

# Experience the Barrow Blueway

An Economic Plan for the Barrow  
Line of the Grand Canal

DRAFT

MARCH 2021



## A Blueway ...

A network of approved and branded multi-activity recreational trails and sites, based on, and closely linked with the water, together with providers facilitating access to activities and experiences.



Rialtas  
na hÉireann  
Government  
of Ireland

Tionscadal Éireann  
Project Ireland  
**2040**



Comhairle Contae Chill Dara  
Kildare County Council



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the Grand Canal

# FOREWORD

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# 01 Introduction

## 1.1 Why a Plan?

In commissioning this report, our client team – County Kildare LEADER Partnership, Kildare County Council and Waterways Ireland – wanted to develop a shared vision and plan for a positive visitor experience grounded in the sustainable economic development of the Barrow Blueway. We needed to answer the question if a user is travelling along this trail, what would they be interested in seeing, doing and experiencing along the journey. What would lead them to take the journey in the first place and whether on foot, on a bike or on the water, what would inspire them to explore further? Understanding this we needed to assess what was missing in terms of the experience on the ground, identify the opportunities to fill these gaps and recommend the kind of support needed to enable communities, businesses and individuals to take advantage of the opportunity this particular blueway could present.

The Barrow Blueway, if well developed, could meet a range of needs –

- enhance people's well-being – enabling them to be active in nature
- improve people's prospects – by presenting business opportunities
- appeal to visitors – by delivering a range of excellent experiences
- increase awareness and appreciation – by facilitating encounters for the young and not so young with the waterway's natural and cultural heritage
- add value to the work that is underway – by building on and integrating what is being developed – the path itself, the plans and masterplans for the places along the route and the projects which are being developed by individuals, communities and other organisations
- improve the range, depth and accessibility of activities – by identifying the needs and motivations of users and visitors

- orientate people – by letting let them know where to go, what to do, what they can see
- reveal the stories of the place – through interpretive wayfinding
- identify vital connections – linking things to do, places to go, things to discover
- facilitate pleasurable access to the water and along the towpath – by offering choice of movement – on land, on water

## 1.2 Where is it For?

The focus of this plan is the Barrow Line – the canal spur off the Grand Canal - which stretches some 46kms from Lowtown/Robertstown in north county Kildare to Athy. The towpath route is predominantly rural and is punctuated by the small towns of Rathangan, Monasterevin, Vicarstown and Athy.

## 1.3 Who is it For?

First and foremost, this Plan provides a guide for the partners as they work collaboratively to develop the potential of the Barrow Blueway. It is also for all those who contributed to the development of the plan on the way through so that they can see not only the outcome of the time they invested in the process and but also how their own particular ambition for the Blueway might best be realised within the context of the wider agenda which the Plan sets out.

## 1.4 How was it Developed?

Following a competitive tendering process Louise Browne Associates was commissioned by County Kildare LEADER Partnership in September 2020 to undertake the work. The development of the plan relied hugely on the input from a wide range of contributors, listed on page 3, whose ideas, experience and expertise were sourced through a comprehensive series of one-to-one strategic conversations; five publicly advertised participative

workshops and a series of focus group working sessions with community development groups, key agencies and other interested individuals. A three-day field trip, conducted by barge, bike and on foot enabled members of the consultant team to travel the length of the canal, visit each of the settlements and experience the destination through the eyes of a visitor. Our site investigations were supplemented with desk research drawn from a wide range of sources which we were keen to ensure were as up-to-date as possible.

## 1.5 How it Works

In what follows we provide an initial introduction to our study area – The Place. This section is supported by an appendix – available here (embed a live link in section 2 of the final report) which details the outcome of our audit of the destination's assets, attributes, heritage features and facilities. In sections three and four - The Enabling Context and The Building Blocks of a Successful Blueway we set out the background to this initiative and detail important considerations for its future development, promotion and management. In section five, we explore the Market Opportunity to better understand the motivations and needs of existing and prospective users and visitors. In the Destination Response, we draw on the outcomes of all the engagement undertaken – people's hopes, concerns and ideas - and begin to fashion a vision for the Barrow Blueway and a mission for all those who are keen to be involved in its development. An important consideration here is our development of what we are calling a Blueway Blueprint – a framework which identifies what's needed, what's missing and the role places along the route could and indeed, need to play, if the ambition for the blueway is to be realised. In section seven, The Economic Opportunity, we present the spatial outworking of the blueprint where we explore at key locations along the route, 'What's Here?', 'What's Coming' and 'What Else We Could Do' in terms of recommended interventions. Section eight, Gearing Up and nine, Getting the Word Out deal respectively with the activation of the Blueway and its marketing and promotion and include recommended system-wide actions. Finally, in Managing and Keeping Track, we consider how best to ensure that this initiative delivers on its promises.



# 02 The Place

The River Barrow rises in the Slieve Bloom Mountains in the southern midlands, and flows, joining its sister rivers the Nore and the Suir, into the Irish Sea at Waterford Harbour. Through a tremendous feat of engineering, it was made navigable in the eighteenth century by the insertion of short sections of canal along its course. Today the 114km long 'Barrow Way' follows what's left of canalside towpaths and riverside roads from Lowtown in County Kildare to St Mullins in south County Carlow.

## 2.1 Our Focus

The focus of this plan is the Barrow Line – the canal spur off the Grand Canal - which stretches some 46kms from Lowtown in north county Kildare to Athy. The towpath route which is currently signposted as the Barrow Way, is predominantly rural and is punctuated by the small towns of Rathangan, Monasterevin, Vicarstown and Athy.

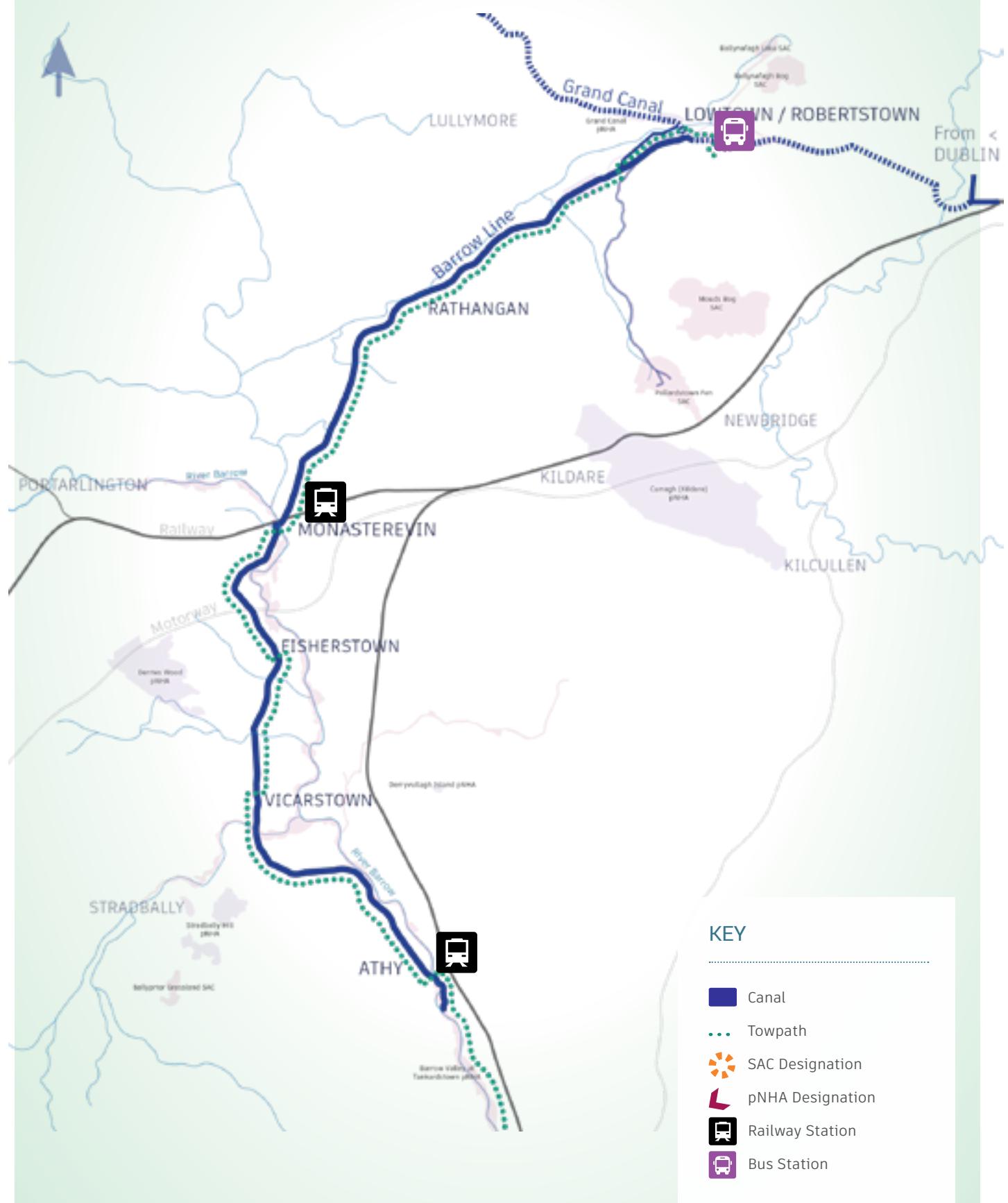
The primary features of built heritage on the route are the canal structures most of which date from 1790 and are intact. Of significance are the bridges,

aqueducts, winding holes, warehouses, quays and Grand Canal agent's offices, examples of which can be seen in Athy and Monasterevin. The canal is an important part of Ireland's industrial heritage and links the navigable River Barrow with the Grand Canal between the Shannon and Dublin. Although its significance was reduced soon after by the building of the faster railways, the canal tells the story of agrarian and industrial development and is part of the significance of the towns along its route.

The canal criss-crosses the valley of the River Barrow as far as Monasterevin and as such passes close to and, on several occasions, over the River Barrow and its tributaries. An important designation therefore is the River Barrow and River Nore Special Area of Conservation (SAC). What is clear from ecological surveys carried out for the riparian councils along the Barrow and the Barrow Line is the high quality of the environment in terms of its biodiversity, water quality and visual appeal and its sensitivity at certain times of year. While the canal has not been designated as a whole, parts of it have pNHA status and it is close to and interacts with the River Barrow and River Nore Special Area of Conservation under the EC Habitats Directive.



# THE PLACE



# 03 The Enabling Context

## 3.1 The Blueways Initiative

There are currently four Blueways in Ireland which meet the Blueway Brand requirement. These include:

- Lough Derg Blueway - 160 km of shoreline paddling trails from multiple trail heads
- Shannon Erne Blueway - 3 sections totalling just over 73 km and each broken down into smaller sections
- Royal Canal Blueway at Mullingar - 23 km
- Shannon Blueway, 4 sections currently open on North Shannon totalling 87 km including the Camlin River Loop)

Each of these water trails is linked to walking routes and cycle paths either alongside, linking to, or close to water. A further trail is being developed along the Lower Bann Navigation in Northern Ireland. Current Waterways Ireland Blueways are presented on the website [www.bluewaysireland.org](http://www.bluewaysireland.org) which provides detail of each trail section together with information about accommodation, activity services and attractions.

## 3.2 The Blueway Partners

The development of blueways has been achieved through a partnership between Waterways Ireland, Fáilte Ireland, Tourism Northern Ireland, Sport Ireland and Sport Northern Ireland. Local Authorities, Local Enterprise Offices and LEADER companies are also engaged in animating the routes, facilitating business development and service provision and in marketing the opportunities. The partners have decided that in order for a route to call itself a Blueway in Ireland it must meet certain criteria. These are set out in the Blueway partnership's publications below with routes being subject to accreditation.

- Blueway Management and Development Guide ([https://www.sportireland.ie/sites/default/files/2019-10/blueway-management-development-guide\\_0.pdf](https://www.sportireland.ie/sites/default/files/2019-10/blueway-management-development-guide_0.pdf))

■ Blueway Accreditation Criteria Checklist and recommended process for developing Blueways in Ireland. (<https://www.sportireland.ie/sites/default/files/media/document/2020-04/blueway-accreditation-criteria-checklist1.pdf>)

- Blueways Development Toolkit

Standards are also informed by:

- A guide to planning and developing Small Vessel Water Trails in Ireland (2013). Developed by Waterways Ireland and the Irish Sports Council / National Trails Office in conjunction with Irish Leisure Consultants (ILC)
- Blueway Soft Infrastructure Guidelines Discussion Document. Developed by ILC for the Irish Sports Council / National Trails Office
- Blueway / Water Trail Development Standards Ireland (2015). Developed by the Irish Sports Council / National Trails Office, Canoeing Ireland and Irish Underwater Council
- A Guide to Planning and Developing Recreational Trails in Ireland (2012). Developed by the Irish Sports Council / National Trails Office

## 3.3 The Barrow Blueway

Waterways Ireland owns and manages the Grand Canal Barrow Line, a 46 km long still water canal between Lowtown, a junction on the Grand Canal and the Barrow Navigation at Athy Co. Kildare. Most of the route is within County Kildare, with a section of towpath and canal in County Laois. Waterways Ireland is currently developing the infrastructure for the Blueway by resurfacing the existing towpath to create a 2.5m wide, traffic-free, multi-use route. Kildare and Laois County Councils are providing pedestrian crossings where the route crosses roads and a number of lowered jetties are being put in place to enable easy access and egress for paddlesports.

The programme of works to create the 46 km

Blueway is being funded through a successful application by Waterways Ireland, Kildare County Council and Laois County Council to the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund for €6.8 million. The project is being led through a partnership approach which also includes the private, community and voluntary sectors thereby ensuring that it will be developed, promoted and maintained for the benefit of the region as a whole.

The concept for the Barrow Blueway was initially developed as a 115 km route from Lowtown to St Mullins in County Carlow. The SAC designation along the River Barrow however meant that planning permission for that part of the route was not granted. The remainder of the route is available for walkers as a grassy surface and will continue to be available as a National Waymarked Way, the Barrow Way.

The development of the Grand Canal Greenway from Celbridge is also moving forward and will end for the time being at Robertstown, Co. Kildare, close to the planned end of the Barrow Blueway at Lowtown. It is likely that more experienced cyclists will use both facilities – one in conjunction with the other – and may rise to the challenge of the longer cycle route.

### 3.4 The Ambition for the Blueway

This initiative is designed as an opportunity to promote well-being through opportunities for walking, cycling and enjoying the water on paddle-powered craft. A small number of barges and cabin cruisers currently use the waterway. Motorised craft may come in greater numbers as a result of the additional services provided for Blueway users as the waterway is linked to the Shannon via the Grand Canal and to St. Mullins and New Ross via the Barrow. Apart from increasing people's well-being, a greater level of use of the waterway and its towpath by visitors to the area is intended to improve the local economy and to support local services.

#### Using the Blueway

The feasibility of the Blueway as a route for different types of user has been established prior to the commissioning of this report as follows:

#### Using the Towpath

The walking route along the towpath has been in place for many years and is promoted by Sport Ireland as a National Waymarked Way. Signage for the route is in place and a monitoring system was installed by the National Trails Office in Sport Ireland. The route is easy due to its level nature.

The current surface of the former towpath varies from grass to tarmac with the majority of the route not having a sealed surface. At present whilst both walkers and cyclists use the route, the surface is most suitable for well-shod walkers or people on mountain bikes. In order to accommodate walkers and cyclists it is proposed to provide a surface suitable for cycling along the route. This is a major undertaking which is being put in place in stages by Waterways Ireland over a two-year period with completion anticipated by the end of 2022.

#### Using the Canal

The feasibility of the Barrow Line route for paddlesports was examined by Canoeing Ireland for the Blueway Steering Group and a detailed report prepared based on fieldwork by the authors. The report concluded that this still water canal is deemed suitable for people with no prior experience. Some of the distances between service and access points are considered challenging for beginners and there are some places where it would be difficult for someone accidentally capsizing or entering the water to climb out. The report recommends providing lower jetties at some locations at the right height for paddlesports users. Nine sets of lower jetties are being installed by Waterways Ireland as part of the ongoing work on the Blueway infrastructure. The main purpose of the jetties is to allow paddlers to exit the water, carry their craft around locks and re-enter the water on the other side. Locations where this is required include;

- Lock 19 (old Barrow Line)
- Lock 20
- Lock 21
- Lock 22
- Lock 23
- Lock 24
- Lock 25
- Under the M7 motorway bridge
- Lock 26

The paddling feasibility study recommends dividing the trail into five sections, accessed via 6 trailheads or access and service points at:

- Lowtown
- Lock 22 Glenaree Bridge
- Rathangan
- Monasterevin
- Vicarstown
- Athy (Lock 27)

### 3.5 Service provision on the Blueway

The proposed trailheads coincide with the main settlements and their services with the exception of at Lock 22. The feasibility study recommends that toilets and showers should be available at each of the trailheads and suggests that existing facilities such as the railway station at Monasterevin and the shop and garage close to the canal at Rathangan, might be adapted. The feasibility study notes the lack of services for visitors along the way. Canoeing Ireland points to the importance of providing services if the route is to be developed.

At least two canoe outfitting companies 'Go with the Flow' and 'Paddle your Own Canoe' already use the route in providing self-guided holidays for their guests.

**Go with the Flow** – River Adventures is a family run, adventure activity business established in 1996 by Charlie Horan. Based in Kilkenny, it offers affordable, guided canoe trails, canoe hire and canoe holidays on the River Barrow. No prior experience is required and 'adventures' are available for complete beginners of all ages and abilities. The company also sells canoes and kayaks. A typical holiday would involve facilitating an arrival by train to Monasterevin from Dublin and the provision of canoe and camping equipment for a journey via the Grand Canal Barrow Line and the Barrow Navigation to St Mullins or Graiguenamanagh over 5 days.

**Paddle Your Own Canoe** offers the opportunity to rent a canoe and camping gear and organises multi-day trips. It offers trails between Monasterevin and New Ross and a variety of packages. Customers are expected to transport themselves to the starting point beside the river, where they are met and given a brief introduction followed by a demonstration and safety talk and a practice session in an area of calm, sheltered, flat water. All canoeing gear is supplied and camping needs can be supplied if customers don't have your own tent etc.

The feasibility of the route for paddleboarding has been tested through practical activity from the commercial operator **Shannon SUP** which has worked with beginners on the waterway. Existing activity hubs at **Athy** and **Vicarstown** also offer opportunities for paddlesports including paddleboarding for local people. **The Blueway Kayak Club** at Monasterevin

provides opportunities to try activities and gain leadership qualifications. Paddleboarding is facilitated by the provision of lower jetties suitable for access and egress by kayaks, with a good example of this being at Vicarstown.

**A Rowing and Kayaking Club** operates in Athy and offers a range of opportunities to try canoeing on the canal and river. The club works with Canoeing Ireland to develop leaders for this community-based activity. There is a vibrant life on the water in Athy and the club supports the Tri- Athy triathlon event by providing safety cover, and it has hosted a series of canoe polo events in the canal harbour. The **Kildare Sports Partnership** has supported the development of the club and its leaders and has recently taken forward a feasibility study for the Shackleton Outdoor Education Centre at Athy on the Dominican lands between canal and river.

At Vicarstown the **Laois Sports Partnership** has assisted the development of the Stradbally, Timahoe and Vicarstown Wellness Hub which has an activity centre on the canal. This offers opportunities for canoeing, kayaking and paddleboarding for local people. Monasterevin, Athy and Vicarstown have received funding through Sport Ireland from the Dormant Accounts fund to assist local people to have more active lifestyles and to develop volunteer leaders to support this.



# 04 Building Blocks of a Successful Blueway

## 4.1 Preamble

Blueways in Ireland are required to conform to a set of guidelines set out in a series of documents with an overview summary document and a full-length guidance document published by the Blueways Consortium of Fáilte Ireland, Tourism NI, Waterways Ireland, Sport Ireland and Sport NI. Documentation can be viewed on [https://www.sportireland.ie/sites/default/files/2019-10/blueway-management-development-guide\\_0.pdf](https://www.sportireland.ie/sites/default/files/2019-10/blueway-management-development-guide_0.pdf)



Progress towards accreditation is in three development phases:

1. Initial planning and development phase
2. Development stage, and
3. Blueway Launch, Management and continued Development.

Progress is assessed at each stage by an independent inspector appointed by the consortium. This role is currently fulfilled by Humphrey Murphy of Irish Leisure Consultants. The Barrow Blueway achieved access to the second stage during the process of developing this report in March 2021.

## 4.2 Blueway Accreditation Criteria

Blueway accreditation criteria are organised into 6 main categories, dealing with:

1. The Experience
2. Technical
3. Access
4. Safety
5. Conservation and Environment
6. Sustainability

Blueways can either provide continuous A to B and water journeys of more than 10km length, in stages or can provide access to water for experiences lasting half a day or more but where the water itself cannot be used in a continuous way.

### The Experience

The Blueway experience should take account of the fact that preparing trail infrastructure is an important part of the development but that the key to its success is the kind of experience the participant receives from it. The trail should be appealing in the sense that it should also provide opportunities to engage with the landscape, culture and heritage of an area, highlighting those elements that contribute to a distinct sense of place. This report has audited the natural, cultural and built heritage of the Barrow Blueway route and this is available in Appendix xx for reference.

The trail needs to be designed in such a way that it is possible and comfortable to use for each activity, broken into appropriate sections, and that all services for arrival, accommodation, hire equipment, eating, learning skills to use the trail and guided activity experiences or journeys are in place. Information is needed for visitors in advance to allow for planning and preparation, and information and signage should be available to guide people to access points and trail services.

This report has been informed by the Canoeing Ireland Feasibility Study on the route and by fieldwork and consultation. Appendix xx shows distance tables and Arrival points or Trailheads suitable for the different types of user. One of the requirements for a trailhead (referred to as Arrival Points and Activity Points in this plan) is that facilities for changing and toilets should be available to the user.

## Technical Considerations

Blueway trails need to conform to trail standards set through Sport Ireland or Sport Northern Ireland in consultation with the Governing Bodies of the relevant sports. There are guidelines for walking, cycling, and shared use trails; and for small craft water trails (paddling kayaks, canoes and stand-up paddleboards (SUP) or rowing small craft. Trails that support sailing journeys or snorkel journeys are also included in the guidelines but are not relevant to the Barrow Blueway.

In addition, arrangements need to be made to ensure that the Blueway is designed in such a way as to facilitate multi-use and universal use, and is managed to mitigate against user conflict. Sustrans' 'one path' approach is worth consideration and can be accessed at <https://www.sustrans.org.uk/for-professionals/our-approach/one-path-initiative-developing-a-positive-culture-on-busy-paths/>

## Access

Blueways are required to have formal access agreement to both land and water for a minimum of 10 years. Since both towpath and water are in the ownership of Waterways Ireland this agreement has preceded the Blueway development. Public liability insurance needs to be put in place by the trail developer for the purposes for which it is to be used.

Commercial users of the Blueway are required to have a license to use the Blueway with their groups, should be able to demonstrate their competence and must have insurances in place. Ireland's Association for Adventure Tourism IAAT has recently negotiated access to a group insurance scheme on behalf of its members. [www.iaat.ie](http://www.iaat.ie) or @iaat.ie has detail of membership, insurance, representation and business support for adventure tourism providers.

## Safety

Blueway criteria require that experiences are designed for novices with few or no skills in adventure activities. It is important that users are not exposed to hidden dangers. Providing for adventure activities requires both the infrastructure provider and the users to be well informed about the risks they will take, since adventure activities have inherent risk, and should be aware of the care they need to take.

Activity operators can minimise risks for novices through providing appropriate experiences and guiding and supervising participants. Operators should ensure that they can demonstrate their competence to lead people in the Blueway environment. User organisations may apply for training and approval/ accreditation/recognition from governing bodies of the sports they intend to lead. A prerequisite is always personal competence in the activity, before seeking to lead others, as is a valid adult first aid certificate, preferable with a remote first aid element. Safeguarding training and screening of staff who work with children or vulnerable adults is recommended.

Links to National Governing Body accreditation schemes relevant to the Barrow Blueway include;

### Canoeing

#### Canoeing Ireland

<https://www.canoe.ie/become-an-instructor-or-coach/>



#### Mountaineering Ireland

[https://www.mountaineering.ie/TrainingAndSafety/\\_LeadershipTrainingAndAssessmentSchemes/\\_TrailWalkLeaderAward/default.aspx](https://www.mountaineering.ie/TrainingAndSafety/_LeadershipTrainingAndAssessmentSchemes/_TrailWalkLeaderAward/default.aspx)

### Cycling Ireland

#### Cycling Ireland

[http://www.cyclingireland.ie/page/coach-education/\\_mbla-scheme/mbla-awards](http://www.cyclingireland.ie/page/coach-education/_mbla-scheme/mbla-awards)



For those leading community health walks on a voluntary basis the **Irish Heart Foundation** provides training <https://irishheart.ie/your-health/our-health-programmes/healthy-communities/slainte/walking-leaders/>



Part of managing the Blueway is the identification of positive and negative control points along the Blueway. This has been assessed as part of this study and is included in Appendix xx

## Conservation and Environment

Blueways should be designed with a knowledge of sites and features with nature conservation designations, the habitats and species they are designated for and the activities to which they are sensitive. In the case of the Barrow Blueway the designated sites and their sensitivities are outlined in Appendix xxx Map of Designated Sites and Appendix xxx Audit of Natural Heritage. The Special Area of Conservation SAC (Nore and Barrow) interacts with the Blueway each time it crosses over or travels close to the river Barrow. The water supply for the Grand Canal Barrow Line emerges from springs in Pollardstown Fen which is also an SAC.

Blueways are intended to enhance, and enable people to understand and enjoy the natural environment they travel through. Canal towpaths are important biodiversity corridors with interesting flora and fauna both in and out of the water. Guided nature walks and information materials can help users to understand and protect sensitive flora and fauna. Old canal bridges are particularly important for bats and the water environment with its emergent vegetation supports a diversity of damselflies and dragonflies.

## Sustainability

In order to ensure the sustainability of the route, three main requirements must be in place to achieve Blueway accreditation:

1. A Blueway Management Group
2. A Blueway Management Plan
3. A formal process to monitor visitor feedback.

The Blueway Management Group is already in place, but requires the development of a formal document e.g. a memorandum and articles of understanding or other formal partnership agreement, which sets out as a minimum;

- Aims and Objectives
- Spirit of the Agreement i.e. collaboration
- Synopsis of Overall Activities
- Term, Termination and Review
- Specific Agreements – these may include:
  - Key Responsibilities of each party
  - Key Contacts / Representatives
  - Financial Obligations / Budgets
  - Branding
  - Intellectual Property

To ensure ongoing sustainability the group should be led by a local authority or state agency.

# 05 The Market Opportunity

## 5.1 Local Interest - Outdoor Recreation and Sport

Sport plays a variety of important roles in Ireland today. Participation in sport not only provides considerable physical benefits, but also enhances mental wellbeing. Social participation in sport provides a key community bond. Sports clubs are at the heart of communities throughout Ireland and play a critical role in bringing individuals together and forging community spirit. Three out of every five people in Ireland regularly participate in sport – either actively or socially. Ensuring that everyone has an opportunity to participate in sport and is encouraged to take this opportunity, is a key ambition for Government. Considerable investments are made by Sport Ireland, Local Authorities and Waterways Ireland in order to achieve this.

The **Irish Sports Monitor (ISM) 2019** identified that recreational walking is the most popular form of physical activity. 66% report that they regularly walk for recreation - the same proportion as measured in the 2017 survey. As such, approximately 2.5 million people walk regularly for recreation and gain from the various physical, mental and social benefits that it provides. More women than men walk regularly for recreation, with 45% of the population also walking for transport. In comparison just 10% of people in Ireland cycle for transport.

22% of people surveyed in the ISM report that they have a long-term illness, health problem or disability, and 16% overall report that they have an illness, health problem or disability that prevents them from taking part in sport or exercise. No difference exists by gender, however those who are older are more likely to report a disability with 36% of those aged 65 or older reporting this. Social participation in sport is lowest amongst people with a disability resulting in their being less likely to join a club. Volunteers are an important component in enabling sports participation, but 75% of volunteers reported having no training in provision for people with disabilities in their own club setting.

The ISM report identifies that a high proportion of those walking, running and cycling are reliant on **public space** and public facilities to do so. In a more recent report<sup>6</sup> the number of adults participating in sport and recreational walking in Ireland during Covid-19 restrictions are stated as having reached unprecedented levels. In 2020 the participation rate in sporting activity was 51%. Three sports dominated with approximately 710,000 participating in exercise, 680,000 in running and 510,000 in cycling. The proportion of adults described as sedentary in the National Sports Policy has declined to 11% compared to 22% during the same period in 2019.

### Recreation Markets in Ireland & the UK: Key Sources

- NUI Research on Ireland's Marine Tourism Sector 'A Survey of Marine and Coastal Overseas Tourism Activity in Ireland 2018'
- RYA, British Marine, Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA), Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI), British Canoeing (BC) and the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS) Annual Watersports Participation Survey UK 2019. This source refers to data from 2018, the most recently published data from this survey, and it surveys people living in the UK, including their participation in activities whilst on holiday
- ORNI, Assessing the Economic Impact of Outdoor Recreation in Northern Ireland, 2019

<sup>6</sup> This report was carried out for Sport Ireland. The research was in five phases, beginning on 28th February 2020 with the latest phase covering 30th April to 15th May 2020. In total over 5,000 interviews took place during this period. IPSOS MORI

## 5.2 Visitor Interest - The Domestic Market

In 2019 people living in Ireland and taking a holiday in Ireland (domestic tourists) were estimated to have taken part in a number of activities relevant to the Blueway. Of these;



46% participated in **walking**



8% in **watersports**



5% in **cycling**, and



18% **heritage and interpretative centres.**

Overall in 2020 Fáilte Ireland research shows that domestic trips were mainly focussed on the outdoors, and that building itineraries to both help and encourage broader activities planning would be well received by those looking to book. Walking was dominant in terms of activities undertaken with both cycling and water activities increasing in popularity from 2019 to 2020.

In terms of consumer sentiment Fáilte Ireland has identified (Feb 2021) that some 87% of Irish people are considering a short break within the next 12 months in Ireland and 69% are considering a longer break.

Waterways Ireland commissioned research from Amárach in 2016 on business and user attitudes towards improving the surface of the towpath of the River Barrow and the Grand Canal Barrow Line. The research took place at 8 locations along the current route of the Barrow Way with the towns of Athy and Monasterevin being included. 409 surveys were recorded with the following results:

### Profile of respondents:

- Slightly more males than females
- 51% aged between 26 and 45 years
- Repeat visits were the norm with three out of five using the trail daily, weekly or more often
- 15% were on their first visit
- 86% were walking, compared to 7% who were cycling and 4% who were out running
- 15% were accompanied by their families, with and without buggies
- The majority of respondents had travelled from within 10km of the facility

### Views of users on the development of a well surfaced trail:

- Just under 80% of people felt that an improved surface as proposed for the Blueway would lead them to visit more often or take a longer walk or cycle
- People with children and older people were more likely to feel they would use it more often.
- Only 7% of people surveyed close to Athy or Monasterevin had a negative response to the idea of improving the towpath surface

### Views of businesses on the development of a well surfaced trail.

A telephone survey of 60 businesses included 5% from Monasterevin and 25% from Athy. 50% of businesses overall were from hotels, restaurants and bars or from tourism and leisure activity providers. Two thirds had an element of tourism provision in their businesses but for only 20% was this year-round business.

All businesses believed that there was scope to improve tourism in the Barrow and Barrow Line areas with the following suggestions:



When asked what, if at all, a Blueway might bring to the area the following responses were received:



Some businesses expressed concern that increasing numbers of cyclists would reduce the path's appeal to walkers and wanted to ensure that the path was usable by all.

### 5.3 Visitor Interest - The Overseas Holiday Market

In the UK there was an increase of 0.7 million in the number of people taking part in water sports activity of any kind from 2017-2018, with the increase primarily in family groups. The number of women and young people increased significantly from 2017-2018. Canoeing and kayaking were the

most popular type of boating activity, demonstrating a long-term growth trend of 4% increase year-on-year. The study found that 2.1 m people in the UK paddle at least once per year in canoes, kayaks or stand-up paddleboards. Boat ownership has not been increasing in the UK over the past five years, the exception being in respect of kayaks and paddleboards.

Fáilte Ireland's report on overseas holidaymakers to Ireland in 2019 identified hiking and cross-country walking as the main activity engaged in, with some 2.3 million taking part in this activity. Cycling was the second most frequent activity engaged in at 361,000 people.

12 A Guide to Planning and Developing Small Vessel Water Trails in Ireland 2013. Developed by Waterways Ireland and the Irish Sports Council / National Trails Office in conjunction with Irish Leisure Consultants (ILC)



Source: Key Tourism Facts - Fáilte Ireland estimates based on Survey of Overseas Travellers

Market research carried out in 2016 identified significant potential markets for a Blueway product.

	Britain 19.4M
	France 16.3M (particularly northern France)
	Germany 37M

To attract such potential visitors, the key requirements are a mix of land and water based activities along with a rich opportunity to experience Ireland's culture, music, history and hospitality, particularly in landscapes unique to Ireland and in sheltered waters. More recent research conducted by Fáilte Ireland into the Blueways Ireland Brand Proposition provides some further insights into the key segments for the blueway offer, highlighting how the different life-stages of prospective visitor present different opportunities as follows;

#### Unconstrained Adults Under 30

Good interest in Blueways experiences/activities, but as one of the many days out/activity/holiday options they have when Covid restrictions lift

Stronger opportunities among domestic cohorts than international

#### Younger Families

Certainly open to some aspects of the Blueway experience, but the logistics of taking small children on the water (safety, stress involved) results in more barriers to overcome for this group than others.

#### Older Family

Parents of older families (early teens in particular) see the Blueways as a great option for their family.

Lots to engage the kids as well as adults A great opportunity to get this age group off screens and doing something as a family

#### Unconstrained Adults 55+

Certain aspects of the Blueways experience seem particularly relevant for the more active of this age group (varied pace, mix of activities, exploration of the country)

Enthusiasm for the Blueways is very high among this cohort, the whole experience ticks a lot of their boxes

13 Greenways as a tourism resource: A study of user spending and value Richard Mantona,\* Stephen Hynes, Eoghan Clifford., NUI Galway, Galway, Ireland

14 Unlocking the Barrow – a cost benefit analysis URS and Countryside Consultancy 2012

15 Based on the British Waterways Demand Model adapted for Ireland by Judith A Annett Countryside Consultancy.

In addition to this, an appealing proposition must speak to the 'dabbler' market remembering that they are;

- enthusiastic, not highly accomplished
- seeking fun, not looking for something strenuous
- light hearted, not serious/focussed
- activities are an aspect of the holiday, not the whole focus – the social aspect needs to be dialled up too.

In summary this latest research has concluded that there is a lot of enthusiasm for active pursuits at the minute, with hiking and paddle boarding particularly on trend for our potential visitors.

#### Market Segments Based on Level of Interest<sup>11</sup>

**Samplers:** these are undertaking the outdoor activity for the first time, or do so on a very occasional basis

**Learners:** those who are learning skills involved in outdoor activity, or wishing to improve

**Dabblers:** those who occasionally participate in the outdoor activity as part of their leisure time or holiday. Holidays present an opportunity for them to participate.

**Enthusiasts:** those who regularly take part in the outdoor activity and will have expert skill and knowledge.

#### 5.4 Blueway Users - Developing the Experiences they want

The nature of potential Blueway users should drive the type of services provided. It is critically important that providers have a correct expectation, so we have segmented users based on available market research and our own knowledge and expertise.

The main differences in the type of experience people are seeking will depend on a number of factors such as whether;

- they live close by, in the rest of Ireland or out of state
- they already have skills or are beginners at journeying skills such as walking, paddle boarding, kayaking or boat cruising
- they already have their own equipment or if they need to be outfitted for the journey or experience

- their level of confidence, for example how much help they need to get started and along the way
- their appetite for planning their own experiences and the extent to which they would like a streamlined package
- how often they would like to use the Blueway - Is it a one-off visit or likely to be a regular feature of their lives
- their level of fitness and willingness to travel various distances.
- their social expectation for the experience, will they travel with like-minded people
- the extent to which they are seeking an Irish cultural experience.
- their mobility
- the extent to which the Blueway and Blueway experience is the driving factor in bringing them to the area, or whether it is incidental to their visit.
- their age

These factors should drive the way experiences are planned and marketed.

The Sport Ireland/Waterways Ireland report<sup>12</sup> on the development of small vessel water trails considers some specific types of user, mainly from the local and domestic market, including;

- **Dependent or supervised groups** which are led by an instructors or guide as a mechanism for personal development, outdoor learning and 'wilderness' encounters delivered by commercial or not-for-profit organisations. These groups are typically at introductory level and will take part in a session or 2-3 hours starting and finishing in the same place or undertaking a short journey. They are also predominantly formed of school age participants though there is a growing family market. This category included Gaisce and Duke of Edinburgh Award Groups where journeys are planned with experienced staff and remotely supervised. Camping is not common for any but the expedition groups likely to take on the whole trail.
- **Peer Groups:** e.g. small groups of friends to travel along canals and rivers on bike, paddleboard, kayak or canoe as part of a social, fun or to have an experience of the 'wild'. As such means of transport have become easier to source, including hire opportunities this type of experience has become more popular, particularly on still water. This group may wish to use camp sites.

- **Individuals** may also use the Blueway for regular training, for journeys and if provided, for competition and challenge events. In general individuals will have equipment and skills and will make their own way and seek information from published information.
- an **additional type** of existing Barrow Line and Barrow user takes on the challenge independently but hires an 'outfit' of kayak, personal flotation device and camping gear from professional outfitters such as the Kilkenny based 'Go with the Flow' or 'Paddle your own Canoe' companies.

In relation to watercraft, the report identifies that the type of craft the user chooses will tend to dictate the type of use made and the type of services required.

### Kayaks and Canoes

**Short (play boat) kayaks, sit-on-top and angling kayaks** are easily accessible, robust and are used by outdoor centres and youth groups to maximise appeal, promote inclusivity, and increase durability. They are most often used for sessions from and back to an activity hub. These craft are buoyant, robust and can easily be stored close to a waterway or transported on a trailer.

**Canadian type canoes** are appealing for journeys on still water canals and easy moving water, have good stability and can carry a lot of camping gear, food and water. They can be adapted for a wide range of people and provide an easier sitting or kneeling position. People with their own canoes may bring them to the waterway and require few services. Out of state visitors are more likely to hire everything they need- (often referred to as outfitting) or book a package of activity, transport and accommodation.

**Touring kayaks and sea kayaks** travel easily and swiftly in a straight line and may have watertight storage for camping and cooking equipment. For people wanting to undertake the whole of the Blueway a stable touring kayak will be the most efficient craft. They can be double or single. Suitable examples appropriate for beginners are;

- The Dagger Stratos (14'long)
  - The Islander Kayaks Jive (9' long)
  - Islander Kayaks Salsa (double touring kayak)
- All have watertight storage hatches behind the seat for carrying day or camping equipment.

### Touring Paddleboards

Touring paddleboards are generally longer than general boards to allow speed and tracking through

the water. Beginners are better on a wider board for stability. Inflatable boards and solid boards are available.

### 5.5 The Economic Benefits of the Blueway

There has been some analysis of the economic impact of Greenways in Ireland and elsewhere based on surveys of expenditure and on methodologies such as the Travel Cost Method. A study published in 2016<sup>13</sup> identified average expenditure per person (cyclist) across international studies of greenway visitor expenditure. This study found an average spend per day of €47, with accommodation and food & drink accounting for the largest proportions. The average stay was found to be 1.56 nights and the average group size 2.82. 27% of this expenditure was on food and drink, almost 38 % on accommodation, 4.5% on bike rental, 7.3% on retail. 8.5% on public transport and 11% on fuel (not counting filling the tank at home).

A study of visitor expenditure in 2012, within a cost benefit analysis of potential changes to the infrastructure of the Barrow Navigation<sup>14</sup>, estimated a total annual expenditure by users of the navigation of €3.5 million per annum broken down as follows;<sup>15</sup>

Type of activity	Expenditure
Moored Boats	€1,214,808
Visiting Boats	€ 1 37,779
Hire Boats	€415,650
Trip Boats	-
Day Boats	-
Canoeing	€81,520
Angling (day only)	€ 643,500
Cycling	€286,553
Informal Visits/Walkers	€751,563
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>€3,531,372</b>

There are no specific counts of users of the Barrow Way by any activity group so it is only possible to arrive at an estimate of future use based on the performance of other Greenways and Blueways, and canoe trails. The Barrow Blueway will have some advantages over more remote facilities such as;

- Proximity to centres of population, accessible from Dublin in less than an hour
- Served by public transport

- Level easy route
- Attractive towns and villages along the way at achievable distances averaging 10 km
- It may also benefit from tourism interest in the tourist attractions of Counties Kildare and Laois.

User figures that are available for start-up greenways amount to;

- Great Western Greenway: 80,000 users first year
- Great Southern Greenway: 250,000 users first year

If there is sufficient publicity for the Blueway and if the consumer understands that a Blueway is essentially a Greenway with additional facilities for watersports, there may be a high usage, particularly if linked with public transport opportunities to make it a one-way route. Our estimate of user expenditure for the first-year usage in 2022 or 2023 (the opening year) 40,000 additional users made up of

Type of user	No of additional visits	Spend per visit	Total additional annual
Cyclists	20,000	€ 50	1,000,000
Walkers and Runners	10,000	€ 28	280,000
Paddlers	5,000	€ 25	125,000

This is a modest assumption but takes into account that the route existed and was usable, albeit for a more specialist user prior to the development of a Blueway. Spending may be higher if international visitors are attracted to the facility and if there are strong associations made between the history of the canal and the development of the Guinness Brewery and the Whiskey distilleries and Maltings.

If the route is well marketed and consumers like it, this throughput and expenditure may double by year three but only if the required opportunities for expenditure are put in place with the capacity to service the route. The services required will need to include;

- accommodation and food aimed towards the user passing through
- packages of accommodation, equipment hire and return transport
- guiding services and information services and

- a set of animation events to draw attention to the facility. Examples might include:

- A Blueway 10k race, on foot and by kayak and paddleboard or a race series
- A Barrow Blueway Marathon of 26 miles traversing the whole of the Blueway.
- Blueway Fun Days
- Canal festivals

The development of further community sports activity hubs at Monasterevin, Rathangan and Robertstown with support from Local Sports Partnerships and Sport Ireland. A planned animation phase will assist in drawing attention to the route, whilst the development of user experiences will be an important part of realising the potential of the route.

# 06 Destination Response

## 6.1 What you told us

Interest in the development of the Barrow Blueway has no doubt been gathering momentum over recent months especially as the work on site inches its way towards completion. Long-time paddlers, active walkers and sports development workers are interested in improved infrastructure, signage – especially signage that can be viewed from the water to assist with wayfinding- and experiences. Community groups are concerned to ensure that the initiative will result in real community, social and economic benefit. The custodians of natural and cultural heritage advocate wise use and careful planning whilst relishing the prospect of interventions that will bring people, whether they be local or visiting, up close to the special places the trail passes through and to the stories that shed light on how they have developed over time as a result of the waterway. Business operators and would-be service providers see expanded business opportunities and are keen to know how best to proceed with their ideas. Many people expressed safety, visitor impact and user conflict issues from a number of different perspectives. Others talked about the importance of marketing the Blueway and, as providers, keeping in touch with one another and with the project promoters. Some just wanted to learn more, see what was going on, or find out how they could get involved.

### What You Told Us

'My second is a suggestion - help business and amenities to promote each other. Our business, the Museum, Athy Boat Tours and various accommodation providers have, informally and organically, been sending people to each other for some time. It works! Our business is a little novel, it's old, and it's known as a place to find about the history of Athy, about services on offer locally and so on. So taxi drivers, locals and other services send people to us, and we send them on. A booklet, a "Local to Local" directory of Blueway related businesses and amenities would be a good first step. Local knowledge, obtained from local sources, complements all the online information, and has the advantage of being personal communication, which tourists on the ground prefer and indeed crave'

## 6.2 Your Ideas

### Tell the Stories of the Waterway

- a museum of the history of the canal, its associations & connections?
- points of interest along the route - quirky anecdotes – appeal to children, break the monotony
- the story of agriculture – tillage - the produce - the maltings – the breweries – the Guinness barges –linking to Dublin
- the story of the flora & fauna
- the story of the barge men
- the links to the other stories of Kildare – the peatlands, the Curragh, the horses
- the stories will be what differentiates this experience from that of other greenways & blueways

### Pay Attention to Transport & Transfers

- parking – convenient to the Blueway
- rail connections are there – convenient, cohesive & coherent connectivity from these points of arrival is needed
- public transport – rural link

### Really Sell the Nature & Quality of the Experience

- branding – rural tranquillity is a key aspect of this blueway experience
- it has the potential to be the best of all the Blueways
- being on the water is a different type of experience – slow pace, close to nature
- participation in watersports is a key aspect of the experience
- opportunities are not limited to the blueway route – link in to other places, make connections

- Levittstown Mill – we want to be part of the story
  - we have a lot to offer
- this is a great first step in focusing minds, seeing how we best develop the experiences

#### Identify the Infrastructure We Are Going to Need

- accommodation – different types for different budgets, be creative
- Barrow Way Inns?
- shelter – at intervals
- water points

#### Strengthen Partnership Approaches to Development & Marketing

- there is a sense that the Blueway is really coming into focus now
- we need to join the dots – the attractions, the amenities, the activities – what's there/what's coming
- we need looped trails, interpretive journeys, intuitive wayfinding
- leave places for nature – biodiversity, peatlands, manage the access
- put packages together – do this creatively and collaboratively
- establish a providers' forum – so that we can find out and join in, letting each other know what we are doing
- is there a role for Blueway ambassadors?
- we need to link into the food network – food is a really important consideration

#### The Overall Initiative Needs to be Well Managed

- one organisation should take control of the quality standards
- is there a role for a rural recreation manager?

### 6.3 Our Vision

The vision for the Barrow Blueway seeks to reflect the distinctiveness of the area, the aspirations of its communities and the ambition of the partners.

*'Connecting communities from Robertstown to Athy, 'Experience the Barrow Blueway' will act as a catalyst to encourage, strengthen and integrate recreational, tourism and economic development initiatives along its 46km length. It will provide ample amenities to support both land and water based use, connect existing places and points of interest, amenities and features along the blueway corridor and, once in place, will enable others to develop, package and add their own Barrow Blueway experiences.'*

### 6.4 Our Mission

To develop a unique Blueway from Athy to Robertstown that provides great opportunities for all in the local community for self-powered land and water recreation and which helps the economies of Counties Laois and Kildare through providing compelling and sustainable experiences for visitors.

### 6.5 Guiding Principles

Partnership – work collaboratively to effect change  
Stewardship – Leave No Trace  
Sense of Place – be true to the essence and distinctiveness of this area  
Universal Access – provide opportunities for all to enjoy the experience  
Share The Space – accommodate the needs of different users

### 6.6 The Blueway Blueprint

Developing a successful blueway does not depend on the structure alone – the towpath and the waterway, although this combination of features can be an attractor to the area - but rather on the benefits local people and visitors derive from the experience.

For this reason, we have focussed on the experience each Blueway user might have in the area and the extent to which they have access to the basic services required for their activity and also to opportunities for a high quality and memorable experience.

In order for the user to be able to take advantage of the Blueway a number of enabling elements need to be in place.

- Pre-arrival information
- Sustainable transport links to the starting point
- Arrival points at key locations
- Basic service points at intermediate locations
- Activity points both on arrival and along the way
- Heritage interest points along and within easy reach of the route

## 6.7 The Key Elements

Ideal specifications for these elements would include;

### Pre Arrival

- Information about the Blueway, where it is and what it offers and its relevance to the user
- The preparation the user needs to undertake to make the most of the opportunities
- The opportunity to book a Blueway experience

### Arrival Point

- Public transport to the desired starting point
- Signage between railway or bus station/stop and beginning of the Blueway
- Opportunities for an overnight stay close to the start of the route
- Opportunities for a self-guided or a guided Blueway experience
- Ways to return the user to the starting point if required
- Opportunities to eat out and provision for a Blueway experience.
- The potential to buy activity supplies which will enhance the experience or enable a repair or replacement of a key piece of equipment

- Steam wash for new equipment being used on or in the waterway (biosecurity)
- Activity safety information and signage
- Blueway code of conduct
- Accessibility for a range of activity to provide a service
- High profile waterway or towpath event

### Activity Point

- Provision of hire (cycle, paddleboard, kayak or canoe) and outfitting (camping equipment)
- Provision of guided experiences on water
- Guided experiences on land (cycle, walk)
- Self-guided Blueway experiences
- Overnight accommodation with activity specific facilities and services<sup>1</sup> (B&B, guest house, inn, camping pods, formal campsite)
- Facilities Block – accessible toilets, showers, and changing
- Activity safety information and signage, biosecurity information
- Blueway code of conduct signage

### Basic Service Point

- Jetty or landing point suitable for paddlesport launch and disembark
- Potable water supply
- Toilet
- Café/pub/shop nearby

### Shelter point

- Basic shelter
- Potable water
- Composting toilet

### Heritage interest point

- Point of interest with visitor facilities
- Opportunities for a guided experience
- Relevant to the Barrow Blueway
- Jetty suitable for trip boat and paddlesports

# AT A GLANCE

## What **The Bueway Blueprint** is all about

	Making Plans	pre-arrival information- where, what, how, what else, what's bookable
	Getting Here	sustainable transport links - public transport
	Getting Started	arrival points - public transport, information, signage, accommodation, bike hire, ways to get back, a guided experience
	Taking the Plunge	activity points - equipment hire, outfitting, experience, overnight accommodation, facilities block
	Keeping Going	basic service points - jetty, water, toilet, refreshments
	Staying Dry	shelter points - basic shelter, water, toilet
	Digging Deeper	heritage engagement points - points of interest with visitor facilities, guided experiences, a heritage boat, boat trips

# 07 The Economic Opportunity

## 7.1 The Visitor Economy

Waterways can generate a number of economic benefits for destinations particularly in terms of tourism and leisure activity<sup>17</sup>. This activity generates an economic return through increased expenditure by visitors, which in turn leads to money being retained locally within the economy, supporting jobs in local businesses. The concept of the visitor economy recognises the importance of the wider set of individuals and organisations that are all key to the success of the destination. While the economic activity of visitors - in particular the revenues they generate - lies at the core of the concept of the visitor economy, its meaning is broader than this. For the blueway to work for visitors, it needs to work, first and foremost, for people locally. The existence of a cohort of service providers will be key to developing local interest in the blueway, building local confidence in participating in blueway activities – especially those on the water- and nurturing a community that is invested in, proud of and supports the blueway. Building this local capacity will not only generate and maintain a positive disposition locally to the blueway, but it will also provide a secure foundation on which to build a sustainable proposition for visitors, who won't necessarily be 'in the know' when it comes to finding out about where to go to have a great experience.

## 7.2 An Enabled Sector

What is important in all of this is building the capacity of the sector – those private businesses, community enterprises, activity venues – both existing and proposed - and public sector interests who are involved either directly or indirectly in developing blueway experiences – to recognise the opportunity presented and, working together, derive benefit for all through from the provision of supporting services and facilities. Timing is a key consideration in this regard. Blueway service providers, whether they are already involved in or are planning to provide nearby activity-friendly accommodation; water-based activities on the canal or hospitality services in nearby canalside towns

and villages, need to have the capacity and lead-in time to respond to change. Whether change comes in the form of a sudden increase in visitation as a result of the completion of the towpath works<sup>18</sup>; the development nearby of a new product or experience – such as the Athy Visitor Centre and Museum or the proposed new visitor experiences at Ballykelly, Ummeras and Robertstown; the investment in new activity hubs – such as the one being planned for Athy; or the provision of canalside infrastructure associated with the works currently on-site, planning for and anticipating the consequences of these changes is a key consideration for all involved in ensuring that this blueway initiative makes a positive difference to the local, and, in time, the regional economy.

Other elements that will contribute to ensuring the economic success of the blueway will include:

- Access to all of the things which we know attract visitors; the natural environment, the heritage and culture, the outdoor activities, leisure and cultural facilities, good food and engaging events; all the things which make a place special, distinctive and capable of engendering pride and interest as a place worth experiencing
- Supporting and well-designed infrastructure which will help to reinforce and shape the area's sense of place and make it an easy place to visit - the signs, the transport – including public transport- parking and orientation, interpretation, public space, and amenities
- Engaged service providers who will cater for the needs of visitors (and of residents); create economic and social activity and increase spending such as the hotels, self-catering, guest houses, B&Bs, Airbnbs; the bars, pubs and restaurants, cafes, museums, visitor centres as well as the activity providers – as mentioned earlier- who, in facilitating and promoting access to the blueway for a range of land and water-based activities, are in a key position to become ambassadors for its continued enjoyment and advocates for its enlightened stewardship.

17 Fitzpatrick Associates, Update on the Economic Value of Recreational Trails in Ireland, Irish Sports Council 2010

18 Scheduled for completion by the end of 2022

### 7.3 The Places we need to Focus on

In essence the Blueway represents the recreational use of the waterway itself in terms of the activity both on and off the water. More specifically the Blueway is best expressed through the supporting infrastructure and services that will facilitate access to the water as well as along the waterway. Launch sites, signage, storage facilities, service blocks, toilets, shelter and points of interest are all important considerations as identified within the Blueway Blueprint. The settlements themselves – the canal side towns and villages – have a key role to play in this regard. They must act as portals and nodes of supporting infrastructure, facilitate access, connect communities and provide information, services and supporting experiences. In order to accommodate multi-day journeys, a network of supporting infrastructure, anchored by the towns and villages, needs to be appropriately spaced along the waterway to accommodate the needs of users in terms of water access, day-use facilities, manageable yet interesting itineraries as well as opportunities to explore the wider cultural landscape.

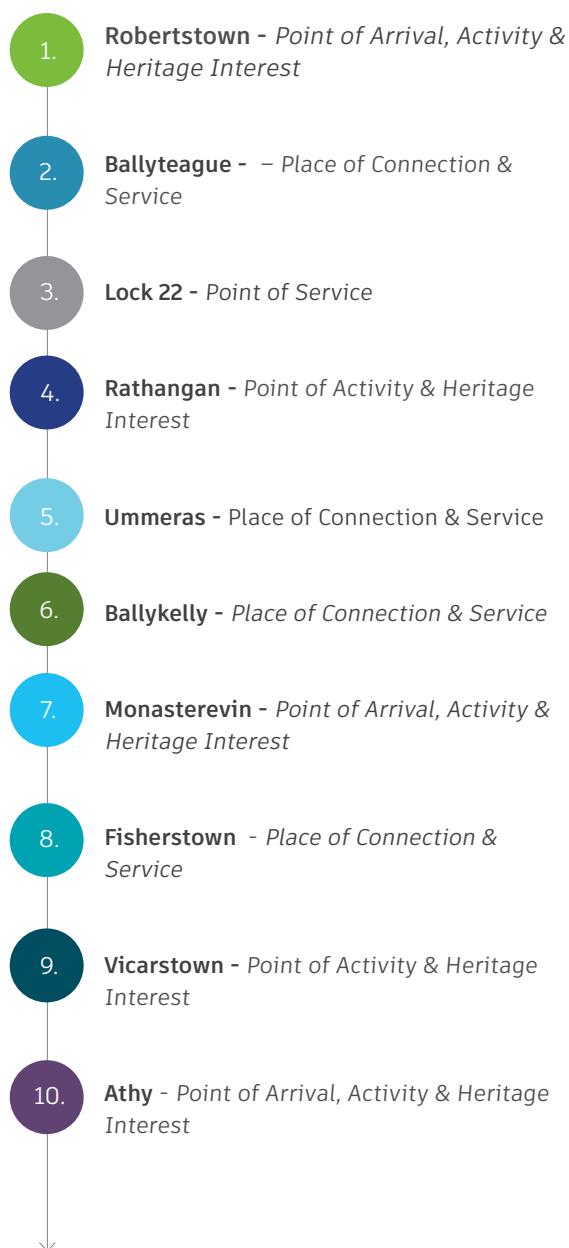


*'Some people prefer to do the Barrow Way as a number of out-and-back excursions, starting and finishing at the same place each day. But we find that the novelty of walking from town to town keeps the children motivated. There's also great freedom in not having a car.'*

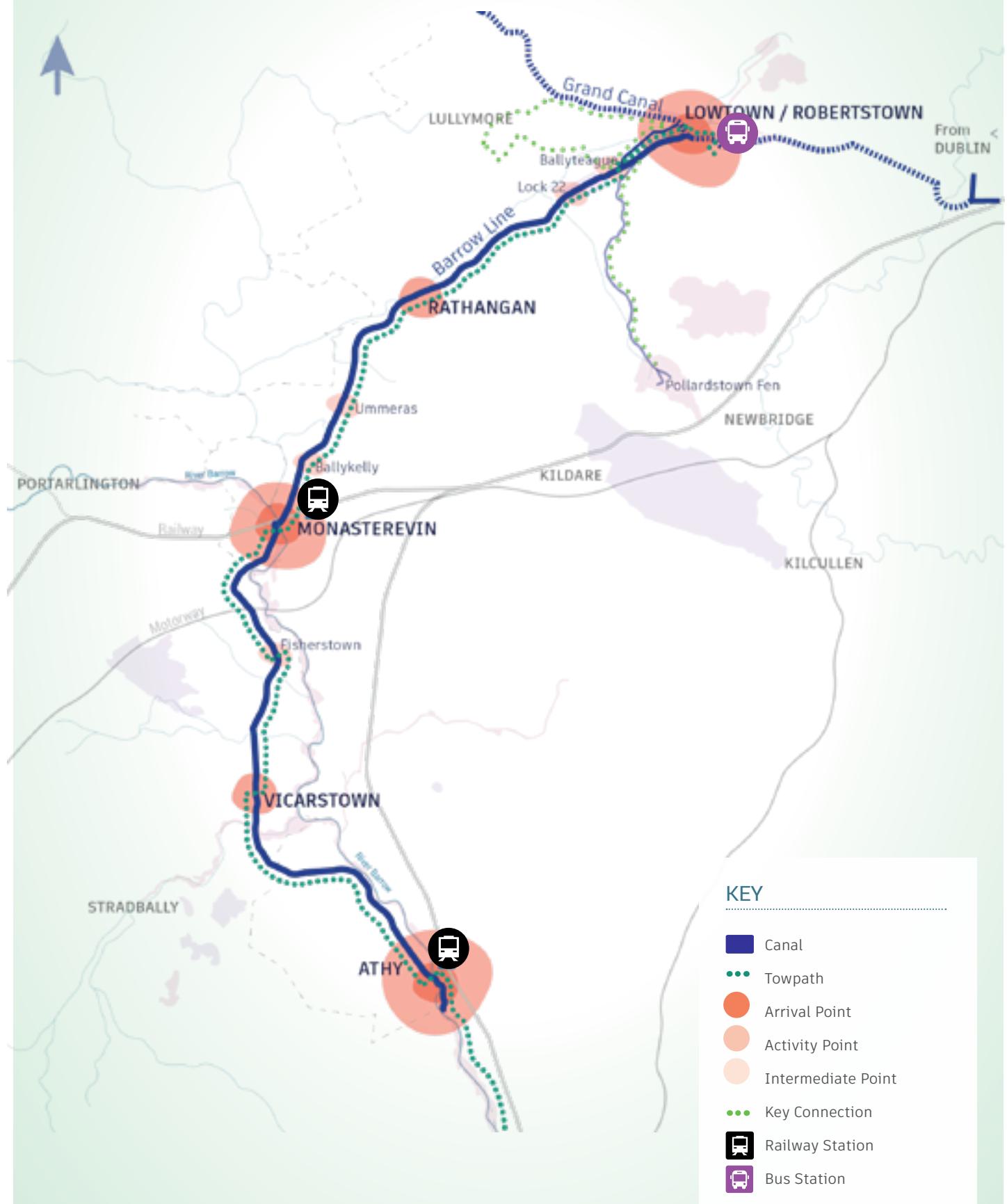
*'But, oh, it's so nice to turn a corner of the towpath and finally see a church spire or the flagpoles of berthed boats. We know then that within minutes we'll be lying on freshly made beds, boots off, taking a well- deserved rest.'*

In what different places along the canal might play in delivering on the ambition for the Barrow Blueway. At each location we identify;

- What's Here? – by mapping the key features and experience supporting elements
- What's Coming? – by providing a description of plans and projects which have relevance for the development of the Blueway and
- What Else We Could Do? – the opportunities, including the identification of opportunity sites, which could be developed to enhance the experience for users and visitors.



# BARROW BLUEWAY BLUEPRINT



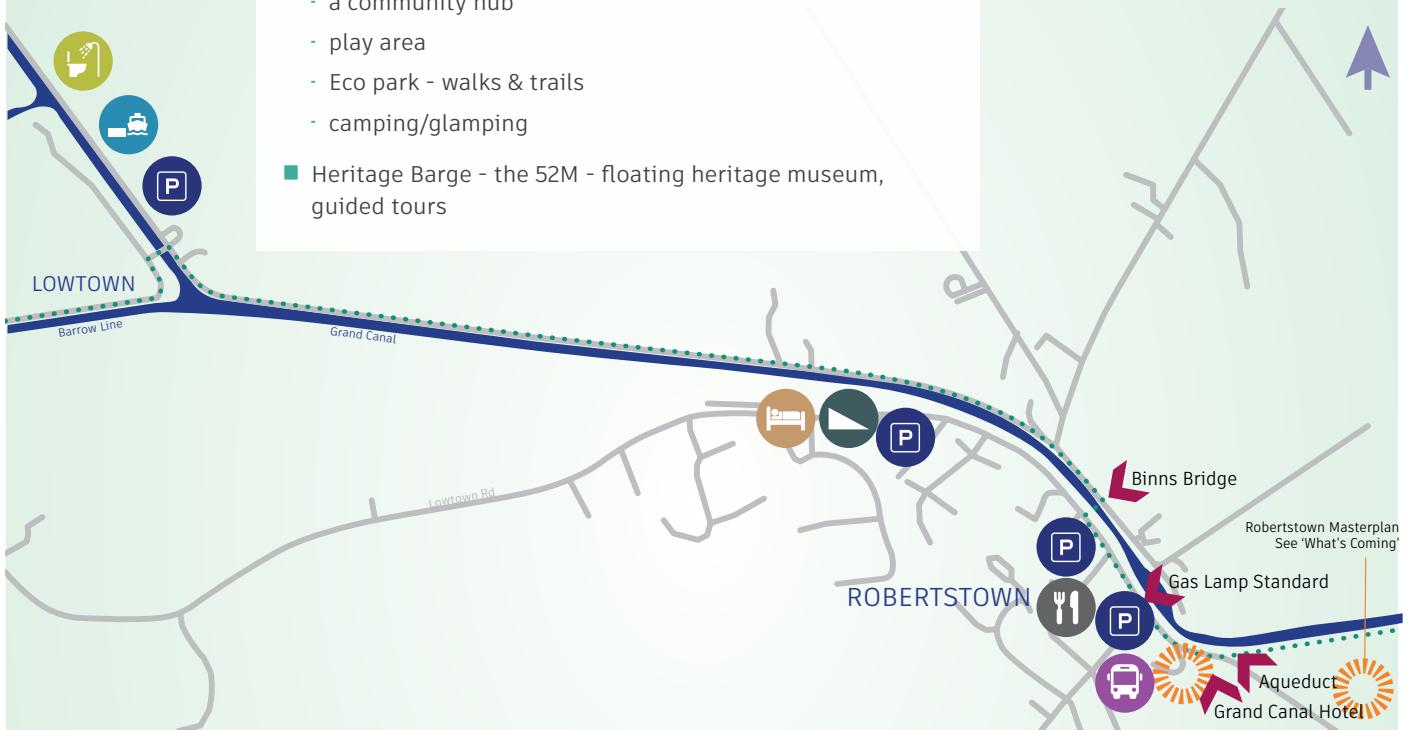
# ROBERTSTOWN

Place of Arrival, Activity & Heritage Interest



## What's Coming?

- Grand Canal Greenway - Celbridge to Robertstown under development
- Robertstown Masterplan - makes provision for
  - a community hub
  - play area
  - Eco park - walks & trails
  - camping/glamping
- Heritage Barge - the 52M - floating heritage museum, guided tours



## What Else We Could Do

### What's Here?

- Canal
- Towpath
- Opportunity Site
- Heritage Interest
- Jetty
- Slipway
- Food & Beverage
- Bus Stop
- Parking
- Service Facilities
- Accommodation

- focus on the Quayside to develop a sense of arrival & orientation onto the water
  - integrate the existing jetty & parking provision as part of this sense of arrival
  - integrate plans to re-purpose the Heritage Barge moored at this location as a community hub
- assess scope to re-purpose the Grand Canal Hotel & lands to the rear to provide
  - a highly visible point of welcome, information & booking for blueway services
  - accommodation
- assess scope to provide facilities - changing, showering, lockers, storage
- offer equipment hire - bike, paddleboard, kayak, canoe & provisioning and outfitting
- develop self-guided/guided blueway experiences
- explore opportunities to eat out / provide for evening dining
- augment the accommodation offer - provide for camping - pods, glamping
- tell Robertstown's story - the advent of the Grand Canal

# BALLYTEAGUE

## Place of Connection & service



### What's Coming?

- lowered jetties for paddlers at locks 19, 20 & 21
- Conservation Management Plan for the Curragh Plains
  - opportunity for the blueway to tie into the wider network of walking & cycling trails along the Milltown Branch of the Grand Canal to Pollardstown Fen & beyond



### What's Here?

- Canal
- Towpath
- Opportunity Site
- Heritage Interest
- Key Connection
- Jetty
- Lock
- Park

### What Else We Could Do

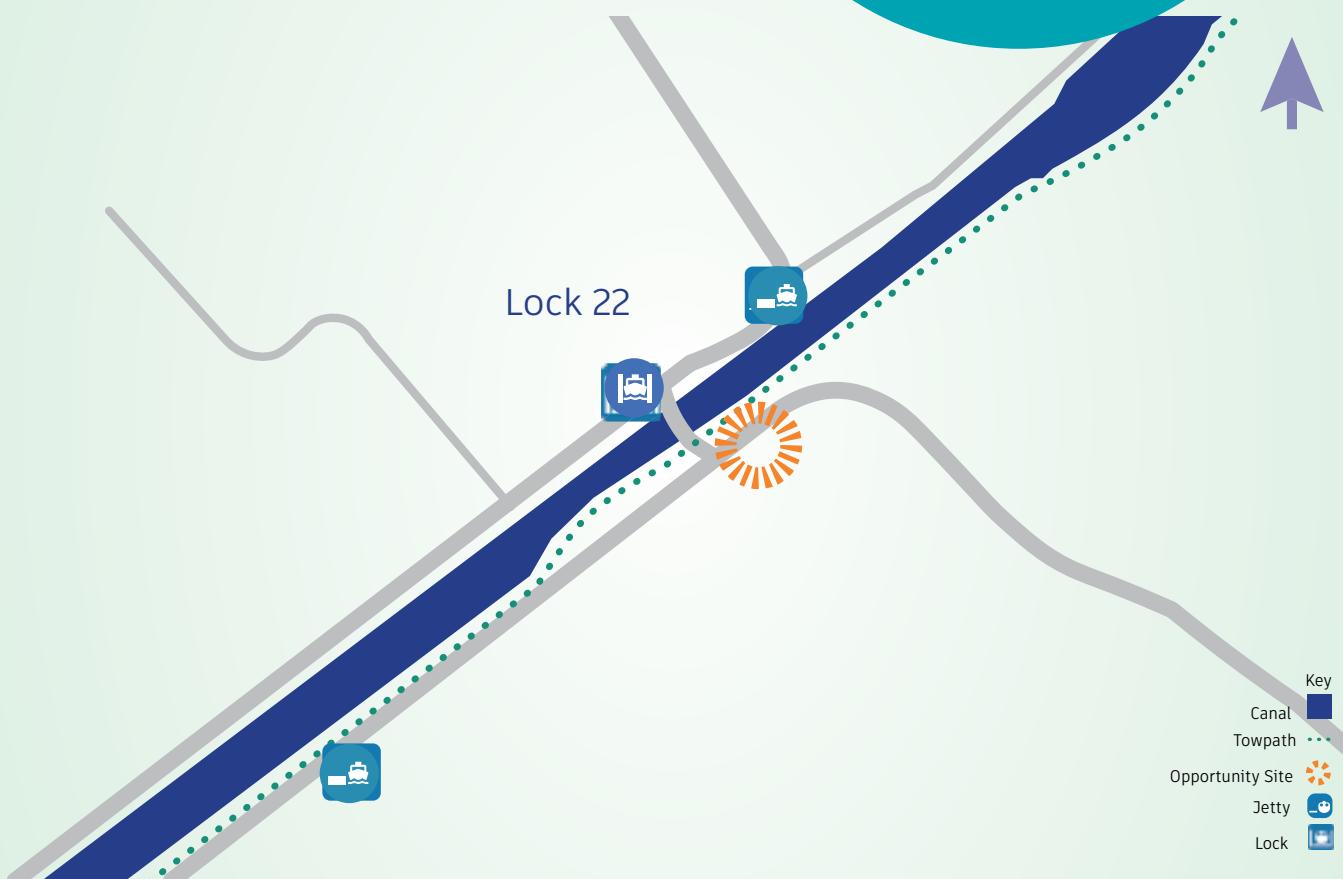
- reach out to Ballyteague GAA, located above the skew bridge on the New Barrow Line to explore their engagement with the blueway
- work with Lullymore Heritage & Discovery Park and the Bog of Allen Nature Centre to develop an off-road, looped trail for cycle and walking trips from the canal
- explore the feasibility of the derelict canalside building at lock 21 to provide
  - shelter/storage for waterway users who want to explore the wider area on foot
- interpret the significance of the heritage features at this location

# LOCK 22

## Point of Service

### What's Coming?

- lowered jetties for paddlers either side of lock 22



### What's Here?

- Canal
- Towpath
- Opportunity Site
- Jetty
- Lock

### What Else We Could Do

- assess the potential of the former lock keeper's house to provide overnight accommodation / blueway services

# RATHANGAN

## Point of Activity & Heritage Interest



### What's Coming?

- Laverty Lodge - Scout Den (7th Kildare/Rathangan Scout Group) - potential for blueway users
- Drummond's Mill (Rathangan Bridge) Masterplan - includes a re-purposing of two canalside heritage properties
- plus a re-instatement of the former canal harbour
- paddling equipment hire (Lock Keepers House)



### What's Here?

- Canal
- Towpath
- Opportunity Site
- Heritage Interest
- Jetty
- Water Point
- Food & Beverage
- Accommodation
- Park

### What Else We could do

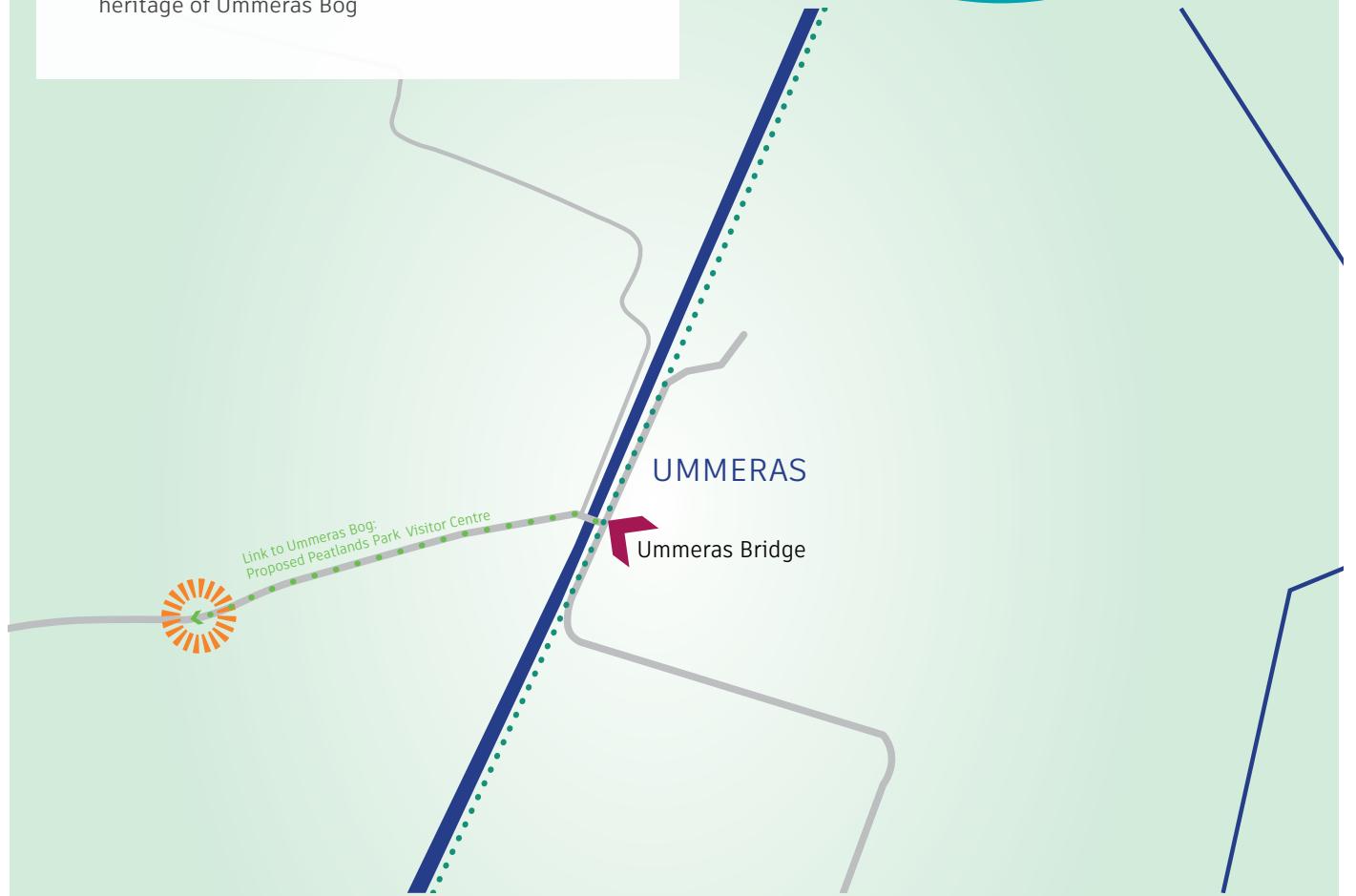
- develop an identifiable point of arrival for small boat users
- identify suitable canalside building for reuse as an activity hub
- provide a facilities block - accessible toilets, changing, showering, lockers & storage
- offer equipment hire - bike, paddleboard, kayak, canoe & provisioning and outfitting
- provide guided facilities on water/on land
- provide overnight accommodation with activity-specific facilities & services
- tell Rathangan's story - the ringfort, impressive late Georgian/Victorian architecture, mills & maltings

# UMMERAS

## Place of Connection & Service

### What's Coming?

- Rehabilitation Plan for Ummeras Bog as part of Bord na Móna's Bog Rehabilitation Scheme, announced in November 2020
- located between Monasterevin and Rathangan,
- Umeras Peatlands Park aims to provide a visitor experience based on the natural and cultural heritage of Ummeras Bog



### What's Here?

- Canal
- Towpath
- Opportunity Site
- Heritage Interest
- Key Connection

### What Else We could do

- work with the promoters of Umeras Peatlands Park to integrate the peatland experience into the blueway offer

# BALLYKELLY

Place of Connection & service



## What's Coming?

Ballykelly Distillery & Visitor Centre is located on a two-hectare site, north of Monasterevin and, currently being developed on site, it will include;

- reception areas, tasting rooms and an exhibition space
- a roof garden and viewing area onto the Mill buildings

## What's Here?

- Canal
- ... Towpath
- Opportunity Site
- └ Heritage Interest
- Jetty

## What Else We Could Do

- ensure easy access from/to the water at this location
- assess the scope to provide a boat trip to/from the new facility
- profile the heritage significance of this prominent early 19th century industrial complex. The mill is of considerable historical and social importance as the focal point for local agricultural activities and a centre of employment in the past.

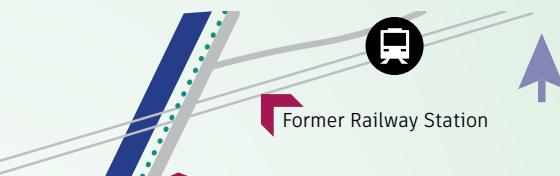
# MONASTEREVIN

## Place of Arrival, Activity & Heritage Interest



### What's Coming?

- Monasterevin Masterplan - includes proposals for Canal Harbour -
  - public realm upgrades
  - town centre connections
  - historic wharf area to be a centre of activity again
- Monasterevin Aqueduct -
  - accessibility
  - improvements



### What's Here?

- Canal
- Towpath
- Opportunity Site
- Heritage Interest
- Jetty
- Water Point
- Food & Beverage
- Accommodation
- Park



### What Else We Could Do

- create a focal point for activities at Canal Harbour/Bell Harbour
- formalise the launch point for paddlers at the approach to Canal Harbour & assess the scope for providing a similar launch site at Moore's Lock
- address the canalside approach from the north in terms of road improvements & traffic calming
- explore the scope to reuse the industrial buildings at Canal Harbour for the provision of blueway services - information, orientation, booking
- integrate these opportunities with access from the railway station and any plans for the conservation management of the former railway station
- provide a facilities block - accessible toilets, showers & changing
- provide equipment hire - bike, paddleboard, kayak, canoe
- provide guided experiences on water/land
- explore scope to provide a boat trip
- explore the scope to provide a canalside food & beverage opportunity
- provide activity-friendly overnight accommodation

# FISHERSTOWN

Place of Connection & service



## What's Coming?

- camping pods
- foraging trails



## What's Here?

- Canal
- ... Towpath
- Opportunity Site
- └ Heritage Interest
- Jetty
- Food & Beverage

## What Else We Could Do

- explore the potential for providing overnight accommodation - camping - nearby
- interpret the heritage features at this location
- develop nature trails

# VICARSTOWN

## Point of Activity & Heritage Interest

### What's Coming?

- heritage barge hire
- camping pods
- paddlesports leader development via SVT Activity Hub
- provision of additional public car parking spaces as part of the towpath works on site



### What's Here?

- Canal
- Towpath
- Opportunity Site
- Heritage Interest
- Jetty
- Moorings
- Boat Hire
- Lowered Jetty
- Food & Beverage
- Bike Hire
- Parking
- Mobile Supplier
- Activity Hub

### What Else We Could Do

- develop a facilities block -
  - accessible toilets, showers & changing
  - explore the potential of part of the canal
  - warehouse building to provide blueway services
  - interpret the heritage features at this location

# ATHY

## Point of Arrival, Activity & Heritage Interest



### What's Coming?

Dominican Lands Masterplan in preparation to include provision for social housing, Eco park and the new Shackleton Outdoor Education Centre which will provide for;

- boat & equipment storage
- showers/changing
- indoor multi-activity space
- coaching & guiding
- access to the canal above the Canal Lock



### What's Here?

- Canal
- ... Towpath
- Opportunity Site
- L Heritage Interest
- Jetty
- Moorings
- Boat Hire
- Food & Beverage
- Mobile Supplier
- P Parking
- Accommodation

### What Else We Could Do

- focus on Athy Canal Lock/William St South
- assess scope to repurpose the Canal Store/Malthouse/
- Former Canal Office buildings to provide
  - information/booking point
  - for blueway services
  - visible point for activity hire services
  - showers, toilets & changing
  - canalside activity-friendly accommodation
  - tell the story of the town's mills & malthouses

# 08 Gearing Up

## 8.1 Activating the Blueway

Preparing for operating a Blueway requires teamwork between all of the actors who are invested in its success, either as a means to promote the wellbeing of local people or as an attractor for people within Ireland or overseas. The approach being taken of proceeding via a formally constituted Blueways Development Group is recommended in the guidelines for developing Blueways and also reflects the need for ongoing, long-term coordination of effort between agencies on elements such as infrastructure development, planning considerations, traffic management, motivation and encouragement, sports and community development to provide animation; enterprise development and funding support.

## 8.2 Doing Business on the Blueway

The provision of adventure activities is a part of tourism industry in Ireland that can only take place against a strong background of voluntary and community effort. Guides, instructors and leaders in adventure activities are all developed through the efforts of National Governing Bodies of Sport whose members are normally volunteers. Standards and instructor client ratios are set by NGBs and the experience requirements for people who lead and oversee programmes are considerable, meaning that providers need a long period of personal experience in the activity they provide, or must employ someone who has that experience.

The Blueway Development process on the Barrow has recognised this in starting the activity development through Local Sports Partnerships, and providing personal competence, instructor and leader training through the sports hubs at Athy and Vicarstown, and through the Blueway Kayak Club at Monasterevin. The Scouts in Rathangan are also building a competence base in the community. It will be important to continue and strengthen this approach and support community members as they move through the competence, coaching, guiding and leadership levels. Similar approaches should be taken in Rathangan and Robertstown. The SVT activity hub at Vicarstown already works with blind and partially sighted people in the community as part of their intention to be inclusive

in their provision and have provided disabled access facilities and toilets at their site.

The Blueway experience as a whole should seek to be inclusive as it is Government and County Council policy to be so. In this the Development Group, communities and potential activity providers may be assisted through CARA disability inclusion training. <https://caracentre.ie/disability-inclusion-training/>. A formal audit of arrangements for people with disabilities to access Blueway experiences should be carried out prior to activity infrastructure being installed and may require some adaptation of existing structures and Blueway Arrival and Activity Points and access and egress from the water. It could be a requirement of achieving a license to operate on the Blueway that businesses should demonstrate how they will provide universal access to their services. Use and display of the CARA inclusion charter is recommended.



## 8.3 Providing Business Support

It will be important to enable businesses to work under license on the Blueway to provide appealing experiences for visitors. Key considerations will include;

- providing support for local businesses to obtain centre or staff recognition from Canoeing Ireland, Mountaineering Ireland and Cycling Ireland.
- liaising with Waterways Ireland to develop an agreed Code of Conduct for multiple use of waterways and towpath

- providing information on conditions for obtaining a licence for commercial use of the waterway
- promoting businesses that meet the standards required on the Blueways Ireland consumer site, the Into Kildare consumer site and Fáilte Ireland's promotional material
- encouraging the development of sustainable local activity businesses and organisations located both on and off the canal to support participation by local people and visitors

In terms of encouraging the provision of activity-friendly accommodation along the route and close by the Blueway, key considerations will include;

- developing a network of accommodation providers for Blueway visitors
- developing an accommodation forum

- providing awareness sessions to experience and accommodation providers on the requirements of activity participants
- facilitate accommodation and activity providers to visit and participate in a successful Blueway experience elsewhere

In terms of encouraging sustainable transport use to access and return from the Blueway;

- convene a Blueway transport forum to plan for Blueway experiences and end-to-end journeys



# 09 Getting the Word Out

## 9.1 The Barrow Blueway Story

Our concept planning and blueprint development included an inventory of existing amenities, features and experiences. As this work progressed, it became apparent that points of interest – the heritage places and associations - could be grouped or categorised into themes. Consequently, part of the spatial outworking of the blueprint involved the gathering or linking of these points of interest into particular themes. Our focus has been on acknowledging the places where these themes can be experienced rather than interpreting the themes themselves. As a result, we see the potential for a number of integrating themes as follows;

- **Towers, Steeples and Stones** – Athy's Medieval Origins
- **Mills, Maltings & Distilleries** – as well as kilns, mash houses, workshops, offices, grain stores and warehouses - impressive reminders of the area's industrial past at Athy, Rathangan, Monasterevin and Ballykelly
- **Locks, Gates & Chambers** - exploring the canal transport heritage of the Blueway
- **Lost Waterways, Lanes & Lace** – exploring Monasterevin's hidden history
- **Brown Gold & Birdsong** – slow travel through bogs and fens, transitioning from brown to green
- **The Final Straw** - exploring the vernacular architecture of thatched dwellings along the Blueway
- **Bluebells & Butterflies**, Damsel & Dragonflies, Bats & Buzzards – getting up close to the Blueway's wildflowers and wildlife

It will be important to add to the enjoyment of the waterway by developing and promoting appealing stories that can bring these themes to life. Consideration should also be given to making evident and restoring the historic Irish mile milestones remaining along the route as well as producing a 'new heritage' way of counting kilometres along the route in a way that will represent heritage in the future.

## 9.2 Creating an Identity

Creating a strong, recognisable identity for the blueway, starts with a logo and brand that represents what makes this proposition unique. A brand identity will help visitors to quickly recognise the Barrow Blueway, promote a positive image of the trail, and celebrate the things that make this blueway experience unique. A marketing campaign will help draw local people, neighbouring communities and visitors to the blueway. It needs to be noted that the full potential of the blueway may not be reached without an engaged local community that knows what it has to offer. The final accreditation of the route as a Blueway will bring with it permission to use the Blueway brand in signage and marketing materials for the route. It will be important that everyone contributing to the success of the Blueway is aware of the rules and opportunities around brand usage and whether or not they can use the style and the logos in respect of their own badging and promotions. As permission to use the Blueway signage will be issued relatively late in the process a discussion on the brand use id required at this stage to prevent people marketing with the Blueway logo before the route is fully ready and launched.

There is some potential for confusion between Blueways and Greenways where they meet, in this case at Robertstown/Lowtown, which can be easily avoided through providing information about the differences. A Barrow Blueway Development website (not aimed at consumers) would be useful in providing everyone with access to the full range of information.

## 9.3 Navigating the Blueway

Signs and markers are essential components of the blueway navigation system. Signage should include all signs associated with wayfinding, navigation and use information viewed from both land and water. In addition, interpretive signs, artworks and installations can provide information about the unique environmental, cultural and historical features associated with the blueway and its canalside communities. In some instances, information about nearby business amenities (e.g.,

where to eat, sleep and shop) can also be helpful. To maintain visual continuity throughout the course of the route, elements like font type and size, color, and other aesthetic features (e.g., logo) should be consistent.

The current Blueways Ireland signage guidelines are not as comprehensive as those agreed for the Greenways and there are a few useful approaches that could be adopted in the case of the Barrow Blueway for example the forward planning for Blueway Signage as illustrated below.

Merchandising using the Barrow Blueway Brand is a potential way to spread the message about the Blueway to other activity participants and its



Advisory Note 3 - Blueway  
Signage Guidelines



Greenway brand mark (for use within Ireland)



Greenways Ireland brand mark  
(for use internationally)

use in a series of Blueway events in the first year is recommended. Given the natural quality of the Blueway an opportunity for nature signage to be used within the brand exists. Adoption of the Greenway nature sites branding could be included in brand guidelines with an example below. In the case of the Barrow Blueway images of Bats and Dragonflies/Damselflies, otter and kingfisher would be relevant as well as a reference to Peatlands in the design.



Sign type per location - Map denoting correct situation of on-road and welcome sign types

## 9.4 Communicating and Celebrating

Communicating with regular updates about the Blueway is key to its continued success, while holding special events is a way to energise new and existing users of the trail.

**Key tools for communication will include;**

- Creating and maintaining a project website as suggested at 9.4



**Design Elements** - A variety of illustrations have been developed to reflect the wildlife of the Greenway. These can be used in various communication and design assets as design



- Participating in local events to present about the Blueway
- Establishing a relationship with media outlets to help advertise major events and initiatives
- Sending regular email updates to key agencies, local businesses, environmental groups and volunteers
- Updating a social media account with user photos and stories about the blueway
- Producing videos to post on websites and social media about the initiative
- Holding special events to celebrate the unique characteristics of the Blueway
- Publishing maps and guides to keep users informed and safe



# 10 Managing and Keeping Track

## 10.1 Blueway Management Plan

Access to the Blueway brand and its benefits requires the production and out rolling of a Blueway Management Plan. This is considered by the partners as good practice and guidance and reasons include:

- Blueway management that ensures the safety of users is considered and that trail standards are maintained at a consistent level
- Blueway management that relates directly to the liability of the Blueway Provider. Proper evidence of an implemented Management Plan will reduce the likelihood of the Blueway Provider being found at fault should a claim resulting from injury on the Blueway arise
- Funding – many funders will require evidence of a Management Plan that clearly shows how the Blueway Management Group will ensure that the trail(s) project will be managed for a specified period of time, normally the duration for which their Letter of Offer is valid. This provides evidence that there is a procedure in place to ensure that the Blueway is maintained at the standard and for the purpose for which the project was funded
- Partner buy-in – a Blueway Management Plan ensures that all project partners are clear about the commitment required to managing the project, once completed.

The Plan should identify the roles and responsibilities of each of the partners, and should:

- Clearly relate to the requirements of the members of the Blueway Management Group
- Be developed by individuals who have an understanding of Blueway management, provision and development within the context of the area
- Clearly reflect the development process for that Blueway to date

The Trail Management Plan should include (but is not limited to):

- Visitor Safety Management Policy and Plan

- Biosecurity Plan
- Blueway Product Inventory
- Maintenance Plan
- Risk Assessment (and a recommendation that Blueway businesses and community activity hubs also prepare risk assessments for each site they use)
- Marketing Plan
- A statement of arrangements for different types of Blueway Users (commercial, voluntary, individual and peer groups)

## 10.2 Visitor Safety Management Policy and Plan

The best practice in this area is outlined within Managing Visitor Safety in the Countryside – Principles and Practice. <http://vscg.org/publications/>. The Blueway Steering Group encourages the adoption of these risk management techniques. Developed by the Visitor Safety in the Countryside Group, the guiding principles and risk management techniques have been developed and implemented by all of its members. They have provided their worth in practice and have been recognised by enforcing authorities and courts, as the basis for sensible risk management.

The Blueway Development Group should consider the need for towpath rangers to monitor the condition and safety of the route on a regular basis and to monitor the behaviour of Blueway users and their compliance with guidance.

## 10.3 Stewardship

The Barrow Blueway is a long-term project taking place in a high-quality environment with good water quality and several stretches that feel remote and adventurous. Both towpath and water are biodiverse and this supports a fauna that adds to the potential enjoyment and likelihood of repeat visits and referrals. It will be important that the approach to management retains and enhances this quality and restores areas that may have been disturbed during the towpath resurfacing process.

Waterways Ireland and the statutory bodies have duties in respect of the areas with conservation designations on or close to the Blueway route. Their staff are already involved in the stewardship of the route in terms of its natural built and cultural heritage. It will be important though to engender a sense of stewardship of the nature of the route amongst users, providers and communities along the way.

Opportunities in this regard include:

- a nature and heritage subgroup to plan interpretation and the environmental content of user information
- a partnership with the National Biodiversity Data Centre in connection with gathering, accessing and recording data about species along the route.
- continued monitoring and removal of litter and waste dumping along the route and in the water.
- development of a Barrow Blueway Volunteer Group that can assist with monitoring and litter picks.
- the development of heritage guides for the Blueway in collaboration with heritage officers and the Shackleton Museum.





