WESTMEATH COUNTY COUNCIL
Local Authority Development

File Ref. LA(M)-120

Planning Report in Accordance with Section 179 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended) and Part 8 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001 (as amended)
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Section 1

1.0 Site/Location Context

The proposed shared greenway extends along the towpath of the former Kilbeggan Branch from Kilbeggan Harbour on the northern end to the County Boundary with Co. Offaly at the Silver River aqueduct on the southern end. The route tracks the southern and western towpath from the Kilbeggan Harbour Buildings until Grange Bridge, where it crosses to the eastern towpath, from Grange Bridge to the County Boundary, encompassing a total distance of 5.6km. It is intended that this proposed route will then connect with a Part 8 proposal by Offaly County Council (OCC) to extend this cycleway/walkway from the County Boundary in a southerly direction, encompassing Bracklin Little and Wood-of-O and terminating at Campbells Bridge, Ballycommon (7.9km).

1.1 Origins of Proposal and Funding of Works

The proposed greenway (cycleway/walkway) along the former Kilbeggan Branch of the Grand Canal is identified as an important strategic link within the Midlands region by Westmeath County Council (WCC). The feasibility of securing this link and its development potential in principle has been included as an objective within respective County Development Plans over the past decade. WCC have succeeded in securing financial grant assistance by the Department of Rural and Community Development in 2018 which will provide for the delivery of this project in full within its administrative area. OCC succeeded in securing financial grant assistance for the delivery of Phase 1 within their administrative area (2018) of this greenway project and are awaiting a decision on an additional application made under the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme 2019 which, if approved will allow for the delivery of Phase 2 and the completion of this overall cycleway and walkway between Kilbeggan Harbour and Campbells Bridge, Ballycommon.

Both local authorities have collaborated with Waterways Ireland (Wl) (the landowner) in the preparation of respective Part 8 project proposals. It is envisioned that this greenway will assist in providing greater linkages to adjoining greenways, with an emphasis placed on linking the Grand Canal and the Royal Canal, whilst also including linkages with the National Cycleway Network/EuroVelo (to the north). The aim of the proposed greenway is two-fold,

1. Provide increased connectivity within this area by way of a segregated and scenic route for cyclists and walkers which can be enjoyed by local communities, visitors, and domestic & international tourism, and
2. Assist in acting as a catalyst for potential economic growth in increasing the tourism offering in this area and its surroundings.

1.2 Advertising and Referrals

This Part 8 proposal was advertised locally in the Westmeath Examiner (circulated 7th May 2019). 4 no. site notices were also erected at all intersections with public roads along the proposed route, notably; at 1. Kilbeggan Harbour, 2. Skeahanagh Bridge, 3. Grange Bridge and 4. Lowertown Bridge.
The application was also referred to the following prescribed bodies and internal sections within WCC:

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1.3** Consultation Process**

This Part 8 proposal was put on public display during the period Tuesday 7th May 2019 up to Tuesday 18th June 2019 (both dates inclusive) at the following locations:

1. Online on the Council’s website:
2. Westmeath County Council Offices, Áras an Chontae, Mount Street, Mullingar, Co. Westmeath.

1.4** Description and extent of the proposed development**

WCC in collaboration with WI propose the development of a shared walking and cycling greenway route, along the towpath of the former Kilbeggan branch of the Grand Canal encompassing a distance of 5.6km. A summary of the Project Proposed is set out in Figure 1 below:
Provision of Shared Cycleway

- c.5.6km upgrade of former towpath.
- Route deviates between the southern and western and eastern side in accordance with design of route proposed within administrative area of Co. Westmeath.

Path Widths

- Varies along the greenway from 1.8km to 3 m at its widest.
- Widths will be dictated by existing on-site features (including visual and environmental sensitivites, cultural heritage (incl. conservation artefacts associated with the former canal) and physical constraints.

Surfacing

- Improvements to the existing towpath along the former canal through the provision of suitable surfacing including 804 sub-base and Quarry Dust which will be the primary surface and surface dressing (to be utilised where deemed necessary and appropriate for vehicular access i.e. serving necessary agricultural use/ Waterways Ireland operations only). Other material finishes will be incorporated into the scheme where deemed appropriate.

Traffic Safety Measures

- Traffic Safety measures to facilitate safe pedestrian and cycling crossings.

Access Controls

- All associated ancillary works and integrated landscape plans, including the re-instatement of temporary construction footprint.

Ancillary Works

- Provision of access controls such as pedestrian and cycle friendly gates along the route.
- Signage will be erected at appropriate junctions/interfaces with public roads, to be agreed post construction following a Health and Safety Audit and prior to the greenway becoming fully operational.

Figure 1: Summary of Part 8 Proposed Greenway - Project Works
1.5 Policy Context

1.5.1 National & Regional Policy Context

Project Ireland 2040 - National Planning Framework 2018 (NPF): The NPF sets out a high-level strategic plan for shaping the future growth and development of the country to the year 2040. It identifies a number of key future planning and development and place-making policy priorities for the Eastern and Midlands Region including building on the progress made in developing an integrated network of greenways, blueways and peatways, that will support the diversification of rural and regional economies and promote more sustainable forms of travel and activity-based recreation utilising canal and former rail and other routes. It also supports tourism development and promotional branding to ensure that areas like the Midlands and Lakelands areas are developed and promoted in such a way as to play their full part in tapping the economic potential of regional and rural areas in the region.

The NPF includes National Strategic Outcomes which are relevant to the proposed project as follows:

National Strategic Outcome 3: Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities- Rural Development: Invest in greenways, blueways and peatways as part of a nationally coordinated strategy.

National Strategic Outcome 7: Enhanced Amenities and Heritage-Amenities and Heritage: Implementation of planning and transport strategies ... and other urban areas will be progressed with a major focus on improving walking and cycling routes, including continuous greenway networks and targeted measures to enhance permeability and connectivity.

Strategy for the Future Development of National and Regional Greenways (2018): This national strategy on greenways sets out five over-arching national objectives which will assist in the strategic development of nationally and regionally significant Greenways in appropriate locations, constructed to an appropriate standard in order to ensure the delivery of a quality experience for all users of the Greenway. Coupled with this, the national strategy aims to increase both the number and geographical spread of Greenways of scale and quality around Ireland, with a consequent significant increase in the number of people utilising greenways (i.e. both as a visitor experience and as a recreational amenity).

Smarter Travel – A Sustainable Transport Future - A new Transport Policy for Ireland 2009-2020: Smarter Travel national policy document recognises the vital importance of continued investment in transport to ensure an efficient economy and continued social development. The five key goals of smarter travel policy are: (i) to reduce overall travel demand, (ii) to maximise the efficiency of the transport network, (iii) to reduce reliance on fossil fuels, (iv) to reduce transport emissions and (v) to improve accessibility to transport.

National Cycle Policy Framework 2009- 2020

The National Cycle Policy Framework sets out a national policy for cycling, in order to create a stronger cycling culture, a more conducive environment for cycling and improved quality of life. The development of a national network of both rural and urban cycle routes is a specific objective of the National Cycling Policy Framework. The policy framework identifies the need to deliver high quality cycle routes on a nationwide basis so as to encourage cycling for transport, leisure, recreation and tourism. This policy document sets a target of 10% of all trips by bicycle by 2020 and places emphasis on promoting and integrating cycle networks.

The Draft RSES for the Eastern and Midlands Region (2019) contains the following Regional Policy Objectives with respect to the delivery of greenways:

Regional Policy Objective RPO 7.23: Greenways, Blueways and Peatways Promote the development of a sustainable Strategic Greenway Network of national and regional routes, with a number of high capacity flagship routes that can be extended and/or linked with local Greenways and other cycling and walking infrastructure.

Regional Policy Objective RPO 7.24: Support Local Authorities and state agencies in the delivery of sustainable strategic greenways, blueways, and peatways projects in the Region under the Strategy for the Future Development of National and Regional Greenways.

1.5.2 Local Policy Context

Westmeath County Development Plan 2014-2020 (WCDP)

Support for the development of a greenway link at this location is set out throughout the WCDP as follows;

Objective O-KBN14: To advance and facilitate proposals for the development of a walking and cycling route along the Grand Canal Branch from Kilbeggan to Ballycommon.

Objective O-RLC2: To seek the reopening of the Kilbeggan Branch of the Grand Canal and to secure its use as a walking route.

Objective O-WB10: To explore how the Grand Canal link at Kilbeggan could be used for amenity use including its possible re-opening, in co-operation with Offaly County Council within three years of implementation of the Plan.

1.6 Appropriate Assessment

Appropriate Assessment is now a standard legal requirement for all plans and projects likely to have a significant impact on European sites i.e. Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) or Special Protection Areas (SPA). Doherty Environmental Consultants Ltd. were jointly commissioned on behalf of WCC and OCC to undertake a Stage 1 Screening for Appropriate Assessment Report for the entire greenway (i.e. Kilbeggan Harbour to Campbells Bridge Ballycommon).

Seven European sites are located within a 15km radius of the proposed greenway in its entirety (i.e. Kilbeggan–Campbells Bridge, Ballycommon greenway), the nearest of which is Spit Hills and Long Hills Esker SAC, approximately 3km to the northeast of the proposed project. None of these sites are identified as occurring within the zone of influence of the project.

Having examined the content of the Stage 1 Screening for Appropriate Assessment which concluded that no likely significant effects are envisaged on the Natura 2000 Network arising from the development proposed and given the type, scale and location of project works proposed and the separation distance between these works and the nearest Natura 2000 sites it is considered that the proposed development, including construction stage works, is not likely to give rise to significant
adverse direct, indirect or secondary impacts on the integrity of any Natura 2000 sites having regard to their conservation objectives.

1.7 Environmental Impact Assessment

Minogue and Associates were jointly engaged by WCC and OCC to undertake an EIA Screening Report for the full scope of the proposed greenway project. This report concluded that, having considered the appropriate criteria, Environmental Impact Assessment for the Kilbeggan-Ballycommon Greenway is not required, as there will be no significant effects arising on the environment from the development proposed due to the following; the minor development footprint, the characteristics and sensitivities of the receiving environment and design and mitigation measures. Enhancement and compensation measures are proposed, including the avoidance of areas of environmental sensitivity, through reduction in towpath width, and provision included to provide for the oversight of construction works by an ecological clerk of works and post construction monitoring.

Given the existence and proposed reuse of towpath and lands associated with the previous route of the former Kilbeggan Branch line, additional land take associated with the proposed works are minor in nature being confined to resurfacing and removal of some overhanging vegetation. No tree removal is envisaged. Environmental management practices (Section 2.2 of EIA Screening Report) sets out for implementation and provides safeguards in relation to potential impacts.

Having considered the above and the content of the screening for EIA report prepared by Minogue and Associates, it is considered that an EIAR is not required in accordance with this Part 8 proposal.

Section 2

2.0 Public Observations/Submissions Received

5 submissions were received during the statutory public consultation period. A synopsis of the issues raised within these submissions and the Chief Executive response to each individual submission is set out in Section 2.1 below.

2.1 Summary of submissions and subsequent response from the Chief Executive to each submission received.

2.1.1 Submission 1: Fáilte Ireland, Áras Fáilte, 88-95 Amiens Street, Dublin 1 D01 WR86

- Expresses that Fáilte Ireland “are extremely supportive” of the proposed greenway from a tourism perspective, subject to all proper planning and environmental requirements being met.
- States that this greenway will provide a unique way for visitors to experience this part of Ireland’s Ancient East, and has the potential to deliver on the proposition behind the Ireland’s Ancient East brand which is premised on a journey of exploration through "5,000 years of history, in lush green landscapes, with stories told by the best storytellers in the world".
• Refers to growth in activity tourism globally and the potential growth in cycling, subject to the provision of infrastructure at the right place.
• Provides statistics on Overseas Travellers and the types of activity engaged in during their trip (main purpose of holiday), on an annual basis from the period 2012 to 2016.
• Refers to Fáilte Ireland’s cycle tourism market research (2013) and references the following in particular:
  - Cycling in Ireland has a core market potential of over 19.5m people within the main European markets alone.
  - Cycling Tourism Ireland refers to visitors’ particular preferences/expectations as the 4 S’, stating that these are also what greenways provide:
    • Scenery - beautiful scenery and landscape which needs to be varied
    • Segregated - traffic free
    • Safe - flat surfaces and good services
    • See and do - lots of activities, attractions and interesting villages.
• Concludes by stating that Fáilte Ireland considers that the proposed greenway will deliver on the “4 S” for Cycling Tourism and that it will also assist to increase the dwell time of those visitors using the greenway and in the surrounding area.

Chief Executive’s Response
Fáilte Ireland’s support is acknowledged and welcomed. From a tourism perspective, it is considered that the delivery of this greenway which will link the Grand Canal and Royal Canal is regionally important, in providing a segregated, scenic and safe cycleway/walkway to visitors from overseas and the domestic market. WCC is committed to promoting sustainable tourism within the County and considers that the proposed greenway will add to the tourism offering in Westmeath.

Chief Executive’s Recommendation
No change.

2.1.2 Submission 2: Offaly County Council, Àras an Chontae, Charleville Road, Tullamore, Co. Offaly, R35 F893

• Refers to the co-ordinated approach between OCC, WCC and Wl in relation to this joint Greenway from concept to planning stage and in relation to funding applications.
• Outlines the connectivity of this proposal with the Grand Canal greenway in Offaly.
• Considers that the proposal is of regional importance and national significance in providing a strategic link from the Grand Canal greenway to the Royal Canal greenway and the Old Rail Trail (EuroVelo2).
• Refers to linkages with OCCs Part 8 proposal which is currently on public display to construct a greenway from Ballycommon to the County Boundary with Westmeath.
• Outlines OCCs commitment to continued co-operation with WCC in providing for the delivery of a fully connected greenway network through the region. As such, OCC commends and welcomes this Part 8 development proposal.

Chief Executive’s Response
OCC’s support and commitment in relation to continued co-operation in the delivery of a fully connected greenway network through the region is noted and welcomed. The delivery of this regionally important greenway connecting Co. Westmeath with the Grand Canal greenway (Dublin to Shannon harbour) is reliant on continued co-operation with both Local Authorities and Waterways Ireland.
Chief Executive’s Recommendation

No change.

2.1.3 Submission 3: Renew Kilbeggan, C/o Mr. Dan Scally, Chairperson, Kilbeggan, Co. Westmeath

Renew Kilbeggan puts forward 3 no. suggestions in relation to the Part 8 proposal as follows:
- Requests that surfacing be tarmac as opposed to quarry dust (as proposed).
- Requests that a history, poetry, folklore, trail be developed along the route.
- Requests that the entire length/land area of the Kilbeggan branch be studied and developed as an ecological theme park, working where possible with farmers/landowners along the route.

Chief Executive’s Response

Renew Kilbeggan’s continued engagement with various Departments within WCC, in the interest of the overall enhancement of Kilbeggan, from a social, economic and environmental perspective is welcomed.

In terms of surface finishes, it is considered that quarry dust is an appropriate finish having regard to nature of the greenway within this rural setting, and the ability of such material to assimilate effectively into its surroundings. Furthermore, surface dressing will be utilised where deemed necessary (e.g. surface strengthening and/or to accommodate necessary agricultural use/WI operations).

WCC is supportive in principle of the suggestion put forward that a heritage trail (comprising history/poetry/folklore) be developed along this greenway, however, it is advised that such works do not form part of this Part 8 proposal. The County Westmeath Heritage Plan 2018-2023 sets out 5 overarching objectives in order to facilitate structured heritage development over the plan period including, ‘Raise awareness of the heritage of the County, promoting enjoyment and accessibility of heritage and promoting community participation in projects’, and in this regard, the suggested heritage trail is consistent with these objectives. It should be noted that WI also provides support to communities in pursuing such initiatives which are also endorsed by WCC (e.g. the Waterways Ireland Heritage Grant Scheme (launched in November each year).

Finally, the request for the Kilbeggan branch to be studied and developed as an ecological theme park, engaging where possible with farmers/landowners along the route is recognised. The merit of this proposal lies outside the remit and scope of this Part 8. However, it should be noted that WI has already commissioned a detailed ecological survey of the Kilbeggan Branch, identifying numerous high priority habitats and species. WCC will continue to engage in discussions with local community groups and WI in respect of projects, as appropriate, including the promotion of ecological awareness through for example, WI Citizen Science Projects.

Chief Executive’s Recommendation

No change.
2.1.4: Birdwatch Ireland, Kilbeggan Branch, C/o Mr. Tom O'Callaghan, Lynn Road, Mullingar

- Welcomes the proposal and commends all involved in the work carried out to date in the design and preparation of the project proposal.
- Welcomes in particular the intension to appoint an Ecological Clerk of Works to supervise works at key stages of development and proposals outlined in proposal which pertain to 'Enhancement of Species Rich Grassland Areas' (refer Section 2.5 of Planning Statement which accompanied Part 8 proposal).
- Welcomes proposal to carry out post construction monitoring of the calcareous grassland in Years 2, 4 and 6 post construction and requests that these monitoring reports be made available to the public as they are completed.
- Welcomes the Councils proposals to "provide for best practices in conserving and enhancing ecology and biodiversity as part of the proposed greenway" - and that "Works such as cutting or pruning of hedgerows/trees to be carried out, outside of the bird nesting season" (as outlined in Section 4.4.1 of Planning Statement which accompanied Part 8 proposal). Comments that hedge cutting and the use of pesticides has been undertaken in recent months (within the nesting season) at locations associated with the proposed greenway.
- States that consideration should be given to how the local community can support the design and development team to achieve the stated aims of the project in relation to protecting the biodiversity of the area into the future. In this regard, puts forward a suggestion - that the council encourage the establishment of a community biodiversity group to engage in raising public awareness of the rich biodiversity and habitats along this greenway and to engage in biological recording of birds, butterflies, bees, wildflowers etc. Further states that Birdwatch Ireland Westmeath branch are willing to support any such efforts.
- Submits four recommendations which relate to the management of the greenway once completed as follows:
  - That grass verges and hedgerows are managed as per the regimes outlined for roadside verges in the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan for Councils.
  - Signage should be provided along the pathway to inform the public that the path is being managed to support pollinators and other wildlife which would assist in creating public awareness of the delayed mowing regime.
  - That ongoing management of the hedgerows on this greenway should only be carried out by suitably trained and qualified persons and that they should also follow the advice of the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan for Councils.
  - If sections of grass verges or other areas are to be re-seeded after the pathway is completed, consideration to be given to native wildflower grassland seed mixes— as opposed to lawn seed (Lolium perenne).

Chief Executive's Response

Birdwatch Ireland’s (Westmeath Branch) support in relation to the development and on-going maintenance of the proposed greenway are noted and welcomed. WCC in conjunction with OCC have committed to engaging the services of an Ecological Clerk of Works to oversee the construction stage of this project, in an ecologically sensitive manner. Furthermore, the Councils have jointly engaged the services of Mitchell & Associates Landscape Architects, to provide their expertise on the incorporation of landscaping requirements (incorporating best practice) as part of the construction stage of this Part 8. Grass verges considerations will be determined by the Landscape Architect in line with best practice. All landscaping works associated with the construction of this greenway should be
undertaken in accordance with a landscape plan, under the supervision of the Ecological Clerk of Works.

The suggested recommendations which relate to signage and the on-going maintenance of this greenway are outside the remit of this Part 8. However, WCC endorses practical and positive measures that will collectively enhance and promote biodiversity within this greenway. In this regard, Section 2.10 Enhancement of the EIA Screening Report provides for a training programme to be provided to all relevant staff, in explaining the ecological importance of habitats and the implementation of a more relaxed mowing regime for areas supporting calcareous grasslands. WCC endorses Best Practices in protecting and enhancing the ecology associated with this greenway.

**Chief Executive’s Recommendation**

In relation to the issues raised, it is recommended that the Part 8 proposal be implemented as proposed (in line with EIA Screening Recommendations), subject to the following additional measure which seeks to promote biodiversity:

1. All landscaping works to be carried out in accordance with an approved Landscaping Plan to be prepared by suitably qualified person(s).

**2.1.5 Submission 4: The Irish Cycling Advocacy Network (ICAN), C/o Mr. Colm Ryder, Chairperson, cyclist.ie**

- Commends the Council’s progress on greenway development, however express dissatisfaction in a number of areas as follows:
  - Considers that the width of greenway proposed is inadequate and below TII’s Rural Cycleway Design (Offline) guidelines. Reference Table 4.1 Required Cross Section Widths.
  - States that details provided are insufficient to allow a full assessment of this proposal and suggest that the design proposed is more a walking recreational pathway rather than a rather than a combined cycling/walking Greenway.
  - Suggest that a quarry dust surface as the primary surface is not a suitable surface for a cycle route for the following reasons: this surfacing is not long lasting/requires regular maintenance and is a skid risk for bicycles (particularly on esker tops).
  - Comments that the proposal will provide for a negligible increase in cyclists (as per Climate Action Plan 2019) due to shortcomings in the design and failure to cater for utility cycling as opposed to recreational cycling.
  - States that the international experience is that inadequate widths lead to conflicts between walkers and cyclists.

**Chief Executive’s Response**

The specification proposed for this greenway has been designed to reflect environmental and landscape sensitivities and conforms to required standards, appropriate to its recreational function.

In relation to route widths, it should be noted that the proposal derived having regard to significant environmental sensitivities, which requires a reduction of the 3m path at locations along this greenway. This greenway route is along a disused canal which boasts significant landscape sensitivity and biodiversity and as such requires a more considered and informed design. WCC has applied a more restrained and sensitive approach to such an attractive stretch in order to protect the visual and
ecological amenities of the area and provide a more attractive greenway for the future visitors of this greenway.

It is considered that the visitors’ experience of this stretch of greenway which incorporates scenic and sensitive local landscape features will be enhanced by the proposed design. The TII Rural Cycleway Design (Offline) Standards (April 2017) (Publication Number DN-GE0-03047) document states the following: “In such cases, [e.g. environmental sensitivities] sufficient advantages might justify either a Relaxation within the standards or, in more constrained locations, a Departure from the standards. The various parameters quoted in this Standard are not, therefore to be regarded as sacrosanct in all circumstances”. It also states “A route should complement and where possible, enhance the area through which it passes.”

It is considered that the proposal in this instance satisfies the greenway requirements as set out in TII Standards Document particularly in relation to towpaths (“there will be situations whereby the cycleway will travel along canal towpaths, disused railway tracks, forest trails etc.”).

TII standards also state “Although a closed pavement construction is preferred by cyclists in terms of comfort and safety, there are occasions where a surface is required to give a sense of the environment. In rural cycleway and greenway situations, where the cycleways attractiveness is just as important as comfort, dust path construction or other loose material construction may be the preferred option in order to blend with the environment and to avoid unnecessary impacts in forests, along protected heritage trails, tow paths and along river banks.”

Having regard to the above given nature and function of the proposed greenway it is considered that the proposed greenway is in line with these standards.

Chief Executive’s Recommendation

No change.

Section 3

3.0 Conclusion

The greenway proposed is consistent with national, regional and local policy and conforms to required standards in terms of the design proposed. This proposed greenway along the former Kilbeggan Branch, will provide c.13 kilometres in its totality of a segregated off-road experience within an attractive quaint, rural environment of varying landscape types of high biodiversity value areas of interest. The natural heritage value attributed to this greenway will also engage the visitor/tourist (network of eskers which surround the greenway (Lowertown Bridge section), bogland, forestry and open agricultural lands). This proposed greenway forms an important direct extension of the Grand Canal which extends from Dublin to Offaly and will also provide for a segregated regionally important link.

3.1 Chief Executive Recommendation

It is considered that the provision of a cycleway/walkway along the former Kilbeggan branch of the Grand Canal is consistent with the provisions of the WCDP 2014-2020 and in line with the proper
planning and sustainable development of the area. It is recommended that the development proceeds in accordance with the scheme documentation, subject to compliance with the following:

1. The development shall be constructed in accordance with plans and particulars submitted with this Part 8 application together with the recommendations contained within the Environmental Impact Assessment Screening Report undertaken by Minogue and Associates.

2. All landscaping works to be carried out, under the supervision of the Ecological Clerk of Works, in accordance with a Landscaping Plan to be prepared by suitably qualified person(s) and submitted to the Planning Authority for approval.

Pat Gallagher
Chief Executive

Date

08/06/2019