



Clare County  
Development Plan  
**2023-2029**

## **Draft Clare CDP 2023-2029 - Public Consultation Portal**

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**Submitted Time: March 28, 2022 3:54 PM**

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### **Volume 1**

Core Strategy, Settlement Strategy and Housing, Economic Development & Enterprise, Retail, Towns & Villages, Design & Placemaking, Rural Development and Natural Resources, Sustainable Communities, Transport, Service Infrastructure and Energy, Architectural, Archaeological & Cultural Heritage

### **Volume 3(a) Ennis Municipal District Written Statements and Settlement Maps**

**Volume 3(b) Shannon Municipal District Written Statements and Settlement Maps**

**Volume 3(c) Killaloe Municipal District Written Statements and Settlement Maps**

**Volume 3(d) West Clare Municipal District Written Statements and Settlement Maps**

Kilfenora

**Associated Documents**

None of the above

**Environmental Reports**

None of the above

**Your Submission**

Please see uploaded documents

**Location Map**



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## Upload Files

Kilfenora's priorities from the Clare CDP.docx, 0.08MB

Regenerating Kilfenora - strategy outline March 2022.pdf, 0.14MB

## DRAFT CLARE COUNTY DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2023-9 – PRIORITIES FOR KILFENORA

This response to the entry for Kilfenora in the draft Clare County Development Plan (Volume 3d) has been prepared following a public meeting held on 15 March 2022 to discuss Kilfenora's future (attended inter alia by 4 N Clare councillors), and a public consultation thereafter specifically on points to be made on the County Development Plan. (Organised by Kilfenora Development Community Group.)

### **A      CONTEXT**

#### **(i)      Remedial action required**

- Kilfenora is a location and community with a long, rich history – farming, music, religion and more
- However, over the past 15 years or so, Kilfenora's economic strength and its position as a centre of activity (business and retail, tourism, culture) in N Clare has greatly declined.
- In the plus column, there have been some positive steps: from 2009 until Covid struck, the Kilfenora Trad Festival kept a flag flying for our unique musical heritage; the Kilfenora Timeline undertook several worthy initiatives – eg the Time Capsule and the Timeline exhibition itself.
- However, the recent past has been less happy. To begin with, removal of the Post Office depressed economic activity overnight. Kilfenora's reputation as a mini-retail centre has largely dissipated, with the closure of our craft shops. There are a few small-scale enterprises in the area, but there could be so much more. The centre of the village has empty houses, despite a number of people desperate for housing. It is no wonder that Kilfenora's young talent has to look elsewhere for opportunities – a story familiar in underdeveloped rural communities.
- Given the economic importance of tourism, and with the latent assets it has, Kilfenora should be a jewel amongst reasons to visit and stay in the Burren area – its remarkable ancient Cathedral; the largest collection of Celtic Crosses in Ireland; Ireland's first interpretive centre, created as THE place to discover the Burren; the Kilfenora Ceili Band Parlour - almost unique globally as an exposition of living musical artists; a Holy Well in the village; surrounded by Iron Age forts and tombs – some of the finest anywhere; and the most convenient centre for exploring the Burren Geopark.
- Yet the marketing of and investment in these visitor attractions has been minimal, compared with the vast spend elsewhere. Kilfenora's sunken profile has been matched by the lack of footfall, exacerbating its economic decline. Symbolic of that, for over four years the Cathedral has been closed and its fabric badly decayed. Visitor accommodation has shrunk to a few holiday rentals and AirBnB offers. Food service offers are quite limited and seasonal.
- Many plans have been published in recent years by Clare County Council and Failte Ireland, inter alia, concerning economic and tourism development. A few have mentioned Kilfenora, but not with any prominence. These plans have generally not involved any discernible local community engagement and consultation.

#### **(ii)      Some green shoots of progress**

- In 2018 CLDC undertook an imaginative initiative to encourage Clare's towns and villages to develop local strategies. Some good ideas were generated by Kilfenora's 'local planning group', but as soon as the Leader-funded facilitator left, the group evaporated and the 'strategy' was not actioned.
- However, with the encouragement of local councillors, from those ashes a fresh community action group emerged in December 2020 – Kilfenora Development – with the aim of both

*Kilfenora Development, 28.3.22*

increasing self-help and working with funding bodies to revitalise the village and associated parishes, in terms of economic, social and cultural activity and reputation.

- An outline strategy for the village has now been drafted, and has been well received in the village. Some project groups are forming – a new Tidy Towns team has already been busy and sustainable energy group has started work.
- A North Clare strategy group has been formed encompassing local community groups such as Kilfenora now has. This provides a basis to share perspectives and ideas on common issues, and for inter-village collaboration.
- Signage deficiencies have been raised in detail on numerous occasions in recent times – one effect being that some visitors had no clue where there were nor what facilities and sights were to be found. There is now some remedial action under discussion with the Geopark team.
- Clare CoCo has appointed Regeneration Officers, providing a mechanism to engage with local communities. Some discussions have duly taken place on improvement efforts, and help has been provided to enable some grants to be obtained, in particular for the overhaul of the Burren Centre exhibition and repair of the Cathedral (and allowing a limited re-opening). The recent meeting on an ‘integrated Burren transport strategy’ is the first time community groups in our area have met collectively with council and FI officials.
- The coalition Government has also been making funds available for local regeneration and environmental improvements that seem favourable to the specific ideas that Kilfenora has recently been advancing to local authorities.

In terms of resuscitating Kilfenora (along with other Burren villages), however, work has only just begun. There is much more that could and should be done, and that is what we will articulate in this contribution to the County Development Plan.

## **B CDP DRAFT PROPOSALS FOR KILFENORA**

The West Clare plan (Volume 3d) contains just over 3 pages on Kilfenora. (Its authorship and provenance are not known to us locally.) This is in summary what it proposes.

- General – become a more sustainable community
- Economic development – encourage growth of service businesses and tourism, and provision of infrastructure to enable future growth
- Housing – reference to both new housing and redevelopment of empty & derelict buildings
- Tourism – develop Kilfenora’s attractions as a gateway to the Burren, including music heritage
- Kilfenora Square – retain usefulness for parking but also improve attractiveness as a focal point

These are observations and suggestions we would agree with. At the same time they are quite general and high level – essentially a basis for discussion – and need to tie into actions, deliverables and investment in order to become a meaningful plan. We will endeavour next to suggest what some specifics should be.

## **C DEVELOPING A PLAN FOR KILFENORA**

At the earliest opportunity, the community would first like a clear, ideally face-to-face, commitment from the Council on these 3 points, to set the direction of the development plan for Kilfenora.

- (i) In company with other villages in the Burren area, we wish to see a clear re-balancing of investment in the Burren as a whole, and from the tourism perspective promoting the Burren as a destination for extended stays. This in contrast to over-emphasis and consequent destructive over-crowding in the coastal strip and at the Cliffs of Moher – and the economic damage from allowing drive-through and day-trip concepts to pre-dominate.

The North Clare area should be managed as a system, spreading the load and benefits, with intelligent transport interlinkages.

- (ii) Within this regional vision, we would wish Kilfenora to be far better promoted as a key destination within the 'string of pearls' that the Burren villages should be - anyone visiting the West of Ireland should have Kilfenora on their must-do list because of its music, history, people and craic. We would be linked to other villages and the Cliffs by an electric bus system.
- (iii) However this applies equally to recovering Kilfenora's position as a great place to live in and work: attractive, historic, lively, good facilities, jobs, engaged community (which is also what attracts discerning and high spend visitors).

A small proportion of what has been invested in the Cliffs would go a long way to make communities like Kilfenora healthier and more self-sufficient, turning a downward spiral into an upward one.

Second, we ask the Council to work with us and invest in a **formal 'Masterplan' for Kilfenora** – as soon as possible - just as it has done for Ennistymon and other locations in Clare. (The resulting benefits are clear to see.) The expense would be modest compared to what has been spent with the likes of Future Analytics elsewhere, since there is already ample research and knowledge available as well as a range of ideas to work with, apart from being a smaller area.

We request this because

- a thorough and independent exercise will make it possible to tackle some issues and possibilities that it is hard to address solely within the community, and address the longer term
- a systemic approach is needed that takes into account dimensions such as housing, accommodation, food etc
- we are advised that the Council itself will find it easier to move to action on the basis of a professional study conducted by experts it trusts, and make a case for national funding where possible.

## **D SPECIFIC AND INITIAL ACTION AREAS**

These are proposals deriving from local consultation.

### **(i) New plan for the Square**

Kilfenora Square has the potential to be one of the most attractive arrival points in any village in Ireland, and the best launch point for cycling and walking in the Burren. (Its re-development has been mentioned in previous CDPs, we understand, but without follow-up action.) There are various possibilities to explore, balancing the need for ample parking with creating a more attractive environment.

### **(ii) Bus park**

As has already been proposed, limiting buses to pick up and drop off in the Square helps to achieve item (i). Vaughans Yard has space available for 6 buses. The owner would simply expect the space to be tarmacked, maintained and insured.

### **(iii) Village speed limits – wellbeing, safety, access to Deanery**

We have already raised several times since October 2020 the importance of moving 50kph speed limits to the edge of the village instead of the quite inappropriate placing at the entrance to the village main street. (We have also mentioned the broader issue of regulating speed on L-roads which compounds the problem, especially given the Google algorithm). All these areas are used by local

walkers, cyclists, ponies etc, but at risk from drivers. In particular the community including the School wants safe access to the Deanery area for recreational and sports usage. As is pointed out, Ennis has moved to 30 kph limits near housing – why are our needs seen as inferior? We have drawn attention to the positive reputational benefits to the Council from taking action here.

**(iv) Digital Hub**

This is an urgently needed facility, especially given the capacity constraints in Ennistymon. We are also all aware of the emphasis the Government has placed on providing such facilities. There is a suitable and sound building in Kilfenora that the Council could use and re-fit internally. (The usage of tourism facilities in Kilfenora and Carran inevitably could not persist once the tourism season started, but did help to demonstrate viability.)

**(v) Electric charging point**

No tourism destinations are really viable without an electric vehicle charging point. We have already requested this some time ago and indicated its preferred location in the Square.

**(vi) Extended wifi**

The installation of wifi in the Square has been helpful. However this needs extending at least to cover the Cathedral area in order to live up to being a well connected visitor destination, to allow use of visitor apps etc.

**(vii) Improved visitor signage**

We have raised this issue repeatedly over 18 months – we need a systemic approach to informational and visitor signage, and have already provided details of what is required. (Some aspects but not all will be aided if signs discussed with the Council's Geopark team are provided.)

**(viii) Investment in Kilfenora as a music centre**

Kilfenora has a great historic reputation for its music, but the reality falls considerably short. There is a danger that it is about to lose its unique attraction, the Kilfenora Ceil Band Parlour, opened with a fanfare by the Irish President but under-promoted ever since. There are a number of ideas on how to turn the tide, including use of the Cathedral, but some seed finance is needed to achieve a positive tipping point. (The Michael Coleman Centre, Kerry Writers Guild and Cnoc na Gaoithe are positive examples of what can be done.)

**(ix) Playground**

There are no play facilities. We have a number of good locations for one in the village interior.

**(x) Housing**

Addressing the chronic need for housing for families that want to live in the area, as well as getting vacant properties and sites in eth are released for use.

**(ix) Increase graveyard provision**

We are running out of space!

There are other ideas under discussion, but we see this as a good starting point for an adult-to adult discussion with the Council.

# REGENERATING KILFENORA - A STRATEGY

## Context

- Kilfenora is a location and community with a long and rich history – farming, music, religion etc
- However, over the past 15 years or so, Kilfenora's economic strength and its position as a centre of activity (business and retail, tourism, culture) in N Clare has greatly declined.
- In the plus column, there have been some positive steps: from 2009 until Covid struck, the Kilfenora Trad Festival kept a flag flying for our unique musical heritage; the Kilfenora Timeline undertook several worthy initiatives – eg the Time Capsule and the Timeline exhibition itself.
- However, the recent past has been less happy. Removal of the Post Office depressed economic activity overnight; the marketing of and investment in the visitor attractions we have has not kept pace with more proactive competitors; and for three years+ the Cathedral has been closed.
- Some good ideas were generated in the 2018 'local planning group' initiative, but as soon as the Leader-funded facilitator left, the group evaporated and the 'strategy' was not actioned.
- Nonetheless, from those ashes a fresh community action group has recently emerged – named Kilfenora Development – and this document articulates the intention to revitalise the village and associated parishes, in terms of economic, social and cultural activity and reputation.
- Our challenges are many, including the rekindling of the integrated community effort that has achieved so much for the village in the past; and the necessity to win support and funding for investment in projects that can succeed in making Kilfenora more attractive to visit and live in.
- Yet there are clear opportunities to be seized, in a climate of Government pronouncements that seem favourable to the specific ideas that we are advancing to local authorities; and given the latent assets and brand qualities Kilfenora possesses that could be turned into lasting value.

## Strategic goal

To enable Kilfenora to be a vibrant community and central hub for economic and cultural activity in the Burren and North Clare – and a highly desirable destination for visitors to the West of Ireland and the Wild Atlantic Way.

- Create a compelling vision, and identify practical projects to make this a reality
- Identify economic and social benefits, in order to raise funds for investment in regeneration
- Encourage greater community self-help and foster well-being
- Collaboration and alignment with partners – Burren Centre, Geopark, BEN, Clare CoCo, other North Clare villages, tourist bodies etc

## The Vision

- A great place to live in and work: attractive, historic, lively, good facilities, jobs, engaged community
- A great place to visit: a fascinating destination to visit, stay and spend money – the music, history, people, craic – that anyone visiting the West of Ireland should have on their list.

## The Strategy

- Move out of the constraints of the Pandemic to build community involvement in activities and support for a village regeneration plan – form project groups where possible
- Ensure village activity groups collaborate and integrate their efforts – as recommended by CLDC. Also collaborate and lobby with other Burren villages for mutual benefit.
- Raise the village profile and brand through communication, increase visitor numbers/income
- Obtain active investment/support from Clare Council and FI to realise Kilfenora's promise



## Action areas – the ongoing plan

### *Overarching requirement – obtain CLDC/Council support for expert, detailed Master plan*

#### **1 Village appearance and amenities**

##### *(i) Create a more attractive impact on entry into the village and its Square*

- Plants and flowers (building on recent grant-aided progress)
- Seating areas
- Tackle eyesores (inc old overhead wires) and Infrastructure maintenance – inc pavements
- Field: public park and play area? (To make Kilfenora one of the most attractive villages in Ireland)

##### *(ii) Amenities*

- Ensure better communication esp through signage of reasons to stop and spend in Kilfenora
- To include shops (grocery, crafts), visitor attractions, tourist information, food/drink, picnic area(s), garage, e-charging point, re-cycling facilities (extend to plastics re-cycling), Post Point
- Obtain Council investment for sound infrastructure – eg extended wi-fi, rubbish bins.
- Re-create Kilfenora Digital Hub – Council to use vacant building to provide badly needed service

#### **2 Core attractions**

Kilfenora has a remarkable bank of historical and archaeological assets that have either not been actively promoted in recent years, or have not even been made known and accessible to visitors. The world needs to know about our triple claim – the City of the Crosses, the home of céili music and – in future – the ‘village of the forts’. Increased footfall is essential to drive up village income.

##### *(i) Cathedral*

- Working with Col on repair plan and re-opening
- Devise a management mechanism to address governance, marketing and income generation
- Improve signage – directing visitors to West Entrance past shops and West Cross
- Disabled parking by West Entrance

##### *(ii) Crosses, Holy Well – promote these as key attractions, biodiversity trail and seating maintenance*

##### *(iii) Forts, castles, tombs – plan to improve access to Doon, Tullaha, Ballykinvarga and other sites*

##### *(iv) The best start point for Burren walkers and cyclists – includes attraction factors such as Wellness, Faith/Spiritual tourism (Clare Camino); publicise a range of routes around Kilfenora, transport links*

##### *(v) Visitor information signs: an inner and outer village information sign; improved cycle route sign*

And of course, working with the Burren Centre as an information point as well as attraction in itself – and provider of village walking tours.

#### **3 Traffic and travel**

- Tackle excessive speeds and create safer space for walkers – Council to move speed limit signs to edge of village housing, additional ‘Slow – walkers’ signs (already requested)
- Address poor village identification and directional signage (already requested)
- Maintain ample space for parking for independent travellers and local community events
- Remove bus congestion with drop/off pick up scheme in Square and create bus park in Vaughans Yard (already requested)

- E-charging point in Square (already requested)
- Walkers and cyclists – invest in facilities, signage; in particular allow safe access to Deanery
- Bus stops to be installed (already requested)

#### **4 Music and culture**

Kilfenora's historic reputation for music in particular needs re-investment. Sessions/ceilis declined in recent years and disappeared in the pandemic. The Burren Centre never promoted its globally unique musical feature, the KCB Parlour, which may disappear by 2023 with the exhibition upgrade.

- Support continuation of the Kilfenora Trad Music Festival
- Encourage musicians to re-start sessions, concerts, classes in Kilfenora – esp KCB & its members
- Use the Cathedral as cultural hub, including as a concert venue (collaborate with Burren Centre)
- Encourage art and crafts displays, create events to attract Irish and overseas audiences
- Support future productions by the Kilfenora Players

#### **5 Energy**

- Supporting Kilfenora SEC in its role of identifying better energy conservation and usage, enabling the community to adapt to the future
- Thereby enabling Kilfenora to become energy savvy, and known as such.

#### **6 Environment**

- Increase focus on positive environmental practices – clean roads, water etc
- Tidy Towns team championing 'stay clean' – maximise community involvement and awareness

#### **7 Farming**

- Encourage formation of innovative farmers group, help Kilfenora to be known for best of new AND traditional practices
- Develop positive stories about Kilfenora farming/agriculture, building on 1500 yrs of heritage
- Maintain a supportive culture for farmers' wellbeing through thick and thin

#### **8 Housing and accommodation**

- Address the need for more housing, arresting the Kilfenora population decline, and enlivening the village by encouraging making vacant dwellings available
- Consider how to increase visitor accommodation as well – Kilfenora cannot be an attractive overnight destination without this.

#### **9 Food**

To be attractive and competitive to both locals and visitors as a place to spend time and money, Kilfenora needs to up its game in food and drink provision, and be part of the Burren Food Trail.

- Genuinely enticing meal and snack offerings, consistent high quality with friendly food service
- Build on the reputation of some stand-out local food producers, and on its historic reputation as a community of great home-made cooking – consider possibilities of a food fair, market stalls

#### **10 Sport, exercise, community activities**

- Create project group to develop community activities (incorporate 'old folks' team?)
- Build on Kilfenora's sporting heritage to enable it to be a great place for exercise, wellness
- Safer roads for walking and cycling; facilities at the Deanery; more use of Burren Centre