# Newry council seeks urgent alternatives after National Trust blocks £30m Slieve Donard gondola funding



The recent withdrawal of permission from the National Trust for the highly debated gondola project on Slieve Donard has thrown Newry, Mourne, and Down District Council into a race against time. With £30 million in funding at stake from the Belfast Region City Deal, the council is now urgently seeking alternative proposals to ensure it doesn't lose this significant financial backing.

Council chair Peter Byrne has publicly appealed for suggestions, highlighting the sense of desperation within the council's ranks. This scenario has drawn comparisons to comedic plots, reminiscent of classic Ealing comedies or even the memorable monorail episode from *The Simpsons*. The challenge is substantial: finding a fresh idea that can replace a project many see as fundamentally flawed.

The gondola was envisioned as part of an expansive, £44 million Mourne Mountains Gateway Project. Initial estimates indicated the project could attract about 350,000 visitors annually, potentially revitalising Newcastle and enhancing its profile as a tourist destination. However, as recent estimates indicate, the cost has surged to nearly £50 million, raising eyebrows among local leaders and residents alike. There are serious concerns regarding the environmental impact, especially given that the National Trust has voiced "significant concerns" over the scheme.

Supporters of the project, including some local business owners, argue it could establish a year-round tourism economy, creating jobs and fostering economic growth. In contrast, opponents, including members of the Alliance party, warn that introducing such a "metal monstrosity" into the beautiful Mourne landscape could irreparably damage its natural allure. Patrick Brown, an Alliance representative, has strongly articulated these sentiments, stating, “the risk of damaging our most valuable natural asset… exceeds £44 million.”

The burgeoning debate around the gondola project isn’t merely a local affair. It reflects broader concerns about how Northern Ireland balances economic aspiration with environmental stewardship. While the Mourne Mountains are celebrated for their stunning natural beauty, the implications of a significant influx of tourists—especially if poorly managed—remain contentious. Many fear that the quaint town of Newcastle, which already grapples with visitor surges during peak seasons, would struggle under the weight of additional tourism.

Despite the challenges, the council has indicated that the £30 million funding is not irretrievably tied to the gondola concept. The Department for the Economy has reassured that alternative proposals could stillsnatch that financial lifeline if justified sufficiently. This flexibility has opened a window for innovative thinking, prompting calls for robust community engagement and consultation. Critics argue that any new proposals must arise from genuine dialogue with residents, businesses, and local stakeholders to ensure they reflect the area's needs and aspirations.

Given the pressures for rapid solutions, the council's capacity to tap into previous successes can offer useful lessons. Two decades ago, Newcastle was rejuvenated through a carefully planned promenade and public realm scheme that, at a fraction of the current gondola’s costs, vastly improved the town's appeal. Similar grassroots investments across the district could yield benefits without the environmental costs associated with large-scale projects.

As discussions regarding the future of the Mourne Mountains Gateway Project unfold, it's evident that the stakes extend beyond just the funding. They encompass the very character and sustainability of the region's economy as well as its ecological integrity. The eventual outcome will depend on how well local leaders harness community sentiment and spirit, showing once again that the most enduring solutions often emerge from collaboration and collective vision.

In the meantime, Newcastle continues to wait for inspiration. Will the community rally around an alternative vision, or will the funding slip through their fingers, lost to the complexities of modern governance and environmental stewardship? Only time will tell.

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Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/newton-emerson-anyone-got-any-ideas-how-to-spend-30m-in-newcastle-LNRWWJTQVNBIHI4H4A6KT5XCGQ/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/estimated-cost-of-mourne-mountains-gondola-has-increased-by-6m-stormont-department-NJDQVB23CZAIXGXMTNNXPHCVI4/> - An estimated cost of building a gondola and tourism centre on the slopes in the Mourne Mountains has increased to close to £50 million, according to a government evaluation. Newry, Mourne and Down Council has also not yet formally delivered an outline business case to Tourism NI, it has also emerged. Tourism NI is the lead agency tasked with signing off and unlocking £30m in central funding for the project to build the gondola from Donard Park in Newcastle, Co Down, up the slopes of the mountains to what is now a disused quarry. The cost of the Mourne Mountains Gateway Project has increased by approximately £6m from the widely cited figure of £44m, the Department for the Economy has told council officials. Mr Brown is further asking why the council has failed to reveal to councillors, and other local representatives, including MLAs, the new estimate which the MLA said was delivered on November 13 last year. Under the project plan, £30m will come from Belfast City Region Deal (BRCD) funding while the council will pay the remainder, up to whatever the final cost. In a letter to Mr Brown, the DfE stated the £30m will not automatically be lost if the gondola plan is scrapped, or changed substantially. The department said “it will be for the BRCD Programme Board, which includes NMD Council, to submit an alternative proposal”. The department also confirmed an outline business case has not been submitted. Alliance is opposed to the project, but the two largest parties on the council, Sinn Féin and SDLP, are supportive, though individual members have expressed some reservations. There is also opposition among local activists, including environmentalists and those who believe Newcastle does not need and cannot handle an influx of more visitors. Following questions to Sinn Féin councillors, including ones on a revised cost, a party spokesperson replied: “The Mourne Gateway project has the potential to be transformative for this district. There must be robust engagement and consultation on the project with residents, workers and businesses within the district and a project board has been set up to steer through the challenges and processes as is the case with other capital projects in council. All possibilities for the Mourne Gateway project must be considered so we can maximise the opportunities it presents to us a district.”
3. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c77jx11y08go> - A fresh round of public engagement events about a proposed £44m gondola on the slopes of Slieve Donard will take place in early 2025, Newry, Mourne, and Down Council has confirmed. On Monday a petition of about 6,000 signatures opposing the Newcastle project, which is due to receive £30m of funding from the Belfast Region City Deal, was presented to the Stormont Assembly. Those behind the petition say they have environmental and economic concerns about the viability of the scheme that hopes to attract about 350,000 annual visitors. Businesspeople who are supportive of the project say they believe it can help create a year-round tourist economy for the region.
4. <https://www.newrymournedown.org/delivery-team-appointed-for-mourne-mountains-gateway-project-as-contract-for-funding-confirmed> - An integrated consultancy team has been appointed to deliver the Mourne Mountains Gateway Project visitor experience in Newcastle following confirmation of a £30 million Belfast Region City Deal Contract for Funding by the Department for the Economy. The Belfast office of global engineering consultancy Arup will lead the highly experienced project team, along with TODD Architects, Gleeds and Tandem Design. The £44 million Mourne Mountains Gateway Project will comprise a visitor centre at the Thomas Quarry site in the Mourne Mountains, and a gondola experience, which will improve accessibility by allowing users to travel sustainably and efficiently from Donard Park to the visitor centre. The Newry, Mourne and Down District Council led project will deliver a world-class international visitor attraction, while developing sustainable travel infrastructure to connect residents and visitors to the Mourne Mountains. Newry, Mourne and Down District Council Chairperson, Cllr Pete Byrne welcomed the latest project developments. “This visitor experience located in the mountains will give residents and visitors the opportunity to connect with the natural beauty of the Mourne Mountains in an accessible and sustainable way,” Cllr Byrne said. “By protecting and enhancing the natural heritage of the region, we can create a sustainable, year-round tourism offering, which will help promote the growth of tourism in Newry, Mourne and Down, and Northern Ireland generally. We believe the Mourne Mountains Gateway Project can position the district as one of the premier tourist destinations across the island of Ireland, and we are delighted to announce the appointment of an expert consultancy team led by Arup.” Ciaran McGarrity, Department for Economy Director, City Deals and Place, said, “The Department has been working closely with the Council to achieve confirmation of the £30 million from Belfast Region City Deal, a huge investment into tourism for the region. The appointment of an Integrated Consultancy Team is another significant marker for this project.”
5. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-65962549> - Newry, Mourne and Down District Council hopes the £44m Mournes Gateway Project will be a gamechanger. The ambitious project would see gondolas or cable cars going along a 1km route from Donard Park. Their destination would be a new visitor centre erected at Thomas Quarry, 230m up. The council said it aims to cater for 350,000 visitors annually and hopes the project would be completed in 2029. The council believes the project would bring hundreds of thousands more visitors to the Mournes. However, not everyone is on board the gondola plan - the National Trust has said it has "significant concerns" about the environmental impact, while one local assembly member has described it as a "vanity project". Earlier this month the council debated an Alliance Party motion to halt it - instead a Sinn Féin motion was passed that will see the project proceed while further consultation is carried out and possible alternatives considered. Alliance Party assembly member Patrick Brown said his party has concerns about the environmental and visual impact of the project, as well as doubts about it financially. "I think we're actually running the risk of damaging our most valuable natural asset in the Mournes by building this metal monstrosity on it," he said. "So I think in the long run it's actually damaging for the area and for the environment. It's very hard to put a financial figure on that, but I'd say it well exceeds £44m and we shouldn't sacrifice the environment on the altar of economic growth." He said the town of Newcastle, which sits in the shadow of the Mournes, "is already full to bursting in the peak summer months" and questioned "spending a huge amount of money on a vanity project like this one". South Down SDLP assembly member Colin McGrath disagreed and described the project as a "significant opportunity" for the area. "It would be naïve to say we're not in competition with the Giant's Causeway, the Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge, with the Titanic Centre, the Marble Arch Cave," he said. "I am lucky in my life to have travelled to a number of places in these isles and in Europe and beyond and it's features like this that people want to come and see. "You think of a gondola half way up a mountain to a visitor centre with an interpretive centre, a café and other facilities - I think that would be an exciting energiser to bring people into the area." The visitor centre would include a restaurant, interpretive centre and other facilities. The DUP abstained in this month's council vote - councillor Glyn Hanna explained they want to see exactly what the final project will look like before fully committing to it. The DUP's Glyn Hanna said the money is specifically for the Gateway Project. "If this project doesn't go ahead, the £30m's lost - it goes back," he said.
6. <https://www.mourneobserver.com/mla-to-present-gateway-project-petition-at-stormont/> - A PETITION calling on the council to halt elements of the planned Mourne Mountains Gateway Project is to be presented at Stormont by a local MLA. Andrew McMurray (Alliance) will hand the Mourne Gateway Info Group petition over to Economy Minister Conor Murphy on Monday (2 December), with the aim that the latter will “exert some influence to engage in a rethink of the problematic elements” – these are identified as the gondola and the Thomas Quarry visitors centre – of the £44m scheme. At the beginning of this week the online petition had attracted just over 5,200 signatures. “The public opinion that has been expressed to me over the years in opposition to this project has been unabated and constant,” said the local representative. “The public are both concerned and frustrated at this project, which has led to this petition. “I, too, share the points that the organisers of this have raised.” Mr McMurray highlighted that the reasons for halting the gondola project, which would link Donard Park to Thomas Quarry, include: lack of public consultation; disregard for alternatives; financial risk; environmental threats; adverse aesthetic impact; negative economic impact; the National Trust having not granted consent; and weather and seasonal factors. “In presenting this petition to the Minister of the Economy, I hope to draw his attention to the amount of feeling towards this project and that he would exert some influence to engage in a rethink of the problematic elements,” he concluded. “Going forward, it would be hoped that the more sustainable and publicly palatable options for enhancing the Mourne Mountains, while also stimulating economic growth, could be further explored, which would both benefit visitors to, and residents of, Newcastle and the wider South Down constituency.” Earlier this month, an information day on the project was hosted in Newcastle by Arup, the engineering company leading the integrated consultancy team appointed to progress it. An indicative timeline displayed on the day anticipated the securing of planning approval in the fourth quarter of 2026, the commencement of building works in the first quarter of 2027, and completion of the project’s construction in the second quarter of 2029. The council-led scheme has received £30m in funding from the Belfast Region City Deal, whilst the local authority is set to contribute £14m.