



Advisory Note 5
Paddling Trail Guidelines

DRAFT

Prepared by Outdoor Recreation NI on behalf of the Blueway Partnership

Grading & Suitability

Blueway Paddling Trails should be primarily be appropriate for the 'dabbler' or 'novice' i.e. those that have little to no skills or prior experience in undertaking adventure activities. However, it is recognised that Blueways will also attract more experienced paddlers and it is not unreasonable to have sections of water within the Blueway experience that provide a higher degree of challenge. Where this is part of the Blueway product there should be **very clear information** that the product is geared for more experienced paddlers **or** on suitably guided trips by accredited providers.

The Blueways partnership is proposing that developers adopt a clear approach to communication on the type of water to be encountered coded as per the information below



Also there should be very clear descriptions in any text that highlights right at the start the difficulty that is like to be encountered and what experience is needed to paddle this section.

Therefore, Blueway paddling trails should be developed as follows:

Rivers

Ideally, Blueways will be developed on simple rivers (that are classed by canoeists as grade 1) but may encompass short sections of more challenging water (that is classed by canoeists as grade). The Blueways partnership recognise that all waters have an element of risk and this is mitigated through experience, skill levels of participants, appropriate equipment, qualified and competent leadership and knowledge. It is recognised that novices can fairly easily negotiate simple waters without any guiding or being led and that under appropriate leadership novices can also enjoy paddling more challenging waters. Above grade 2 requires the paddler to have some level of personal experience and skill.

Simple waters: "The water is stationary or slow moving, there are small riffles and waves and few if any obstructions that are easily avoided. Paddlers need little or no skill to manoeuvre in such conditions and if they make a mistake there are minimal consequences" (Grade 1 water)

Challenging waters: "The way down a river is clear but simple obstructions do exist. Small recirculating waves and drops can be present. There are places where the flow accelerates but there is a clear choice of routes. Paddlers do need to be guided or have sufficient experience that they can effectively control their boats to line up to paddle over the drops or negotiate obstacles" (grade 2 water)

Where there are sections of challenging waters some basic principles apply:

1. There must be clear information in any guides, maps, panels about the type of water that will be encountered and information on whether this section is within the participant's skill level.
2. There must be good signage in the lead up to any section of challenging water and also good egress points so that the section can be portaged or avoided.
3. There should be opportunities to access suitably competent and accredited guides or instructors to lead people on these sections.
4. Developers should liaise with Canoeing Ireland/Canoe Association of N. Ireland on the classification of any rivers.

NOTE: The grading of rivers is not an exact science and usually a grading is reached on the consensus of a number of experienced paddlers. It is therefore somewhat subjective and should be used with some caution.

Man-made weirs do not fall under a river grading system and have many inherent risks. They are rarely designed with recreation in mind and function to manage water levels or reduce flow but also occasionally for fish counting. Weirs are usually classed as "safe" or "dangerous." There are a range of factors in this including height, steepness, uniformity, and shape. Under high water flows many "safe" weirs can become dangerous and **generally weirs need to be treated with extreme caution.**

All weirs on Blueways must be very clearly signed and also be easily portaged.

Where any weirs are being upgraded it is ideal for the developer to engage with the agency and consider the creation of canoe slides

Canals (Simple paddling trails)

Canals are generally relatively safe and very sheltered waterways with minimal flowing water, have controlled depth and are designed for navigation. The greater risk is where there is still a lot of other motor boat usage and also where bank access is limited. For any lock gates there should be good access for paddlers (see landing stage heights).

Lakes

There is a huge range of lakes across the island of Ireland from Loughs Neagh and Corrib as the largest through to small scale ponds and inter-drumlin lakes.

Small lakes are defined as those that are no broader than 250m from shore to shore and are therefore very sheltered and could therefore be categorised as simple trails. However, it is recognised that Blueways may include sections of larger lakes (Lough Allen and Derg are good examples as part of the Shannon). Large lakes need to be considered in like manner to coastal waters (other than issues of tides) and one of the key principles is that there would be easy egress from the water. All larger lakes should be categorised as challenging trails. However, it is recognised that there may be small enclosed bays within these lakes that are suitable as "stay and play" locations that are more simple waters.

There needs to be good information provided to users about the associated risks especially in any specific wind directions.

The Sea

Being an island, it is recognised that the coastline is one of our most important assets. While the Blueways concept was originally designed for inland water ways it is inevitable that some coastal Blueways will be developed. While our coast can be a fantastic place for recreation and water sports the level of risk is inevitably higher and so any coastal Blueways need to be carefully thought through and managed. All coastal Blueways should be classed as challenging trails

Sea conditions are dependent on many factors including:

- fetch (the distance over which the wind has blown) and resultant swell
- wind strength
- duration the wind has been blowing
- depth of water
- nature of shore line including landing zones
- currents
- tide
- air and water temperature

Blueways should be focused on very sheltered tidal water where there is minimal possibility of being blown offshore. This can include enclosed harbours with a minimum of commercial traffic, enclosed on three sides, small enclosed bays, defined beaches (a short section of beach with easy landing throughout and that isn't exposed to Atlantic swell) and the upper reaches of some suitable, slow moving, estuaries.

Coastal Blueways should not include areas where there are strong tidal currents of more than 2 knots and where the coastline does not facilitate easy landings (i.e. cliffs).

There needs to be good information provided to users about the associated risks especially in offshore breezes. **Coastal Blueways must be orientated towards more experienced paddlers or to those who will be led by a competent provider.**

Paddle sport providers who operate in coastal waters need to be specifically trained and hold a recognised qualification to operate on the sea.

Route / Trail:

- A Blueway paddling trail must have a series of defined access / egress points
- Distance between access and egress points should generally be no more than 3km.
- All sections of the waterway must be unobstructed and passable
- Any significant hazards or obstructions must have a clear portage option with associated access and egress points

Access / Egress Points:

Trailheads

These will be the formal of entry and the main locations at which visitors are encouraged to access / egress the waterway

- On a linear river trail this will often be at the most logical upstream and downstream location – bookending the other access points.

- On coastal and inland lake trails – the majority of Blueway excursions will be circular. However, there may be a number of trailheads from which to begin and end a journey.

These trailheads will therefore have the highest volume of use and should adhere to the following minimum criteria (further guidance is provided in Appendix 4.1):

- Parking
 - Off-road parking for a recommended minimum of 10 spaces (including space for trailers)¹
 - No Parking / Loading Bay in close proximity to water
- Information Panel – see Signage
- Toilets and Changing Facilities
- Fresh water tap
- Formal staging area i.e. a hard surface staging area (min 3m x 3m) out with the car park to allow gathering of equipment and preparation
- Unrestricted and easy access from parking to water access
- Water access infrastructure should be fit for purpose, robust and safe at all points of water level
- Consideration of the requirements of activity operators

Access and Egress Points

Secondary access and egress points should adhere to the following minimum criteria (further guidance is provided in Appendix 4.1):

- Parking
 - Off-road parking for a recommended minimum of 5 spaces (including space for trailers)²
- Information Panel – see Signage
- Formal staging area i.e. a hard surface staging area (min 3m x 3m) out with the car park to allow gathering of equipment and preparation
- Unrestricted and easy access from parking to water access
- Water access infrastructure should be fit for purpose, robust and safe at all points of water level

Signage

See Appendix 7

¹ The Blueway Developer is tasked with determining the scale of the trailhead required

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