



Keep Ireland Open thanks Sadhbh O’Neill for permission to share her excellent article on the importance and pleasures of walking published in the Irish Times on May 23rd

**Walking can be transformative and should not be a luxury
It should be possible for everyone of every age and ability to enjoy their surroundings on foot**

Possibly the worst consequence of car dependency is the ensuing loss of freedom and independence for children. Growing up in 1970s Dublin, children played on the streets everywhere and in most homes the six-channel TV was rationed to some degree. We passed the time playing hopscotch or football. We invented elaborate variations of games, we argued over turn-taking and rules. We went to places we shouldn’t have and learned how to take risks, mostly without getting caught or hurt. We explored the edges of our known world and learned to notice what was around us.

This could be dismissed as rose-tinted nostalgia, but by not paying attention to what we have lost, we are normalising both autogeddon and dull and uneventful childhoods. From the perspective of human history, the severance brought about by designing everything around cars is profoundly abnormal. Today, it is rare to see children play on the street.

In 2022, just a quarter of primary school-aged children travelled to school on foot, a fall from 45 per cent in 1986. While this figure is now increasing, according to Sport Ireland research just 15 per cent of children are meeting the recommended physical activity guidelines of one hour of moderate-to-vigorous activity per day.

The tragedy is not just the lack of exercise and the long-term health burdens on entire generations. Loss of opportunities for unorganised physical activity represents an incalculable loss of freedom and independence. We have created a world that is drowning out our human need for physical movement – for fresh air, walking, running and playing.

The fantasy landscapes of endless freedom offered in car advertisements require the frames of reference for children to shrink accordingly: they move in metal boxes between concrete boxes, and the outside world is compartmentalised and unexplored with parks and playgrounds now places to be “visited”. With speed and convenience, we have sacrificed something of ourselves that is necessarily slow and scaled to our ability to absorb and interpret our surroundings. As the writer and activist Rebecca Solnit puts it, thinking is done best at three miles per hour.

Given the fact that all of us move around on foot or by wheeling (buggies, wheelchairs and mobility aids) for at least part of every journey we make, making our communities walkable seems like an obvious way to improve our general wellbeing. Dublin City Council is nonetheless the only local authority in Ireland with a dedicated walking plan. The plan aims to increase the current modal share for walking from 11 per cent to 13 per cent by 2028 but implementation will require dedicated budgets for walking as well as road space reallocation, enough to tempt any populist political candidate into opposition.



Of course, walking is not just about cities. In the UK, the Right to Roam campaign sees public access to walking routes in rural areas as a right to reconnect to nature and access the countryside. Unlike Ireland, many European countries have long-established towpaths and rights of way across the countryside. A walking route is currently under construction around England's entire 4,345km coast.

By contrast, here in Ireland we have virtually no legal right to step onto private land, no matter how remote it is. Ireland has scarcely any rights of way, apart from on public roads and in urban parks. This is why, according to the campaign group Keep Ireland Open, casual walkers are often confined to tarmac or have to struggle on intermittent paths. Worse, they can be turned back by a landowner for no reason. Fundamentally we have to get past a way of thinking about walking and walkability as just an inferior way of getting from A to B. Walking (and for differently-abled bodies – wheeling) is a way of being, it is as natural and necessary as breathing in order to be alive and be in the world. Walking should not be a luxury. It should be possible for everyone of every age and ability to enjoy their surroundings on foot, to breathe fresh air, and see, touch, smell and hear the world around us at an enjoyable and unhurried pace.

There is a deeper, philosophical aspect to the experience of walking. According to ecologist Liam Heneghan, writing about the naturalist Robert Lloyd Praeger whose book *The Way that I Went* is an inspiration for both walkers and naturalists alike, embarking on 1,000 miles of walking means entering into “a spirit of openness to the world, a type of attentiveness that Praeger insists one can cultivate only on foot”. There is no act more transformative in a car-dominated and polluted world than to simply walk for the sake of it and enjoy it.

On June 3rd Keep Ireland Open Chair, Robert Dowd's letter in response was published

Wales can teach us about walking trails

Sir, – I read Sadhbh O'Neill's excellent article on returning from a family holiday in Wales (“Walking can be transformative and should not be a luxury”, *Climate*, May 23rd). As chairperson of Keep Ireland Open, which advocates for legally protected access to the Irish countryside, I want to thank her for highlighting the importance of our work. On our holiday in Wales, we stayed in a remote valley. Numerous legally accessible off-road walks were all around us. We also encountered the Welsh Coastal Path which follows the entire coast of Wales. Apart from the health benefits they offer walkers, these paths greatly benefit the Welsh economy because they draw tourists from far and wide. At the same time Welsh farmers and forestry workers go about their daily tasks. What a lot we could learn from our small neighbour just 60 miles to the east of us! – Yours, etc,

ROBERT DOWDS, Chairperson, Keep Ireland Open, Dublin 22.

Keep Ireland Open AGM, 2024

The AGM of Keep Ireland Open took place on Saturday, 9th. March in Tailors' Hall, Back Lane, Dublin 8. About 50 people were in attendance.

The main address was given by Lucy McFarlane, a recently retired employee of Shropshire Co. Council in England with responsibility for access and paths and bridleways in that county.

A full account of the meeting can be accessed by [Clicking HERE](#)

O’Herlihy Access Consultancy (OHAC) have contacted us to request our assistance and input in a national survey they are conducting, in partnership with Fáilte Ireland.

Fáilte Ireland is committed to ensuring their tourist destinations, products and services are accessible to all people, regardless of age, size, ability, or disability. They are funding the development of public facilities at 19 coastal and inland waterside locations, as well as at five mountain biking centres, with the aim of supporting and encouraging participation in water sports and mountain biking. A key priority of these projects is to ensure these facilities are following best practice in Universal Design with the aim of creating fully accessible and inclusive visitor experiences.

O’Herlihy Access Consultancy (OHAC) have been engaged to facilitate a consultation process to understand the experiences, challenges, and needs of people with disabilities and older people. As part of this consultation, OHAC will be conducting a national survey in addition to the facilitation of online and in person consultation sessions.

Survey Links

[You can access the Survey here.](#)

[You can access the Easy-to-Read Survey here.](#)

Link to register for participation in the online or in-person consultation sessions

[You can register to attend the consultation sessions here.](#)

If you have any further queries please contact O’Herlihy Access Consultancy at tessa@accessconsultancy.ie

The mammoth Planning & Development Bill (747 pages) was debated in Seanad Éireann last week. A legal obligation, in effect since 2010, that compels Local Authorities to identify, list and show Public Rights of Way on a map in their Development Plan is omitted in this version - despite Minister Darragh O’Brien stating in the Dáil that there would be no changes to PRoWs. KIO has been lobbying TDs and Senators to have this obligation retained at Report Stage. Our next newsletter will be substantially dedicated to this important issue.

Thank you for renewing your 2024 KIO Membership.

If you have not renewed already or have not joined us yet please [Click HERE](#)

To make an additional (badly needed) donation [Click HERE](#)

Thank you for reading this Newsletter. If you wish to [Unsubscribe](#) from the mailing list please email: membership@keepirelandopen.org with “Unsubscribe” in the Subject line.
