Glendalough and Wicklow Mountains National Park Visitor Experience

Overview

County Wicklow is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Ireland, enjoying a national and international reputation for its spectacular landscape, its unique ancient monastic settlement, and its cultural, architectural, and archaeological heritage.

Glendalough is a tourist hub within the National Park and is recognised as a significant attraction due to the volume of visitors it attracts year on year. The area is recognised as a site of **international significance** due to its **ecclesiastical city** and **natural heritage** and as a **potential World Heritage Property**, qualities which have led to significant visitor numbers and associated **management issues** in recent years.

In 2020, Fáilte Ireland, in partnership with National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), the Office of Public Works (OPW), the National Monuments Service (NMS) and Wicklow County Council commissioned Consarc Design Group with a multidisciplinary team to deliver a Visitor Experience and Management Masterplan for Glendalough and Wicklow Mountains National Park and Visitor Orientation Recommendations for Co. Wicklow.

Key issues identified in the brief included:

- Improving the regional and seasonal spread of visitors
- Encouraging more tourists to visit outside seasonal peaks
- Encouraging people to visit areas outside of the main attractions all intended to mitigate against regional and seasonal congestion and deliver a better experience for all.
- Increase dwell time in the county

Assessment Process

The consultancy team undertook an assessment and consultation process to discern **key issues** which effect the National Park experience. In tandem with this consultation and **information gathering,** preliminary assessments were carried out of the **existing ecological** and **archaeological sensitivities** of the area.

Key issues include:

Traffic access, car parking & Public Transport
Congestion at peak times & increase dwell times.

Visitor Management
Avoid congestion on key days throughout the year.
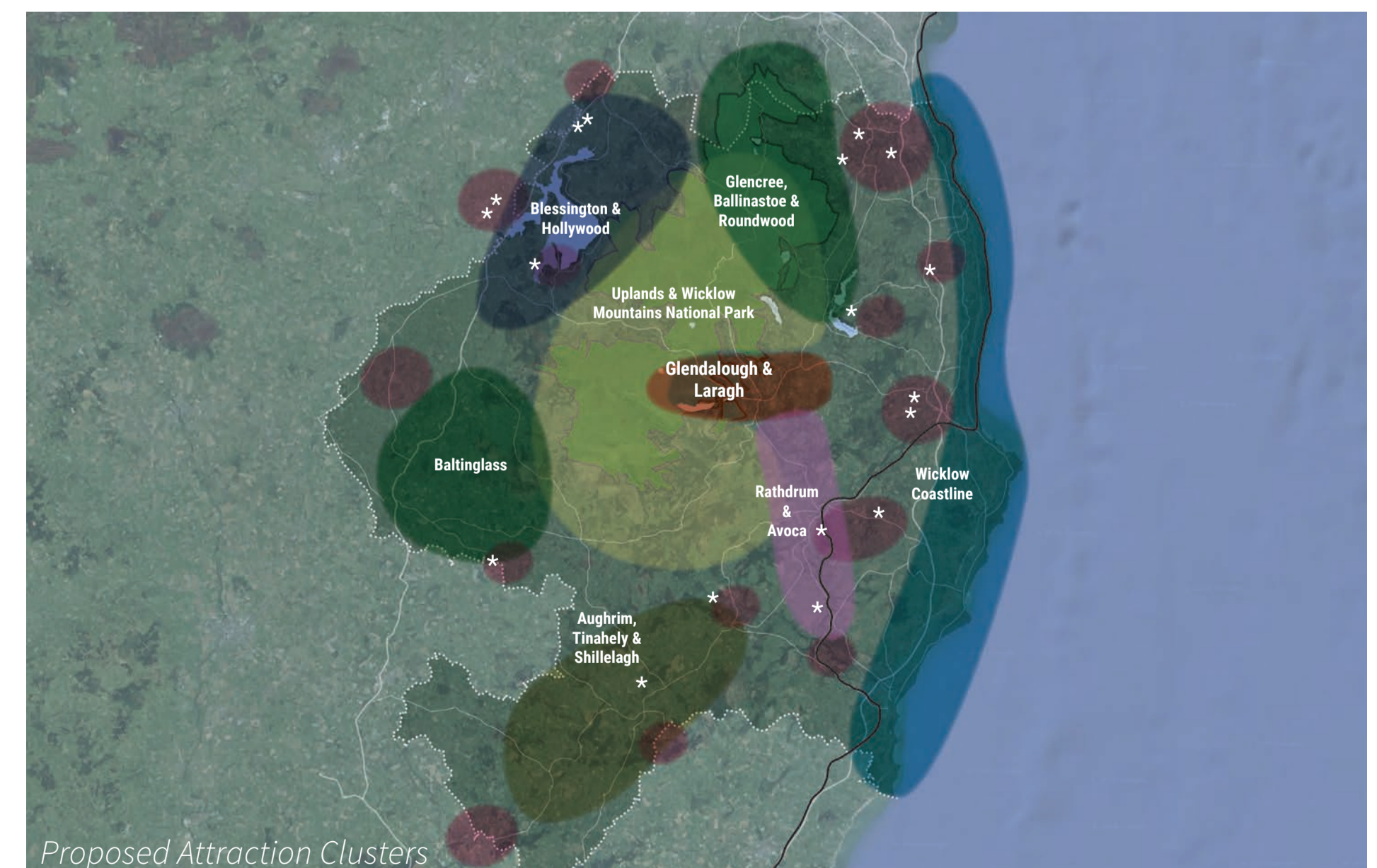
Ecological Impact
Concerns including deterioration of existing habitats.

Archaeology Impact
Concerns on disruption and potential negative impacts on heritage.

Interpretation
Suitable information to convey the significance of the Wicklow Mountains National Park & the unique ecclesiastical heritage within the Glendalough valley.

Proposed Attraction Clusters

Clustering Strategy

Ownership and **responsibility** of attractions within the County is split amongst a myriad of state bodies, local authorities, private estates, farmers and individuals. This presents particular challenges for overall management and strategic operations.

This Plan outlines a **strategy** for **clustering,** and **promotion** of an **overall cohesion of visitor offer**. This will increase the profile and attractiveness of Wicklow County as a place to visit, **encouraging exploration** of multiple destinations of interest, with associated extended stays.

Visitor Dispersal

The need for **visitor dispersal** from Glendalough, **sites** and **key recreation access points** in the northern part of the County is widely accepted. This is supported in part by counter data (pedestrian and vehicle).

The need for **Visitor Management** has been further exacerbated by the growing popularity of walking, cycling and other forms of outdoor recreation in recent years, and most critically by the post COVID surge in visitors to the outdoors. There is clear need for an effective strategy to **disperse visitor traffic** to new, enhanced or less well-known sites across the county, to spread the recreational load, but also the benefits of sustainable Toursim.

The following recommendations are made, working together to effectively disperse visitors to sites across the county -

- Enhanced online presence - particularly via social media channels
- Enhanced quality on the ground - improvements to basic visitor infrastructure
- Tourism product enhancement and development
- Strengthened outdoor recreation hubs
- Increased Connectivity, respecting the sensitive cultural landscape
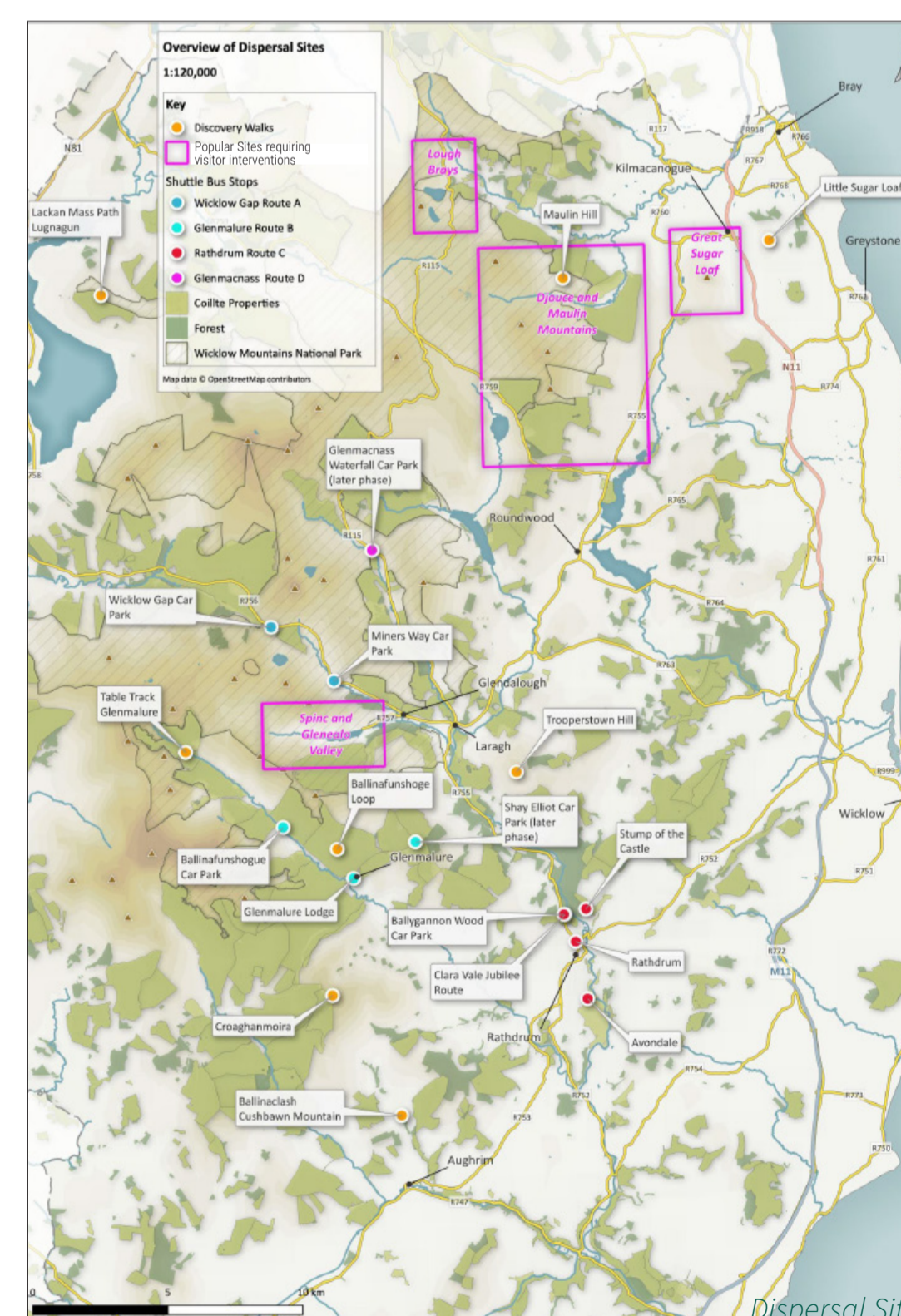
Dispersal Sites

Wider Wicklow Strategy

- Improving the **quality** and **sustainability** of **outdoor recreation sites** is integral to achieving effective dispersal within the Park and on a county wide level.

- A planned and coordinated approach to the **promotion** of lesser well-known sites and experiences with an emphasis on reaching key visitor cohorts through an **enhanced online presence**, particularly via social media channels, is essential to this.

- **Dispersal** to sustainable sites is key to avoid replicating issues elsewhere

- Continued **monitoring** of visitor behaviour via a comprehensive system of visitor counting and feedback from staff on the ground will be necessary to assess the impact of the dispersal strategy and to respond to visitor management issues arising from increased footfall.

- **Off road cycling - planned greenway developments** will significantly increase off road cycling provision, however a gap remains for a family focused site with purpose built off road cycle trail network and other complimentary family friendly offering

- **Glendalough Valley** – first time visitors to Wicklow will want to visit Glendalough therefore the site will continue to experience high visitor numbers. **Extending the footprint of the visitor area along the valley floor to Laragh** can effectively decompress the area between Glendalough and lower/upper lakes while offering opportunities to enhance the visitor experience and extend dwell time.

Your Opinion
How to Respond:

Please scan this QR code and submit your feedback.

GLENDALOUGH AND WICKLOW MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK VISITOR EXPERIENCE

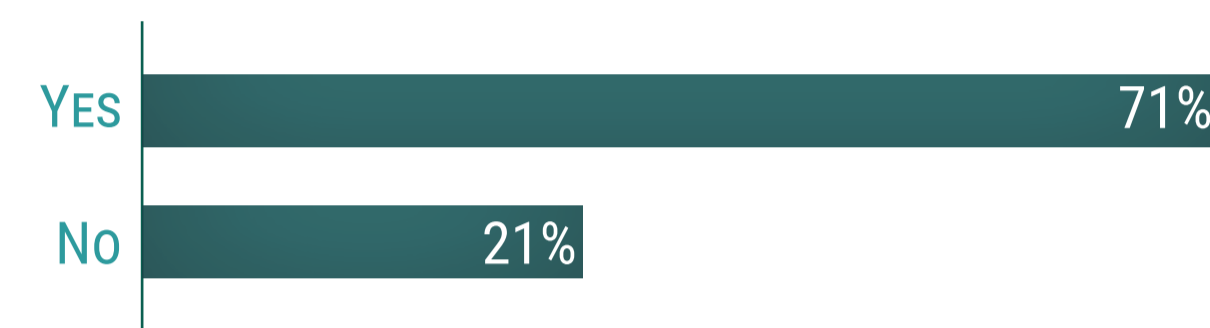## GLENDALOUGH VALLEY PLAN

Feedback from Public Consultation

237 Responses were received from Consultation which ran from February 22nd to the 26th March 2021.
A key message that arose from the consultation was that there is a convergence of visitors within the Glendalough Valley; at the existing visitor centre and associated upper and lower car parks. On a number of days throughout the year, this creates significant congestion, **resulting in excessive traffic, overflowing of car parks, a detrimental visitor experience, and it could lead to a negative impact on the archaeologically and environmentally sensitive landscape.**

What is your experience of Glendalough?

Hiking trails MONASTIC NATURE archaeology
Biodiversity PEACEFUL Over-Saturated TRAFFIC Tourists LOCAL FOOD overcrowded
History WILDERNESS Litter Security toilets
Pilgrimage Congestion

Do you broadly agree with the draft proposals?

YES	71%
No	21%

The Wicklow County Development Plan vision for Laragh-Glendalough 2022 is for the area to be a prime **high-quality** and **long-stay tourist** destination renowned for its natural beauty and the exceptional quality and setting of its unique **natural, archaeological and built heritage**.
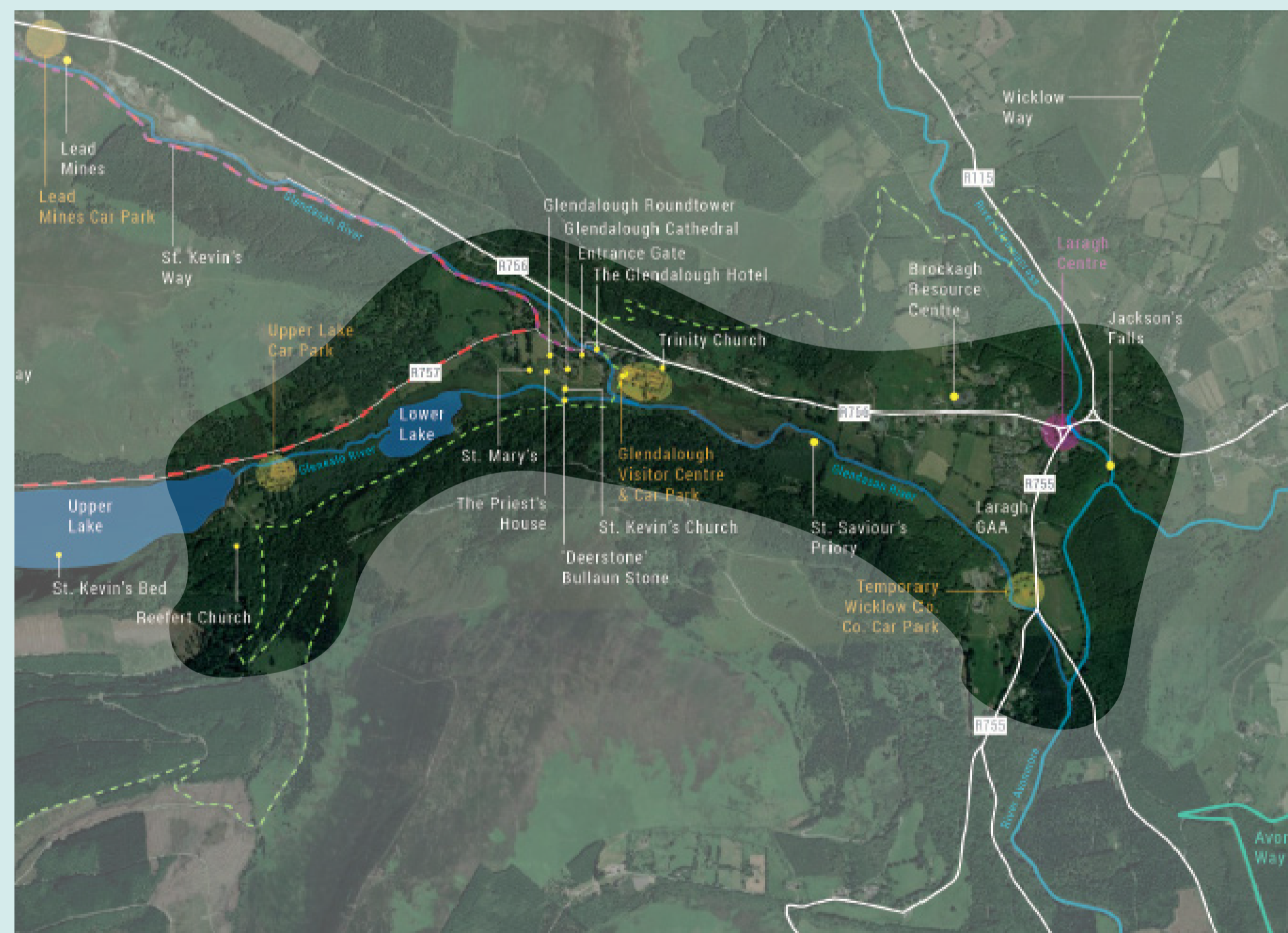
The vision seeks to establish a framework for the **planned, coordinated** and **sustainable development** of the area that **safeguards the heritage** and **amenity** of Glendalough while facilitating Laragh in developing as the service centre and becoming an **accessible 'gateway'** to the attractions at Glendalough and the surrounding area.
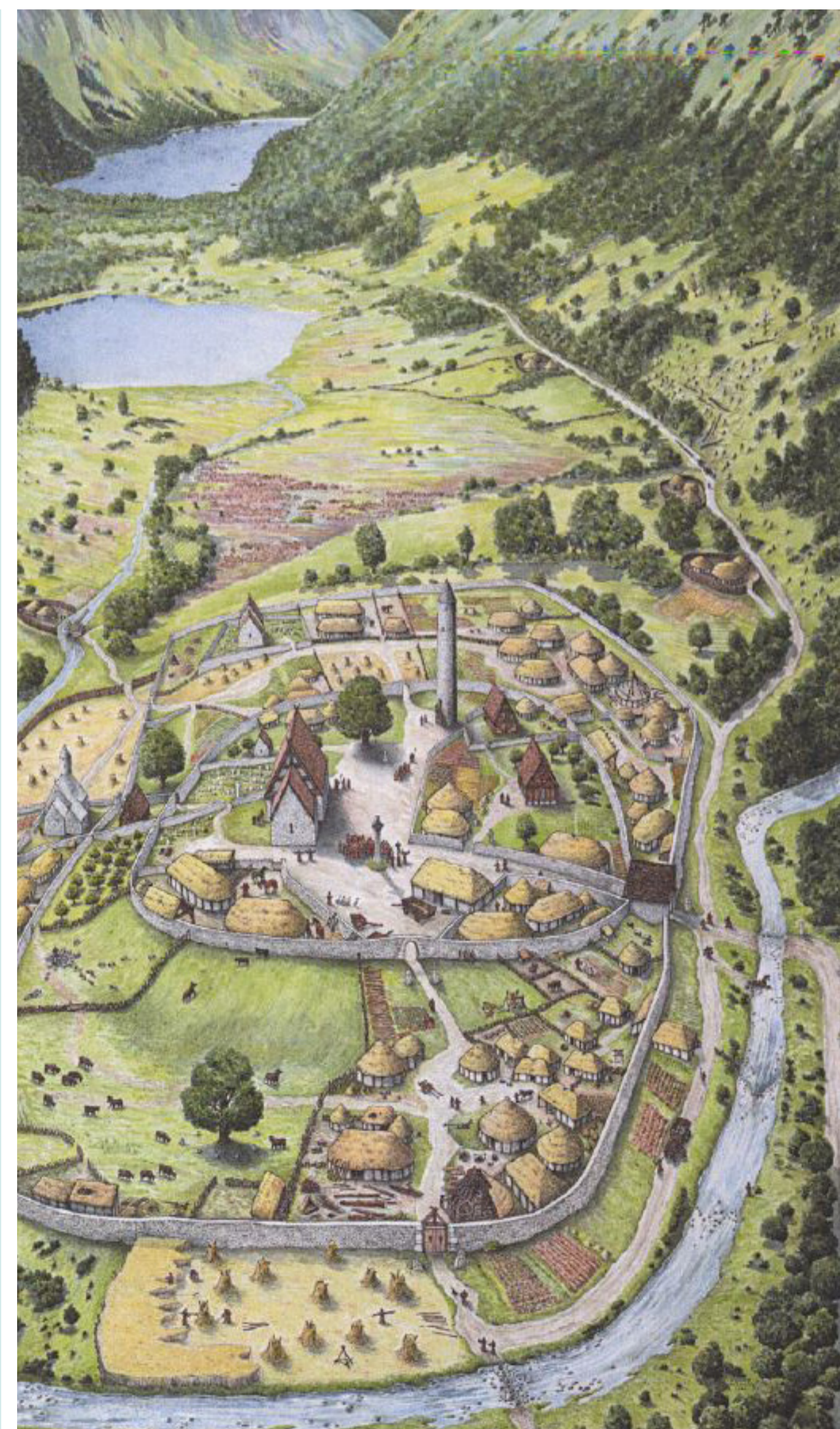
PROPOSALS

Aims of the Plan

Enhance the natural, built and cultural heritage

Objectives
• Record of research and **knowledge** on natural, built and archaeological heritage
• Quantify the **impacts of visitors** and tourism
• Provide **capital support** for enhancement
• Set targets for **improvement of biodiversity**

Actions
• Commission **research** to cover gaps in knowledge
• Assist in any future pursuance by Wicklow Co Co of **World Heritage Status** for Glendalough
• **Erosion Repair** project for upland trails
• Support **habitat restoration** & enhancement projects on public and private land
• **Visitor interpretation** and education programme

Disperse the benefits and impacts of tourism

Objectives
• Increase numbers of **visitors** staying in Wicklow for **multi-day** experiences
• Actively **disperse visitors** throughout the County
• Pro-active **visitor management** to avoid congestion and enhance experience

Actions
• Website for visitor **information** – Publicising/Marketing.
• Co-ordinated **signage**
• **Traffic management** and **Transport offers** inc. Walker drop-off shuttle bus service
• **Recreational Masterplan**
• Develop mechanisms to **co-ordinate visitor management**

Improve the visitor experience

Objectives
• Understanding markets and tailoring facilities
• Improving the quality of the **visitor facilities**
• Developing the varied experiences to **encourage** and enhance the multi-day stays
• Improved interpretation and learning about the receiving landscapes

Actions
• Qualitative visitor surveys
• New visitor arrival **Hub** in Laragh
• Improved and re-purposed **Visitor Centre**
• New Visitor services at **Upper Lake**
• Development of car parks and shuttle bus transport
• Co-ordinated **visitor information signage** across Wicklow

LARAGH TO GLENDALOUGH

MASTERPLAN

A variety of path route options were considered during the plan preparation and subject to an appraisal process including local consultation.

The proposal shown is regarded as the optimum route taking into account heritage conservation and habitat protection factors but the final details will be subject to detailed assessment at Planning stage. Details of the options considered can be found on Page 224 of the Draft Plan.

Elevated Boardwalk

Productive Landscape

Lower Lake Nature Point

Trinity Church

New Bridge

Valley Viewpoint

Jackson Falls Valley Walk

Approximate path alignment along monastic area.

Monastic Site

Lower Lake

Monastic Site

Upper Lake

Deerstone

LARAGH

Eastern Car Park

New path link to Trooperstown Hill

Ballard Wood

Upper Lake Viewpoint

Existing Bridge and Viewpoint

Approximate path from Laragh to the Monastic Site.

Interpretation & Sculpture

Link to Avonmore Way

Play area

Glendalough Viewpoint

New Bridge

KEY

||||| Proposed Multi-Use Path	ℹ Visitors Facilities
New Path/Boardwalk	ⓐ Point of interest
Main Visitor Route	Ⓟ Parking
Green Road	Ⓟ Parking (Peak Days)
All Ability Path	Shuttle Bus Route
Proposed cycle route	○ Shuttle Bus Stop
Existing path network	

LARAGH TO GLENDALOUGH

ARRIVAL AT LARAGH

It is proposed to geographically spread the visitor journey within the Glendalough valley, incorporating the village of Laragh as a gateway to the Glendalough experience.
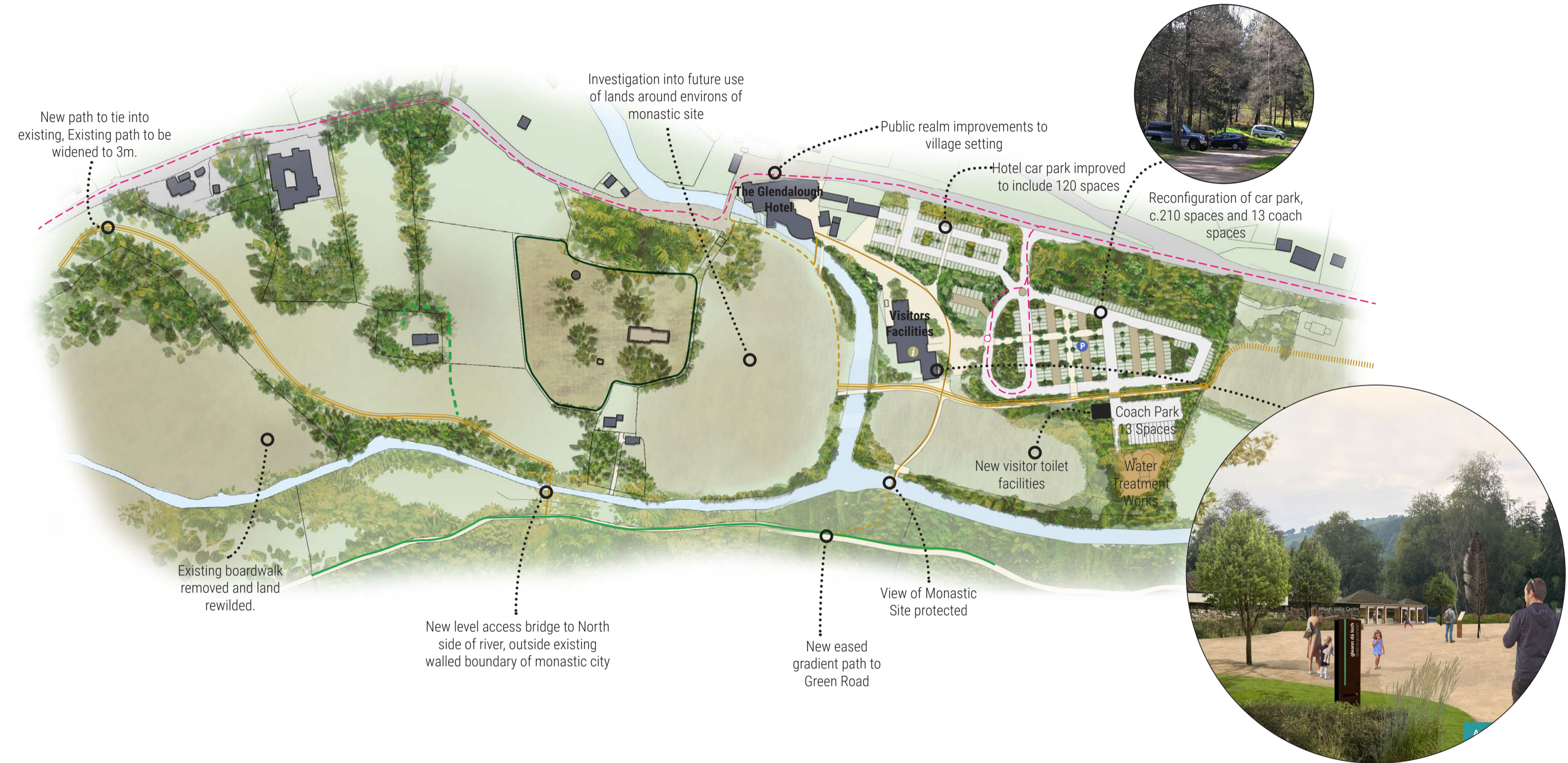
Illustrated below are potential opportunities for car parking, subject to agreements with landowners

Potential new walking route to additional parking via Jackson Falls

New bridge across water course

GAA pitch re-purposed for potential car parking

New woodland path to connect parking area to visitor facilities

Potential additional parking for peak day

Path to Jackson Falls and additional parking

New footbridge, connecting to wide walking routes

Existing Temporary Car Park (to be decommissioned)

New visitor facilities including bike hire, shuttle bus drop off and disabled parking

Coach parking

Motor Home Parking

New woodland car park including coach overflow area and potential Motor home/camper van overnight facility

Link to Avonmore Way

Key

New Path/ Boardwalk
Main Visitor Route
Green Road
Existing Path Network
Shuttle Bus Route

ℹ️ Visitor Facilities
🅿 Parking
🅿 Parking (Peak Days)
⭕ Shuttle Bus Stop

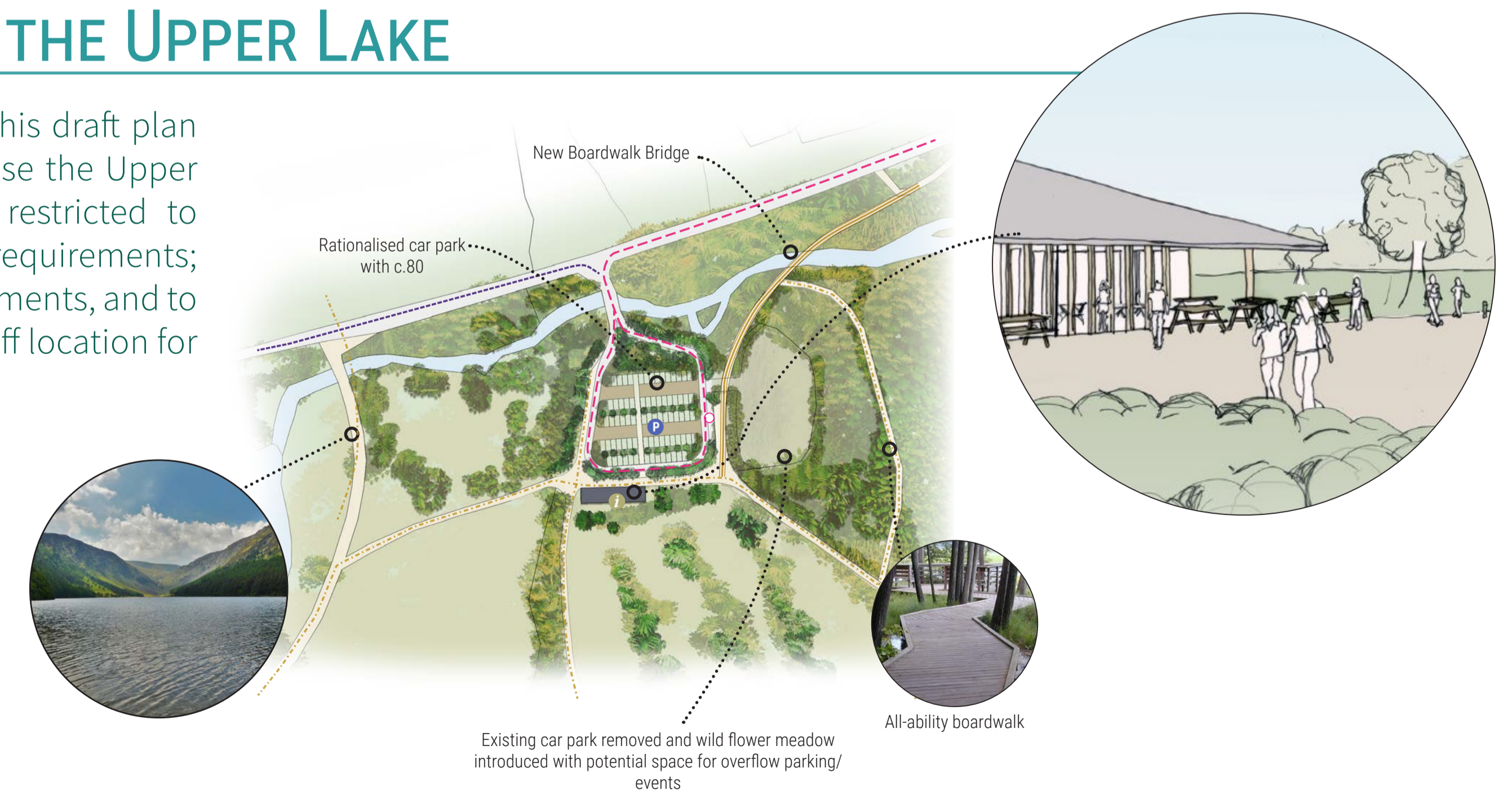## ARRIVAL AT GLENDALOUGH VISITOR CENTRE

The new repurposed visitor centre will deliver a transformational interpretive experience, highlighting the unique landscape beyond. The immersivity of the visitor experience will be enhanced through an open plan room where interpretation will explore how the landscape changed through natural and manmade forces.

New path to tie into existing, Existing path to be widened to 3m.

Investigation into future use of lands around environs of monastic site

Public realm improvements to village setting

The Glendalough Hotel

Hotel car park improved to include 120 spaces

Reconfiguration of car park, c.210 spaces and 13 coach spaces

Visitors Facilities

Coach Park 13 Spaces

New visitor toilet facilities

Water Treatment Works

Existing boardwalk removed and land rewilded.

New level access bridge to North side of river, outside existing walled boundary of monastic city

View of Monastic Site protected

New eased gradient path to Green Road

ARRIVING AT THE UPPER LAKE

It is proposed within this draft plan to reduce and rationalise the Upper Lake car park, to be restricted to essential car parking requirements; i.e. accessibility requirements, and to provide the final drop off location for an electric shuttle bus.

Seasonal restrictions to parking are detailed in the masterplan document.

New Boardwalk Bridge

Rationalised car park with c.80

Existing car park removed and wild flower meadow introduced with potential space for overflow parking/events

All-ability boardwalk

LARAGH TO GLENDALOUGH

PHASING

Implementation will require co-operation and co-ordination between the various state bodies, Wicklow County Council, the local community and a number of private owners and operators. We believe all parties have much to gain from this approach as it will balance the various needs, desires, responsibilities and ambitions.

Phase 1 — 1 - 2 years

- Develop a detailed **Conservation Management Plan** for the valley to guide all proposed interventions
- Introduction of **Variable Messaging Signage**
- Secure long-term parking at Laragh and remodel existing car parks
- **First phase of Visitor Hub**
- Establish **seasonal shuttle bus service**
- New **signage** and **interpretation**, founded on overall branding strategy
- Existing **Visitor Centre** and **walks** at Monastic site **remodelled**
- **Accessible trail** from Visitor Centre to the Monastic Site
- Rewilding of landscape, investment in **all-ability trail network** and **habitat protection**
- **New Visitor services** built at the Upper Lake Car Park
- **Investigation** around **environs** of monastic site.
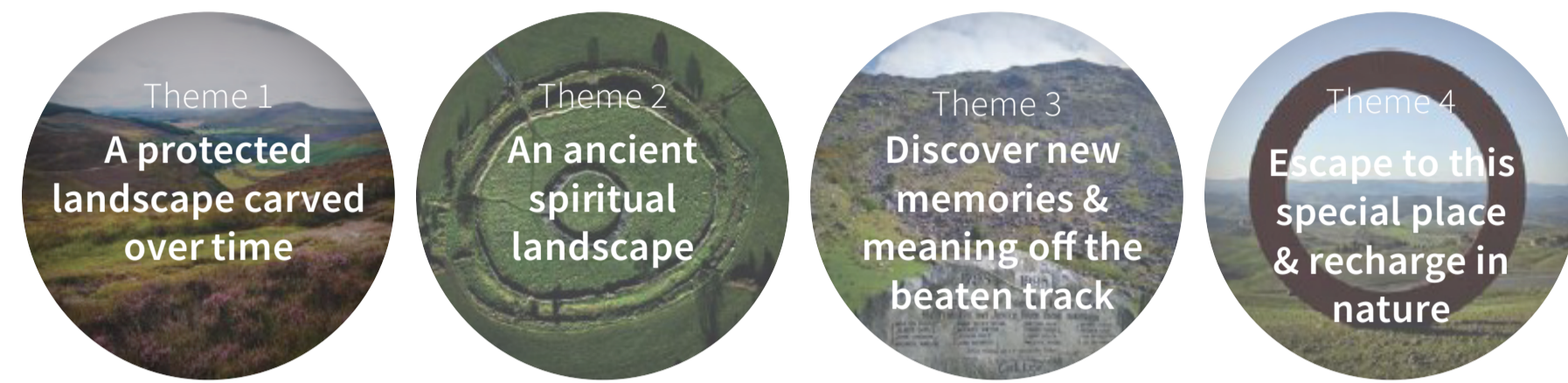
Phase 2 — 3 - 5 years

- **New visitor Arrival hub developed**
- **Car Parks developed** and or expanded, subject to impact assessment
- **Trading stands relocated** from current monastic site entrance gates
- Land between Visitor Centre and Monastic Site and back to Trinity Church relandscaped as the second phase of **restoring the wider monastic landscape**.
- **Seasonal access** timelines established
- Ongoing investment in **sustainable trail network** and **habitat enhancement**

Phase 3 — 6 - 7 years

- **Parking** provision in Laragh increased to **full capacity**, with new car parks North East and South of the village and **linking trails,** with **new visitor orientation Hub** becoming a primary entry point for visitors.
- Expansion of **coach parking**
- Appropriate levels of **natural restoration of the monastic landscape** in line with a Conservation Management Plan to be developed
- **Re-naturing of the valley** ongoing with continued investment in a **sustainable trail network** and **habitat protection**

INTERPRETATION

Themes below can inform the interpretive direction of the visitor experience, focusing the narrative and ensuring any media adhere to the themes.

Theme 1 — **A protected landscape carved over time**

Theme 2 — **An ancient spiritual landscape**

Theme 3 — **Discover new memories & meaning off the beaten track**

Theme 4 — **Escape to this special place & recharge in nature**

Arrival Hub

Visitors will be encouraged to begin and end their interpretive journey at a new orientation hub. Interpretation will begin to set the scene and wayfinding information will orientate them.

Motivational and meaningful interpretive messaging will encourage the visitor to begin their experience in Glendalough Valley.

Visitor Centre

The new repurposed visitor centre will deliver a transformational interpretive experience.

As the visitor passes through this innovative space, experiential and interpretive interventions will take them on a journey away from the everyday.
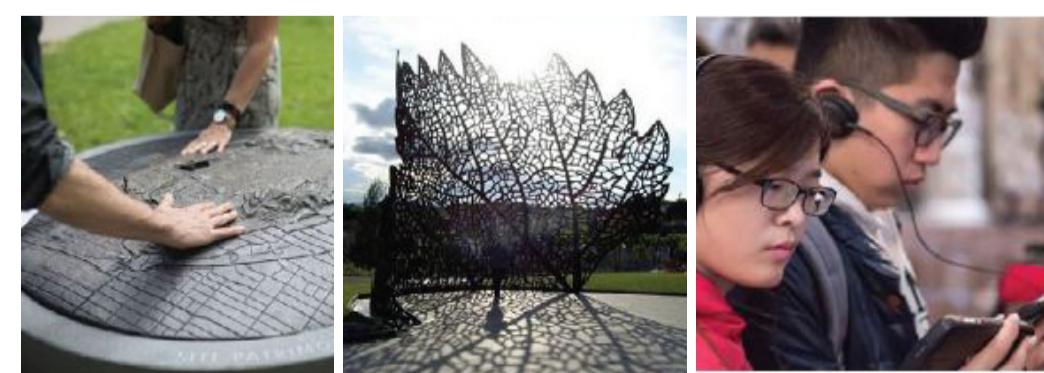
Immersive and interactive, the space intensifies the visitors' experience of nature. Approaching a swaying ancient oak, the leaves will change colour and drop before slowing and carefully replenishing again.

Strategic viewing points will enhance the visitor connection to the outside space, motivating the visitor to explore the surrounding areas.
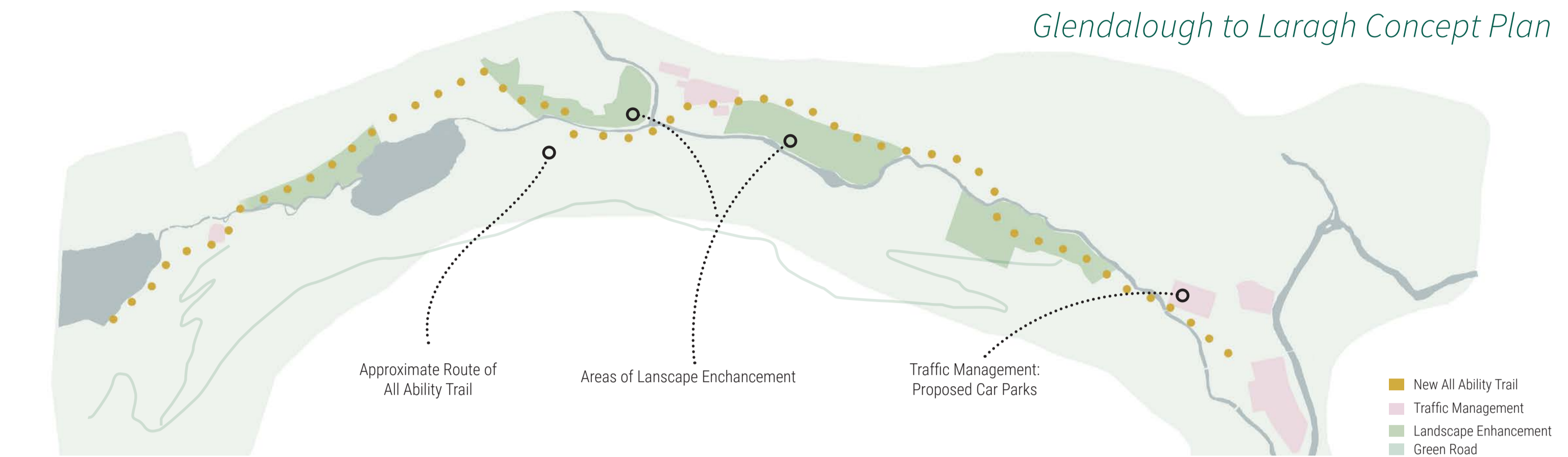
Upper Lake

Sensory and artistic interpretation will reinforce the Upper Lakes key natural assets, way finding and discovery sites.
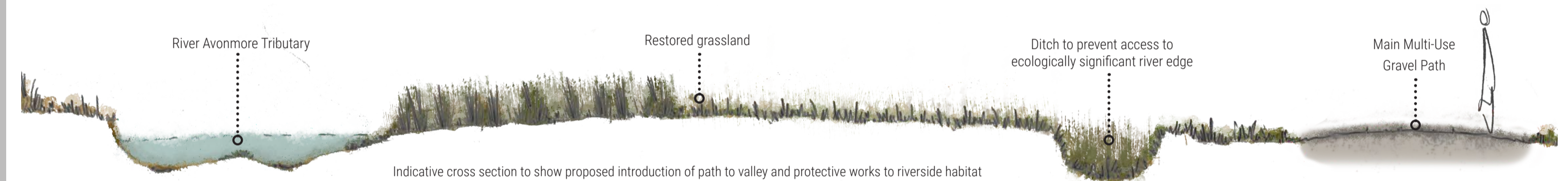
Glendalough to Laragh Concept Plan

Approximate Route of All Ability Trail

Areas of Lanscape Enchancement

Traffic Management: Proposed Car Parks

- New All Ability Trail
- Traffic Management
- Landscape Enhancement
- Green Road

Ecology & Landscape Enhancement

River Crossing Points

Boardwalk

- Proposed **new elevated path** following route of existing boardwalk to **reduce impact on wet woodland** ecosystem.
- Existing fields to south of proposed path planted to **extend existing woodland.**
- River crossing points to be designed to ensure **minimal impact on riverbank ecosystems.**
- Rewilding to encourage development of **species rich grassland**
- Gorse planting encouraged along path edge to **protect riverside environment** from pedestrian access.
- Marshland enhanced and protected.

River Avonmore Tributary

Restored grassland

Ditch to prevent access to ecologically significant river edge

Main Multi-Use Gravel Path

Indicative cross section to show proposed introduction of path to valley and protective works to riverside habitat

Traffic Management

Queues & Congestion

Shared Shuttle Bus Journeys

A primary observation has been the convergence of visitors in one concentrated point within the Glendalough valley. In order to break the observed current cycle of concentration of visitors in one place, it is proposed to geographically spread the visitor journey within the Glendalough valley, incorporating the village of Laragh as a gateway to the Glendalough experience.

New All Ability Trail

This route would connect the main trail network to a new visitor orientation hub, aiding with the dispersal of visitors, and will provide greater access to the natural and built heritage within the valley; creating a compelling visitor experience, with a wide array of varying natural scenery, with archaeological points of interest and viewpoints.

All Ability route connecting Upper Lake to Laragh

Upper Lake Viewpoint	Visitors Facilities & Car Park		Monastic Site (Deerstone Bridge)	Visitor Facilities & Car Park		Visitor Facilities & Bike Hire	Main Car Park		Eastern Car Park
200m	1.4km		300m	1.8km		250m	800m		
				4.8km					