Regional Master plan

DONEGAL COUNTY COUNCIL, IRELAND

Interreg

Northern Periphery and Arctic

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DONEGAL
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01 Introduction

Masterplan background

This regional masterplan for cycling tourism was developed by Donegal Tourism through the project Sustainable Arctic and Peripheral Biking Tourism. The material is based on experiences from the project as well as discussions and workshops with stakeholders in the region. It was collected during the project period between 2023 and 2026, with a focus on autumn and winter 2025/2026.

02 Cycling Tourism in Donegal

Overview: A Guide to Cycling in Donegal

With its jagged coastline, mist-covered mountains, and hidden valley roads, County Donegal is a cyclist's dream. Whether you're a seasoned road warrior seeking the challenge of the **Wild Atlantic Way** or a family looking for a leisurely afternoon spin, Donegal's varied terrain offers a route for every rhythm.

1. The Iconic Long-Distance Routes

If you want to truly immerse yourself in the Northwest, these multi-day trails are the gold standard.

- **The Donegal Cycle Route (EuroVelo 1):** Spanning over 200km from **Newtowncunningham** to **Donegal Town**, this is a flagship section of the Atlantic Coast Route. It winds through coastal cliffs and upland bogs, passing through gems like **Ardara**, **Dunlewey**, and **Ramelton**.
- **The North West Trail:** A massive 326km loop through five counties, with Donegal at its heart. It offers dramatic views of the Atlantic and quiet, rural stretches that make you feel miles away from the modern world.

2. Scenic Leisure Loops

Not every ride needs to be an odyssey. These shorter loops are perfect for soaking in the scenery without the sore legs.

- **Lough Eske Circuit (16.5km):** Starting near Donegal Town, this relatively flat route circles the stunning Lough Eske, framed by the **Bluestack Mountains**. It's a favorite for its "photo-op" potential.
- **Inis Eoghain Cycleway (55km):** A beautiful loop connecting Lough Foyle and Lough Swilly. A third of it is traffic-free, leading you up to the historic **Grianán of Aileach** for a panoramic view that spans several counties.
- **Rossguill Peninsula (20km):** Starting in **Carrigart**, this moderate loop offers constant ocean views and passes by the famous **Downings Beach**.

3. Off-Road & Greenways

For those who prefer to skip the traffic entirely, Donegal is rapidly expanding its network of dedicated greenways and off-road trails.

- **The Muckish Railway Trail:** Cycle along a converted old railway line in the shadow of **Muckish Mountain**. It's 90% off-road and offers a hauntingly beautiful perspective on Donegal's industrial past.
- **Glenveagh National Park:** While primarily known for hiking, the park offers gravel loops that take you deep into the Derryveagh Mountains and alongside **Lough Veagh**. Bike hire by Grassroutes Bike Hire is available within the national park.
- **New Greenways:** Keep an eye out for the newly completed **Muff to Quigley's Point** and **Lifford to Castlefinn** sections. We also have a wonderful new 27 km cycleway from Glenties to Dungloe taking you through some of the most scenic landscape in Donegal.

4. Hidden Gems for the Adventurous

If you want to find the spots most tourists miss, head for these "secret" cycles:

- **St. John's Point:** A narrow, breathtaking road that leads straight out into the heart of Donegal Bay to a lone lighthouse.
- **Granny Valley:** Located near Ardara, this route features a thrilling (and steep!) descent down toward **Maghera Beach** and its famous sea caves.

Local Tip: Donegal weather can change in a heartbeat. Always pack a high-quality waterproof jacket and check the wind direction—a tailwind on the way out often becomes a gruelling headwind on the way back!

Plan Your Trip

- Bike Hire: Check availability and remember E-bikes are increasingly popular for tackling the

03 STRATEGIC MASTERPLAN

Biking Tourism Development Donegal County Council

1. Executive Summary
This Masterplan establishes a strategic framework to position Donegal as a premier global destination for biking tourism. By leveraging the county's rugged natural beauty—from the cliffs of Sliabh Liag to the peaks of Errigal—this plan integrates **Digital Innovation**, **Entrepreneurial Support**, **Stakeholder Clustering**, and **Environmental Sustainability** to create a resilient and lucrative tourism ecosystem.

2. Pillar I: Digital Solutions
Enhancing Visitor Experience and Management
The digital strategy focuses on removing friction from the visitor journey, ensuring that navigating Donegal's terrain is as seamless as a city commute while maintaining the "wild" appeal.
Strategic Actions & Implementation

- **The Donegal Biking Hub:** A centralised, "mobile-first" platform.
  - **Features:** Real-time weather overlays, live trail difficulty ratings, and "Save My Route" offline capabilities for areas with low connectivity.
  - **Safety Integration:** A "One-Touch" emergency location feature that sends coordinates to local mountain rescue or emergency services.
- **Immersive Marketing (The Virtual Trail):** * Deployment of 4K drone cinematography and POV (Point of View) VR experiences of the **Wild Atlantic Way** to capture the international imagination before the traveller leaves home.
- **Smart Infrastructure:** * **IoT Trail Counters:** Deployment of infrared and inductive loop sensors to track footfall. This data will feed into a public "Busy-ness Meter" on the app, encouraging tourists to visit quieter trails and preventing erosion.
  - **E-Bike Grid:** A strategic map of rapid-charging points located at local businesses, ensuring "range anxiety" does not limit the exploration of the county's hilly interior.

3. Pillar II: Entrepreneur Skills
Fostering Local Business Growth
A world-class trail is only as good as the service at the trailhead. This pillar transforms local enthusiasts into professional tourism operators.
Strategic Actions & Implementation

- **The Biking Tourism Accelerator:** * A structured 12-week program providing accreditation in mechanical support, specialised E-bike diagnostics, and wilderness first aid.
- **The "Cyclist-Welcome" Business Kit:** * Mentorship for traditional B&Bs and cafes to pivot toward the "Cycle-Friendly" segment.
  - **Requirements:** Secure, alarmed storage; high wattage drying rooms for wet gear; and "Early Bird" breakfast options tailored for long-distance riders.
- **Digital Literacy Workshops:** * Training SMEs to manage dynamic pricing, respond to TripAdvisor/Google reviews, and utilise Instagram Reels to showcase their unique local proximity to trails.

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4. Pillar III: Clustering
Promoting Collaboration and Shared Value
Donegal's strength lies in its diverse regions. Clustering prevents these regions from competing against each other and encourages them to compete together against international rivals.
Strategic Actions & Implementation

- **Regional Hub Creation:**
  - **Inishowen Cluster:** Focused on coastal road cycling and EuroVelo 1 links.
  - **Glenveagh/Central Cluster:** Focused on gravel grinding and mountain biking.
- **The "One-Click" Package:** * Developing cross-sector itineraries. *Example:* A "Pedals & Potstilling" tour where a bike rental, a guided ride through the Derryveagh Mountains, and a tasting at a local distillery are booked as a single QR-coded ticket.
- **Cross-Border Integration:** * Working with the **Northwest Greenway Network** to ensure that a cyclist crossing from Derry into Donegal experiences no drop in signage quality or digital map accuracy.

5. Pillar IV: Sustainability
Protecting the Environment and Benefiting Communities
To remain a "Top 10" destination, Donegal must protect the very landscapes that attract visitors. Sustainability is treated here as a competitive advantage, not just a regulatory requirement.
Strategic Actions & Implementation

- **Circular Trail Management:** * Adopting the **"Leave No Trace"** gold standard.
  - **Physical Infrastructure:** Use of locally sourced stone and "living" bridges that blend into the peatland and bog environments without disrupting local drainage.
- **Community Benefit Fund:** * A "Voluntary Trail Fee" integrated into bike rentals or specific high-traffic trail bookings. 100% of these funds are redirected to local parish councils for community amenities (e.g., playgrounds, lighting).
- **The "Green Mark" Certification:** * A tiered certification (Bronze, Silver, Gold) for biking businesses based on their carbon footprint, use of local food produce, and support for local employment.

6. Vision for 2030
By 2030, Donegal will not just be a place where people ride bikes; it will be a global case study in how **Active Travel** and **Adventure Tourism** can revitalise rural economies while sequestering carbon and preserving cultural heritage.
Here is the detailed implementation roadmap and financial structure for the **Donegal Biking Tourism Masterplan**. This document serves as a follow-up to the strategic pillars, providing the concrete "how" and "when" for the initiative.

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7. Implementation Timeline: 2026 – 2030
The rollout is divided into three distinct phases, transitioning from foundation-building to global scaling.

Phase 1: Foundation & Digital Launch (Year 1–2)
- **Infrastructure:** Audit existing trails and install IoT sensors at 15 key trailheads (e.g., Malin Head, Sliabh Liag).
- **Digital:** Launch the **Donegal Biking Hub** app (Beta version) with offline mapping.
- **Skills:** Recruit the first cohort for the **Biking Tourism Accelerator**.
- **Clustering:** Establish the "Inishowen" and "Northwest" cluster pilot groups.

Phase 2: Growth & Connectivity (Year 3–4)
- **Infrastructure:** Complete the Donegal section of the **Northwest Greenway Network**. Install 20 E-bike charging stations at 30km intervals.
- **Digital:** Integrate "Smart Wayfinding" with real-time safety alerts and local business push notifications.
- **Sustainability:** Launch the **Community Benefit Fund** and the first round of "Green Mark" business certifications.

Phase 3: Global Maturity (Year 5+)
- **Marketing:** Launch high-impact international campaigns targeting the UK, Germany, and North American "Adventure Travel" segments.
- **Clustering:** Full integration with **EuroVelo 1** and Sligo/Leitrim cross-border networks.
- **Evaluation:** Conduct a comprehensive economic impact study to measure visitor spend vs. infrastructure investment.

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Pillar	Allocation	Key Expenditure Items
I. Digital Solutions	20%	App dev, IoT sensors, high-spec media production, VR assets.
II. Entrepreneur Skills	15%	Accelerator grants, training stipends, specialized workshop equipment.
III. Clustering	10%	Network coordination staff, regional marketing events, joint packaging.
IV. Sustainability	15%	Eco-trail maintenance, Leave No Trace signage, Community Fund seed.
V. Infrastructure	40%	Greenway construction, trail upgrades, E-bike charging grid.

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8.Funding Sources

To ensure financial resilience, the Masterplan utilises a multi-stream approach:

1. **Direct Council Funding:** Annual allocation from the Strategic Development Fund
2. **National Grants:** Applications to the **Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme (ORIS)** and Fáilte Ireland's **Regional Tourism Development Strategy**.
3. **EU Funding:** Leveraging **Interreg** programs for cross-border biking connectivity with Northern Ireland.
4. **Commercial Partnerships:** Sponsorship of charging stations and trail maintenance by private bike manufacturers or insurance partners.

9. **Success Metrics (KPIs)**

To monitor progress, we will track the following annually:

- **Economic:** Increase average daily visitor spend by **15%**.
- **Social:** Support the creation of **50+ new full-time jobs** in the biking services sector.
- **Digital:** Achieve **100,000+ active users** on the Donegal Biking Hub app by Year 3.
- **Environmental:** Achieve **Zero Net Loss** of local biodiversity along high-traffic trails through proactive management.

04 CLIMATE RESILIENCE

Biking Tourism & Climate Resilience in Donegal

1. Climate Change: Significant Challenges for Donegal
Donegal's rugged coastline and peatland landscapes, which attract thousands of cyclists annually, are on the frontline of Ireland's changing climate. Recent data from the **Donegal Climate Action Plan 2024–2029** and the **2025 Tourism Sectoral Adaptation Plan** highlight several critical pressures:

- **Infrastructure Erosion and Peat Instability:** Heavy precipitation events (projected to increase in the autumn/winter) pose a direct threat to greenways built through bogland. Saturated peat can lead to landslides and "heaving" of trail surfaces, requiring frequent and costly repairs.
- **Coastal Squeeze:** Many of Donegal's premier cycling routes (e.g., the Wild Atlantic Way links) are coastal. Rising sea levels and increased storm surges—evidenced by **Storms Bert, Darragh, and Éowyn** in late 2024 and 2025—threaten our shoreline cycle paths.
- **Extreme Weather Disruptions:** High-wind events are becoming more frequent. For businesses, this means more "red alert" days where cycling is unsafe, leading to lost revenue and last-minute tour cancellations.

2. Strategic Opportunities: The "Northern Shift"
While the challenges are real, Donegal is uniquely positioned to benefit from shifting European travel patterns:

- **"Cool-cations":** As Southern Europe faces extreme summer heatwaves, Donegal's temperate climate is becoming a major selling point. In the 2025 season, Ireland saw a surge in "climate refugees"—tourists seeking active holidays in manageable temperatures.
- **Extended "Shoulder" Seasons:** Projections indicate a **12% to 16% increase** in the growing season. For biking tourism, this means a longer operational window in spring and autumn, potentially doubling the revenue potential for local providers.
- **Low-Carbon Experience:** Biking is the "Gold Standard" for sustainable tourism. Donegal's focus on the **Greenways Team** and **Active Travel** plans aligns perfectly with the growing global demand for carbon-neutral holidays.

3. Have we seen the "full picture" of challenges yet?
No. We are only at the beginning of the "Cascading Impact" phase.

- **Systemic Disruption:** While we've seen individual storms, we haven't yet seen the long-term impact on **insurance and liability**. As certain trails become "high risk" for floods or landslides, securing insurance for stakeholders like Owen Clarke or Grassroutes will become a major barrier.
- **Peatland Carbon Feedback:** If our trails contribute to the drying out of peatlands, they could inadvertently release carbon, contradicting our "Sustainable" branding.

4. Required Investments for Climate Requirements
To remain a premier destination, Donegal County Council and stakeholders must transition from "Traditional Trails" to **"Climate-Resilient Infrastructure."**

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Investment Area	Description
Resilient Surfaces	Use of porous asphalt and advanced drainage systems on the Burtonport-Letterkenny and Carrigans-Lifford routes to handle "flash" flooding.
Peatland Engineering	Investing in "floating" trail technology for boggy areas to prevent trail subsidence and protect carbon-sequestering peat.
Digital Alert Systems	Real-time weather monitoring linked to trail-head displays to provide tourists with safe, live updates during "Active Travel" excursions.
Intermodal Transport	Equipping local buses with increased bike-carrying capacity to allow "Climate-Safe" movement when specific trail sections are closed.

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Donegal Biking Stakeholder: Climate Adaptation Checklist

1. Operational Resilience (Managing Extreme Weather)

- [ ] **Dynamic Risk Assessment:** Have you updated your "Go/No-Go" safety criteria for high-wind events? (Note: Storms **Bert** and **Éowyn** in 2024/25 showed that traditional "Gale Warnings" may no longer be sufficient for e-bike safety).
- [ ] **Business Interruption Insurance:** Review your policy specifically for "Climate-Related Disruption." Does it cover revenue loss from trail closures due to landslides or flood damage?
- [ ] **Equipment Protection:** Are bike storage and maintenance facilities elevated or located outside of the newly mapped 1-in-100-year flood zones?

2. Infrastructure & Trail Stewardship

- [ ] **The "Adopt-a-Trail" Feedback Loop:** Establish a direct digital reporting line with the **Donegal Greenways Team**. Providers on the ground (like Owen Clarke) are the first to see "soft spots" in peatland trails after heavy rain.
- [ ] **Nature-Based Shading:** For rental hubs (like Grassroutes), consider planting native broadleaf trees to create "Cool Zones" for tourists returning from rides during increasingly common summer heat spikes.
- [ ] **Water Security:** Install rainwater harvesting at rental depots for bike washing to reduce pressure on local mains during projected summer drought periods.

3. Marketing & Customer Experience

- [ ] **The "Cool-cation" Pivot:** Update marketing materials to highlight Donegal as a comfortable, temperate alternative to the extreme heat of Southern Europe.
- [ ] **Flexible Booking Policies:** Implement a "Weather-Related Credit" system to encourage bookings even when the forecast is uncertain, reducing the impact of last-minute cancellations.
- [ ] **Education as an Asset:** Incorporate "Climate Stories" into guided tours. Explain the importance of the peatlands you are cycling through as carbon sinks—this adds "Sustainability Value" to the customer experience.

Resilient Trail Design: Donegal Standard 2026

The diagram below illustrates the shift required from traditional "hard" infrastructure to the "climate-smart" designs being implemented on the **Burtonport-Letterkenny** and **Carrigans-Lifford** routes.

- **Porous Paving:** Allows water to infiltrate the ground rather than pooling on the surface.
- **Bioswales:** Natural, vegetated ditches that filter and slow down runoff, preventing downstream flooding.
- **Root Protection:** Ensuring that trail construction does not damage the carbon-absorbing roots of the surrounding ecosystem.

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Donegal Biking: Climate SWOT Analysis

STRENGTHS

- Premier temperate climate for physical activity.
- Existing expertise in the Active Travel team.

WEAKNESSES

- High exposure of coastal routes to erosion.
- Dependency on peatland stability for trail integrity.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Attracting "Climate Refugees" from Southern Europe.
- Expansion into a 7–8-month biking season.

THREATS

- Systemic increase in insurance premiums.
- Rapid degradation of trails from high-intensity rain.

04 CLIMATE RESILIENCE

Feature	Traditional Model	Resilient Stakeholder (2026)
Booking	Rigid dates/No-refunds	Flexible "Weather-Swap" options
Safety	Static maps/Helmets	Live GPS alerts & Heat management
Fleet	Standard bicycles	High-range E-bikes with solar backup
Marketing	"Sunshine & Beaches"	"Cool-cations & Storm-Chasing Safety"

SUSTAINABLE ARCTIC AND PERIPHERAL BIKING TOURISM -PROJECT (SUB)

Sustainable Arctic and Peripheral Biking Tourism project (SUB) The international cycling tourism project SUB was implemented by a consortium of six partners in five different countries in 2023–2026, coordinated by the Joint Municipal Authority of Eastern Lapland. The project is co-fnded by the Interreg NPA and local partners.

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