

PRESS RELEASE

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Famous Gobbins Coastal Path to be restored with support from European INTERREG IVA funding

Funding for the restoration of the famous Gobbins Coastal path at Islandmagee was confirmed today as part of a major cross border funding initiative aimed at the regeneration of two cliff path beauty spots on the island of Ireland.

The Gobbins cliff path, which was built in 1902 in its heyday attracted more visitors than the Giant's Causeway, will cost approximately £6million to restore with approximately £3.5 million of the funding coming through the Special European Union's Programmes Body's INTERREG IVA funds supported by the Department of Enterprise. Larne Borough Council has allocated £2million to the Gobbins element of the project and a further £200,000 of funding has come from the Ulster Garden Villages organisation.

Meanwhile a new visitor centre at Bunglass / Sliabh Liag in County Donegal, will also receive funding under the cross border initiative. With the highest sea cliffs in Europe Sliabh Liag is already a popular visitor attraction in South West County Donegal attracting 120,000 visitors annually. The INTERREG project aims to develop a world-class visitor management plan, improve access on the key routes around Sliabh Liag, and further promote the site as a hiking and hill-walking mecca. The project will also strengthen linkages between communities and stakeholders in both the Sliabh Liag and Larne areas.

The funding has been secured by the North East Partnership, one of five cross border partnerships who have received European Union funding under the INTERREG IVA programme, aimed at supporting strategic cross border projects which seek to address the economic and social problems which result from the existence of borders.

Welcoming visitors to Larne for the announcement of the funding package Mayor of Larne Borough Council Cllr Andy Wilson said:

"This is a long awaited day and I want to pay credit to all those who have worked tirelessly and demonstrated unflagging commitment to securing funding for the Gobbins restoration project over many years. I wish to express our gratitude to the funders and assure them we will maintain our momentum and enthusiasm in taking this project forward. The restored Gobbins means so much to this area not just in terms of tourism and visitor investment but it is a matter of great pride for local people".

Cllr. Cora Harvey, Mayor of County Donegal said :

"I welcome the opportunity to work with our cross border partners on this excellent project. I also recognise that at the heart of this tremendous collaborative tourism development project are the local people, landowners and strong community organisations at the heart of these tourism attractions. It is the engagement and collaboration of these groups and individuals now and in the future that will determine the level of success of these projects. I have no doubt that this project will result in a better environment for both visitors and residents alike."

Speaking at the announcement SEUPB's Howard Keery said:

"This £5 million project provides an excellent fit with the objectives of the INTERREG IVA Programme to support development in the region by promoting higher levels of tourism. It takes advantage of some of the region's most extraordinary landscape to create a welcome addition to the overall tourism product offer in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland, which will contribute to developing further the industry in the region."

Chairman of the North East Partnership PJ McAvooy paid tribute to all those who had played a part in realising this opportunity for quality investment in this important cross border project:

"As Chairman of the North East Partnership I am delighted that through North East Councils working together in the North East Partnership, and in co-operation with Donegal County Council we have secured such a large amount of funding to realise this project, which will deliver significant economic benefits to our area and Donegal. Our thanks go to the project promoters, our colleagues in Larne and Donegal, NEP Officials and of course SEUPB."

Larne Borough Council is expected to begin immediately on the procurement process to appoint the contractors to take the Gobbins project forward. The schedule of works and timeline will require sensitive and precision planning to take account of the breeding season of the bird population which inhabit the cliffs at both sites and the seasonal challenges of working in a cliff face environment.

Ends

Notes to editors:

- The INTERREG IVA 2007-2013 Programme is worth €256 million and aims to address the economic and social problems which result from the existence of borders. It has two distinct priority measures which aim to create co-operation for a more prosperous and sustainable cross-border region.

- Ballymena Borough Council is the lead administrative Council for the North East INTERREG IVA Statutory Joint Committee (NEP) established in March 2010. The NEP is a collaborative vehicle between eight local authorities in the North East of Ireland namely, Antrim, Ballymena, Ballymoney,

Carrickfergus, Coleraine, Larne, Moyle and Newtownabbey and these councils have worked together on INTERREG since 2004.

- The NEP councils submitted a package of project applications for consideration to the EU INTERREG IVA Programme for Northern Ireland, the Border Region of Ireland and Western Scotland in late 2007/early 2008.

- The Gobbins & Sliabh Liag project is the second project to be approved and represents a joint project between Larne Borough Council and Donegal County Council.

- * Gobbins Cliff Path was built along the base of the Gobbins Cliff in Islandmagee in 1902 and in its heyday attracted more visitors than the Giant's Causeway

- * The original path was designed by Berkley Dean Wise for the Belfast and Northern Counties Railway Company as a commercial venture to attract passengers to use their rail link between Belfast and Whitehead

- * The path was $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile long and linked by a series of spectacular metal bridges which were incredible feats of engineering in themselves

- * The Gobbins Cliff Path is today in a state of disrepair with many of the original metalwork structures and rails damaged or collapsed because of rust and the action of the sea. It was closed to the public in 1954

- * The Sliabh Liag cliffs standing at nearly 600m high, have become known as the highest sea cliffs in Europe.

- * Sliabh Liag currently receives over 120,000 visitors annually and is one of Co. Donegal's flagship attractions.

- * Larne Borough Council and the local community have been instrumental in informing the vision of a recent cross-border study into Cliff Path attractions, which recommends the restoration of the Gobbins Cliff Path as a major visitor attraction.

- * The restoration plans include the creation of an exciting visitor/community building in Islandmagee to manage visitors to the Gobbins

- * It is estimated that in the first year of its operation the newly restored path will attract 70,000 paying visitors on fully-guided 'experience tours' which will interpret the history and heritage of the site, its flora and fauna and its geological features

* The Gobbins Path will become an internationally recognised visitor attraction and a significant contributor to the success of the Causeway Coastal Route

· Larne Borough Council has undertaken an Ornithological Survey into bird life on the cliffs to ascertain how the project may affect their habitat.