



SUBMISSION

TO

THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON

TOURISM, CULTURE, ARTS, SPORT AND MEDIA

ON

DEVELOPING RURAL TOURISM

OCTOBER 2022

INTRODUCTION

The Irish Hotels Federation welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Committee in relation to the development of rural tourism.

As the national representative organisation of the hotel and guesthouse sector in Ireland, representing the interests of over 900 businesses, the IHF works closely with our industry partners to ensure the right conditions are in place to ensure the long-term, sustainable development and growth of Ireland's tourism and hospitality industry.

Regarding the development of rural tourism, we would make the following observations:

1. DIVERSIFYING THE RURAL TOURISM OFFERING

1.1. Attractions:

1.1.1. Large scale attractions that develop footfall of over 100,000 visitors a year are generally regarded as being viable commercially. These attractions are expensive to fund and generally are beyond the capability of small rural communities to deliver without substantial State supports. We would suggest that the State should examine the possibility of developing more such amenities and that Fáilte Ireland should continue to be funded to expand our rural tourism offering in this regard.

1.1.2. We would suggest that further investment is required for attractions of scale that can stay open year-round including at weekends and provide a guided experience detailing the culture, heritage and locality of the offering. Further consideration should also be given to identifying potential locations as candidates for UNESCO World Heritage status.

1.1.3. There are many examples of where smaller tourist attractions can be successfully developed in conjunction with local community needs. For example, the Michael Cusack Centre in the Burren, which is a very rural area. This facility serves as both a community centre and tourism attraction. Funding for this project is multi-layered and requires intervention from a number of State agencies. We would suggest that the State should develop case studies of such enterprises that might encourage other local rural community groups to consider the provision of tourism attractions that complement their local community requirements.

1.2. Activity Tourism

1.2.1. We suggest a greater focus be given to promoting a wider range of light, non-hazardous activities for tourists. There is significant opportunity to further develop facilities for walking, swimming, cycling and other sports. These activities are important to help give added value to the memorable experience of a short break or holiday.

1.2.2. With insurance such a critical and challenging issue, a group insurance scheme covering all activities in one would be of benefit to visitors and attractions – this could cover for example hill climbing, canoeing, horse riding, cycling, rope climbing, stand up scooter hire, fishing and golf with visitors secure in the knowledge that if an accident should happen that their medical insurance will cover repatriation to their home country and resolve associated transport and cost issues.

1.3. Creative tourism

1.3.1. We would suggest that the development of cultural hubs should be supported as a way to highlight the unique and individual aspects of our local communities, locality and heritage. This should be supported by a

mapping process and possible events diary identifying where unique musical, drama, craft, learning and creative cultural experiences can be found.

1.4. The night-time economy

1.4.1. A more inclusive entertainment offering for all visitor demographics is important for the future development of our rural tourism and night-time economy offering. We would suggest that further consideration be given to planning a variety of regular entertainment mid-week and weekend afternoons, as well as early evenings inside and outside, including around shopping and family occasions. Resources should be developed to enable and encourage communities and festival organisers to get more involved in the planning of events, including seasonal entertainment which include activities in the night-time economy.

1.4.2. The design of centrally located performance areas that have a multitude of uses could be facilitated within County development and town planning in conjunction with local communities.

1.4.3. We would suggest that seed capital and funding mechanism for localities should be explored further.

1.5. Wellness Tourism

1.5.1. Rural-based wellness tourism could benefit from greater coordination and integration with other tourism offerings including agri-food and outdoor activities. Key areas for further development include mindfulness, mental health, de-stress activities, physical outdoor activities, landscape and nature, and traditional spas.

1.6. Supports for Tourism Entrepreneurs

1.6.1. To better foster a culture of tourism entrepreneurship, consideration should be given to providing specialist supports to assist individuals who embark on developing new tourism experiences. This could include the provision of income supports for the duration of the start-up period through a tourism entrepreneur fund. Such a fund could be coordinated by Local Enterprise Offices with input on feasibility from Fáilte Ireland

1.7. Transport

1.7.1. Greater provision of accessible public transport is key to the future development of rural tourism in a manner that meets local tourism requirements. We would suggest that each town and village require a locally developed access and transport plan incorporating the following key elements:

- Provision of public transport routes to key tourism attractions
- Provision of suitable space for recreational vehicles
- Access to charging stations for electric vehicles
- Clear identification of cycle and walking friendly routes
- Designation of certain roads so that large vehicles are prohibited or curtailed

1.7.2. Within the wider tourism context, regional motorways and bypasses are of vital importance to the visitor experience. Cities and towns are being choked by unnecessary traffic which impacts the quality of life locally and the experience of visitors. Examples include the N/M20 from Cork to Limerick, the M21/N69 Adare bypass, and the Galway City Ring Road. We consider infrastructure such as these to be vital for the development of rural tourism.

2. OUTDOOR RECREATION

2.1. Ireland's rural great outdoors is highly promotable to overseas tourists. The most obvious amenities offering enormous potential for further development and promotion include Walkways, Greenways, Cycleways and Blue-ways. We would call for an acceleration in the development of these outdoor amenities across all counties supported by village and town specific tourism development plans that capitalise on existing built amenity and development of further amenity-enhancing projects.

2.2. Water quality is vital for all aspects of life including outdoor recreation. The recently published Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Water Quality in Ireland Report (2016-2021), assessed Ireland's rivers, lakes, estuaries, coastal and groundwaters. It identified declining water quality and predicted that the country will fail to meet the EU and national goal of restoring all waters to good or better status by 2027, if the current level of progress continues. This warning is of great concern, and we recommend urgent action to rectify the situation.

3. DEVELOPING A TOURISM STRATEGY FOR GAELTACHT AREAS

3.1. Our Gaeltacht regions offer visitors a unique cultural experience rich in music, language, art and dance that has significant potential to harness from a tourism perspective. The strategic partnership announced earlier this year between Fáilte Ireland and Údarás na Gaeltachta is therefore a very welcome development and will see both organisations work together across a number of priority areas for tourism development including capital projects, building capacity within the tourism industry and supporting the development of tourism products to showcase the unique cultural offering of Ireland's Gaeltacht regions.

4. OPPORTUNITIES AND SUPPORTS FOR AGRITOURISM IN RURAL IRELAND

- 4.1.** There are very strong opportunities to expand tourism linked to agriculture and food along with Ireland's Green brand, developing food trails that celebrate the diversity and quality of the native produce. Initiatives combining our great outdoors, natural rural habitats with wellbeing activities and agriculture & food experiences could be used to expand the range of immersive tourism experiences attractive to international tourists.
- 4.2.** Other opportunities include site visits to explore best practices in biodiversity, sustainable production, organic fertilisation and bio energy development. On-farm visitor centres for small ruminant (sheep, goats, lamas and alpacas) also offer potential for further enhancement of our rural tourism offering.
- 4.3.** Greater development of equine tourism should be explored, working to incentivise landowners to allow further use of their property for trails and trekking.

5. RURAL TOURISM ACCOMMODATION

- 5.1.** The long-term sustainable development and growth of Irish tourism requires a balance between the often-conflicting demands of those that live in, those that work in and those that visit city and rural destinations.
- 5.2.** An enormous challenge Ireland currently faces is the acute shortage of housing which impacts on all aspects of society. From a tourism perspective, there is an urgent need for a structured response to severe lack of affordable accommodation for employees in many seasonal tourism areas.
- 5.3.** It is vital that regulation is in place to ensure that people in communities both urban and rural are not displaced by those who would take control of residential

accommodation and repurpose it for professional short-term letting.

- 5.4. We believe that all tourism accommodation should be subject to registration whereby all related advertising would require the publication of a registration number specific to the property. Where a property is let in its entirety it should require appropriate planning permission. Where student accommodation is being used for short-term tourism letting this should be restricted strictly to outside the academic year.
- 5.5. An equitable system of regulation will incentivise entrepreneurs to invest in new accommodation capacity, including in rural areas, secure in the knowledge that they will operate on a level playing field.