

National Parks & Wildlife Service

Lough Forbes Complex SAC  
(site code 001818)

**Conservation objectives supporting document -  
raised bog habitats**

Version 1

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**Map 1: Extent of potential active raised bog on Ballykenny and Fisherstown Bogs.**

**Map 2: Distribution of raised bog ecotopes on Ballykenny and Fisherstown Bogs.**

**Map 3: Digital elevation model and drainage at Ballykenny and Fisherstown Bogs.**

# 1 Introduction

This document presents a summary of the background information that has informed the process of setting the Site-Specific Conservation Objective in relation to the priority Annex I habitat 'active raised bogs' (habitat code 7110) (hereafter referred to as Active Raised Bog (ARB)), for which Lough Forbes Complex Special Area of Conservation (SAC) has been designated. Within the SAC, the raised bog habitat for which the site has been selected occurs at two separate bogs; Ballykenny Bog and Fisherstown Bog.

Lough Forbes Complex SAC is also designated for two other related Annex I habitats, namely; 'degraded raised bogs still capable of natural regeneration' (habitat code 7120) (hereafter referred to as Degraded Raised Bog (DRB)) and 'depressions on peat substrates of the Rhynchosporion' (habitat code 7150). Based on the close ecological relationship between these three habitats types, it is not necessary to set specific Conservation Objectives for all three habitats individually. It is considered that should favourable conservation condition for ARB be achieved on the site, then, as a consequence, favourable conservation condition for the other two habitats would also be achieved.

## 1.1 Raised Bogs

Raised bogs are accumulations of deep peat (typically 3-12m) that originated in shallow lake basins or topographic depressions. The name is derived from the elevated surface, or dome, that develops as raised bogs grow upwards through the accumulation of peat; the domed effect is often exaggerated when the margins of a bog are damaged by turf cutting or drainage, and are drying out. Raised bogs are most abundant in the lowlands of central and mid-west Ireland.

Irish raised bogs are classified into two sub-types (Schouten 1984): 1. Western or intermediate raised bogs, and 2. True midland or eastern raised bogs, based on phytosociological and morphological characteristics. In terms of overall morphology, the main difference between these two raised bog types is that while eastern raised bogs tended to stay more confined to the depressions in which they were formed, western raised bogs tended to grow out beyond their original basin, presumably a result of the higher rainfall levels (Cross 1990). In terms of vegetation differences the most obvious difference between the two bog types is the presence of a number of oceanic plant species on western raised bogs which are absent from the true midland raised bogs. The liverwort species *Pleurozia purpurea*<sup>1</sup> and the moss species *Campylopus atrovirens* grow on western raised bogs but not on eastern raised bogs; similarly, *Carex panicea* is generally more common on the high bog surfaces of western raised bogs (Schouten 1984). All of these plant species are widespread in the low-level Atlantic blanket bogs and their presence in western raised bogs is presumed to be due to the higher rainfall levels and greater rain-derived nutrient fluxes.

Exploitation has been extensive and none of the remaining Irish raised bogs are completely intact (Cross 1990). It is estimated that less than 10% of the original raised bog habitat in Ireland is in a near intact state (uncut), with less than 0.5% continuing to support ARB (DAHG 2014). Excavated face banks, whether active or inactive, are a common feature around the margins. Any areas where part of the bog has been removed are termed cutover bog, with

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<sup>1</sup> Note on species nomenclature: *In the case of plant species, only scientific names are used throughout the main text while common English names are included in tables. In the case of faunal species, common English names (where known) are used throughout the text together with scientific names.*

the remaining area referred to as high bog or intact bog. In a natural state, raised bogs are circled by a wetland fringe, known as the lagg zone, which is usually characterised by fen communities. In Ireland, most lagg have been lost through drainage and land reclamation (Fossitt 2000).

The surface of a relatively intact raised bog is typically wet, acid, deficient in plant nutrients, and supports specialised plant communities that are low in overall diversity and comprising species adapted to the biologically harsh conditions. The vegetation is open, treeless and bog mosses or *Sphagnum* species dominate the ground layer. Small-scale mosaics of plant communities are characteristic and reflect the complex microtopography of hummocks and hollows on the bog surface (see Section 1.1.1 below). Raised bogs are driest at the margins and wetness generally increases towards the centre of the peat mass where well-developed pool systems are most likely to occur.

Raised bogs may also contain soaks and flushes (wet 'active' or dry 'inactive') due to the increased supply of nutrients over time through concentrated surface flows, or where there are links with regional groundwater or the underlying mineral substratum. Slight mineral enrichment and / or constant through flow of water provide conditions suitable for a range of species that are not typically associated with other areas of raised bog.

When damaged by peat extraction or drainage, the water table in the peat drops and the bog surface becomes relatively dry; pools are rare or absent, cover of bog mosses is greatly reduced and *Calluna vulgaris* increases in abundance. The drop in water table causes the peat to compress under its own weight causing the bog surface to deform. Greater deformation occurs closest to areas where the water table has dropped. This increases the slope of the bog surface causing rain falling on the ground surface to flow off the bog more quickly. The effect is normally greatest around the margins and in a typical situation wetness increases towards the centre of the bog. Trees such as *Betula pubescens* and *Pinus sylvestris* frequently invade the drier cut margins, but may also occur in flushed areas.

In Ireland, the Annex I habitat ARB is currently considered to be in unfavourable bad conservation status principally as a result of marginal turf cutting, more recent semi-industrial peat extraction, and associated drainage effects caused by these activities (NPWS 2008; 2013). The lowering of regional groundwater levels is also known to have had an effect on some sites. Fires associated with turf cutting, dumping, or agricultural activities may also adversely affect the condition of the habitat.

### 1.1.1 Raised Bogs Microtopography

Raised bogs are typically treeless and are characterised by a distinctive vegetation dominated by bog mosses (*Sphagnum*), sedges, and dwarf shrubs, all of which are adapted to waterlogged, acidic and exposed conditions. Bog mosses, which have unique properties, are the principal component of peat, and are largely responsible for the typical surface features of hummocks, hollows, lawns, and pools. The wettest bogs, which have extensive pool systems, have the greatest variety of plant and animal life and support a range of specialist species.

The following terms that describe microtopography are generally accepted in the study of mire ecology (Gore 1983). A schematic diagram showing the typical microtopographical divisions is presented in Figure 1.

#### Pools

Depressions in the bog surface where the water table remains above the surface level all year around or below surface level for only a very short period of time. They are characterised by the presence of aquatic plant species such as *Sphagnum cuspidatum*, *S.*

*denticulatum*, and *Cladopodiella fluitans*. In more degraded scenarios or where high seasonal water fluctuation occurs, the pools contain open water and/or algae. Tear pools are found on bogs where internal tensions, due to mass movement of peat, has taken place within the high bog and has caused the development of elongated pools. These are frequently found on western bogs and may be natural or anthropogenic in origin.

### Hollows

These are shallow depressions (less than 5cm deep) on the bog surface where surface water collects, or where the water table reaches or lies just above ground level, depending on seasonal conditions. They are often filled with *Sphagnum* species such as *S. papillosum* and *S. cuspidatum*. They take many forms but are often eye shaped. Marginal hollows tend to be elongated as they are focused points for surface water run-off. They are often dominated by *Narthecium ossifragum*.

### Lawns

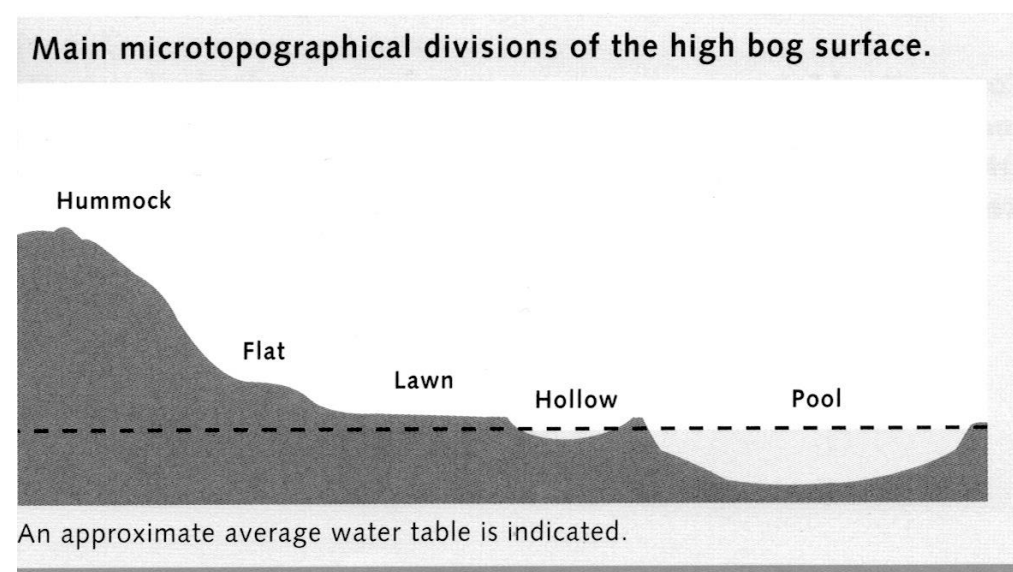
These are shallow hollows or flat areas where one species dominates to form a lawn. This is frequently a *Sphagnum* species, such as *Sphagnum magellanicum*, or *S. papillosum* which can completely fill in a hollow to form a small lawn.

### Flats

These are more or less flat areas which are intermediate between hollow and hummock communities. They tend to be drier than the above situations.

### Hummocks

These are mounds on the bog surface which can range from a few centimetres to more than one metre in height. They are usually composed mainly of *Sphagnum* species, such as *Sphagnum magellanicum*, *S. capillifolium*, *S. austinii* and *S. fuscum* but other bryophyte species such as *Hypnum jutlandicum* and *Leucobryum glaucum* are also important, especially as the hummock grows taller and becomes drier. *Calluna vulgaris* is another important element, as it flourishes where the water table is not at surface level (Kelly & Schouten 2002).



**Figure 1** Raised bog microtopographical divisions on the high bog surface (reproduced from Kelly & Schouten 2002).

### 1.1.2 Typical Flora of Irish Raised Bogs

Raised bogs are characterised by a distinctive vegetation dominated by a variety of mosses (e.g. *Sphagnum* spp., *Hypnum* spp., *Racomitrium* spp.), sedges and grass-like species (e.g. *Eriophorum* spp., *Rhynchospora* spp., *Narthecium ossifragum*, *Molinia caerulea* and *Carex* spp.), and dwarf shrubs (e.g. *Calluna vulgaris*, *Erica tetralix*, *Vaccinium* spp. and *Empetrum nigrum*). In addition to these groups, a number of other species characterise raised bogs including carnivorous plants (e.g. *Drosera* spp., *Utricularia* spp.), lichens of both the bog surface and epiphytes on the stems of dwarf shrubs and the occasional trees on bogs (e.g. *Cladonia* spp., *Usnea* spp.). Herbaceous plants are not a significant element on raised bogs and include a few commonly occurring species such as *Menyanthes trifoliata*, *Pedicularis sylvatica*, and *Potentilla erecta* (Cross 1990).

Drier areas and hummocks usually support *Calluna vulgaris*, *Eriophorum vaginatum*, *Trichophorum germanicum*, *Erica tetralix*, lichens (*Cladonia* spp.), bog mosses (*Sphagnum capillifolium*, *S. austinii*, *S. fuscum*, *S. papillosum*), and other mosses (*Dicranum scoparium*, *Leucobryum glaucum*). Wet hollow areas and pools are characterised by *Eriophorum angustifolium*, *Rhynchospora alba*, *Narthecium ossifragum*, *Drosera* spp., *Menyanthes trifoliata*, bladderworts (*Utricularia* spp.), and bog mosses (*Sphagnum cuspidatum*, *S. denticulatum* and *S. magellanicum*).

A list of flora species that are regarded as being typical of ARB habitat in Ireland is presented in Table 1. A number of these typical species would have a restricted distribution and do not occur throughout the range of the habitat in Ireland (see above), therefore only a subset of these species would be expected to be present on any individual site.

**Table 1** Flora species typically associated with active raised bog in Ireland (after NPWS 2013). *Species list is based on vegetation communities defined by Kelly (1993) and Kelly & Schouten (2002).*

Common name	Scientific Name
Bog rosemary	<i>Andromeda polifolia</i>
Bog bead moss	<i>Aulacomnium palustre</i>
Bristly Swan-neck moss*	<i>Campylopus atrovirens</i> *
Lichen	<i>Cladonia ciliata</i>
Lichen	<i>Cladonia portentosa</i>
Long leaved sundew	<i>Drosera anglica</i>
Intermediate leaved sundew*	<i>Drosera intermedia</i> *
Round leaved sundew	<i>Drosera rotundifolia</i>
Common cotton grass	<i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i>
Hare's tail cotton grass	<i>Eriophorum vaginatum</i>
Large white moss	<i>Leucobryum glaucum</i>
Bogbean	<i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i>
Bog asphodel	<i>Narthecium ossifragum</i>
Purple spoonwort*	<i>Pleurozia purpurea</i> *
Woolly fringe moss*	<i>Racomitrium lanuginosum</i> *
White beak-sedge	<i>Rhynchospora alba</i>
Austin's bog moss	<i>Sphagnum austinii</i>
Red bog moss	<i>Sphagnum capillifolium</i>
Feathery bog moss	<i>Sphagnum cuspidatum</i>
Cow-horn bog moss*	<i>Sphagnum denticulatum</i> *
Rusty bog moss	<i>Sphagnum fuscum</i>
Magellanic bog moss	<i>Sphagnum magellanicum</i>
Papillose bog moss	<i>Sphagnum papillosum</i>
Golden bog moss*	<i>Sphagnum pulchrum</i> *
Lustrous bog moss	<i>Sphagnum subnitens</i>
Bladderwort	<i>Utricularia minor</i>
Cranberry	<i>Vaccinium oxycoccos</i>

Notes: \* Species more typical of western raised bog sites.

### 1.1.3 Typical Fauna of Irish Raised Bogs

Raised bogs are extremely nutrient poor ecosystems. Acidic, waterlogged and exposed conditions make them an unattractive habitat for animal life. As a consequence they are relatively poor both in terms of species diversity and population densities. Many species are opportunists, vagrant or temporary rather than specialists, but nonetheless may have an important impact on the ecosystem through nutrient imports and exports or other interactions (Cross 1990). A list of fauna species that would be typically associated with raised bog habitat in Ireland is presented in Table 2. The species listed are not confined to ARB and most, if not all, will use other areas of the bog and surrounding habitats.

Raised bog is unsuitable habitat for many vertebrates due to the lack of available foraging and suitable breeding places. The Irish hare is the only mammal commonly occurring. The common frog is the most common vertebrate predator.

Although 18 species of birds have been reported breeding on raised bogs (Wilson 1990) many of these species utilise the bog as a nesting habitat only. They are dependent on other neighbouring habitats such as open water bodies, callows and wet grassland particularly for feeding. Just a few species of bird, including meadow pipit (*Anthus pratensis*), skylark

(*Alauda arvensis*) and curlew (*Numenius arquata*) complete their full breeding cycle on the bog and the first two species are the commonest species occurring (Bracken *et al.* 2008). Red grouse (*Lagopus lagopus*) must also be included as a typical bog species, occurring year round as a resident. Red grouse and curlew have declined significantly on raised bogs in recent times. BirdWatch Ireland has published an Action Plan for Raised Bog Birds in Ireland which lists 13 species of conservation concern that are associated with Raised Bogs (O'Connell 2011). A recent review of birds of conservation concern in Ireland has since added meadow pipit (*Anthus pratensis*) to the red (most endangered) list of Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland (BoCCI) (Colhoun & Cummins 2013).

Our knowledge of the invertebrate assemblages associated with Irish raised bogs remains incomplete (particularly micro-invertebrate species) with few studies undertaken (Reynolds 1984a; Reynolds 1984b; Reynolds 1985; De Leeuw 1986; O Connor *et al.* 2001; Crushell *et al.* 2008; Hannigan & Kelly-Quinn 2011; Wisdom & Bolger 2011, Nolan 2013). Van Duinen (2013) highlights the importance of structural diversity at various spatial scales (e.g. micro-scale of hummock hollow topography to macro-scale which would include the landscape setting of the bog, see Schouten (2002)) as a prerequisite for hosting the full species diversity of raised bog landscapes.

A recent study of Lepidoptera associated with raised bogs identified two species that appear to be characteristic of higher quality raised bog habitat, namely bordered grey (*Selidosema brunnearia* (Villers 1789)) and light knot grass (*Acronicta menyanthidis* (Esper, 1789)) (Flynn 2014).

Recent research on spiders has revealed that a number of species are known to occur in Ireland only on raised bog habitats, all of which are considered local/uncommon or rare across Europe (Myles Nolan pers. comm.). Five of these species that can be considered useful indicators of ARB include: *Glyphesis cottonae* (La Touche 1945), *Walckenaeria alticeps* (Denis 1952), *Satilatlas britteni* (Jackson 1913), *Pirata piscatorius* (Clerck 1757), and *Minicia marginella* (Wider 1834) (Myles Nolan pers. comm.).

The information currently available on other invertebrate groups of peatland systems in Ireland is not sufficient to allow a determination of many species that are typically associated with or may be characteristic of higher quality ARB. A selection of invertebrate species and species groups that are known to be typically associated with raised bogs are included in Table 2.



**Table 2** Fauna species typically associated with raised bog ecosystems in Ireland (after O’Connell 1987; Cross 1990; Renou-Wilson *et al.* 2011; Bracken & Smiddy 2012).

Common name	Scientific name
<b>Mammal species</b>	
Irish hare	<i>Lepus timidus hibernicus</i>
Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>
Pygmy shrew	<i>Sorex minutes</i>
Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>
<b>Bird species</b>	
Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Greenland white-fronted goose	<i>Anser albifrons flavirostris</i>
Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
Hen harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Red grouse	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>
Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
Golden plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>
Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
<b>Reptiles and amphibians</b>	
Common lizard	<i>Lacerta vivipara</i>
Common frog	<i>Rana temporaria</i>
<b>Typical invertebrates</b>	
Black slug	<i>Arion ater</i>
Large heath butterfly	<i>Coenonympha tullia</i>
Marsh fritillary butterfly	<i>Euphydryas aurinia</i>
Bog-pool spider	<i>Dolomedes fimbriatus</i>
Water striders	<i>Gerris</i> and <i>Velia</i> species
Oak eggar moth	<i>Lasiocampa quercus</i>
Four-spotted chaser dragonfly	<i>Libellula quadrimaculata</i>
Fox moth	<i>Macrothylacia rubi</i>
Ant	<i>Myrmica ruginodis</i>
Emperor moth	<i>Saturnia pavonia</i>
Great green bog grasshopper	<i>Stethophyma grossa</i>
Other species groups that are well represented on raised bogs include:	Araneae (spiders and mites)
	Ceratopogonidae (biting-midges)
	Chironomids (non-biting midges)
	Coleoptera (beetles)
	Collembola (springtails)
	Diptera (true flies)
	Dytiscidae (water beetles)
	Hemiptera (true bugs)
	Hymenoptera (bees, wasps, ants and sawflies)
	Lepidoptera (butterflies and moths)
	Odonta (dragonflies and damselflies)
	Orthoptera (grasshoppers)
	Syrphidae (hoverflies)
	Tipulidae (crane flies)
	Tabanidae (horseflies)

## 1.2 Habitats Directive Raised Bog Habitats in Ireland

Four habitat types listed on Annex I of the EU Habitats Directive are typically associated with raised bogs in Ireland, two of which are priority habitats (\*):

- 7110 Active raised bogs (ARB)\*
- 7120 Degraded raised bogs still capable of natural regeneration (DRB)
- 7150 Depressions on peat substrates of the *Rhynchosporion*
- 91D0 Bog woodland\*

The interpretation manual of EU habitats gives the following description for ARB: “*Acid bogs, ombrotrophic, poor in mineral nutrients, sustained mainly by rainwater, with a water level generally higher than the surrounding water table, with perennial vegetation dominated by colourful Sphagna hummocks allowing for the growth of the bog (Erico-Sphagnetalia magellanici, Scheuchzerietalia palustris p., Utricularietalia intermedio-minoris p., Caricetalia fuscae p.). The term "active" must be taken to mean still supporting a significant area of vegetation that is normally peat forming, but bogs where active peat formation is temporarily at a standstill, such as after a fire or during a natural climatic cycle e.g., a period of drought, are also included.*” (CEC 2007).

DRB should be, according to the interpretation manual capable of regeneration to ARB in 30 years if appropriate measures are put in place (i.e. no major impacting activities are present and any necessary restoration works are implemented).

In Ireland, the identification of ARB is made at ecotope level based on the vegetation classification developed by Kelly (1993) and Kelly & Schouten (2002).

Raised bog vegetation communities are grouped into a series of community complexes and these complexes are then amalgamated into a series of ecotopes characterised by different physical characteristics using the approach outlined by Kelly & Schouten (2002).

The main ecotopes that community complexes are grouped into include:

- Central ecotope
- Sub-central ecotope
- Active flushes and soaks
- Sub-marginal ecotope
- Marginal ecotope
- Inactive flushes
- Face-bank ecotope

Actively accumulating peat conditions occur within the sub-central and central ecotopes, which are the wettest on the bog and an indication of good quality ARB. Active flushes and soaks are also dominated by *Sphagnum* mosses and typically have wet conditions. These features are associated with ARB and contribute to the overall diversity of the habitat.

The adjacent surrounding marginal, sub-marginal, and face-bank bog areas typically have a supporting function for the central and sub-central communities but are not peat accumulating. These drier ecotopes may or may not correspond to the Annex I habitat DRB, as it depends on whether they are capable of regeneration to ARB. Other drier ecotopes recorded on the high bog that do not correspond to ARB include ‘inactive flushes’ which typically have a low *Sphagnum* cover.

The Annex I habitat Rhynchosporion depressions (7150) typically occurs along pool edges and on flats underlain by deep, wet and quaking peat. Typical plant species include *Rhynchospora alba*, *Drosera anglica*, *Narthecium ossifragum*, *Sphagnum cuspidatum*, *S. denticulatum*, *S. magellanicum*, *S. papillosum*, *Menyanthes trifoliata*, and *Eriophorum angustifolium*.

The priority Annex I habitat bog woodland is also actively peat-forming and overlaps with the ARB habitat. Such woodlands are usually dominated by *Betula pubescens* with a characteristic ground cover dominated by *Sphagnum* moss species, which often form deep carpets, and other mosses including species of *Polytrichum*. Woodland areas are occasionally found on raised bogs that have an absence of the characteristic moss layer and are not regarded as peat forming. Such areas do not correspond to the Annex I habitat.

### 1.2.1 Restoration of Active Raised Bog in Ireland

As already mentioned in the Section 1.1, ARB is currently considered to be in unfavourable bad conservation status in Ireland. In addition, according to its definition, DRB should be capable of regeneration to ARB in a 30-year timescale. Thus, it follows that restoration measures are required in order to halt further losses and increase the area of ARB as well as to improve the condition of existing areas of the Annex I habitat.

Most of the restoration works undertaken so far in Ireland have concentrated on the high bog (e.g. Clara Bog, Mongan Bog, Sharavogue Bog and Raheenmore Bog) to prevent further losses as well as to restore areas to ARB. Nevertheless, some restoration works have also been undertaken on cutover areas such as at Ballykenny and Fisherstown Bogs and Killyconny Bog. Such work aims to do one or more of the following (depending on the bog in question): restore ARB on the high bog; reduce further ARB and DRB loss on the high bog; restore peat forming habitats (such as ARB, bog woodland, poor fen) on the cutover.

Works undertaken by the NPWS have indicated that there are significant differences, both ecological and economic, when comparing the effectiveness of works carried out on the cutover with those carried out on the high bog. Positive and significant results (i.e. expansion or development of ARB) can be achieved over a relatively short timeframe (10 years) on favourable areas of the high bog by blocking high bog drains. In contrast, a longer time period (30 years+) is required to achieve active peat formation on cutover areas, and even then the results are generally confined to smaller areas; i.e. flat areas ( $\leq 0.3\%$  surface slope) or enclosed depressions that have sufficient water flow (minimum catchment 0.5ha) to maintain wet conditions throughout the year. A longer time period (minimum 50-100 years) is likely to be required for high quality ARB habitat (vegetation structure and species diversity) to develop on such cutover areas. In addition, costs of restoration measures on cutover areas are typically significantly higher than those on high bog areas.

### 1.3 Lough Forbes Complex SAC

Lough Forbes Complex SAC encompasses of a number of different habitats, centred on the lake formed by a broadening of the River Shannon. As well as the lake, there is raised bog, woodlands, callow grasslands and a variety of other aquatic and terrestrial habitats. The SAC is situated to the west of Newtownforbes on the Longford/Roscommon border, approximately 6.5km north-east of Longford town.

Two raised bogs, located on the south-eastern shore of Lough Forbes, are known as Ballykenny Bog (to the north) and Fisherstown Bog (to the south). The two bogs are separated by an area of callow grassland and the Camlin River.

The SAC has been selected for five Annex I habitats. The peatland habitats for which the site has been selected are:

- [7110] Active raised bogs\*
- [7120] Degraded raised bogs still capable of natural regeneration
- [7150] Depressions on peat substrates of the *Rhynchosporion*

The SAC is also selected for Natural eutrophic lakes [3150] and Alluvial forests [91E0].

The bog complex is of international importance as it comprises one of the last remaining examples of Shannon River edge bogs. Restoration measures have been carried out on both bogs, including drain blocking and tree removal as part of an EU funded LIFE project undertaken by Coillte.

#### 1.3.1 Ballykenny Bog

Ballykenny Bog is immediately north of Fisherstown Bog. Lough Forbes with the River Shannon forming the western edge of the bog, while the Camlin River runs to the south. Castle Forbes Estate borders the northern edge. Corlehan Wood, a mixed woodland, lies between Lough Forbes and the bog.

The central core area of the bog is quite wet and spongy, with a good complement of bog mosses and well developed hummocks. Ballykenny Bog is unusual in that some of the margins are intact, a rare feature in the Irish midlands. Between the Camlin River and the bog, a complete transition from raised bog to callow grasslands can be seen.

##### 1.3.1.1 Flora of Ballykenny Bog

Ballykenny bog was last surveyed in 2011 (Fernandez et al. 2014)

In the wetter areas of Ballykenny Bog, *Rhynchosporion* vegetation is frequently found. *Sphagnum cuspidatum* is common, along with *Menyanthes trifoliata*, *Rhynchospora alba*, and *Eriophorum angustifolium*. The relatively rare *Rhynchospora fusca* is also recorded. Non-active raised bog habitat is largely confined to the marginal areas of uncut high bog where drainage effects from adjoining cutover bog are most pronounced. The plant species composition in these areas is generally similar to that of ARB, however species typical of very wet bog conditions are either much reduced in abundance or absent. In general, the most frequent vascular species are *Trichophorum germanicum*, *Eriophorum angustifolium*, *E. vaginatum*, *Calluna vulgaris*, *Erica tetralix*, *Narthecium ossifragum* and *Carex panicea*. The most frequent lower plant species present are the lichen *Cladonia portentosa* and the mosses *Hypnum cupressiforme* and bog moss *Sphagnum capillifolium*.

At Ballykenny Bog, ARB includes sub-central ecotope as well as active flushes (Fernandez et al. 2014a, b, c).

Sub-central ecotope is found at 13 locations throughout the high bog area. The wettest sub-

central complex has *Sphagnum* cover ranging from 51-75%, and the microtopography consists of *Sphagnum* hummocks, lawns and pools. *Sphagnum capillifolium* and *S. papillosum* dominate the hummocks layer, *S. magellanicum* the lawns layer and occasionally *S. cuspidatum* in the pools. *Sphagnum austinii* hummocks are also present. Abundant *Eriophorum vaginatum* characterises this complex. This complex is located in areas where rewetting after the blocking of drains has occurred.

The most widespread sub-central ecotope complex at Ballykenny Bog consists of hummocks and hollows. *Sphagnum* cover is lower than described in the wetter areas above, but abundant *Eriophorum vaginatum* also characterises this complex. *Sphagnum* cover increases (76-90%) in some newly developed patches. However, the microtopography is poorly developed compared to that in the wetter complex described above.

A further complex is also widespread at Ballykenny Bog where the microtopography consists of *Sphagnum* hummocks (mainly *S. capillifolium*) and many sections feature flush type species: *Vaccinium oxycoccos*, *Polytrichum strictum*, and *Aulacomnium palustre*. This complex is also recorded in many areas where ARB has recently developed after the blocking of drains.

The site also features a small section of active flush in the northern part of high bog. This consists of *Sphagnum* lawns and hummocks dominated by *S. magellanicum*, *S. capillifolium*, *S. palustre*, *S. fallax* and *S. cuspidatum*.

Western indicators *Racomitrium lanuginosum* and *Pleurozia purpurea* are present throughout much of Ballykenny Bog.

### 1.3.2 Fisherstown Bog

Fisherstown Bog is a good example of a midland raised bog that occurs just south of Ballykenny Bog. The bog was last surveyed in 2012 (Fernandez et al. 2014) The River Camlin runs to the north-east, east, and south of the bog. Between the Camlin River and the bog, a complete transition from raised bog to callow grasslands can be seen.

#### 1.3.2.1 Flora of Fisherstown Bog

Non-active raised bog habitat and examples of Rhynchosporion depressions are present throughout much of Fisherstown Bog. These habitats are similar in character to the examples on Ballykenny as described above.

At Fisherstown Bog the ARB consists of sub-central ecotope. It is found at two locations the largest in the south-western part of the bog, and a smaller area in the north-west. Although five different sub-central complexes are recorded, only two occur over a significant enough area to be mapped by Fernandez *et al.* (2014a, b, c).

The first complex is composed mainly of low hummocks/hollows and lawns with scattered pools and tall hummocks. The *Sphagnum* cover generally ranges from 34-50%, but is higher in places. *Sphagnum capillifolium* dominate the *Sphagnum* hummocks while *S. tenellum*, *S. papillosum*, *S. austinii* and *S. fuscum* are also present. *Sphagnum* lawns are dominated by *S. papillosum* and *S. magellanicum* while *S. cuspidatum* dominate in pools. *Calluna vulgaris* and *Eriophorum vaginatum* dominate the herb and shrub layer along with prominent *Rhynchospora alba*. Other species present include *Menyanthes trifoliata*, *Drosera anglica*, and *Vaccinium oxycoccos*. In the second complex, *Sphagnum* cover ranges from 51-90% composed mostly of hummocks of *Sphagnum capillifolium* with *S. magellanicum*, *S. papillosum* and *S. cuspidatum* dominating in hollows. *Narthecium ossifragum* dominates the herb and shrub layer along with *Calluna vulgaris* and *Eriophorum vaginatum*.

### 1.3.3 Fauna of Lough Forbes Complex SAC

Otter (*Lutra lutra*) has been recorded as occurring within the SAC and may occasionally occur on the bog (DEHLG 2000). Mammal species that have been recorded from marginal areas (and watercourses) surrounding the bog include pine marten (*Martes martes*) and badger (*Meles meles*). Bird species recorded from the bog in the past include Greenland white-fronted goose (*Anser albifrons flavirostris*), merlin (*Falco columbarius*) and red grouse (*Lagopus lagopus*) (DEHLG 2000). Breeding red grouse were recorded in the site during the last national red grouse survey (Cummins et al. 2010)

## 2 Conservation objectives

A site-specific conservation objective aims to define the favourable conservation condition of a habitat or species at site level. The maintenance of habitats and species within sites at favourable condition will contribute to the maintenance of favourable conservation status of those habitats and species at a national level.

Conservation objectives for habitats are defined using attributes and targets that are based on parameters as set out in the Habitats Directive for defining favourable status, namely area, range, and structure and functions. Attributes and targets may change or become more refined as further information becomes available.

National Conservation Objectives for raised bog SACs have recently been published in the Draft National Raised Bog SAC Management Plan (DAHG 2014). The various attributes and the justification of appropriate targets used to define favourable conservation condition for ARB relevant to Ballykenny and Fisherstown Bogs are discussed in the following sections.

### 2.1 Area

NPWS has commissioned a number of raised bog surveys between 1993 and the present-Kelly *et al.* (1995); Derwin & MacGowan (2000); Fernandez *et al.* (2005); Fernandez *et al.* (2006); Fernandez *et al.* (2014a, b, c). Mapping from these surveys has been used to derive the area of ARB for each bog as shown in Table 3. More recent surveys have been able to employ more precise and detailed mapping techniques and more standardised ecotope descriptions. NPWS undertook a review of data from earlier surveys in 2014 taking into account these improved techniques with the aim of providing more accurate figures for ARB. This in some cases has resulted in a change in ARB area for these earlier time periods (NPWS, unpublished data).

The national SAC target for the attribute 'habitat area' has been set at 2,590ha (DAHG 2014). This target is based on the estimated area of ARB (1,940ha) and DRB (650ha) present within the SAC network in 1994 (when the Habitats Directive came into effect).

The area of ARB within Lough Forbes Complex SAC in 1994 is estimated to have been 80.4ha, while the area of DRB is estimated to have been 0.6ha at that time (see Table 3). Using the same approach that has been adopted in setting the national SAC target, the site-specific target for Lough Forbes Complex SAC would equate to 81.0ha (sum of ARB and DRB in 1994). However, in setting the site-specific target the current hydro-ecological conditions on the bog (including cutover) have been considered in order to ensure that the target being set is based on a realistic appraisal of what is achievable as set out below.

The most recent monitoring surveys of the bog estimated the area of ARB to be 9.0ha (Fernandez *et al.* 2014a, b, c). This represents a decline of 71.4ha during the period 1994 – 2011/2012. An additional survey undertaken in 2004 shows that most of this decline occurred during the period 1994-2004 and that in fact, the area of ARB only decreased

slightly during the period 2004-2011/2012 (see Table 3) (Fernandez *et al.* 2014a, b, c).

The current extent of DRB as estimated using a recently developed hydrological modelling technique, based largely on Light Detection And Ranging (LiDAR)<sup>2</sup> data, is 61.6ha (see DAHG 2014 for further details of the technique). This represents the area of the high bog, which does not currently contain ARB but has topographical conditions deemed suitable to support ARB (see Map 1 which shows the total area of current and modelled potential ARB). This area was refined to 33.5ha by estimating the area that could be restored by blocking drains on the high bog. This refinement was based on applying an efficacy factor (see DAHG 2014).

Based on the current assessment of the bog above, it is therefore concluded that the maximum achievable target for ARB on the high bog is 42.5ha, which is 38.5ha less than the estimated area at time of designation. However, it is important to note that this assumes no further decline of ARB due to losses of high bog caused by turf cutting and drainage activities associated with same (Fernandez *et al.* 2014a, b, c). Similarly, should the bog be significantly dependent on regional groundwater levels then any deepening of drains in the cutover could further impact the potential restoration of ARB on the high bog.

**Table 3** Area of ARB and DRB recorded on the high bog at Lough Forbes Complex SAC in 1994, 2004, and 2011/2012 (Source: Kelly *et al.* 1995; Fernandez *et al.* 2014a, b, c).

1994		2004		2011/2012	
ARB (ha)	DRB (ha)	ARB (ha)	DRB (ha)	ARB (ha)	DRB (ha)
80.4	0.6	10.3	Unknown	9.0	33.5

A recent eco-hydrological assessment of the cutover surrounding the high bog undertaken as part of the restoration planning process estimates that, by implementing appropriate management, an additional 1.0ha of ARB could be restored in this area. The long term achievable target for ARB within the Lough Forbes Complex SAC is therefore set at 43.5ha.

In conclusion, the site-specific target for the attribute habitat area is: **Restore area of active raised bog to 43.5ha, subject to natural processes.**

## 2.2 Range

At a national scale, range represents the geographic range that encompasses all significant ecological variations of the ARB habitat. The national SAC target for the attribute 'range' has been set as 'not less than current range subject to natural processes'.

However, range, in the form of habitat distribution, may also be important at the site level, particularly within larger SACs, including those containing a number of individual bogs (i.e. complexes). The attribute therefore under the parameter of range is 'habitat distribution'. At the local level, it is important to conserve the variability and distribution of ARB across a raised bog SAC. This will help to ensure the diversity of the habitat is maintained while lessening the impact of localised damaging activities such as fire.

The conservation of ARB within the Lough Forbes Complex SAC as set out in Section 2.1 above will contribute to safeguarding the national range of the habitat.

The ARB habitat at Lough Forbes Complex SAC comprises sub-central ecotope, as well as

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<sup>2</sup> LiDAR is a remote sensing technology that measures vertical surface elevation by illuminating a target with a laser and analysing the reflected light. This provides much more detailed topographical maps than can be collected by traditional surveying techniques.

active flush. A map showing the most recent distribution of ecotopes throughout Ballykenny and Fisherstown Bogs is presented in Map 2.

The site-specific target for the attribute habitat distribution is: **Restore the distribution and variability of active raised bog across the SAC.**

## **2.3 Structure and functions**

Structure and functions relates to the physical components of a habitat (“structure”) and the ecological processes that drive it (“functions”). For ARB these include attributes such as the hydrological regime, water quality, habitat quality, species occurrence, elements of local distinctiveness, marginal habitats, negative physical indicators, and negative species occurrence. As several of these attributes are inter-connected, they are all included in order to better define habitat quality in a meaningful way. In some cases, attribute targets are not quantified; however, as more detailed information becomes available (for example through further research), more measurable site-specific targets may be developed. Structure and functions attributes are expanded on in the sections below.

### **2.3.1 High bog area**

On individual raised bogs adequate high bog is required to support the development and maintenance of ARB. Raised bog habitat that is classified as neither ARB nor DRB is still important particularly as a supporting habitat for those listed in Annex I of the Habitats Directive. It is an essential part of the hydrological unit which supports ARB and DRB habitats. High bog is of value in its own right as a refuge for species characteristic of drier bog conditions as well as for providing a transitional zone between the Annex I habitats of the high bog and surrounding areas. Additional values for the maintenance of high bog include the preservation of its record of past environmental conditions and carbon storage. The area of high bog in the entire SAC network in 1994 was 10,740ha. The corresponding area in 2012 is 10,515ha – indicating that there has been a 225ha loss of high bog since 1994.

The national target for the attribute ‘high bog’ habitat is to ensure no decline in extent of high bog to support the development and maintenance of ARB.

The area of high bog within the Lough Forbes Complex SAC in 1994 was mapped as 283.9ha, while the corresponding area in 2012 is 283.2ha (based on interpretation of LiDAR and Aerial Photography flown in 2012), representing a loss of 0.7ha of high bog (DAHG 2014). The extent of high bog within Lough Forbes Complex SAC in 2012 is illustrated on Map 1.

The site-specific target for the attribute high bog is: **No decline in extent of high bog necessary to support the development and maintenance of active raised bog.**

### **2.3.2 Hydrological regime: water levels**

Hydrological processes are key drivers of raised bog ecology. The different raised bog communities, assemblages, and species are affected by various hydrological attributes. For ARB, mean water levels need to be near or above the surface of bog lawns for most of the year. Seasonal fluctuations should not exceed 20cm, and water levels should be within 10cm of the surface, except for very short periods of time (Kelly & Schouten 2002). Gentle slopes that limit intermittent lateral losses of water (through surface run-off) and encourage sustained waterlogging are the most favourable to achieve these conditions. These conditions may be maintained on steeper slopes in areas of focused flow (flushes).

The traditional view of water flowing across the bog laterally has been recently refined to also consider that water flows vertically through peat into the underlying mineral substrate.



Water loss, by this route, depends on the permeability of the material through which the water must flow and the difference in head (water level elevation) in the bog and underlying mineral substrate; larger differences encountered in higher permeability materials will result in greater losses. Although the proportion of water lost in this manner may be small, the sustained loss during prolonged dry periods may be sufficient to impact bog ecotopes. Drains extending into the mineral substrate in marginal areas surrounding the bog can lead to an increased gradient between the head in the peat and the head in the underlying substrate resulting in increased vertical water losses from the bog.

### **2.3.2.1 Ballykenny Bog**

The most recent description of drainage at Ballykenny Bog is presented in Fernandez *et al.* (2014b) who reported that there are 25.9km of blocked drains that are considered reduced functional and are therefore likely to have on-going impacts until they become fully non-functional. There are also 0.5km of unblocked drains that were reported to be in-filled with vegetation; it is not known whether these drains are having any impact upon high bog habitats.

There are cutover drains associated with past peat-cutting activities around much of the bog, particularly along the eastern boundary. However, drains in this area have been blocked as part of a restoration programme that was carried out at the site and positive results have been reported. There are functional drains along some of the margins associated with agricultural reclamation, particularly along the southern boundary. Some drains remain functional along some cutover areas surrounded Ballykenny Bog, including the wooded areas along the north and west of the site. Fernandez *et al.* (2014b) report that invasive species *Rhododendron ponticum* dominates the entire western and northern cutover, as well as the edge of the woodland on the north-eastern ridge. This is likely to contribute to lowering water levels within the peat on these cutover areas. Some plants were also noted as encroaching onto the high bog.

Much of the knowledge regarding the hydrological requirements of raised bog communities in Ireland stems from the extensive ecological and hydrological work undertaken on Clara Bog since the early 1990s. The only available hydrological study for Ballykenny Bog is the work carried out by Kelly *et al.* (1995). The hydrochemistry survey identified electrical conductivity (EC) values of between 100 – 150 $\mu$ S/cm in the eastern section of the bog, indicating a small contribution from minerotrophic groundwater. Further north a drain through the mineral till ridge had an EC of 235 $\mu$ S/cm indicating more significant contributions of minerotrophic groundwater. On the north-western margin of the bog a marginal drain was recorded as having EC values of between 100 -450 $\mu$ S/cm indicating increasing contributions of minerotrophic groundwater.

The presence of upwelling groundwater suggests that these drains intercept the regional groundwater table. This can result in a decline in groundwater head, which can impact on the surface of the bog through subsidence. The risk of subsidence depends on the permeability of the underlying substrate, which will influence the extents of impacts from changes to groundwater head. Geological mapping indicates that the bog is underlain by Visean limestone which is subject to karstification (conduit). Subsoil mapping indicates a diverse range of subsoils surround Ballykenny Bog. Along the southern boundary with the Camlin River, there is alluvium, with sandstone till to the east and north and sandstone and shale till to the north-east. The presence of a highly productive bedrock unit as well as potentially permeable substrate suggests that a decline in groundwater head may have contributed to subsidence on the high bog. Further deepening of marginal drains or the adjacent river channels has the potential to have significant impacts on Ballykenny Bog.

### 2.3.2.2 Fisherstown Bog

The most recent description of drainage at Fisherstown Bog is presented in Fernandez *et al.* (2014c) who reported that there are 0.7km of unblocked drains impacting on high bog habitats. However, there are also 9.4km of blocked drains that are considered reduced functional and are therefore likely to have on-going impacts until they become fully non-functional. These drains are mostly concentrated to the west and north of the bog. There is also 1.8km of unblocked drains that were reported to be in-filled with vegetation; it is not known whether these drains are having any impact upon high bog habitats.

Fisherstown Bog is situated entirely in a wide low gradient floodplain of the River Shannon with the River Camlin running to the north, east and south of the site and the Shannon running 1.5km to the north-west. In the north-east and south-east there is a natural gradation from bog to callows, moving down slope to the River Camlin. In these areas no peat cutting has taken place in the past and there are no major drains. There are drains on the cutover in the south-west, west and north-west of the site and these are draining the high bog and impacting on high bog habitats. Drainage maintenance on the adjacent agriculture land seems to have taken place (from analysis of 2010 aerial photography) to the south of the high bog (400m length). These drains are on fields adjacent to the river and approximately 150m from high bog.

As for Ballykenny Bog, the only available hydrological study for Fisherstown Bog is the work carried out by Kelly *et al.* (1995). The hydrochemistry survey as part of this study focused on the northern and north-western margins of the bog where peat-cutting was most extensive. This survey identified electrical conductivity (EC) values of between 98 -200 $\mu$ S/cm in the drains towards the north of the site. This indicates some influence from regional groundwater since EC values associated with bog water are typically  $\leq 80\mu$ S/cm. In the drains to the north-west of the bog EC values of 210 $\mu$ S/cm were recorded, indicating the presence of upwelling groundwater.

Like Ballykenny Bog, the presence of upwelling groundwater suggests that these drains intercept the regional groundwater table with similar consequences likely. Subsoil mapping indicates a diverse range of subsoils surround Fisherstown Bog. Along the northern, eastern and south-eastern boundary with the Camlin River, there is alluvium. There is also sandstone till to the south-west as well as immediately adjacent to the western boundary. The presence of a highly productive bedrock unit as well as potentially permeable substrate suggests that a decline in groundwater head may have contributed to subsidence on the high bog. Further deepening of marginal drains or the adjacent river channels has the potential to have significant impacts on Fisherstown Bog.

The site-specific target for the attribute hydrological regime – water levels is: **Restore appropriate water levels throughout the site.**

### 2.3.3 Hydrological regime: flow patterns

As outlined above, ARB depends on water levels being near or above the surface of bog lawns for most of the year. Long and gentle slopes are the most favourable to achieve these conditions. Changes to flow directions due to subsidence of bogs can radically change water regimes and cause drying out of high quality ARB areas and soak systems.

A map illustrating the slopes and drainage patterns on Ballykenny and Fisherstown Bogs based on a digital elevation model generated from LiDAR imagery flown in 2012 is presented in Map 3.

### 2.3.3.1 Ballykenny Bog

The surface of Ballykenny Bog is in general rather flat; particularly the southern section where there is only a gradual slope to the bog edge. The steeper slopes are confined to the areas to the south-east and towards the large drains in the northern part of the site. The flow patterns at Ballykenny Bog illustrate very clearly that the bog has been affected by subsidence, as there are several areas of focused flow towards the southern and south-western margin. There is also a significant area of focused flow towards the north-western boundary. Most of the areas of ARB on Ballykenny Bog are small sections that coincide with areas of focused flow, including areas where drains have now been blocked. This suggests that high bog drains have had a significant impact on the topography of the bog.

### 2.3.3.2 Fisherstown Bog

The surface of Fisherstown Bog is generally relatively flat, with areas of slope <0.3%. However, it is evident that the surface slope has been affected by subsidence in the past as there are areas of steeper slopes extending into the bog, particularly in the drained areas. In addition flow patterns suggest the bog may have been affected by subsidence, since there are areas of focused flow towards the margins. This is particularly evident along the eastern and southern boundaries, where a large proportion of the flow is focused towards the Camlin River. An area of focused flow is also evident from the centre of the bog towards the western boundary, coinciding with a small pocket of sub-central vegetation occurring on relatively steep slopes (>1%) indicating the focused flow is maintaining ARB habitat in this area.

Changes to flow patterns or slope arising from subsidence associated either with high bog or marginal drainage are likely to have a significant impact on the high bog habitats in the SAC.

The site-specific target for the attribute hydrological regime – flow patterns is: **Restore, where possible, appropriate high bog topography, flow directions and slopes.**

### 2.3.4 Transitional areas between high bog and surrounding mineral soils (includes cutover areas)

Transitional zones between raised bogs and surrounding mineral soils are typically cutover bog and drained lagg zones. The maintenance / restoration of these areas will help to maintain hydrological integrity of ARB and DRB, and support a diversity of other wetland habitats (e.g. wet woodland, swamp, and fen), as well as species they sustain. In some cases, these areas may assist in reducing further losses of ARB / DRB on the high bog and in time could develop into active peat forming habitats (including ARB - see Section 2.1 above). These transitional zones, once restored, can provide ecosystem services through flood attenuation and water purification to downstream areas and potentially increase the carbon storage / sink function of the bog. The estimated extent of such transitional areas within the SAC network is 3,000ha (DAHG 2014). The national target for these transitional areas is to maintain / restore semi-natural habitats with high water levels around as much of the bog margins as necessary.

The transitional areas surrounding both Ballykenny and Fisherstown Bogs include a range of different habitat types (e.g. cutover bog, river, lake, scrub, woodland and callow grassland). The total area of cutover bog is estimated to be circa 187ha. The development of habitats within cutover areas depends on a number of factors including prevailing land-use, topography, up-welling regional groundwater, and drainage.

At Ballykenny Bog cutover bog occurs along the eastern, and north, north-western margins of the high bog. There is a natural gradation from bog to the Camlin river, in the south-west,

where there are large expanses of callows which remain relatively undisturbed Kelly *et al.* (1995).

There are mature mixed woodlands along the west (Corlehan Wood), north-west (Clonguish Wood), north-east (Ballacarrigan Wood) and on the high bog to the east (Derreen Wood) of the site. These are all shown on the 1840s map. They are now being invaded by *Rhododendron ponticum* which is also encroaching onto the bog margins in places. Fernandez *et al.* (2005) describes the woodland that occurs on the high bog.

At Fisherstown Bog cutover is located along the northern, western and southern side of the high bog. In the south-west an area of cutover was afforested with conifers, but the trees were removed as part of the Coillte LIFE raised bog restoration project. The edges of the high bog and the cutover is mainly colonised by *Molinia caerulea*, *Ulex europaeus*, and *Betula pubescens* with the callow vegetation between the bog and the river. To the south-east and south-west of the site *Eriophorum vaginatum* is abundant in the cutover (Kelly *et al.* 1995). Fernandez *et al.* (2005) reports that an old cutover area, which has not been disturbed or cut for many years, contains some active bog vegetation with large hummocks of *Sphagnum capillifolium*, *S. papillosum* and *Polytrichum* spp.

There is a natural gradation from Fisherstown Bog to the Camlin river, in the north-east, where there are large expanses of callows which remain relatively undisturbed (Kelly *et al.* 1995). To the south, there is a natural lagg zone where the bog slopes to the river.

The site-specific target for the attribute transitional areas is: **Restore adequate transitional areas to support / protect active raised bog and the services it provides.**

### 2.3.5 Vegetation quality: central ecotope, active flush, soaks, bog woodland

A diverse good quality microtopography on raised bogs consists of *Sphagnum* dominated pools, hollows, lawns and hummocks, which support the highest diversity of species including hummock indicators: *Sphagnum fuscum* and *S. austinii*; pool indicators: *S. cuspidatum*, *S. denticulatum*, and indicators of lack of burning events e.g. some lichen species (*Cladonia* spp.) (Cross 1990).

The national target for the attribute vegetation quality has been set as “to maintain / restore sufficient high quality bog vegetation (i.e. central ecotope and / or flushes / soaks). At least 50% of ARB habitat should be central ecotope and / or flush / soaks.” Bog woodland is also regarded as a desirable variant of ARB as it adds species and structural diversity to the habitat and therefore, where relevant, also contributes to the 50% target at site level.

A summary description of the vegetation of Ballykenny and Fisherstown Bogs is presented in Section 1.3 above. The vegetation and habitats of the bog have been described in more detail by Kelly *et al.* (1995) and Fernandez *et al.* (2005, 2006 & 2014a, b, c).

The extent of the different ecotopes that correspond with ARB based on the most recent surveys is presented in Table 4 and on Map 2. During the most recent surveys (2011/12) the entire area of ARB comprised sub-central ecotope and active flush.

Comparing this to results of surveys undertaken in 2004 indicates that the proportion remained relatively static throughout the period 2004 to 2011/2012. But a slight increase was reported as a result of rewetting of the high bog brought by restoration works.

The target for this attribute is 21.8ha of high quality ARB (50% of ARB target area (43.5ha)).

**Table 4** Extent of ecotopes classified as ARB in 2004 and 2011 & 2012 (modified from Fernandez *et al.* 2005 & 2014a, b, c).

Ecotope	2004		2011/2012	
	ha	% of total ARB	ha	% of total ARB
Sub-central ecotope	9.9	96.1	8.6	95.6
Active flush / soaks	0.4	3.9	0.4	4.4
<b>Total ARB</b>	<b>10.3</b>		<b>9.0</b>	

The site-specific target for the attribute vegetation quality is: **Restore 21.8ha of central ecotope/active flush/soaks/bog woodland as appropriate.**

### 2.3.6 Vegetation quality: microtopographical features

The characteristic microtopographical features of raised bogs are described in Section 1.1.1 above.

Well developed microtopography occurs in the sub-central ecotope that occur on the two bogs (Fernandez *et al.* 2014a, b, c).

The site-specific target for the attribute microtopographical features is: **Restore adequate cover of high quality microtopographical features.**

### 2.3.7 Vegetation quality: bog moss (*Sphagnum*) species

Bog mosses, which have unique properties, are the principal component of peat, and are largely responsible for the typical microtopographical features as described in Section 1.1.1 above.

The vegetation of a typical raised bog that is still hydrologically intact is characterised by the dominance of several species of *Sphagnum* and dwarf, ericoid shrubs. The most abundant species are *Sphagnum capillifolium*, *S. austinii* and *S. papillosum* which form hummocks or low ridges. *Sphagnum fuscum* may also form hummocks (Cross 1990). On the flats *Sphagnum magellanicum*, *S. papillosum*, *S. tenellum*, and *S. subnitens* are the key species. *Sphagnum pulchrum* may also be dominant in flats on western raised bogs. In permanently waterlogged hollows *Sphagnum cuspidatum* and *S. denticulatum* (western bogs) occur. *Sphagnum fallax* is common where there is slight flushing (Cross 1990). The most commonly occurring *Sphagnum* moss species that occur on raised bogs in Ireland are presented in Table 5 along with a summary of their ecology and typical contribution to peat formation.

Kelly *et al.* (1995) and Fernandez *et al.* (2005 & 2014a, b, c) provide information on the occurrence of *Sphagnum* species throughout Ballykenney and Fisherstown Bogs. Overall the *Sphagnum* cover is high (51-90%) in the ARB areas, and low (to 33%) in non-active raised bog habitat (Fernandez *et al.* 2014a, b, c; Kelly *et al.* 1995).

**Table 5** *Sphagnum* species typically associated with raised bog ecosystems in Ireland. Ecology as described by Laine *et al.* (2009) with minor modifications.

Species	Ecology	Peat forming capacity
<i>Sphagnum austinii</i>	Hummock species	High
<i>Sphagnum capillifolium</i>	Forms small hummocks and carpets	Moderate
<i>Sphagnum cuspidatum</i>	Pool and hollow species	Low
<i>Sphagnum denticulatum</i>	Pool and hollow species	Low
<i>Sphagnum fallax</i>	Occurs in lawns and carpets, shade tolerant. Indicative	Low

Species	Ecology	Peat forming capacity
	of some nutrient enrichment (soaks and active flushes)	
<i>Sphagnum fuscum</i>	Forms dense low and wide, and occasionally high hummocks	High
<i>Sphagnum magellanicum</i>	Lawn species forming carpets and low hummocks	Moderate
<i>Sphagnum palustre</i>	Forms hummocks and dense carpets, often in shaded conditions. Indicative of nutrient enrichment (soaks and active flushes)	Low
<i>Sphagnum papillosum</i>	Lawn , hollow, and low hummock species	Moderate
<i>Sphagnum pulchrum</i>	Grows in lawns and hollows, more typical of western bogs	Moderate
<i>Sphagnum squarrosum</i>	Forms carpets and small mounds. Indicative of nutrient enrichment (soaks and active flushes)	Low
<i>Sphagnum subnitens</i>	Occurs as individual shoots or small cushions and lawns. Tolerant of minerotrophic conditions	Moderate
<i>Sphagnum tenellum</i>	Occurs as single shoots or weak cushions, typically in disturbed patches of the bog surface	Low

The site-specific target for the attribute bog moss (*Sphagnum*) species is: **Restore adequate cover of bog moss (*Sphagnum*) species to ensure peat-forming capacity.**

### 2.3.8 Typical ARB species: flora

Ballykenny and Fisherstown Bogs support the full complement of plant species typically associated with a midland floodplain raised bog (see Table 1 and Section 1.3 above).

The key typical species that are indicative of high quality raised bog include *Sphagnum fuscum* and *S. austinii* which are associated with hummocks and *S. cuspidatum* and *S. denticulatum* which are associated with pools and hollows. All of these species have been reported from Ballykenny and Fisherstown Bogs with the exception of *Sphagnum denticulatum* (Kelly *et al.* 1995; Fernandez *et al.* (2014a, b, c).

The site-specific target for the attribute typical bog flora is: **Restore, where appropriate, typical active raised bog flora.**

### 2.3.9 Typical ARB species: fauna

As mentioned in Section 1.1.3, a list of typical fauna specific to ARB has not been developed and the table contains species that use the wider raised bog habitat. This may be refined as more information becomes available.

Ballykenny and Fisherstown Bogs are likely to support a wide range of fauna species that are typically associated with raised bog habitats (see Section 1.1.3 above).

The site-specific target for the attribute typical bog fauna is: **Restore, where appropriate, typical active raised bog fauna.**

### 2.3.10 Elements of local distinctiveness

A range of features may be associated with raised bogs which add to the scientific, historical, or conservation value of a bog. These can include geological, topographical, archaeological and hydrological features (e.g. soaks, lakes, flushes) and noteworthy species of flora and fauna (Cross 1990). Notable species of flora and fauna include those listed in the Habitats and Birds Directives, Red-listed species and other rare or localised species. For this attribute,

features that are particularly associated with ARB are relevant.

#### **2.3.10.1 Site features**

Ballykenny and Fisherstown Bogs represent excellent examples of floodplain bogs. There are few such examples remaining along the River Shannon.

The other main features of interest at Ballykenny and Fisherstown Bogs is the natural gradation from each bog to the Camlin River, which occurs between the two bog units, where there are large expanses of callows that remain relatively undisturbed (Kelly *et al.* 1995).

There are also interesting transitions from the high bog through to woodland habitats at Ballykenny Bog.

To the south of Fisherstown Bog there is a natural lagg zone where the bog slopes to the river.

#### **2.3.10.2 Rare flora**

No rare flora records have been reported from Ballykenny and Fisherstown Bogs.

#### **2.3.10.3 Rare fauna**

As mentioned above, there is a lack of documented site-specific data relating to the fauna of Ballykenny and Fisherstown Bogs. Breeding red grouse (*Lagopus lagopus*) were recorded during the last national survey (Cummins *et al.* 2010).

In conclusion, the site-specific target for the attribute elements of local distinctiveness is: **Maintain features of local distinctiveness, subject to natural processes.**

#### **2.3.11 Negative physical indicators**

Raised bogs that have been damaged by marginal cutting and drainage, reclamation for agriculture, forestry activities, fire, surface drainage, or the lowering of regional water tables show a range of negative physical indicators (Cross 1990). Such negative physical features of ARB include: bare peat, algae dominated pools and hollows, marginal cracks, tear patterns, subsidence features such as dry peat and / or mineral mounds / ridges emerging or expanding, and burning evidence.

A fire, which occurred in March 2012, severely burned 26.6ha of the high bog (26%) on Fisherstown Bog (Fernandez *et al.* 2014a, b, c). Much of this was in areas that had been classed as sub-central ecotope in 2005. Prior to this, there had been no evidence of fires on the high bog at Fisherstown Bog since before 1995. Fire is considered to have a high importance/impact on high bog habitats.

The site-specific target for the attribute negative physical indicators is: **Negative physical features absent or insignificant.**

#### **2.3.12 Vegetation composition: native negative indicator species**

Indicators of disturbance on a raised bog include species indicative of drying out conditions such as abundant *Narthecium ossifragum* and *Trichophorum germanicum*; *Eriophorum vaginatum* forming tussocks; abundant *Sphagnum magellanicum* in pools previously dominated by species typical of very wet conditions (e.g. *Sphagnum cuspidatum*). Indicators of frequent burning events include abundant *Cladonia floerkeana* and high cover of *Carex panicea* (particularly in the true midlands raised bog type).

The site-specific target for the attribute native negative indicator species is: **Native negative indicator species at insignificant levels.**

### 2.3.13 Vegetation composition: non-native invasive species

Non-native invasive species that can commonly occur on raised bog habitats include: *Pinus contorta*, *Rhododendron ponticum*, and *Sarracenia purpurea* (Cross 1990).

*Rhododendron ponticum* is abundant on cutover areas to the north and west of Ballykenny Bog and also within woodland areas on the north-eastern side of the bog. Although a few individuals were recorded on the high bog, the species is unlikely to spread further across the bog due to the wet conditions that prevail. Similarly *Pinus* spp. have been recorded on the high bog but do not appear to be spreading (Fernandez *et al.* 2014a, b, c).

At Fisherstown Bog some scattered *Pinus* spp. occur on the western part of the high bog but are not considered to be spreading (Fernandez *et al.* 2014a, b, c). *Campylopus introflexus* is frequent in the areas of the blocked drainage complexes.

The site-specific target for the attribute non-native invasive species: **Non-native invasive species at insignificant levels and not more than 1% cover.**

### 2.3.14 Air quality: nitrogen deposition

Peatlands are highly sensitive to air pollution, particularly nitrogen deposition. Reactive nitrogen from fossil fuel combustion or intensive agriculture can contaminate rain and snow, causing soil acidification, nutrient enrichment, and a decline in species that are sensitive to these conditions. There is evidence that the combined impact of elevated nitrogen deposition and a warming climate could exceed the sum of the individual stressors and lead to a dramatic decline in the biodiversity of mosses, sensitive vascular plants, and microbes, potentially leading to catastrophic peat loss (PEATBOG project - <http://www.sste.mmu.ac.uk>).

Air pollution can change both the species composition and the functioning of peatlands. The primary atmospheric pollutant from the Industrial Revolution to the mid 1970s was sulphur deposition, but levels have since greatly declined. Reactive nitrogen (N) deposition (primarily NO<sub>3</sub><sup>-</sup> and NH<sub>4</sub><sup>+</sup>), which can both acidify and eutrophy, became significantly elevated over a widespread area in the early to mid-20th century and is now the major pollutant in atmospheric deposition across most of Europe (Fowler *et al.* 2005).

Nitrogen is commonly a limiting terrestrial nutrient and in un-impacted peatlands it is tightly cycled. With long-term elevated N deposition, vegetation composition typically shifts toward species adapted to higher nutrient levels, with an overall loss of diversity (Malmer & Wallén 2005). In peatlands, field experiments with N additions within the current European range have shown significant declines in bryophyte species-richness and productivity, and shifts in composition toward vascular plants (Bobbink *et al.* 1998; Bubier *et al.* 2007). Community shifts toward more nitrophilous bryophytes in N-enriched regions such as parts of the Netherlands are also well documented (Greven 1992). In the UK, both a general survey of peatlands across the country (Smart *et al.* 2003), and a targeted study of *Calluna* moorland (Caporn *et al.* 2007) showed significant inverse relationships between levels of nitrogen deposition and species richness, with bryophytes particularly impacted. Changes in the vegetation also impact below-ground communities and biogeochemical processes.

Moderate increases in N deposition from a low level may increase *Sphagnum* and vascular plant productivity without an equal increase in decomposition rates, leading to enhanced carbon accumulation (Turunen, *et al.* 2004). However, shifts in species composition from bryophytes to vascular plants may increase the production of easily-decomposable plant



material, leading to higher rates of decomposition, and reduced carbon accumulation (Lamers *et al.* 2000; Bubier *et al.* 2007).

The particular sensitivity of nutrient-poor ombrotrophic peatlands to nitrogen enrichment is reflected in the low critical load threshold of between 5 and 10kg N/ha/yr for these ecosystems (Bobbink & Hettelingh 2011), a level which is exceeded over a significant portion of their range. An Irish study during the late 1990s undertaken by Aherne & Farrell (2000) concluded that total N deposition shows a strong east-west gradient, with lowest deposition in the west at 2kg N/ha/yr and highest in the east and south-east at 20kg N/ha/yr. Average N deposition over the Republic of Ireland was estimated to be approximately 12kg N/ha/yr. The study also concluded that the Critical Load Threshold for N was exceeded in at least 15% of ecosystems studied. The critical load applied to peatland ecosystems by Aherne & Farrell (2000) was 10kg N/ha/yr. This is in line with the recommendation by Bobbink & Hettelingh (2011) that the critical load should be set at the high end of the range in areas of high precipitation and at the low end of the range in areas of low precipitation assuming that Ireland represents a high precipitation area.

It is recommended in the case of the Lough Forbes Complex SAC that the level of N deposition should not exceed the low end of the range i.e. 5kg N/ha/yr. This recommendation is based on a precautionary approach, as the evidential basis for setting a higher level is not particularly strong as alluded to by Payne (2014). Total N deposition in the vicinity of Lough Forbes Complex SAC as reported by Henry & Aherne (2014) is 15.5kg N/ha/yr.

The site-specific target for the attribute air quality is: **Air quality surrounding bog close to natural reference conditions. The level of N deposition should not exceed 5kg N/ha/yr.**

### 2.3.15 Water quality

Ombrotrophic peat waters found on the surface of raised bogs are characterised by low pH values (pH < 4.5) (Moore & Bellamy 1974) and also have low values of Electrical Conductivity (EC). This is due to the fact that the raised bog system derives its mineral supply from precipitation, which is usually acidic and low in nutrients. Raised bog vegetation exchanges cations with protons to further reduce the pH.

Hydrochemistry varies in the areas surrounding a raised bog. Locally, conditions may be similar to the high bog due to a dominance of water originating from the bog. However, elsewhere in the marginal areas, there may be increased mineral and nutrient content of the water due to regional groundwater influences, run-off from surrounding mineral soils, and the release of nutrients through oxidation of peat resulting from reduced water levels.

Hydrochemistry data relating to Ballykenny and Fisherstown Bogs has been reported by Kelly *et al.* (1995). Some minor elevations in electrical conductivity (EC) were recorded amongst marginal drains on both bogs indicating the possibility of local inputs of mineralised groundwater.

The site-specific target for the attribute water quality is: **Water quality on the high bog and in transitional areas close to natural reference conditions.**

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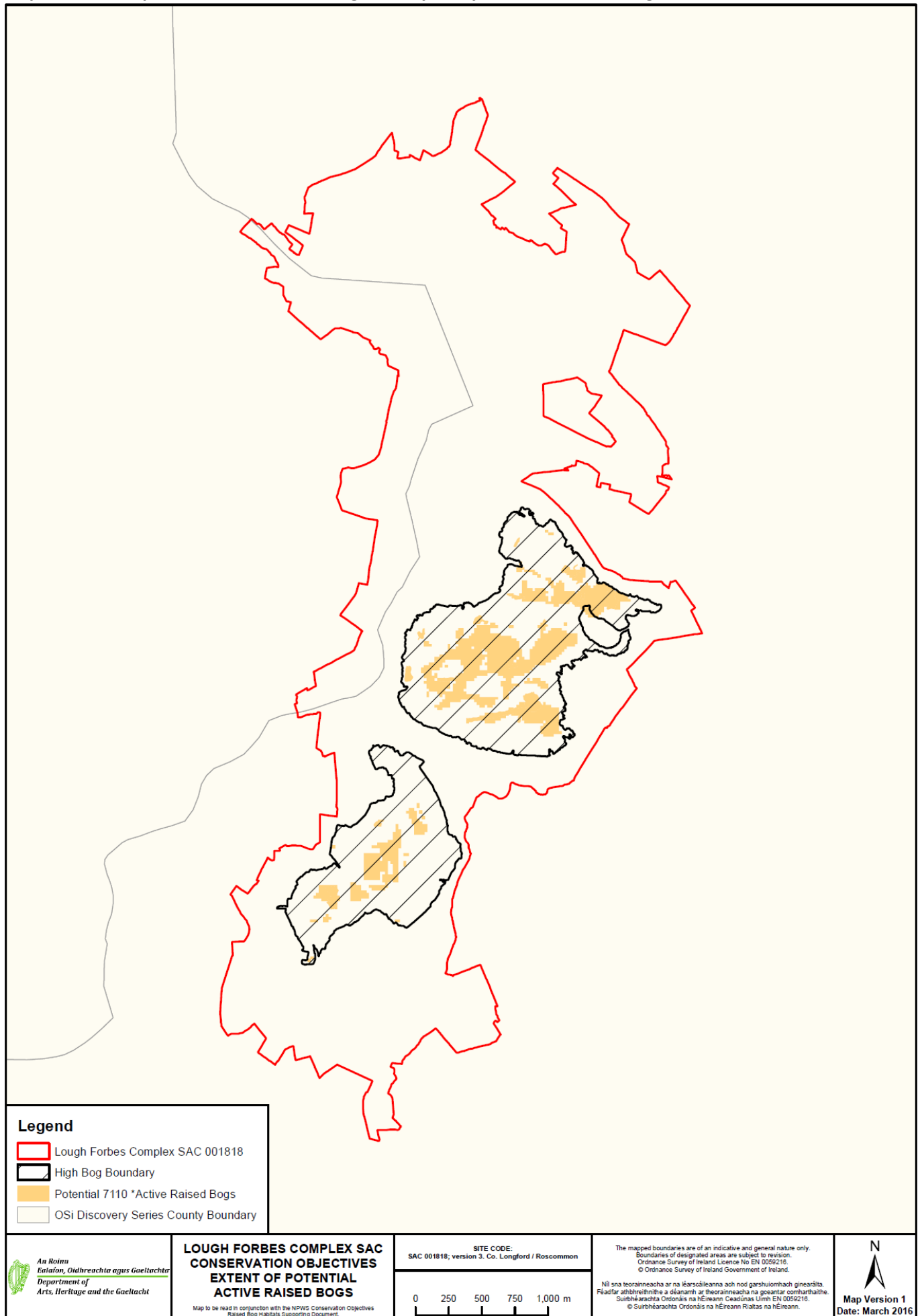
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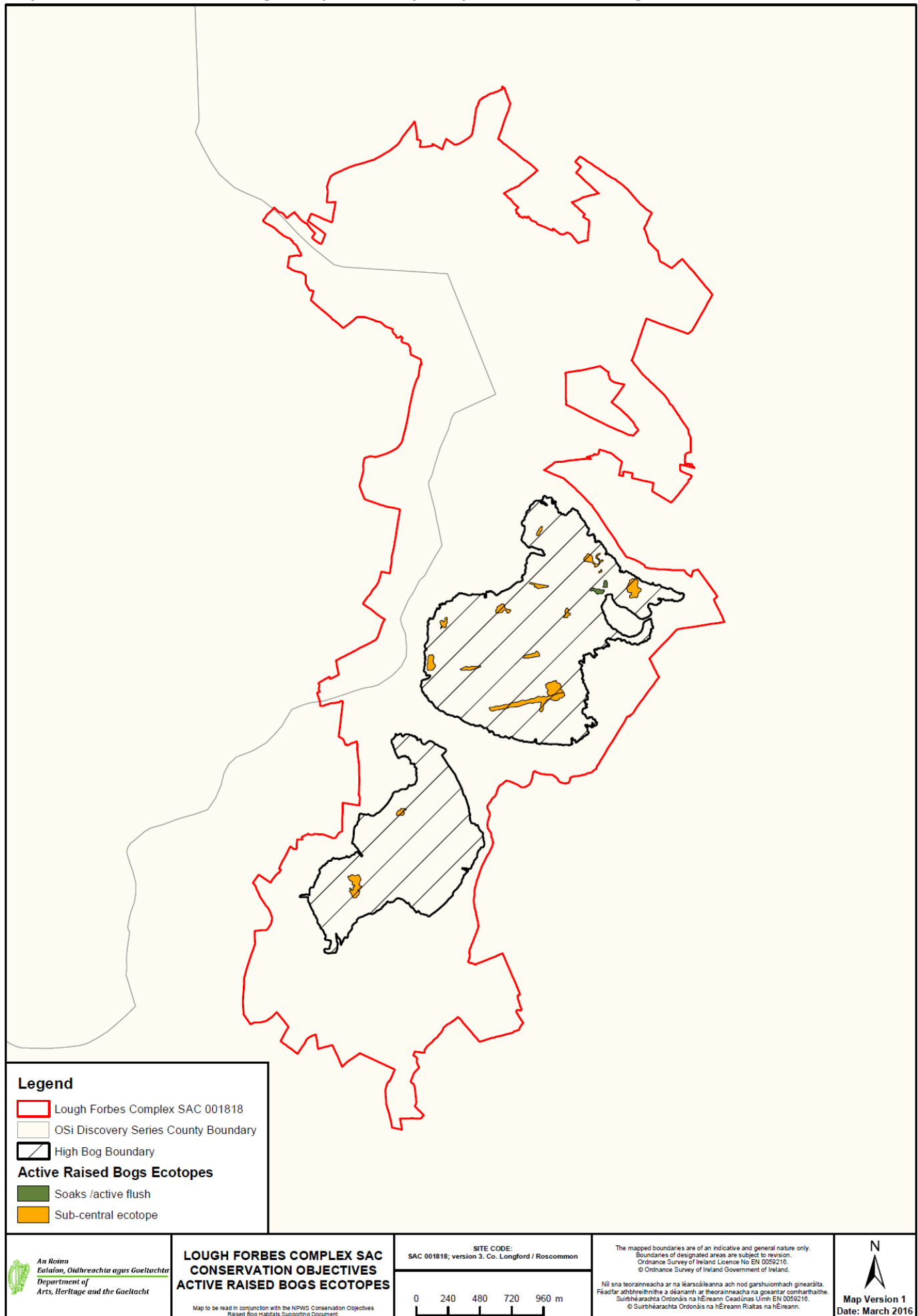
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**Map 1: Extent of potential active raised bog on Ballykenny and Fisherstown Bogs.**



**Map 2: Distribution of raised bog ecotopes on Ballykenny and Fisherstown Bogs.**



Map 3: Digital elevation model and drainage at Ballykenny and Fisherstown Bogs.

