



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Regional Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into the Benefits of Cycling to the
Economy: Great Western Greenway

8 May 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Regional Development

Inquiry into the Benefits of Cycling to the Economy: Great Western Greenway

8 May 2014

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Seán Lynch (Deputy Chairperson)
Mrs Brenda Hale
Mr Ross Hussey
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Kieran McCarthy

Witnesses:

Mr Travis Zeray	Clew Bay Bike Hire
Mr Seán Kelly	Kelly's Butchers
Mr John O'Donnell	Mayo County Council
Mr Padraig Philbin	Mayo County Council
Ms Suzanne O'Brien	Mulranny Park Hotel

The Deputy Chairperson: I welcome Suzanne O'Brien, marketing and sales manager of Mulranny Park Hotel, and Seán Kelly of Kelly's Butcher's, Newport — I think some of us experienced Kelly's Butcher's products last night. We were later going to be joined by Travis and Padraig. You are all very welcome. Please give us the presentations, and we will have some questions afterwards.

Mr Seán Kelly (Kelly's Butchers): I am an artisan butcher from Newport, in the heart of the greenway. Our business started in 1930 and is today run by 20 people. My brother, two sons and daughter are in the business with me. Our main products are black pudding, white pudding and sausages, but we are, as I said, artisan butchers. We have our own abattoir; we start at the field and we do it all ourselves. Over the years, I have entered competitions with the black pudding and white pudding. Some people play golf; I entered competitions, and I won awards in not only this country but all over the world. I see a name over there: "McCarthy". There is a George McCartney, from Moira.

Mr McCarthy: This boy here?

Mr Kelly: Yes. I have met George a number of times. I call him the king of the sausage-making. Three years ago, I was made a Knight of the Boudin Noir — a Knight of the Black Pudding — in France. I might as well tell you that there is no pension out of that job, so I have to keep making the pudding. This year, I started exporting into England and the North of Ireland, and it is going very well for us. On Tuesday morning, we turned the sod on a new factory, and I hope it goes from strength to strength.

I got involved with the greenway because I live on the greenway. My business is right in the heart of the greenway. I remember, when it was not even opened, a young man from Dublin coming into the shop one Saturday morning and said, "I heard that there is a cycle track between Newport and

Mulranny". I said there was and told him where it was. He came back to me after about two hours and said, "Will you do me a favour?". I said, "If I can, I will". "Don't tell anybody about it," he said, "It has been the best morning's cycling ever I had". It was in August, and it was a beautiful morning. I said, "What do you mean?". He said, "It's going to be the start of something big". So, since that morning, many people have done the greenway. As I say, if you are walking the greenway, it is 26 miles long; if you are cycling, it is 42 kilometres. I always say that.

It is unbelievable the number of people it has brought. In the first year, it was 170,000. The last figure I got was over 200,000, and that figure went into my head. They all have to pass my door, and I said to myself, "If I could take a euro off each one of them." Then I said to myself, "If I can take 50p." You can work out yourselves how much that is. Newport is a very small town. We had a restaurant next door, and it was closed for a number of years. My daughter was in Australia. She came home, and she is running the restaurant now. Last year, she turned over €252,000 in the restaurant. That is a small little restaurant in Newport. That is what the greenway has meant to me.

It is bringing a lot of people to the west of Ireland. When I say "the west of Ireland", I mean Westport and down to Achill Island. It is unbelievable and, as I say, they have to spend more. They stay in hotels, as Suzanne can tell you, and it is, as I have said a number of times, as good as a factory of 500 people in this part of the world, given the amount of money that it has generated — so much so that, two years ago, I brought out a greenway pudding. That sounds daft, but I did it because I had people coming into the shop. When I was a young fella many centuries ago, you went to Dublin or Belfast and got a stick of rock. This man over here knows what I am talking about. People were coming in and buying five or six little puddings off me and saying, "This is for uncle Michael" and different people. They were bringing them back from the greenway. Seán said to himself, "I could put a map of the greenway on it and call it greenway pudding". Seaweed was an ingredient in it. Instead of spending €2, they spent €6 because the pudding was bigger, and it has worked.

As anybody in business knows, given the economy that we are in today, the hardest thing for Suzanne or anybody else is to get people into your business. We will not get them into our businesses in Newport, Mulranny, Achill or Westport unless they come here, and, when they come here, we have to look after them. That is true of anybody on the greenway. Pdraig was the engineer on the whole thing, and it intrigues me how he got 162 farmers to agree to give over their land. I maintain that if our Lord came down from heaven, he would not get them to agree. It was unbelievable. It is fantastic. I can see it going from strength to strength. I will say one thing and be a bit parochial. In this country, we have an awful lot of publicity about the greenway, but I do not care where the greenway is from now on or where the walk is; it will definitely not be called "the greenway" like this one has, because it has been the first. We got an unbelievable amount of publicity from it. I got into 'The New York Times' and the 'Los Angeles Times'. Different reporters came. It is unbelievable how it has improved my business over the past three or four years. Any questions?

Mrs Hale: It is lovely to meet you this morning, Seán. I was one of those visitors who came in August because of the greenway. It was the first time ever. I go to Sligo a lot, but had never been to Mayo. I came to Achill because I was with young children. I am absolutely delighted to be here today with the Committee. You talked about how your business grew in relation to the greenway. Was the greenway a catalyst for the growth of your business, and have your staffing figures increased because of the greenway?

Mr S Kelly: Yes.

Mrs Hale: Definitely. You said that your daughter's restaurant turned over €252,000. Is that just tied to the seasonal traffic of the greenway that comes in and out?

Mr S Kelly: As I said, the restaurant was closed three or four years ago because there were no tourists. There was nothing. If you wanted to get a cup of coffee in November in Newport, you could not get it. I am only talking about Newport now. That was the reality of it. Now there are six or seven places selling coffee. I know that it is only a small thing, but that is because of the greenway. Our little town is only a small town, and I maintain that if you are driving through Newport and you close your eyes, you have missed it.

Mrs Hale: You are over the bridge and out of the way.

Mr S Kelly: Exactly. That is it. It has improved our town. Everybody from any business that you talk to is geared into the greenway.

Mrs Hale: Have there been financial benefits?

Mr S Kelly: Of course there have.

The Deputy Chairperson: Like Brenda, I was down last year. I did not go on it, but I was aware of it, Seán, because I saw a thing — I think it was nationwide — on RTÉ after the news, and it struck a chord with me as somebody who does a bit of cycling but not that much. I did more yesterday than I do in a couple of months. I said that I would do that some time when I went down to the west of Ireland. You said that it will go from strength to strength. How do you see it developing and growing? What are the next steps?

Mr S Kelly: The greenway is being extended from Turlough Park House to Castlebar and being brought into different places. I can see it, because more people know about it now. I have done the craft fair in Dublin for the past three years. Last year, the amount of people who came up to me and said, "Oh, you are from the greenway" was great. They did not say that I was from Newport, but from the greenway. That was in Dublin. Two years ago, they had not even heard of me, but now they are saying that I am from the greenway. I met a lot of people at the craft fair. It has broadened this part of the world, and people now know about the greenway. It will improve for the simple reason that more and more people are cycling; it is a big thing now. Last week, four people from my town went to Spain. What is the walk there called?

Mr Padraig Philbin (Mayo County Council): El Camino.

Mr S Kelly: That is the word. They went to that. Why? They could have stayed at home and walked, but they had heard so much about it and wanted to do it.

The Deputy Chairperson: Do many local people use the greenway?

Mr Philbin: About a third.

Mr S Kelly: I will answer that with a personal story: my wife lost two and a half stone on it.

The Deputy Chairperson: Very good.

Mr McCarthy: Thanks very much for your welcome. I joined the rest of the guys and girls yesterday — well, I do not know whether there were any girls. Seán, I and the big fella — what do you call him? Gerard? — did the whole greenway out to Achill Island, and it was absolutely brilliant. It was superb. It is amazing how you got the cooperation of all of the landowners. We know by doing it yesterday that there was cooperation with them. There had to be. Was there any opposition from any of the landowners to it?

Mr S Kelly: Padraig can touch on that, but my answer, purely from an outsider's position, is that there were 12 apostles and one of them was bad — Judas. No matter when you are dealing with people, there will always be one Judas. I do not know; Padraig dealt with them.

Mr Philbin: I do not have any comment on that one. We are not far away.

Mr S Kelly: We will not comment on that, but there has to have been. To get 162 to agree was phenomenal. Padraig can fill you in on that; I would not know that. From my point of view, I think that it has been unbelievable.

Mr McCarthy: You are the butcher, and there are obviously other providers of services —

Mr S Kelly: Yes.

Mr McCarthy: They are all benefiting from it.

Mr S Kelly: Yes, everybody.

Mr McCarthy: Had the greenway not been constructed, that would not have happened and it might not have been —

Mr S Kelly: I do not believe that a lot of us would be in business.

Mr McCarthy: Right.

Mr Kelly: The Galway greenway was the brainchild of the hotel, and the amount of national coverage we have got from it has been unbelievable. If you are leaving Belfast and have heard about Kelly's in Newport or the Park Hotel, you will make a point of stopping. I was in Belfast lately and I called in to see George McCartney, just because I know of him.

Mr McCarthy: What about the local council's involvement in the investment and maintenance of what you have here? What is that?

Mr S Kelly: Kieran, I think that you will have to leave these points —

Mr Philbin: I will do that during the presentation.

Mr S Kelly: Yes. He is the man from the council.

Mr McCarthy: Good luck, and congratulations on the work that you have done.

Mr S Kelly: Thank you.

Mr McCarthy: It has been unbelievable. Well done.

Mr Hussey: Your wife may have lost two and a half stone; I think that I have gained a stone. The quality of the food since we arrived here has been excellent — first class. Clearly, I am not into cycling or walking; all I can do is eat and breathe, which I do very well. I went to see the track yesterday, the location and everything around it, and you cannot use that track without admiring what you see — the natural beauty. You cannot buy that or create it; it is there. That is what took my breath away. When I was coming here, I wondered where the hell I was going. I was driving along the road and I could see absolutely nothing. Then, foolishly, you try to use two different lanes for the area, but that did not work, and I still managed to get here. You have got buy-in here, not just from the 100-odd farmers but from the entire community, and that is very hard to come by. I congratulate you on that. I take it that people are spreading the word. There is a man that spreads the word just by being there; clearly he is attached to this. There are proposals to develop the buildings here and that little bit extra. It is not just about people who want to come and cycle; you could have railway enthusiasts as well. There might not be a railway, but there are those who follow that all through. You have cracked it. If everybody else could do the same, there would be a lot more places like this.

The Deputy Chairperson: Do any other members have questions?

I will bring you in at this point, Pádraig, to answer some of the questions.

Mr Kelly: Can you excuse me? I have to go.

The Deputy Chairperson: OK. Thanks, Sean, for your presentation.

Mr Philbin: You are very welcome. It is very nice to have a delegation from the North. We have had delegations from all over Ireland, particularly in the Republic of Ireland. We operate here on a county council system, and I think that, at this stage, nearly every county council has come to look at what we have done with the greenway. It is very nice to see that word of the greenway has gone past the borders of the state and into Northern Ireland. A lot of the publicity of the greenway has been done through the newspapers, by word of mouth, television and so on. It is a surprise to us that its name has gone beyond it.

Interestingly enough, when we started to look at the greenway, we were looking at Northern Ireland and the good work that has been done up there. We visited the Comber greenway and the Newry canal, and you had some of the same issues that we have had. I will talk a little bit about the

greenway and how it fits into the tourism product in Mayo, and a little bit about where tourism started, focusing in on the walking and the cycling, particularly the cycling market and those who are interested in it. I will then talk about the greenway and our next steps and opportunities. Suzanne will talk about how the community has got involved — it is very much a community project, and that was one of the key constraints — and the involvement of the businesses. Travis will obviously give an example of his own case study of bike hire.

Historically, the west of Ireland showcased Ireland from a tourism point of view. It had those quintessential views of Ireland — stone walls, thatched cottages, lakes, castles and mountains. From a Fáilte Ireland point of view, the tourist board tried to promote the west of Ireland as the entry into the Irish market for overseas visitors. Going back to the early 1900s, the areas were very much inaccessible, particularly Connemara and the Achill areas. One of the reasons why the railways were extended into those areas was to open it up for tourism. Even this hotel is a consequence of that. The early touring journalists would have written about the area and stayed in this part. The two railways that were found here are the Galway/Clifden line, which we will talk about in a few minutes, and the Westport/Achill line, which is obviously this one here. Connemara and Achill became popular on the strength of what they offered — beaches, the Irish way of life and the traditions. However, it has declined over the years, as has all of rural tourism. The market is for visiting cities and so on.

Traditionally, Mayo's attractions would have been primarily here in Achill, but also at Knock shrine and Croagh Patrick. The pilgrimages to the Knock shrine are still very big, but it has been taken over by activity tourism. It has grown on its own, to a certain extent, over the last 30 years. It is now a very important part of where we are going here in Mayo in relation to tourism. You have activities, whether it be climbing a mountain, cycling, walking or paragliding — that chap there is paragliding over Croagh Patrick — and obviously we have the sea here, which is a big natural attraction for surfing. Windsurfing and kite surfing are very important to Achill.

There are a couple of pictures of the different festivals. We are lucky here in that we have a couple of very good adventure centres north and south of the Westport area. That one at the top is the Gaelforce festival. There are two participants kayaking across Killary harbour. After they do that they will get on to their bikes, cycle to Croagh Patrick and climb it, and then there is a big race into Westport. Adventure tourism is very big and has grown here for us. It sounds quite grand, but it involves all of the things that we do, including walking, cycling, equestrian trails, kayaking, paragliding and more of the extreme stuff as well, like bungee jumping and so on — stuff that we are not as involved in. In this county alone, we estimate that there are about 30,000 participants who participate in those festivals and adventure races every year.

It is an objective of ours here in the council in Mayo to become a national outdoor adventure destination. We fit in, in a country where there are many other destinations and locations that have the same aspirations. Even in the North, excellent work has been done, particularly in developing outdoor activities in the Mourne area. Here, for the last 20 or 30 years we have had a number of very good and well-known adventure centres. We have also developed a number of well-known challenges, like Gaelforce or the Sea2Summit challenge in Westport. *[Inaudible.]* It is a national campaign; we are very much part of that. Last year, Achill held the world championship for kite surfing. We are lucky here in that we have 13 Blue Flag beaches generally. We have 12 this year, because we lost one. We have a very good national park here, Ballycroy national park, which is about 10 km from here at the back of the hotel. All of that is national park area. The owner of that, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, in conjunction with Coillte, which is the forestry board, is developing the Wild Nephin wilderness area. It is a huge area that they are proposing to re-wild. Mayo has 130 national approved walks, which is really impressive compared to other counties in the state. We have 60 km of greenway, which is way ahead of anyone else at this stage, including the Great Western Greenway, which is 42 km of that.

Fáilte Ireland estimate that the market for adventure tourism is worth €1.2 billion annually. The participants in adventure tourism tend to be very good. They stay longer and spend 45% more on average. It is particularly very good for tourism businesses. There is a great crossover between the different activities. You have lots of activities. People who are interested in cycling are typically interested in surfing, walking and hiking as well. What is the next generation of tourists going to be interested in? That is the \$64 million question, I suppose, but they are most likely going to be interested in something connected with that.

Here is a breakdown of what people do when they come to Ireland for active pursuits. You can see that, by a long mile, hiking is the most popular activity that people participate in — some 776,000 people participated in it in 2011 — and it is followed then by things like golf and cycling. Cycling is

way down, at 178,000. You can see from the table that there are other things, which are kind of niche, but they have huge potential.

Let us look a little bit at the figures in relation to hiking. You can see that in 2011, 776,000 people participated in it. That was worth €650 million-odd. It is by far the most popular activity that people participate in. Here in Mayo, we wonder whether Ireland is underperforming in relation to that when you compare it to other European countries, in particular European walking destinations. And, you know, we probably are. A lot of that has to do with our low population, for a start, compared to, say, the UK. Walking is a recent product in Ireland; it is only in the last 10 years that we have really got involved in putting in the infrastructure that surrounds it. We have access costs, and we have some very good competition, particularly in the UK, in Scotland and places.

Just a little bit about the walker. The walker is typically middle-aged, affluent and discerning. Walkers stay over a week, and for us the best markets are the UK and mainland Europe. Walkers are looking for a variety of scenery, high- and low-level walks with good facilities and services. Loop walks and themed walks are the most important. Obviously we are lucky here in the west with the scenery, which makes it one of the most popular destinations; however, we are competing with all those destinations. You are well familiar with those.

Let me give you a bit about cycling. It is a completely different story. The figures are very low: 178,000 people participated in it in 2011. We are underperforming there, compared to the European markets. Fáilte Ireland did a report back in 2006, and satisfaction levels have dropped, according to the people who were surveyed. The main reasons were primarily road safety, lack of defined routes, lack of greenways and competition from other areas which had invested in the cycling product. Again, the profile of the cyclist is young to middle-aged, affluent and well educated. They travel in pairs and stay an average of two weeks. They are high spenders, and typically spend 45% more. For us, according to Fáilte Ireland, the best markets are Germany, with 11 million potential cycle tourists, followed by the UK and Holland.

What is the cycling visitor looking for? Long continuous routes through scenic and wilderness areas, attractive towns and services, and cycling facilities. So it is a combination of many different things. Add onto that that they are also looking for the Irish way of life, the craic in the pubs and all the culture that goes with it as well. They are able to deal with on-road and off-road routes, so long as they are not very busy roads. And, obviously, we are competing with the routes in the UK, the Via Verde in Spain and the Atlantic coast cycling route in France, the Vélodyssée. I have also given you an example of the New Zealand cycling network, which I will come back to in a few minutes.

A little bit different for the domestic tourist. Essentially, people who come here, particularly to the greenway, are of all ages, from the very young to the very old. The greatest category is between the ages of 31 and 39. They tend to come with their families. For us, the biggest market in the state is Dublin, which is the biggest centre of population. Fáilte Ireland estimates that, in Ireland alone, 1 million people are interested in cycling — and we are getting a lot of them, to be quite honest. Obviously, there is huge scope.

The biggest difference here is the domestic cyclist — who did not cycle, by the way, prior to 2009 — is looking for a green route through the scenic areas, attractive towns, with all the services and cycling facilities, but they want all greenway. They are completely spoiled. They tend not to cycle on low-traffic roads.

This is what we are competing with. There is the Timber Trail in New Zealand. It was completed just last year. The bridge cost NZ\$300,000. It is very attractive; you would want to go there immediately just to have a look at it and to experience it. There is a little shake in it, so it is more than just the track; it is the experience of going over that.

France has loads of very good greenway networks. There is the Vélodyssée. It is along the EuroVelo route number 1, which I will talk about in a minute. You can see the services. There is a very good greenway network going through really attractive areas. They have bike facilities, such as bike parking. They have a cross-border product, which is Cycle West. It runs from Nantes up to Morlaix, and it connects to Normandy and on over into the south of England. They got funding of £7.4 million through the INTERREG project for that.

There is the Via Verde in Spain. We took a trip on that prior to starting work on the greenway. There is no better experience than going through the tunnels and coming out into the fresh air again and going across a curved viaduct miles up in the sky. It is a really good product. The place we were in

was in northern Spain. It was a really exhilarating experience. There is also the Danube cycle track. You can even get cycle tracks in Germany that are cobbled, with stone cobbles and separate paths for walkers and cyclists. There are very good facilities. You can catch a boat across the Danube and pick up a cycle way on the other side of the river. They really are years ahead in investment.

These are very interesting to us because there is a huge market. The German market, for example, has 11 million potential visitors. Why would they come to Ireland? They probably come to Ireland primarily because of the Atlantic coast. To be able to cycle on any part of the Atlantic coast route, from Cork up as far as Larne, and then to catch a boat and go onto the Scottish part of the network afterwards, is a really good long-term project. Obviously, our greenway here will become a part of it.

We have another route in Ireland — the capitals route — that runs from Dublin to Moscow. These are all proposed by the European Cyclists' Federation, which is essentially a lobby group for cycling. It is a combination of a number of different national lobby groups. It has the ear of the European Parliament and of agencies and departments in certain states. For example, the Department of Transport in France has completed its section from the south of France up to Brittany. It has the ear of our Department in Dublin. These things will happen in time.

I will say a little bit about promoting cycling tourism in Ireland and where it all started for us. In 2006, Fáilte Ireland undertook a study on Irish cycle tourism that looked at why the small number of cycling tourists we would have been used to had all gone. It produced a strategy for the development of Irish cycle tourism. Essentially, that is our bible in terms of how we are developing our network. Smarter Travel and the national cycle policy framework document are primarily interested in sustainable travel; kids cycling to school and workers and commuters using cycle routes and sustainable travel as part of their daily activities. The proposed national cycle network is what we are working from at the moment. The yellow line is the Fáilte Ireland idealistic tourism route, and the black lines are the inter-urban connections. We would have a cycle way, for example, running from Castlebar to Westport and beyond.

The 2006 report proposed that we develop cycle hubs. The cycle hubs in the west of Ireland were to be for Westport, Achill and Clifden. They are shown here by the red routes. You can see the Clifden one followed by Westport and then Achill. We have also developed one up in Belmullet. There was a proposal for a linear route — which is shown by the black line — running up along the coast. This one is from Galway up as far as Ballina and on to Sligo. It then proposed a small number of greenway developments. There was one from Westport town to the quay, which is about 3 kilometres, and one from Westport to Achill. It was actually Newport to Achill in the report, but it has since been changed.

Here are examples of the work that we have done to develop the cycle hub in Achill. It is mainly cycling on no-traffic roads. It is about defining the route and giving people options so that they can cycle for anything from a couple of hours to a couple of days. The Westport one also involved some construction of cycle paths adjacent to a busy regional road.

Within a year of opening, the greenway won the European Destinations of Excellence award. Suzanne might talk a little bit about that. It was very much the whole community here, particularly Mulranny, showcasing the greenway, what it was doing and all the add-ons that it was adding to it at the time. It was a great award to win because it is backed by the European Union and Fáilte Ireland and gives the whole thing a very good international status. It has won many awards, to be quite honest. You do not win awards for a route or scenery. You win it for everything. It is a combination of all the things that are good about the greenway. In 2013, it won first prize at the European Greenways Association awards in Portugal. It also won an Irish Times InterTradeIreland Innovation Award in 2012. It gets great publicity. For example, last year, 'The New York Times' put it as one of its top three favourite bike journeys. There was a little bit of the tourist board getting behind that — it probably did not just happen — but it is great publicity.

I will give a couple of the greenway's key features. It is 42 kilometres long. It is a dual route for walking and cycling. It was funded as a demonstration model for other counties in the state to follow and as the first part of the national cycle network. As I said, it won the European Destinations of Excellence award. It is very much a smarter travel corridor, with 30% of local people using it. It connects right into Westport. It sweeps right around the town and connects to as many estates as we could connect it to. The whole idea there is that the kids and people will use it from early morning to late evening and that it is not just a recreational route for the town.

One of the key things is the partnership and community involvement. It was partnership with landowners, the community and businesses. You are going to see that today, please God. We asked

the landowners whether they were interested in this. There was no way that we were ever going to be able to purchase the land from Westport to Achill. Some people will just not sell, so you would then be into an option of coercion. We were not going to do that, and, even if we had decided to do that, it is not that simple. You would nearly have to do the whole thing and it would be a different product altogether. Essentially, without all the community involvement, it would be just a route.

Generally, people thought that it was a very good idea. They all owned their land. The state railway company had sold it back to each of the individual landowners. So there was no issue about ownership; they owned it. This is not unusual either. There has been a lot of publicity about how good the landowners were. However, I was talking to the manager in Mourne recently, and it was something similar with Newry canal. It might have been publicly owned, but there was so much involvement with landowners. There were a lot of hidden negotiations that people either did not see or have forgotten about, but there is always negotiating with landowners when you are doing any kind of development that impacts on them. Generally, people are very good. In my experience, they are very good.

The greenway has been tremendously popular. We have counters on the greenway that estimate that there were over 300,000 trips last year. We can deduce from that that approximately 200,000 people used it in 2013. The big surprise about the greenway is that, when you put in the basic infrastructure, a number of things happen in relation to enterprise, innovation and regeneration of the place. Suzanne is going to talk an awful lot more about that. You can see the next view from a plane; I must change that. That is a typical Achill landscape, including Mulranny here and other very pretty towns, Newport and Westport being the main hook for the greenway, to be honest. There was an official opening; we had two openings because we built the thing in two phases. Phase 1, between Newport and Mulranny, was opened in April 2010 by the then Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Noel Dempsey. Phase 2, which comprises the connections to Achill and Westport, was opened by the Taoiseach in 2011. So, this is our fourth year of operation. It has massive appeal; it appeals to everybody. It is a mass-market attractor, because it attracts everybody, from cyclists and walkers to joggers, young and old. We have people who are well into their later years who use electric bikes on the greenway, as well as really young ones in buggies.

I will give you an example of the profile of the traffic on the greenway. It is primarily cyclists; 78% of the traffic is cyclists, and you can see that that is growing every year. Travis is waiting every year to tell me how we are doing, but we are waiting to see when this product will level off and there is no sign of it doing that at the moment. I mentioned it earlier, and you can see that the biggest age profile is 31 to 49. Seventy eight per cent of the traffic is cyclists. Three quarters of them come from Ireland and the remainder from abroad. John O'Donnell does the surveys on the greenway, and these findings are from our questionnaire. Last year, he did an online survey of 800 users, and the year before he surveyed about 700 people, so we have an idea of what is happening. It is very important to track what is happening on the greenway. It is very popular with cyclists. Dublin in particular, with about 30%, and Mayo are our biggest markets. Roughly half of people hire a bike and the others bring their own.

We have seen a couple of changes. In 2011, in our second year of operation, an estimated 145,000 visitors used the greenway and that went up to 208,000 last year. As it did nationally, the number of international visitors has increased. They increased from 16% in 2012 to 24.5% last year, but the UK figures stayed the same, at 9.5%. People are looking to cycle longer journeys; Travis might talk a little bit about that and about where they are going and what they will want next year. We need to be aware of that and the fact that they are also using the on-road routes more, particularly down in Achill.

The maintenance of the greenway is being carried out by the council, but primarily by a local community group and a local rural social scheme and a Tús scheme. We do that with the cooperation of the LEADER office in Newport. For us, it is very important that the greenway is maintained by local people. It does not suit a county council operation as much. You need to have an ongoing presence on the greenway; you need to be there nearly every day. It is not just about maintenance. There are questions from tourists to be answered. You need to be very knowledgeable about the area and the trail itself so that you can deal with that. Ideally, we would like people to be trained in first aid in case anything goes wrong. As part of the development, we have plans to use the station house and to have a number of bases for people and for the scheme along the way. To do anything on the greenway, particularly in relation to festivals, you need a lot of volunteers. The Great Western Greenway 10k run, which was held last year, is an example of that. The number of volunteers that are needed to keep all the road crossings manned is quite significant.

I will say a little bit about where we are going. The diagram shows the existing network in Mayo. We now have a greenway that runs from Westport to Achill, and you can see that it also runs just south of Westport towards Croagh Patrick. We are doing a network over in Castlebar as well. The orange and red lines on the diagram are on-road routes, which include loop-cycle networks at Belmullet, Achill, Louisburgh and Westport, and the idea is that all these will combine and link in. It is also very important for us to link back into Galway as part of the Atlantic coast route. Galway has just had an announcement of funding. From Galway to Oughterard, there is a section that got money last week. Clifden also got money. It is a matter of linking all our places with the best of the scenery and the best of the towns. It is not just tourism; it is the smarter travel element and giving a facility to people that they can cycle on as part of their daily activities. The greenway will go to the museum of country life in Castlebar. The idea is that you will be able to cycle from Westport to that facility, which is one of our premier tourist attractions in Mayo.

It is very important for us that we extend the greenway to Clifden and Galway and also north towards Belmullet and Sligo. The N59 is a busy road, but if you cross the estuary with a bridge that has a little bit of a shake in it, it would be an attraction in itself. It would not be the same as Carrick-a-Rede, but it would not be far behind. It would be a tourist attraction in itself, and people would be willing to go that extra couple of miles to experience that. If we cross that estuary, it means that we could use a load of other greenway tracks or existing county roads. Again, it goes through very nice scenery.

In relation to the green patrol, we need a number of activity services centres. Typically, people need toilet and shower facilities. We have one that we have funding for in Westport, which is the smarter travel building. For the station house, the idea is that we will renovate that, in conjunction with the hotel, and provide services there, particularly toilets, showers, drying rooms for clothes and a facility for hiring bikes.

The Blueway is a pilot project. It is a water-based trail. It is being piloted at a number of different locations in Mayo, and we are looking at extending a trail that will go along the coast from Clifden as far as Belmullet. It involves all the typical water-based activities such as surfing, snorkelling, canoeing and so on.

The big thing for us at the moment is the Wild Atlantic Way. It is being marketed as the longest coastal drive in the world. It runs from Cork up as far as Derry. It will link in with the northern coastal route. It is a Cork/Belfast route. We are currently signing that route. The idea is that you will have destination stops along the way. Rather than just stopping for a minute or not being able to stop at all, you will be able to spend a bit of time there and partake in some of the activities. So, you will be able to walk down to the beach, walk on a coastal path, a loop walk or the greenway or just experience some really good scenery. It will all be defined. It is being marketed this year by Fáilte Ireland, and the interest in the trail has been phenomenal. That is where we are at the moment in relation to that. That is it. Thank you very much.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you. Members want to ask questions.

Mrs Hale: You have really captured my imagination. I am a cycling fan, having followed the Tour through France last summer and seeing small villages, such as Alpe d'Huez with its 21 bends, swell beyond belief with the number of tourists coming in. What struck me was that, as well as the cycling support teams, there were lots of families following the Tour through. Although your profile for cyclists is higher than for walkers, cycling abroad in Ireland is not as big as in the rest of Europe. Given the imminent arrival of the Giro d'Italia into Northern Ireland in the next couple of days, did you look at advertising the greenway, given that a worldwide market will be arriving literally a few hours from your doorstep?

Secondly, the development of cycle lanes will have an impact on road infrastructure. How much would that cost, and who would pay for it? Is it to come from local government or central government?

Mr Philbin: In relation to the international race in the North, we did not advertise. You can never do enough advertising. We tend not to advertise ourselves transnationally, because primarily, to date, that has been done by Fáilte Ireland. We tend to focus on trade shows and local advertisement. We attend a lot of events throughout the country such as the Ploughing Championships. We have stands there, and we are involved in programmes such as 'Tracks and Trails'. Suzanne will talk a bit about this. So, it has been very targeted marketing, and, primarily, it will be television, if we can, or newspapers. Fáilte Ireland does a lot of advertising in relation to inviting journalists, travel writers and so on. Again, Suzanne will talk more about that later on.

On the issue of road infrastructure, the greenway was funded primarily by the state. There was no EU funding involved. Smarter Travel is similar. It was not part of the Irish Government's submission to Europe back at the time when they were doing their most recent development plan. So, a lot of the money has been put into it by the Government themselves. They are looking at that for the next lot to see how they can increase the level of cycling and how they can put elements of Smarter Travel and sustainable travel into the national development plan. We have been encouraged to look at INTERREG funding an awful lot more. Obviously, the border counties are really in a great position because, under INTERREG, particularly the a fund, they are very geared towards infrastructure. They are a lot more geared than we are to the INTERREG funds that we might have access to here in this part. In the past month, funding has been announced by the state of €6.5 million to cover two years to fund a greenway in Kerry, a greenway in Galway and a greenway in Waterford. If they could add two noughts after the €6.5 million, they might have enough to satisfy the demand that is there currently. The funding available is very low, but they are looking at ways of increasing it for the future. This is futuristic stuff, and it will probably become mainstream in our roads funding projects. The National Roads Authority (NRA) is the body that is charged with developing the road network in Ireland, and it is now mandated to provide a cycle network as part of any road improvement that it does, excluding the motorways. It does not have to do it for motorways, but it does have to do it for any realignment. In our area, you may have seen on the way between Westport and Newport that the NRA had taken charge of a section of the greenway there that is adjacent to the road. Once you touch a road, building a cycle network is very expensive. It is way more expensive than any greenway on a railway line. A greenway itself is a gravel path, and, once you go into macadam, you are into more expensive materials. You would not feel a few million go. You go a long way with a couple of million in a rural setting with gravel materials.

Mrs Hale: It is interesting. Thank you.

Mr McCarthy: Thanks very much for your presentation. Again, I go back to the question that I posed to the butcher. You talked about the cooperation that you got from the local community, particularly landowners. You said in your presentation that the railway was owned by the state and that, when it was abandoned, the state sold it back to the original owner. Therefore, the landowners were in control, and they could have said yea or nay to the proposal. However, you have everyone on board to provide what we saw yesterday and today.

Mr Philbin: The section between Newport and Mulranny is the first section that we did. We had 85 people involved there, and I think that there was just the one chap who was not interested. We were able to go around them easily enough. There was another landowner who could not cooperate, but some people cannot cooperate. We were not buying the land, so that kind of thing could mean that some people might suffer a financial loss. However, this landowner in particular could not cooperate, but he could give half, so he gave us half his railway. He owned a good stretch of it, which meant that we had to go into adjoining commonage land. It actually meant that 13 more people were brought in, because it was the commonage. However, people were very good.

We have been asked, "Why do people do this?". We have to say that they genuinely thought that it was a good idea. I think that they had probably walked on the railway line in their youth and seen that, from a farming point of view, it was not the best of land. There are a lot of different reasons, I suppose, but I think that the whole idea excited them. They may not have thought that we would get the money as well, so it was easier to say yes. I think that we have a bigger problem getting money for the farms.

Mr McCarthy: What is Mayo County Council's role in providing and maintaining what you have now?

Mr Philbin: Obviously, we give the commitment to the landowners that we will maintain the route, and we have a budget of €50,000 per annum set aside for that. That is for things such as spraying the grass, keeping the weeds under control and making little improvements here and there. We are responsible for the fence maintenance as well. John does some of the work on that, but, for us, there are other schemes, such as rural and social schemes. There is no employment cost relating to those. They tend to involve local people and, in a lot of cases, local farmers. We are really keen that they be encouraged as much as possible. That is because, from a financial point of view, you get an awful lot more value from it, but many more other things also come from it. It makes people prouder of the whole project as well. They feel part of its development and feel that it is a great success. People are quite proud of it, whether they own the railway or not. The railway might have been owned by the 160 landowners, but people in this area have a connection with it, because their grandparents or great-grandparents may have travelled on it or built it. So, it is really part of the whole place.

Mr McCarthy: Finally, I think that you said that you were on the Comber greenway.

Mr Philbin: Yes.

Mr McCarthy: That is in my constituency, and I am very proud of it.

The Deputy Chairperson: There are no votes down here, Kieran. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCarthy: I support it 100%, despite the fact that there was some suggestion that there might be a rapid rail running beside it. That has not happened, thank God, because anyone that uses it knows that, right there, you have complete freedom, you are breathing fresh air and you are not breathing any fumes from passing trains or buses. What you have here and what we have up in the Comber greenway are fantastic, but you have the exposed scenery, whereas Comber is nicely protected by hedges and whins and so on. However, I think that it has been a success.

Mr Philbin: First, we went there with a purpose. When you are faced with building a converted railway, the engineering is not awfully difficult when you know how to do it, and a lot of the relay structures have been built already, so it is there for you. So, there is nothing really complicated about it.

Mr McCarthy: I am glad, because it was wilderness anyway; it was doing nothing for anybody.

Mr Philbin: Absolutely. In making a lot of decisions about the type of surfacing, signage, fencing, gates and all those things, the trips North were great. They started the whole thing for us. I suppose that the greenway that you see there is a combination of a couple of different trips to different places. Maybe the Comber greenway does not have our scenery, but it has Belfast. *[Inaudible due to mobile phone interference.]* The tourist who comes in is looking for long distances and connectivity. In fairness, in the North, you come off the greenway and you are on to a defined route on a road. In a way, you are miles ahead of us. We may have the greenway here of 42 kilometres *[Inaudible.]* to Mayo. Typically, it has not happened around the country, except in *[Inaudible.]*

Mr McCarthy: Does Sustrans do any work?

Mr Philbin: No, only the report that it did for Fáilte Ireland. It had no involvement in the cycling element.

Mr Hussey: I will not mention Comber greenway, because I am from Tyrone, and it is far from Comber. We were never really that fussed about Comber in the first place. *[Laughter.]* There is a farming connection here, and there has been buy-in, but clearly the sheep have not bought in to it, as they still walk the roads occasionally. I do not know whether you noticed that, but there are always contrary sheep, no matter where you go. Have some of the farmers expanded their businesses, perhaps into B&Bs? Has that happened, or is it possible?

Mr Philbin: The first thing is that you will probably find that the odd farmer is a taxi driver, so his business has increased. Yvonne's Cottage springs to mind immediately. That is run by a farmer.

Mr John O'Donnell (Mayo County Council): The children are employed here in the hotel as well.

Mr Philbin: The hotel is the big engine of the area.

Mr O'Donnell: So, you can see the benefit of it.

Mr Philbin: There is also bicycle hire.

Ms Suzanne O'Brien (Mulranny Park Hotel): Absolutely. Also, as I remember Kathleen telling me, there are farmers out there who may not have had that many visitors coming in the week. They may have seen the postman, but they would not have had a huge network of communication. However, they have other people passing and standing chatting at the back gate. Some people are growing cabbages or carrots and selling them along with eggs or other little bits and pieces. That has changed their life, because it has brought new life into the area. So, it may not be huge money, but it changes the quality of life for some people.

Mr O'Donnell: One businessman here employs 15 or 16 people. That is where spin-offs come from. That is just one example.

Mr Hussey: That particular one is certainly successful. Obviously, when you are going through all these things, you see that they have a planning process. We are seeing many long days when planning applications can last forever. Do you have a county council here to deal with planning issues? I take it that that was fairly easy to override.

Mr Philbin: Yes. Depending on the location and the party, the process is typically straightforward, to be honest. We are currently doing one for Killala, which is in the north of the county, and we are inviting submissions from the public. The councils have the control. So, once they decide that that is it, I think that it goes to judicial review after that. It is very clean-cut. Likewise, we tend not to have any problem. Again, "Mayo greenway" is a very good phrase. It may not be in other parts of the country, but in this county it gets a good response from the public.

I know that, when we went to the museum in Castlebar, we did not get any submissions from the public at all. That is quite difficult when you are dealing with permissive access. With permissive access and planning, you are opening it all up, even for landowners with whom you may have agreed certain things. You are inviting everybody in, but we keep talking and asking whether it is under way. It is all about communication, keeping people informed and maintaining that little bit of contact all the time. To be honest, even afterwards, we are still in contact with our landowners. I did not mention that we have a landowner committee for the greenway. That is a key part of it and something that we will get into more in the next year or two. That is because it prevents any problems from happening, because the smallest little things can sometimes be big issues.

Mr Hussey: Given the location of something like this, the problem is that sometimes you get an environmental impact assessment that can perhaps find that frogs that have been bouncing about here for 40 years can no longer do so.

Mr Philbin: It is not an issue, because this is the lowest-impact engineering work that you can do. That is the key point. Remember that the Connemara Greenway went through a very heavy planning process. I think that that is all true, especially in conservation. Every single area from Oughterard to Clifden got through last year — maybe it was the year before that. It is low-impact, and I think that people accept that. On a grander scale, it is sustainable. It is an alternative to road and to commuting and all that.

Mr Hussey: It is not only that; it is the fact that you fit them as you see. As an outsider coming in, I see that everyone involved has their hands in it to a certain degree; it is theirs, and they want it to succeed. That is evident to me as an outsider coming here. Yesterday's visit was a prime example of that. We saw what we saw, but there was more to it. It was not a case of, "There's a drop of water over there." It was sold to us, and it was very, very positive. I have to say that I found that to be very positive from your perspective.

You talked about advertising. One of Ireland's biggest tourist conferences is the Clare tourism conference. Everybody and their granny seem to go to Clare. Have you ever sold your greenway at that conference?

Mr Philbin: Yes. Last year, our county manager presented at Clare on the greenway. I think that that was the first time that it was done, but it will definitely not be the last. The greenway was one of the topics at the conference last year or the year before — I think that it was last year's. We have had a lot of visits from people from Clare. The biggest numbers have come from Clare, Cork and Kerry. We could have four delegations from each county.

Mr O'Donnell: We have had two from Cork.

Mr Philbin: It is the councils and the trade that are coming. They are the real people who drive the greenway development across the country.

Mr Hussey: The bridge is the last thing that I want to comment on. It looks so natural and as though it should be there.

Mr Philbin: We were going to soften it a bit more.

Mr Hussey: It really looks as though that is where it should be. There has been a very wise use of materials and everything else. I would not cross it if you paid me, but it looks good.

Mr Philbin: If that actually happens, or when it happens, we will bring you down to it, so you will have no choice.

Mr Hussey: A very strong wheelbarrow would not get me across.

The Deputy Chairperson: OK, Ross. Now, from one Tyrone man to another: Declan.

Mr Hussey: He is not my brother.

Mr McAleer: We have different political colours. I want to commend this facility. It is amazing. I was on it yesterday, and I was one of the people who cheated by having the battery-powered bicycle. Dealing with the landowners must have been a Herculean task. Did you do this without exercising your powers of vesting? I presume that the county council has the power to vest. I noted the bigger plan for the Atlantic route. Is there a national plan? You are doing this, but are the Government driving a national plan, whereby other county councils will fill in the missing links?

Mr Philbin: I will take the question on the national plan. I showed the slides with the black lines. It was probably not a very good one, but there were black and yellow lines. That is our proposed national cycle network. We cannot afford to build it; it is just so extensive. It is a first draft. Take the commuter lines, for instance. We know that there are places where we could put in that infrastructure but where it would never be used. That is because the distances are too great from one town to the other, for example, and commuters would not travel that far. People will walk for 20 minutes every day, and that is about it. They will cycle three times more. They will cycle 5 kilometres or walk a mile. That is all that you are getting from the mass market of the commuting section. The national plan is that national cycle network that is shown in the diagram. I suppose that we are just looking beyond it, in that we are looking at the EuroVelo. Departments are looking at it as well, as is Fáilte Ireland. However, they do not have the money for it. If you look at the money that they gave out in the last month, you will see that the Kerry project is on the national cycle network, the tourism cycle network and the EuroVelo. Galway is the same. I do not know where the Waterford project is; we will have to look at that one. So, although they did not have much money, they put it into very good schemes.

Of course, there was a big task for landowners. We are very careful when people from other parts of the country come here and we say, "The way to build those things is to use permissive access, so you will get your landowners, no problem". Of course, you will not. First of all, we had to look at our county here. We had done some research on whether people would sell. Some would, but it was no good. That is because the issue was not the number who would but the number who would not. The permissive access was an easier sell for this area and county. However, we would not advocate it as the way to do this across the country.

We have had problems. There have been a few closures. We have been kicked out of bed, so to speak, a few times. You have to deal with that, and we do not like it. However, please God, it is very rare, and generally there is a really good reason behind all that. Was it a big task? Absolutely. Only a few of us were involved. We probably needed a bigger team. You needed certain people who were suited to it — ideally people who talked a lot, and that includes me.

There other thing was that this was the Westport to Achill Island railway line. It is famous across the county. There was no way that, after getting the money, we were going to lose it. We would do whatever it took. That meant working all hours and days. For it to happen, you woke up on a Monday morning thinking about the railway and you went to bed on a Sunday night thinking about the railway, how you would get permissions and how it would be delivered. As far as we were concerned, there was absolutely no way that it was not going to happen.

Mr O'Donnell: We worked weekends, early mornings and very late nights — Pádraig especially.

Mr Philbin: We got more money.

Mr McAleer: Going by what you have here, it was obviously worth it.

Mr Philbin: It was. It was worth it for County Mayo. If you just look at this area, you can see that the hotel was the biggest change here. It was probably the biggest change for all of Achill Island. I showed the lovely picture of Achill Island on the first slide. It has been in decline. Generally speaking, all the rural western counties have been in decline from a tourism point of view. The greenway stopped people in their tracks from the first time that they saw it. People want to do more than just look at the scenery. They want to enjoy it.

The other thing that I suppose is interesting in Ireland is that nobody was cycling in 2009. We were applying for funding in Westport for people on bikes. It was that bad that you had to stage pictures. It would not be too far wrong to say that there was absolutely nobody on the roads. Suddenly, we put a cycleway in, and we see people on it. I remember that before we had even finished the greenway, people were cycling along it. They were passing by our machines. We could not keep people off it, and they had bought bikes. It came at a very good time, when we had a bike-to-work scheme.

Another thing was that we were very lucky that this chap here, Travis, arrived. That is the other side: like all the figures, it is about not just the track but accommodation and bike hire. I want to point out Clew Bay in particular, because it is not just about setting up bike hire and hoping that it will work, charging plenty, letting them off and using sites for 20 years or whatever. It is about going in, just as you do in Clew Bay, where there is customer service from the minute that you walk in the door. All the ideas were new, such as the trailer to carry all the bikes and the collection. That was good for a country that did not cycle, as was even getting the business to set up shop in Westport in a premier place and paying rates, not knowing how you would get to the end of the year financially. I do not know how you did it, Travis. Every place needs an entrepreneur like that who will follow through. From the council's point of view, we said that we would do whatever it took. In their business, the same kind of principle of saying "whatever it takes" can apply.

The Deputy Chairperson: I have just one last question. There was a great rail network in Ulster that covered Donegal, Tyrone and Fermanagh. It was taken out in, I think, the 1950s. However, it has mostly been built upon, and trying to retrieve it would be very difficult, because the land there is better than that here. Did farmers lose the single farm payment as part of your taking the line for the greenway? Any of us who deal with rural areas know that the single farm payment is a key issue.

Mr Philbin: I would be quite confident in saying that it is a massive task to take away a railway, no matter where it is. You will find that bits are gone and an odd house is built here and there, but generally you will find that the vast bulk of the track is still there. You will probably find that the ones that are gone were taken for roads. I know of one in Louth, where the whole thing was taken as part of a new road scheme.

We had our problems here. We had houses on the line, roads that had taken sections of it and the odd guy who would not let us in. However, you will never be running a train on it; you will be running a bike, so you can weave, duck and dive to overcome whatever problems are in the area.

The single farm payment was not really a problem. A lot of farmers have a document from CIÉ to say they own the railway, but it is not on the land registry map, so when they go for farm payments, they tend not to put it in. That is our experience, and it might not be the same in Tyrone. So, some farmers included some sections of the railway and others did not bother. I think that our REP scheme and single farm payment were coming to the end of the cycle, and some farmers were staggered that the cycle had ended for them and they were not getting any payment for it anyway, while others had another two years to go.

The single farm payment is also worked out on the basis of the amount of land you own. If you take out a certain portion, you will find that they may have had so much land that it did not matter, particularly between Newport and Mulranny. It was commonage, but they had so much ground that it did not affect them, while closer to Westport it did. Even though it is a loss, it is small money, and they tended to get over that.

We compensated them and gave them extra gates, for example. We did not ignore that, because it was a loss to people. We were also hoping, although it never happened, that we would get what we call the Walks scheme, which is a scheme here in the state for certain loop walks and long-distance linear walks in the country. I am not too sure of the numbers that are in the Walks scheme. I know that farmers participating in the Burrishoole loop walk near Mulranny get an annual maintenance-related payment for being part of it. A contract is signed every five years and farmers do small maintenance work and get funding. Permissive access for greenways needs the Walks scheme or a greenways scheme. The two go hand in hand.

Another reason why are very keen on the rural social scheme or the Tús scheme is because they are all in the one family. It would be good if we could keep it all like that, rather than just saying, "We are doing the maintenance, and there is no option for anybody to get a maintenance scheme or to be part of other rural schemes." We do not want to jam that up. We have €50,000, and we tend to give that out to for wages. For example, John's wage would be charged to it, and we also give money to those schemes so that they can buy materials and so on.

The Deputy Chairperson: OK. Thanks very much for that, Pádraig. At this stage, I want to bring Suzanne in for her presentation.

Ms O'Brien: I am glad that Pádraig spoke about the work that he put in. To be honest, they drank more cups of tea, and he is underselling how difficult it was and the amount of work that went into it. It is so easy for me to stand up here and talk. That is the easy part, because you have left us with the legacy of a piece of infrastructure and what we can do with that as a business on the greenway.

So, welcome to Mulranny. It is a little cloudier than it was yesterday, but we can look out on Croagh Patrick from the other side. I will talk about the infrastructure as a tool for economic and community development from a community point of view. Where are we? You know where we are. Pádraig mentioned briefly that Mulranny and the greenway are on the Wild Atlantic Way, which is Fáilte Ireland's new coastal drive. The other big thing is that, back in 2011, Mulranny and the greenway were awarded a European Destinations of Excellence (EDEN) award. I do not know whether you are aware of those awards from the EU. Fáilte Ireland administers them, and there is a different theme every year. In 2011, the theme was the regeneration of physical sites, and, between us, we had regenerated the hotel, the greenway, the causeway — I do not know whether any of you walked down it yesterday towards the beach — and the old Victorian loop walk. Fifteen years ago, all those sites were completely derelict. It was because they were all regenerated that the area was awarded a Europe Destinations of Excellence award, which was a great kick-start for the area.

I will give you a brief outline of where the Mulranny story is at now in building the product and developing experiences around it. I do not know how many of you come from a hospitality background, but that is roughly what I will be talking about. I will outline the challenge now that we have the infrastructure in place, what you do with that infrastructure — the tapestry that you can build on — and what we have learnt along the way: the good, the bad and all the rest.

Obviously, the hotel was built with the railway line. The railway line was built in 1895 and the hotel in 1897. Therefore, it has been here an awfully long time. It went through great phases during the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s, and then the railway line closed in 1937. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the hotel traded really well, but, eventually, the roads and whatever else got better, and people started to go on foreign holidays. The investment was not here, so the hotel gradually went down and down until the point in the early 1990s that it completely closed. I am showing you a picture of what the hotel looked like 10 years ago, and it is quite a sorry sight. There was very limited activity and heritage in the area, with a derelict and underdeveloped tourism infrastructure. Basically, Mulranny was a place that you passed through on the way to Achill Island, and people may not even have remembered doing so. From a community point of view, great people in the community were completely underutilised. There was nothing there to work with and a lack of vision. The picture that I have shown you is what the hotel was like 10 years ago, and that went for everything: the greenway and the whole lot. We have come a long way in 10 years.

As I mentioned, the railway line was sold way back in 1937. Pádraig mentioned that and the permissive access. The hotel was bought by local people and Galway people and reopened in 2005. They invested €18 million in the property itself and in the housing complex behind. The greenway started to come on from 2010. Pádraig mentioned that the railway station that you saw is in hotel ownership. It is a sorry sight at the moment, but we hope that we will get funding in conjunction with Mayo County Council and that the construction can begin. I am now showing you an artist's impression of what it may look like in future.

The hotel is a four-star hotel. It is McKennas' Guides-listed for 2014, a publication that details the top 100 places to stay and eat in in Ireland, and I hope that you agree after last night's hospitality. It has a great fine-dining restaurant, with some of the top 10 dishes in the county, and has a top 10 placing for walkers. To put all of that in context, 10 years ago there was very little here, and we are now one of the top five wedding venues in Ireland, the best in Mayo and one of the best in Connacht.

We also started to do other things. When you look at the hotel, you ask, "What are we?" We are bricks and mortar. I used to work in Westport, and I live there, and you can almost sit back and let

Westport do the work for you when it comes to selling rooms and experiences. In Mulranny, you have to do things differently. You cannot just sit back and promote the hotel as a stand-alone business, because that would never work. We tried to re-imagine the role of the hotel in partnership with the greenway. We have this phenomenal piece of infrastructure literally at the back door and are one of the landowners. We thought about what we could do with it. We came up with various community initiatives. It is always key to say that they are "community initiatives". They are not hotel initiatives; they are about working with the community. We have three initiatives at the moment. The Gourmet Greenway food trail is one of our main ones, so I will talk about that a little bit more in a minute. We have Greenway Adventures, which again is harnessing the greenway and all the adventure activity that Pádraig was talking about a few minutes ago. All of that is on the doorstep, and we take in the whole of the Clew Bay area, right round from Louisburgh, Westport and into Achill. We then have the Mulranny Walking Experience, as well as Wild Atlantic Walking, which is our new initiative for this year. We launched the website just a couple of weeks ago, and it is all about promoting walking in the area. We are piggybacking again on the greenway and this whole Wild Atlantic Walking trail.

Where are we now? You can see some of the stunning images. You are right. You were travelling on the greenway yesterday. The location around it is beautiful. What can we do with the greenway as a blank canvas? We started coming up with different types of things. We obviously had the hotel as a product, but we had to come up with more different types of things for people to do. When you go on holiday, you want to be coming back to your family and friends saying, "My God, that was great". It is not just about the bedroom and whatever else but about what you did, the people whom you met when you were there and the memories that you bring home. Therefore, we went about developing the initiatives.

The Gourmet Greenway food trail is the main one. You have the brochure in front of you. It started off with six members. We basically took the greenway, which is 42 kilometres long, and thought, "What food producers are there? What are we serving in our restaurants on a daily basis for breakfast, lunch and dinner? Let us work together with those producers to highlight what is going on in the area". Obviously, food trails are not new. We did not invent them — there are food trails all over the world — but there was none in this area, so we started our own. We started with six producers. Seán was one of them. Today is a really busy day, because tonight we are launching the third year of the Gourmet Greenway. We have a sold-out dinner celebrating a nine-course tasting menu. I am not having lunch, because the dinner is going to be fabulous. We will have all nine courses tonight. We are launching the food trail for 2014. We have gone from having six members to 18. We have everybody now from Seán, who makes sausages, to people who are brewing beer. We have others who make sea salt, plus phenomenal people who are growing edible flowers. It is all here, and it is giving people a platform for the different types of things that they are doing. For the customers it is: see, smell, experience. There is real traceability. You come here, get your brochure, and go out and visit all the different providers. You actually get to meet Seán, who will tell you how he makes his sausages, or your kids will get to plant seeds or collect eggs and different types of things, and they then come back to the hotel and perhaps have the eggs that they collected yesterday for their breakfast. It is all about that kind of experience.

For Greenway Adventures, we have 16 different world-class activity providers with us. Travis is one of them. We have everything: kitesurfing, kayaking, cycling, walking, rock climbing and so many other activities. That gives people lots of different imaginations and different things to do from the walking experience. The other thing that the greenway has brought about — this is not a hotel initiative but is worth mentioning — is that a group of artists are working together. Some 15-plus artists live and work in the area and have combined and branded themselves as the "Greenway Artists". They have studios and different things in Achill, Westport and Newport, so they are also doing something on the greenway side of things.

With the Gourmet Greenway, we could not have asked for better. I do not know whether anyone has heard of John McKenna. He is based in Cork, but he produces and writes probably the most admired books on Irish hospitality and the best places to stay and eat. He is one of the leading voices in Irish food, and he said that Gourmet Greenway is inspired and inspiring and is one of the best things in Irish hospitality. We will take that. We are quite happy with the fact that he said that. None of that would be possible without having the greenway to work on.

Especially after the whole horse meat scandal, people want a story behind the food on their plate. They want to know what they are eating. When I am giving my kids sausages, I want to know what is in them. People are more conscious of what they are eating these days. The Gourmet Greenway is a food experience made real in a unique way. Then there is the fact that we have created our own food trail, which I have mentioned.

Here are the key figures for Mulranny. Again, I will have to rejig the figures in the presentation. To put it in context, Mulranny is a very small village, with 604 people living in it. It is very small, but we have had 208,000 people come through Mulranny in the past couple of years. Ten years ago, you could not even have envisaged that number coming through. It is phenomenal, but it is not only that. There is also the fact that all the businesses have gained from those visitors. A Fitzpatrick Associates report, which was commissioned by Fáilte Ireland a couple of years ago, gave the estimated value to the local economy. I would argue that that figure is very dated and probably needs to be done again. However, a couple of years ago, visitor numbers were estimated at being worth €7.2 million to the local economy. I would definitely argue that the figure is higher at this stage.

The marketing initiatives that we have been able to do because of the greenway contributed to a 19% increase in occupancy and a 15% increase in people coming into the Waterfront Bar and getting food, coffee and sandwiches or whatever. That is delivering again this year, and the figure is growing all the time. In the past three years, the Gourmet Greenway initiative alone has contributed in excess of €1.5 million in publicity, regeneration and increased tourism to the area. Again, that is a huge figure.

Then there is the walking experience. You talked about the publicity around the greenway, and I will talk about it in a minute or so. Fáilte Ireland especially is always looking for stories and for something to sell to the public. It has picked up on the greenway and run with it hugely. It has sent lots of journalists. We have done that ourselves. We have gone walking and cycling with journalists. The area has got a great publicity boost because of the greenway. Visitors do not necessarily always come to walk on the greenway. We have a group of 50 people here at the moment, and they are walking in the Nephin Beg mountains, in Achill and in various other places. They may not touch the greenway, but it has highlighted the area to them.

On the walking experience, a couple of years ago, we sat down with Mayo County Council — it has a walking officer called Anna, who works very closely with Padraig — the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the LEADER partnership and a couple of the walking guides in the area. We came up with an idea of putting a brochure together. We have a Mulranny walking experience brochure that highlights all the walks. It has brought to us in excess of 2,000 bed nights in the past two and a half years. That is business that we would never have had before. We never had a walking product before. It is basically a case of harnessing all that is out there into one focal area and putting it out so that people know about it. You saw it on 'Tracks and Trails' a couple of years ago. Padraig worked very closely with Jim on that. 'Tracks and Trails' has had over one million viewers. The team behind it has, I think, been here twice to cover the greenway and Achill. The programme has been repeated on RTÉ over and over again. A huge amount of people see that and come here because of it.

I highlight the euro signs in the slide because that is what the programme is delivering. There are five new businesses, and that number has increased again. Travis one of the bike-hire people, and there are other bike-hire companies in the area as well. As Seán mentioned earlier, the village of Newport has been transformed. There is 15% of new businesses in the area. People are really taking a pride in how their shop fronts look. As Seán said, his daughter Shauna has opened a cafe, and it is doing phenomenally well.

The greenway is sustaining employment. There have been 38 new jobs created, but that figure does not count all the jobs that the greenway is sustaining. In the hotel alone, we employ over 100 people. We employ 50 people full-time and over 100 people in the summer. Our season is extending. Traditionally, we were very busy from June to September. Now, because of all the publicity, we are very busy from February to mid-November. The greenway has contributed to, I would say, 90% of that. It has been phenomenal.

We have got so much press in recent times. My job is marketing and sales, and I have a very small budget, as everybody has budgets these days. The cheapest way in which to get people to come back is to get them to come back because they want to and for them to tell their friends about it. However, the other way is to get all this press. I could never have paid for this kind of press. We get journalists here and give them a reason to talk about different things. Tonight, for example, we have lots of journalists attending. We have people here from 'The Sunday Times' and 'The Independent'. We have food bloggers. Tonight is not a money-making night; rather, it is about showcasing Mayo food and the Gourmet Greenway food trail to all those people. That is the type of thing that has resulted in nights such as tonight.

Take, for example, the "Greenway Goes Gourmet" newspaper feature. The journalist wrote:

"A wonderful offshoot of the Great Western Greenway is the spawning of creative and exciting cuisine by ... food producers along the route."

That gives a different dimension to the greenway. Last year, if somebody had asked, "What would be the ideal thing you'd like by the end of the year in publicity?", I would have said a double-page spread in 'The Sunday Times'. We got a double-page spread in 'The Sunday Times' because we had something to sell to those journalists. As you can see, Seán is pictured here. He is a real character; he is definitely one of the leading lights. That is just fantastic coverage. The amount of business that we got because of that was phenomenal.

This is an e-zine done by Tourism Ireland. It was sent out to 60,000 people interested in the Tourism Ireland e-zine in Canada. Two people came and stayed because of it. I was surprised that even two people came. I know that it was only two, but they were from so far away. That is the power of something such as that. The e-zine said to follow the Gourmet Greenway in Mayo, and they did.

This feature was the 'Irish Examiner', and it came through from Fáilte Ireland. Back in 2010, journalists started to come because of the walking and cycling. That was their primary interest. They kept coming back to us and saying, "I'd love to come back, but have you got anything else or another angle?" That is where the activity and food side of things came in. Dan McCarthy fell in love with the landscape of Mulranny in that feature.

This was in the 'Sunday Independent' a couple of years ago. Again, it came out after a night such as tonight. Lucinda O'Sullivan is one of the leading critics. The best thing about the article is what she said at the beginning:

"It is amazing what can be done if everyone in a community pulls together."

That one sentence says it all about the community of the greenway and this whole area. That sums it up.

This is Diarmuid Gavin and his little daughter, Eppie, who were on 'Tracks and Trails', so we had a celebrity-type person who went on a trail. He loved it when he was here.

The greenway employs staff, and we have great staff here. Long may that continue, and long may the success of the greenway continue. As I was saying, the Committee Clerk was wondering about coming back in the summer. I said, "Gosh, when would you think of coming?" He replied, "Maybe July". We do not have any availability left for the family apartments from the last week in June until the first week in September. We are fully booked. That is phenomenal; we cannot put a price on that. We have a great kids' club, and that is all great, but people put their bikes on the back of their car and they stay for a week. It is not cheap, but they are here for a week and cycle every day. That is cheap and healthy for the kids. People are so busy doing stuff with their family all the time. The fact that they can go out on a piece of infrastructure and do not have to worry about cars or anything else because it is completely safe is phenomenal.

None of this is done without working in partnership. We say this over and again: we may be able to stand up here — Travis will do the same thing — and give great results and say, "Gosh, isn't this great?", but we did not do this alone. All these people have worked together, including Mayo County Council and Fáilte Ireland. The list goes on and on. Obviously, the greenway landowners are involved. There is the rural social scheme (RSS), Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS) and Tús schemes, and the Foxford Woollen Mills are involved. Lots of different things from a community point of view go on in the area.

We have learnt along the way that infrastructural investment can leverage community and private buy-in. It creates momentum, but it needs direction and coordination. That piece of infrastructure was put in place. In the majority of cases, you will have community buy-in. Work with the energy, and others will follow. There is huge strength in community, because you will say, "OK, he's doing really well. Perhaps I'll have a little piece of that pie". There will always be naysayers and people who will say, "Oh no, that's not for us", but you follow the people who are doing something on the ground, and you work with that, and all the energy will flow from that. Infrastructure can re-energise an area and bring back its sense of pride and place. That cannot be more obvious. You saw the picture of what the hotel was like 10 years ago, and, I am not making it up: it was dire. There was nothing happening. Last year, the Mulranny community was asked by Mayo County Council to represent Mayo at the Pride of Place awards. I do not know whether you have those in the North, but those are awards for small communities. We came second, and we were really proud of that because Mulranny is a

phenomenal place. The pride has really been brought back into the area. Yes, the greenway and the hotel have been part of that, but all those things snowballing and working really well has done that.

We encourage people to take the initiative and highlight the financial rewards. The bottom line is that, if I do not make some money for the hotel, I do not have a job. Travis has to pay staff, everybody else has to do different things, and it is highlighting what people can gain out of it. We want to create experiences and packages and get people to come back time and time again. We have people who come back. Some who are actually in this week are on their 25th stay. You have to have some reason for people to come back again and something new to give them.

Collaboration, collaboration, collaboration: I cannot go on more about that. None of this can be done on our own. The key thing is about working together. I work really well with Padraig, Seán and Travis all of the time. One of Mulranny's hugest achievements happened last year. Fáilte Ireland and Tidy Towns run a Tourism Town award, and we entered with 150 other towns and villages. We were shortlisted in the final 10, and Mulranny won the all-Ireland best small tourism town. That was phenomenal for us. We do all of this stuff, and it is great, but it has come from nothing, really. We help one another. There will always be critics, but when anyone is willing to help others for no payback or reason, that benefits everybody in the end.

I have one last thing that I always have to say: "In the innovative age," — an age that we all think that we are in at the moment —

"a deep sense of the past is central to creativity, contributing to wholeness, integrity, civic responsibility, aesthetic sensibility and ecological stewardship."

Looking after that past is very much in our future, so if we look after it, it will look after us.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thanks very much for that, Suzanne. It is a hugely successful story, there is no doubt, getting to now from the situation 10 years ago. It has certainly worked out for you. I think that we missed things by one day here. We have arrived today and have seen some people, and Paul said that if there was any money in the kitty, we would have stayed tonight. *[Laughter.]* Does anyone want to ask Suzanne a question?

Mr McCarthy: I want to congratulate her on the enormous strides that have been made in this place. As she said, 10 years ago, the place was derelict, and you have the pictures to show it. It is absolutely phenomenal where you are at today. Well done. It is a lesson that we can take away from here: success can happen if everybody works together, from the councils right through.

Mr McAleer: I have to say, Suzanne, your enthusiasm is infectious.

Ms O'Brien: I am very enthusiastic about this place, because working in this community is wonderful.

Mr McAleer: From my perspective, I chair a project at home that is a microcosm of this, and today has given me food for thought for when I get home. It was a brilliant presentation and very thought-provoking.

Mr Lynch: I know that you stressed community buy-in and having integration with the community. What benefits has the greenway given to the community?

Ms O'Brien: Around five years ago, Mulranny started a process, along with Mayo County Council, called a community futures process. It is a Scottish model, which I think is being used only in Kerry and Mayo, but it surveys every single member of the community to see what they want in their area and what they want for their children. One of the big things said was that, in 20 years' time, if the people have kids, they would love to see them stay in the community, have jobs in the area and not have to emigrate. One of the things that came out of that was a tourism committee. Lots of local people who have no tourism background but have a real grá for the area have joined. What they have got up to and what they have put back into it has been a marvel. You can see that the hotel and the shops are doing well and people are coming back. Barbara Daly, for example, is coming to take over her place down here, and she was gone for a long time, but she can see the benefits of it. It is definitely about getting people to stay in the community.

Mr McAleer: I am seeing all the various components here: you have businesses; local buy-in from the community sector; and the hotel. Who joins it all together? Is there a coordinating committee? Who has the master plan?

Ms O'Brien: That is a big question. We all do our bit; there is no greenway office that rolls it all out. We all feel free to pitch in.

Mr O'Donnell: It is a jigsaw that just fits.

Ms O'Brien: It just works. Like I said, it is about collaboration and talking to one another. We all talk to one another on a regular basis about different things. For example, I was saying yesterday that 'Nationwide' has been back on again — you said you had seen it on 'Nationwide' — and we had asked them down tonight. They want to come back again, so they are going to film a piece on the greenway in July and August. We will all feed into that and I, Pdraig or John will pick up the phone. It just seems to work.

Mr Philbin: It does. We had looked at maybe having an office for the greenway, and the railway station at the back would be an ideal place for that, but it is a long greenway: there is Westport doing their bit; Mulranny doing their bit; Achill doing their bit; the bike hire offices doing their bit; and then you have to work with the council.

You can stifle people if you have an office that suddenly puts responsibilities on them. It is a piece of infrastructure that people can use and market as much as they can to get as many people here as they can. It gives that freedom to people to be able to do what they want. Nobody owns the greenway except the landowners, and they own only certain sections. We are very conscious that nobody's name should be associated with it, and we have done that from the beginning. Whether that is a good or a bad thing I do not know.

The Deputy Chairperson: OK. Finally, we will bring Travis in to talk about bike hire.

Mr Travis Zeray (Clew Bay Bike Hire): Thanks for having me, guys. Obviously, I am not Irish; I am Canadian. I moved here about eight years ago. We got started with the bike hire company when we saw the works going on and had no idea what was going on. We asked around a few locals and found out that a greenway was being built with a walking and cycling trail. Being Canadian, I have worked in the outdoor industry for about 20 years, and we spotted the potential of the greenway and the infrastructure that was going to be put there. I have seen these sorts of projects work in Canada, so I sat down, ran a few numbers and decided that somebody was going to need to service the infrastructure once it was put in place. I had a few conversations with Pdraig and Suzanne at the hotel and a few people around Westport.

The beauty of this greenway is that it is such a community project. Pdraig and John were not telling lies; I would get phone calls from Pdraig on a Sunday at 11.00 pm because he had come up with an idea or had a question. Still, to this day, five years on, I will get phone calls asking how many bikes I had out today, how things are looking and that sort of thing.

At first, everybody thought I was crazy. I quit my job and decided to set up a bike hire shop — not a bike store — in Westport. Our very first location was in Westport, and there were only three of us: me, my partner and his brother. We started with 60 bikes. Last month, we opened our fifth location, which is our second in Westport. We work out of here as well. We have a small shop in Achill and one in Newport. We now have just about 500 bikes, and we have 26 staff at the moment. We should probably have 27, one being a PA — Suzanne. *[Laughter.]* It is very easy to say that what we do is bike hire. I do not like to think of myself as a bike hire operator; I like to think of myself as an experience provider. It is very easy to have a few bikes in the back of a HiAce van, hire them out for a tenner a day and say, "Good luck". We have always tried to make the experience much more intimate. Even though we have 500 bikes and we have 500 people out every day in the summer, we still know exactly what each person is doing. When you get to those levels, logistics can become an issue, because we offer a free return shuttle service. Because it is a linear run, people can start in Westport or in Achill and go in either direction. We have buses that pick them up and drive them back to where they started. Doing that makes it a lot more accessible to all ages, including older people. We have had 90-year-olds pulling a baby trailer with their great-grandkids. Guys like that would not be able to do that if they had to cycle 80 kilometres; whereas, that guy did 40 kilometres from Achill to Westport. There is nothing better than seeing that. That is what we really thrive on. We thrive on seeing the kids coming in with their families from Dublin. Dad works all week and works hard all year.

It is the smile on the kids' faces. All they did was ride a bike, but it is spending that time with their parents that really keeps us going.

As Suzanne mentioned, obviously, when things are going well, you are going to have other businesses starting. Thankfully, we were about three years ahead of everybody else, and we are still three years ahead of everybody else. Thinking of the future, the Wild Atlantic Way and the Blueway were mentioned, so we have obviously tried to stay one step ahead of everybody else, and we are offering sea-kayaking tours now out of Westport. We will hopefully be doing that in Mulranny and Achill as well. Those things will all start to grow.

We grew sustainably. We did not just go out and, on day 1, open five shops with 500 bikes. At the end of the second year, I think we had two shops. At the end of the third year, we had four. We are going into our fifth summer now. We go by summers, not years. We have our fifth location up this week.

Like I said before, quality is what we thrive on. We like to think that we offer a fantastic service, and we just keep ourselves moving in the right direction. We have been very fortunate because the greenway has been so successful. We have sort of piggybacked on all the media attention. Thankfully, most of the media people who come through the area tend to choose us. I do not know whether they are directed from the hotels. A lot of times, they are; a lot of times, they find us on their own. We just try to keep that going.

Obviously, there are challenges along the way. Competition always brings a challenge, but, again, like I said, we are trying to stay ahead. Being the premium supplier helps us. I think the expression is, "Often imitated, never duplicated". We have guys popping up. We opened a shop in Westport quay and, two weeks later, we had a direct competitor open directly beside us. Everybody is following us; I suppose that is the good thing. They are watching what we are doing and they are trying to do the same thing, but, thankfully, until now, nobody has been able to do it.

Padraig mentioned people coming down from Cork and Kerry. They are coming from all over. I had another gentleman from the North down with me about three weeks ago. He was from Newry, just north of Carlingford. They are building a new towpath. Where was he from, Padraig?

Mr Philbin: He is the manager of Mourne tours.

Mr Zeray: People are coming all the time. Honestly, I could sit in the office and just answer phone calls all day from people who are looking to set up bike hire companies. It has got to the point where I say, "Come down and meet me", because so many call just fishing for information. If they cannot be bothered to get in the car and drive to see us and how we operate, I do not have time for them.

You guys might know Michael Dawson, CEO and founder of One4all gift vouchers. He has just opened a bike hire place in Howth. Again, it is the dedication and the people who are going to make the effort to do things. He came down five or six times. He would leave Dublin at 5.00 am, get to me by 8.00 am, have a meeting for a couple of hours and head back to Dublin. He is launching his product this weekend at the Giro in Dublin, so he is up and going.

If you are working on projects up there and anybody wants to come down to see how we do it, I have no problem helping people who are genuinely interested. Often, there is no point in reinventing the wheel. We have a system that seems to work, so I am more than happy to help anyone out.

I will go back to the experiences involved with being not just a bike hire company. We come up with different experiences. We try to get something new each year. Last year, we introduced what we called the Greenway to Seaway. People could start their cycle at Westport, go to Mulranny, leave the bike at our Mulranny depot and hop on a fishing boat, which brings them back to Westport, or vice versa: they could get on the boat at Mulranny if they were staying at the hotel here, take the boat to Westport, get a bike and cycle back to Mulranny. We have also done sea-kayaking tours.

The length of the greenway is hugely important. The 42 kilometres is great for a single-day cycle. I was in Munich with Fáilte Ireland and have been to a few trade shows. The Germans were saying, "OK, that's great, but what do we do after lunch?" *[Laughter.]* They would do the 42 kilometres before dinner. So, we put together a package called the Pirate Queen discovery, which is a four-day tour. You start at Westport, go out to Achill, get a boat from Achill Island to Clare Island and spend a day out on Clare Island. You then get a boat to Inishturk and back round to the far end of Clew Bay to cycle back into Westport.

We are trying to add the length. Thankfully, more greenways are coming. The Connemara greenway is coming soon. We toyed with the idea of putting a few shops on that one to keep a consistent flow, but we will just have to see how the greenway goes and whether it is feasible for us. People can be fairly territorial.

The Deputy Chairperson: Not in Ireland. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Zeray: Sometimes, the Canadian coming in does not always work. A section of the website is entitled "Challenge". That is another experience that we are introducing this year. In hindsight, I wish I had not called it the Wild Atlantic Way Challenge, but I did. Everybody is using "the wild Atlantic way" with everything, and I wish I had called it just the greenway challenge.

Most people who come to this area cycle the greenway and climb Croagh Patrick. We added our sea-kayaking trip. It is the only leisurely adventure challenge in the country. They can take five days to complete it. They can climb Croagh Patrick and take a day off; do the greenway and take a day off; and do a sea-kayaking tour. There are no tags on your wrist timing you. It is just a matter of completing the experiences and walking away with a T-shirt. A lot of people have done it already. It is just that sense of accomplishment that people are looking for, just to get out there and be a part of something and say that you did something.

It is a question of just staying ahead of the pack. At the moment, with the new towpath, we are getting a lot of phone calls from Dundalk and Carlingford. There is a bike hire war going on up there. They will not speak to each other; it is getting very messy. I suppose the biggest thing is to work with your partners. Here, it has been community led, and we all work closely together. We have competition, but we do not fall out with them. To be honest, we could not handle all the business; we could not possibly take care of everyone. The other five or six bike hire companies around probably have about 50 or 60 bikes each, and they are sold out every day as well. There is no way that we could do 1,000 people a day; it would not be possible. You have to nip that stuff in the bud quickly, because, eventually, that tension and those bad feelings get to the tourists, and that is not a place that anybody wants to be in. My advice is to keep everybody working together.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you very much; that was excellent. It adds to the success of the previous presentations. No doubt, it is growing. The Giro is in our neck of the woods today; is it? What day of the week is it? It will be there tomorrow and Saturday. It is only going to have greater success because of the Giro. People are cycling more anyhow. Anyone who travels can see that throughout the country. Clones, just across the border from my own neck of the woods, County Fermanagh, has a club. It is a small town, but there are 90 people in the cycling club. They are cycling on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings. It is only going to go from success to success. I was in Westport last July. Every third car had a bike, maybe a kid's bike, strapped to the back of it. Does anybody have any questions?

Mr McCarthy: Thanks very much for your presentation. Well done. On my journey yesterday, the Deputy Chair and Des occasionally went on, and I was left on my own. "What do I do if I get a puncture or if a wheel comes off?" did go through my head.

Mr Zeray: Were you on one of our bikes?

Mr McCarthy: Aye, well —

Mr Zeray: That is the question. We have free roadside assistance with every bike hire.

Mr McCarthy: How do you get from where you are to where I am?

Mr Zeray: There are access points all along the greenway. We have a fleet of drivers, and we have five vans out at all times. One of the advantages of our system is that we are never more than a couple of minutes away from people. Believe me, we are out there. There are 10 or 12 punctures a day, somebody comes off the bike or a derailleur gets stuck in a spoke, for instance. We are usually there within 10 or 15 minutes. When people go out, they are given a business card that has emergency contact details, our emergency breakdown service details and our shuttle service number. The roadside assistance is one of the benefits of going with a bike hire provider as opposed to bringing your own bike. At the front of our shop, you will see a lot of people with bikes on the back of

their cars, because they have decided to come in to use ours. They brought their bike all the way from Dublin or Cork, but they are coming in to use our service because of the service.

Mr McCarthy: The more punctures and wheels that fall off, the more people you have to employ to do those repairs.

Mr Zeray: Exactly. I was talking about competition. They say that imitation is the greatest form of flattery, but, when you start getting too much competition, you start to have a race to the bottom. You have people slashing prices, and they are doing this or that, but, all of a sudden, the quality of the services start to go downhill because they are charging only €7 as opposed to €15. We have never lowered our price, to be quite honest. When it got to three or four bike hire providers, we increased our prices and increased the quality of the service. We just started to separate ourselves more and more. The price went up, but again, you are sorted out quicker. We change our bikes every year. One of you rode the electric bike, which is close to €3,000 a bike. Our standard hybrid bikes retail at about €750. We do not get the bargain-basement bulk-buy bikes. We use two brands: Kona, which is a Canadian bike; and Giant, which is the biggest bike manufacturer in the world and has top-quality stuff.

Mrs Hale: When you purchase the bikes, obviously you approach different cycle companies. We have a really good company in Northern Ireland called Chain Reaction Cycles. I do not know whether there is bike hire by the Comber greenway, but I know lots of very active people and ex-military people for whom this would be an amazing business opportunity. They could come and see you and the pathways to how you contacted people, and bike manufacturers as well.

Mr Zeray: Absolutely. I am more than open to that. With regard to bike manufacturers, the bike game is very different from any other sort of business. If you were selling Kelly's sausages, he would be happy to have Kelly's sausages available in every shop nationwide; whereas, bike manufacturers tend to have one supplier of their brand in a town. In a city the size of Dublin, only three shops would be able to sell Giant, for example. They are very territorial. You have to really get in. When we first opened, we had to buy all our bikes from a shop because we could not get a bike distributor to deal with us. The year after, we had them all knocking on our door. Nobody, including the bike manufacturers, believed that we were not going to sell bikes; they thought that we were daft. Basically, they said no, that we could not make a living from renting out bikes and that we would have to sell them. To this day, we have never sold a bike.

The Deputy Chairperson: Does anybody else wish to ask a question? If not, that is it. It is my duty to thank you all. It was an excellent presentation and very interesting. It would encourage most people. We were talking with the staff last night and said that we would come back at some time as a result of the experience that we had yesterday. We are conducting an inquiry on cycling, and this is part of it, which has been excellent. We have been looking in different directions, and this has been one of the better presentations and experiences, and I thank you all for that. I thank you for facilitating us yesterday on the cycle route on the greenway and for the hospitality last night. It was excellent. As you said, Suzanne, it is within the top 10 and top five of everything, and we experienced that ourselves. We will bring that back home to the North of Ireland. Thank you.