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**11th European Urban And Regional Planning Awards 2015 -2016**

**Category : Strategic Planning**

**Wild Atlantic Way – Fáilte Ireland – National Tourism Development Authority**

**1. Introduction**

The Wild Atlantic Way is one of Fáilte Ireland’s three principal experience brands of scale which are used to market Ireland to overseas visitors and which influence the identification of priorities for tourism product development and investment.

**2. Why is the Wild Atlantic Way initiative considered an outstanding planning example worthy of recognition?**

Wild Atlantic Way represents an innovative re-imagining of the tourism offering of the west coast of Ireland with the necessary scale and singularity to reach overseas audiences. The initiative has provided a step-change in the way tourism in the west of Ireland is planned, managed and presented, and it is designed to bring social and economic benefits to the communities living on the western seaboard, while managing the unique environmental, landscape and cultural assets in a sustainable way.

Nothing of this scale has ever been attempted in Irish tourism before and it is expected that the Wild Atlantic Way will result in real benefits to real communities for many years to come. However, the initiative has to be carefully managed by all stakeholders and for this reason, close partnerships have been put in place as well as a comprehensive Environmental Management Strategy which seeks to protect the core assets.

Early indications are that the Wild Atlantic Way has contributed to increased bed-nights by overseas visitors and increased revenue in the businesses along the Wild Atlantic Way. It has provided the tourism sector in the west with a ‘shot in the arm’ that has already resulted in job creation and new tourism start-ups.

**3. Project Inception**

The idea for the Wild Atlantic Way was devised by the Executive of Fáilte Ireland during an internal planning session towards the end of 2011. The idea was to create a brand for the west of Ireland which would be of sufficient scale and singularity to motivate potential overseas visitors to holiday in Ireland. Further details on the various options that were considered are set out in the ‘Alternatives Considered’ section of the Wild Atlantic Way *Operational Programme 2015-2019* [www.failteireland.ie/waw](http://www.failteireland.ie/waw)

**4. Role played by a Planner**

The early stages of the initiative were led and co-ordinated by a qualified planner, Paddy Mathews, MIPI, including the route identification, signage, and preparation of the Operational Programme. These stages of the initiative are all described below. The skills of a planner were particularly important in creating a vision for the initiative, in liaising with and co-ordinating the Local Authorities, the Leader Companies and the communities along the route, and in ensuring that the initiative was underpinned by the principles of sustainable development throughout. The public consultation element of the route identification was also co-ordinated and managed by the planner. A wider team of Fáilte Ireland personnel was involved in other aspects of the initiative and once the project launched a dedicated Wild Atlantic Way Programme team was established (see section 7), but the initiative still has input from the planner on an ongoing basis.

***The authenticity of the wild and natural environments being show cased along the Wild Atlantic Way is an essential part of the experience.***

**5. Development of the Proposition**

In July 2012, a consortium led by Colliers International and including Brady Shipman Martin (an Irish planning consultancy), won a tender to develop a brand proposition for the Wild Atlantic Way. A copy of both the Brand Proposition report and the Brand Guidelines are included with this application. The video which accompanied the launch of the brand can be viewed at [www.youtu.be/t\_g1SAPNpuQ](http://www.youtu.be/t_g1SAPNpuQ).

Project Update Bulletins were published in July 2012 and April 2013, which set out the project stages and mapped progress being made. These were prepared by Paddy Mathews and were designed to manage public and stakeholder expectation of the initiative as it developed. A number of presentations were made by the planner to the City and County Managers Association (CCMA) and to each Local Authority before the initiative began in an attempt to garner support for the Wild Atlantic Way.

**6. Route Identification and Public Consultation**

Shortly after the brand proposition work began, the route identification was commissioned. This was undertaken by The Paul Hogarth Company (TPHC) and managed by Paddy Mathews. A qualified planner in The Paul Hogarth Company, John Frazer, was also central to this part of the initiative. Four Regional Steering Committees were established with the project partners and comprised Fáilte Ireland regional representatives, the Local Authorities (drawn from County Managers, planners, engineers and tourism officers, depending on the Local Authority), the Leader Companies, Údaras na Gaeltachta, and the Western Development Commission.

Public and trade engagement was deemed to be a very important part of the initiative. A comprehensive public consultation exercise was undertaken during November and December 2012, during which the draft route was put on public display and a series of 15 public consultation sessions were held along the west coast. 388 written submissions were received, which contained 854 individual suggestions relating to the route and the location of Discovery Points. All submissions, together with the decisions on each, was documented and recorded. This resulted in a very high level of transparency with regard to the decision making process. The route and the Discovery Points were adopted by the Regional Steering Groups in February 2013. A Route Identification Report was published in May 2013.

**7. Signing the Route**

Given that the Wild Atlantic Way is a touring route, it was deemed necessary to provide directional signage along its entire length in both directions. Following consultation with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (DTTAS), and the National Roads Authority (NRA), Fáilte Ireland established a Signage Implementation Group which comprised the DTTAS, the NRA and representatives from each of the ten Local Authorities within the Wild Atlantic Way Programme area. The Group was chaired by Paddy Mathews. A pilot signage project was undertaken, resulting in a set of Route Signing Guidelines, to ensure consistency in approach across all 13 sections of the route. Following the pilot signage project, an EU level multi-party framework was established which comprised RPS, ARUP, Atkins and Roughan O’Donovan, through which signage plans were prepared for the remaining 12 sections of the route, which were procured directly by Fáilte Ireland. The first four signage plans were commissioned at the end of May 2013, and together with the remaining eight, were implemented through the NRA (25% of the route) and the Local Authorities (75% of the route) with all costs being reimbursed by Fáilte Ireland.

Fáilte Ireland engaged the services of the Kerry and Donegal National Road Design Offices (NRDOs) to assist with co-ordinating the procurement of the manufacture and installation of the signs on the Regional and Local roads. Just over 4,000 Wild Atlantic Way signs (including patches) were installed on approximately 960 junctions along the route.

The review of all 13 signage plans, together with the inspection of the installation of the signs and the preparation of snagging lists, was undertaken by the Kildare NRDO on behalf of Fáilte Ireland.

**8. Organisational Change**

Up until 2013, in the west Fáilte Ireland was organised administratively into three separate regions: North-West (Donegal Leitrim & Sligo), West (Mayo, Roscommon & Galway), and South-West (Kerry & Cork). With the merging of Shannon Development (which included Limerick and Clare) into Fáilte Ireland in 2013, the decision was taken to merge all four regions and to replace them with one administrative structure within Fáilte Ireland to manage the Wild Atlantic Way. This was a very significant organisational change which brought a consistency in approach from Fáilte Ireland to the management of tourism in the west.

**9. International Trade and Consumer Launches**

The Wild Atlantic Way brand was launched in April 2013 at Meitheal, which is Ireland’s international trade fair for overseas tour operator buyers at which they meet with Irish trade to programme for the following season. The response to the launch was very positive, a flavour of which can be viewed at [www.youtu.be/6P3HVZ5eEno](http://www.youtu.be/6P3HVZ5eEno). A short video outlining the reaction of key overseas tour operators to the Wild Atlantic Way initiative can be viewed at [www.youtu.be/FIGmO2ovGXg](http://www.youtu.be/FIGmO2ovGXg).

The Wild Atlantic Way was launched to the consumer in April 2014. A website presence was developed by Tourism Ireland linked to the Ireland.com website, and Fáilte Ireland designed a web portal for the trade and to enable consumer feedback. See [www.wildatlanticway.com](http://www.wildatlanticway.com). A international marketing strategy was prepared by Tourism Ireland and is being currently implemented. An international sales strategy was prepared by Fáilte Ireland and a home holidays marketing campaign was also launched by Fáilte Ireland. An ad which ran in Irish cinemas can be viewed here.

**10. Operational Programme and Strategic Environmental Assessment**

Once the brand was launched, it was important to put in place an Operational Programme 2015-2019 and to undertake a Strategic Environmental Assessment and an Appropriate Assessment of the Programme. The co-ordination and preparation of the Operational Programme was undertaken by the planner Paddy Mathews with a colleague Mary Stack who is an Environmental Scientist with experience of the planning sector. This was the first SEA and AA to have been undertaken on a tourism programme. Both the SEA and the AA were undertaken by CAAS Ltd (an Irish planning and environmental consultancy) on behalf of Failte Ireland.

The Operational Programme sets out the overall aims and desired outcomes of the Wild Atlantic Way. To ensure that the future development and growth of the Wild Atlantic Way will be in line with the principles of sustainable development, the desired outcomes were expressed under headings of the VICE model: Visitor; Industry; Community; Environment. The Operational Programme, together with the associated Strategic Environmental Assessment and Appropriate Assessment, were adopted in August 2015. A copy of the Operational Programme, together with the SEA and AA can be viewed at [www.failteireland.ie/waw](http://www.failteireland.ie/waw).

**11. Programme of Remedial Works**

Guidelines for a programme of remedial and repair works was prepared by Fáilte Ireland (see attached *Site Maintenance Manual,* prepared by Brady Shipman Martin and The Paul Hogarth Company)to ensure that all of the 189 Discovery Points and Embarkation Points are well presented. On the basis of the guidelines, detailed specifications were agreed and undertaken by the Local Authorities and the works were funded by Fáilte Ireland.

**12. Environmental Monitoring Strategy**

A part of the process of undertaking the Strategic Environmental Assessment, it became apparent that an Environmental Monitoring Strategy was required to help co-ordinate a consistent approach to monitoring any environmental impacts across all Local Authority areas. CAAS Ltd. drafted the environmental monitoring strategy on behalf of Fáilte Ireland In September 2014, a draft environmental monitoring methodology for the Wild Atlantic Way was piloted as part of the Burren LIFE Project. Fáilte Ireland is one of the partners in and funders of the Burren LIFE Project and this was seen as a good opportunity to both contribute to the LIFE Project and to pilot a methodology that could be applied to the entire Wild Atlantic Way. Following the pilot scheme, a set of macro and micro indicators were agreed and the Environmental Monitoring Strategy was implemented during the summer of 2015. This included visitor observation surveys and ecological surveys at each of the 15 Signature Discovery Points.

An Environmental Monitoring Group is currently being put in place which will oversee the implementation of the Environmental Monitoring Strategy by reviewing the findings of each year’s survey and setting the priorities for the following year. Membership will comprise of Fáilte Ireland, the Local Authorities and a number of Environmental Authorities and organisations.

**13. Next Steps**

In addition to the remedial works, Fáilte Ireland has also funded the design and installation of an interpretative panel and a ‘photo point’ at each of the 189 Discovery Points and Embarkation Points, which is being implemented through the Local Authorities.

Research work is currently underway, commissioned by Fáilte Ireland into the distinct Atlantic culture along the west coast which will both inform future product and experience development initiatives, and will aim to strengthen the cultural identity of local coastal communities.

Fáilte Ireland will continue to build on the success to date of the Wild Atlantic Way through the implementation of the Operational Programme. For further information see [www.failteireland.ie/waw](http://www.failteireland.ie/waw).

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