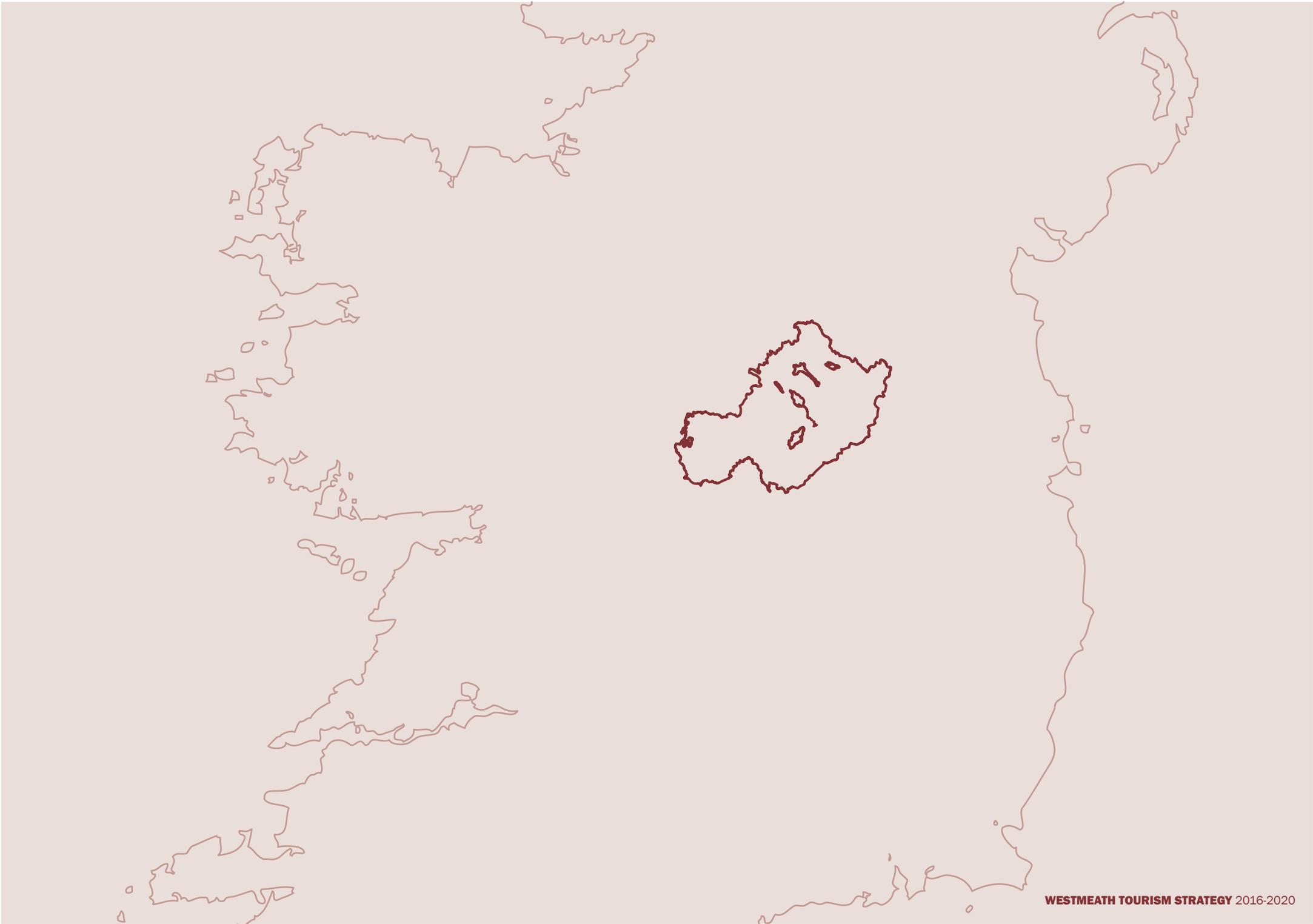
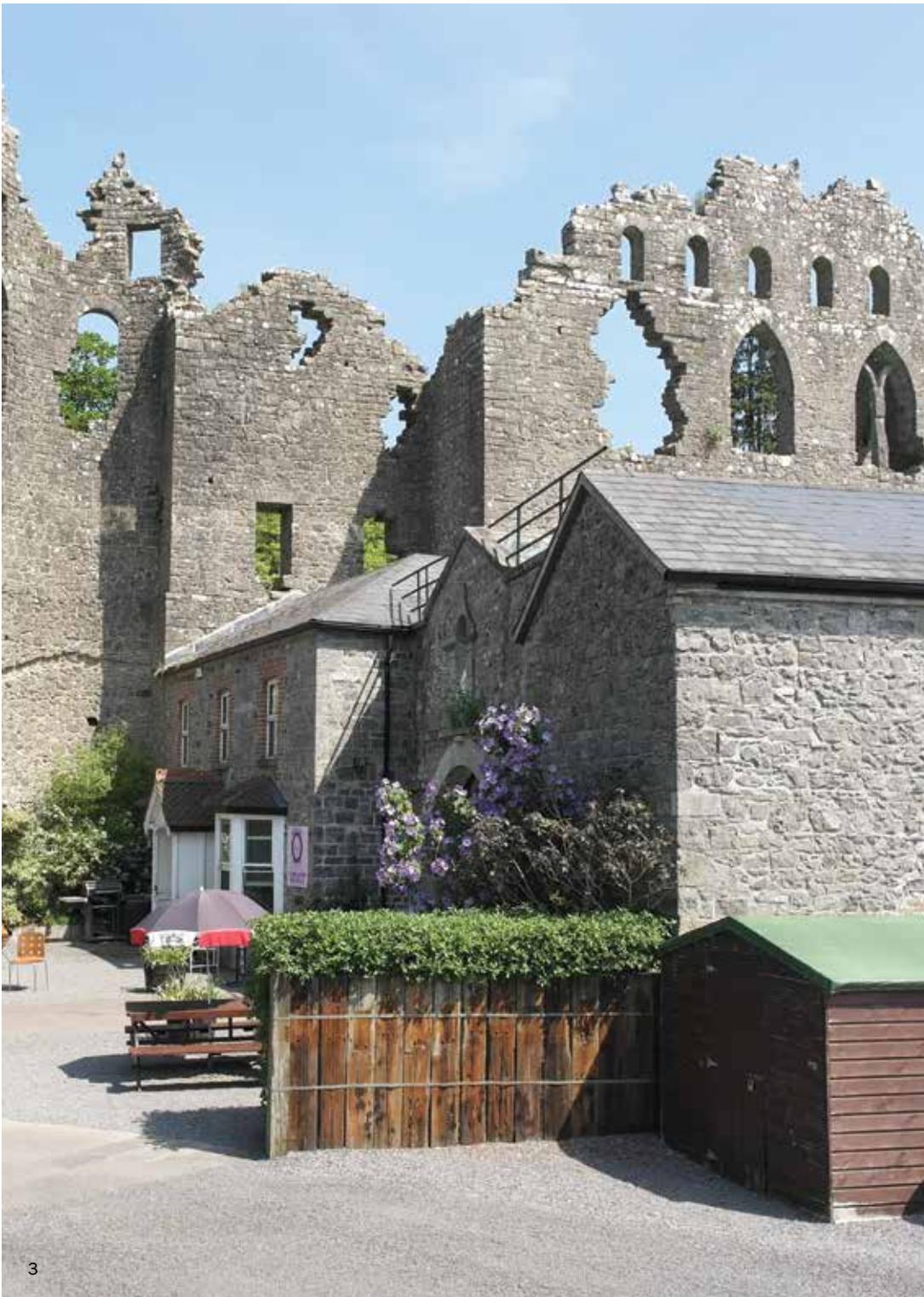




Westmeath Tourism Strategy

2016-2020





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Introduction from An Cathaoirleach and Chief Executive

We are delighted to present and endorse the County Westmeath Tourism Strategy 2016 – 2020. Tourism is an important indigenous industry for Ireland, its benefits influencing many different sectors within the wider economy.

The purpose of this strategy is to provide a road-map for the development of the tourism industry in County Westmeath over the next five years. In its preparation input was sought from public representatives, community groups, tourism providers, state agencies and the wider public. Public consultation workshops were held in Mullingar and Athlone providing opportunities for engagement and discussion.

County Westmeath while not a traditional tourism destination has the potential to develop a unique and high quality tourism product. With its central location, proximity to Dublin and served by quality infrastructure, Westmeath is easily accessed from any part of Ireland. It has an abundance of natural assets, valuable historical built heritage as well as important ancient sites. The challenge is to develop Westmeath as a destination in itself rather than a transit zone to more traditional tourist coastal counties.

It has always been recognised that the warmth and welcome of the Irish people is central to what makes Ireland a unique experience to the overseas visitor. It is essential therefore that our people and their 'stories' are placed at the heart of our tourism offering, and that those dealing with visitors are equipped with the skills to deliver an authentic and quality visitor experience.

Fáilte Ireland has created an umbrella brand, 'Ireland's Ancient East'. Westmeath falls within the Ireland's Ancient region and it is imperative that Westmeath aligns itself to this brand proposition to benefit from the significant national investment in the initiative.

The opportunity is there to develop a really strong tourism product in Westmeath. This can only be achieved by the co-operation and collaboration of all stakeholders working together towards a shared vision. Tourism is a key area in which Local Authorities can promote economic development and Westmeath County Council is pleased to facilitate and enable this process.

We look forward to the implementation of the Strategy and are confident that this strategy will help to develop and grow tourism in County Westmeath over the coming years.



A handwritten signature in white ink that reads "Pádraig MacDermott".

Cllr. Frank McDermott
Cathaoirleach
Westmeath County Council



A handwritten signature in white ink that reads "Pat Gallagher".

Pat Gallagher
Chief Executive
Westmeath County Council

1 Background and Overview

The National Context

Tourism is one of Ireland's largest and fastest-growing indigenous industries. The case for supporting tourism is compelling as it is one of Ireland's fastest growing export earners. The sector brings benefits to all regions of the country with many areas increasingly dependent on it. A pillar of Ireland's economic recovery, tourism has not only delivered new jobs but has the potential to deliver far more.

The Irish tourism industry is now worth €7.3 billion and employs 224,000 people throughout the country. 20% of all new jobs since 2011, have been in the tourism & hospitality sector, the tourism industry has undeniably been at the forefront of Ireland's economic recovery.

Nationally, overseas visitors numbers rose to 8.6million in 2015 – higher than the visitor numbers achieved from Fáilte Ireland's 2013 tourism drive 'The Gathering' where visitor numbers reached a record 6.7 million (up 6% on previous year).

The Irish tourism industry is now worth €7.3 billion and employs 224,000 people throughout the country



Having regard to national tourism policy, specifically 'People, Place and Policy Growing Tourism to 2025' (Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport), the overall tourism goal of Government is that overseas tourism revenue will reach the following targets:

- By 2025, revenue from overseas visitors, excluding carrier receipts, will increase to €5 billion in real terms. (i.e. in 2014 prices)
- Employment in the tourism sector will be 250,000 by 2025 (compared with 224,000 at present).
- There will be 10 million visits to Ireland annually by 2025 (compared to 7.6 million in 2014).

With a clear focus on the overseas market, three principal tourism propositions have been developed. These large scale tourism projects encapsulate and enhance existing tourism assets into proposition brands that can be marketed in their own right to the key overseas market segments.

The principal tourism propositions are:-

- **The Wild Atlantic Way**
- **Ireland's Ancient East**
- **Dublin – A Breath of Fresh Air**

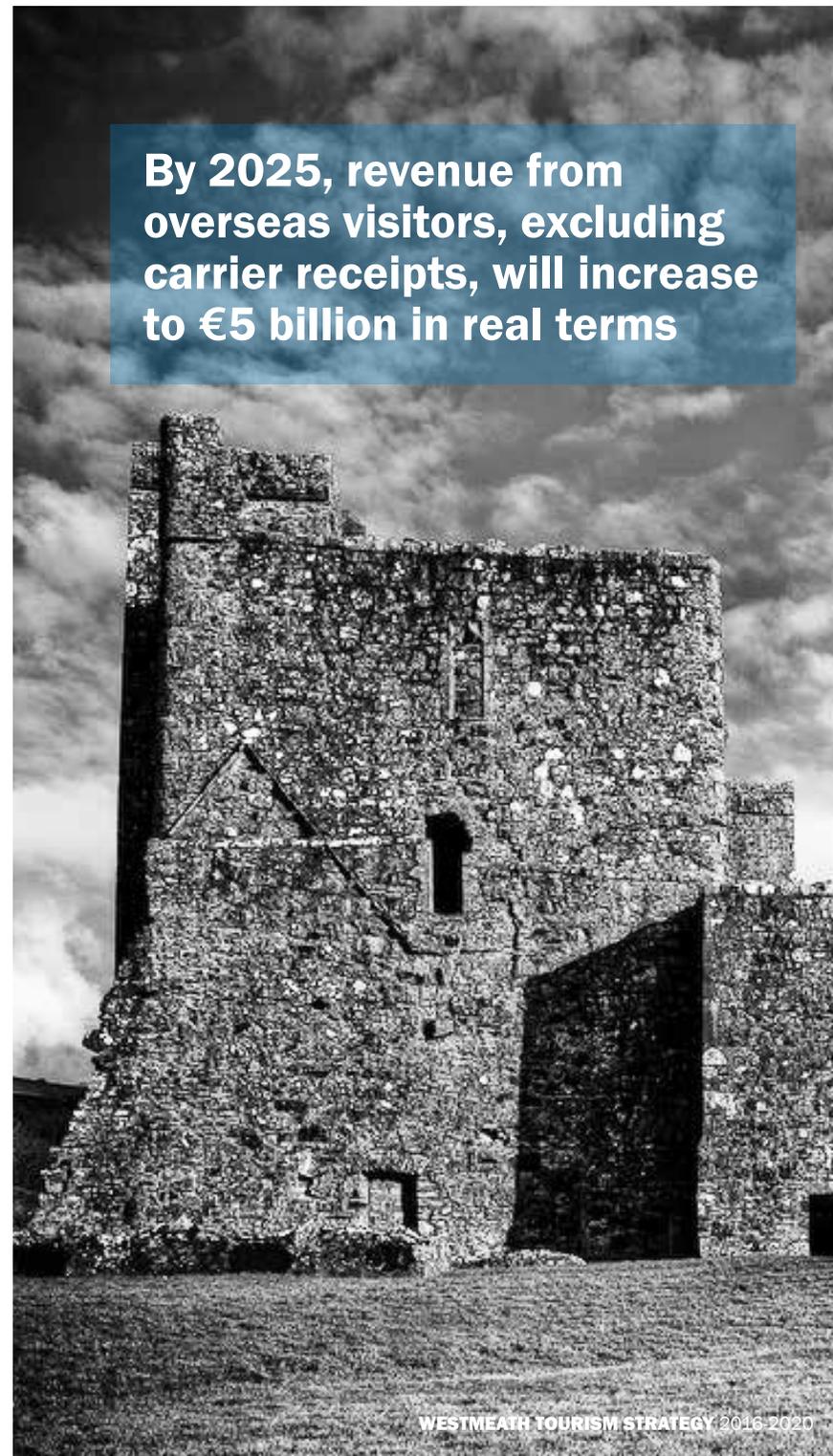
In Ireland, the four main overseas markets deliver 70% of visitors and revenue between them, and when allocating resources it makes sense to focus on countries where the best return is possible.

Westmeath is located in the Ireland's Ancient East (IAE) proposition. The objectives of the IAE 'Brand Strategy' are as follows:-

- Move Ireland's Ancient East from a transit zone to a touring zone
- Grow International Visitor Numbers
- Grow International Revenue
- Disperse visitor traffic across the area by encouraging exploration of signature and lesser known sites and stories
- Demonstrate thought leadership on the brand

While the national focus is on building Ireland's international reputation as a top tourist destination, it is recognised that the stability and growth of the domestic market is paramount to ensure that a strong tourism base is established to build on. A healthy domestic market is considered key to underpinning tourism enterprises on the ground. Fáilte Ireland has reported that domestic trips and the number of holiday nights have steadily increased, thereby supporting the necessity to sustain the domestic market at a local level. It is considered that the vibrancy of the domestic travel market is linked to and supports Ireland's capacity to attract overseas visitors. It provides a strong tourism product platform and serves to maintain off peak business for the industry and ensures quality services, products and experiences.

By 2025, revenue from overseas visitors, excluding carrier receipts, will increase to €5 billion in real terms



Tourism in Westmeath

Westmeath is currently marketed on the international stage as part of the **Ireland's Ancient East** (IAE) proposition. In terms of attracting international visitors, it is recognised that the success of the county is dependent on the success of the region as a whole and that this will require close working relationships between tourism providers and other counties in order to achieve the best tourism offering available.

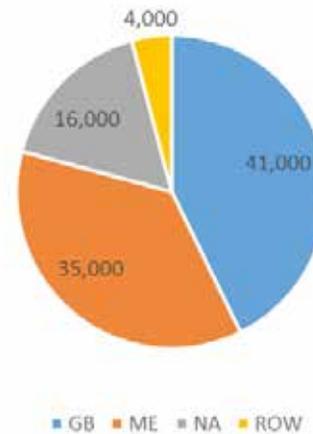
Centrally located, Westmeath is easily accessible from any part of Ireland and just an hour from Dublin. Dotted with sparkling lakes amid rolling hills, Westmeath is truly in the heart of Lakelands Country. The tranquil Royal Canal meanders around Mullingar on its way to the majestic River Shannon which flows through the historic town of Athlone.

Westmeath has the added advantage of being centrally located within the 'Lakelands and Inland Waterways' region that occupies much of central Ireland, a destination proposition that is currently under review by Fáilte Ireland.

Tourism has become an increasingly important sector in the Westmeath economy. Figures show that Westmeath is the most popular and profitable tourist destination of the four midland counties. 96,000 tourists visited the county in 2014; the majority were from Britain and mainland Europe followed by North America. In terms of domestic visitors for the same year, where Westmeath is amalgamated with neighbouring counties Roscommon and Longford, - there were 226,000 trips by Irish residents to the three counties accounting for €37m in expenditure to the region. (Source: Fáilte Ireland Tourism Facts 2013)

Westmeath Overseas Visitor Statistics

96,000 Overseas visitors to Westmeath 2014



GB - Great Britain, ME - Mainland Europe, NA - North America & ROW - Rest of the World (Source - CSO)

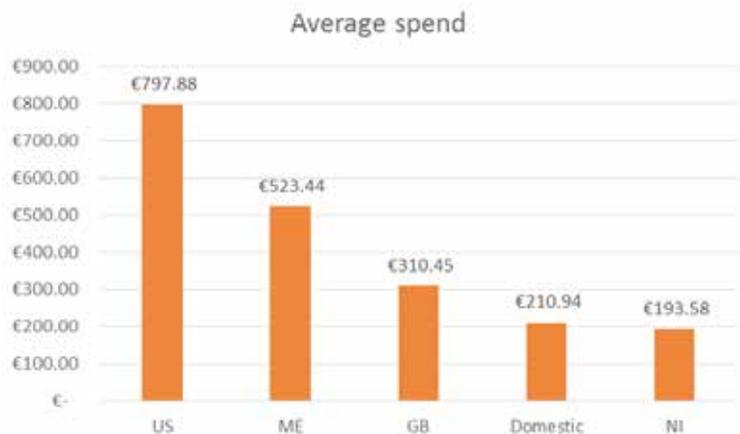
Westmeath Overseas Visitor Expenditure Statistics

€32m Overseas spend in Westmeath 2014



GB - Great Britain, ME - Mainland Europe, NA - North America & ROW - Rest of the World (Source - CSO)

Domestic versus Overseas Tourist Spend



US – United States of America, ME – Mainland Europe, GB – Great Britain, & Northern Ireland (Source CSO)

County Westmeath is rich in natural resources with many lakes, rivers and waterways, particularly the River Shannon and the Royal Canal. The county's major lakes include Lough Ennell, Owel, Derravaragh, Lene, and Sheelin which have been traditionally popular for Angling. Lough Ree, popular with anglers attracts water sports enthusiasts as well as leisure cruiser traffic. Golf, Angling and Equestrian activities have traditionally been important pursuits for the visitor to the county and will continue to be important activities in the future as the county has a good product base in these categories.

In recent years, Westmeath has benefitted from the emerging development of national off-road Greenways that currently traverse the county. Developments such as the Royal Canal Greenway and Old Rail Trail cater for the increasingly popular walking and cycling markets. These are growing markets for Ireland as over 1.2m overseas visitors were engaged in hiking/cross country walking in 2014, an increase of over 62% on the previous year's figure of 742,000 for these activities. (Source: Fáilte Ireland Tourism Facts 2013 & 2014).

Westmeath is steeped in heritage and history and hosts significant visitor attractions in Belvedere House, Athlone Castle and Kilbeggan Distillery. It also contains important heritage sites such as Fore Abbey in the North of the county and Uisneach, one of the royal sites which has great historical significance and is often considered the centre of celtic Ireland. The county's heritage offerings are well positioned to fit with Fáilte Ireland's themed branding initiative *Ireland's Ancient East*. The Ireland's Ancient East initiative is designed to allow visitors to peel back the layers of time and to go off the beaten track to experience thousands of years of history. It focuses on the wealth of cultural and heritage attractions in the area. Such themed initiatives are estimated by Fáilte Ireland to bring an additional 600,000 overseas visitors to Ireland, and increase visitor revenue by 28%.

The county also possesses other attractions in Dun na Sí Heritage and Amenity Park in Moate which encompasses ecology, heritage, arts, genealogy and folklore. Tullynally Castle and Gardens and Mullaghmeen Forest in the North of the county are also popular with visitors.

Westmeath hosts a number of festivals and events which draw on the county's natural and cultural resources. These include drama and literary festivals, agricultural shows, music festivals, river and food festivals, vintage shows etc., all of which contribute to the tourism offering in the county. Family fun days/field days are increasingly popular in most communities in the county, playing a key role for local social interaction, celebrating a particular cultural and natural resource or as a fund-raising mechanism. Though fledgling in nature these events too have the potential to attract visitors outside of their immediate areas.

Westmeath's accommodation is mainly hotel based, including high quality 4-Star hotels as well as Guesthouses, B&Bs and self-catering venues. The majority of the accommodation base is concentrated around the two main towns of Mullingar and Athlone, with limited accommodation in smaller towns and villages or in the countryside. In total there are 54 accommodation premises comprising of 16 hotels, 28 Guesthouses/B&Bs plus an undefined number of self-catering units. The capacity of the 54 registered accommodation providers is 2,707 beds. County Westmeath does not possess a hostel nor are any of its three caravan and camping parks registered with Fáilte Ireland. (Source: Fáilte Ireland Accommodation Capacity by County 2015).

2 Consultation

An Issues Paper was prepared and advertised inviting public submissions regarding the preparation of the proposed Westmeath Tourism Strategy 2016 – 2020. Industry workshops in Mullingar and Athlone followed together with stakeholder meetings.

The aim of the consultation process was to identify key objectives and challenges with the objective of creating a series of deliverable actions to develop Westmeath as a distinct tourism destination. The core objective of the consultation was to identify a number of unique and authentic propositions, supported by an implementation framework to ensure that Westmeath successfully grows over the long-term with an increased share of domestic and international visitor and extended stays/durations.

A total of **twelve written submissions were received** with an **attendance of over eighty people** at the workshops. Stakeholder engagements with various state agencies including Waterway's Ireland and Fáilte Ireland (Regional) etc., were also held.

A number of written proposals were received on the Draft Strategy which were considered by the members of the Economic, Enterprise and Tourism Strategic Policy Committee.

The Strategy proposals were presented to and discussed by the Economic, Enterprise and Tourism Strategic Policy Committee.



3 SWOT Analysis of Westmeath Tourism

Strengths

- Central location - the heart of Ireland
- Natural beauty and unspoilt landscape including our bogs and peatlands
- Natural asset of the lakes and waterways; Westmeath - 'The Lake County'
- Visitor attractions including Athlone Castle, Belvedere House, Gardens & Park, Hill of Uisneach, Fore Abbey, Tullnally Castle, Kilbeggan Distillery and Dún na Sí Amenity and Heritage Park etc.
- Greenways – including completion of strategic link of the Dublin – Galway National Cycle Network constructed between Mullingar and Athlone
- Westmeath Way
- Ability to offer year round activities – boating, angling, sailing, golf, walking & cycling
- Historic towns & villages
- Excellent shopping and dining facilities
- Excellent choice and quality of accommodation
- Ease of access; located at the centre of Ireland with rail and bus links to the principal towns of Mullingar and Athlone plus easy access from the M4 & M6 motorways
- Proximity to three international airports
- Archaeological Heritage

Weakness/Challenges

- Lack of awareness outside the County about the quality and depth of product on offer – transit zone between destination hotspots East and West of the country
- Lack of traditional tourism history; not regarded as a tourist destination at domestic and international level
- Lack of clear vision/direction and unique selling points (USP) for the County
- Lack of product built around the famous names, places and history
- Poor accessibility and access to the lakes and rivers
- Few public recreational facilities and weaknesses in public realm of towns & villages
- Lack of linkages between tourism attractions and amenities
- Poor or dated/obsolete tourist information signage
- Lack of coordination/co-operation among tourism industry operators.
- Fragmented marketing and PR
- Lack of county Tourism Office to coordinate tourist product

Opportunities

- Capitalise on the 'First Mover' opportunity regarding the development of the Galway – Dublin Greenway (NCN)
- Create an operational programme for the delivery of 'stories' and visitor experiences at destination level to elevate Westmeath within IAE
- Develop arts/cultural events, music/ concerts, based on unique characters & attractions of the county i.e. Count John McCormack, Joe Dolan, Hill of Uisneach etc.
- Support, promote and capitalise on food, music, agri, cultural, sporting events/competitions & festivals
- Develop 'Off Season' activities and roll out of packages to extend shoulder season
- Capitalise on the Mullingar Purple Flag accreditation
- Capitalise on the town centre enhancement projects to enhance public realm
- Gain new business through enhanced PR promotion of the positives of the county
- Enhanced interpretation and information for key sites and places of interest
- Facilitate public art installations/ sculptures to enhance the public realm and create 'points of interest'
- Provision of more child-friendly activities and attractions
- Improved signage to, from and within the destination including links to other attraction and public transport hubs
- Increased funding for tourism investment (i.e. Fáilte Ireland Capital Development Programme, Waterways Ireland funding opportunities etc.)
- Support and develop Diaspora links with key overseas markets and examine the potential of providing/ supporting a public Diaspora Database within the county
- Develop, promote and support activity based attractions/holidays
- Capitalise on the proposed Centre Parcs development in Ballymahon, Co Longford
- Utilise Longford/Westmeath Community Transport to provide local transport links
- Tourism and recreational use of bogs and peatlands
- Develop walking routes

Threats

- Failure to implement actions
- Increasing competition from other destinations & inability to successfully promote the county as a 'Destination' rather than a stop-over between the national tourism 'honey-pots'
- Lack of access to countryside, rivers and lakes including access to the islands of Lough Ree
- Lack of aggressive marketing and promotion
- Lack of collaboration and co-operation between tourism industry sector
- Lack of investment from Government

4 Strategic Direction

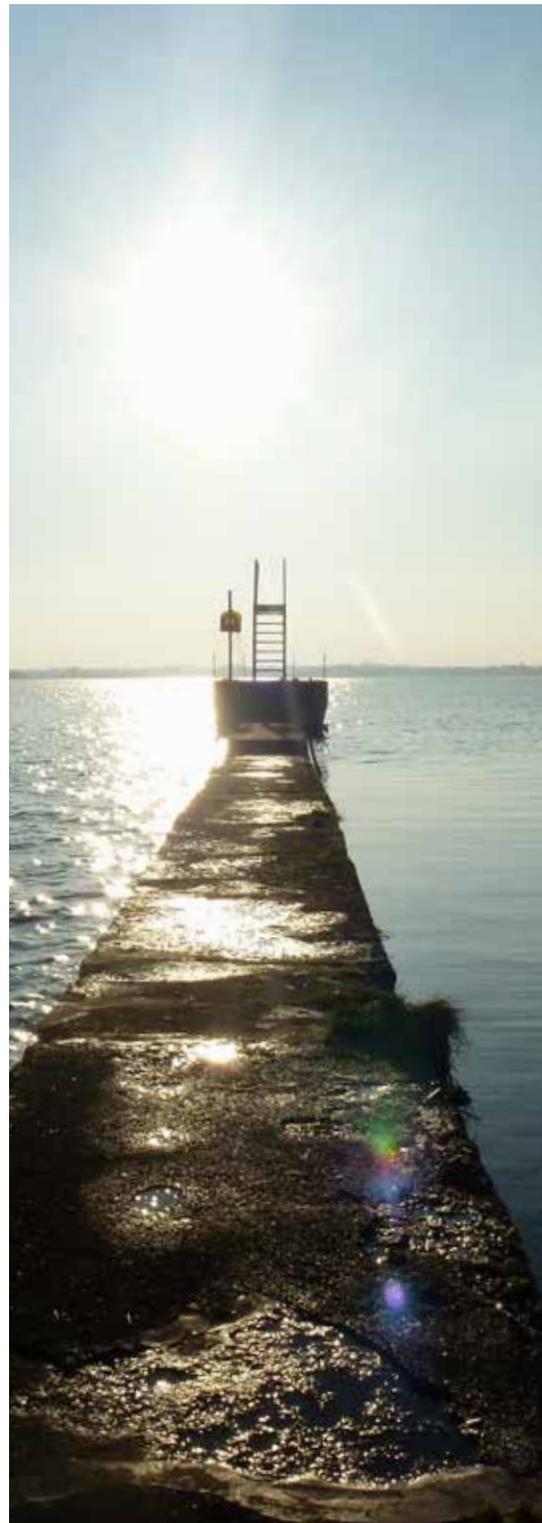
The Westmeath Tourism Strategy 2016 – 2020 is a strategy designed to deliver one common goal for 2020 and beyond – to develop Westmeath as a first choice high quality destination that provides an authentic and memorable holiday experience.

At the heart of the strategy is growth, via quality and authentic visitor experiences that can be achieved by developing and promoting the products and assets that are unique to Westmeath, through a shared vision and delivering them to the highest possible standard at each and every point of the visitor journey. This will be achieved by maximising Westmeath’s potential as a tourism destination within Ireland’s Ancient East as well as distinguishing Westmeath as a unique destination in its own right.

It is an objective of the Westmeath Tourism Strategy 2016 to produce a set of deliverable ‘Actions’ and identify a range of ‘Opportunities’ over the five year life of this Strategy and beyond. In terms of marketing and promotion, this Strategy shall align with Fáilte Ireland’s Brand Proposition for the region – Ireland’s Ancient East (IAE) – (Refer to Appendix 2 Ireland’s Ancient East detail).

It is an objective of this Strategy to successfully grow Westmeath’s share of domestic and international visitors and increase visitor duration. It is therefore proposed that Westmeath develop three principal propositions that shall essentially serve as sub-products to Fáilte Ireland’s primary proposition for the region – Ireland’s Ancient East.

In addition to the three sub-propositions, a number of recommended ‘countywide’ actions and opportunities shall be presented in this document and subsumed collectively into all of the propositions across the county.



The proposed 3 principal Westmeath propositions are as follows:-

Westmeath’s Propositions:

Greenways, Blueways, Lakes & Waterways

(Including the National Cycle Network, lakes, River Shannon, inland waterways, cycle and walking trails etc.)

Athlone & District - ‘Destination Athlone’

(Including Athlone Castle, Luan Gallery, Dún na Sí Amenity & Heritage Park Moate, Ballinahown Craft Village, Glasson – Village of the Roses, River Shannon & lakes etc.)

Mullingar & District - ‘Music, Myths & Legends’

(Including Hill of Uisneach, Belvedere House, Gardens & Park, Lilliput, Fore, Children of Lir experience & Derravaragh, Tullynally Castle, Mullaghmeen Forest, Lakes & Waterways, Kilbeggan Distillery, Kilbeggan Racecourse, etc.)



It is considered, that by successfully aligning the proposed Westmeath propositions with Ireland’s Ancient East, Westmeath can achieve a distinctive tourism offering and experience that will allow the county to compete both nationally and internationally with other tourist destinations.

5 Sub-propositions - Actions & Opportunities

5.i Greenways, Blueways, Lakes & Waterways

Greenways

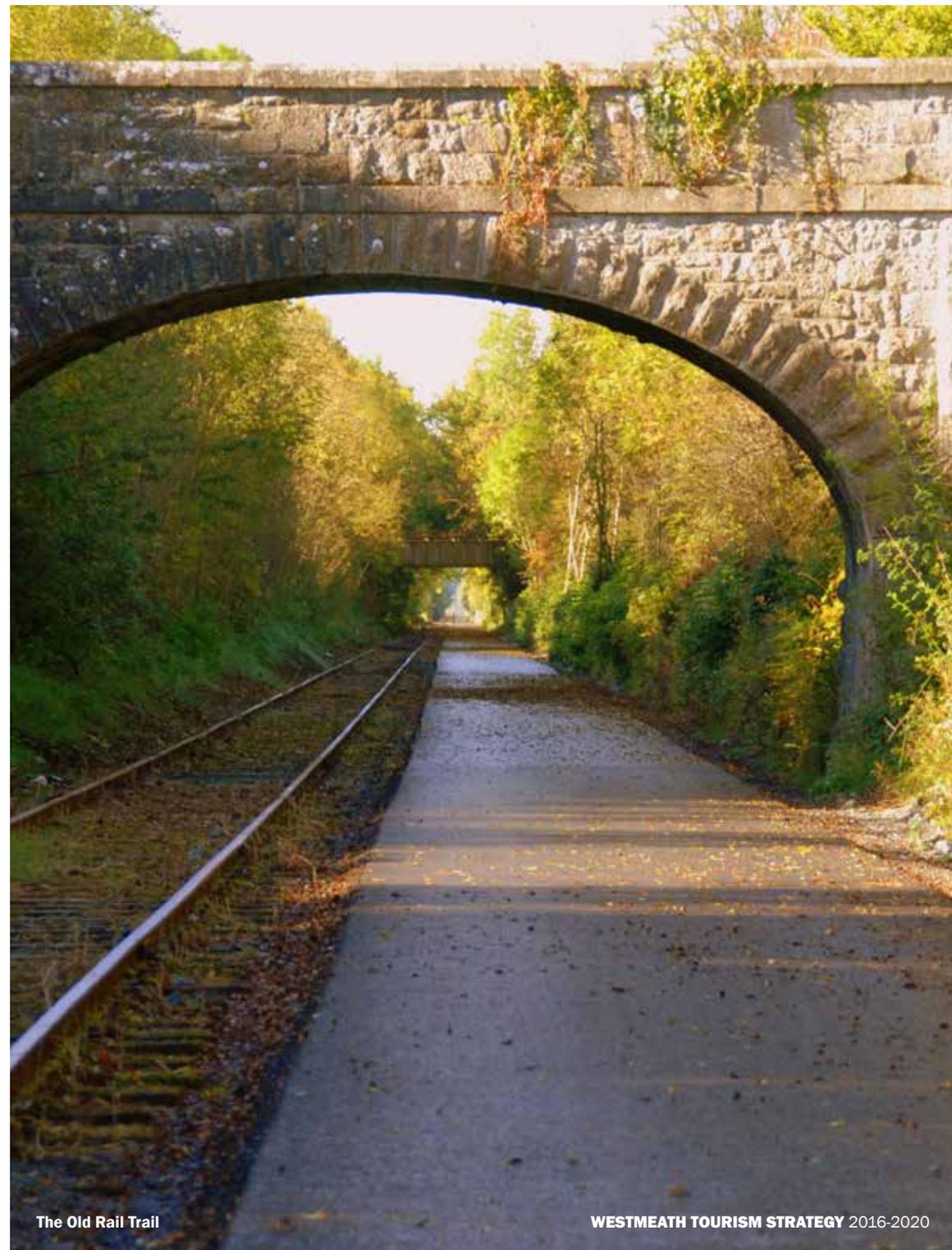
Greenways are fast becoming a feature of the Irish landscape with an emphasis on tourism - particularly following the success of Mayo's Great Western Greenway. The rise of traffic-free trails has resulted in an ever growing and competitive 'Greenway' holiday market. Consequently, it is essential that the Westmeath Greenways offer a 'unique visitor experience' to attract and sustain visitor numbers while achieving a positive return in investment. It is recognised, that while the provision of high quality infrastructure is important in terms of surface materials, ease of use etc., quality infrastructure alone will not serve to create a memorable visitor experience and it is therefore necessary to develop engaging experiences across the Greenways network, in particular, the Old Rail Trail experience and the Royal Canal Greenway.

The Old Rail Trail

It is recognised that while the sporting/recreational aspect of the Greenways will most likely appeal to the 'Great Escapers' target market (see Appendix 2), the appeal of the Westmeath Greenways can be further evolved and utilised as a scenic and alternative link to important tourism attractions throughout the entire county, creating links both off-road and on-road to places of interest and villages that would appeal to the 'Culturally Curious' (see Appendix 2), as well as the domestic target markets. Visitors will choose a destination based on the overall experience of what they can see and do and traffic free cycling is an enjoyable means of experiencing other activities at a safe and relaxed pace.

It is recommended that Westmeath Greenways are developed and promoted as 'Signature Experiences' by highlighting various 'points of interest' along the Old Rail Trail and the Royal Canal together with the creation of cycle loops on and off the Greenways to quaint villages and local tourist attractions or 'Hidden Gems'. The Greenways should be developed as part of a 'Storytelling' journey as promoted in the Ireland's Ancient East Brand to create a memorable visitor experience.

It is further recommended that Westmeath capitalises on the 'First Mover Opportunity' presented in terms of the recent development of the Mullingar to Athlone section of the proposed Dublin to Galway Greenway National Cycle Network (NCN) - 'The Old Rail Trail' as well as the Royal Canal in this regard, and maximises the appeal to potential users across the target markets.



The Old Rail Trail

Galway to Dublin Cycleway – National Cycle Network (NCN)

The Westmeath section of the proposed Galway to Dublin Cycleway NCN extends from the Meath county border, along the existing Royal Canal Greenway, through Mullingar to the town of Athlone. While the route of the Royal Canal Greenway extends north of Mullingar, towards Coolnahay and the Longford county boundary, the route of the Galway to Dublin Cycleway branches off from the canal towpath joining the former Mullingar – Athlone railway track. This section amounts to a 42km section of the proposed 277km of the overall Galway to Dublin Cycleway travelling through the scenic landscape of County Westmeath, via the settlements of Castletown Geoghegan, Streamstown and on to the town of Moate, before arriving on the eastern side of Athlone in the townland of Garrycastle with plans approved to extend to the Athlone Marina.

The final section of the NCN within Westmeath is to the west of the Marina Building; a route is currently being developed to link this Greenway across the River Shannon to Athlone Castle where a new cyclehub is proposed. The Greenway shall then continue west and on to Galway.



Proposed Shannon Cycle bridge

Key features of the Galway to Dublin Cycleway will include:

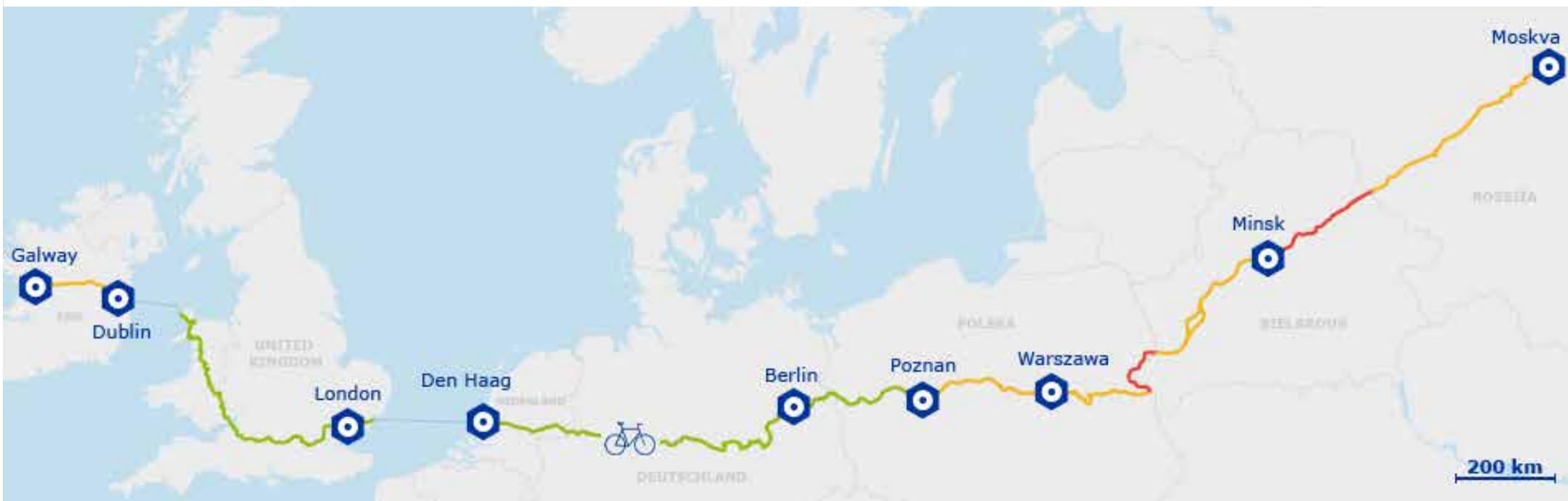
- A long distance cycling trail that caters for multi-functional use, including walking, running, and water transport where it aligns with the waterways network.
- A traffic free environment with good traffic-free connections into key towns along the corridor offering a range of services.
- A means of accessing a range of activities, attractions and events along a 200+ kilometre corridor stretching between Dublin and Galway.
- A tourism offer with a strong brand identity supporting independent travellers and guided tours which draws from the best features of similar destinations worldwide.
- Good access to and from the trail at intermediate points by public transport.
- A local resource, for walking, cycling and water-based activities.
- An engine for driving growth in local business and in the national economy

The Cycleway will be an important national tourism asset attracting walkers and cyclists from all over Ireland, Europe and beyond. It will also provide recreational opportunities for local communities along the route.

EuroVelo

EuroVelo is a European cycle route network with an aim to offer a sustainable Trans-European Network. It comprises 14 long distance cycle routes which cover about 70,000 km of which approximately 45,000 km are in existence. The network is managed by the European Cyclists' Federation which is seeking to ensure that all routes offer high standards of design, signage and promotion throughout Europe.

The Galway – Dublin Cycleway (NCN) has been identified as a significant marketing tool in the promotion of Ireland as a cycle destination as it forms part of the EuroVelo 2 Capitals Route - part of the greater trans-European cycle route. The EuroVelo2 route links capitals across Europe with Galway being the first leg of the route to Moscow.



Source: EuroVelo 2 - Capitals Route Map

Greenways - Opportunities

• Develop world class cycle hubs in the towns of Athlone & Mullingar

Develop world class cycle hubs in the towns of Athlone and Mullingar to act as key national information and access points onto the National Cycle Network and the EuroVelo 2 Capitals Route. Athlone and Mullingar are uniquely positioned in national terms given the accessibility of both towns directly off the M6 and M4 motorways.

In addition to the provision of branded Trailheads, the hubs should include provision of rest facilities and practical information for visitors, including promotion of activities, attractions, accommodation and public transport in the area as well as providing maps, suggested itineraries and practical information such as bike hire & repair. The provision of expert local knowledge and bookings for all Greenway Trails throughout Ireland together with EuroVelo information should be of a standard to enhance visitor's experience including the provision of:-

- Itinerary planning and information
- Secure, covered and lockable bicycle compounds
- Male and female showers and toilets
- Lockers and storage facilities.
- Assist in nationwide Greenway bookings - accommodation, transport links, related activities, attractions, bike hire/repair etc.
- Local information - events, attractions, restaurants
- Free maps, weather & road safety/rules information



• Create a Unique Visitor Experience

Capitalise on First Mover Advantage on the Galway – Dublin National Cycle Route

Having regard to the increasing development and popularity of Greenways across the country, it is considered imperative that Westmeath Greenways offers a distinctive experience to make Westmeath the champion destination in terms of Greenway based breaks and to ensure the longevity and investment return of the Greenway infrastructure.

The heritage of the former rail and canal networks can be presented as a unique selling point and would help secure in the restoration of historic rail and canal infrastructure and buildings as rail/canal heritage along the route(s). The history of the buildings can be interwoven into the concept of the Signature Stories.

The restoration of former rail and canal buildings and infrastructure can act as points of interest, with stories linking to the heritage of historical navigational routes, as well as providing geographic/distance markers acting as locations for 'photo opportunities' serving as an effective marketing tool given the advent of photo sharing across Social Media.

It is therefore recommended that Westmeath's promotion of the Greenways serves to incorporate historical rail/canal infrastructure into the 'Storytelling' concept and utilises existing historic features as signposts or distance markers along the route. The use of rail and canal features along the Greenways will give a feeling of historical significance to the rail/canal corridor and also provide trail users with an idea of where they are and how far they have come.



Before image of Station Cabin along the Old Rail Trail



After image of Station Cabin along the Old Rail Trail



Points of interests do not have to be restricted to a heritage context and can be expanded to include interesting facts such as the use of the former Moate Railway Station as a film location for the 1979 film 'The Great Train Robbery'.



Actor Sean Connery on location in Moate c.1979
Source: www.dublinalwaygreenway.com

• Extend existing Greenway routes

Extend and upgrade existing Greenway routes including the extension of the Old Rail Trail that forms part of the Dublin to Galway Greenway through Athlone.

It is recommended that additional links off the Greenways are created, to provide attractive cycle loops to tourist attractions and surrounding villages & the wider countryside i.e. from Old Rail Trail to Hill of Uisneach, Clonmacnoise etc., and from the Royal Canal to Fore etc.

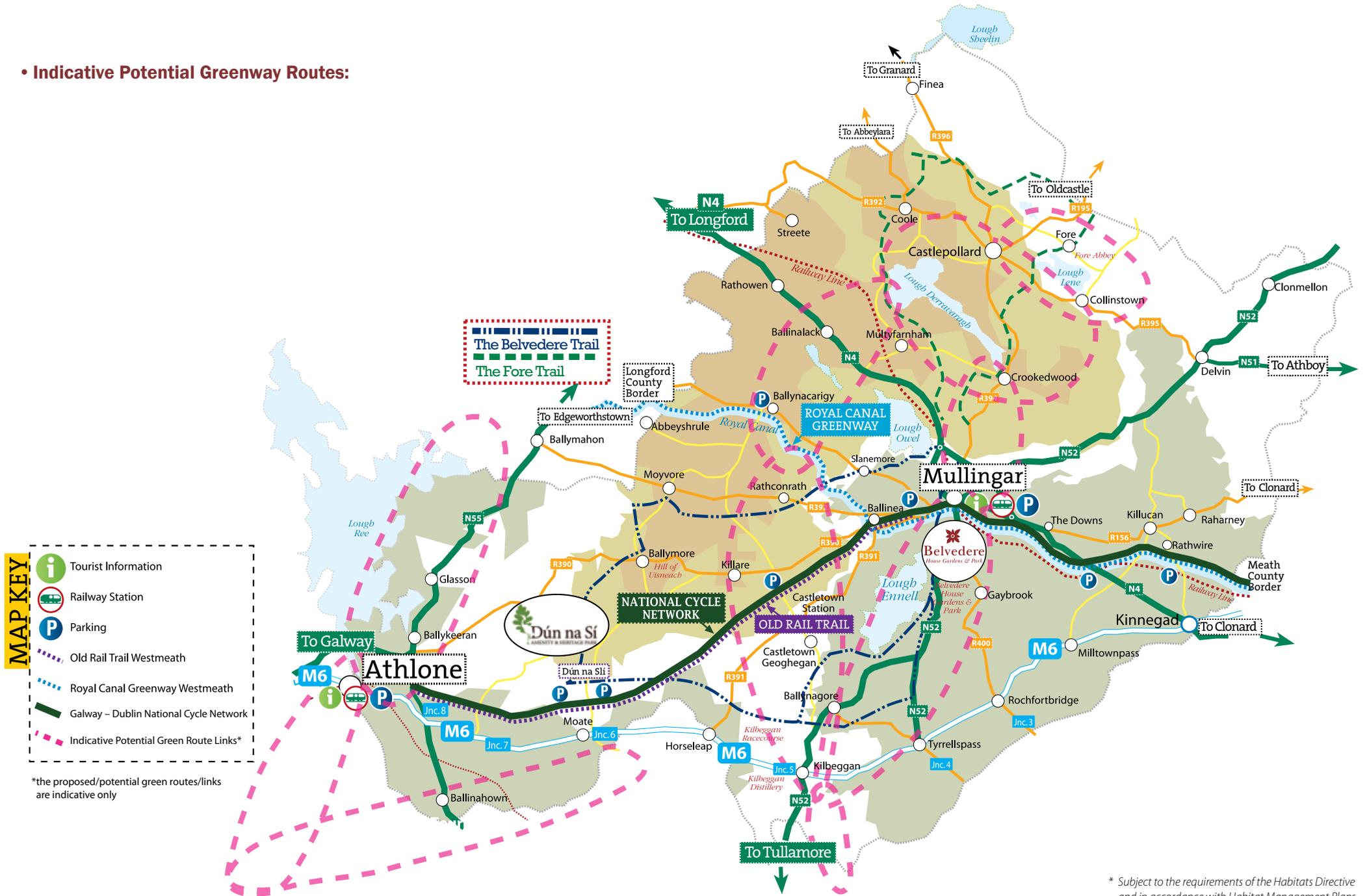


Locke 22 – Foyal Canal



Coolnahay Harbour – Locke Keepers Cottage serves refreshments to weary visitors!

• **Indicative Potential Greenway Routes:**



* Subject to the requirements of the Habitats Directive and in accordance with Habitat Management Plans for designated sites.

Blueways

Blueways Ireland is a recreation and tourism initiative centred on outdoor activity along the beautiful environs of the waterways of Ireland. Blueways provide endless opportunities to enjoy a wide range of activities such as canoeing, cycling and walking, not to mention the tremendous health benefits for the local communities.

The definition of a Blueway is “a recreational water activity trail that is developed for use by non-motorised water activity enthusiasts. It is defined by trail heads, put in and take out points and readily available trail information. Blueways can be developed on canals, rivers, lakes or along the coast and can incorporate other associated land based trails adjacent to the water trail.”

A number of partners have been involved with the lead agency, Waterways Ireland, in developing Blueway trails in Ireland. These include Canoeing Ireland, The National Trails Office of the Irish Sports Council, Fáilte Ireland, Local Authorities and Tourism Offices. Much work has been carried out with local communities and businesses around the Blueways, to develop packages combining activity with fabulous places to Stay, Eat and Go. (Source: Blueways Ireland 2016).



Blueways - Opportunities

- **Support the development and expansion of Blueway activities and facilities on Westmeath's Canals and Lakes in co-operation with Waterways Ireland and the National Trails Office.**
- **Promote recreational and commercial boating opportunities on the Blueway.**

Canals:

In 2014, Waterways Ireland published a report 'Recreation, Tourism and Commercial Product Identification Study' with the proposed vision for the Grand Canal Rural and Royal Canal Rural as:

The repositioning of the canals from a transport waterway corridor to a branded recreational activity zone; achieved through the development of multi-use linear park linking Dublin's urban population with the River Shannon via an East-West Greenway PLUS network.

The report, prepared by Tourism Development International (TDI), identified the following range of potential tourism and recreation activities:

- **Range of boating activities**
- **Angling**
- **Walking**
- **Cycling** – Greenways with additional circuits and loops.
- **Nature/Bird watching**



It is recommended that the proposals outlined in Waterways Ireland Recreation, Tourism and Commercial Product Identification Study are supported by this Strategy wherein it is proposed that the development and promotion of the canal be combined with an outdoor activity animation programme, driving activity participation both on and off-water*. For the Royal Canal this means the development of:

- **‘The Royal Greenway PLUS’** a multi-user activity route along the canal
- **‘Greenway Gateways’** – tourism and recreation hubs along the canal
- **‘Canal Activity Zones’** in each town along the ‘The Royal Greenway PLUS’ driving recreational use
- **Royal Canal PLUS Multi-themed Driving Route** tightly following the route of the Royal Canal linking attractions along the way.

**(Subject to the requirements of the Habitats Directive and in accordance with Habitat Management Plans for designated site(s)).*



- **Support the expansion and improvement of Greenways along the canal networks in conjunction with Waterways Ireland and the National Trails Office.**

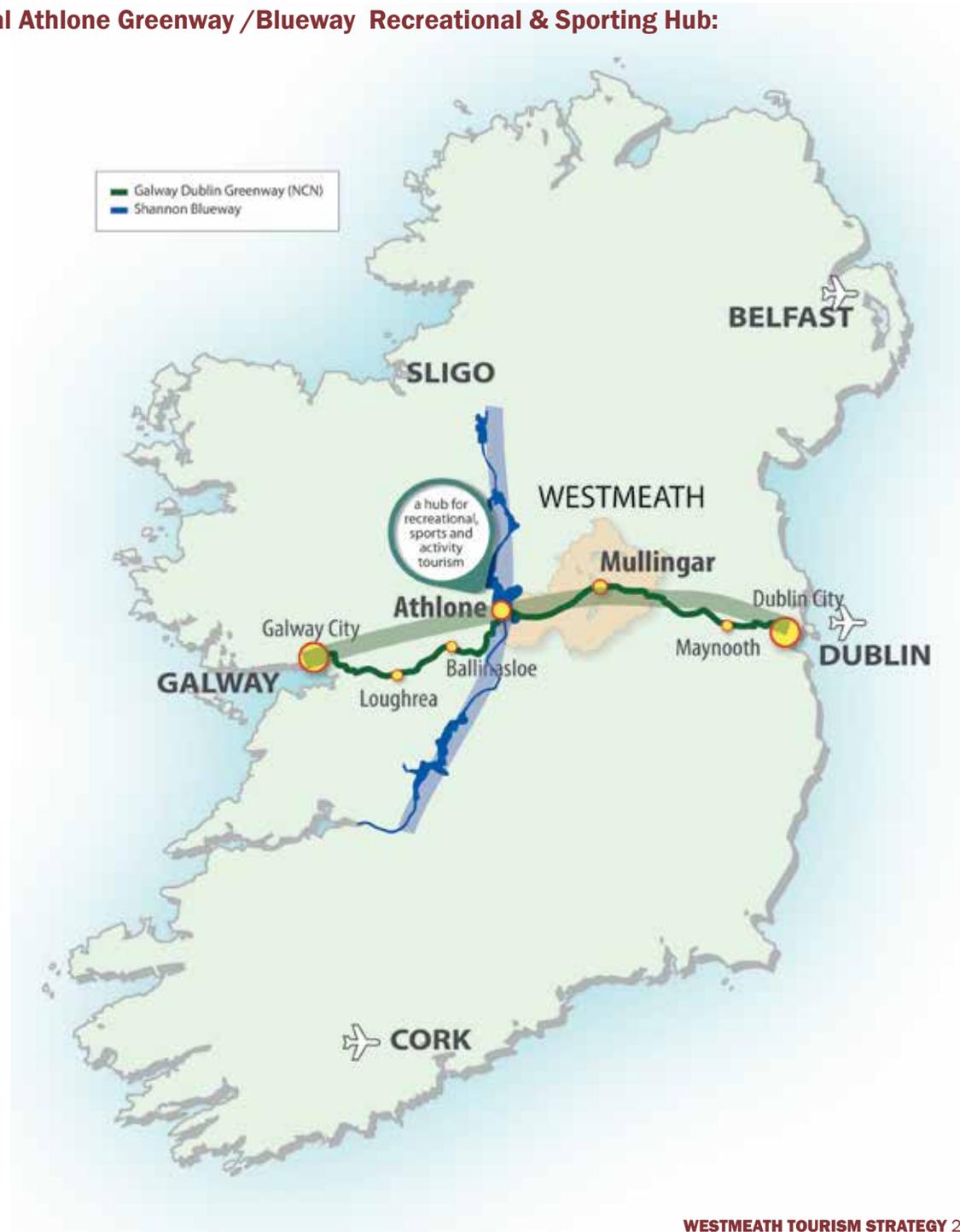
Creation of greenways extending from the Royal Canal along connecting watercourses such as the Feeder Canal to Lough Owel & Lacy's Canal to Lough Ennell (subject to the Habitats Directive).

- **River Shannon Blueway, Lakes & the Galway – Dublin Greenway**

It is recommended that the Shannon Blueway concept is expanded to include the development and promotion of activities in and around Athlone to create an Athlone Blueway/Greenway experience. Such a development would result in the progression of the existing 200km Shannon Blueway which has been described as an innovative, safe and easy to use series of on water and land based trails. With the co-operation and support of Waterways Ireland, the expansion of the Shannon Blueways experience would involve minimum intervention but would leverage existing usage and expand upon high status events such as the successful Tri-Athlone to develop market awareness and serve to tie in with the strategically planned Galway to Dublin Greenway that will pass through the heart of Athlone.

It is considered that there is a viable opportunity to capitalise on the unique intersection of the Shannon Blueway with the Galway to Dublin Greenway that occurs in Athlone. This intersection could act as a key hub, connecting with other water courses and related sporting and leisure facilities, resulting in a hub for sports and activity tourism and be promoted as the destination of where Ireland's National Greenway and Blueway meet - as illustrated over.

Potential Athlone Greenway /Blueway Recreational & Sporting Hub:



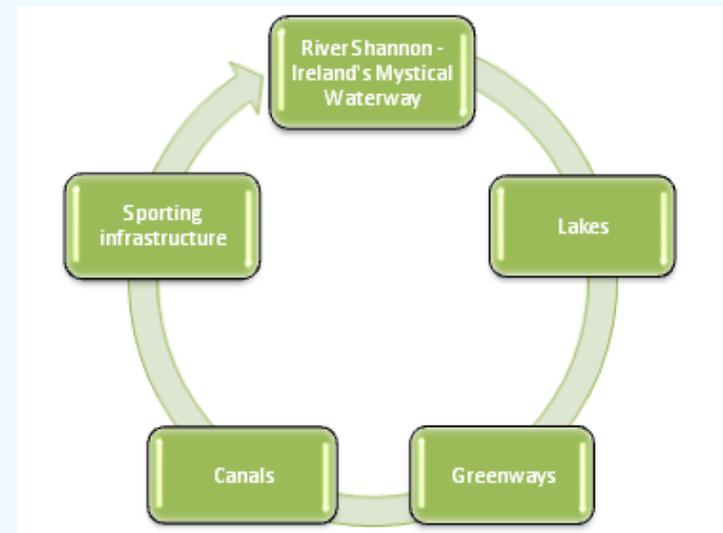


The Greenway/Blueway in Athlone could therefore be easily developed as a hub for recreational, sports and activity tourism. Athlone was awarded the European Town of Sport for 2013 by ACES Europe, the Federation for the Association of the European Capitals and Cities of Sport.

A cluster of features in and around Athlone linked by a common theme is recommended in terms of recreation and amenity, particularly given Athlone's unique geographic location where the River Shannon and Dublin to Galway Greenway – National Cycle Network /EuroVelo 2 intersect.

It is considered that Athlone can serve as a hub, not only due to the uniqueness of the location, but due to the continued success of national events such as the Tri-Athlone and Community Games. Furthermore, the sporting and recreation theme is supported by the existing sporting infrastructure including the Regional Sports Centre, the Athlone Institute of Technology €10 million International Sports Arena facility, Athlone Boating Club, the Buccaneers Rugby Club and Athlone FC which have both hosted international games, in addition to the assets of the NCN and the River Shannon.

Recreational & Sporting Hub



Lakes & Waterways - Opportunities

Lakes:-

• Development of Blueway Activities

It is recommended that Waterways Ireland's proposals, to create Blueway activities and facilities on the Lough Ree (inner lake) to create canoe trail infrastructure, are supported by this strategy. This development emanates from the shared objective of opening up access to the Lough Ree islands that was included in the proposed Product Development Identification Study.

• Promotion of Angling

It is considered that angling as a tourism product for Westmeath the 'Lake County' has huge potential and that the natural resources presented by our natural assets should be optimised. The Fáilte Ireland Angling Strategy (2009) identified angling as an important sector for Irish tourism, with the potential to provide for economic growth, in particular in respect of rural areas, due to the requirement for accommodation, food, entertainment, boat hire and other activities that are part and parcel of the overall angling holiday experience. Statistics revealed that overseas visitors who engaged in angling while in Ireland spent an estimated €105million.

Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI) reported in 2015 that Lough Ree is one of the best fisheries in the country. The organisation released the findings of a scientific survey of adult fish stocks in the lake that was carried out in 2014 and stated that "Lough Ree can be regarded as one of Ireland's premier 'mixed fisheries' that results in the provision of "quality angling on a seasonal basis."

Given the potential revenue accrued from angling, combined with the raw material already available, it is considered imperative that Westmeath works to promote and support the profile of angling in the county.

In the short term, simple measures include the provision of co-ordinated, accessible and up to date information including information on where to buy permits, details of fishing stocks, directions and access to lakes, boat hire etc. Promotion and marketing is essential to highlight and differentiate Westmeath from similar inland destinations i.e. such as the Pike fishing.

It is recommended, that over the longer term, Westmeath presents a number of prime sites in the many tranquil settings that offer good access, adequate facilities and quality fish stocks.



Source: Midlands Angling Facebook Page



Source: www.MidlandsIrelands.ie

Greenways, Blueways, Lakes & Waterways – Actions

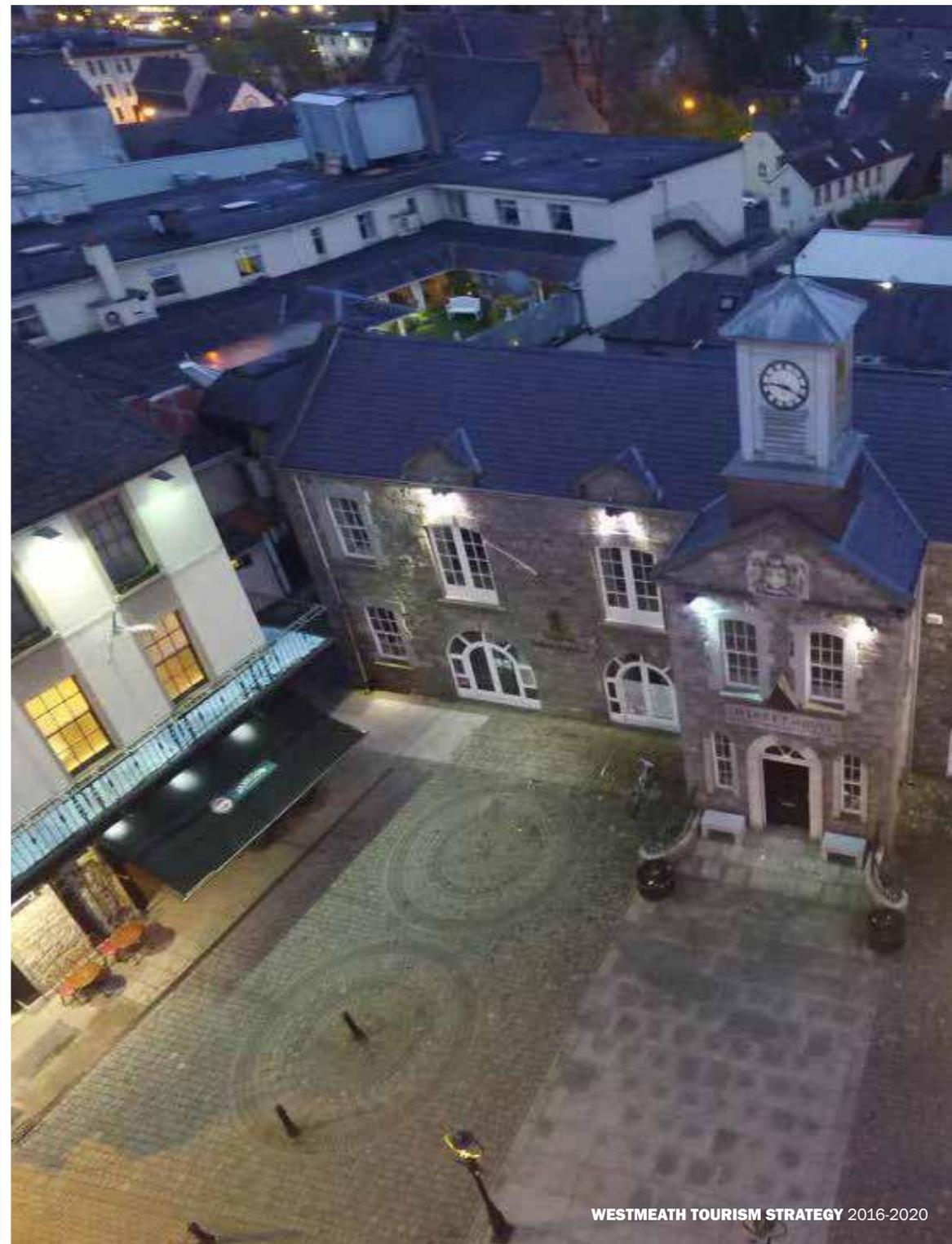
- Develop World Class Greenway Hubs in Mullingar and Athlone to act as a national central access point on/off the Dublin - Galway National Cycleway in the heart of Ireland.
- Capitalise on the Westmeath's First Mover advantage on the Galway – Dublin National Cycle Route.
- Promote the Westmeath Greenways as 'Signature Experiences' in conjunction with Fáilte Ireland by highlighting various 'points of interest' along the Old Rail Trail and the Royal Canal. The Greenways should be developed as part of a 'Storytelling' journey as promoted in the Ireland's Ancient East Brand to create a memorable visitor experience.
- Incorporate historical rail /canal infrastructure into the Ireland's Ancient East Storytelling concept and utilise existing historic features as signposts or distance markers along the route.
- Progress the development of Greenways and Blueways in accordance with National Plans/Policies to ensure a joined up approach to the realisation of a county wide series of connected routes and implementation of appropriate construction standards and marketing initiatives.
- Progress the development and promotion of Greenways and Blueways to capitalise on the centrality of the Midlands, linking the River Shannon, Royal Canal, Grand Canal, and River Barrow.
- Promote and support Blueway festivals, activities, and events in co-operation with Waterways Ireland and the National Trails Office and relevant stakeholders.
- Provision of branded Trailhead visitor information on Greenways & Blueways linking with historical sites in the wider countryside (*attraction of the Greenways/Blueways should not be exclusively limited to the physical corridors of the Greenways – need to link with the Ireland Ancient East brand proposition*).
- Create and extend links to attractive cycle loops and attractions off the Greenway network including expansion of off-road greenways where possible and on-road links to surrounding villages and wider countryside.
- Establish/co-ordinate links to EuroVelo – The European cycle route network.
- Creation of a Waterfront Boardwalk in Athlone along the Eastern bank of the River Shannon extending from Athlone Marina to Burgess Park together with the expansion of the Athlone Marina (in accordance with the recommendations outlined in the Athlone Waterfront Study). Waterways Ireland also plan to develop the Quay Area in Athlone.
- Improve access at selected points around lake shorelines.
- Improve Angling information and facilities – promote the Lakes of Westmeath as the Number One destination in Ireland for fishing.
- Greenways and Blueway infrastructure to align with the 'Storytelling' concept of the Ireland's Ancient East proposition – physical links to historical attractions.
- Support the promotion of independent Water based sports/activities such as paddle boarding, lake swimming & lessons, sailing.



Source: www.MidlandsIrelands.ie

WESTMEATH TOURISM STRATEGY 2016-2020

It is critical that marketing proposals relating to Westmeath's Greenways, Blueways and Lakes align with Fáilte Ireland's proposition, Ireland's Ancient East in order to capitalise on the current international marketing campaign. It is considered paramount, that in addition to the provision of necessary infrastructure and facilities, Westmeath's Greenways and Blueways serve to create unique and memorable experiences that enable the visitor to combine activities on and off the water with cultural, food or heritage experiences, to give Westmeath a reputation as a Destination Champion in the region.



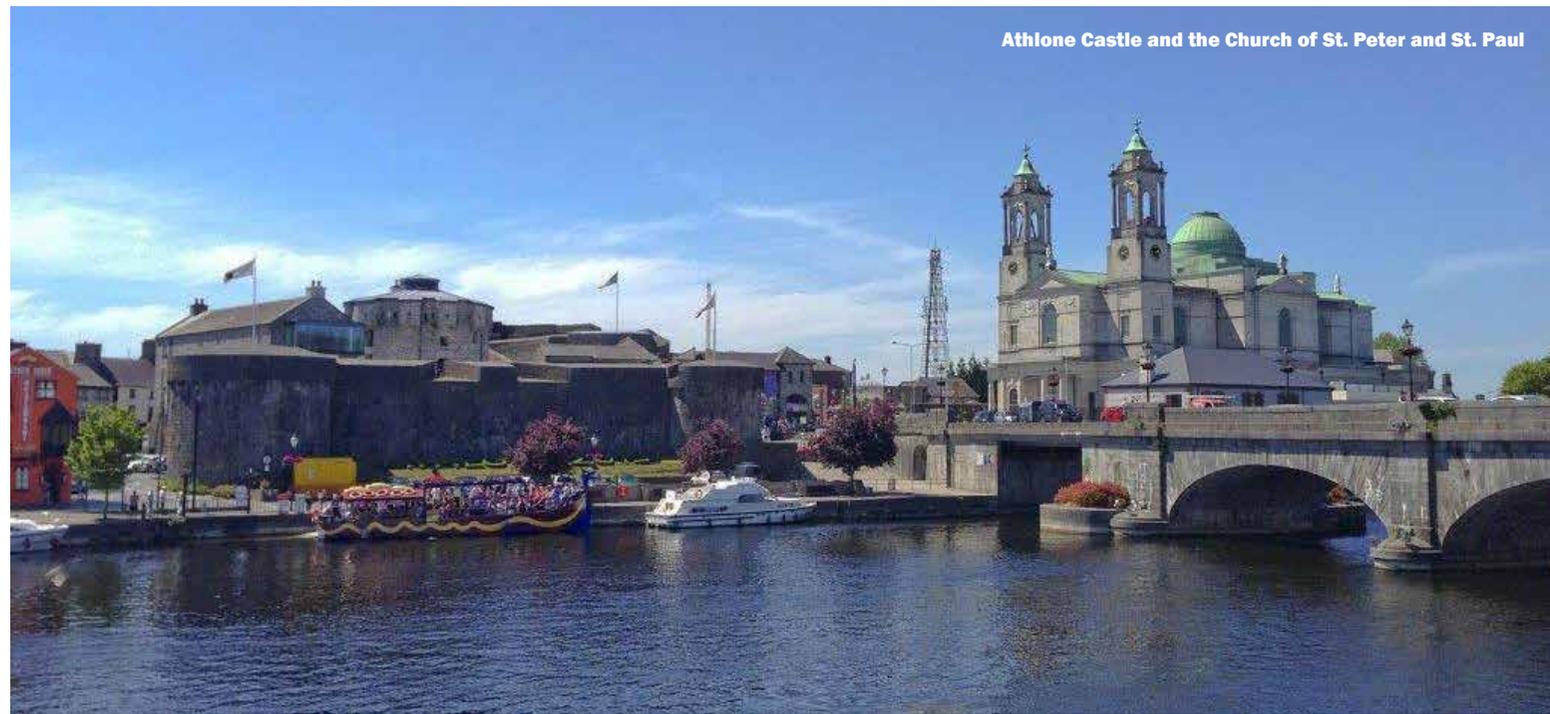
5.ii Athlone & District - 'Destination Athlone'

The attractive medieval town of Athlone straddles the River Shannon and is historically regarded as the principal crossing point on the Shannon connecting the provinces of Connacht and Leinster; the name Athlone (Áth Luain) translates as 'The Ford of Luain'

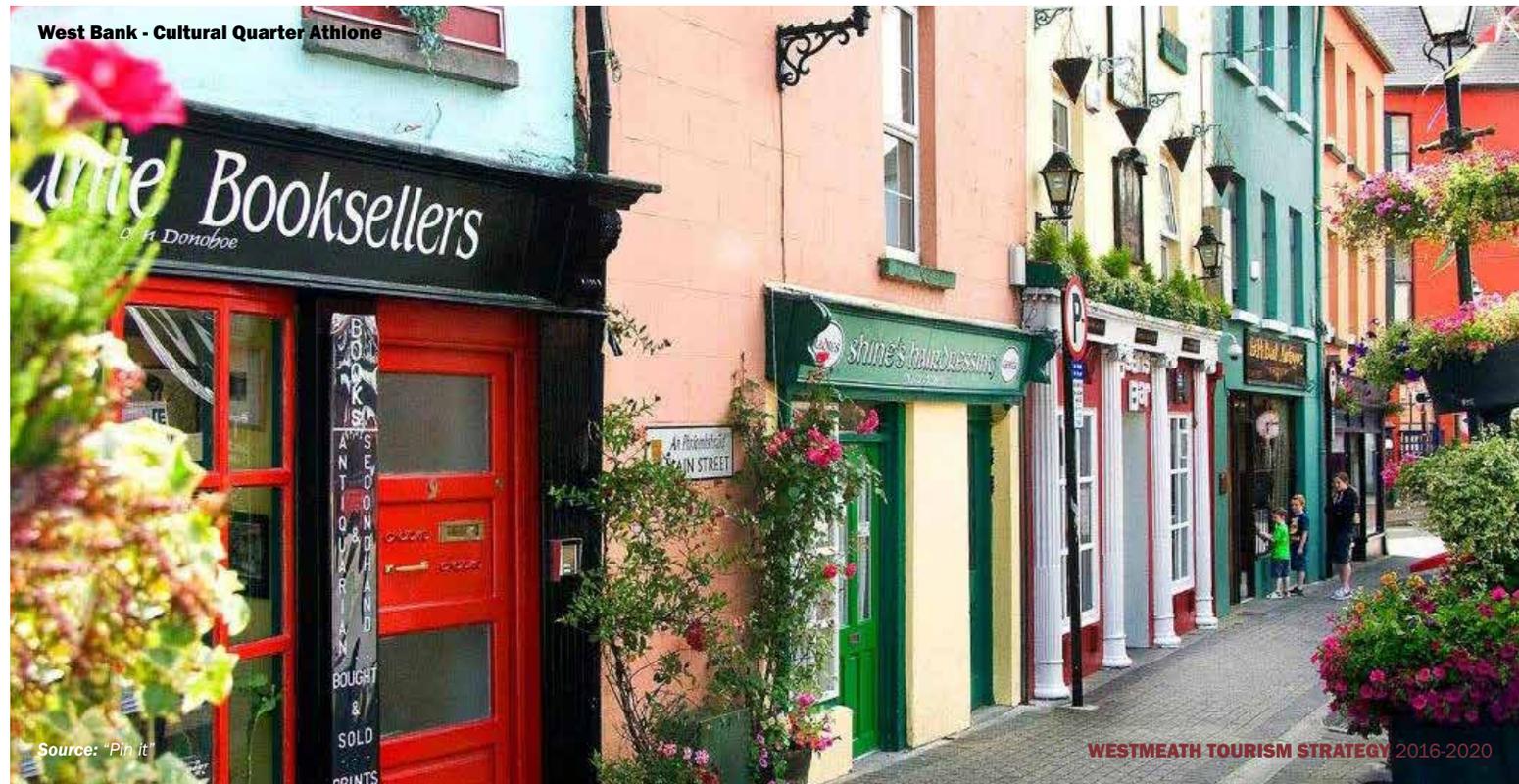
The presence of the Shannon has dictated the settlement form of Athlone resulting in a compact settlement pattern, consisting of a medieval urban grain that remains largely intact, with narrow streets radiating from the historical focal points of the town and enclosed vistas adding a great deal of character and a distinctive sense of place to the town. The historic core of Athlone remains one of the best examples of such street patterns and settlement formation in the country.

The western bank of the town, regarded as the 'Cultural Quarter', is dominated by large scale historic developments including Athlone Castle and the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul (*image above*).

In terms of tourism, it is considered essential that towns and villages present attractive, welcoming and well maintained streetscapes. The historical settlement pattern of Athlone provides a unique character that in itself presents a unique selling point. It is therefore considered essential that the raw material afforded by the historic urban fabric of the town is enhanced to present Athlone as an attractive, vibrant and welcoming urban destination.



Athlone Castle and the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul

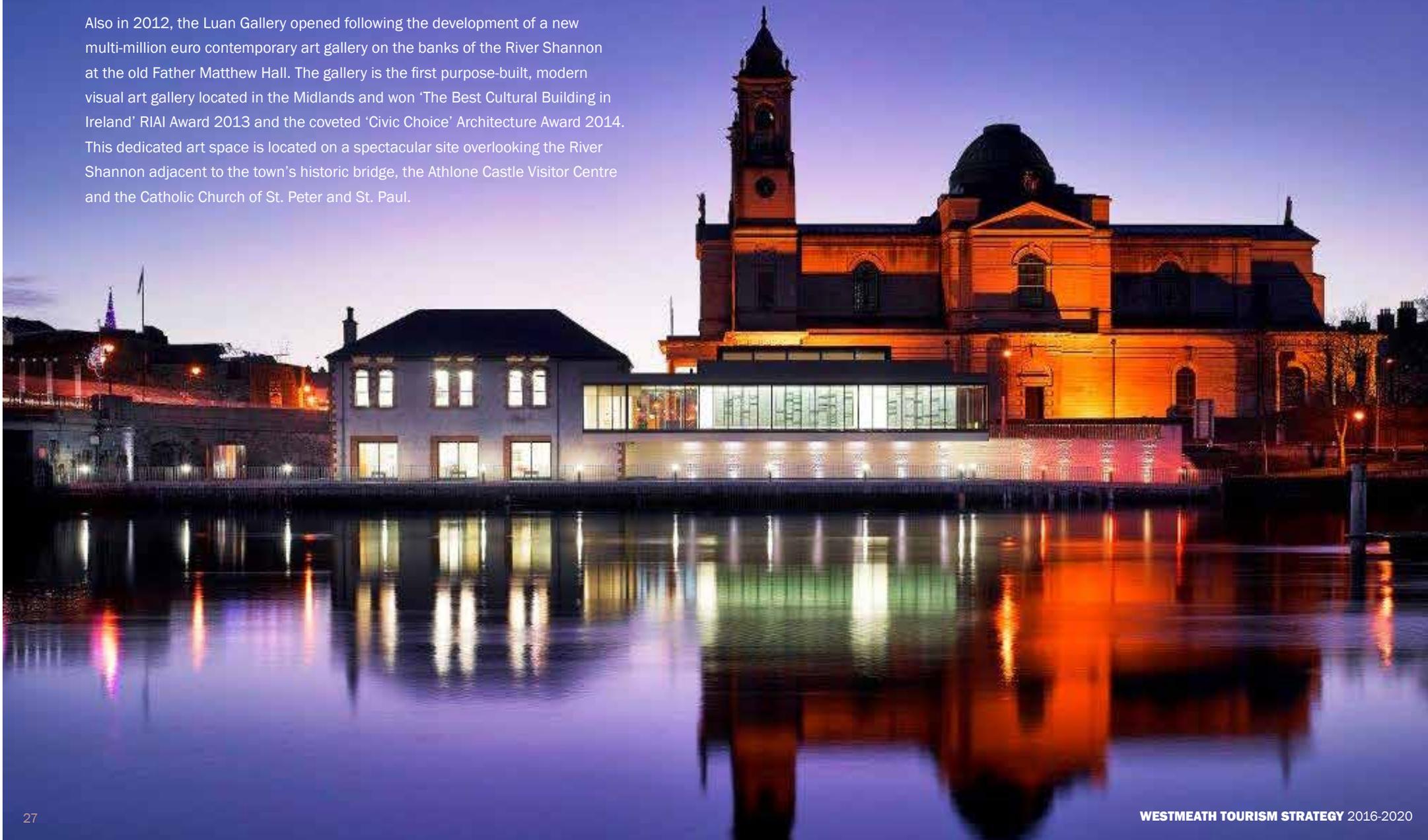


West Bank - Cultural Quarter Athlone

Source: "Pin it"

Tourism in Athlone has been given a welcome boost in recent years. In November 2012 the Castle was re-opened with a new visitor centre following a multi-million euro renovation to transform the castle into a state-of-the-art, multi-sensory visitor experience.

Also in 2012, the Luan Gallery opened following the development of a new multi-million euro contemporary art gallery on the banks of the River Shannon at the old Father Matthew Hall. The gallery is the first purpose-built, modern visual art gallery located in the Midlands and won 'The Best Cultural Building in Ireland' RIAI Award 2013 and the coveted 'Civic Choice' Architecture Award 2014. This dedicated art space is located on a spectacular site overlooking the River Shannon adjacent to the town's historic bridge, the Athlone Castle Visitor Centre and the Catholic Church of St. Peter and St. Paul.

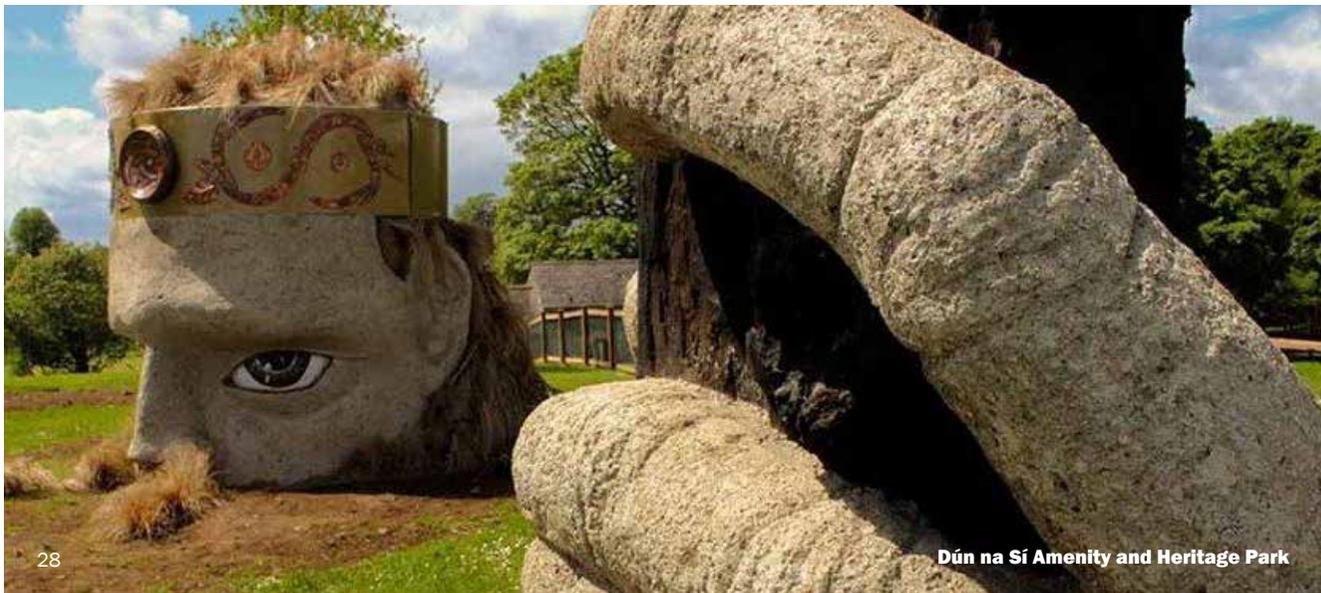


The development of these major attractions adds a welcome dynamic to the growing tourism product on offer in Athlone, already renowned for its sporting events, such as the successful Tri-Athlone, Community Games and the hosting of international Under 21 rugby fixtures as well as the excellent shopping and wealth of restaurants and accommodation including 4 Star hotels.

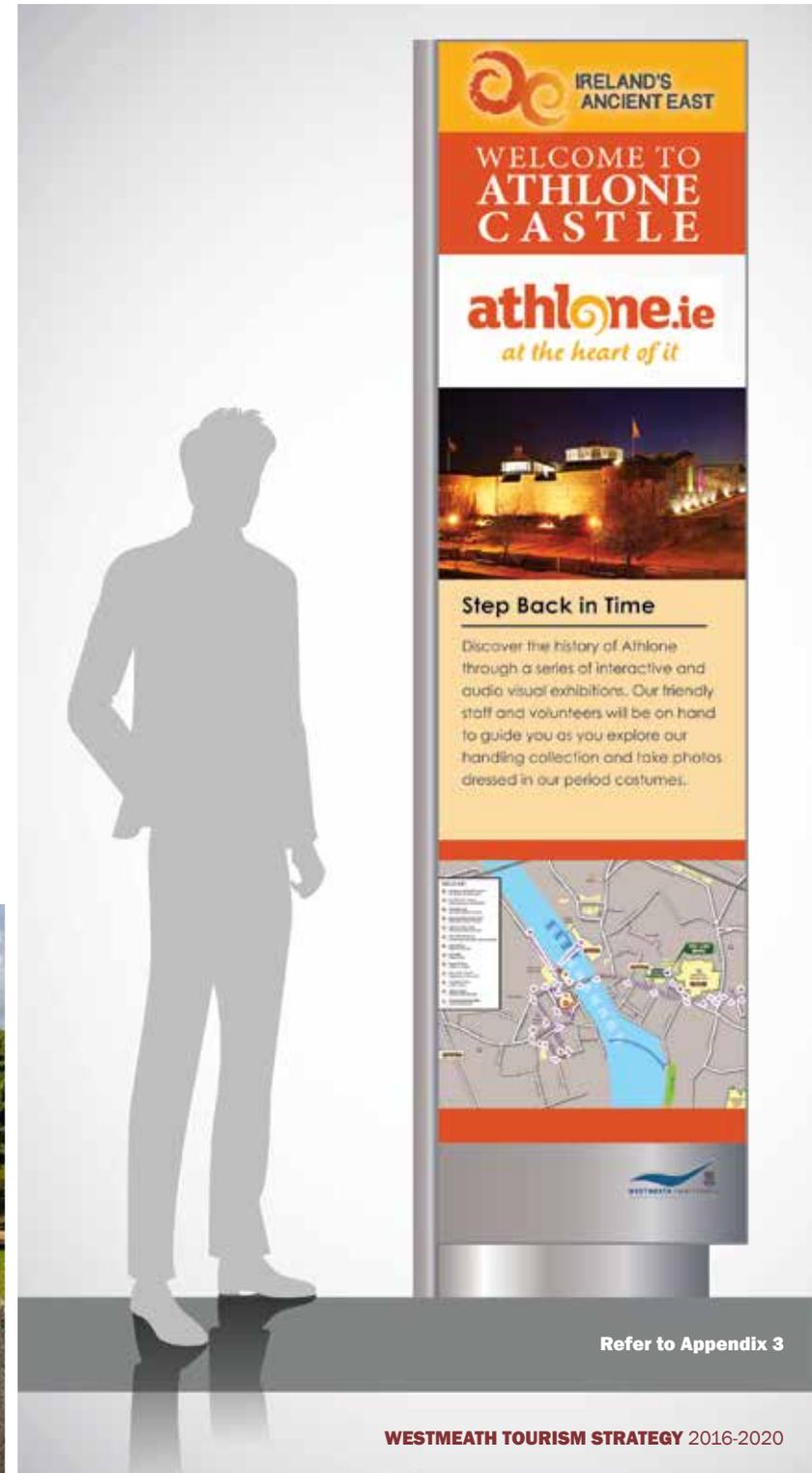
The range of tourism attractions appeals to a wide variety of visitors and is set to expand further with the development of the Galway to Dublin National Greenway through the town, and the growing popularity of water based activities on the River Shannon and Lough Ree such as Bay Sports, and the anticipated development of the proposed Athlone Boardwalk extending from the Marina along the Strand to Burgess Park.

It is recommended that the visitor experience is expanded into the surrounding hinterland of Athlone with the promotion of the picturesque villages of Glasson – ‘The Village of the Roses’ renowned for its Gastro-Pubs and Restaurants, Ballinahown – Craft Village, and Moate – home of Dún na Sí Amenity and Heritage Park which is a safe c. 12km cycle ride along the Old Rail Trail Greenway.

The tourism offering in Athlone has been and continues to be successfully supported and promoted by Destination Athlone - a group of businesses, supported by Athlone Municipal District (Westmeath County Council) and Fáilte Ireland and focuses on Athlone being at the very heart of Ireland offering a wealth of quality experiences for both domestic and international visitors. The success of Destination Athlone is recognised and considered as an exemplary model which stakeholder collaborations in other tourism industries throughout the county should mirror in order to achieve shared success.



Dún na Sí Amenity and Heritage Park



Refer to Appendix 3

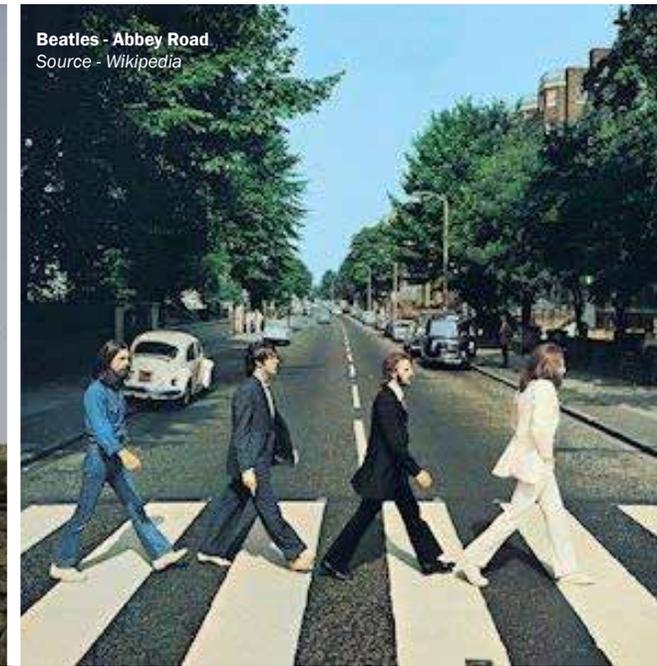
Opportunities

- Creation of Town Walking Trails - It is recommended that user-friendly walking trails are created linking the main visitor attractions and public transport hubs. The walking trails should serve to enhance the visitor experience, by ensuring an engaging story telling concept through a series of branded interpretive panels located along the routes, complimented by wayfinding signage systems. The combination of interpretive panels and signage will provide information to visitors on attractions and places of interest located in the vicinity of the route(s), and should also be available in a digitised GPS linked App for multimedia devices supported by the provision of Wi-Fi Hubs at the main attraction sites and Council properties.

Engaging interpretative design is not only about communicating information effectively but creating a visitor experience as strongly promoted by Fáilte Ireland under the Ireland's Ancient East proposition.

- Identify a suitable location and indicate the geographical landmark location of the point where the provinces of Leinster & Connaught meet; such points of interest are the type of simple interventions that prompt visitors to post a photo on Facebook or Tweet about straight away. Photo sharing via Social Media is an increasing and effective marketing tool to highlight signature experiences.

E.g.:- Geographical location of Scottish and English border & the famous Abbey Road pedestrian crossing



Explore the opportunity of creating a marker point on the proposed Dublin – Galway Greenway Bridge that will cross the River Shannon linking Leinster and Connaught – a strategic East to West location on the National Cycle Network.

- Capitalise on events that draw large numbers to encourage and promote longer stays before/ following scheduled events, attractions, activities by co-ordinating ease of movement, information on things to do, places to stay/eat etc. This can be achieved by a collective marketing drive between providers e.g. bundle packages supported by user friendly tourist information and signage to link events to providers.
 - o Exploit the opportunities of AIT Sports Centre – Community Games (10,000 visitors over two weekends!)
 - o Build on the success of Tri-Athlone, the leisure attraction of Bay Sports (inflatable water park) and the activities of Athlone Boat Club.
 - o Buccaneers and Athlone FC sports grounds – Hosting major fixtures.
- Encourage event organisers to promote longer stays together with links to local tourist providers and attractions – collective approach required.
- Athlone Castle – opportunity to promote presence of Castle with pageantry, walking tours, events etc.
- Public Art – An opportunity exists to present art and sculptures to enhance the public realm (*through the Percent for Art scheme and subject to Development Management*). The exhibition of artistic features in civic places should be encouraged as a 'point of interest' in the urban areas and could be used to further promote/ market festivals and events e.g. the Medieval Castle Fayre, Tri-Athlone etc.

Athlone & District - 'Destination Athlone' Actions

- Promoting Athlone as a destination of excellence for culture, heritage, sports, shopping and activity tourism in partnership with Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland.
- Continue and support the Destination Athlone Initiative.
- Maintain Athlone.ie as a promotional Website and a Tourism App, as a platform to link tourism attractions and business to the mobile customer, together with a comprehensive Calendar of events.
- Enhancement of the visitor experience by creating user-friendly self-guided Walking Tour(s)/Trail(s) equipped with digitised GPS linked Apps for multimedia devices. The IAE 'Storytelling' concept to be facilitated through a series of linked and branded interpretative panels and way marking signs which will allow the visitor to explore Athlone's impressive tourism offering in addition to guided tours at the main attractions.
- Completion of the 'Church Street Enhancement Project' and continued enhancement of the public realm in Athlone.
- Completion of the proposed Waterfront development extending from Athlone Marina to Burgess Park including expansion of the Marina in conjunction with Waterways Ireland. In addition, Waterways Ireland plans to develop the area along the Quay.
- Roll out of WiFi Hubs at main attraction sites and public spaces.
- Expand Brand Awareness of the '@ the heart of it' in conjunction with the Ireland's Ancient East branding to ensure a strong visual presence and proposition with local trade and work with trade to incorporate the brand into their businesses.
- Support the marketing campaign for 'Athlone – at the heart of it'.
- To develop appropriate visitor experiences in line with Ireland's Ancient East Signature Stories.
- Erect branded tourist signage, interpretative panels and Way marking signage as part of the Church Street Regeneration Project and extend through the town linking all the tourism attractions and public transport hubs.
- Develop a World Class Blueway/Greenway Hub in the centre of Athlone. (See *Greenways, Blueways, Lakes & Waterways Proposition*)
- Illuminate the Castle - The addition of appropriate lighting will quite literally illuminate the presence of the Castle and provide an enhanced view in the evenings and at night time, serving to maximise the focal presence of the Castle and create an extended photo opportunity of this important historical landmark and tourist attraction. The lighting scheme could also allow the walls to be colour themed for major events and festivals in the town.
- Encourage visitors to explore the attractive neighbouring villages and towns surrounding Athlone with the promotion of suggested itineraries and bundle packages in conjunction with stakeholders; Glasson – Village of the Roses, Ballinahown – Craft Village, and Moate – home of Dún na Sí Amenity and Heritage Park which is a safe c. 12km cycle ride along the Old Rail Train Greenway.



5.iii Mullingar & District – ‘Music, Myths & Legends’

The traditional market town of Mullingar (*An Muileann gCearr*) translates as “the left-handed mill” and is located in the heart of the Lakelands, where history and heritage combine to create a mythical and magical landscape. Mullingar is famous for the neighbouring lakes, Lough Owel, Lough Ennell and Lough Derravaragh, and the Royal Canal that meanders through the town.

The surrounding areas of Mullingar display some incredible built heritage including Belvedere House, Gardens & Park overlooking Lough Ennell. With its poignant story of the Jealous Wall and 160 acres of parkland, Belvedere House, Gardens & Park is situated just 7 km from the town of Mullingar. Lough Ennell is also linked to Mullingar via Lacy’s Canal and the River Brosna while Lough Derravaragh is known for its connection with the Irish legend of the Children of Lir.

Located west of Mullingar is the Hill of Uisneach, which is the centre of Ireland not just geographically but also effectively with the highways of early Ireland converging near its centre and is likely to be featured as a ‘Signature Story’ in the Ireland’s Ancient East (IAE) proposition. The site is due to be developed further with the proposed Uisneach Interpretative Centre that received approval for Capital Funding in 2015.

North Westmeath presents picturesque country scenes with sparkling lakes and the beautiful Mullaghmeen forest, in addition to unique attractions such as Tullynally Castle and the historic site of Fore Abbey and its Seven Wonders offering a distinctive visitor experience.



The proposed 'Mullingar and District' proposition has a wealth of visitor attractions, that sit comfortably with the Ireland's Ancient East (IAE) proposition, as well as presenting a diversity of sporting and recreational activities including angling and water based activities, and ease of access to the high quality greenway networks extending from the Royal Canal Greenway. The hinterland of Mullingar is also home to Locke's Distillery in Kilbeggan as well as sporting venues such as the Kilbeggan Races and the Mullingar Greyhound Stadium.

Not forgetting Mullingar's links to the music industry, the town is known for its links to singer Joe Dolan, 'Bressie' and Niall Horan of international 'One Direction' boyband fame.

It is considered that the proposed Mullingar & District - 'Music, Myths & Legends' sub-proposition sits comfortably with the Ireland's Ancient East proposition and it is therefore considered essential that Westmeath aligns with IAE promotion and branding in this regard and capitalises on the unique offerings that distinguishes Westmeath in the region. Ireland's Ancient East focuses on 5,000 years of European history, lush green landscapes and stories told by the best storytellers in the world.

In terms of the tourism potential of Mullingar, this strategy recommends that Mullingar is promoted and marketed as the visitor base location for the Ireland's Ancient East using the theme Mullingar & District - 'Music, Myths & Legends'. Mullingar offers a central location midway between Dublin and the West with ease of access (less than an hour from Dublin airport), with a selection of hotels, restaurants pubs and sporting and recreational venues such as the Kilbeggan Racecourse and the Mullingar Greyhound Stadium, as well as a central access point to the National Cycle Network.



Opportunities

- Creation of Town Walking Trails - It is recommended that user-friendly walking trails are created linking the main visitor attractions and public transport hubs. The walking trails should serve to enhance the visitor experience by ensuring an engaging story telling concept through a series of branded interpretive panels located along the routes complimented by a wayfinding signage System. The combination of interpretive panels and signage will provide information to visitors on attractions and places of interest located in the vicinity of the route(s), and should also be available in digitised GPS linked Apps for multimedia devices supported by the provision of Wi-Fi Hubs at the main attraction sites and Council properties.

Engaging interpretative design is not only about communicating information effectively, but creating a visitor experience as strongly promoted by Fáilte Ireland under the Ireland's Ancient East proposition.

- Promote the Westmeath Way, a National waymarked linear walking route. Where possible, additional/optional shorter looped walks may be considered.
- Encourage event organisers and tourism providers to collaborate and work together to promote longer stays together with links to local tourist providers and attractions – collective approach required e.g. Bundle visitor packages with Mullingar as the base promoting 2 night stays e.g. Day 1 - Kilbeggan Races & Day 2 – Explore the sights of Mullingar & District – ‘Music, Myths & Legends’ from the accessible base of Mullingar
- Public Art – An opportunity exists to present art and sculptures to enhance the public realm (*through the Percent for Art scheme and subject to Development Management*). The exhibition of artistic features in civic places should be encouraged as a ‘point of interest’ in the urban areas and could be used to further promote/market festivals and events e.g. the Kilbeggan Races, Festival of Fires, Life Music Festival etc.
- Capitalise on the popular music links associated with Mullingar and support and promote musical festival and events.
- Encourage the use of local food produce and support associated food festivals/events.

Mullingar & District – ‘Music, Myths & Legends’ Actions

- Develop and support a ‘Destination Mullingar & District’ Initiative based on the successful format and structure of the Destination Athlone Initiative.
- Promote Mullingar as a Destination Centre and base to explore the historic attractions located throughout Mullingar & District – ‘Music, Myths & Legends’ such as the Hill of Uisneach, Fore, Tullynally Castle and the neighbouring attractions of Belevedere House and Gardens, Lockes Distillery and the Kilbeggan Racecourse etc.
- Promote and develop the attractions of Mullingar & District – ‘Music, Myths & Legends’ in association with the international marketing campaign developed under the Ireland’s Ancient East Proposition.
 - o Capitalise on the Ireland’s Ancient East branding on promotional and marketing material and signage.
- Promote and support Mullingar’s links with musical talents such as Joe Dolan, ‘Bressie’ and Niall Horan of ‘One Direction’ fame.
- Enhance the visitor experience in Mullingar by creation of a user-friendly self-guided Walking Tour(s)/Trail(s) equipped with digitised GPS linked Apps for multimedia devices. The IAE’s ‘Storytelling’ concept to be facilitated through a series of linked and branded interpretative panels and way marking signs, which will allow the visitor to explore Mullingar’s impressive tourism offering in addition to guided tours at the main attractions.
- Promote the exceptional archaeological heritage of the Mullingar District.
- Enhance the Public Realm in Mullingar.
- Roll out of WiFi Hubs at main attraction sites and public spaces.
- To develop appropriate business experiences in line with Ireland’s Ancient East Signature Stories.
- Expand Brand Awareness of the ‘@ *the heart of it*’ in conjunction with the Ireland’s Ancient East branding to ensure a strong visual presence and proposition with local trade and work with trade to incorporate the brand into their businesses.
- Develop a World Class Greenway Hub in the centre of Mullingar. (*See Greenways, Blueways, Lakes & Waterways Proposition*)
- Promote and support Blueway festivals, activities and events on the Royal Canal in co-operation with Waterways Ireland and the National Trails Office and relevant stakeholders.
- Encourage visitors to explore the attractions promoted under the Ireland’s Ancient East Mullingar & District – ‘Music, Myths & Legends’ proposition, with the creation of suggested itineraries and packaged bundles in conjunction with stakeholders.
- Enhance and promote the amenities.
- Assess the feasibility of establishing a museum/exhibition space in Mullingar/Westmeath.

5.v Collective and Countywide Actions & Opportunities

It is recommended that in addition to the specific actions and opportunities outlined under the various propositions, that a number of common actions and opportunities are included for implementation on a countywide basis.

• Actions

Establish a countywide Tourism Structure to promote tourism in Westmeath.

- Promote Westmeath as a destination of excellence for culture, heritage, sports, shopping and activity tourism, in partnership with Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland, within Ireland's Ancient East brand proposition.
- Collaborate with state agencies such as Waterways Ireland, National Trails Office, Coillte (Outdoors) and industry stakeholders etc., towards a common agenda – to develop and promote Westmeath as a first choice high quality holiday destination and enhance the attractions and assets on offer in Westmeath.
- Support and develop Diaspora links with key overseas markets and promote Diaspora related festivals and events within the county.
 - Examine the potential of providing/supporting a public Diaspora Database within the county.
- Promote and support Gourmet/Food Tourism including:
 - Promotion of Westmeath, and in particular Athlone, as a 'Gourmet Food Trail' destination (86% of tourists dine for leisure – Bord Bia)
 - Promote and support farmers markets etc., with an emphasis on locally sourced Westmeath produce.
- Promote and support sporting, musical and cultural events and festivals and capitalise on the unique characters and attractions of the County such as Count John McCormack, Joe Dolan, The Hill of Uisneach etc.
- Emphasise the importance of using the Irish language in promoting tourism in Westmeath.
- Promote and support Agri shows, festivals and events to showcase an authentic experience in rural Ireland.
- Promote Westmeath as an excellent golfing tourism location.
- Capitalise on the natural assets of our lakes including Lough Ennell, Lough Owel, Lough Derravaragh, Lough Ree, Lough Lene, Lough Sheelin, Lough Bane and Lough Glore.
- Additional direct signage to be explored.
- Support, promote and encourage marketing co-operation between tourism stakeholders within the county and wider Midlands region:
 - Collaborative marketing vision amongst all stakeholders needed.
 - Explore opportunities for joint marketing initiatives.
 - Develop new ways of working in partnership with stakeholder.
 - Align products with attractions/accommodation/activities & services etc., Information and promotion of 'Bundle Packages' etc.
- Greater emphasis on smart phone application for marketing but also maintain physical maps.

• Opportunities

- Encourage event organisers and local tourist providers to collaborate and promote longer stays by providing attractive Bundle Packages e.g. expand a day at the Kilbeggan races to include an overnight stay in Mullingar followed by a tour of the Music, Myths and Legends attractions of Mullingar & District. Similarly, capitalise on Tri-Athlone, Community Games etc., to encourage a weekend stay or summer break.
- Enhance access and market awareness by clustering attractions, such as the production of planned itineraries and selection of recommended touring routes, to create a network of linked attractions through the proposed principal Westmeath Destinations.
 - **Mullingar & District – 'Music, Myths & Legends'** with routes including suggested daily itineraries from the base point of Mullingar:-
 - Day 1:- Mullingar → Belvedere House, Gardens & Park → Kilbeggan Distillery → Hill of Uisneach → Mullingar
 - Day 2:- Mullingar → Mullingar Walking Tour Day → Fore Abbey → sightseeing NW lakes → Tullynally Castle → Mullaghmeen Forest Park →Mullingar
 - **Greenways, Blueways, Lakes & Waterways** – including recommended itineraries and trip duration together with links to villages, towns, attractions and points of interest off the Greenways.
 - **Athlone & District - 'Destination Athlone'**
 - Day 1: Athlone walking tour morning → Ballinahown Craft village → Clonmacnoise → Athlone
 - Day 2: Athlone → Boat trip on the ancient highway ~ the river Shannon→ lunch in Glasson~ Village of the Roses → Athlone
 - Day 3: Athlone → Cycle along Old Rail Trail Greenway to Moate → Dún na Sí Amenity and Heritage Park → Athlone
- There is an opportunity to reflect upon neighbouring tourism offerings which will directly/indirectly impinge upon the growth of Westmeath tourism and to work with these counties in promoting joint tourism initiatives.

6 Implementation

Implementation of the measures in this strategy will require a true partnership between the community, business, the Local Authority and state agencies. The strategic initiatives outlined in this plan provide the guidance needed for all partners to work together to achieve the vision. It is recommended that a Tourism Office, with suitably qualified staff, is established to guide and secure the implementation of the recommended actions and opportunities outlined in this strategy, taking a lead role to ensure the participation and support of all stakeholders including industry, community and local residents. Once actions have been agreed, it is essential that lead organisations and the key supporting partners work together to implement them. As the Strategy evolves, over the life of the plan and future plans, efforts must be continually monitored and evaluated and adjustments made to keep all stakeholders on the same path to success.



Tourism Office - Envisaged Role and Responsibility:-



Following the establishment of a Westmeath County Council Tourism Office, an annual Implementation Plan should be prepared, outlining the actions to be implemented together with a timeframe for delivery, and the nomination of the lead and supporting organisations responsible for the delivery of same. The Implementation Plan would be subject to budgets and national grants available.

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Road Map to Success

Appendix 2 - Ireland's Ancient East

Appendix 3 - Brand Development

Appendix 4 - Bibliography

Appendix 1 – Road Map to Success

The Objectives:

- Create Experiences
- Target Marketing
- Collaboration –based on a shared vision

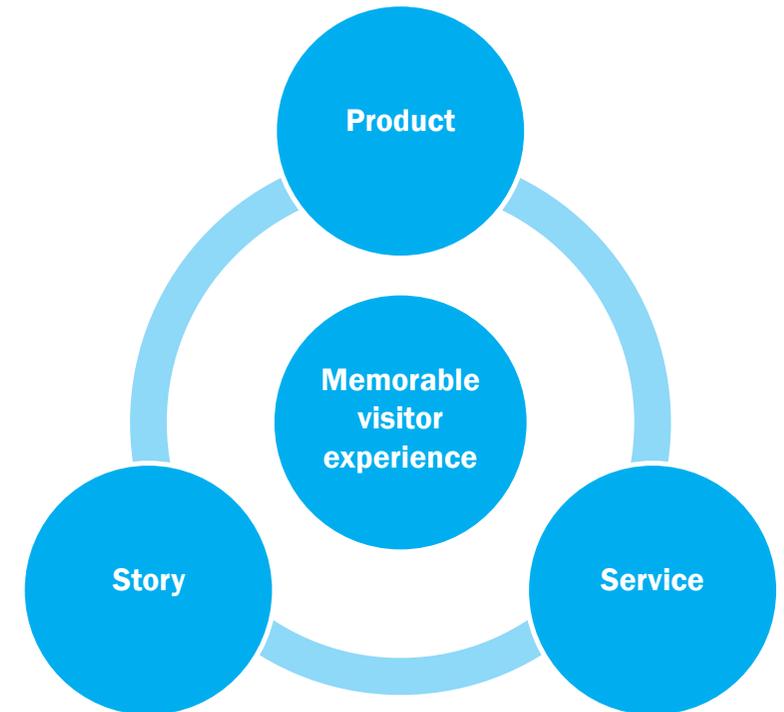
• Create Experiences

Tourists are increasingly seeking tourism “experiences” rather than tourism “products”.

*A tourism product is
what you buy.
A tourism experience is
what you remember.*

- Tourism Product:- accommodation, attractions, tours etc., that visitors purchase to participate in or consume.
- Tourism Experience:- the emotional feeling or personal achievement a visitor derives from the participation in, or consumption of tourism products.

In an era where high quality tourism offerings are expected and global travel is readily available to more and more people, destinations can no longer compete on a simple product versus price basis. To succeed, providers need to move from selling tourism ‘products’ to providing engaging and memorable ‘experiences’.



There is a spectrum of experiences on offer in every destination, therefore, the challenge for Westmeath is to develop the county’s assets and turn them into world-class experiences.

The experience(s) must be authentic and consistent with the identified branding of the Westmeath destination as part of the national Ireland’s Ancient East proposition.

• Target Marketing

In order to sustain and build on international and domestic sales, Fáilte Ireland's Growth Strategy devised 'customer segmentation models' to assist in influencing tourist trends and decisions. Segmentation is the basis for developing a targeted and effective marketing plan.

The two priority target segments for Ireland's Ancient East (IAE) across the four main source markets (GB, North America, Germany, France) are the: '**Culturally Curious**' and '**Great Escaper**'.

Exploring these demographics is key to tailoring experiences and increasing international sales.

Culturally Curious

- Seek authentic experiences.
- Like to get off the beaten track & immerse themselves in the local stories.
- Travel as couples/individuals.
- Motivated by the discovery of local areas that offer real and quality experiences accompanied by engaging stories.

Who are the Culturally Curious?

They choose their holiday destinations carefully and are independent '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 often travel as couples/individuals and rarely in a family group.

Great Escapers

- Seek quality time relaxing.
- Like picturesque landscapes & explore natural/rural locations.
- Usually couples, often with babies or quite young children.
- Motivated by getting away from the stress of everyday life and to spend quality time together.

Who are the Great Escapers?

They are often couples, approximately 30 years old, some with babies or quite young children. Most are in serious need of time out from busy lives and careers. They are specifically interested in rural holidays and travel very much as a couple or family. Great Escapers are on holiday for a break, to get physical with nature, and to reconnect with their partner. More likely to take part in slightly more strenuous, but not extreme, exploration. More interested than other segments in getting connected to nature especially the more remote and exciting places.

In terms of Domestic Segmentation, IAE's Domestic Visitor Segmentation has been categorised and prioritised under the following:

- **Connected Families**
- **Footloose Socialisers**
- **Indulgent Romantics**

Who are the Connected Families?

Connected Families make up 23 percent of the domestic market, the single largest segment. They are made up of relatively young families. They are made up of parents in their thirties and early forties and children generally under the age of ten. They are seeking to create special memories that they can treasure, sharing experiences that they can fondly look back on in the months and years to come.

On average family breaks tend to last between four and seven days and they are most likely to stay in hotels or holiday homes.

Who are the Footloose Socialisers?

Footloose Socialisers make up 15 percent of the domestic market. On average in their late forties and well educated, they are made up of groups of friends that enjoy getting away and spending quality time together. What matters most to them is being with like-minded people, whether they're old friends or new acquaintances.

On average their breaks tend to be for between one to three days and they demonstrate a stronger tendency to stay in holiday homes/rentals than other segments, although they are also likely to stay in hotels.

Who are the Indulgent Romantics?

Indulgent Romantics make up 14 percent of the domestic market. Although relatively broad in terms of age profile they are more likely than average to be aged between 45 and 64. They are 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. On average their breaks tend to be for between one and three days.

From a domestic perspective, Fáilte Ireland reports that domestic trips and the number of holiday nights have steadily increased. As we look towards the future, it is important to build upon this momentum to drive further growth domestically that shall serve to build on a strong tourism product platform and assist in the expansion of the tourist season beyond typical peak travel times.

• Collaboration – based on a shared vision.

- Collaboration & Co-operation - Turning assets into experiences

In tandem with developing and promoting specific tourist attractions in the county, it is considered necessary that all stakeholders work together towards a common agenda:-

**to offer a diverse range of authentic
and unique visitor experiences
that can only be offered in Westmeath.**

One of the main challenges is the lack of coordination/co-operation among tourist industry operators; the mix of state bodies, voluntary organisations, committees and the private sector, working independently, needs to change. The central issue is to establish and develop a common vision between all stakeholders in order to successfully achieve shared priorities to elevate and sustain Westmeath as a 'must see' tourist destination.

It is a goal of this strategy to create and sustain partnerships with public, private and community organisations to plan, fund and implement strategic tourism programmes and measure results. It is therefore considered necessary that all stakeholders connect, coordinate and collaborate towards a shared vision and, as such, it is recommended that a central role is adopted by Westmeath County Council to oversee and coordinate all parties. It is recommended that WCC be a facilitator, enabler, overseer and promoter of much of the visitor experiences in Westmeath as well as connecting to the wider region to achieve coordinated success. The enhanced role for Local Authorities in tourism, as outlined by the Government's tourism policy, specifically promotes co-operation between adjoining council areas as tourism destinations which do not necessarily align with administrative boundaries.

Actions:-

- Establishment of a Westmeath County Council Tourism Office managed by an appropriately qualified Tourism Officer.
- Establishment of a co-ordinated local authority group representing the Midlands region.
- Implementation of the Tourism Strategy is based on the following guiding principles:
 - **Create Experiences** - to create compelling experiences by providing engaging and memorable 'experiences' to increase dwell time and encourage repeat visits.
 - **Target Marketing** – To capitalise and build on the target marketing sectors developed by Fáilte Ireland to encourage visitors to stay in a traditionally tourism 'transit zone.'
 - **Collaboration** – To encourage and support ongoing dialogue, interaction and participation among all stakeholders working together as a collective to a common agenda.
 - **Quality** – To provide overall excellence in tourism products and services while ensuring that the unique character and sense of place is retained.
 - **WCC Responsibility** – To implement a comprehensive system that plans effectively, measures impacts, evaluates results, and adjusts accordingly.
 - **Proactive** - Identify and act on opportunities to maximise the development of the tourism industry within the county and investment in tourism infrastructure.

Appendix 2 – Ireland’s Ancient East

Ireland’s Ancient East

Ireland’s Ancient East is described as a “touring region” as opposed to a route. Unlike the Wild Atlantic Way, which has a set beginning, end and length, IAE initiative presents as a geographical area that visitors’ are invited to explore at their own pace and in their own way.

The focus is very much on built heritage, with 5,000 years of history ranging from passage tombs to Palladian mansions and castles. Tours, walks, festivals and events will be encouraged to tie-in and interact with the brand.

The ambition of Ireland’s Ancient East (IAE) brand proposition is to present a large geographical area that will provide the following:

- A destination that is easy and enjoyable to explore.
- A destination where stories unfold through exploration of our history and heritage.
- A destination where the storytellers at each heritage site encourage further exploration of other historical eras building up to an unforgettable journey through 5,000 years of time.
- A destination set against the lush, green, pastoral landscapes of Ireland.

The IAE brand proposition is encapsulated as presenting:

‘5000 years of history, lush green landscapes and stories told by the best storytellers in the world...;’

In addition to the Ireland’s Ancient East proposition, Fáilte Ireland is developing a series of ‘Signature Stories’ based on nine key themes, each of which will have a central ‘story’. The objective is to entice international visitors to increase their dwell time at various locations throughout the IAE region.

The nine Signature Stories, a number of which are relevant to County Westmeath are as follows:-

- **Maritime Gateway**
- **Vikings**
- **Big Houses & Hard Times**
- **High Kings & Heroes**
- **Ancient Ireland**

- **Castles & Conquests**
- **Sacred Ireland**
- **The Sport of Kings**
- **Ireland’s Mystical Waterway – River Shannon**

The nine themes will be further promoted by unique ‘Hero Products’ in each destination i.e. Belvedere House, Gardens & Park - Big Houses & Hard Times, Athlone Castle - Castles & Conquests and Ireland’s Ancient Highway and the Hill of Uisneach - Sacred Ireland etc.

To capitalise on Fáilte Ireland’s high profile international marketing campaign, it is imperative that Westmeath aligns not only with the Ireland’s Ancient East proposition, but also with the ‘Signature Stories’ and the related ‘Hero Products’.

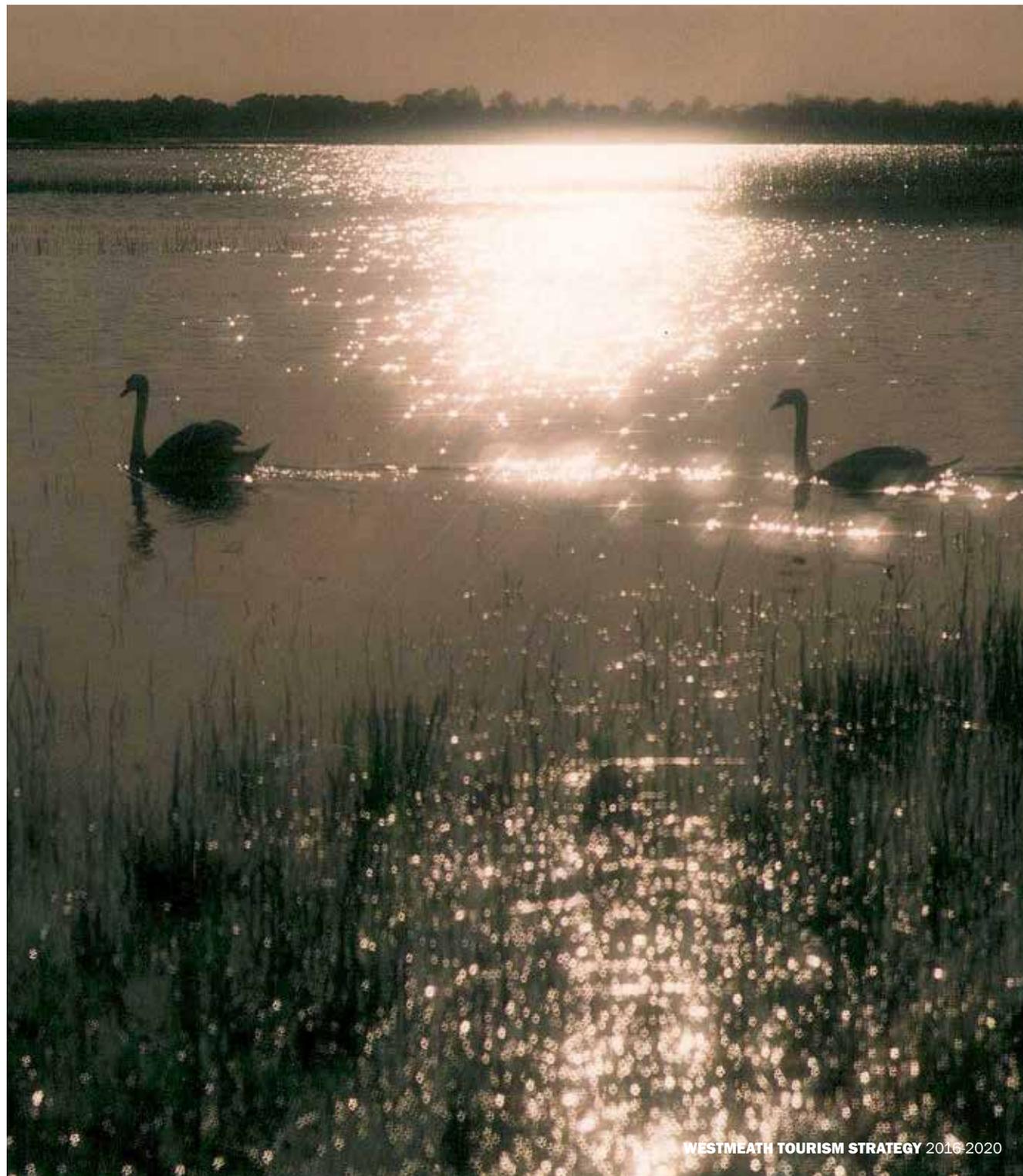
Furthermore, it is considered essential that achievable actions are identified to effectively stimulate and enhance tourism development. Actionable recommendations shall ensure the delivery of results on the ground over the life of the Strategy creating a strong foundation for future long term tourism initiatives and products within the county and the wider region.

In terms of effectively targeting the international tourism market, particularly in the context of promoting Fáilte Ireland's 'Ireland's Ancient East' proposition, it is recognised that regional buy-in is essential and that a collective regional approach is required to achieve success as county boundaries are 'blurred' in the international context.

Notwithstanding the alignment with Ireland's Ancient East (IAE) proposition, it is recommended that Westmeath offers a diverse range of authentic and unique visitor experiences to differentiate and elevate Westmeath as a tourism destination within the IAE region.

In terms of promoting Westmeath, a central issue is to ensure collaboration among stakeholders' with the objective of distinguishing Westmeath as a 'must see' destination within the IAE region.

It is recognised that there is a spectrum of experiences on offer in every destination. The challenge for Westmeath is to develop the county's tourism products and assets and turn them into world-class experiences. The experience(s) must be authentic and consistent with the identified branding of the Westmeath destination as part of the national Ireland's Ancient East 'Storytelling' proposition.



Appendix 3 – Brand Development

Brand development is considered as a critical long-term investment as it aids the target customer to easily identify who you are and what you do. In terms of Westmeath, 'Brand Development' is considered as an important measure to differentiate Westmeath from its neighbouring competitors and to present the USP – Unique Selling Point(s) of the county.

The localised brand proposition is not intended to conflict with the international brand propositioning of 'Ireland's Ancient East', but to become a recognisable brand identity at domestic level in order to differentiate Westmeath from its competitors at a local level. However, it is recommended that any agreed branding encompasses reference to the Ireland's Ancient East identity as localised branding will not be wholly recognised nor promoted by Fáilte Ireland.

It is recommended that the existing 'Athlone at the heart of it' branding is supported to make it recognisable and to promote Athlone in the Shannon Region. The 'at the heart of it' concept should extend countywide in conjunction with Ireland's Ancient East. This could in simple terms, incorporate the IAE's recognisable logo  and thus be recognisable to the targeted international tourist as well as the domestic visitor.



athlone.ie
at the heart of it

- Expand the visual identity of the 'at the heart of it' brand.

Athlone and indeed Westmeath, needs to present that in addition to being geographically located at the heart of Ireland, that the county is also '@ **the heart of** – **the action, the activity, the adventure, the experience etc.**, essentially, the message should be clear - Westmeath is at the heart of.....everything including Ireland's Ancient East region.

The combination of the localised 'at the heart of it brand' and the Fáilte Ireland Ireland's Ancient East Brand logo already has the advantage of similarity in terms of visual presentation as shown right, thus, the combination of the localised and national brand imaging will easily compliment the other.

The roll out of the dual brand propositioning needs to feature in all marketing and promotional material including 'branded' signage.

In the long term, the destination brand needs to be supported not only by Westmeath County Council and Fáilte Ireland, but also by stakeholders within the county, including tourism providers such as hotels, restaurants, attractions etc., to reinforce the unique Brand Identity. A strong visual brand identity will help to identify participants in brand activity, present merchandising opportunities for stakeholders and effectively define a specific destination.



athlone.ie
at the heart of it

Figure 1 Athlone at the heart of it logo

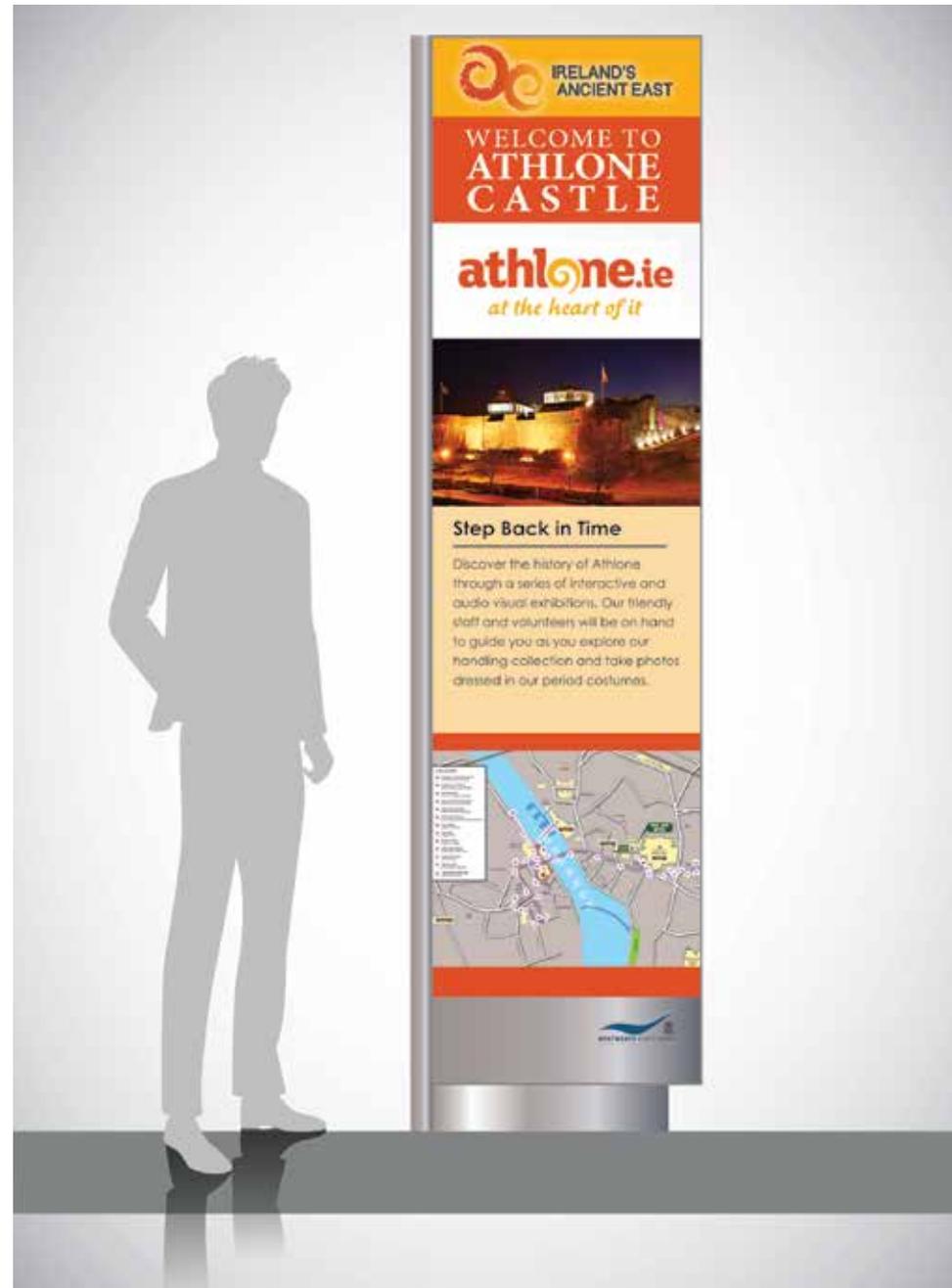


Figure 2 Ireland's Ancient East brand logo

- **Recognisable brand images incorporated in Wayfinding (Trail) Signage:**



- Example of suggested Combined Brand Signage:



Appendix 4 – Bibliography

Collation of relevant policy documents:

- People, Place and Policy Growing Tourism to 2025 – Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport.
- Fáilte Ireland Tourism Strategy – 2016
- Tourism Action Plan 2016 – 2018 (Tourism Leadership Group)
- Westmeath County Development 2014
- Westmeath Local Economic & Community Plan 2016-2021
- Recreation, Tourism and Commercial Product Identification Study Royal Canal Rural 2013 (Waterways Ireland and Fáilte Ireland)
- Positioning Paper Athlone 2015
- The Lakelands and Inland Waterways Strategic Plan 2010-2016
- Lakelands and Inland Waterways Strategic Plan 2010-2016 - Mid Term Review
- Tourism Destination Development Plan – Greater Athlone Area 2011
- Marketing Mullingar Report 2015
- Fore Conservation Strategy
- Athlone Waterfront Study 2010
- Tourism Ireland Marketing Plans 2016
- Fáilte Ireland Global Segmentation Study 2014
- Fáilte Ireland Path to Purchase Research 2015
- Waterways Ireland Marketing Strategy 2012 – 2017
- National Strategy for Angling Development, Inland Fisheries Ireland 2015 – 2020
- Westmeath Local Development Strategy - Rural Development Programme Leader 2014-2020