

COVID-19 SURVIVAL PLAN - Comhar Conrad na Boirne Teo (Burren Centre & Tea Rooms)

Background

The reality we all face – in Ireland and globally- is of an economic depression as great as after WW2, which could last many years.

- Many commercial companies, charities and public institutions are starting to close, many famous and long-standing. Only the fittest will survive, through hard graft and ingenuity.
- In Ireland and in Clare, already once viable local tourism businesses are now shutting their door permanently.
- Others are fighting hard to stay in business and keep staff on their payroll – for example some offering food takeout services - such as Randaddys, Gregans Castle Hotel, Hotel Doolin, Armada Hotel and the Burren Storehouse.

Phase 3 of the lockdown easing now starts on 29 June. Shops and restaurants can reopen, but under the added pressure of social distancing, resulting in fewer customer numbers and therefore markedly reduced income. Phase 4 starts on 20 July, when galleries and exhibitions can open (with safety restrictions).

Re-opening tourism businesses are operating only at times (mainly weekends) when customers are likely to be around – but no one can yet predict if there will be enough income to survive. Those that succeed will have been creative and innovative in attracting customers – developing new products and services, ensuring quality and ‘difference’, and cutting costs.

It is against this context this Survival Plan is presented to start a discussion on how to try to keep the Burren Centre alive as an important local institution and employer.

Financial Situation

The report issued by the Manager (F Connole) on June 2nd 2020 confirmed that The Company is overdrawn to the amount of €19,367.43. The current business model is predominantly based on overseas visitors on coach tours with minimal independent visitor trade. This model did not deliver the required revenue in 2019 and – given Covid-19 restrictions and the grave economic climate – its continuation would threaten the survival of the Burren Centre.

A New Plan

We thus urgently need to design and implement a new and different plan that addresses income and costs. It may also help us to justify continued Pobal funding.

- The Centre’s finances currently rely on 152 staffing hours funded by Pobal.
- There is no guarantee that funding will continue post Covid-19

The Burren Centre is of course a community-owned company. Its continued existence is of critical importance to Kilfenora and to North Clare. Both the Burren Centre’s Constitution and Pobal require its Management Committee to do its utmost to ensure its viability.

That means the Management Committee and its employees must demonstrate – both to the Burren Centre shareholders and to its funders – that they have made every effort to operate in the most cost-effective way possible during this challenging period. This includes

- being rigorous and imaginative in providing services that maximise income – including understanding what customers we can attract and what they will be keen to pay for, and providing value to our community
- marketing the Burren Centre effectively – getting attractive messages out there that reach and motivate our audiences positively (yet on a tiny budget!)

- forensically examining expenditure to ensure best value for money e.g. electricity, internet/phone, insurance, water costs etc.

Given major uncertainties – e.g. are there enough customers for us to survive? will there be a ‘second wave’ of Covid – our plan needs to be flexible, and continually reviewed and revised to meet the circumstances we experience. We need to test, experiment, learn continuously, and generate ideas from employees and the community (re-examining Community survey 2019).

Last but not least, any such plan will only work by all of us pulling together to maximise our chance of economic survival, and to remain an integral part of our community.

3 Month Crisis plan for season 2020

In our current context, who are our potential customers? With other tourism businesses fighting for scarce income, how can we attract them to Kilfenora and the Burren Centre, and get them to spend their money with us on food or anything else?

- Local community – we know there are people who don’t cook, or would appreciate a break, for a meal or just a coffee and snack – and a safe place to meet. What else can we serve and sell to them?
- Visitors – already there are people stopping by in Kilfenora. What will attract cyclists, walkers, families at B&Bs, hotels and rented houses etc?
- What is the right mixture of the traditional and the new that will win their custom?

Based on (continuing) research and committee members feedback, this is what we consider will work best.

1 Open tea rooms and visitor centre from Wednesday July 1st?

Open the Tea Rooms initially Wednesday-Sunday 10am-4pm from July 1st with a view to extending hours from Monday-Sunday pending demand. Propose opening of exhibition on July 20th in line with current government restrictions. It is anticipated that opening hours will need to be closely monitored on a weekly basis as will be influenced by government announcements and visitor demand. Higher visitor numbers are expected at weekends and the approach to the weekend and will therefore align our HR accordingly. We will publicise that we are open and aim to provide a strong message to pull in customers. Frances is working hard to ensure we have the necessary Covid-19 protections in place.

2 Food

Open for sit down and takeaway meals Wed-Sun (note latest Government guidance).

- Traditional fare: breakfasts and dinners, appealing to those locals and visitors who prefer the familiar. Quality and value are important – some are happy to drive to Ennis to get it.
- A little bit of ‘new’: discerning visitors want ‘difference’ and local produce.
- More combined product offerings e.g. coffee and cake, soup and sandwich.
- Take-away, eat out - teas/coffees, homemade rolls/sandwiches/salads and ice creams of a quality to attract passing trade.
- Provide attractive seating facing the Square to attract and encourage visitors and our community locals to spend more time here whilst also adhering to public health guidelines.
- Quality and price: superior coffee, home-made and local produce (note the Burren Basket), but with keen attention to all costs including portion control. Lettuce and herbs can even be grown at The Burren Centre itself??

3 Shop and merchandising

- Capitalise more on locally produced products and crafts e.g. cheeses, coffee, chocolate, seaweed, soap, clothing, artwork etc. (Note - this is a Pobal requirement.)
- Consider relocating shop to lobby area to free up more restaurant space? This will satisfy social distancing requirements for the tea rooms while allowing reception and sales duties to be combined and undertaken by 1 employee??

4 Burren Exhibition & The Kilfenora Céili Band Parlour

How can we make The Burren Centre attractive to visit, especially in the current context? What will help give a new and positive angle to the ageing Exhibition and the little-known Parlour?

- Improve the experience: Fáilte Ireland, Trip Advisor, Booking.com etc all now identify 'experiences' and talking to locals as key attractants. We will move to offer guided visits of the Exhibition, Parlour and the Cathedral/crosses, supported by staff training and youth volunteers/interns to demonstrate local knowledge and pride in our heritage. (check re insurance for outdoor elements)
- Reason to visit Kilfenora?: we will revive and boost the Centre's purpose as a hub for community and cultural activities, and tap into the village's history and reputation. This includes using our facilities for events, and collaborating with other local tourism providers where sensible. Activities to include music - eg musicians playing outside or in at optimum times by the main entrance – and dance, village guided walks.

5 Longer term...

Consider tourism activities that will be easier when the Covid threat decreases, and community activities throughout the year. Revive the 'Kilfenora market' – longer term, consider hosting the historic right for stalls, once a week. All reasons to visit and/or stay in Kilfenora and spend money locally. Collaborate with neighbouring villages to boost visitor numbers.

6 Marketing without a budget

- 2 Pavement spinning signs on Main Street to say 'we're open' for food etc
- Shareholder list: texts and email marketing shots, community word-of-mouth
- PR - obtain Clare FM and Clare Champion coverage, with updates via Kilfenora Notes, and national coverage where possible.
- Social media - Burren Centre and Kilfenora Facebook and website pages, and develop our presence on other social media platforms e.g. Instagram and Twitter

7 Staffing

This plan aims to be feasible on the basis of the 152 staffing hours provided by Pobal and supporting our employees to implement this plan is pivotal. One of the key driver for developing the Burren Centre in the first place was to provide employment for our community and surviving this Covid-19 crisis will therefore help us to continue to do this. Currently, the Centre's budget does not allow for additional staff, so we must ensure the needs of the business are addressed fully and effectively as much as possible within these 152 funded hours – with the hope that by increasing demand, additional employment opportunities will emerge. Volunteers from the village may also assist us so H&S training may be needed with Covid-19.

8 Grant Applications – check every possibility, including...

- The Business Re-Start Grant in the amount of €7,300 (rates waiver).
- COVID-19 Stability Scheme for Community, Voluntary, Charity & Social Enterprise Orgs.
- The Town & Village Renewal Grant Scheme could aid the fit-out of the exhibition area.
- Meals on Wheels – need to consider

In conclusion, The Committee must exercise its responsibility to manage the crisis we face, and this plan – which can evolve to meet circumstances – is how we plan to survive.