

# Development of a Visitor Experience Plan



**- Final Report -**

prepared for



by

**CHL Consulting Company Ltd.**

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## ***Executive Summary***

CHL Consulting Company Ltd. was commissioned by Waterways Ireland in November 2017 to undertake the development of a Visitor Experience Plan for the Shannon and the Shannon-Erne Blueways. This report presents the findings and recommendations to emerge from this work.

Section 1 presents an introduction to the project, setting out the context and scope of the work. Section 2 considers the Blueways within the context of the contemporary visitor experience economy, and notes that, as recreational assets, the Blueways represent a good fit with tourism trends relating to activity and soft adventure. They also fit well with developments in “experience tourism” where visitors want to see and do things that provide a real and authentic sense of the location visited.

Section 3 presents the findings of a review of international practice in terms of Blueways and water based trails – taking into account activities and experiences both on and off the water. The principal focus of this review was on Blueways and related water based activity in Canada, the USA, France, and the UK. Section 4 presents the findings of site visits to both Blueways which were undertaken by the consultants over the period January – March 2018. These observations relate to the conditions found at the Blueways over this period, and an assessment of the potential visitor experience that could be delivered at the Blueways, and how this could be enhanced.

Section 5 presents the findings to emerge from a range of consultations undertaken. These included government agencies, local authorities, and a number of private sector business operators with a potential interest in Blueways development. Section 6 presents some observations on how the Blueway experience could be further developed. These observations are structured across eight priority themes, and in each case a rationale for further development is presented, followed by a number of key recommendations. This section therefore presents a summary business case for each of the interventions recommended for further Blueway development.

Section 7 sets out a number of specific actions that could be undertaken to support the recommendations presented in the preceding section. It is suggested that these actions should be planned for delivery over a medium-term timeframe (mid 2018 to mid-2021). Given the physical development of the Blueway network thus far, it is suggested that over

this medium-term period a priority for Waterways Ireland should be the promotion and marketing of this network, the further development of the visitor experience, and the optimisation of asset performance and usage over this period. Among the actions suggested is that a Visitor Attitude Survey (VAS) should be conducted in mid-summer over the next three years in order to secure consumer feedback and an insight into the visitor experience, as reported by consumers themselves.

For the reader's convenience, these actions are presented in the following pages.

### Priorities for Further Development

Focus Area	Key Actions	Lead Party	Key Dependencies
<b>1. Trail Head Animation &amp; Orientation</b>	1) Establish a funding programme to support a three-year seasonal animation and orientation initiative at a limited number of principal trailheads (2019 – 2021).	WWI	Funding Support
	2) 2. A central element of this initiative should be the development of Blueway Visitor Centres, appropriately themed and branded, to provide information and orientation for the visitor and to serve as a physical and visible representation of the Blueway concept.	WWI	Local Government & Local Communities.
	3) Use the Blueway Visitor Centres as a mechanism to support Blueway promotion and marketing.	WWI	
	4) When fully developed, put the Blueway Visitor Centre programme out to market, and seek private sector operators to develop and implement the initiative over a three year timeframe.	WWI	Private Sector
<b>2. Signage</b>	1) Develop signage within a funded programme based on a clear hierarchical structure. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Motivational Signage to create a sense of Place/Sense of Arrival and create awareness, excitement and anticipation - welcoming visitors to and within Trail Towns and Trailheads.</li> <li>- Navigational Signage to allow visitors find trailheads and access points from the proximate area.</li> <li>- Orientation signage that supports the visitor's information needs during their time on the Blueway – and which also presents specific information panels on things to do and places to see in the surrounding area. This content should also be available online and downloadable on mobile devices.</li> <li>- Functional Signage that helps visitors to find nearby facilities – retail, medical, banking, police, sports, culture, and leisure.</li> </ul>	WWI	Local Authority, local businesses, local community
	2) Review all signage, with a view to removing old brown and out-of-date signs, and ensuring new ones are visible and correctly oriented.	WWI	
	3) Draw on the IAE signage model to improve visitor orientation in relation to things to see and do in areas proximate to the Blueways.	WWI	

Focus Area	Key Actions	Lead Party	Key Dependencies
<b>3. Soft Infrastructure</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Develop a standardized package of facilities and services, to be implemented consistently across all Blueway locations. These should include toilets (including provision of toilets at Acres Lake due to increased popularity), showers, fresh drinking water, canoe racks, hose-down facility for canoes, shelter area, picnic benches, parking, BBQ stands and/or fire pits, bicycle stands, lock-up facilities, information and orientation panels, and safety devices such as lifebuoys and defibrillators. These facilities could be reviewed over the next three years as more visitor feedback is gathered.</li> <li>2) Introduce guidance display for inexperienced visitors on how to use the Blueway safely, (e.g. portage, entry/exit from the water etc.)</li> <li>3) Use soft infrastructure to cross-connect with trail animation by presenting engaging display panels providing information on local attractions, local exhibitions and events, local sports activity etc. This could also include information on local services: luggage transfer and storage, dining, retail, outdoor suppliers and equipment rental, taxis, etc.</li> <li>4) Provide particular supports at locations where no slipway is available. This could include installing handrails on steps to the water, and clearly identifying non-slipway access/egress points on maps and promotional literature as being unsuitable for inexperienced users.</li> </ol>	<p>WWI</p> <p>WWI</p> <p>WWI</p> <p>WWI</p>	



Focus Area	Key Actions	Lead Party	Key Dependencies
<b>4. Private Sector Engagement</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Develop and host a number of Business Engagement events for businesses at relevant Blueway locations. The purpose of these events will be to introduce local SMEs and micro-enterprises to the opportunity represented by the Blueway, to discuss how these local businesses can get involved in this opportunity, and to identify any supports they may require to do so.</li> <li>2) Work with LEO agencies in relevant counties to design and deliver support packages for local businesses interested in getting involved in Blueway related commercial activity. This should be a bespoke programme for Blueway businesses and not a generic training programme.</li> <li>3) Introduce an “Action Learning” programme for SMEs and micro-enterprises in the Blueways area. This is a supported self-learning programme where clusters of small businesses (approx. eight) come together once a month to exchange business experiences, challenges encountered, and solutions identified. This approach to small business support has previously been implemented by Fáilte Ireland in a national programme for tourism development.</li> <li>4) Provide short practical support programmes for micro-enterprises – (e.g.) how to apply for a bank loan making a business case, how to apply for a grant, etc.</li> </ol>	<p>WWW</p> <p>WWI</p> <p>WWI</p> <p>WWI</p>	<p>LEO, business community, Chambers of Commerce</p> <p>LEO</p> <p>LEO</p> <p>LEO, Business Mentoring</p>
<b>5. Additionality</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Establish a coordinating group of Arts/Heritage/Culture officers from relevant local authorities. One single group should be formed to cover both Blueways. The remit of this group should be to consider, over a three year time frame, how a joined-up programme of interventions can best be designed and delivered across the Blueway network. Additionality of the type envisaged is unlikely to be achieved without a direct and focused programme of action, designed and monitored by those with professional expertise in the area.</li> <li>2) Mobilise civic society. This is easy to say and difficult to do. Yet the international review presented in this report offers a number of examples where Blueways were performing at a high level because of the active engagement of local communities. Civic society, and the communities and the cultural and heritage organisations embedded within it, represent a powerful force for “additionality” along the Blueways.</li> <li>3) Consider leveraging existing opportunities for Blueway development. For example, the Tidy Towns competition helps to engender a sense of community involvement and a sense of place. Perhaps a small cluster of Trail Towns (three or four) could enter the Tidy Towns process as a “Blueway Cluster Town”.</li> </ol>	<p>WWI</p> <p>WWI</p> <p>WWI</p>	<p>Local Government</p> <p>Local Community</p> <p>Tidy Towns Event</p>

Focus Area	Key Actions	Lead Party	Key Dependencies
<b>6. Marketing</b>	1) Produce a Blueway Guide to promote the Blueway brand and proposition, and to address continuing confusion associated with the Blueway/Greenway terminology.	WWI	Business Community  Local Community/Volunteers  PR/Media Advisor
	2) Develop an interactive mapping facility to allow visitors create their own maps and integrate other ancillary attractions/services. Integration with Google Maps will allow visitors to use the facility via smart phones when out on the trails.	WWI	
	3) Review main website to allow for inclusion of weather and trail status updates, embedding of YouTube videos, inclusion of new mapping facility, and full use of event section.	WWI	
	4) Review and optimize use of social media, especially Twitter and Instagram.	WWI	
	5) Ensure all businesses and organisations listed on a Blueways website, provide reciprocal prominence to Blueways on their own websites.	WWI	
	6) Develop short instructional videos on YouTube for users and include on main website, e.g. a guide for paddlers on how to navigate locks.	WWI	
	7) Develop a programme of events (or repackage existing ones) along the Blueway, e.g. to coincide with Earth Day, volunteer orientation, lock keeper demonstrations, family nature outings, etc.	WWI	
	8) Establish a panel of high-profile “celebrities” to use in a Blueway endorsement campaign – (e.g.) video clips of these people using the Blueways and commenting on the leisure opportunities they represent.	WWI	
	9) Consider potential for Blueway product merchandising.	WWI	

Focus Area	Key Actions	Lead Party	Key Dependencies
<b>7. The Visitor Experience</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Introduce a “Trail Town” programme that will focus on specific hubs of activity as orientation points for visitors, and as centres for coordinated entertainment/activity by local stakeholders.</li> <li>2) Develop real-time online information on trail conditions.</li> <li>3) Develop a volunteer “stewardship” programme within local communities, through which people living locally can contribute to welcoming visitors to the Blueways, provide some local information, and carry out some simple maintenance works.</li> <li>4) Develop a specific programme with local SMEs to promote and embed the idea of “service connectivity” – through which visitors can access joined-up services such as luggage transfers, equipment rental/repair, taxis, packed lunches, dial-ahead meals and pick-ups etc.</li> <li>5) Create a sense of place/sense of arrival in Trail Towns during the summer season by using signage, banners, lighting and street furniture to present a sense of fun, entertainment, and vibrancy.</li> </ol>	<p>WWI</p> <p>WWI</p> <p>WWI</p> <p>WWI</p> <p>WWI</p>	<p>Local Government – Town Council</p> <p>Local Community</p> <p>Business Community</p> <p>Local Government Town Council</p>
<b>8. Visitor Feedback</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Introduce a peak season Visitor Attitude Survey (VAS) to harvest consumer-centric feedback. This is a key action and should be established as one of the principal tasks to be completed during the summer months. It should be possible to obtain advice and support on survey design and implementation through an agency such as a Business School at a local Institute of Technology.</li> <li>2) Introduce a similar survey across local businesses operating in the proximate area of the Blueways. This should be designed so as to elicit the views of the business sector on how the Blueways are performing, views and perspectives on visitor satisfaction, and views on the level of economic activity generated by Blueway visitors.</li> <li>3) Draw upon the feedback collected over the next two years to determine next steps in terms of further Blueway network extension or development.</li> </ol>	<p>WWI</p> <p>WWI</p> <p>WWI</p>	<p>Survey Expertise</p> <p>Survey Expertise</p>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Project Context

Waterways Ireland was established in 1999 as one of six all-Ireland North/South implementation bodies which were set up within the framework of the Belfast Agreement. In fulfilling its core mission, Waterways Ireland “manages, maintains, develops and promotes over 1000kms of inland navigable waterways principally for recreational purposes”. This focus on recreational purposes, means that the waterways which are managed, maintained, and developed by Waterways Ireland are accessed by a diverse range of users including local communities, users of local amenity, domestic tourists and international visitors. Consequently the effective delivery of its work programmes, requires Waterways Ireland to work with partner agencies such as some fourteen local authorities, Fáilte Ireland, Sport Ireland (National Trails Office), Canoeing Ireland, the Canoe Association of Northern Ireland, the Lough Derg Marketing Group, Destination Athlone, Destination Fermanagh and others.

In pursuing this recreational focus, one of the more notable features of the work programmes developed by Waterways Ireland has been the development of a system of “blueways” which have been defined as:

*“a network of multi-activity recreational trails, based on or alongside idyllic lakes, canals and rivers in Ireland. They provide scenic routes into the heart of rural Ireland by canoe, bike or on foot. Connect with friends and family as you escape to unique natural environments. Feel totally chilled out on a guided paddling trip; build up an appetite on an exhilarating electric bike trip; or gently meander on a canal-side walk. Tranquil Blueway journeys, where the pace of life is slow, along glistening waters, softly fringed and abundant with nature”<sup>1</sup>.*

This programme of Blueway development is ongoing with the most recent addition – the Lough Derg Blueway – officially launched on 6 March 2018. In order to support the operation of the growing Blueway network, Waterways Ireland decided to commission research into the visitor experience along the network, and more specifically to better understand what measures could be taken to improve and enhance this experience. This report presents the main findings to emerge from this research and sets out a framework for the development of a Visitor Experience Plan.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bluewaysireland.org/about-us>

## **1.2 Project Scope**

Of the seven waterways under the remit of Waterways Ireland, two waterways - the Shannon Navigation and the Shannon-Erne Waterway – are the specific focus of this project. In its consumer-facing marketing and communications, Waterways Ireland has developed the Blueways Ireland brand, and so refers to these waterways as the Shannon Blueway (SB) and the Shannon-Erne Blueway (SEB), and this usage is maintained in this report.

The SB is comprised of five linked sections including Drumshambo to Carrick-on-Shannon, Carrick-on-Shannon to Boyle, Carrick-on-Shannon to Roosky, the Camlin River Loop, and Roosky to Lanesborough. The SEB is comprised of four linked sections including Leitrim Village to Ballinamore, Ballinamore to Ballyconnell, the Ballyconnell White Water Course, and Ballyconnell to Belturbet.

These sections on the SB and the SEB (along with their associated walking/cycling trails) therefore defined the geographic scope of the work. In the case of both Blueways, the scope of work included a review of hard and soft infrastructure on the blueways, a review of marketing collateral and website, stakeholder consultations, international best practice review, production of a gap analysis and, recommendations for improving the visitor experience. Details on this scope and requirements were set out at sections 2.4 and 2.5 of the project terms of reference.

The consultants also had regard to some recent blueway research which had recently been completed. This included *Blueways Market Research* carried out by Strategic Marketing in 2016, and *Blueway Soft Infrastructure Guidelines: Discussion Document* carried out by Irish Leisure Consultants in 2015.

## 2. BLUEWAYS AND THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

### 2.1 The Experience Economy

A notable recent trend in terms of consumer behavior and tourism and leisure development has been a growing interest in the “experience economy”. The concept of the experience economy first emerged in 1999 and has since grown in significance in terms of understanding the behaviour of consumers in most developed economies. The Canadian Travel Commission on its website summarized the idea by stating that “*a tourism product is what you buy, but a tourism experience is what you remember*”.

Tourism is about “things to see and do”. This is the primary area of focus for consumers, and it is the basis on which they make their decisions about where to travel – motivated by expectations of what they can see, what they can do, and what they can experience in a destination. That is the primary decision. Having made that decision consumers then plan a series of secondary decisions about where to stay and where to eat and drink. For contemporary tourists, accommodation represents a secondary consideration set. This secondary consideration is only activated once the consumer has engaged with the primary consideration and has decided that a destination is worth visiting.

Following the global economic downturn in 2007, the tourism industry in Ireland – North and South - engaged in an extensive joint programme of consumer research. The purpose of this research was to better understand the factors that motivated visitors to come to Ireland, and to better understand what the consumer expected to encounter during a leisure break in Ireland. The research was undertaken in Great Britain, North America, France and Germany, and now provides a platform of market intelligence which guides the development programmes of government agencies such as Fáilte Ireland, Tourism Northern Ireland, and Tourism Ireland. These programmes are now focused on a much smaller group of market segments, where consumers have been identified that are interested in the type of experiences Ireland can offer. Experience tourism is a central plank of this new focus.

### 2.2 Tourism Experiences

In its good practice guide for tourism service providers<sup>2</sup>, Tourism Northern Ireland (TNI) has described experiential tourism in the following terms.

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<sup>2</sup> TNI: *Creating Experiences: A Toolkit for the NI Tourism Industry*. (2016)

*“Experiential tourism shows rather than describes. The tourist becomes an active participant in the experience. In experiential tourism people value their visit because of direct experience. Experiential tourism encourages visitors to participate and promotes activities that draw people into cultures, communities and the outdoors. Different visitors will want various levels from toe-dipping to total immersion, but the principles remain the same. For the visitor this might mean learning a new skill or meeting and engaging with people who are interested in sharing our local culture, but whatever the experience the visitor becomes a hands-on participant not a passive observer. Experiential tourists seek diverse experiences that match their interests and provide a sense of personal accomplishment. Most importantly, these experiences allow visitors to create distinct memories”*

Fáilte Ireland is also encouraging tourism and leisure providers to think about experiences in a different way.<sup>3</sup>

*“International tourism is undergoing a transformation in how it is developed, marketed and managed, driven by rapidly changing visitor expectations. The increasing emphasis being placed on ‘experiences’ by consumers is far more than a shift in terminology or a fad; it is a well-researched and quantifiable trend.*

*Experiential Tourism is travel motivated by the desire to really connect with a place, its culture and people. It is less concerned with simply seeing or doing things, but rather with immersing oneself in the locale, interacting with people, engaging the senses, and learning the history and stories of the place. An experience has one strong idea at its heart. It is something which one does, sees or feels which is (ideally) unique and certainly distinctive to a particular place. Experiences help the potential visitor make decisions to go to one place over another by imagining themselves there. It also helps them remember the visit as being special and ensures that they talk about it afterwards”.*

### **2.3 Experiences and Activity Tourism**

Given the quality of Ireland’s natural heritage, it is unsurprising that there is a strong and growing interest in “adventure and outdoors tourism” both in Northern Ireland and in Ireland. In Northern Ireland this has been described in the following terms<sup>4</sup>:

<sup>3</sup>[http://www.failteireland.ie/FailteIreland/media/WebsiteStructure/Documents/4\\_Corporate\\_Documents/Strategy\\_Operations\\_Plans/Experiences-Explained.pdf?ext=.pdf](http://www.failteireland.ie/FailteIreland/media/WebsiteStructure/Documents/4_Corporate_Documents/Strategy_Operations_Plans/Experiences-Explained.pdf?ext=.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/activities-and-nature-based-tourism](http://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/activities-and-nature-based-tourism)

*“Activity tourism generally combines physical activity or adventure, cultural exchange or interaction, and an engagement with nature. The market is commonly made up of **hard adventure activities** such as climbing, trekking and mountain biking, and **soft adventure activities** such as walking tours, city bike tours, canoe hire or camping. Soft activities make the majority of the market as they appeal to a wider range of people, require less physical output than hard activities, generally have lower perceived or real risks, and are easily adapted for different visitors, e.g. families”.*

Fáilte Ireland has also pointed out the growing importance of adventure tourism, and “soft adventure” in particular, as a significant feature of a leisure holiday break in Ireland<sup>5</sup>.

*“Adventure tourism is defined by the Adventure Travel Trade Association as an outdoor activity combined with a nature or cultural element, or ideally a mix of all three. Most of us tend to think of bungee jumping, white-water rafting and skydiving as adventure activities, but 90% of adventure tourism is “soft adventure”. It covers everything from walking, cycling, horse riding and water sports, through to archaeology, fishing and birdwatching”.*

## **2.4 Blueways, Experiences, and Soft Adventure**

Notwithstanding the reality that the visitor’s blueway experience can always be further improved, the message from the preceding paragraphs suggests that Waterways Ireland’s investment in its Blueway network aligns well with contemporary consumer interest (both tourists and locals) in becoming involved in authentic experiences and in engaging with some aspect of “soft adventure”. For tourists in particular, the blueway network can serve as a medium through which they can connect with authentic Irish experiences, both on the water and off the towpath, and do so at a slow pace and in a relaxed manner which many tourists expect to experience during their visit to Ireland.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.failteireland.ie/In-Your-Sector/Activities/Get-Out-There-Adventure-Tourism-Conference-2013.aspx>



### **3. INTERNATIONAL REVIEW**

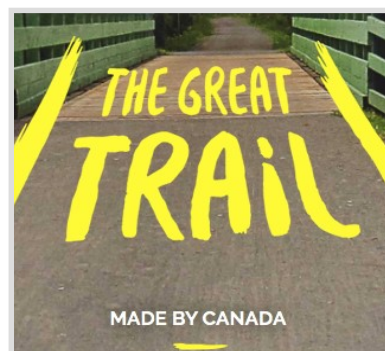
#### **3.1 International Experience**

It is clear from our review that the term ‘blueway’ is not in common use among either destinations or users, and where it is found there is often an inconsistent usage of the term. Where it does exist, it refers to water trails such as canoe/kayak or snorkel trails – as referenced in a later section on the Great Calusa Blueway. It is in this context that the term is already used in Ireland. There is a marine Blueway that encompasses a number of marine activity sites from north-west Mayo to south Galway. This is promoted both on Fáilte Ireland’s Discover Ireland website and by the Irish Underwater Council – although it is not clear how actively it is currently promoted as a trail or a brand.

A number of newer Blueways are also currently in development elsewhere in the country, such as the Ilen River Blueway and Bantry Blueway, both in West Cork and both of which share the same Blueway branding as the SEB. This common branding will contribute to anchoring awareness of Blueways in the minds of consumers. But the application of the same Blueway branding to include walking and cycling trails may be confusing. Internationally, multi-activity trails that combine both land and water are not common. For this reason, in selecting destinations for a comparative review, we have chosen a selection on the basis of the good practice they offer in a number of specific areas. As result, not all are multi-activity trails.

#### **3.2 Canada**

The Great Trail, also known as the Trans Canada Trail, has attracted a significant amount of publicity in the last year with its ‘completion’. It comprises 24,000kms of multi-activity trails that join Canada from coast to coast, and includes 7,000kms of waterways. It crosses a wide variety of terrain, including urban areas – and some of the trail is on road, which has led to safety concerns and challenges regarding the authenticity of calling it a ‘complete trail.’ Nevertheless, with the length of time it has taken to complete, the involvement of so many communities along the way and the appeal to national pride, the Canadian Great Trail has captured the public imagination.



### **3.2.1 Delivering the Experience**

The Trans Canada Trail (Great Trail) is a not-for-profit organisation founded in 1992 with the purpose of developing the national trail. None of the trail is owned by the Trans Canada Trail itself. However, the trail was developed with significant federal and provincial government funding, and encouraging ongoing donations remains a part of the organisation's activity. The trail itself is, in essence, a network of over 500 community trails that are developed, owned and managed locally by trail groups, conservation authorities, and municipal/federal/provincial governments.

Given the wide variety of terrain, trails and partners involved, there is also considerable variation in the supply of facilities along the route. But they include regularly spaced pavilions that provide shelter and fresh water, as well as picnic shelters and bicycle racks. It also makes good use of technology in support of the on-the-ground experience of trail users. The Great Trail app offers not only maps of the various trails but also a route planning option and an activity tracker. It also helps to pinpoint local amenities such as parking and services.

### **3.2.2 Marketing & Positioning**

The Great Trail is clearly positioned as a national icon – 'Made by Canada' – and has strong brand recognition. It is promoted as being within 30 minutes reach of most Canadians. This recognition is also fostered through its use of Champions. The list of these champions for the trail is extensive and includes well-known and well-respected people at a variety of levels. For example, the National Champions include renowned figures such as Bryan Adams, Margaret Atwood and Atom Egoyan. There are also Government and Community Champions. The Trail has also formed strategic alliances and partnerships with key national and regional activity providers and destination management organisations, and it has a number of sponsors.

Not surprisingly, given its iconic nature, parts of the Great Trail are offered in packaged arrangements by a large number of tour operators. Inclusive holidays range from activity-focused breaks (e.g. canoe holidays) to multi-activity holidays for individuals, couples and families that include the Trail along with other leisure experiences. An example of one particular tour operator - Great Canadian Trails - is included Appendix 1.

### **3.2.3 Key Learnings**

- Given the history of the Great Trail, which is different to that of the SB and SEB waterways, it has been developed with strong grassroots engagement - which creates an active network for ongoing maintenance and development work.
- It is an excellent example of how the hearts of the nation can be captured by a 'story', (the Trail isn't, in reality, one trail but is presented as the 'great' trail that unites all of Canada). Perhaps there is more that the SEB could do to establish a greater sense of being a connection between diverse geographies.
- It demonstrates the importance of establishing and maintaining a commitment to a long- term vision.
- It is an excellent example of how to harness and maximise public figures, strategic alliances, sponsorships and donations. Again, there may be an opportunity for the Blueways in Ireland to strengthen its efforts to get the public enthused about what the project is (or could be) about.
- It makes good use of technology to support pre-planning as well as on-the-go planning, using both the App as well as the website.
- Concerns about safety along the on-road sections of the trail highlight one of the strengths of the Blueway model as most of it is off-road.

### **3.3 USA**

The USA has extensive activity trails and has considerable authentic wilderness and natural environments that stimulate ongoing participation by residents and visitors in outdoor adventure pursuits. This combination of good natural 'product' and a strong population base from which to draw users, provides a healthy environment for trail and activity providers to develop. One specific trail has been selected for review: The Northern Forest Canoe Trail.

The Northern Forest Canoe Trail (NFCT), completed in 2006, is the longest inland water trail in America and claims to be the best water trail in North America. It stretches over 740 miles of rivers, streams and lakes, from Old Forge in New York to Fort Kent in Maine. It was developed from an historic connection of waterways and it follows traditional travel and trade routes used by Native Americans, settlers and guides, The trail consists of:

- 23 rivers and streams
- 59 lakes and ponds
- 45 communities
- 65 portages (70+ miles).



### **3.3.1 Delivering the Experience**

The NFCT is a member-supported, non-profit organisation governed by a volunteer Board of Directors which is responsible for the stewardship of the trail, encouraging participation and patronage, and supporting local communities. It works with landowners, communities and volunteers to ensure the trail remains accessible for public use. It provides detailed maps, books and an extensive online trip planner that allows users to build their own map, integrating services and facilities of most interest to the user.

Volunteers are a vital aspect of experience delivery, leading trips, providing event support and acting as trail stewards. Waterway stewards are responsible for the ongoing general upkeep of assigned portions of the trail, e.g. clearing litter, maintaining portages and replacing signs. In return they receive NFCT membership, maps, training and camaraderie. They also work on specific projects such as the installation of access ramps or building of new campsites.

### **3.3.2 Marketing & Positioning**

The NFCT clearly positions itself as the longest, and the best, water trail in the USA, offering a range of paddling experiences that also includes rural communities – “Trail Towns” - along the way. It also focusses on building brand recognition and has a variety of branded merchandise for sale, including high quality clothing and handmade signature paddles offered by third parties.

It retains a dedicated Communications Director on its Board and is actively involved in a variety of activities that encourage both income generation and trail use. These include:

- An annual Paddling Film Festival
- Auctions
- A range of donor options
- Sponsors, that range from Class I to Class V Partners (e.g. LL Bean, Labatt)

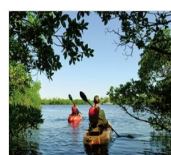
- Business Partners, again ranging from Class I to Class V, and Supporters (e.g. Atlantic Coastal Kayaker).

There are a number of packaged holiday options for various segments of the trail, ranging from simple guided day trips to longer fully-inclusive holidays that integrate equipment, meals, accommodation, transfers and professional guide.

### 3.3.3 Key Learnings

- The focus on the stewardship of the waterways has enabled the NFCT to harness and make good use of volunteers, interns and memberships.
- The membership model has a variety of benefits. It is a source of income, it provides formal connection with relevant businesses (as well as less relevant ones) and enhances PR.
- The highlighting of ‘Trail Towns’, and the fact that none of the land/waters are owned by the NFCT, means the organisation has had to integrate local communities along the way - and it is another good example of how this can be done.

As a final footnote on the USA, it is worth noting The Great Calusa Blueway. This Blueway is a coastal water and inlet canoe trail in the Fort Myers area of Florida. It is 190 miles long and offers useful ‘good practice’ in presenting a trail as a way of accessing the surrounding area and its highlights. The focus of the Blueway is not on the trail itself as much as it is on the 80 places along the way, where paddlers can stop to explore, and on the wildlife that can be seen. This emphasis on “places along the trail” aligns well with the reference to “authentic soft adventure experiences” in Section 2 above.



**explore estero bay**  
the state's first aquatic preserve



**paddling pine island sound**  
a subtropical playground



**the caloosahatchee river**  
represent the newest leg of the Great Calusa Blueway



**estuaries and other ecosystems**  
each ecosystem plays a role in the estuary's health



**tips for photographing wildlife**  
capture images of wildlife from a kayak



**stay along the blueway**  
make your adventure last longer than a day trip



**top stops along the trail**  
more than 80 highlights and access points along the 190-mile trail



**wildlife around every turn**  
1,200-pound manatees to elegant roseate spoonbills

### 3.4 UK

Britain has long made good use of its extensive network of waterways and many areas are inherently associated with waterway systems, such as Norfolk with its Broads. This includes a wide variety of uses, from barges and cruisers to canoes, kayaks, paddle boats and fishing. As a result, there are a considerable number of stakeholders involved in the management of the waterways and their use, including the Canal River Trust, national canoe federations and local authorities.

For many of the waterways in the UK, a licence is required before setting out on a canoe trip - whether that be a one-day or multi-day journey. Membership of British Canoeing can act as a licence, but they can also be bought on an ad-hoc basis as needed. The fees from licensing go towards upkeep of portages, etc. As with most of the other comparator destinations we considered, the term 'Blueway' is not in common use in association with either water-based or waterside trails in Britain, and we have identified The Great Glen Ways in Scotland as one particular trail that we consider a good example for Ireland. We have also included some other general points as relevant.

The Caledonian Canal opened up the Great Glen in Scotland, and the Great Glen Ways offers visitors the opportunity to cross the country coast to coast by water, foot or bicycle. Before it was formalised, the Great Glen already had a reputation as a canoe/sea kayak route - with 4,000 paddlers taking on the trail in 2010. The Great Glen Canoe Trail (GGCT) was launched in 2012 and is Scotland's first formal canoe trail. The canal is now primarily, although not exclusively, used for leisure.

#### 3.4.1 Delivering the Experience

Scottish Canals is responsible for managing the Caledonian Canal. A number of other organisations are also involved as part of the informally constituted Great Glen Canoe Trail Partnership, in the long-term planning and running of the Trail. These include British Waterways Scotland, Highland Council, Scottish Natural Heritage, Forestry Commission Scotland, Scottish Canals, Highlands & Islands Partnership Programme, and the Scottish Canoe Association.

The Great Glen Ways follows 79 miles of path, track, canal and loch from Fort William in the west to Inverness in the east, although the trail is not promoted as one integrated cycle route but rather as a variety of



cycling trails. In addition, some of the open lake waters (e.g. Loch Lochy, Loch Ness) can be subject to considerable waves and are not always suitable for paddling.

Because the canal is a busy waterway, all paddlers are required to register online before embarking on a trip, and registration brings a number of benefits, as seen in the following illustration. Access to the canal itself is free under the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, but there is a charge for some of the facilities. All facilities can be accessed for £10 per person for a period of ten days - which allows use of toilets, showers, washing machines/dryers, electricity sockets for charging, informal camping spots and trailblazer rest sites, where such exist.

**Figure 1: Trailblazer Rest Site on the GGCT**



### **3.4.2 Marketing & Positioning**

The Great Glen Ways is positioned as a long distance trail that is suited to a range of users, from beginner to advanced, with some of the GGCT clearly being suitable only for paddlers with a good degree of experience. Much of the focus is on the canoe trail, rather than the walking and cycling trails, and it has a striking and informative website - <http://greatglencanoetrail.info> - that provides a range of relevant information (including on midges and ticks), trail updates, downloadable maps and leaflets. This good range of facilities and supports has encouraged private operators to package and promote the trails as integrated experiences with luggage transfer and accommodation included. This, in turn, helps to raise the profile of the trails and to attract visitors from outside the areas.

A recent TripAdvisor review<sup>6</sup> of Great Glen Ways gave it a rating of 4.5 (out of 5), with 51% of reviewers rating it as excellent, and 39% rating it very good. This makes the point that there is no reason why a Blueway trail cannot secure very high consumer experience ratings, once consumers are prompted to offer an opinion.

### **3.4.3 Key Learnings**

- Pre-registration allows trail managers to interact directly with users - a vital link in gathering data and feedback.
- Charging a basic fee for facilities encourages greater visitor appreciation for such supports as well as providing an additional income that can be put directly back into amenity development.
- The GGCT Partnership brings together a range of stakeholders in service of a long-term vision for the trails.

## **3.5 France**

As in the case of the UK, there is a strong tradition of waterway navigation - whether by barge or canoe - in France. Again, there is no evidence of any popular (or consistent) use of the term 'Blueway'. There are, however, numerous hiking/cycling/canoe trails across France and they share several characteristics worth mentioning in the context of a review of the Irish Blueway trails.

- French trails offer a variety of experiences suitable for users of differing abilities, from high-adrenaline white water to slower, meandering stretches of water for beginners. This allows the destination to pitch itself to a wide variety of visitors and potential users.
- The landscape through which visitors travel is a key feature of the promotion of each trail. Indeed, the publicity and marketing that surrounds the various trails makes the landscape one of the main reasons for choosing the trail (see illustration below from The Guardian) highlighting the extent to which landscape can serve as motivator for travel.

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.tripadvisor.ie/Attraction\\_Review-g186535-d645626-Reviews-Great\\_Glen\\_Way-Scottish\\_Highlands\\_Scotland.html](https://www.tripadvisor.ie/Attraction_Review-g186535-d645626-Reviews-Great_Glen_Way-Scottish_Highlands_Scotland.html)



**Figure 2: Extract from The Guardian Newspaper, highlighting importance of landscape as a motivator**

### Winning tip: River Ardèche, France

Set out from Vallon-Pont-d'Arc (after the spectacular limestone arch that spans the river) for a 30km paddle in a Canadian canoe through the magical Ardèche gorges, awesome 300m-high limestone cliffs punctuated by pebble beaches and rock shelves for picnicking. Your trip ends at the medieval town of Saint-Martin-d'Ardèche for some great ice-cream of the Monsieur Whippy variety.

● From €20 pp ([aventure-canoes.fr/](http://aventure-canoes.fr/))

- Many are well-packaged and promoted by tour operators, who appear to fill the marketing gap which public agencies fill in Ireland (i.e. there was no evidence, on line, of any 'national' agency having responsibility for trails). Naturally, it is an easier task to market outdoor and water-based activities in a sunny summer climate.

**Figure 3: Examples of local canoe packages in France**



Located at the gates of Cévennes, 35 minutes North of Montpellier at Saint Bauzille de Putois, (turn left at the 1st roundabout) on the D986 highway between Montpellier and Ganges, our Base Camps for Canoë34 du Pont Suspendu (Main Base Camp) and for Tonic Loisirs are set in the Hérault Valley.

Our team is composed of professionals who know how to inspire you with their passion for canoeing and kayaking. You can go canoeing by yourself (canoe rentals) or with a government-certified guide (for Communities, Overnight trips...).



A bus or a minibus will bring you back when you want.

- Canoë34 Le Pont Suspendu (Main reception): Family package, including children from 6 years old

- Canoë34 Tonic Loisirs: Sportsman's packages & Evasion packages, including children from 11 years old.

New: Recreation packages 9 km long, including children from 8 years old, with the starting point at the Grottes des Demoiselles.



- Camping along the trail is a feature of most trails - either wild camping or camp sites. The availability of camping - especially wild camping - is attractive to dedicated outdoor enthusiasts.
- The water is also used for general leisure, e.g. swimming.

### 3.6 Summary Conclusions

Our review of comparator trails highlights a number of specific areas that could be of benefit for the SB and SEB system. These are presented in summary form below and are further integrated into our recommendations later in this report.

- 1) Community engagement is a strong element of many comparator destinations, either by design or necessity. The by-product of this is that communities are more invested in the success of the trails, thereby spreading the burden of responsibility and leadership. There are a number of ways this can be done.
  - The development of a volunteer programme.
  - The identification and development of key Trail Towns that can act as visitor hubs.
  - Developing a membership model for businesses along the Blueway .
- 2) A long term vision drives the development of most successful trails and integrates key stakeholders in delivery.
- 3) Capturing the hearts and minds of the public is important in raising awareness and encouraging uses. This has been done successfully elsewhere by telling a 'big story' (e.g. the linking together of diverse geographies or different parts of a country) and by engaging public figures.
- 4) Integrated technology-based mapping is now a feature of modern life and is a valuable tool in allowing trail users to create and follow their own maps - harnessing nearby facilities and services as well as the core trails themselves.
- 5) Stewardship/Preservation is a core feature of a number of comparator trails, which also acts as a positive word-of-mouth promotion for trails as well as being of practical use.
- 6) Pre-registration/licensing of trail users can be beneficial for a number of reasons:
  - It gives an accurate assessment of usage.
  - It provides a database to be used for research (and possibly marketing) purposes.
  - It allows waterway managers to communicate directly with users, providing valuable and current information on trail conditions.

- If a fee is charged for facilities, the income can be channelled back into further trail development.
- 7) The landscape through which a trail travels is an essential motivator for visitors and needs to be adequately promoted alongside the relevant trails. It also determines, to some extent, the level of skill required - and challenge opportunity offered - by the trail.
  - 8) In the same vein, focussing on the things to see and do along the trail - places to stop off, park the boat or bicycle, and explore - creates a much richer visitor experience.
  - 9) Most packaged holidays by tour operators offering integrated trail experiences focus on one specific activity (e.g. walking or cycling or paddling), and include the following core service elements designed to make the users experience of the trail as easy, convenient, and hassle-free as possible. Sample packages and services are included by way of illustration in Appendix 1.
    - Accompanying guide, or self-guided maps
    - Accommodation (both on and off-trail)
    - Some meals
    - Luggage transfer
    - Transport at the beginning and end of the trail
    - A variety of levels to cater to differing skills/fitness
    - Options of independent and group travel
    - Ongoing advice/support service
    - Equipment Hire

Some of these may be features of longer trails, though it is likely that most of these services could play an important role in the continuing development of the Blueways as an important recreational resource in the Irish midlands.

## **4. BLUEWAYS REVIEW - OBSERVATIONS**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The previous section reviewed a number of international approaches to water and multi-activity trails. This included a focus on the experiences they offer, the manner in which they are organised and delivered, as well as their approach to marketing and positioning. We also referenced visitor expectations and needs. This section of the report moves on to present an assessment of the Shannon Blueway and Shannon-Erne Blueway, and provides some more detailed commentary on different aspects of these Blueways.

This work was based on a series of site visits made by the four CHL team members involved in the project over the period from January to March 2018, in so far as weather conditions permitted over these months. Notwithstanding weather conditions however, all sections of both Blueways were visited and examined by CHL over this time period. Bearing in mind the time of year when these site visits took place, it was perhaps not surprising to discover that at times some parts of the trails/infrastructure were inaccessible due to rain, flood, or lying snow. However, these weather conditions are, in their own right, relevant to the observations presented here, and have informed some of our conclusions

In addition to site visits undertaken, a desk review of marketing and promotional collateral was also carried out. The results of the wider review are presented according to the following reporting structure:

- Hard Infrastructure
- Soft Infrastructure
- Marketing, Website, & Collateral,
- “Off the towpath”
- Quality of the Visitor Experience
- Summary – Issues and Actions.

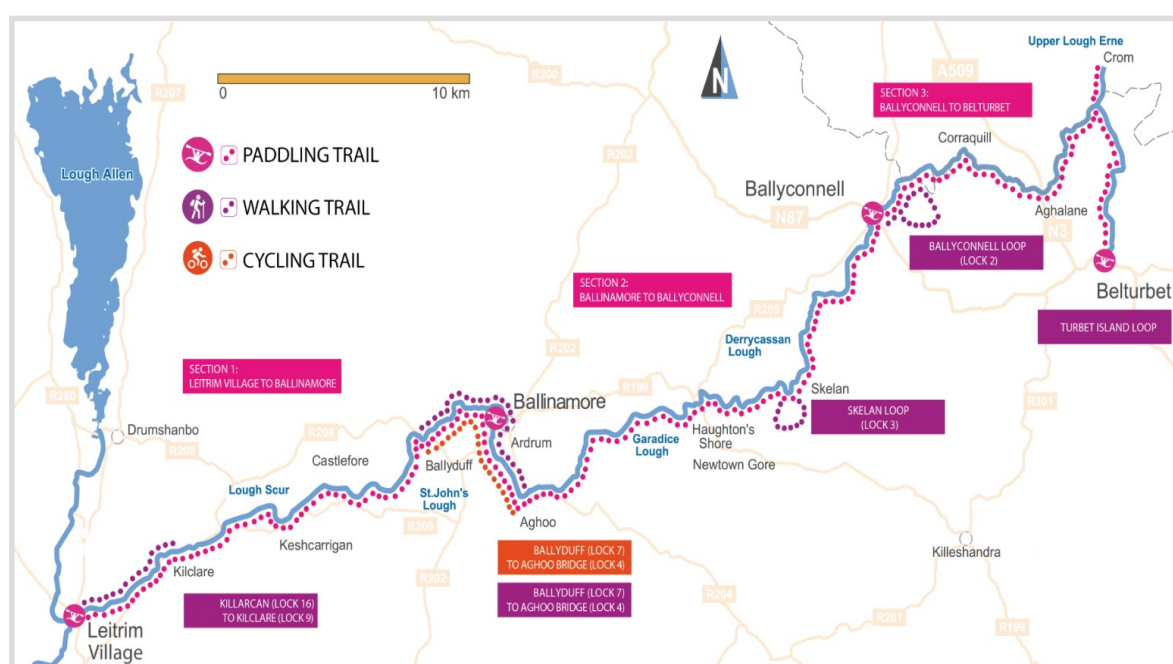
In relation to infrastructure (hard and soft), it was decided to report at the level of each of the two Blueways (SB and SEB), rather than at the level of each individual sub-section of each Blueway, as this was considered as likely to introduce too much detail and repetition into the narrative.

## 4.2 Hard Infrastructure

### 4.2.1 The Shannon-Erne Blueway

The Shannon-Erne Blueway stretches from Leitrim Village to Belturbet, and connects the Shannon with the Erne system. It features 70kms of paddling trails, 30kms of walking trails and 12.5kms of cycling trails, along canals, lakes and rivers. And it is presented in three sections, as illustrated by the map below.

**Figure 4: Shannon-Erne Blueway - Overview**



These three sections can be explored by visitors through fifteen individual paddling journeys, five walking trails and two cycling trails. Our assessment is presented in summary form below.

**Table 4.1: Shannon-Erne Blueway - Hard Infrastructure Assessment**

Hard Infrastructure	Summary Assessment
<p><b>15 individual paddling journeys</b>, five in each of the three sections - the longest of which is 10km (on the final section).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sections 1 &amp; 2 are graded 'Easy'.</li> <li>• Section 3 is graded 'Easy-Moderate'.</li> <li>• The journeys take place primarily along the canal/canalised rivers leading to the junction with the Erne system.</li> <li>• The final stretch is along the Erne River to Belturbet.</li> <li>• Lakes are included in five of the journeys, offering a slightly different paddling experience and needing a greater awareness of weather conditions.</li> <li>• There is a link with Crom and the Lough Erne Canoe Trail in Northern Ireland.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The physical canoe trails are well-kept.</li> <li>• The structured environment and quiet waters of the canals/canalised rivers are ideal for beginner/inexperienced paddlers.</li> <li>• Identified as a trail head on Blueway maps for a paddling trail, as well as for a walking and cycling trail, Ballyduff could not be found either using road signs (from Castlefore) or through Google Maps. Through trial and error, it was finally located but doesn't feel like the natural trail head when you're actually on the ground.</li> <li>• It was a similar experience trying to locate Skelan, which was also not signed from the road or to be found on Google Maps.</li> <li>• Aghoo was also difficult to find.</li> </ul>
<p><b>A White Water Course</b> at Ballyconnell - Grade 2 (difficult)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It offers a good experience for advanced paddlers and has been used by the Olympic team.</li> <li>• However, it was difficult to find it from the car park.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Five walking trails</b>, primarily on a mixture of towpaths, riverbank paths and local/regional roads, as well as some woodland.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three looped walks</li> <li>• Two linear walks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The walking trails are well-maintained with good surfaces suitable to all levels of walkers.</li> <li>• However, the walking experience on the road sections of the trails is not a pleasant one, and is likely to appeal mainly to committed (particularly local) rather than casual walkers.</li> <li>• It was tricky finding the beginning of the Killarcan-Kilclare walking trail at Leitrim. The obvious place to start was at the Marina but Lock 16, which is the trail head, is outside the village and not signed in any obvious way from the village itself.</li> <li>• Lock 16 was flooded and inaccessible. There was no advance warning of this on the website or elsewhere.</li> </ul>

**Two cycling trails**, on a mixture of towpaths and local/regional roads.

- One linear and one looped trail, both of which are also walking routes.

- The cycling trails are well-maintained with good surfaces (including gravel in places) suitable to all levels of cyclists.
- However, if the trails were particularly busy with walkers, they could be frustrating for cyclists who would be vying for the same space. It would be useful to review trail usage and satisfaction during peak periods via a consumer survey administered over a number of weeks in July/August.

**Canal locks and Marinas** that provide entry/exit and portage for the paddling trails via stone steps and slipways. Some of these are trail heads.

- The locks and marinas are well-maintained, as are the canal walls, steps, slipways and portage tracks.
- The slipways provide excellent entry/exit points to the water for canoes/kayaks, and would also allow for multiple entries/exits where there is a group.
- The steps are narrow and would be tricky to manage for individual paddlers, especially as exit points.
- The portage tracks are clear and provide simple access up and down slopes over the locks.

**Toilet/shower blocks**, at trail heads.

- The blocks are small but in good condition, apart from the toilets at Ballinamore which are rusting and of poorer condition.
- Showers are accessed using a card and could not be inspected.

**Parking**

- There was parking available at all points. Parking at trail heads is ample. Parking at other points (i.e. locks) is sufficient for a few cars with room to turn.
- There was work in progress at several points which was temporarily limiting parking space (e.g. Lock 14, Keshcarrigan) but not interfering with visitor access to trails.

**Picnic Benches, Seating**

- Picnic benches are only available in a number of locations, e.g. Lock 13, and benches are widely available. Where they exist, both are in good condition.

**Figure 5: Selection of Images from the SEB Site Visits**

*clockwise from top left: Perfect conditions at Ballinamore, narrow steps, toilet/shower block, portage path, slipway and flooding at Lock 16.*



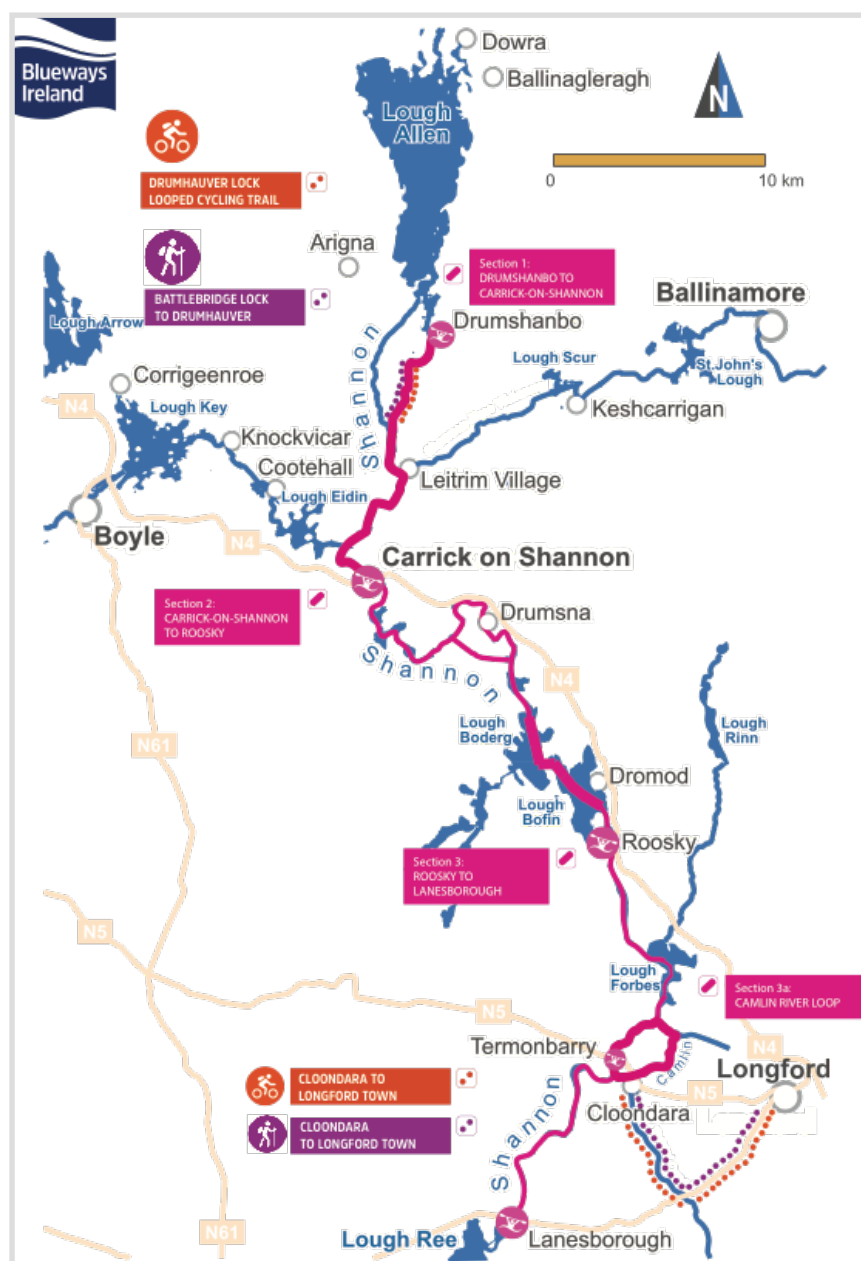


#### 4.2.2 The Shannon Blueway

The **Shannon Blueway** provides a network of trails, primarily on/along the Shannon River, from the foot of Lough Allen, through Carrick-on-Shannon, and on as far as Ballyleague/Lanesborough. It features 100kms of paddling trails, 30kms of walking trails and 23.5kms of cycling trails.

The Shannon Blueway is presented as five paddling sections, one of which is a river loop, as well as walking and cycling trails - as illustrated in the map below.

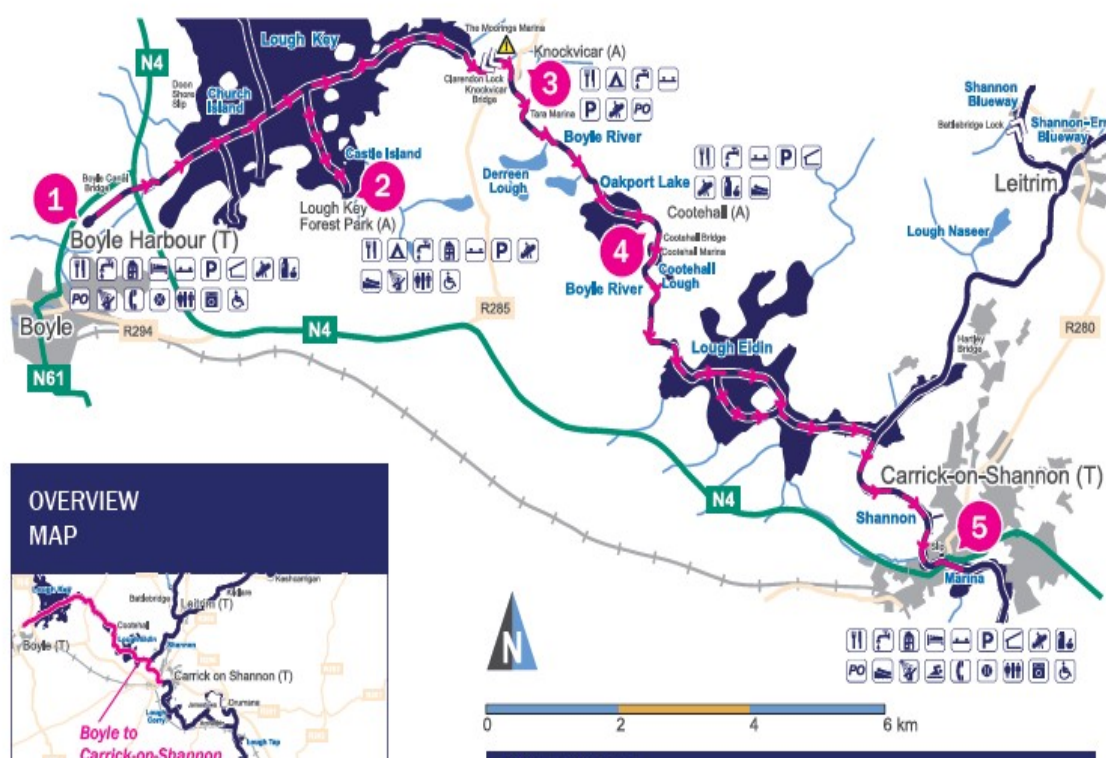
**Figure 6: Shannon Blueway - Overview**



### 4.2.3 The Shannon Blueway - Boyle to Carrick-on-Shannon

The **Shannon Blueway Boyle to Carrick-on-Shannon** extends from Boyle Harbour to Carrick-on-Shannon. Commencing with a short canal section which connects Boyle Harbour to the River Boyle, it then follows the river to its junction with the Shannon approximately 1km north of Carrick, passing through Lough Key, Oakport Lake and Lough Eidin en route. It is a paddling trail only, as there are no opportunities for walking or cycling trails along, or close to, the river banks or lake shores. The total distance is 19.8kms.

**Figure 7: Shannon-erne Blueway - Boyle to Carrick-on-Shannon Section**



This Section of the Shannon Blueway is described on the blueways.org website as “coming in the summer of 2018”. However, it remains possible to find a map and guide to this section at <http://www.bluewaysireland.org/blueways/shannon/activities/section-2-boyle-to-carrick-on-shannon>. Based on our visit to this section of the Shannon Blueway in February 2018, it is clear that it is not ready for use, as shown in our summary assessment below.

**Table 4.2: The Shannon-Erne Blueway - Boyle to Carrick-on-Shannon  
Hard Infrastructure Assessment**

Hard Infrastructure	Summary Assessment
<p><b>4 paddling sections</b>, three of which are relatively short at 4.5km, 4km and 3 km respectively the final section, Cootehall to Carrick-on-Shannon is the longest at 8.3km. All 4 sections travel with the flow of the river and are rated Grade 1.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lakes are included in all sections, offering a slightly different paddling experience and needing a greater awareness of weather conditions.</li> <li>There are 5 points of entry (or exit) comprising the trail head at Boyle Harbour, Lough Key Forest Park, Knockvicar, Cootehall and Carrick-on-Shannon all of which are signposted from the nearest road.</li> </ul> <p><b>Car parking</b> is available at all 5 trail access points, and each of the carparks is signposted with the branded Blueway fingerpost sign with the exception of Lough Key.</p> <p><b>Canal Lock:</b> there is one lock on the Boyle – Carrick-on-Shannon route – Clarendon Lock -which is just north of Knockvicar.</p> <p><b>Toilet/shower blocks</b>, available at Boyle Harbour, Lough Key Forest park and Carrick-on-Shannon.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The trail runs through a very attractive and unspoilt natural environment.</li> <li>The river flow is gentle and offers a good experience for inexperienced paddlers – however, in windy weather, the lakes could be a little more challenging.</li> <li>The water entry and exit points are not marked, and what is currently in place at most points looks very challenging for inexperienced, paddlers as well as children, older age groups and paddlers with physical disabilities. Slipways are by far the easiest means of entry to and egress from the water. Put in/take out points based on steps are much more difficult to use. There is a slipway at the Blueway carpark at Cootehall, and there is one at Lough Key, but it is not signposted and is some distance from other marine facilities there. There was no slipway at the signposted Blueway trail carpark at Carrick-on-Shannon, but there is a slipway on the other side of the river, north of the bridge (in Cortober Riverside Park).</li> <li>At the time of inspection, there was no Blueway information signage at any of the car parks, apart from that at Carrick-on-Shannon. However, the map at Carrick-on-Shannon was of the Drumshambo to Carrick-on-Shannon section. There was no reference to the Blueway in Lough Key Forest Park, either among the plentiful signage around the carpark or in the large visitor centre. Staff in the visitor centre were not familiar with the Blueway.</li> <li>There is no guidance offered to paddler about how to negotiate the lock, nor any means of egress for portage around the lock. Presumably it is intended that paddlers would go through the lock as paddling over weirs is prohibited.</li> <li>The blocks available are well-located and in very good condition. However, there are no facilities other than car-parking at Cootehall and Knockvicar.</li> </ul>

<b>Parking</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was dedicated parking available at all points, although capacity at Cootehall and Knockvicar is very limited.</li> </ul>
<b>Picnic Benches, Seating</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Picnic benches/seating are available at all 5 trail access points.</li> </ul>

**Figure 8: Selection of Images from Boyle to Carrick-on-Shannon Section**



**Boyle Trail Head**



**Slipway at Cootehall**



**Water access at Knockvicar**



**Slipway at Lough Key Forest Park**



**Slipway at Cortober Riverside Park, Carrick-on-Shannon**

#### 4.2.4 The Shannon Blueway - Camlin River Loops

The **Shannon Blueway Camlin River Loops** extends from Richmond Harbour in an anti-clockwise loop North East on the Camlin River turning West to join the Shannon River which leads South West to Termonbarry before turning East into the Cloondara Canal and back to the Camlin River and Richmond Harbour. The total distance is 10 km.

**Figure 9: Shannon-Erne Blueway Camlin River Loops**



This section of the Shannon Blueway is described as; “A little Adventure! The starting point for canoeing the Camlin River Loop is Richmond Harbour, a picturesque setting with a variety of services’, which was born out as accurate from our site visit. Richmond

Harbour is indeed a very attractive small village with Termonbarry offering a more developed range of services. The website points to Richmond Harbour as the access point but the map illustrates that access to the loop can be via either Richmond Harbour or Termonbarry. The trail is described as paddling, walking and cycling; the paddling aspect being the most prominent.

Based on our assessment to this section of the Shannon Blueway in February 2018, while it was not possible to access the water due to weather conditions it was easy to imagine how this could be a very pleasant family, group or couple destination for a short leisure trip.

**Table 4.3: The Shannon-Erne Blueway - Camlin River Loops  
 Hard Infrastructure Assessment**

Hard Infrastructure	Summary Assessment
<p>Car parking is available at the Richmond Harbour access point. There is car parking adjacent to the river at Termonbarry There is a much larger car park area adjacent to the marina. The access point signposted at Cloondara Canal does not have car parking.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The car parking space is quite limited at Richmond Harbour and given that it is a main hub for public facilities plus cruiser traffic it may not be suitable for trailers or caravans needing to turn during busy times. Similarly, the river side car parking at Termonbarry is long and narrow and could get clogged up very easily with trailers and turning traffic. There is a much larger car park next to the marina (and public toilets) which is several minutes' walk by the road but could be easily accessed over a short spit of land if a path was put in place directing paddlers to the gravel slip way which is by far the more preferable access point on that site.</li> <li>The signage at Termonbarry is quite obscure at the turn off the main road which leads into a residential estate. The most effective signage is at Cloondara Canal which actually doesn't have car parking. The signage indicates a turn off the main road to a drive way with a locked gate. At the time of the inspection this was quite dangerous.</li> </ul>

Hard Infrastructure	Summary Assessment
<p>Car parking is available at the Richmond Harbour access point. There is car parking adjacent to the river at Termonbarry There is a much larger car park area adjacent to the marina. The access point signposted at Cloondara Canal does not have car parking.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The car parking space is quite limited at Richmond Harbour and given that it is a main hub for public facilities plus cruiser traffic it may not be suitable for trailers or caravans needing to turn during busy times. Similarly, the river side car parking at Termonbarry is long and narrow and could get clogged up very easily with trailers and turning traffic. There is a much larger car park next to the marina (and public toilets) which is several minutes' walk by the road but could be easily accessed over a short spit of land if a path was put in place directing paddlers to the gravel slip way which is by far the more preferable access point on that site.</li> <li>The signage at Termonbarry is quite obscure at the turn off the main road which leads into a residential estate. The most effective signage is at Cloondara Canal which actually doesn't have car parking. The signage indicates a turn off the main road to a drive way with a locked gate. At the time of the inspection this was quite dangerous.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Canal Lock</b> there are three locks on the Camlin River loop, at Richmond Harbour, Termonbarry and Cloondara Canal.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The locks were in excellent condition and well maintained. There is no guidance offered to paddler about how to negotiate the lock, nor any means of egress for portage around the lock. Presumably it is intended that paddlers would go through the lock as paddling over weirs is prohibited.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Toilet/shower blocks</b>, available at Richmond Harbour and Termonbarry</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The shower and toilet block at Richmond Harbour was not accessible. The toilets at Termonbarry were in poor condition.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Parking</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There was dedicated parking available 2 of the 3 points, although capacity is limited and the space allocated not adequate for larger vehicles or trailers during busy times.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Picnic Benches, Seating</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Picnic benches/seating are available at all 3 trail access points. More could be made of the public realm at Termonbarry to encourage its use as an outdoor amenity / riverside parkland.</li> </ul>

Figure 10: Selection of Images from Camlin River Loops Section



Richmond Harbour





**Termonbarry**



**Cloondara**

### **4.3 Soft Infrastructure**

Soft infrastructure along both the Shannon and Shannon-Erne Blueways comprises of both Blueway and other signage, information provision, and safety equipment (defibrillators, buoyancy aids, and water gauges). Non-Blueway signage includes wildlife and safety notices, old information panels, directional finger posts (e.g. for canal walks) and old Shannon-Erne Waterways signage.

There is a variety of Blueway place signs, directional signage, information signs and orientation panels along the trails. These range in size from a few centimetres to half a metre or more, and the signs fulfil a number of functions, including:

- creating a sense of place, e.g. the large signs on main roads informing drivers that they are in a Blueway area;
- directing visitors to trail heads/access points, e.g. finger post signs used at the turn into a trail head or lock;
- identifying specific locations, e.g. large signs clearly identifying the location or lock number;
- directing paddlers, walkers and cyclists to/along trails, e.g. small rectangular paddle/portage signs;
- providing detailed orientation information for specific trails, e.g. large vertical and horizontal information panels.

The distinctive logo, text and blue and white colouring are clear and carried throughout all the Blueway signage - as illustrated in the examples overleaf.

Figure 11: Selection of Blueway Signage



**Along the Shannon Erne Blueway**, the Blueway signage is consistently applied throughout and all signs are in good condition. However, the review highlighted a few specific aspects relating to signage that may require attention.

- There is still mixed signage along the route - both the older brown Waterways signage and the new Blueway signage. At specific locations, the brown signs still dominate (e.g. turn into Lock 15). This dilutes efforts to create a sense of place and can be confusing for visitors unfamiliar with the areas.
- At specific locations, there are too many signs, e.g. Ballinamore, and some of the signs are old, badly maintained and of little relevance.
- There needs to be ongoing attention to finger post signs at turns to ensure they don't get overtaken by shrubbery, as is happening Ballinamore. Finger posts require ongoing attention not only to ensure they are not hidden but to ensure they are also pointing in the correct direction.

**Figure 12: Mixed Signage along the Blueway**



The buoyancy aids were in good condition wherever they were available on both the SB and SEB.

**Figure 13: Slipway and Water Gauge at Tarmonbarry Lock**



#### 4.4 Marketing, Website, Collateral

We reviewed three distinct areas of Blueway marketing collateral – website, social media, brochures & maps - and these are presented, along with our observations, in Table 4.2 below.

**Table 4.2: Marketing Collateral Assessment**

Collateral / Channel	Conclusions
<p><b>Website:</b></p> <p>Our review focused on <a href="http://www.blueways.org">www.blueways.org</a>. Another website was also found - <a href="http://www.headintotheblue.com">www.headintotheblue.com</a> - but it is diverted to the former.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The website is easily discoverable when searching for blueways in Ireland. But it doesn't come up when searching under canoe/walking/cycling holidays Ireland. This suggests the need to ensure the SEO takes account of a consumers' likelihood to search for these (rather than 'blueway'). It also suggests the need to ensure the SB/SEB is highlighted on activity providers' websites.</li> <li>• The website is very professionally designed and clearly laid out.</li> <li>• It is highly motivational and informative, with comprehensive maps and descriptions of both the overall Blueway as well as the individual trails.</li> <li>• The links to partner sites for accommodation, activity guides/trips and dining are useful. However, these need to be checked regularly to ensure the connections are live as not all were at the time of the review.</li> <li>• There is only one event listed in the event section (and there were none the first time the website was reviewed).</li> <li>• There is no section for weather/status updates - a twitter feed or similar - on the home page would allow for live updates. We consider this an important element</li> </ul>

to include on the website given the relevance of both weather and trail conditions for visitors\*. Even if there is nothing to report, the existence of a current update reassures potential visitors.

- Given the excellent quality of the promotional videos on Youtube, these should also be given prominence on the website. As with the point above, a slight redesign of the homepage would enable videos to be embedded.

### **Social Media**

#BluewayDoltYouWay

- Facebook: This has a good following and is in regular use, although many of the updates are quite general in nature, rather than specific.
- Twitter: This is not being used as it should be for an 'up-to-the-minute' social media channel. It would be the ideal place to have status and weather updates.
- Instagram: Very small following. A mixture of images, including trade images. Its ongoing use needs to be considered and if it is to be continued, then a decision about whether it is for a public or a trade audience needs to be made.
- Youtube: Very small following but there are some excellent professional videos on the site that are both highly motivational as well as giving potential consumers a good sense of what the trails are like on the ground. As with Twitter, a decision needs to be made about whether this is a public or a trade platform - and if it is the former, which appears to be the case, a separate page created for trade videos.

### **Brochures & Maps**

- There are a good selection of brochures and maps available, all downloadable from the website. These cater to varying levels of interest - from consumers generally considering the Blueway and looking for an overview of the entire route, through to visitors looking to follow specific routes/journeys.
- All guides carry the distinct Blueway branding, reinforcing awareness, and are presented clearly and concisely.
- The maps contain a high degree of relevant information and descriptions, including trail details and safety/information contact details.
- It could be argued that not all of the items referenced on the maps are relevant (e.g. swimming pool, tennis) and that others are more so (e.g. ATM, garage).
- Creating corresponding trails on Google Maps would allow for visitors to use the static maps as planning tools to create their own personal maps. It is also vital to ensure that all trail heads and main access points referenced on the Blueway maps are included in Google Maps (most are but not all, as mentioned earlier).

\*See footnote for examples of weather sections on comparator websites<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.gartan.com/useful-information/>  
<https://www.seagullouffitters.com/weather-forecast/>  
<https://www.weatherforyou.com/reports/index.php?pands=Hells+Bay+Canoe+Trail%2CFlorida>

#### 4.5 “Off the Towpath”

The Shannon Blueway and Shannon-erne Blueway wind their way through a considerable number of towns and villages, and these have the potential to provide a variety of functions with regard to the trails. These are presented below, along with the conclusions of our review.

**Table 4.3: Functions**

Function	Assessment
On a very basic level, many of the main trail heads are located in towns/villages along the waterways. As such, they are the first point of connection with the Blueway for visitors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The opportunity to create a greater sense of ‘blueway’ place in towns/villages along the trails could be further exploited. Doing more in this regard will clearly require local authority input.</li> </ul>
Towns/villages also provide an opportunity for trail users to avail of essential services and facilities, and for orientation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>They generally provide essential services, such as shopping, ATM, and petrol/diesel.</li> <li>However, the availability of specialist services/goods for walkers/cyclists/paddlers is not readily apparent.</li> </ul>
They can also act as hubs for visitors, providing an accommodation and activity base to which visitors will return.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A few of the larger population centres have a sufficient supply of accommodation, dining and other facilities to serve as visitor hubs or “Trail Towns”.</li> </ul>

Given the important role that the towns and villages have to play for visitors, they warrant specific attention in their own right. One approach could be to label/categorise towns and villages according to the level of services and facilities they offer for Blueway users. Creating a formal mechanism through which they could participate in the further development of the Blueway would also enhance the overall experience for visitors, e.g. through voluntary stewardship of specific sections, checking on conditions, etc.

##### 4.5.1 Things to See & Do

There is an abundance of things to see and do within easy proximity of each Blueway. These range from historic sites and visitor attractions through to other off-trail activities, either related to the core activity (e.g. other walking trails) or entirely different (e.g. spa, dining). The main Blueway website highlights a selection of ‘hidden treasures’ - specific activities and attractions along the Blueway. The providers that are linked on the website also offer more than Blueway experiences, and the overview guides and maps show where museums and other things to see and do are available, albeit in very summary format.



It would be unreasonable to expect the Blueway website and marketing collateral to contain a comprehensive listing of things to see and do all along the waterway. But there is little doubt that these have an important role to play in both motivating visitors to choose a destination and in their enjoyment of the destination. Attention needs to be paid to the integration of key things to do and see along the Blueway - one potential solution for which might be the use of an interactive mapping facility on the main website, as suggested earlier.

#### **4.5.2 Service Connectivity**

An important determinant of the quality of the visitor experience off the tow path will be the level of integrated service connectivity the visitor encounters. In this context, “service connectivity” is taken to relate to issues such as the following:

- When a visitor leaves the water, what is their next point of service?
- Can they store their luggage/belongings anywhere – if they wish to visit a nearby town for a few hours?
- Might it be possible to have their luggage picked up in a van (operated by a local service provider) and taken forward to their next activity or overnight accommodation?
- Might it be possible to have their canoe similarly collected?
- Will they be able to hire a bike at the point they leave the water – or very close by?
- Will they be able to access public or private transport?

Clearly to the extent that such support services don’t exist (or are insufficiently provided), the consumer experience of the “off the towpath” strand of the Blueway experience will be quite limited.

Derrycarne Wood offers a case example of some challenges that could be encountered. The location is a listed access point along the SB, and the Lough Boderg Trail<sup>8</sup> offers an extremely pleasant woodland walk leading up to the lake.

Visitors to the Blueway could leave the river at Dromod, perhaps have lunch, hire a bike in Dromod, cycle along a less trafficked local road (L1601), cycle/walk in the wood for an hour or two, and then re-enter the water at Lough Boderg at the shingle beach slipway and continue their journey down to Rooskey. However this small illustration of an off the

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.irishtrails.ie/Trail/Derrycarne---Lough-Boderg-Trail/405/>

towpath experience is entirely contingent on the availability of appropriate service connectivity in Dromod – (i.e.) bike hire and canoe transport services. It is noted that on the day CHL visited the wood, a barrier prevented vehicle access to the wood (see below), suggesting that some visitors to the SB would be deterred by the prospect of carrying a canoe from the entrance to the lake shore (about a ten minute walk).

**Figure 14: Derry Carne Wood at Lough Boderg**



#### **4.6 Summary Issues and Actions**

The points below summarise some of the principal issues and associated actions that we have identified. These are addressed in some greater detail in Section 6 below.

- 1) Consideration of adaptation of water entry/exit points at locks to facilitate easier access.
- 2) Removal of old signage.
- 3) Attention to existing finger post signage to ensure visibility.
- 4) Attention to the few specific signage weaknesses that exist (i.e. Ballyduff, Skelan).
- 5) Development of interactive mapping facility that would allow visitors create own maps based on existing trails as well as to locate and add other activities / attractions / services / routes.
- 6) Development of system to allow for ongoing monitoring and communication with regard to trail conditions.
- 7) Establish a peak-season visitor survey to assess usage and satisfaction levels at times when demand is highest. (Issues relating to congestion or shared use of trails by different activities can only meaningfully be assessed at peak-demand periods.
- 8) Review of social media use, particularly Twitter and Instagram.
- 9) Review of main website to allow for:
  - inclusion of weather and trail status updates;
  - embedding of Youtube videos;
  - inclusion of new mapping facility.
- 10) Work with listed trade to ensure consistent approach and reference to Blueway on their websites.
- 11) Development of plan to integrate trail towns/villages and ensure delivery of quality services/facilities.
- 12) Address the issue of "Service Connectivity". Consideration to be given to the establishment of a small grant scheme to incentivise local entrepreneurs into the "blueway market".

## **5. CONSULTATIONS AND GAP ANALYSIS**

### **5.1 Who We Spoke With**

Consultations were carried out at two levels as follows:

- a) Contact was made at institutional or organizational level with Fáilte Ireland, Sport Ireland, Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland (ORNI), Leitrim County Council, Roscommon County Council, Cavan County Council and Longford County Council.
- b) Contact was also made at the level of individual small businesses along the SB and SEB Blueways. Initially it had been hoped to meet with individual consumers/visitors along both Blueways, but given the timing of the project (January – March 2018), it was recognized that there would be few, if any, visitors to the Blueways over this period. Therefore as a proxy measure of consumer feedback, it was decided to speak with a number of small businesses along the Blueways who have had direct contact with their own customers, as an alternative route to understanding the consumer experience along the Blueways. A list of these businesses is provided at Appendix 2.

### **5.2 What We Found Out**

At local authority level there was considerable interest in how the midlands/lakelands might emerge as a “fourth proposition” to be promoted by Fáilte Ireland in addition to Dublin, the Wild Atlantic Way, and Ireland’s Ancient East. In particular, there was some concern in relation to the following points:

- 1) Confusion still exists between the terminology of Greenaway and Blueway. This was considered to be unhelpful and particularly confusing for consumers.
- 2) While all agencies (Waterways Ireland, Fáilte Ireland, and local authorities), wanted the same outcome, there was a sense of “blurriness” as to who did what. Agencies operate independently of each other – more collaboration might be helpful.
- 3) The “Blueway” is not a clearly define product, and it is not clear if it is fully water-based or if there are other dimensions.
- 4) There was a sense that local communities could be mobilized more effectively to serve as an “integrator” between visitors and local service providers.
- 5) It seemed unclear where visitors could find information on where to hire a canoe or where to hire a bike.

- 6) There was particular interest in the emerging concept of a midlands National Wetlands Wilderness Park, and how the Blueways could most effectively link in to this.

It is clear also that counties such as Roscommon, Longford and Leitrim reference the Shannon as a significant resource in relation to their economic and tourism development – (see for example the Roscommon County Development Plan 2014-2020, p31).

Fáilte Ireland earlier this year launched its “fourth proposition” under the title “Ireland’s Hidden Heartland” with the River Shannon and the Beara-Breifne Way positioned as the two principal elements of the new initiative. It is also understood that consumer research undertaken by Fáilte Ireland some months ago reported extremely strong interest among tourists in relation to water based activity, and the type of soft-adventure experience previously noted in Section 2 of this report. Fáilte Ireland therefore has confirmed its continuing support for the promotion of the Blueway network. It is understood however that Fáilte Ireland is unlikely to support coastal Blueways as they are considered as being potentially too challenging for the average tourist. Consequently the inland blueway network is its area of primary interest. The inland blueway network, and most particularly the predominantly canal-based section from Carrick-on-Shannon to Drumshambo, would appear to represent a good fit with the interests of tourists. It would appear also that some definitional matters around the use of the term “blueway” remain to be clarified, and that Fáilte Ireland is of the view that not every water trail will necessarily be considered to be a blueway.

In general, the business sector was very positive and supportive of the Blueways initiative and wished to see it grow. Most of the businesses contacted were SMEs and micro-enterprises and were very clear that the Blueways represented either their core market or a significant source of additional business. There was a sense that this was an evolving initiative and an expectation that it would grow further over time. Only in one case was there little recognition of the Blueway, and rather the “river” was considered an important generator of business in the more conventional sense of cruiser traffic.

In a small number of cases telephone calls were either unanswered or rang out. This is probably illustrative of the reality in February/March for micro-enterprises in a seasonal and occasional business such as tourism.

### 5.3 Insights for Blueway Development

Local authorities are strongly supportive of the Blueways network. They remain somewhat uncertain however as to the direction being taken at central government level in relation to tourism development, and the future positioning of Blueways in that emerging policy context.

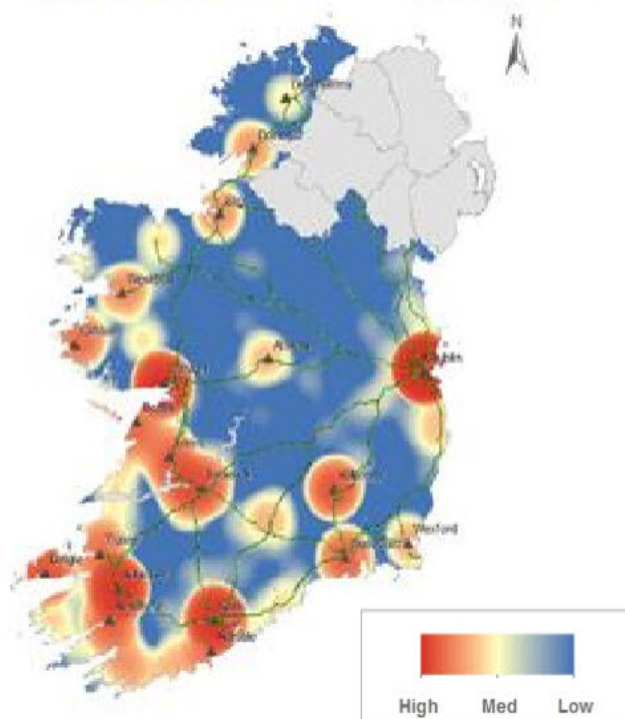
Local small businesses are (unsurprisingly) supportive of the Blueways initiative and would wish to see it promoted and marketed as strongly as possible.

### 5.4 Gap Analysis

In 2016 Fáilte Ireland published a tourism performance report<sup>9</sup>, which contained a “hotspot map” showing the parts of Ireland where international tourists actually choose to visit. This map is reproduced Figure 15 below.

**Figure 15: Distribution of Overseas Holidaymakers**

## Overseas Holidaymakers : A Hotspot Map



<sup>9</sup> Regional Tourism Performance in 2014 (February 2016)

What the map reveals is that the highest concentration of overseas tourists are to be found in the coastal counties of Ireland. Based on their own research - and for their own independent reasons - most tourists to Ireland visit the coast and coastal cities. By contrast, midland counties experience a considerably lower tourist footfall. For agencies such as Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland however international visitors represent the key performance metric. All expenditure made by international visitors is new additional money in the Irish economy and is in effect a strong export component of the economy. Hence the considerable attention international tourism receives from the relevant tourism agencies.

Both the SB and the SEB are located in the blue area of the map above – this is the less tourism-centric part of Ireland. Unlike Fáilte Ireland, Waterways Ireland has a somewhat wider concept of its customer base. This base is comprised of three elements – local communities, domestic tourists, and international tourists. So while international tourists are also an important market segment for Waterways Ireland, they are just one of three segments. Therefore for Waterways Ireland, a successful outcome for the organisation, having invested in the Blueways network, is that the facilities are used to the fullest possible extent – by all users – subject to sustainability, safety issues, and congestion constraints.

Like any dataset, the map above should be treated with some caution. The implication of the map is not that tourism should be abandoned within the blue areas. Rather it is that tourism development needs to be designed and implemented much more carefully in those areas. Equally those involved in tourism must recognise that they face a stiffer challenge than their counterparts on the coast. One owner of a long established tourism business in Co. Leitrim, who was consulted in the preparation of this report, observed (perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively) that tourism could be considered to be even more important in Leitrim than in Galway. The point being made was that in relative terms – and given the relative scarcity of economic activity elsewhere in Leitrim – tourism was likely to represent a bigger slice of the economic pie in Leitrim than might be the case in Galway.

In this regard, a related point is how the performance of the Blueways should be evaluated. The concept of “high-performance” is much used and much talked about nowadays – high-performance athletes, high-performance workplaces and so on. This raises the question of what a high-performing tourism asset looks like, and whether the Blueway network will evolve into being such a high-performing tourism asset.

In terms of the attributes of a high-performing tourism asset, it can be argued that four inter-connected elements must be in place to support peak performance. These are:

- 1) Fundamentally, there must be a significant core tourism asset of intrinsic interest to visitors. This could be a man-made attraction or a feature of the natural or cultural heritage. It must possess the capacity to capture the interest and attention of consumers. It must be consumer-centric. This is the fundamental core – the following three elements merely serve to animate the core asset.
- 2) The asset must be supported by a range of essential services. This is the service connectivity issue. Consumers must be able to find out about it (marketing/promotion/online), they must be able to access it (local transport), they must be able to engage with it (equipment hire, weather information), they must be able to learn about it (online information, apps, local guides and storytellers – perhaps even lock-keepers in the case of the Blueways?), and they must be able to access all these services in a way that is flexible and in a way that supports their own itinerary and their own plans.
- 3) The core asset must have a compelling experience to offer and/or a compelling story to tell. This could involve a feature in the built or natural environment.
- 4) Stories require story-tellers. “Stories” in this context can include the conventional meaning of the word, but can also include local entertainment, music, drama, comedy, folklore, local history, and local customs (Gaelic games). These are essentially the features which it is hoped the Blueways consumer will encounter when they go “off the towpath”.

It could be argued that tourist attractions such as the Guinness Storehouse, Titanic Belfast, the Giant’s Causeway, and the Cliffs of Moher tick all four boxes and so are considered to be high-performing tourism assets. So the following question must be to what extent does the Blueway currently, or potentially in the future, tick all four boxes? It could be argued that a paddling trip on the canal from Carrick-on-Shannon across the two locks and a walk across the floating boardwalk at Acres Lake, followed by bike hire and a visit to the Arigna Mining Museum ticks all four boxes. The challenge is to consistently deliver these experiences to the visitor.

Ireland’s inland waterways have long been considered an attractive feature of the natural heritage and an important tourism asset. However apart from river cruising and angling,



the potential of the waterways has to date remained somewhat under-developed. Consequently, the capital investment made in developing the Blueway network can be considered to be an appropriate intervention for a public agency such as Waterways Ireland. This investment has properly resulted in the creation of a “public good” – a public resource which is open and free to all users to access and enjoy (unlike a private good such as a cinema). This creation of a public good/amenity is often considered to be a core function of government, following which the private sector should recognise the opportunity created in the delivery of the new recreational facility and move in and service it as described at point (2) above. This then has the effect of creating jobs and economic activity in local areas along the Blueway, as has proved to be the case along the Mayo Greenway.

Waterway Ireland’s investment has addressed point (1) above. This investment has focused on the core asset, improved the waterway infrastructure, branded the waterway, and so brought the asset to a point where it is more visible and accessible as a recreational and tourism asset. Waterways Ireland has also gone some way into point (2) in creating a website, providing on-trail shelters, on-trail information, canoe stands, seating and picnic facilities, and (in some locations) shower/toilet blocks. There is however a limited to which any publicly-funded government agency can go in terms of points (2), (3), and (4). Typically in tourism infrastructure development, a point is reached where it is considered that the remaining work must be carried out by the private sector.

The ultimate focus of this narrative is on the concept of a “gap analysis”. This can be addressed at two levels. At a narrow level, the gap could be considered to be quite small. Waterways Ireland has made a considerable investment in the waterways infrastructure and in the development of the Blueways brand. Notwithstanding the opportunities for improvement identified in this report, Waterways Ireland’s achievement in improving the core waterway infrastructure is a very considerable one.

At a wider level - in moving across points (2), (3), and (4) above, the gap could be considered to be significantly wider. Experience elsewhere in tourism infrastructure development would also suggest that some of these gaps can remain enduring ones. Yet for the most part, these matters are not within the direct gift of Waterways Ireland. They are essentially matters requiring the attention of the private sector, and perhaps also the tourism development agencies. In that case Waterways Ireland’s function moves more into the space of prompting initiatives, and seeking to secure outcomes by supporting the work of others. These matters are examined in a little more detail in the following section.

## **6. DEVELOPING THE BLUEWAY EXPERIENCE**

With the development of the Shannon and the Shannon-Erne Blueways, and the launch of the Lough Derg Blueway in March 2018, Waterways Ireland has developed three very significant tourism and recreation assets. Following this period of product investment and development, the implementation plan presented here is less concerned with the continued creation of additional product, but rather focuses instead on the actions that should be taken to support the promotion and optimisation of the existing and newly developed Blueway network over the medium term – (i.e.) mid-2018 to mid-2021.

Based on our assessment of the Shannon and Shannon-Erne Blueways, our research into international good practice and comparators, and the anticipated interests of target visitor segments, we believe that further development of the Blueway visitor experience should focus on the eight priority themes set out below:

- 1) Trailhead Animation/Orientation
- 2) Signage
- 3) Soft Infrastructure
- 4) Private Sector Engagement
- 5) Additionality
- 6) Marketing
- 7) The Visitor Experience
- 8) Visitor Feedback.

The reasoning behind the selection of these eight themes is presented below, and each of these areas in turn will serve thereafter as a spine for the detailed Action Plan presented in Section 7 below. In respect of each of the eight themes noted, the narrative follows a two part structure. The first element is a “rationale” which presents an outline of why the particular theme in question is considered significant or pertinent to the further development of the Blueway network. The second element consists of a recommendation (or a set of recommendations) that CHL believes should be implemented to support further Blueway development. The Action Plan at Section 7 is anchored in these recommendations.

These eight themes can be considered as a set of clusters or packages of related insights, which can serve as programme/funding streams to guide implementation and planning.

## 6.1 Trailhead Animation / Orientation

*Rationale:* A “sense of arrival” and a “sense of place” are noted in this report as features that are important for those traveling to a new location. A sense of arrival is important in that it conveys a sense that the visitor has reached their destination, that the location is physically attractive and interesting, and that there is a welcoming feel about the area. A sense of place is important in that the visitor understands that this is a unique location, that there are lots of new things to see and do, and that it will be possible to stay a day or two in the area, being fully occupied while engaging in new experiences. Some destinations naturally possess and present these features. Many however do not, and have to work a little bit harder to communicate to the visitor what it is that they have to offer. This is common across many tourism/leisure destinations in Ireland.

This report has also noted the potential to identify particular towns along the Blueway as “Trail Towns”, where clusters of services could support the visitor experience. In addition to specific towns, particular locations – such as Acres Lake – could also be identified and supported in a similar manner. Visitors to the Blueways are likely to fall into two categories. The first will be those who do their research online, identify what they wish to do, book and pay for that in so far as they can online, and bring with them some or all of the equipment they might need. These visitors arrive pre-prepared, and most probably, well informed. The second type of visitor might be described as “walk-ins”. These could be visitors on a general leisure break near a Blueway, but they may be unaware of the Blueway and the opportunities it provides, or they may have only a partial understanding of it. The majority of leisure tourists are “walk-ins” – the question is whether they might find along the Blueway an appropriate facility into which they can walk.

This points to a developmental opportunity - at a limited number of locations along the Blueway – to introduce a number of consistently themed and branded “Blueway Visitor Centres”. The purpose of these centres would be to:

- animate or bring to life the opportunities and experiences available along the Blueway and on the Towpath.

- provide some orientation to the visitor as to how they could plan a day/half-day on the Blueway, and how they can best navigate their way in the area they would like to visit.
- share some of the history, folklore and stories of the area, and tell visitors where and how they can find out more.
- hire equipment that may be required (canoes, bikes, etc.), and engage guides and/or instructors as required.
- provide other services such as storage facilities, toilets, etc.,
- provide a retail opportunity for Blueway branded merchandise.

It could be argued that some of these services are already being provided through Fáilte Ireland Tourism Information Offices. It is unlikely however that Fáilte Ireland would be able to bring the particular focus or knowledge base that a bespoke Blueway Visitor Centre would. These centres would also represent a physical branded facility where the Blueway concept could be promoted and marketed, and – most importantly – made visible to those visiting the town/location in question. Such facilities should operate on a seasonal basis only (May to September) and as such they will need to be planned and developed accordingly. For example it is unlikely that permanent structures would be required. Some space could perhaps be shared through an existing Tourism Office or other public/community facility, or through a temporary structure which might serve as a “pop-up” visitor centre.

### ***Key Recommendations***

- Establish a funding programme to support a three-year seasonal animation and orientation programme at a limited number of principal trailheads, and other suitable locations.
- Design this programme in such a way that it provides information, orientation and other visitor services, as well as serving as an instrument for the promotion and marketing of the Blueway concept itself.
- Having developed the detail and structure of the proposed Blueway animation/orientation initiative, publish a call for “Expressions of Interest” from private operators who might wish to prepare and provide this service on behalf of WWI (either under licence or some similar operating agreement).

## 6.2 Signage

*Rationale:* Signage serves a variety of purposes, from awareness-building and creation of a ‘sense of place’ through to the provision of information, orientation, and interpretation. Signage helps to create a sense of place, and of particular importance, a “sense of arrival”. Strong creative signage will be the first Blueway ‘experience’ that a visitor has once they arrive in an area. The new “Welcome to the Blueway” signs are striking and clear, but there is a need for consistency in approach across the entire network of trails.

### **Key Recommendations**

A comprehensive approach to signage should be based on a hierarchy of sign types, each serving a different and particular purpose. This hierarchy approach is summarised below:

- **Motivational:** Sense of Arrival/Sense of Place signage that welcomes visitors to key locations (e.g. Trail Towns) along the network, and creates a sense of excitement and anticipation; also small signs for businesses to display their service, and the contribution they offer in the local experience.
- **Navigation:** directional signage that makes it easy for visitors to find trailheads and access points from main junctions and routes, and from town centres.
- **Orientation:** network signage that assists visitors in accessing the Blueway, provides on-site information to help visitors experience the trails (both on and off the water), and encourages them to explore and stay in the surrounding area.
- **Functional:** health and safety signage, local facilities (cultural, sporting, & leisure), food & accommodation, toilets/showers, storage facilities, banking/ATM, supermarkets, etc.
- Consider how the model of the IAE signage could be drawn upon as an instrument to provide information and guidance for the visitor, in relation to proximate attractions and points of interest along the Blueway.

### 6.3 Soft Infrastructure

*Rationale:* The natural environment provides the basic ‘building block’ for the visitor experience along the Blueways. This hard infrastructure represents the core of the Blueway asset - it provides the physical ‘hardware’ which paddlers, cyclists and walkers need - the means with which to get in and out of the water, or along the water-side, the facilities at trailheads, and so on. However “soft infrastructure” is also an essential component of the leisure experience – this includes facilities such as bike racks, canoe storage, lock-up facilities, BBQ stands, shelters, picnic tables, toilets, etc.

There is a potential for this soft infrastructure to play a bigger part in the visitor experience.

#### **Key Recommendations**

- Support safer entry/egress from the water via slipways and handrails.
- Develop consistent approach to soft infrastructure delivery as defined above.
- Drawing upon the findings of this report, identify locations where soft infrastructure facilities (as defined above) could be improved across the Blueway network.

### 6.4 Private Sector Engagement

*Rationale:* As the responsible public authority, Waterways Ireland, has delivered two significant pieces of public recreational infrastructure in the Shannon and Shannon-Erne Blueways. It is already working with other public authorities such as local government, National Trails Office, Fáilte Ireland, and Tourism Northern Ireland to ensure that these assets are fully promoted, mobilised, and functioning in an optimal manner. In terms of securing an economic return on the funds invested however, it is unlikely that public authorities alone can deliver this outcome. Experience elsewhere (for example, the Mayo Greenway) has shown that when a piece of tourism/recreational infrastructure is delivered, it begins to serve as the “spine” for a range of economic and business activities. These activities grow as local businesses begin to realise the economic implications of the new facility at their doorstep, and begin to offer goods and services along that facility. This in turn enriches the visitor’s experience. However, there can be a “lag effect” in this regard, as local businesses may initially be slow to understand the new opportunity in their area. However, wherever and whenever a real business opportunity exists, commercial entities will eventually recognise it and act upon it.

It is seldom the role or function of public authorities to engage in direct commercial activity. However as the lead agent involved in developing the Blueway network, WWI will have a particular role in supporting local businesses to recognise the commercial potential arising from that development.

### **Key Recommendations**

- Work with local LEOs to design and deliver support packages for local businesses interested in getting involved in Blueway-related commercial activity.
- Develop and host a number of Business Engagement events for businesses at relevant locations.
- Provide training and mentoring support to local SMEs and micro-enterprises in areas such as management, finance, and marketing.
- Develop and support SME business clusters (to generate greater service connectivity).

## **6.5 Additionality**

*Rationale:* Additionality in this context refers to features along the Blueway (both on and off the water) that have the effect of enriching and adding to the visitor experience along the way. These could derive from the natural heritage (nature trails, horticultural trails, gardens, wildlife interpretation, landscape interpretation, etc.), the built heritage (the architecture and monuments of towns and villages, industrial heritage, and the stories of the engineering feats associated with the original development of the canal network), and the cultural heritage (art/sculpture installations, music events, local food and crafts, local markets, etc.). The rationale in this instance is not to suggest that these features will necessarily be found at all locations along both Blueways. It is however to suggest that locations should be identified at points along the Blueway where these features exist and where they should be included in Blueway promotional collateral – in the absence of such promotion they could remain unknown to the visitor, and so the opportunity for experience additionality will have been lost.

Some illustrative examples in this regard include, Cavan Burren Park, Lough Boora, Lough Key, and some of the sites and locations currently promoted under the Ireland's Ancient East brand. It may be expected that further opportunities in this regard will arise with the recent launch of the *Ireland's Hidden Heartland* brand.

### Key Recommendations

- Establish a coordinating group of Arts/Heritage/Culture Officers from the relevant local authorities (one group for the two Blueways) which can serve as a source of innovation in this area and a driver of implementation.
- Through this group access relevant Arts/Heritage/Culture organisations, and other relevant agencies in civic society that could mobilise activity and volunteers at preferred points along the Blueways.

## 6.6 Marketing

*Rationale:* Before a visitor can decide to engage in a Blueway experience, they must know it exists. It is the particular purpose of marketing to capture the attention of consumers, to create an interest in the Blueway experience on offer, to convert that interest to desire, and lastly to convert that desire to action – to book and buy the experience. A well designed marketing programme could well be the most important intervention made by WWI over the medium-term period noted above. WWI already has a well-evolved marketing programme. However as noted previously in this report, there is a particular communications challenge that needs to be at the centre of future marketing activity. This relates to a certain level of confusion that continues to surround the terminology and definition of Blueways. This can arise through confusion between Blueways and Greenways, whether the “blue” in Blueways means they only involve water-based activity (and so the potential of the “off the towpath” dimension is missed by some consumers), and what type of features and attributes a Blueway must possess before it can be properly termed a Blueway and promoted as such by the tourism agencies.

### Key Recommendations

- In order to address confusion around Blueways/Greenways (definition and terminology), develop a consumer-centric Blueway Guide for the particular purpose of bringing greater clarity to the Blueway Brand, the leisure proposition it represents, and the service/experience it delivers in practice.
- Optimise Blueways promotion in social media channels;
- Develop online content most likely to appeal to Free Independent Travelers (FITs) – these are more likely to be Blueway visitors (rather organised coach tours).



- Develop a programme of promotional events, and consider ‘celebrity’ endorsement.

## 6.7 The Visitor Experience

*Rationale:* The visitor experience extends beyond the water and the towpath, to other services and facilities in the area with which visitors engage – these include accommodation, food/beverage, retail, entertainment, information, guiding services, and local events. At an even wider level, the visitor experience will be impacted by factors such as the presentation of towns and villages (public realm, streetscapes, shopfronts, facades, noise and litter, public order and safety) and the ease with which visitors can find, and engage with, local events and activities. Clearly much of these matters are outside the remit of WWI – although this point underlines the need for strong local alliances and structures between local stakeholders, and in which WWI can participate.

Notwithstanding the above, WWI directly controls the visitor experience in so far as it is encountered on the water and on the towpath. Some measures that could enhance this experience have been noted above (soft infrastructure), and also reference back to points noted in the body of this report relating to matters such as the development of Trail Towns, and development of certain trail information services (for example real-time information on trail conditions, including weather and safety information).

### **Key Recommendations**

- Introduce a ‘Trail Town’ programme that will focus on specific hubs of activity as orientation points for visitors, and as centres for coordinated entertainment/activity by local stakeholders.
- Develop real-time online information relating to conditions on the Blueways.
- Promote the concept of “service connectivity” among local businesses and service providers.
- Ensure access points to the water are available that are consistent with the needs of novice paddlers.

## **6.8 Visitor Feedback**

*Rationale:* Ultimately, the visitor experience must be informed by an understanding of who the visitors are, where they come from, what they are interested in doing, their level of proficiency in doing certain things (i.e. canoeing), how long they plan to spend in the area, how much money they actually spent in the area, how and where they access their leisure information, and more generally what their motivators for travel are.

In the absence of this information, WWI and its partner public service bodies (local government and tourism), as well as its private sector partners, will lack the basis upon which to plan an “information-informed” programme of Blueway development and operation. Some of this information is already available through data collected by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) and Fáilte Ireland. This data can be useful in terms of general consumer profiling, market segmentation, and the areas/activities most preferred by visitors, but it doesn’t provide the type of insight required to guide further detailed development of visitor facilities and services along the Blueways. Nor does it provide the type of data required to support private sector involvement and to convince private sector investors to put their money into Blueway businesses.

### **Key Recommendations**

- Introduce a consumer-centric Blueway Visitor Attitude Survey (VAS) starting in summer 2018, to measure patterns of usage, satisfaction levels, and other relevant information among Blueway visitors.
- Introduce a business survey along the Blueways (and particularly in Trail Towns), in order to obtain insights on Blueway visitors from the perspective of commercial operators.
- These surveys should be relatively simple and inexpensive to implement – perhaps by liaising with the Business School of a local Institute of Technology to source survey workers and supervisors.

It is suggested that further Blueway development on the Shannon should be deferred until at least two such surveys (2018/2019) have been conducted, and at which point an enhanced “evidence-informed” information base will be available.

## 7. ACTION PLAN

### Priorities for Further Development

An Action Plan is set out below which draws upon the narrative in Section 6, and presents a number of specific actions across the eight themes considered.

Focus Area	Key Actions	Lead Party	Key Dependencies
<b>7.1 Trail Head Animation &amp; Orientation</b>	1) Establish a funding programme to support a three-year seasonal animation and orientation initiative at a limited number of principal trailheads (2019 – 2021).	WWI	Funding Support
	2) 2. A central element of this initiative should be the development of Blueway Visitor Centres, appropriately themed and branded, to provide information and orientation for the visitor and to serve as a physical and visible representation of the Blueway concept.	WWI	Local Government & Local Communities.
	3) Use the Blueway Visitor Centres as a mechanism to support Blueway promotion and marketing.	WWI	
	4) When fully developed, put the Blueway Visitor Centre programme out to market, and seek private sector operators to develop and implement the initiative over a three year timeframe.	WWI	Private Sector

Focus Area	Key Actions	Lead Party	Key Dependencies
<b>7.2 Signage</b>	1) Develop signage within a funded programme based on a clear hierarchical structure. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Motivational Signage to create a sense of Place/Sense of Arrival and create awareness, excitement and anticipation - welcoming visitors to and within Trail Towns and Trailheads.</li> <li>- Navigational Signage to allow visitors find trailheads and access points from the proximate area.</li> <li>- Orientation signage that supports the visitor’s information needs during their time on the Blueway – and which also presents specific information panels on things to do and places to see in the surrounding area. This content should also be available online and downloadable on mobile devices.</li> <li>- Functional Signage that helps visitors to find nearby facilities – retail, medical, banking, police, sports, culture, and leisure.</li> </ul>	WWI	Local Authority, local businesses, local community
	2) Review all signage, with a view to removing old brown and out-of-date signs, and ensuring new ones are visible and correctly oriented.	WWI	
	3) Draw on the IAE signage model to improve visitor orientation in relation to things to see and do in areas proximate to the Blueways.	WWI	

Focus Area	Key Actions	Lead Party	Key Dependencies
<b>7.3 Soft Infrastructure</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Develop a standardized package of facilities and services, to be implemented consistently across all Blueway locations. These should include toilets (including provision of toilets at Acres Lake due to increased popularity), showers, fresh drinking water, canoe racks, hose-down facility for canoes, shelter area, picnic benches, parking, BBQ stands and/or fire pits, bicycle stands, lock-up facilities, information and orientation panels, and safety devices such as lifebuoys and defibrillators. These facilities could be reviewed over the next three years as more visitor feedback is gathered.</li> <li>2) Introduce guidance display for inexperienced visitors on how to use the Blueway safely, (e.g. portage, entry/exit from the water etc.)</li> <li>3) Use soft infrastructure to cross-connect with trail animation by presenting engaging display panels providing information on local attractions, local exhibitions and events, local sports activity etc. This could also include information on local services: luggage transfer and storage, dining, retail, outdoor suppliers and equipment rental, taxis, etc.</li> <li>4) Provide particular supports at locations where no slipway is available. This could include installing handrails on steps to the water, and clearly identifying non-slipway access/egress points on maps and promotional literature as being unsuitable for inexperienced users.</li> </ol>	<p>WWI</p> <p>WWI</p> <p>WWI</p> <p>WWI</p>	

Focus Area	Key Actions	Lead Party	Key Dependencies
<b>7.4 Private Sector Engagement</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Develop and host a number of Business Engagement events for businesses at relevant Blueway locations. The purpose of these events will be to introduce local SMEs and micro-enterprises to the opportunity represented by the Blueway, to discuss how these local businesses can get involved in this opportunity, and to identify any supports they may require to do so.</li> <li>2) Work with LEO agencies in relevant counties to design and deliver support packages for local businesses interested in getting involved in Blueway related commercial activity. This should be a bespoke programme for Blueway businesses and not a generic training programme.</li> <li>3) Introduce an “Action Learning” programme for SMEs and micro-enterprises in the Blueways area. This is a supported self-learning programme where clusters of small businesses (approx. eight) come together once a month to exchange business experiences, challenges encountered, and solutions identified. This approach to small business support has previously been implemented by Fáilte Ireland in a national programme for tourism development.</li> <li>4) Provide short practical support programmes for micro-enterprises – (e.g.) how to apply for a bank loan making a business case, how to apply for a grant, etc.</li> </ol>	<p>WWW</p> <p>WWI</p> <p>WWI</p> <p>WWI</p>	<p>LEO, business community, Chambers of Commerce</p> <p>LEO</p> <p>LEO</p> <p>LEO, Business Mentoring</p>
<b>7.5 Additionality</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Establish a coordinating group of Arts/Heritage/Culture officers from relevant local authorities. One single group should be formed to cover both Blueways. The remit of this group should be to consider, over a three year time frame, how a joined-up programme of interventions can best be designed and delivered across the Blueway network. Additionality of the type envisaged is unlikely to be achieved without a direct and focused programme of action, designed and monitored by those with professional expertise in the area.</li> <li>2) Mobilise civic society. This is easy to say and difficult to do. Yet the international review presented in this report offers a number of examples where Blueways were performing at a high level because of the active engagement of local communities. Civic society, and the communities and the cultural and heritage organisations embedded within it, represent a powerful force for “additionality” along the Blueways.</li> <li>3) Consider leveraging existing opportunities for Blueway development. For example, the Tidy Towns competition helps to engender a sense of community involvement and a sense of place. Perhaps a small cluster of Trail Towns (three or four) could enter the Tidy Towns process as a “Blueway Cluster Town”.</li> </ol>	<p>WWI</p> <p>WWI</p> <p>WWI</p>	<p>Local Government</p> <p>Local Community</p> <p>Tidy Towns Event</p>

Focus Area	Key Actions	Lead Party	Key Dependencies
<b>7.6 Marketing</b>	1) Produce a Blueway Guide to promote the Blueway brand and proposition, and to address continuing confusion associated with the Blueway/Greenway terminology.	WWI	Business Community        Local Community/Volunteers    PR/Media Advisor
	2) Develop an interactive mapping facility to allow visitors create their own maps and integrate other ancillary attractions/services. Integration with Google Maps will allow visitors to use the facility via smart phones when out on the trails.	WWI	
	3) Review main website to allow for inclusion of weather and trail status updates, embedding of YouTube videos, inclusion of new mapping facility, and full use of event section.	WWI	
	4) Review and optimize use of social media, especially Twitter and Instagram.	WWI	
	5) Ensure all businesses and organisations listed on a Blueways website, provide reciprocal prominence to Blueways on their own websites.	WWI	
	6) Develop short instructional videos on YouTube for users and include on main website, e.g. a guide for paddlers on how to navigate locks.	WWI	
	7) Develop a programme of events (or repackage existing ones) along the Blueway, e.g. to coincide with Earth Day, volunteer orientation, lock keeper demonstrations, family nature outings, etc.	WWI	
	8) Establish a panel of high-profile “celebrities” to use in a Blueway endorsement campaign – (e.g.) video clips of these people using the Blueways and commenting on the leisure opportunities they represent.	WWI	
	9) Consider potential for Blueway product merchandising.	WWI	

Focus Area	Key Actions	Lead Party	Key Dependencies
<b>7.7 The Visitor Experience</b>	1) Introduce a “Trail Town” programme that will focus on specific hubs of activity as orientation points for visitors, and as centres for coordinated entertainment/activity by local stakeholders.	WWI	Local Government – Town Council
	2) Develop real-time online information on trail conditions.	WWI	
	3) Develop a volunteer “stewardship” programme within local communities, through which people living locally can contribute to welcoming visitors to the Blueways, provide some local information, and carry out some simple maintenance works.	WWI	Local Community
	4) Develop a specific programme with local SMEs to promote and embed the idea of “service connectivity” – through which visitors can access joined-up services such as luggage transfers, equipment rental/repair, taxis, packed lunches, dial-ahead meals and pick-ups etc.	WWI	Business Community
	5) Create a sense of place/sense of arrival in Trail Towns during the summer season by using signage, banners, lighting and street furniture to present a sense of fun, entertainment, and vibrancy.	WWI	Local Government Town Council
<b>7.8 Visitor Feedback</b>	1) Introduce a peak season Visitor Attitude Survey (VAS) to harvest consumer-centric feedback. This is a key action and should be established as one of the principal tasks to be completed during the summer months. It should be possible to obtain advice and support on survey design and implementation through an agency such as a Business School at a local Institute of Technology.	WWI	Survey Expertise
	2) Introduce a similar survey across local businesses operating in the proximate area of the Blueways. This should be designed so as to elicit the views of the business sector on how the Blueways are performing, views and perspectives on visitor satisfaction, and views on the level of economic activity generated by Blueway visitors.	WWI	Survey Expertise
	3) Draw upon the feedback collected over the next two years to determine next steps in terms of further Blueway network extension or development.	WWI	



## **8. APPENDICES**

### **Appendix 1:**

#### ***Samples of Packaged Arrangements in Comparator Locations***

## A1. SAMPLES OF PACKAGED ARRANGEMENTS IN COMPARATOR LOCATIONS

### A1.1 Great Canadian Trails

Great Canadian Trails is a specialist activity travel company and is part of the international adventure travel company, **World Expeditions**. It offers a range of supported self-guide and small group tours on the Canadian Great Trail, with options that include hiking, cycling, paddling, orienteering, mountain sports and even culinary. They have a grading system that also allows consumers to select the appropriate level for their experience and fitness level.

Packages range from short breaks to longer trips, and generally include **accommodation (ranging from hotels to wild camping), food, luggage transfers and maps/guide.**

World Expeditions already programmes Ireland, but not the Blueways.


**Page Samples from Great Canadian Trails Website**

## CANADA


GO REMOTE → GO ACTIVE

Great Canadian Trails (GCT) is the active Canadian holiday specialist, offering unique and remote adventure packages from coast to coast... to coast. Experience charming communities and changing landscapes at handlebar level, paddle along dramatic shorelines and hike rugged trails with the support of our expert local team. Plus, our tours span all four seasons – go snowshoeing in winter, explore endless trails during spring and summer and enjoy spectacular fall colours amongst pristine wilderness in autumn.


You'll find adventure with GCT no matter where or what time of year you choose to discover Canada!




New Trips 2018



Supported Self Guided



Hike the West Coast Trail



Small Group Guided

**Guided and Self Guided Active Trips**

Explore Canada with a local guide or on a fully supported self guided adventure

Our adventure travel holidays in Canada are rated not just in terms of destinations we visit but also the type of journey and activity we offer. To ensure you select your ideal adventure holiday we invite you to read the description of activities, style of travel as well as our grading system.




**GUIDED**


JOIN A SMALL GROUP OF LIKE-MINDED ENTHUSIASTS IN THE COMPANY OF A LOCAL PROFESSIONAL WILDERNESS GUIDE AND SUPPORT STAFF

**SELF GUIDED**

TRAVEL AT YOUR OWN PACE WITH COMPREHENSIVE MAPS AND ROUTE NOTES, LUGGAGE TRANSFERS, BIKE RENTALS AND ACCOMMODATION INCLUDED



Autumn colours on Ontario's Great Lakes - Photo: OTMPC



Trip Overview | Itinerary | Inclusions | **Dates and Book**

### Trip Highlights

- Taking in the views from atop the Sleeping Giant
- Feeling as if dropped into a Group of Seven painting
- Enjoying rocky lookout points over Lake Superior
- Paddling by kayak or Traditional Voyageur Canoe
- Learning about Ojibwe legends and historic fur trade routes
- Hiking amid spectacular fall colours
- Camping on an island under the stars
- Visiting a working lighthouse


**AT A GLANCE**

**Duration:** 7 Days  
**Province/Territory:** Ontario  
**Starting Point:** Thunder Bay  
**Activities:** Guided Hiking  
**Grade:** Introductory ⓘ  
**Trip Code:** SUP  
**Prices From:** CAD\$1990  
\* All prices subject to applicable taxes

[Download Trip Notes](#)

[Book Now](#)

[Ask an Expert](#)



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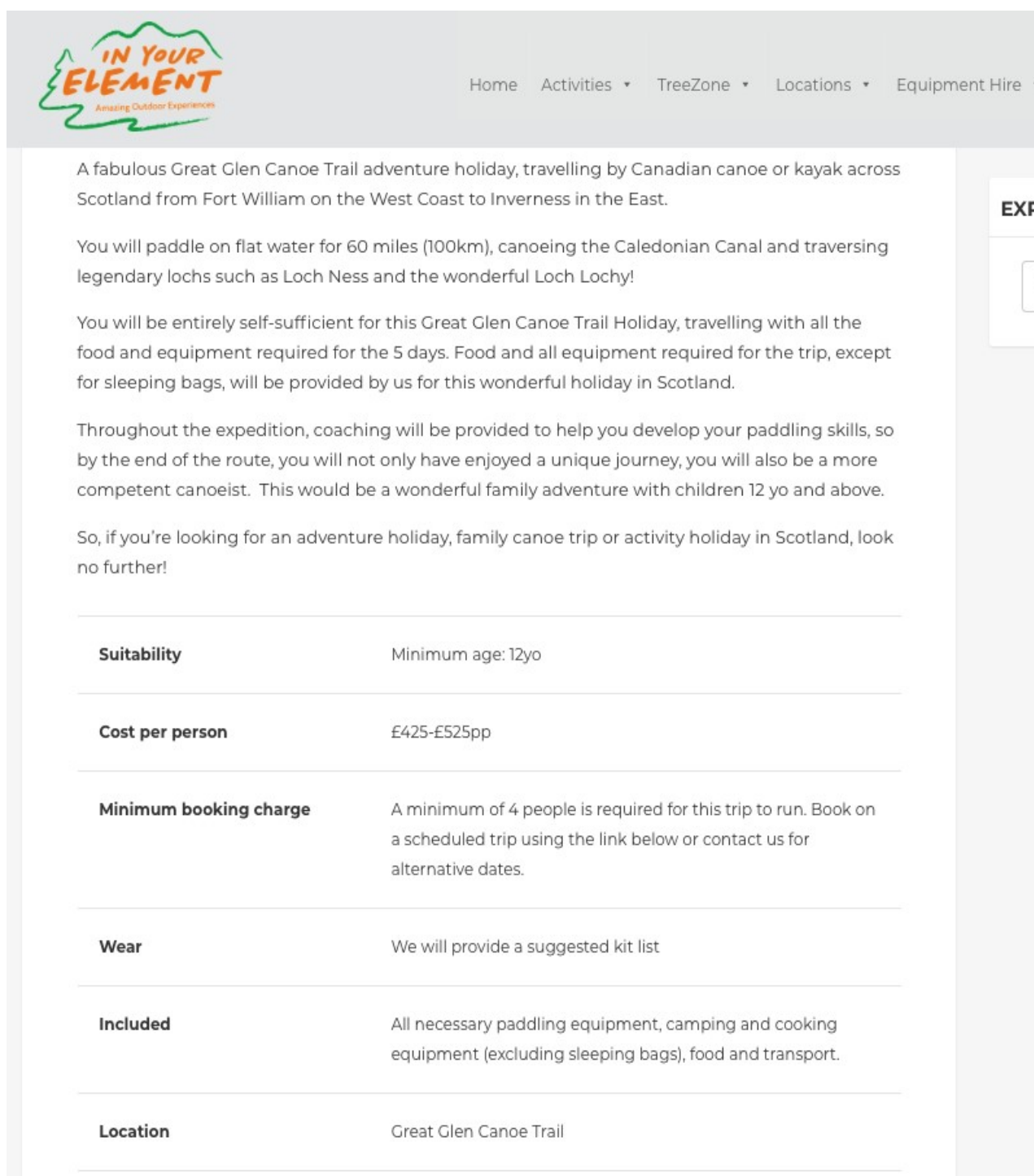
Dates ▾

**Find a Trip** ⌂

[Advanced Search](#)

## A1.2 Scotland

The Great Glen Canoe trail has attracted a number of specialist providers to develop businesses based on the needs of paddling visitors. Below are some examples of their services and offers.



The screenshot shows the 'IN YOUR ELEMENT' website with a navigation menu (Home, Activities, TreeZone, Locations, Equipment Hire) and a main content area for a Great Glen Canoe Trail adventure holiday. The text describes a 60-mile (100km) paddling trip across Scotland from Fort William to Inverness. It details that food and equipment are provided, coaching is available, and the trip is suitable for ages 12 and above. A table lists key details: Suitability (Minimum age: 12yo), Cost per person (£425-£525pp), Minimum booking charge (4 people minimum), Wear (suggested kit list provided), Included (paddling, camping, cooking equipment, food, transport), and Location (Great Glen Canoe Trail).

**IN YOUR ELEMENT**  
Amazing Outdoor Experiences

Home Activities ▾ TreeZone ▾ Locations ▾ Equipment Hire ▾

A fabulous Great Glen Canoe Trail adventure holiday, travelling by Canadian canoe or kayak across Scotland from Fort William on the West Coast to Inverness in the East.

You will paddle on flat water for 60 miles (100km), canoeing the Caledonian Canal and traversing legendary lochs such as Loch Ness and the wonderful Loch Lochy!

You will be entirely self-sufficient for this Great Glen Canoe Trail Holiday, travelling with all the food and equipment required for the 5 days. Food and all equipment required for the trip, except for sleeping bags, will be provided by us for this wonderful holiday in Scotland.

Throughout the expedition, coaching will be provided to help you develop your paddling skills, so by the end of the route, you will not only have enjoyed a unique journey, you will also be a more competent canoeist. This would be a wonderful family adventure with children 12 yo and above.

So, if you're looking for an adventure holiday, family canoe trip or activity holiday in Scotland, look no further!

<b>Suitability</b>	Minimum age: 12yo
<b>Cost per person</b>	£425-£525pp
<b>Minimum booking charge</b>	A minimum of 4 people is required for this trip to run. Book on a scheduled trip using the link below or contact us for alternative dates.
<b>Wear</b>	We will provide a suggested kit list
<b>Included</b>	All necessary paddling equipment, camping and cooking equipment (excluding sleeping bags), food and transport.
<b>Location</b>	Great Glen Canoe Trail



**Explore Highland**

By Canoe... by Kayak... by SUP...



Home Diary Short Trips by Canoe by Sea Kayak by WW Kayak by SOT Kayak by SUP Hire **Shuttles** Retail More Info

## Great Glen Shuttle Service

**Explore Highland offer planned, bespoke and an emergency Great Glen Canoe Trail shuttle services for those taking on Scotland's first formal Canoe Trail.**

Based in Inverness we offer a cost effective shuttle services for canoe and kayak groups of any size.

### Planned & Bespoke Shuttle Service

Groups normally meet at our canal side base, Inverness, where we can offer refreshments and shelter when packing your kit into your hired drybags and barrels.

After loading up our minibus we can then lead you to the Great Glen Canoe Trail car park by Muirtown Basin, where there are designated parking spaces you can leave your vehicle(s) for free during your Great Glen expedition.

Loading up and shuttling direct to the top of Neptune's Staircase at Banavie, Fort William takes just under two hours. We also offer safety advice en route over the shuttle journey and stop off briefly at Loch Ness side, Urquhart Castle and Fort Augustus to highlight various options for taking on the Great Glen Canoe Trail safely.

See [our location](#) page for directions and other facilities available.

### Search Site



### Upcoming Events

[Paddle Loch Ness \(4 hours\) - 04/05/2018](#)  
[Private Booking - Bailey - 12/05/2018](#)  
[Private Booking - EH SUP - 12/05/2018](#)  
[Private Booking - EH SUP - 12/05/2018](#)  
[Introduction to Sea Kayaking Course - 13/05/2018](#)

### Mailing List Opt-In



## Open Canoeing - Great Glen Canoe Trail

★★★★★ 62 review(s)



Watch Trip Video

Download Trip Dossier

**Next available trip:** 4th July    **Duration:** 4 night(s)  
**Location:** Multi-Location    **Comfort:** Wilderness Camping

**Difficulty:** Easy    Difficult

- ✓ Canoe from the west to the east coast through the spectacular Great Glen loch and river system - including some canoeing in Loch Ness
- ✓ Journey in the company of experienced wilderness canoe guides and develop your paddling skills en route
- ✓ Wild camping on the shores of some of Scotland's finest lochs with superb wilderness cooking throughout

**Price: from £795.00 £745**

[VIEW TRIP DETAILS](#)

Highlights

**What's Included**

Grading

Guides

Accommodation

Travel

Reviews

- ✓ 4 nights wild camping on the banks of the lochs
- ✓ All meals as stated in the itinerary (Meals included indicated as B=Breakfast, L=Lunch, D=Dinner)
- ✓ All transport, starting and finishing in Fort William (with the option to be dropped in Inverness on Day 5 if required)
- ✓ The services of at least one experienced and knowledgeable canoe guide / driver throughout your trip.
- ✓ All group equipment including tents, group safety equipment and cooking /eating equipment and utensils. Please note that sleeping bags are not included. However, sleeping bags and sleeping mats are available for hire.
- ✓ All specialist open canoe equipment, including canoes and buoyancy aids.

### A1.3 Europe

As with Canada and Scotland, there are a wide variety of activity providers packaging paddling, walking, cycling and multi-activity holidays in Mainland Europe. They are mostly offered during summer, with some more northern countries also offering limited winter holidays. Below are some examples.



This active week in Croatia offers families the opportunity to explore this incredible country on foot, by bike, kayak and by raft on an itinerary with a difference.

Go kayaking through a canyon

Discover magical landscapes

Try river rafting

Explore unspoilt forests

Splash about in waterfalls

Walk in a beautiful national park



Clear water, unspoilt woods and magical landscapes make this area one of Croatia's most desirable destinations. Your family activity holiday takes you on a journey on the Mreznica River, through Plitvice Lakes National Park and to the Una River in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The Mreznica is considered to be one of Croatia's cleanest rivers, offering plenty of great places for splashing about in the water. At 64 kilometres long, it is particularly special with its 93 waterfalls and pools of warm water, perfect for swimming away from beach crowds.

#### Typical Itinerary

Expand itinerary

DAY 1	<b>Fly to Zagreb, transfer to the Mreznica River</b>	<input type="button" value="v"/>
DAY 2	<b>Kayaking on the Mreznica River</b>	<input type="button" value="v"/>
DAY 3	<b>Walks in Plitvice Lakes National Park</b>	<input type="button" value="v"/>
DAY 4	<b>Cycling through the Mreznica area</b>	<input type="button" value="v"/>
DAY 5	<b>Free day; optional excursions</b>	<input type="button" value="v"/>
DAY 6	<b>Rafting along the Una River</b>	<input type="button" value="v"/>
DAY 7	<b>Kayaking the Mreznica River canyon</b>	<input checked="" type="button" value="v"/>
DAY 8	<b>Transfer to Zagreb Airport &amp; fly to UK</b>	<input type="button" value="v"/>





**Included:**



**Private Transport:** transport from and back to any Gothenburg hotel or airport. **Kayaking Equipment:** Double Kayak\*, Paddles, Spray Decks, Life Jackets, Bilge Pump, **Camping Equipment:** Tent (1 per 2 persons), Sleeping Bags, Sleeping Mats, Torch, First Aid Kit, Waterproof Bags, Rope, **Navigation Equipment:** Compass, Map, Customised Guide Book, Emergency Phone, **Cooking Equipment:** Gas Stove and Gas, Lighters, Pans, Cups, Plates, Cooking Utensils, Eating Utensils, Water Bottles, **Services:** Pre-pay Food Service, Baggage Storage.

\*A double kayak is recommended for a more enjoyable & social trip - however, single kayaks can be provided at special request.

## COMFORT PACKAGE (ADD-ON)

Add our comfort package and enjoy a more comfortable trip. Our self-inflating camping mat and pillow mean that the lumps and bumps associated with camping are no more.

You can request the comfort package any time before the start of your trip or mention it on the enquire page in the 'Anything else we should know' box.

**Included:**

Inflatable Sleeping Mat, Inflatable Pillow, Camping Stool

**Appendix 2:**  
***List of Consultations***

## **A2. LIST OF CONSULTATIONS**

Businesses consulted:

- 1) The Seven Horseshoes, Belturbet
- 2) Leitrim Quay Accommodation & Boat Hire, Leitrim Village
- 3) The Bush Hotel, Carrick-on-Shannon
- 4) The Landmark Hotel, Carrick-on-Shannon
- 5) Keenan's Hotel, Tarmonbarry
- 6) Electric Bike Trails, Carrick-on-Shannon
- 7) Way to Go Adventures, Ballinamore
- 8) Cavan Canoeing, Butlersbridge
- 9) Carrick Boat and Bike, Carrick-on-Shannon
- 10) T & E Kayakers, Lanesborough
- 11) Rivermania, Carrick-on-Shannon
- 12) Leitrim Surf Company, Leitrim
- 13) Adventure Gently Canoe Tours, Dromahair
- 14) The Angler's Rest, Ballyconnell
- 15) The Barge, Leitrim
- 16) Cox's Bar and Steakhouse, Dromod
- 17) The Oarsman Gastro Pub, Carrick-on-Shannon
- 18) Cavan Burren Park, Cavan
- 19) Una Bhán Tourism and Traditional Craft Shop, Boyle
- 20) Lough Ker Forest and Activity Park, Boyle
- 21) Mulvey's Arts & Crafts, Carrick-on-Shannon.



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