

The Connemara Coast and Islands Visitor Experience Development Plan

Progress Report November 2021



**Fáilte
Ireland**

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Clifden, Connemara, County Galway
Cover: Pine Island, Derryclare Lough, County Galway

A few words from the CAITN Co-Chairs

Where it began...

CAITN is the *Connemara and Islands Tourism Network* and was established in 2018 following a recommendation in the *Fáilte Ireland Visitor Experience Development Plan (VEDP)* for Connemara & the Islands. CAITN is an independent, not-for-profit tourism network representing the interests of all stakeholders in the tourism industry within the region. The Implementation Group of 20+ stakeholders meet on a quarterly basis to oversee the delivery of sustainable tourism projects, everything from marketing to product development.



Highlights to date...

We are now over halfway through the five-year plan. For us, the Co-Chairs of CAITN, there have been three major highlights to date. Firstly, the value of **cooperation and collaboration** has been significant and cannot be underestimated. Having key stakeholders from state agencies to local groups and industry (activity providers, attractions, and accommodation providers) around the table, has enabled coordinated progress on the plan, in particular product development and marketing. Secondly, before COVID-19 it was very encouraging to see that the **tourist season was extending** on both sides with businesses staying open longer – we look forward to the return of this along our beautiful part of the Wild Atlantic Way. Thirdly, the **substantial progress on the Connemara Greenway** is already a success. It is hugely encouraging for all involved in tourism to see the on-going rollout of this major asset – for the benefit of visitors and communities alike.

Where to now...

When COVID-19 closed down tourism for the entire region and country, it demonstrated how valuable the sector is to our regional economy and that it cannot be taken for granted. At this, the halfway point of the VEDP strategy, we hope all stakeholders will now put their collective shoulders to the wheel to bring the rest of this plan over the line. It's time for a reboot and this significant milestone allows us to reassess where we're at, what's left to complete, and plan how we will get there. There has been great energy shown by the Implementation Group in championing particular actions from the VEDP and we welcome more champions for more actions.

Thanks to...

- Without mentioning specific people, businesses, or organisations we would like to offer a *Míle Buíochas* to all for the incredible *meitheal* that has gotten us to this point.
- A special thanks to the Wild Atlantic Way team in Fáilte Ireland for keeping us on the straight and narrow and the unending support they have provided CAITN since its inception.

Le meas,

Dominic O Mórain & Terry O'Toole – CAITN Co-Chairs

Two handwritten signatures in black ink. The first signature is on the left and the second is on the right. Both appear to be cursive and somewhat stylized.

The Connemara Coast and Islands Visitor Experience Development Plan

Summary

Launched in March 2018, The Connemara Coast and Islands Visitor Experience Development Plan (VEDP) aimed to maximise the opportunity that existed to find new ways of using the area's very special backdrop of landscape and stories, to continue inspiring the visitor – reinvigorating those seeking authentic connections with local Irish culture and the Gaelic language, rewarding the contemplative mind and challenging those in pursuit of adventure.



VISION: The Plan was designed to encourage all operators and organisations involved in delivering a tourism product to reinforce and add value to the experience through aligning with the stories and themes identified therein and target the Culturally Curious and Great Escapers market segments. The vision was to extend the season and attract visitors to engage with the true essence and story of the Connemara Coast & Islands without compromising the environment or culture of the region.

Visitation to the Connemara Coast and the Islands is growing, with pressure being felt strongly in some areas while other areas perceive themselves as being left behind. Although quantitative data for the destination is difficult to access, feedback from businesses suggest an overall growth in visitor numbers to Ireland and County Galway. The way forward for the Connemara Coast and Islands is through strong partnerships, the delivery of compelling experiences, and a focus on getting the story to the visitor – inspiring them to travel off-season, stay longer and enjoy the essence of this stretch of coastline.

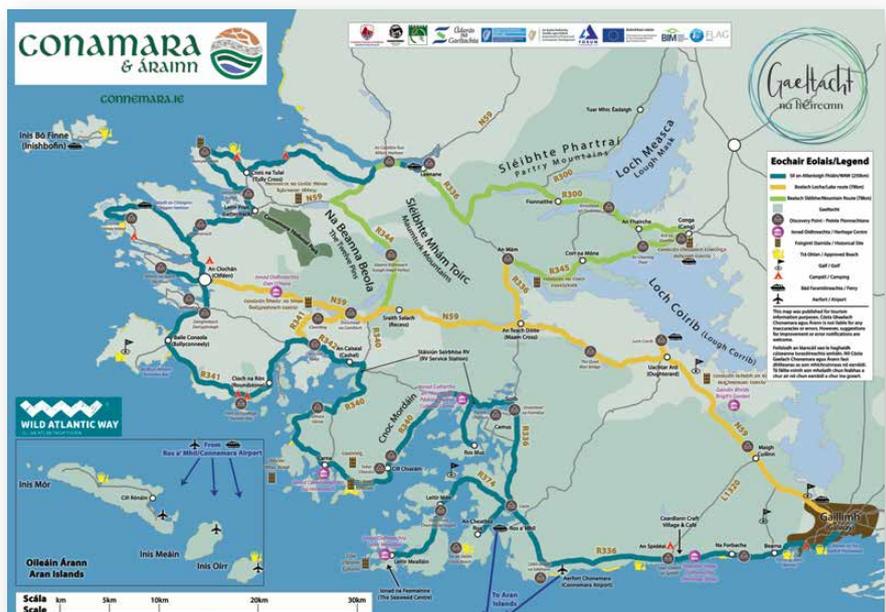
GEOGRAPHY: Connemara is a geographical district in the west of County Galway with lakes, rivers, mountains, cliffs, stunning beaches, and with the only fjord in the west of Ireland, Connemara has long been regarded as one of the most beautiful places in the world. This is the part of County Galway that starts just west of Galway City, and is bordered by Lough Corrib to the east, Killary Harbour to the north and by Galway Bay and the Atlantic Ocean to the west. We include all three Aran Islands and Inishbofin in the Connemara destination.

DESTINATION PROMISE:

Feel the wind and the sea mists, hear the call of the wild, explore the "savage beauty", experience the spontaneity of the Gaelic spirit – and be inspired.

VEDP Themes:

- Wilderness, Tradition & Innovation
- Inlets & Islands
- Resilience & Rebellion
- Inspired by Connemara & the Islands



A message from Fáilte Ireland



The Connemara Coast and Islands VEDP was launched in March 2018 and was one of the first of such plans in Fáilte Ireland.

It was a success right from its launch, as it brought together the public and private sector in a collaborative and progressive framework, with the aim of spreading visitors right across all parts of the region, encouraging visitation in the off-peak, and increasing dwell time and revenue.

Incredible work has been delivered to date as part of the VEDP by CAITN (Connemara and Islands Tourism Network), under the leadership of Terence O'Toole and Dominic O Mórain. So much progress was made in the first two years and while the pandemic hit half way through our 5 year plan, the tourism network held strong and priorities were adapted to deal with the crisis.

As we use this moment here to take stock of all the fantastic work that has been delivered in Connemara since 2018, and on all we have achieved together as a tourism destination, I welcome the opportunity to refocus our efforts on our future priorities now as we recover from COVID-19 and move into 2022 and beyond.

I would like to commend the membership of CAITN for the way in which they captured the essence of the VEDP strategy and its shared objectives, and for driving forward its actions on behalf of their individual sectors and local areas.

We are very proud of the strong partnership that has emerged in recent years with the CAITN members, our industry partners, and the Wild Atlantic Way team in Fáilte Ireland. We will continue to work closely with you over the term of this plan as we strive to achieve sustainable growth in the years ahead which will positively impact the industry here.

I look forward to continuing our shared journey in developing Connemara and the Islands into a world class holiday destination.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Miriam Kennedy'.

Miriam Kennedy

Head of Wild Atlantic Way
Fáilte Ireland



Fáilte Ireland and the Connemara VEDP

Product Development:

Recognising that Experience Development is the art and science of delivering a consistent message that inspires consumers throughout their travel experience, Fáilte Ireland has provided significant funding to develop the tourism product in Connemara since the publication of the VEDP, including the below catalyst projects:

• Large Capital Grants & Strategic Partnership Grant Schemes

1. €500,000 funding for the Ballynahinch to Clifden section of the Connemara Greenway with works underway. The Connemara Greenway is a key tourism infrastructure project which is being developed in partnership with Galway County Council, the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme (ORIS), and the Department of Transport.
2. €1.9 million under the National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS) Strategic Partnership to Connemara National Park for developing walks and visitor centre upgrade – designing new trails and upgrading their interpretation.
3. €1.7 million to Kylemore Abbey towards upgrading of interpretation inside the Abbey.
4. €450,000 under the Office of Public Works (OPW) Strategic Partnership for redevelopment works at Dún Aonghasa Visitor Centre, and interpretation for 10 other visitor points on Árainn/Inis Mór.

• New Horizons Small Capital Grants Scheme 2018

A new Small Capital Grant Scheme was launched by Fáilte Ireland in 2018 for new and existing visitor attractions on the Wild Atlantic Way, specific to two VEDP locations – Skelligs and Connemara. A total of 23 expressions of interest were received, of which 11 progressed to application stage. Following a robust evaluation process, 5 applicants in Connemara have been recommended for funding amounts of up to €200,000.

Wild Atlantic Way Signature Discovery Point at
Derrygimlagh, Clifden, County Galway

1. Aran Heritage Centre
2. Connemara Gaeltacht Archipelago Visitor Experience
3. Killary Fjord new terminal building
4. Transatlantic Connections Centre
5. Connemara Railway

These projects are currently going through the compliance phase of the application process and it is hoped they can be progressed for completion in 2022.

- **Destination Towns Initiative**

Clifden was awarded €500,000 under this Fáilte Ireland initiative which is being administered through our local authority partners Galway County Council. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the project deadline has been extended to Q1 2022.

- **Regional Festivals & Events Funding**

From 2018 to 2020 Fáilte Ireland allocated funding of €49,675 to festivals in Connemara through the Regional Festivals & Events programme administered by the local authority or via direct funding under our Festival Innovation Programme. Both the Clifden Arts Festival and the inaugural Alcock & Brown Festival benefited from this funding.

Networking Events:

The Connemara VEDP calls for enhanced collaboration and cross-promotion amongst all industry partners and, with this in mind, Fáilte Ireland has facilitated very successful networking events in partnership with CAITN. The most successful of these events was the **CAITN networking event** on Wednesday, March 13th 2019 in Peacockes Hotel, Maam Cross. The event was a valuable networking opportunity and provided CAITN and VEDP Lead partners with a platform to present its work to date to stakeholders and to outline its plans to support the Connemara tourism industry for the following 12 months. An unprecedented 160 industry partners attended the event.



The Fáilte Ireland Authority with members of the Connemara tourism sector at Notre Dame, Kylemore Abbey in September 2019.

Enterprise Supports, Mentoring and Training:

Fáilte Ireland's goal is that all visitors experience the world-class service our industry here in Ireland is famous for. To this end, in Connemara, we have provided training to front-line staff in tourism businesses. Some **Customer Service Excellence** businesses completed this training in-house for 75% of their front facing staff and achieved the Service Excellence Business Award. This programme provided staff with the skills to:

- provide a top-quality customer experience from arrival to departure,
- create lasting impressions and memorable experiences,
- demonstrate how to add the personal touch,
- encourage feedback and manage complaints,
- upsell and cross-sell.

Additionally, 25 strategically positioned tourism businesses participated in Fáilte Ireland's first ever **VEDP Modular Activation Programme** focused on sales training from September 2019 to February 2020. The success of this programme was noted nationally and is now the blueprint for VEDP Activation Programmes in other Wild Atlantic Way VEDP areas and the various Destination Recovery Taskforces established as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Members of CAITN's Sales & Marketing Sub-committee participated in a Fáilte Ireland **Social Media Destination Strategy** which continues to be active into 2021 and has resulted in a significant improvement in Connemara's online social media presence.

Fáilte Ireland also provided more advanced **Leadership Skills** training and mentoring for senior management to assist them in preparing to attend in-Ireland Travel Trade events such as Meitheal.

In 2020, **Business Diagnostic Clinics** were provided (online) for key tourism businesses to help them determine the best next steps for their business. They received expert financial advice and guidance on topics such as budgeting in the short-term, debt management, operations going forward including HR, asset utilisation and business adaptation.

A **Saleable Experience Programme** was delivered to assist targeted businesses to sell their experience to the international marketplace. Participants learned the skills to create a written pitch for buyers and a B2B fact sheet, the contents of which are used in Fáilte Ireland buyer guides.

Local Experts Programmes were delivered to front line staff in Clifden and Maam Cross. The workshops were fun, free, informative and an ideal opportunity to network with others across the region sharing stories and knowledge of hidden gems that in turn could be shared with visitors.

Sales, Media and Publicity:

A number of representatives of the Connemara tourism sector were sponsored by Fáilte Ireland to attend **overseas sales events** particularly targeting the French market in 2018 and 2019 to represent the destination. Participants included Clifden Station House, Dan O'Haras Homestead, Lough Inagh Lodge, Ballynahinch Castle Hotel, DK Connemara Oysters and Builin Blasta, Spiddal.

In November 2019 Fáilte Ireland piloted a **VEDP B2B Buyer Roadshow** in Galway City giving 20 Connemara tourism businesses the opportunity to meet 10 ITOA and OTA members in-destination for the first time. There were many new contracts as a result and we hope to host the workshop again and encourage the recovery of international tourism to Ireland post COVID-19.

Fáilte Ireland regularly brings both domestic and overseas journalists to Connemara and the Islands to showcase the best the region has to offer. We also promote the region to tour operators on **familiarisation trips** to Connemara and the Islands, Galway city and county.

For the past number of years Fáilte Ireland has joined forces with the **Ryan Tubridy Show** broadcasting from various locations along the Wild Atlantic Way every morning for a week. In 2019 the show was broadcast live from Árainn/Inis Mór featuring interviews with local tourism businesses from across the VEDP region discussing the many activities and experiences on offer.

Marketing Campaigns:

In June 2020 Fáilte Ireland's **Make a Break for It** campaign encouraged Irish people to pack their bags and get out to explore all that Ireland had to offer. This multi-channel campaign investment of €2.5 million reached 97% of all adults nationally and ran for 12 weeks, aimed at exciting Irish people about a holiday in Ireland, inspiring and informing them about where to go and what to do across all regions, and reassuring them that it was safe to travel within Ireland. Connemara featured strongly in the 2020 campaign and also features in the 2021 **Keep Discovering** campaign.

Fáilte Ireland's new €4 million domestic marketing campaign was unveiled on the 24th May 2021 as the tourism sector was preparing to reopen for the season. Fáilte Ireland's '**Keep Discovering**' campaign aims to drive domestic holidays for the remainder of the year and to reboot and rebuild Ireland's tourism industry. Advertising has been running across TV, press, radio, outdoor, cinema, PR and digital channels to encourage and remind Irish people to discover the joy of holidaying in Ireland as they begin to reconnect with each other.

The Connemara region features prominently in the campaign, as can be seen in the below still image from the national TV Ad, showing on-water adventure activities on Killary Fjord.



COVID-19 Supports from Fáilte Ireland

COVID-19 Online Business Supports Hub

Fáilte Ireland's top priority for 2021 is supporting Ireland's tourism and hospitality businesses to survive, re-open and recover from the impact of the COVID-19 crisis. With that in mind we have developed an extensive range of business supports to guide our industry partners through operating their businesses during COVID-19.

Visit the customised business support hub on www.failteireland.ie which features expert insights, business supports, toolkits, advice and more.



The tourism industry makes an invaluable contribution to Irish society and all of Fáilte Ireland's resources are firmly focused to help stabilise and rebuild the sector.

COVID-19 Safety Charter

Fáilte Ireland consumer insights research throughout the pandemic in 2020 and 2021 shows that safety is a significant concern as people plan domestic trips going forward. A new COVID-19 Safety Charter was designed for the 2020 season to help reinforce consumer confidence. In signing up to the charter, businesses undertook that all of their employees followed Fáilte Ireland's operational guidelines and had completed the Infection Prevention Control training programme. The Safety Charter gave reassurance to employers, employees and customers that the business was ready to re-open safely.



To date, almost 400 business in Galway City & County have registered for the COVID-19 Safety Charter, the majority of whom are located in the Connemara destination. For more information visit <https://www.failteireland.ie/apply-covid-19-safety-charter.aspx>

COVID-19 Adaptation and ReStart Grant Plus:

In August 2020, a new €26 million fund was launched by Catherine Martin T.D., Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, to help tourism businesses with the costs of adapting premises or operations and implementing Fáilte Ireland's Guidelines for Re-opening in COVID-19. Eligible costs included those for barriers and protective screens, the development of outdoor areas, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and sanitisers.



Among the many successful applications received from businesses in Galway city and county, Connemara businesses featured prominently.

Fáilte Ireland also administered the **Re-start grant plus for B&B's** and again Galway was to the fore among regions to benefit.



Cliff Diving at Killary Fjord, County Galway

CAITN's Marketing Response to COVID-19

In March 2020, CAITN coordinated a marketing response to COVID-19. It was a short sharp advertising campaign to attract the Irish domestic market to have their staycation in the Connemara & the Islands region during the summer of 2020.

Campaign elements included national radio and print ads supported by a social media strategy and a content strategy. The focus of the campaign was 'Social Distance' and 'Self Isolation' and how the region lends itself so well to these, now commonplace buzz words.

The campaign was the largest ever coordinated campaign for the region and by the region, with 27 contributors from individual businesses and state agencies. It was also the first use of the brand name 'Connemara & the Islands'.

Campaign creatives were designed in Connemara by Shane Forsythe – www.shaneforsythe.ie

Campaign results:

- **€23,500 funding raised** and spent directly on radio, print, content and social marketing.
- **€228,258** Campaign Advertising Value Equivalent (AVE). Source: TrueHawk Media.
- **8 High Quality Videos** which were made available to campaign contributors.
- **7 High Quality Articles** created for Connemara.ie which are still in use.
- **Trending** – #Connemara trended twice on Twitter.
- **Social Advertising Reach** – 1,021,759 via Facebook advertising.
- **Connemara.ie Traffic** quadrupled from 2309 to 9356 YOY.
- **7103 Email Subscribers** added to the destination's database.
- **A Busy Region** – Tourism providers reported a very busy 2020 summer.



It's been a long road, but with travel restrictions easing there's light in the western sky. It's time to start thinking about how to make the most of your summer and with a Connemara Laethanta saoire, a fresh adventure isn't far away. Enjoy stunning seafood, unspoiled landscapes and beaches, and indulgent experiences in the comfort and safety of the region's finest hotels, restaurants, holiday cottages and guest houses.

To explore and find out more visit connemara.ie
Search: Connemara & the Islands

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Connemara & The Islands
It's a Different World

Campaign Financially Supported by:	Abbeyglen Castle Hotel All Things Connemara/Clifden Bike Shop Ballyvaughan Castle - Hotel & Estate Clifden Station House Hotel Connemara Chamber of Commerce Connemara Coast Hotel	Connemara National Park Connemara Sands Hotel & Spa DK Connemara Oysters Eno Wine Faherty Wholesale	Connemara National Park Connemara Sands Hotel & Spa DK Connemara Oysters Eno Wine Faherty Wholesale	Foylie's Hotel Clifden Galway County Council Great Fishing Houses of Ireland Hehir's of Clifden J&C Kenny Wines and Spirits	Joyce's Craft Shop King's Paper & Gift Shop, Clifden Kyllemara Abbey & Victorian Walled Garden Lough Inagh Lodge Hotel Love Connemara Cottages	Mannion Bike Hire Millars Connemara Pacoche's Hotel Rennylee House Hotel & Resort Rosleague Manor House Hotel Údarás na Gaeltachta/Connemara.ie
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An independently funded initiative coordinated by CAITN - the Connemara & Aran Islands Tourism Network. Strategic support provided by Fáilte Ireland / Wild Atlantic Way



New section of the Connemara Greenway

Galway County Council



Comhairle Chontae na Gaillimhe
Galway County Council

Vital to the success of the Connemara VEDP is the support of lead partner, Galway County Council. Without local authority cooperation and expertise many of the catalyst projects including the Connemara Greenway, walking and hiking trails and Blueways, would not happen; not to mention the significant enhancement of visitor facilities in coastal locations and on offshore islands.

Below is an overview of ongoing Connemara VEDP projects led by Galway County Council:

- Galway County Council sourced €40,000 through Town and Village Accelerated Measures to appoint a digital agency to support delivery of a suite of collaborative marketing projects. Through change management and consultation, an updated umbrella **brand** was delivered for 'Conamara agus na hOileáin'; a campaign strategy was implemented throughout the holiday season of 2021 and into the shoulder season; a new suite of photography has been commissioned and PR and digital strategy is supporting the delivery of social media and video projects which had been developed through partner funding streams. Galway County Council worked closely with key stakeholders and lead partners, **Cósta Gaelach Chonamara agus Árainn (CGCÁ)**, who contributed significant funding secured through LEADER/ Forum Chonamara in order to implement and manage these marketing initiatives.
- Galway County Council invested in PR in partnership with Galway City Council and Tourism Ireland to develop a programme that secured significant airtime on 239 stations in the United States with transmission of a television series. Commencing in January 2021 '**Ireland: County by County**' supported the goal of keeping Ireland in the North American visitor's imagination with Connemara featuring Kylemore Abbey, Letterfrack, Sweathouse Saunas, The Misunderstood Heron, and a piece to camera as Gaeilge from the team at An Garraí Glas.
- Galway County Council continue to support **CGCA**. In 2018 the local authority funded the company with €20,000 seed funding. In 2020;

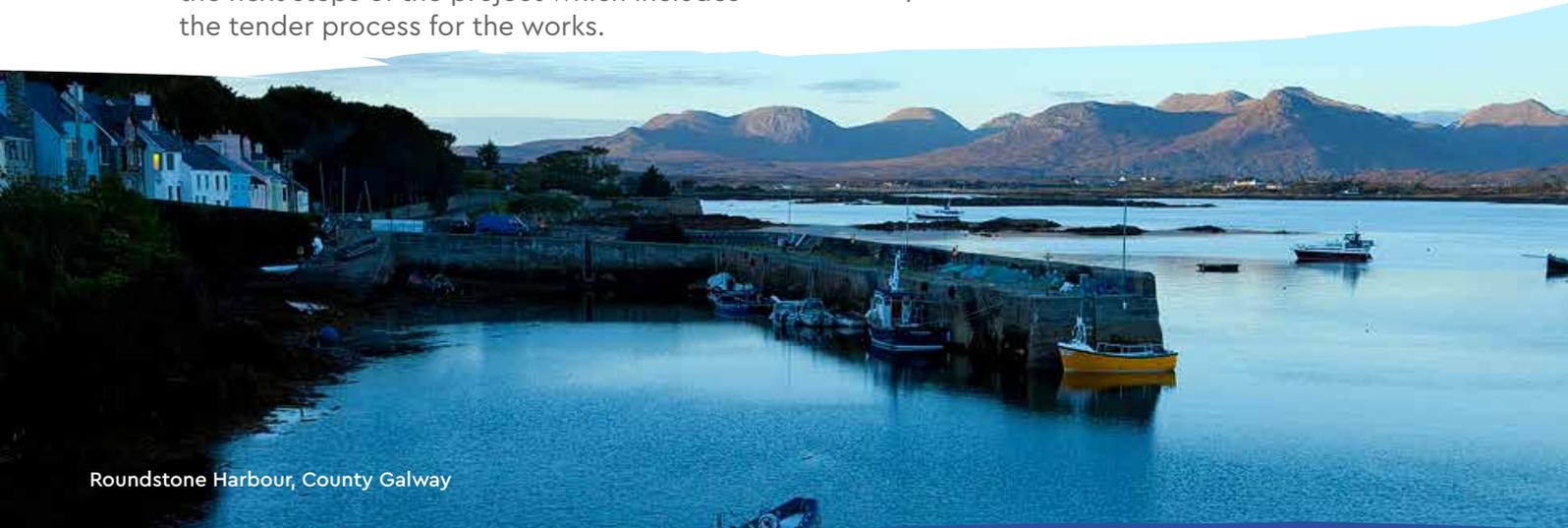


- Galway County Council facilitated the use of the Connemara.ie website for CGCA to ensure Connemara remains one of the top tourist destinations in Ireland – **Connemara.ie** is the official online shopfront for this destination. With the CGCA company managing the website they are positioned to maximise tourism's economic, environmental and cultural contribution to the wider Connemara economy. The website was launched as part of the overall campaign in May 2021.
- Significant work is underway to develop Clifden as a visitor destination and a 'Great Place to Live'. In 2019 Clifden was selected as Galway's '**Destination Town**' and awarded €500,000 from Fáilte Ireland, with Galway County Council adding €166,000 to the overall project value, in addition to resourcing and leading the project. The proposal includes a wayfinding and interpretation strategy, the implementation of a suite of maps, signage and 'placemaking', public realm improvements and 'Greenway readiness' projects.
- Clifden was also awarded €1.056 million through the **Rural Regeneration Development Fund** and Galway County Council. The projects undertaken under this programme will align to maximise impact of funding allocations and will greatly improve the way locals and visitors alike navigate and make use of Connemara's main town.
- Galway County Council continues to develop a significant network of infrastructure that will grow the visitor experience in Connemara. Our key tourism product for the region is the **Connemara Greenway** which is progressing well with sections now open to the public. The project has been supported through partnership with Fáilte Ireland, Outdoor

Recreation Infrastructure Scheme (ORIS), and the Department of Transport.

€2 million has been allocated by Department of Transport on predevelopment of Galway to Oughterard to bring this section through the planning stage. €4.2 million was awarded by Department of Transport to construct the route between Clifden and Recess. Galway County Council have appointed a valuer to negotiate the acquisition of lands along the route. Galway County Council have also recently been granted €450,000 by the Department of Transport to prepare an application to An Bord Pleanála to deliver Greenway/Cycleway routes between Clifden and the Marconi Site at Derrygimlagh, Wild Atlantic Way Signature Discovery Point, and between Clifden and Kylemore Abbey via Letterfrack. A route selection report will form part of the application for planning approval to An Bord Pleanála.

- Heather Humphreys, T.D., Minister for Rural and Community Development has now approved the business case for developments at **Inis Oírr pier**. The Operations and Infrastructure Team at Galway County Council prepared the business case and this project is listed as one of the Government's key infrastructure commitments in the Project Ireland 2040 plan. This development addresses safety risk issues that have arisen over the years, in particular danger from waves breaking over the pier. Additionally, the development aims to address capacity challenges arising from high visitor and ferry traffic using the pier. With the Minister's approval of the business case, Galway County Council can now proceed to the next steps of the project which includes the tender process for the works.
- Galway County Council's Connemara Area Office worked in partnership with Fáilte Ireland to support delivery of the **Derrygimlagh Signature Discovery Point** including the Marconi Station and the Alcock and Brown landing site.
- The team in Connemara also worked in partnership with Fáilte Ireland to deliver the **Wild at Heart** signage strategy which will be promoted through the 'Discover Galway' marketing campaign in the 2021 shoulder season.
- Since 2018 an overall investment of €1.3 million has been led or supported by Galway County Council through the **Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme**. Projects include trail upgrades and management at Corr na Mona, Clonbur Woods, Derroua, Cappahoosh, Sheanadh Mhaca, and significant tranche of work on the Connemara Greenway supported through ORIS.
- Our **Community Support Scheme** funds a range of Connemara festivals such as Clifden Arts Festival, Connemara Mountain Walking Festival, Feile Mhic Dara, Coiste Féile Traidhpicnic; Cleggan Fringe Festival, Clifden Trad Fest, the Connemara Pony Show and festivals associated with the natural environment of the region, like Connemara Green Festival and Sea Week, the Galway Hooker Regatta, and local Galway Hooker and currach races and other unique local events.
- Galway County Council supports the development of feasibility studies e.g. the Galway Hooker Association to explore development of a visitor centre in Connemara.



Roundstone Harbour, County Galway

Údarás na Gaeltachta



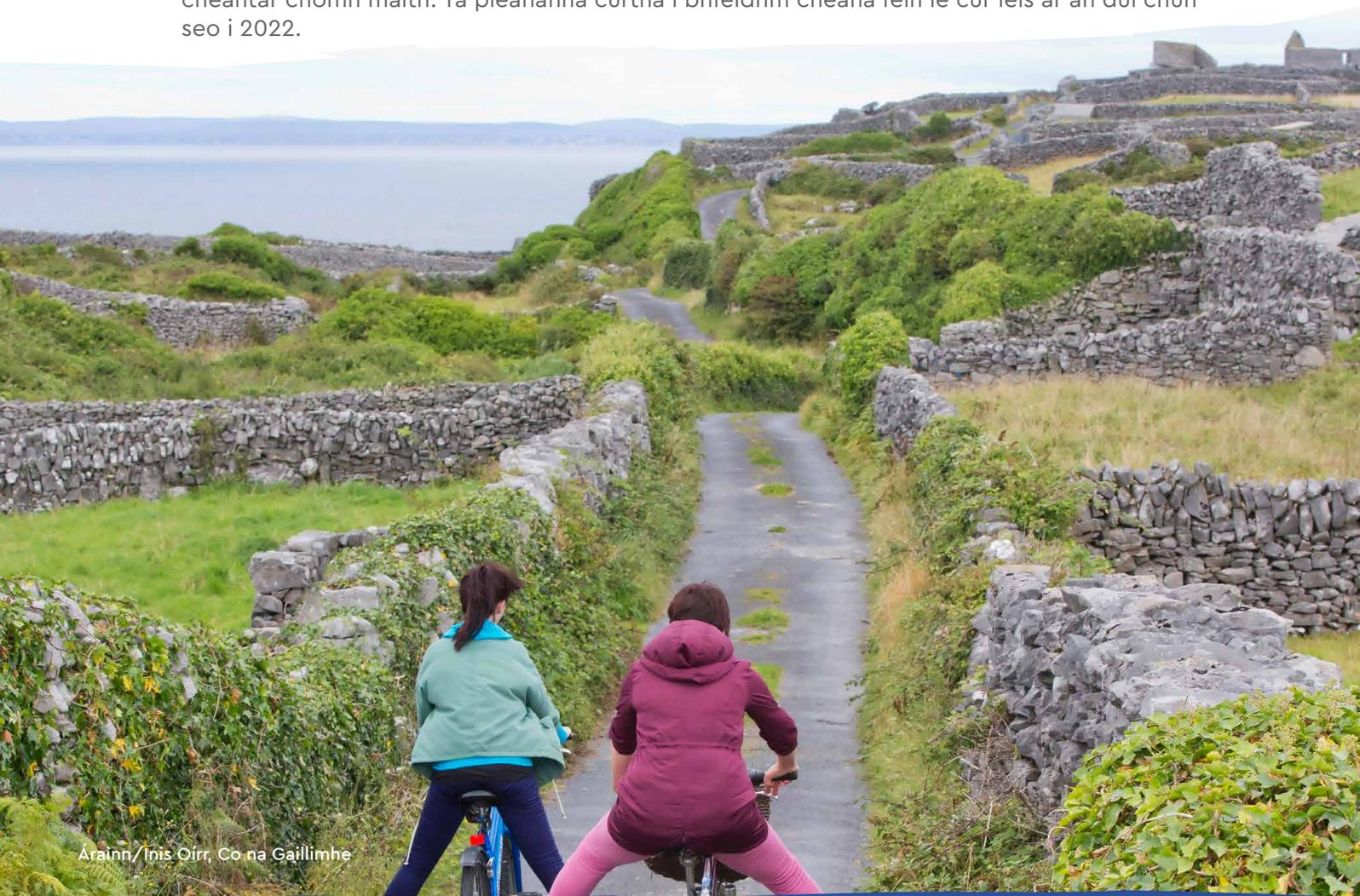
Údarás na
Gaeltachta

The strength of the Gaelic culture and Irish language in the Connemara and Islands destination has been identified in the VEDP as a major opportunity for tourism development, and some of the most noteworthy developments since the launch of the VEDP have been driven by lead partner Údarás na Gaeltachta. Údarás na Gaeltachta has led the way in developing a network of cultural heritage centres throughout Connemara and the Islands and, since 2018, has established many new mechanisms to support the tourism industry in the Connemara Gaeltacht. Áirítear roinnt dá gcuid éachtaí móra thíos:

- Údarás na Gaeltachta assisted over 15 tourism businesses with grant aid of €45,000 to develop and improve their **online digital presence** and made available €25,000 in **business consultancy** grants to 10 tourism operators to address the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Údarás na Gaeltachta hosted a South Connemara **Networking Event** in December 2018 to further foster collaboration and cross-promotion efforts as called out in the VEDP. Attendees were introduced to the Connemara VEDP strategy, model and objectives and encouraged to participate.
- **Walking & Cycling Trails** – Údarás na Gaeltachta, on behalf of the Department of Social Protection, administers employment schemes in the Connemara Gaeltacht. Trí na scéimeanna seo cuireadh roinnt bealaí siúil i gcrích agus táthar ag fanacht le himscrúdú ar shiúlóidí/bhealaí rothaíochta nua i gCamus agus i Leitir Mealláin in 2021 i gcomhar le Comharchumainn phobail áitiúla Mar forbairt ar Slí Chonamara, tá 35km do siulodi claraithe i 2021 le sport Ireland.
- **Marketing** – Four trainee tourism marketing officers have been recruited through an Údarás na Gaeltachta's training scheme, with a total investment of €130,000 (in 2020). Rinne na gcuid oiliúnaithe Teastas sa Turasóireacht Inbhuanaithe (leibhéal 8) saincheaptha arna forbairt ag Ollscoil Teicneolaíochta na Mumhan. The Trainees are now developing strategic Gaeltacht visitor attractions in Carna, Leitir Mealláin and Árainn/Inis Mór and destination development in Joyce Country and Connemara and the Islands.
- **Product Development** – Working closely with Fáilte Ireland, plans are progressing to develop visitor centres in Leitir Mealláin and Árainn/Inis Mór (under the New Horizons Small Grant Scheme 2018) and The Immigration Centre visitor attraction in Carna. This will go to tender in 2021 and will see the installation of new interpretation at each site. Údarás na Gaeltachta's overall vision is to develop a singular tourism attraction brand for Gaeltacht projects along the Wild Atlantic Way.
- Tá Údarás na Gaeltachta ag tacú le pleananna chun **Árainn/Inis Oírr** a forbairt mar cheann scríbe don turasóireacht oideachais (artists' retreats, music classes etc.) and have progressed with the recruitment of a tourism officer for Áras Eanna, County Galway's only Arts Centre.
- Cheadaigh tacaíocht ón Údarás na Gaeltachta chun Oifigeach Turasóireachta a earcú le haghaidh **Cósta Chonamara & Árainn** don ghrúpa chun líonra margaíochta/tionscail a forbairt agus chun suíomh gréasáin cheann scríbe nua a forbairt **www.connemara.ie**



- **Joyce Country & Western Lakes Geopark Project (JCWL)** – Údarás na Gaeltachta supported the recruitment of a Tourism Officer for JCWL working towards putting in place the resources and structures to achieve UNESCO Global Geopark status.
- A number of **experience development workshops** were held in 2020 aiming to encourage early stage tourism providers to develop their experiences and bring them to market.
- **Festivals** – Údarás na Gaeltachta supported the development of the new Scallop & Seaweed festival which will encompass an area from Ceantar na nOileáin to Carna. The 2020 festival was cancelled but they are hopeful it will proceed in 2022.
- In relation to **Teach Synge on Árann/Inis Meáin**, there have been initial talks with owners of the house to explore possibilities and Údarás na Gaeltachta is assisting their application for funding to undertake essential repair works to the roof. Teach Synge is called out in the VEDP as a tourism opportunity to consider.
- D'óstáil an tÚdarás sraith **imeachtaí líonraithe ar líne** do ghnólachtaí turasóireachta agus táthar ag leanúint leo seo in 2021. In early 2021 a further series of **Marine Tourism information sessions** were introduced for existing and incumbent marine based ventures. Sessions were aimed at developing visitor attractions and were both well received and well attended.
- D'éirigh le Cósta Chonamara & Árann comhfheachtas margaíochta a chur i bhfeidhm chun turasóirí a mhealladh go dtí an cheantar le linn an tsamhriadh i mbliana. Trí chomh oibriú leis na páirtithe leasmhara agus cúnamh ó Chomhairle Chondae na Gaillimhe, bhí feachtas éifeachtach curtha i bhfeidhm le hábhar bolscaireachta nua cumtha agus íomhanna nua forbartha don cheantar chomh maith. Tá pleananna curtha i bhfeidhm cheana féin le cur leis ar an dul chun seo i 2022.



Árann/Inis Oírr, Co na Gaillimhe

Dún Aonghasa and the National Monuments of Árainn – OPW

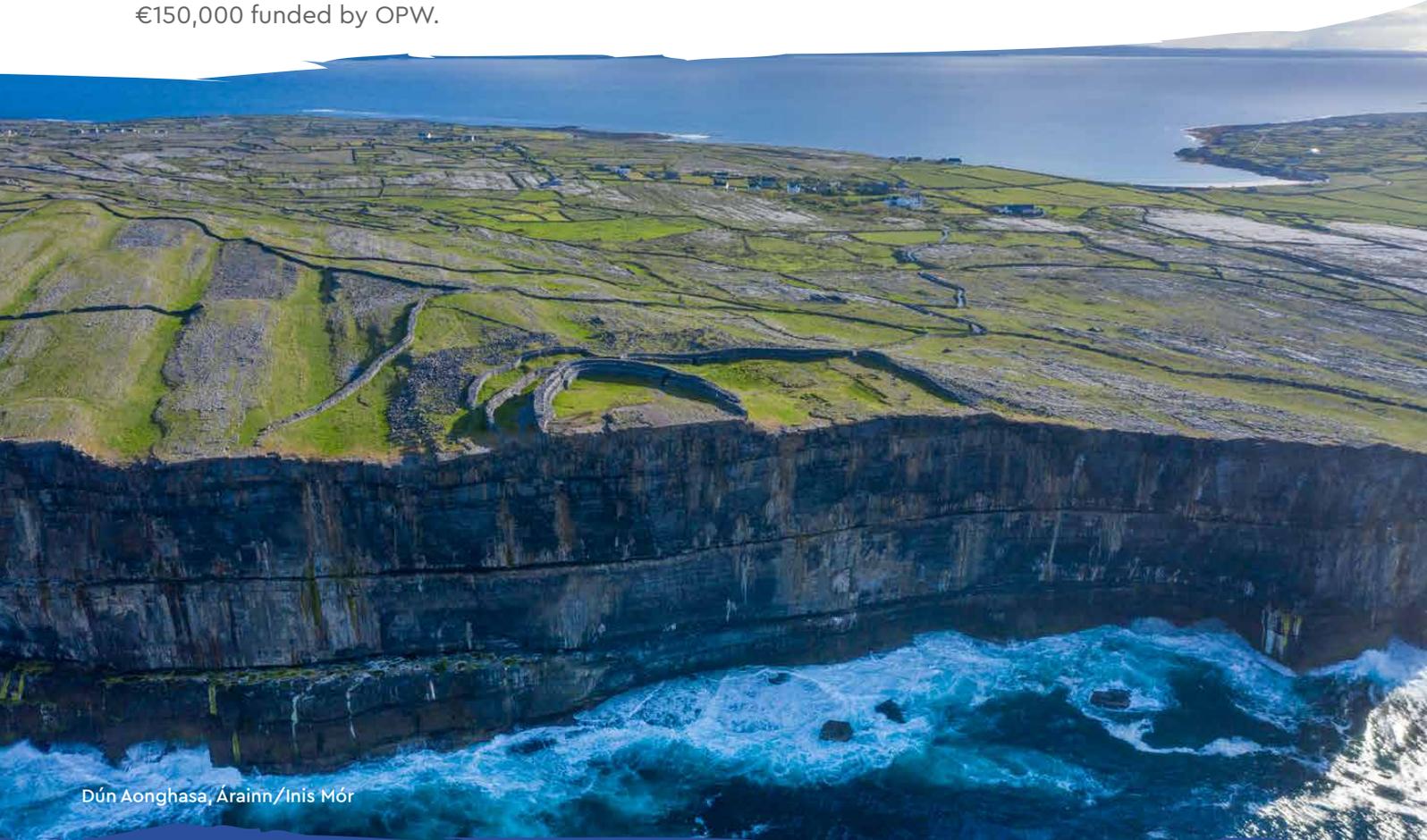


OPW



Dún Aonghasa Visitor Centre, which opened in 1999, welcomed an incredible 132,000 visitors in 2019 but it's accepted that its exhibition is in need of updating for a modern audience. Tandem Design are the appointed designers for the project and, in consultation with the OPW and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, are producing an innovative exhibition which will combine cutting edge archaeological research with a strong visual element telling the story of Dún Aonghasa in an engaging and entertaining way.

A significant part of this overall project will be the installation of high-spec interpretation points at 10 other National Monuments across the island. It is hoped this will encourage visitors to explore the Island more deeply thereby increasing dwell time, and hopefully lead to a greater engagement with the rich heritage of Árainn. Fáilte Ireland has committed €450,000 to this project, with another €150,000 funded by OPW.



Dún Aonghasa, Árainn/Inis Mór



Inagh Valley, Connemara



Derryclare Lough, Connemara

Kylemore Abbey & Victorian Walled Garden

KYLEMORE ABBEY
& VICTORIAN WALLED GARDEN



Kylemore Abbey & Victorian Walled Garden is one of Ireland's best-loved visitor attractions and one of the most visited tourist destinations outside of the greater Dublin region. The beautiful setting and the Abbey's dramatic exterior were integral in drawing visitors to Kylemore since opening as a visitor attraction in the early 1990's. However, having been used as a school until 2010, the interior of the Abbey lacked what was required of a top-class, modern visitor experience. It was on this basis that Kylemore undertook a major reinterpretation project 'From Generation to Generation'. With the financial help from its Large Capital Grant Scheme, and industry insights and expertise afforded to Kylemore Abbey by Fáilte Ireland, this project successfully launched in summer 2019 and has elevated the Kylemore Visitor Experience and Kylemore Abbey's standing as a key tourism product for Connemara and the Wild Atlantic Way.

Equally important, given the west coast's unpredictable weather, is being able to provide a wonderful experience for visitors irrespective of the elements. The 'From Generation to Generation' visitor experience does just that. Prior to its development, visitors spent approximately 15 minutes in the Abbey building, accessing five rooms with limited interpretation. The new experience encourages visitors to spend approximately 40 minutes in the Abbey, taking them through nine areas which have been modernised, restored, and reinterpreted.

The development of the Kylemore Abbey visitor experience and the ongoing work with the VEDP and the Connemara and Islands Tourism Network, has greatly enhanced the enjoyment for visitors; Kylemore Abbey's ability to preserve valuable parts of its history and heritage and its further development as a key visitor experience on the Wild Atlantic Way.



Kylemore Abbey, Connemara

Connemara National Park



**An Roinn Tithíochta,
Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreacht
Department of Housing,
Local Government and Heritage**

In December 2018, shortly after the launch of the Connemara VEDP, Fáilte Ireland approved funding of €1.9 million towards developments at Connemara National Park. The project is part of a strategic partnership with the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) to achieve the aims of further developing quality visitor experiences at Ireland's National Parks while conserving and protecting the natural environment for the enjoyment of future generations. This significant investment will allow for better visitor management and encourage visitors to stay longer in the region by providing a new and unique outdoor recreation experience focusing on the cultural heritage of the Park that complements the natural beauty of the landscape.

The project will include the development and upgrade of several kilometres of new trails, a children's natural play area, a visitor car park and a new Lime Kiln Trail to enhance access to more areas of the National Park.

The improvements to the recreational trail system in the Park will also include:

- improvements to the Ellis Wood Nature Trail
- improving the sustainability of the Diamond Hill Trails
- the development of an all-ability trail from the main car park linking to the Ellis Wood Nature Trail
- development of an all-ability trail around the Park's pond area
- development of a sensory trail
- development of a new farm trail.



Diamond Hill, Connemara National Park

VEDP impact to date

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, there was a growing momentum across the tourism sector in Connemara and the Islands as a result of the VEDP strategy which was launched in 2018. It was unprecedented to have so many public and private sector stakeholders working together with a shared ambition of growing the visitor economy for the destination.

At the time of the launch, accommodation occupancy in Connemara was very low compared to other areas along the Wild Atlantic Way, with a huge variance on occupancy with hotels in Galway City. By September 2019 however, the key account hotels in the region had reported to Fáilte Ireland an average **occupancy growth** of 11% on their 2017 figures.

As the summer season in 2019 was drawing to its usual early close in Connemara, many of the anchor tourism businesses made the decision to **extend their season** for their first time, closing later than usual, or deciding to reopen earlier in 2020.

As 2020 approached, the established tourism businesses in Connemara were looking forward with optimism to increased occupancy levels due to growing demand from both domestic and overseas markets, an extension to the season was already happening, and many had hired more staff so there was **increased employment in tourism**. All of this lended itself well to giving a degree of confidence to new business start-ups, and a number of new tourism businesses were established during this period, contributing to much welcome **new tourism product and experiences** on the offshore islands and in areas like the South Connemara Gaeltacht.

Some of these experiences are captured below through testimonials from local businesses in the area...

Máire O'Connor, Lough Inagh Lodge Hotel

Lough Inagh Lodge Hotel has had an interesting and challenging two years during the pandemic. As with all in the tourism industry the COVID-19 responses were much appreciated and insulated our business. The development of the COVID-19 Safety Charter has been positively received by both our team and visitors so congratulations on this initiative.



On opening after the first lockdown in July 2020 we were pleasantly surprised with the extraordinary level of home market business which has continued into the 2021 season. We always had a strong domestic market originating from the east coast but now see growth from as near as Galway City and all along the Wild Atlantic Way. We have been delighted to take part and get the benefit of the various different marketing campaigns for Connemara and the Islands – a big “Buladh Bos” to all involved. Here in Lough Inagh Lodge Hotel we are incredibly lucky to have retained our team and are extremely fortunate to have a professional group that has embraced all the challenges. The ongoing investment in tourism infrastructure and mentoring programmes arising out of the Connemara and the Islands VEDP has enhanced our offering to our regular visitor and our new guest base. With this in mind, we have taken the decision to extend our season and open earlier in 2022.

James Sweeney, Clifden Station House Hotel

Between 2015 and 2019, the Clifden Station House Hotel was achieving annual growth in almost all KPI's. Occupancy was improving across all months of the year, significant rate growth was achieved in periods of high demand and the longer season allowed the hotel to maintain a larger roster of full time staff.

Increased demand from overseas, particularly from America was a primary driver of this improvement, with its higher average yield per US visitor than any other market. Between 2015 and 2019, we increased our occupancy by 8% and our ADR grew by 10%.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, we have become totally reliant on the domestic travel market. Thankfully, Connemara as a region has a good reputation and history of tourism in Ireland, with visitor attractions and experiences that are the match of anywhere else in the world. Over the past 2 years, the entire Wild Atlantic Way has thrived with the staycation trend and I think Connemara established itself as one of Ireland's most iconic regions. With the loss of international visitors, we have had to become more creative in attracting guests in the competitive domestic market. A success that we had in the Clifden Station House was partnering with other local businesses to create a holistic experience for the visitors, for instance with Doonmore Hotel & Inishbofin House Hotel on a 4 night two-centre break, and with a local walking guide to operate a 4 night Connemara Guided Walking Break.

This cross selling and inclusion of other local enterprises helped us differentiate ourselves from competitor areas like Westport and Dingle. CAITN and the cooperation that the meetings have fostered, was instrumental in these ventures getting off the ground.



Niall O'Brien, Aran Island Ferries

The impetus of the Connemara VEDP has been very positive, inspiring greater vision and confidence in the development of new tourism products, infrastructure and supports across Connemara and, more importantly from an Aran Island Ferries perspective, all three of the Aran Islands. Such strategic planning acts as a catalyst to motivate investment and positive development which is always welcome from a

domestic and overseas visitor perspective. From our Rossaveal base, Aran Island Ferries is very much a point to point transport provider from Connemara to all three of the Aran Islands. As the largest and only year-round passenger ferry to the Aran Islands, the impact of the Connemara VEDP has seen an increased variety of accommodation being developed on the Aran Islands, new visitor experiences from land to water based activities, all of which are conducive to the core values of island life and its culture and heritage. These developments are also crucial to creating a more sustainable tourism product for the Aran Islands. Collectively, we, as a tourism industry, can then attract increased repeat business when visitors can reacquaint themselves and renew their Aran Island experience. Such development is also key to attracting new visitors. All of which is very much welcomed by Aran Island Ferries following the successful expansion of our business this year to include a new Galway City Route to Árainn/Inis Mór and the Cliffs of Moher along with our traditional Rossaveal route. Positive development and strategic future planning gives confidence to businesses like Aran Island Ferries which is family owned and continues to grow, reinvest and create employment in rural communities of Connemara and the Aran Islands.



Frankie Moran, Aran Islands Camping & Glamping

Our business is constantly evolving as we experiment with different ways of operating and selling our product. It's been an interesting few years and it's been fantastic to see not just our own business grow but the transport companies, activities and experiences within the region of Árann/Inis Mór develop at the same time. The Island is changing very quickly and the standard of hospitality is being raised in all areas which benefits both the Island and the visitor. I personally found the VEDP training with Fáilte Ireland of great benefit, to train and network with those who have more experience was invaluable to me, as well as building a network of allies in the region. In 2019 when we opened first, we had 4 full time staff and fast forward to 2021 where during the Summer we had 13 full time staff and 2 part time staff. We also went from 9 bedrooms and the campsite in 2019 to 24 bedrooms and the campsite in 2021. Our season length, occupancy and revenue all increased throughout this period. As time goes on, we continue to learn and evolve, in turn improving and developing our product, and increasing revenue as we go into the future.



Zoe Fitzgerald, Renvyle House Hotel

As with every business there is no time to rest. We're constantly working on new ideas whilst retaining and improving the warm welcome and the hospitality afforded to our guests at Renvyle House Hotel. The last couple of years have given us the chance to implement some of our learnings from the Fáilte Ireland VEDP training from 2019. It was a great benefit to work with so many varied tourism enterprises and have a good network built up before the pandemic which translated easily to social media during that time to keep tourism alive in peoples' minds. We have decided to stay open all year round and hope that builds a stronger season for all in the Connemara region. We will continue to develop our offering to our guests.

Jonathan Powell, Clifden Bike Shop/All Things Connemara

We are a Clifden based business providing service, retail and a good smile to Connemara. Our three business avenues of All Things Connemara, Clifden Bike Shop and What's On® Connemara visitors guide are all developing with hard graft, knowledge and adaptation, not only through cohesion, but working with and to the benefit of others, married up with core quality products and good service.

Our KPIs show great trends especially with the bike boom and the visitors guide, from 2016 to 2019 we showed a 61% increase in sales, and while 2020 versus 2019 was down 55% (44% inc. govt. grants) it was very survivable. 2021 is up 30% ytd on 2020, but understandably still down 46% on 2019, but we still have the last quarter to go. So with the cohesion of extending the shoulder period, on-line sales, unilateral collaborations and marketing promoting Connemara, in my view – longevity can be achieved and balanced.



Andrew Murray, Doonmore Hotel, Inishbofin

Having completed my 8th season managing our family's hotel, there is no doubt that the last 2 have been difficult. However, they have also been enlightening, thought provoking, and energising, which proved to be a very positive learning experience. We adapted and we succeeded, with the help of a fantastic staff. Our occupancy rates have been rising steadily but hit record levels this year 2021, including September.



The fruits of all the hard work we put in over the previous years were reaped these past two years as Irish people, who have always made up most of our clientele over the past 52 years, came to support our business in droves. Credit also for Fáilte Ireland's support over the past few years and their promotion of the area as well as boosting camaraderie and cooperation between so many businesses in the region.

I look forward now with great hope to the next few years; to continued success, to busy shoulder seasons and the next chapters of our unique story.

Padraig Hernon, Aran Off Road Experience

Hi. Padraig is ainm domsa. My brother Aonghus and I set up Aran Off Road Experience in February 2020. We are a tourism provider based on Árainn/Inis Mór. We bring visitors on off-road, fully guided experiences of Árainn/Inis Mór. Our vehicle is a customised Land Rover Defender 4X4 13-seater Jeep. Due to our unique vehicle, we can take you on roads and bothríns that no other vehicle can access. We believe in the concept of slow tourism and getting under the skin of a destination.



When we opened our business we were just getting set for the 2020 summer season and then COVID-19 interrupted our plans! However, we feel very confident and optimistic about our company's future. Our business has continued to grow since then and we have recently invested quite significantly and see a bright future ahead for Aran Off Road Experience.

Carol Hinch, Ballynahinch Castle Hotel

Ballynahinch Castle Hotel is delighted to be part of the VEDP Project over the past five years. Having sat on numerous committees and action groups over the past 20+ years to promote Connemara, the VEDP project was very focused with clear goals and strategies with sub-working groups achieving these goals.

The Connemara Greenway phases 1 & 2 have been a fantastic benefit to our business, not just for our guests but as an amenity for everyone, both locals and visitors to the area. The footfall to the estate from the Greenway necessitated in



us adding the Garden Café, an additional food & beverage outlet located in the walled garden. The investment in Kylemore Abbey has also benefited us all with a world class visitor attraction on our doorstep. The projects in the pipeline and on the longer term plan will all ensure Connemara is a destination on the bucket list for both domestic and international visitors for years to come.

We look forward to continuing our support to the VEDP project over the next number of years.

Alex Goor, Killary Fjord Boat Tours

Killary Fjord Boat Tours are delighted to be part of the Connemara VEDP. It has strengthened relationships between ourselves and other businesses and encourages cross selling within the region. The Fáilte Ireland Activation Programme workshops were of very high quality and of great benefit. Since joining the VEDP we have decided to extend our season in 2022.



Diarmuid Ó Mathuna, POTA Café

POTA is a brand new café in the heart of the Conamara Gaeltacht – an authentic taste of Conamara with a modern twist. We opened the doors in mid-June 2021 and the dream was to put the best food Galway has to offer on show in a bilingual café. With Rossaveal Harbour and the Aran Islands on the doorstep and a burgeoning artisan food producer scene all around it, POTA's goal is to build a community around sustainable, delicious food. The café occupies the ground floor of a beautiful thatched building. The traditional looking exterior gives way to a contemporary feel inside. This is what POTA is all about, a modern approach grounded in the rich cultural heritage of the area. After waiting 12 months to open, I thought we'd need one or two staff. We were so busy during the summer of 2021 we had to take on twice that. I'm very optimistic about what the future holds with so much to do and see in the area and such amazing producers all around us.





Aasleagh Falls, Connemara, County Galway

What's next for Connemara

At the time of going to print, a review of the progress of the Connemara VEDP was well underway, led by the CAITN Co Chairs, with the lead agencies Fáilte Ireland, Galway County Council and Údarás na Gaeltachta. As the 2021 season came to an end the partners came together to take stock of all the fantastic work that has been delivered since the plan was launched in 2018 and refocus the efforts of CAITN into 2022. This review is showing that roughly 78% of the VEDP actions to date are complete, or in progress. But there is still a lot to do.

The following key themes are emerging as priorities to focus on as we enter the final phase of the life of the VEDP in Connemara:

- **Catalyst Projects** – Continued development of Connemara Greenway and Connemara National Park, Cohesion on Trails Development for Coastal and Inland Looped Walking and Cycling Trails, and the New Horizons Small Grants Scheme Projects.
- **Destination Town, Clifden** – implementing the wayfinding and interpretation strategy for Clifden, a suite of maps, signage and 'placemaking', public realm improvements and 'Greenway readiness' projects, all of which are to be coordinated by Galway County Council and underpinned by the larger Rural Regeneration Development Fund project. This overall vision for Clifden will greatly improve the way locals and visitors navigate and make use of Connemara's main town.
- **Take to the Waves** – Building a Connemara Coast Blueway network, and Adventure Sector networks, and exploring Angling Tourism Opportunities.
- **Festivals and Events** Best Practice Workshops and Toolkits – Support for new and existing festivals in Connemara including Regattas with Galway Hookers and Currach races.
- **Islands of Stone** – A CAITN Islands sub-committee will explore any feasible development opportunities for the three Aran Islands and Inishbofin.
- **Discover Vibrant Gaelic Culture** – Support for Údarás na Gaeltachta led initiatives promoting Irish language and cultural heritage experiences throughout Connemara such as Teach Synge, Carna Immigration Centre, Lettermullen and Aran Heritage Centres, Aran Eanna.
- **Online Digital Presence** – A focus on transforming the digital presence of the destination, increasing revenue generated through online channels, through Fáilte Ireland's Digital That Delivers initiative.
- **Visitor Management and Congestion solutions.**
- **Sustainability, Eco Tourism and Dark Skies opportunities.**

All of this activity will continue to be led and coordinated through the members of CAITN to the end of 2022, while a proposed reform to the structure of CAITN is explored, with a view to anchoring the network and its ethos of partnership and collaboration with all tourism stakeholders in Connemara.

Membership of CAITN Implementation Group (November 2021)

Name	Business/Association/Agency	Representing/Sector
Dominic O Mórain, Co-Chair	Lough Inagh Lodge	IHF/Hotels
Terence O'Toole, Co-Chair	Love Connemara Cottages	ISCF/Self-Catering Sector
Siobhán Bennett	Connemara Mountain Walking Festival/Connemara Coastal Cottages	Festivals & Events/Walking/Self-Catering Sector
Cillian de Grás	OPW/Ionad Cultúrtha an Phiarsaigh/Dún Aonghusa	Visitor Attractions
Ruth Mulhern	Galway County Council	Local Authority
Alan Farrell	Galway County Council	Local Authority
Michéal Ó Clochartaigh	Forbairt Chonamara Láir Teo	Gaeltacht & Connemara Co-ops
Máirín Choisdealbha-Seoighe	Forbairt Chonamara Láir Teo	Central Connemara Gaeltacht
Jonathan Powell	All Things Connemara	Activities
Conor Coyne/Jessica Ridge	Kylemore Abbey	Visitor Attractions
John Dee	Notre Dame – Kylemore Abbey	Notre Dame & Kylemore Abbey
William Cormacan	National Parks & Wildlife Service	Connemara National Park
Ciara Ní Fhátharta	Chomhlacht Forbartha Inis Meáin	Inis Meáin Community Development
Andrew Murray	Doonmore Hotel	Hotels & Inishbofin Development
Steve Ó'Cúláin	Cósta Gaelach Chonamara & Árainn	Gaeltacht Tourism Network
Meadhb Seoighe	Údarás na Gaeltachta	Gaeltacht/Irish Language
Lisa Nic Mhathúna	Cósta Gaelach Chonamara & Árainn	Gaeltacht Tourism Network
Brendan O'Malley	Forum Connemara	Rural Recreation Officer
Karen Mannion	Forum Connemara	Leader
Cliona Standún	Standún	Retail
Justin Keogh	Keogh's of Oughterard	Retail/Oughterard Tourism
David Keane	DK Connemara Oysters	Food Provider/Taste the Atlantic
Shane Young	Killary Adventure Company	Adventure/Activities
Carol Hinch	Ballynahinch Castle Hotel	Hotels
Diarmuid Ó Conghaile	GMIT Galway Mayo Institute of Technology	Education
Clodagh Ní Ghoill	Gréasán Gnó Árainn	Aran Business Network
John Sweeney	Connemara Chamber of Commerce	Connemara Business Community
Dean Gibson	Connemara Sands Hotel	Hotels
James Sweeney	Clifden Stationhouse Hotel	Hotels
Miriam Kennedy	Fáilte Ireland	Tourism Development
Daithi Gallagher	Fáilte Ireland	Tourism Development
Letitia Wade	Fáilte Ireland	Tourism Development
Agnes O'Donnell	Fáilte Ireland	Tourism Development



Sky Road, Clifden, County Galway



Inishbofin, County Galway

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