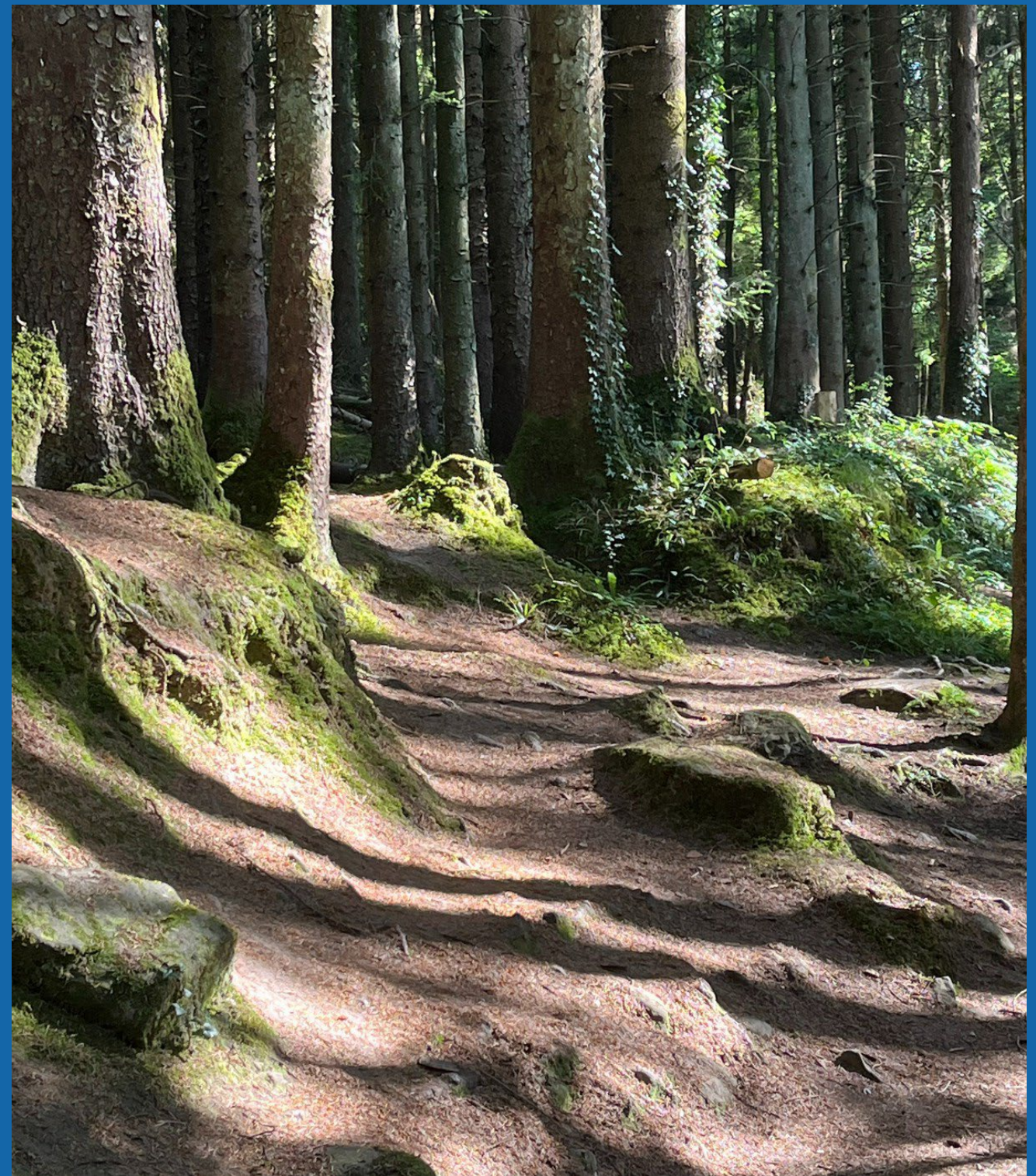


# OFFALY OUR OUTDOORS THE OUTDOOR RECREATION PLAN FOR COUNTY OFFALY

2025 - 2029





Offaly, a gem of intricate routes and networks, of paths formed on land and water.

Connecting past to present, and people to place.

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FOREWORD

"Offaly, Our Outdoors (2025 - 2029)" is the first County Outdoor Recreation Plan for Offaly. Developed by a project team of key stakeholder agencies, the plan envisages a county where residents and visitors are free to enjoy countless opportunities to engage in outdoor recreational activities on land, in the air and on water.

The project team recognises that considerable capital investment has been and is being made to develop outdoor recreation infrastructure in the county. It is also cognisant of the fact that the cost of maintenance is now a significant challenge to the custodians of the outdoor recreation facilities. To this end, the primary focus of an outdoor recreation plan for Offaly over the next five years will be:

- Ensuring that amenities which have been developed are maintained to a very high standard
- Working with local communities to prioritise “last mile connections” from rural areas into Offaly’s primary recreational routes and facilities, in addition to trail heads / launch points and promoting the provision of visitor services and facilities
- Committing to working collaboratively on the ongoing development and promotion of outdoor recreation amenities in the county through programmes such as the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme (ORIS) and others
- Ensuring the delivery of inter county and regional scale projects such as the Midlands Cycling Destination Offaly Feasibility Study, Bord na Móna and Fáilte Ireland’s Strategic Trail Network and Waterways Ireland 360
- Establishing both an outdoor recreation forum and an outdoor recreation committee to oversee delivery of this plan; and
- Securing funding to employ a dedicated Outdoor Recreation Officer to support the committee in its work

The plan to follow is presented in six sections: -

The introductory section cites the significant investment made in developing outdoor recreation infrastructure in Offaly. It highlights the county’s central location in Ireland and illustrates how Offaly can serve as a natural “Greenway roundabout” for walkers and cyclists accessing routes both in and out of the county.

The second section highlights the importance of outdoor recreation to numerous national and local policies. 11 national / international and seven local policies are referenced.

The third section provides an overview of the many opportunities for outdoor recreation in Offaly. This includes walking and mountaineering, cycling and mountain biking, playgrounds and parks, parachuting and air-based activities, horse riding, bird watching, and a range of water-based activities such as angling, open water swimming, stand up paddle boarding, canoeing, kayaking, rowing, boating and cruising. Offaly’s unique situation where 23% of its land is state owned is cited together with a range of current and future challenges and future developments.

The fourth section provides a stakeholder analysis of the organisations involved in preparing this plan as well as an outline of consultations undertaken.

The fifth section sets out 33 actions to be delivered in the lifetime of the plan under the six themes of Leadership, Environment, Awareness, Opportunities, Infrastructure and Access, and Expertise, while the sixth section references next steps to be taken.



### 1.1 THE TEAM

Ann Dillon	Director of Services	Offaly County Council
Andrew Murray	Director of Services	Offaly County Council
Orla Martin	Head of Enterprise	Offaly County Council
Roisin Lennon	CEO	Offaly Local Development Company
Caren Carruthers	Tourism Officer	Fáilte Ireland
Jasper Petersen	Recreation Manager	Coillte
Brian Tracey	Regional Manager	Waterways Ireland
Patrick Harkins	Regional Manager	Waterways Ireland
Lisa Kealey	Recreation Manager	Bord na Móna
Eammon Henry	Coordinator	Offaly Sports Partnership
Peter Maher	Member	Slieve Bloom Walking Group

### 1.2 INTRODUCTION

"Offaly, Our Outdoors" 2025 - 2029 outlines a comprehensive plan to sustainably develop and manage outdoor recreation in the county. The priorities for action have been identified through a review of relevant policy and programmes in tandem with consultation with key stakeholders involved in the planning, development and operation of outdoor recreation in Offaly.

The plan will build on the significant work already underway in Offaly, particularly in terms of the development of outdoor recreational infrastructure; and will seek to balance the multiple and competing demands being placed on outdoor recreation. These demands include being a driver of tourism growth; a catalyst for employment and enterprise; and a driver for enhanced quality of life, something that will support improved health and wellbeing outcomes.

This plan will seek to develop a sustainable and balanced roadmap for the management of the environment that we recreate in. The strategic priorities for Offaly include: -

- protecting our natural assets
- enhancing connectivity of outdoor recreation infrastructure to our towns and villages
- developing collective actions in terms of the ongoing management and maintenance of outdoor recreation offerings across the county
- promoting health and wellbeing
- fostering community engagement; and
- driving economic growth through tourism

The Offaly Outdoor Recreation Committee (OORC) is committed to the implementation of the actions outlined in this plan, with the development of a Terms of Reference for the Outdoor Recreation Committee; as well as the recruitment of dedicated staff and the establishment of an Offaly Stakeholder Forum.

The actions outlined within this plan reflect a commitment from the OORC to integrate national guidelines and best practice in relation to planning, managing and maintaining outdoor recreation in the County. In addition the plan reflects a commitment to increase the knowledge, skills and expertise of those delivering outdoor recreation projects at both local and national level.





### 1.3 OUR PLACE

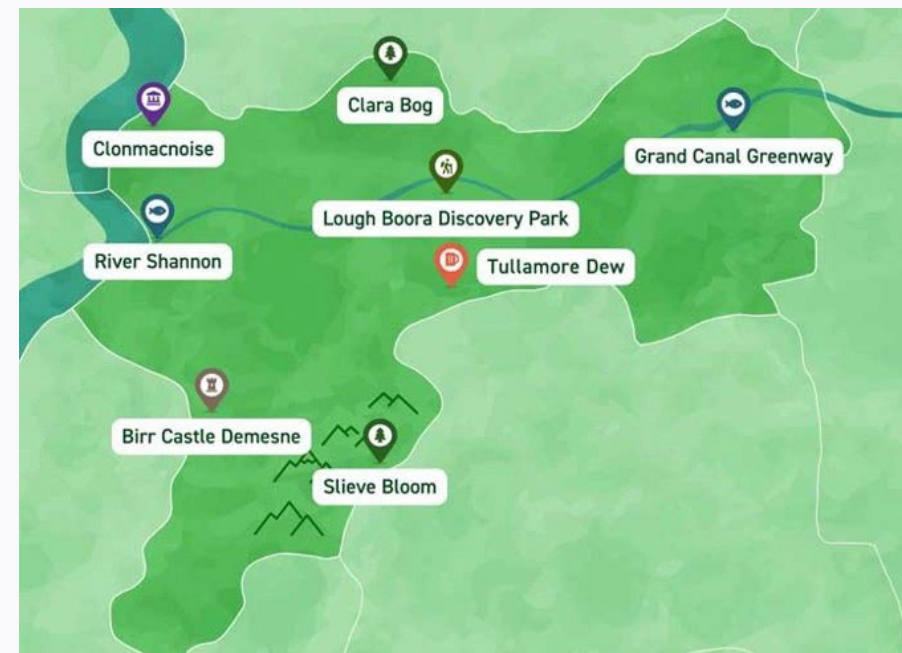
Offaly is centrally located in Ireland's midlands. Approximately 199,981 hectares in size, Offaly has a rich tapestry of landscapes; from the uplands of the Slieve Bloom Mountains to the peatlands (a mix of state managed Bord na Mona and Coillte owned, with some also in private ownership) that comprises one fifth of the county's landmass.

Offaly has an extensive system of Eskers in the north west and centre of the county with possibly the best examples of esker complexes in Ireland at: -

- Knockbarron Eco Walk, at the foot of the Slieve Blooms; and
- the Eiscir Riada, running from Shannonbridge via Clonmacnoise, Clara, Durrow and onwards to the east of the county, connecting to Westmeath in the north and Birr in the south.

The River Shannon and Callows, the River Brosna and the Grand Canal traverse the county contributing significantly to the diverse range of natural heritage and habitats. Offaly also boasts significant built and architectural heritage including the monastic sites in Clonmacnoise, Durrow and Croghan Hill as well as the castles at Birr, Kinnitty and Tullamore.

Offaly's natural and ecological resources have shaped the county's identity, culture, economic and social development. In the most recent past this included the peatland communities developed as a result of industrialised peat harvesting. Now as the county transitions to climate neutrality, the sustainable management and development of these natural assets offers the potential for Offaly to redefine itself, both economically and socially. The ask is that Offaly becomes a sustainable place to live; a place where communities thrive and visitors are welcomed to an outdoors that balances environmental responsibility, economic vitality and a high quality of life.



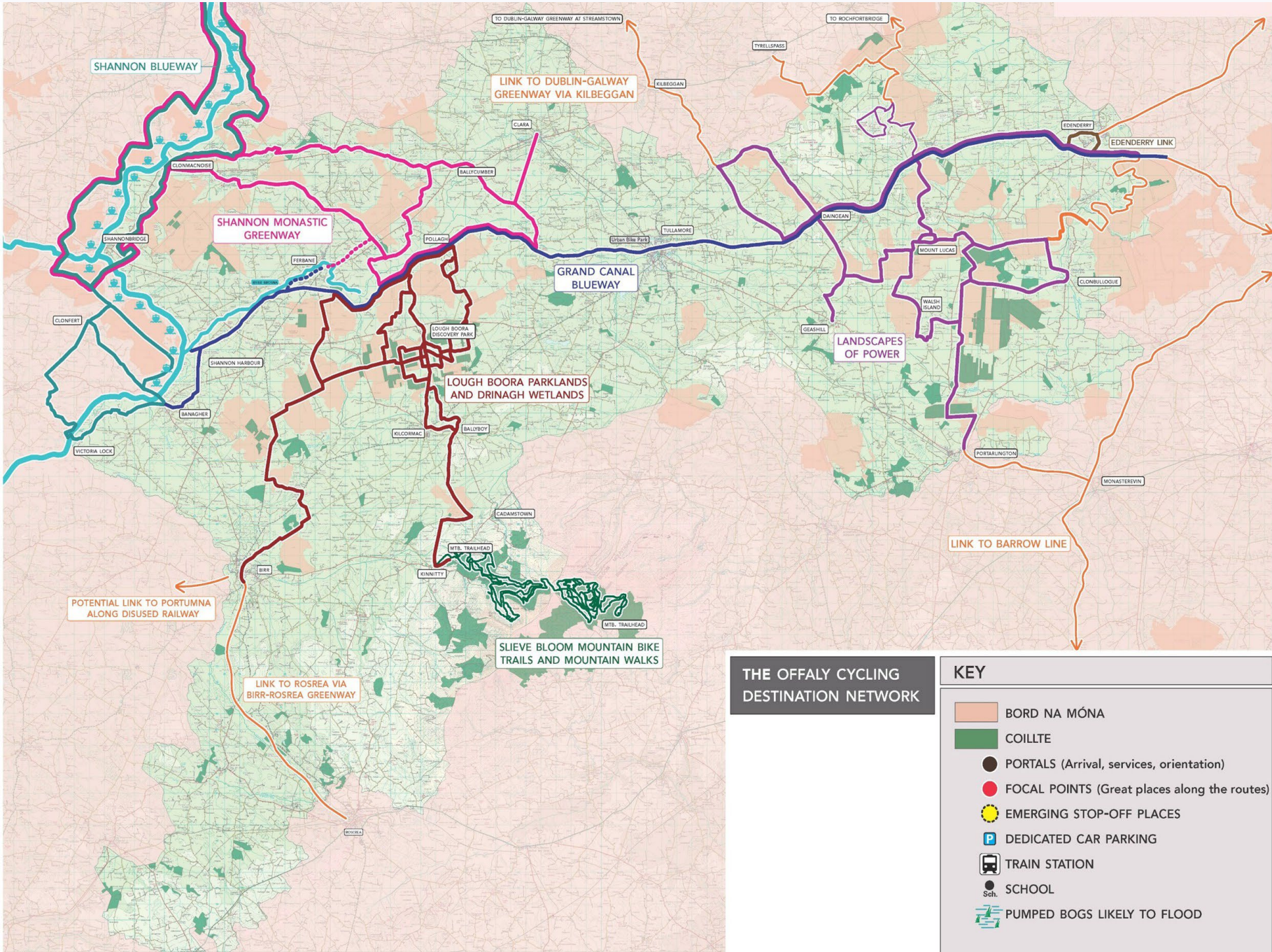


## 1.4 OFFALY OUTDOORS - THE STORY SO FAR

Over the last eight years, Offaly County Council, Bord na Móna, Coillte, Waterways Ireland and Fáilte Ireland have worked to create walking and cycling routes throughout the county, with a clear goal of establishing Offaly as both a national and international cycling destination.

The Midlands Cycling Destination, Offaly (MCD-O) commissioned by Offaly County Council in collaboration with Bord na Móna, Waterways Ireland and Coillte identifies circa 300km which could be developed as walking and cycling routes. Of this circa 300km, approximately 80km of routes have already been developed; with a further 25km identified for development as part of a Bord na Móna / Fáilte Ireland Strategic Trails project. Projects on the Offaly Way, Slieve Bloom Way and locally marked trails, as well as projects in Lough Boora Discovery Park have been developed to connect people both within the county and beyond.

This has laid the groundwork for significant outdoor infrastructural development in Offaly and continues to influence current planning and policy commitments of local stakeholders. The MCD-O identified the potential for developing outdoor recreational infrastructure in Offaly, and suggested how leveraging the county's natural and physical assets to create extensive trails could attract new visitors, enhance connectivity between towns and villages, support increased access to the outdoors, encourage sustainable mobility and establish strategic linkages with other counties and the greater Dublin area through the greenway network.



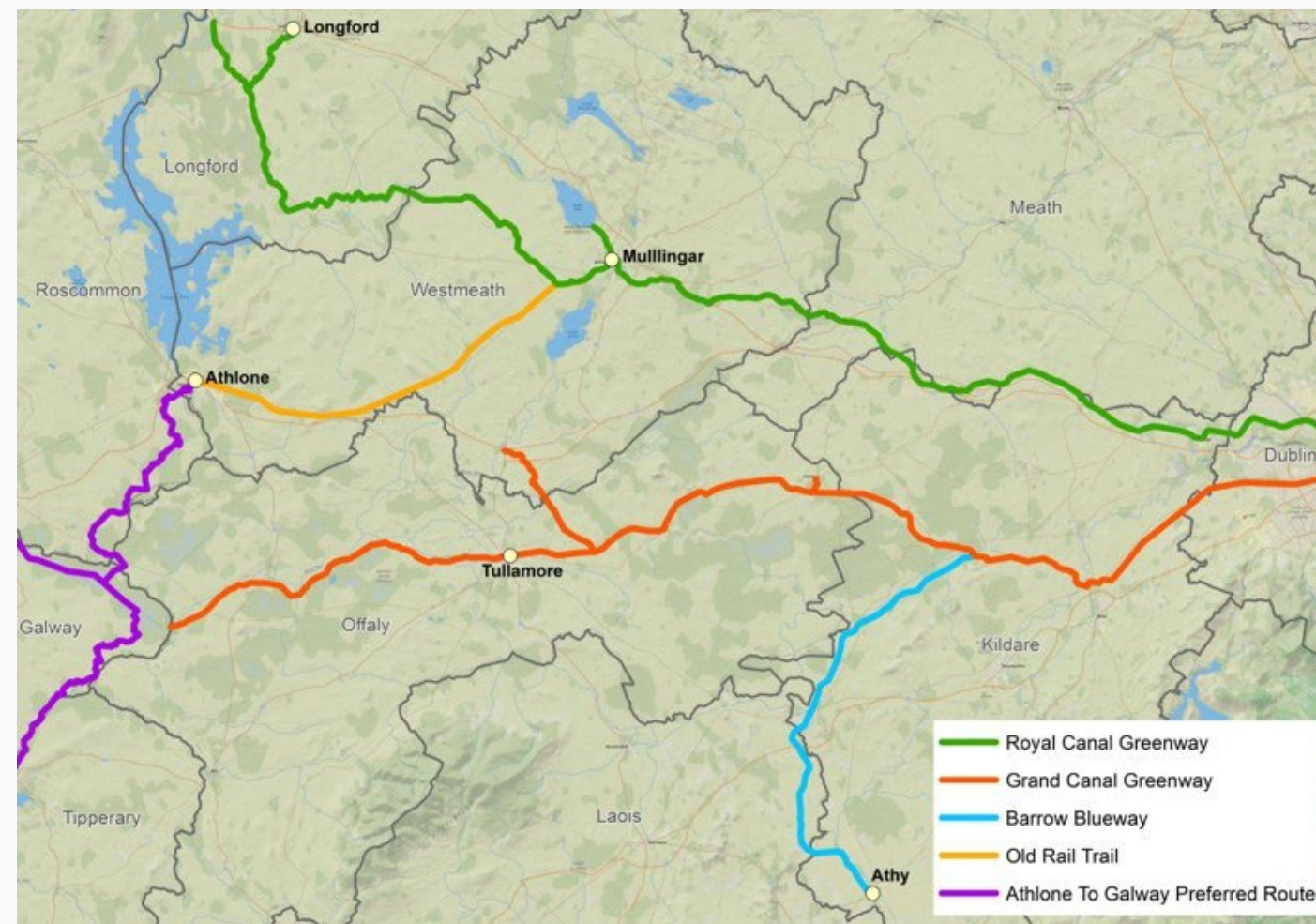


## 1.5 OFFALY- IRELAND'S NATURAL GREENWAY ROUNDABOUT

Offaly, bordered by counties Westmeath, Meath, Laois, Kildare, Tipperary, Galway and Roscommon, lends itself to be a strategic inter-connector between the national greenway infrastructure and the River Shannon to the Royal Canal, Grand Canal and Barrow Blueway.

Future work on the Dublin to Galway Greenway, the Beara / Breffni Way, the Midlands Cycling Destination, Bord na Móna's cycling and walking trails and the Derrycastle Lakes and Walkways, alongside the implementation of the Shannon Masterplan and the tourism strategies of Ireland's Hidden Heartlands will strengthen and support Offaly's unique location. Combining this with the work of local communities to support '*Last Mile*' connections (i.e. the final link from newly developed peatland trails and off road walking trails to hubs, gateways, towns or visitor attractions) for local people and visitors is key.

Offaly is the central hub or intersection for walkers and cyclists on our National Greenway Network, and this presents a significant economic opportunity for the county to maximise its tourism offering to attract increasing numbers of domestic and overseas visitors.





## 1.6 DEFINING OUTDOOR RECREATION

The Outdoor Recreation Plan for Offaly has adopted *"Embracing Ireland's Outdoors"* definition of outdoor recreation: -

*"Activities that take place in the natural environment, such as walking, canoeing, mountain biking, orienteering and wild swimming"*

(Appendix 2, page 74, Embracing Ireland's Outdoors)

Offaly boasts an array of land, water and air-based activities that facilitate people's engagement with the outdoors.



As we innovate and expand our engagement with the outdoors (i.e. welcoming new activities, experiences and diverse users), we must also broaden our understanding of what outdoor recreation means. A more inclusive and adaptive definition will ensure that outdoor spaces in Offaly continue to meet the needs of all people, while supporting sustainability, accessibility and responsible use.

Our Outdoors can: -

- Include soft adventures in rural and urban settings
- Be integrative and reflective of the wider culture and heritage of engaging with nature through art, drama, music; and by using the outdoors as a place for learning



## 2.1 THE NATIONAL POLICY CONTEXT

The last 10 years has witnessed significant planning and investment by key stakeholders in the development of outdoor recreation infrastructure across the country; the scale and scope of such development bringing both opportunities and challenges, reflected at a local level.

*"Our Outdoors"* is Offaly's strategic response to this dynamic. It acknowledges national policy priorities and outlines the specific priorities at local level, which in turn will inform the development of appropriate actions for Offaly. A full analysis of the key policy documents can be found in Appendix 1; and are summarised below: -

*Embracing Ireland's Outdoors 2023 - 2027* is a five year strategy concerning the development and management of outdoor recreation in Ireland, building on the *"Outdoor Recreation Plan for Public Lands and Water in Ireland"*, developed in 2017.

*The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)* are a set of 17 goals that aim to reduce inequality and improve health and wellbeing, whilst protecting the environment.

*Project Ireland 2040* is the overarching policy framework for the National Planning Framework (NFP) and the National Development Plan (NDP).

*Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021- 2025* is a policy document reflecting the pivotal role that rural areas play in our national economic, social, cultural and environmental wellbeing and development,

*"Rural areas hold much of Ireland's natural resources, biodiversity and visitor attractions; and rural communities are important guardians of our heritage, culture and natural capital".*

*Climate Action Plan (CAP) 2024* sets out a road map for Ireland's ambition to transition to a carbon "neutral economy by 2050.

The *Just Transition Strategy* outlines how the Midlands region is "the first in Ireland to directly experience the negative impact of transition to zero carbon". The Government's policy to support transition and simultaneously transform the region's economic and competitive position are underpinned by strategic plans as national, regional and local level.

Complimenting this is the *Regenerative Tourism and Placemaking Scheme 2023 - 2026* being delivered by Fáilte Ireland. This will support the development of tourism, outdoor and recreation amenities in the Midlands, to include specific projects in Offaly.

The *National Sports Policy 2018 - 2027* provides a definition of sport that goes beyond the traditional understanding of sport as a competitive pursuit and validates the wider role that sport plays as a recreational activity, and its benefits in terms of health, wellbeing and social relationships.

Waterways Ireland's *Tourism Master Plan for the Shannon Region 2020 - 2030* is a 10 year plan for the development of the Shannon Region as a major tourism destination to be aligned with the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands region.

The overarching objective of *Irelands Forest Strategy 2020 - 2030* is to increase the national forest estate and to deliver biodiversity, climate change, water quality, economic and quality of life benefits to all.

*Healthy Ireland, A Framework for Improved Health and Wellbeing in Ireland 2013 - 2025* has a vision of Ireland *"where everyone can enjoy physical and mental health and wellbeing to their full potential, where wellbeing is valued and supported at every level of society, and is everyone's responsibility "*.

*People Place and Growing Tourism to 2025* highlights how tourism is a key driver for Ireland's ongoing economic development. It acknowledges the level of capital investment made in the development of outdoor recreation offerings across the country and provides a frame of reference for regional tourism strategies such as *"Ireland's Hidden Heartlands "*.

*The National Biodiversity Plan (NBP) 2023 - 2030* reflects on the growing understanding and importance of biodiversity and sets itself five strategic objectives: -

1. to build a whole government approach to biodiversity
2. to meet urgent conservation and restoration needs
3. to highlight the relationship between people and nature
4. to support an evidence base for action in biodiversity; and
5. to support Ireland's contribution to international biodiversity structure

Offaly County Council (OCC) have a legal requirement to report on the implementation of the NBP.

## 2.2 OFFALY - STRATEGIC CONTEXT

This section of the 'Our Outdoors' plan looks at the regional and local level policy and programming priorities in Offaly.



### OFFALY POLICY & PROGRAMMES

The Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly) 2019 - 2031 is a regional level plan for the implementation of Project 2040. It addresses public policy areas including spatial, economic and climate actions, and investment frameworks.

The Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan to 2024 identified three strategic objectives under which projects and initiatives for delivery across the four Midlands counties (Laois, Longford, Offaly and Westmeath) have been agreed. "*Strategic Objective 3, Placemaking, Positioning the Midlands as a community of choice in which to live, create, study, work, visit and invest*" is particularly relevant to this plan.

The Offaly County Development Plan is the overarching strategy for planning and sustainable development in Offaly.

The Offaly Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) 2024 - 2029 is a five year strategic framework to support collaboration in the areas of economic and community development in Offaly. The plan refers to outdoor recreation and amenity development across its four high level objectives.

The Offaly Local Development Strategy 2023 - 2027 identifies economic development, social inclusion and sustainable development as its priorities for the delivery of the LEADER programme.

The Offaly Tourism Strategy 2023 - 2027 has identified many strengths and opportunities for Co. Offaly including the quality of its six key tourism attractions, and the potential to develop a range of outdoor recreational products on publicly owned lands and waters.

Active Offaly 2021 - 2025, Offaly Sports Partnership's strategic plan is a plan for the development of inclusive physical and recreational activity by all of the community in Offaly for enhanced physical and mental wellbeing.



## 2.3 PRIORITIES - OFFALY'S OUR OUTDOORS - IT'S MORE THAN A TRAIL

The review of national policy and programmes indicates how the scope of outdoor recreation has expanded and how it provides significant added value to a range of policy areas. This is also true at a county level. The review of policies and programmes of stakeholders in Offaly provides a framework for the development of a collaborative approach to outdoor recreation in Offaly underpinned by key priorities. While Offaly's priorities align with many national priorities, there is a specific impetus to see how the development of outdoor recreation can have a positive impact on tourism, business development and environmental sustainability particularly as the county's location is at the heart of the Just Transition territory.

### Considerations for Outdoor Recreation in Offaly

- The changing demographic picture in Offaly underpins the need for creative thinking and planning for programmes that support increased access for particular sections of the community, particularly for younger people, older people and those who may not traditionally be engaged with their place and / or the outdoors.
- Population growth in urban and peri urban locations will have implications for future developments of recreational infrastructure in these communities and should positively impact on quality of life and sustainable placemaking.
- Tourism growth requires enhanced visitor experience with additional services to include equipment hire (such as bike hire, kayaks, etc.), food and beverage offerings, and accommodation.
- Providers of outdoor recreation and end users working together to achieve greater connectedness between existing trails, towns and villages such as '*Last Mile*' connections (i.e. the final link from newly developed peatland trails and off road trails to hubs, gateways, towns or visitor attractions).
- The need for local communities to be resourced and supported to be vibrant and interesting places to work, rest and play, along with supporting people's health and wellbeing.
- The requirement for county level data on visitor numbers and usages of outdoor recreation to inform coordination of provision at local level.
- Greater collaboration across stakeholders in the development, management and maintenance of outdoor recreation in a balanced and sustainable way. This partnership requirement and the work it requires should not be underestimated.



## 2.4 EXTERNAL CONTEXT

### Occupier’s Liability Act 2023

Changes in Occupiers’ Liability will have a significant impact for landowners and for permitting access for recreational purposes. The positive changes outlined below will create greater protection for landowners in permitting access to their lands for outdoor recreation.

The 2023 act amends Section 3 of the 1995 Act and requires the considerations of a number of factors when determining the duty of care owed to visitors. Before the amendments, occupiers had a duty of care to take '*such care as is reasonable*' in the circumstances, to ensure the visitor does not suffer damage because of any danger on the premises (common duty of care). Under the new Section 3, in determining the common duty of care, regard must be given to a number of factors including duty of care owed to recreational users and trespassers.

Under the 2023 Act, the occupier continues to owe recreation users and trespassers a duty not to act with '*reckless disregard*' where there is a danger on their premises; however, it is no longer relevant whether the specific danger was one which the occupier was reasonably expected to provide protection against. The new standard under the 2023 Act is whether the occupier '*knew of, or was reckless*' as to the existence of the danger. This raised standard aims to rebalance the duty of care owed to recreational users and trespassers, and the rights of occupiers.

With regard to entry to commit an offence, Section 4 (3) of the 1995 Act states that "*where a person entered the occupier’s premises with the purpose of committing an offence, or where they committed an offence on the premises, the occupier is not liable unless the court decides otherwise 'in the interests of justice'.*" The 2023 Act amends Section 4 (3) to provide that "*the occupier will not be liable unless the court deems otherwise 'in exceptional circumstances', having regard to considerations such as the nature of the offence, the extent of the occupier’s recklessness and / or whether the person accused is a trespasser*". This amendment purports to raise the threshold for finding of occupier’s liability, and limit the circumstances where the court can impose liability.

The 2023 Act inserts Section 5A into the 1995 Act, also provides for the voluntary assumption of risk by entrants. Under Section 5A, an occupier does not owe obligations to visitors or recreational users where they have willingly accepted a risk, and where they are capable of comprehending the risk. Acceptance is based on their words or conduct, without proof of communication with the occupier. As such, written agreement is not necessary to limit or release an occupier from liability. Notably from an insurance coverage perspective, occupiers can assume that visitors or recreational users will take reasonable care for their own safety on the occupier’s premises.



### 3.1 A SNAPSHOT OF OUTDOOR RECREATION IN OFFALY



**Cycling and Mountain Biking** - Enjoy a leisurely cycle along the flat and peaceful surroundings of the Grand Canal, Lough Boora Discovery Park, Mount Lucas, Cloncreen and Derrinlough Wind Farms, Ballycumber / Clonmacnoise pilgrim path or the Slieve Bloom Mountains where you can enjoy a number of different grades and distances of cycling routes.

For those looking for a lengthy challenge to discover the region, try the 95km Slieve Bloom Village and Heritage Cycling Route. For a shorter but more strenuous climb, the scenic Glendine Cycling is more suitable. Birr Cycle Hub also offers a variety of routes that includes traveling through the mountains, Lough Boora and a number of local villages.

Circa 160km of mountain bike trails have been developed in the Slieve Bloom Mountains between Kinnitty in Co. Offaly and Baunreagh in Co. Laois. Both the 100km Kinnitty Trail and the 60km Baunreagh Trail are comprised of a network of purpose-built *'single track'* trails and forest roads designed for mountain biking on waymarked circular routes.

**Walking in Offaly** - Walkers have a choice of 28 marked routes ranging in length from one hour to four hours, and varying degrees of difficulty. The total distance of marked walkways in Offaly is 360km, including the Offaly Way at 37km, the Grand Canal Way at 71km and the Slieve Bloom Way at 84km.



**WaterSports**- This offering includes stand up paddle boarding, and canoeing and kayaking on the majestic River Shannon or the Grand Canal. Using the River Shannon as its base, Birr Outdoor Education Centre delivers action packed programmes for adventurers. The centre offers a wide range of water sports courses including canoeing, sailing and board-sailing, plus summer camps (residential and non-residential) during July and August. The centre boasts a full range of specialist equipment for all its courses, including a lecture room and swimming pool.

The outdoor swimming pool at Banagher is one of Ireland's most unique pools, located on the River Shannon, in the picturesque Banagher Park, at the intersection of Offaly and Galway.

**Birdwatching**- Offaly offers some of the most varied bird-watching opportunities in the country. The natural floodplain known as the Shannon Callows is world renowned for its birds and wildlife, and has one of the largest concentrations of breeding waders on these islands with Lapwing, Redshank, Curlew, Sandpiper and Godwit living there.

Offaly's other notable bird-spotting areas include the Lough Boora Discovery Park, Little Brosna (Ashton's) Callows, the Slieve Bloom Mountains and Turraun Nature Reserve.

**On the Water** - Both the River Shannon and the Grand Canal offer opportunities for boating and enjoying the outdoors from a different perspective. Offaly provides a number of serviced marinas for boaters to stop, stay and enjoy the picturesque towns and villages along the river from Shannon Harbour to Shannon Bridge and onto Banagher and Meelick Weir; while the river provides an alternative way of engaging with the outdoors, a leisurely and enjoyable holiday experience for all.

**Angling** - There are a range of angling locations in Offaly, with a number of active angling clubs across the county. Lough Boora is home to several angling lakes which are stocked with Trench, Carp and Bream. Loch Dochais in the Lough Boora Discovery Park is fully accessible to wheelchair users with modified and accessible fishing stands, specifically designed for wheelchair users. Other angling spots in the county include Cloghan Lake, Pallas Lake and the Grand Canal.

**Equestrian** - There are a number of equestrian and pony trekking centres operating in Offaly: -

- the Slieve Bloom mountains provides the location for Country Challenge Trekking
- Birr Equestrian Centre operates a trekking facility in the grounds of Kinnitty Castle at the foothills of the Slieve Bloom mountains
- Anna Harvey Equestrian; and
- Rhode Stud and Equestrian

**Parks & Playground** - Offaly boasts an array of parks and playgrounds which facilitate a diverse range of activities. Birr, Edenderry and Tullamore offer purpose built skateparks; with an additional 29 playgrounds located in towns and villages around the county. Both the Grand Canal and Mount Lucas Park Runs have witnessed significant increases in participation, from the seasoned runner to new beginners.

**Parachuting** - For those with a head for heights, Offaly provides the location for the Irish Parachute Club, located not far from Edenderry, just outside the village of Clonbullogue. The club is one of the longest established of its kind in Ireland. Every level is catered for from first time jumpers to seasoned skydivers. Free fall through the skies at speeds of up to 200km/h in a never to be forgotten experience. In excess of 12,000 jumps are made annually at the Irish Parachute Club which has its own fleet of aircraft and the most modern up to date parachuting equipment.



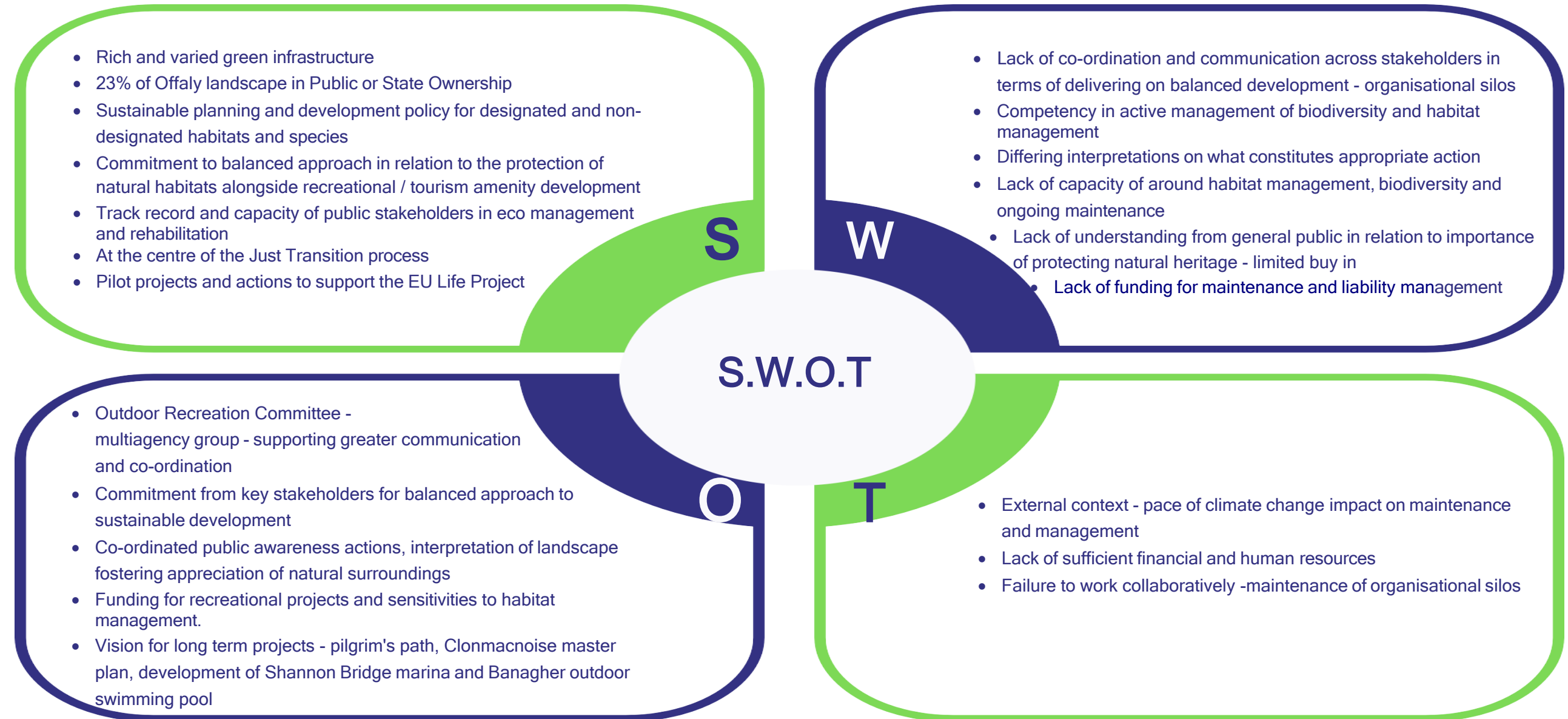


## 3.2 SWOT Analysis

As part of the consultation process, a SWOT Analysis was carried out.

The SWOT Analysis is a strategic planning tool used to identify and evaluate the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats of an organisation or project.

It helps organisations assess their internal capabilities and external environment to inform decision-making and strategy development.



## 3.3 CURRENT AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

There is a need for standardised and consistent national and regional frameworks, and associated guidance for landscape character assessment to advise on collection, monitoring and review of landscapes from a physical, scientific, ecological, biodiversity and cultural value.

Identification of costs associated with the ongoing management and maintenance of recreational amenities  
- scaling up of recreational offerings without the necessary financial resources to support ongoing maintenance could be counterproductive.

The overlap between locations of recreational interest that are ecologically sensitive means a need for greater understanding and coordination by key stakeholders in terms of '*how to*' balance amenity development with the preservation and protection of habitats.

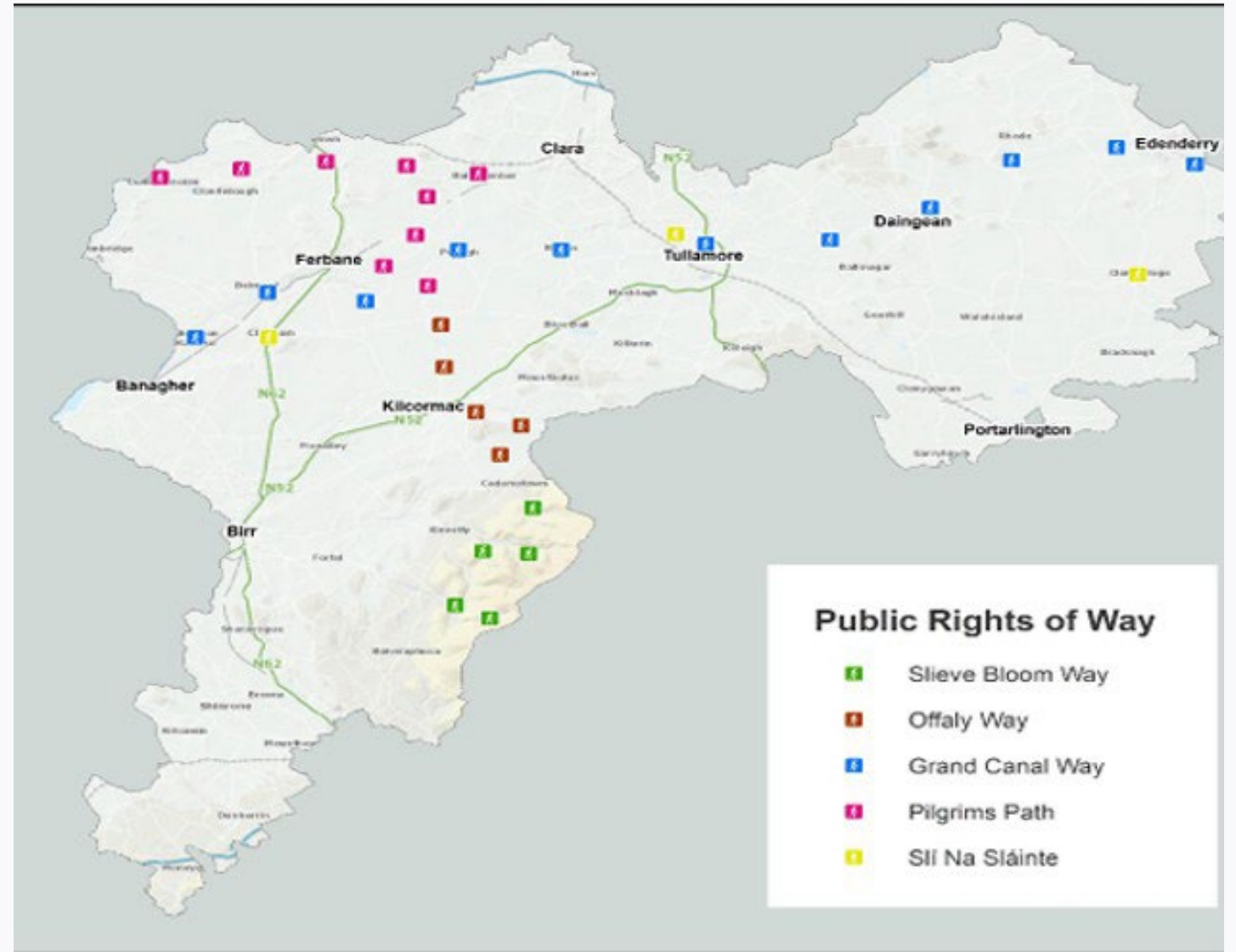
There is a need for greater cooperation among stakeholders in areas of high sensitivity as regards ongoing management and maintenance.

Future proofing provision through the development of a standardised mechanism for monitoring and managing visitor numbers, maintenance and liability management.



## 3.4 FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

Offaly, unlike other counties, has 23% of its land in public or state ownership, which provides significant opportunities for future developments. Currently, many of the recreational developments planned will be predominantly located on these public lands.



## 3.5 END USER

We know anecdotally that more people are engaging in the outdoors.

We know that walking and cycling are predominantly the most popular forms of recreation. We also know from our discussions that engaging in the outdoors is different for everyone and can depend on socioeconomic status, age, health status, ability and location.

Recreation can be a structured activity with a group or a slow solitary walk in the woods, from a high octane adventure to the dip of a toe in the water; the range and scale of people's engagement in the outdoors is always evolving.



### WHO IS THE END USER?

Being outdoors and what you do when you get there can differ depending on where you are, whether you are out in your own community or visiting a new place. When thinking of the '*end user*', there is a need to distinguish between the needs of local communities and those domestic and overseas visitors, '*Our Market*', all of whom will benefit from being in the outdoors but the impetus and approach to supporting greater numbers of different types of users will be different.

### LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Those with an interest, who need little encouragement, but want to get out and about to experience a range of interesting local activities; are interested in health and fitness; are part of a familiar routine with family and friends; or involved in sports and recreation.

### LOCAL COMMUNITIES - HARD TO REACH

Those in our community who find it difficult to get involved, who need support and encouragement to engage in group activities for health, wellbeing and social interaction.

### THE CULTURALLY CURIOUS

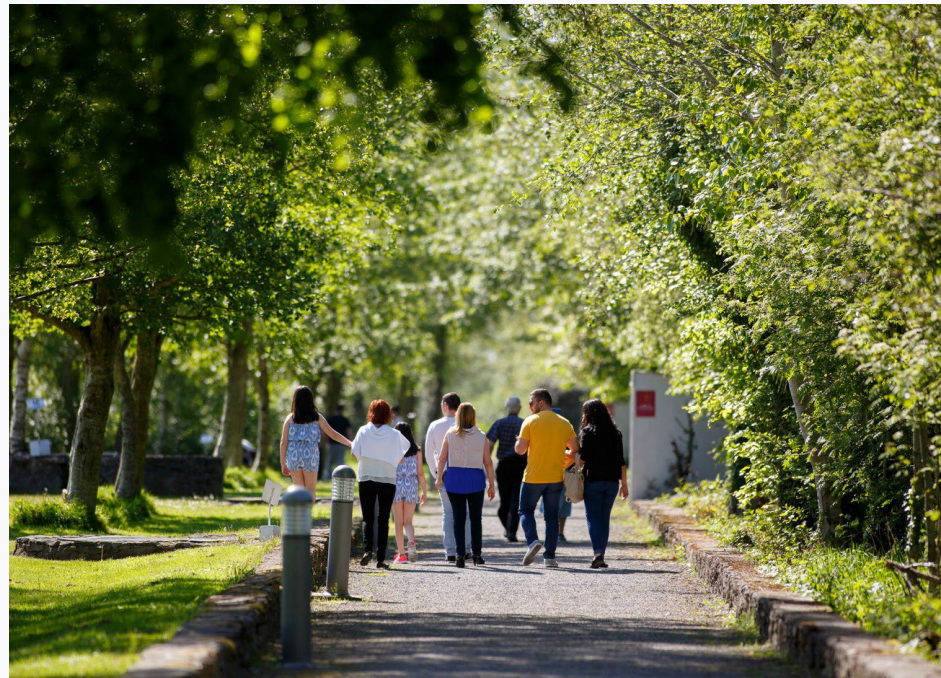
Those visitors who are motivated by culture - well educated; interested in authentic experiences.

### THE GREAT ESCAPERS

Motivated by opportunities to spend time in the natural environment with family seeking rural experience and outdoor recreation.



# SECTION 3 - CURRENT SITUATION





## 4.1 Stakeholder Analysis

### Offaly County Council

- Application for, and delivery of Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme (ORIS) Measures 1, 2 , 3 and Feasibility Study projects
- Promote Co. Offaly as a quality place to visit and stay with a wide variety of high-quality tourist attractions and visitor facilities and infrastructure (County Development Plan, page 203)
- Prioritise walking, cycling and sustainable travel in the planning, layout and design of places (Local Economic & Community Plan (LECP), page 11)
- Provide access to nature and green spaces, play and active recreation opportunities (LECP, page 11)
- Will act as employer of the Outdoor Recreation Officer on behalf of the County Outdoor Recreation Committee

### Offaly Sports Partnership

- Programme delivery and support of ORIS Measure 1 applications
- Delivered urban outdoor adventure projects in the towns of Edenderry and Tullamore on the Grand Canal for children and young people, adults and older adults, women and girls, and youth at risk
- Deliver the '*Her Outdoors*' programme targeting women and girls each summer
- Deliver the Grand Canal Greenway Cycle Relay from Edenderry to Shannon Harbour during Bike Week
- Deliver school cycle activities in the outdoors in Lough Boora and along the Grand Canal during Bike Week
- Support delivery of 'Woodlands for Health' programmes
- Will act as line manager of the Outdoor Recreation Officer on behalf of the County Outdoor Recreation Committee
- A member of the Slieve Bloom Outdoor Recreation Partnership

### Offaly Local Development Company

- Implementation of Local Development Strategy which has strong focus on outdoor recreation and community engagement
- Community based ORIS Measure 1 projects
- Just Transition Projects
- A member of the Slieve Bloom Outdoor Recreation Partnership

### Fáilte Ireland

- Working with stakeholders and industry to support further development and promotion of outdoor amenities including the Grand Canal Greenway and Blueway, and the Slieve Bloom Mountains

### Coillte

- Continue to maintain and improve our recreational offering in Offaly
- Support and participate as a member of the County Outdoor Recreation Committee
- A member of the Slieve Bloom Outdoor Recreation Partnership

### Waterways Ireland

- Manage, Maintain, Develop and Promote the River Shannon and Grand Canal waterways
- Manage, Maintain, Develop and Promote the Shannon Blueway and Grand Canal Greenway
- Development of new WI depot in Tullamore, thereby freeing up the existing depot for urban upgrade.
- The development of enhanced and new mooring destinations throughout Offaly.
- Improved access to the navigations for recreational users
- Continue to work with other stakeholders in a collaborative manner where objectives and remits align
- Continued expansion and improvements to recreational Blueway and Greenway trails along the navigations

### Bord na Móna

- Develop universally accessible rollable cycle trails through the EU Just Transition Fund Regenerative Tourism and Placemaking Scheme for the Midlands on available and suitable former industrial peatlands; alongside the upgrade of existing trails, subject to required consents and funding availability
- Continue to provide and improve outdoor recreation opportunities at Lough Boora Discovery Park including upgrade of trails through the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme and the delivery of the Velo Rail project
- Continue to collaborate and engage with Offaly County Council on the Lough Boora Sculpture Park
- Continue to engage with local communities and stakeholders regarding amenity provision as part of Renewable Energy developments
- Support and participate as a member of the County Outdoor Recreation Committee



## 4.2 CONSULTATION PROCESS

The full consultation process undertaken in Offaly focused on direct one to one engagement with the stakeholders involved in the development and management of the outdoor recreation infrastructure in the county. It also involved engagement with organisations who support peoples' access to the outdoors. In addition, direct engagement was undertaken through focus group sessions in Offaly. The outcomes of these one to one sessions and focus group meetings, along with the ongoing workshops with the County Outdoor Recreation Committee and a desk based review of local strategies and action plans provided solid foundations for the identification of county level priorities for the outdoor recreation plan.

Within the past 12 months extensive consultation has been undertaken across the county as part of the development of the County Development Plan, the Local Economic and Community Development Strategy, and the Local Development Strategy. The findings from these consultations have been utilised to inform the development of the Outdoor Recreation plan.

The Offaly Local Development Company has undertaken considerable work in supporting local towns and villages to develop strategic community plans. The need for developments in outdoor recreation and amenity provision is consistently articulated at community level. Most plans outline specific actions for funding either through the Department of Community & Rural Development's '*Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme* ' or through the LEADER programme.

These ongoing community animation actions provide a finger on the pulse of local need, and are filtered upline to relevant stakeholders, particularly the Local Authority. The establishment of the stakeholder's forum in Offaly will provide an additional vehicle for engagement with local communities and end users in terms of the development of outdoor recreation.

A public consultation process is underway.



4.1 CONSULTATION PROCESS





## 5.1 OFFALY OUR OUTDOORS STRATEGIC ACTIONS

### 5.1.1 LEADERSHIP & COLLABORATION

While there has been collaboration between stakeholders in the development of Offaly's outdoor recreational infrastructure to date, this consultation process highlighted the need for greater collaboration. The establishment of the Offaly Outdoor Recreation Committee (OORC) will formalise this collaborative approach for the planning, development, management and maintenance of outdoor recreation in County Offaly.

#### CONTEXT & CONSULTATION

- An increase in the number of stakeholders involved in outdoor recreation requires a local structure for collective thinking and action
- Common strategic priorities for local stakeholders - tourism growth, economic development, biodiversity and habitat management, health and wellbeing
- Common operational challenges - visitor management, maintenance, interpretation, information and awareness raising, skills deficit and personnel, mapping provision, data collection, digitisation
- Added value of collaboration - responsible recreation, community custodians, sharing learning and expertise locally, enhanced participation by all, role of outdoor in education as an outdoor learning lab where Offaly can innovate

Objective - To work together in a collaborative way to enhance, promote and grow the existing outdoor recreation amenities; and to plan collectively for future projects in County Offaly.

ACTION	TIME	LEAD	STAKEHOLDERS	OUTCOMES
Establish Offaly Outdoor Recreation Committee (OORC) Agree structure and terms of reference Review membership of committee annually	Short Term	OCC	OORC	Committee established Terms of reference agreed
Employ Outdoor Recreation Coordinator (ORC)  Define and agree job description, roles and responsibilities agreed by all members of the OORC	Short Term	OCC	OORC	Outdoor Recreation Coordinator employed
Establish the Offaly Outdoor Recreation (OOR) stakeholder forum with agreed terms of reference, implementation plan and protocols for relationship to the OORC.  Stakeholder forum to be chaired by a member of the OORC	Short Term	OCC	OORC - Offaly Sports Partnership, (OSP), Offaly Tourism, OLDC, Public Participation Network (PPN), Comhairle na nÓg	Forum established Implementation plan in place Agreed calendar of meetings
Identify new high quality projects and funding opportunities emanating from individual stakeholders and wider community engagement.	Ongoing	OORC	OORC	Collective action on project identification
Plan and develop a coherent maintenance strategy for all outdoor recreation infrastructure in Offaly	Ongoing	OORC	OORC	Agree protocols, good practice and opportunities for cross organisational working
Employ a dedicated Rural Recreation Office (RRO) for County Offaly.	Medium Term	OLDC	OORC	RRO appointed Work plan in place
Establish a cross directorate Outdoor Recreation Committee (ORC) in OCC to ensure collaborative working in the delivery of the Offaly Our Outdoors Plan	Ongoing	OCC	OCC	Internal committee in place Calendar of meetings agreed

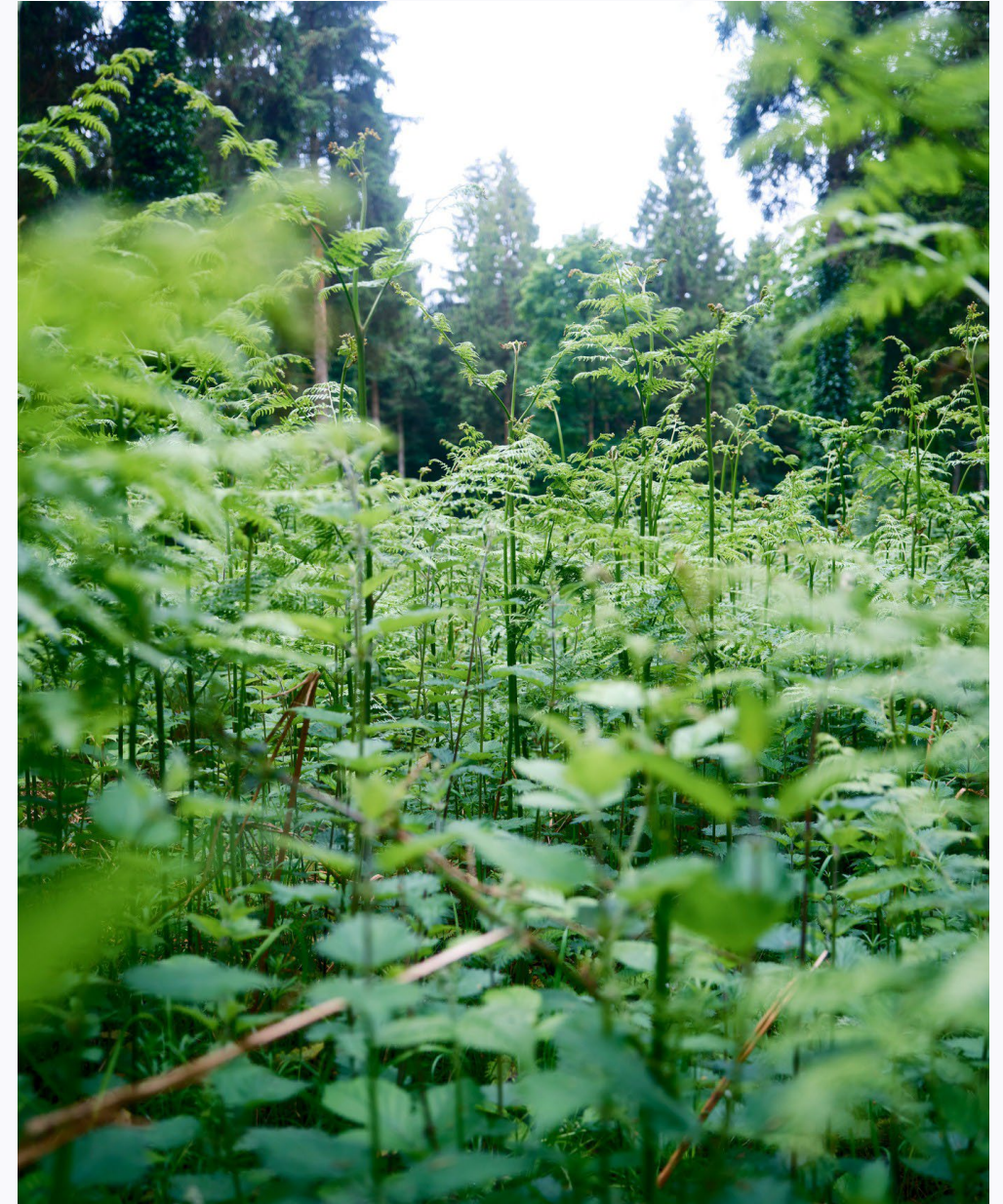


## 5.1.2 ENVIRONMENT

The Offaly landscape is unique and diverse, and presents both opportunities and challenges for outdoor recreation. All stakeholders involved in outdoor recreation are committed to protecting the landscape for future generations while also creating opportunities for people to explore, appreciate and enjoy.

### CONTEXT & CONSULTATION

- Offaly is a County that is most impacted environmentally, economically and socially by the Just Transition process; therefore, Offaly should position itself as an area for targeted investment
- Legislative changes - Habitat directive
- Balancing demand for increased visitors with environmental protection
- Too much variation in how outdoor recreation trails are planned, managed and maintained
- Offaly as an environmental exemplar to innovate how we engage with our natural surroundings
- Supporting a greater understanding of legislation and biodiversity for outdoor recreation providers and the wider community
- Maintenance, a critical issue for all stakeholders.



Objective - To ensure that Offaly’s rich array of natural, cultural and built heritage assets are sensitively managed

ACTION	TIME	LEAD	STAKEHOLDERS	OUTCOMES
Implement national guidelines in relation to the development of outdoor infrastructure and related facilities.	Ongoing	Offaly Outdoor Recreation Committee (OORC)	All	Actions aligned to national guidelines
Develop collective data management system to monitor visitor numbers and support better planning and sustainable development of outdoor recreation infrastructure at county and inter-county levels.	Short Term	Offaly County Council (OCC)	All	Data collection and management system in place
Provide ongoing training and development supports to staff working in outdoor recreation in sustainable development.	Medium Term	OCC	OORC Relevant landowners	Training programme agreed and delivered
Support innovation at all levels (individual, community and organisational) - community custodians, promoting responsible behaviour; Offaly, a Green Exemplar	Ongoing	OORC	OORC	Community Custodian pilot project site identified



## 5.1.3 AWARENESS

Offaly has an array of outdoor recreation amenities, many of which are relatively new. A collaborative and consistent approach to awareness raising by a broad range of stakeholders is needed in terms of interpretation, messaging on responsible recreation, gathering information on visitor numbers and experience to inform future development.

### CONTEXT & CONSULTATION

- No real data at county level in terms of local and visitor levels
- Low levels of awareness of what outdoor recreation is available
- Range of stakeholders, different branding and messaging causes confusion for the end user
- Collaborative action on consistent messaging from stakeholders on responsible enjoyment of the outdoors
- Need to change user behaviour in terms of how we recreate responsibly
- Community custodians - local volunteers engaged in awareness and other activities in local communities
- Involve a wider range of stakeholders to support awareness raising activities (e.g. schools, communities and interest groups)



Objective - To collaborate on the development of actions that will support an increased awareness and responsible appreciation of the outdoor recreation offerings in Offaly

ACTION	TIME	LEAD	STAKEHOLDERS	OUTCOMES
Support all outdoor recreation providers in the county with the tools to provide accurate, accessible and open data on the National Digital Database.  Agree protocol for updating information.	Ongoing	Offaly Outdoor Recreation Committee (OORC)	Stakeholder Forum	Data counters provided Data collated
Develop a mechanism for monitoring and aggregating data at county level on visitor numbers to include a centralised map of all outdoor recreation infrastructure in Offaly	Ongoing	Offaly County Council (OCC)	All	Skills and equipment for data collection in place
Agree and implement a standard approach to interpretation and signage across all outdoor recreation facilities	Medium Term	OORC	All	Interpretation and signage model designed and agreed
Market and promote outdoor recreation amenities as part of Offaly’s Tourism Strategy	Ongoing	Offaly Tourism Fáilte Ireland	Stakeholder Forum	Promotion of Offaly’s outdoor recreation amenities ongoing
Explore opportunities for the expansion of arts and heritage projects in the community directly linked to the outdoors	Medium Term	OORC	OORC	Creation of specific programmes for all, through schools, activity groups, community organisations
Develop a range of programmes driven by end users around responsible level	Ongoing	OCC	OCC	A number of initiatives identified and delivered



## 5.1.4 OPPORTUNITIES

Stakeholders involved in outdoor recreation provision need to consider how all communities can engage with the outdoors with all partner organisations having a role and responsibility in this process. Targeted interventions with community groups and sports organisations, as well as a calendar of events and activities would encourage the broader community to use outdoor recreation facilities.

### CONTEXT & CONSULTATION

- Increased uptake in outdoor recreation
- Strong evidence base to support the health and wellbeing benefits of the outdoors
- Outdoor recreation has a preventative cost saving for the economy in terms of reducing public health expenditure
- Changing demographic profile, aging and young population, requires new ways of encouraging people to get out and about
- Need for greater awareness amongst stakeholders in relation to the barriers to participation (financial, social, physical, mobility)
- On our doorstep - how do you get there if you don't have a car? Connectivity, community hubs, equipment, etc.;
- Rethinking / defining outdoor recreation - it isn't just about active adventure but micro adventures, particularly in urban outdoor spaces (e.g. as simple as a walk or dipping a toe in the water)
- Universal design of outdoor recreation spaces benefits everyone
- Young people and the outdoors - often determined by familial engagement, proximity, social peer group versus the perception of young people as troublesome
- What about those hard to reach groups in our community - need for targeted programmes (e.g. SAOR Programme)
- Engagement with innovation (e.g. Social Walk Leader Training)
- Role of Schools and Community Networks.



Objective - To ensure that everyone in Offaly has the opportunity to engage with the outdoors at their point of interest and ability.

ACTION	TIME	LEAD	STAKEHOLDERS	OUTCOMES
To provide and expand the delivery of structured outdoor recreation opportunities - Park Runs, Her Outdoors, Woodlands for Health, etc.	Ongoing	Offaly Sports Partnership (OSP)	All	Greater awareness of our outdoor infrastructure and health benefits for users
Continue to strengthen collaborative action between organisations at local level focusing on engagement projects targeting under-represented groups to include issues of wellbeing, mental health, inclusion A community driven approach.	Ongoing	OORC	All	Gaps in accessibility for specific target groups identified Specific engagement projects designed to increase participation
Provide a mix of outdoor recreation opportunities from soft and gentle micro adventures to active adventure	Medium Term	OSP	OLDC Healthy Offaly	New activities in place to ease people into participation at entry level
Provide business supports across a range of projects to encourage and support outdoor recreation enterprises	Short Term	Local Enterprise Office (LEO)	LOETB Fáilte Ireland, OLDC	Opportunities for the creation of new service providers explored and new business supported
Promote the participation of young people, with a focus on disadvantaged youth and vulnerable communities through Art, Music, Multimedia, Outdoor Classroom, Pocket Forests, Green spaces Create an outdoor living learning lab.	Ongoing	OORC Laois / Offaly Education & Training Board (LOETB)	All	A series of focused interventions planned and actioned in outdoor settings
Develop specific targeted actions with agencies that may be outside of the Offaly Outdoor Recreation Committee (OORC) but who have a significant role in terms of access to hard to reach communities	Ongoing	Offaly Local Development Company (OLDC), OSP, Healthy Offaly, LOETB	All	A series of focused interventions planned and actioned in outdoor settings



## 5.1.5 INFRASTRUCTURE & ACCESS

Maximise Offaly's strategic central position as a 'Connector' on the national Greenway and Blueway network along with linkages to other inter-regional outdoor recreational developments; as well as supporting the ongoing development of projects planned by key stakeholders with particular consideration given to resourcing maintenance, visitor management strategies, and the protection of landscapes / habitats, etc.

### CONTEXT & CONSULTATION

- 23% of Offaly's land is in public or state ownership
- Strong commitment to connectivity to towns and villages (i.e. 'Last Mile' - the final link from newly developed peatland trails and off road trails to hubs, gateways, towns or visitor attractions)
- Ongoing maintenance and trail management - protection of existing provision
- Balancing demand for increased use with management of landscape / habitat, etc.
- Impact of legislation
- Implement planned actions - Bord na Móna, Offaly County Council, Fáilte Ireland, Waterways Ireland Master Plan, National Parks and Wildlife Services
- No issues of overuse at present but need to anticipate same
- Maintaining good relationships with landowners - early problem solving, role of honest broker, central point of contact (i.e. Rural Recreation Officer for Offaly)
- Ongoing education and awareness raising about responsible recreation
- Universal Design of Offaly's outdoor infrastructure



Objective - To future proof the provision of outdoor recreational infrastructure that balances responsible behaviour, protection of our biodiversity with long term economic sustainability.

ACTION	TIME	LEAD	STAKEHOLDERS	OUTCOMES
Support the ongoing implementation of the National Walks Scheme	Short Term	Offaly Outdoor Recreation Committee (OORC)	All	Review and deliver on the National Walks Scheme
Implement plans for enhanced connectivity to towns and villages across Offaly and adjoining counties. Explore and develop opportunities for 'last mile' connections	Short Term	Offaly County Council (OCC)	All	All current infrastructure is mapped Opportunities and solutions for connectivity are explored Plans agreed
Animate, engage and support business community and social enterprise in terms of ancillary services and facilities	Ongoing	Local Enterprise Office (LEO), Laois / Offaly Education & Training Board (LOETB), Offaly Local Development Company (OLDC)	Stakeholder forum	Work with individuals and communities throughout Offaly to promote the opportunity for service provision and business creation
Implement shared learning and upskilling in relation to trail design, interpretation and maintenance	Ongoing	OORC	All	A management and maintenance training programme is agreed All landowners put in place a common approach to interpretation and ongoing maintenance
Develop collective actions for responsible recreation - proactive strategies with schools, communities, walking groups, etc.	Ongoing	OORC	All	Clear guidelines and approaches agreed that promote and encourage responsible recreation
Anticipate and future proof the provision of outdoor recreation infrastructure by collaborating on the development of guidelines for visitor management plan.	Medium Term	OORC	All	Use collected and collated data to review visitor numbers and put in place visitor management plans



## 5.1.6 EXPERTISE

Developing skills and expertise across the outdoor recreation sector will be fundamental to its continued growth. While there is evidence of high levels of expertise within individual organisations, there is a need to equip all those involved in outdoor recreation with the necessary skills and knowledge to maintain, sustain and protect our unique landscape for future generations.

### CONTEXT & CONSULTATION

- Skill and expertise deficit
- Enterprise and job creation - need for increased numbers of skilled workers in outdoor recreation and ancillary services
- Business and sectoral clustering for practice sharing and learning
- Supporting a greater understanding of sustainable recreation for all stakeholders
- Collective implementation of agreed standards and guidelines in maintenance / interpretation / visitor management
- Impact of digitisation
- Role of community as custodians
- Role of outdoors in educational practice from early years to third level



Objective - To provide those involved in outdoor recreation with the core skills to plan, manage, maintain and monitor amenities to high quality and a sustainable standard.

ACTION	TIME	LEAD	STAKEHOLDERS	OUTCOMES
Implement standards set by Sport Ireland.	Ongoing	Offaly Outdoor Recreation Committee (OORC)	All	An agreed methodology and approach to planning and design of new amenities, in line with Sport Ireland guidelines and standards
Laois / Offaly Education & Training Board's (LOETB) Birr Outdoor Education Centre (Birr OEC) to be an education hub to support the outdoor recreation community in achieving accredited qualifications.	Ongoing	LOETB	Stakeholder forum	Birr OEC as the central hub for outdoor recreation training for new instructors, and an exemplar for the wider region
Build community leadership in responsible outdoor recreation management.	Ongoing	OORC	All	A proactive programme to build community awareness for the community's responsibility in the general maintenance and guardianship of their local amenities
Establish community events that link to our amenities (e.g. sponsored walks / fundraising events, Park Runs, etc.) Create outdoor classrooms for learners of all ages	Ongoing	Offaly Sports Partnership (OSP) Offaly Local Development Company (OLDL) LOETB	All	A calendar of activities agreed which brings our outdoors into the mind-set of a greater number in the community (e.g. the Grand Canal Canoe Challenge, the Great Boora Run, Offaly Park Runs, etc.)



## 6.1 OFFALY OUR OUTDOORS - NEXT STEPS

The next steps will see: -

- the formalisation of the County Outdoor Recreation Committee and associated terms of reference; and
- the recruitment of dedicated staff to include an Outdoor Recreation Co-ordinator

The Steering Group involved in the formulation of this plan has also agreed to secure a dedicated Rural Recreation Officer for the County, along with establishment of the Offaly Stakeholder Forum.

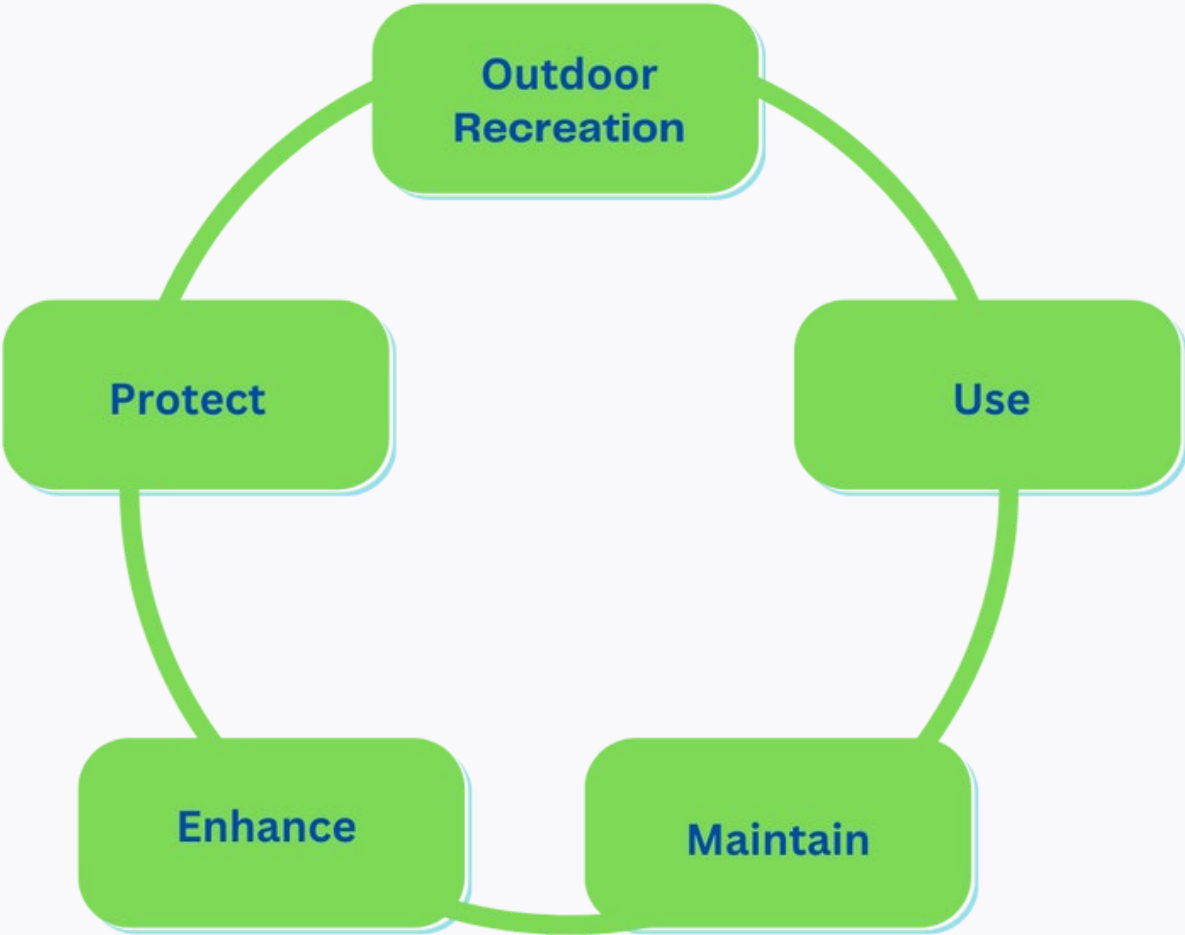
In implementing this plan the County Outdoor Recreation Committee will adopt the following logic model: -

**Use:** varied, interesting and accessible resources that provides appropriate, engaging opportunities for recreation, soft and active adventure

**Maintain:** developing co-ordinated responses to visitor management of existing and new outdoor recreational assets; investing in ongoing maintenance of; as well as developing expertise and upskilling for same.

**Enhance:** connecting people to place; quality of life and experience; promoting learning and respect for nature; information, branding and data collection; enhancing the skill and capacity of all involved in the provision and management of outdoor recreation.

**Protect:** the natural landscape and habitat in a sustainable way.





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Development Company**