

An abstract graphic design featuring several overlapping triangular and quadrilateral shapes in various shades of green, ranging from a deep forest green to a light sage green. The shapes are arranged in a dynamic, layered composition that fills the left and top portions of the page, creating a modern and organic feel.

# COMHAIRLE NA TUAITHE

Annual Report

June 2019 - December 2020

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# Chairpersons Report

The last 18 months has been an exciting and productive time for Comhairle na Tuaithe in delivering on the new vision and mandate presented by the Minister for Rural and Community Development in June 2019. This annual report considers the achievements from the introduction of that new mandate to the end of 2020.

Comhairle na Tuaithe has done much to support the sustainable development of the sector since 2004 and I believe that we can make an even bigger contribution in the coming years based on our expanded remit. The rationale for Comhairle na Tuaithe has never been stronger. Over the last year the outdoor recreation sector has demonstrated its importance to the health and wellbeing of our nation. This will continue to be the case. In addition, the sector will also be an important contributor to the economic recovery as it continues to represent a growing part of our national tourism product.

I believe we are putting the structures in place to ensure that Comhairle fully supports the sector in the coming years. The review of the Comhairle membership and Comhairle working arrangements has been an important deliverable in recent months and will put us in good stead as we collectively address new challenges in the coming years. In that regard, I look forward to working closely with our new members from the start of 2021 as they bring a new perspective to our work.

I am particularly pleased with the increased level of stakeholder engagement through Comhairle over the last year in particular. I know this will continue apace, including through the development of a new communications plan for our work.

Lastly, the work that has commenced on the development of the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy will be vital to guiding the work of Comhairle and the strategic development of the sector across Government in the coming years. This is a key deliverable for 2021 and one that has the potential to transform the sustainable development of the sector in the coming years.

I would like to conclude by thanking members for their significant contributions over the last 18 months and I look forward to making even bigger steps forward in delivering on our mandate in 2021.

*Liam Twomey*

Chairperson

# Comhairle na Tuaithe – Overview

Comhairle na Tuaithe (The Countryside Council) is an Advisory Council, established in February 2004, by the then Department for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, and meets approximately four times a year. Comhairle na Tuaithe is made up of representatives from farming organisations, recreational users of the countryside, and state bodies with a responsibility or interest in the countryside. The Department of Rural and Community Development acts as secretariat to Comhairle na Tuaithe.

Since the inception of Comhairle na Tuaithe, there has been significant growth in the numbers engaging in outdoors recreation across a wider range of activities in more remote and fragile environments and through a variety of new formats such as adventure races.

On 6th June 2019, a new mandate was presented to Comhairle na Tuaithe to reinforce and strengthen its advisory role in relation to the sustainable development of the outdoor recreation sector in Ireland. A new independent Chair was appointed. The new mandate strengthens the role of Comhairle in advising the Minister on the sustainable development of outdoor recreation, particularly in the open countryside. Comhairle will also identify opportunities to facilitate the development of rural enterprises based on outdoor recreation activity, and to consider the scope for the development of a new National Strategy for Countryside Recreation, taking account of recent developments and investments across the sector.



**Photo: Fáilte Ireland**

# Vision

The vision for Comhairle na Tuaithe is:

“To be an effective collaborative body which supports the development of outdoor recreation activities for social, health and economic benefits, and which promotes sustainable and responsible use of the outdoors where the rights and responsibilities of both landowners and recreational users are recognised and respected.”

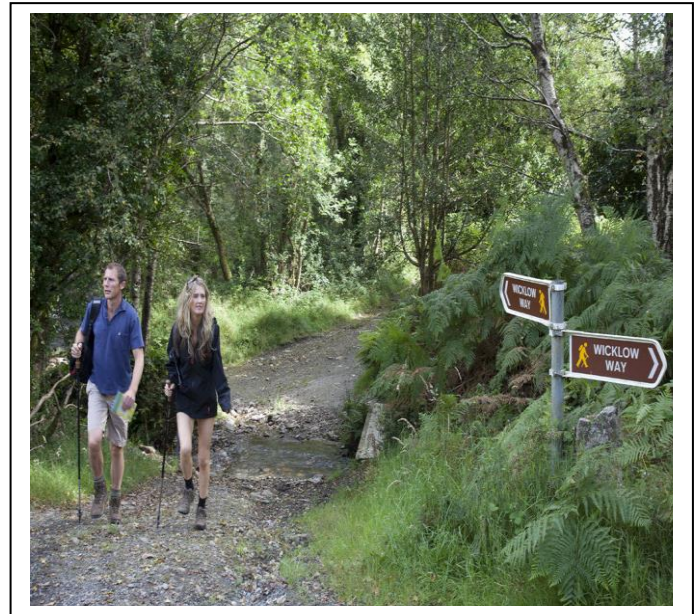


Photo: Fáilte Ireland

# Mandate

The role of Comhairle na Tuaithe is to:

- Act as a forum for consultation and collaboration between stakeholders on matters related to outdoor recreation, particularly in the open countryside.
- Advise the Minister on matters relating the use of the countryside for recreational purposes and the impact of such activities on the landscape, the wider environment, the heritage of the countryside and on the people who live or work there.
- Advise the Minister on issues relating to access to private lands for recreational purposes.
- Identify and advise the Minister on opportunities to develop rural enterprises based on outdoor recreation.



- Through its members, promote and encourage responsible use and preservation of the countryside in the context of increased outdoor recreational activity.
- Consider the scope for the development of a new National Strategy for Outdoor Recreation, taking account of recent developments and investments across the sector.
- Review and, if necessary, update Ireland's Countryside Code.
- Meet as an advisory body, up to four times annually.
- Develop an annual work programme in furtherance of this mandate and form any a limited number of sub-groups which may be necessary to progress elements of the work programme.
- Organise, at least once a year, a wider Consultation Forum on Outdoor Recreation to broaden the reach and engagement of Comhairle with stakeholders.
- Provide an annual report to the Minister on the work of Comhairle na Tuaithe, within 6 months of the end of each calendar year.





## **2019-2020 Work Report**

### **1. Comhairle na Tuaithe Membership and Working Arrangements**

The membership of Comhairle na Tuaithe has more or less remained unchanged since it was established in 2004. However, the outdoor recreation sector is much broader than ever before and the number of stakeholder interests in the sector is growing steadily.

A subgroup was set up to look at the membership and working arrangements of Comhairle na Tuaithe. The members of this subgroup were:

- Department of Rural and Community Development (Chairperson)
- Fáilte Ireland
- Keep Ireland Open
- Irish Farmers Association (IFA)
- Sport Ireland
- Mountaineering Ireland

The Subgroup met three times and between meetings the Secretariat engaged with the group through email and prepared comprehensive questionnaires to obtain the views of the Subgroup members on the various issues set out in the Terms of Reference.

A report was presented to members of Comhairle na Tuaithe in September 2020 and all recommendations were agreed. The addition of new members, as recommended by the Report, was subsequently approved by the Minister for Rural and Community Development.

The various recommendations are now being implemented and include -

1. The Membership of Comhairle na Tuaithe should fully reflect the stakeholders identified in the mapping exercise undertaken by the subgroup.
2. Address under-representation in certain categories of stakeholders by inviting Cycling Ireland, Ireland's Association for Adventure Tourism (IAAT) and Leave No Trace Ireland to become core members of Comhairle na Tuaithe.
3. Re-establish a system of rotation for a limited number of members representing the User category.
4. Establish a Communications Subgroup with the aim of bringing about greater engagement between Comhairle and other stakeholders in the outdoor recreation sector.



5. Approve the introduction of Standing Orders for the functioning of Comhairle na Tuaithe.
6. Formally establish the following subgroups:
  - National Outdoor Recreation Strategy Development Subgroup
  - Communications Subgroup
  - Sustainable Uplands Access Subgroup
7. Ensure that the objectives and principles recommended by the Subgroup are taken into account in the establishment of the Inter-Departmental and State Body Committee.
8. Facilitate greater understanding of, and coordination/cooperation between, Comhairle and other networks active in the outdoor recreation sector.

## **2. National Outdoor Recreation Strategy**

A subgroup has been set up to develop a new National Outdoor Recreation Strategy. The Strategy will provide a vision and an overarching framework for the growth and development of outdoor recreation in Ireland, drawing together the many strategies, programmes, agencies and elements in Ireland's outdoor recreation sector around a shared vision. The members of this subgroup are:

- Coillte (Chairperson)
- Mountaineering Ireland (Vice-Chair)
- Department of Rural and Community Development
- Department of Transport
- Fáilte Ireland
- Irish Farmers Association (IFA)
- Sport Ireland
- National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS)
- Irish Local Development Network (ILDN)
- City & County Managers Association (CCMA)
- Rural Recreation Officer

The strategy will assist with and guide:

- Managing the increased demand for outdoor recreation in a sustainable way which respects and protects landowners, landscapes, heritage and fragile natural environments.
- Providing high-quality, accessible and inclusive outdoor recreation experiences for enhanced well-being, social and economic benefits.
- Information accessibility and availability, so as to encourage responsible recreational behavior.
- Managing, maintaining and resourcing our outdoor recreation services and facilities.
- Creating opportunities for rural communities and landowners to benefit from the economic value of outdoor recreation activity.

The Subgroup met four times in 2020. A Request for Tender for an external consultant to support the development of the strategy was prepared by the group and published on 16<sup>th</sup> December 2020. Their role will include providing background research and benchmarking and managing the consultation process.

### **3. Countryside Code**

The new mandate for Comhairle na Tuaithe requested a review and, if necessary, an update of Ireland's Countryside Code. Following a review and presentation by Leave No Trace Ireland, the Council confirmed that the Leave No Trace principles continue to deliver as the Countryside Code in Ireland. These principles can be found at the below link:

<https://www.leavenotraceireland.org/resources/educational-resources/skills-and-ethics-for-activities/>

Leave No Trace has also been invited to now become a core member of Comhairle na Tuaithe

### **4. Guidelines for Responsible Outdoor Events**

A subgroup was re-convened to review and finalise The Guidelines for Responsible Outdoor Events. These are intended for any event organiser, community group, development company, tourism organisation, or other group involved in planning and

implementing large scale outdoor activity events in the wider countryside, to manage the impact of their event on the environment.

Interested members who were not part of the original group were also invited to join. The members of this Subgroup are:

- Fáilte Ireland (Chairperson)
- Irish Uplands Forum
- Mountaineering Ireland
- National Parks and Wildlife Service
- Sport Ireland

The guidelines will inform responsible and sustainable events, and offer practical advice for event organisers. They will include timelines for planning events, checklists for before, during and after events, useful resources for event organisers and case studies illustrating well managed events. The Group have also developed a Responsible Outdoor Events Charter.

The group have met numerous times and have consulted with Coillte, Leave No Trace Ireland and event organisers in developing the guidelines. The group sought and was given endorsement of the guidelines at the Comhairle na Tuaithe meeting in November 2020 and are proceeding to design and publication stage. Work is expected to be completed by Q3 2021.

## **5. Recreation in the Irish Countryside Booklet**

The Recreation in the Irish Countryside booklet provides information to landowners and recreational users in respect of property rights, obligations and responsibilities. The group identified that the booklet should be reviewed and updated to take account of recent case law in relation to access to the countryside. The booklet was circulated to all members and input requested, while photos were requested from RROs.

Helen Lawless (Mountaineering Ireland) has taken the lead for the redesign of the booklet and this is currently ongoing. It is expected that the booklet will be finalised and published by Q3 2021.

The current booklet can be found at the below link:

<https://www.sportireland.ie/sites/default/files/media/document/2020-04/accessliability.pdf>

## **6. Other Work**

Comhairle has engaged with various organisations over the last 18 months including Leave No Trace Ireland, CARA and the Irish Uplands Forum who each presented to the Council.

The Group has discussed and explored a number of key issues impacting on the sector including:

- Impacts of COVID 19 on outdoor recreation
- Love This Place, Leave No Trace Public Awareness campaign
- Recreational Trail Development in Ireland
- Responsible Dog Control
- Outdoor Recreation Plan for Public lands and waters
- The Uplands report 'A Profile of Ireland's Uplands'
- The ongoing development of a Trails Monitoring App
- Great Outdoors Accessibility Guidelines
- Strategy for the Future Development of National and Regional Greenways
- Sport Ireland's Outdoors Policy

The group has also commenced establishing a Communications Subgroup and a Sustainable Uplands Subgroup to progress key objectives of Comhairle.

The issue of access to the countryside for recreation and the indemnification of landholders in the uplands continues to be discussed within Comhairle na Tuaithe, with the DRCD indicating that it was examining the introduction of an insurance policy for the two agreed Mountain Access Project Areas. The outcome of the Government's Insurance Reform initiative may also assist in this area.

## Next Steps

The workplan for Comhairle na Tuaithe for 2021 includes the following:

- Development of a new National Outdoor Recreation Strategy which is expected to be finalised in the latter half of 2021.
- Establishment of a Communications subgroup and development of a Communications Plan for Comhairle na Tuaithe by Q3 2021.
- Establishment of a subgroup to look at Sustainable Uplands Recreation in Q1 2021. The group will focus on, among other things, reviewing the Mountain Access Programme and facilitating its expansion. It will also focus on enabling landowners to continue to allow access to recreational users by addressing issues which may be associated with recreational activity. This group act as a consultation forum for the Department of Rural & Community Development in relation to securing a suitable insurance / indemnity arrangement for upland areas as part of an expanded Mountain Access Project.
- The Guidelines for Outdoor Events and Responsible Outdoor Events Charter to be published by Q2 2021.
- Recreation in the Countryside booklet to be finalised and published by Q2 2021.
- An Inter-departmental Group on Outdoor Recreation to be established in Q1 2021 to support the work of Comhairle and particularly the development and implementation of the new National Outdoor Recreation Strategy.
- New core members to be invited to become members of Comhairle na Tuaithe in January 2021 including Leave No Trace Ireland, Cycling Ireland and Ireland's Association for Adventure Tourism (IAAT).
- Rotation of some members to be introduced in Q1 2021 with new members to be invited to become members for a period of three years including Canoeing Ireland and CARA.



# Appendix 1

## Comhairle na Tuaithe Membership <sup>1</sup>

- Chairperson
- Department of Rural and Community Development
- Mountaineering Ireland
- Walking Routes Ireland
- The County and City Management Association (CCMA)
- Keep Ireland Open
- Heritage Council
- Irish Integrated Local Development Network (ILDN)
- The Irish Farmers Association (IFA)
- Irish Uplands Forum
- The Irish Creamery Milk Suppliers' Association (ICMSA)
- The Irish Cattle & Sheep Farmer's Association (ICSA)
- Department of Transport
- Coillte
- Fáilte Ireland
- Sport Ireland
- The Angling Council of Ireland
- The Irish Country Women's' Association
- The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS)
- Scouting Ireland
- Waterways Ireland
- The British Horse Society Ireland (BHS)

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<sup>1</sup> The membership of Comhairle na Tuaithe 2019-2020 is included here and doesn't take into account any changes to membership which were introduced in 2021 following the report of the Membership and Working Arrangements Subgroup.



Photos: Fáilte Ireland