

Westmeath Tourism Strategy 2021 to 2027

PUBLIC CONSULTATION

1: Introduction

Westmeath County Council are preparing a new Tourism Strategy, which will guide and inform tourism development in County Westmeath from 2021-2027.

Tourism is an important indigenous industry, its benefits influencing many different sectors across the wider economy. With considerable heritage and cultural assets, a scenic and rich natural environment, vibrant towns and villages and an easily accessible location, Westmeath has enormous potential to benefit from tourism.

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 nearly 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.

In November 2016, Westmeath County Council launched the first-ever 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 priority themes, Destination Athlone, Mullingar: Music, Myths and Legends and Blueways and Greenways. Many objectives have since been realised for the long-term benefit of tourism in Westmeath, including [Visit Westmeath](#) promotional activities reaching national and international markets, further development of the county’s recreational infrastructure and enhancement of the visitor experience at destination towns, villages and attractions.



The Consultation Process

It’s important that the new Strategy fully reflects and responds to the range of opportunities and challenges for our county. This is the first of 5 ‘Issues Boards’, aimed at setting the context and framework for a comprehensive public consultation process:

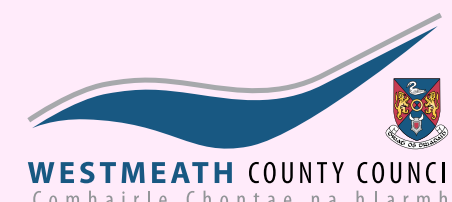
- 1: Introduction
- 2: Context for the new Strategy
- 3: Athlone and Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands
- 4: Mullingar and Ireland’s Ancient East
- 5: Developing and Marketing Immersive Visitor Experiences

We are now inviting members of the public to make submissions and proposals which will help to shape the new Tourism Strategy. We are also engaging with stakeholders, including agencies such as Fáilte Ireland and Waterways Ireland, industry representatives and relevant interest groups.

Unfortunately we can’t conduct face-to-face consultations at the moment, but should you wish to discuss your ideas or comments before making your written submission, please email us at tourism@westmeathcoco.ie and we would be happy to engage with you by phone, email or online meeting.

How to have your Say

You can have your say by sending a submission via the [Public Consultation Portal](#), or by emailing tourism@westmeathcoco.ie. Please reference the topic to which your submission relates in the heading.



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2: Context

Policy Context

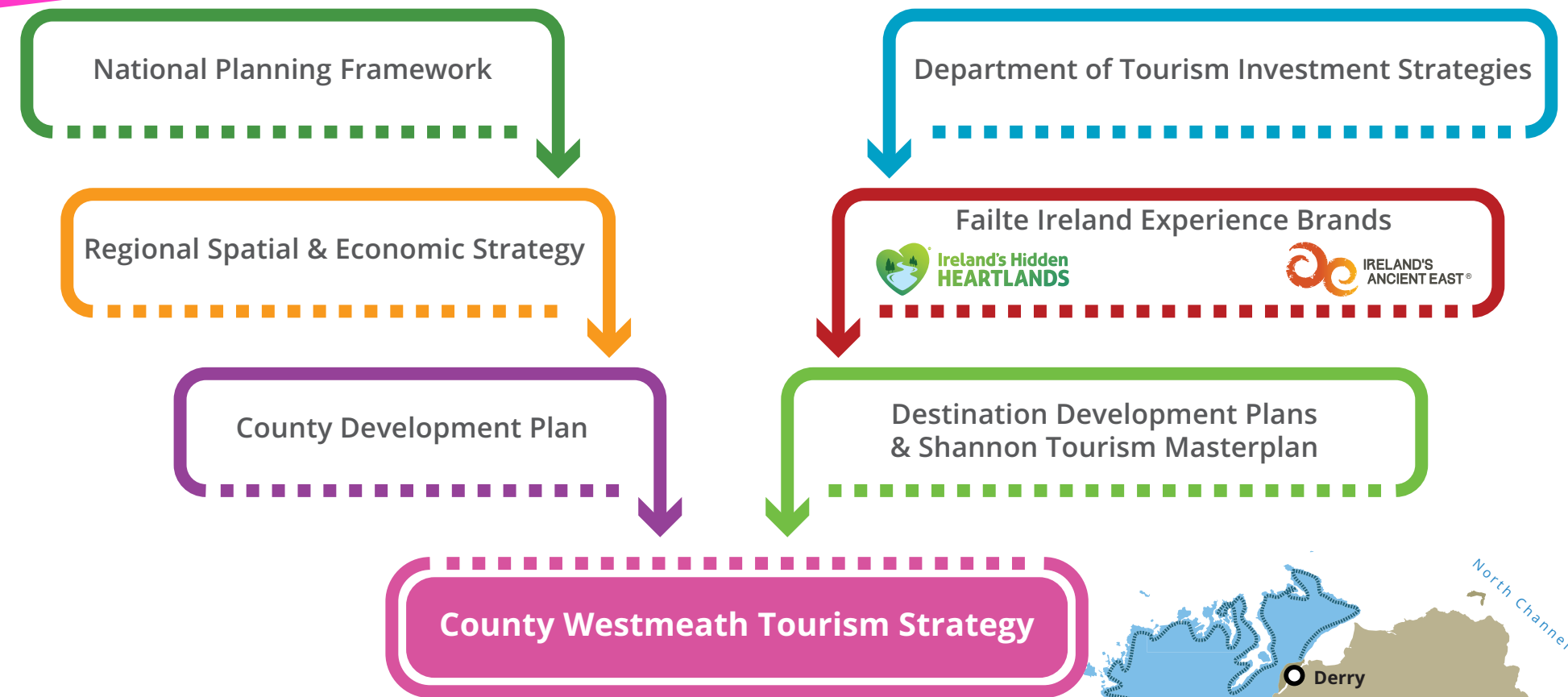
At national, regional and county level, there are many existing plans and strategies which are relevant to tourism in Westmeath. In developing the new Tourism Strategy, we must take account of the existing adopted policy and strategic approach set out by our National Tourism bodies and Planning Authorities.

National tourism policy falls within the remit of the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and agencies Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland. Ireland is promoted nationally and internationally using 'Brand Ireland', under which four distinct experience brands are used to define the appealing characteristics of each region. Most of county Westmeath is covered by 'Ireland's Ancient East', including Mullingar. Athlone and the area adjacent to the River Shannon and Lough Ree are now part of 'Ireland's Hidden Heartlands'. It's important that we align our new strategy with the relevant brands, so that we can take full advantage of the opportunities offered by them.

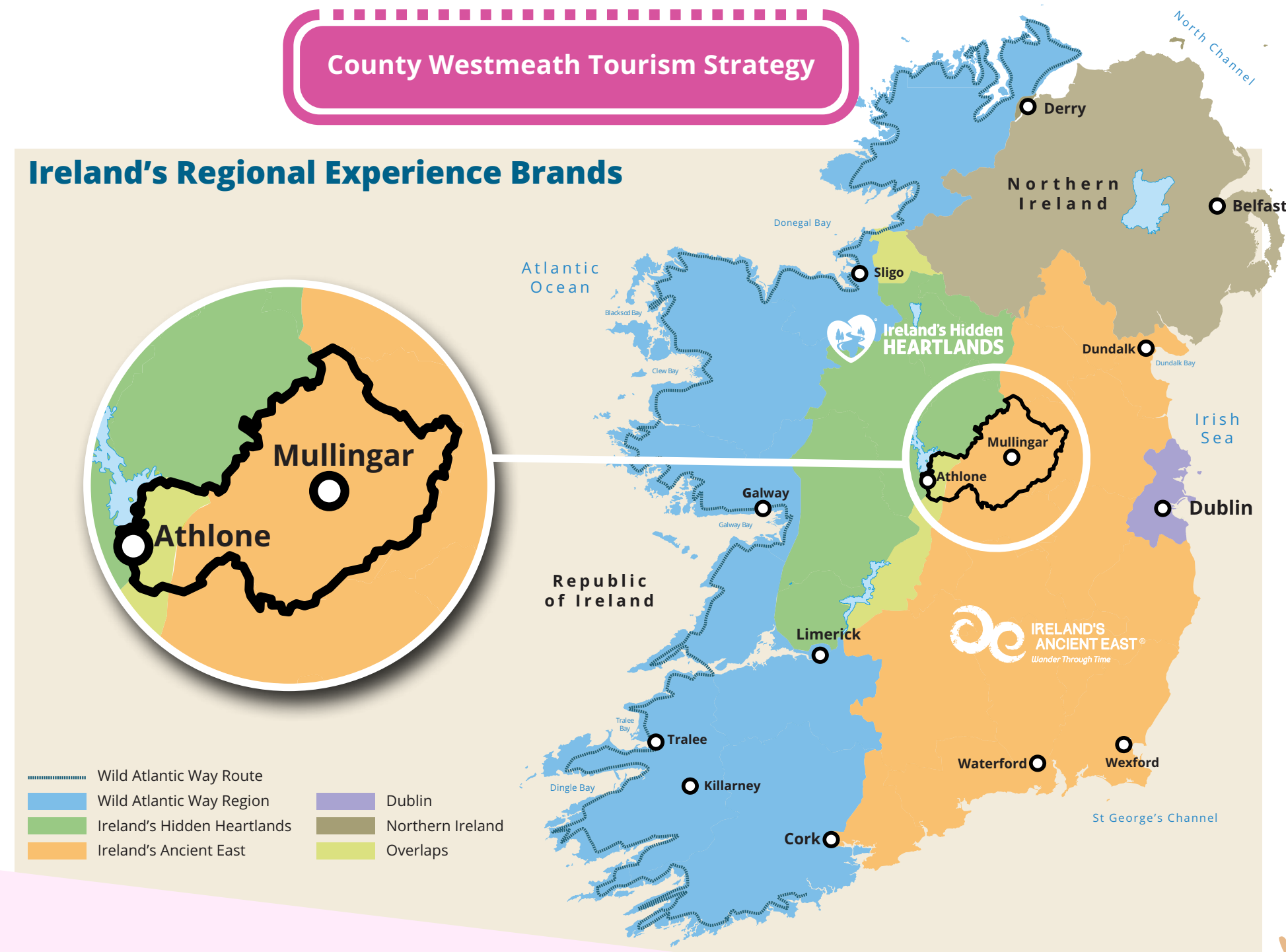
The new Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2017 includes a dedicated Tourism Chapter. The objectives and policies contained in this County Plan align closely with the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy 2019 and the National Planning Framework 2040. The County Development Plan has a key role in 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.

Environmental Sustainability

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. It will express and detail the integrated approach required to deliver the broader direction and objectives set out in adopted policies and plans, which have themselves been subject to legislative requirements relating to public consultation and environmental assessment. Screening for Strategic Environmental Assessment and Appropriate Assessment are being conducted as part of this process.



Ireland's Regional Experience Brands



Tourism Performance

By 2020, tourism had become one of the country's most important economic sectors, supporting an estimated 260,000 jobs and generating over €5 billion for the national economy. Most of this growth has been concentrated around the coastal counties, however Fáilte Ireland has been working closely with Westmeath County Council and others to achieve a more regional spread of tourism. Initiatives underpinning Ireland's Ancient East and the new Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand, along with investment to enhance the visitor experience can support our growth in the future.

Most recently, Covid 19 has delivered a massive and devastating shock to the industry worldwide with unprecedented impacts for tourism businesses. When travel can safely resume, tourism will have a key role to play in our economic recovery and in the immediate term, domestic tourism has the potential to help sustain our tourism businesses.

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3: Athlone & Ireland's Hidden Heartlands

Destination Athlone

Athlone is an important Visitor Destination Town, providing the services and infrastructure needed to encourage visitors to stay in the wider region. This includes a range of accommodation, restaurants, cafés, visitor attractions and guided tours. 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](#), due to its potential to provide year-round facilities of scale.

The town itself is known for a strong 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 Walks and the picturesque village of Glasson.

Significant improvements have been made to the streetscape of Athlone in recent years and further public realm enhancements are underway, along with a comprehensive new signage and wayfinding scheme. In addition, the Dublin to Galway Cycleway is being developed through the town on its way westwards, with a new River Shannon crossing point being created in the coming year.

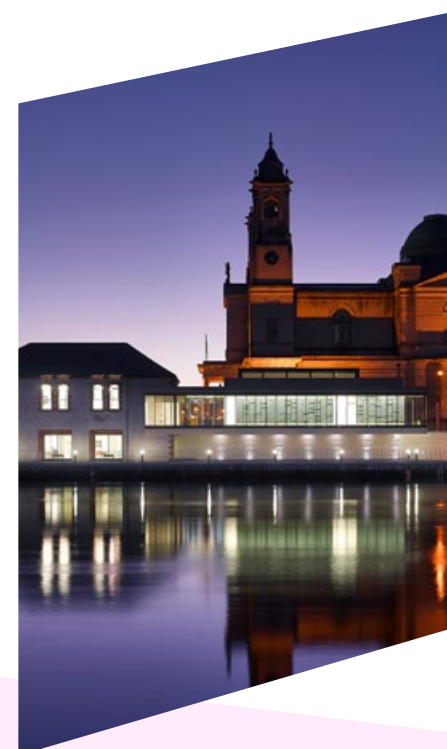
Ireland's Hidden Heartlands

Athlone and its hinterland adjacent to the River Shannon and Lough Ree are part of Ireland's Hidden Heartlands, the newest experience brand from Fáilte Ireland. Visitors to Ireland's Hidden Heartlands 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.

Further details on Ireland's Hidden Heartlands can be found on the [Fáilte Ireland website](#) or get in touch for updates on marketing activities.

Working Together

It is essential that a co-ordinated and collaborative approach is taken involving relevant agencies, tourism businesses and communities. Destination Athlone are an industry-led working group which have made significant achievements in collective marketing to date. Further collaborative work will be essential to reach the full potential of this area in the future.



Suggested topics for you to consider

- How can we realise the potential of Athlone as an international tourism destination of excellence?
- What gaps or deficits exist in visitor service provision in Athlone?
- How can we encourage and facilitate visitors to stay in Athlone and the surrounding area for longer?
- How can we make better use of our tourism infrastructure and assets in order to maximise revenue generated from tourism?
- How can we reap the benefits of Ireland's Hidden Heartlands for the Athlone area as this new brand grows?
- What developments, initiatives or projects could be taken to ensure visitors to Athlone have an immersive, memorable and brilliant visitor experience? Who should undertake these initiatives and how?
- How can we expand the tourism season beyond the summer months?
- How can we encourage a stronger evening and night-time tourism economy?
- What undiscovered potential or niche tourism activities exist that should be explored further?
- How can we better connect visitors with our local stories, communities and culture?
- How can we bring forward the objectives of the Shannon Tourism Masterplan for this area?

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4: Destination Mullingar & Ireland's Ancient East

Destination Mullingar

Mullingar town offers a strong accommodation base with high-quality hotels and guest houses, along with excellent restaurants and cafés. Historically a market town, Mullingar is also known for its 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. Mullingar's musical heritage has been identified as a unique selling point for the town and a distinctive quality that could set it apart from other destination towns in the region. The birthplace of Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann and the home of musical legends Joe Dolan, Niall Breslin and Niall Horan, the town's live music venues are bursting with local talent each night. Work is ongoing to explore how visitors can enjoy and engage with this musical heritage in immersive and memorable ways.

Ireland's Ancient East

Most of County Westmeath, including Mullingar is included in Ireland's Ancient East, a brand which promises visitors 'a journey through thousands of years of immersive history, in lush green landscapes and stories told by the best storytellers in the world'. In line with this brand, Westmeath offers a rich heritage, with local storytellers, tours and attractions including the Hill of Uisneach, Dún na Sí Amenity and Heritage Park, Belvedere House, Gardens and Park, Kilbeggan Distillery, Tullynally Castle Gardens and Fore Abbey. The lakes and waterways of Westmeath are also connected with a rich heritage, including the famous legend of the Children of Lir associated with Lough Derravarragh. The Royal Canal Greenway traverses the county, with many preserved original bridges and locks visible to those who travel this route by boat, bike or foot and the Old Rail Trail Greenway brings visitors along the historic Great Western Railway line through the scenic Midlands landscape.

Castlepollard and the north of the county displays a distinctive cultural landscape with a cluster of visitor attractions and points of interest. There is potential for tourism growth in this area supported by the more extensive visitor services provided in nearby Mullingar.

The Hill of Uisneach features as part of Fáilte Ireland's latest Destination Development Plan for Ancient Sites and further development programmes will include the House and Gardens and Activities sectors. Details on Ireland's Ancient East, marketing plans and target market segments can be found on www.failteireland.ie/irelandsancienteast

Collaboration

Collaboration between all stakeholders, agencies and tourism businesses will be essential in order to realise the full potential of this region. A formalised 'Destination Mullingar' structure has yet to be established; but such an industry-led group could undoubtedly achieve significant progress in marketing the distinctiveness of Mullingar as a strong and vibrant visitor destination.

Suggested topics for you to consider

- How can we engage visitors with Mullingar's music and musical heritage?
- How can we bring history, heritage and storytelling into our visitor experiences in line with Ireland's Ancient East?
- How can we increase collaboration among tourism businesses and communities and formalise an industry-led structure for collective marketing?
- How can we encourage and facilitate visitors to stay in Mullingar and the surrounding area for longer?
- How can we make better use of our tourism infrastructure and assets in order to maximise revenue generated from tourism?
- What developments, initiatives or projects could be taken to ensure visitors to Mullingar have an immersive, memorable and brilliant visitor experience? Who should undertake these initiatives and how?
- How can we expand the tourism season beyond the summer months?
- How can we encourage a stronger evening and night-time tourism economy?
- What undiscovered potential or niche tourism activities exist that should be explored further?
- How can we better connect visitors with our local stories, communities and culture?

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5: Immersive Visitor Experiences

Countywide, Westmeath 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."

- How can we create more immersive visitor experiences in Westmeath?
- How can we market our tourism offering in a stronger and more effective way, taking account of opportunities offered by Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland?

Outdoor Recreation

With extensive greenways, woodland and lakeshore walks and water-based activities, opportunities for visitors to engage in outdoor recreation are in abundance in Westmeath.

- How can we grow and enhance our outdoor visitor offering in an environmentally sustainable way?
- How can we create more immersive experiences for visitors engaging in outdoor recreation?
- What services and facilities need to be provided to support outdoor tourism and where?
- How can we engage these visitors with our communities, culture and other visitor offerings?
- How can we encourage long distance cyclists or day trippers to stay longer and spend more on their visit?

Heritage, Tours and Visitor Attractions

Westmeath is steeped in heritage and already has a strong foundation in the provision of world-class tourism attractions. Assets include Athlone Castle Visitor Centre, Belvedere House, Gardens and Park, the Luan Gallery, The Hill of Uisneach, Tullynally Castle Gardens, Kilbeggan Distillery, the Kilbeggan Races, Dún na Sí Amenity and Heritage Park and Fore Abbey. Increased investment and support is required in order to increase revenue generated to the local economy from these attractions, both directly and indirectly. Creating stronger linkages between attractions, activities, visitor services and accommodation is critical to increase visitor dwell time and spend.

- How can more immersive visitor experiences be provided at our visitor attractions?
- How can we increase revenue generated to the local economy?
- How can we create strong, effective linkages between attractions and visitor service providers to increase visitor dwell time and spend?
- How can our visitor attractions be better aligned with regional brands Ireland's Ancient East and Ireland's Hidden Heartlands in order to maximise marketing potential?
- How can we incorporate storytelling and local culture into the visitor experience?
- What additional visitor attractions and activities could be provided and how?

Culture, Festivals and Food

Westmeath is a county rich in culture and the artist expression, with art galleries, craft shops and theatres offering the chance for visitors to experience our local artistic talent.

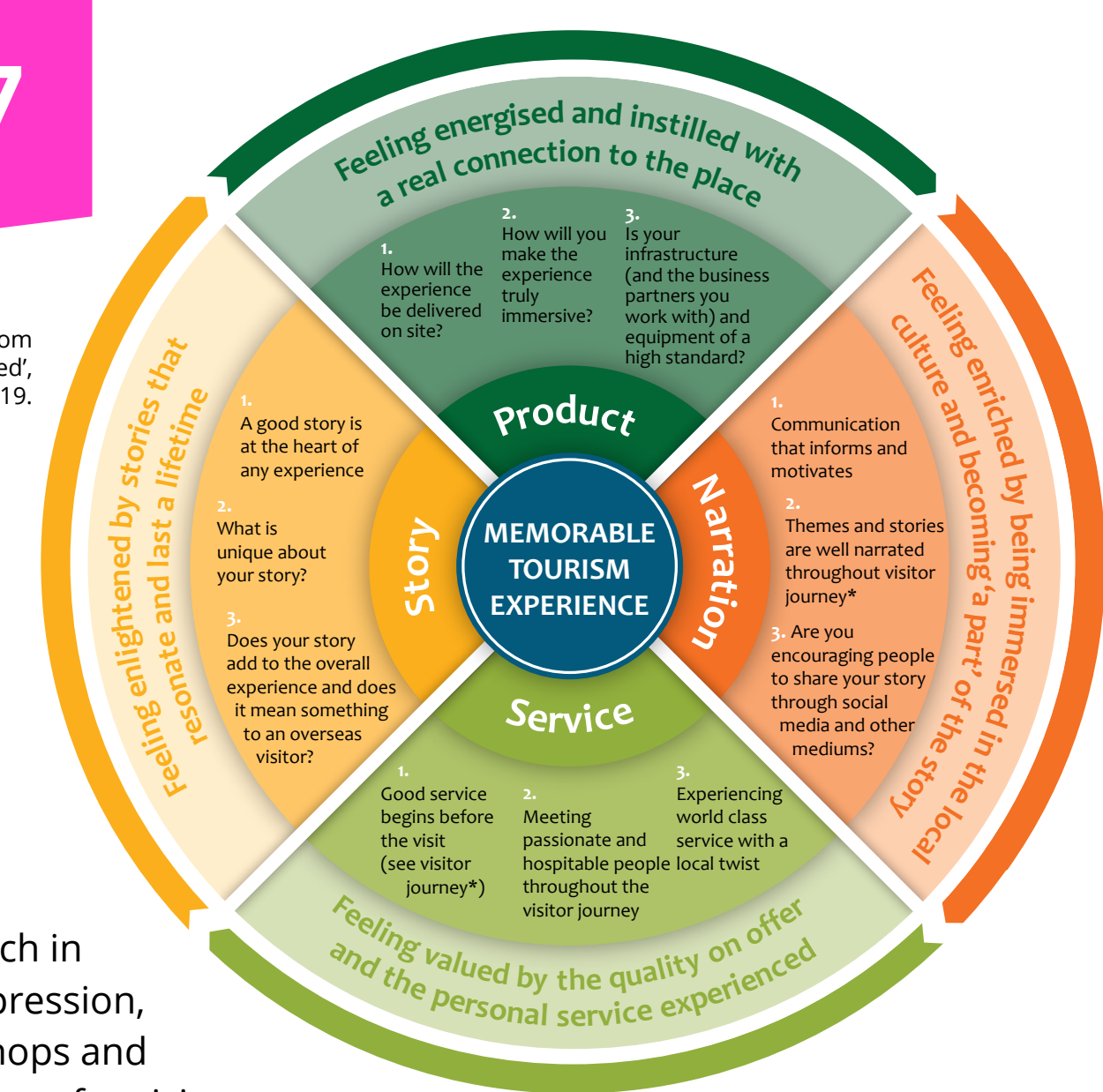
Musical talent is also evident and the tradition of Irish music is celebrated county-wide, through Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann centres and traditional pubs.

A number of vibrant festivals enable local communities to celebrate a valuable cultural heritage and spotlight unique local attributes.

Food tourism is increasing in importance internationally and locally produced food and beverages offer the opportunity to engage the senses and create memorable experiences.

- How can we better showcase our local artists and musical talent to visitors in a structured way, to facilitate marketing and maximise revenue generated?
- How can we support home-grown events and festivals to develop to their full potential and attract larger audiences where appropriate?
- How can we better connect our local creative communities with visitor infrastructure in order to enable visitors to better experience our local talent and distinctiveness?
- How can we create more memorable food experiences for visitors, showcasing our artisan produce and connecting visitors with the stories and people involved?

'Experience Wheel' from 'Experiences Explained', Fáilte Ireland 2019.



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