

BURREN CENTRE STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION (Town and Village Renewal grant)

1.0 Introduction

This report is based on the findings of additional stakeholder engagement and consultation undertaken following approval of a Town and Village Renewal grant. Our goal is that the new exhibition can be as sustainable and resilient as possible for the challenges that lie ahead, taking into account that the tourism industry has been one of the hardest hit by Covid-19. We wish to ensure that the Burren Centre can contribute, and respond as positively as possible, to both the needs of our community and the rebuilding of local tourism. Hence the importance of consulting our shareholders, Burren communities, statutory stakeholders, educators, businesses and public representatives.

1. Overview

This project, the first major investment in the Burren Centre since its re-design and expansion in 2001, is critical for the Centre to survive and succeed in future. The range and quality of visitor attractions in N Clare has greatly increased over the 20 years – the Burren Centre now has highly capable comparators and competitors. There has also been a digital revolution, and the Centre needs to modernise and establish its digital presence. Accordingly, these are our **goals**.

- Restoring the Burren Centre (BC) to a position of national importance as a visitor attraction and an innovative interpretive centre - a highly desirable destination for visitors to Ireland, Clare and the Wild Atlantic Way (WAW).
- Being THE primary portal (physical and online) for visitors to the Burren UNESCO Geopark, a repository of knowledge and showcase that will remain compelling for decades.
- Providing a memorable and satisfying exhibition experience and visitor information point.
- A flexible, appealing, well-equipped and easily maintained space for visitor and community activities.
- Achieving a considerably higher and stable income flow to enable future investment in staffing – as a prominent local employment provider – and improved service quality and infrastructure.
- As a Licensed Information point, increase our value to the wider Burren area by attracting and then directing visitors to other local attractions.

The BC aims to play a significant role in drawing visitors inland from the WAW and Cliffs, to create deeper engagement with the wide variety of Burren attractions, more reasons to staycation, and greater economic benefit for our Burren communities and the wider North Clare region.

2. Background information

2.1 Stakeholders – approx. 300 Co-op shareholders; customers; employees (current, past); local business owners; local authority, Govt Agencies (e.g Pobal, Failte Ireland) and funding bodies (e.g. Tomar Trust, Clare County Council); fellow members of the Burren Eco-Tourism Network; other Burren-related bodies e.g. Burrenbeo Trust and the Geopark team.

2.2 The Burren Centre relationship with the region – the Burren Centre was created as a co-op to serve the whole Burren area, and this should be clearly reflected in the outcome of this renewal exercise. Its purpose has always been about serving the community as well as being a visitor attraction.

2.3 Branding – we are ~~working towards~~ updating our visual identity (logotype, gentian logo). Looking forward, we intend to develop some branded items for sale accentuating the ‘Burren’.

2.4 Customer segmentation - Burren Centre customers and users segment in multiple ways, according to our experience, views received in consultation and from relevant information sources.

Failte Ireland has some analytical data on behavioural characteristics, although this has not been updated to allow for Covid pandemic factors (which are significant). This is our perspective.

- **Buses vs free independent travellers** – there are major differences in buyer behaviour and thus in servicing their respective needs. The latter are generally less time-poor, tend to spend far more (esp in the craft shop) and are more discerning in food purchases. The BC in the past has focussed greatly on bus tour operators, and will continue to seek this business when post Covid conditions allow. However, in line with prevailing tourism wisdom we are focused on attracting discerning visitors with greater spending orientation.
- Certain **nationalities** are more interested in some things than others in visiting the Burren. However, in engaging with what the BC can offer, there is no significant differentiation we need to make in our product and services. Whatever nationality, we should provide a welcoming and educative experience online or physically (and allowing for non-English speakers where possible – 86% in our survey supported multi-lingual presentation). Note that we engage with tour operators from different countries in advance of each season as part of business and promotional planning.
- **Irish domestic visitors.** While there are many variations, certain patterns are observable. For example, a proportion of domestic visitors assume a certain amount of knowledge, and may be

less willing to engage or spend without being marketed to with compelling 'offers'. Some are repeat visitors to the Burren, and again need to be given fresh reasons to visit the BC.

- Appealing to all **age groups**, including specific ways to engage young children and teenagers.

2.5 Education and schools

The BC intends to build on its historic linkage with the education sector, actively engaging with schools and encouraging visits. The exhibition content needs to take curriculum needs into account.

We also wish to strengthen association with academia relevant to the Burren – for example engaging with researchers, staging guest lectures.

3. Summary of additional consultation

The **consultation process** comprised a survey open to shareholders and to any other contributors, plus in-depth focus groups involving a range of N Clare tourist businesses and experts on various subjects, e.g. marketing, geology, farming and music. These are the main points emerging:

3.1 Experience

Strong themes were '**authenticity**' and '**real experiences**'. This includes engagement with local people, which starts with having welcoming and informative staff/guides – the personal touch. This is regarded as a winning feature of the BC in the past, and of other local comparators such as Aillwee Cave, Burren Perfumery, Caherconnell, Doolin Cave and Burren Smokehouse. Specifically, the BC needs to allow both for self-guided and guided experiences, within the exhibitions and externally. The latter may include providing a village tour and collaboration with Burren guides.

3.2 Conservation. The BC has prime responsibility for bringing what some assume to be a forbidding environment to life – this is a living landscape in every sense – as well as ensuring full awareness of points of fragility and the need for conservation and protection.

3.3 The five senses. The experience of visiting the BC should allow for inspiring engagement of all 5 key senses as ranked in order of importance by respondents – sight, sound, touch, smell and taste.

3.4 Content themes (ranked importance from questionnaire and focus groups):

3.4.1 Archaeology and historical structures. Creating an exciting introduction to the Burren's rich array of structures – forts, castles, tombs, churches and other religious sites, celtic crosses, holy wells

– many of which are on the doorstep e.g. Kilfenora’s unique cathedral and long-standing description as ‘City of the Crosses’; Poul nabrone and much more. We must continue to highlight the important researchers/discoverers such as Westropp.

3.4.2 Music (inc dance) was the most mentioned in all focus groups and 3rd equal in the questionnaire. Kilfenora music is identified as emblematic of the Burren region as the KCB membership has always been drawn from that wider catchment. The distinctive and historic KCB repertoire is recognised as representing both a style of playing and sets of ‘Kilfenora’ tunes, that in practice are played by a wider range of musicians (and subtly contrasts with other styles such as East Clare). *A critical point is that we need to maximise its historic reputation* and consider how to incorporate our musical heritage as part of the redesigned exhibition. Results advise that the new exhibition must provide an appeal to, and engage with, the different visitor segments. Careful thought will need to be given to how to make the best of the considerable investment and research involved in creating the existing Kilfenora Céilí Band Parlour. Consideration must also be given to the BC as a platform for music and dance activity and content (live, online).

3.4.3. Flora and Fauna – the amazing richness despite the stony landscape and Atlantic winds, plus the unique contrast of Arctic and Mediterranean plants.

3.4.4 Geology – not mentioned as much in consultation as might be expected, perhaps as it is a given that this is the primary distinguishing characteristic of the Burren, as a UNESCO geopark. The exhibition needs to provide a vivid, inspiring and educative introduction to its hills, valleys, turloughs, caves etc. Close collaboration with the Geopark team was endorsed in the consultation.

3.4.5 History – from pre-historic times through warring chieftains, resisting the Anglo-Normans, Cromwellian times and on to the Famine, emigration, and finally some mining and industry. The current exhibition has interesting detail that could be brought to life more vividly.

3.4.6 Farming – a key feature of the Burren as a living place, shaping the landscape and representing 1000+ years of social history that connects with the here and now. Includes history of markets and marts in the region.

3.4.7 Religion – reflected both in ancient structures (many dozen churches, inc 20 built between the 6th and 12th centuries) and social history, the Burren’s ecclesiastical heritage is worthy of attention in its own right (and for its appeal to a segment of potential customers) e.g. the distinctive and remarkable relationship with the Holy See.

3.4.8 Other notable themes and topics

- Folklore and story-telling
- Local traditions – eg matchmaking, strawboys
- Sport: primarily Gaelic football, and remembering that Carran is the birthplace of Michael Cusack (has its own Centre).
- Local food and crafts (some of which should be featured as retail and café items)
- Culture, Art, Photography etc. (Many artists live and work in the Burren)
- Environment, climate change and the work of Young Scientists – suggested for a showcase in the exhibition.
- Book, plays and films – including well-known programmes filmed in the area, inc Fr Ted.
- Ancient and modern trackways (inc walking and cycling routes)
- Wellness – can link to holy wells, spiritual matters, herbs etc.

3.4.9 Burren Centre history – there is strong local support to considering including a small feature on the history and development of the Centre itself, including the previous exhibition designers.

3.4.10 Spatial mapping – in order to support the positioning of the BC as a place with a serious ‘knowledge’ dimension, focus groups proposed the concept of ‘spatial turn’. This involves using deep mapping to express the complex relationships people have with the Burren as a symbolic, physical and heritage place and space we live, work and visit. This can create a living digital media/resource and engage local communities in directly contributing their knowledge and perspectives of the Burren and its people, allowing for varied perspectives and interpretations of the Burren as a living space. To facilitate participation and quality assurance of input, curators/volunteers could coordinate contributions under the various themes – e.g. history, geology, music, flora/fauna. See examples from West Cork (<http://www.deepmapscork.ie>), Lough Boora, and Oranmore and connecting with UCC and NUIG.

3.5 Technology

The re-design must identify investment and deployment of technology that is ‘smart’ in several ways.

- Creating an inspiring, memorable and immersive experience.
- Integrating different types of technology – including from the physical to online experience
- Providing avenues for deeper-dive users (visitors to researchers) to engage and explore
- Minimise technology redundancy

- Avoid excessive complexity and on-cost.

4.0 Overall impression

Summarising, both the focus groups and questionnaire reflected considerable respect for the quality of information in the current exhibitions. For the future the issue is not so much about content but significantly improving the impact of the displays, the quality of the experience, and memorability – now and into the future.