

EU Just Transition Fund Consultation
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A Chara,

This submission has been prepared by Fáilte Ireland, the National Tourism Development Authority, in response to the public consultation on the Draft Territorial EU Just Transition Fund.

Having regard to the time period since the adoption of the National Peatlands Strategy in 2015 the conversations around peatlands use, environmental and biodiversity goals, climate action, just transition and the commercial use of peat have all changed significantly. The landscape of the peatlands particularly in the midlands will change from 'brown to green' (and blue) in the coming years. Furthermore, the future tourism and recreation potential of peatlands has been brought into greater focus.

Within the context of the Draft Territorial Just Transition Fund submission, where the aim is to provide a long-term framework to optimise the peatlands contribution to the 'social, environmental and economic' well-being of this and future generations, Fáilte Ireland welcomes the opportunity to input to the consultation process on the draft Territorial Plan for the EU Just Transition Fund. We are eager to ensure that the potential that tourism and amenity development has for sustainable enterprise and job creation in this region is recognised within the Territorial Just Transition Plan. Climate Action and Bord na Mona's cessation of peat harvesting brings about an opportunity to identify and explore sustainable tourism development initiatives in the midlands.

A number of proposed changes to the actions set out in the plan are recommended to appropriately reflect the ongoing work by Fáilte Ireland, the National Tourism Development Authority and to prioritise actions for implementation in relation to tourism and recreational use. A key strategic pillar of Fáilte Ireland's current corporate strategy is 'Opening the Outdoors' with the goal to transform Ireland's outdoor tourism experience. There is a growing consumer segment that wants to get active in nature and have outdoor experiences, in particular walking, safe segregated cycling and water-based activities. Covid-19 has accelerated this by increasing everyone's appreciation of the outdoors and with the significant shift away from peat extraction, our peatlands have an increasingly important role to play in the future development of Ireland's outdoor product offering.

Overview of Submission

We welcome the 4 potential development needs and objectives identified in the draft Territorial Plan to address the transition challenges in the period to 2030 and to contribute to reaching a climate neutral economy by 2050

1. Modernise the Business Environment and Create Employment Opportunities
2. Enhance the Skills Profile
3. Focus on Environmental Sustainability and Industrial Heritage
4. Enhancing the potential of the region as a place to live and work

While tourism can play an important role in the direct and induced benefits across all 4 Development areas identified in the draft plan, we particularly welcome the inclusion of **Action 11** under Development Need 3: ***Developing the Midland's Tourism Potential in the Draft Territorial Plan.***

Within this submission, we have outlined the importance of tourism in 3 key areas and where possible and appropriate, we have identified and recommended actions which will support alignment to the Just Transition Fund:

- (i) Tourism as a Key Economic Driver at National, Regional and Local Level
- (ii) The importance of peatlands from a biodiversity and unique habitat perspective
- (iii) The potential of peatlands for sustainable tourism opportunities.

1. Tourism as a Key Economic Driver at National, Regional and Local Level

Tourism is undoubtedly amongst Ireland's most important indigenous economic sectors. It is a significant employer, supporting 260,000 jobs prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020. It generated approximately €9 billion for the Irish in economy in 2019, with export revenues accounting for over €6.9 billion of this via expenditure by overseas visitors travelling to and within Ireland. In addition, domestic tourism generated something in the region of a further €2 billion.

Apart from its overall economic importance, the importance of tourism to local and regional economies cannot be understated. In many rural areas, it is the only employer of note outside of agriculture. Analysis published by Ernst and Young (Potential impact of Covid-19 on Irish Tourism, April 2020) indicated a significant proportion of jobs dependent on tourism in rural counties such as Kerry (18%), Donegal (13%) and Waterford (12%). In many such areas, there are limited alternative sources of employment.

Notwithstanding its economic value, tourism also has other qualities which are difficult to quantify but contribute greatly to the social benefit of communities. Tourism amenities within localities make them better places to live for local residents, whether by providing attractions and activities or offering good quality hospitality and events. In a post-Covid world where remote and hybrid working is becoming the norm, regional towns and villages that are nice places to live with strong tourism & recreation infrastructure can transform the economies of regional Ireland beyond tourism.

In addition, tourism plays an important role in promoting Ireland's image abroad, generating a positive impression of Irish people, landscape and culture for our visitors which can influence other aspects of our relationship with the world, whether in investment decisions or educational choices.

Investment in tourism and tourism assets has proven to be an 'enabler and multiplier' for many other sectors. The Wild Atlantic Way tourism experience brand is a prime example

of this. It leverages Ireland's unique geographical positioning along the Atlantic Ocean by allowing visitors engage with and understand how the sea shaped our coastal communities, our lifestyle and our traditions. It highlights the ability of the National Tourism Development Authority to develop, coordinate and work collaboratively to advance common tourism, environmental and other goals.

However, investment in the development and enhancement of tourist attractions, including historical and heritage sites and outdoor infrastructure can have low levels of direct return on investment and will struggle to compete for private sector investment with sectors where there are greater direct returns to be had. Therefore, state investment is critical if the private sector and community groups are to develop such infrastructure as an asset base, which is critical to the creation of distinctive tourist experiences. In this regard, the Territorial Plan and Just Transition mechanisms have the potential to enable and generate significant derived returns and benefits for the Midlands, including sustainable employment in green enterprise and the development of recreation amenities and trails which can enable and stimulate the regeneration of midlands towns and villages.

2. Nature Conservation and Biodiversity in Peatlands

As the National Development Authority for tourism in Ireland, Fáilte Ireland recognises and will continue to ensure that all tourism initiatives it is involved in are planned, developed and managed in a sustainable and integrated manner. The main objective in working towards a sustainable tourism sector is to protect, enhance and promote both our natural and built heritage for the common benefits of visitor, industry, community and the environment. Furthermore, the emerging move towards regenerative tourism highlights the role that tourism can play in rural communities in contributing to the circular economy and the regeneration of both communities and nature: in this context, tourism aims to contribute to flourishing places and thriving communities.

Driving Decarbonisation of the tourism sector is a key priority of Fáilte Ireland's strategy. Fáilte Ireland is committed to working towards ensuring that the tourism sector plays its part to help deliver Ireland's commitments under the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

Ireland should have the ambition to be amongst the world-leaders in sustainable tourism practices.

Peatlands are particularly important from a carbon sequestration perspective as they are vast stores of carbon and are subsequently one of our most valuable resources in helping to tackle climate change. As well as supporting a wide range of biodiversity, they provide society with a range of ecosystem services which benefit our health, wellbeing, and environment.

Fáilte Ireland welcomed the Government's recent announcement of €108 million in funding for Bord na Móna's large-scale peatlands restoration project. In addition to delivering a range of climate action benefits from greenhouse gas mitigation, the enhanced improvements will strengthen biodiversity, increase ecosystem services and develop the amenity potential of the peatlands. This will provide opportunities to enhance activity tourism in the midlands and Fáilte Ireland will work with the relevant stakeholders to build on this and help maximise these opportunities in a sustainable manner.

Fáilte Ireland is a partner in Wild Atlantic Nature LIFE IP, a 9-year EU-funded LIFE Integrated Project, working with farmers, local communities, and landowners to add value to the wide range of services provided from our Special Area of Conservation (SAC) network of blanket bogs and associated areas. Key outputs will include the preparation of Guidelines for the Sustainable Presentation and Management of Tourist Access to Natura 2000 sites along with the organisation of Community Workshops to maximise the potential in nature for local tourism with local stakeholders including community groups and landowners.

Previously, Fáilte Ireland was a partner in the Burren LIFE project which has delivered a number of durable outcomes, including the establishment of the Burren Ecotourism Network, a group of tourism enterprises that deliver memorable visitor experiences while ensuring the conservation of that unique and fragile environment and the creation of sustainable jobs.

Fáilte Ireland is currently engaged with the LIFE IP Peatlands and People Project “Pillar 3 (Peatland’s Discovery Attraction)” Advisory Group which has the aim to be ‘Ireland’s Climate Action Catalyst’. Fáilte Ireland will support consumer testing of the project concept and will work with the project team over the coming years, to help design and deliver a transformational tourism project for the Midlands, based on the heritage of the bogs.

3. Leveraging peatlands for sustainable tourism & employment opportunities

Ireland’s natural assets are the bedrock upon which Irish tourism has been developed. They are drivers of international demand and vital to Ireland’s visitor experience

There is increased demand for outdoor activities, eating and cultural events among visitors and communities alike, and improving our outdoor experiences will directly enhance the quality of the experience for visitors and locals alike. All four of Ireland’s regional brand areas (Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland’s Ancient East, Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands and Dublin) are well positioned to develop motivating outdoor tourism experiences that can tap into this need.

However, Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands Brand has perhaps the greatest potential in this regard due to a convergence of many factors. The brand proposition is to *‘Explore the green heartlands of Ireland’s natural rural beauty, where activity and relaxation are centred around rural communities and their lifestyles; and can be discovered across a latticework of land and water trails, showcased by the iconic River Shannon and the Beara Breifne Way’.*

The vision statement for the Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands region, as contained in the draft Regional Tourism Strategy 2022-2026 is as follows:

It’s 2032 and Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands is one of Europe’s leading regenerative tourism destinations (top 10 ranking), a place where tourism works to create flourishing places and thriving communities which are highly sought after by visitors who share our passions. The region has become well known as a place where visitors can reconnect with

nature as well as taking time out to reconnect with family and friends. With the River Shannon at its heart, and a well-connected web of Greenways and Blueways spread throughout the region, this is a place where nature is the backdrop to a wide range of compelling visitor experiences, from outdoor activities to uncovering intriguing heritage and cultural gems that continually surprise and exceed visitors' expectations. Active fun-filled days roll into relaxing, cosy evenings in historic hotels and lakeside lodges. The region, which is highly valued for its special environmental qualities and biodiversity and its easy access to the outdoors, has also earned a reputation for its wellness qualities, where the visitor is re-energised by nature.

The rich natural, industrial, and cultural heritage of the peatlands plays an important part of the wider landscape proposition and should be celebrated and integrated across the visitor experience in the region.

The National and EU Just Transition Fund and the Climate Action Fund will be important enabling mechanisms for the delivery of Bord na Mona's 'Brown to Green' strategy and the wider potential to transition the region to become a standout sustainable tourism destination of the future with peatlands being a core element of the proposition. Other synergies and complementary funding mechanisms including the Rural Regeneration & Development Fund and the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Fund will also have a role to play in supporting a variety of initiatives that will contribute to a 'just transition' of the wider Midlands region in response to the ending of peat extraction for power generation.

Failte Ireland greatly welcomed that in recent calls for applications under the RRDF, the fund specifically highlighted the ability of tourism projects to act as a key driver for economic recovery in the post Covid-19 environment, providing an immediate stimulus to support the recovery and further development of rural economies and communities:

"Projects which consolidate and better position our strong existing tourism offering, with particular focus on projects in pursuance or support of existing Masterplans, major tourism routes (for example, the Wild Atlantic Way) or Visitor Experience Development

Plans. In addition, projects which improve infrastructure for existing tourism trails and amenities and those which seek to avail of evidence-based opportunities, including environmental or ecotourism or marine and activity tourism.”

Focussing on the midlands, the peatlands provide a rich story to be told to our visitors through land and water access, interpretation, sculpture, and people. The peatlands can create a compelling proposition for the visitor allowing them to move slowly through the landscape, experiencing and learning about the industrial heritage and environment on their journey, while being active in nature.

Fáilte Ireland commissioned a **Review of the Opportunity for Peatlands Tourism in the Midlands**, delivered by Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland (ORNI) in August 2021. The report highlights the significant opportunities for tourism in the following areas:

Green Experiences

The convergence of many factors lends itself to the Midlands being a more ‘green’ experience and potentially become a standout regenerative ecotourism destination of the future. The landscape will change over time from brown to green and blue interwoven with sustainable energy production. The Just Transition will incentivise green enterprises along with the development of amenities and trails.

We know from international examples such as Slovenia, New Zealand, Costa Rica who are seen as leaders in eco/sustainable tourism that it can bring real opportunities to a destination. The positioning of the ‘greening’ of Ireland is a potentially powerful one and a brand fit for Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands and parts of Ireland’s Ancient East with the opportunity to be a first mover in eco-tourism nationally.

A Network of Trails

The post-industrial peatlands offer a unique opportunity for land access via Bord na Móna’s rail network, bridges, and bog roads. It also gives rise to a network of off-road trails (and waterways with the Shannon Masterplan playing a key role) which includes

over 700km of narrow-gauge railway. It is noted that current plans would see the removal of a substantial portion of this network for rehabilitation. It is therefore crucial that the Land Use strategy under development by Bord na Móna considers the potential trail development from the outset in parallel with rehabilitation and renewable projects.

Fáilte Ireland and Bord na Móna have engaged in an MOU in order to develop a **Strategic Network Trail Plan**. Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland (ORNI) has been commissioned to develop the Plan, due for completion in April 2022. The plan is examining the feasibility of creating a network of recreational trails across the peatlands in the midlands to connect with existing recreation infrastructure, visitor attractions and linkages to towns and villages.

The potential for trails has been widely recognised by local authorities and community organisations, with many expressing an interest in the development of trails on Bord na Móna lands. We welcome and support this interest. The benefit of developing trails will be two-fold: it will give local communities in the region access to trails with the opportunity to be more active, as well as potentially attracting domestic and international visitors stimulating the local economy.

Rather than single trail projects being funded and developed individually, we would recommend that priority is given to trails that form part of a network of interconnected trails that link peatlands to the emerging blueway and greenway network, the Royal and Grand Canals, our towns and villages and to other natural and cultural heritage sites. This would potentially create a sustainable network that will benefit local communities. For any such trail network to become a success, significant investment in associated infrastructure and services is vital, e.g., applying agreed quality standards for trail design, creating cycle-friendly towns and villages, the provision of appropriate catering and accommodation, the provision of bike hire, repair and shuttle services, and ongoing long-term investment into management, maintenance and marketing.

While identifying this great opportunity, we also recognise that peatlands are highly sensitive environments and that a balance will need to be struck between minimising the

potential impact of trail development on habitats and species and providing quality trail experiences in open spaces.

Further and ongoing research will reveal the potential appeal of the network to tourists as part of the Irish Hidden Heartlands destination offer, and parts of Ireland's Ancient East where relevant. However, even without taking tourism into consideration, a co-ordinated and strategic approach to the development of a unified and experiential recreational trail network, that adheres to agreed quality criteria and standards will greatly benefit local communities and businesses.

The '**Strategic Network Trail Plan**' aims to provide a strategic development framework.

The newly emerging peatland tourism experiences resulting from the National Just Transition fund and the projects in incubation for application to the upcoming EU Just Transition Fund, in addition to the existing and planned tourism projects included in the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands Regional Tourism Strategy, demonstrate the significant opportunity to transition and transform tourism and communities across the Irish midlands.

The Limburg region of Flanders, Belgium demonstrates the transformative effect a tourism trail network can have on a region with similar challenges to the Irish midlands.

Limburg Case Study

In the 1990s, cycle tourism was identified as a potential catalyst for economic development in response to the closure of industrial coal mining and sand extraction in the Limburg region of Flanders. A trail network, marketed under a single brand identity, was developed to allow visitors to freely explore the landscape. After over 25 years of consistent investment, the network now consists of 2000km of easy-to-navigate bicycle trails which connect towns and villages, cultural attractions, nature reserves, waterways and other open spaces. A host of cyclist-friendly ancillary services are provided in the region's towns and villages. Now, 3.5 – 4 million tourists use the network every year, in addition to local active travel and leisure users.

To enhance visitor appeal, the trails are animated with numerous points of interest such as innovative cycle experiences (e.g., sunken trails 'Cycling through Water' and elevated trails 'Cycling through Trees'), as well as viewpoints and rest points, large scale outdoor sculptures and trailside interpretation points to engage visitors in the cultural and natural contexts of the landscape. <https://www.visitlimburg.be/en>

Industrial Heritage

The industrial heritage of the peatlands and in particular the Bord Na Móna heritage is a nationally important story. Bord Na Móna and ESB archives and collections are extensive with many oral histories to be told. The story can be expressed locally through the historical and cultural context of individual just transition communities. Sensitive interpretation will be a key element in sharing the story of the midlands landscape, allowing people to encounter stories on the trail network as well as at visitor hubs. The role of communities in telling this story would be vital.

Internationally, an example of industrial heritage regeneration is Zollverein Coal Mine Industrial Complex in Germany which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and considered good practice. The coal mine closed in 1986 and has been transformed into a prime site for the art, culture, and the creative sectors. A Museum showcasing the formation of coal 300 million years ago to its transformation today along with modern art galleries, exhibition halls, restaurants, swimming pool and an ice-skating rink are key elements of the experience. It attracts more than two million visitors a year. <https://www.zollverein.de>

Visitor Centres & Bog Experiences

The post-industrial peatlands present a unique opportunity for land access via Bord na Móna rails, bridges and bog roads and a network of off-road trails (and waterways) –to support Ireland's Hidden Heartlands 'Yours to uncover' tagline in becoming even more of a reality. A number of existing attractions require investment to upgrade and elevate the visitor experience within the region. As the rehabilitation takes place, the landscape will evolve and change over time, it is difficult to pre-empt the scope of future visitor opportunities in this area. Development of other peatland-based community-led

experiences and trails are to be encouraged and will have a positive impact but it is strongly recommended that this occurs within a clear and strategic framework.

Accommodation The draft Regional Tourism Strategy for Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands anticipates growth in the accommodation sector in the region most notably in alternative accommodation. The ‘active in nature’ element of the Hidden Heartlands brand offers a significant accommodation development opportunity to untap the outdoor and nature elements of the region and a number of stakeholders are currently looking at options throughout the region. It is proposed to undertake destination-based accommodation audits over the duration of the Regional Tourism Strategy (2002-2027) to scope out the additional accommodation requirements in the region. This will inform the expansion and improvement of the accommodation sector in the region. This will provide new opportunities for the region in particular the development of authentic and innovative accommodation offerings to support emerging peatland visitor experiences in existing and new tourism hubs in the region.

Designations

Internationally, National Park and World Heritage status designations have resonance with visitors and can act as attractors to a destination for their environmental, scientific, and cultural appeal. These designations require significant resourcing and collaboration to implement and for the ongoing management. From a tourism perspective, evidence suggests that designations are not deemed as strong motivators to travel but that they substantiate the credibility and integrity of the destination. Further consideration in this area is warranted.

Impact and interactions of Ireland’s Draft Territorial Plan and Tourism

The review of Ireland’s Draft Territorial Plan and the opportunity for Fáilte Ireland to contribute from a tourism development perspective is greatly welcomed to ensure that the formulation of policies and actions appropriately acknowledge and support the positive role that tourism and amenity can play in the future evolution of peatlands and the associated economic and social contributions to the communities in the Just Transition counties. A strong peatlands strategy and a Just Transition plan with tourism as a key

sector within it, will help to ensure that the interests of both are recognised. This will also enhance and promote co-operation between key stakeholders and communities.

The built, natural, and cultural assets constitute the core assets of the tourism industry and are essential to the sustainability of the sector. However, the tourism sector often has no direct control over these assets and so depends on strong and transparent working relationships with agencies such as Bord Na Móna, Office of Public Works (OPW), National Parks and Wildlife Services (NPWS), Coillte, Waterways Ireland and Local Authorities to name but a few. Fáilte Ireland seeks to partner and work collaboratively with these agencies to optimise the visitor experience of state-owned lands and assets including our peatlands, wetlands, and waterways. These relationships are key to understanding the positive role of sustainable tourism and identifying opportunities for developing visitor experiences with the state landowners whose remits do not always incorporate tourism and visitor management.

Fáilte Ireland recognises and supports the prioritisation of the delivery of a connected network of greenways, blueways and ‘peatways’ in the midlands region as highlighted by the **Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy**.

As aforementioned Fáilte Ireland and Bord na Móna have engaged in an MOU to develop a Peatlands Strategic Trail Plan and Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland (ORNI) has been commissioned to deliver this work, due for completion in April 2022.

The study is exploring connectivity and linkages between existing and planned trails in the Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands and Ireland’s Ancient East region, and the linking of post-industrial assets with existing and planned strategic tourism projects in the Midlands region.

The study has an emphasis on examining the tourism potential of Bord na Móna’s significant peatland landholding and how it can be leveraged to grow sustainable outdoor recreation opportunities in the region in a way that is compatible with Bord Na Mona’s land use strategy and goals in relation to environmental rehabilitation, biodiversity, and green industry.

The **Strategic Network Trail Plan** will serve to provide direction and recommendations for the further development of trails, and ensure they provide platforms for sustainable development and deliver inspiring experiences that will satisfy and inspire local communities, domestic and international visitors.

It is also key to note that the delivery of Just Transition is not the single remit of any one agency or department and that a whole of government approach will be required, taking key areas and linkages with climate change, environment, agriculture, land use, tourism and recreation to name but a few, into account. Having regard to the myriad of agencies involved and the governance structure surrounding our peatlands and the National Just Transition approach to recreation and tourism development to date, it is imperative that there is greater coordination and joined up thinking across all stakeholders moving forward. Fáilte Ireland has established strategic partnerships with the OPW and the Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage, the National Parks & Wildlife Service, Coillte and Waterways Ireland and will work closely with these partners to support a co-ordinated approach to the delivery of the tourism and recreation actions of the EU Just Transition & Territorial Plan for Ireland's midlands.

Fáilte Ireland as the National Tourism Development Authority is committed to ensuring that the tourism infrastructure is developed sustainably. Key to this in a peatland's context is to ensure that the development of amenities and trails is considered from the outset to create a coordinated green network for recreation and sustainable green transport, connecting peatland communities with one another and with larger towns. It is imperative that tourism development and amenity is considered and planned for in all peatland strategies, landscape and land use plans going forward and not to be retrofitted or considered subsequently.

Recommendations to the Draft Territorial Plan for the EU Just Transition Fund

The Draft Territorial Plan review presents a significant opportunity for the development of peatland-based tourism in Ireland and an opportunity to support a world class

peatland's experience which could step change Ireland's global position in terms of regenerative eco-tourism. This submission presents a distillation of our key recommendations on how this can be achieved, and we ask that the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications and the Midlands Region Regional Authority as the funding authority for the EU Just Transition fund to consider the significant social and economic benefits of tourism as a key driver in supporting the Just Transition programme to deliver on its objectives in terms of regeneration in the context of Ireland's Draft Territorial Plan.

- **Fáilte Ireland should be recognised as a Relevant Public Authority in the updated EU Just Transition Fund Territorial Plan.** As the National Tourism Development Authority, Fáilte Ireland's role is to support the long-term sustainable growth in the economic, social, cultural and environmental contribution of tourism to Ireland. Investment in tourism and tourism assets has proven to be an 'enabler and multiplier' for many other sectors. Having regard to the current ongoing research in the future tourism and recreation potential of peatlands and our engagement with the relevant state agencies and stakeholders, it is considered that the authority has an important role to play in the sustainable development of our peatlands and just transition.

For Fáilte Ireland the main objective is to develop a sustainable tourism sector which contributes a positive economic and social contribution to Ireland. Environmental protection, economic competitiveness, community & visitor engagement and involvement, all play a part in successfully achieving and delivering on this objective. Our natural landscape and our heritage are some of our greatest tourism assets and the 8 strategic pillars within our strategy support sustainable development to protect, enhance and promote both our natural and built heritage for the common benefits of visitor, industry, community and the environment.

- **A stronger focus on tourism, amenity and recreation use is recommended in the draft Territorial Plan. Specifically in relation to Action 11 in the draft plan; 'Developing the Midlands Tourism potential',** Fáilte Ireland would

ask that this action place more emphasis on the strategic development potential of sustainable tourism and the strategic trails development framework in unlocking the regenerative and commercial potential within the region through Just Transition funding.

Actions for priority in the period 2022-2027 should reflect the changed landscape we are now operating in and the adaption of the Regional Tourism Strategy for Ireland's Hidden Heartlands. The Development and enhancement of sustainable tourism within the Midlands region, should identify at a strategic level the potential of tourism in creating a partnership approach which enables the region to develop as one of the leading regenerative 'Just Transition' tourism destinations in Europe, with nature and communities at the heart.

- **The integration of Just Transition into County, Regional and other key stakeholder plans is crucially important and should be encouraged to unlock the regenerative potential and to support sustainable tourism developments in the region.** Just Transition and other relevant funding mechanisms will be pivotal to the development of tourism and recreational projects in the period to 2027. The socio-economic and environmental benefits of tourism can reach areas of the country where other sectors fail to penetrate or provide benefits to communities. The tourism potential of our peatlands should be strengthened within the Territorial Plan for the value it can deliver to the economy, in particular employment, community activation and for the strong interdependency between tourism and other sectors. This is particularly the case for the midlands and the opportunity of Ireland's Hidden Heartland in becoming a standout 'green'/ ecotourism destination of the future with peatlands, wetlands, and waterways an integral part of the tourism offering.
- **The updated Territorial Plan and prioritised actions should support the development and delivery of the Regional Tourism Strategy for Ireland's Hidden Heartlands** and serve as a guiding framework to unlock the potential of the region, bringing benefits to communities, stakeholders, and industry. The

peatlands, peatways and waterways have a key role to play in creating a compelling and connecting proposition for visitors in the region

We hope this submission is helpful in the consideration of the socio, economic and environmental potential of tourism and peatlands, and the strong case made will ensure it will be brought into greater focus and an area of prominence.

We look forward to future and ongoing engagement with the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications and other stakeholders in the delivery and implementation of a Just Transition. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any further queries or questions.

We thank you for your time and consideration of our submission.

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Head of Ireland's Hidden Heartlands
Fáilte Ireland