

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM NA MEÁIN, TURASÓIREACHT, EALAÍONA, CULTÚR, SPÓRT AGUS GAELTACHT

JOINT COMMITTEE ON MEDIA, TOURISM, ARTS, CULTURE, SPORT AND THE GAELTACHT

Dé Céadaoin, 2 Nollaig 2020

Wednesday, 2 December 2020

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 2 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 2 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Ciarán Cannon,	Malcolm Byrne,
Alan Dillon,	Micheál Carrigy,
Peter Fitzpatrick,	Shane Cassells,
Brendan Griffin,	Annie Hoey.
Mattie McGrath,	
Imelda Munster,	
Johnny Mythen,	
Christopher O'Sullivan.	

Teachta / Deputy Niamh Smyth sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

The joint committee met in private session at 1.02 p.m., suspended at 1.17 p.m. and resumed in public session at 2 p.m.

Impact of Covid-19 on the Tourism Sector: Discussion

Chairman: I welcome representatives from Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland to discuss the impact of Covid-19 on the tourism sector. I ask members to sit only in the permitted seats and in front of the available microphones to ensure they are heard. Failing to do so can cause difficulties for broadcasting, for sound staff and for those working on the Official Report. I remind them to please maintain social distance at all times during the meeting. Members are requested to use hand sanitiser and the wipes provided to clean the seats and desks shared to supplement the regular sanitisation during breaks between meetings.

I welcome Mr. Paul Kelly, chief executive of Fáilte Ireland and his colleague, Ms Jenny De Saulles, director of industry engagement, who will join the meeting remotely, and Mr. Niall Gibbons, chief executive of Tourism Ireland. Witnesses will have three minutes for opening statements, followed by questions from members. The committee may publish opening statements on its website following the meeting.

I must explain some limitations in parliamentary privilege and the practice of the Houses regarding references witnesses may make to another person in their evidence. Witnesses who are physically present or who give evidence from within the parliamentary precincts are protected pursuant to both the Constitution and statute by absolute privilege, but witnesses and participants who are to give evidence from a location outside the parliamentary precincts are asked to note that they may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as a witness giving evidence from within the parliamentary precincts. Some witnesses may think it appropriate to take legal advice on this matter.

Witnesses are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way to make him or them identifiable, or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of that person or entity. If statements are potentially defamatory in relation to the identification of somebody or an entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative that witnesses comply with any such direction. Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against persons outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

Mr. Paul Kelly: I thank the Cathaoirleach and members for the invitation. In 2019, tourism accounted for 260,000 jobs. In some counties, as many as one in five jobs relied on tourism. In 2020, sector revenue has declined by a massive €6 billion and hundreds of thousands of jobs have been lost. While revenue stopped for businesses, the costs did not and the stress on business owners is immense.

Fáilte Ireland's response has been comprehensive. Our Covid advisory group of industry, agencies and Department officials has met 26 times. We have refunded €3 million to businesses in fees and delivered 14 separate suites of online support tools, which have been accessed half a million times by industry. We developed and continuously update 11 sets of sectoral safety guidelines, which have been accessed 90,000 times. On business tourism, Fáilte Ireland,

working with industry, continued to win future business. This year, we generated 206 new conference leads worth €121 million and our total future leads pipeline is now worth more than €1 billion. We delivered 12 virtual international sales platforms with over 2,000 global business tourism buyers.

On international leisure tourism, we supported more than 1,100 Irish industry members to engage with international buyers on 17 virtual sales platforms organised in Ireland by Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland's overseas platforms.

We launched a major new summer marketing campaign, Make a Break for It. We also launched the Fáilte Ireland Covid safety charter designed to deliver, and instil confidence in, safety in tourism. Thus far, 5,000 businesses have registered. This week, we are launching campaigns to promote safe indoor dining and to promote accommodation gift vouchers. We also established 23 local recovery task forces nationwide.

In addition to our own programme, we have provided extensive analysis and input to our Department, the tourism recovery task force and wider Government to inform the July stimulus, budget 2021 and ongoing supports. We are administering four new grant schemes for Covid adaptation, bed and breakfast accommodation restart, coach tourism and inbound agents. Combined through these four schemes, we hope to distribute €54 million to more than 12,000 businesses. Budget 2021 allocated an additional €55 million for strategic tourism business survival, and we are currently developing this scheme. Extensive research informs all this. Since March we have completed 27 separate research projects, thereby getting insights from 3,000 businesses and 32,000 individuals.

I acknowledge the work of the Fáilte Ireland team and our Department on behalf of the tourism industry. In addition to this, the Fáilte Ireland team has also contributed significantly to the wider national effort from helping speedy processing of the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, applications to working with the HSE in developing the "Keep Your Distance" and "Hold Firm" communication campaigns.

Looking to the future, while the industry is very grateful for the very significant Government support, the severity and longevity of restrictions means that for many, current supports will not be enough. Insolvencies have started and will accelerate after Christmas unless something significant changes.

Tourism will recover and the speed of Ireland's recovery will primarily be determined by how many tourism businesses have survived. We cannot rebuild employment without employers so we must not shy away from providing the business supports required, and to do so would be to abandon regional development and self-sustaining rural communities.

Mr. Niall Gibbons: I thank the committee for the opportunity to address it today. I am the chief executive of Tourism Ireland. As members know, Tourism Ireland is the organisation responsible for marketing the island of Ireland overseas. It was established as one of the six areas of co-operation under the framework of the Good Friday Agreement.

Before I speak about the devastating impact of Covid-19 on the tourism sector, I will give some context about overseas tourism prior to the outbreak and spread of Covid-19. Overseas tourism had recorded nine consecutive years of record growth and in 2019 we welcomed almost 11.3 million overseas visitors, who spent €5.9 billion across the island of Ireland.

With our unique all-island remit, we have seen a renaissance in overseas tourism to North-

ern Ireland over the same period, with 2.2 million overseas visitors last year, generating almost £600 million in revenue for the economy there. In a normal year, we deliver world class marketing programmes in over 21 markets around the world, with an audience of approximately 600 million. Our extensive and targeted programme of activity includes: advertising; social media and digital marketing; and overseas publicity and co-operative promotions with air and sea carriers and other travel partners.

Since March, because of the restrictions on international travel, unfortunately most of our paid promotional activity has been cancelled or postponed. However, the Tourism Ireland teams around the world have been engaged in an extensive programme of activity throughout 2020 to keep the island of Ireland “front of mind”, with prospective future holidaymakers until such a time as they can visit again. We have been running an online campaign, which is using the hashtag “#FillYourHeartWithIreland”. Because people are not travelling this year, the aim of the initiative is to bring the best of Ireland to their screens. It is about the sharing of inspirational content that speaks to the world at this difficult time and connects people with the island of Ireland. This campaign has achieved excellent engagement with our fans and followers on social media. It has delivered almost 300 million impressions on our Facebook channels, with 30 million views and 5.7 million engagements. There have been 170,000 engagements on Twitter, as well as 5.6 million engagements and 5.5 million “likes” on Tourism Ireland’s Instagram channels.

A key element of Tourism Ireland’s promotional activity is to showcase Ireland’s unique cultural and artistic experience around the world. Examples of this from our “#FillYourHeartWithIreland” campaign have included our collaboration with Philip King and his “Other Voices: Courage” series, as well as our work with *Hot Press* magazine to highlight a musical celebration of Van Morrison’s 75th birthday “Rave On, Van Morrison”.

During 2020, Tourism Ireland has been carrying out an extensive programme of Covid-19 research in our major markets. The research has supplied learning into developing consumer behaviour and attitudes, and these are fundamentally shaping our activity programme. Tourism Ireland has been represented on the tourism recovery task forces in Ireland and Northern Ireland, as well as on the aviation recovery task force in Ireland. Recommendations from the task forces will be integral to our restart activity.

Looking to the future, this has been a catastrophic year for tourism but it can and will recover from this pandemic. Recent news about vaccine programmes is positive and gives us hope. In our research, Ireland has consistently been shown as one of the destinations that holidaymakers would be most comfortable visiting, even while social distancing measures are in place. We have a three-phase plan to restart, rebuild and ultimately redesign demand.

Our success in supporting the recovery of overseas tourism and driving business development is dependent on many factors. However, there are three key areas of action. The first is consumer motivation and identifying when consumers will be ready to consider holidaying again and which markets offer us the best short-term prospects. Our research shows that summer 2021 is most commonly seen as the next holiday window; younger holidaymakers, as well as those who have visited before, or have family or friends here, are most comfortable about travelling to Ireland; and closer to home markets are likely to present the best short-term prospects. However, it is fair to say that consumer sentiment has deteriorated in our more recent surveys.

The second element is access, and the airline industry has been hit particularly hard by this

crisis. Ireland has now found itself in a competitive position for air routes, with no guarantees about which routes will return. Support will be required to build demand and increase the viability of new and existing routes.

The third element is industry and trade. The overseas travel trade has long been a loyal supporter of Ireland; however, we are now facing higher levels of competition than ever before from destinations across the world. The excellent relationships which Tourism Ireland enjoys with the overseas travel trade are vital to our long-term success. We will need to invest to create the demand that will support the product on the ground.

While remaining very flexible and adapting to conditions, Tourism Ireland has developed a clear work plan. This will include the launch of a significant kick-start campaign as soon as the time is right, the development of a new consumer campaign to address evolving consumer motivations, with stage 1 of the new campaign ready for our kick-start activity and extensive social media and publicity activity, as appropriate, to keep the island of Ireland in the minds of prospective visitors. A significant redesign of our international website, *ireland.com*, and our digital marketing capability has been under way throughout 2020. The new site is currently going live, with weekly market releases happening since the end of November. These will conclude in the middle of this month. Our new *ireland.com* will be fundamental to our proposed kick-start success.

The pace of recovery is unknown. However, based on the best information to hand, Tourism Ireland currently predicts the recovery could take in excess of five years. In order to improve on this position, an effective, sustained and large-scale marketing approach will be required. This should begin as soon as the health situation allows. As international travel begins to restart, it is clear that keeping the island of Ireland front and centre in consumers' minds will be critical. Every destination across the globe has experienced the impact of Covid and will be seeking their share of the recovery. This increases the competition in the market.

When the time is right, Tourism Ireland needs to punch through the noise and create an immediate desire to visit. To achieve this, a significant marketing investment will be required to enable large-scale, reframed consumer communications in markets with the greatest opportunity. Tourism Ireland is committed to working with our colleagues in Fáilte Ireland, Tourism Northern Ireland, the tourism industry and all stakeholders to support the recovery. We have a shared ambition for a sustainable recovery. Once this crisis is past and Ireland is open again to overseas visitors, we in Tourism Ireland will be ready to play our part in delivering a sustainable recovery for the long-term future of our industry.

Speaking of sustainability, I was delighted that Lonely Planet recently named the Burren Ecotourism Network a "best community tourism project" in its *Best in Travel* list for 2021, placing it in the top 30 on the globe.

I am in regular contact with my counterparts in other Ireland agencies, including Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland, Bord Bia and Invest Northern Ireland, as well as the Department of Foreign Affairs, about how we will promote the island of Ireland overseas with a "team Ireland" approach in 2021 and beyond. I thank the committee for listening to the submission and I am happy to take any questions.

Chairman: Ms De Saulles is with us remotely so perhaps she wishes to say a few words. We can see a lovely background but we cannot hear her. I hope she will be able to contribute later. Members have seen the rota and know when they can speak. Members have five minutes

and we will be as strict as possible on this to ensure everybody gets an opportunity.

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: Will there be a second round of questions as there is much to get through?

Chairman: That depends on the members. We will see how it goes with five minutes.

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: If the witnesses do not have time to answer my questions, I would be grateful if they could provide them in writing.

I thank the witnesses for coming today and for the tremendous work they are doing in promoting Ireland. One of the successes was the “Make a Break For It” campaign, which was a major success. During July, August and September, we saw an a wonderful phenomenon of people starting to discover parts of Ireland they had never seen. Instagram lit up with images of Ireland that we had never seen before because people were discovering Ireland for the first time. It was tremendous and realised what was on their doorstep.

Have we learned lessons from that for future strategy? We must still work on the international market and getting people in from other countries. There was a worrying statistic, however, that the spending of overseas visitors compared with domestic visitors is skewed. Is there now an opportunity to address this and build on the success of the “Make a Break For It” campaign and the wonderful experience people had in July, August and September? That is my first question. I would love to hear if there is a strategy in that regard.

The success of the Wild Atlantic Way, which is a Fáilte Ireland strategy, has been amazing. I can attest to that first-hand being from west Cork. Huge credit is due for that. I want to ask Mr. Kelly about the breaking up of the Wild Atlantic Way into regions. For example, an effort is being made to break up west Cork, where I am from, and rename and remarket it as the Haven Coast. I warn against doing that because west Cork is a unique brand in itself. It has a unique culture and unique food, and as we can see from the Old Head at Kinsale there behind Ms De Saulles, the scenery is phenomenal. There is already a brand there and I would be worried about reinventing the wheel. I ask that we stay away from that type of rebranding and stick with what is already there. West Cork is a brand in itself.

The backdrop behind Ms De Saulles is the Old Head at Kinsale. About 4 or 5 miles off that, right now, are the most incredible megafauna and marine wildlife to be seen anywhere in the world. I must declare an interest here. I was formerly a whale watching guide in Courtmacsherry, which is only approximately 7 miles from where Ms De Saulle is. The marine wildlife off the coast of west Cork is absolutely phenomenal. There are fin whales, which are the second largest whale species that has ever lived, humpback whales, common dolphins, minke whales and basking sharks. It is unbelievable. During July, August and September, people realised for the first time that they had this on their doorstep. I am not sure Fáilte Ireland or Tourism Ireland recognise that and I would like them to take that criticism on board. I am not seeing it in a big way. There should be a much bigger push because the whale watching in Ireland is among the best on the planet in terms of the number of species one can see. It is a bit nippy and cold but if people dress up they can have an absolutely amazing experience. That is something I would like to see addressed in future strategies.

I will make one final point and hopefully there will be a second round of questions. I refer to the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS. The witnesses cannot answer this directly but I would love to know if they have had feedback from their members. We are getting a lot

of contact and phone calls from businesses, and hotels in particular, that have had their CRSS withdrawn under level 3. This is a backward move. My understanding of the legislation is that where there are restrictions to accessing a business, it should be able to avail of the CRSS and there are still countywide restrictions in place. Take a smaller county like Carlow, for example. People there cannot rely only on business from within their county. That needs to be reversed, at least up until 18 December.

I have only left the witnesses with 25 seconds to respond but there will hopefully be a second round because I have other questions as well. If they could elaborate on any of those issues, it would be great. I ask Mr. Kelly to address the strategies, the Haven Coast idea in the context of west Cork and so on.

Mr. Paul Kelly: I will be as brief as I can. We have a very significant programme to follow up on the Ireland, “Make a Break for It” campaign as soon as we are ready to go. We have a suite of creative ideas under the name Keep Discovering, which is the follow up from that. The research we got back showed that 95% of people who took a domestic holiday during the summer were either very or extremely satisfied with it. We think there is a significant opportunity to drive up the amount of revenue and employment that comes from domestic tourism. Previously, Irish residents spent roughly the same amount of money abroad as overseas holidaymakers spend in Ireland. Irish residents spent in the region of €2 billion holidaying in Ireland and approximately €5.5 billion holidaying abroad. If we could get even €1 billion of what Irish residents spend holidaying abroad into Ireland, that would be a huge boon to the tourism economy. It spreads all around the country and across the year. It is very valuable and we have a very significant campaign to follow up on that.

As regards the Wild Atlantic Way and the Haven Coast, there is absolutely no intention whatsoever of dividing up the Wild Atlantic Way. The Wild Atlantic Way is the Wild Atlantic Way. The Haven Coast was a way of describing a part of the Wild Atlantic Way. It was not intended to be a brand on its own or anything like that. We have dialled back from that idea because it was creating some confusion. We are very much focused on the Wild Atlantic Way as the brand. There is no need to be concerned about that. Destination brands like west Cork will still exist their own right. We are completely aligned on that.

On dolphin and whale watching, we did a bunch of international research on different experiences, how appealing they were in terms of their breadth and how motivated people were to travel specifically for them. Dolphin and whale watching came out high and we are keen to dial that up. There are issues around scalability and so on, and it has to be done in a sustainable way, but that is very much on our radar and it is available all along the west coast, from Donegal to west Cork.

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: Did Mr. Kelly see the footage taken in the summer?

Mr. Paul Kelly: I did.

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: It was incredible.

Mr. Paul Kelly: It was fantastic stuff.

Chairman: We must move on to be sure we can fit everyone in.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I welcome our guests. I concur with Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan and acknowledge Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland’s teams, as well as the Department officials

who work extremely hard to promote Ireland. The tourism sector makes a vital contribution to the local economy in the constituency I represent in Mayo. It supports over 5,500 jobs and generates something in the region of €208 million for the local economy. The challenge for businesses all over the country is to ensure we rebuild employment. We must ensure that employers are supported during this very challenging period. I refer to the adaption grants that were designed for tourism businesses to make improvements in order that they could continue trading through level 3, 4 or 5 restrictions. Cafés and restaurants, or premises that did not have an alcohol licence, were excluded from those grants. Is there any justification for that?

Mr. Paul Kelly: Our primary remit is tourism. We extended the adaptation grants to include as much of hospitality as we could, such as pubs and restaurants. Our issue with cafés is about the definition of a café because there are coffee stations in Applegreens, Centras and petrol stations throughout the country. The criteria we had to go off was what was a licensed premises. We were processing thousands of applications on for these grants in a short period of time. That was the practical issue. It is also important to note that that money came from a diversion of our capital funding so it could only be used for capital items such as Perspex screens and hand sanitiser. It could not be used for wearable PPE or other items. It was not a general thing. Those are simply the rules from finance because it was capital funding. The amount of money cafés would have had to invest in capital type items would be very small and therefore, the amount we would have been able to give any café would have been tiny.

Deputy Alan Dillon: In relation to restaurants-----

Mr. Paul Kelly: Restaurants were included once they had an alcohol licence.

Deputy Alan Dillon: That is where the real issue is. An awful lot of restaurants that were not in a position to have an alcohol licence closed during level 5 restrictions and found it extremely difficult to be viable if they reopened. That is the real challenge that we had to listen to as public representatives. Many of these restaurants were sole restaurateurs and not gastropubs, which could afford to do without the grants. It was very difficult for us to explain that situation to people. One has to come from the business point of view in terms of looking at criteria and trying to meet them.

Mr. Paul Kelly: To be honest, many restaurants have not engaged much with Fáilte Ireland. They would not have been on our system and they would not be used to these type of grant applications. That was the reason for many of the issues. We extended the deadline to allow more businesses apply and we have given as much support as possible. Any restaurateur with an alcohol licence, whether he or she was open or not, was able to apply as long as he or she had a commitment to reopen. We do not want to be putting taxpayers' money into businesses that are not going to reopen. As long as they were giving a commitment to reopen at some stage they would have been eligible to apply so there should not have been an issue in that regard.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I thank the witnesses. My questions are for Ms De Saulles and Mr. Gibbons. To start off on the good news, a vaccine will be available in a shorter time than we previously thought. In my area of Wexford, hoteliers such as Billy Kelly, Colm Neville and Anton Treacy, who run three of the biggest hotels in Wexford, are major employers. They were very concerned about their staff. How can we further support hoteliers without compromising public health?

Mr. Kelly of Fáilte Ireland said in his opening statement that it established 23 local recovery task forces nationwide. Would it be possible to get more detail on that, for example, the destina-

tions, whether local businesses can tie in with them and, if so, how they can do that?

Tourism Ireland is responsible for marketing the island of Ireland. What impact do the witnesses believe Brexit will have on its work? Have Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland explored the possibility of engaging with the next generation of content creators who often conduct travel blogs on new media such as TikTok? There is an opportunity in that regard for a new audience that might no longer be on Facebook or Instagram. Has that potential marketing avenue been explored?

How do the witnesses believe they can increase international travel? How can we improve the traffic light system being used?

Chairman: Are both witnesses to respond?

Deputy Johnny Mythen: Yes.

Mr. Niall Gibbons: Regarding Brexit, we established a Brexit task force the week after the UK voted to leave the European Union. We have conducted approximately five or six waves of research in our key markets of North America, Germany, France and Britain to see the impacts in respect of travel to Ireland.

In terms of the major standing, first, if the UK was to leave without a deal on 1 January there might be a possible depreciation of sterling, which makes Ireland more expensive. Second, in the context of Covid-19, there are a number of what appear to be very small issues but they matter to families travelling. For example, what is their situation with regard to the European health insurance card for people who travel from the UK, which is a third country now? The situation with regard to car insurance and pet passports are trivial in the context of Covid but in the context of summer holidays how will they impact on people's capacity to travel?

The other issue which works to our advantage is the fact that the common travel area will continue post 1 January. That is something Ireland will enjoy as a competitive advantage *vis-à-vis* British people travelling to the Continent from 1 January onward.

The other concern we have is that on the Northern Ireland front the research we have conducted on France and Germany indicates a level of confusion among consumers who pick up their newspaper, do not know the details of our politics here and decide that it might be a lot of hassle to come to Ireland with all that is going on at the Border. They may wonder if they can cross it, for instance. We are getting those questions from German and French travel operators. It is a minor hassle but enough for people to say, "I'll leave it this year and I might go next year when all the issues have settled down". We are on top of those issues. Our Brexit task force met again last month. It consists of senior members of the UK and Irish travel industries. We plan to meet again in the first week or two of January when, hopefully, we will have a clear answer as to where we are going.

On the overseas issues, the Deputy mentioned travel influencers on TikTok. We have a range of things going on in the digital space. Our new *Ireland.com* suite of websites has just been launched in 12 different languages. It is for English speaking countries, such as the US and Britain, and for France, Germany, Japan, China, etc. We also have a digital marketing project which will include more personalisation in terms of advertising.

Regarding social media, we have a new strategy under way that is looking at the areas the Deputy spoke about such as TikTok and other new media that can reach a new audience that tra-

ditional platforms like Facebook do not meet. In terms of where we stand right now, Facebook is still colossal for us. We are the fourth largest agency in the world on Facebook and Twitter. We have 4.5 million friends on it and they all have an average of 200 friends each. If we can get everybody to like our share about Ireland, we will reach an audience of more than 900 million people. They are still very significant platforms but things are changing rapidly in the area.

On the traffic light system, we were very pleased to see it come in. It is also complicated by the fact that the UK is not operating the traffic light system. It is operating air corridors. We did an analysis to see what would have been open, in terms of Covid infection rates, if the traffic light system had been in place since last March. Britain could have been open to us during the summer for a few months, and Germany also, but a market like the United States is completely outside the zone; it is in the red zone. The traffic light system combined with the comprehensive track and trace system, and hopefully a vaccine, will see us open the doors next summer.

Mr. Paul Kelly: I confirm for Deputy Mythen that there is a Wexford destination recovery task force. Obviously, not all the tourism businesses will be able to be involved in it but it is about the leadership between Fáilte Ireland and Tom Enright's team in Wexford County Council. As a Castlebridge man I was never going to not have a recovery task force and that is under way.

In terms of the support for the hotels, which another Deputy mentioned, there are a number of major issues. The Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, at level 3 is essential to allow hotels get sorted. I could speak for a long time about all the various challenges the industry is facing but we might come back to that when answering other questions.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I welcome our guests, Mr. Kelly, Mr. Gibbons and Ms De Saullés. This is a huge issue and the figures given by the witnesses are stark and scary in terms of the number of insolvencies we will face.

I want to be positive regarding the products we have in Tipperary. I congratulate Pat Slatery, Triona O'Mahoney and Marie Phelan regarding the Munster Vales and the new product they launched recently. I thank the witnesses for their support of that. It is a tourism development strategy encompassing three or four counties and mountain ranges. We have nice places to visit in Tipperary. We are not only renowned for hurling and horses. We have a lot of scenery also.

Fáilte Ireland has been involved as an advisory body to the HSE and it has been blamed by the publicans in respect of the wet and dry pubs. Who came up with the name "wet pubs"? We do not have to wear Wellingtons going into any pub, thank God. It is a horrible name and I would like to get some clarification on it because there are major issues now around the CRSS. In the last opening up, some pubs got food from approved providers and made arrangements for it to be safely eaten in their premises but that has been denied to them now. I have been told by gastropub owners that they will not be able to reopen because they are afraid of crowds who may come from 20 or 30 miles away. There is not a level playing field in that regard and that needs to be sorted out because it is very unfair.

Knockmealdown Active, which is a small voluntary group, and other voluntary groups are working to promote tourism and get their areas fit for its return. I often use the greenway in Dungarvan but also the new blueway. Deputy Griffin, when he was Minister of State, was down in County Waterford with us but we have a fabulous blueway on the River Suir and I want to compliment all involved in that. That is good for our health also but we need to market it.

The hotel sector needs to be supported because even though they were closed they were paying huge amounts of money in standing orders to a plethora of different providers and they were fleeced. They have accrued massive losses while their doors were closed. The witnesses cannot deal with that but I appeal to them to consider it in their role as an advisory body to the Government. I would be happy if they would answer those few questions.

Mr. Paul Kelly: I will go first. We were delighted to support the team in Munster Vales. I have cycled the Carrick-on-Suir blueway and know how beautiful it is. Tipperary has got tremendous potential. I welcome the new tourism strategy for the area. I have been through it and it is a fabulous county and we support the development of it. I believe there is a bright future for tourism in Tipperary.

With regard to the language around wet pubs, I have no idea where that word originated from but the Government, following health advice, was trying to allow pubs that serve food to open. The distinction between a gastropub and a restaurant is unclear. I am not sure whether I am in a restaurant or in a gastropub these days. It is hard to draw the line but we wanted to find some mechanism to allow those pubs that serve food to open when restaurants were open.

I completely agree with the points on the challenges that businesses face and the standing costs. One area that struck me recently is that of insurance, which needs attention. If businesses are not trading and if they have far fewer customers and staff as a result, there is a significant reduction in their risk profile. However, we are hearing stories that insurance premiums are only being reduced by 6% or 7% in some cases and those reductions are applying to next year's premiums as opposed to a rebate being provided on this year's premiums. That is not strictly within the remit of Fáilte Ireland but looking at some of those costs that businesses have had to incur, there should be better supports for the industry in that area. That issue should be looked at.

Chairman: Does Mr. Gibbons wish to respond to that?

Mr. Niall Gibbons: I do not have much to add. We have met members of the Golden Vale tourism plan team and they have done a great job. I am delighted with them.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I welcome Mr. Kelly, Mr. Gibbons and Ms De Saulles who is joining us remotely from the second most beautiful county in Ireland. I thank them all for being with us today. It was a great honour and pleasure to work with them for three years from 2017 until the middle of this year. I have seen at first hand just how hard they and their teams work. It is more than just a job. Those who are working in agencies such as Fáilte Ireland or Tourism Ireland must have a passion, and that is clear to everyone who has contact with them. I thank them for the work they do on behalf of the people of Ireland and I acknowledge the huge work that goes on behind the scenes. In particular, I pay tribute to the efforts that have been expended this year since the arrival of Covid-19.

Often with tourism events, whether they are overseas or here, we talk about the need for resilience in the face of shock events such as foot and mouth disease, the attacks of 11 September 2001, the ash cloud event or the severe acute respiratory syndrome, SARS, epidemic but nobody could have envisaged what 2020 has brought. It is ironic that this day last year, I was with Tourism Ireland - Mr. Kelly would have been there as well - launching the 2020 marketing plans. Who could have foreseen where we would be a year later?

It will be very important, as we move into 2021, particularly into the second, third and

fourth quarters, that we are ready for the recovery and ready to bounce back. I concur with the statements that have been made on supports for business. I ask that every effort is made to speed up the processing of applications for business supports. It is also important that the CRSS be made available for the hospitality sector at level 3 as well. I am glad that was mentioned because level 3 is similar to level 5. Is there a specific focus for 2021, given that we do not expect to be fully back to normal? Is there a particular focus from Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland on the outdoors and on trying to promote activities that the consumer might be more comfortable with? Is the research showing that this is what people have an appetite for when they start travelling? Beyond that, assuming we will have a full vaccination roll-out during 2021, how long will it take to get back to where we were in 2019? Will we revert to 2019 figures in 2022?

Mr. Paul Kelly: I thank the Deputy for his kind words. It was a great pleasure to work with him during those years and I thank him for all of his support during that time. His passion, enthusiasm, energy and insight were valued and I thank him for that.

On the outdoors, that is a central part of our strategy in terms of development because it will be important not just during Covid-19 but post Covid-19. We have to define the outdoors as both urban and rural and we have to define both daytime and night-time. We are looking at all of those aspects. Just yesterday, we engaged with a number of local authorities, including Kerry County Council, on a proposal that we will announce in more detail after Christmas around the building of facilities for shared activity use to access the water in beach locations and so on. We are working through all of our destination towns, which the Deputy launched with us in Tralee last year. There are a bunch of public realm improvements that will facilitate improved enjoyment of the outdoors in urban areas in terms of public seating, signage and general public realm improvements. The research completely backs up the view that this is what people want and that is coming through from the Irish and international research. That is a big part of what we will be doing.

We are acutely aware of the cash flow pressures businesses are under and we are moving as fast as we possibly can on the processing of grants. Unfortunately for the adaptation grants scheme, the applications came through late and we had to extend the deadline. We then got thousands of applicants in the last two days, which slows everything down. We are working through them as fast as we can and we will continue to do that.

Mr. Niall Gibbons: I thank the Deputy for all the support he gave us in his time as Minister of State. What are our customers saying about us? We have conducted thousands of surveys in recent months and some of the key messages are that when people get travelling again - as they are very keen to do - they will travel to destinations that are closer to home. They are keen to get back to visiting their friends and family and they will likely go to familiar destinations. That is different from the message we would have been given a year ago when people were looking for destinations they could brag about and the new and the wonderful. What does that mean for us? It means we are well-positioned and that we are likely to be out much earlier in markets such as Great Britain, mainland Europe and North America than we will be in long-haul markets, which we do not expect to really come back until 2022 and beyond.

There are other trends. For example, 20% of European travellers do not see themselves taking a break until 2022. There are still a lot of people who are undecided on their destination for next year. Ireland benchmarks well against a competitive set. Unfortunately, higher Covid-19 rates put people off. The types of issues people are looking at online are the costs of travelling and also cancellation policies, which are significant. They are also wondering if their travel insurance will cover them if they get Covid-19. There is still a big cloud of uncertainty

out there. The big message coming through is that people are still planning and dreaming of a trip and very keen to travel. As I said, there will be a bigger focus next year on markets that are closer to home. We are looking to be ready to get out of the blocks as soon as the time is right.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Mr. Kelly mentioned insolvencies in the new year. I wonder if he could expand on that. Does he have any predictions in that regard? What do we need in the short term, over the coming months, to stop the large-scale failure of businesses in the sector?

Mr. Paul Kelly: We have seen a small number of insolvencies to date. We are key accounting hundreds of businesses around the country and providing business mentoring and financial support. Through those engagements and through our engagements with some of the leading accountancy agencies, we are seeing more and more of those businesses teetering on the brink and which are likely, in the first half of next year, to have difficulty returning a set of accounts that would classify them as a viable going concern. When the July stimulus and the budget were done, the outlook for the tourism and hospitality business was probably more positive than now, given the level 5 restrictions we have had for the past six weeks. While it is great that intercounty travel will be open for three weeks at a key time and one that is good for safety, those restrictions are probably tighter than was envisaged at the time.

We have spoken about the CRSS. Regarding how banks are approaching businesses now, the moratorium, which was absolutely vital for survival, ended in October. It is still relatively early days since that ended but we are now getting to hear back how banks are treating tourism and hospitality businesses on a case-by-case basis. Whereas in some instances we are hearing of banks being supportive and flexible, we are also hearing of cases where banks are demanding full capital and interest repayments in line with a normal schedule as if business was ongoing. That is clearly unsustainable when businesses cannot trade and cannot get any revenue. We do not have enough evidence to call anybody out individually yet, but we are hearing of some cases, which we will be monitoring and following up as appropriate. The support from banks will be essential.

The Government-supported schemes through the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, SBCI, have very low applicability and uptake in tourism businesses. They are not helping the tourism sector to any material extent. Only a handful of businesses in the tourism sector have been able to access those. It is not that the Government does not want the money to go there but because of the process and the involvement of banks, the money is not going into tourism businesses. For businesses to be able to refinance and restructure their debt, as Mr. Gibbons said, the recovery will not come immediately and there will be a period before we can build back up to the types of business levels we thought we would have. It will be critical to find a mechanism to help businesses restructure their financing.

Deputy Imelda Munster: That was very informative.

Did Tourism Ireland spend all its marketing budget for 2020? Can what is left over be carried over to 2021? Mr. Gibbons said that its already paid-for promotional activity had been postponed or cancelled. Can it recoup any of that? Does it have a bigger promotion budget for next year, given what we will be coming out of and what we will be going into?

Mr. Niall Gibbons: To clarify, we postponed all our paid-for marketing activity, such as advertising on television etc., as one would expect, from the first week of March when it became apparent that it would not be worthwhile. We still have ongoing investments to keep everything running. Our staff were engaged in a very active programme during the year. We are in talks

with the Department about how unspent funds at the end of the year can be handled; hopefully it will supplement our budget next year.

The Government set up a tourism recovery task force. Its report in the summer recommended a doubling of the tourism marketing fund for next year. That will be under consideration in the coming months when the time is right to do that. The existing budgets would be insufficient for the level of work required when we get back to a post-Covid world. I am sorry I do not have the exact figure but we are-----

Deputy Imelda Munster: Mr. Gibbons can furnish me with it later. Does he have an idea even of the percentage of unspent funds which might be carried over into next year?

Mr. Niall Gibbons: We are discussing the figures with the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media at the moment. It is complicated by the fact that we get 25% of our funding from Northern Ireland, which comes in sterling and has a different year-end. We have funding ratios that we need try to maintain. I would be very happy to come back to the Deputy with the figures.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I welcome Mr. Kelly and Ms De Saulles from Fáilte Ireland, and Mr. Niall Gibbons from Tourism Ireland. We all agree that 2019 was a fantastic year for tourism in Ireland with 260,000 jobs. Every €1 million spent on tourism supports 27 jobs, while generating money for the Exchequer of €1.8 million.

I come from the wee county, Louth, which contains the M1 motorway connecting Dublin to Belfast. Louth is very lucky to have the two biggest towns in Ireland, Dundalk and Drogheda, as well as plenty of small towns and villages. We appreciate the capital investment in Louth in recent years on King John's Castle in Carlingford, as well as the money invested in the Fleadh Cheoil in Drogheda. We, in Louth, feel we have much to offer and this corner of Ireland should not be neglected. We have the Drogheda Museum in Millmount, St. Peter's church, the Monasterboice high cross and round tower, the Carlingford adventure centre, the great eastern greenway, which connects Omeath and Carlingford, as well as the County Museum in Dundalk, to name just a few.

The alarm signals are in the report. In 2020, the industry will lose €6 billion, with thousands of jobs lost especially along the Border. What plans have been put in place? All counties have done well in recent years. To make money requires investment. We are hoping that the funding is there. The witnesses spoke well together. What plans do they have for tourism funding in Louth?

It was mentioned that €3 million was refunded to businesses in fees etc., which seems like a small amount of money. What are the plans? I ask the witnesses not to forget County Louth.

Chairman: Those points were well made. The pressure is now on Mr. Kelly.

Mr. Paul Kelly: Absolutely. On the €3 million in fees, as soon as the Covid pandemic hit we immediately refunded to businesses any registration fees for accommodation and fees to participate in sales platforms that either we or Tourism Ireland would run. It was a tiny drop in the ocean in the context of a €6 billion revenue loss, but it was important for us to get whatever we could back to businesses.

Regarding our own funding, we repurposed about €16 million at short notice. The Government gave us a further €10 million for the adaption grant scheme. In recent weeks we launched

a grant scheme for inbound agents. These are the people at the top of the funnel who bring people into Ireland who then stay in hotels, eat in restaurants, use buses and taxis etc. If these people go out of business, we lose the business they have on their books and we lose the vital relationships they have with international buyers.

We have swept up any money that we have left over in our budget and put it into a fund total of about €10 million that we will now distribute to those inbound agents. They did not qualify for CRSS and the only support they have had was the wage subsidy scheme, which is not enough to cover any of their fixed costs. We have allocated any funding we have had left over into that to help fund those businesses. Basically, any funding we have been able to get from our own resources we have prioritised giving that to businesses. In all of our work and analysis we have advocated for more Government support going into the businesses.

We have been working with Louth County Council. For a wee county, Louth is a very important part of Ireland's Ancient East offering and has some great historic assets. The Deputy mentioned King John's Castle and so on. I am delighted to say that we will complete our destination towns project with Louth County Council in Drogheda in the second half of next year. That will further improve and enhance Drogheda's offering and appeal to tourists. It is very much on our radar. We continue to invest in the area. That is just one example of an upcoming project.

Mr. Niall Gibbons: The only thing I would add is that the Deputy left out what is probably the biggest hook the area has for the coming years, which is the ancestry of the President-elect of the United States. We have already had a few genealogists who have mapped his ancestry contact us. We can make the most of that when the time comes. We have good connections with Louth. It is an important part of the future. When we get going next year, it will not be off of our map. I assure the Deputies of that.

Deputy Ciarán Cannon: I thank all of the witnesses not only for the time they have spent with us this afternoon but for the significant time they have spent in working with those involved in tourism and hospitality, shepherding them through what has been an unprecedented time for all. I have just a couple of observations to make. I suppose there is no harm in being somewhat parochial when one gets the opportunity. I live approximately 20 minutes from the Wild Atlantic Way. Some excellent work has been done over recent years to determine how to drive some of the significant traffic this wonderful concept generates further inland and off the Wild Atlantic Way, both to make it more sustainable with regard to how it is traversed and the impact it has on towns and villages along the route and to drive additional economic activity inland.

One such proposition is the Burren loop, which takes in the north of the Burren and southern Galway, an area we like to refer to as the Burren lowlands. Significant work is ongoing in that regard. It was supposed to be live for the season just gone but that was obviously never going to happen in the context of where we are. I hope it will be live for next season and that all necessary signage will be in place. There is a very large number of tourism operators in the area. Mr. Gibbons mentioned the award for sustainable tourism recently given to operators in the Burren area. They are very ambitious with regard to what this loop can do for some of the smaller inland towns and villages off the Wild Atlantic Way.

While I am on the Wild Atlantic Way, through nobody's fault, an excellent project to develop a cycling event along the length of the Wild Atlantic Way was not successful. It is a massive undertaking for any cyclist. The event was broken down into 16 stages, which may have

been one of the reasons it was not as successful as had been hoped. I still believe, however, that we have a powerful opportunity to develop a number of cycling events along the Wild Atlantic Way, which could be marketed internationally. It is one of the most stunning locations in the world with regard to its scenery, the welcome, and the people, traditions and culture of the area. I hope that, despite difficulties having arisen with the first iteration, we might try to get something similar under way again.

The Beara Breifne Way, which is Ireland's potential answer to the Camino, starts in County Cork and winds its way all the way to Cavan. A significant part of the route runs through east Galway along the Hymany Way. An initial commitment of just over €1 million was made a number of months ago. How has that money been spent? How do we intend to further market this extraordinary opportunity to open up Ireland's Hidden Heartlands? As somebody who has a passion for tourism, exploration and using his bike to see different parts of the world, I believe there is an incredible opportunity here to open up a whole region, that middle part of the country running through the spine of Ireland along the banks of the Shannon, through places that have yet to experience the kind of economic lift that tourism can provide. What are the plans for that area in the future?

Well done to all the witnesses for the exceptional work they are doing in very challenging times. When we emerge from this, we will emerge stronger and more focused on where our real strengths lie with regard to marketing ourselves internationally. Well done to both groups on their excellent use of social media. Both Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland can hold themselves up as global exemplars in the use of social media. We have really upped our game in this regard over the past five to ten years and we are seeing the results internationally.

Mr. Paul Kelly: The Burren loop is a very exciting initiative. It should be fully open by the time tourism gets up and running again. It is a fantastic part of the world. We were delighted to see the work of everyone involved in the ecotourism project recognised. The idea of looped drives off the Wild Atlantic Way will be key in helping people have an even better experience and helping to spread visitors in order that it is more sustainable and better managed. It will also share the benefit of tourism with a wider proportion of the community. The Burren loop is a great example of that and I believe it will lead to a lot more development and new small businesses, such as sustainable ecocraft businesses, setting up in that part of the world. It will be ten years' time before we really see the full benefits of the Burren loop.

We have a master plan for both the Beara Breifne Way and the Shannon navigation. These are in train at the moment. As for the Beara Breifne Way, it is really important to note that it is not just about the walk or the path itself but about how these paths and walks, when built, connect with businesses and communities along the way. How do we get people onto the Beara Breifne Way from a town that is 1 km or 2 km away from it? How do we get people off it and into local bed and breakfast accommodation, local cafes and so on? All of this tourism development is part of the master plan for the development of the Beara Breifne Way.

With regard to cycling on the Wild Atlantic Way, we were very disappointed that things went wrong with the first iteration of that but we are fully committed to, and believe massively in the potential of, the Wild Atlantic Way becoming globally famous as a cycling route or as a number of cycling routes. We are working with a range of stakeholders to try to bring that to life.

Mr. Niall Gibbons: I would just add that there are products being developed which will be very important to the marketing in the future. We are working very closely together.

Deputy Ciarán Cannon: To be clear, will the Burren loop will be live by the upcoming season? Is that the plan?

Mr. Paul Kelly: Yes, that is my understanding. I will confirm that in case there has been any hiccups in development. I will come back to the Deputy on the issue, but my understanding is it will be live.

Senator Shane Cassells: I apologise as I am probably going to get called away in a second. I will pose a couple of quick questions. I thank both organisations for their presentations and for the work they do on behalf of the sector. It is appreciated. The stark figures outlined in the presentations demonstrate the severity of what we are dealing with both from an economic point of view and the point of view of sectoral interests.

With regard to the supports, the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, was before the committee at the start of October and was looking forward to the three or four-month period during which various incentives were to be put in place, one of which was the stay and spend initiative. There was a fund of more than €200 million for this scheme. In the context of the number of weeks for which we were in level 5, I expect that, if one were to break it down, somewhere in the region of €40 million was saved. Will that money be reinvested in the sector as grant aid? What sort of communication has there been between Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland and the Minister as to what is going to be done with that money?

Mr. Paul Kelly: The stay and spend scheme is an initiative of Revenue and the Department of Finance. We worked with them to market and promote the scheme. As the Senator will know, the mechanism is one of tax rebate. We were never allocated a pot of money or anything in this regard. There is no pot that can be reallocated.

Deputy Shane Cassells: I know that but Mr. Kelly's agency is an industry player and will have communicated with Mr. Niall Cody or whoever as to whether the timeframe was to be extended or as to how the money it was proposed would be lost to the Exchequer in tax could be reinvested.

Mr. Paul Kelly: That will be a matter for our Department to take up with the Department of Finance. I imagine that the financial projections that were done at the time across the whole economy in respect of the stay-and-spend scheme have ended up being quite different from what has come out because of the deteriorating health position. Importantly, because we moved to level 5 restrictions, the stay-and-spend scheme could not be accessed. A tax rebate on money spent on tourism, considering that 23 cent in every euro spent on tourism goes back to the Exchequer, with the Exchequer reinvesting some of that to stimulate demand would pay for itself as an initiative. The principle of the initiative is great-----

Deputy Shane Cassells: It is definitely very good. I will move on, but Revenue will never come chasing anyone to hand money back, so the liaison and the communication are important. The concept was good. I am not too sure it will be realised if we go into January with further restrictions. We will not see the scheme realise what it was supposed to do in the domestic market.

Mr. Paul Kelly: We will certainly pick that up with our Department and Revenue.

Deputy Shane Cassells: It is key. Whatever the Government allocates in the context of what it thought would be lost to the Exchequer on one side, that theoretical pool of money must be driven back in.

The issue of liquidity was touched on. Paul Gallagher was before the committee before the move to level 5. He discussed this briefly with me. He said hotels would not disclose that they are having liquidity issues. He talked about the forecast numbers for November. We are talking about an occupancy of 4%, which would equate to nearly 60,000 empty bedrooms during the month. Do the witnesses have figures yet for empty bedrooms during the month of November?

Mr. Paul Kelly: No, we do not have those specific data yet, other than to say that because of level 5 restrictions, the occupancy levels, obviously, will have been way below what would have been required to cover any of the fixed costs.

Deputy Shane Cassells: Mr. Gallagher outlined those figures with that in mind. Given the gravity of liquidity issues, what are the sector's expectations for January, February and March?

Mr. Paul Kelly: I think the sector's expectations are relatively low. At the moment, the sector has only been told it can open with inter-county travel until 6 January. What will happen after 6 January? Obviously, what will happen on the health front will be a massive determinant of that. That period until the season gets going again post St. Patrick's Day is always the worst time of year anyway. It is always the toughest time of year to get through. People are now facing into it with nothing left in the reserves, so I think the expectation is, once again, very grim.

Deputy Shane Cassells: I return to a point Deputy Dillon raised when he led off this afternoon on the supports for cafés. I acknowledge what Mr. Kelly said about the bar that was used in licensing and so on. Is there good collaboration between Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland on marketing the food product? Tourism Ireland has used that as a marketing point and has carried out analysis as to what can differentiate us from other countries and bring tourists here. Is there good collaboration between both bodies in that respect?

Mr. Paul Kelly: Absolutely, and Mr. Gibbons can speak to this as well. About this time last year we were just coming to the end of Taste the Island, which was a three-month-long food initiative we had developed to build and market the island of Ireland as a quality food destination. It was a joint initiative between Fáilte Ireland, Tourism NI and Tourism Ireland that had got off to a great start. It was just being established last year. This year was supposed to be the year it was going to be marketed internationally but, obviously, it made no sense to run it this year. That is just one example of how we work together to promote the food offering in Ireland. Does Mr. Gibbons wish to add anything?

Mr. Niall Gibbons: Yes. That was a good initiative. Food will be another passion point in the new campaign we will go out to shoot in the first quarter of next year and which will be part of the major relaunch. I heard a great phrase a number of years ago. We got research from a company called Condé Nast, one of the most prestigious publications in our industry. It stated that food is the new currency of tourism. It influences people's choice of destination. It is not always about going to gourmet restaurants, by the way. It could be about going to the farmers' market. It is about the local ingredients and the artisan producers. Ireland is very well positioned now with some of the great work Bord Bia has done, for example, and we overlap with Bord Bia in this space to bring the taste of Ireland to the world.

Deputy Shane Cassells: I wish to ask Mr. Kelly a brief question about the training issue. There will be a huge number of people having left the industry who will not come back. We have heard the anecdotal evidence of people going to work in supermarkets and so forth because they can get a guaranteed contract. What will Fáilte Ireland's supports be for people getting back into the industry when it gradually reopens?

Mr. Paul Kelly: We have a division that looks after careers promotion and-----

Deputy Shane Cassells: I know that but I am talking about retraining if it is the case that people will have to apply to work in a new workforce.

Mr. Paul Kelly: Ms De Saulles looks after this area. Do we have sound from her?

Ms Jenny De Saulles: Yes. Just as Mr. Kelly was saying, that will be the huge challenge in bringing people into the industry. We have a careers oversight group and we have been working with the third level education bodies as well as the ETBs on creating a range of easy-to-access training that can bring people into the industry. One of the big challenges we have had with retention in tourism is the perception that there is no career, so we are doing a big piece of work within Fáilte Ireland on continuous development. That is for those in the industry whom we can upskill in order that they can take the opportunities that will come in the future and will be encouraged to stay in the industry because they will believe there will be career progression opportunities for them.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: I thank Mr. Kelly, Mr. Gibbons, Ms De Saulles and all their staff and teams for the work they do. Like my colleague, I apologise for being called away to vote. A number of the issues I wanted to ask about have been raised but I will put a couple of specific questions to the witnesses.

One of the issues is the outcome of Brexit. There has been a lot of emphasis on additional shipping routes. Most of this has been around avoiding the land bridge, but I often think we have not focused sufficiently on ferry traffic. Coming from Wexford, I have a particular interest in enhancing the offering in Rosslare. With new ferry routes being put in place, there are opportunities. Are there plans to develop and market those?

Mr. Niall Gibbons: This needs to be put into perspective. Ferries are a really important source of business. On the three corridors, in a normal year, so to speak, pre Covid, there are nearly 50,000 car spaces every single week. People who travel on ferries tend to stay longer and spend more than people who arrive by air. Ferry travel is a really important source of business for the regions on the northern, centre and southern corridors. We have been talking to DFDS about the new ferry that was announced last week with a view, perhaps, to putting some supports in place for marketing in that regard. I know that the Minister for Foreign Affairs is meeting Brittany Ferries as well to talk about Cork, so we are briefing him on that as well. We do a lot of co-operative work with the existing carriers. Again, I am talking about a pre-Covid environment, but the likes of Irish Ferries, Stena Line and P&O engage in joint marketing campaigns with us, mainly in the British market but also in the French market, to stimulate that car traffic. It is an important source of business, and the Brexit comment is very relevant at the moment too.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: One of the other issues is the CRSS and the need to extend the wage subsidy scheme. We have talked about this extensively already but I have specific concerns about some of the not-for-profit tourism ventures. I am thinking of Wexford and Hook Head, Dunbrody and the Irish National Heritage Park, which have not been able to avail of the commercial subsidies and supports. It will be essential that such ventures, which are located all around the country, will have the supports to survive until next summer, when the vaccine rolls out.

Mr. Paul Kelly: In addition to the CRSS, the Government has allocated €55 million in busi-

ness continuity support for 2021 to Fáilte Ireland. We are working through the detail of that scheme and how we might bring it to businesses. There was very much a sense that we did not have clarity as to what the CRSS would and would not cover but that there would probably be gaps in it. One of the issues is that to be eligible for the CRSS one has to be eligible for corporation tax, and those not-for-profits are not eligible for corporation tax. We cannot confirm any details but we are aware of those sectors of the tourism economy that do not qualify for the Covid-19 restrictions support scheme, CRSS, and not-for-profit attractions such as the Dunbrody Famine ship, Hook Head, etc., would fall into that category. We are very aware of those. It is important that those types of community projects get supported because they bring visitors into areas. They are strategic tourism businesses. They bring business in and drive demand in an area. We will be doing all we can to help in that regard.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: Golf tourism is a specific market that has been hit. International golf tourists are hugely important to Ireland. That industry has been badly hit and has not been able to avail of the same supports. How are we going to revitalise that sector?

Mr. Niall Gibbons: The whole golf space is a key part of what we offer internationally. We saw, for example, the success of the Open Championship in Northern Ireland last year. It got amazing publicity. I know from personal experience that the absence of golfers up and down the west coast had a considerable impact on golf clubs this year. That has a knock-on effect on caddies and downstream activities, so to speak. Certainly on the marketing front, golf will be to the forefront of our promotional campaigns. That is not only for attracting golfers, it is about the destination and all that goes with it because it is much higher end. Mr. Kelly might want to talk about the product side of things.

Mr. Paul Kelly: There is the Ireland Golf Tour Operator Association. All of the members of the association should be eligible for the inbound agency survival scheme that I spoke about and which we are funding with €10 million. That scheme is now open. We are now working with those inbound tour groups to make sure of their survival because if they do not survive, we lose those relationships. Those are the key people with whom Mr. Gibbons's team works in international markets so we have to make sure that those businesses survive.

I know that for some golf courses, though not all, international revenue is the mainstay of their finances. They are struggling at the moment and will need some form of support. We will be having conversations with our colleagues on the sport side because we do not want those trophy courses going out of business because they are really important.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I have one quick final question around the post-Covid environment. We must think about getting to next summer and beyond, but Covid will have an impact on international travel and business travel. If they were to make a pitch and look at the Irish tourism product in five years' time, where do our guests see it? What will have been the impact of Covid and Brexit? This is a bit of crystal ball gazing, but where do our guests see the industry?

Mr. Paul Kelly: I am sure Mr. Gibbons will talk from a marketing and positioning point of view. I will talk from a product point of view. It is important to say that there is a considerable amount of development going on at the moment. We have approximately 50 to 55 large capital grant projects in train all around the country. I think 15 of those are due to be completed and to open between 2020 and 2021. The work is continuing on those projects. One or two of them were delayed because of Covid but, in the main, they are all continuing.

We have invested €15 million with local authorities in destination towns all around the country. The Department of Transport is funding the development of greenways in conjunction with local authorities. Local authorities around the country have carried out public realm work to enhance their outdoor offering through cycle lanes, outdoor seating and stuff. All of that development has continued apace while we have been, effectively, closed to international tourists. When those international tourists come back here, Ireland is going to be a far better place to come to than before the closure because of all that development work. We will be going in with a strong product offering in that regard.

There are a couple of key areas when we look to the future. The outdoors is essential and opening up and improving access to the outdoors, and boosting its enjoyability are essential. Making the most of our State-owned land and assets is essential, as is improving access to them. I am thinking of our national parks, Office of Public Works, OPW, sites, Coillte sites and all the assets that local authorities have.

The digitisation of the industry is also important. There are parts of the Irish industry, such as activity providers and attractions, that are behind the best in class in the world in their digital presence and online bookability. During the pandemic, the global digital transformation has been massive. Some of the metrics that the likes of Google look at indicate that the world has moved as much, in digital terms, in the past eight months as it had in the previous eight years. A huge transformation has just happened. That means that our tourism businesses and products must have a brilliant online presence. We have done a complete overhaul of *discoverireland.ie*. I know that Mr. Gibbons has done a fantastic job on *ireland.com* for international visitors. We need all of our industry to be in the same space and we have a big project that is going to be driving that.

The final thing I will say relates to sustainability. That is another big initiative that needs to happen and the tourism sector needs to play its part in Ireland meeting its climate change targets. We need to drive the further decarbonisation of the tourism industry and find more sustainable transport solutions and things like that. That is another big theme for the next five years.

Chairman: I will draw that particular debate to a close, if that is okay, and move on to Senator Carrigy.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: Our guests are very welcome. I compliment both organisations. If we look at the figures for Tourism Ireland prior to the pandemic, huge numbers were coming in and we were doing the job right. I am involved in the county tourism committee in Longford and get regular emails with updates from Mr. Kelly. Particularly since the outbreak of Covid, the Make a Break campaign has been excellent in the promotion that it has given to all parts of Ireland. I was involved with the former Minister of State, Kevin Boxer Moran, in pushing to get the Hidden Heartlands brand for our midlands area. It has proved more than successful and the numbers are ahead of the projections at the beginning. I compliment Mr. Paddy Matthews and the rest of the team working on that brand because they are doing an excellent job. It has also given an opportunity for people to get to know their own areas. People in Longford have got out and used the greenways and blueways, the walks along the river and our excellent forest walks. A part of what the Hidden Heartlands brand is about is slow, easy tourism. Hidden Heartlands has created opportunities.

I apologise if I cross over with questions that have already been asked because I had to go out of the room for a while in order to vote. Mr. Kelly mentioned a number of schemes,

including CRSS. Have our guests identified areas that have not been serviced by various supports from the Government, a number of which Mr. Kelly has mentioned? Have they met with Department officials to make sure that all areas of our tourism are being supported to make sure they will all be there in 2021? Do our guests feel that Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland have sufficient funds for a marketing campaign in 2021 and 2022? Are there sufficient funds available to regain visitors to Ireland?

Mr. Paul Kelly: I thank the Senator for his kind words about the Hidden Heartlands. It is surpassing expectations. The businesses in the Hidden Heartlands had a disproportionately good summer and that Make a Break campaign worked particularly well for the area. Businesses along the Shannon corridor, in particular, did very well for the period of time they were allowed to be open.

I am delighted to say that we will be finishing the destination town work in Longford town next year. It will link up along the canal greenway which will further enhance that part of the world.

The Senator asked if we have enough money. I would say, first and foremost, that the priority needs to be on business survival. Of course, we could always spend more money but the priority would be to get as much money as possible to businesses to enable them to survive so they can be there to re-employ people and take advantage of tourism when it can come back, which it will. We have regular meetings with all the sectors of industry, and there are people in the Hidden Heartlands who are facing challenges. For example, those providing boat rental services are not included the scope of the CRSS, and that presents a real challenge to all those operating cruise businesses along the Shannon. Those working in car rental and as inbound tour operators also fall outside of the scope of the CRSS. Indeed, because of the way the scheme is set up, there are a number of sectors, which are not currently supported, other than through the wage subsidy scheme, and will need further support. Boat rental is excluded from the reduction in VAT rate to 9% for historical reasons. It is important that reduction is maintained into the future, to enable us to be competitive in a recovery, but if at all possible, it should be extended to include some sectors that are currently excluded, such as boat and car rental.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I have a few short questions on the Stay and Save initiative. It must be extended next year, and hopefully businesses will be able to open for this. We need to do more promotion to encourage businesses to register with the Revenue. I checked on the statistics in October and in many counties the numbers of businesses registering are very low.

On the issue of the retail export scheme, I am cognisant of that. I am thinking of the English tourism trade coming to Ireland. There is an issue with the threshold of €75 that has been put in place by the Department of Finance in respect of the VAT refund for purchases made and subsequently exported. What are Mr. Kelly's views on that issue? Is the threshold sufficient, or does he see it having an impact on the English tourism market in the years ahead?

Mr. Paul Kelly: The original proposal was for that threshold to be €175, and the reduction of it to €75 is massively important, taking into consideration the numbers of people who spend money. Ideally, we would prefer there to be no threshold, but we do not think that there is a major issue with it. Other countries are being more aggressive and are offering a tax refund. I am not sure of the exact rationale behind the introduction of the threshold, but a threshold of €75 is much better than one of €175. We would prefer the threshold to be zero so as to stimulate as much spend as possible in small retail outlets such as craft shops and other shops when tourists visit the country.

Chairman: I have a few questions and observations that perhaps the witnesses could comment on. I am from the Cavan-Monaghan constituency, which I believe is part of the Hidden Heartlands and part of Ireland's Ancient East. The Wild Atlantic Way has been a huge success, and illustrates what marketing and packaging a destination can do for an entire region. The Wild Atlantic Way campaign opened up that whole coastal area, which, prior to that, had not been viewed in the same light. Are there any statistics available on the level of tourism to the Wild Atlantic Way, the Hidden Heartlands and the Ancient East? I assume that the Wild Atlantic Way is the most popular of the three packages or concepts, but I would like the witnesses to comment on the issue. Unlike places such as Killarney, west Cork and other beautiful tourist hotspots, Cavan-Monaghan is not somewhere that people automatically think about going for a week or a fortnight on holiday, but there are fantastic facilities and outdoor activities available there. There is the additional aspect of being in the Border region, and with Brexit coming down the tracks, the area will face a new set of challenges.

In respect of Fáilte Ireland's engagement with the local authority in the area, I know that Joanne Hayes does wonderful work in trying to promote the county of Cavan. I ask the witnesses to comment on their engagement with local authorities in the promotion of tourism in the area. Belturbet is a town along the River Erne, which I recall as being a hive of activity ten years ago, with boats coming in, and tourists on the streets, but it is a very different landscape today from a tourism perspective. I ask the witnesses to comment on the emphasis they place on areas and counties like Cavan-Monaghan.

I also want to get the views of the witnesses on festivals that have been completely shut down during the pandemic, which is something we have not discussed in detail today. In this context, the Galway Arts Festival and Galway being the European Capital of Culture 2020 spring to mind, but also festivals all around Ireland, in particular those in coastal areas. I am mindful of the loss of the revenue and tourism associated with the festivals and how we are going to come back from that. I hope that we will only be living with Covid-19 for a certain period, and that the introduction of a vaccine will bring all those festivals back to what they were. The cancellation of the international arts festivals and concerts has caused huge loss to the tourism industry. Perhaps the witnesses could comment on the issue.

Mr. Kelly also mentioned the Beara Breifne Way, with which I am unfamiliar. I ask him to brief us on that.

Mr. Paul Kelly: I will first deal with the issue of cancelled festivals. My heart goes out to all those involved with the Galway - European Capital of Culture 2020 project. It was a fantastic opportunity and a great programme of work was devised, which was subsequently decimated by the impact of Covid-19. We provided a great deal of support to festivals this year to help them to survive. Festivals take a long time to plan and a significant amount of work goes into them, and it is more important that festivals survive so that they can return when they are permitted to do so. While we do not envisage that festivals are going to happen in the first half of 2021 in the way they normally would, we will be giving them some level of funding. The funding will be reduced, but it will help them to survive into the future. We need to look at the situation in the second half of 2021 and how things are developing as to whether festivals can happen. Perhaps Mr. Gibbons might comment on the international marketing of these festivals.

On the points the Chair raised about Cavan-Monaghan, I can confirm that the west part of County Cavan is in the Hidden Heartlands and the eastern part is in Ireland's Ancient East, as is Monaghan. The opportunity that that brings for the area is very much on our radar. Unfortunately the work to make Monaghan town a destination town will not be completed next year,

but hopefully it will be completed in the first half of 2022, and we will have enhanced the offering of Monaghan town as a tourism destination. We are working with the local authority in Cavan on the Hidden Heartlands concept, and the opportunities it provides, including linking in with Fermanagh to promote the Cavan lakes and the Marble Arch Caves area, which is something that we think can be developed.

The Beara Breifne Way will be a big addition when we can bring it to life. It is effectively a continuous walk from Blacklion down to the Beara Peninsula. Cavan will be at one end of the way, so it will provide an opportunity to drive tourism growth as either a start or finish point on that walk.

Chairman: On the concepts of the Hidden Heartlands and Ireland's Ancient East, does Mr. Kelly think it is helpful or unhelpful that the two concepts are splitting the county of Cavan?

Mr. Paul Kelly: That was a question that we debated long and hard. We like to see a county fall into one brand area, because it is simpler for engaging with local stakeholders and local authorities, etc., but it also has to make sense when we are presenting it international visitors and sharing a map with them. I do not think that tourism development in Cavan has in any way been harmed by it, it has just made it a little more complex. It is something on which we are happy to continue to engage with the local authority and stakeholders, and keep it under review. It is important that west Cavan is part of the Hidden Heartlands. The offering there, including its lakes and so on, fits in better with the natural outdoors offering of the Hidden Heartlands than with the historical-based offering of Ireland's Ancient East. That is important. We will keep that split under review and continue to engage with local parties on the matter.

Chairman: On the same theme, I ask Mr. Kelly to address the success of the three particular concepts.

Mr. Paul Kelly: The Wild Atlantic Way is obviously a success but, even before it was done, the area was more developed from a tourism point of view, with towns such as Galway and Lahinch and attractions such as the Cliffs of Moher, County Kerry and west Cork. The Wild Atlantic Way has accelerated that. It is the oldest of the brands. These brands are all incredibly new by international standards. They are babies. The Wild Atlantic Way has been incredibly successful. Ireland's Ancient East has grown very well and areas such as Wexford and Kilkenny have done very well.

Chairman: Has it had more success than the Hidden Heartlands?

Mr. Paul Kelly: It has, but it was more developed to begin with and it has been around longer. Ms De Saulles may wish to address this issue because she was in charge of building Ireland's Ancient East. The Hidden Heartlands has had a faster start than we had with Ireland's Ancient East. We have had more industry engagement over the first year or so and it is going incredibly well. Does Ms De Saulles wish to speak to Ireland's Ancient East, given her history?

Ms Jenny De Saulles: As Mr. Kelly stated, it is important to remember that the brands are very new. They are babies. As Mr. Gibbons will confirm, the Wild Atlantic Way has significant resonance with the domestic audience. The Ireland's Ancient East brand had less resonance with the domestic audience, but it actually had significant resonance with the international audience. When the international audience thinks of Ireland, it thinks of a green Ireland with castles and culture. Where Ireland's Ancient East resonates is really with the US market and the market in European countries such as France. It resonates better with the international market

than it does with the domestic one. That said, the Keep Discovering campaign we ran last year raised the profile of Ireland's Ancient East domestically. It is continuing to grow in the domestic market and has great potential, as does the Hidden Heartlands.

Chairman: Fishing, a very traditional activity, was historically a tourism attraction for countries such as Cavan. I refer to Covid and the impact on outdoor activities. Tourism attractions such as fishing have been kind of lost over the past ten or 15 years. Do the witnesses have any plans to invest in that type of tourism again for counties such as Cavan?

Mr. Paul Kelly: That is part of what we will be considering as we look to open up the outdoors in terms of considering the types of activities that will bring tourism in. It is important to focus on the activities that can bring the best revenue in to areas, but fishing is certainly within that remit. Does Mr. Gibbons wish to contribute from an international point of view on the brands or fishing?

Mr. Niall Gibbons: Activities are going to be a focus for us into the future. The Chairman referred to festivals. They are really important for us. Events such as the St. Patrick's festival, the Galway international Arts Festival - it was a tragedy this year - the big Listowel Writers' Week and the Belfast International Arts Festival are all major parts of our promotional platform overseas.

On Border counties, as an all-island agency, we would point out the importance of cross-Border dialogue. It is important that we do not let the consumer think that all these experiences just stop at the Border. A significant amount of great work has been done, going back to the Shannon-Erne project 20 years or 30 years ago. That need to be continuously built on. There is some good funding available under the PEACE initiative that we are continuing to talk to colleagues and tourist boards about to ensure the experiences do not just stop at the Border.

Chairman: I thank the witnesses. I have two Deputies who are very eager to contribute on issues that may relate to their constituency.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I thank the Chairman. We are nearly up to the two hour limit. The witnesses have been fantastic in their answers. I will start with a positive. It is phenomenal that the Chairman's constituency and my constituency are by a Camino-type walkway. The Beara Breifne Way has significant potential. It must be promoted and pushed because it involves everything good that Ireland has to offer. It runs from the tip of the Beara peninsula up to County Cavan. The Chairman and I will meet halfway on it some day.

I wish to get into a bit more detail on a few issues that have been touched on, particularly Fáilte Ireland operations. I refer to the adaptation grant. How much has been paid out on the adaptation grant so far and how much remains to be paid out? When is it expected that the remainder could be paid out?

Mr. Paul Kelly: First, I do not have a figure in that regard because the closing date for many businesses was extended until the middle of November and we are still working through those applications. Importantly, we opened the scheme for pubs that do not serve food. The closing date for those premises is not until 18 December, so we will be taking applications until just before Christmas. It will only be in the new year that we will have some sense of how much has been drawn down.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I would appreciate it if Mr. Kelly would send on those figures as soon as possible.

Mr. Paul Kelly: I will.

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: Deputy Dillon raised the issue of the exclusion of coffee shops from the scheme. I think Mr. Kelly referred to the fact that petrol stations, for example, might have coffee shops. I think that decision has to be revisited. I am not suggesting for a second that coffee shops in petrol stations should be brought within the remit of the adaptation scheme but there are some really impressive cafés in towns and cities that have big demands for PPE gear, be it separation between tables, cleansing material, visors, masks and so on. Some of them are quite surprised and disappointed that they have been left out of the adaptation grant just because they do not happen to have a liquor licence. I ask Mr. Kelly to elaborate on that issue and maybe revisit that decision, if that is possible.

Mr. Paul Kelly: First, it is important that we look at the scale of this issue. As the scheme was funded from capital money, it had to be designed to cover capital costs. Personal protective equipment and things like that could not be covered under the adaptation grant because of Government financing rules. The scheme only covers assets. For example, a Perspex screen could be covered but a mask could not. A hand sanitiser unit could be covered but the hand sanitiser liquid could not. That is because it is capital funding that we had to allocate and we were trying to get it to as many businesses as we could as quickly as we could to help cover those costs. There may be a misunderstanding regarding the amount of money involved. For example, the average amount allocated to pubs that do not serve food is €1,000, while restaurants get an average of €2,500. It is important to recognise that the grant will not be the difference between closure and survival for these businesses. The level of funding is probably dwarfed by what is available through the Covid restrictions support scheme and it is definitely dwarfed by the extended wage subsidy scheme, etc. I do not want people to think they have been excluded and will miss out on €5,000, €10,000 or €15,000 as a result. That is not why the fund is there. It is a relatively small amount of money and it can only be drawn down if the business has spent money on those types of assets. That is a requirement of the grant.

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: In the current climate, €500 or €1,000 could mean a lot to these businesses. When their neighbour competing for the same lunchtime market is able to get a bit of a competitive advantage because they can avail of this grant, it does make a difference. I ask for the decision to be revisited.

When or how will the €55 million contingency funding provided in the budget be spent? Which stakeholders will be consulted regarding the allocation of that €55 million?

Mr. Paul Kelly: In terms of consultation, we are listening to the challenges and industry input all the time. Mr. Gibbons sits on a call we have with representatives of all the industry bodies every two weeks. We listen to their input on those calls. Our consultation with industry is extensive. Designing the detail of funds and how funds work cannot be done by a big committee.

One needs a group of experts as there is a great deal of EU legislation to take into account. We will be doing that with our Department based on the input that we received from the industry, and on the other Government supports that are there; we will be working through that.

As to when this will happen, we will be announcing the details in the first quarter of next year. We have four schemes under way at the moment. We have the adaptation scheme, we are administering the bed and breakfast accommodation restart scheme and the coach tourism scheme for €10 million, and we have the inbound agents’ scheme for €10 million also. We have

a total of €54 million between those schemes that we are trying to get out to businesses. We have started work on the next €55 million and have started designing the scheme based on all the inputs that we are receiving from the industry. We hope to have further news on that in the first quarter of 2021. I am not saying that we will have the detail of the full €55 million by the first quarter of 2021 because we may end up doing that as a number of different schemes. We are looking at all of the options at this stage and we may end up with it being a phased process. We do not know what the challenges that businesses later on in the year and across next year are going to be. We have got to-----

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: I want to say a sincere thanks again to our witnesses for coming in today which I greatly appreciate and I look forward to working again with both of them.

Chairman: I call Deputy Brendan Griffin to speak now.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I thank the Chairman. I am conscious that we are getting close to the end so I will be very brief. Can Mr. Kelly tell me about the development of two routes that I was very keen to have included in the programme for Government? The first is the Carlingford to Cobh coastal route and the development of an experience along that route. The other is the development of the wild Atlantic walking route from Malin Head to Kinsale. I live along that route and have been very keen for years to see the linking up, for example, of the Dingle Way to the Kerry Way through Castlemaine Harbour. Can I have an update on both of those experiences; is there a projected timeline in moving those forward?

Can Mr. Gibbons also tell me his views on international travel in the aviation sector? In particular, I note that he envisages our best markets are the closer to home ones right now. I was always struck in my time in the Department on the huge increase in lift between North America and Ireland during the years from 2011 to 2018-19. Correct me if I am wrong but it went from seven routes in 2011 to 24 or 25 at the time of the peak in 2018-19. What is Mr. Gibbons outlook as to our seat capacity from 2022 onwards? How long will it take is to get back to the level of lift that we had at the peak period? I am conscious that our witness does not have a crystal ball, as if he had I would be asking him for tonight’s lotto numbers, - I believe is approximately €12 million tonight - but on a serious note, what is Mr. Gibbons’s best judgment on the above question?

Mr. Niall Gibbons: That is a hard question to answer right now. All of those aviation routes have been decimated. The Deputy is quite right in that the North American experience was spectacular for the past seven to eight years. Traditional gateways like New York, Boston, and Chicago are there and they will come back on a smaller scale in the initial sense, but we are looking out for where the real spectacular growth came from in the last six to seven years which was from places like San Francisco, LA, Seattle, and Dallas with American airlines, together with Philadelphia and Charlotte. I have no crystal ball right now but we need to talk to all of the carriers which are living now day by day. Back in March Delta Airlines had a cash burn of \$100 million a day which is now down to \$18 million. These are big numbers which are impacting on the connectivity.

The American airlines have been granted a bailout of \$50 billion by the US Government to keep things going; and Lufthansa has received €9 billion as have Air France and KLM. We are fortunate to have two great carriers in Ryanair and Aer Lingus that serve us really well and we have to do everything we can to work with those airlines to help restore connectivity, particularly into our regional airports. Dublin Airport is in very difficult shape now but many of the

airlines will return to Dublin. Ireland West Airport, Knock, however, is closed at the moment. Shannon Airport has no commercial flights right now and Cork Airport has an average of two per day. One of the biggest crises we will have will be the restoration of the numbers of people coming here.

People are putting out some projections that perhaps we will see it restored within three years. There are many factors which will underpin this. Ryanair made that comment recently and we would love to think that because that would be the ultimate driver of how fast recovery comes. Many of those airlines and routes, however, were hard won. They are sometimes marginal calls as to whether one will fly from Dallas to Dublin or to Manchester. We go in and work very hard to sell the destination and we are going to have to do that again.

Chairman: I thank Mr Gibbons and call Senator Carrigy now, but I will return to Deputy Griffin for a moment.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: My apologies, Chairman, but I just wanted to ask Mr. Kelly about the walking coastal routes.

Mr. Paul Kelly: I will be very brief. We are continuing to work on research and scoping around the Wild Atlantic Way coastal walking route. That was another one of those immense ideas when we researched different product ideas that could drive much incremental business. We are continuing to do the scoping work on that. We were delighted to see the Carlingford to Cobh route in the programme for Government and we are beginning to scope out the thinking on what that might look like but that is at the very early stages. The one thing I can say is that, as Mr Gibbons has stated, the visitor experience does not stop at the Border and I had one conversation with my colleague, John McGrillen of Tourism Northern Ireland, about what might happen if we had that route and how that might go up and around places like the Giant's Causeway etc. It is an excellent initiative and we will be working on it but we are in the very early stages of looking at what kind of shape it might take and are trying to be as creative as possible in looking at different alternatives there. It is also important to think of sustainability within that.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I would just encourage engagement as early as possible with the communities living along this route. I remember doing reconnaissance in January 2018, in driving south from Dublin to Wexford and Waterford along that part of the coastline. There is immense potential. I agree with Mr. Kelly on the issue of sustainability, which is the buzzword we need to focus on. This can be done and become a very successful product and can again mirror the success of the Wild Atlantic Way, which is only seeing the beginning of its success. In further developing that into a continuous walking route, this can be something for many generations to come and can be a great moneyspinner for local communities along the way. I thank the Charman, the committee and our witnesses.

Chairman: I finally call Senator Carrigy.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I have more of an observation or an opinion than a question. We promote a great deal in Ireland and in Longford alone recently Fáilte Ireland have invested in the Knights & Conquests Heritage Centre project, which I was involved in at the beginning, together with work on Maria Edgeworth, projects where we are telling stories about different parts of our history but we do not tell the story of our own independence. This is a period for which I have a great grá myself and although we are now within the Decade of Commemorations there is no site that tells that story. We have the GPO and Kilmainham Gaol in Dublin

that are specific, but we do not have anywhere that tells the whole story through which we can teach our children. This is something that they are more aware of now and were not for years, as this was virtually never taught as history in our schools up until recently. It is of great importance. As I have said I am from Longford which has very strong links to that whole period of our history, together with Cork and Tipperary. What are our witnesses' views on this? This is a project that could be developed somewhere. Naturally enough, I would be prioritising my own area because of the very strong links that it has. We need a place to which people who come to Ireland can go and in which they can get the whole story told them. We are telling other stories in other ventures and projects around the country.

Mr. Paul Kelly: There are a number of places where we tell that story. The GPO Witness History Museum and, as the Senator has said, Kilmainham Gaol are two that stand out and are very near here, together with the Michael Collins Centre down in Clonakilty and various other places around the country. It is important when looking at that story that it is told sensitively. We are looking at developing destinations by using stories that are distinctive to an area. Every parish in every county has great history and great stories from various parts of history. What we have to see is what is unique to an area as well as being compelling and of interest to visitors. If we invest in projects that do not meet all of these criteria, we will put taxpayers' money into things that will not necessarily give a return to the local community and economy. We have to make sure that they are of interest to visitors and distinctive - in other words, they are not the exactly the same as something else down the road. This is our developmental point of view. I am sure it is difficult for Mr. Gibbons to market.

Mr. Niall Gibbons: We are an all-island body so there are many dimensions to the independence story. From our experience, one of the best ways of bringing stories to life is walking guides. There is a big interest in local history and everyone's interpretation of independence throughout the 32 counties of the island is very different. It is something people need to think about at community level as opposed to always the national tourist board doing it. The walking tours in west Belfast tell a very interesting story of modern history, which is very sensitive and raw at present. It brings a chapter of history to life. There is a great deal of capacity in other towns and villages to do this. From an international perspective, this is sometimes the feedback we get with regard to investing, as opposed to an interpretive panel. Museums are great and what has been brought to life through the 1916 journey has been very good. It has great resonance. EPIC tells the story of the diaspora. Some really good products have come on the scene. Do not discount the local walking guides to bring the story of the locality to life. Sometimes they are the best people to do it.

Chairman: What is the position with the Beara Breifne project? What is the timeframe for its completion?

Mr. Paul Kelly: That is in master plan development mode at present. We will have an update on it at some stage during next year. In the context of a timeframe for its completion, until we get the full scope of what is required from a developmental point of view, I could not say. No doubt it will be completed over phases. There is already a Beara Breifne Way walk. There are sections of it that need to be upgraded. There are sections that are on the road that we need to take off the road to improve the visitor experience. The walk is already there and people can do it today. It is not uniformly up to a standard that we would say is good enough for us, with confidence, to ask Mr. Gibbons and his team to promote. The international visitor expectation would be higher. We need to get it up to that standard, which is what the master plan is about. We will have more on this. I will find out a bit more detail on the timetable and send it on to

the Chairman.

Chairman: I would appreciate that, as would Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan.

I thank our guests for being with us. I thank Mr. Kelly, Mr. Gibbons and Ms De Saulles, who was waiting patiently remotely. We did not get to hear her at the beginning but we got a lovely visual and we had her contribution, which we appreciate. It is much more difficult to do this remotely and we appreciate her patience and her being on call to answer questions. The evidence of the witnesses has been very informative and will assist the committee in its examination of these matters.

I ask members and witnesses to vacate the room immediately in order that it can be sanitised and set up for the next meeting.

The joint committee adjourned at 4.05 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Wednesday, 9 December.