

JOINT OIREACHTAS COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC PETITIONS AND THE OMBUDSMEN

Public Petition Number P00030/23 “Create a walking and cycling greenway on the closed railway from Sligo to Athenry” from Western Rail Trail

Chairman, members of the committee,

Thank you for your invitation to attend the committee today, to discuss the Public Petition relating to a walking and cycling greenway on the closed railway from Sligo to Athenry. Can I relay to the committee the apologies of our Chief Executive Jim Meade, who was unavailable today.

In addressing the matter raised under this public petition, I propose to address Iarnród Éireann’s policy generally as it relates to greenways and other alternative uses of disused rail alignments, and how this specifically applies to the Sligo to Athenry alignment.

Iarnród Éireann wants to see the role of rail in meeting the transport needs of our country expand. We believe that we are about to embark on the most significant expansion of our rail network in generations, and the draft All Island Strategic Rail Review outlines the strategic pathway we will take up to 2050.

As the draft AISRR has been jointly developed by the Department of Transport in Ireland and Department for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland, this illustrates that it is, ultimately, public policy which will determine the likelihood for specific alignments to be developed.

Therefore, with our colleagues in CIÉ Group Property, we have in the past licensed alternative uses for closed or disused rail alignments where there is no realistic prospect in the policy timeframe which has been defined for the reestablishment of rail on such an alignment.

Examples of alignments which remain in the ownership of CIÉ, but which have been licensed to local authorities for use as a Greenway include:

- Navan to Kingscourt
- Athlone to Mullingar
- Midleton to Youghal
- Rathkeale to Abbeyfeale

Our policy indicates a preference that the relevant local authority should be directly involved in the development of the alternative use.

These examples we’ve supported in the past do have clear benefits :

- It protects the alignment from adverse possession, and ensures that it is fully maintained should there be a future requirement to reinstate rail services
- It provides a public amenity in public ownership through the development of a leisure facility
- It transfers the costs of maintenance and upkeep to the local authority, ensuring that Iarnród Éireann can focus its resources on the operational rail network.

Crucially, however, we have established license arrangements which state that – should a requirement for the alignment to be used for rail operations emerge at any point in the future – a six month notice clause can be invoked to cancel the license so that the alignment can revert to our control for the purposes of developing and delivering rail services.

To bring this general outlook to the specifics of the Athenry to Sligo.

This alignment has been closed to rail services since 1975 between Claremorris and Collooney, and since 1997 between Athenry and Claremorris, both latterly freight-only lines. However, there has been active consideration by Government departments and agencies of the potential for various sections of the alignment to be re-established as a rail line over recent years, as part of a Western Rail Corridor.

Most recently, the draft All-Island Strategic Rail Review has indicated that the Review supports the re-establishment of rail services on the Athenry to Claremorris section, but does not include Claremorris to Collooney.

With Athenry to Claremorris indicated as commencing within this decade, clearly this will be reestablished as a rail line.

We would of course ultimately wish to see the reestablishment of rail services between Claremorris and Collooney also.

However, heretofore this has not been included within indicated public policy positions.

As a result, Iarnród Éireann and CIÉ Group Property has engaged with both Mayo County Council and Sligo County Council on alternative uses for the alignment, in the context of that license condition which would see it revert to us with six months notice.

Mayo County Council has established a Velorail operation over a 10-mile section of the alignment centred on Kiltimagh Station. The current licence runs to March 2030, with the six-month notice clause applying.

Separately, Sligo County Council has indicated it wishes to develop a Greenway between Collooney and Bellaghy on the county border. Iarnród Éireann has facilitated these studies and, subject to the draft All-Island Rail Review being confirmed, will engage with Sligo County Council on the matter.

Should Sligo County Council secure the necessary funding and approvals to progress this project, it will be clear that it is solely on the condition that a license will issue with a six-month clause should its reestablishment as a railway be supported.

I trust this clarifies our position, and I am happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.

Barry Kenny, Head of Corporate Communications, Iarnród Éireann