



An Roinn Turasóireachta, Cultúir,
Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán
Department of Tourism, Culture,
Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media

Sustainable Tourism Working Group

Actions to Promote Sustainable
Tourism Practices 2021-2023



Introduction

The tourism landscape changed drastically in early 2020 with the outbreak and spread of COVID-19. It had a devastating impact on our tourism industry here in Ireland and all across the world. There is no doubt that its effects will be felt by our industry and local communities for years to come. During this time the majority of all tourism activity has been put on hold and this has provided an opportunity to rethink and re-evaluate our tourism offering and to begin to address sustainable tourism development in a more meaningful way during the recovery and rebuilding phase following this crisis.

The UNWTO defines sustainable tourism as:

“Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities”

The actions identified here aim to grow the awareness and understanding of issues relating to sustainability in tourism across the economy and society. Successful implementation of these actions will deliver metrics that will help to establish a better understanding and map progress in this area. It will also further embed the sustainability message into the work of the Department, our tourism agencies and industry.

It has long been recognised that collaborative agendas are necessary to ensure that tourism can be a force for sustainable development. The delivery of these actions are a statement of intent from the Government, the tourism agencies and the tourism industry committing to work together to ensure that the sustainable tourism agenda is a central part of the thinking for practitioners, policy makers and tourists.

Background

The Government's Tourism Policy Statement, *People, Place, and Policy: Growing Tourism to 2025*, affirmed and agreed that it will place tourism as a key element of its economic strategy, with development in the tourism sector reflecting the highest standards of environmental and economic sustainability. This policy was successfully implemented by way of two Tourism Action Plans, initially from 2016-2018 and latterly from 2019-2021. The implementation of the most recent Action Plan was interrupted by the need to respond to the devastating impact the COVID-19 crisis has wrought on the Irish tourism sector.

However, the 2019-2021 Action Plan contained an action providing for the establishment of a working group to review international best practice in sustainable tourism and to propose guiding principles for sustainable tourism development in Ireland. A Sustainable Tourism Working Group was established under the aegis of the Tourism Leadership Group and chaired by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and includes senior representatives of the Irish Tourism Industry Confederation (ITIC), Fáilte Ireland, and Tourism Ireland.

Our Ambition and Guiding Principles

The Group agreed that sustainable tourism needs to look at a wide definition and include all pillars of sustainable development; environmental, social and economic. The Group also agreed that the principles would need to look to both short term and long term goals and set a framework within which all stakeholders could align their work in sustainability to deliver.

The Group completed its work on this action in late 2019 and its [report](#) was endorsed by the then Tourism Ministers and the Tourism Leadership Group and published on 19 December 2019 confirming the following ambition:

Ireland will seek to be amongst the world-leaders in sustainable tourism practices

In addition the report set out guiding principles for sustainable tourism development in Ireland:

Guiding Principles

1. All of government will work together with industry towards achieving a sustainable tourism sector.
2. Sustainable tourism growth will be achieved in a manner that focuses on overall economic benefit ahead of the number of tourists.
3. Tourism will support economic growth in communities throughout the country and with a greater spread of demand across the year.
4. In delivering high quality tourism experiences that exceed our visitors' expectations, we will do so in a manner that minimises any negative environmental or community impacts.
5. As custodians of our natural landscape and of our historic and cultural assets, we will protect them for the next generation.
6. Responsible behaviour by our visitors will be encouraged to maximise the mutual benefit of tourism to Ireland's people and place.
7. The tourism sector will support and promote efforts to move to more sustainable forms of transport to, and around Ireland.
8. The tourism sector must play its part to help deliver Ireland's commitments under the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

Policy Direction

It was clear from the research carried out by the Group that the traditional model of tourism was changing and a new national policy was needed, in line with the United Nation's (UN) Agenda for Sustainable Development, which has sustainability at its core. In 2020, the newly formed Government included a commitment within the Programme for Government, *Our Shared Future*, to develop a new sustainable tourism policy document and in advance of this an interim action plan. However, the emphasis in 2020 and 2021 has been on helping

the sector to recover from the COVID-19 crisis with resources remaining firmly focused on the survival and stabilisation of the tourism sector. Notwithstanding this, in order to maintain momentum on the sustainable tourism agenda, the Sustainable Tourism Working Group reconvened in 2021. It has now completed the development of a suite of actions that promote sustainable tourism practices which can be implemented prior to a new policy being developed.

In line with the Programme for Government commitment, it is expected that the development of a new national tourism policy, that mainstreams sustainability, will commence in the latter half of 2021 when the tourism sector starts to recover from the COVID-19 crisis. This policy will be informed by and build upon the work undertaken by the Sustainable Tourism Working Group and be consistent with our sectoral climate change targets and commitments.

Alignment with National and International Government Policy on Sustainable Development

United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development



In 2015 the UN developed a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals in order to frame the UN member states' agendas and policies up to 2030. As part of the process each UN member state must produce an implementation plan.

In 2018 the Government published "*The Sustainable Development Goals National Implementation Plan 2018-2020*". The purpose of this document is to set out how Ireland intends to implement the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) through development of actions and targets around each goal. It is incumbent upon all Government Agencies and Departments to ensure these actions and targets are adhered to and that each sector contributes to Ireland's realisation of these goals.

There are four Sustainable Development Goals (8, 12, 14 & 17) that have targets which specifically relate to tourism and the actions in this report seek to address

in particular the tourism target under Goal 12 Responsible Consumption and Production.

- National target 12.b: Develop and implement tools to monitor sustainable development impacts for sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products.

National Climate Policy

The Climate Action Plan published on June 17th, 2019 identifies the nature and scale of the climate challenge and charts a course towards ambitious decarbonisation targets. Reflecting the central priority climate change will have in our political and administrative systems in the future, the Plan sets out governance arrangements including carbon-proofing our policies, establishment of carbon budgets, a strengthened Climate Change Advisory Council and greater accountability to the Oireachtas.

The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021 aims to put on a statutory footing a commitment to achieve a climate neutral economy no later than 2050. The bill establishes a legally binding framework with clear targets and commitments set in law to ensure we achieve our national, EU and international climate goals and obligations in the near and long term.

The targets set in the Climate Action Bill must be reflected through the doubling of ambition in the 2021 Climate Action Plan. The successful implementation of this Action Plan and the development of a new national tourism policy which seeks to mainstream sustainability will ensure that our tourism sector will be a strong participant in achieving these targets.

An Integrated Approach to Sustainable Tourism Development

Our tourism agencies and industry have a pivotal role to play in the implementation of sustainable tourism practices and as a first step will further integrate sustainability into their strategic plans and promotional activities. This work is

already underway by both the agencies and industry in line with the initial report of the Sustainable Tourism Working Group and this Action Plan.

For Fáilte Ireland, the main objective is to develop a sustainable tourism sector. Environmental protection, economic competitiveness, community & visitor awareness and involvement, all play a part in successfully achieving and delivering on this objective. Regionality and Seasonality have been the cornerstone for strategic development and for a number of years now Fáilte Ireland has also deployed the VICE Model approach of Visitor, Industry, Community and Environment. This continues in Fáilte Ireland's current medium term strategy to help the tourism sector to survive and recover from the impacts of COVID-19. Our natural landscape and our built heritage are some of our greatest tourism assets and the 8 strategic pillars within this strategy support sustainable development in order to protect, enhance and promote both our natural and built heritage for the common benefits of visitor, industry, community and the environment.

Tourism Ireland adopted sustainable destination marketing principles in 2018 that aimed for greater regional and seasonal spread of overseas visitors. In seeking to rebuild our international tourism, Tourism Ireland will develop a new sustainability action-plan to ensure its activity takes the sustainability principles into account. This will include a review of activity, priorities and direction for promoting the island of Ireland and how Tourism Ireland itself should adapt to meet the challenges and opportunities of the future.

In June 2020, ITIC published its first Tourism Industry Revival Plan in response to the immediate and devastating impact of Covid-19. This Plan includes recommendations to support a sustainable recovery for the tourism sector by transitioning to more environmentally friendly tourist transport, increased emphasis on outdoor activities, more hands-on heritage and cultural experiences, local food production, and slow tourism hubs.

An updated Industry Revival Plan was published by ITIC in February 2021 and restated a commitment to sustainable tourism practices in a post-COVID environment. ITIC will lead out on ensuring that its members deliver their part in full towards helping Ireland be climate neutral by 2050 as per the Climate Action Bill.

It has been shown that building a sustainable business is good business as it promotes longevity and more interaction with key stakeholders. Prior to the

pandemic there had been a growing realisation among individual tourism operators that sustainable practices were not necessarily a cost. Changing consumer preferences has led to many enterprises taking steps to make their offering more sustainable and generating more business as a result. The COVID-19 crisis is likely to reinforce such preferences. It is clear, therefore, that the industry needs to continue moving in a sustainable direction – both because of the benefits to the environment and communities, but also to individual businesses. Over time, sustainability will become the norm and it will be those businesses not engaging which will be the outliers. Collaboration will be vital at industry level and also with local and national government, and the tourism agencies, to realise Ireland’s ambition of being amongst the world leaders in sustainable tourism practices.

Themes

The main objectives of this plan are to identify actions which promote sustainable tourism practices, establish new research methods which will increase the level of evidence available, and form a clear narrative for communicating about the sustainability agenda to build a better understanding and awareness among tourism stakeholders and the general public.

The actions are grouped under the following themes:

Policy

Our national policy commitments on sustainable development and climate change are evolving rapidly. To ensure that tourism takes a pro-active approach to contributing to our national commitments, a new national tourism policy, which mainstreams sustainability, will be developed when the sector begins to recover from the COVID-19 crisis. This new policy will contribute directly to the national response to the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, in particular the specific tourism target under Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth): *by 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products.*

Evidence Base

The internationally recognised VICE model acknowledges that tourism in a destination is the interaction between **Visitors**, the **Industry** that serves them, the **Community** that hosts them, and the **Environment** where it all takes place. As we head towards a post-pandemic world, extensive research, data collection and analysis is required to build our understanding of consumer and market sentiment towards sustainable tourism products and experiences and to get a better understanding of the impact of visitor activity on our environment. The establishment of a benchmark CO₂ value for Irish tourism will support evidenced based decision making for effective reduction of the tourism carbon footprint.

Environmental Impact

The quality of our natural scenery and physical environment is something that is irreplaceable and must be preserved for future generations to come. Ireland's commitments through the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Bill 2021, to achieve a climate neutral economy no later than 2050, is consistent with our ambition to be amongst the world-leaders in sustainable tourism practices. To do this, we must support the development of sustainable tourism experiences that minimise any negative environmental impacts. The successful implementation of the actions identified in this plan will lay the foundations for a green transition of the tourism industry and destinations by providing better access to information and tools for visitors to practice responsible tourism and give tourism businesses and destinations the ability to measure tourism's impact on the environment.

Awareness & Education

The actions identified here aim to grow the awareness and understanding of issues relating to sustainability in tourism across the economy and society. To begin to develop a better understanding we must ensure that a clear message is being communicated and that the sustainability agenda is embedded within training programmes for all tourism stakeholders. A clear narrative needs to be established for communications about the sustainability agenda and its implementation, which reflects community and business understanding and attitudes towards it.

Business Planning

It is vital that a shared vision and a set of measurable objectives are incorporated in the medium and long term plans of our tourism agencies and industry. This will allow for the immediate progress of sustainability initiatives for these key tourism stakeholders ahead of a new national policy being developed.

Destination Management

Our people, heritage and culture form a significant part of the tourism experience promoted to visitors, and the economic gain from visitor expenditure and support from employment contributes to the overall quality of life within our communities. As part of a sustainable approach, we must ensure that communities are involved in destination planning and that community impact and benefit is considered within management plans. Ensuring increased visitor awareness, education and responsible behaviour in relation to tourism are also an important contribution to destination management. Fáilte Ireland will seek to adopt a sustainable destination management approach by instilling the sustainability agenda within its Destination Experience Development Plans. It will also develop new initiatives which seek to engage visitors and influence their behaviour for the benefit of our natural environment and local communities.

Sales & Marketing

Informed by extensive research, both of the consumer and our own product, we can shine a light on areas and destinations at home that are striving to be best in class in terms of sustainability and develop platforms that enable connections between consumers, trade and businesses in promoting sustainable tourism experiences. We must tailor our marketing programmes to focus on sustainable tourism product and continue to promote our authentic Irish culture, heritage, people and landscapes.

Actions to Promote Sustainable Tourism Practices 2021-2023

Theme	No.	Action	Lead	Timeline
<i>Policy</i>	1	Initiate the development of a new national tourism policy which takes full account of the Ambition and Principles for Sustainable Tourism Development in Ireland.	DTCAGSM	Q4 2021
	2	Retain the Sustainable Tourism Working Group and review the structure of the Group with a view to overseeing the implementation of this action plan.	DTCAGSM	Q3 2021
<i>Evidence Base</i>	3	Commence a process to establish a benchmark CO ₂ value for Irish Tourism.	FI	Q1 2022
	4	Review and enhance Fáilte Ireland's Tourism Approval Rating survey which measures the views of tourism and its impacts at community level.	FI	Q1 2022
	5	Identify new data sources that measure seasonality and the regional spread of visitors to increase the understanding of consumer behaviour when international tourism resumes.	FI	Q2 2022
	6	Build measures of sentiment on sustainability into research programmes at home and abroad with consumers, trade and industry.	FI, TI	Q3 2022
	7	Initiate the development of a mechanism that allows Industry to report on carbon reduction and off-setting measures.	FI, Industry	Q1 2022
	8	Utilise Destination Experience Development Plans to measure environmental impacts at key tourism destinations.	FI	Q3 2021
	9	Ensure that tourism is taken into account in research conducted by D/Transport into the impact of the	DTCAGSM	Q3 2021

		introduction of carbon taxation on the aviation sector in Ireland.		
<i>Environmental Impact</i>	10	Initiate the development of carbon calculators which will allow tourists, to and within Ireland, and tourism businesses to evaluate the impact of their carbon footprint on the environment.	FI	Q1 2022
	11	Undertake research and analysis to investigate options for tourists within Ireland, to minimise and offset their carbon emissions.	FI	Q1 2022
	12	Carry out a feasibility study on the infrastructure required to be able to travel and tour Ireland's experience regions by sustainable modes of transport.	FI	Q2 2022
	13	Help to establish Ireland as a leading sustainable tourism destination by supporting government investment in leveraging Ireland's national capital. For example through the development of greenways, blueways and walking trails.	FI	Q3 2021
<i>Awareness & Education</i>	14	Establish clear and consistent messaging about the sustainability agenda and its implementation, to promote and embed the concept within the community, industry and key tourism stakeholders.	STWG	Q3 2021
	15	Incorporate the guiding principles for sustainable tourism development in business support programmes.	FI	Q3 2021
	16	Increase and promote the awareness and understanding of the sustainable tourism agenda for key tourism stakeholders and policy makers through training and development opportunities.	TI, FI, ITIC, DTCAGSM	Q4 2021
	17	Encourage applications from the tourism sector for the next SDG Champions Programme which raises public awareness of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals through partnership and promotion at a national level.	STWG	Q3 2021
<i>Business Planning</i>	18	Assign responsibilities at director level in both Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland to provide strategic direction and increased profile for sustainable tourism development.	FI, TI	Q3 2021

<i>Destination Management</i>	19	Include reference to sustainability commitments and actions in the tourism agencies annual Business Plans, Corporate Plans, Statements of Strategy and Annual Reports.	FI, TI	Q1 2022
	20	Assign a senior industry representative to act as a sustainability champion to ensure that tourism businesses play their full part in delivering the sustainability agenda.	ITIC	Q3 2021
	21	Communicate consumer insight on sustainability to industry stakeholders and develop new resources which will allow tourism businesses to access relevant sustainability information and reporting tools.	FI/TI	Q2 2022
	22	Identify and deliver incentive and capex schemes to industry to address key change barriers & drivers to stimulate transformational change.	FI	Q3 2022
	23	Ensure that the guiding principles for sustainable tourism development are embedded in Fáilte Ireland's Destination Experience Development Plans.	FI	Q3 2021
	24	Develop and promote a sustainability pledge for both inbound and domestic tourists and tour operators to support Ireland's efforts to help preserve the environment and act in a responsible and sustainable manner.	STWG	Q1 2022
	25	Evaluate the benefits of introducing a national tourism enterprise sustainability programme along the lines of 'Origin Green'.	STWG	Q2 2022
	26	Identify and develop Destinations that have the potential to be promoted as best in class in terms of sustainability.	FI	Q4 2022
	27	Organise workshops with local stakeholders including community groups/farmers etc. to maximise the potential of nature based solutions in local tourism.	FI	Q2 2022

<i>Sales & Marketing</i>	28	Create and embed aligned sustainability messaging to inform domestic and overseas consumer campaigns, and domestic and overseas trade communications.	FI, TI	Q4 2021
	29	Identify and map existing accredited sustainable tourism product and businesses, including geographical clusters, to inform promotion at home and overseas.	FI	Q2 2022
	30	Create new sales and marketing opportunities for those sustainable tourism businesses that want to grow their international business.	TI	Q3 2022
	31	Undertake media and trade familiarisation programmes which feature sustainable tourism product.	FI, TI	Q4 2021

Appendix I

Working Group Members

Colm O'Connor (Chair)	-	DTCAGSM
Darragh Morgan (Secretary)	-	DTCAGSM
Eoghan O'Mara Walsh	-	ITIC
Orla Carroll	-	Fáilte Ireland
Shane Dineen	-	Fáilte Ireland
Mark Henry	-	Tourism Ireland
Fiona Dunne	-	Tourism Ireland