



### **Submission on Draft County Development Plan: Walking Infrastructure in Wicklow**

The objectives set out by Wicklow County Council (WCC) in Chapter 18 of the *Draft Wicklow County Development Plan 2021-2027* for green infrastructure in general, and for walking routes in particular, are admirable and appropriate. As the chapter makes clear, being able to walk can certainly benefit the County's citizens through "improved health and wellbeing" as well as "place-making'... positively recognising... the character of particular locations" (p.384). WCC also shows insight in recognising that such benefits "can be strengthened and enhanced when the sites/assets are *linked together into a network of green infrastructure*" (p.384). Having a comprehensive **network** of rights-of-way throughout the county is vital to achieving the benefits of walking, for both **Wicklow** people and visitors.

I wish to commend WCC for listing at least some rights-of-way in its draft plan and for imaginative initiatives such as the Blessington Greenway, the Arklow-Shillelagh trail and for enhancing in recent years walking routes such as that from Kilmacanogue to the Sugarloaf. However, achieving the good objectives set out by the Council requires a much more extensive network of walking routes, routes that should be available in every locality within the county, in lowlands as well as uplands.

The Covid pandemic highlighted this need but also the lack of adequate facilities for walking. People wanted to walk safely in their own area, but very many could not find accessible places to walk in their immediate locality. Being able to walk near to where one lives is all the more important in the light of WCC's appropriate goals on Sustainable Transport, in Chapter 12 of the Draft Plan:

Reducing the need to travel, especially long distances, by private car... prioritising active travel modes of walking and cycling... Delivering improvements to the pedestrian environment and promoting walking as a mode of transport through the provision of new and improvement of [sic] existing walking facilities throughout the County... (p.261)

Given that the greater part of Wicklow's population lives in the north-east of the county, projects such as the Greenways that are envisaged, the Wicklow Way and a few Rights-of-Way around Wicklow Town, admirable though these are, cannot achieve the objectives WCC have set out.

While recognising the good intentions of WCC, the stated objectives require a much more ambitious **vision** for walking facilities throughout the county. The lack of anything

approaching an adequate vision for walking in the draft plan is very striking. Achieving a comprehensive network of satisfactory walking facilities will, of course, take time but no significant progress can be made without such a guiding vision.

What would a proper Vision for Walking look like? I wish to suggest a few of the elements that should go into it, among others:

- *Some off-road walking opportunities in every locality in the county, with these integrated with each other as far as possible.* WCC's admirable dossier of 110 Rights-of-Way in the north-eastern corner of the county, compiled in the late 1980s, would be a good starting point for the Plan in that area, but similar surveys would need to be carried out throughout the county.
- *Access routes (predominantly off-road) from all towns and villages in the county to the Wicklow Way.* Examples of such access routes might be the following: (i) from Bray through Enniskerry to the Wicklow Way via the Cookstown River, Knocksink Woods and the Old Road to Curtlestown (which is well documented, in Judge Liam Price's book in the 1930s, in over 20 of J. B. Malone's articles from the 1940s to 1970s, in the WCC dossier in the 1980's, etc.); (ii) from Bray and Greystones to the Wicklow Way via the Sugarloafs and Deerpark; (iii) linkage from the Arklow-Shillelagh Greenway to the Wicklow Way beyond Shillelagh.
- *A pathway along the entire coast of County Wicklow.* If Wales can have 1,400 km of pathway around its coastline, and the South-West Coast Path in England can extend for over 1,000 km, why can we not achieve much smaller walking facilities in Ireland?
- *There should be good and safe footpaths in the vicinity of all towns and villages, and wherever road walking is required in the network of walking facilities.* Examples of the inadequacy of footpaths can be given in too many locations throughout the county, but I refer to Enniskerry here as one example, where there is a dangerous inadequacy of footpaths in at least three places. There are no footpaths (i) from the Powerscourt entrance to Tinahinch Bridge, a particularly dangerous stretch of narrow walled-in winding road, used by high numbers of visitors who walk to Powerscourt Waterfall; (ii) through the Scalp, until one crosses into Dun Laoghaire Rathdown; and (iii) on bendy roads around Kilmolin.

Ireland's lack of walking infrastructure stands in disgraceful contrast with other European countries and a vision for any county would need to aspire to achieving the standard set in all our neighbouring countries. For example, just across the Irish Sea, the county of Cumbria is very similar geographically to the county of Wicklow, but it has 7,645 km of public rights-of-way. That is what a network should look like! Adjusting for its smaller size, County Wicklow should have about 2,500 km of public rights-of-way to be comparable.

However, even by Ireland's low standards regarding walking infrastructure, Wicklow does poorly at present. For example, Dun Laoghaire Rathdown – a county less than one-sixteenth of the area of County Wicklow – lists 51 Rights-of-Way and the authorities there emphasise that “this list of Rights of Way does not purport to include all the Public Rights of Way”. So, for Wicklow to match its near neighbour's density of Rights-of-Way, it would need to list 800 in its plan rather than the miserable seven it does list.

We recognise that council officials have in the past been inhibited from promoting the common good, as far as walking infrastructure is concerned, by backward attitudes among some landowner lobby groups, but we feel it is time for their effective veto to be confronted and the “improved health and wellbeing” of the population as a whole to be given far greater weight.

WCC needs to also be far more assertive when traditional walking routes are being lost, as is happening all the time. For example, the much-used and wonderful walk in the Luggala Estate, from the Pier Gates to Lough Dan, is at present closed and a notice attributes this to ‘filming’ – even though the filming appears to have concluded. Another fine walk in the Luggala area was closed off at the time of Foot-and-Mouth, with a sign giving this as a reason for closure many years after that epidemic had passed. Walking routes are a key part of our heritage. They are rapidly being eroded and require urgent and extensive action by our local authority to stem the erosion and reverse the trend.

Kevin Warner



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