

# International Appalachian Trail Ulster Ireland

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Submission for the National Planning Framework consultation

Page | 1

The International Appalachian Trail (IAT) Ulster Ireland Chapter comprises a group of local authorities, public sector bodies, charities and voluntary sector organisations in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland. The common denominator for the members of the group is an interest in walking.

The IAT is a continuation of the famous Appalachian Trail in the US, including trails in Canada, Greenland, Iceland, Norway, Scotland, Wales, Spain and Morocco. Our part of the trail starts at Slieve League in Donegal, goes across the border to Northern Ireland at Kelly's Bridge and follows the Ulster Way northwards to the Antrim coast and south to Larne.

The IAT trail was launched at the Ulster American Folk Park in Omagh by Joe McHugh TD and Mark H. Durkan MLA in August 2013. The trail launch had the support of former Governor of the State of Maine, Joseph Brennan. Governor Brennan was one of the original proposers of the IAT in 1994. We also received a very enthusiastic letter of support from Senator George J. Mitchell who acknowledged this 'spectacular and historic section of the trail'.

The IAT is a genuine cross-border project which is working well and, albeit growing from a modest start, has the potential to become a major attraction for locals and for visitors alike.

Whilst the 'Wild Atlantic Way' already has been a great success, those who travel along this route do so by car. They can move quickly through what is such a historic landscape rich in natural and cultural heritage. Not so the walkers, who spend time, move slowly and gain awareness and appreciation as they do go. Walkers are also more likely to leave money behind as they spend more time along their route. The benefits of walking as an economic driver is clear to see in Scotland's Kinlochleven, a village that was transformed from an industrial town to a centre for walking; and in the virtual rebirth of the villages along the route to Santiago de Compostela across Northern Spain. There are



plenty of similar experiences from the American villages along the Appalachian Trail.

Market research conducted for the IAT in Canada suggests that those visitors from outside the region, who come to walk parts of their IAT, are of above average earnings and with an interest in a wide range of cultural activities. Many of them also return to the route of their walks, either 'virtually' via the internet or in person, to purchase goods they saw when walking.

As 37% per cent of the Irish population live in small settlements, it could be questioned if the emphasis should be altered slightly in the current National Planning Proposal. Instead of looking for the 'the potential for towns and the surrounding rural areas', there needs to be a strong and well-resourced focus on the actual potential of the rural areas and the asset base in this part of the country. Traditionally there has been too strong a drive towards the urban centres. Rural areas per se, are too weak to be able to withstand and reverse such migration if working in tandem with the same centres that they should resist.

National Policy Objective 15 – the reversal of the decline in the core of small towns and villages will only work if the resources in and around these centres themselves are recognised and used as economic drivers. Such locations should not be used merely as an extra resource base for large city growth. Walking tourism, which has such a limited impact on natural and cultural heritage, but still has the potential to stimulate local economic growth, is a valuable contributor to such an approach.

National Policy Objective 16 – the focus on natural and cultural heritage fits hand in glove with Ireland's recent acceptance of the UNESCO Conventions on tangible and intangible heritage. This mechanism should be matched with an approach which has a lot of potential to support the growth of artisan businesses and the recognition of the superb natural heritage in Ireland. Such a type of development will contribute to the attractions of the landscape for walking tourists, who as seen elsewhere, are interested in a far wider range of cultural heritage than merely the trails.

National Policy Objective 17 – the inclusion of provision of amenities and services will help to shore up the development of walking tourism and ensure



that such tourists will remain for longer in the small villages and settlements along the trails, thus leaving more money behind.

National Policy Objective 20 – to enhance the competitiveness of rural areas by diversification of the rural economy; provides further support for the development of walking tourism and long-distance trails. Walking is a very low-carbon activity that draws on local and low-mileage services and resources. In addition, the development of high-quality artisan businesses, such as the Économusée network currently being developed by Teagasc and Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust, will ensure that local craft products and cultural heritage really does have the opportunity to contribute to diversification and economic growth.

National Policy Objective 21 – farm diversification and to protect natural and cultural heritage whilst supporting rural tourism is an interesting way of recognising the rural landowners’ role as custodians of the landscape as part of the solution. The opportunity to diversify economic activity in a rural setting without devaluing the natural and cultural heritage is a valuable contribution to growing rural tourism such as walking. Farmers should be supported in their endeavours to contribute to the growth of their communities.

National Policy Objective 23 – national greenways; this has already proven to be a worthwhile driver for the growth of the economy in Mayo, for example. In this case there really is a success story to act as an exemplar for further greenway developments. Many of these would open up walking along routes that would fit in with the NPO 51.

National Policy Objective 47 North West Strategic Partnership. This is a very interesting region with a lot of potential for real growth. In Alvar Aalto’s terms of the functional region, the area works so well in terms of tourism and for walking. We see the IAT contributing to and benefiting from the continuation of this growth.

National Policy Objective 51 – all-island tourism; trails and natural and built landscape. Landscape biographies developed to support the long-distance trails like the IAT will further support the walker and enhance the visitor experience. (Sadly, one of the best examples of such an approach has never been translated to English, namely [www.grind.no](http://www.grind.no)). Whether literary or geological or



an inclusive landscape biography, the Irish and the Northern Irish landscapes have a lot to offer. Slow tourism works here. Walking is a prime contributor to this type of market. The IAT has already started to attract in walkers from the US and from Germany in particular.

As the IAT continues to be developed and added to in terms of spurs and of landscape and heritage experiences, its potential as an economic driver will continue to grow. As a brand, the International Appalachian Trail has strength and recognition. The organisation has already started to draw on resources from local and regional authorities along its route. The IAT has the potential and the willingness to contribute to the overall tourism and the economic growth in the rural areas along its trail.

The European Committee of the Regions is currently calling for a 'strengthening of the partnership principle and the place-based approach'. They are asking for regional policy delivery to include them 'actively engaging.... rural communities and promoting tools to trigger and support local development'. As such they encourage long-term investment in cross-border initiatives The IAT is just such an initiative.

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