

# Reference Planning Application 1718

## The Barrow Blueway



**Submission by:**

**County Carlow Chamber of Commerce, Industry & Tourism CLG**

**Gateway Business Centre**

**Athy Road**

**Carlow**

**Contact: Brian O'Farrell, CEO**

## Foreword

County Carlow Chamber of Commerce, Industry & Tourism CLG wish to make a submission on the proposed development of the Barrow Blueway by Waterways Ireland. The Chamber strongly urges the County Councils of Carlow, Laois and Kildare to approve the application and to ensure that they work together with Waterways Ireland in developing the River Barrow Towpath into the multi-use shared leisure route that will define the new standard for similar projects across the country.

Developing the Barrow Blueway will allow everyone to take time out to explore Ireland's unique waterscape, turning the area into a multi-activity recreational trail alongside an idyllic setting.

The Barrow Towpath provides a scenic route into the heart of rural Ireland which can be enjoyed by canoe, bike or on foot. Developing this will allow even more people to connect with friends and family as they escape to a unique natural environment. The impacts from the completion of this project would be wide ranging both directly and indirectly on businesses and communities throughout the county and beyond.

## County Carlow Chamber

The County Carlow Chamber was established over 70 years ago, working on behalf of member businesses to assist in the social and economic development of Carlow. The Chamber has lead on many projects over the years and continues to work on behalf of members on a range of policy priorities.

The County Carlow Chamber currently represents over 170 businesses throughout the County including many of the county's largest employers. In total, Chamber members employ approx. 4500 people across the county operating in a range of sectors including tourism, retail, manufacturing, services and education. Carlow businesses also contribute over €14m annually in commercial rates towards the local economy, that is in addition to the contributions from employment, taxation and significant contributions through community support and sponsorship.

The members of the chamber operate in a range of sectors, these member companies and individuals bringing a wide range of skills and expertise to the organisation which assists in defining the direction and focus of the Chamber.

## Barrow Way Survey

In mid-2017, County Carlow Chamber surveyed its members for their opinions in relation to the Barrow Towpath project. The survey was designed to gain input and understanding from Chamber members in relation to the proposed development of the River Barrow Towpath by Waterways Ireland.

## Results of the Survey

In the survey, members were asked if they were in favour of the Barrow Towpath Development Project going ahead, 90.7% of respondents indicated that they are in favour of the project going ahead. There was a strong view among the responses in favour of the project that it would act as a significant tourism asset for Carlow and the region, and potentially be a catalyst for growth in the tourism industry. Responses also highlighted that the development would make the towpath more accessible to everyone, particularly individuals who cannot enjoy it at present for various reasons including those with limited mobility. In its current form the towpath can become impassable at times and the surface is not suitable for those who are infirm, wheelchair bound or pushing a child's buggy.

Of the remaining responses, 4.6% indicated that they were undecided on the matter while another 4.6% indicated that they were not in favour of the project proceeding. The main reasons given by members who were not in favour of the project were that they felt it should not proceed for environmental reasons or that the River Barrow Towpath is currently underpromoted as an amenity and that should be changed.

The members were asked if they felt that there was enough information available on the project in the public domain. This question was included as it was very important to ensure that individuals and businesses could make a properly informed decision on the proposed development. In total 73% felt there was enough information available with 26.6% indicating that they did not feel they had adequate information on the project.

The towpath development spans over 115km and the majority of this development runs through Co. Carlow. The impacts from the completion of this project would be wide ranging both directly and indirectly on businesses throughout the county and beyond. While these impacts are not yet fully evident, respondents were asked whether they felt the development of the towpath could impact on their business. 33.9% felt it would have a direct impact on their business and an additional 32.3% said that they were unsure about the potential impact. The remaining 33.8% said that they didn't feel that it would have an impact on their particular business.

## Details

- As stated under Policy 8 in the Carlow County Development Plan 2015 – 2021; it is the policy of Carlow County Council to “Consider the development of off-road routes, such as disused railway lines and bridle paths, for both walking and cycling to improve access to rural tourist attractions and support the development of the ‘Barrow Corridor’ in County Carlow in connection with adjoining Local Authorities”.

There is a responsibility on the council to ensure that the development of the path is completed in such a way as to improve access, not just to the section in Co. Carlow, but also in collaboration with the other stakeholders. The provision of a route which is both accessible to reach and also designed to be accessible for all to utilise is a key factor. In its current form, the Barrow Towpath is not accessible to everyone.

- The Carlow County Development Plan 2015 – 2021 also recognises the value of the asset advising:  
The Barrow Corridor is a significant natural asset to County Carlow with great potential for tourism and recreation, subject to a sustainable approach to all development. The Corridor provides particular opportunities for;
  - Boating and cruising development
  - Nature and Wildlife Sites of interests
  - Cultural tourism
  - Activities along tourism trails
  - Enhancement of the Barrow Way and South Leinster Way Trail and walks along old railway lines such as the Borris Viaduct
  - Fishing and Angling

It is vital to protect the history and heritage of the Barrow Towpath while also telling the story of the area and all 115km of the route. Ireland's Ancient East showcases Ireland's living culture and ancient heritage and brings it to life through stories, many of which link to the Barrow path, and these combine to create unique visitor experiences, unite stakeholders and support vibrant communities.

The goal of Failte Ireland is “To make Ireland’s Ancient East the most personally engaging cultural destination in Europe by harnessing the authentic character of the real Ireland, its living culture, lush landscapes and hidden history, opening it up for everyone.

When we achieve this, we support sustained economic growth and community wellbeing whilst valuing our heritage, history and environment.”

The Barrow towpath in its current form is not open for everyone to access and enjoy, unless work under the proposal is given permission to proceed then the single greatest tourism asset in the East of Ireland will fail in meet the objectives established of both Failte Ireland and Irelands Ancient East.

- The Planning Submission by waterways Ireland includes research which was carried out by Amárach Research in July 2015, whereby they surveyed users of the Barrow Towpath. The research highlighted one of the current issues which exists with the Barrow Towpath

currently. Of users surveyed, 1% reported mobility issues and only 23% had children with them.

The current surface of the Barrow Towpath is not suitable for individuals with mobility issues due to a number of factors, including the uneven surface, wet muddy and slippery conditions, and lack of suitable rest areas or amenities.

The Census 2016 showed that the number of people with a disability increased by 47,796 between 2011 and 2016 and stood at 643,131 in April 2016, accounting for 13.5% of the population. Among those aged under 20, there was an increase of 11,828 persons (15.6%) with a disability since 2011. This represented a disability rate of 6.7% in this group (up from 6% in 2011).

It is vital that in planning for now and also in planning for the future that we consider and ensure that areas such as the Barrow Towpath are accessible for all to enjoy and appreciate.

- It has been highlighted by some parties in their argument against the development that the current grass surface dictates the pace, a pace which accommodates both walkers and joggers and cyclists, advising that no one can go so fast that they intimidate or endanger any other user.

The only potentially wheeled users of the Barrow path are not just cyclists; rather we need to ensure that the surface is suitable for wheelchairs & push buggies.

The current grass surface in the majority of places is unsuitable for these users, and thus prevents them from enjoying the full potential of the Barrow Towpath.

- The National Trails Office Guide to Planning and Developing Recreational Trails in Ireland indicates that a sustainable trail is required “to be valued and supported by the local communities”. The results of the survey conducted by County Carlow Chamber clearly indicate that there is strong support for the planned development of the Barrow towpath.
- The Irish Trails Office Strategy also states that “sustainable management (for trails) is defined as – meeting the needs of today without negatively impacting on future generations”. This planned development will help to sustain the valuable resource which is the Barrot Towpath into the future. The Barrow Towpath was originally a hard surface, as the path had a commercial use, facilitating the towing of barges along the river by horses. The use of a hard surface then even highlights the fact that in years past, the users of the area realised that the need for such a surface was vital to accommodate its use year round.

## Conclusion

County Carlow Chamber urges the Council to approve the application and to ensure that they work together with Waterways Ireland and the neighbouring County Councils in developing the River Barrow Towpath into the multi-use shared leisure route that will define the new standard for similar projects across the country.

It is vital that this opportunity is not lost to the region, we need to ensure that there is collaboration amongst the stakeholders to bring this to fruition. The Barrow Towpath Development does, can and will form part of a wider asset in the development of the region. The Waterford Greenway has been hailed a huge success since it was officially opened in March 2017, and already plans are being reviewed for the extension of a greenway from Waterford, through South Kilkenny towards New Ross. To develop this would provide a linkage meaning that visitors and locals would walk from Kildare through to Dungarvan.

The results of the survey conducted by the Chamber showed overall that a strong majority of respondents are in favour of the Barrow Towpath development going ahead as they see the potential this has for the growth and development of Carlow and the region as a tourist destination and its potential to create further investment and jobs in this area. In addition, it was noted that the works would ensure that the towpath is more accessible for everyone to enjoy.

This submission by the County Carlow Chamber is not just the voice of one in relation to the proposed development, rather the voice of the collective membership where the majority showed strongly in favour of the proposed development by Waterways Ireland.