



## **Submission to Department of Social Development in Response to Consultation on South East Coast Masterplan**

June 2012

### **1. Introduction**

Mountaineering Ireland (MI) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Regeneration Masterplan for the South East Coast Area. The consultation document includes many positive suggestions and highlights the strengths and potential of this special area. Mountaineering Ireland's main concern in the area is with the Mourne Mountains, a key natural asset and a nationally important area for outdoor recreation activities.

### **2. Mountaineering Ireland**

Mountaineering Ireland is the representative body for hillwalkers and climbers on the island of Ireland. MI is recognised as the National Governing Body for the sport of mountaineering by both Sport Northern Ireland and the Irish Sports Council. The term mountaineering refers to a spectrum of activities that includes hillwalking, rock and ice-climbing, rambling, bouldering and alpinism. MI has almost 11,000 members comprising 153 clubs and over 1300 individual members (December 2011).

The work of Mountaineering Ireland includes:

- Representing the interests of hillwalkers and climbers;
- Providing a comprehensive range of services to members;
- Improving and securing access to Ireland's hills and crags;
- Promoting conservation and responsible use of the mountain environment;
- Encouraging safe practice and promoting skills and leadership training.

### **3. General observations**

#### **3.1 The Mourne landscape**

The plan seeks to make the most of the area's physical assets. Undoubtedly the most significant element, that physically defines this area and provides its distinctiveness, is the Mourne Mountains. The exceptional scenic quality of the Mournes is enhanced by their proximity to the coast and the character of the surrounding landscape. In considering the future development of Kilkeel, Newcastle

and Warrenpoint, the relationship between the towns and their surrounding landscape needs greater consideration. It is the natural, or semi-natural, quality of this landscape that draws people to the area. Plans for future development must respect and protect the integrity of the Mourne landscape.

### 3.2 Importance of area for recreation

The Mourne area is Northern Ireland's premier location for outdoor recreation activities, particularly for hillwalking, rockclimbing, mountain-biking and fell-running. These activities also make a noteworthy contribution to the area's tourism offering and tourism revenue.

The landscape itself is often the only facility that people need for recreation. Most wild landscapes are best left alone and not managed like a public park, however at locations with a high degree of recreation activity, there is a need to invest in parking areas, stiles and other infrastructure as well as the ongoing maintenance and repair of upland paths. As the Masterplan seeks to maximise the area's tourism potential, measures should be included to mitigate the impact of increased visitor activity on the natural environment and the recreation experience.

### 3.3 Protected environment

The national importance of this scenic landscape is reflected by its status as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Kilkeel, Newry and Warrenpoint are all within the Mourne and Slieve Croob AONB. AONB designation brings with it a responsibility to safeguard the natural beauty, wildlife and historic heritage of the area, whilst at the same time promoting its enjoyment by the public at large.

Due to the quality of the habitats, and the flora and fauna of the area, a number of sites within the AONB are protected by additional designations (e.g. as Special Areas of Conservation or Areas of Special Scientific Interest). Plans for future development should be consistent with management objectives for these sites.

### 3.4 Focus on built development

Although the vision in Section 2 refers to each town being welcoming, and the three towns working together, MI is surprised that the Masterplan proposals are focused entirely on built development. Support for continued development of the social infrastructure in the area is essential to realisation of the vision.

To give one example to illustrate this, developing outdoor activity tourism requires more than a critical mass of infrastructure and activity, acceptance and engagement by host communities must also be nurtured. The work of the North West Wales Outdoor Partnership in encouraging local people to participate in outdoor recreation activities provides a positive example - <http://www.partneriaeth-awyr-agored.co.uk/english/about-us.php>.

## 4. Specific comments

### 4.1 The Gondola

Mountaineering Ireland is concerned by the proposals for a gondola development connecting Donard Park with Drinnahilly. This development would have a negative impact on the iconic view of the Mournes from the Promenade. The view from Murlough National Nature Reserve would also be significantly affected.

Drinnahilly is within the Mourne Mountains Landscape Character Area, where one of three principles for accommodating new development is:

*'The development of wind farms, radio masts, reservoirs and associated infrastructure should be discouraged in this highly sensitive landscape. Careful visual analysis would be required before construction.'*

While the landscape assessment process did not predict proposals for a gondola, it is clear from the above statement that such development would not be appropriate in this area. MI is strongly of the view that any large scale or vertical development, such as the proposed gondola, would be particularly disruptive to the landscape and scenic quality of this area.

A further difficulty associated with the gondola proposal is the environmental damage that would result from giving large numbers of people immediate access to the mountain environment. There are also safety considerations - it is likely that many people who would avail of this facility would not have the skills, clothing, or footwear to cope with upland weather and terrain.

It has been suggested that the gondola could connect with a higher point on the mountains. While it is difficult to comment without having details of what is envisaged, it is very likely that any such proposal would be strongly resisted by the mountaineering community.

### 4.2 Public transport

The vision in Section 2 refers to connecting the three towns by foot, cycle, public transport and car, however the remainder of the document includes no specific proposals to achieve or improve these linkages. Neither does the document refer to connections between the towns and the key natural asset of the Mourne Mountains. Even at current visitor levels, there is a shortage of parking areas across the Mournes, resulting in roadside parking, with associated risk and congestion on narrow roads. Improved public transport connecting the three gateway towns with the Mournes would reduce this pressure and increase recreation opportunities. The current Mourne Rambler bus service could be improved and better promoted. This would encourage walkers to visit the towns and spend money in the area.

### 4.3 Pedestrian links

The need for better pedestrian links in the area has been identified in previous studies, most recently through the Mourne Strategic Path Review commissioned by the Mourne Heritage Trust, Northern Ireland Environment Agency and Sport NI. For example, a walking trail linking Donard Park and Bloody Bridge would be of great value, similarly a link between Donard Park and Tollymore Forest would enhance the recreation value of these important assets. A coastal path along the South East Coast would make an excellent flagship project and would encourage visitors to connect with the natural environment and remain longer in the area.

## **5. Closing comments**

In conclusion, while MI welcomes the initiative to regenerate the South East Coast area, we urge a cautious approach, and highlight the importance of ensuring that development does not detract from the quality of the landscape and natural environment that attract people to this area.

It is MI's assertion that the proposed gondola would detract significantly from the scenic quality of the area and we urge the Department for Social Development and the District Councils to consider alternative options that are consonant with the strengths of the area.

It is notable that the Masterplan did not refer to other tourism initiatives such as the Mourne Coastal Route and Destination Management Forum for the Mournes. Successful regeneration of the South East Coast requires more than a series of capital projects and a marketing programme, there is a need for integrated planning, sustained support for the local community and resources for the ongoing management of visitor impacts in the area.

Finally, as the representative body for a significant user group in the area, MI asks to be included in any further consultation on plans for the South East Coast.

## **6. Further information**

MI would be happy to elaborate on, or discuss, any of the ideas contained in this submission.

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