



## Irish Uplands Forum

*Promotes Sustainable Economic and Ecological Development in the Uplands*

### **Irish Uplands Forum**

The Irish Uplands Forum was founded by the late Professor Adrian Phillips arising from his involvement in development work in the Wicklow uplands in the 1990's and a 1995 conference on upland management in Galway. The benefits arising from a partnership approach to sustainable upland management have motivated and sustained the Forum since then.

### **Introduction**

The Irish Uplands Forum commends the overall thrust of the Green Paper, *Stronger Local Democracy – Options for Change*, which as the Minister says in his Foreword, is concerned with strengthening local government to meet 21<sup>st</sup> Century challenges which include "improved environmental management" and "ensuring greater connection between local government and local people".

As an organisation founded on the Local Agenda 21 principle of encouraging greater local ownership of, and participation in, local decision making for sustainable development, the Irish Uplands Forum wholeheartedly supports the Minister's view that local government should be strengthened to play an even greater role in Irish life.

We welcome in particular the following principles and issues addressed in the Paper:

- The principle of subsidiarity, i.e. decision-making at the lowest appropriate level;
- Recognition of the democratic deficit identified by the Taskforce on Active Citizenship - the perceived distance between the citizen and the local authority "particularly but not exclusively in urban areas" (p.15);
- The desirability of achieving "a system where the instinctive reaction of local people is to look to their own local democratic institutions to solve local problems" (p.16),
- The benefits of developing strengthened relationships between local community groups and local authorities (p.82).

Past local government reform and the social partnership process have improved community and voluntary participation in local government through the County Development Boards, community fora and representation on Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs). However, the report of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship endorses the Irish Uplands Forum's view that these initiatives have not achieved a connection between local government and the average citizen.

### **Elected mayors for all counties and cities**

While the Irish Uplands Forum supports the proposal to introduce a directly elected full-term mayor in each county and city, the powers and responsibilities attached to this post need careful consideration. It must result in a gain, rather than simply a transfer of some of the powers at present exercised by the Manager, otherwise there could be a loss of efficiency, or potential for conflict. One function that does not exist strongly today might be encapsulated in the idea "Reaching the people" - i.e. mainly a PR function, with specific responsibility to oversee communications and contacts, including promoting customer-focus amongst council employees; ensuring information flow in the planning process and seeing that participatory processes such as community fora and SPCs are effective.

### **Strategy Policy Committees**

The Irish Uplands Forum welcomes the recommendation that the Chairs of SPCs be elected for the full term of the Council; such continuity should enhance the effectiveness of SPCs. There may also be other aspects of the operation of SPCs which could be adjusted to improve effectiveness and increase democratic input to local government. For example, the present system of appointment of members of SPCs by Council officials selecting from panels of persons nominated by authorised bodies, lacks adequate democratic credibility, and should be replaced by some form of direct elections involving a range of representative bodies. A mechanism could be put in place to ensure there is feedback to SPCs following discussion of SPC proposals by Council. In relation to SPCs, the Irish Uplands Forum also draws the Minister's attention to the experience of SPC participation highlighted in ADM's 2003 report on Community Participation in Local Social Partnership (*see Appendix 1*).

### **Funding local government**

The Irish Uplands Forum supports the Consultative Committee's view that "strong local government ideally requires autonomy in raising local finance". Without that it is difficult to see how full local authority responsibility and accountability can flourish. While substantial income is generated by local authorities, mechanisms such as the contribution required from potential developers are unreliable and uneven. The Irish Uplands Forum recommends the re-introduction of some form of universal local taxes in tandem with an equivalent reduction in national taxes.

### **Local democracy in rural areas**

The Paper notes the importance of local community groups and states that strengthened relationships between such groups and local authorities would be mutually beneficial. The challenges identified in the Minister's Foreword all resound at community level and local community groups need support to deal with these challenges. The challenges faced by rural communities have a different emphasis to urban areas, with the loss of basic services (such as shops, post office, health centre and Garda station, which have contributed in the past as foci for social communication and support), lack of local employment opportunities, integration of new and existing residents, declining rates of voluntary activity and the increased cost of transport all featuring strongly.

The Irish Uplands Forum recommends that the “disconnect” between citizens and local government would be best addressed through establishment of a lower tier of local government. Rather than seeing this as the creation of a new layer of bureaucracy, this should be viewed as extending legitimacy and support to existing groups which meet standards of good governance and operate within a democratic framework. In effect it would extend the principle of subsidiarity downwards. This could perhaps be achieved through Section 128 of the Local Government Act which provides for the designation of local community groups as “recognised associations”.

The Irish Uplands Forum has recently undertaken a study of Nature Parks in Austria and their relationship with their local communities (*see Appendix 2 for draft report*). We will shortly submit the report on this study for the Minister's consideration. In undertaking this study, we were struck by the fact that every community in Austria, down to quite small villages and their surrounding countryside, has an elected mayor and council, and that the existence of this local democracy over a long period appears to have developed a strong sense of responsibility in communities for their own affairs. We understand that similar local democratic structures exist in most European countries and we feel that their absence in Ireland is a serious disadvantage in providing for social and economic development of local communities and the enhanced management of their environment.

This view is corroborated by the final report of the Carnegie Commission for Rural Community Development, published in 2007 following a three-year consultation process to examine the challenges facing local rural communities across the UK and Ireland. That report states “We consider that new systems of elected governance at community level are an essential requirement for the revitalisation of democratic governance and should be introduced across the UK and Ireland”. This is but one aspect of a comprehensive, positive and practical report which identifies the key characteristics of a thriving rural community of the future; the full report is available online at:

[http://rural.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/a\\_charter\\_for\\_rural\\_communities-the\\_final\\_report\\_of\\_the\\_carnegie\\_commission\\_for\\_rural\\_community\\_development](http://rural.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/a_charter_for_rural_communities-the_final_report_of_the_carnegie_commission_for_rural_community_development)

Having regard to all of the above, the Irish Uplands Forum regrets that the reforms under consideration by the Minister do very little to enhance local democracy in rural areas. We recognise that to address this as part of the current process could result in a serious delay, however we urge the Minister to initiate a further process to provide for enhanced local democracy in rural areas.

### **Participative democracy and local government**

Chapter 7 of the Paper deals with civic participation in local government and puts forward options to improve participative democracy. While the Irish Uplands Forum supports all forms of engagement that improve local participation, the availability of such opportunities cannot by itself guarantee participation, and those participating may not be representative of the community as a whole. As stated above, Irish Uplands Forum's preferred solution is a new lower tier of local democracy.

Recognising that this will take time, we make the following comments in relation to participative democracy and local government. Options such as Petition Rights are weighted towards larger settlements and urban areas; consideration should be given to mechanisms to achieve engagement between local authorities and dispersed rural communities. The Community Futures process utilised by Mayo County Community Forum could provide a useful model in terms of local authority engagement with communities, capacity building and an empowering approach to addressing the challenges facing rural communities. Information on Community Futures is available on:

<http://www.mayocdb.ie/Home/GroupsForums/CommunityFutures/>

. Ultimately, Irish Uplands Forum would like to see such "novel forms of engagement" used in addition to, rather than instead of, representative democratic structures at local community level.

### **Conclusion**

While many of the *options* outlined in *Stronger Local Democracy – Options for Change* are beyond the scope of the Irish Uplands Forum, overall we welcome publication of the Green Paper and the Minister's commitment to strengthening local government. We view this as another significant phase in the evolution of local government towards a more democratic model.

This Paper is concerned with reforming the existing local government structures, and as these structures below county level only exist in towns and cities, citizens of rural areas may be excluded. Not wishing to delay the current reform process, Irish Uplands Forum recommends that a further process be initiated to enhance local democracy in rural areas.

## Appendix 1

**Extract from ADM report on the Experience of the Community Sector in Local Social Partnership, published 2002, full report available on:**

**<http://www.pobal.ie/media/Publications/LDSIP/TheRoleoftheCommunitySectorinLocalSocialPartnership-brianharvey.pdf>**

In this study, the experiences of local social partnership in Wicklow, South Dublin and Cork city have been mixed. Before recording them, it should be emphasized that the structures of local social partnership are new and at an early stage of development. In some cases, industrial relations difficulties held up their establishment and the number of meetings held were small in number, especially in South Dublin.

- Community representatives have generally made more impact on the city or county development boards than on the strategic policy committees. Voluntary and community representatives have very positive experiences of the childcare committees. Here, meetings are regular, lengthy enough for policy development and chaired by community representatives.
- The picture from the strategic policy committees is a difficult one and some reports are of confrontation. Unlike the CDBs, they have not yet settled into their new role and have been slow to address either strategic or policy issues. Many councillors appear to see SPCs as a minor extension of the way the council traditionally did its work and do not fully appreciate their strategic purpose.
- Voluntary and community sector representatives have found SPC meetings to be intimidating, bureaucratic, mechanistic and a destructive experience. Some councillors have responded negatively to the arrival of the community representatives and complained about their arrival. Some community and voluntary sector representatives feel they were treated with contempt, suspicion and lack of basic respect. At its most extreme, the right of the community sector to organize itself is disputed. Women representing the voluntary and community sector, especially in male-dominated bodies, have found this process to be doubly stressful.
- Some councillors feel quite threatened by the changes in their role. They feel that the centre of political power has shifted out of the council chamber and into SPCs, CDBs partnerships and RAPID. They worry that the CDB development plans (2002) will supersede the development plans they approved several years earlier.
- The clash of cultures in the different means of working between the voluntary and community sector on the one hand and the council has proved to be a serious difficulty. One representative felt that there was an enormous gulf between her concept of consultation and what she felt was the council's model (*'this is what we have decided: do you have any comments?'*).
- SPC meetings are generally very short (about an hour, sometimes less), formal, over-structured and follow a procedure and pace which voluntary and community representatives find inimical to reflective policy-making. In some cases, SPC meetings took the form of field trips or presentations, with no policy discussion. Community representatives have tried to steer councillors toward a policy-making role, but it has proved difficult.

## Appendix 2

### **Community Involvement in Nature Parks in Austria**

Study visit by members of the Irish Uplands Forum, May 2008

*(draft report, 15 July 2008, relevant sections highlighted)*

**Primary purpose of visit:** To assess the quality of the relationship between the parks and the communities.

**Sponsorship:** The Heritage Council has kindly sponsored the visit, and borne most of the costs involved. The Irish Uplands Forum would like to record its gratitude herewith.

#### **Participants:**

Dr Alan Craig: Retired senior executive in the Department of the Environment, former Director of the National Parks & Wildlife Service of that Department.

Sean Byrne: Wicklow farmer and guesthouse owner, Board member of the Wicklow Uplands Council.

David Rowe: Retired chartered accountant, and member of the Wicklow Dublin Mountains Board.

**Introduction:** In 2006 the Irish Uplands Forum drafted a report for submission to the Government, proposing legislation for the establishment and governance of the existing form of national parks in Ireland (areas owned and totally managed by the Government, having no residential occupation), but also enabling and giving legal status and protection to areas of outstanding natural beauty, of special heritage value, or of scientific interest, in which people lived and worked. In that report the Forum proposed a particular model, in which the determination of policies for the areas concerned and their administration would lie mainly with residents, landowners and users. We suggested the title "Community Parks" for such areas.

In regard to objectives the proposals included the following: "A holistic brief for a community park should include conservation of both natural and built heritage , enhancement of habitable environs, encouragement of environmentally sensitive economic ventures (including tourism), education, research, use of volunteers, control and facilitation of countryside recreational activities, including access, walking, cycling and riding routes etc., and the facilitated management of inter-interest conflict."

It soon became apparent that there were deeply felt concerns and anxieties amongst the farming community as to the possible adverse effects that designations under such proposed legislation might have. The Forum therefore felt it incumbent on it to find out, if possible, how such designations were regarded by residents and landowners elsewhere, if there were structures already established similar to that proposed in the report. It turned out that throughout much of continental Europe "nature parks" existed which had many of the key features proposed – community involvement and control, voluntary

participation, objectives including the enhancement of economic benefits, with education, research and heritage conservation.

The ideal would have been to mount a fairly comprehensive study in a number of countries, so as to compare models. However, the Forum, lacking resources in manpower and finance, could not undertake such a task, so it was decided to select a single, apparently appropriate, country, and review a sample of parks there. The selection of Austria was fortuitous, and arose from a visit to this country of a group of Austrian park managers, hosted by the Heritage Council. It turned out to be ideal for our purposes.

**Scope of study:** Five parks were visited, selected by Ms Marelli Asamer-Handler, wife of Franz Handler, Chief Executive of the Nature Parks Association, to provide as great a variety as possible in size and nature of the parks. Individual description of the five parks is appended. In each park discussions took place with the management, and in most cases also with farmers and residents of the parks. In all cases a short walk through a park with park guides helped to appreciate its nature.

**Acknowledgement and thanks.** From the point of view of the visiting team the visit was an unqualified success, very largely due to the efficient and perceptive organisation by Marelli Asamer-Handler, mentioned above, and staff members of the Association, Manuela Reinhart and Katharina Maier. In addition to that, however, the warm welcome in each of the parks, the granting of time from busy days, the provision of walk guides, and the hospitality of meals and refreshments, made the visit an extremely pleasant and memorable experience.

**Context and comparison.** Success in establishing nature parks in Austria, with relatively little suspicion or opposition, is most probably partially due to factors which apply in Ireland to a very much lesser degree. They are:

**The universal tradition of local democracy.** Every community in Austria, down to quite small villages of 500 people or less and their surrounding countryside, has an elected burgomaster or mayor, and council. These bodies have considerable powers in the governance of local affairs, including the power of the local mayor to make planning decisions (which may be appealed to higher authorities). Whilst clearly this may have some drawbacks arising from the intimate relationships between governors and governed, in general it seems to work very well.

In the specific matter of planning, guidelines are issued by provincial governments. The degree of control over siting and design varies as between the different provinces and between the different categories of landscape. In many areas of protected landscape there are conditions relating to the colour and slope of roofs, and probably the design of fenestration. In other areas restrictions on design appear to be very liberal. However one gains the impression that the people have an innate sense of what is appropriate, matured over a long period, and are in any event conservative in their feelings about both buildings and farming.

At a higher level than the local scene, the 9 provincial governments have wide-ranging powers, including the legislation necessary to enforce relevant EU directives, including the habitats directive. It is they who have decided, mainly in the 1950s and 1960s, the areas appropriate for protection, and the regulations governing house design, where they exist.

The existence of local democracy over a long period has developed a strong sense of responsibility in communities for their own affairs, and a pride in their place and surroundings. This is evident in the absence of litter, in local initiatives in care and enhancement of villages, and in general tidiness.

In Ireland the lowest level of democracy resides in county councils, mostly representing upwards of 80,000 people, often substantially more, and some larger town councils. These bodies are elected, but have relatively limited powers. The administration of the counties lies largely with Managers, who are appointed by the Government. The present Minister for the Environment and Local Government proposes to increase local democracy by instituting directly elected mayors, and bestowing upon them some powers.

Local initiatives do exist, and there are many voluntary groups working towards the promotion of commerce or the enhancement of the environment. One of the principle initiatives in this regard is the Tidy Towns programme, launched in 1958, which has made a huge improvement in the ambience of many towns and villages. Community councils are widespread but have no statutory basis or formal powers.

However, because of the lack of any tradition of formal local government at the intimate level of villages and towns, there is a widespread attitude of dependence on central government, and a reluctance to take responsibility for local issues.

Local pride and personal responsibility. There appears to be very little litter or rubbish in Austria, and a low level of vandalism. Farmyards observed, some without notice, were neat and clean. Households, farms, roadsides tended to be enhanced by details of design – decorative bargeboards, wood-carved figures, wall-end paintings; the use of flowers everywhere. This appears to arise from an inculcated respect for the landscape, respect for authority, pride in the landscape, the attractiveness of homesteads and villages and a long tradition as a tourism country. What limited vandalism there is, is concentrated (as one might expect) near cities.

**Land protection:** Only 30% of the land in Nature Parks is subject to nature conservation laws, usually the more remote or wilder parts, and is under quite severe restrictions. A farmer, for example, must use his land in the traditional way, and will be paid a subsidy for so doing. The remaining 70% is under "cultural landscape" protection. The restrictions are not so severe, but do involve certain requirements in regard to the colour of roofs, for example. In no case is industrial use, such as quarrying, power generation etc., permitted. However light, farm-based enterprises, such as added-value farm or forest products, are encouraged. All nature parks are in the area of "cultural landscape".

There is no restriction on forest harvesting, but traditional forest management is strictly adhered to. There is no felling of large areas, due to risk of avalanches and the long term sustainability of the forest. Clear felling is in small sections, and in most cases by selection of suitable individual trees. In consequence all forests are of mixed age, and there are no tangled scars on the landscape.

**Landscape issues:** The high alpine meadows, which are rich in a unique flora and fauna and are of great scientific and cultural importance, were created over centuries of farming practice of summer grazing of a special breed of cattle suited to those areas, and to a lesser extent by wandering shepherds who followed the cattle with their sheep flocks, and

penetrated to even more remote areas. These practices prevented the intrusion of scrub. Reforestation was limited to replacement of felled timber, and the intensive use of forest saplings for fencing and other uses by the farmers. Due to the current changing economic situation this system of farming is disappearing and the meadows are under threat of reverting to forest. Nature Parks are supporting and encouraging schemes which will assist farmers to ensure the long term viability of these important landscapes.

It seems clear that the traditional form of landscape management is not, of itself, sustainable, and requires subsidisation in some form to ensure its continuance. Motivation for so doing is partly aesthetic, partly concern for heritage, but also economic insofar as Austrian tourism depends to a very large extent on the traditional nature of Austrian landscape and buildings.

In general we found very few full time farmers operating in the Nature Parks. Most had other sources of income. Where an additional enterprise was farm based, whether as a tourist service, a forest business, or the adding of value to farm produce, the land and the environs were well cared for: better usually than where the farm owner's additional source of income involved employment away from home.

The main problem seems to be that due to the drift from the land, because of the labour involved in the management of sheep and cows, farming land becomes neglected and invaded by scrub, or deliberately planted for forestry. Generally it is felt that there is enough land under trees (close to 50% of the country), and an objective in a nature park would be to try to keep the land in production as farm land.

**Tracks and trails:** Everywhere there is a network of tracks and trails through private land, and there is complete freedom to roam. There is little or no abuse of this freedom. The creation of new tracks will occur only with the agreement of the landowner. Mountain biking and horse riding are usually restricted to designated areas, and may involve payment. In non-designated areas these activities can only be engaged in with consent of the landowners. Tracks and trails are generally maintained by local tourist organisations. Landowners have a liability for the safety of tracks, but are indemnified by the Government. The old inter-community routes are cherished.

**Nature Parks:** The first nature parks in Austria were established in 1962, and were for the purpose of protecting the recreational landscape in the environs of Vienna. For a long period thereafter there were very few parks, and the main period of expansion was in the late 1990s and early 2000s. To-day there are 44 parks ranging in size from 65 Sq. Km to a mere 20 hectares. They also vary widely in the form of governance, and in their local objectives. Still, only 3% of the country is in nature parks, whereas the equivalent figure in Germany is 28%.

The parks have no relation to the National Parks, which are large areas of virtually uninhabited landscape, controlled by the provincial governments together with the federal government and subject to very strict conditions.

Overall objectives: The overall objectives of the parks are stated as –

- The protection of the landscape;
- Education;

- Recreation;
- Regional development.

It is the intention that each of these four objectives is given an equal status with the others.

In connection with Regional Development, in addition to any local branding schemes, there is a Nature Park brand scheme, participated in by 20 parks, for the establishment of a high quality guarantee. Under this scheme, products must be produced in a Nature Park (in an area of "cultural landscape"), and production must respect the landscape. Quality is controlled by the controlling bodies of the organic farmers association or the organisation of direct selling farmers. This is a Leader programme.

Legal status: The parks are given legal status under provincial laws. In most of the provinces visited, they can be set up only on lands which are already designated as "protected landscapes". However, in many cases, for the purpose of consolidating a park area, the "protected landscape" designation has been extended to include contiguous areas, or to infill gaps.

Management and staff: Each park is managed by a park manager or director, who reports to a committee. In the smaller parks this committee can be simply the mayors of whatever communities are involved. In the larger parks the committee is likely to involve representatives of tourist organisations and farming organisations, with, sometimes, two or three directly elected community members. The structure of the governing body varies in each park: the only factor in common is that they are all based on local communities, and there is no imposition of government-nominated members.

The staff is usually minimal. In the smaller parks it may consist of the park director only. The reasons that this is possible appear to be –

- The intimate and supportive relationship between the parks and the local mayors and their staff, so that staff and office facilities are often shared;
- The use of contractors on projects.

Curiously, the use of volunteers appears to be minimal, except that in some cases a cadre of volunteer guides has been established. Holiday work parties, for example, appear to be rare.

Financing: The budget for the Nature Parks Association is €250,000, paid by the provincial governments, the amount depending to some extent on the number of parks served. The Association attracts about €700,000 in project monies.

70% of the funding of individual parks is borne by provincial governments, and is probably, to a large extent, a funnelling from EU sources. The remaining 30% is locally engendered.

Supervision of operation: Parks are left very much to their own devices, supervision from outside being minimal. Since the majority financing comes from the provincial governments, there is the *potential* of withdrawal should reports of malpractice emerge, but this seems never to have happened.

In some provinces (e.g. Carinthia) the Department for Nature Protection plans to introduce an "audit" every ten years, but this is just an intention at the moment.

Community interface: The inclusion of any area within a park is at the option of local people. In some provinces visited, individual landowners can opt out, and the park maps indicate the areas so excluded. In other provinces local communities vote as a whole for inclusion or exclusion, and all the area within the competence of any communities voting in favour is then included. There is a tendency for very large landowners to seek exclusion, presumably because they wish to retain total control.

Apart from these large landowners, and also hunters who tend to oppose Nature Parks because they do not favour more recreational users in the countryside where they hunt, there is very widespread popular acceptance of the parks. Initially there have been suspicions that the parks might impose unacceptable restraints; but these anxieties have mostly dissipated after experience of the actual operation of the parks. There are probably a number of reasons for this:

1. The parks have seldom imposed restraints in excess of those already existing under land or habitat designations, and are not involved in planning decisions;
2. The parks have actively encouraged local development, the marketing of local produce (e.g. by local branding), and the promotion of tourism and recreational pursuits. It is claimed that 30% of tourists come to an area because of the existence of a park.
3. The parks have been a medium for attracting project money from Leader, and from the various EU schemes;
4. There is an element of pride in being included in a park;
5. The parks have served as a catalyst for communal enterprise.

There appears to be an opinion that inclusion in a park has no effect one way or the other on land values.

As indicated above, the governance of the parks heavily involves local communities.

**Implications for Ireland:** The foregoing report highlights the considerable differences between conditions in Ireland and those in Austria, particularly in regard to local democracy, forest management, existence of free-roam trails and tracks, and respect for landscape. Nevertheless, having observed the manner in which nature parks are operated, the social circumstances associated with their establishment, their general acceptance by landowners and the public, and the benefits that are perceived in the areas in which they are sited, we are of the opinion that a network of similar organisations would be to the benefit of Ireland generally, and particularly to the areas in which they might be established: areas of special natural attraction, of scientific importance, or of traditional aspects (customs or artifacts) worthy of conservation. The potential benefits, in the light of the Austrian experience, might include –

- The existence of a structure through which funding could be facilitated;
- Increase in tourism potential;
- Encouragement of derivative small industry, or other economic activity, through branding and sales promotion;
- Greater social integration;
- Educational promotion, in the appreciation of nature and of traditional values.

- Greater protection against inappropriate development;
- Local employment, through contracted work etc.
- Encouragement of more vibrant, living communities.

We therefore propose the following:

- 1. Minister Gormley's proposals in regard to the election of local county mayors, with the devolution of certain powers to their office should be supported.**
- 2. Responsible local democracy should be encouraged, with the introduction of legislation promoting the establishment of councils at parish or village level, and the devolution to them of certain significant powers relating to local affairs.**
- 3. National legislation should be introduced to regulate all protected landscape, including national parks, and including the enablement of nature parks or community parks (i.e IUCN Category 5 parks).**
- 4. The principle of each landowner voluntarily choosing inclusion or exclusion from involvement in community nature parks should be accepted, and incorporated in any legislation instituted in pursuance of the previous paragraph.**
- 5. The overall objectives of community nature parks should give equal emphasis to the four following –**
  - Economic development.**
  - Education**
  - Heritage conservation**
  - Recreation**
- 6. National landscape categorisation, having regard to (a) the nature of the landscape, and (b) the usage of the landscape, should be encouraged.**
- 7. The selection of potential areas for the introduction of community nature parks should have regard to the foregoing landscape categorisation, as a major ingredient in the process.**
- 8. In the meantime the establishment of a pilot community nature park should be considered, in an area of sensitive landscape where local acceptance of the concept might be anticipated – the Burren would seem to be one of the most likely areas. Prior to the establishment of such a park, those in the area interested in the venture should be funded to carry out a study visit (similar to the visit reported on herein) to nature parks in Europe, as for example the Regional Nature Parks in France.**

**Next steps:** The first immediate next step is to submit this report to the Heritage Council, and to seek dialogue with that body on the implications of the report, and action which might be taken consequent thereto.

Secondly, the report should be submitted to the Minister for the Environment, and his support sought for (a) the establishment of local councils; (b) the introduction of legislation as envisaged in Par 3 of the previous section; and (c) a programme aimed at creating a network of nature parks.

Thirdly, discussion should be commenced initially with Burrenbeo, or such other group as seems appropriate, with a view to setting up a pilot nature park.

*Note: The final report including a brief description of each of the Nature Parks visited will be available from Helen Lawless, Wicklow Uplands Council ([hlawless@wicklowuplands.ie](mailto:hlawless@wicklowuplands.ie)) in September 2008.*