

Screening Report for Strategic Environmental Assessment

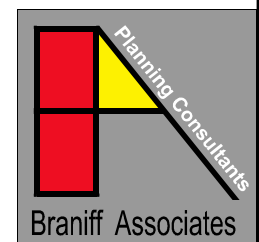
Beara Breifne Way Trail Plan 2021-22



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Screening Statement

Strategic Environmental Assessment Determination

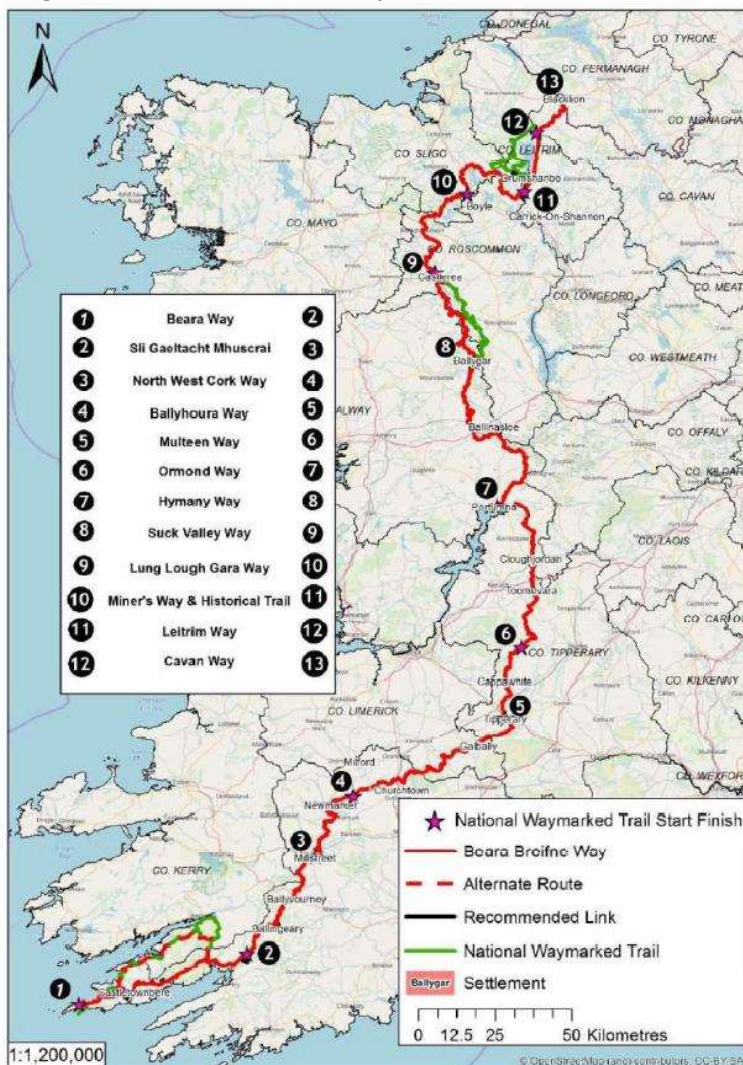
Beara Breifne Way Trail Plan 2021/2022

1.0 Introduction

This document constitutes a Screening Report for a determination as to whether the proposed Beara Breifne Way Trail Plan 2021/2022 should be subject to Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) under the European Communities (Environmental Assessment of Certain Plans and Programmes) Regulations 2004, S.I. No. 435/2004. It is prepared by Braniff Associates Planning & Environmental Consultants, in conjunction with Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland (ORNI), on behalf of Fáilte Ireland.

The Trail Plan relates to the Beara Breifne Way, which is the longest waymarked trail in Ireland that extends for approximately 700kms from Dursey Sound in Co. Cork to Blacklion in Co. Cavan (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Beara Breifne Way Trail Route



The route is currently passable utilising existing national waymarked trails. An audit undertaken in 2019 recognised the tourism potential of the trail but identified numerous required improvements to the trail and surrounding visitor infrastructure.

Accordingly, Fáilte Ireland has commissioned a multi-disciplinary team led by ORNI to work on the Beara Breifne Way Trail Plan to design and cost the proposed works required. These are to enable the Beara Breifne Way to become a long-distance walk of international significance, as well as a soft product for casual walkers and visitors to explore nature and appreciate culture.

2.0 Background

The Beara Breifne Way is a unique grass-roots, community-led initiative and is the largest community-based project ever to be undertaken in Ireland. The Beara Tourism and Development Association has championed and driven this project over the past 17 years. Twelve community groups have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to ensure continuity in the progression of the trail. Significant efforts have been made by the National Waymarked Way committees and local communities to advance the Beara Breifne Way, and this Trail Plan is a result of these.

Its development has been supported by a considerable number of stakeholders since 2001 including The Heritage Council, Fáilte Ireland and the ten Local Authorities along the trail, namely Cork County Council, Kerry County Council, Limerick City & County Council, Tipperary County Council, Offaly County Council, Galway County Council, Roscommon County Council, Leitrim County Council, Sligo County Council and Cavan County Council.

The trail generally follows the route of the historic march undertaken by Dónal Cam O'Sullivan Beara, and visits many of the places and communities shaped by his story. On New Year's Eve 1602, he led one thousand men and women, including four hundred soldiers, on the epic march north, hoping to join forces with rebel leaders in Ulster. They sheltered and ate where they could, but were ambushed time and again by native chieftains, who hoped to protect their stores of food and ingratiate themselves with the English. After fourteen days, O'Sullivan Beara and his people reached Leitrim Castle, stronghold of the rebel O'Rourke of Breifne. Of the one thousand people who had started out, only thirty-five remained.

3.0 Beara Breifne Way Trail Plan 2021/2022

This Trail Plan is the successor to the 2019 Tourism Masterplan for Beara Breifne Way, prepared by ORNI on behalf of Fáilte Ireland, in that it constitutes the next stage or out-workings of this Masterplan. The Masterplan was commissioned by Fáilte Ireland to guide future investment and development along the Trail route, so that the Beara Breifne Way realises its potential as a world class long-distance walk and visitor experience.

3.1 Key objectives of Trail Plan

The key objectives of the Trail Plan are to:

- Identify key opportunities and significant constraints along the Trail to help to ensure the sustainable development of future proposals along the Beara Breifne Way.
- Create an internationally compelling tourism proposition of scale and singularity with appeal to both the domestic and overseas markets.

- Deliver economic and social impacts directly to rural, non-traditional tourism areas in a viable manner, thereby contributing to sustainable job creation, increased revenues and local community development.
- Support a network of clusters of tourism businesses in the ten counties along the trail corridor.
- Protect the natural and historic environment along the Trail route, and encourage respect for and understanding of the natural, built and the anthropogenic history of the Beara Breifne Way route for all visitors and local communities.
- Promote the sustainable use of the Trail in the interest of the environment and amenity of the local communities.

3.2 Core elements of Trail Plan

Mindful of the above objectives the Beara Breifne Way (Long-Distance Walking Trail & Visitor Experience) Trail Plan will incorporate the following project elements:

- A technical trail audit detailing appropriate trail design and build specifications that take into account environmental sensitivities along its length;
- An Interpretation Framework and Branding Strategy to bring the trail and its rich history and heritage to life;
- Wayfinding and Orientation Strategies for the trail, in order to make it user friendly and to direct walkers away from the more sensitive environmental constraints, while still providing them with a rich understanding of the environment across which they are traversing;
- Built Heritage Assessments where required, on National Monument or protected structure sites along the trail corridor; and
- Environmental Assessments, including Appropriate Assessment (AA) and Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA).

3.3 Implications of Trail Plan for the Environment

In terms of its relationship with the environment the Plan seeks to improve the Trail by investigating and considering recommendations in respect of the following:

- (i) Trail upgrades;
- (ii) Trail reroutes, particularly in terms of facilitating off-road journeys or safeguarding the more sensitive environmental aspects of the route; and
- (iii) Identifying the potential for trail linkages in order to maximise synergy with other tourism assets in the future.

In respect of the potential for reroutes, it is important to note that the majority of the Trail (circa 80%) will remain as is.

Moreover, in terms of improving the Trail, the development priority is for minimal intervention on the environment so that walkers can appreciate its natural, historic path. Unavoidably, however,

it will become necessary to carry out some works in certain locations to secure safe and comfortable passage. Works could include the laying of: bog bridges; gravel build sections; and local stone slabbing alongside supporting trail furniture to include stiles, gates and waymarker posts.

Other associated development largely pertains to the incorporation of trail information structures along the route including the erection of totems, signposts, lecterns and occasional graphical art forms. Potential locations are being identified and assessed for architectural visitor viewpoints and discovery points along the existing trail sections.

4.0 Criteria for Strategic Environmental Assessment

The European Council's Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Directive (2001/42/EC) requires an environmental assessment to be carried out for certain plans and programmes which are likely to have significant effects on the environment. The SEA Directive was transposed into national legislation via Statutory Instrument No. 435/2004 - European Communities (Environmental Assessment of Certain Plans and Programmes) Regulations 2004 (hereinafter referred to as the 2004 Regulations).

Screening refers to the process involved in deciding whether a particular plan or programme, other than those for which Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is mandatory, would be likely to have significant effects on the environment, thereby requiring SEA and the preparation of an Environmental Report.

The criteria for determining whether a particular plan or programme is likely to have significant effects on the environment are outlined in Schedule 1 of the 2004 Regulations.

Schedule 1 of the 2004 Regulations identifies two main sets of criteria for determining whether a plan or programme is likely to have significant effects on the environment. These include:

- (i) the characteristics of the plan and programmes; and
- (ii) the characteristics of the effects and of the area likely to be affected.

Both these sets of criteria are listed and responded to below in respect of the Beara Breifne Way Trail Plan 2021/2022.

4.1 The characteristics of plans and programmes, having regard, in particular, to –

a) the degree to which the plan or programme, or modification to a plan or programme, sets a framework for projects and other activities, either with regard to the location, nature, size and operating conditions or by allocating resources

The Beara Breifne Trail Plan is not a statutory plan or programme. Its preparation is not a legislative requirement of central or local government and it is not subject to a formal adoption process. However, its preparation on behalf of Failte Ireland will provide a framework for the development of the Trail at the regional and local authority level. It intends to provide sufficient information on the route which would help assist a Local Authority or future developer to secure implementation at the local level.

Accordingly, having regard to Article 9 of the 2004 Regulations, as recalled below, an environmental assessment has to be carried out for this Plan.

9. (1) Subject to sub-article (2), an environmental assessment shall be carried out for all plans and programmes

(a) which are prepared for agriculture, forestry, fisheries, energy, industry, transport, waste management, water management, telecommunications and tourism, and which set the framework for future development consent of projects listed in Annexes I and II to the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive

b) the degree to which the plan or programme, or modification to a plan or programme, influences other plans including those in a hierarchy

The Trail Plan may be incorporated into statutory Development Plans at the local authority level, including County Development Plans and Local Area Plans. This can be achieved either by adoption at the stage of formulating Development Plans or by means of a Variation Order to an existing Development Plan.

c) the relevance of the plan or programme, or modification to a plan or programme, for the integration of environmental considerations in particular with a view to promoting sustainable development,

The Trail Plan seeks to promote walking as a sustainable tourist activity while respecting the environmental sensitivities of the route.

d) environmental problems relevant to the plan or programme

The Plan seeks to develop an optimum route so as to avoid and reduce the potential for environmental issues to arise. Environmental problems relevant to the plan essentially centre around the requirement to strike a balance between promoting tourism and outdoor recreation on the one hand and protecting the environment on the other.

e) the relevance of the plan or programme for the implementation of European Union legislation on the environment (e.g. plans and programmes linked to waste management or water protection)

The relevance of the Plan for waste management largely pertains to the probability of litter pollution during the operational phase. Furthermore, any waste from construction activities will either be reused within the scheme, or recycled/disposed of at an authorised waste facility under the Waste Management Act 1996.

In terms of water protection, there will be potential in the short term for water pollution associated with sediment activation from groundworks and/or hydrocarbon release from work vehicles and plant (e.g. generators).

4.2 Characteristics of the effects and of the area likely to be affected, having regard, in particular, to –

a) the probability, duration, frequency and reversibility of the effects

In general, the low-key scale and nature of the proposed trail augurs well for benign environmental impact. This notwithstanding it is acknowledged that there is still a likelihood of negative environmental effects. While the bulk of these may be short term in duration e.g. threat to waterways from spillages during necessary construction improvements, permanent long term effects are associated with its operation. Chief among these are disturbance to wildlife, erosion of landscape terrain and risk of litter pollution.

b) the cumulative nature of the effects

The cumulative nature of the effects of this Trail Plan mainly relates to its potential to link with other tourism initiatives along its route and the combined impact of increased tourist numbers on sensitive, less travelled, rural landscapes.

c) the transboundary nature of the effects

The Trail terminates at Blacklion, County Cavan, near the border with Northern Ireland, which means that there is the real prospect of a healthy cross border usage of the Trail. Indeed, it links directly with the Ulster Way which extends to Ballycastle on the north coast.

d) the risks to human health or the environment (e.g. due to accidents)

The risks to human health are minor and are principally related to the threat of accidents from construction traffic and related fuel spillages entering watercourses.

e) the magnitude and spatial extent of the effects (geographical area and size of the population likely to be affected)

The magnitude of the effects is likely to be confined to the vicinity of the trail extending circa 700km and traversing 10 counties that encompass a total population of 1.6m people.

As a reflection of its rural character the largest settlement along the route is Tipperary Town with a population of circa 5,000 people. Most other settlements are quite modest in size with populations running into the hundreds.

- f) the value and vulnerability of the area likely to be affected due to –**
i) special natural characteristics or cultural heritage;
ii) exceeded environmental quality standards or limit values; or
iii) intensive land-use;

The following points are made in response to (i), (ii) and (iii) above.

(i) Not surprisingly, given its length, there is a wide range of natural heritage sites located within 15kms of the Trail (Table 1). This includes many European Sites and National Sites.

Table 1

Number of natural heritage sites within 15kms of Trail	
SACs	115
SPAs	23
NHAs	56
pNHAs	249
ASSIs	32
Ramsar	1

As evidenced in Table 2 below there are also multiple locations within 2kms of the Trail that possess recorded features of the built heritage.

Table 2

Number of built heritage/historic environment locations within 2km of Trail	
National Inventory of Architectural Heritage sites	598
Sites and Monuments Record	1,569

Added to the above, there are areas of archaeological potential along its path. They are mainly associated with historic religious sites and castles.

(ii) Given that the Trail passes through a largely rural area the route is associated with a location where existing air quality standards are unlikely to be exceeded. The risk to air quality from trail improvements is comparatively low. Save for short term exceedances from construction traffic, they will be largely connected with relative increases in vehicle emissions by users at commencement and end points.

(iii) Compared to urban areas, population density is lower along this rural route and, accordingly, land use is less intensive. The proposal is not an intensive land use but, in relative terms, increased operational use of the trail could pose environmental issues for high quality, vulnerable landscapes.

g) the effects on areas or landscapes which have a recognised national, Community or international Protection status.

The Beara Breifne Way study area comprises a variety of landscapes which includes uplands, lakelands, river valleys, raised bogs and drumlins. Some of these landscapes are recognised as being distinctive due to their natural and man-made beauty, as well as their intrinsic character. Many local authorities consider these areas as of being of high importance in terms of their landscape sensitivity to change from development.

At a more local level there is also a range of statutory designations to protect specific locations and views for their visual amenity and character.

5.0 Conclusion

Having regard to the screening assessment criteria above the following conclusions can be stated:

- It would appear that the majority of responses to criteria relating to the characteristics of the Trail Plan (4.1a-e above) are affirmative in determining the need for SEA. Moreover, by highlighting how the Trail can be developed in sections within the context of the overall route, the Plan aims to have material weight in guiding its development at the Council level.
- Most of the responses to criteria relating to characteristics of the effects and of the area likely to be affected (4.2a-g above) are equally positive in confirming the need for SEA. Likely significant effects on the environment could occur at both the operational and construction stage. Key impacts could include: noise & disturbance to wildlife; soil compaction/erosion; impact on peat stability; sediment activation and/or hydrocarbon release to watercourses/groundwaters during construction; visual impact on sensitive unspoilt landscapes; severance of farmland; and litter pollution.

Taking into account the foregoing it would appear that the Beara Breifne Trail Plan is likely to have significant effects on the environment and should therefore be subject to Strategic Environmental Assessment.

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8th August 2021