



PORTUMNA FOREST PARK STRATEGIC DESIGN PLAN

Public Consultation Feedback Summary Response

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Portumna Forest Park Strategic Design Plan

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1. ABOUT THE PUBLIC CONSULTATION

Coillte is committed to developing a long-term vision to enhance the recreational benefits of Portumna Forest Park for the local community and wider tourism sector through a sustainable and eco-friendly approach.

As a first step in achieving this, Coillte set out to engage with the local community and with relevant stakeholders. A public consultation event took place in Portumna Workhouse on Tuesday 24th October 2023. This took place alongside the public consultation for the Portumna Public Realm project led by Galway City Council.

The overall aim of the consultation was to present the draft Portumna Forest Park 5–10-year Strategic Design Plan and to gather feedback from the community and stakeholders to ultimately inform and shape the final Strategic Design Plan over the coming months. Details of the public consultation were displayed on the project website: <https://www.portumnaforestpark.com/> and the consultation was advertised through a number of channels including direct engagement with key stakeholders such as elected representatives and local businesses and an advertisement in the local newspaper.

The vision to upgrade and enhance Portumna Forest Park was well documented in local media and questions were raised by some members of the local community about the proposed draft plan. A Coillte spokesperson appeared on local radio station Galway Bay FM to outline Coillte's approach to the development of the draft Strategic Design Plan and to address the concerns raised where possible. Coillte also announced an extension to the public consultation period to enable the local community to have more time to share their feedback on the draft plan.

Following the public event and direct stakeholder and media engagement, the consultation remained open to feedback from 24th October - 22nd November 2023.

The feedback from the public consultation and direct engagement with stakeholders has informed Coillte's approach to a Strategic Design Plan for this important local amenity.

Hereafter, this report will set out the recurring themes identified through the public consultation, identifies actions for the refinement of the Strategic Design Plan, and recommends the next steps.

2. SUBMISSIONS & RESPONSES

A total of 296 submissions were received during the public consultation between 24th October - 22nd November 2023. Once the consultation period was complete, the project team then analysed and summarised all submissions.

Once the responses were carefully assessed, the team considered the appropriate next steps and amendments to the Strategic Design Plan.

2.1 Issues Mentioned Frequently in the Feedback

The content of individual submissions varied, however, several themes emerged more frequently. These themes are documented below.

It is worth noting that many of these issues were commented on both favourably and negatively; for example, some submission's viewed the changes to the local amenity negatively whilst others viewed them more favourably.

The order of the feedback listed below is presented to reflect the order and weighting of submissions per theme - highest to lowest. In the submissions received:

- 46% raised concern relating to the impact to the local environment;
- 45% raised concern relating to forest accommodation / chalets;
- 23% requested the provision of equestrian facilities in the plan;
- 17% raised concern about noise and traffic from the shuttle bus concept;
- 16% raised concern in relation to enhanced car parking proposals (western car park, etc.);
- 15% queried economic benefits of the plan;
- 14% were against the concept of the boardwalk;
- 11% commented that the park needs a new visitor hub / centre.
- 10% wanted a greater level of stakeholder engagement.

These and several other issues are discussed in further details below.

2.2 General Feedback & Responses

2.2.1 Impact on the Environment

The most frequently raised concern – noted in **46%** of submissions - related to the potential impact on the environment; Some of the comments received are included below:

"Very little focus on wildlife in the plan / no consideration given to biodiversity or other environmental factors."

"Services such as water, sewage and lighting would have negative effects."

"Prefer if there was less environmental impact and even if there were barriers at the at the main entrance to pay for the upkeep."

"Bonaveen and Rinmaher that are untouched, and the development will change all that."

"..include an educational interactive gallery on the forest's flora and fauna."

"..The board walk, kayaking and walks/cycle ways are all exciting proposals, and I would hope that balancing the importance of protecting the inherent natural environment of plant and wild life."

The aim of the Strategic Design Plan is to develop a new vision for Portumna Forest Park in order to enhance the recreational benefits to the local community and beyond, in a sensitive and environmentally conscious way.

The park contains a mix of areas of coniferous forest and semi-natural woodland habitat types. Detailed mapping of the existing woodland types and preliminary inspections of habitat merits / areas of protection were carried out and considered during the development of the draft Strategic Design Plan. Areas designed to protect and enhance biodiversity and heritage; and areas that may be more suitable to allow for certain development activities have been identified in the draft Strategic Design Plan. Three overall character areas are recognised along with several features or locally distinctive sub-areas as outlined below.

Area 1: Predominantly Coniferous Woodland Habitat

- These sites are located to the east and west of the existing car park and close to the regional road and to Portumna Town;
- These are characterised by robust, mature conifer forest habitat;
- Broadleaf trees such as ash, oak and beech are also present in groups, some of which are historic in nature – these create more sensitive areas locally due to the age of specific veteran trees;
- Landscape and ecological sensitivity are classified as low at these sites – a working forest character, nonetheless with attractive fine stands of trees;
- These sites present a more robust setting for potential visitor infrastructure, activities and/or accommodation to be located due to the lack of ecologically valuable habitats.

Area 2: Turlough & Mixed Woodland Habitat

- These sites are located in the area west of the golf club;
- Conifer woodland is dominant in this area, although there are some areas of mature broadleaf trees at the site;
- The unique scenic Turlough Wood forms a central feature of this area;
- This area attracts fewer visitors due to the distance from the Coillte car park and to the town;
- This site has potential to support low intensity scenic & recreational amenities.

Area 3: Predominantly Broadleaf Woods & Lakeside Habitat

- The largest and most broad Landscape Character Area of the site is situated in the southern half/extent of the site;
- This area includes Bonaveen Harbour and Headland, and Rinmaher Headland;
- It is characterised by deciduous trees, wetland and lakeside habitats;
- Much of this area is within, or close to Lough Derg, Northeast Shore SAC (Special Area of Conservation) or is aligned to the Lough Derg SPA (Special Protection Area) for birds;
- In landscape, character and ecological terms, it is by far the most ecologically sensitive area of the site and therefore, the least robust in absorbing and accommodating potential development of some activities;
- Visual and physical lakeside access is poor at this site;
- This site has potential for slow, tranquil, low to no impact uses, with enhanced lakeside access.

Prior to the development of any concept within the Strategic Design Plan, each element of the plan will need to be taken through the appropriate planning and statutory processes. During this next stage, more detailed surveys will be carried out to inform the design development and the appropriate environmental assessments will be undertaken. As with all statutory planning processes, the public will have an opportunity to engage and comment on any aspect of development.

Actions:

Coillte will review the Strategic Design Plan concepts in areas deemed environmentally sensitive including Turlough Woods and the broadleaf woods and lakeside to ensure that these habitats are protected and preserved.

Concept designs for servicing the various elements of the Strategic Design Plan have been in development. A pre-connection enquiry has been submitted to Irish Water to determine if there is capacity in the existing water supply and water treatment systems in Portumna, and to determine what if any network or system upgrades may be required.

2.2.2 Forest Accommodation

The second most mentioned element of the Strategic Design Plan related to forest accommodation, with **45%** of submissions raising concern in relation to the concept of forest accommodation and chalets.

"We do not need chalets / houses in the forest."

"Hotel sitting idle just at the edge of the other side of the Forest Park."

"Loss of a large number of natural, mature trees to build cabins and recreation areas."

"Portumna badly needs visitor accommodation."

The analysis carried out during the development of the draft Strategic Design Plan into how best the local economy can be supported and enhanced through amenities at Portumna Forest Park identified a need and opportunity to establish short-break holiday accommodation (2-4 nights). This accommodation would be designed to accommodate a target market which includes families, couples, or multi-generational groups.

This target market was identified as being nature-loving and active and seeking short breaks in an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity. Therefore, in appealing to this market, it is essential to conserve and enhance the forest environment and protect the ancient woodland. The type of accommodation identified in the draft Strategic Design Plan is in line with the tourism strategy for the region, and the aim is to focus on attracting visitors who will explore local area attractions and engage local activity providers.

An assessment was undertaken which found Portumna Forest Park has the potential for holiday cabins offering year-round accommodation to visitors. The proposed location of these cabins is immediately to the west of the existing forest park car park and south of the golf club, in an area of woodland that is predominantly commercial coniferous woodland and is considered sufficiently robust for this type of development. Coillte, working in partnership with a suitable provider, will continue to explore options for visitor accommodation. This area will remain open and accessible to the public.

The plan also identified scope for a simple wild camping facility at the remote western corner of park near to Turlough Woods, with the potential for camping towards Portumna Town or Portumna Harbour, which will serve the town, the castle and park

visitors. These options would provide a more affordable accommodation offering and appeal to those who enjoy camping.

The exact type, scale and location of any accommodation requires more detailed surveys and analysis which will further consider the local environment, habitat, and flooding issues.

Action:

Coillte and its partners will carry out more detailed site surveys and inspections to further explore and refine the accommodation concepts.

2.2.3 Equestrian Facilities

A total of **23%** of the submissions received requested the provision of equestrian facilities.

"Bridleway - need for safe areas for horse riding."

The Strategic Design Plan aims to create a hierarchy of routes in terms of surfaces and character from easily accessible, universal surfaces to grassy tracks suitable for a range of uses. The concept of providing for equestrian users would be consistent with the draft Strategic Design Plan, however, there would be a need to ensure that equestrian activities would be primarily segregated from other users.

Action:

Coillte will consider the scope to provide a bridleway within the Portumna Forest Park that could be segregated from other users or consider other nearby forests that may be suitable for accommodating equestrian activities.

2.2.4 Shuttle Link

A total 17% of submissions raised concern against the idea of a shuttle bus, with specific concerns relating to traffic conflict with walkers and cyclists, increased noise, and pollution.

"Shuttle bus route could lead to increased traffic, noise, and pollution."

"A shuttle bus to the town - using the road that already exists – electric / non carbon emission vehicles."

Currently there is a limited regional bus service and local link service connecting the forest park with Portumna Town. These services connect into the town and do not service the forest park. The centre of the forest park is 1.5km, approximately a 20-minute walk, from the town centre; access points to the lakeshore are located further away. This distance would be out of reach for many mobility-impaired visitors, with the only alternative being a drive to the car park within the forest park.

The shuttle bus concept is designed to provide an electric shuttle service that could connect the Portumna Forest Park Visitor Hub to the wider forest park, the town, and to adjacent amenities such as the castle, harbour, beach, and marina. This service could be provided using a narrow buggy type of vehicle that travels at suitably low speeds quietly on dedicated forest roads shared with walkers and cyclists.

Action:

Coillte will further explore the shuttle buggy vehicle type and possible routes into the forest park in consultation with key stakeholders including Galway County Council and the Office of Public Works.

2.2.5 Car Parking

A total of **16%** of submissions raised concern in relation to car parking proposals. Most of the concerns raised related to the western car park concept; specifically, the approach road was considered very narrow, reference to this area as unique due to the Turlough Wood central feature, and with the sensitive habitat surrounding it. This area of the park is also the quietest / least visited area, given its relative remoteness from the town and the forest park car park.

"New entrance on L8806 road impact and impact on mature mixed woodlands, red squirrel."

It is noted that during the peak season Portumna Forest Park can attract approximately 300 vehicles per day. The current car parking capacity at the forest park is for approximately 150 cars, and this is regularly oversubscribed at peak times.

The draft Strategic Design Plan identifies a potential new car park at the eastern side of the park which would provide improved connectivity to Portumna town centre. This concept is consistent with the Portumna Public Realm Enhancement Scheme which seeks to improve connectivity between the town and the adjacent amenities.

It was considered that there was potential for a new small car park facility with approximately 20 spaces at the western boundary of the park which could accommodate local access.

Action:

In consultation with key stakeholders including Galway County Council and Office of Public Works, Coillte will further explore the feasibility of the provision of a new car park at the eastern side of the park.

Coillte will consider opportunities to provide the small car park facility at the western side of the park, with consideration given to possible impact of traffic and the sensitive habitat in the area.

2.2.6 Economic Benefits

A total of **15%** of the submissions received mentioned the economic benefits of the plan. These submissions were mixed with some members of the public doubting the potential economic benefits to the town while others considered that the plan would provide new investment and job opportunities.

A number of submissions suggested the proposed enhancements would be complimentary to existing amenities and would create the potential for further services to be developed in the local economy.

"Great to see investment being put into Portumna Forest Park."

"Privatise the development... no benefit to our town either commercially or environmentally."

"Will lead to job creation opportunities."

"Preserving the park's environment will enhance its appeal, attracting more tourists and bolstering the local tourism industry."

The emerging vision for the Portumna Forest Park Strategic Design Plan is: *That Portumna Forest Park with its outstanding forest and lakeside lodges and range of amenities can become the catalyst for transforming Portumna from a day-only tourism destination into a spectacular biodiversity forestry and lakeside hot spot / overnight destination.*

An indicative economic assessment of the Strategic Design Plan concepts has been carried out.

Action:

A more detailed economic impact assessment will be undertaken as the Strategic Design Plan concepts are sufficiently developed to assess the wider economic impact in the area with consideration to the potential to support local tourism providers such as restaurants, cafés, activity providers, and retail business.

2.2.7 Boardwalk Concept

Some **14%** of the submissions raised concern in relation to the boardwalk concept which is outlined in the draft Strategic Design Plan as located in an area of highly sensitive habitat.

"Lakeside floating trail might disrupt the aquatic ecosystem and the habitats of waterfowl and other aquatic species."

" Whether it be dog walkers, bird watchers, or mums meeting for a coffee while their little ones play, the forest park is a park that can offer something for everyone and it's great to see its potential being unlocked!"

Portumna Forest Park has extensive frontage to Lough Derg, however, access to the lake is very limited. It is an aim of the Strategic Design Plan to improve the relationship between the park and the lake in three ways; visually, spatially, and through enhanced access for visitors.

The concept relating to the boardwalk aims to provide improved access and visual connection with the lake. There is potential for a floating pontoon at Bonaveen that could provide an entry point to the blue-way and provide improved access to the water for wild swimming.

It is recognised that the area identified for the possible boardwalk is within the most sensitive area of the park, much of which is within, or close to, the Lough Derg, Northeast Shore SAC (Special Area of Conservation) or is aligned by Lough Derg SPA (Special Protection Area). All proposals in the SAC – shore area – will be the subject to detailed feasibility assessment and environmental assessments.

Action:

Coillte will carry out detailed ecology and habitat surveys in these areas to determine the feasibility of the boardwalk / pontoon concepts.

2.2.8 Stakeholder Engagement

A total **10%** of the submissions wanted a greater level of stakeholder engagement.

“Plans without any consultation with the local community.”

“Consultation timeframe too short / not enough consultation.”

“Need more community involvement.”

The Draft Portumna Forest Park Strategic Design Plan has been informed by:

- Lough Derg Visitor Experience Development Plan;
- Shannon Masterplan 2020 – 2030;
- The Ireland Hidden Heartlands Initiative;
- Portumna Vision 2030;
- Galway County Council Public Realm Plan for Portumna;
- Coillte Nature Policy.

In addition, Fáilte Ireland and Galway County Council were consulted during the development of the Portumna Forest Park draft Strategic Design Plan prior to wider stakeholder and public consultation.

The public consultation period on the draft Strategic Design Plan was initially open for two weeks following the public consultation event held on 24th October 2023. Following a number of submissions received during the initial consultation period, it was decided to extend the consultation period to four weeks until 22nd November 2023.

The in-person public consultation event held at the Portumna Workhouse Centre on 24th October 2023 was well attended, and 296 written submissions were received throughout the consultation period. The project team has analysed and summarised the input received before considering appropriate alterations to the Strategic Design Plan.

Action:

Coillte will consider and agree on possible changes to the Strategic Design Plan as outlined in this report and agree appropriate next steps for further consultation with key stakeholders.

2.2.9 Visitor Hub / Centre

A number of submissions mentioned the Portumna Forest Park Visitor Hub. These submissions were generally supportive of the initial concepts, recognising that the existing building is no longer fit for purpose.

"Having a main hub of a visitor centre is essential... include an education room."

"Invaluable resource for education."

The concept for the Portumna Forest Park Visitor Hub / Centre aims to develop a distinctive building with adjoining amenities that are appropriately scaled and designed to serve the overall Strategic Design Plan. The visitor hub is intended to provide appropriate services and amenities and enhance the natural assets of the park. It will provide improved access to observe, enjoy, and learn about the natural and cultural heritage of the park. This would include a meeting and welcome area; indoor and outdoor space for groups; and an interpretation and education centre.

Action:

Coillte will further consider how best to progress the visitor hub / centre concept.

2.2.10 Tranquillity of the Park

A number of submissions raised concerns about the level of development proposed within the forest park and the impact that this would have on the peace and tranquillity currently enjoyed in the park.

"Development would damage the peace and tranquillity...it appears that the Forest Park will be converted into a commercial venture."

"Adventure activities could disturb the peace and tranquillity of the forest."

It is noted that the forest park covers almost 450 hectares in area and contains a mix of coniferous forest and semi-natural woodland. Detailed mapping of the existing woodland types and specific habitat merits and areas of protection were considered during the development of the draft Strategic Design Plan.

The Strategic Design Plan has identified more robust areas of coniferous forest located in more remote locations either side of the main forest access road with scope to accommodate higher adrenaline activities. It is anticipated that these areas are suitable to create commercial opportunities to provide attractions for families and groups.

Consideration was also given to less noisy activities such as jogging and trail cycling which could extend through the wider trail system.

Action:

Coillte will review and confirm the large swathe of forest land throughout the park which will see little or no interventions and will therefore be preserved.

2.2.11 Local Amenity

It was evident from many of the submissions received that Portumna Forest Park is a highly valued amenity within the local community. Concerns were raised that the Strategic Design Plan will disproportionately impact on this local amenity.

"The park offers a sanctuary where residents can engage in recreational activities, promoting a healthier lifestyle and overall well-being."

"Taking away a local amenity."

"Park that can offer something for everyone and it's great to see its potential being unlocked!"

"Maintain free and accessible for locals."

The overall concepts outlined in the draft forest park Strategic Design Plan aim to enhance the park through additions, interventions and facilities which create sustainable opportunities for tourism whilst maintaining and celebrating the character and unique quality of park

The Strategic Design Plan will ensure existing community uses and access are maintained and enhanced and balanced with visitor needs. The plan will also ensure that Portumna Forest Park is integral to the Portumna Town experience with improved connectivity to heritage and town facilities, such as Portumna Castle, the marina and waterfront amenities.

Action:

Coillte will provide further clarity on the development concepts and confirm that the forest park will remain open to the public. Coillte has clarified there is no intention of selling areas of the forest to private enterprises.

3. NEXT STEPS

As stated in the public consultation material, the next steps in finalising a Strategic Design Plan are to:

- Progress the actions identified in this report and refine and finalise the Strategic Design Plan;
- Prioritise infrastructure improvements, such as trails, parking and central facilities;
- Seek experienced private sector partners, where appropriate, to deliver specialist services or facilities;
- Identify sources of public sector funding, such as the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme, European Regional Development Fund, Fáilte Ireland and other project partners, as well as Coillte's own resources;
- Build partnerships with Galway County Council and the Portumna local community to ensure complementary actions create a synergy for local benefits to emerge from the Strategic Design and management of this unique resource.

4. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, about half of respondents viewed the draft Strategic Design Plan favourably. However, many submissions had specific critiques or were concerned by a specific impact.

The project team extensively reviewed the feedback and modifications to the final Strategic Design Plan will be recommended based on this feedback. The Strategic Design Plan is part of Phase 1: Scope.

The next steps will include Phase 2: Concept Development and Option Selection, which will be informed by further site surveys, and if successful this will be followed by Phase 3 Preliminary Design, and Phase 4: Statutory (Planning) Processes.

It is recommended that the immediate next steps should include:

- A summary report of the submissions received to be shared with key stakeholders and those who made submissions;
- Refinement of the Strategic Design Plan concepts and content considering the feedback received;
- Further engagement with key stakeholders on the Strategic Design Plan should be completed following careful assessment of the feedback received to date;
- Consideration should be given as to how the next steps including the planning and design stages will be progressed.

Development Phases & Current Phase

PHASE 1: Scope and Purpose
PHASE 2: Concept Development and Option Selection
PHASE 3: Preliminary Design
PHASE 4: Statutory Processes
PHASE 5: Detailed Design and Procurement
PHASE 6: Construction and Implementation
PHASE 7: Close-out and Review



Current Phase