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Date: 9<sup>th</sup> September 2020

Re: Preparation of Galway County Development Plan 2022-2028: Fáilte Ireland Pre-Draft Submission

To whom it may concern,

#### 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 Galway County Development Plan ('the Plan') for the period 2022-2028 by Galway County Council ('the Council').

Fáilte Ireland welcomes the opportunity to engage with Galway County Council on the emerging Plan for the County. Fáilte Ireland is seeking to enhance the partnership approach between the 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 submission has been prepared having regard to the tourism profile of the County; the background information in the Issues Paper; the current Development Plan 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. The Objective of this Submission
2. Commentary on the Current Galway Development Plan 2015-2021
3. Background Information Provided: Issues Paper
4. Key Tourism Assets & Challenges in Galway County
5. Fáilte Ireland Initiatives
6. Response to Key Questions
7. Further Suggestions for the New Development Plan
8. Conclusion

## 1.0 The Objective of this Submission

Fáilte Ireland has prepared this submission to support and assist the Council in the formulation of planning policies and frameworks for the period 2022-2028. Fáilte Ireland are seeking to enhance the partnership approach between the Council and the Authority and ensure that the expertise of both organisations is shared.

The submission seeks to enhance the policy convergence 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 the Regional Teams 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.

We wish to see continued acknowledgement and support of the tourism sector and its stakeholders in County Galway. There are a number of key areas which can see improvement such as the continued improvement of facilities along the Wild Atlantic Way (WAW), the lack of choice / availability in accommodation and increased support of local businesses, which are highlighted in further detail within this submission. Much of the County's tourism is focused on its coast and the Wild Atlantic Way however East Galway has many amenities and attractions as illustrated by Fáilte Ireland's 'Ireland's Hidden Heartlands' brand initiative.

Fáilte Ireland has invested significantly in key towns, initiatives and amenities in the County such as the various Visitor Experience Development Plans and through the Destination Town Funding Scheme. We wish to see these investments acknowledged and further progress in the new

Development Plan. We request an objective supporting continued cooperation between the Council, Fáilte Ireland and other tourism stakeholders in the county.

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 the enhancement of amenities and heritage can make a significant contribution to quality of life through well-designed public realm, recreational infrastructure; and, amenities in rural areas, such as national and forest parks, activity-based tourism and trails such as greenways, blueways and peatways. This is reflected in the National Planning Framework and North Western Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy (RSES) under National Strategic Outcome No. 7.

## 2.0 Commentary on the Current Galway Development Plan 2015-2021

Tourism is referenced in the current County Development Plan within Chapter 4 which relates to Economic, Tourism & Retail Development. However no dedicated Chapter is included within.

Furthermore the Vision Statement of the CDP references those who visit, stating:

*“Enhance the quality of life of the people of Galway and maintain the County as a uniquely attractive place in which to live, work, invest and visit, harnessing the potential of the County’s competitive advantages in a sustainable and environmentally sensitive manner.”*

We welcome tourism being identified at an early stage of the current County Development Plan and request that it be included as part of the Strategic Aims for the county in the forthcoming Development Plan to underpin its importance to the county.

The current County Development Plan refers to the Wild Atlantic Way and to co-operating with Fáilte Ireland and other relevant bodies including County Councils and Heritage Ireland generally. We wish to see an objective supporting continued cooperation between Fáilte Ireland and other tourism sector stakeholders in the emerging Development Plan.

Now in its sixth year, the Wild Atlantic Way has captured the imagination of visitors both home and abroad. This is very much testament to the strong partnership between the key stakeholders (including Galway County Council), the tourism industry, and the Wild Atlantic Way team in Fáilte Ireland. The Wild Atlantic Way brand is having a huge impact on the region; in 2019 it sustained 80,000 jobs, 3.7m visitors and over €3bn in spend. At the time of preparation the WAW was still in its infancy and as such we wish to see greater recognition of the brand in the forthcoming Development Plan. This should include investment in key infrastructure along the route, such as roads, accommodation and improved facilities at discovery points.

A key improvement possible in the new Development Plan would be a dedicated chapter on tourism in order to provide the required focus on tourism. It is considered given the importance of tourism to Galway that a dedicated chapter would allow for an extensive and wide ranging approach to be taken to the multifaceted and distinct tourism products in Galway, which may include but is not limited to:

- Accessible Tourism
- Activity & Adventure Tourism
- Amenity Paths and Networks
- Cycling
- Wild Atlantic Way
- Ireland's Hidden Heartlands
- Arts, Craft and Food Tourism
- Business Tourism
- Coastal Tourism
- The Islands
- Festivals and Events
- Gaeltacht Tourism
- Heritage and Cultural Tourism
- Major Attractions
- Rural Tourism
- Urban Tourism
- Visitor Accommodation

It would also allow for greater integration and collaboration with the tourism strategy for the City and would provide for a co-ordinated approach to tourism in the City and County as a whole.

Such a chapter enables decision makers and stakeholders to easily follow guidance in relation to tourism amenities and assets. The chapter should (a) encompass all of the policies and objectives relating to this important economic driver, building on the actions and objectives set out in the wider Development Plan 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 Plans (included in Appendix A of this Submission).

### 3.0 Background Information Provided: Issues Paper

The Issues Paper addresses a wide range of issues, many of which are of relevance however it lacks a real focus on tourism. We submit that the Issues Paper could go further in identifying the requirements of a sustainable and vibrant tourism sector. While the Issues Paper may be a strategic document and takes place early in the Development Plan process, we submit that these issues should be considered at this early stage to ensure a robust tourism strategy for the County is incorporated into the Development Plan, given the importance of tourism to Galway.

The following topics raised are of relevance: Rural Place Making and the Countryside, Economic, Enterprise, Tourism and Retail Development, The Galway Gaeltacht, Natural Heritage, and, Landscape and Green Infrastructure. In relation to tourism, the Issues Paper focuses on the provision of future greenways however there are a broader range of areas which also require further consideration and support from the Council, and which are discussed in this submission.

The Issues Paper contains a section partly focusing on tourism within 'Economic, Enterprise, Tourism and Retail Development', which notes the following:

*‘North-West Region and has a very successful brand domestically. The Wild Atlantic Way has been a successful tourism initiative for the counties along the Atlantic seaboard. The Wild Atlantic Way stretches almost 2,500km from Donegal to Cork, and includes almost 700km of Galway’s coastline. This tourism initiative has been very effective in marketing and promoting tourism, in particular Galway City, Conamara, including Oileáin Árann and Inishbofin, resulting in tourist numbers increasing annually.’*

*“A key tourism infrastructural requirement for the county would be the delivery of the Dublin to Clifden Cycleway. The Conamara Greenway - a section of the cycleway between Ballinasloe and Clifden, spans approximately 84 kilometres. This greenway will for the most part utilise the former Clifden to Galway rail line which closed in 1935. A 6km section of the greenway from Athry to Cloonbeg opened in 2018. It runs close to the route of Ballynahinch Castle and Ballinafad graveyard, north of Cloch na Rón. To the east of the county there is untapped potential for the development of the Lakelands brand, which comprises of Lough Derg and an interconnected lake system on the Shannon and the Hidden Heartlands tourism brands.’*

We request further references to the important role tourism plays in the local economy, which is considered especially important in Galway. It is considered that an ambitious and robust tourism chapter will both encourage and support tourism product development through the planning process but will also place Galway in a strong position for both Urban and Rural Regeneration funding (URDF and RRDF).

#### 4.0 Key Tourism Assets & Challenges in County Galway

In addition to the information contained within the current County Development Plan the County Council had previously commenced the preparation of a Tourism Strategy entitled Galway to 2025 and we would request that the forthcoming County Development Plan includes an objective to deliver this.

Galway has a broad range of tourist amenities and attractions which include, *inter alia*:

- Ballynahinch Castle
- Burren Nature Sanctuary
- Burren Discover Trail
- Ceardlan Spiddal Craft Village
- Claddagh Arts Centre & Katie’s Cottage Museum
- Claregalway Museum
- Cnoic Suain
- Connemara Heritage Centre
- Connemara National Park
- Connemara Smokehouse
- Connemara Greenway
- Dan O’Haras Homestead
- Dartfield Country Estate & Horse Museum
- Derrygimlagh WAW Signature Discovery Point
- Dun Aonghasa
- Galway Atlantaquaria
- Galway Irish Crystal Heritage Centre
- Galway City Museum
- Glengowla Mines Experience

- Inisbofin
- Irish Workhouse Centre
- Killary Harbour & WAW Signature Discovery Point
- Kylemore Abbey & Gardens
- Leenane Sheep and Wool Centre
- Lough Corrib
- Loughwell Farm Park
- Pearses Cottage
- Portuman Forest Park
- Portumna Castle & Gardens
- The Aran Islands
- The River Shannon
- Thoor Ballylee
- Turoe Pet Farm & Leisure Park

It is considered that there are some over-arching objectives and challenges for Galway that should be carefully considered in the formulation of the tourism chapter of the forthcoming Development Plan. These are discussed below and further throughout this submission by Fáilte Ireland.

#### Sustainable Tourism

The approach to Tourism in the new County Development Plan will need to place a strong emphasis on ‘Sustainable Tourism’. This is defined as *‘tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities’*<sup>1</sup>.

Tourism development must be balanced with the protection of the natural environment, a key attractor itself, and the people who live in these areas. Ongoing environmental management of Wild Atlantic Way (WAW) and managing visitor expectation is crucial to sustainable tourism in the County.

Traffic management and safety are issues which must also be carefully considered. The Council should continually monitor this in particular car park capacity, suitability of public realm and traffic management in towns. Discovery points along the WAW are popular stopping points and should have suitable facilities.

Other initiatives we wish to see promoted include:

- Increased public transport in the county such as the potential for electric buses serving more rural areas to allow ease of movement. Possible delivery mechanisms that could be explored would include the extension of the Rural Transport Network to include tourism objectives and key tourism sites.
- Improved road quality to facilitate better access by public and private bus transport.
- A collaborative approach should be used between Galway County Council, Galway City Council, Irish Rail and CIE with regard linkages regards bus, train, car parking, and greenways.
- The promotion and encouragement of local link bus routes aligned to tourism locations and timing to facilitate use by tourist and locals supporting their future viability.

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<sup>1</sup> Making Tourism More Sustainable - A Guide for Policy Makers, UNEP and UNWTO, 2005, p.11-12  
<http://www.unep.fr/shared/publications/pdf/DTIx0592xPA-TourismPolicyEN.pdf>

- Encouragement of dedicated and suitable cycle infrastructure to allow for the promotion of cycling along the routes for both recreation and leisure cycling. This should include other cycle infrastructure at key stations, i.e. pumps, electric charging.
- The Council should aim to achieve increased greenway coverage and network.
- Charging infrastructure in parking for electric bicycles and cars.
- Encourage low carbon or carbon neutral businesses.

#### Waste Water Treatment Infrastructure

We support investment to ensure resilience of water supply and waste water treatment. The importance of high-quality Waste Water Treatment Plants to ensure treated waste water will not harm or pollute the surrounding environment when it is discharged into it, is crucial to protect our coastal areas, rivers and lakes. The quality of bathing waters is also paramount to the tourism sector. In Ireland, we are particularly fortunate to have a varied and beautiful coastline with many pristine beaches that are open to the public to enjoy. To ensure their standard, it is imperative to continue to make strident efforts to protect and improve our waters.

As has been well documented in recent years there is a significant shortfall in waste water treatment infrastructure in the County. This has directly hampered the development of the tourism sector and the local economies in many Galway towns. This is most notable at this time in South Connemara. The impact of insufficient waste water treatment on the tourism has the following impact:

1. A threat to the development and promotion of on water and in water activities and attractions through degradation of water quality.
2. Prevention of further development of tourism infrastructure such as accommodation due to lack of sewage treatment capacity in the area.
3. Potential negative implications for the tourism industry where it may be perceived that additional visitor numbers is exacerbating and putting additional pressure on an already inadequate or absent treatment system resulting in further negative impacts on the receiving environment.

As such the provision of this infrastructure should be prioritised as a matter of urgency.

#### Vacancy in Towns

A key area of concern at present is the high incidence of vacancy in towns such as Spiddal and Clifden. Many properties are long vacant and the level of inactivity is having a wider negative impact on the community. As result there are very few opportunities for new businesses to invest. The Council should take a proactive approach to encourage these properties back into use.

More generally, tourism can have a positive impact on the vitality and vibrancy of towns. Fáilte Ireland has published 'Development Guidelines for Tourism Destination Towns' to provide a framework to support communities and Local Authorities and set out the key drivers of what makes a town appealing to the international tourist.

These guidelines are intended as a practical aid to Local Authorities, Chambers of Commerce, LEADER Programme Local Action Groups and other business and community groups who consider their town to either be a tourism destination town or have the potential to develop as one. They can also be used by smaller towns and villages with the potential to further develop as day trip destinations.

Other measures which can have a positive influence on tourism in towns includes enhanced public realm, improved wayfinding and signage, the promotion of town facilities and tidy towns initiatives. In terms of architectural design, it can be useful to engage with towns to facilitate consistent approach to the design of signage, streetscape and colour schemes. For example support a town painting schemes for urban renewal.

#### Indoor Attractions

We request that Galway County Council encourage the provision of more indoor tourism and recreational facilities and acknowledge and support the ongoing work by Fáilte Ireland in this regard, including the development and improvement of indoor attractions being grant aided through the New Horizons Small Grant Scheme 2018. This could include additional hours at heritage assets to allow greater use or more spaces for the night time economy suitable to families such as theatres, arts and music.

#### Support for Festivals

Fáilte Ireland has identified festivals as a key driver for tourism growth, particularly during off-season times. Investment in and business development support for festivals is helping to drive growth in the regions and entice both domestic and overseas visitors to different parts of the country in the off-peak season. Fáilte Ireland also provides funding for local festivals through its 'Regional Festivals and Participative Events Programme', which has been managed by Local Authorities since 2018.

We wish to see support for festivals in the forthcoming Development Plan.

#### Accommodation and Facilities

In many areas in Galway there is a lack of choice in accommodation, for example Clifden and West Galway has an absence of luxury accommodation. More widely there is an absence of choices in accommodation from holiday homes, motorhome parking, to more alternative accommodation types such as camping and glamping sites. Previously outlined issues relating to wastewater infrastructure is also proving a challenge to the increase in supply of accommodation offering.

Small scale accommodation is often locally owned and managed meaning tourist spending often results in an immediate benefit to the local economy. The Council should support the development of a wide range of accommodation and other local enterprises through Development Plan policies, objectives and zonings.

It is considered that the Development Plan should particularly support the development of tourist accommodation on the County's Islands which currently have limited accommodation offerings. This is a key component of improving the attractiveness to tourists and ensuring economic synergies can occur for local businesses.



As a way of encouraging local enterprises the Council should consider encouraging more pop-ups and temporary uses such as coffee kiosks. While these uses should be carefully managed they may provide an additional attraction to an area lacking in these facilities and services. We understand that there are considerations in relation to Bye-Laws, which although not directly relevant to planning, we would request that should be looked at so that smaller scale facilities can be licensed in key locations.

#### Improved Access for Water Based Activities

Despite its extensive coastline and proximity to inland waterways, the access to these facilities can be difficult. Galway has many excellent blue flag beaches, scenic rivers and lakes which have great potential for recreational use. Access for angling in particular is important in areas like Leenane and Moycullen, Lough Corrib etc. The Council should encourage improved facilities and access to these resources.

Related to this is the development of 'Blueways'. Blueways are recreational trails, based on or alongside lakes, canals and rivers. They provide scenic routes into the rural Ireland by canoe, bike or on foot. County Galway has significant potential in this regard.

## 5.0 Fáilte Ireland Initiatives

#### Visitor Experience Development Plans

The key to unlocking the growth potential of an area is the development of experiences that will motivate potential tourists to firstly visit there and secondly to dwell in the area. These new experiences are less concerned with visitors passively seeing or doing things; they encourage tourists to immerse themselves actively in the locale, interacting with people, engaging the senses, and learning the history and stories of the places. Fáilte Ireland's response to this challenge has been the creation of a framework to develop and deliver visitor experience development plans (VEDPs) along with strengthening destination towns. This approach identifies the key assets of an area and provides a framework to present the experiences and stories of that area in a way that tourists can readily and easily understand. It clearly identifies tangible actions and a process for businesses to shape their respective tourist experience(s) in line with the overall experience brand proposition and the key motivating themes for their area.

Fáilte Ireland has prepared a Visitor Experience Development Plans (VEDP) for the Connemara Coast & Aran Islands. We request an objective acknowledging and supporting this VEDP and others, including Destination Development Plans in the future. We wish to see an objective supporting continued collaboration with the Fáilte Ireland and tourism stakeholders to ensure successful implementation and delivery of these VEDPs. The development of 'Visitor Experience Development Plans' can provide a comprehensive and holistic response to ensuring attractions are appreciated and appeal to visitors.

The Connemara Coast & Aran Islands VEDPs (launched March 2018). As an example, the VEDPs identify Catalyst Projects including, *inter alia*:

- Assess the feasibility of a range of potential projects Connemara National Park in line with the National Park Interpretation Frame-work to enhance the visitor experience and strengthen shoulder and off-season visitation.
- Investigate the feasibility of developing new coastal and inland looped walking and cycling trails and promoting these trails as part of a network.
- Assess the feasibility of establishing a Leenane-Killary Fjord Adventure Hub
- Assess the feasibility of promoting and expanding the Connemara Coast Blueway network

We request a policy/objective supporting the promotion and implementation of Catalyst Projects as identified in the VEDPs.

#### The Wild Atlantic Way

In relation to the Wild Atlantic Way, which incorporates of West and Southern Galway, we request continued development of routes and discovery points. We request an objective aiming to work in collaboration with FI to ensure continued maintenance of discovery points and ensure access routes are maintained for all users. As part of this we wish to see continued evaluation of existing facilities for visitors such as toilets at key locations.

There are 189 Discovery Points along the Wild Atlantic Way and 25 in Galway alone including the islands. Fáilte Ireland would like to see the management and maintenance of these (in particular the 2 Signature Discovery Points) highlighted as a priority within County Development Plan.

Fáilte Ireland launched the *New Horizons on the Wild Atlantic Way 2018 Grants Scheme* to provide funding of over €1m for 9 new and operating visitor attractions along the Wild Atlantic Way within the defined geographies of the Connemara Coast & Aran Islands and the Skellig Coast.

The continued investment and upgrade of these attractions is of strategic importance to tourism in County Galway, the development of any indoor visitor experiences/attractions across South Connemara/Connemara Gaeltacht in particular can contribute to these areas.

Aligning to Fáilte Ireland's 10 year vision/5 year strategy 2018-2023 to drive sustainable growth and increase economic contribution, the Wild Atlantic Way Operational Programme (OP) provides for the opportunity for a series of drives off the Wild Atlantic Way. The Burren Discovery Trail, which includes parts of South Eastern Galway and Clare, is one such proposal provided for by the OP. The intention of creating such a scheme is to;

- Encourage existing and future visitors to explore the Burren region inland from the Wild Atlantic Way coastal route and to do so through interpretation (common themes and storytelling) and signage.
- Disperse visitors from areas of the Wild Atlantic Way that may be experiencing some congestion in peak times and to do so over an extended time frame outside of peak season.
- Gain from the existing attractions and viewing points and link such areas in a cohesive manner.

- Present existing good quality visitor experiences located adjacent to the catchment of the Wild Atlantic Way.
- Ensure the local economy benefits in the most sustainable manner in creating such a scheme.

The scheme identifies locations where Fáilte Ireland would fund the provision of new directional signage and interpretation. These locations are along routes that already exist and that are already used by visitors in order to view the landscape and facilitate transport to places that are already used by visitors. It is submitted that this should be identified and supported in the forthcoming Development Plan.

#### 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 parts of East Galway, Westmeath, Cavan, North Tipperary, and Offaly; as well as Counties Roscommon, Leitrim, and Longford. 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 fishing.

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 required to deliver on the potential of the Hidden Heartlands and should be fully enshrined in the Development Plan.

#### Other Fáilte Ireland initiatives

Other Fáilte Ireland initiatives in Galway include:

- Shannon Masterplan: In partnership with Fáilte Ireland and Local Authority Representatives, Waterways Ireland is leading the preparation of the Shannon Tourism 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.

- 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. The Hymany Way, which is one of a series of 11 sections of the greater Beara Breifne Way, traverses East Galway.

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 and parking.

- Destination Towns Funding: funding of between €250,000 and €500,000 is available to develop up key towns that have the potential to become a tourism hub. This scheme, which is open for applications, will provide funding for the Local Authorities to enhance public spaces and attract more overseas visitors.

Galway City and Clifden have received significant funding through this scheme, this funding should be further capitalised upon to maximise the impact of this investment.

- Platforms for Growth Investment Programme: A capital investment programme worth €150 million and will run from 2019 to 2022. Major new visitor attractions of scale will be developed and existing attractions greatly enhanced under the programme which falls under the Government's Project Ireland 2040 strategy.
- Kylemore Abbey & Walled Gardens: Relaunched in 2019 after an investment of €1.7 million under Fáilte Ireland's Grants Scheme for Large Tourism Projects 2016-2020 the re-development of the Abbey's interior creates a visitor experience that provides an engaging introduction to the Kylemore Abbey site. Fáilte Ireland has worked with Kylemore Abbey and Gardens to develop this new aspect of the already well-known historic and cultural attraction as a key tourism product in Galway.
- Connemara National Park: Connemara National Park is a key attraction along the Wild Atlantic Way and it has seen a rapid expansion in visitor numbers over recent years with more than 250,000 visitors annually. The popularity of the Connemara National Park reflects the quality and richness of the environment and the beauty of the landscape. Fáilte Ireland has in recent years provided significant funding to Connemara National Park to facilitate improved facilities such as the development of an additional 10.5 Km of new trails, a children's natural play area, visitor carpark at Mweelin and a new Lime Kiln Trail to enhance access to more areas of the National Park. The project, when completed, will allow visitors to explore higher level walking and hiking providing greater access to five of the Park's mountains including Binn Bhán, the highest mountain in Co Galway.

- Dun Aonghasa, Inis Mor: Fáilte Ireland through strategic partnership with the OPW, has put significant investment into upgrading the Visitor Centre at Dun Aonghasa on Inis Mor.

## 6.0 Response to Key Questions

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 management 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:

### Economic, Enterprise, Tourism and Retail Development

- *How can the County Plan support inward investment and job creation in the County and where should it be directed?*
- *What areas of the County have the potential to become sustainable key tourism attractions?*
- *What areas within Galway have the potential to form part of the development of a comprehensive tourist trail within the County?*
- *What policies should be introduced to further support town centre retailing and commercial activities that enhance the vitality and vibrancy of our town and village centres?*
- *How can the Plan policies help integrate enterprise land uses with other uses such as residential, transportation and tourism, etc?*

The provision of a range of tourist facilities including accommodation and increased coverage of high quality transport infrastructure will increase access to County Galway including areas which are lesser visited. The support of small scale, local tourist businesses can support the local economy such as accommodation.

Sustainability is a core consideration for tourism as the quality of the landscape and surroundings is a crucial aspect of the attraction as such any degradation would impact tourism negatively. Visitors are now more aware of their impact and are making choices based upon sustainability considerations. Key considerations in this regard include options relating to sustainable travel between sites with the promotion of public transport along key routes and the informed design and location guidelines for the development of tourism related facilities in sensitive amenities.

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, motorhome parking, etc. should be identified. The protection and enhancement of the tourism resource with information and interpretation provided and the actual resources carefully managed and protected should be a key aspect of the Development Plan.

Tourism has many overlapping benefits. Encouraging small scale tourism entrepreneurship can provide a much needed boost to the local economy as spending by those visitors stays in the local economy as well as proactive planning policies including provision of supporting infrastructure such as visitor car parking, toilets, café or catering facilities – particularly in sensitive or more rural locations.

As highlighted above, VEDPs can promote lesser known areas in a sustainable and comprehensive way. VEDPs can also help identify key areas where infrastructure is lacking and restricting tourism development. The provision of a range of tourist facilities including accommodation and increased coverage of transport infrastructure will increase access to County Galway including areas which are seldom visited.

Other measures which can have a positive influence on tourism in towns includes improved public realm, improved wayfinding and signage, the promotion of town facilities and tidy towns initiatives. In terms of architectural design, it can be useful to engage with towns to facilitate consistent approach to the design of signage, streetscape and colour schemes. For example support a town painting schemes for urban renewal. Being more creative in the reimagining of public space and the public realm of our cities and towns will be key to short-term recovery post Covid-19 and will also drive longer-term attractiveness by ensuring more connected places that are more accessible, easier to get around and much more pleasant to experience for visitors and residents alike and encourage people to stay longer.

Proactive measures by the Council to reduce vacancy will have a significant impact on local business and the local economy. Properties returned back into use will draw activity back into the town and support existing businesses adding to the vitality and vibrancy of the town.

#### *The Galway Gaeltacht*

- *How can we manage our cultural resources to ensure that the Gaeltacht economies and communities prosper in a sustainable manner?*
- *How do you think that the Plan can support the Gaeltacht area?*

The Galway Gaeltacht is an important part of Galway's cultural heritage. Fáilte Ireland recognises that there is a strong interdependency between heritage and tourism. Leveraging of our heritage assets can lead to economic, social and cultural benefits for local communities, and the wider area.

In 2017 over 90% of overseas holidaymakers across our 4 target markets visited a heritage site in Ireland as part of their holiday. This demonstrates that heritage is an intrinsic element of Ireland's tourism offering and as such, its economic value cannot be neatly separated from the overall value of overseas tourism to Ireland.

Promoting Tourism in these areas could provide a meaningful boost to the local economies and their communities. Improved access and visitor experiences will increase awareness and education allowing visitors to enjoy and appreciate the county's heritage into the future. An increased

understanding of the unique heritage of these areas may help their conservation in the long term. Again, social sustainability is a key aspect in this regard.

#### *Natural Heritage, Landscape and Green Infrastructure*

- *How can the new County Plan protect and enhance Galway's existing natural heritage and biodiversity?*
- *How can the new County Development Plan tailor its policies and objectives in a manner that will continue to protect the natural heritage including landscape while supporting sustainable development?*

Fáilte Ireland acknowledges that the county has an abundance of natural assets which is reflected by a significant number of designated sites for nature conservation. We are supportive of policy objectives to support initiatives that enhance and protect the county's unique natural heritage and biodiversity. However, it is important to acknowledge and recognise that tourism can play an important role in a sustainable way subject to appropriate management within these areas. For example, The Wild Atlantic Way passes through some of Ireland's most valued wild places – many of which are highly sensitive to environmental impact arising from unmanaged development.

Strict environmental protection is in place for many of these areas and there are legal requirements to assess new developments to ensure that no harm arises. As part of the development of the Wild Atlantic Way, we are also committed to the continuous monitoring of environmental effects and have developed a strategy for environmental surveying and monitoring to support this. Two sets of guidelines are being developed currently as a result of monitoring, general high-level site management guidelines and specific habitat specific site management guidelines.

Since 2017 Fáilte Ireland has established Strategic Partnerships with four state agencies including the Office of Public Works (OPW), National Parks and Wildlife Services (NPWS), Coillte and Waterways Ireland. As the owners and managers of these assets, Fáilte Ireland works with these agencies to optimise the visitor experience of state-owned lands and assets such as national parks, nature reserves, forest parks and heritage sites. This is key to positioning tourism on the agendas of those who directly manage and deliver the visitor experience but may not have tourism as their main remit. It is also key to note that heritage is not the single remit of any one agency or department and that a whole of government approach will be required, taking key areas and linkages with climate change, environment, to name but a few, into account.

Having regard to the sensitive nature and location of many of these sites improving access must be achieved in a sustainable manner. Considerations such as improving cycle and walking trails to sites, information signage, and orientation in all key towns, with accessible parking would facilitate ease of access for all. The development of digital platforms to educate and inform the public as to how best to interact with and protect, sensitive sites and environments should also be considered.

The development of coastal walks/ paths is also a key aspect of the visitor experience. These types of walks bring people into coastal communities, and provide opportunities for local guides, activity providers, coffee shops, bars, restaurants and accommodation providers etc.

#### *Architectural and Archaeological Heritage*

- *How can the new County Development Plan promote awareness of the County's past which includes Protected Structures, ACA's and archaeology?*
- *How can the new County Development Plan promote awareness of the County's past which includes Protected Structures, ACA's and archaeology?*

Fáilte Ireland recognises that there is a strong interdependency between heritage and tourism. Leveraging of our heritage assets can lead to economic, social and cultural benefits for local communities, and the wider area. In 2017 over 90% of overseas holidaymakers across our 4 target markets visited a heritage site in Ireland as part of their holiday. This demonstrates that heritage is an intrinsic element of Ireland's tourism offering and as such, its economic value cannot be neatly separated from the overall value of overseas tourism to Ireland.

It is acknowledged that the built heritage may have different and varying needs and requirements in order to unlock their potential, with the business and operations of attractions, conservation of monuments/ buildings etc., particularly relevant. The formulation of policies which acknowledge and support the positive role that heritage plays within tourism will benefit both heritage and tourism. A strong heritage policy with tourism as a priority sector within it, will help to ensure that the interests of both sectors are recognised. This will also enhance and promote co-operation between stakeholders.

Future development proposals should be considered in terms of their impact on the built landscape. High quality design and guidance is essential in minimising the potential impact of development.

## 7.0 Further Suggestions for the New Development Plan

### Tourism Amenities and Assets Maps

Fáilte Ireland 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 routes– 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; Further guidance is available here:



<https://www.failteireland.ie/FailteIreland/media/WebsiteStructure/Documents/Publications/Failte-Ireland-Tourism-Destination-Towns-Guidelines.pdf?ext=.pdf>

- Sensitive environments where the provision of services 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 logos applicable to the county i.e. Wild Atlantic Way and Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands

#### Renewable Energy Strategy

Fáilte Ireland recommends that all County Councils prepare a Renewable Energy Strategy, and this should continue to be an objective for the County which should be progressed in the short term. Included within this should be a map, which identifies areas suitable and unsuitable for the siting of wind turbines.

#### Landscape Character Assessment

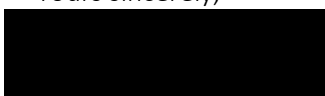
Fáilte Ireland requests that the National Landscape Strategy 2015-2025 be referenced in the forthcoming Development Plan and that a specific Landscape Character Assessment for Galway be incorporated. To achieve a more specific protection for tourism assets, we request an objective protecting the integrity of key tourist amenities from negative visual and landscape impacts.

### 8.0 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.

Should you have any queries on this please do not hesitate to contact Fáilte Ireland, where we would be happy to discuss the matters raised above and will be available throughout the County Development Plan Review process.

Yours sincerely,



Planning & Environment Manager

## Appendix A – 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.

- o 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.
  
- o 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.
  
- o 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.
  
- o 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.
  
- o 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.