



Rural Economy
& Development
Programme



The Burren Lowlands Economic Development Study

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Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 CONTEXT OF THE SURVEY

From 1995 to 2007, Ireland had a period of strong economic growth known as the Celtic Tiger. In 2008 the economic crisis started in the USA and Ireland was hit by a sudden economic slowdown. Today, evidence of a slow recovery are appearing. However, the country was unevenly affected by the crisis. Rural areas were the most impacted with higher increases in unemployment rates and decreases in employment rates. Rural areas were themselves impacted at different levels. Their aim is now to find new opportunities to thrive through a sustainable development thanks to their own assets.

According to an index of rural towns in Ireland, created by Teagasc and based upon the unemployment rate and the net migration rate, Gort within the Burren Lowlands, an area of South Galway and North Clare, was one of the most impacted rural areas in Ireland. The over reliance of the local economy on construction and the closure of a local meat factory in 2007 partly explain it. The region therefore needs a revitalization policy based on its assets and potential. This study aims at proposing ways to make it more attractive to work, live and visit.

Moreover, a group of motivated and dynamic citizens gathered and built a non-profit organization called the “Burren Lowlands Development Group”. The purpose of this group is to undertake economic development and revitalisation of the area. It is hoped this document will provide some assistance to the initiative of this group.

1.2 PROCESS OF THE STUDY

The development plan was created in three stages: a diagnosis of the Burren Lowlands, a consultation of the inhabitants and stakeholders in order to cease the main expectations of the population, and the formulation of recommendation for the Burren Lowlands Development Group and any other stakeholders that may be involved.

The diagnosis was mainly based on the census data, on interviews with different stakeholders already or potentially involved in the region development, and on two documents produced by Teagasc:

- LAURA DELHEURE. Rural Tourism in the Lowlands oh South-East Galway, Diagnosis and development prospects from French key-cases. Teagasc/AgroParisTech. 2012. This report provides a comprehensive diagnosis of rural tourism in the Burren Lowlands.
- CATHAL O'DONOGHUE. Gorgeous Gort, Context for the Development of Gort. Teagasc. February 2014. This short document prepared by Teagasc for the Burren Lowlands Development Group provides an economic diagnosis of the Burren Lowlands in the regional and national context. It has been included in the Section 1: Burren Lowlands' diagnosis.

The consultation of the inhabitants was undertraken via a public meeting organised by the community group which became The Burren Lowlands Development Group a few

days later. The meeting took place on the 7th of April of 2014 in the Lady Gregory Hotel in Gort. More than 200 people gathered to propose ideas for the Burren Lowlands future, and to express their expectations. The diagnosis and the recommendation were drawn from this meeting and completed by individual meetings with stakeholders in the fields of business, enterprise, tourism, rural development and community workers during the months of March, April and May of 2014.

1.3 THE REPORT'S STRUCTURE

This report aims to gather and formulate ideas drawn from the population consultation and providing recommendations for the development of the Burren Lowlands. The diagnosis and the process are detailed first. Then a comparative study of key-cases of successful strategies of development was carried-out (Section 3). The two last sections are dedicated to the recommendations for a development strategy.

Chapter 2. BURREN LOWLANDS DIAGNOSIS

The purpose of this section is to present briefly the area of study, its location, its population, its assets and weaknesses and the changes in its economic situation over the last few years. The section builds upon an analysis undertaken by Teagasc on the Burren Lowlands¹.

2.1 LOCATION OF THE AREA OF STUDY

The area of study is the lowlands of South-East Galway and North Clare. This territory is called the “Burren Lowlands”. The region encompasses the towns of Gort, Kinvarra, Adrahan and their hinterlands. Its limits are the towns of Clarinbridge and Craughwell on the North, the Slieve Aughty Mountains on the South and East Crusheen in County Clare to the South. The name of “Burren Lowlands” is related to the typical karst landscape of this region formed by eroded limestone rocks, swallow holes and turloughs. Therefore the region is part of the Burren from a geological point of view.

Gort is the most important town for a large swathe of South Galway and North Clare. It is the largest town from Ennis to Oranmore and from Portumna to the sea. However it has suffered significantly in economic terms in the downturn. Thus, in this initial analysis we will focus on Gort to characterise the economic and demographic situation.

¹ Cathal O’Donoghue. *Gorgeous Gort. Context for the Development of Gort*. Teagasc. February 2014.

Figure 1. Maps of the area of study

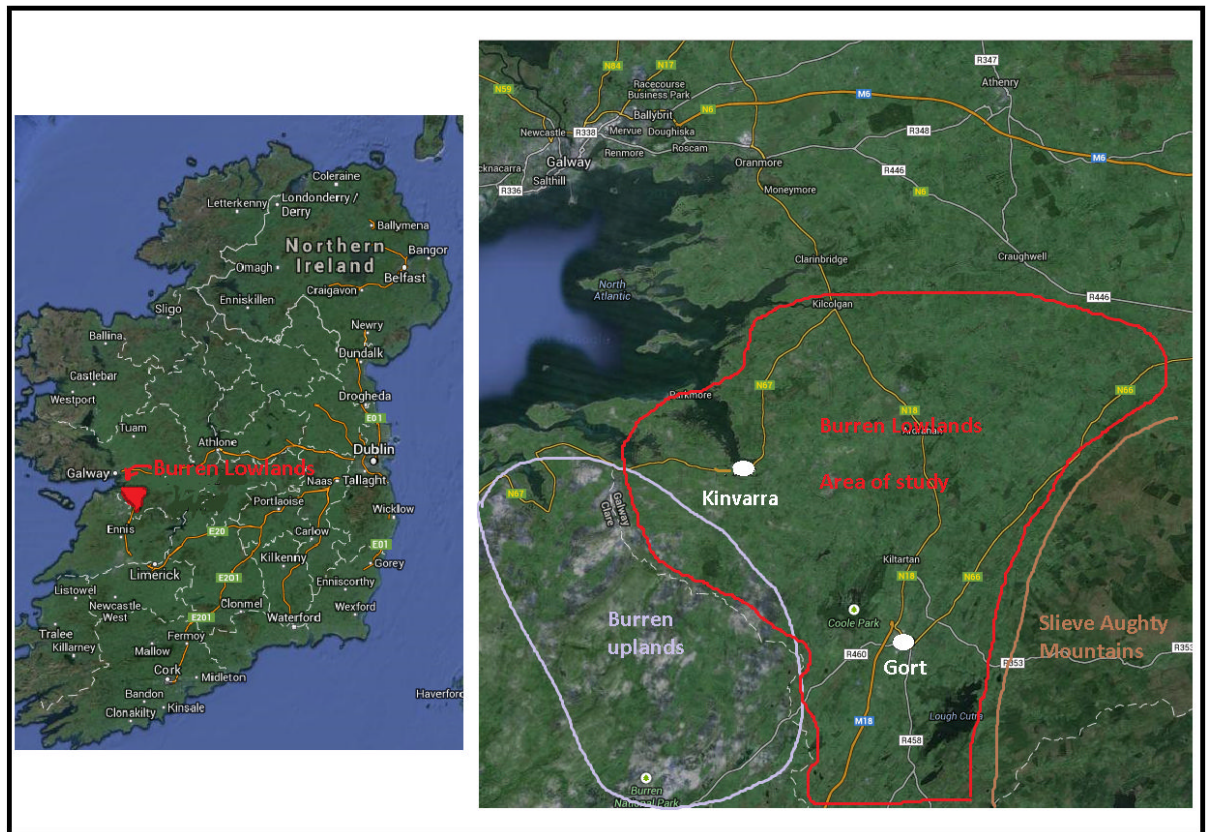


Figure 2.1b 15km range of Gort



2.2 NATIONAL CONTEXT OF SMALL AND MEDIUM SIZED TOWNS

Drawing upon the analysis undertaken by Teagasc, we report first national characteristics of small and medium sized towns in Ireland.

- Except for the largest towns, the total population and the working age population has grown faster in Small and medium sized towns and the open countryside than nationally.²
- Inward migration rates also higher, although there is substantial national variation across counties.

² In this document, refer to rural areas as areas outside the 5 main cities, separately referring to towns over 1500, large towns of over 10000 and including settlements and villages of under 1500 as part of the open countryside.

- Small and medium sized towns and the open countryside have on average have been impacted to a greater extent by the economic down turn than cities, with higher increases in unemployment rates and decreases in employment rates.
- On average unemployment rates are higher than national average (but lower than in Waterford or Cork).
- Except for the largest towns, education levels are lower than the national average in small and medium sized towns and the open countryside.
- Except for the largest towns, in terms of the sectorial composition of jobs in small and medium sized towns and the open countryside, they are disproportionately reliant on declining industrial sectors (those with falling employment – Agriculture, construction, industry).
- Poverty rates are higher in small and medium sized towns and the open countryside
- Significantly, particularly in the smallest towns, the share of working age households with no one in work (jobless households) is 20% higher than the national average at 31%.
- The age of properties is slightly younger in rural areas than in the urban areas with 45% (33% in cities) built since 1991, reflecting the property boom.
- However, the share of unoccupied homes is 60% higher in small and medium sized towns and the open countryside at 20%.
- Within rural areas, there is a large gap between the share of owner occupied housing in open countryside (81%) and in the towns and villages (64%), the latter is below the national average (70%).
- Consumer demand is depressed. Savings rate was 2% in 2007 – it is now 12-14% nationally across households and industry. For non-high wealth households, savings rate rose from 2% to 8% 2005-2010. Differential increase in small towns. Savings rates have risen substantially amongst the smallest towns, with the savings rate increasing by 300% more than that in cities, reflecting the worsening economic situation. The biggest impact of the changed savings rate is a reduction in investment expenditure. Personal consumption has not been affected to the same degree.
- Averages in indicators mask a wide variability in characteristics. For example comparing the best 10 towns and the worst 10 towns (measured by unemployment and migration), the bottom 10 have twice the unemployment rate, a difference in the net migration rate of 80% and 56% of the share of tertiary education.
- Small and Medium sized towns typically have lower visibility in national policy strategies.

2.3 GORT SPECIFIC CONTEXT

Gort has been significantly affected by the downturn as measured by the 2006 and 2011 Censuses of Population (See illustration 2).

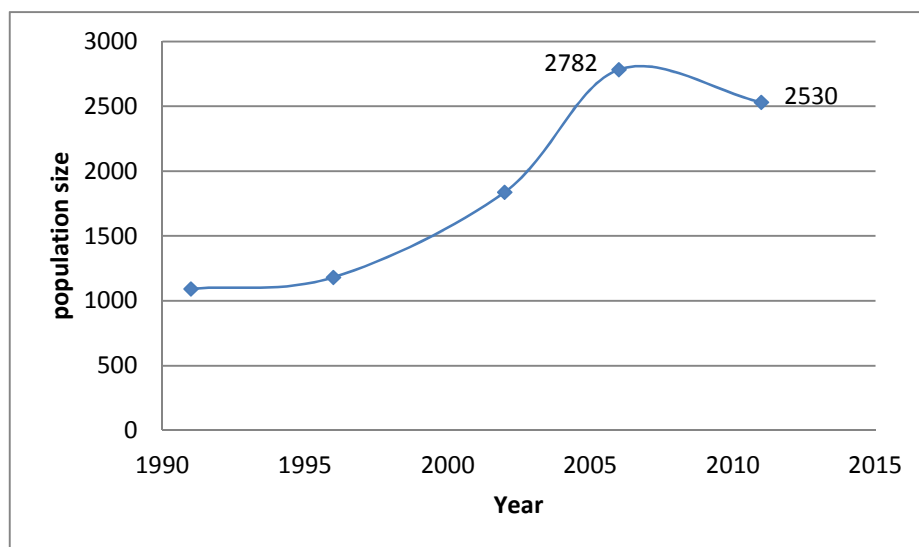
- In a time of rising population, Gort lost 252 people; the only district in South Galway with a population loss; a net emigration rate of one sixth
- In 2011, there were 440 less people in work and 360 fewer jobs in Gort, resulting in an increase in the unemployment rate from 4% to 14%. In the wider Burren Lowlands, 450 jobs were lost, largely due to a decline in construction. In 2006 there were 877 people in construction, while in 2011 there were 274
- However the share of tertiary graduates has increased from 16% to 20%.

- The share of unoccupied housing was 36% in 2011

The demographic shift of Gort (Illustration 2) shows a period of strong rising population from the late 90s to the beginning of the economic downturn in 2008. This growth reflects the national economic bloom of these years. However it is much more important than the overall population increase in Ireland over the same period with a positive immigration rate of 56.7% between 1996 and 2006 from just over 1000 to 2782 at the peak, whereas the national rate was 16.9%. One of the main reasons is the opening in 2000 of a meat factory which resulted in an important immigration flow of Brazilian workers hired by the firm, and the development of a Brazilian Community. In 2006, the population of Gort was over 30% Brazilian. In addition to that, Gort economic development relied mainly on construction during this period. Therefore, Gort had an important but unsustainable increase in economic activity prior to the crash. In 2007, the meat factory closed down and in 2008 the economic downturn started all over the country. Gort population started to decrease and the town lost 252 people between 2006 and 2011, in a time of rising population, as a direct consequence of the unemployment growth.

The wider Burren Lowlands currently has 12500 people, equivalent to Mallow, Castlebar or Letterkenny.

Figure 2. Evolution of the population size in Gort



As a contrast we compare a similar sized town in the same part of Galway, Oranmore (Table 2). Over this period Oranmore:

- Gained nearly 600 people
- Had 180 more people in work, lost 110 jobs, had an increase in the unemployment rate from 2.7% to 8.6%
- Increased its share of tertiary graduates from 34% to 35%
- The share of unoccupied housing was 13% in 2011

Gort thus has been hit significantly harder than Oranmore in terms of jobs, population change and the share of unoccupied housing is higher. The education level is lower.

Prior to the crash, from Q4 2007, Gort had been quite successful,

- Its population increased by over 900 between 2002 and 2006, had a net immigration rate of 60%
- It had 700 more in work and 600 more jobs and had an unemployment rate of 4-6%, comparable with Oranmore

In tables 3 and 4, we report the change in the industrial structure. The biggest difference between Gort and Oranmore is the decline in the share of construction jobs from 21% in 2006 to 6% in 2011 in Gort compared with 12% and 6% in Oranmore respectively. Thus to some extent the construction crash and unsustainable housing boom affected Gort to a greater extent than Oranmore or other towns nationally.

Table 1. Socio-Economic Profile of Gort

Year	Population	Number in Work	Number of Jobs	Net Jobs	Net Migration Rate	Unemployment Rate	Tertiary Educated	Tertiary Share	Unoccupied house share
2002	1838	804	1060	256	0.22	0.06	330	0.18	
2006	2782	1494	1644	150	0.60	0.04	450	0.16	
2011	2530	1058	1285	227	-0.15	0.14	497	0.20	0.26

Table 2. Socio-Economic Profile of Oranmore

Year	Population	Number in Work	Number of Jobs	Net Jobs	Net Migration Rate	Unemployment Rate	Tertiary Educated	Tertiary Share	Unoccupied house share
2002	2407	1124	1420	296	0.206156	0.033534	602	0.25	
2006	3523	1950	2461	511	0.440392	0.026743	1196	0.34	
2011	4132	2129	2346	217	0.117943	0.086222	1434	0.35	0.13

Table 3. Industry Profile of Gort

Year	Agriculture, forestry and fishing	Manufacturing industries	Building construction and	Commerce and trade	Transport and communications	Public administration	Professional services	Other
2002	0.03	0.19	0.07	0.33	0.04	0.03	0.20	0.12
2006	0.04	0.20	0.21	0.24	0.02	0.03	0.13	0.13
2011	0.03	0.22	0.06	0.29	0.12	0.04	0.21	0.04

Table 4. Industry Profile of Oranmore

Year	Agriculture, forestry and fishing	Manufacturing industries	Building construction and	Commerce and trade	Transport and communications	Public administration	Professional services	Other
2002	0.03	0.31	0.10	0.27	0.09	0.01	0.09	0.09
2006	0.03	0.26	0.12	0.28	0.09	0.01	0.09	0.12
2011	0.02	0.18	0.06	0.37	0.17	0.02	0.14	0.03

Teagasc created an index of small and medium sized towns in Ireland based upon the unemployment rate and the net migration rate. In Table 5, we report the ranks of towns in County Galway over the Census periods 2002-2011. As part of a Teagasc study, where towns were ranked in relation to unemployment and emigration, a number of facts emerged:

- Galway has some of the top towns nationally under this measure with Clarinbridge, Barna, Carnmore, Clifden, Craughwell and Oranmore all in the top 10 per cent of towns. Most of these towns are commuter towns and reflect Galway's economic strength.
- Ballinasloe and Rossaveal are in the bottom 20 per cent
- Gort however having been just outside the top 10% in 2006 and 2002 are now in the bottom 10% in the country having lost 350 jobs and lost 10% of its population during the crisis.

Table 5. Rank of Galway Towns in Ireland (ranked by combination of unemployment and migration)

Town	2002	2006	2011
ATHENRY	20	20	30
BALLINASLOE	70	90	90
BARNA	20	10	10
CARNMORE	10	40	10
CLAREGALWAY	10	20	40
CLARINBRIDGE	10	10	10
CLIFDEN	50	70	10
CRAUGHWELL	10	10	10
ROSSAVEAL	80	100	90
GORT	20	20	100
LOUGHREA	30	30	70
MOUNT BELLEW	30	20	30
MOYCULLEN	10	10	20
ORANMORE	10	10	10
OUGHTERARD	30	40	40
PORTUMNA	50	60	40
TUAM	80	70	70

However it was not always this case. Prior to the crash Gort was reasonably highly ranked just outside the top 30. Gort thus had been far the largest decline in rank across all towns in Ireland.

However the decline since 2006 is an aberration reflecting a magnified impact of the crisis in Gort relative to other towns due to

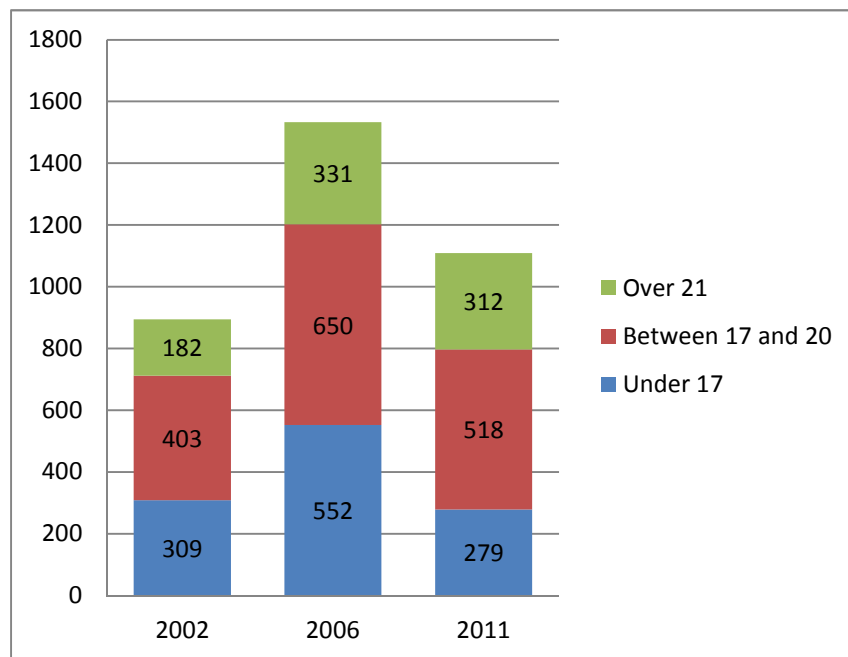
- An over reliance of construction
- An unsustainable increase in economic activity
- An unsustainably fast population and housing rise prior to 2006.

The earlier ranking however reflects a historical strength in terms of its attributes and economic potential.

Illustration 4 highlights for example that Gort is at the centre point of a high education axis that follows the road between Limerick and Galway, where the ratio of post-

secondary educated to those who left education before 17 is double. It is thus a rural area with relatively high human capital. Moreover, the downturn has accentuated. Illustration 3 highlights that most people who left Gort after the crash had ceased full time education before 17. Indeed there number dropped of 273 people. It reflects the heavy losses of low-qualified jobs.

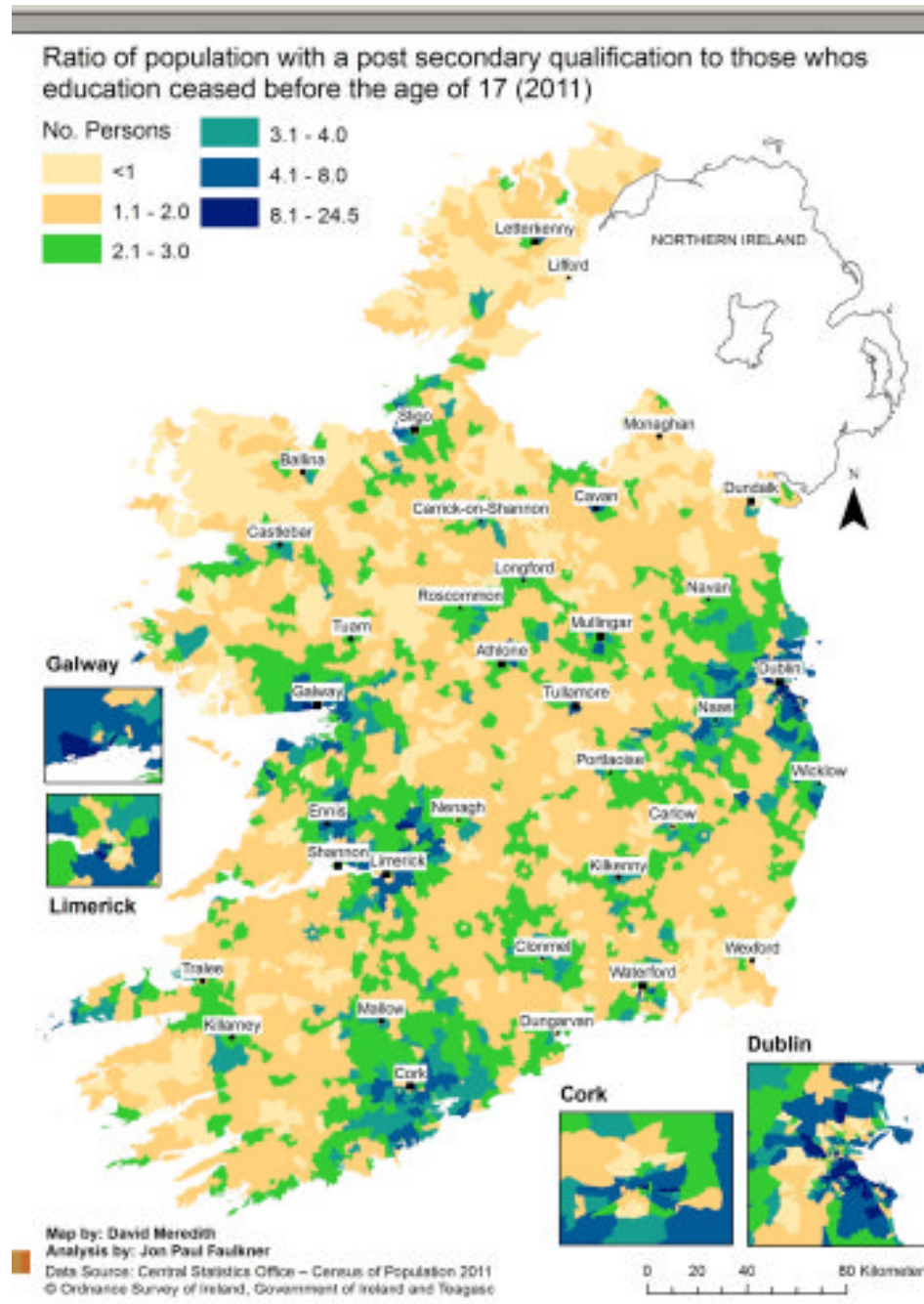
Figure 3. Number of persons aged 15 years or over, classified by age at which full-time education ceased



This geographic position is also reflected in excellent, road, rail and airport links as well as close proximity to major tourism assets such as the Burren, Coole Park, Galway Bay and Lough Derg. Indeed geologically, Gort form part of the Burren lowlands. Gort also has a significant cultural heritage as a central location within the Celtic revival movement at the turn of the last century.

A recent study by Teagasc highlighted that Gort and its surrounding area is one of a good example of an Irish rural area with a significant tourist potential but which is under-exploited. This report also emphasises the potential of building upon a French concept known as Terroir, where, food, landscape, culture and heritage are combined to create a vehicle for both cultural and economic development.

Figure 4. Ratio of population with a post-secondary qualification to those whose education ceased before the age of 17.



2.4 CONTEXT GOVERNMENT POLICY

Ireland has suffered from the economic crisis that began in 2008. It appears that both urban and rural areas have been affected by the recession. However, it has been very much more pronounced over the rural area: unemployment increased by 114% in urban areas and by 192% in rural areas. This trend is more global, it does not only concern Ireland.

In this context, the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine has launched an invitation to make submissions for the Rural Development Plan 2014-2020. This Rural Development Plan (RDP) will be defined according to the UE priorities. Indeed, the Ireland's RDP is financed by EU funding, which is provided by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

As member of the EU, Ireland's RDP has to follow the six priorities below:

- Foster knowledge transfer and innovation in agriculture, forestry and rural areas
- Enhance farm viability and competitiveness of all types of agriculture, and promote innovative farm technologies and sustainable management of forests
- Promote food chain organisation
- Restore, preserve and enhance ecosystems related to agriculture and forestry
- Promote resource efficiency and support the shift towards a low carbon and climate resilient economy in agriculture, food and forestry sectors
- Promote social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas

All submissions for the RDP will have to be encompassed in, at least, one of those priorities.

Moreover, in 2013, Minister Hogan (Department of Environment, Community and Local Government) and Minister Coveney (Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine) launched a research and consultation process in the form of the Commission of the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA). The latter is supposed to look at the potential for economic development in rural Ireland and give some recommendations (See on Annexe 1, page 69).

Gathering the results of the RDP SWOT analysis and those of the CEDRA, it appears that some areas will need more support than the others through the RDP interventions. These areas are:

- Support for Enterprise Development and Job Creation, in sector such as artisan food, renewable energies, marine, social enterprise and creative industries
- Effective and coordinated use of available resources, physical and human
- Support and enhance national communication initiatives

It is now important to target the funding available under the RDP 2014-2020 to maximise its impact on rural areas.

Chapter 3. THE PROCESS OF THE STUDY AND THE DEVELOPMENT PLAN STRATEGY.

According to our diagnosis, the area of the Burren Lowlands has been particularly affected by the economic crisis. In this section, we describe the process undertaken in this study to come up with a range of recommendations: the background, the objectives, potential actions and how and who will be involved in the project. In other words, this section is the description of the economic development strategy proposed.

3.1 GENERAL BACKGROUNDS AND DRIVERS

Since 2006, the area of the Burren Lowlands has lost 460 jobs, mainly in the construction sector. Considering this economic situation, the question of the future of this area has appeared quite important. In 2012, a French postgraduate student, Laura Delheure did a survey about The Burren Lowlands Tourism. Her report is entitled “Rural Tourism in the Lowlands of South-East Galway, Diagnosis and Development prospects from French key-cases”³ and describes the concept of “Terroir” and how could it be adopted to the Burren Lowlands.

Then, in October 2012, aware of the situation of rural areas in Ireland, the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas was launched. The Commission published a report at the beginning of the year (2014) giving recommendations and priorities for the development of rural areas. Moreover, in parallel, Teagasc realised a SWOT analysis of Gort to highlight the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of the town (you can find it in “Gorgeous Gort” study in Section 2).

Following from those works and the non-improvement of the economic situation of the region, from the beginning of 2014, local residents have started to feel deeply concerned by the situation and have demonstrated the willingness to enhance the situation.

It is in this context that the Burren Lowlands Development group supported by Teagasc launched the present study which aims to understand the wider situation and propose some recommendations to enhance the economic situation and stimulate the employment of the Burren Lowlands.

In order to ensure this, the first step was to gather information concerning the area: census data, industrial and economic structure of the region, touristic assets... The idea was to have a minimum of knowledge about the area and its population before starting anything. Indeed, to set up a development plan, it is important to know who the people of the area are. Some questions such as the following ones have to be answered:

- How many people are in the workforce and what are their ages?
- What job do they do and what kind of education do they have?
- What are the number and type of jobs in the area?
- How many are unemployed?

³ *Rural Tourism in the Lowlands of South-East Galway, Diagnosis and Development prospects from French key-cases*, Laura Delheure, 2012, Teagasc/Agroparistech.

- How many kids are in school and what is the education level?

Many of that information can be answered thanks to the CSO census. All the answers to these questions can be found in the previous section concerning Gort. It could be useful to do the same study for the Burren Lowlands, that is to say for the area gathering the data of all towns and villages located within a 15km arc of Gort. This area includes the following Electoral Districts: Boston, Caher, Carran, Crusheen, Killanena, Lougha, Muckanagh, Ardammullivan, Ardahan, Ballycahalan, Beagh, Cahermore, Cappard, Castleboy, Castletaylor, Derrylaur, Gort, Kilbeacanty, Kilchreest, Killeenavarra, Killinny, Kiltartan, Kilthomas, Kinvarra and Skehanagh. The 7 first ED are located in County Clare, the others are from County Galway.

In a second phase, several interviews with different stakeholders were undertaken in order to understand the situation and to have an idea of what people concerned think about this issue. The stakeholders met included:

- Tourism (Lady Gregory and Kiltartan Museum, Cool Park, The Burren Beo Trust, The Burren Ecotourism, The Burren GeoPark, the heritage officer of Galway County Council, Failte Ireland)
- Businesses (Enterprise Ireland, LEO)
- National and local development institutions (Teagasc, Galway Rural Development, Galway County Council)
- Local communities (Gort resource Centre, coffee shop owners, retired involved people, hostel owners...)

All these meetings permitted us to get an idea of the Lowlands current economic situation, of its history and of its assets and weakness. It also highlighted the working of different institutions concerned by the issue.

Moreover, everyone we met during this period gave very many ideas to improve the current situation of the area. An important part of the information collected during the appointments has been included in the report. The latter proposes a list of recommendations classified per theme. Those recommendations came from propositions of people met, but also from inspiration of what has already been done in other areas around the world.

For each of those ideas, the stakeholders concerned to put in place and to help to set up the idea have been identified.

3.2 WHAT? DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Prior to defining the goals of the development Plan, problems, opportunities and strengths have to be identified.

There have been two recent attempts to undertake a SWOT analysis for Gort in 2013. The first was undertaken by the West Regional Authority and more latterly by the Gort Development Group facilitated by Teagasc. It is uncanny however the similarities between the findings of the two studies that were undertaken independently, indicating the robustness of the issues. In the table 7 below, we combine the results of the two SWOT analyses.

Table 6. SWOT Analysis

Strengths		Weaknesses	
Railway Station Near Airport Motorway Diaspora Amenities Heritage Road and Rail Infrastructure Gateway to Burren Swimming Pool, Hotels, Retail Long established service and hub town Sports clubs	Sports and Recreation Farming Community/ Mart Play parks Sport Broadband Physical Fabric of Town Main town in region Tourism Potential Proximity to Galway The Square Attractions and amenities Improvement in infrastructure (water and broadband)	Parking Underuse of The Square: i.e. market; Lack of Signage Signage on Motorway No Tidy Towns Committee Closing of the Heritage Centre Upward only rent reviews Tourism numbers in decline Failure to utilise natural resources such as the river Derelict/Semi derelict historical buildings	Allocation of free time Lack of cohesion between politicians and local community No Local TD Empty Shops: Rates Aesthetics Roundabout and entrance to town Tourism authorities promotion Not enough industry or job creation Litter collection is sparse
Opportunities		Threats	
Increase tourism The Burren; Kilmacduagh; Literary history – potential spinoffs (Education/research) Flooding; unique geology Govt Literary Festival March Pride Transport Bike Hire; Cycle Maps AnTaisce Cruise Liners Skills Profile Landscaping Fibre broadband for all businesses – eCommerce	Coole Park Coole Park Marketing Burren Beo connection Walking Tour Eco tourism Weigh house Extra 8 Ryanair flights Elections; use it as opportunity Access Food Culture Work more closely with surrounding area More industrial parks Information centre Complete public amenity projects (public toilets) Greater level of local initiatives	Apathy: County Council; Galway, Insurance Resources	Rudderless Risk aversion Unemployment & slow recovery Local National Wildlife Park Emigration

The previous step made it possible to define it. To sum up, the main statements are:

- Problems: lack of dynamism, unemployment and slow recovery, unskilled people, lack of innovative and fresh businesses, unexploited and unorganised tourism assets (lack of communication and signage, no tourism office), lack of coordination and communication between the different communities, unattractive downtown of Gort (empty shops no highlighted, square underexploited) ...
- Strengths: particular landscape of the Burren Lowlands, a lot of heritage sites and history, an available workforce, strategic location to set up businesses (on the motorway between Galway and Limerick, railway station, close to commercial ports of those two cities, close to Shannon airport), Brazilian diaspora, cheap real estate and available locals.
- Opportunities: increase and improve tourism (heritage sites and history, arts and festivals, ecotourism, nature sports activities, access and communication), play the Burren card (unique geology, wildlife), work more together, get in touch with the Burren Ecotourism Network and Burren Beo, develop and promote local food production, revitalise Gort's downtown, develop innovative start-up with potential export...

Then, the question to ask is “What do we want to be? What is our future vision?” The one defined for this study was to make the Burren Lowlands a better place to live, to work and to visit. That means improve the quality of life by creating new jobs and the number of businesses, make some effort in term of attractiveness of the town to make people (both visitors and residents) want to spend time into the town making it more vibrant, and also develop all the amenities needed to be able to receive people. This is the goal of the development plan. In order to reach it, improvements will have to be done in the following areas:

- Tourism, Art, Culture and Heritage
- Education and skills
- Businesses, retails and agri-food
- Aesthetics and tidy town
- Advertising, marketing and networking

3.3 LESSONS FROM OTHER STUDIES IN RELATION TO PRODUCING A DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

In order to facilitate the establishment of a development strategy we drew upon good examples from elsewhere.

Small Towns, Big Ideas was a year-long study of small towns across the United States who are surviving and, in some cases, thriving as hubs of economic and civic development (Lambe, 2008). The study identifies seven themes as take-away lessons for other communities.

1. In small towns, community development is economic development

Strategies typically associated with community development can correspond with economic development. Communities that incorporate economic and broader, long-term community goals stand to gain more than small towns that take a piecemeal approach. Successful small towns balance short-term economic gains with longer-term community development goals.

2. Small towns with the most dramatic outcomes tend to be proactive and future-oriented: they embrace change and assume risk

Dire economic and civic situation can act as a spur for local communities to try new things and take new risks rather than rely on how things have always been done. Successful small towns embrace change and adapt business models to shifting circumstances. This may involve a lot of trial and error and towns may have to be willing to accept some failures in order to make progress. Towns should also be proactive rather than reactive. This means responding to challenges before they become a problem and preparing the local community for opportunity.

3. Successful community economic development strategies are guided by a broadly held local vision

The study emphasises the importance of establishing and maintaining a broadly held vision, including goals for all manner of development activities. Inclusiveness and openness is vital for the planning and visioning process, especially to ensure that opposition to the development efforts does not take hold for lack of understanding of the larger vision. A separate but related point is that in small towns, people (as opposed to money) are always the most important resource and are the one absolutely necessary ingredient to successful development. Additionally, special attention must be paid to integrating newcomers into the community as they can bring a new energy and fresh perspective to local challenges.

4. Defining assets and opportunities broadly can yield innovative strategies that capitalise on a community's competitive advantage

Given the limited sources of competitive advantage for small towns, economic development assets need to be defined in as broad a way as possible. Assets for small town development might include individual people, non-profit organisations, businesses, open spaces, farms, parks, landfills (biomass), museums, schools, historic architecture, local attitudes or any number of other assets. Further, the mere fact that that a particular town is small can become an asset e.g. lower costs to business, perception of higher moral and ethical standards in small towns.

5. Innovative local governance, partnerships, and organisations significantly enhance the capacity for community economic development

Most successful towns in the study included an innovative element of either organisation or governance. Creative approaches to organisational structure can strengthen a community's development potential. Regionalism, or identifying opportunities and partnerships beyond town boundaries can help small towns to pool resources toward shared objectives. It is also important for local leaders to be able to connect with higher level policy makers and business leaders for developmental purposes. Public-private (including non-profit) partnerships are also emerging as a successful organisational model for small town development.

6. Effective communities identify, measure and celebrate short-term successes to sustain support for long-term community economic development

Given the long-term nature of community development, leaders in small towns must repeatedly make the case for the importance of their efforts. A number of strategies can be used to accomplish this. First, short-term success can build long-term momentum. Beginning

with steps that can be accomplished in short order can demonstrate that change is possible and build momentum to tackle more intractable challenges. Also, once people see change happening, it gives them more of an incentive to join in the process. Second, communities should make an explicit effort to monitor and measure the impacts of their efforts. Data can be used to attract additional investment from outside sources and can also be used to convince a community's naysayers to join the efforts. Finally, small towns should communicate and celebrate success. Local papers should be kept informed of various economic development projects. Even the most modest successes should be publicised.

7. Viable community economic development involves the use of a comprehensive package of strategies and tools rather than a piecemeal approach

Successful development in small towns is always multifaceted. Thriving communities tend to have a comprehensive package of strategies and tools that match the core assets, challenges and opportunities within their regional context. However, there is no universally applicable formula for small town development. Decisions on what to do and how to do it must be based on local conditions, context and capacity.

Barkley (2001) recommends six separate alternatives for employment generation in small towns and strategies communities can use to make these alternatives come to pass in their towns.

1. Recruit new basic employers from outside the community, primarily branches of multi-plant manufacturing concerns

Branch plants generally export orientated, strengthening the community's economic base; provide lots of employment opportunities from the outset.

Community actions: develop local industrial sites and public services; provide specific information on local available labour; provide transportation, recreation, communication, business services facilities to improve local living conditions; consider targeted searches for firms.

2. Support entrepreneurial activity and the development of new small businesses

Locally owned firms purchase many of their inputs locally, thus increasing multiplier effects; provide more stable employment over the business cycle; provide greater opportunity for managerial and professional jobs.

Community actions: form investor networks to assist new firms with equity and debt capital needs; provide mentoring and education for potential entrepreneurs; adopt encouraging community attitude towards entrepreneurship, especially after previous business failure

3. Increase income and employment in local agribusiness industries by further processing of local production or the development of new agricultural products

Rural areas have comparative advantage as principal inputs located nearby; may stimulate demand for locally produced goods (backward linkages).

Community actions: programmes to aid new agribusiness firms will be similar to those for small business start-ups although innovative nature of some agribusiness firms may mean they require greater access to local capital pool as more formal financing may be unavailable.

4. Expand local service and trade activity to reduce leakages of spending outside the community

Service industries provide greater employment stability during business cycle fluctuations; service and trade industries generally put few demands on local services and the environment; increase local multiplier by reducing imports.

Community actions: survey consumer needs and buying habits to identify market potential of retail/service outlets; analyse and renew town centre shopping districts; generate more purchases by non-local people through promotion and advertising; develop informational programmes to encourage people to buy locally; bring retailing centres alive by combining product/service promotion with recreational activities.

5. Develop tourism, recreation and retirement industries so that significant outside spending is attracted to the community

Brings outside money to the community; tourism clean industry with relatively few demands on local public services and environment (if properly controlled); development of tourism/recreation facilities can also benefit locals

Community actions: planning of tourism product must be community oriented as tourist experience greatly dependent on local hospitality; local government should assume responsibility for promotional activities if community offers numerous tourist attractions as under-investment in these efforts will occur if financing left to individual businesses; government ownership/subsidisation of tourism activities may be useful if availability of these activities generates/prolongs tourist visits; communities interested in attracting retirees must provide for special needs of the elderly e.g. healthcare services, public transport etc.

6. Develop programmes which will aid in the retention of and expansion of existing businesses

Improving efficiency of existing firms enhances area's competitive advantage; assisting local firms should have greater short-run employment benefits than assisting new/incoming businesses

Community actions: organise educational programmes to strengthen management capacity of firms; develop local capital pools for use by local businesses; sponsor educational opportunities for local employers and employees to improve quality of workforce; provide quality ICT services; sponsor business appreciation events.

Creating a Development Strategy

For towns looking to develop a strategy in order to boost economic development, Coppedge (1982) and Woods and Sloggett (2002) both provide detailed checklists to show what is required.

Coppedge (1982) provides a seven step strategy:

- Develop an overall plan;
- Look at the infrastructure;
- Compile a list of "suspects" (businesses that could operate profitably in the area);
- Convert suspects to prospects (prospective business);

- Sell the prospect (convince prospect to start a business in the area);
- Follow through on commitments;
- Keep existing businesses.

Woods and Sloggett (2002) put forward eight steps toward designing a strategic economic development plan:

- Establish a steering committee;
- Obtain technical assistance;
- Develop basic data;
- Review economic development alternatives;
- Analyse key issues;
- Identify financial resources;
- Set priorities;
- Implement the plan.

3.4 HOW? ACTION STEPS – STRATEGIES

Building upon this, how does the community achieve its objectives?

To achieve its goal, the Community needs to be organised, to have some people leading and organising the actions, to share the responsibilities and to plan its actions. Also the process is likely to take time as different steps have to be followed.

Step 1: Establishment of The Burren Lowlands Development Group

In parallel of the present study, Burren Lowlands' residents have also been aware of the problematic situation of their region: considering immigration and job losses between 2006 and 2011 census, the Lowlands' area is among the 10 regions of the country the most affected by the economic recession. Following from a consultative meeting with the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas last year, a small group of business people and members of the community came together to form an action group.

And in January 2014, some of them established the Burren Lowlands Development Group, a non-profit association, with intent to boost the economy of the region.

The objective of this group was to find ways to increase employment in Gort and its hinterland. Given the ecological zone in which the area sits the group decided to call itself the Burren Lowlands Development Group. There is widespread support for this group in the area, with over 50 alone serving on various sub-committees of the group.

One of the reasons for utilising the brand, the Burren Lowlands is that it unifies an area that spans two counties with similar economic issues, opportunities and potential. Branding an area in this way also helps to promote the area in terms of economic and tourism potential. A very good example of this is the Ballyhoura area, spanning South East Limerick, North East Cork and South West Tipperary. Ballyhoura has been very effective in branding and providing a focus for development in that area.

As a border area, much of the economic linkages span both Counties Galway and Clare and the wider Burren Area.

They have determined their goal as the “prosperity of the Lowlands”. Their key target areas are job creation, sustainable tourism, educated workforce and appreciation for arts and heritage.

They launched the process on the 7th of April by organising a public meeting at the Lady Gregory Hotel. The aim of this meeting was to let residents giving their ideas to find solution to improve the following areas:

- Tourism, art, culture and heritage
- Industry, business, argi-food and skills
- Retail
- Community, sports and education
- Aesthetics and tidy town

Around 200 people attended the meeting and a large range of ideas were given. The next point is to know who will really be involved in the organisation in order to share duties and plan a strategy.

A submission draft has already been submitted to the Galway Rural Development Plan 2015-2021. We hope our study will help them in their process.

Step 2: Action planning and sharing of tasks

After having established this Group, the next step was to share the different tasks: who will be responsible of Tourism? Who will deal with businesses? Who will be in charge of the communication...? Things have were distributed among the members of the Group.

Then, a schedule has to be done: when this or that action will begin, where and with whom? Do we have to meet some people? The idea is to distribute the different actions (elected among the recommendations given in Section 4) among a specific period of time. It would really help to clarify and to organise the development.

Step 3: Anticipation of obstacles

For each action, and for the whole development plan, some obstacles would be met. The idea is to anticipate those possible obstacles in order to limit the risks. Think about solutions to those barriers will enable to respond quickly in case of problem.

The possible obstacles can be faced on different levels:

- Funding
- Delays regarding to the schedule
- Shortage of skills and tools
- Difficulties of organisation and structure
- Political difficulties
- Cultural and attitude barriers
- This is not an exhaustive list, a large range of obstacle can occur.

Step 4: Cost evaluation

Undertaking an economic development Plan costs money, generally more that any single organization or community Group has within their budget. For each task, the question “How

does it cost” has to be asked. The idea is to establish a budget for each action and identify who is to provide the funding.

Box 1. The Development of a Tourist Office

Recognising the opportunities that could arise from tourism, the development group within 2 months of the kick off meeting resourced and established a tourist office in Gort. A vacant premises and start-up capital was provided by a local businessman. Volunteers developed the building and a resource person was provided by Galway Rural Development.



3.5 WHO? RESOURCES, STAKEHOLDERS AND SUPPORT AVAILABLE TO ACHIEVE GOALS

There are various resources and stakeholders to help communities to prepare, finance, and realise a development plan. The chief resource is the local community. However there are also state and community organisations that can provide resources, training, promotion and advice. The table below gives some available resources according to the area in which they can provide services. The major part of the stakeholders quoted below can provide funding, training, advice and promotion.

Table 7. Stakeholders and resources of different fields in the Burren Lowlands

	Stakeholders and Resources
Tourism	Fáilte Ireland, Heritage Office of the County Council, Burren Beo Trust, BurrenLife, The Burren Geopark, The Burren Ecotourism Network, The Burren Community Charter, Ireland Reaching Out
Agriculture, Business and local production	LEO for businesses with less than 10 employees, IDA for foreign investing companies, Enterprise Ireland for local companies with potential export, Enterprise Centre, Bord Bia for food businesses, Gort Chamber of Commerce Teagasc Farm Organisations Galway County Council Galway Rural Development Clare Rural Development
Education and skills	SOLAS (Further Education and Training Authority), Education and Training Boards, Intreo for support, training and education to help you back into work, The Galway Education Centre, Burren Lowlands' retired people who could launch a network of consultants
Advertising	Local and national media (newspaper, radio, TV, internet), Funding and grants from some of the previous stakeholders (mainly in term of tourism)

3.6 ASSESSMENT

In a successful economic development program, the process toward completion of each action and work task is periodically reported. It gives the opportunity to celebrate success and to modify the schedule and the next actions if necessary to assure successful accomplishment. Some tools to gauge progress are needed. Table 8 gives some examples.

Table 8. Examples of indicators for different fields of development

Category	Examples of indicators
Tourism	Number of tourists Number of nights spent in hotels Number of activities Attraction of festivals
Businesses	Number of new businesses Number of workers in businesses Gort Chamber of Commerce activity
Downtown revitalisation	Amenities improvement Gort's square usage Accessibility Tidy Town efficiency
Participation stakeholders by	Number of participants from different sectors Number of funding Maintaining the number of member in The Burren Lowlands Development Group
Timeliness	Number of actions which has been realised according to the schedule

Chapter 4. EXAMPLES OF KEY STUDIES OF ECONOMIC REVITALIZATION

The following section describes 4 a number of development success stories of small towns of the United States of America. Those examples come from a report entitled “Small Towns Big Ideas” of the UNC School of Government. Each of those towns has launched a strategy for building local capacity for economic development. The example selected reinvigorated their economy through three different strategies: ecotourism, arts and local entrepreneurship. In each case we tried to make a comparison with the Burren Lowlands, highlighting common assets which could enable to develop a similar strategy in our area of study.

4.1 DEVELOPMENT THROUGH AN ECOTOURISM STRATEGY: BIG STONE GAP CASE

Big Stone Gap is a town located close to Virginia’s western boarder in the United-States. The short comparison below shows that both have many similar features. After a period of rising unemployment and poverty due to the collapse of the mining industry, Big Stone Gap throve again thanks to an ecotourism-based development strategy. The purpose of this case study is to show how Burren Lowlands’ community could draw inspiration from this successful strategy and adapt it to its own situation.

Table 9. Comparison of Big Stone Gap and the Burren Lowlands

	Big Stone Gap	Burren Lowlands
	Main features	
Population:	4800 (in 2000)	2644 (Gort in 2011)
Location	Cumberland Mountains, Wise County, Virginia, USA	Burren Lowlands, Galway County, Ireland
Closest urban centre	Knoxville: 220 km, about 850 000 inhabitants in the metropolitan area	Galway: 37 km, about 75 000 inhabitants
Closest main road	Interstate Highway: 93 km	On the road between Limerick and Galway (M18 and N18)
	Natural assets	
Rural landscapes	Close to the Jefferson National Forest, the "Grand Canyon of the South" and the Natural Tunnel State Park	Close to the Burren Uplands, just next to Coole Park, in the Burren Lowlands (unique natural features like turloughs)
	Heritage assets	
Cultural History	The region inspired several popular novels and films. John Fox Jr. wrote <i>Trail of the Lonesome Pine</i> about coal mining in Big Stone Gap.	Strong heritage about Lady Gregory and Yeats: Coole Park, Lady Gregory House and Authograph Tree, Kiltartan Museum, Thoor Ballylee, Woodville Walled Garden etc.
	Economic History	
	<u>1800s to 1980s</u> : development of the town based on the coal mining industry. <u>1980s</u> : the mining industry starts to falter. <u>1992</u> : the county's unemployment rate is about 20%. <u>Late 1990s</u> : start of the economic development strategy based on ecotourism. <u>2005</u> : the county's unemployment rate is about 4.6%.	<u>1990s to 2008</u> : fast economic growth in Ireland, development of the town mainly based on the construction sector. <u>Since 2008</u> : recession, collapse of the construction sector. <u>2011</u> : Gort unemployment rate is about 14%.

The Strategy

The Big Stone Gap's economic development strategy was to "use ecotourism to attract new investment and to create employment opportunities by supporting local entrepreneurs". To do so, the town partnered with different stakeholders in order to build a strong and efficient network to support entrepreneurship in the ecotourism industry. Four main stakeholders were involved in this cooperation; each of them brought different skills and supports:

- **The Heart of Appalachia Tourism Authority** tasked with showcasing the unique offerings of the region.
- **Virginia Cooperative Extension** which is an educational outreach program led by Virginia tech, the Virginia State University and the National Institute for Food and Agriculture, "offered workshops in the community to demonstrate how residents could start their own business and take control of their economic future".
- **Mountain Empire Community College** which provided business plan feedback and financial advice to local entrepreneurs through its Small Business Development Centre.
- **Southwest Virginia Community Development Finance**, a community development financial institution, provided a lending option for ecotourism entrepreneurs.

Thanks to this strategy, many businesses began to take off and the regional economic stagnation ceased. The first lesson drawn from this key case is that "supporting entrepreneurs is a long-term and transformative economic development strategy" since it makes the local economy less reliant on outsiders such as coal companies. The second one is that "entrepreneurs need a flexible and multi-faceted support network" mostly because a single organization can't face the broad range of needs which are different for each entrepreneur. A network of services is therefore necessary.

With a view to comparing it to the Burren Lowlands, it is important to underline that the annual growth rate of the tourism industry in south-western Virginia was 17% in the late 1990s. It is therefore too ambitious to expect similar outcomes in the Burren Lowlands even if there is a significant potential in the tourism industry. A broader strategy encompassing other sectors will be necessary.

The Burren Lowlands potential

As pointed out by the table 9, the Burren Lowlands have a lot of natural and cultural assets which would allow such a strategy to be effective. The region is very well located compared to Big Stone Gap. It is crossed by the motorway and very close to an important urban centre. As in Big Stone Gap, there are meaningful natural assets in the region, and the cultural heritage is more important. The Lowlands suffered during the economic downturn but were more strongly stricken than other rural areas because of the over reliance on construction. So the region was affected by the collapse of an industry which employed people with particular skills, its current situation is therefore similar to Big Stone Gap situation in the 1980s after the mining industry collapse.

In the field of eco-tourism, several ideas were mentioned at the meeting on the Burren Lowlands future which took place in the Lady Gregory's Hotel on the 7th of April. For instance cycling or bus tours could be developed, particularly on the Lady Gregory and Yeats theme. Other ideas such as horse riding, visitor farm or different kind of one-time events could be considered.

How to adapt this strategy in the Burren Lowlands?

In Big Stone Gap, the different stakeholders of the development strategy played four main roles: promotion of the touristic attractions, training in business development, financial advice, providing lending options. Our aim is now to determine which stakeholders could carry out such roles in the case of the Burren Lowlands.

Promoting the touristic attractions

Different resources and partners can be mobilized to carry out this role:

- **The Burren Ecotourism Network.** Members of this network benefit from there “Destination Marketing & Promotion Strategy”. As part of the Burren, businesses of Gort, Kinvarra or Adrahan could apply for membership. As this network appeared to be a good leverage for ecotourism enterprises, you will find further information on this organisation, on the eligibility requirements for membership and on all the benefits of network membership in annexe 4.
- **The website** (<http://www.gortononline.com/>) has definitely to be improved and made more ergonomic and attractive.
- **A tourist centre** opened in Gort since volunteers offered to manage it and provide a place for it during the meeting of the 7th of April in the Lady Gregory’s hotel.
- Training entrepreneurs in business management and providing financial advices.

In relation to training, there exist organisations or resources that can provide either training workshops or direct advice for small businesses to start or expand:

- **The Burren Ecotourism Network** provides training on sustainable tourism to its membership.
- **Local expertise.** Any kind of local skills in business management can be useful for budding entrepreneurs. For example, the town of Brevard in North Carolina built a Retiree Resource Network which provided “top quality consulting and advising services [...] free of charge” (Small Town Big Ideas, p29).
- **Galway County Council**

There are a number of potential resourcing opportunities including

- **The Western Development Commission** was set up to promote social and economic development in the Western Region, it provides loan and equity to businesses and local communities for projects in tourism, industry, renewable energy, organic agri-food etc.
- **LEADER program** is a European fund for rural development managed by Galway and Clare Rural Development Companies.
- **Galway and Clare Local Enterprise Office**

4.2 REVITALIZATION BY ARTISTIC REPRESENTATIONS: COLQUITT AND BLACK MOUNTAIN CASES

We present here two key-cases of successful small town revitalization based on arts and culture. The first one is the case of Colquitt where the inhabitants developed an outstanding theatre show which attracts today around 40 000 people every year. The second is Black Mountain where the community manage to rekindle a vibrant artist community that was previously a strong asset of the town.

Colquitt success story

Table 10. Comparison of Colquitt and the Burren Lowlands

	Colquitt	Burren Lowlands
	Main features	
Population	1940 (in 2000)	2644 (Gort, in 2011)
Location	Miller County, Georgia, USA	Burren Lowlands, Galway County, Ireland
Closest urban centre	Tallahassee: 100km, about 375 000 inhabitants in the metropolitan area (181 000 in the city) metropolitan area	Galway: 37 km, about 75 000 inhabitants
Closest main road	Interstate Highway: 80 km	On the road between Limerick and Galway (M18 and N18)
Minority Population	45% (2000)	27.2% (2011)
	Economical History	
	<u>1800s to 1980s</u> : development of the town based on peanut industry and textile manufacturing <u>mid-1980s</u> : the mining industry starts to falter. <u>1992-2006</u> : economic recovery thanks to theatre	<u>1990s to 2008</u> : fast economic growth in Ireland, development of the town mainly based on the construction sector. <u>Since 2008</u> : recession, collapse of the construction sector. <u>2011</u> : Gort unemployment rate is about 14%.

Colquitt is a little town located in Miller County, in the South West of the State of Georgia in the United-States. Historically it was a farming community, which collapsed in the mid-1980s. In order to stimulate the economy, a group of civic leaders, formed the **town's first art council** in 1990. The idea was to put in place a play "written, and produced by local residents that depicts the life and history of Colquitt": *Swamp Gravy*. The first performance took place in 1992. Now, the town of Colquitt attracts thousands of people every year (an average of 40 000) for *Swamp Gravy*, "a musical play that celebrates life in rural south-western Georgia".

The Strategy

How does it start? How has it been financed?

After the creation of the town's arts council in 1990, it was in 1991 that, Richard Geer, a graduate student, met the Colquitt-Miller **County Arts Council** in relation to his idea as "an opportunity to help invigorate the local economy". Then, a proposal drafted by Geer and the Arts Council, received a \$15 000 grant from the **Georgia Humanities Council**. This funding have allowed Colquitt to create and show the *Swamp Gravy* play. The first representation took the stage in a 60-year-old cotton warehouse.

What have been the benefits and consequences of such an event on Colquitt economy?

- Since 1993, as of 2005, the play has sold more than 120 000 tickets and generated over \$4 million. This money has been reinvested into several things:
- Revitalization of downtown buildings
- Renovation of a local mini-mall to offer affordable rental space for vendors of arts, crafts and antiques
- Creation of a storytelling museum, a bed and breakfast and a mural project
- Development of a children theatre
- Creation of the Swamp Gravy Institute. This is "a consulting and training organization that works with other communities to design programming similar to that in Colquitt".

- Moreover, in 1994, the play was designated as the “official folk life of Georgia”.
- This play has brought local population together, reducing racial tensions and enhancing minority population integration.
- As far as the play is performed by local residents, it has created “devotion to the common goal of improving the community”.
- “Cultural tourism now provides more jobs than any other industry in Colquitt”.

This experience highlights the fact that “strategically designed arts programs can catalyse economic development” and “small towns can use the art to build community capital and defuse racial tensions”.

The Burren Lowlands potential

There are opportunities for the Burren Lowlands in taking some inspiration from this success story of it to stimulate its economy. The idea would not only be to tell the story of the town but also to use theatre as a tool to give an easy and fun interpretation of Yeats and Lady Gregory history and heritage. That is all the more interesting because Yeats and Lady Gregory are both linked to theatre.

Who could lead the project?

In the case of Colquitt, the initiative came from a reasoned graduate student. As far as the Burren Lowlands are concerned, we can imagine many possible contingencies:

- An experienced reasoned person could lead the project and gather people to put it in place
- A theatrical community could be created in order to lead the project
- The project could be delegated to a group of students supervised by teachers of the secondary school
- The Wild Swan Theatre Company

Where could it take place?

This event could take place in **the Lady Gregory Hotel**. “The Lady Gregory can cater for up to 400 people, theatre style in the renowned Gregory Suite and also have alternative options - the W.B Yeats Suite and the Edward Martyn Suite.” It could be a perfect place.

During the summer time, one could organize some open-air stages in Coole Park. Indeed, this park has a wonderful site perfectly suitable to the organisation of such an event. Coordination with the Visitor office of Coole Park will be necessary.

What could be the benefits of such an event on the Burren Lowlands’ economy?

- The money generated by the sale of tickets would be reinvested into similar things as Colquitt did:
 - Revitalization of downtown buildings, repainting shops façades for example
 - Renovation of empty shops to offer affordable rental space for vendors of arts, crafts and antiques
- It will bring local population together, reducing racial tensions and enhancing Brazilian community integration.
- In a similar way as Colquitt, as far as the play is performed by local residents, it will create “devotion to the common goal of improving the community”.

- It would help the region to be more attractive to visit as far as the play would promote Lady Gregory and Yeats heritage, making visitors want to visit other places linked to Lady Gregory and Yeats (Coole Park, LaKiltartanMuseum, Thoor Ballylee...).
- It would attract media, what could help the promotion of the Lowlands.

Which stakeholders could help the region to put in place this project?

- Colquitt received some help from that Art County Council and the Georgia Humanities Council. Which bodies could finance the Burren Lowland's theatre project?
- The Irish equivalent of the Art County Council is the **Art Office of the Galway County Council**. The Burren Lowlands could apply for assistance from the Art officer of Galway County Council.
- Another stakeholder, which could be compared to the Georgia Humanities Council, is **Culture Ireland**. The latter "operates a range of funding programmes to support and promote the presentation of Irish arts internationally".
- The **Art Council** which is "the Irish government agency for developing the arts". It is the major funder of the arts in Ireland.
- The **Ireland Funds** could also be involved in such a project. "The Ireland Funds support Irish culture and heritage by providing funding for programs that promote cultural awareness and understanding; [...] increase public access to a variety of art forms and collections support community arts initiatives; and ensure the protection of and access to Irish heritage sites and resources".
- The region could also seek contribution from local civic groups as the **Lions Club** of Gort.
- The region could also request advice from the **Burren College of Art** or some established theatre companies as Druid Company in Galway.
- South Galway Education Center

In a similar way, we can also quote the example of New York Mills in the Minnesota State of the United-States which has stimulated its economy through the creation of a regional cultural centre. This latter has created 350 jobs and 17 businesses in the first 6 years the cultural centre was opened.

4.3 BLACK MOUNTAIN SUCCESS STORY

Black Mountain is located in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Carolina. This small town became a vibrant cultural hub in the 1930s thanks to the opening of an experimental school in interdisciplinary education which attracted a number of European artists who fled the Nazi persecution. A rich community of musicians, architects and writers settled there. Among these intellectuals were very famous writers such as Buckminster Fuller, Merce Cunningham and Joseph Albers. However, after the war, most of the students and teachers moved to the West Coast. In 1956, the College closed its doors and the town lost its wealth and vibrancy. Thirty years later, the small town thrived again thanks to the opening of a Centre of the Arts which success brought back to Black Mountain its old fame of a cultural hub.

Table 11. Comparison of Black Mountain and the Burren Lowlands

	Black Mountain	Burren Lowlands
	Main features	
Population	7 510 (in 2000)	2644 (in 2011)
Location	Foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, North Carolina, USA	Foothills of the Burren, Galway County, Ireland
Closest urban centre	Knoxville: 48 km, about 83 000 inhabitants	Galway: 37 km, about 75 000 inhabitants
Closest main road	Interstate Highway: 1,5 km	On the road between Limerick and Galway (M18 and N18)
	History	
	<p><u>1933</u>: Opening of the Black Mountain College as an experimental school in interdisciplinary education.</p> <p><u>1933 to 1945</u>: the college attracted many artists fleeing Nazi persecution. Several world-renowned artists studied there (B.Fuller, M.Cunningham)</p> <p><u>1953</u>: the college closed its doors.</p> <p><u>1960s to 1980s</u>: economic downturn, many building dilapidated.</p> <p><u>1990s</u>: revitalization through arts culture.</p>	<p><u>1899</u>: Foundation of the Irish Literary Theater by Lady Gregory, W.B. Yeats and Edward Maryn, all lived in the Burren Lowlands.</p> <p><u>1990s to 2008</u>: fast economic growth in Ireland, development of the town mainly based on the construction sector.</p> <p><u>Since 2008</u>: recession, collapse of the construction sector.</p> <p><u>2011</u>: Gort unemployment rate is about 14%.</p>
	Assets for an art-based strategy	
	The town had been a cultural hub for 30 years thanks to Black Mountain College. The old hall of the town was available to create a Centre of the Arts.	The Burren Lowlands are the cradle of the Irish Literary Theater. The Gallery Café is an innovative concept and has a good fame in the region. Many places are empty and the rent is cheap.

The Strategy

How does it start? How has it been financed?

The aim was to rekindle the local arts culture in order to attract tourist and investors, but also new inhabitants. In the 1990s, town leaders decided to provide a building for the Black Mountain Centre of the Arts and then to retire the centre's construction debt. In 1995, the artists who were working in the centre set up a non-profit organisation to raise funds to renovate the building, which was the old town hall. Since the opening, the centre attracts cultural enthusiasts from the entire south eastern region. "Concerts and galleries showcase a range of local and international artists, musicians, theatre production and classes."

To renovate the town hall, the Black Mountain Centre of the Arts got a low-interest loan from the local authorities and an \$88 000 donation, they also campaigned for other donations. But the second strategic decision of the local authorities was to pay off the centre's debt in 2002. Operating debt free enabled the centre to offer more events to the public , this decision

boosted thus the cultural activity and Black Mountain community is now reaping the benefits of this investment.

What have been the benefits and consequences of such an event on Black Mountain economy?

Today, hundreds of artists are living in Black Mountain. A study showed the economic impact is about \$66 000 for each artist annually. The Centre for the Arts is told to be a big reason people come to live in the town and is now considered as a tourist honeypot.

Three lessons are to be drawn from this success story. First, “public-private partnerships can be developed to support community development interests”, secondly, “investing in the arts community can be a driver of economic development in a community”, and finally “strategic investments in community organizations can align private/non-profit sector interests with broader community interests”.

The Burren Lowlands potential

Even if we can't expect such a tremendous revitalization through arts and culture only, we have identified four assets that would allow the Burren Lowlands to develop a similar strategy:

The Irish Literary Theatre was founded in the region by Lady Gregory, Yeats and Edward Maryn.

There are many empty premises in Gort and the rent is very low. Establishing an art centre in one or several places should be thus affordable.

The Gallery Café, located in the square, already exhibits and sells local artist's works of art and benefit from a very good fame in the region.

The Burren Lowlands are surrounded by tourist honeypots such as the Burren, the Wild Atlantic Way, Galway and the Connemara. To extricate itself, the region has to showcase its assets. It has the potential to become an unavoidable cultural hub in the region.

4.4 A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO BOOST ENTREPRENEURSHIP: STAR CASE

Star is a very small town located in the Yadkin Pee Dee River basin. This little community relied on the single industry of hosiery mills until the 1990s. When the mills closed, unemployment reached frightening rates. To get out of this situation, Star worked toward economic diversification joining other communities to create a “strategic plan for economic revitalization and balanced growth”. The communities set up a regional non-profit organization called “Pee-Dee Lakes Project” to carry out the plan. Star worked with this organization to develop a business incubator which started to show encouraging results only two years after it was launched.

Table 12. Comparison of Star and the Burren Lowlands

	Star	Burren Lowlands
	Main features	
Population	800 (in 2000)	2644 (in 2011)
Location	Yadkin Pee Dee River basin, North Carolina, USA	Foothills of the Burren, Galway County, Ireland
Closest urban centre	Charlotte: 112 km, about 775 000 inhabitants	Galway: 37 km, about 75 000 inhabitants
Closest main road	Interstate Highway: 115 km	On the road between Limerick and Galway (M18 and N18)
	History	
	<p><u>Before 1940:</u> Star grew as a railroad stop.</p> <p><u>1940s-1980s:</u> Hosiery mills settled in the region and formed the basis of Star's economy.</p> <p><u>1990s:</u> The two hosiery mills of Star closed, 1000 jobs were lost.</p> <p><u>1994:</u> Creation of a regional non-profit organization to create a strategic plan for economic revitalization and balanced growth.</p> <p><u>2004:</u> Development of the STARworks centre: a business incubator.</p>	<p><u>1990s to 2008:</u> fast economic growth in Ireland, development of the town mainly based on the construction sector.</p> <p><u>Since 2008:</u> recession, collapse of the construction sector.</p> <p><u>2011:</u> Gort unemployment rate is about 14%.</p>
	Assets to develop entrepreneurship	
	Many jobs were lost in a short period of time, strong demand for new jobs.	
	Creation of the non-profit organization Pee-Dee Lakes Project to carry out a development plan.	Recent creation of the “Burren Lowlands Development Group by dynamic volunteers”.

The Strategy

How does it start? How has it been financed?

Star's strategy was to develop a business incubator and a network to help businesses getting out this incubator to settle into the local market. The incubator called STARwork Centre for Creative Enterprises was launched in 2004 when an old mill building in downtown Star was given to the Pee-Dee Lake project. The project received a grant from the Golden LEAF foundation and U.S. Department of Agriculture to fund renovation of the building. One year later, the centre opened with a first new business, a ceramic artisan, quickly followed by others.

In the meantime, the community carried out an improvement of the business district in order to provide places to go for the budding businesses after incubating. This downtown revitalization was led by a citizen organization divided into different teams, ranging from economic restructuring to promotion and marketing.

What have been the benefits and consequences of such an event on Star economy?

Two years after the project was launched, the ceramics business moved to the downtown and created seven jobs. Moreover it is in discussion with one of its suppliers to open a facility in the town. Other new businesses were incubating such as a geothermal company and a glass and metal studio. Even if the number of jobs created by this project is much lower than the losses after the hosiery mills closure, it shows rural communities can find new economic engines to thrive. Moreover, fostering small businesses allows to diversify the economy and thus to make it less vulnerable.

Two lessons were drawn from Star's development strategy. The first one is to "find creative re-uses for vacant buildings". The second is that "surviving the economic transition requires a shift in local expectations regarding job creation". Indeed, Star was a town with one big employer and residents have now to understand the small businesses are becoming the new economic base of the region.

The Burren Lowlands potential

The Burren Lowlands have the potential to draw its inspiration from Star's strategy:

Location: Gort is the biggest town between Ennis and Oranmore, close to both Limerick and Galway, close to Shanon Airport. The Motorway will be finished within two years; Gort will thus be at 2 hours driving from Dublin. It is well located for businesses with regional, national and even international reach.

Local resources: There is a strong will among the Burren Lowlands population to revitalize the region as brought in light by the recent creation of the community-led non-profit organization called the "Burren Lowlands Development Group" that could spearhead this strategy.

Vacant buildings: As many businesses closed since 2008, there are many free places in the Burren Lowlands that could be used for new businesses or for a business incubator.

Chapter 5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE BURREN LOWLANDS DEVELOPMENT GROUP TO ENHANCE THE ECONOMIC SITUATION OF THE AREA

This part of the report tries to resume, in an organised way, the most relevant ideas to improve The Burren Lowlands' economic level, drawing upon ideas generated people we met during our investigation, from Burren Lowlands' residents who participated to the meeting of the 7th of April, and from examples of towns which successfully stimulated their economy. The purpose of those ideas is to make the Burren Lowlands a **Better place to Live, to Visit and to Work**.

5.1 TOURISM

The region of the Burren Lowlands has a real potential in term of tourism: it is, as its name suggests it, part of the Burren, it is on the main axe between two touristic and attractive cities (Galway and Limerick), it is close to Shannon airport, it has a lot of heritage buildings and places in link with Yeats and Lady Gregory... However, the region is has not been exploited thoroughly its potential. In order to become an attractive place for tourists, the region has to think about several things: adapt the town to make it a welcoming place, facilitate the access to places of interest, showcase and promote those places and develop events and activities around it. There are a lot of steps to become a famous touristic place. Below, we develop some ideas which could help the Burren Lowlands to be more attractive in term of tourism.

Box 2. Tourism Potential of the Burren Lowlands (penned by Ruairi O'Shaughnessy)

North to the village of Ardrahan in the shadow of an old Norman Castle, is "Doon" one of the finest examples of a three ringed early earthen fort dating back well over a 1000 years. Further north and enjoy some fabulous Sea food and the world famous Oysters at Clarinbridge.

In the North West of the Burren Lowlands is one of Irelands most beautiful villages, Kinvarra, home of the famous Galway Hooker traditional fishing boats on the edge of the Burren with easy access to a number of walking and touring locations, where one can tour or enjoy a Medieval Banquet at the picture postcard Dunguaire Castle. There are many local restaurants or bars, with Irish Traditional music in the evening or and the numerous local festivals such as Criunniu na mBad or the Cuckoo Fleadh.

South to towards Beagh and North Clare there is an amazing geology of the Burren Lowlands, learn about turloughs and how rivers magically disappear underground in swallow holes at the wonderfully named Devils punchbowl, hear the water gurgle and rise at the "churn" and "ladle" and watch the river reemerge at the spectacular "Cannahowna" before flowing peacefully through the town. The waters of the Burren Lowland in the words of Lady Gregory are like life itself travelling "from a mystery, through a mystery to a mystery".

Travelling South one can also visit some of the lovingly preserved Holy Wells in the region, or visit the O'Shaughnessy Stronghold at Fiddaun Castle, as fine example of a fortified towerhouse and bawn as there is in the country. A visit to Ardamullivan Castle, haunted by the ghosts of two rival Shaughnessy heirs who fought a duel here. Hopefully in time one will be able view the unique medieval wall paintings which make the Ardamullivan Castle a site of National importance.

East is the relatively unexplored Sliabh Aughty mountains that between Galway and Clare, one of the largest inland mountain ranges in Ireland. It is an area rich in Culture, tradition and re known for its Irish Music. New research and discovery has revealed layers of archaeological activity and suggests much, much more is there to be yet uncovered. The beautiful woodlands, bogland and the lush Green valleys near to Lough Greaney the are in totally contrast with the rocky Burren and provide a wonderful locations to walk, pony trek or hike.

In the immediate hinterland of the town of Gort steeped in history and the birthplace of the Gaelic Revival. This particularly visible in Coole Park, the home of Lady Gregory, and Thoor Ballylee, the home of Yeats and Tullira Castle the home of Edward Martyn; all of whom were founders of the national theatre at the Abbey. Many of the leading lights in the Gaelic revival are associated with Coole the Autograph tree. Promoting this a Lady Gregory, Yeats, Heritage Trail has been developed to link such wonderful sites as Coole, Kiltartan Gregory Museum, Thoor Ballylee, Woodville Gardens, that inspired such famous writers as Yeats, Shaw, Hyde, Synge, O'Casey not to mention Raftery, Fahey and Merriman.

South Galway and North Clare also played in the other areas of Gaelic Revival, Edward Martyn from the Tullira Castle co founder of the Abbey Theatre, Irelands National Threatre with Yeats and Lady Gregory, he was also founder of Feis Ceol and An Túr Gloine, Ireland's first stained-glass workshop, which began with windows installed in Labane Church before reaching the heights of the stain-glass work found at nearby St Brendans Cathedral, Loughrea.

The largest cultural and sporting movement in Ireland, the GAA also has links in the region with its founder Michael Cusack born in Carron, Co. Clare, he taught at Lough Cultra National School in Beagh, also the man credited with initial standardisation of the sliotar is Ned Treston was from the town.

There is not many places in Europe or the world can boast as many historical or archaeological sites as the Burren Lowlands, from the relatively unknown Grannagh Dolmen, near Gort, built by the first farmers 5000 years ago, to the collection of Bronze age Wedge tombs in the Aughty foothills, hundreds of ringforts and cahers, dozens of Castles and Country Estaes such as Tullira, Coole or Lough Cultra.

This is not to mention the numerous Ecclesiastical sites such as Drumacoo or Kilternan with of course the jewel in the crown being Kilmacduagh the least known major Monastic Site in Ireland, it is our Clonmacnoise or Glenalough. Founded by St Colman in the 7th century the site has a huge array of ruins to be discovered with the highest surviving round tower in Ireland at 112ft. The legends of St Colman and his kinsman Guaire, who gives his name to the town of Gort echo across the whole Burren Lowlands.

The Burren

The idea is to underline that the Burren Lowlands area is part of the Burren. As you can see on the map below, the region is perfectly included in the Burren. It first has to be accepted in people mind who often tend to reduce the Burren to the Burren Uplands...

The link with the Burren and its promotion could be done thanks to the Burren Ecotourism Network (see more details in annexe 1 and 3). This organisation has already set up a lot of programs helping all kind of businesses, activities, accommodation and trails linked to the Burren and promoting it in a sustainable way. Some of them are quoted below:

- Burren food trail: local producers could become member
- Burren outdoor adventure and activity: horse tour, kayaking...
- Burren Hostel Hop
- Propose a trail to be part of “Trails in the series”

Figure 5. The Burren Location



For the moment, there is currently no partnership between the Burren Lowlands and the Burren Ecotourism network. The Lady Gregory Museum or Thoor Ballylee are not members of the network. One of the main problems is that the Burren Ecotourism network is funded by Clare County Council. Even if the Lowlands are part of the Burren, if more than 2 or 3 businesses want to be part of the network, Galway County Council will have to be involved in the Burren Ecotourism Network. The conclusion is that Galway County Council should establish cross co-operation with Clare County Council to promote the Burren Lowlands as part of the wider Burren.

Heritage sites and local history

Sites concerned: Kilmacduagh, Coole Park, Kiltartan Gregory Museum, Thoor Ballylee, Killirrane Graveyard, Roxborough Gates, Woodville Walled Gardens, O'Shaughnessy Stronghold at Fiddaun Catle, Erdamullivan Castle, Tullira Castle in Adrahan. Thoor Ballylee is currently closed because of floods. It belongs to Failte Ireland but the later would like to

give it to the Galway County Council. Because of the frequent flood risk, nobody is, at the moment, able to say when the Thoor will reopen.

Improve the access: parking for both cars and coaches, shuttles, bike hiring and cycling paths, walk paths... (See the template Great Western Greenway more below in the Downtown revitalization part). The Galway Rural Development, as well as Failte Ireland, would be able to subsidize those kinds of projects, especially, Failte Ireland have some funding for cycle routes.

As far as Coole Park is concerned, simply extend its opening hours and revitalise Friends of Coole could promote better interaction between the Park and local stakeholders and users.

Organise some tours: walking tour, bike rides, horse-riding and horse carriage as it is done in Killarney National Park, guided tours, coaches' tours ... The idea of The Lady Gregory and Yeats Heritage Trail is good, it just misses transports (see the map below). It should be good to focus on improving and developing this idea which has yet been started.

In order to organise those kinds of tours, all accommodation providers should work together, by forming a network of accommodation owners. They should combine their groups of tourists in order to make the coach transport cost-effective. An idea which could help to bring tourist in the Burren Lowlands for those kinds of coaches' tours would be to get in touch with Galway or Dublin tour companies, in order to include the area into their coaches tours.

Figure 6. The Lady Gregory and Yeats Heritage Trail Map



There is also an idea of audio itineraries proposed by Jackie Queally, the writer of the book *Spirit of the Burren*.

Promotion: The best thing would be to create a leader group in charge of organising and promoting the tourism around heritage site and the Lowlands' history. There are yet some people who could really be interested in being in charge of that (Jackie Queally, Siwead

Morgan). Communication and signage, information centre, promotion by artistic representation (see Arts and festival part below) are basic things which should be done for the tourism promotion (See the part *advertising, marketing and networking*).

Arts and festivals

Develop an arts and music festival to focus on Yeats and Lady Gregory: Yeats and Lady Gregory are the celebrities of the region but most of Irish and foreign people do not really know about them. In order to promote them in a playful way, the region could highlight them through a festival. This festival could take place in Coole Park which is a very spacious place linked to Lady Gregory. It could involve arts, music and theatre (See Colquitt Key study on page 32 In Section 3.2). Moreover, 2015 appears to be the perfect year to start this project since it marks the 150th anniversary of Yeats's birth. For this occasion, the first festival could be organised. There is also the idea of celebrating it writing big poems on street walls.

Moreover, it could also be an opportunity to promote the Tullira Castle which was the home of Edward Martyn who founded the national Theatre at the Abbey with Lady Gregory and Yeats. He is often forgotten but he is as important as the two other characters.

Ireland is well known for its traditional music. There is already a music festival in Gort, the Cooley Collins Traditional Musical Festival, which occurs in October but it does not seem to work as well as it used to. The idea could be, instead of creating a new music festival as suggested above, to focus on the existing one and to enhance it. In this case, collaboration with Coole music (a music school) could be a good idea. This music school organises a lot of events, such as an orchestra festival first weekend of every March, which could easily be extended to include other art forms. Coole music could also be involved in the project developed in the previous point above.

Participative courses for hand craft, painting, pottery. The idea would be to organise some courses in relation with local production. It could be hand craft courses as well as painting or pottery. This could be the opportunity for the visitor to socialise with the local community, what is part of what they are looking for when they visit a new region. Those courses could be organised by local craftspeople. They could be organised in their own workshop as well as in a cultural centre or in Coole Park Visitor Centre.

Easy and fun interpretation of the history in the region. Telling the history in a playful way is often more successful than in a theoretical way. One of the ideas would be to set up a play telling the Lady Gregory and Yeats story. The play would be performed by local residents and volunteers. It could start in coordination with The Wild Swan Theatre Company (see the comparison with Colquitt key study). Once again, we are speaking about Lady Gregory and Yeats but we should include Edward Martyn.

Another idea is to use the story of the Ardamlivian Castle haunted by the ghosts of two rivals Shaughnessy heirs who fought a duel here. It could be a good way to promote the Castle.

Gort, the main town of the area, has been known for a long time as the "Little Brazil". Even if the Brazilian community has decreased since the economic recession, it is still important. There is a Brazilian festival but the latter is quite inactive. Reinvigorating it could participate in shaping Gort's features. Moreover, it appears that the Brazilian community has never been very well integrated into the region. This festival could be a way to do that.

Cooperation with the Lough Cutra Castle. The Lough Cutra Castle is a privately owned castle but the owners are open to proposals in relation to enhanced tourism possibilities. For the moment, every year there is a triathlon organised in the estate. But it could also be possible to rent the land in order to organise some festivals or concerts, it is just needed to discuss about it with the Lough Cutra Manager.

Adventure sports activities

With the particular landscape of the Burren Lowlands, the proximity of the Slieve Aughty Mountains and the unexplored Sliabh Aughty Mountains, the Lough Cutra Castle, Coole Park and many other places, the Burren Lowlands area has a huge range of possibility to develop nature activities.

Adventure activities such as kayaking, caving, biking, fishing, horse-riding, hiking... could easily be developed. Those activities could be promoted by the Burren Ecotourism Network into the Burren Outdoor Adventure and activities brochure (also give a lot of good ideas). They could also be gathered and promoted in an adventure sport agency located in Gort's downtown. This agency could first start as a bike rental shop and hiking agency and then be extended to other sport activities.

There is also the idea of developing a Yoga and meditation centre. Indeed, the region is suitable to those kinds of activities. Jackie Queally who wrote the Spirit of the Burren might be interested in such a project. She already does sonic healing (gongs and forks used in sonic acupuncture and for toning in nature). She just led a small tour round Gort with locals who learnt a lot. And she is also used to people meditating at the sites she takes them to. She can be contacted at Jackiequeally@gmail.com.

Moreover, in France, a new kind of event has been created few years ago and appears to be a big success. It is a Mud day⁴. It is a 13km obstacle course with, as its name suggests it, mud. The problem in France is that we cannot always guarantee that there will be mud on the day of the event. By contrast, in the Burren Lowlands, for much of the year it would be quite a certainty that there will be mud!

Community, Education and Sport

Key to making the Burren Lowlands a nicer place to live visit and work is having a vibrant community. Our vision is having a sustainable, active and vibrant community in the Burren Lowlands, building upon the many existing community organisations and activities in the area.

Sport is very strong particularly in respect of Hurling and Camogie, with St Thomas' the All Ireland club champions in 2013, Gort provincial champions in 2012, neighbouring Clarinbridge the All Ireland champions in 2010 and provincial champions in 2011. Ardahan were provincial Camogie champions and All Ireland finalists in 2014.

There also many other sporting strengths from Golf, to Rugby, to Athletics, to Water Sports amongst others. Our vision is increase Sporting participation in our area, both improving health and well-being and promoting community cohesion and spirit. There is a strong

⁴ For more information on this event: <http://www.themudday.com/fr/homepage.html>

Adventure Sports tradition for example in the Burren Outdoor Education Centre in Bell Harbour.

A key part of our strategy will be the development of a Sporting participation strategy.

Development of a Cycleway

Table 1. The Greenway Map



The Development Group would like to promote the development of cycling in the area as a potential transport mode, given the relatively flat landscape.

This initiative would take the May Green way as inspiration.. Such a green way has been created from Westport to Achill Island and this has been a great success. In the first year, it attracted 50 000 extra tourists to the area. “The Great Western Greenway is a 42km long track for cyclists, walkers and runners which follow the route of the former Achill to Westport railway line. [...] In 2011 the Great Western Greenway was awarded the EDEN European Destination of Excellence Award for Sustainable Tourism”⁵. In 2014 they expect in excess of 100 000 people to walk and cycle on this greenway⁶.

Failte Ireland, the Department of Transport and the Department of Rural affairs provided funding while Mayo County Council secured the access and developed the route. It also provided funding but to a lesser extent. Lastly, local landowners were also involved into the project since they gave a permissive access. A lot of activities, accommodation and bike rental shop have been developed all along the way, creating a lot of businesses. For example, in Mulranny village alone, 7 businesses have been created thanks’ to the greenway.

⁵ <http://www.greenway.ie/index.html>

⁶ You can find the background and the investment of the project on the following link: <http://www.failteireland.ie/Best-Practice-Case-Studies/Category-2/The-Mayo-Greenway.aspx>

The County Development Plan currently plans to extend the National cycleway to Kilcolgan. In order to access the tourism assets in the Burren Lowlands such as Coole Park, Thoor Ballylee and the Kilmacduagh, we propose that this route be extended along the hard shoulder of the current N18 to Gort, via a dedicated cycle lane separated from the traffic. It would enable an easy and pleasant access to tourist facilities places, and then it would be an environmental investment and create a kind of wildlife corridor

A similar greenway could be created in the Burren Lowlands, connecting places of interest. At a bigger scale, we could even imagine a way going till Kinvara, until the Burren National Park, and why not to Portumna going through the Slieve Aughty Mountain. This would be a big project involving more than the Burren Lowlands only.

Encourage visitors to stay into the town, and mainly into the main town of the area: Gort

Accommodation. In order to attract the largest range of tourist, you have to offer a large range of accommodation, to any type of budget: camping, youth hostel, B&B, self-catering accommodation, 3-4-5 star hotels...

Restaurants, pubs and cafes. In Gort for example, there is the Gallery Café which is a real success. New coffee shops, restaurants and pubs would be welcome to refresh the area. Furthermore, existing ones should take some inspiration on the template of the Gallery Café.

Attraction of the downtown (see *Downtown Revitalisation* part). This point is very important since the downtown is the place which will give the first impression of the town to visitors. That is the reason why efforts should be made on it, mainly in Gort which is the central point of the Burren Lowlands.

Safety and perception of safety. This is particularly important at night. As a consequence, streets should be well lit along walk paths. Furthermore, walk ways need to be improved to let pedestrians walking in security all around the town. A town with no safe place to walk will not invite people to stroll around it.

Customer services and warm welcome. When outsiders are coming to visit a new region, they are not only looking for beautiful places, nice coffee shops and tasty food, there are also looking for nice people and warm welcome. Residents are part of the charm and the features of a region. More than being welcoming, staff in shops, in hotel, in bus...should know a minimum of the history of their region, opening hours of the tourist office... in order to give some advice to visitors. Some training for that may be organised (LEADER, Institute of Technology, Failte Ireland).

Finally, to become a rural tourism destination, structured networks and collaboration agreements are essential. Creating inter-community co-operation and collaboration is a complex process requiring education, training, capacity building and facilitation.

Other Recommendations

The community are currently in the process of re-opening a tourist information centre, benefitting from Philanthropic donations of local business people and volunteers. The community would like to develop local Discovery days for locals and tourists.

- The County Development Plan should recognise more clearly and explicitly the opportunity for economic development of this area in terms of tourism development as whole rather than simply a series piecemeal sites. To maximise the interest in visiting the area, the offerings of the area need to be bundled and packaged
- As this is not one of the 10 national scale destinations of Failte Ireland, there is a need for the two Counties to develop and promote this as a distinct tourism destination.
- In terms of Failte Ireland National initiatives, the area intersects with the Wild Atlantic Way in Kinvarra and the Burren. The Plan should highlight the opportunities in which we can link and leverage these national investments for local gain.
- The County should establish cross county co-operation with Clare County Council to promote the Burren lowlands as part of the wider Burren and in particular part of the Burren Geo Park, Burren Hostel Hop etc.
- More can be done to leverage the strengths of this region for economic gain, particularly in the case of Coole Park. Simple examples include the extension of its opening hours and revitalising Friends of Coole to promote greater interaction between the Park and local stakeholders and users. Improvement of pedestrian and cycle access to Gort would be useful.
- Maximise the impact of Inse Guaire Castle on the local economy in Kinvarra, particularly by improving the pedestrian link between the town and the Castle and for appropriate tourist parking to be located in the town itself.

5.2 BUSINESS AND RETAIL

Retail and local services are another significant opportunity for employment creation, particularly as the population grows. However this sector has been very heavily hit by the economic downturn.

This area has been severely hit over the crisis. In 2007, nationally we saved 2% of our income. By 2009, we were saving 11% - mainly through running down credit cards, loans and mortgages. According to Teagasc research, small towns and areas like this increased even more. As the government stops taking €3bn a year out of the economy to balance our books, we will see more money available to spend locally and eventually an improvement in consumer confidence. €3bn is equivalent to 40000 jobs nationally. If we make the area attractive place to spend their time and money, we could look to increase employment significantly over the period.

While construction will never again return to the heights seen in the boom, we will see some recovery. The construction of the motorway will also provide employment. We could see more sustainable construction jobs in the area, meeting the needs of the growing population which is expected to increase by 1000 over the next decade.

Organisation

Currently, there is a real problem of communication and coordination between businesses in Gort. The Chamber of Commerce is relatively inactive. There is a strong need to improve network and communication to propose a common and collective project and ask for grants.

In a submission to the Galway county development plan it was felt that

- The County should develop an explicit retail plan for the retail centres of the region, particularly in Gort, Kinvarra and the surrounding Burren Lowlands.

- The Plan should highlight ways to stimulate and revitalise the areas Farmers Markets in Gort, Ardrahan and Kinvarra. Opportunities in particular exist in relation to seasonal markets at Harvest and Christmas.

Develop innovative businesses with export potential

This is exactly the kind of businesses which can be supported by Enterprise Ireland (see more information next point). As of now, Enterprise Ireland only deals with 2 businesses in Gort. After having met them, it appears that the Burren Lowlands don't really have innovative businesses and could play on it. For example, it could develop Information Technology Businesses.

In terms of other business sectors, the area has the advantage that major centres of export sector employment are within commuting distance in Shannon and Galway. Every day a net 2000 people commute out of the area to work; many in these sectors. The opening of the motorway to Galway will make this easier. The Burren Lowlands can take advantage of the high economic growth rates in Galway City.

As the Burren Lowlands is part of a corridor of people with high skills between Limerick, Ennis and Galway (See Figure 1 above), it has a lot of potential to attract high skill value added Foreign Direct Investment. Once the M18 motorway is complete it will be ideally suited for high value businesses that can export out of Shannon Airport who can make use of the high skills in the Galway area. However there has been relatively little investment in recent times.

- The Group should identify ways in which they can work with agencies like the Local Enterprise Offices (LEO), Local Development Companies, IDA and Enterprise Ireland develop niche FDI for this part of the County.

5.3 AGRICULTURE AND LOCAL PRODUCTION

In terms of moderately good land like this area and the growth rate of the Agri-Food sector, there are opportunities to develop this sector in the area. Cattle and Sheep and to a lesser extent, dairy cows and goats are the main agricultural enterprises in the area. However at present much of this is commodity production. There is relatively little processing or added value activities in the area. Given the large expansion in Food exports, increasing employment on the added value side is a major opportunity.

- Working with development agencies a strategy should be developed to generate employment associated with added value businesses linked to the meat, dairy and plants produced and grown in the area.
- Linking to with existing Burren branding and explicitly forming part of the Burren Food Trail should be promoted
- Given the regulatory challenges in developing food products an incubation space for food businesses should be developed in the area.

Farmers' market

For the moment, there is no real farmers' market in the central town of the Burren Lowlands, Gort. There is a little market on Friday but has more potential. There is such a market in Kinvarra on Fridays, in Loughrea on Thursdays, and in Ardahan on Saturdays. Not to compete with those neighbouring towns, and considering that there is nothing vibrant organised on Sundays in Gort, a farmers' market could be set up on Sundays with local production. This market could start being only a seasonal market, at harvest. Then, if offer and demand are adequate, the market could become permanent (all the year). Another alternative could be, not to create a new farmers' market in Gort, but to develop the Ardahan's one. Moreover, Gort is an old market town. This asset could play on it to set up its market.

Furthermore, the region could also play the seasonal market card. It could set up a Christmas market for example. This one could promote local craftsmanship and productions.

Multicultural Food festival

It is well known that Gort was, for a time, a "little Brazil". Just after the economic crash, some of Brazilian people went back to home. But the community is still important. In order to integrate them with local population and to share their culture, it could be an idea to organise an event as a food festival to let them show their culinary culture. Moreover, the number of Romanian and traveller people has increased over the past few years. They could also participate to this festival. And of course, Irish culinary specialities would also be part of it. The idea would be to let people share their culinary culture.

Failte Ireland is able to finance and reinforce some regional and national festivals and participative events: *"The minimum eligibility requirements: Festivals must generate a minimum of 600 overnight stays. Participative sporting events must generate a minimum of 1,000 overnight stays. The festival/event must have a minimum expenditure of €10,000. If your festival or event is not eligible under this scheme, you may be able to avail of some of the practical business tools we provide. These include training, mentoring and, in some cases, promotion."*⁷

Furthermore, in Lisdoonvarna, in October, the Burren food festival takes place every year. It is organised by the Burren Ecotourism Network and Burren Food Trail in conjunction with Burren Beo Winterage Festival⁸. It would be useful to take some inspiration of this event to organize something similar in the Burren Lowlands.

Food trail

The Ecotourism Network has set up a network of local producers including restaurants, farmers, breweries, seafood producers... All of them are involved to build a sustainable future for the Burren region. To promote the Burren food, the Burren Ecotourism Network has produced a map showcasing all the memberships of the food trail⁹. The condition for being part of the Burren food trail is that the Galway County Council would be involved in

⁷ <http://www.failteireland.ie/Develop-your-tourism-enterprise/Identify-available-funding/Festivals-and-Participative-Events-Programme.aspx>

⁸ <http://www.burrenecotourism.com/food/the-burren-food-festivals/>

⁹ <http://www.burrenecotourism.com/food/burren-food-trail/>

the Burren Ecotourism Network. The Galway County Council is not closed to discussions about this point.

Craftsmanship has to be promoted. There are a lot of artists in the Burren Lowlands. There already exist some shops of craft products but they are not featured. In Gort for example, empty shops could be used for art exhibitions, craft products could also be sold in a market, some participative courses could be organised for both local residents and visitors. We could also think in opening a local art centre showcasing local works of art. We can quote the success story of New York Mills, a little town of United-States, which has stimulated its economy through a regional cultural centre. This has attracted outside talents and energy, and has created 17 businesses and 350 jobs in the first six years that the cultural centre was open¹⁰.

Development of local food processing

Local processing mainly creates jobs and higher value products type which can be exported or sold at local level. Those effects would stimulate the local economy. Furthermore, the idea of exportation is not aberrant since the Burren Lowlands are crossed by the motorway between Limerick and Galway and that both Limerick and Galway are important cargo ports. It is also close to Shannon airport which represents a gateway to the global market. Moreover, such companies as Enterprise Ireland could help businesses to win export sales on global market. For the moment, Enterprise Ireland deals with two companies in the Burren Lowlands, both of them are located in Gort: Top Form, which works on construction products and system, and Pearse Piggott and Sons, a poultry factory. But generally, there is relatively little processing or added value in the area. Food exports are a major opportunity.

Local distillery or micro-brewery

Local abattoir and meat factory.

The main production of the Burren is cattle and sheep. Major part of the cattle is not finished in Ireland but sent to Spain or Italy for the finishing period. As a consequence there is not a lot of beef processing in the region. However, an organic slaughter plant already exists in Peterswell, at the edge of the Lowlands. It is a registered abattoir for organic beef and lamb and also supplies restaurants. And according to some people we met during our field study, this abattoir has the possibility to slaughter more animals than it currently does. As a consequence, if some farmers want to finish their animals in their farm, stopping sending them to Spain or Italy, it might create more added-value to the region but it requires further investigations and project assessment. The question would be to know, in the beef's case, what would be the cost of local fattening. In the lamb's case, the question is not needed since lambs are already finished in Ireland.

Furthermore, between 2001 and 2007, there was a meat processing plant in Gort. The factory mainly employed Brazilian people which represented, at this date, one in four of the town's population¹¹. When the factory closed, most of Brazilian people went back to Brazil. But there is still a strong Brazilian workforce available in Gort. Moreover, the real estate is very

¹⁰ New York Mills study, extract from *Small Towns Big ideas, Case Studies in Small Town Community Economic Development*, from the UNC School of Government-N.C. Rural Economic Development Center, p.130

¹¹ <http://www.rte.ie/news/2007/0413/87828-jobs/>

cheap in Gort and that should be highlighted to attract investors. Finally, real estate is easily affordable, the labour is here and there are a lot of cattle and sheep, so this could be an opportunity for investors to open a new meat factory.

Bakery. Bread and pastries are becoming more and more appreciated by people. Moreover, visitors are numerous to look for something tasty for a snack. Especially French tourists are found of homemade baked goods. There is really a niche to be taken in this field. As an example of success story in this field, we can quote *The Food of Athenry*¹², which is a family bakery. They have two separate bakeries, one for Certified Gluten Free products, and another one for wheat and spelt products. They bake a wide range of products catering to many dietary needs with some products that avoid dairy and/or eggs and/or yeast. It is quite a success and they currently sell their products all around Ireland through various stockists. They also won a lot of award for the quality of their products.

Local dairy factory.

A significant number of people suggested us the idea of a local cheese production. Indeed, for a country having many cows and sheep, it doesn't produce so many cheeses. Irish cheese production mainly relies on large scale factory production concentrating on cheddar production and mainly owned by the dairy cooperative. Small scale factory, producing other kind of cheese than the famous cheddar, could really be a niche market. Moreover, having a conversion unit in place could create added value. First of all, the product could be sold on local farmers' markets, and if it works well, be extended on the national and global market.

There are yet some small scale cheese productions in Ireland and part of them or members of the CAIS, The Irish Farmhouse Cheese makers Association¹³. This association enjoys support from Bord Bia, The Department of Agriculture, Enterprise Ireland and the European Union. We can quote the Burren Gold, which is a traditional farmhouse cheese located in the Burren in North County Clare, and which is member of the CAIS. It makes a Gouda-type cheese with an unpasteurised cow's milk.

We have spoken about cheese production but we could also think about other dairy products such as fresh cream, yoghurts or ice cream which could be locally sold and exported according to the production volume and the success.

Furthermore, we could also think in a **local food unit** and an **incubation space** gathering all the local production: brewery, bakery, butcher, cheese... It could allow businesses to work as a unit and to be stronger. They would also be able to promote their product above a common brand (The Burren Lowlands Food for example).

5.4 SUPPORT SERVICES

What kind of organisation could help businesses to be set up?

¹² <http://www.foodsofathenry.ie/>

¹³ <http://www.irishcheese.ie/homepage.html>

LEO. The Local Enterprise Office¹⁴, is the former County Enterprise Boards. This is a public body which help local new businesses to set up. They mainly provide direct financial supports to micro businesses, that is to say to businesses with 10 or less employees. They also give a lot of advice and connect businesses with the appropriate State Resources.

The Enterprise Centres. The Enterprise Centres help local businesses to set up. They have quite the same role as LEO except that it is a private company. As a result, they are less restricted to decide how much money they will give to this or that business.

For the moment, the Burren Lowlands doesn't have their own Enterprise Centre. The closest one is in Ballinasloe. It should not be useless to create an Enterprise Centre in the region.

Enterprise Ireland. It is a public body, mainly dealing with innovating companies with export potential. Except from start-up with high potential, they mainly work with businesses with more than 10 employees. As a consequence, to set up a business, LEO will generally be the first organisation to help. Then, if the business is growing and have export potential, Enterprise Ireland will be able to bring a great help.

The Galway Rural Development and the Clare Local Development Company which delivers funding local enterprise support and funding from the LEADER programme.

Teagasc: the national Agriculture and Food Development Authority supports farms and food businesses in relation to improving their incomes and productivity.

Bord Bia: It is the organisation which helps specifically food businesses in relation to marketing their output.

Retired workers' network. According to the 2011 census of the CSO, 12.8% of Gort population aged 15 years old and over, are retired workers. Those persons have work experience that could be shared with current workers. More especially, they could advise them and help them to set up and run businesses in the best possible way. They could create a kind of voluntary consultant group that new business man would be able to contact for some advice. It would be a kind of mentor support structure.¹⁵

5.5 THE BURREN LOWLANDS: A PLACE TO LEARN

The Burren Lowlands have two main cultural assets: the specificity of natural heritage such as the geological bedrock, and Yeats, Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn heritage. The Burren is a stunning place for specific wildlife, geology and farming. On the other side, Lady Gregory, Yeats and Edward Martyn heritage includes heritage buildings, natural places (Coole Park and Woodville walled Gardens) and local history. As a consequence, the region seems to be a place with a lot of things to learn in many different fields of knowledge. Hence, the idea has come to take an advantage of this. Indeed, we could make the Burren Lowlands as a kind of learning hub.

¹⁴ www.localenterprise.ie/galway

¹⁵ This Idea is taken from Brevard Key Study from Small Towns Big ideas, Case Studies in Small Town Community Economic Development, from the UNC School of Government-N.C. Rural Economic Development Center, p.29. You can find the study in annexe 1 on page 81.

Educational tourism has been identified by the group as an economic opportunity. Currently foreign language students during the Summer provide seasonal employment and additional income for many families in the areas. The Burren Lowlands has a vision of itself as a Place to Learn. There are opportunities to further develop this, in particular targeting:

- Academic conferences associated with the Archaeological, Geological, Ecological and Literary Heritage of the area.
- Hosting Irish Studies students from the United States, (given the closeness of Shannon) during the Winter months in the area, as part of their Junior Year Abroad.

The multi-cultural nature of the area with large foreign born populations such as Brazilians is a key strength of the area. The area is welcoming towards immigrants and values their cultures. The Development Group would like to encourage the development of multi-cultural activities in recognition of this such as Carnival and Food Festivals.

Below, we describe some ideas which could help to make the region known as a place of knowledge and learning.

Discovery field trip for schools

In France, there are a lot of school visits called “Green classes”. The principle is quite simple: during their trip, pupils discover the natural environment in which they are and learn about it. There are various places which can welcome school groups. Among them, there are farms. Indeed, some farmers propose to welcome classes during, generally, one day, to let them discover farming life. This is a shared advantage since it is a concrete and funny way to learn for children, and a mean to increase the farmers’ income.

There are also some hotel and holiday centre which propose some theme trips (heritage, wildlife, gastronomy...) for schools. Those kinds of activities work very well and farmers, hostels or individuals could find some interest in proposing such services to schools.

Students exchanges

This is another alternative to let students learn about the Burren Lowlands. Those exchanges could as well be done with foreign students as with students from other areas of Ireland. First of all, it will enable outsiders to discover the Burren and its heritage. This will let the Lowlands be more known through word of mouth, which is non-negligible. In the other way, it will enable students of the region to discover something else and bring fresh and new ideas for the Lowlands communities. Moreover, it will include Burren Lowlands in a broad education network and will stimulate the education level.

This topic could be discussed with the Galway Education Centre which “liaises with Enterprise and other Education partners to build partnerships that will benefit the next generations.”¹⁶

Archaeology, geology, biodiversity and literature courses.

¹⁶ <http://www.galwayec.ie/mission.php>

The Burren Lowlands are deeply linked with a lot of interesting topics. First of all, it is part of the Burren. As a consequence, the Lowlands area is full of geological and wildlife features. The region could exploit these assets and highlight it through education programs. There are already some courses organised in the Burren Uplands by the Burren Geopark (Burren *Geology Evening Classes*, *Geology Summer Field School*). The Burren Lowlands could organise similar courses. There are two solutions: or there are some volunteers in the region who would accept to deliver some courses about the Burren's features (it could be in the form of evening courses, classroom trainings, field based trainings, or/and why not distance learning); or the region could rely on a database of outsiders' teachers or organizers it could advice to visitors.

On the other hand, the Burren Lowlands also have a lot of potential in term of literature. And unlike the Burren features, there are no longer any other places delivering courses about Lady Gregory and Yeats Literature, or more broadly, about the national Theatre at the Abbey (Lady Gregory, Yeats and Edward Martyn are all foundres of it and natives of the region). However, there are a lot of people interested in it. It is relevant to adults with an interest in the topic (tourist or not) as well as literature students. Interactive training for both of them could be organised. Just to give an example, one could though in a field based training to discover homes of Lady Gregory, Yeats and Edward Martyn: Coole Park, Thoor Ballylee and Tullira Castle.

Moreover, the region is also full of Archeological (Grannagh Dolmen built 5000 years ago, the collection of Bronze age Wedge tombs in the Aughty foothills), historical (dozens of castles and Country Estates as Tullira, Coole and Lough Cutra Castle) and ecclesiastical (Dromacoo, Kilternan, Kilmacdaugh) sites which could be used as field based training supports.

For all those topics, the best thing would be to set up a training Centre. Anyway, information should be found on a website (on the town website first of all).

Furthermore, the Burrenbeo already has a lot of learning programs¹⁷ for children, secondary and tertiary students, adults, and conservation volunteers. the Burren Lowlands communities should really take some inspiration from what the Burrenbeo does;as it is full of good ideas.

Finally, making the Burren Lowlands a place to learn appears to be a very good idea since it is a sustainable, social, environmental and economic solution to reinvigorate the town area.

5.6 DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION: MAKING THE BURREN LOWLANDS A NICE PLACE TO LIVE AND TO VISIT.

The downtown has a crucial importance for tourist attractiveness and to encourage people to live in the Burren Lowlands. For a visitor, the downtown will generally give them their first impression of the town. As a consequence, if the downtown is attractive and welcoming, visitors will stop in it, walk around the town, keep an eye on they can do in the surrounding and maybe stay. On the contrary, if no efforts are done on the downtown, visitors will never have the idea to stop into the town and pay interest in what they could do around. That the reason why the downtown has to be revitalized.

¹⁷ You can find the different programmes on the following link: <http://www.burrenbeo.com/learning-landscape>

The Square

The square in Gort is currently not used as well as it should be. However, it is full of old buildings with great aesthetic potential. But unfortunately, they are not enhanced. Moreover, the square may be a place where people could meet and spend time together in a pleasant atmosphere. But for the moment, it is not the case since the square is full of cars and doesn't offer any place to sit and have a discussion.

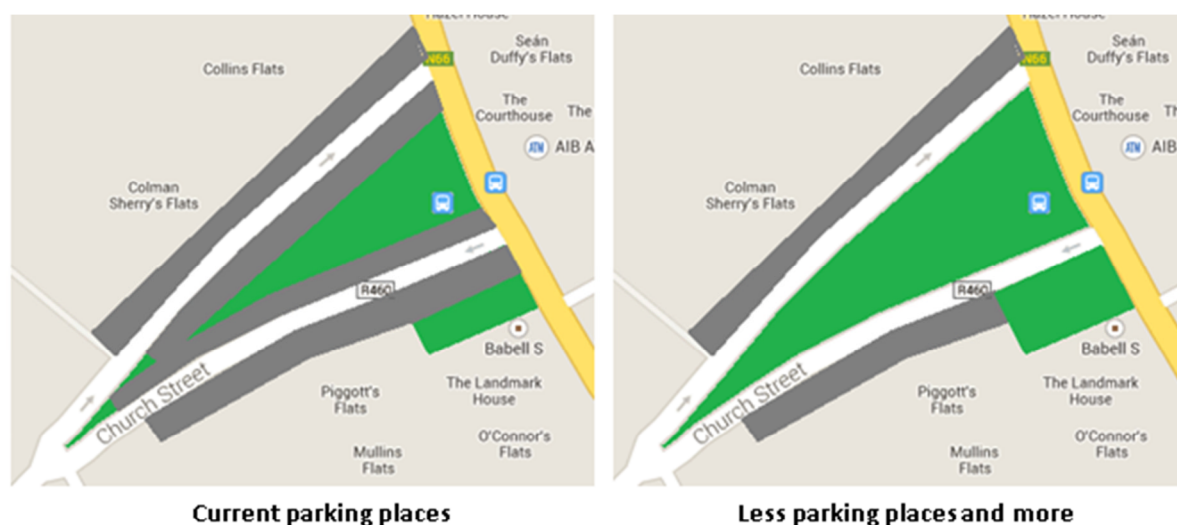
The County Development Plan should identify a strategy for a complete revitalisation of the Square in Gort with more communal space, street furniture and street art, free public Wifi. The community are willing to work with the County to re-open the Public Toilet facility in the Square. The Plan should identify an alternative parking plan for Gort. Facades should be repainted.

Here we list some ideas which could help to make the square more attractive and pleasant.

Repainting downtown façades: The idea is to make the “streetscape” more attractive. This will give a new and fresh look to the square and make people want to spend time on the square, making it more alive and vibrant.

Resting places: The idea is to encourage people to spend more time on their square. For this, it could not be a bad idea to install some places where pedestrians could sit and socialise. It could simply be some benches.

Figure 7. Car Parking of Gort's Square



A pedestrian square: At the moment, the square can be considered as a parking lot. As a consequence, it does not encourage people to socialise on it. The number of parking spaces should be reduced in order to let space reserved to pedestrians only. For example, the centre of the square could be a pedestrian space :

Parking places are represented in grey and pedestrian places in green. The best thing would be to totally remove cars from the square and build an outlying parking close to the downtown. The example above could be a kind of transition. Moreover, as far as parking places are concerned, they are all paid. That does not encourage visitors to stop in the downtown. There would be a one or two hours free parking.

Public toilet: New public toilet has recently been built in the Square but has never been opened. It should be opened as a priority.

Public art: Public art can be a source of pride to local people, and might add interest for the visitor. Moreover, it can also help to tell the story of the town and its people. This can be made in the form of sculptures, paintings, creative amenities...¹⁸

¹⁸ You can find some ideas of Public arts on the : <https://www.pinterest.com/spudart/public-art-ideas/>

Figure 8. Examples of Public Art



The Linesman (1999). This bronze sculpture, by Irish artist Dony MacManus, commemorates the tradition of docking in Dublin area, which disappeared with the containerisation of shipping cargo.



Oscar and Edward Wilde, an Estonian writer, in Galway City

We can also quote some Irish examples:

We could imagine a statue of Yeats or/and Lady Gregory, some Yeats' poems written on walls... It would let it telling, showcasing and impregnate the town of it heritage.

Tourist information: As pointed out above (in the Tourism part), there is a true need to inform visitors about what they can do into the towns and its surroundings. For that, an Information centre is needed into the Square, a big map showing places of interest, shops, restaurants, hotel... would also be a good idea.

Another idea to promote places of interest and local and cultural events would be to use showcases of empty shops.

Attractive places to eat or have a drink: There are yet some pubs and restaurants in Gort downtown but few of them appear very vibrant. A particularly fresh and attractive restaurant is the Gallery Café which is a big success. Existing restaurant, café and pubs should take some inspiration from the Gallery café and other new one could be opened. Those places are not only dedicated to tourists but also to residents.

Rent the empty shops: Currently, since the economic recession, there is a lot of empty shops in the downtown. The idea would be to encourage owners of such empty shops to rent them at a minimal rental amount or perhaps free for a period of time in order to stimulate the economy and the establishment of new businesses.

Green spaces and way

Green spaces: Green spaces are very important in a town, from an environmental point of view as well as the atmosphere and quality of life it creates. Simple things as flower beds could be easily put in place. Participative trees and mixed plantings could also be organised to let residents feel concerned about their town. As the tidy town competition in Ireland, there is a Flower city label in France which rewards the most beautiful flower cities. Without

necessarily seeking to create a similar label in Ireland, Gort, Kinvarra or Adrahan could become a flower towns.

Walkway

The walkway, in and around the town, is currently unsafe and could really be improved. Moreover, it already is an “Architectural walking tour” of Gort which can be done with an audio guide telling the story of the town. Similar tours exist in Athenry, Ballinasloe,

Table 2. Gort Architectural walking Tour



Loughrea, Tuam and Portumna. They have been created by Galway East¹⁹ but are not well known. Gort could build a walkway on it.

Coaches and cars convenient parking

If Gort wants to be an attractive place, the most evident thing it has to do is to provide parking for coaches and cars. The best thing would be to build a parking out of the downtown but not too away from it, people might be able to join the square waling in less than 5 minutes.

¹⁹ <http://www.galwayeast.com/wayfinding/index.php>

Aesthetics and tidy towns

The development group has identified the need for improved aesthetics and visual impression of the towns and villages in the area as being key to making the area a nice place to live, visit and work. There are a number of strong existing Tidy Towns Groups such as Ardahan and Kinvara. Gort has recently established a group.

During the meeting of the 7th of April, a lot of people suggested the idea of installing some public litter into the street. Indeed, this could help to keep a clean street. The consequence is that some people, for example the tidy town community, will have to empty the bins frequently. Moreover, the state of cleanliness is one of the most important thing for a visitor as it one of the first thing he will notice.

Children areas and sports

We often forget to mention children and teenagers into a town. They also need some places and activities, for themselves and also for their parents who will be enable to have time for them. Some places as a Youth Centre, proposing some activities, could be set up by some volunteers.

Furthermore, sport is also very important into the region particularly in respect to Hurling and Camogie with some national and provincial champions (St Thomas' the All Ireland club Champions in 2013, Gort provincial champions in 2012, neighbouring Clarinbridge the All Ireland Champions in 2010 and provincial champions in 2011. Adrahan was provincial Camogie champions and All Ireland finalists in 2014). The idea would be to encourage the youth to get involved in sport, to promote community cohesion and spirit, and to improve health and well-being.

5.7 ADVERTISING, MARKETING AND NETWORKING

A development initiative to make a place more attractive has to be led jointly with a good communication on it. Many concerns were raised about it during the 7th of April meeting in Gort, especially about the signage on the roads and the website. We try here to sum up the main ideas and advices gathered for each mean of communication.

Local and regional media

To target the domestic tourism market, local media should be contacted whenever it is necessary. As the Burren Lowlands are right at the border of County Clare, both media form County Clare and County Galway are important. A database of relevant journalist could be maintained updated so that any group proposing an event or carrying out any action can use the database easily. Here is a non-exhaustive list of local media:

Radio: Galway Bay FM, Flirt FM, RTE Galway, Radio Pirate Woman

Newspaper: The Galway Advertiser, 'The Connacht Tribune, Galway independent, Galway First, Galway Voice, The Clare Champion, The Clare People

Nicola Corless, a journalist present at the 7th of April meeting in Gort, already proposed to publicise any community organisation event in the Clare Champion just getting in contact with him²⁰.

Material support: Print and Signage on the motorway

Material supports such as brochures, maps, small guide-books are a good mean to showcase the best of what the region has to offer. These materials could be maps of walking routes, main access and transport points, local Accommodation, restaurants, pubs, shops of interest. Then it should be dealt in the main tourist honey pots of the region, in the tourist offices of Galway, Ennis, Limerick and Dublin and at Shanon airport.

Different public bodies can provide funds to print brochures (for projects satisfying some requirements proper to each organism) such as Galway County Council or Galway Rural Development.

For the signage on the road, a common strategy of communication that would benefit to all the businesses should be set up. It would be more efficient than overwhelming the driver with individual signs. The too numerous signs should be removed to focus on one or a very few striking signs to attract people in the towns of the Burren Lowlands so that every businesses can take advantage of it.

The idea of a “Dolmen” on the roundabout at the entrance of Gort promoting the town as the “Gateway to the Burren” was proposed several times.

Web

The current website²¹ has to be improved, or another website for all the Burren Lowlands can be created. It should be consumer focussed, visually appealing and motivating, carrying a clear and consistent message about the region and what it has to offer. The use of “Google friendly” words for the website and the texts within it can make a significant difference. For example, a tourist planning its holiday will probably write “accommodation Burren”, using these words increases the likelihood he will be directed on the website.

On the website, people must be able to find easily :

- Links to local providers ‘sites
- Promotional material produced for download
- A list of Accommodation, restaurants, bars, shops of interest
- The public transport timetables
- Information on local events

Social media are today the biggest leverage for communication; a Facebook page on The Burren Lowlands already exists with a main administrator but all the community should feel responsible of supplying and sharing it. A Twitter account will be created soon.

(<https://www.facebook.com/burren.lowlands>)

²⁰ You can contact him at ncorless@clarechampion.ie

²¹ www.gortonline.com

Local involvement

The lack of knowledge of the local population about the natural and cultural heritage of their own region has been highlighted and is an important issue. Intern communication is therefore important too, such as “Discovery Day” for locals, opening attractions or activities for a discounted or free entry in order to let locals know what their region has to offer so that they will be able to act as ambassadors in selling it and its attributes to visitors.

Travel Guides

Travel guides are the best mean to target foreign tourists. A few lines in one of them can make a big difference. For English speaking countries, the Lonely Planet is the best known; in France, it is the “Guide du Routard”. For the moment only Coole Park and KilMacduagh appear briefly in it. Unfortunately French tourists barely know Lady Gregory or Yeats, but places such as the Gallery Café or the Lady Gregory Hostel definitely deserve a few lines in it.

Networking

Develop networks in every fields can be a good leverage. For example in the eco-tourism sectors, businesses members of the Burren Ecotourism Network benefit of its promotion strategy, hence the importance of a rapprochement between Clare and Galway County Councils on this issue.

Current residents could get in touch with formers residents who have moved in order to encourage them to come back and share their experience, and maybe set up new businesses in the Burren Lowlands. Indeed, people who are linked to the region will be more inclined to get involved in this town than any other outsider.

The most important thing is certainly to have a leader group in charge of stimulating Burren Lowlands’ communities and organising the action plan. This Group has recently be created by some business people and members of the community who came together to form an action group. The latter is named the **Burren Lowlands Development Group**, according to the ecological zone in which the area sits. A submission to the County Galway Development Plan 2015-2021 has already been made.

5.8 EMPLOYMENT AND SKILLS

Between 2006 and 2011, around 600 jobs were lost in the construction sector; there is an important pool of workers available for new enterprises in the region.

However the challenge is to have the right skill set to get these jobs; particularly for the 600 who have lost jobs in construction. Delivering on re-skilling is a significant challenge. The submission to the County Development Plan defines the following objectives concerning up skilling people:

- The Plan should identify ways to up-skill the 600 who lost jobs in construction. In particular it should identify ways in which education facilities and the new Education and Training Board can deliver this objective.
- A third level Access programme should be developed in the VEC in Gort to facilitate greater educational participation by those in need of up and reskilling

The **Education and Training Boards** (ETBs) can carry out the objective of up-skilling people. They are the former VECs and there are currently 16 ETBs in Ireland (gathering 33 VECs). “The Principal Object of ETBI is to promote the development of education, training and youth work in Ireland.”²²

Another organization which can deal with training is **SOLAS**, the new Further Education and Training Authority in Ireland. They are responsible for funding, planning and coordinating training and further education programs, while ETBs will ultimately be responsible for the delivery of publicly-funded Further Education and Training programs.

Furthermore, there is also **Intreo** which focuses on employment services. They “act as a single point of contact for all employment services and supports for both Jobseekers and Employers, providing support regarding benefits entitlements, advice on training options and assistance in securing employment/employees.”²³ This service is managed by the Department of Social protection and will work closely with SOLAS and ETBs regarding the referral of individuals for Further Education and Training.

The Burren Lowlands region is thus ideally located. It is close to two important urban hubs and one international airport. But it remains far enough to Galway and Limerick to be the commuting and commercial zone of a large area. Therefore, its location would suits both to local medium-size enterprises and to bigger firms with high value export vocation. All the services necessary to the quick installation of any enterprise are present, the area mainly have to focus on up-skilling its population.

In the box below, you can find a detailed start-up case study of a small food business written by Bord Bia. It explains how a woman has set up her food business helped by the organisations quoted above.

²² <http://www.etbi.ie/about-etbi/>

²³ <http://www.solas.ie/intreo.aspx>

Box 3. Bord Bia Food Business Start Up Case Study - Kate's Cup Cakes

Kate wanted to start a food business. She was a keen baker and had developed recipes for several varieties of cup cakes in her own kitchen which friends and family loved. Kate had experience in Sales and Marketing but not in the food business.

The first step Kate took was to contact her local County Enterprise Board for tips and advice on how to start a food business. The CEB gave Kate some guidance and offered her a place on an "Investigate your business idea" training programme. After attending the course, Kate realised that she had to be organised about researching for her business to check the commercial viability of her new venture. She therefore went about putting in place a NPD project plan.

NPD

Using a gantt chart and the stage gate process, Kate gave herself a six month period to check the feasibility of her business and divided her tasks into NPD, Financing, Consumer and Market Research, the search for external premises, if necessary, and for a food technologist.

Kate then contacted Teagasc for a list of Food Technologists in her area as Kate had no food manufacturing experience and soon realised that she would need assistance to make her recipes in larger batches while retaining that same home baked taste, assistance in finding suitable premises to produce the cup cakes so that they meet the required quality standards e.g. HACCP. Kate also needed advice on whether or not she would be able to produce the cupcakes at home as this was her preferred option, so she also looked up the HSE website for the contact details of her local Environmental Health Officer (EHO) to check if the premises was fit for purpose. Her EHO visited her home kitchen and pointed out several reasons why it would not be possible for Kate to produce the cup cakes in her home suitable for the retail market. The EHO gave her the option of either building and extension or seeking external premises.

Kate met her food technologist and together they discuss the option of either Kate manufacturing the cupcakes herself or sub-contracting manufacturing to a third party. After much debate and research, Kate chose to manufacture herself.

Through her local authority, Kate and her food technologist found a food incubation unit in shared premises with other start-up and established small food companies. Kate therefore carried out the remainder of the NPD on the cupcakes with the assistance of her food technologist. Kate received training in HACCP and an understanding of the necessary premises design and layout required to meet HACCP criteria.

During the course of the NPD, Kate and the food technologist wrote up the formulations, product specifications and production procedures for the cupcakes. Through contacts with the food technologist, Kate sourced the ingredients she required being careful to request specifications of all ingredients for her nutritional analysis. Kate also carried out a lot of research on the costs of her ingredients and ordering lead times. For packaging, Kate carried out research on all of the possible options both with packaging manufacturers but also through store audits. For the retail market Kate realised that she would need both inner and outer cases and had to take account of the cost of these.

Once the recipes were finalised, Kate's food technologist arranged for both shelf life and

nutritional analysis as a prelude to working on labelling the cupcakes.

As well as using this information and related cost to write up her Business Feasibility Study, Kate later used it to write the “Product and Technology” section of her business plan.

Consumer and Market Research, Branding and Labelling

Kate realised from her own experience that the product label is often the first interaction a customer will have with the cup cakes and is therefore her number one marketing tool.

From her consumer research, Kate had established that her consumers with the most purchasing power did not like the artificial colours prevalent in all of her competitor’s cup cakes. Kate had, through both secondary market research (Mintel reports obtained from Bord Bia, the research on consumer trends carried out by Bord Bia, other consumer and market research reports and consumer magazines) and primary market research (tasting panels at a farmers market stall she attended weekly, focus groups and questionnaires with the assistance of an independent market research sources through a third level institution – using a graduate in marketing who needed a market research project to complete their masters degree), segmented her customers into three main segments: children, mostly girls, from the age of six to fourteen, young adults, again predominantly female from the age of 19 – 24, and the mothers of young girls, aged 25 – 44. The latter segment was the one with the most purchasing power.

From her market research, Kate had established the size of the market in Ireland for cup cakes as being €2m per annum and she hoped to achieve 10% of this. She had segmented her market sectors into retail (the multiples and specialist food stores), foodservice (restaurants, café, hotels and Contract Catering companies) and online mail order (for weddings, communions and birthday parties). Her route to market was via a distributor for both retail and foodservice and through adding an online portal to her website. Kate carried out a SWOT analysis on all of her competitors as she has many competitors in Ireland and wanted to avoid launching a “me too” product. Following this analysis and the analysis of her consumer needs and benefits sought, Kate developed a marketing position for her range of cup cakes using established unique selling points including: natural ingredients, no artificial colours (her food technologist assisted Kate with sourcing natural colours), Irish produced using Irish ingredients, provenance, as this was a family business, innovative individual packaging which also helped to secure longer shelf life for her products and pricing which represented good value for money.

Kate then came up with a Marketing Mix for each of her customer segments including a media relations PR campaign targeted towards the publications that her target customers read, to radio programmes that they listened to whilst commuting to and from work and to cookery and local business focussed TV programme. Kate worked on an informative, interactive website, blogs for recipe ideas and Facebook to create “fans” for her cupcakes. Kate also joined LinkedIn to keep in touch with relevant suppliers, buyers, journalists and contact in the food industry.

To reflect the USPs on the labelling, Kate used her own brand name and stories about her the founder on the reverse of the cup cake box label. With the assistance of her food technologist Kate ensured that the labels carried all compulsory information and she opted for the Group Two Format of Nutritional Analysis.

Kate wrote her Mission Statement following her consumer and market analysis with the assistance of her food technologist and partner.

Kate used all of this information in the Consumer and Market research section of her feasibility study and at a later stage the Consumer and Market Analysis and Sales and Market Strategy sections of her business plan.

Trademarking

In order to protect her brand name, Kate ran a search on the availability of the name on both the Irish and European patent websites. The search was clear, so Kate opted for a CTM (Community Trademark) as she intends to export to other European countries in due course and to prevent other EU companies from using her brand name in the meantime.

As well as using this information and related costs to write up her Business Feasibility Study, Kate later used it to write the “Product and Technology” section of her business plan.

Financial Forecasts and Funding

Throughout the course of her research on the commercial viability of her business, Kate kept a record of all costs associated with producing, distributing, selling and marketing her products so that she could come up with an accurate pricing model for each product. Through her Market research, Kate was able to forecast volume projections for the first three years of the business having analysed her target retailers and foodservice sectors for indications of the level of demand. From this, Kate was able to compile projected Cashflow Analysis, Profit and Loss Accounts and Balance sheets for the next three years.

As well as using this information write up the financial section of her Business Feasibility Study, Kate later used it to write the “Financial projections and funding requirements” section of her business plan.

Once her business feasibility study was written and form that her business plan, Kate was convinced that she had a commercially viable business and had the confidence to go out and raise the necessary funding to launch her business.

Having been a PAYE earner for the previous six years, Kate applied for the Seed Capital Scheme from the Revenue Commissioners with the assistance of her accountant. This enabled her to make a share capital investment in her own company. As her partner also wanted to invest in the business, he made a BES investment in the company. This helped Kate to get the company set up and carry out required research, but to launch the company (Kate had to have labels and POS designed and printed etc.) and take on additional employees, Kate sought additional grants from her local CEB and applied for an Innovation Voucher (at this stage she had formed a limited company), working with a third level institution to carry out research on extending the shelf life of her products, full nutritional analysis and NPD on new innovative product ranges. At a later stage Kate applied to First Step for a loan to help her to hire an additional sales person as her business expanded.

Management Team and Company Structure

Kate then proceeded to focus on building a management team that would have all of the necessary skills to run the business. As Kate had good sales and marketing experience but

little knowledge of the food industry, she recognised the need for a QA/Production manager with food industry experience. Kate spoke to FAS about a graduate placement job and applied for employment grants through the priming grant application to her local CEB once her business plan was written.

Kate also discussed her requirement for a chef to work with her in the production plant with FAS and used advice from the DETE and the SFA as well as her accountant on employment regulations and PAYE and PRSI obligations

Kate decided to form a limited company and registered the company name with the CRO.

Kate used this information to write the “Company Structure and Operations” section of her business plan.

Source: Bord Bia Vantage Website

(http://www.bordbiavantage.ie/startingyourbusiness/businessplanning/Documents/Business_Start-Up_Case_Study.pdf)

Chapter 6. GENERAL CONCLUSION

We sum up here a few arguments showing that the Burren Lowlands is a good place for small, medium sized and even big enterprises to invest and settle in.

In terms of business sectors, the area has the advantage that major centres of export sector employment are within commuting distance in Shannon and Galway. Every day a net 2000 people commute out of the area to work. The opening of the motorway to Galway will make this easier. The Burren Lowlands can take advantage of the high economic growth rates in Galway City.

Location, the main asset

Other assets

- Gort now benefit of the High Quality Broadband

The Burren Lowlands are close to both Galway and Limerick, close to Shannon Airport, and there is a train station in Gort, the main town of the area.

Moreover, as the Burren Lowlands is part of a corridor of people with high skills between Limerick, Ennis and Galway, it has a lot of potential to attract high skill value added Foreign Direct Investment. Once the M18 motorway is complete it will be ideally suited for high value businesses that can export out of Shannon Airport who can make use of the high skills in the Galway area. However there has been relatively little investment in recent times.

Some other features which could attract new investments are that Gort now benefits from the High Quality Broadband and that the rent is very low and many dwellings are available

Here are the main distances and times highlighting Gort as an ideal location for enterprises to settle in:

Galway:

- 37 km, i.e. 37 minutes, from Galway and will be at **20-25 minutes** when the motorway is finished
- **52 minutes** by train

Limerick:

- 62 km, i.e. **40 minutes** by car
- **1 hour** by train

Dublin and Dublin airport:

- 207 km by car, i.e. 2 hours and 8 minutes, and will be at **1h and 50 minutes** when the motorway is finished
- **2 hours and 35 minutes** (Dublin Heuston)

Shannon airport:

- 49 km, i.e. **30 minutes** by car
- Shannon airport is the closest European airport of the United-States, there are for instance direct flights for Boston, the flight last **6 hours and 45 minutes**

As we have shown, the Burren Lowlands were strongly stricken by the crisis and need a strong revitalisation. Today all the ingredients are gathered to enable such a revitalisation to be successful. A tangible will and involvement from the inhabitants to make this place a

better place to live was made concrete with the recent creation of the Burren Lowlands Development Group.

This citizen involvement can be added to the numerous assets of the region like its natural and cultural heritage, its location and its accessibility. It gives good reasons to be optimistic. The main threat for the region remains to become a commuter zone and nothing else. The best way to avoid it is to diversify the development projects and to tackle every field mentioned in this report. Focusing on the local assets allows to set up a long term development strategy and to protect the local economy from unpredictable outsiders, and a diversified economy is less vulnerable if one sector collapses as it happened in 2007 with the meat factory closure. However, the town of Gort appears as an ideal location for a medium-sized or a big enterprise to settle in. This asset should be showcased to attract companies which might create a significant number of jobs over a short period.

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