

North South and Cross Border Public Sector Training  
Programme

*Project Title:*

*Middletown to Monaghan  
‘A Social Economic Study of the  
benefits of the proposed reopening of  
the Ulster Canal’*

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## Middletown to Monaghan

### 'A Social Economic study of the benefits of the proposed reopening of the Ulster Canal'

#### **1.1 Project Overview:**

The reopening of the Ulster Canal is a high profile North - South capital project. There is widespread interest from both the community and public sector, North and South of the Border, in the possible reopening of the Canal which would be symbolic in creating a North South link between both communities.

The Blackwater Partnership has recently secured Interreg Funding to compile a socio economic study of the effects of the possible reopening of the Ulster Canal. This will be a major piece of work. As our project title indicates, we have chosen a specific part of the canal, between Middletown and Monaghan town, some 10kms which straddles the border with Northern Ireland. Our objective is to focus on the value added to the local economy and community interests in Middletown and Monaghan arising from the possible reopening of the canal. The scope of our project has been confined by geographical boundaries and relates specifically to social and economic issues. This will complement the work to be undertaken by the Blackwater Partnership.

While researching the project, we felt it would be appropriate to look at other similar examples of how the development of a stretch of inland waterway had brought social and economic benefits to a specific area. We have included therefore, a brief case study on the effects of the reopening of the Shannon Erne Waterway on the town and surrounding area of Ballinamore, Co. Leitrim.

**Our Project is divided into a number of sections:**

- 1.1 Project Overview – outlined above
- 1.2 Methodology and research carried out
- 1.3 The Ulster Canal – A Brief History
- 1.4 Middletown to Monaghan – Assessment of the impact of the reopening of this section of the Ulster Canal
- 1.5 Case Study – The Ballinamore ‘success’ storey
- 1.6 Can this success be replicated?
- 1.7 Summary and Conclusions



*Section of the Ulster Canal, between Middletown and Monaghan*

**1.2 Methodology and research carried out:**

To date much research and documentation has been published relating to the reopening of the Ulster Canal. As our project has focused on one discrete part of the canal, it necessitated a significant amount of research and trawling of documentation to refine the relevant information and present it in a concise and interesting manner. Part of our research included two field trips, one to the Ulster Canal between Middletown and Monaghan and one to Ballinamore, Co. Leitrim. Michael, in consultation with Godfrey McCartney, of the Blackwater Partnership gained valuable insight and information into the history, background and current situation regarding the Ulster Canal. He also made a field trip to the canal between Middletown and Monaghan. Caroline visited Ballinamore and carried out a number of interviews with locals to get first hand knowledge of their experience of the reopening of the Shannon Erne Waterway in Ballinamore.

### **1.3 The Ulster Canal – A Brief History**

The Ulster Canal was opened in 1841 and it formed a major strategic link between the Waterways of Ireland linking Lough Neagh to Lough Erne. The canal is approximately 93 kms long, with some 26 locks and extends from the river Blackwater at Charlemont in County Armagh, to Wattlebridge on the River Finn in County Fermanagh. The canal passes through, or close to a number of small towns and villages including, Charlemont, Moy, Blackwater, Benburb, Milltown, Caledon, Tynan, Middletown, Monaghan, Smithboro and Clones.

The canal was relatively unsuccessful mainly because its locks were too narrow and coupled with inadequate water supply it suffered from lack of commercial use and went into decline in the early 1900's. It was abandoned in 1931 and has been deteriorating since then. However, the Ulster Canal remains a valuable asset with immense cultural and historical significance. Reopening of the canal for recreational and tourism purposes would benefit all the communities it touches. The six metre wide waterway boasts 56 intact single apron masonry arch bridges and there are other structures such as 'Lockkeepers' houses and canal stores dotted along the canal corridor, which provide significant enrichment to the cultural landscape.

A number of feasibility studies have been carried out assessing the potential economic and social benefits of the reopening of the entire canal and gauging costs involved. It is envisaged that the project would cost some £90 million, split 50:50 between both jurisdictions. The project would take approximately 7 years and once complete, operational and maintenance costs would amount to an estimated £800,000 per annum, with a recommended £100,000 investment required for marketing purposes in the years immediately following its opening.

Notwithstanding this, reopening of the canal would constitute a large engineering project which would provide significant inherent benefits in the areas of tourism and economic development. Its strategic value would lie in its contribution to rural development in a disadvantaged area of the Border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and in its key linkages within Ireland's existing 1000kms inland waterway network.

#### **1.4 Middletown to Monaghan – Assessment of the impact of the reopening of this section of the Ulster Canal**

The stretch of the canal between Monaghan and Middletown is some ten kilometres long and flows through 9 Locks. The socio-economic ‘landscape’ of the local area is quite diverse, ranging from a small cross border village, Middletown, through rural countryside and farmland and rising to enter and pass through the ‘Hub’ town of Monaghan town at Lock 17. Though only a relatively short section of the canal, the economic and social dividends which may accrue from the reopening of this section of the canal may be substantial, and moreover, it may benefit a broad spectrum of the community both North and South of the border.

Middletown is a small village in Northern Ireland. The village comprises a main street area with a cross roads at the eastern end. There are a number of small housing developments on the approach roads to the village. Service provision in the village is quite limited, comprising a small supermarket, post office, restaurant, public house and a small amenity area and playing field just outside the village. The hallmarks of the North South divide and those associated with a ‘border crossing’ are evident and dominate this small village. While the village itself does have basic service provision, the physical demeanour and general environment and surrounds of the village are in need of substantial upgrading and improvement, to entice people to ‘stop off’ and spend some time here.

Though the village itself is lacking in many services there exists much development potential. It could in fact capitalise on its strategic location as a cross border point and focus on this unique feature, where ‘North meets South’. Middletown also has good road links to Armagh and Monaghan for people wishing to access the canal at this point. A large stone Market House and Court House add to the character of the town and could be redeveloped into an information/heritage centre. The reopening of the canal would provide the impetus to develop a range of services and facilities in the town. Land based recreation activities in and around the town would help to build a sustainable tourism product by encouraging people to stop off and spend some time in the area, thus generating economic spin off.

From a social perspective the impact of the reopening of the canal while difficult to quantify in monetary terms, would also have a very positive effect. Middletown, like many other border villages has suffered economic and social degeneration over the past three decades. Absence of economic investment impinges on social development, which can in turn lead to a sense of ‘fatigue’. Undoubtedly the reopening of the canal would provide the cohesive force to bring this community together, to add value to the community through a cross border project and instil a great sense of civic pride in this area. This ‘feel good factor’ is something which is impossible to ‘cost’ and in many cases can have an even greater reward for the community to which it applies.

As the canal leaves Middletown and makes its way towards Monaghan it travels almost entirely through rural unspoilt countryside. Substantial parts of the canal here have deteriorated significantly and are in need of major refurbishment. This does not mean however, that the economic and social rewards from a reopening of the canal here are lessened. In fact the potential here is quite considerable as it would ‘open the flood gates’ for rural enterprise development currently absent in the area. This is particularly important in an area where a declining agricultural base needs to be supplemented by alternative forms of economic activity.

The possibilities in this regard are endless: cottage industries including cheese making, hand crafted goods, development of cycling and walking paths and nature trails, horse riding and golf to name but a few. Examples from the Shannon Erne Waterway could be replicated; At Swan Island near Ballinamore a pet farm, amenity area and restaurant have been developed and serve as a ‘stop off’ point along the Waterway. Opportunities also arise regarding the development of private berthing facilities along this stretch of the canal and would provide additional income to land owners. At lock No.10 just outside Middletown, a now derelict Lockkeepers house (and bridge) if refurbished, could be transformed into a small heritage/cultural centre, and serve as a ‘stop off’ point along the canal. Similar development potential exists at Lock 17, just outside Monaghan, where a disused Lockkeepers house could be developed along a different theme. Such development, not alone stimulates economic activity, but adds to cultural, amenity and visual impact.



***Picture of part of the canal between Middletown and Monaghan - Many parts of the canal have deteriorated significantly and it is almost indiscernible in some places.***

Rural development opportunities, while generating economic activity, also promote social development and cohesion. This is of particular relevance in an area where communities have been divided by the border. As with urban areas, remote rural areas have also ‘fallen foul’ of the existence of the border and social fabric is in need of repair. The development of the canal would not alone be visually pleasing but also help to build and regenerate communities and enable these communities reach their full potential. Such regeneration encourages people to come and live in these areas, thereby building and consolidating local communities on a long term basis which is positive for local schools, services, businesses etc.



***Part of the Canal between Middletown and Monaghan***

The canal passes through the centre of Monaghan town, which is quite unique in many respects. As the county town, the largest town along the route of the canal and its strategic location on the N2 Dublin to Derry road, Monaghan has a vital role to play in any development along the canal. Monaghan town has also been designated as a ‘Hub’ town, by the Irish Government, in the National Spatial Strategy launched in 2002.

While tourism is not the main economic driver in Monaghan, recent development strategies at both national and county level have placed increased emphasis on the development of a specific tourism project for County Monaghan. In 2002, Monaghan County Development Board in the ‘Strategy for Economic, Social and Cultural Development’, highlighted the fact that tourism in Monaghan is ‘largely underdeveloped’ and that the County has ‘no major tourism flagship project’. It continues on to say that ‘The Peace Process offers the county a unique opportunity to develop a modern sustainable tourism project. The potential exists to develop activity based on holidays in a natural unspoilt landscape in addition to the establishment of a major flagship project, such as the Ulster Canal’.



*Section of the Ulster Canal as it weaves through Monaghan Town. This picture is taken outside the Credit Union Building in the town.*

One of the draw backs to the development of the canal in Monaghan Town is that in many places the route has become indiscernible and in some cases built over by roads and buildings. This problem is not insurmountable and the reopening of this section of the canal, though challenging financially and from an engineering perspective would open up such huge potential for Monaghan Town, in terms of economic prosperity, visual amenity, vitality and prosperity that it would be difficult to fully quantify. Layers off development, including hotels, restaurants, pubs, general retail outlets and a range of service providers would benefit significantly from an increase in tourist numbers. The reopening of the waterway would provide a quality visitor destination and it would also unleash the potential for the development of street back-lands, where a range of accommodation, recreation and other services could be developed and provided for tourists to the town. Adequate mooring/berthing facilities developed in close proximity to the town centre would encourage tourists to stay overnight generating further economic spin off.

While the immediate economic gains relating to the reopening of the canal would accrue to Monaghan town itself, it would also stimulate the development of business and services outside the town some of which have been mentioned earlier: golfing, cycling smaller cottage industries etc. A specific opportunity also exists to focus on health and general 'well being' which ties in well with the peace and solitude associated with canal travel.

The social rewards to be reaped from such development are in some ways more difficult to quantify than those in rural areas. However, large scale capital projects, such as this one require a driving force to sustain momentum and drive further development. It is in this regard where social and community involvement is important and key to the success of the project. People like to be associated with success which instils a sense of pride. This pride is often translated into a positive welcoming atmosphere which is something that no amount of marketing or investment can achieve. Yet again it is that 'feel good factor' that simply exists within an area.

### **Case Study – The Ballinamore ‘success’ story:**

The town of Ballinamore in County Leitrim is home to a population of just under 1,000 people. The town itself is built on the banks of the Shannon Erne Waterway, formally known as the Ballinamore- Ballyconnell Canal. The canal itself was built between 1853 and 1860 but only operated for 9 years. In 1961 the Inland Waterways Association ( IWAI) called for a survey of the canal however, it was three decades later before sufficient community, political and financial support culminated in the reopening of the canal. The canal took five years to reconstruct and was reopened in 1994. The project cost some 33 million euro and was sponsored by the Irish and British Governments, the European Regional Development Fund, the International Fund for Ireland and the ESB.

The development of this Waterway links Ireland’s two most significant waterways, the Shannon and the Erne and has created some 750kms of cruising waterway. Since 1994 over 3,500 boats have gone through the link each year. The number of boating tourists is about 15,000 per season which in economic terms is worth about 14.5 million euro and has generated some 3000 sustainable jobs. Ballinamore, being one of the urban thoroughfares on the canal has benefited significantly from this economic spin off. Prior to the opening of the canal, Ballinamore, like many small urban centres in the Border Region was suffering from population haemorrhage and lack of any significant capital investment. The reopening of the canal has reversed this situation and Ballinamore has been transformed into a bustling urban centre with much of its rejuvenation stemming from the reopening of the canal.



As part of the development of the canal a modern, fully equipped marina was opened in 1994. The Marina which holds 30 boats is currently leased to a French company who are responsible for its upkeep and maintenance. The marina provides an idea stop off point along the canal and generates the economic spin off which has transformed the town over the past decade. The key to this success lies in the fact that facilities have be provided to justify why canal users should stop off at this particular point and be encouraged to stay. In Ballinamore and its surrounding area particular emphasis has been placed on the development of local places of historical interest. A Genealogy Centre has been established to provide a full time professional genealogy service for County Leitrim. A town trail (walking trail) has also been developed and a new children's playground is nearing completion. On visiting the town one is immediately drawn to the obvious range of sign posting for picnic areas, walking trails and areas of historical interest. The town itself has undergone a complete 'facelift', with old style shop fronts adding to the character of the town.



*Marina at Ballinamore Co. Leitrim on Shannon Erne Waterway*

While meeting with the members of the Ballinamore Development Association during our field trip there, we were struck by the immense pride which they took in the development of their town and in particular, the success of the development of the canal. It is obvious that such success would never have materialised were it not for the great sense of community spirit and drive, spearheaded by one or two individuals, who succeeded in getting this project up and running and sustained it since its opening in 1994.

The group which we met also referred to the many changes and diversification in the provision of goods and services which had taken place over the past ten years. Retail outlets are now catering for wide and varied tastes, providing a range of cheeses, wines and barbeque provisions previously unavailable in the town.

In more general terms in the surrounding area the canal itself has eight moorings along the route, each of which has public toilets and picnic facilities. The locks themselves are open between 9am and 9pm. A 'Riverside Barge Company' has also been established from where members of the public can hire out barges. The Ballinamore Development Company also has a number of boats available to hire for shorter trips along the canal. Although most of the tourists here are French, the market continues to expand with increasing numbers travelling from Austria and other parts of Europe. The potential for opening private berthings along the canal has not yet been fully exploited and if managed effectively, could open up a new area of rural diversification for land owners.

The future of Ballinamore looks very positive. Although the spin off from this is quite seasonal ( March to September) continued community spirit and drive, innovative thinking and development have made this part of the Shannon Erne Waterway a great success and a fine example for other 'Inland Waterway' towns to follow. While the economic dividends in Ballinamore are obvious and easy to quantify the social impact is equally important. The town and surrounding area have been transformed with much new housing development which helps regenerate and bring new life to the area. The coming to fruition of this project has brought the community together with a sense of pride and success and continued determination to respond to the needs of changing markets and tastes. While it is often difficult to quantify this type of success and the social dividends stemming from the reopening of the canal, our trip to Ballinamore and surrounding area gave us a real sense of a community with drive, determination and above all pride in their success story.

### **1.5 Can this success be replicated?**

Having examined the positive effects of the reopening of the Shannon Erne Waterway in one specific area, Ballinamore, the question must be asked whether or not this success can be replicated along the stretch of the canal between Middletown and Monaghan. While the geographical makeup of both areas, in terms of population dispersal, social fabric and economic development may not be identical, both areas share a common denominator, the presence of the canal.

**From This.....**



*Ulster Canal, Midway between Middletown and Monaghan*

**To This ? .....**



*Haughton's Shore: Berthing facility on Shannon Erne Waterway, Outside Ballinamore*

In considering the reopening of the canal between Middletown and Monaghan a number of key issues arise. Most of these stem from the experiences of the development of the Shannon Erne Waterway and provide valuable guidance for similar projects.

1. It is imperative that an integrated approach is taken regarding the development of the canal and the tourism product which ensues. It is not sufficient to simply restore the canal in the hope that amenities will eventually follow. There must be an integrated development plan put in place to provide the necessary facilities and amenities to attract and maintain tourists. This would include adequate berthing facilities, development of places of historical and cultural interest, adequate signage and perhaps most importantly, the drafting and implementation of a robust marketing plan, which would be imperative to the success of any project of this nature.
2. Community education and involvement from an early stage, in partnership with the landowners along the route is essential. By applying the ‘bottom up’ approach it instils a sense of ownership in the project, greater commitment by those involved to bring the project to completion and moreover, reinforces the stability of the project.
3. The successful reopening of the Ulster Canal, and in particular, the stretch between Middletown and Monaghan will depend heavily on the close co-operation between the administrative bodies, Government Departments and agencies either side of the border. The Shannon- Erne Waterway and its organisational and development structure has set in place a suitable template which could be replicated in the case of the reopening of the Ulster Canal.

There is no reason why the Ballinamore success storey cannot be replicated. In many ways the redevelopment of the Ulster Canal has a considerable ‘head start’ in that it can learn from the experiences of the Shannon Erne Waterway. The reopening of the stretch of the canal between Middletown and Monaghan would revitalise communities, enhance property and land values along the route, open up considerable potential for farm diversification and rural tourism initiatives, as well as contribute to cultural, heritage and environmental prosperity.

## 1.6 Summary and Conclusions

The reopening of the Shannon Erne Waterway in 1994, which linked the Shannon navigation in the Republic of Ireland with the Erne system in Northern Ireland stimulated significant interest in the reopening of the Ulster Canal. If restored the canal would link the Erne and Shannon systems (which link Limerick, Waterford and Dublin) to Lough Neagh and the Lower Bann systems in Northern Ireland. The route of the canal is in a disadvantaged and long neglected rural area and the section of the canal between Middletown and Monaghan, which we have examined, typifies much of the remainder of the Ulster Canal in terms of geographical and social characteristics.

The economic and social returns arising from the reopening of the canal between Middletown and Monaghan are potentially enormous. The area in question has been devoid of investment in either economic or social infrastructure and is in dire need of a major capital project to boost morale and regenerate faltering communities. The presence of the canal provides the ‘natural’ answer. The restoration of the canal will help revitalise and regenerate communities, stimulate the provision of goods and services currently unavailable, and most importantly, stimulate the development of a thriving sustainable tourism product. While it is easy to evaluate the success of any project in terms of economic or monetary gain there are numerous benefits not readily quantifiable which can be applied to this stretch of the canal.

They include:

- **Community Benefits:** adding value to a community and instilling a sense of pride
- **Regeneration Benefits:** regenerating rural and urban areas in a disadvantaged border area.
- **Heritage and Cultural Benefits:** developing areas of heritage and culture previously dormant e.g. architectural heritage
- **Environmental Benefits:** development and safeguarding of an integral part of the landscape in a managed, inclusive and sustainable way.

In May 2000, Waterways Ireland commissioned ESB International and Ferguson and Mc Ilveen, in conjunction with Tourism Development International and Price Waterhouse Coopers, to update an earlier feasibility study on the Ulster Canal. The final report indicated that the restoration of the canal is feasible. The capital costs of the restoration including land purchase, is estimated at £90 million in 2000 prices. The project would take 7 years to complete and once complete annual operational and maintenance costs would be in the region of £100,000 per annum. An investment of £100,000 in the early years for marketing the waterway was also estimated.

The report did not quantify however, the wider socio economic benefits which would emanate from this project, including the potential to regenerate a disadvantaged cross border area, and the fact that it forms an important strategic link between the waterways North and South of the Border and moreover contribute to the tourism product on the island of Ireland.

The current campaign advocating the reopening of the canal has encountered mixed fortunes. While the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland ( IWAI) failed in their application for £5 million funding to reopen a section of the canal the Blackwater Regional Partnership has recently secured Interreg funding to carry out a socio economic study of the possible reopening of the Ulster Canal. The absence of current political and economic support for the project further compounds the situation. The reopening of the Ulster Canal would appear therefore, to be haunted by the same problems which resulted in its closure in 1931, a lack of financial and political commitment.

The future of the Ulster Canal is uncertain at present. Its reopening is challenged by engineering, financial and political constraints. The British and Irish Governments do not regard it as an economic priority. Despite this, it is difficult to ignore the economic and social dividends which would accrue from its redevelopment, even in the short stretch of the canal we have focused on between Middletown and Monaghan.

*We wish to acknowledge, with many thanks, the advice and assistance which we received, during the compilation of our Project, from Mr Godfrey McCartney of the Blackwater Partnership and also the Ballinamore Development Association ( in particular, Mr Kieran Smith, Mr Sadie Mc Govern and Mr Damien Prior).*

***Included below are a number of pictures taken during the field trip to Ballinamore and its surrounding area:***

