

Review of County Development Plan,
Forward Planning Department,
Offaly County Council,
Áras an Chontae,
Charleville Road,
Tullamore,
Co. Offaly.

26th September 2019

**Re: Planning and Development Act 200 (as amended)
Notice re: Review of Existing Offaly County Development Plan 2014-2020 and the
Preparation of New Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027**

A Chara,

This submission has been prepared by Fáilte Ireland, the National Tourism Development Authority Fáilte Ireland, in response to the public notice seeking submissions in relation to the review of the current County Development Plan 2014-2020 and the preparation of a new County Development Plan 2021-2027.

The Authority welcomes the publication of the Issues Paper and thanks the County Council for the opportunity to comment on this document and to facilitate engagement with the local authority during the course of the formulation of the new County Development Plan.

This submission seeks to ensure that the emerging County Development Plan is adequately informed and takes due consideration of tourism as one of the most important and indigenous economic sectors in the county, the region and nationally. Fáilte Ireland is particularly keen to see a cross sectoral approach between tourism and other sectors and the need for integrated planning policies and strategies.

Please see attached the Paper entitled Developing Tourism in Offaly produced jointly by Irelands Hidden Heartland; Ireland Ancient East; and Fáilte Ireland, which should be read in conjunction with this submission.

The Significance of Tourism to the Irish Economy

Tourism is one of the largest and most important sectors of the national economy, providing employment for approximately 260,000 people, an economic contribution of €8.4 billion, and exchequer revenue of €1.78 billion, which helps fund other key public services.

With regard to County Offaly, Fáilte Ireland's figures indicate that in 2017, 52,000 overseas visitors came to Offaly generating revenue of €16m. Offaly is part of both the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands and the Ireland's Ancient East brands. The Shannon bank in Offaly is a brand crossover area where tourism businesses and attractions can leverage the brand which works best for their business. The areas west of the N62 are part of the new Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand and the east of the county, with its rich historical assets, is part of Ireland's Ancient East.

A successful tourism sector also creates significant benefits for many other sectors such as agriculture, food and drinks, accommodation providers, transport and retail. For this reason tourism is a particularly important activity and spatial land use in its own right to be accommodated within the emerging County Development Plan notwithstanding its contribution to enhancement of Quality of Life and the enhancement of places of residence, work and play (as set out in the Issues Paper) and can positively affect both physical and mental wellbeing which is acknowledged in the Issues paper as being key drivers of the emerging County Development Plan.

Fáilte Ireland seek to ensure the following in the context of the emerging County Development Plan:

- To provide a dedicated tourism chapter including policies and objectives for tourism;
- Tourism should be planned for as a spatial land use. Tourism features should be mapped in the County Development Plan in a similar way that other functions and roles are presented.
- Key nodes of tourism activity in the County should be identified – both existing and proposed specific tourism centres (major tourism attractions, outdoor activities etc.);

- Existing transport links between nodes and identified trails – whether walking, cycling or road based including greenways and blueways should also be identified.
- Strategic tourism centres (principal towns containing tourist facilities) where key services such as accommodation providers etc. are located. Further guidance is available at: <http://www.failteireland.ie/FailteIreland/media/WebsiteStructure/Documents/Publications/Failte-Ireland-Tourism-Destination-Towns-Guidelines.pdf?ext=.pdf>.
- Sensitive environments where the provision of services and development must be sensitive and appropriate to the robustness / sensitivity of the receiving environment and in particular its existing tourism significance;
- Areas of unrealised tourism potential where proactive policies will aim to encourage the development of this sector;
- Branding – reference and use of Fáilte Ireland Tourism Brand(s) logos (Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands and Ireland’s Ancient East) applicable to the county;
- Proactive planning policies including provision of supporting infrastructure such as visitor car parking, toilets, café or catering facilities – particularly in sensitive locations;
- Sustainable travel between sites with the promotion of public transport along key routes; Informed design and location guidelines for the development of tourism related facilities in sensitive amenities. Key to this would be the consideration of particularly special areas which may not normally be considered – such as the proposed views of proposed developments from riverside, prominent or elevated locations etc;
- Full realisation of the economic potential of increased visitor revenue and increased dwell time with high quality tourism infrastructure including accommodation providers, restaurants, holiday homes, etc.;
- Protection and enhancement of the tourism resource with information and interpretation provided and the actual resources carefully managed and protected.
- Update of the county Wind and Solar Energy strategy, objectives and policies, whereby Fáilte Ireland recognises the value and necessity of strengthening, improving and expanding energy infrastructure in the county and region, and that this in turn supports the growth of the tourism sector. Whilst Fáilte Ireland is generally supportive of the development of transmission infrastructure and is supportive of the economic benefits associated with its

growth and development, potential impacts on landscape and the natural environment (including those on tourism) must be considered and this must be clearly expressed in the emerging County Development Plan.

Key Issues for the Emerging Plan to Address

The Issues Paper identifies a number of questions or issues for the new plan to address. A number of these influence tourism development. In responding to these areas of interest, Fáilte Ireland would maintain that the appropriate consideration, planning and protection of tourism through forward planning and development control are keys to development of the tourism industry.

The questions relating or effecting tourism detailed in the Issues Paper and Fáilte Ireland's response are as follows:

How can Offaly best capitalise upon its tourism potential?

Offaly is well placed as a key part of two Fáilte Ireland brands to optimise the potential for tourism through proper planning and development. The consideration of natural and heritage resources, strategic planning for accommodation and promotion of inter-agency tourism strategies in the upcoming development plan will build on the previous success of strong tourism consideration in Development Plans.

Are there any areas/attractions in Offaly that you think have been overlooked but have the potential to be developed for tourism and recreational purposes?

Potential tourism opportunities identified in the development plan process should undergo a tourism assessment including the potential for Fáilte Ireland support through programmes including the Rural Development Fund.

How can we achieve a balance between the growth of the County and the protection of the environment?

Robust assessment of the environmental impact of developments including the consideration of the impact on tourism as outlined in the Fáilte Ireland Guidelines on Tourism in EIAR.

How do you suggest we make better use of key resources such as land, water, energy, waste and transportation infrastructure?

Fáilte Ireland welcomed the inclusion of a growth strategy for the region in the EMRA which is both asset and evidenced based to ensure sustainable growth across the region, having regard to the parameters as defined by the National Planning Framework. The general theme of sustainable compact growth of both urban and rural areas is welcomed. It is vital that this is implemented and supported through the development plan core strategy. Tourism services and facilities should be clustered within established settlements as this will serve to protect the quality of the Irish environment; foster strong links to a whole range of other economic and commercial sectors and sustain the host communities; and utilise existing ancillary services and facilities such as water and wastewater infrastructure, power supply etc, rather than creating a requirement for further development in the Irish landscape.

How should we enhance our heritage and amenity?

The relationship between tourism and heritage has potential synergistic benefits. The preservation of heritage to improve tourism can in turn support that preservation. This is not restricted to heritage sites and should also include elements such as urban design (e.g. shop frontage restrictions in heritage towns).

How can the Plan encourage the reuse and regeneration of protected structures that have fallen into disuse?

The adaptive reuse of existing historic buildings is one of the best ways a community can improve the economic, social and environmental sustainability of its village or a town. According to the Heritage Council *“The connection between reuse and economic vitality is strong. In the Irish Times’ 2016 list of best shops, 57/100 were located in historic structures. Similarly, of the top 100 restaurants in Ireland as chosen by the McKenna Guides in 2018, 74 were located in historic structures. Finally, many of the higher profile co-working spaces in Ireland are in old structures (e.g. The Digital Hub,*

Dogpatch, Fumbally Exchange Waterford, Ludgate Hub). Proactive planning policies and objectives which support the reuse and refurbishment of protected structures and older buildings of architectural, cultural, historic and aesthetic merit which, make a positive contribution to the character, appearance and quality of local streetscapes and the sustainable development of the county should be included in the plan.

Are there places that require better accessibility?

Accessibility has a significant impact upon tourism, especially regional access to transport. Connectivity of key tourism attractors as strategic economic infrastructure should be given strong consideration in the County Development Plan.

What new transportation improvements are required to improve access in the County?

It is an objective of Fáilte Ireland to continue to shift our visitors onto sustainable modes of transport which will also result in a significantly improved visitor experience. Transport in existing strong tourism areas needs to be supported and consolidated. A priority should be to provide a wider range of targeted public transport options for visitors who wish to travel from urban areas to rural based tourism attractions and amenities. Possible delivery mechanisms to be explored would include the extension of the Rural Transport Network to include tourism objectives and key tourism sites. Enhanced walking and cycling facilities also have a key role to play in utilising our resources and moreover opening up access to the abundance of natural assets.

What ideas have you for the after use of Bord na Mona peatlands on cessation of harvesting and production?

Fáilte Ireland supports the use of peatlands in providing recreation, access to nature and the use of peatways in forming a connected network of green infrastructure for leisure as indicated in the EMRA RSES. The peatlands (both Bord na Mona cutaway bogs and intact bogs, such as Clara Bog) provide opportunities for tourism development. The Living Bog project is a good example, which contains some Offaly bogs, and the work of this initiative should be supported. The role of Bord na Mona in particular in the development of tourism, using the work done with Lough Boora should be developed further.

How do you suggest we strengthen our rural economies and communities?

An evidence-based approach to economic and social development with tourism as an element of local economies based upon tourism assessments is key to rural development. Fáilte Ireland supports this approach.

How can a balance be achieved between protecting the natural landscapes of Offaly as a resource for tourism and residents of the county whilst accommodating development necessary to sustain the rural community?

The pathway to sustainable rural development outlined in the 2017 Action Plan for Rural Development and supported through key objectives of the National Planning Framework and EMRA RSES provided guidance on achieving protection of the environment and balancing development. Consolidated growth to support rural towns and villages while protecting natural landscapes will contribute to economic and environmental sustainability while promoting sustainable tourism as a contributor to the rural quality of life.

Tourism Strategy for Offaly

Offaly forms part of two of the four Fáilte Ireland Regional Experience Brands - Ireland's Ancient East and Ireland's Hidden Heartlands. These brands are making a significant impact on tourism across the east and midlands delivering increased visitor numbers and spend, season extension and creating jobs. Offaly as a largely rural county is important for tourism as tourism in Ireland, for the most part, takes place in rural areas. These areas are home to rich heritage and immense natural beauty that support a varied tourism offering. These assets should be acknowledged and explicitly referenced as a growth enabler for Offaly.

The cruising industry is very important for tourism in Co. Offaly. Facilitation of the development of navigation infrastructure is very important, as is the adaptation of navigation infrastructure for tourism, e.g. development of on-shore facilities for boat users, etc.

Key towns in Offaly including Tullamore, Birr and Kinnity should be a focus for tourism provision, as key towns act as a base or hub for a whole host of activities and attractions within their immediate environs and hinterlands including the Tullamore Dew Distillery, Birr Castle and Gardens and Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Centre. Fáilte Ireland would reinforce that it is vitally important to ensure provision is made for the expansion in accommodation and facilities within these towns along with supporting infrastructural investment including transport links, public realm etc.

Following on from the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy, development plans should provide for sustainable growth within town centres with a focus on regeneration of brownfield sites in lieu of developing out of town greenfield sites. Fáilte Ireland welcomes this approach as it will allow tourism services and facilities to be clustered within established settlements as this will serve to protect the quality of the Irish environment; foster strong links to a whole range of other economic and commercial sectors and sustain the host communities; and utilise existing ancillary services and facilities, protecting the Irish landscape and its tourism value.

While the strategy for key towns should consider tourism as a primary development and economic driver, it is important that tourism is not seen as ‘fall back’ in the absence of other economic development strengths in some towns. It is crucial that an analysis of the potential for tourism growth in these towns is carried out.

In addition to the strategic planning for tourism, Fáilte Ireland request that Offaly County Council recognise and facilitate Fáilte Ireland’s upcoming initiatives for Offaly, which are detailed in the attached leaflet ‘Developing Tourism in Offaly’. These projects include the Beara Breifne Way, the Shannon Masterplan and the Regional Festivals and Participative Events Programme. The forthcoming Shannon Tourism Masterplan currently being developed by Fáilte Ireland in partnership with Waterways Ireland seeks to drive tourism opportunities both on and off the water, and in the towns surrounding it. The priorities emanating from the masterplan should inform and be embedded in the review of the development plan. A wider consideration is also the need for an integrated management approach to the Shannon Callows including tourism.

‘Visitor Experience Development Plans (VEDPs) will be continued to be prepared by Fáilte Ireland in association with a range of other stakeholders, including the Local Authorities, key stakeholders and

members of the tourism industry. These plans are developed in order to realise the sustainable economic potential within Mature and Developing tourism areas. VEDPs are built on solid partnerships and collaboration amongst local and national stakeholders. They are the vehicle through which Fáilte Ireland aligns its own resources with those of its key stakeholders to deliver a 3-5 year commercial development plan that builds capacity and capability, primes demand, and delivers world class visitor experiences within defined geographic areas or across unifying themes. The key focus of these plans is to unlock the economic growth potential of an area by progressing a range of key initiatives that will motivate and facilitate potential tourists to visit and stay longer in the local area’.

Fáilte Ireland is currently developing the ‘Tales of Two Worlds’ Visitor Experience Development Plan which brings together Ireland’s historic houses and gardens, and the period in Ireland’s history of famine and emigration. Fáilte Ireland would like to see inclusion of a policy/objective to support the delivery of this VEDP.

Conclusion

Fáilte Ireland welcomes the review of the Offaly County Development Plan and recommend that the consideration of tourism in the Eastern Midland Region RSES and our comments are addressed in the published Draft County Development Plan in order to take due consideration of tourism as one of the most important and indigenous economic sectors in the region and Ireland.

Should you have any queries on this please do not hesitate to contact me.

Is mise le meas,



Environment & Planning Manager, Fáilte Ireland

Appendix A – Fáilte Ireland’s Guidance on Sustainable Tourism

Fáilte Ireland promotes the incorporation of the principles of sustainability in the tourism policy section of the County Development Plan. Fáilte Ireland has developed five key principles that ensure developments achieve a balance between appropriate tourism development and economic, environmental and social sustainability. Developments will be assessed having regard to compliance with these and the associated policies.

Principle 1: Tourism, when it is well managed and properly located, should be recognised as a positive activity which has potential to benefit the host community, the place itself and the visitor alike. Sustainable tourism planning requires a balance to be struck between the needs of the visitor, the place and the host community.

Principle 2: Our landscapes, our cultural heritage, our environment and our linguistic heritage all have an intrinsic value which outweighs their value simply as a tourism asset. However, sustainable tourism planning makes sure that they can continue to be enjoyed and cherished by future generations and not prejudiced simply by short term considerations.

Principle 3: Built development and other activities associated with tourism should in all respects be appropriate to the character of the place in which they are situated. This applies to the scale, design and nature of the place as well as to the particular land use, economic and social requirements of the place and the surroundings.

Principle 4: Strategic tourism assets – including special landscapes, important views, the setting of historic buildings and monuments, areas of cultural significance and access points to the open countryside, should be safeguarded from encroachment by inappropriate development.

Principle 5: Visitor accommodation, interpretation centres and commercial / retail facilities serving the tourism sector should generally be located within established settlements thereby fostering strong links to a whole range of other economic and commercial sectors and sustaining the host

communities. Sustainable tourism facilities, when properly located and managed can, especially if accessible by a range of transport modes, encourage longer visitor stays, help to extend the tourism season and add to the vitality of settlements throughout the year.

Underlying these principles for Sustainable Tourism, the definitions of economic, environmental and social sustainability against which any tourism project assessed are defined as follows:

Economic sustainability must be considered to ensure that the tourism sector is managed. The key strengths of the County include landscape, heritage, natural environment, lifestyle and amenity pursuits. The sector is highly affected by seasonality and there are extremes in visitor numbers as key attractions contrasted with smaller attractions which struggle to maintain visitor numbers. These ‘peaks and troughs’ should be carefully managed to ensure the protection of natural resources. Tourism innovation should also be encouraged – particularly where it brings about environmental benefits. Finally, for projects to be economically sustainable they should meet the needs of the permanent and also visitor population alike, so the preparation of robust business plans for all such developments will ensure proposals are viable and sustainable.

Environmental sustainability will be central to the development and protection of a viable tourism sector and this is a key consideration in the County where tourism attractions are located in environmentally sensitive areas and close to historic areas where the quality of the built heritage and environment must be protected from inappropriate development – whether tourism related or not. The ‘mainstreaming’ of policy guidance tools such as the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) will undoubtedly address any deficits in relation to many of these key policy areas.

Social sustainability is arguably more difficult to assess. Many of the potentially negative impacts of tourism development can however be addressed through careful consideration of the social and cultural nature of the receiving environment. The impacts that large-scale developments can have on existing local communities’ policies can be assessed having regard to the impact of visitor numbers on local quality of life, culture and heritage – with a particular emphasis placed on unique areas such as culturally sensitive areas where small impacts over time may have a significant cumulative effect.

Appendix B – Irelands Ancient East



In a competitive market place, Ireland can best achieve a higher profile and incremental growth by putting tourism propositions of scale and singularity in front of potential visitors. Fáilte Ireland has developed four key geographically based, thematic propositions to present Ireland to overseas tourists. These are Dublin, Wild Atlantic Way and Ireland's Ancient East (IAE) and the new midlands proposition, Ireland's Hidden Heartlands.

Ireland's Ancient East is a destination brand rooted in the rich history and range of cultural heritage experiences that are particularly prevalent in the east and south regions of Ireland.

Ireland's Ancient East seeks to motivate more people to holiday in Ireland and to spend time in the region. Tourists, especially those from overseas, have relatively overlooked this area of Ireland. Currently Ireland's Ancient East is visited by 44% of overseas visitors but achieves 22% share of the total expenditure. However, when Cork City is stripped out the region receives only 23% of overseas visitors and 11% of spend. The region is also heavily reliant on the domestic holidaymaker who spends only €230 per capita whereas the overseas tourists spends €550 per capita.

Ireland's Ancient East objective is to turn the area from a transit region into a touring region, to increase the number of visitors staying overnight in the region and in turn growing revenue ahead of volume. Ireland's Ancient East seeks to grow the value of tourism to the region by 28% resulting in €204 million more tourism revenue for local businesses and communities by 2020.

The strategy is to:

- Build a brand of international quality and credibility;
- Create a set of unique and authentic stories to set Ireland's Ancient East apart from the competition;
- To reposition the region from a transit to a touring area; and
- To work with partners to develop world-class experiences.

Key Themes for Ireland's Ancient East

Ireland's Ancient East is a destination brand built on stories. We have developed a series of signature stories that reflect the proposition and visitor experiences, including festivals.

For the region to deliver economic growth, it also needs to focus on key domestic and international consumer segments. Based on research, Fáilte Ireland has identified international visitor segments with the greatest potential for the development of Irish Tourism focusing on the key primary markets of USA, GB, France and Germany.

Our Goal

To make Ireland's Ancient East

... the most engaging, enjoyable and accessible cultural holiday experience in Europe.

Our Vision

Ireland's Ancient East will be an immersive experience of living culture, breath-taking landscape and hidden history made remarkable by vibrant communities, local lore and the authentic character of the real Ireland.

Our Promise:

Ireland's Ancient East offers a personal experience of 5,000 years of Europe's history. Your journey of discovery in this relaxing, off the beaten track, lush beautiful landscape, that attracted warring settlers for millennia, will be made illuminating by stories from the best storytellers in the world.

The Brand Promise

The ambition with the brand promise is to create

- A destination that is easy and enjoyable to explore
- A destination where stories unfold through exploration of our history and heritage
- A destination where the storytellers at each heritage site encourage further exploration of other historical eras, building up to an unforgettable journey through 5,000 years of time
- A destination set against the lush, green, pastoral landscapes of Ireland.

Appendix C– Irelands Hidden Heartlands



Ireland's Hidden Heartlands is Ireland's newest regional brand that launched in April 2018. This region encompasses nine counties in an area that stretches from Leitrim to Lough Derg. This is an opportunity to explore the green heartlands of Ireland's natural rural beauty, where activity and relaxation are centred around rural communities and their lifestyles. This region is showcased by the iconic River Shannon, Ireland's longest river and is also home to the Beara Breifne Way, Ireland's longest way marked walking route. Both of these signature assets act like spines through the heart of the region. Our signature assets are Rivers & Lakes, Forests, Bogs and Hidden Heritage Gems. The Hidden Heartlands is like a decompression chamber and is the perfect way to escape from the stresses and fast pace of urban life.

Ireland's Hidden Heartlands looks to motivate people to get off the beaten track and experience a relatively overlooked area of Ireland. One of the key challenges for the region is that it is a permeable transit zone with many domestic and overseas visitors passing through the region. The region is easily accessible from all the main airports including Dublin, Shannon, Cork and Knock. It is also served by most of the main motorways passing through the country but the challenge is slowing people down and giving them a reason to break up the journey, increase bed nights and take in the many great things to see & do.

There is a large number of quality approved accommodation in the region, particularly in a number of larger hubs. This accommodation includes everything from Hotels to Guesthouses, B&Bs and Log Cabins. The big challenge is that Ireland's Hidden Heartlands currently only gets approximately 3.5% of domestic and overseas bed nights.

The Hidden Heartlands offer really unique visitor experiences that are intimate in nature and provide a real opportunity to get to know the locals. While there are a couple of visitor attractions that receive over 100,000 visitors and others that work with larger coach groups, many of the visitor attractions and activity providers in our region are tailored to smaller groups and FITs who are looking to get away from overcrowded tourist hot spots. There are a number of good industry networks and clusters but a key objective is to increase the number of clusters and networks.

One of our other signature offerings is cruising on the River Shannon, its lakes and waterways. There are a number of Cruise boat companies operating from different parts of the River Shannon like Carrick on Shannon, Banagher in Offaly and Portumna in Galway on the banks of Lough Derg.

This is a really unique holiday experience that is popular with both domestic and overseas visitors but there is a lot of extra capacity there to grow. This type of holiday gives you the opportunity to explore the Heartlands by water and stopping off at your own pace at the different towns and villages that live by the waters edge.

The Hidden Heartlands is about exploring off the beaten tracks and in doing so, discovering a more relaxed easy going part of the country, where the threads of a more traditional life are still in evidence and the unaffected friendliness that Irelands is so famous for is in full display. While the domestic market is identified as the one with the biggest potential in these early stages of brand development, there is also a big opportunity with markets like Germany, France, UK and USA.