



BLESSINGTON eGREENWAY

WICKLOW COUNTY COUNCIL

Response to An Bord Pleanála RFI Item
12

Public Consultation and
Communication

January 2024



Wicklow County Council,
County Buildings,
Station Road,
Wicklow,
Co. Wicklow.

The proposed scheme aims to establish a primarily off-road shared-use path catering to pedestrians and cyclists. Encompassing approximately 33km, the project entails the development and enhancement of a greenway traversing through forest and woodlands along the shoreline of the Blessington Lake/Poulaphouca Reservoir SPA.

This document has been prepared in response to the request for additional information (Item 12), specifically addressing the public consultation and communication conducted for the Blessington eGreenway.

1. Background to the Proposed Project

The public consultation process was mainly completed prior to the issue of the Guidelines for the Strategy for the future Development of National and Regional Greenway and the Code of Best Practice for National and Regional Greenways.

As outlined in the Planning Statement, this proposed project is a community-led initiative, planned and developed by the local community over several years. The Blessington & District Forum, a local community group, commissioned the Irish Leisure Consultant to conduct a Feasibility Study on Recreation Opportunities at Poulaphouca Reservoir. This study identified a potential 'Flagship Project' involving the creation of a surfaced multipurpose walking and cycling trail circling the main Reservoir adjacent to the shoreline, with a proposed first phase from Blessington to Russborough.

The local forum group diligently planned, funded, and completed a 6km walkway beside the reservoir, which was opened in February 2014.

In August 2016, Wicklow County Council, in conjunction with the forum group, Wicklow County Council submitted, under Grants Schemes for Large Tourism Projects 2016- 2020, a funding application to Fáilte Ireland. Unfortunately, this application for funding was unsuccessful.

In 2018, an opportunity arose to seek funding for this proposed development through the funding stream under the Strategy for the Future Development of National and Regional Greenway. Wicklow County Council and the local community collaborated once again, submitting a funding application, and presenting the proposed development to the Department of Transport. In June 2019, funding for the project was successfully secured.

2. Public Consultation

As noted, many of the consultation events occurred prior to the publication of 'The Strategy for the Future Development of National and Regional Greenways,' which was released in July 2018. The consultation and information events conducted are summarised below:

2.1 Feasibility Study

In the June 2010, the Feasibility study prepared by Irish Leisure Consultants states the following -

“This report is based on a series of site visits to the Blessington area, an extensive consultation process with agencies, residents and sports participants in the period of September 2009 to March 2010.”

The report was commissioned by the Blessington and District Forum. Following the publication of this report, this group developed and delivered phase one of the Blessington Greenway, a walking trail of a length of over 6kms.

2.2 Part VIII - Wicklow County Council Planning Ref: 17/307

As part of the statutory approval process through the Part VIII, Planning & Development Regulations 2001 (as amended), a statutory public consultation was conducted for the proposed development. This consultation period spanned from 22nd March 2017 to 5th May 2017. The extract from the public consultation event notice is outlined below:

“Plans and particulars of the proposed development may be inspected or purchased at a fee not exceeding the reasonable cost of making a copy, at the offices of Wicklow County Council, County Buildings, Station Road, Wicklow, Baltinglass Municipal District Offices, Blessington Co. Wicklow, Blessington Library, Blessington Co. Wicklow during opening hours from 9.00am to 3.30pm Monday to Friday excluding Bank Holidays, for a period from 22nd March 2017 to 5th May 2017.

Submissions and observations with respect to the proposed development dealing with the proper planning and sustainable developments of the area in which the developments would be situated may be made in writing to Theresa O’Brien, Administrative Officer, Community, Cultural & Social Development, Wicklow County Council, County Buildings, Wicklow on or before 22nd May 2017.”

As outlined in the above notice, the plans and drawings for the proposed development were publicly displayed in various locations throughout the county. Additionally, as part of this public consultation process, a meeting was held in Valleymount, Co. Wicklow.

A total of 293 submissions were received, with an overwhelming 278 submissions in favour of the development. The Manager's report to the members of Wicklow County Council further elaborates on the submissions, stating the following:

“In considering these matters there could be a tendency to focus on the opposing submissions and due consideration should of course be given to them. But it is equally important that sight should not be lost of the fact that there is overwhelming local support for this project. This support has been demonstrated at all stages of the analysis of and the creation of Phase 1 of the Greenway dating back to the County Council's first raising of the opening up of Blessington Lakes in the Outdoor Recreational Strategy published in 2009.

Included in the latest submissions favouring the development are ones from numerous local employers and a range of bodies such as West Wicklow Business Network, Wicklow Tourism, Russborough House, Blessington Tidy Towns Group and Blessington and District Community Forum. These represent a wide range of businesses and organisations providing employment for many people throughout the locality. They highlight the many economic, social and health benefits which will flow from the completion of the Greenway. They also point up the obvious direct correlations between the development and local

and national policy objectives. This strong support is not surprising given that the Greenway is a good example of a 'bottom-up', 'community-led' project - which has in turn been nurtured and supported over the years by Wicklow County Council."

At a meeting on the 3rd of July 2017, the Members of Wicklow County Council unanimously voted to proceed with the proposed project after considering the Manager's report.

3. Support for the Proposed Development

As highlighted in Appendix One of the Strategy for the Future Development of National and Regional Greenways, 'the support of the community and potentially affected landowners is essential to the long-term success of the Greenway and those potentially impacted by a proposed Greenway route.' This principle has been and continues to be the primary driving force behind the progression of this community-led project.

Public engagement has indicated strong support from most of the community and local businesses for the proposed development. This sentiment is evident in the public submissions received during funding application submissions and the Part VIII planning application process.

Locally, the proposed development is recognised as a significant and beneficial addition, providing both social and economic advantages to the area. Anticipated benefits include substantial job creation in the tourism sector. Furthermore, the project is poised to meet the increasing demand in the tourist market for outdoor activities, catering to both local residents and tourists.

To further support and enhance the local tourism sector, the Wicklow Local Enterprise Office organised a 'Start Your Own Business' program in 2021.

4. Community Engagement

4.1 Local Community Groups

Over the last few years, a series of online and in-person meetings have been conducted with local communities, including the Vallemount Forum Blessington Town Team and Blessington and District Forum. These sessions aimed to provide updates on the project and gather valuable feedback and input from these community groups.

4.2 Formal Council Meetings

Regular updates on the project's progress are provided to the local Municipal District Office through a combination of in-person and online meetings, as well as via email. Briefings on the project's advancements have also been extended to members of the public and the media. The Council's Municipal District meetings, which are open to both the public and the media, serve as platforms where these updates are shared. Anyone interested in the project is welcome to attend these meetings to stay informed on its development.

4.3 Greenway Project Board

A Blessington Greenway Project Board was established, featuring key members, including a local community representative. This representative actively participates in regular meetings, sharing essential project information with their local community peers.

4.4 Wicklow County Council's Newsletter

In 2019, updates on the progression of the project were featured in Wicklow County Council's official newsletter for Spring, Winter, and Autumn. Accessible both online and in print, the newsletter reached over 44,000 homes and businesses in the County.

5. Landowner Engagement

The proposed greenway route predominantly traverses state-owned land. Even during the challenges posed by the Covid pandemic, Wicklow County Council maintained a consistent effort, holding regular landowner's meetings.

As previously mentioned, the primary land on the route falls under state ownership, specifically the ESB. From the project's initiation, a representative from the ESB has actively participated, holding a position on the Blessington eGreenway Project Board. Continuous and comprehensive engagement with this key landowner is ongoing.

In addition, Wicklow County Council has undertaken numerous on-site meetings with landowners affected by or adjacent to the greenway. These meetings are crucial components of the continuous dialogue and collaboration efforts, and they persist as regularly scheduled engagements.

6. Project Liaison Officer

Aligned with the Strategy for the Future Development of Regional and National Greenways, a Project Liaison Officer (PLO) was appointed to the proposed project. This officer is accessible to all stakeholders. The appointment of a PLO is also mandated under 3.1 of the General Provisions of the Code of Best Practice.

As outlined in section 3.1, the PLO serves as the primary point of contact and remains available prior to, during, and after the proposed construction stage of the project.

7. Current Communication Structures

7.1 Communications Working Group.

In March 2023, the initial meeting of the Communications Working Group occurred. This platform is envisioned to play a pivotal role in facilitating the sharing of information with the local community. The membership of this group will continue to grow in order to support the proposed development.

7.2 Greenway Social Media

With the support of Wicklow's Strategic Promotion's Officer, Wicklow County Council is actively expanding the social media reach for the Blessington eGreenway. Recently, Wicklow County Council launched a dedicated Greenway website that serves as a comprehensive repository for all project documents and a centralised source of information.

The website features a dedicated contact page, providing a platform for members of the public to ask questions, offer comments, or provide feedback on the proposed project. Additionally, the Strategic Promotion's Officer will be instrumental in building a strong social media presence for the Greenway on platforms such as "X" formally known as Twitter and Instagram.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Blessington eGreenway project, spearheaded by the community-driven Blessington & District Forum, stands out as a model of collaborative effort unfolding over years of planning and execution. Public consultation has been a vital component, marked by meticulous processes such as the 2010 Feasibility Study and the 2017 Part VIII Planning Ref: 17/307, with a resounding 278 out of 293 submissions favouring the development, attesting to robust community support.

Beyond public sentiment, the proposed development has garnered active contributions from local businesses, organisations, and tourism bodies, driven by the anticipated economic, social, and health benefits aligned with local and national policy objectives. Comprehensive community engagement initiatives, including meetings, formal council engagements, and the establishment of a Greenway Project Board, underscore a commitment to keeping stakeholders informed.

Landowner engagement, particularly with the ESB as the primary landowner, remains a focal point, showcasing ongoing efforts for dialogue and collaboration. The introduction of a Communications Working Group, utilisation of social media platforms, and the launch of a dedicated Greenway website reflect a forward-looking approach to maintaining transparency and accessibility.

As the Blessington eGreenway project advances, the positive engagement witnessed to date underscores the transformative power of collaboration, community involvement, and effective communication in realising a sustainable development vision. This journey not only showcases the dedication of local stakeholders but also positions the Blessington eGreenway as a potential model for community-led initiatives in the broader context of regional and national greenway development.