Mr. Patrick Keating,
Senior Executive Officer,
Westmeath South Area,
Westmeath County Council,
Civic Offices,
Athlone.

Monday, 07 October 2013

**NCN – Shared Pedestrian and Cycleway Facility from Athlone to Mullingar**

Dear Patrick,

Thank you for referring the above application to An Taisce for comment.

This submission is being made as part of the work of the Cycling Coordinator position on behalf of An Taisce and Cyclist.ie, a new position which is being funded under the European Cyclists’ Federation Leadership Programme 2013-14.

**1 - Summary of Benefits of the Scheme**

Firstly, An Taisce warmly welcomes the proposed construction of high quality cycle routes by Local Authorities, where their impact on the built and natural environment has been properly assessed, and where they have been designed and constructed in a manner sensitive to those environmental considerations.

In line with the aims of the National Cycle Policy Framework (Department of Transport 2009), the proposed cycle greenway should be designed to help prompt an increase in cycling and walking in Co. Westmeath. The route will appeal to several different types of users:

- firstly, the cycling visitors, and locals wishing to cycle all, or at least a significant length, of the longer Dublin to Galway National Cycle Network (NCN) route which will form part of the EuroVelo “Capitals” Route #2 (European Cyclists' Federation 2013) – Figure 1 below;

- secondly, (local) recreational riders, including families with young children, who may be less experienced and who may wish to avoid the busier, more heavily trafficked roads;
• and thirdly, cycling commuters and utility cyclists travelling within Athlone, Moate or Mullingar towns wishing to access a range of amenities, such as shops, leisure facilities, schools, places of employment etc., via quieter and safer routes.

Figure 1 – The Euro-velo Network showing Euro-velo #2 “Capitals Route” from Moscow to Galway (European Cyclists' Federation 2013)

2 - Improving Access to Facilities

We warmly welcome the development of the disused rail line.

The scheme will provide a motor-traffic free, tranquil route for tourists/visitors and for local recreational riders. It could also act as a safe route for those commuting to various destinations such as local schools and sports grounds / facilities. It is noted already that at least part of this route is well used by locals in Athlone (Figure 2 below).

We strongly recommend that access be provided to as many adjacent developments and destinations as possible in order to maximise its utility. This should, of course, include any bus and rail connections, and features that would be of interest to tourists such as accommodation, food, entertainment, sights, heritage features, attractions etc.
3 - Retaining the Rail Corridor
We are aware of the concerns of some locals that the development of the cycleway would jeopardise the chances of the Mullingar to Athlone rail-line ever opening. We feel however that these concerns are unfounded since, based on experiences in the UK, the retention of the route as a cycleway / pedestrian route is the best way to prevent other developments taking place on the line itself which would, effectively, permanently ruin the chances of this ever happening. We note Variation 13 to the Westmeath County Development Plan 2014-2020, made on 22nd July 2013, and the new policy which reads:

New Policy P-CRA16 – To support and facilitate the provision of a cycleway and walkway between Mullingar and Athlone, as part of the National Cycle Network, within the corridor of the disused railway line, pending the reopening of this line as a railway (Mr. Eamonn Brennan 2013)

In pure economic terms, the extensive and immediate benefits from building an off-road route such as the proposed that can accrue to Athlone itself and Westmeath County and surrounding areas are substantial and have been well documented. To reject the traffic free alignment provided by the rail corridor would be a serious mistake.

I attach (in Appendix I) a short summary of the economic impact of the now renowned Mayo Greenway, which demonstrates the positive impact of such a development on the region.

Our understanding is that CIE has not sought a closure order on the corridor and the railway has not been lifted. Furthermore we understand that the Railway Safety Commission (RSC) will not look favourably on cycleways / footpaths running alongside operational railways. If this is so, where stands the cycleway were the railway to reopen? Clarification needs to be sought from the RSC on this matter. We do not want to see a
situation where rail reopenings, which by themselves can do much more to make our roads safer and improve our environment (by removing HGV movements), are jeopardised in favour of a cycleway. Long abandoned railways are a different matter altogether and we see no issue with their conversion, but when it comes to disused sections where the railway is still in place we seek clarification of plans there.

4 - The Creation of a Greenway must not Detract from Efforts to Make All Roads Safe for Cycling

One concern we do have with cycleways is that they can sometimes generate the idea that cyclists have no place on the ordinary roads. We are continually being told that "the roads are too dangerous for cyclists". However there is insufficient attention being paid to improving driving and cycling standards it would seem. Standards on both sides of the divide can be equally dismal and unfortunately enforcement is still laughable. Whilst some resources have been put in place to deal with one aspect of driving, namely speeding, motorists in many cases still appear to be free to conduct themselves as they please otherwise as long as they don't break the assigned limit for the piece of road they're on.

Consequently, we are now seeing a new generation of cyclists who, whether from parental pressure or their own lack of confidence, will only cycle on traffic free paths. We see teenagers in some estates – even those without through-traffic or much traffic - where cycling within the estates is confined to the footpath only. One also sees the ridiculous situation where people now drive to somewhere (e.g. Phoenix Park) to cycle. Far better if we could encourage these cyclists to use the present road network and, by increasing the numbers of cyclists on the roads, the safer they will be not just for cyclists but for pedestrians too.

5 - Biodiversity and Route Maintenance.

Pending the completion of a full EIA, which will provide an assessment of the biodiversity along this corridor, we wish to note at this point that the designers of the scheme need to plan a maintenance regime for the route. It may be inappropriate to use tractor mounted cutters or to apply herbicides along this corridor, so the regime needs to account for how vegetation such as briars will be trimmed back so as to maintain an accessible route for all users while retaining the biodiversity.

6 – 30kmh Speed Limits for Roads in Adjacent Urban Areas

There is an increasing trend to provide 30km/h speed limit zones in urban areas to improve safety and so enhance the urban environment especially from pedestrians' and cyclists' perspectives. The recently published revision of the Design Manual for Urban Roads and Streets (DMURS) encourages the further introduction of 30km/h zones in urban areas, and outlines the safety differences of different speed levels. See the copy (of Figure 4.2) from DMURS in Figure 3 below (Department of Transport 2012: 63).

Given the likelihood of increased numbers of cyclists and pedestrians accessing the cycle greenway at various access points along its length, it is strongly recommended that the Council introduce a 30km/h speed limit in these adjacent zones especially in the vicinity of
the residential areas, schools, sports grounds and other busy locations (if not already in place).

![Hard and Fast Facts](image)

**Figure 3 – Outcomes from Car Impacts with Pedestrians as a function of speed**

7 - Cycle Stands
It is strongly recommended that the opportunity is seized by the Local Authority to introduce plenty of (attractive and sheltered!) bicycle parking stands at amenities and in urban areas along and next to the proposed facility. Such cycle parking stands will be well received by cycling tourists and by locals, and encourage visitors, in particular, to stop off and visit. For details of cycle parking planning and design, see Chapter 5 of the National Cycle Manual (National Transport Authority 2012).

8 - Public Art
An Taisce acknowledges that very long stretches of cycle route through largely unchanging surroundings can create a less than ideally stimulating environment. Canal-side and railway line cycle and walking routes can suffer particularly from this weakness. It is for this reason that public art is an essential element of the UK National Cycle Network. It is strongly recommended that the NRA, the design consultants and the Council reflect on the great potential for enhancing the visual interest and place-making dimensions of the route by incorporating quality public art and other design features into the scheme. (See, for example, the website of Sustrans as per the list of references in Appendix III).

9- Conclusion
An Taisce warmly welcomes the construction of the high quality cycling route between Mullingar and Athlone along the identified corridor. We believe that the facility has enormous potential to help create a wonderful tourism and recreational product for those in the Midlands, and will be a critical link in the long term EuroVelo network of Trans European cycle routes. If carefully linked to local amenities, it could also become a terrific utility cycling route.
We would however emphasise the following points:

- There needs to be good permeability (or “filtered permeability” as it is sometimes called, so as to indicate that there is permeability for cyclists and pedestrians but not motorised vehicles) – and good connections to the cycleway so as to encourage both local utility cycling and enhance the visitor experience.

- There is also a great need for widespread 30km/h zones in Athlone, Moate and Mullingar towns so as to complement the proposed route, improve general safety for pedestrians and cyclists, and encourage visiting cyclists to explore the town.

- A use of public art to adorn the route would enhance the visitor experience.

An Taisce trusts that our commentary will assist Westmeath County Council, the NRA and the design consultants with the next stage of the planning process.

I would be grateful if you could acknowledge our submission and advise us of any further decisions made in regard to this application.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

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APPENDIX I – FÁILTE IRELAND INFORMATION ON THE MAYO GREENWAY (Fáilte Ireland 2012)

In January 2012, the Mayo Greenway won the prize for best public project at the Local Authority Members Association (LAMA) awards. Read about one of the real success stories in adventure tourism in Ireland.

Background

- The world-class Great Western Greenway is a 42km traffic-free cycling and walking facility. It primarily follows the line of the famous Newport/Mulranny Railway, which opened in 1937. Its development has been made possible by agreement of local landowners who have given permissive access to users to pass through their lands. This route offers gentle gradients and some of the most idyllic scenery in the West of Ireland. The route forms part of the National Cycle Network, and it is the longest off-road cycling experience in the country.
- The first 14km stage of the Greenway opened in 2010, while the extension opened on 18 June 2011, lengthening the route to 42km, all off-road.
- The foundation stone for the construction of the Great Western Greenway was laid in March 2007 with the publication by Fáilte Ireland of the Sustrans report “A strategy for the development of Cycle Tourism”. The report identified Galway, Clifden, Westport and Achill in the West of Ireland as hub towns and suggested the development of a series of cycle loops from each of the hubs one of which should be family-friendly, while the other hubs should be linked via cycle-friendly routes or, where possible, via greenways.

Awards won

The Great Western Greenway is one of the real success stories for adventure tourism in Ireland. In January 2012 the Mayo greenway won the overall award as the best public project at the Local authority member’s association (LAMA) awards. In February 2012, the Mayo greenway won the public sector category at the Irish Times innovation awards presented in the Royal Hospital in Dublin.

Key players involved

- Fáilte Ireland/Department of Transport/Department of Rural affairs – provided funding
- Mayo County Council – secured access, developed the route/provided funding
- Local landowners – gave permissive access

Action taken

- Securing funding in principle
• Securing landowner permission, which eliminated the need for a CPO (compulsory purchase order) for the route
• Completion of the route from Newport to Mulranny in 2010 as stage one of the routes, helping to ensure that the rest of the route was secured and developed

**Achievements to date**

The Fitzpatrick’s report commissioned by Fáilte Ireland on the economic impact of the Greenway notes:

“Estimates derived from the study suggest that all direct expenditure associated with the Greenway would contribute to a projected €7.2m in spend in the local economy over a full year in 2011.

This expenditure includes:

• nearly €940,000 in expenditure by local residents, made up of 34,400 “visits” to or “uses” of the Greenway, at an average spend of €27.31 per visit or use
• over €3.5m in expenditure by domestic visitors, made up of 14,800 domestic visitors spending an average of €49.85 per day with an average length of stay of 4.8 days
• nearly €2.8m in expenditure by overseas visitors, made up of 8,000 overseas visitors spending an average of €50.71 per day with an average length of stay of 6.8 days
• contribution to a projected local economic impact of about €6.3m, which consists of nearly €2.8m in spend by overseas visitors and over €3.5m in spend by domestic visitors
• contribution to a projected national economic impact of nearly €2.8m, which consists of the spend by overseas visitors”

**Next steps**

• Support the formation and development of community and trade groupings that add value to the Greenway experience for visitors e.g. Gourmet Greenway, Artists Greenway etc.
• Become an active member of the EEWA Direction (EU Greenway Association) and apply best international practice to the Greenway.
• Support the expansion of the Mayo Greenway to incorporate the Connemara Greenway and expand the route from Galway to Clifden, Westport, Achill, Belmullet and on to Ballina.
• Pursue current research that supports the development of a Great Western Blueway along the coast of Mayo to mimic the existing Greenway project.
APPENDIX II – REFERENCES

Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government, (2012), 'Design Manual for Urban Roads and Streets'.
Mr. Eamonn Brennan, Administrative Officer, Forward Planning, Westmeath County Council), (2013), 'Letter to An Taisce,'