

Press Release: Sonairte Ecology Centre's campaign to bring public transport to disconnected rural communities of Laytown and Julianstown in East Meath

Sonairte - The National Ecology Centre is campaigning to extend the D1/D2 Bus Éireann service from its current terminus in Laytown out a further 4km to Julianstown in order to connect the two communities together via a frequent and affordable public transport link. In addition, the campaign advocates for Sonairte to become a bus stop along the route in order to connect the ecology centre to both communities and to make it more accessible to all community members as an important community hub, natural amenity and source of local employment.

Sonairte has been an intrinsic part of both communities since its founding in 1988 and is highly valued locally for its diversity of benefits in the areas of environmental education, nature-connection, mental health, community activities, local organically-grown food and family-friendly events, and is regularly used by families, individuals and groups in the East Meath, Louth and greater Meath area.

“Sonairte is an untapped community resource which would join up these two rural areas that have seen poorly-planned development and influx in population on a massive scale over the last 25 years without the appropriate commensurate infrastructure being provided simultaneously,” said Dr. Kim Reilly, Chair of Sonairte’s Board.

“This much-needed service would be in high demand by community members and would provide an array of benefits to the area by linking the two towns and the ecology centre together, serving to support a wider and more integrated community area. It would also have the added benefit of linking the ecology centre to the larger network of public transport, making it accessible to people who wish to avail of its ecological and environmental education resources from the wider community in Drogheda, Dublin, and beyond.”

The extraordinary benefits of natural amenities and community hubs like Sonairte have never before been such an important life-line for local community members as they have since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. They have provided all-important access to nature for exercise and mental health in an easy-to-socially-distance environment yet, despite efforts from active community members and local politicians, Sonairte remains disconnected from the local communities due to an incredible lack of infrastructure between Laytown and Julianstown - with no public transport, lighting, cycle lanes or even footpaths along the 80km/hr regional road that links the two towns.

East Meath TDs Imelda Munster, Ged Nash and Fergus O’Dowd have already lent their support to the campaign by contacting the National Transport Authority directly on the matter, with Fergus O’Dowd calling the extension a “reasonable request” and Ged Nash stating that it “makes a lot of sense”.

However, despite the benefits this important infrastructure would provide to the community, the extension has previously been refused by the National Transport Authority when contacted by Drogheda-based TD Imelda Munster on the issue last year, stating in their response: “The NTA is of the view that there would be insufficient demand to warrant the extension and additional cost of providing such services.”

In her correspondence with the NTA, TD Imelda Munster stated: “This minor bus route extension would be of enormous benefit to local people who don’t drive, as well as the elderly and for the TÚS and CE workers at Sonairte, some of whom have existing medical conditions, and are forced to walk an extra 20 minutes from the train station or bus terminus along a dangerous stretch of road which has no footpaths or lighting. This would not only allow the people of Julianstown and Laytown easy access to Sonairte but would connect the existing Bus Éireann Dublin Airport - Drogheda route to Laytown, Bettystown, Mornington and Donacorney via a frequent and affordable service.”

This lack of infrastructure is denying basic public services to these small rural communities and is not only unacceptable from the point-of-view of road-user safety, disability access and community connectivity but also from an environmental stand-point.

"Ireland is currently considered a laggard on the global stage when it comes to the environment and climate. With greenhouse gas emissions per capita greatly exceeding that of most of our European neighbours, and with a large proportion those emissions coming from transport, it would be a logical step to invest in improving local public transport networks to reduce emissions. This is especially relevant in rural areas where people are highly dependant on cars as their only means to get from A to B," said Sadhbh Quinn, Sonairte's Education and Public Engagement Officer.

"To deny the populations of two communities the access via public transport to an ecology centre - a means of providing education to the general public on climate change and the environment - illustrates a troubling lack of planning around climate action in Ireland. Especially when the potential positive impacts of small scale changes such as this, if adopted widely, could serve to make a big difference on a national level toward meeting the goals of Ireland's Climate Action Plan, and on an international scale in meeting the commitments and targets of the EU 2030 Climate Target Plan, the Paris Agreement and UN Sustainable Development Goals."

Sonairte's recently launched petition on Change.org, "Connect Sonairte Ecology Centre to local communities via public transport", is gaining traction and has already garnered over 300 signatures from community members and stakeholders in support of this much needed service. Please help to make our community a more connected, inclusive and environmentally-friendly place to live by signing and sharing the petition at the following link: <http://chng.it/ZrigN8sp>

ENDS

Contact:

Sadhbh Quinn - epe@sonairte.ie / 086 340 9764

Dr. Kim Reilly - chair@sonairte.ie / 087 778 0548