



An Roinn Forbartha
Tuaithe agus Pobail
Department of Rural and
Community Development

Comhairle na Tuaithe

Annual Report 2021- 2022

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Sustainable Upland Recreation Subgroup visit to Binn Shléibhe,
Clonbur, Co Galway



Chairman's foreword



2021 and 2022 were very productive and exciting times for Comhairle na Tuaithe with the development of *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors 2023-2027*, the new National Outdoor Recreation Strategy. The level of collaboration that was achieved through Comhairle, its subgroups and the extensive consultation with both the public and other stakeholders, has further strengthened the outdoor recreation sector.

This annual report considers the achievements over 2021 and 2022 as Comhairle Na Tuaithe advanced its work under the new mandate.

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 following the publication of the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy. The rationale for Comhairle Na Tuaithe has never been stronger. Over the last number of years 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 rural economy as it continues to represent a growing part of our national tourism product.

I believe the Strategy will put the necessary structures in place at both a national and local level to ensure that Comhairle fully supports the sector in the coming years.

Lastly, the work that has been undertaken on the development of the Strategy is vital to guiding the work of Comhairle and the strategic development of the sector across Government in the coming years. This has been the key deliverable for 2022 and has the potential to transform the sustainable development of the sector in the coming years. I am particularly pleased with the increased level of stakeholder engagement through Comhairle over the last couple of years throughout the development of the strategy in particular. I know this will continue apace, including through the implementation of the strategy.

I would like to conclude by thanking members for their significant contributions over the last two years and I look forward to making even bigger steps forward in delivering on the implementation of *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors* in 2023.

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. It meets approximately four times a year. Comhairle Na Tuaithe is made up of stakeholder 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, and particularly since Covid-19 pandemic, there has been significant growth in the number of people engaging in outdoor recreation. There has also been a significant growth in the range of activities that take place in more remote, and often fragile, environments and through a variety of new formats such as adventure racing, scrambling, wild swimming and caving.

A new mandate for Comhairle

In June 2019, a new mandate was presented to Comhairle na Tuaithe to reinforce and strengthen its advisory role for the sustainable development of the outdoor recreation sector in Ireland. An independent Chair, Dr. Liam Twomey, was subsequently appointed. The new mandate strengthened the role of Comhairle in advising the Minister for Rural and Community Development on the sustainable development of outdoor recreation and identifying opportunities for the development of rural enterprises based on outdoor recreation.

An important role for Comhairle over the last number of years has been the development of the new National Outdoor Recreation Strategy 2023-2027, which takes into account recent developments and investments across the sector and the impact that Covid-19 has had on our use of the outdoors. *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors* was published in November 2022.



Island View Riding Stable, Co. Sligo

Vision for Comhairle na Tuaithe

“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.”



Caves of Keash, Co. Sligo

Mandate for Comhairle na Tuaithe

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.



Summit of Carrountoohil, Co. Kerry

2021 - 2022 Work Report



Comhairle na Tuaithe at the Launch of Embracing Ireland's Outdoors in Castlecomer Discovery Park, Co. Kilkenny

1. National Outdoor Recreation Strategy

The primary focus of Comhairle na Tuaithe over the last number of years has been to drive the development of a new National Outdoor Recreation Strategy. This strategy was developed in line with the commitment in the Programme for Government and is a key action in Our Rural Future.

The Strategy sets out the following vision, mission, values and objectives for the future of Outdoor Recreation in Ireland as follows:

Vision: Ireland's outdoors, a world of activities for all.

Mission: The strategy will lead, guide and facilitate the sustainable development and management of outdoor recreation and increased participation, in order to realise social, health and economic benefits. We will do this whilst respecting the custodians of the land and water, caring for the environment and promoting responsible recreation.

In 2020 Comhairle na Tuaithe commenced the development of a new Strategy to 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. A subgroup of Comhairle was set up to progress the development of the strategy and members of this subgroup were:

- 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

In 2021, following a competitive process Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland were appointed as external consultant to support the development of the strategy.

Two public consultations were held to inform the development of the strategy, as well as regional workshops with a variety of stakeholders. The first phase consultation took place in 2021 to generally scope out ideas and observations to inform the Strategy. It included workshops with Comhairle members and the Inter-Departmental Group on Outdoor Recreation, an online public survey and stakeholder workshops with organisations such as local authorities, Waterways Ireland, Heritage Ireland and local development companies.

Over 2,100 responses to the public survey were received and this feedback informed the development of the emerging draft actions. A second public consultation was held in May 2022 which confirmed the general support for the emerging objectives and actions of the strategy.

A series of bilateral meetings were held with other government departments and agencies to ensure that the strategy was as robust as possible and that the identified objectives and actions are deliverable in the long term.

The subgroup met regularly throughout 2021 and 2022 to progress the development of the strategy and its work was guided by a strategy steering group which was also set up in 2021.

Following extensive work *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors*, the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy 2023 – 2027, was launched on 28th November 2022 in Castlecomer Discovery Park, Co. Kilkenny. The strategy has a detailed Action Plan, containing 95 Actions, which have been agreed with all the relevant Departments. The Action Plan will be used to monitor the implementation of the Strategy.

Embracing Ireland's Outdoors will ensure that there is a joined up and coordinated approach to deliver maximum impact from the significant investment in the sector and to build on the natural advantages in place. The Strategy also aims to increase the number of people active in the outdoors, especially young people and under-represented groups, and to foster a greater understanding of how to enjoy the outdoors responsibly.

Better planning and development of outdoor recreation infrastructure will be embedded through the Strategy implementation. This will lead to enhanced protection of the environment and will be in keeping with best practice management of landscape and habitats.

The implementation of the strategy is being led by DRCD and Sport Ireland and progress will be overseen by Comhairle na Tuaithe, with a Strategy Oversight and Implementation Group being established through Comhairle to review and monitor the progress of the strategy implementation.

Embracing Ireland's Outdoors

National Outdoor Recreation Strategy 2023-2027



97,000 cases of disease were prevented in Ireland due to physical activity participation in 2019 providing a total cost saving of over

€405 million



Recreational walking

is at its highest level ever recorded in Ireland

€1.7 billion

overseas tourism expenditure



2.7 million

Overseas visitors took part in outdoor activities in 2019



55% of people in Ireland

spent more time outdoors that they did before the COVID-19 pandemic



Recreational walking is the

Number 1

physical activity in Ireland



98%

of Irish adults like to spend time outdoors

€1.63 billion

Investment in outdoor recreation infrastructure over four years.



2. Comhairle na Tuaithe Membership and Working Arrangements

In 2020 a subgroup was set up to look at the membership and working arrangements of Comhairle na Tuaithe. A report with the findings of this subgroup was presented to members of Comhairle na Tuaithe in September 2020 and all recommendations were agreed.

An update on the implementation of the report's recommendations in 2021 and 2022 follows:



| Report Recommendations | 2021-2022 Update |
|--|---|
| The Membership of Comhairle na Tuaithe should fully reflect the stakeholders identified in the mapping exercise undertaken by the subgroup. | The membership of Comhairle na Tuaithe has been expanded to include more representation from groups in the growing outdoor recreation sector. |
| 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. | All members have been invited to join Comhairle na Tuaithe and have accepted membership |
| Establish a system of rotation for a limited number of members representing the User category. | A rotational system has been implemented to increase representation from user groups |
| Establish a Communications Subgroup with the aim of bringing about greater engagement between Comhairle and other stakeholders in the outdoor recreation sector. | A communication subgroup has been established but has paused until the publication of the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy. |
| Approve the introduction of Standing Orders for the functioning of Comhairle na Tuaithe. | Standing orders have been approved and introduced. |
| Formally establish the following subgroups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Outdoor Recreation Strategy Development Subgroup • Communications Subgroup • Sustainable Uplands Recreation Access Subgroup | All groups have now been established |

| | |
|---|---|
| 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. | The Inter-Departmental Group on Outdoor Recreation was established taking into consideration the recommended objectives and principles. |
| Facilitate greater understanding of, and coordination/cooperation between, Comhairle and other networks active in the outdoor recreation sector. | Members of Comhairle are active members of the Visitor Safety Group and share information on the various areas of work. |



3. Guidelines for Responsible Outdoor Events

A subgroup of Comhairle na Tuaithe was established to develop 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, in order to manage the impact of their event on the environment. The members of this Subgroup are:

- Fáilte Ireland
- Department of Rural and Community Development
- Irish Uplands Forum
- Mountaineering Ireland
- National Parks and Wildlife Service
- OPW
- The Heritage Council
- Irish Farmers Association
- Sport Ireland
- Coillte
- Leave No Trace
- IAAT



Outdoor Event Guidelines pilot event

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 are also developing a Responsible Outdoor Events Charter.

The group have met numerous times over the course of 2021 and 2022 and have consulted with Coillte, Leave no Trace Ireland and various others, including event organisers, in developing the guidelines.

The group sought and was given endorsement of the framework for the guidelines at the Comhairle na Tuaithe meeting in November 2020. The guidelines were piloted on a selection of events covering professional, amateur, large scale and small scale as chosen by the group. Draft guidelines were completed by the subgroup in 2022 and three pilot areas were selected to test the guidelines. The Guidelines are expected to be completed by Q2 2023.

4. 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. In line with a commitment under *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors* to develop guidance for the sector, the members of Comhairle na Tuaithe agreed that the booklet should be reviewed and updated to take account of recent case law in relation to access to the countryside.

Helen Lawless (Mountaineering Ireland) has taken the lead for the redesign of the booklet. It is expected that the booklet will be finalised and published in Q2 2023.

5. Sustainable Uplands Recreation Subgroup

The Sustainable Uplands Recreation Subgroup was established and convened for the first time in February 2021. The group was established to replace and build on the work of the Mountain Access Group which had been non-operational for some time. That group had an important remit, in particular, with the further development of the Mountain Access

Project (MAP). The terms of reference for the new group were agreed by Comhairle na Tuaithe and the membership of the group consisted of representatives from the following organisations:

- Department of Rural and Community Development
- Mountaineering Ireland
- Irish Uplands Forum
- Irish Association for Adventure Tourism (IAAT)
- National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS)
- Irish Natura and Hill Farmers Association (INFHA)
- MacGillycuddy Reeks MAP area
- Binn Shléibhe MAP area

The agreed work priorities for the group were to act as a consultation forum for the Department in relation to securing a suitable insurance / indemnity arrangement for upland areas as part of an expanded MAP, to review the MAP Toolkit and to review the MAP pilot with a view to advising on the further expansion of the MAP.

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. In August 2021 a pilot insurance policy was secured through FBD Insurance, which was subsequently renewed in August 2022 for the two Mountain Access Project Areas of the MacGillycuddy Reeks and Binn Shléibhe.

The subgroup met various times in 2021 and 2022 including undertaking site visits to both Binn Shléibhe and the MacGillycuddy Reeks to review the learnings in both MAP areas in 2022. They also visited Croagh Patrick to learn about the Sustainable Access and Habitat Restoration Project which is funded by the DRCD and Mayo County Council.

A guidance document to support the expansion of the Mountain Access Project is currently being drafted. This guidance document will be completed in early Qtr 3 2023 in advance of the proposed expansion of the Mountain Access Project pilot area by end 2023, as committed to in *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors*.



Site visit to Croagh Patrick, Co. Mayo

7. Other Work

While Comhairle was unable to meet in person in 2021 and 2022, the group still managed to hold productive and consistent meetings via WebEx throughout the period. As well as the quarterly meetings there were numerous subgroup meetings held with

representatives from Comhairle, and other organisations from the sector, to collaborate on the development of the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy.

As part of the quarterly meetings the Group discussed and explored a number of key issues impacting on the outdoor recreation sector including:

- Leave No Trace Training Programme for Private Landowners in the MacGillycuddy Reeks in Kerry
- Love This Place, Leave No Trace Public Awareness campaign
- Responsible Dog Control
- Respect for Landowners from Recreational Users
- Loss of payment for farmers under agricultural schemes due to recreation activity
- Review of the Walks Scheme
- Amendments to the Occupiers Liability Act
- Government's Action Plan for Insurance Reform
- Indemnity concerns



Aughris Coastal Walk, Co. Sligo

Next Steps

The workplan for Comhairle na Tuaithe for 2023 includes the following:

- Progress the actions of the new National Outdoor Recreation Strategy
- Establishment of a subgroup to oversee the implementation of the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy.
- Establishment of a Responsible Behaviour subgroup, to include communications and the development of a Communications Plan for Comhairle na Tuaithe.
- The Guidelines for Outdoor Events and Responsible Outdoor Events Charter to be published and piloted.
- Recreation in the Countryside booklet to be finalised and published by Q2 2023.



SURS visit to the MacGillycuddy Reeks, Co. Kerry

APPENDIX 1

Current Membership Comhairle na Tuaithe:

- Chairperson
- Department of Rural and Community Development
- Mountaineering Ireland
- The County and City Management Association (CCMA)
- 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)
- Integrated Local Development Network (ILDN)
- Department of Transport
- Coillte
- Fáilte Ireland
- Sport Ireland
- The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS)
- Waterways Ireland
- Keep Ireland Open
- Beara Breifne Committee
- British Horse Society Ireland (BHS)

Additional Members 2021

- Leave No Trace Ireland
- Cycling Ireland
- Ireland's Association for Adventure Tourism (IAAT)
- Canoeing Ireland
- CARA

Members whose rotation ended in 2021

- Scouting Ireland
 - The Irish Country Women's' Association
 - The Angling Council of Ireland
-

National Outdoor Recreation Strategy working groups:

A number of groups were established to support the development of *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors*. These included a Steering Group, and Inter-Department Group and a Working Group as well as several subgroups.

A **Steering Group** was established to support the practical development of the strategy and included the following representatives from Comhairle na Tuaithe:

- Daithi de Forge, Chair (Coillte)
- Helen Lawless, Vice Chair (Mountaineering Ireland)
- Louise Burke (Sport Ireland)
- Ciara Munnely (Sport Ireland)
- Deirdre Maloney (DRCD)
- Lèon Fox (DRCD)
- Aideen Martin, Consultant (Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland)

A **Working Group** was established to tease out the main themes and issues to be addressed through the outdoor recreation strategy. The work arising from this group and its subgroups informed the strategic objectives and values of the strategy.

The Working Group and its subgroups included the following members:

- Ciara Munnely, Sport Ireland
- Daithí de Forge, Coillte
- Declan Rice, ILDN
- Deirdre Maloney, Department of Rural and Community Development
- Derek O'Neill, Department of Transport (RIP)
- Flor McCarthy, Irish Farmers Association
- Helen Lawless, Mountaineering Ireland (Vice-Chair)
- Inga Bock, RRO Donegal
- Lèon Fox, Department of Rural and Community Development (Secretariat Support)
- Mark Rowlette, Fáilte Ireland
- Sonya Kavanagh, Kildare County Council / CCMA
- Wesley Atkinson, National Parks and Wildlife Service

An **Inter-Departmental Group on Outdoor Recreation** was established to ensure a collaborative cross-governmental strategy that could be delivered upon by all departments of the Government and included representatives from the following Departments:

- Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM)
- Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
- Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media
- Department of Transport
- Department of Environment, Climate and Communications
- Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage
- Department of Children, Disability, Equality and Integration
- Department of Health