DUBLIN BUSINESS SCHOOL

MBA Programme

Research Question:

Marketing Rural Tourism – An analysis of the development and adoption of marketing strategies by small, family owned, peripheral, rural-tourism businesses

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Abstract:

This thesis investigates the place-based adoption of marketing philosophies by small, family owned rural tourism business in South West Mayo. It provides insights into the motivations of the owner/ managers, their understanding and application of accepted marketing conventions and their decision making process. The external business environment is also analysed to determine the level of inter-firm collaboration and the impact this is having on business outcomes. The available organisational supports are also analysed to determine the extent of their activities, the underlying rationale and the level of engagement.

The research draws from the existing tourism literature to present the accepted academic theory, which is presented for scrutiny against the primary information gathered in the in-depth interviews with the businesses and other stakeholders.

The research adopts a qualitative framework, focusing on the tacit knowledge afforded by unstructured, in-depth interviews. The research provides for a comprehensive understanding of the subscription to a market orientated philosophy and the impact of neglecting to develop marketing capabilities.

It is hoped that the research furthers the academic literature on small rural tourism businesses in the West of Ireland, the challenges they face and the areas of weakness that require improvement. The transferability of the key insights are uncertain and this may form the focus of a future study.
Chapter One: Introduction to the research

1.0 Overview of the tourism industry in Ireland:

The United Nations World Tourism Organisation defines tourism as the "the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes" (Tugberkugurlu, 2010)

In Ireland, tourism accounts for approximately 60% of the country’s export’s of services and approximately 5% of GDP (Wright, A. & Linehan, M, 2004, page 1). The industry has a long and interesting history in this country. As far back as 1795 the Ennis Chronicle, as it was then called, ran advertisements for the rental of houses for what it referred to as the ‘saltwater season’, and the English author Emily Bronte spent part of her honeymoon in Kilkee on the West Coast of Clare in 1854.

Numerous important developments have been charted over the years that have impacted on the development of the industry in Ireland, one of the most important of which is improved access. From the establishment of a network of Horse drawn Cars by Italian born Charles Biancioni in 1802 linking hotels and offering packaged tours, the opening of the railways serving the regions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the development of the road network, the increased ownership of family cars right through to the access to cheap national and international flights. Geography helps to determine the relative importance of the different transport networks and for an island economy such as Ireland air travel has been particularly important in connecting geographically remote areas. Air travel is the preferred form of transport particularly for those coming from long-haul destinations (WDC, 2011, p 2). This improved access coupled with the increases in leisure time and disposable income are some of the social changes that have facilitated the ongoing development of the industry. (Wright, A. & Linehan M, 2004, p.2-3).

After a slow start the tourist industry in Ireland has grown apace, aided in no small way in recent years by the access to the European funding and resources afforded, having joined the European Economic Community. Ireland joined the EU, as it is now
called, in 1973 as a poor peripheral country with a GDP at 62% of the EU average. As a consequence it was recognised as an ‘Objective 1’, disadvantaged area and received significant development funding (Hegarty, C. & Przezborska, L., 2005, p. 65).

Overseas visitors have increased from 1.9m in 1986 to 6.3m in 2012, with associated revenues of €5.4bn, €4bn of which was from foreign exchange earnings (Failte Ireland, 2012, p.7). In 2013 total tourism revenue stood at €5.7bn of which €1.4bn directly benefitted the exchequer through taxation.

Three years ago the sector was in survival mode. Having apparently weathered the darkest days of the recession, the industry is moving from survival mode to a more positive outlook of consolidation and growth. The current rhetoric being espoused by government is that, because of its regionally dispersed nature and the diverse skills base, tourism has been placed at the centre of the economic recovery plan to reverse the increasing unemployment figures of recent years. Industry support measures such as the special 9% VAT rate, the ‘Gathering’, the 0% air travel tax and Visa waiver have been introduced. Since 2010 inbound visitor numbers have increased by 950,000 and resultant revenue has increased by 10% with an extra 15,000 employed in the sector (Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, 2014).

1.1 Emerging rural tourism sector:

Tourist destinations are increasingly gaining recognition as being socio-cultural constructions rather than mere locations and over time living culture has moved from the periphery to the core of national tourism strategy (McCarthy, B., 2012, p.260 & 276). As with tourism generally, rural tourism has developed due to increased levels of discretionary income and increased leisure time but particularly in recent times with the diversification of tourists’ desires and motivations (Ionel, B., Unknown, p.750).

Globally, tourism is recognised as being one of the fastest growing industry’s (According to OECD figures, the number of international tourists exceeded 1 bn for the first time in 2012: that number is expected to increase to 1.8 bn by 2030) but for peripheral, rural locations it is likely to be the only growth industry (Irvine, W. &
Anderson, R.A., 2004, p. 229). Since the 1970’s tourism activity in rural areas has steadily increased in popularity in the ‘developed’ world and this trend has played a major role in the economic and social development of stagnated rural economies (Su, B., 2011, p. 1438). With the declining role of agrarian economies tourism has taken on a more central role in rural development to tap into these emerging trends. Almost a quarter of Europeans now choose the countryside as their holiday destination (Sharpley, R., 2007, p. 126).

The last decade of the 20th century has witnessed a strategic shift away from mass tourism toward niche offerings devoted to individual and targeted needs (Mihailovic & Moric, 2012, p. 268). The tourism market has sought out more customised products and experiences within local cultures in environmentally responsible locations (Sanagustin-Fons, M.V. et al, 2011, p. 552). This trend has been much remarked upon by academic observers. Professor Mary P. Corcoran of NUI Maynooth recently attributed the emergence of the sector to, ‘world weary tourists seeking exactly the kind of authentic, grounded and reassuringly unvarnished experiences that rural life has to offer’. The modern tourist she said would find much on offer in the ‘built heritage, history, cultural artefacts and monuments, natural environments, artisan food production, eco-tourism and so on which villages and towns can offer (Sunday Independent, 30.03.2014, p.24).

Peripheral areas are thus perceived as being repositories of older ways of life and culture which are aligned with modern tourists passion for authenticity (Urry, J., 2002) and are seen by many as the ‘antidote to the anomic of urban living’ (Cawley, M & Gillmor, D. A., 2008, p. 317). Rural areas are increasingly viewed as being ‘repositories of both natural and historical heritage’ and there is an ever increasing trend as society become’s increasingly urbanised, to place a greater value on peripheral locations and their associated values. ‘Tourists value “rurality” as a differentiating element for their holidays and associate it with high quality and unspoilt scenery, with peace, quite and to some extent solitude, and with the personal attention that small scale rural tourism enterprises can offer their guests’ (Polo-Pena et al, 2012, p. 1047). These areas are moving from being zones traditionally associated with primary production to being zones of consumption where the qualities previously viewed as barriers to economic development have become the key attraction and are
consumed in their own right. The very conditions that were seen to be the route of disadvantage have been harnessed and the otherness often spoken about with regard to the periphery has become a source of advantage (Anderson, A.R., 2000, p.97).

The convergence of the modern tourist seeking the ‘pleasure periphery’, and locals seeing the opportunity in the increasing numbers of visitors, is making for some interesting anomalies in economic performance statistics around the world (Brouder, P., 2012, p. 386).

Tourist development in many countries had for some time suffered from uneven regional development as government policy was more supportive of accessible regions. New development policy initiatives have emerged to address these inequalities (Ateljevic, J., 2009, p.301). Rural tourism is increasingly appraised at policy level, as an instrument of revitalisation and the investment by government in Ireland has been identified as an alternative approach to addressing market failure, market imperfection and social need (Cawley, M., & Gillmor, D.A., 2008, p. 316). The roots of Irish rural tourism are in a predominantly agricultural-based economy and foundation associated attractions included;

1. Farm activities – Turf cutting, farmhouse cooking and animal husbandry.
2. Off-farm activities – Fishing, wildlife watching, hill/ forest walks, golf etc.
3. Attractions- Health farms, heritage trails, arts and crafts or gaelic language.
4. Entertainment – Music/ dance in traditional pubs, barn dances and parish centres.
5. Heritage attractions – Abbeys, museums, gardens, caves, churches and castles.

In the Western Region (Appendix 1) the industry is particularly important, employing nearly one in five (19.2% of the working population or 23,700 people) (Western Development Commission, 2011, p.2). Tourism in the West began to feature in the official record’s from the middle of the 19th century with the growing popularity of exploring what were perceived to be primitive areas (Wright, A. &Linehan, M, 2004, p.3). Data from 2010 has shown that the region has performed poorly in attracting tourists with the west experiencing a decline of 18.3% in overseas tourist visits between 2008 and 2009 (Forfás, 2009, p.17).
1.2 Benefits of rural tourism:

The benefits associated with the sector are many and varied. Many rural regions that were traditionally dependent on primary extractive industry, as rural Ireland would have depended on agriculture, have suffered multiple blows to their social cohesion such as depopulation and unemployment (Brouder, P., 2012, p.384).

Rural Tourism is viewed as having the unique capacity to support disadvantaged rural areas economically and socially with the potential to reduce dependency on state agencies and ‘facilitate enterprising behaviour’. Special mention has been given to its viability in supporting declining incomes from traditional sources to meet ‘market failure, market imperfection and social need’ (Cawley, M & Gillmor, D. A., 2008, p. 316). Indeed the diversification of small agricultural interests into rural tourism in increasingly identified as the appropriate precipitate for rural development and regeneration (Sharpley, R. & Vass, A., 2006).

Most rural tourism businesses fall into the small or micro category and these businesses, that extend beyond the simple provision of services are recognised in many countries as being key actors in ‘saving’ the periphery. These small firms have also been linked to creative product development and ‘innovative entrepreneurship’ (Ateljevic, J, 2009, p. 282). Tourism complements development in rural areas as the ‘endogenous growth, capacity building and leisure space impacts, all contribute to the local creative milieu’ (Brouder, P., 2012, p. 394)

1.3 Aim of the research:

The achievement of the strategic goals of rural tourism destinations is contingent on the understanding and application of underpinning business philosophies, one of the foremost of which is marketing. Marketing provides the platform to define business objectives and strategies and to align supply and demand, to avoid strategic drift, whilst generating profit (Mihailovic and Moric, 2012, p.267).

The aim of this research is to gain an insight into the depth of understanding of marketing philosophy in small, remote, family owned tourism businesses in West Mayo and to get an insight into what, if any marketing strategies have been adopted.
The research aims to address a number of pertinent questions:

- The level of sector specific formal training undertaken by he owner/managers
- Whether the businesses have been or are engaging in market research
- Whether they have a marketing strategy with identified strategic objectives identifying where it is they want to go.
- Whether they have a marketing plan showing how they are going to get there.
- Whether they are making use of the supports available to them and their assessment of those supports.
- Whether there are cooperative networks in place to maximise outcomes through co-ordinated efforts.

1.4 Personal interest in the topic:

I am personally interested in this area for a number of reasons. First and foremost I am originally from Louisburgh which is on the shore of Clew bay, 20 km west of Westport and I would like at some point in the future, to return there to raise my family. For me the opportunity to analyse the local tourism industry in depth is a critical step in informing my decision as to whether to pursue this goal. My reasons for choosing rural tourism as the vehicle to realise my dream are not entirely out of sync with those encountered by Shaw and Williams (2002) that found that many hospitality owners chose to enter the market because they wanted to be self employed, hated their previous occupation, sought a better lifestyle, had personal reasons for making a change or preferred a location (Shaw G. & Williams, A., 2002).

In his presentation to the Irish Rural Link annual conference in May 2013 Conor Skeehan, Head of the Environment and Planning Department in the School of Spatial Planning at DIT, called on planning policy to address the realities of the various regions, and zone regions for particular types of development. In outlining his planning policy vision for Ireland he proposed three separate zones (Fig 1 &2).
Step One: Recognise Area Strengths

(Skeehan, C, 2013)
There is a growing consensus that the Western seaboard should be zoned for the development of tourism and that efforts to encourage industry to locate in the West are ill-founded.

I would point to an alternative view that such mono-economic development policies take the form of ‘staples economies’ and their development paths. Staples economies are those that rely on primary extractive industries that are entirely export dependant for economic development. The mining communities in Canada and Australia would be examples of such staple economies where villages were abandoned when the extraction of natural resources ended (Nelson & McKinnon, 2004). Tourism in remote areas sometimes follows patterns of previous staples in that it is primarily based on natural resources, it is dependant on external mediation for infrastructural investment and marketing for example and is susceptible to external market change (Schmallegger, D. & Carson, D., 2010, p.202). Faced with adverse economic conditions governments often focus on tourism as the viable instrument of recovery with its high labour intensity, relatively low entry levels in terms of skills and training and quick economic returns. If tourism in remote areas is set up in such a way with large investment for rapid return there is a danger that the local economy may fall into the staples trap and be susceptible to boom-bust cycles (Lundmark, L., 2005).

Whilst I don’t share the view regularly expressed by Mr. Skeehan et al., I do recognise the difficulty my local area has historically had, in attracting industry to the periphery of the periphery and I accept the reality that this is unlikely to change. I was therefore motivated to investigate the tourism sector in this market in more depth to gain a greater understanding of the pitfalls and more particularly, the opportunities.
Chapter Two: Literature review

2.0 Introduction:

‘An analytical reading of the literature in an essential prerequisite for all research’ (Hart, 2001, p.2). As part of the process of researching the dissertation topic, through the analysis of literature and case studies related to the development of rural tourism, a picture emerged of the various interacting elements essential to engendering a healthy market environment. This chapter focuses on the literature around some of these elements and the relevance of these topics to small, rural, family owned business operating in one such market.

Successful development of rural tourism is by no means straightforward, with a myriad of challenges facing the industry including the friction of distance, issues with sourcing debt finance, seasonality and sustainability. Elaboration and analysis on these issues will not form part of this study however and this literature review is focused on the following:

- The import of market research and the adoption of marketing philosophies to give these businesses a fighting chance.
- The rationale behind the focus by policy makers on rural tourism as a means of economic development.
- The key motivations for the actors in such markets.
- The importance/relevance of co-operative networks in establishing a coherent brand and in ensuring that in the division of value, the proportion achieved by the businesses is maximised.

2.1 The application of marketing philosophy by small rural tourism businesses:

‘The basic function of marketing is to attract and retain customers at a profit’ (Jobber, D., & Ellis-Chadwick F., 2013, p.4). It is generally agreed that it is an underutilised

Marketing philosophy is the platform for ‘defining business objectives and strategies and the creation of tourist products which deliver unique experience to customers and generate profit for the locality’ (Mihailovic and Moric, 2012, p.267). As proximate demand for their product is limited (Cawley and Gillmor, 2008, p.320) providers need to create awareness, interest and the desire to sample the offering, to address falling margins and ‘underutilised utility’ (Gorman, 2005, p.2).

The 4 stages of marketing development have been identified as follows;

- Reactive stage – Initial marketing activity where the business may make personal contact with the customer or vice versa. The business is likely to be heavily reliant on word of mouth recommendations.
- Tinkering marketing – Marketing that occurs out of the need to expand sales. It may be haphazard or disjointed largely because it is carried out spasmodiacally or spontaneously. Examples may be embryonic brochures or leaflets, occasional advertising, a local exhibition or sponsorship.
- Entrepreneurial marketing – Recognised value in sales generation and carried out as part of program of activities. May be instinctive and high risk and performance is dependent on aptitude of owner/ manager for marketing activities (Marketing book).
- Proactive marketing – Methodically controlled by marketing expert or specialist. Characterised by well developed integrative and proactive approach with interlinked, supporting activities where the entire program works towards clearly defined objectives (Siu, W.S., & Kirby, D., 1999, p.271).

In the interest of avoiding the pitfalls of strategic drift and creating a business environment that nurtures growth and continual development it is important for businesses to engage in the process of formal Market Planning (Fig. 2.1);
The adoption of such a structured approach provides for the following rewards:

- Consistency - through reference to a common plan
- Encourages the monitoring of change
- Encourages organisational adaptation
- Stimulates achievement through focus on objectives, strategies and results
- Informed resource allocation
- Provides insight in search for sources of competitive advantage

(Jobber, D., & Ellis-Chadwick, F., 2013, p. 43).  

Fig. 2.1
2.1.1 The marketing mix:

The marketing mix gives us an insight into how businesses set out to achieve their objectives through the products they offer, the price charged, methods of promotion and how they are distributed (Hollensen, 2011, p. 10). In the service industry, an additional 3 elements are necessitated by the extremely visible nature of the service assembly process and the simultaneity of production and consumption (Fig. 2.2). ‘Pure services are intangible….so the customers suffer higher perceived risk in their decision making’. The additional elements of people, physical evidence and process is crucial as a means of influencing the customers perception of service quality (Jobber, D., & Ellis-Chadwick, F., 2013, p.378)

![Marketing Mix Diagram](image)

**Fig. 2.2**

2.1.2 Barriers to adoption of marketing philosophies:

The successful adoption of marketing plans are highly dependant on the knowledge of the individual entrepreneur who, in small rural tourism enterprise, is likely to have only generalised knowledge of the workings of the company as a whole. There tends to be a lack of detailed knowledge of the more sophisticated marketing tools (Polo-Pena et al, 2012, p. 506). The enterprise is generally operated by the entrepreneurs own social circle and relatives rather than by professionals (Polo-Pena et al, 2012, p. 507). The lack of these professional skills and knowledge is one of the underlying threats to sustainable rural tourism development in the future (Su, B., 2011, p. 1441).
Studies have shown the main factors restricting the marketing focus of small tourism firms to be; ignorance of market orientation, limited resources, perceived inappropriateness, lack of ambition, short term focus, an unclear view of the market and a perceived lack of competitive differentiation (Morrison, A, & Conway, F., 2007, p.53).

2.1.3 Benefits of adopting marketing philosophies:

Marketing in rural tourism needs to be viewed as a tool to further the strategic goals of rural tourism destinations such as, ‘Long-term prosperity, guest satisfaction, profit maximisation, extension of the tourist season, neutralisation of the negative social impacts, stabilisation of employment, support and further diversification of existing economic activity, temporal and spatial redistribution of tourist demand etc.’ It is a platform for defining business strategies and objectives and the development of offerings that deliver unique experience to consumers and generate profit for rural tourism destinations (Mihailovic, B & Moric, I. 2012, p. 267).

A study carried out on peripheral rural tourism businesses in New Zealand found that only a minority of small tourism firms planned for training in any formal sense and learning approaches were not sequential and rational, but were developed and executed in an incremental, trial-by-error manner’ (Atelijevic, J., 2009, p. 294).

It is absolutely essential for all levels of governments, in collaboration with public sector agencies, to promote a unified training program system in order to train the operators for marketing and managerial knowledge and capability (Su, B., 2011, 1441).

2.1.4 Market research:

‘Consideration of the needs of tourists in rural areas is only possible on the basis of market research, as a lever to create an adequate supply’ (Mihailovic and Moric, 2012, p. 274). Much of the previous research would suggest that small tourism firm marketing activities are often ‘operational, short-term, haphazard and reactive in nature’ and that insufficient resources are applied to market research (Friel M., 1999,
There is a general perception that small tourism firms do not undertake formal market planning with directed actions (Friel, M., 1999, p. 100), and that marketing is underutilised for many rural tourism destinations (Clarke, J. et al, 2001, p.197).

Paucity of market research can result in insufficient understanding of the desires and expectations of the customer and how best to serve these needs as well as insufficient understanding and support from financial institutions.

Once a tourist has decided to travel to a particular destination, a key issue is what factors influence the choice/purchase of various tourism goods and services. This is particularly important as the consumption mix chosen by the tourist determines the nature of the economic benefits and as such, it is vital for the operators in that region to understand the economic parameters associated with the demands generated (Divisekera, S., & Deegan, J., 2010, p.1682). ‘The purpose and motivation for visitation has significant consequences for overall expenditure and consumption patterns’ (Divisekera, S., & Deegan, J., 2010, p.1684).

In an intensely competitive market, there can often be significant research into the local competition with a corresponding paucity of research into the business environment, thereby failing to manage change and exploit business opportunities (Friel, M, 1999, p. 106).

2.1.5 Barriers to carrying out market research:

A major part of the problem can be that in a fragmented market environment the resources of qualified staff and finances can be limited (Mihailovic and Moric, 2012, p.274).

This deficit is sometimes attributed to ‘non-tourist entrepreneurs’ entering the arena to supplement deteriorating agricultural incomes without any experience in the sector or formal marketing skills (Mihailovic and Moric, 2012, p.270). Such firms are often reactive in their responses to change in the market and hold short term perspectives. Market research is often limited to recording how visitors have heard about the
business but there is also a growing realisation of the need to research customer needs and how well these needs are being met (Friel, M., 1999, p.101 &107).

2.1.6 Implications of lack of market research:

Destinations and operators that make decisions on the supply side that aren’t in tune with changing customer needs and desires suffer the phenomenon of ‘Strategic drift’ (Dwyer, L. et al, 2009, p.63).

New product development or incremental adjustment to existing product and service and other innovative ‘tweaking’ creates a competitive advantage over the local orthodox business approach. Local small business owners tend to overvalue their ‘knowledge’ of the local environment and often overlooked important changes such as market trends and dynamic visitor behaviour’. The adoption of a market orientated approach, underscored by solid market research can help position a business to exploit opportunity and avoid the pitfalls and uncertainty of passivity (Atelijevic, J., 2009, p.299).

2.1.7 Market Segmentation and targeted marketing:

It is not always possible to design a totally unique experience for each customer. The concept of identifying groups of customers who have similar needs helps mitigate against general misalignment of supply and demand. If groups of individuals with similar needs and motivations can be identified, the marketer can then formulate marketing activities designed to satisfy each of these segments (Page, S.J. & Getz, Don, 1997, p.51).

Operators use segmentation to provide valuable information on customers to inform adjustments to their offering to better match it with customers’ needs (Malzer et al. 2004). Rural tourists from different countries share certain traits in that they are often motivated by the desire to explore the natural environment and experience different cultures, participate in outdoor activities as well as the search for peace and solitude.
Researching combinations of motivations and what destination attributes tourists are looking for allows companies to target their marketing and receive favourable returns on their marketing investment (Pesonen, J.A., 2011, p.70).

Research has shown that there are certain market segments that traditionally provide a greater return on marketing investment, and research carried out by Tourism Ireland found that certain segments within the main geographical markets have a greater likelihood to choose Ireland over alternative destinations. These are segmented as follows:

- **The Culturally Curious** – These are travellers in the over 45 category travelling with their partner. Their key interests are generally landscapes, history and culture and their main motivation is for a new experience.
- **The Great Escapers** – These tend to be younger and more interested in rural holidays. They seek an authentic rural experience close to nature, separate from their urban familiarity.
- **The Social Energisers** – These are younger groups who like to holiday as groups or as couples. They are generally looking for excitement in a vibrant location. (Ireland, Dept. of Transport, Tourism and Sport, 2014).

All rural tourists seem to be motivated by relaxation, getting refreshed and comfort. Beautiful natural landscapes and a laid back atmosphere are also recognised as important destination attributes across segments (Pesonen, J.A., 2011, p.81). As such promotional activities should be designed for experiences that are in tune with this demand.

### 2.1.8 Digital media capabilities:

The achievement of competitive advantage depends to a large extent on the permanent incorporation of technological innovations such as the internet or ‘Information and Communication Technology’ (ICT), and it is seen of particular importance in emerging areas or areas of limited economic development (Polo-pena, A.I., & Frias-Jimilena, 2010, p. 36). Exacerbating the time demands which characterise small rural
tourism businesses are often limited financial means. This necessitates creativity of approach to perform many tasks at limited costs (Schaupp, L.C., & Belanger, F., 2014, p.187). The antecedents of social media usage have been shown to be technology competence, customer pressure, the mobile environment and competitive pressure.

2.1.9 Benefits of use of digital media:

For the rural tourism sector several studies have shown that the deployment of ICT helps the development of tourism business and competitiveness and this can be considered an appropriate strategy (Lituchy, T.R., & Rail, A., 2000).

The opportunities afforded by the incorporation of ICT include the capacity to present themselves to an international market, to limit the periods of low occupancy through commercialisation, reduce dependency on intermediaries and compete with larger providers. Critically the cost of deployment is low making it accessible to small business (Polo-Pena, A.I., & Frias-Jimilena, 2010, p.36).

Engaging in social media efforts can help generate exposure and increase traffic for the small business at a fraction of the cost of traditional marketing approaches with the main cost being the time that it takes. It provides a platform for exposing small business to a vast pool of potential custom as well as helping to nurture the existing customer base in an inexpensive and effective manner. Effectively it is ‘word-of-mouth on fast forward’ (Schaupp, L.C., & Belanger, F., 2014, p.188). ‘By using innovations, business may change the rules of competition and leverage new ways to surpass competitors, changing the competitive landscape’ (Schaupp, L.C., & Belanger, F., 2014, p.194).

The growing primacy of internet-based contact that destinations have with potential visitors provides a tremendous opportunity to provide more localised information and promote sustainable tourism to an audience that is inspired by more general campaigns to seek out the experiences they desire (Ely, P.A., 2013, p. 89).
2.1.10 Barriers to the use of digital media:

In spite of the benefits the deployment of this technology it is often poorly applied in rural businesses, due to knowledge and training deficits, lack of strategic goals and factors such as the demographics and management structures. Application of digital technologies often centres around the establishment of a web page and email with little other forms of ICT. A web page and email, whilst considered to be the most important ICT elements in rural tourism are also generally accepted to be the minimum standard (Polo-Pena, A.I., & Frias-Jamilena, D.M., 2000, p.44).

Those that embrace new technologies have a better competitive position relative to those that don’t and are also better positioned to improve their competitive position over time thanks to a domino affect with their greater capacity for adapting emergent technologies (Polo-Pena, A.I., & Frias-Jamilena, D.M., 2000, p.45).

Social media has led to a shift in accountability of organisations towards customers and aside from the obvious benefits it also presents its own challenges. It can create new threats to the reputations of organisations reinforcing the need for the development of proper social media policies (Aula, 2010, p. 43). One study carried out in the U.S. found that 65% of small business owners attempt to manage social media without the necessary competence (Looney, B. & Ryerson, A., 2011, p.157). The factors needed for social media adoption include technology infrastructure, applications and system integration as well as staff training (Schaupp, L.C., & Belanger, F., 2014, p.193).

One of the most significant aspects of IT for tourism SME’s has been the reengineering of the booking system which can also contribute to cultivation of marketing networks. Preparing their home page forces the entrepreneur to ‘codify their knowledge in order to define their product and communication proposition’ (Nilsson, P.A., 2005, p. 593).

The holidaymaker study carried out by Failté Ireland in the greater study area of Galway/ Mayo in 2013 underlined the importance of adoption of a digital media strategy for any doubters. 51% of the holidaymakers surveyed said that they had first
become aware of the area on the internet and a staggering 82% of visitors sourced information about the area on the internet before travelling (Ireland, Fáilte Ireland, 2013).

2.2 Rural tourism as a focus of government policy:

Since the 1970’s tourism activity in rural areas has been increasing in popularity in all of the developed countries worldwide, playing a key role in the development of rural areas that were economically and socially depressed. This along with the challenges facing small scale agriculture and other primary activities precipitated the move by many in rural areas into diversification into tourism (Su, B., 2011, p. 1438). The focus of government policy on the stimulation of the industry is not new. Since the adoption of the Single European Act (1987), there was a commitment within the EU to address regional disparities through the promotion of economic and social cohesion. The Maastrict Treaty (1992) acknowledged for the first time, the role of tourism in these actions’ (Wanhill, S., & Buhalis, D., 1999, p.295).

As early as 1980, within the context of developing countries, Rodenberg was arguing that the ‘common economic objectives of increased earnings, foreign exchange, investment, job opportunities and minimisation of adverse social and cultural effects might be best achieved through the promotion of small businesses rather than large enterprises in the tourism industry sector’ (Morrison, A. et al, 2010, p. 741).

2.2.1 Rationale for investment of public funds:

Empirical studies have shown that a relatively low investment in the development of rural tourism yields a high level of job formation relative to other industries (Fleisher, A & Felsenstein, D, 2000, p.1020), yielding favourable cost-benefit ratios and net present values per job, bolstering the suitability of tourism promotion as an economic development strategy for rural communities (Fleischer and Felsenstein, 2000, p. 1021.

The tourism industry outperforms other sectors in such comparative studies due to the focus on performance in terms of job creation and the labour intensity of the small scale service industry. Investment and working capital subsidies given by
governments throughout Europe have been reinforced with technical support, in order
to provide targeted assistance to meet the specific needs of the individual firm

2.2.2 Policy development:

Family firms are recognised as having the potential to be the backbone of
development in rural areas and small towns, so policies have been directed toward
encouraging and sustaining them. The potential advantages they bring to marginal
areas are several; children to sustain schools, ties to the land resulting in commitment
to the area and attitudes favouring conservation of resources (Getz, D, & Carlsen, J.,
2000).

2.2.3 Roles of the various institutions/ bodies:

It is important that the roles of the institutions, associations and governments are
clearly understood and co-ordinated and that they evolve in a process of co-operation
with the industry (Mihailovic and Moric, 2012, p.274). Democratic deficit between
institutional strategies and local providers can result in the absence of a shared vision
and ultimately the expectations of tourists not being aligned with the offering. In such
circumstances the institutions will lose the confidence of the sector they support and
‘individual operators may suffer strategic drift’. It is also important that rural tourism
and other economic sectors be carefully integrated by policy makers in order to avoid
displacement; a phenomenon whereby the support of one sector results in a
commensurate negative impact on another (Dwyer et al, 2009, p. 63).

A recent study on the focus on rural tourism as an instrument of regional development
in New Zealand found consensus amongst all of the providers interviewed, that the
tourism sector could only be developed to its full potential with adequate public sector
support and appropriate infrastructural policy (Atelijevic, J., 2009, p.293). In
disadvantaged rural areas the role of government, is to work through specific agencies
and identify good practices, benchmarking, the provision of financial support, and to
invest in the skills and labour force (Wanhill, 2000).
2.2.4 **Trends in policy development:**

Policy development must be underpinned at all times by the foundation stone of market research and differentiated segments require careful analysis for interpretation of the nuances. ‘Any policy aimed at stimulating sectors of the economy through tourism must be informed by individual source market demands and consumption behaviour’ (Divisekera, S., & Deegan, J., 2010, p.1687). Appropriate statistical and qualitative analysis provides the basis for appropriate development policies to meet local needs (Sharpley, R., & Vass, A., 2006, p. 1041).

Over the years regional development strategies have shifted from a ‘one-for-all’ approach to a more customised development strategies suitable for different types of regions. The development of a more pluralist model involves numerous interactions between national regional actors and agencies (Atelijevic, J., 2009, p. 302). These ‘bottom-up’ strategies are in tune with the concept of sustainability in which local communities are more proactive in facilitating the regional endogenous development (Atelijevic, J., 2009, p. 283). The key implication of the bottom up approach is the decentralisation of decision making to lower territorial levels. The degree of integration has been defined according to the percentage of local people employed, the type and degree of participation, decision making power, and the ownership of resources in the local tourism sector (Saxena, G & Ilbery, B, 2008, p. 234).

Aside from contributing to the emergence of a creative, social milieu, the bottom-up endogenous development also provides for reduced likelihood of business leakage or repatriation of profits to urban centres.

In New Zealand, supports for the capital investment in tourism had traditionally focused on physical construction activity and other fixed physical assets. In recent years government support configuration has switched from a grant based system towards information supply and up-skilling programmes as the previous concept was perceived to be inefficient, often supporting those lacking any business ability (Atelijevic, J., 2009, p. 289). A similar trend has been seen in Ireland.
2.2.5 Policy initiatives in Ireland:

In Ireland the support of rural tourism has been advanced as an appropriate precipitate of economic recovery and support measures have included a new 9% value added tax (VAT) rate, ‘the Gathering’, aimed at enticing the Diaspora ‘home’, the removal of the air travel tax and the VISA waiver. This policy is understandable when we consider the metrics; the sector supports 137,000 jobs in the accommodation and food sector alone and employment in tourism is estimated to be in the region of 200,000.

The primary focus of the tourism policy in Ireland is to maximise the benefits of overseas visitors recognising the importance of the export sectors to a small island economy in sustaining and improving our living standards. The ambition is that by 2025 revenue will reach €5bn and employment in the sector will reach 250,000. Additionally they have explicitly set a target of a 95% ‘very satisfied’ rate, indicating the import attributed to this variable. They have targeted a clear understanding of the responsibilities and expectations of Government, State agencies, Local Authorities, and other stakeholders in the development of the industry with an enhanced role for the local authorities, with LEADER programmes to come under their stewardship when the 2014 program is launched. As tourism enterprises are competing for business within the consumer’s choice of destination, they have little incentive to market the destination alone. Therefore this role is assumed by Tourism Ireland who through their activities endeavour to create the ‘purchase funnel’, by improving awareness amongst overseas consumers, increasing interest levels and precipitating active planning and purchase (Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, 2014, p. 7).

As the quality of Ireland’s tourism physical assets is quite strong, it is recognised that the ‘experience’ is now the primary focus (Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, 2014, p.13).

Tourism Ireland has the responsibility of marketing Ireland abroad as an all-Island destination. It was formally incorporated in 2000 following the designation of tourism as an area for cooperation under the Good Friday Agreement (1998). It has responsibility for all-island destination marketing, Tourism Brand Ireland, the
delivery of regional and product marketing and promotional activity (Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, 2014, p.31).

Failté Ireland’s (FI) role is the development of people in tourism through skills building, skills development, capability building, and the development of tourism experiences (Monaghan, F., 2014). Aside from the capital investment, FI also provides other forms of support to the tourism industry, including advice and assistance on establishing and developing a tourism enterprise, tourism related academic research, and tourism destination development (Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, 2014, p.25).

2.3 Owner/manager motivations:

Academic literature refers predominantly to financial criteria when discussing success, which has traditionally been measured by financial performance, e.g. growth, profit, turnover, return on investment or number of employees.

Some researchers argue that success should be examined from the subjective perspective, and the starting point for so doing should be the business owner. Subjective criteria for success may include measures such as personal satisfaction and achievement, pride in the job and a flexible lifestyle. Non-financial criteria tend to be more important to the small business owner (Reijonen, H., 2008, p. 617).

Success is affected by several factors including owner characteristics such as efficiency, opportunity recognition, perseverance and social skills. Other factors include market opportunities, number of business partners, financial capital and strategies used to achieve goals (Honig, 1998).

Goals are essential in forming the premise of success, directing behaviour toward that success and serving as benchmarks of success. In small enterprises goals are often implicit. In contrast to larger enterprise goals of small family run tourism business are frequently stated as the achievement of a satisfactory income, job satisfaction and control over job operations (Reijonen, H., 2008, p. 618).
Academic literature identifies many common causes of failure in tourism. One such cause is that the businesses are often run by owner/operator’s who have no formal business or marketing background, no prior experience in the tourism industry, are supplemental in their approach and are not growth motivated.

2.3.1 **Lifestyle motivations:**

Lifestyle entrepreneurship refers to the owner focus where business goals are secondary to personal ones (Bolton, B. & Thompson, J., 2003).

‘Lifestyle entrepreneurs may consciously limit the scale and scope of their businesses in order to balance economic performance and sustainability in socio-cultural and environmental terms’. In particular these owners may want to be close to nature and involved in community life. For them to survive requires capturing a viable niche market and the re-conceptualisation of success to encompass non-economic measures (Getz, D., & Carlsen, J., 2005, p. 248). They often prioritise outcomes that are intangible in nature (Polo-Pena et al 2012, p. 508)

It is not uncommon for family business to accept lower returns or longer payback on their investment, or to sustain a lifestyle rather than to maximise profits or personal revenue. They may be autonomy seeking rather than growth entrepreneurs. Small family businesses are frequently assumed to be risk averse because the must place family ahead of potential growth (Petric, Lidija, 2003, p.1748). Lifestyle enhancement is the predominant motive for starting a small family business (Getz, D., & Carlson, J. 2000).

In many cases they are not run on a commercial basis and are often under capitalised (Petric, L., 2003, p. 1760). Many family run businesses do not want to grow beyond the subsistence level and therefore will not create significant job opportunities. Another concern is the relatively widespread lack of innovative spirit (Iorio, M., & Corsale, A., 2010, p. 153)

Owner managers may be family entrepreneurs with weak management skills and resistance to advice or change. They are likely to a substantial proportion of their
wealth in the firm and their incomplete management expertise in no help in dealing with a difficult business climate in respect of securing finance and penetrating the market. Their marketing is often weak, relying on over-generalised and inappropriate methods (Nilsson, P.A. et al, 2005, p.584).

2.3.2 Operational Focus and lack of relevant training experience:

In New Zealand, the development of supplemental tourism products are often used to generate additional income and diversify economic activities, mostly because the necessary assets for the proposed activity, such as land in a tourist location, farm and vineyard were already in place’ (Atelijevic, J., 2009, p. 283). This incidental approach to starting a business can be fraught however as ‘agricultural values and guest-service values are frequently incompatible’, and part time or supplemental operators are unlikely to invest to develop and grow the business (Sharpley, R., & Vass, A., 2006, p.1043). Supplemental owners also tend to spend an excessive amount of time ‘running’ rather than managing the business and subsequently lose their sense of direction (Atelijevic, J., 2009, p. 297).

2.3.3 Entrepreneurialism in rural tourism:

It is generally accepted that only a minority of owner-managers in small rural tourism businesses have growth aspirations. A proportion will be relentless in their pursuit of opportunity and a proportion will pursue personal goals.

Only a sub group are entrepreneurial. Entrepreneurial behaviour is defined by the intention to create wealth and accumulate capital (Chell, E., & Baines, S., 2000, p.198). Growth orientated businesses are more likely to enter into non-family business partnerships and to network widely and actively with other businesses and organisations (Baines, S., & Wheelock, J., 1998).

2.3.4 Market orientation:

Market Orientation (MO) is a philosophy focused on discovering and meeting the needs and desires of its customers through its product mix. It is recognised as being
suitable approach for building the competitiveness of small and medium sized enterprises (Blankson, C., & Cheng, J.M.S., 2005). MO leads to a sustainable competitive advantage as competitors find it difficult to copy this resource (Polo-Pena, 2012, p. 506). It is the business culture that most effectively and efficiently creates superior value for customers (Narver, J.C., & Slater, S.F., 1990, p. 20). Interestingly, according to Kohli and Jaworski (1990), the marketing orientation of an organisation is a function of the formal education of its senior managers and a marketing orientation enhances the performance of the organisation.

2.3.5 Owner/manager motivations in Ireland:

The rural tourism industry in Ireland is dominated by small and medium enterprises as well as by sole traders (Gorman, C., 2005, p.2). Many of the providers are either part time, either in terms of their working hours or their focus. The fragmented nature of the businesses often contribute to an overall lack of vision (Gorman, C., 2005, p.5).

A study carried out on rural tourism/agri-tourism businesses in Ireland found that the operators had relatively high standards of education with 31% having 3rd level education, and a further 41% had completed 2nd level. Only 17.2% had actively participated in tourism training however. Information communication and technology (ICT) and language proficiency were notable deficient skill areas and some 92.1% had not worked in the industry before (Hegarty, C., & Przezborska, L., 2005, p.69).

2.4 Cooperative networks:

Cooperative networks refer to ‘Geographic concentrations of interconnected companies and institutions in a particular field, linked by commonalities and complementarities’ (Pinto, R.B. & Kastenholz, E., 2011, p. 217). Collaboration is a process of joint decision making among key stakeholders of a problem area, to address the future of that area. Collaboration and the development of cooperative networks within the tourism industry have arisen from the need to achieve broad based support for policies within an industry that is diverse and fragmented’ (Kubickova, M. & Wang, Y., 2009, p.1).
When discussing the presence and intensity of inter-firm cooperation and competitiveness in rural tourism the word ‘embeddedness’ is often used. ‘Embeddedness pertains to the strength of the networks and other mechanisms through which tourism is linked into local resources (Kalantaridis and Bifka, 2006).

2.4.1 Benefits of cooperative network development:

Within a particular region there are a wide range of stakeholders with multiple interrelationships; including tourists, tour operators, business owners, host community members, and various organisations and agencies that promote and support the industry. It is generally accepted that the absence of an integrative framework for managing this diversity is a weakness’ (Cawlay, M. & Gillmor, A., 2008, p. 317). Partnerships induce the exchange of knowledge and technology, thus improving the skills of partners and their capabilities (Wang, Y., & Fesenmaier, D.R., 2007).

When two or more organisations collaborate in some form of joint action they expect to achieve a result that they could not have achieved alone. Examples of such positive results include promotional cost reductions, extension of markets, improvement of the communication between service providers to guarantee a more interesting and satisfactory overall tourist experience or simply an increase in the number of visitors (Gnoth, 2003).

There are 3 benefit categories of networks in tourism destinations; Learning and exchange, which refers to knowledge transfer and communication for example; business activity referring to the cooperative activities, inter-trading within the network, enhanced product quality and visitor experience for example and; community benefits which might include improved community spirit and the reduction in value leakage, that sees a greater proportion of value being afforded to the industry rather than the other stakeholders (Gibson, L. et al, 2005).

Within the industry there are a broad range of stakeholders and tourists usually consume a bundle of goods and services while on a trip. The key elements of such a consumption bundle may be classified under six broad commodity categories; Food,

2.4.2 Barriers to cooperative network development:

In spite of the well documented benefits associated with a joint effort a 2008 study by Cawley and Gillmor found that ‘institutional representatives reported that small tourism businesses…competed for a limited market rather than collaborating to attract larger numbers of clients’ (Cawley and Gillmor, 2008, p.329).

Inter-firm relationships in the industry are often complex and may be characterised by both cooperative and competitive behaviours. Indeed several issues arise related to cooperative destination marketing: short term benefits versus long term vision; concurrent collaboration and competition among rival actors; stakeholders’ roles and involvement through the destination or project life cycle; conflict management. Usually firms that are competing in the marketplace must cooperate with each other within destination marketing strategies. The concept of competition, developed in game theory, sustains that firms engage in simultaneously competitive and cooperative relationships (Pinto, R.B. & Kastenholz, E., 2011, p. 218).

Rural tourism is by its very nature fragmented and this can contribute to a lack of vision, direction and image of the sector as perceived by those working in the industry. This can result in the poor integration of the various elements of the offering i.e. accommodation and activities (Gorman, C., 2005, p.5).

Marketing and promotional activities undertaken by local groups or individuals in a particular market, in an effort to achieve competitive advantage over their local competitors may undermine cooperative marketing efforts within a region. The ‘Rural Tourism Organisation’ (RTO) in New Zealand identified competitive business attitudes by individual operators, as an obstacle to more constructive and comprehensive collaboration’ (Atelijevic, J., 2009, p. 296). Whilst there continue to be issues of destructive competitive behaviours in small rural tourism markets the ‘go-it-alone’ approach of many tourism operators and sectors of the past are giving way to
stronger cooperation and collaboration with the realisation that no one business or
government establishment can operate in isolation (Pinto, R.B., 2011, p. 217).

As previously discussed for the characteristic large number of micro, small and
medium enterprises operating in the sector, inter-firm competition can be a major
limiting factor for collaborative development and a fragmented and un-cooperative
environment with poor information and resource interchange can cause inefficiencies
(Morrison, A 1998, p.192). The development of cooperative networks can be a
challenging process, evidenced in that more than half of all collaborative relationships
do not add value and are therefore unsuccessful (Kubickova, M. & Wang, Y., 2009,
p.2). The development of co-operative networks may be somewhat restricted by what
some academics have described as ‘the paradox of network concept’ which refers to
the intersection of an economic competitive perspective and a social trust perspective
(Monsted, 1995).

Other barriers to co-operation cultivation include incompatibilities due to life cycle
development, resource limitations of time and capital and distrust.

There may be an integration dilemma where the more experienced entrepreneurs, who
already have networks in the industry, will want to progress more hastily than those

Owners of small business, who are generally operationally involved in their
enterprise, typically lack time for formal networking and many owner-managers
adhere to a ‘self-employed or micro-firm culture of individualism or anti-
participation’ (Chell, E., & Baines, S., 2000, p. 197). Such businesses, sometimes
referred to as ‘fortress enterprises’ do not utilise business support networks or indeed
engage in any networking activities beyond those clearly demanded by trading needs
(Chell, E., & Baines, S., 2000, p. 200).

### 2.4.3 Antecedents of successful collaboration:

For the successful development of collaborative partnerships it is vital that there is a
good partner fit. This simple means partners who are not in competition, are on top of
their game and that will grow and develop while providing equal support in a symbiotic relationship (Kubickova, M. & Wang, Y., 2009, p.5). Important for the achievement of partner fit are shared visions, supportive and complementary qualities and consistently high performance and integrity. It is important to remember that whilst collaborative relationships can add value they can also be value destroying. If a partner is affiliated with an incompetent business they can be made to look bad and suffer brand damage underlining the importance of alignment and trust (Kubickova, M. & Wang, Y., 2009, p.5). Networking theory, when linked with ‘social embeddedness’, suggests that trust is the social glue that makes networking activity possible (Chell, E., & Baines, S., 2000, p. 211).

2.4.4 Inefficiency of independent focus:

Fragmented activities, exacerbated by an identified lack of training and expertise often result in casualties (Gorman, C. 2005, p.12). Competitive intensity can also result in price focused competition which results in economic leakage. Competition is especially destructive where it gravitates solely on price, as it transfers value directly from the industry to the consumer. Price cuts are also easy for competitors to see and match making successive rounds of retaliation likely (Porter, M., 2008, p.8)

‘Individual rural tourism businesses possess neither the skills nor the resources for effective marketing, a prerequisite for success (Embacher, 1994). As such there is a need for collaboration through concentrated regional or marketing structures (Clarke, 1999).

The modern tourist expects to be offered a range of products and services that satisfy all of their needs. Small rural providers are not generally in a position to provide for all of these needs due to their scale and lack of capital financing. This view is further developed in terms of the appraisal of the region by the market, with the contention that tourists are more likely to visit rural destinations, particularly those that are remote relative to major population centres if there are a number of reasons both to go and stay (Sharpley, R., 2007, p.139). As such it is critical that a joint approach is taken by the proximal business owners in terms of providing a package to cater to the full gamut of customer needs (Mihailovic, B. & Moric I., 2012, p. 272).
Through enabling cooperative network development, destinations can develop value chains to achieve their strategic objectives outlined in the marketing plans. In an increasingly competitive environment this will be critical for their ability to ‘satisfy their demand, develop the prosperity of their region, enhance the profitability of local enterprises and achieve equitable returns for their resources utilised’ (Wanhill, S., & Buhalis, D., 1999, p.297).

A tourism network can substantially improve small tourism business performance by transforming their sporadically scattered products into a one-stop-shop selling a wide variety of functionally interrelated tourism products (Petric, L. 2003, p.1765).

Formal and informal networking has proven to be an effective way for small tourism firms to compensate for their intrinsic weaknesses and disadvantages. These forums allow for developmental discussions around individual concerns, the exchange valuable experiences, an opportunity to learn specific skills (e.g. workshops, conferences, training programs) as well as the critical mass to lobby the policy makers (Atelijevic, J., 2009, p. 298). Participation in formal networks, enables the representation of the collective interests of businesses in wider arenas beyond the immediate locale (Saxena, G., & Ilbery, B., 2008, p. 244).

The academics are increasingly looking towards the contribution of clusters to the development of local rural tourism businesses (Sharpley, R., Vass, A., 2006, p.1043). There is general recognition of the role of cooperation in the creation of empowering networks that enable a shared understanding and ownership of goals and objectives, helping members realise the ‘network advantage’, by aggregating and creating new knowledge and building capacity (Saxena, G., & Ilbery, B., 2008, p. 239).

2.4.5 Benefits of collaboration to the wider community:

Tourism makes a number of contributions locally such as increasing the supply of services as well as the social contribution to the local leisure space through the interaction of the creative arts and tourism (Brouder, P, 2012, p. 393). The benefits of cooperation however can extend beyond the partners to the wider community. Local
non-tourist activities may be promoted, leading to a broadening of the economic, employment and societal base of a given region (ramwell, B., & Lane, B., 2000).

To promote value generating cooperation, it is important that there be a local network of actors that interact and share ideas, with consensus on common interests for otherwise competing firms. It is important also to recognise the role of the wider community and the benefit of their inclusion. Ultimately the community should be benefitting from a number of externalities (Brouder, P., 2012, p. 387). Communication between all the stakeholders and frequency of that communication is considered an essential component of co-operative marketing (Gorman, C., 2005, p.9).

2.4.6 Cooperative network development in the study area:

At the national level Failté Ireland has explicitly targeted international growth and have advocated that co-operative marketing opportunities are the most effective means of accessing overseas markets in a cost effective manner (Gorman, C., 2005, p.4).

In spite of this there is empirical evidence of value destroying, inter-firm competition in the study area. Reports have found that most businesses in the larger study area liaised with the authorities and with the national tourist board, in the context of promotion and marketing. Several institutional representatives reported that small business in both Northwest Mayo and the Moy Valley, Central Mayo area competed for a limited market rather than collaborating to attract larger numbers of clients’ (Cawley, M., & Gillmor, D.A., 2008, p. 329).

The social and cultural mileau within which networks operate must be based upon trust and reciprocity. The tourist destination must be comprehended as an endogenous local system but also as a specific tourism product representing the substratum of economic, natural, social and economic elements. Its competitiveness depends on the quality and harmonious interrelation of economic activities, natural values, social culture and the local system of value (Petric, L. 2003, p. 1766).
2.5 Gap in the research:

Customer behaviour in general has been studied from a rationalist perspective though attention is increasingly being paid to an affective component. ‘The functional dimension refers to the rational and economic valuations made by individuals, while the affective dimension is less developed but captures the feelings or emotions generated by products or services’ (Polo-Pena, A.I. et al, 2012, p. 1048).

There is an identified ‘paucity of research into the marketing practices and approaches of small tourism and hospitality firms’ (Friel, 1999) and a requirement for the analysis of the performance of family firms (Boer, 1998). Small firm researchers have not been able to reach consensus on the contribution of marketing to the success of small firms (Siu, W.S., & Kirby, D., 1999, p.260). Whilst the literature does identify causes of failure in rural tourism much of this is not substantiated by empirical evidence and is based on perception and supposition. The reported causes of failure include:

- Family firms run by owner/operators with no formal training in business or marketing and no prior experience in the tourism industry (McKercher & Robbins, 1998).
- Lack of capital and poor management that is resistant to change and reluctant to seek advice (Nilsson et al, 2003).
- Exposure to seasonality with low demand periods threatening viability and strategies to counter or adapt to this cyclical demand having negative impacts on family life (Getz and Carlson, 2004).
- Reactive responses to external events rather than a proactive approach and generally ad-hoc application of marketing philosophy.
- Short term perspectives that are exacerbated by intense local competition (Friel, 1999, p. 101).

Others have countered that the prevalence of these factors has been exaggerated and that whilst it may be true of a number of businesses operating in the sector it is by no means generally representative. One of the reasons advanced to discredit the suggestion that small firms are not market focused, don’t take a strategic approach
and are inept in terms of the adoption and application of marketing philosophies is the difficulty that incumbents and new entrants to the industry have in securing debt finance. New businesses in particular are required to produce detailed business plans in order to access funding and marketing is a key component of such plans (Friel, 1999, p.102).

Researchers engaged in hospitality management have ignored small enterprises or arguably misunderstood their dynamics by treating them as scaled down versions of large firms. As a result more rigorous research on the management of such organisations and how they engage with their economy is now emerging (Jaafar, M. et al, 2012, p.2). One possible reason for this might be that when compared with large firms, small firms are less willing and able to co-operate, are often quite reluctant to open the company to an unknown researcher for observation, and have no formal marketing policies and/or are not aware of their strategic decisions (Davis, C.D. et al, 1985).

A comparative analysis carried out in nine EU countries, criticised the analysis of small firms by government agencies for using ‘flawed methodologies’. The reasons given were; issue of calculation due to definitional and conceptual challenges, highly seasonal employment patterns that were difficult to record, organisational variations, operational capacity and characteristics and issues of registration around the black economy (Morrison, M. & Conway, F., 2007, p.50).

In was the authors intentions that this research might shed some light on whether the perceptions of marketing inefficiencies held true for this study area and if so to what extent poor application of marketing philosophy is limiting growth.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction:

Research is concerned with understanding the world and informed by how the researcher views their world, what they understand it to be, and what they see as the purpose of understanding (Cohen, L. et al, 2000). This section aims to inform the reader on the activities that have been undertaken to answer the research question.

This chapter aims to describe and explain the methods applied by the researcher in addressing the research questions outlined in Chapter one. The kernel of the issue is to inform why different businesses operating in a particular environment have divergent levels of monetary success (This is an important qualification given that financial motivations are not always foremost for operators). The selected study sample was regional in nature and was concerned with the provision of an insight into six businesses and the building of theory around the factors underpinning their development.

A comparative approach was adopted enabling the researcher to interrogate the research findings and identify consistencies and inconsistencies (Hantrais, L. & Mangan, S.P., 1996). The comparisons allowed a deeper understanding of the features that were generic and those that were specific to individual business; which has implications for the transposition of the conclusions elsewhere. A comparative approach also allowed for the analysis and assessment of the adoption of academic philosophies, their impacts and the impacts of overlooking them.

3.1 A brief recap on the research question:

By way of a reminder the aim of this research was to address the following questions;

- The level of sector specific formal training undertaken by the owner/managers
- Whether the businesses have been or, are engaging in market research
• Whether they have a marketing strategy with identified strategic objectives identifying where it is they want to go.
• Whether they have they a marketing plan showing how they are going to get there.
• Whether they are making use of the supports available to them and their assessment of those supports.
• Whether there are cooperative networks in place to maximise outcomes through co-ordinated efforts and their attitudes towards their development.

3.2 Scope of the research:

By way of gaining an understanding of the tourism destinations and the environment in which tourism activities take place four key tourism destination categories have been identified;

• Centrally located metropolitan destinations: These function as both a destination in their own right as well as a generation area for other destinations. They are well integrated into national and international transportation networks.
• Peripheral urban destinations: Located near large metropolitan areas these generally have less of a central place function and have less appeal for tourists.
• Peripheral rural destinations: The destination may lack a central focus or node and its key attraction may be the landscape characteristics. The destination is spatially removed from major tourism generation areas and usually attracts many more tourists that it generates.
• Natural environment destinations: Peripheral, remote areas with sparse populations and may be subject to strict development guidelines and preservation orders. Weak economic systems outside of the tourism sector and by and large industry dependant.

(Lundgren, 2006, p.89)

As the focus of this study is rural tourism, before proceeding further it is probably worth defining what it is we mean by that handle. In Ireland it is simply defined as ‘holidaying in rural towns/ areas with less than 1500 people’. The EU definition is
somewhat more explicit; ‘a holiday that is primarily motivated by the desire to closely experience the countryside, its people, heritage and way of life. The holiday should be primarily based in a rural setting as opposed to being a general touring/sightseeing holiday’ (Reference).

3.2.1 The selection of the study area:

Destinations with established brands that attract large numbers of visitors were deliberately excluded as their business environment is a less appropriate context in which to investigate the research question (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008, p. 323). Institutional representatives in Ireland have reported increased support of rural tourism in various ways but have recognised a failure to dispense numbers from a limited number of popular destinations to more remote areas (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008, p. 327). Westport would be one such established brand that is popular with large numbers of tourists and the focus on the in-depth interviews with business owners will be in the more remote peripheral areas outside of Westport. Qualitative researchers usually work with small study samples in context to allow for in-depth analysis and the selection of these samples tend to be targeted rather than random (Miles and Huberman, 1994). As such six family owned businesses dotted around the shores of Clew bay were approached and agreed to participate in the study. The location of the businesses are shown in the map in fig 3.1. This map shows some of the tourist infrastructure currently in place in the area as well as some of what is proposed for further development.

Additional to these operators, a further 3 interviews were carried out with supporting organisations to attain an understanding of the support structures in place for these businesses and the form and focus of those supports and how they can be accessed. An effort was also made to determine the level of engagement with these support organisations by local businesses and an assessment of their performance and importance.

These interviews were with;
• Louisburgh HQ – A voluntary tourist office situated in the centre of Louisburgh with a focus on the regeneration of the area through the support of local business.

• South Mayo Development Company Ltd – The administrator of the LEADER Rural Development Programme.

• Failté Ireland – The national tourism development authority.
Due to the nature of the research dimensions quantitative, reductionist type approaches do not obviously lend themselves to revealing aspects, such as values, meanings, attitudes that condition behaviours, for example associated with lifestyle, migration, gender and family (Morrison, A. et al, 2010, p. 747)

As such the focus of this study was on the peripheral rural destinations and the focus of the literature review was on related academic studies relevant to the development of tourism in such peripheral locations.

Aside from the fact that the study area has a particular personal significance for the author in that it is his ancestral home, the area is an appropriate setting in which to conduct this study because of its particular character that makes it unsuitable for intensive agriculture and its poor industry infrastructure. The recreational capability of the greater Louisburgh area is restricted by problems of access, both to the mountains and coast and the inability to retain tourists due to the lack of a suitable accommodation base (O’Flaherty, M., 1993, p.89). Whilst the central focus of strategy for Louisburgh has been, and is, on active recreation there is a recognised need for the development of wet weather attractions to complement outdoor activities (O’Flaherty, 1993, p. 112). The area outperforms the nearest urban centre, Westport, some 12 miles away in terms of its recreational potential but suffers due to its remote location and poor access. The benefits cited from the maximisation of the recreational potential in the area include;

- The extension of the holiday season.
- Lengthening of tourist visits through the provision of recreational opportunities
- Increased likelihood of return visits.
- Potential to spread benefits to the rural hinterland (O’Flaherty, M, 1993, p. 106)

In an effort to provide some tangible figures on the potential for development of the area it is calculated that up to 100,000 people climb Croagh Patrick each year (Mac
Gréil, Michaél, 2013, p.55) and Clew bay has been identified as an underutilised resource for the recreational enjoyment of citizens and visitors (Mac Gréil, Michaél, 2013, p.57). Clew Bay is in itself a beautiful natural inlet of the Atlantic Ocean bordered on the South from the mouth of the Killary fjord to Wesport Quay and on the North from Achill Island to Newport. Clare island is located in the mouth of the bay. The numerous islands in the bay mark the western end of ‘the drumlins’, the ice age deposits of clay, gravel and sand. Clew bay has recognised potential for the provision of adventurous educational and enjoyable recreation for visitors (Mac Gréil, Michaél, 2013, p. 91).

The area is also along the route of the Wild Atlantic Way (Fig. 3.2), the overarching proposition currently under development by Failté Ireland. Clew Bay has been earmarked for the development of a meaningful cluster where local businesses will be supported in developing market appropriate activities and attractions to attract overseas visitors and encourage them to extend their stay (Monaghan, F., 2014, appendix 7).
3.3 The Research Onion:

The research onion developed by Saunders et al (Appendix 2.), attempts to rationalise the issues underpinning the selection of data collection and research methodologies. Five separate stages are identified, namely; Philosophies, Approaches, Strategies, Time Horizons and Data Collection Methods. The model is a metaphor for describing the layers of the research process. The outer layer of the onion relates to the development of knowledge. Saunders et al identified three main strands of research philosophies or paradigms (Saunders and Lewis, 2012, p.105).

3.4 Positivism, Interpretivism and pragmatism:

The positivist paradigm is a research philosophy similar to that used in the physical and natural sciences with the law of cause and effect as a founding principle. This philosophy assumes that though direct access to the environment it is possible to obtain objective knowledge about the external reality and that this reality is separate from those who observe it (Weber, 2004). In essence it asserts that there is one ‘real world’ with potential for absolute objectivity. The paradigm underlies what are quantitative methods of data collection.

Detractors of this philosophy argue that the method can result in oversimplification and that the rich complexity of the world as lived is side stepped. They argue that the research must be contextualised, to account for the stance and frame of reference of the researcher and that complete objectivity is not realistic (Creswell, 2009, p.12). The search for more flexible alternatives saw the resurgence in qualitative research and the introduction of interpretivism, less constrained by the rigidity of positivism and with a softer approach to understanding reality (Carson et al, 2001). This philosophy advances the theory that the boundary between reality and those that observe it is less clearly defined and that the context of the data collection must also be accounted for. As such Interpretivism can be placed on the opposite end of the continuum to positivism as it ‘includes multiple realities, different actors’ perspective, researcher involvement, taking account of the contexts of the phenomena under study’ (Carson et al, 2001, p.5). With a more informal subjective approach, qualitative researchers are characterised by their preference for a more personally invested approach and their

Both of these philosophies favour particular techniques which support their ideology and are easily defined at a philosophical level. This is not the case however when it comes to the more practical issues of research design and a certain hybridisation may take place. The difficulty with this is that positivism and interpretivism are distinct and incompatible in terms of researchers’ assumptions about the ‘nature of knowledge and suitable ways of generating knowledge’ (Guba and Lincoln, 2005). Therefore any combination of the two philosophies, or a mixed method approach much be considered in the context of a separate paradigm (Denscombe, 2008). Pragmatism, as this use of mixed methods has come to be known, advances that rather than choosing either a qualitative or quantitative approach and applying this to the research question that the question itself should inform the applied philosophy (Saunders and Lewis, 2012, p.107). One of the key benefits of using multiple methods is seen as a means of establishing validity in qualitative research and adding perspective to quantitative research (Carson et al, 2001, p.10). It can be used to particular effect in the study of complex social phenomena comprised of both interpretivist and positivist elements (Sale et al, 2002).

3.5 Research approach:

The second layer of the onion looks at two different approaches to conducting research; deduction and induction. Deduction involves the testing of a theory and is generally associated with positivism whilst induction involves the building of a theory and is generally associated with interpretivism. Theory testing involves deducing predictions from existing theories and identifying these as the hypotheses for research whilst theory building involves building new theories or the adaptation of existing ones. The pragmatic approach adopts abductive reasoning, which when applied to qualitative research is a ‘combination of deductive and inductive thinking with logical underpinnings (Patton, 2002, p.470).

The study involved inductive research interviews. Originally it had been the authors intention to also include a deductive element of surveys of visitors to the rural tourism
businesses being examined but this proved to be overambitious in the time available to complete this study. The intended focus of these surveys was to determine the origin of the visitors; how it was they came to hear of the destination and whether their experience was aligned with their expectations. Statistical analysis would then provide for detailed assessment of patterns of responses and allow for integration with the qualitative analysis (Driscoll et al, 2007, p.26). The aim was to bolster the findings of the qualitative in-depth interviews with a more closed-end instrument where certain relevant factors could be analysed in a systematic manner (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). If the findings were consistent across different approaches then the conclusion could be viewed with more confidence.

Qualitative research is best suited for this study as many scholars suggest that ‘qualitative researchers can obtain insights into the underlying cognition, affects, and overt behaviour and can provide data about feelings, thoughts, intentions, and behaviours that could not be captured with a rational approach. Qualitative research relies on the interpretation of the text, the identification of new theories that emerge based on comparisons with existing literature. (Chen, P.J., 2010). It is a case of comparing, contrasting, replicating and classifying the objects of study where the researcher is trying to understand particular situations (Creswell, J.W., 2009).

3.6 Research Strategies:

Where a qualitative study can be improved through the use of quantitative data, a mixed-method design is preferred (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). Mixed methods research incorporates the use of a number of different methods including secondary data, Interviews, surveys and observations.

Whilst it was the original intention to use a pragmatic, mixed methods approach for this study, to give a deeper understanding of both the development and adoption of marketing strategies and also the effectiveness of those strategies on the target market this proved too ambitions a task given the limitations in terms of time and word count.

The strategies were chosen with a focus on their potential contribution towards framing and answering the research question.
3.6.1 Secondary data analysis:

A detailed analysis of relevant secondary data on the subject was initiated in the literary review and was advanced and developed throughout the research process as new sources become known. This included the analysis of official statistical data, historical documents, industry reports, academic and administrative papers etc. This information source provided extensive background knowledge with regard to;

- Information on national and regional industry development.
- Identification of the target market in terms of quantification, origin and dispersal.
- What is the national and regional brand.
- The main challenges faced by rural tourism globally and in Ireland.
- The main policy instruments used to address these challenges, their development and rationale.
- The barriers to and benefits of cooperative networking.
- The motivations of rural tourism operators and the impact of those motivations on development.

3.6.2 Interviews with key sources:

In order to test the in depth interviews a Pilot Study was carried out on a similar business to those being studied but in a different region. To this end, the proprietor of a hostelry in Slane, Co. Meath with whom the researcher is on friendly terms, kindly agreed to be the subject of a trial run to iron out mechanistic issues with wording, sequencing, timing and control (Kinnear and Taylor 1996, p.355). The transcript of this interview structure is attached in appendix 3 and the interview transcript itself is in appendix 4. Based on this trial, revisions were made in relation to the format of the interview which was determined to be overly structured and hindering natural flow of conversation.

Rather than asking pointed questions the interviewer invited the interviewee to speak around the broad topics and encouraged tangential discussion to give insight into their
personal experiences. The interviews were thus kept quite open and thematic analysis was used in the post interview stage, allowing for the informants to speak for themselves and affording ample opportunity for various opinions and ideas to emerge (Brouder, P, 2012, p.387).

In-depth interviews with business owners were targeted to assess attitudes and opinions with regard to factors underpinning adoption of marketing philosophy with particular attention to market research, supporting policy, cooperative networks and motivations. It was anticipated that emergent themes might also arise on foot of the interviews and secondary data analysis which indeed transpired to be the case. These could not be accommodated in the study in any depth due to the considerably broad scope already included, the lack of time to adequately research them and lack of space to include them.

The long interview is the most revealing tool in the arsenal of qualitative studies and ‘every qualitative interview is, potentially, a pandora’s box generating endlessly various and abundant data’ (Mc Cracken, 1988, p.12). The flexible semi structured nature of the interviews contributed toward teasing out the presence and intensity of social and professional milieus and assess whether intra-competitive forces were limiting marketing strategy adoption and effectiveness. Careful questioning of the interviewees contributed to a greater understanding of the various points of interest and this tone of informality created a comfortable environment that elicited tacit, truthful, and candid responses. By including six interviews it was hoped that some saturation of qualitative data might occur.

The interviews with the business owners took place at the business at a time convenient to them. In some cases it was conducted in a private office whilst in others it was conducted in a common circulation area with various activities taking place nearby. As previously mentioned the interviews were in all but one case recorded to allow for the correction of memory limitations, thorough and repeated examinations as well as provide for counter accusations in relation to the researcher bias. Due to rapport struck up between the interviewer and the interviewee’s there was a large amount of irrelevant information recorded. The interviewer used his discretion and did not transcribe the interview’s verbatim. Interviews lasted an average of over 1
hour. A research guide was used to keep the interviewer focused on the broad areas of interest but the questions were kept very much open so that the interviewees were free to say as much as they wanted.

Interviews were carried out with key support organisations at a local and regional level. Relevant individuals with key roles in the support of rural tourism have been identified and these included representatives from Louisburgh HQ which is the local voluntary tourist office (appendix 5), LEADER (Appendix 6), Failté Ireland (appendix 7) and the Local Authority. Topics considered included; The rural Ireland Brand identity and how this has developed, policy and trends in development, local initiatives and supports available and access to those supports and the level of engagement with small businesses and the nature of that engagement.

These individuals have been chosen because they are representative of certain sectors of the industry at regional and local level. This part of the process focused on a small sample with a focus on gaining insight and understanding. As previously stated these interviews took the form of guided conversations and were structured informally (Johns and Lee Ross, 1998).

The interviews were recorded for contextualised understanding where possible. In one interview, with a representative of the local authority he was not comfortable with the idea of being recorded and instead he agreed to email his insights shortly thereafter.

### 3.7 Analysis and interpretation of data:

The challenge with qualitative analysis involves the analysis of vast amounts of data. Crude information has to be refined to reveal insights relevant to the research question. Unfortunately there are no formulas for the determination of relevance and no conventions for testing validity and reliability (Ryan, 2009, p.150). Through extensive reading around the topic the researcher became acutely aware of expected trends and where results were not consistent with expectations this opposition was carefully analysed to ensure accuracy. In qualitative studies the digestion of
information can be a passive, involuntary process and patterns and themes emerge organically without that express intention at a particular time (Patton, 2002). In the course of carrying out a qualitative study a subconscious process of interpretation occurs. Thoughts and insights creep up on the researcher spontaneously with flashes of insight. This indeed was the case during this study with distraction from the research process often harrowing the ground for creative thinking and insightful interpretation. In addition to the continuous development and refinement of the research process the researcher needed to immerse themselves in the interviews and secondary data and structure the content into a form coherent and consistent with the research objectives (Gordon, W. & Langmaid, R., 1988). There can be a danger with qualitatively focused studies that the researcher can get distracted from the primary focus and follow tangents and as such it was important to be guided by the research question at all times.

The secondary data was used to validate accounts from the interviewee’s, identify rival accounts and distinguish between the intentions of policy makers and outcomes (McCarthy, B., 2012, p. 264).

3.8 Research ethics:

This is concerned with the issues of consent, harm, privacy and confidentiality of data (Punch, 1994). It is important that all participants will engage voluntarily and will have full disclosure of the potential risks of that engagement whatever they might be (Berg, 2004).

In deference to such sensitive issues the ethical principles considered in this research included disclosure of the purpose of the study, the informed consent of the interviewee’s as well as confidentiality and anonymity when requested. Additionally remarks made in the course of the interviews, that had no bearing on the research topic, which were considered by the potentially contentious should they be seen by other interviewee’s, were removed from the transcripts.
The ethical consideration ensured the correct and truthful representation of the data by the researcher. The researcher is responsible for ensuring that all of the information provided is accurate and in context (O’Leary, 2004, p.51).
Chapter 4: Analysis

4.1 Analysis:

In this chapter the author gives a summary of the interviews (Full transcripts can be seen in the appendices at the back of this document) with a more detailed discussion of the findings in the subsequent ‘discussion’ chapter.

The summaries will be presented by interview rather than by topic to give a more fluid understanding of the approach of each business with respect to the identified aims. The sequence of presentation of the summaries is according to the sliding scale of marketing capability encountered from inept and reactive to proactive, progressive and insightful.

4.1.1 Business No. 1 (appendix 8):

This business is a small 18 bedroom hotel in Louisburgh Town. It was bought in 2002 from which time the interviewee managed the business until it closed in late 2013. She had no formal training or experience in the hospitality industry.

There was no market plan and no market research was carried out prior to opening. There was no technological facility to record statistical data on the customers until just before it ceased trading and there were no structures in place to record, monitor and review this data. They created a website which needed to be build three times and were only able to take bookings online at the very end. The business was occasionally advertised in the local paper, and bookings were taken through ‘Holidaybreaks’ website for a short period.

The manager felt that the lack of marketing focus was a serious hindrance. An effort was made to engage with Failté Ireland but she was unimpressed with the level of support received. She found it difficult to find time to market the business because of the operational responsibilities.
The business was not involved in any cooperative promotional activities with any other business or support body and the managers foremost motivation was social interaction. The business was closed down however in late 2013 and is due to reopen in Aug. 2014 under new management.

4.1.2 Business 2 (appendix 9):

This business is a small, family owned, stand-alone hotel, 6 miles to the West of Louisburgh. As was the case with business no. 1, there was no formal market plan in place prior to buying the premises in 1991 and there was no formal market research. Due to the remote location the issue of seasonality is accentuated and each year on opening the reputation has to be rebuilt.

In terms of the marketing activities, adverts are taken out in the local papers in the summer months. They have a website, have used flyers from time to time and depend largely on word-of-mouth. There is an informal approach to marketing without identified strategic goals or objectives. Bookings for the rooms are primarily though the website ‘Bookings.com’. With the recent launch of the Wild Atlantic Way’ they have joined Failté Ireland to be listed as an accommodation provider on the route.

The manager has no industry specific training and prior to purchasing the business she had very limited sector specific experience. The primary motivation cited is the provision of a community service as the bar is the hub of the isolated community.

Market research is carried out on an informal basis and involves the interviewee talking to customers. There is no formal process for the recording and review of the elicited information. Statistical information recorded on the online booking is not formally reviewed or analysed.

The interviewee feels that future developments would need to consider the development of an activity to attract groups, but is not growth motivated and has no interest in advancing this further. She feels that this would require a strategic focus and she prefers to be operationally involved.
She welcomed the opening of the voluntarily run, tourist office in Louisburgh as a positive development and also recognised the benefit of a bistro bar opening in Louisburgh. She saw this as a challenge, with the additional competition, but also as a positive in that people are attracted to areas with a choice.

4.1.3 Business No. 3 (appendix 10):

The business in question is a bistro bar located in the centre of Louisburgh. The interviewee bought the premises, which had been vacant for 3-4 years, in 2013. Prior to purchase he carried out extensive, informal market research, visiting successful bars on the West Coast and mimicking elements of their model. He is cognisant of the importance of the local market and doesn’t increase his prices in the peak season.

The owner is a venture capitalist with a number of other successful businesses, dealing with corporate clients in the electronics sector, in his portfolio. He has a family history in the area and cites philanthropic motivations of regenerative contribution for the purchase of the business. This business is supplemental. He is not operationally involved and has appointed a full time manager. He has a background in marketing and also deals with marketing specialists in his other enterprises and provides mentoring support to the manager.

The marketing activities undertaken include the creation of a website and Facebook page. He is also registered on ‘Tripadvisor’, has taken out an advert on ‘Mayo T.V.’, has posted a ‘YouTube’ video and distributed flyers. He has set targets of achieving a certain number of covers per week and has also targeted entertainment events to establish the venue as a ‘Trad Pub’. He has approached other successful bar owners informally, with similar products to establish an alliance.

He feels that there is some resentment locally towards his success. He has engaged with the Local Authority to develop tourism infrastructure and has lobbied to this effect with another tourism business owner in Clare Island. He has not engaged with any other local stakeholders on this initiative.
4.1.4 Business No.4 (appendix 11):

The business is a small hotel located along the route of the Great Western Greenway between the scenic seaside towns of Newport and Mulranny. The owner/manager took over the family business in 2001 after taking redundancy from his directorship in an electronic manufacturing plant. One of his first acts was to close the shop which was performing poorly since the arrival of large, low-cost retailers in the local hubs.

He developed a marketing plan with phased development to incorporate catering capabilities followed by a function room and accommodation. The decision to expand was taken to grow revenue having monitored market demand. With the opening of the Greenway (cycle route following the old railway line between Westport and Achill), he recognised demand for camping and caravan park facilities and applied for planning for a 20 bed hostel. He received it in 2011 after engaging with the National Roads Authority to reduce the speed limit on the road outside the premises. He applied for LEADER funding from the South Mayo Development Co. Ltd. but has so far been unable to secure this due to their restructuring. He is considering seeking a private equity partner to complete the development as he feels he cannot wait another summer.

He has clear targets in terms of average occupancy rates to justify the investment and has expanded his target market and widened his product range to cater for special dietary requirements with a view to increasing turnover.

He is involved cooperatively with other businesses on an informal, voluntary basis to generate goodwill. He has also formed a successful alliance with a large hotel also operating in the area to lobby the local authority for technology infrastructure improvements. He has negotiated with local landowners to secure direct access onto the greenway from his business.

His marketing activities include advertising in the local papers, on the local radio station and on ‘Mayo T.V.’. The business has a Website, Facebook page and Twitter account which carry menu and event information and are updated by qualified staff. He has delivered certified hospitality training to his front of house staff.
He cited growth and profit as his main motivators and he has set profit focused performance indicators that are measured on a weekly basis were possible and monthly basis where necessary. He has incorporated technological innovations for market research and also to facilitate regulatory compliance.

4.1.5 Interview 5 (appendix 12):

The business in question is a Hostel on Clare Island with an attached bar and restaurant overlooking the Harbour. After the original hotel burnt down in 2006 the business was redeveloped as a hostel, with the rationale that it could cater for larger volumes at a fraction of the development cost of a hotel. The owner/ manager stated that the margins on the accommodation, which has a low fixed cost, were attractive compared to those for the food and beverage elements.

The interviewee grew up in the business and after taking it over in 1999 developed 4 separate plans, none of which were pursued due to the unattractive figures. The business plan for the current business plan was approved in 2010. It has conservative projection of performance with realistic figures. The interviewee felt that it had to be ‘bulletproof’ to receive approval in the prevailing economic environment. He stated that a detailed and well researched business plan was critical to reducing financial pressures of uncertainty and limiting risk.

The targeted markets were batchelor/ette parties, activity groups and universities (to capitalise on the academic heritage of the island). The asset includes classroom facilities with capacity for 50 students. Future development plans include weddings and events.

Performance is reviewed in the off-season against the key metrics. The interviewee has worked with local landowners, activity providers and the ferry company to package the offering, has set up a tourism committee and has set up and promoted an adventure race. He promotes other activity providers on the island to market the island as an attractive experience.
He has a small marketing budget with a focus on creativity. He carries out ‘Search Engine Optimisation’ (SEO) and ‘Adwords’ analysis to improve his google ranking and has developed close working relationships with the media. A travel programme broadcast in Britain and Ireland will carry a piece on the ‘Raft Building Festival’ he set up, at zero cost.

He received LEADER funding of €150k for the development of the business and is positively disposed towards the efforts of the various supporting bodies. He feels that it is important for the businesses to get their products right and then the message will travel.

He records visitor information and plans to focus more on market research in the off-season, once the development phase is complete. He feels that this strategic analysis is difficult to carry out in peak season because of the operational pressures. He also plans to carry out a deep business review after 5 years to inform future development decisions.

4.1.6 Business 6 (appendix 13):

The business is an interpretive centre set on a working sheep farm six miles outside Louisburgh on the boundary of a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). One of the main attractions on offer is an interactive sheep dog herding demonstration which was found to be the most sought after activity by tourists on a recent ‘Córas Iompair Éireann’ (CIE) tours survey. Because of the low stocking ratios imposed by Europe the business was not viable as a conventional sheep farm.

The owners engaged proactively with the planning authority to get planning approval and received LEADER funding to the tune of €150k for the development. They also engaged at every stage of the development with their insurer to keep the premium down and ensure adequacy of cover. They found the planning authorities, LEADER (The South Mayo Development Company) and Failté Ireland very supportive and professional.
The wife in the partnership is originally from the area and admitted that emotion and sentiment played a key role in the decision to develop the business as they could have bought a Hotel in Westport for less than the cost of development. The couple have a strong business background with the husband having run aviation businesses in the U.S. His wife has a marketing qualification and extensive marketing and tourism experience. On returning to Ireland in 2000 she initially bought a Bed and Breakfast and later ran a hotel. She helped found ‘Destination Westport’, a cooperative alliance of the hotels in the town. Since opening in July 2014 they have initiated contact with established tourism businesses in the wider area and are conscious of only partnering with business with a quality product that create synergy.

Their future development plans include the installation of poly-tunnels, and the construction of a farm machinery museum and a ‘heritage house’ for wet day activities. They have engaged with an ecologist for the development of education programmes and are setting up a tele-data link to offer these programmes to universities in the U.S. They have set explicit targets to have 100,000 people doing their online programmes within 5 years. They are also developing online lesson plans which will be personally presented to school principles in February 2015.

In terms of promotion they have a Website, and social media platforms and have recently recorded a video for ‘Golf T.V.’ with a reach of 68 million Americans. They have also participated in ‘Meithéal’, a Failté Ireland run trade fair where they presented to bus tours from around the world. CIE tours had wanted to send a tour immediately but they declined, feeling that because they were not ready it could result in brand damage. They received bookings based on the strength of the presentation and accepted the offer of a German bus tour operator to translate their website into German for a small fee. Regular staff briefings take place to communicate the ethos and ensure consistency.

The husband will continue to provide consultancy services in the aviation industry to generate capital for the development of the next phase of development but they stress that this business is their main focus. They are keen to get the marketing element to where it needs to be as quickly as possible but are finding this difficult due to embryonic developmental pressures.
Chapter 5: Discussion & Conclusions

5.1 Introduction:

As previously discussed small, family run rural tourism business is generally regarded as being deficient in their understanding and application of marketing philosophies as. In this chapter the author endeavours to interrogate the validity of that general assumption, presenting academic interpretation and using evidence from the in-depth interviews as confirmation or confrontation.

5.2 Owner/manager motivations:

The manager has a diverse role requiring understanding of all of the business functions and their interaction (Brouder, P., 2012). The business and the manager cannot be assessed in isolation as their ‘beliefs, ideals, preferences, experience and expertise will essentially be those of the small firm itself’ (McCartan-Quinn, D., & Carson, D., 2003, p. 206).

Whilst the omnipotent influence of the owner manager can encourage creative and innovative behaviour, given that such business are unencumbered by the bureaucratic burdens familiar in larger firms, this unstructured creative approach can contribute to uncertainty and manager behaviour can sometimes appear inconsistent, incoherent and incomprehensible (McCartan-Quinn, D., & Carson, D. 2003, p. 202). A reoccurring theme in the interviews was the impact of emotion on the decisions to establish the businesses, a feature less common in large companies with devolved management structures. Business no. 6 explained that if their decision making was purely rational they would have purchased a large hotel in receivership on Westport Quay, with an established market and representing unquestionable value at a fraction of its market value. Instead they chose what might be viewed as a more uncertain path to develop their business in a remote, difficult to access area and to commodify the latent value of the family farm to make it sustainable. Business no.2 stated that they had been agonising over the decision to exit the market due to apprehension that a new owner may not remain true to the ethos of the bar. Such emotionally founded
business decisions would be uncommon in larger firms with a hierarchical management structure.

Some academics have made the distinction between a ‘life-style business’, which is set up to provide adequate income for the founder, and the ‘entrepreneurial business’ which is founded to grow. It must be stated however that businesses 3-6 were growth motivated and their decision making was by-and-large rational and supported by hard data. Businesses 1 and 2 might be better described as ‘life-style’ motivated where they were neither interested nor motivated in growing the business to generate additional revenue and had a survival or sustaining focus.

Another trend that emerged was the level of experience and academic qualification and the attitude towards continued professional development of the owner/managers. The life-style businesses (Business 1 and 2) had no sector specific or business qualification and had not undertaken any further training. The more entrepreneurial businesses of 4-6 had extensive marketing or business backgrounds and had also demonstrated an aptitude and appetite for engaging on further training programmes and had availed of the networking opportunities afforded. Business no. 3 occupied somewhat of a middle ground. Unlike the other’s the owner was not from the locality and had no background in the sector. He was however highly success orientated and was determined to succeed where others had failed. A study by Anderson (2000, p.98) found that out-of-town business owners can sometimes have attitudes that contribute to success as ‘where locals tended to see constraints, cosmopolitans saw opportunity’ and that where locals looked toward other locals, cosmopolitans were more concerned with wider approval’.

Another common perception of small rural enterprise is that they are reactive and have little time to think strategically about the business with resource constraints requiring an intuitive approach to decisions making (Brown, J. 1995). This was in concurrence with the feedback in the interviews where all of the interviewee’s found it difficult to find the time to plan, particularly in the peak season. Whilst businesses one and two had submitted to their fate in this regard, businesses 4-6 had minimised the potential dangers of strategic drift by having structures in place to record data on an ongoing basis, for review and interpretation in the off-season. Business no.5 had
planned for a deep review would take place after year 5 to evaluate performance and inform future strategic decisions. These ‘entrepreneurial’ business owners had developed systems and structures to record and interpret internally generated data, showing a proactive management focus transcending the reactive stereotype.

Management of small firms is sometimes referred to as an adaptive process focused toward immediate and short term advantage where the ‘perceived science of planning confronts the art of intuition’ (Mc Kiernan, p. & Morris, C., 1994). An element of flexibility that is facilitated by the unilateral operational structure is also important in a dynamic industry where rapid changes in demand and consumption trends are common (Morrison, A, & Conway, F. 2007, p.53). An example of this in practice would be the targeting marketing of family rooms for mid week in Business 5 when capacity typically exceeded demand. This owner stressed that marketing practices can be adopted or aborted at short notice to react to a changing market environment. Provided that these decisions are appropriate, such flexibility is a source of competitive advantage for small business over their larger, more cumbersome rivals.

Having analysed the interview transcripts and immersed himself in the academic theory, it must be said that the author finds the contention that small firms are typified by non-profit and zero growth motivations (Cromie, S., 1991), to be wide of the mark and overly general. Whilst businesses 1 and 2 fitted that profile, businesses 3-6 were growth motivated and had specific performance objectives and targets in this regard.

5.3 Market Research:

The access to and consideration of market research is central to positioning a business in the way of opportunity. ‘Sound planning and management of resources, led by marketing research, analysis of the needs of all stakeholders and partnership between the public and private sectors are instrumental for the long-term prosperity of destinations and their residents’ ( Wanhill, S., & Buhalis, D., 1999, p. 297).

There was a diverse range of approach with regard to market research encountered in the businesses interviewed. It is generally regarded as an underutilised resource by small business (Clarke, J. et al, 2001, p.197). This paucity of information can result in
the inability to forecast future demand for products, and a passive reaction to changes in the marketing environment (McCartan, D., & Carson, D., p. 204). This passivity is evidenced in the approach of business 2 to the newly launched ‘Wild Atlantic Way’ concept and its likely impacts on her business. No additional promotional activities were planned to capitalise on the greater exposure and a ‘wait and see’ attitude was adopted.

Again, businesses 1 and 2 had done little with regard to accessing available external data to inform their original decision to trade, or subsequently, to inform strategy decisions. Businesses 3-6 had to varying degree’s carried out research and business 6 it could be said had based every business decision from consideration of the business model, through conception to operation, on hard data. They based their core product offering on the verified market demand for sheep dog handling on a working farm showing accordance with a comprehensive study carried out in Spain where most interviewee’s agreed that ‘the viability of rural tourism lies on the fact of being compatible and complementary to traditional activities, not being a substitute to previous incomes’ (Sanagustin Fons, M.V. et al, 2011, p. 554). Business 4 also had a very considered approach to market research and was cognisant of the research that the increased presence of foreign workers in hotels was identified as departing from tourists’ expectations of meeting local people (Cawley, M. & Gillmor D.A., 2008, p. 327), in his human relations policies. Business 5 demonstrated an in-depth knowledge of the theory of market orientation and an understanding of how this would be applied in practice.

With regard to internally generated market research, again business 1 and 2 were the laggards. Business 1 did not have the infrastructure in place to gather statistical data until the business was already doomed to failure. Whilst they recognised that this was a key weakness for the business, they didn’t appear to have the capacity or resources to improve their situation in this regard. Business 3 was somewhat inconsistent in its approach and businesses 4-6 were using it to create competitive advantage. Business 5 had completed numerous business plans before settling on his current path and questioned the wisdom of entering the market blindfolded, particularly in light of the fact that small businesses have most likely provided personal guarantee’s for their capital funding and are highly leveraged. He regarded extensive market research as a
prerequisite for any strategic decisions and as something to be carried out on an ongoing basis, to support the business and limit the exposure and associated stress of business failure. Business 5 had a very structured approach to ongoing market research, which was analysed with robotic frequency and had also ensured that the benefits and implications were communicated to key members of staff.

Again it must be said that the general perception that ‘small tourism firms do not undertake formal market planning with directed actions’ (Friel, M., 1999, p. 100), and that marketing is underutilised for many rural tourism destinations was not consistent with the research findings. In the interview with Failté Ireland (appendix 7) the interviewee commented that there were a number of progressive businesses operating in the study area indicating that it may not be reflective of the situation elsewhere (Monaghan, F., 2014).

5.4 Marketing activities:

The marketing challenges faced by small firms can define their future. While the principles of marketing are equally applicable to both small and large firms, it is sometimes perceived to be problematic for smaller firms particularly. In accordance with this view, business no. 1 recognised deficiencies in marketing as the major contributor to market failure but was unable to apply the principles to salvage the business.

The utilisation of marketing techniques and resources are often inhibited by limited resources and in many cases, an operational focus. The internet can provide the opportunity for ‘affordable and effective dynamism and versatility’ in the marketing performance of small firms, enabling them to compete with larger enterprise (McCartan-Quinn, D., & Carson, D., 2003, p. 205). The key to this is the adoption of creative marketing practice.

In spite of the obvious time constraints and operational pressures being experienced the better performing businesses interviewed in this research had all undertaken courses in professional development in the area of marketing to address what they saw as personal weaknesses that were limiting successs. Improved marketing practice
can only be achieved through education of the owner/manager due to their level of influence and omnipresence within the organisation (McCartan, D., & Carson, D., 2003). Businesses 4-6 had all undertaken digital media training and used it for interactive communication with their markets to develop deeper relationships.

All of the businesses with the exception of business 1 had the basic standard of a serviced website and social media platform. Businesses 1 and 2 used undifferentiated activities of traditional media, newspaper advertising as well as some flyers and were largely dependant on returning custom, passing traffic and word-of-mouth. Business 3 was somewhat more progressive having posted YouTube video’s and taken out ads on ‘Mayo T.V.’. Business 4 had qualified personnel monitoring and updating the social media output, which was used to carry menu specials and details and records of recent events. Business 5 and 6 showed differentiating creativity in their activities, establishing networks in the media to carry their promotional material as content on travel shows, to exponentially increase their potential exposure to a wider audience. Their use of digital media to provide the ‘physical evidence’ highlighted in Chapter 2, in the extended marketing mix, as being key to reducing the perceived risk to the consumer of purchasing an intangible, demonstrates a certain level of insight into the challenges of providing certainty to the customer in terms of product quality. The choice of marketing channel was also aligned with the preferred communication medium of the target market, established in their marketing plan. Their activities were consistent, coherent and focused. Both were very much aware of the importance of marketing in the value chain but also the criticality that all elements of the chain are supportive. Business 5 stressed the focus on having the marketing plan in place, but emphasised the importance of getting the product right. He felt that if the message is good enough it would travel. This level of insight into the interrelated and mutually supportive elements of the ‘Marketing Mix’, is in confrontation with the suggestion that the performance of rural tourism businesses is blunted by poor comprehension of marketing philosophy (Atelijevic, J., 2009, p. 297).

5.5 Supporting policy:

‘Policy must empower local people and reduce dependency on state agencies and facilitate enterprising behaviour’ (Cawley, M, & Gillmor, D.A., 2008 (319).
‘Policy coordination and integration is required across the breadth of government agencies either directly (e.g. regulation, compliance) or indirectly (e.g. interest rates, regional tourism marketing) involved in small firm development.

One of the key targeted areas of policy for improvement is skills. An ‘Expert Group of Future Skills Needs’, is planning to commence a detailed assessment of the workforce skills and competency requirements for the hospitality sector in Ireland up to 2020. Whilst the infrastructure has improved drastically in recent years the focus has turned to the skills deficit in the areas of management capability, IT and design. These skills are required across all tourism sub-sectors including marketing (Dept, of Transport, Tourism and Sport, 2014, p. 17).

State Tourism Agencies have been focusing their energies on the development of products of a sufficient scale to be marketed internationally. In the case of the west coast the proposition is the ‘Wild Atlantic Way’. Private tourism enterprises in the region are being encouraged to tailor their offering to meet the needs of the visitors who are enticed to travel by the overall concept (Dept, of Transport, Tourism and Sport, 2014, p. 18). Businesses 3 and 5 have been lobbying the local authority to provide funding for tourism infrastructure that would help them capitalise on the national marketing activities.

Business 1 admitted to a lack of understanding with regard to the supports that were available. They engaged in organised networking meetings but without any clear vision or where they were going and consequently did not have the necessary focus of an identified objective to apply for support for. Business 2 did not find the regional and national supports to be of any value, felt that they were targeted at the larger providers and had the same level of disinterest in what they were doing and why they were doing it as she felt the support bodies had in her business. Businesses 4-6 had all availed of funding provided under the LEADER programme, and had engaged in the training programmes provided by FI. Business 6 had also taken part in networking events put on by FI. All 3 had engaged with all of the influential institutions on various elements of their development plans from funding for infrastructural development to engagement with the planning authorities and lobbying of the local
representative for support of the wider community and by extension their business interests.

All of the businesses were firm in their support of the voluntary tourist office that had opened in Louisburgh in 2012 recognising its role as a central focus independent of the individual providers. A recent study on rural tourism in Northern Sweden found that one of the most recurring themes amongst institutional interviewee’s was the importance of the tourist office (Brouder, P., 2012, p.390). There appeared to be however a lack of sector specific skills amongst the members and no clear focus or strategic objectives beside the nebulous desire to support local businesses. Such deficiencies are not uncommon apparently and there is often great enthusiasm on the part of volunteer organisers but a shortfall in formal management and marketing skills (Dept, of Transport, Tourism and Sport, 2014, p. 15).

It is important that policy support’s development at an appropriate rate as rapid growth within smaller firms can have a destabilising effect and result in collapse through crippling cash flow imbalances. As small firms grow instinctive management becomes insufficient as managed systems, controls and procedures increase in importance (Stewart, V., 1990.). Although it may seem counterintuitive, deliberate constraints need to be put on growth to confine it to a scale that can be internally managed in the destination (Schmalleger, D., & Carson, D., 2010, p. 215). Business 6 demonstrated their understanding of these dangers by intentionally delaying growth policies until such time as the product was ready for market recognising that they only get one chance to make a first impression.

5.6 Cooperative networks:

There is consensus within the academic research that tourists do not choose between competing tourism operators in the first instance. Rather they choose a destination and this choice is based on the quality of the overall offering, including ‘natural scenery, culture, and visitor attractions and events, all of which contribute to the overall attractiveness of the destination’ (Dept, of Transport, Tourism and Sport, 2014, p. 7).
Small rural tourism businesses do not have the resources generally to independently provide a packaged offering to cater to all of the needs of the market. As such in order to attract visitors to a destination, it is necessary to present the offering as a package of individual elements through cooperative practices and alliances that provide ease of access and differentiation for the visitor.

Networking efforts by businesses 1 and 2 were on a very basic level and whilst both regarded the development of structures for improved cooperation as important, they were unsure of the nature of that engagement and how it might be of benefit. Business 3 and 5 were involved in a bilateral agreement to lobby for infrastructural tourism investment in the area. Such exclusive arrangements can actually undermine the general cooperate framework. ‘Endogenous fraternities that seize opportunities to embark upon innovative ventures are frequently the catalyst of friction, culminating in disputes, jealousies, or perceived challenges to traditional power structures within a locality’ (Butler and Hinch, 1996). They were disinterested in participating in committee’s due to the bureaucratic burden. If partners are not progressing at the desired speed or if they lose their flexibility, this could lead to the dissolution of collaboration (Bramwell, B. & Lane, B., 2000).

Of all of those interviewed business 5 and 6 had the most structured approach to networking and had partnered with select other providers to achieve differentiation. They were also involved in cooperative marketing arrangements and recognised this as important where the partnership resulted in synergy. They were discriminatory with regard to their choice of partner however, citing the dangers of association with a poor performer which could cause brand damage. This selective behaviour is recognised in the academic research and it is generally accepted that partners of equal strength will be more successful than where one overshadows the other. Unequal or lesser partners with less influence may be excluded which can lead to mistrust (Kubickova, M. & Wang, Y., 2009, p.2).

The development of a social milieu does not mean that there is a Marxist utopia, and areas with value-adding cooperative networks can also be characterised by intense inter-firm rivalry. The important point is that in spite of these rivalries local interest prevails putting the success of the area paramount. Indeed a microcosm of such
interacting processes of competition and cooperation is in evidence in Business 5 where the owner of the business is vocal in espousing the benefits of collaboration whilst simultaneously; the two ferry companies serving the island are engaged in intense competition, which has on more than one occasion seen them before the courts. One of these companies is run by the brother of the owner of business 5 (appendix 12).

5.7 Limitations of the research:

The geographical focus of the study is a limiting factor as the findings may not be representative of other areas. Similar studies in other geographical areas might lend weight to the research in terms of consistency and the facilitation of comparative analysis. As the research is qualitative the researcher relied on the utilisation of tacit knowledge (felt and intuitive knowledge) and as such the conclusions and insights are based on the author’s interpretation. Therefore it could be difficult to generalise the study results for other destinations.

The size of the sample is also quite small and whilst it is the author’s belief that the businesses selected provide a representative transaction of tourism businesses in the area, results may be in variance with those of a similar study carried out on a larger sample.

Another limitation of the study was the exclusion of the local population and the consumers of the offerings, who are certainly relevant to the development of the thesis as key stakeholders. The study provides only qualitative data; quantitative research to include surveys of visitors, could possibly provide additional information and or a combination of both would give more weight to the themes established (Kubickova, M. & Wang, Y., 2009, p.7).

Another key consideration is the degree of familiarity between interviewer and respondent which potentially could influence the honesty and extent of replies. It is an accepted norm in fieldwork that survey interviewers should be strangers with no pre-existing relationship to the respondent. The logic behind this practice is that a pre-existing relationship can lead to biased responses if sensitive information will be
withheld, in order to prevent its use as subsequent gossip in the community
(Friedman, J., 2012). The informed approach of interviewing acquaintances also has
its benefits however and indeed can be justified theoretically, by arguing that in this
type of work complete objectivity is impossible. Subjectivity must intrude at the level
of the respondent and of the measuring instrument, the researcher. ‘The potential
problem of bias, and challenge to reliability, can be countered by a reflective account,
thus allowing the reader to evaluate reliability in context’ (Anderson, A.R., 2000, p.
98).

In spite of these limitations it is hoped that the study will shed some light on the
sector and highlight current deficiencies and potential improvements that might be
made in terms of marketing rural tourism.

5.8 Final remarks:

Based on the interpretation of the primary information gathered it is clear that a
formalised, structured, strategic approach to marketing is not ubiquitous to all of the
operators and that there is a sliding scale in terms of competencies in this business
function. It is also clear that such an approach is not necessarily essential for survival.
It does however appear to be a key determinant of the level of success enjoyed, and
can be critical in affording the operators a greater level of control of their future as it
forces them to understand what is going on, how to progress and how to create

It would seem that, even for the more progressive operators, there will always to be a
disconnect between the accepted conventions of what small businesses should be
doing in terms of marketing their product, and what they are actually doing, given the
myriad of time and resource pressures under which they operate.

It also must be said that whilst the tourism industry in Ireland generally has
experienced impressive growth, that growth has not been uniform across the country.
With 70% of overseas visitors arriving in Dublin, the regions outside of the capital
suffered a decline of 1% between 1999 and 2006 with Dublin experiencing growth of
9% for the same period. The promotion of concepts such as the ‘Wild Atlantic Way’,
and the ongoing support of the operators to position themselves, through the adoption of marketing philosophy, to best avail of the benefits, it is hoped might redress this imbalance (Failte Ireland, 2008, p.24). Operators need to understand that they are not in competition with each other; rather they are competing with concepts such as the ‘Great Ocean Road’ in Australia and the ‘Garden Route’ in South Africa (Monaghan, F., 2014).

5.9 Self reflections on learning: (Appendix 14).
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Appendices:

Appendix 1:

Geographical boundary of the Western region

Source: CSO. Transport 2008. STP route codes cannot be computed due to double counting of arrivals and departures at national airports.

*All airport data from CAIA (UK Civil Aviation Authority). All airports classify domestic and international travel differently and airport classification is not static for all airports.

Appendix 2:

The research Onion. Saunders et al, 2007
Appendix 3:

Original outline structure of interview:

**In depth interviews: Outline Structure**

**Introduction:**

1. How would you define your business?
2. Is the hostel your primary business or is it supplemental?
3. When did you start trading?
4. Why did you choose to start trading? What was the catalyst?
5. Have you always worked in the industry?
6. What did you do before?
7. How did your previous experience help you?
8. How did you start out?
9. How has the business changed in the intervening period? How has it developed?
10. Who is involved in management?
11. Who makes the strategic decisions? Executive or diplomatic?

**Market research:**
1. How would you describe the business environment in terms of the;

   a. Political environment: Inspire you with confidence? Is policy
      supportive or destructive?
   b. Economic environment:
   c. Social environment: Have customers needs/ wants / desires changed?
   d. Technological Environment: adequate infrastructure?

2. What do you see as the biggest challenges for the business?

3. What were the major changes that you have seen over the years?

4. Were you able to prepare for these changes or were they out of the blue? Can
   you plan for changing market conditions or do you just have to react?
   (Example of Good Friday Agreement. Did you start to market to northern
   visitors?)

5. What would you see as the businesses strengths? What do you do best?

6. What would you see as its weaknesses if any? Where could you improve?

7. What are the opportunities for the future?

8. What do you see as the future threats?

9. Do you collect any information off your customers/ visitors? Do you get them
   to fill out any questionnaires/ survey forms/ feedback forms about their
   experience?

10. What sore of information would you gather – Statistical/ behavioural?

11. Do you or does anyone on your behalf analyse this or any other information to
    inform decisions?
12. Do you have any online forums for feedback/discussion with past or future customers?

13. What would you say are the main barriers to marketing for you? (Time/Finances/Incomplete information/Supports/Training)

14. What do you see as the businesses best asset?

**Customers:**

1. What is your product?

2. Is there a cultural or educational element?

3. Who are your customers?

4. What ages are they?

5. Where are they from?

6. What do they want?

7. Do you target different segments?

8. What percentage of them would be repeat visitors?

**Employee’s and seasonality:**

1. How many people are employed? Full time/Part time

2. Where are your employees from?

3. What would their academic background be?
4. How long have they worked for you?

5. Are you open all year around?

6. How does business compare between Summer and Winter?

7. Have you made any effort to extend the season?

8. Is business tied to weather? Slow in bad weather?

9. Have you made any efforts to limit the impact of the bad weather? Including activities that are not impacted or improved facilities for indoor activities?

**Training and Qualifications:**

1. Have you any formal training or qualifications in the sector?

2. Do your employees undergo any formal training?

3. What training do they undertake? Does it vary depending on their role?

4. Is this prescriptive (Legally or institutionally required) or subscriptive?

5. Have you customer service procedures/practices in place?

6. How are these decided on and communicated?

**Competitors:**

1. Who are your competitors?

2. How does your offering compare with theirs?
3. How do you compete? (Price discounting/ differentiation of offering)

4. Would you say that the competition has been constructive (Centred around differentiation/ product development) or destructive (Focused on price)?

**Cooperation:**

1. Do you co-operate with other businesses locally?

2. Would you say that the local businesses are competitive or cooperative?

3. Are there any formal co-operative structures in place?

4. Do you meet regularly? What is the purpose of these meetings?

5. Who sets the agenda? Who chairs the group?

6. Do you cooperate with other in dealings with suppliers to leverage economies of scale?

7. Do you contribute to a central fund for coordinated marketing activities?

8. Has the business ever come into conflict with other stakeholders in the community?

9. What was the nature of the conflict?

10. Is it ongoing or was it resolved? How was it resolved?

**Suppliers:**

1. Who are your suppliers?

2. Where are they based?
3. How long have you been doing business with them?

4. How has your relationship changed over the years?

Support Structures:

1. What institutions/organisations or government bodies are you aware of that provide support for the industry?

2. What supports do they provide? (Around market research/training/technology/promotion)

3. Have you availed of their services? Do you ever contact them for advice?

4. Do you communicate with them regularly? Do you know the person with responsibility for this area?

5. Is this interaction one way or two way?

6. Is there a mechanism for you to influence/comment on policy?

7. Do they take your suggestions on board?

8. What do they do well?

9. What improvements would you suggest?

10. Do they require any undertakings from the business before providing support?

11. Are you a member of any professional organisations?

12. Do you subscribe to any sector publications?
Manager personality/ focus:

1. What are the metrics of success (Objectives); (May word this question as ‘If the stop button was pushed tomorrow what would you miss most?’). What would you say are the wider benefits to the community of your activities?
   
   a. Profit
   b. Growth
   c. Provision of local employment
   d. Enrichment from social interaction
   e. Lifestyle
   f. Social status
   g. Contribution to local economy

2. You mentioned that your main customers are….. Has this always been the case?

3. Why do you think your visitors choose you?

4. Have you changed your offering to suit these customers? If yes how?

5. What would you see as the determinants of success (Strategic objectives)?

Marketing Plan:

1. Do you have a formal marketing plan in place or do you make marketing decisions on an informal basis?

2. Who developed this?

3. Who is in charge of marketing?
4. Have they any formal qualifications in the area?

5. How do they decide on what activities to undertake?

6. Do you have a separate marketing budget?

7. What are your marketing activities?

8. What has worked well in the past?

9. What hasn’t worked?

10. Do you use different activities for different markets?

11. How do you communicate with your target market?

12. Do you use online media?

13. Do you have a website?

14. How many visits would the site get per day/week?

15. How often would you update the website?

16. Is this done internally or externally?

17. Can the website be used for bookings?

18. Do you monitor the websites of your competitors?

19. Do you use social media?

20. What social media tools do you use?
21. What audiences do you target?

22. What is the aim of using social media?

23. Who are your friends/followers on social media?

24. Does social media improve the businesses image/reach?

25. Is there two way communication?

26. Do you review the value of marketing expenditure/how?

27. Who looks after your social media presence?

28. Do you use it to create awareness around offers?

29. Do you have a social media development budget?

30. What if anything do you measure on social media?

31. What is your social media growth rate?

32. Do you have any way of measuring the success of marketing activities?

33. Do you have any procedures around customer feedback?
Appendix 4:

Interview transcript of dummy run on family owned rural-tourism business in Slane:

In depth interviews: Dry Run (To inform decisions on structure and format).

Date of interview: 03.07.2014

(D) Interviewer, Darragh O’Grady
(I) Interviewee. Business owner/ manager.

Context: The business is located 2 km outside Slane Village. I was travelling from Navan towards Slane and in spite of having received specific directions on how to get to the business, which is approx 1 km along the road directly across from one of the entrances to Slane Castle, I missed the turn and ended up in Slane Village. I turned around and came back out the road and took the right turn. I was surprised to see that there was no sign for the business on the main road.

I had called on Tuesday the 1st and arranged to meet the owner on the Thursday at 7.30. On arrival at 7.15 p.m. I went to the reception desk but there was nobody around. There were a number of American tourists out front and a group of middle aged Indians getting ready to head off somewhere after settling their belongings into the cottages.

A young French couple arrived into the reception area and were also waiting to be attended to. I went over to the house and rang the doorbell. The owner’s husband answered the door. I explained who I was and why I was there. He said that the owner must have forgotten about our meeting and that she had gone down to the shops but would be back in 20 minutes. He brought me into the living room, offered me tea and then went to attend to the guests.
He returned after settling the guests and we spoke for some time about what I was doing and then about the business and how it had developed. He told me that his father had been working on the family farm in the 1930’s when a farming accident resulted in him breaking his back and being consigned to hospital for 2 years. When he returned from hospital he was unable to do any manual labour and went around the farm keeping a journal. As his health improved he bought himself a van and started delivering loose milk (He would go from door to door and pour whatever quantity of milk the customer wanted into their receptacle) in Dublin. He opened a distribution centre in Clonee. He was very successful and after 6 years he bought the 220 acre farm that the business now sits on.

He suggested that had his father not been injured in this way he might never have been able to look around and plan strategically. He felt that small farmers on 80-100 acres aren’t making enough and are married to the farm 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Like his father before his accident they can’t see the bigger picture.

He recounted a story about an elderly couple from New Orleans who had stayed with them a number of years ago. One evening he was going down the farm to check on the sheep as it was lambing season. He invited them to come along. When he got there he found that one of the ewe’s was struggling to give birth. He carefully realigned the lamb inside the ewe and having rectified whatever issue she was having with giving birth he got the lady to deliver the lamb, by reaching into the ewe and pulling it out. He said that undoubtedly that woman would never forget that experience that she couldn’t have had anywhere else.

Joanne arrived shortly afterwards and we removed to the office in the hostel to conduct the interview.

**Interview transcript:**

D: How would you define your business?
I: We provide tourist accommodation in a rural setting.

D: Is the hostel your primary business or is it supplemental?
I: The accommodation is a supplemental business. We have 3 businesses going on here. We have a 220 acre dairy farm that my sons are running and we also have an oil business out the back where we sell high quality cooking oils to restaurants and take back and refine their waste. Everybody helps out with everything. The accommodation end of things is developing and growing all the time and taking up more and more time.

D: When did you start trading?
I: In 1999. We originally started off with the hostel. We converted the stables into hostel accommodation. It was getting so busy that we hadn’t enough room so we developed the cottages to cope with the demand. So we now have 6 self catering cottages, a hostel and a campsite. We put a lot of money into it in the beginning and LEADER followed up with funding for developing the original hostel.

D: In order to qualify for funding what did they require?
I: They were looking for your planning permission originally. You have to pay for everything up front first and then submit your application for funding. They also look for surveys and market research etc. to prove that it is a viable proposition. They wouldn’t provide funding if you were looking to compete with an existing local business but at the time when I started this there were no similar businesses around.

D: Why did you choose to start trading? What was the catalyst?
I: The children were getting bigger and I was looking for something for me to do. Also they were coming to an age when they were starting to move away and there were going to be looking for money for doing different things and I thought that there might be something else that I could do that would help contribute to that cost.

D: Did you always have an interest in the area or was the financial motivation the catalyst?
I: No. It was something basically for me to do. I had been at home raising the 5 kids from when they were small and was very busy with that, between their education, bringing them around to football matches and driving them here there and everywhere. They were very involved in sport; football, tennis and absolutely everything, but when they got older they went to boarding school and from there they started going away to college etc and were becoming more independent and I was looking for something to do myself.

D: Have you always worked in the industry?
I: Not per se. I used to work summers when I was young with my aunt who had a guest house in Rosslare but that would have been my only experience in the sector.

D: It must have been a very daunting task then starting the venture?
I: I was very nervous in the beginning, definitely, wondering would it or wouldn’t it work but at the same time I was fairly confident having done a lot of market research. We had also completed a lot of surveys and people were telling us that yes it would work. The fact that it was budget accommodation and that it was based here on the farm was also a help. At the time Irish people weren’t into hostelling as such and had a poor perception of it and it was really the European Market that were our customers. As the years passed we had more Australian, and American visitors but our market would still be predominantly European.

D: And do you do any target marketing of this European segment.
I: We market to them through the website and internet. Most of our bookings are carried out on line.

D: Can you take payment online?
I: Yes

D: We’ll look at that in more detail a little later if that’s ok?
I: O.K

D: What did you do before?
I: I worked in an office in Dublin

D: Would that have been beneficial from an admin point of view?
I: Yes

D: How did your previous experience help you?
I: It would have been a help from the office administration end and I had the computer skilled from it also. I also did and continue to do a lot of courses to up-skill. Through LEADER I completed a course in Starting Your Own Business, I did a course with the enterprise board, I did a course in French as well as a number of courses with Tourism Ireland to update myself. Particularly in the first few years I was updating myself all of the time.

D: Were the courses fully funded?
I: No you have to pay but some of them were subsidised. The Meath partnership courses were part funded.

D: We’ll also look at the training end of things in a little more detail a little later if that’s ok?

D: How has the business changed in the intervening period? How has it developed?
I: Well it started out with the Hostel and then later we developed the self catering and the camping. One of the changes is that now we see a lot more Irish people coming. Weekends are also much busier now also as the area has become very popular for weddings and also the campsite has become much busier because Irish families just don’t have the money for the foreign holidays. Families have invested in tents and for the kids it doesn’t matter where they’re going (The destination is irrelevant). We have families coming to us from Duleek. The kids say
we’re going to Spain mammy after being told they’re going to Slane and it’s all the same to them. The kids have a great time and there definitely has been a huge increase in the camping the last few years. The campsite had always been very busy in the summer with the French and the Germans and the Dutch but now we’ve Irish as well.

During a brief chat with the owner’s husband on arrival he explained that the margins were better out of the camping than on the hostel and self catering – Charging €25 per head in the hostel and have €5-6 profit out of it compared with €7 per head for the camping and having the same margin.

D: What would you say is the difference between the Irish customer and the Dutch and the French?
I: I would say they are more demanding. They don’t leave the place as good. The foreign customers are much more appreciative of what you have (To offer). The Irish demand more and don’t respect the place as much. They’re paying very little because its all budget accommodation, everything we do here is on a budget and much cheaper than anywhere else and yet they expect 5 star treatment. Another difference is that the foreign customers are big into recycling and will use all of your bins where the Irish will put everything everywhere. They come here camping and they’re looking for the cooker and the hair dryer (Extra Service that isn’t covered in that product).

D: Who is involved in management?
I: Just me but everybody helps out when we’re busy. Everyone can answer the phone or open the book and see if we have availability and then my oldest daughter helps out quite a bit in her free time because she works flexi hours (In her full time job) and it is her intention to take over the business.

D: Who makes the strategic decisions? Would it be executive or diplomatic?
I: Myself and my daughter. She’s the future.

**Market research:**

D: How would you describe the Political environment? Does it fill you with confidence? Do you think they are supportive of the industry, are they making the right decisions, does it impact on you at all?

I: It does impact us in some ways because you have new costs associated with waste and water and electricity hike’s. All of these things are costing us. We’re working off a budget. Our costs are low. We’re trying to keep them low but I’m finding that increasingly difficult with all of these extra charges.

D: I asked earlier about how you were reaching your market abroad and you said that the foreign tourist could access the website. Do you do anything to market the place in Ireland besides the website?

I: We advertise on certain other websites. We’re on a camping website. We’re on booking.com.

D: Is it nearly all digital media? Do you use flyers or posters?

I: We do use flyers. We do a trip around most of Ireland early in the year and then again after Christmas delivering flyers. About twice a year we do a trip delivering our flyers around and we work in conjunction with other people as well. A lot of our business would be word of mouth and Facebook and Trip Advisor.

D: I was talking to (your husband) there when I arrived and he told me about bringing an elderly couple from New Orleans with him down the farm one evening during lambing season and he got the lady to pull a lamb. I can only imagine that you would get a lot of people talking about experiences such as that.

I: Absolutely and we get a lot of great reviews on Trip Advisor as well.
D: How would you describe the economic environment? Has the recession improved or had a negative effect on the market?

I: It would certainly have improved the market environment for the campsite and for the hostel. People are looking for the cheaper accommodation options. Something else I notice around the weddings here with which we’re very busy (Weddings in the 4 local hotel’s from which the business benefits on account of the overspill) there are a lot of people looking to take a dorm bed. Six or eight of them can go into a dorm, they’re only paying €20 each and they’re only in it for a few hours. Then they have the en-suite rooms and they’re happy with that. I see it a lot with people who might have been here at a wedding in one of the venues before and they will come back and book the dorm.

D: How would you describe the social environment? What are the customers’ needs, wants and desires?

I: The people coming here have a really good time. One of the best things we ever did here was to put farm in our name. Everybody who books knows they’re not coming to a town or a city. They know they’re coming to a farm and that has been a huge advantage for us. At the time we had a big argument about whether we would include ‘Farm’ in the name and I decided that we would.

D: Was that decision taken on a gut feeling or did you do any research into it.

I: I just wanted people to know they were coming to a farm, because I didn’t want them to think they were coming to Slane village. The fact that it’s a working farm has been a huge advantage. They can go for walks, see the animals and the vegetable garden etc.

D: When was the decision taken to change the name to include farm?

I: It was always in it (The debate had been in the original naming of the business).

D: How would you describe the technological environment?
I: The WiFi and the internet have changed (The business) hugely. People can get off a plane, go onto the website using their mobile phone and see if we have availability. I have a computer out in reception for people to go on the internet but I don’t have to have that any more but it’s still there. I a lot had a payphone with a coin box. I’ve actually disconnected it because nobody was using it.

D: Are you happy with the standard of internet service?
I: It’s always been quite good here. We use the Net One and have been with them from day one because they were the only ones providing a quality service.

D: What would you say are the biggest challenges for the business?
I: Competitors. There are more and more of them since I started 15 years ago. The other factor now with the recession is that you are competing with hotels that are in NAMA and they are giving away beds. They’re not giving the service that we give or the personal contact but they are absolutely giving away the beds to sell food and sell drink.

D: You’re not lowering your prices to compete with them?
I: We’re focusing on improved service and personal contact.

D: In relation to the changes we’ve already spoken about that you have experienced over the years, were you able to prepare for these changes or were they out of the blue? Can you plan for changing market conditions or do you just have to react? (Example of Good Friday Agreement. Did you start to market to northern visitors?)
I: You react to changes as you see them. You look for trends. For example with the campsite if the weather is good you know that you are going to be a lot busier. People now know that we are here. We have made other changes such as putting in a ‘plug-in’ and a hardcore area in the camp site because more and more people were coming in camper vans. Based on the requests we knew that there was enough of a demand for this.
D: I suppose what I’m getting at here is that the market is always changing and you are obviously involved proactively in Tourism (She is the Chair of the ………and has produced a report on the future of Rural Tourism), are there publications available that would help you look at trends in the macro environment?
I: There probably are but to be honest with you I don’t take an awful lot of notice of them. I think they’re a waste of time for a rural business around here because they’re focused on the cities and promoting Dublin and Kerry and Galway and Limerick and for the likes of us here, I am on the Boyne Valley Committee and I have pushed and pushed and pushed for what they were going to do for the Boyne Valley region and I have yet to see an ad on the television for the area. I’m just back from a trip to the West and the Greenway and it is constantly being promoted. Apparently though, they are supposed to be bringing out a supplement in the Irish Independent for the Boyne Valley Region.

D: I noticed that there was a GoKerry supplement with last Sunday’s Independent.
I: Yes and they don’t need it down in Kerry.

D: Is that Failte Ireland or GoKerry that are doing that?
I: It’s a mixture of both. They’re excellent at promotion down in Kerry. They’re absolutely brilliant at it. They think of absolutely everything.

D: As part of my research for this dissertation I read a PhD looking at the difference between the competitive environments in Kerry and Clifden. The conclusion basically was that in Killarney the businesses are cooperative whilst in Clifden they are competitive.
I: That’s what I’m trying to push here. If you are cooperative it works so much better. It’s very difficult to get that message across. We’ve done it in Slane with the craft co-op. There are 20 small crafts producers who are all working together, they have a premises between them, and
they have a showcase for their product. It’s working brilliantly. We’ve also been trying to get the food group to do the same but they won’t. They’re very individual and just won’t cooperate.

D: What would you see as the businesses strengths? What do you do best?
I: Our personal touch.

D: What would you see as its weaknesses if any? Where could you improve?
I: If we could have someone looking after the place 24/7. We can’t afford to do that. We couldn’t justify the cost of a full time manager. We try to have somebody here as much as possible but I also have to look after the house. In the summer time we have young girls working here but we obviously have to pay them. What we do is make sure that you are here in the morning when everybody is going and be here in the evening when everyone is arriving and during the day then divert the phone to your mobile. On other thing I would change also if I was to start over would be to change the dorm sizes. They’re currently 10 bed and 12 bed dorms. If I was to do it over I’d change them to sixes to improve versatility.

D: What are the opportunities for the future?
I: There’s huge potential here for the future.

D: Would you see that as being farm based?
I: Perhaps but also to develop the walks more and possibly having something like a quad train to take people on tours of the farm. There’s also potential for developing an activity like a play area or rope based activity and there’s plenty of space for development. There’s huge potential but at my age I’m not interested in doing any more. It’ll be up to the younger crowd to take it to the next level.

D: Do you take hen nights or stag parties?
I: We do now but for a long time we didn’t. In the very first week that we were open we had a group in that told me they were going golfing in Navan and they left the place in a mess. It was the best thing that ever happened because after that I questioned every group and checked if they were who they said they were and if they were going where they said they were going and took deposits. Hen nights now are older and more settled. All they want is to sit around and have a few glasses of wine and they generally only stay one night because they have to get back to the kids.

D: What do you see as the future threats?
I: The rising cost of doing business and the regulatory environment. We have inspections every year and sometimes twice a year. This year they have come back looking for a fridge freezer in the cottages and they also took issue with the breakfast bar. They were fine when we got approval 15 years ago but the standards are getting higher and higher. At the time we got approval there was no requirement for disability access but I made one of the cottages disability friendly but now it’s becoming mandatory. Another requirement was the installation of a security system with cameras all around the place and the costs of compliance around health and safety and fire safety. Failte Ireland is also getting us you pay more and more and if you need to be registered with them.

D: Do you collect any information off your customers/ visitors? Do you get them to fill out any questionnaires/ survey forms/ feedback forms about their experience?
I: Everybody who books in fill in their email address and they also fill in where they have come from, how they found out about us. All that sort of thing.

D: Do you have questionnaire’s or survey forms or feedback forms?
I: We give them a feedback card and they send that back or else they may send in their review to trip advisor.

D: What sort of information would you gather – Statistical/ behavioural?
    The statistical information I’m referring to here is age, gender, where they are coming from, how did they find out about you, how long do they stay etc. The behavioural is more focused on how did they enjoy their experience. What could be improved etc?
I: We do that also.

D: Who analyses that information for you or do you do it yourself?
I: We do it ourselves.

D: Do you have any online forums for feedback/ discussion with past or future customers?
I: We have an online forum that we use. We’re on Trip Advisor and we’re on a Google one as well. If anyone is booking on line with us the information they fill out is collated.

D: Do you encourage people to leave feedback by offering deals?
I: No we don’t do anything like that.

D: What would you say are the main barriers to marketing for you?
    (Time/ Finances/ Incomplete information/ Supports/ Training)
I: Time is the biggest barrier. We know we should do it but then we look at all of the people we are getting for the little amount of marketing that we do.

D: Would you be worried that if you made a bigger effort to market that you might be inundated and demand might exceed supply.
I: Yes that would be another issue. We do a lot of stuff on the internet.

D: Would finance act as a barrier to marketing?
I: No the finance wouldn’t be a problem. We haven’t spent much on marketing.

D: What do you see as the businesses best asset?
I: Being on a farm and also that we’re in the Boyne Valley Region.

D: Is there a cultural or educational element to you offering?
I: Yes we have that here because the guests are coming to an authentic working farm. They can walk out there through the cows. They can go up there and pet the donkey, go up and take a look at the vegetable garden or go up and take a few of the free range eggs in the morning. Those are authentic rural experiences. They’re getting a true understanding of the lifestyle and they’re also meeting the family and that’s an important part of it too.

D: Who are your customers? You said that it is primarily Europeans as well as Australians and an increasing number of Irish. Are there any emerging markets? Do you get many Asians?
I: A few yes. We had some Japanese here last year. They were very into their tennis. I organised a game for them against the local club in Strathallen and they said that it was the best part of their holiday. They loved the fact that they were interacting with the local people. The Irish Music is huge here too. The local pub has traditional music on a Saturday night and they absolutely love that. I tell the guests about it when they arrive. I work with the proprietor quite a lot. We help each other out.

D: What ages are they?
I: It would vary. For the camping it would vary from kids up to adults. We would also see where granny and granddad might stay in the hostel and the kids would stay in the campsite. The hostel would generally cater for the middle aged and the cottages appeal to the older generation. Because of the fact that we have the hostel the cottages and the campsite we can cater for a broad range of people. We also cater
for school groups in the hostel. They come here because of Newgrange, the site of the battle of the Boyne and Patrick Ledwidge Cottage. Patrick Ledwidge was a war time poet from Slane and his poetry is on their curriculum. They stay here and we run an educational element here on the first day, they stay the night and the following day they do an activity at Causey Farm which is 20 minutes away.

D: Where are these school groups coming from?
I: Throughout the country. We do up flyers with Causey farm and we send them. These groups come in October/November and they extend our season.

D: Do you target different segments? You’ve already said that you send flyers to the schools. Do you do anything else?
I: We do. We put packages up on Facebook. We might put a family package up that might include Tayto Park or Funtasia. Sometimes we use the packages to increase numbers where we might be quite. We would offer things like a third night free where they stay 2 nights.

D: A lot of your marketing activities seem to be internet based. Do you do anything specifically to attract the older customer?
I: We tend to reach them through their families. A lot of the guests who are attending a wedding in the area are bringing the Granny to babysit and they are putting her up in a cottage and taking a separate cottage themselves. This is very different than when I had a young family. When I was young I had a babysitter all the time. The best thing I ever did was to get an aupair. We had very good aupairs from Germany and Paddy and I were able to get on with it. This generation are coming with Granny and they’re booking 2 cottages or they might bring the sister. It’s always a relation and they always book two cottages. In my day the kids were left at home with the babysitter and they were perfectly happy.

D: Would you get a lot of repeat visitors?
Yes. I would say bout 70% of our business is repeat visitors.

One full time (Me) and about 5 part time during the summer. During the winter I have one other lady with me. I’m actually paid now.

I could do with more but we can’t afford it.

Family and local girls.

They’re third level students.

No. They’re all very grateful for a job.

Sometimes they come back. Last year we had a girl here from Austria and she was very good. She came in April and she stayed until September. She wants to come back again. How long have they worked for you?

It depends. If groups are looking to stay in the winter we will open for them.

It is much quieter in Winter. I used to close here from the middle of November until the end of January. I’d still open for a group but I wouldn’t be bothered besides. Now because of the Wedding factor here we open at weekends through the winter and we’re very busy for the weekends. I have taken time off for the last few years but now that
(Daughter) is more involved she has decided that we’re going to stay open. If we had a family occasion coming up or something we wouldn’t take any bookings.

D: How much of an impact would the weather have on different elements of the business?
I: The campsite closes in the winter and in the summer if the weather is bad you won’t have as many people camping. I notice as well that when the weather is good people travel around more and we get more people coming in off the cuff (without having pre-booked). A couple of years ago in the really bad snow people couldn’t get to us so we were badly affected then. That year during the freeze all of the pipes burst and when it thawed it was a pure disaster. We had to replace everything so now during the winter we switch off everything to prevent that from happening.

D: Have you made any efforts to limit the impact of the bad weather? Including activities that are not impacted or improved facilities for indoor activities?
I: We developed a games room so now for people coming to the campsite they can go up to the games room or look at T.V. This has always been open but recently it has been made more accessible to people on the campsite.

D: Have you any formal training or qualifications in the sector?
I: No.

D: Do your employees undergo any formal training?
I: No. They just do their in-house training on what they are to do and how they are to do it.

D: Have you customer service procedures/practices in place? Are the girls customer facing, would they be in the background operations or would they be involved in a bit of everything?
I: They do a bit of everything but some of them would be doing bookings and meeting the customers and some of them wouldn’t.

D: Who are your competitors?
I: I have no direct competitors locally besides a few B&B’s that have a different offering anyway. My nearest competitor would be Newgrange Lodge which is also a hostel over beside Newgrange.

D: Nationally who would you see as your competitors?
I: Everybody in the city because that’s where they’re pushing everybody.

D: How does your offering compare with that of Newgrange Lodge?
I: They’re a hostel set up but they don’t call themselves a hostel. It’s in a rural setting but it’s not on a farm. A lot of people don’t like the sound of a hostel and that’s why they call themselves a lodge. A lodge sounds more exclusive. They charge higher prices than us.

D: How do you compete? (Price discounting/ differentiation of offering)
I: We stick to our prices irrespective of what they do. I have a value on what I do here and I’m not going to drop my prices to rock bottom. We’re slightly different in that I don’t pay someone to stand here and meet the customers. I have a value on what I offer and nobody else offers what I offer. That’s the big difference between rural business which are predominantly family owned and urban businesses that tend to have cheap labour, often from Eastern Europe, running the business for them and they aren’t as invested in it. We put a lot of pride and effort into what we do.

D: Do you co-operate with other businesses locally?
I: I’m very involved in the Slane Tourism group (Local) and I see the benefit of working together. I’m also involved in the Boyne Valley (Regional) Tourism Group. As I said I cooperate with the local pub. I also work with the local restaurants. Next week I have a group coming
in form England, they don’t have cars. They’re staying in the cottages and the local restaurant is delivering breakfast to them in the morning. He’ll send out the menu before hand and they will select what they want off it and he will send it up to them.

D: Is that the first time you have done this?
I: Yes. They weren’t interested in cooking. They’re a youngish crowd, on their holidays, over for a weeding and so we decided we’ll look after this for them. I also direct a lot of our customers who like to eat out to the local restaurants. I send them in to the craft shop quite a bit too.

D: What about Slane Castle. Are they helpful?
I: They’re useless. They’re not interested in doing anything for anybody. They’re only out for themselves. The only thing is that we use them for their brand. They could be flying down there. I’d love to have that place. I’d have it hopping.

D: Are there any formal co-operative structures in place?
I: Yes we have set up the craft co-op and we’re looking to extend this to a food co-op. We also have the tourism group.

D: Does the tourism group meet regularly?
I: We used to meet every month but we can’t do this during the summer months because we’re too busy but we keep ourselves up to date with the internet and I’m also involved with the hub in the village. This is a community based tourism information office. This is funded by Meath Partnership and we have 4 girls working in it so it’s open every day and between them they keep all the organisations going in the area. It’s working really well.

D: Who sets the agenda?
I: We have a chair and a secretary of the group and we have discussions about what will be covered.
D: Do you cooperate with other in dealings with suppliers to leverage economies of scale?
I: We don’t deal with suppliers as a group.

D: Do you contribute to a central fund for coordinated marketing activities?
I: Yes we do. At the end of the month we’re having an event called Slane ‘Slap Up’. It’s running form the Wednesday until the Sunday and each of the venue’s are doing something and the accommodation suppliers are working with them. Between all of us we put so much in for the advertising of it and we work together on that end of things also.

D: Do you pay a fee to Failte Ireland?
I: Yes an annual fee per bed. It’s a couple of thousand per year to be registered on their list.

D: Do you have to pay Trip Advisor.
I: No. If you want to advertise with Trip Advisor you must pay them then. We get enough advertising with the comments that people leave on it. Tourism Ireland also advertises businesses. Some of the internet ones are free to you if you’re a member and then there are other ones that you have to pay for.

D: Would you see these as money well spent?
I: No.

D: Has the business ever come into conflict with other stakeholders in the community?
I: No.

D: What institutions/ organisations or government bodies are you aware of that provide support for the industry?
I: Tourism Ireland, Failte Ireland, The Tourism Board, Meath Tourism Board, Boyne Valley Tourism Board, Business Enterprise Board and Meath Partnership.
D: What supports do they provide? (Around market research/ training/ technology/ promotion)

I: Meath Partnership provides training in Marketing. They would also provide help with funding for capital expenditure projects. They would contribute a percentage. Tourism Ireland also provides different marketing supports if you need it. In fairness they are there if you need them but they’re really for helping out groups or partnerships rather than individual business. We use them to help with marketing initiatives for the village.

If you are applying for funding for a capital expenditure development you have a mountain of forms to fill out. It takes up a lot of time. Also you have to pay for everything up front and then you get your funding afterwards. We sought funding when we were developing the hostel but when it came to doing the cottages we didn’t bother because of the bureaucracy. Another issue was that I couldn’t get Joe down the road to do a little job because he mightn’t have all his paperwork in order. It has actually gotten much worse since then.

D: Would you be in regular contact with the official bodies?

I: All the time.

D: So you know the person responsible for your area?

I: I do. Sarah Flanagan.

D: If you were considering applying for funding how do you find out about your options?

I: I can find it online or I can ring them to discuss it with them. They’re very approachable. I have a good record where anything I have done with them has been successful and also through the village I have done a lot with them also. Some people apply for these things and never see them through. You have to have a good record with them. If I call them with an idea they can advise me on how to make it a success.
D: Would they take your advice on board? Is this interaction one way or two way?
I: Yes they do.

D: What do they do well?
I: (No answer)

D: Another way of asking this is what don’t they do well? What could they improve on?
I: The paperwork.

D: Do you subscribe to any sector publications?
I: Sometimes if they bring out any magazines or Journals that relate to the business I might. These might be Tourism Ireland supported. We’re in Lonely Planet and Let’s Go. Some of them are free because you get in through your customers. They come and inspect you and decide whether its worth putting you in. I’ve been in those for 15 years. They include us because they say that we are a place to go that shouldn’t be missed. There are others that you have to pay to go into. The Lonely Planet is very important. Tourists take these as gospel. We’re in all of the European versions. All nationalities use the Lonely Planet.

D: Do you get many English tourists?
I: Quite a few. We get a lot of English and Northern Irish camping and in camper vans.

D: Did you notice any difference since the Good Friday Agreement?
I: It didn’t make any real difference. There was also a lot of talk that there would be a big difference with the Queen coming over and that didn’t make any difference. We’re just back from a few days in the West and there didn’t seem to be a huge influx of tourists over there and most of the people we met over there on holidays were Irish. We went on the greenway, cycling to Achill from Westport and back and
met very few tourists. I have a friend that runs the tourist information centre in Adare and I was down with her two weeks ago and she was saying that she hasn’t seen an increase in tourist (numbers) at all.

D: Do you get many Americans?
I: More this year than before. There’s been a definite increase in them this year. They’re useless. They’re a new type of American tourist. They’re a little bit older (40+) and they’re coming for the hostel because it’s a little bit cheaper and they’re coming on their own. They’re not travelling in groups and they’re obviously on a budget. They’re coming in here and looking for 5 star treatment. Americans are used to everything being done for them. At reception I have all of the tourism information you could get in brochures and books and they won’t read it. They want me to tell them. They’re hard work.

D: What are your metrics of success? Which of the following objectives are most relevant to you?

   i. Profit
   ii. Growth
   iii. Provision of local employment
   iv. Enrichment from social interaction
   v. Lifestyle
   vi. Social status
   vii. Contribution to local economy

I: Profit is important. Enrichment from social interaction is also huge and we all benefit from it. Not only with the tourists but because of the business I also interact more with other people around and that’s a hugely important part of my life. The lifestyle end of things also in that I don’t have to travel to work. Social status wouldn’t really be my focus. As for growth, I’ve grown enough.
A Welsh guy turns up having booked a room over the internet and (I) goes out to reception to book him in. She talks to him like he is an old friend. He got a flat tyre on the way there.

D: You mentioned that your main customers are European. Has this always been the case?
I: Yes

D: Do you have a formal marketing plan in place or do you make marketing decisions on an informal basis?
I: We had. I developed it. I did out the marketing plan when I was applying for funding but I was doing it for myself anyway. I’ve done a lot of marketing courses anyway.

D: Do you ever revisit it to see if it needs updating?
I: We try to do that in the winter when we’re not just as busy.

D: Who could you go to for help in developing a marketing plan?
I: LEADER and the Enterprise Board.

D: Would the consultation be on a one to one basis?
I: No. It would be a group situation. There are people who will do it with you one-on-one. I’ve just finished a six month course with the Smurfit Business School and one of them called out here to me.

D: Do you have any formal qualifications in the sector?
I: I have completed a lot of courses. Some of them aren’t relevant but some of them are good. What I find is that you learn as much from the people you meet on the courses as what you learn from the course content.

D: Who is in charge of marketing?
I: Myself and my daughter. She does a lot of stuff on the internet.

D: How do they decide on what activities to undertake?
I: I look at what is going on in the area.

D: Do you have a separate marketing budget?
I: No.

D: What are your marketing activities?
I: We’re selling packages now with Causey Farm, Tayto Park and Funtasia. You can book your tickets for Tayto Park through us. The tickets are cheaper here and then you don’t have to queue when you get there. Every family in the country goes to Tayto Park as one stage or another. We have a good relationship with them.

D: What has worked well? What hasn’t worked?
I: One thing that worked really well was that we put pictures of the business in the window of a vacant building in the village to brighten it up a bit. We put in one large picture of the hostel and another of the cottages and an arrow pointing out the road towards the turn off for the business. This reminded the people in the village that we were here. Because we’re outside the village and off the beaten path they tend to forget that we’re here. We got a lot of referrals for the campsite as a result. It was also done at a very low cost.

On the negative side, when I started out I thought that I needed to advertise with everyone and I was wasting money on it. I was paying membership subscriptions to everyone. I stopped doing that then.

D: Do you use different activities for different markets?
I: Yes we do up the packages with Tayto Park for the families and the school children and then for the others we would do mostly social media.

D: Do you use online media?
I: Yes we use Facebook, Trip Advisor, Lonely Planet, booking.com. All of them.

D: Do you have a website?
I: Yes.

D: Can you take bookings and accept payment on the website?
I: Yes.

D: How many visits would the site get per day/ week?
I: Don’t know. I wouldn’t have time to look at it.

D: How often would you update the website?
I: My daughter would do this regularly.

D: Is this done internally or externally?
I: Internally.

D: Are you a member of any associations?
I: We have our own informal association locally.

D: Do you monitor the websites of your competitors?
I: Yes. We use Google analytics for this. We also use Google analytic to monitor our own internet activity.

D: Do you use social media?
I: Yes. Facebook primarily.

D: What audiences do you target?
I: Past customers.

D: What is the aim of using social media?
I: Creating awareness.
D: Who are your friends/ followers on social media?
I: Past customers.

D: Is there two way communication?
I: Yes. We put everything up on it. Pictures of local events, the flowers out front in full bloom, video’s of the cows calving or the goat getting into the vegetable garden. Stuff like that.

D: Do you review the value of marketing expenditure/ how?
I: We don’t really spend anything on marketing.

D: Do you use it to create awareness around offers?
I: Yes

D: Do you have a social media development budget?
I: No. he only cost to us is time.

D: What if anything do you measure on social media?
I: The number of visitors, where they’re from, how often they visit the site, what caused their interest. That sort of thing.

D: What is your social media growth rate?
I: Don’t know.

D: Do you have any way of measuring the success of marketing activities?
I: With the Tayto Park tickets we can look back to see how many we got and how many we sold. That sort of thing.

D: Do you have any procedures around customer feedback?
I: Yes we look back on the comments on the internet and in the on site comments book in the offseason to see if there are any recommendations that we might implement. That is how we decided on the hairdryers in the cottages and the hostel and the power point in the camp site.
Appendix 5:

Interviewee: Louisburgh HQ Co-ordinator.
Date: 19. 07.2014
Duration: 40 minutes and 39 seconds

Context: The interviewee (I) is originally from Blackpool in England but has been living in Louisburgh with her family since 1989. Also present was another volunteer (I2), also originally from England, who gives foraging tours in local Old Head forest. As with the other interviewees the interviewer (D) gave a brief recap on the reason for seeking the interview and the topics that were of interest. He also explained that it had not been his intention originally to interview anyone in Louisburgh HQ but having conducted interviews with local businesses it became apparent that it would be a weakness in the analysis if HQ was not included.

Louisburgh HQ is a voluntary tourist office sited on the square in Louisburgh. It opened in June 2012. A number of people living locally, concerned about the ongoing deterioration of the town’s image, came together and with the help of donations, rented the premises (Which had been vacant for decades) and redecorated it.

Louisburgh HQ, an initiative aimed at promoting Louisburgh and the surrounding area and supporting local businesses. The drop-in centre, functions as a ‘hub’ where visitors can access the local community, all the services that are available and events that are happening. It promotes the 100-plus businesses that run independently from Lecanvey to Killeen and out to Leenane as well as the islands. The centre is not just for tourists, however. It’s also a resource for locals. It operates as a therapy centre and clinic; as a space for drama, arts and crafts; and as a place where anyone who might want to start a business can go to for general advice.

Interview transcript:

D: First thing first I suppose. When did HQ open?
I: June 2012.

D: Its open 2 years. What was the original motivation behind opening it?

I: The motivation was that there were 7 girls, all with their individual skills and talents. There are 2 accountants, 1 person in marketing, 1 solicitor, 1 is into homeopathy, 1 works for the health board and one owns a restaurant. They all came together and decided that they wanted to promote Louisburgh, and get it back on its feet. A lot of the businesses had closed and it was becoming pretty run down. They wanted to say, listen Louisburgh’s great, come and visit or come and stay.

D: For altruistic reasons? Is there any commercial aspect to this?

I: No. It’s all voluntary. We do have to do a bit of campaigning because we have to pay the rent. That is our biggest headache because we have to pay the rent. There are no grants out there for this sort of thing.

D: As it becomes more established are there routes you can go down to get funding?

I: Not that we’re aware of. We’ve applied for grants but generally it’s for something specific that you’re going ahead with. Of course there isn’t much money in Ireland now. We entered a competition run by Coca Cola and won €10,000 which is great but the amount of rules that come along with it mean that it can’t be used to pay the rent. It has to be spent on promoting healthy living. We’re getting maps made of local cycle routes and walking routes.

D: Are these off road or are they established routes? Are you dealing with local landowners for access?

I: No. That takes years. We’re working with the council as well. If you start putting road signs up and they haven’t approved it they’ll take them down again. That defeats the purpose.
D: Are any of the businesses that are the likely beneficiaries of what you’re doing making donations?

I: Yes. There are different things that people can do (to support us). This summer we came up with this idea of ‘Love Louisburgh’, and you’re going to have to buy one after this anyway. They’re car stickers for €1 and they’re in the Louisburgh GAA colours. Then we have sheets of stickers as well. We have maps as well, where we drew a map of the area to be given out to tourists and businesses pay to go on the back of it. Businesses also pay to go on our website.

D: Who developed the website?

I: There was a girl Cathy and the accountant put it together. There are a few mistakes on it but generally we can give it out for walks etc.

D: Do they pay for the maps?

I: Yeah they pay €0.50 for it (The cost of photocopying). The idea is that we are here for the community and for the businesses. The ‘Love Louisburgh’ did really well and we launched it on Paddy’s Day. Michael Ring launched it for us.

Someone comes into HQ looking for one of the organisers. She inquires about what time it is open until. She is told that they are open until 7 p.m.

L: I was in here all day yesterday and then today I have been helping a friend of ours over the road, Des Downs, and he has an art gallery across the road. He’s in England. He did that map on the wall (There is a large impressive landscape map of the area on the wall). He designed it and had it made for us.

I2: People keep asking if there is a postcard of it available.

I: That’s a great idea. What did he say?

I2: He’s too busy at the minute. He’s running out of pictures in the shop.
I: He’s after signing up with Disney or Dreamworks or somebody.

I2: He does a lot of animation stuff.

I: There’s going to be a lot of editing here (laughing). We do a lot of fund raising. Like I said the ‘Love Louisburgh’ went really well. We have lots of volunteers. We have a shop across the road which is a craft shop where local exhibitors display their wares. It’s in Duffy’s. Catherine (Duffy) is one of the original 7, which is now 10. That’s her home-place (the shop, formerly run by Catherine’s mother, Mary). She works in the health board and is based in Galway. We open it as a craft shop in the summer. Mayo based craft workers can use it to exhibit in the summer and we sell their stuff and take a 20% commission. In July and August it’s really good. Don’t forget that the summer here is really short. One of the women that work’s in there has a really lovely garden and she did an open garden day and that raised a few hundred which was great. The week after that we organised a beach party. I organised that with another fella. We just went to the €2 shops and got loads of little bits and wrapped them up and took a lucky dip, one for boys and one for girls. We only charged €1.50. Then we got bottles of juice and crisps and only charged €1 for them. We kept the cost low because nobody has money. That raised a good few hundred. We had burgers and sausages that we bought locally.

D: What sort of a day did ye get?

I: It was great. Will was in charge of the bouncing castle.

I2: When we were setting up at 3.30 it was one of them cold summer days and there were 3 people and their dog there. You were taking all of these burgers out of your van and you were thinking who’s going to come. It got to about 5 and it was a lovely sunny evening and people started coming form everywhere. People came from Westport, Castlebar, Newport as well as lots of locals and lots of people on holiday.

I: We got lots of great feedback. The community was saying how great it was. The low price was important. You could get a burger for €2.50 and a sausage for €2.50.
I2: The kids could get onto the bouncing castle for €1. As a parent myself I’m fed up with going to places where they just rip you off. You can’t do anything. If you’ve got kids hey want to go on a ride.

**A lady comes in and inquires about a place to eat. Will gives her a choice of what is available locally.**

I: If you look on the website you will see pictures of the event. We did a sandcastle competition that was free to enter and the winner got €10. The buzz out of it was great. Then we had a bit of a bonfire and some friends came down and played guitar. It was really cool.

D: What do you see as the future for HQ? Speaking to different businesses in the area I’m getting the impression that traditionally co-operation may not have been what it might, and that HQ may prove to be a unifying force? Have you any feedback to that effect?

I: This is only my second year. When they first opened it was known as Louisburgh blow-ins. Obviously I am from England but the rest are from Dublin, Galway, Northern Ireland. The rest are Irish. The locals are really hard to crack. It can be like pulling teeth. Jesus don’t quote me on that (laughing).

D: Being a local myself I think most of them would accept that.

I: At first they didn’t understand us. They didn’t get what we were at and what we were trying to achieve which was understandable. I found that a lot of the locals didn’t want to come in because we were being advertised as a Tourist Information centre. Understandably! Why would they come in to a tourist information centre? They know what’s going on. Slowly they’re starting to come in a lot more which is great and it’s what we really want to encourage.

D: I was here last year for the refreshments after Janet’s run (A charity fundraiser fun run/ walk organised by the local shopkeeper) and I had never been here before. Now
I’m not living around and I didn’t realise the work that had been done. For as long as I can remember before that this building, strategically positioned on the square, had been vacant and a bit of an eyesore. After that run there was a lovely community feel. Previously such events would have been held up at the GAA club but that’s a bit removed from the town. It’s a nice environment to come in to and the atmosphere is really light, bright and friendly. Do you think it is likely that FI will fund this in the future?

I: I don’t think so. We are (affiliated with) FI. We have the approval. We get the booklets etc. A lot of it we have but wouldn’t use. Like there’s stuff like camping and caravans and it’s encouraging people to pass through rather than stay here. We put them up and people can take them if they like but we don’t push them. I had been working with FI because we wanted the ‘Wild Atlantic Way’ to come out here. Originally it was going to go from Westport to Leenane and bypass Louisburgh. It made no sense. It really rankled. Fair dues the girls really worked hard on getting it out here and now it is. But this winter worked really hard with Grainne Kilcoyne, in FI and we got businesses put onto their website. The only criteria are that you have to be insured. Will does foraging walks around Old Head and he shows them all different wild foods. That’s what I was working with this winter was getting the businesses that were less than 8km from the sea onto the WAW website. The likes of the West Coast Climbing, Will, Doug who does the family fishing trips every Sunday. All of those were able to get onto the website and more. They wouldn’t have heard of it only that FI came to us and then we could get the word out that way. They wouldn’t go around every business. All of the stuff in here came form FI. In Westport they moved office so I went in one day and asked for all of the fixtures and fittings that they didn’t need. That’s why we’ve got all of this posh looking stuff and really tidied the place up. To raise funds we got sweat shirts printed (With Louisburgh related messages) and again we take 20% commission of them, and books. People who have written books come in and sell their books here. The rent is the big headache that is constantly on your mind. We have some big events. We’re going to keep doing the beach party because it was a big success and got the community in. Then we do a spring fair and we also do a Halloween party for the kids but that’s free.

D: Is it open all year round then?
I: Yeah. January would be a bit more sporadic. We wouldn’t be open the hours. It’s open the weekends and sometimes during the week because if I need to do work (personal) I might as well do it here to have the door open because we still have to pay the rent anyway. Other businesses have started coming to us and starting to give us their leaflets. I’m slowly finding that they are starting to come to us now rather than us constantly going to them which is great.

D: What more would you like to see the businesses do to help? Are they doing enough or could they help more?

I: They could always help more but at the moment it’s difficult but in the summer it’s really busy here dealing with the tourists and for the businesses. In the winter I would like to work more with the businesses. Tommy (The Derrylahan) told us that the reason he came (bought the bar) was because he saw what we were doing. In fairness they do support us because to be on our website they have to pay and even that is a big help to us. Then Janet’s Walk (The aforementioned charity walk/run) also uses it. The businesses do send people to us now where as at first they were a little reluctant. Kirstey is a photographer and she used to work from home so she approached us and asked if she could rent a corner of the room to display her pictures. If we sell any of her stuff when she’s not here then we get the 20% but if she is here no. She’s great because even if we are late or whatever she’s in and can open up. She really is enjoying being part of it.

D: Before I started this project I had assumed that there were regular meetings of the businesses in the area to have a joint strategy and to form a kind of cohesive strategic plan. I have come to realise since that this is not the case. Would you envisage any role for HQ to act as the precipitate for the establishment of such an entity?

I: Well we have tried to do that a few times. We have invited businesses in on an evening and you would probably get about 10 businesses and we all meet up and we discuss what’s going to happen and what they would like to see but there would only be one meeting. We ourselves meet as 10 often in the winter. The summer wouldn’t be the time to do it anyway. It should all be done by then. What we’re hoping to do
next year is to get more (of the strategic stuff done now) rather than leaving it to the end.

D: There are PhD’s written on co-operative networks and the associated benefits in the tourism industry where the local businesses don’t see each other as competition but as being part of a package to attract visitors to an area because visitors won’t visit an area for a restaurant or a pub or whatever in isolation. There needs to be more going on. Perhaps HQ can be the catalyst to improve the levels of co-operation locally?

I: Yeah they’re getting it now. They do support us and all we’re here to do is support them. We’re working on a package at the minute to attract walking holidays and we have all of the bed and breakfast’s on board and know how many they can take. One of the accountants has looked at putting together a walking plan. Now that we have that together we’d like to progress it and I’d like to work with the ramblers in England and bring more people to stretch the season. Walking would be suited to September/October.

D: Would schools be a possible target to extend the season.

I: Not necessarily. I know in England you get a fine if you take them out of school. Perhaps locally! Last summer one of the ladies that looks after the hall had a load of brochures and she didn’t want to give them to us and she didn’t want to give them out because they didn’t have Louisburgh on them. It was completely missed. I promised that I’d follow that up but with so much stuff going on in the background I forgot. We got an email yesterday saying final call we need to know what you are going to do in Louisburgh (For culture night) but we are pretty good at putting stuff together quickly and cheaply.

D: What is culture night?

I: It’s a national thing. It’s one night when anything cultural can be put on in each village or town which has to be free for people to attend and is to encourage cultural activities. I had wanted to get Louisburgh on the map of it. Culture night is on the 19th
of September so I’ve just been rushing around to the other organisers. Because I’m the co-ordinator and there’s 10 of us I wouldn’t go to all 10 for everything because it takes ages and everyone has specific skills. Declan Ryan (Of ryanair) lives here and he loves what we’re doing and is very encouraging but he doesn’t give money. He would give other things…like he gave a house away to the kids from the no-name group. What he did was that he said that he wanted to send all 10 of us on a 2 day course in Dublin, with this in mind, to give us an idea of where are we going and how are we going to get there and to refocus the group. Because there are 10 of us the communication was a nightmare. What we used to do was send an email but that gets confusing especially if people change email addresses etc. So they (The course) put us into groups so we all came back reenergised. There were 4 groups and a core and it has worked really well. So culture night came and I had been In touch with one of the accountants who is quite arty and Trish who has the ‘Surf and Turf’ (Local restaurant) and we’ve put a plan together in the last 2 days as to what we’re going to do and we have agreement. One is the open Mic. On the last Sunday of every month we do an open mic. night here and its free. People come in and they can sing or play an instrument or do what they like. It’s for 2 hours and it’s a bit of craic. It’s really popular. It’s old and young. Tim Rodgers would be down at that and his daughter. For culture night we’re going to get that in the hall. I wanted Geraldine to come and talk here, she’s a poet, but she’s an ambassador for Trocaire I think, so she has to be in Dublin, so I’ve no got Father Pat O’Malley to do a talk in here instead (A local ex missionary priest who wrote ‘the year of living dangerously’ about his time in Africa) and the pubs will put stuff on as well. That will all go in the brochure.

D: The likes of that stuff that you’re doing. Is it organic or is there an underlying long term plan?

I: No. It is a bit, ‘make it up as we go’. The overall idea is that we attract more businesses to the town. We’d like to see the town doing better.

D: The place certainly seems to have picked up in the last couple of years.

I: Yeah we’re hearing that and the webpage is getting more hits and the Facebook page. Delores does that and she’s brilliant. Then we have the newsletter. That’s great.
We put ‘Love Louisburgh’ out in the newsletter and asked could you please make donations to keep us going and people have been great. There was a great response. And then when your email come in and you saying that you spoken to the businesses and that they had spoken positively about us it makes you feel good.

D: Like I said the businesses I have spoken to have mentioned HQ as a positive development for the area.

I: Yeah Tommy (The Derrylahan) said that to us and its great to get that feedback. As I’m sure you’ll hear a lot of these things we do for free because we want the community on board and its working.

D: A lot of the academic stuff that I am reading as well would not be entirely accurate for this area. It would make the case that rural business isn’t clued in, doesn’t understand its market, is reactionary, is peripheral, supplementary and other negative associations. The people I am speaking to, in contrast, seem to be very much aware of what they’re doing and why they’re doing it without necessarily applying marketing models per-se but doing it in an organic, experiential fashion. When they were mentioning HQ as one of the key stakeholders I felt that I can’t complete this study and not speak to HQ. It will give it a little more validity.

I: The bottom line is that we’re here for the community and we love t when they come on board. The likes of Go Explore on Clare Island, these were businesses that did come and meet with us and tell us what they wanted us to do and we have tried to do that. But they come in if they have something to say rather than staying out there moaning.

D: Perhaps the unique position afforded by virtue of the fact that your members are not entrenched in the community with all of the baggage that may be passed on from generation to generation. They may be more willing to deal with you as a result?

I: Neither myself nor my family had any family here. We came here for a better life for our children in 1989. There’s so much more going on in Louisburgh now that there has been. One of the big things that I have noticed is the demand for camps. A
new family come in every Saturday and are looking to see what camps are running this week for the kids. We’re just giving out leaflets constantly. We only have 3 or 4 but then we’re giving out the West Coast Climbing and the horse riding, which reminds me that I must get some more leaflets off them. I know there have been people coming out here to get out of Westport because it’s too noisy and too busy. Now is the time (to capitalise). Its going to be the new Westport. There’s a delicate balance. We don’t want the place to change.

D: Nothing fails like success as they say.

I: That’s it. There are some really nice beaches around that we all really like and we don’t tell anyone about them (Laughing).

D: The people coming in then, would they be from Mayo, from Ireland or from where.

I2: They come from everywhere. Last year with the good weather we had a family came form Dublin for a few days and they ended up just staying until the weather turned.

I: There isn’t anywhere nicer to be when the weather is good.

D: I agree. I have always felt that Westport has traded on Clew Bay and Louisburgh, which has far better access to the real gems on Clew Bay, has made little effort to do so. Particularly a few years ago. Westport could be packed to capacity and you would go into establishments in Louisburgh and they would be empty. The tourists would take a drive out to the beaches for the day but we weren’t able to make them stick.

I: This is what we’re trying to do. We’re trying to get that niche. We’re providing them with a focal point to get the information. Even with the WiFi. We don’t charge for that. They just come in, sit down and start using it. We moved here in 1989 and I know exactly what it was like.
I2: We’re really expanding out beyond the holiday season with the Halloween event for the kids where we turn this into a haunted house and that’s for the locals. We also have the Christmas Fair which has grown and grown.

A local girl comes in looking for a ‘Love Louisburgh’ sticker and decides she wants a second one for her brother in Australia. Two young girls then come in and sit down at the table to use the WiFi.

D: That about covers it in any case. Thank you both very much. I’ll send on a draft of the transcript for your approval.
Appendix 6:

**Interviewee (I):** South West Mayo Development Co. Ltd. (LEADER) - Enterprise and Community Development Officer  
**Date:** 31.07.2014

**Context:** This interview was carried out over the phone. The purpose of contacting the South West Mayo Development Co. Ltd. was to garner information as to the supports provided for small rural tourism business and how they are accessed.

**Interview transcript:**

D: The thesis I’m doing is on marketing rural tourism and the scope of which is around Clew Bay. I’ve interviewed seven businesses in the area to get an idea of what they are doing from a marketing perspective. To get an overview of the market environment I wanted to get an idea of the supports that are available to these businesses. Padraig suggested that it would be important to speak with LEADER because you are involved on a one-to-one basis with such small businesses.

I: We are for sure. Have you had a chance to look at our website? If you go into [www.southmayo.com](http://www.southmayo.com) you will see an icon, ‘Rural Development Program – View Projects’. It’s on the front page of our website. You will see a full list of all of the projects that we have funded and completed up until June 2014 under this current program. You’ll see for example Achill Tourism Ltd., which is a social enterprise to do with a tourism network on Achill and we funded, ‘event and tourism festivals marketing training’. For ‘Adventure West Louisburgh’, there was tourism enterprise dry room and accommodation funding. We provided funding there of €25,500. You will see very quickly those businesses that are tourism related. Another one here, Clew Bay Bike Hire was a new business; we gave €16,000 towards the purchase of their first bikes. Now they’ve grown a lot since we dealt with them. I know that my colleague Sue is just back in the door from meeting the adventure Islands and they were heavily funded under the RDP. They’re up on 17,000 ‘likes’ on their Facebook page and they got an award from Tripadvisor in the last week.
Those are a snapshot. If you go through that list you will see the large number of projects that we have funded. We have invested about €1.2m to tourist related projects in south Mayo. That includes everything from the purchase of equipment, marketing and the development of buildings (This wouldn’t be very common but we provided grant funding of about €150k towards the development of the building at Glenkeen Farm). We also provided funding for the high line structure and the zorbing at Westport House.

D: What form would the marketing support take Sabina?

I: It could be the full development of a new website; it could be the development of promotional material; it could in some cases be the provision of a mentor to give advice on marketing. We could put in an expert with the business. O.K you’re up and running, you have all your kayaks or bicycles or whatever…how now do you market? What’s your web presence like? What’s your social media presence like? We give them the tips and tools to implement the proper marketing strategy rather than ‘ah sure we’ll print 1000 brochures and see how we get on. There’s investment like that. We’ve funded some training for the tourism network in Westport and we’ve done the odd research project. We’ve funded the Michael McGreal study on tourist views in Westport (Westport 11/12).
We’ve worked with a really interesting French guy who does fishing trips in Clew Bay. He’s an excellent promoter. He focuses mainly on the French Market. He knows it. He focuses on 2 or 3 main tourism trade shows in France that are at the beginning of the year and that keeps him going. He has links with another business that deals with Irish Ferries also. He doesn’t advertise locally. He has a website and he’s on the internet but he has a different approach in that he focuses on a market that he knows very well.

D: Is there some uncertainty around the future of LEADER. Is that correct?

I: The delivery of LEADER is uncertain, but the program is secure. We were delivering the 2007-2014 rural development program but it is likely that it will lead into 2015. The next program is 2014-2020 but the reality is that it won’t launch until
into 2015. At the moment the dep. Of Local Govt. (It was Phil Hogan) had great
ambitions that the Local Authorities are better placed to deliver Local Development
Programmes like the Rural Development Program. This is not our view but we’re still
fighting that. The next rural development program is definitely happening but it is
going to be significantly smaller. It will be €250m down from €370m (It was
originally €425 but it was cut). There is some information available for the new
program in draft format.

D: Am I correct in thinking that LEADER doesn’t focus exclusively on tourism?

I: We provide support under 8 different headings. One of them is diversification
which supports farm families that are trying to develop on-farm activities and
development. I’ve been involved in one in Wexford for example where we helped
develop ice cream production on a dairy farm. The goal is to use the assets of the farm
for something other than farming.

Another one is business creation which is general. It could be Tourism but it probably
won’t be because we have one specific budget for Tourism development. We are
working with a business that is developing a travel mobile application for example.
The idea is that the businesses would feed into it, tourists would feed into it and the
support bodies would feed into it, to provide real time knowledge, local insight and
secrets etc. that might not be available elsewhere and there would be no need to buy
guide books. We do a lot of support of technology businesses.

We did a lot of food projects but this has since been taken out of the program. We
have also helped develop craft businesses and we have even funded an all star stage
school in Ballyheane. The website includes a lot of information on the funding and
supports that have been provided. Half of the program is business related (Farming,
general business and farming). Tourism is a huge part of the rural development
program.

D: It seems to be a broad range of skills that would be required for such a diverse
business portfolio. How does it work? Does the company create networks to put
businesses in touch with mentors?
I: We do as much as we can in-house. My main role for example is to assist and to process applications for funding but I’m coming at it with a commerce degree and a Masters in Entrepreneurship. There a lot of skills in the office. My colleague who deals with a lot of the tourism projects has a tourism background. If someone needs specialised assistance to develop a strategic marketing plan for a new tourism business for example we do have access to a mentoring panel where we would assign an expert or specialist in a particular area to the business for a short period of time because we do have a very large case load. A lot of our work involves getting the grants approved and paid and that takes up a lot of our time. We don’t generally have the time to spend with individual business to sit down for 5 or six mornings and coach them. We would be overstretched in terms of staffing for that so that is where we buy in experts to help businesses with very specific problems.

We work quite closely with the local authorities. Last year I was on the assessment panel for the Gathering grant scheme. That was delivered through the LA. We also deal with them on a project that we are doing at the minute called the ‘Blue ways’. This is a water trails project that has enormous potential for the ‘Wild Atlantic Way’ and also for other waterways in Ireland. We’ve identified sites that are particularly suitable for snorkelling and kayaking trails. That involves co-operation between the South Mayo Development Company, our neighbours down in Connemara, the Inisboffin LEADER company which is the one for the Islands, Mayo Co. Co., Galway Co. Co., the underwater council, the Blue Union and Failté Ireland.

D: What’s involved in developing these ‘Blue-ways’? Is it developing the infrastructure?

I: Not so much from our perspective, but definitely I know that FI intend to come in on the back of the project with that kind of investment. What we felt was that there are a lot of water based activity providers out there. They are doing a lot of surfing and kayaking and that kind of stuff but there wasn’t any Brand Identity that they could hang their hat on. The ‘Blueways’ are in Achill, Old Head (Louisburgh), a couple of sites in Galway and Inisboffin harbour. A lot of the businesses now are putting up a lot of posts on their Social Media sites saying that the ‘Blueway’ activity
is growing and a lot of them are calling their trails ‘Blueway Trails’ where before they would have said “we can bring you on a snorkelling trip”. They’re tapping into the brand. The Greenway has been a huge success and there has money been allocated for similar projects in Cork and Kerry.

D: Would the idea be that if I am looking to tap into the ‘Blueway’ brand I would have to put in place certain structures to achieve a certain standard?

I: FI are going to identify 4 or 5 sites on the ‘Wild Atlantic Way’ where they are going to invest in ‘Blueway’ infrastructure. Lahinch is one of them for sure. Whether we get that sort of investment at Achill or Oldhead remains to be seen but we can make a case now because we can show that there is a demand out there and that the ‘Blueways’ are working. They are providing employment to those water based sports providers that might not have been there before or who may not have been as busy before. We can make a case through our local FI representative in Mayo, Brian Quinn to support it. I know that FI are very much behind the ‘Blueway’ brand and they are committed, but the investment in infrastructure may not be at all of the sites that we have selected…they may pick one in Mayo, one in Galway, one in Clare, one in Donegal etc. There may be potential at the smaller sites for us to lobby the LA for smaller scale investment. We have taken care of the marketing of that this year. It has been tough with Tweeting and Facebook posting etc. We have a website that links to the FI website and I must say that FI have been fantastic in helping to promote it. We’re all working in our main jobs so it can be difficult to find the time to spend on the ‘Blueway’ promotion but we are doing it. We did leaflet drops on Friday evening. We wear many hats to ensure that the projects are successful.

There are projects like that which the LEADER companies would drive themselves or participate in, but only in co-operation. We’re all about co-operation and partnership. We wouldn’t do anything in tourism without consulting with FI. If the local groups aren’t tying in with national policy there is a problem. Years ago a lot of LEADER companies would have funded accommodation providers, self catering, and the improvement of B&B’s. We wouldn’t touch that kind of thing now. The general consensus is that we have enough beds. We would only be increasing the competition between the existing businesses. We were able to support the first couple of bike hire
businesses on the greenway. One was electric escapes, which rents electric bikes and the other was Clew Bay Bike Hire which rents regular bikes. The market takes over then. There must be 10 companies now operating on the greenway. It’s a proven product now. When Clew Bay bike hire came to us nobody knew whether the idea would work and the idea of grants is that they re to take an element of the financial risk for a business to enter a sector that isn’t necessarily tried and tested.

The LEADER or ‘Rural Development Program’ fits into a space that neither FI or the LA caters to. We get down and dirty with the small providers. The LA or the Local Enterprise Office (LEO) doesn’t have the funding to do what we do. Tourism business doesn’t qualify for their support programs. Up to now the Rural Development Program has been the main source of public funding for small, micro tourism developments. We can fund up to €200k. For the small tourism business, LEADER has been the only show in town for the past 20 years.
Appendix 7:

Interviewee (I): Failté Ireland (Head of Operations Fáilte Ireland West & Mid West).
Date: 22.07.2014
Duration: 48mins and 40 seconds
Location: FI offices on Amien St. Dublin

Context: As with the other interviewees DO’G gave a brief recap on the reason for seeking the interview and the topics that were of interest. The interviewee is based in Galway but commutes to Dublin a couple of days a week. She kindly agreed to meet after office hours and discuss the supports provided by Failte Ireland to small rural tourism businesses.

D: A lot of the academic stuff that I am reading would make the case that rural business isn’t clued in, doesn’t understand its market, is reactionary, peripheral, supplementary and other negative associations. I was surprised then to find that some of the people I am speaking to, in contrast, seem to be very much aware of what they’re doing and why they're doing it without necessarily applying marketing models per-se but doing it in an organic, experiential fashion. Now there would be a sliding scale where some of them would be much more clued in then others but overall I have been surprised by the level of expertise encountered. I suppose the reason I wanted to speak to you was to gain an understanding of the role of FI. FI comes up in all of the interviews as one of the key, if not the key stakeholder. They all would have paid membership to FI in the past….

I: In the past. The old Regional Tourism Authorities (RTA’s) would have been membership based so you had to pay £100 or €150.

D: Do they still pay a contribution?

I: No there are no contributions. If they are accommodation providers they have to pay a registration or an accreditation under the quality assurance programs but it is probably perceived as being a membership.
D: I wanted to speak to you about the different regions and how they are marketed individually. I’d imagine that marketing Dublin for weekend breaks would require a different approach than marketing the West of Ireland.

I: Yes and a very different audience. Will I give you an overview on FI?

D: Please.

I: It’s the National Tourism Development Authority. FI is only around since 2003, with the merger of the old Bord Failte (BF) and CERT which was the training body for the hospitality industry. At the same time all of the overseas offices of BF merged with all of the overseas offices of the Northern Irish Tourist Board (NITB) to form Tourism Ireland (TI). TI is a marketing agency for the island of Ireland. They operate out of Ireland. They have an office in Dublin which is a kind of back office and for their corporate functions whereas all of the marketing is done overseas. We are the development authority. Our role is to develop people in Tourism, so skills building, skills development, capability building, to develop tourism products or experiences as we now call them. We have responsibility for domestic marketing. We would do all of the home holidays marketing; encouraging Irish people to take more short breaks. We have an education remit which is being handed over bit by bit to the Institutes of Technologies and SOLAS, which is taking on more of the skills based training. If we were a multinational TI would be our overseas marketing division. We have the product development, the people development, we have a research and insights function to provide consumer insights, industry insights, what’s happening overseas, benchmarking Ireland against other destinations. In the last 5 years we have lost 50% of our operating budget and 25% of our personnel in the challenging times we find ourselves in. That has forced us to rethink what our key roles are. Instead of just cutting 20% off the budget again next year and 10% off it the following year, we have had to sit back and take stock of where can we add value to the tourism industry. In our 2010-2013 strategy it was all about survival. Our role was to work with business to get through the tough, challenging years. We’ve just spoken about it, the majority of businesses are small and micro enterprises. Even some of the bigger hotels you would have been scared by the lack of understanding of Balance sheets and financial
records, financial management, revenue management etc. It was about getting them to cut the fat out of their businesses, cut their costs but to position themselves to take advantage of the growth. Last year then the industry turned a corner. All of our barometers indicated that things were going to be better than previous years. In hindsight it was the first year of growth since 2007. Now the strategy for 2014-2016 is very much about growing business. Where is that growth going to come from? Its not going to be the domestic market just yet, which we’re saying will hold steady but the rate will be challenged. Numbers will still be pretty good. People will take holidays in Ireland but they’re going to spend less and they’re going to take cheaper hotel breaks..

D: This is projected?

I: No its happening but we don’t see that changing hugely in the next 2-3 years. The numbers will still be there but they are a more value conscious customer. That growth is going to come from overseas. Our key objectives are growth in overseas revenue and sustaining and creating jobs as a direct result of tourism. In order to do that we were saying, ok what have we got? The west coast has lost a significant share of business by 2008. That really wasn’t compounded until the recession hit here. Irish people were taking short breaks and were happy to spend. Behind those numbers though, international visitor numbers had been declining since 2001 but since 2008 we lost a big chunk of the British market and a significant amount of North American business. Dublin had become expensive. Value for money was becoming an issue and Ireland was perceived as expensive and Dublin was seen as being the cause of that. Then there was the bit in the middle of the country; the hole in the doughnut as it is sometimes called. We really took a forensic look at our operations in the last 18 months to 2 years and really we said, in order to get growth we’re going to have to have propositions that are going to cut through this cluttered marketplace internationally and to give people reasons to come and to show them that there’s really plenty to do and see. For once the focus has come away from accommodation providers. Very few people come to Ireland because they decide that they want to stay in a B&B or a hotel. They’re going to come because Culture, Landscape, History, Heritage and the bed is then a by-product. We came up with this initiative ‘The Wild Atlantic Way’ (WAW) which is a proposition for the whole west coast; Donegal to
West Cork. It’s presenting Ireland’s west coast as a compelling reason to choose Ireland as your holiday destination.

D: Did that brainchild come out of FI or out of one of the regions? Is there a central think tank?

I: I forgot to say that until 2006 you had a number of regional tourism authorities. You had the Northwest region, the West region, the Shannon development in the middle, you had the Southwest of Cork and Kerry, and then you had the sunny south East, Dublin and one other. They all transferred into FI in July of 2006. Then we still operated under the regions but as numbers got tighter we couldn’t afford to have all of these different regions. It sort of stemmed out of a couple of the regions on the West coast looking at touring routes for 3 or 4 counties. We felt ok, that still doesn’t give us the same scale so at one of these planning meetings we said ok what bout the whole west coast. We were wondering should it be the ‘Hibernian way’, the ‘West coast drive’ or whatever. At the time we were just thinking of the major roads and that you would deviate out to the coast. Then we did a piece of research on it and decided, no if it was going to be coastal you had to hug the coastline. It’s turned out to be quite successful. It has captured the imagination of communities, tourism businesses, the political classes and it resonates with the overseas tour operators. It gives them a reason to present the west of Ireland as a holiday offering. We launched it to the overseas trade in April 2013 at an international buyers’ workshop where we bring in about 400 overseas tour operators to meet with nearly 1000 tourism operators over 2 days. They have a sort of speed dating meetings that last about 10 minutes that give them a chance to sell their wares and hopefully get featured in some of the programs for the following year. We decided that we better test this thing and see does it resonate. At that stage it was very much a drive and obviously the west coast. They loved it so we felt we were on to something so we started to do quite a bit of serious work on it then to start bringing it to life. There was no point in telling anybody in Ireland about it until you had something to unveil; until the signage plan was done. Basically it’s a long term project. 2014 is the start year with the signage on the ground this year. We’re starting at the interpretation. The whole objective is to get visitors out to the west, get them to slow down, engage in activities, meet with the people, spend
time, spend money and the bottom line, grow revenue from international visitors to the west of Ireland. It’s not going to happen in one year or 2 years.

D: There certainly seems to be a lot of excitement out there amongst the people that I am speaking to.

I: There is in fairness and its also helping them to realise that they’re not competing with each other. Westport isn’t competing with Clifden or Clifden isn’t competing with Kerry; you’re competing with the Great Ocean Road in Australia or the Garden route in South Africa. We need to get them here in the first place, and then depending on what your offering is, they might choose to this part of the WAW or another part of it. Dublin then is another big project. We’re trying to grow Dublin’s share of the pie in the short break market. This is a very different audience and very different promotional initiatives. Then we’re working up a proposition that is looking at to a heritage offering. Ireland is a very small country. You can pretty much do everything everywhere but you can do certain things better in certain places. In the est coast its very much about culture, landscape, traditional culture and history. Then you have this heritage offering that is built heritage that is houses, castles, gardens. Its more gentrified. It’s not as rugged or as barren. They have a number of clusters that are well developed. You have a Boyne Valley proposition, the Kilkenny medieval mile, the Waterford biking triangle; but they don’t have an overarching proposition, so there is a big piece of work going on at the minute to see (what is the way forward). Its not going to be a geographic (proposition). We thought it might be kind of east and south, but when you look at where it’s all plotted it goes over as far as Limerick, there’s Clonmacnoise, there’s Cork, so that piece is still in development whereas the WAW we have the overarching proposition but we are working on breaking that down to kind of meaningful clusters. So loads of stuff going on. The idea then would be that the businesses would rally under these overarching propositions. In essence you would say that the hard marketing is done. If you are presenting the WAW, we want to work with these smaller businesses to be the deliverers of it. The accommodation obviously would be key but more important would be the experience providers; the activities, the attractions, the walking guides. It’s what you can do and see while you’re there. Its about helping them to up-skill in terms of their online/ digital
offering. So (what I mean by that) is how do they present their business, is there website optimised to target French and German visitors if that’s their market?

D: So what form does that take? Is that the provision of training?

I: Over the last 3 years they were very much survival support whereas now they are very targeted. It would be looking at the flow of their website. Is it presenting an experience? If we consider an accommodation provider; if I am coming form France or Germany then I don’t want to see a wedding on the front page and I don’t really care whether all of your rooms are en-suite. I expect them to be en-suite, and I don’t care if your function room can hold 350 people because I want to come and let’s say cycle the greenway and visit the islands and a few other business people. If I stay here I want to know how long it will take me to get to Roonagh key to get to Clare Island, where can I rent a bike etc. Actually do you know who does it really well is the Mulranny Park Hotel. We would have used them as a kind of a benchmark over the past few years. They’re leading with experiences, as distinct from, ’84 bedrooms all en-suite and a great function hall and banquet suite’. Yes we can help them with search engine optimisation, setting up a website. Actually we’re gone beyond the support for setting up a website. Those supports were there in a previous era that you would hope at this stage that they would have one but (where we do get involved) can they optimise it for international visitors. Can they translate part of it into French or German? Can they answer those queries? How do they go about doing that? We have the supports that can help with all of that. Is their website mobile ready? We have a national web test that will tell them what they would need to do to get it mobile ready, help them in terms of search engine optimisation, look at the whole area of social media, how to set up a Facebook page, how to have a Twitter handle, how often to feed it, what type of messaging you should use. We have a whole load of digital supports and we have a whole load of sales supports. How to maximise your revenue. One of them there that we talked about this morning was about how to maximise familiarisation trips. It sounds basic, but the number of people that if they’re dealing with overseas tour operators they don’t know what they’re looking for. First of all, what commission do you pay, can you take groups, what’s the largest size, can you do a separate dinner, can you do separate menu’s; things like that. They don’t want to see your banqueting suite and they really don’t care if you have a swimming pool or not.
There’s a presumption that there is a certain level of capability there but it’s not always there. Some people do it really, really well and then others would surprise you by how poorly they do it. You’d nearly find that it’s the more established businesses that struggle than some of the smaller setups. We do have a whole range of supports built around businesses to help them capitalise on new strategic propositions in the whole area of selling, digital and developing experiences. Turning your offering from a product into an experience. When we gave funding for the Greenway, an off-road walking and cycling track) we hadn’t a notion really how it would play out. We had no idea that there would be gourmet greenway or an activity greenway and that was local businesses saying right, how can we maximise our return from this piece of tourism infrastructure, for want of a better word. I remember cycling the middle section of it from Newport to Mulranny, with Travis Seery and Paul Harmon, before they ever bought a bike and he was thinking, ok we might buy about 20 bikes and see how it will go. That was in 2011. You’re only talking about 3 years later and now you have the Greenway taxi and Paul has the one where you cycle out as far as Mulranny, get the boat back and catch fish along the way. Bring them home if you’re staying in self catering accommodation. I mean that cohort of businesses where you are doing your thesis are probably a cut above.

D: Certainly on the Greenway they have been presented with a ready market and they’re getting the most out of it. I suppose the main geographical focus of my study, aside form a bistro bar in Mulranny is more peripheral and out from Westport. Westport is different in the sense that it has had its act together for some time in terms of co-operative structures etc.

I: Yeah they have a little group called destination Westport and after Killarney they are probably up there. Their big challenge is that they are very domestic focused. Westport really came of age in the late 90’s, early 00’s, so they didn’t have to go overseas because there was a readymade east coast market that were heading West. When I was working in the states I you mentioned Westport, everyone would have understood Connecticut. It wouldn’t even have dawned on them that there was a Westport in Ireland. We’ve been doing a good deal of work with that group in terms of how they were looking to diversify. It’s a short enough season. Its July and August
for families and then they have the golden oldies in April, May and September, but they work together and they get that importance.

D: Where I’m looking is more peripheral again. You’re 12 miles out from Westport. If Westport is doing well, Louisburgh will do better, but it won’t necessarily do well. It’s about how to get them to come out and if they are coming out how do you get them to stay out. With Westport access is less of an issue because you have the train coming in. For Louisburgh access is an issue. I was out at a heritage centre between Louisburgh and Delphi on Sunday morning. Again the owner is very up to speed. She has a marketing degree and has a lot of experience working in marketing and tourism having worked in the marketing department for Ryanair. She’s after taking over a 5,000 acre farm and they’re doing sheep dog demonstrations with bus tours as well as turf cutting and stuff like that. They would have that same issue of how to get people out from Westport. They’ve looked at it and they’ve said there are this many tour buses passing here each day; how do we get them to stop and how do we get them to have us on their itinerary and to tie in with destination Westport so that the Castlecourt hotel for example might offer this as a day trip…..

I: So that they get an extra bed night, she gets more visitors through the door etc.

D: Exactly.

I: Well that’s where we can help as well with the likes of that Meithéal workshop that I spoke about where we would facilitate meetings between the businesses and overseas buyers.

D: She was at it. She presented to them.

I: First of all we have done work on what are the best segments for Ireland. We are looking at segments for their motivations rather than their demographics. Depending on the type of holiday you are looking for your motivations are going to be different. If you are going with your family you’re are going to want to make sure that baby is taken care of and its easy and hassle free whereas if you are running away for a nice romantic weekend you are in a complete different frame of mind. This is all
motivation based. Normally we used to talk about people who were 50 plus, or 30 plus but depending on the nature of the trip or why you’re going it can be very different. It is a totally different way of looking at things by us. You may even have different segments wanting to do the same thing but they might consume it in a different way. They might access it differently. I always take the example of Dun Aonghus on the Aran islands. A couple of years ago we went out on the Oct. bank holiday Monday. I was surprised to see that the boat was full. It was full of non-nationals. They were all from Japan, a lot of Americans, a good few Germans and about 10% Irish. They all got off the boat and the Americans and the Japanese all ran for the tour buses and the mini-buses to get them out to Dun Aonghus. The Germans rented bikes or walked. Ultimately we met them all along the road using various modes of transport. They were all going to Dun Aonghus because it was the attraction…the Japanese were there with the tripods up trying to get the best shot, the Americans wanted the banter from the local fella on the mini bus but they weren’t going to do the walking. Others had their guidebooks but they wanted to explore it for themselves. They were all coming to the island for the same reason but how they approached it was different. We need to present things to people they way they want to consume them. Going back to your small businesses in West Mayo, they need to understand who their business is aimed at or to tailor their business for Germans or French or North Americans they need to know how they like to consume it, their motivations for travel etc. If they don’t provide accommodation, they will need to link with those that do in the likes of Clifden or Westport or whatever. The hotel people have the better ability to do the selling so they will need activities to get people to come in the first place and the activity people tent to be that bit smaller without the same sales or marketing budgets. They’re not going on overseas missions. There are 2 areas then that they need to focus. They need to network with their peers or the businesses in their area but they also need to link in with our familiarisation trips and the tour operator opportunities. We have a website called ‘Promotions Ireland’ which is a website that lists all of the trade opportunities. Now there is a fee for some of them so you have to say is that really for me or will I get business from this or is my business tailored for that particular market? It’s understanding your business and who it resonates most with, or tailoring it to suit the best market prospects. We have been rolling out these segmentation workshops in what these people want, how they want to consume it, how you communicate with them. You don’t have to go overseas on
sales missions and you don’t have to have elaborate marketing campaigns. There are a huge amount of things about being on line and visible on line in the right way. We’ve a staggering statistic, which is probably out of date by now, that most people visit about 23 websites before they will make a holiday booking. So like, which of them do you use…them all. We’d even find with our own website that we are seen as the validator. We’re not the motivating site. They’ll look at the user generated content from their peers or from Tripadvisor and then they’ll come to the tourist boards website to see are you really in Louisburgh and is it really 14 miles from Westport or whatever. They use us as the reference guide to see are they approved, or accredited and quality assured by the tourist board.

D: It’s interesting that you say you have moved on form the standards focus because it has come to be expected.

I: Yeah it’s all about the experience now and its about what like minded people or people who influence you are saying and where they are going. Its more peer driven opportunities.

D: I was talking to the owner of a hostel on Clare Island and a point that he made was that the Greenway between Westport and Achill was the first in the country and there are a lot more of them starting to spring up around the country now. He felt that unless the businesses around it continue to develop and innovate it will become passé and tired. What he and others are talking about is trying to set up a destination Clew Bay where you might cycle from Westport to Achill, get the boat to Clare Island with your bike. You cycle around Clare Island and do whatever there, on to Inisturk and maybe Boffin, back into Roonagh quay and cycle back into Westport. I was asking again on how he would see that idea become a reality. Again some of the businesses I have spoken to were very dependant, and were waiting for someone else to make things happen. His point was listen, we need beat our own drum and to make this happen and not be waiting for FI or any other body to come along and do it. It was a surprising outlook for me as I wouldn’t have expected businesses at that level to be so progressive. It would take a major co-operative effort to get that across the line.
I: Again in that particular area they have started to work together. I suppose he is very forward thinking and wouldn’t be representative of everybody we would meet. He’s right. We’re looking at along the WAW having 8 or 10 geographic clusters. We would see Clew Bay as being one so within the Arc of the bay we need to see what would keep you 2-7 days. Here’s a cycle piece, here’s an island piece and then hop to another island and then what’s the history here and whether you came back into Roonagh and continued on down to Leenane or whatever. From the Killary right up as far as Achill there is an opportunity there. What’s the big story there? Might it be a Gráinne Uaile story or a water based activity or might it just be activities generally. Is there a cultural offering? What can they do than perhaps other sections of the WAW and lead with that. I don’t know if anyone has spoken to you about the Blue Ways. These would be water based trails for snorkelling and Kayaking and Old Head would be one of them. On the August bank holiday weekend on the Sunday there will be activity providers who will have a ‘try the blueway’ promotional day. If we just go back to the Greenway for a second. I mean we thought, this is fabulous, 42 km of off road trail. I remember saying it to a German tour operator and he looked at me and said, ‘do you really think that somebody is going to leave Germany for 42 km. They wouldn’t go for 420km, but as part of a tour they might do a half day or a day on it. It wasn’t going to be the motivator to get them there but it might be one thing that would help populate their few days. We thought that was very interesting. It was a sort of a levelling statement. This in its own right isn’t going to bring people in but it might add to their experience while they are there or give them an extra bit of value in that particular area.

D: Looking at the percentages of foreign tourists to domestic, those that I spoke to were saying that 70-80% of the tourists coming through the door were Irish and indeed a lot of them were relatively local. Has that changed drastically?

I: It would have been higher in the past because Irish people in the 90’s lets say didn’t have the where-with-all to take foreign holidays. At the moment I think its 66% of all bed nights on the west coast are domestic. It is improving. With the likes of the WAW we’re hoping that if we can get more people to the west coast can we look at getting an extra night out of them. We’re not looking for mass tourism like Benedorm or the Canaries. We’re looking at getting a longer staying, higher spending visitor. And
we’re looking at getting them to come outside of the peak season of July and August so that they’re coming in April, May, June and September and so on. You’re right, it’s over-reliant on the domestic market. I can understand that (not targeting the overseas market) because if it’s a short season, and you put an ad on the back page of the times or put up a banner ad or whatever the phone rings or the website is busy right away, you can see it clearly. It’s a longer lead in time to get overseas visitors. I think understanding what market best resonates with the market or tailoring it to suit and working with FI or getting in front of the tour operators who are always looking for something new, something different that others don’t have. I think the WAW and this whole experience development piece that we’re doing will help greatly in that. If you’re an activity provider or an attraction, outside of the big ones like the cliffs of moher or Turlough House, you have to network with the accommodation sector to say right, will you include me or is there a way that we can work together as well as getting the tour operators to come. Even things like this, its just off the press, its called the secrets of the Wild Atlantic Way. If you want you can take a copy of it. These are lesser known attractions. These won’t be the reason that you’d come but they may be the thing that would make your stay memorable or enjoyable. To you or me, we might say that’s not a secret…but you won’t find it in the tour operator brochure or the list of 10 things to do in Ireland.

D: Just going back to what you were saying on the trends of visitor numbers of overseas visitors dropping since 2001. I read a paper called ‘Ireland of the unwelcomes’ which dealt with visitor perception of the famous Irish welcome and what visitors expected and how it compared with their experience. They also pointed to the deterioration and suggested that other sectors in Ireland were booming and that we didn’t need tourism. That (deteriorating numbers of foreign visitors) in one sense seems counter-intuitive because at the same time access to the west was improving all the time with Ireland west Airport in terms of the number of routes etc.

I: Yes but then after 2008 a lot of those routes were discontinued. I think Shannon Airport said that between 2007 and 2008 they had 850,000 passengers through the door they were back to 200,000 in 2012 which is back up to 350,000 again. They lost a huge chunk of access and visitor numbers. Ireland west was constantly growing
because they had a different strategy but they had Ryanair routes in for one year, then they pulled them the following year and had to go back to square one.

D: There was no certainty there for the visitors.

I: No, but it’s starting to improve again. Motorway access has improved. Whether we like it or not 70% of all overseas visitors still come in through Dublin but you can be in Galway in 2 hours, you can be in Sligo in 2.5 hours. That is improving. The average length of stay of overseas visitors to the West coast is only 4.8 nights so a lot depends on their length of stay. This compares with 6 in Ireland generally. If we give them reasons to spend an extra night, and it’s not going to be the hotels that will change the world, it’s going to be the activity providers. They will need to network with the hotels in their area, to give the hotels reasons to tourists to stay an extra night and also link in with tour operators and avail of all of the online stuff and make sure they have a really good on line presence that will target the clients that they will resonate with. I think by virtue of marketing the WAW, the big umbrella marketing job will be done and then if we present it in various different clusters, by theme or by geography then people should be saying well I’m here and I’m located so far from it or whatever. It’s reciprocal. The accommodation providers have to utilise the activities and attractions, which in turn have to use the accommodation sector. I don’t think that they should be thinking that they have to go on a sales mission overseas because it’s not realistic.

D: Let’s say I’m a small business in rural Ireland. Have you any feedback to indicate how they find the process of accessing the supports?

I: Accessing them in terms of knowing where to get them or the availability of them?

D: Knowing where to get them.

I: It shouldn’t be from a tourism point of view. Over the last few years most of our teams who are called ‘key account managers’, all had a list of clients ranging from activities to attractions that they would have worked with and provided supports to. Then we’d run a lot of group workshops in particular areas. Now those supports are
going to be fine tuned in the likes of the WAW to develop the WAW. We would be
doing them under the umbrella of a Clew Bay cluster or a West Clare cluster or
whatever it might be, and saying ‘what’s your big selling point for the WAW’.
They’re still there but they are more tailored. The supports now are going to be more
toward the digital piece, the selling piece and the experience development piece. As I
would see we have an unwritten 80/20 rule where we don’t say no often but we won’t
go outside of those areas. We don’t go offering supports (outside of those areas) but if
people come to us we would work with them. We have a huge amount of on-line
supports. All of the stuff we would have done over the last 3 or 4 years. We’ve turned
them into either webinars or on-line tutorials on FI.ie. We have a whole business
support section there. Anybody who is starting out, if they want and sat down, it
wouldn’t be for the want of availability of stuff. A lot of people might say that they
want somebody to show me, but the stuff is there on-line. Most of it is pretty good.

D: The supports that are offered like the training, would that be provided as fully
funded training or would a contribution be required?

I: Some of it is fully funded and we have started to look for a bit of a contribution for
certain pieces. We found in the last year or 18 months as business started to pick up,
people were starting to sign up and then not showing up on the day. We’d have
trainers booked up and in place and you could have 20 people signed up and then 8
arriving. If you had a credit card number or a small cost; some of it we would be
happy to have refunded if they showed up, but to have some guarantee. In the tougher
years they were showing up and were very grateful for it but we definitely notice in
the last year that the uptake hasn’t been as high because people have been distracted
with business being a bit better. If you pay for something you value it that bit more. It
still wouldn’t be a full cost, it would be heavily subsidised but with a bit of a cost we
feel that businesses would value it a bit more.

D: Brian Quinn and Grainne Kilcoyne in the FI Westport office are very local. Can
businesses arrange one-on-one meetings with the local offices?

I: They can. We would have teams in Letterkenny, Sligo, Westport, Galway,
Limerick, Tralee, Killarney and Cork and in fairness those teams have responsibility
for working with the industry in that area. For example the lads in Ballina might be complaining that Brian is all about Westport because he is based in Westport but that whole Clew Bay area and Achill and Erris is his core Area. They know the product better, there is a one stop shop for people and he would put people in touch with other parts of FI, for other aspects of the business.

D: Would there be two-way communication between these teams and the businesses that would inform policy decisions?

I: Absolutely and in fact it has to be 2 way communication because that will inform what supports are needed. Having on-on-one conversations or through a group dynamic we need to identify what the gaps are in the skills dynamic and feed this back to the development side of the house here who will put programs in place to address some of those challenges. Anything we do in future, we’re saying we nearly have to have service level agreements with businesses, that if we provide insights and we provide training we need to get feedback from them as they implement it; did it work, did it change your business mix, did business increase, did it decrease. You find a lot of people get supports and they don’t implement them; oh I meant to get around to it. Someone mentioned mentoring in the last meeting. We spent a huge amount on mentoring in the last 3 years. People would be coming back for more mentoring before they would ever have implemented the recommendations so we had to get a bit stricter and insist that they demonstrate that you have taken the learning’s on board, that you put them into place. Then what was the result of it and we’ll talk to you about the next piece.

D: That just about covers everything I wanted to cover Fiona.

I: I suppose for the rural tourism businesses it’s tougher for the small guys. They’re the marketer, the HR person, the general manager, they’re everything. Most of these businesses are less than 10 employees and sometimes are less than 5.

D: And they don’t have a marketing department.
I: They do not and they have ended up in it. In the case of the likes of (the hostel owner in Clare Island) it was a family business but also he is passionate about it. That’s half the battle. They’re bringing the passion to it and the enthusiasm and the interest but they are trying to do everything. They’re not alone, there’s other people doing the same so I think the whole networking, this cluster approach will help and shared learning’s. It’s not easy. Hopefully with the likes of WAW and that momentum and enthusiasm will sort out the international marketing so for them it’s about tapping into that. I wouldn’t have been able to say that 5 years ago or 3 years ago.

D: It’s funny when you mention how the businesses in Ballina would say that Brian Quinn (Failte Ireland) is all about Westport and doesn’t do anything for the rest of them. I did a dummy run interview with a farm/ accommodation provider in Slane, CO. Meath and in the same vein the owner was complaining that FI are all about the WAW and they aren’t doing anything for the Boyne Valley.

I: And we would have worked with them to bring the whole Boyne Valley piece together. As it happens the Boyne Valley was the prototype for the signage and the touring route for the WAW, albeit on a much smaller scale but we took an awful lot of the learning’s as to what worked; the public consultation and engagement that came out of the Boyne Valley that was applied to the WAW.

D: Yeah they have a great product. They’re looking to go more into walks around the farm and that but I believe there is a big issue with insurance which also came up at the heritage centre.

I: The local Authority or LEADER were offering reduced insurance or public liability for small businesses who are getting into that. We’re becoming a very litigious society.

D: I digress; they are doing so many things right there (the business in Slane) but I got lost on my way. They’re only a kilometre off the main road and they have no sign.
They probably have so many irons in the fire and they’re still farming something as fundamental as that can be overlooked.

I: There is some plans to rationalise the plethora of tourist signage in the West. In Galway they are signing all the town-lands and then it’s up to the business owner to ensure that they give good directions. A lot of the overseas visitors will be depending on the GPS so it’s important to have those posted.

D: Thanks a million for you time Fiona. Its very much appreciated.
Appendix 8:

Interviewee: Former Owner/ Manager
Date: 27.07.2014
Duration: 27 minutes and 21 seconds

Context: This business is a small 18 bedroom hotel in Louisburgh. It faces Croagh Patrick and backs onto the Bunowen River. It was bought by the interviewee in 2002 and redeveloped to include the bedrooms, a bar and lounge and a large function area. It was also landscaped to provide access to the river at the rear which was previously not utilised.

The business was closed down however in late 2013 and is due to reopen in Aug. 2014 under new management.

Interview transcript:

D: started by giving a brief introduction of the reason for seeking the interview and the topics that were of interest.

I: When we were in the business it would have been very beneficial if there was some funding available to pay somebody to come in for 3-4 months and set you up for marketing etc. but that wasn’t there

D: As I recall you invested heavily in the premises itself after you took it over.

I: We bought the hotel in 2002. When we took it over we just redecorated and refurbished the pub. We were there 3-4 years when we did the major redevelopment. There was a big investment to incorporate the new dining room. There was no (External) money available for anything. We did check into it at the time through FI.

D: I have spoken to other business locally and also up in Meath and they have made the point that depending on what it is that you are doing there is funding available but
that the problem with it is the mountain of paperwork that you have to work through. They have said that it is prohibitive.

I: That’s what I found with most of the stuff. Even filling out the forms for getting into booking.com, the amount of stuff you had to put into the application form; the measurements of each room, the measurements of your bathrooms, your en-suite rooms, four pictures of each room etc. It was ridiculous.

D: And did you complete the process?

I: I had it almost done last year and in the end it was too late to submit it. That is a good website to be on. They get a big percentage out of the bookings as well.

D: Were ye able to advertise the accommodation anywhere?

I: What we had was our own website?

D: Did ye develop that yourselves?

I: We brought someone in to do it. It was changed about 3 times. You know what happens. Each time the next person in (Website developer) they said that what was in place was crap. Each time it was €1,000. They say “I’ll do it, it’ll be very reasonable”, and then you’re handed a bill for €1,500. The last fella was €1,500 or €1,200 and all he did was make a few changes and it still wasn’t right.

D: Could you take booking through the website?

I: We could in the end. We couldn’t take payment though. The VISA thing was going to cost a fair bit of money again to do it up and the last summer we were there it seemed to be really slow. The rooms were so so in August but there just wasn’t enough (revenue) coming in to develop all those things.

D: How many rooms were there?
I: 18. Every time you turned round there was a bill for something. The amount of stuff that you wouldn’t know until you were in it. There are so many things that had to be paid out for you just say to yourself, “where is the money coming for to do it”. Somebody did come in form Failte Ireland helping to do a marketing plan but they produced a list of 5 actions and you had to do them all yourself. It wasn’t a help really.

D: Was the problem that you are so busy operationally that you don’t have the time to develop strategically?

I: You’d really want someone there full time to be on top of that (marketing).

D: Do you have to pay an annual contribution to FI?

I: You do. It (the amount) depends. There are 2 different types of licence. I think it was €800 or there about. The other one we were on was Holiday breaks. I can’t remember which one it was. You had stamps and you gave them so many rooms and they would fill them. It’s very cheap. The rooms were coming out at €30 or so. You get bookings through them alright but it was small.

D: Was the accommodation open all year?

I: No it was just in the summer. We normally opened the May bank holiday until September.

D: Were the bar and the function room open all year?

I: Yeah. The function room could bring in a fair bit of money depending on how busy we were.

D: Was it mostly locals in the function room?

I: Yeah. Birthday parties and stuff. The marketing thing generally, I don’t think that people are spending big money on it. I met up with a few people that were into
marketing and they gave me guidelines of what to do and that. They were simple enough. They were from other (similar) businesses and they weren’t spending big money on it either. They were trying to be clever. Even the local radio station is very expensive to advertise on.

D: Would most of the people who stayed have been local, from the region, national international or just people who were passing and decided to stay?

I: You’d have passer by people. A good few English. They’d have booked in advance by phone. We had a lot of repeat visitors too. People who would say that I want that room overlooking the river or whatever. That’s what I miss this year, seeing a lot of the familiar faces again. Around reek time (pilgrimage Sunday on Croagh Patrick) there was one big group made up of 4 different related families that used to come and they’d take 5 or 6 different rooms. They had been coming since we opened. We had a lot of repeats. Then we had people that were coming from as near as Galway that had never heard of Louisburgh. They were just passing by with a friend or whatever and they decided they’d stay. Sometimes you’d get people coming for a funeral or whatever, particularly from Galway, I don’t know why, and they’d be amazed that they had never heard of Louisburgh. They used to say that the place was so nice and they’d be back again.

D: I wonder where were they coming from or going to? Were they going to the islands?

I: I don’t know. Some of them were going to the islands alright, Clare Island particularly and they’d stay over the night.

D: It’s a lovely venue and very well presented.

I: Yeah. It’s a shame really that there wasn’t more business around.

D: Had you any background in the sector before or did ye decide to just have a crack at it.
I: No (background in the industry). Yeah (just having a crack at it).

D: That must have been daunting?

I: It was in the beginning. I think the whole area of Louisburgh (rather than just one premises) needs something to bring people to it.

D: Ye were the only ones west of Westport offering accommodation.

I: Yeah. Apart from the B&B’s. Some people love the homeliness of the B&B’s. I think it was the marketing that fell down.

D: Was there LEADER funding or anything that you could have availed of?

I: No I don’t think so. I know that I enquired before at those meetings that I used go to in Failte Ireland in Galway, Westport, Renvyle and different places. They used to invite all of the local businesses around. They were networking exercises really. At one of them, it was a big one in Knockranny, I was asking the lady about funding for a small hotel and she said there was funding but that you would have to draw up a plan of what you were doing, maybe for festival or event. It seems to be easier to get group funding.

D: Didn’t ye run a festival at one point?

I: Yeah there was a small festival. I don’t think we could get funding for that. I wasn’t in it at the time. It started off as a meeting (between the local businesses) but ended up with just Simon form teach Na N-ól and ourselves. That was quiet enough I think. You have to persevere for a few years. It didn’t make a loss. Even the big one in Westport that Dick Burke used to run on the Fairgreen has fallen through but someone said that they were starting up again next year. I don’t know of any other funding that is available for businesses.

D: Would there be much coordinated co-operation between the businesses around Louisburgh?
I: No. In Westport different Hotels have teamed up and they package their offering. Even the lady on the marketing courses I was on was saying that we should go and talk to someone on Clare Island and also Delphi. We had a girl in the very beginning who was very good and she tried to do a lot of that in the beginning and she tried to do a lot of that, ringing up schools for transition year students and that. What really happened in the end groups weren’t even coming because they didn’t have the money. We had one group that came down since we opened from somewhere in Dublin. They used to come surfing every year. They’d come and wait the night. They’d have a lunch the first day and dinner that evening.

D: Did ye organise that with the surfing business?

I: No. This guy found us on the website. He and 3 or 4 other teachers would come on a big bus and then they’d go surfing the day they arrived and again the next morning. They were coming for 5 or 6 years. Then the last year things were very tight. We were actually providing it at the same price as we had the first year. They were saying that some of the children weren’t able to make the payments. They were going and they said that they hoped to be back next year and then they didn’t come back last year. It was in September. It was a lovely boost to get at the end of the season. The parents I think were out of work and it got tight for them.

D: You mentioned that John (Mary’s husband) was building. Was the hotel the main focus or was it supplemental?

I: At the start the two lads were working (the two husbands were building) and myself and Mary (MH’s sister in law) were there (In the Hotel). I think what happened at the end there was money being put into the hotel by he lads. It wasn’t paying it’s way. A lot of money has gone into it. The most thing of all was the electricity costs. They were something else. The kitchen had a lot to do with that. We got this lad in form a company called Power Savvy. He was made redundant from somewhere else and he set this company up. He monitors electricity usage. He’d show you the graph and when the kitchen would come on for breakfast at 7a.m. the consumption would just
shoot up. During the day when everything was running consumption was huge. You’d know it was your kitchen. It’s savage on electricity.

D: What about rates from the council. Were they high as well?

I: Oh yeah. You couldn’t keep up with them really.

D: Would you say there is a future in the business?

I: Yeah. You’re only talking about 18 rooms. It’s very bad in the summertime if you can’t fill 18 rooms every night. If there was more marketing put into it you should be able to. I don’t know about the winter time but you should be able to fill the rooms from June to September.

D: Would the weekends have been full all of the time?

I: Yeah in the summertime. Maybe not full every night but you’d have 12 or 13 of them full. Sometimes in the summertime you would have to turn people away. It wouldn’t happen often but on the busy weekends. Feile weekend or if there was a function on you might have a real overflow. In the summertime there was a lovely buzz to it. All of the visitors were so lovely. They really liked it and they used to say how homely and friendly it was. It wasn’t like going to a big hotel. I miss it in the summertime. In the morning when they were down for the breakfast they were all so cheerful. They were lovely. It was very seldom that we had any problems. They used to always love the beds and say that they had a lovely night’s sleep. Some of them used to walk around as though it was their own place. They’d pop into the kitchen. If they were there for a few nights. They used love it out the back (down by the river) as well.

D: Would you consider opening it again in the future?

I: Yeah. I love that kind of work but there would have to be more in it. It is too much of a worry when you’re not making enough. The bills are there and you have to meet them as best you can and you’re wondering if you are going to get a good week or is
this going to be a good night. In Westport it seems to be better. Then again I don’t think that the pubs in there are that busy at night time either. Tourists don’t go out that much at night time. There aren’t the same drinkers around.

D: What was the main staple for you, food or drink?

I: They’d have their food and you’d see them going up to the room, bottles of water. You’d get the odd family or couple that would stay and spend a few pound but a lot of them would go to their rooms or hit for up town and ten come back looking for a late one. A lot of them aren’t drinkers.

D: If there were more events in the area would it make a big difference?

I: It would yeah. You set up so much for that weekend. You could be overstocked or under-stocked.

D: If you ran out could you go up to one of the other pubs for a keg?

I: You could yeah. We normally topped up well for that weekend. The last time I had kegs for a few weeks afterwards. We could run up to Joe’s if we ran out. Change was another thing. If someone ran out of change they’d be down to you or you could run up. That was fine in Louisburgh alright. Even as far over in Old Head (The caravan and camping park), I remember getting a key off them. If you were looking for anything (marketing support) there probably is something out there but you need someone full time researching it and you need to follow it up. There’s no point in being in serving breakfast and thinking that you have to fill out that form or that should be gone today.

D: A lot of the academic theory would talk about the importance of market research and marketing plans. Is that a realistic focus for small business?

I: No. You’d also be asked what kind of people are you targeting. We’d say everybody. Maybe its not the right way. I don’t know. If you set up that we only want families, first of all our place wouldn’t have been really geared for families, but you
would take them. You couldn’t say that we will only take families because we wouldn’t have all family rooms. Or if you look at the surfers, they’re all single rooms and they’re on a really low budget. At this stage you kind of have to take what you get. You don’t really have the number’s coming through Louisburgh to rule anyone out. With only 18 rooms you can’t target tours either. We couldn’t cater for a bus of 52. It’s difficult enough. There are probably tours out there and if you were bigger you could get them. I know for the first few years we were there that on a fine day there used to be queue’s out to the door. They would be queuing for tables. They were all from Westport out for the day and that. That all stopped. The first year (2002) was absolutely mad. There were people everywhere in Louisburgh that time. There are extra food places and that in it now and you’ll see small groups around but the volume isn’t in it like it used to be. In those years you’d go home and you’d be wrecked. The August bank holiday we used to have to put them in the function room to eat. I think that in Westport now the hotels are selling the room and the dinner as a package to hold the customer. If they’re out for the day they have to go back in to get their dinner, otherwise they will be buying it somewhere else. Now you’d have people having a coffee and maybe a light snack to keep them going. In those years the hotels weren’t as clever. They’re selling 2 nights and an evening meal and the customer is having a glass of wine and maybe a few drinks and it’s all adding up.

I’m very sorry, I never even asked you if you’d have a cup of tea.

D: No thanks you’re grand. For you what was your main motivating factor for working in the business?

I: It was meeting the people, making sure that everything was perfect. Personal service. You’d be mortified if anyone came down and said there was dust on the floor or whatever. You’d have people coming down and asking how long is this open. I’d say 5 or six years or whatever and they’d say wow, it’s so new. I suppose the volume of people weren’t going through it either (to wear it out). In the morning when they’d be leaving you’d be standing at the door and shaking their hands and seeing them off. It was like a B&B really. Several people still ring and enquire about it and all that. I suppose in a bigger place you would only be worried about profit. The owner probably wouldn’t be in the place 3 times in the year.
Appendix 9:

Interviewee: Joint owner and manager.
Date: 12.07.2014
Duration: 56:03

Context – This business is a small, family owned, stand-alone hotel in a remote, rural area overlooking Clare Island, Inishturk and Cahir Island. It has a number of self catering apartments alongside. It is on the exposed section of coastline between the mouths of the Killary Fjord and Clew Bay and is nestled at the foot of Mweelrea mountain, the highest mountain in Connaught. The landscape is dominated by small farm holdings and commonage on the surrounding hills.
The road narrows as it makes its way south west from the nearest town of Louisburgh to the business and within approx. one mile of the business the main road is not sufficiently wide to accommodate two cars passing.
The interview was carried out on the Saturday morning at 12.00. On arrival there were a small number of locals in the bar having refreshments as well as a few families having bar food.

Interview Transcript:

D: If you could just an introduction as to you got started? How long are you set up?
I: We are here 22 years, this would be our 23rd year.

D: Did it start as it is now?
I: No, well it pretty much started as it is now but it was pretty run down.

D: You were in England?
I: We came back from London. And we had partners so we just moved in patched up a few things and carried on as it was.

D: You didn’t invest too much at the start?
I: Well, no, we came back in May and got straight into it, thinking it would be okay, but we didn’t realise that it was very run down.

D: Who had it at that stage?
I: Derek Taylor & Phil, so they were coming to the end of their working career. Anyway they were getting out of it, they didn’t care, it was an old building or badly built in the first place. One section of it had been a house, so that wasn’t too bad and the other section then, bar the floor, the rest was pretty badly maintained. The roof was bad which was a big problem.

D: And were they doing accommodation?
I: Yeah, they had 10 bedrooms going all the time. There was 4 staff that were staff accommodation. We lived in it for a couple of years, so we were living on the premises at that stage with 2 small kids. It was fairly trying. You know water wasn’t working properly, you could turn on a tap and have leaves coming through as much as water. The first stage (my husband) wasn’t too impressed with it but we in tanks etc., (my husband) was still building over in London so he would have a good background in that sort of thing.

D: So, as you went along you made improvements?
I: We improved the lounge, we found that the bar needed too much structural work, it was going to take too much money. Of course you come back to the idea that you would make lots of money, but it would get soaked up in mortgages and expenses and living expenses and (My husband) was building as well. It was only part-time we were really doing it. During the winter it was closed during the day. There was a huge amount of work that needed to be done. Which eventually what happened was, we were in business 5/6 years and closed down the rooms that were too difficult to maintain, too damp, too wet. And eventually we just came up with the idea and built the apartments so we actually knocked half the premises that was here. Closed the kitchen and the rooms and just had the local bar. Then we built the apartments, sold them on and renovated here. Literally the only part that is of the old place is the floor. The floor there that’s all. Everything was gone, windows smashed out and all.
D: When was all that done? I remember coming back here years ago and it was a very different layout.

I: Very different layout, totally bad layout, now it was still the main place for locals, for the festivals. We had loads of festivals and things like that going on. 10 years, 11 years ago, about 2002, so from 2001 to 2004 we were doing the renovations, cause we literally just had the bar for that first summer. We closed down for 6 weeks; My husband had done some work behind the scene and the bar was partitioned off. He got a lot of work done and then took that down and then for the 6 weeks they were building the wall it went from the wall to where the board is there, that was the size of the new bar. So then that was small enough if you wanted to play darts etc., they didn’t have the space that they were used to, oh the pressure! But it was very manageable at that size, it was still a very nice bar but you couldn’t have music in it really. You had no dance area.

D: Is there a bit of a trade-off there between trying to keep it cosy in the winter and at capacity in the summer?

I: Yes, ideally you would want to partition it across. Well I suppose here is a big enough section anyway. We have the darts here 3 nights a week, most of the time, 2/3 nights.

D: For the summer?

I: No, no for the winter so you are using that space anyway. It is a bit of a trade off, especially with heat, as the heat is gone bananas in the last few years and you are very conscious of it compared to 10 years ago. So after that then, apartments were sold, we continued each year and expanded it out. We put on 2 more rooms and we had to put in a disabled room. Regulations changed and you need to have a disabled room.

D: And is it that you have to do it or if you don’t do it you will miss out on something else?

I: You have to do it, but you kind of need it anyway. You know you could have a family coming for a party and they are going to have, maybe elderly parents or something. It is just handy to have alright.

D: So that is completely separate to the self-catering?
I: No, there is no self-catering

D: Oh sorry, yeah, I was thinking of the apartments.
I: The apartments were sold, they were privately owned, we sold them on otherwise we wouldn’t have been able to fund the renovations. It really was a time to decide if we were closing up and walking away or whether we were going to do something else. So the apartments gave us a enough leeway to renovate here otherwise this place was never going to make the money for itself. It was too run down anyway at that stage, the roofs needed changing, it didn’t generate that kind of income. When you are only open during the summer for 6 weeks max. You wouldn’t even have from May to September, it would have been from the 12th of July to the 2nd last week in August.

D: Has that always been the case and is it still the case?
I: It has expanded now, well we are doing food all year so it’s not like we had to start from scratch. Each year you had to build a reputation.

D: And I suppose there is a problem there because people are unsure if you would be open if they go back.
I: Yes, so that was a huge problem so you either had to be open, advertise it and they had to be used to using you. Even during the winter now you would constantly need to keep it in people’s faces that you are actually open. And then if you are closed for a couple of weeks. It is difficult again for people who aren’t used to you being closed or seasonal and there a lot of places closing for a longer time each year.

D: And have you made any headway into stretching the season or is it very much, it is what it is and is very difficult to change?
I: It is very difficult, you think you have, and then you get groups in maybe, say in September we have some groups in for 2 weekends in September, but that’s all you are guaranteed. They are a knitting group.

D: Well, it will be less mess than a stag do anyway.
I: I hope so, yeah.

D: And how did you get them? They just saw your website?
I: No. Just a lady that stayed locally and has moved to the area and she wanted to do it. Again it was just kinda luck rather than looking for walkers. I have done the route of trying to email walkers, putting adverts in papers; you don’t get that much back from it. You know, it is word and mouth. You are very dependant on word or mouth in a small place or people find you and say oh brilliant, cyclists find you or walkers, Mweelrea, is quiet important.

D: And the Atlantic Way, will that make a difference?
I: It should do now.

D: It is only this year, the signs have only gone up.
I: The signs have only gone up in May, so the advertisement for now is really for next year and it will be then that it will make a difference so we are joining Bord Fáilte (Failte Ireland) and yeah I do think that will make a big difference cause we are signposted, we were hardly even signposted up to now.

D: So it was word and mouth primarily up until that? And you know when you were saying, I actually had to do a dummy run of this, kind of get an idea of the topics and questions I was going to ask. I am living in Meath so I went to a place in Slane, she has a hostel and self-catering and she was giving out stink about Bord Fáilte (Failte Ireland) because she was paying a couple of grand a year for all she gets back out of them..
I: Yeah, everybody says that. You don’t really get anything out of them only for the fact you get the sign and whatever advertising they are doing. You get nothing from them, especially if the Atlantic Way wasn’t being advertised.

D: So there was no point in being with them up until that point?
I: Absolutely not. I would have found them a disgrace now. I would have no respect for them. They were fine for Westport, they were involved in some of the promotions of festivals but on a small scale. Louisburgh HQ are very important to Louisburgh.

D: They are only there a year?
I: They are there, this is there 3rd year. They are voluntary
D: They are funded by Bord Fáilte (Failte Ireland)?
I: Yeah, they are involved in it but are not completely run by it.

D: It is a great addition, on a prime location there on the corner. I don’t know how well Louisburgh is marketed generally, you know, by the likes of Bord Fáilte (Failte Ireland), but people are coming in they don’t know what’s here.
I: It’s not bad, in one fowl swoop it’s not bad. Now they wouldn’t be promoting individual towns really they were marketing but they were marketing festivals and things like that, you would see on their Discover Ireland magazine and they are a fortune to go into these magazines for a small business which is only open for 7/8 weeks……

D: And is there anything you can do, for instance, if they were marketing a festival, could you hijack them nearly and do something small around that?
I: Well then you will get emails to say, “are you within walking distance to Westport?” And then you would have a very disappointed person when they arrive in the door. Bookings.com originally put us on as part of Westport and when people arrived they weren’t satisfied because they thought they were staying in Westport. There is a big difference; you need to know where you are coming too. So we had to get that changed in a hurry. You know, it was fine then, if people wanted to come out here you would get loads of bookings from it, but they know where they are coming to and there is no surprise. There were 3 teenagers that I thought …..

D: They thought they were going to stumble out of Matt Molloy’s?
I: Well I don’t think it was Matt Molloy’s …..

D: The labour, would it be mostly locals you have working here?
I: It is mostly locals. Sometimes you would have someone who travels, who just wants to come to the area. But generally it would be locals. It has been very much locals over the last few years.

D: On a part-time basis?
I: Yes, part-time. They are mostly all part-time because up until June we only open weekends for food. And that’s the time the accommodation opens up, unless they ring
up and you explain that we are not actually doing dinners today and tell them to go to Louisburgh for the time being and lots of people do that and they need to know. There is just a lot of locals that are looking for work now than a few years ago. There is plenty of work if you are just working weekends and you are doing something else during the week. My daughter) is in college during the week and she can work then at the weekends and it works well that way. And if you are open (all year you need steady staff.

D: And just going back to when you came back from England, had you, I know (your husband) worked on the buildings, but did you have any background in this sort of stuff?
I: Not really. Well I tell you what when I was a teenager I worked in a bed & breakfast, 14 bedrooms, so I knew how to make beds and standards.

D: But from a management point of view, this would have been alien?
I: Yes, you put a demand on yourself, a personal demand.

D: And did you have to go do training on it or did you just learn on your feet?
I: Learned on our feet, I think now. Myself and (my husband) had done some work in a bar in London, just kind of part-time on a Saturday night cause we had two small kids at the time. So we just did it that way, we knew how to pull a pint. Jimmy Davitt (a local bar man who had worked in the business before they bought it) was here actually, he was our guiding light, you know Jimmy do you?

D: I do actually, when I worked in Joe Mac’s (a bar in Louisburgh) in the summer back in ‘94/’95, Jimmy had to show me how to change a keg. Joe brought me in on a Sunday morning (my first day) when there was no one there, and set me up and showed me how to use the till. He headed off and next minute there was a game on the television and the crowd started to come in and Jimmy came in behind the bar and helped out.
I: Yeah, he would have been cleaning pipes now and maintaining things and he would have been very good at that. Derek was there too and then headed off and there was the gas which was a lot more complicated than we realised. But you will find that you
live and learn. We lived in the place for a year so if anything went wrong in the place you met it.

D: Useful resource to have?
I: It was useful alright.

D: Have you ever done any or looked into any training courses with Fáilte Ireland or with Leader or do they give you any support?
I: No, never did a Fáilte Ireland course, there was no back up at all. I suppose if you paid for it, but it would be quite a lot. No, we were never approached. We were with Fáilte Ireland but there was nothing, no training support whatsoever. We are with the Vintners Association now but you would still pay a pretty packet if you wanted anything like that.

D: And the one they did here a few years ago was that funded by Fáilte Ireland?
I: Yes, it was like a FAS course, people got paid €20/€30 to do work here, in the bar or do kitchen work. It was more using the business as a business (used as a training facility).

D: So you were a case study for them. They were using you to train these other people?
I: No, they were using the premises and paying us for the premises, so yeah it was more of a business deal than anything else.

D; That would’ve worked well, I would have thought?
I: Yeah it did. It worked very well. But they moved it around. It was a good initiative for training people up but I would think it is more important now if they did it. If they were doing it 7/8 years ago there was work anyway, so it was hard to get people to do the schemes but they were good I think.

D: So was it difficult a couple of years ago to get people to come in and wait tables, was it a major problem.
I: A major problem. We were only open for the summer and we wouldn’t have staff continuously, it was a major problem to get fairly mature staff who’d know how to
deal with different situations, the young ones wouldn’t know how to deal with a difficult customer or someone who comes in, well you know there will always be some complications so it is good if you have a bit of a head on you, a bit of experience. We have had some young staff and Bevin is still there and they are well used to Louisburgh, they have been brought up with it and Keelagh was here and they would have been very important now if we weren’t open in the winter for food, to know where everything was, all the bits and pieces. As you said when Jimmy showed you, because there is a lot to learn when you go in there first.

D: When you are reading about businesses you regularly see reference to performance objectives such as profit, growth, these sort of things, and then when you are reading about small businesses, profit is obviously important but would you say that there are other focuses? Would it be important for you that you don’t have to drive to Galway to work for example?
I: Em, I suppose that you are close to your work.

D: That could be a bonus and a sickener at times?
I: Oh yeah it is good to be able to distance yourself from work when you go home. That is probably the biggest disadvantage. It’s handy that you are close by, that you are independent of course that would be a big thing. But running a small business now, I wouldn’t really recommend it at all to be perfectly honest in a rural area.

D: Long hours?
I: Well you are always on call and as well as that you are only able to get so big in a way. And in our position unless we keep working on it personally, and (my husband) is always involved especially in behind the bar, I’d say we would have no business. It’s because we are involved in it all the time.

D: Right, so you can’t kind of step back, bring in a manager and go at something else?
I: We did try that and in the beginning did envisage that we would be able to get someone, we wanted a manager here cause we were trying to raise 4 kids, (my husband) wanted to go play football, if I wanted to go somewhere you were always caught, if there was something on you were always busy. That’s what it amounts to
and then you have winter time, there is nothing on and you have nothing on work-wise, so looking back on it……

D: You are well used to it now at this stage.
I: Yeah used to it now. But if you wanted to go to Galway to work, I wouldn’t go that distance, if you lived out in the country you are going to have to think of some ideas anyway…..

D: And you know what you were saying about the growth there, if you are trying to maintain it at a certain level, the future of it, would you be looking at it and saying “what do we do here next?”. Previously when you built the apartments and sold them on. Are you kind of looking at what the next project?
I: No, it kind of is as it is and there is only maintenance on it. I don’t see any reason to get any bigger. Even having the function room for weddings etc., cause again you are back into maintenance again and……

D: How many weddings are you going to get and..
I: And there is only room for 40 or 50 for a wedding, now we have one in August and we have a marquee, there are certainly options there if you really wanted but we certainly wouldn’t think it worth it.

D: I’d say the wedding market has changed a lot anyway, cause people are going for something a lot different.
I: Yes and we have another one in October, which is a completely different wedding again. They are fun but it is as it is, so we are not looking to expand. What we want is to fill the rooms on a regular basis, cause the local bar is struggling a bit. The bar goers are not being replaced. People are eating and drinking before they go out and people with families don’t have the money. So people have really wised up and aren’t spending it on alcohol if they haven’t got it.

D: I was talking to (a locally based pub and restaurant owner) on that and he was saying from a turnover point of view that drink is an awful lot easier to make money, if you are getting through it, than the food, there is a lot more investment in the food.
I: The food is a lot more labour intensive. It is an out & out pain in the arse.

D: But you have to do it otherwise you will not get people in for a drink.
I: And that has changed as well, in the winter you could tick along and not have food going along. But it was getting quieter, the old guys used to knock around but there is nobody to replace them. We are here 20 years and there is nobody replacing them so the 10 or 15 you would have along the bar for 5 nights a week they were company for each other. And as that has dwindled down there is no one for them to meet. And they drink and drive, now we don’t have much hassle with that but still some people will.

D: As you mention that it is important to have (your husband) behind the bar cause he is the company.
I: Yeah, the counsellor.

D: You mentioned that you don’t have a lot of respect for the efforts of Fáilte Ireland. What would you like to see them doing or what could they do better?
I: Promote the Wild Atlantic Way in such a way that it isn’t aimed at filling the big hotels cause that’s what they do, go to America fill big tour buses, it is all tour bus orientated really. Their regulations are totally based on the big hotels as well and that makes it difficult for small businesses to…

D: How do you mean? The cost of measuring up to them or complying with them?
I: …compliance first of all, there are certain things that they wanted, room size, there is no flexibility, lounge areas are ridiculous really.

D: So they should have a separate set of rules depending on the number of bedrooms you have?
I: Or your premises, where you are. Because we are out here there is no reason to say we have a big reception area, you don’t use it. You are only trying to maintain it and it costs too much, you don’t have the money, you know, why would you want to do it?

D: And they require that you do this?
I: They have certain regulations and there is no flexibility with these regulations.
D: And can you approach them and have a discussion with them?
I: No.

D: They don’t have a process.
I: They do but it is a desperately slow animal. It is a very strange bureaucratic. It is like your tax office really. If you want something done you get, this is the book, this is the regulations, these are the rules. It is like going into Mc Donalds, if there is something on the burger you cannot get it taken off.

D: And are they based regionally, in Castlebar or Westport?
I: Brian Quinn is in Baltray, I presume he is Mayo based, after that it comes from Cork is it..

D: Head office is it?
I: For reports, the reports, they get another company to do up reports, they are just an advertising body.

D: The reports on coming out and inspecting you?
I: Yeah, they are an advertising body, they are nothing else. They come into you and do up where the tourists are coming from and that but that’s all they really are, is a research company. And they are really good for the big towns as I said to you, and drawing people to the big towns when they put on a big advertising campaign and they can feed off it.

D: Have you access to that research or is it any good to you? Are they of any relevance to you?
I: No, we would have no contact with them whatsoever. And even when we were with them we had no contact other than in August when they would be looking for you to fill out the form and pay whatever €700 or €800 to affiliate for another year. Seriously!

D: And you know market research and that, do you do any of that yourself, can you do it? When people come here do you do a survey, like, where are you from etc., to try and compile an idea of who you are dealing with?
I: Yeah, you talk to them, you are there in the morning to check them out and I just ask them then.

D: So it is on an informal basis you try and get an idea of people?
I: No, I don’t formalise it at all.

D: So who would be the most people you would get, the English, Irish?
I: They are completely mixed with Bookings.com, English, even the Irish are booking through Bookings.com even though they are only down the road in Galway maybe. They research and want to be beside the beach. Em, you have Swiss, Germans, it’s a huge mixture with Bookings.com. There are a lot of people from Dublin now and they might be working in Google or something, they would be foreign who would come but they work in Google, they might be Lithuanian or Polish, it is very mixed.

D: What would you say would be the percentage of Irish versus foreigners?
I: You are still saying let’s say 50%, 50%-60%.

D: Irish?
I: Yes, it depends now but the next few weeks now it will be a lot of Irish. June there would have been quite a lot of foreigners and the mix of them is from anywhere.

D: So how do they find out about you? They just go on Bookings.com?
I: Yeah, bookings.com or the website. They can book through the website.

D: Have you anyway of knowing how they found you or is it just by having a chat with them?
I: Ah, you know how they booked. You have a lot of information on that booking sheet that nobody should really ever have on you but you would nearly have as much as the tax man really, it’s kind of like a wall really gosh.

D: And do you ever go through that and think, well I am trying to say is if you were looking at numbers that you may have gotten this year and then in the off season you might get to look back on it and think what we could do to get more of them next year?
I: Yeah, you’d often think of it, unless you are targeting groups or you join in another couple of… I joined several new HRS, LateRooms.ie, I was going to join Expedia, they are extremely popular at the moment, but they are 23% commission, so I kinda said ‘I don’t think so’, now we went to the bother of filling out everything and got to the bank direct debit bit and said ‘No, I don’t think so’. The rest of them are 15% which is a good bit to be taking off by the time you have, if you don’t have a very strong flow of people. So it is still Bookings.com that most of them are coming from. I have very little from HRS and LateRooms.

D: And is it all digital media?
I: Near enough, we have had very few calls for accommodation which I find really strange at this stage of the year. The last 2 weeks I am really wondering, cause it would have been early up to that.

D: I was just thinking there, you know my parents age group, well they are actually getting more and more tech savvy but you would imagine that a lot of them still wouldn’t be using or proficient on internet and research and stuff like that.
I: I think they are all fairly with it. And they all seem to be, even if they don’t know how to send an email, they seem to be able to go on the internet, onto Bookings.com and they will find a phone number. Well they won’t find a phone number there but they will work it. The sites are pretty easy to work.

D: That lady in Slane that I was talking to said that when she open up in 1997, she said she joined everything. She had no background in the industry, she said whatever was going I paid up and subscribed for the year. Since that I think she has it filed back to 2 or 3 and it is now a very successful business. Was the temptation there for you to do this, this and this, without any idea….

I: If it were good, bad or indifferent?
D: Yes
I: First year we didn’t because we didn’t know what to expect. Just got thrown in the deep end in May and got on with it and then in the winter we were doing up the lounge. The bar was much busier then as well. So probably we didn’t concentrate on the rooms at all. The food was always the issue.
D: Was it the bar that was carrying other things that might not have been covering themselves or not?
I: The which?

D: Would the bar have been covering areas that might not have been covering there own costs? Where the rooms making money themselves or was the bar kind of supporting them?
I: The rooms will make money if you have people in them. Now if you can close it down and not have the maintenance, the rooms are never going to lose you money. And they will carry the food. It is the food that will lose money and will lose ya big time.

D: Stock that is left over?
I: No, labour, staff, you open hours that you would never dream of opening only that you are serving food. That is where you are going to get caught. With the food you will do your menu up accordingly and you will have a good idea of how much custom you will have and then you put on a few specials and when they are gone, there gone. You can manage that fairly well but you cannot manage he labour involved and we are constantly getting quiet periods, busy periods and you have no idea which way it is going to be.

D: So when people are coming for food, do you think it is mostly that they know you are here and they are coming for a meal or they were passing by and come in for a meal. Our family was back here last year and there were 40 odd, and you knew we were coming in advance. Do you get more of that or can you get the incidental passers-by.
I: The walk-ins are usually between 2 and 10 people, any more than that coming and you would usually get a phone call. But you would need to, to set up a table, and you would be ready for them staff wise. Thursday night we had 3 different groups of 10 in, 2 of which booked, and only because 1 of them was a mix-up, they thought they had it booked here. You would need to know cause normally you would only have 1 and I would be on standby but you know if come 7 o’clock if you haven’t many in,
you would need certainly a second person in or third person, and that was Thursday. Last night there were 2 people here there was no need for 2. It is totally unpredictable.

D: Is there any way to target those sort of groups? Do you go and put an ad in the Mayo news and say promote the function room end of things?
I: There is an ad in the Mayo news every week. When we open up for food I send out a text to everybody that I have on my phone, which would be a lot of people. It is in Louisburgh HQ, it is on the website, it’s on facebook, so people know you are open. There is still only a limited population and I suppose people are minding their pennies. The Derrylahan is there also and it wasn’t there last year or the year before, so that is going to take a huge number that would come out and have bar food here rather than go into the restaurant.

D: And in the longterm do you think that would be a competitor or would it help?
I: It is both, but still on a Wednesday and Thursday evening people will have a choice of 2. When they didn’t have the choice of 2 you were going to be the lucky one no matter what. And if people are around for the week, they can eat in both places. It is good to have a choice. If you are coming to an area they like to have a choice. And it is good to see it done up in the town, because if there is nothing in the town people aren’t going to come to us either so it is not a disadvantage either.

D: That is another one of the topics I am covering, which is competition versus cooperation and there is a PhD’s that I have read comparing Killarney and Clifden. Killarney is really cooperative and all the business were working together to promote the area, and even contributed to a central fund to market the area and bring out publications on it. And then in Clifden the pub on one side is looking at the other lad and he will go 5 cent cheaper on the pint, rather than compete with Galway city, they are actually competing internally. So would you find it cooperative between all the businesses in Louisburgh or you could see them as competitors, or are they the same package?
I: There is a mixture, it has improved. HQ is very important for improving that, sending people out as a mix and promoting each place and have stuff in the town for people to do and it brings up the whole…
D: What kind of stuff?
I: They have walks up in Old Head Wood, they have foraging.

D: So stuff that costs nothing essentially?
I: Well it is voluntary. I don’t know if they have to pay him. Jewellery making, bits and pieces that were lifting up the town, we were asked for €50 per year for a contribution, which is very little, and we are put up on the website and they have our cards in the town. They are very important.

D: I was at the Janet Walk last year and after it they had tea and buns etc., in it and it was fierce well run, that is interesting that they are at that..
I: Yes, they are very important. Sometimes there is cooperation and sometimes there isn’t. Tommy Lyons is all set for cooperation and is very into the fact that they are more of an addition to everybody, which they are, especially Joe Mac, they go eat in the Derrylahan and then have a drink in there or even the Bun Abhaínn. So they should be working together.

D: Speaking to Tommy and mentioning you as key contributors. You know, I think in Westport, they have, I think, a traders committee. But they try and meet up and have a coordinated target, so they are all working in the same way. Whether that is the case I don’t know but there is anything like that here? In Westport business sit down together once in a blue moon for a chat…
I: No they don’t seem to be able to. They certainly weren’t doing it when everything closed. Whether they have started doing it now or not, they would have traders meetings but only to set the price of beer and make changes that way. Well Michael is involved in the music now and trying to get people to, like it is the pubs that benefit greatly from it, it is difficult to collect that money. They don’t see it as a big benefit to them. I don’t understand why, because it is, to any business in town it would be a big benefit.

D: I suppose, the only way to look at it from their point of view, is that they have to put it up front, with no guarantee of getting it back it. Now we both know that…
I: it is fairly well guaranteed.
D: So nothing set in stone from that point of view.
I: Definitely it would be good if there was good negotiations as they are run independently, the bars are anyway, run independently.

D: And if there was something like that would you be interested, as a business owner to be involved in it? As a part of a committee, or a rotating chair and all that craic?
I: Yeah, I would have no problem with it. It would be very good for cyclists, or Atlantic Way. HQ are trying to set up an English School.

D: Right, to bring in foreign students.
I: Yep, there is a huge amount that could be done and certainly going through HQ is a great way of getting this done rather than through traders, because traders seem to be busy themselves, and when you are busy it is just something else that needs to be done. But asking for a contribution is not out of order, it takes money to run everything.

D: Who is running HQ?
I: There were 6 women who started it off, there was Brid Conroy, Therese Mc Caffrey..

D: I think I seen a photo in the Mayo news, but I don’t think I saw any local names in it?
I: No their not, they are all people who have moved to the area and appreciate the area more than those already in it.

D: Always the case, and I wonder what their professional backgrounds are?
I: Em, Therese is a social worker and is still working. Brid is an accountant.

D: Social worker is a diplomat which is important in these dealings.
I: Yeah, she has small kids which I suppose would be difficult for her to be heavily involved in it. Some of them are doing massage and that where they would be trying to, they can do it from home or at people’s houses, so you wouldn’t be tied to working a 9-5 job, Monday to Friday. Although I would be saying that is a great idea working that.
D: It is an innovative way of having a health spa when you don’t have the plush sort of a. You know Delphi is a long way out the road when you know you can, you would think people would go for that, you can call up to the house, have a glass of wine and a massage on holidays.
I: Well everyone has a pain somewhere.

D: Yes, that is for sure
I: So it is to promote that as well. They have a good bit going on there, when you go and have a look and makes Louisburgh look like there is something going on instead of a lot of ruined buildings when you go through it. There is a big difference.

D: The place has transformed in the last few years.
I: Yeah in the last 2 years since they started up. I think they have a big input into that positive ethos, and they have opened up that craft shop across the way and even if you just stop for a coffee, you can have a browse, buy a woolly hat or whatever you like. It looks cute.

D: I think I have pretty much covered most topics. Are there any challenges, what would be the biggest challenges for you?
I: Probably the future now to see what direction it goes.

D: Like is the drink driving, if that is to become zero tolerance, it depends on what part of the country you are in, there will be a little more tolerance round here. But if that were to be rolled out is that going to be a major thing, if the drink was to go?
I: It doesn’t really make a difference now because it is at zero tolerance really now, because you cannot go and have a drink now.

D: But culturally if that was to stop, at the moment people like to go for a pint, if that was to change?
I: No, people have stopped, there is none of my kids that will drink and drive. So they are hitting into their 20’s, not sure what age you are, probably 30’s…

D: Oh well into them.
I: Yeah, well, it has changed, no one will come out here from town and drive back into town, even if there is, if it was completely lax round here, unless you were staying locally. You can’t go down past Killeen comfortably with a few beers on you.

D: Let’s say, we are talking about people who go for a pint, they are not drinking and driving. If people stop and they might go for a coffee and a bite to eat, and the trends are going that way, well in the urban centres anyway. Would that have a major impact on you?

I: Well it is all urban people that are here during the summer. Yeah, definitely, just 2 days ago at 10.15pm they came into the bar and asked Padraig for 2 cappuccino’s. If that happened a few years ago, you would say ‘coffee now?’

D: Hiding the kettle..

I: Well he would make the coffee but you wouldn’t be getting a cappuccino that is for sure. They would think it was odd you looking for a coffee. People themselves would find it odd you looking for a coffee. But I’d say that will change. Because you would prefer a coffee or decaffeinated coffee rather than a coke or an orange, there is a huge health trend going against it, there are no one coming in looking for a bottle of coke to give their 6 year old kids, they look for a jug of miwadi, that is in the last 2 or 3 years only, you will have very little coke going out to the kids. It is not just the money, it is much better to have a jug of miwadi or water, they will order water for the kids or else it is 1 coke and then water.

D: Anecdotally, there is a right old mark up on coke so that would be hit.

I: Yes you would charge for the miwadi, we only started charging for the miwadi last summer, there was shock horror because it has become so popular you are saying that we cannot really be serving the whole table and them not drinking anything because the food element would be independent as well. So that has changed but you had to be charging something for the miwadi. But there was shock and horror that you would need to pay for your water. But you were buying in the miwadi and you had to buy cases every week at €15 - €20 per case. But like, it is another health conscious thing that people are doing as well as to save the wallet.

D: So what do you think in 20 years time?
I: For here?

D: Yes
I: I think it would need to be activity based, so you could bring in groups of people.

D: and if you were to do that, would you be using activities already established and packaging it, or would it be setting up your own activities?
I: I think it would need somebody to come in and set up with that type of background, than to do it ourselves. I don’t see myself doing it.

D: Why not?
I: Ah we are too long here and it is a totally new thing. Padraig will probably go back building and he has the farm as well. Like our kids are nearly reared. If we are going to be working every weekend and when we say goodbye to them and I don’t want to be working weekends for much longer. I know it sounds a bit crazy but I think it is time to move on and let someone else, now the local bar will be the bigger sufferers for it, that is Padraigs biggest concern, that the local bar would be looked after, that someone else would come in and bring in groups of people and it still wouldn’t be a local bar. But I still think there would be.

D: And I’d say with Padraig that would be, like that, going back to the objectives..
I: Would that be emotional and economical.

D: Emotional and like (your husband) is a community orientated person and I would say not knowing him that well, but knowing him, that his main driver is not always financial.
I: No, it would be community. It is an important base for the community, for us all, I wouldn’t like to see it change, the bar. It is a nice spot and we are proud of it. We will see anyway. But I think that is what will keep it if the upstairs is developed it will keep the downstairs going, because you won’t make the money on the food. And we are not exactly on the main road to anywhere.

D: It might become a main roadway.
I: Ya think?
D: Well, with the Atlantic Way it might really take off.
I: Unless they put the bridge over the Killary it will still be.

D: Put a bridge across the Killary, you are cutting your nose off despite your face maybe, people mightn’t like the look of it.
I: Oh they wouldn’t be allowed. I mean it is one of the nicest places in the country and they are going to keep it that way. But that won’t make it economically viable, even for people living here, if there isn’t a business for people to work in, it is all snowballs. It is important that Louisburgh is building itself up again because you can see.

D: That everybody benefits, rising tide and all that..
I: Everyone benefits which is very important for the likes of the outskirts. It is alright for people to move into town but that won’t do.

D: But isn’t there a rising trend, speaking of trends, I am only reading about this and it could be complete nonsense but…you have thousands of people working in Google and places like that and we are becoming a far more urban society and now people will pay you to do what you would have paid someone else, like they will pay you to come and milk the cow, which it sounds mental. Because there are men who have been milking cows all their life and the thought of sitting down at a stool and go at it would sicken them to do it. But is those trends are accurate and those people are looking for a more rural, peripheral experience, the likes of the Ocean Lodge might become the centre of the universe.
I: Yeah but then they won’t want to pay for it, then you would have to turn it into a, is it an exclusive spot or are we going to bring them out to milk cows, which you probably could and you could bring them to the bog, stick them in the bog for a week, turning turf, you would really be on a win-win. But, yes there are a lot of things you could be doing but you would want to be.

D: You would need a lot of energy
I: To start them all off again, yeah you would and we would have a few irons in the fire but we would not be totally dedicated.
D: That is probably one of the first things I should have asked you is it supplemental or is it central. So is the farming and the building a bigger part of your livelihood than the hotel?
I: No, it’s not. The hotel would be, but the building used to be.

D: So it changed as the economy changed.
I: Yes, so we had to put an awful lot more emphasis on here and time adhered, the building wasn’t really bringing in anything, but (my husband) was building the apartments so he was building all the time. At that stage building houses for Tommy Lyons and we would have done all the contracting on all those houses so.

D: And hopefully that will come back again.
I: So the hotel was a god send really. It kept us all employed and all my kids employed, until they got out. They ran away on me.

D: They are only out for a little while.
I: They move on to spread their wings a bit. Onwards and upwards there is always something changing. It will be interesting to see in a few years here, if the rooms can be developed, we have tried things over the years and they never really.
D: Developed into what?
I: To increase the steady flow of people because the premises here is sound, it is ready to go, like a switch, turn on, turn off, it is quiet economical and all that.

D: You know the location, it is quiet spectacular. Would you consider moving towards an exclusive model? But the likes of Inchidoney and Delphi started off with a certain market, they were low cost and then they gradually moved into an exclusive market.
I: Well I guess Delphi is doing both, they really developed it. They are doing both.

D: Both have separated it.
I: Yes, they have managed it very well.
D: They have completely marketed it separately as well. But I mean would that be something you might go down the road of or would that be more difficult dealing with those people, that you would be attracting.

I: You would need a bigger place. Like Delphi Lodge is an old building, a stately home, there is a lot of lounge spaces and hanging out spaces.

D: I have never actually being in it.

I: Yeah it is lovely.

D: I am actually interviewing them and Delphi Adventure centre.

I: You are kind of different, the marketing and stuff. Delphi has a huge amount going into marketing and they do advertise.

D: They only opened, the adventure centre and the spa have only opened a marketing department this year. That is what Deirdre said. She said that they have now got 4 full time marketers but previously they didn’t, they had someone looking after marketing but they didn’t have a marketing department.

I: Well gosh, they were fairly well up on it, when I was looking up stuff that I should be doing, Delphi were always out there, with their logos everywhere.

D: Maybe they were and they have gone to a different level now. Don’t know.

I: I would have thought they had a marketing department or someone that would be doing nothing else. We couldn’t afford, for me to be sitting in an office all day.

D: Looking at that kind of stuff..

I: Making calls morning and evening or whatever, but then you are caught up in the work part of it which I enjoy really.

D: It is nice to have a bit of both.

I: It is, you have to do both to make it work.

D: Is there anything you have done marketing wise since you opened that you thought was a complete waste of time?

I: Oh advertising in the Independent.
D: So why did you do it, because other people were?
I: It used to work, in the early years, it was fine the first few years, pre the internet. Then I did it once or twice in later years and sure at that stage people weren’t using the papers at all then.

D: And was there a way of tracking this?
I: You would get a phone call, or you would ask them or they would tell you or you would have a form when they were booking in which asked it. Yeah it changed completely. There were a lot of things that were a waste, there were flyers, you would get them out and running but you never knew whether they were binned.

D: that’s what they say 50% of your marketing budget is waste but you never know which 50.
I: So we kind of cut down to what worked. You went with the times. Mayo News is a completely waste of time. It is fine for those over in America that want the news but as an advertising tool it is a waste of time.

D: Why?
I: Well the people are all local anyway. And unless they are looking in the Westport pages to see if we are open they are probably not looking at the Louisburgh lines.

D: is it expensive?
I: yes it all adds up. They have cut it down again but it used to be €64 - €84 per week. So that adds up over the month and year. But he advertises the Darts in it and feels he should.

D: and are the teams from all over the county?
I: No they are all locals, there are some teams from Louisburgh now. But it is mostly locals doing over the last 22 years. It is not everyone there every year.
Appendix 10:

Interviewee: Owner (There is a separate manager appointed)
Date: 12.07.2014
Duration: 41:18

Context: The business in question is located in the centre of Louisburgh in the townland of 'Cluain Cearbán'. It was originally a planned town, constructed in 1795 by the 3rd Earl of Altamount, John Denis Browne of Westport. Browne - later 1st Marquess of Sligo - built the town to house Catholic refugees fleeing sectarian conflict in the north of Ireland.

Louisburgh is the focal point of an area some 450 square miles in extent, stretching from Killary Fjord to the South, to the Owenree River to the North, and from the coast to the Erriff valley watershed in the East. All of this landscape is designated as an area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in the Mayo County Development Plan, and calls have been made for its designation as a 'Special Amenity Area' (Mayo, Ireland, 2014).

Historically the area has suffered the socio-economic blights of immigration and rural depopulation. The most recent survey showed that there were just 37 people living in the town where just three or four decades ago, 57 businesses thrived and 300 people lived (The Mayo News, 2012).

The business in question is a pub/restaurant and function room on the main street. The interviewee bought the premises, which had been vacant for 3-4 years, in 2013. It was previously run as a bar and function room with a nightclub that was run intermittently. The new owner is a Dublin businessman with family connections in the area. He is a high profile Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) personality. Prior to re-opening he carried out extensive renovation works to incorporate a funky smoking area with access to the promenade along the river, and he has placed an emphasis on the ‘quality bar food’, element of the product. He is not operationally involved in the business which would be of low priority in relations to his general business portfolio.
Interview Transcript:

I: When we were starting out we had to make a decision as to whether to retain the old name or whether to rename it. We decided that there was no point in changing the name because the locals were going to call it by the old name regardless and this could create brand confusion. Every town has a central focal point and for me that has always been the Derrylahan. We saw that the town was down on its luck and we wanted to give it new life. We looked at the Derrylahan and we figured that if we took it on and did it really right we could make it work. I remember standing on the Street on a Sunday afternoon last November at 4 p.m., with my builder John Kelly and there were 4 cars on the main street in Louisburgh. We went into the local pubs. There was 3 in one pub, 2 in another and 4 in another. We said ‘Wow’. I’m either going to get this very right or very wrong. When you try to do a project like this you try to understand what the market is looking for. We felt that the successful products in the West of Ireland were bistro bars. Nevin’s, The Tavern in Murrisk, Brennan’s Lane in Ballina, JJ Kings in Clifden, McHugh’s in Liscannor. These are destination points in themselves. You always have to sell pints. It’s not like going out for dinner. This is a casual option. I decided I’d do a bit of Philanthropy. So when I bought this off the bank it was never going to be a profit venture for us. It was put up into a trust for my kids and we used that money to buy it off the bank and invest in it. Like all projects we started out saying we’d spend three or four hundred thousand on it and I suppose we’ve six hundred spent on it at this stage. We spent six months going around to all these places researching them. I put on a stone weight. We had dinner in them observing what makes them tick…what makes them work. The atmosphere we felt was key. We wanted a nice warm atmosphere. We decorated it with that in mind. We took the old benches from the old nightclub and cut them up into smaller seats and finished them with timber bookends. All the chairs from the old bar were sent off and re-upholstered and re-varnished. The only thing that was new in the bar area was the tables. We tried to create a Mayo theme. We bought the stain glass windows out of a pub that was 90 years old in Louth that was closing down. To be honest we didn’t realise they were green and red until we saw them up against the window. We decided that we wanted something that locals would eat in first and foremost. You need local business. That’s about your price point. It’s about delivering price and volume. You also need the right menu and you need a chef who can cook. Funny enough, that
sounds straightforward but the hardest job we had was getting the right chef. We got him from Brennan’s lane in Ballina. We were just lucky in the ACC had just taken that over from him and he was really pissed off and he told me that there was a really good chef there you should try and get him. They had a very good reputation. We started the whole project that way and then we decided to employ local. We have 22 people on the books now. All of them are local. Most of them are students, some of them are mums who do some of the day shifts in the winter months. They all wanted to work 15-20 or 10-12 hours. Whatever suited them suited us. We created the whole ethos of buzzy, buzzy, buzzy. The staff here are great and it’ll enhance their education. When you work front of house it develops the interpersonal. So that’s how we started. Since we opened there has never been a Sunday where we didn’t do 100 cover’s and we’re open 12 months of the year. We have never gone below 90 cover’s on a Saturday.

D: You say that this was never targeted as a profit making enterprise. Would I be correct in thinking that it isn’t loss making.

I: No. It has to wash it’s face. I’m not going to put any more money into it and I’m not going to be in this business for 20 years. I’m involved in lots of other businesses and this isn’t my focus.

D: So would you consider this business as supplemental rather than primary?

I: This (business) is not relevant (in the greater scheme of things). From my own perspective it was just to try and lift Louisburgh. I have a long history in this area and I felt the town was going and we were lucky enough to be able to afford to do something about it.

D: Having spoken to the organiser of Féile Chois Cuain, had the Derrylahan not reopened it would have thrown the entire festival into doubt because the capacity wouldn’t be there for the numbers that it attracts. Féile Chois Cuain is one of the key events in the social calendar for people in the area.
I: It’s not the weekend itself that’s important. We’ve had people back here after having attended féile. The festival for us was a disaster. We were new to it and wouldn’t be as cute as other publicans around; the entire bar was full of musicians. We had no room for drinkers. We had the food down in the function room. We did 360 covers on the Sunday. It was bedlam but we needed so many staff to cater for it that we didn’t make any more money than we would have covering 100 on a normal Sunday in the bar. We learned an awful lot though. What Féile did for us was that it branded us. We’ve had a lot of people back here since.

D: Was it your busiest weekend?

I: Profit wise Easter was a far busier weekend but certainly from a branding point of view Féile was a huge success. We did very well to keep the quality right for that weekend because it was very demanding. We had 4 chefs in the kitchen. Operationally it was a great learning curve. The waitresses learned a lot. It was big to build the Brand and to position the Derrylahan as a destination. We launched just before Christmas when everyone was advising us not to. The conventional wisdom is that you shouldn’t open for food until a month after you open. I said fuck it, we’ll jump in at the deep end and go for it. We had all of the people returning for Christmas and we had a phenomenal Christmas. We have a very loyal customer base which is expanding all the time.

D: Tell me about that customer base.

I: We look after the locals. We’re not changing our menu prices over the summer. Lots of places do.

D: What proportion would you say is local?

I: From January to April I’d say 80% of our business was local. Now, in the height of the season I’d say it’s probably going the other way because the volumes are going up and the extra people are tourists. We can seat 65 in the bar. We’ve set a target of 500 covers per week. The our targets were 1000. Then our targets get to 1500. Since we opened we’ve done 500 a week. The back area only opens for functions. Its not open
atat besides. We had a 70th birthday party recently with 40 people. They didn’t want to be in the bar. They went down there, nice and private. We do special menu’s for the likes of that. We do special menu’s for the funerals. What we’re trying to do is create the brand Derrylahan again. One of the thing’s I learned a long time ago in business is that you can try and change a name but people will always call it as they remember it. I always think of Whirlpool when they bought Phillips washing machines. They had been called Phillips for years. On the appliances in year one they had big Phillips, small Whirlpool, in year 2 they had the brand names or equal size and in year 3 they had big Whirlpool and small Phillips and in year 4 it was just Whirlpool. Ten years later their market research found that people were still calling them Philips washing machines. It shows you that a name is a very difficult thing to change.

D: So it’s about getting a positive association between the name and your experience.

I: Yes. What we’re trying to do is build a brand that is giving value for money, child friendly and a bit of craic. People refer it. We get an awful lot of referrals.

D: So you’re talking essentially about word of mouth promotion? For a business like this how do you promote it? Do you have a website for example?

I: Yes. We have spent money on our website. We’re probably 70% of where we want to get it at the minute. We’ve our own Facebook page & Tripadvisor. Going forward there’ll be a video of the chef cooking a new dish. All of that kind of niche quirky stuff.

D: So the people that are coming in the door. Are they people who have seen the business advertised on the digital media or are they people who are just passing the door?

I: I did Mayo T.V. ads. We got quite a number of people through the door from that. In fairness I think the image of the building is what brings a lot of people in. The original idea was that we would have the bar divided so that you could close the lounge in the winter time but as it has transpired everyone wants to sit in there. What blows me away is that people I knew who used to sot here and drink here years ago
before it closed, come in now and will sit in he exact same spot. You can spend whatever money you like but you won’t change their habits.

D: What future developments do you envisage?

I: What we’re trying to do is develop the reputation as a trad pub. We have Trad music every Saturday night. We have our food up until 9 or 9.30, people finish up eating, the music starts and that brings in another crowd again. That has been really successful. I was joking with Matt Molloy in Westport recently that maybe we could twin with each other, I’m also talking to the guys in Donoghue’s in Dublin who I know very well to twin with them. We’ve had a serious conversation but we both keep laughing. The idea of these associations is that you create a bit of a buzz. People won’t go to the same pub every night. All I’m trying to do is get 10% of the punter out of Westport for a day. If we can get 10% of the people coming out of Murrisk car park to turn left (for Louisburgh) rather than right (for Westport). People don’t even know what’s out here. We need to keep telling people that this is fantastic. Even in Old Head, just 2 km outside Louisburgh they don’t come back here. They go to Westport.

D: What can be done about that?

I: We’ve got to just keep at it. We keep putting flyers on windows, flyers on windows, flyers on windows. It’s amazing the amount of people who are coming back to Louisburgh now from the Old Head caravan park and houses that never came back before. Previously they have always gone to the Tavern in Murrisk.

D: Do we need to improve accommodation facilities?

I: The accommodation in the area is lousy. The problem with accommodation is that it is so expensive to provide. The return on investment makes it prohibitive in the current climate.

D: What do you think that is down to regulatory standards and cost of Credit or what?
I: Westport has such a glut of product. It’s very hard to compete with Westport’s product now. So all that you can try and do is to get some of that business to come out and visit you. If you got bolshy enough you might put on a bus service. There’s a huge cost in that. If you look at the hotel that John Walsh built (A Hotel overhauled in the town circa. 2005 that was closed at the time of this interview), it’s a fine premises. If I had done that project I would have had a lot less function space in it, a smaller dining area and more rooms. That’s what he needed. He had only 16 or 18 rooms. There isn’t room in a town this size for 2 function rooms. It’s like we’ve just bought SPAR (The building that used to house the old SPAR shop that was burnt down in 2009). Everyone was asking us were we going to open a supermarket. Are we fuck, there’s one here already. What we’ll do is redevelop the site and we’ll build nice townhouses. We’ll put a nice arch into it from the front to bring the back of the site into play, and our ambition is to put 2 bedroom old folk’s properties in there. The idea is that people can come in and start living in Louisburgh again. If you’re a widow living five miles out of town and your family is away it’s a lonely spot. We’ve reopened the off-licence on the old site for now. Andy Durkan is running it. The plan is that Andy is going to take the licence over to his shop in September. The idea is that we will have a supermarket in the town that is a one stop shop.

D: This brings me on nicely on to one of my main focuses which is inter business co-operation.

I: I think in towns like this I’m sure there are people who resent what I have done. I think that this is human nature. I think what we have done is brought a lot more people back into the town. People might say that we are getting the lions share of the business. We probably are at the moment but as they keep coming back that business will spread.

D: Would it be fair to say though that you are not in direct competition with the other bars. You are the only bar in the town doing food.

I: Absolutely. And Joe next door goes with this strumming music next door on a Saturday night so I said we’ll go with Trad to provide a bit of variety. The Bunowen
have a lovely job done. It’s a lovely drinking pub. I go in there for a few pints myself. I think a lot of the business from here goes up there.

D: In this town people tend to come back to town and go to a number of pubs rather than staying in any one.

I: I used to do it myself. I used to start below in the Hotel and work my way up. Funny enough I used not go to the pub below at the bridge.

D: Do you think that was due to location or management. It’s only 40 metres down the road.

I: I think it’s simply that it’s down the hill. If you go and do research on country towns, the main road that goes through a town, will always survive. Go left and right and these street’s haven’t survived in most country towns.

D: Is that worrying for Louisburgh being peripheral to Westport?

I: If John Walsh’s hotel was where P.J Sammon’s electrical is (On the main street) I’d say it would be twice as busy. That’s the reality. I’ve done a lot of touring around Ireland myself. Have I ever turned left or right down a street? Very rarely.

D: Would signage help? Are we drawing enough attention to ourselves?

I: I don’t know. When you’re touring you tend to stay on a straight road. Even take beaches. Unless you want to get out and actually walk the beach you tend to just look at it out the window. It’s interesting. We made the decision to change the colours on the façade of the Derrylahan to lift and brighten the place to draw attention to it. Black is a lovely colour in its own right and it did its time but we decided the place needed a lift. Andy Durkan has said to me that since we opened the place his business on Sunday’s has been 20 higher.

D: You mentioned some of the changes you have made to the aesthetic. Did you bring in a consultant to help with those types of decisions or were they instinctive?
I: I listened to a lot of people but I didn’t employ an architect to do the internals. I have marketing guys that I would deal with in my other businesses and this would also be a personal strong point. I did a lot of research. We looked at another great destination bar in Multifarnam where you can’t get a table on Saturday or Sunday. It’s a great destination bar. Furey’s in Moylough is another example. There are loads of these places that are very successful. The real trick is to create the atmosphere, the buzz and the quality. If you can do that then you have a chance.

D: What exactly is your own business experience?

I: For the last 10-15 years I’ve been a private equity investor. I see a business, there’s a guy wants to run it. I sit down, we stress test everything and look at the strategy and numbers and I then make my decision a to whether to put the money up. If I put my money up the owner gets control back when he buys me out. That’s really how it works. People tell me that customer service is very important in this trade, but I tell them that customer service is very important in every trade. Because its customer facing in this business people tend to think that it’s more important but its not.

D: In manufacturing businesses it would be seen as less of a priority.

I: I fundamentally disagree with that. I do all Google work all over Europe. I do it for one reason….we’re awfully good at what we do. We give them service that they can’t get from anybody else.

D: What do you do for them?

I: We supply their entire IT infrastructure. The Google website sits on our infrastructure. For corporate clients customer service is even more important. We do all of the Cisco work all over Europe. We do all of the Dell work all over Europe. We’re a little company in Dublin. The only reason we do that work is because we’re awfully good at our customer service. If we tell them that we’re going to have that widget in Denmark on Monday morning at 12 p.m. it’ll be there at 12. Not at 3 or 6 or the next day and ringing up and apologising, saying some fella let us down. That
doesn’t fly. They pay us to do that. That customer service to me is away ahead of anything that you get in the hospitality trade. All you get in the hospitality trade that I have seen to date is people who smile and look nice. What we try to do here is get the people to engage. To get them to feel that this is theirs. We’re not here 24/7. I haven’t been here since the June weekend. So I’m not here watching the staff and telling them how they need to do things. I’m giving them the reins and telling them to go away and do it. Austin O’Malley there is 22/23 yrs of age, Kieron O’Reilly the same thing, Peig, Mairead and Helen Burke…all fantastic people and there’s no one there telling them what to do every day.

D: So how much time would you give to this?

I: I’m down for five weeks now but I come here for 5-6 weeks every summer. I’m hardly here atall (In the business). Tonight is Saturday night so I’ll be in tonight. There are people down and if they here I’m down they expect to see me. In fact if people hear I’m down they’ll be in. And I’ll be here tomorrow evening. I take 6 weeks out of the businesses every year and that’s my strategy. That’s when I do all my planning. People think that I’m off for 6 weeks, which I am, but then I’m not operationally involved in any business. My phone only rings from guys who I invest in so I don’t get any calls from their customers. When I come down here I go out for cycles, I walk the beaches and I plan the next game.

D: To take you back to that competition/ co-operation argument; have you come into conflict with any businesses?

I: No. But I haven’t gone for conflict. I have engaged very actively with Mayo Co. Co. I explained to them exactly what I was trying to do for Louisburgh.

D: Were they supportive?

I: They have given me good support in relation to rates. They gave me a 40% reduction on the rates for the first year. They’ve helped me on the whole concept of what we’re trying to do. The bridge project was coming anyhow. Declan Ryan of Ryanair has now bought Philbin’s and is going to do it up into a book shop and store
and coffee place. Now all of a sudden we have gone from a street that was dead to a hive of activity. There are 2 projects that I’m still trying to do. I’m actively working with the council on the Grainne Uaile way. Everyone calls it the Green Way I’m calling it the Grainne Uaile Way. We’re actively working with them to try and give us a blueprint plan. I’m doing this myself because I find that every time you try and engage with people here they all have different ideas…I have no interest in different ideas. I just want the Grainne Uaile Way. This is a cycling track from Murrisk to Roonagh Pier, which then brings you out to Clare Island. Why am I doing that? If we get that Louisburgh is made for long after I’m gone. Then you can have your accommodation because there are volumes of people that will sustain accommodation. I’m putting a lot of energy into that and I’ve also helped the council on some projects because I know the data centre space very well. They’re coming up with a whole new data centre blueprint for North Mayo. I’ve put them in touch with some serious players and some serious industry figures that might look at putting a plant down there. There has been a lot of give and take with each other. I’ve committed to them that for every dollar they put in I’ll raise a dollar. We think that $3m is what it will cost to do the Grainne Uaile Way. I think we’ll raise $1.5m.

D: Do you work with any other support bodies.

I: I’m working very closely with Failte Ireland. Brian Quinn in Westport. Super people. They have been very supportive of us. On the Wild Atlantic Way if you look up the Flemington Post there is a guy in here with his Irish coffee saying that the Derrylahan was one of the nicest places he had been on his trip. They have a U-Tube video up on their website. Brian has been very supportive. We’re on their wish list inside so people go into the tourist office and are told to go on out to Louisburgh. That’s the kind of stuff you have to do to avail of the loose business. I think what has happened here is that a lot of the business people are weary. The likes of John Staunton (the local Pharmacist), is a great guy. I’d say John is weary at this stage from trying to keep his business going. He’s an awfully decent fella. He has put an awful lot of energy into Louisburgh. Whilst John isn’t the biggest benefactor of the good will he invests this sort of thing will help increase visitor volumes to the area and everyone benefits. The man next door would be the weak link (Joe McNamara,
Publican). He wouldn’t be engaging. I’ve found the Swift’s (The proprietor’s of the Bunowen Inn Bar) to be engaging, they’re really good guys.

D: There is no business committee/ development association in Louisburgh?

I: I think if business improved that that will happen again. What’s happened is that people have been in survival mode for 2-3 years….survival mode going down….where now I think that they’re still in survival mode but on the incline. Business in the town has improved since we have reopened. We get a lot of people in here and they don’t stay here. They drink in the 3 pubs. I hear the hotel is reopening. Marketing is key for selling Louisburgh as a destination. You can travel to the islands from Louisburgh, you have the beaches, the cycling and the walking, but if you’re looking to occupy kids in swimming pools, don’t come to Louisburgh.

The interviewee receives a call from another tourism sector business owner in Killadoon, some 6km west of Louisburgh. This owner had heard that the interviewee was in town. They discuss business and the short season for a few minutes and look forward to meeting up for a chat.

I: He’s (he other owner) is a really great guy. That Hotel is in a spectacular location. It’s amazing the mindsets in this place. I can’t understand it. A lot of the town never go back there. You’d swear it was Westport. It’s only 4 miles out the road. They’re drive to Tourmaceady for a drink rather than going back there. The distance isn’t the issue, it’s the mindset. I think that’s part of rural life. His business is very West. I suppose where else would you go. If you’re living in Thallabawn (16km west of Louisburgh) it’s the only option.

D: If you were doing all of this again would you do anything differently?

I: No I don’t think I would. Not really. I probably wouldn’t have done up the function room as quickly. We have gotten no return out of the function room really for the investment that went into it.

D: You’ve had some pretty big gigs.
I: We had but they cost money to put there. We had Eleanor Shanley there and we hardly wiped our face with it. We had about 120 at it. We needed more than that. You’d get 250 into that venue. We have Sean Keane coming on the bank holiday Saturday. We’ll see how that goes. We have the Bogus Pogues, Laurence Salmon from Lecanvey is one of them. They’re here on the Sunday night. Rather than doing a disco night we’re going to have a band night.

D: Do you intend to open ‘Skamps’ (The old nightclub) again?

I: No. We did two runs of it and it was an absolute disaster. There was more damage done to furniture than it was worth. You can see them all in the (CCTV) video. They’re lovely customers here normally and then you see them in the video fighting with their nails. It’s not drink that does that to them. It’s the other stuff. I wouldn’t say that I’d never do a disco again but we’re going to try this dance thing now. It’s a lot dearer to put on obviously because you have to pay the band obviously. The ‘Bogus Pogues’ will be the first run. They’re a complete copy of the ‘Pogues’.

D: I was speaking to a business owner on Clare Island and he was saying that he has Declan O’Rourke coming on the 9th of August and you have had the likes of Eleanor Shanley. Can you get any support form the arts council or anywhere for bringing acts?

I: No but they don’t cost the island much. The artists are very fair to the islands. It cost me €2k to get De Danann and Eleanor Shanley. It costs me €2k to get Mike Hanrahan and Stockton’s Wing. The PA system then costs you €600 on top of that. That’s compared to the Bogus Pogues who might cost you €750. We have a band here tomorrow night that are in Clare Island tonight, they were in McGings in Westport last night. We’re going to put them in the beer garden from 6-8.30 p.m. before the world cup final to see does it work.

D: When you’re looking to book a band to you look at the cost and the numbers you need to cover costs?
I: No. I did a deal with another business owner on Clare Island that I would take a few of his bands on the Sunday to encourage them all to come. The artists can get a good wedge out of the weekend rather than coming to do one gig. He and I get on very well. He runs out of kegs, we’ll send a few down to the pier to him. He then delivers them back to us. Joe Mac is very good in that way, Laurence is very good that way. We help him he helps us. In fairness to Joe he’d rarely run out of drink. He’s a good man on the drink. Our business is 60-40. 60% food, 40% drink which we’re happy enough with because there is a good mark up on the drink. We make fuck all on the food. If you think about it the cost of sale for pulling a pint is the 30 seconds of labour plus the wholesale price. There’s the plate of food, a plate of chicken wings that that guy over there is eating, aside from all of the capital costs, they have been fried, baked and put on a plate, 2 chefs, probably 10 minutes. A chef that’s on €14-15 per hour. So for us to make money here we can’t allow the food to o any more than 60-40.

A local girl, Louise arrives in and is taking a look around. She congratulates Tommy on the look of the place and tells her he will show her around in a few minutes when this talk is over.

D: How do you see that playing out in the future? Will the current trends away from drink continue?

I: No. If you look at him (nodding towards a customer at a nearby table), he has had his plate of food plus a pint and might be back in later for the music. He coming in and drinking a plane glass of water and eating the food is a disaster. He coming in and having a sparkling water is great. This is what you have to train the staff to do….. push the products with the good margins.
Appendix 11:

**Interviewee:** Owner/ Manager  
**Date:** 19.07.2014  
**Duration:** 1 hr 10 minutes and 20 seconds

**Context:** The business is located along the route of the Great Western Greenway between the scenic seaside towns of Newport and Mulranny. It consists of a small hotel with just 4 rooms, a high quality bar-food restaurant, a bar and function room. Food is served daily from 9am to 9pm all year round. The large function room which can hold up to 150 people, an ideal spot for parties large and small and also has an upstairs restaurant. There are also camping facilities across the road and planning for the development of a 20 room hostel.

The premises was established in the early 1800’s and enjoys scenic sea and mountain views. Local amenities include hill walking, deep sea and river fishing and shore angling, Mulranny golf course and the local beaches. There are also a number of sites of historic and cultural significance in the surrounding area.

On the Sunday morning of the interview the interviewer arrived shortly before 12:00. The premises opened for food at 12:30 but there were already a number of visitors from Northern Ireland sitting outside on the benches. The interviewer was offered a coffee and asked to wait while the manager completed the final alterations to the extensive specials menu before the interview commenced in the back office. The interview lasted over an hour and when the interviewer emerged into the main bar area shortly after 1 p.m it was a hive of activity. The owner proceeded to greet the diners in a friendly and familiar manner and knew many of them by name.

**Interview transcript:**

D: How long are you here?
I: I set up this business 12 years ago. 13 years in December. Basically I purchased the business from my mum and dad, it was a family business.

D: There was a pub here?

I: There was a pub and shop. There was a lounge, the lounge that you see there today was there also. It was an operational business when we took it over and when we did take it over we did refurbishment on the premises, nice colours on the inside and put in nice comfortable seats. It was in bad need of a face lift. So we spent a few pound on that and we operated then just as normal, with the shop, bar and lounge, with a bit of music on a Saturday night and we were doing quiet well. When I did come into the business I was involved in manufacturing, that is my background, I was production manager for a company for a number of years.

D: And where was that?

I: In Castlebar, that would have been Volex Limited. We were into the manufacture of cable accessories, harnesses for cars, computers, all that stuff. But there was a bit of a downsizing in that business and you could see it coming. Volex would be an international company, it would have manufacturing plants in the US, Europe, Asia and the UK.

D: And it was just that they were trying to rationalise and go to a cheaper labour force?

I: Exactly, that was very much happening at the time, we found the year of the millennium, we were flat out up until that time. I remember having to go in at Christmas time and do conference calls with customers on how they were going to get product and so on. But then a few months after that things completely changed and I don’t know, but would you remember back to the dot.com bubble.

D: I do, yeah
I: There was a bit of a bust in that and that kinda put everything upside down, but the customers came to us and said listen we are buying off Castlebar now but how much would it cost to get it manufactured in Croatia, how much would it cost to get it manufactured in Estonia, you know. China is a bit too far but maybe in another couple of year’s time…

D: Too far from the market, cause the market being the western world

I: Yeah, we would be supplying, at that time, our biggest customers were Ericson’s, they made the base stations for the mobile phones, so you know how you have that mobile phone there, that would transmit to the base station, that will in turn transmit to another base station so you have a series of base stations throughout the world that takes your signal and amplifies it and sends it off to the next one, so that’s the way it operates. So we made the caballing for all of them so our customers were saying, ‘We want better prices’ and basically Castlebar couldn’t compete so I suppose I was a Director at the time of the company so I got a bit of an insight of what was going on, so I said to myself, we need to make changes. Either I would get another job or buy over the family business which I always wanted. So I opted for the family business.

D: So you weren’t running this and doing that at the same time, you were exclusively doing that?

I: Well I was actually running both of them for about months, until I got, I had to get my redundancy. Very important, once I got the redundancy then full blast into getting this place. And one of the first things I did was to put in for planning permission. I met with the engineer one day, Bernard Moran, he was a local lad from around here and he would have done a lot of work for the Castlecourt, Knockranny and pubs, a lot of pubs in Westport and that. He had a good knowledge of the business. So I said to Bernard, ‘Come up with a plan, I want to do bar food, I want to be able to do some functions’. He says, ‘So basically what you are telling me is that you want a mini hotel’. Well I says ‘yes’. So fair enough he went off and he came back with a drawing and the drawing he came back with, fantastic, you know, it had the wow factor. I said ‘Let’s go with that’, the only thing we had to withdraw on was the rooms, that is my Achilles heel of today, is that I don’t have enough rooms, but at the time there was a
lot of emphasis, it is just like the fads in planning. A lot of emphasis on environmental and septic tanks and that kind of stuff, so we had to ask would this work to accommodate 10 or 12 rooms and no it wouldn’t. So we had to pull back on the rooms and we just went for the kitchen, the dining room and additional kind of offices and stuff, to make this operation work.

D: So, how many rooms have you now?

I: We have 4, but we started off with 6, but then we had to take, this room was a disabled room, as an office, we had another room down there but we had to use that for the kitchen. So when we opened and I will come to that later on as to why but we didn’t envisage that it would take off the way it did and so that’s why we needed more space. The one question and the one thing I will always say at the time, we were very lucky when we went for planning because 6 months after we were granted planning the National Roads Authority took over this road here, okay, so it meant that there was no development in this area unless it was classed as a village or a town so what happened then was we got in at the right time and we were able to expand the business and open up or whatever. But I always make that point, if I was 6 months later, this would never have happened. Bearing in mind as well Darragh we have, in the summertime, anything from 45-50 jobs for the summer and on an all year round basis, we would have 30 jobs, full and part time, so that is a lot of money feeding into the locality.

D: Are they mostly locals?

I: Ah yeah, I actually only have 1 foreign girl working for me and she is a girl that worked with me a number of years ago and she was looking for a job in the summer and I figured there was one girl on holidays…

D: Do you think that is important to people that it is Irish staff?

I: It is, people will say it to you, now, its not something you want to go shouting about but it is very local people, local staff. Say for example I have 1 foreign national and if
something asks for something local, ‘hmmmmmm..’ it doesn’t look good, you know. People like to see Irish staff.

D: I was reading an article, I think “Ireland of the unwelcomes”, a paper that was written back in 2000, maybe early 2004 and apparently, Fáilte Ireland do measurements/evaluations of the various things people come to expect and appreciate when in Ireland, and one of the things was a welcome and that actually had dipped in 2004 and they were saying that this was because tourists were coming over here and what they were coming for was a cultural sort of, heritage experience and they found that an awful number of people that were working in this industry were Eastern European.

I: Exactly, and they come into a lounge down there, I’ll be perfectly honest with you Darragh, when I started off here in 2004, I had a problem getting local staff and by the luck of god there was one fella who came to Knockranny and he was a waiter and then he put me into contact with this guy in Slovakia and I spoke to him on the phone and told him to come on over, I’ll check you out, you know. As it happens he was one of the best guys I ever employed and the fella that recommended him started off in the hotel and he must’ve worked in every damn hotel in Westport, he couldn’t hold down a job. He recommended this guy to me and he was fantastic. But what he done as well, in college, he was in a catering, waiter college and Hotel Management would have been his background. But what he was able to do for me was to get a team together for me, and the girl I have now was in that team as well, very good staff. At that time with the Celtic Tiger and that we had problems in hiring good staff, you know. So that was it, we started off in summer 2004, we started off doing the food and then we started growing the business, then we had the plan, I had the business plan kind of laid out , you know, pace myself, we do the food first, build the kitchen and then by 2008/2009 we were going to build the function room.

D: So you had all this planned way in advance?

I: Yes, we had the business plan done up, professional business plan with it all mapped out. So basically what we did was look at the whole thing and said 2008/2009 we would build the function room. But I was able to pull that forward and start my
function room in 2006, by the summer of 2006, I had my function room up and running as well so that created additional capacity for diners as well as the case may be. So I was able to add to that and cater for, it opened up new opportunities for me in terms of functions and weddings, birthday parties and having a private room for people if it was available if it was needed.

D: And you know you were saying there now with the developments, so you are 13 years going and you started off and it was the bar and that kinda stuff and you moved onto the food and then on to the function room, like each one of those improvements or developments was that based on people coming in and asking ‘Can we get food here?’ or ‘Do you know where we can find a function room?’ or did you build it first in the hope of creating demand. Was it demand led?

I: No, it was vision, because one of the things I had seen at an early stage of this business was if I was only a bar and a shop I was going to be very much constrained in what our turnover would be and I know in 2002 we had a phenomenal, in 2001 we had just a month when we started off, but 2002 was a good year, then 2003 was a super year. So I knew there was no way I could keep it up this way unless I did something new and the only new thing I had to do was to look at what else can you serve. And people coming in from the golf course in Mulranny, we were doing soup and sandwiches and bits and pieces like that, you know you were kept going. So I said the way to go was food and the other thing we seen because of legislation, the Gardai were upping the anti in breathalysing and all that kinda stuff.

D: I hear they are pretty bad around here?

I: Ah they are yeah. But in terms of legislation and that, that was coming into play as well. Just as it happens, don’t know if it was 2000/2003, actually there was 1 guy who was pulled in one night and breathalysed and that had a very negative effect on the whole area. You know what I am saying. So we said that we certainly used to get a lot of fellas travelling down from Newport for a few pints of an evening and a few from Mulranny so I said I have to move on with our plan. So that’s what I did and how I started having the vision, you know, plus I was lucky in the guy that I met in terms of, Bernard Moran, he knew a lot about the business and had the expertise and
he was able to advise me on what route to take, what size of a kitchen. He was able to advise me of the layout of the lounge, although we had a nice lounge there, we had very little to do with it to bring it up to, people sitting down and having an eating experience because the first refurb he done he thought of that as well, if we ever did food, he kinda laid the blueprint, that this would cover food for you as well. And even the height of the counter, if you go out to the counter out there and there is a kind of a step at the bar that you can put your feet on and again that was there so you can put your feet on the step, sit at the counter and you were at the correct height for eating, he had that all figured. So was that was it now. From there on we went to the function room and from there on. And then we seen there was a demand for rooms, in 2007, I went for planning again for more additional rooms, cause we figured that the area was up and coming. Mulranny Hotel was back the road, they were doing weddings, people were enquiring for rooms we hadn’t got.

D: From overflow from the Mulranny Hotel or just general?

I: Just generally when something like Mulranny comes to an area it generates interest, it’s a location, it is a place to go, you know.

D: The more the area offers the better.

I: Yeah, its just like with the Greenway now. And the loop walks, people come to the area because of the Greenway and they want to share in the experience of it and if they go down we might stay a night and if so where do they stay? So then we went looking at adding on our rooms but then we had a problem with our good friends, the National Roads Authority, so that was fine, we went off after them, we made 2 attempts to get planning, but without a speed limit outside here, it didn’t wash.

D: How do you mean? You would have to reduce the speed limit down to 60 as a normal pedestrian…

I: Yeah, it was normal speed on the main road outside our place before that. But it wasn’t until 2011 until we go the speed limit in place, that took 4 years to get it in place.
D: Was there any help, like do you have to go and deal with the NRA directly or can you go through Fáilte Ireland or is there anyone there that can help you?

I: No it was like actually talking to that filing cabinet there, when you were talking to the NRA, cause you didn’t know who you were talking to, so basically what we did was, we made contact through Darragh Colleary in Ballina and I went to him about it and I went to Michael Holmes, Michael would have a lot of contact with the NRA as well. But I think the turning point was Noel Dempsey was going to a Fianna Fáil meeting in Achill one evening and Darragh Colleary got him in here and we had a meeting with some counsellors, we showed him our plans and what we started from and he was really impressed, jeez that really sounds good, you know so we told him that the thing that was holding us back in redeveloping this business was the speed limit outside our door and at this stage we had spent a good lot of money trying to get planning permission which was turned down each time.

D: For that reason?

I: For that reason, no speed limit. But then there was a girl killed down the road here, Yvonne..

D: I remember the case alright

I: Well she was a Garda as well, you know, and that was high sensitivity and it was just about the time I was to get the call and even the county manager said to me ‘I could waiver it but if anything happened, and just things are so (sensitive) at the moment, so you will just have to go and get the speed limit’. He said that ‘if you get the speed limit’, that didn’t come for a few years later. Anyways we got it, Noel Dempsey delivered on what he said he would do and within a few months, September time or maybe end of November we got the speed limit enacted. It was very simple in the finish, once you know the right ones to go to. But in saying that we applied for planning and we now have planning permission for a 20 bedroomed hostel.

D: You have?
I: Yes and then next to that what happened was the recession and whole thing with the banks and so on. LEADER were a big part of our plan as well, they were to co-finance us in it and that was all put on ice so we are at a stalemate now. But one of the things I have said this year is that I cannot go into another year without bedrooms, whether I get investors in with me and go ahead with the plan or some other bank comes in and supports me on it or I can build it to a configuration that I can afford. Instead of doing 20 bedrooms maybe do 10, and that is the most likely one, you know, go small and then see how things go. If we have 10 and 4 we have 14 bedrooms. If you had 14 bedrooms filled, that’s nice. So that’s our plan kind of for the future.

D: You are talking there about Leader and that, is it how they will support you if you are not going into direct competition with an already existing business?

I: Exactly, yes, well one of the things if I was putting on bedrooms, is that I could call this a hotel but if I called this a hotel they wouldn’t support me because there is a hotel in Newport and another hotel in Mulranny. Why do we need an extra hotel when they could have the argument that the Mulranny Hotel closes down for 3 or 4 months of the year and you are going to make things worse on them. That’s the thinking, we went for something different we went for a hostel, you see if we were building a hostel it would be to a very good 3*** hotel standard, if you know what I mean. The model I was looking at, I stayed in England one time, Preston and I stayed in one of these Premier Inn’s. I went into it, nobody at reception, one girl to check in and check out, they had machines for checking in and checking out.

D: No overheads there then.

I: Very little overhead but in terms of the experience and the stay was everything you would get in a hotel, you know, everything nice and clean.

D: So saving on service

I: Saving on service but as well the way they do it, I found out afterwards how they would do it, that in all Premier Inn’s, they don’t do the cleaning themselves, they have
contractors to come in and do that for them, down to the little shampoos, towels etc.,
that is all contracted out, somebody else does that, they don’t have anything to do
with that at all. All they own is the building, someone else has the food etc.

D: Interesting model..

I: That’s not the way we would do it here, as I said in terms of how they do the
business, the rooms or whatever, I had as comfortable a sleep in the Premier Inn as I
would’ve had in the Burlington.

D: Just at a lower price point.

I: And the price was good.

D: And how do you find them to deal with Leader?

I: Leader is non existent at the minute. Totally non existent because of the fact that
they were kind of, there is something going on at the moment in relation to Leader
and who they are responsible too. So Leader was their own identity, reporting to the
Minister, now what they want to do is cut out the middle man and have Leader
reporting to Mayo County Council.

D: Oh right

I: Which would not be good, I’ll be honest with you. I think with their own separate
identity they were able to make their own decisions themselves. If it goes to Mayo
County Council you will have everyone and their mother making decisions. A lot of
colloquialism, you know, I don’t think it would be a good move, and there has been a
lot of talk and meetings about it but it still gone no way forward or back. But all I
know is I think our project would cost about €450,000 - €480,000 and I think the
maximum grant we could get would be €200,000.

D: And you would have to source the rest of the funding yourself?
I: Yes, but at that level of funding it would be very worthwhile, wouldn’t it. Like if you got €200,000, even €150,000 it would be very worthwhile and what we would need to think of, is you see, our payback and our payment on our mortgage or whatever we borrow, because obviously you will have a great summer but you will have a quiet winter. So your occupancy rate, we figured, would have to be in or around, on an annual basis 40%, that would be the occupancy level we would need to hit to pay.

D: I get ya.

I: But if we were above that, then happy days we are making money. But what I would say is that if you had your hostel next door, or whatever you want to call it, if you had another 15 bedrooms there, the support of the bar and the food would go way up.

D: When you have to go into the like of Leader and present your business plan, I suppose if you had the hostel there would it extend your season slightly too. There seems to be more to do around than there was years ago.

I: Well we were just saying there this morning that we had music in the bar last night and there was damn all of a crowd at it to be honest but in saying that, it was a great idea, great night not very well supported but if you had more rooms it would add to that. That bar could have been packed last night.

D: And is it a problem, it is a beautiful location and the location is such a big part of this, but is your isolation, like you have no public transportation so would that be a big problem?

I: It is, yes and taxis are a big problem for us down here as well. But in saying that if you have people staying on site. We also have a taxi service ourselves, we have our own courtesy car.

D: And is that run on a Friday night, Saturday night or is it ran all the time?
I: That is all the time. I did about 4 or 5 runs last night. Picking up people from holiday homes, picking them up bringing them home, you know and that is the kinda things you have to do, when you are rural like ourselves you have to do the things that no one else would dream of. In saying that and getting back Darragh in terms of what you are interested in rural tourism is fine but it does need to be incentivised and the reason why I said that is that initially I got something like €100,000 from Leader. That gave me the confidence to say, ‘well look I have that €100,000’, it just gave me the push I needed cause if I didn’t get the money, would I have put all my savings, redundancy money into it, No, you have to be careful you know. But that €100,000 that I got, if you look at that since I opened in 2004, how many times I have paid that back, I would say about 15 times, if I took just the VAT element, the VAT alone we would be in or around €170,000 - €180,000 in VAT alone a year.

D: Right, so they had a good return on their investment.

I: Yes, so you are not talking about income tax, you are talking about employers PRSI, you are not talking about the tax that all our employees pay on their wages, PAYE and all that kinda stuff. So really I was a good investment.

D: So I wonder, I was just thinking, if I was in that position with Leader giving me €100,000, it would inspire me with confidence about what I am looking to do cause surely they are looking to hit targets and to prove that they have (made a prudent investment). It is great for them that you were so successful afterwards so they would be looking at it carefully to see your market, the potential for success and if they are handing you €100,000 that must give you a bit of a fill up and they think we are on to something here.

I: Yeah. Well I know that Leader has often used me as a kinda yardstick to say listen this is Johnny boy down in there and he may give you a talking to on what he has done and what he hasn’t done so you know we have often done that for them as well but if you were to ask me ‘Well today now John, you are sitting here what would you do and if I give you €200,000 tomorrow morning what would you do?’ I’d say that there was no question, I would be gone over to Conor Holmes to dig out that site tomorrow morning to put up 10/12 rooms for me and there is no doubt about it so I
am so confident about the package and what we can offer here and even though we are rural, we are out here in Tiranar we have people who come back time and time again, they come back for the experience, they come back for the food, the drink.

D: I suppose the personal service is a major thing.

I: And the personal service, the staff and ourselves or whatever the case may be.

D: Would you say that this is your primary business or is it supplemental? What proportion of your business would that be local or is it tourists and is that going up or down?

I: When you talk about local business, I’ll tell you what is local, locals to me is out in Louisburgh, locals to me are in Westport, Castlebar, they are in Lahardaun, they are in Ballina, they are in Belmullet. When I was local before in the little bar between Mulranny and Newport and that was my locals but basically with the package we have now and the new business model we have expanded the area from where we attract people in from. So it is hard to say but I would say about 70% of our business is in Dublin, people leave Dublin and drive down here going down to Achill but don’t stop on the way down until they get here.

D: It’s a brand that seems to be growing very well there is nobody that doesn’t know Nevin’s.

I: Yes, so in terms of locals it is very hard to, you know

D: Pigeon hole yourself..

I: But the thing is what you got to do is that 70%-80% tourism and you have a 25%/30% whatever the case may be, that 70% you have to look after very very well and you have got to know that people in Ballina will come up here for parties, for occasions. We have a family that have been here about 5 times already and they come from between Lagherdaun and Ballina, Crossmolina. Now they are probably about, 30 miles from here. They have an option of going to Belmullet which is 25 miles, Ballina
which is 10 miles and Foxford which is another 10 miles, but you know they come here for a reason. In saying that it is not easy, we have got to keep our standards, good quality, have our staff on the ball. No kind of long waiting times for meals, you constantly have to watch it all the time.

D: Micro managing it at all times

I: Yeah it is a tough business but a rewarding business if you do it right.

D: And speaking of the rewarding business would your, its phrases like Key Performance Objectives and these sort of things you would hear in business, so a lot of what I am reading on businesses such as this in rural areas of tourism. The key focus is not financial as such in industry you would be looking at return on investment objectives but what I am reading about when it concerns small businesses, and you can tell me if this is wrong, its more about lifestyle, well obviously profit is important but the lifestyle of having to sit into a car and drive into Dublin everyday and back out and the impact you are having on the local environment, you are employing locally and its given a lift to the entire area. What for you is the reason why you get out of bed in the morning? Is it the figures or what is it?

I: Okay, the first thing I will say to you, it is like driving a car, you get into your car today and you are driving back to Louisburgh. If you are driving up to Newport and you are passing the Garda Station, you will think well Ronan (local guard) is within looking at you, you will cut down your speed, you will ensure that you have enough fuel in your car, you will make sure that she is not overheating, these are all key performance indicators, it is the same with this business. Every business, it is all down to your financials, you can be a very busy man looking after your customers but if you are not making money basically you will end up on the side of the road. Our business model, we have key performance indicators we measure certain key performance indicators every single week. We have a drink margin, we have a food margin, we have a wages margin, these are things we measure every week, we also do our turnover analysis in terms of, we do turnover and comparison each month. We would look at how we would have compared to last year and see if our business is growing and with that information you can make decisions. Do you have to put up staff or do
you have to bring them down. Every month, at the end of every month we have key performance indicators that would give us, some of them you can’t measure until the end of the month others you can measure weekly because sometimes things change very rapidly where you could have high staff for the summer, next thing you get into September and the figures go way down and you have to get in there and react very quickly otherwise you start losing money. So there are certain things like that. In terms of food margin as well, because our business would be 70% food and 30% drink, and the cost of food is very high so you have to make sure

D: The cost of providing it??

I: Well the cost of buying it and wasting it, providing it goes into wages. In terms of buying it is something you have to look at as well, because 1% in the food margin would mean a savings for us of €10,000 a year, 1%. So if you are down at 60% and you should be at 70%, you lose €100,000 a year, you get what I mean. That’s why it is very important that your business model, its lovely out there and you are shaking hands, welcoming people in but behind all that there is a business model that that is your mantra and I would say every Monday by 12 o’clock if I don’t get the percentages of food and wages or whatever I am not a happy camper. We need to be looking at the following week, if the chefs food margin is down well then he is going to have to improve it for the next week otherwise we lose this.

D: And you would discuss this with management so it is not only you who is privy to this information,

I: Oh absolutely, the head chef would be the main one, the supervisor on the floor certainly would be involved, they can’t be bringing in everyone and their mother but there needs to be enough staff down there. But there are all sets of key performance indicators that you have to manage your business with, there are also, any businesses it is very important that you have a very good accountant, very important that you have a very good accountant, that will make sure and go and analyse your books and obviously things have to be done strictly by the book, more or less. There is always maybe an opportunity but very little now a days. We are all on these tills, these modern tills all our food goes in on the table. If you came in here for a meal today you
will get a receipt to say, I have been in here, I have had a turkey and ham and a coke. So that is fine, you go off and that is it and I can get a report at the end of the day that this man was in here yesterday at o’clock, he had a turkey and ham and a coke, he handed in a €50 note and we gave him so much change. All that from the back office, this computer here manages all that.

D: So it is generating trends that you could analyse?

I: One of the big things in this business is it’s a cash business, you know, cash in, cash out. There is opportunity to fiddle the books however that could easily get you into a lot of bother. And if you cross your tax people or revenue they could bring you down

D: They aren’t very forgiving

I: They could put you out of business as simple as that. It has been transparent there with lots of business. I had a tax audit here one time, just going back about 2 years ago. We got notification of the audit, a month away. I said for feck sake we would have been better off if we had it in 2 weeks but it gave us time to have everything for them. The tax inspector came down with her parents on a Sunday unannounced and she came in and bought 3 drinks and she paid for them, nothing wrong with that. Then they were brought to a table and sat down and they had their meal and their meal went on to their table, the 3 dinners or whatever it may be. But in the middle of the meal she decided she was going to have an extra quarter bottle of wine and went up to the bar, ‘I want a quarter bottle of wine, please’, there’s your quarter bottle of wine, here is your receipt and she paid for it there and then. But during the course of the audit she did her audit and went off. Oh I said that’s great she is out of my hair in one day. But she must’ve forgot about the day she was down, but she had all everything written down, very well, time exactly when she came in, what she did, what she bought, what she didn’t buy and what she paid at the end for the food. So she rang me and said ‘Look there are a couple of things I want to go through with you with regard to PAYE and I want to look at your tills’. Jesus, I said this was strange, has she found something on me or what. So she came in and that was the big thing she wanted, she wanted, ‘I came in at such a time and bought 3 drinks and I see them 3 drinks, can I see when I bought the food’ and then she said ‘I got a quarter bottle of wine half way
through the meal, can you show me that’, so the girl said no problem I will be with you in a few minutes so she went into the back office here and she was able to copy and paste the 3 different transactions that she had. She put them on an A4 page that’s the history of your transactions with us on that Sunday, whatever the date. She just looked up and smiled. She just looked up and smiled. She knew then you see that our systems were in place. Say for example, if for example you went up and the drinks, or we couldn’t find the food, straight away alarm bells would go off. This fella is not declaring the food so again the one thing in any business starting off, rural or in town or whatever, you have got to keep things right.

D: Anecdotally you probably know a lot of businesses around the area and would you think the standard you are setting there is the norm?

I: Well I think if it is not the norm it will be because they will get caught out, because they have new tools and everything else that would be able to, they would be able to suspect. Say you start a place, say in Louisburgh and you are competing with John Nevins and someone goes out and says jeez I was in Louisburgh the other day, Darragh was there himself and it was packed to capacity and then they will be watching to see what kinda of revenue is coming in, in terms of VAT and they will be saying that he is doing the same business as John Nevin so how come… and it is only a matter of time before they figure it out. And they have the tools and the technology and they are a lot more sophisticated on how they run checks on people. If I was giving a talk to anyone starting their own business it would be on that, you have got to keep your taxes right.

D: And the technology makes it that much easier for you to do that?

I: Again in terms of the wages, minimum wage you have to look at that, we pay bank holidays here, holidays to all staff, everyone, so you have to make sure that under 18’s you do not go over the hours and under 16’s, although we don’t employ, as a rule we don’t employ under 16’s, you know.

D: Legislation is there…
I: Yes there is a lot of legislation there and there are a lot of things going on so behind it all there is a business there, on the background there is a lot of stuff going on besides. And the other one coming in here quiet a lot would be the health board, the HSE, checking our kitchen, how we operate the kitchen, how we cook the meats, how we keep a record of our fridges and general hygiene in general.

D: And are they overboard John or are they fair enough?

I: They are fair enough.

D: Regulations I mean. What you need to comply with?

I: I think they are fair enough. It protects us as well, no one knows the responsibility we have if things goes wrong, god forbid but if someone gets food poisoning or something like that. It can be fairly catastrophic, if it goes to the HSE, they could come in with a team of people and go through everything.

D: So from a litigation/liability sort of thing it is a help to you.

I: It is. If you operate HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point).

D: I have heard of that alright

I: If you operate HACCP, it does keep you out of trouble. And just say someone does have a bad experience and they took you to court well if you can go into court and show, look this is the model I am operating to.

D: And this is for best practice, or is this a regulatory requirement?

I: It is a regulatory requirement because when the health officer comes in, that will be her bible, are you operating within the parameters that they set out HACCP. So say for example if you go into a court of law and you have your HACCP in order, they will say well this man is doing what he is supposed to be doing and an odd something got out or got through so fair enough.
D: The fault lays elsewhere.

I: Well at least he is doing his best and then the health officer will come in and say ‘Can I see the last 10 reports on this man’ or lets say the last five visits and if it is down to a fly thing that needs to be replaced.

D: And you can show that you acted on their recommendations.

I: What I always do, I always write back to them, they will send out a report to you saying what they found on the day. So what I do is write back to them saying this is done, done and done. This requires a bit of building so I will need to wait on better weather or it could be painting that needs to be done outside, so we will do this a month out, and I have a price for this and it will take 3 months but I hope to have it done by that date. But the important thing is Darragh, when they come back to you in say 5 months time of 3 months, they are regular when they come in. So you have wrote back to them you have made the commitment and what you have said you will do you would better have it done. Simple as that.

D: The Greenway, you are talking about developing the business, adding the hostel and growing it and all that, what has the impact of the Greenway been or without the Greenway would you be thinking of doing this?

I: No, absolutely the Greenway has switched on the lights for us in lots of ways. We have suffered a lot in this area of ours: Achill would be in this area, Ballycroy. We have had a lot of emigration in the last few years, a lot of people had been dependant on the buildings and so on so they had to emigrate to make a living. So we have men working away from their wives and their families maybe gone for 2/3 months at a time. A lot of people are actually working out in Sweden and Holland and you mightn’t see them for 3 or 4 months so that is less business. There are less family occasions, the wife might come in with 1 of the kids but you are not getting the whole family out. So you are missing that, there are a lot of people moved away basically. But on the other hand you have the Greenway come in to this area and this is why we are blessed because it is bringing a lot more people in and even at weekends it is
bringing people out from the towns. Everyone wants to keep fit and go walking and
do the healthy sort of things, you know. There’s more, cycling is unbelievable how
that has taken off. So what it has done is, we have lost on the emigration side of things
our local business but there is another business that has come in the form of the
Greenway and there are more outdoor activities at the weekend, even during the week
and even some schools. We have even had stag and hen parties on the Greenway
where they will do a cycle from Mulranny to here and then they will feck off again.
So that’s it. But the Greenway I think is doing a lot and I think it is getting Mayo on
the map in terms of Westport, Achill and all surrounding areas. I think the big one
coming up is the Great Western Way or the Wild Atlantic Way.

D: So it’s open but they just haven’t gripped the imagination or not everyone is aware
of it yet.

I: But there is some Route 66 in the States, or something. There is a friend of mine
and it didn’t immediately click with me, but they are going hiring a camper van for
doing this Route 66. So the way I see it is that we will see a lot more of these guys
coming into the country driving along the great western way and seeing whatever.
And one of the plans I have, I do caravan parking as well, now I don’t have it very
well marked or anything else but that is another opportunity that we have, in terms of
caravan parks.

D: Down by the beach?

I: No just across the road there. At the car park, I actually wired it up there last week
for more power points so they can plug in the vans at night and whatever. So we are
doing that so that will be another opportunity as well in terms of creating new
business down the road.

D: Last thing really, with regard to the other businesses in the area. I have read a
PhD’s done on co operation versus competition in local business. It compares
Killarney, which is amazing as they all come together to market the area not just their
own business, and the anthesis to that that is presented is Clifden. They say that in
Clifden the local businesses see each other as competition rather than seeing Killarney
as the competition. Would you have good relations with the other local businesses that would be part of the package, or do you work together, do you meet up or is it fragmented?

I: No, we would work together a lot with the local businesses. Just to give you an idea, the basics first. If someone came in and were stuck for change or they needed a barrel of Guinness or whatever, simple things, neighbourly love, you give it to them. In terms of Mulranny Hotel we do work with them quite a lot cause they put us on the mailing list that we have accommodation here. So again that is very good for us cause anytime there is a wedding on the phones is hopping once they fill up. We have worked with different things, we have a hell of time down here with our phones over the last few months. I don’t know if you heard there down in Achill the whole thing was cut off for 3 days and bearing in mind it was a big weekend in Achill, last week was the marathon and people couldn’t get in contact with B&B’s, with hotels.

D: Internet gone as well?

I: Internet, pass machines the whole lot gone. Now we were involved, not involved, part of the Achill telephone system going back until about last January. But myself and the manager in Mulranny kept on to Eircom all the time and the least little thing, our phones are down, we can’t do credit card transactions, our customers cannot contact us, so we kept up the pressure on them and we were switched over to Westport so last week was you know. So myself and the manager met up last week and we were saying Jesus didn’t we do great. Now what we are looking at is broadband, new broadband system they are willing to put in because they have gotten so much bad press over the events of last week. So now is the time to push it for this fibre optic broadband which is much faster, we are attached to this three at the minute and some days you will get it and others you won’t. We are operating things like that, we are also operating the Gourmet Greenway, okay which is all artisan, butchers, bakers, cheese makers all that stuff along there. Now we are not fully involved but we do some work along that but we are not fully a member. We work on things like that and there is a good relationship. I don’t see the hotel as a competitor of mine, I don’t see the hotel in Newport, you have to be careful of them now and watch what you are doing, you can’t let down your guard. You can’t say very well, there is a new hotel
open in Newport, he is a nice guy and sure if he gets a bit sure what the heck but he could take your custom. What every man can do is operate his establishment and look after your own customers, look after your own staff, look after your own business and your standards and let everyone do the same thing. Collectively then you have to look at, well what is good for the area. I found that a big pinch, when this hotel back in Mulranny is closed. There is more benefit to me when it is open.

D: That’s interesting isn’t it?

I: It is. Same thing, the new hotel in Newport, that is drawing people into the area. They will want to get out of town, they’ll want a different eating experience and they will say ‘Well Nevin’s is just out the road’. Happy days, so they are the type of things. Business generates business. I wouldn’t be too worried about people starting a business, I think the more businesses you have in an area it brings..

D: More of an attraction to the area..

I: Yeah, I was out in Budapest a number of years ago, we went out for a bit of a break I suppose but they had all their businesses out there at the time, which they don’t have now. But there was this street in it, Les Friends was the name on the street and this guy was able to tell me that he was out there 5 years and the first time he walked along this street it was almost derelict, there were old cars, scrapped along the street and within 2 years the whole thing changed and it was very sophisticated, lovely restaurants from here over to past the church. So it just shows you, you could say well there is one restaurant here and we are not setting up anymore, it wouldn’t have any identity but by 20 restaurants coming in this place became a meeting place, it became unique in terms of this is the place you go to eat in Budapest.

D: The lady I spoke with in Slane that I spoke with, something she does is, you know Tayto Park?

I: Oh yeah yeah
D: So she has got, so what she will do is advertise on her website that they will give room and board and will give you Tayto Park tickets and you will get them cheaper than at Tayto Park and as well as that you won’t have to cue when you get there. So obviously they are in partnership on this cause they see the benefit and Tayto Park see the benefit and the customer gets the benefit so I am just thinking do you or anybody else, lets say the bicycles you were saying that that has gone through the roof lately, that people are using the bicycles so if I went into Newport and I am getting my bike and lets say the bike is €15 and maybe a dinner here is €15 but if I get the 2 of them there it would be €25. Are you aware of any of that going on where 2 businesses are selling a product but it is combined.

I: No not really, not ventured into anything like that. No what we would do is if people wanted bikes is that we would just ring up the bike hire company and we just get the bikes dropped here and away they go.

D: But there is no benefit to you other than to keep the customer happy.

I: Yes to service the customer, no we don’t so say for example if people come here and their car is in Mulranny and they couldn’t go any further we would drop them to Mulranny. It is a lot of goodwill.

D: Hard to measure the benefit but there is a benefit to you.

I: Yes, well there is good word of mouth and it creates a good atmosphere about the place. Word of mouth is the best thing, if you have people going away happy from the place cause they will tell an awful lot more people so we have got to be very careful in how we discipline ourselves with the service we give to customers and its not just serving them in here a person could come in for a cup a coffee and say listen I need a lift to Newport can you help me and you say listen here I will drop you. There is nothing in it for me but it is the goodwill factor. That is how you build up your business, that’s how you build up the area. That’s why people are leaving here saying “I had a great experience and I’d go back there”, and they tell more people. We do that all the time.
D: In terms of marketing what do you do?

I: We do some local advertising on the Mayo News, Mid West Radio and Mayo T.V., we have placed ads on that. We also put ads in the Mayo Advertiser. We actually won Mayo Pub of the year last year with the Mayo Advertiser. That’s the main way we advertise. However in the last number of years we are doing more on Facebook and Twitter. Social media is huge. I wasn’t very well up on Twitter until recently, but I did a Failte Ireland course here with the staff a couple of weeks ago. We got FI to do training with all of our front-of-house staff which went very well. The staff respect it because the trainer is a professional, everyone gets a cert from the course. I did the course myself originally in a separate location, I was very impressed with it and so I got him to come here with it. There were about 25 people that attended that course, waitresses on the floor. That I would hope would add to the experience that people will have when they come in the door into Nevins. It was the tutor that had asked me if I did much on Twitter, and I hadn’t. I got my daughter and one of my supervisors, Sophie on to it. Sophie would do more on Facebook and my daughter would be more into Twitter. The amount of emails that are coming in through Twitter is incredible. We have a cocktail night in here on Sunday night. We do it every year with the staff. We got something like 960 followers through Facebook. That was 2 days ago, it’ll be even more now. Facebook and Twitter are a new way to create access and it’s free. It’s a great way to get the name out there and building the brand. I don’t just look at this as a business; I see it as a brand. When the time is right we’ll move it somewhere else. With the kids getting that little bit older we can look at some other site. We have a brand there that we can move easily to other locations. Social media will be a huge part of our marketing going forward. For example any new dishes we introduce (on the menu), we put them up on Facebook. I’ve had people come into me and the girls would say “here are your menus” and they’d say we know what we want. We saw the menu on Facebook and we want to try out this or that. They didn’t even want to see the menus, they knew what they wanted. Part of our business and our brand is that we keep changing. If we look at today’s menu, I have 16 main courses on that special menu today, additional to the 10 that are on the standard menu. We also have 10 desserts on the special menu and 5 on the standard.
D: This is my fourth interview and some of them have been 30 minutes. We’ve now over an hour in which I apologise for but it’s because you have so much information. When I’m reading up on this a lot of the academic studies talk about rural business as being reactive, not marketing savvy, little formal training and expertise etc. I’m finding that this is largely inaccurate and that the people I’m interviewing are the experts.

I: The course that I was on and that I brought here was connected with the ‘Wild Atlantic Way’. That’s what the course was about. I asked that he inform the staff about the Wild Atlantic Way because I wanted the staff to know what was coming down the tracks. We’re looking to the future. What business are we looking at doing next year, what about the year after. When I took over the business initially I knew where I had to go, I knew I had to go into food. I knew I had to can the shop. I knew I wasn’t making any money on it because of the competition with the supermarkets the Aldi, Tesco, Lidl’s etc. You can see yourself the damage that they have done. There is that in it right enough. You have to look at marketing and look forward. Just looking at the specials here! You have to look at the trends in food. People like funky foods. They like the traditional stuff too. Some days you will put on beef and Guinness casserole and it will fly out the door. Some days it won’t. One of the big things we find is that you need change. Different options for people! O.K. we’re rural but people come here for a reason. They come here for the quality, the choice, the service and they come here for the price. There are a range of things that they come here for. We’re out in the country. Why would people travel 30 miles from Ballina on a Sunday? There has to be something that you give that makes you different from anyone else. If I had six specials there today they’d say what’s wrong with him. You have to have an edge. It takes a lot of work. It takes research, looking at trends, what do people want? People also want healthy options. A big part of our business at the minute would you believe is Celiac’s. We do a special Celiac menu. On the back of our standard menu we also have a gluten free menu. I can show you an email from a guy who came in here today. He emailed before he arrived to check if we catered for Celiac’s and what offers can we give him. When he comes in today we can hand him that menu. Do you see the power in that?
D: It’s amazing the level of thought that has gone into the offering and the level of expertise behind it.

I: I think there is huge opportunity down the line provided we can cater for it and make the necessary changes. It's important to keep the core business right, then the add-ons, the Caravan Park, More bedrooms here, we hope to be doing an independent route onto the greenway next week that you won't have to go onto the Main road.

D: To sort that I presume you have to talk to local farmers etc.?

I: I have that all done. You have to negotiate and be diplomatic. You have to do the Bertie Ahern on it.

D: Would it be fair to say that the Greenway is huge to you but that it wouldn’t be as good without (Your business) either?

I: Exactly. We add to the greenway. People look at what’s in the area. People make an occasion of it. They decide to cycle the greenway, have their dinner here and maybe cycle back to Newport and get picked up there. We had schoolteachers here recently who cycled out from Westport. They had their few drinks and didn’t cycle back. They enjoyed it. It was something different.
Appendix 12:

Interviewee: Owner/Manager
Date: 20.07.2014
Duration: 58 minutes and 41 seconds.

Context: Clare Island is the largest of the Mayo off-shore islands and is located at the mouth of Clew bay approximately 4 miles from the nearest mainland point of Roonagh. It has a varied terrain: spectacular cliffs with large numbers of nesting sea birds and a rich 'inland' topography of hills and bogs and small pockets of woodland. The ferry crossing takes approximately 20 minutes. The current permanent population of 130 increases substantially during the summer tourist season (Clare Island Info, 2014).

The business in question is a Hostel with an attached bar and restaurant overlooking the Harbour. The premises is modern and bright having been build in 2012 and offers spectacular panoramic views of Clew bay from Achill to the drumlins in the inner bay, Croagh Patrick and Louisburgh. The bar is large enough to accommodate functions/ events and there is a function room on the first floor.

On the morning of the interview the interviewer went to Roonagh Quay to catch the ferry. There are 2 ferry companies serving the island, and they compete aggressively for business. They run identical schedules and have their ticket sales huts within metres of each other. The companies have taken their case before the courts on more than one occasion in their ongoing efforts to gain a competitive advantage (A jaundiced view, 2003).

As the interviewer approached the hut to buy his ticket both cabins started shouting their offers aggressively to try and capture the business. This is quite off-putting for the visitor who may be concerned that by choosing to travel with one company it may be seen by the other as taking sides in the dispute. One of the ferry companies is owned by the family of the Hostel owner’s family. This dilemma may be less pronounced for the non-local who may be oblivious to the embedded social networks.
Interview transcript:

D: If it’s ok with you we’ll start with the basics. What are your products?

I: Food, beverage, beds, and most importantly the experience. Where I hope to pull in revenue down the road would be entertainment and music. Declan O’Rourke Is here on the 9th of August and Leo and Anto from the Saw Doctors are in on the 30th and the 31st of August. That’s another source of revenue we’re looking at. That’s what we’re selling.

D: How has that evolved over time? I remember this as a hotel.

I: Its funny I never had the interest in the hotel and that’s why we didn’t go down that road but also the cost per square meter of building a hotel per bed occupancy is much higher. At the moment I have 42 beds here. For me to accommodate 42 beds in a hotel I would need about 2,500 m2 of structure and I have 42 people sleeping here in 520 m2 of structure.

D: Is that because of regulatory requirements or customer expectation?

I: It’s what people expect and also the gross floor area per bedroom. Each bedroom including a toilet would need about 18m2, you multiply that out and then include the circulation space and the services that go with that and elevators and everything. Basically when I did this, in keeping with the fact that I had no interest in running a hotel again, what supported my plan was that we were in the throes of the deepest recession that the country has ever seen. Ever. We have never feel so far from such a high point before. Economically we had to see what was realistic in terms of the capital expenditure. They were some of the key determinants of the ultimate decision.

D: When did the hostel open?

I: 2012. It’s doing well. The accommodation needs to get stronger. The food and beverage is going very well but I need to get the numbers up on the accommodation.
We’re going in the right direction. Beds have very low operating costs in that all you need is electricity and people to clean them. Basically all you need is a few hours in the morning and you can turn them over and get them ready. If you have a high occupancy in bedrooms you have a low cost and your margins are much higher. In food and beverage especially, a pint of Guinness for you to buy in there will set you back €4. How much of that do I see before I start paying staff and electricity?

D: No idea.

I: €1.46 per pint. If I sell 100 pints I’m just scraping in €150 before I start paying wages and utilities. That’s the reality of it. In your drink as well you’re paying 23% VAT. At a time years ago there was money to be made in drink, now there isn’t.

D: Because of the volume’s

I: More volume, less Tax. It was just a different environment. I wasn’t fluent in business at the time so I can’t give you all of the in’s and out’s of it. I know from talking to dad that there was a lot of money to be made from drink back in the day. Obviously there was a higher turnover of drink. People were drinking far more. That was the social scene and that’s all changed now. The thing about bars, especially in a place like this the bar has to be operating from early. I open the doors at 10.30 a.m. and the bar has to be cleaned first. I have guys on here from 8 a.m. until the time that we close; I won’t give the hour, that’s a huge amount of man hours. People expect that service. People come in on the boat and they expect a cup of coffee. I don’t have the option like Michael Henaghan (Pub owner in Westport), a fabulous idea, he locks his doors until party time, he opens the doors and bang. That to me is business. He’s making money. We’re burning too many man hours. With a bedroom, you can clean it and lock it up. If somebody wants it, it’s a point of sale. It happens there and then and it’s sold. With a beverage you have to have your premises open burning money all the time. You have a higher margin on your accommodation. With food you have a higher fixed cost. The cost of your food is a lot less as a percentage of your sales than drink but your kitchen has a fixed operating cost on a day because you need a guy cleaning, you need a chef, a commis chef. Once your sales pass that point, anything after that is profit. You have to get the business up to that level. You have to cover cost. Food is better if you’re turning over enough of it but there isn’t a whole lot of
money in drink and that’s why there are so many bars closing down left, right and centre. The time that goes into it, you’re open for such long hours, the tax man gets so much of it and also Diageo. €150 a keg is what you’re paying them.

D: When was the fire in the hotel? (The original hotel burnt down and had to be knocked).

I: 2006

D: Was it positive in the sense that it presented you with an opportunity to rewrite the blueprint?

I: No. I spent years and years in here working in this place. Mum died in 1999. I took this place over when I was 19 or 20 when I left college and I ran it mostly with the help of my family. I did 3 or 4 different business plans for the place through that time. Business plans that went all the way through to planning and the business plan failed because the figures didn’t stack up so I didn’t push ahead with them. I had the opportunity to push ahead with one of them in 2005 but I chose not to go ahead with it (thankfully) because the figures didn’t stack up and I didn’t get the support that I needed from the department in terms of tax incentives that I was looking for. I had tried a good number of plans and they had all failed. At that point in 2006 after the fire I decided I was off and I went back to college to do something I was interested in. I was interested in quantity surveying since I was a kid so I decided I would do it, I did it, I got a first class honour and I went and worked for Davis Langdon in Dublin for a couple of years. During that time when I was working for them doing crazy hours, worse than what you would be going If you were working for yourself I was thinking to myself, what am I at. I loved the work but I was killing myself. Sometimes I was working 48 hours working straight through to a deadline. At the same time as I was working up there, I was working on the business plan for this. As I said it was always something that I had an interest in and I liked the idea of moving back West as well; I didn’t want to be in Dublin. When I did the business plan and I checked the figures, it was positive. The capital cost, the expenditure wasn’t dramatic. The model based itself on the number of beds that I could get under the roof. On a good weekend when I have 42 people staying, that’s 42 people that in most instances, even though I
have the self catering facilities, they will eat and drink here as well. The model made sense.

D: This appears to be a perfect fit for you. I could see you staying in a hostel. Was the decision to go with the hostel market led of lifestyle led?

I: It wasn’t market led. It depends. I travelled Australia, I did the whole hostelling experience and I really enjoyed that and I always had an interest in it after that. I suppose I was looking around Europe as well and I was seeing the big chains that are starting up like Generator and there are a few others.

D: Hostel chains? I wasn’t even aware of any. It almost seems counter intuitive. You mentioned Australia and New Zealand. I travelled over there and stayed in hostels over there that were family run and the appeal was really the close personal relationships that you could develop with the owners where you threw down your bag and you almost felt that you were home for the weekend. How does that work for a franchise?

I: It works. I suppose they’re all based in densely populated cities. This hostel is unique. There’s probably no hostel in the country like this in terms of the standards that it has reached. That could only happen through the linkage with the bar and the food. The whole thing is intrinsically linked. A hostel on an island like this couldn’t happen without the bar and the restaurant. The business model was that you would have 42 people staying on a small footprint as opposed to the 2,500 meters for a hotel. Like you would need 20 rooms and that would require a massive extension. It would be costing you around €1,400-€1,500 hundred per square meter to develop, probably more because you’re on an island...probably €1,600 per square meter. Then you have to keep all the workers and you have to pay premium prices because they want to stay Monday to Friday and all that stuff. That was the driving force behind the decision, capital. There was no way that I was coming in here and burying €1m on Clare Island.

D: Tell me about the business plan. How detailed was it? Were you getting into what percentages of occupancy you needed across the 12 months etc?
The interviewee had to run out to take a phone call so I lost my train of thought.

D: Where was I? Are you open all year?

I: We’re open all year for groups. Occupancy at the start when you’re doing your business plan and your projections, its all speculative. You realistically don’t know what is going to work. When I did the business plan for this place it was that thick (holding his finger approx. 2 inches from his thumb). The banks hadn’t seen the likes of it in donkey’s years, unless it was being done by KPMG or someone like that. It had to be bulletproof for them to give me money in 2010 because they were giving it to nobody else. I had spent nearly a year and a half solid working on it and it was bulletproof. All of the markets and my projections were realistic. I didn’t over elevate anything. It was all realistic figures. In saying that, you have to get that confidence through market research. I did a lot of market research through statistic analysis from FI and the CSO. Also I had the confidence of the past. I knew that the island had the capability to attract numbers. I had al of that, I did my market research. I set out my markets and they were University’s, Stag’s, Hen’s, Walking Groups etc. The off season was aiming at the university’s which I’m still working on. I haven’t nailed it yet. Clare Island was the site of this massive naturalist survey done in 1901 by a guy called Robert Lloyd Preagor. To make a long story short it has massive academic significance and it was updated in the 1990’s by the Royal Irish Academy and it was used as a kind of benchmark for environmental change. Students are coming here all year round to study. Last year we had 2 groups of students from DIT here for nearly a week. These guys have to have a field study aspect to their course and I’m saying this is the place to do it. This is base camp that can cater for up to 42. You have the food, your beverage, games, adventure activities if they want to tie that in; we have a classroom facility that can seat up to 50 some people. We’re saying ‘come down, use the survey’. It has everything from archaeology, botany, marine biology, history….it has everything. It’s all there documented and they have all of their primary research readily available and I have it here in hard copy. That was a big part of it as well.

D: So that would extend your season?
I: Yeah. That’s the whole idea. We keep the bar ticking over in the off season for the locals and to provide them with a bit of choice, but that’s not a money maker. It’s just to provide a service.

D: What about your down time? Is that used to review what has happened during the year, what you might change for next year etc.?

I: Absolutely, but the whole thing changes. When you open the doors and start changing everything changes. Even now I look and I’m thinking right that didn’t work. You need to see that early on and you have to make those decisions and already I’ve changed so many directions. You have to, especially in a place like this. You have to try new things all the time…see what works, what doesn’t and if it doesn’t work you drop it and move on to the next thing.

D: I’m anecdotally aware that you work hard to promote the business. What have you tried that you felt didn’t work for you?

I: I’ll put it to you this way. I know I said that I could see things that didn’t work but it might be that you didn’t see an immediate return. I don’t drop it. I still continue with it and it becomes another facet to the business. Like the adventure activity. I had hoped that I would have a higher occupancy of rooms through that.

D: Were you selling that as a package?

I: Yes

D: Were you saying I’ll provide you with your flippers and your snorkel gear?

I: I brought in Ian and Louise from Adventure West and I showed the spots. I said this is a great spot for coasteering, that’s a great spot for hiking/ and rock climbing but it belongs to Oliver. I introduced them to Oliver. I said give him a small cut of it, we all agreed and next thing we have a great rock climbing facility. You have to be diplomatic. It’s what works. It’s good for Ian, its good for me and it’s good for Oliver. All of those little things. I set up the partnership then. ‘Clare Island Partnership’ is a
partnership between ‘Clare Island Ferry Company’, ‘Adventure West’ and ‘Go Explore Hostel’. We all come in under the umbrella of ‘Clare Island Adventures’, we’ve set up Facebook, a website. We sell package offers for Stags, Hens, Universities, Schools, Football Clubs to come down on training breaks, for adventure groups, for all of those markets. I take for the ferry and the accommodation and the food here and then Ian and Louise take direct for the adventure activities.

D: Do they get it at a more competitive price that if they were to come and do each of those elements individually?

I: Yes in some instances we do. A lot of the time we are selling it at the same rate because there is such a cost in the setup of all of it. What we’re doing is provide a one stop shop. We take the hassle out of it and there is obviously a cost to that. It’s a better tool to get across to people because people no longer look at where they go or how they get there…that’s the last thing they’re thinking about. The ferry…who cares. Sure that’s only a mode of transport. Where we stay…who cares. Sure once we’ve a nice bed.

D: So what does matter?

I: It’s what they do. It’s the activity. It’s the thing that drives them. Its what made them look for a location to have that experience.

D: Would your marketing activities be primarily around digital media?

I: We do take out ads as well but I don’t have a huge budget. I’m not overly keen on spending a crazy amount of money on advertising. Its more important to be creative. I’m not sure if this is right or wrong but I’ve set up 4 very good websites, Clare Island Adventures, Go Explore Hostel, Clare Island ferry Company and Clare Island rentals. I have all of them linked together. The entertainment is kept up to date. These are all the triggers that might help people decide to come. We do our Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) work to make sure that our site is visible and ad-words and all of that kind of thing that helps to improve your Google ranking. You have to be familiar with all of that kind of stuff. That all goes on in the background and its almost
automatic. For me the message will travel if the message is good enough. Word of mouth is huge its number one. The likes of the Leo and Anto gig. That message flew. I have people coming here from all over the country. They’re coming form England. The 85 seats that I have for the gig are sold out. 70-80% of them are coming from England because it’s an iconic event. That is worth thousands (in advertising) because the ‘Sawdoctors’ have got millions of fans. They put it up on their website and that had driven a huge amount of traffic to my website because people want to know where to book. That is a very strong tool. The same goes for the likes of Declan O’Rourke and the singles weekend. It’s an easy sell to anybody in media. All you need to do is feed it out to the right people because it’s interesting and there’s no other one happening in the country at the time. Although I believe they’re doing one in Castlebar just after we have done ours in June but we have another one coming up now in May.

D: I suppose it might not capture the imagination as much in Castlebar.

I: No. That’s why it’s a bit of an easier sell in here. Things like that are important. The rest of the stuff needs to be right and it needs to be done and it needs to be done right. Otherwise there is a break in the chain. You get all that right; your website, your social media, your connections with media, the people you know and the people you can send emails off to. We have lists of people that we can send stuff to that I have met in here over the years. I would have established friendships with them and you look after them. That’s all the basic’s. The networking. That all needs to be done and done well. After that it’s a case of getting the things that are interesting. The raft building for example is another thing we have set up. That’s on the August bank holiday. There’s no other raft building festival in Ireland. We’re making a festival out of it.

D: How does it work? Do you thrown down a load of gear on the beach and let everybody pull out of it, build a raft and have a race?

I: Everybody gets the same amount of gear. They are rigged up with helmet and all the rest and its an easy sell because its unique. It captures their imagination.
I must have sent 20 emails to the Brennan brothers about doing something on this place. You know coming in when I was setting up this place. The last one I sent was a couple of months ago. They had obviously done the research on the place. I knew her on a first name basis at this stage and she said at the end that there’s not really a whole lot we can do for you…you’re doing plenty yourself and you’re doing fine. I said fain enough. She said that she had passed us over to a holiday programme in Ireland and England. I can’t think of the name of it just now but it’ll come to me in a minute. She gave me her details and straight away I emailed her with the info on the festivals. She looked through the list and came back asking about the raft building festival. It captured her imagination. Lorene Todd from ‘Model Media’s’. Next thing they came down 3-4 weeks ago and did a whole show on it and it will be airing in January. It’s those kind of things. That’s at no cost to us…

D: And good content for them.

I: Yeah. I looked after them; fed them, kept them. I sent them up to the lighthouse. I’m not all about selling or pushing the hostel. The hostel is the very last thing that I push. It’s way down the bottom of the ladder. It’s all about the experience and it’s all about what you can do. I’m always pushing the Yoga Centre, the weavers and all of the different things that people can do on the island. The very last thing I push is the hostel.

D: It’s an interesting point actually. One of the topics I hope to look at as part of this study is co-operative networks. Its interesting that you’re talking about presenting Clare Island as a package where everybody is contributing towards it. Would you see it as a cooperative environment generally?

I: Totally. Absolutely. I’m starting all of these festivals here. Like the seafood festival. I’m not getting involved in any committee’s. We set up the tourism committee to get things started and we got a lot of stuff done but after that I’m not getting involved in committee’s because they’re too slow and too cumbersome. Too much bullshit. I set up the festivals and I ask the people who want to get involved or the people who I think should be involved to get involved and they do. Most of them are very happy to do it and very supportive and that’s what’s worked for us so far.
We’ve had a good few festivals already. The pirate queen festival for example was a great success. That all started when I was doing the adventure race 3 years ago. I set it up, promoted it and I was the only one that ran it. I organised it and there was nobody there so I ran the fucking thing myself. Two years ago I did it and there were 7 people on it. Last year we ran it again and there were 38 people on it. It’s going in the right direction. Everybody on the island participated and helped in the running of it. All the tourism partners came down because they see it as a benefit to everybody. That the single-most important thing. People won’t come to an island to stay in a nice hostel.

D: Right. There has to be various other elements to it.

I: Of course. The island is an amazing place and that’s one of the factors, but people are a huge factor and all of the other businesses that people are running.

D: I’m also looking at the various supports that are available. Would you have any comments on them?

I: Yeah. LEADER was supportive in terms of the start up capital. I mean I got €150,000 from them. It was nearly the maximum. It’s a very, very very, very difficult process.

D: Paperwork?

I: That element isn’t so bad because when I sit down to do that sort of stuff I have no problem doing it. I can horse through stuff like that. It was very difficult for me and it was very difficult for the people in charge of securing the LEADER funding for me because they were told that they had to procure this funding through the public procurement regulations that they had absolutely no training in. They were just handed this and told to run with it. They were handed a booklet and told that’s how you need to do this. I went to college and I studied it for 4 years and I’m still not proficient in it. It was a dangerous process because if I made 1 or 2 mistakes, and it went through the system like that then I would have lost my funding.
D: And you don’t get your funding until after it is built right?

I: Yeah. You get it after you have paid it out. You have to finance it through a separate loan.

D: Can you borrow on the strength of it?

I: Yeah. You borrow on the strength of the letter of approval and the sanction form LEADER but there is a high risk that if you don’t do it correctly, and sometimes you’re not given the right guidance from the so called professionals, that you could lose it. It’s a high risk thing. I wouldn’t be rushing back to it again.

D: I was speaking with John Nevin yesterday and he was saying that LEADER is in limbo. There’s some restructuring going on. Is that right?

I: Yeah. There are a lot of changes afoot. There are a lot of changes on the island. The island CDP project is up for grabs as well apparently. We might be losing our development office which is ridiculous. These are challenges that are coming down the road and we have action groups set up. We had a meeting the other day about it. Hopefully that won’t happen. LEADER are undergoing huge change at the moment. Who knows what level of funding is going to come out again. Everything is being centralised now. Even if you look at the re-drawing of the electoral boundaries. With the policies that are in place at the minute, everything west of the Shannon is going to become more and more marginalised. Even if you look at Austin Francis (Austin O’Malley was a local representative until the recent local election when he wasn’t returned), the way the system was changed meant that there wasn’t a hope in hell of him getting in. When are we going to get a local councillor again? It’ll be very difficult for us to get representation again. They’re talking now about the councils taking over the islands, in the same way that they’re taking over LEADER. They want everything to go through the councils. The County Councils are so inefficient and under resourced. The Councils will admit straight up that its so difficult to work on the islands because they can’t get people to come out and work out here. We’re on to them to come out and fill pot holes out here. The first thing they will say to you is that islands are different. We can’t get trucks in and out this quick. Policy then is saying
that we want everything centralised and standardised. They’re trying to take away our development office at the same time who co-ordinate and try and negate and offset some of the disadvantages for the island, by having a central organiser. Some one who can look after the islands affairs. They want to take that away. Hopefully we’ll get it sorted. It’s not set in stone yet.

D: Would you be happy with the promotion of the West brand and Clare Island by Tourism Ireland and Failté Ireland?

I: Yeah. FI can only do so much. At the end of the day it’s up to every business to bang their drum just a little bit louder than everywhere else. Killarney didn’t get to where it is today because FI promoted it. Killarney got their shit together and had a good product. FI saw that and decided this is actually a good place and decided that it was a good place to send people because they’ll have a better experience and they’ll leave with a better impression and then they’ll tell more people that Killarney is a great place to go. More people will fly into the country and spend money. That’s exactly what happened. It’s the same for anyone. It’s the same for Clare Island. I mean we need to have a great product, shout loud about it and we have to connect in with Westport, which I’ve already done with the festival of the pirate queen and connect in with Louisburgh as we’ve done with HQ (The volunteer tourism information office) and Tommy Lyons (The Derrylahan), connect in with Achill. We’re all linking up. My vision for Clare Island and Clew Bay is that we do the same as Westport has done with destination Westport, that we sell Destination Clew Bay. Why not? There’s nowhere like it. The Greenway form Westport down to Achill is fantastic. A massive success. That’s not down to marketing. That’s down to the experience. People had an awesome experience. That’s a huge success story that’s totally down to experience. People had a great experience and they went and they told absolutely everybody and then everybody wanted to go. That’s exactly how it happened. If that can be extended from Westporrt out to Roonagh. We already have the service going from Clare Island to Achill. We need to improve that.

D: What are we talking about here? You would take the bikes from Roonagh to Clare Island, then on to Achill and off they go again?
I: That link would bring the whole of Clew Bay into play. Believe me, I have said this to everybody. You can’t pick up the newspaper today without seeing another Co. Co. giving planning permission or funding for a Greenway. Every Co. Co. in the country. Its all over the Irish Times. They’re gone fucking mad on it. As time goes on the Mulranny and Achill Greenway is going to be diluted in terms of its draw.

D: Been there, done that. Find the road less travelled?

I: Yeah. Westport was the pioneer project true enough, but that will soon be forgotten when all of these other ones come up and good products as well. Believe me the whole West Coast of Ireland has that potential. That one (The Wesport-Achill Greenway) doesn’t have anything above what the whole of Ireland has to offer. What it does have is the potential to go around Clew bay taking in the islands and that will be unsurpassable in the country.

D: What’s involved? I was talking to Tommy (Tommy Lyons of The Derrylahan) and he mentioned that he had met with you to look at how to extend the Greenway from Croagh Patrick to Roonagh.

I: Tommy has been working on that. The council I think see it which is good. Obviously they see it with the success of what happened down below. That alone is testament to what they need to do. They read the papers every day so if they’re not hugely interested in taking it a step further, nobody is or nobody would be. They’ve received every award under the sun for this so its an easy sell for them. I think they’ve learned a lot from that experience in terms of landowners etc. so I thin it’s a case of leaving it to them at the moment. If you went to them with a big push and went public I think land owners could feel they’re being rough ridden.

D: A lot of it is already there right? You’ve got it out as far as Croagh Patrick.

Two kids in the relaxation area of the hostel where the interview was taking place asked if we would mind if they turned on the T.V. The interviewee told them that we would move to facilitate them so we resumed in the pool room overlooking the harbour.
I: Yeah but I think what we need is a designated track. I was talking to them (The council) about the back-roads and they said that it needed to be a designated track. There’s a lot involved in it. There are a lot of people involved and a lot of land owners. At the moment I’m going to keep quiet and let them do their work. I will be keeping tabs on it and if it goes dead then I will start (Lobbying) again. I’ll leave it alone for now because that has been the advice to me. We’ll wait and see. It has huge potential.

D: What future developments do you envisage?

I: I want to get into weddings and that’s my next project. When I built the place I designed the roof above us here to take a load and it’s designed to take the full weight of 50-100 people. You’re now able to get married outside, in the last week or so. I will start promoting the place for that. I will be working on it over the winter for small weddings. I will do the function in the bar for up to 60 people and the bar is a perfect setting as a function room. We will close off the place and give it over to the event. If there is more than 60 we can do up to 150 in a marquis. We have the pad and everything ready for it out there. That’s the next project.

D: Is the lighthouse currently doing weddings? What is it catering for?

I: The lighthouse is catering for high end B&B and dinner packages and they’re getting them. They’re doing very well. The wedding side of it would again be an all island initiative. I’d do all of the catering. I have 6 rooms upstairs. They’ll stay up in the lighthouse and the B&B’s. Again we’ll give them the full package offer.

D: Sounds like an easy sell.

I: Yeah. It will be. The front of the place here has really come out well and it lends itself to functions and groups. You have the lower deck and then up here. You have the bar. Up above if the weather is good. Drinks reception in the lounge. There are lots of options. That’ll be a source of good revenue. People come to a wedding and they have €150 in their back pocket and they will spend it.
D: And they take in all of your service.

I: Yeah.

D: Last thing I suppose. When someone stays here what information do you collect from them? Is it place of origin, age, how you heard about it etc?

I: Yeah we have that capacity on our online system. When people are checking in we get all of that information from them. To tell you the truth to date I haven’t used it to my advantage because the first couple of years in business, especially when you’re doing it on your own, I’m still trying to finish the place.

D: Trying to get the time?

I: Yeah it’s incredible like. I’m looking forward to next year now because I went into this summer with a lot of stuff still to complete. It’s weighed down my mind. I’m 3 years into the build works and I’m fed up of working on the structure. I just want to work 100% on the business. That’s where you need to be. It’s that balance you need to achieve. When the summer kicks in to have all of the strategic stuff done in the winter, your analytics. To have analysed your accounts and strategies from the year before and try to plan your year ahead. When the summer kicks in there is still a lot of stuff changing that requires you to think on your feet and adapt. I’ve noticed that this year. It’s so hard when you’re in a small business like this in a rural area, not to be engaged in the operational issues 100% of the time. That’s naturally where you’re drawn to, the operations. It’s that balance of working on the business and working in the business that has to be found. Trying to get that right is tough. Once I get over this summer I have a few little bits to get done out the back and then the building is finito. It’ll be literally then a case of maintenance, turning the key and ready for action. Even the systems are constantly being built. Right up until this year, I didn’t have a proper cash system. It takes such time to get things right. Something like this takes over your life. It has to for the first few years. I expected that. Hopefully next year we can work more on the strategy and the structure of the business. Hopefully after the 5th year we
will sit down and do a serious plan. We’ll take a look at what we’ve done. If it’s not working after 5 years we’ll take another look.

D: Would you have any idea what proportion of your market is repeat visitors?

I: I’d say about 30-40%.

D: What would the breakdown of the market be?

I: The family market is starting to improve. We give an option of a family from Sunday night to Thursday night. That’s doing well this summer. A lot of it is local people, people from around Clew Bay. People from Westport or Dublin. They might of heard of the place form someone else. Most of our business is Irish. The Americans and those travelling from distance will go to the safe bet. They will go to the likes of Killarney. It’s a huge cost coming here and they don’t leave anything to chance. They say they want to go and experience the real Ireland and find those amazing places and that’s their dream, but when it comes down to it they’re sitting down in front of a laptop and they choose the safe bet.

D: I suppose we’ve all done that. I mean in Australia I travelled to Uluru, down along the Gold Coast and the Great Barrier Reef etc.

I: Exactly. Those guys, the likes of Killarney. Its because they’ve had their product right for so long. In 20 years time that might be Clew Bay.

D: I’m been reading a lot around visitor perceptions etc. and one that stands out is called ‘Ireland of the unwelcomes’. It was written around 2004. They monitor feedback from tourists. What was happening was that the satisfaction with the ‘Friendly Irish’ was on a downward trajectory. I have been speaking with lads based around Killarney and they were saying that back then they didn’t have time to be stopping and speaking to tourists. Contrast that with now and they say that its even being drilled in the schools. They’re making the kids aware of hoe tourism impacts them. Everybody has some family member of friend who is working in tourism or is a direct beneficiary of it in that area. These guys are telling me that you will see young
fella’s of 17 years of age stopping and speaking to tourists, asking them how are they getting on etc. They’re aware. I don’t know are we at the same level in the West. A lot of the academic journals I have been reading would say that rural tourism is reactionary, fragmented with limited expertise and market awareness. These journals in fairness are based on the global experience but certainly the experience I have been having in terms of the interviews I have conducted show a surprising level of expertise and market understanding.

I: Yeah. There are a lot of good operators around Clew Bay. I mean you have Paul Harmon of Electric escapes, Adventure West. There are a lot of small operators that have got their shit together.

D: I was out in Glenkeen Farm this morning. Have you heard of them?

I: Yeah. Catherine O’Grady. I head they have a fine place out there.

D: Yeah some of the ideas out there are terrific and the business plan isn’t based on supposition, its based on tangible numbers. Maybe its because people are looking for debt finance and in order to secure that they have to present a fairly detailed business plan?

I: Yeah. But if you’re putting your head on the block why would you put yourself under the pressure of doing it blindfolded? You have to get out there and learn and know what’s coming up and the best direction to take. It’s the simple things and its often the case. I often think of something and maybe I would have read something a couple of weeks ago or I would be sitting down and thinking over my experience of last year, or I might think of something on that Facebook course I took and it would culminate in an idea. A little light-bulb comes on and points you in a particular direction.

D: Is that a product of being really into what it is that you are doing?

I: Yeah.
D: I’m just thinking of the anthesis where you might have a guy going into an office job that he hates and clocking in and watching the clock until he leaves at 5. When he clocks out he’s off. I presume you’re never off?

I: Yeah I’m never off. It’s funny because I often think about it and sometimes I’d be aware of it when it happens. Something comes across your path and all of that then comes together and you just say…Jesus this is the way to go, or that is the thing to do or I shouldn’t do that. That all happens because of all of the shit that you’re involved in and all of the shit that didn’t work, the bullshit that you had to go through and all of the failures because there are more of them. This could be a failure, who knows. The likelihood is that it won’t….

D: Because it’s a calculated risk?

I: Yeah. Its amazing (The sources of inspiration). Even talking to other people, even this conversation. Once you’re out there and you’re connected to people and you’re aware of what’s around you, all of that contributes.

D: I’m more than covered what I had hoped to cover. When you go into these conversations you don’t know what’s going to come out of them and some of the stuff you talked about didn’t arise in any of the other conversations because everyone has a different experience and faces different challenges. With your permission what I will do is present a summary of each interviewed business and show their location on a map. I’m not sure who will have access to this but the likelihood is that it will be sitting in DBS library and its no harm having pleasant pictures of the businesses I’ve spoken with in that. I don’t know if you have any that you want me to put up?

I: Yeah go on to my Facebook and you’ll see a couple of professional photos that I had taken lately. They’re unmistakable. You’ll see them on my timeline and you can use what you want (For this application).

D: I’ll do that. Perfect Carl. I really appreciate that. Thanks for your Time.

I: No worries.
Appendix 13:

Interviewee: Owner/ Manager  
Date: 20.07.2014  
Duration: 58 minutes and 41 seconds.

Context: The business is an interpretive centre set on a working sheep farm offering the opportunity to experience elements of rural farm living such as turf cutting, sheep herding and sheep shearing. It is located at Glenkeen on the boundary of a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) just 6 miles from Louisburgh on the picturesque Leenane road.

The farm also boasts a visitor centre and children’s play area and you can also enjoy nature walks, peatland habitats, archaeological sites, a famine walk and demonstrations. Nestled at the bottom of the Sheffrey Mountains, the visitor centre has a capacity for 250 guests and features traditional tearooms, a craft shop and an historic photographic exhibition. An extensive menu of traditional Irish dishes all carefully handcrafted on site.

The history of the farm has been traced right back to the 1640s. Over 1,400 acres in size, this single family-owned sheep farm, with a commonage footprint that extends to over 5,500 acres, is larger than some national parks (Kelly, D., 2014).

The business is owned and run by a local woman and her American Husband. She has a background in Marketing and extensive experience working in the tourism industry. He is a helicopter pilot with a strong business background. At the time of the interview the business had just opening a few days and there was still some aesthetic works being carried out.

Interview Transcript:

D: What are you selling?
I1: We’re selling a little bit of Ireland. That is in a nutshell what the tourists want. They want to come over and have an experience. If we can provide an experience then the bits and pieces that we sell in here become a function of that experience. People want to experience Ireland. They don’t want to come and visit it through a pane of glass with the Mona Lisa on the other side. If a bus tour arrives here, the number one thing on the CIE tour’s list of requests is to see dog handling on the farm. We are in the final phase of setting up our sheep fields over there where they (the tourists) will come out and see the dog doing some herding. We have 2 puppies also. We’ll break the groups into 2 and give a puppy to each group. They get to hold on to the puppies while the mother does the work. At the end of the exhibition a volunteer will come up and command the mother. Everybody loves puppies. That’s one facet of it. Another is the footing of turf. We’ve also set aside 20 acres for them to walk through with the remains of a heritage building in it. They can explore the flora and fauna of the area. We’re doing an ecological trail that my wife will speak to you about later. Everything is about the experience. Our polytunnels are going to go up in the back. They can walk through and pick their own vegetables. We’ll sell them out front. There is no money per say in the vegetable sales of sheep herding, but when you combine it with a snack and a food service…..

D: Will you be charging for the sheep dog experience?

I1: My wife has put more thought into that. There will be a fee but I don’t know what that will be as yet. When a bus comes in they will come out and experience that and that will be an element of the package they are paying for. She has provided the bus companies with a number (cost) and they thought it represented exceptional value. I don’t know what that number is.

D: This area is really beautiful and offers a lot to the bus tours in terms of scenery but the opportunity to stop, get out and sample the culture really embellishes that experience. I don’t know are the sheep-dog trials available elsewhere in Ireland?

I1: It is actually. It’s in Leenane and also across the Killary. I have visited those folks and asked if they wanted to be part of the tour. There are local tour buses…the tour provider, Declan Kennedy, and the hotels send the tour buses out. I figure if I was
on that tour I wouldn’t want just one stop. I would want to go to multiple stops and see it done differently.

II gets up and goes over to the window to call the dogs in off the road.

II: We went and spoke to the local folks and asked them if they wanted to participate. Everybody said that they did. The limiting factors they had (The people based on the south side of the Killary) were that they hadn’t the road infrastructure to accommodate buses. The place in Leenane is a really small facility, the museum is fantastic. It’s perfect for the visitor to sit down and have a chat. Most folks, like my mother, like to come in have a little experience, sit down and talk to her buddies, write about it, take pictures and plan the next bit. This is the only place that has the capacity. Now Kylemore abbey is fantastic. The problem with Kylemore is that it is too commercial. I think they can probably fix that with a bit of creative architectural design. When we built this we wanted to figure out a way to extend the Irish living room to the visitor whilst still ensuring sufficient space to handle bus loads. We have it set up for 100 people. We have capacity for 250. We’d probably like to keep it to 100 to keep the boutique character. When there are 100 people in here there is a lot going on. We made it as big as we could without making it look big.

D: How long is this in the making?

II: Six years since we actually put drawings down. My wife went and visited Knocksbury farm when she was a kid. It’s a very successful thing in America. She said she would like to do that when she’d go home. She mentioned it when I first met her. We arrived here (from the U.S.) and bought a B&B on the harbour. She was always talking about coming out here. One day my wife’s uncle and I were watching T.V. There was a Jamie Oliver type show on one of his buddies. It was called Jim’s farm. This guy went to the bank, he borrowed money to buy a farm and the show traced the trials and tribulations of running a farm and making ends meet and he failed. It was great because it showed the anguish and excitement and the road to failure. The BBC went back to him and they said ‘let’s do it over’. Obviously farming is not sustainable in the way that you are doing it. He was doing boutique farming. Not intensive. They said what you do have is a lot of passion and a lot of drive. You
need to take your primary products and develop them into an end product. He came up with this thing called Jims farm stand. My wife’s uncle and I were sitting there laughing and we said ‘that’s it’. What we have here is one of the largest farms in Ireland. According to the ‘Farmer’s Journal’ it’s in the top 20 something. We lose money every year. We’re limited in terms of our stock number because of the destocking (policy) on the hill, The metrics are kind of goofy. One fella with a few acres can have a lot of sheep and then we have a lot of acres but can have very few.

D: Is that based on carrying capacity?

I1: No. We have about 1500 acres on the hill but we only have a stock quota of 300. We have to get a waiver from our REPS officer to submit with our farm statements to qualify as a farmer (and access the farm supplement). This is due to the low stocking density. You need a stocking density of at least one live stock unit per hectare. We have 300 to 1500 acres. To qualify we should have 700-800. Funny enough we’re ok with it (the quota). We’re not upset about it because there’s no money in sheep. It serves us. How do we take the farm and its income potential and combine it with various activities to make it sustainable? Jim’s farm on T.V. was the way. It was my wife’s idea from when she was a child really. 6 years ago I started doing the drawings for the building. Originally it was in the field across the way because I thought that was the best site.

D: Is that your background Are you a draughtsman?

I1: I am a pilot by trade. I’ve worked with autocad in various capacities. We went for preliminary planning approval and we received a notification, ‘planning not recommended’. Then we went with an architect and we sat down and he scared us with his fees and so forth for just doing the paperwork and submitting it for approval. Then we took one more bite at the appeal and we went to an engineer, John Lambe in Westport. He was very straight and honest with us. He came out and walked the place, assessed what he believed the planning dept. would like to see. We drew up some plans according to my drawings, then he changed them, then we changed them. Then we went and visited the planning dept. on numerous occasions, working with them rather than telling them this is what we want we asked what would they accept?
D: Do they encourage that?

I1: They encourage it. If you work with them it makes the process seamless. This was a very difficult area for planning approval because its in a SAC. The council must also answer to Europe as a result. Although the footprint of the building is not in it, it is surrounded by it. All of the fences and fields (concerned with the enterprise) are outside of the SAC. As soon as I go across the fence out there I am in the SAC. So what would happen if rubbish blew across the fence for example; are there any molluscs in the river and how could this affect it? Understanding the sensitive nature of the area was important when they were looking for archaeological impact studies. The area has a rich archeological significance. It is on the EU heritage maps. We also needed environmental impact statements. Our septic percolation field was put as far away form the river as possible. Nobody was going to complain.

D: I suppose that’s a benefit of doing this in such a low density area aswell. Who’s going to complain. You are your neighbours.

I1: We actually had a complaint for irresponsible farming but it turned out to be a begrudging relative. It was great for us in one way. They stated that we had been dumping rubbish and burying bits and pieces in the area. We had the whole site cleared. They came out and they couldn’t see anything. The complainant had given detailed maps marking the sites etc. They complained to 7 ministers in Dublin. We passed the site survey and everything but they asked for the receipts for the waste removal. I said funny enough I don’t have any receipts but I have a pick up truck and I was going to the landfill. The landfill luckily had kept all of the receipts and I had spent €1000 in waste the previous year. My wife was also able to tell them that we had a waste removal company that we had worked with for 8 years also. I hadn’t even thought of that. We had such a record of rubbish removal it satisfied their requirements. That’s not to say that the old guys (the uncles) weren’t dumpers. It was crazy what they used to do. They used to light the fire with the milk containers. I used to think ‘are you kidding me’ but that was just he American not understanding the cultural differences. Its interesting to compare the Ireland of yesterday (and the attitudes) to today. We were exonerated and deemed responsible farmers.
D: You mentioned 1500 acres. Is any of that commonage?

I1: We have access to some 5000 acres of commonage. Our portion of that commonage is approx. 1500 acres. Of fenced in fields we have maybe 100-120 acres.

D: I am doing a lot of trend research in Irish tourism. Walking has grown in popularity in recent years. Looking around here you couldn’t find a better location to go walking. Is it something that you have an interest in developing?

I1: We have a number of ideas. First off we’re limited by what our insurance provider will allow us to provide to the public and still maintain a certain level of cover. We’ve defined 4 fields that we will allow access to that he approved. One of these fields we have to fence to prevent against the unknowing from slipping down a bit of a hill. Outside of that we cannot formally provide any trails because we won’t be covered. However the farm extends both sides of the road in commonage and if you were to youtube it everybody is going up there on their own which I think is pretty cool. Outside of the enclosed field and walking up the heritage trail on the road towards Doolough we have no formal trails but we wouldn’t necessarily discourage folks. According to my insurance guy, because its commonage we’re protected provided we’re not seen to be promoting it.

D: So you can’t provide people with maps of trails?

I1: What we’re going to do is put a map on that blank space of wall. We may even have GPS coordinates on there. I’m a big fan myself. I try to get a couple of mountains a year. I think that would be kinda cool. I don’t know how useful it would be to most folks but at the very least it’ll be something interesting to look at. They have these new products where you can tape bits and pieces and it will give you your position and your elevation. You can use it to plot. I may put up video’s here so I might not be promoting it but I may be showing them how I went up.
D: It seems crazy that from an insurance point of view you would be precluded from promoting this?

I1: I have never spoken to the folks in Westport house about this but if you spoke to the locals in the know, they say there are a few million in claims against Westport house for slip and fall issues. It’s unfortunate. We were going for a bouncing castle. We are putting polytunnels out here so that people can go and sit in them. Some of it will be flowers, some of it will be vegetables, some of it will be organic, some of it will be hydroponic. Then over here we have a 36 ft long by 88ft long farm building. One half is going to be new farm equipment the other half will be old farm equipment. A story on the wall. Our builder, Seamus, was saying that we should put a little heritage house in there for the rainy days, an additional thing to look at and I think it is totally cool. In the very back we wanted to put a bouncy castle with a net around it so when the kids are bouncing around on it they don’t run into a farm implement but the insurance guy said ‘No’, he said ‘No bouncy castle’, he said ‘leave it with him’ but came back the next day and said ‘No bouncy castle’. In Westport House last year a Louisburgh girl broke her arm. It was very well governed, going by the rules but she bounced the wrong way and they had to pay out and he said underwriters don’t want to touch it. Ireland has become very litigious. Mayo County Council, if you slip and fall, if you go into them with a suit complaint, anything less than €20,000 it is cheaper to pay out.

D: I work in property management in Dublin and it sickens me to my very core the culture that now exists.

I1: Well in Dublin you used to have a row of beautiful cherry trees and a bunch of years back the radio was lit aflame by a bunch of people complaining, that they were cutting down all the cherry trees and they couldn’t believe it, there were people out there holding onto trees like something out of the 60’s. Along the route the trees were raising the sidewalks and with the trip and fall suits it was cheaper to cut the trees down, than it was to address one of the major issues that affect the Irish community which is the way that complaints are settled.
D: The culture is a problem but the system is the major problem as far as I can see because it encourages people, as you say if you go to a solicitor and they will tell you if you go in at this price, they will write the cheque, we don’t even have to go through the process.

I1: Because it is an economic thing.

D: Yes, it’s numbers, so it costs less to write the cheque than to see the case through, which is absolute madness and is perpetuating the whole problem.

I1: It is.

D: Anyway when you bring that back to the practical implications, we can see that here, you cannot (sell walking tours).

I1: And when we set this site up we went to great efforts to take down barbed wire and have one line and then a secondary line of protection for children and such because a lot of times parents are handing over the responsibility of their child to us and we don’t accept it, we cannot accept it, we are not vetted by the cops, our staff are not vetted by the cops, so we cannot. But legally we need to take a second look at our infrastructure where the parents may become negligent. And we have gone to great lengths for that, we have even set up video cameras everywhere so that we can actually, if a kid goes missing we can see what direction they went running in and so forth, it has gone that ridiculous.

D: It is interesting how this conversation has gone, right about, insurance is such a major focus.

I1: It is a huge focus, its part of our infrastructure, the exception percentage point was to meet insurance recommendations, whether it be the audio visual, the alarm security, in part the site work, the guard rails on a step that high, everything that we could do in our power was to mitigate all issues or as many issues as possible, to provide us with a better platform for the insurance company.
D: I suppose you would be kind of wondering with our landscape why we have become such an indoor community. Having lived and worked in New Zealand their focus is very outdoors. They are not hamstrung by health and safety regulations like Ireland is.

I1: Well this year, handicap complaints came into play in 2014 and if your walls weren’t up by December 2013 and your planning permission submittal wasn’t before 2012, you didn’t have to comply with a lot of the handicap legislation, our walls were up by 2013 but our application was granted in 2013. So the day we got the grant to go ahead with our project was in 2013, we started our project in 2013. The outside area we had intended to do level access. So when you walked out the doors there were no ramps, no interruption as you walk out to the parking lot. The problem is if you look out there you have to have at least a drop of 50:1, what that meant was that if we did level access we would have to bring another €20,000 - €30,000 worth of fill so to make the compliance it cost us a lot of money because we had to do ramps all round here. It was really shocking from everyone’s perspective because the enforcement of it was so new that no one really had the grips on it. We are one of the most compliant buildings to this because we followed it to the T but it was at great expense. But how would you do that in San Francisco, you know, 50:1 you are not going to get that but this is rural Ireland. Now if I was to cut my parking lot short it wouldn’t make a difference and we do have a handicap landing pad and I do believe that we do need to look after the handicap. But there is no flexibility with it, in fairness to the governing bodies they do not have the ability to flex. We found a great product that has been approved throughout Europe with wheelchair access and so forth. It is a crush stone, that we can use all round the building instead of concrete which is unsightly, you put this thing down and fill it with stone. The Unités States and all countries in Europe, with the exception of Ireland, have signed off on it. We asked if we could use that product, because we are based in a rural setting, part of our planning was that we could not have pavement, or have a paved flat top area so it all must be either crushed stone or whatever and this was a perfect bet. We went to the governing bodies but they couldn’t approve it but it had been approved by the UK, France, Germany, you name it but over here they haven’t had the time in the saddle to make themselves more flexible.
D: So you are saying that you cannot have concrete or tarmac, just crushed stone out there?

I1: I have crushed stone out there because that was part of planning.

D: And you would think that from a handicap point of view that this would be more difficult for people to navigate.

I1: It is, so if you look out here what we have had to do was paving stone. But if we were able to use that product and take some of the rough concrete from around the building, you know for the footpaths round the building that would have been really neat looking and more cost effective also and we would have been able to take the money saved there and apply it to somewhere else. Which could have added to our economic basket so to speak instead we are getting one project up, completely it, making money on it and then starting the next. As opposed to, what we wanted to do was to have it all done at the one time but we have had to do it in bits and pieces.

D: There is a couple of topics I need to cover, supports, would that be your department or would that be Catherine’s. Like when you were deciding to do this and you were researching funding or assistance.

I1: That was Catherine and she led most of that because she is intimate with the folks here. What I will say with the folks here, the planning department, were exceptionally helpful. Everyone did what they could within their capacity working within the boundaries that they gave us so the folks in the planning were amazing. You hear stories about how horrible they are and the issues that come off.

D: Generally you hear that from people who are trying to build a one off type of house on a hill with a great view though.

I1: And that is what we are, so to speak, and everyone says how did we get planning permission, but we worked with them.

D: I think there is a key difference you are providing a public amenity.
I1: Well we like to think that but in itself it is in the middle of an SAC, the last one out so to speak on these sites before regulations came in. So the planning was fantastic we worked with them and they worked with us. Mayo County Council, anytime we had a question they were very helpful. Leader, the Western Development.

D: Have they closed down now, was there a stale mate or something?

I1: They were phased out. They were so wonderful and helpful. Failte Ireland, they have professional courses for marketing, and also different verticals. Each one, I attended anyway, I couldn’t believe how professional they were in presentation, their presentation tools, organisation. I expected the opposite. Maybe that is the yankee in me. From my background in the States and you expect professional all the way through and then coming over to rural Ireland I expected it to be the other way around. These guys they do it well, and I was shocked and they have a lot of real professionals in there that know how it goes.

D: That is interesting, now, I have read journal after journal on rural tourism and a lot of it is globally based and a lot of it New Zealand based and also based around Ireland and they perpetuate this image of rural tourism as being this kind of haphazard, fragmented, uninformed.

I1: I do think it used to be that way, but they have changed that. It may have been a recent change but it is. I was not sure about this course and I was downright shocked to how well, like they have real professionals there, it is not just someone’s uncle in there. They are real sharp. For example, on one of the courses we went on they say you need to qualify and quantify your financials, what that means is that at the end of the day, if it is a cloudy day, you need to know how many cups of tea and pots of soup did you sell, so you can find out where your profit sellers lie on any given day. Which we always understood and knew but to hear it from a professional, so you need to do accurate, exact report generation, which my wife is queen at that.

D: Facilitated by modern technology, so you don’t have to do the counting.
I1: No, we don’t but we do a monthly audit anyway. Just to make sure we are doing it right and it’s not going out the back door. I was floored, I didn’t expect the professional teaching. Now in my professional career, I had to go to courses and I used to fight going to them. Every time I kicked up a storm but had to go into them I was delighted because I realised that I don’t know everything, and the information being presented to me was fantastic. And coming over here I went back to the old way, of ‘Oh man, I don’t want that’ and then when I went I was equally delighted, because the knowledge gained was huge.

D: I have 10 interviews to do with people who would have an offering on rural tourism and then I am meeting Failte Ireland and Leader and so far I am probably halfway through the interviews with some of the businesses, and like that I was coming in expecting something, a haphazard approach, an unstructured sort of approach to marketing and what I found is again, completely the opposite. I met with a chap in Mulranny yesterday and he gave me chapter and verse on marketing. He has no formal marketing learning. But he was listing out and he was hitting every single part of the marketing mix but from a very organic viewpoint. Like I said he hadn’t read the textbook but he could write it. So like yourself, the market research has been done and everything looks so well. When you come in here, everything looks so natural and you guys are so into it and you could be forgiven in thinking these guys are just passionate about it and may or may not have invested the thought and time with it and when you get sitting down, and this is consistent with everyone I have spoken to, the amount of investment in time and effort is staggering.

I1: If you looked at the capital investment we put in here it was shocking but before we did that we could tell you that there is 373 cars or vehicles passing the building over a 7 hour period in the summer of which 12% is commercial traffic. So those who had the capital to invest and can invest money are generally very cautious about investing it so they want to know the very minutia of every action, which we did with this, like a lot of new start ups do, unless they have excess capital they inherited. We fought to get to where we are and gosh we have had a few up’s and down’s in our careers but we would never want to look back and be on the tight side again.
D: Another thing is, the level of cooperation and competition within businesses that are working within the same area, striving to survive within the same niche market lets say. One PhD I have read referenced Killarney as the shining light where a lot of the businesses they meet up on a regular basis, they also contribute to a central marketing fund.

I1: That is Westport also. Catherine is on the Westport tourism side and when she was running a hotel in town they formed a hotel group, where they would do a summer meet up and the synergy, of a group together, is exponentially more powerful than individuals going at it.

D: And they would see each other as an overall package rather than seeing the other as the competition.

I1: Absolutely, and we look at it in a similar fashion. The better Delphi does the better we do. The Killadoon Beach Hotel does, the better Lousburgh does, the better we do, because the area will become a destination, a one off. If you have multiple goods in a basket you are gonna get someone to come out to you. If you only have one thing in your basket you are only going to get that guy that wants that one thing. You know his brother, sister, children are going to be left somewhere else. It is in our best interest to see our neighbour prosper. You don’t want to see me everyday, although since we opened we have had one group coming everyday which is funny. You want to come to us, go to Delphi, you want to have a diverse experience because I don’t want to eat Chinese every night.

D: And of course you cater for different things and on a really wet day this place works but what really works for families is Westport House and when the sun comes out they want to be out here.

I1: Or Westport House and we are with Westport House and we are working with them hand in hand and they are recommending us and we are certainly recommending them because this is a unique experience. This used to be part of the lands of the family there. But this was the rural farmers’ side and that was the Lord’s side and it is
a total different position, but it is kinda neat and they are really decent people over there and have been very helpful with us and look forward to the future.

D: And when you say working with them what does that mean? Is there a brochure with both names or is it when I go to Westport House they will tell me that I should go check this place out?

I1: Catherine has been working with their head marketing person both in Westport Tourism and as friends, parallel. First off, I think it was her first visit here I think last Tuesday night, we have literally just finished, we are still putting up fences and lights. Animals will be coming in next week. She was talking to Catherine about Glenkeen and giving her recommendations and such. What was successful for them and suggesting that we try different some different areas, she had never heard of the town land of Glenkeen. She was in the lower hall of the building and there is a map wall and there it was Glenkeen and it turns out that her partner’s family are from this area. A lot of coincidental things, first thing she said was she needed a stack of brochures, she was going to carry them for us. What we are doing are putting up links on our website to everyone we know is offering good quality product. So it won’t come back to us wondering why we are recommending this when it is a guy out there who is trying to just take money. So that is as far as we have gone with joint marketing efforts. Will we do further? Absolutely. Promoting other people, promoting Westport. One thing we intend to do, Westport, Louisburgh catchment area, we intend to work with hotels, the restaurants etc., of lets say Knockranny House. He comes out here and does a fundraiser for a local charity and we knock out a bit of food, come out about once a month, raise a bit of money for cancer or whatever. We get great name recognition and he gets a bit of self promotion that he already has. But take a smaller restaurant, like the Hudson Pantry in Louisburgh and you have people from Westport coming out, they are looking at it and then it feeds on itself. There are numerous other opportunities, myself, I have had my head down in the sand working on the construction side. Not so much putting the bricks and mortar up but making sure the detail was in the building that we required. One interesting thing we will be doing is over in that area we will be setting up a tele/data link, Monday I think they are coming out, and our intention is, when we get the polytunnels up in the back. We are going to science classes with the secondary schools out here. The Washington DC school
system is going to give the same curriculum as we are. It will be lesson plans. Each school will have a period a day. So one lesson plan a week, where they can review do a pre lesson plan so on the day the kids will do the lessons out here televised over to Washington DC and the school systems that will be watching it. There will be one of the schools televising back, sort of like facebook. So they are looking at a cross cultural experience and promote the sciences, which we think is kinda cool. And we have a few universities in the States that are interested in furthering that. When we have that set up, the forecasting, a friend of mine does the teledata connections for most of the schools on the Eastern Seaboard and he seems to think that the interest that we are getting, we are doing Washington DC cause it is a small school system, then we will go into Boston next. But it is the Massachusis system that is a big system but we want to get it right with the smaller system so that is why we are starting with Washington.

D: It also gets them interested in Glenkeen, the West of Ireland.

I: Well we see it as a branding. A friend of mine is a very successful man, and in his company one of the fellas, two of them I have been out with but are not best buds or nothing. He took over a company called Snapple and he said ‘Well if you have a hundred people looking at your brand name and you are not even selling them anything, but you are selling them quality, clean, wholesome, intellectual, you put a dairy label or juice company public and it generated it over a billon dollars. But there is a lot of interest in that, if we ever get to that will remain to be seen but what we are concentrating on is the here and now and this will be fine and will take us to where we want to be in our personal lives. I am working abroad, Catherine works a great number of hours. With developing a brand, the interest was taking a dairy brand to China, cause China was trying to come over and buy dairy companies because of their dairy issues in the past. Well we are genuinely interested in going down the line of doing our televised courses, the televideo guy in the University seem to think that we will have 100,000 people online doing these courses in 5 years time because of the interest and the query surveys they have done. Currently, we are using the curriculum from the Huntington Library, it should be consistent with Ireland and over there and there is a lot of interest in providing niche curriculum on the University side and exchange programmes. I have had a lot of interest from the US. I wanted to get the
people from the farming colleges up here but I couldn’t get the man to return my phone calls, the one in Galway, I have called them about 20 times so I don’t know if they would like to partner.

D: You are talking about Mount Bellew?

II: Yes, I have left messages.

D: There is a guy in Louisburgh that could probably get you the contact there if you are still interested?

II: At this point, no, I have told the Universities in the States that we were slowing the process down to make sure that we got it right, I didn’t want to let them know that I couldn’t contact my guy. He is either (a) under pressure, which I can understand he wouldn’t have the capacity to deal with us, (b) their whole infrastructure is under pressure, which could be the case, or (c) he is incompetent or doesn’t care. But what we want is to get grad students to come down, we want them to do a study, now this is out of Dublin. We want them to study our business model, we want them to make recommendations for us to go forward with our business model and when we do go forward with it they do their thesis paper on us, on agri-tourism one of the largest farms in Ireland, how it wasn’t sustainable before now. And within financial capacity we would like to apply those recommendations and would like an ex student to come up and see how we are doing then and see what has been successful and those that have been less successful, augment that and take it to the future, whether it be an ongoing refinement of the business model and taking it to the future and how can this model be replicated elsewhere. And there we look at the polytunnels, if every farmer in Mayo put up a 30ft x 90ft tunnel, Ireland might not still be an importer of produce, a 30 x 90 polytunnel in the United States generates $10,000 a year. It would make Ireland more sustainable and bring more income to the rural farmer. Now if we form a co-operative, I am not a co-operative fan, but am interested in working with folks. A co-operative under business leadership would be fantastic where we got all my neighbours in on it and all the folks on the West side in on it and prove the model and start feeding Ireland the great produce. We are bringing stuff in from Spain and Italy. There is nothing better than having your own fresh fruit and vegetables, there is more
nutritional value. With someone studying the model as we set it up so we can replicate bits and pieces like this with the neighbours and so forth, it would really have an indelible footprint on the economic status of the West.

D: When you look at the trends in food consumption and the attitudes towards factory processed pork and beef, a lot of beef in Europe is not grass fed and an awful lot of people are more aware of that and people want to see a happy cow out in the field before they eat it. And then if you are looking at that with the sheep and look at flavour, even a sheep on the flatlands of Co. Meath, I think there is a marketing potential there to promote the marinating on the hill that the sheep gets before it is killed. Whether it has an impact on the taste or not, but I think it does.

I1: What we tell everyone is that our sheep are eating the flowers on the mountain and the heather and we have tried putting them in with garlic itself. It is fun stuff, but to get the universities involved with us, to look at our business model and valuate this model and make recommendations, we apply the recommendations. They come back again, the student doing his thesis, identifying successes and failures and further recommendations so it is constantly evolving and fine tuning it, and there is different verticals and you can take the successful verticals and multiply those in a team fashion, not only in the polytunnels but you can look at the hill walking model. We have a horse riding farm up there and we could look at how the business model might apply to them. There is a lot of potential. There is a lot of raw natural resources out here and I refer to people with that, that could be really employed to regenerate this area.

D: And the beauty is the resources. I remember in New Zealand as well. I remember going to a guy on a bus tour, where you got on a bus today, you got off it 4 weeks later. You stopped in spots all around the place and you go to 2 activities a day. Now it cost a lot of money but for what you are getting it is fairly cheap for the activities you are getting must be cheap. We paid $1500, and your accommodation and activities were paid throughout. I remember stopping by this person and he was gold panning.

I1: We get lots of people gold panning along this river.
D: And how much does it cost, a pair of wellingtons and a pan and someone who knows what they are talking about, someone who has done some Geology.

I1: The Head Geologist who researched all the gold over here runs the Harbour Shop in Westport, well his wife does, he runs a goldmine in Papua New Guinea. He offered his services to educate us and set us up to do that on a commercial basis, you know for the tourists and stuff. The only thing is that I don’t know where that would stand with the insurance providers.

D: I am just going to go through 3 quick topics. Who is your market, is it English, Irish, American?

I1: 80% of the tourists coming to Westport are Irish according to the tourism survey. On the Wild Atlantic Way I would imagine that that matrix is changing, I don’t know if as many of the Irish are interested in bus tours. So can I qualify the spin off that, with the Wild Atlantic Way, no I can’t but I can tell you this. I can describe how my market is getting here, if there are 3,000 or so vehicles are passing by every 7 hours during the summer time of which 12% is commercial traffic, so you have roughly 300 commercial vehicles coming by and if the split was 50:50 with buses to delivery trucks, then you have 150 buses, so they will be arriving by bus so 50% of our business will arrive that way and the other 50% will be the individual coming out from the hotels, the hotel group in Westport are called ‘Destination Westport’, they have agreed to take us on board because it puts another egg in their basket. Come to Westport, stay for 3 or 4 days, go to Westport House, walk the harbour, climb Croagh Patrick, cycle the Greenway, visit Glenkeen Farm, visit a working farm. When we put this together we looked at roughly a 50:50 mix-up. The bus groups and the individual tourists coming in by cars, of the individuals there will be a rough mixture of 50% locals and 50% Irish of the visiting population to the hotels coming out. In that in itself is where it lies. Now how do we market to the likes of America and the others, Catherine is more in tune with the matrix of that and where they come from. We did a video out here for golf tv and they wanted to know what would you do if you are not golfing. So they came out here and we did some sheep herding for them and they say that they will be showing that to 68 million Americans. So they will see that, I don’t
know if that is accurate or not, it seems like a big number but bits and pieces like that we are interested in.

D: You said there that you were working abroad, so for you this is supplemental, that your primary source of income is elsewhere.

I1: I am going away to supplement this, to make sure that we have the cash for the next step because we cannot count on the economy. 3 years they say that it takes to break even for a properly run business. We would like to do better than that with the effort we are putting in. So for this year we presume we will lose money. Losing money we cannot go with phase 2 and 3, so we need to go away and generate capital to build them and so forth. And when we are done with that and things are up and running then this will be my primary source of income.

D: The last point, you will be happy to hear. Your motivations, clearly you are very business focussed and astute in that way.

I1: I run million dollar companies and lost with them to. I have gone up and down 3 times but lucky to have ended on somewhat of a positive, but back in the late 90’s/ early 2000’s we were having helicopters and so forth, I ran an aviation group so we took a beating after September 11th.

D: So when you and Catherine, well her background is here, so she probably has it tattooed on her heart that she wanted to work here but..

I1: But her professional background is marketing, she used to work for the head of the Credit Unions in the United States, speech writing and she also worked with Puerto Di Velli, one of the worlds leading companies in branding and marketing, then she went to work for Ryanair and worked in marketing and sales in the office, and with O’ Leary she used to go setting up places and new hubs and it was neat and fun, she was young and that was her first job out and then she went to the States and worked in Puerto De Velli and then Cuana Credit Union National Association working for folks dealing with billions of dollars, writing speeches, it was interesting but in her heart she wanted to come home, this was her heart. In 1999, the priest called her up and he
said you gotta move home and take over the farm. So came to me and said ‘Fr James wants me to move home and take over the farm’. I said ‘No way’ cause we had a private jet at home, well it was my lawyers who I was teaching to fly, we had a free car. Every weekend we were in Nantucket or Florida or somewhere. And she said ‘No, we are moving home’. So I said ‘Okay’, so we moved home, the place needed a lot of work so how about I work abroad and commute back and forth. So she came back in 1999 and I came back in 2001 but I commuted back and forth all the time. I have been commuting ever since. We have been putting in a lot of financial effort into this, to bring this to where it is, it is not just the building, there is a lot of neglect with the size of it and you have to throw a lot of money at fields, fencing, equipment and so forth, it was tough. So we figured that (a) make it sustainable or (b) get rid of it, and that was the ugly fact of it. With the economic climate of the day it would have been cheaper to buy, a guy had an island out in the middle of Clewbay with a brewery on it, Inishturkbeg, we could have bought that for less money than what we put in here but the farm would need to be sold because it wouldn’t have been sustainable.

D: And that decision clearly was not made solely on the numbers, it was emotional.

I1: It definitely was emotional decision based on that we could have bought a hotel in town. We didn’t spend that kind of money here, but we could have capitalised it and bought that one recently sold on the quay. But it was a conscientious decision, this is where her family was. Back in the early days her family were evicted and then they got it back. So it was kind of a neat story and there was a lot of passion to it.

D: Again, based on the academic type of reading I have done on the subject they are saying rural business and whatever that may be, as there is an awful lot of variation in there, one of the key objectives I suppose aren’t profit driven, profit there has to be, but the other is being lifestyle.

I1: Lifestyle is big to us as this will be seasonal. We will work very hard and when we are not working hard we will have time off and we have always worked through the seasons, 7 days a week, in our different vocations so having the ability to say hey we have 2 or 3 months off is very enticing. If we dig in really hard here then we can use that time to regenerate and refocus and regroup and redefine ourselves, cause when
you get caught in a situation and you are in there day and night and every hour, you can only see so far. But when you get back you have time, your vision comes back and you can look at it and say well maybe we are going in the wrong direction or can we apply something different to might benefit us better. We would like to think that we have a great vision but we also have a lot of great folks who have given us advice and the neighbours had some cool stuff to say. Now some of it we had thought of and some of it we hadn’t. We will get through the season, then regroup and think of better ways to improve ourselves. That is why I would like to get universities in and if you know of any folks that might want to participate in our development of the business practices we are always open for it. I got the contact numbers for the heads of the Universities in Dublin but I haven’t called yet cause I am not ready yet but as soon as another couple of weeks is done we will be ready. It doesn’t necessarily have to be a Dublin University but I would really like it to be an Irish university. I have great interest from the States, huge interest but eh..

D: I definitely would have contact numbers, now my college is a business college and not a tourism college.

II: That is what we are looking for, a business college to look at the Agri-Tourist Business. If you take a tourism guy then all they look at is tourism, they are not looking at it from a financial side of things. If you take a business man and take him to look at it from a business terms. That is what we are looking for.

D: Increasingly when you are dealing with tourist colleges they do have a major economic focus also, I don’t know if they had previously but they certainly do now because any of the guys you are talking to now, first question is ‘What’s your market?’.

II: Well that is interesting, I think that is a brand new change.

D: Oh yeah it is all market led, lets not build something and provide something because you think it is cool, let’s see what the market wants and build on that.
I1: It’s like the sheep dogs. No. 1 request from CIE Tours are the sheep dogs. We have 12 acres over there, we have just put the last bit of our fencing on there tonight and we will have our sheep over there ready for go.

After speaking with the husband in this husband/ wife business partnership I then spoke to his wife for just under 30 minutes to get an understanding of the marketing activities and their foundation. She was qualified in Marketing and also had extensive experience in the discipline both outside and within the tourism industry.

D: I have spoken about the packaging of the offering (with your husband). Do you mean a package where you are putting an activity with the catering end of things or do you mean going to another business and packaging both businesses?

I2: I mean where we are packaging the catering end of things and the activities. So the package I sold them was for a duration of an hour they can have a sheep herding demonstration for 20 minutes, afterwards they come into the visitors centre for freshly baked scone, tea or coffee. They get a chance to browse our craft shop and look at the local produce and local craft makers produce. Part of that experience that wasn’t advertised in the package would be a spontaneous event where an employee will come out and play the fiddle because I found in the research before we opened the business. Its very important to add the spontaneity, that it is not run of the mill, standard and they are not getting the same replicated everywhere. For example we had a private group here for a pre-wedding dinner party, there was 30, there were about 15 people from Belgium, where the bride was from and then the other group were Irish. After their meal, one of our staff came out with their fiddle and another girl sang, and they said that this was the icing on the cake. So they are leaving happy with a fond memory because for a lot of groups it is about building memories and moments, things they can talk about when they go home.

D: I was saying to (your husband) that before I began these interviews I did a dummy run on a farm up in Slane, Co. Meath that also provided accommodation in a farm setting. I was talking to the husband of the lady who runs it and he was telling me that the farm used to be a sheep farm. Once there was a couple from New Orleans staying,
and one of the days a ewe (female sheep) was yaning (giving birth) and he asked them did they want to come along and they might see a lamb, anyway they went along. Lots of the ewes were there with their new born lambs and there was another with the lambs coming backwards so he had to turn them. He then got the lady from New Orleans to put her hand in and to delivery the lambs. He said that there was loads of positive responses from that on the facebook page. He said that it was intangible and hard to say what financial benefit it generated, but the likes of that goodwill is phenomenal and of course it wasn’t advertised. Along the same lines as giving them a little extra.

I2: Absolutely, another part of our research was people are looking for an authentic engaging experience, so something like that is ideal where they can get involved and down and dirty and touch it. And that is part of the package we want to offer here.

D: It is counter intuitive, you can now get people to pay to go and turn turf.

I2: Yes, you can get people to do the work for you. You would pay them almost if you could. The other thing, we are working with an ecologist to develop educational programs and that will be rolled out next year and that is where we want to use the farm as a research base for universities. We won’t be charging for that experience we are hoping for a knock on effect where they use the centre, they lunch here, they may lecture here. It would be good for people coming in to be able to listen to that and we want to promote it for school tours. Now the school tours package will be different as well. We will be able to give them a talk on the ecology of the area because this is in a special conservation area. So it is a really important area for natural life and habitat. For example, on Mweelrea, there is Artic Alpine which has survived since the ice age because it is always in a shaded area. On the property there is horsetail grass, and that is here since the dinosaurs and people make tea from it. And we also want to develop a presentation for interested groups that are interested in the wildlife of the area, evidence of footprints and what kind of droppings to be looking out for associated with the different wildlife. Also, bird watching is another market we are interested in developing and we want to engage with Michael Viney, the author of ‘Wild Mayo’, we think he would be of huge benefit to have here perhaps giving lectures and talks. We also want to invite the Mayo nature club out here to use it as a base to explore this
beautiful area. I mean we are so lucky, its protected, its preserved, it’s a huge asset not just for us but for everyone.

D: And I think you guys are going to be a big asset to the synergy or symbiosis for all the other businesses in the area. It is a long trek from Leenane, well you have Delphi there, but all the way to Louisburgh. The Atlantic Way wasn’t going to originally include this wing it was going directly form Leenane to Westport, which seems absolutely madness. It is a 30 minute journey and I think you are on the right hand side, prime location just before you get to Louisburgh.

I2: We just need to work on our signage. Just going back to marketing we didn’t put enough though and planning into the signs and they are not doing the business any justice. They are not giving a proper image of what is available and that is another area on which we have fallen down.

D: It is a small thing though and easily tweaked.

I2: Yes, we are working on it now and having them changed. We are just getting a façade for the existing sign and screwing it on to it. But again we are probably losing business because of that so we need to get on to that fairly quickly. The social media side of it, we have a facebook page but it is allocating the time, at the moment we are focussing on everything that is happening in the business, getting the training and the staffing and all systems running smoothly, so then we can leave an allocate time to focussing on marketing on that.

D: You are still embryonic, so I would imagine that is pretty standard. You will be developing and evolving as time goes on. No business opens and its ready to go.

I2: Absolutely, no it doesn’t, but we are anxious to get the marketing side of things done as quickly as possible cause we are sort of in the middle of the season now and it will only be a short while until it starts to fall off.

D: What would you say is the season?
I2: I would say it is a 10 week season, the peak season. I think the shoulder season has strengthened here over the years in the West of Ireland, especially with the introduction of festivals, like Gaelforce, although that is in the peak season, there is marketing for that in the shoulder season, events like the Bluegrass festival, the Arts festival. Destination Westport would use those events for pushing the shoulder season.

D: Would the schools you were chatting about be a way of extending the season for you?

I2: Definitely, we would hope to be presenting to school principals next February and not just sending flyers in but going in with a physical presentation. Images really sell, pictures tell a thousand words. A lot of flyers go in the bin. I think you are better off representing your business. You have immediate response for any questions, queries or concerns and you can even close the deal if you are pushy enough in a nice way. So that is our focus for next year, working on that and building a profile really to establish ourselves as a venue for school tours. And the good thing about this is the location, it is not going to cost a fortune for a bus for a school from Castlebar, Claremorris, Ballina. I think the longer school tours are gone by the waste side because it is costly.

D: You are immediately set to take those from Castlebar but if you were to go for Dublin, you would currently have to package with the likes of possibly Killadoon Lodge Hotel or hostels in Westport.

I2: Yes, you mentioned packaging there. It would be our intent to approach Delphi Lodge and Adventure Centre and build a program or even a joint brochure for a destination Delphi because we all have a different offering and we could work together in harmony to really promote the area. Yes I think there is huge potential in that.

D: It was staggering talking to Jim and the amount of thought that went in to this and what has evolved over time. Do you see where you would be dealing with Delphi or any other business in the area to see how you might develop together to..
I2: Yeah, I think initially we need to invite them here. They need to see the product and see what we have. We need to be able to communicate exactly what their clients would experience, because everyone is worried about their customer, as it costs so much to get customers in the door you need them to have a good experience.

D: That was something I hadn’t thought about was the gamble when packaging that the other element could let you down.

I2: Yes, so when you are recommending anywhere you need to experience it yourself and be absolutely fluent in what that offer is and then matching it to your customer because it is not going to suit everyone. But I think Delphi Lodge and Adventure Centre have great products and I hope that they will use this, we have spoken to them in brief, I don’t think there will be huge co-operation this year because the season has started already, they are very busy. It would be difficult for them to come on board with us but definitely in the winter months we can get something working there.

D: You said you presented to Meithéal and that is your tour groups, would they primarily be European, American?

I2: Global, I met China Holidays, I met a lot of North American Tour companies, CIE Tours wanted to send a trial tour bus in here in June. I said we weren’t open and they said what about sending them in to experience the sheep herding. I could have done that Darragh but they would have been looking at a building site and leaving with half an image. There would be an uncertainty of what is available. So I chose not to take it because you are either doing 100% or not. So I told them we would be ready at the end of July and I think that gives us enough time to get everyone comfortable, we know what we are doing and we have it down to a fine art. You have to be so careful with tour buses, you only get one chance, they are not coming back if they have a bad experience, and they are going to be our bread and butter next year. Now we have been lucky, we have a German group and a UK group booked in for next March, without any trial. They just loved the product and the presentation. Now we were lucky in that regard but they have confirmed for next year.
D: Do you know where they are staying?

I2: They will be staying in Westport. They will be coming out here for morning coffee and the sheep herding demonstration. We are thrilled and actually the tour operator offered to translate our website into German, which was a massive help. Now we gave him about €150 but it was a very cost effective way of promoting our business in Germany and I think the easier you make the website for navigation, for language the better chance you have of being chosen by the customer.

D: The activities, the sheep shearing and herding, will there be times set out everyday on the website, so if come from 11-12 there will be sheep herding.

I2: Yes, we will do it for groups with advance booking so whatever time they want it we will arrange it. We want to arrange it 4 days a week on our website so people will get into the routine of coming out and businesses, hotels and B&B’s can communicate that to their customers if they are looking at an activity for the day.

D: The sheep shearing will you be staggering it so you would have a sheep everyday or something like that. Who does the herding for you and who does the shearing?

I2: Well my husband does the sheep herding because it is a working farm and because of the link with the business we have hired another person off-site, he is a sheep dog trainer, you have probably heard of him, George Hughes. He has trained all of our sheep dogs he is fantastic. He is really excited for it and he does the whistle really well and is well used to the sheep herding competitions. So I think getting somebody that is that experienced, he will be able to address any questions or queries after the event. In time we will have female and male staff that we would hope to train up so if we do get a group in we can do a spontaneous herding event.

D: The staff you mention are they local or..?

I2: Yeah, we have one French student over for the summer and the rest are all local, we have 7 staff.
D: And they are students and back to college in September?

I2: Actually one lady is part time and that is her time. She is a part time cook and she bakes beautiful products. The idea here is that it is produced on site. It is homemade. I don’t know if Jim mentioned the polytunnels we are going to introduce next year.

D: He did. So future directions, I think you have pretty much covered the schools direction. From an infrastructure point of view have you got a grand plan or will you see what the market wants over time and try and develop it over time.

I2: Yes, definitely we are going to test the water with everything and that is not just the infrastructure, our menu etc., before we put anything permanent or fixed on the wall we are going to see what the demand is because we want to tailor make it for the market that is coming here. From an infrastructure point of view we are looking at building a structure to the left of the building here, for accommodating old farming tools and machinery. I don’t think we have to wait to test the market on that, I think that will work very well. People come in and they get a chance to see, it will be like a farming museum if you like. We are just going to see how it goes and develops, we are going to use comment cards as well to get feedback.

D: Jim mentioned, I wasn’t aware of your background but it seems to be extensive. But your original qualification is in marketing and he mentioned you worked with Michael O’Leary and Ryanair.

I2: Yes I started off when they were setting up all their UK offices. That was a good experience, fun, loved it. I was out on all the new flight launches, they were busy with that at the time. I was based in North London and then just before I left they were decentralising everything back to Dublin and that was why I left. I had never lived in Dublin and wanted to stay in London do got a job with Royal Brunei.

D: Are you originally from Glenkeen?

I2: yes the house next door.
D: And how long are you back?

I2: We moved back here in 2000 and then I got a job in Sales and Marketing in the Atlantic Coast Hotel, that was just a newly opened hotel at the time, loved it.

D: A lot of the academic stuff I have been reading, doesn’t seem to be accurate, well doesn’t seem to apply across the board anyway. One of the things it would suggest is remote rural business is not solely profit driven, clearly it is a key focus for everyone but you would have had an emotional connection to this, as he said you could have bought the Atlantic Coast Hotel for less than what is invested in here maybe so does that make you work that much harder to getting this right do you think?

I2: Oh yeah, we are very interested, everything has to be 100%, you only get one chance at it and people can be very critical and in every briefing I have with the staff, you are only as good as your last meal in the hospitality industry and if 1 person comes in and has a bad experience they will tell 20. 1 person comes in and has a good experience they might tell 4 or 5, but we seem to be drawn to the negatives. I think for any new business trying to get off the ground especially in a rural location it needs to have its product right, it needs to have a quality product to offer and that is why we are taking it slower this summer so we get everything right within the building. We wouldn’t be happy with that craft shop, there is not enough produce in it, there is not enough of a display, it is not that interesting but crafts people are very slow on giving product on a sale or return basis. We are not buying product because we don’t have the capital to sit on the shelf. We are buying the produce on a sale or return basis.

D: And who are your exhibitors?

I2: All people from Mayo crafts, we have Roger Harley, who is the potterer in Westport, we have June Burke, she is a weaver and she has offered to come out and give weaving demonstrations and wool dying demonstrations so that is another element we could have. We have Dolly from Louisburgh, she does handmade cards, lovely fabric decorations and brooches, bookmarks. We have Frank Bennett who is coming up to display driftwood. We have Sue Bennet displaying art, my cousin Marie Morrison who is an artist, some of the pictures are hanging up on the walls. We have
a jeweller from Islandeady, she makes her jewellery from glass and is all hand painted. We have a stone mason, Patrick Kitterick, he is displaying celtic crosses and celtic signs and that. That is it for the moment. I do have turf crafts coming because I thought that that product would be suitable for here because of the bog and everything. But there is a delay on that order for some reason. They do black cats, celtic crosses and the figure with the man and the sack of turf on his back, cute stuff. We were looking at a product that would be easy for customers if there were on the go or in a coach and they don’t want to be taking bulky items. We also went with a John Hynde stand cause I know it is a bit paddy wack produce but it sells, that is the keyrings and magnets and that kind of stuff. I think that element will sell, we have sold some items off it.

D: The idea of someone coming out and looking, that lady I was speaking about in Meath, who is very heavily involved in the community and she was saying that they have set up a co-op of crafts people, generally if someone is working out back in a shed it is difficult for them to take their head up and to stop working for a minute and promote it so what they did was take a room in a dilapidated building, done it up and open once a month and all the crafts people are selling their own produce which she said that was the key element of it, that you are actually dealing with the person who has made the product. And they tell you how they have made it and they are looking to develop it further so people might use it as a workshop.

I2: I definitely do think people love theatre, they love to sit and watch and see it being made from start to finish.
Appendix 14:

Self reflections on learning:

Introduction to reflections on learning:

This paper reflects on the learning process of the academic programme undertaken and on the dissertation process in particular. Oscar Wilde once remarked that, “Education is an admirable thing but it is well to remember that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught”. One can only assume that he was alluding to the importance of self-directed learning and personal development aspects of academic endeavour. The benefit of such reflection is to capture the tacit knowledge that is absorbed and utilised and how effective is the learning experience in advancing continuous improvement (Daly, S.M., & Scott, L.M., 2011, p. 2).

The reflection on learning is of particular importance for this work as the author has carried out a qualitative study in an area that is familiar to him and has interviewed small tourism business operators who are also known to him. This is referred to as an informed approach to research and is recognised as having its shortcomings in that it can engender research bias. It can also be justified theoretically however, by arguing that in qualitative research complete objectivity is impossible. Subjectivity must intrude at the level of the respondent and of the measuring instrument, the researcher. ‘The potential problem of bias therefore, and the challenge to reliability, can be countered by a reflective account, thus allowing the reader to evaluate reliability in context’ (Anderson, A.R., 2000, p. 98).

Learning styles:

The learning experience is best understood by gaining an understanding of the different learning styles. Bases on the work of David Kolb (1984), Peter Honey and Alan Mumford identified 4 distinct learning styles; Activists, Theorists, Pragmatists and reflectors. They advanced the view that in order to maximise personal learning experience, the learner must understand their learning style and seek out opportunities to learn, consistent with that style. They broadly defined these styles as follows;
• Activists – Learn by doing and are open-minded and enthusiastic. They tend to act first and consider the consequences afterward. They prefer to tackle problem solving by brainstorming for speedier results and are bored by implementation and long-term consolidation.

• Theorists – Adapt and integrate observations into logical theories. They can assimilate disparate facts into coherent theories and like to analyse and synthesise data. They are rational thinkers. They tend to be detached, analytical and dedicated to rational objectivity rather than subjectivity and ambiguity.

• Pragmatists – Keen to apply theories, techniques and ideas to see how they apply in practice. They learn by experimentation and become frustrated by rumination and open-ended discussion. They have a practical approach to problem solving.

• Reflectors – Collect and digest data before forming conclusions. They apply a cautious philosophy and consider all angles and implications before making decisions. They tend to learn by observation rather than active involvement (University of Leicester, 2014).

The author would identify with the pragmatist style but during the course of this research, where necessary, he has adopted practices that would have more in common with reflectors and theorists. For example, from the point of view of carrying out the research for the thesis, in order to maintain focus it was important to study existing concepts and models and compare and contrast the theories identified in the secondary data analysis, with the primary research. Such an approach would be more closely aligned with the theorist learning style. The author would also, in periods of reflection, ruminate on the research material and form opinions and achieve insight without any direct intention to do so. Such retrospective digestion of information might be associated with the reflector learning style. In spite of these occasional diversions the author adhered primarily to the pragmatist learning style. An example of this would have been the initial decision to test the interview structure on a
business owner, outside of the scope of the study prior to carrying out the first interview. Modifications were subsequently made, based on this experience to improve the process. After each interview thereafter, the sound files were reviewed and improvements incorporated for the subsequent test case.

**Challenges faced through the process:**

The challenges I faced on the course were both intuitive and external. Initially I felt intimidated by the impressive academic pedigree of my peers and I questioned the wisdom of my arrogance. To further compound my apprehension I was getting married that November and the associated financial pressures exacerbated by the added burden of tuition fees and a demanding job in a company struggling to stay afloat in a treacherous market, truly tested my resolve.

In July 2013 I accepted a job offer to work as a Property Manager and in August my wife and I were blessed with the arrival of our first child, a baby girl. This proved to be a very challenging time as the new work role required the development of a whole new skill-set. Whilst I had assumed responsibility for the management of over 1,300 residential and commercial units the real inspiration came from my personal life. Becoming a parent gave me an intense sense of pride and renewed ambition to set a good example for my family as a dad and provider.

The additional responsibility in my professional and personal life, compounded by the demands of completing a part-time Masters degree, demanded a very structured approach to time management. When a child is in the early stages of development, developmental milestones seem to be reached on a daily basis, whether it is sleeping through the night, holding their bottle independently or taking their first tentative steps. It was very important to me on a personal level to be present in my baby’s life as much as possible whilst also ensuring that I was, at a very minimum, satisfying the requirements of my academic study. To this end I removed the elective, non-essential elements of my routine such as T.V., a social life and participation in sporting pursuits, particularly around periods when those time pressures were most pronounced and I pursued a strict focus on my time management. I became disciplined in mentally planning my schedule.
Personal development:

Prior to undertaking the MBA I identified key areas of weakness which I felt needed development for the achievement of my career goals. These included confidence building, the development of analytical skills, improved focus, and the development of an understanding of the business functions.

Confidence building:

Culturally, the values I have been brought up to respect include personal reservation and modesty, both of which might be perceived as weaknesses in the business world where stereotypical traits of success might include an outgoing nature, confidence and a certain amount of arrogance. I have not always felt assured in my own academic ability having been raised in a family where the Irish proverb of ‘Mól an óige agus tiocfaidh siad’ (Praise the young and they will prosper) was subordinated to ‘Mól an lá um trathnóna’ (Praise the day in the evening). One of the reasons for my undertaking the MBA course was to improve my confidence and this has been advanced through development of my understanding of the content of the course and also through the interaction with my colleagues. I found that as the course progressed I became more confident to participate in class debates, to take a more central role in group activities and also to hazard what is often an alternative point of view. I have come to understand that in most cases there is not a right or wrong answer or a correct way to do something but a large number of viable points of view each with their own merits. I have also come to believe through the primary research for my dissertation that those businesses with a strong, assured personality at the helm, are more likely to succeed whether or not they adopt conventional wisdom.

Analytical skills:

Prior to undertaking the MBA my academic development had advanced in a haphazard, spontaneous fashion with little strategic thinking going into my decisions. As I have assumed more responsibility in both my personal and professional life I realised that I needed to be more calculated, and to set incremental objectives for personal development. My participation in an MBA course has furthered these ambitions.
Before the course I understood what it was that I wanted to do in terms of pursuing my career goals but I had no idea how to develop the idea or how to identify and analyse the key internal and external factors that would inform its viability. Through my MBA studies I have used various analytical tools to analyse trends, assess the competitive environment, and identify external opportunities and threats and my own strengths and weaknesses in a strategic and rational way. These skills I believe will stand me in good stead in the future.

**Improved focus:**

In the past my cavalier approach to my future has landed me in some very interesting and challenging situations. Whilst this has at times been thrilling it has also meant that I have not always taken decisions that were in my best interest. In recent years I have identified this as a weakness and have consciously deliberated on such decisions at length, weighing them against long term goals. Throughout the MBA we have been reminded ad-nauseum of the importance of consistency, certainty and reliability in the business environment and this regular reinforcement has helped instil in me a deep respect for these values. As the level of responsibility has increased in my life I have also taken the conscious decision to be more strategic in my thinking by building on past experience.

Undertaking the MBA course has certainly required a strict focus and a reasoned approach to time management. I am mindful of the anecdote where the teacher takes a bucket, fills it to the top with stones and asks the students if it is full, to which they logically reply that it is. The teacher then pours in a smaller bucket of sand which filters down between the stones and smoothes it level with the top of the bucket and again asks the students if it is full, to which again they reply that it is. The teacher then pours in a smaller bucket of water which filters through the sand until it is brimming. Prior to undertaking the MBA I though my life was full. Since then I have gotten married, had a child, moved to a more intense management position in a new job and have managed not to suffocate, due primarily to my improved focus.
An understanding of the business functions

Initially I had targeted the development of my understanding of marketing, finance and operations as being key areas of equal import for improvement. However, as the course developed I found that my key weaknesses were in Marketing and Finance. In my professional experience I have gained a significant amount of managerial and operational experience in my roles as Plastering Sub-Contractor, Site Foreman, Training Development Manager and Property Manager and whilst I did not have any academic qualification in this area I had developed these skills by osmosis.

In light of this realisation I selected finance and marketing as my elective modules in year two. The business I hope to open is what is called a destination business depending as it does on the natural rural landscape to attract visitors. Such businesses must create awareness around their product and present it in such a way as to capture the interest of the consumer and instil in them the desire to sample the offering. I have found the course very enlightening in how best these responses might be triggered. I also wanted to be in a position to make informed decisions around capital structure and the implications of such decisions as the fruition of this project will be contingent on my capacity to source external finance at the lowest possible cost.

Course demographics and dynamics:

I have always found in my personal life that I have enjoyed the company of others and I have been able to find a common ground on which to develop a relationship, in spite of, in many instances, divergent cultural backgrounds. By extension in my professional life I have tended to view diversity, whether it is cultural, political or educational, to be something to be embraced rather than as an obstacle to be avoided or vaulted. The rich cultural diversity of the participants on the course enhanced the learning experience, providing for divergent approaches and opinion, borne out by the classroom dynamic which encouraged participation. Personally I felt encouraged to contribute, when I felt that I had something new or insightful to proffer. During my undergraduate studies I would have been less inclined to assert myself in such situations but thankfully those inhibitions have long since departed.
Concluding remarks:

In conclusion, I feel that the skills identified for development were by and large, relevant for my academic and professional ambitions. Having waded through the course I can now look forward with confidence to taking my business aspirations to the next level by focusing on the practicalities of such an endeavour. Admittedly, it felt like a burden at times over the past 2 years but to quote the inimitable Mr. T, ‘No pain, no gain’. The skills I have developed in data analysis and interpretation as well as my vastly improved understanding of the business functions are intrinsic to the development of a viable business plan and pitching this to prospective financiers. In researching my thesis topic, which aimed to assess the key determinants of success and failure in running remote rural hospitality businesses, the interviews with business owners provided critical learning, specific to the industry and the environment.