

COUNTY WESTMEATH
**TOURISM
STRATEGY**
2023-2027

DRAFT

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is Ireland's largest indigenous industry, its benefits influencing many different sectors across the wider economy. Tourists bring direct expenditure to the county offering significant economic and social opportunity, sustaining jobs in the tourism and hospitality industry directly and in a wide range of ancillary services. Research by Fáilte Ireland shows that each additional 1,000 overseas tourists support 20 jobs in the tourism industry¹. Westmeath County Council recognises the important opportunity that tourism provides in terms of economic impact, job creation and sustainability for the county. Investment and support for tourism development can also lead to county pride, confidence and community wellbeing, which are also critically important.

With considerable heritage and cultural assets, a scenic and rich natural environment, vibrant towns and villages and an easily accessible location, Westmeath's potential for tourism is significant. Development and enhancement of our visitor offering has accelerated in recent years. For example, attractions such as Athlone Castle, the Luan Gallery, the Hill of Uisneach Visitor Centre and Belvedere House, Gardens and Park have received significant investment. Our outdoor recreation assets now include over 100km of greenway developed along the scenic Royal Canal and historical Old Rail Trail, which will form part of the first coast-to-coast greenway from Dublin to Galway in the coming years. Our main destination towns of Athlone and Mullingar now boast a range of high-quality accommodation and visitor amenities. Communities have also contributed greatly, leading projects to enhance the visitor experience and deliver festivals and events.

Much has changed since the adoption of the first county strategy in 2016. The Ireland's Hidden Heartlands regional experience brand has been steadily gaining traction with domestic markets and more recently in the international marketplace. Since 2022, all of County Westmeath is now included within this brand region and the new Regional Tourism Development Strategy prioritises regenerative tourism and calls out many of the county's key assets, including greenways and heritage. The development and promotion of facilities for outdoor recreation has accelerated. The National Planning Framework placed an emphasis on the regeneration of our towns and villages, resulting in substantial investment for projects that are transforming these visitor destinations. Climate action has grown in priority for all policy makers, relevant to every sector, not least tourism. The substantial impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on our hospitality sector has generated a compelling need to accelerate support for affected businesses, to help them to recover and minimise longer term effects and more recently, inflation and the cost of living crisis is impacting industry viability.

This Strategy aims to guide tourism development countywide, taking account of the range of challenges and opportunities available for the county. Delivery of the strategy will require collaboration, involving a range of stakeholders, including Westmeath County Council, Fáilte Ireland, tourism and hospitality businesses and communities countywide. 3 yearly Action Plans will be developed to ensure implementation of the strategy, to be reviewed and revised annually in accordance with changing opportunities and challenges. Actions will be achievable, with a lead stakeholder and clear timeline identified for each action.

¹ Fáilte Ireland, Development Guidelines for Tourism Destination Towns, 2019

SECTION 1: BACKGROUND

Previous Tourism Strategy

In November 2016, Westmeath County Council launched the first-ever county strategy dedicated to tourism, which aimed “to develop Westmeath as a first-choice high-quality destination that provides an authentic and memorable holiday experience”. This Tourism Strategy focussed specifically on three distinct priority themes through which to concentrate action: Destination Athlone, Mullingar: Music, Myths and Legends and Blueways and Greenways, along with countywide marketing actions.

The objectives and actions set out in this strategy have been largely implemented, with some activities ongoing in the longer term. Following adoption of the strategy, a tourism section within Westmeath County Council was established and a full-time Tourism Officer was engaged as part of the Local Enterprise Office in July 2017. ‘Visit Westmeath’ countywide promotion commenced at this time, with assets and activities now including a county tourism website, printed marketing materials, social media marketing reaching national and international markets, a Visit Westmeath app, exhibition display materials, collaborative marketing activities with Waterways Ireland, Fáilte Ireland, neighbouring counties and other stakeholders, advertisement of our county’s assets on TV, radio and printed media, along with product-specific marketing activities such as the Royal Canal Greenway initiative.

Further development of the county’s recreational infrastructure has also taken place, including greenway and walking trail developments and the addition of amenities, infrastructure and interpretative signage. Ongoing initiatives have enhanced the visitor experience at destination towns, villages and attractions, including the completion of a visitor interpretation project at Belvedere House, Gardens and Park, the provision of grant aid for shopfront enhancements and outdoor dining infrastructure and public realm enhancement schemes.

Process to Prepare a New Tourism Strategy

The process to prepare a new Tourism Strategy commenced in 2021, with an initial pre-draft public consultation process conducted to inform the preparation of a draft strategy. A set of 5 issues papers were produced and displayed on the Westmeath County Council Consultation Portal from the 20th May, outlining the key topics for consideration in developing the new Tourism Strategy, along with links to relevant reference documents and policies. Submissions were invited from members of the public, and this invitation was publicised via local press and social media. The deadline was extended to the 22nd September to allow additional time for submissions, taking account of the difficulties facing the tourism industry at that time. Along with the invitation for public submissions, a series of consultation meetings and workshops were held with key agencies and stakeholders during Spring, Summer and Autumn of 2021.

The pre-draft consultation concluded with a total of 21 written submissions received, along with extensive recommendations from stakeholders outlined at consultation meetings and workshops, all of which have been taken into account in the preparation of this draft strategy. The main topics and issues raised during the pre-draft consultation phase were:

- Realise the untapped potential of Westmeath’s lakes and waterways for activity tourism, such as kayaking, swimming and angling, addressing water quality issues and providing facilities
- More cross-selling, collective and collaborative marketing is required
- Artisan food and craft trails should be developed

- Build a calendar of organised Festivals & Events and provide a full time Festival & Events Coordinator
- Walking and hiking trails should be developed, in scenic areas, around lakes and linked to archaeological, built and natural heritage
- Wayfinding and interpretation signage is required at various locations and obsolete signage should be removed
- Greenway service provision should be improved, along with linkages to towns, villages and attractions
- Accessibility – bus links connecting accommodation with attractions and provision to transport and store bikes for greenway users
- Realise the potential of Mullingar’s musical heritage
- Realise the full potential of existing visitor attractions including Belvedere House, Gardens and Park and the Hill of Uisneach
- Ensure that tourism does not impact negatively on sensitive designated heritage sites
- Carry out conservation works to protect important heritage tourism sites, e.g. Belvedere House
- Realise the potential of strategic greenways passing through Mullingar and Athlone
- Further public realm improvements are required in towns
- Support Athlone as important visitor destination for the surrounding region
- Recognise the unique cultural landscape in North Westmeath and it’s potential as a tourism cluster

A more detailed summary of all written submissions received, and list of stakeholder meetings and workshops has been provided in Appendix A.

At the time of the consultation process, a review of regional brands was being undertaken by Fáilte Ireland which concluded on the 7th February 2022, with the announcement that the entire county was to now be included within Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands. A process to prepare a Regional Tourism Development Strategy for Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands also commenced at this time and it was advised that the County Strategy should be delayed in order to ensure full alignment with the new emerging Regional Strategy. A Draft Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands Regional Tourism Strategy was published for public consultation in October 2022 and this Draft County Strategy has been fully aligned with this emerging Regional Strategy.

Overriding Status of the Strategy

Implementing the Strategy will involve Westmeath County Council helping to facilitate, promote, support and coordinate stakeholders (including government agencies, tourism operators, communities and visitors) in their activities in a way that is consistent with existing and emerging plans that have been subject to environmental assessment/screening for environmental assessment, as appropriate. The Strategy will not provide consent, establish a framework for granting consent or contribute towards a framework for granting consent.

The Strategy will be situated alongside a hierarchy of statutory documents setting out public policy for, among other things, land use development, tourism, infrastructure, sustainable development, environmental protection and environmental management. These other existing policies, plans etc. have been subject to their own environmental assessment/screening for environmental assessment, as appropriate, and form the decision-making and consent-granting framework.

The National Planning Framework (NPF) sets out Ireland’s planning policy direction up to 2040. The NPF is being implemented through Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSEs) and lower tier Development Plans and Local Area Plans. The RSE for the Eastern and Midland Region sets out various objectives relating to tourism development and activities that have been subject to environmental assessment/screening for environmental assessment, as appropriate. The RSE has informed the preparation of the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027 and Fáilte Ireland’s “Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands” Regional Tourism Development Strategy, both of which set out various objectives relating to tourism development and activities and have been subject to legislative requirements relating to public consultation and environmental assessment/screening for environmental assessment, as appropriate.

The Strategy fully aligns with the provisions of the existing NPF, RSE, County Development Plan, Fáilte Ireland’s Regional Tourism Development Strategy for Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands and Westmeath County Council’s Climate Adaptation Strategy. As such, the proposed Strategy is wholly subject to the requirements of the provisions set out in these documents and does not set out to introduce any alterations or additions to those provisions.

Implementation of the Strategy shall be consistent with and conform with the NPF, the Eastern and Midland RSE, the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027 and Fáilte Ireland’s “Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands” Regional Tourism Development Strategy, including provisions relating to sustainable development, environmental protection and environmental management that have been integrated into these documents, including through SEA and AA processes.

In order to be realised, projects included in the Strategy (in a similar way to other projects from any other sector) will have to comply, as relevant, with various legislation, policies, plans and programmes (including requirements for lower-tier Appropriate Assessment, Environmental Impact Assessment and other licencing requirements as appropriate) that form the statutory decision-making and consent-granting framework, of which the Strategy is not part and does not contribute towards.

Environmental Screening of this Draft Strategy

In line with National, Regional and Local Policy, the new strategy will place a strong emphasis on sustainable tourism, safeguarding the quality of our landscapes, natural environment and cultural heritage for the long-term enjoyment of these assets. This tourism strategy will express and detail the integrated approach required to deliver the broader direction and objectives set out in adopted policies and plans including the County Development Plan and Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands Regional Tourism Development Strategy, which have themselves been subject to legislative requirements relating to public consultation and environmental assessment. Reports on the screening processes conducted for Strategic Environmental Assessment and Appropriate Assessment are provided in Appendix E.

SECTION 2: TOURISM IN WESTMEATH

Situational Analysis

County Westmeath is known for its sparkling lakes, scenic rural landscapes, vibrant culture and rich heritage. The county's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats relevant to tourism can be summarised as follows:



STRENGTHS

- Extensive network of Strategic Greenways crossing the county
- The iconic River Shannon with boat tours and cruising options
- Scenic and historic lakes with internationally recognised ecological value
- Concentration of quality visitor infrastructure in Athlone and Mullingar, including excellent shopping, dining and accommodation
- Award-winning restaurants, particularly in Athlone area
- Strong Industry-Led 'Destination Athlone' group
- Central location and excellent access by road, rail and greenway
- High-quality visitor attractions including Athlone Castle, Belvedere House, Gardens & Park, Hill of Uisneach, Fore Abbey, Tullyally Castle, Kilbeggan Distillery and Dún na Sí Amenity and Heritage Park etc.
- Musical heritage of Mullingar, including birthplace of Fleadh Cheoil na hEireann
- Rich heritage and culture with captivating historical stories, excellent storytellers and tour guides
- Excellent golf courses, including Glasson and Mount Temple
- Three designated lakeshore bathing areas
- Excellent activity providers including boat tours and bike hire



WEAKNESSES

- Wayfinding and signage within Athlone and Mullingar inadequate and obsolete signage located around the county
- Limited service provision for outdoor recreation facilities – including watersports providers
- Poor provision for off-road walking / long distance hiking relative to other counties
- Lack of formalised collaborative marketing initiative for Mullingar
- Lack of strong calendar of annual festivals and events, capable of attracting an international audience
- Challenging shoulder and winter seasons hindering industry sustainability
- Limited provision for guided tours at some locations, eg Fore Abbey
- No formal defined industry-led marketing group for Mullingar



OPPORTUNITIES

- Ireland's Hidden Heartlands and Westmeath's central position and strong product alignment with this brand
- Capitalise on Dublin-Galway greenway – first coast to coast greenway passing through Athlone and Mullingar
- Realise the untapped potential of our lakes for tourism
- Potential to expand the tourism facilities at Belvedere, including water-based activity provision
- Progression of Athlone Food Circle and similar initiatives to tell the 'food story' of our county
- Implementation of Shannon Tourism Masterplan and enhancement of waterfront in Athlone
- Opportunities to enhance public realm further and provide for visitors through Urban/ Rural Regeneration and other schemes
- Development of new Destination Mullingar initiative
- Depth of history and heritage around the county which could be interpreted for visitors
- Progress UNESCO World Heritage Designation for the Hill of Uisneach and realise it's potential as a world class visitor experience
- Progress UNESCO Biosphere Designation for Lough Ree
- Promote Mullingar for its musical heritage and build a legacy from hosting the Fleadh Cheoil 2022
- Develop inter-connected trails and multi-activity exploration of the county
- Opportunity to extend the season and provide year-round visitor experiences due to nature of visitor attractions and amenities
- Just Transition Funding



THREATS

- Water quality, maintenance of status at bathing areas
- Challenges posed by Brexit
- Problems recruiting and retaining staff for accommodation and services
- Climate change
- Reduced confidence in international travel due to war and security concern
- Ongoing uncertainty following pandemic, potential resurgence or slow return in confidence of international markets
- Continued cost of living crisis



Source: www.visitwestmeath.ie from Digital and Printed Guide 'Top 10 Things to Do in Westmeath'

Tourism Performance Pre 2020

The tourism sector in Ireland experienced strong growth in the decade prior to 2020, becoming one of the country's most important economic sectors and largest indigenous industry. In 2019, it supported an estimated 260,000 jobs and generated over €5 billion for the national economy.

Historically Fáilte Ireland and CSO visitor research has included County Westmeath as part of the Midlands region. Although this region did not experience a growth in visitor numbers commensurate to its coastal counterparts, the county itself had been outperforming some of our neighbouring

counties, due to a number of strong visitor attractions and a critical mass of visitor services concentrated in the towns of Athlone and Mullingar.

The most recent county data is from 2018, which indicated that Westmeath welcomed 1% of the 9.6 million overseas tourists who came to Ireland, spending 1% of the €5,217bn overseas tourism expenditure in Ireland. Irish residents took 238,000 trips to Westmeath spending €27m. Although no county-specific Fáilte Ireland or CSO research is available for subsequent years, ongoing communication with the sector has indicated an approximate 90% occupancy rate among main accommodation providers during the summer season. However, the 'shoulder' and winter periods tend to prove more challenging for the sector, outlining a strong need for support in extending the tourist season to support ongoing viability of our hospitality businesses.

Key Challenges to Consider

Covid 19 Pandemic Recovery

From Spring 2020, the Covid 19 Pandemic delivered a massive and devastating shock to the industry worldwide, with unprecedented impacts for tourism businesses. The severity of the impact was felt more by hospitality than any other economic sector, as accommodation providers, restaurants, pubs, cultural venues and attractions were faced with difficult and challenging circumstances, with uncertainty surrounding re-opening, altered operating protocols and increased cleaning requirements and reduced capacities creating serious impacts in terms of viability. Staffing has been a particular concern in the aftermath of the pandemic, with the stop-start nature of business impacting on staff retention, coupled with a staff shortage that had already existed pre-Covid.

Brexit

Brexit is likely to have a continuing impact on tourism; from the impact of currency fluctuations on individual tourist decisions, to impacts on the supply chain for the hospitality sector. For the Irish tourism industry, the UK is a very significant market with more than 3 million British tourists contributing almost €1 billion to the economy each year². In the ongoing recovery from Covid and as confidence among travellers increases, it is expected that nearer overseas markets will recover sooner, so any drop in the UK market may result in a slower and more difficult recovery.

Climate Change

Climate change is considered to be the single, biggest challenge facing economic and social stability in our future. It is resulting in significant global challenges, threatening our natural and economic resources and impacting on biodiversity, food security and vulnerable landscapes. Many of these landscapes and natural resources form the raw materials of tourism offerings worldwide and therefore the tourism sector is one of many which will likely suffer as the impact of climate change worsens. The tourism industry is also considered to be a significant contributor to the climate crisis, with unsustainable forms of travel contributing to damaging emissions. Immediate action is required to mitigate against the causes of climate change and adapt to the inevitable consequences of our changing climate. It is therefore essential that the principles of positive Climate Action underpin this strategy, its objectives and actions.

Inflation and the Cost of Living Crisis

Recent soaring inflation in Ireland and globally has also become a growing concern, compounding difficulties in an already recovering tourism sector. Staff shortages are exacerbated by a growing cost

² Failte Ireland, Tourism Facts, 2019

of labour and running costs of businesses are at an all-time high. The reduced VAT rate of 9% is due to expire at the end of February 2023 with extensions currently being sought.

Global Forces

War in Ukraine has created uncertainty in the travel market internationally. It has placed additional pressure on accommodation and transport infrastructure and with a proportion of our tourism accommodation facilities temporarily repurposed to support the refugee crisis, a shortage of hotel beds for tourists has emerged in high pressure areas.

Investment and Funding

High levels of investment in tourism development have taken place in recent years, with capital works undertaken to develop and enhance attractions such as Athlone Castle, the Luan Gallery, the Hill of Uisneach Visitor Centre and Belvedere House, Gardens and Park. The recreational tourism offering has also received significant investment, including the recent extension of the Dublin to Galway Greenway as far as the River Shannon in Athlone and a new bridge crossing the Shannon now under construction. Westmeath County Council have been proactive in driving forward the transformative regeneration of the county's towns and villages. Athlone and Mullingar in particular have benefitted from a series of streetscape enhancements and planned public realm and placemaking interventions. Shopfronts and hospitality businesses countywide have improved their visual appearance and facilities for outdoor dining. Funding programmes such as the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) and the more recently announced Just Transition Fund will have transformative effects on our destination towns and visitor infrastructure in the coming years. Capital Funding Programmes currently available or available in the recent past and which are of specific relevance to Westmeath tourism development are listed in Appendix C.

Private sector investment has also been significant in recent years, including a range of visitor accommodation and other services. Communities have also contributed greatly, leading projects to enhance public areas along with the development of community tourism attractions such as Dún na Sí Amenity and Heritage Park, Moate. Many publicly funded projects have been matched or supplemented with funds from private business or communities.

Policy Context

At national, regional and county level, there are many existing plans and strategies which are relevant to tourism in Westmeath. In developing the new Tourism Strategy, we must take account of the existing adopted policy and strategic approach set out by our National Tourism bodies and Planning Authorities.

National tourism policy falls within the remit of the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and tourism bodies; Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland. Fáilte Ireland is the National Tourism Development Authority. Its role is to support the tourism industry and work to sustain Ireland as a high-quality and competitive tourism destination. It provides a range of practical business supports to help tourism businesses better manage and market their products and services. It also works with other state agencies and representative bodies, at local and national levels, to implement

and champion positive and practical strategies that will benefit Irish tourism and the Irish economy. Tourism Ireland is responsible for marketing the island of Ireland overseas as a leading holiday destination.

In terms of developing our county's tourism infrastructure, planning and development policy is set out in the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027, which aligns with the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy and the National Planning Framework. This County Strategy is also closely aligned with the emerging Regional Tourism Development Strategy for Ireland's Hidden Heartlands.

A more detailed list of policies, plans and strategies that are relevant to this County Tourism Strategy is set out in Appendix B.

Ireland's Hidden Heartlands

Ireland is promoted nationally and internationally using 'Brand Ireland', under which four distinct experience propositions are used to define the appealing characteristics of each region. All of County Westmeath sits within the newest of these regional experience brands, 'Ireland's Hidden Heartlands', having been previously split between Ireland's Ancient East and Ireland's Hidden Heartlands until February 2022.

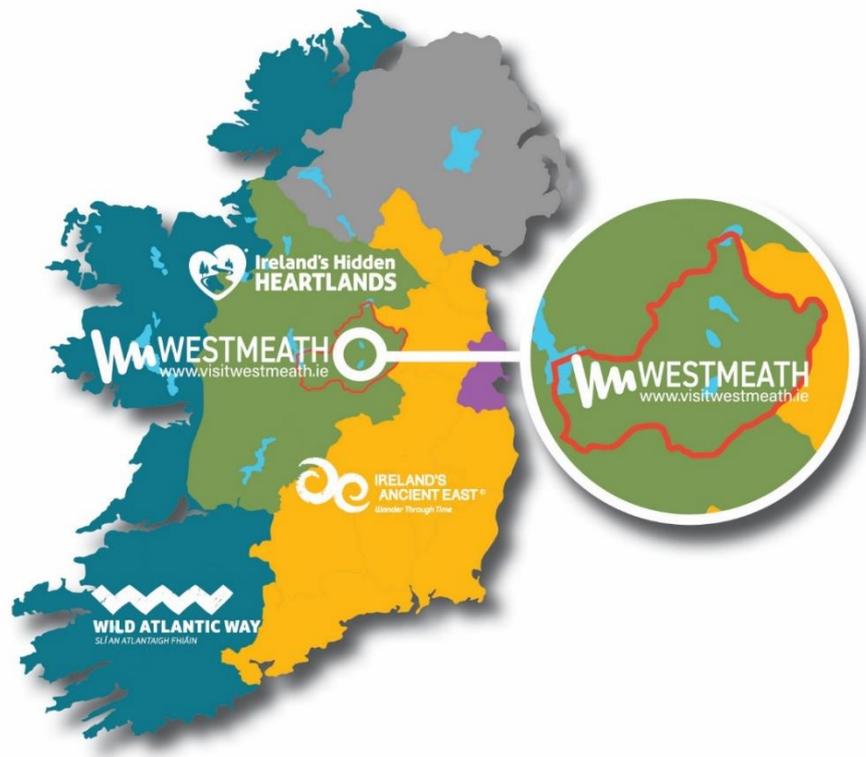
The essence of the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand is about being 'active in nature'. The brand proposition is as follows:

'Active in Nature – Yours to Uncover'

“Explore the green heartlands of Ireland's natural rural beauty, where activity and relaxation are centred around rural communities and their lifestyles, and can be discovered across a latticework of land and water trails, showcased by the iconic River Shannon and the Beara Breifne Way.”

Visitors are promised a slow-paced experience, immersed in the natural environment and culture of the region. Activities such as walking, cycling, boat tours, bird-watching, fishing, and watersports are central to this theme, along with the chance for visitors to engage with local communities, their culture, crafts and local food.

Having regard to the key natural assets of County Westmeath, including our scenic lakes, rural landscapes and the River Shannon, along with the substantial level of investment which has taken place in recent years in the county's outdoor recreational product, our tourism offering is already strongly aligned with the Hidden Heartlands brand. Most significantly, the county contributes two strong destination towns to the Hidden Heartlands region, with both Athlone and Mullingar offering a good range of accommodation, restaurants and visitor services. Along with Westmeath's central geographical position in the region, Westmeath has the potential to become the primary base for Ireland's Hidden Heartlands visitors.



Source: www.failteireland.ie 'Brand Architecture' 2018 (adapted to reflect 2022 change to IHH region and to include County Westmeath outline)

For all future tourism development and marketing activity, it's important that we not only align with the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand, but that the principles, objectives and essence of this brand are fully embedded within our work. This will enable us to take full advantage of the opportunities offered, as it continues to develop and take a stage in the international marketplace.

Regional Tourism Development Strategy, 2023 to 2027

The County Westmeath Tourism strategy sits within the overarching framework of the Regional Tourism Development Strategy for Ireland's Hidden Heartlands. The development of the strategy is aligned to the five strategic objectives of the Regional Tourism Strategy, which are:

- 1: Raise awareness and recognition of the region and brand among domestic and international visitors and increase the duration of visitor stays, particularly within the domestic market
- 2: Enhance the range and quality of our visitor experiences to underpin the Hidden Heartland's brand proposition, leveraging the natural and cultural assets of the region in a sustainable way with a focus on ecotourism
- 3: Grow the economic impact of tourism and create jobs in local tourism by supporting the tourism industry (private, public and community sectors) to develop its capacity and capability.

4: Establish the region as one of the leading regenerative tourism destinations in Europe with nature and community at its heart

5: Build a committed industry and stakeholder coalition to guide and co-ordinate the sustainable development of destinations across the region

Destination Maturity Model

In the Regional Tourism Development Strategy, Fáilte Ireland have identified four levels of destination maturity. Each maturity level is defined through a set of assessment criteria focused on creating distinctive destinations. These include factors such as current levels of recognition within the overseas and domestic markets and the density and quality of tourism products and accommodation. Additional considerations include the depth of services (day and evening time) available for visitors in the primary and secondary hubs in the destination and the strength of local tourism industry networks.

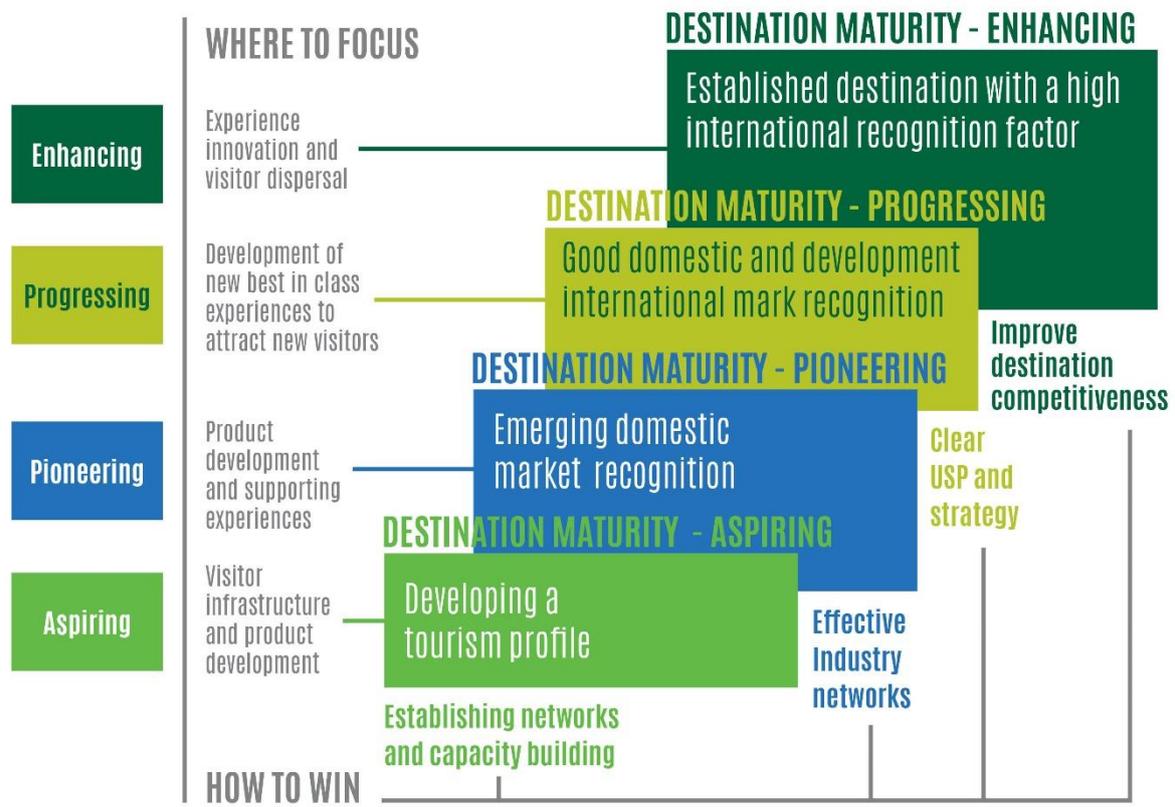


Source: Fáilte Ireland, Ireland's Hidden Heartlands Draft Regional Tourism Development Strategy, 2022

Starting with **Aspiring** destinations, which represent areas with low levels of tourism activity, the stages of destination maturity grow to **Pioneering** before developing into more mature tourism destinations defined as **Progressing** and **Enhancing**.

The four destination maturity categories each establish a number of key objectives to be achieved. In very mature destinations (i.e. Enhancing), the core objectives will include visitor experience innovation and visitor dispersion. Destinations categorised as Aspiring or Pioneering will focus on development

activity such as product development, improving visitor infrastructure and building effective local tourism networks.



Source: Fáilte Ireland, Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands Draft Regional Tourism Development Strategy, 2022
Adapted from Butler, (1980), Tourism Area Life Cycle.

County Westmeath sits within a **Mid Shannon and Midlands Destination**, which is considered to be **Pioneering, with areas that are Aspiring**. A Destination and Experience Development Plan for the sustainable development of tourism in this destination over 3–5 years is planned for development in 2023.³ This County Tourism Strategy takes account of the maturity stage of the destination, focussing strongly development of the tourism product, improving visitor services and infrastructure and support for industry networking and collaborative actions.

Visitor Profiles and Trends

Understanding our International Visitors

In 2019, Fáilte Ireland conducted research on the profile of visitor to the Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands region. At this time, one third of tourists to Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands were overseas residents, mainly coming from Britain and Mainland Europe (Germany & France). Visitors stayed 6.1 nights on average in the region, with a high proportion spending at least one night in other regions, 65% on the Wild Atlantic Way, 61% in Dublin and 42% in Ireland’s Ancient East. Hidden Heartlands visitors have

³ Fáilte Ireland, Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands Draft Regional Tourism Development Strategy, 2022

been typically older than the average holidaymaker, with 56% over 45 years, travel either in couples or family groups with 68% using a car⁴.

Research by Tourism Ireland in Ireland's key source markets highlights that relaxation, a variety of attractions and things to do, quality time with loved ones and value for money were influential when choosing where to go on a short break or holiday. Our overseas visitors have been defined as 'Culturally Curious', 'Great Escapers' and 'Social Energisers'⁵, whose characteristics, preferences and motivation to travel are described as follows:

1. The Culturally Curious are often aged 45+ travelling as a couple or alone. They are 'active sightseers' looking to visit new places and expand their experience by exploring landscapes, history and culture. They want to talk to the locals and get under the skin of a place and like to get off the beaten track. They are motivated by authenticity, discovery, history. They want real insights, genuine encounters and out-of-the-ordinary experiences - sights, sounds, smells and tastes.
2. The Great Escapers want to reconnect and spend quality time with partners and family. They want to be surrounded by natural beauty and feel removed from everyday life. They are motivated by wishing to balance life and focus on what's important. They do so through connection with nature and history, returning home revived.
3. The Social Energisers can be identified as young couples and adult groups looking for excitement, new experiences, and a fun, social holiday somewhere new and vibrant. They're looking for interesting events, fun activities, and gigs, along with the nightlife of vibrant towns and cities.

Due to proximity, British holidaymakers may feel like they know what Ireland has to offer and that it might be similar to what is available closer to home. While German visitors for example are more likely to consume the landscape in an active way, getting out and about in Ireland's landscape is by itself not enough for them, soaking up the atmosphere of an authentic culture is also important. French holidaymakers tend to enjoy getting off the beaten track, away from perceived tourist hotspots and are drawn to places that provide a sense of freedom and a means to explore unspoilt landscapes. The French market is drawn to authenticity in choosing their holiday destination.

Understanding our Domestic Visitors

Unlike overseas visitors, domestic consumers travel year-round & throughout the country. Therefore domestic tourism can help to sustain the tourism industry during the more challenging shoulder and winter seasons. For this reason, domestic tourism is considered to be the 'foundation stone' of the tourism sector⁶.

Domestic market segments are defined as 'Connected Families', 'Footloose Socialisers' and 'Indulgent Romantics':

1. Connected Families are generally made up of parents in their thirties and early forties and children generally under the age of ten. For Connected Families, family holidays are the best weeks of the year and a special opportunity to spend quality time together, creating memories to last a lifetime. They put their heart into planning and finding out everything a destination

⁴ Fáilte Ireland, Tourism Facts and Figures, 2019

⁵ Fáilte Ireland, Driving Growth through Segmentation, 2014

⁶ Niall Tracey, Fáilte Ireland, 'From Survival to Recovery' 8/2/2022.

has to offer, the best places to stay, the hidden gems and all the activities available that can be shared by adults and children together.

2. Footloose socialisers are made up of groups of friends that enjoy getting away and spending quality time together. They like to get off the beaten track every now and again, try out different places, meet the locals and really get under the skin of a place. They enjoy good food and drink and tend to be interested in the history and culture of the place they are visiting.
3. Indulgent Romantics are made up of couples, interested in going to different places and enjoy the atmosphere of new cities, particularly if they offer opportunities for shopping, pampering, enjoying great food and the little indulgences in life. They enjoy quick and spontaneous weekend breaks to get away from the stresses and bustle of their daily lives and reconnect with one another. Savvy trip planners, they are interested and knowledgeable about quality travel, restaurants, food and wine and expect a certain standard of comfort in their accommodation and hospitality.

While the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands region has strong potential to appeal to all domestic market segments, research during the Covid 19 Pandemic showed a tendency for younger unconstrained adults in particular to express intent to substitute international holidays for domestic trips⁷.

Ireland's Hidden Heartlands has shown particularly strong potential to attract increased tourism during the shoulder season, with intent to travel for these months standing out somewhat from the other regions in Ireland. Given its inland location, it is an ideal shoulder season destination. An estimated 80% of domestic tourists spend 1 – 3 nights in the region and predominantly engage in outdoor activities and touring around by car⁸. With outdoor activities being high on the agenda in the aftermath of the pandemic, the Hidden Heartlands is ideally suited to meet this demand.

SECTION 3: VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF TOURISM IN WESTMEATH

Creating the Vision

In developing a vision for the future of tourism in Westmeath, the primary considerations have been the county's pivotal position at the centre of the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands Regional Experience brand, along with the relevant national and regional policy context, as set out above and in Appendix B, the county's strengths and opportunities, the key challenges facing tourism development in the medium term and the detailed feedback and observations provided during the pre-draft consultation process conducted.

In addition, the specific roles, strengths and expertise available within Westmeath County Council and that of each of the agencies and stakeholders which are also involved in developing and promoting the county for tourism has been taken into account, along with potential synergies and crossovers that will emerge in implementation.

⁷ Fáilte Ireland, COVID 19 – Consumer Sentiment Behaviour, 2020

⁸ Ireland's Hidden Heartlands Regional Tourism Strategy 2022-2026

Vision for the Future of Tourism in Westmeath to 2027

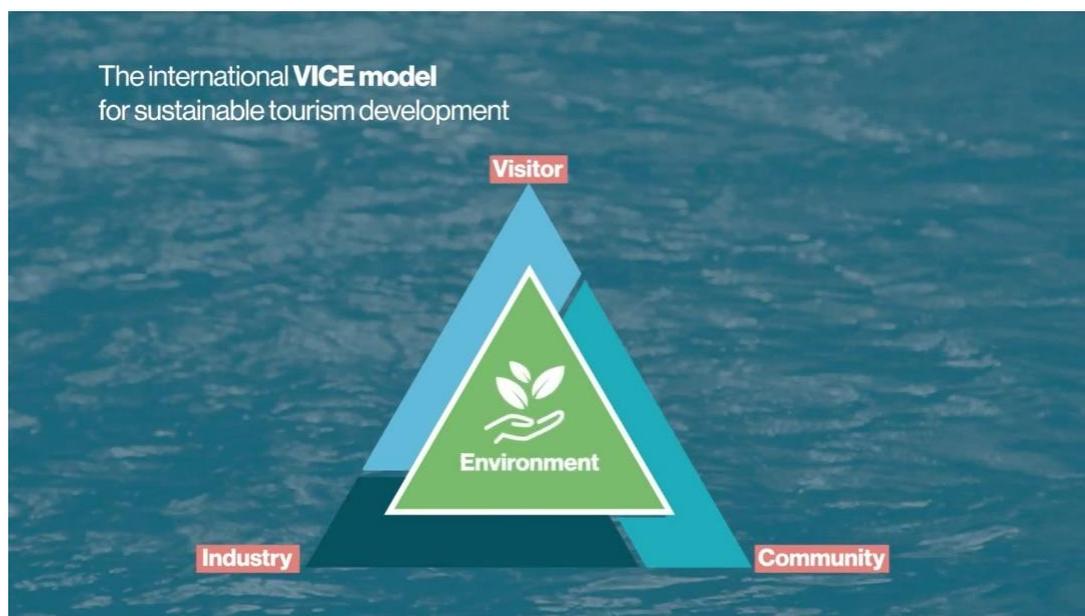
*'The hub for visitors exploring **Ireland's Hidden Heartlands**, with an enterprising, **resilient and thriving** tourism industry, connected and **collaborating** to promote **vibrant, sustainable** visitor destinations, with sufficient **high-quality visitor services** and a range of **memorable, immersive visitor experiences**, showcasing our **distinctive heritage, landscapes, culture and food.**'*

Underpinning Sustainable Tourism Development Principles

Taking account of the policy context for this strategy, along with global and national trends, ensuring the sustainability of tourism development is now more important than ever before. In addition to our responsibility to ensure the protection of resources for future generations, promoting 'greener' tourism in our county also offers opportunities. The Ireland's Hidden Heartlands promise of immersion in a beautiful and serene natural environment, connection with authentic cultural activities and opportunities to enjoy home-grown, local food goes hand in hand with eco-tourism principles.

To fully capitalise on its central position within Ireland's Hidden Heartlands and become the exemplar destination from which to explore and fully experience all that the brand promises, future tourism actions for Westmeath must embrace positive climate action and sustainable tourism.

The internationally recognised VICE Model for tourism development identifies sustainable tourism as the interaction between Visitors, the Industry that provides services to them, the Community and culture that hosts them and their collective impact on and response to the Environment where it all takes place. This approach recognises not only the need to protect natural and heritage resources and provide a quality visitor experience but also to promote tourism that is regenerative, ensuring that it brings benefit to the local economy and host communities.



In order to frame our approach to ensuring sustainable tourism development, we have applied the VICE Model directly to this strategy, with the following Westmeath Tourism VICE Objectives developed, which will underpin the actions set out in this strategy.

VICE Objectives for Westmeath Tourism Development

V	Visitor	Create a compelling visitor destination with immersive, memorable and authentic experiences
I	Industry	Support the growth and resilience of our tourism industry, increasing visitor numbers and spend, dwell time and season extension and tap into available collaborative marketing opportunities
C	Community	Boost economic benefit from tourism, create new employment opportunities and attract investment to improve local infrastructure and amenities
E	Environment	Ensure protection of our natural and cultural heritage resources in the delivery of all tourism development actions and support climate change mitigation and adaption in the tourism sector

This strategy and its actions are directly aligned with our county’s Climate Adaptation Strategy, along with Fáilte Ireland’s guidance on sustainable tourism development, the current Westmeath County Development Plan, Heritage Plan and Biodiversity Plan.

SECTION 4: STRATEGY FOR TOURISM IN WESTMEATH 2023-2027

Strategic Pillars

The strategic direction for tourism in Westmeath is set out in terms of a Vision for Westmeath Tourism 2027, underpinned by principles of sustainable tourism development as outlined, followed by a series of priority initiatives, which are set out under three Strategic Pillars, as follows:



1. Industry Support, Collaboration and Marketing

1.0 Introduction

To achieve a thriving tourism sector, boost economic benefit countywide and see a return on the substantial and ongoing investment made in tourism product and infrastructure, this strategy has a key focus on supporting industry and collaborating to ensure maximum impact from development and marketing activities.

In the short to medium term, supporting resilience in the sector is a priority, so that it is well-positioned for growth when international tourism returns to pre-pandemic growth levels. Industry will need to have the capacity to adapt their products and services to reflect new consumer behaviours and capitalise on emerging opportunities. Westmeath County Council will continue to work closely with Fáilte Ireland, Chambers of Commerce and other key agencies and stakeholders through its Local Enterprise Office in assisting tourism businesses in their recovery and to grow and thrive, creating jobs and positive impacts for local communities.

The Ireland's Hidden Heartlands Regional Experience Brand will bring increasing opportunities for our county over the coming years, introducing our tourism offering to new national and international audiences. In order to fully tap into these opportunities and to provide a clear and consistent message of the county as a destination of excellence within the IHH region, all stakeholders, including industry and agencies will need to work in partnership. While industry collaboration has been strong in Athlone, the remainder of the county has been fragmented in terms of industry-led collaborative marketing efforts. A key focus of this strategy will be to improve collaboration and encourage industry leadership and ownership of collaborative initiatives, closely and extensively supported by the local authority and Fáilte Ireland. This may include developing itineraries and packaged offerings, combining marketing efforts for maximum impact and tapping into national and international campaigns.

1.1 Industry Support

Training and Mentoring

Westmeath Local Enterprise Office is a dedicated team within Westmeath County Council who support new and existing enterprises in County Westmeath. Supports offered to tourism businesses include the provision of training, information and advice, specialist mentoring, marketing support, networking opportunities and grant aid under a series of categories, including measures to upgrade trading online capacity and enhancement of shopfronts. Tourism and hospitality businesses frequently avail of the general training courses available such as ‘Start your own Business’ and Social Media Marketing Bootcamp, however in addition, bespoke training sessions for the tourism industry are also delivered as required, including social media training targeting key tourism markets and tapping into key tourism-related opportunities.

Fáilte Ireland are tasked with supporting tourism development at a national level and deliver a range of supports to the tourism industry, designed and based on detailed research into tourism trends and challenges facing the sector. Fáilte Ireland’s ‘Business Support Hub’ features expert insights and advice on a range of topics including Sales and Marketing, Financial Planning and HR and online training courses such as ‘Marketing on a Shoestring’ and ‘Developing your Digital Marketing Plan’.

Staffing continues to be a significant challenge for the tourism and hospitality sector and in response, Fáilte Ireland have developed a series of supports for businesses to recruit, retain and upskill staff. The location of the Athlone Campus of TUS (Technological University of the Shannon), with its dedicated Department of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure within the county offers potential for retaining skilled graduates within the area to meet the staffing needs of our hospitality sector.

An increase in coach tours has also taken place in recent years, with international operators including Fore Abbey, the Hill of Uisneach and Athlone Castle in their itineraries. Fáilte Ireland offer advice and assistance to attractions on how best to provide for coach tour operators and communicate and promote their Business-to-Business offering, via events such as Meitheal and ITOA. It will be an objective to increase participation of Westmeath’s businesses in all such opportunities.

Digital Capacity

There has been a digital revolution in the global economy in recent years— global acceptance and usage of digital technology has jumped as much in the Covid period as it did in the previous 8 years⁹. The tourism sector in particular has been forced to accelerate their online business capability, with the ability to support online bookings and sales becoming an essential mode of operation. In this regard, the ‘Digital that Delivers’ programme from Fáilte Ireland has offered technical and financial support for businesses to optimise their sales and marketing activity online, including a website improvement grant scheme which has benefitted a number of Westmeath tourism businesses, along with Destination Athlone Marketing Group. In addition, Trading Online Vouchers are available from the Local Enterprise Office to support businesses in creating online sales capacity. It will be important that the digital capacity of Westmeath tourism and hospitality sector continues to be upgraded if we are to match and surpass competitors.

Capital Grant Schemes

Capital grant schemes through Fáilte Ireland are announced periodically in accordance with the National Tourism Investment Strategy, including capital schemes to upgrade visitor attractions and visitor interpretation. The LEADER Programme is implemented in the county by Westmeath Community Development and offers substantial levels of grant aid for tourism businesses and

⁹ Fáilte Ireland, Digital that Delivers Application Guidelines 2021

community tourism projects. Support offered through LEADER includes pre-development and feasibility studies, capital costs related to business start-up or expansion and marketing plans.

Employment Support Schemes

Westmeath Local Enterprise Office can support employment in tourism businesses in terms of salary support for unique tourism services and projects that are focussed predominantly on generating revenues from overseas visitors.

Networking and Collaboration

Business networking enables cooperative relationships to develop between like-minded businesses and encourages cross-selling and collaborative marketing. In addition to the networking opportunities already available via events and training programmes, future bespoke networking events and activities should be offered to stimulate product familiarisation, brand awareness and cross-selling within the expanded Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands region. The Athlone Food Circle is a new industry-led initiative which has begun to tell the ‘food story’ of Athlone, promoting the range of high-quality food and drink offerings available in the region. Further activities could focus on specific sectors, including artisan food, art and craft countywide.

Eco-tourism and Green Enterprise

Support for eco-tourism and green enterprise is available through the LEADER Programme and businesses with under 10 employees, business start-ups and communities can apply for capital costs associated with green business. The Local Enterprise Office offers a ‘Green for Micro’ support programme, which assists businesses to conduct a sustainability audit and action plan, for ‘greening’ their business. ‘Lean’ is another relevant Local Enterprise Office support programme, which assists businesses to minimise waste and become more efficient and profitable as a result. It will be a priority to promote maximum participation in these programmes and any future initiatives introduced during the lifetime of the strategy.

1.1 Industry Support	
Overall Priority: Support our industry to achieve success, growing the economic impact of tourism for the benefit of local business and communities and facilitating the provision of exemplary visitor experiences.	
Initiatives:	
1.1.1	Ensure a strong collaborative approach to supporting Westmeath’s tourism business via the resources available from the Local Enterprise Office, Fáilte Ireland and LEADER, identifying gaps and specific needs in consultation with industry and implementing bespoke support solutions as required. A Tourism Business Support forum will be established to formalise collaboration.
1.1.2	Develop an annual Industry Engagement Plan, to include training events, networking opportunities and regular communication of supports for the sector in Westmeath, by Westmeath County Council in collaboration with Fáilte Ireland and the Local Enterprise Office, to ensure a structured approach and to encourage participation by tourism businesses.
1.1.3	In all communication with tourism industry, raise awareness of the full range of supports available through all agencies and continuously consult with the sector to identify issues, challenges and gaps in support available.

1.1.4	Promote and strongly encourage businesses to access available supports to minimise waste and become 'greener', more environmentally sustainable and efficient including LEAN, Green for Micro, LEADER funding and any new initiatives introduced.
1.1.5	Encourage new tourism enterprise opportunities, including expansion of existing enterprise and new start-up tourism and hospitality providers.
1.1.6	Re-establish the County Tourism Steering Group made up of representatives from key tourism agencies, attractions and industry representatives and ensure meetings are held bi-annually to identify opportunities for the county and plan collaborative actions.
1.1.7	Encourage participation of Westmeath tourism and hospitality business in Fáilte Ireland's emerging carbon reporting initiative, using carbon calculators and supports available to help businesses reduce their carbon footprint.
1.1.8	Support tourism and hospitality businesses to recruit, sustain and upskill staff, promoting supports available through the Local Enterprise Office and Fáilte Ireland. Westmeath County Council will create a specific tourism business section on the Local Enterprise office website to outline the full range of supports.
1.1.10	Explore opportunities, in collaboration with TUS (Technological University of the Shannon) through their Athlone-based Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure Department, to encourage the retention of skilled graduates in quality employment within Westmeath tourism businesses.
1.1.11	Maximise opportunities for capital investment in tourism product and infrastructure for the county, by supporting and encouraging industry to apply for available grant schemes.
1.1.12	Increase the digital marketing capacity among tourism industry, through targeted and bespoke training and mentoring programmes, including social media, SEO and digital upgrades.
1.1.13	Support businesses to upgrade their digital presence, including optimised websites and online sales platforms, tapping into supports available through the Local Enterprise Office and Fáilte Ireland.
1.1.14	Encourage increased participation of Westmeath's businesses in Business to Business marketing opportunities, including events such as Meitheal and ITOA and encourage tourism businesses to avail of the extensive support and advice offered by Fáilte Ireland in this regard.

1.2 Collaborative Marketing

The 'Six Markets Marketing Framework' - A Partnership Approach to Marketing

Maximising tourism return on investment will be the priority in how we communicate with our visitors and this will require continuous engagement across internal, external and collaborative networks. New levels of marketing effectiveness will be achieved through a 'Six Markets Marketing Framework', consistent with the strategic approach adopted within Ireland's Hidden Heartlands Regional Tourism Development Strategy. This Six Markets Model will establish a new level of communications programming for the destination, while engaging with the full stakeholder base to influence marketing impact. It will focus on new collaborative approaches, maximising marketing alliances and aligning destination communications activity.

1. External Marketing: Sustained Marketing, Communications and PR activities, building awareness of the county's established tourism product offerings and promoting Westmeath as a key base from which to explore Ireland's Hidden Heartlands, aimed at domestic and international visitors.

2. Internal marketing: Encourage and facilitate stakeholder engagement in the delivery of this strategy and the wider opportunities associated with Ireland's Hidden Heartlands, facilitating new ways of working together and tapping into emerging opportunities.
3. Alliance Marketing: Develop marketing scale through strategic alliances with our Partners in Tourism e.g. local and countywide industry and regional partners such as Waterways Ireland and neighbouring counties.
4. Referral Marketing: Increase the levels of engagement with national tourism agencies e.g. Fáilte Ireland, Tourism Ireland.
5. Influencer Marketing: Ensure sustained communications with tourism influencers e.g. ITOA, Travel Media and online influencers.
6. Digital Marketing: Ensure countywide adoption of dynamic, innovative and effective digital marketing, tapping into all opportunities to maximise impact online.

In the delivery of the Six Markets Model we will continue to build on existing relationships to deliver a sustained communications approach. We will work with a number of established clusters and explore opportunities for new networks to form and work together. These include Destination Athlone, Destination Mullingar, North Westmeath cluster opportunities and countywide collaboration through Visit Westmeath.

Collaboration with key agencies and stakeholders

Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland invest significant resources in ongoing and effective marketing campaigns, targeting domestic and overseas tourism markets. Domestic marketing campaigns are delivered throughout the year, using the DiscoverIreland.ie platform and associated digital marketing channels, TV advertising and printed media. International marketing campaigns take place via Tourism Ireland's Ireland.com platform and a range of initiatives targeting key market segments worldwide.

The Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand offers significant opportunities for Westmeath to gain recognition and prominence as a visitor destination for the region. Since its launch in 2018, it has gained traction in the domestic market and following a successful introduction to tour operators and media in the international market in 2019, it is now being taken on-board by Tourism Ireland for promotion to the international consumer. Westmeath County Council will continue to collaborate with and support the work of Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland to maximise marketing opportunities for the county, its visitor attractions, destinations and businesses.

While these larger-scale marketing activities offer greatest potential to reach large numbers of visitors, these broader national and international campaigns will lead potential visitors to destination platforms and to individual attractions and services. It is therefore essential that marketing at a county and local level is also conducted to a high quality, while being fully aligned and complementary to national and international marketing messaging.

In addition, opportunities exist to collaborate with neighbouring counties to promote larger-scale visitor experiences. The Royal Canal Greenway is an example. This 130km greenway crosses four counties, with Waterways Ireland as a key stakeholder. A Visitor Experience Forum has been established for this Greenway, which includes a Marketing Team with representation from each county. Since the greenway's launch in 2021, successful collaborative marketing action has resulted in extensive national and international media coverage, including a three-episode feature on RTE's Nationwide TV Programme, the award of 'European Cycle Route of the Year' 2022 by leading Dutch Walking and Cycling Magazine Fiets en Wandelbeurs, a feature on Spanish Travel Programme RTVE.

5 min read

Ireland's unmissable castles

Legend, lore and lavish surroundings have ensured that Ireland's castles never fail to capture our imaginations

#HousesandCastles #Landmarks

Monday, 05 July, 2021



Tullyally Castle, County Westmeath

Tullyally Castle

Occupied by the same family since the 17th century, **Tullyally Castle** is linked to one of Ireland's best-loved legends, The Children of Lir. Indeed, visitors reported that a 'fairy

Ancient history

Source: Ireland.com 2021, sample article showing Westmeath attraction featured in Tourism Ireland international marketing

'Destination Athlone' - Collaborative Marketing Initiative

'Destination Athlone' are an industry-led working group which have made significant achievements in collectively marketing the destination in recent years. Originally set up in 2014 as a forum to facilitate and encourage collaboration between the principal stakeholders in the Athlone area, a marketing company was incorporated in 2015 to focus on marketing Athlone as a visitor destination.

The aim of Destination Athlone is to develop and promote Athlone as a regional destination and touristic hub and a centre of excellence for stand out visitor experiences, targeting both visitors and locals alike under the brand, 'Athlone at the Heart of It'. The core platform for the brand's expression is the website www.athlone.ie, which is currently undergoing an upgrade with a fresh and modern design and new visitor-focused marketing content. The Destination Athlone model is considered to be an exemplary one, tapping into both public and private sources of funding to achieve the common goal of destination marketing.

The group is supported by Westmeath Local Authorities, Fáilte Ireland, Waterways Ireland and Athlone Chamber. Westmeath County Council and the Athlone-Moate Municipal District are

committed to supporting the ongoing activities of Destination Athlone, including an annual budget allocation.

Destination Mullingar Collaboration Opportunity

The 2016 Tourism Strategy recommended that the Destination Athlone model should be mirrored by other stakeholder collaborations throughout the county, in order to achieve shared success. Some collaboration has taken place in recent years among Mullingar hospitality businesses on an ad-hoc basis and for particular initiatives or events, such as the launch of the Royal Canal Greenway in 2021 and Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2022. However the destination would greatly benefit from the establishment of a formalised collaborative marketing model. It is considered that an industry-led group for the Mullingar area, similar to the Athlone model could undoubtedly achieve significant progress for the destination in achieving a more sustainable tourism industry, highlighting the destination, increasing dwell time and extending the season beyond the summer period. Mullingar has much to offer in terms of identifying its distinctiveness as a strong and vibrant visitor destination, including its musical heritage and hub for outdoor recreation at a meeting point of strategic greenways, surrounded by lakes and scenic landscapes.

Mullingar Chamber have been a strong driver of collaboration and promotion, particularly in recent years, with a new www.mullingar.ie website created in 2021 and the hashtag #lovemullingar used in promotional initiatives, along with events such as the Christmas Market. As drivers of innovation and collaboration for local industry, the Chamber's leadership will be key to facilitating the development of a formalised 'Destination Mullingar' action group.

North Westmeath Tourism Cluster Opportunity and connection with the Boyne Valley

The tourism potential of the North Westmeath area is widely recognised due to the unique cluster of noteworthy heritage sites and visitor attractions within a small geographical area, coupled with an exceptionally scenic landscape of hills and limestone lakes. The Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027 identifies the opportunity to maximise the potential of the strategic location of Castlepollard as a tourism base for local attractions such as Tullyally Castle, Fore Abbey, Mullaghmeen Forest and Lough Lene.

Westmeath County Council is supportive of efforts to realise the potential of this cluster and create a stronger marketing link to promote the attractions in the area. Potential exists for the creation of a heritage interpretation and tourism base in Castlepollard as part of the regeneration project underway to restore the Market House area. There is also potential for the North Westmeath cluster of attractions to take part in a wider emerging initiative to promote a Boyne Valley Visitor Experience, led by Fáilte Ireland and incorporating the nearby Loughcrew Cairns and Oldcastle.

Visit Westmeath Countywide Marketing Activities

At a county level, Westmeath County Council are working to promote the county as a destination of excellence for culture, heritage and activity tourism. A county tourism brand was developed in 2017, based on the prominence of our outdoor recreation assets, including greenways, water-based amenities and the concept of discovering lesser-known experiences. The tagline 'Discover your next Adventure' was adopted on promotional materials along with a blue and green 'Visit Westmeath' logo. Our county tourism website www.visitwestmeath.ie was launched in 2018, featuring inspiration items, sample itineraries and special offers, along with listings of accommodation, attractions, activities and food. Printed marketing materials have also been developed, which are updated regularly and distributed to attractions and Tourist Information offices. A suite of exhibition materials was also developed and have been used for display at a series of trade shows and events. 'Visit Westmeath' pages are also active on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, which continue to highlight key events and attractions each day through posts and stories all year around.

A new 'Visit Westmeath' tourism and heritage app was developed in 2021, offering location-specific tourism information and including an option to save favourites to plan itineraries, along with a quick share button and 'near me' feature. Ongoing work is since taking place to add to and update the app with new information including new images, video clips and any attractions not previously featured. Further development work is planned to incorporate self-guided trails and itinerary building to the app design and opportunities exist to develop further apps or audio guides to tell the local memorable stories and interpret the depth of heritage associated with various sites, to supplement physical visitor infrastructure or where physical interpretation and signage is unsuitable due to heritage constraints.

All marketing materials continue to be updated with fresh content and up-to-date details. New imagery and video content is created regularly for use in 'Visit Westmeath' marketing activities and for use by Fáilte Ireland, Tourism Ireland, journalists and others in promoting the county. A photo library featuring thousands of high-quality images showcasing the county's scenic areas, attractions and activities is now available for tourism marketing use, along with video content.

'Visit Westmeath' features are also included regularly in a selected range of publications, through paid advertisement and through the arrangement of media 'familiarisation trips' with travel journalists. Featured publications include the Irish Independent, Irish Examiner and Your Daily Adventure Guide which is distributed to Tourist Information Offices and attractions nationwide. Opportunities to promote the county via TV and radio are also delivered as opportunities arise, with Westmeath programmes recently developed for RTE Tracks and Trails and the US production Ireland: County by County.

1.2 Collaborative Marketing	
Overall Priority: Adopt a partnership approach to marketing, framed by the Six Markets Model, with a focus on maximising alliances, collaboration and aligning destination communications activity.	
Initiatives:	
1.2.1	Adopt the Six Markets Marketing Framework to promote Westmeath as a visitor destination of excellence for culture, heritage, shopping and activity tourism, in partnership with Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland, in line with the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands Regional Experience Brand.
1.2.2	Develop three-yearly Marketing Plans for Visit Westmeath, created by Westmeath County Council and reviewed annually, taking account of opportunities offered through regional and local collaboration with key agencies, industry and communities.
1.2.3	Review and refresh the Visit Westmeath brand logo and messaging to fully reflect the visitor offering, align with Ireland's Hidden Heartlands and present Westmeath as a compelling base from which to explore the region.
1.2.4	Adopt a co-ordinated and collaborative approach in promoting the county as a tourism destination, involving relevant agencies, tourism businesses and communities, through a re-established County Tourism Steering Group and other established working groups as required.
1.2.5	Collaborate with Fáilte Ireland in their efforts to establish and embed the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand throughout the county and support tourism businesses and communities to engage with the brand and associated initiatives as it grows.
1.2.6	Continuously review how Westmeath attractions, accommodation and activity providers are featured on Discoverireland.ie and other Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland platforms and update information where required.

1.2.7	Based on the 'Six Markets' approach, refresh destination marketing content, including imagery, video, itineraries, blogs, in collaboration with agencies, tourism businesses and communities, for use in promoting the county via regional, national and international marketing initiatives.
1.2.8	Carry out a redesign of the county tourism website VisitWestmeath.ie to incorporate Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand messaging across the entire county's offering, along with work to modernise and enliven the site and increase interactivity and user engagement.
1.2.9	Continuously update all county marketing materials, including Visit Westmeath website, app, printed and exhibition materials and social media pages with fresh content and up-to-date details.
1.2.10	Prioritise the production of digital marketing materials over print, reducing and strictly limiting the production of printed brochures, with any necessary printing using recycled, uncoated and easily recyclable paper where possible.
1.2.11	Ensure full alignment with Ireland's Hidden Heartlands in delivering Visit Westmeath countywide marketing activities to ensure maximum impact from this work.
1.2.12	Continue to work closely with Waterways Ireland and neighbouring counties to promote the Royal Canal Greenway and develop similar marketing groups as required for other cross county visitor experiences as they emerge.
1.2.13	Continue to fully support the 'Destination Athlone' industry-led group in their work to realise the full potential of Athlone as a visitor destination of excellence for the region, both at a steering group level and in delivering practical assistance to the marketing sub-group.
1.2.14	Support, enable and facilitate the establishment of a 'Destination Mullingar' collaborative marketing initiative and representative action group, working with Mullingar Chamber, hotels, attractions and other stakeholders in the Mullingar area, with Mullingar Chamber as a leading partner and with industry contributions supplemented by financial support from Westmeath County Council.
1.2.15	Support individual business in their tourism marketing activities, including the provision of assistance to access or create marketing content, upskill staff through LEO and Fáilte Ireland training, mentoring and other support and tap into opportunities and collaborative marketing initiatives.
1.2.16	As part of the Castlepollard Regeneration Programme, support the promotion of North Westmeath as a tourism and heritage cluster with Castlepollard as its base, supported by the more extensive tourism infrastructure in Mullingar and explore the potential of this cluster of attractions and hospitality businesses to benefit from Fáilte Ireland's emerging Boyne Valley marketing initiative.
1.2.17	Consider the use of digital technologies including mobile apps to provide self-guided tours and interactive guides, telling local memorable stories and interpreting the depth of heritage associated with various sites, to supplement physical visitor infrastructure or in place of on-site interpretation and signage at sensitive heritage sites.

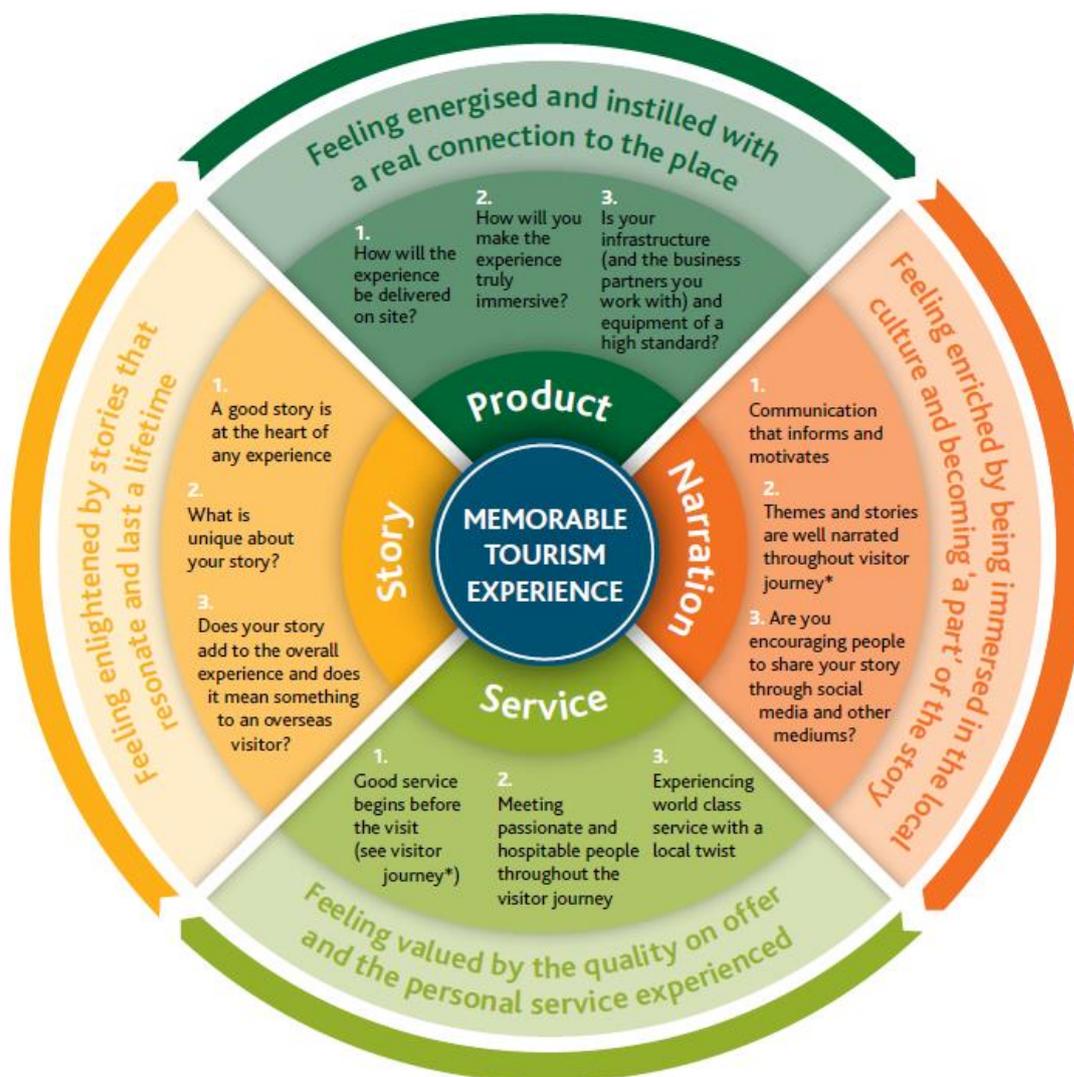
2. Immersive Tourism Experiences

2.0 Introduction

A core objective of this strategy is to create compelling reasons for tourists to visit and dwell in our county. Westmeath currently boasts a wide variety of high-quality visitor attractions and activities,

including historic houses, castles, gardens, greenways, walking trails and water-based activities. In addition, our local communities, towns and villages, restaurants, bars, shops and parks all make a strong contribution to the experience of a visitor. For today’s international tourist, holidays are less about ‘doing’ something and more about feeling that they are truly immersed in a place or an activity. “An immersive tourism experience is one that engages the senses, makes connections on an emotional, physical, spiritual, intellectual or social level and creates a lasting memory.”

Over the lifetime of this strategy, Westmeath County Council will prioritise efforts to activate the existing wealth of assets and attractions which are already in the county, developing more immersive, memorable and world-class visitor experiences, building on the significant levels of investment that has already been made and compelling visitors with our intrinsic heritage, culture and scenic environment.



Source: *Experiences Explained, Fáilte Ireland, 2015*

2.1 Outdoor Recreation

Introduction

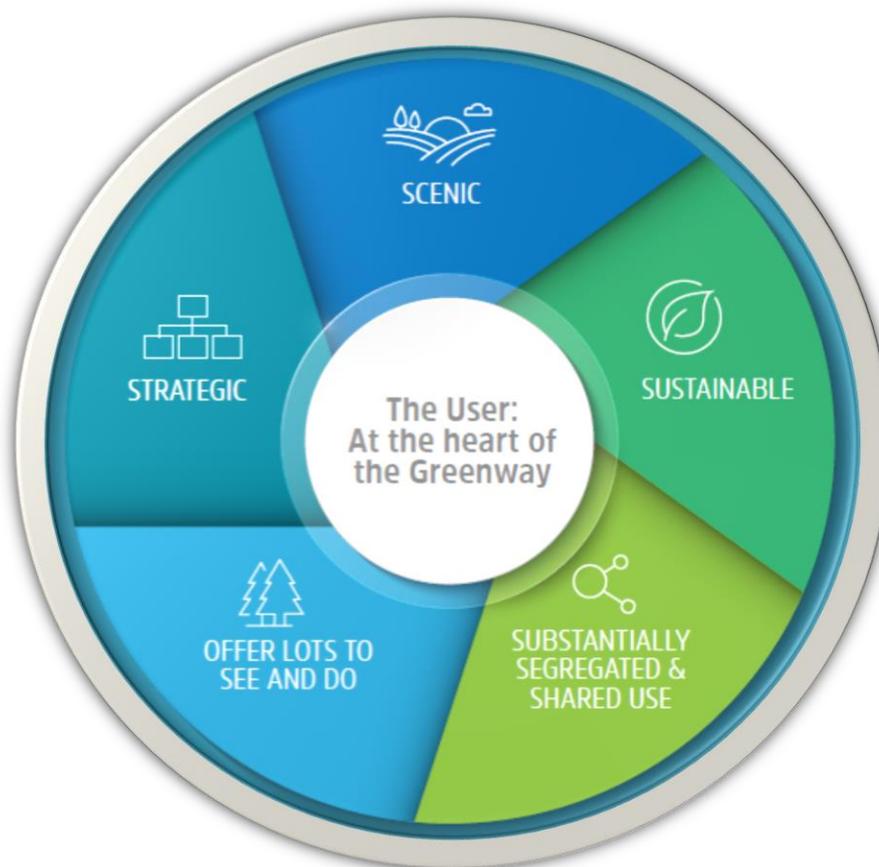
With a heightened interest in activity holidays post-pandemic; trails, greenways and outdoor activities are now regarded as core experiences in any visitor destination. Furthermore, the promise of getting ‘active in nature’, is fundamental to the Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands brand, creating an increased impetus for the county to advance the development of world-class activity tourism offerings.

Historically a stop-off destination for visitors on the way from Dublin to Galway or the southern coastal counties, Westmeath now has the opportunity to become the destination of choice in its own right, slowing visitors down and allowing them to spend time exploring our county and get off the beaten track.

Greenways

With considerable investment over the past decade, Westmeath now offers more kilometres of greenway than any other Irish County and what's more, the County's greenways are strategic routes, creating valuable interconnections between major destinations of Dublin and Galway in the longer term, along with towns Mullingar, Athlone, Maynooth, Tullamore and assets with significant amenity potential such as the River Shannon and the Royal and Grand Canals. Works are ongoing to complete the Dublin-Galway route as the first coast-to-coast greenway in Ireland and other north-south linkages are now being explored. The resulting interconnected latticework of greenways across the region has the potential to truly transform it for tourists and locals alike in the coming years.

To create successful greenways, the National Greenways Strategy recommends that all such developments should be underpinned by five key elements as illustrated in the diagram below:



Source: Greenway Visitor Experience & Interpretation Toolkit (from National Greenways Strategy), Fáilte Ireland 2021

While Westmeath's Greenways have been developed to very high-quality and technical standards, we are now faced with the challenge of activating the investment made, creating jobs and economic advantage for the communities through which the greenways pass. With greenways now being developed up and down the country, many with similar characteristics being created alongside disused railways or waterways, we also now need to find ways to stand out in an increasingly crowded marketplace. Continuation of planned connections and further greenway routes will increase the

value of these assets in the long term, while connecting with nearby amenities, attractions and scenic areas will be a priority over the lifetime of this strategy. In this regard, three priorities can be identified to realise the potential of our greenways for tourism as follows:

Connect: Further connecting our greenways with towns, villages and attractions where possible throughout the county will increase accessibility of greenways for visitors and locals alike. It will also enhance the viability of service providers and support the promotion of multi-day itineraries and coherent packaged visitor offerings. The Just Transition Programme offers opportunities to advance development of an emerging latticework of greenways across the midlands, including north-south connections, such as the Shannonbridge / Clonmacnoise to Athlone, the Grand Canal / Kilbeggan greenway to the Royal Canal in Mullingar and along with a further connection from Athlone to the Royal Canal in Longford. Such initiatives would create an interconnected proposition of international scale, enabling cyclists to explore the midlands by bike, increasing dwell time and permeability through the county and supporting service provision in the interconnected towns and villages. Cycle links have also been advanced from the Royal Canal Greenway to Killucan and from the Royal Canal Greenway to Scragh Bog, via the existing connection to Lough Owel. Further potential links the Old Rail Trail to Castletown Geoghegan and to the Hill of Uisneach would also be valuable.

Service: Support the provision of high-quality visitor services, along greenways and at main trailheads and intersections. En-route services include toilets, shelters, signage, water refilling stations etc. Trailhead services include cafes, accommodation, lockers and secure bike storage to enable cyclists to experience other attractions and enjoy all the destination town or village has to offer. Signage and signposting are also important, both on-the-ground and through digital means (including apps and online, interactive mapping etc). The provision of high- quality bike hire services, covering 365 days per year, with a range of bicycle types, including electric, tandems and trailers will be supported and actively promoted.

Activate: It will be a priority over the lifetime of this strategy to maximise the economic benefit from greenways through creating compelling reasons to visit and dwell in the towns and villages along the way. To achieve this, the challenge is to create distinctive experiences for the greenway user, identify the local stories, heritage, landscapes and bring these to life, connect cyclists and walkers with local attractions, visitor centres, audio tours, viewing points or other forms of interpretation and interactivity that immerses visitors in the locality. Linked with 'Connect' and 'Service' above, the potential to provide multi-activity exploration of the county should also be explored, connecting cycling and walking trails with locations where water-based activities can be enjoyed, allowing visitors to easily and seamlessly enjoy a varied 'active in nature' experience across multiple days around the county.

The enhancement of biodiversity along all greenway routes will also be a priority, implementing the county Biodiversity Strategy in collaboration with local communities, Waterways Ireland and other stakeholders. This will include the promotion of native tree, hedgerow and wildflower planting schemes along greenway corridors and promoting and celebrating the local wildlife and environmental quality of these areas.

Walking and Hiking

In addition to greenways, opportunities for visitors to enjoy an off-road walking experience are provided via a number of looped walking trails. These include native woodland trails at Portlick Millennium Forest near Glasson on the Lough Ree shoreline, at Mullaghmeen Forest to the north of the county and within Belvedere estate on the Lough Ennell shoreline. A short, looped walking trail was developed around the historic village of Fore, allowing visitors to explore the ancient monastic site and take in the scenic landscape of this area. Short bog walks have also been developed at Scragh

Bog, Long Hills Esker near Tyrellspass and Carn Park near Mount Temple, however these ecologically sensitive areas may not be in a position to support significant numbers of visitors and marketing has been limited as a result.

Walking and hiking trails are particularly important aspects of today's visitor destinations. In 2019, an estimated 2,392,000 visitors to Ireland engaged in hiking and cross-country walking, versus 361,000 who engaged in cycling and 237,000 who played golf¹⁰. However, notwithstanding our strong cycling tourism product offering relative to other counties, our cross-country walking and hiking product has an evident deficit. Westmeath has just one long-distance dedicated hiking trail, the Westmeath Way, which is fragmented from Lilliput to its connection with Mullingar Town and much of the route follows public roadways, some sections of which carry fast traffic.

Sport Ireland maintain a register of trails, which are subject to quality standards and these trails are listed on IrishTrails.ie. Trails which are included on the National Trails Register may be included in a National Trails Insurance Scheme, including trails on public, private and community land. Westmeath has just two walking trails on this list, along with the Royal Canal and Old Rail Trail greenways. In comparison with our neighbouring counties, Offaly have 12 and Roscommon have 13 listed off-road walking trails. While visitor can and do use our greenways to walk, visitors have come to expect a wider variety of walking and hiking trails, with varied surfaces and opportunities to become fully immersed in the natural environment, away from hard surfaces and tarmac paths.

The National Walks Scheme, funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development has been in operation since 2008 and has resulted in the development and enhancement of 48 trails across the country. These trails pass through private lands, with permissive access agreements in place with private landowners and a bi-annual payment to those who sign up to maintain their section. A Rural Recreation Officer is employed in 12 of the participating counties, who administer the scheme, using it to maintain, enhance and develop trails in these areas. Over 2,040 landowners on National Waymarked Ways, Looped Walking Routes, Heritage Routes and other approved trails are currently benefitting from this scheme across the country¹¹. There are currently no trails included in the National Walks Scheme in county Westmeath.

As hiking trails do not require a hard-surfaced path, the trails could allow visitors to explore our scenic environments with minimal environmental impact. Ideally, walking trails should be connected with towns and villages, where visitor services, including accommodation, cafes, toilets etc can be provided and from where visitors can access trails without the use of private car transport. It will be an objective of this strategy to secure resources for the development of new and enhanced off-road walking, hiking and rambling trails and to explore opportunities to avail of the National Walks Scheme.

Lakes, the River Shannon and Water-Based Activities

Westmeath is known as the 'Lake County', with expansive lakes dotted throughout, including Lough Ree, Lough Ennell, Lough Owel and Lough Derravaragh. The value of the lakes from a tourism and amenity perspective is significant having regard to their scenic beauty, serene environment and natural heritage and habitat value. The county's waterways are also of great value, the iconic River Shannon bounds the county to the west and the River Brosna meanders southwards from Mullingar. The historic Royal Canal traverses the county on its journey from Dublin city to Longford and is navigable through the county.

Our lakes and waterways have benefited from substantial public and private investment from a variety of sources. Public amenity areas have been developed at numerous locations along the lake shores,

¹⁰ Fáilte Ireland Tourism Facts 2019

¹¹ <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/942b4b-the-walks-scheme-and-rural-recreation-officers/>

many of which include car parking, information panels, toilets and viewing points, with enhanced facilities such as diving boards, boardwalks and boat mooring at some locations. Visitors enjoy scenic lake views of Lough Ennell at Belvedere House, Gardens and Park, Lough Ree at Portlick Millennium Forest and various other locations. A Blueway was launched along a 23km stretch of the Royal Canal around Mullingar in 2018, with boat access at various intervals.

A trail has been created along the Lough Owel feeder canal in Mullingar, connecting the Royal Canal Greenway in Mullingar directly to the shores of Lough Owel for walkers and cyclists. Potential now exists to provide for water-based activities for visitors at this location, enabling a multi-activity experience to be offered including cycling, kayaking etc. Visitors using this greenway link reach Lough Owel at a picturesque location, where an existing disused sluice building and hard surfacing already exist, which could potentially be repurposed to enable water-based activity provision. It will be an objective of this strategy to explore this and other such opportunities, supporting tourism activity providers to establish, utilising existing infrastructure and potentially securing capital funding for equipment through the LEADER Programme.

Increased visitor access and enjoyment of Westmeath's lakes and waterways could also be achieved through creating stronger transport connections with nearby towns and villages at which visitor services are located. Such services may include bike, boat and watersport equipment hire, changing and toilet facilities and guided tours, along with general services such as accommodation, restaurants etc. Connections could include walking or cycling trail links or the provision of rural transport initiatives such as Local Link bus routes. Support for the establishment of any small-scale enterprises relevant to water-based tourism will be strictly mindful of the challenge posed by the inherent environmental sensitivities at such locations.

Wild swimming has increased in popularity across the globe and offers a tourism opportunity for our 'Lake County'. The quality of our water resources is of paramount importance to realising this potential. The Blue Flag designation is an internationally recognised award and is a valuable accolade in terms of promoting the quality of our lakes and waterways for tourism. Killinure Point at Glasson is currently designated with 'Blue Flag' status and the County also has three Designated Bathing Waters at Portnashangan, Lough Owel, The Cut at Lough Lene and Lilliput at Lough Ennell., which offer visitors the chance to experience the refreshing clear waters and stunning scenery of Westmeath's lakes.

Historical water quality issues at Lough Ennell have resulted in on-going negative press coverage, however collaborative work was undertaken to track and address pollution sources by the agricultural community, Westmeath County Council, the Local Authority Waters Programme and the Agricultural Sustainability Support and Advisory Programme, with an excellent water quality status achieved in 2021 and 2022. It is essential that this work continues, with a multi-agency approach, in collaboration with key tourism stakeholders, including the range of attractions, accommodation and activity providers around Lough Ennell.

The River Shannon is an iconic environmental, heritage and economic asset. It is increasingly popular as a boat cruising destination and marina infrastructure at various locations along the Shannon corridor is being upgraded to meet increasing demands. The Shannon is recognised as a central component for attracting tourists to Ireland's Hidden Heartlands and the Shannon Tourism Masterplan sets out plans for investing €70 million in visitor facilities in the Shannon river region by 2030 to create up to 5,000 tourism-related jobs. Pre-development work has taken place to create a canoe trail on Lough Ree's inner lakes and other water-based activity projects, with on-water links and trails also proposed as part of the implementation of this plan.

Lough Ree has been proposed for a potential UNESCO Biosphere Nature Reserve Designation due to its significant biodiversity and ecological value which would create increased tourism opportunities due to the international acclaim it would receive. The Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht are working with Westmeath County Council in tandem with Roscommon and Longford Local Authorities, Waterways Ireland, Coillte, Bord na Mona, OPW and Fáilte Ireland to achieve this designation.

In addition to their inherent ecological and scenic value, Westmeath’s lakes and waterways also have immense historical and archaeological value. Lough Derravaragh is integral to Irish mythology, as the lake where the legendary tale of the Children of Lir took place, offering opportunities to bring this story to life for visitors in association with the lake.

The character and visual value of our lakes is considerably embellished by a series of islands scattered across them. These features have enormous ecological value, in addition to archaeology due to the long history of their habitation. Guided boat tours of Lough Ree currently provide visitors with stories of viking hoards found on the islands along with unique birdlife. A sculpture of King Malachy is prominently displayed in the Belvedere parklands, highlighting a nearby island on Lough Ennell on which he is buried. Given the immense heritage tourism value of the islands on our lakes, the Council will support any initiatives, which bring the stories of the islands to life and explore their tourism potential, taking account of their acute environmental sensitivities. Such initiatives may be led by tour guides or boat hire operators, who could add value to their offering by incorporating interpretation and storytelling associated with the islands.

This Tourism Strategy does not provide for developments other than those which are provided for in the current County Development Plan and all tourism-related development in the vicinity of any of the lakes in the County shall be subject to planning regulations and the requirements of the Habitats Directive.

2.1 Outdoor Recreation	
Overall Priority: Work with Fáilte Ireland, Waterways Ireland, other stakeholders and local communities to deliver and activate a ‘lattice-work’ of greenways, blueways and trails across the county, creating economic opportunity for local industry and enable visitor enjoyment of our established outdoor assets, while ensuring the safeguarding of environmental quality.	
Initiatives:	
2.1.1	Support the development of the Dublin to Galway Greenway, as Ireland’s First Coast to Coast Greenway and Eurovelo 2, including the completion of the new River Shannon bridge in Athlone.
2.1.2	Support initiatives to further connect our greenways with towns, villages and attractions where possible throughout the county, including links to the Hill of Uisneach and Belvedere House, Gardens and Park.
2.1.3	Support efforts to create strategic connections between greenways, including north-south linkages such as Athlone south to Shannonbridge and north to Longford, Mullingar to Kilbeggan and Mullingar to North Westmeath.
2.1.4	Support the provision of high-quality visitor services along greenway routes such as toilets, shelters, signage and water-refilling stations where required.
2.1.5	Support the provision of high-quality visitor services at main trailheads, towns and villages along greenway routes, such as cafes, accommodation, lockers and secure bike storage.
2.1.6	Provide signage and signposting along greenways where appropriate, to highlight local visitor attractions, amenities and places of interest nearby.

2.1.7	Support the provision of high- quality bike hire services, covering 365 days per year, with a range of bicycle types, including electric, tandems and trailers, with provision for both urban and long-distance cycling experiences and actively promote these services.
2.1.8	Work with local attractions and communities to create distinctive experiences for the greenway user, identify the local stories, heritage, landscapes and bring these to life, connect cyclists and walkers with local attractions, visitor centres, audio tours, viewing points or other forms of interpretation and interactivity that immerse visitors in the locality.
2.1.9	Explore the potential to provide multi-activity exploration of the county, connecting cycling and walking trails with locations where water-based activities can be enjoyed, allowing visitors to easily and seamlessly enjoy a varied 'active in nature' experience across multiple days around the county.
2.1.10	Support initiatives to enhance biodiversity along all greenway routes, in line with the county Biodiversity Strategy including native tree, hedgerow and wildflower planting schemes along greenway corridors, bird and bat boxes and promote the local wildlife and environmental quality of these areas.
2.1.11	Review the provision of off-road walking, hiking and rambling trails in the county and support efforts from communities and Sports Partnership to progress the development of new trails and upgrade existing trails to Sport Ireland standards, utilising the National Walks Scheme where appropriate.
2.1.12	Explore opportunities to create walking, hiking and rambling trails near scenic landscapes, alongside our lakes and rivers, and around historical sites, enabling visitors to explore these scenic environments while minimising any environmental impacts.
2.1.13	Prioritise the development of walking trails which are connected with towns and villages, either directly or via public transport or greenways, where visitor services, including accommodation, cafes, toilets etc can be provided.
2.1.14	Support projects which improve and add to the visitor experience at existing trails, including potential viewing points, picnic areas, play areas and improved signage and other facilities.
2.1.15	Explore the potential of creating blueways and water trails along our rivers and lakes, with water-based activity service providers to facilitate visitor access.
2.1.16	Encourage and assist tourism activity providers to establish, expand and succeed, utilising supports available through the Local Enterprise Office, LEADER, Fáilte Ireland and the Irish Association for Adventure Tourism.
2.1.17	Encourage the provision of multi-activity visitor experiences, connecting water-based activities linked with walking and cycling trails, tours and other attractions / activities.
2.1.18	Encourage and support the development of accredited blueways, with service providers available to enable visitor access, including potential for a Shannon / Lough Ree Blueway and a revitalisation of the Royal Canal Blueway.
2.1.19	Support the provision of facilities for water-based activities associated with our lakes and waterways, subject to compliance with planning regulations and the requirements of the Habitats Directive; prioritising service provision in nearby towns and villages and utilising and upgrading existing infrastructure where possible.
2.1.20	Encourage the use of existing underutilised infrastructure close to lakes, rivers and other amenities to be repurposed and refurbished to accommodate tourism activity providers where suitable and subject to planning regulations and the requirements of the Habitats Directive.
2.1.21	Encourage and seek to create stronger connections between water-based amenities and nearby towns and villages, such as the Cut at Lough Lene and Collinstown village, Donore at Lough Derravarragh and Multyfarnham, Portlick or Killinure with Glasson; where visitor

	services can be best accommodated, including walking or cycling trails rural transport initiatives such as Local Link bus routes or marketing links.
2.1.22	Prioritise developments which maximise the use of any existing infrastructure at water-side locations as opposed to new developments at these locations.
2.1.23	Support the development of angling tourism, in collaboration with Inland Fisheries Ireland, Waterways Ireland and angling clubs and explore the potential for family tourism and novice angling to be facilitated and promoted.
2.1.24	Support efforts to secure a UNESCO Biosphere Nature Reserve Designation for Lough Ree.
2.1.25	Realise the potential of wild swimming as a visitor activity in the county, promoting designated bathing areas and blue flag sites and supporting initiatives to maintain and improve the quality of these facilities.
2.1.26	Support the continued collaborative approach to addressing the quality of the visitor experience at Lough Ennell as part of a wider plan to address its water quality and secure habitat protection.
2.1.27	Support the interpretation and celebration of our valued natural habitats and wildlife, prioritising methods of visitor interpretation and initiatives that do not impinge on the environmental sensitivities of these locations, including digital trails.
2.1.28	Progress the implementation of the Shannon Tourism Masterplan, in partnership with Waterways Ireland and Failte Ireland, realising Athlone's potential as a key visitor services hub on the Shannon and progressing actions to enhance the visitor experience and create additional 'on-the-water' experiences such as canoe trails on the inner lakes of Lough Ree
2.1.29	Consider, in collaboration with National Parks and Wildlife Service, Bord na Mona and local communities, potential for the sensitive use of bogs for recreation, including trails, dark sky experiences and re-wilding initiatives.
2.1.30	Explore opportunities to bring the stories and history of our lakes to life for visitors, including the legend of the Children of Lir, associated with Lough Derravaragh and King Malachy at Lough Ennell.
2.1.31	Explore opportunities to enable greater visitor enjoyment and appreciation of the islands on Westmeath's lakes, including their natural beauty, habitat value and archaeological heritage, including digital interpretation and storytelling via local guides.
2.1.32	Promote the principles of 'Leave no Trace' in all signage and promotional media associated with trails and outdoor recreation facilities.

2.2 Heritage, Tours and Visitor Attractions

Introduction

Westmeath is steeped in heritage and already has a strong foundation in the provision of heritage tourism experiences. Built heritage assets and attractions, which are open to the public for tours, guided or self-guided, include Athlone Castle Visitor Centre, Belvedere House, Gardens and Park, The Hill of Uisneach, Tullynally Castle and Gardens, Kilbeggan Distillery, Fore Abbey and Dún na Sí Amenity and Heritage Park. Continued investment and support is required in order to increase revenue generated to the local economy from these attractions, both directly and indirectly. This could include works to add to the visitor offering or improve layout and visitor orientation, along with modernising interpretation and methods to increase engagement. Heritage assets which do not have an established visitor centre or tour guide, can still enrich the visitor experience by connecting visitors with the locality and associated memorable stories. At these sites, creative measures of storytelling could be adopted, including audio tours, augmented reality apps or other digital measures. For sensitive heritage sites such as the Bronze Age togher at Coolure, digital storytelling might offer opportunities to present the stories without negatively impacting the sites.

Creating Clusters

The creation of stronger linkages between attractions, activities, visitor services and accommodation is critical to increasing visitor dwell time and encouraging multi-day visits to the county with resulting economic benefit. The creation of marketing connections between heritage sites and nearby towns or villages can allow for visitor interpretation to be provided off-site, also avoiding impact on these sensitive locations. Physical connections are also important and the provision of rural bus services and walking, cycling or water trails should be considered to further connect attractions and heritage sites with visitor services.

As referred to in the Collaborative Marketing section above, an opportunity exists to create a strong tourism and heritage cluster in North Westmeath, with Castlepollard as an information and services base, supported by the more extensive visitor services in nearby Mullingar and projects which contribute to realising this ambition will be encouraged.

Visitor Interpretation

A key challenge is to enhance the interpretation of our heritage, moving from the provision of historical information to 'storytelling interpretation', which aims to build meaningful relationships between places, communities and the people who visit them. Interpretation content should be engaging, entertaining, accessible and visitor-focused content that can contribute to an authentic and memorable experience based on what's distinctive about the attraction itself. A compelling journey should be created for the visitor, presenting the uniqueness of the attraction with clarity and with a range of sensory measures used to engage and immerse. A revision of the layout and storytelling experience at Athlone Castle Visitor Centre for example is proposed, which would give prominence to the most iconic stories of this site and clarify a set of distinct visitor flow options. A 'Toolkit for Storytelling Interpretation' has been produced by Fáilte Ireland to provide guidance on achieving compelling interpretation solutions.

Enhanced Experiences

Many of our visitor attractions and heritage sites offer potential to expand their tourism offering, enabling more interaction with the environment, landscape and setting at which they are located. Belvedere House, Gardens and Park for example, with its lakeshore setting and expansive grounds could potentially provide for water-based activities or other outdoor pursuits, along with a further augmented and enhanced storytelling experience. Fore Abbey has increased in popularity in recent years and the village itself, steeped in archaeological heritage and scenic beauty is supporting new businesses catering for growing visitor numbers. Continued investment in the visitor offering is required in Fore, in collaboration with the OPW and the local community to enhance the experience, while retaining the authenticity of the Abbey and heritage features.

Other sites could connect with local food, craft, culture or landscape in order to offer more to see and do and celebrate all that is unique about their setting. New visitor attractions will be encouraged to plan carefully for connecting with their surroundings, identifying ways in which visitors can interact with local assets and distinctive stories. New initiatives to enable visitor access or interpretation of heritage sites will be supported, subject to careful consideration of the carrying capacity of such sites to prevent negative impacts.

Communities contribute significantly to the offering in Westmeath and a Business Toolkit has been produced by Fáilte Ireland to assist communities to deliver greater economic benefits from their work. Dún na Sí Amenity and Heritage Park is a community tourism initiative which has enormous potential to contribute to the growth of tourism in the region and will be supported in this regard.

The provision of guided tours will be encouraged and tour guides will be supported in establishing their business, gaining accreditation and tapping into marketing opportunities. Where guided tours are not currently available, or to supplement the service provided by physical guides, the introduction of digital solutions could be employed, enabling self-guiding, with a paid hospitality service or business acting as a base for visitors.

With beautifully maintained 18th Century gardens in the grounds of Tullynally Castle and a Victorian Walled Garden at Belvedere House, Westmeath has potential to become part of a potential future Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands Garden Trail, connecting with other similar experiences, gardens and parklands, such as Bir Castle Demesne in Offaly for example.

Heritage Conservation

In tandem with any work to create new or enhanced visitor offerings, investment must be made in heritage conservation, which will reduce any potential loss of authenticity and will help to ensure the assets remain for future generations to enjoy. Taking care of heritage assets will foster appreciation of them, highlighting their value and uniqueness to locals and visitors alike. Efforts to secure a UNESCO World Heritage Site designation for the Hill of Uisneach will be strongly supported, along with plans to sensitively augment the visitor experience, considering off-site options and connections with Loughnavalley village to provide services to support visitor growth. Works to conserve historic structures will be pursued through the Historic Structures Grant Programme and other support schemes as they become available.

Westmeath’s natural heritage cannot be underestimated for its tourism value. Native wildlife can be found in abundance along our waterways, lakeshores, greenways, trails and parklands. Activities such as birdwatching and foraging are becoming increasingly popular as ‘slow tourism’ becomes more prevalent internationally. Visitors targeted under the Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands brand proposition are those who want this more relaxed pace of holiday, where they can attune with nature and go ‘off grid’. Visitor attractions will be encouraged to protect, enhance and promote the county’s natural heritage, including native tree planting and pollinator initiatives.

2.2 Heritage, Tours and Visitor Attractions	
Overall Priority:	
Continue to develop the quality and range of heritage-based visitor experiences, with a focus on existing visitor attractions and tours.	
Initiatives:	
2.2.1	Support existing visitor attractions, heritage sites and guides to augment and improve their visitor offering, adding activities and experiences, increasing interactivity and immersion and strengthening the ‘sense of place’ experienced by visitors.
2.2.2	Support visitor attractions to undertake projects that will increase revenue generated which may include works to add to the visitor offering or improve layout, along with modernising interpretation and methods to increase engagement.
2.2.3	Encourage increased visitor awareness and enjoyment of the county’s heritage, having careful regard to the inherent sensitivities of such sites, with consideration to the use of digital trails, audio guides and augmented reality as a means of storytelling.
2.2.4	Support the creation of stronger linkages between attractions, activities, visitor services and accommodation including marketing links, business clusters and physical links, which could include walking, cycling or water trails or rural bus links.

2.2.5	As part of the Castlepollard Regeneration Programme, develop and implement a masterplan for the renovation of the Market House to include tourism and heritage information, acting as a base for the cluster of tourism and heritage attractions in North Westmeath and the unique cultural landscape of the area.
2.2.6	Ensure all visitor interpretation at attractions and related to heritage sites is designed to immerse visitors in our unique and memorable stories and encourage the use of a range of interpretation media, including interactive, sensory measures and digital technologies, along with physical guides where possible.
2.2.7	Support Athlone Arts and Tourism Ltd in efforts to upgrade the visitor experience at Athlone Castle, including measures to enhance and clarify the visitor journey, modernise the interpretation and storytelling mechanisms, improve visitor flow, increase revenue generated and increase dwell time.
2.2.8	Explore options to augment the visitor experience at Belvedere House, Gardens and Park, which may include water-based activities, outdoor pursuits, enhanced storytelling and events.
2.2.9	Support measures to enhance the visitor experience at Fore Abbey, in collaboration with the OPW and local community, including tour guiding, events, visitor services and interpreting the unique stories of the Abbey and 7 Wonders.
2.2.10	Support communities in developing and strengthening community tourism projects and facilities.
2.2.11	Support the establishment of tour guiding services and encourage tour guides to gain accreditation and tap into marketing opportunities.
2.2.12	Where guided tours are not currently available, or to supplement the service provided by physical guides, the introduction of digital solutions will be supported, such as digital trails, audio guides and augmented reality as a means of storytelling, enabling self-guiding, with a paid hospitality service or business acting as a base for visitors.
2.2.13	Secure investment and deliver projects to conserve our built and natural heritage assets, to reduce any potential loss of authenticity and ensure sustainability, including works required to conserve Belvedere House among others.
2.2.14	Strongly support efforts to secure a UNESCO World Heritage Site designation for the Hill of Uisneach, along with plans to sensitively augment the visitor experience, considering off-site options and connections with Loughnavally village to provide services to support visitor growth.
2.2.15	Support and encourage efforts to protect, enhance and promote the county's natural heritage, including native tree planting and pollinator initiatives, at existing and new visitor attractions, heritage sites and points of interest.
2.2.16	Support initiatives to enhance the gardens at Belvedere House, Gardens and Park and explore potential to form a Garden Trail, including gardens at Belvedere and Tullyally, linked to others in the region, including Birr Castle.

2.3 The Food Experience

Introduction

Food tourism is gaining importance internationally and locally produced food and beverages offer the opportunity to engage the senses and create memorable experiences. The food and drink culture of Westmeath has been growing over the years, with artisan producers emerging along with quality eateries and venues at which visitors can taste this produce. In the midlands, there is a “recognisable lineage back to our origins in grain, with exceptionally strong capabilities in milling, baking, distilling

and now with a flourishing gin and craft brewing scene”¹². Kilbeggan Distillery is home to the world’s oldest licensed distillery dating back to 1757 and offers tours and tasting sessions to visitors. Dead Centre Brewing allows enjoyment of its local craft beer with artisan food and scenic views across the River Shannon.

Restaurants and Experiences

Blue Book members include the Wineport Lodge on the shores of Lough Ree and the Shannon Princess, a luxury boutique hotel barge, both offering renowned food experiences. There are also many eateries which have been commended by food critics such as the McKennas, Georgina Campbell and the Food Writers Guild, including Thyme and Kin Khao which are included in the Michelin Guide and The Fatted Calf, which is a member of the Eurotoque Chef Grouping. Glasson Village and Grogan’s of Glasson form part of a cluster of renowned restaurants in this small village. As referenced in the Midland Food Strategy, food and beverage consumption accounts for 35% of all international tourism revenues. A significant opportunity therefore exists to improve our share of tourism visits, dwell time and spend, based on harnessing the emerging food and drink culture. It will be an objective of this strategy to support the creation of more memorable food experiences for visitors, showcasing our artisan produce and connecting visitors with the stories and people involved.

Collaboration and Trails

A new group of artisan food producers and restaurateurs, Athlone Food Circle have taken steps to tell the food story of the Athlone area, with further ambitions to promote Athlone as a distinctive food destination. Westmeath County Council will support this group and encourage similar initiatives for other areas in the county. In addition, Westmeath County Council is supportive of artisan food and craft markets, including farmers markets and will assist and promote where required. The Athlone Festival and Events Project group were successful in securing funds for market infrastructure in 2019 through the LEADER Programme and this initiative could potentially be replicated elsewhere. The range of food experiences in the county could potentially collaborate to form a food trail, such as the outstanding restaurants and cafés, artisan producers such as An Olivia Chocolates, distilleries at Kilbeggan and Fore, Dead Centre Brewing, Multyfarnham Cookery School, food markets at Collinstown and other locations, along with the foraging experience at Uisneach.

2.3 The Food Experience	
Overall Priority: Support efforts to bring high quality, locally made food to the forefront of the visitor experience through collaborative work to tell the local food story, cross selling initiatives and events.	
Initiatives:	
2.3.1	Support the producers of artisan food and craft and collaborate with Fáilte Ireland and Westmeath Community Development to consider a revival of the Westmeath Food Network, whereby potential for a food festival, markets or events, cross-selling initiatives and food trails could be explored.
2.3.2	Support the Athlone Food Circle initiative in its further developments and encourage a similar initiative in the Mullingar area or countywide, telling the story of local produce and incorporating the local food story into a marketing initiative.

¹² Midland Food Strategy 2021

2.3.2	Explore the potential of creating a food trail in the county, incorporating opportunities for visitors to ‘meet the makers’, receive demonstrations, tasting sessions, cooking lessons and immersive experiences connected with locally produced food.
2.3.3	Promote local sourcing of quality food and drink in the hospitality sector, reducing food miles and creating a greener tourism industry and promote all tourism businesses who take this initiative.

2.4 Culture and Festivals

Creativity and Cultural Expression

Westmeath is a county rich in culture and artistic expression, with art galleries, craft shops and theatres offering the chance for visitors to experience our local artistic talent. Theatres include the Dean Crowe Theatre, Athlone Little Theatre, Mullingar Arts Centre and Tuar Ard. The Luan Gallery in Athlone showcases the most interesting artists from the Midlands, Ireland and abroad, with floor to ceiling windows offering uninterrupted Shannon Views. Visitors can browse locally-made craft and gifts at the Bastion Gallery, Athlone, Glasson Gift Gallery and the Handmade Design Studio in Mullingar. Visitors can enjoy demonstrations and workshops of crafting ancient bogwood at Celtic Roots Studio and visitors can enjoy a tour of the workshop at Mullingar Pewter to learn about this historic craft. Initiatives that can showcase local artistic talent and creativity for visitors are encouraged, such as exhibitions, performances, demonstrations, workshops, markets, and events, through the work of the Westmeath Arts Office.

Musical talent is also evident and the tradition of Irish music is celebrated countywide, through Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann centres and traditional pubs. Mullingar is known for its musical heritage in particular. The birthplace of Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, the town is set to host the event again in 2023, following a successful 2022 event. This offers a fantastic opportunity to showcase the area to a national and international audience. The area is also home to many famous and talented musicians, including Joe Dolan, Niall Horan, Foster and Allen, The Academic and Bressie. Other than regular but ad-hoc performances in Mullingar’s pubs, there are no facilities to currently showcase this musical heritage in a co-ordinated and structured way that would encourage wider audiences to plan and book visits to the county on the basis of this attribute. This strategy will support efforts to bring the county’s and particularly Mullingar’s musical heritage into a more marketable position, so that it can become a strong attractor for tourism.

Communities

Local communities are integral to our appealing rural landscapes and community volunteers and individuals are active in articulating their local talent and the distinctiveness of our county all year ‘round. However these activities are often considered to be ‘local’ and ‘community’ and are therefore not necessarily accessible or promoted to visitors from outside the county. A great opportunity exists to better connect our local creative communities with visitor infrastructure in order to enable visitors to better experience our local talent and distinctiveness. This could create more authentic experiences, appealing to Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands target markets and the Diaspora, who may wish to connect with the ‘real’ stories in our communities. Through the Westmeath Public Participation Network, opportunities to better connect visitors with community activities could be explored, including the GAA, amateur dramatics or other artistic and creative activities.

Festivals

A number of vibrant festivals enable local communities to celebrate a valuable cultural heritage and spotlight unique local attributes countywide. The RTÉ All Ireland Drama Festival takes place in Athlone each year with its 70th year celebrated in 2022. The Bealtaine Festival on the Hill of Uisneach marks

the beginning of summer each year on this ancient ceremonial site. However the county lacks a year-round calendar of festivals capable of attracting large audiences and spotlighting the county as a destination. Support will be required to boost existing tourism festivals and also to nurture ideas for new festivals which could grow to become successful annual events, particularly those connected to the county's best and most iconic assets, such as the River Shannon and Mullingar's Musical Heritage.

2.4 Culture and Festivals	
Overall Priority: Support and assist festivals which showcase distinctive culture and artistic talent, festivals of scale and those which have the potential to generate long term impact for the local economy.	
Initiatives:	
2.4.1	Encourage initiatives that can showcase local artistic talent and creativity for visitors such as exhibitions, performances, demonstrations, workshops, markets, and events, in support of the work of the Westmeath Arts Office.
2.4.2	Collaborate with Mullingar Chamber and local stakeholders to showcase Mullingar's musical heritage and talented artists to visitors in a co-ordinated and structured way, so that Mullingar music can become a stronger driver of tourism for this area, inspiring more advanced bookings, extending dwell time and season.
2.4.3	Assist existing tourism festivals to realise their growth ambitions and grow organiser capacity, through Westmeath County Council's annual support scheme and any supports offered through Fáilte Ireland, LEADER and the Westmeath Arts Office.
2.4.4	Nurture ideas for new festivals which could grow to become successful annual tourism events, particularly those connected to the county's best and most iconic assets, such as the River Shannon and Mullingar's Musical Heritage.
2.4.5	Facilitate and assist Westmeath Comhaltas in the delivery of a further successful Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann Festival in 2023 and support any subsequent events of scale hosted in the county with a focus on ensuring maximum exposure for Westmeath as a destination of excellence in all marketing and PR activities.
2.4.6	Explore opportunities to bring Westmeath's communities, culture and creativity to life for visitors, potentially engaging communities in a 'what's on' or 'ask a local' initiatives, in collaboration with Westmeath PPN.
2.4.7	Build on the success of recent initiatives such as the Local Live Music Performance Scheme to further explore ways in which our local musical and performance artists can be brought to the forefront of the visitor experience.
2.4.8	Support the 'Green your Festival' initiative and encourage and support festival and event organisers to incorporate green principles in their event planning and management.

3. Destination Towns and Visitor Services

3.0 Introduction

In planning their trip, visitors need reassurance that there will be plenty of quality things to see and do, both in the day-time and evening, along with a range of accommodation options, restaurants and ancillary services. The most effective and efficient way to deliver this for visitors is through the promotion of compelling destination towns, which can provide the critical mass of services required by visitors to spend multiple days and explore the wider region. Athlone and Mullingar both offer a range of high-quality visitor services, including accommodation, restaurants, cafés, visitor attractions

and activities; the core motivators for visitors and basic ‘raw materials’ required in creating strong visitor destinations.

However, developing strong sustainable destinations is complex and multi-faceted, involving a variety of stakeholders and touchpoints that impact on the quality of the visitor experience. The ease of access, visitor flow and wayfinding, appealing landscape and public realm and the distinctive elements that create memorable experiences all contribute to the success of a destination. In addition, visitor expectations are ever evolving; for example, a demand for outdoor dining grew in response to the Covid 19 pandemic and provision for outdoor performances, markets and events are now considered essential in supporting the creation of vibrant and appealing town centres. The below graphic shows the broad range and myriad of expectations of the modern tourist.

Strong character & sense of place	Rich diversity of functions and activities	Adaptable urban structure to accommodate longer term changes	Well-connected network of streets
Priority in town centre for pedestrians	Coherent, legible and attractive streetscapes	Good quality and attractive public realm⁵	Survival of the main street
Unlocking under-used and vacant sites	Ensuring clean and safe environment	Addressing traffic and congestion	Integration of green spaces & linkages, within and around the town

Source: ‘What Tourists are Looking For’, *Development Guidelines for Tourism Destination Towns*, Fáilte Ireland, 2019

With such a range of expectations to meet, fostering strong destinations requires a shared vision and partnership between all stakeholders, including Local Authorities, Fáilte Ireland and other agencies, industry and communities.

3.1 Destination Towns

Athlone

Athlone is an important Visitor Destination Town, providing the services and infrastructure needed to encourage visitors to stay in the wider region. A key visitor services hub for Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands, Athlone is identified as a Regional Centre in the National Planning Framework and is named as a Tourism Hub Town in the new Tourism Masterplan for the Shannon.

Visitor services provided include a range of accommodation, restaurants, cafés, visitor attractions and guided tours. The town itself is known for a vibrant arts and culture scene and signature waterside attractions such as Athlone Castle and the Luan Gallery provide strong visitor experiences. High-quality local food is also renowned in this area, with a concentration of award-winning restaurants. A crossing point on the River Shannon, Athlone is a base for cruising, boat tours, angling and other water-based activities. Nearby villages, tourism assets and attractions include Ballinahown Craft Village, Dún na Sí Amenity and Heritage Park in Moate, Portlick Millennium Forest Trails and the picturesque village of Glasson.

Athlone was awarded funding under 2019 Fáilte Ireland’s Destination Towns Investment Programme, to support the creation of a new comprehensive wayfinding and interpretation signage scheme, along with measures to enhance the public realm at the castle as the signature visitor attraction in the town. When completed, this project will complement the ongoing regeneration and public realm enhancement schemes taking place in the town to enhance its overall attractiveness, including streetscape enhancements along Church Street, providing increased pedestrian space and provision

for outdoor events and performances, where a cluster of high-quality retail, restaurants and bars are currently located. A further regeneration project underway focuses specifically on the west bank of the River Shannon and incorporating a cluster of key visitor attractions including Athlone Castle, St Peter and Paul's Church, the Luan Gallery and the River Shannon banks.

In addition, the Dublin to Galway Cycleway is being developed through the town on its way westwards, with a new River Shannon bridge being created in the coming year. This offers a strategic opportunity for Athlone to become an important base for recreation and activity tourism. It is an objective of this strategy to realise the full potential of this opportunity, with a view to creating a world-class cycle hub in the longer term, which can act as a key information and access point onto the emerging network of midlands greenways, including the Dublin to Galway connection and EuroVelo 2 Capitals Route. The hub should include provision for itinerary planning and information, secure bicycle storage, showers, toilets and lockers, booking assistance and weather/ safety information.

Together, the range of projects planned and underway will further transform and greatly enhance this destination town. It will be a priority to ensure that works showcase the most appealing attributes and provide for increased visitor dwell time, improved visitor flow and permeability and an activation of Athlone's inherent assets, enabling increased economic opportunity and job creation. In this regard, a joined-up approach will be taken, with the local authority, Waterways Ireland and Fáilte Ireland collaborating with businesses and communities to respond to unique opportunities arising.

A designated space for outdoor performances is located in John McCormack Square and further spaces may be considered as part of upcoming public realm enhancement projects, providing more vibrant public spaces and the opportunity for festivals and events to take place. Provision for outdoor dining can also contribute to the vibrancy of a destination town and many restaurants and cafes tapped into the Outdoor Dining Infrastructure Scheme in 2021 to provide facilities.

Mullingar

Mullingar is a high-potential, emerging destination town, with a strong accommodation base made up of high-quality hotels and guest houses, along with excellent restaurants and cafes. The County Town of Westmeath and historically a market town, it has a strong retail base, with boutique-style shopping and unique craft and gift shops. This concentration of visitor services can enable Mullingar to serve as a regional Destination Town, acting as a base for multi-day visits and allowing visitors to explore the range of surrounding attractions. Almost encircled by the Royal Canal Greenway and in close proximity to scenic lakes, the town is becoming a popular base for cycling, watersports and other recreational activity. The town is also popular for music and performance art, with a concentration of live music venues located in the town centre, celebrating the town's renowned musical heritage.

Nearby tourism assets which add to the attractiveness of Mullingar as a destination include Belvedere House, Gardens & Park, on the shores of Lough Ennell. Within a twenty-minute drive of the town, popular attractions include the world's oldest licensed whiskey distillery in Kilbeggan, the Kilbeggan Races, the ancient Hill of Uisneach; the 'Mythological Centre of Ireland'. Mullingar also provides a base from which visitors can explore the unique cultural heritage landscape of North Westmeath, including the oldest inhabited castle at Tullyally and its historical gardens, Fore Abbey, Loughs Derravarragh and Lene and many significant archaeological and historical sites.

Within Mullingar, significant public realm works were completed in 2019. Works included widened footpaths, creating a more comfortable and safe environment for pedestrians, slowing visitors down and enabling them to enjoy and take in their surroundings. Two projects under the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund are now at pre-development stage in the town, at Blackhall, a key town centre site and Canal Avenue, an important visitor access point, linking the Royal Canal

Greenway with the town centre park, via the River Brosna. Both URDF projects will create more attractive spaces and flow pathways for visitors, which highlight the unique and appealing natural and heritage assets of the town.

Mullingar has a vibrant evening and night-time economy and has been awarded the Purple Flag each year since 2015, in recognition of its vibrant and diverse mix of dining, entertainment and culture while promoting the safety and wellbeing of visitors and local residents. Initiatives to expand evening and night-time economic opportunities will be strongly supported across Mullingar and all towns and villages offering visitor services, creating vibrant and safe spaces for visitors to dwell and facilitating activities and events outside of peak hours. Engaging evening activities could include guided tours, performances, events, exhibitions, fairs and opportunities to engage with the natural environment and celebrate biodiversity, such as bat walks etc. In addition, the creation of spaces for outdoor performances, festivals and dining would help to create more vibrancy in the town centre and offer an opportunity to bring the towns arts and musical heritage onto the streets, supplementing the vibrant pub culture and supporting ongoing efforts to enhance evening and night-time economic opportunities.

Towns and Villages Countywide

Towns such as Moate and Castlepollard, along with villages around the county provide a range of visitor facilities and can offer a unique experience and connection with our rural communities. Continued enhancement of amenities such as trails and heritage features will be supported, via annual Town and Village Renewal and Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Schemes, along with the LEADER Programme. Many of these projects are led by communities, fostering a sense of pride in our county, which shines through in the experience of visitors. Development Schemes (RRDF and Town Centre First) for Moate and Castlepollard will be progressed, with strong emphasis placed on local and surrounding visitor assets and amenities to ensure maximum economic benefit to local industry.

3.1 Destination Towns	
Overall Priority:	
Continue to strengthen the role of Athlone and Mullingar as urban tourism destinations, enhancing the public realm, creating active and vibrant public spaces and adding to the range of memorable and high-quality visitor experiences and services provided taking account of Fáilte Ireland’s ‘Development Guidelines for Destination Towns’, 2019.	
Initiatives:	
3.1.1	Instigate and progress the development of world-class cycling hubs in Athlone and Mullingar, delivering a high-quality, interconnected and serviced cycling experience through these strategic greenway intersections.
3.1.2	Support the implementation of Urban and Rural Regeneration Projects, including Athlone’s cultural west side, Blackhall in the heart of Mullingar town and Canal Avenue in Mullingar linking the Royal Canal Greenway with the town centre and future regeneration opportunities. These projects will create a vibrant and appealing public realm, and a strong ‘sense of place’, animating local distinctiveness, heritage and connectivity with surrounding amenities.
3.1.3	Support and facilitate the delivery of the Shannon Tourism Masterplan, particularly those which provide for increased access to the waterfront and water-based activities, in collaboration with Waterways Ireland, Fáilte Ireland other stakeholders.
3.1.4	Support placemaking initiatives and projects which aim to enhance and promote the visitor offering and sense of place in towns and villages.

3.1.5	Support the development of a strong evening and night-time tourism economy, in collaboration with arts and music venues, festivals and events committees and local Chambers of Commerce, including support for the Purple Flag initiative, currently successfully delivered in Mullingar.
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3.2 Wayfinding, Directional Signage and Interpretation

In addition to being unfamiliar the area, visitors may also be dealing with language barriers or driving challenges when navigating the county for the first time. First impressions are created on arrival and it is essential that an easy and pleasant experience is provided to visitors as they arrive and move around the county. Improvements to visitor orientation and flow can “improve visitor satisfaction levels, to bring business to less prominent locations, increase dwell time and drive visitor spend”¹³. In particular, a high-quality signage scheme is essential at visitor access points and within visitor destination towns, with other key visitor sites spotlighted where required. The design and implementation of a new Wayfinding and Interpretation Strategy for Athlone is already underway and Mullingar would also benefit from such an initiative.

In addition to erecting new signage where required, the removal of obsolete and outdated signage can be just as important in ensuring clarity for visitors and an easy, enjoyable experience. Often the principle of ‘less is more’ is relevant when it comes to signage. A small number of well-placed signs with carefully considered content and design can be much more effective and less visually intrusive than a myriad of signs scattered throughout the county. This is particularly true in sensitive natural landscapes and heritage sites and at such locations, priority will be given to digital signposting and digital interpretation methods.

Interpretation of our built, natural and cultural heritage in an engaging way can transform a great visitor experience into a truly memorable one. Modern tourists expect an authentic experience when learning about local heritage and culture and to really get ‘under the skin’ of the locality rather than simply reading information that is available to just about anyone¹⁴. It is a key challenge to move beyond simply providing historical information to ‘storytelling interpretation’, which aims to build meaningful relationships between places and communities and the people who visit them. In this regard, all new visitor interpretation will be required be engaging, entertaining, accessible and visitor-focused and will use a variety of media, including digital trails, audio, augmented reality and art installations, along with more traditional methods such as storyboards and printed materials.

3.2 Wayfinding, Directional Signage and Interpretation	
Overall Priority: In collaboration with Fáilte Ireland, prepare and implement a signage plan for the county, removing obsolete signage, creating clear and visitor-oriented wayfinding and animating local stories and heritage with visitor interpretation.	
Initiatives:	
3.2.1	Remove obsolete tourism signage around the county where identified, including outdated ‘Ireland’s Ancient East’ signs.

¹³ Tourism Guidelines for Visitor Destination Towns, Fáilte Ireland, 2019

¹⁴ A Toolkit for Storytelling Interpretation, Fáilte Ireland, 2018

3.2.2	Identify signage and interpretation required at strategic access points and locations, in collaboration with Fáilte Ireland and Waterways Ireland.
3.2.3	Complete and implement the comprehensive new Wayfinding and Interpretation Strategy being developed for Athlone town, aimed at increasing visitor dwell time, penetration and immersion in local heritage and culture.
3.2.4	Seek to devise and deliver a new wayfinding and interpretation scheme for Mullingar, to improve visitor access, orientation and engagement with the unique heritage and attributes of the destination, subject to the availability of funding.
3.2.5	Require that all new signage and interpretation is of an excellent quality and design, in line with Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands branding and celebration of the unique attributes of the location in order to provide tourists with a strong ‘Sense of Place’ and first impression.
3.2.6	Require that all new visitor interpretation is engaging, entertaining, accessible and visitor-focused and encourage the use of a variety of media, including digital trails, audio, augmented reality and art installations, along with more traditional methods such as storyboards and printed materials.
3.2.7	Consider proposals for new signage in accordance with the TII <i>Policy on the Provision of Tourism and Leisure Signage on National Roads (2011)</i> ”, Planning Regulations (including Fingerpost Signage Regulations) as appropriate, with priority given where suitable to supplementing existing signage with digital signposting, digital interpretation methods and marketing support.

3.3 Visitor Services and Infrastructure

Introduction

The provision of sufficient, appropriate and high-quality infrastructure to meet the needs of visitors is fundamental to Westmeath reaching its potential for a thriving tourism sector. Services and infrastructure will be provided for in accordance with the policies and objectives set out in the County Development Plan, which prioritises clustering infrastructure within visitor destination towns and villages where possible and appropriate, providing for a suitable range and critical mass of services that will strengthen visitor destinations. It is essential that all such provision is of a high design standard and that the development of visitor infrastructure linked to natural and heritage environments does not detract from the quality and value of these environments.

Accommodation

Current visitor accommodation provision is strong, relative to other midlands counties. A total of approximately 2,800 bed spaces are currently available, the majority located in high quality facilities such as the Sheraton, Radisson, Bloomfield, Annebrook and Park Hotels. While there are three camping and caravan parks in the county, only one of these has received confirmation of meeting Fáilte Ireland Quality Standards, hindering the potential of the two unapproved facilities in terms of access to national and international marketing opportunities. Two glamping businesses have also been established in the county with a third is at pre-development stage, further offering variety to the county’s accommodation base. The county’s stock of Bed and Breakfast and self-catering type accommodation is strong, with a number of historical properties offering this type of accommodation and others offering scenic views and visual proximity to visitor amenities. There are currently no publicly designated locations for RVs such as campervans and motorhomes in the county. It is important that the county continues to offer a wide range of accommodation types and in doing so, the quality of the experience offered is critical in ensuring the success of the destination overall.

In line with projected growth targets of 2% per year for Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands, there may be a requirement for additional accommodation in the medium term and it will be important that such

proposals are based on robust research to determine the need and type of accommodation required. Hotel capacity is reportedly limited during the summer months with a lull in bookings during the winter and shoulder seasons. Efforts to extend the tourist season would therefore greatly support the growth of tourism revenue in the county and support the viability of businesses all year around. Pressure on existing tourism accommodation has been exacerbated due to the ongoing refugee crisis.

Transport and Coach Tours

Westmeath is fortunate to be very accessible to visitors, with excellent motorway and national road access, including the M6 and N4, along with nationally important railway stations at Mullingar and Athlone and Dublin airport just an hour away. In addition, it is located in the heart of the country, where the River Shannon meets with an emerging network of nationally important greenways. Ongoing work to increase connectivity for walking and cycling countywide, including Active Travel and greenway projects, will be critical to support attractions and locations which are not currently on greenway routes and increase visitor permeability through the county and Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands region. This work also reduces visitor reliance on private car transport with resulting reduction in carbon emissions and climate impact, along with slowing visitors down in the process and encouraging them to dwell longer and visit more than the usual ‘hero’ experiences.

Rural transport services could also play a more prominent role in enabling visitors to explore the county and more rural attractions, without the need for car transport. A pilot collaborative scheme involving Local Link, Fáilte Ireland and Westmeath County Council to connect Mullingar town, the Royal Canal Greenway and Belvedere House, Gardens and Park by bus was successfully delivered in 2021, with a further pilot in 2022 extending to North Westmeath. It will be an objective to explore options for the delivery of this and other similar schemes in the longer term. Given the linear nature of our greenways in particular, a bus scheme that provided cyclists with alternative ways to return to their accommodation with their bike would prove very beneficial in supporting the growth in cycling tourism.

3.3 Visitor Services and Infrastructure	
Overall Priority: Promote the development and strengthening of Westmeath as a tourist destination by continuing to provide and enhance infrastructure and visitor services, in line with the County Development Plan for Westmeath and in collaboration with the tourism industry, Fáilte Ireland and other stakeholders.	
Initiatives:	
3.3.1	Collaborate with the tourism industry and Fáilte Ireland to identify future visitor accommodation and service requirements, taking account of existing provision and projected growth and support initiatives to proactively meet any identified requirements where provided for within the planning system and subject to development management and environmental standards.
3.3.2	Support accommodation providers to tap into all available supports and opportunities to maximise their viability all year ‘round and increase the standard of their visitor offering where required.
3.3.3	Encourage all visitor accommodation providers to secure the relevant Fáilte Ireland Quality Assurance Standards where possible.
3.3.4	Continue to advance the development of walking and cycling infrastructure, enabling permeability of visitors through the county without negative climate impact.
3.3.5	Collaborate with Local Link and the National Transport Authority along with Fáilte Ireland and other relevant stakeholders to consider opportunities to provide rural bus

	links for tourists, including connections from Mullingar to Belvedere, Mullingar to North Westmeath and greenway connections which allow return bus journeys for cyclists with their bikes.
3.3.6	Provide information for visitors on charging provision for electric vehicles around the county.
3.3.7	Support tourism service providers to achieve the highest standards in environmental management and climate proofing, such as accommodation, restaurants, activity providers, festivals and events and tourism enterprises, to include energy efficiency, waste management, procurement and recycling.

APPENDIX A: PRE-DRAFT CONSULTATION SUMMARY

Written Submissions Received

Submission Number	Subject	Portal / email
1	Mullingar and surrounds	Via Consultation Portal
2	Lough Owel and Lough Ennell	Via Consultation Portal
3	Various suggestions	Via Consultation Portal
4	Lough Ennell, Lilliput, Lake County, positive opportunities vs negative press re pollution crisis	Via Consultation Portal and email
5	North Westmeath - Collinstown, Fore, Castlepollard, and Hinterlands	Via Consultation Portal
6	Athlone	Via Consultation Portal
7	Hill of Uisneach	Via Consultation Portal and email
8	Loughnavalley and Uisneach	Via Consultation Portal and email
9	Uisneach, Ballymore, Centre Parcs	Via Consultation Portal
10	Delvin	Via Consultation Portal
11	Fore	email
12	Loughnavalley Community Development	email
13	Walks and visitor experience in North Westmeath	email
14	North Westmeath and heritage	email
15	Mullingar, lakes, festivals and other opportunities	email
16	Angling	email
17	Lakes and general visitor experience	email
18	Viking themed festival in Athlone	email
19	North Westmeath archaeology and heritage	email

20	General / various	Via email to Heritage Officer
21	General /various	Via email to Heritage Officer

Consultation Meetings with Agencies

1	Fáilte Ireland – IAE & IHH	9/6/2021 & 3/8/2021 and various
2	Waterways Ireland	7/7/2021
3	Westmeath Community Development	9/7/2021

Facilitated Consultation Workshops

1	Accommodation	8/9/2021
2	Attractions and Activities	8/9/2021

Consultation - Internal

1	Environment Section / Climate Action	17/8/2021
2	Heritage	10/02/2021 & 21/9/2021
3	Planning	27/1/2021
4	Sports Partnership	12/02/2021

APPENDIX B: SUMMARY OF RELEVANT POLICIES, PLANS AND STRATEGIES

Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027

The Westmeath County Development Plan 2021- 2027 includes a dedicated Tourism Chapter. The objectives and policies contained in this County Plan align closely with the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy 2019 and the National Planning Framework 2040. The County Development Plan has a key role in facilitating the development of our tourism potential, through supporting sustainable development of our natural and historical assets and strengthening the role of our towns and villages in providing tourism-related infrastructure.

Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy, Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly, 2019

This Strategy specifically highlights the region as a “key destination for tourism, leisure and recreation activities”, with a policy to support the development of an integrated network of greenways, blueways and peatways, while ensuring that high value assets and amenities are protected and enhanced. Athlone is emphasised as a visitor destination town with particular potential as a base to explore the Hidden Heartlands, while Mullingar is described as a potential ‘tourism hub’.

National Planning Framework 2040

Tourism is part of National Strategic Outcome 7, ‘Enhanced Amenities and Heritage’ which requires investment in well-designed public realm, recreational infrastructure and rural amenities including activity-based tourism and trails such as greenways, blueways and peatways, with the development of a strategic national network of these trails highlighted as a priority. Our built, cultural and natural heritage is identified for its intrinsic value in defining the character of urban and rural areas and adding

to their attractiveness and sense of place. Athlone is identified as a Regional Centre in the National Planning Framework which highlights its prominence for supporting growth in the midlands area.

FI Corporate Strategy

Fáilte Ireland's Corporate Strategy seeks to guide the industry back to recovery following the Covid-19 global pandemic. It sets out a course of action based on the following seven strategic pillars, from which this Regional Tourism Strategy takes its cue:

To sustain tourism businesses in the short term so they can thrive over the long term. *Survive to Thrive*

To support industry to attract and retain talent to support sustainable growth. *Supporting Tourism Careers*

To achieve a sustained step change in Irish staycations. *Accelerate Domestic Tourism*

To transform Ireland's outdoor tourism experience. *Opening the Outdoors*

To transform Irish tourism's online presence and ecommerce capability. *Digital that Delivers*

To enhance the destination experience and support the industry in building a pipeline of future international business. *Destination Development and Distribution*

People, Place and Policy: Growing Tourism to 2025, Dept of Transport, Tourism and Sport, 2015

This National Strategy aims "to facilitate a vibrant, attractive tourism sector that makes a significant contribution to employment across the country; is economically, socially and environmentally sustainable; helps promote a positive image of Ireland overseas, and is a sector in which people want to work". Implementation of this strategy is being realised through a series of Three-Year Action Plans.

Fáilte Ireland's Guidance on Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism planning requires a balance to be struck between the needs of the visitor, the place and the host community, ensuring that our landscapes, our cultural heritage, our environment and our linguistic heritage can continue to be enjoyed and cherished by future generations. Five key principles are outlined by Fáilte Ireland to guide future developments of tourism infrastructure.

IHH Regional Tourism Development Strategy 2023 – 2027

The ambition for the IHH Regional Tourism Development Strategy 2023 – 2027 is to drive recovery and growth of the visitor economy in Ireland's Hidden Heartlands to create sustainable, high-quality jobs in the sector that will serve to support and strengthen local communities while protecting our natural environment. This will be achieved by raising awareness and consideration of the region as a visitor destination and by increasing the average length of stay. In doing so, we will redefine tourism success based on our sustainability goals. The associated objectives are as follows:

- Strategic Objective 1: Raise awareness and recognition of the region and brand among domestic and international visitors and increase the duration of visitor stays, particularly within the domestic market.
- Strategic Objective 2: Enhance the range and quality of our visitor experiences to underpin the Hidden Heartlands brand proposition, leveraging the natural and cultural assets of the region in a sustainable way with a focus on ecotourism.
- Strategic Objective 3: Grow the economic impact of tourism and create jobs in local tourism by supporting the tourism industry (private, public and community sectors) to develop its capacity and capability.

- Strategic Objective 4: Establish the region as one of the leading regenerative tourism destinations in Europe with nature and community at its heart.
- Strategic Objective 5: Build a committed industry and stakeholder coalition to guide and co-ordinate the sustainable development of destinations across the region.

Westmeath Climate Change Adaptation Strategy 2019 - 2024

This Climate Change Adaptation Strategy has been developed by Westmeath County Council which aims to build resilience and respond effectively to the threats posed by climate change. Climate adaptation considerations set out in this strategy must be mainstreamed into all plans and policies and integrated into all operations and functions of Westmeath County Council.

Relevant actions include:

- Develop sustainable and integrated travel solutions, including walking and cycling routes and connections with towns and villages
- Support development of Electric Vehicle (EV) charging infrastructure throughout Westmeath
- Support the transition to a low carbon and climate resilient economy
- Promote the development and use of greenways throughout the county
- Undertake a Native Tree Planting programme and natural borders in design of greenways/blueways, tracks and trails
- Consider alternative social and economic functions for peatland areas, including tourism and recreation

Strategy for the Future Development of National and Regional Greenways, Department of Tourism, Transport and Sport, 2018

This strategy recognises the high potential of Greenways as economic contributors to rural communities through increased tourism. In order to ensure the maximum benefit in this regard, future greenways funded under this strategy will be required to be strategic, scenic, sustainable, offer lots to see and do and substantially segregated from vehicular traffic and offering shared use between pedestrians and cyclists”.

Our Rural Future 2021-2025

This document outlines a framework for the sustainable development of rural Ireland and includes key objectives to support rural enterprise including tourism and revitalise our towns and villages. Outdoor activity tourism is specifically highlighted as a key growth sector which can provide opportunities for rural areas.

The Shannon Mighty River of Ireland. A Tourism Masterplan for the Shannon 2020 – 2030

This Masterplan aims to reposition the Shannon as a key tourism destination within Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands, identifying world-class visitor experiences based on the region’s natural and cultural assets. The plan aims to achieve an improved spread of tourism in the region that appeal to public and private investment but also harness the social potential of the Shannon’s natural and cultural assets in an environmentally sustainable way.

Athlone is named as a Tourism Hub Town, due to its potential to provide year-round facilities of scale and three 'discovery zones' have been identified with Discovery Zone 2: Mid-Shannon incorporating Athlone.

Actions relevant to Westmeath and Athlone include:

- Develop on-water linkages, along with Athlone's waterfront amenities to build a critical mass of attractions and activities and services
- Development of the Glasson-Coosan-Wineport-Killinure-Hodson Bay activity and food nexus;
- Completion of the National Cycleway and the new bridge that will deliver 'slow tourism' into the core of Athlone town and DZ2;
- Development of the planned cycleway south from Athlone to Clonmacnoise, linking the National Cycleway to the monastic complex and south to Shannonbridge;
- Completion of the Athlone-Mullingar- Royal Canal circuit to deliver 'active in nature' experiences across the peatlands, directing visitors via Ballymahon-Clondara to Portlick – Athlone based on local consultations.
- Develop an enhanced range of cruise options, boating and guided tours from Athlone waterfront linked to onshore attractions (islands, monastic sites, activity centres, bike tours) and hinterland.

This Masterplan also identified the need for consistent messaging along the Shannon to present it as a unified proposition of scale.

Midland Food Strategy 2021 – 2024

This Strategy highlights a significant opportunity "to improve our share of tourism visits, dwell time and spend, based on harnessing an emerging food and drink culture". Food Tourism is the fourth Strategy Pillar of the Strategy, with an objective to "develop evocative food and drink visitor experiences". Actions include encouraging the development of a network of vibrant farmers markets, building on our heritage in milling and distilling, through hosting an international awards event such as the World Whiskies Awards and keeping food and drink to the forefront of major events and destinations.

Development Guidelines for Tourism Destination Towns, Fáilte Ireland, 2019

Fáilte Ireland's practical guidelines for the development of 'destination towns' in Ireland. Key points in the document include principles for unlocking the economic potential of the visitor for local businesses and communities, capture local distinctiveness and ensure ample things to do and see, day and night.

Midlands Regional Enterprise Plan to 2024

A Strategic Objective of this plan is to 'position the Midlands as a community of choice in which to live, create, study, work, visit and invest', including destination marketing, cross-promotion and completion of the new River Shannon bridge as part of the Dublin-Galway Cycleway.

APPENDIX C: LIST OF FUNDING SCHEMES

List of existing and recent funding schemes relevant to tourism development:

Funding Scheme	Activities Supported
Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme	Greenways, blueways, trails, supporting infrastructure and marketing
Town and Village Renewal Scheme	Innovative actions to revitalize towns and villages, including tourism initiatives
Rural Regeneration and Development Fund	Rural renewal in towns and villages under 10,000 population
Urban Regeneration and Development Fund	Compact and sustainable development, through regeneration and rejuvenation
EU Just Transition Fund	Substantial fund to create new employment opportunities for communities previously dependent on peat
LEADER (through Westmeath Community Development)	Eligible projects include tourism infrastructure and marketing, green enterprise, community infrastructure and training
Fáilte Ireland Capital Grant Scheme for large tourism projects	Capital projects which meet the objectives of the relevant FI Brand Propositions
Faillte Ireland Destination Towns Scheme	Funding to boost the attractiveness and tourism appeal of towns
National Greenways Funding Programme	Funding for strategic greenways and links
Fáilte Ireland, Waterways Ireland and Local Authority Festivals Programmes	Festivals capable of attracting an international audience, regional audience or innovative elements
Creative Ireland	Local and community, artistic and creative activities and projects
Built Heritage Investment Scheme and Structures at Risk Fund	Fund for historic properties and structures at risk
NPWS Raised Bog Community Engagement Scheme	A new grant scheme has been announced to support community groups with conservative and revitalization of raised bog areas
Waterways Ireland Heritage Grants	Grants to assist community-based heritage projects associated with inland waterways
Heritage Council	Conservation and interpretation of built and natural heritage
Just Transition Fund	Innovative projects that contribute to the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the Midlands region
Rural Innovation and Development Fund	Agri-Food Tourism Initiatives to develop linkages between local food and tourism offerings, including support for business development and marketing
Westmeath County Council Shopfront Enhancement Scheme	Visual enhancement of shopfronts, including painting and signage

APPENDIX D: GUIDANCE DOCUMENTS

- Greenway Visitor Experience & Interpretation Toolkit, Failte Ireland, 2021

- TOURISM IN THE COMMUNITY A Business Toolkit for Community Tourism Projects, Failte Ireland, 2019
- Experiences Explained A guide to understanding and developing memorable tourism experiences, Failte Ireland, 2018
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APPENDIX E: ENVIRONMENTAL SCREENING REPORTS AND DETERMINATIONS