

Submission No: 041



Submission by Doolin Community Council to Clare County Development Plan 2022-2028

The Doolin Community Council, incorporating members of nine local community organisations, welcomes the opportunity to bring the concerns of the local residents to the attention of those engaged in drawing up the Clare County Development Plan 2022-2028. In parallel with that process we have been engaged in completing the Doolin Development Plan 2021-2024 through a close engagement and survey with the local community, highlighting a series of changes and developments necessary to contribute to improved quality of life and community experience for those living in or visiting Doolin. These proposals fall under a number of headings.

Developing Community Infrastructure

In the Clare County Development Plan 2017-2023 Doolin is described as follows:

Due to the nature of the growth of Doolin there is no single village centre. However, there are three identifiable service areas within the settlement in addition to Doolin Pier. These are Fisher Street, Fitz's Cross and Roadford.

As development has continued in the area the Settlement Boundary as set out in the 2017-2023 plan may be no longer adequate. There has been continued additional development on the seaward (west) side of the R459. There is in fact a fourth population area, known as Garrihy's X, roughly around the junction of the R478 and R479, where there are around 50 households and where the local convenience store is located. Some of these houses were built as holiday homes but are now permanent residences. This cluster is significant because it is at the top (eastern end) of the R478 also known as the School Road, from the National School which is attended by significant number of children from this area.

The 2017-2023 plan further states:

Doolin has three individual service areas. There is an identified need to connect the three areas through the provision of road improvements and a footpath and lighting scheme. It is an objective of the Council to provide a public footpath and public lighting scheme from Roadford to Fisher Street. The Council will seek to prepare this scheme during the lifetime of the Plan.

While some progress has been made on this objective (roughly half has been completed) we believe that it needs to be more ambitious, in particular to include the fourth settlement area described above and connection to the Community Centre. In addition, at Fitz X there is a need for a Zebra crossing as pedestrians are expected to cross the road to the footpath on the other side at a busy cross roads.

Reflecting this, in a recent survey of local residents, one third of respondents indicated a need for footpath and lighting schemes to be introduced to better integrate the different population centres of Doolin and to provide pedestrian access to the local facilities of the National School, the

Community Centre (which is also the trail head for the Doolin - Cliff of Moher - Liscannor coastal trail), the Church, the shop/convenience store and Doolin Pier.

In effect this means extending the Fisherstreet to Roadford footpath (when completed) to connect to the Community Centre (which is also the children's play area) and Church (to the north) and to the Pier (to the south). In addition, it is considered important that a footpath (preferably with integrated cycle path) and lighting connect Fitz X to Garrihy X (R478) and thus connect the National School to the main population centres of the village. It is a matter of public policy and national health strategy to encourage children to walk or cycle to school. The R478 at present is too dangerous a road to walk or cycle on as it is the main vehicular access point to Doolin and the Pier.

In the previous Development Plan it was stated, in regard to footpaths, that:

The boundaries between the fields and the road are principally stone walls with an informal grass edge. Ways need to be found to retain these distinctive walls perhaps by constructing footpaths behind them.

We are happy to endorse that approach where possible.

In any settlement area it is surely a fundamental right of the residents to be able to safely walk to the main activity points in their village - the shop, the school, the church, the community centre and the pier. That can only be achieved by the provision of lighted footpaths. This would have the additional benefits of integrating the communities, giving better access to the Community Centre and enabling children to safely walk to school.

The period 2022 to 2028 seems a reasonable period in which this could be achieved. Doolin Community Council and the local residents will help in any way we can to achieve this objective.

Development of Roads and Transport

The development of the hospitality industry in Doolin in the last twenty years has been remarkable and there are many levels of accommodation available to the visitor from hostels, to self catering, through B&Bs and high quality hotels. Similarly there are many services available including restaurants, pubs (serving meals) and activities such as walking tours, ferry trips and spectacular cave visits. In 2019 it is estimated that 300,000 people used Doolin Pier for ferry trips or Cliff Cruises and every one of them passed through Fisherstreet at least twice, on their way there and back. This has led to many more visitors to the village and has focused attention on one particular area, traffic congestion, that has been under pressure in recent years.

Doolin needs an integrated Traffic Management Plan and it is likely that Clare County Council is best placed to take a lead in developing same with input from the National Roads Authority, the Gardai and naturally the local residents. In the recent survey of the community, Traffic Management was cited by one third of respondents as the most important issue affecting their quality of life. This Traffic Management Plan would need to be integrated with that being developed for the Cliffs of Moher Centre and should be comprehensive within the Geopark area.

There needs to be a review of signage in the area especially safety signage for visiting walkers and drivers ("walk on the right, drive on the left"). Every year there are a number of road accidents caused by visitors driving on the wrong side of the road, especially in the mornings.

There needs to be a review of speed limits in the village. In particular there should be 30kph limits introduced in Fisherstreet and Roadford and in the area around the National School, possibly with a ramp. These are inexpensive developments that may save lives in the coming years.

Doolin was built on high quality low volume tourism. With the Covid-19 decimation of coach tourism and international tourists, Doolin, despite a shortened season in 2020, prospered with domestic holiday makers. This has highlighted the importance of diversifying the tourism mix within Doolin, and how lower volumes of guests with a higher spend are more economically beneficial to the area, as well as making tourism more sustainable, reducing the impact on local stakeholders and improving the quality of life for local residents.

The growth in traffic by Day Tour Coaches was massive in the 2017-2019 period and being unexpected, and therefore unplanned for, caused many problems. To quantify the nature of that explosion a Burren Coach Survey conducted on 07 June 2017 (a wet mid-week day) recorded 75 individual buses in Doolin. That number increased in 2018 and 2019 meaning that there were almost certainly over 100 coaches per day in high season negotiating our narrow roads and bridges. These vehicles having to negotiate two narrow Victorian-era bridges -150 to 200 crossings a day - in competition with motor and caravan/RV traffic. The community are proud of the bridges which are part of our heritage so some solution needs to be found.

The changes brought about in the 2020 season provide an opportunity to pivot tourism strategy back to the high quality, low volume and, most importantly, sustainable product. We believe this could be found through a combination of changes to the Day-Tour licensing system (with the NRA), changes to the "stop points" (governed by the County Council), a review of weight restrictions on certain local roads (to prevent coaches using narrow local roads as "rat runs") and some decisions on parking facilities and a limit on daily numbers. Most fundamentally we believe that the local community should have formal input into the decision making in these areas on an on-going basis.

Mass coach tourism disappeared in 2020 due to Covid 19 and was replaced by self drive domestic tourism. Businesses who previously relied on mass coach tourism had a strong summer season once lockdown was lifted. From a resident's perspective there was a noticeable reduction in incidents and near misses on the local roads with an increase in road safety for cyclists and walkers on our roads.

As part of the Development Plan the Council could seek to encourage small to medium conference and seminar business to make use of Doolin facilities, especially in the shoulder or off season periods. There is adequate existing infrastructure locally to support this, by way of accommodation, seminar rooms and broadband. Our proximity to Shannon Airport, nearby cities Limerick, Galway, and further Cork and Dublin make Doolin an ideal location for conference tourism with supportive facilities for meetings and wide range of outdoor activities.

There has been discussion in past years about the implementation of parking bye-laws for areas with traffic pressure in the village - primarily Fisherstreet and possibly Roadford. In relation to Fisherstreet we request that this process begin again. There have been a number of possible solutions put forward and we are not advocating one over the other, however some action is needed. Previous consultations have been limited to the 10 businesses situated in Fisherstreet. We think it necessary to involve also the residents who have to use Fisherstreet as part of their daily lives. There are 26 households (in the townlands of Ballaghaine and Doonmacelim) who must travel through the street to access shops, the school, the Community Centre, the doctor, their workplace - in short for any domestic purpose. Any proposed bye-laws (or their absence) has an impact on them and they should be consulted. Doolin Community Council is prepared to organise such consultation if required.

Sustainable transport

Doolin Community Council is registered as a Sustainable Energy Community and, in alignment with Government and Local Authority policies, aims to reduce carbon emissions. A switch to Electric Vehicles (EV) is recognised as an element of such policies but one of the associated difficulties of implementation is the availability of charging points - especially in rural areas.

The County Council should take an initiative, in tourist areas such as Doolin, to provide EV charging points whereby every business and accommodation provider would provide at least 1 charge point per 3 bedrooms. And a charging point for every domestic house. There should be a focus on restaurants and public car parks having high capacity charging points enabling charging in 30-60 minutes. These charging points can be revenue generating for the County Council to fund other local projects.

Development of the Community Environment and Litter Management

One of the impacts of up to one million visitors per year to a small community is a growth of litter. One of the ways to control that impact is the provision of secure points to deposit litter. It is a matter of incredulity that in a relatively small geographical area with a large number of visitors there is absolutely no provision for proper disposal of litter. We have previously suggested and propose again that the County Council provide a number, probably four or five, PEL Solar Powered Compacting bins in the area between Roadford and Doolin Pier.

We suggest these specific bins because they are designed to prevent household rubbish bags being put in, are designed to prevent sea-birds from pulling out deposited items of food etc. and through the solar powered compaction will take more litter and require fewer visits to empty. They can also come equipped with an SMS transmitter to signal when they are approaching capacity. In addition they are manufactured in the west of Ireland and will therefore contribute to jobs and commerce in the west.

To supplement this, it would be important to have an attendance of a person, at least at the height of the season for the months of June, July and August, on a daily basis to collect any litter deposited in the area from Roadford to Doolin Pier.

Waste Water Infrastructure

The lack of any central waste water treatment has been an issue for many years, indeed it has been raised as an issue by local committees since the 1960s.

In the Clare Development Plan 2017-2022 the following commitment was made:

To encourage the investigation by Irish Water of the feasibility of using capacity at the wastewater treatment plant in Lisdoonvarna to serve Doolin

We believe this action should be continued and that a feasibility study should be carried out and further that there should be some formal local input into that process. If that feasibility study is positive we would hope that in the 2022-2028 period there could be some implementation of a waste water system.

Water Supply

In relation to potable water supply the CDP 2017 - 2022 made reference to the area being subject to the constraint of the Ennistymon Regional Water Supply. However, within those constraints there is considerable variability in water pressure in different parts of the village. We believe this is due to different standards of piping with some areas served by 3 inch pipes and others by 3/4

(three quarter) inch pipes. Those with the narrower pipes obviously suffer disproportionately from pressure variations. As part of the new Development Plan the Council should aim to redress this issue.

Leisure facilities for visitors and residents

In the current Development Plan the Council states as a General Objective:

To provide for the further development of a diverse tourism product which supports the year-round tourism activity and enhances employment and economic activity;

One of the most successful tourist products in recent years has been the upgrading of the Liscannor - Cliffs of Moher - Doolin Cliff Trail. This has attracted thousands of visitors (Irish Trail counter figures show in 2016 a)Cliffs Centre- Hags Head 105,798, b)Cliffs Centre - Doolin 83,710) and has been a great leisure facility for locals. Sadly however it has not had the attention needed for a walking trail on the Atlantic coast with attendant weather. We are aware that the Cliffs of Moher centre have upgraded the trail for 1K north and south of the Centre. We are also aware that there is a division of responsibility for the rest of the trail between the County Council and the CLDC. Our appeal in this submission is for the County Council to work with CLDC and the local community to maintain and improve this incredible facility into the future.

One of the issues relating to the Cliff Walking Trail is the provision of parking for walkers. The designated Trail Head for the walk is the Doolin Community Centre and there are parking facilities there. However walkers using that trailhead would then have to walk on the road from there to the actual trail, two kilometres on a narrow road competing with motor, caravan, RV and coach traffic. It is another significant reason to complete the footpath from Fitz X to the Community Centre solving several problems including the current *ad hoc* parking by walkers.

To build on the success of the Cliff Trail we believe there could be a number of "loop walks" developed around Doolin. These, as the name suggests, would start from some point around the village and loop around through spectacular scenery, past historic heritage sites and return to the village where accommodation, food and drink could be found. These trails could include information and orientation boards but would not require significant infrastructure. Some signage and the provision of stiles to enable dry-stone walls to be navigated safely would be required. A riverside walking trail could be developed (with land-owner agreement) between Fisherstreet and Roadford along the Aille river. In addition, there are a number of "bog roads" which could be inexpensively developed as nature walks. We believe this would contribute to the development of a diverse and sustainable tourism product as described above.

In conjunction with such walking and cycling routes the Council should seek to raise awareness of and protect and promote the many heritage sites in and around Doolin. These include medieval castles and churches dating from the 14th century and even older Standing Stones, Ring Barrows and a Court Tomb (3,000BC) along with stone forts, ice age remains (erratic rocks) and a stone age "flint factory". All of this would create a narrative to "develop a diverse tourism product".

Sea swimming has undergone a revival of popularity in recent years with many writers extolling its virtues. At the old pier in Doolin there is a natural facility for people, locals and visitors alike, to enjoy the Atlantic in some safety. This has been enjoyed for many years, there are photos of Victorian groups enjoying the sea at Doolin more than 120 years ago. The old pier at Doolin has been categorised as a leisure facility and should continue as such.

Sea sports such as kayaking, surfing and diving have also become more popular in recent years. The slipway, beside the old pier, is vital for such activity and should receive basic maintenance to remove algae which can present a danger to users, being extremely slippery under foot. This is a simple and inexpensive maintenance to be carried out perhaps 4 to 6 times a year.

In relation to the facilities being planned by the Council at Doolin Pier we have previously suggested, and do so again, that the facilities provided should have allowance for leisure users e.g. facilities for divers, areas for kayakers to store simple property in lockers, steps to enable bathers to cross over rocks to the beach. The provision of facilities at the pier, though they may be largely for commercial users, should also accommodate

visitors and locals wishing to use the area. This was highlighted in the Clare County Council report on Socio-Economic Analysis - Doolin Pier Masterplan and Visitor Centre (2016).

A significant factor in the local resident's use of the pier area is car parking. The current County Council by-laws provide for parking charges, without exception, for 24 hours per day, 365 days per year (notwithstanding that the machines are inoperable from October to March). When the bye-laws were enacted a submission was made that there should be some provision for residents - either a 30 minute lee-way (to take children for a swim) or a resident's "badge" allowing for free short term parking. We wish to reiterate this request. Local residents already support the Council in its work through Residential Property Tax and Income Tax and should have some benefit from the provision of a Council-owned amenity.

We note that under the said bye-laws there is no charge for coaches to park at the pier. We have previously asked, and do so again, that this should be reversed and coach parking at the pier should not only be charged for but should be strictly limited to no more than six at any one time, in order to reduce the stress on the local road systems and residents caused by heavy coach traffic through the village.

Finally on the question of the re-development of the pier area we would reiterate that this cannot be defined or perceived in isolation from the local community. While commercial businesses must be accommodated and consulted it must be recognised that such development has an impact on all the community. We have previously engaged with the team driving the project and hope to do so again. We think it important that in any new County Development Plan reference to the Doolin Pier development, the views and interest of the local community would be recognised. Doolin Pier is an asset of relevance to the whole of the local community.