GLENDALOUGH
AND WICKLOW MOUNTAINS
NATIONAL PARK

Draft Visitor Experience & Management Masterplan
November 2022

Glendalough
A Living Landscape

Our landscapes are a layered palimpsest of geological and human activity, displaying the complex processes which have shaped the natural environment and which have influenced human interaction. While dramatic mountainous and valley landscapes can offer a vision of picturesque beauty which can facilitate an instant 'snapshot' moment, there clearly exists a deeper value as to why we feel such a strong a connection with this natural scenery.

In her poetic prose, 'The Living Mountain', Nan Shepherd describes the intricate play of soil, altitude, weather and living organisms within mountainous regions as having a 'mysterious' effect on our senses. It is this 'mysterious' effect which led to the Wicklow Mountains valley being used as a medieval religious retreat, and it is this same quietness and serenity which makes the area popular with outdoor enthusiasts today.

The Wicklow Mountains National Park epitomises a fusion of tangible and intangible values, displaying a natural picturesque beauty overlaid with layers of cultural and built heritage.

It is in these layers of cultural and built heritage, wildlife and habitat, that meaning is found, and while even a superficial exposure brings reward, rich experiences are to be had in a deeper understanding of, and immersion in, all these complex interactions. The value of Glendalough and the Wicklow Mountains National Park, then, is not just in its tourism based economic importance to the region, important though that is, but in its much wider contribution to human experience, reinforcing our recognition of the need for protection and enhancement of wild landscapes and habitats, bringing alive the purpose of official designations, proving the need for investment in their long term care and showing how human interaction is compatible with the sustainability of heritage landscapes.

Contents

WICKLOW MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK

1.0   Introduction

The Visitor Experience and Management Masterplan (VEMMP) for Wicklow Mountains National Park is a seven to ten year plan. It is designed to provide a phased roadmap for enhancing the visitor experience within the setting of Glendalough and the Wicklow Mountains National Park, and to establish key objectives to protect the area and support local communities, against which future projects will be assessed.

The central challenge for the VEMMP is how to balance the ever-increasing desire for people to visit and experience Glendalough and the Wicklow Mountains National Park, welcome as that is, with the overriding importance of protecting and conserving those values which give the area its significance.

This VEMMP sets out a strategy for achieving the over-arching objective for Wicklow Mountains National Park which is to create a sustainable balance between enhancing the area as a major visitor destination based on outdoor recreation, trail networks, and direct experiences with nature, and conserving its natural, built and cultural heritage. The Draft Plan sets out an iterative process which will continually adapt to the needs of all users of the National Park and will balance the core conservation and heritage values with visitor demand.

The Visitor Experience and Management Masterplan is informed by the previously published Tourism Interpretation Master Plan (TIMP), which identifies the unique character of each of Ireland's National Parks and seeks to guide the phased and coherent development of sustainable tourism within the parks.
This document is also informed by the existing Wicklow County Development Plan 2016-2022, and the supplementary vision for Laragh-Glendalough 2022 which highlights the aspiration for the area to be a prime high quality and long-stay tourist destination renowned for its natural beauty and its unique archaeological and built heritage.

A Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) has informed each stage of the evolution of this Plan and has resulted in a series of evidence-based measures that will ensure that the implementation of the Visitor Experience and Management Masterplan will cause no harm to the sensitive surrounding environment.

This Visitor Experience and Management Masterplan is firmly based on the belief that it is possible to achieve that balance – all the proposals for development of the physical infrastructure and attractions are carefully considered against their impact on the significance of the place and a series of enhancements will ensure that significance grows.

1.1 Project Background

The Wicklow Mountains are 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 (Gleann Dá Loch) is a well-established tourist hub within the National Park and is recognised as a major cultural attraction due to the volume of visitors it attracts year on year – around one million visitors annually. The area is rightly recognised as a site of national, even international significance due to its monastic city and natural heritage and is a potential World Heritage Site, but those very qualities have unfortunately led to visitor management issues in recent years.

Given the exponential growth in outdoor recreational participation in recent years, it has been recognised that a visitor management plan is required to ensure that the impacts are manageable, sustainable, and not detrimental to the continuance of the natural, built and cultural heritage.

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.

The proposals are intended to balance the core conservation and heritage values of the NPWS, NMS and OPW with increased and sustainable tourism demand and to set out a co-ordinated approach between the different parties leading to a shared vision and plan with the visitor experience at the centre for future developments.

Key issues identified in the brief included:

- Improving the regional and seasonal spread of visitors
- Persuading 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.

It is a key aspiration of this plan to ensure that visitors are spread geographically throughout the wider Wicklow region and throughout the year to minimise peaks and bottlenecks which can become unmanageable, and can be detrimental to visitor experience as well as ecological and heritage sensitivities.

Wicklow is a renowned destination for outdoor enthusiasts (overseas and domestic) who enjoy being active in nature, through activities such as walking, hiking, rock climbing, cycling and mountain biking. Wicklow offers a vast array of marked trails in some of Ireland's most unique landscapes and scenery. The Plan is to help make this range of assets more accessible to walkers and cyclists through better awareness and promotion of the range of options along with the provision of alternative access points and improved facilities. This 'dispersal' strategy is aimed at spreading the benefits and impacts of tourism more evenly across the county and encouraging people to visit where there is sustainable infrastructure – robust trails, car parking facilities or accessible public transport

The VEMMP seeks to provide guidance on future development within the Wicklow Mountains National Park, ensuring sustainable tourism within the Park and wider area is married with the promotion and support of conservation.
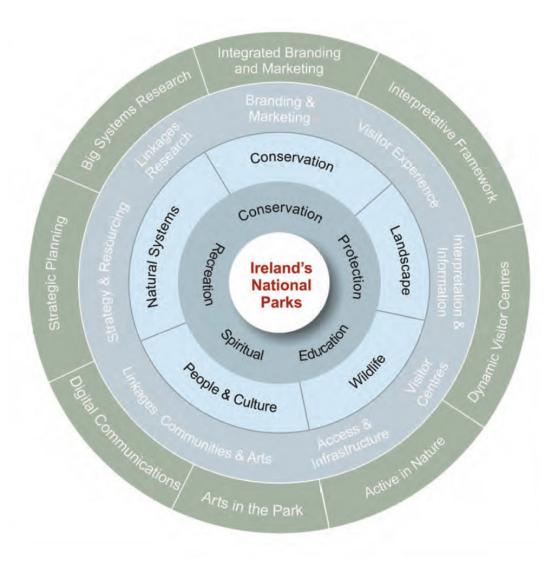
WICKLOW MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK

2.0   Summary of Report Contents

The Visitor Experience and Management Masterplan comprises a number of key elements which combine to create an integrated set of Aims, Objectives and Actions. A suite of technical reports detail the appraisal of the existing context relevant to each aspect, and lays out the aims, objectives and actions to be addressed by any new proposals within the area. This Summary sets out the contents of each of those reports and indicates where they fit into the overall Plan.

The contents can be divided into four broad sections

A   **UNDERSTANDING**
Fact gathering of existing background information

B   **PROPOSALS**
Recommendations to address key emerging issues

C   **DELIVERY**
Recommendations for implementing and managing proposals

D   **REVIEW**
Strategic Environmental Assessment and Economic Appraisal

The technical documents which combine to form the integrated set of Aims, Objectives and Actions are:

2.0.1

Section A   UNDERSTANDING

A1   Visitor Analysis
Author: Outdoor Recreation NI

This is a technical background document which brings together known information about previous and existing visitor patterns, trends and numbers. The work on this identified the difficulties in collating information from different sources, but it sets out how much visitor traffic in Wicklow is generated by day trips from Dublin and how that skews the visitor hospitality infrastructure and incomes in the County.

A2   Gazetteer of Existing Attractions, Trails and Activity sites and Initial Analysis
Author: The Paul Hogarth Company

In the early stages of the project the team visited and collected information on a wide range of attractions and activities. This was supplemented during the extensive public consultation process and we now have a comprehensive record of visitor sites, although this is fluid with new initiatives constantly coming on stream. The conclusion is that in general there is no shortage of visitor activity opportunities in Wicklow but some surprising gaps in provision (such as the amount of off road family cycling currently available) were identified.

A3   Traffic Surveys (McShane)
Author: Kevin McShane Ltd

The early information gathering process identified that although issues of congestion around Glendalough and some upland care parks were well known, there was little in the way of relevant data in respect to the number of people per car and parking dwell times.

An extensive traffic and car parking survey was undertaken the weekend of 21st - 24th May 2021 in conjunction with Wicklow County Council and the results are presented in a technical report. This weekend is normally one of the busiest of the year and proved to be instructive in the extent of congestion, car queuing, car parking in obtrusive areas and other issues detrimental to a good visitor experience. The data obtained from these surveys also allows collation with the pedestrian visitor data as set out in the Visitor Analysis paper and gives a factual basis for the calculation of car park requirements in and around Laragh, and indicators of upland car parking requirements.

A4   Analysis and Concept Development
Author: The Paul Hogarth Company

Analysis of the initial surveys, consultations and site visits led to the formation of a concept development of the Plan. This has been reviewed and developed through the consultation and detailed design process but is included here to show how the thinking behind the plan emerged.

A5   Feedback on Public Consultation
Author: The Paul Hogarth Company

A detailed report on the public consultation process has been prepared by the Paul Hogarth Company and widely circulated so consultees could see the results of the feedback and the teams interpretation of it. In general there was wide support for the initial aims and objectives of the plan which have followed through into the proposals.

SECTION A
UNDERSTANDING

2.0.2   Section B   PROPOSALS

B1   Recreational Trail Masterplan - Two parts and Appendices
Author: Outdoor Recreation NI

This is a county wide set of proposals for enhancement of the existing trail network based on achieving the three aims of the Plan – Enhancement, Dispersal and Improvement. Part 1 sets out the overall strategy with a series of objectives and actions including the need for a central, online information hub, a co-ordinated approach to signage, improvements to car parks and facilities, designation of sustainable 'Discovery Walks' capable of absorbing large numbers of people looking for an introduction to the outdoor environment. Other recommendations relate to off road cycling including the lack of family cycling opportunities and the potential for the Outdoor Recreation Hubs as designated by the Wicklow Outdoor Recreation Forum. Part 2 of the report sets out detailed proposals for the upgrading of a number of the key sites to make them robust and environmentally sustainable and improve the visitor experience.
The proposals in these plans are integrated into the overall Masterplan and in particular the Glendalough Valley Plan as sustainable walking and cycling infrastructure is a key part of this, as set out below.

B2   Glendalough Valley Plan
Author: The Paul Hogarth Company, Tandem Design, Consarc Design Group, Kevin McShane Ltd

The Masterplan contains a significant series of proposals for the Laragh-Glendalough valley aimed at transforming the visitor experience and minimising the impacts on the local community. The rationale for them is contained in the 'Principles and Phases' paper, illustrated in the Hogarth and Consarc maps and drawings and the Tandem Interpretation Strategy. It is recognised that overnight change will be difficult and so the 'Principles and Phases' paper sets out a proposed phasing strategy by which incremental change builds up to the longer term transformation. The physical proposals go hand in hand with the management and delivery proposals set out separately, but the two issues are integral, as discussed below.

B3   Wicklow Wide Strategies
Author: The Paul Hogarth Company, Tandem Design

An important part of the overall brief was County Wicklow wide 'Visitor Orientation' and the proposals for this are contained in a series of visuals prepared by the Hogarth team and a interpretation strategy developed by Tandem. Both these documents seek to build on the strengths of the many attractions, activities and sites throughout the County and proposes a series of Visitor Hubs, spread through the County, building on the particular strengths, assets and potential of each area.

SECTION B
PROPOSALS

2.0.3   Section C   DELIVERY

C1   Management and Delivery Structures
Author: Consarc Design Group

It was recognised in the Plan brief that co-ordinated working across a number of state bodies; Wicklow CoCo and the local community, private owners and businesses was crucial to the delivery of a comprehensive and broadly acceptable Plan. This was reinforced during the public consultation process with strongly worded responses suggesting that support for the Plan was dependant on a credible and resourced delivery structure. It is recognised that this is a complicated area but it is crucial to overall success and so the Management and Delivery Paper sets out a phased approach to the development of integrated management structures. Early collaborative projects between the stakeholders could include a mechanism for the collecting and collating of visitor counter data (traffic and pedestrians), a combined approach to signage and a one stop shop for visitor information – both for the paying attractions and the trail access details.

A separate 'Management Case Studies' document gives examples of three current approaches to management of similar areas and issues – in the Mournes, the River Nore Catchment and Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park in Scotland

SECTION C
DELIVERY

2.0.4   **Section D**   **REVIEW DOCUMENTS**

D1   **Strategic Environmental Assessment**
Author: Doyle Kent, Faith Wilson

The proposals have been developed in conjunction with advice and input from the team's Planning and Environmental consultants, who will carry out a Strategic Environmental Assessment on the Draft Plan.

D2   **Economic Appraisal**
Author: Cogent, Consarc Design Group

An economic appraisal of the proposals will be prepared as they are formalised, with a review of the options and phases as set out in the detailed plans. This is supported by preparation of budget capital costs for the recommended physical infrastructure.

SECTION D
REVIEW

3.0 SECTION A
UNDERSTANDING
summary

3.1 Assessing the Significance of Wicklow Mountains National Park

The significance of Glendalough and the Wicklow Mountains National Park can be summarised as follows:

- The sublime landscape setting; a dramatic glacial landscape interwoven with historic ecclesiastic and productive human activity.

- The connectivity between spirituality and natural serenity which saw Glendalough as a centre of hermitage in Celtic Ireland through St Kevin and subsequent pilgrimage routes.

- The monastic settlement; one of the largest and best-preserved medieval ecclesiastical sites in Ireland of global significance, with evidence of human occupation from Neolithic times.

- The importance and value of the landscape and habitat – designated both as a SAC (Special Area of Conservation), and a SPA (Special Protection Area) as part of the European Natura 2000 Network of protected sites, all founded on the areas of ecological importance to a number of key species and habitats.

- The National Park designation which brings with it a recognition of the need for and potential of management and visitor services including environmental education, landscape and habitat enhancement. The state ownership is a recognition of the national importance of Wicklow Mountains to the people of Ireland.

- Mining Heritage; the Wicklow Mountains are part of a huge granitic mass, which extends from Dun Laoghaire to New Ross forming the largest expanse in northwestern Europe incorporating The Glendalough, Glenmalure and Glendasan valleys

- The Great Military Road: Running from Rathfarnham to Aughavanna, the Great Military Road indicates a fascinating history of the 1798 rebellion in Wicklow. Covering 58 km, it was constructed between 1801 and 1809 and is still a key route through the Wicklow Mountains, although mostly used by cars today. It traverses the inhospitable mountain blanket bog habitats which are a key feature of the Wicklow Uplands.

3.2   Assessment Process

Throughout the duration of this project in 2020 and 2021, the VEMMP consultancy team undertook an assessment and consultation process to discern key issues which effect the Wicklow Mountains National Park experience. Current and historic visitor numbers were reviewed along with traffic numbers to give factual credence to concerns raised at community and stakeholder consultation events. In tandem with this consultation and information gathering, detailed site surveys were conducted to assess the existing ecological and archaeological sensitivities of the area.

A thorough research and cataloguing exercise was undertaken of existing attractions, trails and activity sites within the wider Wicklow area to ascertain the current visitor offer within the region. The output of this consultation is shown in **Appendix A2**.

A survey of the existing signage, wayfinding and interpretation strategy was undertaken to inform key narrative elements to be further explored through interpretation, and how this is currently used to disperse visitors throughout the Wicklow Mountains National Park and wider Wicklow area.

The consultation process was conducted online and in person with statutory bodies, local businesses and staff as well as the local community to understand the current perceptions around issues such as visitor numbers, congestion, and attractions. The feedback received was used to inform further research and further refinement of the VEMMP.

3.3   Visitor Analysis

Wicklow has drawn visitors for centuries, at least since the time of St Kevin, attracted by the natural beauty and power of its mountains, valleys rivers and forests, and it is these innate qualities that continue to bring significant numbers of visitors to the area.

Glendalough is currently the most visited attraction in Wicklow with visitors drawn to the unique landscape, history and natural ecology of the area and the wider National Park. The annual number of visitors to Glendalough and the Wicklow Mountains National Park demonstrates the key role of providing compelling visitor experiences as a tourism driver.

To inform the Visitor analysis, the following has taken place:
• Review of current visitor data
• Review of relevant available research & insights
• One-to-one consultation with key stakeholders

The findings of the Visitor Analysis are incorporated in **Appendix A1**.

According to Fáilte Ireland stated visitor numbers, Glendalough holds a dominant position as the primary visitor attraction in County Wicklow, receiving significantly higher numbers of visitors than other popular attractions such as Powerscourt House, National Sealife Centre or Russborough House and Parklands.

In general, pedestrian numbers in Glendalough valley are trending upwards over the past few years. Visitor counter numbers indicate a particular increase in pedestrian traffic on the Green Road and at the archway entrance to the monastery. However, traffic on the monastery bridge (between the visitor centre and the Green Road) has remained relatively steady.

The broad insights provided within **Appendix A1** demonstrate that the majority of current visitor focus is within the monastery and the Green Road, and to a lesser extent, the boardwalk. These are not replicated in other areas such as Derrybawn and Glenealo Bridge. This aligns to insights gained during the consultation process, which revealed that most visitors tend to remain on the valley floor.

Pedestrian and vehicular counter data reveal that the numbers of visitors to

Glendalough may have exceeded capacity of car parking and visitor service provision on at least 30 days during 2019. A co-ordinated programme of ongoing monitoring and analysis of pedestrian and vehicle movements around Glendalough and Laragh is required to evidence visitor volumes and frequency of peak and super-peak days. It could be speculated that many of these visitors are on relatively short trips (including timebound coach tour visits), limiting their ability to explore the trail network more widely beyond the Green Road (from the visitor centre) and the Miner's Road and Poulanass waterfall area (from the Upper Lake car park)

The key challenge for sustainable tourism within Wicklow is to ensure that the positive effects of visits to Glendalough are felt throughout the wider region, promoting longer stays within the area, and visits to wider areas beyond the confines of the National Park. It is intended that the positive effects experienced as a consequence of the proposed development enhancements within this draft plan are felt not only within the National Park, but in the wider area; providing opportunities for private sector enterprise within the region.

Wicklow already offers a rich visitor experience and is an invaluable resource of what people - local residents and visitors alike - are seeking out, and there is so much potential to enhance, develop and deepen those experiences. However the research, surveys and consultations undertaken in the preparation of this report indicates that there are limitations and threats to that potential which need to be addressed by proactive and co-ordinated visitor management. This Masterplan seeks to set out a series of actions to realise that potential.

Attraction	2017	2018	2019
Glendalough Monument & Site	639,826	732,824	732,362
Powerscourt House, Gardens & Waterfall	501,601	472,523	487,876
Russborough House & Parklands		130,000	200,000

Visitor numbers to Wicklow top visitor attractions 2017-2019

3.4   Identification of Issues

Throughout the consultation process, a number of key issues emerged as common concerns and potential threats to the continued use, enjoyment and sustainability of Glendalough and the Wicklow Mountains National Park. It can be said that all of these key points are mutually connected; for example ineffective visitor management can lead to traffic congestion, which in turn can lead to subsequent impact on archaeological and ecological sensitivities due to human activity.

The main issues identified were:

• **Traffic access and car parking**
Causing congestion at peak times. Traffic data and observations on the current existing congestion experienced in the Glendalough valley and upland carparks is documented in **Appendix A3.**

• **Visitor Management**:
It was noted and observed that visitors are not suitably managed, directed or dispersed to avoid congestion on key days throughout the year.

• **Ecology Concerns**:
including erosion of existing habitats and impact on the designated area.

• **Archaeology Concerns**:
including disruption and potential damage to heritage assets within the area

• **Interpretation**:
The need for suitable information to foster care, respect and knowledge of the significance of the Wicklow Mountains National Park and Glendalough valley was a key recurring issue within the research and issue identification process.

Ecological Impact

Traffic and Car parking

Visitor Management

Archaeological Impact

Interpretation

Identification of issues

3.4.1

Visitor Management

Current annual visitor numbers to Glendalough are circa 1,000,000 which is a recent substantial increase, giving rise to congestion problems on key days. The major issues are largely caused by extreme peaks of demand on relatively few days rather than the total annual numbers, but the overall increases are putting a strain on capacity and this will increase, with the risk of both visitor disappointment and environmental impact. Existing facilities, including the visitor centre and car park, were designed for a smaller number of anticipated visitors as is experienced today, and as such have recently struggled to deal with peak visitor demand.

The challenge is to design in capacity for what will be an inevitable increase in visitor numbers and so mitigate congestion and ensure visitors have a great experience whilst avoiding environmental impact and habitat damage.

The issues associated with the management of visitors is discussed in detail in **Section C - Delivery.**

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Identification of issues

3.4.2   Traffic and Car Parking

The main entrance to the Glendalough Visitor Centre and two main car parks are located on the R757 road, which extends eastwards towards the village of Laragh, and to the North connects with the R756 which extends west over Turlough Hill and North to Poulaphouca Lake.

The area has experienced significant issues with traffic management in the peak season, pushing the overflow of cars onto the R757. Once the car park has reached capacity, and visitors and vehicles continue to arrive, the vehicular overflow extends out of the Park onto the main R757, causing significant problems as the road becomes impassable at times.

Further to the Glendalough car parks, other visitor attractions within the Wicklow Mountains have experienced over crowding due to high demand for parking spaces. Car parks at areas such as Lough Tay Viewing Point, Baravore, Ballinafunshoge, and Ballinastoe Wood have experienced cars parking beyond the extents of the designated car park due to high demand.

A number of surveys have been carried out by Kevin McShane Ltd to determine the capacity and capability of the traffic infrastructure currently provided. The findings of these are detailed in the Technical Note in **Appendix A3**. From analysis of visitor numbers, it can be seen that numbers to the area rose sharply typically during a number of key dates throughout the year – 'peak' and 'super peak' days. The survey information shows that on 'peak' and 'super peak' days the current capacity and visitor management measures are inadequate to prevent congestion, queuing, inappropriately placed temporary car parks, significant inconvenience to local residents and a poor quality visitor experience. This has been acknowledged for many years but the survey data contained in this report shows empirical proof and identifies the scale of the problem to be addressed.

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Identification of issues

3.4.3   Interpretation

Interpretation is primarily a communication process that helps people make sense of, and understand more about what it is they are experiencing when visiting a site, collection or event. It is an essential tool which contributes to the National Parks and Wildlife Service satisfying its responsibilities to educate and engage with the public about the importance of the natural environment.

Fáilte Ireland's manual 'Sharing Our Stories: Using interpretation to improve the visitors' experience at heritage sites' states that:

> *"Interpretation is rather like storytelling; it pulls the right story out of the bag, dusts it down and presents it to people in a coherent way. Stories often contain facts and truth but they draw on emotions, create atmosphere, encourage imagination and can provoke questions and debate."*

The history of the Wicklow Mountains National Park is so rich, that it would be a disservice to the landscape and to those visiting if the importance of its heritage was not effectively communicated. Our heritage provides clues to our past and how our society has evolved. It helps us examine our history and traditions and enables us develop an awareness about ourselves. It helps us understand and explain why we are the way we are. The entire area has a special place in Irish history; geologically, naturally and culturally. In visiting the area, visitors should come away with an understanding of its place in history, and their own.
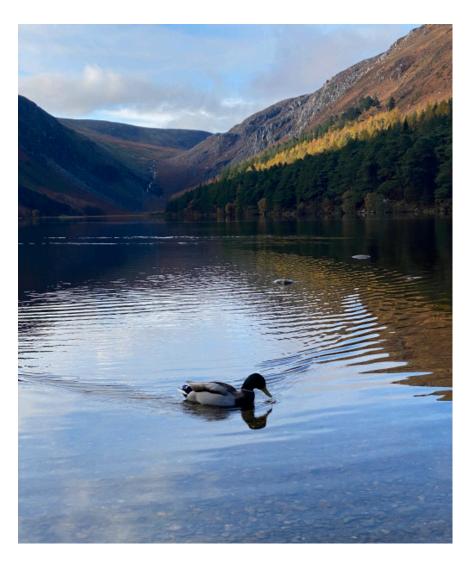
Currently within the Wicklow Mountains National Park, most opportunities for interpretation are restricted to specific and fixed areas such as the existing visitor centre, or text heavy entablatures on existing monuments. It has been noted that there is currently little opportunity for visitors to direct their own interpretative and informal learning journey as they move through the national park. The existing visitor centre's adjacency to the main car park seems to assume a model of learning and engagement that requires visitors to 'load up' on information before their onward journey. Rather than incorporating interpretation throughout the visitor journey, the current layout requires the visitor to gain information regarding all aspects of the Park's heritage and significance at the visitor centre, which they must retain in order to apply during their self-guided exploration of the park. This would not now be regarded as best practice in helping visitors understand and interpret the landscape they are journeying through.

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Identification of issues

3.4.4   Ecological Impact

The Wicklow Mountains are a complex and unique uplands site, and as such, form part of a Special Area of Conservation due to its unique vegetation and habitats. Heath, blanket bog and other alpine vegetation give sustenance to deer, hares, badgers and otters among other mammals and birds. In all, twelve habitats listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive are found within the site. Several rare or protected plant and animal species occur, adding further to its value.

Marrying such an ecologically sensitive site with a significant footfall of visitors is a key consideration for any national park. The negative impact which visitors can have on sensitive ecological environments is acknowledged as an issue for national parks globally. While visitors come to these special places to enjoy their natural beauty, it is critical that the potential negative consequences of visitor impact are acknowledged and 'designed out' to effectively avoid detrimental impact on the environment. Within this VEMMP solutions have been sought to mitigate existing impacts which have been experienced as a consequence of the visitors and to offset these previous impacts by enhancing the natural resources within the National Park.

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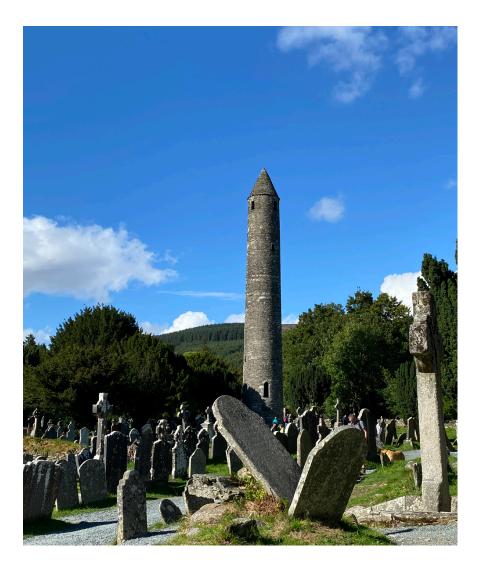
Identification of issues

3.4.5   Archaeological Impact

Historical landscapes, archaeological sites and natural parks are regarded largely as properties of scenic, social, cultural and historical importance, and that the requirement for a society to appreciate and understand its heritage is an opportunity which should be afforded to all. Reconciling this accessibility with the fragility of historic structures is a critical concern for historic sites throughout the world.

Archaeological sites and historical places are finite, fragile, and non-renewable resources. It is well recognised that increased tourism can lead to damage and general deterioration of historic sites if not appropriately managed. It is important, then, to ensure that best practice is adhered to ensure the archaeologically sensitive sites of Glendalough and the Wicklow Mountains are preserved for future use, and enhanced to provide the best learning experience for visitors.

Key guiding principles for ensuring this protection and enhancement should be to preserve and maintain the historic sites, and ensure that visitors come away with a suitable understanding of the significance of the place.

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3.5   Realising the potential

Awareness has grown in recent years of the threats to the environment and landscape character of Wicklow - erosion, congestion, climate change, pollution, littering and waste disposal are all contributing to the loss of habitat and biodiversity, damage to sites and monuments, a diminution of the integrity of the landscape and the loss of natural capital.

Such issues are not confined to Wicklow and are to a greater or lesser extent present throughout rural Ireland. However, the presence on the doorstep of over 2 million people in the greater Dublin area creates a unique situation for Wicklow bringing with it the pressures of car based day trips which generate traffic and congestion without, largely, the consequent financial contribution to the area from accommodation, hospitality and other visitor services. This inevitably creates tensions between host communities and visitors which are in no-one's interests.

The Covid 19 pandemic has not created these tensions but it has exacerbated them, with significant increases in day visitors and consequent congestion, littering, erosion, interruption of farm activities all at a time when hospitality was unable to fully function and there was little financial input into the local economy. All these issues were identified in the research and survey stages of this Plan and endorsed in the comprehensive public consultation process undertaken in the Spring of 2021.

The challenge is obvious – what measures are needed to reverse this friction, to become a virtuous circle of slow, sustainable tourism where investment in the natural and built environment goes hand in hand with improved visitor infrastructure, creating a better visitor experience, where visitors are proactively managed to avoid conflicts with the local communities and inward investment from overnight accommodation, activities, experiences and hospitality brings economic advantage?

There is no shortage of visitor attractions in Wicklow – trails, historic and cultural sites, gardens and estates, managed attractions and around it all, a special natural environment. However, there is a marked shortage in comprehensive, co-ordinated management of that resource. Ownership and responsibility is split amongst a myriad of state bodies, local authorities, private estates, farmers and individuals. All have their own responsibilities and pressures on resources but none have the responsibility or capacity for overall management. Dealing with congestion and other consequences of exceeding the carrying capacity of individual sites is in no single body's remit.

Glendalough is the prime example of this as although the issues and pressures occur in many other areas it is in the Laragh/Glendalough area that they are most manifest. The combination of the internationally recognised monastic site within a spectacular valley served by a narrow dead end road close to a small village within an hour's drive of over 2 million people creates a recipe for popularity and crowding. With a tradition of attracting visitors going back centuries, a reputation for safe car parking (unlike other, more remote, upland areas) availability of facilities and the comforting familiarity for repeat visitors, it is easy to understand why Glendalough gets between 750k – 1 million visitors a year – a figure that's puts it in the very top tier of Irish visitor attractions.

And yet, there is no overall mechanism for managing that visitor presence with responsibility split between National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), the Office of Public Works (OPW), National Monuments Service (NMS), Coillte and Wicklow County Council for their 'own' areas with significant private sector owners holding key assets and land. On the other two visitor sites in Ireland with such numbers (Giants Causeway WHS and Cliffs of Moher) there are single bodies with the responsibility for overall visitor management. In comparable areas in Britain eg Loch Lomond and the Trossachs or Cairngorms National Parks, there are now established mechanisms for the co-ordination of state bodies and private landowners and management structures that involve the local communities. In the Mournes, which like Wicklow has a significant population within an hour's drive, the Mourne Heritage Trust was established to co-ordinate the work of state bodies and Council and liaise with farmers and landowners, and despite under resourcing and limited funding has made a significant contribution to manging the many challenges.

4.0 SECTION B
PROPOSALS
summary

4.1   Aims of the Plan

From all the research, studies and surveys, discussions and consultations and debates, three key Aims for this Visitor Masterplan have emerged.

AIM 1   **ENHANCE** the natural, built and cultural heritage

AIM 2   **DISPERSE** the benefits and impacts of tourism

AIM 3   **IMPROVE** the visitor experience

The proposals set out in this draft Plan are designed to be interdependent to ensure a careful mutually beneficial balance between physical developments, protection and enhancement of the natural environment, improving the visitor experience and investment in staff and management resources. It is through this balance and careful integration that the long term success of the project will be achieved, as well as the justification for the investment and the certainty of delivery.

The principles of the iterative phasing of this plan are outlined in **appendix B2: Glendalough and Laragh Valley – Principles and Phases.** These Principles are the basis for a phased approach to development based on incremental steps to match demand. They are envisaged as a progression from small scale interventions as soon as possible to relieve existing pressures forward to longer-term, comprehensive and ambitious plans to transform the visitor experience in the valley.

Specific proposals outlined in the Recreational Trail Masterplan and Glendalough Valley Plan focus on high profile visitor destinations which are currently under significant pressure. Proposals are outlined for the short, medium and long term, which address those challenges, providing clear recommendations that will deliver visitor experiences of international quality, whilst safeguarding the highly sensitive built and natural heritage environments.

These proposals sit in the context of a vision for the County as a whole and how it can fulfil its tourism potential. The Wider Wicklow plan recognises the wealth of visitor destinations across the County. It also recognises the current visitor patterns with day visits, mainly from outside the County, to individual locations. The 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. This in turn will be supported by improved accommodation and hospitality provision.

The wider vision for the County will enhance the visitor profile and quality of experience, creating employment and increasing local economic benefits.

Each of the proposals itemised within Section B of this Visitor Experience and Management Masterplan seek to address the 3 key aims of the plan to offer an all encompassing solution to improve the existing Wicklow Mountains National Park. The proposals are noted in the following documents:

B1   **Recreational Trail Masterplan - Two parts and Appendices**
          Author: Outdoor Recreation NI

B2   **Glendalough Valley Plan**
          Author: The Paul Hogarth Company, Tandem Design, Consarc Design Group

B3   **Wicklow Wide Strategies**
          Author: The Paul Hogarth Company, Tandem Design

Wider Wicklow areas of interest

WICKLOW MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK

4.1.1   Aim 1 - Enhance

It is widely and generally accepted that the quality and integrity of the 'receiving' landscape – natural, built and cultural – is of crucial importance to the sustainability of tourism and the visitor experience – people will not want to visit a degraded and impoverished environment and it was clear from the consultation process that the public are very aware of issues around the quality of the landscape and environment, with comments on such issues as the importance of biodiversity, 'rewilding', replacement of coniferous plantations with native woodlands, control of the deer population etc.

There is recognition that all parts of our landscape are shaped by human activities over the centuries – nothing is completely 'natural' but at the same time there is a growing public sense that a re-balancing of 'development' and 'nature' is required. Through time, scars of previous generation's exploitation such as mining can become valued industrial heritage. That does not convey a rationale for future exploitation but the layers of change in a landscape are crucial to its understanding and through that its protection and enhancement, appreciation and enjoyment.

There are many studies and reports which show that current 'protection' measures are insufficient to halt a general decline in quality, in particular of the natural environment, and that significant intervention and investment is required to restore and enhance. There are many factors here, from the macro scale of climate change to individual actions, erosion by visitors or agricultural practices, insensitive development, loss of habitat and bio-diversity.

Understanding the landscapes and their significance is thus the starting point for putting in place intelligent measures to protect and enhance them and, of course, much is already known through decades of research and study by a wide range of bodies. Collating that knowledge to support a significant package of interventions is crucial at arriving at a series of objectives and actions. There are already some important projects underway to restore the condition of the upland bogs – in the private estate of Luggala and on public lands at Liffey Head Bog (Irish Water and NPWS). The primary motivation in both is carbon capture as a means of combating climate change but as this chimes with the public mood for nature protection and improvements to bio-diversity, it is arguably supportive of enhancing the visitor experience and public engagement with the Wicklow Uplands in a positive manner. This aim is all about investing in the resource – building up the natural capital – and objectives and actions to pursue this aim might include:

Objectives

• Create a central baseline record of research and knowledge on natural and built heritage

• Quantify the impacts of visitors and tourism

• Provide capital support for enhancement

• Set targets for improvement of bio-diversity

• Review the myriad of protection designations and how they are working in practice

Actions

• Commission research to cover gaps in knowledge

• Pursue World Heritage Status for Glendalough

• Erosion Repair project for upland trails

• Support bog rewetting and enhancement projects on public and private land

• Visitor interpretation and education programme

4.1.2   Aim 2 - Disperse

It is well known that tourism can bring both positive and negative impacts and the study has established that both are currently unevenly distributed across the County.

As the recent Wicklow CoCo commissioned Accommodation Study shows, Wicklow is under supplied in visitor accommodation based on visitor numbers largely because most international visitors stay in Dublin and are brought to Wicklow by bus on day trips so their revenue largely stays in Dublin and is not invested in local jobs and services. Likewise, the local visitor market is dominated by day trips from Dublin bringing little into the local economy. The impacts are also unevenly distributed, notable around Glendalough and Laragh, suffering from peak time congestion that mars the visitor experience and negatively impacts on the local community.

This Dispersal Strategy is developed on the basis of active management of the visitor experience – with a number of objectives and actions:

Objectives

- Increase numbers of visitors staying in Wicklow for multi-day experiences

- Actively disperse visitors more evenly throughout the County

- Pro-active visitor management to avoid congestion and enhance experience

———————————————

Actions

- 'One stop shop' – website for visitor information – including Publicising/Marketing/Social media messaging.

- Co-ordinated signage

- Transport offers

- Pricing mechanisms in car parks

- Traffic management

- Recreational Masterplan built around dispersal strategy – Discovery walks – new trails spread around the County

- Develop mechanisms to co-ordinate visitor management

- Walker drop-off shuttle bus service

4.1.3 **Aim 3 - Improve**

Wicklow has an international standard natural and built environment but it is generally recognised that the visitor experience does not match that quality and there is much to be done to improve it, in particular at Glendalough and Laragh as the premier visitor site, but throughout the County.

This aim is focussed on the capital investment in visitor infrastructure as a means to enhance the visitor experience and to support the Dispersal Strategy and the enhancement of the receiving landscape.

Objectives

• Understanding the markets and tailoring facilities accordingly

• Improving the quality of the visitor facilities in the Glendalough valley

• Developing the varied experiences to encourage the multi-day stays

• Active visitor management to enhance the experience

• Improved interpretation and learning about the receiving landscapes

Actions

• Qualitative visitor surveys to inform future visitor services

• New visitor arrival Hub in Laragh with supporting car parks and infrastructure - 'Arrival'

• Improved and re-purposed Visitor Centre incorporating natural and monastic heritage – 'Learning'

• New Visitor services at Upper Lake with relandscaping the car park- 'Discovery'

• Appropriate development of upland car parks and connecting shuttle buses

• Co-ordinated visitor information signage across Wicklow

4.2   Glendalough Valley Plan
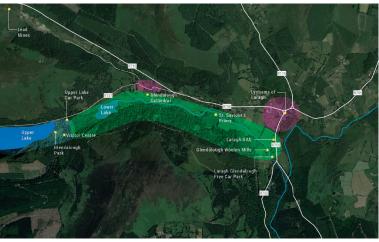
New Visitor Flow

One of the primary observations during the 9 month consultation process has been the convergence of visitors in one concentrated point within the Glendalough valley; at the existing visitor centre and associated upper and lower car parks. The majority of visitors coming from the Eastern, Dublin direction travel via the village of Laragh, arrive in the visitor centre car park, enjoy a walk around a looped trail, return to the car park and venture onwards in their car. On a number of days throughout the year, this creates significant congestion, resulting in excessive traffic, overabundance of overflowing car parking, a detrimental visitor experience, and it could lead to a negative impact on the archaeologically and environmentally sensitive landscape.

This occurs mostly due to the fact that the infrastructural arrangements of access and car parking in the valley are limited to these two car parks, with additional ad hoc overflow car parks facilitated by local landowners as a pragmatic response to excessive demand. The natural visitor behaviour of parking close to the visitor centre is facilitated by a lack of an alternative option, or lack of designated alternative visitor flow.
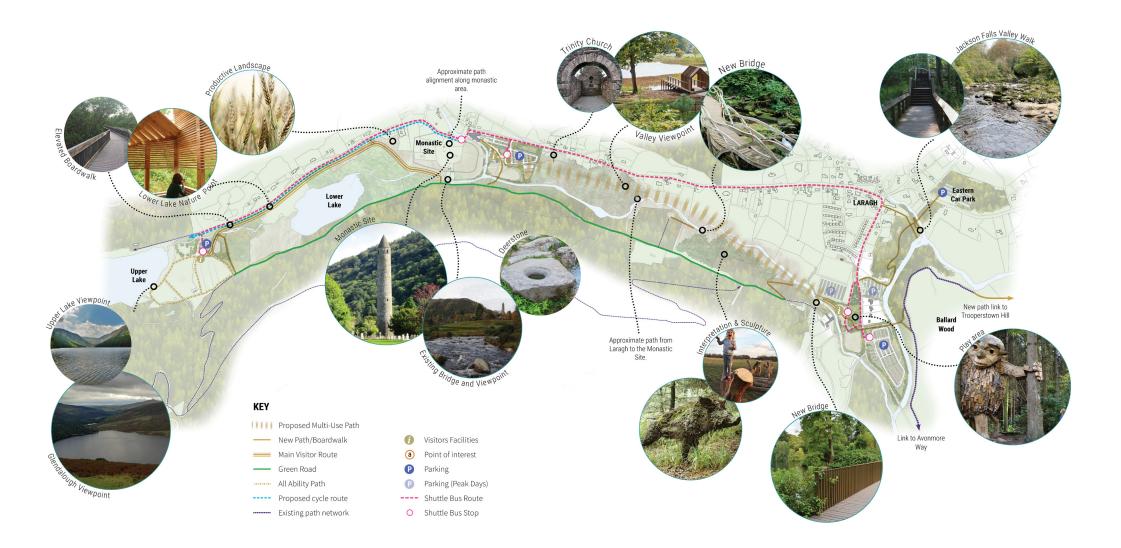
In order to break the observed current cycle of concentration of visitors in one place, it is proposed to geographically spread the visitor journey within the Glendalough valley, incorporating the village of Laragh as a gateway to the Glendalough experience. This principle of moving visitor arrival from the main attraction point is a strategy which has been utilised in many sensitive sites, including Bru na Boinne and Stonehenge. It is proposed that this will reduce the concentration of visitors in one place, and minimises associated negative impacts such as traffic, parking and environmental issues. Providing a prescribed visitor journey starting within the village of Laragh also critically addresses a key concern raised in the Laragh and Glendalough Settlement and Tourism Plan; that the economic benefit that should be resulting from the nearly 1 million visitors that come the area every year to the Glendalough valley area is not being fully realised by local commerce.

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.

In assessing a suitable visitor starting journey, it is critical to ensure that any bottleneck is not simply being pushed further down the valley, but that a comprehensive strategy is applied which provides an infrastructure for even visitor dispersal. Within the draft plan it is intended to introduce a phased strategy which combines new car parking within the village of Laragh, and a new all ability visitor trail up the Glendalough valley which not only alleviates pressures of traffic and footfall, but which also provides for a richer experience within the valley, allowing visitors to experience the full gamut of natural and built heritage within the historic valley. Full details of these proposals is available for reading in **Appendix B**.

Laragh - Glendalough Valley

Laragh - Glendalough Valley Plan

Productive Landscape

Trinity Church

Jackson Falls Valley Walk

Approximate path alignment along monastic area.

New Bridge

Valley Viewpoint

Elevated Boardwalk

Lower Lake Nature Point

Lower Lake

Monastic Site

Monastic Site

Eastern Car Park

LARAGH

Upper Lake

Deerstone

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

Play area

Glendalough Viewpoint

Link to Avonmore Way

New Bridge

KEY

Proposed Multi-Use Path	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	

Glendalough
Orientation Hub

Arriving at Laragh

Arriving at Laragh

It is recognised that there is a spatial disconnect between Laragh and Glendalough, and that the two are considered by many visitors as two distinct entities; separately signposted with different reasons for visiting one and not the other. It is proposed within this plan to bridge that gap, to help ensure the establishment of Laragh-Glendalough as an identifiable and attractive destination, and provide physical connections between them for pedestrians, cyclists, and public transport alternatives.

The plan proposes that the gateway for the Glendalough valley should be in Laragh, roughly 2km from the existing visitor centre. Locating a new visitor arrival hub by the Glendasan river, adjacent to the existing GAA club and Woollen Mill. This gateway building would signify the beginning of the visitor journey within the Glendalough valley, and provides an intuitive and exciting starting point for further discovery,

Relocating the main orientation and information centre to this location would remove the main point of entrance in the area from the archaeologically sensitive monastic site, removing car parking and peak visitor congestion from this area. The strategy for vehicular traffic parking is noted within **technical appendix A3.** As a general strategy, a number of potential sites on the outskirts of the centre of Laragh village have been identified for use as primary and overflow car parking, with potential for coach parking, camper van parking, and integration of electric powered shuttle bus.

On the worst day recorded, there were over 300 cars queuing for entry into the Glendalough car parks. This, in addition to the existing 248 car parking spaces, as well as 212 additional 'ad-hoc' car parking spaces would necessitate the need for 400 car parking spaces within the village of Laragh to ensure traffic congestion is mitigated.

(Peak Day)

Existing Temporary Car Park (to be decomissioned)

New All ability trail

The Glendalough to Laragh Masterplan shows the concept design for a new proposed 'all ability' trail connecting Laragh to the Monastic site and beyond to the Upper Lake and the Miner's Road. This trail will offer accessibility within the valley which currently is not possible within the existing Green Road trail.

This route would not only physically connect the main trail network to a new visitor orientation hub, aiding with the dispersal of visitors, but 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.

To provide a new pathway within the existing valley corridor will not only require protective measures to ensure there is no harm to the existing eco systems, but could also offer an opportunity for habitat restoration and ecological enhancements within the wider trail corridor.

A key advantage of relocating the Glendalough visitor orientation hub to Laragh is the opportunity it provides to establish the village as the main hub and trailhead for the wider walking and cycling network that radiates from here including the Wicklow Way, St Kevin's Way, Avonmore Way, Miner's Way and Trooperstown Hill.

New Interpretation

Visitors to Wicklow need a clear understanding of the county and its opportunities for experiences and facilities to provide comfort and guidance before and after a visit. This draft plan proposes that Laragh is the ideal location for a central gateway to these experiences, and the perfect location for visitors to better understand the National Park more widely; becoming aware of the different journeys available throughout Wicklow, and developing a sense of awe and wonder at this remarkable county.

The arrival point at Laragh has the potential to combine powerful storytelling with emotive messaging about the impact humans have had on the landscape and biodiversity of the Wicklow Mountains. This draft plan proposes Laragh as the gateway into the monastic settlement of Glendalough and into the Glendalough/ Glenealo valleys, providing visitors to these sites with key information to provide a frame for their experience, whilst also encouraging them to explore more widely throughout the region.

The arrival hub at Laragh enables visitors to appreciate the complex interaction between nature, geology and human experience as they traverse up the Glendalough Valley. Throughout the visitor journey within the valley, interpretation is proposed to be interspersed for to ensure information is conveyed to visitors in an interesting and educational manner.

gleann dá loch
Ionad na gcuairteoirí

Arriving at Glendalough Visitor Centre

Arriving at Glendalough Visitor Centre

Within this plan, it is proposed to refurbish and repurpose the existing visitor centre area within Glendalough to provide an engaging information and visitor orientation point along the wider Glendalough valley trail. Rather than forming the primary entrance point to the monastic city, as is currently the case, the existing visitor centre area is proposed to be a destination node within the overall valley trail where visitors can stop before onward travel. This provides a pitstop to allow visitors to know they are on the right path, and provides an opportunity for interpretive information and refreshment.

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. As the visitor passes through this innovative space, experiential and interpretive interventions will take them on a journey away from the everyday. It will transport them through time, to when St Kevin first walked through the land here and connect them with the natural, spiritual and built heritage of the Glendalough valley.

While the aim of this draft plan is to disperse visitor numbers throughout the Glendalough valley region, it is recognised that there will still be a requirement for direct access to the green road for shorter trail walks.

Within this plan, it is intended to reduce and rationalise the existing car park in front of the visitor centre. This is intended to provide a more direct and intuitive access from the car park area, through the visitor centre and onwards to the monastic city and trails around the two loughs beyond from which the region derives its name. It is also proposed that this will address a key issue experienced within the existing visitor centre area; that coach parking and visitor drop off will occur further away from the 'front door' of the visitor centre, which regularly obscures the visitor centre entrance and serves to disorientate the desired visitor flow.

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Arriving at the Upper Lake

The Upper Lake area car park is currently seen as the 'primary' car park for the Glendalough experience, a perception which results in overcrowding and congestion as visitors attempt to park as close to the Upper and Lower Lakes as possible.

Because of the large footfall and adjacency to the pleasant picnic area to the south, private food vendors currently provide a service of refreshments to visitors before their onward travel up the mountain trails. While this does fulfil the requirement of providing refreshments, the manner in which these temporary food vans are located within the Upper Lake car park is having an adverse effect on the amenity of the area. 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.

Providing a specifically designed refreshment pavilion will avoid the 'temporary' feel of the current scenario.

Approach to Upper Lake Pavilion from car park area

4.3   Wider Wicklow

County Wicklow has been visited by people from nearby and across the world for centuries. Across the county, there are many places of quality and interest to visitors, some already attracting significant numbers of people, others which are 'hidden gems'.

The analysis and consultation undertaken as part of this plan highlighted that there is an existing pattern of day-visits to the county, including from the greater Dublin area and beyond. Overnight and longer stays in the county are limited, with people tending to visit a specific destination. The 'brand' awareness of the county is limited, with 'Wicklow Mountains' having prominence. Specific places, even in the case of Glendalough are not synonymous for visitors with Wicklow County.

It has been observed that there is little coherence to the overall Wicklow visitor proposition, with some places being over-stretched whilst others have significant potential to deliver more and better. The Wider Wicklow plan seeks to address this challenge.
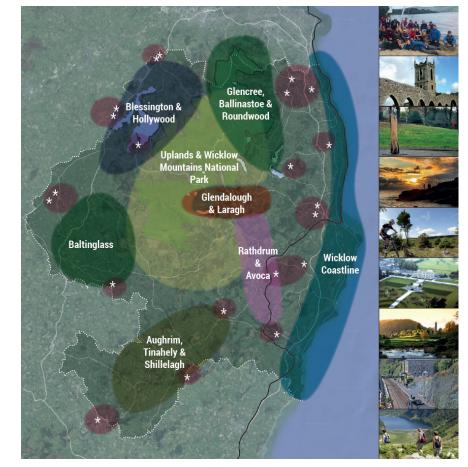
Increasing the length of stay
Central to the plan is the objective of encouraging people to stay longer, visiting other places in the area and enjoying the local hospitality.

Building on the Wicklow County Council Outdoor Recreation Strategy, the plan proposes a series of clusters. These will strengthen the synergy between places in parts of the county, consolidating their distinctiveness and the associated visitor experiences.

The following outlines the proposed clusters and the synergies to be consolidated:

Glendalough
Since St. Kevin journeyed to Glendalough in the 6th Century, inspired by the beauty of the lakes and valley, the area has been a place of pilgrimage and a place for people to visit from nearby and around the world. The valley is of international significance for its religious heritage. The industrial lead, zinc and silver mining heritage, dating to the 1790s provides another layer of significance, within the outstanding landscape setting. Added to this heritage/cultural focus, the valley has become a magnet for a wide range of outdoor recreational visitors.

Wider Wicklow areas of interest

The plans for the Glendalough Valley identify how the qualities of the area can be improved, by managing the impact of visitors, enhancing their experience and encouraging people to stay longer to enjoy and explore the area better. As outlined, key to this will be to encourage people to explore and enjoy other parts of the County, dispersing the pressure that is currently focussed on the Valley. It is in that context that the proposed 'clusters' are particularly important, spreading the pressure as well as the benefits of tourism.

Active Outdoors
To the north of the County, there is an existing 'cluster' around Roundwood and Ballinastoe, where the upland landscape is the setting for a wide range of outdoor activities, with a focus on destination mountain bike trails, that attract visitors from across Ireland and beyond.

It is proposed to consolidate the 'Active Outdoors' offer, strengthening the awareness of opportunities in the area, enhancing the quality of experience, including the hospitality/accommodation offer. A key element will be delivery of the Signature Trails identified in the Recreational Trails Masterplan.

Blessington
Bleessington is the hub for an area of rolling landscapes and expanses of water. With the mountain backdrop, this area lends itself to a 'gentle' enjoyment of outdoor activities. The Greenway, provides an extensive, safe and easily accessible facility. Likewise, the lakes, as relatively sheltered water bodies provide opportunities for a range of safe, readily accessible watersports.

Opportunities to consolidate this offer should be pursued, improving and enhancing the existing provision, with hospitality and accommodation provided.

Baltinglass
Stakeholder engagement highlighted the wealth of points of heritage interest in the area. The complex of hillforts is particularly impressive.

There is an opportunity for awareness of the heritage of the area to be strengthened, encouraging exploration of the towns, villages and surrounding landscape.

Tinahely & Shillelagh
To the south of the county is a landscape of rolling valleys and woodlands, with picturesque villages, steeped in history and culture and with a strong reputation for hospitality. It is proposed within the Wider Wicklow plan that the unique and distinctive character of these these villages is promoted for exploration as part of the visitor journey throughout Wicklow.

Uplands
The Mountains dominate the central part of the County. This landscape of peaks rising to over 900m, dramatic valleys, waterfalls and lakes attracts visitors from nearby and from abroad. This is a landscape with extensive and well-used trail networks. For people experiencing it from cars and coaches, the Wicklow Gap, Sally Gap and Military Road, with views over Lough Tay and Lough Dan provide dramatic introductions to the area.

The Recreational Trail Masterplan outlines how access to the uplands can be better managed, encouraging dispersal, which takes pressure off areas where the environment and visitor experience are currently compromised. Improved parking provision is proposed giving confidence in their security and with basic facilities, that encourage use.

Wicklow's Coast
The County's 60Km of coastline includes dramatic headlands and sweeping beaches, traditional seaside towns, attractions such as the Sea Life Centre and rich maritime heritage. Long stretches are not easily accessed or even visible, greatly diminishing awareness of this outstanding asset.

It is in this context and cognisant of the environmental sensitivities that it is proposed to promote Wicklow's coast, encouraging dispersal of visitors and improving the quality of experience, including where possible, walking/cycling connections. The coastal towns should be the focus of sustained regeneration, developing their specific visitor offer, accommodation and hospitality provision.

The Garden County
Across the County there are many grand properties with beautiful, managed grounds, these include places such as Russborough House, Kilmacurragh Botanic Gardens and Druid's Glen Hotel and Golf Course.

These are jewels in the county's visitor offer. It is proposed to better promote these destinations, encouraging people who visit one to explore others.

Connectivity
The M11 and N81 make Wicklow County an easy place to access, with proximity to Dublin making it a popular place for day-trips.

Key to sustainable development of tourism in the county will be using the main roads and rail links as points of connection. This accessibility will be important to permit longer and more leisurely stays within the county.

Investment in the rail infrastructure is a priority, providing a regular service to Rathdrum, restoring the town's importance as a base for exploring the county. This will provide a viable alternative to access to Glendalough by car and coach, as well as strengthening connections along the coast.

Walking and cycling connections, including strategic routes from Arklow to Rathdrum and onwards to Lara will support initiatives to deliver sustainable modal shift as well as being visitor attractors in their own right.

Hubs

It is important that there should be a clear vision for each town and village to thrive, strengthening their distinctive identity and complementing each other.

The role of Laragh as a vibrant village that is synonymous with the Glendalough experience is outlined in the Glendalough Valley Plan.

Rathdrum will have a key role to play, providing access by rail and integrating existing attractions such as Clara Lara Fun Park and the major investment at Avondale. Elsewhere, Arklow should be developed strongly, with its maritime heritage.

The hubs should become the focus for a diversity of types of accommodation, with assured quality standards and associated hospitality and cultural provision that will be central to the visitor experience.

Establishing a Strong Cohesive Identity

It is proposed to establish a strong 'brand' identity within which the various visitor destinations gain collective strength. This would apply principles similar to places such as the Lake District or Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park.

It is proposed to establish a 'Wicklow Mountains' brand for the uplands and their fringes. To the east of the M/N11 would be 'Wicklow's Coast'

Signage, online and promotional material will use this to strengthen cohesion, encouraging people to see these as areas to explore, rather than being individual locations to visit. The online presence will be particularly important facilitating visitors in understanding the breadth of offer and how to plan extended stays.

4.4 Principles and Phasing of Development

The following are the key guiding principles for any development within the Glendalough-Laragh valley as detailed within this Plan.

- Safeguard, restore and enhance the setting of the heritage and natural environment of Glendalough using sustainable principles, as a place for local people to be proud of and as a place of world-wide significance to be visited by people from across Ireland and internationally.

- Facilitate visitors in their enjoyment and understanding of Glendalough, as a monastic site of outstanding significance in a beautiful setting.

- Dispersal of visitors for whom the monastic experience is not the primary reason for their visit, to reduce the pressure on Glendalough. This will focus on encouraging walkers/cyclists/leisure users to use other areas, especially at peak times as part of the County wide strategy

- Develop a sustainable trail network that encourages the exploration and enjoyment of the Glendalough Valley, its outstanding and unique heritage, culture and landscape, with routes that are accessible to all, on foot, bike and wheelchair.

- Restore the quality of the monastic landscape and its wider valley setting, from the Upper Lake to Laragh, befitting the potential World Heritage Site (WHS) designation.

- Integrate engaging interpretation that enriches the visitor experience as part of the trail network and through improvement of the existing facilities at Glendalough.

- Provide good quality accessible parking in Laragh associated with a new visitor arrival building that becomes in time the main point of welcome for Glendalough and the wider Wicklow Mountains.

- Provide an attractive and efficient shuttle bus service that connects the parking in Laragh with Glendalough and the Upper Lake.

- Develop an uplands shuttle bus service to connect lowland hubs with trailheads.

- Encourage sustainable transport connections across Wicklow including from Blessington, Kilmanogue and Rathdrum, connecting with the railway station, including walking, cycling and bus routes.

- Incrementally reduce car parking at the Upper Lake and adjacent to the existing Visitor Centre in Glendalough reducing the impact of parked and moving vehicles on the most sensitive areas, making them increasingly attractive for local people and visitors.

- Promote, strengthen and enhance the quality of existing commercial offerings at Glendalough and Laragh – hospitality, accommodation and visitor services and support new, diversified opportunities.

- Facilitate a critical mass of high-quality activities and attractions that encourages multi-day visitor experiences – 'slow and sustainable' tourism

These **Principles** are the basis for a **Phased** approach to development based on incremental steps to match demand. They are envisaged as a progression from small scale interventions as soon as possible to relieve existing pressures forward to longer-term, comprehensive and ambitious plans to transform the visitor experience in the valley.

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.

The proposals are set out in 3 broad phases, approximately in the order we see implementation as desirable. There is a potential stopping point or pausing point after each phase which could be used to review and measure effectiveness and inform the detail of the following phases. For the purposes of the economic appraisal, the completion of each phase is considered as an option which will allow their relative costs and benefits to be assessed.

Phase 1   1-2 years

Laragh

- Introduction of Variable Messaging Signage (VMS) to approach roads to direct visitors to the Laragh car parks when capacity at Upper Lake and Visitor Centre becomes limited. The detail of this is set out in a Technical Note.

- Secure long-term car park locations in Laragh and develop the initial phases.

- Wicklow County Council have extended their lease on the current temporary car park and are in discussion with owners of land for a longer term car park on the Rathdrum road (CP1). In Phase 1 we propose that the first northern section be developed to replace the existing temporary car park.

- Wicklow County Council start acquisition process with land on NE side of Laragh on the Roundwood Road (CP2).

- Wicklow County Council enter into an agreement with Laragh GAA club for partial use of their grounds as part of an enhancement plan for facilities. The first phase could be pitch enhancements to the No1 pitch and building of new clubrooms on the northern end of the site, to facilitate the southern half of the site becoming part of the visitor service proposals.

- First phase of Visitor Hub building to orientate visitors using the Laragh car park and shuttle bus service, including introduction of VMS signage.

Laragh to Glendalough

- Develop all-ability pedestrian and cycle link between Laragh and the Upper Lake. Preferred route has been identified, starting in Laragh GAA grounds and discussion with landowners started. Associated environmental enhancement of the river corridor. Alternative routes also identified if preferred route not feasible.

- Establish a high quality, effective, seasonable shuttle bus service. Industry advice is that a minimum of 4 buses required. Ideally one bus is always one at each stop to give confidence that system is operating. But real time information could help with this. Hydrogen or electric powered.

- VMS (Variable Messaging Signs) installation on the 4 main approach roads linked to car park counters to facilitate management of the parking provision – see below for operational details.

- Improvements of the heritage and landscape setting throughout the valley including a co-ordinated signage and branding strategy.

- Co-ordinated approach to visitor information collection through counter data, traffic surveys etc.

Glendalough Visitor Centre, Village and Hotel area

- Visitor Centre remodelled and extended to provide an all encompassing introductory visitor experience covering natural, built and cultural heritage. Additional interpretative and orientation installations in the grounds, with a clear visitor pathway identified to maximise the visitor experience.

- Car Park remodelled with new entrance to create a pedestrianised visitor gathering space in front of the visitor centre, with connectivity to new all ability trail to and from Laragh.

- Car Park will remain open all year round to pre-booked coaches (13 spaces) in new coach park area. It is anticipated these will be largely half day visits so total of 26 coach slots per day. Coaches not pre-booked will be directed to Laragh car parks with shuttle bus service (potentially drop off and pick up allowed at shuttle bus drop off)

- Car Park will remain open to private cars but controlled by VMS system from March to October, so when nearing capacity, cars will be directed to Laragh car parks. Potential facility for pre-booked mobility parking permit holders all year round. Barrier installed after hotel car park entrance to control traffic to Upper Lake.

- Revised path network in and around visitor centre to direct and manage visitors, with landscaping/replanting of more natural landscapes around.

- Develop a detailed Conservation Plan for the built heritage of the valley and in particular, set out a vision for enhancing the character and significance of the monastic heritage.

- Develop Glendalough Visitor Website to inform and co-ordinate visitor stays in the Glendalough area.

Upper Lake/Lower Lake connections

- Options study on creating accessible trail from Visitor Centre to the Monastic city and beyond to the Upper Lake. 3 Options identified and detailed benefit/impact study required.

- Enhanced landscape, including 're-wilding', with investment in a sustainable all

ability trail network and habitat protection.

- New signage and interpretation, founded on overall branding strategy

Upper Lake Car Park

- New Visitor services building – toilets, coffee shop and information

- (Removal of existing toilets and trading vans and reduction in hard landscape once new building completed)

- Shuttle bus drop off and pick up area created with car park re-modelling.

- Car Park will remain open to private cars in the off season (eg end October to start of March).

- From March to September VMS signage would be in operation and when car park nears capacity, cars would be stopped at Visitor Centre and road closed to private vehicles (except residents). Shuttle bus would be in operation. Potential facility for pre-booked 'blue badge' holders all year round.

- Enhancement of landscape setting with new native planting and control of deer

- External interpretation, signage and branding to guide visitors to maximise their experience.

- Existing NPWS cottage used as ranger base with environmental interpretation material in grounds.

- Existing Education centre remains as current use.

Phase 2   3-5 years

Laragh

- New Visitor Orientation Hub developed as an inspirational entry point fusing buildings and landscape to make the journey rewarding and special, commensurate with a World Heritage Site designation. Located in GAA grounds in area of former GAA clubrooms.

- Car Park on former GAA second pitch developed (CP3) – possibly reserved for mobility parking permit holders or priority bookings

- Rathdrum Road Car Park (CP1) expanded as demand required – middle section. Potential overflow coach park and potential overnight campervan site.

- Eastern Car Park (CP2) developed, along with trail network to Laragh and through woods to Visitor Hub. Shuttle Bus point developed

- Wicklow County Council acquire land to east of GAA grounds (CP4) as long term overflow car park and trail access point.

- VMS system from Phase 1 adapted as required to facilitate the increased use of the parking in Laragh and control of upper valley access.

Visitor Centre, Village and Hotel

- Trading stands relocated from current monastic site entrance gate, with area landscaped and softened, to area between hotel and visitor centre car park within new designed structures, or potentially around 'Glendalough Market Square' – area to north side of hotel, landscaped and largely pedestrianised, with creation of traditional market square character.

- Hotel car park extended into current OPW lands with balancing removal of hotel car park south of river to create a pedestrianised zone for hotel and

- other visitor services and potential interpretative experience on the historic monastic city and surrounding domestic and agricultural life. Net gain of formal car parking to hotel and creating space for hotel development and expansion without impact on visitor experience of the monastic site. Hotel car park and resident's access will be all year round.

- Lands between Visitor Centre and Monastic site and back to Trinity Church re-landscaped as the second phase of restoring the wider monastic landscape, combined with expanded monastic site interpretation, including potential for interpretation of the historic agricultural and domestic supporting setting of the monastic 'city'.

- Installation of accessible trail from Visitor Centre to monastic site and on to Upper Lake – creation of preferred route following outcome of Options study in Phase 1.

Upper Lake car park

- Closed from 1st March to 31st October at weekends and from 1st May to 30th September all week.

- Trader vans removed from the car park with a coffee dock in new Visitor service building.

- Potential facility for pre-booked blue badge holders all year round.

- Ongoing investment in sustainable trail network and habitat enhancement.

Phase 3   6-7 years

Laragh

- Parking provision in Laragh increased to full capacity, with new car parks to north east and south of village and linking trails, with the new Visitor Orientation Hub becoming the primary entry point for most visitors.

- Shuttle bus capacity increased to meet demand.

Visitor Centre, Village and Hotel

- Further expansion of coach parking at Visitor Centre if demand remains, with reduction in private car parking. Bookable blue badge car parking remains.

- Potential high quality accommodation pods for visitors on sites between Visitor Centre car park and road if integrated well into landscape.

- Scope for further commercial development in and around Glendalough Market Square on the northern side of a re-landscaped square.

Upper Lake car park

- Closed from 1st March to 31st October at weekends and from 1st May to 30th September all week as set out in Phase 2

- Full restoration of the monastic landscape in line with the Conservation Plan

- Re-naturing of the valley ongoing with continued investment in a sustainable trail network and habitat protection

5.0 SECTION C *summary*
DELIVERY

5.1   Recommendations for implementing and managing proposals

Practical and achievable mechanisms for the delivery of the Masterplan are crucial. A key issue emerging from the public consultation process was that the means for delivery of the Plan proposals, and confidence in that, was a factor in how well supported the Plan would be – in other words, respondents needed to be convinced that there were going to be mechanisms for delivery in order for them to support the proposals.

The background to this is a long history of reports, strategies and studies which have not been implemented and a feeling that there are lots of bodies 'doing their own thing' rather than in a co-ordinated fashion, some areas over-developed and congested whilst others have been neglected. There was criticism of the state bodies for not co-operating with each other or with the wider community and a reported lack of trust between all the stakeholders.

It is also clear from our research and analysis that there are a large number of dedicated staff of the state bodies and Wicklow County Council working in a wide variety of ways; many community groups developing exciting projects for their local areas and a wide range of entrepreneurial people developing hospitality and activity ventures, people committed to development of recreation, caring for the environment and active in many and various ways.

There have also been many initiatives to bring people and groups together including The Wicklow Uplands Council, established in 1997, which includes over 50 groups from the farming, environmental, recreation, community sectors, aiming to build consensus and develop policies, strategies and initiatives. It is an important and valued forum for discussion but it has limited resources and no powers. There are also many other collaborative groups such as Visit Wicklow, Wicklow Outdoor Recreation Committee, Wicklow Heritage Forum etc, with specific roles and purposes.

What is clear from all of this is that there is a complex entanglement of many bodies, individuals and organisations, all of whom have a legitimate stake in what happens, and are affected, by better or worse, by changing patterns of use, and yet there is no one body whose responsibility is to provide the overview – to co-ordinate, to develop and to promote and to protect all that makes the Wicklow environment such a special and invaluable asset, and to carry out the increasingly important role of visitor management.

The obvious conclusion is that if the desired outcomes of the Plan are to be realised it will need new management, implementation and delivery structures with the appropriate resources. There are many models for such structures, but the circumstances in Wicklow, with the proximity of Dublin, the particular patterns of landownership, the close connectivity between rural communities and the visitor attractions and the vulnerability of the built, natural and cultural heritage, mean that a bespoke model is required, though drawing on successful initiatives elsewhere, taking the experiences from such bodies as the River Nore Vision project, The Mourne Heritage Trust and the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority, amongst others. Details of each of these are included in the separate 'Management Case Studies' paper (Appendix C1)

At the heart of this challenge is finding a structure which can achieve a fair balance between the needs and aspirations of the local community, the expectations of visitors and, above all, the protection and enhancement of the environment – the Wicklow Mountains – the county's greatest and enduring asset.
All of the stakeholders have their part to play in that, but the consultation showed that there is a strong desire to create a collective sense of purpose to implementation change for the better of all, and it is this which will shape our recommendations for a new management and delivery structures for the Wicklow Mountains.

There are three broad groupings of stakeholders, all of equal importance.

• Central Government or State bodies
• Local Government, Councillors, officials and connected bodies
• The public - Community, Farmers and Landowners, Hospitality and leisure businesses, NGO's etc.

None of these three broad groupings are homogenous and existing connections need strengthened. Discussions are ongoing with the stakeholders and a series of proposals will emerge for inclusion in the Plan.

Wicklow County Council has an important role to play in supporting and representing the views of the host communities, local businesses and other bodies. In addition to the existing Outdoor Recreation Forum, Visit Wicklow, Wicklow Partnership, Wicklow Heritage Forum and other bodies, it is recommended that the embryo 'Community Advisory Group', brought together to represent the views in particular of the Glendalough and Laragh community, be more formally established. Some specific duties of the Council – eg traffic, parking and roads management - are crucial, in particular in the Laragh and Glendalough area. The valuable role of the Wicklow Uplands Council is also an important part of the management structure with the voice of the disparate communities feeding into the delivery of the Plan.

In summary, the future management and delivery model must respond to the three key deficits in the current arrangements

- There is no co-ordinated visitor management across Wicklow and this is leading to congestion, unbalanced impacts and benefits and harm to the visitor experience.
- There is a lack of co-ordination and co-operation between the various state and local authority bodies which results in duplication, gaps in services and a loss of opportunities for resource sharing
- There is little or no active involvement of the local communities in visitor management. Experience across Europe would suggest this is crucial in achieving a balance between the needs and desires of the visitors and host communities

In the short terms there is merit in setting up a number of collaborative projects which will better inform future visitor management decisions and help address some of the congestion at busy times.

Collaborative projects

Visitor Information Gathering
At the moment OPW, NPWS and Coilte all have people counters in various locations, Failte Ireland do some visitor surveys and Wicklow County Council have a programme of traffic surveys, although this has been mostly for road maintenance reasons. The project has highlighted the un-coordinated nature of this information gathering so there are gaps and overlaps and recommends a comprehensive and co-ordinated system of visitor data collection so to inform and justify future visitor management measures. This would be an ideal project for collaboration between all the bodies.

'Wicklow Wide' Website and Information Hub
The Dispersal strategy needs an integrated 'one stop shop' for reliable information for visitors, interactive and up to date.

All the state bodies need to feed into this (eg trail information) and the private sector attractions, services and facilities could be managed through Failte Ireland or Wicklow County Council building on the current Visit Wicklow website. Although it carries information on many of the attractions it is missing the trail infrastructure detail that many visitors are basing their visits on and in particular 'live' information about trail closures, forestry operations etc. The potential of this Wicklow Wide website, though, is to use it as a visitor management tool – part of the Dispersal mechanism, to encourage people to go to the less visited sites and take pressure off busy areas at peak times.

There is no, one, satisfactory, website which provides visitor info about the Glendalough experience. 'Glendalough.ie' is run by the Brockagh Centre and OPW don't have a dedicated site. This is serious gap and the coordination involved in updating visitor facing information would be excellent pilot collaborative project that would allow for trialling of co-ordination mechanisms between the various bodies on a more manageable scale.

Wayfinding – Laragh and Glendalough
It is generally recognised that there is no co-ordinated visitor information and signage through the Glendalough valley and this is the first step to overall visitor management. This needs to cover parking mechanisms including the VMS signage and clear orientation and information way finding throughout the valley. This would be part of wider discussions on co-ordinated visitor management, eg between OPW, NMS and NPWS over the enhancement of the Visitor Centre as the central orientation point for all aspects of the valley, linked to site wide interpretation and information.

Wicklow Signage Strategy and Branding
A key part of the overall strategy is to create a collective character and feel for the whole area, so that visitors are aware they are entering a special landscape. Signage and branding have a significant part to play in this so developing a single brand, supported by the individual identities of the state bodies and Council would be an important collaborative move.
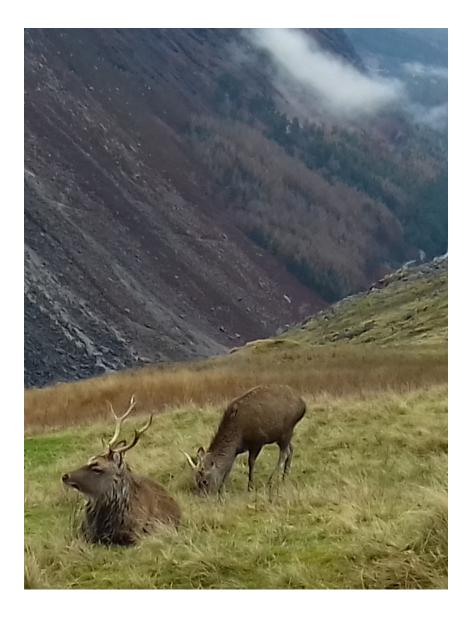
6.1 Strategic Environmental Assessment – SEA

A Strategic Environment Assessment has been undertaken in tandem with this draft Plan. The Strategic Environmental Assessment seeks to underline the ambition to provide for a high level of protection of the environment and to promote sustainable development within the National Park

The SEA process is designed to identify the risks to the environment that may arise as a result of the plan, and any proposed developments that will flow from the plan. The key nature conservation issues associated with the various developments contained in the plan include
• biodiversity loss
• disturbance of species
• direct (footprint) and indirect (water pollution) impacts to protected habitats
• changes to ecological landscape etc.

Screening for Appropriate Assessment of the plan has taken place as the Plan as developed with a number of initial ideas for developments within the plan being dropped as the Screening process identified potential risks to the protected habitats.

6.2   Economic Appraisal

An economic appraisal is being carried out of this masterplan to evaluate the cost benefit of any new interventions. Outline costs of proposals have been considered on the basis of the outline designs noted in Section B of the technical documents.

The economic appraisal assesses not only costs of capital projects and financial benefits of tourism, but considers a wide range of societal benefits which can be derived through the development of national parks and the promotion of tourism and outdoor recreation therein. These include:

Recreation and leisure benefits;
*   Health and well-being;
*   Learning and education;
*   Social capital and cohesion, tackling poverty and enhancing social inclusion;
*   Improved image of a region and quality of place;
*   Climate change mitigation, sustainability, and increased biodiversity;
*   Culture, heritage, and landscape;
*   Increased land and property values