



The Burren Life Programme (BLP) 2016 Progress Report

(Jan 1st 2015 – Feb 22nd 2016)

Introduction

The Burren Life Programme (BLP), rebranded in 2015 from the Burren Farming for Conservation Programme (BFCP), is a pioneering agri-environmental programme which aims to conserve and support the heritage, environment and communities of the Burren. The BLP adopts a ‘hybrid’ approach in that it co-funds farmers to undertake environmental *Actions* and also pays these farmers for the delivery of environmental *Outputs*. It builds on the blueprint for sustainable farming in the Burren which was developed under the BurrenLIFE Project (BLP) (2005-2010).

The stated objectives of the BLP are:

- To ensure the sustainable agricultural management of high nature value farmland in the Burren.
- To contribute to the positive management of the Burren’s landscape and cultural heritage.
- To contribute to improvements in water quality and water usage efficiency in the Burren region.

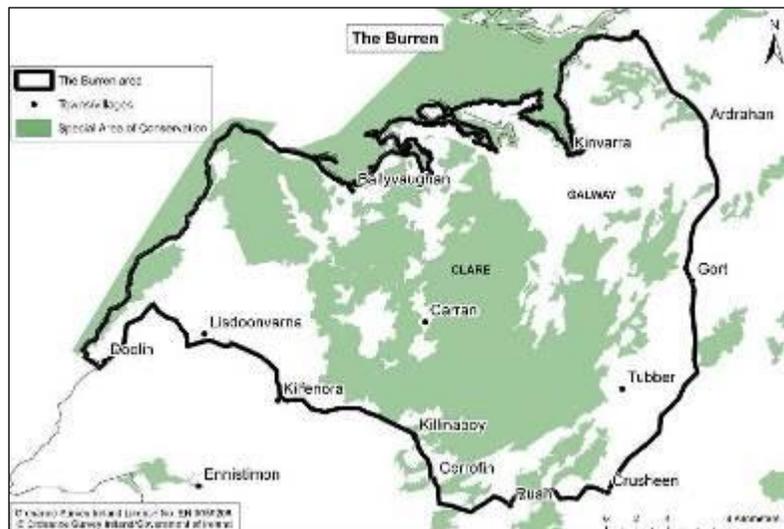
The BLP is jointly funded by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (of the Dept. of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (DAHG)) and the Dept. of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM). The BLP is managed, under contract with NPWS, by High Nature Value Services Ltd, in Carron.

The BLP also enjoys the strong support of the Burren branch of the Irish Farmers Association (IFA), who were centrally involved in the original BurrenLIFE project, and from a range of other stakeholders including The Heritage Council who co-fund the Field Monuments Advisor position.

The BLP was initially planned as a three-year programme (in line with CAP funding timelines) to run from 2010-2012. This was subsequently extended to include 2013, 2014 and 2015. The BLP will be further expanded (to include 4-500 farmers) as ‘the Burren Programme’ under Pillar 2 of Ireland’s new Rural Development Programme from the period 2016-2020.

The reference area for the BLP is c. 72,000ha in size and includes: 13 Special Areas of Conservation (three main sites), one SPA, a National Park & three National Nature Reserves. It is estimated that up to 1,000 farmers are located within this area, though a significant number of these are not farming Burren-type land and as such are not relevant to BLP.

Entry to the BLP is voluntary and was based on a once-off call for applications issued by DAFM in April 2010. All 340



applications from this call were assessed and ranked according to a number of environmental criteria agreed on by the Project Steering Committee. These criteria included history of participation in REPS, area and proportion of designated land on holding, listed National Monuments on holding and proportion of total holding situated in Burren. Each application was allocated a score (range 10-360) and those with the highest scores were invited to join the Programme. Of the 156 participants in 2015, all had scores of 200 points or over.

More details on the background to the BLP, and associated documentation (Year 1-5 reports, Terms and Conditions, Research papers, Burren LIFE reports etc.) are on www.burrenlife.com.

This report summarises the progress of the BLP in 2015, its sixth year of operation. The report also presents summary data from the past six years of the BLP which attest to the strong growth and positive environmental and socio-economic impact of the programme in the Burren.

Areas under management

The total area currently covered by the BLP is 14,546ha, which equates to 47.9% of the three main N2000 sites in the Burren (Table 1) and includes 1,298ha of Public land. The average area of SAC & Annex I habitat per farm was 93.5ha, but only 59.9% of this area is deemed 'eligible for payment' under BPS rules (and thus for payment under BLP).

	BLP Area (ha)	SAC size (ha)	% SAC in BLP
BLP total	14,586.41*	30,462	47.88
Black Head – Poulsallagh SAC	2,527.8	5,572	45.36
Moneen Mountain SAC	3,971.37	6,070	65.43
East Burren Complex SAC	7,692.03	18,820	40.87

Table 1. Areas (ha) of the three main Natura 2000 (SAC) sites within the BLP
 (* this overall area includes 346ha of non-SAC Annex I land and 49.4ha of other SAC land)

Funding: The total amount approved for payment (by BLP team) to BLP farmers for their 2015 plans was €950,928.58. This equates to an average payment per farm of €6,096 (range €786 to €15,000), or a payment per (digitised) hectare of €65.2 (not allowing for any additional DAFM deductions).

An estimated €5.88m has been paid to Burren farmers over the 6 years of the BLP, equating to €6,586 per farmer per annum on average (also not allowing for any additional DAFM deductions).

BLP Payments continue to be issued under three measures - Measure 1 (M1): Management of species rich grassland; Measure 2 (M2): Site enhancement works and Measure 3 (M3): Protection of designated land and other areas of Annex I habitat. Most (c.92%) of the budget is spent on M1 (increasingly) and M2, with only 8.2% going to M3 (mostly to farmers not in AEOS or GLAS) (Table 2).

	Year 6 Payment	Year 5 Payment	Year 4 Payment	Year 3 Payment	Year 2 Payment	Year 1 Payment
Total	€950,929	€1,044,222	€1,059,304	€1,147,007	€958,371	€639,385
Measure 1	€516,060 (54.3%)	€494,686 (47.3%)	€481,097 (45.4%)	€485,872 (42.4%)	€ 420,402 (43.9%)	€295,657 (46.2%)
Measure 2	€356,920 (37.5%)	€456,752 (43.7%)	€511,386 (48.3%)	€545,048 (47.5%)	€ 482,688 (50.4%)	€303,330 (47.4%)
Measure 3	€77,948 (8.2%)	€92,784 (8.9%)	€66,821 (6.3%)	€116,371 (10.1%)	€ 55,181 (5.8%)	€40,398 (6.3%)

Table 2. Payments made in Years 1-6 of the BLP under the three Programme Measures (as a % of total)

Measure 1 (M1)

The M1 payment for the ‘management of species rich grassland’ is based on an annual site assessment of habitat condition (based on 9 criteria) by the BLP farm advisor (overseen by the BLP team). Each SAC/Annex I field is given a score from 0-10. In Year 6 of BLP, 1,029 fields (7,321ha eligible, c12,200ha digitised) were ‘scored’ by farm advisors and/or BLP staff. On the basis of these annual assessments, €516,060 was paid to farmers, an average allocation of €3,308 per farm.

Analysis of the data shows a gradual but significant improvement in M1 scores between Years 1 and 6 (Fig. 1). This bar chart shows that the percentage area of land with ‘high’ scores (8, 9, 10) is, in general, increasing at the expense of areas with ‘low’ and ‘medium’ scores (1-7), indicating an overall improvement in site condition and, under this ‘pay for performance’ measure, farm income.

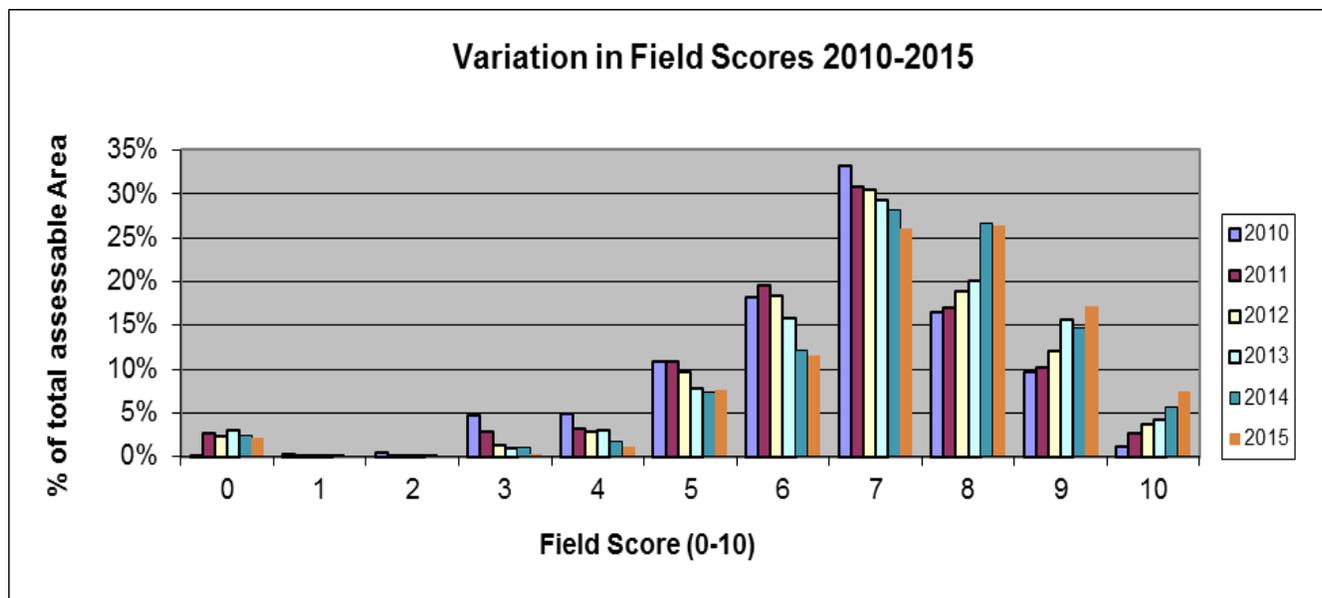


Figure 1. Comparison of M1 scores (by % of total M1 area per score) between 2010 and 2015.

Over the past 6 years of the BLP, a total of €2,693,775 has been spent on Measure 1, c.45.8% of the total payments made under the Programme. Looking at the average M1 score across all farms as a percentage of the max M1 available, it is interesting to note the gradual, positive year on year improvement: 2011 (64.93%), 2012 (67.23%), 2013 (68.75%), 2014 (70.96%), 2015 (73.1%).

Measure 2 (M2)

M2 works are nominated and co-funded by the farmer. These works help the farmer address the agri-environmental needs of his/her land and potentially increase the M1 score on the land. This farmer-led approach to farm planning is central to the success of the BLP as it results in bespoke plans for every farm, as well as a higher standard of work. The BLP team works closely with farmers and advisors to ensure all work is completed to a high standard, payments being withheld otherwise.

Within M2, a total of 1,137 separate jobs were planned in Year 6, though only 1,005 eventually completed - averaging 6.4 jobs per plan at an overall cost of €356,920. A breakdown of the M2 budget based on general work type is shown in Table 3 below. Scrub removal remains the main M2 task planned – 32.6ha removed, including 25.35km of paths at a cost of €200,392. However, this is well down on 2014 scrub work (42.3ha, 38.7km paths, €270k budget). Other tasks such as stone wall repair (20.1km plus 9.7km wire fencing), gate installation (108 gates) and water provision maintained or increased uptake (see Column 3 of Table 5). However, in general M2 spend was significantly down in 2015 (€48k, 25% less than 2014 figure) due in part to very poor winter weather.

Farmers contributed 25%, 50% or 75% to the cost of each M2 task, amounting to an additional estimated input into the BLP from the farming sector of €193,853 in Year 6. This equates to an effective Year 6 M2 spend of €550,773, some 35.2% of which is funded by participating farmers through co-funding of Measure 2 works, further testimony to the excellent value for money provided by BLP.

Measure 2 Work Category	Paid in 2015 (Year 6)	% of M2 Year 6	% of M2 Year 5	% of M2 Year 4	% of M2 Year 3	% of M2 Year 2	% of M2 Year 1	Funding Rate
Scrub Removal	€200,392	56.1	59.1	70.3	70.6	61.1	44.3	75%
Stone wall repair and fencing	€75,608	21.2	16.7	12.1	12.1	14.8	19.7	50-75%
Water Provision	€26,836	7.5	7.5	6.7	6.6	11.1	15.2	50%
Access Tracks	€15,402	4.3	7.9	4.4	3.6	5.7	5.8	25%
Gate installation	€17,143	4.8	4.0	2.5	4.3	4.1	7.3	50-63%
Habitat Restoration	€14,806	4.2	3.0	1.4	0.8	2.0	4.8	75%
Feeding equipment	€6,732	1.9	1.8	2.6	2.0	1.3	2.9	25-50%
Total	€356,920							

Table 3. Year 6 Measure 2 Payments per category and M2 percentage breakdown Years 1-6

M2 Cumulative Impact

Since its inception in 2010, €2,656,124 has been spent on M2 works which amounts to c.45.2% of total BLP budget. The main investment has been in tackling invasive hazel and blackthorn scrub: €1.64m, equating to c.62% of all M2 funding, was spent on the removal of 240.7 ha of scrub from species rich grasslands and the reopening of 162.6km of new paths to facilitate livestock movement and herding (Table 4).

Measure 2 Work Category	Total budget, Year 1- 6 (€)	% of Total M2 spend, Year 1-6
Scrub Removal	1,643,973	61.9%
Wall repair & fencing	410,747	15.5%
Water Provision	230,480	8.7%
Vehicle Access Tracks	138,847	5.2%
Gate installation	113,857	4.3%
Habitat Restoration	64,183	2.4%
Feed equipment	54,037	2.0%
Total	2,656,124	

Table 4. Budget spend per M2 Work Category over the entire programme period (2010-2015)

Aside from scrub work, there has been a significant investment of €1.012m in other farm infrastructure which will have a lasting impact beyond the life of the BLP. Works include (Table 5): 109km of stone wall repaired, 32.3km of additional wire fencing erected, 703 new gates hung, 439 water troughs and 76 water storage tanks installed, 180 feed troughs and 128 feed bins purchased, 20.8km of new vehicle access tracks constructed, 32km of existing track upgraded or repaired, as well as 127 habitat restoration jobs completed.

Measure 2 Works	Total	Year 6	Year 5	Year 4	Year 3	Year 2	Year 1
Area of Scrub removed – not incl. paths (ha)	240.74	26.85	32.7	51.99	61.43	44.16	23.59
Scrub pathways (m)	162,609	25,354	38,674	37,384	32,365	21,600	7,231
Area of scrub stump-treated (ha)	181.29	28.1	30.1	45.5	38.2	24	15.3
Stone wall repair (m)	109,213	20,108	21,875	14,992	16,867	18,833	16,538
Wire fencing (m)	32,297	9,712	4,239	5,844	5,111	5,991	1,400
Gate installation (no.)	703	108	108	88	135	122	142
Water Troughs (no.)	439	56	65	53	61	93	111
Water storage tanks (no.)	76	11	12	8	13	15	17
Feed Troughs (no.)	180	7	28	16	29	34	66
Feed Bins (no.)	128	10	19	22	17	24	36
New Access Tracks (m)	20,845	1,412	5,731	3,049	3,339	5,714	1,600
Upgrade Access Tracks (m)	32,082	6,238	9,577	4,915	2,604	3,764	4,984
Habitat Restoration Jobs (n)	127	24	21	24	19	19	20

Table 5. Works done per M2 Work Category per year and over the entire programme period

Adding the estimated M2 co-funding by farmers of €1.52m to the €2.66m paid out means that c. €4.2m worth of M2 work has now been completed under the BLP. The average drawdown of the maximum available M2 budget has declined from c.63% in 2011 to 42.7% in 2015. This is as a result of less work being planned by farmers, the reasons for which vary from farm to farm. An additional factor was the extremely wet winter of 2015 which greatly reduced completion levels of planned work.

Measure 3 (M3)

€77,948 was paid under M3 in Year 6 (8.2% of budget) down from Year 5 by c.15k (16%). This reduction was largely as a result of M3 payments being discontinued from Sept 1st 2015 as they can henceforth be covered through GLAS. *Over the past 6 years of the BLP, a total of €449,503 has been spent on Measure 3, c.7.6% of the total payments made under the BLP. (Note: 1.4% of BLP budget was spent on once-off payments to farmers for farm planning and for hosting farm demo events).*

Farm plans were prepared for each farmer in Year 6 by one of 10 trained advisors (one less than in 2014). Four advisors drafted almost 75% of all plans. BLP farm advisors undertook refresher training in 2015 and were provided with updated digital resources for the planning year.

The main work of the BLP team in Year 6 has been assisting in the compilation of the 156 farm plans, ensuring that all planned works deliver positive environmental impact and value for money, that they are legally compliant and that they are completed to a high standard. The team, composed of 5 staff members (2 full-time and 3 part-time which equates to 4 full-time staff), also organised training events for farmers and advisors, hosted numerous study groups, spoke at several conferences and workshops, helped organise a highly successful conference on High Nature Value farming. The BLP team have also liaised closely with DAFM to plan the introduction of new 'Burren Programme' in 2016.

In summary, Year 6 of the BLP saw the programme consolidate and grow in impact, profile and maturity. All stakeholders in the BLP – farmers, advisors, funders and others – continue to work in a very positive, inclusive and professional way and it is this level of co-operation that has made the BLP so effective and has resulted in an extension and expansion of the programme planned for 2016-2020.