



**A submission**

**To**

**Offaly County Council**

**Re:**

**preparation of the new**

**Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027.**

**From**

**Ballycommon Canal Renewal Group**

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Tidy up at Thongs Bridge, Ballycommon

## **Introduction**

This document is submitted in response to a call for written submissions to Offaly County Council on the County Development Plan 2021–2027 and is an amended version of the plan we submitted for the 2014-2020 County Development Plan.

Ballycommon Canal Renewal Group (BCRG) was formed in May 2010 by a group of local people who have seen the Branch of the Grand Canal that goes from Ballycommon to Kilbeggan become more overgrown every year. Our Mission is to promote and participate in the development of the full amenity potential of the Ballycommon to Kilbeggan Branch of the Grand Canal and related Grand Canal activities.

Following consultation with Waterways Ireland and Offaly County Council our volunteers have achieved modest but significant improvements along the Canal in the general Ballycommon area. Having seen the improvements that a local voluntary group can achieve, we feel that with the assistance of Offaly County Council, working in liaison with Waterways Ireland and other statutory bodies, we can return the canal to its former condition as a navigable branch of the Grand Canal.

It is our long term goal to have this branch of the Grand Canal restored to its former navigable state and we propose a number of measures which will facilitate and support this goal. We believe there is major potential to develop various types of tourism and business facilities related to the local waterways as has happened in the UK and on mainland Europe. We understand that this is a major undertaking both financially and structurally. However, we feel that unless restorative action is taken in the near future, a very important part of our local industrial and built heritage will be lost to further generations together with the tourism potential it offers.

## **An overview of the currently disused eight mile stretch of the Kilbeggan branch of the Grand Canal between Ballycommon, Co. Offaly and Kilbeggan, Co. Westmeath.**

The Grand Canal is one of Ireland's most historic stretches of waterways and celebrated the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the completion of the Ballycommon to Kilbeggan Branch, in 2010.

The wildlife of the Kilbeggan Branch is very diverse. The channel was cut through a number of eskers (ridge of sand and gravel left behind by the retreating glaciers after the last Ice Age ) and also crosses a raised bog. Plants growing on eskers have to be tolerant of very calcareous or lime-rich conditions. On raised bogs the soil is very acidic and a different range of plants can be found. When the canal was being built across the bog, lime-rich soil was brought in to build up the towpath. As a result lime-loving plants such as Quaking Grass and Carline Thistle can now be found growing beside acid-loving species such as Purple Moor-grass and Bog Asphodel.

The Kilbeggan Branch enters the Main Line of the Canal at Ballycommon, between Daingean and Tullamore. There are no locks on the Kilbeggan Branch. A dam was built across the mouth of the branch when it was closed to navigation in 1961, and it was allowed to dry out.

It is worth noting that the main contractor who built this section of canal was non other than William Dargan who worked on many major infrastructural projects of the time including the Dublin to Kingson railway (the first railway in Ireland) and the London to Holyhead Road under the guidance of Thomas Telford.

There are ten bridges along the Ballycommon to Kilbeggan Branch of the Grand Canal which each require restoration work to a greater or lesser degree. There is also a very attractive aqueduct on the Offaly / Westmeath border over the Silver River which requires some attention. Each of these bridges and aqueduct are unique in that they are complete cut stone archways compared to the rugged infill archways that are on the main line of the Grand Canal

Some of the proposals that we put forward for the 2014-2020 plan were as follows:

- a. A Way Marked walking/cycling route
- b. Restoration of the bridges and Silver River aqueduct

- c. Re-watering of the entire stretch of the Ballycommon to Kilbeggan Branch

### **Proposals in detail.**

- **A Way Marked Walking/Cycling Routes:**

Currently there are a number of Way Marked walking routes based on the Irish Canal System.

The Grand Canal Way stretches from Lucan Bridge near Adamstown in County Dublin for 117 km (through Ballycommon) to Shannon Harbour. The route is an informal linear park punctuated by the locks that characterise canal technology, carefully restored surviving lock-keepers cottages, and the towns and villages whose existence is owed to the trade and commerce the canal brought in the 18th and 19th centuries ([www.irishtrails.ie](http://www.irishtrails.ie) )

Meanwhile the Royal Canal Way currently follows grassy towpaths, gravel and sometimes tarmac canal-side roads from the Dublin suburb of Ashtown 105 kilometres via Mullingar to the village of Abbeyshrule in County Longford. ([www.irishtrails.ie](http://www.irishtrails.ie)

Simultaneously the Westmeath Way is a 33km-long low-level linear walking route from the town of Kilbeggan, famous for its whiskey distilling and horse racing, to the town of Mullingar. ([www.irishtrails.ie](http://www.irishtrails.ie) )

Each of these walking routes are independent and linear in nature and while they have unique attractions, places of interest and specific natural or built heritage focal points, they are of their nature linear and the walker must make alternative arrangements in order to either return home or proceed.

The development or restoration of the tow path along the Kilbeggan Branch would facilitate the completion of a loop which would allow the walker leave from any point along the route and continue right around the system until they return home again. Indeed the loop could be completed in a number of stages allowing visitors to revisit the area regularly. This would support local businesses which provide accommodation and refreshments along the way. We also feel that the completion of this walk/cycle way would be an initial step in redeveloping the canal and opening it up to the public.

- **Restoration of bridges and Silver River aqueduct:**

As previously mentioned, there are ten bridges along the branch in addition to the aqueduct which carries the canal over the Silver River. Each of these bridges carries the name of the local landlord or landowner on whose property they are built. To further enhance the walking/cycling experience we propose either a sign or interactive information point to be situated at each bridge explaining local points of interest etc.

Each of these bridges and the aqueduct are structurally sound and continue to carry traffic to this day. Remedial works would serve to maintain them and where necessary restore fallen stones and general weathering. Repair work may also be required to the underpass of the bridges where the horses once walked to tow the boats.

- **Re-watering of the entire stretch of the Ballycommon to Kilbeggan Branch:**

This is the overall and long term goal of the Ballycommon Canal Renewal Group.

This eight mile stretch of canal was closed to commercial traffic in 1960 by CIE and in 1961 they placed a dam across the mouth of the branch at Campbells Bridge, Ballycommon and allowed the canal to drain away. Since then the canal has become silted and overgrown with shrubbery in places. Whilst we are not engineers, we believe that it is possible to restore this branch to navigation over a number of years without significant impact to the environment, wildlife or the economy.

In addition to the boating community, this would benefit local angling groups, canoe/kayaking clubs, wildlife enthusiasts, walking groups and cyclists to name but some. It would also greatly enhance the environs through which it passes.

### **Developments achieved Under the 2014-2020 County Plan**

It is with great pleasure that we acknowledge the efforts of Offaly County Council in bringing parts a & b of our initial proposal to fruition, and while works are still on going, the benefits from its

development and the quality of the works undertaken must be commended. There has also been restoration works carried out on some of the bridges along the navigation.

### **Submission for the 2021-2027 County Plan**

Our submission for the 2021-2027 County Plan is for Offaly County Council, to investigate and develop the proposal to a finality for the reopening of the Ballycommon to Kilbeggan branch of the Grand Canal as a full and proper marine navigation. We understand that there are other Government bodies involved but as was proven with the work carried out on the Greenway route that this is achievable. It is sixty years since this branch was closed and as ever time is slipping past and we feel it is of the utmost importance that now more than ever that a proper plan with defined steps, guidelines and implementations is set in place and acted upon. We as a local group would also welcome the opportunity to assist in whatever way possible.

### **Conclusion**

It is a level stretch of canal which offers significant potential as an amenity for walking, angling, boating and water based activities. This has potential for locals and tourists alike. There are several existing businesses in the localities which would benefit from the tourism potential of this facility. In addition Kilbeggan Amenity Group has successfully restored the Kilbeggan Harbour at the end of the Branch and it is currently ready for water.

Since the collapse of the economy after the 'Celtic Tiger Boom' and the more recent Covid19 restrictions in Ireland and across the rest of the world there has been a resurgence in people holidaying at home and in particular the boating, camping and outdoor pursuits sectors have seen a major increase in activities.

Boating holidays are the traditional mainstay of activity on Irish waterways and they feature prominently in the promotion of Ireland internationally. The strong growth in boating on the Shannon and other Irish inland waterways has been driven by the purchase of private boats. This represents a strong potential market which would bring much welcomed economic growth to the localities

### **Angling**

Since 1991 there has been a major programme of fish stocking to establish the Irish canals as a top class coarse fishery. Accompanied by programmes to maintain the high standards of water quality, there have been marked improvements in the number of fishing competitions and the level of foreign anglers. Particularly Waterways Ireland has been keen to encourage local anglers.

### Events

An increasingly popular way to present the attraction of waterfronts and canals is to use them as a base for events and festivals. At a local level the Annual Canal Fun Day at Ballycommon, hosted by ourselves goes from strength to strength. The number of water based and waterside festivals is increasing and represents a popular way of raising awareness of the waterways.



Angling, Walking and Kayaking on the Canal at Ballycommon 2012

### Sports tourism

Canals can provide excellent venues for competitions such as long distance canoe racing, canoe polo, angling and in some cases rowing. Sports tourism can bring significant numbers of visitors to areas which have few other obvious attractions. It should be noted that there is no lock along the entire stretch of the Ballycommon to Kilbeggan Branch, rendering it extremely suitable for distance racing.

The restoration of the Ballycommon to Kilbeggan Branch of the Grand Canal would offer an added and much needed dimension to the Irish Waterways System and to the attractiveness of the Midlands which has the potential to offer additional facilities to locals and tourists alike with the associated contribution to the local economy. North East Offaly would benefit greatly from a tourist attraction such as this.



We would encourage Offaly County Council to strongly further consider including the redevelopment of the Ballycommon to Kilbeggan Branch of the Grand Canal as part of their County Development Plan 2021 – 2027.

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