

Report on	Council support for Mid Ulster (Heaney) Cluster
Date of Meeting	11 March 2021
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	No	x

1.0	Purpose of Report
	To seek support from Mid Ulster Council for the Mid Ulster (Heaney) cluster of businesses in their application for Phase 2 Collaborative Growth Programme funding.
2.0	Background
2.1	This cluster of 15 tourism and hospitality businesses based in and around Bellaghy have developed as part of the delivery of our Mid Ulster Council Tourism Strategy. One of the key strands of our Tourism Strategy is the development of our Tourism Development Group and associated clusters – Seamus Heaney being one of them. This cluster group supported by Council Officers is very strong and one of the leading clusters both locally and across Northern Ireland.
2.2	The group have successfully completed their Phase 1 Collaborative Growth scoping study. Invest NI supported this Phase 1 study. The group are now preparing to submit an application for Phase 2 of this process and seeking funding of £170,000 from Invest NI to deliver on the actions outlined in their scoping study. They are working closely with their Invest NI Programme Executive to deliver this programme and the support that goes with it.
2.3	In May 2018 the cluster commenced working on the delivery of their Phase 1 Scoping Study, throughout this work they have achieved many positive outcomes and impacts including:
2.4	New Business Development – the group reported growth in terms of tourism engagement and working with tour operators, buyers, and partners. A sample of the progress reported from members during Phase 1 is as detailed below: There is a significant level of new business underway within a number of the cluster members businesses. A number of Tour Operators are programming the region and member businesses already including CIE Tours, Brack Tours, Royal Irish tours (Canada), Custom Ireland, Contiki, EF (Education First Tours USA).

<p>2.5</p>	<p>Other outputs include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 86 cluster meetings have been held with excellent attendance. • 2 businesses are in the process of applying for Invest NI Innovation Vouchers to further develop their business. • Over 60 follow up appointments have been created with Tour Operators. • From World Travel Market 2019 over £300k worth of new business has been negotiated across cluster businesses. • One Cluster member reported that 48 tour groups x 18 people were booked for 2019/20. This group series has welcomed visitors from US, Canada, Australia and NZ into Mid Ulster and this contract is currently on hold due to pandemic. This contract will recommence with reopening. • A number of collaborations are underway within the cluster and engagement has commenced with the Taste Causeway cluster, the National Trust at The Giants Causeway plus members have established a positive working relationship with Dalriada Kingdom Tours and others. • They have worked to deliver key events including hosting the Tourism Ireland GB Team Expo in Seamus Heaney HomePlace, as part of Tourism Ireland designating Seamus Heaney HomePlace a key theme in 2018. • The group have made significant national and international contacts and have hosted renowned chef Darina Allen on a two-day showcase in the region supported through the Enterprise European Network, plus Study Visits to Hay on Wye and Cork City and County and hosted reciprocal visits. • They have accepted in two new members who bring added depth to the group including Glenshane Country Farm, an Embrace a Giant Spirit brand demonstrator and new business River Bann Boat Tours. Two of their members are Embrace a Giant Spirit brand demonstrators namely Glenshane Country Farm and Seamus Heaney HomePlace with potentially two further in the pipeline for 2021. This is indicative of the quality of experiences offered through the cluster, this quality aspect will continue to be front and centre in the work being delivered throughout Phase 2. • Members have demonstrated strong commitment to the cluster through investing time and finances in participation in events and exhibitions including World Travel Market in London, study visits in Wales and Cork and Seamus Heaney celebration event in Dublin. • Active participation of this cluster group in the Mid Ulster Whats app group and webinars. <p>This work must all be considered going forward in the context of the Covid pandemic and the worldwide slump in international travel. The picture going forward may be markedly different, however this group are keen to take on this challenge and continue to push on, grow and develop their businesses both individually and as a collective.</p>
<p>3.0</p>	<p>Main Report</p>
	<p>This Phase 2 application will cover 5 proposed workstreams outlined below and will run over two and a half years. It is envisaged the programme will commence on 1st April 2021 and complete on 1st October 2024.</p> <p>The five workstreams will cover the following:</p>

<p>3.1</p>	<p>1. Recruitment of Facilitator, Governance & Initial Project Planning Following the recruitment of a facilitator, the cluster would like to commence activities by revisiting the Governance and membership of the group to ensure that a robust structure is in place to bolster its future sustainability.</p> <p>It is anticipated that the facilitator will work with the members to resolve issues around criteria for membership / recruitment of future members and quality standards.</p> <p>The members would like to explore the potential of developing an associate membership status, as this would give them flexibility to work with businesses that in the first instance may not necessarily meet membership criteria but could contribute to future growth and development.</p> <p>The facilitator will also undertake a training needs analysis amongst members to identify the most appropriate training and map the specification for the training programme.</p> <p>The facilitator would then work to lever additional support from identified stakeholders to deliver the training.</p> <p>The group has identified Responsible Tourism as a key element, which must be integrated across each work stream and will be incorporated across activities. Tourism NI as a key strategic issue is highlighting this for the future of tourism in NI.</p>
<p>3.2</p>	<p>2. Branding & Marketing The facilitator will deliver the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a specification for a brand identity exercise. They want to create a brand or identity that enables members to proactively promote, sell and reflect their product offering. This will dovetail with the Tourism NI Embrace a Giant Spirit brand and the Council’s destination branding (currently in development). • The new identity will be developed as a commercial brand for the members, rather than a destination brand. It will be fully representative of the cluster’s product offering, the heritage and the richness of culture within the area. • The facilitator will work with the group to develop marketing collateral including a website, a portfolio / directory of products and a bank of digital materials (imagery, hashtags, video content etc.) that can be accessed and used by cluster members. • The facilitator will develop a communications plan that will include an ongoing PR campaign. • Establish a digital presence for the cluster to include a LinkedIn page for B2B purposes, Facebook and Instagram presence for B2C content marketing. The facilitator will be responsible for the development and implementation of the content plan.

- Identify where members product offering has pivoted or evolved as part of their COVID recovery plan.
- Innovation and planning exercise with the group to identify potential new areas of collaboration and review these against market trends, leveraging in support from stakeholders where possible.
- Development of an internal digital directory and marketing portfolio that each member can access.
- The facilitator will conduct a quality assurance review in relation to marketing and digital activities and assist the individual members, where necessary, to enhance their activities through signposting to relevant stakeholder support.

It is envisaged that Council support if approved will support this marketing workstream and the development of collateral in particular

3.3 3. Commercialisation & Business Development

This will be a key area for the cluster as they move to a stage of commercialisation. The group has a number of key events that they plan to attend including key Tourism Ni and Tourism Ireland platforms such as:

- Britain & Ireland Marketplace London January 2021, January 2022,, January 2023
- Meet the Buyer Belfast April 2021, January 2022, January 2023
- Milwaukee Irish Fest Milwaukee August 2022
- World Travel Market London November 2021, November 2022
- Flavours of Ireland London November 2021, 2022
- Irish Tour Operators Association, Belfast November 2021, 2022
- European Tour Operators Association Workshop, London, November 2021, November 2022

As part of the commercialisation process and building on the development of the website, the facilitator will work with the cluster to explore potential options for itinerary development, centralised bookings and payment options plus other commercial opportunities that present themselves.

3.4 4. Internationalisation

An important element of Phase 2 will be to build on the links that were established as part of the Phase 1 project.

During the course of the Phase 2 the group would like to explore the links with:

- Food Clusters in Ireland, e.g., the Cork food cluster and its connections with Ballymaloe; and
- Other culture festivals in GB and ROI, e.g., Hay Festival, Galway Arts Festival.
- This will manifest in the delivery of a cultural festival. As part of the best practice learning from the Phase 1 project, the group are keen to progress the potential to develop a festival that would have a similar audience to the Hay

<p>3.5</p>	<p>Festival. The group would anticipate developing the programme for the festival in 2021 with the aim to launch the festival in Spring 2022.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The facilitator will explore funding opportunities and seek to lever additional funding from, eg, the Tourism NI Events Fund and Mid Ulster Council's Events funding. • This element will include exploring commercial links with other clusters with a view to creating food and cultural experiences on an all island basis. <p>5. Upskilling</p> <p>Upskilling is an area that the group places significant importance on, highlighted through the successful participation on the TNI Kate Taylor Skills Development Programme in 2019. The cluster is keen to engage with a number of stakeholders to develop a quarterly training programme for the duration of the programme. The members anticipate that this will include key areas of digitalisation and sustainability.</p> <p>In addition, the cluster has been in contact with tour operators they regularly work with to ascertain if they would deliver an annual Market Update session.</p> <p>Following the update the members would undertake a series of product development sessions to create innovative new packages that can be developed and brought to market. The group will also follow up with other public and private sector stakeholders to explore opportunities to develop this further.</p> <p>It is anticipated that the skills development programme will include 4 workshops per annum, 10 over the duration of the project.</p>
<p>4.0</p>	<p>Other Considerations</p>
<p>4.1</p>	<p>Financial, Human Resources & Risk Implications</p>
	<p>Financial: This cluster of businesses are seeking support of £12,500 from Mid Ulster Council to help support this application to Invest NI and to deliver elements of this programme. This would translate as :</p> <p>2021 - £5,000 2022 - £5,000 2023 - £2,500</p> <p>If this application Invest NI will provide £170,000 of support to help deliver this programme over the next two and a half years. The bulk of this support will cover facilitation costs.</p>
	<p>Human: Council officers will continue to support the management and development of this cluster.</p>
	<p>Risk Management: The current Covid pandemic is a clear risk to the programme however the tourism industry both locally and nationally at the behest of TNI and TI continue to keep the shop window open and to network with key stakeholders. Businesses are continuing to develop their business plans and promotions in the background and will be ready to relaunch when current restrictions are lifted.</p>

	<p>The members of this cluster have attended Britain & Ireland MarketPlace, Virtual Meet the Industry, Irish Tour Operators Workshop in the last three weeks and are planning to attend Meet the Buyer this spring.</p> <p>They have shown amazing resilience during this pandemic and have taken time out to reinvent and pivot their businesses rather than giving up.</p>
4.2	Screening & Impact Assessments
	Equality & Good Relations Implications:
	Rural Needs Implications: The group has identified Responsible and Sustainable Tourism as a key element, which must be integrated across each work stream and will be incorporated across activities. Tourism NI as a key strategic issue is highlighting this for the future of tourism in NI.
5.0	Recommendation(s)
5.1	Council to support this cluster in their request for financial support of £12,500 over the next three years.
6.0	Documents Attached & References
6.1	N/A