

# **Submission to the public consultation on extension of the Western Rail Corridor**

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## 1. Introduction

Ballyglunin Railway Restoration Project welcomes the inclusion by the Government in the Capital Plan of Phases 2 and 3 of the Western Rail Corridor linking Galway and Mayo, and we acknowledge that the railway will play a vital role in:

- Providing transport for workers in Galway city,
- Enabling greater access to education facilities and healthcare facilities
- Encouraging tourists to explore the wider western region with its many untapped tourism resources,
- Benefiting commercial enterprise.
- Allowing the development of Ballyglunin station as a major heritage tourism attraction

We are confident that the independent review of the potential of the railway in the context of the Atlantic Economic Corridor will confirm the major contribution that the railway can make in terms of regional connectivity, linking Galway city with its natural hinterland in line with the National Planning Framework.

Linking Westport, Ballina, Castlebar, Claremorris and Tuam by rail to Galway will have an enormous impact allowing direct rail travel to and from Limerick and Cork offering tourists proper access to the west and north-west for the first time which would help to balance the spread of tourists over the region as opposed to a concentration in Galway city as exists at present.

## 2. Background

The Ballyglunin Station is situated 12km south of Tuam, and 14km north of the Athenry on the Western Rail Corridor. It is strategically located relative to the intersection of the M17 (Tuam to Limerick) motorway and the N63 (Roscommon to Galway). In addition the station is centrally located relative to the Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Hidden Heartlands and the Atlantic Economic Corridor.

The station, ancillary buildings and the site surrounding them represent an outstanding example of a typical late 19th Century Railway Station. The platform follows a standard pattern of station buildings used on the Sligo to Limerick line by the Great Southern and Western Railways engineers and builders.

In 1951, the Ballyglunin Railway Station featured prominently in the John Forde film, 'The Quiet Man'. The film has gained iconic status on a global stage and as a result the station is visited on a daily basis by tourists from across the world.

In 2004 the community came together to protect and conserve the station and later in 2012 the Ballyglunin Railway Restoration Project Charity, a limited company, was established. The objective is to restore and develop the station and its wider environs so that it can be enjoyed by visitors and the local community and consequently add value to the regional economy.

## 3. Supporting sustainable society through rail transport

Railway is well recognised as an environmentally superior mode of transport when compared with road based transport. Ireland is in the midst of a climate emergency which requires a whole of

society response to threat that climate change presents. Ireland is also awakening to the threats presented by particular emissions from diesel powered forms of transport.

The people of Ballyglunin want to see development of low carbon transport infrastructure that reduces travel times, emissions and improves the quality of life for people in the region. Galway City has been ranked as one of the most congested cities in Ireland. The recent opening of the Tuam to Gort motorway has in no way helped this situation. As a result commuters are spending more time in their cars and less time in their communities. This is having a direct impact on rural society.

**Key benefits:**

- An electrified rail transport service connecting the West of Ireland will have enormous benefits for society across Ireland.
- Attempting to access facilities work ,education hospitals in Galway on a daily basis is at crisis point a rail service would help to overcome this problem
- With rail transport commuters, can enjoy a higher quality of life while reducing their impact on the environment and in turn reduced the existing congestion in Galway City.
- Urban based tourists will no longer have to own a car and typical two car families can reduce to a single (electric) car.
- enable the dispersal of tourists to other areas in the region
- Development of commuter belt alongside the Western Rail Corridor leading to less urbanisation and development of smart villages.
- Large companies across the world recognise that quality of life is crucial to attracting the brightest and best talent. By creating an efficient transport corridor throughout the west and in collaboration with initiatives from the Atlantic Economic Corridor, the West of Ireland will be positioned to be an extremely attractive place for companies to locate their business and consequently driving regional economic development.
- Providing access to essential services to senior citizens and those who are affected by rural isolation.

## 4. Supporting sustainable tourism through rail

The tourism potential of Ballyglunin, Athenry and Tuam has been well documented. Galway City is an established venue for event tourism e.g. Galway Races, Galway International Arts Festival, Film Fleadh, Oyster Festival. However, eastern part of the county has endless untapped potential from a tourism perspective.

In 2018, the Ballyglunin Railway Restoration Project commissioned international heritage consultant and former director of the Hunt Museum Limerick, Dr Hugh Maguire, to complete a study on the future of the station. He concluded that the station has enormous heritage value which should be exploited as a regional heritage attraction. A further study by Zena Hctor archaeologist identified 250 sites of historic interest in the area further demonstrating the enormous wealth of heritage in the locality with the potential for tourism and diversification of the local rural economy.

We believe that the extension of the Western Rail Corridor offers the potential to develop a much needed major tourism attraction for the West of Ireland that would cater to all age groups. The attraction would be based around route that retells the story of steam transport in Ireland while visiting some of Ireland's most historic towns – Athenry, Ballyglunin and Tuam and also providing

access to Cong and Ashford linking with the Quiet man film as well as Westport and other destinations in Mayo.

Of the top 40 most visited tourism attractions in Ireland according Failte Ireland, the top two in the West are Kylemore Abbey and Connemara National Park. Turlough Park or Ballycroy National Park in Mayo do not feature on this list. Access by rail would create connectivity and a movement of tourists from an already well supplied Galway City. 92% of tourists rate our scenery and hospitality as important in choosing Ireland as destination. Rail transport would allow urban tourists to visit special places of scenic interest as well as allowing the opportunity to consider other options in the future. Tourist numbers visiting the West of Ireland (Galway Mayo and Roscommon) in 2018 reached 3.2 M of which 2.5 million came to Galway. A train service to Mayo is essential to help with the dispersal of those tourists if we are to avoid a mass tourism product in Galway city which will cause tourist to go elsewhere. Places like Venice have now to reappraise their overcrowded and exploited mass tourism product.

**Key benefits:**

- In line with Failte Ireland strategic objectives - diversification of tourism attractions and a wider experiences in the West of Ireland is essential
- Increased economic activity along the Western Rail Corridor can be achieved through tourism development
- The potential for Green Tourism is enormous. For example the unpolluted night sky experience at Ballycroy attracts international tourists for that special experience
- People bring their values with them on holidays and this includes their environmental values. The green image which Ireland is promoting with our food products will in the future include transport.
- Greater connectivity will help with the concentration of tourists in the city of Galway and increase bednight stays in hotels and guest houses in the region.
- Proliferation of tourism activities benefiting the regional economy (net export from Ireland).
- Exploiting the potential of Ireland West and Shannon International Airports.
- Diversification of rural economy away from primary agriculture.
- Provide a tourism infrastructure that appeals to less mobile tourism market.

## 5. Conclusion

Ballyglunin Railway Restoration Project welcomes the review of the extension of the Western Rail Corridor. Our group represents a widely held view that the development of the phase 2 and 3 of the WRC will support the development of a vibrant, sustainable rural economy in the region. We also view such a development as positioning the West of Ireland for a low carbon future which would act as an example of best practice in balanced regional development. The Western Rail Corridor is a critical piece of infrastructure which must be exploited to its full potential through the development of new and innovative rail services that meet the needs of society, business and tourism.