

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: Saturday 26 January 2019 17:43
To: rses
Subject: Submission in respect of draft RSES

[REDACTED]
26th January 2019

Draft RSES submissions
Northern and Western Regional Assembly
The Square
Ballaghaderreen
County Roscommon

Re: Submissions in respect of draft RSES

Dear Madam/Sir,

I welcome the publication of the draft RSES document for this North West Region, and the opportunity it provides for inputs that can make the RSES not only better but relevant to all sectors of the community and all areas of the North West. At first and subsequent reading of the draft, a number of anomalies and omissions come to light that can be simply remedied. I trust that you will accept this submission for what it is, a piece of constructive criticism of the draft that does not reflect in any way on the efforts of the people who put together this otherwise excellent document. My submission is simply an attempt to deal with realities and achievable aims to make the North West Region more prosperous and a better place in which to live, work and do business.

A number of years back I challenged Failte Ireland policy on leisure tourism. My own direct experience of this booming industry worldwide led me to believe that Irish official thinking was out of date, missing out on a huge demand that was being satisfied by countries with a more savvy approach. At the time, policy here with regards to walking and cycling was confined to local loop trail development, a policy that encouraged national and international tourists to visit places for a short period, to walk or cycle and then leave to spend their money elsewhere. I could see from the success of long-distance routes in other countries that there was another market segment, the long-distance hiker and cyclist, people who by the nature of their activity had to eat, drink and stay in small towns and villages along their route.

I was particularly impressed by the extraordinary success of the Hadrian's Wall Path in Northumberland, a simple and cost-effective initiative that has transformed the fortunes of a number of dying towns and villages in the North of England, a Region that had much in common with the North West of Ireland in terms of small farm size, poor land and a declining population. Now, even small places like Greenhead and Gilsland have come back to life since this path was opened. Previously closed pubs, shops and hotels have reopened, farms have created new enterprises by opening B&Bs and camping barns, and new businesses in the food, transport, logistics, construction and leisure industries are employing people who would normally have to leave to find work. Spin-off benefits like the Wall Bus Service now put viable transport links back into the communities along the route, and baggage handling companies that move luggage from place to place for hikers also provide a courier service to all kinds of businesses along what has become a new economic corridor in that part of England.

Similar paths criss-cross much of Europe as well as New Zealand and the USA. Germany has almost 80,000 km of linked trails for instance. In Slovenia, the old derelict communist-era railways that used to provide 'transport for the masses' in the Istrian peninsula have largely now been revived as leisure and amenity routes for cyclists and walkers,

and a significant food and tourism industry has grown up on the back of this infrastructure. France has also embraced the concept, as have all other European countries.

My concerns about our lack of interest in this market segment were eventually taken on board by Failte Ireland when their research showed that millions of European tourists would visit Ireland if we had such a network – not simply a handful of short or even one-day trails like the Great Western Greenway, but a linked network that would allow them to spend one or two weeks cycling or walking in Ireland. I met with then Minister Pascal Donohoe, he was immediately taken by my argument and agreed to begin work on the Dublin-Galway route, which has now been largely completed as far as Athlone.

This route will be delivered over the next few years, but the North West still has no plans to use it to deliver growth to inland towns that are among the most deprived in Ireland. Towns like Kiltimagh, Tuam, Swinford, Charlestown and Tubbercurry are still stagnating while the national economy grows, but to date the only initiative from the Local Authority sector has been the suggestion that the derelict rail link between these towns should reopen, and that this would in some way bring back industry and employment to the Region.

Despite successive examinations of this proposal that showed that there is no business case for this initiative, and little chance of government funding, the groupthink approach of some County Councillors still clings to the forlorn belief that building a railway on a winding Victorian route will somehow magically buck the trend that saw it closed in the first place. Nobody appears to be able to answer the question as to how exactly a railway will bring jobs to Kiltimagh or Swinford, unless a way is found to monetise being stared at from a mostly empty passing train. Certainly this formula hasn't worked in places like Gort. However, the lack of potential investment in rail on this route is no reason to abandon it and allow it to fall gradually out of public ownership, as has happened with other closed lines and is starting to happen in some places with this asset.

If the complete route from Athenry to Collooney and on to Enniskillen on the proposed Leitrim and Northern Counties Greenway route were to be used as a 'greenway' to feed tourists into the quiet and unspoiled parts of the Region, it would take pressure of the already busy 'Wild Atlantic Way' corridor and create an alternative destination for lovers of the outdoors. It would also protect the so-called 'western rail corridor' in the event that some or all of it might provide part of a rail, energy, broadband or other infrastructural solution in the future. It would also provide a safe local amenity for families to walk and cycle, and a commuting route to schools and work for a considerable number of local residents. It would provide a piece of low cost, nationally-funded infrastructure to service a part of the North West Region that is pretty much left out of this strategy in terms of any specific initiative to bring jobs and an enhanced quality of life to people in the Region. Initial studies in Sligo suggest a payback on any such investment of two to four years.

There is a specific omission from this draft document that omits two existing initiatives around this asset. On page 215, it lists examples of greenways that can be delivered, but omits two that are significant and that have progressed beyond the aspirational stage. Sligo County Council has already completed a feasibility study on the section of closed railway from Bellaghy to Collooney with a view to building a greenway on the route, and has applied for funding for this project. Galway County Council has applied for funding for a feasibility study for the 'Quiet Man Greenway' on the section of the route that runs through County Galway, from Athenry to Milltown. At the very least, these two officially-endorsed projects should be added to this list; ignoring their existence means omitting the reality that people want to see an alternative use for this publicly-owned asset in the event that a railway is not built on the route in the next few decades. Irish Rail has already committed to licensing greenways on this route with the proviso that rail use will take precedence if it ever becomes feasible.

The wider issue of rail versus trail on the 'Western rail corridor' or 'Western rail trail' also needs to be addressed in the RSES. Previous strategies committed fully to rail, without any kind of certainty that rail was an option, and this has contributed to significant stagnation in local authorities and has driven funding away from the Region and into the coffers of other places. Even still, when it is recognised that greenway development will not be a factor in preventing the construction of railways, Mayo County Council continues to avoid greenway development on the section of the Western Trail that runs through County Mayo, despite a strong lobby from the community for this investment. In recent times however, even Mayo is changing its stance and has backed the ten-year leasing from Irish Rail of a short section of the closed line in Kiltimagh for a small local leisure project.

The draft RSES unfortunately go down the same route as the previous Regional Planning Guidelines with regards to the Western Rail Trail/Corridor. On Page 232, objectives 113 and 115 correctly seek the quick completion of the rail review for the route, but go on to make assumptions about the use of the route for rail, ignoring the possibility that the review may find against investment in rail infrastructure on the route, or that government funding may not be available even in the event that the review finds for rail. It would be prudent to (a) not make any assumptions about the review outcome as the draft has done, and (b) to add a clause to the effect that and interim or alternative use for the asset should also be an aspiration, for reasons outlined earlier in this submission. To do otherwise is to not only encourage the dereliction and loss to public ownership of the route in the event that the rail review finds against rail in the immediate future, but also to leave Local Authorities uncertain as to whether they can seek funding for alternative use of the asset.

In summary, it would be of significant benefit to the Region were the NWRA to make the following minor changes to the draft RSES document. None of these changes will in any way prevent or impede the construction of a railway on this route, should funding become available for such a project.

1. To add the Sligo Greenway Project from Bellaghy to Collooney to the list of greenways on page 215.
2. To add the Quiet Man Greenway from Athenry to Milltown to the list of greenways on page 215.
3. To amend the map on page 214 to reflect 1 and 2 (above).
4. To ensure that all or any references to the so-called 'western rail corridor' from Athenry to Collooney do not in any way preclude the use of the route for purposes other than rail, while still acknowledging that rail may be an option for the route at some future time.
5. To add a paragraph to Objective 115 on page 232 of the draft document, as follows: *'(c) It shall be an objective to utilise the route of the closed railway from Athenry to Collooney for suitable leisure, energy, communications or other infrastructural needs, as long as such alternative or interim use does not preclude the construction of a railway on some or all of the route at some time in the future.'*

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission to the process. I look forward to seeing a final document that will be relevant, practical, pragmatic and useful to the citizens of this Region over the next decade, creating a framework that will not hamper or hinder positive developments in the way that the previous planning guidelines have (albeit inadvertently) done.

Yours sincerely

John Mulligan