

**Lough Erne – Meeting of Minds 2024**  
**Evaluation of Co-Design process report**  
**13<sup>th</sup> December 2024**  
**Issued**

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## 1. Executive Summary

The 2024 Meeting of Minds conference, hosted by the UK and Ireland Lakes Network (UKILN) and the Lough Erne Landscape Partnership (LELP), brought together 111 participants in Enniskillen, Northern Ireland, from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4th October 2024. The event aimed to strengthen connections between professionals and communities around stillwaters management, while building lasting support networks.

### Event Impact

The conference achieved high satisfaction rates, with 92.9% of survey respondents reporting being quite or very satisfied. A notable 78.6% expressed interest in joining an ongoing stillwater community, demonstrating strong appetite for continued collaboration. The innovative format, combining presentations, site visits, cultural elements and facilitated discussions, was particularly praised.

This evaluation has particularly highlighted the delicate balance needed in environmental management between professional expertise and local knowledge, particularly in the context of Lough Erne. Participants valued the knowledge sharing and network building but emphasised the need for:

- Stronger involvement of decision-makers and government representatives
- More equitable power distribution between well-resourced and grassroots organisations
- Better mechanisms for turning discussion into action
- Regular opportunities for ongoing connection and collaboration
- Enhanced support for community participation

## Key Achievements

- Successfully engaged freshwater stakeholders across Northern Ireland and Ireland, with strong participation from within 50 miles of Lough Erne
- Pioneered UKILN's first hybrid conference format, enabling broader participation through online access to key sessions
- Created meaningful connections between practitioners and local communities
- Generated significant momentum around stillwaters management issues
- Built foundation for a Lough Erne stakeholder forum
- Demonstrated value of integrating cultural and technical perspectives
- Successfully implemented a bursary scheme supporting 13 participants who may otherwise have faced financial barriers

## Building a Lasting Network Around Lough Erne

The event revealed strong potential for establishing lasting networks through:

- Regular stakeholder forum meetings to maintain momentum
- Building on LELP's legacy through coordinated community engagement
- Creating regional focus groups to support ongoing collaboration
- Connecting citizen science projects and practitioners
- Using online talks between conferences to maintain engagement
- Sharing outputs from discussion sessions
- Focusing on shared learning and best practice exchange
- Supporting ongoing partnerships and collaborations
- Exploring formal protection designation for Lough Erne

## Areas for Development

Despite overall success, several challenges emerged. While there was strong participation from across Northern Ireland, engagement from some key stakeholder groups could be improved. The co-design process, while innovative, faced challenges in managing dynamics between different organisations. Practical barriers around timing, transport and accessibility limited participation for some stakeholders.

## Priority Actions Identified for UKILN

- Share conference outputs and evaluation findings with all participants
- Embed the learnings of the Meeting of Minds event into future ones
- Develop local focus groups to maintain momentum between biennial conferences
- Review UKILN governance structure over next 6-12 months

## Overall Recommendations

1. For Lough Erne to consider the establishing a Lough Erne Management Forum. UKILN should consider the following:
2. Create a Multi-Level Engagement Structure
3. Engage in earlier strategic event planning
4. Strengthen community voices, in the vicinity of Lough Erne and for future event development
5. Enhance event accessibility
6. Establish a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion framework
7. Develop supporting engagement infrastructure
8. Strengthen evaluation and knowledge sharing

9. Prioritise development of a long term resourcing model

10. Commission future development work

## Strategic Considerations

While Lough Erne faces water quality challenges, it differs in severity from Lough Neagh's situation. The imminent conclusion of LELP funding in December 2024 creates urgency around establishing sustainable coordinated management approaches. The event demonstrated a clear appetite for building a more connected, collaborative network that brings together different types of expertise and offers multiple ways to engage. The Lough Erne case study provides UKILN with a model that could be replicated across major lake systems in the UK and Ireland, bringing together local communities, practitioners, scientists and policymakers in each region.

Success in delivering this vision will require dedicated resources, clear management structures, robust supporting infrastructure, and commitment to genuine co-creation with local communities.

## 2. Introduction

The UK and Ireland Lakes Network (UKILN) works to ensure lakes, loughs and other stillwater bodies reach their full ecological, economic, cultural and landscape potential. With lakes facing increasing pressures from climate change, the need for collaborative action has never been greater [Figure 1].

Since its formation, UKILN has hosted annual conferences to showcase best practices in freshwater management, celebrate community-led successes and connect those focusing on stillwaters. The 2024 event, developed in partnership with the Lough Erne Landscape Partnership (LELP), aimed to strengthen these connections and build lasting networks for peer support. The process of developing a funding proposal was an agreement between UKILN and LELP.

The event had six core objectives:

1. Exchange knowledge and build capacity for sustainable lake management;
2. Enhance community engagement in freshwater protection;
3. Develop a UK and Ireland-wide community of practice;
4. Address key themes: community engagement, water quality, climate resilience, and landscape management;
5. Promote diversity, equity, and inclusion;
6. Create a lasting legacy for Lough Erne and beyond.

This initiative is particularly timely for Northern Ireland's loughs, offering opportunities to empower local communities while sharing experiences with practitioners across the UK and Ireland. Guided by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation's research on diversity in the environmental sector, UKILN's approach emphasises inclusive engagement throughout the planning process.

This report presents findings from extensive stakeholder consultation to optimise the event to achieve its objectives, including preferences for event format, suggested speakers, and potential session topics. It

addresses barriers to participation and recommends ways to create an inclusive, engaging event. These insights will shape both the future event programming and its facilitation, while informing the future work of LELP and UKILN in stillwaters management across these islands.

The report should be considered alongside these other outputs from the stakeholder engagement process:

- 2024 UKILN Legacy Conference Communications Plan
- 2024 UKILN Legacy Conference Development Stakeholder Map
- 2024 UKILN Legacy Conference Programme and Facilitation report



Figure 1: Recent articles from local newspaper, The Impartial Reporter, highlighting the environmental and social pressures facing Lough Erne and its local community.

### 3. Lough Erne in the context of UKILN's Network Development

Lough Erne stands as one of Northern Ireland's most significant waterways, a complex system of two connected lakes characterised by islands, peninsulas, and wooded shorelines. The area holds exceptional environmental value, supporting high biodiversity including rare species and providing critical habitat for ground nesting birds like curlews. As part of the Cuilcagh Lakelands UNESCO Global Geopark, it represents a unique ecosystem of wetlands, grasslands, and woodlands that demands careful stewardship.

However, the lough faces significant challenges. Water quality is under pressure from agricultural intensification, while semi-natural grasslands and ancient woodlands continue to decline. Invasive non-native species pose increasing threats to local biodiversity. Limited public access and awareness, combined with development pressures on shoreline habitats, create additional strain. The cross-border nature of water management adds another layer of complexity requiring coordinated action.

The area's rich cultural heritage, including early Christian sites, intertwines with its contemporary importance for local recreation and tourism. A strong farming community maintains agricultural productivity, though this sometimes conflicts with conservation goals. This complex stakeholder landscape necessitates carefully coordinated management approaches that balance different needs and interests.

Despite these challenges, significant opportunities exist. The Lough Erne Landscape Partnership (LELP) has demonstrated success in community engagement, providing a foundation for future initiatives. There is growing potential for expanding citizen science programs, enhancing sustainable tourism, and strengthening cross-border partnerships. Nature-based solutions offer promising approaches to environmental challenges, while new networks between stakeholders continue to develop.

This event gave the UKILN and the LELP the opportunity to share and build on their experience collectively; to develop an event which enabled them to bring together those interested in stillwaters from across Northern Ireland, Ireland and the UK; to learn from a collaborative event development process; and to be more considered about effective engagement for stillwaters, inclusion, reducing barriers to participation and to create new ideas which can be explored in the longer term at a variety of geographical scales.

The 2024 event built upon these opportunities by bringing together diverse stakeholders to share knowledge and forge lasting connections. It aimed to not only to address Lough Erne's specific challenges, but also to develop UKILN's capacity to facilitate meaningful knowledge exchange between lake regions across the UK and Ireland. This approach reflected UKILN's strategic commitment to building stronger connections between scientific expertise and local knowledge, while creating more collaborative and inclusive ways of working. The learnings from this event will inform how UKILN operates and engages with lake communities going forward.

#### 4. What is event co-design?

Co-design is a collaborative approach that treats community members as equal partners in developing solutions [Figure 2]. For this event, Legacy Events was appointed to oversee a comprehensive co-design process that brought together institutional expertise with local knowledge.

The process aimed to:

- Create an inclusive, engaging event that goes beyond the usual conference format of presentations and Q&As
- Bridge the gap between professional knowledge and community experience;
- Build lasting connections that support sustainable lake management;
- Ensure the event was accessible and relevant to diverse stakeholders.

The key questions guiding the process were as follows:

##### Network Development

- How can UKILN build a stronger, more effective network?
- What is the appetite for stakeholder engagement in event planning?
- How can we create tailored ways for participants to engage?

##### Community Engagement

- How can we involve local communities not typically engaged in freshwater protection?
- What mechanisms will ensure diverse voices are heard?
- How can we build a sustainable community of practice around Lough Erne?

##### Impact Assessment

- Are we reaching and engaging the right stakeholders?
- How does this co-designed approach differ from traditional events?
- What skills, connections and knowledge do participants need to take action?

We know it takes time to understand what local communities need and to build trust. By bringing together UKILN's structure with local knowledge, we aim to create an event that makes a real difference to how we look after our lakes and loughs. By combining UKILN's formal structure with community expertise, the aim is to develop an event that catalyses lasting improvements in stillwaters management.

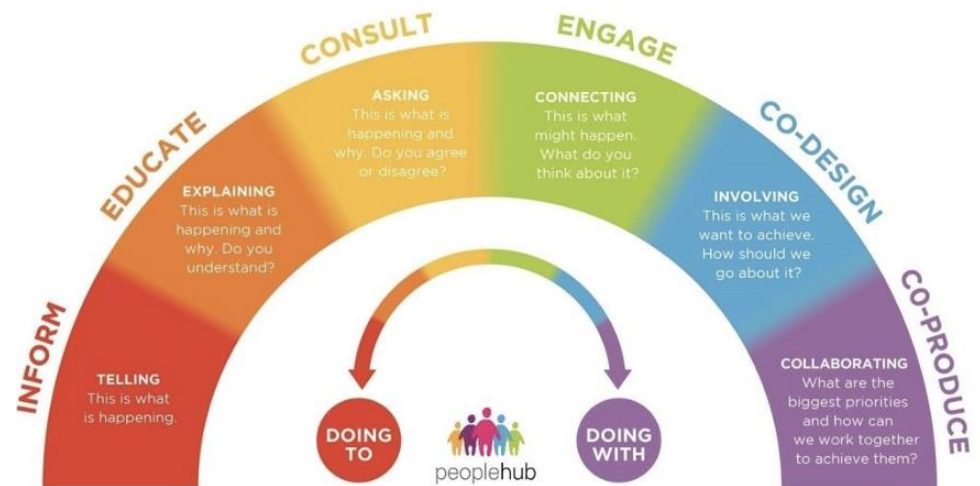


Figure 2: Spectrum of Participation. Source: peoplehub, 2024

## 5. Methodology for evaluation

Through the planning and delivery process, we tested innovative methods of stakeholder involvement and evaluated their effectiveness. These can be reviewed in the accompanying documents to this report.

Throughout the event, we documented both successes and challenges, gathering insights that will inform future engagement strategies. These learnings have led to strategic recommendations for UKILN's future development, particularly in how it connects with and supports lake communities.

Our methodology included:

- Stakeholder engagement interviews were conducted prior to the event with five key stakeholders from DAERA, Lough Neagh Partnership, Waterways Ireland and Ulster Wildlife.
- Evaluation interviews carried during event out with 6 attendees.
- Online post event feedback survey distributed to attendees
- "Aspirations Cards" were provided at registration to capture attendees' goals and expectations for the event as they arrived.
- A post-event roundtable discussion using an interactive Miroboard to explore priorities for future action around stillwaters.
- "Interactive Networking Feedback Board" allowed attendees to rate the quality of their networking experience during the event in a visually engaging way.
- Slido results during interactive event sessions.

To measure the success of these objectives, a set of progress and performance indicators were established within the co-design process [Table 2].

Following the event, we analysed evaluation data against agreed indicators to measure its impact and effectiveness [Table 1]. This comprehensive report details the stakeholder mapping results, conference outcomes, and evaluation findings, with specific recommendations for LELP and UKILN's future approaches.



Figure 3: Photo showing collaborative session at Meeting of Minds 2024

## 6. Results of evaluation

There were 111 attendees in total at the Meeting of Minds 2024 event across two days, demonstrating strong success in bringing together diverse stakeholders. The evaluation data, gathered through surveys, interviews, interactive sessions and post-event feedback, reveals several key themes.

### Event Impact and Satisfaction

The event achieved high overall satisfaction rates, with 92.9% of post event survey respondents reporting being quite or very satisfied. This was reflected in strong engagement during sessions, with 77 out of 111 attendees actively contributing to interactive elements. The innovative format combining presentations, site visits, cultural elements and facilitated discussions was particularly praised, with attendees appreciating the balance between formal and informal networking opportunities.

### Community Building and Network Development

An important finding was the strong appetite for ongoing engagement, with 78.6% of post event survey respondents expressing interest in being part of a continuing stillwaters community. This desire for connection manifested across sectors, from environmental professionals to local community members. However, the evaluation revealed important gaps in representation. There were limited attendees representing community groups in the vicinity of Lough Erne, however evidence indicates that 21% of attendees travelled less than 10 miles to attend, a much higher proportion of local attendees than thought to have attended previous UKILN events.

### Knowledge Exchange and Learning

Participants reported gaining valuable insights across multiple areas:

- Practical approaches to water quality management
- Community engagement techniques

- Cross-border collaboration opportunities
- Integration of cultural and environmental perspectives
- Citizen science initiatives

The hybrid format proved effective, with 25% of post event survey respondents participating online, though some technical challenges were noted regarding presentation sharing and session access.

### Power Dynamics and Inclusion

Several post event survey respondents highlighted concerns about the dominance of well-funded environmental NGOs in shaping content and discussion. This was particularly noted in relation to grassroots community voices feeling overshadowed. While the co-design process was praised for its intentions, starting earlier and ensuring broader participation was suggested as crucial for future events.

### Barriers to Participation

Key barriers identified included:

- Timing of events (weekday/working hours)
- Transport accessibility
- Cost (though mitigated by bursaries)
- Competing sessions creating difficult choices
- Technical issues for online participants

### Cross-Border Elements

The event successfully facilitated cross-border knowledge sharing, though participants noted more time was needed for strengthening these connections. The value of learning from different jurisdictional approaches was highlighted, particularly regarding water quality management and community engagement.

### Future Development Needs

Several clear priorities emerged for future development:

- Earlier and broader stakeholder engagement in event planning



- More structured support for implementing learnings post-event
- Better mechanisms for ongoing communication between events
- Greater inclusion of senior decision-makers and policy representatives
- Enhanced support for local community participation
- Improved technical infrastructure for hybrid delivery

### **Cultural Integration**

The integration of cultural elements - including local stories, songs and heritage - received positive feedback, with attendees noting how this enhanced their understanding of the landscape's significance. This approach helped bridge technical and community perspectives effectively. Some of the feedback also noted that an opportunity to visit the Lough before the event might have offered better context to the community culture session at the start of the event.

### **Diversity, Equity and Inclusion**

The event brought together participants from across the UK and Ireland, though the majority (71.4% of post event survey respondents) travelled less than 50 miles to attend, reflecting strong participation from across Northern Ireland. 21.4% of post event survey respondents travelled over 100 miles and 7.1% attended virtually, suggesting the hybrid format helped enable wider geographical participation. Despite some minor technical challenges, the hybrid format proved effective in expanding reach and could serve as a model for future UKILN events, particularly for increasing accessibility and reducing travel barriers.

The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation funding enabled a dedicated bursary scheme, which successfully supported 13 participants who may otherwise have faced financial barriers to attending. This targeted financial support helped create a more inclusive event by covering travel and accommodation costs for those who needed it.

According to the post event survey responses, the age profile skewed towards mid-career and senior practitioners, with 67.8% of attendees aged 45 and over. Only 10.7% were aged 25-34, highlighting the need to engage more early-career professionals and younger participants. The gender balance was relatively even, with 57.1% female and 42.9% male attendees.

The ethnic background of the post event survey respondents largely reflected the local Northern Ireland demographics, with 57.1% identifying as White Irish and 35.7% as White British [Census 2021 Main statistics for Northern Ireland Statistical bulletin Ethnic group, September 2022].

A lack of diversity in terms of disability representation was evident, with only 7.1% of post event survey respondents reporting a disability or long-term health condition, compared to a rate of 24.1% in the general population of Northern Ireland [Census 2021 Main statistics for Northern Ireland Statistical bulletin Health, disability and unpaid care, December 2022].

Professional representation was weighted towards environmental NGOs (35%) and government agencies (28%), with much lower representation from grassroots community groups and businesses (4%). This suggests more work is needed to broaden participation beyond the traditional environmental sector.

The post-event survey revealed that accessibility was supported by the affordable ticket price and convenient location (both 46.4%), while the inclusive atmosphere and accessible content presentation (both 39.3%) also helped enable participation. However, barriers around timing, transport and technical issues were noted by some participants, particularly for the hybrid elements.

### **The Co-Design Process**

Overall, the co-design approach was a positive step, but more work is needed to truly empower local communities and drive meaningful change. The results on the key questions guiding the co-design process were as follows (section 4).

### **How can UKILN build a stronger, more effective network?**

- Foster regular knowledge sharing and best practice exchange (mentioned repeatedly in survey responses about desired benefits)
- The need to create opportunities for cross-border collaboration were highlighted by a participant
- Incorporate cultural and historical perspectives into discussions to strengthen community connections.
- Establish a forum for stakeholders to meet regularly (suggested in feedback)
- Connect different types of expertise - technical, community, and artistic (evidenced by diverse participant feedback)
- Improve connections between environmental NGOs and statutory bodies (identified as a key take-away)
- Use international case studies to provide broader perspectives and inspire local action
- Focus on shared advocacy and communications for water quality issues
- Facilitate partnerships to better use resources
- Support citizen science initiatives

### **What is the appetite for stakeholder engagement in event planning?**

- The high percentage of post event survey respondents (78.6%) interested in being part of an ongoing community suggests strong appetite
- Survey responses show people value collaborative approaches and shared learning

- Participants expressed desire for diverse voices and perspectives in planning
- Feedback indicates appreciation for co-design elements that brought in different community views
- Several respondents mentioned wanting to be more involved in future initiatives

### **How can we create tailored ways for participants to engage?**

- Technical knowledge sharing and training
- Arts and cultural events to help deliver scientific messages
- Community engagement at catchment level
- Citizen science projects
- Youth engagement initiatives
- Cross-border collaborations
- Regular stakeholder forums
- Partnership projects
- Online participation options (mentioned regarding technical aspects working well)
- Expand the use of tools like Miro boards or Slido for virtual collaboration
- Local community-led initiatives
- More arts-based engagement was highlighted by a participant

### **How can we involve local communities not typically engaged in freshwater protection?**

- Use arts and cultural events to help deliver scientific messages (mentioned multiple times)
- Make science more accessible and relevant to local people
- Find "the hook" to encourage more collaboration (suggested as a key action)
- Engage more young people (consistently mentioned as a priority)
- Use citizen science projects to involve local residents

- Consider timing of events (some found daytime/weekday events difficult)
- Provide materials in plain language and multiple formats
- Improve public transport options to enable attendance
- Create more informal networking opportunities (downtime for talks was valued)

### What mechanisms will ensure diverse voices are heard?

- Start engagement earlier to provide more opportunities for input
- Include more diverse participants from a broader range of groups
- Reduce dominance of well-funded environmental NGOs
- Include more government department representation
- Use methods like rotating discussion groups (this was praised in feedback)
- Consider accessibility needs (subtitles, sign language suggested)
- Ensure inclusive atmosphere (39.3% noted this helped)

### How can we build a sustainable community of practice around Lough Erne?

- 78.6% of post event survey respondents expressed interest in being part of an ongoing community
- Establish a regular stakeholder forum (suggested multiple times)
- Build on LELP's legacy
- Create regional focus groups
- Connect citizen science projects and practitioners
- Use online talks between conferences to maintain engagement
- Share outputs from discussion sessions
- Focus on shared learning and best practice exchange
- Support ongoing partnerships and collaborations
- Consider formal protection designation for Lough Erne

### Are we reaching and engaging the right stakeholders?

- Good diversity but key gaps noted
- Only 4% of post event survey respondents represented local community/community groups
- Limited government/decision-maker presence
- Few young people
- Dominated by environmental NGOs
- Need more water quality experts
- 50% attended representing organisations vs 25% personal interest
- Ensure senior policymakers and government officials are present to bridge the gap between community input and actionable policy

### How does this co-designed approach differ from traditional events?

- Broader attendee mix than previous conferences
- More interactive elements (table rotations, speed dating)
- Cultural elements integrated (songs, poems, stories)
- Hybrid format with good online access
- Mix of presentations and site visits
- Informal networking time valued
- Co-design process (though mixed views on effectiveness)

### What skills, connections and knowledge do participants need to take action?

- 92.9% quite or very satisfied
- 85.2% would attend again
- Key takeaways included:
  - New partnerships formed
  - Practical solutions shared
  - Better understanding of community engagement
  - Cross-border connections made
  - Technical knowledge gained
- But gaps remain:

- Presentations not shared promptly
  - Some sessions conflicted
  - More practical demonstrations needed
  - Follow-up mechanisms unclear
  - Need clearer pathways to action
- 
- Participants reported gaining valuable insights, networking opportunities, and ideas for future initiatives and collaborations
  - Some attendees specifically mentioned plans to apply learnings from the event to their own work, such as community engagement and citizen science projects

Table 1 presents the evaluation results for the key objectives, against the indicators identified by UKILN at the start of the co-design process. Each indicator is scored qualitatively on a scale of 1-5, where:

- 1 = Limited success
- 2 = Some success
- 3 = Moderate success
- 4 = Significant success
- 5 = Outstanding success

The scores are based on data from participant surveys, interviews, and interactive feedback sessions carried out during and after the event. This evaluation methodology was designed to assess both immediate event impacts and potential for longer-term change in stillwaters management practices.

Objective	Indicator	Method of Evaluation	Score
<b>Heightened Awareness of Water Quality Pressures</b>  Increased awareness among local communities about water quality challenges facing Lough Erne, including pollution sources and potential impacts on public health and livelihoods.	A1. Number of local stakeholders informed / engaged about the impact of water quality pressures on public health, recreation, and local livelihoods	Event interactive activity Post Event Survey	3/5  Strong feedback that more local voices needed Limited representation from farmers and local businesses Clear evidence of knowledge transfer, with multiple participants noting the value of learning from other lakes' experiences to inform local management Feedback indicated need for more grassroots involvement
	A2. Level of understanding among participants in addressing water quality issues post-event, and	Event Interviews	4.5 / 5  Strong positive feedback on content value Key takeaways showed deep understanding of issues Participants highlighted practical learning and applications
	A3. Level of interest in taking local action	Post Event Feedback Session	4/5  Over 75% of participants interested in ongoing community involvement and would attend future events Significant interest in establishing a stakeholder forum for Lough Erne Strong interest in networking and collaboration
<b>Increased Community Engagement</b>	B1. Number of stakeholders engaged in event planning and preparation	Co Design Workshops	3.5/5

Enhanced community understanding and involvement in freshwater protection through the existing local strategies and partnerships, and empowering stakeholders who would not normally be active. (in Northern Ireland and UK wide)	activities		Some stakeholders felt excluded from planning Feedback that process started too late
	B2. Level of engagement and feedback from participants regarding the inclusivity and effectiveness of the event planning process including evaluating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) engagement to inform future activities	Post Event Survey Post Event Feedback Session	4.5/5  High engagement in interactive sessions Strong participation in feedback processes Positive response to networking opportunities
<b>Strengthened Resilience to Climate Change</b>  Improved confidence, knowledge and capacity for resilience-building initiatives among local stakeholders to mitigate the impacts of climate change on ecosystems and local communities. (in Northern Ireland and UK wide)	B3. Number of new strategic connections made between 'stillwaters' stakeholder groups during or within one month after the event	Post Event Feedback Session Post Event Communications	3.5/5  Good diversity of attendees but key gaps noted Strong cross-sector networking reported Some important stakeholders missing (central government, farmers) Clear appetite for ongoing connections
	B4. Participants reporting use of skills/knowledge gained to make change happen within one month of the event	Cannot fully score this indicator as it requires one-month follow-up data	Initial responses show intention to use learning:  Multiple participants cited specific projects they planned to investigate further Several mentioned applying learnings to their own work Many noted valuable connections made for future collaboration

Table 1: Progress and performance indicators to evaluate the effectiveness of the co-design process

## 7. Recommendations

Based on comprehensive analysis of participant feedback, interviews, and survey responses, we propose the following strategic recommendations to strengthen both immediate event impact and long-term network development.

### Recommendation 1: Establish a Lough Erne Management Forum

A dedicated forum should be established to maintain momentum and coordination between stakeholders. This should:

- The development of this forum should be considered as a legacy action following on from LELP.
- Meet three times per year to review progress and align activities
- Include balanced representation from statutory agencies, environmental NGOs, community partners, farmers, tourism providers and anglers
- Focus on practical action planning around water quality, biodiversity and sustainable use
- Provide a formal mechanism for cross-border collaboration
- Be supported by LELP partners/UKILN initially and could consider future independence

To ensure meaningful community input, a separate Lough Erne Community Forum should be established alongside the Management Forum. This would provide regular opportunities for community discussion and ensure local voices feed directly into Management Forum decision-making. Such a structure would enable ongoing community involvement in lake management while maintaining and building upon

the strong community connections established through LELP. The Community Forum would act as a vital bridge between local residents and the Management Forum, ensuring decisions reflect community needs and priorities.

### Recommendation 2. UKILN to create a Multi-Level Engagement Structure

To maintain engagement between major events, UKILN should:

- Host biennial major conferences rotating between UK regions and Ireland. This timeframe provides adequate space for building realistic funding and staffing capacity while ensuring consistent high-quality delivery.
- Support monthly informal "Lakes & Locals" meetups in key locations using the People Planet Pint model (section 8)
- Facilitate online knowledge-sharing sessions every quarter
- Ensure consistent branding while allowing local adaptation

### Recommendation 3. UKILN to engage in earlier strategic event planning

While the 2024 Meeting of Minds event benefited from a 12-month lead time, with 7 months dedicated to concept development and securing crucial funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, future events should plan for similarly substantial preparation periods. Event delivery tasks and marketing should start at least 8 months before the event date. The compressed timeline for the 2024 event, while successfully managed, limited opportunities for deeper engagement and created unnecessary pressure on both organisers and participants.

A longer lead time would enable proper funding to be secured before detailed planning begins, allowing for more certainty around resources and commitments. This would support thorough assessment of resource needs, including staffing, venues, technical requirements and support for community participation. It would also allow time to develop and implement a comprehensive evaluation framework from the start, rather than retrofitting assessment approaches.

Most importantly, an extended timeline would enable genuine co-design with diverse stakeholders. The evaluation showed that while the co-design approach was valued, many felt it was rushed and therefore limited in its reach. Earlier planning would allow relationships to be built with underrepresented groups and create space for their meaningful involvement in shaping the event.

- The project team should include or have access to professional event management and marketing expertise from the outset. The evaluation highlighted several logistical and communication challenges that could have been mitigated with specialist input at the planning stage.
- This shift to earlier planning represents a significant change in approach but is essential for delivering events that truly reflect the network's commitment to inclusive and effective engagement.

#### **Recommendation 4. UKILN to strengthen community voices, in the vicinity of Lough Erne and for future event development**

To address the power imbalances highlighted in the evaluation, changes are needed in how similar events and activities are planned and delivered. Community engagement must begin much earlier in the planning process, with a minimum 12-month lead time to enable meaningful participation and co-creation. This longer timeline should be supported by dedicated funding specifically for community-led sessions

and content, ensuring local voices have resources to develop and share their perspectives effectively.

Clear protocols should be established for content development, with explicit requirements for including diverse voices and experiences. These should be accompanied by practical support mechanisms - such as travel bursaries, childcare support and mentoring - to enable community representatives to attend and present at events. This support should extend beyond financial assistance to include preparation time and presentation coaching where desired.

To provide oversight and ensure accountability, a representative content review panel should be established. This panel should include members from different stakeholder groups, with particular emphasis on those traditionally underrepresented in environmental management discussions. The panel would review proposed content and programming to ensure balanced representation and diverse perspectives.

Additionally, a programming charter should be developed and agreed with major partners. This would set clear expectations about shared platform time and establish mechanisms to prevent well-funded organisations from dominating discussions and agenda-setting. The charter should emphasise the value of different types of knowledge and expertise, from academic research to lived experience.

#### **Recommendation 5. UKILN to enhance event accessibility**

Making events truly accessible requires a comprehensive approach that addresses multiple barriers to participation. The timing of sessions should be more flexible, with a mix of daytime, evening and even weekend options to accommodate different work and family commitments. This varied scheduling would make it easier for community members and those with caring responsibilities to participate.



Transport emerged as a significant barrier in the evaluation, and future events should include dedicated support such as shuttle services from key transport hubs. The registration process should facilitate car sharing arrangements, with the website and marketing communications actively promoting this option to reduce both costs and environmental impact.

Financial barriers should be addressed through clear, well-publicised bursary schemes, advertised early enough for potential participants to plan their attendance. Hybrid participation options need strengthening, with improved technical support to ensure online attendees can fully engage with sessions. Cost-effective solutions such as AI-powered sign language interpretation and subtitling should be explored to make content accessible to deaf and hard of hearing participants.

Catering needs greater consideration, with high-quality options that meet various dietary requirements, including vegetarian and vegan choices. This ensures that all participants feel equally valued and catered for at events.

Beyond these practical measures, we need to create clear pathways for underrepresented groups to participate. This means proactive engagement with community organisations, to understand specific barriers and developing targeted approaches to address them.

### **Recommendation 6: UKILN to establish a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion framework**

This initial demographic snapshot, while incomplete, marks an important step forward in understanding UKILN's reach and impact. However, it also highlights the need for continued focus on diversity, equity and inclusion. The complex challenges facing stillwaters affect diverse communities and require diverse perspectives and expertise to address effectively. To address this, UKILN should develop a DEI framework, drawing inspiration from successful models in other sectors such as . It would be focused on:

- Building strategic partnerships with relevant organisations representing underrepresented groups, for example, IEMA DSI, CIWEM Early Careers Network
- Creating mentorship programmes and pathways for early career professionals in stillwaters management. A cost-effective example is the Mentoring Program - Heat Exchanger, which was launched in 2019 by the District Heating Divas and has made over 200 successful matches [website <https://www.districtheatingdivas.com/>, accessed 2024]
- Ensuring diverse representation in the Lough Erne Management Forum, future event steering groups and event speaker panels
- Setting clear diversity targets and collecting consistent demographic data

### **Recommendation 7. UKILN to develop supporting engagement infrastructure**

Sustaining engagement between events requires robust supporting infrastructure. At the heart of this should be an online resource hub where materials, presentations and best practices can be easily shared and accessed. This would create a living library of knowledge, allowing participants to revisit content and newcomers to get up to speed with key issues and approaches. This hub could mirror the PANORAMA Platform used by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which provides resources for practitioners globally.

A dedicated networking platform or app would help maintain the valuable connections formed during events. This should be simple to use and facilitate both peer-to-peer communication and broader community discussions. Regular newsletters would keep the community informed about local initiatives and opportunities, while a shared calendar would help coordinate activities and prevent clashes between events.

Systematic documentation of case studies and successful approaches is vital for learning and replication. These should be written in accessible language and include practical details about implementation challenges and solutions. This growing body of evidence would help demonstrate what works and why, making it easier for others to adopt proven approaches.

Clear pathways for implementing learning need to be established, helping participants move from inspiration to action. This might include templates for project planning, guidance on securing funding, or mentoring relationships with more experienced practitioners. The goal is to ensure that good ideas do not get lost after events but instead find practical application in communities across the network.

#### **Recommendation 8. UKILN to strengthen evaluation and knowledge sharing**

A systematic approach to evaluation and knowledge sharing is needed to demonstrate impact and guide future development. This should begin with baseline data collection on current engagement and collaboration levels, against which progress can be measured. Clear targets should be established for diversity and engagement, with regular monitoring to assess progress and identify areas needing attention.

Performance indicators should be made clearer and more measurable (SMART) - for example, replacing broad measures like "good representation" with specific targets for different stakeholder groups and participant diversity.

Regular progress monitoring should be embedded in all activities and the network's development should be reviewed annually, examining both quantitative metrics like membership growth and qualitative aspects such as the strength of regional connections. Particular attention should be paid to tracking collaboration outcomes - new partnerships formed, joint projects initiated, and resources shared across the network.

All presentations, research findings and session outputs should be made available to attendees within two weeks via the UKILN website, enabling participants to focus on engagement rather than note-taking during the event. The portal should include speaker contact details (with permission) to facilitate ongoing knowledge exchange.

One month after each event, a detailed follow-up survey should examine how learning is being applied in practice. This should investigate specific actions taken by participants, explore how they've used new knowledge and skills, and document any new collaborations that have emerged. Understanding barriers to implementation and identifying where additional support is needed will help shape future activities and resources.

#### **Recommendation 9. UKILN to priorities development of a long term resourcing model**

Implementing these recommendations will require significant resources beyond those available for the current event. Core funding is needed to support dedicated coordination roles that can maintain momentum and relationships between events. Without this ongoing coordination, there's a risk that energy and connections will dissipate.

UKILN should prioritise developing a sustainable funding model for future activities, exploring opportunities multi-year grant funding from environmental and community-focused foundations, partnership funding models with statutory agencies sponsorship and corporate sponsorship. This would support:

- Periodic large-scale events like Meeting of Minds
- Regional network development and ongoing engagement activities between large scale events
- Resources to support co-design processes and community engagement

Substantial investment in technical infrastructure, such as website development, is required to support hybrid events, resource sharing and ongoing communication. This includes both initial setup costs and ongoing maintenance and support. While some elements might use existing platforms, creating an effective digital ecosystem for the network will need proper resourcing.

Supporting meaningful community participation requires dedicated funding for travel, childcare, time compensation and other practical support. Professional facilitation services are essential for managing complex multi-stakeholder discussions effectively and ensuring all voices are heard.

Marketing and communications capacity needs strengthening to maintain engagement and share learning across the network. This includes both strategic expertise and practical skills in content creation and platform management. Evaluation expertise is also needed to assess impact and guide development effectively.

These resource requirements represent a step change from current arrangements for UKILN and will need careful consideration in future funding discussions. However, they are essential investments in creating a sustainable and inclusive network that can effectively support community-led environmental stewardship.

#### **Recommendation 10. UKILN to commission future development work**

UKILN needs dedicated support to develop their organisational capacity and sustainability. The learning from the event has highlighted the need for commissions to examine future form, function, governance and funding models. These should explore sustainable funding approaches that reduce dependence on project-based grants, while maintaining accessibility for all stakeholders. They need to develop robust governance structures that balance regional autonomy with network-wide consistency, supported by clear operational frameworks that define roles, responsibilities and decision-making processes.

Partnership approaches require particular attention, establishing principles and practices for collaboration that respect different organisational capacities and cultures. Regional development strategies must be crafted to support local initiatives, such as LELP legacy activity, while maintaining connection to the broader UKILN network.

## Event Strategy Implementation (with suggested timelines)

### 6-12 Months Pre-Event

#### 1. Resource Requirements and Skills Gap Analysis

Conduct an early assessment of the team's resource needs to ensure alignment with the event's scope. Begin 9-12 months in advance by mapping specific roles and responsibilities and identifying any skills gaps, such as expertise in event technology, sponsorship acquisition, or content curation. Address any gaps by training existing team members, hiring specialists, or collaborating with external agencies to enhance capacity and skill sets, streamlining the planning process and ensuring high-quality delivery.

#### 2. Prioritise Content Suggestions

Gather input on topics through pre-event surveys and audience insights. Group content suggestions by theme (e.g., innovation, policy, community impact) and rank based on demand. Form a committee of diverse stakeholders to review and select content that balances attendee interests with industry trends. This early focus on content ensures the event remains relevant and engaging, with room to make adjustments as needed.

#### 3. Consider Governance, Risk and Budget

Create a steering committee to govern the event, with diverse representation and all event design and delivery roles and responsibilities clearly defined. A thorough risk management strategy should be developed, while venue selection and contract negotiations can begin once the governance structure is in place. A robust financial monitoring system should be established at this stage, and sponsorship packages should be created ready for early outreach.

#### 4. Consider Event Logistics and Secure Venues

Shortlist suitable venues that meet the event objectives, preferred location, capacity requirements and any technical specifications. Once a preferred venue is secured, event logistics planning can get underway.

### 4-6 Months Pre-Event

#### 5. Begin Agenda Development

This period focuses on confirming keynote speakers and finalising session formats. Networking activities should be carefully designed to maximise value for delegates, while exhibition space planning can progress.

#### 6. Speaker Engagement

Begin outreach to potential speakers 4-6 months before the event. This lead time allows for identifying and securing in-demand experts and facilitators, aligning their contributions with event themes, and negotiating schedules. Securing speakers early also allows for promotional activities around confirmed presenters, boosting early interest and registration. The additional time provides flexibility to manage contingencies, ensuring a well-rounded speaker lineup.

#### 7. Sponsorship Strategy and Value Proposition

Develop flexible sponsorship packages that align with sponsor objectives and event themes. Offer options that range from branding opportunities to session sponsorships or networking lounges.

#### 8. Structured Networking Opportunities

Design targeted networking sessions to facilitate meaningful connections. Options could include curated roundtables, industry-specific lounges, and structured speed-networking

sessions. Consider using a networking app or digital profiles to allow pre-event introductions and streamline connections. Structured networking builds community and allows attendees to engage more effectively with one another.

#### 9. **Consider Event Infrastructure**

With venue contracts finalised, detailed logistics planning can begin in earnest. Technical specifications should be developed, while catering and accommodation requirements need careful consideration. An accessibility and inclusion plan should be created, ensuring the event infrastructure supports participation from all delegates.

#### 10. **Launch enhanced Registration website**

Launch an interactive event website 4-6 months in advance, to maintain consistent engagement and provide long-term value for event attendees. Include an Insights Hub for articles, case studies, and industry resources, along with a Learning Hub that features on-demand content from past sessions. These resources establish the event as an ongoing educational platform. Ensure the website reflects the event's tone and voice, encouraging attendees to remain engaged year-round.

#### 11. **Initiate marketing and communications activity**

The event website should be launched alongside registration opening, supported by a comprehensive promotional campaign. A detailed communications timeline will ensure consistent stakeholder engagement, while social media strategy should be implemented to build momentum. Send early invitation to previous event attendees and VIP guests. Regular updates to all stakeholders maintain engagement and excitement.

#### 12. **Monetisation Through Exhibitor Partnerships**

Begin exhibitor outreach and finalise exhibitor packages 3-4 months prior to the event. Offer different levels of exhibitor participation, such as premium locations, standard stands, or exclusive demonstration spaces, aligning exhibitors with attendee interests. Monetising exhibitor spaces not only generates revenue but also enriches the attendee experience through interactive learning opportunities, such as product showcases and workshops.

#### 13. **Non-linear Event Structure with Diverse Formats**

Finalise a variety of session formats 3-4 months ahead, catering to diverse learning and engagement styles. Consider panel discussions, workshops, Q&A sessions, and live demonstrations, allowing attendees to choose sessions that suit their interests. A flexible, non-linear approach provides a personalised experience, encouraging deeper engagement and exploration of topics relevant to each attendee.

#### 14. **Operational event planning**

Detailed running orders must now be developed, alongside comprehensive staffing plans. Briefing documents should be created for all team members and suppliers. Transport and transfer arrangements need careful coordination, while speaker support requirements must be fully addressed.

#### 15. **Consider Delegate experience**

The delegate experience requires careful attention to detail, from designing an efficient registration process to planning clear signage and wayfinding. Networking tools should be organised to support meaningful connections, while delegate materials need thoughtful preparation. The social programme should be finalised to complement the main event content.

## 3-4 Months Pre-Event

## 8. Case studies for building a thriving COP

To inform UKILN's future development, we examined three different models of regional networking, each offering distinct approaches to building and maintaining engaged communities. These range from highly structured professional organisations to informal local meetups, providing insight into different ways of fostering connection and collaboration. The case studies illustrate different ways to build and sustain regional networks while maintaining consistency of purpose across diverse locations.

### CIBSE's Network Model

CIBSE (Chartered Institution of Building Services Engineers) operates a structured network of 20 volunteer-led regional committees that provide local support for its professional community. The CIBSE model demonstrates how membership organisations can manage regional networks through a formal governance structure. Each region operates with an elected committee, with leadership selected annually through General Meetings. Committee members have clearly defined roles and responsibilities, ensuring efficient operation at the local level. Regional representation is maintained at the highest level through regional chairs sitting on the CIBSE Council, creating direct links between local and national decision-making.

The model's success relies on comprehensive support from the central organisation, with regular communication between regions and headquarters ensuring consistent standards while allowing for local adaptation. Standardised operating procedures across all regions help maintain quality, while providing a framework flexible enough to meet varied local needs.

Key Success Factors:

- Strong central governance framework
- Clear volunteer role definitions

- Professional development opportunities
- Standardised financial management
- Regular committee renewal through elections
- Direct link to organisational leadership
- Support for regional communications

Relevance for UKILN:

This model demonstrates how to:

- Structure regional volunteer networks
- Maintain consistent quality across regions
- Support volunteer leaders effectively
- Balance local autonomy with central oversight
- Create clear pathways for member engagement

The CIBSE model showcases how professional bodies can effectively manage regional networks while maintaining high standards and volunteer engagement.

### Local B-Corp groups - B Locals

B Locals demonstrates how structured, regional networks can build communities around business sustainability, offering insights for developing UKILN's regional presence. The B Local model operates through formal partnerships with B Lab UK, combining structured organisation with local autonomy. Each regional chapter is led by volunteers who are certified B Corp members, operating within defined geographical territories. The model balances formal structure with community engagement through B Socials - events that feature expert panels and bring together both certified B Corp members and interested parties from the wider business community. Establishing new regional groups requires official approval from B Lab UK, ensuring consistency and quality across the network while maintaining strong local connections.

This structured yet flexible approach allows B Locals to maintain high standards while adapting to local needs and contexts. The combination of certified leadership with open participation helps build both expertise and community engagement, creating sustainable regional networks that support B Corp's broader mission of using business as a force for good.

Key Success Factors:

- Clear governance structure
- Quality control through parent organisation
- Consistent branding across regions
- Formal connection to certification program
- Balance of structure and local autonomy
- Geographic coverage through strategic regional hubs

Relevance for UKILN: This model could inform UKILN's regional development by:

- Creating formal regional chapters
- Establishing clear leadership structures
- Maintaining quality through central oversight
- Building credibility through formal affiliation
- Supporting regional identity while maintaining network cohesion

This model shows how formal structure can support sustainable network growth while maintaining consistent quality and brand identity.

## People Planet Pint

At the other end of the scale toward a more casual structure, People, Planet, Pint demonstrates how informal, regular meetups can build a thriving community around shared interests in sustainability and environmental issues.

The model centres on monthly informal gatherings with no structured agenda or formal presentations. These meetups focus on natural networking and knowledge sharing in a relaxed environment. They are intentionally open to people of all backgrounds and expertise levels, from industry professionals to interested newcomers. The events take place in local, accessible venues such as pubs or cafes, making them convenient and welcoming for community members.

The model operates under one unifying brand - People, Planet, Pint - but allows each local group significant autonomy in shaping their gatherings. Monthly informal gatherings have no structured agenda, focusing instead on organic networking and knowledge sharing. These meetups welcome people of all backgrounds and expertise levels, from industry professionals to interested newcomers, and take place in local, accessible venues like pubs or cafes.

While the core brand provides recognition and credibility, local organisers have the freedom to adapt the format to their community's needs. Some groups might occasionally include short talks or site visits, while others maintain purely social gatherings. This flexibility ensures each meetup reflects its local community while maintaining connection to the broader network through the shared brand and common values.

The decentralised approach has proven successful in building strong local communities while maintaining a recognisable national presence. The combination of consistent branding with local autonomy creates an accessible, scalable model for community building.

This casual model removes traditional barriers to participation and allows organic connections to develop. The combination of regular scheduling and informal setting creates a comfortable environment where participants can build relationships and share knowledge naturally over time. Relatively little oversight would be needed by UKILN to facilitate these groups.

Key Success Factors:

- Regular scheduling creates continuity
- Relaxed atmosphere encourages open discussion
- Inclusive approach welcomes diverse participants
- Location-based groups build local connections
- Zero barriers to entry

Relevance for UKILN: Similar informal meetups could complement UKILN's annual conference by:

- Maintaining engagement between formal events
- Building local networks around stillwaters
- Encouraging knowledge sharing in relaxed settings
- Attracting new participants to the network

This model demonstrates how regular, informal gatherings can strengthen community bonds and maintain momentum between larger events.