

LEADER

Community-Led Local Development



National Rural Network

LEADER 2014-2020 (EXTENDED TO 2022) NRN CASE STUDY

Project name: International Appalachian Trail (IAT) Ulster Ireland

Date: March 2020 – September 2022

Local Action Groups:

- Donegal Local Development CLG
(Lead partner in Republic of Ireland)
- Derry and Strabane Rural Partnership
(Lead partner in Northern Ireland)
- Causeway Coast and Glens LAG
- Fermanagh and Omagh LAG
- Mid-Ulster Rural Development Partnership
- Mid and East Antrim LAG

Further information:

[Website](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Instagram](#)

International Appalachian Trail (IAT) Ulster Ireland



Summary

Launched in 2013, the International Appalachian Trail (IAT) Ulster Ireland is a 279-mile / 449-kilometre coast-to-coast cross-border walking trail. Beginning at Slieve League in Co. Donegal, the trail traverses four counties and finishes at the port of Larne in Co. Antrim. Along the route, walkers can experience breath-taking scenery, historic landmarks, diverse culture and heritage sites.

In 2016, led by Donegal Local Development CLG in the Republic of Ireland, and Derry and Strabane Rural Partnership in Northern Ireland, six Local Action Groups (LAGs) came together to determine whether there would be sufficient interest in taking the IAT forward as a cooperation project and to assess its potential economic and community benefit to each of the areas involved. Based on the findings of an Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland (ORNI) scoping study, they decided to proceed. Funding received under the Rural Development Programme has had a transformational impact.

Among the benefits has been the establishment of an international standard high quality walking experience; increased uniformity across the route with regard to trail infrastructure, branding and marketing; and the creation of a strong working relationship between the partner LAGs involved.



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Context

The Ulster Ireland chapter of the IAT was formally launched in August 2013, four years after Donegal Local Development CLG had begun advocating for, and promoting the idea of bringing the route to Ireland in 2009. This is one of an expanding number of chapters which comprise the IAT family and which include among others Maine in the US, Quebec in Canada, Iceland, England, Scotland, Wales, The Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, France, Spain and Morocco. The remnants of what is known as the Caledonian – Appalachian Oregon is at the core of the IAT narrative and provides a focus for member chapters to celebrate a shared heritage. All chapters also share a common mission which is to establish a network of walking trails that extend beyond borders to all geographic regions. In addition to connecting people and places, the goal is to promote natural and cultural heritage, health and fitness, environmental stewardship, fellowship and understanding, cross-border cooperation, and rural economic development through eco and geo tourism.

The IAT Ulster Ireland chapter comprises local authorities, public sector bodies, charities and voluntary sector organisations in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The common denominator for each of the group members is an interest in walking. The trail starts at the iconic Slieve League and passes through the Bluestack Mountains in Co. Donegal before crossing the border into Northern Ireland. Here the route picks up the Ulster Way where it takes in the landscapes of Tyrone and the Sperrins, passes onto the Giant's Causeway and the north Antrim coastline before traversing the Glens of Antrim and finishing at the port of Larne.



The route of the IAT - Source: IAT Ulster Ireland

In 2016, led by Donegal Local Development CLG in the Republic of Ireland, and Derry and Strabane Rural Partnership in Northern Ireland, six partner LAGs came together to determine whether there would be sufficient interest in taking the IAT forward as a cooperation project. Following an initial scoping study, which examined the merit and potential of a full-scale capital cooperation project that would be mutually beneficial to each of the LAG areas, a decision was taken to proceed. LEADER funding was sought to develop and improve the physical infrastructure along the IAT with a significant investment directed towards marketing the route.

This project was part funded under Priority 6 (LEADER) of the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and the European Union. The total funding secured in Northern Ireland Council areas is £1,306,000. Participant Councils – Derry City & Strabane District Council, Fermanagh & Omagh District Council, Mid Ulster District Council, Causeway Coast & Glens

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Borough Council and Mid & East Antrim Borough Council contributed £340,000 of the total project costs as well as significant support to wider project delivery. The remaining £966,000 is secured through the NI Rural Development Programme.

In the Republic of Ireland, the project is funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD), delivered by Donegal Local Development CLG, on behalf of Donegal Local Community Development Committee in partnership with Donegal County Council through grant aid received under The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development in Ireland 2014–2020. The total funding secured in Co. Donegal of €214,735.83 includes a LEADER grant of €161,051.87 and additional match funding from Donegal County Council and the Rural Recreation Programme.



Causeway Coast, Co. Antrim - Source: IAT Ulster Ireland

“The project aims to connect Donegal to the Derry City and Strabane District as well as other Local Action Groups (LAGs) throughout Northern Ireland by improving a trail that will have both local and international appeal. This will help stimulate local economies by creating additional tourist amenities. It will also add value to the continuous work being carried out under the Rural Recreational Programme and the Walks Scheme in Donegal” *Frank Kelly, Formerly of Donegal Local Development CLG*

“We started working to get the IAT to Ireland in 2009 and launched the route on the ground in 2013. I am delighted that we now have the funding to enhance the user experience on our section of this incredibly diverse international trail” *Inga Bock, RRO, Donegal Local Development CLG*



Slieve League, Co. Donegal - Source: IAT Ulster Ireland

Objectives

- Deliver a cross-border and cross LAG cooperation project to enhance the Ulster Ireland section of the IAT and provide a quality and consistent walking experience across the entire route;
- Enhance the visitor experience along the IAT through the installation of new interpretive panels and trail furniture,

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and the refurbishment and upgrade of visitor car parks/amenity sites;

- Increase the profile, identity and brand awareness of the IAT – locally, nationally and in the U.S, through a comprehensive programme of marketing;
- Increase economic value of the IAT route to the local and national tourism sector;
- Achieve uniformity in terms of branding and marketing across the route;
- Promote natural and cultural heritage;
- Promote health and well-being through walking.

Derry and Strabane Rural Partnership Strategy, the animation and maximisation of opportunities from the IAT began to emerge as a realistic and feasible project.

Following this, a number of meetings were held between Derry and Strabane Rural Partnership and a range of stakeholders in Co. Donegal, aimed at developing a realistic, achievable, and mutually beneficial project, in the area of tourism and recreation, with a specific link to the IAT.

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Beginning in April 2016, Derry and Strabane Rural Partnership hosted monthly networking meetings to progress discussions on the IAT with officers and board members from the partner LAGs through which the route traverses. These meetings enabled the group to discuss the potential of the project to bring economic and community benefit to each of the Council areas. The partner LAGs agreed to part-fund a scoping study into the feasibility and viability of the project.

During the initial Rural Development Programme project scoping phase, Derry and Strabane Rural Partnership was nominated lead partner in Northern Ireland for the IAT Ulster Ireland Cooperation by partner LAGs. Among the activity undertaken by them included:

- managing a best practice visit to Scotland;
- procuring the delivery of a project scoping study;
- procuring the delivery of a design / branding toolkit;
- procuring the delivery of a programme of marketing activity; and
- procuring the delivery of the design and artwork of interpretive panels.

Activity undertaken by Derry and Strabane Rural Partnership was in close consultation with partner

Activities

Donegal Local Development CLG began advocating for, and promoting the idea of bringing the Ulster Ireland chapter of the IAT route to Ireland back in 2009. When the route was formally launched in August 2013, they set about approaching LAG partners in Northern Ireland about the potential of establishing a LEADER Cooperation cross-border project to enhance the route.

At this time in Northern Ireland, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) considered Cooperation Actions to be a priority activity for the 2014-2020 Rural Development Programme, with a particular emphasis on cross-border projects, and on the development of opportunities afforded by unique landscape or natural resources crossing the boundaries of two or more LAG areas. Following a consultation period which considered potential projects to be included in the

LAGs, Councils and an IAT Steering Group via meetings and workshops.

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The formal need for the project, works and investment was demonstrated initially within a detailed scoping study undertaken by Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland (ORNI) between May and September 2017. This included detailed analysis of the current status of the wider IAT Ulster Ireland route, focusing on the individual sections within each of the Council areas. This report provided a number of recommendations for enhancement of the trail.

Each of the partner LAGs reviewed the development needs and capital works requirements for their respective areas as identified within the ORNI study, and in partnership with Councils and Donegal Local Development CLG, prioritised key actions for delivery. Each partner then submitted an application for funding to the Rural Development Programme Cooperation Scheme, as well as submitting a budget - sharing costs for a wider programme of marketing activity.

In May 2018, Park Hood Landscape Architects were commissioned via a competitive tender process to deliver a design / branding toolkit for all wayfinding / marking and interpretive signage along the full route to ensure a consistency of approach in the procurement and installation of trail infrastructure.



Interpretive signage on the IAT - Source: IAT Ulster Ireland

ORNI was also commissioned to deliver a programme of local, national and international (U.S) marketing activity. A temporary marketing officer was appointed to facilitate communication between ORNI and the six partner LAGs. In addition, two marketing project working groups were set up incorporating staff from ORNI, partner LAGs, partner Councils, and the temporary marketing officer. LAGs and Councils made available local knowledge on their section of the trail so that local places of interest could be highlighted on trail literature.



The IAT Ulster Ireland website was launched at the end of 2021 - Source: IAT Ulster Ireland

“The project provided a unique opportunity to engage in a strategic joint marketing initiative with each of the partner LAGs to develop the IAT brand”
Eamon Gallogly, Mid-Ulster Rural Development Partnership

Results

The establishment of this cooperation between the six partner LAGs involved has resulted in the development of an international standard high quality walking experience connecting four counties and six district Council areas north and south of the border. Physical enhancements made to the IAT Ulster Ireland supported by LEADER funding such as new way marking, trail re-routing, additional trail infrastructure and furniture, branded signage, art and sculptures,

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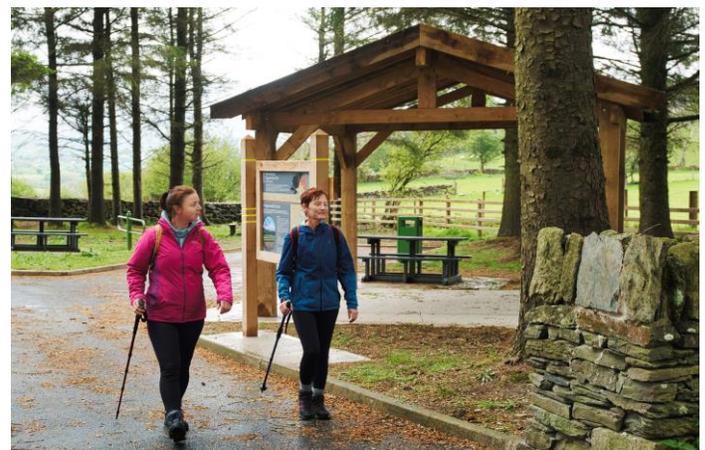
path developments and amenity improvements along the route have not only served to improve walker safety and navigation on the trail but have also helped to showcase the region’s culture, history and heritage.

“The significant financial support received by the International Appalachian Trail Ulster Ireland from the Rural Development Programme has had a transformational impact on what was an embryonic initiative, launched formally in 2013. The end product is a high quality long distance walking trail, framed within stunning landscapes, enriched by increasing the profile of local culture, history and heritage and supported by critical infrastructure and visitor services. The International Appalachian Trail Ulster Ireland now constitutes an international standard visitor walking experience which fits with Tourism NI’s Embrace A Giant Spirit. It will drive growth within the region’s tourism sector by increasing visitor footfall while contributing to connecting people and places, promoting natural and cultural heritage, health and fitness, environmental stewardship, fellowship and understanding, and cross-border cooperation” Philip McShane, Rural Tourism Officer, Derry City & Strabane District Council



The IAT Ulster Ireland framed within stunning landscapes - Source: IAT Ulster Ireland

The IAT has capitalised on, and connected trails already in place along the route such as the Bluestack Way and the Ulster Way and links up existing infrastructure within the vicinity of the IAT.



A new shelter at Barnes, Co. Tyrone - Source: IAT Ulster Ireland





“This project aims to make trails that already existed even better” *Coleen McBrien, Fermanagh and Omagh LAG*

The uniformity in terms of branding rolled out across the IAT has increased public awareness and recognition of the route for walkers and visitors alike.



Branding and design of signage is consistent throughout the IAT - Source: IAT Ulster Ireland

“Causeway Coast and Glens Local Action Group (LAG) in partnership with LAG groups from other council areas have worked together to develop and promote this renowned walking trail. Their efforts have resulted in significant improvements including updated information panels and improved facilities which will enhance the experience of our visitors who come here to enjoy our outdoor spaces and breathtaking scenery... I have no doubt it will encourage more walkers and outdoor enthusiasts to explore our part of this fantastic trail which enjoys global recognition” *Councillor Richard Holmes, Mayor, Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council*

In late 2021, LEADER funding supported the creation and launch of the IAT Ulster Ireland website. The website is a ‘one-stop shop’ for anybody interested in walking the trail. It provides up-to-date information on the IAT and features a number of short and longer walks. A range of images can be accessed in the gallery section of the website.



The new IAT Ulster Ireland website and capital work development were celebrated at a national launch event in Co. Tyrone in late 2021 - Source IAT Ulster Ireland

The provision and delivery of key tools from the outset of the cooperation project will ensure the future sustainability, development and growth of the initiative. There is clarity around the design and branding throughout the IAT, as well as the marketing programme moving forward, while findings from the





initial ORNI scoping study have identified additional medium to long term objectives that can be worked towards by the partner LAGs, Councils, and the Ulster Ireland chapter of the IAT.

“An added benefit is that ORNI, as part of their work on the IAT, have asked for spin off routes near to the IAT, in neighbouring areas... This will bring walkers on the IAT into nearby towns and villages, thereby increasing footfall and benefitting the local economy and potentially accommodation providers” Stephen Catherwood, Mid and East Antrim LAG

Finally, work undertaken by the various partner LAGs involved in this cooperation over the last number of years has led to the consolidation of the IAT Ulster Ireland partnership at a strategic level. Moreover, at an operational level, there has been substantial growth in the number of new entrants, facilitators and champions to the initiative.



Newly installed 'Recycled Seat' along the Owenea River near Ardara, Co. Donegal - Source IAT Ulster Ireland

Lessons

Importance of pre-development funding

Pre-development funding enabled partner LAGs to carry out a comprehensive scoping study of the entire route of the IAT which incorporated the physical trail,

signage and interpretation, visitor experience and marketing including brand recognition and economic benefit. This exercise formed the basis of subsequent funding applications for physical infrastructure and marketing support, both of which were supported under the Rural Development Programme.

Scope for more collective collaboration

Each of the six partner LAGs tendered for the delivery of capital improvement works in their own respective areas separately and at different times. Although there was ongoing communication between partners to ensure a consistency of approach, it was suggested that a dedicated capital working group between those involved in the cooperation could have enabled smoother delivery and provided focused and agreed solutions to any issues arising. In addition, a more overarching strategic approach in relation to procurement generally would have been helpful, as opposed to each Council procuring themselves.

Knowledge exchange

The cooperation project provided participating partner LAGs, most of whom had not worked together previously, with the opportunity to meet regularly, and to share learnings, documents, templates and other information with each other with regard to procurement and a range of other issues.

“The cooperation project and working with other Councils built and increased relationships. It was insightful to learn about the IAT not only in Ulster-Ireland, but also in other areas of the world” Stephen Catherwood, Mid and East Antrim LAG

“The opportunity to be involved in such a unique project was an exciting prospect” Eamon Gallogly, Mid-Ulster Rural Development Partnership



“The other LAGs were happy for us to work at our own pace and provided us with the flexibility we needed once they knew the commitment was there”
Coleen McBrien, Fermanagh and Omagh LAG

Working alongside landowners

One of the initial steps in each of the LAG areas involved mapping the route of the IAT. Consultation and collaboration with landowners was a fundamental part of this.

“Funding new trails under LEADER is quite challenging, as most trails will need to access private land. Early and ongoing engagement with landowners is vital to ensure permission and goodwill are achieved throughout the lifetime of a trail project. We are very grateful to be working with so many proactive landowners on the IAT” *Inga Bock, RRO, Donegal Local Development CLG*

Total Funding

In the Republic of Ireland (Donegal):

Total project budget (i)+(ii)+(iii) =	€214,735.83
+ (i) Rural Development Programme support (a)+(b)	€161,051.87
+ (a) EAFRD (EU) contribution	€101,140.57
+ (b) National / Regional contribution	€59,911.30
+ (ii) Private match funding	€10,736.79
+ (iii) Other public funding	€42,947.17

In Northern Ireland Council areas:

Total project budget (i)+(ii)+(iii) =	£1,306,000
+ (i) Rural Development Programme support (a)+(b)	£966,000
+ (a) EAFRD (EU) contribution	£608,580
+ (b) National / Regional contribution	£357,420
+ (ii) Private match funding	-
+ (iii) Other public funding	£340,000

More information can be found on the International Appalachian Trail Ulster Ireland [website](#).