



Ms. Niamh Smyth T.D.,
Cathaoirleach,
Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Sport and Media,
Leinster House,
Dublin 2,
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Email: jcmedia@oireachtas.ie

17 October 2022

Dear Cathaoirleach,

I refer to your letter issued by email on the 19th of September 2022 requesting briefing material on various departmental policies pertaining to the issue of developing rural tourism.

Areas for which the Department is responsible, such as housing, planning, local government and especially heritage, have a key enabling and supporting role in the development of rural tourism, especially through the policies of the National Planning Framework.

In addition, this Department has a central role, in collaboration with the Department of Rural and Community Development in the development and implementation of the Town Centre First policy approach and also supports the work of the Night Time Economy task force chaired by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sports and Media.

As requested, please find attached a written submission relating to the activities the Department is engaged in that support the development of rural tourism.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Graham Doyle".

Graham Doyle
Secretary General

The Secretary General is a Designated Public Official under the Regulation of Lobbying Act, 2015



Rural Tourism

- While DHLGH does not have a specific remit with regard to rural tourism it recognises the contribution that the development of this sector can make to the wider goal of promoting the economy and social fabric of rural areas. The Department, through its function in overseeing the implementation of the National Planning Framework supports diversification and development of the rural economy through a number of key policy objectives.
- The Department recognises the importance of tourism centred around the heritage and cultural attraction of a town can be an important driver in the local economy, supporting local businesses in the hospitality and entertainment sectors in particular, which, in turn, are also of benefit to local residents.
- Through the delivery of the town centre first policy (TCF), the Department, along with our colleagues in the Department of Rural and Community Development are working to provide an opportunity for enhanced measures to protect and preserve local heritage but also for it to be properly recognised and valued as a potential economic driver for the wider overall regeneration of rural towns in particular.

National Planning Framework

- The National Planning Framework (NPF) is a high-level strategic plan for shaping the future growth and development of our country out to the year 2040. It contains numerous National Policy Objectives (NPOs) that seek to diversify the rural economy through tourism with a particular focus on agricultural and activity tourism. The NPF encourages a diversification of economic activity in rural areas and much of this can be linked to developing



visitor attractions based on natural assets and biodiversity. The following policy objectives specifically encourage the rural tourism sector:

- National Policy Objective 22 seeks to facilitate tourism development and in particular a National Greenways, Blueways and Peatways Strategy, which prioritises projects on the basis of achieving maximum impact and connectivity at national and regional level.
- National Policy Objective 23 seeks to facilitate the development of the rural economy through supporting a sustainable and economically efficient agricultural and food sector, together with forestry, fishing and aquaculture, energy and extractive industries, the bio-economy and diversification into alternative on-farm and off-farm activities, while at the same time noting the importance of maintaining and protecting the natural landscape and built heritage which are vital to rural tourism.
- National Policy Objective 39 supports the sustainable growth and development of the maritime economy and continue to invest in the seafood sector and our Fishery Harbour Centres, particularly in remote rural coastal communities and islands. This includes the associated coastal and maritime tourism sector.
- National Policy Objective 49 supports the coordination and promotion of all-island tourism initiatives through continued co-operation between the relevant tourism agencies and Tourism Ireland. Further opportunities to maximise market exposure exist through co-operation across rural areas north and south including linking the Causeway Coast with the Wild Atlantic Way and the lakelands border region with Ireland's Ancient East brand. Development of blueways, such as the Shannon- Erne Blueway



and greenways such as the Ulster Canal Greenway also offer potential for an enhanced tourism offering throughout the border area.

- Finally, National Strategic Outcome 3 (*Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities*) further commits to facilitating a major expansion in activity and food-based tourism and building on the success of greenways by developing blue corridors and water-based recreation networks as well as new ‘peatways’. There is also a commitment to further invest in the agri-food sector, as set out in the government strategy *Food Wise 2025*.

Town Centre First

- The Town Centre First Policy was launched on 4th February and now provides a co-ordinated, whole-of-government policy framework to proactively address the decline in the health of towns across Ireland and support measures to regenerate and revitalise them.
- Town Centre First represents a new approach to the development of our towns where local communities and local businesses can be central to reimagining their own towns and planning their own futures, including in the area of tourism.
- Our town centres are a key consideration for Fáilte Ireland and are a core element of the experience of any overseas or domestic visitor. The Town Centre First Policy will support the alignment of local investment with tourism focused priorities within the town/region based on quality place-making principles.
- Town Centre First is being delivered jointly by the DRCD and DHLGH.



Key elements of the TCF Approach include:

Town Centre First Plans

- These are non-statutory plans that will be produced by a local Town Team drawn from local community and business representatives. These will identify challenges, actions and integrated responses across a number of themes (business/commercial; community/cultural; housing; built environment; heritage). The plan will be action and project orientated in nature and will assist the town in accessing a range of funding programmes available for town regeneration across a number of government departments and agencies.

Town Regeneration Officers

- Local authorities with towns will be provided with a dedicated post at a senior level who will lead Town Centre First implementation at a local level including supporting local Town Teams in the preparation of their TCF Plan, assisted by the wider local authority. €2m in funding for these roles has been allocated by DRCD. A role profile for this post was developed by the LGMA, in consultation with DRCD and DHLGH and the recruitment process for these posts is well underway by the local authorities.

- **National Town Centre First Office**

A National Town Centre First Office has now been established within the Local Government Management Agency to drive Town Centre First actions and coordinate stakeholder engagement at a national level and across the local government sector. This office will also be a forum for best practice with capacity building programmes for Town Teams, a Health Check Programme and other resources, funding information and best practice models for developing Town Centre First plans.



- €500k has been allocated, between DRCD and DHLGH to fund this office. The competition for the role of National TCF Office Co-ordinator has recently been completed and the successful applicant has commenced in the role.
- **National Oversight and Advisory Group**
The structures mentioned above will sit under a proposed National Oversight and Advisory Group (NOAG) whose role will be to set the agenda, high level action plan and ultimately oversee the implementation of the overall programme. This group will be made up with representation from local government/government departments, agencies & wider expert representation and would also link with town teams to provide a feedback loop on the progression of the overall programme.

Capturing and Sharing Best Practice

- One of the key goals of the National Town Centre First Office will be to support the achievement of impactful regeneration across the country through the development of a Town Centre First Toolkit. This best-practice Toolkit will inform the local approaches to regeneration and will encompass specific strands targeting key factors such as urban development, economic/enterprise development, community engagement, digitalisation, climate action, tourism development and others.
- In addition, a number of 'Pathfinder' towns will be identified nationally to act as early priority demonstrators of the TCF approach – assisted by the TCF National Office. Utilising the lessons learned from these Pathfinder towns, additional supports and initiatives will be developed to help 'early stage' towns to begin the TCF journey.



- The TCF policy is being supported through a number of funding programmes across government including the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund, the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund, the Town & Village Renewal Scheme, etc which are all investing in the improvement of the physical and environmental quality of our towns.

Night Time Economy (NTE)

- The Department has also supported and contributed to DCATGSM's work in developing an innovative approach to supporting and developing a vibrant, diverse, and sustainable night-time economy in Ireland, which will also serve to support the tourism offering of Rural Towns and Villages.
- Under Action 16 of the NTE Taskforce Report a dedicated workshop was held by DHLGH on 11 May 2022 to understand and determine the range and practical scope of planning and development-related actions that can support the NTE. Some of the issues examined as part of this workshop were the role of planning, noise and fire regulation in the NTE and improvement could be made to these processes to facilitate more activity in the cultural and NTE sectors.
- A report on the NTE workshop held was being prepared and has been submitted to the Night-Time Economy Implementation Group for consideration and action.