

DONEGAL LEADS THE TRAIL TOWARDS RURAL RECOVERY

Donegal County Council is the lead partner of the new Atlantic Area Trail Gazers Project, which includes trails in spectacular locations from Donegal to Portugal. It has been set up to stimulate rural community growth by linking strategic walking and recreational pathways in areas of natural, built and cultural heritage with the surrounding towns and villages.



Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, she was delighted with the progress being made and with each project partner's commitment to push forward and deliver key outputs over the next number of months.

EIGHT SELECTED TRAILS

The project partners have selected a wide variety of trails to test best practice methods in installing sensors and counters, capturing and predicting footfall patterns to future-proof trail maintenance and service plans.

They will also survey trail users to identify factors that would enhance the visitor experience, and will work with local business to develop Business to Consumer (B2C) initiatives based on feedback from visitors, in addition to developing develop community trail plans that are focused on niche experiences.

The eight trails selected to test this project are the 'Knocknarea/ Killaspugbrone Loop' in Sligo and 'Inch Levels' in Donegal; 'Chemin De Mémoires' in Bretagne (France); 'Via Verde del Plazola' in Navarra (Spain); 'La Caldera de Taburiente' on the Canary Island of Las Palma; the 'Seven Hanging Valleys' in the Algarve (Portugal);

'Sacred Mountain' in Viana do Castelo (Northern Portugal); and the 'Taff Trail' in West Wales and the Valleys.

In addition Glasgow Caledonian University and Ulster University in Coleraine are providing the guidance on innovative technology and data capture solutions for each site.

PROJECT UPDATES ONLINE

During the two-day online meeting, partners from each region presented their updates which included:

*** The development of a 'Lost Stories and Folklore of the Trails App'** – this will capture old stories, folklore and fables of key points of interest along each trail; in a bid to preserve this oral history, share it with visitors and build up a sense of nostalgia, a desire to discover more

The EU-funded project is being led by Donegal County Council in association with its next-door neighbour Sligo County Council, and partners from Portugal, Spain, France the UK. The overall aim is to explore the impact of walking and recreational trails on sustaining rural communities, and to provide incentives for visitors to further explore, experience and enjoy all that surrounding towns and villages have to offer.

Following the online launch of the project's website in early June, Donegal County Council joined the other partners of the Atlantic Area Trail Gazers Project in an online meeting on 23-24 June where detailed planning on this unique project continued.

Loretta McNicholas, Project Manager for Trail Gazers at Donegal County Council, said that despite the difficult times during the



One of the scenic trails – Inch Levels Wildfowl Reserve, Inishowen, Co. Donegal



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about the area and an experience that will live with them long after their visit.

* **The agreement on a 'methodological guide for calculating trail multipliers'** – to quantify the direct and indirect economic impacts on local economies of every euro spent along the trails.

* **The scoping of key options for development** – this will enhance footfall or economic, social and cultural interactions between each trail site and the surrounding catchment area.

Partners were also given updates on key strategies to ensure overall conservation and protection of trail sites through development of trail care packs and podcasts to promote the health benefits of walking and cycling. The next steering meeting is scheduled to be held in October 2020.

"It is likely that Covid-19 will have an impact on the vitality of small rural communities; therefore maximising the return from strategic investments in tourism, walks and recreational infrastructure as key to planning the recovery of rural communities across the Atlantic Area," noted McNicholas.

"This project is learning from experts in the field who have years of experience in working on trail development and knowledge of what works and what doesn't in targeting niche walking and environmental tourists. This will ensure that rural communities and infrastructure can grow sustainably to accommodate increases in visits without damaging the natural assets that visitors come to see," she added.

IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY INPUT

In pointing out the vital importance of community input to this project, McNicholas noted that to this end the partnership would like to ensure that key sectors in the rural community are represented on the project advisory groups in each of the regions.

"These groups will guide the development of a 'shared vision' for each trail site that is based on evidence and data captured through the project, providing a range of shovel-ready, community-supported projects through practical trail plans to ensure sustainable rural futures.

"The partnership will continue to ensure that all necessary arrangements are in place so that this work can continue once the Covid-19 restrictions are lifted," she added.

For more information contact Loretta Mc Nicholas, Project Manager of the Trail Gazers Project, Donegal County Council; by email: Imcnicho@donegalcoco.ie



TRAIL GAZING AT THE TOUCH OF A BUTTON!

The new website www.trailgazers.eu enables users to join an online community devoted to walks and trails in the Atlantic Area, and to navigate their way along these eight pilot trails across Europe from the touch of a button.

The website provides detailed information on the project by looking at best practices, introducing all project partners, learning about each pilot trail and lots more.

Visitors can virtually stroll from 'Inch Levels' in Donegal to 'Plazaola' in Navarra, Spain, from 'Chemin De Mémoires' in Brittany, France to 'Taff Trail' in South Wales, learn more about 'La Caldera de Taburiente' in the Canary Islands, 'Knocknarea/Killaspugbrone Loop' in Sligo, visit 'Sacred Mountain' in Northern Portugal or 'Seven Hanging Valleys' in the Algarve, Portugal.

Donegal County Council's Project Manager said: "Travel is now more about appreciating the way of life offered by these hidden trails, learning about local history, cultural and natural landscapes and embarking on voyages of self-discovery that will stay with the person long after the holiday has finished."

'Trail Gazers' will work on the creation of new virtual tourism

initiatives to showcase all that the regions have to offer to wider audiences, in addition to sharing and learning from partner experiences' and knowledge to develop sustainable community trail management plans to protect the assets that visitors come to see and protect trails for future generations.



For more information on the Trail Gazers project visit www.trailgazers.eu