

Loop Walks **Key Criteria**

Mission

To identify and market quality looped walks in Ireland to meet changing customer preferences.

Background

Market research on Irish tourism indicates that increasingly, visitors seek quality looped walks in areas of high physical and amenity value where they can interact with locals and savour the relaxed pace of life.

In response to this shift in customer requirements and reflecting the increase in shorter stays of our visitors, Failte Ireland has developed a strategy which characterises and defines the walks for which demand is growing.

Phase 1

Phase 1 of the strategy identifies a range of examples of existing walks which embody the characteristics of the type of quality loop walks for which demand is growing. It is accepted that the growing demand for these walks will result in new walks becoming available as time passes. In addition to the examples of quality looped walks, the characteristics of these walks have been described and listed. Walks which embody the required characteristics will be marketed by Failte Ireland as quality loop walks.

Guidelines

The following loop development guidelines are firmly based on the outcomes of research into the interests and preferences of the *occasional walker* from Ireland and abroad.

1. The loop must start from and finish at an appropriate **trailhead** which provides, at a minimum;
 - ample, safe car parking facilities;
 - a mapboard with details of the trail (see Mapboard in Loop Furniture).

Other desirable elements of a trailhead include;

- services such as shops, pubs, restaurants;
- toilet facilities;
- changing/showering facilities;

Close proximity to public transport links and accommodation outlets is a bonus.

2. The loop should be of 1.5hrs to 4.5hrs **duration** for the average walker. As the fitness levels and walking speeds of walkers vary considerably, a distance range is estimated at 8km/5ml to 12km/8mls - but this will depend on the level of ascent and difficulty of terrain.

3. A **mapguide** specific to the loop, and clearly outlining the trailhead, direction of travel, and key features must be easily available.

4. The loop should be as **natural** as possible. Physical development should only be undertaken where it is advised in a technical appraisal carried out by an approved inspector, and where;
 - the walker's *safety* would be compromised by not doing so.(e.g. erecting a footbridge at a stream crossing, clearance of vegetation to allow safe access to an old laneway);
 - the *sustainability* of the loop would be compromised by not doing so (e.g. developing a section of stone pathway to prevent erosion).

5. The loop should be off-road and not use any trafficked roads or tarred surfaces.

Exceptions may be made in certain circumstances, for example;

- where roadway is used to take the walker from the trailhead in an urban settings onto (or off) the loop;
- where a short section of road is used to link two sections of the loop because no other possibility exists.

Even in these exceptional circumstances, however;

- a loop should never use National or Regional Roads (i.e. roads with N or R in the number) unless it proceeds on a purpose-built footpath.
- a speed limit of 50kms per hour must be in force on all roads which are included as part of the loop.

6. The trail must provide *assured access* to the walker. In this regard, the route should be clearly waymarked (with the exception of Level 3 loops) using a consistent standard scheme throughout (see Loop Furniture) and the walker must be able to complete the loop without meeting any physical obstructions or challenges from property owners.

7. The loop should provide the walker with a *memorable experience*. In this regard, key considerations include;

- a variety of terrain (e.g. open country, bogland, riverbank, green road);
- a range of on-route sites of interest (e.g. architecture, archaeology, biology, heritage);
- quality scenery and good viewing points.

9. The loop should avoid;

- areas which endanger the walker in any way. This might include crags or cliffs, steep slopes, deep water, military ranges or game reserves, etc
- special areas such as wildlife reserves or heritage sites.
- environmentally sensitive areas or easily eroded surfaces (e.g. bogland)
- overuse of one type of terrain for example, planted forestry which can limited in scenic value; or beaches where heavy sand challenges less fit walkers.

10. There must be clear evidence of plans for the *sustainable development* of the loop and, in particular, ongoing maintenance and marketing. This may be taken on by one organisation (e.g. Local Authority), or may involve a partnership between community organisations, public agencies, and/or private bodies.

11. Loops should fit into one or more of the following themes, with a designated dominant theme:

- Heritage
- Nature
- Mountain
- Coastal
- Island

Occasional Walker

The loop concept has been developed to cater to the needs of the *occasional walker* - broadly defined as a person that;

- walks for more than 2hrs on average less than twice a month;
- has limited though variable fitness levels;
- has limited navigation or emergency procedures skills;
- has limited knowledge of access issues
- is unlikely to have done any research on the loop prior to arrival.

Level of Difficulty

All loops will be assigned a 'level of difficulty' ranging in value from Easy to Moderate to Hard.

All loop walking trails should adhere to the standards recommended by the National Waymarked Way Advisory Committee (NWWAC), which requires that ;

1. Permissive access has been granted for the walking trail
2. The trail complies with all recommended standards
3. Public liability indemnity insurance is in place
4. Each trail has a designated committee or responsible authority to ensure the trail quality is maintained at a high standard.

Loop Furniture

Loop furniture should be of high quality design and in keeping with the landscape. The core items of furniture for a loop walk include;

1. Mapboard

A mapboard, reflecting the design of the mapguide, should be placed at the trailhead and should ;

- clearly display loop(s);
- identify the trailhead;
- identify points of interest on route;
- outline level of difficulty and suggest duration of walk;

Key physical considerations include;

- smaller rather than large (A3-size is adequate)
- weatherproof in design;
- vandalism resistant.

Ensure that the erection of the mapboard complies with local planning regulations.

2. Waymarkers

Recycled plastic markers have proven to be most effective in terms of longevity and clarity.

In some situations, however, it may be inappropriate to use such markers including;

- sensitive areas (e.g. bogland);
- areas of high scenic value;
- large sections of open ground.

In these situations it may be more appropriate to use waymarkers that are, for example, lower than recommended or made of wood or stone.

3. Directional Arrows

Directional arrows should be affixed to the waymarkers to guide the walker along the route. It is strongly recommended that;

- circular plates (see pic) are used. These can be rotated and fixed to reflect accurately the direction of travel.

4. Gates/Stiles

Gates or stiles will be required to give access through field boundaries, fences, walls, etc. Gates are preferable to stiles (which are challenging for some people) - they should remain unlocked and be easy to open and close. All gates should bear a sign requesting the walker to leave it as found. Stiles when used should be sturdy, slip-resistant and safe.

5. Footbridges

Appropriate footbridges should be used to give access across waterways (such as rivers, streams, drains and ditches). The safety of the walker should be protected by ensuring that the footbridge is sturdy and slip-resistant.