Historic Towns In Ireland
Maximising your tourism potential

Fáilte Ireland
National Tourism Development Authority

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE OF THE GUIDELINES

These guidelines are intended as a practical aid to Local Authorities, Chambers of Commerce, Tidy Towns Committees, and any other business and community groups who are interested in improving the tourism amenity value of their towns and villages. Cultural tourism is one of the fastest growing areas of tourism internationally – growing significantly faster than mainstream tourism. Heritage and culture have been identified through research as broad motivators and key elements of both general holidays and specialist holidays in Ireland. Fáilte Ireland's *Tourism Product Development Strategy 2007-2013* identifies Ireland's historic cities, towns and villages as a cultural heritage asset with significant tourism potential. The challenge is to unlock this potential and deliver a high quality historic town experience for visitors that captures local distinctiveness.

Central to these guidelines is the concept of sustainable tourism and the need to ensure that future tourism growth goes hand in hand with the protection, planning and management of the quality, character and distinctiveness of our unique historic towns. Sustainable tourism development should not only increase revenue for the town's businesses, but should also deliver on conservation, environmental and social goals.

These guidelines were prepared following a desk top review, consultation with key stakeholders, and a review of international best practice in managing tourism in historic towns. To inform the preparation of the guidelines, Fáilte Ireland also undertook face-to-face surveys with visitors to ten historic towns throughout the country. The survey sought to identify what is important to the visitor and how the visitor experience could be enhanced and the tourism potential of the towns maximised. The survey findings point to significant improvements that can be made in most towns, particularly in relation to access and movement, visual impressions, quality of public realm, hygiene factors and the range and quality of things to do. We are, in many cases, failing to capitalise on the very significant tourism potential that our towns and villages possess, a potential that can result in real benefits to the triple bottom line (economic, environmental and social) of these towns.

STRUCTURE OF THE GUIDELINES

The guidelines are divided into four main sections:
1. Tourism in historic towns (Section 2);
2. The visitor survey (Section 3);
3. Making the most of your historic town (Section 4); and
4. Marketing and networking (Section 5).

Carrick-on-Shannon, Co. Leitrim:
A very attractive town for visitors and a base for cruising on the Shannon. Much care is taken with the maintenance and presentation of the public realm in the town, which includes a recently completed riverside walk.

HOW THE GUIDELINES FIT WITH OTHER PLANS AND STRATEGIES

All of the historic towns for which these guidelines are intended, will have a planning framework put in place by the relevant Local Authority, either in the form of a Town Development Plan, Local Area Plan or the County Development Plan. The function of these statutory plans is to outline the strategic vision for the development of the town and to put in place the policies and objectives to ensure that this development happens in a sustainable manner. In addition to these statutory plans, some towns may also have in place a number of other non-statutory plans and guideline documents, such as Public Realm Plans, Village Design Statements or Tourism Development Plans.

It is not intended that these guidelines would necessarily result in a new plan or strategy, but that they would inform the content and priorities of existing plans for the town, both statutory and non statutory.

In some cases, in the absence of a tourism strategy for the town, it may be deemed necessary to prepare such a strategy. In such cases, these guidelines can be used to inform an appropriate tourism strategy.

In all other cases, it is envisaged that these guidelines would be used to influence the tourism content of the following plans and strategies for an historic town:

- Development Plan
- Local Area Plan
- Area Action Plan
- Urban Design Plan
- Public Realm Plan
- Village Design Statement
- Tourism Development Plan
- Transport Management Plan.

There are a large number of government policies, strategies and guidelines which have been taken into account in preparing these guidelines, and which are aimed at achieving more sustainable levels of development within historic towns. Many of these are listed in the *Select Bibliography* section at the back of this document, but it is not intended to be an exhaustive list.

Dingle, Co. Kerry, is a town steeped in heritage, traditional Irish music and the Irish language and is located in the West Kerry Gaeltacht. The traditional shopfronts and brightly painted buildings are very popular with visitors to the town.

Kilkenny City: A very well developed town for visitors, where attractions are integral to the town centre, the castle, river walks, medieval lanes and buildings. It has a tight urban core which has kept much of its traditional quality.

TOURISM IN HISTORIC TOWNS

THE DEMAND FOR CULTURAL HERITAGE TOURISM

Recent research has shown that not only does cultural tourism constitute one of the central planks of the Irish tourism industry, but that it is also one of the fastest growing areas of tourism internationally.

The Survey of Overseas Travellers 2008 shows that over €2.2 billion was generated by the 3.3 million visitors to sites of historical/cultural interest in Ireland[1]. Those participating in cultural/heritage tourism contribute 54% to total overseas tourism revenue. Hiking and walking is the next highest contributor at 9%, golf and cycling at 3% each, angling at 2% and equestrian at 1%. Also culture and heritage tourists tend to stay in Ireland for longer periods and spend more.

Research also shows that our historic towns constitute a significant part of the attraction for culture and heritage seekers. In 2008, almost 57% of respondents to Fáilte Ireland's Visitor Attitudes Survey singled out the attractiveness of Ireland's historic towns as being 'very important' to them in considering Ireland for their holiday. These historic towns are likely to become increasingly important to tourism in the future, as visitors continue to travel to urban areas for short breaks. The unique characteristics of the towns, the stories they tell, the people that live in them and the opportunities to engage with aspects of traditional culture, generate a strong appeal to our visitors, particularly those in our key target consumer segment of sightseers and culture seekers. For up-to-date research data on the markets and its consumer segments, see www.faitleireland.ie/research.

Abbeyleix, Co. Laois: New paving outside the restored Market House, now a County Library. The building is located on a crescent shaped open space, which is re-paved to create an attractive area, separated from the main road by stone uprights as bollards.

[1] Includes historic houses, monuments, museums, galleries and heritage/interpretative centres.

WHAT IS A HISTORIC TOWN

Practically all of Ireland's towns can be labelled 'historic towns', in that they all have a rich and varied past, an interesting stock of historic buildings and a good story to tell. Some of these towns have become very popular with tourists due to their location, the attractions and historic buildings they contain, or the fact that the story they tell is particularly compelling.

For the purpose of this document, the term 'historic town' is taken to include cities, towns and villages that possess significant cultural and heritage assets.

The layout of morphology of these towns today is influenced by the landscape within which they are located as well as by the history and the manner in which they were developed. The one thing that can be said for sure is that all Irish towns are different.

Ireland's unique past has resulted in towns whose "street pattern today reflects the layout of early medieval monastic settlements, villages from the Plantation period, ones that are planned estate villages dating from the 18th and 19th centuries and others that are framed around long established, if often now lost, industries. These settlements were also important market and social centres for the surrounding rural catchment areas".[1] Of course in some cases, these forms of settlement will overlap in particular towns.

THE FORM OF IRISH TOWNS

The main aesthetic components of historic centres are firstly their general form and character, which is influenced by their topographical context. A hilly site will, by its nature, influence the layout of a town of village. There will be views and vistas over the surrounding landscape, narrow winding streets, which are full of surprises and intimacy. Conversely, settlements developed in the context of flat landscapes, generally have a more spacious and formal layout. The view from the single main street village to the countryside has fewer surprises. Its essential character is immediately recognisable. Many large cities and towns may combine elements of both. It is these essential forms which give cities and towns their 'personality' e.g. Ennis, Co. Clare, is different in 'personality and character' from Nenagh, Co. Tipperary, though both are county towns and provide the same function as administrative, regional and residential centres. On a smaller scale, Inistioge, Co. Kilkenny, with its narrow winding streets and access ways, is different in personality to Castlecomer, also in Co. Kilkenny, with its broad and spacious tree-lined street.

It is this essential 'personality' or 'character' which needs to be identified and protected in the context of future development and improvement policies. This totality of elements fused together within a compact space and influenced by local topography, create an aesthetic which, in its distinctive form, is personal to each town or village, but, in its generality, shares a distinctively Irish common theme with historic centres everywhere.

Combined with these physical characteristics is the vitality and energy generated by the mixture of land uses, shops, houses, churches, schools, all closely intertwined.

Of course, visitors may not understand how the town has developed in history, yet they are likely to be captivated by the story of the place and its layers of history which may be read through the fabric of the town. This story, however, will need to be brought alive for the visitor as not all of our visitors are architectural historians.

Examples of the many forms of historic urban settlement are presented in the illustrations above[2].

[1] The Heritage Council, *Enhancing Local Distinctiveness in Irish Villages*, January 2009.
[2] Aalen, F.H.A.; Whelan, Kevin; Stout, Matthew; (1997), *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape*, Cork University Press, p.186.

A	B	C	D
Malin, county Donegal	Coolgreany, county Wexford	Bandon, county Cork	Athy, county Kildare

E	F	G	H
Mitchelstown, county Cork	Johnstown, county Kilkenny	Dunsany, county Meath	Dunlavin, county Wicklow
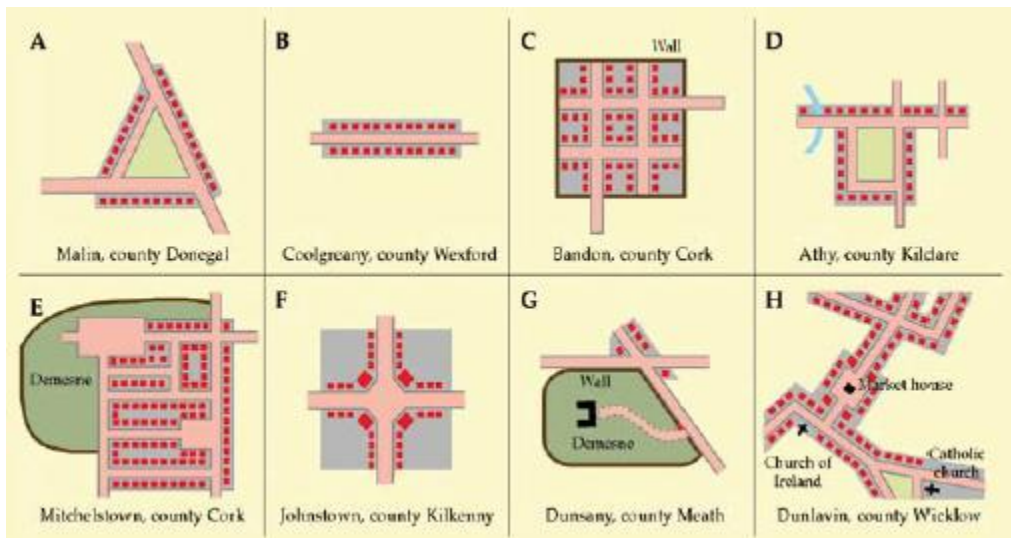
Village of Avoca, Co. Wicklow, an 'attraction' village: Many visitors from the UK are drawn to it as the fictional 'Ballykissangel'. However, it already had an anchor tenant in Avoca Handweavers original mill, and has built on its success with tourism amenities. The colourful Main Street housing is a Local Authority scheme. As the above photo shows, pedestrian access has been provided to the river front.

THE ECONOMIC VALUE OF TOURISM IN HISTORIC TOWNS

As stated in the previous section, cultural heritage tourism is a very significant generator of foreign exchange earnings for the Irish economy, bringing in €2.2 billion in 2008. The economic attraction of tourism for a historic town is that it leverages an existing set of local 'assets' to generate economic activity in that town. In turn, the benefits of tourism for the town are enhanced through a number of multiplier effects, ranging from the ability of the town to host facilities, services and events that the host population might not sustain by itself (albeit seasonally), to the simple economic spin-off for a range of enterprises that are supported by those who service the tourists directly.

Restaurants and Bars are direct beneficiaries of tourism in any historic town and also provide employment.

The economic benefits of tourism to historic towns are as follows:

- Increased spending locally which improves the viability of both tourism and non-tourism businesses;
- Opportunities for a town to diversify its economic base, particularly during economically challenging times;
- Increased employment and/or employment security. While some jobs are generated directly such as tour guiding, much of the employment effects are in related service sectors such as restaurants or hotels and further back the supply-chain;
- Increased utilisation of local infrastructure such as roads, parks, and other public amenities. In some instances, this increased utilisation can be used to justify further infrastructural investment.

Localness and distinctiveness is attractive. Visitors are always looking to see something different, for example shopping in this **Curiosity Shop in Malin Head, Donegal.**

Case Study: The Economic Impact of Tourism in York in 2007

A large number of visitors are attracted each year to York, a small walled city in Northern England, by its historic buildings and visitor attractions. Visitor research indicates that, while iconic attractions such as York Minster and the National Railway Museum play an important part in attracting first time visitors, it is the ambience of the compact and pedestrian friendly town centre, rich with cafes, bars, restaurants and shops to which visitors are drawn once they arrive.

- In 2007 there were just over 4 million visitors to York
- The total expenditure generated in York by tourism was £364 million
- Tourist expenditure generated 10,646 jobs in 2007 (out of a total population of approx 190,000)
- The vast majority of visitors to York are from within the UK.

Room for improvement

While the figures above are impressive, there is in fact some room for improvement in terms of the impact that tourism could have on the economy of the city. Only approximately 14% of visitors to York stay overnight, i.e. approximately 86% are day visitors. However, that 14% of visitors who overnight account for 54% of tourist expenditure in the City. This implies that managing the quality of the after-dark visitor experience in York has the potential to increase the percentage of visitors staying overnight and a small increase in the number of overnight visitors could greatly increase the economic impact of tourism on the city.
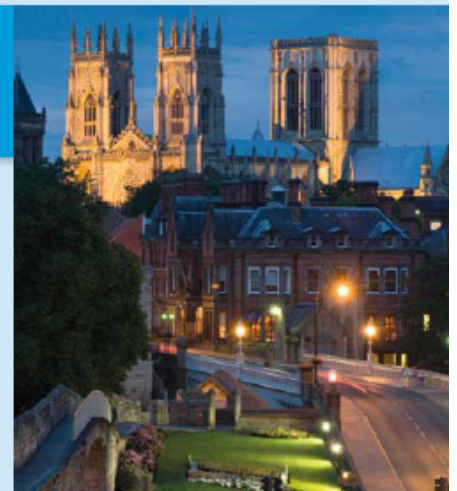
City of York: While York achieves very high visitor numbers each year, most are day visits, which means the city is losing out on the high yielding overnight visitors.

Opposite: York Minster, one of the key tourist attractions in the City.

Whether or not visitors stay overnight in an historic town largely determines whether the town is considered to be a 'hub' or an 'attraction' in tourist terms[1].

A town classed as a tourism hub is typically a place where visitors are likely to spend more than one night and use as a base from which to further explore the wider area or destination (e.g. Kilkenny, Westport).

An attraction town, however, is primarily the subject of day visits by tourists with a much smaller proportion of overnights, (e.g. Lismore, Cashel).

The level of expectation by tourists for services will primarily depend on whether the town is considered to be a hub or an attraction. As a hub, the town will be expected to provide a good range of high quality accommodation, a visitor information service, and a vibrant night-time economy with restaurants and pubs with live music, etc. It will also be expected to have good public transport links as well as car and bike hire services.

An attraction town would not be expected to provide the same range of services as a hub town, but should nevertheless include good access to the town's main attractions, a high quality public realm, good presentation of the town's story, high quality visitor signposting and adequate parking. Like a hub town, an attraction town should also be safe for the visitor both day and night, and should be generally clean and well maintained, with particular reference to litter, derelict sites and the maintenance of streetscapes and individual buildings.

Rock of Cashel, Co. Tipperary: The core attraction in the town of Cashel.

¹ Not to be confused with the definition of a 'hub' as contained in the National Spatial Strategy.

Improvements for pedestrians in Cashel Town: Note the new lighting stands, trees, paving and signage, and the removal of overhead wires.

Main Street, Arklow, Co. Wicklow: Attractive Georgian townhouse incorporating a shopfront with rounded glass display windows, now in use as a hardware shop. Beside it, a classical style Victorian bank. An example of excellent street frontage architectural quality, both maintained in good condition. New shopping centres and retail parks on the edge of towns pose a threat to the economic viability of the historic core of many Irish towns.

₁ Not to be confused with the definition of a 'hub' as contained in the National Spatial Strategy.

WHERE TO START

The visitor experience of historic towns is influenced by a number of factors, including ease of access and movement, visual impressions, the range and quality of things to do and see, hygiene, and human interaction.

In order to learn more about what our visitors like and dislike about Irish historic towns, Fáilte Ireland commissioned a face-to-face survey of overseas visitors to ten towns of varying size. Approximately one hundred overseas visitors were interviewed in each of the ten towns, giving a total sample size of 951. The aims of the survey were (a) to profile overseas visitors to historic towns and (b) to assess their level of satisfaction with their visit to these towns.

This section sets out the general findings from all ten surveys, together with the survey results from three towns, Westport, Kilkenny and Dingle. The survey questionnaire is included at Appendix A and can be used by any Local Authority and any other relevant stakeholder (e.g. Chamber of Commerce, etc.), that wants to assess the particular strengths and weaknesses of their historic town from a visitor perspective, and identify what improvements can be made to maximise the tourism potential of the town.

Further information on the profile of visitors to any particular town (typical age/socio-economic background, method of arrival, length of stay, etc.) can be undertaken by contacting local tourism providers (hotels, golf courses, etc.) and your Fáilte Ireland regional office.

PROFILE OF VISITORS

The ten visitor surveys undertaken by Fáilte Ireland found that, in general, visitors to historic towns are typically over 45 years of age and predominantly from the middle to upper socio-economic groups. In terms of gender, there was a similar number of male (47%) and female (53%) visitors and there was a good spread of nationalities with one third from Britain, one quarter from each of the United States and mainland Europe, and 15% from the rest of the world.

Visitors to historic towns typically spend 11.5 nights in Ireland, which is longer than the average stay for all overseas visitors at eight nights. The survey also found that visitors will, on average, visit an historic town six days into their trip. There is also a tendency for those who travel further to get to Ireland to spend longer in the country.

Almost 80% of visitors to historic towns travelled to the town by car, while 10% arrived by private bus or coach, or by public bus or train. Not surprisingly the majority of visitors travelled around the town on foot.

The majority of visitors to historic towns fell into the category of the outdoor type. The other main activities they engaged in while on holiday were visits to historic/cultural sites (79%), walking (61%) and visiting gardens (53%).

When planning their trip to Ireland, the main sources of information used by half of all holidaymakers interviewed were the internet and guidebooks, while Tourist Information Offices (TIOs) and guidebooks were the key sources used to get information on the towns they visited.

REASON FOR VISIT

For seven out of ten overseas visitors, the main reason for visiting historic towns on their trip was to visit a particular attraction. Other reasons mentioned were the opportunity to visit friends and relatives, shopping, to visit the Tourist Information Office, to attend a specific event, or to use a specific service such as the bank or post office, while one in ten stated they happened to be just passing through.

The Tourist Information Office is a key source of information for visitors once they arrive in a town

RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

The most enjoyable aspects of the historic towns for the visitors surveyed were particular attractions (e.g. castles, abbeys, etc.), the character of the town centre, the surrounding scenery and the local welcome. Few debilitating drawbacks were identified spontaneously by visitors. However, there was some reference by visitors to finding the town expensive, poor signage, and issues with traffic management and car parking, including the price of parking.

An analysis was undertaken which takes all the aspects that the ten historic towns were measured on and the extent to which each aspect influenced overall satisfaction ratings. This provides a measure of how important each aspect of the town is to visitors.

The findings for each town can be represented on a chart as at Figure 1 on page 13. The circle on the chart highlights those aspects which are rated as important by visitors yet where towns perform relatively poorly. These are identified as the key areas for improvement if the tourism potential of that town is to be further unlocked.

The aspects of historic towns that were rated most highly by visitors were the quality of accommodation, restaurants and bars, a sense of security walking around the town, street lighting, exploring the town by foot, overall visual appearance of the town and the presentation of buildings and monuments (Figure 1).

The aspects of historic towns that were rated least favourably by visitors were the lack of outdoor market facilities and day-time entertainment, the quality of public toilets, signposting to and around the town, and the absence of public art (Figure 1).

Kinsale, Co. Cork: Narrow street and vibrant colours
all add to the distinctiveness of Irish towns.

Public art, where it occurs in Irish historic towns
helps to tell something of the town's past and is
greatly appreciated by visitors.

Figure 1: Mapping of importance of aspects for visitors to all ten towns
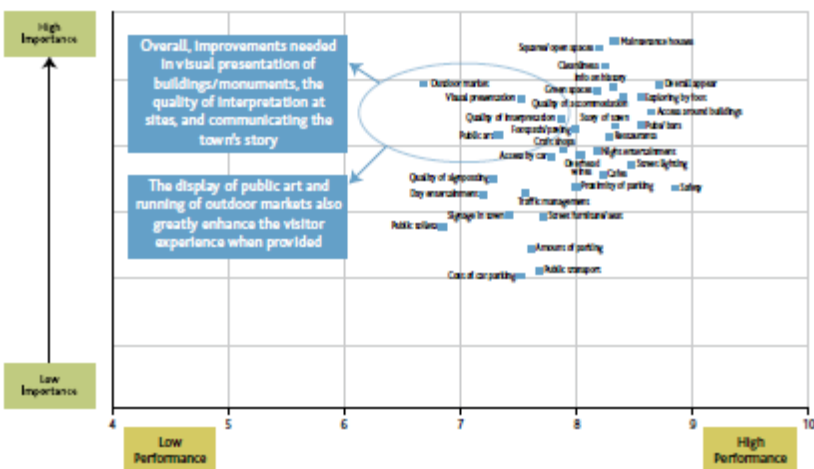
The main reasons why visitors would recommend a town to others were found to be the presentation and quality of the buildings and streets, along with the history of the town and the story it has to tell.

The survey found that the key aspects of the town which require improvement are the presentation and quality of buildings and monuments, the quality of interpretation at sites and communicating the town's story. The display of public art and the presence of outdoor markets were found to greatly enhance the visitor experience where they existed. The majority of visitors said that they would be very likely to recommend the historic towns they visited to friends and family.

Of course all historic towns are unique and while some generalisations can be made about the tourism performance of Irish towns, it is important that each examines its own situation. While the results are presented in this section for three of the towns that were included in the visitor survey, Fáilte Ireland encourages each historic town that wishes to improve its tourism performance to undertake the visitor survey using the survey form included at Appendix A.

The remainder of this section outlines the principal findings from three of the towns surveyed: Kilkenny, Westport and Dingle.

Kilkenny

Kilkenny is an important historic and commercial centre in the south-east with a population in the urban area of 8,661. It has retained much of its original medieval street layout to a large extent, with streetscapes dominated by buildings from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, peppered with buildings from earlier periods, such as the late 16th century Rothe House. It is very popular with both overseas and domestic visitors, particularly for domestic short breaks. Some of the streets in the town centre have been pedestrianised and the town has a good range of visitor accommodation, restaurants, cafes, shops – with a particular emphasis on craft outlets – and visitor attractions.

The survey found that visitors to Kilkenny were particularly satisfied with:

- Accommodation
- Craft shops
- Public spaces
- Pub/bars
- Cafes and restaurants
- The ease with which the town could be explored on foot.

Elements of the town which are important to visitors but which the visitor did not rate highly included traffic management and parking, as well as street furniture, seating and public art (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Mapping of importance of aspects for visitors to Kilkenny

Parliament Street, Kilkenny: Not all streets can be pedestrianised.
Here, the footpath is generous and is buffered from traffic by street parking and bollards.
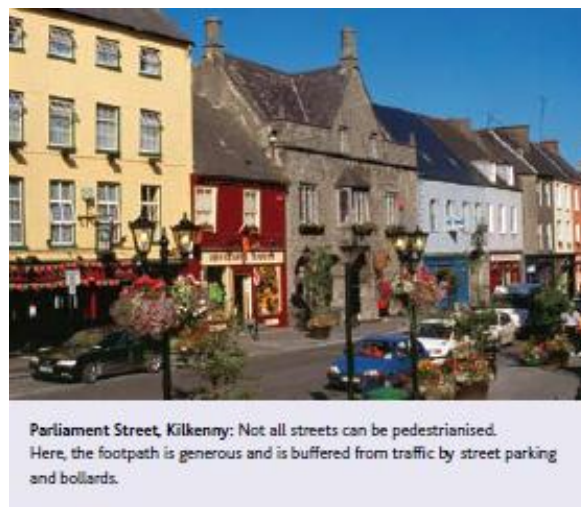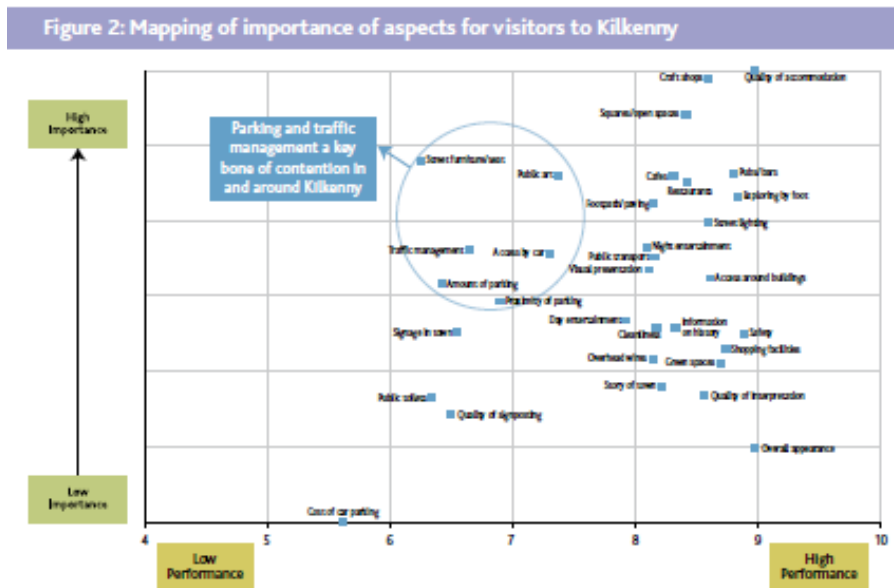
As part of the survey, visitors in each of the towns were also asked what other towns they had visited or intended to visit during their stay. Figure 3 shows the main towns that were visited by those who responded to the survey in Kilkenny. In this case, there is clearly an element of geographic clustering with the most popular towns visited being in the south east and south west of the country.

Westport

Westport in County Mayo has a population of just over 5,163. An estate town largely laid out in the nineteenth century, it has retained much of its original architectural character. The visitor survey bears testament to good planning and the achievement of its numerous Tidy Towns awards with exceptionally high levels of visitor satisfaction in the survey. It has become one of Ireland's most popular tourist destinations with both overseas and domestic visitors, with many outstanding features, most notably the tree lined boulevard known as The Mall. It is a busy tourist and commercial centre with good visitor accommodation, restaurants and cafes and tourist shops.

Visitors to Westport were particularly satisfied with:

- Exploring the town by foot
- Cafes and restaurants
- How well the story of the town is communicated
- Pubs and bars
- Night time entertainment
- Craft shops.

Figure 4: Mapping of importance of aspects for visitors to Westport

Exceptionally high levels of satisfaction with the Westport Experience

High Importance

Low Importance

Low Performance

High Performance

Exploring by foot

Cafes
Overhead wires
Story of town

Restaurants

Pubs/bars
Night entertainment
Craft shops
Information on history

Public art
Shopping facilities
Quality of interpretation
Quality of accommodation
Street lighting
Street furniture/seat
Visual presentation

Outdoor market
Access around buildings
Overall appearance
Green spaces
Public toilets
Signage in town
Cleanliness
Squares/open spaces
Footpaths/paving
Proximity of parking
Safety
Cost of car parking
Maintenance houses

Figure 5: Principal towns also visited by visitors to Westport

Westport, Co. Mayo, which makes excellent use of the river as a dominant feature in the town.

Westport
Galway
Kilkenny
Dingle

Dingle, Co. Kerry.
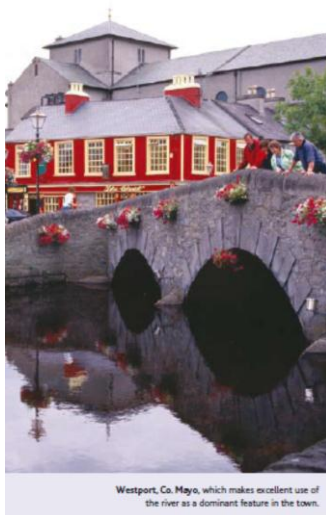
Figure 5 illustrates the main other towns that visitors to Westport visited. Generally visitors to Westport tend to visit other key tourist towns, namely Galway, Kilkenny and Dingle.

Dingle

Dingle, meaning O'Cuis's Fort, is a town in County Kerry on the Atlantic Coast. It is the only town on the Dingle Peninsula and is situated on a natural harbour below Slievanea mountain. Dingle has a population of 1,920, but it serves the larger population of the western part of the peninsula in particular, and in the summer months it caters for large numbers of visitors.

Dingle is located in a Gaeltacht area. Fishing and farming have long been the principal industries in the town, but tourism has become an increasingly important business in the town, particularly since the filming of "Ryan's Daughter" on the peninsula in 1969. The town's distinctive pubs and excellent seafood restaurants are a significant draw for visitors. There is also a considerable variety of things to do in the town with an array of craft shops and galleries.

Visitors to Dingle were particularly satisfied with:

- The interpretation and telling of the town's story
- The overall appearance of the town
- Night-time entertainment.

Elements of importance to visitors to Dingle which did not score so well included street furniture and lighting, signage, the presence of overhead wires and the public toilets.

Figure 6: Mapping of importance of aspects for visitors to Dingle

Figure 7 shows that the main other towns visited by visitors to Dingle are clustered in the south east and south west of the country.

CHALLENGES FACING TOURISM IN HISTORIC TOWNS

Mitchelstown, Co. Cork, planned by the Earls of Kingston. King's Square, built in the mid eighteenth century, is considered to be among the finest urban squares in Europe, with Kingston College almshouses. The important contribution that this green space, with its mature trees, makes to the overall quality of this space, cannot be overstated.

[2] Including the Visitor Attitudes Survey (annually), the Survey of Overseas Travellers (annually), Heritage and Culture: Thematic Research (2008) and Culture and Heritage Strategy: Making It Work for You (2006).

Most towns could fulfil more demand without large investment. By undertaking the visitor survey in each of ten historic towns, it was possible to identify what tourists like and want as part of their experience.

When taken together with other[2] research which has been undertaken by Fáilte Ireland these insights point to a number of key challenges facing historic towns in realising their potential as tourist attractions, including:

General

- improving visitors' **first impressions** of a town;
- identifying the **target market** and the towns **unique selling point**, bringing the **town to life** and marketing it;
- delivering a high quality experience that captures **local distinctiveness**;
- managing and accommodating a wide **range of visitor types**;
- managing **day visitors**, which can form a high proportion of visits to historic towns, encouraging them to stay longer and overnight:
- addressing **seasonality** and encouraging visitors year round.

Stakeholders

- managing the needs of the **local population**, ensuring that they are not adversely affected by tourism, e.g. congestion, and that social benefits are maximised;
- working with other **stakeholders**, including those in the areas of conservation, education and arts, who may view themselves as being in conflict or in competition with tourism.

Accessibility

- making towns **easy to access** and making it easy to move around them on foot. This includes reducing the reliance upon, and impact of, the car, tackling traffic congestion and improving signage.

Developing & maintaining assets

- ensuring the town retains its **defining characteristics**, which can be derived from its built and natural heritage, as well as its culture and stories;
- ensuring that **new development** respects and contributes positively to what already exists.
- Identifying opportunities for ongoing **improvement to the tourism assets** of the town, e.g. historic buildings and streetscapes, festivals, exhibitions, public art, rivers, open spaces, etc. as well as linking to other tourism offerings, e.g. activities, the arts, etc.;
- improving the quality, usability and attractiveness of the **public realm** including the green infrastructure;
- ensuring that the 'softer' elements of the town's tourism assets are made accessible to visitors and that quality is enhanced, e.g. eating, socialising, meeting and engaging with Irish people, engaging with traditional culture such as Irish language and music;
- harnessing the activities of artisan food producers and craft producers to enhance the distinctiveness of the town as well as offering the visitor a wider range of things to do and see;
- ensuring that the town tells its stories in an interesting and compelling way;
- ensuring that the town makes the necessary links to other attractions in the surrounding area.

Marketing & Promotion

- undertaking co-ordinated marketing of a number of historic towns in a particular region;
- producing up-to-date maps and marketing material;
- networking with other tourism providers in the town and region to ensure a coherent and consistent approach and message to visitors at all times.

Advice and guidance about how historic towns can start to address the above issues and maximise their tourism potential are set out in the next section.

Multi use spaces are valuable tourist assets in a historic town as can be seen from this example of the Parade in Kilkenny.

Dubrovnik, Croatia, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Licensed service vehicles are allowed on the streets for two hours in the morning. Special electric vehicles are used to transport food and drink to restaurants, shops and bars. Pedestrians come first everywhere in the town.

Dubrovnik, Croatia: This picture shows the square in use in the morning as a daily vegetable market for local produce. The same square is used at lunchtime and in the evening for restaurants, cafes and bars.

MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR HISTORIC TOWN

This section sets out four principal steps that should be followed once you have made the decision that you want to improve what you have to offer visitors to entice them to stay longer and spend more. These four steps are as follows:

1. Getting feedback on your visitors' experience
2. Meeting basic visitor needs
3. Showcasing the town's best assets
4. Enticing people to stay longer and spend more.

In expanding on the above four points, the following sections contain a range of recommendations and examples of good practice which can be implemented to improve the experience of a town for its visitors, thus maximising its tourism potential. These are designed to assist towns in responding to the issues and challenges that they face in trying to maximise their tourism potential, as set out in the section 3.3.

It should be noted that the examples used are selective and indicative of possibilities, rather than inclusive and comprehensive.

Summary points
- Undertake the visitor survey to find out what your visitors think of your town and what their experience is like
- Identify their basic needs and meet them well:
  - Easy access by car
  - Convenient but unobtrusive parking
  - Good orientation and directional signage
  - Pedestrian friendly town centre
  - Good quality information about things to see and do in the town and the surrounding area
  - Safety, both day and night
  - A clean and litter-free environment
- The character and distinctiveness of the historic built environment is your core tourism asset
- Ensure that effective policies are in place to protect and enhance the built and natural heritage
- The public realm is an important tourism asset which can greatly influence the experience of the visitor
- Maximising the use of public space for activities such as farmers markets is very popular with visitors
- Ensure that the town's story is told in a clear and engaging manner. Decide on what story you want to tell before choosing a medium through which to tell it.
- Entice visitors to stay longer by:
  - ensuring there is a good range of things to see and do. In particular, ensure that attractions, such as historic buildings, are open to the public and not just viewed as facades from the street. If they feel they have 'seen and done' the town in the first two hours of their visit, they will move on;
  - providing good opportunities for shopping and good quality restaurants;
  - providing opportunities for them to walk around the town and into the rural environs of the town;
  - promoting the town as a base from which to explore the surrounding area
- Feeding visitor interest with stories that fire their imagination.

GETTING FEEDBACK ON YOUR VISITORS' EXPERIENCE

When trying to answer the question: 'What can I do to improve the attractiveness of this town for visitors?'

it is important to first know what your visitors think of the town at present. The best way to do that is to ask them. It is recommended, therefore, that before applying any of the recommendations contained in these guidelines, that the Local Authority commissions a survey of between 100 and 400 overseas visitors to the town, using the survey questionnaire included at Appendix A to these guidelines.

Once you have identified the particular strengths and weaknesses of the town from the visitors' perspective, you can begin to plan for improvements. Depending on where the strengths and weaknesses lie, further plans or strategies may be necessary. For example, if a lot of the weaknesses relate to the quality of the public realm, it is recommended that this issue be addressed comprehensively through the preparation of a Public Realm Plan, of the type that has already been undertaken for a number of Irish towns in association with the Heritage Council. Likewise, if weaknesses are identified in the area of visitor engagement by the town's businesses, a first step might be to undertake a training programme for these businesses on customer service and visitor engagement. If the weaknesses identified are more fundamental, for example, general dissatisfaction by the visitor with the range and quality of things to do in the town, then

a comprehensive tourism development strategy might be required to address a broad range of issues.

The results of the visitor survey will provide a clear indication of its visitor experience, for example, whether basic visitor needs are being met, or whether the challenges lie in refining the quality of the town's core cultural heritage assets, or improving the way in which the town's story is told. There are three broad phases of improvement which can be addressed by any historic town that wishes to maximise its tourism potential:

- Meeting basic visitor needs
- Showcasing the town's best assets
- Enticing people to stay longer and spend more

The three steps above can be viewed as broadly sequential and be used as objectives which can be contained in the Development Plan or any Tourism Development Strategy for the town.

SATISFYING BASIC VISITOR NEEDS

ACCESS AND INFORMATION

ARRIVAL

The visitors' first impression of a town will be formed upon their arrival. Towns may have a number of points of arrival – by train or bus, by coach as part of a group, and by car. Convenient parking for both coaches and cars should be indicated, preferably in advance, as suitable for access to the centre. Good access to and within the town is vitally important for visitors to have an enjoyable experience of the town.

The town must, therefore, ensure that arrival points are adequately serviced and are kept clean and tidy to ensure a positive first impression.

The short journey from the car park or set-down point to the centre of the town should also be a good one for the visitor. Visitor orientation signage at these strategically important locations should also be considered.

Most town centre areas have a scale which allows them to be visited on foot in a relatively short period, an hour or two, not including visits to specific attractions, such as castles, churches or historic houses, which may extend the visit to a full day. Visitors will be greatly helped by a suggested orientation tour which introduces the town. In most places, this can be achieved by making a loop around the centre picking up key locations and features of interest, which avoids retracing steps and gives a good idea of the place with possibilities for further exploration. In 2008, Fáilte Ireland initiated a programme which funded the signing of short walking trails in 45 historic towns throughout Ireland.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Visitor information is simply about imparting information to the visitor about places to stay and visit, and things to see and do. As mentioned in section 3.1.1 above, the internet and guidebooks are the principal sources of information used by half of all holidaymakers to historic towns when planning their trip. However, once they arrive in Ireland, overseas visitors' preferred source for information on historic towns they wish to visit are Tourist Information Offices (TIOs) and guidebooks. Upon arriving in a town, the Tourist Information Office will often, therefore, be the first port of call for the first time

visitor. So, in order to ensure that historic towns get their message to their target market, they need to develop a strong presence on the internet as well as supplying high quality information on what to see and do, and where to stay, in their nearest Tourist Information Offices.

It is very important that there is consistency in approach from all those in the town who are supplying tourist information, that the visitor is receiving a consistent and coherent message about the town and the surrounding area. This is why it is important for the various tourism providers in the town to agree on the town's unique selling proposition, as outlined above in section 2.4. This helps to reinforce the message to the visitor that the town is worth spending time in, and in the case of a 'hub' town, that it is worth staying in and using as a base for exploring the surrounding area. TIOs are usually also a very good source of advice on one or two-day itineraries that the visitor can follow in the surrounding area.

Other tourism providers in the town should familiarise themselves with any itineraries, both private and public transport based, to enable them to impart these to the visitor too if required. Information on public transport schedules, upcoming festivals and times and locations of regular events such as traditional music sessions are also very important for the visitor.

In lieu of a physical tourist information office, some towns have installed touch-screen self service kiosks e.g. Dublin Tourism, Suffolk St. or 'Blue spots' in Berlin, Germany. These facilities also have the advantage of potentially being an 'after-hours' service.

The use of technology to enhance the walking experience is gradually becoming more commonplace
in historic towns. Research commissioned by Fáilte Ireland on enhancing the visitor experience through the use of information technology showed that 96% of tourists own a mobile phone and 88% of this cohort bring their phone on holiday. This presents the opportunity to use mobile phones and Bluetooth technology to impart information to visitors. This area is still developing in Ireland and for more information on the emerging possibilities for this technology please see the study at: **http://www.failteireland.ie/Information-Centre/Publications/Research-and-Statistics/Thematic-Final-Report**.

The advent of 'iWalks', which are audio guides available to download from the internet prior to a visit, have been very successful in cities such as Dublin and Cork. Where there is no tourism information office a cost effective alternative would be to customise 'iWalks' to meet a visitor's needs by including practical information on amenities in the town such as theatres, accommodation or restaurants. Close proximity technology e.g. bluetooth technology can also be harnessed to provide instant information to visitors as they pass by places of interest. Orientation signs located at key arrival points, as discussed above in section 4.1.5, are also a very important source of basic visitor information.

Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford, across the river from the bus stop, one of the several arrival/stopping points for the centre. This area is a relatively small triangular space, paved and greatly enhanced with a single tree reaching a degree of maturity to allow it to characterise the space and absorb traffic noise. The information panel beside the parking bays is being consulted by visitors. From this location, a short walk along Abbey Place, where public toilets are located, leads into Abbey Square and uphill past the castle to the centre of town.
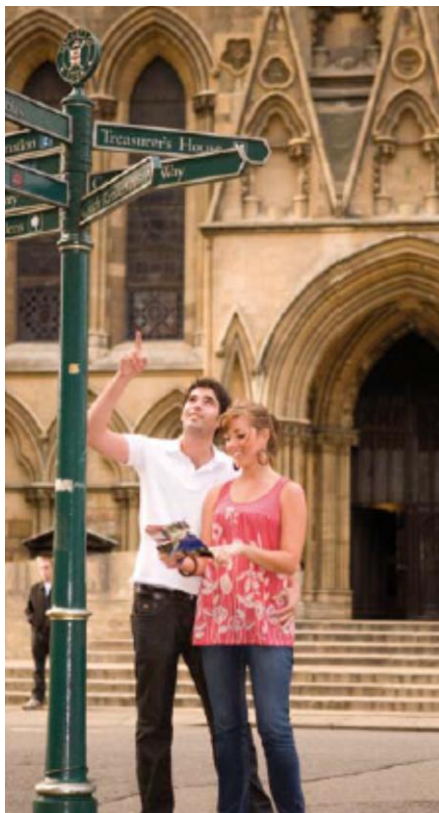
Signage

While tourist signage is an invaluable resource, ensuring that just the right number of signs are provided can be a difficult balance to strike – too few signs and visitors can become frustrated at junctions with no signage at all, while too many signs can result in unnecessary visual clutter, detracting from the overall visitor experience. Another signage issue which can affect the visitor experience and mar the quality of the public realm in general is the erection of new pedestrian signs without removing the ones being replaced. This again leads to visual clutter and detracts from the attempt to introduce a comprehensive and coherent pedestrian signage system.

Signage not only serves the purpose of providing direction, but can also bring the story of the town alive for visitors. Orientation and directional signage, accompanied by interpretative signage provided at certain attractions or points throughout the town, can facilitate intellectual access for the visitor as well as ease of movement throughout the town.

For further information on ensuring high quality orientation signage, as well as pedestrian directional signage and on-street interpretative signage, please see Fáilte Ireland's Guidelines on Pedestrian Signage in Historic Towns (www.failteireland.ie/publications).

While these guidelines contain specifications for a particular style of signage, which have been implemented in 45 historic towns throughout Ireland, the town may wish instead to refer to the broad principles about the design of a walking trail contained in the guidelines, while devising its own signage design and type.

York Finger Post Signs: This type of signage is one way to help orientate visitors as they provide concise directional information. They can also be designed to have empathy with the local heritage or architecture.

Orientation signage printed on the glazing of a new kiosk in Kilkenny helps visitors orientate themselves quickly when they arrive in an interesting historic town.

Orientation signage usually contains a map of the town, a 'you are here' marker, the location of the principal points of interest in the town and, in this case in Athlone, Co. Westmeath, the route of a walking trail which links a number of visitor attractions together.

Moving around the town

Once they have orientated themselves, visitors should be able to move around the town on foot with ease and safety. This does not necessarily mean that the town has to have a high level of pedestrianisation, although pedestrianisation, where it exists, is appreciated by visitors. At a minimum, attention should certainly be paid to the quality of footpaths and to pedestrian signage to ensure that the principal attractions and facilities can be easily found. A number of towns have prepared Mobility Management Plans (e.g. Kilkenny), which seek to prioritise pedestrians over vehicular traffic in the town centre and include associated improvements to the quality of the public realm. Mobility Management Plans also aim to resolve transport and access problems such as travel delay, access and parking.

Walking

Facilitating and encouraging exploration of the town on foot should be encouraged by all historic towns.

Exploring a town on foot is probably the best way to fully appreciate and experience all that it has to offer. In addition to indicating the location of particular attractions, signage can also highlight an area or quarter in the town. The development of historic walking routes/trails described above aim to facilitate navigation around towns, however issues of traffic management must be addressed if the pedestrian is to feel safe and comfortable in a town. Traffic calming, pedestrian crossings, pedestrianised zones, etc., can all significantly help improve the attractiveness of walking around a town.

Mapped walking routes are also useful means by which to encourage visitors to spend more time in the town. However, in order to be successful, the route must be interesting, attractive and safe.

Syracuse, in Sicily, is a heritage town with a history and structures dating back to Greek civilisation. There is organised parking at some distance from the Main Street/Square, yet the route into the centre is pedestrian and memorable. Photos show the point of arrival at the Main Square.

Kinsale, Co. Cork: A tiny back street with unused space was given a facelift. The underused lane to the Courthouse Square became a natural pedestrian route, improving access.

Kinsale, Co. Cork: Main Street in Kinsale has survived the era of engineering-led road widening to facilitate smooth and rapid movement through the town. The building which now houses the 'Kinsale Bookshop' in the picture was scheduled for compulsory purchase and demolition as its protrusion into the road reduced the capacity of the road for speed. Nowadays, the presence of the building is seen as an effective eighteenth century example of traffic calming.

Vehicular traffic in towns

Local Authorities generally try to minimise the volume of through traffic in a town due to the congestion that can build up, particularly if there is insufficient parking in the town centre. A graded length of stay in areas where parking charges apply; typically one hour in the centre with all-day parking outside of the central streets may discourage this. Also, long term free parking at a little distance from the centre can be an encouragement for business owners and staff to park in a way which will help to support the long term sustainability of town centres.

With many historic towns now being by-passed, opportunities present themselves to improve the quality of the experience for both motorists and pedestrians using the town centre. Such opportunities include the widening of footpaths, full pedestrianisation of certain streets, the introduction of one-way systems for vehicular traffic and the provision of cycle lanes.

Many historic towns have become dominated by cars, due particularly to the increase in car use in Ireland in recent years. The presence of cars on the streets in the centre of an historic town can also result in significant congestion. This is particularly the case if there is an excessive amount of on-street parking and two-way traffic, which is not pedestrian friendly and can lead to the visitor feeling that they are 'in the way'. Many towns, particularly market towns, use the market square as a car park which is a missed opportunity from the perspective of making the most of the public realm. Such practices can result in the proliferation of white and yellow lines, signs, parking meters and/or pay machines, barriers, bollards, kerbs, etc., all of which can detract from the visual attractiveness and the unique atmosphere of an historic town.

Mitchelstown, Co. Cork; The Market Square, reorganised to limit parking and designed to facilitate the weekly outdoor market, a very convincing example of shared space without conflict.

Where a medieval street pattern is still extant, there tends to be a lower tolerance threshold by the visitor for cars. Wider streets, such as those found in many market towns, tend to have a higher capacity for the absorption of traffic without impacting negatively on the enjoyment of the visitor. However, even in these cases, the over-use of on-street parking can impact negatively on the overall character of the town.

Sligo; This riverside walk in Sligo makes the most of the river and is attractively laid out with seating, lamp stands and litter bins. The retention of the trees on the opposite bank adds significantly to the overall amenity value of this town centre location.

Manchester City Centre; The area known as the triangle is a very successful new urban space in the regenerated shopping centre. The 'stream' made up of stepping stones charts the course of a real stream which has been canalised above ground and used as a new irresistible attraction for children and adults alike, but it is used mostly by pedestrians. Martha Schwarz, who was the landscape architect, also designed the Grand Canal Basin Square in Dublin.

HYGIENE AND SAFETY

Litter

Ireland has a serious litter problem in both urban and rural areas throughout the country. Fáilte Ireland is concerned about the potential impact of this problem on Ireland's image as a tourism destination abroad. The damage that this is likely to cause to the tourism industry may not be evident in the short term, but rather over an extended period of time with the gradual erosion of our credibility as a clean, green destination.

Fáilte Ireland's Visitor Attitudes Survey in 2006[3] included a number of questions on what our visitors thought of litter in Ireland. The results of the Visitor Attitudes Survey suggest that littering is noticed by holidaymakers to Ireland in not insignificant numbers. Littering is noticed by visitors in our towns and cities, with one third of visitors stating that they do not consider streets in Ireland to be clean and litter free. In addition, only 44% of visitors perceive the streets in Ireland to be cleaner than those in their own country.

3 These litter questions are being repeated in the 2010 Visitor Attitudes Survey. See www.failteireland.ie for the results in early 2011.

The highest level of dissatisfaction among holidaymakers appears to be with the emptying of litter bins. Only 40% of all holidaymakers agreed that "litter bins on Irish streets are emptied regularly", contrasting starkly with the 65% who think that cities and towns are well provided with litter bins. It would appear, therefore, that full and overflowing bins are perhaps more noticed by holidaymakers than any other form of litter.

Tidy Towns Competition

Given the strong correlation between a sustainable tourism industry and a clean and well kept environment, it is no coincidence that the Tidy Towns competition was devised by Bord Fáilte in 1958. The role that cleanliness in a town can play in heightening the quality of the visitor's experience cannot be overstated.

The Tidy Towns competition, which has been run by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government since 1996, produces a handbook which provides practical advice to Tidy Towns groups on how to plan for and undertake environmental improvements to their town (www.tidytowns.ie). It is also no coincidence that towns and villages that score highly in the competition every so often go on to perform well in relation to tourism. The criteria upon which the judging of the tidy towns takes place include:

- Overall development approach
- The built environment
- Landscaping
- Wildlife & natural amenities
- Litter control
- Waste minimisation
- Tidiness
- Residential areas
- Roads, streets & back areas
- General impression.

Ardagh, Co. Longford, which is a past overall winner of the Tidy Towns competition. The green space in the centre of the village is well maintained at all times.

Litter: Litter can immediately alter the first impression of a historic town, which, if bad, can be difficult to recover.

Public Toilets

Complaints from visitors about the condition or lack of public toilets are regularly received by Fáilte Ireland.

Such facilities must be kept clean and well maintained as they can influence their impression of the town in general. Public toilets are very often prominently located within a town and therefore their design and cleanliness will reflect strongly on the overall quality of the public realm.

The requirements of special needs groups should also be considered in designing public toilets, for example, people with mental or physical disabilities and their carers; the infirm or elderly population which is growing; people with babies or young children and people of all ages with a range of medical conditions.

Safety and the Perception of Safety

The safety of the visitor throughout the duration of their stay should be a priority for all historic towns.

This is particularly important at night. For example, after their evening meal, many visitors to historic towns like to stroll around the town soaking up the atmosphere on the streets and in the pubs. Some visitors may also choose to follow a walking trail at night, so the trail should be well lit along its entire circuit and should not invite a visitor into an area or site that is known to be unsafe, or has a reputation for anti-social behaviour, however intermittent this may be.

Killarney Public Toilets: Well designed and well maintained.

Public toilets, Cambridge: The toilet block designed by the architects Freeland Rees Roberts also incorporates a newsagent kiosk and has won several awards. The coloured panels contain fluorescent lights which change colour between red, blue and green. The mix of uses for the building and the associated activity together with the lighting provide passive security which ensures the safety and condition of the facility. Photography by Peter Cook

Customer Service and a warm welcome

Good customer service is a vital part of a quality visitor experience. Visitors expect and should receive a welcoming, helpful and informed service from everyone they come into contact with from planning their visit to their departure from the town. The industry is diverse and fragmented in nature with a large number of small and medium sized businesses, including accommodation, attractions, transport operators, agencies, retailers, pubs, restaurants, cafes, tourist information offices etc. Those working in the industry should be trained in good customer service. The local LEADER company, Institute of Technology or Fáilte Ireland office may be in a position to offer this sort of training.

Carrying out a 'mystery shop' can be a useful and inexpensive way of finding out what service visitors are receiving. For example do staff in shops, front desk staff in hotels or bus drivers know the history of the town? Do they know the opening hours of the tourist information office or local attractions? These are all issues which can impact on the quality of the visitors' experience.

Street Ambassadors

Street ambassadors are used in Dublin City Centre and in Limerick City as tourist guides, to report trouble to Gardaí and to ensure streets are clean and well maintained. The uniformed ambassadors in Dublin are on the streets as part of a 'Business Improvement District Scheme' (BIDS). BIDS also involves street cleaning and graffiti removal, and is an initiative which originated in the United States. The scheme was facilitated by legislation in 2006, and a poll of Dublin businesses showed more than 77 per cent favoured the scheme. The Dublin BIDS covers the city centre, stretching from Parnell Street to St. Stephen's Green.

The Dublin model could provide a blueprint for other cities and towns in Ireland. Limerick was the first Irish city to institute the street ambassador project. Each summer there are twelve ambassadors who walk three different routes throughout the city offering information and assistance to tourists.

Fáilte Ireland's research shows that Ireland's friendly, warm and welcoming people are a key attraction for overseas visitors. Training in customer service for people providing service to tourists will reap dividends for the business and for the town.

Dressed in brightly coloured uniforms, **Limerick's street ambassadors** are there to provide information, advice and assistance to visitors.

LOCAL DISTINCTIVENESS

The primary assets of an historic town will often be its stock of historic buildings and its 'sense of place'. Identifying a town's 'sense of place' can be a difficult and amorphous exercise, but it is important to try if the town is to clearly identify its 'unique selling proposition', which will allow it to better position itself in the tourist market. Identifying this 'sense of place' can begin by identifying what makes the town different from other towns – what is its essential character and distinctiveness.

Its character can be found in both tangible and intangible things: It is the town itself, its story, architecture, historical associations, parks, gardens and public realm. The potential of the public realm as a tourist attraction must not be underestimated and will be covered in more detail in Section 4.3.2. The core attraction in many well known historic towns across the world, such as Venice, Bruges or York, is not any one particular attraction or historic building, although these are obviously crucial, but the public realm and the distinctive streetscapes, which allows visitors to wander around and soak up the 'sense of place'.

In unlocking its tourism potential, an historic town must therefore, begin by identifying what it is that makes it unique and distinctive, and identifying clearly the story it wants to tell to visitors.

Cobh, Co. Cork: The particular character of Cobh is shaped by its topography – a steep slope down to the water, its seafront location, and its stock of predominately Victorian buildings and the bold colour schemes used on many of the streetscapes. All of these elements make for a memorable visitor experience.

Protection of the built heritage

Much of the attractiveness of an historic town is directly linked to the character and distinctiveness of its built heritage, which should be protected. The guidelines issues by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government entitled Architectural Heritage Protection: Guidelines for Planning Authorities, provide comprehensive advice and guidelines on the management of Protected Structures and Architectural Conservation Areas. While it is not the purpose of this document to duplicate the content of those guidelines, it should be mentioned that in addition to a Record of Protected Structures for each historic town, the town should also consider the identification of an Architectural Conservation Area for its centre, which would help to ensure that small changes to buildings that are not Protected Structures do not result in a gradual erosion of the quality, character and distinctiveness of those features that are most appealing to visitors.

Streetscapes

'Streetscape' is often used as a generic term that encapsulates the whole of the street: The topography, the buildings, the ground surfaces and the street furniture, encapsulating both the public and private realm. These component parts work together inseparably, yet the ownership is usually quite different, with a multiplicity of owners fronting the street and a single authority charged with looking after the public realm. The character of the streetscape and buildings will be determined by the texture of materials used, the age of the buildings and streets and the particular appearance of the buildings and other structures.

Many Irish towns have a developed a tradition of using relatively strong colours but without any deliberate concerted effort on the part of the town as a whole. To date, individual shop and house owners have chosen colours to suit themselves and this has largely resulted in streetscapes that are both colourful and distinctive. However, maintenance of the town's historic buildings and streetscapes, which can often simply involve keeping them clean, can often be overlooked, and yet this can make a marked difference to the visitors' experience. Westport and Youghal Town Councils each recently implemented painting programmes of the buildings within the historic core areas of these two important historic towns. The programme was very simple - it involved devising a flexible colour scheme from which building owners could choose, with the cost of painting the buildings shared between the owner and the Town Council. The programmes, which are entirely voluntary in terms of participation, have proved very successful in both towns, and Fáilte Ireland would recommend the approach to other historic towns, due to the simple yet dramatic impact it can have on the appearance of a streetscape.

Birr, Co. Offaly: As the perfect setting for its characteristic Georgian buildings, Birr makes good use of the mature green spaces in the town.

Mill cottages in Slane have beautiful cut stone surrounds flush with coursed stonework, with overhanging slate roofs. Traditional buildings like this are intrinsic to the particular character of Slane.

Youghal Town Shopfront: These before (above) and after (below) photographs of a shop front in Youghal demonstrate how a painting programme can add to the overall visual appeal of a town.

The newly painted shop fronts allows the town display its long history as a trading centre, reveals the decorative appeal of the streetscape and demonstrates the skills of the local craftsmen.

Shopfronts

A diversity of original and traditional shopfronts is an important part of any streetscape which can add interest as well as authenticity. Retaining many of the proportions, materials and colours of traditional shopfronts, without resorting to pastiche, is an important consideration in designing new shopfronts, particularly in streetscapes that display a high level of distinctiveness.

There appears to be more sympathy and affection among shop owners for shopfronts than for windows, with the result that many have been conserved or replaced with authentic copies. It also appears to have been popular over the last decade or so for the old shopfront to be presented on new buildings in towns, yet there are good examples of modern shopfront design which fit the location. In Enniscorthy, there is a style of shopfront which has earned the title, 'Enniscorthy shopfront'. That is about as locally distinctive as you can get. Youghal Town Council took the initiative in 2005 to create a poster of its distinctive shopfronts in an attempt to raise local awareness of this fragile heritage. The poster, which was sold in local shops, also proved very popular with visitors to the town.

Shop window displays can also be of great interest to visitors, particularly when strolling around the town after the shops have closed. Close attention should, therefore, be paid to the quality of window displays and a number of Local Authorities run award schemes for the best presented shopfront which is a great incentive to maintain quality. The windows of vacant shops can also be used as an opportunity to tell part of the town's story for visitors, for example, using them to display school projects on the history of the town.

Youghal, Co. Cork: Youghal Town Council produced this poster of traditional shopfronts which is sold in local shops and has proven to be a popular souvenir with visitors to the town.

Windows
Windows are one of the finest, and most neglected elements of a streetscape. The classical traditions in proportion and size of windows, based on the 'golden section' and produced a fine heritage of sash windows, particularly in towns. Unfortunately, the conservation and authentic replacement of windows has succumbed to the influx of uPVC windows. In many towns, the simplicity of facades has been damaged without any control. Where possible, existing timber sash windows should be repaired and draught proofed, and replaced only if there is no alternative.
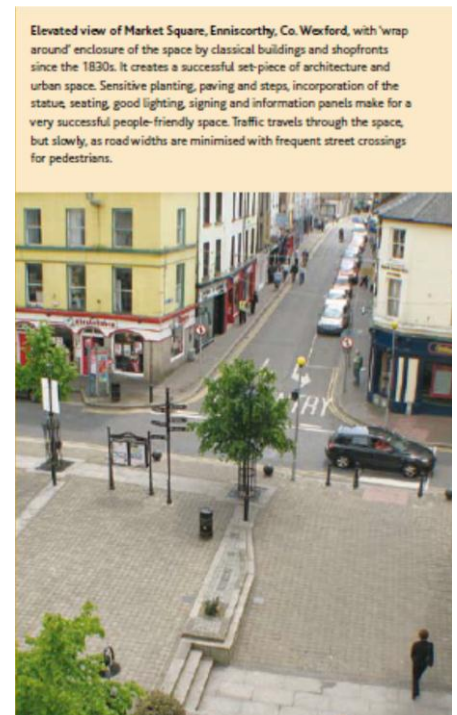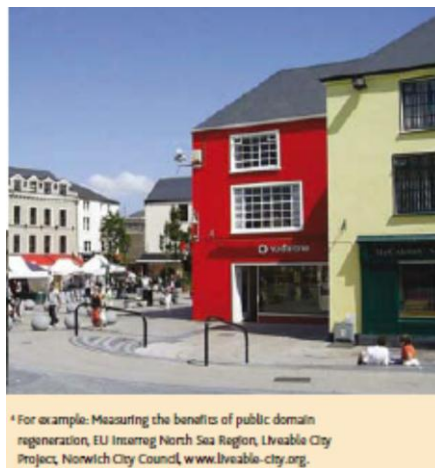
THE PUBLIC REALM

The public realm in a town is comprised of streets, squares, parks, courtyards, alleys, malls, car parks and the spaces between buildings, all those parts of the town that are accessible to the public. Features within the public realm may include trees, seats, flower planters, public art and sculpture, traffic signs, railings, steps, water features and advertising hoardings. The use of space can vary from a place to meet or relax, street cafes and restaurants, a venue for events, area for trading to a place for public art and sculpture.

The public realm should be viewed as a significant tourism asset and its use, quality and appearance can have considerable implications for tourism and can heavily influence the experience of the visitor. The attractiveness of the public realm can often determine how long a visitor lingers in a town once the principal attractions have been seen. A number of studies have been undertaken which demonstrate the economic value of a high quality public realm, in terms of attracting inward investment to the local economy and of increasing visitor spend and length of stay[4]. A number of Local Authorities have undertaken Public Realm Plans to ensure a plan-led approach to the maintenance and development of the public realm.

A public realm plan is a useful tool for managing an urban landscape and promoting a co-ordinated approach to planning. It is important for directing investment in improving the public realm in towns.

Investment in the public realm helps to promote investment in the buildings that surround the streets and squares and is particularly important to manage the flow of traffic through and around towns. Through the preparation of a number of Public Realm Plans by Local Authorities in association with the Heritage Council, a strong and widely accepted methodology has now been established for the preparation of such documents. Further information on the preparation of Public Realm Plans can be obtained from the Heritage Council: **www.heritagecouncil.ie**.

Tralee, Co. Kerry, makes good use of this public space for a market. Photographs courtesy of Holger Lorenz.

[4] For example: Measuring the benefits of public domain regeneration, EU Interreg North Sea Region, Liveable City Project, Norwich City Council, www.liveable-city.org.

Elevated view of Market Square, Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford, with 'wrap around' enclosure of the space by classical buildings and shopfronts since the 1830s. It creates a successful set-piece of architecture and urban space. Sensitive planting, paving and steps, incorporation of the statue, seating, good lighting, signing and information panels make for a very successful people-friendly space. Traffic travels through the space, but slowly, as road widths are minimised with frequent street crossings for pedestrians.

The needs of the visitor, as well as those of the local community, should be considered centrally in a Public Realm Plan, as is the case in the Public Realm Plan for Kilmallock, Co. Limerick, which includes consideration of the following:

- First impressions and the welcome towards the visitor
- Identity and local distinctiveness as expressed through building materials, local craftsmanship and building morphology
- Orientation and interpretation (effective signage)
- Legibility and ease of movement
- Enhancing the sense of place
- Reinforcing the perception of safety and well-being

The Kilmallock Town Walls Conservation & Management Plan and Kilmallock Walled Town Public Realm Plan may be viewed on Limerick County Council's website: **www.lcc.ie/Office_Locations/Kilmallock_Area_Office/**

A good reference point for Public Realm Plans is a paper by Ian Poole from St. Edmundsbury Borough Council entitled 'The Management and Maintenance of Historic Streets and Squares: Examples from Europe', which is based on a study tour he made in 2008 of the historic towns and cities of northern Europe, funded by CABE Space Scholarship. It provided a number of good examples of programmes of regenerating the main public spaces and other streets in historic town centres. In order to achieve high visitor satisfaction ratings, it is necessary to have a good quality public realm that provides a welcoming place that can be adapted for a number of functions, such as festivals, markets, civic events or public gatherings. Many of the improvements and changes in the examples used of the cities and towns have been carried out in accordance with the principles of shared space. The development of shared space principles aimed at reducing the dominance of the car for street design can improve safety, congestion and access, see: **www.historicstreets.org.uk**

The character of a town can be overshadowed by too much street clutter. Clutter can be considered items such as excessive street markings, poorly located items that physically block or restrict pedestrians, redundant items and temporary signs which have not been removed. It also includes unnecessary signage and overhead wiring. Stripping back the clutter transforms the area by revealing the town's character and provides open spaces for both locals and visitors to enjoy.

Salisbury is a beautiful Cathedral City, full of history and renowned architecture. However, the Salisbury Civic Society concluded, after carrying out a survey of over 60 streets, that it has become cluttered over time
markedly reducing its character. They found the city centre was littered with hundreds of bollards. For example one parking area for 53 cars had 63 bollards. They now have a comprehensive public realm strategy aimed at creating an attractive, safe, clean and green city.

Cork City has recently completed a significant public realm renewal programme for St. Patrick's Street, Shandon Street and South Parish/Barrack Street as part of an urban renewal programme which was initiated in 2000. In 1999 Cork City Council ran a design competition for the refurbishment of the historic centre of Cork which was won by the Spanish architect Beth Galí.

St. Patrick's Street, Cork: Space gained by limiting the area of the road and removing roadside parking has created a new space in St. Patrick's Street without eliminating traffic. Trees, as they mature will help to visually separate street and pavement. Stone block seats are placed close to the street.

3. STRATEGY PROPOSALS

Kilmallock Public Realm Plan

3.3 Area 3: King's Castle and Heritage Square

Key Proposals

King's Castle as existing

New Heritage Square:

1. Car Valet building acquisition and improvements for proposed Option B Heritage Centre.
2. Creation of new public square with relocated Fenian Monument as focus, high quality surfacing - Type 3 (1-2), street lighting, formal seating and interpretation board.
3. Improved public access to King's Castle.
4. Traffic calming (raised table and textured surfacing) to roadway.

- Improved visitor access to King's Castle.
- Development of new Regional Heritage Centre:
  Option A - to rear of the medieval stone mansion. In later building.
  Option B - acquisition of Car Valet building, immediately beside King's Castle.
- Relocation of Ballyhoura Information Hub/Information Centre to proposed new Heritage Centre.
- Rear access to Stone Mansion with possible recreated Knot Garden.
- New Heritage Square.
- Relocation of Fenian Monument as focal point to new square.
- Refurbishment of existing corner space with new raised planting beds and public art feature.
- Textured road surface around Castle as traffic calming measure.
- Potential redevelopment site for 'Arts & Crafts' adjoining Stone Mansion, with archway pedestrian access from Sarsfield Street and rear access maintained from Butter Zone.
- Improvements to Site of Friar's Gate.
- Essential repairs to Wall as per Conservation and Management Plan recommendations.
- Possible look-out platform with stepped and ramped access from inside of Wall.
- Existing grass area beside Wall re-cultivated and seeded.
- Screen planting to existing play area.

Heritage Square as proposed

Extract from the Kilmallock Public Realm Plan.

The Diamond, Donegal Town: The function of the Diamond has been completely transformed by the re-design of this important public space in the centre of Donegal town. The Diamond is popular with local residents and tourists and is also used as a venue for outdoor concerts and events.

Abbeyleix, Co. Laois: Crescent at Abbeyleix, Co. Laois, from which cars were removed, creating a very attractive urban space.

The St. Patrick's Street renewal scheme is based on having the desired amount of traffic rather than the maximum capacity for this city centre street. Cork City Council was fortunate in having a wide street with which to work, allowing it to make it more pedestrian friendly by widening the footpaths and reducing the traffic to one lane in either direction. Galí designed the lighting which has the shape of a Latin sail and is reminiscent of the cranes in the city's docks.

The Grand Parade renewal programme was also undertaken by Galí and this allowed continuity with St. Patrick's Street. Prior to renewal, the Grand Parade was a wide boulevard which was not pedestrian friendly. The renewal scheme has transformed it into a social space for local and visitors. Glass structures have recently been added which are to be coffee pods, and it is now an attractive area opening out onto the river Lee. Some old features have also been retained such as the old cannon bollard from the Napoleonic period, and the fountain on Grand Parade. The Viking Triangle project is a cultural and economic initiative undertaken by Waterford City Council to UNESCO World Heritage Site standards. The initiative is intended to spearhead the cultural regeneration of the historic core of Waterford through the radical reordering of the precinct's architectural and archaeological heritage together with its artistic assets to ensure that the city's cultural potential is fully exploited. This innovative, integrated and vibrant urban renewal project is of sufficient magnitude to give the city a cultural identity while at the same time giving coherent leadership and direction to the cultural transformation and economic regeneration the city as a whole.

The construction of the new main public sewer in Wexford facilitated the regeneration of the quayside in **Wexford Town**, which has proved hugely popular with both locals and visitors alike. The area where the town meets the sea is often a key defining characteristic of any historic town and requires special attention to ensure that it functions successfully as a public space with a high tourism amenity value.

Athlone, Co. Westmeath: For years, many Irish towns developed with their backs to the rivers that flow through them, rather than facing onto the river. In recent years, however, towns are beginning to realise the amenity value of rivers and are addressing the river in a positive way. Here in Athlone, the 'Left Bank' area is a haven for visitors, with its narrow winding streets, traditional shopfronts and easy access to the riverfront.

St. Patrick's Street, Cork: The street is returned to pedestrians with a much diminished carriage-way for vehicles. New lighting introduces new visual interest into the street at its entry point from the bridge. The new paving scheme, together with the new lighting and street furniture also provide the historic buildings and streetscape with a new setting.

Clarion Hotel frontage onto the River Lee, reinvented to provide out of doors space under cover and car park access. The timber board is an extension to the quayside.

Public parks, like this one in Clonakilty, Co. Cork, play a important part in 'slowing tourists down' during their visit to an historic town. Parks and other high quality green spaces in and around the town invite the visitors to linger a little longer and take a break from their exploration of the town.

Waterford City: Previously a traffic junction, this space in Waterford City has created a new focal point for the shopping centre. The space, which is traffic-free, creates a social atmosphere which encourages visitors to linger longer.

The setting of an historic town can contribute as much, if not more, to its character than the historic buildings it contains, like Clifden, Co. Galway, which is nestled between the mountains and the sea.

Green Infrastructure

Green infrastructure, in the context of Irish historic towns, can be described as the network of green spaces within and around the town and the green linkages between them. The focus of green infrastructure is on environmental social and economic benefits and it should, therefore, be acknowledged as an asset that can have a particularly high tourism amenity value'.

Green spaces are greatly appreciated by inhabitants of towns, and no less by visitors who will enjoy the contrast between the hard, urban spaces and those which are predominately green. Traditionally, the hard space may have been the Market Square and the green space the Fair Green, both of which have survived in many towns and villages.

Many towns also incorporate natural features which have influenced their location, orientation and layout – rivers, lakes, hills and valleys. These landscape features can contribute significantly to the unique character of the town and can increase the amenity value of the town for visitors. Unbuilt areas close to the centre have come under huge pressure during the past decade. There should be a careful balance between the vitality of the town and the important role played by the surrounding landscape in contributing to the character and distinctiveness of the town.

River banks in particular are attractive because of landscape and wildlife qualities, and they are an opportunity for creating walking routes for locals and visitors alike.

Green spaces such as this at the Mall in the heart of **Armagh** provides a welcome oasis for visitors.

Beach promenades are very popular with visitors but must be kept well maintained such as this in **Lahinch, Co. Clare**. In addition, the Blue Flag programme is essential for any historic town with a popular beach that wishes to develop its tourism potential.

Maintenance of green areas adjacent to town walls provide a very attractive contrast between built and green infrastructure as can be seen in this example from **York**.

Inistiogue, Co. Kilkenny: The landscape setting and green spaces around and within an historic town contribute as much to the character and distinctiveness of the place as the historic buildings.

Glaslough, Co. Monaghan: The landscape within which the village is set is absolutely intrinsic to the character of the place.

Public art

The role of public art in Irish cities and towns has a long history and there are examples all over Ireland of monuments to people and events in town spaces that are a source of pride to local people which add interest for the visitor, helping to tell the story of the town and its people. For example, 'The Cyclist' bronze statue in Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford, which simply depicts a cyclist on a racing bike and represents the location of the start of the second stage of the Tour de France in 1998, is particularly popular with French visitors to the town.

Current ideas about public art have edged away from monumentality, other than in the making of deliberately oversized objects which make a comparable impact. The 'embedding' of art in the ground and on vertical surfaces is a way of locating art sustainably in busy places.

The work of Gordon Young, an English visual artist with Irish connections, is a highly successful interpreter of local relevant art for the public domain where some of the essential local character of place is woven into artistic work. For example, the long pavement in Morcambe, called 'Flock of Words' is described in his words as follows:

" *This serves as one example only of this kind of work. The essence of the approach is that the public art produced is inspired by and is a reflection of the special attributes of a place. It is the same for every place – the key is identifying the town's Unique Selling Proposition".*

Public art, such as these statues of a mother and her children in **Cobh, Co. Cork**, can tell the story of the town as well as being attractive.

A quiet moment for Percy French in the Courthouse Square, **Ballyjamesduff, Co. Cavan**, as he reads over his composition 'Come Back Paddy Reilly'. A tribute to Percy French who worked in the town and positioned with subtlety and skill to remind visitors of his association with the town.

A Flock of Words by Gordon Young

Morecambe, England: A 300 metre typographic pavement connecting the new railway station with the sea front. The path is a part of Tern, an arts based regeneration project, the theme of which is the abundant bird life of Morecambe Bay. The content ranges from the book of Genesis to Shakespeare to Spike Milligan, Burns and Milton. Constructed from granites, concretes, stainless steel, brass and bronze. The manufacture saw the development of new techniques that pushed the latest technology to its limits. The resulting pieces are much remarked upon by locals and visitors alike.

'Weathered Woman' by José Croft, is part of the Ennis Sculpture Trail which winds its way around the town, encouraging visitors to spend more time exploring the town.

STORY AND INTERPRETATION

Fáilte Ireland's annual Visitor Attitudes Survey consistently identifies the Irish people as the single most important motivating factor for visitors to Ireland. The value of interaction with local Irish people in contributing to visitors' experience cannot be overemphasised.

The more that people and their stories are built into the experience of an historic town, the higher the visitors' satisfaction level will be. This is where interpretation, or 'How we tell our stories', becomes significant. Bringing the past to life so that it resonates with visitors and gets them thinking and talking is the role of interpretation.

Visitors who are drawn to heritage want to know something about why a town matters, what's special about it, what has happened there and how that might relate to them. They visit historic towns because second hand accounts, or reading books and websites are not the same as 'being there'. Wellplanned, clearly thought out and engagingly delivered interpretation makes this experience of 'being there' richer and more relevant. It welcomes visitors into the rich heritage of the town, helps them appreciate its treasures, and informs and enlivens their visit. It can also engage them in activities and give information that provokes their emotions, imagination and understanding. It sheds light on Irish culture, past and present, and provokes questions and dialogue.

So in order to deliver this participative and authentic interaction that visitors want and expect, they need easy and fun interpretation of our history to make their visit worthwhile, meaningful and memorable.

This can be achieved by answering for them:
- Why does this town matter?
- Why is it like it is?
- What do I feel about this town and/or the people who lived here?
- What was it like in the past?
- What is happening here now?
- What will it be like in the future?

So interpretation, particularly if carried out face to face, can be 'the voice of the place'. It can incorporate human-interest stories local tales, folklore and legends, dialect and accent.

Personal interpretation is the first medium to consider when thinking about how to interpret the history of your town to visitors. Nothing beats learning about local historical places from local people.

Interpretation does not necessarily have to be complicated. The best interpretation is often a well-informed person who is steeped in an understanding of the town and passionate about welcoming visitors and telling its story. Welcoming, well informed, well-trained and responsive guides can give visitors that first hand contact with Irish people that they want.

Of course, interpretation can use other media such as print (panels and leaflets in all their forms), audio, multi-media and others.

Interpreting historic towns well will enhance visitor satisfaction levels and build memorable experiences of your town that they will want to talk about. Good interpretation translates into positive word of mouth referrals to other potential visitors, an invaluable asset to a tourism business.

Where interpretative panels are being used to convey the story of the town or a particular site or building within the town, it should be remembered that good storytellers tell simple and engaging stories. Telling a simple story doesn't mean, however, that it should only recount the chronology of events and the bare historical facts. Some of the most boring and disengaging interpretative panels in historic towns are those that stick solely to the historical facts. History is first and foremost about people and what they did. The story of any historic town needs the human element in order to anchor it in the memory of the visitor. This, however, doesn't mean that it should be 'dumbed down' for tourists. Extracting the clean, simple and engaging lines of a story is very different to dumbing it down. It is surprising the number of interpretative panels that can tell the story of a place or a building, without ever mentioning a single person. Providing an insight to the social history of the place or the lives and actions of particular characters associated with it can be a good place to start for interesting stories.

Fáilte Ireland has published a learning manual on best practice in heritage interpretation for tourism businesses called *Sharing our Stories*. Copies can be downloaded from our website, www.failteireland.ie, or can be requested directly from Fáilte Ireland.

While utilising various electronic technologies in imparting the story of a town can be an attractive solution, it should be stressed that the most important thing is to go through the process first of assessing your audience, resources and story, before deciding on what method of interpretation to use.

Utilising the latest interpretative technology is not necessarily always the best solution - only when you have carried out an assessment should you decide what method of interpretation is best for you in telling your story. (This approach applies to individual

visitor attractions, such as historic sites and buildings, as much as it does to the town in general.)

When you are clear about your audience, your resources and what story you would like to tell, you are then ready to select the best method of interpretation to suit your needs.

There is a wide range of interpretation media available so you need to think carefully about which will work best for you, from an audience, a resource and a physical space perspective. The following is a useful checklist to help you to determine which method is best for you.

Think about	Implications for media
Susceptibility to vandalism	If the site is not staffed, not secure at night and/or vandalism is an issue, all fixed installations (including panels and sculptures) are likely to be vulnerable. Your options are to: a) make installations inaccessible to vandals (e.g. by placing sculptures behind water) b) remove, or otherwise protect, installations when the site is not staffed c) use other media d) use vandal-resistant materials (none are perfect) and allow time and resources for cleaning (which should always be done promptly).
Frequency of visits	If a high proportion of your visitors come twice a year or more, you will need to ensure that the interpretation changes so the story appears fresh and interesting. This again means that you cannot rely solely on permanent fixed installations, such as exhibitions and panels. Your options are: a) events – these work well if your audience is predominantly local b) variable interpretation – temporary panels, leaflets, quiz trails, podcasts and other audio can all be produced at relatively low cost to add variety to the interpretation.
Type of visitors	If you have a high proportion of knowledgeable visitors you may need to produce more detailed information. This should be in a portable form (printed or downloadable) that they can carry around with them and take home. If you have, or are trying to attract, family visitors interaction is important - quizzes, trails, role play, demonstrations and practical activities can all be good. A variety of media helps all visitors, including those with sensory impairments and different learning styles.
Nature and sensitivity of site	Conservation and aesthetic considerations are important at heritage sites. Your interpretation must enhance, not detract or distract from, the experience of the site. Fixed installations such as panels must be planned and designed with care and sensitivity. Your interpretation and the people using it must not damage the fabric of your site.
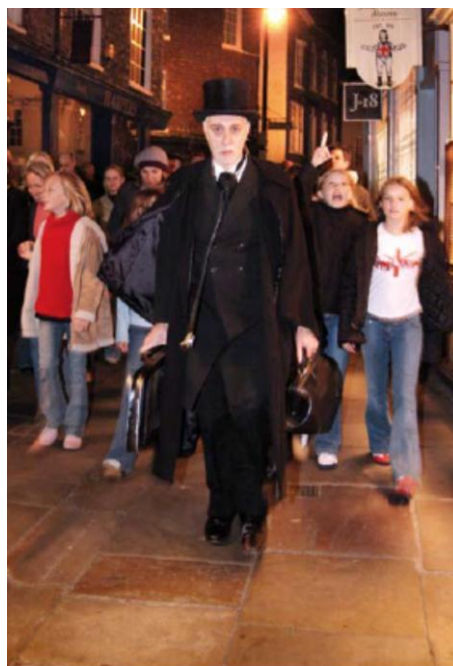
Themed guided tours can be informative and great fun like this Ghost Hunt in York.

Think about	Implications for media
Other media already in use	All visitors will benefit from a range of media so it may be good to use a different medium for a new project. Consider how your existing interpretation would work for visitors who like learning through talking and listening, or looking at pictures, or through activity, or by reading, through thinking about things alone, or by being part of a group.
Resources available Seasonality	This is about choosing a medium so that you can make the best use of what you have. You may want to choose media that allow you to change your interpretation for different seasons (e.g. for gardens, farming or wildlife sites) or in line with the calendar (for festivals etc.).
Staffed/unstaffed site	If there are no staff on site, you will not be able to distribute items such as leaflets, activity packs or audio tours on site. Your best options are: a) fixed installations e.g. panels (where vandalism is not a problem) b) downloadable (Wi-Fi or Bluetooth) material.
Staff resources/availability	Face-to-face interpretation depends on the skills and availability of people.
Budget	Your finances will influence what you can achieve but (with the exception of very expensive options such as permanent exhibitions) it will usually influence the scale and quality of what you produce rather than your selection of medium.

ACTIVITY IN THE TOWN

Market Square in Enniscorthy: A Punch and Judy show attracts a large audience during the Summer Dance and Music Festival. Later in the afternoon, the square is used for music and dance.

A critical question for an historic town to ask itself is, "Why should a visitor stay here overnight?" This can be a particularly difficult issue for towns that find themselves within the catchment of a city or large town which can offer a wider range of evening activities and accommodation, and to which visitors will return to in the evening.

While an attraction town is likely to offer some of these activities, it may not, however, have the critical mass of people to offer the same diversity of activities as a hub town which would have a strong accommodation base. In fact, it may be that the appeal of a smaller place is that its attractions are more likely to be locally driven, perhaps with traditional music in pubs on a weekly rather than nightly basis.

All towns can look at ways which could entice visitors to spend more time in the town, either longer into the evening or overnight. The reasons to stay might be quite simple, such as a restaurant with a good reputation, a hotel with a great breakfast, an arts centre that offers all-in-one packages with accommodation providers, a well-known traditional music session or distinctive evening tours of the town.

Some suggested 'enticements' for visitors to stay longer in a town once they have 'seen and done' the main attractions, are set out in the remainder of this section.

SHOPS, RESTAURANTS AND BARS

Good shops, high quality restaurants and bars provide visitors with good reasons to spend more time in an historic town. The growth of shopping as a recreational activity together with the availability of shops selling produce which is local to the area all contribute to the potential of extending a day trip into an overnight, or at least encouraging a late evening rather than a mid afternoon departure. This is made easier if the town has restaurants with a reputation for good food sourced locally.

MARKETS

Mahon Point Farmers' Market, Cork: Farmers' markets are a great opportunity for visitors to meet local people as well as sampling the best of local and seasonal Irish food.

The visitor survey of historic towns found that farmers' markets, where they were encountered by visitors, were extremely popular and rated very highly with the visitor. Farmers' markets have boosted the activity of local markets, shifting the attraction from general goods to home grown and organic produce.

Local Authorities might engage with the organisers of farmers' markets to improve the location and appearance of the stall and generate a sense of place for the event.

FESTIVALS AND EVENTS

Wexford Opera Festival: The night-time economy is a very important factor in enticing visitors to spend more time in a town. A good range of evening entertainment whether part of a festival programme or not, is essential if you expect your visitors to stay overnight in your town.

Fáilte Ireland research has shown that organised festivals and events are a great way to draw visitors into a town or region. If not already in place, towns should explore if there are any existing events or festivals in the wider area which the town can get involved in through the provision of infrastructural supports (e.g. accommodation, dining, etc.), or if there is the potential to develop any new ones.

Local traditions, folklore or celebrations can often be overlooked or undervalued, but frequently have the potential to form the basis of a very appealing event for locals and visitors alike. Such festivals and events can act as a hook to get domestic and

international publicity for the town or region, as well as being important drivers of revenue and business.

Full involvement of all relevant stake-holders, from business interests to the local community, is often the key to their success, so established relationships and networks will facilitate any such development.

Contact your Fáilte Ireland regional office for further information and advice.

ACCOMMODATION

Listowel Fleadh Cheoil: A well organised and run festival with an appealing programme is a proven means of driving new business into a town.

If an historic town wishes to entice more visitors to stay overnight, the crucial ingredient to get right is tourist accommodation. The last ten years has seen a doubling in the number of hotel beds in Ireland from around 30,000 to just over 60,000. Hotels have been built over this period in towns that would never have had a hotel before. A town with a range of different accommodation types, from a three, four or five star hotel, to high quality guesthouses and bed and breakfasts, will have a better chance of enticing visitors to stay longer in the town, once this is coupled with a compelling range of things to see and do once they are there. A choice of self-catering accommodation and possibly a caravan and camping site are also likely to result in a greater number of overnights. Some towns might find that while they have traditionally had a good stock of tourist accommodation, the range and quality of attractions and activities in the town and the environs might have deteriorated in recent years. In these cases, attention needs to be focused on improving the range of things for the visitor to see and do, to ensure that the viability of the stock of tourist accommodation is not undermined. Accommodation providers cannot hope to survive without the town itself offering a compelling reason to visit. With very few notable exceptions, tourists do not travel to a town to stay in a hotel or a B&B. While accommodation can contribute, or detract significantly to the overall experience of the tourist, they will visit the town primarily for its cultural heritage offering.

This arcade style interactive audio visual game located in a **Gate Tower of York City Walls** provides both information and entertainment for the visitor.

Well known historic buildings or other built historical features in a town are a major attraction and are a magnet for visitors particularly for visitors from outside the area. However, in order for visitors to want to spend longer in a town they must be given things to do. Visitors want more than just to view something interesting, they want to have memorable experiences, they want to take home memories from a day out or a holiday. Historic towns that want to drive further tourism growth need to concentrate strongly on enhancing the visitors experience and impart cultural knowledge in novel ways that involve visitors and therefore encourage them to stay longer.

There are many good examples of how this can be done in new and engaging ways. York tourism, for example, provides an arcade game in one of the Gate Towers that entertains the visitor while informing them about York's history. Also Dublinia is an innovative way of bringing alive for the visitor an aspect of Dublin City's medieval past for which there are very few traces left in the city. The key is to slow visitors down during the exploration of the town in that way enticing them to stay longer.

Holding festivals and events is a tried and tested way to engage visitors for longer and has already been discussed in this section. Another way to do this is to enhance the number and range of learning opportunities that fit with local themes. Culture consuming visitors are sophisticated people who seek learning and enrichment. Their thirst for self development can provide opportunities for historic towns. Programmes can be developed which offer visitors the opportunity to develop their creative potential through active participation on courses that reflect the historic theme of the town such as hand crafts, pottery or painting. One example is where Norwich has converted the medieval church of St. James into an animation theatre which offers visitors the opportunity to learn how to make puppets in special adult workshops.

Can you add an ingredient that will enhance what you already have? It's often the little things that make the difference and turn a good product into a great experience for the visitor. Are there opportunities where visitors can socialise with the local community? What's special about what is on offer that allows visitors take away memories from their visit?

MARKETING & NETWORKING

Summary points
- Know who your visitors are, where they come from and why they have visited your town.
- Arrive at a clear vision of what you want to achieve for tourism in the town and articulate it clearly in either the Development Plan or a Tourism Development Strategy.
- The visitor should get the impression that the town is working as a unified destination. Ensure that businesses, together with all aspects of the community, are working in partnership to develop and promote the town. Bring a tourism focus to the broad range of groups already working to improve the quality of life in the town for local people. Visitors notice local pride.
- Contact your local Fáilte Ireland office for advice on how best to co-ordinate your marketing efforts.
- Develop strong collaborative networks among relevant stakeholders in the town, e.g. business interests, service providers, public agencies, community interests, etc.
- Develop an effective web presence.
- Ensure that the principal tourism providers in the town have availed of the range of Fáilte Ireland's business support services as appropriate.
- Your local businesses, both tourism and non-tourism, are your front line of visitor engagement. Ensure they are doing it well.
- Find out how your town can make best use of available funding sources.

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR MARKET

The first step in tourism marketing is getting to know your visitors. In order to satisfy their needs, you must first know who they are, where they come from, how they travelled to your town, why they have visited and what sort of experience they're looking for. Fáilte Ireland has undertaken extensive research into the profile of the cultural heritage tourist[5] but there is still a lot of information that you can find out about the tourists visiting your town. As mentioned in section 3.1, further information you can use to build up a profile of your visitors can be obtained from local tourism providers (hotels, golf courses, etc.) and your Fáilte Ireland regional office. Once you have collected all this information, you could think about undertaking a visitor survey, the questionnaire for which is attached at Appendix A, and which has been outlined extensively in section 3. The findings from the ten surveys of visitors to historic towns undertaken by Fáilte Ireland, including the visitor profiling information, is contained in section 3.1.1.

DEVELOPING YOUR PRODUCT

Section 4 of this guideline document contains a wide range of tips and advice about developing a high quality tourism experience to meet the needs of your visitor. It is important to remember that a tourism 'product' is not just about heritage centres or historic castles. Rather it encapsulates all aspects of the visitor's experience of your town, from their basic needs such as good access, safety and information, to developing the cultural heritage offering in terms of character, buildings and public realm, to exploring ways that visitors can be encouraged to spend more time in the town. Any examination of the tourism experience might result in the identification of opportunities to develop or improve visitor attractions or amenities which could involve capital expenditure.

5 Including the Visitor Attitudes Survey (annually), the Survey of Overseas Travellers (annually), Heritage and Culture: Thematic Research (2008), and Culture and Heritage Strategy: Making It Work for You (2006).

There is a range of funding sources available for the implementation of such actions. As funding changes annually due to government budgets, a good place to start in exploring the funding opportunities is your Fáilte Ireland regional office.

Preparing a Tourism Strategy
In the Introduction to this document, it was mentioned that these guidelines were not necessarily intended to result in the preparation of a new plan or strategy, but instead to contribute to the content of other plans and strategies, such as Development Plans and Public Realm Plans. However, in some cases, an historic town might consider it helpful to prepare a tourism strategy which would provide a clear vision of how to achieve more sustainable levels of tourism in the town. Where such strategies are prepared, they should seek to complement existing plans and strategies, such as the Development Plan for the town.

A tourism strategy must also take account of relevant national and regional tourism plans and strategies, where they are relevant. It should also take account of any destination management plans that may be in place or in preparation for the wider destination.

A good place to start is the English Historic Towns Forum guidelines, 'Making the Connections – A practical guide to tourism management in Historic Towns' which outlines what could be contained in a tourism strategy for an historic town:

- Background policy and factual information
- A SWOT analysis
- Clear measurable objectives for tourism, embracing the needs of residents, the environment, visitors and businesses
- A statement of the main strategic directions for the industry – including issues like product definition, image, key markets, local impact and training needs
- Action points
- An assessment of the resources needed and their availability
- An outline of the processes for engaging the local community and carrying out the strategy, including timescales, targets and benchmarks
- Monitoring measures and review procedures linked to objectives, actions and timescales.

Business supports
Fáilte Ireland offers a range of practical business supports for tourism enterprises. These include:

- Manage your cashflow and reduce your costs
- Improve your business efficiency and performance
- Promote and develop your product
- Maximise your e-Business presence and grow business markets
- Advance your management skills and update staff skills
- Build business relationships

For further details on any of the above supports, log on to www.failteireland.ie or contact your local Fáilte Ireland office

Identifying the Unique Selling Proposition of an historic town
Identifying the defining characteristics and the unique story of the town are key to enhancing what will appeal to visitors. In marketing terminology, this is about identifying the 'unique selling proposition' or USP of the town. In analysing this, towns should consider the key tourism attractions and facilities both within the town itself, as well as in the surrounding area. This will help to identify what visitors already find appealing about the area, and could be used as a basis on which to identify and build on the Unique Selling Proposition (USP) of the town itself.

Clearly identifying an unambiguous USP will help to deliver a clear and coherent identity for the town to its visitors, which will make the experience all the more meaningful to them. Consultation with local tourism providers as well as business interests in the town is key to ensuring that all stake-holders are 'on message' when they communicate with visitors both prior to and during their visit. The concept of a USP and how it can be identified and used is discussed further in section 4.

The importance of networking
Partnership working and community capacity building are key to success in maximising the tourism potential of historic towns. There is a wide range of stakeholders who will have an interest and should be involved, including the local community, the Local Authority, tourism businesses and non-tourism businesses.

Successful networking often requires a focus to work towards and this is where a detailed tourism plan becomes useful. Central to the successful implementation of any tourism plan is the need for agreed written objectives, a scheduled work programme, strong leadership and assigned responsibility for the overall programme. Businesses (tourism or non-tourism) that work together in an historic town are much more likely to succeed in maximising the tourism potential of the town than those that view themselves in competition with one another and seek to engage in marketing activities independently of each another.

Town twinning is another initiative through which good practice in tourism in historic towns could be shared.

Publicity
Raising awareness of the town and its appeal will be key to increasing its profile and attracting visitors and revenue. Therefore establishing contact with local and national journalists and media is a principal method of achieving this. Towns should maintain updated databases of relevant journalists (radio, print, TV), all of whom should be invited on a press visit to the town, where they get the opportunity to experience it for themselves, with a view to writing articles or producing material on it afterwards. Regular communication should be maintained with these journalists, through sending e-zines and/or press releases with updates on 'What's On' in the town, events taking place, quirky stories about the town, etc., with a view to appearing in suitable features or publications. Visitors very often use local newspapers as a source of ideas for things to see and so. Fáilte Ireland has a dedicated Publicity Team who develop itineraries for visiting media from overseas markets.

Again, contact should be made with this team through your local Client Services Officer to ensure the town's inclusion on any such itineraries where appropriate.

Print

Production of an appealing print piece or flyer, showcasing the best of what the town has to offer, including maps of visitor walking routes, locations of essential facilities, main access and transport points, etc., is a useful way of raising awareness among your target visitor market both before and after they arrive and can encourage a longer stay in the town.

Visually appealing pieces, which are brief and to the point, with a clear consumer focus, are most effective in this regard. Fáilte Ireland's Tourist Information Office network should be used to distribute these practical supports for visitors. Local accommodation, restaurants, pubs and other tourism businesses should also be utilised as outlets for leaflets and brochures. If the town is on a wider touring route or itinerary based upon the wider destination, it should seek to make promotional material relating to the town available at other points along the route to encourage visitors to stop and spend time in the town.

Web

Fáilte Ireland research shows that the internet is increasingly becoming the channel of choice for consumers in selecting their holiday destination and the things they will do while there. It is important, therefore, that towns use the web to promote what there is to see and do for the visitor. A dedicated website for the town, which again is consumer focussed, visually appealing and motivating, carrying a clear and consistent message about the town and what it has to offer, will greatly enhance the profile of the town amongst potential consumers. Any print material which has been produced on the town should be available for download on this site, and in particular any maps of visitor routes and trails. Links to local tourism providers' sites could also be established on the website. Towns should look to optimising the website, so that it can be easily found when searched, and tools such as Google Analytics should be used to measure its use. Fáilte Ireland operates a Web-Check and Web-Build programme where individual tourism providers can avail of assistance and support in either developing a new website, or enhancing an existing one, and towns can also avail of this service (see section 5.2 on business supports).

Local Involvement

Positive 'word of mouth' has been found to be the single most effective method of advertising and awareness-raising. Towns should, therefore, involve the local community as much as possible in everything that they do as a key strand of any marketing campaign. By running a 'Discover Day' for locals, and opening up attractions or activities for a discounted or free entry, locals will get to know what their town has to offer visitors, and will in turn be able to act as 'ambassadors' for their town in selling it and its attributes to visitors. For example, during 2009, Athlone, Carrick-on-Shannon, Mullingar and Tullamore all held 'Discover Days' which were aimed at raising the awareness of local people and businesses about what is available to see and do in the town.

Overseas visitors consistently cite the Irish people as being a key motivator for them in choosing Ireland as a holiday destination, and are always looking for opportunities to interact with local people while here.

So whether it's through having a local historian giving them a guided tour of the town, or meeting with locals in the town's pubs or restaurants, a positive interaction with local people will be invaluable in creating the positive word of mouth that is needed to develop repeat business to the town and associated revenue.

Marketing Group Representation

For towns without the resources or skills to devise and implement their own marketing plans and activities, they do have the option of joining an existing Marketing Group. For an annual membership fee, these towns can avail of the comprehensive programme of trade, consumer, web and publicity promotions which the Marketing Group would carry out annually on behalf of their members, both domestically and in overseas markets. For further details on such groups, please contact your local Fáilte Ireland Client Services Officer.

For further information on how to market and promote your town, how to liaise with tour operators and the potential of trade and consumer shows, visit our website, www.failteireland.ie

MEASURING SUCCESS

Regardless of the marketing activities undertaken by the town, constant monitoring and measurement of their effectiveness should be undertaken. Visitors to the town should be regularly surveyed to get feedback on their experiences and impressions, and to highlight any shifts either in their expectations or in their actual experiences on the ground. Fáilte Ireland can provide advice and assistance to towns in undertaking the visitor survey contained at Appendix A. Quantitative as well as qualitative findings should be maintained, and where possible should be measured against comparable findings from other towns, as well as to the region generally. It is important that a consumer focus is maintained throughout the implementation of any tourism plan, in order to ensure that it is meeting its needs and expectations, and is adapting to an ever-changing business environment. While having a tourism plan in place is not absolutely necessary in order to implement many of the tips contained in these guidelines, a plan does provide key performance indicators which can be used to measure success over time.

Above all, there are four macro indicators which should be included in any monitoring programme to measure progress towards a sustainable level of tourism in historic towns:
1. Visitor satisfaction
2. Local community satisfaction
3. Economic prosperity, and
4. Environmental protection and enhancement.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Ireland's historic towns remain one of our most important tourism assets which appeal to the very valuable 'culture seeker' visitor. However, many of these towns are diamonds in the rough, which have not yet realised their full tourism potential.

While we have seen what towns like Clonakilty and Westport can achieve by developing their tourism offering from what was originally a low base, other towns which have as much to offer in terms of their story, their architectural heritage and the range of things to see and do, remain uncharted territory for the visitor. This is exacerbated by the fact that the commercial viability of many historic town centres has been challenged over the past ten to fifteen years, with smaller shops and businesses finding it difficult to compete with larger edge-of-town retail parks. Despite this, however, the essential character of the public realm and the distinctive stock of historic buildings in many historic towns have come through the Celtic Tiger years relatively intact, presenting these towns with a opportunity to carve out a niche for themselves in the tourist market. The benefits of doing so can be wide-ranging. Tourism, when it is properly developed and managed, should be recognised as a positive activity which has potential to benefit the local community, the town itself and the visitor alike.

Sustainable tourism planning requires a balance to be struck between the needs of the visitor, the place, the businesses and the community. These guidelines are designed to help historic towns develop their tourism potential in a sustainable manner, delivering benefits for everyone.

Questionnaire Survey of Overseas Visitors to Historic Towns

A questionnaire was used to undertake the survey of ten historic towns that informed the preparation of this document. Download the historic town questionnaire [ppt, 1.1MB] to find out what your visitors think about their experience of the town. Fáilte Ireland is happy for the survey questionnaire to be amended to reflect the particular interests of your own town or of the body or organisation undertaking the survey. If any assistance or advice is required in undertaking the survey, please contact your regional Fáilte Ireland office.

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An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council

The Heritage Council has developed an award winning multi-disciplinary training course entitles 'Introduction to Landscape Character Assessment' (which includes townscape appraisal) in association with nine professional institutes within the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, and the Landscape Observatory in Catalonia, Spain.