

Irish Trails Strategy

Promoting and developing
activity in the Irish Outdoors





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Foreword

John Treacy, Chief Executive, Irish Sports Council

I am very pleased to announce this new and innovative strategy for recreational trail development in Ireland. This strategy is a significant component of the Irish Sports Council's overall strategy- *Building Sport for Life*, which is focused on getting more people active and participating in all types of sport across the country. It is my hope that this strategy will encourage people of all ages to take up and enjoy a range of enjoyable outdoor activities such as walking, cycling, running and water sports. All of these pursuits are lifelong activities and vital for improving people's health and well-being.

The development of this strategy has involved many people and organisations with extensive experience, knowledge and interest in this area. Their excellent work to date serves as a solid foundation for further development and I thank them all for this. I hope we have your continued future support in the development of a world class, Irish trails network. Much work lies ahead if this vision is to be achieved. I can assure you of my support and the full support of the Irish Sports Council in advancing this strategy in the coming years.

Yours sincerely



John Treacy

Chief Executive, Irish Sports Council

Joss Lynam, Chairman National Waymarked Ways Advisory Committee, Irish Sports Council

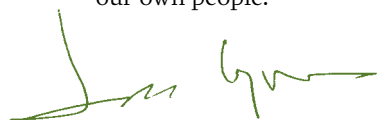
This Irish Trails Strategy is the culmination of many years work. In the 1970s, I and a number of people, in Cospoir and the Sports Section of the Department of Education had a vision of *Sport for All*, true recreational sport in which everyone could participate. Walking is the epitome of Sport for All.

At the same time the tourism benefits of walking began to be realised, and following the creation of the Long Distance Walking Routes Committee in 1979, some thirty three waymarked walking routes were developed in the following three decades.

Over the years, demands of both tourists and, more importantly, our own people, have changed, and so the National Waymarked Way Advisory Committee (NWWAC), a sub-committee of the Irish Sports Council, has taken the initiative to prepare this strategy in order to provide the basis for a successful response to these changing and developing trends.

Much work has gone into the preparation of this strategy by the members of the Strategy Working Group, including extensive research that confirms the broad range of benefits and value attributed to walking and walking trails. They have studied best international practice for trail development and management and have set an ambitious vision for recreational trails development in Ireland for the coming years.

Now the possibilities are become much more varied, moving beyond further development of walking trails and tow-paths, to the creation of multi-use tracks and greenways, on-road and off-road cycling trails, waterways and portage routes – all there for the enjoyment of tourists, and even more importantly, our own people.



Joss Lynam

Chairman, National Waymarked Way Advisory Committee



Executive Summary

Executive Summary

There is enormous potential for recreational sport in the Irish countryside and a well-resourced and well-utilised recreational trail network is an important element in realising that potential. The National Waymarked Way Advisory Committee (NWWAC), a sub-committee of the Irish Sports Council has taken the initiative to prepare this strategy in response to changing trends, demands and opportunities evident in Irish society and communities throughout the country and changing tourism opportunities. The preparation of this strategy has involved a large network of statutory agencies, authorities, community groups and individuals throughout the country, all with extensive experience, knowledge and interest in this area.

Recreational trails provide benefits to three main groups of people:

- **for Irish people**, trails offer opportunities for outdoor physical activity, promoting physical fitness and mental health and wellbeing
- **for tourists**, walking and cycling are very important niche products, extending the tourist season and increasing regional and rural spending
- **for rural communities**, trails provide opportunities to develop new and innovative rural tourism initiatives that can contribute to the economic sustainability of rural Ireland.

The ambitious vision set out in this strategy for recreational trails in Ireland is - “to create, nurture and maintain a world class recreational trail network that is sustainable, integrated, well utilised and highly regarded, that enhances the health, well being and quality of life of all Irish citizens and that attracts visitors from around the world”.

The scope of this strategy is intended to be sufficiently broad to include the full range of recreational trails in Ireland. Trails can be footpaths with natural surfaces, multi-use tracks with constructed surfaces, on-road and off-road bicycle routes, walkways, forestry access roads designated as trails, utility corridors or former rail lines, waterways and portage routes. Priority will be given to walking and cycling trails and greenways in the initial stages of implementation but will extend to consider horse-riding trails, water-based trails and other types of recreational trails as resources permit. While it is accepted that trails may also be required for motorised recreation, this strategy is focused on non-motorised trails.

The strategy recommends the designation of a lead department and the establishing of appropriate executive arrangements including the establishing of an Irish Trails Advisory Committee and a National Trails Office. It also identifies a range of priority projects focusing on the development of new policies and procedures for trail standards, classification and signage, the development of a five-year plan trails development plan, the setting up and coordination of programmes for quality assurance, research, education and training and, importantly the coordination of a marketing and promotion plan for Irish trails.



1 Introduction

Introduction

1.1 Strategy Vision

The broad vision, which serves as a foundation for this strategy, is:

- * **to create, nurture and maintain a world class recreational trail network that is sustainable, integrated, well utilised and highly regarded, that enhances the health, well being and quality of life of all Irish citizens and that attracts visitors from around the world.**

The long-term objectives, which this strategy seeks to advance over the next ten years, are:

- to position Ireland in the top tier of European countries for availability of quality recreational trails, spread throughout the country
- to promote and facilitate the highest sustainable level of usage of the recreational trails among Irish people
- to establish Ireland as a premier international tourism destination for the broad range of outdoor recreational activities associated with a diverse trail network.



1.2 Strategy Context

Sport has always captured the Irish imagination. The critical interest exists. The challenge for this development agency (Irish Sports Council) is to harness this passion into increasing active participation at all levels and as a lifetime activity.

Sport For Life, The Irish Sports Council's Statement of Strategy 2003–2005

Sport includes all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organised participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being and at forming social relationships.

Countryside and outdoor activity is an important and exciting dimension to both recreational and competitive sport in Ireland today. The range of activities that people of all ages and abilities can undertake in the countryside is broad and diverse and is making a significant contribution to the health, wellbeing and lifestyles of all Irish people. Recreational trails are used as a vehicle to facilitate a range of these activities and are now well recognised for the benefits they yield to the economy and to the wellbeing and health of individuals, communities and the environment, especially in rural and under-developed regions are now well recognised.

This strategy is integral to the future development of Ireland, especially rural Ireland, from an economic, health and quality of life perspective as it seeks to significantly improve opportunities for all domestic users and tourists to participate in responsible outdoor recreation in Ireland. Whilst this strategy is primarily

intended to advance the development and use of trails it should be seen in the wider context of the many initiatives which are taking place in the areas of tourism, heritage, rural development and countryside recreation. All these related developments should help to create and foster greater and more sustainable use of the resources available to both residents and visitors in the Irish countryside.

Today, there are 32 long distance walking routes included in this network. Outside this, recreational trail development has not progressed in line with demand in Ireland over the last decade and overall, the quality and standard of recreational trail development, for the most part, falls well below international standards. While many good results are being achieved, there are many enhancements that can be effected if there is a coordinated strategic overview and an integrated approach at the decision-making, planning and implementation levels.

Recreational trail development to date has relied essentially on individual, voluntary and community initiatives; we are fortunate that there is already a deep well of goodwill towards, and significant involvement in, the establishment and maintenance of Irish walking trails. Community involvement and support are essential for a sustainable Irish recreational trails network and must be maintained. Furthermore, new initiatives must be taken to encourage more volunteers to support this work, to build better physical and organisational links between rural and urban facilities, to promote good practice among users of trails and, in particular, to facilitate and promote greater use of trails by people of all backgrounds, ages and abilities into the future.

1.3 Strategy Scope & Focus

The strategy is national in focus and aimed at supporting and encouraging sustainable trail development at local, community and county level throughout Ireland.

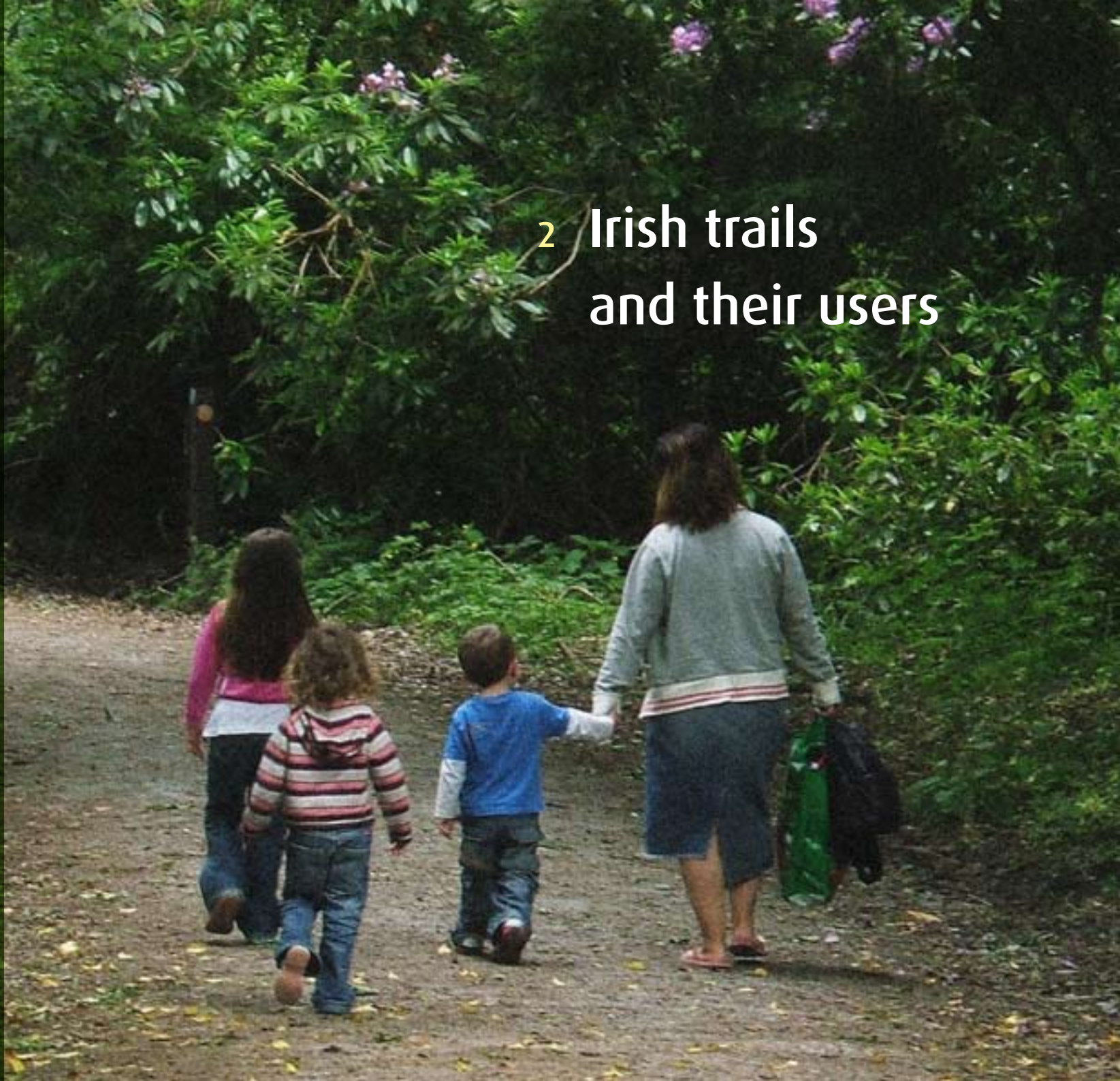
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Access trails also come under the scope of this strategy and refer to trails that are developed primarily as access routes to locations for other activities, e.g. mountaineers wishing to journey into upland areas to climb, or anglers wishing to get to boating or river-bank fishing locations.

Priority will be given to walking and cycling trails and greenways in the initial stages of implementation but will extend to consider horse-riding trails, water-based trails and other types of recreational trails as resources permit. While it is accepted that trails may also be required for motorised recreation, this strategy is focused on non-motorised trails.



2 Irish trails and their users



Irish trails and their users

2.1 What is a trail?

A recreational trail can be a corridor, route or pathway, generally land or water based, primarily intended for recreational purposes, including walking, hiking, cycling, canoeing and horse-riding. It will have strong linkages with natural environments and local heritage and may be located in rural or urban environments. Trails typically have a distinguishing and suitable surface or pathway, are usually well marked and should be designed and managed for the purpose intended.

2.2 Irish trails 2006

Ireland has approximately 8,300 km of developed walking trails which include a national waymarked way network, pilgrim paths, forest trails, a range of themed trails (including environmental and geological trails), greenways (walking/cycling trails) and Slí na Sláinte walking routes. From mountain to coast and island and urban to rural locations, trails have been developed in some of the most scenic and popular recreational locations around the country, including national parks, forest parks and reserves and along waterway towpaths, to varying standards around the country. Unlike the UK and other EU countries, there are no official cycling trail network, off-road cycling trails, canoe trails or equestrian trails in Ireland.



2.2.1 Examples of trail development initiatives

Irish Waymarked Way Network - (See map - Appendix 1)

There are 32 National Waymarked Ways located in 25 counties throughout Ireland today. This network of walking routes reflects Ireland's diverse and unique countryside, ranging from towpath walks along canals and rivers, through circuits of the mountainous peninsulas of the southwest, to the rugged coastline along the west coast and up into the northwest. These trails don't demand great stamina, difficult navigation or climbing techniques and, while experienced walkers may enjoy the challenge of walking a trail from beginning to end, people with less experience can choose to walk a short section of a Way. They rarely rise above 300m (1,000 ft) altitude, except on occasion to cross a well-marked pass over this height. This does not stop them from winding through magnificent countryside and mountainous areas. While there are a few rugged stretches over open mountain passes, the routes in the main follow old disused roads, grassy trails and forest tracks. The Ways are developed locally to a reasonably high standard, with the agreement of all landowners.

Fáilte Ireland Looped Walking Trails Network

Fáilte Ireland, Ireland National Tourism Development Authority, has recently launched a new network of 14 looped walking trails. These trails are graded easy to difficult, are predominantly off-road and are based around coastal, island, nature and mountain themes. It is planned to extend this network over the coming years.

Coillte Recreation infrastructure development programme

Coillte supported by the national development plan is investing €5.3 million in walking and cycling trails (including 3 new mountain bike facilities) at 32 locations across the country.

Pilgrim Path Project, Heritage Council

The Pilgrim Paths project was set up by the Heritage Council in 1997, in association with local communities throughout Ireland, to develop a network of walking routes along medieval pilgrimage paths.

Irish Heart Foundation Slí Na Sláinte Programme

Slí na Sláinte is a health promotion initiative aimed at encouraging people of all ages and abilities to walk for pleasure and good health. Since its introduction by the Irish Heart Foundation in 1996, Slí has grown to include a network of almost 140 walking routes around the country.

Ballyhoura Fáilte

Ballyhoura Fáilte has established an impressive network of walking trails in recent years. With over 150km of off-road marked trails, the area offers much in the way of walks, from leisurely strolls through peaceful pastureland or forest tracks, to the Ballyhoura Way, a 90km, long distance walk which traverses the area from east to west.

Kingfisher Cycle Trail

The Kingfisher Cycle Trail is a cycling trail located in counties Leitrim, Fermanagh, Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal and is part of the National Cycle Network (UK).

Lough Erne Canoe Trail, Fermanagh

The Lough Erne Canoe Trail is a 50km trail linking Upper and Lower Lough Erne in County Fermanagh with the Shannon Waterway. It is the first dedicated canoe trail to be developed in Northern Ireland and the UK.

2.3 International trail development initiatives

UK National Trails

The National Trail network in the UK is made up of 19 internationally recognised, long-distance routes for walking, cycling and horse riding, extending to about 3,000 miles or 4,800 km. Each Trail in England and Wales has a National Trail Officer who is responsible for overseeing its management and maintenance to nationally agreed standards. Maintenance is undertaken by the local highway authority together with landowners and, often, with the help of volunteers. Funding for National Trails is provided by national government through English Nature, the Countryside Council for Wales and Scottish Natural Heritage and also by local highway authorities along with other funding partners.

In addition England has about 190,000 km (118,000 miles) of footpaths, bridleways, byways and other rights of way. Under the *Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000*, passed in 2004, a major new right of access is gradually being introduced that will give people the opportunity to walk freely across mapped access land, without having to stay on footpaths, giving the public open access to around one million hectares (4,000 square miles, 8% of the country).

New Zealand Great Walks

Trail usage and outdoor adventure sports are a central element of the New Zealand tourism industry, which contributes almost 15% of New Zealand's GDP (NZ\$13 bn). New Zealand has developed a world-class network of hiking trails involving extensive amenity areas, campsites and huts for overnights. The *New Zealand Walkways Act 1990* "deals with the establishment and

administration of walking tracks over public and private land. Its aim is to provide for access to the countryside for recreation, whilst protecting the rights of landowners." The Department of Conservation is the single government department responsible for their development and upkeep and has recently launched a development programme for recreational trails and amenities with a budget of NZ\$600 m (€341 m) to be invested over 10 years.

US National Trails System

The US National Trails System began in 1968 with the Appalachian National Scenic Trail and the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail. The system was further expanded and today, the federal portion of the system consists of 20 national trails covering almost 40,000 miles. In addition to this, there are 1,000 rails-to-trails conversions, and more than 800 national recreation trails.



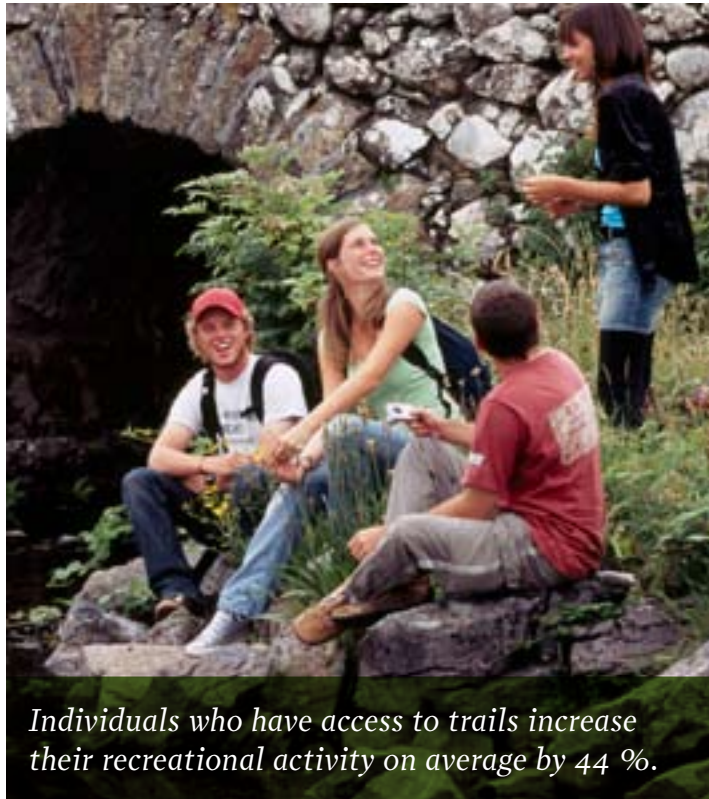


3 The benefits of Irish trails

The benefits of Irish trails

- * **This section sets out the principal contexts and the trends affecting Irish society. It sets out current use of Irish recreational trails and the benefits that they provide; it also assesses likely future demand.**

A footnoted version of this chapter is available on request from the Irish Sports Council



Individuals who have access to trails increase their recreational activity on average by 44 %.

3.1. The health context

Physical inactivity is a serious risk factor that contributes to poor health. Regular physical activity can have a wide range of health benefits.

The recent report from the Task Force on Obesity can be seen as an urgent wake up call to many sectors of society, to families and to individuals to work together and support each other in combating one of the least desirable outcomes of an affluent society that increasingly generates its wealth through knowledge application, and decreasingly through physical activity.

Sedentary lifestyles and levels of obesity are on the increase in Ireland. Recent research commissioned by the Irish Sports Council indicates that about 22% of adults in Ireland are completely inactive and two in three Irish adults are not meeting the minimum level of activity recommended for health by the World Health Organisation.

Furthermore, many younger people are not taking enough exercise. Students in second-level schools receive less PE per week than is recommended in their PE syllabus.

While outdoor physical activity can be an aid to achieving and retaining physical fitness, it has also been shown, most recently through research commissioned by the Countryside Recreation Network in the UK, that it brings substantial benefits to mental health and wellbeing, even from relatively short periods of exposure.

The economic burden of physical inactivity is significant and is expected to increase dramatically in the coming years.

In commenting on the challenge for society in combating obesity, the Task Force has highlighted a number of the environmental determinants including “proximity to facilities such as open spaces, parks and safe recreational areas” as being important to address. The Task Force has made twenty recommendations under the heading of *Physical Environment*, highlighting the responsibilities on both statutory and non-statutory agencies to take positive steps to facilitate and promote physical activity.

This issue is also highlighted in the *National Spatial Strategy*, which recommends that “sustainable development will, among other things, mean maximising access to and encouraging use of public transport, cycling and walking” in Ireland and “giving opportunities for all in a high quality environment.”

3.1.1 The health benefits

Walking is the ideal healthy-living leisure activity. It is the most common form of physical activity and is accessible and acceptable to the majority of individuals.

Research has clearly established a link between health benefits and the provision, availability and use of recreational trails. Trails provide opportunities for individuals to be regularly active through walking or cycling and are therefore a means of achieving physical activity goals as outlined in current Irish health promotion strategies.

Trails provide a wide variety of ways to be physically active. Evidence shows that availability of and access to walking trails increase the number of individuals partaking in physical activity.

Trails utilised as an intervention facility have been shown to increase levels of physical activity. Individuals who have access to trails increase their recreational activity on average by 44 %.

A Dublin City University review of the benefits associated with recreational trail use has identified the health benefits of a physically active lifestyle to contribute in a positive way to: weight control, development of healthy bones and protection against cardiovascular disease, diabetes and certain types of cancer. In addition to the physical health benefits of outdoor recreation, improved psychological well-being is an accepted health benefit of regular exercise and recent research into the effects of green exercise on mood and self-esteem confirmed that it generates many positive physical and mental benefits regardless of the level of intensity, duration or type of activity. The evidence indicates that nature can help us recover from pre-existing stresses or problems, have an immunising effect by protecting us from future stresses, help us to concentrate and think more clearly, improve self-esteem and reduce feelings of depression.

The study concludes that recreational trails offer excellent potential to help Ireland address its obesity problem. Increased trail usage can deliver considerable health cost savings.

3.2 The economic context

The Irish countryside, and the lifestyles of many who live and work in rural Ireland, have changed dramatically over the past decade, and this trend will continue. There is considerable urgency for rural communities throughout Ireland to begin to explore new uses for the countryside and to develop rural tourism opportunities that can contribute to the economic sustainability of rural Ireland. The Irish countryside offers tremendous tourism opportunities for both domestic and international visitors to engage in a broad range of outdoor activities; the provision of a world-class recreational trails network is one of the ways in which this potential can be realised.

Recent research (3.1.1 below) highlights the significant economic contribution of trails and forest recreation in Ireland today. It is envisaged that, with further development, sustainable management and promotion of a recreational trail network, the economic benefit to rural communities throughout Ireland will be very significant. By attracting people into rural areas, recreational trails can:

- **generate significant economic activity**
- **create employment**
- **increase real-estate values**
- **produce additional rural income through activities like festivals and events.**

Businesses such as bed & breakfast establishments, hostels, pubs, restaurants, tour-guiding companies, self-catering establishments,

retail outlets, farm based activities and cycle-hire businesses have been developed around trails and this leads to an increase in employment in the local area.

The Strategy is mindful of recommendations made in *New Horizons for Irish Tourism*, and subsequent Tourism Action Plan Implementation Group reports, which seek to double overseas visitor spending in Ireland by 2012. The tourism action plan implementation group has reported that

- *in many cases, special interest sectors are not well coordinated at national level [and] there is a need for greater progress in the provision, development and effective marketing of a wide range of activities which provide visitors with a positive and unforgettable experience.*

It further highlights the fact that

- *there is evidence to indicate that the Irish tourism product has, in many ways, become tired and lacking in verve or “bounce” for many tourists [and] the search for meaningful and authentic experiences has emerged as a significant trend in tourism over recent years. [Tourists] increasingly seek to participate in the lifestyle and to engage with people of the country they are visiting.*

This strategy seeks to address at least some of these issues in so far as they relate to outdoor recreation, by exploring all opportunities available to create a world-class trails network and establish Ireland as “go to” international destination for activity breaks and holidays.

There is significant work currently underway in the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs on the development of an Irish Countryside Recreation Strategy and a Rural Development Strategy. The Trail Strategy seeks to complement and contribute to this broader policy initiative.

3.2.1 The economic benefits

Economic consultants Fitzpatrick Associates quantified *The Economic Value of Trails & Forest Recreation in Ireland* in their comprehensive economic survey for the Irish Sports Council and Coillte in November 2005.¹ The focus of this study was on establishing a reasonable estimate of the total market and non-market economic benefits associated with recreational trails and forests recreation in Ireland.

The study involved two extensive primary surveys in Ireland, research on three international case studies (Scotland, Finland and New Zealand), a review of relevant literature and other data and consultation with industry and other stakeholders. The two surveys were

1. **On-Site Trail Users Survey, where 636 people were interviewed at 15 trail and forest locations throughout Ireland to obtain the views of those who regularly use forests or trails for recreation**
2. **a postal survey of 3,000 adults, selected at random, to obtain the views of those who may not use forests or trails regularly**

The key results were

1. **the total annual direct economic impact of trail usage by Irish residents is estimated at €307 million**
2. **the total annual non-market value of trails is estimated at €95 million (contribution to national well being)**
3. **the total annual economic value of international walking and cycling tourism is estimated at €218 million**

Direct economic impact of trail usage by Irish residents: €307 million

The total number of trail visits undertaken by Irish residents annually is estimated to be 17.5 million, with a direct economic impact of €307 million.

One third of all interviewees spend money in local businesses as part of their visit. The most common form of expenditure is on food, with 34% of interviewees likely to purchase food in a local pub, restaurant, café or shop. The average expenditure of trail users (interviewees) per visit was found to be €22.

The total annual direct economic impact of trail usage by Irish residents is estimated at €307 million

¹ Copies of this report can be obtained by contacting the Irish Sports Council

5% of interviewees spend money on local accommodation, and the average spend per overnight visitor was €64. This represents an important source of income for local bed & breakfasts and farm-house accommodation businesses that have experienced a decline in demand from other visitor types in recent years.

Non-market value: €95 million

The non-market value of trails represents the monetary value of the benefit accruing to trail users. This value is calculated using a “willingness to pay” economic model, where leisure activities such as trail walking are compared in economic value to other forms of leisure activity, such as a game of golf or a visit to the cinema. The survey of users has shown that each trail visit has estimated benefits valued by the user at about €5.40. Based on an annual number of trail visits in Ireland of 17.5 million, and the value per visit of €5.40, the total annual non-market value of trails is €95 million.

International walking and cycling tourism: €218 million

Developed recreational trails and forest infrastructure are an integral part of both the walking and cycling tourism product in Ireland. About 260,000 overseas tourists engaged in hiking/hill walking in Ireland in 2004. Total expenditure by these visitors was just under €138 m. The value of cycling tourism to the Irish economy is estimated at €80 million per annum.

The development of a world class recreational trail network can and will contribute significantly to this sector of Irish tourism, as is very evident from experience in countries such as New Zealand.

Other Irish research

The Fitzpatrick Report results are supported by the findings from a number of smaller studies undertaken in recent years to estimate

expenditure by domestic users of trails in Ireland.

An ongoing monthly survey conducted by the ESRI in 2002 identified substantial expenditure on food and drink from the recreational walkers, most of which is purchased on or near the facility.

A Dublin Institute of Technology study on the Kerry Way and the Wicklow Way found the average daily spend by overseas walkers in Kerry was €53 compared to that in Wicklow at €33. The study concluded that the mean spend for foreign visitors is greater than that of Irish walkers.

In 1997 a Waterford Institute of Technology study examined walking related expenditure in the Irish uplands. The study estimated total expenditure per trip €420 for foreign visitors compared to €94 for domestic visitors. Expenditure was on accommodation, travel costs, expenditure incurred on site and equipment.

Events and festivals with an outdoor recreation theme offer additional economic opportunities for rural communities throughout Ireland. Research carried out during the Wicklow Walking Festival held in Co Wicklow in 2002 showed that the festival generated €76,000 over the weekend in the local community.

3.3 The environmental, cultural and social context

Ireland is a vibrant, developed country with a population forecast to grow from 4.1 to 4.6 million over the next twenty years. Demographic trends will lead to a significant growth in the level of trail usage in the medium term and we can assume that the demand for suitable and accessible outdoor recreation facilities will continue to grow over the coming years.

Many people are, for one reason or another excluded from participating in the broad range of recreation activities possible in the Irish countryside. Access and recreational use of countryside by a number of disadvantaged groups, including people with disability,

ethnic minorities, and people living in disadvantaged areas is an issue in Ireland to be addressed. The cultural backgrounds of users will be more diverse than at present and this brings new challenges and further opportunities.

Sport is an important leisure-time activity for young people and outdoor recreation offers many exciting opportunities to engage and involve younger people in a range of alternative and exciting sporting activities. It is evident from a range of research undertaken, most recently from the National Children's Office, that young people are not participating in recreational activities such as walking/hiking, biking or canoeing to any notable extent at present. This is particularly true of young people living in larger cities and towns. This strategy seeks to reverse this situation.



3.3.1 Environmental, cultural and social benefits

Recreational trails provide a broad range of environmental, cultural and social benefits, which result in a higher quality of life, a healthier environment and more attractive communities for people. Although sometimes difficult to quantify, research shows these benefits are real and will become increasingly important in Ireland in the years to come.



Trails provide a resource for people to experience and enjoy heritage and culture

High quality recreational trails:

- provide a more sustainable option of travel and transportation for people; urban trails offer specially located infrastructure for commuting to work while recreation facilities enhance our living environment
- provide a resource for people to experience and enjoy the heritage and culture of the local community and landscapes in which they are located; they also serve as an important means of protecting and conserving heritage
- operate as a meeting place for the community and encourage community involvement and related pride. In relatively deprived areas, trails provide a positive facility for their local community; trails also provide a place for people of different backgrounds to socialise and interact
- are hands-on environmental classrooms, where people can be physically active and learn about our heritage, wildlife and environment. Trails support educational initiatives such as the new primary schools physical education curriculum and the Department of Education's Geography curriculum
- can be used by groups who are normally excluded from or under represented in leisure activities: the disabled, teenagers, young women, the elderly, ethnic minorities and mothers with young children.

3.4 Current demand

Recreational trails attract and provide benefits to two groups of people:

- **domestic users** - especially those who are not attracted to or do not participate in team or competitive sports, trails offer opportunities for outdoor physical activity. Such activity is beneficial not only for achieving and retaining physical fitness but also for maintaining mental health and wellbeing
- **tourists** - walking and cycling are two very important niche tourism products in Ireland. Walking attracts more visitors than any other activity holiday, extends the tourist season and increases regional and rural spending.

3.4.1 Domestic Users

Irish people using trails are motivated by many factors, including the desire to

- **appreciate natural scenic beauty and the environment**
- **experience physical challenge and exercise**
- **gain awareness and knowledge of nature and heritage**
- **socialise with friends or family while pursuing a special interest.**

The Irish Sports Council recently researched adult participation levels in sport and recreation. It found that walking and hiking are the most popular and important forms of leisure-time physical activity in Ireland today. On average, only about 13% of regular walkers use designated walking routes. The total number of domestic trail visits undertaken by Irish residents is estimated to be of the order 17.5 million annually.

It is also evident from the development and growth of a number of national governing bodies of sport and representative associations that Irish people are becoming increasingly active in a number of outdoor activities including road cycling, mountain-biking, trail running, kayaking/canoeing and recreational horse riding. Many of these are associated with recreational trails.

Research undertaking in the preparation of this strategy reports;

The health benefits associated with trail usage are the primary motivation for about one third of all trail visitors. Over two thirds of those interviewed as part of recent studies stated that trail activities were either the most important form of exercise they undertake or an important element of a wider exercise regime. However, much recreational walking is undertaken with a leisure and social focus and at a frequency and level of intensity below minimum recommended levels of physical activity.

The majority of visitors to forest areas and trails are not specialist users and are unlikely to stay for more than three hours or engage in active hiking or other specialist sports.

A high proportion of Irish people, especially those living in rural areas, report few areas to walk safely for recreation, social or health

purposes and are forced to walk on increasingly busy and dangerous country roads.

The proximity of a trail to a residence has a major bearing on the frequency of usage: the lack of local trails is the most significant obstacle to usage, and a large percentage of survey respondents stated that they were not aware of the location of trails.

Professional/managerial socio-economic groups are more likely to visit trails and forest areas, while people in older age groups were found to visit trails and forests more frequently; this indicates a likely increase in demand as Ireland's population ages.

The vast majority of visitors were satisfied with the quality of trails and forest areas available in Ireland, but a high proportion of those who had travelled abroad to participate in trail activities believed that the product available in the countries they visited was superior to that in Ireland.

3.4.2 Tourists

Walking

Walking attracts more visitors than any other activity holiday and contributes significantly to regional and rural spend, seasonal extension and motivation to travel to Ireland. There has been a significant decline in the number of overseas visitors coming to Ireland for some activity holidays over the last decade. This can be partially attributed to factors such as increased quality and product offerings from other countries, reduced cost of travel to other far-away walking and hiking countries, increased costs of holidays in Ireland and a market trend away from longer activity-break

holidays towards shorter city breaks. Reports of, gaining access for recreation purposes to some of our most scenic recreational environments is undoubtedly also an inhibiting factor.

Recent figures relating to walking indicate a good recovery from lows in 2002/03. This does not invalidate the judgement that the overall quality, diversity, availability and promotion of recreational trails in Ireland have fallen behind international standards and market requirements.



Cycling

Cycling too features strongly in the suite of activity holidays promoted by Fáilte Ireland. Cycling holidays make a substantial contribution to the Irish tourist economy with in excess of 100,000 annual overseas cyclists holidaying here and generating €86.2 million per annum. In addition 50,000 domestic holiday-makers engaged in cycling while holidaying at home.

Mountain biking

Mountain biking is one of the fastest-growing outdoor recreation activities in the UK and its growth is also evident in Ireland. Mountain biking is particularly popular among younger people and offers many positive benefits in terms of sport participation, health and social inclusion.

All available indicators point towards increased interest among Irish people in a range of outdoor and countryside recreation activities



3.5 Future demand: the users

Recreational trails are used by both Irish people and tourists, to the benefit of rural communities. There is significant scope for growth to meet increased demand from home and abroad.

3.5.1 Domestic users

All available indicators point towards increased interest among Irish people in a range of outdoor and countryside recreation activities. Leisure activities growing in popularity include recreational walking and hiking, hill running, cycling, mountain biking, horse riding, orienteering and a range of water-based activities.

This growth has emerged from a combination of increasing population, improved economic prosperity, extended leisure time, the considerable rise in car ownership and increased awareness of the health benefits of exercise.

Approximately 360,000 Irish people (10% of the population), have a disability. This sector requires much better facilities than currently provided. Access and recreational use of countryside by a number of other disadvantaged groups and communities should be a priority in the development of trails.

Public demand for recreational trails is likely to continue to increase. But in recent years supply in Ireland has fallen well behind demand in terms of availability and quality of recreation facilities and amenities, so that many Irish people now travel to other countries for activity breaks and activity-based holidays.

3.5.2 Tourists

The provision of a world-class recreational trails network that reflects user needs and preferences is one of the ways in which the full potential of the activity holiday sector of Irish tourism can be fully realised. Outdoor activity-based holidays are a very important offering for the Irish tourism industry. Research indicates high visitor demand and considerable potential for further growth in this sector.

Market research specifically focused on walking trends indicates that demand is growing steadily for shorter circular and loop walks, ranging from 30 minutes to a day, as well as themed trails (e.g. historical, bio-diversity and environmental, educational, health etc).

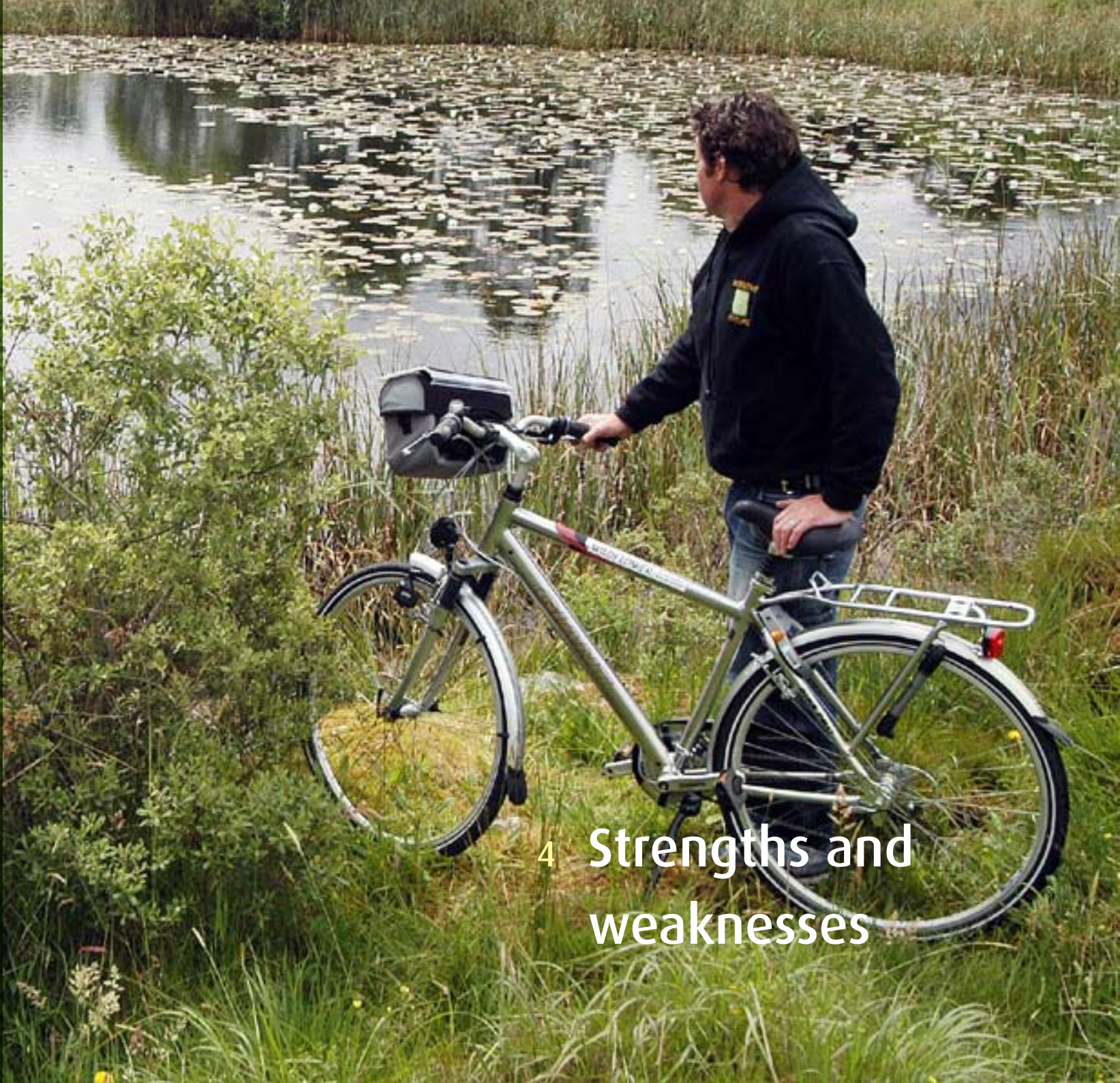
Trails that offer landscape variety, a range of physical challenges and facilities and services commensurate with the trail experience are critical to meeting visitor expectations.

While there has been a decline in the number of cycling visitors in recent years, there is potential for substantial additional tourism business from this sector. Fáilte Ireland has undertaken some research into the development of an Irish cycle network: secondary and tertiary public roadways with low volumes of vehicular traffic would be used. An on-road network of 2,500 km, in visitors' preferred regions, has been identified. It is envisaged that recommendations made from this important research would tie in with the structures and guiding principles set out in this Irish Trails Strategy.

Mountain biking also offers considerable tourism potential, conditional on the provision of sustainable off road mountain biking trails.

Water based trails and equestrian trails also offer considerable potential in attracting activity focused tourists to Ireland in the future.





4 Strengths and weaknesses

Strengths and weaknesses

4.1 Strengths

Ireland enjoys many advantages that, in combination, offer an excellent basis for planning and developing a world-class recreational trails network.

4.1.1 Natural advantages

Ireland offers an excellent environment for outdoor recreation because of its

- **magnificent scenery**
- **diversity of landscapes and physical features**
- **rich heritage**
- **low-density population**
- **accessible geographic location**
- **temperate climate.**

These features provide a foundation for fruitful development of our recreational trails network.



4.1.2 Local initiative and goodwill

Recreational trail development in Ireland has to date relied essentially on individual, voluntary and community initiatives and we are fortunate that there is already in place a deep well of good will towards, and significant involvement in, the establishment and maintenance of walking trails in Ireland. Many landowners, in particular, have displayed enormous goodwill in granting permissive ways and this has been the basis of most recreational trail developments in Ireland to date. Community involvement and support is essential for a sustainable Irish recreational trails network and must be maintained. Furthermore, new initiatives must be taken to encourage more volunteers to support this work, to build better physical and organisational links between rural and urban facilities, to promote good practice among users of trails and, in particular, to facilitate and promote greater use of trails by people of all backgrounds, ages and abilities into the future.

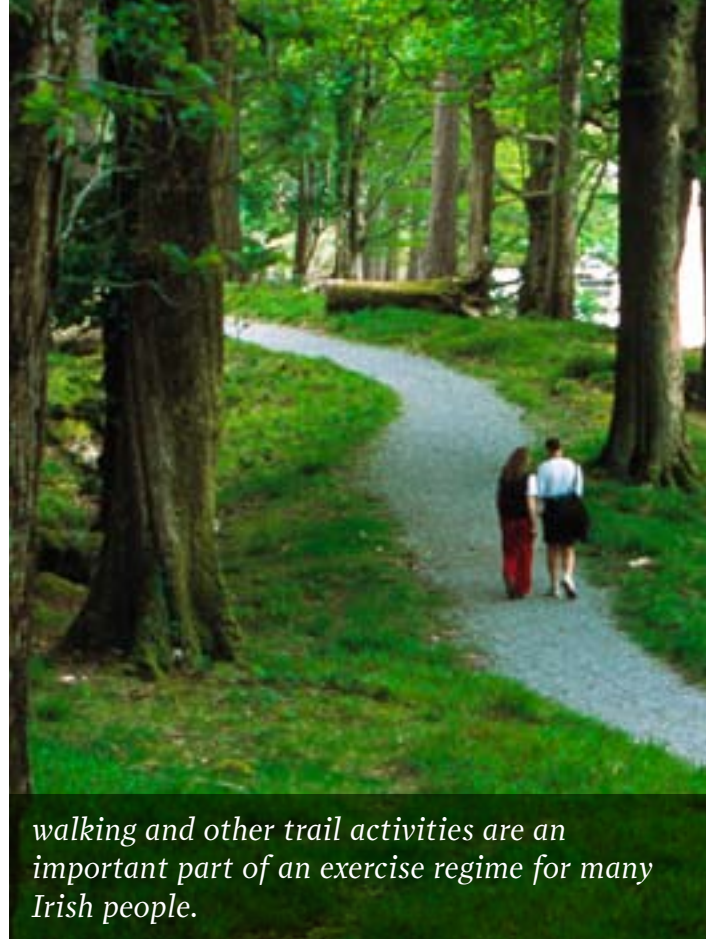
4.1.3 Extent of existing provision

Ireland already has approximately 8,300 km of developed walking trails and 2,100 km of cycle trails. The walking trails include the 32 National Waymarked Ways, which are medium and long distance walking routes (2–9 days) located in 25 counties. They cover about 3,403 km and another 747 km of walking trails serve as access routes and loop routes off them. Other trails developed in recent years include six pilgrim paths (heritage trails), a number of National Park walking trails, forest walking trails, 140 Slí Na Sláinte walking routes and a new network of shorter Looped Walking Trails.

4.1.4 Access to public lands

Coillte, the country's largest landowner, is a major provider of walking trails, owning and maintaining 52% of all off-road walking trails and approximately 24% of the total amount of developed walking trails in Ireland (*Irish Recreational Trails Audit 2005*, Coillte Consult). Coillte currently operates an open forest policy for recreation and its *Recreational Policy Healthy Forests — Healthy Nation* (2005) gives a clear and very positive commitment to further develop the potential of the forest estate for recreation.

As Ireland's forest authority, the Forest Service promotes recreation as a major non-timber benefit of Irish forestry, and encourages the development of woodland amenities, both for public access and enjoyment and as the basis of leisure-based enterprises. It promotes forest recreation by supporting relevant initiatives by providing funded under NeighbourWood scheme grants, and by encouraging good practice through its publication *Forest Recreation in Ireland - A Guide for Forest Owners and Managers*.



walking and other trail activities are an important part of an exercise regime for many Irish people.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) is responsible for the management of six national parks, all of which offer excellent opportunities for recreation trail development. Recent trail development projects undertaken in Wicklow, Glenveigh and Connemara are very welcome initiatives and serve as examples of good practice for other trail development projects.

Other Statutory agencies with responsibility for land management include Waterways Ireland and Bord Na Móna. Both bodies provide access and support for recreational trail development to land and water resources, under their responsibility.

Future measures from all of the above mentioned bodies designed to promote and encourage outdoor recreation will have an obvious application in the development of trails in the coming years

4.1.5 User satisfaction

Our research indicates that

- walking and other trail activities are an important part of an exercise regime for many Irish people. Almost one-third (29%) of those interviewed stated that health reasons associated with exercise were the primary reason for their visit
- the majority of people visiting sites (and using trails) are not specialist hikers: the most commonly cited reason for visiting was to enjoy a leisurely stroll (54%), while some 30% engage in active walking or hiking
- 80% of the 636 people interviewed at various trail locations stated that the quality of sites was either good or very good
- the sites rated the highest were those located in areas of scenic beauty
- the vast majority of visitors were satisfied with the quality of trails and forest areas available in Ireland.

4.2 Weaknesses

Our analysis of the trail audit, and our consultations with trail development groups and individuals involved with trail development around the country, have provided a list of the important issues and challenges facing trail development in Ireland today.

4.2.1 Access

There is no legal right of access to private land in Ireland and this constraint, combined with a reluctance on the part of many private landowners to permit access to their property defines the range, supply and quality of trail developments possible in Ireland. This issue is explored in greater detail in section 4.3 as it is the single most important and defining issues that will impact on the success or otherwise of this strategy and the creation of a sustainable recreational trail development in Ireland.

4.2.2 Location and information

A very high proportion of Irish people, especially those living in rural areas, report few areas to walk safely for recreation, social or health purposes. The *Irish Recreational Walking Survey 2003* (ESRI for Irish Sports Council) found that the non-availability of local trails was the main obstacle to trail usage, with people being forced to walk on increasingly busy and dangerous country roads.

A high proportion of survey respondents stated that they were not aware of the locations of trails; this lack of information appears

to be a greater difficulty in urban areas, while those living in the countryside are more concerned about trail availability.

Many trails are developed in areas that are remote and difficult to access, especially from larger urban centres, and the proportion of trails located in urban and coastal areas is low. Only 14% of recorded trails nationwide are located in the greater Dublin area (counties Dublin, Wicklow, Meath and Kildare).

The most significant impediment to trail usage was found to be the lack of availability. Lack of information about trails appears to be a greater difficulty in urban areas, while those living in the countryside are more concerned about trail availability. The development

of more trails ranked as the improvement most requested by respondents, with over 52% stating it was the most pressing issue. Improving the quality of existing trails, promoting and marketing trails, and improving ancillary facilities such as parking and toilets, were also regarded as important improvements required.

4.2.3 Type

The present supply of trails is over reliant on country roads, 55% (4565 km) being on country roads and lanes owned by county councils. Walking on country roads is not an optimal walking experience: it can be dangerous and lacks a satisfactory interaction with the surrounding

Young people are not participating in recreational activities such as walking/hiking, biking or canoeing to any notable extent at present



countryside, people and the natural environment. The main reason for using public roads is the reluctance of private landowners to allow access. The use of private land for walking trails is low at 14% (about 1162 km).

Existing trails are often discontinuous and not interconnected with other trails or transport links.

4.2.4 Cycling and mountain-biking

Research shows that there are concerns amongst cyclists on holiday in Ireland about road safety, traffic volume and poor directional signage throughout Ireland. Unlike most other European countries, Ireland does not have a dedicated cycle network. Outside the main cities, cycle ways are very few and they were developed without any national framework. There are currently no official off-road mountain biking trails. Coillte is currently developing three major networks as part of the Forest Recreation infrastructure programme.

4.2.5 Quality

Trail developers have a poor understanding of what constitutes “sustainable” trail development.

Survey respondents rated the quality of trails as either average or poor. Of those who have travelled abroad for the purpose of visiting trails, only 13% said that Irish trails are of higher quality than those elsewhere.

Other improvements highlighted in the surveys include the need for;



- more and better maps, signage and other information about trails
- improved parking facilities, provision of toilets and control of litter
- improved trail maintenance
- improved security.

4.2.6 Resources

Groups and individuals involved in trail development state that funding for trail development, construction and maintenance is inadequate, with a lack of sustained investment and a fragmentation of funding that leads to a focus on quantity rather than quality.

There is too much reliance on voluntary and community effort, with few people employed full-time to plan, develop and manage trails. It is difficult to organise maintenance on a voluntary basis and difficult to sustain community and voluntary effort and to get new people involved.

4.2.7 Planning and coordination

A significant amount of trail development has emerged in an uncoordinated manner in Ireland. It is clear that further resources should be devoted to the development and management of a number of these routes to bring them up to top international trail quality standard. However, there is a lack of planning and effective coordination regarding the management, development, promotion and monitoring of recreational trails at county, regional and national levels. That manifests itself in a low level of awareness and recognition of the value and contribution of trails to economic and national well-being at county, regional and national levels.

Regional and county levels

Many developed trails, including National Network Waymarked Ways, are managed on an ad hoc basis and are largely dependent on a number of committed individuals and active local organisations, usually working in a voluntary capacity. Local Authorities do not



have a clear and recognised role in the management or development of walking trails. Twenty-two different organisations oversee or manage walking trails at present.

The lack of coordination results in poor linkages between recreational interest groups, community development groups, Local Authorities, private sector businesses and other stakeholders. Landowners and managers, trail users and developers have not discovered how to work together effectively in the trail budgeting and funding process. The communication links between and among users and managers are weak.

National level

At national level, those involved in trail development find few formal structures to link key government departments, statutory



Access and recreational use of countryside by a number of disadvantaged groups, including people with disability, ethnic minorities, and people living in disadvantaged areas is an issue in Ireland to be addressed

agencies and authorities and community development associations involved with trail development. There is no lead government department defining policy and coordinating development.

Government departments

At present six departments and various executive agencies have a role to play in the development, support or promotion of recreational trails. There is no coordinating system or mechanism to facilitate orderly planning, funding, implementation or evaluation.

Department of Arts, Sports and Tourism, in addition to its policy role in these sectors, is the parent Department of Fáilte Ireland and the Irish Sports Council, to which the National Waymarked Way Advisory Committee and the Local Sports Partnership network report. While there is some cooperation, particularly on walking

and cycling, between ISC and Fáilte Ireland, there are now established mechanisms to ensure a coordinated approach to planning, implementation or evaluation of relevant functions.

Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht establishes policy on a range of areas, notably community and rural development. It has established and leads Comhairle na Tuaithe which is now developing a National Countryside Recreation Strategy. It oversees the implementation of the LEADER + Programme, National Rural Development Programme and the Rural Social Scheme through a network of 35 LEADER companies and three collective bodies. The Rural Social Scheme offers an income supplement to small farmers and part-time fishermen. It provides services of benefit to rural communities including maintaining and enhancing the waymarked ways, designated walks and bog roads. In addi-

tion, the Department administers the CLÁR programme which provides funding and co-funding to Government Departments, State Agencies and Local Authorities in accelerating investment in physical, economic and social infrastructure. It is also the parent department of Waterways Ireland, an important provider of walkways along the waterway towpaths.

Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government is the parent of the **National Parks and Wildlife Service** and the **Heritage Council**, both of which have major roles in the maintenance and development of trails, as well as managing access to sensitive areas and sites with conservation and heritage status. Most importantly, it is the parent department of Local Authorities, who play a central role in trails development at present and will be critical in achieving a sustainable trail network in the future.

Department of Agriculture and Food incorporates the **Forest Service** and is Coillte's parent department. It is also the key department in the state's relationship with the farming community and rural landowners and helps to shape and then administer various EU Schemes, which both regulate and support agriculture and farming. It has been, in recent times, lobbied by various interests to seek to restore to the REPS scheme a means of providing payment to farmers who opt to facilitate the development and maintenance of trails through their lands.

Department of Transport has an important role to play in the development of the urban Greenways, in the facilitation of safe cycling, in making abandoned rail routes available as potential trails and, in particular, in the development of better public transport access between urban and remote rural areas, including locations convenient to the start and finish points of trails.

Department of Health and Children, and now the Health Service Executive (HSE), have a major role to play in the promotion of health and prevention of disease. Given the proven benefits of outdoor exercise in promoting physical and emotional health, the Department and the HSE can be major promoters and facilitators of the use of trails. They are also likely to sponsor research on the health and social benefits of trails.

Other bodies

There is clearly a need to establish a secure mechanism to facilitate cooperative working and joint initiative among these Departments and agencies. In addition, and equally importantly, there is a need to facilitate participation by and cooperation among the many voluntary and community based organisations and recreational user groups that are already, or can become, involved in trails development, maintenance or usage. They include

Avondhu Tourism

Ballyhoura Fáilte

Beara Tourism Development Association

Bluestack Way Committee

Irish Canoe Union

Cycling Ireland

Dingle Way Committee

East and Mid Clare Way Ltd

Irish Mountain Running Association

Irish Heart Foundation

Irish Uplands Forum

Kerry Way Committee

Mountain Meitheal

Mountaineering Council of Ireland

North Kerry Walks Ltd

Ordnance Survey Ireland
Shannon Development
Sheep's Head Way Ltd
Six Regional Tourism Development Authorities
Údarás na Gaeltachta
Walking/Cycling Ireland
Walking Routes Ireland
Western Development Tourism Programme
Wicklow Sustainable Trails Network
Wicklow Uplands Council

4.3 Access

Access to our most scenic, popular and appropriate recreation areas, with the good will and support of landowners and rural communities, is a basic requirement for full realisation of the range of opportunities and benefits possible from trails.

Recreational trail development in most countries is based on policies agreed between public and private landowners, development agencies and recreational user groups and may be underpinned by appropriate legislation. These policies are usually based on respect for land ownership rights, environmental guidelines and a demonstrated demand that is legitimate and deserving of satisfaction in the interest of the common good.

The topic of access to the Irish countryside for recreational purposes has become a prominent and serious issue in recent years. This is attributed primarily to the increased number of people visiting and engaging in recreational activities on both private and publicly owned land and to the lack of recognition of the impact of this

activity. Many property owners have concerns relating to liability, trespassing, damage to property, interference with agricultural operations, noise pollution and legal access rights. Resolution of the access issue in the Irish countryside has become more urgent in recent years and has centred on the role, if any, of legislation and the need for recognition of the possible disturbance factors inherent in the provision of access.

In order to improve and develop existing and further trail development opportunities in the Irish countryside, three distinct landownership situations need to be recognised and developed using different approaches:

- **trails on public land**
- **trails on private land**
- **highways or rights of ways.**

4.3.1 Trails on public land

Access to publicly owned land, while not without difficulties, is generally enabled, sometimes with restrictions. Forest areas are very suitable locations for trail development and offer some excellent opportunities for further development. Coillte is a major provider of walking trails, and has over 8,000 km of forest roads which are available to walkers, the Forest Service promotes recreational use of forests, the National Parks and Wildlife Service manages six national parks and both Waterways Ireland and Bord Na Móna offer some facilities.

4.3.2 Trails on private land

As stated previously, there is no legal right of access to private land in Ireland. However, landowners have displayed enormous goodwill in granting permissive ways and this has been the basis of most recreational trail developments in Ireland to date.

A *permissive way* is not a public right of way but a route that can be used by the public, for the specific activity intended, with the permission of the landowner, and where users of the route refrain from any abuse of the landowner's interests. A landowner may withdraw this permission with reasonable notice but would hopefully refrain from doing so. Most permissive paths have a designated responsible authority or management committee, which normally establishes public liability insurance so that all landowners or occupiers are indemnified against injury resulting from use of the walking route. Responsibility for maintenance and management usually rests with the Local Authority or local management committee; good performance in this regard is also important to the continued co-operation of landowners.

This system operates well where well-structured local route management committees are in place involving landowners, Local Authorities' representatives and community development officers. It is accepted that some private landowners are not willing to participate in such projects but, overall, the permissive approach is the recommended approach for gaining access for recreation on private property in Ireland. It is further acknowledged that this approach would be improved if landowners received recognition by way of payment for work and activities that help maintain the trail.

4.3.3 Highways or rights of ways

Thanks to the cooperation of local authorities, use of (current) public roads does not create problems. However, roads not in current usage introduce a further factor

Both public and private land can have old public lines of communications running through them. Incorporating these in Waymarked Ways was a core value in the early development of a long distance walking routes network, seen then as a pro-active means of conserving heritage. The landowners concerned must respect the legal maxim *Once a Highway always a Highway* and these lines must remain open to the public. The rights of the public can be extinguished only by way of a specific action of the Minister of Transport. Nevertheless, even where such public rights existed, the practice to date of walks developers and managers has been to operate on the basis of the landowner's goodwill.

However, a changing situation, particularly the more frequent changes in ownership, makes formal recognition of such lines, whether paths or roads, critical to the continuation and extension of walking routes. Accordingly, Local Authorities should see the establishment of complete registers of public ways as an urgent task.

4.3.4 Potential liability

Liability to users is a major concern for all property owners and is important in terms of access and recreation in the Irish countryside. At present, the owners and occupiers of private property crossed by approved National Waymarked Ways are indemnified against negligence claims by a recreational walker for accident, damage or

injury sustained while walking on private property. This indemnity is primarily provided through a policy administered by Irish Public Bodies Mutual Insurance Ltd. The validity of the liability insurance through IPBMI is dependent on NWWAC/ISC being able to confirm that the route is safe. All national waymarked ways are inspected annually and the responsible authorities/local management committees are expected to have a maintenance programme in place for the walking route to ensure that it is maintained. This policy and procedure has operated well. It will be necessary to make this a national scheme - to include all trail developments. It is also essential that in addition to the existing indemnity to landowners, indemnity to the trail development/ management committee is included.

The owner/occupier of any private property is further protected in Irish law under the provisions of the *Occupiers Liability Act 1995*.

Under the Act, the duty of care to a recreational user is the same as to a trespasser.

4.3.5 Comhairle na Tuaithe

Comharile na Tuaithe, under the direction of the Department of Community, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs has developed a Countryside Recreation Strategy in 2006. This strategy includes a number of agreed parameters and guidelines to form a basis for the development of an access policy for recreation in Ireland. It is essential that all approved trail development projects are developed and managed in accordance with these parameters and guidelines.

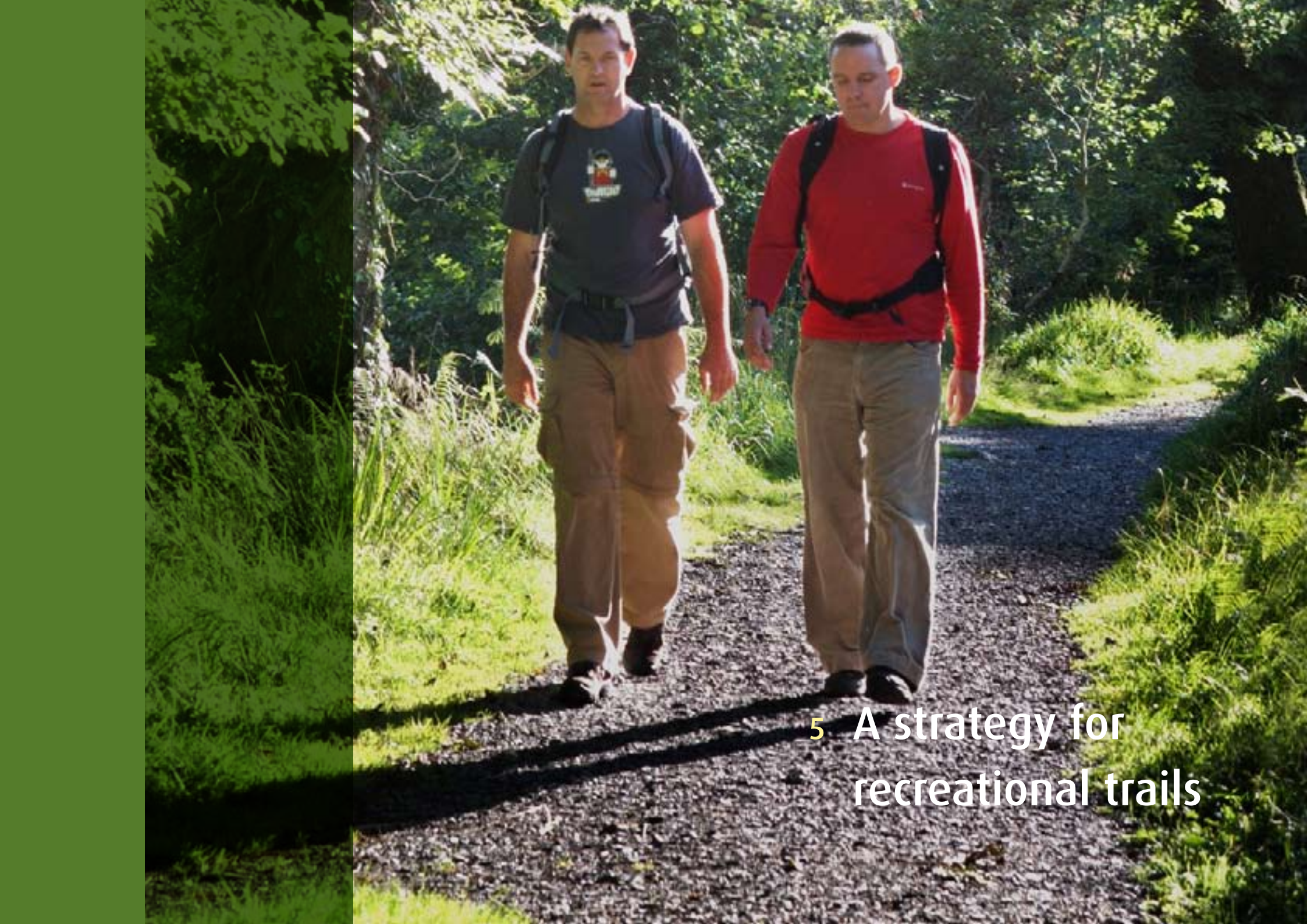
Agreement on the managed situation, in terms of recreational trail



development, will positively influence the resolution of the situation, in open countryside and upland areas. In this regard, there will be a need to plan for a number of issues in terms of trail development and management in Ireland:

- **existing trail developments:** there is a need to secure long-term agreement for a number of existing developed and well-established walking trails. Trail management plans — including monitoring, maintenance and inspection procedures — will need to be agreed, put in place and implemented annually for all existing trail developments
- **upgrading of existing trail developments:** a significant amount of upgrading, re-routing and further development is required on existing trails. This will require improved access agreements, significant capital development funding and trail management plans to be agreed and implemented annually
- **new trails:** there are several gaps and potential opportunities for new recreational trail developments for a range of activities including walking/hiking, cycling, horse riding and water-based trails. All new developments will require a feasibility study, an agreement for long-term access and a trail development and management plan to be agreed and implemented with all relevant stakeholders.





5 A strategy for
recreational trails

A strategy for recreational trails

A sustainable Irish recreational trail network can only be achieved if statutory, non-statutory and local community networks coordinate planning and development.

This strategy, and the project plans which will flow from it, are intended to provide a policy and operational framework within which stakeholders can work together so that all existing trails can be managed and enhanced and new trails can be planned and developed on a more strategic and sustainable basis.

The strategy is national in focus but is intended to stimulate and assist in developing integrated local and regional plans, building on the existing infrastructure.

The development and success of an Irish recreational trails network will be contingent on the ability and effectiveness of all stakeholders to coordinate trail planning and development activities, capitalising on identified opportunities, securing appropriate investment in trails and developing sustainable management regimes. The ultimate goal is to create and maintain a world-class trail network that respects and protects our countryside and where communities throughout Ireland can benefit from its use.

5.1 Strategy principles

Certain principles must guide the future direction of recreational trail development in Ireland:

- **sustainable and sensitive trail development**
- **appropriate provision for people with disability**
- **sustained user, landowner, community and agency involvement and support**
- **strategic investment**
- **integrated trail planning, implementation and monitoring/ongoing evaluation**
- **coordinated marketing and promotion.**

5.1.1 Sustainable and sensitive trail development

Sustainable management is defined as

- **meeting the needs of today without negatively impacting on future generations' right to enjoy the same.**

This strategy recognises Ireland's nature conservation responsibilities under national and European law and the need to respect and protect all habitat and wildlife designations. In setting up or maintaining trails, it will be necessary to comply with the legal

requirements in relation to Special Areas of Conservation, Special Protection Areas, Natural Heritage Areas and adjoining areas, the resting and breeding places of protected species of animals and the habitat or environment of any protected species of flora.

Recreational trails must

- **respect the integrity of the trail itself, particularly where it is a heritage route/old line of travel**
- **respect and protect the land and surrounding landscapes in which they are located**
- **meet the needs of recreational users and be fit for purpose**
- **be designed and built to appropriate standards that minimise all negative environmental impacts**
- **promote harmony and minimise conflict between different user groups, landowners and land managers.**

Sustainable management of a trail includes the management of heritage along a trail — whether it is a historic site or a hedgerow or the line of a railway — and also includes accessible interpretation of heritage through appropriate media.

5.1.2 **Appropriate provision for people with disability**

This strategy recognises Ireland's social equality and inclusion responsibilities and, through the proposed developments, will seek to improve the current provision of recreational trails for people with disability. This work will be undertaken in partnership with the appropriate representative bodies and associations.

5.1.3 **Sustained community and agency involvement and support**

Trails will only be successful if they have strong community support. They must also recognise the essential contribution of landowners and land managers in developing and managing trails and ensure their continued goodwill and involvement. This is evident from the experience of the National Waymarked Way Advisory Committee and its predecessors over the last twenty seven years. Volunteer and community support is absolutely essential in establishing, managing, maintaining and promoting sustainable trails.

All elements of planning, implementation and review of this strategy must operate to sustain and encourage individual and community involvement and enhance the importance of trails in the economic, social and recreational life of the community. It is also essential to engage and involve all the agencies, statutory and voluntary, to gain their support and commitment in implementing the recommendations made in this strategy. The government, the Council's parent department and other departments and statutory agencies have a major role to play.

5.1.4 Strategic investment

A strategic approach to all recreational trail development is strongly advocated. The development and implementation of these proposals will be characterised by shared vision, researched and informed planning, sustainable development, effective and co-ordinated management and value for money on all investment, based on the selection of carefully chosen priorities and informed by a monitoring and evaluation system (see Section 5.4 below).

New developments and maintenance of existing infrastructure to prescribed standards must have assured and accessible sources of funding. At present, both development and maintenance are hampered by a lack of funds or a lack of information on how to access the funds that may be available. Resources are limited, disjointed and not assured in any quantity; the lack of consistent funding places an unacceptable burden on and causes serious frustration to those who volunteer to support trails.

For the foreseeable future, state funding will be the main source of support. The strategy envisages establishing effective funding mechanisms, with clearly defined responsibilities for deployment of adequate resources within an overall plan and with consistent standards of compliance and accountability at all levels. A lead department and executive agency is essential for this purpose.

5.1.5 Integrated trail planning and implementation

It is essential to provide and maintain a structure that ensures all stakeholders are working together in partnership. The achievement of this objective will represent a considerable challenge, given the

minimal coordination and planning mechanisms in place. It will require sustained effort, considerable goodwill and the willingness to learn from both success and failure. Four elements are essential:

- **appropriate governance, management and coordinating structures**
- **evidence-based planning, prioritising and funding**
- **adherence to standards**
- **rigorous monitoring and evaluation.**

Governance, management and coordinating structures

Based on an analysis of current obstacles to orderly development and on best practice in a number of other countries, successful implementation will depend on

- **agreeing to assign overall coordinating responsibility to one department**
- **establishing under the aegis of the Irish Sports Council an appropriately skilled and resourced executive unit**
- **establishing and maintaining coordinating mechanisms, particularly with all other relevant departments, statutory agencies and stakeholders**
- **creating systems to facilitate a free flow of initiatives, information and expertise up, down and laterally within the overall community of agencies, Local**

Authorities and community groups with a role in the maintenance and development of trails.

Evidence-based planning, prioritising and funding

Research undertaken so far highlights the shortcomings in the information available to support rigorous planning and subsequent evaluation of benefits, sustainability and performance. The initiation and continuation of a well focused research programme, together with ongoing structured collection and analysis of information from both providers and users, are essential if planning and prioritisation are to be conducted in accordance with best practice. While initial funding of developments will have to be based on the apparent soundness of proposals and their fit with agreed priorities, it should be an objective to link funding increasingly closely to performance.

Adherence to standards

Clearly defined and consistent standards are essential to ensure trails are sustainable, valued and protected. A specialist working group, established as part of this strategy to review this area has made a number of initial recommendations in this regards based on accepted good practice. Their implementation will ensure that trails reach best international standards and contribute to the realisation of the vision and objectives of this strategy. A copy of the working group's report is included as an annex to this strategy.

Rigorous monitoring and evaluation

Continuing support and sustainability will be critically dependent on achieving planned outputs, outcomes and impact. It will also be necessary to demonstrate by objective method that the investment is good value for money and that, in any international league, Irish trails perform well for their users and promoters.



Clearly defined and consistent standards are essential to ensure trails are sustainable, valued and protected.

5.1.6 Coordinated marketing and promotion

Coordinated and sustained marketing and promotion of trails to the local population and to visitors is essential in order to realise the full benefits of the trails network and ensure its sustainability. Given the present fragmentation and under-resourced level of initiative in this area, implementation will require considerable effort.

Research has shown that

- a large proportion of the population are not aware of trail developments
- the tourism take-up in activity break holidays has fallen in recent years and considerable potential exists for growth in this sector
- there is stiff competition from well-promoted facilities nearby in Wales and Scotland.

A sustainable programme of marketing, promotion and information is needed to increase both local participation and the number of visitors from abroad. The programme can, of course, avail of existing local and regional initiatives, but Irish trails, as they develop, would undoubtedly benefit from branding and high-profile identification.

5.2 Initial implementation measures

In submitting this strategy for consideration by the relevant departments and ultimately by government, it is necessary to set out the initial implementation measures and chart the transition from approval of concepts to the point where they can begin to be applied. Four measures are seen to be essential:

1. designate a lead department
2. establish an Irish Trails Advisory Committee
3. establish a National Trails Office
4. develop systems for distribution of funds and appropriate accountability.



5.2.1 Designate a lead department

At present six departments and various executive agencies have a role to play in the development, support or promotion of recreational trails. **This strategy recommends that one department be designated as the lead department in relation to all aspects of trails.** In this role, it would have the following principal responsibilities:

- **to oversee and, as necessary, guide national policy in relation to trails;**
- **to establish and support appropriate coordinating, advisory and consultative arrangements to facilitate the development of inclusive policy and practice in relation to trails.**

In light of recent consultations, it is recommended that the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism, in its existing role as parent department to both the Irish Sports Council and Failte Ireland, be designated as the lead department.

5.2.2 Establish an Irish Trails Advisory Committee (ITAC)

There is no coordinating system or mechanism to facilitate orderly planning, funding, implementation or evaluation of trails in Ireland. There is clearly a need to establish a secure mechanism to facilitate cooperative working and joint initiative among all agencies. **This strategy recommends the establishing of an Irish Trails Advisory Committee (ITAC) to facilitate this and to coordinate the implementation of this strategy.**

The extensive range of agencies involved in trail provision and development (*described earlier 4.2.7*) will be represented on this Committee. It is envisaged that the Irish Trails Advisory Committee will comprise of a Steering Committee and a Consultative Council.

It is considered, having regard to Government policy in relation to the containment of the number of executive agencies and to its present functions and capacities, that this role should be assigned to the Irish Sports Council, irrespective of the decision made in relation to the lead Department. The Irish Trails Advisory Committee (ITAC) will inter alia absorb the present functions of the National Waymarked Way Advisory Committee (NWWAC) of the Irish Sports Council.

The Irish Trails Advisory Committee (ITAC) will be expected to;

- **achieve agreement on a harmonised approach to certain elements of trail provision including; trail standards, trail classification systems, trail signage policy, trail development guidelines, trail quality assurance and appropriate marketing and promotion. The aim would be to agree on systems and standards which are consistent and coherent to all users and developers.**
- **advise, guide and support the work of a National Trails Office, as described here under**
- **prepare a list of sources of current and capital funds available for the provision of trails with a summary of the totals available.**

- ensure that systems to monitor and evaluate the impact of trails are in place and are implemented.

5.2.3 Establish a National Trails Office (NTO)

This strategy recommends the designation of a National Trails Office to coordinate and drive the implementation of this strategy.

The functions of the National Trails Office (NTO) would be as follows

- to work in close association with the ITAC, informing and guiding on all matters relating to trail policy development
- implement the priority projects recommended in Section 5.3 including the development of a five-year plan.
- guide, facilitate and monitor the planning, provision and maintenance of trails at local (county) and regional levels
- maintain an up to date register of all approved trail developments on a county-by-county basis.
- provide a technical advisory service on all new trail development projects, ensuring compliance with recommended standards
- coordinate a trail quality assurance programme
- establish and maintain systems to monitor and



Community involvement and support is essential for a sustainable Irish recreational trails network.

evaluate the administration, outputs, outcomes and impact of trails, and to review policy and practice in light of the results

- quantify the resources (financial, personnel and materials) required to maintain and develop trails in accordance with agreed plans and standards, and advise the Irish Sports Council, through the ITAC on the annual and medium term requirements, in accordance with agreed budgetary procedures.
- administer the funds made available to it for the planning, development, maintenance and evaluation of trails
- assess the overall personnel and skill requirements necessary to support the planning of a trails network and to advise on the adequate supply of appropriate expertise
- liaise with relevant national, regional and local agencies to agree an ongoing integrated marketing and information strategy in respect of trails.
- prepare and publish regular reports on trails, with particular reference to progress in relation to plans, outcomes of evaluation and levels of usage.

The National Trails Office will function as a unit within the Irish Sports Council. It should incorporate a range of skills and experiences necessary to implement the strategy, and should be particularly strong on building alliances and good working relationships, planning, monitoring and evaluation, evidence-based prioritisation and allocation of resources on a transparent and consistently objective basis.

A number of suitably experienced officers will be required to work in collaboration with the NTO in a number of locations throughout the country. They can be employed by a variety of agencies as has already been demonstrated in a number of areas. These officers would lead in the coordination and implementation of the strategy at community, county and regional level and would serve as important links between the national office and the trail community throughout the country. They would undertake duties ranging from physical trail development, monitoring and management, to planning and coordinating activities such as training, education and awareness-building programmes. It is further recommended that strong consideration be given to linking with and utilising the local sports partnership network, the Comhairle Leader network and the Local Authorities in structuring these positions.

5.2.4 Develop systems for distribution of funds and appropriate accountability

It is assumed that, while the overall financial situation in relation to trails will be reported on a consolidated basis, individual departments and agencies will retain their current relevant budgets insofar as existing functions remain with them.

It is, however, recommended that additional funds for upgrading existing trails and developing new trails should be channelled exclusively through the Irish Trails Advisory Committee.

Early work on these systems is essential to enable the Irish Trails Advisory Committee (ITAC) and the National Trails Office (NTO) to discharge their responsibilities effectively.

5.3 Initial implementation projects

A number of important projects relating to trail design, development and management have been identified as requiring attention during the first phase of implementation, which should last no more than eighteen months from the date of identification of the lead department and the establishment and funding of the proposed new structural arrangements. These initial projects are

- develop an Irish trail standards system
- establish a classification system for all trails
- establish a national trails signage policy
- prepare Irish trail construction guidelines
- establish a trail quality assurance programme
- prepare and agree a five-year trail plan
- establish a trail research programme
- develop and commence an education and training programme for trail management, construction and maintenance
- establish and commence implementation of a recreational trails marketing and promotion plan.



The development and success of an Irish recreational trails network will be contingent on the ability and effectiveness of all stakeholders to coordinate trail planning and development activities

5.3.1 Develop an Irish trail standards system

This strategy aspires to create, nurture and maintain a world-class recreational trail network that is sustainable, integrated, well utilised and highly regarded. It also recognises that many different types of recreational trails may be required and suitable for development in Ireland. Irish Trail Standards are required by all management agencies involved with recreational trail development in Ireland. Consistent standards and classifications across the country will lead to better quality trails, improved cost estimates, better resource and maintenance planning and, in the longer term, a sustainable trails network.

5.3.2 Establish a classification system for all trails

It is essential that information be provided to recreational trail users in a format that is reliable, accurate, easily understandable and consistent. This is also important from a promotion and marketing perspective. A classification system based on slope, tread surface, obstacles, physical effort required and time estimates should be developed and adopted by all agencies for all Irish trails.

5.3.3 Establish a national trails signage policy

Signage is an important element of all recreational trail developments. A new recreational trail signage policy and system should be developed and agreed among all stakeholders and should be linked closely with the proposed trail classification system.

5.3.4 Prepare Irish trail development guidelines

This strategy recommends the development of a new Irish Trail Design and Development Guideline, which would provide all the essential information necessary for sustainable trail development in Ireland.

5.3.5 Establish a trail quality assurance programme

It will be necessary to establish a comprehensive and integrated trails assurance programme to ensure that all recreational trails conform to agreed standards, meet the needs of intended users and are maintained at the agreed standards. A trail assurance system would include

- **an independent trail inspection programme**
- **an annual Irish Trails Award Scheme**
- **a support structure and grant scheme for trails maintenance.**


5.3.6 Prepare and agree a five-year trail plan

It will be the responsibility of the Irish Trails Advisory Committee (ITAC) and the National Trails Office (NTO) to oversee the development and implementation of a five-year trail plan based on agreed priorities and funding availability. It is recommended that following a call for submissions and detailed evaluation, the NTO will prepare a fully costed five-year trail development plan. Each

project identified in this plan should be supported by a feasibility study, a detailed cost breakdown and a project plan.

A significant amount of information is now available to inform a new trail development plan. In planning future development, emphasis should be placed on evident need, quality and sustainability rather than quantity. Based on the currently available research, there is a shortage of recreational trails in or near a number of major urban centres, most notably the greater Dublin area. There is a need for trails that link urban centres with the countryside, short to medium length looped walking routes (between 2 and 15 km), shared use walking/cycling routes, trails that link lowland areas with scenic upland areas, forest trails, themed trails (heritage, environmental, geological etc), medium and long distance cycling routes and off-road cycling trails. In addition, there is an opportunity to establish a number of water-based canoe and kayak trails and bridleways (horse-riding trails).

This work involved in doing this should involve the various departments, agencies, and community groups focusing together on an essential task. It should also help the NTO to identify strengths and weaknesses in the overall area to which it is expected to give leadership, and may be particularly useful in assessing skills availability and processes that work well to strengthen coordination and cooperation. If it is considered that it is not advisable to extend to a five-year horizon, then a plan covering not less than three years should be prepared. The preparation of a plan is identified as a priority for this strategy and should be initiated and completed within eighteen months of the lead department being appointed.



Sustainable management (for trails) is defined as - meeting the needs of today without negatively impacting on future generations' right to enjoy the same.

5.3.7 Establish a trail research programme

It is clear that all the key stakeholders need to be kept continuously up to date and informed on a range of economic, social and health matters. They need current and reliable data on changing market requirements and needs of all recreational trail users. They must also be informed on matters relating to trail usage, quality, standards, materials, technologies and techniques relating to sustainable trail development and management. To this end, this strategy recommends establishing a trails research programme. This will support the proposed monitoring and evaluation system outlined in Section 5.4.

5.3.8 Develop and commence an education and training programme

Competence and knowledge in a broad range of areas and skills are required at different levels for this strategy to achieve its stated goals. A comprehensive and accessible education and training programme will need to be established. It is envisaged that this would primarily be aimed at Local Authorities and agencies, groups or individuals currently involved in recreational trail development and management. This programme would focus on skills including physical trail development, management planning, trail maintenance planning, monitoring environmental impact, budgeting, communications, research, marketing and promotion.

5.3.9 Establish and commence implementation of a recreational trails marketing and promotion plan

The long-term objectives, which this strategy seeks to advance over the next ten years, are:

- **to promote and facilitate the highest sustainable level of usage of recreational trails among Irish people**
- **to establish Ireland as a premier international tourism destination for the broad range of outdoor recreational activities associated with a diverse trail network.**

A central element in advancing these objectives will be the development and delivery of a multi-dimensional awareness-building marketing and promotion plan, targeting both domestic users and international visitors. It is envisaged that a new brand identity will be developed, along with promotional materials and a website. Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland will be central to this plan, which will tie in with both agencies' annual promotion and marketing plans. A number of governing bodies of sport, the Local Sports Partnership network and the HSE Health Promotion officers will also be important contributors to this element of implementation.

5.4 Trail strategy monitoring and evaluation system

It will be essential to monitor, evaluate and report the impact and success of this strategy on a regular basis. This will be possible through the development and management of a strategy monitoring and evaluation system and the evaluation of data that derives from it.

The strategy monitoring and evaluation system will be based on the agreed vision and core objectives of this strategy, which ultimately aspires to seeing many more people of all ages and abilities throughout Ireland and from abroad using and enjoying a top quality and sustainable Irish recreational trails network. In achieving this, it is necessary to provide value for money on all investment in this area. The system will also greatly improve the working relationships and linkages between all agencies and organisations with a stake in this area.


The proposed system will serve as a management tool to track progress and monitor the impact of all programmes undertaken as part of this strategy and will also serve as an important input in further strategic planning.

Goals, targets and performance indicators should be agreed for each project and programme delivered, following a process of consultation between the designated lead department and relevant stakeholders at a very early stage in the implementation of this strategy. The principle of performance-based funding and ability to contribute to the core strategy objectives will underpin this system. All project indicators will be based on quantitative and qualitative data, giving a rounded picture of the project.

The monitoring and evaluation system should include processes to

- **establish baseline indicators on current levels of usage, user satisfaction, awareness and trail quality**
- **survey usage level and experiences on trails**
- **capture user satisfaction**
- **monitor the performance of the executive and administrative structures that are charged with the coordination and delivery of this strategy**
- **evaluate the impact and success of the grant schemes proposed for trail development and maintenance**
- **identify the successes and failures of projects and present recommendations for future projects based on what worked and what didn't work**
- **evaluate the impact of programmes.**

It is envisaged that this system will be informed by a number of sources including Failte Ireland's *Annual Visitor Exit Survey*, the Irish Sports Council's *Sport & Recreation Participation Surveys* and others.



Appendix

Map of Ireland's Waymarked Ways

National Waymarked Ways Network 2006



LEINSTER

1. The Wicklow Way (E8)
2. The South Leinster Way (E8)
3. The Slieve Bloom Way
4. The Offaly Way
5. The Grand Canal Way
6. The Barrow Way
7. The Royal Canal Way

MUNSTER

8. The East Munster Way (E8)
9. The Tipperary Heritage Trail
10. The Blackwater Way (E8)
11. The Kerry Way (E8)
12. The Beara Way (E8)
13. The Sheep's Head Way
14. The Dingle Way
15. The North Kerry Way
16. The Ballyhoura Way
17. The Slieve Felim Way
18. The Lough Derg Way
19. The East Clare Way
20. The Mid Clare Way
21. The Burren Way

CONNACHT

22. The Western Way (Galway)
23. The Foxford Way
24. The Suck Valley Way
25. The Sligo Way
26. The Miners' Way & Historical Trail
27. Slí Chonamara (Connemara Way)

ULSTER

28. The Cavan Way
29. The Bluestack Way
30. Slí Dhún na nGall (The Donegal Way)
31. The Táin Way
32. Monaghan Way
33. Westmeath Way

Waymarked Ways of Northern Ireland

- | | |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| A. Ring of Gullion Way | E. Causeway Coast Way |
| B. Newry Canal Way | F. Central Sperrins Way |
| C. Lecale Way | G. Carleton Trail |
| D. Moyle Way | H. Slieve Donard Way |




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