

# CELTIC ROUTES PROJECT *The End Of The Journey?*

A unique tourism project has seen successful initiatives rolled out between local authorities in Wexford, Waterford and Wicklow and their Welsh counterparts in Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire and Ceredigion since its launch in 2019. However, the future of Celtic Routes is now threatened due to Brexit, and unless new funds are sourced it may close at the end of August.

*Voted one of Ireland's favourite attractions, the iconic Hook Head Lighthouse, situated at the tip of the Hook Peninsula in Wexford, is one of the oldest lighthouses in the world.*

**T**he Celtic Routes tourism project was designed to foster links between the three south east counties in Ireland and their Welsh colleagues, in order to increase visitor travel between these regions in addition to other links.

An indication of the success of Celtic Routes was revealed in a recent report, which showed that from the inception the project in 2019 to the end of March 2023 almost 300 million people around the world have checked out information on Celtic Routes.

Initial funding of €2 million was provided under the European Territorial Co-operation Programme and then in 2022, the Welsh Government announced new funding arrangements to replace those previously administered by the EU. So, all in all close to €4 million has been invested in the project to date.

However, after four successful years the entire project's future is threatened due to Brexit and the UK leaving the European Union, with project officer Oonagh Messette now warning that Celtic Routes will close at the end of August unless new funds are sourced.

"As a direct result of Brexit, there will be no continuation of the Ireland Wales Co-operation Fund. While there may be considerable willingness on the part of all stakeholders, without the funding to administer activities, much will be lost," she noted.

"Our partnership, our networks, our collaboration and our immense marketing and promotion power essentially comes to a close at the end of August this year," according to Ms Messette, Wexford County Council's Project Officer for Community Development.

## **CONTINUED ALLIANCES NOW IN JEOPARDY**

Project Partner Michael Nicholson, Director of Service with Wicklow County Council, commented: "Celtic Routes has been

one of the most successful projects that has ever crossed my desk. It has brought our counties closer together and Wicklow tourism has benefited immensely from this collaboration.

"Between Brexit and the pandemic, it may be a little while before we see quantifiable results but just having 300 million people view our area is extraordinary and none of our partners could have achieved that result



*The Black Castle ruin stands on a rocky headland over the sea, at the eastern side of Wicklow Town.*



## Ireland-Wales Tourism



Pictured at the launch of the Celtic Routes project in Enniscorthy on 26 November 2019 were (l-r): Minister of State at the Department of Defence, Paul Kehoe TD; Aileen Dowling, Fáilte Ireland; Wexford County Council's Oonagh Messette, Celtic Routes Project Officer, and Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine, Andrew Doyle TD.

on their own. As a partnership, we have many ideas for continued alliances but that is all now in jeopardy."

The objective of Celtic Routes since the outset has been to encourage visitors to explore new areas of Ireland's south east and the west region in Wales en route to their final tourist destination. It aimed to transform less well-known areas from transit zones to new touring sites, increasing the time visitors spend in these regions and thereby capitalising on the opportunities to boost local economies.

An underlying aim of the project was to convert potential visitors transiting through the towns and cities into staying visitors. Another objective was to increase sustainable economic developments by maximising visitor spend, income retention, adding value to the combined tourism offerings within the region through a tailored marketing and promotional campaign for both visitors and tourism providers, supported by the three local authorities.

### CROSS-NATIONAL COLLABORATION

Messette pointed out that the ending of the Celtic Routes initiative would be a

severe blow to tourism and hospitality in the south east, which is still recovering from the Covid shut down. Over five years of cross collaboration between Ireland and Wales – and importantly between Waterford, Wexford and Wicklow – the Celtic Routes brand has reached almost 300 million viewers all over the world, according to the findings of the analytics.

Through a combination of social media, print media, out-of-home and programmatic advertising, analytics also showed peaks of interest from the Indian sub-continent and Southern Europe as well as traditional markets such as the UK, USA, Germany and France.

Through various thematic networks, businesses across all six counties have teamed up and assisted each other in

a practical and constructive way with 140 businesses engaging on an ongoing basis. In another practical demonstration of the value of Celtic Routes, over 200 businesses now use the project's asset library of 13,000 photographs, cinagraphs and videos for promotional purposes.

A TV series, which was filmed across all six counties last summer, has since been shown on S4C in Wales and was screened on TG4 in Ireland in July, while it is also available on the BBC iPlayer.

"The cross-county and cross-national benefits of Celtic Routes are obvious at this stage and for such a valuable resource for the tourism and hospitality industry in both countries to be lost would be nothing short of a disaster," noted Ms Messette, adding: "A way has to be found to save this unique venture."



For further information on the Celtic Routes tourism project visit [www.celticroutes.irish](http://www.celticroutes.irish)