Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Screening for Appropriate Assessment

Determination on habitat management measures for Corncrake *Crex crex* in the Falcarragh to Meenlaragh SPA in accordance with Regulation 42A EC (Birds and Natural) Habitats Regulations 2011-2021

Prepared by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage
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1. Introduction

This determination on Screening for Appropriate Assessment (AA) has been made by the Ecological Assessment Unit (EAU) of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) in accordance with Regulation 42A(8) of the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011-2021 ('the 2011 Regulations").[1]

On the 10th December 2025, in accordance with the requirements of Regulation 42A(3) of the 2011-2021 Regulations, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage ('the Minister') furnished the EAU with a request for a Screening for Appropriate Assessment (AA) determination on the proposed habitat management for Corncrake *Crex crex* within the Falcarragh to Meenlaragh Special Protection Area (SPA) [Site code: 004149]. The proposed works are supported by the EU Corncrake LIFE Project. Access for initial works will involve transit along an existing track within Ballyness Bay SAC [Site code; 001090]. Hereafter referred to as "the project".

The EAU have evaluated and analysed the information contained in the referred to above documents and location maps provided and carried out a determination. The purpose of this document is to provide a record and an audit trail of the EAU reasoned thinking in view of best scientific knowledge and the Conservation Objectives of European Sites.

[1] As inserted by Regulation 7 of the European Union (Birds and Natural Habitats) (Amendment).

2. Background

Pursuant to Regulation 42A(1) of the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations, 2011 (S.I. 477 of 2011), a Screening for AA is required to be carried out on the project. AA is a process required under Article 6(3) of the EU Habitats Directive. Article 6(3) is transposed in Ireland by the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 (S.I. No. 477 of 2011), as amended, and by Part XAB of the Planning and Development Act, 2000, as amended.

All plans and projects which are not directly connected with or necessary to the management of a European Site, but which either individually or in combination with other plans or projects, are likely to have a significant effect on a “European Site”, require that an AA of these effects to determine if they will adversely affect the integrity of these sites. The proposed conservation measures are considered to fall under the requirements of AA as applied to all plans and projects.

The Screening for AA process scrutinises the plan or project to determine if there is potential for likely significant effects either individually or in combination with other plans or projects, on a European Site. European Sites are part of the Natura 2000 network and include those designated as Special Areas of Conservation (SAC), Candidate SACs (cSACs) or Special Protection Areas (SPA). This Screening for Appropriate Assessment describes the outcome of this analysis in respect of the project.

3. Legislation and Guidance

This section provides details on the adopted methodology with sources of guidance and information gathered to inform the preparation of the report.

3.1 Guidance and Data Sources

- Communication from the Commission on the precautionary principle. European Commission (2000);
- European Commission. (2001) Assessment of Plans and Projects Significantly Affecting Natura 2000 Sites: Methodical Guidance on the Provisions of Article 6(3) and (4) of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC;
- European Commission. (2007) Guidance Document on Article 6(4) of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC;
- Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government. (2010) Appropriate Assessment of Plans and Projects in Ireland - Guidance for Planning Authorities;
- Appropriate Assessment under Article 6 of the Habitats Directive; Guidance for Planning Authorities. Circular NPW 1/10 and PSSP 2/10;
- European Commission. (2018) Managing Natura 2000 Sites: The Provision of Article 6 of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC;
- Office of the Planning Regulator. (2021) Practice Note PN01 - AA Screening for Development Management; and,
- Official Journal of the European Union. (2021) Methodological guidance on the provisions of Article 6(3) and (4) of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC (Volume 64; 2021/C 437/01).

3.2 Assessment Methodology

This report is based on review of desktop data. Sources of information utilised for this report and accessed during December 2025 include the following:

- National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS) Designations Viewer[2]; and,
- National Biodiversity Data Centre (NBDC) Maps[3].

3.3 Legislative Background

According to the EU Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) and the EU Birds Directive (79/409/EEC), Member States are required to establish a Natura 2000 network of sites of highest biodiversity importance for rare and threatened habitats and species across the EU.

In Ireland, the Natura 2000 network of European sites comprises SACs, candidate SACs and SPAs.

SACs are selected for the conservation of Annex I habitats (including priority types which are in danger of disappearance) and Annex II species (other than birds). SPAs are selected for the conservation of Annex I birds and all migratory birds and their habitats. The Annex habitats and species, for which each site is selected, are the Qualifying Interests (QI) for SACs and Special Conservation Interests (SCI) for SPAs of each site. Conservation Objectives for the site are defined for these QI or SCI.

A key requirement of the Habitats Directive is that the effects of any plan or project, which is not directly connected with or necessary to the management of a European Site, but which alone, or in combination with, other plans or projects, are likely to have a significant effect on a European Site, should be assessed before any decision is made to allow that plan or project to proceed. The obligation to undertake a screening for AA, and if necessary, an AA, derives from Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive and both involve a number of steps and tests that need to be applied in sequential order.

Article 6(3) is concerned with the strict protection of sites, while Article 6(4) is the procedure for allowing derogation from this strict protection in certain restricted circumstances.

[2] National Parks & Wildlife Service Designation Viewer. Accessed at ArcGIS Web Application 16/12/2025

[3] National Biodiversity Data Centre Maps. Accessed at Maps - Biodiversity Maps (biodiversityireland.ie) 16/12/2025

Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive states:

> "Any plan or project not directly connected with, or necessary to, the management of the site but likely to have a significant effect thereon, either individually or in combination with other plans and projects, shall be subject to appropriate assessment of its implications for the site in view of the site's conservation objectives. In the light of the conclusions of the assessment of the implications for the site and subject to the provisions of paragraph 4, the competent national authorities shall agree to the plan or project only having ascertained that it will not adversely affect the integrity of the site concerned and if appropriate, after having obtained the opinion of the general public".

Article 6(4) states:

> "If, in spite of a negative assessment of the implications for the site and in the absence of alternative solutions, a plan or project must nevertheless be carried out for imperative reasons of overriding public interest, including those of social or economic nature, the Member State shall take all compensatory measures necessary to ensure that the overall coherence of Natura 2000 is protected. It shall inform the Commission of the compensatory measures adopted.
>
> Where the site concerned hosts a priority natural habitat type and/or a priority species, the only considerations which may be raised are those relating to human health or public safety, to beneficial consequences of primary importance for the environment or, further to an opinion from the Commission, to other imperative reasons of overriding public interest."

The competent authority is required to carry out a screening for AA, and if necessary, an AA as required by Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive. If the competent authority determines that the plan or project will adversely affect the integrity of a European site, it may only authorise that plan or project by following the Article 6(4) procedure.

The Article 6(3) and 6(4) procedures are outlined as follows:

Stage 1 - Screening for Appropriate Assessment – to assess, in view of best scientific knowledge, if the project or plan, individually or in combination with another plan or project is likely to have a significant effect on the Natura 2000 site.

Stage 2 - Appropriate Assessment – This is required if it cannot be excluded, on the basis of objective information, that the project or plan, individually or in combination with other plans or projects, will have a significant effect on a Natura 2000 site. The AA must include a final determination by the competent authority as to whether or not a proposed project would adversely affect the integrity of a Natura 2000 site. In order to reach a final determination, the competent authority must undertake examination, analysis and evaluation, followed by findings, conclusions and a final determination. The appropriate assessment must contain complete, precise and definitive findings and conclusions, and may not have lacunae or gaps.

Stage 3 – Assessment of alternative solutions - the process which examines alternative ways of achieving the objectives of the project or plan that avoid adverse impacts on the integrity of the Natura 2000 site.

Stage 4 - Assessment where no alternative solutions exist and where adverse impacts remain - an assessment of compensatory measures where, in the light of an assessment of imperative reasons of overriding public interest (IROPI), it is deemed that the project or plan should proceed.

Under Regulation 42A(1) of the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations, 2011-2021 (S.I. 293 of 2021), the Ecological Assessment Unit is the competent authority in relation to screening for AA of projects and plans (such as the proposed conservation measures) which the Minister proposes to undertake or adopt.

4. Overview of the Project

The Corncrake LIFE Project aims to improve the conservation status in Ireland of the Corncrake (*Crex crex*) by the enhancement of the Special Protection Area (SPA) network and surrounding farmland. The LIFE Project operational area covers 8 project sites (in SPAs designated for breeding Corncrake) and includes non-designated adjacent supporting farmland. The site of proposed conservation measures is within the operational area for The Corncrake LIFE project and the proposed project is aimed at supporting the favourable conservation condition of habitat for Corncrake. The proposed project comprises a component of the overarching objectives of the EU Corncrake LIFE project which are:

- securing landowner cooperation and local community involvement and support;
- improving targeting and delivery of effective conservation measures, underpinned by science;
- improving management regimes for Corncrake in project sites;
- creation and maintenance of Early and Late Cover (ELC);
- improving knowledge exchange with farmers and planners in project sites;
- promoting the Corncrake as an asset for local areas and communities

The above objectives aim to improve habitat conditions for Corncrake. While the creation of improved habitat conditions cannot in itself guarantee an increase in population, the LIFE project will strive to achieve a 20% increase (151 calling males were recorded nationally in 2018 (approximately 85% of which occurred within the project sites) in calling males across the operational area over the lifespan of the programme.

The project aims to deliver actions across a total of 1,000 ha (hectares) of the total target area, subject to landowner agreement. This will be achieved through a combination of habitat management agreements, land leasing and strategic land purchase. This project focuses primarily on applying and developing best practice to achieve the above project objectives. The role that local communities, particularly landowners, must play in conserving Corncrake habitat is fully recognised and the project will work collaboratively with all of the relevant stakeholders. The ultimate success of the project will depend heavily on successful engagement with local stakeholders. To that end, the project will include specific actions aimed at securing landowner cooperation and promoting local community involvement.

The proposed project aims to restore lands from a partially abandoned pasture to a traditional meadow system which will include areas of early cover suitable for breeding corncrakes and the inclusion of crops to create further habitat mosaics.

4.1 Purpose

The Corncrake (*Crex crex*) is the most terrestrial member of the *Rallidae* family whose breeding grounds extend from Ireland to Asiatic Russia in the northern hemisphere. The Corncrake winters in southern and eastern Africa, migrating northwards to arrive on its breeding grounds from early April onwards and departing again in August and September.

The Corncrake, listed on Annex I of the Birds Directive (2009/147/EC); is classed as 'Least Concern' by the IUCN Red List criteria. However, on account of large decreases in both population and range, it is on the Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland[4]. The most recent assessment of Corncrakes in Ireland, submitted in Ireland's report to the EU under Article 12 of the Birds Directive, notes an 85% decrease in population since 1978 and a 92% decrease in range.

Article 4 of the Birds Directive requires that the species mentioned in Annex I shall be the subject of special conservation measures concerning their habitat in order to ensure their survival and reproduction in their area of distribution. The measures at this site will contribute towards the Site Specific Conservation Objectives of Falcarragh to Meenlaragh (SPA) [Site code: 004149].

5. Project Description

Works are proposed to take place across a 0.86 ha site in Magheraorty, within the Falcarragh to Meenlaragh SPA (Figure 1) relating to the management of traditional hay meadows/semi-natural grassland for breeding corncrakes. The site is currently being restored from a semi-abandoned pasture to a more traditional meadow system, which will be grazed over winter and will include an area of early cover suitable for breeding corncrakes. Proposed works will include: repairing approximately 350m of existing fencing, the installation of a gate at the north side of the plot, the addition of approx. 50m^2 of gravel hardstand at the south side access point to facilitate machinery operations for grassland management, the removal of encroaching shrubs to improve grassland habitat and reduce predation risk, and the creation of 0.05ha nettle bed with manure and rotten bales.

Works will take place outside the corncrake breeding season i.e. prior to May 1st or after August 15th. These will be carried out before the end of January within a period of 2 to 3 weeks.

[4] Gilbert, Gillian & Stanbury, Andrew & Lewis, Lesley. (2021). Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland 4:2020-2026. 43. 1-22.

5.1 Fence Repair

A damaged fence will be replaced with wooden posts, sheep wire and a line of barbed wire. Existing loose concrete posts will be replaced with wooden posts to facilitate easy maintenance over the long term. An new gate will be installed at the north side access, which will be mainly used for grazing stock relocations. This work will take approximately 1 week.

5.2 Hardstand Installation

At the south side access point, a steady slope will be created with stone and gravel to create a functional access for machinery for grassland management. This will become the main entrance to the field as it will be dry and accessible for a longer period during winter. Likewise, this will reduce the need for access through the north side of the plot, which crosses the Ballyness Bay SAC. Stones will be placed with a digger. This will be the first work to be carried out and machinery necessary for the management of the site will access through this hardstand for the remainder of works.

5.3 Shrub Removal

0.05ha of shrub will be removed at the west side of the field. This will increase the suitable habitat for corncrakes and reduce hiding areas for predators. This work will be carried out with a digger and a mulching attachment. All the cut material will be directly mulched and any excess material created will be added to the early cover patch.

5.4 ELC creation

Manure and rotten bales will be transported with a tractor from a local farm and stables. Particular attention and adequate inspection of the materials will be carried out to ensure that there is no risk of invasive species spread. All the material will be placed with a digger on a strategic area of the field, where it is sheltered from the wind to help nettle growth and is central to the field to provide easy access for corncrakes to the meadow. The material will be spread as a 30 cm thick layer over 0.05ha and nettle roots will be then added to this area. This work will take a maximum of 3 days.

6. Part 1: Necessary conservation measures

Answer these questions if the activity is “directly connected with or necessary to the management of the site”. Otherwise go to Part 2.

a). List the European site(s) and the relevant Conservation Objectives (include version number of the Conservation Objective).

Falcarragh to Meenlaragh SPA [Site code: 004149]

NPWS (2024) Conservation Objectives: Falcarragh to Meenlaragh SPA 004149. Version 1. National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Accessed on 16th December 2025.

Available at: https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/protected-sites/conservation_objectives/CO004149.pdf

Special Conservation Interests

Corncrake Crex crex [A122]

Conservation Objectives

To restore the Favourable conservation condition of Corncrake in Falcarragh to Meenlaragh SPA, which is defined by the following list of attributes and targets:

- Population size.
- Population trend.
- Spatial utilisation by breeding pairs.
- Extent and condition of nesting and foraging habitat.
- Forage spatial distribution, extent, abundance and availability.
- Disturbance to breeding sites.

b). State how this activity furthers the Conservation Objective(s)

The implementation of the project as outlined above will improve and directly contribute to the Site Specific Conservation Objectives for Falcarragh to Meenlaragh SPA, notably:

Corncrake:

- **Extent and condition of nesting and foraging habitat.**
- **Forage spatial distribution, extent, abundance and availability.**

c). Does this activity have the potential to impact negatively on any Conservation Objective (CO), Qualifying Interest (QI)/Special Conservation Interest (SCI) for this or any other European site?

The effect on all QI and SCI features of the Falcarragh to Meenlaragh SPA and Ballyness Bay SAC have been considered. Access to works on the initial project element “hardstand installation” will be gained by crossing an existing track within Ballyness Bay SAC. The effect of access to implement this measure is expected to be localised in extent, short-term in duration and there are not expected to be any effects beyond that expected through the ordinary course of agriculture. After the installation is complete, access will be gained from a different direction to the site which does not cross Ballyness Bay SAC.

Throughout the course of these works, there are not expected to be any effects beyond a *de minimis* level on any Conservation Objectives for which the sites have been designated. No significant adverse impacts on the QI or SCI features of either the SAC or SPA are anticipated.

Yes ☐ No ☑

d). Are there aspects of this activity which are NOT directly connected with the management of the site?

Yes ☐ No ☑

If the answer to EITHER of the above questions is **Yes** a Screening for AA is required, go to Part 2.

If the answer to BOTH questions is **No** go to Part 5.

7. Part 2: Identification of European Sites within the Potential Zone of Influence of proposed activities

List all European sites which may be affected by this activity because they are linked by an ecological pathway. If the site has a second European designation (SAC, SPA) this also needs to be considered.

8. Part 3: Assess the likelihood of significant effects

Provide this information for **each site** listed in Part 2.

List the QI/SCIs for the site(s), their current conservation condition and the Site Specific Conservation Objectives (SSCO) for that QI/SCI. Then answer the questions about the impact on that QI/SCI.

Tick all the boxes below which may apply.

Your answer will determine if the activity is likely to have a (negative) effect on this QI/SCI. Negative effects may arise because of the activity's location within the site; its proximity to the QI/SCI or the size of the land take involved; the abstraction of water or minerals; emissions or waste arising; the types of transport or machinery being used; the length of time involved or seasonality of the work.

a). There is likely to be a reduction in the area of QI/SCI habitat ☐

b). The physical/chemical quality of the environment is likely to be changed in a way which may cause the deterioration of the QI/SCI habitat (e.g. applying lime to an acidic soil) ☐

c). The structure of the ecological community is likely to be altered (e.g. through altered species composition) in a way which will have negative impact on the QI/SCI. ☐

d). A QI/SCI species is likely to be disturbed (e.g. through noise, vibrations) ☐

e). The population size, characteristics or reproductive success of a QI/SCI species is likely to be changed either directly or indirectly (e.g. lighting close to a bat roost entrance) ☐

f). QI/SCI species or habitats are likely to be more vulnerable to change or less resilient to external change (e.g. to flooding, fire or drought) ☐

g). There are likely to be effects on other species /habitats (not a QI/SCI for this site) which are ecologically linked with this QI/SCI and, as a consequence, there are likely to be negative effects on this QI/SCI (e.g. the impacts on geese which are the SCI when their non-QI feeding areas are damaged). ☐

h). This activity will cause a deterioration in the conservation condition of this QI/SCI. ☐

i). There are likely to be other ecological effects not listed above which are likely to have a significant effect on the QI/SCI. ☐

Explain the effects:

_____

If you have ticked a box for any QI/SCI in any of the sites affected by this activity the likelihood of a significant effect cannot be ruled out and the activity MUST be screened IN for AA.

9. Part 4: In Combination Effects

Is this activity likely to cause negative effects in combination with any other plan or project?

(In answering this question you should consider any other consents which have been applied for or granted. For example, other ARCs, planning consents, forestry consents, or activities authorised as part of an agreed farm or land management plan. List the plans or projects considered).

_____

_____

No ☑ **Yes** ☐ **Uncertain** ☐

If the answer is Yes or Uncertain the activity MUST be screened IN for AA. Fill in Part 5 accordingly.

10. Part 5: Findings of the Screening for AA

Screening not carried out as the activity is “directly connected with or necessary to the management of the site”. ☑

Likely significant effects are expected or uncertain.

This activity Screens **IN** and AA **is** required. ☐

Likely significant effects are NOT expected.

This activity Screens **OUT** AA **is not** required. ☐

Signature: Darren Ellis, Ecological Assessment Unit

Date: 16th December 2025.

11. Part 6: Conclusion

Following an analysis of the activity, the EAU determines[5], in accordance with Regulation 42A(8) of the 2011 – 2021 Regulations, that the proposed habitat management for Corncrake *Crex crex* within the Falcarragh to Meenlaragh Special Protection Area is entirely comprised of activities that directly support the Conservation Objectives of the designated site.

It can be concluded with certainty that the project as part of the Corncrake LIFE Project is a necessary conservation measure that is directly connected with or necessary for the management of this site and the network of SPAs designated for breeding Corncrake.

[5] Darren Ellis (Ecological Assessment Unit, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage) 16th December 2025.

12. Supplementary Information

Figure 1. (below): Location of Falcarragh to Meenlaragh SPA as per NPWS (2024) Conservation Objectives: Falcarragh to Meenlaragh SPA 004149. Version 1. National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

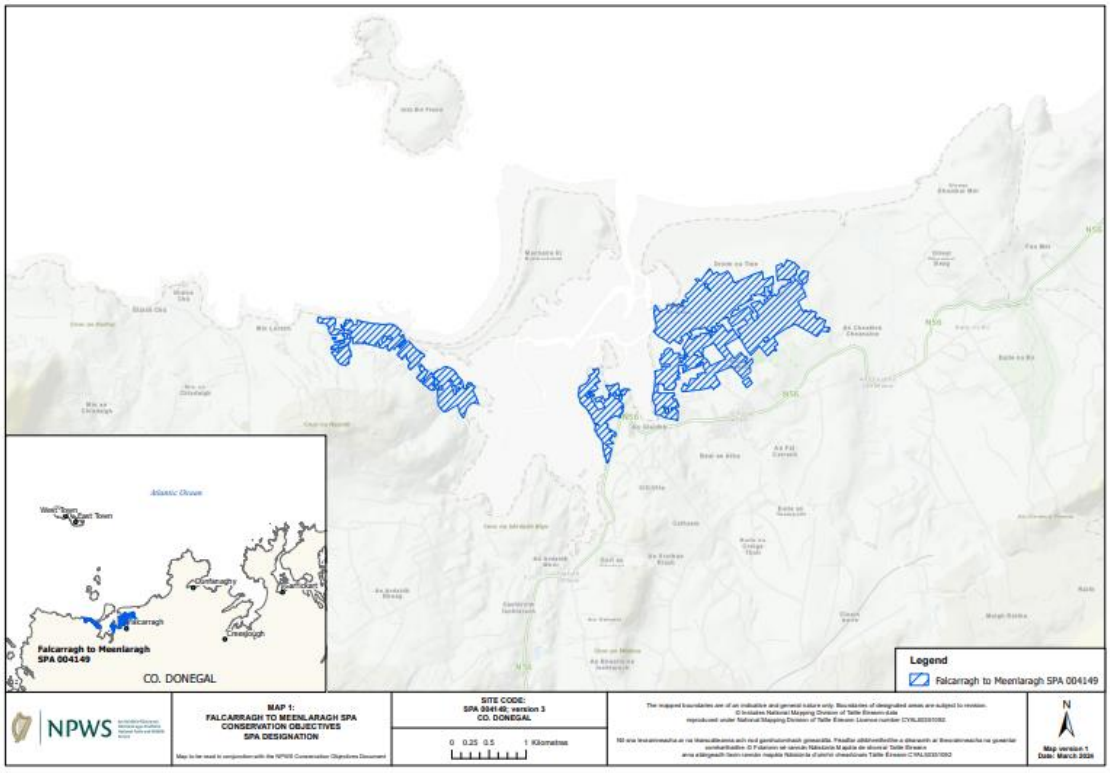


Figure 2. (below): Location of Ballyness Bay SAC as per the NPWS (2014) Conservation Objectives: Ballyness Bay SAC 001090. Version 1. National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.

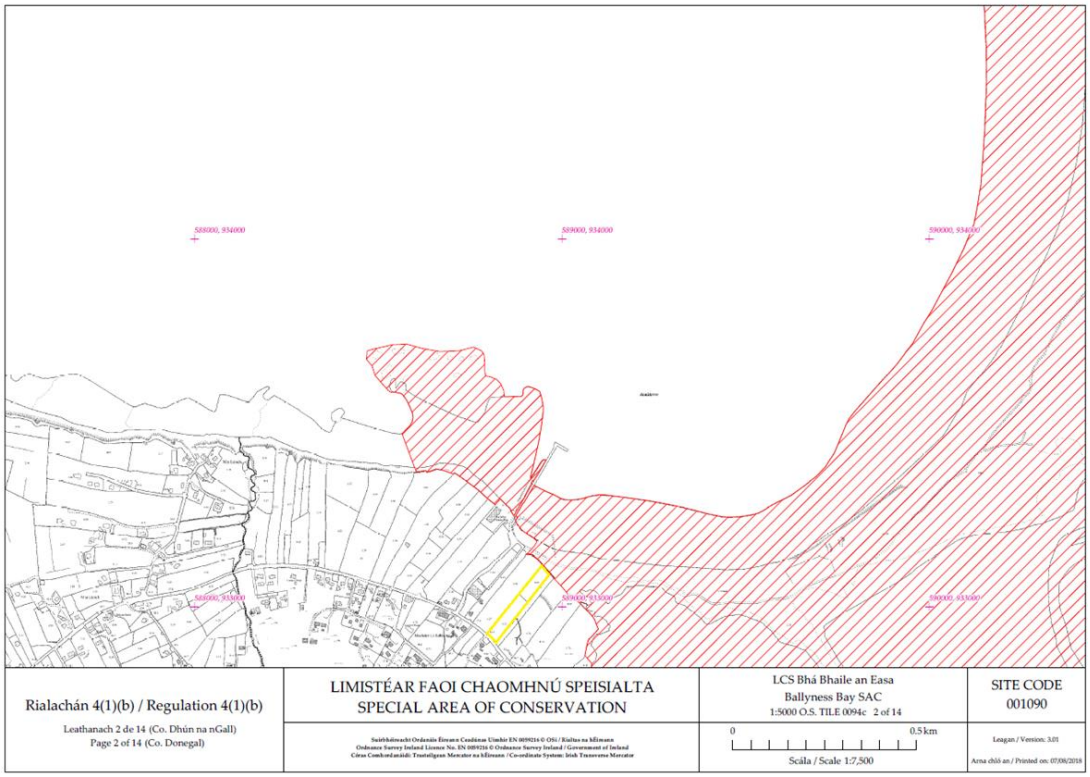
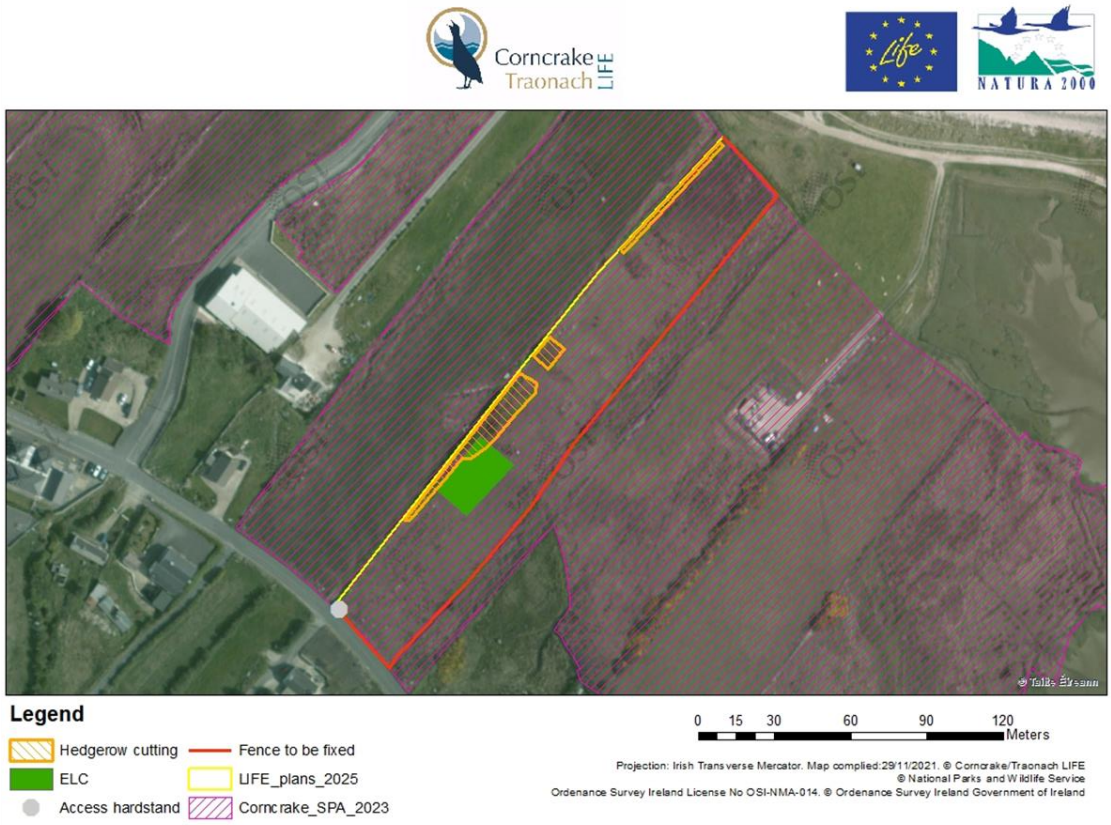


Figure 3. (below): Location of proposed habitat management works within Falcarragh to Meenlaragh Special Protection Area (SPA) [Site code: 004149] with each project element annotated in the map legend.



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