

**Sustainable
tourism
report**

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Embedding sustainability in policy and practice

Martin Ryan, Managing Director of Fexco Managed & Advisory Services, discusses the organisation's vision of embedding sustainability in policy and practice.

In spring 2024, Fexco Managed & Advisory Services joined forces with *eolas Magazine* to host a round table on the transformative journey of Irish tourism. This session brought together leaders from government departments, tourism authorities, the energy sector, community groups, and private industry. The goal is to evaluate Ireland's progress towards building an environmentally restorative, economically inclusive, and culturally authentic tourism model.

Fast forward to mid-2025, and it is clear that the sector has embraced this ambition. Grounded in the principles of regenerative tourism and aligned with the *Climate Action Plan 2024*, Ireland is reframing its tourism identity as a destination and a global exemplar of sustainability in action.

From compliance to contribution

Tourism's inclusion in Ireland's *Climate Action Plan 2024* reflects a growing national consensus: no sector can afford to remain passive in the transition to net zero. As one of the most cross-cutting sectors of the economy, tourism has a profound influence on energy consumption, carbon emissions, land use, and cultural resource management. Transport, accommodation, food services, and infrastructure collectively represent a sizeable portion of tourism's environmental footprint. As such, the imperative to embed sustainability within the tourism value chain is no longer just an ethical consideration – it is both a strategic necessity and a business survival issue.

The *Climate Action Plan* – anchored in the Programme for Government and aligned with the EU Green Deal and Fit for 55 package – sets out binding sectoral targets for decarbonising economic activity by 2030. For tourism, this means a decisive pivot toward low-emission mobility, energy-efficient accommodation, sustainable supply chains, and circular economy practices. The sector must also play a more active role in biodiversity protection and in supporting nature-based climate solutions, especially in ecologically sensitive rural and coastal areas.

Tourism's decarbonisation pathway encompasses multiple coordinated actions: emissions reductions in aviation and ground transport; electrification of hospitality infrastructure; the adoption of green building standards; and better integration with regional land-use and biodiversity planning. Tourism destinations must also incorporate climate risk assessments – factoring in rising sea levels, flood risk, and ecosystem degradation that could threaten their long-term viability.

Operationalising this agenda, Fáilte Ireland's Climate Action Programme – delivered in close collaboration with the



Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) – is providing practical tools, funding streams, and technical guidance to tourism businesses across the country. Hundreds of operators are now engaged in benchmarking their energy use, conducting environmental impact assessments, and undertaking retrofitting projects that include solar PV installations, heat pump adoption, and water efficiency upgrades. A growing number are signing up to science-based targets, moving beyond compliance to proactive climate leadership. Energy audits, carbon literacy training, and sustainability action plans are becoming core components of accreditation schemes such as the Green Hospitality Programme and Sustainable Travel Ireland.

This collective momentum is helping to reposition Irish tourism not just as a passive responder to climate

obligations, but as a proactive contributor to Ireland's decarbonisation goals and a visible partner in delivering tangible, local climate benefits.

From tourist to stakeholder

The modern visitor is no longer a passive consumer. Motivated by ethics, personal wellbeing, and environmental awareness, today's tourists increasingly arrive not just as guests, but as informed stakeholders with specific expectations around the social and ecological footprint of their travel. They want to engage meaningfully with places, understand their impact, and contribute positively to local economies. In this new paradigm, sustainability is not an optional add-on – it is a foundational requirement that shapes the decision-making process from the earliest stages of travel planning. ▶



Fáilte Ireland’s Sustainable Tourism Barometer 2025 reveals that more than 70 per cent of international visitors now actively seek out eco-certified tourism providers. This growing demand for authenticity and accountability is influencing every aspect of the tourism offer – from carbon transparency and green transport options to locally sourced food, inclusive programming, and the visible reinvestment of tourism income into host communities. These visitors are attuned not just to what they experience, but to how it is delivered and who benefits.

Digital platforms are rapidly adapting to this shift. Major booking engines and travel aggregators are beginning to feature carbon footprint calculators, filter searches by sustainability credentials, and highlight destinations with independently verified green certifications. Algorithms are being trained to favour operators that demonstrate transparency, ethical business practices, and a commitment to regenerative tourism principles.

This evolution is not merely about responding to consumer pressure; it represents a significant opportunity to

deepen Ireland’s competitive edge. The country’s diverse natural landscapes, rich heritage, and globally recognised storytelling tradition position it exceptionally well to deliver immersive, place-based experiences. These include slow-tourism offerings such as guided hikes through rewilded peatlands, storytelling evenings in Gaeltacht communities, farm-to-fork culinary trails, and heritage craft workshops that connect visitors to the people and practices that define Irish identity.

By leaning into these strengths and amplifying its sustainability credentials, Ireland can redefine its tourism narrative – from a destination of interest to a destination of influence in the global shift toward responsible travel.

Community-driven models: Tourism as a force for regional equality

In alignment with the National Planning Framework and *Our Rural Future*, tourism is increasingly recognised as a vehicle for balanced regional development. Once reliant on agriculture, industry, or peat extraction,

communities are repositioning themselves as hubs of cultural, ecological, and creative tourism.

One notable example is the Coillte Nature Partnership in the Midlands, which is restoring former peatlands into carbon sinks while developing interpretive trails and eco-tourism amenities. Local authorities, supported by the Just Transition Fund, empower communities to co-design visitor experiences that reflect their values and vision.

In the west, the Slow Adventure Cooperative in Leitrim has linked accommodation providers, craft producers, and outdoor guides into a single product, offering multi-day, low-impact itineraries supported by local storytelling and circular economy principles. The initiative has led to a 22 per cent increase in overnight stays and has supported emigrants’ return to tourism entrepreneurship.

Policy integration

Policy frameworks are now reinforcing rather than resisting the shift toward sustainable tourism. At the EU level, introducing the Short-Term Rentals Initiative is bringing much-needed transparency to data, licensing, and taxation, enabling governments to manage tourism flows better, protect housing markets, and support sustainable practices.



Nationally, the integration of environmental impact assessments into planning processes for tourism-related developments ensures that new investments meet both regulatory and climate resilience standards. Local development companies are increasingly factoring tourism into Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs), ensuring cross-sectoral coherence in how regions grow and adapt.

Additionally, the anticipated rollout of Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) requirements in 2026 will demand robust ESG reporting from larger tourism and hospitality businesses. Fexco is already working with several such firms to develop streamlined data solutions, ensuring they are ready to meet these expectations and use ESG data as a strategic asset, not just a compliance exercise.

Strategic investment

Fáilte Ireland's €14.5 million in new project funding marks a broader shift toward impact-driven investment in tourism infrastructure. Flagship projects now integrate biodiversity protection, cultural preservation, and climate adaptation from the outset.

In tandem, the Department of Rural and Community Development has prioritised tourism in Rural Regeneration and Development Fund calls, focusing on infrastructure such as greenways, dark sky reserves, and interpretation centres. These investments are yielding multiple dividends – improving visitor experiences, restoring natural capital, and strengthening rural economies.

Private investment is also mobilising. Impact investors and ESG-focused venture capital firms are showing increasing interest in sustainable tourism products. With the growth of green finance, tourism SMEs offering a measurable environmental or social impact are better positioned to secure blended capital.

Technology and data

Digitalisation is accelerating the sustainability transition. Platforms like Fexco's PACE (Platform for Analysing Carbon Emissions) are now being explored for tourism-specific applications, helping destinations track emissions across visitor touchpoints. Such tools can also support local authorities in setting science-based

“Ireland has the opportunity to become a global leader in regenerative tourism.”

targets and developing data-driven decarbonisation plans.

Beyond emissions, smart destination dashboards are being trialled in pilot areas such as Dingle and the Boyne Valley, aggregating data on water use, waste, seasonal congestion, and biodiversity indicators. These tools are transforming destination management, shifting from reactive problem-solving to proactive planning.

Tourism SMEs are also embracing digital transformation, with booking engines integrating sustainability filters, and social media campaigns pivoting to storytelling that highlights conservation efforts, cultural authenticity, and inclusive visitor offers.

Supporting systems change

At Fexco Managed & Advisory Services, we view tourism as a high-potential sector for delivering on Ireland's broader ESG ambitions. Our work supports public bodies, tourism operators, and communities to align economic growth with sustainability through:

- **Data solutions:** Helping enterprises and regions develop carbon baselines and impact reports aligned with CSRD and ESG frameworks.
- **Strategy and advisory:** Guiding sustainable tourism masterplans, funding applications, and governance design for emerging destination management organisations (DMOs).
- **Community enablement:** Supporting grassroots initiatives through capacity-building, mentoring, and access to public-private partnerships.

We see particular potential in connecting tourism with energy transition, circular economy, and biodiversity strategies – ensuring tourism is not siloed, but integrated into the fabric of Ireland's sustainable future.

Three priorities for

scaling sustainable tourism

To unlock the full value of Ireland's sustainable tourism transition, coordinated national action is required across three key fronts:

1. **Sustainable mobility:** Prioritise low-carbon transport links to and within tourism corridors – integrating rural transport schemes, EV infrastructure, and multimodal options.
2. **Digital inclusion for SMEs:** Invest in tools, training, and platforms to help micro and small enterprises monitor impact, digitise operations, and market themselves sustainably.
3. **Policy alignment and local governance:** Deepen integration between planning, climate, heritage, and tourism policy through stronger interdepartmental coordination and enhanced powers for local DMOs.

Destination Ireland reimagined

Ireland is not just transitioning how tourism looks – it is redefining what tourism is for. In doing so, it is demonstrating that tourism can support climate action, revitalise communities, protect heritage, and drive innovation. This journey is still unfolding, but the momentum is unmistakable.

As we look toward 2030, Ireland has the opportunity to become a global leader in regenerative tourism – a country that welcomes the world while safeguarding the very things that make it worth visiting.

Fexco Managed & Advisory Services is proud to play its part in that vision, helping shape a tourism sector that is inclusive, intelligent, and irreversibly sustainable.

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The 35th Government of Ireland's tourism priorities

The new government has changed the department responsible for tourism policy, with tourism now within the remit of the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment.

Prior to this reshuffle, tourism had been within the remit of the former Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

The Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment is Peter Burke TD. However, at the time of writing, no Minister of State has been formally handed responsibility for tourism. The statutory handover of policy responsibility took place on 1 June 2025, under the Ministers and Secretaries (Amendment) Act 1939.

Programme for Government

The Programme for Government makes 37 references to tourism. The policy framework prioritises incremental growth in tourism capacity, with particular attention given to sustainability, infrastructure optimisation, regional distribution, and compliance with broader socioeconomic objectives.

The Government's tourism policy is to be formalised in a new national tourism strategy to 2030, aimed at increasing visitor numbers and



Peter Burke TD, Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment

employment levels in a manner aligned with national development goals. The strategy incorporates existing frameworks such as the Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Ancient East, Hidden Heartlands, and Dublin, and aims to distribute tourism-related activity more evenly across geographic regions. This is to mitigate overconcentration effects and optimise regional economic outputs.

Support for agencies such as Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland will continue, with these entities tasked with promoting Ireland as a tourism destination in both domestic and international markets. Planned initiatives include the 'Year of the Invitation', a community-focused campaign to encourage diaspora engagement and community-level tourism event organisation. The campaign is modelled on historical precedents such as The Gathering (2013) and is primarily cultural in orientation.

Infrastructure and connectivity

Infrastructure investment will be directed toward improved access to tourism sites. This includes public transport enhancements to high-volume tourism zones and expanded greenway and blueway networks. A comprehensive review of national aviation policy is to be conducted to assess capacity and utilisation at regional and national airports, with a view to maximising inbound and outbound connectivity.

The Government also intends to upgrade existing tourism infrastructure via the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme. Investment is to be directed toward tidal pools, trails, walkways, and other facilities. Coillte will remain the primary agency for forest park maintenance and upgrades.

Sustainable and regenerative tourism

The document places a recurring emphasis on "regenerative" tourism, particularly in the Midlands. EU Just Transition Funds are to be deployed to support such projects. These are intended to achieve co-benefits in environmental remediation and economic diversification for areas experiencing industrial decline.

Tourism initiatives will be aligned with the Government's climate and biodiversity strategies. Nature-based tourism assets such as greenways, blueways, and marine-based activities are identified as low-impact alternatives to conventional tourism forms. Funding for the National Walks Scheme and continued stakeholder collaboration (e.g., with landowners and local authorities) are central to these objectives.

Marine and coastal development

A separate marine tourism strategy is to be developed in collaboration with Fáilte Ireland. Objectives include the enhancement of coastal visitor infrastructure, development of marina assets, and promotion of marine recreational activities such as whale and dolphin observation. These activities will be implemented alongside expanded Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and associated conservation regulations.

The tourism strategy aims to ensure that ecological considerations are embedded within all marine sector tourism development proposals. The Government states that it will work to balance ecological protections with economic usage through legislative and policy oversight.

Economic development and sectoral integration

The programme outlines a continuation of financial and technical support mechanisms for rural tourism under the LEADER Programme and the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund. Measures include incentives for sustainable food and beverage tourism, particularly where local produce can be integrated into visitor offerings.

The tourism strategy will also interface with skills development policies to address career pathways within the hospitality and tourism sectors. Engagement with the Department of Further and Higher Education is planned to expand course offerings and labour market alignment, using the National Training Fund as the primary financing mechanism.

Analysis

The handover of tourism policy demonstrates that the new government views tourism as an economic enabler, rather than an intrinsic policy objective. The Government's tourism-related policies as outlined in the Programme for Government are consistent with a cautious, data-driven approach to sectoral development.

The focus on regional balance, environmental sustainability, and infrastructure investment reflects a broader integration with national economic and planning frameworks. However, implementation will rely on coordination across multiple departments, regulatory compliance, and alignment with EU funding structures.

Overseas visitor numbers sharply decline in 2023

Approximately **6,564,000** overseas visitors came to Ireland in 2023 according to Fáilte Ireland's Key Tourism Facts 2023 National Summary published in February 2025.

This represents a **32 per cent** decrease from pre-pandemic levels in 2019 when there were **9,674,000** overseas visitors, according to a report published by the Sustainable Tourism and Visitor Experience Lab (STORY) in September 2022. The report, titled *Climate Change and Tourism: The Carbon Footprint of Irish Tourism*, also states that Irish tourism contributed an estimated **11.62 MtCO₂eq** in emissions in 2019. This is the latest available data on emissions from the Irish tourism industry.

It asserts that overseas visitors accounted for **10.12 MtCO₂eq**, **87 per cent** of tourism emissions. Climate Change and Tourism identifies aviation as "the most significant contributor to Irish tourism emissions", accounting for **7.33 MtCO₂eq**. The following is a breakdown of the emissions generated by visitors by country.

- US: **2.99 MtCO₂eq (41 per cent)**
- Australia, New Zealand, and other Oceania countries: **1.14 MtCO₂eq (16 per cent)**;
- Other areas: **0.99 MtCO₂eq (13 per cent)**; and
- Great Britain: **0.36 MtCO₂eq (5 per cent)**.

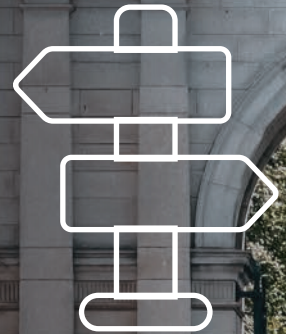
"The findings above demonstrate that long-haul flights have a significant impact on aviation emissions," the report states. It asserts that the high levels of emissions generated by the US "is due to a combination of travelling long distances and higher visitor numbers".

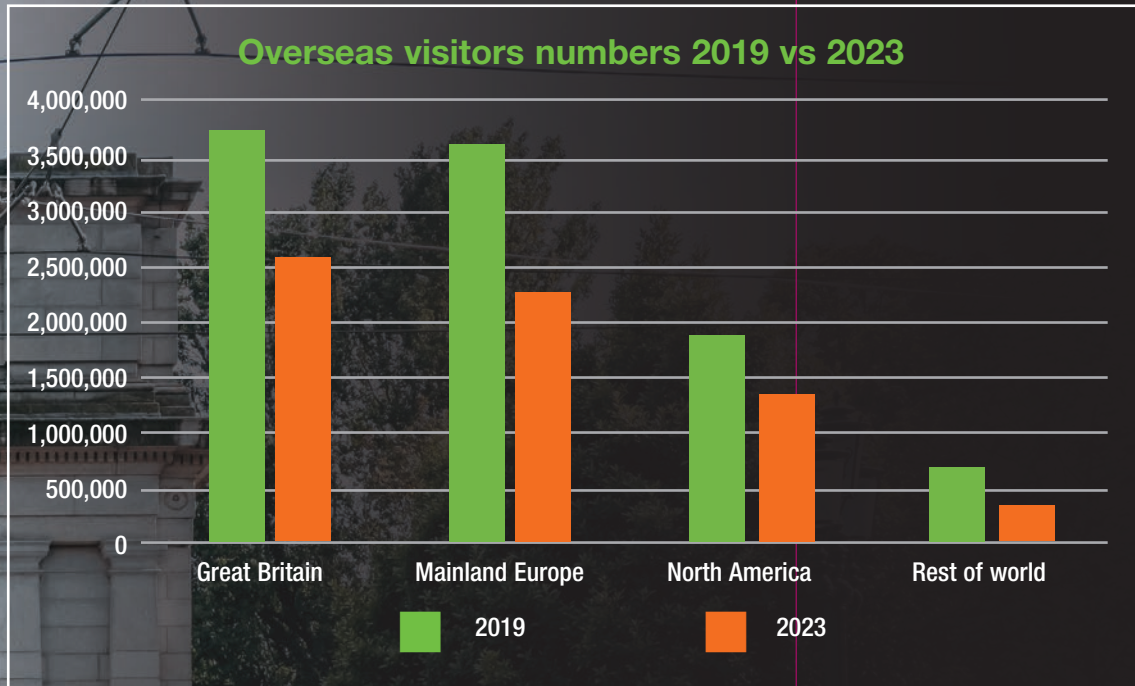
The report adds: "In comparison, Ireland's most significant overseas tourist market, Britain, is responsible for only **5 per cent** of aviation emissions. This is a relatively low contribution due to the shorter flight distance."

In 2023, Great Britain had the largest contingent of visitors with **2,604,000**, a **25 per cent** decrease from 2019 when it stood at **3,487,000**. It was followed by mainland Europe at **2,260,000**, a **37 per cent** decrease from 2019 when it stood at **3,609,000**. There were **1,340,000** visitors from North America, a **29.5 per cent** decrease from 2019 when it stood at **1,902,000**. In 2023, **362,000** visitors came from 'rest of world', a 46 per cent decrease from 2019 when it stood at 676,000.

Approximately **1,347,000** visitors came from Northern Ireland in 2023, a **5.5 per cent** increase from 2019 when it stood at **1,277,000**. The STORY report estimates that visitors from Northern Ireland produced **0.15 MtCO₂eq**, 1 per cent of total emissions in 2019.

In 2023, **14,309,000** domestic trips were made in Ireland, a **23 per cent** increase from 2019 when there were **11,621,000**. The STORY report estimates that domestic visitors produced **1.35 MtCO₂eq**, **12 per cent** of total emissions in 2019.





It identifies internal transport as the highest contributor to domestic tourism emissions in Ireland. "Domestic tourism contributes nearly the same level of internal transport emissions as overseas tourists, even though their length of stay is far shorter. This is mainly due to the more prominent use of personal cars and further distances travelled."

Although it is likely that emissions from domestic trips and visitors from Northern Ireland have increased in comparison to 2019, it can be assumed that total emissions from the tourism industry have reduced in line with the significant decrease in overseas visitors in this time.

2025 so far

Central Statistics Office data show that **1,612,000** foreign visitors completed a trip in Ireland during the months of January, February, March, and April in 2025. In April 2025, **528,100** foreign visitors completed a trip to Ireland, down by 4 per cent from April 2024 and up by **14 per cent** from April 2023.

Great Britain had the largest contingent of visitors at **214,200**, 40.6 per cent of the total. The US was second with **93,200 (17.6 per cent)**, followed by Germany with 36,300 (6.9 per cent).

Overseas visitors stayed a total of **3.4 million** nights in the country, **1.5 per cent** less than April 2024 and **6 per cent** less than April 2023. On average, foreign resident overnight visitors stayed for **6.5 nights**, up from 6.4 in April 2024 and down from **7.9** in April 2023.

European overseas visitors excluding Great Britain spent the most nights in the country at **1,339,900** nights (**39 per cent** of total). Visitors from Great Britain spent **959,000** nights (**27.9 per cent**), visitors from North America spent **856,300** nights (**24.9 per cent**), and 'other' visitors spent **281,400** nights (**8.2 per cent**).

A total of **1,931,300** visitors arrived by sea or air while there were **1,949,400** departures, up by **12.1 per cent** from April 2024. Of all departing passengers, **64.2 per cent** were outbound Irish residents. A further **8.8 per cent** were same-day visitors while **27.1 per cent** were foreign resident overnight visitors.





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Ireland's first certified sustainable destination



Ireland's first destination to achieve international sustainable tourism certification through EarthCheck. Picture: The Bridges of Ross, Co. Clare.

Clare County Council has recently achieved the globally recognised GSTC sustainable destination certification, awarded by leading certifying body EarthCheck.

In 2021, Clare County Council launched a 10-year Clare Tourism Strategy, Guiding our Journey to a Vibrant New Future in Tourism, which was an evidence-based, forward-looking, and innovative approach to tourism planning in Clare and a roadmap for public and private investment over the following decade. Led by the Tourism Department of Clare County Council, this strategy was shaped through extensive stakeholder and public consultation. The

strategy is underpinned by a clear and ambitious vision: "Clare is a globally renowned, sustainable, and vibrant destination by 2030."

In an era of growing sustainability commitments, there is an increasing demand for transparency and integrity from stakeholders across the public sector, industry, residents, and visitors. Tourism is Ireland's largest indigenous employer, supporting essential

livelihoods, especially in rural areas of Ireland such as County Clare. In the face of global uncertainties affecting other sectors such as pharmaceuticals and technology, there is a critical need to sustain and strengthen tourism as a resilient, community-driven pillar of Ireland's economy.

Recognising the vital role of local authorities in managing destinations and tourism infrastructure, Clare County

Council has adopted an initiative-taking leadership approach. Through cross-departmental collaboration and engagement with external stakeholders, the Council has successfully secured Ireland's first third-party verified sustainable destination certification from EarthCheck, the world's leading certification body for sustainable tourism.

According to Councillor Shane Talty, Chair of Clare County Council's Tourism Directorate SPC: "Securing this accreditation is a major achievement at a time when the tourism sector is navigating significant challenges. It is vital that our county continues to lead by example, setting a path that others may follow now and into the future."

This internationally recognised certification requires destinations to monitor and report on a comprehensive set of environmental, cultural, social, and economic indicators, all subject to independent auditing. The requirement of annual auditing and benchmarking is a core component of the certification process, supporting continuous improvement by identifying strengths, gaps, and opportunities year-on-year, enabling destinations to adapt proactively to emerging challenges and sustainability goals. Clare's achievement ensures that its tourism practices are informed by the highest global standards, offering a credible and measurable pathway toward sustainability. Furthermore, this certification places Clare County Council in a strong position to comply with the forthcoming EU Green Claims Directive, designed to prevent greenwashing and promote authenticity in environmental communications across the European market.

As part of the certification process, a Sustainable Destination Action Plan is currently being developed to guide the long-term implementation of sustainable tourism practices throughout County Clare. Central to the action plan is resident insights, ensuring that local values, concerns, and aspirations directly inform how actions are shaped and delivered. In collaboration with partners such as the Atlantic Technological University (ATU) and the Atlantic Coast Sustainable Tourism Observatory, a UN Tourism initiative, the certification supports evidence-based decision-making. The certification commitment is demonstrated through a series of key deliverables, including:

- establishment of a county-wide,



Ireland's first Destination Green Team supporting an international sustainable destination certification, chaired by Deirdre O'Shea, Head of Tourism, Clare County Council.

multi-sectoral Destination Green Team;

- adoption of a Sustainable Destination Policy;
- development of a Sustainable Destination Action Plan;
- destination Risk Assessment;
- implementation of an annual, third-party audit; and
- annual Benchmarking and reports.

Sustainable tourism in action: The role of local authorities

Local authorities play a critical role in the delivery of tourism across Ireland, with responsibilities ranging from infrastructure management to supporting Destination Experience Development Plans (DEDPs). The sustainable certification journey offers local authorities a structured framework to engage meaningfully with residents, visitors, local businesses, and public agencies to advance tourism in a more sustainable way. As local authorities across Ireland are now mandated to develop climate action plans, it is essential that tourism strategies are aligned with broader climate objectives. Clare's experience in achieving the

certification provides a practical and replicable model for other local authorities seeking to integrate tourism with climate resilience and community engagement.

However, to fully realise this ambition at a national scale, dedicated funding within research mechanisms is essential. Such investment represents strong value for money, particularly when the outcome is a tourism sector that is more resilient, aligned with climate action goals and supports sustainable development strategies.

As James Hanrahan of Atlantic Technological University (ATU) notes: "Securing dedicated research funding is essential for sustainable tourism development. The Planning and Development Act 2024 plays a pivotal role in enabling forward-looking infrastructure planning and it is vital that we integrate planning processes with robust research to ensure evidence-informed decision-making. Tourism, by its nature, experiences its 'up days' and 'down days', which makes having specialist, evidence-based expertise all the more critical. While local authorities may not always receive the recognition they deserve, their role within democratic governance is essential. Through elected representatives and structured planning



County Clare's countywide sustainability approach builds on the proven model of sustainable tourism in North Clare, the Geopark Code of Practice (Photo: Awards night Code of Practice, April 2024).

frameworks, they are uniquely positioned to support long-term sustainability goals. Fundamentally, local authorities play a central role in realising the principle – that a good place to live is a good place to visit.”

County Clare's Destination Green team

As part of Clare's journey toward certification, County Clare has established Ireland's first Destination Green Team, chaired by Deirdre O'Shea, Head of Tourism, Clare County Council. In addition, Clare County Council has resourced a full-time Sustainable Destination Development Officer, Fiona McKenna, who has led all background research and data collection. The team is dedicated to the implementation of the certification process. As McKenna notes: “One of the valuable outcomes of pursuing sustainability certification is the formation of the Destination Green Team and the ability to benchmark, and action against data as a team.”

Core responsibilities of the team include delivering Clare's Sustainable Destination Action Plan, aligning relevant policies, and conducting risk assessments. The team brings together around 40 members, representing diverse expertise from Clare County Council's Environment, Climate Action, Heritage, and Biodiversity departments, alongside strategic partners. This integrated governance model ensures that Clare's sustainable tourism certification is informed by best practice and is aligned with national and EU policy objectives. Current members of the Clare Green Team include the following representatives, namely:

- Tourism Department, Clare County Council;
- Environment and Climate Action Department, Clare County Council;
- Municipal Districts, Clare County Council;
- Rural and Community Development Department, Clare County Council;
- Heritage, Biodiversity and Planning Department, Clare County Council;
- Burren and Cliffs of Moher UNESCO Global Geopark, Clare County Council;
- Clare Collections, Clare Tourism Development DAC;
- Irish Farmers' Association;
- North Clare Community Group;
- Burren Ecotourism Network;
- East Clare Tourism Network;
- Loop Head Tourism Network;
- Private tourism businesses;
- Fáilte Ireland;
- National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS);
- Office of Public Works;
- Geological Survey of Ireland;
- National Monuments Service;
- Limerick Clare Conference and Sports Bureau;
- Shannon Airport; and
- Atlantic Sustainable Tourism Observatory, Atlantic Technological University, Sligo, Ireland.

The role of Shannon Airport and Moneypoint Power Station

As part of Clare's EarthCheck certification process, key infrastructure sites were independently audited. These included Shannon Airport, a vital transport hub, and Moneypoint Power Station, currently undergoing a major transition towards clean energy while continuing to serve as a critical backup for Ireland's electricity grid.

Shannon Airport

Sustainability is increasingly central to the strategic direction of both County Clare and Shannon Airport. The Shannon Airport Group has formed a Sustainability Team, led by Sinéad Murphy.

The key figures on the Shannon Airport Group's Sustainability Team are active members of the Clare Green Team –, a cross-sectoral working group established to coordinate the EarthCheck certification. Their active involvement reflects a growing recognition of the airport's role not just in connectivity but also in advancing climate and sustainability standards. During the EarthCheck audit, Shannon Airport demonstrated tangible actions across several aspects including carbon management, waste reduction, energy efficiency, biodiversity regeneration, and stakeholder engagement.

The integration of airport infrastructure within the county's sustainability agenda highlights the importance of collaborative governance in destination management.

The Shannon Airport proactive engagement is a showcase of the type of public-private partnership needed to transition Ireland's regions toward more resilient futures. The collaboration between Clare County Council and The Shannon Airport Group through the Clare Green Team and sustainable destination certification, offers a leading example of how aviation, local authorities and community stakeholders can collectively work together through the lens of sustainability.

Moneypoint Power Station

Sustainability is also central to the evolving role of Moneypoint Power Station within County Clare and the national energy landscape, under the leadership of Stephen O'Mahoney. As one of Ireland's largest energy generation facilities and a large historic employer within Clare, Moneypoint is undergoing a significant transition-from a legacy fossil-fuel plant to a forward-looking clean energy hub.

Critically, it will continue to serve as a strategic backup provider for the national electricity grid. During the EarthCheck audit, Moneypoint Power Station demonstrated a commitment to emission reductions, energy innovation, and stakeholder cooperation. Its presence in the certification process underscores the county's integrated approach to sustainability, one that does not exclude heavy infrastructure, but instead brings it into the forefront of the process.

By collaborating with Clare County Council within the certification, Moneypoint is helping to redefine what sustainability looks like for complex legacy energy infrastructure in a rural context. This alignment between energy transition and destination sustainability planning within certification positions Clare as a national example of forming strategic partners across climate, national security, and economic development.

Businesses' role in sustainable destinations

County Clare's approach to sustainable destination management draws on historical, proven models of business and cross-sectoral collaboration. Established in 2019, the Burren and Cliffs of Moher UNESCO Geopark Code of Practice for Sustainable Tourism is adopted by approximately 60



businesses within the Burren Ecotourism Network.

The Code of Practice has been recognised as a best-practice in sustainability, requiring businesses to measure, monitor, and action against energy and water use, waste generation, use of local products and services, contribution to communities, protecting biodiversity and promoting culture.

As Carol Gleeson, manager of the UNESCO Global Geopark explains: "The Code is evidence-based, and third-party evaluated. When visitors choose businesses that have completed the Code, they are choosing businesses who demonstrate that they are actively protecting their landscape, investing in local economies, and are passionate about working together towards a better future for their communities."

Clare County Council has demonstrated increased commitment to expanding the Code of Practice across more tourism networks within the county. This reflects the recognition that local businesses play a crucial role in transitioning destinations

to become more sustainable by aligning with recognised sustainability standards. Tourism enterprises that complete the Code of Practice not only reduce their environmental impact, but also enhance the visitor experience and strengthen the destination's reputation. Their collective efforts are vital in meeting the sustainability indicators required for international sustainable destination certification.

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Policy framework sets tourism direction to 2030

Before the dissolution of the previous Dáil, the then-Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht and Media published the *Tourism Policy Framework 2025-2030*, setting out a range of sustainability-related goals for the sector.

Published in November 2024, the framework identifies climate action, environmental protection, and social responsibility as core components of future tourism development in Ireland. It takes a three-pillar approach – environmental, economic, and social – with particular emphasis placed on environmental sustainability due to intersecting national and EU targets.

Environment

Under the environmental pillar, the framework specifies that the State's tourism sector must play a role in achieving climate mitigation objectives. A key action involves calculating a baseline for tourism-related carbon emissions, for which Fáilte Ireland is responsible. Once the baseline is

determined, the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment will be mandated to establish reduction targets. By 2030, the average carbon emissions per visitor bed night must be reduced by 60 per cent. Targets will be embedded in successive short-term tourism action plans.

Tourism businesses will be expected to undertake environmental audits and implement emissions reduction measures. Public supports, such as grants or promotional funding, may be linked to evidence of environmental action. Guidance will be developed for operators to adopt practices such as switching to low-emissions energy sources, improving insulation, and reducing food waste. A platform will be launched to allow businesses to share

examples of actions taken, with a focus on replicable and measurable outcomes.

The framework also requires the publication of a sectoral adaptation plan under the National Adaptation Framework. This aims to address risks to tourism infrastructure from sea level rise, increased storm activity, flooding, and other climate-related impacts. The aim is that the plan will identify vulnerabilities in tourism-heavy regions and provide guidance on long-term resilience strategies.

Biodiversity is another area covered under the environmental pillar. The policy outlines that tourism development should not compromise natural habitats and must align with the *National Biodiversity Action Plan*.

Businesses will be encouraged to enhance biodiversity at their sites using measures such as wildflower planting, reduction of pesticide use, and conservation of native species habitats. Local authorities and public agencies will be asked to consider biodiversity impacts when planning tourism-related infrastructure.

Water quality and waste are also addressed. The policy notes that tourism generates waste and resource consumption, particularly in high-traffic areas. The document refers to the national *Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy* and sets out expectations for increased recycling, food waste prevention, and reduced plastic use in the tourism sector. Accommodation providers and visitor attractions are to ensure proper waste segregation, and the use of reusable items such as cups and containers will be promoted.

Transport is identified as a major source of emissions linked to tourism. The policy includes actions to reduce transport-related emissions, both for travel to and within Ireland. Visitors are to be encouraged to use ferries, rail and sail options, and low-emission vehicles.

To achieve this, the framework envisages collaboration with agencies responsible for transport infrastructure to support the rollout of electric vehicle (EV) charging stations at key tourism sites. Public and active transport options, such as cycling and walking, are to be included in destination experience development plans (DEDPs), especially in rural and nature-based tourism regions.

Economic and social

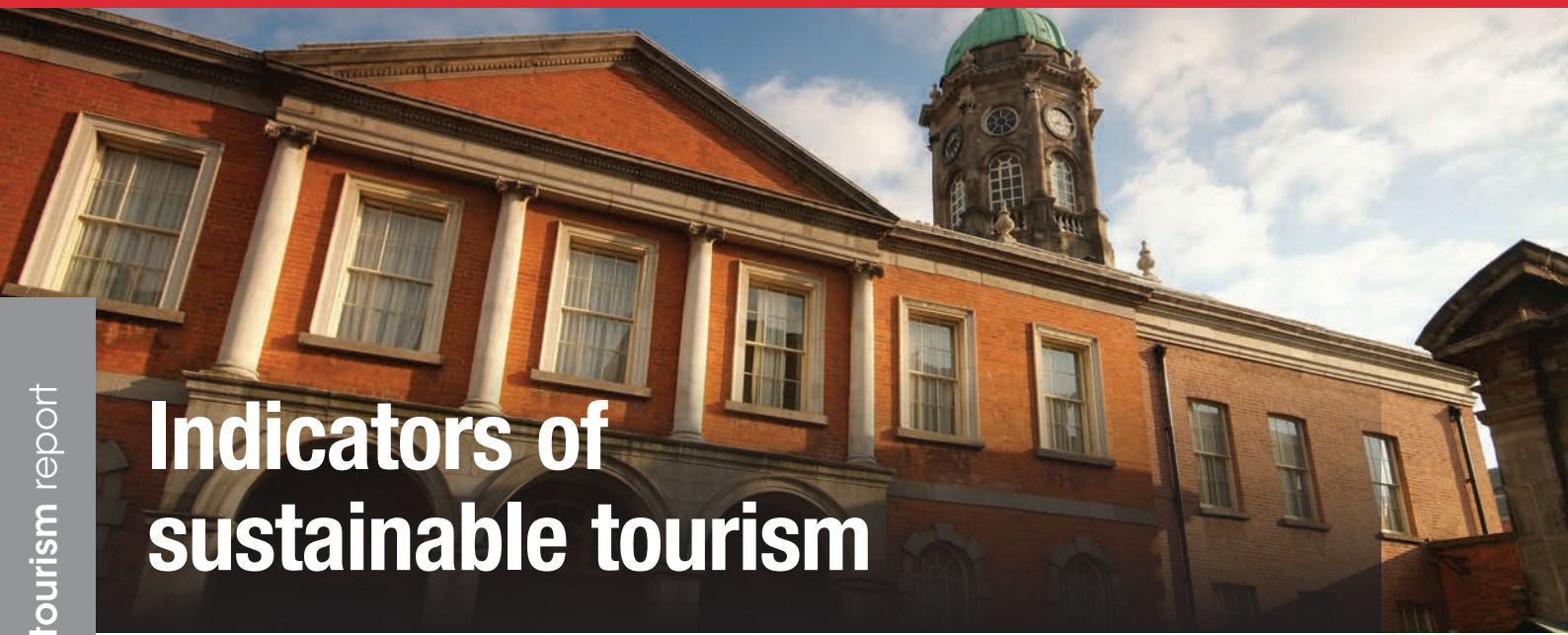
The economic and social pillars of the framework also contain elements linked to sustainability. Economic goals include a shift away from visitor volume growth towards revenue per visitor, based on the rationale that fewer, longer stays have a lower carbon impact than high turnover. Domestic tourism is identified as a lower-emissions alternative to outbound travel, and policies will be developed to encourage Irish residents to holiday at home.

Socially, the framework states that tourism should benefit host communities and avoid negative local impacts. It outlines that local authorities and tourism agencies should consider seasonality, regional balance, and employment quality when developing tourism strategies. The development of tourism careers that are stable, full-time, and year-round is a stated objective. Training will be made available to support businesses and communities in delivering sustainable tourism services.

The policy also states that tourists should be made aware of sustainability efforts and their role in contributing to them. The framework states that awareness campaigns will be launched to promote water conservation, litter prevention, recycling, and low-impact travel. The tourism agencies are expected to incorporate sustainability messaging into marketing materials, itineraries, and visitor information resources.

Verification and measurement are addressed through commitments to improve data collection and introduce reporting on environmental indicators. This includes revisions to visitor satisfaction surveys to capture perceptions of Ireland as a sustainable destination. Certification schemes and ecolabels may be supported or recognised, and Ireland's performance will be aligned with international benchmarks where feasible.

Speaking at the time of publication, then-Minister Catherine Martin said: "This policy is formulated using the well-established sustainable development model that balances economic development with environmental and social considerations. Implementing the strategic objectives of this policy framework will bring tangible benefits to the sector and will also provide facilities and experiences of value to local communities."



Indicators of sustainable tourism

Climate Action Plan 2025 stipulates that a sectoral climate adaptation plan for tourism must be developed in 2025. Sustainable tourism indicators outlined by the Sustainable Tourism and Visitor Experience Lab (STORY) at the Atlantic Technological University could set the foundations for this plan.

STORY measures a tourism destination’s environmental impact using 17 core indicators across seven sub-categories: reducing transport impact; climate change; solid waste management; sewage treatment; water treatment; energy usage; and landscape and biodiversity protection. The core indicators for a destination’s success in reducing transport impact are:

- percentage of tourists and same-day visitors using different modes of transport to access the destination;
- percentage of those using local, soft mobility, or public transport services to navigate the destination;
- average kilometres travelled by those from accommodation to destination; and
- average carbon footprint of those travelling from accommodation to destination.

STORY evaluates a destination’s efficacy in addressing climate change by the percentage of tourism enterprises taking adaptation responses and actions, and those involved in climate change mitigation schemes including CO₂ offset, low energy systems, etc. It also measures it by the

percentage of tourism accommodation and attraction infrastructure located in ‘vulnerable zones’.

Indicators for a destination’s solid waste management include waste production per tourist night compared to the general population waste production per person; the percentage of tourism enterprises separating different types of waste; and the percentage of total waste recycled per tourist compared to the total waste recycled per resident per year.

Sewage treatment is measured by the percentage of sewage from the destination treated to at least secondary level before discharge. Water management is evaluated by the water consumption per tourist night compared with that of residents, the percentage of enterprises taking water consumption reduction actions, and the percentage of enterprises using recycled water.

The core indicators for energy usage are as follows:

- energy consumption per tourist night compared with residents;
- percentage of enterprise taking action to reduce energy consumption; and

- percentage of annual energy consumption from renewable sources compared to overall energy consumption.

To evaluate landscape and biodiversity protection, STORY measures the percentage of local enterprises in the tourism sector actively supporting protection, conservation, and management of local biodiversity and landscapes.

In February 2025, Fáilte Ireland announced its plans for sustainable tourism development. According to the organisation, the plans include “significant investments in destination development, domestic marketing, festivals to spread visitors beyond the busy summer months and initiatives to attract more business events to Ireland”.

Commenting on the plans, Minister for Tourism Peter Burke TD says: “In line with our new Programme for Government, these robust plans look to create a balanced regional spread of tourism, develop long-term, sustainable, well-paid careers in the industry, enhance our tourism infrastructure and support the sustainable growth of this sector.”