

OFF-ROAD CYCLING STRATEGY

JUNE 2012



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Coillte is the largest provider of outdoor recreation in Ireland and off-road cycling is one of the growing recreational activities catered for on its lands. This document delivers a coherent strategy for the future management and development of off-road cycling on Coillte lands over the next ten years.

The strategy is set in the context of currently providing for this activity at six centres around the country, but with increasing demands from the public, development agencies and others for further provision in Ireland's forests.

This high level of demand is seen in proposals for new facilities and trails by local authorities, tourism agencies, local development companies and community groups and with unsanctioned trail-building by clubs and riders in many forests.

Through this strategy, Coillte will manage future development of the activity through

an approach of provision, education and sanction. The strategy sets out potential locations for development of trails of national, regional and local scale and informs the selection of sites as designated cycling areas. Building on the success of the Leave No Trace message, the strategy sets out how we intend to engage with the sector to educate the public on what we provide and how we will actively encourage responsible use of the facilities. It also sets out the measures we will adopt to deal with ongoing issues relating to dangerous or irresponsible use of forests for cycling.

We have clearly demonstrated how we can deliver trails that are enjoyed by many thousands of visitors annually and that are built to the highest international standards. As a sustainably managed forest company, we will continue to provide great recreational experiences for the public, while delivering on our commercial, environmental and conservation objectives.

We welcome others to partner with us in delivering on the outputs from this strategy and look forward to providing exciting, enjoyable trails for Ireland's citizens and visitors.

Coillte Recreation Team
June 2012

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1. SETTING THE CONTEXT

Mountain biking has become a mainstream recreational activity in Ireland and Coillte are in a unique position in the provision and management of off-road cycling trails. Off-road cycling trails are, by their nature, extensive and usually located on publicly-owned lands. Purpose built trails for off-road cycling¹ are almost exclusively provided by state forest organisations in Western Europe. In an Irish context, given Coillte's extensive land holdings, the greatest pressure for provision of trails falls to Coillte as the de facto trail provider. There is currently no national strategy on off-road cycling² and decisions to support, develop or facilitate the development of mountain bike trails or trail networks are being dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

This strategy will detail a coherent position on trail provision, resourcing and management of the activity. It will outline a vision for the development and management of off-road cycling on the Coillte estate over the next 10 years and will look at current activity, demands, resourcing, frameworks for development, regulation of the activity and provision of infrastructure.

The strategy sets down the position for Coillte for off-road cycling on its estate only and does not give a view for other landowners or potential trail providers.

Through this strategy, to manage all aspects of off-road cycling in the future on its lands,

Coillte will adopt an approach of provision, education and sanction. These elements form the basis for the sections in this document.

This strategy will examine and answer questions such as:

- What level of further trail building, if any, is appropriate for Coillte in the context of how many trails can Ireland support?
- What role does Coillte see for itself in this area in the future?
- What type of trails should be provided and where should they be located?
- What is the Coillte position on funding of trail development and management?
- What model is proposed for dealing with the current level of unauthorised use?

In this strategy, we inform the public about how and where trails may be developed, how they will be funded and what resources we expect to manage and maintain them.

There are opportunities through the implementation of this strategic plan to develop a high-quality, off-road cycle trail network which will deliver improved management of the activity, support rural tourism through the unlocking of tourism markets both domestic and overseas, increase active participation in sport for citizens and potentially, develop revenue streams to fund management and maintenance of trails. This infrastructure must sit comfortably with forest management, help to manage

¹ Off-road cycling for the purpose of this document means off public roads rather than off forest roads, i.e. use of a bike anywhere on Coillte's property is included here

² No State body, Govt dept or official agency has presented a strategic position on off-road cycling – attempts to do this on a joined-up basis have been unsuccessful to date. However, the key stakeholders are represented on the steering group of this Coillte strategy project.

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the activity on the estate and help provide resources to underpin its management and upkeep.

1.1 Pressures on Coillte's estate

Prior to any trail development on Coillte lands there was an increasing level of unauthorised (and sometimes potentially dangerous) trail building taking place on Coillte lands. The policy on mountain biking is clearly set out in our recreation policy where the issue of unauthorised mountain biking is dealt with. One of the methods of dealing with this issue is to manage the activity by the provision of designated trails and as such six cycle trail locations were developed by Coillte between 2007 – 2011. Being the first waymarked cycle trails of their kind in Ireland, they provided new access to family groups and experienced mountain bikers alike. While they give Coillte a tangible method of managing a previously unmanageable activity, it has also opened up the pent up demand which in turn is creating demands for more access³. Increasing visitor numbers to these centres, coupled with the economic benefits that are now accruing to local communities from these visitors has led to a substantial demand for further provision. Along with this, the culture of cycling in Ireland is changing rapidly with a growing number looking to use trails and parks to teach their children to cycle and to recreate in their local communities.

These demands put pressure on Coillte

from rural development companies, tourism development organisations and local authorities for further provision, but no strategic thinking has been put behind why (or indeed if) more trails should be developed or if so, where they should be located. These demands are evidenced in three ways:

Inappropriate use of trails

Waymarked ways are the primary resources for walking tourism in Ireland and over 50% of them are owned and managed by Coillte⁴. This amounts to over 3,000kms of waymarked walking routes on Coillte's land, requiring management and maintenance inputs on an annual basis.

Over recent years, Coillte have developed many walking trails leading the way in professional trail design and construction techniques in this area. However, these trails have been designed for walking provision only and their use by cyclists creates visitor conflict issues and infrastructural damage which Coillte are then required to manage and repair. Inappropriate use of trails takes extra resources to deal with in visitor conflicts, visitor safety and trail maintenance and repair.

Unsanctioned trail-building

User-built trails have been developed on Coillte lands without permission over many years. Many forest areas close to large urban

³This can also be linked to the recent re-emergence of cycling as a widespread recreational activity driven by projects such as the Bike-to-work scheme, Dublin bikes scheme and an increase in time opportunity for participation in the activity.

⁴ Source: Setting New Directions - A Review of National Waymarked Ways in Ireland, 2010, National Trails Office

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centres contain these unsanctioned trails. They are an attempt by some to develop challenging (and in some cases, extremely challenging) jumps and trails, which are not catered for by Coillte's purpose-built trails.

Many of the unsanctioned trails tend to be downhill in nature and are used at high speeds - these create significant conflicts at interfaces with forest vehicles, staff and other visitors where they emerge onto the forest road network or onto walking trails. Those that engage in building these trails, jumps and obstacles are often highly experienced; however they build challenges that only they are able for. These unsanctioned trails present a significant challenge to other users.

They also present a business risk to Coillte arising from potential claims for injuries to third parties in a collision with a cyclist using these trails. While there have been no instances to date of reported accidents on these trails, there is a risk to inexperienced users who may find them and are unprepared for the level of challenge they present, being injured in a fall.

Coillte's current policy is to remove any dangerous jumps or structures when they are found. However, where they have been dismantled, they tend to re-emerge again quickly. Evidence from the UK is that the Forestry Commission have been unable to eliminate this unsanctioned trail building

and where trails/jumps have been destroyed, they re-emerge again either in a similar location, or go 'underground' completely and out of sight of the usual range of forest management. The high standards of sustainable trail building which Coillte apply to its purpose-built trails must equally apply to user-built trails.

The challenge for Coillte is to harness the energy of clubs involved in these user-built trails and channel it into responsible use of forests and better quality trail-building.

The strategy will put a process in place to bring user-built trails under management control by working with MTB clubs to develop and use their resources to build trails to a standard that Coillte can endorse. It will also set down clear standards for developing more challenging trails in a structured way.

Increasing demands for access

There is an increasing level of demand from external bodies that now see off-road cycling trails as a potential local business, community and tourism asset in their area. By the nature of off-road cycling, requiring access to large tracts of land and extensive lengths of singletrack⁵, these proposals are directed at Coillte lands. This is manifested by numerous proposals being put to Coillte and Failte Ireland for new trail developments.

The popularity and success of Ballyhoura

⁵Singletrack is narrow twisting trail, used in one-direction only and lies at the core of any trail system used for mountain-biking. A one-hour ride on such a trail would require over 10kms of length, emphasising the requirement for access to large or even vast tracts of land for the activity.

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MTB (see panel) is driving local authorities to seek similar developments in their counties without considering what effect over-provision may have. Experience from Scotland shows that over-proliferation of trail centres has diluted the financial benefits from the overall market and left trail providers with dwindling resources to manage and maintain their trails. While Coillte have set down a protocol recently to help manage proposals for recreational development, a strategic view is needed to guide proposers and funders on where development is appropriate and demanded.

Along with providing strategic direction for potential future development, this document will allow others to see where Coillte are willing to consider developments and where they can engage with Coillte to deliver resources and infrastructure for off-road cycling once funding is in place.

Ballyhoura MTB Trail centre

This is the largest trail centre on the island and attracts over 30,000 visitors per year. The trails were developed as a 'short-break destination' for visitors; enough trails for at least 2 days riding, thereby encouraging visitors to stay for at least one night and encourage spend in the local area. This resource is seen as a key to drive valuable inward tourism spend. The spend in the local economy is valued at €1.44M in 2011. This is entirely additional expenditure which would not be realised without the development of the MTB trails in 2007.

1.2 Recreation Policy

In 2005, Coillte recognised increasing demands for access to its lands by off-road cyclists and set down its policy for off-road cycling in Healthy Forests, Healthy Nation⁶. The policy states that:

- Cycling is permitted in Coillte forests on designated areas and tracks.
- The policy is to manage cycling for safe and sustained use, in line with best international practice.
- Coillte will seek to provide and manage facilities in cooperation with both statutory and NGO bodies for off-road cycling.
- Coillte expects all cyclists to respect the forest, other users and follow the off-road cycling code

Within the same policy document, the section on General Recreation Policy also provides some context for this strategic work and it states that:

- The company will continue to provide recreation that is environmentally, socially and economically sustainable
- While recognising its role in the rural community, Coillte does not have a primary or lead role in the provision of tourism facilities, but will facilitate such developments within partnership arrangements.
- Coillte sees it's primary recreation

⁶See Link to Coillte Recreation Policy document

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objective as one of delivering maximum benefit to the most users

The policy was formed in the context of Coillte land being used for the activity in an unsanctioned way for many years, growing in size and extent since the 1980's. This in our view will continue to be the case. No other public landowner has a stated position on access to their lands for cycling.

1.3 Coillte's role in off-road cycling trails

Trail provision allows Coillte to manage recreation activities on its land. As with all trails, cycle trails manage the way the public access our lands and experience the outdoors. They allow us to manage use by the public into those areas where we deem suitable and exclude them where not.

Coillte exists under its mandate as a commercial semi-state body with responsibility for the management of the lands and resources vested in it by the state. One of our stated goals is 'attracting people to nature and supporting local communities'. This, together with the extensive landholding and our policy to support recreation development and work in partnership with others, means that off-road cycling will continue to be an important activity for Coillte.

Cycling is an established recreational activity

on the estate. Many thousands of visitors access our lands for this activity and the general growing interest in cycling will further increase numbers over coming years, even if Coillte do not provide further trails.

With over 440,000 ha. of land, Coillte is the single largest landowner and largest provider of outdoor recreation in Ireland. By 2005, the economic evaluation of forest recreation report referenced over 18 million visits per annum to the estate. Since then, off-road cycling has become established as a segment of our overall visitor numbers and visitor monitoring shows that this number is increasing each year.

Coillte have a built up a strong base of knowledge around trail provision for cycling and mountain biking.

Taking the policy position on off-road cycling the approach to managing cycling/ mountain biking on Coillte lands is a three pronged strategy:

- **Provision**
- **Education**
- **Sanction**

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By setting down the location, scope and scale of strategic developments, we can engage with those who have resources to help deliver them, e.g. tourism agencies, local authorities, MTB clubs, etc. For any future trail projects, formal arrangements for capital funding and ongoing management and maintenance must be documented at the outset using a Memorandum of Understanding or similar mechanism. This is to ensure that the burden is not unduly placed on Coillte to resource them during and after development.

2.1 Sustainability

The principles of sustainability will underpin all future trail development. These principles will ensure that trails are designed and built in the **right way, in the right place and for the right people**. There are examples of trail developments (primarily walking trails) which, in the past, may have been funding-led and the rush to development has ignored the site conditions and the long-term appeal of trails to users leading to poor trail conditions, increased maintenance costs and their eventual obsolescence. By their nature, many of Coillte's trails are in remote and wilder landscapes – applying 'built environment' thinking to their development and construction can lead to unacceptable impacts on the landscapes in which they sit.

While ensuring that trails do not negatively impact on commercial forest operations, biodiversity or landscape, it is also important

that forest operations do not cause damage to built trails.

- The sustainability framework for Coillte trails sets down clear criteria to which trails must comply.
- The needs of the landowner and the needs of the trail user must be balanced
- Trail developments must sit comfortably with commercial operations in the forest
- They must not impact negatively on the landscape
- They must provide long-term appeal to users
- There must be a clear demand for the trails. If there is no clearly identified user group for proposed trails, then they should not be developed.

While trails provide the primary method of managing access for the public on Coillte lands, they also have impacts on the way Coillte manage their lands for commercial purposes. However, the trails constructed in recent years have been designed and planned to minimise these impacts and this will continue to be the position for future developments.

2.2 Spatial development plan

The sites identified in this document are those where we will engage with others to consider developments. This approach will allow Coillte to:

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- Work with tourism, local authority, community and development agencies to develop a high-quality trail network with funding streams to support their development and management.
- Manage and control the existing level of unsanctioned trails by engaging with clubs to build trails in the locations and to the standards that Coillte set down.

It details three levels of potential locations – centres of national scale, centres of regional scale and club trails. These are detailed below. A fourth category – community trails – have not had specific locations identified, but a set of criteria to assess site proposals as they arise has been developed.

2.3 Framework for planning, design and construction

Coillte have led the way in recent years in developing high-quality trails for both walking and cycling and have built substantial expertise in the area of sustainable trail planning, design and construction.

As a principle this strategy recommends that all trails in the future will be planned in line with the standards referred to in this document. Trails will be robustly built in line with detailed construction standards and will ideally require only low levels of maintenance to be maintained as high-quality, authentic recreational experiences open to the public.

So, what types of trails will Coillte provide? As stated in our Recreation Policy, our primary recreation objective is delivering maximum benefit to the most users. To this end, we will provide trails that are accessible to the largest segments of users and ensure that such developments lead to sustainable growth in the market for these trails. This will be provided by delivering trails of varying grade and challenge ranging from those suitable for family cyclists to demanding and challenging mountain bike trail systems. The trails will be contour trails and will adhere to best practice as set down by the International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA) guidelines on building within the 'half-rule'⁷.

Coillte will designate two types of areas for cycling, those with designated cycling trails and those with none – the latter will use existing roads, ridelines, tracks, etc.. The status of these two areas are different and there are important distinctions which guide the way they are managed and what they provide for visitors.

2.3.1 Types of trails and trail models

There are essentially two different status of trails, namely **social** and **designed** trails. Each has very different and important maintenance and liability issues for Coillte and a brief understanding of both is needed

⁷More information at IMBA website. The development of contour trails has been proven to ensure greater durability and less maintenance input than fall-line trails. In summary, their gradient does not exceed half the gradient of the slope on which they sit

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before we define the types of trails we will provide.

Social trails are informal trails, tracks, paths, etc... i.e. they have emerged over time, they use existing infrastructure, they are sometimes simply desire-line paths/tracks and are used through local knowledge for recreation and they may have little or no signage or waymarking. An example is the forest road network on Coillte lands – many neighbours/ locals use the road network for their regular walks. Coillte facilitate this use but do not waymark the routes or provide guidance on what is the nature of the route. Those who use them rely on their own knowledge and ability and Coillte have a very low duty of care towards these visitors, compared to those trails that walkers/ cyclists are invited or encouraged to use.

As forest roads and ridelines are primarily a transport infrastructure for timber, we cannot maintain them to a specified standard in a cost-effective way for general recreational activity, especially cycling⁸. Walkers access them on an 'as-you-find-them' basis. Use of these 'trails' by walkers does not impact on Coillte or on others in the way that cyclists impact on other users of the forest.

However when these trails are used for cycling, issues can arise due to bike speeds on steep and even moderate gradients. The use of unsuitable ground for cycling can create damage to 'trails' that were never

designed for such use. As we have set out to provide for *informal* cycling access, we will designate forest areas for general cycling use and we have set clear criteria to allow forest properties to be carefully considered and assessed for their suitability. These areas **will not have waymarked routes** in the forest and will use existing infrastructure only (mainly forest roads and ridelines). These will be called **Forest Cycling Areas** and are detailed later. The entrances at these forests will have some basic information for visitors, outlining the multiple uses of the forest and highlight that cyclists, walkers and other traffic should be aware of each other's presence.

Designed trails are formal constructed trail systems where visitors are encouraged to use trails in a particular way and they are waymarked and graded for their information and use.

Crucially, social and designed trails have two very different levels of duty-of-care from the provider to the visitor with designed trails requiring a greater level of responsibility by a landowner for visitors care. As we provide information on the standard of the route, there is an obligation on us to maintain the route to that standard.

However, designed trails allow Coillte to control visitor access into specific places, which makes them of significant value to Coillte as the trail provider. We know where cyclists will be and can react to interfaces

⁸ Of course, Coillte do maintain those forest road sections that are used at MTB trail centres, but these have clear revenue streams or funding or resources for this maintenance work. They are in effect, part of the formal trail network.

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with operations much more easily. We also maintain designed routes to a set standard ensuring that when we inform visitors about the nature of a trail, this information remains accurate and doesn't present unexpected challenges or hazards to the visitor.

All new trail developments will be **designed** trail systems by their nature – they will be formally planned, designed and purpose-built. We can present clear and accurate information to allow users to select the right trail for their ability and this is how we currently deal with the purpose-built trails we have developed.

Trail centres

For new formal trail systems developed on Coillte lands, the **trail centre model** will be used. This allows for visitor facilities⁹ to be concentrated at one location (trailhead) to create the opportunity for revenue generating opportunities at the trailhead. All waymarked trails will lead out from and return to the trailhead usually in a stacked-loop layout. By adopting this model, it should be possible to create income streams that can assist with the ongoing management and maintenance of trails.

Linear routes

Linear routes will primarily not be developed by Coillte as the company's landholdings are unlikely to allow the development of such

trail networks. However, where joined-up planning with other landowners is carried out, there may be scope for these routes to be developed and they will be assessed on a case-by-case basis. There may be scope here **where appropriate** to convert some **national waymarked ways** on Coillte lands to dual-use trails¹⁰ – this can only be considered where gradients, trail surfaces, sightlines and overall trail aims are appropriate.

Specialist or niche-market trails

Some recent trail developments in Northern Ireland and the UK have concentrated on a perceived demand for specialist features within trails or specialist trail products. This is essentially creating niche products and is responding to a very vocal but tiny percentage of demand in the off-road cycle market.

The emergence of what is being termed 'gravity-focussed' cycling is influencing the demand for more featured off-road trails products – including drop-offs, skinnys, teeter-totters, etc (all challenging features for accomplished mountain bikers).

These features are included in the development of 'bike parks' and these are not seen as infrastructure that Coillte has a primary role to provide. Such developments need a strong commercial focus as they require **substantial and intensive management and maintenance** on an ongoing basis. If such

⁹ Visitor facilities are car-parking, trail information signage and possibly toilets, showers, retail, catering, etc..

¹⁰ This requires some direction from the National Trails Office to progress this area as they have overview of the National Waymarked Ways.

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proposals are received by proven operators, they will be considered in a commercial context only.

'Downhill' is a term which has developed over the past number of years and generate images of out-of-control riders at breakneck speeds hurtling down mountains with substantial impacts on the trails that they ride! It is a discipline that has attracted large numbers of younger riders and can lead to the movement towards extremely challenging features that have no place on Coillte lands. However, Coillte now have trail classifications that detail the gradients, features, widths, etc.. of all trails and there is scope to manage very challenging trails including those perceived as 'downhill' within these classifications, while ensuring appropriate features are located in the appropriate places for the appropriate rider. In the future 'downhill' trails will be accommodated largely within the 50% rule and still have a place on Coillte land.

2.3.2 Trail Classification and Grading

This defines the categories of off-road cycling trails that Coillte will provide or will allow others to provide on their lands. It is based on **National Trails Office standards** in this area and gives an expanded level of detail on trail features, etc. It details the widths, surfaces, gradients, features and user suitability for each category of trail.

The classifications define trail types ranging from family-cycling and multi-use trails (class 1) up to the most challenging 'expert' trails (class 6).

The trail classes are linked to a grading system which gives users clear information to the user. The grading system to be used on Coillte cycle trails was developed in 2007 and this will remain in place.

2.4 Off-Road Cycling Spatial Strategy

One of the main objectives of this strategy is to define potential locations where trails of national and regional scale could (subject to appropriate funding being in place) be developed over the next 10 years. It will also identify locations where Coillte will engage with clubs and others for volunteer-led or community-led trails and set down criteria to designate forest properties for cycling.

Potential trail developments have been categorised by their objectives and their scale. It is recognised that trail developments will range from those of the largest scale with clear tourism spin-offs, right through to those serving local recreational or community needs. These latter trails may not even require new infrastructure to allow off-road cycling to take place, but simply require an informed decision to designate suitable forest properties for cycling.

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There are five categories of trail locations. Their scope and scale and criteria to select suitable sites or to provide a basis for site assessment are described below.

Trail type	Potential grading	Trail Class Range ¹¹
Centres of National Scale	All	2-6
Centres of Regional Scale	All	2-6
Club trails	Moderate to difficult	4-6
Community Trails	Easy	1-2
Forest Cycling Areas	Easy	2

2.5 Criteria for selection of trail locations

Drawing on Coillte's experience in developing Ballyhoura (a centre of national scale) and Derroua and Ballinastoe (regional scale centres) in 2007/2008, coupled with examination of international best practice and the findings from Failte Ireland's market research into MTB in Ireland and the UK¹², criteria were developed to allow potential locations for national scale and regional scale trail centres to be identified.

2.5.1 National scale centres

These are the highest profile trail developments aimed at the largest possible market and are intended to be at the peak of tourism activity for off-road cycling in Ireland. They will be the primary driver for attracting overseas visitors to come to Ireland for mountain biking. They must exceed the offering available in the UK to attract visitors to come here, be of the highest value and quality and be maintained to the highest standards. They must appeal to both domestic and overseas visitors and be stand-alone, short-break destinations in their own right. They ideally will have a high level of visitor facilities, with car-parking, toilet and shower blocks and with potential to add-on café and bike hire or retail facilities.

A of national scale trail centre should consist of at least **80kms** of waymarked trails with at least **4 independent waymarked loops**. Our experience has shown that to provide this, sites must be in excess of **1500ha** in size to ensure that trail development is not over-intensified and impacting adversely on timber management, conservation or other objectives.

A national scale trail centre should consist of not less than **50% purpose-built singletrack** trails providing a wide level of trail challenge ranging from **class 2 to class 6 trails**. The area should generally be of very varied topography with good ground and

¹¹ The trail classifications refer to Coillte's Trail Classification and Grading system and further information is available on request

¹² This research was conducted by Milward Brown Ulster in Summer 2011.

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soil conditions capable of delivering cost-effective trail construction.

To be capable of being promoted as an **international tourism destination**, the sites must be located within a **3 hour drive** of ferry port access to the country¹³ (**180kms** used as the limit of this criterion).

To make the sites as easily accessible as possible to a visitor base, they must be located within **20kms** from a motorway or the national primary road network. As they will drive high visitor numbers into an area, with subsequent high traffic movements, they must have an access point within **1km** of a national or regional road.

To be a stand-alone short-break destination (and thereby encourage visitors to overnight in the area), the site should be a minimum of **90kms** from the nearest other of national scale.

The criteria for selecting sites for **national scale** trail centres are:

Criterion	Metric
Length of trail	> 80kms
Loops	4+
Singletrack	> 50%
Site size	> 1500ha
Location	< 180kms from ferry port

Criterion	Metric
Road access	< 20kms from M and N primary roads
Exclusion zones	> 90 kms from another national scale centre
Other	Must be within 1km of N or R road
Trail class range	2 to 6

2.5.2 Centres of regional scale

These developments will create a high value regional recreation resource, which is also part of a national tourism product. The developments will primarily be day-visit destinations for domestic markets although international visitors should be encouraged as part of a larger package.

The developments can, when combined with other facilities, be a short-break destination for both domestic and international markets. The development can also form part of a larger 'all Ireland' longer term destination. They are smaller in scale than centres of national scale and visitor facilities will be basic provision only.

A regional scale trail centre should consist of between **20kms to 30kms** of waymarked trails and must consist of not less than **50% purpose-built singletrack** with a minimum of **2 independent waymarked loops**. To provide this, sites must be in excess of **500ha**

¹³ This was a clear requirement from UK riders, identified in Failte Ireland research, who are the largest potential external visitor base for national trail centres here.

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in size to ensure that trail development is not over-intensified and impacting adversely on timber management, conservation or other objectives.

The development should be associated with basic visitor facilities e.g. parking and toilets and have the possibility to support add-on developments such as bike hire and provision of light refreshments.

Again, the area should generally be of varied topography with good ground and soil conditions capable of delivering cost-effective trail construction. To provide a wide level of trail challenge, they may contain trails ranging from class **2 to class 6**.

As it is primarily a day-visit destination for the domestic market, it must ensure that it provides the maximum benefit to the largest possible number of visitors within a reasonable distance from their locations. To do this, it must be located within a **40km** radius of population bases greater than **15,000 people**.

To make the sites as easily accessible as possible to a localised population base, they must be located within **10kms** from a motorway or the national road network. As they will send high visitor numbers into an area, with subsequent increased traffic movements, they must have an access point within **1km** of a national or regional road.

To encourage good spatial distribution, a regional scale centre should not be located within **40km** of another centre of regional or national scale.

The criteria for selecting sites for **regional scale** trail centres are:

Criterion	Metric
Length of trail	20 to 30kms
Loops	2+
Singletrack	> 50%
Site size	> 500ha
Location	< 40kms from 15,000 population
Road access	< 10kms from all M and N roads
Exclusion zones	> 40 kms from another national scale or regional scale centre
Other	Must be within 1km of N or R road
Note:	In Dublin/Wicklow area, a number of regional scale sites may be located within 40km exclusion zone ¹⁴
Trail class range	2 to 6

2.5.3 Club Trails

These trail locations are areas where

¹⁴Two trail centres currently exist at Ballinastoe and Ticknock. It is envisaged that to cater for demand and to respond to the extent of current off-road cycling activity in this area, up to three other sites may be developed. These will be marketed as a National centre, creating a destination in their own right.

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mountain biking is actively taking place in the forest by clubs. They have been identified by Cycling Ireland where some level of user-built trails have been constructed, or where local clubs actively use the forests for their activities or events. These areas may require intensive management in the early phase to ensure that the working arrangements between clubs and Coillte are detailed and understood. They will also require clubs to undertake some basic training on trail design and construction techniques.

In **selected** forest properties, Coillte and the clubs can engage and agree volunteer trail-building where they are identified as priority sites. The clubs with whom Coillte will engage here will be properly constituted and will be affiliated to Cycling Ireland. Note that the identification of a site as a *potential* location for club trails should not be interpreted as authorisation for the activity at that forest. It simply indicates that it is a site where discussions between local clubs and Coillte can take place to explore the options for volunteer-led trail building.

On agreed sites, the arrangements for volunteer work undertaken by the club will be set out in a Memorandum of Understanding and the work will be licensed by Coillte. Cycling Ireland's insurance policy will carry sufficient cover and indemnity for the duration of the work and when complete, Coillte will take the trails into their public liability insurance cover. The same standards

apply to club trails as to others and when work is completed, they will be inspected and monitored.

The metrics for **club** trails are:

Criterion	Metric
Length of trail	Up to 20kms
Loops	2+
Singletrack	> 80%
Site size	> 250ha
Location	Selected forest properties – see list
Road access	Must have clear public road access to forest property
Trail class range	4 to 6

2.5.4 Community Trails

Community trails will cover those areas where a local development company, community group or local authority may wish to work with Coillte to develop **easy-grade or family cycle trails**. They will be relatively short trails, aimed to provide for local and community recreation. They are not intended to be tourism assets per se, but will of course add to the offering for visitors to a locality. They must be associated with suitable car-parking at the forest property. They are not to be interpreted as merely waymarking existing forest roads or ridelines for cycling – they will involve development of suitable

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trail sections to ensure a high standard of infrastructure is installed in accordance with the standards referred to above.

As part of Coillte's continued improvement of its forest parks, family cycle trails will be developed where the parks are deemed suitable and where resources for their development are identified. These come within the category of **community** trails.

Community trails should be an important local recreational resource and **will cover trail classes 1 and 2 only**. They will not exceed 10kms in total length, but they will have a very high proportion of purpose-built trail as required by trail class 1 and class 2 standards – this is a necessity to meet the standards for these classifications. They will not consist of more than 2 waymarked loops.

Sites must be in excess of 250ha in size to ensure that trail development is not over-intensified and impacting adversely on timber management, conservation and other forest management objectives

Sites must be reasonably accessible from the motorway and national scale road network and must be easily reached from moderate sized urban centres i.e. within 10kms of populations centres in excess of 10,000 people.

For these trails to be located in appropriate landscapes, **topography must be relatively**

flat – gradients for class 1 and 2 trails do not exceed an average of 5%, which mean that hillsides, upland or mountainous areas are unsuited to these developments. Again, ground conditions must allow for cost-effective trail development.

The criteria for selecting sites for **community** trail sites are:

Criterion	Metric
Length of trail	Up to 10kms
Loops	2+
Singletrack	> 80%
Site size	> 250ha
Location	< 10kms from 10,000 population
Road access	Must be within 1km of national or regional road
Exclusion zones	> 40 kms from other Community trail
Trail class range	1 to 2

Note that potential locations for community trails are not identified in this strategy. The site selection criteria will be applied on a case-by-case basis, either proactively by Coillte or in response to a proposal from an external group. A decision on the suitability of any site will be determined by Coillte and sites must meet the criteria detailed above.

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2.5.5 Forest Cycling Areas

Leaving aside the development of new trails or upgrading existing trails, it is seen that there is scope to designate some forest areas to cater for demand for areas away from vehicle traffic (i.e. public roads) for cycling. These will be informal but designated areas for cycling and there will be **no waymarked routes** and **no trail construction** in these forests¹⁵. They will not be exclusively used for cycling; rather that cycling will be just another recreational use of that forest.

These areas will involve a careful assessment of a forest property to ascertain its suitability for cycling using existing infrastructure only. Should it be designated, a sign at the point-of-entry to the forest will welcome cyclists, explain the Forest Cycling Code, make visitors aware of any hazards on site, make visitors aware of the responsibility for their own safety in the forest and note that they are sharing the use of the forest with others. Cyclists will be expected to use their local knowledge or rely on their own ability in the outdoors to navigate their way.

A set of criteria to assess the suitability of a forest property for cycling is detailed here:

- The forest should not be a high-use recreational forest already under pressure from many other recreational groups
- Forests with many developed looped or long-distance walks should not

be considered. Similarly, where arrangements exist with groups to maintain the forest or other trails within the forest, consideration must be given to these in the first instance.

- The topography should be relatively gentle rather than challenging – forest cycling areas are intended to provide for cyclists with lower levels of experience in the outdoors.
- Forests with forecasted high levels of operations over the ten year period following the proposal should not be considered.
- Consider likely ways that cyclists could use the forest and the likely routes they would take. Descents on forest roads should be avoided but where unavoidable, should be mitigated by long clear sightlines and through use of warning signage - cyclists cautioned to control their speed, etc.... Any walking trails within the forest that do not allow for safe dual-use should be marked for walking use only.

Safety information should be provided at points-of-entry to these forests and give guidance on safe use of the forest for cycling (give way to walkers, control speeds on forest roads, be aware of forest operations and adhere to notifications on-site, etc) and inform cyclists that roads/ racks may be very rough, and so on.

Proposals for sites to be designated as Forest Cycling Areas will be assessed by

¹⁵The reader is referred to the section on social 'trails' and the increased burden of maintenance attaching to their use for cycling.

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the Recreation Unit in Coillte.

2.6 Selecting locations for trails

2.6.1 Sites for national and regional scale trails

The following methodology was used to identify potential locations for centres of national and regional scale. There were 3 steps in the methodology:

Step 1

The criteria detailed in 2.5 above were used to create layers within Coillte's Geographic Information System (GIS). Layers of information containing forest property boundaries and sizes, the national road network, ferry port access points, towns, cities, buffers around existing sites, etc were created during the first step. The GIS was then queried to generate a list of properties which reached or exceeded all of the set criteria, so e.g. for a national scale trail centre, any site that was greater than 1500ha, that lay within the 180km zone from ferry access point, was within 20kms from a of national scale primary road or motorway, etc was included in the first trawl and added to a list of sites.

Step 2

The GIS was again queried to verify and select the properties identified at step 1, or

to remove them from the list depending on a number of factors.

Properties were de-listed where they were found to:

- Be disjointed, fragmented or dispersed e.g. a 1500ha block may be comprised of many small properties in very close proximity but separated from each other by public roads or private land-holdings and therefore be unusable as a trail centre
- Have poor soil structures such as blanket or raised peats. These would not allow for cost-effective trail development.
- Be long-term leased land and therefore not available for recreational development.
- Have poor topography (essentially too flat or not enough gradient to provide for high quality trails of varying challenge)

Step 3

Preferred locations were then selected from the list generated at Step 2 and are detailed below. The tables below list the sites selected using the GIS criteria.

NB: The potential locations listed below are those that are available for site assessment to examine their feasibility for trail centre development. Coillte will not enter into discussions on proposals for national scale or regional scale trails on other sites which are not listed below.

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Table 1 - Potential centres of national scale

No.	County	Forest	General name/ area	Forest property names (some)
1	Limerick / Cork	LK08	Ballyhoura MTB ¹⁶	Greenwood, Garrane, others
2	Dublin / Wicklow	Various	Dublin / Wicklow Mountains ¹⁷	Ticknock, Ballinastoe MTB, Tibbradden, Cruagh, others
3	Offaly / Laois	Various, OY08	Slieve Blooms	Glenregan, Baunreagh, others
4	Sligo	SO04	Ox Mountains (eastern end)	Glen Wood, Rathosey, Seevness, Gortakeeran

Table 2 - Potential centres of regional scale

No.	County	Forest	General name/ area
1	Clare	CE06	Cratloe Forest
2	Donegal	DL10	Corravaddy / Mongorry Forest
3	Galway	GY24	Derroua MTB ¹⁸
4	Kerry	KY14	Rossacroe
5	Louth	LH01	Ravensdale
6	Waterford	WD05	Glendalligan
7	Wexford	WX08	Forth Mountain

¹⁶ Ballyhoura MTB is the largest trail centre in Ireland and was opened in 2008.

¹⁷ The Dublin/ Wicklow National Trail Centre will reach critical mass through the networking of a series of regional trails in the area. There are already two regional scale trails in the Dublin/Wicklow area – Ticknock and Ballinastoe.

¹⁸ Derroua MTB is an existing trail network near Oughterard.

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2.6.2 Sites for club trails

These sites are selected locations from a list compiled by Cycling Ireland and Coillte identifying where club activity is actively taking place. They contain a moderate to high level of user-built trails or they are regularly active for mountain biking. They may be locations where events are licensed from time to time, but also show continued high levels of activity outside of event times.

Table 3 - Club trails – priority locations

No.	County	Forest property names (some)
1	Clare	Ballycuggaran
2	Cork	Clashnacrona
3	Cork	Tracton
4	Dublin	Carrickgollogan
5	Dublin	Ticknock
6	Dublin	Ballyedmonduff
7	Galway	Derroua
8	Galway	Rosscahill
9	Laois	Cullahill Mountain
10	Laois	Fossy
11	Laois	Cullenagh
12	Mayo	Knockranny
13	Westmeath	Tober
14	Wexford	Bree Hill
15	Wexford	Deerpark / Kilbrannish
16	Wicklow	Carrick Mountain
17	Wicklow	Cloon Upper
18	Wicklow	Deerpark / Djouce
19	Wicklow	Ballinastoe

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NB: This list does not show every forest where trail building activity may be taking place. It identifies those which are a priority to define working arrangements to manage the activities in a more formal way.

They should not be taken to indicate that their use is now authorised. They are those sites where discussions between local clubs and Coillte may take place.

This list is subject to review as necessary to manage club activities.

Any club wishing to work with Coillte to develop their own trails must be formally attached to Cycling Ireland and covered by insurance arrangements agreed between Coillte and Cycling Ireland.

2.6.3 Sites for Community Trails

Coillte have set out above clear criteria to assess sites for their suitability for community trails. While a list of sites in this category has not been developed, proposals where suitable partners wish to engage with Coillte to deliver these trails will be examined as they arise.

2.6.4 Sites for Forest Cycling Areas

Forest Cycling Areas will be designated where Coillte wish to extend use of a forest to cyclists or where a clear demand and need is identified.

3. EDUCATION

3.1 Responsible use of the forest

Coillte welcomes responsible users. Coillte now manage a considerable number of recreational activities on forest lands and expect that those pursuing their legitimate interests will also take care not to negatively impact on others, forest operations or the environment. There have been many issues of conflict between cyclists and walkers on the estate and this can only be managed to a certain point by Coillte as the landowner. Where trails are clearly marked for single-use, dual-use or multi-use, it is expected that directions of the landowner are respected and that one user group does not impinge on another's enjoyment of a trail or area. We do expect that when off-road cyclists access the forests for their activity that they respect the fact that we cannot provide for their activity at all locations and that we expect them only to access those areas we have designated for cycling. This is in line with the first principle of Leave No Trace and the IMBA rules of the trail which are endorsed by Leave No Trace.

3.2 Leave No Trace and the IMBA¹⁹ Rules of the Trail

The fundamental message that we advocate and promote to guide responsible use of the forest estate is the Leave No Trace message. The principles of LNT are:

1. Plan Ahead and Prepare
2. Be Considerate of Others

3. Respect Farm Animals and Wildlife
4. Travel and Camp on Durable Ground
5. Leave What You Find
6. Dispose of Waste Properly
7. Minimise the Effects of Fire

IMBA developed the "Rules of the Trail" to promote responsible and courteous conduct on cycle trails. These guidelines for trail behaviour are recognised around the world and just about every issue created by conflicts between riders and landowners relates in some way to one of these principles. Coillte and Cycling Ireland have agreed the **IMBA** rules of the trail to guide users on best practice in this area. They are:

1. Ride Open Trails
2. Leave No Trace
3. Control Your Bicycle
4. Yield Appropriately
5. Never Scare Animals
6. Plan Ahead

3.3 Trail building

Under the strategy set out in this document, we want to engage with those who can work with us where we have identified locations suitable for development and or use. Furthermore all new trail construction carried out by Coillte or by others on Coillte land must comply with the best environmental practice to limit impact on the environment. To facilitate club-built trails, Coillte will engage with volunteer

¹⁹ IMBA is the international Mountain Bicycling Association.

3. EDUCATION

clubs to improve their knowledge of trail construction and appropriate use.

We wish to see the mountain bike community engage with us in advocacy to promote responsible, appropriate and safe use of the resource. Where others wish to continue to disregard our clear directions, we will not accommodate them on our lands and will take appropriate actions to limit their use.

At sites designated for cycling, we will give our trail users clear, accurate and up-to-date information about our trails to allow them to make an informed decision about their suitability for their needs. We will inform cyclists about safe use of bikes on the estate and explain how bike use can impact on other forest users.

The agreed 'Rules of the Trail' – a code for best practice for riders - to support the Leave No Trace message which has been agreed between Coillte and Cycling Ireland will be promoted on all cycling sites and in all literature and online information available to the public.

4. USE OF COILLTE LANDS AND SANCTIONS

4.1 Licences for events

Coillte provides permits to Cycling Ireland affiliated clubs and others from time-to-time to allow events to take place on the formal cycle trail network and in other areas. This will continue to be the case for events as Coillte needs to manage operations in conjunction with events ensuring no conflicts arise. This system has worked well to date and is proposed to be continued. A new application system for recreational permits is now available on the Coillte Outdoors website.

However, Coillte retain the right not to permit events organised by clubs whose members choose to ignore directions set down by Coillte on use of designated areas only for cycling or who have demonstrated a lack of respect for the resource made available to them or who have not adhered to the conditions of previous permits issued.

4.2 Sanction

Byelaws were introduced in 2009 under the 1989 Forestry Act to govern use of the lands and it prohibited certain activities. The byelaws were introduced as a management tool to help with reducing the level of safety issues from the inappropriate use of trails and roads, to manage conflict between different visitor groups to Coillte lands and to control unauthorised activities that can cause nuisance, environmental damage

or be a source of risk to other users and employees.

This byelaw is now in place on a substantial part of the estate and defines that cycling is not allowed except in areas and on routes designated for cycling. In the case of cycling, despite signage explaining the existence of the byelaws being erected at entrances to forests not designated for cycling use, there continues to be widespread abuse of these areas by cyclists. Enforcement of the provisions of the byelaw is the responsibility of the Gardaí. To date, Coillte forest managers have refrained from involving the Gardaí except where a criminal act or serious infringement of the bylaw has taken place, e.g. criminal damage to barriers, dumping, break-ins to cars parked on the lands, etc..

The use of byelaws to restrict the act of using a bicycle on a part of the lands deemed unsuitable is just one part of a number of measures to manage and encourage responsible behaviour. The byelaw (as it relates to cycling) will remain in place and the issues highlighted will be addressed through this strategy.

Failure by cyclists and others to comply with officially posted notices or instructions will result in removal of permissions and permits.

4. USE OF COILLTE LANDS AND SANCTIONS

4.3 Advocacy and responsible use

The role for clubs and organisations

Sanction is the last and least favoured of the approaches to managing off-road cycling on Coillte lands. Coillte sees the opportunity to promote and develop cycling through the provision of trails and education as the most proactive and positive approach to managing this important issue. Coillte would like to see the role of the national and club based mountain bike organisations develop one of advocacy for responsible use geared to enhance and protect the resource into the future.

5. DEVELOPING PROJECTS

5.1 Trail Planning and Design Methodology

To ensure that trails are built within the sustainability framework and to the standards set down, a protocol for planning and designing trails is required.

Each trail proposal which is to be advanced for development will require a clear process of higher level and subsequently detailed trail design. This is the process used to date for the existing trail centres and has served well in ensuring that trails were built in accordance with clear standards and to ensure that the type of trails that were planned were delivered correctly. The steps are to define the scope and scale of the project and give very clear parameters for the subsequent site design detail.

5.2 Site assessment, concept plan and funding

This stage is a high level plan which allows for consultation at appropriate stages with potential funders, statutory and NGO organisations as required. This strategy is primarily a spatial development plan and it should be noted that Coillte will only advance developments in the locations identified when resources for both capital and current expenditure have been identified or secured with appropriate funders.

5.3 Trail corridor evaluation

This step lays out potential routes for trail development and allows for final adjustments after consultation with the key stakeholders. Once agreed, the trail corridors are set down and fixed.

5.4 Trail construction plans and specifications

This is the micro-design stage – the main output is a flagged line on the ground and accurate and clear specifications to allow trails to be constructed.

5.5 Branding Standards and Trail Construction Guidelines

The trail construction guidelines and standards set the benchmark for all future trail construction on Coillte land. They are used in trail construction projects in conjunction with site specific trail specifications to define how a trail is constructed. They are not detailed in this document, however any trail constructed on Coillte lands must meet these standards to reach safety and environmental requirements.

Coillte manages its recreation infrastructure as part of its core value of *attracting people to nature and supporting local communities*. As such it is essential that **Coillte's central role in delivering on this value is widely recognised**.

5. DEVELOPING PROJECTS

Coillte has developed a strong brand presence through both its CoillteOutdoors and Coillte brands and it is Coillte policy that any development on Coillte lands for recreation purposes must be branded in accordance with these branding guidelines.

APPENDIX 1 – PROJECT GROUP MEMBERS

The steering group for this strategic work included representation from Failte Ireland, the National Trails Office, Cycling Ireland and the Rural Recreation Section of the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, to whom Coillte express their sincere gratitude for their insight and assistance in developing this strategy.

Strategy Group Members

Daithi de Forge, Coillte (project manager, national technical trail adviser)

John Galvin, Coillte (manager of Ballyhoura MTB centre)

Doug Corrie, National Trails Office

Des Moore, Rural Recreation Section, Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government

Sean Herlihy, Off-Road Commission, Cycling Ireland

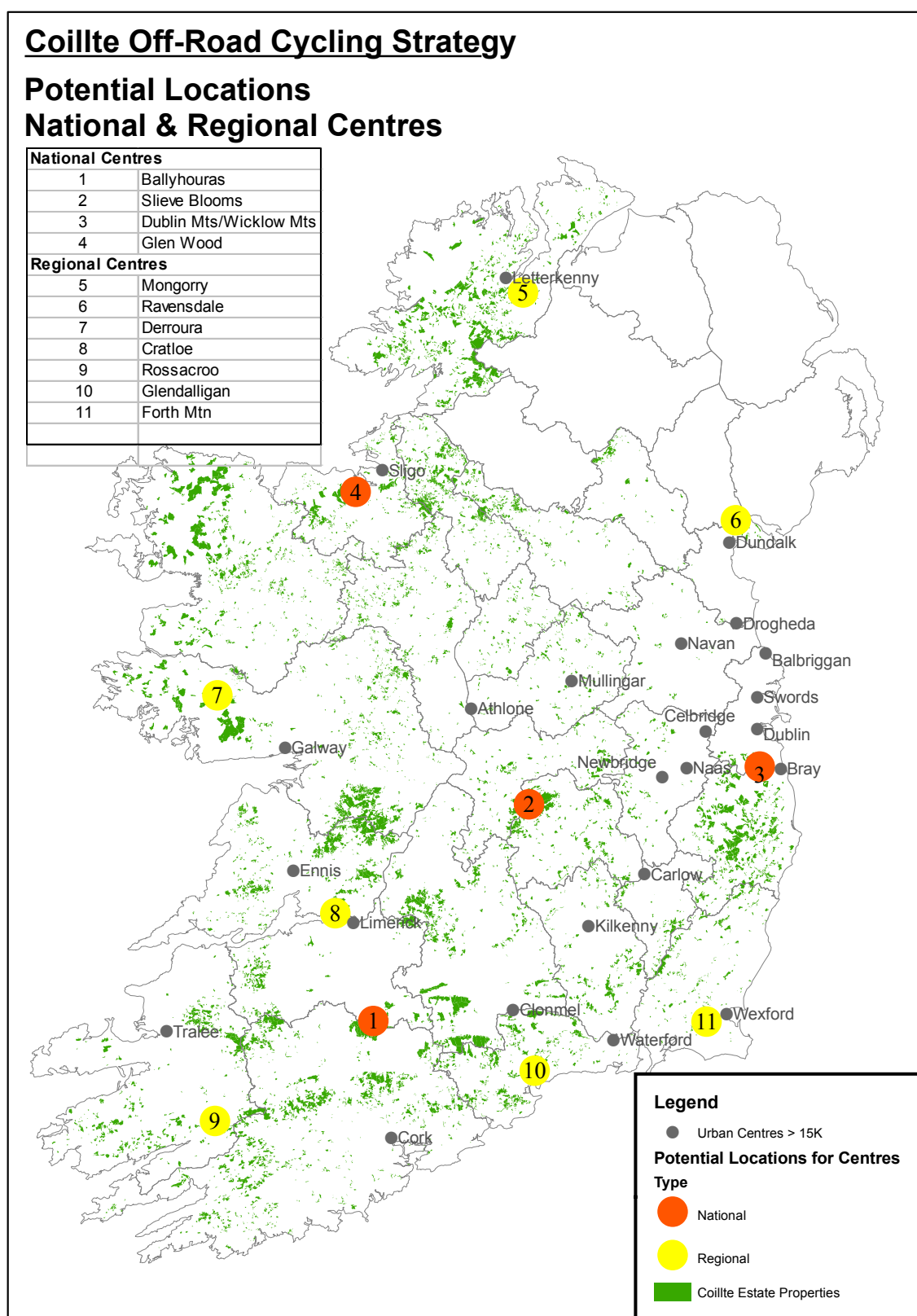
Ciara Scully, Failte Ireland

Bill Murphy, Coillte (project owner)

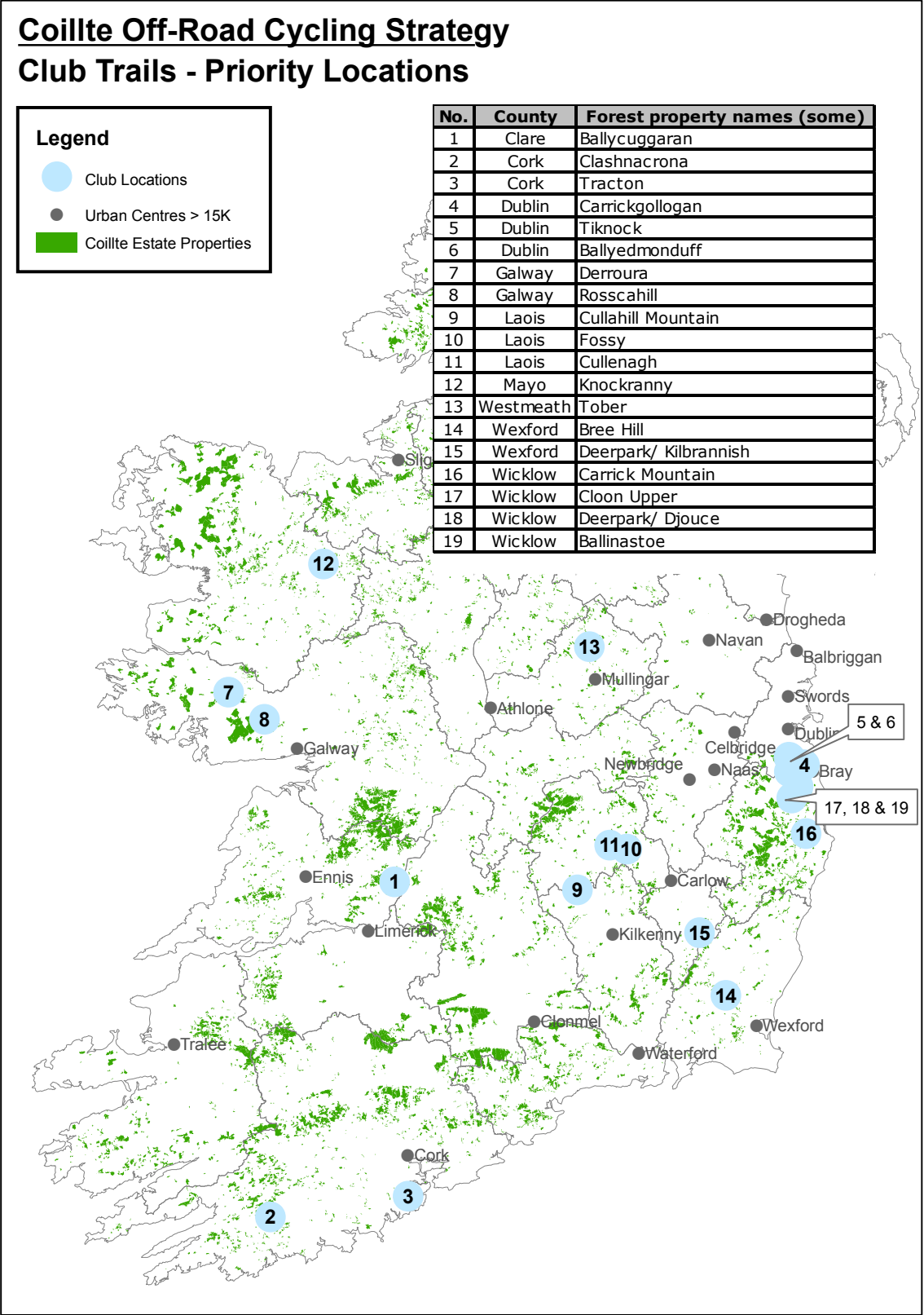
Technical consultant

Dafydd Davis, TrailsWales (professional trail planner and designer)

APPENDIX 2 - MAP OF POTENTIAL NATIONAL AND REGIONAL TRAILS



APPENDIX 2 - MAP OF POTENTIAL CLUB TRAILS



Coillte Off-Road Cycle Strategy

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