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

Comhairle na Tuaithe

Annual Report 2023

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Note: The photos in this report are taken from Ireland's Content Pool or were taken at the 2023 Comhairle na Tuaithe meetings.

Comhairle na Tuaithe meeting, February 2023
Lough Boora Discovery Park, Co. Offaly

Chairman's foreword

2023 was a very productive and exciting year for Comhairle na Tuaithe following the launch in late 2022 of *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors*, the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy *2023-2027*.

This annual report considers the achievements over 2023 as Comhairle Na Tuaithe advanced its work to implement the actions of this strategy.

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 through the delivery of *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors*.

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.

The work that has been undertaken on the implementation of the Strategy is vital to guiding the work of Comhairle and the strategic development of the sector across Government in the coming years. The Strategy has the potential to transform the sustainable development of the sector in the coming years.

I was delighted to learn that Minister Humphreys has allocated €2 million in funding to support the development of new County Outdoor Recreation Plans and to pilot six new County Outdoor Recreation Officers. These new supports are key deliverables under the strategy and will enable Comhairle to fully support the sector at both a national and local level in the coming years

I am particularly pleased with the increased level of stakeholder engagement through Comhairle over the last couple of years, in particular throughout the development of the strategy. I know this will continue apace, including through the strategy implementation as we further engage with the outdoor recreation sector. I would like to conclude by thanking the members of Comhairle for their significant contributions over the last year and I look forward to us making even bigger steps forward through the delivery of *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors* in 2024.

Dr Liam Twomey,
Independent Chair of Comhairle na Tuaithe

Comhairle Na Tuaithe overview

Comhairle Na Tuaithe (The Countryside Council/ Comhairle) is an Advisory Council which was established in February 2004 as a non-statutory body by the then Department for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. It meets four times a year and 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.

Since the inception of Comhairle there has been significant growth in the number of people engaging in outdoor recreation.

Glenealy, Co Wicklow

In June 2019, a new mandate was given to Comhairle to reinforce and strengthen its advisory role for the sustainable development of the outdoor recreation sector in Ireland.

This 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.

Over the last number of years Comhairle has played a lead role in the development of *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors,* the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy 2023-2027 and will continue to play a vital role in the implementation of the strategy over the course of its lifetime.

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."**

Cumann na nBad, Water Sports School, Arranmore Island, Co Donegal

Current 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.

Upper Lake, Wicklow Mountains National Park

2023 Work Report

1. National Outdoor Recreation Strategy

The primary focus of Comhairle na Tuaithe in 2023 was commencing the delivery of *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors,* the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy 2023-2027 which was launched in November 2022. It was developed in line with the commitment in the Programme for Government and is a key action in '*Our Rural Future*'

Embracing Ireland's Outdoors was developed in collaboration with Comhairle and is a collaborative cross-Government, stakeholder-led strategy. It reflects the views of stakeholders, the public and the whole of Government and it sets the stage to strengthen and support the sustainable development of the outdoor recreation sector in Ireland for years to come.

The strategy aims to 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 vision for the Strategy is **'Ireland's outdoors, a world of activities for all.'** The strategy aims to lead, guide and facilitate the sustainable development and management of outdoor recreation and increased participation, in order to realise social, health and economic benefits; whilst respecting the custodians of the land and water, caring for the environment and promoting responsible recreation.

The detailed Action Plan in the strategy contains 95 Actions which have been agreed with all the relevant Government Departments and State Agencies.

The implementation of the strategy is being co-led by DRCD and Sport Ireland and progress is being overseen by Comhairle na Tuaithe. A Strategy Oversight and

Implementation Group was established through Comhairle to review and monitor the progress of the strategy implementation. The group meets quarterly in advance of Comhairle na Tuaithe meetings.

The members of the Strategy Implementation & Oversight Group are:

- Department of Rural and Community Development
- Mountaineering Ireland
- Coillte
- Fáilte Ireland
- Sport Ireland
- Waterways Ireland
- The Irish Farmers Association (IFA)
- Ireland's Association for Adventure Tourism (IAAT)
- Local Authority

County Outdoor Recreation Plans and Officers

Among the key actions in the strategy is the development of County Outdoor Recreation Plans and the establishment of a County Outdoor Recreation Committee in order to achieve a more planned and coordinated approach for the development of outdoor recreation in the county.

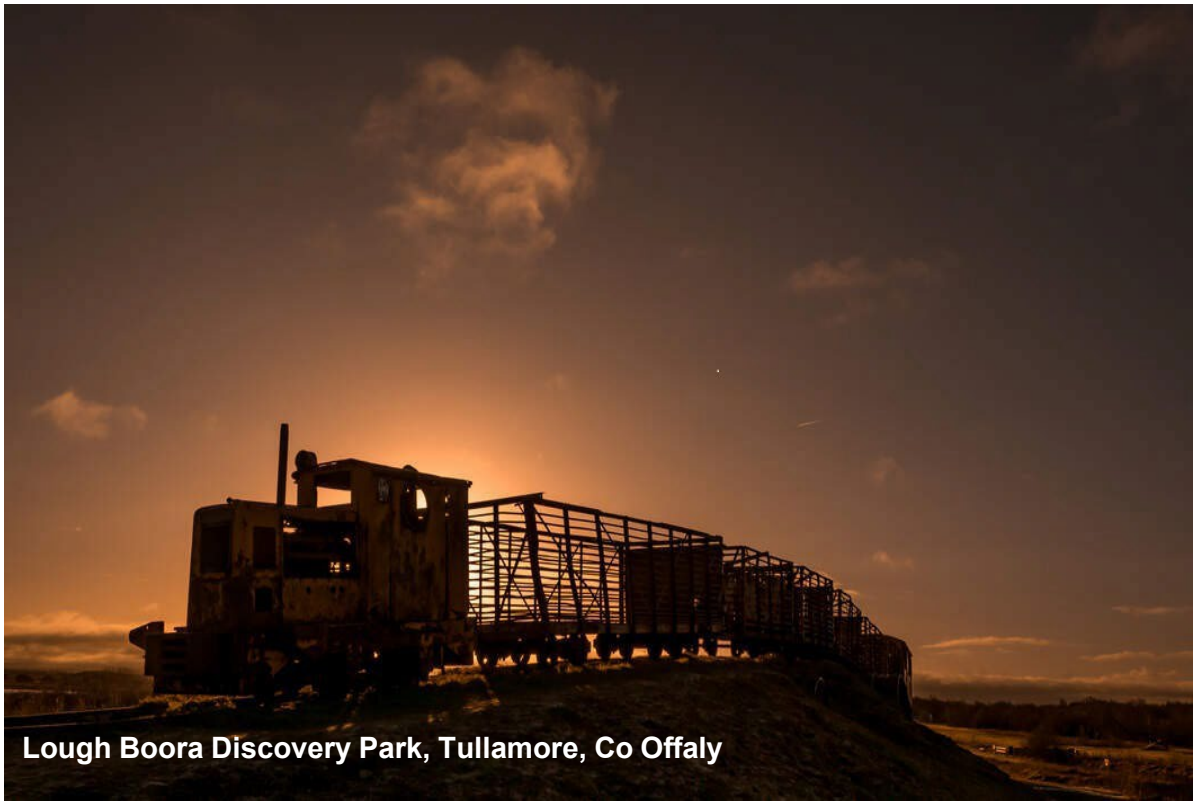
In December 2023 Minister Humphreys announced funding of €780,000 to support the development of County Outdoor Recreation Plans. This funding will provide up to €30,000 for each county to develop a short, focused plan to underpin the effective development of their outdoor recreation amenities over a three-year period. New guidelines have also been published to ensure that the plans are aligned with the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy.

Future investment decisions in each county will then be informed by these plans, including funding decisions taken under schemes such as the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme (ORIS).

Funding of €1.28 million over 3 years was also approved for a pilot programme to introduce County Outdoor Recreation Officers in six of Sport Ireland's Local Sport Partnerships (LSPs) – Clare, Longford, Mayo, Meath, Sligo and Waterford. These roles will be developed with the LSPs through a national working group with Sport Ireland as part of the pilot project to ensure consistency across the counties and to avoid potential duplication of work.

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.

Guidance is currently being finalised for the establishment of County Outdoor Recreation Committees and Stakeholder Forums.



Lough Boora Discovery Park, Tullamore, Co Offaly

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.

Following the launch of *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors*, the Membership and Working Arrangements Subgroup was reconvened to review the membership structure of Comhairle na Tuaithe.

The members of the Group were:

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

The Second Review of the Membership and Working Arrangements of Comhairle na Tuaithe report was prepared for the Minister of Rural and Community Development.

The report included recommendations to:

- Update of the six categories of stakeholders in the outdoor recreations sector
- Agree that the number of members of Comhairle na Tuaithe should be capped at 25.
- Maintain a stable and consistent core membership, while continuing a limited number of rotating members.
- Address under-representation by certain categories of stakeholders by inviting the following ETBI to become core members of Comhairle na Tuaithe as a representative in Training, Education & Research category
- Host all Comhairle na Tuaithe documents to online
- Engage Rural Recreation Officers and other non-member stakeholders so that they can contribute their expertise to subgroups where appropriate.

The Report was presented to the Minister in January 2024.

Glenbarrow, Waterfall, Slieve Bloom Mountains, Co Laois

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 (Chair)
- 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

The guidelines will ensure events are responsible and sustainable by offering 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 last three years 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 Q1 2024.

Adventure Race, Lough Derg, Co Tipperary

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. The booklet will also give an overview of changes to the Occupiers Liability Act, which came about through The Courts and Civil Law Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023. On the 31st July 2023 new provisions which govern the duty of care under the Occupiers' Liability Act 1995 (the 1995 Act) were enacted. The changes introduced in the 2023 Act aim to provide a balance between the rights of occupiers and the duty of care owed to (i) visitors, (ii) recreational users and (iii) trespassers. In addition, the 2023 Act sought to make it simpler for occupiers to limit their liability.

Mountaineering Ireland has taken the lead for the redesign of the booklet.

It is expected that the booklet will be finalised and published in 2024

5. Sustainable Upland Recreation Subgroup and Mountain Access Project (MAP)

The Sustainable Upland Recreation Subgroup was established in 2021 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 membership of the group consists of representatives from the following organisations:

- Department of Rural and Community Development (Chair)
- Mountaineering Ireland
- Irish Uplands Forum
- Irish Farmers Association (IFA)
- 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
- Croagh Patrick Stakeholders Group

In August 2021 a pilot insurance policy was secured through FBD Insurance, which was subsequently renewed in 2022 and 2023 for the two Mountain Access Project Areas of the MacGillycuddy Reeks and Binn Shléibhe. There have been no claims to date on this policy which has brought reassurance to landowners in both areas.

The subgroup is currently finalising a guidance document to support the expansion of the Mountain Access Project. This guidance document will be completed in early 2024 in advance of the proposed expansion of the Mountain Access Project pilot area in 2024 as committed to in *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors.*

6. Responsible Behaviour Subgroup:

During 2023 the Responsible Behaviour Subgroup was established.

The role of the group is to:

- Develop an agreed position on responsible behaviour in the outdoors, including dog control, by all Comhairle na Tuaithe stakeholders.
- Develop and deliver a Responsible Behaviour in the Outdoors Plan, including a campaign to promote a culture of responsible dog ownership in outdoor recreation.
- Develop clear communications that enables better understanding of the landowner's position around access and liability, and the personal responsibility of recreational users for their own safety.

The work of this group will also

- Guide the development of a common approach to visitor management in Ireland's most crowded outdoor recreation sites, as outlined in Action 2.5 of the strategy,
- Support Sport Ireland in delivering on Action 3.7 of the strategy to develop and implement a communications plan.

Memberships of the group consists of

- Sport Ireland (Chair)
- DRCD
- Fáilte Ireland
- IFA
- IAAT
- Waterways Ireland
- Mountaineering Ireland
- NWPS

The first meeting of the group was held on 28th May 2023. Over the course of 2023 four meetings of group were held, as well as an in person workshop with key stakeholders to determine Comhairle's vision for responsible behaviour which was held on Sport Ireland campus in July 2023. The vision for responsible behaviour was agreed by Comhairle at its September meeting.

Since then the subgroup have been preparing a tender document to source support in order to evaluate current research on responsible behaviour and to develop a communication plan on responsible behaviour. Work is ongoing on this.

7. Other Work

Comhairle na Tuaithe met four times in 2023. Venues for the meetings included Lough Boora Discovery Park, Co. Offaly, Wild Nephin Park, Co. Mayo, Sport Ireland Campus, Dublin and Athlone, Co Westmeath.

As well as the quarterly meetings there were numerous subgroup meetings held with representatives from Comhairle, and other organisations from the sector, to further the work of Comhairle na Tuaithe.

As part of the quarterly meetings regular updates were provided to the group from DRCD Department of Transport; Coillte; Fáilte Ireland; and Sport Ireland.

Members of Comhairle presented to the group on the following:

- Sport Ireland: Get Ireland Active; Recreational Cycle trail criteria
- Waterways Ireland: Revision of bye-laws
- National Parks and Wildlife Services: Wild Nephin National Park

At each quarterly meeting various issues impacting on the outdoor recreation sector were discussed including:

- ‘Love This Place’ Public Awareness campaign
- Responsible Dog Ownership
- Respect for Landowners from Recreational Users, particularly in upland areas
- Loss of payment for farmers under agricultural schemes due to recreation activity
- Expansion of the Walks Scheme
- Outdoor recreation funding
- Amendments to the Occupiers Liability Act
- Insurance issues faced by Outdoor Recreation providers
- Indemnity concerns.

Next Steps

The work plan for Comhairle na Tuaithe for 2024 includes the following:

- Progress the actions of *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors,* the new National Outdoor Recreation Strategy
- Establishment of a new subgroup to oversee and create clear guidance procedures for the development and maintenance of outdoor recreation infrastructure, trails and related facilities in the outdoor recreation sector.
- Publish the Guidelines for Outdoor Activity Events and Responsible Outdoor Events Charter.
- Support the development of County Outdoor Recreation Plans
- Support the new County Outdoor Recreation Officer roles
- Host the first National Outdoor Recreation Conference in June 2024.
- Finalise and publish the Recreation in the Countryside booklet.
- Oversee the expansion of the Mountain Access Project including publishing guidance to support its expansion.
- Develop a Communications campaign for Responsible Behaviour in the Outdoors
- Implement the recommendations of the Membership and Working Arrangements Second Report
- Address the emerging recommendations from the Sustainable Upland Recreation Subgroup
- Develop an agreed approach to land and water access for the development of new national and community/local trails.

Comhairle na Tuaithe meeting, 18 May 2023, Wild Nephin National Park, Co.Mayo

APPENDIX 1

Comhairle na Tuaithe Membership (as at December 2023):

- 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
- Leave No Trace Ireland
- Cycling Ireland
- Ireland's Association for Adventure Tourism (IAAT)
- Canoeing Ireland
- Active Disability Ireland (formerly CARA)
- The British Horse Society Ireland (BHS) (Rotating member – end December 2023)
- The Angling Council of Ireland (Rotating member – end December 2023)