

County Development Plan Review
Forward Planning
Planning Department
Roscommon County Council
Aras an Chontae
Roscommon
F42 VR98

By online submission:

Date: 30th July 2020

Re: Preparation of Roscommon County Development Plan 2021-2027: Fáilte Ireland
Pre-Draft Submission

To whom it may concern,

1. Introduction

This submission has been prepared by Fáilte Ireland, the National Tourism Development Authority, in response to the public notice seeking submissions in relation to the preparation of a new Roscommon County Development Plan ('the Plan') for the period 2021-2027 by Roscommon County Council ('the Council').

Fáilte Ireland welcomes the opportunity to engage with Roscommon County Council on the emerging Plan for the County. Fáilte Ireland is seeking to enhance the partnership approach between the County Council and the National Authority and ensure that the expertise of both organisations is shared.

The preparation of this submission comes at a time when Fáilte Ireland are emphasising the need for land-use plans to manage all land uses and economic drivers – of which tourism is but one, in a more holistic, strategic and spatial manner to maximise the efficient use of resources and the achievement of greater outcomes for society at large.

We hope that this submission can represent a first step in a collaborative process that culminates in the adoption of the new Development Plan.

The Objective of this Submission

Fáilte Ireland has prepared this submission to support and assist Roscommon County Council in the formulation of planning policies and frameworks for the period 2021-2027. Fáilte Ireland are seeking to enhance the partnership approach between the County Council and the Authority and ensure that the expertise of both organisations is shared.

The submission seeks to enhance the policy coverage in the new Development Plan to ensure a meaningful framework is established for the enhancement of tourism in the County, and the wider region, during the Plan period. It has been prepared with inputs from professional planners as well as various strands within Fáilte Ireland. It provides the Council with a concise single submission from the Authority dealing with all aspects of tourism – from strategic planning, to visitor experience and destination management.

Tourism is an important economic driver in Co. Roscommon generating approximately €42.8m from overseas and domestic revenue. It has a compelling role to play in safeguarding and growing jobs in the local economy. Despite significant tourism developments, Roscommon is underperforming relative to its potential as highlighted in the Roscommon Tourism Strategy 2017-2022.

As the National Development Authority for tourism in Ireland, Fáilte Ireland recognises and will continue to ensure that all tourism initiatives it is involved in are planned, developed and managed in a sustainable and integrated manner. For Fáilte Ireland the main objective in working towards a sustainable tourism sector is to protect, enhance and promote both our natural and built heritage for the common benefits of visitor, industry, community and the environment. The VICE (Visitor, Industry, Community and Environment) Model for Sustainable Tourism is an approach that Fáilte Ireland adopts in all of our activities and outputs and this approach should underline the approach to sustainable tourism development in Roscommon.

The submission has been prepared having regard to the tourism profile of the County; the background information in the Issues Paper; the existing Roscommon Tourism Strategy 2017-2022 and an established template for sustainable tourism policies being used by Fáilte Ireland to guide Planning Authorities.

For ease of reading, we have structured this submission as follows:

- 1) Introduction
- 2) Commentary on the Current Roscommon Development Plan
- 3) Key Tourism Assets in County Roscommon
- 4) Discussion of Background Information Provided
- 5) Further Suggestions for the New Development Plan

6) Conclusion

2. Commentary on the Current Roscommon Development Plan

The vision statement in the current County Roscommon Development Plan 2014 states:

“Roscommon County Council will adopt a positive and sustainable approach to balanced development thereby enhancing the lives of people who live in, work and visit the county, whilst protecting the natural and built environment “

While the vision statement indirectly protects the county’s tourism amenities and assets referring to the natural and built environment; and, to those who visit. We request that tourism be referenced within one of the ‘key aims’ contained within the Core Strategy.

Section 3.5 of the current Roscommon Development Plan references some of these considerations such as natural and built heritage, landscape, rural economy, tourism destinations etc. In order to achieve a consistent approach to tourism in Ireland, we request the Council include a dedicated tourism chapter or strategy within the future Development Plan. This enables decision makers and stakeholders to easily follow guidance in relation to tourism amenities and assets.

Such a chapter which would (a) encompass all of the policies and objectives relating to this important economic driver, building on the actions and objectives set out in the Roscommon Tourism Strategy 2017-2022 and (b) recognise the significant role that tourism plays in the overall operation and development of the County. In particular, Fáilte Ireland promotes the incorporation of the principles of sustainability in the tourism policy section of the County Development Plan (included in Appendix A of this Submission).

The Authority would also like to see tourism policies and objectives clearly set out where possible through the inclusion of maps in the Development Plan. The inclusion of the County’s strategic tourism locations; transport routes; scenic routes and views; tourism attractions and facilities; and transportation hubs in the Development Plan maps, serves as an effective tool to highlight the importance of tourism in the strategic planning of the County.

3. Key Tourism Assets in County Roscommon

Roscommon possesses a range of tourism amenities that the current Development Plan relates to, including the following:

- The Arigna Mining Experience

- Boyle Abbey
- Castlestrange
- Cloontykilla Castle
- Cruachan Aí Heritage Centre: including the Rathcroghan Mound
- King House
- Lake O'Flynn
- Lough Key Forest and Activity Park
- Lough Ree
- Roscommon Friary
- Roscommon Racecourse
- The Rathcroghan Archaeological Complex
- The River Shannon
- Tullyboy Farm

However, it is noted the following tourism assets should also be added to this list in the Development Plan:

- The Beara Breifne Way
- Roscommon Castle
- Strokestown House and the Famine Museum
- Clonalis House

We request the forthcoming Development Plan protects key assets in County Roscommon primarily in the form of a dedicated tourism chapter which provides a clear and comprehensive strategy which is clear for stakeholders to regard.

Fáilte Ireland has placed significant investment in a number of newer key tourism assets in recent years in particular the brand initiative 'Ireland's Hidden Heartlands' which includes the Beara Breifne Way; the town of Boyle as a destination town; and Strokestown Park House and Famine Museum.

Ireland's Hidden Heartlands

'Ireland's Hidden Heartlands' is a brand initiative created by Fáilte Ireland which has had much success since its launch in 2018. It encompasses Roscommon, Leitrim, and Longford as well as parts of Westmeath, Cavan, North Tipperary, Galway, and Offaly. It aims to promote the hidden treasures of Ireland focusing on the inherent beauty of the inland countryside, where activity and relaxation coexist with the rural communities and their lifestyles. The promotion is identified as

'Yours To Uncover' which encourages visitors to focus on themes of discovery and exploration and encourages visitors to uncover their unique experience of the natural beauty and treasures of Ireland's Hidden Heartlands.

We request that the 'Ireland's Hidden Heartlands' identification and branding is fully integrated into the Development Plan and that an objective aligning with, supporting and promoting this initiative is also included. Ireland's Hidden Heartlands encourages individuals to be 'Active in Nature' through a range of activities across Greenways or Blueways including walking, cruising, cycling, and angling. Fáilte Ireland are currently developing Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand guidelines which will assist stakeholders.

Policies as identified in this submission relating to accommodation, multi-partner approaches, the establishment of navigation and signage strategies, provision of facilities for walkers, cyclist, water based tourists are all encouraged to deliver on the potential of Ireland's Hidden Heartlands and should be fully enshrined in the Development Plan.

The Beara Breifne Way

The Beara Breifne Way is a long-distance walking route based upon the historic 14-day march of O'Sullivan Beara in 1603. The route has historic relics dotted throughout the journey which stand as snapshots in time, reflecting its history. One of the largest community-based projects in Ireland, the Beara Breifne Way has 12 stages, from Cork to Cavan and many points in between. It has seen more than 40,000 people walk its path, with the area's heritage displayed throughout.

We request an objective to safeguard its future success in the new plan, this should relate to key issues such as promoting key facilities and services for visitors such as accommodation, signage, parking, and sustainable transport. 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 visitor attractions and amenities. Possible delivery mechanisms to be explored would include the extension of the Rural Transport Network (Local Link) 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.

The Shannon Masterplan

In partnership with Fáilte Ireland and Local Authority Representatives, Waterways Ireland is leading the preparation of the Shannon Masterplan. The key objective of the Masterplan is to revitalise the combined Shannon Navigation and Shannon Erne Waterway as a key destination within Ireland's Hidden Heartlands, identifying world class visitor experiences based on the region's natural and

cultural assets. This Masterplan is currently in preparation and due to be placed on public display soon.

Fáilte Ireland requests the inclusion of an objective recognising and supporting the forthcoming Masterplan. In addition, views and prospects of the Shannon are hidden in many places, increasing the accessibility of these vistas and providing of access and allowing them to become more visible would help increase appreciation for the Shannon's scenic attributes and its use for land based activities such as cycling and walking.

Boyle Destination Town

In 2019 funding was allocated to Boyle through Roscommon County Council as part of the €15.5 million 'Destination Towns' initiative launched earlier in 2019 by Fáilte Ireland. The purpose of the funding is to boost the attractiveness and tourism appeal of towns nationwide.

Fáilte Ireland requests the inclusion of an objective to support future tourism initiatives in Boyle in order to capitalise on the potential benefit of the funding for the town of Boyle.

Strokestown Park House & National Famine Museum

As announced in 2019, Fáilte Ireland has committed to a €3.9 million investment for the new National Famine Museum at Strokestown Park which is the largest investment to be made in a visitor attraction in Ireland's Hidden Heartlands over the last 10 years. The existing famine museum at Strokestown Park will be transformed into the new state-of-the-art National Famine Museum which will tell the complete story of the Great Famine for the first time. The development will include a new visitor centre and café and it is expected to bring 50,000 more visitors and €13.2million in additional revenue to the region over the coming years.

Fáilte Ireland requests an objective to safeguard and support this planned investment in the new plan.

4. Discussion of Background Information Provided

We welcome references to tourism in the Issues Paper, in particular regard to 'Rural Development and Natural Resources', and 'Economic Development'. We submit that greater detail focusing on tourism is appropriate to meet its broad range of considerations.

The Issues Paper possess a series of questions with a direct bearing on tourism, the following responses summarises Fáilte Ireland's views on the key questions:

What is your vision for County Roscommon?

Fáilte Ireland wishes to see a County which is attractive to visitors but also supports the needs of stakeholders in the tourism sector without compromising the integrity of the County's natural and built heritage. The Development Plan can assist by providing clear support and guidance for stakeholders, developers and planners to ensure the sustainable development of tourism in the County in the future. This can be reflected in the Strategic Aims of the new Development Plan and further detailed in a dedicated tourism chapter.

What do you think makes an attractive town/village centre?

The vitality and vibrancy of a town is a crucial aspect in making it attractive. Roscommon has many handsome towns and villages which are in need of rejuvenation. Tourism initiatives can act as a stimulus attracting further investment to an area creating a vibrancy and vitality. Improved public realms and encouraging the reuse of vacant buildings or unused upper floors in town centres may assist in this regard with providing accommodation and facilities for tourists. 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. Furthermore, Enterprise/Heritage/Community Initiatives – (not just tourism initiatives) that draw on and enhance the traditional townscape and its attractiveness for residents and visitors alike, enterprise etc – Places that are pleasant to work and live in tend to be vibrant and interesting and therefore attractive to visitors as well. The heritage council Town Centre Health Check Programme is a good example of this. The aim of the programme is to raise awareness, understanding and appreciation of the critical role that historic town centres play and the wide-ranging impacts that their vitality and viability have on overall socio-economic, environmental and cultural growth and development, and on quality of life for citizens and visitors alike.

Many of these towns are historic in nature however lack the investment to increase their tourism appeal. Roscommon should identify other towns, similar to Boyle, where investment in the townscape may be identified to improve the attractiveness to locals, visitors and investment opportunities. In addition, County Roscommon has a number of significant historic house and castles which require continued support and management. Some of these houses, such as Clonalis House, are lesser known however have the potential to attract visitors to the area.

How can we strengthen our rural economies and communities?

Tourism can make a key contribution to rural economies and communities. Most tourism facilities in County Roscommon are community or locally owned and managed, meaning spending remains in the local economy and as such should be promoted and safeguarded by the Development Plan. As such support for the internationally recognised VICE model should be identified in the

Development Plan. This model identifies sustainable tourism as the interaction between Visitors, the Industry that provides services to them, the Community and culture that hosts them and their collective impact on and response to the Environment where it all takes place.

How can the countryside be safeguarded in terms of biodiversity and habitats while accommodating development?

Ireland's Hidden Heartlands proposition is very focused on nature and light touch/impact tourism, access to nature and experiencing is central to the brand. Therefore, any development should ideally start with the significance of the biodiversity and progress from there. Roscommon possesses a huge variety of habitats including sites designated for nature conservation such as bogland, turloughs, eskers, callows, woodland, lakes and rivers. Many are home to species of rare plants and animals. These locations can be appreciated and visited through public parks, forest walks and other amenities thus increasing awareness of conservation requirements. Sustainable tourism and eco-tourism can help support the natural heritage by providing facilities required through education and careful management.

What do you think are Roscommon's key economic strengths or opportunities? How can we better link key tourism attractions with our towns and villages, so that greater economic benefit can be obtained from tourism?

Tourism is not a key traditional sector in Roscommon, however the County possesses a rich heritage and diversity of natural attractions suggesting it has great potential for future growth. The benefits of tourism overlap with many other areas such as agriculture, conservation, education and environment. Towns and villages will benefit greatly from increases in local tourism.

'Ireland's Hidden Heartlands' has had much success since its launch in 2018 and brought focus to this part of Ireland which may not traditionally have been seen as an obvious tourism destination. Roscommon should actively promote engagement and co-operation with the other counties in the Hidden Heartlands (namely Leitrim, and Longford as well as parts of Westmeath, Cavan, North Tipperary, Galway, and Offaly) to ensure continued promotion and provision of facilities to attract both visitors and continued investment.

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

Significant recent investment has been made in the Beara Breifne Way, this long-distance walking and cycling route has significant potential in the future. However, parts of the county lack a range of suitable accommodation and facilities for walkers, long distance hikers and cyclists for example.

This route also has significant potential for achieving regional synergies with neighbouring counties and should be capitalised upon.

In addition, there are many forest parks in Roscommon. Most notable is Lough Key, however there are other smaller scale forest parks with a range of activities such as Derryvunny and Mote forest parks. These parks could have potential for future growth in tourism and recreation.

A range of type and scale of accommodation is required to support tourism and varying types of tourism. Accommodation for families, walkers, cyclists, adventure sports users, weekend breaks etc. comes with a need for different facilities which should be supported by the Development Plan. Much of the accommodation is currently located adjacent to larger neighbouring towns such as Athlone and Carrick on Shannon with a lack of facilities in western parts of the county.

5. Further Suggestions for the New Development Plan

Tourism Amenities and Assets Maps

The Authority would also like to see tourism policies and objectives clearly set out where possible through the inclusion of maps in the draft Development Plan.

Such a map should illustrate:

- **Key nodes** of tourism activity in the County – both existing and proposed specific tourism centres (major tourism attractions, water access etc.); including the list of key assets identified in Section 2 above.
- Existing transport **links** between nodes and identified trails – whether walking, cycling or road based including greenways and blueways.
- **Strategic tourism centres** (principal towns containing tourist facilities) where key services such as hotels etc. are located;
- **Sensitive environments** where the provision of services must be sensitive and appropriate to the robustness / sensitivity of the receiving environment.
- **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 logos applicable to the county i.e. Ireland's Hidden Heartlands.

Wind Energy & Landscape Considerations:

The current Development Plan provides detail in relation to renewable energy and wind energy in Chapter 4 and within a separate strategy, referencing Wind Energy Guidelines 2006 and the

Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) prepared as part of the CDP. The LCA includes references to tourism throughout and specifically within Section 2.3 'tourism potential'. While it includes a map with identified areas of Wind Energy Development Potential in Roscommon it does not include reference to sensitive tourism amenities.

The Issues Paper provides detail in relation to the Council's approach to 'Climate Action, Energy and Environment'. Fáilte Ireland requests the Council develop a dedicated Renewable Energy Strategy. Included within this should be a map, which identifies areas suitable and unsuitable for the siting of wind turbines and sensitive areas such as tourism facilitates or assets. Robust policies will assist the Council in ensuring a continued emphasis on the positive interactions between both the energy and tourism potential of the County.

6. Conclusion

Fáilte Ireland would like to thank the Council in advance for their consideration of this submission and encourage the inclusion of the Authority's recommendations in the preparation of the new County Development Plan. We greatly appreciate this opportunity to take part in shaping the Plan for the County and hope that this submission can represent a first step in a collaborative process that culminates in the preparation and adoption of the new County Development Plan.

Yours sincerely,



Shane Dineen

On behalf of, Fáilte Ireland

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Appendix - Sustainable Tourism Principles

Key principles for sustainable tourism development should be set out as the introduction to the tourism policy statements of the County Development Plan. The following five principles, which have been prepared by Brendan O’Sullivan, Department of Geography, UCC, on behalf of Fáilte Ireland, encapsulate the need to achieve a balance between appropriate tourism development and economic, environmental and social sustainability.

- **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 its 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