

WicklowUplands
COUNCIL

FINAL PROGRESS REPORT TO NOVEMBER 2023

Wicklow Uplands Council
Parish Hall, Main St, Roundwood, Co. Wicklow
info@wicklowuplands.ie
www.wicklowuplands.ie



An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council



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1. Introduction

The Wicklow Uplands Council is an independent, voluntary organisation that represents the shared interests of over 60 diverse member groups and individuals in the Wicklow and Dublin Uplands. Since 1997 The Wicklow Uplands Council has taken a consensus and 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.

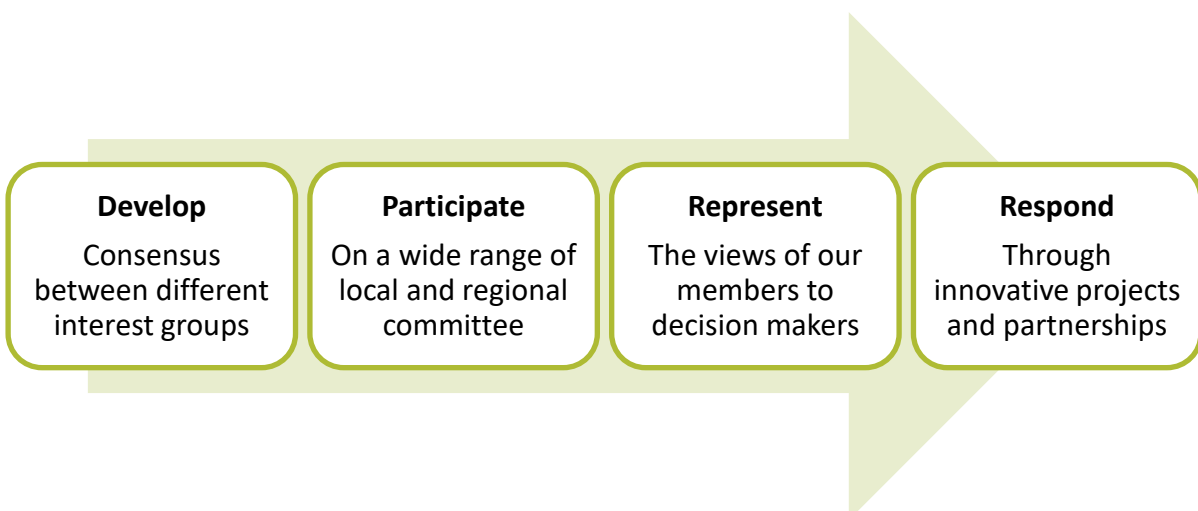
The past year marked a period of significant transformation for the Wicklow Uplands Council, characterised by the culmination of several projects through 2022 (SUAS, Deer Management, Upland Path Condition Survey). The employment contract for the communications officer who was assigned to support dissemination and knowledge transfer of these project came to a close. As these significant initiatives reached their conclusion, considerable attention was directed towards administrative activities throughout 2023.

A noteworthy transition occurred in the administrative management of the Council in the middle of the year, leading to the appointment of a new coordinator in the final third of the year¹. This change in personnel is anticipated to bring fresh perspectives and insights to the organisation. The on boarding/transition period was not without challenge as there was no crossover of administrative function between predecessor and incumbent.

As we move forward, the Wicklow Uplands Council remains dedicated to its mission and objectives, aiming to enhance the economic, recreation and environmental welfare of the region and its communities.

“Support the sustainable use of the Wicklow Uplands through consensus and partnership with those who live, work and recreate there” The preparation of a new strategic plan is being initiated, this will

Our Values



¹ As a result of this staff change the WUC Progress Report has been compiled using the 2022 report as a template, edited and amended to reflect the activity as understood by the incumbent.

guide endeavours for the period spanning 2024/25-2030. This comprehensive plan will be a testament to the Council's commitment to forward-thinking and sustainable development within the Wicklow Uplands. The Wicklow Uplands will be part of the great opportunity to provide solutions to many of the biodiversity and climate change challenges being faced.

This progress report summarises work and activities from January to the beginning of November 2023 in line with our mission to:

2. Organisational Management

2.1 Board of Directors

A voluntary board of directors are responsible for guiding the work of The 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 the core value of The Wicklow Uplands Council, no decision is made or has been required by the board of directors through the process of a 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 this happens on the 3rd Wednesday of each month. Excluding August and December unless otherwise called.

Wicklow Uplands Council Board Directors 2022/2023		
Panel Group	Name	Organisation
Farmers & Landowners	Denis Halpin	Wicklow Cheviot Sheep Owners
	Sean Malone	Wicklow Cheviot Sheep Owners
	Daniel Molloy	Wicklow IFA
	Mary Catherine Murphy	Wicklow Cheviot Sheep Owners
	Joe Morrissey	Wicklow IFA
	Owen Brady	Wicklow Cheviot Sheep Owners
	Donal Anderson	Dublin IFA
Environment & Recreation	Louis O'Byrne	Independent Member
	Máire O'Connor	Mountaineering Ireland
	John Ferns	Co. Wicklow Game Conservation
	Hannah O'Kelly	Independent Member
Tourism & Economic	Sean Byrne	Lough Dan House
	Geoffrey Seymour	Roundwood Community Council
	Eugene Stephens	Ashford Self Catering
	Dáirine Nuttall	Ireland Tour Guide
Community	Garvan Hickey	Independent Member
	Aideen Klauer	Hollywood Forum

	Claire Chambers	Roundwood Community Council
	Mary Kelly Quinn	Glendalough & District Development Association
Co-options	Declan O’Neill	Wicklow IFA
	Philip Maguire	Dublin IFA
	Carmel Kealy	Motorcycling Union of Ireland
	Michael Keegan	Independent Member
	Pat Dunne	Wicklow Cheviot Sheep Owners
	Tom Byrne	Wicklow IFA

2.2. Staff

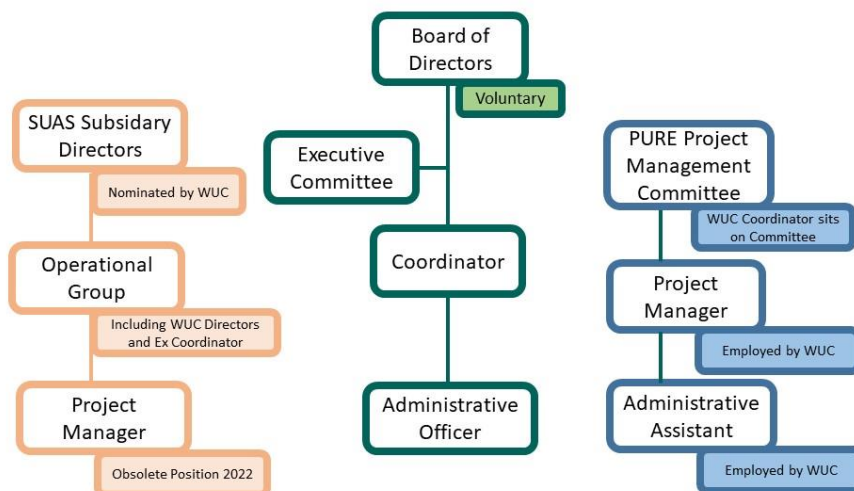
Wicklow Uplands Council employs a small team.

A full time Coordinator and a part time Administrative Officer are responsible for managing and directing Wicklow Uplands Council day to day activities. There has been a recent change to the administrative structure. A new coordinator took up position in September. The working hours of the Administrative function is on a 4 day basis (Monday-Thursday, 9:00hrs – 16:00hrs)

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

The SUAS Project (Sustainable Uplands Agri-environment Scheme) operated by a subsidiary of Wicklow Uplands Council is in the process of being wound up, the company is in the process of being voluntarily liquidated this being undertaken by IFAC.

Wicklow Uplands Council Structure (November, 2023)



2.3. Funding 2023

In 2023, Wicklow Uplands Council was financially supported by:

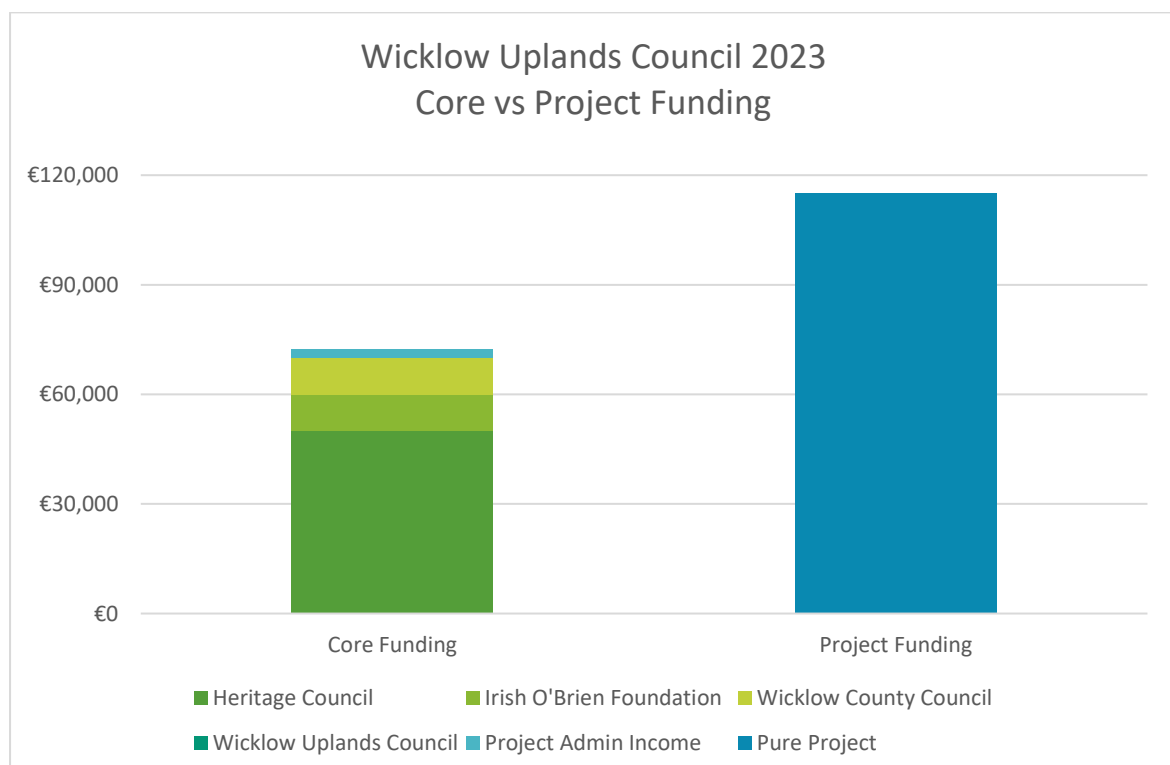
- The Heritage Council’s Heritage Capacity Funding 2023
- The Iris O’Brien Foundation
- Wicklow County Council

Collectively this amounted to core funding of €70,000 and allowed for the employment of staff, overheads and small project expenses.

Core funding to the Wicklow Uplands Council enables it to leverage specific project funding through various sources. In 2023 this amounted to over €185,000. As outlined in the introduction, no new projects were applied for or secured by the Wicklow Uplands Council in 2023. Detailed work and focus was required for ongoing administration and rolling programmes and to close off the portfolio of 2022 programmes.

The operation and delivery of projects is an important source of additional income for Wicklow Uplands Council, as a nominal administration fee is charged, a number of project proposals and Expressions of interest have been worked up during 2023, to be realised including

- a feasibility study to develop a Social Enterprise using locally sourced sheep fleece as the principal material for path restoration work & drain blocking on eroded peatlands throughout the uplands.
- Village panel requests have been raised for Glenealy, Carnew and Vallemount
- Mapping and Control of the Invasive Species *Rhododendron ponticum* across commonage and enclosed farms
- Annual Uplands Forum and knowledge transfer event



Key Priorities as per 2021 – 2023 Strategic Plan	Progress 2023
To obtain funding to secure the future sustainability of our work	Ongoing efforts to find new arrangements beyond 2023.
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. Wicklow Uplands Council has a strong portfolio most recently e.g., SUAS, Deer Management, Upland Path Condition Survey and PURE,
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. Through 2023 the focus has been in establishing a route from Sugar Loaf to Roundwood. In 2023 the Upland Path Condition Survey was launch by Minister Malcolm Noonan resulting in 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., Trail Developments – encourage more visitors and support local business SUAS – supporting upland farmers, Wicklow Uplands Council employees a number of staff
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 2023 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 the Tourism & Economic Panel, with Mr Fred Verdier Tourism Officer, Wicklow County Council (stock image WUC)

4. Project Updates

Throughout 2023 Wicklow Uplands Council continued to administer a number of projects (trail development, village interpretive panels, PURE) and also close out a number of completed initiatives (SUAS, Deer Management, Path Survey) that responded 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 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 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 continues to be 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 through 2022, work commenced in 2023 on a new walking trail linking Sugar Loaf and the Vartry Reservoirs. The agreed name is the Sugar Loaf Way as it is recognised and iconic, (in 2022 it was suggested to be ‘The Calary Way’) the 9km route now connects the Sugar Loaf to the Vartry Trails providing a waymarked walking route from Bray to Roundwood – a distance of over 30km from Bray Seafront. The new long distance trail links Bray Head, the Little Sugar Loaf, the Great Sugar Loaf and the Vartry Reservoirs. As the trails increase the connectivity between towns

and villages along the way, it supports 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). The work has been ongoing through 2023.



Route from Bray to Vartry Reservoirs

4.2 Sustainable Uplands Agri-environment Scheme (SUAS)

The Wicklow and Dublin mountains are 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.

The open mountains and 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 (Special Area of Conservation, Special Protection Area, Blue Dot Water catchments, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty).

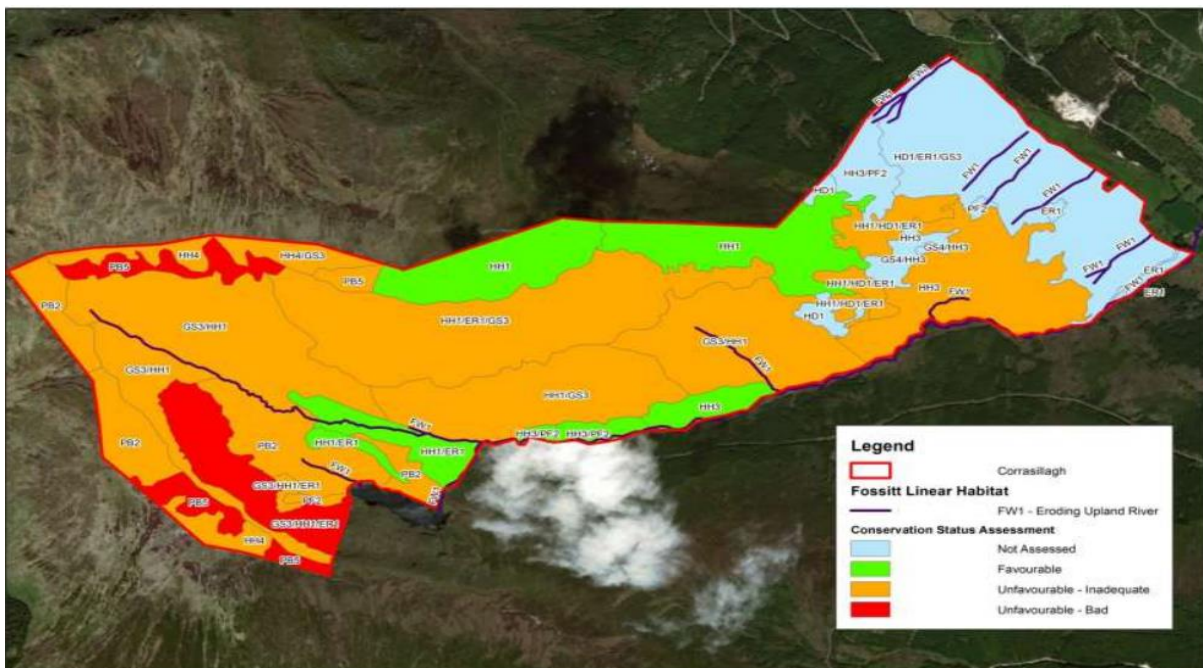
In response, Wicklow Uplands Council developed the Sustainable Uplands Agri-environment Scheme (SUAS) pilot project (2019-2022). The ambitious project developed innovative and sustainable solutions to the economic and environmental challenges facing farmers in the Wicklow and Dublin uplands, and to improve the conservation condition of protected upland habitats. Many learnings

from this scheme and other National EIPs (European Innovation Partnership (EIP), funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food, and the Marine (DAFM) under the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020) have supported actions under the National Agri-Climate Rural Environment Scheme (ACRES) which has been rolled out through 2023.

For the Wicklow Uplands Council 2023 marked the closing of this project and the administrative wind down required. Through 2023 knowledge share activities have continued (Teagasc Uplands Forum in November 2023, Westport, Co. Mayo the most recent)

A recap on the range of actions implemented over the project period included:

- 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, Ecologist.

The Project operated a hybrid results-based approach. This approach worked by making a baseline payment to farmers based on the condition of habitat - better condition resulted in a higher payment. Further payments were available to farmers for the completion of actions that go towards improving the habitat. Given time those actions will see the habitat improve.



Water Quality Training Day at Glenmalure September 2022

Upland farming is often framed negatively, the SUAS project has proven that upland farmers have the skills and desire to carry out habitat management actions and are part of a solution for the biodiversity and climate change challenges being faced.

The project has successfully demonstrated that with the right supports, and positive active engagement, farmers will play a vital role in the management of our uplands for positive landscape action. Habitat improvement actions carried out included:

- Vegetation management activities including; controlled burning of heather, mechanical cutting, bracken bruising and spraying. The project assets (bracken bruisers) have been used through 2023 to continue this action.
- Introduction of cattle to graze and trample heavy vegetation (targeted grazing) has resulted in further upland farmers introducing cattle with positive conservation grazing outcomes.
- 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 ecological woodland corridors. Ongoing monitoring and care through 2023 has seen good success in tree establishment.
- Drain blocking on boggy areas to improve water retention, protect the integrity of the peat to act as a carbon sink. The trial of 'sheep fleece' has arisen through 2023 as a result of the development relationship between National Park rangers and farmers.
- A bare peat restoration trail to revegetate and protect peatlands is under ongoing monitoring in 2023 and beyond.

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

4.2.1. Bare Peat Restoration Trials with Sheep Fleece

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 which has a knock on effect on waterbodies downstream. The reality is that these damaged and unvegetated areas will never recover without intervention.

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. This further led to the trial of locally sourced 'Sheeps Fleece' as a an alternative to the presently used Coir Rolls (Coconut Fibre) being imported.

The process involved:

- Sheering of sheep in situ
- Rolling the sheep fleece, binding it
- These are firmly pegged into the drain



Mr Donie Anderson SUAS participant Sheering Sheep in situ, as a trial for using Sheep Fleece as a replacement for 'Coconut' Coir in peatland drain blocking. (Image courtesy; H McLindon, NPWS)

4.3 Protecting Upland Rural Environment (PURE) Project

Since its initiation by the Wicklow Uplands Council and launch in 2006, the PURE 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 the unique partnership which saw the bringing together of statutory and non-statutory organisations (Wicklow County Council, South Dublin County Council, DunLaoghaire Rathdown County Council, Coillte, National Parks & Wildlife Service) working closely with local communities and relevant stakeholders to ensure the protection of the rural landscape.

The PURE Project's rapid response to removing illegally dumped waste from the landscape and its various awareness raising initiatives, have resulted in conjunction with legislative actions and national initiatives (e.g WEEE Directive 2012/19/EU, Plastic bag levy, 2001, REPAK and Leave No Trace) in a steady reduction of illegally dumped material in the upland landscape. On an annual basis the PURE Project removes an average of 260 tonnes of illegally dumped waste from the landscape, equating to a monthly average of ~21 tonnes.

A new truck has been purchased to replace that which has been on the road since 2006, this thanks to capital funding committed through the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications.

The free phone number 1800 365 123 supports the reporting of illegal activities.

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 free of litter, tidy, and to research information about local wildlife and the built, cultural, & 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 2023 Pure Mile, there are over 900 miles or roads, mountains, woodlands, valleys, forestry, 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 2,500 litter picks/clean-ups were organised by Pure Mile Groups in 2023 resulting in the collection of over 4,000 bags of litter and rubbish being removed from the Wicklow and Dublin upland region.

4.4 Deer Management Project (DMP)

Throughout Ireland Deer have a recognised importance, they have a significant heritage, economic and social value. In Wicklow predominantly, there was a growing public concern regarding the unsustainable growth of the wild deer population and the consequent environmental and economic impacts. The DMP which was initiated in 2018 with the principal aim of establishing at least three new Deer Management Units (DMU's) through the county and to put deer management in Wicklow on a more professional and coherent basis. 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 and members made representation in 2023 to the National Deer Forum supporting the development of National Deer Management Plan which is presently undergoing completion.

background and information; 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 projects success 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 confirmed 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.

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 through proper measurement and data collection



Image: Cages deployed on grassland area allowed determination of grazing impact

- 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. This was enacted in 2023.

4.5 Upland Path Survey

In July 2023 the Upland Path Condition Survey was Launched by Minister Macolm Noonan Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. An onsite inspection and briefing on the comprehensive Wicklow Uplands Paths Assessment report was delivered.



Minister Malcolm Noonan, visits the Wicklow Uplands to view erosion due to Hill walking (Irish Independent 02.08.2023)

Background Given the close proximity to Dublin, upland paths in the Wicklow Mountains experience very high levels of footfall compared with other areas of Ireland. 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.

As the majority of paths in the Wicklow and Dublin uplands cross peat, the survey found that erosion was 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.



Eroded path on Clohernagh – mage | Courtesy
Helen Lawless

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 proved valuable an early extract used by Wicklow's Rural Recreation Officer informed 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 (ORIS) to be delivered by Wicklow County Council.



Image: Road Signage indicating Sugar Loaf Way & Great Sugarloaf. €450,000 has been secured from Outdoor Recreation Investment Scheme to complete path maintenance this as a result of the extensive upland Path Survey.

5. Communications and Outreach

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

- Facebook followers amounts to >4,800 + www.facebook.com/WicklowUplandsCouncil
- Twitter followers amounts to > 2,000 followers www.twitter.com/WicklowUplands
- Instagram followers amount to >2,000 www.instagram.com/wicklowuplands
- The SUAS Project has a standalone Facebook page with 661 followers www.facebook.com/SUASproject

Wicklow Uplands Council website www.wicklowuplands.ie is the main repository for all Wicklow Uplands Council information, policy, projects etc. The website has an average of >1,000 Unique Visitors per month.

5.1 Media engagement

In 2023 Wicklow Uplands Council no longer employed the services of a Communications Officer. The roll of delivering media output lay with the administrative office. The community nature and the large stakeholder engagement of the organisation does generate local media interest (radio and print including the Bray People, The Wicklow Times and East Coast Radio). Due to the national significance of many of its projects/programmes it does receive requests to contribute authoritative input to articles on a broad range of Upland related matters. Pieces have been presented on RTE's HEATED production, The Independent and Irish Times Newspapers. Social media is updated with all relevant information of local, national and international concern. This spans the diverse membership group and the wider community engaging with the Wicklow uplands.