



WicklowUplands
COUNCIL

Report January to November 2022



Wicklow Uplands Council
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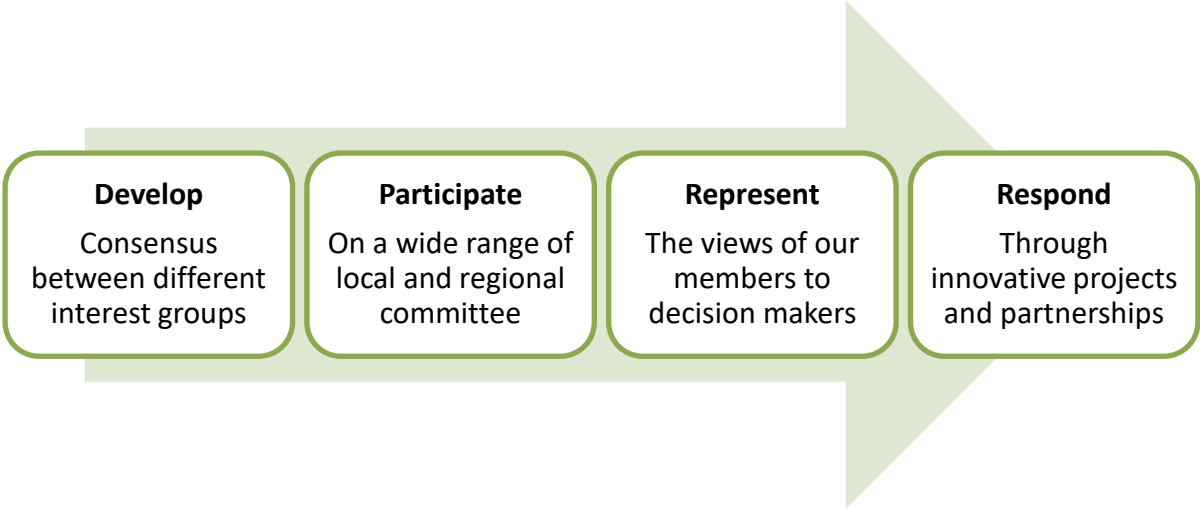
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1. Introduction

First established in 1997, Wicklow Uplands Council is an independent, voluntary organisation that represents the shared interests of over 40 diverse member groups and individuals in the Wicklow and Dublin Uplands. Wicklow Uplands Council takes a partnership approach to sustainable development and promotes projects that bring value to the people who live and work in the Wicklow and Dublin uplands, as well as to those who enjoy the area for recreational activities. This progress report summarises our work and activities from January to October 2022 in line with our mission to:

‘To support the sustainable use of the Wicklow Uplands in consensus and partnership with those who live, work and recreate there’

Our Values



2. Organisational Management

2.1 Board of Directors

A voluntary board of directors are responsible for guiding the work of Wicklow Uplands Council. They collectively represent the views and concerns of their representative groups, oversee projects, develop project proposals and policy positions, and implement governance practices. Consensus decision making is a core value of Wicklow Uplands Council with no decision taken by the board of directors having ever been decided upon by vote. Details of our Board of Directors are included in the table below.

Monthly directors’ meetings and executive committee meetings, in addition to any project subcommittee, stakeholder meeting etc. take place in the office of Wicklow Uplands Council, Parish Hall, Main St, Roundwood, Co Wicklow.

Wicklow Uplands Council Board Directors 2022/2023		
Panel Group	Name	Organisation
Farmers & Landowners	Tom Byrne	Wicklow IFA
	Denis Halpin	Wicklow Cheviot Sheep Owners
	Owen Brady	Wicklow Cheviot Sheep Owners
	Daniel Molloy	Wicklow IFA
	Donie Anderson	Dublin IFA
	Sean Malone	Wicklow Cheviot Sheep Owners
	Joe Morrissey	Wicklow IFA
Environment & Recreation	Jim Sheehan	Mountaineering Ireland
	Bob Galvin	Bray Coast Care
	Russell Boland	Independent Member
	John Flynn	Co Wicklow Game Conservation Council
Tourism & Economic	Sean Byrne	Lough Dan House
	Dairine Nuttall	Ireland Tour Guide
	Geoff Seymour	Roundwood Community Council
	Eugene Stephens	Ashford Self Catering
Community	Garvan Hickey	Independent Member
	Aideen Klauer	Hollywood Forum
	Claire Chambers	Roundwood Community Council
Co-options	Louis O'Byrne	Independent Member
	Declan O'Neill	Wicklow IFA
	Pat Dunne	Wicklow Cheviot Sheep Owners
	Carmel Kealy	Motorcycling Union of Ireland
	Philip Maguire	Dublin IFA
	Michael Keegan	Independent Member

2.2. Staff

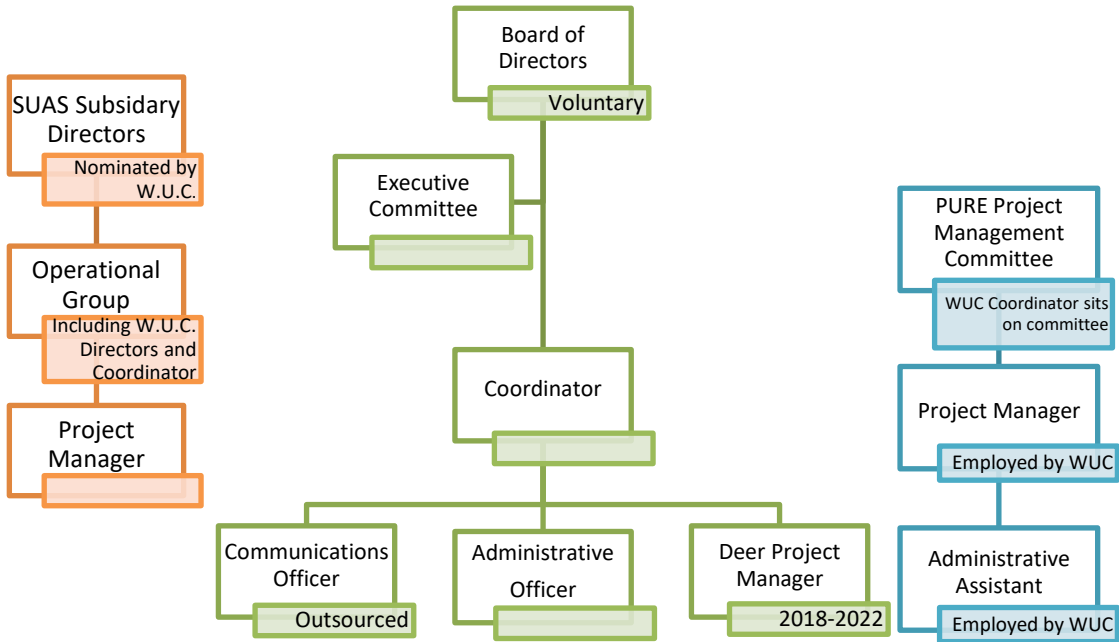
Wicklow Uplands Council continues to employ a small team. A full time Coordinator and a part time Administrative Officer are responsible for managing and directing Wicklow Uplands Council activities.

The services of part time Communications Officer and Project Manager were also engaged in 2022, Our Communications Officers has responsibility for implementing our communications plan and promoting our work to a wider audience, while the Project Manager had direct responsibility for the Deer Management Project – the project was completed in 2022 and the role finished.

Wicklow Uplands Council also employs staff for the PURE Project (Protecting Upland and Rural Environments), including a full time Project Manager and a recently hired Administrative Assistant. These positions are based in the PURE Project office in Tinahely, Co Wicklow.

In addition, the SUAS Project (Sustainable Uplands Agri-environment Scheme) is operated by a subsidiary of Wicklow Uplands Council and sees the employs a full time Project Manager.

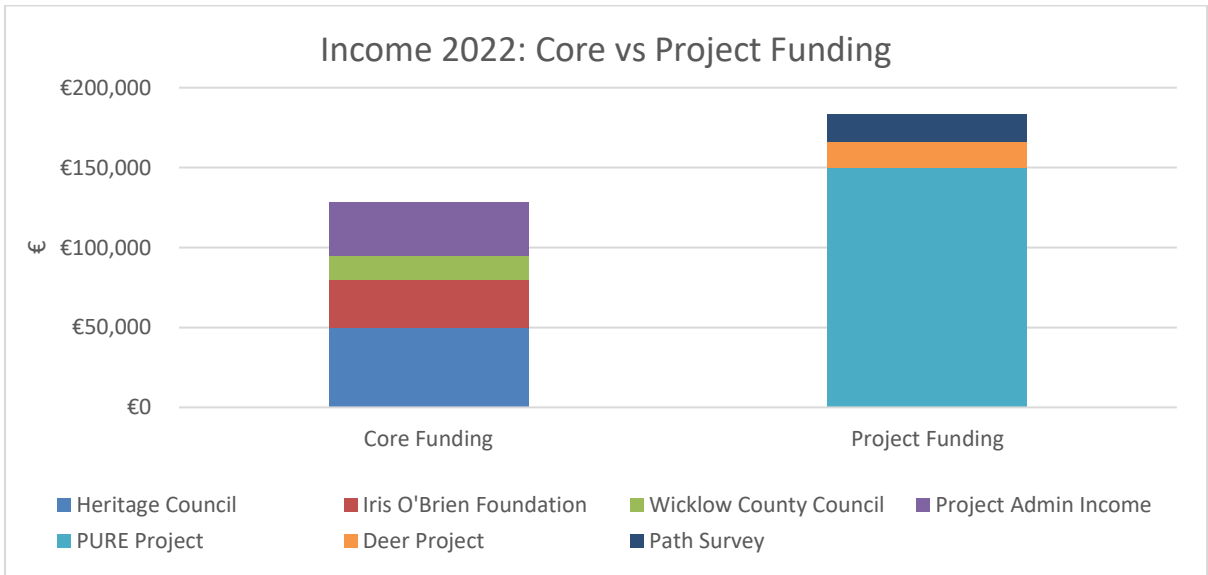
Wicklow Uplands Council Structure



2.3. Funding 2022

In 2022, Wicklow Uplands Council was financially supported by: The Heritage Council’s Heritage Capacity Funding 2022, The Iris O’Brien Foundation & Wicklow County Council. Collectively this amounted to core funding of €95000 and allowed for the employment of staff, overheads and small project expenses.

Core funding enabled the leverage of significant specific project funding through various sources. In 2022 this amounted to over €195000 in relation to the PURE Project, Deer Management Project and Upland Path Condition Survey – see graph below. This figure does not take into account finances associated with the €1.95m SUAS Project as it operated by a subsidiary. The operation and delivery of projects has become an important source of additional income for Wicklow Uplands Council as a small administration fee is charged. In 2022, project administration fees provided an additional €33,200.



2.4 Key Priorities

Our Key Priorities as per 2021 – 2023 Strategic Plan	Progress 2022
To obtain funding to secure the future sustainability of our work	Efforts are ongoing efforts to find new arrangements beyond 2022. Additional project administration income was delivered through the SUAS Project in 2022 in recognition of the project support delivered by Wicklow Uplands Council staff.
To encourage the sustainable management of our natural heritage, habitats, and landscapes	All projects and activities are centred around the protection and sustainable management of the upland landscape e.g., PURE, SUAS, Deer Management, Upland Path Condition Survey etc.
To continue to develop opportunities for sustainable recreation	Wicklow Uplands Council is responsible for the management of 30km of walking trails including; The Avonmore Way, Sugar Loaf Way, Bray Head Loop and the Belmont Way. Our current focus is establishing a route from Sugar Loaf to Roundwood. In 2022, an upland path condition was commissioned to establish a baseline of the condition of 167km of popular hillwalking routes across the uplands.
To encourage rural employment and support the retention of the rural population	Our projects support the local economy e.g., SUAS – supporting upland farmers, Trail Developments – encourage more visitors and support local business Wicklow Uplands Council employees a number of staff
To improve communications and to raise awareness of the identity of Wicklow Uplands Council and its work	A Communications Officer was engaged in 2022 to raise greater awareness our work. We have a regular presence in the media
To promote the Wicklow Uplands by collectively promoting towns and villages which act as ‘gateways’ to the area	A network of interpretative panels has been created in towns and villages across Co Wicklow

3. Representing the shared interests of the Wicklow Uplands

Throughout 2022 Wicklow Uplands Council continued to represent the shared interests of the uplands on a number of fora and committees. These include:

- Co Wicklow Public Participation Network
- Dublin Mountains Partnership Consultative Forum
- Irish Uplands Forum
- Local Community Development Committee (LCDC)/ PPN
- St Kevin’s Way Management Committee
- Wicklow County Tourism
- Wicklow Heritage Forum
- Wicklow Local Sports & Recreation Partnership
- Wicklow Multi Agency Animal Welfare Committee
- Wicklow Outdoor Recreation Committee
- Member of Leave no Trace Ireland
- Member of the EUROPARC Federation



A meeting with members of Environment and Recreation Panel

4. Project Updates

Throughout 2022 Wicklow Uplands Council operated a number of key projects that respond to challenges raised by our members. All projects are developed from the bottom-up and delivered in partnership with various relevant stakeholder organisations. This bottom-up approach along with wider agency support, ensures that projects are delivered in an effective and sustainable manner.

An outline of our current project activities is included in the sections below. Full details of all projects can be found on our website www.wicklowuplands.ie/projects.

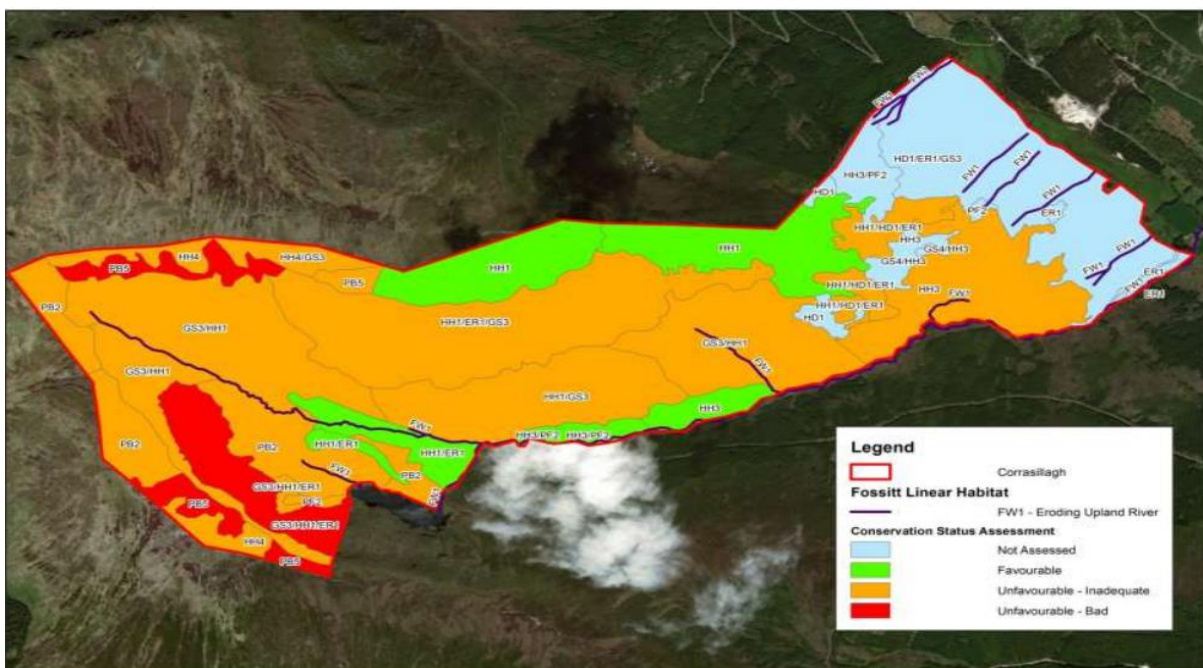
4.1 Sustainable Uplands Agri-environment Scheme (SUAS)

The open mountains of the Wicklow and Dublin uplands are a cherished landscape that provide food, energy, timber and drinking water for adjacent urban populations. They also provide an important space for outdoor recreation and are home to unique habitats and species that are protected by conservation designations. It is a living landscape that has been managed and shaped by generations of hill farming activities. Despite this, the majority of upland habitats are found to be in poor conservation condition, with upland farming also in decline.

In response, Wicklow Uplands Council developed the Sustainable Uplands Agri-environment Scheme (SUAS) pilot project. The ambitious project was established to develop innovative and sustainable solutions to the economic and environmental challenges facing farmers in the Wicklow and Dublin uplands, and to improve the conservation condition of protected upland habitats. 2022 marks the fifth and final year of the project which is a European Innovation Partnership (EIP), funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food, and the Marine (DAFM) under the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020.

Over the past five year the project has implemented a range of actions including:

- Establishing 15 commonage groups, and engaging 10 non commonage upland farms, a total of 85 farmers, to take responsibility for developing and implementing environmental management plans
- Carrying out detailed habitat assessments for each site and developing agreed management plans – see image below
- Increasing farmer’s knowledge of environmental management issues through training and collaboration with the project ecologist and relevant stakeholders
- Remunerating farmers for the carrying out a range of habitat management actions
- Developing sustainable grazing regimes



A map detailed the habitat condition of one of the SUAS commonages –Faith Wilson

The Project is operating a hybrid results-based approach. This approach works by making a baseline payment to farmers based on the condition of habitat - better condition results in a higher payment. Further payments are available to farmers for the completion of actions that go towards improving the habitat. Given time those actions will see the habitat improve and result in higher baseline payments. Recent ecological surveying



Water Quality Training Day at Glenmalure September 2022

Upland farming is often framed very negatively, however the SUAS project has proven that upland farmers have the skills and desire to carry out habitat management actions. The project has successfully demonstrated that with the right supports, and positive active engagement, these farmers will play a vital role in the management of our uplands. Habitat improvement actions carried out to date include:

- Vegetation management activities including; controlled burning of heather, mechanical cutting, bracken bruising and spraying
- Introduction of cattle to graze and trample heavy vegetation
- Active shepherding and distribution of mineral bucket to attract sheep to areas which need more grazing
- Planting of native trees along stream gullies to protect water quality and develop woodland corridors
- Drain blocking on boggy areas to improve water retention, protect the integrity of the peat and support the carbon sequestration
- A bare peat restoration trail to revegetate and protect peatlands

An end of project conference is currently in planning for November. A number of international speakers will attend with the keynote address given by Minister Pippa Hackett.

Full details of the SUAS Project can be found on our website at <https://wicklowuplands.ie/suasproject/>

4.1.2. SUAS Bare Peat Restoration Trials

Protecting and restoring peatland is recognised as one of the most important things that we can do to help combat climate change and reduce carbon emissions. Carbon rich peatlands are the planets most important long-term sinks for carbon as they absorb and store carbon from the atmosphere - the Wicklow and Dublin uplands are dominated by these peat soils. In their natural undisturbed state, and with a water table that is persistently high, peatlands can very effectively sequester and store this carbon in the ground for thousands of years.

However, damaged and dry peatlands lose this ability and become a carbon source, releasing previously stored carbon into the atmosphere. Drains, eroded gullies and in the worst cases vast areas of bare peat all represent damaged peatland. Without plant cover the peat can no longer store carbon and is susceptible to erosion. The reality is that these damaged and unvegetated areas will never recover without intervention.

In 2022, the SUAS Project worked alongside the National Parks and Wildlife Service and with upland farmers to trial some revegetation and restoration techniques on a number of sites featuring extensive erosion. The process involved:

- Cutting and collecting heather from a donor site
- Flying the cuttings to the designated site and spreading them over the bare peat – this serves to introduce a seed source and to help stabilise the peat to allow seedling take hold
- A bespoke grass seed mix and fertilizer is then spread – this further stabilises the peat to encourage the heather to grow. Once the fertilizer depletes the grass will die back but the heather continues to grow
- Wooden dams are installed to slow the flow of water – this helps raise the water table and encourage peat formation
- The plots are fenced off to prevent livestock, deer and human disturbance



A helicopter bringing supplies to the peatland restoration site



Representatives from WUC, SUAS, NPWS and farmers with Minister Noonan at a peat restoration site

The project has received considerable attention including a site visit from Minister Malcolm Noonan, Minister for Heritage & Electoral Reform earlier this year. The recovery process is a long and slow but there are already positive indications and it is hoped that further projects will build on this vital work.

4.1.3. SUAS Project Conference

On 17th November 2022, an end of project conference was held to celebrate and disseminate the findings of the project. Minister Pippa Hackett delivered the keynote address full venue with over 70 people in attendance. The conference brought in international guests to present and discuss some potential future options for the management of uplands based international experience.



Minister Pippa Hackett with speaker for the SUAS Conference

4.2 Sustainable Trail Developments

Wicklow Uplands Council continues to manage the Avonmore Way, Belmont Way, Bray Head Loop and Sugar Loaf Way walking trails – a distance of over 25km. Our long-term vision is the development of a long distance off road walking route along the east of the county linking from Bray in the north to Woodenbridge in the south. The route will connect the villages along the way including Kilmacanogue, Roundwood, Annamoe, Laragh, Rathdrum, Avoca and Woodenbridge.

After much negotiation and surveying, work is due to commence on a new walking trail linking Sugar Loaf and the Vartry Reservoirs. Tentatively named the 'Calary Way', the completion of the 9km route will not only connect the Sugar Loaf to the Vartry Trails but will also finally provide a waymarked walking route from Bray to Roundwood – a distance of over 30km from Bray Seafront. The new long distance trail will link Bray Head, the Little Sugar Loaf, the Great Sugar Loaf and the Vartry Reservoirs and expected to attract considerable numbers. As the trails connect directly with towns and villages along the way, it will support those local economies and importantly provide links with public transport at various points along the route.

The latest section is being managed in partnership with Wicklow Uplands Council and Wicklow County Council with funding secured under the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme (ORIS). It is expected that work will be completed in early 2023.



Emerging Route from Bray to Vartry Reservoirs

4.2.1 Vartry Trail Closure

Following an alleged incident on a privately owned section of Roundwood’s Upper Vartry Trail, the section was closed to the public in February 2022. The closure meant that the very popular trail could no longer be completed as a loop and was a major blow to the local community. The landowners and adjoining business worked with Sport Ireland, Wicklow County Council, Wicklow Uplands Council and County Wicklow Partnership, and after a very lengthy process a resolution was found, and the trail was reopened in October 2022. The news was met with much celebration in Co Wicklow and further afield.

4.3 PURE Project

Since its launch in 2006, the PURE (Protecting Uplands & Rural Environments) Project has continued to make great strides in tackling illegal dumping and fly tipping across the Wicklow and Dublin uplands. Key to the project’s outstanding success, is working closely with local communities and relevant stakeholders to ensure the protection of the rural landscape.

The PURE Project’s rapid respond to removing illegally dumped waste from the landscape and its various awareness raising initiatives, have resulted in a steady reduction in the in illegal dumping in the upland landscape. On an annual basis the PURE Project removes an average of 263 tonnes of illegally dumped waste from the landscape, equating to a monthly average of 21 tonnes. To September 1st this year there have been 520 PURE Truck collections representing 105 tonnes of waste.

The well-known 'PURE truck' which has been on the road since 2006 is expected to be replaced by the end of the year thanks to capital funding committed through the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications in 2021.

2022 has also seen a new free phone number launched to encourage the reporting of illegal activities. As the project's impact and influence continues to grow, so too does the team working to deliver its success with the recent arrival of an Administration Assistant to the busy Tinahely office. The Assistant is employed directly through Wicklow Uplands Council.

To Report fly-tipping/illegal dumping in Wicklow and Dublin Uplands
Phone: 1800 365 123



4.3.1. PURE Mile

First launched in 2010, the PURE Mile is a unique environmental, community initiative, which encourages communities and groups to adopt a mile of road, (or miles) or other settings, and to work together to enhance these areas by keeping them tidy, free of litter and to research information about local wildflowers, plants, trees, animals, and the built, cultural, and social heritage. Some groups have taken the extra step of creating websites, heritage booklets and walking routes to the benefit of locals and visitors alike.

For the 2022 Pure Mile, there are over 800 miles or roads, mountains, woodlands, valleys, forestries, and upland amenities, involving thousands of volunteers - the largest number ever since the initiative began. Along with community groups, under the 'Clean up the Uplands' category, the PURE Mile continues to welcome special interest groups such as sports and recreational groups, scouts, schools and a growing number of corporate bodies, who are currently active across all areas of the uplands.

There were over 1,000 litter picks/clean-ups undertaken by Pure Mile Groups in the first 6 months of 2022 resulting in the collection of over 3,000 bags of litter, rubbish, and dumped material being removed from the Wicklow and Dublin upland region.

4.4 Deer Management Project

Deer are a very important resource of significant heritage, economic and social value. However, there is ever growing public concern regarding the unsustainable growth of the wild deer population in Wicklow and the consequent environmental and economic impacts. The Wicklow Deer Management Project was initiated in 2018 with the principal aim of establishing at least three new Deer Management Units (DMU's) in the county and to put deer management on a more professional basis.

A DMU is a defined area which brings together the various interested parties including, landowners, hunters and relevant bodies. A deer management plan is prepared with agreed objectives to sustainably manage a healthy deer population within the DMU. It is crucial that accurate records of the level of activity within the DMU are maintained.

The project successfully delivered on the envisaged outcomes and carried out a series of actions including;

- the establishment of five DMU's along with management plans
- the capture of accurate data of activity within the DMU's
- an increase in numbers of female deer culled
- an increased uptake of out of season deer control under Section 42 licencing

The project also identified that landowners face significant agricultural and economic losses from the grazing of valuable grassland by deer through a series of grassland measurements. Furthermore, a TB testing pilot initiated by the Project determined a TB incidence rate of 16.6% in suspect deer samples sent for testing and identified 'hotspot' locations that merit further investigation for disease control.



Cages deployed on grassland area allowed determination of grazing impact

A number of key recommendations were produced based on the findings of the project including:

- While more detailed deer population data is needed, the focus of deer management plans should be reducing the adverse impacts associated with deer
- Deer management programmes need to make full use of the open season and out of season deer control under Section 42 licencing with increased culling of female deer required.
- Further work is needed to identify the full impacts of deer on conservation habitats and biodiversity
- All landowners need to consider the leasing of hunting carefully as it is they, the landowner, who have ultimate responsibility for ensuring that hunters on their lands are operating effectively. The sharing of accurate data between landowners and hunters is an absolute necessity in this regard.
- New technologies should be fully embraced to assist in evidence-based deer management and to streamline existing licencing systems.
- The TB testing pilot identified TB hotspots in West Wicklow and warrant much further detailed investigation. The model proved efficient and effective and can easily be rolled out to other TB blackspots.
- Venison needs to be promoted as a sustainable healthy product.
- The National Deer Management Forum should be reformed as a matter of urgency.

The three year project was funded jointly by the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine and the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and managed in conjunction with Wicklow Deer Management Partnership. The Project Steering group are keen to secure a further funding agreement to build on the work started by the project.

4.5 Upland Path Survey

Given their proximity to Dublin, upland paths in the Wicklow Mountains experience very high levels of footfall compared with other areas of Ireland. Unfortunately, this high level usage has led to noticeable erosion of the most popular paths, many of which traverse Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and sensitive habitats. The majority of these paths are informal hillwalking routes rather than designated trails where there is some degree of management in place. These informal paths have evolved over decades and their growing popularity has resulted in the trampling and loss of vegetation and consequent soil erosion. In addition to environmental damage, poor path condition detracts from the quality of people’s recreation experiences. These informal paths are found throughout the Wicklow Mountains on both public and private lands, but the majority are found within the Wicklow Mountains National Park.

To establish a baseline of current path condition, Wicklow Uplands Council and Wicklow Mountains National Park/National Parks & Wildlife Service, along with Coillte, Mountain Meitheal, Mountaineering Ireland and County Wicklow Partnership’s Rural Recreational Officer and Wicklow County Council commissioned a survey of over 165km of these upland paths. LEADER funding was secured to engage an expert path surveyor from Scotland – Chris York, Walking the Talk.



Eroded path on Clohernagh – Helen Lawless

As the majority of paths in the Wicklow and Dublin uplands cross peat, the survey found that erosion was indeed a significant issue across the region. It noted that erosion of many paths is accelerating rapidly due to the growth in recreational use, and in some cases, this is exacerbated due to access by unlicensed off-road vehicles.

The report states quite clearly that it was not carried out to promote the development of new paths and trails, but rather to establish the impact of these paths on the environment and how they can be managed to reduce their impact. In that regard, it produced a series of recommendations on appropriate path repair and restoration techniques ranging from ‘light touch’ and ‘early intervention’

measure right through to ‘major repair’ and realignment. There are also some paths identified that are not suitable for any works due to concern for impact on the environment and fragile peatlands.

Given the scale of the works required, the final report suggests that it will require at least **4,000 days of labour to repair the existing network of upland paths**. By way of quantifying that estimate, it is the equivalent of a team of 4 working continuously for almost 5 years just to tackle the work outlined in the report. Furthermore, as working with peat is such a skilled and technical process, the report recommends that a locally based team of skilled path workers should be trained and based in Wicklow. With the right resources the Wicklow Uplands could become an important training hub for path work.

The report is already proving to be extremely useful, with an early extract used by Wicklow’s Rural Recreation Officer to inform a successful grant application for €450,000 carry out extensive remedial stonework on the iconic Great Sugar Loaf. The funding was secured under the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme and will be delivered by Wicklow County Council.



The Great Sugar Loaf - €450000 has been allocated towards repair works on the path to the summit

5. Communications and Outreach

Wicklow Uplands Council continues to have a visible online presence through various channels:

- Our Facebook continues to grow with 4,857 followers.
www.facebook.com/WicklowUplandsCouncil @WicklowUplandsCouncil
- The SUAS Project has a standalone Facebook page with 661 followers
www.facebook.com/SUASproject
- Twitter followers have also increased steadily with 2159 followers
www.twitter.com/WicklowUplands
- Instagram followers amount to 1,864
www.instagram.com/wicklowuplands

Our website www.wicklowuplands.ie is our main repository for all Wicklow Uplands Council information, policy, projects etc. The website has an average of 1,100 Unique Visitors per month.

5.1 Media engagement

Wicklow Uplands Council and the SUAS Project, generate considerable media interest and often receive requests to contribute authoritative input to articles on a broad range of Upland related matters. Examples are included in the table below:

Date	Title	Published
Nov '22:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Packed programme for SUAS Project conference” • “SUAS Project announces list of speakers for a special conference” • “Minister Pippa Hackett and TV presenter Ella McSweeney among speakers at SUAS Project conference in Wicklow” • Further coverage on the conference expected 	Wicklow Times WicklowNews.net Wicklow People
Sept '22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “County Wicklow’s upland paths to be focus of special online event” • “Special Event To Discuss Upland Paths In The Wicklow Mountains” • “Wicklow Uplands Path Report Discussion Takes Place Today” 	Wicklow People WicklowNews.net EastCoast.fm
Aug '22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Minister Noonan gets first-hand experience of Wicklow Uplands peatland restoration project” • “Walk highlights importance of rich Wicklow uplands heritage” • “Granamore Commonage welcomes all for Heritage Week walk” 	Wicklow People Wicklow People Wicklow People
Jul '22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “SUAS Project Changing Wicklow’s Upland Landscape” • “Wicklow Uplands Council’s AGM and Panel Meeting Announced” 	East Coast FM WicklowNews.net
Jun '22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Lessons learned from the SUAS Uplands EIP” 	Farmers Journal
Apr '22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “SUAS Pilot Project Completes Extensive Tree Planting Programme” • “Responsible Dog Control” 	WicklowNews.net Wicklow People
Mar '22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Tree planting will help prevent erosion and will filter water entering streams” • “Appeal for responsible dog owners during lambing season” • “Wicklow farmers and council raise dog attack awareness” 	Wicklow People WicklowNews.net Farmer’s Journal
Feb '22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “SUAS Project to feature on Signpost series on Friday” • “SUAS Project to featured on popular Signpost web series” • “Attacks on sheep can have devastating impact on farmers” • “Responsible Dog Control” 	WicklowNews.net Wicklow Times Tallaght Echo Irish Independent
Jan '22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Pilot project aims to support a recovery in upland farming” Published 	Tallaght Echo
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Pilot project aims to support a recovery in upland farming” • “SUAS Project included as part of sustainable agriculture webinar” • “Gardaí issue warning to motorists visiting beauty spots as fines handed out” 	Tallaght Echo Wicklow People WicklowNews.net