



Association of Visitor Experiences & Attractions
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Deputy Niamh Smith
Cathaoirleach
Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media
Leinster House, Dublin D02 XR20

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A Chathaoirleach,

I am pleased to attach at this time a Submission on Rural Tourism on behalf of the Association of Visitor Experiences and Attractions.

I would be happy to answer any queries you might have.

Yours sincerely

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Written Submission on the Importance of Rural Tourism

Association of Visitor Experiences and Attractions

Chair: Geraldine Enright, Director, Cliffs of Moher Visitor Centre

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Association of Visitor Experiences and Attractions (AVEA) is the representative body for the visitor experiences and attractions (VEA) sector. Our members employ 4,500 people, and in 2019 welcomed over 25 million visitors, and generated in excess of €500 million in visitor revenues that supported local communities in every region.

While the concentration of AVEA's largest members (>100,000 visitors per year) is primarily in Dublin, of the approximately 480 visitor attraction sites in the Republic of Ireland, 83% of these are outside Dublin. **Thus, AVEA has a deep and sustained interest in the optimisation of conditions to support Rural Tourism.** AVEA members include strategically important locations that draw visitors out of the urban centres, such as the Cliffs of Moher, Birr Castle, Spike Island, and Hook Lighthouse, to name a few.

Many visitor attractions are located in areas that do not offer alternative employment opportunities of scale, but in themselves are tremendous drivers of local rural economies. In addition to providing employment themselves, which generates revenues spent locally in the purchase of goods and services, they also generate demand for ancillary services including food service, retail, and transportation.

Visitor attractions, due to the volume of day and overnight visitors they draw, have a dependence on having a strong and integrated local support infrastructure, including access by roads and public transport, a labour pool, accommodation stock, food service availability, and more.

VEAs also have an Important contribution in the sustenance of the fabric of local communities, economically, socially and culturally. They play a role in recounting local heritage and history, and showcasing local traditions and crafts.

During the Covid pandemic, VEAs experienced prolonged periods of closure, when they operated without international visitors, and with drastically reduced capacities. The pace of recovery is such that in 2022, most rurally-based attractions expect to achieve only 60-70% of 2019 visitor footfall levels. This contrasts with >90% recovery as reported at many Dublin sites in 2022.

AVEA identifies a huge range of opportunities to develop and enhance the rural tourism offering in a sympathetic and sustainable way, to respond to changing consumer wishes and to create new and attractive visitor offerings. These include: 'getting away from it all'; clustering; slow tourism; dark skies; agritourism; alternative accommodation offerings; blueways, greenways and walkways; closer engagement with state agencies; product development; competitiveness measures; and intra-tourism carbon offset programmes, to name a few.

The immediate future for AVEA's rurally-based members is challenging, and consideration should be given to some measures which can help in our businesses' recovery.

I. INTRODUCTION

- (i) The **Association of Visitor Experiences and Attractions (AVEA)** was established in 2017 as the national representative association for the Visitor Experience and Attractions industry in Ireland. It was formed by the sector to provide a forum for networking, and thereby build greater competence and confidence in operational and experience delivery. As the representative body for the VEA sector, the Association provides a collective voice and representation to create greater awareness and understanding of this vital tourism sector, recognised as the key destination drivers.
- (ii) AVEA membership has grown to over 100 members and includes all the leading visitor experiences and attractions in Ireland. Our membership ranges from iconic must-see destinations like the Guinness Storehouse, Book of Kells, Kylemore Abbey, and Cliffs of Moher Visitor Centre, to smaller but regionally significant attractions like Hook Lighthouse, Spike Island, Waterford Treasures and Birr Castle. We also list amongst our membership a number of the National Cultural Institutions, and the top OPW sites. Visitor attractions are Ireland's strategic tourism assets. AVEA members are keenly aware of the important role they play in protecting our built and natural heritage assets so that future generations can continue to enjoy them. The VEA sector is firmly rooted in Ireland's cultural heritage, and AVEA's membership encompasses a rich tapestry of places and buildings that have survived countless generations; their ongoing prosperity is integral to delivering the stories of our history and culture and the recovery of the tourism industry. Holiday visitors are motivated to travel to and around Ireland to explore and enjoy the country - its natural and built environment, people, heritage and culture. Visitor attractions and experiences play a vital role in stimulating awareness and interest among visitors, and in fulfilling their expectations by offering a wide choice of things to see and do.
- (iii) The stated objectives of AVEA are:
 - 1. To provide a forum for the exchange of knowledge, information and advice
 - 2. To improve performance within the industry and promote the development of the core skills and competencies, through education and career development, to drive its continued success
 - 3. To conduct research for the sector, and gather data on performance and the needs of the sector.
 - 4. To represent the attractions and experience sector and to advocate its importance within the tourism industry, local and national government.
 - 5. To promote the deployment of sustainable tourism practices and action to reduce carbon output.
- (iv) AVEA played an important role in the Report prepared by the Tourism Recovery Taskforce (2020) which delivered a roadmap for the survival and recovery of Irish Tourism. [This report](#) identifies the visitor attractions and experiences sector as 'key strategic assets' and essential destination drivers. The VEA sector is noted as having an important role in driving regional visitation numbers for accommodation and hospitality businesses. The Report called for investment with targeted prioritisation for cultural and heritage tourism products. AVEA welcomes the Minister's inauguration of the Recovery Oversight Group which regularly meets to ensure the recommendations of the Plan are implemented.

II. VISITOR EXPERIENCES AND ATTRACTIONS, AND RURAL TOURISM

The number of admissions to visitor attractions is testament to their importance. Based on data collected from AVEA's members, Fáilte Ireland, and other sources, it is estimated that, in 2019, almost 40 million visits were made to some 390 visitor attractions in the Republic of Ireland. **These attractions are spread throughout the country, promoting tourism and economic activity which, in many locations, would not otherwise occur.**

Annually AVEA conducts a survey of its members performance. In 2019, this survey of members reveals the value of their tourism and economic contribution. Based on the data supplied by respondents, the following highlights emerge:

- AVEA's members received an estimated 25.3 million visitors in 2019 (which is used across the industry as a 'base' year), 22.6 million in the Republic of Ireland, and 2.7 million in Northern Ireland; this represents, respectively, 57% of visits to all attractions in the Republic, and 24% of all visits to attractions in Northern Ireland.
- AVEA's members employ over 4,500 people.
- AVEA's members generated an estimated €501 million in revenues in 2019, a very high proportion of which flowed into their local economies in wages and purchasing of goods and services.
- International visitors represented 55% of AVEA members business. However, the dependence on international visitors in Dublin was far greater at 79%, with rural attractions having a greater number and spread of domestic visitors.
- Visitor attractions are typically built on a volume model. The average ticket price (net of VAT) for non-Dublin AVEA members in 2021 was **€9.23**, with spend on retail and food/beverage adding on average a little over €10. Rural sites in particular rely heavily on these secondary income streams to survive; equally, these ancillary services are dependent on volume footfall in order to be viable.
- Staff costs make up almost half of operating expenditure, which signals the very slim margins on which many businesses operate.
- While Government supports enabled many businesses to retain core staff in 2020-21, the number of part-time and seasonal employees dropped by one-third during the same period. These part-time and seasonal roles are valuable economic contributors in rural locations, and their temporary loss is notable.

III. A STRONG AND INTEGRATED LOCAL SUPPORT STRUCTURE

While visitor attractions are identified as **key drivers to destinations**, their greater contribution to the local tourism economy is in the integration of other tourism offerings. In order to create a destination, a visitor attraction or experience must be supported by key elements, including but not limited to:

- A sufficient stock of accommodation, with a choice of price points
- Infrastructural enablers including road access, public transport access, signage, etc
- Engagement with local stakeholders including local authorities, regional development agencies, tourism agencies, business groupings, etc
- Ancillary tourism services including food/beverage, local transport, retail, activities/entertainment,
- An active and available pool of labour
- Affordable living conditions for local residents, to support labour force

The challenges around sufficient hotel accommodation have been widely reported in 2022's season. The removal of tourism accommodation for humanitarian purposes from the for-sale stock of bedrooms had the consequence of significantly reducing visitor numbers in particular areas. Youghal, Lisdoonvarna and Spiddal were examples of towns which saw a depletion of their tourism economies due to the unavailability of tourism accommodation.

Local Authorities (LAs) have been increasingly engaged in the development of their tourism economies, with the appointment of Tourism Officers at LAs around the country. Examples of strategic planning and investment in tourism that continues to benefit rural economies includes: the development of the Waterford Greenway; partnership investment projects in Co Wexford in Hook Lighthouse, the Irish National Heritage Park, and the 'Wexfordia' project in New Ross; and the Cliffs of Moher 2040 Strategy. It is estimated that 143 visitor experiences/attractions are under the management of Local Authorities, which underlines their importance to the rural tourism economies.

Of course, Local Authorities also have an important role in ensuring the planning of future tourism development is in keeping with their own authority development plans: identifying economic needs, driving economic benefit, while sustaining community fabrics and protecting the environment. This is revisited on page 9.

Rurally-based visitor attractions have benefited from strategic investment programmes including the Rural Regeneration Development Fund (RRDF), which committed €1bn between 2021 and 2027. One of the areas this Fund targeted was the enhancement of heritage and/or other community assets including the provision/enhancement of recreational or leisure facilities.

Also extremely important has been the LEADER programme: the total funding available under the LEADER 2014-2020 Programme is €250 million. AVEA members are keenly attuned to opportunities that may enable them, individually or collectively, to enhance the rural tourism offering. This is not just limited to their

interest in visitor attractions, but the wider offering, including, for example, the current call under Pobal for a pilot scheme to manage rural walking and hiking trails.

It should be noted that a consequence of the devastation of the rolling Covid business closures and the collapse of international tourism was a slump in AVEA members' expenditure in Capital Projects. In 2020, investment in essential building maintenance, refreshment and renewal fell by -78% amongst our non-Dublin members. Businesses found themselves using up cash reserves, and heavily were reliant on a wide range of measures including but not limited to:

- Fáilte Ireland Adaptation Grant
- Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), and Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS)
- PUP (accessed by temporarily laid-off staff)
- Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS) to a limited number of Visitor Attractions
- Fáilte Ireland Business Continuity Grant Aid funds
- Local Authority Commercial Rates waiver
- Local Authority Re-start Grant

The resultant reduced spending on capital projects can result in a deterioration and/or dating of the tourism offering; hence, there is great importance attached to schemes, programmes and incentives that encourage investment in product. **AVEA wishes the Committee to note the significance to our rurally-based members of RRDF, LEADER, POBAL and other schemes.**

In response to extended periods of closure, significantly reduced capacities, and the resulting impact on all revenue streams (ticket sales, events, food and beverage, retail, etc), since 2020 AVEA members have sought new ways to deliver their product and innovate. Examples include outdoor activities such as games and walking tours, outdoor dining, and outdoor events. These initiatives did not in any way make up for lost revenue. The objectives were to re-imagine the customer engagement points, and to retain critical staff, in the hope of strengthening recovery and anticipating changing visitor trends. It is a sign of the resourcefulness and thoughtfulness of the VEA sector that such innovation was tried and tested, in order to keep local markets and domestic visitors engaged and interested.

IV. OUR RURAL FUTURE

It is noted that the Government policy document <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/4c236-our-rural-future-vision-and-policy-context/> identifies key areas of benefit and significance in supporting rural communities. As referenced above, visitor attractions as an important element of rural tourism are closely integrated with the opportunities created by vibrant rural communities. Visitor attractions are excellent examples of sustainable tourism contributing socially, economically, environmentally and culturally, as the following points illustrate:

- Visitor attractions, identified as key ‘destination drivers’, make communities more appealing. They bring people to rural areas, to visit and to work and add to the attractiveness of a place to live.
- Investment and development of rural digital hubs are critical to creating rural communities that are economically self-sufficient.
- Visitor attractions are catalysts for further rural development and for creating and enhancing sustainable rural communities, towns and villages in Ireland.
- Visitor attractions, in drawing culturally curious visitors to destinations, provide opportunity for cottage industry and spin-off industry in the surrounding hinterland for services, art craft and design suppliers, driving innovation and entrepreneurship.
- Visitor attractions and their footfall attract investment, public funding, and private investment in complimentary product offerings eg cafes, galleries, retail, public realm, recreational areas.
- Visitor attractions play an important role in education, interpretation and protecting of the landscape, heritage, culture and protected structures.
- Visitor attractions provide venues and recreation for the community and for visitors to the area.
- Visitor attractions provide a mix and range of roles and employment types.
- Visitor attractions have a symbiotic relationship with the Regional Airports.

V. OPPORTUNITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With over 100 members right around the country, AVEA is closely attuned to consumer sentiment and trends in consumer demand. Research by Tourism Ireland and globally indicates that holiday-makers are seeking out more meaningful and authentic leisure experiences, treasuring their time with family and friends, investing more on holidays, and booking longer stays. This presents tremendous opportunities for rural tourism providers where visitors can **'get away from it all.'**

Examples of rural tourism visitor experiences which, although micro, have successfully positioned themselves include the Caherconnell Sheepdog Experience, Wet Mongrel Stand-Up Paddle-Boarding, the Burren Smokehouse, Hazel Mountain Chocolate Factory, and the Aillwee Burren Experience – all located within 30km of each other. The importance of **clustering** cannot be overstated.

Agritourism is another area in which AVEA sees opportunities – open farms, hands-on experiences, authentic meet-the-farmer engagements; however, considerations around high insurance premiums are sure to be at the forefront of business-owners' minds. As, in response to the climate crisis, tourism adapts to put forward more sustainable tourism propositions, **agritourism** is well-placed to lead the revolution in delivering experiences and education that support environmental sustainability. Examples include Newbridge Farm, Causey Farm, and Airfield Estate.

AVEA welcomes the focus that has developed in recent years on developing **slow tourism** that is in touch with nature. In particular, we welcome how the strategic investment in blueways including the Shannon-erne waterway, greenways (Limerick, Waterford, Mayo), camino-style point-to-point walking routes such as St Declan's Way, and hiking trails have opened up huge opportunities for visitors to truly get off the beaten track. Synergies develop as these routeways offer opportunities for complementary businesses to connect and work together, enhancing destination appeal and creating 'solutions' for visitors.

AVEA welcomes the designation of **dark sky** areas in Kerry and Mayo offering amazing star-gazing opportunities on the edge of Europe, an escape from light pollution and an opportunity to see astronomical sights with the naked eye, something that is increasingly difficult in our urbanised world.

We would like to note the strategic decision in Ireland's Hidden Heartlands to turn the focus on slowing down the visitor, encouraging **longer dwell time**, which results in greater economic spend as well as visitor enjoyment and satisfaction. It is estimated that almost 450,000 international tourists visited Ireland's Hidden Heartlands in 2019, generating €178 million in revenue.

Possibly the greatest success story in the marketing of rural tourism has been the high awareness and uptake of the **Wild Atlantic Way** visitor offering. Drawing its USP from the rugged landscapes, coastal drives, and rural isolation in stunning surroundings, the Wild Atlantic Way (WAW) proposition has captivated global audiences. International visitor spend in WAW tourism businesses is expected by the tourism agencies to exceed €2 billion in the coming years.

Reflecting changing visitor desires in the post-Covid environment, an uptick in interest has been seen in camping, caravanning and **non-traditional accommodation** such as forest cabins and tree-houses. This trend will need to be met with appropriate responses by Local Authorities to ensure that such accommodation provision is delivered in a way that meets consumer demand, generates economic benefit, and aligns with LA development plans.

AVEA sees huge opportunities in creating stronger working ties around rural tourism with **state agencies** such as Waterways Ireland, Bord na Móna, Coillte, the National Parks and Wildlife Services, Inland Fisheries Ireland, etc. Research during Covid clearly demonstrated the positive health benefits – physical and mental – of being in nature, and of spending recreation time in rural areas. AVEA believes that closer links could be established to engage the ‘recreational’ remits of state agencies more closely with tourism stakeholders, so that the benefits can be enjoyed and shared more widely.

Moreover, AVEA sees a unique opportunity for these state agencies to potentially offer carbon mitigation solutions for our urban-based visitor attractions, in particular older heritage buildings. An **intra-tourism carbon offset programme** would have the dual benefit of offsetting carbon output from urban tourism businesses while investing in safeguarding and developing our natural tourism assets – bogs, forests, cliffs, inland waters, sand dunes, flora and fauna – and thus enhancing our rural tourism appeal.

As with all elements of tourism, it is important to look outside the country to understand key trends, to learn what others do well, and to avoid mistakes. New Zealand is famed for its guardianship of pristine landscape, and is determined, post-Covid, to be a leader in ‘**leave no trace**’ tourism (<https://www.euronews.com/travel/2022/10/24/new-zealand-overtourism-residents-plead-with-tourists-to-tread-lightly-and-leave-no-trace>.) At the forefront of ‘Swisstainable’, the sustainable tourism proposition of the Swiss tourist board, is connectivity and accessibility via an excellent, efficient and widely distributed **transport** network (www.myswitzerland.com.)

Again, with an eye to overseas, it is important to consider **competitiveness** in Irish tourism. Competitiveness touches on many elements – not just price and product, but perceptions of value for money, comparisons with similar market offerings, benchmarking, and more. Most pressing is the expected VAT rate change to 13.5% from 1st March 2023, which will position Ireland as a high outlier when comparing tourism VAT with other EU countries. Costs of doing business are already at an all-time high with record energy prices, and consumer confidence in some key markets, eg Great Britain and, to a lesser extent, Germany, currently softening.

Competitiveness also manifests itself when visitors consider the intrinsic appeal of a destination – is its product fresh, timeless, to international standards, appealing and attractive, and persuasive at the point of decision-making? Ongoing investment in **product development**, as facilitated by the national tourism development agency Fáilte Ireland, by local authorities and regional development bodies, by programmes/funds/schemes as references above, by private investment, and by partnership arrangements, is absolutely critical to the successful marketing of the rural tourism experience.

VI THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE FOR RURAL VISITOR ATTRACTIONS

- (i) **Cautious Tourism Scenario for 2023:** Uncertainty abounds as VEAs look into the winter months faced with energy bills (some members reporting a quadrupling year-on-year) and a softening of demand from key European markets as cost of living rises and the continuing war in Ukraine damages travel confidence. The anticipated ending of the TBESS at the end of February will coincide with the increase of VAT to 13.5%, at an early and vulnerable time in the tourism season.
- (ii) **Measures which can help:** As our rurally-based members in particular continue to experience a slow pace of recovery, we have identified the following key asks as essential to mitigate business vulnerability.
 - Retention of 9% VAT rate to 2025
 - Review of energy supports particularly for heritage buildings which are difficult to retro-fit, and for businesses using oil as a main source of heat
 - Assurance that the TBESS or a similar support will be available to our not-for-profit members, as the current scheme is not designed with them in mind
 - Continued support for the national tourism agencies to enable capital investment, product development, and overseas marketing
- (iii) **Rising cost of living:** It is widely reported that household bills are rising with home energy, motor fuel, other utilities, and the grocery basket all on the increase. Given the pressures on consumer spending, visitor attractions play an extremely important role in providing families with local, affordable ways to spend leisure time, providing orderly, weather-proof indoor opportunities for enjoyment, engagement, experiences, and memory-making.

AVEA's Chair, Geraldine Enright, and CEO Catherine Flanagan thank the Joint Committee for the opportunity to provide this Submission and they remain available to present at a hearing at the convenience of the Committee.

AVEA MEMBERS 2022-23

14 Henrietta Street – Adare Heritage Trust – Aillwee Burren Experience – Airfield – Ardgillan Castle – Avoca Mill - Belvedere House & Gardens– Beyond the Trees Avondale - Birr Castle Gardens & Science Centre – Brú na Bóinne Newgrange - Bunratty Castle – Butler House – Canal Boat Restaurant - Castletown House - Chester Beatty – Christ Church Cathedral Dublin – Cliffs of Moher Visitor Experience – Clondalkin Round Tower - Cobh Heritage Centre – Dalkey Castle & Heritage Centre – Donegal Castle - Doolin Cave – Doolin Ferries - Dublin Castle – Dublin Discovered Boat Tours - Dublinia – Dún Aonghusa - Dunbrody Famine Ship – EPIC The Irish Emigration Museum - Fota House Arboretum & Gardens – Foxford Woollen Mills – GAA Museum and Croke Park Tours – Experience Glasnevin – GPO Witness History – Guinness Storehouse – Hook Lighthouse – House of Waterford Crystal – IMMA Irish Museum of Modern Art - Irish National Heritage Park – Irish National Stud & Gardens - Irish Rock n Roll Museum – Irish Whiskey Museum – Jameson Distillery Bow St. - Jameson Distillery Midleton – Johnstown Castle Estate, Museum & Gardens – Kilbeggan Distillery – Kildare Village – Kilkenny Castle – Killarney Brewing Company - Killary Fjord Boat Tours - Kilmainham Gaol - King John’s Castle – Kylemore Abbey & Gardens – Living Yougal – Lough Boora Visitor Centre - Lough Gur Visitor Centre - Lough Key Forest and Activity Park – Malahide Castle & Newbridge House – Medieval Mile Museum – Mount Congreve Trust – Museum of Literature Ireland – Nano Nagle Place - National Botanic Gardens - National Gallery of Ireland – National Leprechaun Museum of Ireland - National Library of Ireland - National Museum of Ireland - Country Life - National Museum of Ireland – Decorative Arts & History – National Museum of Ireland – Natural History – National Wax Museum – Newbridge Silverware – Oakfield Park – Pearse Lyons Distillery – Phoenix Park Visitor Centre - Powerscourt Distillery – Powerscourt Estate – Rebel City Distillery - Rediscovery Centre – Roe & Co Whiskey Distillery – Rock of Cashel - Rothe House – Russborough House & Parklands – Saint Patrick’s Cathedral – SEA Life Bray – Skerries Mills – Slane Castle – Slane Distillery – Sliabh Liag Visitor Centre – Smithwicks Experience Kilkenny - Spike Island – Stillgarden Distillery - Strokestown Park House & The National Famine Museum – Swords Castle – Tayto Park – Teeling Whiskey Distillery – The Shed Distillery of PJ Rigney Visitor Experience – Titanic Experience – Trinity College Dublin & Book of Kells – Tullamore Dew Visitor Centre - Valentia Lighthouse – Waterford Treasures – Wells House and Gardens – Westport House – Wicklow Gaol – Windmill Lane Recording Studios