

Comeragh Mountains Outdoor Recreation Strategy and Action Plan





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Introduction

Background

The Comeragh Mountains covers an area of approximately 180km² in Co. Waterford. The range rises sharply to a plateau with a maximum elevation of 792m.



The study area extends approximately from the banks of the River Suir in the north, to Dungarvan in the south, and is bound to the east and west by the settlements of Kilmacthomas and Ballymacarbry respectively.

For generations, outdoor enthusiasts have been enjoying the Comeragh area. A range of facilities have been developed on a piecemeal basis to facilitate this enjoyment, including car parks and waymarked trails.

To date, no multi-stakeholder strategy for outdoor recreation has been delivered for the Comeragh Mountains.

Need for the Strategy

With recent increased interest in the Comeragh Mountains’ outdoor recreation offering, this has had an adverse impact on the environment, especially within the Comeragh Mountains Special Area of Conservation (SAC), putting the integrity of sensitive habitats and species under pressure. It has also stretched the resources available to manage the area's outdoor recreation facilities appropriately.

Concurrently however, there is also a need to provide local communities with access to green space and opportunities to get active in the outdoors and to promote economic development in the area, through activity tourism.

This strategy therefore seeks to develop a holistic and collaborative approach to managing outdoor recreation in the area, for the benefit of the mountain environment and local communities. It sets out a vision, strategic priorities and actions for the next 5 years to realise this ambition.

Development of the Strategy

The strategy development process was led by Outscape on behalf of Waterford City and County Council.

A Steering Group was established, which included representatives from the following organisations:

- Coillte
- Fáilte Ireland
- Mountaineering Ireland

- Munster Vales
- National Parks and Wildlife Service
- Waterford City and County Council
- Waterford Leader Partnership
- Waterford Sports Partnership

The Steering Group worked collaboratively to identify the vision, key priorities and actions for the Strategy.

The process took place from May 2024 to March 2025, and included:

- Benchmarking and good practice analysis
- Workshops with the Steering Group
- Stakeholder consultation, including public and landowner consultation
- Path Condition Survey
- SEA Screening under the SEA Directive
- Appropriate Assessment screening, in line with the Habitats Directive

This strategy document represents a summary of the primary outputs of the strategy development process.

It reflects the position of the Steering Group at the time of publication and is subject to change based on national, regional and local policy, the availability of funding and other opportunities that may arise in the future.



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The Comeragh Mountains

The Comeragh Mountains are formed of a high plateau made up of sandstones and conglomerate rock. The plateau is fringed by 13 ‘coums’ or corries – deep valleys scooped out by glacier action during the last Ice Age. Commercial forestry and woodland areas are found on the lower slopes.

Humans have occupied the area for thousands of years, and this is reflected in the large number of archaeological sites present and in local folklore.

The upland area is held both in private ownership and commonage. Hill sheep farming has shaped the landscape, habitats and biodiversity of the upland, and currently provides high-quality lamb.

The Comeragh Mountain environment is protected by planning, environment, habitats and water quality legislation. Much of the mountain landscape is designated within the Comeragh Mountains Special Area of Conservation (SAC) due to the presence of priority habitats and species which are significant at a European level.

The area’s habitats include areas of dry and wet heath, blanket bog and others including scrub, cliffs and scree, woodland and grassland, supporting a distinctive variety of plant and animal life, including bird species under significant threat such as Peregrine Falcon, Red Grouse, Hen Harrier and Chough.

The Nire Valley Woodlands SAC is also located in the Comeragh area and includes three areas of old sessile oak woodland.

Some of the rivers and water catchments of the Comeragh Mountains area have the highest ecological quality and have been designated ‘Blue Dot’ water catchments, which require protection under the Water Frameworks Directive.



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- Comeragh Mountains
Outdoor Recreation Strategy**
- Scale: 1:200,000
- Settlements
 - Comeraghs Recreation Point
 - Sport Ireland On-Road Cycling Route
 - Sport Ireland Walking Route
 - Waterford Greenway
 - Coillte Recreation Trails
 - Coillte Forest Roads
 - Rivers
 - Coillte Properties
 - Special Area of Conservation
 - Blue Dot Catchments
- The map displays the Comeragh Mountains area, highlighting various outdoor recreation routes and points of interest. Key locations include Clonmel, Kilsheelan, Carrick-on-Suir, Rathgormack, Clonea-Power, Portlaoise, Kilmeaden, Kilmacthomas, Lemybrien, Stradbally, Bunmahon, Ballinroad, Dungarvan, Waterford, Newcastle, Ballymacarbry, and Kilbrien. The River Suir and River Blackwater are also shown. The map includes a legend, a scale bar (0 to 10 Kilometers), and a north arrow.

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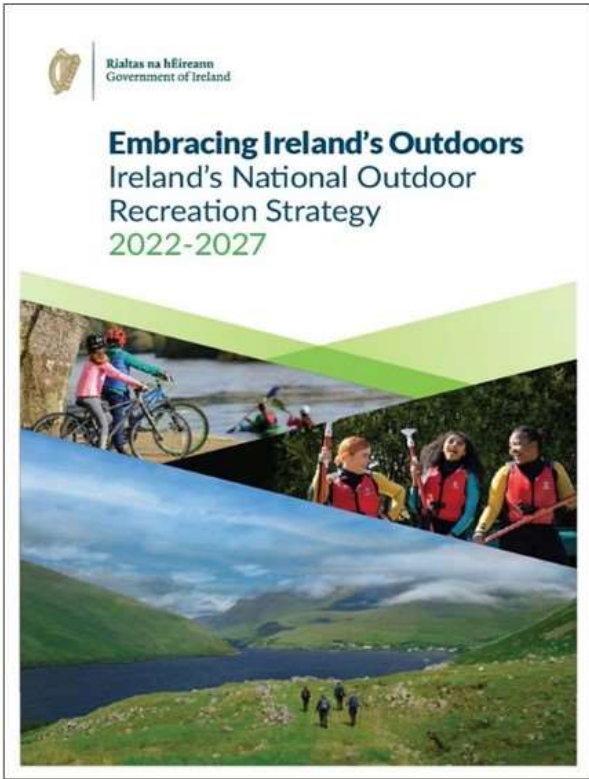
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Strategic Context

Scope

Outdoor recreation is defined as activities that take place in the natural environment. Activities can be:

- passive activities - do not involve physical exertion e.g. bird watching or picnicking
- soft activities - low impact and low to moderate intensity e.g. walking or easy cycling
- hard activities - moderate to high intensity e.g. hillwalking, mountain biking or rock climbing.



Embracing Ireland’s Outdoors

The Government of Ireland’s strategy for outdoor recreation, ‘*Embracing Ireland’s Outdoors*’, is a key deliverable under ‘*Our Rural Future*’ The Rural Development Policy 2021-25.

The objectives and actions of ‘*Embracing Ireland’s Outdoors*’, are key considerations in the context of the development of an Outdoor Recreation Strategy for the Comeragh Mountains.

Embracing Ireland’s Outdoors aims to strengthen the sustainable development of the sector and drive significant economic and health benefits to communities, while protecting landscapes, habitats and built heritage.

At a county level, the ambition is to achieve a more planned and coordinated approach between the many stakeholders, with the introduction of a County Outdoor Recreation Committee and the development of a County Outdoor Recreation Plan for each county.

The Strategy also aims to improve how recreation and access is managed in upland areas and address the recreational impact on some of Ireland's most iconic mountain ranges through the expansion of the Mountain Access Project by adopting an integrated approach to management of upland areas.

The introduction of the County Outdoor Recreation Committee and the expansion of the Mountain Access Project present key opportunities for the Comeragh Mountains.

Other strategic considerations

This strategy will help contribute to the delivery of other national and regional plans and strategies and has also been shaped by them.

Project Ireland 2040

The National Planning Framework prioritises investment in recreational infrastructure and activity-based tourism amenities, for the benefit of rural economic development and improving the health and wellbeing of citizens, while protecting and preserving fragile environments.

Waterford City and County Development Plan

- prioritises the development of sustainable tourism and identifies the Comeragh Mountains area as having significant potential which seeks to ensure no adverse impacts on ecological integrity including the Natura 2000 Network.
- has specific objectives relating to the sustainable development of outdoor recreation, including commissioning an integrated management plan and management structure for the county’s uplands.

National Biodiversity Action Plan

The National Biodiversity Action Plan 2023 - 2030 outlines that:

- responsibility for biodiversity is shared across the whole of government and society
- recreation can have a negative impact on protected habitats

- all Public Authorities and private sector bodies must move towards achieving no net loss of biodiversity.
- commits to a national Nature Restoration Plan, in line with the EU Nature Restoration Law, by 2026.

Other local strategies

These strategies address themes of rural and economic development, sports participation and environmental issues.

- Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) - for the Southern Region
- Ireland's Ancient East Regional Development Strategy
- Waterford Sports Partnership Strategy
- Waterford Local Economic and Community Plan
- Waterford Climate Action Plan
- Roadmap to Carbon Neutrality
- Failte Ireland's Waterford Destination and Experience Development Plan (draft)
- Rural Waterford - Visitor Experience Development Plan (2021-2023)
- Waterford Local Development Strategy 2023-2027 (Waterford Leader Partnership)

Current situation

Existing offering

Walking is the main activity in the Comeragh Mountains area. Cycling and running are also significant activities.

Waymarked trails

There are several waymarked walking trails in the area, which are included on the National Trails Register, administered by Sport Ireland Outdoors, and promoted by Visit Waterford on behalf of Waterford City and County Council.

Many of these walks are located on private land, including some on commonage land. Some landowners participate in the Walks Scheme and receive payments for trail upkeep and repairs. The scheme is funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development and administered locally by Waterford Leader Partnership.

Waymarked walks currently included in the Walks Scheme are marked with an asterisk (see next section). Many of these walks are located on open mountain and are not suitable for all due to their strenuous nature and potentially harsh environment. However, there are many easy-graded trails in the area to adequately cater for local community need.

Nire Valley Walks

Four waymarked walks begin and end at the Nire Valley trailhead and car park. The walks are located on privately owned open mountain terrain.

- *The Gap Walk (5.5km, moderate)
- *The Sgilloges Walk (6.5km, strenuous)
- *Coumlara Loop Walk (7km, strenuous)
- *Coumduala Loop Walk (7.5km, strenuous)

Rathgormack Walks

Four waymarked walks located within the vicinity of Rathgormack village. The Boolas Loop Walk takes in open mountain terrain on private land.

- Glenpatrick Bridge Loop (8km, moderate)
- Lough Mohra Loop (7km, moderate)
- Rath Beag Loop (3.5km, easy)
- *Boolas Loop Walk (9km, strenuous)

Mahon Falls

An unwaymarked, linear trail to the base of the Mahon Falls from a car park – graded easy, 2.5km return.

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Forest walks

There are several forests owned by Coillte in the Comeragh Mountains. All forest roads are open to walkers, subject to forestry operations. Recreation amenities are provided at the following sites:

- Carey’s Castle – car park and picnic site, recreational trails
- Colligan Wood – car park and picnic site, two waymarked trails (National Trails Register)
- Crough Wood – managed in partnership with Comeragh Community Development Group, Council-managed car park at Mahon Bridge. The wood features a linear waymarked walk, 5.4km return. The western end of the trail is currently closed due to unstable ground

National Waymarked Way

The East Munster Way is a 70km long-distance walking route that traverses Co. Tipperary and north Co. Waterford. It passes through the study area through forested areas between Ballymacarbry and Clonmel, including via Carey’s Castle.

Upland hiking

The Comeragh Uplands are a popular area for upland hikes. Mountaineering Ireland members from all parts of the country, including eight Waterford-based clubs, enjoy hiking in the area. Hikers can access the uplands from several points to roam across the Comeragh Plateau and outlying hills. Paths have been worn along popular routes, with erosion locally impacting the integrity of natural habitats.

Cycling

The Comeragh Mountains area is popular with road cyclists, who utilise the area’s major and minor roads. There are two waymarked cycle routes in the area, which form part of a suite of routes across the County which are named in honour of local cycling hero Sean Kelly. These routes feature on the National Trails Register.

- The Kelly Comeragh Challenge (160km)
- The Kelly Legacy (105km)

Mountain biking races (downhill and enduro events) are held annually in Carey’s Castle, Canon Hill and Nire Valley. These sites are also used on an informal basis all year round by mountain bikers.

Waterford Greenway

Officially opened in March 2017, the Waterford Greenway has been one of the county’s most prominent amenities and visitor attractions for over 7 years. Its location just to the south of the Comeragh Mountains has encouraged Greenway users to visit popular locations in the area such as Mahon Falls and Coumshingaun.

Other activities

Other outdoor recreation activities that take place in the area includes rock climbing and scrambling, and passive enjoyment of the outdoors, e.g. wildlife watching or picnicking

Visitor demand

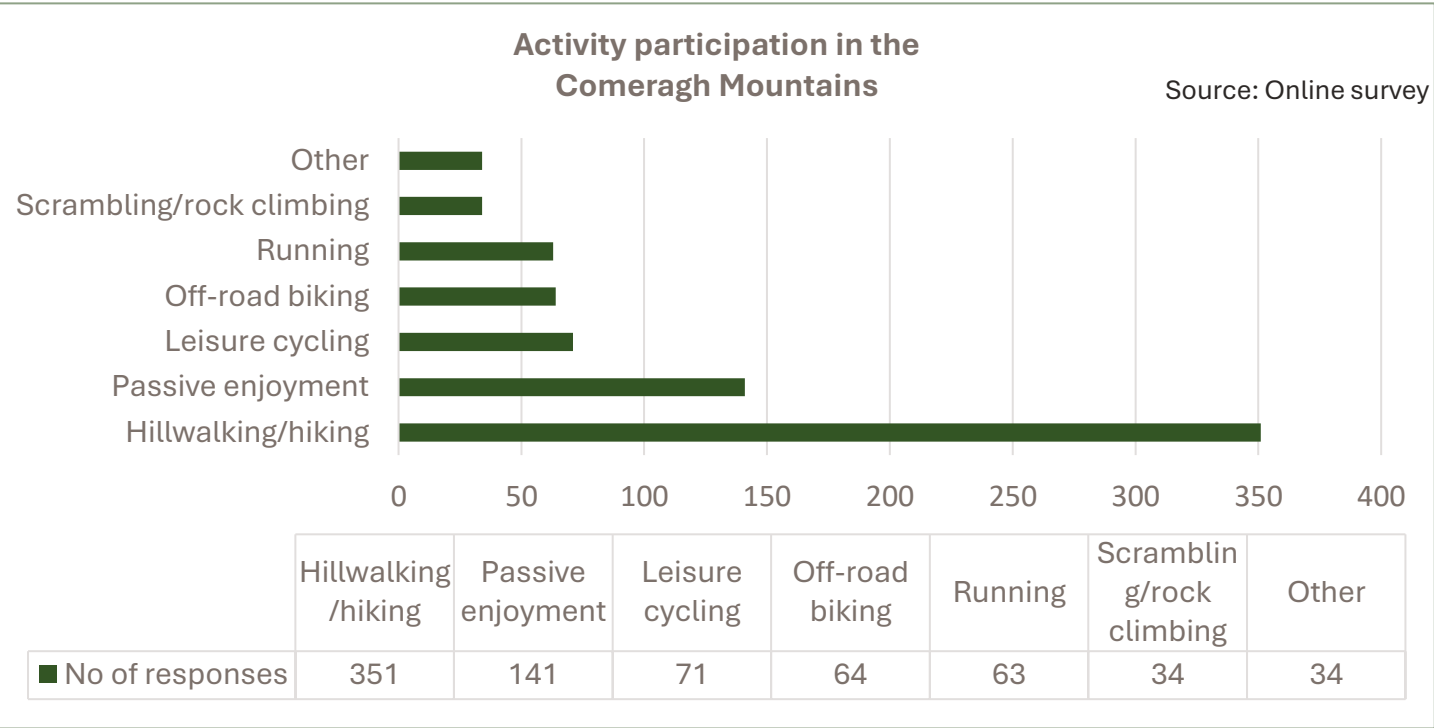
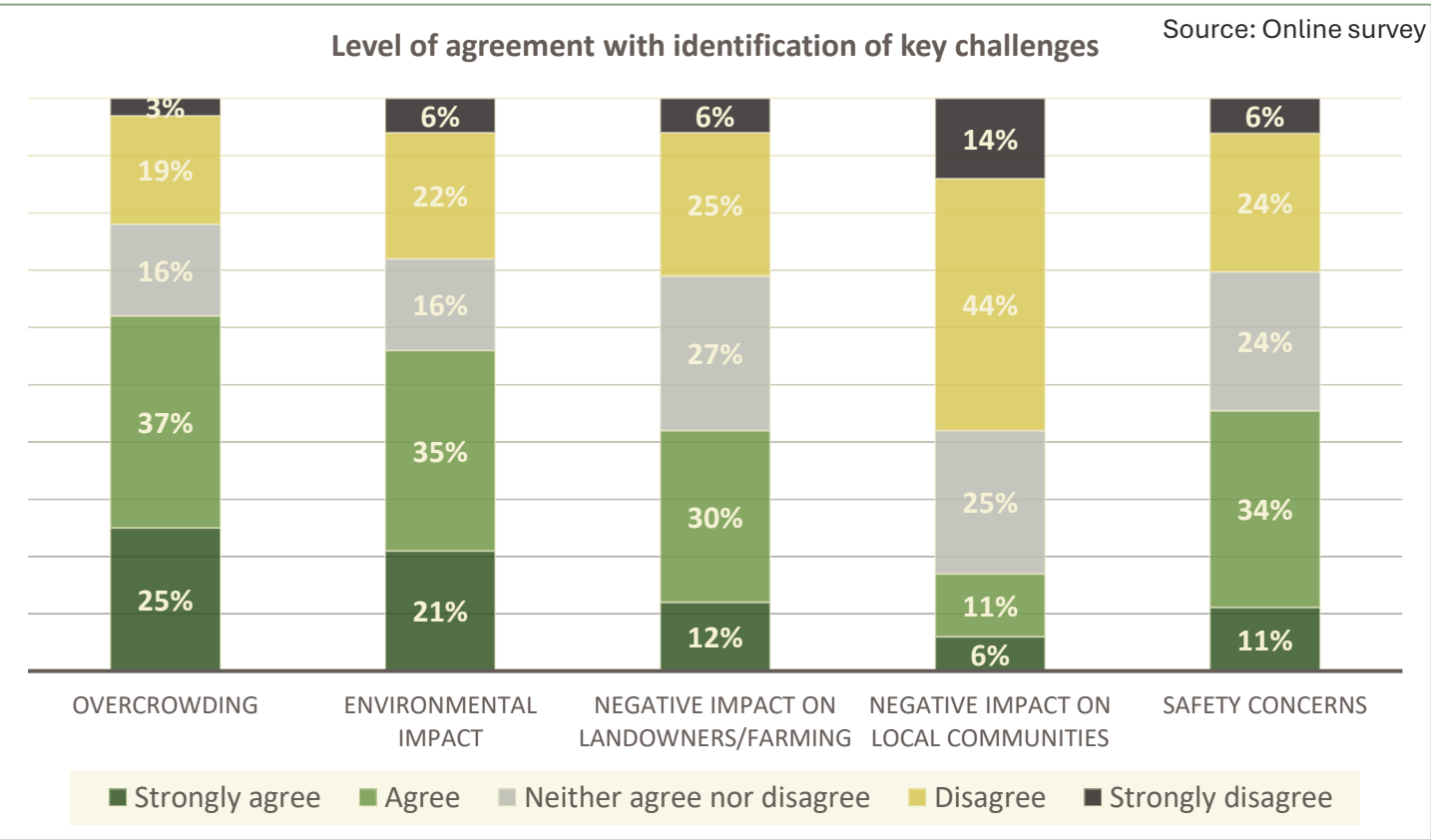
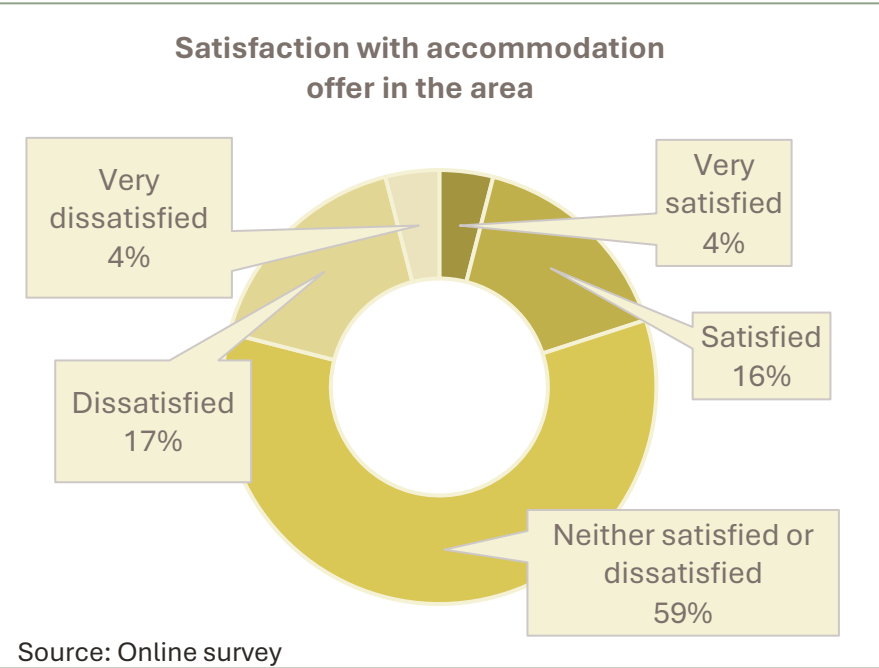
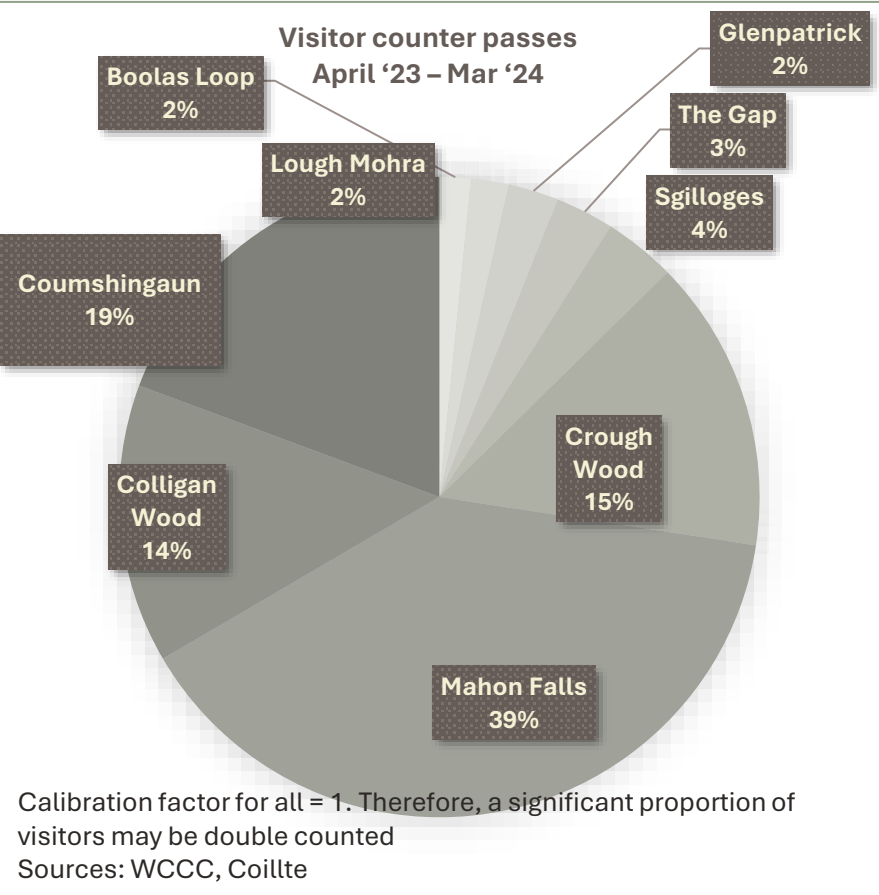
The Comeragh Mountains are a significant regional if not national asset. The area attracts outdoor recreation enthusiasts from outside the county, who collectively represent a community of interest in the area.

Like most outdoor recreation locations across the country, the area experienced a significant increase in use following the lifting of travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. This impacted negatively on the area, especially at popular walking sites, causing overcrowded car parks and poor parking practice on roads and entrances, pollution of the environment and disturbance to local communities and farmers. Demand has remained high post pandemic, with anecdotal evidence indicating that there has been some moderation in 2024.

To tackle some of the congestion issues, Waterford City and County Council increased the size of the Mahon Falls car park, and constructed a new carpark at Mahon Bridge, adjacent to the Crough Wood trailhead.

Data collected by automatic visitor counters located on managed walking locations in the area show that the distribution of walkers on promoted routes is uneven. Mahon Falls, Coumshingaun, Colligan Wood and Crough Wood are significantly more popular than other walk locations.

Visitor management concerns were raised during the public consultation process. Overcrowding and the impact of recreation on the environment were identified as the top two challenges in an online survey and these issues were also raised during the public consultation meeting.



Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities & challenges

The primary strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges of outdoor recreation in the Comeragh Mountains were identified with the Steering Group and through the consultation process.

Strengths

- Natural beauty and unique geology
- Proximity to settlements, coast and greenway
- Provision of services improved in recent years
- Strong walking offering for local communities and visiting hillwalkers
- Engaged and informed key stakeholders
- Proactive community involvement

Weaknesses

- Lack of governance structure, plan and strategic approach to development to date
- Lack of holistic recreation management for the mountain range (limited to management of permissive paths)
- Damage to environment caused to date by recreation
- Visitor activity concentrated on four walks/sites
- Lack of clarity on positioning of Comeragh Mountains' visitor experience

Opportunities

- Future formation of County Outdoor Recreation Committee and development of County Outdoor Recreation Plan
- Expansion of the Mountain Access Project (provides a means for enhanced landowner engagement/ cooperation and benefits in the uplands)
- Potential for enhancement of SAC
- Potential to widen the recreation activities on offer beyond walking in appropriate environments
- Potential to increase visitor participation in rock climbing
- Potential to explore the opportunities surrounding a Dark Sky Reserve.

Challenges

- ‘Unfavourable’ assessment of the SAC, with lack of dedicated national resource
- Diversion/management of visitor demand at honeypot sites and potential for future growth in number of visitors to Comeragh Mountains
- High levels of resource required to implement strategic vision
- Impact of footfall on the condition of the SAC
- Impact of scrambler bikes on the condition of the SAC
- Impact of irresponsible visitor behaviour, e.g. litter/traffic

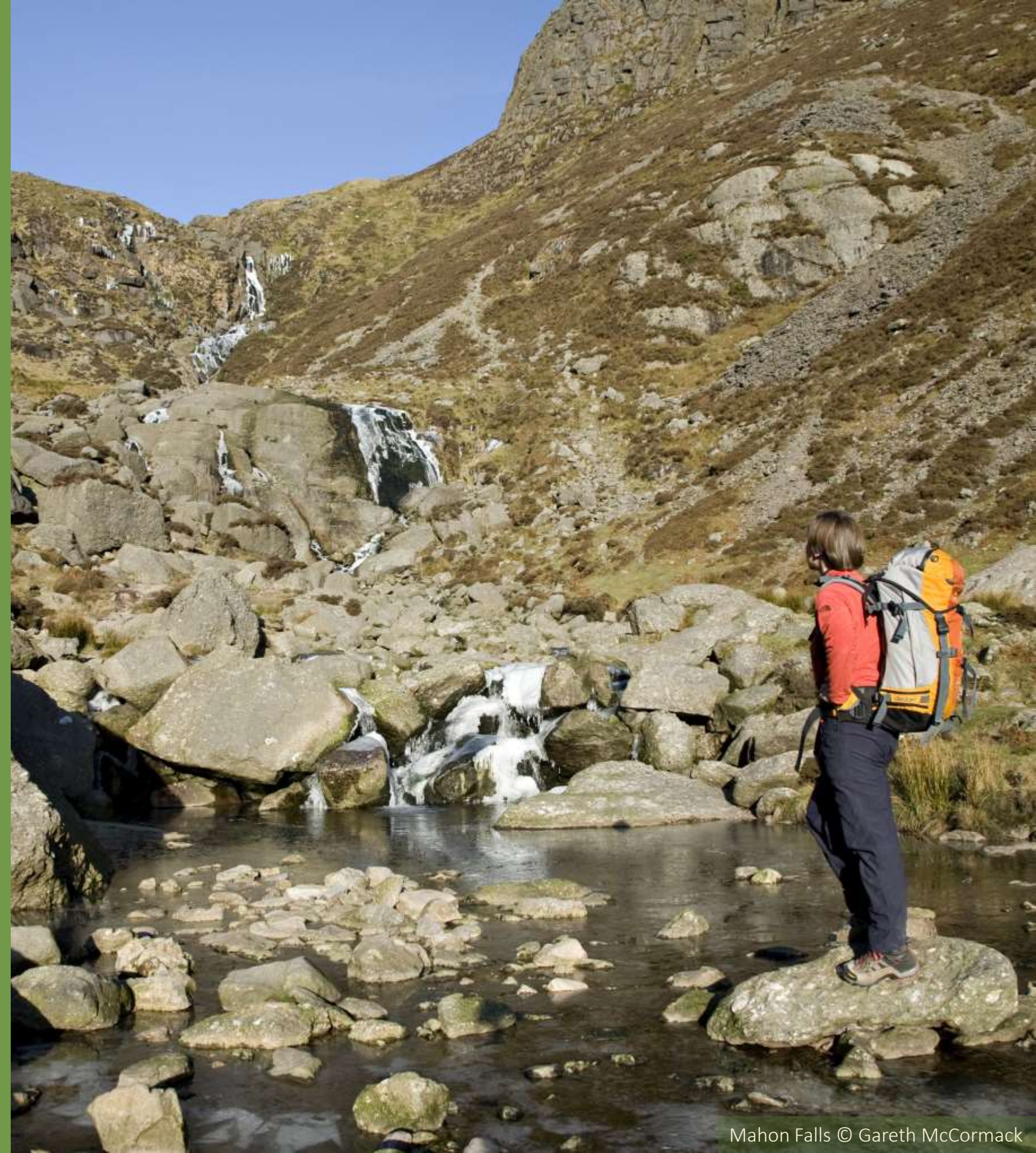
Vision

A thriving mountain environment, cherished and enjoyed by all.

Strategic priority

The priority for outdoor recreation in the Comeragh Mountains over the next five years is to place local communities and the restoration, conservation and enhancement of the natural environment at the core of decision-making by developing an inclusive framework for managing, maintaining and improving existing amenities and access.

Objectives & Action Plan



Strategic Objectives

The strategic objectives are defined within the 6 themes of ‘Embracing Ireland’s Outdoors’.

Leadership & Collaboration

Create the collaborative structures and frameworks for the oversight and integrated management of outdoor recreation in the Comeragh Mountains.

Environment

Restore, protect and conserve the natural environment at every opportunity.

Access & Infrastructure

Repair, enhance and protect appropriate access and infrastructure in the Comeragh Mountains area.

Awareness

Use a coordinated communications approach to promote the Comeragh Mountains and responsible behaviour and good practice in the outdoors through consistent messaging, effective marketing and visitor management.

Opportunities

Actively encourage, accommodate and facilitate participation in responsible recreation in the mountains for all, with a particular focus on the local population.

Expertise

Enhance the competencies and capacity of those responsible for the planning, development, management and maintenance of outdoor recreation infrastructure and opportunities.

Leadership & Collaboration

Why is this important?

Over the last decade, there has been significant change in the Comeragh Mountains and outdoor recreation more generally. This includes the growth in visitor numbers and consumer demand, as well as an increase in the available funding for outdoor recreation infrastructure. Consequently, the level of involvement and number of stakeholders has also increased.

These pressures have highlighted the need for greater oversight and management of the Mountain range as a whole, to ensure the protection of the natural, built and cultural heritage of the area, and to sustain local communities. It is also recognised that many stakeholder groups, and landowners in particular, don't currently have a mechanism to have their say or a role in decision-making.

This is of particular importance for the Comeragh Mountains Special Area of Conservation (SAC), which has conservation objectives that require the protection of its species and habitats under the EU Birds Directive and EU Habitats Directive.

What is our ambition?

Our ambition is to achieve a clear and coordinated approach between stakeholders for decision-making in the Comeragh Mountains. The creation of a new management structure will ensure all stakeholders have a role in decision-making, including landowners.

A new forum, the ‘Comeragh Mountains Forum’ will create a means for a wide variety of representatives from the entire mountain community to come together and have a role in decision-making.

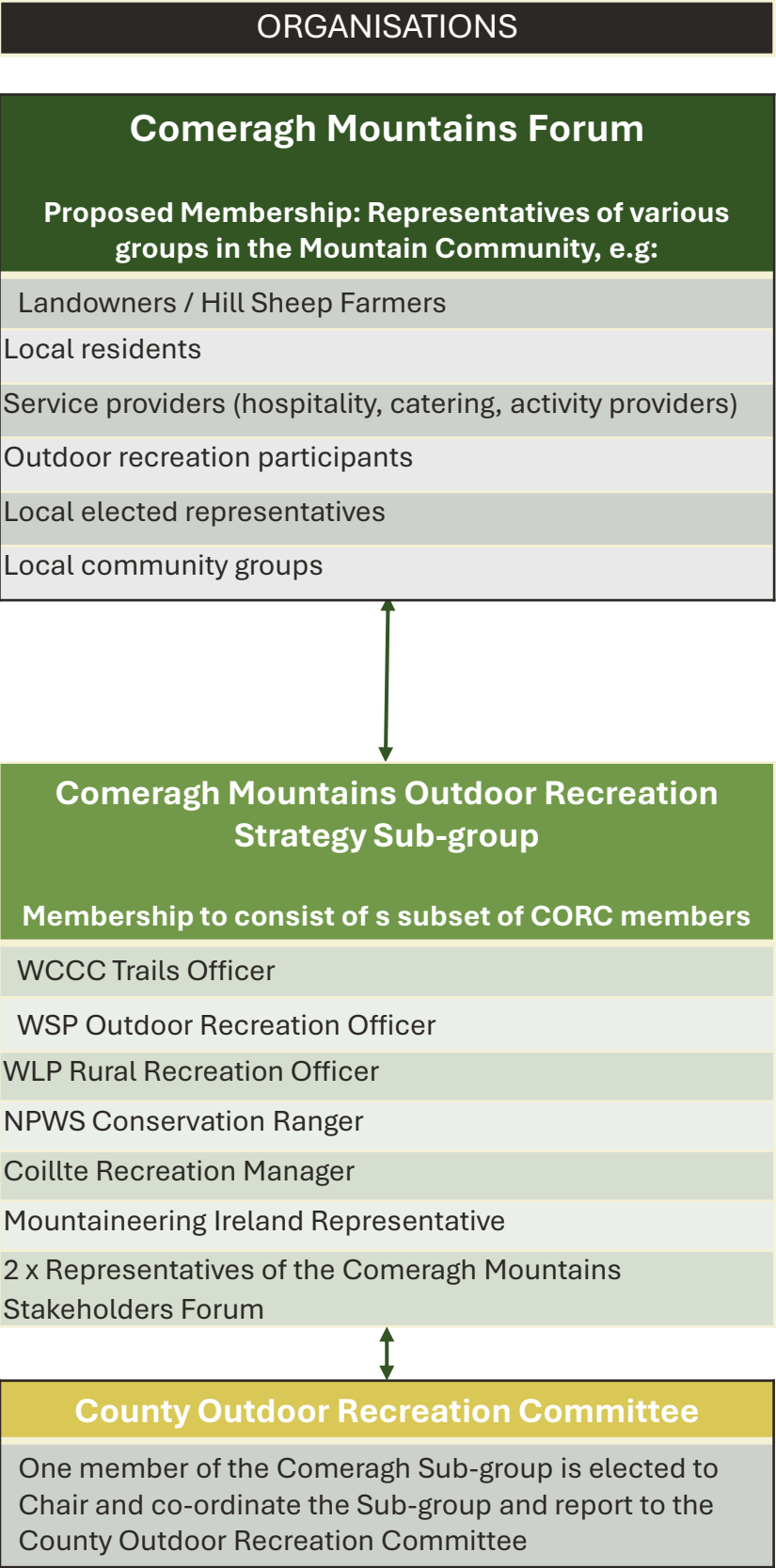
This Forum, with the support and assistance of the subgroup, will apply to participate in the Department of Rural and Community Development’s ‘Mountain Access Project’ which offers support to groups wishing to facilitate and manage public recreational access to defined upland areas in a way that manages the demand for recreation access while respecting landowners and the environment.

A Comeragh Mountains Outdoor Recreation Strategy Sub-group will be formed of the relevant members of the County Outdoor Recreation Committee. This group is tasked with the delivery of the Comeragh Mountains Outdoor Recreation Strategy.

The new structure will have defined lines of communication and collaboration with the County Outdoor Recreation Committee to ensure a seamless approach to outdoor recreation across County Waterford.

Strategic Objective

Create the collaborative structures and frameworks for the oversight and integrated management of outdoor recreation in the Comeragh Mountains.



Proposed organisational structure for the collaborative management of outdoor recreation in the Comeragh Mountains

Leadership and Collaboration

Objective				
Create the collaborative structures and frameworks for the oversight and management of outdoor recreation in the Comeragh Mountains.				
No.	Action	Timescale	Lead Delivery Organisation	Stakeholders
1.1	<p>Establish the Comeragh Mountains Outdoor Recreation Strategy Sub-group (hereby referred to as ‘the Sub-group’).</p> <p>This will be a dedicated Sub-group of the Waterford County Outdoor Recreation Committee (CORA) to deliver the objectives and actions outlined in the Comeragh Mountains Outdoor Recreation Strategy. The group will include relevant members of the CORA and two representatives of the Comeragh Mountains Forum.</p>	Q1 2025	WCCC Trails Officer	County Outdoor Recreation Committee
1.2	<p>Establish and provide support (and/or resource external support) to the Comeragh Mountains Forum (CMF) to facilitate the inclusion of the local community, landowners, outdoor recreation participants and providers in collaborative working and decision-making relating to upland landscape management in the Comeragh Mountains, including (but not limited to) sustainably managing and facilitating outdoor recreation and the protection and enhancement of the local environment. This action should consider the Irish Uplands Forum’s Guiding Principles for establishing local sustainable development partnerships to facilitating management of upland areas.</p>	Q2 2025	Waterford Leader Partnership	Sub-group, local community and landowners
1.3	<p>Define a structure for reporting/liaison between the CORA / Sub-group / CMF</p>	Q1 2025	Sub-group	CORA
1.4	<p>Prioritise outdoor recreation proposals for advancement, ensuring that emerging opportunities are considered and agreed upon by the Sub-group. Prioritised proposals should align to this Strategy and the County Outdoor Recreation Plan (CORA). These agreed priorities should be reflected in project applications to the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme and any other relevant funding sources.</p>	Ongoing	WCCC Trails Officer	Sub-group
1.5	<p>Identify and apply for funding opportunities to resource the realisation of the Strategy Action Plan.</p>	Ongoing	WCCC Trails Officer	Sub-group
1.6	<p>When opportunities arise, take the lead in establishing contact and fostering collaboration with other local groups to achieve any shared objectives (e.g. Comhar Comaraigh, local development groups).</p>	Ongoing	Waterford Sports Partnership - Outdoor Recreation Officer	Sub-group
1.7	<p>Carry out an annual progress review of the Strategy</p>	Annually	Waterford CCC Trails Officer	Sub-group

Environment

Why is this important?

All stakeholders have a shared responsibility to fulfil the legal obligations when it comes to protecting the natural environment, particularly within the SAC.

Enjoying time in natural landscapes and connecting with nature is a core motivator for outdoor recreation participation.

The provision of outdoor recreation in the Comeragh Mountains, and the social and economic benefits which it brings fundamentally relies on a healthy and sustainable natural environment.

The challenges of sustainably managing recreation in the Comeragh Mountains area is recognised. There is a need to balance access with environmental priorities and other landowner needs.

What is our ambition?

Our ambition is to ensure a regenerative approach is taken to achieve the Vision. Integrated planning is required to ensure that actions have a positive effect on the area’s habitats and species, as well as on local communities and businesses.

Integrated planning is required to ensure that visitors can continue to be welcomed to the mountains alongside conservation actions to restore the integrity of the SAC.

The Management and Maintenance Plan (see Action 3.1) should incorporate innovative approaches to managing recreation, including:

- sustainable transport strategy and traffic management strategy to relieve pressure on honeypot sites
- dynamic visitor management approaches e.g. adjusting approach to reflect seasonal variations
- agreement on carrying capacity and limits of acceptable change, and on a means of achieving targets e.g. through visitor incentives/access controls or mitigating measures.

Strategic Objective

Restore, protect and conserve the natural environment at every opportunity.



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Environment

Objective				
Restore, protect and conserve the natural environment at every opportunity.				
No.	Action	Timescale	Lead Delivery Organisation	Stakeholders
2.1	Collate and review all available data in relation to the conservation status of the SACs in the Comeragh Mountains, and, if necessary, commission new studies to generate any information needed to provide a baseline for monitoring activity and/or make informed decisions on future actions.	Q4 2025	WCCC Biodiversity Officer	NPWS
2.2	By using existing data sets and/or by commissioning new research, produce a map that shows key sensitivities with regards to habitats and species to guide the CORC and other stakeholders in future decision-making and to inform the Management and Maintenance Plan.	Q1 2026	WCCC Biodiversity Officer	NPWS
2.3	Identify threats to the SAC's qualifying interests from outdoor recreation activity and use this information to agree a process in relation to monitoring the potential impacts of visitors on protected habitats and species.	Q1 2025	NPWS	WCC Biodiversity Officer
2.4	Review the recommendations of the Upland Path Survey and agree an action plan.	Q1 2025	Subgroup	NPWS, Forum
2.5	Ensure that the Visitor Management Plan appropriately addresses environmental concerns and includes decisions on appropriate mitigation measures, e.g., footpath repair and/or habitat restoration.	Q3 2025	WCCC Biodiversity Officer	Sub-group
2.6	Ensure all public communications, e.g. environmental education, interpretation, promotion, and at special events, and the communication guidelines (see 4.1) consistently inspires visitors to care for the mountains by highlighting why the Comeragh Mountains are special and emphasises the need for responsible visitor behaviour and to reduce the threats identified during 3.3.	Ongoing	WCCC Biodiversity Officer	Sub-group/ Visit Waterford/ Munster Vales/ Fáilte Ireland / Comeragh Rural Tourism Cluster
2.7	Raise public awareness of the appropriate methods to report illegal/antisocial activity in the area e.g, dumping, poor car parking, recreational quads / motorbikes in the SAC, wildlife disturbance.	Q4 2025	WCCC Trails Officer	Sub-group / Gardaí
2.8	Develop a Fire Management Plan for the SAC.	Q1 2026	WCCC Biodiversity Officer	Forum, NPWS, Fire Service, Gardaí
2.9	Support Waterford City and County Council in the delivery of the County Biodiversity Plan in the Comeragh area.	Ongoing	Subgroup	WCCC Biodiversity Officer

Access and Infrastructure

Why is this important?

In the Comeragh Mountains area, outdoor recreation takes place on some state-owned lands, however much of the upland recreation occurs on privately owned land, including commonage land.

Sustaining access to these areas relies on the good will of the landowners and those with commonage rights.

Prior to this Strategy, there has been no sustained effort to manage recreation and its impact across the whole mountain range.

There is a need for a collaborative approach to decision making with regards to planning and delivering recreational trails, including building consensus on trail construction standards, monitoring and maintenance, and environmental protection and restoration.

What is our ambition?

Our ambition is to protect and enhance the current access arrangements in the long-term.

This will be achieved by taking a holistic approach to managing the resource, particularly in upland areas and SAC, through collaboration with landowners, statutory bodies and communities.

The formation of the Sub-group and Stakeholder Group provides an opportunity to take a more collaborative and proactive approach to planning and managing recreation in the Comeragh Mountains, including to:

- manage all recreation, not just those trails with permissive paths in place
- establish baseline information and ongoing monitoring processes
- ensure that the protection and restoration of natural habitats is fundamental to any intervention
- ensure compliance with the requirements of the SAC, including Activities Requiring Consent.

A key action for this theme is to commission a Management and Maintenance Plan, a landscape-scale study to identify a long-term strategy for visitor management in the area.

Strategic Objective

Repair, enhance and protect appropriate access and infrastructure in the Comeragh Mountains area.



Mahon Falls © Fáilte Ireland

Access and Infrastructure

Objective				
Repair, enhance and protect appropriate access and infrastructure in the Comeragh Mountains area.				
No.	Action	Timescale	Lead Delivery Organisation	Stakeholders
3.1	<p>Develop a Management and Maintenance Plan for the area as part of the Mountain Access Project (MAP) with a focus on Mahon Valley, Nire Valley, Kilclooney/Coumshingaun, Rathgormack Trails, Crotty's Lake and any other key site that may be identified by the Forum.</p> <p>The Plan should include the following elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a) Sets out agreed methods and standards to monitor, maintain and repair the existing upland paths and trails to ensure paths are secure and the environment is protected and enhancedb) Considers the overall visitor experience, including access points, car parking, signage, waymarking, traffic and transport, visitor servicesc) Ensures that all interventions are appropriate to their environmental contextd) Agree and communicate a clear and uniform policy on dogs in upland areas, including the SAC.e) Considers the objectives and recommendations of Fáilte Ireland's Waterford Orientation Project	Q3 2025	Comeragh Mountains Forum and Waterford Leader Partnership	Sub-group
3.2	<p>The Sub-group will support the Mountain Access Project and the development of a Management and Maintenance Plan by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a) Seeking funding for the project, including for the appointment of an officer to co-ordinate the Projectb) Develop an erosion monitoring strategy which can subsequently be incorporated into the Management and Maintenance Plan.c) Manage the delivery of any other additional research and projects as required to inform the Management and Maintenance Plan	Ongoing	WCCC Trails Officer,	Sub-group and Forum, WCCC Biodiversity Officer, NPWS
3.5	Investigate the opportunities for establishing agreements between local clubs and landowners with regards to the safe maintenance of club mountain bike trails.	Ongoing	Coillte	Mountain biking clubs, Cycling Ireland
3.6	Agree on a future for the Waterford Cycling Trails in the Comeragh Mountains area, considering whether these should be either decommissioned, or a long-term management and maintenance plan put into place. This decision will be informed by national guidance and engaging with other key stakeholders including Sport Ireland Outdoors, Cycling Ireland.	Q3 2025	WCCC Trails Officer	County Outdoor Recreation Committee
3.7	Support Fáilte Ireland in the delivery of the Waterford Destination Experience Development Plan in the Comeragh Mountains area in a way that is compatible with this Strategy and the needs of the environment, landowners and local communities.	Ongoing	WCCC Tourism Officer	Sub-group, Fáilte Ireland
3.8	Make the outdoors more accessible to people with disabilities, by providing necessary infrastructure where possible and appropriate, by applying the recommendations of Active Disability Ireland's and Sport Ireland's accessibility guidelines to current and future amenity improvements and developments, and providing access information in appropriate formats/media.	Ongoing as opportunity arises	WCCC Trails Officer	Waterford Sports Partnership, Rural Recreation Officer

Awareness

Why is this important?

The Comeragh Mountains are a key part of the Waterford activity tourism offer, and stakeholders have succeeded in raising the profile of the area amongst national and international tourists.

Currently the Comeragh Mountains outdoor recreation offer is promoted through a range of official and unofficial channels.

Lack of awareness is a barrier to participation for locals and visitors, and so the offer needs to be consistently communicated to the public through a range of channels.

Participants require support to understand their potential impact on the environment, landowners and local communities, and to consider their own safety.

Promotion and marketing messaging needs to encourage awareness of where and how to participate in activities, and how to behave responsibly in the outdoors.

What is our ambition?

Our ambition is to create a coordinated approach to raising awareness of the Comeragh Mountains as a venue for outdoor recreation among both locals and tourists, while also communicating the importance of responsible behaviour during their visit.

Our ambition is to ensure consistent messaging across multiple organisations. This calls for an innovative approach, which could bring multiple benefits, e.g.,

- encourage responsible behaviour to protect the mountain environment
- make the most of increased visitor interest in the area to communicate key messages to receptive audiences
- harness community interest and enthusiasm to help spread key messages
- support service providers to clearly communicate key messages
- clarify the visitor offering and market positioning in agreement with tourism and marketing stakeholders.

Strategic Objective

Use a coordinated communications approach to promote the Comeragh Mountains and responsible behaviour and good practice in the outdoors through consistent messaging, effective marketing and visitor management.



Mahon Falls © Fáilte Ireland

Awareness

Objective				
Use a coordinated communications approach to promote the Comeragh Mountains and responsible behaviour and good practice in the outdoors through consistent messaging, effective marketing and visitor management.				
No.	Action	Timescale	Lead Delivery Organisation	Stakeholders
4.1	Develop guidelines to advise the area’s stakeholders (including local, regional and national bodies/campaigns) on appropriate messaging and imagery for use in educational contexts, visitor information and promotion which are in line with environmental and community priorities and concerns for the Comeragh Mountains area.	Q1 2025	WCCC Trails Officer	WCCC Trails Officer, Tourism Officer, Biodiversity Officer, Communications Team, Munster Vales, Fáilte Ireland
4.2	Support the Department of Rural and Community Development’s National guidelines on responsible behaviour in the outdoors (when made available), by: a) evolving the local guidelines (4.1) to align with national priorities b) raising awareness of the guidelines amongst local communities and visitors to the Comeragh Mountains area.	Q1 2026 and ongoing	WCCC Tourism Officer	Sub-group, CORC
4.3	Develop a visitor profile and marketing positioning document for the Comeragh Mountains	Q3 2025	WCCC Tourism Officer	Sub-group, CORC
4.4	Adopt and promote Fáilte Ireland’s Sustainable Outdoor Events and Sustainable Festivals guidelines, and Toolkit for Planning and Organising Walking Festivals and Events. Support the organisers of existing and new festivals, events, community initiatives, including applicants to the WCCC’s Festivals and Events Support Scheme, to adopt the recommended practices outlined in this guidance, including raising awareness amongst festival participants about the area’s environment and responsible behaviour.	Q2 2025	WCCC Trails Officer	WCCC Tourism Officer, Biodiversity Officer, WCCC Economic Development – Festival Team
4.5	Review www.visitwaterfordtrails.com to ensure consistency with agreed messaging (4.3).	Q2 2025 and ongoing	WCCC Trails Officer	Visit Waterford
4.6	Promote www.visitwaterfordtrails.com widely as the reliable source of trail information	Q2 2025 and ongoing	WCCC Trails Officer	Visit Waterford, Munster Vales, Fáilte Ireland, Comeragh Rural Tourism Cluster
4.7	Carry out a review of how trails, paths and desire lines are depicted on digital and hard copy maps and guides, and then engage with map suppliers and vendors to communicate the Subgroup’s preferences for mapping the Comeragh Mountains.	Q1 2026 and ongoing	WCCC Trails Officer	Sub-group, CORC
4.8	Via the Comeragh Rural Tourism Cluster, engage with, provide training to and support private businesses that are providing services to users of the outdoors and to foster collaboration in developing the overall visitor experience.	Ongoing, at least once per annum	WCCC Tourism Officer	Fáilte Ireland
4.9	Commission an Interpretation Plan to take forward as part of the implementation of the Management & Maintenance Plan (see 3.1) , which outlines how the area’s natural and cultural heritage and traditions should be communicated to visitors.	Q3 2026	WCCC Trails Officer	WCCC Heritage Officer, Biodiversity Officer, Tourism Officer, Fáilte Ireland

Opportunities

Why is this important?

Spending time in the outdoors and participating in outdoor activities brings a multitude of benefits to individuals and society.

Providing opportunities for people to get active outdoors helps to tackle physical inactivity and mental wellbeing amongst the population.

Enhancing engagement with the outdoor environment will increase awareness of the environment and conservation issues.

It is acknowledged that there is unequal access to the outdoors across society. There are multiple social and economic barriers that may prevent people engaging in outdoor recreation.

What is our ambition?

Our ambition is to extend an invitation to diverse audiences to visit the Comeragh Mountains for recreation.

We will achieve this by taking actions to actively encourage those who have not visited before, especially those with social or economic barriers that can prevent participation.

We will take a balanced approach to consider how recreation sites in the area could be made more accessible, especially to people with disabilities, by determining what actions are appropriate to the upland environment.

Strategic Objective

Actively encourage, accommodate and facilitate participation in responsible recreation in the mountains for all, with a particular focus on the local population.



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Opportunities

Objective				
Actively encourage, accommodate and facilitate participation in responsible recreation in the mountains for all, with a particular focus on the local population.				
No.	Action	Timescale	Lead Delivery Organisation	Stakeholders
5.1	Identify opportunities for voluntary local community participation in delivering the Strategy objectives and actions, including through engagement with local organisations, e.g. Waterford Volunteer Centre, Comhar Comeragh, local community and social enterprise groups.	Q3 2025	Waterford Sports Partnership	Sub-group, Forum
5.2	Alongside relevant partners, scope out a volunteer plan, defining resourcing requirements, roles and responsibilities, and the creation of a co-ordinator role if required. This should include the consideration of establishing a local ‘Mountain Meitheal’ team to deliver upland path projects.	Q1 2026	Waterford Sports Partnership	WCCC Trails Officer
5.3	Develop and deliver an annual programme to encourage local people to participate in outdoor recreation and reap the health and social benefits of nature connection and physical activity.	Q1 2026	Waterford Sports Partnership	Sub-group, Forum
5.4	Develop and deliver an annual programme to engage those currently under-represented in using the Comeragh Mountains for recreation (e.g. young people, migrants, people with disabilities, economically disadvantaged), to encourage them to become more active and engaged with the outdoors.	Q1 2026 and ongoing	Waterford Sports Partnership	
5.5	Support small businesses and activity providers to sustainably provide services to outdoor recreation participants by directing business owners to available support e.g. training or funding opportunities.	Ongoing	WCCC Tourism Officer	Fáilte Ireland

Expertise

Why is this important?

Over the past number of years, there has been a significant increase in government support for outdoor recreation, including the availability of significant funding for capital projects.

The National Outdoor Recreation Strategy commits continued funding for capital projects, and to support programmes which support sustainable management, e.g. the Mountain Access Project.

Concurrently, the number of people (including employees, landowners and volunteers) involved in developing, maintaining and promoting outdoor recreation has grown. Whilst this has grown, there has been limited investment in capacity building to support those involved.

This has resulted in varying levels of awareness and practice of:

- sustainable recreation development
- legal obligations that exist with regards to protecting the environment and SACs

This has consequently resulted in a number of examples of poor practice in trail development and management in the Comeragh Mountains.

What is our ambition?

The development of this Strategy presents an opportunity to improve skills and knowledge in planning, developing and maintaining trails, so that poor practice is not replicated.

Actions will be taken to ensure practitioners are operating with sufficient knowledge, skills and expertise in their work area.

This will include ongoing training and improved connection with relevant professional bodies.

Professional advice will be sought to take key decisions relating to development and conservation priorities, including the findings and recommendations communicated in the Uplands Path Survey (2024).

Strategic Objective

Enhance the competencies and capacity of those responsible for the planning, development, management and maintenance of outdoor recreation infrastructure and opportunities.



Mahon Falls © Fáilte Ireland

Expertise

Objective				
Enhance the competencies and capacity of those responsible for the planning, development, management and maintenance of outdoor recreation infrastructure and opportunities.				
No.	Action	Timescale	Lead Delivery Organisation	Stakeholders
6.1	Define roles and responsibilities within the Sub-group and Forum and assess relevant skillsets and training requirement or expert advice is required to deliver this Strategy and the recommendations of the Upland Path Survey, e.g. visitor management planning, trail planning, development, management and maintenance, environmental protection and enhancement.	Q4 2025	WCCC Trails Officer	Sport Ireland Outdoors
6.2	Work with sector leaders to identify the experience and competencies required by those who undertake trail/footpath development, maintenance or repair work in the Comeragh Mountains area.	Q4 2026	WCCC Trails Officer	Sport Ireland Outdoors, Mountaineering Ireland
6.3	Nominate a representative to lead in networking with national contacts, through engagement with the Irish Uplands Forum, and with similar upland management organisations to promote mutual support and learning, e.g., Wicklow Uplands Council, Macgillycuddy Reeks Mountain Access Forum, Croagh Patrick Stakeholders Group.	Q2 2025	Waterford Leader Partnership Rural Recreation Officer	Forum
6.4	Appoint a nominee/s to attend relevant training events/ meetings/ conferences and subscribe to updates (e.g. e-zines, newsletters) provided by key professional bodies and communities of practice (e.g. Comhairle na Tuaithe, Sport Ireland, EUROPARC Federation, Outdoor Recreation Network, Visitor Safety Group, Mountain Meitheal Ireland) and report to the Sub-group on relevant learnings.	Q2 2025	WCCC Trails Officer	Sub-group, CORC
6.5	Source additional support and funding (e.g. LEADER funding) to provide appropriate environmental education and training to members of the Forum to enable them to participate in the delivery of the Strategy and the Project, e.g. by participating in monitoring projects or educating/advising visitors.	Q2 2026	WCCC Biodiversity Officer	Waterford Leader Partnership, Subgroup

Acronyms

CORC

County Outdoor Recreation Committee

FI

Fáilte Ireland

ORO

Outdoor Recreation Officer

RRO

Rural Recreation Officer

LSP

Local Sports Partnership

MAP

Mountain Access Project (Administered by the
Department of Rural and Community Development)

NPWS

National Parks and Wildlife Service

SAC

Special Area of Conservation

Sub-group

Comeragh Mountains Outdoor Recreation Strategy
Sub-group

WCCC

Waterford City & County Council

WLP

Waterford Leader Partnership

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