

Laois County Development Plan Review,
Forward Planning Team,
Laois County Council,
Áras an Chontae,
JFL Avenue,
Portlaoise,
Co. Laois.

2nd March 2020

By email: cdp@laoiscoco.ie

Re: Laois County Development Plan 2021-2027 Issues Paper

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 preparation of a new Laois 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. We are particularly keen to see a cross sectoral approach between tourism and other sectors and the need for integrated planning policies and strategies.

The Significance of Tourism to the Irish Economy

Tourism is one of the largest and most important sectors of the 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.

Last year Ireland welcomed 10.8 million overseas visitors – up 1.8% on 2018. However, no less than any other sector, tourism is vulnerable to external global forces, a competitive marketplace and the trends and requirements of an ever more dynamic and discerning consumer. In this context any growth is hard won.

In a Laois context, in 2018, Laois welcomed <0.5% of the 9,609 million overseas tourists who came to Ireland, spending <0.5% of the €5,217bn overseas tourism expenditure in Ireland. Irish residents took 237,000 trips to Laois and Offaly (2% of the 10,918 million domestic trips in 2018) spending €30mn (1% of domestic tourist spend).

New tourism targets have been set after projected revenue and visitor numbers were reached in 2018. The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport have agreed to adopt the revised performance targets out to 2025 with revenue from overseas tourists, excluding carrier receipts, increased to €6.5 billion in real terms (i.e. excluding the effects of inflation) by 2025, up from €5.2 billion in 2018. There will be 11.6 million tourists visiting Ireland annually by 2025 (tourists are defined as overseas visitors staying at least one night – the figure in 2018 was 9.5 million). To accommodate the development and growth of tourism which is projected under the revised figures outlined above, a well-managed, maintained and connected public transport network is a key enabler and of critical importance.

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 Development Plan notwithstanding its contribution to enhancement of quality of Life and the enhancement of places of residence, work and play and can positively affect both physical

and mental wellbeing which is a key principle of the Eastern and Midland Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy (RSES).

Fáilte Ireland seeks to ensure the following in the context of the emerging development Plan:

- To acknowledge and recognise tourism as a key economic driver for Laois which supports job creation;
- 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 Ancient East) applicable to Laois;
- 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 a variety of accommodation types, restaurants, attractions, activities etc;
- Protection and enhancement of the tourism resource with information and interpretation provided and the actual resources carefully managed and protected.
- Update of the Wind Energy Strategy and Landscape Character Areas;
- Robust policies to support and prioritise investment to ensure resilience of water supply and wastewater treatment for the county. The importance of high-quality Wastewater Treatment Plants to ensure treated wastewater will not harm or pollute the surrounding environment when it is discharged into it, is crucial to protect our, rivers and lakes. The quality of bathing waters is also paramount to the tourism sector. To ensure their standard, it is imperative to continue to make strident efforts to protect and improve our waters.

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 management are key 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:

Are there any areas that have the potential to be developed for tourism and recreational purposes?

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. In Ireland's Ancient East and including Laois, Fáilte Ireland has developed two Visitor Experience Development Plans 'Tales of Two Worlds' and 'Castle & Conquests'. Fáilte Ireland would like to see inclusion of a policy/objective to support the delivery of these VEDP's.

Fáilte Ireland has identified festivals as a key driver for tourism growth, particularly during off-season times. They are an important component of the Irish tourism product offering. They provide opportunities to showcase culture, people and places, thereby greatly improving the tourist experience. Investment in and business development support for festivals is helping to drive growth and entice both domestic and overseas visitors to different parts of the country in the off-peak season. Fáilte Ireland provides funding for local festivals through its 'Regional Festivals and Participative Events Programme', which has been managed by Local Authorities since 2018.

Fáilte Ireland has partnered with Coillte and the Department of Rural and Community Development to support Ireland's mountain biking community to firmly establish Ireland as one of the top mountain biking destinations in the world. Significant investment in the Slieve Bloom Mountain Bike Trail through the RRDF fund opens the possibility of developing the Laois trail head at Baunreagh and surrounding towns such as Mountrath and Coolrain as well as leveraging the strong accommodation stock in Portlaoise. It is planned to develop visitor facilities at Baunreagh with café, showers, bike hire, spares. Fáilte Ireland would welcome a policy objective to support this development which would create an international mountain biking proposition in the Slieve Bloom Mountains and as one of four national centres.

The Barrow Blueway was recently awarded RRDF funding for 46km route (30km Kildare, 16km Laois). Vicarstown in Laois, which already has an established barge and bike hire business, has the potential to benefit from this investment. The development of Blueways provides valuable opportunities for rural communities to attract more visitors. These values lie not only in the recreational opportunities that they offer but also in their potential to stimulate local businesses and regenerate local areas. A blueway can be defined as “a network of approved and branded multi-activity recreational trails and sites, based on and closely linked with the water, together with providers facilitating access to activities and experiences”. This definition is as defined in the National Blueway Development and Management Guide.

How can greater access to the natural, built and archaeological heritage be facilitated, while having regard to the sensitive nature of many sites?

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.

Tourism is a key economic driver often delivering full time and seasonal income into areas where employment opportunities are either scarce – or which constitute a suite of mixed activities throughout the year. Tourism-related activities can be an important source of finance for the capital investment needed to support development and maintenance.

It is acknowledged that the built, natural and archaeological 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, are 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.

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 above, we consider that the following projects within the county are important from a heritage perspective.

- Rock of Dunamase - The site is currently managed by the OPW and is free to access and open all year round. It is a key site for the county but has not been developed to its full potential and lacks basic visitor facilities such as toilets and adequate parking. Fáilte Ireland provided grant funding for the development of a downloadable Rock of Dunamase Audio Guide in 2015 but otherwise interpretation is limited. We welcome the fact that the Council is committed to the conservation to Rock of Dunamase and will work closely with the OPW to ensure the its protection for future generations.
- Emo Court - A key OPW site with the potential to contribute to the visitor economy. The first floor of the property was opened up in 2019 with RRDF funding, the kitchens will be renovated in 2020 and open in 2021 as a 'downstairs' big house experience. The Ireland's Ancient East team put a resource in place to develop a visitor engagement strategy for the new developments in 2019.
- Portlaoise historic quarter - Laois County Council received URDF funding to develop the Old Fort/Maryborough Fort and to position Portlaoise as a low carbon town. Some public realm

developments have been delivered others will be implemented under the Fáilte Ireland Destination Towns investment.

- Other heritage products - Timahoe Round Tower & Heritage Centre, Donaghmore Famine Workhouse Museum, Abbeyleix Heritage House (and Abbeyleix itself as a heritage town), Aghaboe Abbey and Heywood Gardens.

How can change to the quality, character and amenity value of our landscapes be managed?

Fáilte Ireland welcomed the inclusion of a growth strategy for the region in the EMRA RSES 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 can the Plan encourage the reuse of Protected Structures that have fallen into disuse?

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).

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.

Conclusion

Fáilte Ireland welcomes the review of the Laois 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 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. The National Tourism Development Authority look forward to corresponding with the Council on the forthcoming stages of the County Development Plan process.

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 process.

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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.