



# Blessington Local Area Plan Submission - Report

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## File

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LOCAL AREA PLAN  
SUBMISSION APRIL 2024

Cllr. Edward Timmins

## Submission Introduction

My submission below, following ongoing consultation with residents, focuses on the following areas:

- Public Transport (the rationale for the Luas extension, more buses, new bus stops on the Naas Road and creating local linkage with the nearby villages of Manor Kilbride, Lackan, Ballyknockan, Vallemount and Hollywood as outlined in section one below).
- Recreational Facilities (A Multi-Use Sports Complex on zoned land near the Avon).
- Urban Regeneration (Enhancing the Market Square, co-working spaces, reducing dereliction, improving the streetscape and increasing town centre green spaces).
- More zoning of educational sites (including a new community education facility).
- Roads and footpath improvements (including street lighting and prioritising pedestrians to enhance walkability in the town).
- Age-Friendly Communities and Age-friendly Tourism.
- Blessington Greenway (Opportunities and Potential).
- Walking Trails and Continued Access to Glending.

Blessington, West Wicklow and East Kildare are growing areas of population and require a better service from public transport with significant investment in infrastructure needed. A Luas extension from Saggart would benefit all of West Wicklow. There is no train, and the N81 upgrade is on hold. Without having real ambition and determination for this area, the situation will not change, and quality of life will remain severely impacted by long journeys and long waiting times. In the interim, improvements to the existing bus service must take place. Additionally, greater linkage must occur with nearby villages through the bus network. Recreational facilities through a multi-use sports complex and urban regeneration could have a transformative impact on the town. Improvements are needed to existing infrastructure such as roads, and footpaths to upgrade them. There are significant opportunities with regard to tourism as a result of the Blessington Greenway. Continued access to Glen Ding Forest should be one of the cornerstones of any tourism or recreational strategy for this area.

## 1. Public Transport

Submission in bold and underlined below:

**The local area plan should include, as part of its strategy, and part of its objectives, the extension of the Luas line from Saggart to Blessington with the addition of a park and ride site in the town.**

The new N81 from Tallaght to Hollywood has been shelved. No new transport infrastructure has been given to West Wicklow in living memory. There is no train service. The existing N81 road is of poor quality. The population of Blessington is growing rapidly. It would be availed of by all of West Wicklow, East Kildare and further afield. The distance is only 14km or about 8 miles. Blessington is located only 26km or 17 miles from Dublin city centre.

This objective is already included in the county Development plan where it received support by all councillors present.

My proposed successful amendment (Amendment number EM26 relating to the Luas to Blessington) in the County Development Plan listed under the public transport objectives in Chapter 12 Sustainable Transport states:

- **to promote the Luas extension from City West/ Tallaght to Blessington**

I secured the following **amendment** in the Plan:

**“to support the enhancement of public transport services and infrastructure in West Wicklow and in particular to support the improvement of bus services / bus priority on the N81, bus linkages to rail stations and the development of park-and-ride facilities at strategic locations”**

The case for a Luas to Blessington is outlined in detail below from the latest local research and with regards to the growing population in the area, limitations of buses, and future transport needs for this area with this current local area plan in mind.

According to the *NTA Greater Dublin Area Transport Strategy 2022 – 2042*, the N81 has an Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT) flow of 12,000 vehicles per day, and an HGV percentage 5.9% becoming congested when joining the M50 into Dublin City Centre operating at above 120% capacity and operates at 80-100% capacity near to Blessington. Furthermore, it is noted the two main areas of the town (Main Street and Market Square) are currently dominated by traffic due to the N81 passing through the town which has created an unsuitable environment for free-flowing vehicular movement creating congestion in the town itself (NTA, 2021).

Buses alone cannot provide sufficient public transport capacity to meet the needs of Blessington Commuters. As a result, the area will remain heavily reliant on cars, which will further damage the environment at a time we are being told to reduce our carbon emissions. Currently car use in Blessington is 79%, with 94% of people having at least one car (NTA, 2021). This is unsurprising as the car is the only realistic transport option for most commuters.

Research carried out as part of the *Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan* showed how 44% of those surveyed would like access to other destinations via public transport. There are many villages across West Wicklow still with no proper bus services and as outlined below, there is a need for greater linkage with Blessington. As a result of a lack of alternatives, there is a high car dependence for travel to work, school and college.

### **Population Growth**

Blessington, West Wicklow and East Kildare are growing areas of population as stated above. Wicklow's population increased by nine per cent between 2016-22 to 155,851 according to *Census 2022, Population Increase by Local Authority: A Review of Preliminary Data* published by the Local Government Management Agency.

As the population rises, there is a greater demand for services and public transport. The *NTA Greater Dublin Area Transport Strategy 2022 – 2024* estimates population growth in the region is expected to follow an upward trend with Blessington and Baltinglass forecasting notable growth in population up to 2040, while Naas is also forecasting a relatively large growth in population which will significantly impact this particular location (NTA, 2021). The study states, there has been “rapid commuter-focussed residential expansion” without an increase in proper services. Furthermore, the study states: “Blessington is one of the towns recording the highest growth rates in the country over the last ten years (>38%), which has lower levels of employment provision” (NTA, 2021).

***“The Wicklow County Development Plan 2016-2022 recognises the progress made in the national public transport network over the past number of years, while acknowledging that deficiencies still exist within County Wicklow. Over the lifetime of the previous two development plan periods (2004 – 2016), the delivery of public transport failed to keep pace with the population growth of the County, reinforcing the already well-established car-based commuting pattern towards Dublin. As new employment opportunities develop in the County, the challenge will also be to make these towns more accessible”***  
(NTA, 2021 Greater Dublin Area Transport Strategy 2022 – 2024)

## **Demand for Public Transport and Level of Service**

The Luas Red line from Saggart and Tallaght is able to bring 6,000 passengers into Dublin city in the morning peak hour. To the east, the Luas Green line has a similar capacity. Saggart is just 8 miles from Blessington yet has to rely on low-capacity buses as the only mode of public transport.

With 308 million passenger journeys last year, the following figures below from the *Transport for Ireland* website (January 2024) highlight the importance of public transport:

- The Luas carried 48.2 million passengers last year, a 25% rise than 2022.
- Dublin Bus carried over 145 million passengers, a 20% increase that 2022.
- Bus Éireann served in excess of 44 million passengers (an increase from 35 million).
- Go-Ahead Ireland's Metropolitan served 16 million passengers (compared to 12.5m).
- Rail passenger journeys in 2023 also grew too. An estimated 45.5 million passenger journeys were made by rail during the past 12 months, up from 35.8 million in 2022.
- TFI Local Link had a 78% increase in passenger numbers to 3.2 million!

*(Source: Transport for Ireland 17<sup>th</sup> January 2024:*

<https://www.transportforireland.ie/news/record-highs-for-public-transport-passenger-numbers-in-2023/>)

In terms of figures, there were approximately 600 car trips from the Blessington area to the Naas area in the AM peak, and there are 750 AM car trips from the study area to Dublin City Centre and the Tallaght/Citywest areas in 2021 (NTA, 2021). This figure will undoubtedly continue to rise. More buses must be provided. In addition, more local link bus stops must be provided particularly on the Naas Road close to residential areas.

## **Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area 2016 to 2035**

The Transport Strategy aims for 23% of all trips to be made by public transport in the Greater Dublin by 2025 (Dublin, Meath, Kildare and Wicklow). This target is up from 16% at the start of the period, so additional public transport will be required in Blessington.

### **Inadequacy of existing public transport capacity**

Buses alone cannot provide sufficient capacity for Blessington. As far back as 2001, the Dublin Transportation Office report entitled 'A Platform for Change' dispelled the myth that buses could solve the problem. According to the Report: *"In summary, the analysis of the 'Comprehensive Bus' scenario established that buses alone could not address the problem because in many of the main transportation corridors the bus mode cannot provide the necessary capacity to cope with the forecast demand"*. A more recent study further

encapsulates the problem. According to the Blessington Town Health Check Report published in January 2020: *“The bus does not offer a frequent, reliable or efficient option as a mode of travel for residents in Blessington. Even though it remains essential for many, this is in spite of the service, rather than due to it.”*

### Connecting with nearby Villages

The Wicklow County Development Plan describes the success of Wicklow Rural Transport Initiative that has been operating under the NTA’s Local Link Rural Transport programme since 2018. While acknowledging this initiative plays a pivotal role in the daily lives of those living in rural areas by providing access to shops, services and amenities in more urban centres and larger villages, there is a greater need to link with villages in close to proximity Blessington. This would improve the lives of local residents.

Submission in bold and underlined below:

**It is essential this plan promotes through its strategy and objectives, greater local linkage to connect Blessington with Manor Kilbride, Lackan, Ballyknockan, Valleymount and Hollywood.**

This would enable greater mobility for residents in more rural areas including senior citizens. Such a service would furthermore assist in combatting rural isolation.

### The proposed Route for the Luas

There is already a 300-metre-wide strip frozen for the selected route for the proposed N81 and that the Luas could track the route on a much narrower strip than 300 metres.





## **2. Community Facilities in Blessington**

### **Multi-Use Sports Complex**

Submission in bold and underlined below:

**The plan designates a location for a Multi-Use sports complex and this is included in the objectives of the plan**

This would include a swimming pool and other sports facilities. The soccer club needs a home and has huge membership. The GAA club continues to grow and needs more facilities. Many other clubs including athletics and rugby need more facilities. The Blessington Town Centre First Plan published in November 2023, observes how the provision of proper community facilities has not coincided with the rapid population growth in the vicinity.

## **3. Urban Regeneration**

### **Blessington Main Street and Town Centre**

An Urban Design Framework Study is necessary for the town centre. According to the Town Health Check, the Market Square which encompasses the Blessington Monument and Credit Union House has *“the potential to be transformed into a public plaza that caters for pedestrians and could offer a focal point for visitors to enjoy and events to be held”*.

The Main Street should be developed to enhance the attractiveness of the town centre and continue to entice people to visit shops and encourage new businesses. As noted above, the two main areas of the town (Main Street and Market Square) are currently dominated by traffic due to the N81 passing through the town which has created an unsuitable environment for free-flowing vehicular movement creating congestion in the town itself (NTA, 2021). Traffic management could improve this.

The correct use of parking spaces should be encouraged in the town plan. According to the Town Health Check *“Misuse of parking spaces, a lack of appropriate parking measures and a poorly designed urban environment have resulted in Blessington developing as a location that prioritises parking, and cars, above all else”*. Such issues could be alleviated with proper signage. Enhanced accessibility is paramount to ensure areas remain accessible for all groups in the town for example, the Accessibility Audit undertaken by Universal Accessibility, found that the Market Square is currently inaccessible to elderly residents and those with disabilities.

Vacant lands to the south and north of the Blessington Town Centre development, along with an area of temporary surface car parking, could provide significant opportunities for infill development in line with the existing streetscape and in consultation with residents. A small community garden with seating, could provide a new unique space in the town centre



itself. Further variety of retail options for consumers could be provided in the addition to increased outdoor green spaces and urban vegetation.

### Quarry Lands

These zoned areas in Blessington would be best suited to the employment development as they are near existing housing, businesses and services. They must be developed to benefit existing residents.

It would be my preference to see a vacant building turned into a new enterprise centre solely with the function of supporting small businesses in the area (similar to the model of a local enterprise office or LEO). Small businesses are central to the development of Blessington and all land use zoning decisions must be made with existing businesses in mind. Remote working is a cornerstone of the current Wicklow County Development Plan and there is an opportunity to create co-working spaces in Blessington. Dereliction should be reduced.

The Blessington Town Centre First Plan shows several sites which would allow for the full activation of a town centre first plan with several “opportunity sites” identified from a surfaced car park to reducing dereliction to improving frontage. Detailed recommendations are set out in this plan which should be considered as part of the formulation of the new town plan.



(Image: Blessington Town Centre First Plan Page 67 'Activating the Town Centre')

#### **4. Schools and Education**

The new 1000 student secondary school must be provided without delay. There is also an opportunity to create more community education spaces. An Cosán in Tallaght is an example of such a facility. Lifelong learning should be promoted.

#### **5. Footpaths and Roads**

Blessington is a walkable town, and more footpaths and roads must be taken charge of by the Council to create safe walking areas for the entire community. Supplementary street lighting must be provided. A recommendation contained in the Blessington Town Health Check Report was to “prioritise pedestrians”. Existing footpaths must be connected to the broader network of footpaths in addition to the provision of segregated cycle lanes. 59% of people surveyed in the Town Health Check lived under 3kms from the town centre so it is therefore important that there are suitable footpaths in this area.

#### **6. Age- Friendly Communities and Age- Friendly Tourism**

Parks, suitable for all ages should be considered. According to Age Friendly Ireland, “An Age Friendly Town is one in which older people are actively involved in social, economic and cultural life and in creating a better local environment, to everybody's benefit. Age Friendly Towns respond to what the older community needs.” It is important that seating is available in the Blessington. The plan should include many of the considerations listed in the Age Friendly Town’s toolkit: <https://extranet.who.int/agefriendlyworld/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Age-Friendly-Towns-Toolkit.pdf>. In addition, an age friendly tourist destination such as Beyond the Trees in Avondale could be considered for the area within the vicinity of the lakes. Wheelchairs could be loaned, and a sensory garden could be created for those with additional needs. The Avondale Forest Part Case Study is available here: <https://agefriendlyireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/AFI-Tourism-Case-Study-online.pdf>. The expansion of the Blessington Greenway around the Poulaphouca Reservoir presents a significant opportunity for inclusive recreation and age-friendly tourism in our locality. This will be in excess of 35km and will contain car-parks, toilets, and refreshment facilities but must also contain disability access and adequacy accommodate older people.

## 7. Blessington Greenway; Opportunities and Potential

The Blessington Lakes and Greenway project has received a total of approx. €15 million in funding following an additional top up of €6.4 million when €63.5 million was allocated to greenways across Ireland. In addition to creating employment through tourism related services (such as bike rental), the Blessington Greenway can play a key role in increasing customers to local businesses such as coffee shops, restaurants, shops and public houses. With up to 300,000 future visitors expected per annum, the area must be significantly prepared to cater for such numbers.

The Strategy for the *Future Development of National and Regional Greenways (July 2018)* observed the transformative effect of greenways including health benefits and their role as a “key enabler to rejuvenating rural towns and villages”. Various strategies from the Government’s *Tourism Policy Statement People, Place and Policy Growing Tourism to 2025* to the *Action Plan for Rural Development Realising our Rural Potential* emphasised the benefits of outdoor recreational tourism. These benefits must be fully embraced in Blessington as noted in objective 4 of the abovementioned strategy that declares, “Greenways provide opportunities for the development of local businesses and economies”.

Wicklow County Council should promote a “leave no trace” philosophy for users of Greenways and the strategy recommends ‘Code of Conduct’. Improved public transport links to Blessington will assist in catering for increased tourist numbers. The Blessington Tourist Office is providing an excellent tourist information service (including in online promotion/marketing) and this office should be supported to develop further.

As noted in the Blessington Town Health Check Report, the Greenway has a special USP in that it will be the country’s first ‘E-Greenway’. Accordingly, the route encircles Poulaphouca Reservoir, which generates electricity sustainably so the concept of sustainable energy has been carefully integrated into this project where charging points for e-bikes will be available across the route. The Town Health Check explicitly states the greenway “will put Blessington on the map as one of Ireland’s foremost sustainable destinations”. Accordingly, sustainable transport to Blessington (i.e.) the Luas from Dublin must be an option in the future.

## 8. More walking trails and continued access to Glen Ding

Submission in bold and underlined below:

### **A walking route from the ring road to Glending woods**

Sport Ireland have developed a comprehensive document in relation to Walking Trails. Continued partnerships must be built with landowners in the spirit of mutual respect for the land. I previously called on Wicklow County Council to look at constructing a footpath from the vicinity of Deerpark and the ring road to the woods on the Naas Road as these woods are very popular for walkers. People should not have to drive down the Naas Road and park off a busy road to access the woods. I want increased access to Glen Ding for the benefit of all Blessington and West Wicklow residents.

### **Conclusion**

Blessington is a growing area steeped in potential if the correct facilities are provided. Central to this is public transport improvement - especially the extension of the Luas to Blessington. The provision of more recreational facilities through a multi-use sports complex has the potential to transform the community. Significant urban regeneration would have a transformative effect on the town from the better use of spaces to making the area more attractive to visit. Small businesses are central to the development of Blessington and all land use zoning decisions must be made with existing businesses in mind. A 1000 student Secondary School must be fast-tracked, and more land should be zoned for educational use (particular community education). Continued improvements to roads and footpaths are necessary particularly with regarding to street lighting and ensuring pedestrians are prioritised. The Blessington Greenway offers the expansion of tourism potential in a way like never before. The concept of exploring age-friendly communities, and age-friendly tourism could greatly enhance the lives of older people. More walking trails could benefit this area, and continued access to Glending Forest is paramount for all Blessington residents.

The opportunities for Blessington depend on the vision and ambition that we have for the town at this moment in time.

***Cllr. Edward Timmins***

***April 2024***

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