



To Wicklow County Council

Planning Department

Wicklow

August 2011

Friends of the Murrough Pre draft submission regarding Wicklow Town and Environs Local Area Plan.

The Friends of the Murrough welcome the integration of these two Local Area Plans, particularly as this group's primary concern is the coastal strip from Kilcoole to Wicklow Head, one of Wicklow's key assets which has hitherto been much neglected.

VISION

Our vision for the future of the coastal strip would embrace the concept that this strip is a recreational amenity of national importance without compromising either the protected habitat and birds in the area or its tranquil beauty

The coastal strip has been used for recreation for centuries past as outlined in the history below. In recent years, (despite coastal erosion which has greatly reduced the public space available), numerous groups and individuals continue to take advantage of one of the few significant areas of open space along the east coast.

This is particularly relevant as much of the 30 miles of coast in county Wicklow is now privatised, developed or in other ways not accessible to the public. Indeed access to the cliff walk south of the town is barely accessible now due to a lack of maintenance of the path and the continuing encroachment of the local golf club though people still find their way through barbed wire fences.

Access to the Murrough has also diminished, particularly in the current period of development, but beyond the section closest to the town, there remains an unspoiled coastal strip framed by long views towards the Wicklow Mountains.

The scenery on the Murrough with lakes, wetlands, seashore and the backdrop of the Wicklow mountains – the cliffs and quiet little bays on the cliff walk make it a potential tourist destination of national importance. It is within reach by public transport from Dublin and is in walking distance of the primary growth centre and county town for Wicklow.

The Murrough is used by a range of local clubs and individuals as follows.

Bird watching

Due to the range of birds found in this area and the encouragement provided by Birdwatch Ireland from their HQ at Blackditch, bird watching has become a significant activity in this area. Birds include Fulmar, Shag, Herring Gull, Kittiwake, Guillemot, Razorbill, Puffin, Kingfisher, Little Egret, Greenland White-fronted Goose and Whooper Swan, ducks, waders, Short-eared Owl, Hen Harrier and Peregrine Falcon to name a few.

Photography and painting

The iconographic beauty of the area has inspired many artists whose work is sold at home and abroad, bringing fame and notoriety to the county.

Fishing

The 18 kilometer stretch of coastline between Greystones and Wicklow town is the most productive fishing area on Ireland's east coast. Most of the angling takes place on the sloping shingle beach running between the two towns. Access to intermediate points along this stretch is from the Kilcoole and Newcastle villages on the Greystones - Wicklow coast road. Small boat fishing is very popular with launching available in Wicklow harbour.

Sailing

Wicklow Sailing Club meets at the end of the quays and makes active use of the coast line. The visual attractiveness of the coast here, so close to the town, plays an important part in bringing major competitions to the area.

Rowing

There is a very active rowing club in Wicklow and regular events are held along the Murrough. The annual summer regatta is focused on this area and is a significant economic driver for the town

Swimming

Whilst swimming is not recommended along all the bay, the area nearest the town is popular for organised and casual swimming

Athletics

Inbhear Dee Athletics Club run frequent races along the Murrough and naturally the flat land makes a popular training ground for aspiring athletes. The area also proved useful during training for Special Olympics and for joggers. This facility is not available elsewhere.

Hang gliding

In recent years the lawns were used for power assisted hang gliding

Special Events

Regular public firework displays

Charity Events eg 7th Summer Family 5k Walk on behalf of the Cancer society and other Family Fun Runs

Walking and picnicking

Studies undertaken in 1966 for the Nature Park Feasibility Study indicated large numbers of people accessing the Murrough to walk. 15 years later, when the town has tripled in size, far more people are walking in an area reduced by erosion. The area is seriously degraded and the extension of industrial zoning north of the rail crossing has created a poorer visual outlook with considerably more litter blowing over from the developed areas. Despite this degradation the land continues to be a popular walk, close to the town, with views of the seascape and beyond the development to the Wicklow hills.

Circular walks are particularly popular and could be opened up along Broadlough and around Wicklow Head

THE VALUE OF SPACE FOR RECREATIONAL AMENITY

* Tourist potential

The opportunities here have been outlined in the previous section listing all the activities that take place along the strip. Studies have indicated the difficulty of bringing significant industrial employment to this area due to poor communications and weak urban structure. However if the environmental quality is protected then Wicklow town should have a bright future based on significant development of the tourist industry. The sensitive development of the Murrough will be vital if this potential is to be realised.

The benefits of providing good quality environments to the local economy and the tourism sector are exemplified in the report on the Economic Value of Nature, by Lorcan O'Toole from the Golden Eagle Trust (see attached). For example

Hiking and Cross Country Walking is the commonest activity noted amongst holidaymakers (830,000) and was over four times more important than the next commonest activity listed, Golfing (143,000). (Fáilte Ireland Tourism Facts).

The Friends of the Murrough recommend that these facts are given at least equal weight with other interest groups or land owners seeking industrial development opportunities which may be met in a variety of other sites around the town. It is not true that all development is good.

* Visual amenity

The sheer beauty of the Murrough with uncommonly long views across sea, lakes and mountains adds significantly to the quality of life in the area

It is now generally understood the environmental quality of life in a town has considerable impact on the potential economic development of an area. This is referred to in the National Spatial Strategy, Regional Planning Guidelines and at length in the draft Public Realm Plan for Wicklow. The economic spin off from the use of the Murrough for recreational purposes is also obvious though yet to be quantified.

In some countries quality of life indices are used in addition to Gross National Product as an indicator of the progress of the nation. The Happiness Index is acquiring increasing acceptance as a valuable indicator.

This new plan should allow for the collection of data so that the implementation of objectives can be monitored. Criteria relating to well-being should be included in this. Examples can be found in the development plans of other places in Ireland.

* Health Impact

There are also health impacts that affect both quality of life and economic factors. The Institute of Public Health in Ireland published a review of Health Impacts of the Built Environment in 2006. This draws on various research papers and notes for example that physical activity reduces the risk of obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes and stress, but according to the World Health Organisation, 60% of the world's population do not achieve the minimum amount of daily physical activity needed to bring about health benefits.

A review of the economic benefits of green space estimated that provision of greenspace to bring about a 1% change in the sedentary population could have an economic value ranging from £479 million to £1442 million per year depending on whether older people (75+) were included or excluded in the analysis. The report concluded that the impact of physical activity on cardiovascular disease, musculo-skeletal diseases, stroke and cancer was measurable,

Evidence from elsewhere suggests that the presence of green spaces can be beneficial to mental health.

* Urban environments that lack public gathering places can encourage sedentary living habits, while the provision of attractive parks and open spaces can facilitate opportunities for exercise. The likelihood of being physically active may be up to three times higher in residential environments that contain high levels of greenery, and the likelihood of being overweight or obese may be up to 40% less . Green spaces can have a positive impact on health through providing:

- A space for communities to meet and interact
- A place to exercise
- A place to relax
- A pleasant visual experience
- A barrier to reduce environmental noise
- A filter to improve air quality

The health effects of exposure to poor air quality have also been extensively studied. Long-term exposure to high levels of air pollution can reduce life expectancy by a year or more. There is also increasing evidence that air pollution impacts on the cardiovascular as well as the respiratory system. Some population groups are more vulnerable to air pollutants, including very young children, the elderly, those with cardio-respiratory disease, those who are exposed to other toxic materials that add to or interact with air pollutants, and the socio-economically deprived. Green spaces can positively influence health through their contribution to improved air quality. Vegetation removes pollutants, whether gases or dust-related and this effect is seen on all sizes of particulate pollution and with all traffic-related pollution.

Deteriorating physical features of urban environments such as dilapidated environments, vandalism, graffiti and litter can also harm health. Studies have highlighted how such environments can impact on both mental and physical health through reduction in physical activity, increased anxiety among residents and increased social disorder. People are more likely to exercise if the scenery is enjoyable.

The likelihood of using public open space for physical activity increases with increasing ease of access. Qualitative research has found that access to free facilities is an important factor influencing activity.

Slí na Sláinte has already designated as number of walks in the vicinity and it is proposed that further grants might be available from the Heart Foundation.

REVIEW OF CURRENT DEVELOPMENT PLANS – THE COASTAL STRIP HAS DETERIORATED IN RECENT YEARS..

This coastal strip meets many of the criteria highlighted for attention in several existing County Wicklow documents such as the Outdoor Recreation Strategy, the Heritage Plan, the Biodiversity Action Plan, the Wicklow Public Realm Plan.

Each of these documents highlight the importance of developing and protecting areas such as the coastal strip which are characterised by high quality environment.

The coastal strip is also singled out for attention in both earlier development plans yet on the whole, the ambiance of the strip has deteriorated since the last plan period. With the collapse of the economy the aspirations for developing the urban quarter have not been met and unfortunately the infrastructural improvements (roads and sewage) have resulted in unexpected damage to the amenity value of the strip.

The Wicklow Town Plan proposal for an Action Area Plan has not been progressed and the worthy objectives of the earlier plans have not been fulfilled. Currently in this area there have been some welcome upgrading of existing commercial structures and the establishment of a number of recycling businesses which appear to be difficult to regulate sufficiently to avoid public nuisance, primarily noise and visual intrusion. The objectives in the current Environs Plan have proved too vague to contribute anything useful.

Further north have been number of tentative proposals for development, mainly quite inappropriate for the area and none designed to take advantage of the splendid natural environment, nor to develop tourist potential of the area. Some land owners in the area do not see any reason why they shouldn't block off ancient rights of way with large industrial fencing.

The development plan should make the vision for this area very clear so that all stakeholders are completely clear about their rights and responsibilities. The plan is a contract between the local authority, developers and the public and should speak plain clear language so that there are no misunderstandings

Friends of the Murrough would state categorically that we would not support any proposal for more industrial development, including a new port, in this area as we believe that further industrialisation of this area would undermine the development of the town's tourist potential which we believe to be more viable in the long term.

To provide some context for this submission there follows an outline of the history of the coastal strip:

HISTORY OF THE MURROUGH

The first settlers in Wicklow Town date from the stone-age period. They were associated with a settlement on a high bank of the Vartry River. Later, the Vikings arrived around the 9th Century and tradition relates that they had a settlement at the Round Mount, also overlooking the river. There seems to have been a Viking settlement on the Murrough, as a richly decorated remnant of a Viking sword was found in that locality towards the end of the 19th Century.

Older residents of our town will remember the Murrough mostly as a recreational area where there was ample open ground to accommodate playing pitches for football and hurling, a small golf course, horse and dog racing. The Murrough was also a venue for school sports. It was much frequented by families who could spend the day swimming, cycling, fishing or boating either on the lakes or at the sea. For walkers, there was always unhindered access to the lakeside at Broadlough and the long stretch of coastline going north towards Kilcoole area. Most of the festivities associated with the annual regatta centred on the Murrough area and it was also a great location for travelling circuses and fun fairs during the summer season.

Following a dispute in 1970s concerning walkers' rights, the judge ruled that the public had the right to roam in that region but a large area of the lakeside at Broadlough has been inaccessible since 2005 with barbed wire down to the water's edge, while walking at the upper Murrough around Five Mile Point is also restricted due to wire fencing erected by Iarnrod Eireann.

The new road bridge presented some opportunities to open up a circular walk along the Murrough and back beside the lake however this has not progressed despite willing cooperation from the local landowner.

HISTORY OF THE CLIFF WALK

Records show that a traditional right of way exists, extending from Wellfield (Black Castle area) to Wicklow Head, and indeed the senior citizens of our town would testify that this walk has been in place for generations. Older residents of our town, some in their mid-nineties and closely associated with Wicklow lighthouse, recall that they often walked this area as children. Irish Lights maintained the roadway leading to the lighthouse.

Bride's Head, situated on this walk, is an area of particular historical interest. At the entrance to the canyon there is a fresh-water well (Bride's Well) from which local fishermen drank in the belief that it would keep them safe. It is possible to make out the outline of the foundations of a Penal Church which was erected in the late 17th Century to serve the spiritual needs of the local community during that sad period of our history. Close to the beach we can see the remains of an old lime kiln which gives

its name to the little bay, while in a cave nearby some workings have been found dating from the Stone Age period – over 5,000 years ago. Apparently a knapper carried on his business there, producing flints for arrow-heads and axes. There has obviously been human habitation in the area for a very long time.

Further on, at Wicklow Head, stands the old octagonal tower, which was constructed in the late 1770's and which served as a lighthouse – it was powered by candles! It now serves as a holiday home.

In 2002 the Councils erected wire barriers along with notices across this traditional walk in order to prevent access, as they considered certain parts of the pathway to be dangerous. No effort has since been made to repair this pathway, although the public still continues to walk there.

There was an objective in the current plan (4.6 Open Space OS4) to request funding to study the establishment of a tourist trail along the cliff walk however this does not appear to have happened to date though Friends of the Murrough have themselves prepared a costed proposal which will be presented to the Council very soon.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The coastal strip be identified as a key resource for eco-tourism development and an integrated Action Plan be developed to regulate development proposals in line with its potential to provide active and passive outdoor recreation and associated amenities that do not compromise the biodiversity or tranquility of the area.
- We would like to encourage eco-tourism, specifically ornithologists, anglers, walkers, photographers, artists, etc. That is to say that we want to encourage tourists who have a respect for protected areas,
- That objectives and routes be mapped to develop walks and in particular circular walks both around the Murrough and Broadlough, and also around Wicklow Head. (see attached map)
- The educational value of the areas for ecology students could also be highlighted. A Management Plan would ensure information points for tourists when, for example birds would be nesting, or which areas should be out of bounds, or where binoculars or viewing points might be provided etc.
- A Management plan would also set out what is and what is not suitable tourism development Whilst a fun fair might be appropriate in the urban section of the strip it would not be suitable further north of course.

- The new plan should include a clear objective to complete a Local Biodiversity Action Plan for the entire coastal strip within 12 months
- Zoning for new built development should be reduced, and current sites along the Murrough de-zoned as there are plenty of other empty zoned sites in the town that are most unlikely to be developed now for several plan periods
- That previous objectives to identify the Murrough as a suitable site for a new port not be repeated. This is no longer a viable proposal and to retain it in the plan will blight the potential of tourist development.
- Any remaining sites zoned and/or developed for business and light industry should contain specific set of controls to regulate the height of buildings, noise and light emissions with constraints tighter than those generally applied.
- Clearly identify in text and on maps the rights of way
 - along the Murrough and the circular walk around the sea side of Broadlough,
 - along the cliffs from Black Castle to Wicklow Head
 - The circular walk from the Dunbur Coast Road (at the entrance opposite the red gates that lead to lighthouse) running along the back of Sea Point and Sea field to exit at Dunbur Park near the hockey pitch.
- Clearly identify views and prospects. This does not automatically reject any development but ensures that any development is sensitive to the location.

The sites should include:

- the view south towards Wicklow town from the railway bridge footpath
- the views, north and south along the Vartry river from the new flyover.
- The view towards the Murrough from the new Town Relief Road between the Friars Hill Junction and the Rocky Road Junction

Note.

Friends of the Murrough was reactivated some years ago because the public were increasingly suffering the loss of certain amenity areas of the Murrough and Broadlough, together with other traditional walkways from the Black castle to Wicklow Head. The organisation has the support of 2,500 signatories together with an additional 1200 who give us support on line. A public meeting to discuss the issue was attended by two hundred people.

Contact

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