**An Roinn Iompair,
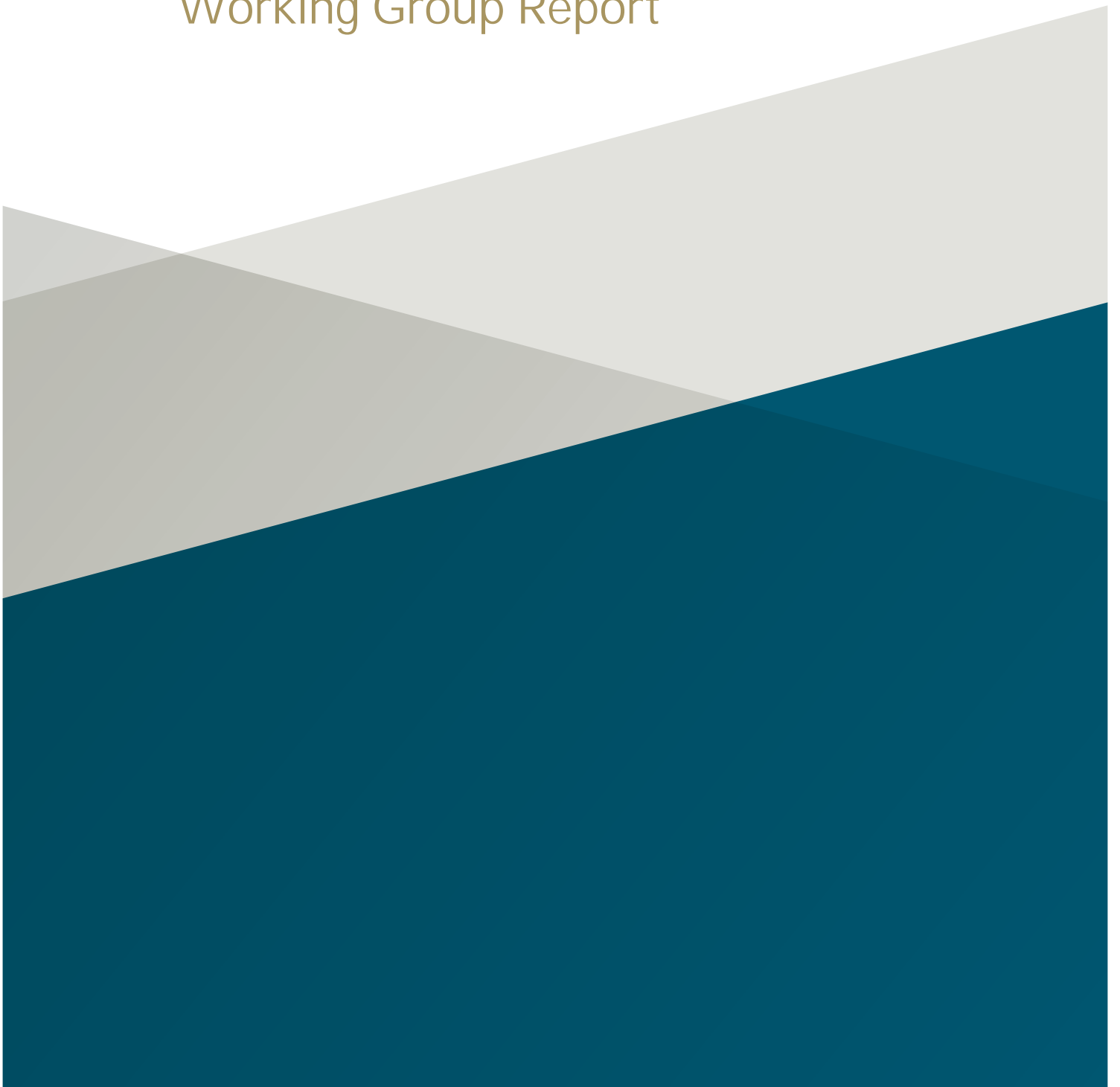Turasóireachta agus Spóirt**
Department of Transport,
Tourism and Sport

Tourism Action Plan 2019-2021

Sustainable Tourism
Working Group Report

**An Roinn Iompair,
Turasóireachta agus Spóirt**
Department of Transport,
Tourism and Sport

Introduction

Tourism is becoming one of the largest and fastest growing sectors in the world economy and it is estimated that export earnings generated by tourism grew to USD 1.7 trillion and international tourist arrivals reached 1.4 billion in 2018.[1] At home, the Irish tourism sector has experienced steady growth for the past 8 years, culminating in overseas visitor spend of over €5 billion with almost 10 million tourist visits in 2018. Overall the sector was worth almost €9.4 billion (including domestic tourism receipts and carrier fare receipts) to the economy that year.[2]

The rise of globalisation and technological advances in recent years has led to increased air connectivity, cheaper airfares and larger air traffic volumes. Although this has led to economic benefit, the social and environmental impacts of this growth are being felt at all tourist destinations. There is increasing recognition that tourism growth must be sustainable, environmentally as well as commercially and socially. In 2015, the United Nations published 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which address the global challenges we face, as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Ireland's National Implementation Plan sets out how we intend to implement these goals through the development of actions and targets around each goal.

The definition of sustainable tourism is well established, but full understanding remains limited. The UNWTO define 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 Government's Tourism Policy Statement "*People, Place, and Policy - Growing Tourism to 2025"* affirms and has 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.

The policy goals and objectives contained in the policy statement are delivered through a series of Action Plans. One of the first actions identified within the Tourism Action Plan 2019-2021 commits to a review of sustainable tourism development in Ireland:

- *A working group has been established to review international policy and best practice in sustainable tourism and propose guiding principles for sustainable*

---

[1] Source: World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) International Tourism Highlights 2019
[2] Source: Fáilte Ireland Key Tourism Facts 2018

tourism development in Ireland. The Group will report to the Tourism Leadership Group with their recommendations.

The action was agreed by the Tourism Leadership Group in April 2018 and a working group was formed (Appendix I) in August 2018 to carry out this action. The working group was chaired by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (DTTAS) and included senior representatives of Fáilte Ireland, Tourism Ireland and the Irish Tourism Industry Confederation.

Scope

At the first meeting of the group it was agreed that an important and significant piece of work is required to support the future growth and management of tourism in Ireland i.e. to develop guiding principles for sustainable tourism development and recommendations on implementation. The group discussed the scope of the work involved and agreed the following should form key elements of this work:

- Sustainable tourism needs to look at a wide definition and include all pillars of sustainable development; environmental, social and economic.

- Metrics and Indicators will be key for setting targets, and measuring and monitoring progress. This could include everything from carbon/ aviation emissions from the sector, and any international and national environmental/ climate change indicators that may be relevant.

- Sustainable tourism principles should look to short term and long term goals.

- There are different layers of responsibility, intervention required e.g. National (set policy context and support with investment), Regional/ Local/destination level (Regional Assemblies, Local Authorities), Community, and Business - and every layer has a role in delivering on any principles developed.

- The overarching principles will set a framework which all stakeholders can align their work in sustainability to deliver - it will not be as effective if stakeholders are working to different agendas.

- It was also recognised that each member of the working group is doing work in the area of sustainability and that it would be useful to compile this as a starting point.

- Also some benchmarking of sustainable tourism policy internationally could be undertaken and this could also feed in to the development of an Irish policy.

- Any recommendations made by the group will be informed by the overarching policy and strategy identified in the Government framework for sustainable development for Ireland, *Our Sustainable Future*, and the *Sustainable Development Goals National Implementation Plan 2018-2020*, as well as the Government's 2019 *Climate Action Plan*.

Consultancy

Fáilte Ireland drew up a request for tender, in consultation with DTTAS and Tourism Ireland, based on the key deliverables agreed by the group. The following terms of reference for the consultancy were established:

- Conduct a robust review of international policy and best practice in sustainable tourism
- Propose guiding principles for sustainable tourism development in Ireland
- Provide recommendations on successful implementation

Following Fáilte Ireland's procurement process, Earthcheck Pty Ltd was successful in the tendering process and appointed as the workings groups' consultant.

The key outputs from the consultant's report include;

Review of International best practice –
Countries selected for review included those acknowledged as being leaders in the field; a selection of neighbouring European countries; and a selection of smaller island states. Scandinavian nations are leaders in the field, driven in part by deeply embedded commitments to sustainable development principles. It is apparent however that most countries reviewed during this study, have prepared

their approach to sustainable tourism policy within a broader tourism strategy or as part of overall sustainability policies where these are in place.

Where Ireland Currently Sits Against Sustainable Development Goals and Sustainable Tourism Criteria –
While there are gaps in Ireland's policy approach when considered against the full suite of assessment criteria, there are a wide range of underpinning and tourism-specific programmes which deliver against sustainable development objectives. Therefore, Ireland is not starting from a base level; our situation echoes that of many other nations.

Stakeholder Consultation –
Consultation with the tourism trade and key stakeholders regarding sustainable tourism development in Ireland was undertaken as a key element of the consultancy. Over 60 key stakeholders (Government Departments, State Agencies, and Industry Bodies) were consulted during the summer period in 2019. There was a clear consensus from the industry that Irish Tourism needed to make progress in relation to achieving UNWTO's definition of sustainable tourism. It was considered that it is now timely for the tourism industry as a whole to embrace sustainability. There was a strong consensus from consultees that the highest level of priority was required in order to develop and deliver a sustainable tourism policy.

A full report, including an appraisal of where Ireland currently stands (using a variation on the Global Sustainable Tourism Council's destination criteria), a report on the stakeholder consultation phase, a summary of international sustainable tourism policy approaches, and recommendations for implementation, is available separate to this report.

Guiding Principles

At its meeting on 14 November the group discussed and subsequently agreed the following ambition and principles for sustainable tourism development in Ireland:

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

The vital role of a current and future sustainable tourism sector to the Irish economy and its citizens is recognised. Therefore, by taking steps now, Ireland will seek to be amongst the world-leaders in the delivery of qualitative and quantifiable sustainable tourism practices by 2030 in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. DTTAS, in association with the tourism agencies and industry, will develop a policy with strategic goals for sustainable tourism development and report on these regularly. These goals should include the sector's climate impacts, its broader environmental impacts, economic impacts, community satisfaction with tourism and customer satisfaction. Ireland has a reputation as the 'Emerald Isle' internationally and sustaining and nurturing this green image through the adoption of sustainable tourism practices is an important underpinning for future tourism growth. Achieving a credible and proven sustainable tourism reputation could also be a differentiator and therefore a competitive advantage for Irish tourism going forward.

1. ***All of government will work together with industry towards achieving a sustainable tourism sector.***

   DTTAS recognises the importance of a whole of government approach in concert with the tourism agencies and the Irish tourism industry as critical to achieving successful sustainable tourism outcomes. DTTAS will take a leadership role in driving forward Ireland's sustainable tourism sector development, in the first instance through policy development and in policy activation through and together with its agencies and industry partners. The tourism industry will be encouraged to drive up business participation in recognised sustainable tourism accreditation schemes and promoting sustainable tourism experiences.

   Possible Areas of focus

   -DTTAS to provide leadership, resources, funding and work with industry on the development and implementation of sustainable tourism policy

   -All government decisions and actions take full account of the impact on tourism

2. ***Sustainable tourism growth will be achieved in a manner that focuses on overall economic benefit ahead of the number of tourists.***

   Tourism is a key economic driver for the Irish economy and continuing to grow its contribution is important for Ireland to realise its economic

development ambitions. Policy will focus on the growth in the value of tourism as opposed to growth in the volume of tourism in line with the revised Government performance targets for tourism in Ireland to 2025.

Possible Areas of focus

- Marketing which focuses on building tourism value from target international and domestic markets, factoring in the needs to support regional and seasonal dispersal

- Improved tourism productivity aligned with industry needs on productivity measures (profitability/margins, staffing, aligning experiences with target audiences, marketing ROI etc.)

3. ***Tourism will support economic growth in communities throughout the country and with a greater spread of demand across the year.***

   Tourism is an indigenous economic sector which generates employment and incomes in communities throughout Ireland. An increased focus will be put on regional growth and season extension to deliver greater visitor dispersal throughout the country with a more even spread of demand across the year.

   Possible Areas of focus

   - Tourism growth and activity which is supported by communities and contributes to improving quality of life.

   - A greater proportion of visitor spend and supply chain benefits are retained locally

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.***

   DTTAS, Ireland's tourism agencies and the Irish tourism industry will cooperate closely in the management and future development of tourism products based on the sustainable management of attractions and visitor experiences. The tourism agencies will only support development of visitor experiences that sustain Ireland's environmental and cultural capital while ensuring a safe, satisfying, accessible and fulfilling experience for visitors. Tourism has positive social and economic impacts on communities and the development of tourism products and experiences will aim to sustain and deepen these impacts.

Possible Areas of focus

- *Focus on delivering compelling great value for money experiences which build visitor satisfaction*

- *A standard set of metrics will be established to enable national and local measures*

- *Informed by consumer research, strengthen the focus of tourism marketing on authentic Irish culture, heritage people and landscapes*

5. **As custodians of our natural landscape and of our historic and cultural assets, we will protect them for the next generation.**

    Ireland's tourism sector derives a unique advantage from the nation's natural beauty. Sustaining and nurturing the nation's natural assets (including coasts, mountains, rivers and lakes) through the adoption of sustainable tourism practices is recognized as a fundamental underpinning for Ireland's future sustainable tourism growth. Ireland's tourism sector acknowledges it has a role as a custodian of Ireland's natural and built heritage, environment, and historical and cultural assets.

    Possible Areas of focus

    -Tourism activity that contributes to the preservation and enhancement of Ireland's environment, culture and heritage

    -Tourism businesses identify and support initiatives where tourism activity can support ecological restoration

6. **Responsible behaviour by our visitors will be encouraged to maximise the mutual benefit of tourism to Ireland's people and place.**

    The role of domestic and overseas visitors as active participants and key stakeholders in a sustainable tourism sector is recognized. DTTAS will work through agencies and the tourism industry to promote Ireland as a tourism destination where the role of the visitor in sustaining the natural environment and supporting sustainable tourism job creation is key, and where possible to seek to influence the actions of visitors who plan to visit.

    Possible Areas of focus

- *Educate visitors about Ireland's cultural and behavioural expectations and influence visitor behaviour*

- *Invite visitors to make a commitment to behave responsibly through a dedicated mechanism e.g. pledge, off-setting scheme*

7. *The tourism sector will support and promote efforts to move to more sustainable forms of transport to, and around Ireland*

Tourism and transport go hand-in-hand and tourism displays a very high dependency on transport for its successful operation. Shifting our visitors onto sustainable modes of transport is a priority and public transport providers and private transport operators will be actively encouraged in this regard. As an island nation, Ireland relies heavily on air transportation for tourism purposes and to a lesser degree sea access. Maintaining and growing direct, competitive and convenient access to the island of Ireland is of critical importance to our tourism sector. Having regard to the vital role that tourism plays in supporting sustainable livelihoods and economic development throughout Ireland, we will work with and support the aviation and ferry sector to seek more fuel-efficient sustainable solutions to travel to the Island of Ireland and to encourage off-setting of carbon emissions.

Possible Areas of focus

- *Integration of sustainable transport options into tourism trails and itineraries*

- *Work with transport providers to identify opportunities for increased visitor uptake of sustainable transport options*

- *Work with and support the aviation and ferry sector to seek more fuel-efficient sustainable solutions to air and sea travel to the Island of Ireland and identify the opportunities available to visitors for carbon off-setting and minimising the impact of air travel*

8. *The tourism sector must play its part to help deliver Ireland's commitments under the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.*

DTTAS recognises the collective ambition of Irish government agencies to support the government's commitments under the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Economic growth must be linked to reductions in carbon emissions and the tourism sector must play its part in achieving those reductions. The tourism sector will make an active contribution to Ireland's commitments in reducing its carbon emissions.

Possible Areas of focus

- *Tourism businesses establish environmental management plans which guide investment on building business sustainability, including measures and actions to reduce their carbon footprint and work towards carbon neutrality*

Next Steps

The Sustainable Tourism Working Group recommends the following Implementation Framework on foot of its work:

Implementation Framework		
1	Policy Commitment	DTTAS to develop a sustainable tourism policy statement, setting out the rationale and benefits of a sustainable approach together with the guiding principles and implementing actions to deliver on the ambition, taking account of the possible areas of focus identified
2	Initial Actions	In advance of the completion of the policy statement, the Sustainable Tourism Working Group will draw up an Interim Action Plan which will identify initial actions for implementation, to include some or all of the actions set out below.
3	Leadership Team	Establish a cross-agency and industry leadership team to drive implementation of the Interim Action Plan and, subsequently, the sustainable tourism policy including relevant government departments, tourism agencies and industry representation.

Some potential initial actions which could be considered for the interim action plan include the following:

a.	Evidence Base	Prioritise establishing new research measures which fill gaps in the current evidence base, providing for informed management decisions. These would potentially include: Community - Instigate a community sentiment survey/ methodology that enables collection of resident sentiment at local level Industry - Review visitor surveys to ensure that samples are

		sufficient to measure seasonality and regional dispersal
		- Investigate methods such as the use of big data/telco data to improve understanding of visitor flows
		Environment
		- Establish carrying capacity/impact assessment mechanisms at key tourism destinations
		- Work with relevant government Departments and utility providers to ensure mechanisms are in place for businesses to measure water, energy, waste usage
		- Make a carbon calculator available to tourism businesses
		Visitor
		Integrate questions on visitor sentiment and expectation towards sustainable management and visitor experiences into existing consumer research program
b	Leadership	Identify a director-level post within Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland to provide strategic direction and leadership, ensuring raised profile for sustainability.
c	Building Understanding	Build awareness and understanding of sustainability within key tourism agencies and industry, potentially including
		- Integration of sustainability training as part of new staff induction/ continuing professional development
		- Integration of sustainability training across Fáilte Ireland's business support programmes
		- Programme of study visits to build understanding of sustainable tourism policy and practice
		- Training and capacity building for policy makers and key stakeholders regarding sustainability and green procurement
d	Communication	Establish a clear narrative in communicating about the sustainability policy framework and its implementation, which reflects community and business understanding and attitudes towards sustainability.

Sustainable Tourism Working Group
December 2019

An Roinn Iompair,
Turasóireachta agus Spóirt
Department of Transport,
Tourism and Sport