

30th November 2020

Planning Unit
Development Plan Review,
Louth County Council,
Town Hall,
Crowe Street,
Dundalk,
Co. Louth
A91 W20C.

RE: Draft Louth County Development Plan 2021 – 2027

Dear Sir/Madam,

We have recently read the draft Louth County Development Plan and wish to make a submission in relation to same, specifically regarding **Section 6, Tourism section 6.3.8 Carlingford Lough Ferry**.

We note that under this section, the reference to Carlingford Lough Ferry refers to the following:

“The Carlingford Lough Ferry operates between Greenore Port, County Louth and Greencastle, County Down. The ferry accommodates a range of vehicle types including cars, vans, camper vans, caravans, minibuses and coaches. The service departs hourly from each terminal throughout the year and every half hour during the summer months. The service began in 2017 and provides an important tourism link for County Louth.”

While we understand that the County Development Plan is an over arching plan, without reference to individual private entities, we believe that the key role that Carlingford Lough Ferry plays in the development of Tourism within the area is not fully captured within this document. Specifically, in relation to key objectives set out under the development of the Narrow Water Bridge, which we believe the ferry service is already meeting. These objectives are noted in the plan as follows:

- Facilitate improved cross – border access to the scenic beauty on both sides of Carlingford Lough.
- Enhance the tourist potential of the cross-border region and stimulate job creation.
- Improve the leisure potential of the region for the residents as well as tourists/ visitors.
- Promote interaction between the communities north and south of the border.
- Encourage pedestrian and cyclist activity and complement other visitor initiatives in the cross-border region and
- Encourage a modal shift amongst those working in the area.

In light of this, we wish to make the following submission to offer additional information on our cross-border ferry service for your consideration.

Background

Carlingford Lough Ferry is a cross border roll-on, roll-off ferry service that commenced operations in July 2017. The company has spent over €10 million of entirely private capital to bring the service into being. The concept had been an aspiration since the early 1980's at EU InterReg, Stormont, District Council, Co. Council and Chamber level and has seen continued growth annually since its launch. We are in the key early stages of growth and see immense potential in terms of attracting both tourists and day trippers into Carlingford and the wider Co. Louth area.

Improved Cross Border Access

Since commencing operations, Carlingford Lough Ferry has offered a valuable cross border community and tourism link. To date, the service has transported 141,620 vehicles and 497,278 passengers between Greencastle, Co. Down and Greenore, Co. Louth. We have been experiencing continuous organic growth in traffic as awareness increases. Summer 2020 traffic was on average 23% higher than summer 2019. By comparison with traffic volumes of any other roll-on, roll-off ferry service on the island of Ireland, Carlingford Lough Ferry is still in early stages of development with significant further growth potential. Our customers are a mix of both domestic and international. Our off-season domestic customers are a mix of both leisure and commercial, which include vehicles, motor bikes, cyclists and walkers who rely on this valuable cross border link. We operate 2 vessels at peak times in the summer, a 40-car & 250 passenger capacity vessel and a 20-car & 130 passenger capacity vessel. Feedback from locals indicate that the service is having a very positive impact in the local Co. Louth area.

Supporting Tourism Development

We note that under Policy Objective **TOU 17**, the plan outlines the objectives to "Facilitate sustainable development of the Tourism Sector" and under **TOU 18** to "Facilitate and encourage the growth and sustainability of the Tourism Sector.

In line with these objectives, we wish to highlight the following:

In addition to our roll on roll off Ferry service, Carlingford Lough Ferry has developed a series of new tourism experiences for the Tourism Sector. In 2019, Carlingford Lough Ferry launched its evening Passenger Cruises, which departed from Greenore, Co. Louth and Greencastle, Co. Down. These cruises proved extremely popular and in 2020, despite the impact of COVID-19, the Company was successful in operating twelve sell out Lough & Lighthouse cruises. We know from our booking information, that these customers travelled from as far away as Kerry to attend these cruises, staying locally and contributing to the local economy.

To further supplement our daily cross border car ferry service, we have invested in onboard audios that offer passengers the opportunity to learn about the Lough's history, ecology and surrounding Mountain regions. We have also invested in developing an onboard cyclist lounge to service the growing number of cyclists that we carry.

Our marketing strategy is based entirely around destination marketing rather than product marketing and we continue to promote the areas North and South of the border to the Tourism Industry. In 2020 alone, Carlingford Lough Ferry participated in six tourism conferences, (Meitheal, Meet the Buyer, ITOA, IGTM and IGTOA & World Travel Market) and met with over 125 International and National tour operators as part of our destination marketing strategy promoting both Co. Louth & Co. Down.

Future Developments

Carlingford Lough Ferry has extended its product offering to the tourism sector and remains focused on developing new tourism experiences in the area. We continue to work with both Failte Ireland and Tourism NI in developing and promoting these products in addition to our cross-border ferry service.

For 2021, we will offer a total of twenty Lough & Lighthouse Cruises. Our ferry, the 'Frazer Aisling Gabrielle' has a passenger capacity of 250, presenting a significant opportunity to attract a large volume of customers to the area. We are also planning to extend our range of passenger cruises on Carlingford Lough to include a series of 'Meet the Maker' Lough Cruises. These cruises support sustainable tourism by working collaboration with local food producers and breweries and offering passengers the opportunity to sample these products onboard as they cruise Carlingford Lough.

Conclusion

We believe that Carlingford Lough Ferry, as an existing cross-border service, plays a key role in the development of tourism in Co. Louth and is already successfully meeting the objectives set out within the plan. By comparison with any other ro-ro ferry service on the island of Ireland, our traffic numbers have very significant room for further growth. No other roll-on, roll-off domestic ferry service has access to the extent of population within a one-hour drive time of our terminals that Carlingford Lough Ferry enjoys.

We are located at the mid-point of the two largest cities on the island, namely Dublin and Belfast. We are concerned, from reading the draft plan, that the contribution the service is making to tourism development within the area is not fully recognised. We note that while Carlingford Lough Ferry is mentioned within the document, no policy objective has been set in regard to it. We are keen to work with Louth County Council in further developing this service, to ensure we meet our aligned objectives as we move forward.

We are confident that the development of the Narrow Water Bridge will compliment our existing service and we welcome its development. We believe these 2 projects have the potential to create a circular route for the collective benefit. However, we believe that Carlingford Lough Ferry should be aligned under the key objectives set for the development of the Bridge. We also feel that, given the role that the ferry already plays in developing tourism in the area, a specific policy objective should be set in regard to the service, to both protect and support the development of this important and existing cross border service.

We would like to thank you for the opportunity to make this submission and we look forward to your feedback.