

Report on	Newferry to Toome Blueway Feasibility Study
Date of Meeting	Wednesday 4 th December 2019
Reporting Officer	Michael Browne/Nigel Hill/Tony McCance
Contact Officer	Michael Browne/Nigel Hill/Tony McCance

Is this report restricted for confidential business?	Yes	
If 'Yes', confirm below the exempt information category relied upon	No	X

1.0	Purpose of Report
1.1	The officers are seeking permission to seek quotes for consultants to carry out a feasibility study for development of a proposed Blueway between Newferry and Toome.
2.0	Background
2.1	Blueways are 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.
2.2	A Blueway offers a truly unique experience into the countryside and along stunning waterways, allowing the visitor to experience a beautiful fusion of the past and present. A Blueway is very similar in concept to a greenway except rather than being a trail across land, this is a water trail.
2.3	The development of Blueways presents valuable opportunities for rural communities to attract more visitors. These values lie not only in the recreational opportunities that they offer but also in their potential to stimulate local businesses and regenerate local areas.
2.4	<p>The Lower Bann River which stretches for 60km from Toome to the Atlantic is rich in wildlife, history and built and natural heritage as evidenced by the wide range of environmental designations attributed to it. Although considerable development has taken place along the River in recent years, in order for the River to maximise its full outdoor recreation potential moving forward, several key issues have been identified that require urgent addressing namely;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the River is currently a hidden asset, not reality identifiable as a destination and therefore it cannot capitalise on its role in social and economic development currently access on the water allows full length navigation but the river banks only allow fragmented river bank routes for walkers and cyclists

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • given that the Lower Bann drains Lough Neagh, Rivers Agency is obligated to manage the water levels in Lough Neagh releasing excess into the Lower Bann with consequent impacts on water levels and flows which then impacts water and river bank based recreation e.g. sailing and angling. • water ski-ing and jet skiing zones are not always being adhered to by the user groups thereby causing damage to the biodiversity and habitats of the area.
2.5	In order to address these issues, Waterways Ireland has been working with the Local Authorities to create a 'Blueway' along the Lower Bann, which will significantly enhance the recreational opportunities in this part of Mid Ulster.
2.6	A Lower Bann Blueway would result in the development of a multi-use trail running alongside the already fully navigational water course linking walking, cycling, canoeing and paddle boarding with local towns and villages, leading to the creation of recreational hubs (clusters of activity), which then can be marketed as a 'Blueway', making the Lower Bann become more visible and recognised as a valuable recreational asset in the MUDC area.
2.7	Within the confines of the MUDC boundary along the Lower Bann, Toome and Portglenone have been identified as 'recreational hubs' i.e. sites that provides quality leisure facilities and amenities. Four other sites that fall within the MUDC boundary along the River have been identified as 'significant sites' namely; Lough Beg and Church Island, Newferry West, Hutchinson's Quay and Portna.
2.8	These are locations along the River that are integral to the overall Lower Bann visitor experience but avoid overprovision of amenities, necessitates lower levels of investment as well as acknowledging potential environmental sensitivities. It is important that Mid Ulster Council 'buys' into the concept of the Blueway along the Lower Bann both investing in the development of the 'hub' and 'significant' sites as well as the 'Blueway' marketing brand.
2.9	The RSBP is currently working with Forest Service NI to acquire a licence for approximately 100 hectares of peatland north of Newferry which it hopes to restore into a publicly accessible nature reserve whilst the Bann Valley Development Association are involved in developing a network of Community Trails near Clady and Inishrush, Portglenone Community Association are involved in developing angling and the Fisherman's Walk at Portglenone whilst TIDAL is involved in the creation of a Waterways Heritage Centre in Toome.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	Waterways Ireland have offered Mid Ulster Council £9,000 funding to carry out a feasibility for the development of a blue way from Newferry – Toome (See appendix 1.) The funding is subject to Mid Ulster Council contributing £1,000 to the total budget and project managing the feasibility study.
3.2	The feasibility study will consider extending the existing Blueway on the The River Bann from Newferry West to Toome, including Lough Beg. This proposed section of the Blueway would also include landscape that Seamus Heaney referenced in

	his poetry, and will look at extending the visitor offering to Seamus Heaney HomePlace.
4.0	Other Considerations
4.1	Financial, Human Resources & Risk Implications
	Financial: Within existing budget.
	Human: Tourism & Arts and Culture staff required to deliver events. .
	Risk Management: Risk assessment will be carried at the stand.
4.2	Screening & Impact Assessments
	Equality & Good Relations Implications: N/A
	Rural Needs Implications: N/A
5.0	Recommendation(s)
5.1	Recommend that the Council procures a company to carry out a feasibility study for a Blueway from Newferry to Toome.
6.0	Documents Attached & References
	Map showing land from Newferry West – Toome.