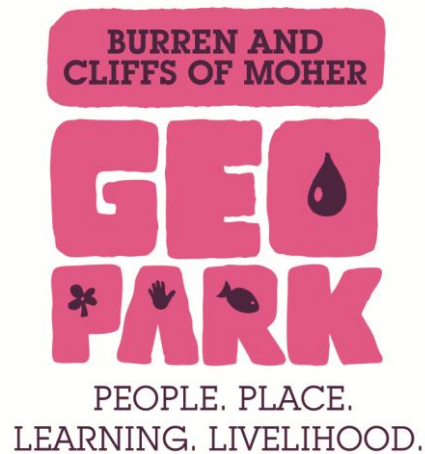


ACTION B1 - TOURISM ENTERPRISES EVALUATION

FOR THE

GEPARK LIFE PROJECT LIFE 11 ENV/IE/922

BURREN & CLIFFS OF MOHER GEOPARK



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PART 1 INTRODUCTION

Action B1 relates to tourism enterprises and aims to strengthen the capability of enterprises in the use of natural resources, resource efficiency, use of renewable energy, energy efficiency, waste reduction, reduction of the carbon footprint. The action is planned to be implemented by four steps:

1. Improving environmental impact
2. Improving economic impact
3. Resource planning for the enterprise
4. Implementing the plan

In early 2013, JC Action Coaching Ltd (T/A DeBrún Communications) completed a report on the evaluation and benchmarking of the sustainable tourism project in the Burren Region. The report combined perspectives on marketing, training and certification experiences over the period 2009-13 into the context of an overall sustainable destination strategy approach. It positioned them within the EU Life Tourism for Conservation project of the Geopark and detailed specific indicators and measurement tools within the European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS) which could be adapted to measure performance in the Geopark. This report may be viewed on [here](#).

The recommendations from that report formed the basis of a consecutive work programme between February 2013 and March 2014, also undertaken by JC Action Coaching Ltd (T/A DeBrún Communications). The outcomes of that work programme were evaluated and explored in our completion report dated March 2014, which can be viewed [here](#).

A further work programme for the 12 month period April 2014-March 2015 evolved in turn from the recommendations of this 2014 completion report. This work programme was agreed with the Geopark LIFE Management Team and updates were provided periodically to the GeoparkLIFE Steering Group. An interim progress report was completed in October 2014, the main findings of which are incorporated into this document.

The work programme continues to be considered under the following key strands, which are discussed in further detail in the main body of this report (Part 3):

1. Performance to date against objectives for LIFE programme – Action B1
2. Development of baseline information
3. ETIS Sustainable Tourism Indicators
4. Policy & Stakeholder Practice
5. Geopark Sustainable Code of Practice for Tourism
6. Training Programme
7. Marketing
8. Burren Ecotourism Network
9. Measurement & Evaluation

PART 2 OVERVIEW OF KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

For ease of reference, the recommendations for each strand of the programme, and in particular for the next 12 month period, are summarised in Table 2.1 below.

Now at the mid-way point of the GeoparkLIFE programme, the programme created under Action B1 Tourism Enterprises has made significant progress against its core objectives. It has benefitted from and capitalised on the momentum that existed in the Geopark's work with tourism enterprises prior to the commencement of the GeoparkLIFE programme. There are positive outcomes to report under nearly all of the strands discussed in Part 3 of this report.

At the same time, it is our view that Action B1 is at a very important juncture at this mid-way point in the programme, and it is clear that a revision of approach may be required in certain key areas. Certain impeding factors and unanticipated outcomes have come to light in recent months and these areas require collective attention and decisive action to ensure the core objectives of the B1 programme continue to be achieved and exceeded.

Therefore, the following overarching recommendations are made:

1. STRATEGIC PLANNING.

Planning and evaluation of the work programme should move from an annualised tactical approach, to a 3-year strategic planning approach. A comprehensive 3 year strategic plan would:

- a. Tightly define objectives and allocate adequate resources to actions under each objective.
- b. Eliminate time-consuming projects and processes that are not in line with programme objectives.
- c. Provide certainty of resource (human and financial) to each element of the work programme, essential for effective planning and execution.

Ultimately, this would lead to the rationalisation and cohesion of objectives within Action B1 itself, and further between Action B1 and the other key actions of GeoparkLIFE, B2 and B3.

2. BURREN ECOTOURISM NETWORK

GeoparkLIFE aspires to its key B1 partner, the Burren Ecotourism Network, emerging as a strong, independent and self-sustaining network of sustainable enterprises. It has become clear that the current approach to partnership with the Network may in fact be counterproductive in this regard. In addition, the current structures within the B.E.N. itself may no longer be fit for purpose and are potentially inadequate to move it forward into a more sustainable future. We recommend that GeoparkLIFE

- a. works with B.E.N. to review existing decision-making structures, communication channels and work programmes.
- b. works with B.E.N. members to enable the group articulate a new, more relevant vision for the group.

- c. Takes a mature view of the relationship with the Network, and enables a true partnership engagement that allows the Network emerge as a strong, confident and independent partner within the destination.
- d. Invests significantly in the next 6 month period to ensure retention of existing members in the Network.

3. GEOPARK SUSTAINABLE CODE OF PRACTICE FOR TOURISM

Having now completed two years of the Geopark Sustainable Code of Practice for Tourism, significant questions have emerged around its effectiveness for the destination. In particular, questions have emerged around the usefulness of the toolkit, the onerous nature of the reporting requirements, the excessive amount of tools and templates, the benefit or otherwise of annual reporting, the need for a technology-based reporting and evaluation mechanism as well as other items. At the time of writing, there has not been an opportunity for the GeoparkLIFE team to fully consider these (the final evaluators report was received in late March). Prompt attention and decisive action is required in order to progress this area.

4. EUROPEAN TOURISM INDICATOR SYSTEM (ETIS)

Our 2014 report highlighted the benefits and considerations of seeking to embed the ETIS into the GeoparkLIFE programme. One year on, we feel that ETIS has the potential to be a most useful framework for the future development of the project, in particular for providing a context within which the current partnership of stakeholder groups can be solidified. For this to happen, a much greater understanding of ETIS as a management tool and basis for decision-making within sustainable destinations must be achieved within the Steering Group. In addition, as recommended last year, sufficient resources must be allocated to the implementation of ETIS if it is to become meaningful within the programme. We recommend that ETIS itself is named as a key strand of GeoparkLIFE, not within Action B1, but as an overarching framework for the entire programme (perhaps sitting best under E1 Project Management or C1 Monitoring). (See Section 3.3 for further discussion on ETIS).

Table 2.1 Summary of Recommendations from this report

SECTION	STRAND	RECOMMENDATIONS
3.1	Environmental, Social & Economic Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct a second B.E.N. Enterprise Survey in late April/early May 2015 that tracks the key indicators of GeoparkLIFE. Ensure the format of the survey enables comparison between the views of new members and existing members. • Through the B1 Working Group, invest time in creating a shared understanding of the desired outcomes of the 'Resource Planning' and 'Implementation indicators, leading in turn to a defined work programme for their achievement. • GeoparkLIFE to date has placed emphasis on environmental management techniques within enterprises. Investigate the potential for enhancing this baseline activity by introducing a complementary emphasis on socio-cultural aspects of sustainability within the destination.
3.2	Development of Baseline Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set continuous improvement targets for the component indicators (discussed in Section 3.2), using the outcomes of the 2014 Enterprise Survey as a baseline. • Following review of the 'Resource Planning' and 'Implementation' objectives of the B1 programme, identify the most appropriate baseline and therefore target for the Resource Planning
3.3	ETIS Sustainable Tourism Indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Echoing our recommendation from last year, we again emphasise the need to allocate a resource to the collation and analysis for all ETIS relevant data in order to make it meaningful as a tool for analysis and decision-making. • Once data has been collated and a true picture of the sustainability of the destination emerges, invest in embedding ETIS as a framework for co-operative discussion and decision-making within the Steering Group.
3.4	Policy & Stakeholder Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete ETIS data collation and analysis and include as a key item on agenda of October 2015 Steering Committee meeting. • Circulate summary report, highlighting key questions and considerations, to all Steering Group members by early September 2015.
3.5	Geopark Sustainable Code of Practice for Tourism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As a matter of immediate priority, undertake an indepth and critical review of the Code of Practice spirit, training programme, reporting and evaluation processes. Engage the B1 Working Group and a wide range of tourism enterprises in this review. • This review group may be tasked to a) assess the desirability of a Code of Practice Manual and online

		<p>learning resource (including a cost/benefit analysis), b) review and refine the Code of Practice templates and toolkit in good time i.e. completely signed off by June 2015 c) assess the possibility of an online reporting and monitoring system for evaluation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study the conclusions and recommendations of the external evaluator, paying particular attention to the recommendation for a technology-based reporting and evaluation solution. Would investment in such a solution enable transferability of the model to other destinations? • Continue with the GeoparkLIFE awards event and associated case studies as a means of recognizing and sharing best practice in sustainable tourism within the LIFE programme.
3.6	Training Programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The outcomes of the review recommended in Section 3.5 must inform the development of any further training programme. • Discuss the inclusion of business development and business planning supports in future training programmes with the B1 Working Group, and develop a proposal for same for consideration by the wider Steering Group. • Ideally, promptly establish the training contribution that can be made in future years of the programme by GeoparkLIFE partners and, following this, agree a budget for training development and delivery. • Include training programme planning in the overall 3 year strategic plan, with a clear articulation now of how each training event fits to the overall desired outcomes of Geopark LIFE.
3.7	Marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommendations are likely to form part of a review of Marketing & Communications by the Communications Co-ordinator and the B.E.N. Marketing Committee. Observations in this regard are contained on P. 20 of this report.
3.8	Burren Ecotourism Network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As with other categories discussed in this report, the development of a 3-5 year plan for B.E.N. as a stand-alone organisation is recommended. This would include strong measures on vision, objectives, financial sustainability and marketing. • A move away from the current 'parent-child' dynamic between GeoparkLIFE and B.E.N., towards a 'parent-young adult' dynamic would perhaps be most conducive to ensuring the long-term sustainability of the Network itself. This would require a willingness on the part of GeoparkLIFE to relinquish some control, resources and recognition to the Network. It would also require a willingness on behalf of the Network to take responsibility for its own financial sustainability and work programme.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A certain ‘floundering’ has been noted in recent months. For this reason, a strong re-articulation of the Network’s vision and purpose is recommended, together with considerable investment in retaining current members through face-to-face meetings and dialogue. • B.E.N. itself can be supported in re-assessing the robustness of its governance, executive structures and working groups (as well as the extent of the activity programme) in terms of achieving its own objectives.
PART 5	Measurement & Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieve buy-in to the measurement and evaluation methodology described in Part 5 of this report, and use as a framework for the remainder of the project. If agreement is not possible, refine this measurement and evaluation methodology to a point where it can be agreed and accepted for the remainder of the project. • Agree a template of annual reporting by all relevant stakeholders built around the above criteria and measurement variables by end May 2015 and establish a formal calendar of reporting. • Ensure that this template is relevant to the Layman’s Report required in 2017 as well as any other reporting requirements of GeoparkLIFE (e.g. B2 and B3).

PART 3 EVALUATION OF ACTIVITIES April 2014 – March 2015

3.1 Environmental, Social & Economic Objectives - performance to date against objectives for LIFE Programme – Action B1

2014 Recommendation: Retain the four indicator components (environmental , economic, resource planning and implementation) as proposed in the Geopark LIFE application as key indicators for Action B1 throughout the programme.

A survey of enterprises who participated in the Code of Practice Training 2013-14 was conducted in May 2014. The outcomes were encouraging overall and are documented below:

OVERALL INDICATOR FOR B1: 100 enterprises to complete a training programme of 2000 training days.

Overall Performance Year 1: 52 enterprises had the opportunity to participate in a total of 504 training days between October 2013 and March 2014.

Overall Performance Year 2: 57 enterprises had the opportunity to participate in a total of Code of Practice training days between October 2014 and March 2015.

These figures are discussed in more detail in Section 2.6 Training Programme.

COMPONENT INDICATORS

Environmental Component: the use of environmental management techniques by the tourism enterprises, comparing pre-training to post-training.

- 45% felt that the training programme had *significantly enhanced* their awareness of environmental management techniques and resources.
- 52% felt that the training programme had *somewhat enhanced* their awareness of environmental management techniques and resources. (i.e. a total of 97% reporting an enhancement of some level)
- 44% have measured and recorded specific savings since before the programme began while a further 20% were already doing this before the programme (36% however did not record any specific savings).
- 80% found establishing baselines was a useful management tool; 5% found that it wasn't. 8% did not manage to establish a baseline at all. A further 8% were new this year and so could not establish a baseline yet.
- 87% of enterprises felt that they had lessened their environmental impact as a result of the programme.

- 97% found the Code of Practice to be a useful and effective standard of environmental good practice in the Geopark.
- 44% of enterprises currently hold independent certification; 89% would like to maintain or obtain certification in the future.

Economic Component: **attitudes and beliefs of enterprise managers and owners as to whether or not their business has been strengthened as a result of the programme.**

- 66% of participating enterprises felt that *local awareness* of their business had increased somewhat as a result of their participation in the Network while 11% felt it had increased significantly.
- 57% of participating enterprises felt that *national awareness* of their business had increased somewhat as a result of their participation in the Network while 5% felt it had increased significantly.
- For 72% of enterprises, 2013 saw an increase in business on the previous year; for 19% their business was unchanged versus 2012 and 8% were down on 2012.
- 72% of enterprises expect an increase in business in 2014, 5% expect a decrease in business, while 10% expect no change.
- 77% were either *very confident* or *fairly confident* in the long-term sustainability of their tourism enterprise.
- 79% felt that their business had been generally strengthened as a result of the programme.

Resource Planning Component: **the number of enterprises preparing new business plans and the extent to which the environmental themes are integrated into those plans.**

- 54% of enterprises currently have a business plan (of any sort), 46% do not. Only 17% of respondents indicated that environmental or sustainable themes were integrated into their business plans.

Implementation Component: **the number of enterprises undertaking some new activity as a result of the programme, with descriptions of these activities.**

- 42% (14) felt they had engaged in new commercial activity as a result of their participation in B.E.N.; 58% (19) had not. 16 businesses (33%) skipped this question.
- When asked about the use of various environmental management tools in their business pre- and post-training:

OVERVIEW OF ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT TOOLS PRE-AND POST-TRAINING

	a) already existed pre-training –	b) exists now post-training –	Total Respondents –
– Waste Measurement & Monitoring System	41.67%	61.11%	36
– Water Measurement & Monitoring System	24.24%	75.76%	33
– Water Protection Management Plan	39.39%	60.61%	33
– Energy Measurement & Monitoring System	35.14%	64.86%	37
– A documented Environmental Policy	32.50%	70.00%	40
– A current Environmental Action Plan	22.50%	80.00%	40
– A documented Green Purchasing Policy	31.58%	73.68%	38
– A Sustainable Transport information section on your website	22.22%	77.78%	36
– A Leave No Trace message on your website	16.67%	83.33%	

2015 Recommendations:

Conduct a second B.E.N. Enterprise Survey in late April/early May 2015 that tracks the key indicators described above. Ensure the format of the survey enables comparison between the views of new members and existing members.

Through the B1 Working Group, invest time in creating a shared understanding of the desired outcomes of the 'Resource Planning' and 'Implementation indicators, leading in turn to a defined work programme for their achievement.

GeoparkLIFE to date has placed emphasis on environmental management techniques within enterprises. Investigate the potential for enhancing this baseline activity by introducing a complementary emphasis on socio-cultural aspects of sustainability within the destination.

3.2 Development of baseline information

2014 Recommendations: Conduct an Enterprise Survey in May 2014 (following completion of all Code of Practice training and evaluation) to establish baseline measurements for the four component indicators of B1.

Aggregate the baseline data figures submitted by B.E.N. Enterprises to demonstrate actual contribution to environmental and conservation objectives.

The Enterprise Survey was indeed conducted in May 2014, the key outcomes of which have already been outlined in Section 3.1. These outcomes are effectively the baseline for each indicator and an appropriate target for improvement can be defined.

With regard to the aggregation of baseline data figures, our anticipation that this would emerge from collating the individual baselines established by businesses was not met. Some difficulties in the establishment of baselines within businesses, as well as the feasibility of comparing baselines across businesses, have emerged. Further work is required in this area if aggregate baseline figures are to be established.

2015 RECOMMENDATIONS

Set continuous improvement targets for the component indicators (discussed in Section 3.2), using the outcomes of the 2014 Enterprise Survey as a baseline.

Following review of the 'Resource Planning' and 'Implementation' objectives of the B1 programme, identify the most appropriate baseline and therefore target for the Resource Planning and Implementation components.

3.3 EU ETIS Sustainable Tourism Destination Indicators

2014 Recommendation: The GeoparkLIFE team should consider the opportunities and challenges associated with implementing the various aspects of the ETIS toolkit. Where it is decided to proceed with ETIS-level surveys and analysis, it is recommended that sufficient resources (particularly contractor and partner time) are allocated to these projects in advance and are integrated into a formal calendar of activity for the GeoparkLIFE team.

The GeoparkLIFE Steering Committee decided to continue as a pilot destination for ETIS at European level and to continue to utilise the ETIS as a framework for development and decision-making. This was driven by the belief that the outcomes of the analysis envisaged by the ETIS would be relevant to the core programme of GeoparkLIFE, and more particularly, to plans for the 'AfterLIFE' programme into 2018 and beyond.

The three levels of primary analysis required by ETIS are:

1. Visitor Survey
2. Residents Survey
3. Enterprise Survey (encompassing all enterprises in the destination, not just members of the B.E.N.)

In addition, the ETIS framework would also involve accessing secondary data held by the national tourism authority, Fáilte Ireland (in relation to visitor surveys and tourism planning), and the local authority, Clare County Council (in particular the heritage, environmental, enterprise and planning sections).

Let us consider each of the 3 primary data collection elements in turn:

3.3.1. Visitor Survey 2014

A key contribution of one of the GeoparkLIFE partners, Fáilte Ireland, was the design, implementation and analysis of a comprehensive Visitor Survey in September 2014. This survey examined not only the key ETIS indicators identified as relevant to our destination, but also a number of indicators relevant to Action B2 Monuments and Habitats. The findings of this survey may be used to populate the ETIS dataset.

3.3.2. Resident Survey

It was hoped to be able to co-operate with the local secondary school, Mary Immaculate Comprehensive in Lisdoonvarna, in order to conduct a Resident Survey. The school has an excellent reputation for success and participation in the national Young Scientists Exhibition and had entered a project to study the attitudes of residents toward tourism in their area. Unfortunately, the project was not selected for the finals of the Young Scientists and so did not proceed in the anticipated timeframe. However, discussions are ongoing with the Lead Teacher with regard to this project and it is hoped that the resident survey will still take place in co-operation with the school in Quarter 2, 2015. The sample ETIS Resident Survey template is being used and may be amended to take into consideration any additional research interests of the students/school. It would be advantageous to

supplement this quantitative survey with a qualitative focus group exercise, and also to repeat the entire process in late 2017.

3.3.3 Enterprise Survey

The GeoparkLIFE Management Team considered undertaking an enterprise survey of the entire destination (as opposed to a survey of just the B.E.N. Enterprises). It was decided not to proceed with this survey in 2014 as it was felt that businesses without a relationship with GeoparkLIFE would be reluctant to complete the survey. In addition, it was felt that the general tendency towards increased regulation, self-reporting and utility charges would negate against businesses voluntarily disclosing information on their waste, water, wastewater and energy data. Moreover, GeoparkLIFE does not have a remit to influence the general business community within the region and so the insight for the programme that may be gained from the survey exercise is uncertain. It is a decision for the GeoparkLIFE Steering Committee to consider whether there is merit in undertaking such a survey in 2015, bearing in mind that its value will lie in the project's ability to use it as a baseline i.e. a similar survey would have to be completed in 2017.

3.3.4 Secondary Data from within stakeholder organisations

The data to support several ETIS indicators can be gathered from stakeholder organisations. This element of ETIS implementation was not completed in the 12 month period under review. A key issue flagged in our previous report was the need to assess whether or not the additional data analysis demanded by ETIS could be managed within current resources. It must be acknowledged that in 2014 there was insufficient resource available to gather data from all of the available sources, to collate it and, most importantly, to analyse it.

3.3.5 ETIS as a measurement framework and tool for destination decision-making

As highlighted in Part 2 of this report, ETIS has the potential to unify the engagement of the various stakeholder groups to GeoparkLIFE within a joint discussion and decision-making framework. It can yield very comprehensive information that will form the basis of better, more informed, more inclusive decision-making and planning. An example that arose during the past year may be used to illustrate how this might work in practice:

Once we fill in all the data from this year's surveys and other sources, we create a report of how we're doing against our key criteria. This report will reveal criteria where the destination is performing very well (e.g. sustainable tourism management in enterprises) and others where the destination might be deemed to have a way to go (e.g. transport impact or climate change). This picture can be shared with the Stakeholder group (the partners) who together assess the implications of where we are on our journey towards being a sustainable destination. The 'red flags' should be obvious and should point the group towards areas they would want to prioritise or improve.

ETIS focuses on collective responsibility and collective actions. So let's say our visitor survey is showing us that we have 2% of all visitors arriving at the destination using sustainable transport means. Do we regard this as poor, average, acceptable, the best that can be done? We record the decision. If we regard it as poor, where would we like this % to be at in 2-3 years time? Let's say we set ourselves a target that by 2018 5% of all visitors arriving at the destination would do so using sustainable transport. That's specific and measurable. Then the stakeholder group figures out a strategy that

would enable us to achieve that. This strategy would include what we are currently encouraging businesses to do in terms of incentivisation, visitor education and awareness, improvement in facilities and staff knowledge. But it would also include actions by other stakeholders like the local authority, the Geopark, bus and coach companies, cycling providers, car hire companies, E-cars, Department of Transport, Fáilte Ireland etc. By having the various stakeholders around the table together, the idea behind ETIS is that responsibility is shared and actions of autonomous groups are connected under a cohesive strategy feeding a single target (i.e. an increase from 2% to 5% over 3 years). The strategy would then need to be broken down into tangible actions with clearly defined timelines and responsibilities i.e. projects and action plans.

2015 Recommendations :

Echoing our recommendation from last year, we again emphasise the need to allocate a resource to the collation and analysis of all ETIS relevant data in order to make it meaningful as a tool for analysis and decision-making.

Once data has been collated and a true picture of the sustainability of the destination emerges, invest in embedding ETIS as a framework for co-operative discussion and decision-making within the Steering Group.

3.4 Measurements relating to policy and stakeholder practice

2014 Recommendations:

Seek to proactively enhance the connection and interface between the tourism enterprises and the relevant public bodies.

Action B1 relates specifically to tourism enterprises that are members of the B.E.N.. The experiences, attitudes and behaviours of the enterprises that engage in Geopark LIFE should be informative in terms of considerations around the policies and practices of other stakeholders, specifically the Geopark LIFE partners.

As outlined in the previous section, the ETIS framework highlights that enterprise practice is just one contributory factor to the achievement of a sustainable destination. True sustainability can only be achieved through the interaction between those enterprises and public bodies as well as on the practice and policies of public bodies themselves. Key indicators required by the ETIS are, for example:

- Existence of a multi-year sustainable tourism strategy which includes implementation, monitoring, development, control and evaluation systems
- Existence of an accessibility policy that requires tourist sites and facilities to be accessible to all.
- Existence of policies to protect cultural heritage
- Policies and regulations relating to water conservation and management
- Policies and incentives relating to energy conservation, renewable technologies
- Policies and incentives around waste generation and waste management
- Sewage treatment
- Transport impact and sustainable transport development
- Climate change mitigation and adaptation policies and strategies

The direct connection between the policies and practices of public bodies on the one hand and the tourism enterprises on the other has been enhanced over the course of the programme to date. There has been an increased representation of tourism enterprises at the Steering Group and Advisory Group level. Improved communication to the enterprises around the full extent of GeoparkLIFE programme has also been helpful. Undoubtedly, there is significant scope for further enhancement in this area, and this should remain a key priority of the overall GeoparkLIFE programme.

2015 Recommendations:

Complete ETIS data collation and analysis and include as a key item on agenda of October 2015 Steering Committee meeting.

Circulate summary report, highlighting key questions and considerations, to all Steering Group members by early September 2015.

3.5 Geopark Sustainable Code of Practice for Tourism

2014 Recommendations:

Retain the Geopark Sustainable Code of Practice for Tourism as a core standard for all B.E.N. enterprises, and seek to embed its spirit and ethos in the operations of the tourism enterprises.

Seek quotes for future evaluations based on the templates and tools devised this year.

Work on enhancing co-operation with independent third-party certification and standards organisations that are relevant to tourism enterprises in the Geopark territory.

Create communications materials for enterprises that adopt the Geopark Sustainable Code of Practice e.g. window stickers, jacket badges, web certificates and/or wall plaques.

In the Enterprise Survey conducted in May 2014, following the first year of its implementation, 97% of respondents found the Code of Practice to be a useful and effective standard of environmental good practice in the Geopark. There was very positive feedback on the practical nature of the supporting training programme and its ability to deliver true attitudinal and behavioural change amongst the enterprises – 87% felt they had lessened their environmental impact as a result of the programme. While the cost associated with independently evaluating the Code of Practice submissions was cause for consideration, there was strong feeling at both enterprise and stakeholder level that independent verification of submission was essential.

Recommendations for improvement on the process were received from the external evaluator in April 2014, many of which were acted upon. One of the key recommendations was the rationalisation of the toolkit documents and templates that enterprises are being asked to use to return data figures. While we attempted to progress this project between May and September 2014, priorities and pressures of key stakeholders meant that this work was not completed in the necessary timeframe. This had considerable knock-on effect in terms of the quality of submissions in January 2015.

At the time of writing, the first evaluation reports from the 2015 Code of Practice submissions are being distributed to the participating enterprises and the evaluation report of the external evaluator has been received. The second year of the process has highlighted significant areas of concern, that warrant priority attention by the B1 Working Group in the next 2 month period.

A summary of some of the key items of concern are:

- There is little appetite amongst enterprises to engage in Environmental Management training annually. It may be that the key benefit of the Code of Practice programme lies in Year 1, when significant impacts can be recorded within businesses.
- The time commitment required to attend training is a barrier to participation, particularly given the extremely busy meeting and activity schedule which exists within the Network.
- As identified last year, there is a critical need for a professional review of templates and tools being given to businesses as a support to the Code. The toolkit was not adequately

reviewed or rationalised during the past year, leading to a toolkit that was at best confusing and at worst prohibitive in its use.

- The Year 2 submissions did not show evidence of internalization of recommendations from Year 1. They did not demonstrate that businesses had in fact improved their sustainability.
- There remained an absence of targets, periodic monitoring and annual progression (either in terms of monitoring or reporting).
- It is difficult to isolate the extent to which a) poor tools b) poor reporting or c) poor practice influence the overall outcomes.
- The reporting structure is overly onerous on businesses and also overly onerous (and costly) on evaluators.
- The Code of Practice risks becoming a replica of existing certification schemes, which is not a desired outcome of Geopark LIFE.
- GeoparkLIFE did not create communications and marketing materials around the Code of Practice for use by enterprises.

Having said this, the GeoparkLIFE Code of Practice Awards, introduced in December 2014, proved to be a very effective mechanism for highlighting areas of best practice within the Code from amongst the members, and for disseminating this practice amongst the wider membership. The current creation of case studies around the winning entries in each category will further enhance the dissemination of this practice amongst Burren enterprises and well as farther afield.

2015 RECOMMENDATIONS

As a matter of immediate priority, undertake an indepth and critical review of the Code of Practice spirit, training programme, reporting and evaluation processes. Engage the B1 Working Group and a wide range of tourism enterprises in this review.

This review group may be tasked to a) assess the desirability of a Code of Practice Manual and online learning resource (including a cost/benefit analysis), b) review and refine the Code of Practice templates and toolkit in good time i.e. completely signed off by June 2015 c) assess the possibility of an online reporting and monitoring system for evaluation.

Study the conclusions and recommendations of the external evaluator, paying particular attention to the recommendation for a technology-based reporting and evaluation solution. Would investment in such a solution enable transferability of the model to other destinations?

Continue with the GeoparkLIFE awards event and associated case studies as a means of recognizing and sharing best practice in sustainable tourism within the LIFE programme.

3.6 Training Programme

2014 Recommendations:

Complete a formal training evaluation based on the evaluations of each workshop, the overall post-training evaluations of participant businesses and the experiences of the training leaders in the LAPN.

Invest time and resources into refining templates and presentation of Geopark LIFE training materials.

Write a training programme manual for Geopark Sustainability Code of Practice training that can be refined annually during the GeoparkLIFE programme.

Include business development and business planning supports in future training programmes.

Promptly establish the training contribution that can be made in future years of the programme by GeoparkLIFE partners and, following this, agree a budget for training development and delivery.

These recommendations provided the context for training provision in 2014 and remain valid for the upcoming periods also.

Overall Provision & Participation

Between October 2013 and March 2014, a total of 52 enterprises took part in a Sustainability Training Programme, and a total training provision in Year 1 of Geopark LIFE of 504 training days (or about 25% of total target delivery for the overall programme).

For the period October 2014 and March 2015, GeoparkLIFE built on this to develop and co-ordinate the delivery of two parallel training strands:

- Geopark Sustainable Code of Practice for Tourism training (targeted primarily at a cohort of 12 enterprises wishing to join the Burren Ecotourism Network, but also open to existing BEN members)
- Structured Networking & Referrals Training/Facilitation (targeted primarily at a cohort of 45 existing B.E.N. members who had completed Code of Practice training in 2013-14, but also open to aspiring members).

Training Strand	Number of Training Events	Total Training Day Provision
Geopark Sustainable Code of Practice for Tourism	11	212
Structured Networking & Referrals Programme	15	515
OVERALL TOTALS	26	727

Completion Rate – Aspiring Members 2014-15

Of the 12 businesses that commenced the programme, 8 (66%) submitted Code of Practice documentation for external review and returned a signed Declaration of Compliance with the Code of Practice.

Of the 4 businesses that did not complete the Code submission, 3 enterprises cited general business and time pressures (Burren Hostel, Caherconnell Stone Fort, Michael Cusack Centre), while the fourth business (Burren Hotels) was subject to unexpected sale. All 4 of these enterprises have become Business Friends of B.E.N. for 2015, and have expressed intention to complete the Code of Practice requirements over the course of 2015 and apply for membership in early 2016.

Participation Rate – Existing Members 2014-15

While the Geopark Sustainable Code of Practice for Tourism programme 2014-15 was open to all members of B.E.N., it is clear that there was not a great general demand from this cohort to repeat elements of this training. There was reasonable participation at two workshops that had not previously been offered: Visitor Management & Education and Contributing to Conservation in the Burren. Overall about half of this cohort attended at least one Code of Practice Training workshop, with none attending more than 3 workshops.

This must be seen in the context of a very full schedule of Networking & Referrals programme, which enjoyed strong participation, as well as a very full schedule of committee and general network meetings. (See Section 3.8 for more detail on full B.E.N. activity).

Of the 41 existing enterprises who remained members of B.E.N. into 2015, 39 submitted Code of Practice documentation for Year 2 of the Geopark LIFE programme (compared with 45 last year). Therefore, there were a total of 47 Code of Practice submissions in 2015.

Partner Contribution

Through the GeoparkLIFE programme, Clare County Council representatives were again able to draw on the resources and expertise of members of the Local Authority Prevention Network (LAPN) to develop and deliver parts of the training programme relating to resource management. In total, 5 of the training events had LAPN involvement, led by the Environment Section in Clare County Council. A further 3 sessions were again provided by GeoparkLIFE partner Fáilte Ireland, in the area of social media strategies for Networks and market segmentation strategies.

It remains the case that the availability of this resource from within agencies is not something that can be assumed is available every year. The preparation for programme delivery was certainly hampered by uncertainty regarding whether or not the service could be provided. Both Fáilte Ireland and Clare County Council were able to justify the time and resource allocation as part of their partner contribution to the GeoparkLIFE programme. However, in terms of transferability of practice for other destinations, the heavy demands on scarce resources within agencies would certainly be a barrier to the adoption of this model in other areas.

Financial Outlay

The total financial outlay for GeoparkLIFE of these training programmes and supports came to €22,717, broken down as follows:

- Venue Hire & Refreshments: €4744
- €5365
- Mentoring (Raquel Noboa): €640
- Social Media Training (Razorcoast): €1900
- Social Media Manual Development (Razorcoast): €1968
- FAM Trips x 4 (Bus Hire & Refreshments): €2000 (est)
- Intranet Resource Area Upgrade: €1100
- Evaluation: €5000

ITEM	AMOUNT €
Venue Hire & Refreshments	4744
External Trainers (Mary White, Maurice Bergin, Fidelma Ray, Brian Moore):	5365
Mentoring (Raquel Noboa):	640
Social Media Training (Razorcoast):	1900
Social Media Manual Development (Razorcoast)	1968
FAM Trips x 4 (Bus Hire & Refreshments):	2000(est)
Intranet Resource Area Upgrade:	1100
Evaluation:	5000
TOTAL	22717

Excluding evaluation services, the total financial outlay for GeoparkLIFE of training programmes in 2014 came to €9198, broken down as follows:

- Venue Hire & Refreshments: €6304 (€7304 less €1100 participant contribution which was paid to BEN – this contribution went towards refreshments/lunch for each day)
- External Trainers (Mary Mulvey, Fidelma Ray, Maurice Bergin): €1200
- Mentoring (Raquel): €587
- Folder (Design & Production): €1107
- Evaluation:

Training Format

Our report last year recommended an examination of the balance between group workshop training delivery and one-to-one mentoring as the most effective means of achieving the overall outcomes. This is important given that a significant cohort of the B.E.N. membership has now been involved in ongoing training over a number of years. At this point, we can certainly conclude that there is a preference for field-based, practical ‘events’ rather than training workshops – these prove to be more informative and more memorable for participants. The workshop format is somewhat ‘jaded’ for this cohort of business and there’s now a strong appetite for moving to another level of activity, perhaps more socio-culturally based rather than environmental-policy based. We can also conclude

that one-to-one mentoring is very effective, given the highly tailored nature of the activity. In terms of return on the training euro, it may well be considered as the most effective method.

Our intranet resource section was reviewed to be more intuitive and user-friendly, and proved this year to be an effective booking and communication mechanism. There is still further scope for enhancing this tool as a resource area and discussion forum.

While Year 1 of the programme had an almost exclusive emphasis on environmental management training, Year 2 combined environmental management training (mainly for new applicants) with networking/marketing training and facilitated events. This led to an exceptionally full calendar of activity with a wide variety of event format. For the remaining training cycles, it is recommended that there is a tight alignment of training content with overall GeoparkLIFE objectives, in particular in the space where these overlap with the objectives of members of the B.E.N.. Learning outcomes must relate to overall project objectives in a readily-understood and transparent fashion.

Potential areas for future training delivery

Without wishing to pre-empt the deliberations of the newly-formed B1 Working Group, some suggested areas for future training delivery that have already been discussed with GeoparkLIFE management are:

1. Climate Change Module (which would include a focus on energy and sustainable transport)
2. Heritage (Reading the Landscape) Module
3. Conservation Activity Support Module
4. Category-specific sustainable product development/enhancement modules:
 - a. Accommodation (essential for next cycle)
 - b. Food
 - c. Activity & Adventure (including Walking)
5. Networking & Referrals Programme

An alignment of a training programme such as this with a revised B.E.N. meeting structure could lead to a much more streamlined set of events that are tightly aligned to overall objectives and capacity.

2015 Overall Recommendations:

The outcomes of the review recommended in Section 3.6 must inform the development of any further training programme.

Discuss the inclusion of business development and business planning supports in future training programmes with the B1 Working Group and develop a proposal for same for consideration by the wider GeoparkLIFE Steering Group.

Ideally, promptly establish the training contribution that can be made in future years of the programme by GeoparkLIFE partners and, following this, agree a budget for training development and delivery.

Include training programme planning in the overall 3 year strategic plan, with a clear articulation now of how each training event fits to the overall desired outcomes of GeoparkLIFE.

3.7 Marketing Strategy

From an economic perspective, there are two key indicators for GeoparkLIFE:

1. *Average length of stay of visitors*
2. *Average daily spend of visitors*

The 2014 Visitor Survey undertaken by Fáilte Ireland should provide the baseline data for this which can then be tracked over the coming years. A complete evaluation of the overall marketing strategy may be outside the scope of this report at the time of writing, given that such a review is best completed by the GeoparkLIFE Communications Co-ordinator and the B.E.N. Marketing Committee. Much progress was made in the period under review in areas such as website communication and promotion, social media activity, the embedding of a Network Social Media strategy, formalised referrals systems and awards nominations.

For the purposes of this report however, the following observations are made:

- Perhaps more than any other area, the necessity for a 3-year strategic plan is most evident in the area of marketing. In the absence of a clearly articulated and shared 3-year plan, with a commitment of resources over the longer term, decision-making around marketing risks being reactive in nature. The alignment of marketing actions (and then resources and budget) with clearly defined objectives that are shared between GeoparkLIFE and BEN is the best means of ensuring the desired return on investment.
- Marketing activity should be planned about 12 months in advance, which requires more clarity on budget allocation.
- A focus on continuous innovation within our product categories is required.
- The Communications Co-ordinator role has a very wide brief, with the communications initiatives needed to promote the visitor destination often competing with the communications needs of the GeoparkLIFE project. A review of B.E.N.'s structures, as suggested in the next section, might provide the opportunity for clarifying roles and responsibilities.
- The support for the accommodation sector could be greatly improved and perhaps even prioritised over other sectors within BEN. A training and facilitation support programme that would equip the accommodation providers with the tools they need to a) market themselves b) market the destination and c) link with others enterprises is desirable.

3.8 Burren Ecotourism Network

2014 Recommendations:

Launch a formal discussion with the B.E.N. membership on how to ensure the long-term sustainability of the Network and its relationship with key stakeholders.

Identify future funding and resourcing options that can be managed independently of Geopark LIFE.

The 2014 recommendations above remain the two over-riding recommendations again for 2015. It may be acknowledged that more progress needs to be made against these two areas if B.E.N. is to emerge from GeoparkLIFE as a strong, vibrant and sustainable Network. While the Network remains more or less constant in terms of actual size (anticipated 47 members in 2015), it is strengthened in terms of the overall profile and reach of its members. In addition, its work programme and activity level has increased disproportionately to its membership and overall capacity. This is as a result of an enduring commitment and enthusiasm amongst businesses for the overall project, and an immense voluntary effort invested by members into the various aspects of the work programme. An analysis of participation undertaken by us in December 2014 on behalf of the B.E.N. Executive highlighted widespread and meaningful participation within the group, which is a considerable achievement at this stage in the Network Life Cycle.

At times, however, it is not clear how the various projects and programmes undertaken by the Network 'return' a tangible benefit to the Network or its members. A recent statement by a Network member is worthy of note here "all voluntary effort should result in one of three things for members: respect, credit or business". Notwithstanding the overarching objective of protecting the natural and cultural heritage of the area, these three elements are worthy of focus by the group.

This is becoming increasingly important for the Network given the very high risk of burnout and volunteer fatigue faced by Network members, who invest considerable time and effort into projects for which the return is sometimes ambiguous. In fact, the density of the schedule during the low-season is something that needs consideration by the Network due to the excessive demands for time and attention on member businesses. Table 3.8.1 illustrates an approximation of the number of events taking place within the B.E.N., mostly within the 6 month period of the off-season.

Table 3.8.1

Event Type	Estimated Number of Meetings
General B.E.N. Meetings	6 per year
B.E.N. A.G.M.	1 per year
Committee Meetings	4 main meetings per season, average for each committee: (Marketing, Conservation & Advocacy, Executive, Food, Activity & Adventure, each meeting 4 times, assuming member participation in one committee)
Marketing & Networking Events for whole Network	10 on average
Conservation & Advocacy Events for whole Network	5 on average
Code of Practice Training	11 events
Networking & Referrals Training	15 events
TOTAL MEETINGS & EVENTS	52

While not all members attend all events, the effort of even deciphering what is on and the purpose of each event is considerable. Moreover, the work generated as a result of meetings as well as the volume of emails and communications surrounding the events can also be overwhelming.

To date in 2015, issues of communication, leadership, partnership, ownership and decision-making have emerged with a growing recognition within the group itself and within GeoparkLIFE that a review of structures and vision may be necessary to ensure the long-term viability of the group. Some key recommendations in this regard are outlined below.

Recommendations 2015

As with other categories discussed in this report, the development of a 3-5 year plan for B.E.N. as a stand-alone organisation (rather than a component of GeoparkLIFE) is recommended. This would include strong measures on vision, objectives, financial sustainability and marketing.

Ideally, a move away from the current 'parent-child' dynamic between GeoparkLIFE and B.E.N., towards a 'parent-young adult' dynamic would be most conducive to ensuring the long-term sustainability of the Network itself. This would require a willingness on the part of GeoparkLIFE to relinquish some control, resources and recognition to the Network. It would also require a willingness on behalf of B.E.N. to take responsibility for its own financial sustainability and work programme.

A certain 'floundering' has been noted in recent months. For this reason, a strong re-articulation of the Network's vision and purpose is recommended, together with considerable investment in retaining current members through face-to-face meetings and dialogue.

B.E.N. itself can be supported in re-assessing the robustness of its governance, executive structures and working groups (as well as the extent of the activity programme) in terms of achieving its own objectives.

PART 4: PROPOSED WORK PROGRAMME 2014-2017

A broad work programme for Action B1 Tourism Enterprises is timelined in Table 4.1 below. The work programme follows a cycle of 1) recruitment 2) retention 3) Training Provision 4) Training Review & Refinement 5) Marketing and 6) Evaluation & Reporting.

Table 4.1

	Q2 14	Q3 14	Q4 14	Q1 15	Q2 15	Q3 15	Q4 15	Q1 16	Q2 16	Q3 16	Q4 16	Q1 17	Q2 17	Q3 17
Retention & Recruitment														
Training														
Review & Refinement														
Marketing														
Evaluation & Reporting														

Recruitment:

During 2014-15, it was agreed by the GeoparkLIFE Steering Group to shift the focus away from seeking to recruit 100 enterprises over the life of the programme (as originally envisaged), to consolidating the engagement with a smaller cohort of committed enterprises. Therefore, there will not be a strong push to recruit new members during 2015 with an emphasis instead on retaining current members. It appears that 4-5 additional businesses may be interested in joining the Network in any given year.

Retention:

Seek to retain all current network members. Allowing for retirement and changing business circumstances, it can be expected that 5-10 members will leave the Network in any given year. Retaining members at this current critical juncture will require an investment of time in meeting with, listening to and responding to members.

Training: An indepth review and analysis of the current Code of Practice training programme, support materials and online resources is required; develop and refine relevant business capacity and networking training supports; introduce training in the area of sustainable business planning, green purchasing, marketing for accommodation providers.

Marketing: Deliver an integrated marketing strategy, which is reviewed and refined annually in conjunction with the Marketing Committee of the Burren Ecotourism Network. This report assumes that the marketing budget is under discussion with the Communications Co-ordinator and Geopark LIFE manager.

Evaluation: All programmes and activities to include inbuilt evaluation mechanisms. In particular, the evaluation and data collection generated through primary survey research can be timetabled as follows:

	Q2 14	Q3 14	Q4 14	Q1 15	Q2 15	Q3 15	Q4 15	Q1 16	Q2 16	Q3 16	Q4 16	Q1 17	Q2 17	Q3 17
Visitor Survey														
Resident Survey														
BEN Survey														
Enterprise Survey														

Reporting: Overall experiences and effectiveness to be formally reported annually.

PART 5 MEASUREMENT & EVALUATION

The objectives of Action B1 are to maximise and/or optimise performance against each of the components outlined in Part 1 of this report. The methodology was summarised in the March 2014 report and is reproduced here. An additional column has been added to suggest responsibility for each area. Ideally, the methodology would remain constant over the life of the programme.

Key Component	Methodology	Measurement	Suggested Responsibility
Environmental	<p>Geopark Sustainable Code of Practice for Tourism:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Define the exact environmental management techniques and policies that are desirable - Provide training to enable businesses implement these techniques and policies - Secure independent review of the degree to which businesses adopt the Code. - Review annually and refine the training and mentoring programme to address the evolving needs of the businesses in respect of the Code. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Numbers of businesses participating in the Code of Practice training programme. 2. Number of training days made available to participating businesses. 3. Numbers of businesses demonstrating adoption of the Code of Practice a) annually and b) over time. 4. Numbers of businesses reporting a change in environmental management techniques as a result of training (including description of the change) 5. Documented case studies of good practice in tourism conservation and sustainable tourism management. 	<p>B1 Co-ordinator</p> <p>B1 Co-ordinator</p> <p>B1 Co-ordinator</p> <p>B1 Co-ordinator</p> <p>Communications Co-ordinator & B1 Co-ordinator</p>
Economic	<p>Sustainable Destination Marketing Strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Implementation of the marketing strategy as described in the May 2013 report to ensure continued and increasing marketing opportunities for the destination and individual 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Annual barometer of business owners and managers as to whether they believe their business has been strengthened as a result of the training programme. 2. Annual barometer of business 	<p>B1 Co-ordinator</p> <p>B1 Co-ordinator</p>

	<p>businesses within the destination.</p> <p>Implementation of the sustainable Code of Practice whereby businesses, particularly those that are buildings-based, will achieve cost-savings as a result of increased resource efficiency.</p>	<p>owners and managers as to whether they believe their business has been strengthened as a result of the marketing programme.</p> <p>Other useful indicators:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Number of trade opportunities made available to the Burren Ecotourism Network. 2. Quality and quantity of media coverage generated by the GeoparkLIFE programme. 3. Outcomes of annual visitor survey tracking changes in average spend, average length of stay and overall visitor satisfaction. 4. Case Studies of cost savings achieved that are directly attributable to improvement environmental management techniques. 	<p>Communications Co-ordinator</p> <p>Communications Co-ordinator</p> <p>B1 Co-ordinator & Communications Co-ordinator</p> <p>Communications Co-ordinator</p>
Resource Planning	<p>Create a template for sustainable business planning/business planning that is rooted in sustainable management techniques.</p> <p>Provide relevant training and mentoring.</p> <p>Acknowledge the need to allow time for business confidence in the long-term viability of tourism for conservation as a business framework.</p> <p>Ensure the marketing and communications strategy remains strong enough and sustainable enough to encourage businesses to conduct</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Number of enterprises creating new business plans 2. Number of these business plans that have express environmental components. 	<p>B1 Co-ordinator</p> <p>B1 Co-ordinator</p>

	long-term business planning that has integrated environmental themes.		
Implementation	<p>Ensure the Code of Practice training programme includes elements that heighten enterprise awareness of commercial and environmental opportunities that may be transferable across businesses.</p> <p>Maintain strong relationships between Geopark personnel and enterprise owners and managers in order to capture key information in these areas.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Number of enterprises undertaking some new commercial activity as a result of the programme (analysed annually with description of the activity). 2. Number of enterprises undertaking some new environmental activity as a result of the programme (analysed annually with a description of the activity). 3. Evaluation by the businesses of the effectiveness of this new activity in improving their business. 	B1 Co-ordinator & Communications Co-ordinator for all in this section.

A further evaluation of these results in the broader context suggested by ETIS may also be completed periodically during the project and again at the end of the project (assuming sufficient resources for same).

2015 Recommendations:

Achieve buy-in to this measurement and evaluation methodology and use as a framework for the remainder of the project. If agreement is not possible, refine this measurement and evaluation methodology to a point where it can be agreed and accepted for the remainder of the project.

Agree a template of annual reporting by all relevant stakeholders built around the above criteria and measurement variables by end May 2015 and establish a formal calendar of reporting.

Ensure that this template is relevant to the Layman's Report required in 2017 as well as any other reporting requirements of GeoparkLIFE (e.g. B2 and B3)