

# Leaders for Nature Programme Impact Report



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# Executive Summary

Ireland is running out of time to close the gap between policy ambition and on-the-ground action on nature. The EU Nature Restoration Regulation and Ireland's 4th National Biodiversity Action Plan are the most demanding environmental commitments the island has ever made -and yet the institutional infrastructure needed to deliver them, a genuinely cross-sector, trust-built network of leaders, has not existed. Until now.

Leaders for Nature was designed to change that. Delivered over six months by Common Purpose Ireland, Native Events, and Leave No Trace Ireland, it brought together 43 front-line environmental stakeholders from government, civil society, private enterprise, and academia and asked a deceptively simple question: what becomes possible when these people are given the space, the skills, and the trust to lead together?

This evaluation, underpinned by the Kirkpatrick model and thematic qualitative analysis, demonstrates that the programme delivered exceptional return on investment. It successfully equipped participants with the relational infrastructure, systems awareness, and adaptive leadership skills needed to drive nature recovery. By moving away from traditional corporate training environments and utilising natural settings as active "co-facilitators," the programme achieved highly measurable shifts in participant self-reflection, integrity, and cross-boundary influence. Most crucially, the programme immediately catalysed actionable, cross-sector collaborations - including funded all-island tenders - proving its core thesis: when diverse environmental stakeholders are given the tools and trust to connect, they accelerate systemic change.



The evaluation shows that the results exceeded every expectation of a pilot programme. Participants did not just develop as individual leaders. They built a living, self-sustaining network that is already winning cross-border funding tenders, co-hosting EU Presidency seminars, and creating community gardens -all before the final session had concluded. Seventy-one percent of participants achieved five-star satisfaction on day one of the programme; by the closing alumni gathering, that figure had risen to 83%. The most significant individual shift -a +1.12 gain in reflective leadership -points not just to skills acquired, but to a deeper change in how these leaders understand themselves and their role in the wider ecological system.

This report presents the evidence for that transformation. It is also, unashamedly, a case for continued investment -because the collaborations seeded by this pilot are mid-formation, and the biodiversity emergency will not wait.

**43**  
**Cross-Sector**  
**Leaders**  
**Convened**

**83%**  
**Five-Star**  
**Satisfaction**  
**at Close**

**+1.12**  
**Gain in**  
**Reflective**  
**Leadership**

**24/34**  
**Participants**  
**Already**  
**Collaborating**



# Strategic Context: The Leadership Gap in Nature Recovery

Ireland is operating at a pivotal moment for nature. The EU Nature Restoration Regulation and Ireland's 4th National Biodiversity Action Plan represent the most ambitious suite of environmental commitments the island has ever undertaken. These frameworks explicitly call for a whole-of-government, whole-of-society response, recognising that the scale of transformation required cannot be achieved by any single agency acting alone.

However, Ireland's institutional landscape for nature remains heavily fragmented across government departments, local authorities, private enterprises, and civil society. This fragmentation produces duplication of effort, generates mistrust, and slows the pace of implementation. The Leaders for Nature partnership was born from a shared frustration with this siloed reality.

As Megan Best, CEO of Native Events, noted, "Working with nature teaches us that everything is connected... This programme will create the Leaders for Nature that we so urgently need." Responding to the biodiversity crisis is an adaptive challenge that requires shifts in values, relationships, and behaviors, not merely the application of technical expertise. Environmental leaders must be capable of holding complexity, facilitating difficult conversations across competing worldviews, and sustaining their resolve under immense pressure.

Leaders for Nature was built on the recognition that this relational infrastructure must be deliberately constructed. It will not emerge from another conference, another strategy document, or another well-intentioned working group. It requires immersion, challenge, and time - and that is exactly what this programme provided.



[Watch the Leaders for Nature Video](#)



# The Cohort: Cultivating a Cross-Sector Ecosystem

To build true systemic capacity, participant curation was meticulous. The pilot convened 43 front-line stakeholders representing a vital cross-section of the environmental and professional landscape, breaking down traditional institutional boundaries. The cohort's diversity was a structural intervention in itself, comprising:

- NGOs, Charities, and Civil Society: 29.7%
- Government and Public Sector: 18.9%
- Private Sector, Business, and Industry: 10.8%
- Philanthropy, Academia, and Community Development: 24.3%

**30%**  
**NGOs, Charities  
& Civil Society**

**19%**  
**Government  
& Public  
Sector**

**24%**  
**Philanthropy,  
Academia &  
community**

**11%**  
**Private  
Sector,  
Business &  
Industry**



This diverse composition expanded participants' interpretation of environmental challenges and provided a realistic grounding in what cross-sector collaboration requires in practice. This mix was not incidental. The diversity of the cohort expanded each participant's interpretation of environmental challenges and -critically -gave them a realistic grounding in what cross-sector collaboration actually requires in practice. The tensions, the vocabulary gaps, the differing time horizons: all of these became productive learning material rather than obstacles.

# Programme Design & The Impact of Place-Based Immersion

The most distinctive design decision in Leaders for Nature was the most consequential: getting leaders out of boardrooms and into the landscape. Natural and historic settings -Borris House, the Burren Nature Sanctuary, Airfield Estate -were chosen not as pleasant backdrops, but as active participants in the learning process.

Leaders for Nature was conceived as a genuine learning journey, integrating place-based immersion, executive coaching, peer mentoring, and structured storytelling. A defining innovation of the programme was the deliberate move away from traditional corporate boardrooms. Natural and historic settings - such as Borris House, the Burren Nature Sanctuary, and Airfield Estate - were curated not as passive backdrops, but as active "co-facilitators" of the learning experience.

*“Beginning the course with the three-day immersion at Borris House was excellent and should definitely be retained as a core element of the programme. It provided a strong foundation for relationship-building, trust, and shared learning from the outset.”*

*Susan Adams,  
CEO, Education for  
Sustainability*



# The Science of Nature-Based Leadership Development

The evaluation shows that this place-based immersion had a profound, scientifically backed impact on participant leadership skills:

## Cognitive Restoration

Grounded in Attention Restoration Theory, the natural settings provided "soft fascination," removing the high cognitive load of traditional offices. This allows depleted mental resources to recover, leading to clearer thinking and improved problem-solving.

## Psychological Safety and Trust

Immersion in nature prompted the nervous system to shift toward parasympathetic dominance, lowering cortisol levels and reducing defensiveness. This strips away symbolic corporate status cues, creating a flatter hierarchy where leaders feel safe to express vulnerability and build trust.

## Neurocognitive Shifts for Adaptive Leadership

Nature exposure actively quiets the brain's default mode network, reducing self-focused rumination. This neurological reset prepares participants for deep transformational work, creating the space necessary for perspective-taking, creative breakthroughs, and adaptive leadership.

In short, taking leaders into nature was not a nice-to-have. It was the mechanism. And the evaluation data confirms that participants felt it: by the final gathering at Airfield Estate, the satisfaction arc (71% → 79% → 81% → 83% five-star ratings across successive events) reflects a cohort that deepened its engagement as its roots grew.

## Aligning Operations with Environmental Ethos

The logistical execution of the programme rigorously mirrored its core environmental mandate. Working closely with venue hosts, the delivery team tracked and minimised the programme's footprint. The residential event at Borris House generated a highly efficient benchmark of 4.10 tCO<sub>2</sub>e. Material waste was minimised through the use of salvaged timber and eco-friendly inks, while catering actively prioritised local, organic suppliers, serving significantly more plant-based meals than meat-based meals and reducing food miles.

# Quantifiable Metrics: Individual and Collective Development

The evaluation used a pre- and post-programme Kirkpatrick framework, combining quantitative self-assessment with thematic qualitative analysis. The data tells a consistent story: this programme changed not just what participants know, but how they lead.

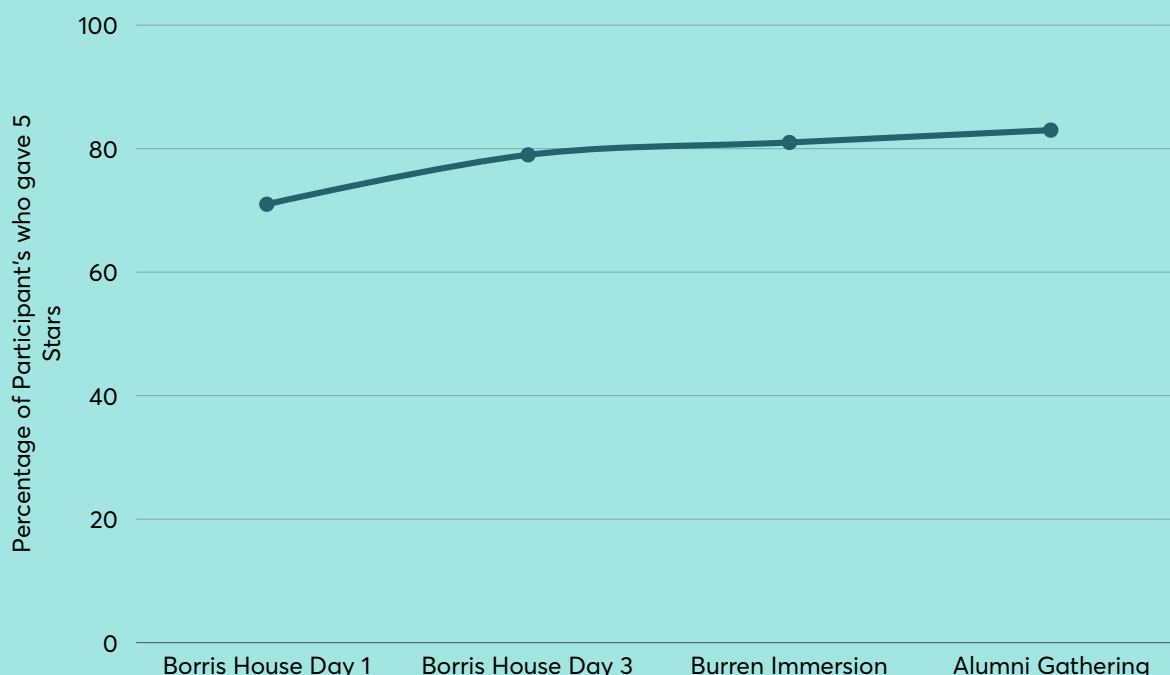
A defining feature of the Leaders for Nature programme was its meticulously planned yet iterative nature. Following key milestones, participant feedback was gathered and reviewed carefully by the programme team to directly inform and adapt subsequent sessions. This responsive design ensured high and sustained engagement throughout the programme's six-month delivery.

## The Satisfaction Arc

In-programme event satisfaction rose continuously -not because expectations fell, but because the cohort deepened. A programme that begins with strangers and ends with a community demanding to continue is one that has done something real.

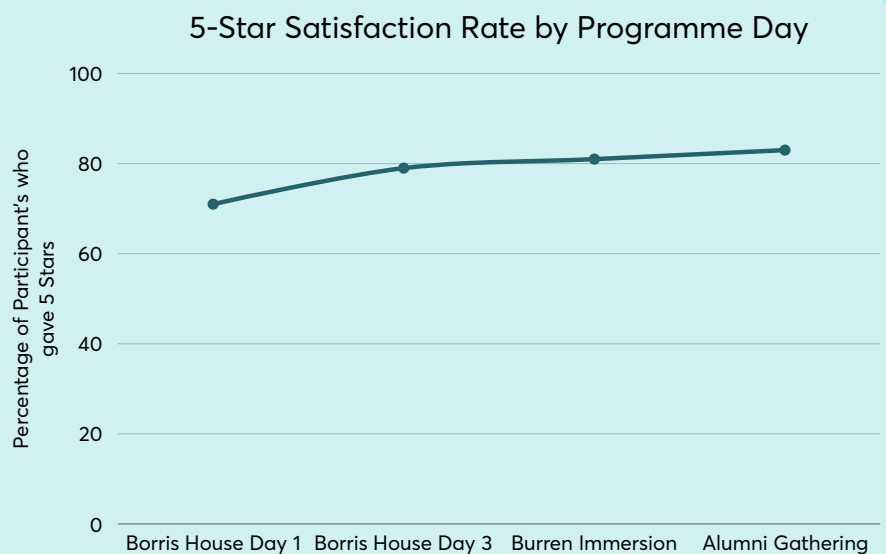


5-Star Satisfaction Rate by Programme Day



## Formative Metrics

In-Programme Event Satisfaction Event feedback demonstrates how effectively the programme resonated with participants as the sessions progressed and the team iterated on delivery, with satisfaction climbing consistently at every in-person milestone:



- Borris House Day 1: 71% of respondents awarded the opening day a 5-star rating.
- Borris House Day 3: Satisfaction grew as relationships deepened, with 79% of respondents giving the final residential day a 5-star rating.
- The Burren Immersion: By the mid-programme gathering, satisfaction continued to climb, with 81% of respondents awarding the day a 5-star rating.
- Alumni Gathering (Airfield Estate): Satisfaction peaked at the final graduation gathering, with 83% of respondents awarding the day a 5-star rating. Feedback highlighted the powerful concluding storytelling session, the networking marketplace, and the strong sense of cohort cohesion.

## Summative Metrics: Individual Development

Based on the pre- and post-programme Kirkpatrick evaluation data, participants experienced highly measurable shifts in their individual leadership capabilities. The most profound changes occurred in how participants internalise and practice leadership:

### Reflective Leadership

The most significant measurable shift across the entire programme was in self-reflection, which saw a massive +1.12 gain (rising from a 3.21 baseline to 4.32). Participants reported moving away from reactive management toward calmer, more deliberate, and values-led leadership.

### Integrity and Adaptability

Participants reported measurable growth in consistently leading with integrity (rising from 4.00 to 4.26) and demonstrating resilience and adaptability in the face of challenges (rising from 3.88 to 4.21).

### Systems and Values Awareness

Post-programme, participants rated their ability to see their work as part of a wider socio-ecological system at 4.47/5, and their awareness of how their values shape their leadership decisions at 4.38/5.

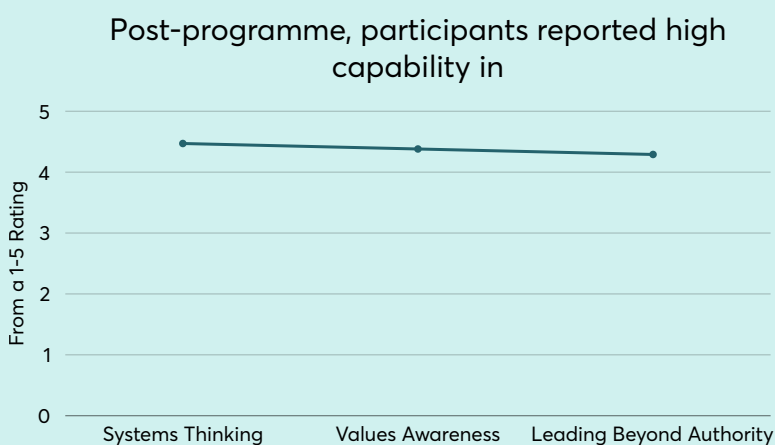
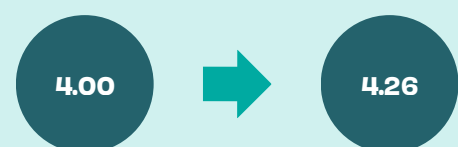
### Leading Beyond Authority

Participants reported high confidence (4.29/5) in understanding how to lead and influence beyond their formal authority, a critical competency for environmental leaders navigating complex, multi-stakeholder systems.

### Self Reflection



### Leading with Integrity



## Summative Metrics: Collective Readiness

Perhaps the most telling numbers in the entire evaluation are those measuring the cohort's collective orientation. Individual leadership development is valuable; a network that commits to acting together is transformational.

**Intent to continue collaborating**

4.68/5

**Commitment to collective leadership**

4.62/5

**Belief that real opportunities are emerging**

4.62/5

*"I feel like I am a bridge myself between the more business/corporate and community/environmental/nature world... It has given me clarity on the issues, but also the tools to deal with complex challenges."*

*-Anonymous post-programme participant*



# Key Drivers of Transformation



The thematic analysis revealed specific curriculum elements that acted as the primary engines for participant growth:

## **Storytelling as a Strategic Tool**

Rather than a peripheral communication skill, narrative storytelling emerged as a major mechanism for leadership transfer. Cited by 17 out of 34 respondents as the element with the greatest impact, participants are now actively using these public narrative frameworks to communicate complex environmental challenges, build institutional influence, and shape cross-sector strategies.

## **Peer Coaching and Accountability**

Small peer groups met regularly to approach real-life challenges and support one another's application of learning. This created immediate accountability and reinforced the link between the programme's theoretical frameworks and participants' day-to-day professional practice.

# The Network in Action: Collaborations Already Formed

The most potent and immediate return on investment for the Leaders for Nature programme is the tangible collaboration it has already sparked across the sector. At least 24 out of 34 surveyed participants have already initiated or strengthened cross-sector collaborations as a direct result of the programme. The data provides strong evidence of cross-boundary, multi-party partnerships that have rapidly moved past the networking phase into formal, operational execution.

## Funded Tenders and Strategic Projects

The programme has successfully brokered multi-regional and cross-sectoral funding wins.

### All-Island Peatland Restoration

Paul Kelly (Brinkl, Belfast) and Laoise Dillon (ERINN Innovation) successfully partnered to win a two-year, multi-regional tender covering the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Scotland. The project will deliver a community-led creative response to ongoing peatland restoration projects. Crucially, they are also linking this work with Derek McLoughlin, Project Manager at Wild Atlantic Nature, whom they met through the LEADERS FOR NATURE cohort.

### Climate Finance in the Catching Sector

Catherine Barrett (Bord Iascaigh Mhara) reported that the programme gave her the confidence to step beyond her core skill set to initiate a climate finance project aimed at accelerating climate actions in the catching sector, heavily relying on increased cross-boundary collaboration with internal and external stakeholders.

### Creative Agriculture

Another participant has actively partnered with cohort members to apply for Creative Ireland funding to promote the intersection of creative agriculture, food, and climate.



## Joint Sector Initiatives and Events

Collaboration is manifesting in immediate, on-the-ground sector action across the country.

### Woodland Restoration and Policy Seminars

Brian Gormley (Green Foundation Ireland) has already partnered with Daithi to deliver a water quality webinar. He is currently working with Irene Rondini (Irish Green Building Council) to co-host an EU Presidency seminar, and is actively collaborating with Clare Bromley (National Parks & Wildlife Service) and other partners to host a specific Leaders for Nature woodland restoration event in Glenveagh National Park.

### Community Gardens and Youth Education

Ellie Donovan (IRD Duhallow) has established multiple operational links. She is working with Davie Philip (Cultivate) to create a community garden in the Global Green area at the Electric Picnic festival. Furthermore, she is linking with Diarmuid Hayes (Biodiversity in Schools) for an after-schools programme, and collaborating with Paul Kelly (Brink!) on PhD research regarding community gardens North and South.

### Peer-Led Collaborative Infrastructure

Demonstrating immense ownership over their collective future, participants have independently established durable, ongoing structures to sustain their cross-sector exchange.

This includes the creation of an ongoing Leaders for Nature book club to sustain shared learning, independent commitments to continue peer coaching clusters, and independently hosted cohort gatherings. As one participant noted, they are actively "starting to build a network of people from multiple different sectors and backgrounds [and] identifying the different angles people are coming from and the shared challenges".



## Participant Testimonials: The Value of the Leaders for Nature Experience

To fully capture the transformational value of the pilot programme, the data speaks clearly through the voices of the leaders themselves:

*"This session was the best, the pinnacle for me. There was a common fear of the programme drawing to a close which drove a determination not to let closure happen. Universally, people felt that this was just the beginning and that energy and emotion tumbled out... YOU did this. I know how difficult it can be, especially for an inaugural roll-out... You gave us something very special to build from, and we will, individually and collectively."*

*-Angela Duffy, Resolve Partners*



*"I feel like I am a bridge myself between the more business/corporate and community/environmental/nature world. Sometimes there is a wide divide... It seems like tapping into personal values and perspectives helps to strengthen that bridge... It has given me clarity on the issues, but also the tools to deal with complex challenges."*

*-Anonymous Post-Programme Respondent*



*"An inspiring experience, well delivered and curated as usual. I'm very grateful for the entire Leaders For Nature program which has been a transformative experience."*

*-Jonathan O'Leary, Storyteller/Writer, Foinse*



*"I have a much more rounded view of different actors and agencies involved in the environmental sector across the country. Having this knowledge - and new, strong connections - is invaluable as we seek to further our own environmental work."*

*-Anonymous Post-Programme Respondent*

# Recommendations for Future Programme Iterations

To refine the programme, protect its strongest features, and address areas for improvement, the evaluation yielded several concrete recommendations for future cohorts:

## **Protect and Strengthen In-Person Immersion.**

Retain the opening residential as a core feature and consider adding one additional in-person touchpoint, as place-based outdoor immersion was critical for relationship-building and cohort cohesion.

## **Redesign Online Delivery.**

Shorten the online sessions, reduce density, and give each session a clearer single purpose, as participants felt the current online blocks were occasionally too long and compressed.

## **Add Early Ecological Framing.**

Include a concise early session explicitly focused on the systemic drivers of biodiversity loss, climate interdependence, and the Irish policy context to better ground the leadership challenge for all participants regardless of their professional background.

## **Clarify Systems Learning.**

State clearly at the outset that the programme is designed to build systems awareness and leadership capability, rather than deep technical environmental expertise.

## **Support Organisational Influence.**

Add a practical strand focused on coalition building, internal narrative strategy, and applying programme learning within resistant or constrained institutions, as personal leadership growth currently outpaces participants' perceived ability to shift deeply entrenched organisational cultures.

## **Scaffold Peer Continuity.**

Add a simple ongoing architecture to support peer relationships post-sessions, such as scheduled reconvenings and shared reflection mechanisms.

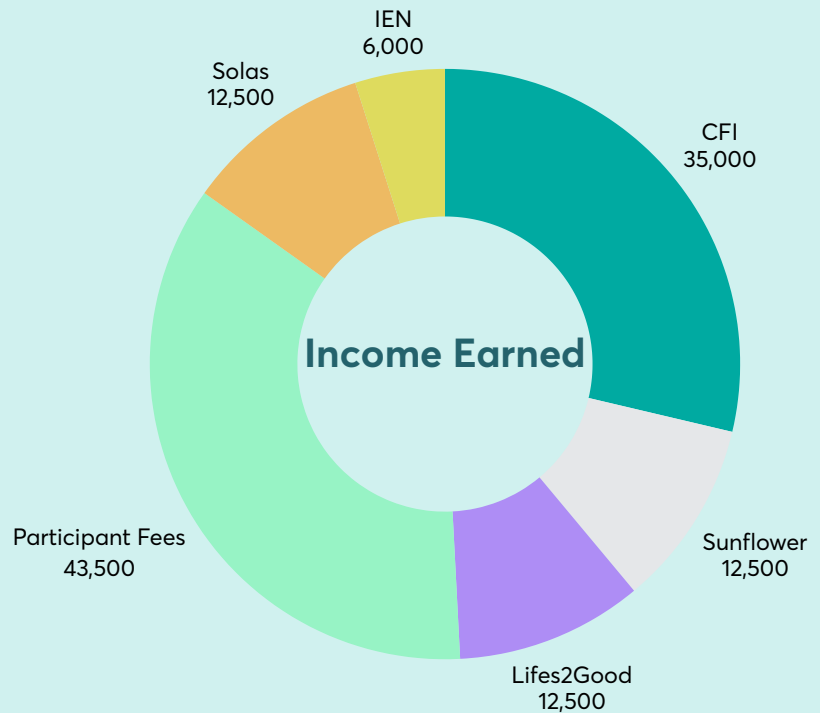
## **Incorporate a Wellbeing Strand.**

Consider adding a light-touch, optional reflective space on resilience to help participants process the grief, isolation, and burnout frequently associated with environmental leadership.



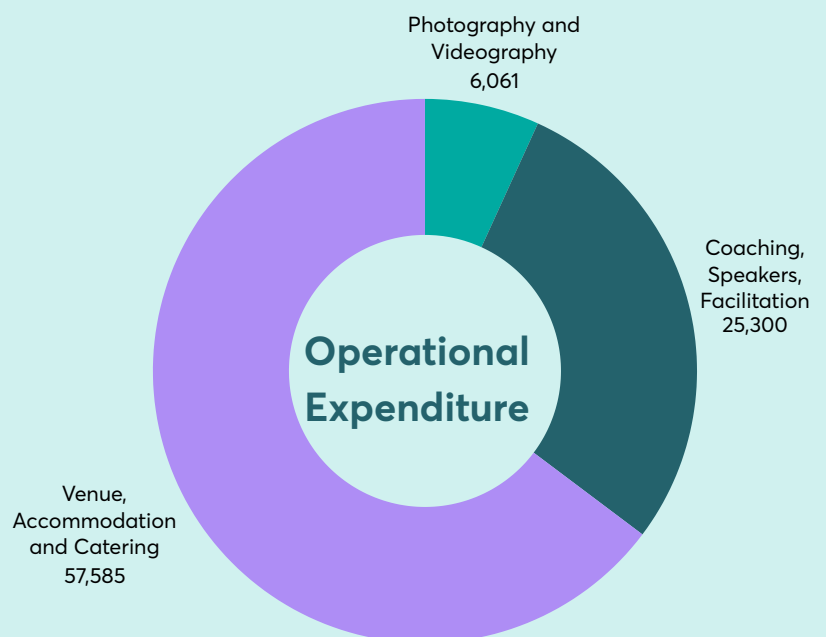
# Income and Expenditure

The 2025/2026 Leaders for Nature Programme was made possible through a total income of €122,150, bolstered by the generous support of our funding partners: Community Foundation Ireland (€35,000), the Lifes2Good Foundation (€12,500), and the Sunflower Charitable Foundation (€12,500).



We are also incredibly grateful for the contributions from Solas, the Irish Environmental Network and Skillnet Ireland's Climate Ready Academy, which helped subsidise participant fees alongside direct contributions from the participants themselves.

While direct operational expenditures - including venue hire, accommodation and catering (€57,585), photography and videography (€6,061), and coaching, speakers fees, and expert facilitation (€25,300) - totaled €88,946, this figure does not reflect the true cost of delivering a programme of this scale.

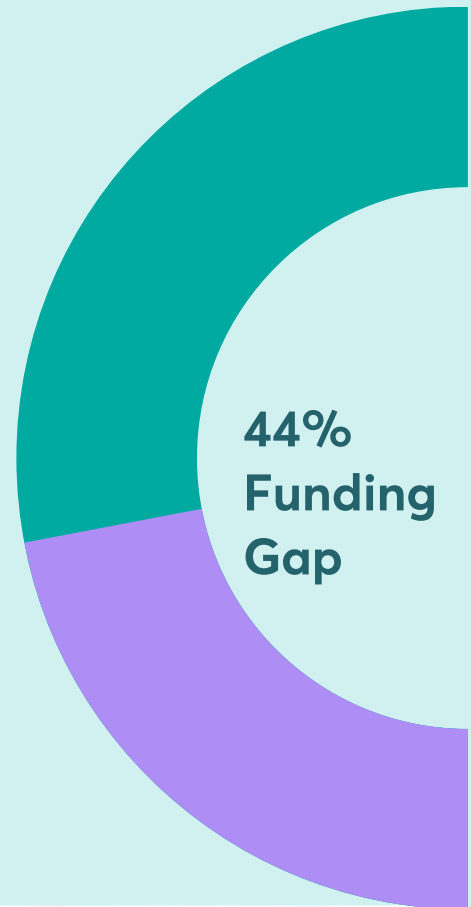


# Income and Expenditure

The success of this pilot was largely driven by the 'invisible' investment of the organising partners: Common Purpose Ireland, Leave No Trace Ireland, and Native Events. Collectively, these organisations contributed approximately 407 days of unbilled team time to develop and deliver the inaugural Leaders for Nature Programme, as a proof-of-concept.

Using standard sector payscales, described in the 'Pay & Benefits in the Community & Voluntary Sector 2024' report published by the Wheel, the cost of these person-hours amounts to €129,600, revealing a real-term funding shortfall of €95,530 which represents 44% of the total cost to run this pilot programme - €218,546.

While the passion and dedication of these micro-enterprises and charities proved the programme's impact in year one, this model is currently financially unsustainable. To continue elevating Ireland's nature leaders and building vital capacity across the sector, a significant increase in future investment is required to bridge this gap.



# Strategic Questions for Future Investment

The Leaders for Nature pilot successfully proved its core thesis: when diverse environmental stakeholders are given the space, tools, and relational trust to connect, they will collaborate to address the biodiversity crisis faster and more effectively than they could alone. The programme has seeded a resilient, cross-boundary network of changemakers ready to drive Ireland's climate and biodiversity action plans forward.

To build on these quantifiable successes and scale the systemic impact of the programme, we invite our current and prospective funders to partner with us in addressing the following strategic priorities:

## ***How can future funding resource the active pipeline of "mid-formation" collaborations?***

The evaluation data shows a strong pipeline of collaborations that are currently in the active exploration or network-building phase. Participants have already established valuable peer-led infrastructure, such as the Leaders for Nature book club and ongoing peer coaching groups. How can we provide the necessary scaffolding, such as scheduled peer reconvenings and shared reflection mechanisms, to ensure these emerging partnerships reach their full operational potential?

## ***How can we scale the programme's cross-boundary and all-island reach?***

Participants strongly valued the diverse, cross-sectoral nature of the cohort, and the strongest examples of collaboration often spanned different jurisdictions, including links between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. How can we secure strategic investment to expand our outreach into Northern Ireland and increase participation from underrepresented sectors to deepen the programme's systemic impact?



# Conclusion

## The Beginning Not the End

When participants gathered at Airfield Estate for the closing alumni day, something unexpected happened. Instead of the quiet satisfaction of a programme well-completed, there was urgency. People were not ready to stop. Collaborations were mid-conversation. Partnerships were mid-formation. A network that had not existed six months earlier was now too alive to let go.

That is the most honest measure of what Leaders for Nature achieved in its pilot year. Not the +1.12 gain in reflective leadership, impressive as that is. Not the 83% five-star satisfaction rating. Not even the funded all-island tenders. It is the fact that 43 people who had never been in the same room together now refuse to be separated -because they can see what becomes possible when they act together.

The biodiversity emergency is not waiting. Neither are these leaders. The question for funders and partners reading this report is not whether this programme is worth investing in. The question is whether Ireland can afford to slow it down.





# Leaders for Nature

