

## Simon Musial

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**From:** Fergal MacCabe <[REDACTED]>  
**Sent:** 28 December 2018 12:20  
**To:** RSES  
**Subject:** Draft Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (Consultation Submission)

A Chara

I fully support the aims and objectives of the Draft Strategy, which flow from the well founded National Planning Framework and therefore urge its adoption and implementation through local Development Plans.

My submission relates exclusively to the observations on the future envisaged for Tullamore at p. 59 of the Draft Strategy. In particular I support the policy which decrees that *'consolidation and regeneration shall be the key priority and objective for the development of Tullamore and that future Development Plans will be required to identify opportunity sites for town centre regeneration such as the regeneration of the Shannon (Grand, surely?) Canal Harbour in the town which has potential for commercial and tourism related development'*.

I have a single reservation however, in relation to RPO 4.46 which makes a commitment to support Tullamore as a tourism hub. This tourism role is envisaged solely in relation to the towns proximity to natural amenities and recreational opportunities including the Grand Canal, Greenways and Blueways and outdoor recreational parks.

Most of these natural amenities (Slieve Bloom Mountains, River Shannon, Boora Parkland) are some distance from the town and there are other bases (Athlone, Birr, Kilcormac) which are as well, if not better, placed to cater for visitors. Equally, while cyclists or walkers may use the future Greenways and Blueways, I suspect that their numbers would not be particularly significant and that bases such as Edenderry and Athlone would compete for such visitors also. I remain to be convinced that a reliance on these attractions will bring revenues sufficient to contribute to the achievement of urban regeneration and place making which is at the heart of the EMRA strategy..

Surprisingly, the Strategy makes no reference to the one area in which Tullamore does enjoy a unique and successful economic advantage- Whiskey Tourism. In this respect, the Midlands Region contains two historic and well known distilleries with a further one in development. Whiskey distilling is an industry indigenous to the area and in particular has been pursued in Tullamore for over two hundred years.

Visiting whiskey distilleries is now a world wide tourism activity. Previously dominated by Scotland, Ireland is now catching up by leaps and bounds and the local whiskey, Tullamore DEW, as a well known international brand, is in the forefront of the expansion. In 2016, 650,000 tourists visited Irish distilleries and it is projected that numbers will rise to 1.9 million by 2025. Between 2010 and 2015, visitors to Ireland grew by 40.7% but distillery visiting grew by 63.7%. Irish whiskey is now the fastest growing premium spirit in the world and constitutes one-third of our beverage exports, accounting for 400m Euro of sales last year- an increase of 300% in ten years.

Tullamore DEW is now the second largest selling Irish whiskey, marketed in 135 countries and one quarter of visitors to its Visitor Centre on Bury Quay are American- the highest spending category. Whiskey is very much an Irish cultural ambassador and the marketing of 'Whiskey Trails' linking the Republic and Northern Ireland is entirely in harmony with the basic thrust of the National Planning Framework's all island strategy.

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These figures are taken from the Irish Whiskey Association's excellent 'Irish Whiskey Tourism Strategy 2016' which has been endorsed by the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine Mr. Michael Creed and which sets out a clear pathway for the exploitation of the industry. Amongst its aims are:

- \* To support the growth of Irish whiskey distillers and visitor centres
- \* To create an Irish whiskey trail and tourism infrastructure around distilleries.

The Whiskey Tourism Strategy notes that in Scotland, economic clusters around distilleries add 150 jobs in accommodation, sports, recreation and culture. These are frequently combined with golf, fishing, hill walking, angling and other food and beverage experiences and attractions in the local community.

The Tullamore DEW Visitor Centre, in conjunction with Locke's Distillery in Kilbeggan is already benefiting from its location proximate to the Dublin Galway motorway, making both useful journey breakers for tourists going to or returning from the West of Ireland. They will soon be joined by the Ree Distillery in Lanesborough, Co. Longford which is under construction. In addition the highly successful Mór Gin Distillery in Tullamore has the potential to become a tourist attraction also. The burgeoning world wide recognition of the brand name 'Tullamore' has superb marketing potential for exploitation by other associated enterprises and is a selling point unique to the Midlands region.

The greatest challenge and opportunity, I submit, is in exploiting this real and expanding market for the benefit of the town of Tullamore as a whole and utilising it to discharge the primary objective of regenerating its historic core- much as the Guinness Storehouse has done in Dublin. This could be achieved by making the town centre a visitor experience in itself, thus attracting tourists to explore it further or even stop overnight. This will require the greater integration of the existing (or any future) visitor centre with the commercial and cultural core of Tullamore and the enhancement of the town's urban fabric to encourage lingering and exploration. Such an initiative could only be accomplished by the commissioning of a highly skilled team of architects, town planners, urban economists and tourism advisers dedicated exclusively to its design and delivery.

Two vacant or underused sites in Tullamore town centre, the Grand Canal Harbour and the large site directly behind the Tullamore DEW Visitor Centre, have significant potential to contribute towards the achievement of this objective. Their essential and detailed forward planning should be directed to this end in accordance with RPOs 6.11, 6.12, and 6.13 and RPO 9.7 of the Draft Strategy. A new pedestrian link between Bury Quay and Patrick Street could connect into the imminent Street Enhancement Scheme and bring visitors to the proposed Arts Centre in High Street, while the recently announced redevelopment of the Canal Harbour could be integrated with the planned pedestrianised O'Connor Square via the long envisaged reopening of the old bridge across the Tullamore River.

Were an enhanced or alternative Visitor Centre contemplated in the town, its integration into the proposed redevelopment of the Grand Canal Harbour would be very appropriate. All around the world, vineyards, distilleries and breweries have invited star architects such as Frank Gehry, Jean Nouvel and Tadeo Ando to provide stunning destination buildings. Indeed spectacular visitor centres have now become the centrepieces of many successful urban renewal schemes. The Grand Canal Harbour by virtue of its central location, broad water body dominated by the church spire and its historic associations, provides an opportunity for one of the most exciting urban renewal projects in Ireland.

First choice candidates for its design, were it to come about, would of course be Grafton Architects who have gained architectural honours from Milan to Lima and Venice and whose principals have Offaly roots. What an exciting prospect that would be and what international attention it would bring to Tullamore.

I suggest therefore that RPO 4.46 be reworded as follows:



'Support Tullamore as a tourism hub **having regard to its distilling history and industry** and also to its proximity to natural amenities and recreational opportunities including Grand Canal Greenways and Blueways and out door recreational parks'.

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Fergal MacCabe B. Arch. Dip. Tp.

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