

Enhanced Conservation Measures for Common Swift populations

Submission to Draft Wicklow County Development Plan 2021 - 2027

Dear Forward Planners

Common Swifts (*Apus Apus*) are birds typically found in urban areas, they nest in man-made structures. The latest long-term trends for the Irish Swift population, recently published from the Countryside Bird Survey CBS¹, shows a decline of almost 58% in the breeding population between 1998-2016 - **this is one of the largest declines in distribution of any Irish bird species.**

Swifts utilise narrow cavities in walls, and especially under eaves. Modern building practices do not create any nooks and crevices for swifts. Renovation of older buildings, re-roofing, pointing etc. typically obstructs and precludes nesting, resulting in the loss of large numbers of nest sites and colonies.

A Birdwatch Ireland Survey of Swifts in Wicklow 2019² shows unexpectedly low numbers of nesting pairs, with few or no birds nesting outside of the 5 main urban areas. The populations in the remaining 14 localities where Swift nests were confirmed ranged from between 5 and 1 nest sites and these are the areas that are in critical need of conservation action.

Further declines in Common Swift Populations are not inevitable, and they can be reversed, if urgent action is taken at Planning Level within the timeframe of this Development Plan.

A widespread approach in the U.K. is the mandatory provision of built-in swift nest boxes, and the use of swift bricks. This approach has also been successfully adopted in County Mayo, where swift nest boxes are built into the walls of any new school building extensions, and other public buildings. This type of swift nest box project is long-term, for the life of the building and thus helps to ensure a core breeding population of swifts in towns.

The success of built-in nest boxes in County Mayo has been dramatic, with excellent take-up by swifts, examples include Westport Town Hall (12 out of 12 boxes occupied), Castlebar Swimming Pool (12 out of 24 boxes occupied within two seasons). There is an excellent visual presentation of these boxes here ³, again emphasising the almost spotlessly clean nature of this bird when nesting.

¹ CBS - <https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/publications/pdf/IWM115.pdf>

²

https://www.wicklow.ie/Portals/0/adam/Content/madPt8eY2EKBD9kqT9rbQ/Link/Wicklow%20Swift%20Survey%20Report%202019%20FINAL_WEB_VER.pdf

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZDApIIKbdkl>

Although it facilitates take-up, it is not necessary for swifts to be normally resident in an urban area to attract new nesting pairs. As a semi-colonial bird, new nest sites adjacent to existing will have a greater attraction, but swifts are wide-ranging when feeding, and pairing up for breeding, and can be attracted to new areas using caller-lures. It may take several years for swifts to occupy new custom-made nest sites, but the critical factor in the maintenance of core populations is the availability of these stable nesting sites.

(In the context of County Wicklow, just one building gable with 24 suitably placed built-in nest spaces can potentially double the surveyed Swift nest sites of a town such as Rathdrum or even Bray.)

Many European and U.K. swift nest products have recently been adapted for Irish building conditions. For example, Woodstone have created a built-in nest-block, which is very similar in dimensions to an Irish “standard” concrete block. Genesis Nest Boxes (Killarney) manufacture triple-nest boxes, designed to be built in without the use of a lintel. Swift bricks are also highly successful, allowing for tidy access points to internal nest sites.

The latest, up-to-date information (as of 30/08/2021) on some of the more suitable swift nest products for Irish conditions can be found here:

Woodstone built in Nest Boxes – <http://www.swiftconservation.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BUILDING-in-Woodstone-NEST-BOXES-01-21.pdf>

Optimal Box Placement – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9oYvJkvT0o&t=886s>

Genesis Nest Boxes – <https://genesistnestboxes.ie/>

Swift Bricks – <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/may/18/securing-their-swift-return-how-a-simple-brick-can-help-migratory-birds-aoe>

BirdWatch Ireland are happy to supply further steer and provide recommendations if needed at any point and can be reached at swifts@birdwatchireland.ie or on (057) 9151676

The use of swift bricks and blocks is a simple, cheap and effective measure to attain Biodiversity Net Gain.

Existing Building Considerations

In preparing the new draft County Development Plan it is important for the local authority to consider the following:

It is illegal under The Wildlife Act 1976 (+ amendments) to intentionally kill or cause harm to nesting bird species. Therefore, to comply with Irish legislation and to follow best practice the following actions should be carried out within the respective situations outlined below.

The following best practice should be adopted by the local authority during their own operations and made standard procedures as part of any relevant work carried out by contractors on the council's behalf:

When working on buildings where Swifts are nesting (during nesting season):

- Always carry out a nesting Swift survey in advance of works taking place on any building potentially suitable to nesting Swifts. (The 2019 Birdwatch Ireland Swift Survey is an excellent starting point for County Wicklow, but more detailed surveys are required to protect existing nest sites.)
- Limit working on these building to outside the Swift nesting season (end April – end August inclusive), if work must take place it must be limited to areas where Swifts will not be affected (internal work) or disturbed. Wholescale removal of roof structures and masonry is to be avoided always within the nesting season. – Do not block nest access with scaffold and do not net or wrap areas of scaffold close to elevations or roof-plates where Swift nest entrances are active.

When working on buildings where Swifts are nesting (outside of nesting season):

- Preserve the Swifts nest access holes or make new ones to match the old exactly

The use of external swift nest boxes should be viewed as a last resort. In Irish conditions, they are vulnerable to storms, heatwaves (July 2021), and prone to damage by ladders, building works etc.

It is requested that particular attention is paid to the **Protection of Swifts in Energy Retrofitting schemes**. Swifts prefer nesting in certain Local Authority Housing estates. Some of these estates have been identified in recent Swift surveys as key population reservoirs across County Wicklow. It is envisioned that buildings in these same estates will be externally insulated within the lifetime of the 2022 – 2028 Development Plan. **This represents a major threat to swifts, but one that can be easily avoided through proper surveying and planning.** The placement of external insulation around wall-plate or gutter level needs to be expertly and independently assessed, so that external access to existing nest sites is not compromised.

BirdWatch Ireland has together with experts compiled a booklet outlining best practice in conserving Swift nest sites whilst also delivering building repairs, renovations and new building stock, the Saving Swifts Guide can be found here: <https://birdwatchireland.ie/publications/saving-swifts-guide/>

New Build considerations

In preparing the new draft County Development Plan it is requested that the Local Authority considers the following:

When working on new builds or renovations to buildings that do not have Swifts nesting:

- At the planning stages for all new public buildings (over 5 metres), built-in Swift bricks (preferable) or externally fixed Swift nest boxes should be incorporated.
- At the planning stages of all new private buildings (over 5 metres) built in Swift bricks or externally fixed Swift nest boxes should be stipulated by county planners.

The wording quoted below is what Kildare County Council have included in their current County Development Plan. The provision has led to the stipulations for Swift nest boxes and bricks in several new developments from Schools to retail outlets (Lidl Stores etc.) all resulting in very positive results for locally nesting Swifts. BirdWatch Ireland and other groups encourages Waterford City and County Council to adopt a similar policy in their planning procedures and County Development Plan to see similar results realised.

Kildare County Council County Development Plan example wording to ensure provision for Swifts in all new suitable building developments in the county:

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- Requires all new developments to identify, protect and enhance ecological features by making provision for local biodiversity (e.g., through provision of Swift nest boxes or towers, bat boxes, green roofs, etc) and providing links to wider Green Infrastructure network as an essential part of the design process.

(Chapter 13.10.3 of the Kildare County Development Plan)

THIS IS A SIMPLE MEASURE TO ENSURE THE PROTECTION OF A CRITICALLY ENDANGERED BIRD SPECIES.

I thank the Forward Planning Team for their time in the consideration of this matter.

Gary Gill 30/08/2021