

St. Declan's Way Strategic Plan

A Path to Growth for a Sacred Irish Camino 2024 - 2028



Prepared by:
Tourism Development International
and the St Declan's Way Steering Committee

Lady's Abbey, Ardfinnan, Co Tipperary

Table of Contents

	Page		Page
Executive Summary	1	5.5 Promote Pilgrim Tourism	26
PART 1 Context	3	5.6 Market the Authenticity of the Trail – A Sacred Irish Camino	27
1.1 Project Background	4	5.7 Support the continued growth of Mount Melleray Abbey	28
1.2 TDI Engagement Objectives	5	5.8 Link Theme of Authenticity to Other Key Heritage Locations	29
1.3 TDI Approach	5	5.9 Increase Walker Numbers	31
PART 2 Product Demand	7	5.10 Improve Infrastructure Through Better Transport Links	31
2.1 The Walking Tourism Market & St. Declan’s Way	8	5.11 Encourage More Diverse Accommodation Options	31
2.2 Ireland’s Ancient East & St. Declan’s Way	9	5.12 Strengthen Community Connectivity Through More Frequent Walking Events	32
2.3 Ireland’s Outdoor Recreation Strategy & St. Declan’s Way	10	PART 6 Action Plan	33
2.4 St. Declan’s Way Case Study	12	6.1 Overview	34
PART 3 Best Practice in Comparable Trail Development	13	6.2 Detailed Action Plan	34
3.1 Background of Pilgrim Tourism	14	6.3 Funding Sources	36
3.2 Key Success Factors for Each Case	19	PART 7 Conclusion	37
PART 4 Strategic Challenges for St. Declan’s Way	20	Appendices	39
PART 5 Product Development: Vision & Recommendations	23	A1 Map of St. Declan’s Way	40
5.1 Recruit a Development Manager	24	A2 St. Declan’s Way Governance	41
5.2 Facilitate Further Off-Road Trail Development	25	A3 St. Declan’s Way - Walker Numbers & Expected Economic Impact	43
5.3 Improve Technology & Website	26	A4 Photo Credits	44
5.4 Broaden the Marketing Strategy	26		

Executive Summary

1. St. Declan's Way (SDW) is the longest Pilgrim Path in Ireland, at 115Km. It is also the oldest, being at least 1,500 years old. It follows the ancient path used by St Declan of Ardmore when he visited and paid homage to St Patrick in Cashel. In the following centuries, it was also used by monks to travel between monastic sites on the route like Ardmore, Ardfinnan and Lismore. (*see map of the trail in Appendix 1*)
2. The ambition is to create an Irish Pilgrim Path that mirrors the world-famous St James's Way, the Spanish Camino; a destination led product; between Cashel Co Tipperary and Ardmore, Co Waterford.
3. The majority of pilgrims who visit St James' Way in Spain walk the stages from Sarria to Santiago over 5/6 days. That distance of 115kms exactly matches SDW. So, we wish to compete on an Irish platform for this tourism business, both at home and overseas.
4. The current route is operational since 2021. It is approved as a long-distance walking trail by Sport Ireland and as a Pilgrim Path by the Heritage Council. It is currently generating about €2m per annum in tourism spend based on conservative estimates of 4,000 walkers p.a. and spend of €100 per day over 6 days (daily spend is based on Key Tourism Facts, Fáilte Ireland 2023). It is perhaps the best value for money route delivered so far in Ireland with 115kms of trail, opening up the old St Declan's Way track on land owned by 56 landowners, with the project delivered at a cost to date of €250,000. This implies a cost per km of €2,200, vs a cost of €30,000 / km for many other routes constructed so far in Ireland.
5. We estimate that based on current trends 20,000 pilgrims will be walking the trail each year in five years' time, with a tourism spend of €12m per annum (*see Appendix 3*). A Development Manager is required who will liaise with all stakeholders to manage the coordination and development of the trail. It is expected this will be a 5-year appointment at a total cost of €400,000.
6. St. Declan's Way travels through several towns and villages either involved in or expected to be involved in upcoming rural regeneration programmes (eg Cahir, Cappoquin, Ardmore). SDW can be a catalyst for each of these regeneration initiatives once tourism is considered a key aspect of the respective town and village development plans. It can improve footfall and create accommodation, dining and local employment opportunities.
7. The route is managed by the St. Declan's Way Steering Committee, a voluntary body with representatives from Tipperary and Waterford, from farming organisations, tourism providers, walkers, and enthusiasts. It has the support of Tipperary County Council, Waterford City and County Council, South Tipperary Development Company, and Waterford Leader Partnership. Funding to date for the trail has come from voluntary fund raising, philanthropy and the State via the ORIS funding stream.

8. The St. Declan's Way management structure requires strengthening, better support, leadership and board representation from the local authorities and other agencies like Munster Vales, Tipperary Tourism, Visit Waterford, and the Leader Companies.
9. About 70km (60%) of the route is on tarmac roads. The SDW steering committee is actively engaged in positive discussions with more landowners to allow further access to their lands, allowing walkers to enjoy the Irish countryside to a greater extent. As these will be new paths through farmland, these projects will require significant extra funding. The committee's target is to get a further 20km off road in the next 5 years at a cost of at least €1m.
10. An important enhancement of the St. Declan's Way product offering is to boost additional and more economical overnight accommodation. Other enhancements envisaged are transport links for walkers and their baggage, enhanced historical experiences, spiritual and contemplative opportunities, trail head experiences and events and environmental experiences. These will all depend upon extensive information sharing improvements via an upgraded website and significant management work to initiate and put these upgrades in place.

The Ireland's Ancient East product development plan and its Destination and Experience Development Plan focus on two themes that are at the core of St. Declan's Way being Ancient Routes and Ancient Senses.

St Declan's Way incorporates many Sustainable and Environmental themes. As a walking product, it is best experienced as a full 6 day walk on foot, with public transport being used to travel between trail heads where needed.

In summary, St Declan's Way is outgrowing volunteerism and in order to deliver on its' full potential, it requires professional support and direction at steering and executive level, together with more financial support.

Key Financial Headlines :

- Budget Time Horizon - *Years 2024 to 2028 (5 years)*
- Total Budget Cost (2024 to 2028) - **€2.4M**
- Expected Number of Pilgrims (2024-2028) - *59,000*
- Average Spend per Day - *€100*
- Average Number of Days per Pilgrim Journey - *6*
- **Total Tourism Spend (2024-2028) - €35.4m**



Liam Lynch Monument

PART ONE

Context



Cathedral and Round Tower, Ardmore

1. Context

1.1 Project Background

Initial efforts were made to open St. Declan's Way in 1994, when Ardmore Enterprise Co-Op received funding to reopen sections of the trail and to produce a map of the route. The project was marginally successful, but it lapsed, and a new group was formed in 2015 known as the St. Declan's Way Steering Committee. This group of 11 members from different areas along the trail have now worked together for over 8 years.

The St. Declan's Way Steering Committee has undertaken a range of initiatives since the committee formed in 2015 and as a voluntary group, their achievements are remarkable.

- The committee successfully negotiated permissive access agreements with over 50 landowners in Waterford and Tipperary between 2015 and 2018, handling all interactions as a voluntary group.
- They agreed variations to the route in the Knockmealdown mountain range with multiple parties including Sport Ireland, Mountaineering Ireland, Coillte and several large landowners.

- They secured several grants of ORIS funding between 2016 and 2019 to clear original sections of the trail which were completely overgrown and no longer passable. These grant allocations were as follows:
 - ORIS 2016 €150,000, managed by Waterford Leader Partnership
 - ORIS 2019 €25,000: Tipperary County Council
 - ORIS 2019 €54,000: Waterford City and County Council
- Contractors were sourced in conjunction with both Waterford City and County Council and Tipperary County Council to deliver each project.
- The committee successfully prepared the trail with the contractors and landowners in advance of the Sport Ireland audit in May 2021. The route was approved as a National Trail two months later that year.

In October 2021, it was announced that St. Declan's Way would join the Walks Scheme in Co Waterford and the introduction of the Walks Scheme, the relationship with the landowners has become more structured and their commitment to the trail is hugely impressive.

The committee continues to engage with a wide set of stakeholder groups including several state agencies, local businesses, and community groups.



Lismore Castle

1.2 Tourism Development International (TDI) Engagement Objectives

In February 2023, the St. Declan's Way Steering Committee engaged Tourism Development International (TDI) to prepare a Strategic Plan for St. Declan's Way to set out an overall vision for the walking trail, to document the challenges and opportunities facing the project and to bring all of the future priorities together in an action plan.

The objectives of the TDI engagement were:

1. Provision of management support and guidance to the Steering Committee.
2. Preparation of a Strategic Plan for St. Declan's Way designed in a manner that can both inform and facilitate continued engagement with community groups, businesses, landowners, and other stakeholders. This is with a view to building on existing partnerships and developing new relationships, supporting the future development of the trail.
3. To assist the Steering Committee by preparation of this strategy so it can inform and underpin engagement and induction of new members.

4. To facilitate the development of necessary policies and procedures for the committee to ensure the ongoing effective management of St. Declan's Way.

1.3 TDI Approach

The approach adopted by TDI in the preparation of this report has included:

A Situation Analysis (April 2023)

Followed by

A series of Progress Team Meetings & Workshops with the committee of St. Declan's Way

The Situation Analysis included:

- St. Declan's Way trail familiarisation and analysis of St. Declan's Way promotional material.
- In-depth consultations with members of the committee and key stakeholders.
- Consultations with Lismore Castle management team and Mount Melleray Cistercian community.
- A governance structure and funding overview.

- A review of Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland policies and plans.

Following in-depth discussions amongst the committee on the findings of the multi-staged Situation Analysis, further analysis was carried out under the following headings:

- A series of visits to all parts of the trail.
- Participation in the annual St. Declan's Way Pilgrimage on Holy Saturday, April 2023 walking from Goatenbridge to Lismore during an event organised by Knockmealdown Active during Pilgrim Paths Week (www.pilgrimpath.ie).
- Discussions with Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland and a full range of public and private sector stakeholders as well as with community groups.
- Studies of over 20 pilgrim paths / trails overseas with a focus on pilgrim trails with a similar mixture of pilgrim heritage, outstanding natural resources situated in rural and small-town communities between major centres of population.
- Examination of Fáilte Ireland's destination strategies for Tipperary and Waterford.

- Identification of the principal attributes of the St. Declan’s Way trail area that can be featured in a branding proposition to attract recreationists, pilgrims, and tourists from various sources.
- The key role of County Development Plans from a St. Declan’s Way perspective.
- Discussions around an appropriate future operating model for St. Declan’s Way.

The following strategies were examined as part of the process:

- County Development Plans - Co Tipperary and Co Waterford 2022 to 2028.
- Recreational Strategy for the Knockmealdown Area– Knockmealdown Active & SLR 2011.
- Munster Vales Strategic Tourism Development Plan 2020 - 2025.
- Embracing Ireland’s Outdoors - National Outdoor Recreation Strategy 2023-2027.
- Ireland’s Ancient East Regional Tourism Development Strategy 2023-2027.

During the period May to June 2023, there was a further set of consultations undertaken with the committee where the findings of the Situation Analysis and research were discussed. What follows in this report is an overview of how St. Declan’s Way can firmly position itself as an outstanding pilgrim trail for the benefit of local communities, and for national and international visitors.



Cappoquin House

PART TWO

Product Demand



Coronation Walk, Cahir

2. Product Demand

2.1 The Walking Tourism Market & St. Declan's Way

The UN World Tourist Organisation sees walking tourism as:

“one of the most popular ways to experience a destination”

See source document: Walking Tourism – Promoting Regional Development, Executive Summary | UNWTO

Walkers are explorers and are eager to know what is around the corner. Central to their motivation is absorbing the natural, cultural, historical, and culinary aspects of a place at a slower pace than most travellers, seeking meaningfulness, tranquillity and the ability to unwind.

Slow travel is on the rise internationally, where one destination is fully discovered and is experienced in a sustainable and experiential way. Slow travel trips take longer yet are carried out less often and contribute more to local economies than faster paced multi base breaks. The nature of long-distance walking lends itself to the slow travel concept and by extension, St. Declan's Way as a walking product fits clearly into this category.

As it has been central to the ancient practice of pilgrimage for 1,500 years, it is also classified as a pilgrim walking trail.

Younger generations of walkers tend to focus more on self-guided walking holidays, which are more flexible, cost efficient and allow more independence. They are more eager to participate in unusual tourism activities all of which creates opportunities for walking trails to attract this target market. The growth of the Camino de Santiago in Spain has shown the potential for attracting large numbers of international tourists of all age groups on an ongoing basis.

Supporting the development of walking tourism, St. Declan's Way incorporates many Sustainable and Environmental themes. It is best experienced as a full 6 day walk on foot, with public transport being used to travel between trail heads where needed. It is envisaged that new signage will increasingly be digital in nature, based on the use of QR codes vs larger traditional signs. Construction of trail furniture like stiles, seating and tables will continue to be low impact and our respect and appreciation of the woodlands, wetlands and Special Areas of Conservation through which we pass will increasingly be reflected in how the trail is marketed.

The UN World Tourism Organization sees a range of benefits that destinations can achieve by developing walking tourism.

- Walking tourism often provides local communities and businesses with financial benefits, for example spending in local facilities (homestays, tiny lodges) offering local products and food.
- It encourages communities to be involved in tourism by developing new business opportunities and creating employment for locals.
- Walking tourism leads to improvements in local living standards.
- Yields gained are used for investing in maintaining certain facilities for both tourists and residents (for example: trail maintenance, facilities, natural and cultural conservation), in education for locals (for example: guide training for locals, hospitality courses, marketing training, bookkeeping), or as investment outside the specific tourism market (for example: housing, education, access to healthcare).

Allied Market Research forecasts that the global adventure tourism market, of which walking tourism is a part, will significantly grow by 13.3% per year to \$1.6 billion in from 2018 to 2026, with European tourists central to this growth.

With Ireland already established as a destination of choice for British, French, and German tourists, developing walking trails like St. Declan's Way will become essential if some of this growing adventure tourism market is to be captured. Walkers of the Camino de Santiago are seeking out new walking trails to explore and St. Declan's Way is ideally placed to provide an Irish walking challenge of a similar nature.

2.2 Ireland's Ancient East & St. Declan's Way

Ireland's Ancient East has been developed by Fáilte Ireland as a branded visitor experience encompassing the rich heritage and cultural assets that Ireland has to offer. Fáilte Ireland's goal is to make Ireland's Ancient East the most personally engaging cultural destination in Europe by harnessing the living culture, the lush landscapes and hidden history of the area, opening it up for everyone. When this is achieved, it will support sustained economic growth and community wellbeing whilst valuing Ireland's heritage, history, and environment. The Ireland's Ancient East visitor experience is based on Ireland's rich built, natural, and cultural legacy, made accessible and delivered through storytelling and interpretation at key historical sites throughout the region.

The Ireland's Ancient East product development strategy focuses on a Destination and Experience Development Plan that is centred on two themes being Ancient Routes and Ancient Senses.

Ancient Routes

As an age-old pilgrim path with 1,500 years of history, St. Declan's Way is a leading experiential route, with the legacy of Ancient Ireland visible across the landscape as the walker travels from Cashel to Ardmore. From the Rock of Cashel and Lady's Abbey to the Round Tower of Ardmore, St Carthage's Cathedral in Lismore to St Declan's birthplace in Drumroe, there are ancient sites and settlements all along the walking trail. The route also crosses other ancient paths like Bóthar Na Naomh in Waterford, Rian Bó Phádraig in Waterford, and Tipperary, along with mass paths in Lough Kent in Tipperary.

Ancient Senses

St. Declan's Way passes castles, stately homes, present day and ancient monastic settlements. It travels through fields of corn, over mountains and through dairy farms to the sea. It passes alongside some of the largest rivers in these islands and over several days, it brings walkers through different towns, villages and hamlets giving them the chance to meet warm, welcoming locals right in the heart of ancient Ireland.

The trail presents the perfect opportunity to develop the strategic pillars of Ireland's Ancient East product development strategy by:

- **Unlocking Heritage Assets:** St. Declan's Way, an ancient monastic highway, provides a means of linking sites like the Rock of Cashel and the Round Tower in Ardmore through a slow travel, walking tourism product.



Cathedral and Round Tower, Ardmore

- **Revealing Natural Assets:** The sheer variety of terrain along the length of the trail reveals some of the very best in scenery that Ireland has to offer.
- **Introducing Legends:** St. Declan's Way has plenty of cultural and heritage opportunities to create Legends, to build up the mystery of those who lived in times past through music, storytelling, and immersive learning experiences. St. Declan himself is a key example of this, a saint who travelled widely, who is connected to multiple sites in Tipperary and Waterford and who could provide a unifying figure behind which the stories and experiences of a Legend can be developed.
- **Developing the Industry Base:** Further economic development in the tourism sector will be needed both by the public and private sector in the coming years to develop the accommodation and services sector in West Waterford and South Tipperary. Waterford City and County Council and Tipperary County Council now can work together to support a tourism product that will be of benefit to the rural community in both counties.

2.3 Ireland's Outdoor Recreation Strategy & St. Declan's Way

In setting out its' future development programme, the St. Declan's Way team are mindful of the key vision and mission statement as outlined in Ireland's National Outdoor Recreation Strategy 2023 - 2027 namely:

“Our Vision

Ireland's outdoors, a world of activities for all

Our Mission

To lead, guide and facilitate the sustainable development and management of outdoor recreation and increased participation, in order to realise social, health and economic benefits. We will do this whilst respecting the custodians of land and water, caring for the environment and promoting responsible recreation. ”

The importance of outdoor recreation and walking is highlighted in the strategy, and it clearly links to opportunities in the Walking Tourism market.

The benefits brought to society as a result of walking include:

- Physical and mental health.
- Social inclusion.
- Nature connectedness.
- Community cohesion.
- Environmental protection.
- Rural and economic development.

The development measures for an enhanced St. Declan's Way outlined in this report are designed to realise many of the above benefits.

Ireland's National Recreation Strategy for the next 5 years very clearly outlines the direction of travel of the National effort towards outdoor recreation.

The strategy centres around 6 key principles all of which are mirrored in the objectives within the strategic plan for St. Declan's Way.

Leadership - To create a more coordinated, cohesive approach at national and county level to ensure best use of our resources. Our ambition is to establish a clear leadership structure at national level and ensure funding is better.

Opportunities - To increase and support the number of people active in the outdoors, especially young people and under-represented groups.

Awareness - To create awareness of our outdoor recreation opportunities and how to enjoy them responsibly.

Expertise - To improve the knowledge, skills and expertise of stakeholders and partners. Our ambition is to equip those working in this area with the skills and expertise.

Environment - To protect the environment through better planning and development of outdoor recreation, in keeping with best practice management of landscape and habitats.

Access - To protect and improve access to the outdoors, for the benefit of all.

Whilst there are many aspects of St. Declan's Way that resonate with all the priorities of the National Recreational Strategy the areas of Leadership and Opportunities are critical as the collective effort in developing and supporting this trail is essential. The expertise of the group has already been well demonstrated with much done already on very limited resources.



2.4 St. Declan's Way Case Study

Evidence of St. Declan's Way alignment of its policies with the national strategy on outdoor recreation is seen in the Case Study section in the 'National Outdoor Recreational Strategy 2023-2027'.



Lismore



St Declan's Way

The goodwill of private landowners allows the people of Ireland to enjoy access to many areas for outdoor recreation. New opportunities for access to trails and green spaces are being developed through the efforts of many community groups working in partnership with local farmers.

St Declan's Way is a pilgrim walking route linking Cashel in County Tipperary and Ardmore in County Waterford. Knockmealdown Active is a multi-community group located in the Tipperary and Waterford boundary area. Together with the St Declan's Way committee and the Waterford LEADER Partnership, the group has successfully worked with over 45 local farmers to agree permissive access to allow the St Declan's Way to follow the ancient pilgrim's route across farm and rural lands.

The secret to success has been the respectful partnership between all stakeholders and the recognition that St Declan's Way is for the benefit for everyone in the local community.

St Declan's Way brings tourism and day-visitor spend to west Waterford and south Tipperary. It has the potential to become the "Irish Camino" pilgrim route as it follows the journey taken by St Declan from Ardmore to meet St Patrick in Cashel. Research shows that pilgrim walkers spend 2.3 times more than the average tourist, illustrating the potential economic benefit as these walkers progress along St Declan's Way, through Cashel, Cahir, Ardfinnan, Melleray, Lismore, Cappoquin and Ardmore.

In anticipation of the estimated 20,000 walkers who will enjoy St Declan's Way each year, a new hostel in the historic Mount Melleray Abbey was developed to accommodate walkers. The development was part funded by LEADER.

"Giving access to our land to allow people to walk on St Declan's Way was an easy decision for Noeleen and I. We wanted local people and visitors to be able to enjoy this part of rural Ireland. We also wanted to leave a legacy for generations to come and make sure that this historical walk is not forgotten. The community we live in is very important to us, so if the walk could help create any economic opportunities for the local community then this was definitely something we would facilitate."

Sean Osborne, Farmer, County Waterford

"The goodwill of landowners and their willingness to see the bigger picture laid the groundwork for the reopening of St Declan's Way in June 2021. Without their support the project would never have gotten off the ground."

Conor Ryan, St Declan's Way Steering Committee

Source: 'Embracing Ireland's Outdoors - National Outdoor Recreation Strategy 2023-2027'

PART THREE

Best Practice in Comparable Trail Development

Walkers in Cashel

3. Best Practice in Comparable Trail Development

“With their unique historical, cultural and natural features, pilgrimages represent vital opportunities to further strengthen tourism’s ability to foster intercultural dialogue and contribute to the protection of religious and spiritual sites,”

UNWTO Secretary-General, Taleb Rifai, 2014



Melleray Abbey

3.1 Background of Pilgrim Tourism

In its simplest term a Pilgrimage is the movement of a traveller or group of travellers making a journey for religious purposes.

Pilgrimages have been happening all over the world for thousands of years with the Haj being the largest pilgrimage in the world attracting some 200+million Muslims to visit Mecca on a religious journey annually, while over 5million pilgrims still visit Lourdes each year.

In recent years there has been an increase in popularity of pilgrim routes in Europe with the most well-known pilgrim route in the region being the Camino de Santiago which last year registered a whopping 438,000 pilgrims with the Pilgrim’s Office to collect their Compostela Certificate.

The success of the Camino de Santiago was helped by the then European Council declaring the Camino the first European Cultural Route in 1987.

Originally the term Pilgrim or Pilgrimage inferred the undertaking of a journey that was “exclusively considered as a manifestation of faith, bringing people together to seek the divine and to be in its presence”. However nowadays, the meaning of pilgrimage has expanded beyond this and is combined with other spiritual, historical, archaeological, and naturalistic motivations (Cerutti & Dioli, 2013. Fernandes et al., 2012).

Pilgrim Paths of Ireland is a voluntary organisation (in existence since 2013) set up to increase awareness of the pilgrim paths in Ireland and their tourism and economic potential.

St. Declan’s Way works closely with the Pilgrim Paths team and the St. Declan’s Way volunteers often participate in events held on other pilgrim routes in Ireland, getting to know the volunteers involved in those projects.

In this section we carry out a comparative analysis of 4 key pilgrim walks in Europe and the UK highlighting the key take-aways for consideration for St. Declan’s Way.

St. Cuthbert's Way - Scotland

Established: Summer 1996

Location: Scotland & England -
Scottish Borders & Northumberland

Starting Point: Melrose Abbey - Scotland
Ending Point: Holy Island - England

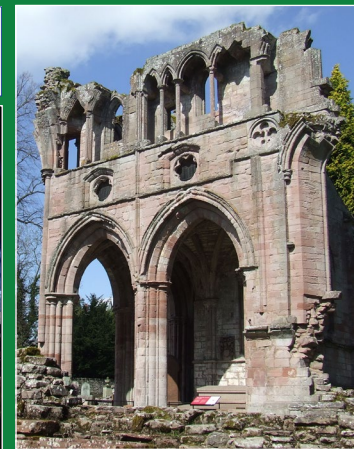
Length: 100km

No. of Routes on Walk: Just one but considered
extending walk to St Cuthbert's resting place.

Management Structure: Two Councils &
1 national park.

“Started as a partnership between public agencies from both England and Scotland, it is now managed by a steering group involving representatives from Scottish Borders Council, Northumberland County Council, Northumberland National Park, Northumberland Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Ron Shaw, the originator of the route.”

Observations: Motive to embark on the SCW is Pilgrimage/Religious/Heritage/ Challenge/ To tick a box (have completed other walks) and Spirituality. Recommend making route multi-purpose (walk, cycle, bridleway).



Seasonality: All year round but mainly April-September

USP: Also operates as a cycleway and a bridleway (more recently).

Technology: No apps (take up too much memory space); Downloadable GPX map; WebGIS on Council mapping system.

Insta Moment: Wideopen Hill, highest point on the route – this is highlighted at the point and Holy Island.

Marketing: No active marketing strategy. Merchandise sold through FB.

Other: There is a SCW map that Harvey Maps produce, also the route is shown on OS maps by green diamonds, like all other long distance trails.

Key point of interest = **One of the major challenges faced is securing funding to maintain infrastructure along the route.** Funding and grants available for new items and ideas but not always easy to get funding to replace old or obsolete infrastructure.

Ambition is to appoint guardians to the Way – local residence who live near and use the way and for them to take ownership of a section whereby they might do minor maintenance and report any issues to the management team.

St. Olav's Way - Norway

Raison d'être: In medieval times Christians made the pilgrimage to Nidaros Cathedral to visit the shrine of Saint Olav. The revival and signposting of the ancient trails were completed in the late 90's.

The tourism board started promoting it as a new European pilgrimage routes called Pilegrimsleden. So this is a relatively new trail.

Location: Norway - Finland, Denmark, Sweden and Norway, with Nidaros cathedral in Trondheim (Norway) as the pilgrim goal.

Starting Point: Various starting points.

Ending Point: Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim.

Length: 643km

No. of Routes on Walk: 7 different pilgrim routes.

Management Structure: ACSOW (Association for the Cultural Route of St. Olav Ways) is the association founded to manage the status and the route. The association has members in all four countries.



Observations: On average, the most important motivational dimensions among the SOW pilgrims are (in descending order) Exercise in nature, Slow travel, Nature – knowledge and joy, The inner me and Meet the locals and local heritage. (Reference: Long distance hikers & their inner Journey).

Seasonality: June to September

USP: Ambassadors for the Way with different experiences and backgrounds.

Technology: <https://stolavsleden.com/> and new and improved digital, clickable and zoomable maps which also highlight accommodation. Can apply your own filters.

Camino de Santiago

Established: Originally in the 9th Century but in modern day 1993 UNESCO World Heritage Status.

Location: Predominantly Spain but takes in Portugal and France depending on route.

Starting Point: At each pilgrim's own door. Main routes from Spain, Portugal and France.
Ending Point: Santiago de Compostelo

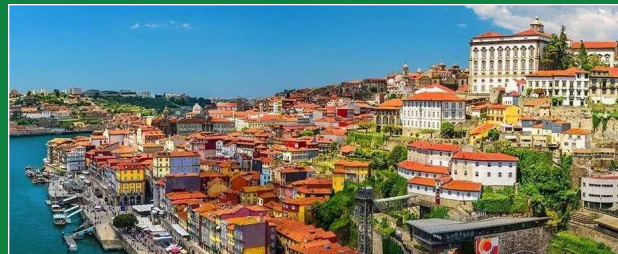
Length: 800km (4-5 weeks)

No. of Routes on Walk: 281 listed

Established No. of Users: 438,307 in 2022

Demographic: Majority Spanish (by approx. 50%) then US. Italian, Portuguese and German, French, UK and Irish. **Ireland is in the top 10 users.**
Average age is 50+ and majority in organised groups.

Management Structure: Each local Government Department takes responsibility for their part.



Observations: Number of pilgrims started to rise late 80s when the Council of Europe declared the cultural importance of routes crossing all of Europe with a destination in Santiago de Compostela.

Seasonality: August is the busiest month – year round.

USP: The historical element to the Camino and its link to St James and for the religious reasons associated however today it is known more for its spiritual journey with **approximately a third of users do so for non-religious reasons.**

Technology: Google Maps – Often seen as an opportunity for a digital detox.

Marketing: Each Department along the route takes charge of its own marketing & promotion.

Other: The Camino de Santiago has become a **source of economic growth in the regions of northern Spain.** Today Santiago de Compostela is suffering from the pressures of mass tourism with overcrowding around the cathedral.

North Wales Pilgrim - Wexford Pembrokeshire Pilgrim Way - Wales

The Way of St Aidan and St David was developed by the British Pilgrimage Trust linking St. David's Cathedral in Pembrokeshire, Wales with Ferns Abbey in Co Wexford, Ireland. It involves pilgrims in a sea crossing between Rosslare and Fishguard following a journey taken in the sixth century by St Aidan of Ferns to Wales, where he was one of St David's most faithful disciples.

Established: A route to St David's since 6th Century and celebrating 900 year anniversary this year. Newly revived way was unveiled soft launch / inauguration May 2022 in Wales. Irish end still waiting its inauguration.

Location: Wexford Ireland and Pembrokeshire Wales Two countries – Ireland and Wales. Cross border element.

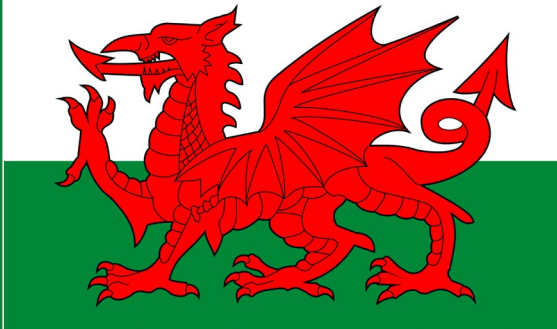
Starting Point: Ferns
Ending Point: St. Davids

Length: 130km in total (St David's Way 60Km currently open)

No. of Routes on Walk: One of two route between Ferns, in Ireland and St David's in Wales.

Established No. of Users: Estimated at 4,000-5,000

 Taith Pererin Gogledd Cymru "Camino Cymru"
North Wales Pilgrim's Way "The Welsh Camino"



Management Structure: The project was sponsored by Pembrokeshire and Wexford councils and is also backed by EU funding (ERDF).

Currently managed by Pembrokeshire Coast National Park and British Pilgrim Trust. Currently in transition over to a charitable status in Wales and a CLG was formed on the Irish side.

Observations: Fastest growing sector in travel - a key focus of inter-railing and GAP year plans. It ties in with the next generations' awareness of environmental issues and the increasing need to 'find yourself'.

School and Universities are key target market need to link in with them.

Accommodation on the new route is good – very good range of accommodation from hostels to hotels.

Seasonality: Year round but strongest May to September.

Technology: Uses the "Outdoor Active App". Linked some Audio to it with stories along the way linked to the trail. However there is also a strong feeling that a pilgrimage is a chance to step back from technology.

Marketing: Journeying, Pilgrimage – main promotion service providers.

3.2 Key Success Factors for Each Case

St Cuthbert's Way (England) Critical Success Factors:

This way is similar to St Declan's Way as it straddles two councils and is managed by a Steering Group:

- Multi-purpose use (walk, cycle and bridle way) broadening the ways appeal.
- Availability of merchandise along the route and online via third party (Northern Heritage).
- Use of "Guardians of the Way" from land owners and volunteer community along the route.

St David's Way (Wales) Key Success Factors:

- Exceeded its user target in year one with over 1,000 registered in the first year of opening with a five year target of 4,000 - 5,000 users per year.
- Benefits from being part of a new combined, international walking route which starts in Ferns, Co. Wexford, crossing from Rosslare in Ireland to Fishguard in Wales before finishing in St David's Cathedral in Pembrokeshire.

St Olaf's Way (Norway) Key Success Factors:

- An officially recognised **Cultural Route of the Council of Europe**
- A Designated Route Manager is employed by the National Pilgrim Centre to oversee the day-to-day management, marketing, and maintenance of the walk.
- Ambassadors selected from past pilgrims of St Olaf's used for assisting the development of the route and offerings <https://stolavsleden.com/ambassadors/>.

St James' Way, Camino de Santiago (Spain)

Key Success Factors:

- The first officially recognised Cultural Route of the Council of Europe
- Excellent infrastructure on the route from accommodation to porters to food and medical. Statistics are frequently gathered and readily accessible
- Strong authenticity factor to the route, with new access points to Santiago de Compostela being developed in recent years e.g., Camino Portuguese etc.

St Declan's Way (Ireland) Key Success Factors:

- Two local authorities working well together with the assistance of the RROs in both regions with the added support from the Knockmealdown Active group bringing greater local and national engagement.
- Excellent use of limited financial resources.
- Dedicated local community leadership group successfully forming partnerships.
- Strong Authenticity factor with unique heritage and scenery.
- Spiritual heritage in St Declan's story.

Conclusion

Examination of a range of other pilgrim trails in existence around the world indicates the importance of what can be learned from other sites that have had strong successes. The key point here is to take best practice and use it to the best advantage of St Declan's Way without in any way diluting the authenticity or uniqueness of the experience.

PART FOUR

Strategic Challenges for St. Declan's Way

Pilgrim and Fr Denis Luke, Mount Mellerey Abbey

4. Strategic Challenges for St. Declan's Way

S

Strengths

- Ancient 1,500-year-old walking route, with very strong levels of authenticity and spectacular scenery.
- Good brand awareness in Ireland due to walking events and media exposure.
- Suite of professionally produced marketing and promotional assets in place – logo, brochure, high quality still and video imagery, pilgrim passport.
- Wonderful mix of terrain include fertile arable land, rivers, the mountains, ancient woodland and the sea.
- Large number of appealing heritage sites along the trail, including several of international significance.
- 115km reach, travelling through 12 towns / villages / hamlets each with their own link either to St. Declan or to other important saints.
- Good access into the area from the M8 motorway in Tipperary and the N72 and N25 in Waterford.
- Strong community networking in recent years means there is great commitment to SDW from community groups along the trail.
- Motivated and respected SDW Steering committee in place, with great experience and connectivity.
- Strong partnership with Knockmealdown Active and the reputation and calibre of the events that they run on the trail.
- Mount Melleray Abbey, situated at the halfway point on the trail in the Knockmealdown Mountains.
- Mount Melleray Pilgrim Paths, a 30km looped network of walks interlinked with St. Declan's Way.
- Strong relationship between the St. Declan's Way team, the South Tipperary Development Company, Waterford Leader Partnership, Tipperary County Council, and Waterford City and County Council.

W

Weaknesses

- Lack of accommodation directly on the trail, especially in Co Waterford.
- Inconsistent level of public transport along the trail. Some areas are well serviced eg Cashel to Cahir and others less so e.g. Goatenbridge to Cappoquin.
- 60% of the route is on road with the largest part of this being between Cashel and Cahir.
- Competition for funding with other outdoor recreation projects in Tipperary and Waterford.
- Website is basic, lack of a St. Declan's Way digital map.
- Lack of pilgrim passport stamps customized for each town / village.
- No current measurement of impact of St. Declan's Way on towns and villages along the trail.
- Reliance on public sector funding and voluntary effort.

O

Opportunities

- Development and promotion of distinct St. Declan's Way experiences with national and international appeal.
 - Drive the regeneration of several towns and villages through creating new economic opportunities in accommodation, dining, luggage transfer and transport.
 - Become a marketing platform for local mini projects and events linked to the St. Declan's Way e.g. novel events like the introduction of champing (camping in churches).
 - Identification of a small number of ambitious projects that will raise the profile of the trail.
- Update to website to give a slicker, more professional impression.
 - Range of funding schemes available from ORIS, Leader, Town & Village Renewal, RRDF.
 - The trail could be marketed to a greater extent as a Pilgrim Path, distinguishing it clearly from other walking trails in Ireland.
 - Further sections of the route could be taken off road following consultation with landowners.
 - Community accommodation could possibly be provided using halls and churches along the route, with the additional opportunity to redevelop derelict buildings and bring them back into use.
 - Transport links could be improved between rural villages both in South Tipperary and West Waterford and between the two counties.
 - Cultural activities could be run more frequently along the trail to link St. Declan's Way to an even greater extent with the surrounding communities.
 - St. Declan's Way could be cross promoted with other activities in the area, be they visitor attractions or activity sports to increase bed nights in the area.
 - Major opportunity to promote St. Declan's Way in the European walking market amongst those who have already completed the Camino, particularly in France, Spain, Germany, and Italy. St. Declan's Way could apply for recognition as a Cultural Route of the Council of Europe.
 - Opportunity for stage agencies to build on the groundwork done to date and invest significantly to develop St. Declan's Way as a major tourism asset.
 - Development of local looped walking trails connected to St. Declan's Way that will link with population centers e.g. Villierstown, Clashmore in Waterford and Newcastle and Golden in Tipperary. St. Declan's Way can also be linked to the Suir Blueway and the future Blackwater Blueway in Waterford.

T

Threats

- Competition for funding could mean that St Declan's Way may be hindered in its' development plans.
- The St. Declan's Way Steering Committee could disband in future years.
- Community support could wane if activity on the trail slows down or community events are no longer run on the trail.
- Knockmealdown Active could stop running their SDW walking events in the future.
- Alternative walking trails may be developed in Ireland which could compete with the trail.
- Lack of clarity about the future management and ownership of the website and social media accounts.
- Landowners withdrawing permissive access due to negative encounters with walkers/visitors.
- Damage to trail infrastructure and surface due to increased frequency of severe weather events.

PART FIVE

Product Development: Vision & Recommendations



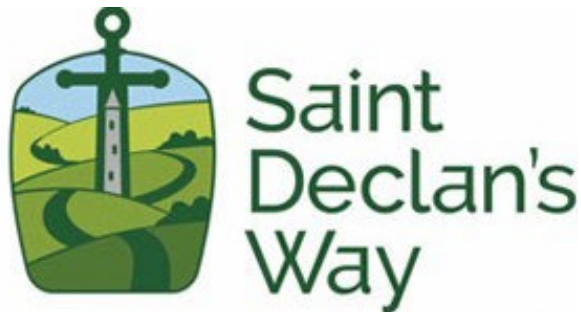
Rock of Cashel

5. Product Development: Vision & Recommendations

Vision

The **Vision** for St. Declan's Way is central to the development of the trail.

*To create an **Irish Camino** attracting domestic and international visitors to St Declan's Way, by offering a well-maintained trail with access to transport, accommodation, cultural sights, and other amenities. To encourage **new and existing accommodation providers** to package their destinations with St Declan's Way. To build on the strength of existing relationships to continue to develop the walking trail.*



Recommendations

5.1 Recruit a Development Manager

To develop St. Declan's Way to its fullest potential and deliver on the recommendations below, a Development Manager should be recruited. The range of work streams in the short to medium term is too concentrated for the voluntary committee, and there is an opportunity to accelerate the project following the appointment of a manager.

The overarching responsibility of the Development Manager will be to implement the key recommendations of this strategy, especially in terms of the development of accommodation and other services and the marketing and promotion of the trail.

Ideally, the Development Manager will be an experienced professional with a background in rural development, project management or business support. They would be employed on a contract for services basis with performance targets set at the outset and the contract subject to annual performance review.

Key contributions arising from the appointment of a Development Manager:

- The Development Manager is required to rollout the trail development strategy on the ground over the next 5 years, as the projects are increasing in pace and complexity.
- It is critical to build on the strength of the community connectivity inherent within the existing Steering Committee. They interact with several voluntary groups who work themselves with different state agencies and organisations. This new appointment will be expected to enhance these linkages for the betterment of St. Declan's Way and the many communities along the route.
- To differentiate St. Declan's Way from other walking trails.
- An increased level of accommodation is a key priority for the development of St. Declan's Way. The Manager will work with the community to develop the accommodation concept in the many villages along the trail, with a dedicated resource to roll out this concept and source funding for same.

- The Manager will develop the cultural and heritage connections between St. Declan's Way and the visitor attractions along the trail, supporting prospective providers seeking to source further investment and resources.
- There are an increasing range of partners and stakeholders in towns and villages along the trail with whom regular communication must be maintained and the voluntary committee will not have the reach or capacity to deliver this as the project develops. The St. Declan's Way project is now outgrowing volunteerism and needs professional support.
- The trail will become much better known and promoted through the work of a Development Manager, as they partner with Ireland's Ancient East, Munster Vales, the local tourism officers, and other stakeholders to coordinate future marketing and development of the trail.
- The Development Manager will require a 5-year period to get the project to an advanced stage.

The funding of a Development Manager is fundamental to getting the other projects moving simultaneously and keeping up momentum.

5.2 Facilitate Further Off-Road Trail Development

The St. Declan's Way Steering Committee will continue to develop further off-road sections of the trail, opening areas of the countryside which will only be accessible on foot. 40% of the route is currently off road, much of that in Co Waterford. The first priority includes the development of 1.8km of off-road track at New Inn, Co. Tipperary, to be followed by further off-road sections of route in Tipperary and Waterford. In total, we estimate that a further 14km can be taken off road in Tipperary and another 6km in Waterford.

In time, it is also intended to incorporate St. Declan's Well, St. Declan's birthplace and St David's Well as waymarked locations along St. Declan's Way. All three locations are in Co Waterford and there are several other ancient sites in Tipperary which can also be linked to the trail such as Hore Abbey and Athassel Abbey. As access to all these sites is through private land, this will also require negotiation with landowners.

The committee will also work closely with the Rural Recreation Officers to improve the trail infrastructure. ORIS 2023 funding has been applied for in Waterford to add five new seats and a picnic table to the trail in 2024.



Golden Vale, Co Tipperary

5.3 Improve Technology & Website

Technology is essential in creating a basis for sharing information on St. Declan's Way with a wide audience.

The current St. Declan's Way website uses basic WordPress functionality which means it mainly acts as a noticeboard for the trail. The Steering Committee has applied for ORIS 2023 funding to complete a project to enhance the website further and create a stronger story map for the route, to create navigational guides and to bring better visual representation to the trail.

QR codes may also be incorporated to access quality information at many different points along the route. A pilot QR code installation was developed with great effect by John Tierney of Eachtra Archaeology Projects for the Historic Graves Project in the Round Tower graveyard, Ardmore. It highlights ten key items of interest there including St. Declan's Grave, an Ogham stone and the Masons' Grave and brilliantly brings to life the ancient stories of those buried in the graveyard.

A means of tracking pilgrim feedback and pilgrim numbers must also be incorporated into the website. This will help improve our product and improve engagement with our Pilgrims.

5.4 Broaden the Marketing Strategy

Digital marketing is already creating strong awareness levels for the trail. Video and photographic content funded by Fáilte Ireland in 2021 is used regularly at St. Declan's Way and Munster Vales events.

This content has also been made available to the public on the Munster Vales website. Merchandising is an excellent way of creating awareness of the trail and it also provides a memento of the experience of completing the walk. Knockmealdown Active purchased St. Declan's Way buffs in 2023, which they in turn sold to participants at each of their walking events. They have been incredibly popular.

Attractive and branded merchandise is known to perform very well when targeted at the right audience. Branded hats, water bottles and t-shirts could also be produced amongst other items.

There are several marketing and promotional platforms that support St. Declan's Way such as Munster Vales, Tipperary Tourism, Visit Waterford, Ireland's Ancient East and Pilgrim Paths of Ireland. Each of these is really important in helping raise awareness of the trail.

There is scope to increase awareness of St. Declan's Way among walkers on continental Europe, many of whom may have completed or are contemplating the Camino de Santiago. Marketing support and translation of content will be vital to reach this international market. Fáilte Ireland has a network of offices and promotional initiatives to reach this market and their support will need to be harnessed.

5.5 Promote Pilgrim Tourism

There is evidence from surveys undertaken for pilgrim trails on the impact of pilgrim tourism (*See analysis of the Socio-Economic Impact of the Camino de Santiago*). These impacts can be summarised as follows.

- Pilgrims have a lower transport impact and have a bigger economic impact than regular tourists. Each pilgrim has the same impact as 2.3 domestic visitors. While the average pilgrim spend in Spain is €44/day according to this research, the average tourist daily spend in Ireland is €100 a day (*Fáilte Ireland 2023*).
- On the Camino, each euro spent by a pilgrim generates up to 11% additional output. Pilgrims support employment, with each euro spent by a pilgrim generating up to 18% additional employment.

- The research further outlines that pilgrim spending is curbing rural population decline and it is well proven that people in rural areas welcome pilgrims - more than 90% of local people perceive pilgrims as having a positive impact. Pilgrims support local spend with food and beverage forming approximately 61% of a pilgrim's budget whilst on the trail as compared to 26% for normal non-resident tourists. When accommodation spend is included, the impact of pilgrims is even greater.

Given St. Declan's Way passes through 12 different towns, villages and hamlets, the long-distance pilgrim walker opportunity is clear. The challenge is encouraging communities, business owners and landowners to develop services that these walkers will need, which in turn will lead to more walkers on the trail in due course. This wider economic effect will also impact towns close to the route like Golden, Clonmel, Dungarvan and Youghal.

Driving this economic impact is one of the key reasons why a Development Manager is needed.

5.6 Market the Authenticity of the Trail – A Sacred Irish Camino

Authenticity is critical to distinguish a pilgrim route from other tourism products and is often associated with religious factors. Although in recent times less importance is being attached to religious factors and there is a shift towards seeking a more spiritual dimension to the pilgrim walking experience.

The Authenticity of St. Declan's Way gives the trail its strength and is a key strategic growth driver. Emphasising this Authenticity will support the continued development of a coherent, unambiguous and market ready branded pilgrim way of scale, that will significantly increase its future tourism potential.

To deepen the sense of Authenticity and to bring the *Sacred Ireland* theme to life, the St. Declan's Way team have sought to create several links between the pilgrim walking trail and the local communities. These include the following examples:

- As part of the annual St. Declan's Way pilgrimage in April 2023, Rev Paul Draper, Dean of St Carthage's Cathedral Lismore, welcomed 300 pilgrims to the Cathedral, where they gathered to listen to his words of encouragement before they started their 20km pilgrimage walk that day.
- Fr Denis Luke O Hanlon of Mount Melleray Abbey frequently works with the St Declan's Way team to organise pilgrim walking events in Mount Melleray. These events are very popular and over 300 walkers often attend. Examples of this include the Christmas Walk at Mount Melleray held on 28th December 2022, which will be repeated on 28th December 2023.

- The Church of Ireland piloted the Church Camping concept in August 2023, led by the Rev Máirt Hanley who stayed overnight in St Paul’s Church of Ireland, Ardmore and then in St Mary’s Church of Ireland Cappoquin with two other pilgrims. They completed their trip with a third overnight stay in Mount Melleray Abbey. The conclusions of this pilot study are still being prepared at the time of writing.
- The St. Declan’s Way Steering Committee is frequently in contact with the local communities and churches along the trail. In total, there are over 25 community groups who are involved in the annual pilgrimage from Cashel to Ardmore.
- Waterford Camino Tours (now known as Celtic Ways since October 2023) brought six different walking groups to the trail in 2023, with another six trips planned in 2024. These groups walk the full length of the trail over five days. The St. Declan’s Way Steering Committee and Knockmealdown Active support Phil Brennan and the Celtic Ways team to deliver as best an experience on the walking trail as possible, helping them source guides, navigate any route changes and introducing them to new areas of interest along the trail.
- As part of their personal growth and development, secondary schools regularly take their students on full day walks of St. Declan’s Way, often focusing on Mount Melleray as the start or end point. The trail is also used by schools as part of the Gaisce programme each year, where children have to complete a number of outdoor activities to gain certain accreditations.
- Mount Melleray Abbey hosted a very popular Taizé event in October 2023, with hymns sung by the All-Ireland Peace Choir. This choir will sing again in the Abbey to launch Pilgrim Paths Week in March 2024, an event which will be co-hosted by St. Declan’s Way.

The committee envisages that partnership with key stakeholders along the trail, especially with the religious community, will help develop the *Sacred Ireland* theme to add to the real sense of spiritual authenticity in this pilgrim walking experience.

5.7 Support the continued growth of Mount Melleray Abbey

Underpinning the ambition to become a pilgrim way of scale, the Cistercian Abbey at Mount Melleray is core to the success of the St. Declan’s Way vision. The values of the Cistercian order are complementary to St. Declan’s Way and its ambitions often connect to the public through the strength of the walking trail. This is seen in the success of walking events held by the St. Declan’s Way team in Melleray and the high level of footfall on the newly developed Mount Melleray Pilgrim Paths. The monks have realised that for many young people, spirituality is moving to the outdoors and the St. Declan’s Way walking product helps them access a younger target audience than heretofore.

The popularity of Mount Melleray is evident through different media visits in recent times. As part of RTE’s All Walks of Life series, the Taoiseach Leo Varadkar was interviewed by the former President Mary McAleese on St. Declan’s Way at Mount Melleray in 2021. Nuala Carey visited with the RTE Summer Show in 2022 and most recently Ms Jess Glynn, a social media influencer, came to Melleray to walk St Declan’s Way in August 2023, with her 20,000 social media followers watching her movements online.

The potential to further develop the Cistercian Abbey at Mount Melleray as an outstanding flagship attraction along the way is enormous and is worthy of a study.

5.8 Link Theme of Authenticity to Other Key Heritage Locations

There are several key ancient locations on the trail which lend to the overall experience and authenticity of St. Declan's Way. The Development Manager and committee will need to create relationships with the development groups in each area to ensure they are aware of the economic, cultural, and recreational opportunities that St. Declan's Way presents.

- **Cashel** – an iconic ecclesiastical site, this was the seat of the High Kings of Munster for over a thousand years and is where Brian Ború was crowned King. All the early Christian missionaries including Declan, Ailbe and Patrick were duty bound to visit Cashel, both to seek the permission of the King to pursue their spiritual endeavours and, as they hoped, to convert the King to the Christian religion. It was St. Declan's journey to Cashel from Ardmore to meet St Patrick and the High King of Munster which is at the heart of the St. Declan's Way story.

In addition to the Rock of Cashel, St. Declan's Way passes the Bolton Library building, in the grounds of the Cathedral Church of St John the Baptist. This library housed the extraordinary collection of early printed books and manuscripts collected by Archbishop Bolton in the 1700s, which is now in the care of the University of Limerick.

- **Cahir** – This town has one of Ireland's largest and best-preserved castles which attracts thousands of tourists annually and it is also part of the historic Butler Trail. In this area, St. Declan's Way follows the route of the 'Coronation Walk' which leads from the castle to the 'Swiss Cottage', a cottage 'orné' designed by John Nash on the instructions of the First Earl of Glengall (Butler Family). This is where St Declan's Way follows the River Suir to the Swiss Cottage and intersects with the Suir Blueway.
- **Lady's Abbey Ardfinnan** – On this site lie the ruins of a Carmelite monastery which dates to 1315. At this point St. Declan's Way picks-up the ancient 'Rian Bó Phadraig' and links up with the East Munster Way and the Tipperary Heritage Way, all of which reveal hidden architectural, archaeological, and other cultural gems.

- **Mount Melleray Abbey** – The first monastery founded in Ireland since the Reformation, this Cistercian Order monastery was built in 1832 at Scrahan, Cappoquin, by a colony of Irish and English monks, expelled from the French abbey of Melleray after the French Revolution of 1830. The land at Scrahan was given to the monks by the Keane family of Cappoquin and people came from far and wide to help the monks cultivate the land. Parishes took it in turns to send men to help the monks and local landowners continue to this day to support the monks in their endeavours.



Mount Melleray Abbey

- Lismore** –St Carthage founded a monastic community in Lismore, and it was also a famous ecclesiastical city, while also at one point being the largest university in Europe in the Dark Ages. It is well known for the beautiful Lismore Castle formerly owned by Sir Walter Raleigh, later by Robert Boyle (of Boyle’s Law, known as the “Father of Modern Chemistry”) and now owned by the Duke of Devonshire. St Carthage’s Cathedral is a building of great beauty, home of the Cotton Library and is built on the site of an earlier ancient settlement. This area of Waterford is where St Declan’s Way intersects with Bóthar Na Naomh (another ancient pilgrim trail) and is also where the legendary Valentine Great Rakes performed as a healer in the seventeenth century. Lismore has an extensive pilgrimage history and its future development as a tourism centre is a very important factor in the future growth of St. Declan’s Way.
- Ardmore** – Home to the burial site of St. Declan, this is the oldest Christian Settlement in Ireland founded circa 416AD. St. Declan’s Feast Day is celebrated on 24th July when the local community celebrate The Pattern, a festival which has existed for hundreds of years.

St. Declan’s Grave is located close by Ardmore Round Tower and St. Declan’s Well is on the popular Cliff Walk route. Together with St. Declan’s Stone and the stained-glass window showing St. Declan’s Bell in the local Catholic church, there are many associations with St. Declan in the village of Ardmore. It is truly his home.

There are many other points of interest along the way including the Rian Bó Phádraig (the Path of St Patrick’s Cow) the myth and legend of which are linked to St. Declan’s Way. There are numerous opportunities to link St. Declan’s Way to a host of other ancient paths in the area, so deepening the pilgrim’s awareness of the ancient nature of the trail.

It is also important to note that St. Declan’s Way will facilitate the dispersal of walkers right throughout South Tipperary and West Waterford. The Liam Lynch Monument (Goatenbridge, Co Tipperary) and Dromana Bridge (Cappoquin, Co Waterford) are examples of two sites which are of immense historical importance but are often overlooked on sightseeing itineraries in their respective areas. However, as they are both now connected to St Declan’s Way, they are seeing further footfall and are being connected through a slow tourism walking product which will help their preservation in the long term.



Lighting candles at Mount Melleray Abbey

5.9 Increase Walker Numbers

With the right development plan in place, the committee expects that there could be up to 20,000 pilgrims walking the trail each year in five years' time with a potential economic impact of €12m per annum. We estimate that 4,000 walked the route in 2023 (with an economic impact of €2m over 6 days), driven in the main by the annual pilgrimage organised by Knockmealdown Active.

There are several pedestrian counters on the route which have been recently installed but further counters are required to build a comprehensive picture from this data source. Other data capture initiatives should be trialed like allowing pilgrims to register their completion of the route (or stages of the route) on the St. Declan's Way website, as is done in Santiago de Compostela when Camino Pilgrims arrive there.

It should be emphasised that as well as facilitating long-distance pilgrim walkers, sections of the trail are also frequently used by local communities for recreational purposes for short distance walking e.g. Cahir Coronation Walk, looped trails on both sides of the Knockmealdowns, Lady Louisa's Walk, Lismore, and Ardmore Cliff Walk. This is a facet of St. Declan's Way that can be further developed into the future.

5.10 Improve Infrastructure Through Better Transport Links

There is public transport access to St. Declan's Way with bus links to Dublin and Cork from the towns of Cashel and Cahir. There are Local Link services to Ardfinnan, Lismore, Cappoquin, Aglish and Ardmore and a train service at Cahir to Limerick Junction and Waterford. Both Ardmore and Cashel trailheads offer car parking facilities, with cafés and restaurants nearby.

However, the trail would benefit from a Local Link service between South Tipperary and West Waterford, linking the rural villages in these areas. Mount Melleray would benefit from a more frequent service, and the villages of South Tipperary would also benefit from the introduction of a formal Local Link service. The development of a linear transport route connecting Cahir, Goatenbridge, Melleray, Cappoquin, Aglish, Clashmore and Ardmore would facilitate movement of walkers along the trail, with the bonus of connecting those living all year round in these towns and villages.

5.11 Encourage More Diverse Accommodation Options

Accommodation along the route is limited with some B&B and camping style options in smaller villages while Cahir and Cashel offer hotel options. In general, there is a lack of accommodation directly located on the trail especially in the more rural areas.

The Leader Strategy 2023-2027 will focus on funding the development of new alternative accommodation options, both in villages and on farmlands along St. Declan's Way. The Leader companies will offer up to 75% funding for new projects, subject to the necessary planning permission requirements and assuming they fit with the Leader development strategy.

Community groups are also being encouraged to think of novel means of hosting pilgrims in their community halls, for simple, one-night low price accommodation stays. Pilgrims could be encouraged to bring sleeping bags and mats to sleep on the floor or camp beds could be provided. A small number of halls could get together to trial the initiative over one season with booking being managed through a central website. Luggage transfer services could also be piloted during this time.

The refurbishment of St. Declan's Hostel in Mount Melleray Abbey is still underway at the time of writing, and it is expected that the opening of this hostel will significantly improve the accommodation offering in the Knockmealdown area of the trail.

Church Camping is also being actively championed by the Church of Ireland through pilot church stays, which were organised in August 2023 by Rev Máirt Hanley of Baltinglass in St Paul's Church of Ireland Ardmore, St Mary's Church of Ireland Cappoquin and Mount Melleray Abbey. Church Camping is very popular in the UK (known as *champing* there) and on the Camino de Santiago in Spain where churches are used to accommodate pilgrims on single overnight stays. Staying in a church creates a true sense of pilgrimage and one which the St. Declan's Way team are keen to replicate.

Improved accommodation choice, luggage transfer services and greater demand for food and drink outlets will all contribute to the State's Town Centre First Strategy and will contribute to the economic regeneration of this often-overlooked area of Ireland.

5.12 Strengthen Community Connectivity Through More Frequent Walking Events

Knockmealdown Active are a voluntary group based in South Tipperary and West Waterford who run the St. Declan's Way pilgrimage walk over 5 days from Cashel to Ardmore each year. These organised walks are growing in popularity with often up to 300 attending each day and it is expected the walk will be run over 6 days in 2024.

There are over 25 community groups working with Knockmealdown Active in the weeks leading up to the events and on the day itself to help the events run smoothly (as traffic marshals, parking marshals, on trail maintenance prior to the event etc).

This annual guided walk is important to maintain for several reasons:

- It fosters a strong community ethos along the trail where villages and towns can see the economic benefit of St. Declan's Way for themselves.
- As the walks are run over three weekends, overnight stays are common for those walkers visiting from far afield, generating great economic benefit locally.

- It creates superb publicity for the trail each year, with images of the walkers appearing in both local print and social media for several weeks, generating more interest and awareness of the trail.
- The guided walks are a means to introduce people to parts of rural Ireland on St. Declan's Way that are rarely visited. A local historian is invited to address the pilgrims at the start of each day, with a view to giving participants a better appreciation of the highlights on the route being traversed that day. Guided long distance walking is also a great way to network, to create new alliances and make new friends.

The community network which has been developed by the growth in strength of the annual pilgrimage is also the same network that could develop the community accommodation opportunity.

The St. Declan's Way team have developed deep connectivity with these groups in the last 10 years which is why it can clearly see how a community accommodation solution could work along the trail. This opportunity was discussed with numerous community groups at a Waterford Leader Partnership funding information session in October 2023 and it was well received.

A group of people are jumping from a pier into the water at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright reflection on the water. The sky is blue with some clouds. In the background, there are trees and hills. A red inflatable boat is docked at the pier, and a man is sitting in it. The text 'PART SIX' is written in large white letters across the middle of the image, and 'Action Plan' is written in smaller white letters below it.

PART SIX

Action Plan

Villierstown Quay on the River Blackwater, Co Waterford

6. Action Plan

6.1 Overview

The financial and development plan for St Declan's way is summarised by the following diagram which sets out the key areas involved in the development process.

6.2 Detailed Action Plan

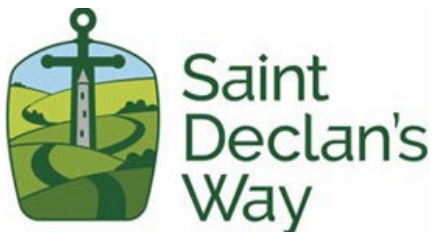
Objective	Action	Lead *	Partner	Time-frame	Cost / Funding	KPI
1	Recruit a Development Manager: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage with stakeholders to determine how this could be done Actively lead the recruitment Actively support management of the resource 	St Declan's Way Steering Committee	Councils. Leader.	2024-2028	€400,000	Development Manager is recruited. Projects are delivered.
2	Further Off Road Development. 14km in Tipperary, 6km in Waterford.	St Declan's Way Steering Committee	Local Landowners. Sport Ireland Outdoors. Rural Recreation Officers.	2024-2028	ORIS - €1,000,000	New Off Road delivered
3	Improve Technology and the Website: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Launch new website Introduce use of digital maps, audio guides and QR codes 	St Declan's Way Steering Committee	Munster Vales. Leader.	2024-2025	ORIS - €100,000	New website to be launched. QR codes, audio guides to be added to maps.
4	Broaden the Marketing Strategy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner with social media influencers to attract younger walkers Work with ERA, international walking assocs to target international walkers 	St Declan's Way Steering Committee	Munster Vales. Failte Ireland.	2024-2026	ORIS / Failte Ireland €100,000	New campaigns launched each year.
5	Promote Pilgrim Tourism: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Run campaigns to raise awareness of pilgrim economics 	St Declan's Way Steering Committee	Pilgrim Paths Ireland. Mount Melleray Abbey. RC & COI Churches. Local community groups.	Ongoing	0	Material prepared to be circulated
6	Market the Authenticity of the Trail - A Sacred Ireland: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Run events in conjunction with the churches Organise walks including ancient ecclesiastical sites 	St Declan's Way Steering Committee. Knockmealdown Active.	Pilgrim Paths Ireland. Mount Melleray Abbey. RC & COI Churches. British Pilgrimage Trust.	Ongoing	0	At least 3 events run annually

Table Continued:

Objective	Action	Lead *	Partner	Time-frame	Cost / Funding	KPI
7	Support the continued growth of Mount Mellera Abbey: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage the opening of St. Declan's Hostel in 2024 Run an international pilgrim conference concept in Mellera Introduce more pedestrian counters in Mellera 	St Declan's Way Steering Committee.	Mount Mellera Abbey. RC & COI Churches. Leader. Local community groups.	2024-2026	Leader - €50000	Hostel to be opened. Pilgrim / Conference to be held.
8	Link the trail to other heritage locations along the route: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve signage and digitised connectivity between both Utilise audio inserts on digitised maps to bring cultural links to life 	St Declan's Way Steering Committee	OPW. Lismore Estates. RC & COI Churches.	2024-2028	ORIS - €100000	Audio guides produced
9	Increase Walker Numbers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invest in increased promotional activity both in Ireland and overseas 	St Declan's Way Steering Committee	Munster Vales. Failte Ireland. Sport Ireland Outdoors.	2024-2028	Failte Ireland - €150000	Annual promotional campaigns delivered
10	Improve Transport Links: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seek improved bus connections between towns and villages on the trail 	St Declan's Way Steering Committee	TFI. Local Link. County Councils.	2024-2028	TFI	New bus routes introduced along the trail
11	Encourage new alternative accommodation options: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pilot the community accommodation offering Support landowners or communities who come up with new ideas Share new ideas with landowners and communities on a regular basis 	St Declan's Way Steering Committee	Leader. Councils.	2024-2028	Leader - €500,000	New accommodation options come on stream
12	Strengthen Community Connectivity: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to support KMDA in running the annual pilgrimage Bring the communities together to discuss SDW plans 	St Declan's Way Steering Committee. Knockmealdown Active.	Local community groups. RC & COI Churches. Leader.	2024-2028	0	One new feature to be added to the walk each year. Launch Strategic Plan.

* The leadership of several of the priorities will move to the Development Manager once the role is resourced

Total	€2,400,000
--------------	-------------------



6.3 Funding Sources

We believe that the Development Manager role will need to be funded by both Tipperary and Waterford City and County Councils, jointly over a 4-year period.

The other funding sources relevant to this project are listed below:

- ORIS Scheme

This is a key funding source as St. Declan's Way is closely aligned to the objectives of the ORIS programme. The ORIS funding stream is incredibly important to St. Declan's Way as it provides the main source of state support for priority initiatives as identified by the Steering Committee.

In 2023, it has applied for a Measure 1 application in Tipperary to cover the cost of the redevelopment of the St. Declan's Way website. It has also applied for new seating and a picnic table through Measure 1 funding with Waterford City and County Council.

The group intends to apply for further funding in 2024 to develop several kilometres of new off-road track in Tipperary, on lands owned by different farmers.

As already said, it is critical to the trail development strategy that the Steering Committee are successful in these funding applications. Sources of potential funding are as follows:

- Waterford City and County Council and Tipperary County Council – both administer various funds and are essential supports.
- Leader Companies – WLP and STDC, as above with the councils.
- Employment support schemes - CE etc - maintenance and upkeep, may be helpful in some developmental work. Also, community environment action scheme and rural social scheme.
- Visit Waterford, Munster Vales, Fáilte Ireland.
- Heritage Council and other government agencies.
- ETB/LEO - Small supports, possibly in training etc.
- EU such as INCULTUM and INTERREG.
- Philanthropy like Tomar Trust and other charitable trusts.

PART SEVEN

Conclusion

Lickey Valley, Clashmore, Co Waterford

7. Conclusion

Ireland is known as “*the land of Saints and Scholars*” and the pilgrim tourism offering is very much a cross-over between religious and cultural tourism.

The increased interest along with a shift in motivation to undertake a pilgrimage from religious purposes to more spiritual, holistic, historical, cultural reasons has contributed to the wave of popularity in pilgrim ways.

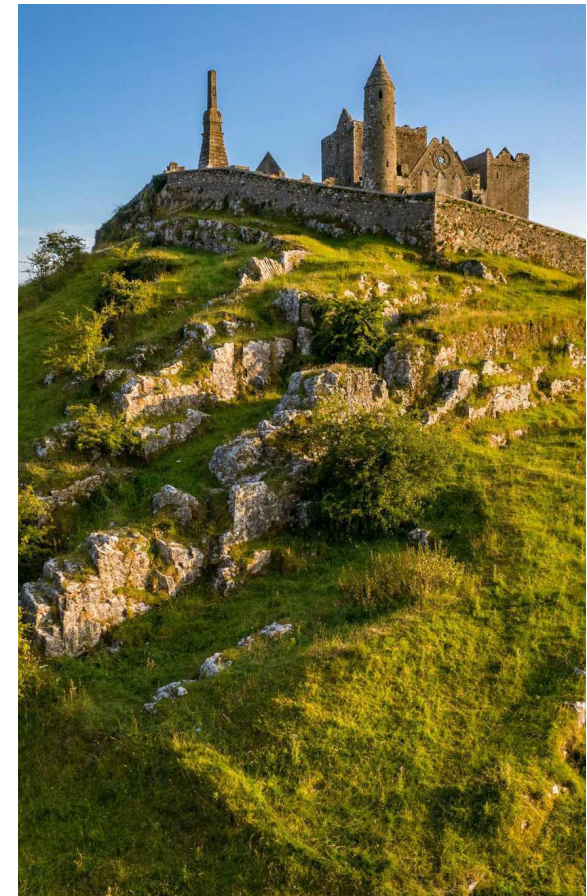
The UNWTO see walking tourism as one of the most popular and sustainable ways of experiencing a destination allowing tourists to better engage with local people, nature, and culture.

Pilgrim tourism also meets the increased demand for outdoor activities with relatively low investment and can bring about social and economic benefits to residents and communities when properly developed and managed.

There has been a general increase in walking holidays with the trend for slow travel and wellness tourism with special nod to mindfulness. All these elements have contributed to the increase in way-marked ways in Ireland and beyond.

St. Declan’s Way is an ancient pilgrim highway that dates back over 1,500 years and has undoubted authenticity and pilgrim heritage. The vision is clear and ambitious and is set out clearly in this strategy. The development of the route is well underway, but progress now needs to be accelerated by making increased levels of funding available and by the appointment of a Development Manager to undertake a range of projects over the next number of years.

This strategy sets out the importance of the trail, our ambitions and targets and outlines the crucial next stages to help it become the foremost Sacred Irish Camino, with the right local and international appeal to develop its’ true potential.



Rock of Cashel

APPENDICES

The Crois, the county boundary between Tipperary and Waterford

Appendix 1: Map of St. Declan's Way

115km from Cashel, Co Tipperary to Ardmore, Co Waterford



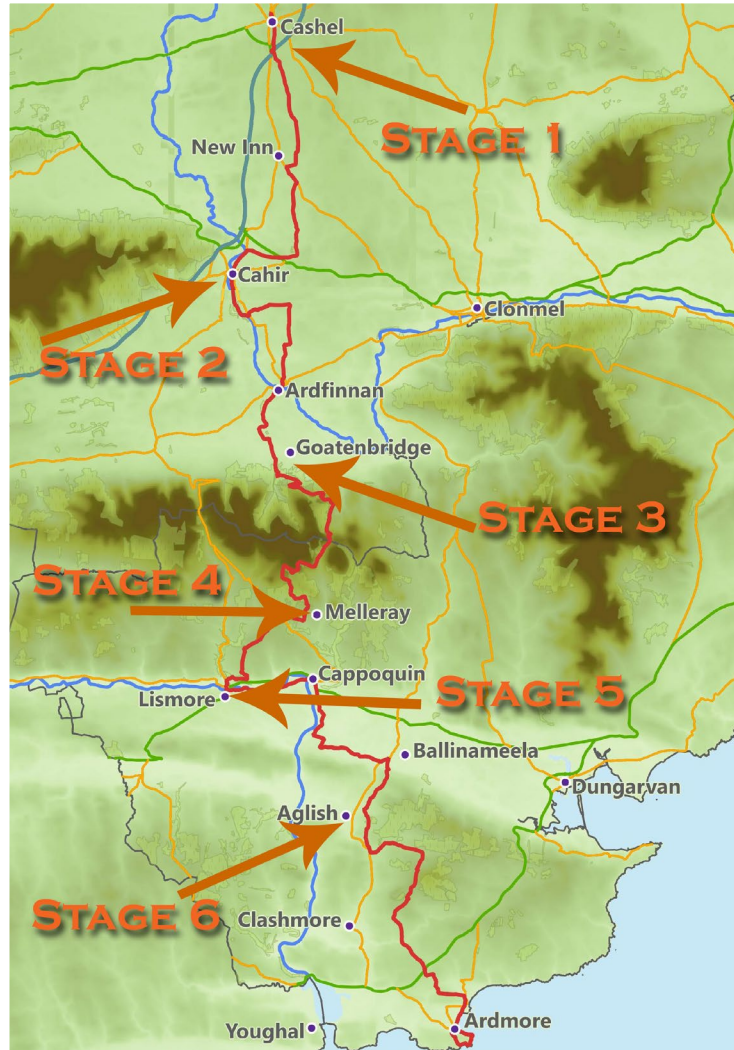
Rock of Cashel, Co Tipperary



Coronation Walk & Swiss Cottage, Co Tipperary



Liam Lynch Monument, Co Tipperary



Mount Melleray Abbey, Co Waterford



Lismore Castle, Co Waterford



Round Tower, Ardmore, Co Waterford

Appendix 2: St. Declan's Way Governance

Legal Structure of the Committee

The committee have included in the brief the need for professional guidance on establishing an appropriate legal structure for the committee and also on how the members will meet their regulatory commitments under the new structure.

At the situational analysis stage, it was recommended that the legal form is influenced directly by the following considerations:

- Objectives of the promoters – Purpose of the Entity – St. Declan's way as a pilgrim trail along with any associated activities and projects.
- Future Growth Plans – Expansion of the trail, commercialisation etc.
- Staff / Volunteers / Scale.
- Stakeholder / Partner Expectations.
- Funding & Financing.
- Liability & Exposure.
- Attitude of the committee members and their perceptions of Risk.

On examining these factors for the Saint Declan's committee and looking at the formation of other legal structures for Community based organisations in Ireland a **company limited by guarantee** with **charitable status** is the most beneficial form for the St. Declan's way committee.

Company Limited by Guarantee

The key features of a company limited by guarantee are as follows as per the Irish company's registration office:

A company limited by guarantee (CLG) is essentially a company whose liability is limited by a guarantee and has no share capital. There are members of the company who have liability that is limited to the amount they have undertaken to contribute to the assets of the company, in the event that it is wound up, not exceeding the amount specified in the memorandum. A company limited by guarantee does not have a share capital, the members are not required to buy any shares in the company. It is covered by part 18 of the companies act 2014.

Advantages of the company limited by guarantee and charitable status:

- This legal form secures separate legal personality from the members as well as very limited liability in the event of a wind up.

- There is no requirement for the members to contribute financially but they can guarantee a small amount by choice.
- The Charitable status allows the company to be attractive to funding agencies and a wide range of potential funding sources.
- It is easier to gain support of volunteers to contribute their time and effort where charitable status applies.

Setting up a Company Limited by Guarantee

To register a new Company limited by guarantee with the company's registration office the following are required:

- 1. Form A1** - This is the application form for company formation. Provide the necessary details about the company, directors, secretary, shareholders, and share capital.

For Form A1 the following will be needed:

- Company Name
- Company address
- Name of Members

Submit the completed Form A1, along with the required fee, to the CRO electronically through the CRO Online Registration System (CORE).

2. A company's constitution - which includes details about the company's purpose, powers, internal regulations and governance.

3. Registering for taxation purposes with the Revenue

4. Setting up a company bank account

There are 2 options to registering the company from the committee point of view:

1. Set up the company online via the online registration environment - CORE.
2. Appoint an accountant familiar with registration to complete the process. Accountants in practice are familiar with this process and are a very effective way of facilitating the registration and also the various follow up filings that are required particularly on an annual basis

It will take approximately 5 to 10 days for the company's registration office (CRO) to process a new application for registration.

Recommendation

There are a range of formal processes involved in registering the company and ensuring that annual filings are kept up to date and all relevant regulations and taxes are covered.

Local accountants are very familiar with these processes and will keep the members well covered from a governance and legal point of view. It is recommended that a local accountant is engaged to carry out the basic registration and regulatory functions.

The current structure is an informal voluntary group. This structure works well for the moment and it is the intention of the steering committee to remain with this structure for the time being. The option of a CLG company is the next recommended development if a more formal structure becomes required or beneficial for funding or other purposes.

Suggested Governance Structure

The suggested governance structure is a two-tier structure. The first tier is the immediate board or steering group that will manage directly the development of St. Declan's way. This steering group is effectively the continuation of the current committee.

This group either remains as an informal committee under the current structure or becomes a more formal board if the route of a CLG is perused.

The second tier is a wider steering group made up of the key stakeholders with an oversight role to support the development of the pilgrim route. This steering group is likely to comprise of representatives from both local authorities, Tipperary County Council and Waterford City and County council, Knockmealdown active group, local representatives, tourism representatives, tidy towns, monks of Mount Melleray, Church of Ireland and the Catholic Church.

Conclusion

This chapter set out the practical implications of a company limited by guarantee as a vehicle for the future development and management of St. Declan's way. The governance structure that is recommended is the establishment of a 2-tier structure with the steering group as the immediate tier overseeing development of the trail supported by a wider tier of stakeholders.

Appendix 3: St. Declan's Way - Walker Numbers & Expected Economic Impact

	2022	2023
Projected number of walkers	3,000	4,000
Number of days on the trail	5	5
Spend per day	€100	€100
Total spend €	€1,500,000	€2,000,000
Spend in €M	€1.50	€2.00

	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	Total 2024-2028
Projected number of walkers	6,000	8,000	10,000	15,000	20,000	59,000
Number of days on the trail	6	6	6	6	6	
Spend per day	€100	€100	€100	€100	€100	
Total spend €	€3,600,000	€4,800,000	€6,000,000	€9,000,000	€12,000,000	€35,400,000
Spend in €M	€3.60	€4.80	€6.00	€9.00	€12.00	€35.40

Assumptions:

Number of Walkers

- There is no clear definitive basis for the number of walkers, as the counters have only recently been installed.
- Estimates for 2023 are based on anecdotal information from businesses along the route.
- Best estimate is that there will be about 20,000 walkers per annum in 5 years.

Number of Days on the Trail

- The trail is walked in a more manageable format in 6 days. See John G O'Dwyers Pilgrim Paths of Ireland book.

Spend per Day

- Spend of €100 / day is based on Key Tourism Facts, Failte Ireland statistics 2023.

Appendix 4: Photo Credits

Imagery sourced from <https://munstervales.com>, other than:

Section	Pages	Source
3. Best Practice in Comparable Trail Development	Page 15	www.stcuthberts-way.info
	Page 16	https://pilegrimsleden.no/en
	Page 17	santiagoways.com
	Page 18	www.pilgrims-way-north-wales.org



Dúibhín Déagláin



Knocknaskagh, Ballinameela, Co Waterford