bonis RIP Irish Whale and Dolphin Group							

Website pages: comparison of 2025 vs. 2024. Source: Google Analytics



Killer whale "Aquarius", Donegal Bay, 19 July 2025. Photo: Gary Burrows, IWDG

Goal one: Maintain and grow consultancy revenues as required to fund IWDG activities and positions, through the successful delivery of current contracted projects, ensuring full compliance with client requirements and regulatory guidance.

Outcome: IWDG Consulting turnover increased during 2025. Over 20 individual projects were delivered on schedule with positive client feedback, strengthening client relationships, reinforcing IWDG Consulting's reputation for reliable, high-quality marine mammal services. Recent new project commitments for monitoring and mitigation work provide ongoing opportunities to support overall revenue targets.

Goal two: Influence marine and coastal activities through consulting services, while ensuring compliance with environmental legislation and best practice mitigation.

Outcome: Marine mammal monitoring, mitigation and advice provided across major infrastructure projects. Early input into project design and viability ensures any potential impacts are discussed at a very early phase. Clients supported before, during and after works using IWDG's long-standing research and field expertise, helping projects move forward responsibly while keeping marine wildlife at the forefront of decision-making.

Goal three: Successfully support major marine infrastructure projects across Ireland through MMO provision, PAM/SAM, VP watches and environmental input.

Outcome: A wide range of projects delivered over the past year, including Dublin Port, the PISCES Cable System and a range of monitoring programmes in the Shannon Estuary, demonstrating IWDG Consulting's capability across construction, survey and baseline data collection activities.

Goal four: Provide work opportunities to young marine mammal biologists in Ireland

Outcome: Ongoing employment and hands on field experience provided to early career MMOs and PAM operators across multiple projects, helping them build practical skills while expanding IWDG Consulting's MMO panel and wider team. Ongoing collaboration with the ESB/MMO training in IWDG head office and onboard Celtic Mist (this training programme won the Renewable Skills Champion category at the Irish Renewable Energy Awards 2025).

Goal five: Support NPWS reporting obligations to EU on the status of Annex II species

Outcome: IWDG delivered a second abundance estimate of bottlenose dolphins in the West Connacht Coast SAC on behalf of the NPWS. The estimate was similar to 2021 and provides the science to support NPWS reporting to Europe on this population's conservation status. A second survey targeting harbour porpoise in the Roaringwater Bay and Islands SAC was not completed due to poor weather.

IWDG Consulting was also formally registered as a Trade Mark of the IWDG.

OUR SUPPORTERS: SPONSORS AND FUNDERS

Thanks to all individuals, governmental agencies, and philanthropic organisations that helped us accomplish our goals this year.

- Inis Energy of the Sea
- Irish Environmental Network
- The Heritage Council
- National Parks and Wildlife Services (NPWS)
- Community Foundation Ireland
- Sunflower Charitable Foundation
- Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage
- Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine
- Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs-NI
- Marine Institute
- Interreg Atlantic Area
- Fair Seas
- Clare County Council
- Kerry County Council
- Donegal County Council
- Limerick County Council
- Louth County Council
- Mayo County Council
- Sligo County Council
- Wexford County Council
- SECAD Partnership CLG
- EU OCEAN – EU Horizon 2020
- Benevity
- Paypal Giving Fund



Corporate Members:

Achill Seascape, Dingle Boat Tours, Lilly Ireland–Eli Lilly., Grainne Griffin, Hook Lighthouse, Mowi Ireland, Quinns Pharmacy Gort, Safety Compliance Support, Shoes for Crews, Vagabond Tours, Wolfhound Adventure Tour

ORGANISATION OVERVIEW

HISTORY

The Irish Whale and Dolphin Group (IWDG) was founded in 1990 to establish an Irish stranding and sighting scheme and to campaign for the declaration of Irish territorial waters as a whale and dolphin sanctuary. Just six months later, in June 1991, the Irish Government declared all Irish waters to be a whale and dolphin sanctuary – the first of its kind in Europe. The IWDG is a broad mix of conservationists, whale watchers, researchers, educators and, above all, people who are passionate about marine wildlife and cetaceans in particular.

GOVERNANCE

The IWDG is a registered charity with the Charities Regulator (RCN 20029913). The IWDG is governed by a voluntary board of Directors composed of members to ensure good gender balance and diversity of skills to assist in areas such as governance, research, education and development. The IWDG is an employer with nine full-time and one part-time employee, eight service providers and five volunteer officers assisting us to deliver our work. During 2025, twelve external consultants assisted us in our consultancy work. The CEO is responsible for the day to day running of the IWDG while the board is developing a longer-term, more strategic view of the IWDG and continues to provide oversight on corporate governance and finance.

REPRESENTATION AND NETWORKS

IWDG is an active member of the Environmental Pillar and is represented on the board of the Sustainable Water Network (SWAN). We contribute to the Environmental Pillar Marine Working Group and Marine Hub, and represent the Pillar at regular meetings with the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority.

IWDG is also represented on the Marine Spatial Planning Stakeholder Group, the MSFD Technical Group, the Clare Heritage and Biodiversity Forum, FLAG West Fisheries Liaison Group, North Bull Island STAG, the Irish Ocean Literacy Network, and the National Biodiversity Forum.

OUR PEOPLE AND VOLUNTEERS

IWDG's work is made possible through a broad network of people who contribute their time, expertise and commitment to cetacean conservation. With over 1,000 members, many of whom are involved in one or more local groups, and a team of 18 volunteer and non-volunteer staff, including our CEO, IWDG brings together a dedicated network of officers, volunteers, researchers, collaborators and partners supporting our research, conservation, education, welfare and outreach work across Ireland and beyond.

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE INITIATIVES

Unexpected challenges, delayed policies

During 2025, IWDG continued to operate in a rapidly evolving policy and operational environment, with several external factors presenting ongoing challenges.

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) remained a significant area of uncertainty. Continued delays and changes to the legislative route and timelines created difficulties for planning stakeholder engagement, maintaining momentum and providing clarity to members, partners and coastal communities. While progress was made through advocacy and engagement, the lack of enacted legislation constrained certainty around implementation and next steps.

Policy and advocacy workload increased substantially, with simultaneous processes underway across MPAs, Natura 2000, Marine Spatial Planning (MSP/DMAP), the NRL framework and multiple EU-level policy initiatives. Responding effectively to this volume of consultations and engagements required sustained organisational capacity and careful prioritisation.

Offshore Renewable Energy (ORE) development continued to accelerate, placing ongoing demands on IWDG's scientific, policy and advocacy resources. The scale and pace of activity, particularly around surveys, licensing and infrastructure planning, required continuous engagement to ensure cetacean impacts, particularly underwater noise, were adequately considered.

Live stranding responses presented growing operational and financial pressures. The increasing number and complexity of live strandings placed significant demands on volunteers, veterinary professionals and coordinators. In particular, the financial burden and logistical challenges associated with euthanasia for protected species remained unresolved, highlighting the need for clearer national frameworks and sustainable funding solutions.

Future Projects and Strategic Priorities

Looking ahead, IWDG will continue to focus on initiatives that strengthen cetacean conservation outcomes while building organisational resilience.

Marine Protected Areas and policy advocacy will remain a core priority. IWDG will continue to advocate for the publication and implementation of MPA legislation, supported by ongoing political and departmental engagement, public communications and webinars. EU-facing advocacy and relationship-building with MEPs and Commission processes will also continue, particularly to support improved outcomes for marine Natura 2000 management and MPA implementation.

Offshore Renewable Energy will remain a major area of focus. IWDG will continue to engage with Government, regulators, developers and NGOs to ensure robust mitigation of impacts on cetaceans, particularly in relation to underwater noise, and to promote the integration of high-quality ecological data into marine spatial planning and project-level decision-making.

The IWDG Local Groups Roadshow will further develop community and membership engagement through face-to-face engagement with members and coastal communities nationwide. The roadshow will provide updates on IWDG projects, research and policy priorities, support local groups, and increase community-level understanding of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and wider marine conservation issues.

Fair Seas Conference 2026 will provide a major opportunity for national engagement on MPAs. IWDG will support and participate in the conference, contributing scientific expertise, advocacy input and public engagement activities. During this period, Celtic Mist will be anchored in Cork, supporting associated outreach and engagement events.

A new **Progressive Web App (PWA)** will be developed to improve accessibility and functionality for sightings and strandings reporting, while supporting future-proofed citizen science participation.

Marine Institute-funded Vertebrate Necropsy and Pollutant Project, delivered on behalf of ATU, will be supported by IWDG from November 2025. This will involve identifying suitable carcasses through the IWDG Stranding Scheme for post-mortem examination, coordinating recovery to the Cork Regional Veterinary Laboratory, and delivering training for key volunteers in high-quality bycatch assessment and cause-of-death identification.

Whale Track Ireland will be a central focus of IWDG's campaigning and grant-seeking activity in the coming period. Securing dedicated funding for the project is a priority to ensure its long-term sustainability as a flagship national monitoring programme.

The Stranding Responders Online Course will be developed to expand access to training, support volunteer capacity nationwide, and improve consistency and safety in stranding response.

IWDG research vessel Celtic Mist during the 2025 summer survey cruises. Photo: Eva Lambert, IWDG



FINANCIAL OVERVIEW 2025

2025 FINANCIAL HIGHLIGHTS



Income and Expenditure

Income

In 2025, IWDG generated €1.50m in income, an increase of 60% compared to 2024 (€938k). This significant growth reflects increased activity across IWDG's longer-term projects, consultancy work, grants and funding, and fundraising.

Long-term project work continued to be an important part of IWDG's activity during 2025, with projects including OCEANS, Atlantic WhaleDeal, MAREIRE and Fair Seas contributing to the organisation's programme of research and conservation work. Some longer-term projects were paid following the completion of reports, contributing to the significant increase in income during the year.

Consulting and Overheads remained the largest recorded income category at €834k (56% of total), representing a 77% increase from 2024. This increase reflects higher levels of consultancy activity and project-related work during the year.

Grants and Funding increased by 30% to €353k, while Core Funding increased by 53% to €71k. Core funding from INIS covered 2025 and 2026, with additional support from the Irish Environmental Network and Community Foundation Ireland.

Membership income increased by 6% to €41k, demonstrating continued public engagement.

Gifts and Donations increased significantly by 329% to €67k, reflecting a strong increase in donations and fundraising activity.

Celtic Mist Cruises generated €35k, broadly in line with 2024, while Courses and Education income decreased by 15% to €28k. RIB Hire income also decreased by 47% to €5k.

Publications and Merchandise income increased by 17% to €12k, supported by increased shop opening hours during the year.

Overall, the significant growth in project activity, consultancy, funding and fundraising resulted in a substantial increase in total income in 2025.

Expenditure

Total expenditure in 2025 was €1.29m, an increase of 41% from 2024 (€914k).

Consulting, including outlay and travel, remained the largest area of expenditure at €662k, an increase of 22%, reflecting the increased volume of consultancy work delivered during the year and longer-term projects being paid over extended periods. Staff costs increased by 61% to €415k, reflecting the addition of three staff members, an Engagement and Outreach Officer, Science Officer and Policy Officer, together with additional time for the Live Stranding Coordinator.

Celtic Mist expenditure increased by 43% to €43k, reflecting larger repairs, general upkeep, expenses incurred during cruises and refunds associated with cancelled cruise legs. IWDG also covered accommodation and light lunches for helpers.

Courses and Education expenditure increased to €20k, reflecting investment in the organisation's education capacity, including the appointment of a new Education Officer.

Marketing and Website expenditure increased by 88% to €15k, including website and software subscription costs and new app development.

Merchandise expenditure increased to €19k, reflecting additional merchandise ordered for Whale Tales and strong sales during the year.

Insurance costs decreased by 7% to €12k, while Core Running Costs increased by 8% to €57k, reflecting repairs, new laptops and equipment for staff, conferences and conference attendance.

This increased investment in staffing, consultancy delivery, training, digital infrastructure and organisational activity supported the significant expansion in IWDG's work during 2025.

Income Statement for the year ended 31 December 2025

Item	2025 (€)	2024 (€)	% Change
Income	1,498,001	938,168	+59.67%
Expenditure	(1,291,925)	(913,928)	+41.36%
Surplus before interest	206,076	24,240	+750.15%
Interest receivable and similar income	881	331	+166.16%
Surplus for the year	206,957	24,571	+742.28%

Income Analyses

Income from	Total Funds 2025 (€)	Total Funds 2024 (€)	% Change
Celtic Mist Cruises	34,565	35,085	-1.48%
Gifts & Donations	67,357	15,708	+328.81%
Grants / Funding	353,219	272,738	+29.51%
Core Funding	71,487	46,831	+52.65%
Consulting & Overheads	833,566	471,315	+76.86%
Membership	40,763	38,562	+5.71%
Courses & Education	27,531	32,273	-14.69%
Equipment Hire	-	-	
RIB Hire	5,100	9,680	-47.31%
Publications & Merchandise	12,331	10,506	+17.37%
Misc. / Basking Shark Conference Income	52,082	5,470	+852.14%
Total income	1,498,001	938,168	+59.67%

Expenditure Analyses

Expenditure on	Total Funds 2025 (€)	Total Funds 2024 (€)	% Change
Celtic Mist	43,380	30,389	+42.75%
Consulting incl. outlay & travel	661,779	544,154	+21.62%
Marketing / Website	15,017	7,990	+87.95%
Courses & Education	19,707	4,197	+369.55%
Staff	414,644	257,978	+60.73%
Merchandise	18,992	4,134	+359.41%
Insurance	11,515	12,439	-7.43%
Core Running Costs	56,879	52,647	+8.04%
Misc. / Basking Shark Conference	50,012		
Total expenditure	1,291,925	913,928	+41.36%

Surplus and Reserves

The year closed with a strong surplus of €207.0k, compared with €24.6k in 2024. This significant improvement reflects the substantial increase in income during the year, particularly from consultancy and overheads, grants and funding, and donations.

- Bank and cash balances increased by 30% to €850k.
- Debtors increased by 150% to €149k.
- Net current assets increased by 33% to €890k.
- Overall net assets increased by 26% to €997k.

The improved financial position provides IWDG with increased capacity to support its ongoing research, conservation, education and outreach activities. The Board continues to prioritise financial stability and the responsible management of resources to safeguard operations and maximise IWDG's impact in protecting whales, dolphins and their habitats.

Financial Position

Balance Sheet	2025 (€)	2024 (€)	Change
Fixed Assets	107,091	119,994	-10.75%
Current Assets			
– Stock	9,227	20,681	-55.38%
– Debtors	149,443	59,788	+149.95%
– Bank / Cash	850,165	655,511	+29.70%
Total Current Assets	1,008,835	735,980	+37.07%
Current Liabilities			
– Creditors / Accruals	(118,446)	(65,451)	+80.97%
Net Current Assets	890,389	670,529	+32.79%
Total Assets less Current Liabilities	997,480	790,523	+26.18%

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IWDG research vessel Celtic Mist during the 2025 summer survey cruises. Photo: Eva Lambert, IWDG