

DONEGAL OUTDOOR RECREATION STRATEGY

2023–2029



Rialtas
na hÉireann
Government
of Ireland

Tionscadal Éireann
Project Ireland
2040

Ár dTodhchaí
Tuaithe
Our Rural
Future



The European Agricultural Fund
for Rural Development:
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Comhairle Contae
Dhún na nGall
Donegal County Council



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Foreword



Councillor Liam Blaney
An Cathaoirleach,
Donegal County Council

The Donegal landscapes and waterscapes accommodate a host of outdoor recreation activities suitable for a wide range of users, the sustainable development of which will be informed by the Donegal Outdoor Recreation Strategy 2023-2029 and on to 2040, seeking to guide, nurture and sustain a diverse, natural authentic outdoors for all.

Our Place here is distinctive and unique - synonymous with the identity of County Donegal and informed by a myriad of factors including geology, the marine, land/water cover, natural, built and cultural heritage that together combine to define our character and our outdoor environment.

Our outdoor environment offers an endless, changing and unique immersive experience, that informs the fabric of the place and the communities who live here. More and more people are enjoying this rich and diverse outdoor environment from surfing and sailing to walking and cycling, in part as people become more aware of the need for physical activity to promote health and mental wellbeing. The number and variety of outdoor recreation activities is increasing. Easily accessible and well- developed recreation infrastructure is important in supporting the social fabric of society, similarly recreation facilities are a key component in supporting the tourism sector with many developments bringing much needed economic activity into the County. This Strategy will seek to guide the sustainable development of Donegal as a diverse, natural authentic outdoors for all.



John G. McLaughlin
Chief Executive,
Donegal County Council

During the preparation of this Strategy, extensive consultation took place with a wide range of stakeholders including landowners, land managers, Elected Members, Council Officers, representatives of Governing bodies of Sport, most specifically the Donegal Sports Partnership, Development Agencies, State Agencies, the community and the public. I want to thank everyone for engaging so positively in the process and I look forward to seeing the partnerships that have already developed through the Strategy's preparation, strengthen in the future. Already, a number of actions identified in the Strategy are being delivered upon on a cross sectoral basis; with Donegal County Council currently inviting applications for the post of a Biodiversity Officer and progressing a Community Trails Plan for the Donegal Municipal District, supported by our elected members. Working across agency and delivering on the objectives of Healthy Ireland with our Healthy Ireland Coordinators and Slaintecare colleagues, Health Checks are developing in our rural towns and villages. The Health Checks consider accessibility and connectivity, identify paths and trails facilitating door-stop walking and have been done with colleagues on a cross-directorate and cross sectoral basis.

This helps align funding, link communities and provides a joined up and cost-effective approach to path development across the County. We are just at the start of this journey, managing our outdoor environment, considering most particularly climate resilience, and I very much look forward to further sustained and meaningful engagement, as endorsed through the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy, with our partners the Donegal Sports Partnership and yourselves in guiding, nurturing and sustaining outdoor recreation in Donegal up to 2029 and beyond.



Councillor Niamh Kennedy
Chairperson of Donegal Local
Community Development Committee

Donegal Local Development CLG. on behalf of the Donegal Local Community Development Committee/ Local Action Group coordinate, manage and oversee the implementation of local and community development programme across the County including driving the delivery of the first Donegal Outdoor Recreation Strategy 2023-2029. Our Committee is made up of public and private sector members, including local authority members and officials, State agencies, private sector and local and community development representatives. Although our jobs and related responsibilities/roles differ in one way or another, the complexities and range of challenges we face in doing our work, the sharing of experiences we enjoy through our work in the LCDC/LAG, most recently in developing the Outdoor Recreation Strategy, provides for a greater understanding and appreciation of the value of, partnership, collaboration and working together- the value of which is borne out in the actions as identified in the Donegal Outdoor Recreation Strategy. The importance of outdoor recreation in improving the health and well-being of our County's residents, in building stronger, more cohesive and inclusive communities across our County and in generating economic growth for our County through activity tourism, is also further recognised as a key priority informing the wider sustainable development of the County as is evidenced in the emerging Local Economic and Community Plan, the County Development Plan and the Donegal Tourism Strategy.

01

Introduction



Introduction

County Donegal, located in the northwest of Ireland provides a wealth of opportunities to participate in and enjoy outdoor recreation activities.

Predominantly rural in character, Donegal covers an area of 4,801 square km², and is the fourth-largest County in Ireland. It is nationally recognised for its rugged diverse landscape and extensive indented coastline (c.1,132km). The coast together with an abundance of mountains, hills, forests, loughs, rivers, blanket bogs, beaches and islands provides a range of rich recreational opportunities for both local communities and visitors alike.

This precious environment is informed by a unique and distinctive cultural heritage. The Donegal Gaeltacht, including the island community, is the largest Irish speaking community in Ireland and occupies almost a third of the County. It constitutes a significant natural resource for recreational opportunities.

Donegal is home to the Sliabh Liag cliffs located in the south of the County, among the highest sea cliffs in Europe, Ireland's highest sea arch, Pollet Arch in Fanad, Ireland's most northerly point, Malin Head, and Glenveagh National Park, which is one of only six National Parks in Ireland.

Donegal's resource value and high-quality environment is reflected in the significant number of environmental designations across the County (approximately 30% of the County is designated) including, Natural Heritage Areas, National Park, Ramsar sites, Nature Reserves, Geological Heritage Sites and

Special Protected Areas and Special Areas of Conservation. In addition, and at the time of writing (2022) Donegal has 12 designated blue flag beaches and 2 blue flag marinas, together with 4 green coasts, an award made by the Foundation for Environmental Education and operated by An Taisce.

The landscapes and waterscapes of County Donegal currently present rich opportunities to explore and engage with the outdoors, and there is a now an evolving recognition and greater understanding that the resource base which provides these opportunities is finite and therefore an informed and balanced approach is required to ensure that the very resource which provides the opportunities for recreation and enjoyment, is protected and managed appropriately.

This is Donegal's first Outdoor Recreation Strategy. It will ensure outdoor recreation in Donegal is developed and managed in an environmentally sustainable and responsible manner, facilitating a greater awareness and understanding of the County's natural, built and cultural heritage, whilst nurturing and supporting its communities in realising the potential of The Place for the greater good of its people, visitors and the economy.

In the preparation of this Strategy, cognisance has been given to the wider external environment and emerging trends in outdoor recreation across Ireland and in the UK, to

ensure recommendations are future proofed across the lifetime of the Strategy. These major trends include;

- More people are enjoying the outdoors than ever before
- Soft activities such as walking and cycling continue to be the most popular but there is a notable rise in new activities such as open water swimming and Stand Up Paddleboarding (SUP)
- People are interested in participating in a range of outdoor recreation activities e.g walking, cycling, adventure play
- Multi-generational participation in the outdoors has increased
- People's lives are busier but more flexible, with users wanting opportunities 'closer to home' to participate with friends and family

- There is an emerging awareness/ understanding of the importance and value of sustainability
- Fully digital consumers are more demanding in terms of information as social media growth continues.

An evidence-based approach, aligned with national policy has shaped the preparation and subsequent detail of this Strategy, to ensure the future prosperity and wellbeing of the County and its citizens, and in welcoming visitors to enjoy the rich diversity of outdoor recreation opportunities the County has to offer.

The Strategy's Vision covers the period up to 2040, with the Action Plan covering the period up to 2029.





02

Outdoor Recreation
Defined

Outdoor Recreation Defined

Within the context of this Strategy, outdoor recreation is defined as ‘physical activities that take place in the natural environment’.

The definition includes land, water and air-based activities, and ‘passive enjoyment of the outdoors’ which straddles all three activity columns. (Table.1). The definition does not include activities that take place outdoors on confined courses or pitches e.g., golf, football, show jumping or motorised activities e.g., quads/scramblers, except for motorised mobility aids. It aligns with the definition in the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy for Ireland (2023–2027).

Outdoor recreation activities:

- are usually undertaken by people in their leisure time - however this can include organized activity through clubs /groups (e.g coastal rowing club, guided walking group)
- involve physical human power/effort – however this can sometimes involve equipment (e.g surfboard, canoe, bike, boat, ropes), or passive enjoyment of the natural environment
- require access to green and/or blue spaces in rural or urban environments
- are not primarily focused on competitive outcomes
- sometimes use purpose-built facilities in the natural environment to facilitate participation (e.g construction of walking, mountain biking and horse-riding trails, development of canoe steps)



Land-Based

- Walking
- Hill walking/hiking
- Leisure cycling
- Mountain biking
- Horse riding
- Trail/Off-road running
- Orienteering
- Bouldering, scrambling, rock climbing, mountaineering
- Caving
- Adventure Play



Water-Based

- Paddle sports -includes canoeing, kayaking and Stand Up Paddleboarding (SUP)
- Rowing
- Wild swimming
- Surfing
- Coasteering
- Wind surfing/kite surfing
- Sailing
- Diving
- Angling



Air-Based

- Para gliding
- Hang gliding

Passive enjoyment of the outdoors

Table 1 – Outdoor Recreation activities covered within the Strategy

03

The Importance of an Outdoor Recreation Strategy



The Importance of an Outdoor Recreation Strategy

The importance of outdoor recreation as a key asset in improving the nation's health and well-being, building stronger, more cohesive and inclusive communities, and generating economic growth through activity tourism, continues to be recognised, most recently reflected in national policy.

The number of people participating in outdoor recreation in Donegal and across Ireland has increased significantly, by many factors, including the Covid-19 pandemic along with an increased awareness and appreciation of our positive mental and physical wellbeing.

Numerous academic studies have considered the positive outcomes for individuals and communities of participating in outdoor recreation. Over 3,500 of these studies were reviewed and collated into one document,¹ and summarised on the right:

Because of the identified benefits listed, outdoor recreation is widely recognised as an integral element in delivering on several of government's wider national policies and strategies as referenced in the next section.

¹ Benefits of Outdoor Sport for Society <http://outdoorsportsbenefits.eu/resources/> (European Network of Outdoor Sports, 2018)

Benefits of Outdoor Recreation



Mental health and wellbeing

- General mental health status
- Quality of life and overall wellbeing
- Combating mental illnesses and disease
- Positive affective states
- Reducing negative affective states
- Control and coping
- Self-development
- Positive experiences
- Active and happy ageing



Physical health

- General physical health and related factors
- Combating diseases like stroke, heart attack and cancer
- Low injury rates and extended life expectancy
- Healthy ageing
- Subjective health perception
- Sun exposure effectiveness



Active citizenship

- Community benefits
- Integration and inclusion
- Volunteering
- Bonding Capital



Education and life-long learning

- (Intra) personal development
- Interpersonal development
- Educational motivation and achievements
- Cognitive aspects to improve learning
- Environmental awareness and behaviour



Crime reduction and anti-social behaviour

- Increase of prosocial behaviour
- Prevention and reduction of crime



Additional benefits

- Lifetime physical activity
- Accessibility
- Cognitive functioning
- Other multiple effects

Table 2 - Summary of Outdoor Recreation Benefits

04

Strategic Context



Strategic Context | National Strategies



The importance of outdoor recreation is acknowledged and recognised as a key mechanism in delivering on elements of several Government strategies, plans and policies including:

Project Ireland 2040

Programme for Government-Our Shared Future

Our Rural Future – Rural Development Policy (2021-2025)

National Outdoor Recreation Strategy (2023-2027)

The Healthy Ireland, A Framework for Improved Health and Wellbeing (2013-2025)

Climate Action Plan (2023)

Sport Ireland Policy on Sport and Physical Activity in the Outdoors (2020)

Get Ireland Active! National Physical Activity Plan for Ireland (2016, reviewed in 2020)

National Disability Inclusion Strategy (2017-2021)

Tourism Recovery Plan (2020-2023)

Tourism Development and Innovation Strategy (2016-2022)

4.1 Project Ireland 2040

Project Ireland 2040 is the government's long-term overarching strategy to make Ireland a better place for all its people. The National Planning Framework (NPF) and the National Development Plan (NDP) combine and form the two pillars of Project Ireland 2040 and set out a shared vision for coordinated planning and investment across the island of Ireland. Project Ireland 2040, through the NPF is underpinned by a shared set of 10 goals or National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs) for every community across the country. These are the tools the NPF will use to deliver on its goals and include most specifically in relation to the development of the Donegal Outdoor Recreation Strategy NSO 3 - Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities and NSO7 - Enhanced Amenities and Heritage. The Framework recognises the key role rural areas play in defining Ireland's identity, in driving its economy and high-quality environment, with an understanding that requisite investment is required to maintain and support amenities in rural areas, such as national parks and forest parks, activity-based tourism and trails such as greenways and blueways, either linked to or born from our built, cultural and natural heritage. Furthermore the NPF recognises and values the inextricable link in rural areas, between agriculture and tourism, where agriculture creates and maintains the landscapes upon

which tourism trades, acknowledging the maintenance of access to these landscapes and the creation of new access is dependent on maintaining good links with landowners and the agricultural sector.

4.2 Programme for Government - Our Shared Future

The focus of the Programme for Government (June 2020) is to improve the wellbeing of the Irish people and society with the immediate challenge to recover and rebuild in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. It acknowledges the contribution tourism brings in reaching its vision and outlines a commitment to develop and strengthen Ireland's image as an 'outdoor activity holiday destination' to the domestic and international markets. Key actions related to outdoor recreation reference the development of a new National Outdoor Recreation Strategy, supported by increased investment in trails, greenways, blueways, cycleways, angling and associated rural recreational amenities thereby capitalising on an increased demand for adventure tourism, thus bringing increased economic benefits to rural towns and villages.

Strategic Context | National Strategies

4.3 Our Rural Future, the Rural Development Policy (2021-2025)

Our Rural Future, the Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, seeks to create a vibrant and sustainable rural Ireland, transforming the quality of life and opportunities for people living in rural areas and commits to publish Ireland's first ever National Outdoor Recreation Strategy, backed up by increased investment in trails, greenways, cycleways, blueways and other amenities, capitalizing on the increased demand for outdoor pursuits post Covid-19. It acknowledges that outdoor

recreation plays a key role in achieving the ambition for rural Ireland to be a destination of choice for outdoor activities and adventure tourism and provides opportunities for employment growth in rural areas associated with activity tourism. It also recognises the community and wellbeing benefits of outdoor recreation through the development of green spaces and recreational amenities that encourages community enjoyment and more vibrant communities, as well as supporting healthy, active lifestyles in local communities.



4.4 The National Outdoor Recreation Strategy (2023-2027)

The National Outdoor Recreation Strategy 2023-2027 is a cross Government stakeholder-led strategy, which was developed in collaboration with Comhairle na Tuaithe. Embracing Ireland's Outdoors sets out a vision, mission and actions to lead, guide and facilitate the sustainable development and management of the outdoor recreation sector for the next five years and involved significant stakeholder and public engagement. Given that the natural environment is the setting for outdoor recreation, protection of the environment is central to the strategy, with a focus on minimising recreational pressure on sensitive habitats and species

The strategic objectives are:

- **Leadership:** To create a more coordinated, cohesive approach at national and county level to ensure best use of our resources.
- **Environment:** To protect the environment through better planning and development of outdoor recreation, in keeping with best practice management of landscape and habitats.
- **Awareness:** To create awareness of our outdoor opportunities and how to enjoy them responsibly.
- **Opportunities:** To increase and support the number of people active in the

outdoors, especially young people and under-represented groups.

- **Access:** To protect and improve access to the outdoors for the benefit of all.
- **Expertise:** To improve the knowledge, skills and expertise of stakeholders and partners.

4.5 The Healthy Ireland, A Framework for Improved Health and Wellbeing (2013-2025)

- Healthy Ireland is a government framework for action to improve the health and wellbeing of our country. It defines a clear vision, with four central goals. It sets out a broad framework of actions that will be undertaken by Government Departments, local authorities, statutory agencies, community and voluntary groups, businesses, families and individuals to improve health and wellbeing and reduce the risks posed to future generations.
- The Healthy Ireland Framework 2019-2025 is a roadmap for building a healthier Ireland. It is based around four key goals to increase the proportion of people who are healthy at all stages of life, to reduce health inequalities, to protect the public from threats to health and wellbeing and to create an environment where every individual and sector of society can play their part in achieving a healthy Ireland.

Strategic Context | National Strategies



4.6 Climate Action Plan (2023)

- The Climate Action Plan 2023 sets out how Ireland is putting climate solutions at the centre of its social and economic development. At its heart, the Plan is about realising the opportunities that a clean, sustainable environment, economy and society will offer, in a way that is fair for everyone.
- It builds on the Climate Action Plan 2021 that highlighted the importance of outdoor recreation as a vehicle in increasing nature connectedness and promoting pro-environmental behaviours and as a solution to reducing transport emissions through the development of walking and cycling infrastructure with the consequent benefits of improving people's health.
- The Plan also advocates the need to return existing peatlands to more natural conditions to deliver a range of climate benefits through reduced carbon emissions, long-term carbon storage, increased carbon sequestration, and enhanced resilience to the locked-in impacts of climate change. Work is already underway to restore the damaged areas of peat on the lower slopes of Errigal mountain, that have suffered from increased use of the mountain from walkers.

4.7 Sport Ireland Policy on Sport and Physical Activity in the Outdoors (2020)

Sport Ireland's Policy on Sport and Physical Activity in the Outdoors (2020) has a vision to create opportunities for everyone to participate in and enjoy sport and physical activity in the outdoors. The goals of the policy are built around four targets including Target Area 3 - 'supporting infrastructure development' and Target Area 4 - 'creating opportunities'. Under Target Area 3, two of Sport Ireland's policy goals include,

- supporting the strategic development of quality outdoor infrastructure in rural and urban settings to enable increased participation in sport and physical activity
- continuing to support the development of recreational trails in Ireland by promoting quality criteria and best practice and maintaining a National Trails Register.

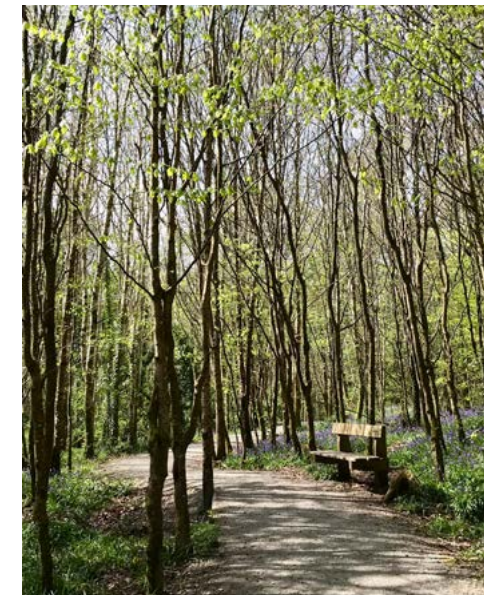
Under Target Area 4 one of its policy goals is to

- 'activate and promote existing and new outdoor recreation infrastructure in the State including trails, greenways, parks, forest recreation sites, mountain bike trails and blueways.

4.8 Get Ireland Active! National Physical Activity Plan for Ireland (2016, reviewed 2020)

The National Physical Activity Plan seeks to increase population levels of physical activity which would lead to health, economic and social benefits. It contains the following two actions:

- prioritise the planning and development of walking and cycling and general recreational /physical activity infrastructure
- develop and promote walking and cycling strategies in each Local Authority area.



Strategic Context | National Strategies

4.9 National Disability Inclusion Strategy (2017-2021)

The National Disability Inclusion Strategy is a co-ordinated and planned approach, across Government Departments to promote greater inclusion by people with disabilities in Irish Society. Section 8 'Transport and Accessible Places' of the Strategy seeks to develop access to outdoor recreation facilities especially footpaths and trails, and Section 6 'Person-Centred Disability Services' seeks to ensure that leisure facilities are based on universal design principles and that disability awareness and competence is fostered in sporting organisations.

4.10 Tourism Recovery Plan (2020-2023)

The Tourism Recovery Taskforce (TRT) established in May 2020, developed a recovery plan for the tourism industry in recognition of the impact COVID 19 has had on the sector. One of the key actions of the TRT is 'Increasing Investment in Tourism Product' which identifies Ireland's built and natural heritage as the bedrock upon which Irish tourism has been developed and acknowledging investment is required, while seeking a more creative innovative approach to developing the product offering. Additional investment will be required in product development including in outdoor activities and enabling access and better use

of Ireland's vast open spaces, thus enhancing Ireland's position as a green, clean and sustainable destination.

4.11 Tourism Development & Innovation (2016-2022)

Fáilte Ireland's Tourism Development and Innovation: A Strategy for Investment 2016-2022, includes ambitions to increase the economic contribution of tourism across local communities including a number that relate to engaging with the outdoors e.g 'access to the landscape'. Fáilte Ireland is committed to supporting, directly or indirectly, projects which sustainably create or improve access to, or enhance the visitor experience of the brand

propositions including the Wild Atlantic Way such as the development or enhancement of outdoor amenity infrastructure such as pathways to improve accessibility and manage erosion, wildlife viewing points, coastal paths etc. Alongside this investment, Fáilte Ireland will encourage Local Authorities and project promoters to adopt international best practice in providing sustainable and sensitive access to the landscape and the coast.

The Donegal Outdoor Recreation Strategy will seek to deliver on and align with the policy reference and national strategies as cited above.



Strategic Context | Donegal County Council Strategies

The Donegal Outdoor Recreation Strategy will align with and seek to deliver on the objectives of the County Donegal Development Plan 2018-2024 (under review), The Local Economic and Community Plan - 2016-2022 (under review) and the emerging Tourism Strategy for Donegal (2023-2027).



4.12 County Development Plan (2018-2024)

The County Development Plan sets out an ambitious vision for the future growth and development of the County from 2018-2024. Key objectives and Council policies within the Plan that relate to outdoor recreation are included within the chapters on infrastructure, natural heritage, tourism and the marine resource and coastal management, and include;

- encouraging and facilitating joined up long-distance walking and cycling routes for recreation as alternatives to the car, particularly in rural areas, between settlements
- supporting and facilitating the maintenance, enhancement and expansion of the National Cycle Network
- safeguarding the scenic context, cultural landscape significance, and recreational and environmental amenities of the County's coastline from inappropriate development
- consideration of development proposals for resource related/activity-based tourism product developments (e.g. developments related to walking, cycling, horse riding, fishing/angling, water sports, outdoor pursuits, craft/cultural centres etc) throughout the County except within Areas of Especially High Scenic Amenity



- facilitating the development of new and the upgrading of existing marine access infrastructure including piers, harbours, berthing facilities and slipways
- facilitating the appropriate development of angling facilities throughout the County
- facilitating development proposals that enhance access to and provide for the sustainable development of the Islands.

4.13 Local Economic and Community Plan (2016-2022)

The County Donegal Local Economic & Community Plan 2016-2022 aims to promote economic development and community development in the County. The Vision of the Plan is 'to connect Donegal's people and places, harness its economic opportunities and to achieve strong, healthy, inclusive and

sustainable communities.' The Plan's 7 priority goals all have relevance to the Outdoor Recreation Strategy namely;

- to develop Donegal as a connected place
- to harness Donegal's natural and human capital
- to value, sustain and develop Donegal's culture and creative resource
- to promote sustainable, inclusive and healthy communities
- to develop Donegal as a lead region for learning, research and innovation.
- to develop the 'Donegal' Brand
- to promote entrepreneurship, investment and enterprise

The role of outdoor recreation is an integral element of the emerging Tourism Strategy for Donegal (2023-2027).



05

Process of
Developing the
Donegal Outdoor
Recreation Strategy

Process of Developing the Donegal Outdoor Recreation Strategy

Over the past number of years, there has been a heightened awareness and understanding both internally within Donegal County Council (DCC) and among the other key players across the County responsible for outdoor recreation, that a collaborative approach was needed to guide future decision making related to outdoor recreation, given the increasing and diverse, albeit interlinked body of work everyone was doing.

To inform the delivery of this Strategy and ensure an informed and collaborative process ensued, a Steering Group comprising representatives of DCC and the Rural Recreation Officer (RRO) of Donegal Local Development Company (DLDC) was established to share knowledge, information, provide advice to the project team throughout, and guide the direction of the Strategy.

A Stakeholder Group was established soon after which provided a source of information for the audit, contributed to the formulation of the Strategy's vision, mission and themes and agreed the Strategy's recommendations and associated lead delivery agencies, as outlined in the Action Plan.

Stakeholders included representatives of the following sectors - tourism, environment, participation, accessibility, farming, education, health and youth as well as the Local Development Companies and all relevant state agencies.



To inform the development of the Strategy, a comprehensive audit was undertaken comprising;

- an overview of the landscape in which Donegal's outdoor recreation sits including landownership, access, environmental profile and designations
- an assessment of the current provision of all activities which take place across Donegal as defined in Table 1 including site location for each activity (with associated facilities and infrastructure, where applicable) and where relevant, clubs associated with the activity and activity providers offering the activity. This information was mapped using GIS.

- an overview of existing, ongoing, and potential opportunities for outdoor recreation development at a Municipal District level, given the size of the Donegal.

Detailed information on the audit is available in a separate Audit Report which accompanies this Strategy.

A key component of the Strategy process also included undertaking a comprehensive consultation programme. This included;

- 1-1 consultation with all members of the Steering Group and Stakeholder Group
- 1-1 consultation with the National Governing Bodies of all outdoor recreation activities listed within Table 1

- staff across directorates within DCC and the Public Participation Network (PPN), more specifically the Environmental Pillar.
- on-line consultation workshops with elected members.
- on-line consultation workshops with members of the public which were hosted per Municipal District.
- a public on-line questionnaire to which 457 responses were received

Site visits to key recreational sites were also made during the Strategy process to allow familiarisation and to validate consultation responses.

06

Current
Position



Current Position

Given the geographical size of Donegal, the current position of outdoor recreation has been recorded as challenges and opportunities for each of the individual five Municipal Districts (MDs) as well as a combined analysis for the whole County.

An analysis of the current position of each MD, together with opportunities for each forms part of the accompanying Audit Report to this Strategy.

Table 3 details the current position for the County as a whole and summarises the feedback obtained through the extensive consultation process.

The focus is to take full advantage of the challenges identified and to effectively counter those with actions, to lead and manage the development of outdoor recreation that involves a collaborative approach by all agencies involved.



Challenges	
There is no one stop shop or dedicated person within Donegal to go to for advice, guidance, information on all things related to outdoor recreation	There is limited horse-riding provision across the County, no public bridle paths.
Currently there is limited partnership and collaborative working across the outdoor recreation industry per se e.g. landowners/managers (both State and private), DCC, Development Companies, community groups, activity providers, service providers, participation programme providers	Some recreation sites require considered access, directional signage to the site, trailhead information, waymarking and interpretation
A community focussed bottom-up approach would address issues with regards to outdoor recreation development between landowners and managers	Visitor services' provision e.g. toilets, changing facilities, catering services and below users' expectations in key recreation sites
Further clarity is required around the roles and responsibilities of those involved in outdoor recreation on the ground on a day-to-day basis e.g. RRO, DCC Outdoor Recreation Officer, new Island RRO, Officers in DCC who complete Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme (ORIS) funding applications	There is limited accommodation provision for recreational users e.g. hostels, campsites, glamping, pods, and Aire-de-service
There is no Biodiversity Officer in Donegal/DCC	Further detail is required to inform a co-ordinated ongoing rolling management and maintenance programme for walking trails and outdoor recreation sites
The Islands are becoming increasingly more popular creating visitor management issues and concerns over damage to the island's biodiversity and habitats	Detailed information is required by specific user groups with regard to accessibility.
Some 'honey pot' sites both on the coast and inland are suffering from an array of visitor management issues e.g. traffic congestion, litter, human waste issues, campfires, wild camping, dog worrying.	Funding opportunities are limited to deliver outreach participation programmes for underrepresented groups

Table 3 – Challenges and Opportunities



Challenges

Several key outdoor recreation sites have exceeded their 'ecological carrying capacity', manifested as trail erosion resulting from a combination of high user numbers and lack of on-going maintenance and environmental monitoring.

There is no formal networking of activity operators across the County

There is an urgent need for targeted path development training, most especially in landscapes of a special or sensitive character.

Increased insurance costs poses significant challenges causing a loss of activity providers loss of activity providers across the County

There is limited coordinated data on user numbers across the County

Formal regulation of the activity provider sector requires further consideration across the country.

There is no formal process in place for upland event organisers to ensure events are sustainable and sensitive to the receiving environment

There is limited 'night' offering by the private sector to enjoy the outdoors e.g. sunset walks, moonlight kayaking

There is some ambiguity over the definition of Greenways and Blueways.

There is a limited number of Irish speaking outdoor recreation guides, 'Lowland Hill Leaders', ghillies and qualified outdoor recreation instructors.

There is poor accessibility and connectivity between existing recreation facilities and new tourism developments.

The connections between outdoor recreation and stories interpreting the rich natural and cultural heritage of the area including the Irish language are not fully realised.

Family-focused outdoor recreation opportunities are limited e.g. family off-road cycling, pump tracks, adventure play

There is further potential to develop outdoor recreation focused events across the County

There are no formal off-road mountain biking sites in the County.

Opportunities	
Donegal is rich in heritage - natural, built and cultural	The draft County Donegal Tourism Strategy 2023-2027 recognises the importance of outdoor recreation as a key contributor to the area's visitor proposition and economic growth of the area
Donegal Gaeltacht is 1502km ² - equivalent to 26% of the total area of the Gaeltacht - including the Donegal's islands	There are 6 National Parks in Ireland and Glenveagh is the 2nd largest in the Country and is one of the County's key recreation sites. A 'Visitor Experience and Development Plan' is nearing completion for Glenveagh National Park and recommendations include increasing the outdoor recreation offering
Donegal has a diverse and rich variety of landscapes and waterscapes available for outdoor recreation e.g. coast, rivers, loughs, forests, mountains, hills, marine cliffs, islands, bogs, beaches	Proposed facilities centres for water-based activities, funded by Fáilte Ireland are being developed in Bundoran and Downings
Donegal is recognised as an outdoor recreation destination in Ireland for both land and water-based activities	Initial Greenway development funding has been received for 6 subject sites with 3 in Inishowen as well as Barnesmore Gap, Letterkenny-Burtonport, Castlefinn and Foyle Valley Greenway link (Carrigan – Castlefinn)
Walking is well provided for, including an abundant wealth of walks of varying lengths including forest walks, park walks, mountain and hill walks, coastal walks, walks along former railway lines and bog/turf roads	3 Local Development Companies are involved in outdoor recreation development across the County as well as Donegal County Council (DCC), Údarás na Gaeltachta, National Parks and Wildlife (NPWS), Coillte, Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI) and the Loughs Agency
Donegal has adequate provision for water sports infrastructure; piers, slip ways, harbours, pontoons and marinas	A number of very proactive community groups are involved in outdoor recreation, involving the development, management and maintenance of facilities
In 2022, Donegal has 12 blue flag beaches, 2 blue flag marinas and 4 green coasts	A Rural Recreation Officer (RRO) is employed by Donegal Local Development Company (DLDC) and is hugely active across the County
Juxtaposition of coast and land for outdoor recreation opportunities creates a unique offering	A new RRO has been appointed with responsibility for the Islands
Donegal has the longest coastline in Ireland – 1,132km and is a prominent route on the Wild Atlantic Way	A new Gaeltacht and Islands Manager has been appointed by Fáilte Ireland
Donegal Airport provides good accessibility - voted 3 years in a row as the world's most scenic airport	There is a strong private sector providing recreational opportunities through hire of equipment, teaching, guiding, boat trips etc
Is the most highly designated County in Ireland in terms of habitat designations – including International (National Park), European (SPA, SAC, NHAs) and Regional habitat designations	There is a dedicated Outdoor Education and Training Centre based at Gartan managed by Donegal Education and Training Board
3 of Fáilte Ireland's signature points for the Wild Atlantic Way are in Donegal i.e. Fanad Head, Malin Head, Sliabh Liag Cliffs	There are a number of successful participation programmes using the outdoors in place through the Donegal Sports Partnership (DSP), Foróige, and the Health Service Executive
The Inishowen Peninsula 'Destination Experience Development Plan' led by Fáilte Ireland's is nearing completion.	There are a number of active websites and social media channels promoting outdoor recreation to name but a few including Donegal.ie, Inishowen.ie, discoverdonegal.ie, govisitdonegal.com



07

Vision, Mission and
Strategy Themes

Vision, Mission and Strategy Themes

The following Vision and Mission have been developed to guide, nurture and sustain outdoor recreation in Donegal up to 2040.



Our Vision

Donegal – a Diverse, Natural, Authentic outdoors for all



Our Mission

To provide an authentic outdoor recreation experience for all to enjoy while protecting our unique and diverse landscapes and waterscapes, developed and nurtured in respectful partnership and working together to deliver social, economic and environmental benefits for our local communities and visitors

To inform the delivery of the Strategy's vision and mission, six themes were identified from which several strategic actions flow. The key themes are:

1.

Collaboration



2.

Environmental Integrity



3.

Facilities and Visitor Servicing



4.

Inclusivity



5.

Training and Education



6.

Awareness and Participation



08

Key Themes





Theme 1 | Collaboration

Objective: To encourage those involved in outdoor recreation either directly or indirectly, to work together in a positive, open, accountable and collaborative way.

Given the size of Donegal, it is inevitable that a multitude of organisations are involved in planning, developing, managing and promoting outdoor recreation across the County. These include public and private landowners who own or manage land on which outdoor recreation takes place, the local authority and community organisations/groups, the three Local Development Companies, and associated state bodies. In addition, several sporting organisations and numerous private sector businesses are involved directly in facilitating participation whilst others are involved in performing an education and training role related to outdoor recreation.

To date, meaningful or sustained collaboration between the various bodies involved in outdoor recreation has been limited, confusion of roles and responsibilities within the wider outdoor recreation sector, duplication of effort amongst organisations and often scarce resources not being used as efficiently as they could be.

For the user of Donegal's outdoors, this current piecemeal approach ultimately leads to a reduction in their visitor experience, and for the environment, creates unnecessary damage through ill informed, though well intentioned, decision making.

From consultation, key areas for future collaborative working to inform the sustainable development of outdoor recreation in Donegal include the environment, strategic planning, facilities planning, funding priorities, project delivery, facilities management, research, training, promotion and awareness and performance monitoring.

To facilitate and lead this new strategic collaborative approach the following recommendations, which align with the recommendations of the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy, are proposed.

- 1 Appoint a County Outdoor Recreation Coordinator
- 2 Establish a Donegal Outdoor Recreation Committee
- 3 Establish Donegal Outdoor Recreation Stakeholder Forums

In addition, a further two recommendations are proposed. These are:

- 1 Establish a Donegal Outdoor Recreation Working Group
- 2 Establish a Donegal County Council Cross-Directorate Outdoor Recreation Committee

8.1.1. Outdoor Recreation Coordinator

To ensure the co-ordination and delivery of the Outdoor Recreation Strategy a dedicated resource, namely, an Outdoor Recreation Coordinator, is required. This Coordinator will be accountable to the Donegal Outdoor Recreation Committee. It is anticipated that in addition to acting as the Secretariat to the Committee, Stakeholder Forums and Working Group (see below for further detail), the Outdoor Recreation Co-ordinator will also have responsibility for key areas of work including:

- acting as the single dedicated point of contact for all outdoor recreation stakeholders in the County
- offering advice and expertise in areas such as access, the trail planning process, trail build and maintenance
- raising the skill set and knowledge of the key stakeholders involved in outdoor recreation
- highlighting the County's strategic priorities for capital investment in outdoor recreation and ensuring all stakeholders are working collaboratively to deliver these.
- coordinating and guiding strategic outdoor recreation initiatives in other areas such as research/monitoring, communication, participation and education.





8.1.2. Donegal Outdoor Recreation Committee

The key objective of the Outdoor Recreation Committee is to ensure co-operation and collaborative working between all key stakeholders directly or indirectly involved in outdoor recreation planning, development, management, promotion, education, training and participation.

As part of the development of this Strategy a Stakeholder Group was established including representatives from the following sectors - tourism, environment, participation, accessibility, farming, education, health and youth, the three Local Development Companies, the local authority, and relevant state agencies.



Subject to review, this existing Stakeholder Group may form the basis of the proposed Outdoor Recreation Committee with final membership defined following an audit to validate all sectors are appropriately represented, and that due consideration has been given to the numbers representing each sector. The Committee's main role will be to agree an annual Operational Plan based on the actions outlined in the Donegal Outdoor Recreation Strategy and which will inform the annual Work Programme of the new Outdoor Recreation Coordinator. The Operational Plan will prioritise work relating to on-going site/trail maintenance, asset renewal of existing sites/trails and new outdoor recreation developments across the County, and will identify an agreed project lead to progress respective areas of work specifically in relation to funding

The Committee's Chair will be elected from the Committee's members and shall meet monthly for the first 6 months and thereafter four times a year.

The Committee's members will agree and implement a MOU outlining requisite roles and responsibilities to ensure the delivery of actions emanating from the Strategy. As appropriate, standing subgroups and/or time-limited or project specific subgroups will be created when necessary.

Membership of the Donegal Outdoor Recreation Committee will include as a minimum, representatives from each of the organisations listed in Table 4.



Proposed Membership of Donegal Outdoor Recreation Committee

Secretariat to the Committee	– Outdoor Recreation Coordinator
Local Sports Partnership	– Chief Executive Officer
Local Development Companies	– Rural Recreation Officer (DLCD) – Rural Recreation Officer (Comhar na nOileán) – CEO – Inishowen Development Partnership
Local Authority	– 1 Officer involved in outdoor recreation planning, development, delivery or funding. – Outdoor Recreation Officer – Healthy Ireland Coordinator for Donegal
Private Landowner Representative	– Irish Natura and Hill Farming Association – Irish Farmers Association
Public landowners/land managers	– Coillte, Inland Fisheries Ireland, Loughs Agency, NPWS, OPW
State Agencies	– Fáilte Ireland, Údarás na Gaeltachta, NPWS Ecologist / District Conservation Officer (or similar)
Education, Training, Disability, Inclusion, Health and Youth	– 1 representative from each sector
Stakeholder Forums	– Chair or representative from each of the 5 MD Stakeholder Forums

Table 4 - Proposed membership of Donegal Outdoor Recreation Committee.



8.1.3 Donegal Outdoor Recreation Municipal District Stakeholder Forums

Key to the success of the Outdoor Recreation Strategy moving forward is encouraging and facilitating meaningful buy-in from the wider Donegal outdoor recreation sector ensuring that a community focused ‘bottom up’ approach is adopted to ensure the sustainable future development of outdoor recreation in Donegal. Consequently, the establishment of a Stakeholder Forum in each of the MDs, given the geographical size of Donegal, will provide the opportunity for input and ownership to the planning and delivery of the Outdoor Recreation Strategy at a local level.

Facilitated by the new Outdoor Recreation Coordinator and chaired by a Forum member, appointed annually by Forum members, each Forum will meet three times a year

providing an opportunity for members to meet, learn and network, share collective knowledge on issues such as rising insurance costs, marketing, branding, maintenance, access, etc, bring issues for consideration to the Outdoor Recreation Committee and receive information back from the Outdoor Recreation Committee, creating a forum for information exchange that is particular to place.

The Chair of each District Forum will attend the Outdoor Recreation Committee meetings. Additional Forum members can be invited to participate in the Committee’s standing subgroups and time-limited subgroups e.g project-based subgroups as appropriate and when necessary.

Membership of the Forum will include a wide range of interest groups such as those detailed in Table 5.



Proposed Members of Donegal Outdoor Recreation Stakeholder Forum

Local Elected Representatives
Community Groups
Landowners/site managers including private landowners, Fort Dunree, Sliabh Liag Visitor Centre, Inch Wildlife Reserve
Commercial outdoor activity providers
Local representatives of National Governing Bodies of Sport e.g Mountaineering Ireland, Cycle Ireland, Swim Ireland
Outdoor recreation enthusiasts, clubs etc
Service providers to the outdoor recreation sector e.g accommodation providers
Health representatives i.e., HSE
Youth Organisations
Age Friendly Donegal
Disability organisations
Outdoor recreation volunteers
RSS/TÚS/CE Scheme supervisors involved in outdoor recreation
Local representatives involved with the Irish Association of Adventure Tourism

Table 5 - Proposed membership of the Donegal Outdoor Recreation Stakeholder Forum



8.1.4 Outdoor Recreation Working Group

Whilst the Outdoor Recreation Committee will bring together a wide range of representatives involved in outdoor recreation, there is also a need for a smaller group of organisations to meet regularly in a working group who are involved on a day-to-day basis in delivering outdoor recreation across the County.

This Working Group will provide a platform to share and discuss projects at concept, development and planning stages, projects

under construction, specifics of project particulars, potential new projects and raise and discuss specific issues of concern amongst the Group's members.

The Group will be facilitated by the new Outdoor Recreation Coordinator and will meet initially monthly for the first 12 months from establishment. It will be Chaired by a member of the Group on a rotational basis, for a 12-month period.

Proposed Membership of Donegal Outdoor Recreation Working Group

Secretariat	— Outdoor Recreation Coordinator
Chair	— Member of the Group on a rotational basis
Local Development Companies	— DLDC - Rural Recreation Officer — Comhar na nOileán- Rural Recreation Officer — Inishowen Development Partnership x1
Local Authority	— Biodiversity Officer — Outdoor Recreation Officer or other — Tourism Officer
Public landowners/land managers	— NPWS, Coillte, Inland Fisheries Ireland, Loughs Agency
State Agencies	— Údarás – Community Employment Scheme Officer

Table 6 - Proposed membership of the Donegal Outdoor Recreation Working Group

8.1.5 Donegal County Council Cross-Directorate Outdoor Recreation Committee

Outdoor recreation by its very nature cuts across the remit of several directorates in DCC. Given the scope, diversity and complexity of the work, the size of the Council and the number of staff involved, it is important Officers involved in specific aspects or projects in relation to outdoor recreation are fully aware of the detail of other colleagues' work in the same or related field, providing for an alignment of delivery and an efficiency of customer service.

The Cross Directorate Outdoor Recreation Committee will facilitate information exchange, nurture positive and productive working relations, create synergies between and across various outdoor recreation projects, reduce duplication of effort, increase economies of scale and ultimately provide better decision making and alignment of delivery across the County. The Cross Directorate Outdoor Recreation Committee will meet three times a year.

The Committee will be chaired at Director level, to provide the requisite and necessary value to the conversation, raising the profile and acknowledging the importance of our outdoors at the highest level of the organisation.

Areas within the local authority that will be represented on the Committee are listed in Table 7

Areas of interest - Donegal County Council Outdoor Recreation Committee

Health and Well Being
Diversity – Youth Council and Age Friendly
Community Development
Environment
Education
Economic Development
Planning
Tourism
Roads
Active travel
Culture
Heritage

Table 7 - Areas to be represented on the Council Cross-Directorate Committee.





Theme 2 | Environmental Integrity

Objective: To safeguard and protect the natural, built and cultural heritage of Donegal for the enjoyment of future generations



Donegal's environment is a valuable national and local asset that requires sustainable management to facilitate development and growth whilst also retaining, conserving and protecting its character, quality and resultant value.

Donegal has an extensive and diverse resource base comprising mountainous spines, areas of blanket bog, pristine rivers and lakes, rich marine resources including coast, beaches and islands all of which lend themselves to the provision of a wide range of outdoor recreation activities for both the local community and the increasing number of visitors coming to Donegal.

This particularly unique and high value environment is a fundamental part of Donegal's natural, built and cultural heritage and ensuring its integrity is essential to the future sustainable development and continued enjoyment of outdoor recreation across Donegal.

In recognition of its quality environment, and with a view to protecting it, up to 30% of the County is designated as Natural Heritage Areas, National Park, Ramsar sites, Nature Reserves, Wildfowl Sanctuaries, Biogenetic Reserves, Refuge for Fauna, Irish Geological Heritage Sites and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs). The latter two designations

fall under a network of sites referred to as Natura 2000 sites and comprise sites of the highest biodiversity importance for rare and threatened habitats and species across the EU. At present there are 47 SAC's and 26 SPA's within, or partly within Donegal. In addition, and at the time of writing, Donegal is home to 12 designated blue flag beaches and 2 flag marinas, together with 4 green coasts.

As previously referenced, in the introduction, Donegal's Islands form a unique part of the outdoor recreation proposition of the County. Levels of use have increased significantly in the past number of years initiated in a renewed curiosity of the place and largely facilitated via ease of boat access. Several of the Islands are designated of importance because of their habitats and rich biodiversity. In this regard it is important to ensure the islands are not further compromised by inappropriate or excessive human activity and that outdoor recreation is managed within the 'recreational carrying capacity' of the area.

The fundamental concept in which each environment can sustain recreational activities up to an optimal level, after which deterioration can be expected in the environment and/or the activity taking place, is known as the 'recreational carrying capacity'. The most obvious manifestation on the ground of recreational forces exerting heavy pressure on sensitive areas, is through

path braiding and path degradation and deterioration. Damage can be evident in the form of ecological, physical and perceptual damage.

- Ecological damage manifests itself as damage to vegetation, soils and landforms
- Physical damage affects the path's surface and its surrounding
- Perceptual damage refers to the damage caused to the landscape and wild land quality by the visual impact and the presence of paths – which in turn causes a reduction in a person's aesthetic experience and overall enjoyment of the environment.

Paths that tend to show the greatest susceptibility and evidence of degradation include routes to well-known destinations which attract many people due to the clear definition of the route on the ground, i.e. accessibility and easy orientation, considerable publicity associated with the walk or because they are recognised as the popular local walk in the area, e.g. Errigal, Muckish. In addition, purpose-built paths that have not been properly planned, designed or constructed can also contribute to significant environmental degradation and deterioration. In many cases the path has been built in the wrong place, albeit with all good intentions, so understanding the principles behind where and how to build paths is key.



In addition to path degradation, other issues of environmental concern, many of which have been exacerbated as a direct result of increased user numbers, include littering, dog fouling, human waste issues, wild camping and wildfires.

Conserving, protecting and managing Donegal's outdoor environment for future generations, whilst encouraging an appreciation and enjoyment of these resources is a key element of this Strategy. To ensure that the integrity of Donegal's environment is not compromised, the following recommendations, are proposed.

- Appoint a Biodiversity Officer for the County
- Support and activate the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy's (NORS) Training Programme on planning and developing higher quality and sustainable outdoor recreation infrastructure – including trails
- Communicate NORS responsible behaviour message and associated marketing campaign -tailored specifically for Donegal
- Facilitate environmental monitoring of the key honey-pot sites across the County Donegal.
- Increase and co-ordinate existing visitor counter data across the County

8.2.1 Appoint a Biodiversity Officer

To inform the development of outdoor recreation and help ensure that outdoor recreation development proposals seek to only enhance and protect the environmental quality of Donegal's landscapes and waterscapes, it is recommended that DCC employ a Biodiversity Officer. This Officer will work across all Council Directorates ensuring that for all outdoor recreation projects the appropriate processes have been adhered to, and to ensure the necessary measures are in place to facilitate the ongoing protection and enjoyment of the outdoor environment e.g through Screening and Appropriate Assessment (AA), as necessary. The purpose of an AA is to establish whether a particular plan or project is likely to have a significant effect on a Natura 2000, either individually or in combination with other plans or projects.

The appointment of a Biodiversity Officer will acknowledge the value and importance of Donegal's environment and will seek to guide and inform those organisations working in outdoor recreation in Donegal through providing advice and guidance in relation to the appropriate development of outdoor recreation in the County. With so much of the County classified as a designated landscape, this Officer will play an important role in the proposed Outdoor Recreation Working Group ensuring that all those at the table developing outdoor recreation have a renewed appreciation and informed understanding of the unique diversity and sensitivity of

the receiving landscapes and waterscapes and are wholly aware and appreciative of their responsibilities ensuring the ongoing sustainable development of the environment.

8.2.2 Support and activate NORS's training programme on planning and developing higher quality and sustainable outdoor recreation infrastructure – including trails

Due to a renewed appreciation of the beauty of our great outdoors, and the resultant ever increasing visitor numbers, many recreation sites across the County are showing signs of exceeding their recreational carrying capacity. The most obvious manifestation of this is through badly eroded trails, use of desire lines, trail braiding etc, particularly evident in sensitive and upland areas. In most cases the damage has been caused through a lack of understanding or knowledge of how to plan, design and build sustainable trails in sensitive landscapes.

In this regard, attendance on specific training courses informing the development of trails as developed by NORS will be compulsory for those in receipt of grant aid for trail planning, design and construction. This will be applicable to Council Officers, Development Companies, local community groups and all working within the realm of outdoor recreation trail provision.

Training is also required for those involved in organising, promoting and funding events

in relation to outdoor recreation specifically, creating an awareness and understanding of the potential environmental damage that can be caused delivering events in sensitive areas, acknowledging the appropriate process to be followed when organising events e.g screening and completion of an AA as necessary, and an nurturing an understanding of ways to mitigate potential damage. Communicating and supporting Fáilte Ireland guidance when hosting outdoor events within particular landscape settings is key to nurturing positive relations, raising environmental awareness and ensuring events are enjoyable and sustainable into the future.





8.2.3 Communicate NORS's responsible behaviour message and associated marketing campaign -tailored specifically for Donegal

This Strategy seeks to encourage greater use of the outdoors by a more diverse range of users, given the significant benefits that participating in outdoor recreation brings, it is however acknowledged that increased participation, particularly by new audiences unfamiliar with the outdoor environment also brings significant challenges to landowners and land managers. In recent years, there was an unprecedented number of new cohorts enjoying Donegal's outdoors, leading to increased and unnecessarily irresponsible use of the outdoors manifested as increased litter, dog fouling, human waste issues, wildfires, wild camping and issues over car parking. It is recommended that support is given to communicating NORS's message on responsible behaviour, which will be tailored specifically for Donegal showcasing specific examples of good and bad practice, and capitalising on the existing very rich collateral of the Donegal brand identity.

8.2.4 Facilitate Environmental Monitoring of Recreation Sites across the County

Many of Donegal's outdoor recreation sites are showing signs of environmental degradation through increased human activity as well as natural causes and most specifically climate change. It will be important moving forward to monitor the impact that climate change could potentially have on key recreation sites across the County such as Ards Forest Park, Glenveagh National Park, Errigal, Muckish, Malin Head, Sliabh Liag etc.

Monitoring degradation caused by both natural causes and increased recreational activity will ultimately lead to a healthier, less degraded environment and a more enjoyable experience for the user.

8.2.5 Increase and Co-ordinate Existing Visitor Counter Data across the County

Collating and interrogating robust and accurate data, such as the number of people visiting recreation sites or using trails, is fundamental not only to inform good visitor management practices but also to inform and clarify on-going expenditure in outdoor recreation. Evidence is a key raw ingredient to model 'social return on investment', whereby a site owner can say that for every € invested in the site, there is a x€ return in terms of social value.

Pedestrian counters at recreation sites/trails across the County is sporadic, with some sites having a comprehensive system in place e.g Inch Levels through the Trail Gazer project, whilst limited to no provision exists at other sites. For those site owners that do collect the data, there is currently limited co-ordination and sharing of data in any meaningful way with others involved in outdoor recreation across the County.

The new Outdoor Recreation Coordinator will coordinate data across the County, which is currently being collected by various

stakeholders disparately, and present the findings annually to the Outdoor Recreation Committee. The Co-ordinator will also encourage a wider visitor monitoring programme by providing information and detail on the specification of various counters available and assisting project promoters to carry out research on their facilities such as calculating the social return of investment. Trail counters will be installed as a matter of course during the development of any new outdoor recreation project in Donegal.





Theme 3 | Facilities and Visitor Servicing

Objective: To provide high quality, accessible, enjoyable and sustainable outdoor recreation opportunities and experiences across the County, supported by visitor servicing facilities where appropriate.

Donegal's diverse landscapes and waterscapes currently provide a wealth of outdoor recreation opportunities. Of the 22 activities contained within the definition of outdoor recreation, 20 are known to take place across Donegal on land owned or managed by Coillte, Inland Fisheries Ireland, NPWS, Lough Agency, DCC and private landowners. Private landowners play an intrinsic and very valuable role in providing access to many of Donegal's walking opportunities, especially the area's long-distance National Waymarked Ways.

Essential and intrinsic to the provision of outdoor recreation opportunities across Donegal is the role performed by local community groups. In many areas these groups are leading the development of outdoor recreation and the on-going management and maintenance of these facilities.

The current opportunities for outdoor recreation across Donegal are defined by Outdoor Recreation NI as:

- Iconic
- Signature
- Activity hubs
- Community hubs
- Community Trails

Iconic signifies outdoor recreation opportunities and experiences that are key drivers for international and domestic visitors such as the International Appalachian Trail and the Eurovelo cycle route, whilst signature refers to outdoor recreation opportunities that could form a key part of an international visitors' wider itinerary when visiting the County e.g Sliabh Liag cliffs, Glenveagh National Park, Malin Head. Signature outdoor recreation opportunities also hold significant appeal to domestic visitors and the local community who want to casually explore and connect with the distinctive local landscapes and waterscapes.

Activity hubs refer to outdoor recreation sites, with a clustering of activities and supporting visitor services within a confined area e.g. forest park or beach. Although primarily used by locals, they attract large number of visitors typically during holiday periods for example Ards Forest Park, Downings beach, Donegal Bay, Lough Foyle. Community hubs refer to outdoor recreation sites that provide primarily local communities access to high-quality green and blue space enabling residents to be more active, therefore improving health and wellbeing and community cohesion. They usually involve the opportunity to take part in more than one activity e.g Corravaddy Wood, Drumboe Woods. Many of these community hubs include community trails, that is, walking

trails that provide safe 'doorstep' outdoor recreation opportunities at a community level e.g Duntally Wood, Rathmullan Wood.

Opportunities exist in Donegal to develop new outdoor recreation facilities and visitor services, and includes implementing the outdoor recreation recommendations included within other site specific/national plans for the area, extending and in many cases elevating the 'quality' and proposition on offer at existing outdoor recreation sites/trails and developing new outdoor recreation facilities for those members of the public currently underprovided for.

Fundamental to any future outdoor recreation development, as referenced under the theme of Environmental Integrity, is the need for any intervention to be undertaken sensitively and sustainably to ensure that the very resource which provides the opportunities for recreation and enjoyment, is protected and managed appropriately. In addition, any new developments will be future proofed to facilitate access for all, enabling as wide a range of people to enjoy the outdoors of Donegal.



To help deliver on this theme of the Strategy, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Support NORS and existing Plans/Strategies particular to the County in relation to the provision of outdoor recreation.
- Enhance the quality and visitor services' proposition at outdoor recreation sites.
- Consider a range of options for the future management and maintenance of outdoor recreation sites.
- Prepare a County Greenway Strategy
- Prepare Community Trail Plans for each MD



- Prepare Recreation Masterplans for specific locations
- Undertake a Water based Trails and Blueway Feasibility Study for specific locations
- Undertake a Scoping Study on family focused provision
- Undertake a Scoping Study for mountain biking
- Develop the Wild Atlantic Way Walking Trail

8.3.1 Support NORS and existing Plans/Strategies for the County

Ireland's National Outdoor Recreation Strategy, 'Embracing Ireland's Outdoors' was published in November 2022 by the National Government. In addition, several strategies and plans already exist or are nearing completion across the County that encompass recommendations related to the planning, development, management and maintenance of outdoor recreation in specific areas/sites and include Glenveagh National Park, Inishowen, Malin Head, Drumboe Woods, Lough Foyle and its tributaries, Arranmore Island, Ards Forest Park, Inishtrahull, Sliabh Liag Pilgrim's Path and Errigal.

Support will be provided through the Outdoor Recreation Committee to implement the recommendations of these strategies and plans, and others that come onboard within the timescale of this Strategy, provided the recommendations adhere to the principle of environmental sustainability.

8.3.2 Enhance the quality and visitor services' proposition at outdoor recreation sites

It is acknowledged that it is both practically and financially impossible to provide the visitor services recreational users wish to see at every outdoor recreation site across the County. However, as services become more important to users' enjoyment of the outdoors, elevating the 'quality' of existing outdoor recreation sites play a key factor in the future of outdoor recreation provision across Donegal.

Enhancing the quality and offering of existing sites includes for example, improving the directional signage to the site, the visitor welcome, trailhead panels, information boards, waymarking and interpretation, and improving the quality of the site's infrastructure specifically trail surfaces, car parking, toilets and catering facilities.

Introducing new visitor services to recreation sites such as toilets, changing facilities, car parking, and catering facilities will require an understanding of the site's existing user groups e.g families, those with disabilities, popularity of the site, site accessibility and proximity of other similar services etc.

Whether a site is simply enhanced in terms of quality, or a new visitor service is developed, consideration should always be given to

accommodating as wide a range of users as possible, ensuring all work is sympathetic for the landscape or waterscape setting in which it is completed, and over-engineering avoided.

It is recommended that on a rolling annual basis an agreed number of sites/trails are audited in detail by recreation managers, the results of which will be forwarded to the Outdoor Recreation Committee to inform the prioritisation of sites for asset renewal, on-going maintenance and capital expenditure in visitor servicing.

Priority should be given initially to those key sites that were identified through consultation as having inadequate visitor servicing provision relative to the level of activity taking place at each site e.g. Ards Forest Park, the Pilgrims Path, Sliabh Liag and Blue Flag beaches e.g. Portsalon, Marble Hill, Carrickfinn etc

An important visitor servicing requirement for recreational users to Donegal is sourcing appropriate accommodation. Market research, financial projection and investment is required largely from within the private sector to expand the range and quantity of visitor accommodation on offer across the area e.g. camping pods, glamping as well as Aire-de-Service.



8.3.3 Assess options to ensure future sustainable management and maintenance of outdoor recreation sites

Without doubt the greatest challenge facing the future of outdoor recreation in Donegal, as identified through the consultation process, is the on-going management and maintenance of existing sites/trails. All stakeholders involved in outdoor recreation provision must ensure that the emphasis of capital funding should equally focus on the maintenance and renewal of existing outdoor recreation infrastructure, as much as on the development of new and additional infrastructure. In addition, the emphasis of capital funding should equally be distributed between local community infrastructure e.g community trails, as well as strategic infrastructure e.g trails and adventure play in Ards Forest Park, Glenveagh National Park and Drumboe Woods.

To help address the on-going management and maintenance of outdoor sites, it is recommended that an audit is undertaken by DCC on a cross-directorate basis to examine the existing role of local community groups and community support organisations in the future management and maintenance of outdoor recreation infrastructure across the County. DCC has already in place arrangements with several community groups to manage and maintain facilities e.g Malin Head. This exercise will provide further

clarity informing the appropriate governance arrangements with such groups through either Service Level Agreement, Memorandum of Understanding, providing clarity around roles and responsibilities.

8.3.4 Prepare a County Greenway Strategy

The preparation of a Donegal Greenway Strategy will inform the strategic development of greenway infrastructure across the County.

Work is currently progressing across the County regards the Greenway development, in the absence of a strategic framework. It is therefore difficult to understand the longer-term vision for Donegal's Greenways and consequently is leading to over ambitious expectations regarding future development within some areas. Developing a Greenway Strategy will bring much needed clarity on the definition of a Greenway and how it differs significantly from other recreational trails in terms of size, scale, scope, construction techniques and funding implications. As part of the development of the Greenway Strategy, consideration will be given to completing the 'missing links' in the Council's current Greenway proposition and the potential of linking the main Greenway spines to nearby towns and villages and other existing recreation sites through a network of community trails.

8.3.5 Prepare Community Trail Plans for each MD

The desire and importance of people having local trails in their community was highlighted in recent years. Community Trails create a 'sense of community' as well as improving the health and wellbeing outcomes of those who use them. Although some areas across Donegal have limited community 'doorstep' walking opportunities, others are well catered for, with some potentially over-provided, as individual community groups work in isolation unaware of what a neighbouring group is doing. To inform the consolidation of existing trails and the strategic development of future community trails, it is recommended that a Community Trail Plan is developed for each Municipal District to be undertaken in collaboration with the Healthy Ireland Programme for the County. A Community Trail Plan is currently progressing within the Donegal Municipal District with the support of the District Members. The Community Trail Plan will ascertain the need for future trail development based on parameters such as proximity to population, distance to existing greenspace, potential contribution to the wider visitor proposition through a community trail network and prioritisation for future funding going into trails.





8.3.6 Prepare Recreation Masterplans for Specific Locations

Recreation Masterplans are an essential tool to inform the sustainable development of a given area thereby minimising ad-hoc, piecemeal development, and ensuring that the final proposition can meet the needs and expectations of the end users and to the quality standard expected. Taking a more strategic approach to outdoor recreation requires a collaborative working practice with other partners. Several areas have been identified that will benefit from such an approach to help consolidate and enhance the existing outdoor recreation product as a basis for increasing provision and participation e.g. Lough Finn – River Finn corridor, Trusk Lough and its wider environs, Killybegs north and wider area, Barnesmore Gap and Redcastle/Carndonagh. Recreation Masterplans are recommended for each of these areas and will be developed in partnership with the local community.



8.3.7 Undertake Water based trails and Blueway Feasibility Study for Specific Locations

Further clarity and information will be provided identifying the difference between Blueways and Water Trails e.g canoe trails, snorkelling trails etc the definition of both and the criteria that needs to be met to be designated as one or the other. Based on consultation, it is recommended that a feasibility study is undertaken for four waterscapes to determine whether the potential exists to develop the water-based outdoor recreation opportunities at each sufficiently to meet the definition and criteria for Water Trails and Blueways as set out in the documentation produced by Sport Ireland, Fáilte Ireland, Waterways Ireland, Tourism NI and Sport NI. The four areas for consideration include Donegal Bay, Mulroy Bay, Lough Foyle and Lough Swilly/Inishowen peninsula.

8.3.8 Undertake a Scoping Study of Family Based Provision

A myriad of water-based activities, concentrated on the County's numerous beaches, are currently available for families across the County to enjoy. However, the family focused offering is weak for land-based activities particularly for safe off-road cycling trails, pump tracks and adventure play. Whilst the development of the proposed Greenways will help address the deficit in off-road cycling opportunities, short-term opportunities should be explored and supported, particularly at those sites already offering outdoor recreation provision as well as exploring new sites. Developments such as the pump track in Gartan OEC, the new pump track currently under development in Letterkenny and the proposed new adventure play area in Glenveagh National Park are to be welcomed, nonetheless it is recommended that a Countywide Scoping Study is commissioned seeking to identify specific sites which could accommodate family focused outdoor recreation development. Such a Study would consider not only issues such as availability of land, consideration of future management and maintenance etc, but also more importantly an assessment of need based on an area's population and more specifically the area's demographic profile.





8.3.9 Undertake a Scoping Study for a Mountain Bike Trail Centre

There is currently no formal mountain biking trail centre in the County nor are there any plans by Coillte, who lead Ireland's Mountain Bike Trail Centre development, to develop a mountain bike trail centre in Donegal. Consequently, mountain bikers leave the County to bike elsewhere, with the closest trail centre located in Coolaney, Sligo or Gortin Glens in Omagh. With no formal mountain biking provision, it has been identified through consultation that unsanctioned mountain biking is taking place at numerous locations across the County, including Corravaddy Wood, Ards Forest Park, Gartan/Church Hill area and the area around Lough Salt.

Coillte is receptive to communities coming forward with proposals, these being assessed against several criteria including the financial impact to commercial forestry and the impact on the environment. Several clubs have previously approached Coillte regarding developing mountain bike sites, but any future development proposal should be of a scope and scale that is attractive to a range of riding abilities. Evidence from Northern Ireland demonstrates that the most popular mountain bike trail centres are those developed with families in mind. A Scoping Study is recommended for the County to

determine the main mountain bike user markets e.g. family, enthusiasts, enduro, and downhillers, identification of critical factors of success based on the market, potential sites for development and consideration of the on-going management, maintenance and liability responsibilities of service providers.

8.3.10 Develop the Wild Atlantic Way Walking Trail

Donegal has a wealth of walking opportunities ranging from community trails to long-distance trails, and there is the opportunity to become, if developed, a significant part of Ireland's most iconic walk - the Wild Atlantic Way Walking Trail (WAWWT). The WAWWT trail would act as a key driver attracting international and domestic visitors and add to the existing proposition, offering further reason for visitors to come to Donegal and celebrate the unique landscapes on offer. With the longest coastline in Ireland at 1132km and consequently the longest stretch of the Wild Atlantic Way, developing the WAWWT would bring significant economic benefit to Donegal's communities. It is recognised that this Trail is a long-term aspiration, with many challenges particularly around access agreements. It is further anticipated that progress towards the long-term vision will only ever be realised through developing short

coastal walks and linking these together. In this regard it is recommended several separate feasibility studies of small sections of coast that have already received traction or on which access has been agreed in principle progress. Priority areas exploring feasibility options include the Bloody Foreland, Inishowen Peninsula and the area from Donegal Town to Port passing Killybegs, Glencolmille, Sliabh Liag. This approach will help connect existing recreation facilities to new tourism developments e.g. Sliabh Liag, Fort Dunree, Malin Head, Fanad Head.

Walking is the most popular recreational activity undertaken in Donegal and given that the success of most walks in Donegal is dependent on the goodwill of private landowners, it is imperative that continued support is given to existing landowners e.g. through participation in the Walks Scheme, administered by Department of Rural and Community Development. Walks included presently in the Scheme are the Bluestack Way and the Sliabh Liag Pilgrim's Path. Unfortunately access has already been lost to some of Donegal's most beautiful walking areas and consequently it is essential that when strategic walking trails are identified, applications are submitted for inclusion in the Walks Scheme with the agreement of relevant partners.





Theme 4 | Inclusivity

Objective: To ensure that everyone can participate and feels welcome in the outdoors of Donegal.

It is well documented that participating in outdoor recreation can make an invaluable contribution to an individual's emotional, mental and physical wellbeing and consequently it is essential that as many people as possible can enjoy the outdoors and reap the benefits of doing so. There is however, a significant gap across Donegal in participation levels from some sections of society namely, women and girls, older adults, young people, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, unemployed and those from areas of high social need. This is not unique to Donegal and similar patterns are evident across the whole of Ireland.

This disparity is already being addressed through the work of the Healthy Ireland Programme, the Donegal Sports Partnership (DSP), Foróige, and the HSE. The most common barriers to outdoor participation in Donegal include lack of personal confidence and motivation, the prohibitive cost of hiring equipment for certain activities, a poor public transport system across the County, inaccessibility of sites to the less able/disabled, limited land based outdoor facilities for young people and insufficient detailed information on specific sites to allow an informed decision to be made before visiting e.g surface of the trail, availability of accessible toilets.

Recommendations to address the lack of specific infrastructure to encourage more young people and families to get out and enjoy the outdoors has already been included in section 8.3.8 whilst section 8.6 proposes recommendations to encourage greater numbers of women and girls, older adults, ethnic minorities and those from high social need areas to enjoy the outdoors. In addition, finding composite solutions to some of the barriers preventing inclusivity in the outdoors falls outside the scope of this Strategy, e.g addressing Donegal's limited public transport system.

Recommendations made in this section of the Strategy seek specifically to address underrepresentation from those who are less able/disabled and include:

- Support NORS's work providing better access to information on outdoor recreation through auditing of inclusive and accessible outdoor recreation infrastructure
- Complete an Audit of Parkrun events specifically in relation to accessibility
- Support NORS's work providing better access to information on outdoor recreation through providing detailed information for sites





8.4.1 Support NORS's work providing better access to information on outdoor recreation through auditing of inclusive and accessible outdoor recreation infrastructure

Across Donegal there are a limited number of sites which are wholly accessible to those that are less able/disabled.

Many outdoor recreation sites provide disabled car parking and disabled toilets. There is one 'Changing Places' facility available at Narin beach providing a dignified toileting and changing experience for those with more severe disabilities. In addition, several of the County's beaches provide 'beach wheelchairs' (Rathmullan, Downings, Carrickfinn, Marble Hill, Rossnowlagh, Fintra) with several others are waiting on delivery of the chairs (Culdaff, Bundoran 2022).

Having the above facilities however doesn't guarantee that those who are less able/disabled to actively enjoy the site. At some sites the 'journey' from the car park to the actual facility such as the beach or a walking trail isn't accessible, e.g., Lough Trusk, at others the appropriate visitor servicing requirements are not in place to accompany existing developments e.g no changing places facilities at all beaches offering beach wheelchairs e.g., Carrickfinn and at others the facility is inaccessible e.g walking trails. Often walking trails at recreation sites are too steep, for example, to allow a wheelchair user to push themselves along it, too narrow to allow for example an elderly person to walk side by side with another giving support, or surfaced with inappropriate material, for example, coarse stone provides difficulties for those who are visually impaired.



Whilst it is recognised that it is impossible to provide access for all, everywhere, this Strategy presents an opportunity to start to address the barriers facing those who are less able/disabled. To increase the accessibility of all outdoor recreation sites across the County, it is recommended that, on a rolling annual basis, an agreed number of sites/trails are audited in detail by recreation managers and the modifications/improvements to make the site more inclusive to a greater number of people recorded. The results of this annual audit will be used by the Outdoor Recreation Committee to prioritise funding for expenditure. Works which may need to be considered include car parking, toilets, changing places, changes to trail surfacing, trail width, increased seating along a trail and more detailed and specific information on trailhead panels/information panels. This information will also feed into the National Digital Database project as set out in NORS.

8.4.2 Complete an Audit of Parkrun events specifically in relation to accessibility

The Parkrun concept has been one of the success stories across Ireland and the UK during the past decade, encouraging people of all ages, abilities and background to run 5km once a week in their local park. There are currently five Parkruns operating across Donegal weekly in Falcarragh, Narin Beach, Dungloe, Buncrana and Letterkenny, the latter being accessible to those with

disabilities. To increase the inclusivity of Parkrun, an accessibility audit of all existing Parkruns is recommended, with the results disseminated through the appropriate channels, and recommendations to improve accessibility considered.

8.4.3 Support NORS's work providing better access to information on outdoor recreation through providing detailed information for sites

For anyone using the outdoors, having accurate, up to date and accessible information on the site to be visited, forms an essential part of the overall visitor journey. For those with disabilities the level of detail provided is even more paramount in helping make informed decisions before leaving home. Further consultation with a wide range of disability organisations, to identify the appropriate level of detail required, is recommended, with the outputs feeding directly into promotional channels in relation to outdoor recreation across the County. This is considered further in section 8.6.

This information will support the National Digital Database project as set out in NORS which seeks to collate detailed information on where and how people can access the outdoors and outdoor activities and with content that is inclusive to all audiences.



Theme 5 | Training and Education

Objective: To better equip all those involved in outdoor recreation, now and in the future, with the necessary skills and knowledge to ensure users are afforded a sustainable and quality outdoor recreation experience

Fundamental to the future sustainable development of outdoor recreation in Donegal is training and educating those involved directly or indirectly in the sector. This cohort includes landowners and land managers who provide access for outdoor recreation activities, those involved in planning, developing and delivering facilities on the ground and the private sector including existing/future activity providers e.g walking guides, surf board hire operators etc and service providers e.g accommodation and café owners.

A lack of adequate training and knowledge informing the development of outdoor recreation is a significant national issue and consequently a series of recommendations are made in NORS which will be implemented as they emerge. Communicating and ensuring support for the training and education initiatives developed and delivered by NORS will be a key role of the Outdoor Recreation Co-ordinator.

Training will range from attending events already being offered by other credible outdoor recreation training organisations, such as the Outdoor Recreation Network of Ireland and the UK (ORN) and the Visitor Safety Group of Ireland and the UK (VSG), through to creating bespoke training programme across the Country, specific to the needs identified.

Delivering any comprehensive training and education programme will create opportunities to facilitate discussion and debate on a wide range of subject matters, allow for dissemination of new policy initiatives and good practice throughout the wider outdoor recreation sector, enable and encourage effective interchange of ideas and views and encourage formal and informal networking opportunities.

To achieve the Training and Education objective of this Strategy, the following recommendations are proposed

- Communicate, support and facilitate training for those responsible for planning, delivering, managing and maintaining outdoor recreation facilities as developed by NORS
- Communicate and support training for activity tourism providers and service providers
- Support the outdoor recreation community in obtaining accredited outdoor recreation qualifications
- Communicate and support the activity sector on how to deliver safe, quality experiences for all as developed by NORS.

8.5.1 Communicate, support and facilitate training developed by NORS for those responsible for planning, delivering, managing and maintaining outdoor recreation facilities

Keeping up to date with the latest thinking, research, policy and outdoor recreation best practice is key to the sustainable development of Donegal's landscapes and waterscapes and associated recreational offering. To inform the decision-making process in relation to planning, developing, delivering and managing outdoor recreation facilities and events across the County, a comprehensive training programme developed by NORS will be communicated and supported. Training will involve workshops, practical training courses, preparation of advice notes, undertaking learning journeys to other parts of Ireland and further afield to visit good practice and delivering outdoor recreation themed conferences. Areas for upskilling include, as referenced previously in section 8.2.2, the planning, design and construction of trails particularly in sensitive environments, outdoor event planning, visitor monitoring and research, new approaches to visitor safety, signage, and interpretation as well as training on how to carry out appropriate assessments etc.





8.5.2 Communicate and support training for activity tourism providers and service providers

As users to the outdoors travel and experience outdoor recreation in different settings, they become better informed and expectations around what constitutes a quality outdoor experience rise.

Creating a business support training programme is therefore essential across the whole outdoor recreation service industry, from training accommodation hosts to consider, for example providing drying facilities for wet walkers, through to cafes owners accommodating muddy cyclists. In addition, working with partners in the activity tourism industry is key in ensuring and building quality assurance of the proposition on offer e.g. engaging story telling on guided walks as well as ensuring the service offered accommodates the needs of visitors e.g. evening activities such as moonlit kayaking trips, sunrise walking tours and sunset SUP experiences.

Training not developed by NORS but that is important and specific to Donegal, will be developed at a local level and delivered through a variety of mechanisms including industry toolkits specific to each activity, industry workshops, seminars and learning journeys. An essential element of any training to activity tourism providers and service providers is ensuring that sustainable business practices are implemented.

8.5.3 Support the outdoor recreation community in obtaining accredited outdoor recreation qualifications

Having insufficient numbers of people trained in specific outdoor recreation activities is currently restricting the scope and scale of work that can be offered to locals and visitors. Specific training to strengthen the capacity of guided services include training of, 'Lowland Walk Leaders', Irish speaking walking guides, ghillies and qualified watersports' instructors in activities such as surfing, canoeing and SUP. Regular engagement between the Outdoor Recreation Co Ordinator and the activity tourism sector to assess staffing and training needs will be essential moving forward. Gartan Outdoor Education Centre

is a significant asset potentially informing the future training needs of the sector. The Outdoor Recreation Co Ordinator will work with Gartan Outdoor Education Centre to determine what courses or training facilities it could offer to fill this identified training need locally and directly.

8.5.4 Communicate and Support the Activity Sector on How to Deliver Safe, Quality Experiences for all as Developed by NORS

Not having sufficiently qualified instructors in place and not having the appropriate insurances in place presents a risk to those offering guided services and to those who

own or manage the sites at which these take place. Communicating and supporting the commercial activity sector following the completion of NORS's review, of the potential to improve the safety and quality of commercial provision including options on accreditation and insurance implications is essential.

In addition, it is important that commercial providers are aware of their responsibility to the local community in which they are operating, for example, only using sites for which landowner permission has been received and parking responsibly with minibuses and trailers in residential areas close to piers and harbours.





Theme 6 | Awareness and Participation

Objective: To create an increased awareness of Donegal's outdoor recreation opportunities and increase the number of people active in the outdoors, especially from underrepresented groups

One of the key barriers to people accessing the outdoors is lack of information. Providing information on where to go and what to do is essential in encouraging increased use of the outdoors for residents and visitors. Ensuring that information on Donegal's outdoor recreation opportunities is accurate, current, accessible for all and is provided in one place, is recognised as one of the key actions of the Strategy.

As previously stated, participation levels in outdoor recreation across Donegal are not equal, with significant gaps from some sections of society. Whilst previous sections have already proposed recommendations to overcome this disparity, recommendations in this section focus on programmes for inactive people and those with the lowest participation levels in outdoor recreation, including ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, older adults, unemployed, women and girls, young people and those from areas of high social need.

To achieve the Awareness and Participation objective of the Strategy, the following recommendations are proposed:

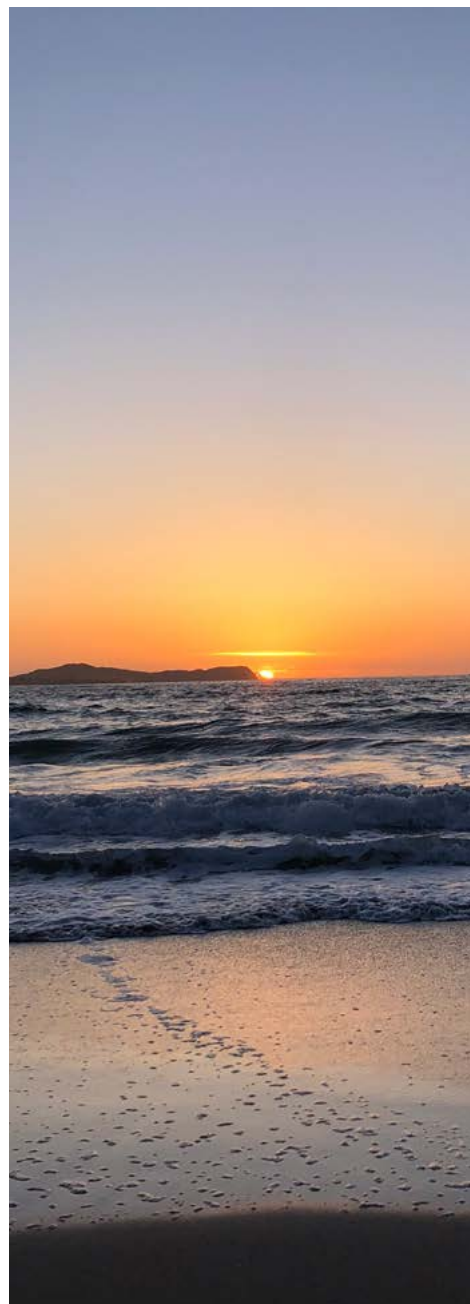
- Clarify the roles and responsibilities of those involved in the provision and management of outdoor recreation information
- Understand the customer and associated information needs

- Develop a comprehensive database of/on outdoor recreation
- Ensure greater access to outdoor recreation information is available online
- Develop a timebound and targeted advertising and promotional campaign
- Support and facilitate an increase in participation for all, with a focus on under-represented groups

8.6.1 Clarify the roles and responsibilities of those involved in the provision and management of outdoor recreation information

Currently there is no-one single entity responsible for outdoor recreation data across the County. It is recommended that a dedicated resource (information lead) is assigned to collate, host and oversee data on outdoor recreation (including green spaces, blue spaces, trails, and other outdoor recreation infrastructure and opportunities), deliver the actions emanating from the Strategy and provide a robust evidence base to inform the decision-making process and subsequent sustainable development of the County in relation to the provision of outdoor recreation.

Similarly, there is currently no-one single entity responsible for raising awareness and promotion of the outdoor recreation opportunities available to local people and therefore it is recommended to assign a lead person (awareness lead), with adequate resource, who will be responsible for providing information and raising awareness on outdoor recreation opportunities to the local community.





8.6.2 Understand the customer and associated information needs

The expectations and needs of the local community and that of the visitor are different. An informed and evidence-based understanding of these differences is essential in developing the recreational offering across the County e.g. data collation requirements, the marketing channel selection and promotional plans. A review of the two audiences' needs is required as soon as possible, the outcomes of which will shape the remaining actions in this section of the Strategy. The following table provides the starting point for this review based on consultation.

Local People

Characteristics

- Residents within Donegal
- Motivation is physical activity, mental health, spend time with family
- Community Engagement
- Combating social isolation

Information Needs

- All accessible sites and trails, particularly those close to home
- All blue and greenspace, trails and activities

8.6.3 Develop a comprehensive database

A comprehensive robust and accurate database is necessary to inform the future sustainable development of outdoor recreation in Donegal. Once operational the data can be fed into platforms such as GoVisitDonegal.com, Discoverireland.ie.

It is vital that improved and more detailed information is collated and made available to the public, so that an individual can make an informed decision on whether a specific site/trail is suitable for their needs.

Visitors

Characteristics

- Visitors from outside Donegal
- Visitors who will enjoy some outdoor recreation as part of their visit to Donegal
- Not 'walkers' or outdoor recreation 'enthusiasts'

Information Needs

- Identify and focus on highlights of outdoor recreation in Donegal e.g. Donegal, Inishowen Peninsula, The Islands, Sliabh Liag
- Activities: Walking, Surfing
- Coast - boat trips, cliff walks, angling, surfing

A key part of this recommendation is to engage continuously with all key stakeholders in Donegal to ensure the information is current and up to date.

This database will be monitored and reviewed in a scheduled and timely manner and co-ordinated by the Outdoor Recreation Coordinator.

Sport Ireland is currently undertaking a significant project to collate a database to include up-to-date, accurate information on opportunities to be active in Ireland, including trails, green and blue spaces, such as beaches and public parks. It is recommended that the responsible person highlighted in 8.6.1 works closely with Sport Ireland to support the collation and audit of data to feed into this National Digital Database, and to inform the development of outdoor recreation more locally in Donegal.

8.6.4 Ensure greater access to outdoor recreation information is available online

Currently, most people access information on the outdoors from tourism platforms and websites, with GoVisitDonegal.com regularly cited as the primary source of information. GoVisitDonegal.com predominantly targets the visitor and as such, there is an identified gap addressing the needs of the community. It is recommended that an appropriate platform is developed or adapted to communicate specifically with the local community.

Within the agreed online platforms, it is recommended to prioritise and present data appropriate to the audience on the online platform as determined by the review outlined in 8.6.2. For example, this may mean reducing the volume of information to visitors so that the focus is on priority destinations and activities. This may also mean, for example, having a dedicated section on all walks in Donegal, that allows local people to see what walking trails are on their doorstep or where the Donegal Sport Partnership or HSE, can direct programme participants.

In addition, within the agreed online platform, it is recommended an interactive map to display the information, to use for orientation or navigation is developed



Table 8 - Information needs of visitors and local people



8.6.5 Develop a timebound and targeted advertising and promotional campaign

Preparing and implementing a Marketing and Promotion Plan, targeting the needs of the local community in relation to outdoor recreation, is recommended as a responsibility of the Awareness Lead as cited in section 8.6.1 and includes for example,

- seeking out and engaging the most popular local social media channels
- engaging and feeding into Council and other members of the Recreation Committee's communication plans to residents, such as newsletters
- featuring a 'Walk of the Week' in a local newspaper with pictures and a map

Furthermore, developing initiatives in conjunction with the Healthy Ireland Programme has the potential to encourage behavioral change and positively impact physical and mental health, while promoting the use of outdoor facilities through the creative use of IT and the development of a community currency incentive.

Given that outdoor recreation is such an intrinsic part of the tourism offering in Donegal, the new Tourism Strategy for the County, currently under development, will consider the findings and recommendations of this Strategy. The emerging Tourism Strategy for Donegal wholly aligns with and complements the aims and objectives of the

Outdoor Recreation Strategy for Donegal recognising outdoor recreation as an integral element of the tourism offering of the County

In partnership with Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland, it is recommended that the DCC's Tourism Marketing Unit, in partnership with the ORWG, agrees priority outdoor recreation locations and activities to promote Donegal and ensure this is reflected consistently in online and offline promotional activity and content creation.

Furthermore, developing initiatives in conjunction with the Healthy Ireland Programme has the potential to encourage behavioural change and positively impact physical and mental health, while promoting the use of outdoor facilities through the creative use of IT and the development of a community currency incentive.

In addition, as part of increasing Donegal's profile as an outdoor destination, opportunities to host additional national, European and international events will be sought. There is an abundance of opportunities for water-based events given Donegal's extensive and diverse coastline. In the past Bundoran has hosted the European Surfing Championships and Portnoo the Irish qualifying event of the World Coastal Rowing Championships.

Evidenced based and considered conversation is essential in informing any future large-scale events in upland areas in Donegal particularly given landscape sensitivity and carrying capacity of these areas.

8.6.6 Encourage participation for all, particularly underrepresented groups

In addition to encouraging the local community to take part in outdoor recreation through increasing awareness and promotion of the opportunities, participation and activation programmes are critical for getting people active in the outdoors, particularly for those groups who are underrepresented.

To ensure that the opportunities for participation are truly accessible for all communities and target groups, it is the role of all stakeholders to facilitate the work of the Donegal Sports Partnership, Foróige, and the Health Promotion Improvement, Health and Wellbeing Division of the HSE through:

- identifying and where appropriate, providing increased funding opportunities

to continue their outdoor recreation outreach programmes

- improving accessibility of the product offering e.g., development of family/young people focused facilities, development of all-ability trails (see section 8.3.8)
- improving the information provided so that an individual can make an informed decision if the product is suitable for their ability or culture (see section 8.4.3)

The potential also exists for other cross-stakeholder initiatives to take place to encourage greater participation of Donegal's great outdoors e.g. hosting a 'Weekend of Getting Outdoors'. The weekend will be held annually for local people to take part in a whole host of free-of-charge outdoor recreation opportunities.





09

Action Plan

Action Plan

This Strategy sets out six themes to deliver the Vision of, ‘Donegal – a Diverse, Natural, Authentic Outdoors for all’ up to 2040.

It is hoped that by delivering the Strategy’s six themes of

- collaboration,
- environmental integrity,
- facilities and visitor servicing,
- inclusivity,
- training and education
- awareness and participation

that an authentic outdoor recreation experience will be enjoyed by all, while protecting the unique and diverse landscapes and waterscapes of the County.

Successful delivery however will require:

- an on-going commitment from all stakeholders involved directly or indirectly in the development, management and promotion of outdoor recreation across Donegal
- all stakeholders to work together in partnership for the greater good of outdoor recreation across the County
- an ability to secure long-term funding to employ the Outdoor Recreation Co-ordinator
- an ability to secure long-term capital funding from internal organisational budgets of the key stakeholders as well as through external funding sources e.g grant programmes
- an ability to secure budget and staff to deliver an annual rolling maintenance programme of outdoor recreation sites
- private landowners agreeing to allow public access across their land for existing walking trails and for new trail opportunities
- good community and industry buy-in for outdoor recreation

Successfully overcoming these dependencies is essential, as the benefits of implementing the recommendations of the Strategy has a significant role to play in the future prosperity and well-being of the County and its communities, and in attracting visitors who can avail of the diverse range of outdoor recreational opportunities across Donegal.

The following Action Plan sets out the specific actions to be delivered under each of the six themes during the next 5 years.





Theme 1 | Collaboration

To encourage those involved in outdoor recreation either directly or indirectly, to work together in a positive, open, accountable and collaborative way.

By 2029 we will see: A collaborative approach to outdoor recreation across Donegal

Action	Timescale	Lead Organisation(s)
1.1 Appoint a new Outdoor Recreation Coordinator to co-ordinate the delivery of the Donegal Outdoor Recreation Strategy (DORS).	Short-term	DSP
1.2 Undertake an audit of all stakeholders involved in outdoor recreation across Donegal.	Short term and Continuous	Outdoor Recreation Coordinator
1.3 Establish and facilitate a Donegal Outdoor Recreation Committee (DORC) endorsing the approach of shared and collective responsibility among various stakeholders.	Short term and Continuous	Outdoor Recreation Coordinator
1.4 Establish and facilitate in each MD an Outdoor Recreation Stakeholder Forum to provide for better co-ordination, planning and development of outdoor recreation at a local level.	Short term and Continuous	Outdoor Recreation Coordinator
1.5 Establish and lead a Cross Directorate Outdoor Recreation Committee in DCC to raise the profile of outdoor recreation and ensure collaborative working based on the DORS	Short term and Continuous	DCC
1.6 Establish and facilitate an Outdoor Recreation Working Group (ORWG) to consider project particulars and specific issues in delivering projects across the County	Short term and Continuous	Outdoor Recreation Coordinator

Collaboration will seek to contribute to the following Sustainable Development Goals:





Theme 2 | Environmental Integrity

To safeguard and protect the natural, built and cultural heritage of Donegal for the enjoyment of future generations.

By 2029 we will see: A new approach to planning and developing outdoor recreation infrastructure/trails across Donegal

Action	Timescale	Lead Organisation(s)
2.1 Appoint a Biodiversity Officer for the County to ensure sustainability and environmental integrity is at the forefront of all outdoor recreation development.	Short-term	DCC
2.2 Ensure the environment and sustainability is a standing agenda item at each Outdoor Recreation Working Group meeting	Continuous	Outdoor Recreation Coordinator, ORWG members
2.3 Communicate, support and facilitate a training programme for all those currently involved in the planning, development, and construction of outdoor recreation infrastructure including trails.	Short-term and every year thereafter	Outdoor Recreation Coordinator, ORWG members

By 2029 we will see: Improved visitor management and environmental sustainability at key outdoor recreation sites/trails

Action	Timescale	Lead Organisation(s)
2.4 Deliver a training course on most current visitor monitoring counters and which will inform the 'Social Return on Investment' model	Medium-term and every 2 years thereafter	Outdoor Recreation Coordinator
2.5 Coordinate across Donegal the data sourced from existing visitor monitoring data and report back to the Outdoor Recreation Committee and wider outdoor recreation community.	Medium-term	Outdoor Recreation Coordinator
2.6 Communicate and support a training course and post training documentation for all those involved in running outdoor recreation events enforcing the value of process and the importance of our landscapes and waterscapes	Short-term and every year thereafter	Outdoor Recreation Coordinator, ORWG members
2.7 Implement when published, forthcoming national guidance provided by Fáilte Ireland	Long-term	Outdoor Recreation Coordinator, ORWG members
2.8 Support the roll out across the County of the national 'responsible behaviour' message and campaign tailoring it specifically for Donegal e.g. through photographs, local Support the roll out across the County of the national 'responsible behaviour' campaign with consistent messaging around responsible behaviour, tailored specifically for Donegal e.g. incorporating best practice case studies from local to international level	Short-term and continuous	Outdoor Recreation Coordinator, ORWG members
2.9 Put in place a rolling programme of environmental monitoring at the key recreation hubs/sites	Medium/long -term	Coillte, Loughs Agency, NPWS, DDC

Environmental Integrity will seek to contribute to the following Sustainable Development Goals:





Theme 3 | Facilities and Visitor Servicing

To provide high quality, accessible, enjoyable and sustainable outdoor recreation opportunities and experiences across the County, supported by visitor servicing facilities where appropriate.

By 2028 we will see: Robust strategic planning of outdoor recreation infrastructure

Action	Timescale	Lead Organisation(s)
3.1 Prepare a Greenway Strategy for the County	Short-term	DCC
3.2 Develop Community Trail Plans for each MD across the County	Short – medium term	DCC
3.3 Undertake Feasibility Studies to develop a series of short coastal walking routes that could lead in the long-term to the creation of a Wild Atlantic Way Walking Trail e.g Donegal Town to Port Bloodyforeland, Glengesh	Short – medium term	DCC, DLDC, IDP, Údarás, Comhar na nOileán
3.4 Undertake Masterplans for key recreation hubs: Lough Finn, Trusk Lough, Killybegs, Redcastle-Carndonagh, Donegal Gap/ Barnesmore Gap, Glengesh, Dunlewey	Short – medium term	DCC
3.5 Undertake a Feasibility Study to determine the viability of developing Blueways or Water Trails in Donegal Bay, Milford Bay, Lough Foyle and Lough Swilly/Inishowen peninsula	Short-term	DCC, Loughs Agency, FI
3.6 Undertake a County-wide Scoping Study for family-focused off-road cycling trails/pump tracks and adventure play.	Short-term	DCC
3.7 Undertake a Scoping Study for the creation of a Mountain Bike Trail Centre	Short-term	Coillte, DCC

By 2028 we will see: Enhanced outdoor recreation opportunities available across the County for a wider audience

Action	Timescale	Lead Organisation(s)
3.8 Support the implementation of recommendations contained within NORS and existing Strategies and Plans for the area e.g Glenveagh National Park, Inishowen, Drumboe Woods, Inishtrahull etc	Continuous	ORWG and individual members
3.9 Initiate design, planning and where possible, development on the ground of new coastal walking trails that could feed into a larger WAWWT	Long term	DCC, DLDC, IDP, Údarás, Comhar na nOileán
3.10 In collaboration with relevant partners identify strategic walking trails and apply for inclusion in the Walks Scheme administered by DRCD	Medium - long term	DLDC, DCC
3.11 Initiate design, planning and if possible, development on the ground of a network of Community Trails across the County based on the recommendations of the Community Trail Plans.	Long term	DCC, DLDC, IDP, Údarás, Comhar na nOileán



3.12 Initiate design, planning and where possible, development on the ground of new recreational opportunities based on the recommendations of the Development/Masterplans as above	Long term	DCC, DLDC, IDP, Údarás
3.13 Initiate design, planning and where possible, development of Blueways and Water Trails across the County based on the recommendation of the Feasibility Study as above	Long term	DCC, DLDC, IDP, Údarás, Comhar na nOileán
3.14 Initiate design, planning and where possible, development on the ground of new family focused opportunities based on the recommendation of the Scoping Study as above.	Long term	DCC, DLDC, IDP, Údarás, Comhar na nOileán

By 2028 we will see: Improved quality and visitor servicing of outdoor recreation facilities

Action	Timescale	Lead Organisation(s)
3.15 Undertake on an annual basis a detailed audit of a specific number of sites /trails to determine maintenance, enhancement and new works required, seek approval at the ORC for funding prioritisation and implement recommendations of the audit on the ground	Continuous	DCC, Loughs Agency, NPWS, Coillte, DLDC, IDP, Údarás, Comhar na nOileán

By 2028 we will see: Better managed and maintained outdoor recreation facilities

Action	Timescale	Lead Organisation(s)
3.16 Undertake an exercise to assess the existing role of local community groups and community support organisations in the future development, management and maintenance of outdoor recreation infrastructure across the County	Medium term	DCC

Facilities and Visitor Servicing will seek to contribute to the following Sustainable Development Goals:





Theme 4 | Inclusivity

To ensure that everyone can participate and feels welcome in the outdoors of Donegal

By 2028 we will see: An increase in under-represented groups taking part in outdoor recreation		
Action	Timescale	Lead Organisation(s)
4.1 Undertake a rolling annual detailed audit of outdoor recreation sites across the County considering inclusivity and accessibility	Short term - continuous	ORWG Members
4.2 Based on the outcome of the Inclusivity and Accessibility Audit, undertake a programme of on-going capital works to address the issues raised e.g requirement for changing places toilets, improved trail surfacing, additional seating along trails etc	Medium - long term	ORWG Members
4.3 Based on the outcome of the Inclusivity and Accessibility Audit, update all information sources on each site/trail to ensure an informed decision can be made pre-visit. Communicate this information widely using relevant organisations/networks	Medium - long term	DSP, DCC, HPA, Foróige
4.4 Carry out an audit of all Park Runs across the County and provide detailed information on each as to whether they are suitable for the less able/disabled	Short term	DSP
4.5 Communicate and support the delivery at a national level of training, for a range of stakeholders, on key inclusivity themes e.g development of accessible infrastructure,	Medium - continuous	Outdoor Recreation Co-ordinator

Inclusivity and Visitor Servicing will seek to contribute to the following Sustainable Development Goals:





Theme 5 | Training and Education

To better equip those involved in outdoor recreation, now and in the future, with the necessary skills and knowledge to ensure users are afforded a sustainable and quality outdoor recreation experience

By 2028 we will see: Sharing and learning between those involved in outdoor recreation

Action	Timescale	Lead Organisation(s)
5.1 Communicate and support a national training programme such as workshops, conference, training events, learning journeys on a wide range of outdoor recreation topics to facilitate learning, networking and sharing of good practice	Medium-term - continuous	Outdoor Recreation Co-ordinator, ORC members
5.2 Encourage key stakeholders to become members of the industry networks such as Visitor Safety Group and Outdoor Recreation Network and put in place a methodology to allow information to be shared.	Short – medium term	ORC members

By 2028 we will see: Activity providers better equipped to deliver safe and quality experiences for all

Action	Timescale	Lead Organisation(s)
5.3 Communicate and support national guidance on improving the safety and quality of commercial provision of outdoor activities, including legislation, accreditation, and insurance implications	Medium-term	ORC members Outdoor Recreation Co-ordinator
5.4 Develop and deliver a Training Plan for activity providers/service providers on providing a quality outdoor recreation experience. This could include workshops, guidance manuals, toolkits as developed through NORS	Long-term	FI, DCC
5.5 Establish Gartan OEC as a training hub to train more locals in NGB awards and other outdoor courses e.g Lowland Leader	Medium – long term	Outdoor Recreation Co-ordinator Gartan OEC, DSP, HPA, Foróige

Training and Education will seek to contribute to the following Sustainable Development Goals:





Theme 6 | Awareness and Participation

To create an increased awareness of Donegal's outdoor recreation opportunities and increase the number of people active in the outdoors, especially from underrepresented groups

By 2028 we will see: Clarity on roles and responsibilities

Action	Timescale	Lead Organisation(s)
6.1 Assign lead person (information lead) responsible for collation, hosting and oversight of data on outdoor recreation.	Short-term	DCC
6.2 Assign lead person (awareness lead) responsible for providing information and raising awareness of outdoor recreation to local people.	Short-term	DCC

By 2028 we will see: Informed understanding of the customer

Action	Timescale	Lead Organisation(s)
6.3 Review the needs and preferences for the two key audiences, for those living in Donegal and for those visiting Donegal, in partnership with the Donegal Outdoor Recreation Committee.	Short-term	DCC

By 2028 we will see: Robust evidence based data for the sustainable development of outdoor recreation

Action	Timescale	Lead Organisation(s)
6.4 In partnership with Sport Ireland, support the collation and audit of data to feed into the Sport Ireland National Digital Database	Short-term	DCC, Sport Ireland
6.5 Collate and audit additional data to meet the needs of both the local people and visitors to Donegal. Data to include improved and more detailed information so that an individual may make an informed decision if the product is suitable for their ability or culture	Medium-term	DCC
6.6 Set up a process to audit and review outdoor recreation data to ensure the information is accurate and up-do-date.	Medium-term	DCC

By 2028 we will see: Better access to digital information on the outdoors

Action	Timescale	Lead Organisation(s)
6.7 Develop or adapt appropriate online platforms to communicate to local people and visitors.	Medium-term	DCC
6.8 Prioritise and present data appropriate to the audience on the online platform	Medium-term	DCC
6.9 Within the agreed online platform, develop an interactive map	Long-term	DCC



By 2028 we will see: A planned and targeted approach to promotion

Action	Timescale	Lead Organisation(s)
6.10 In partnership with the Donegal Outdoor Recreation Committee, develop a promotional plan to increase awareness for local people of where and how to take part in outdoor recreation.	Medium-term	DCC, DSP, HPA, Foróige.
6.11 In partnership with the Donegal Outdoor Recreation Committee, Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland, ensure priority locations and activities for visitors are reflected consistently in online and offline tourism promotional activity and content creation	Short-term	DCC, FI, Tourism Ireland
6.12 Seek opportunities to host additional national, European and international water-based events e.g surfing, coastal rowing	Short-term	DCC
6.13 Ensure inclusive content and imagery is incorporated onto online platforms	Medium-term	DCC
6.14 Incorporate the national guidelines on responsible behaviour in the outdoors into all communication and proactively promote to local people and visitors	Medium-term	All
6.15 Continue to deliver participation programmes to support an increase in participation	Ongoing	DSP, HPA, Foróige
6.16 Increase the number of programmes and participants engaged in outdoor recreation for all, in line with Sport Ireland's guidance and available funding	Short-term	DSP
6.17 Facilitate the work of DCC, Healthy Donegal, Donegal Sports Partnership, Foroige and the HSE in driving participation	Ongoing	All
6.18 Encourage communities to be more active in their local parks and open spaces and improve their lifestyle	Ongoing	Healthy Ireland

Awareness and Participation will seek to contribute to the following Sustainable Development Goals:



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