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

# Comhairle na Tuaithe

## Annual Report 2025

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**Note: The photos in this report are taken from Ireland's Content Pool or were taken at 2025 Comhairle na Tuaithe events including meetings.**

# Chairman's foreword

Welcome to the 2025 Annual Report for Comhairle na Tuaithe.

In November 2025 I was delighted to be invited by Minister Calleary to take over the Chair of Comhairle na Tuaithe following the very successful tenure of Dr. Liam Twomey. During 2025 Comhairle Na Tuaithe has continued to make a huge contribution to support the outdoor recreation sector.

This annual report considers the achievements of Comhairle na Tuaithe over 2025, in particular its work in supporting the delivery of *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors*, the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy *2023-2027*.

Among the many highlights of Comhairle's work during 2025 was the second National Outdoor Recreation Conference which was held in Limerick in June. This was a fantastic opportunity for those working in the outdoor recreation sector to discuss challenges, make connections and consider ways to further work together. The conference highlighted the work of Comhairle na Tuaithe and the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy, looking at examples of outdoor recreation projects, discussing the benefits of outdoor recreation with a particular focus on how to encourage responsible behaviour in the outdoors. The sector welcomed the new 'Recreation in Ireland's Outdoors' booklet which Minister Calleary launched at the conference. This booklet will support landowners with an understanding of their position around access and liability, while also providing information for recreational users on their personal responsibility for their own safety.

The work that has been undertaken on the implementation of *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors* is vital to guiding the work of Comhairle. For example, the Responsible Behaviour subgroup has undertaken great work in leading on research in changing behaviours, identifying messaging around encouraging responsible behaviour in the outdoors and agreeing a position on responsible dog management in the outdoors. The Guidance on Infrastructure Development Subgroup is working towards putting a guidance and training framework in place to ensure those delivering outdoor recreation projects are as informed and trained as possible. The Sustainable Upland Recreation Subgroup continues to work towards an expansion of the Mountain Access Project and a new Upland Recreation Scheme for landowners in the MacGillycuddy Reeks. And finally, the Visitor Management working group is developing a toolkit to support a common approach to managing visitors in our outdoors.

The outdoor recreation sector is an important contributor to the rural economy and research is underway to evaluate the monetary contribution of outdoor recreation, as well as its health and wellbeing benefits to our society.

I would like to thank 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 2026.

Éamon Ó Cuív, 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 and Gaeltacht (the Department) acts as secretariat to Comhairle.

**Guidance subgroup site visit to Portumna**

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

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 and the Gaeltacht 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 and implementation 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."**

Guidance Subgroup on site visit at Portumna Forest

Kayaking as part of the pre-Conference Networking Activities

# 2025 Work Report

## 1. *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors*, the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy 2023-2027

*Embracing Ireland's Outdoors* was developed in collaboration with Comhairle and is a collaborative cross-Government, stakeholder-led strategy. The strategy contains 95 key actions to be delivered over the 5-year period. For 2025 the main focus of Comhairle na Tuaithe was continuing to support the delivery of the actions in *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors*.

The Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht and Sport Ireland continue to co-lead the strategy implementation, with progress being overseen by the Strategy Oversight and Implementation Group (a subgroup of Comhairle). The group meets quarterly in advance of Comhairle na Tuaithe meetings to monitor progress.

Strong progress was made across the actions contained in the strategy in 2025, and some detail in this regard is included in the following sections. The second progress report was published in July 2025 and covered the 12 months from July 2024 to June 2025. (Link)

# 2. County Outdoor Recreation Plans and Officers

Some of the key actions in the strategy are the development of County Outdoor Recreation Plans and the establishment of County Outdoor Recreation Committees in order to achieve a more planned and coordinated approach for the development of outdoor recreation in each county.

Funding of €30,000 per county was provided to 23 counties by the Department in December 2023 to support the development of the county outdoor recreation plans. An additional €10,000 was provided to each county to undertake environmental screening of the plan and translation of the plan to Irish. Over half of the plans have now been finalised, with others due to be completed in 2026. These plans will inform future investment decisions in each county, including funding decisions taken under schemes such as the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme (ORIS).

County Outdoor Recreation Committees and Stakeholder Forums are also being established in each county to support the delivery of the County Outdoor Recreation Plans. 19 of these committees have now been established. A County Outdoor Recreation Committee Forum will be held in 2026 to support and build capacity for the committees.

The County Outdoor Recreation Officer pilot programme has supported the development of the County Outdoor Recreation Plans and establishment of the County Outdoor Recreation Committees in Clare, Longford, Mayo, Meath, Sligo, and Waterford. Based in Sport Ireland's Local Sports Partnerships, the officers were recruited during 2024 and 2025, and a review of the roles will be undertaken in 2026 before a further roll out is considered.

County Outdoor Recreation Officers, Trinity Point

## 3. Recreation in Ireland's Outdoors Booklet

In line with a commitment under *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors* to develop guidance for the outdoor recreation sector, the Recreation in Ireland's Outdoors booklet was launched in 2025, taking account of recent case law in relation to access to the countryside.

The booklet provides information to landowners and recreational users in respect of property rights, obligations, and responsibilities. It includes an overview of changes to the Occupiers Liability Act, which came about through The Courts and Civil Law Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023. 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.

The booklet was promoted at the National Outdoor Recreation Conference and the National Ploughing Championships.

## 4. Sustainable Upland Recreation Subgroup

The Sustainable Upland Recreation Subgroup (SURS) was established in 2021 to act as a consultation forum for the Department in relation to reviewing and expanding the Mountain Access Project (MAP). This includes reviewing the MAP Toolkit, supporting new MAP areas and advising on the further expansion of the MAP.

Site Visit and meeting to Croagh Patrick February

In 2025, the group worked with three applicant areas following a call for expressions of interest in 2024 for new upland areas interested in joining the MAP. This was in line with the commitment in *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors* to expand the MAP.

The three applicant areas are Croagh Patrick in Co. Mayo, Mount Errigal in Co. Donegal, and the Comeraghs in Co. Waterford.

The Sustainable Uplands Recreation Subgroup undertook a site visit to each of the three areas followed by feedback to support their applications and bring them on to the MAP. Grant funding of €10,000 was also made available to each of the three areas by the Department to support their MAP applications.

## 5. Responsible Behaviour Subgroup

The Responsible Behaviour Subgroup was established in May 2023 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 to enable better understanding of the landowner's position around access and liability, and the personal responsibility of recreational users for their own safety.
- Support Sport Ireland in delivering on Action 3.7 of the strategy to develop and implement a communications plan.

The group continued to meet regularly throughout 2025. The group worked with both The Behaviouralist and Design Works to prepare, agree, and design the approach to evaluating current research on responsible behaviour and to develop a communication plan on responsible behaviour.

Mark Byrne, Design Works

The research undertaken by The Behaviouralist was completed and published in April 2025. Design Works completed their work and presented to Comhairle na Tuaithe on 15th of May 2025. They also presented at the National Outdoor Recreation Conference in June 2025.

A workshop was held with Comhairle na Tuaithe members and other stakeholders in Dublin in July 2025 to discuss the particular challenges around dogs in the outdoors, which formed the basis for Comhairle's agreed position on responsible dog management in the outdoors.

## 6. Visitor Management Working Group

Visitor management workshop Sligo

A working group was established under the Responsible Behaviour Subgroup to guide the development of a common approach to visitor management in Ireland's most crowded outdoor recreation sites, in response to Action 2.5 of the strategy. The group met regularly throughout 2025, including hosting a workshop in Sligo in February to commence work on a toolkit to provide guidance on managing visitors in our outdoors.

The Guidelines for Outdoor Activity Events were published in March 2024 and an online learning support video is being developed by Fáilte Ireland with input from Comhairle an Tuaithe members. This will be launched in early 2026 and will support the monitoring and implementation of the guidelines.

## 7. Guidance on Infrastructure Development Subgroup:

Guidance Subgroup site visit to Portumna

The Guidance for Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Development Subgroup of Comhairle na Tuaithe was established in February 2024 to develop guidance on the procedures, roles and responsibilities for the development and maintenance of trails, outdoor infrastructure, and related facilities.

Over the course of 2025 the group met regularly to progress this work, as well as participating in an in-person workshop in September to create clear guidance procedures on the process and practices for the development of outdoor recreation infrastructure. The group have identified the requirements at each stage of infrastructure development and will continue working in 2026 to identify guidance already in place and where additional guidance is required.

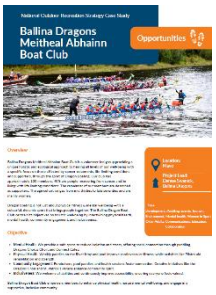
Site Visit to Graiguenamanagh

A new Outdoor Recreation Knowledge and Skills Framework was developed by Sport Ireland to support the sector to understand what skills and competencies are required by people working in developing outdoor recreation infrastructure. The subgroup has agreed recommendations to take this forward including conducting a skills survey and identifying further training opportunities.

Site visit to Graiguenamanagh

The group undertook two best practice site visits in 2025. The first took place in Graiguenamanagh, Co. Kilkenny in March and Portumna, Co. Galway in October.

The group is continuing to work with the sector to submit projects to be included as case studies as part of a National Case Study Project, which is to be hosted on Sport Ireland's website. (Link)



# 8. National Outdoor Recreation Conference

The second annual National Outdoor Recreation Conference was held in Limerick on Thursday 26th June 2025, to support the delivery of *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors.*

The conference provided an opportunity to network with national and county organisations involved in outdoor recreation, join in the discussion on national outdoor recreation policy and hear about the latest developments in the outdoor recreation sector in Ireland.

The conference included panel discussions, key-note presentations, breakout sessions, and networking opportunities. Over 300 attendees discussed the challenges and opportunities in developing and maintaining sustainable outdoor recreation across Ireland and increasing participation in the outdoors.

The conference MC was Ella McSweeney and speakers and panellists included: Minister Dara Calleary, Dr. Una May (Sport Ireland), Mark Byrne (DesignWorks), Colin O'Hehir (Department of Health), Mark Rowlette (Fáilte Ireland), Kieran Reilly (Mayo Outdoor Recreation Officer), Louise Burke (Sport Ireland), Cáillin Conneely (IFA), Keith Bickford (Kilfinane Outdoor Education Training Centre), Martin O'Brien (Barrow Valley Outdoor Activities Hub), Chris Scott (Outscape/Blueway Partnership), Aisling Hubbard (Wicklow Local Sports Partnership), Barry Dillon (Venture Out), Tom Losey (Liquid Therapy), Diana Thornton (LikeBikes), Ellie Berry (Tough Soles) and Sean Ronayne (Irish Wildlifesounds).

Selection of photos from the National Outdoor Recreation Conference

# 9. Other Work

Comhairle na Tuaithe met four times in 2025. Meetings were hosted in Carrick on Shannon and Acres Lake in Co. Leitrim, Beyond the Trees Avondale in Co. Wicklow, and Ballinasloe in Co. Galway. A meeting hosted in Dublin in November marked the first meeting with the new Chair, Éamon Ó Cuív, and was also attended by Dara Calleary TD, Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht.

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 Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, the Department of Transport, Coillte, Fáilte Ireland Sport Ireland and Waterways Ireland.

Members of Comhairle presented to the group on the following:

- Dennis O Rourke gave a presentation on the work of the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS).
- Catherine Casey of the Heritage Council gave a presentation on the links between heritage and outdoor recreation.
- Martina Earley from Roscommon Integrated Development Company gave a presentation on the Local Development Companies Network and the role they have in assisting in outdoor recreation at a local level.
- Daithi de Forge from Coillte gave a brief talk on the Beyond the Trees development and the Coillte history at the site in Avondale, Co Wicklow
- Liam Feeley from Mountaineering Ireland briefed the group on how they promote responsible participation in mountaineering and how they are a voice for the protection of mountain landscapes.

- Mark Rowlette from Failte Ireland gave a presentation on the Water Sports Facilities being developed across the country and an update on the Midlands trail network.

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

- Responsible dog ownership
- Expansion of the Walks Scheme
- Outdoor recreation funding
- Report on international approaches and models for physical access.
- Responsible behaviour in the outdoors

Other presentations included:

- Findings from research on the benefits of outdoor recreation
- Our Rural Future strategy and how stakeholders can get involved in the next iteration.

# 10. Next Steps

The work plan for Comhairle na Tuaithe for 2026 includes the following:

- Further progress the actions of *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors,*
- Continue to support the development of County Outdoor Recreation Plans and review as they are finalised.
- Support the County Outdoor Recreation Officer pilot roles.
- Host the third National Outdoor Recreation Conference in June 2026
- Oversee the expansion of the Mountain Access Project
- Oversee the roll out of the new MacGillycuddy Reeks Upland Recreation Scheme.
- Finalise Comhairle na Tuaithe's position on Responsible Dog Management
- Develop a communications campaign for responsible behaviour in the outdoors.
- Develop guidance procedures on the process and practices for the development of outdoor recreation infrastructure.
- Provide training on the new Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Knowledge and Skills Framework, conduct a skills survey for the outdoor recreation sector, and identify training opportunities.
- Develop a toolkit to support a common approach to visitor management in Ireland's most crowded outdoor recreation sites.
- Host a County Outdoor Recreation Committee Networking Forum

Comhairle na Tuaithe meeting in Dublin in November 2025

# APPENDIX 1:

## Membership of Comhairle na Tuaithe and its subgroups

**Comhairle na Tuaithe Membership (as of December 2025):**

- Chairperson
- Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht
- Mountaineering Ireland
- The County and City Management Association (CCMA)
- The Heritage Council
- Local Development Company Network (LDCN)
- 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 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)
- Education & Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)
- Horse Sport Ireland

**Strategy Implementation and Oversight Group (SIOG):**

The members of the group consist of representatives from the following organisations:

- Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Chair)
- Mountaineering Ireland
- Coillte
- Fáilte Ireland
- Sport Ireland
- Waterways Ireland
- The Irish Farmers Association (IFA)
- Ireland's Association for Adventure Tourism (IAAT)
- The County and City Management Association (CCMA)

**Sustainable Upland Recreation Subgroup (SURS):**

The membership of the group consists of representatives from the following organisations:

- Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (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 Shléíbhe MAP area
- Local Development Network Company (LDCN)
- Coillte

**Responsible Behaviour Subgroup:**

The membership of the group consists of representatives from the following organisations:

- Sport Ireland (Chair)
- Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht
- Fáilte Ireland
- Irish Farmers Association (IFA)
- Irish Association for Adventure Tourism (IAAT)
- Waterways Ireland
- Mountaineering Ireland
- National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS)

**Visitor Management Working Group**

The membership of the group consists of representatives from the following organisations:

- Fáilte Ireland (Chair)
- Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht
- Sport Ireland
- Irish Farmers Association (IFA)
- Irish Association of Adventure Tourism (IAAT)
- Waterways Ireland
- Mountaineering Ireland
- National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS)
- Coillte
- Leave no Trace.

**Guidance on Infrastructure Development Subgroup**

The membership of the group consists of representatives from the following organisations:

- Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Chair)
- Sport Ireland
- Fáilte Ireland
- Department of Transport
- Leave no Trace.
- Local Development Company Network (LDCN)

- Waterways Ireland
- Coillte
- Canoeing Ireland
- BnM
- National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS)
- Heritage Council
- Local Authority

# Appendix 2:

## Current mandate for Comhairle na Tuaithe

The role of Comhairle na Tuaithe is to:

1. Act as a forum for consultation and collaboration between stakeholders on matters related to outdoor recreation, particularly in the open countryside.
2. 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.
3. Advise the Minister on issues relating to access to private lands for recreational purposes.
4. Identify and advise the Minister on opportunities to develop rural enterprises based on outdoor recreation.
5. Through its members, promote and encourage responsible use and preservation of the countryside in the context of increased outdoor recreational activity.
6. Consider the scope for the development of a new National Strategy for Outdoor Recreation, taking account of recent developments and investments across the sector.
7. Review and, if necessary, update Ireland's Countryside Code.
8. Meet as an advisory body, up to four times annually.
9. Develop an annual work programme in furtherance of this mandate and form a limited number of sub-groups which may be necessary to progress elements of the work programme.
10. Organise, at least once a year, a wider Consultation Forum on Outdoor Recreation to broaden the reach and engagement of Comhairle with stakeholders.
11. Provide an annual report to the Minister on the work of Comhairle na Tuaithe, within 6 months of the end of each calendar year.