

REGENERATING KILFENORA - A STRATEGY

Context

- Kilfenora is a location and community with a long and rich history – farming, music, religion etc
- However, over the past 15 years or so, Kilfenora's economic strength and its position as a centre of activity (business and retail, tourism, culture) in N Clare has greatly declined.
- In the plus column, there have been some positive steps: from 2009 until Covid struck, the Kilfenora Trad Festival kept a flag flying for our unique musical heritage; the Kilfenora Timeline undertook several worthy initiatives – eg the Time Capsule and the Timeline exhibition itself.
- However, the recent past has been less happy. Removal of the Post Office depressed economic activity overnight; the marketing of and investment in the visitor attractions we have has not kept pace with more proactive competitors; and for three years+ the Cathedral has been closed.
- Some good ideas were generated in the 2018 'local planning group' initiative, but as soon as the Leader-funded facilitator left, the group evaporated and the 'strategy' was not actioned.
- Nonetheless, from those ashes a fresh community action group has recently emerged – named Kilfenora Development – and this document articulates the intention to revitalise the village and associated parishes, in terms of economic, social and cultural activity and reputation.
- Our challenges are many, including the rekindling of the integrated community effort that has achieved so much for the village in the past; and the necessity to win support and funding for investment in projects that can succeed in making Kilfenora more attractive to visit and live in.
- Yet there are clear opportunities to be seized, in a climate of Government pronouncements that seem favourable to the specific ideas that we are advancing to local authorities; and given the latent assets and brand qualities Kilfenora possesses that could be turned into lasting value.

Strategic goal

To enable Kilfenora to be a vibrant community and central hub for economic and cultural activity in the Burren and North Clare – and a highly desirable destination for visitors to the West of Ireland and the Wild Atlantic Way.

- Create a compelling vision, and identify practical projects to make this a reality
- Identify economic and social benefits, in order to raise funds for investment in regeneration
- Encourage greater community self-help and foster well-being
- Collaboration and alignment with partners – Burren Centre, Geopark, BEN, Clare CoCo, other North Clare villages, tourist bodies etc

The Vision

- A great place to live in and work: attractive, historic, lively, good facilities, jobs, engaged community
- A great place to visit: a fascinating destination to visit, stay and spend money – the music, history, people, craic – that anyone visiting the West of Ireland should have on their list.

The Strategy

- Move out of the constraints of the Pandemic to build community involvement in activities and support for a village regeneration plan – form project groups where possible
- Ensure village activity groups collaborate and integrate their efforts – as recommended by CLDC. Also collaborate and lobby with other Burren villages for mutual benefit.
- Raise the village profile and brand through communication, increase visitor numbers/income
- Obtain active investment/support from Clare Council and FI to realise Kilfenora's promise

Action areas – the ongoing plan

Overarching requirement – obtain CLDC/Council support for expert, detailed Master plan

1 Village appearance and amenities

(i) Create a more attractive impact on entry into the village and its Square

- Plants and flowers (building on recent grant-aided progress)
- Seating areas
- Tackle eyesores (inc old overhead wires) and Infrastructure maintenance – inc pavements
- Field: public park and play area? (To make Kilfenora one of the most attractive villages in Ireland)

(ii) Amenities

- Ensure better communication esp through signage of reasons to stop and spend in Kilfenora
- To include shops (grocery, crafts), visitor attractions, tourist information, food/drink, picnic area(s), garage, e-charging point, re-cycling facilities (extend to plastics re-cycling), Post Point
- Obtain Council investment for sound infrastructure – eg extended wi-fi, rubbish bins.
- Re-create Kilfenora Digital Hub – Council to use vacant building to provide badly needed service

2 Core attractions

Kilfenora has a remarkable bank of historical and archaeological assets that have either not been actively promoted in recent years, or have not even been made known and accessible to visitors. The world needs to know about our triple claim – the City of the Crosses, the home of céili music and – in future – the ‘village of the forts’. Increased footfall is essential to drive up village income.

(i) Cathedral

- Working with Col on repair plan and re-opening
- Devise a management mechanism to address governance, marketing and income generation
- Improve signage – directing visitors to West Entrance past shops and West Cross
- Disabled parking by West Entrance

(ii) Crosses, Holy Well – promote these as key attractions, biodiversity trail and seating maintenance

(iii) Forts, castles, tombs – plan to improve access to Doon, Tullaha, Ballykinvarga and other sites

(iv) The best start point for Burren walkers and cyclists – includes attraction factors such as Wellness, Faith/Spiritual tourism (Clare Camino); publicise a range of routes around Kilfenora, transport links

(v) Visitor information signs: an inner and outer village information sign; improved cycle route sign

And of course, working with the Burren Centre as an information point as well as attraction in itself – and provider of village walking tours.

3 Traffic and travel

- Tackle excessive speeds and create safer space for walkers – Council to move speed limit signs to edge of village housing, additional ‘Slow – walkers’ signs (already requested)
- Address poor village identification and directional signage (already requested)
- Maintain ample space for parking for independent travellers and local community events
- Remove bus congestion with drop/off pick up scheme in Square and create bus park in Vaughans Yard (already requested)

- E-charging point in Square (already requested)
- Walkers and cyclists – invest in facilities, signage; in particular allow safe access to Deanery
- Bus stops to be installed (already requested)

4 Music and culture

Kilfenora's historic reputation for music in particular needs re-investment. Sessions/ceilis declined in recent years and disappeared in the pandemic. The Burren Centre never promoted its globally unique musical feature, the KCB Parlour, which may disappear by 2023 with the exhibition upgrade.

- Support continuation of the Kilfenora Trad Music Festival
- Encourage musicians to re-start sessions, concerts, classes in Kilfenora – esp KCB & its members
- Use the Cathedral as cultural hub, including as a concert venue (collaborate with Burren Centre)
- Encourage art and crafts displays, create events to attract Irish and overseas audiences
- Support future productions by the Kilfenora Players

5 Energy

- Supporting Kilfenora SEC in its role of identifying better energy conservation and usage, enabling the community to adapt to the future
- Thereby enabling Kilfenora to become energy savvy, and known as such.

6 Environment

- Increase focus on positive environmental practices – clean roads, water etc
- Tidy Towns team championing 'stay clean' – maximise community involvement and awareness

7 Farming

- Encourage formation of innovative farmers group, help Kilfenora to be known for best of new AND traditional practices
- Develop positive stories about Kilfenora farming/agriculture, building on 1500 yrs of heritage
- Maintain a supportive culture for farmers' wellbeing through thick and thin

8 Housing and accommodation

- Address the need for more housing, arresting the Kilfenora population decline, and enlivening the village by encouraging making vacant dwellings available
- Consider how to increase visitor accommodation as well – Kilfenora cannot be an attractive overnight destination without this.

9 Food

To be attractive and competitive to both locals and visitors as a place to spend time and money, Kilfenora needs to up its game in food and drink provision, and be part of the Burren Food Trail.

- Genuinely enticing meal and snack offerings, consistent high quality with friendly food service
- Build on the reputation of some stand-out local food producers, and on its historic reputation as a community of great home-made cooking – consider possibilities of a food fair, market stalls

10 Sport, exercise, community activities

- Create project group to develop community activities (incorporate 'old folks' team?)
- Build on Kilfenora's sporting heritage to enable it to be a great place for exercise, wellness
- Safer roads for walking and cycling; facilities at the Deanery; more use of Burren Centre