

The Great Western Greenway – a 42km traffic-free cycling and walking trail – follows the route of the Westport to Achill railway, which closed in 1937.



ON THE TRAIL OF IRELAND'S GREENWAY ROUTES



There's been a growing appetite by overseas visitors and locals alike to enjoy Ireland's scenic walking and cycling routes, since Mayo County Council first opened the Great Western Greenway in 2010. Deirdre O'Flynn gives a rundown on current and upcoming projects under the Greenways Development Strategy to hit the trails north and south.

Greenways are trails designed for shared use by leisure walkers and cyclists and, according to Fáilte Ireland, "are one of the biggest success stories of Irish tourism that have brought transformative benefits to local communities".

Three million overseas tourists engaged in hiking and cross country walking and cycling in 2018 alone, and with an increasing popularity in Irish trails and walkways, the country's local authorities, government and tourism bodies have been quick to respond.

The Government responded in 2018 with a €53m Greenways Development Strategy for 2019 to 2021, to increase the number,

length, and regional spread of off-road walking and cycling tracks across the country. The long-term strategy falls under Project Ireland 2040, under which many councils applied for greenways funding.

MAYO FIRST TO MAKE ITS MARK!

They follow on from Mayo County Council's successful involvement in developing the Great Western Greenway in 2010, followed by Waterford County and City Council's Waterford Greenway, which first opened to the public in 2017.

Indeed, an estimated quarter of a million people use the Great Western Greenway annually, while up to 280,000 people visited



The 46km Waterford Greenway links Waterford City and Dungarvan along the old Waterford to Mallow railway line.

the Waterford Greenway from its opening in 2017 to November 2019, according to Fáilte Ireland. Two-thirds of those visitors – 68 per cent – said the Greenway was the main motivation for their visit to Waterford.

One of the goals of the Greenways Development Strategy is to replicate the success of Newport on the Great Western Greenway, Kilmacthomas on the Waterford Greenway, and Moate along the Old Rail Trail in other locations around the country.

“We see the benefit of greenways in providing local employment to host communities, in making a significant economic contribution, giving confidence to the tourism industry to diversify and expand and, most importantly, giving visitors a compelling reason to visit Ireland,” noted Fiona Monaghan, Fáilte Ireland’s Head of Activities.

GOING THE GREENWAY ROUTE

North, south, east and west, here’s a rundown of the some greenway routes around Ireland, and also those due to hit the greenway trail over the coming months:



The goal of the North West Greenway Network, due to be completed by December 2021, is to develop 46.5km of cross-border greenway in the region.

Great Western Greenway, Co Mayo: 42km traffic-free cycling and walking trail following the route of the Westport to Achill railway, which closed in 1937. Attracting 80,000 visitors who spent €7m in its first year in 2010, it has been a huge success and a case study for subsequent greenways on the entire island. <http://greenway.ie/>

GREENWAY DEVELOPMENTS

Waterford Greenway: 46km Greenway linking Waterford City and Dungarvan along the old Waterford to Mallow railway line. With 11 bridges, three viaducts, the Durrow Tunnel, Mount Congreve, Waterford & Suir Valley narrow gauge heritage railway, the Comeragh Mountains, and sea views aplenty, the greenway has proved to be a big hit with tourists. <https://www.facebook.com/WaterfordGreenway/>

Great Southern Trail Greenway: 39km route along an old railway line that connects the three market towns of Rathkeale, Newcastlewest and Abbeyfeale in West Limerick. Among its highlights are Norman castles, abbeys, medieval ruins, workhouses, famine graveyards, deserted railway stations, and a viaduct. www.limerick.ie/great-southern-greenway-limerick

Grand Canal Way: 117km route, following the towpath of the Grand Canal from Lucan Bridge, near Dublin's Adamstown, through Co. Kildare and on to Shannon Harbour, Co. Offaly. Visitors will come across the locks that kept canal traffic afloat and lock-keepers' cottages whose residents helped to keep the route ticking over in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Royal Canal Way: 146km from Ashdown in Dublin, through Kildare, Meath, and Westmeath to Cloondara in Longford. Work is ongoing on the towpaths, so the entire route is not fully accessible. Expected to be completed during 2020, 90km of the Royal Canal Way will form part of the proposed Dublin to Galway East-West Link. <http://royalcanal.ie/>

Galway to Dublin Cycleway: This will be Ireland's first dedicated inter-city route for cyclists and walkers. Stretching 276km, it is part of the Capitals Route, an international touring route extending from Galway to Moscow, and part of the EuroVelo network of long-distance cycling routes in Europe.

Taking in Counties Galway, Roscommon, Westmeath, Meath, Kildare and Dublin, route users will travel alongside canals, rivers, disused railway lines and purpose-built cycle paths. As of

GREENWAYS GOING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

In June 2019, the government named the following nine local authorities who secured €40m of the €53m Greenways Development Strategy fund. "This investment will see Ireland with a network of around 500km of Greenways," said then Minister of State for Tourism, Brendan Griffin TD.

- Cork County Council: Middleton-Youghal Greenway (€8m).
- Galway County Council: Connemara Greenway (€2.6m).
- Kerry County Council: Tralee-Fenit section of Great Southern Greenway (€3m). Extension of Great Southern Greenway westwards into Kerry (€3.5m)
- Mayo County Council: Clew Bay Greenway (€3.2m)
- Waterford County Council: Waterford Greenway (€2.65m)
- Offaly County Council and Waterways Ireland: Grand Canal Greenway (€2.35m)
- Kildare County Council and Waterways Ireland: Grand Canal Greenway (€1.7m)
- Wexford County Council: New Ross Greenway (€8m)
- Wicklow County Council: Blessington Lake Loop (€5m)

One of those projects, the New Ross Greenway is set for completion by the end of 2021. "Part of the greenway will run alongside the River Barrow, Ireland's second longest river," said Tony Larkin, Director of Services at Wexford County Council. "And it will open to views of Ireland's longest bridge, the newly-opened Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Bridge."

In January, the government opened an applications process for greenways funding following the allocation of €4.5m to greenways from the Carbon Tax Fund in the October 2018 Budget. The plan is to progress a number of Greenways to 'shovel-ready status' in time for the next round of construction funding from 2022-2024.



February, 100km of the Greenway have been completed and it is possible to travel along the route from Athlone Town to Maynooth, Co. Kildare. A cycle-hub will also be created at Athlone Castle, acting as a mid-point focus of the Galway to Dublin cycleway. <https://www.galwaytodublincycleway.ie/>

North West Greenway Network: This cross-border project is led by Derry City and Strabane District Council (DCSDC), working in partnership with Donegal County Council, the Department for Infrastructure and Sustrans (the UK-based walking and cycling charity).

The goal is to develop 46.5km of cross-border greenway in the North West, with links to Buncrana, Lifford, and Muff in Co Donegal. To be completed by December

GREENWAY DEVELOPMENTS



The 39km route of the Great Southern Trail Greenway follows an old railway line connecting Rathkeale, Newcastlewest and Abbeyfeale in West Limerick.

2021, it has received €14.8m from the EU's INTERREG VA programme and matched funding from the Department for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport in Ireland. <http://www.donegalcoco.ie/community/nwgreenway/>

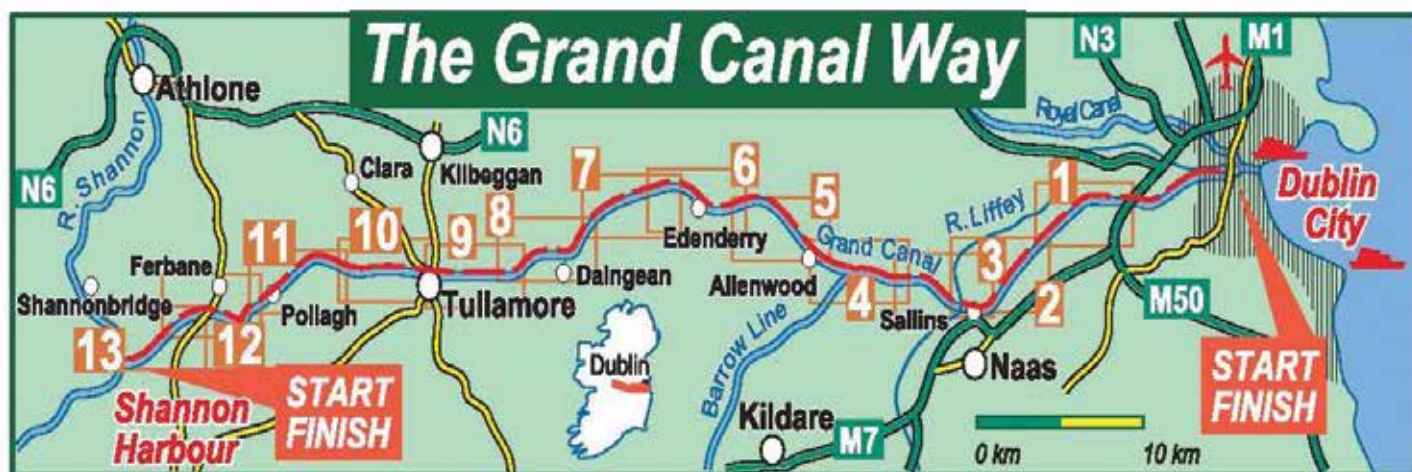
In January, the Strabane-Lifford link got a boost with Derry City and Strabane District Council's Planning Committee approving plans to develop a £1m cycling and walking route in Strabane.

As well as benefiting cyclists and walkers, the completed project "will also provide an incentive for more local people to choose active travel which will have a positive impact on the environment by reducing congestion and fuel emissions",

according to Cllr Christopher Jackson, Chairman of Derry City and Strabane District Council Planning Committee.

NORTHERN IRELAND STRATEGIC PLAN STALLED
Elsewhere in Northern Ireland, the collapse of the Stormont administration has stalled the Northern Ireland Strategic Plan for Greenways, which was first launched in 2016 by then Infrastructure Minister Chris Hazzard.

The strategy gave the green light to 1,000km of greenways across the north, including cross-border connections. The greenway paths "will also be integrated with other modes of transport, making it easier for people to leave the car behind," noted Hazzard at the launch of the strategy.



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