



Comhairle Ceantair
an Iúir, Mhúrn
agus an Dúin
**Newry, Mourne
and Down**
District Council

Mourne-Gullion-Strangford

Experience Development Plan and Workbook



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This document has used images from the following sources:

- Tourism NI
- NMDDC
- TEAM-Tourism





Introduction

Mountains, Myths and Maritime

Where the spirit of land and sea meet

Where fire and ice have moulded

Where the myths of fact and fiction
merge

Where the flavours of mountains and
maritime mingle

Where the challenges of peaks and
currents motivate

Where viewsapes and tranquility
mesmerises

WELCOME to this Experience Plan and Workbook.

It has been designed to support the development of unique visitor experiences within the Mourne-Gullion-Strangford upland and coastal area in a way that highlights the distinctive attributes of the destination and establishes a strong market position for it. It has been written to assist you – whether you are an individual business, a cluster of businesses, or a tourism-related agency – in the development of visitor experiences, and has been prepared by Newry, Mourne and Down District Council (NMDDC).

The purpose of the Experience Plan

This Experience Plan is a tool. It presents a framework that will guide the strengthening of existing experiences and the development of new experiences to provide **compelling reasons for visitors to come to visit our mountains, coastal areas and communities.** With the right experiences in place, we will attract new visitors from the Republic of Ireland, the UK, and from other countries overseas year-round – visitors that tend to stay longer and spend more – and we can create a much stronger sense of ‘destination’ in the marketplace.

This Plan complements the 5-year Tourism Strategy that was launched at the outset of 2017. Its success will be based on everyone recognising its relevance as a strategic way forward in ensuring the ongoing sustainable growth of an industry that was worth £61 million to the local economy in 2016. It aims at helping all businesses raise the bar and work in synergy to bring our “mountains, myths and maritime” strengths to life in a vibrant and unique way.

This Plan will stimulate new ideas, new ways of thinking and new approaches to working together to deliver new experiences.

It is the first of its kind in Northern Ireland, and the outcome of extensive consultation with business operators and agencies. It is a structured plan and workbook combined, that will give you a fresh understanding of how to deliver experiences that your visitors will never forget.

How is this Experience Plan structured?

The Introduction provides an overview of the Tourism Strategy 2017-2021, and highlights the linkages between this Experience Plan, the Strategy and the Global Geopark initiative. The Strategy identified the need for this type of plan, and it is helpful to see how the two documents inter-relate.

Part 1 looks at the visitor and what motivates them to travel. Increasingly our visitors are seeking unique experiences and ways of emotionally connecting with the place they are visiting, so Part 2 outlines the concept of experience development and what is involved.

Stories are generally the core of a memorable experience – they provide the insights that the visitor is looking for in visiting a destination and they are often the basis of the memories long after the visit is over. Part 3 presents a thematic structure for bringing our stories together, and Part 4 outlines a series of potential EPIC experiences that can be offered as examples of how to use the thematic structure to animate our destination. These are IDEAS – some may already exist as experiences, but many will need to be discussed as concepts for developing new experiences. Would the idea work? Who do you need to work with to bring the experience together? How often is it feasible to deliver the experience? How many can participate in the experience?

Part 5 looks at what is required from businesses to ensure success in delivering experiences. The last section, Part 6, provides a number of worksheets that will help you get started in your planning. Ideally, you will work through these pages in a workshop or small group setting.

Strategy Framework

The five-year Strategy sets out the strategic direction for the tourism industry within the District of Newry, Mourne and Down. It outlines the current situation, the strategy framework, and a series of recommendations that are designed to achieve the vision and goals, and to ensure that industry is in the business of delivering *EPIC moments*.

Vision 2021

Newry, Mourne & Down is a premier, year-round mountain and maritime destination in Ireland recognised for its EPIC experiences in outdoor adventure, its rich tapestry of cultural heritage, myths and unique stories, and its authentic local life.

Our Promise

Delivering 'EPIC' moments

Our Goals

To work collaboratively toward assisting Northern Ireland achieve its targeted growth rate of 6% per annum in overnight expenditure by:

- Focusing on developing visitor destination experiences that will deliver '*EPIC moments*'.
- Building a unified and entrepreneurial industry that is customer-focused.
- Ensuring that the development of tourism is undertaken sustainably and contributes to the enhancement of social, cultural and environmental values.

Our Headline

Mountains, Myths and Maritime

Newry, Mourne and Down has long been recognised for its spectacular scenery; the dramatic relationship between the mountains and the sea; the myths and stories that highlight the rich cultural heritage of the region; and the unique opportunities to experience the outdoors against this composite backdrop of landscape and culture.

Our headline, *mountains, myths and maritime*, helps to develop a shared story that will begin to create a stronger image of what makes this area distinctive - both in the minds of industry and ultimately within the marketplace.

It sets the stage for the Strategy's focus on creating destination experiences that are associated with the mountains and the coastline, and for its emphasis on the stories that give the destination experiences a unique quality.

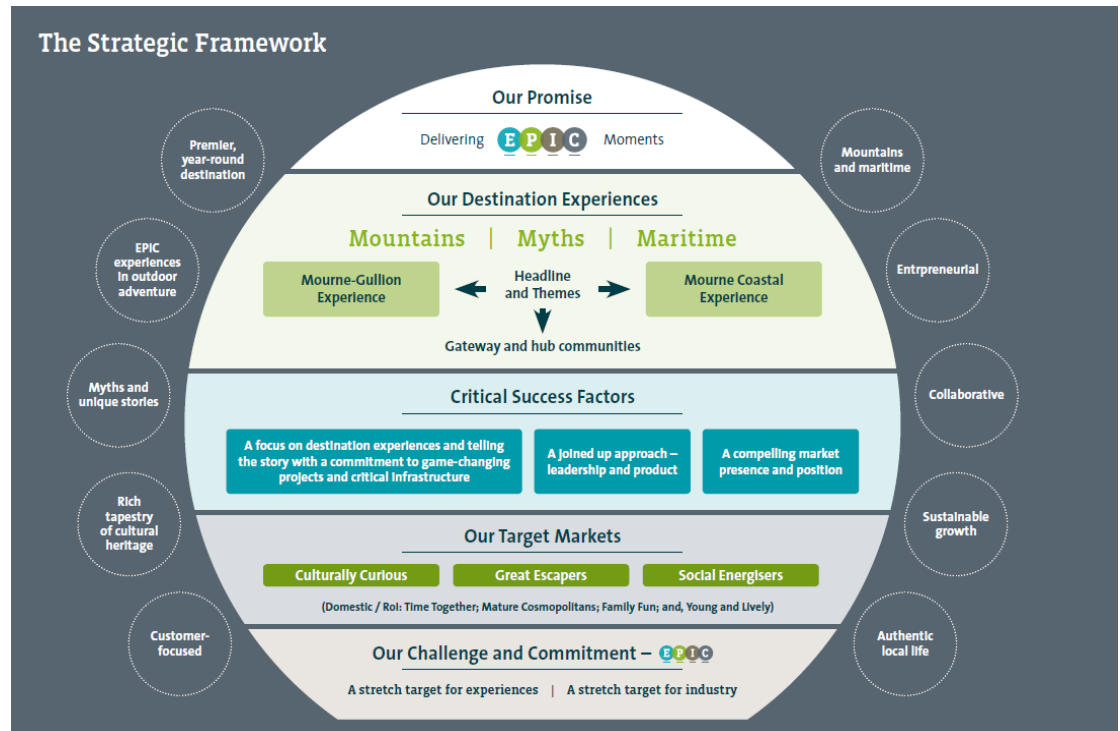
Strategy Framework

A focus on 'EPIC' – The underlying approach

The concept of "EPIC" underlies the Strategy framework. It relates to a **new approach to developing experiences and working together.**

It has been used as both a concept and an acronym, and is designed to act as a 'cue' to inspire new thinking.

Delivering EPIC moments means delivering impressively great experiences. It means working in partnership to 'join up' existing disparate products to create experiences that are EPIC. Taken as an acronym, it challenges industry to think in terms of delivering tourism products that are:



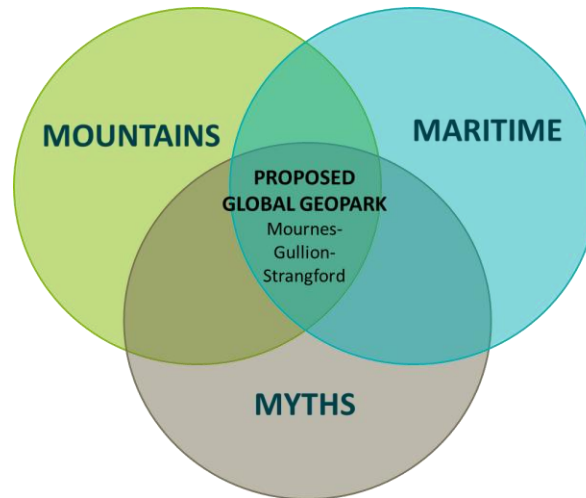
The core destination

This Experience Plan is applicable to the entire District of Newry, Mourne and Down.

But like any destination, there is a core area that has a particular appeal to visitors and this lies at the point where the 'headline' concept of *mountains, myths and maritime* appears to intersect.

Right at this convergence, lies the proposed UNESCO Global Geopark that will incorporate the Mourne Area of Outstanding Beauty (AONB), including the more ancient, craggy uplands of Slieve Croob, the Ring of Gullion AONB and the Strangford and Lecale AONB. This area taken together represents the primary focus for the Experience Plan, although the Plan can be applied to areas beyond.

The Global Geopark initiative has the potential to really define our destination in the visitor's mind. Designation will give the Mourne-Gullion-Strangford area international significance, and will provide opportunities to explore working with partners across administrative boundaries into County Louth, and into neighbouring local government areas.



Pursuing Global Geopark status

To be successful in achieving designation, it is important to begin immediately on developing and offering experiences that are tied to the concept of the Geopark, and to be building on the geo-heritage that makes this area globally significant. This Plan is designed to be a tool that will help businesses move in this direction. Many of the experience ideas are concepts that can animate proposed 'geosites' and will add a new level of visitor engagement with the site, and appreciation for its significance.

How was this Plan developed?

The process of preparing this plan was initiated by NMDDC and facilitated by TEAM-Tourism Consulting. The work involved :

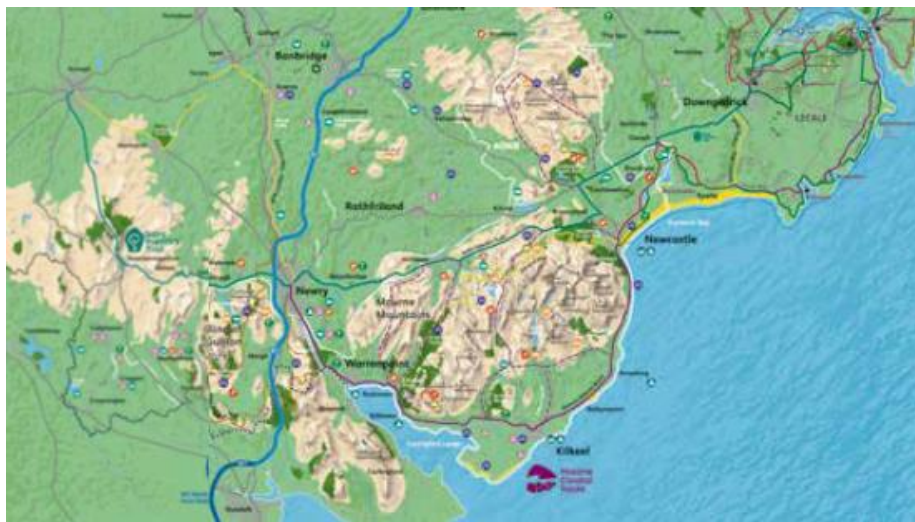
- Establishing a Working Group with representatives from the tourism sector and all the key agencies that have a role in destination management or the delivery of tourism. This Working Group played an important advisory role.
- Undertaking a series of community workshops to begin identifying key stories, themes and potential EPIC experiences.
- Engaging business operators through site visits and participation in an extensive range of activities.
- Reviewing the stories and themes, and establishing a framework that would provide meaningful structure for developing and enhancing experiences.
- Reviewing the framework and an initial collection of potential experiences with the tourism industry, the Working Group and NMDDC.

At all stages, the discussions with tourism operators were used as an opportunity to explore new opportunities for building on the EPIC acronym and creating experiences that would embody experiential, personalised, iconic and immersive, and creative elements.

Reviewing our context

The strengths and opportunities that characterise the destination were assessed within the Tourism Strategy, together with the strategic challenges that face the growth of the tourism sector. These are summarised below and provide further rationale for a new approach:

STRENGTHS & OPPORTUNITIES	CHALLENGES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outstanding and diverse scenic beauty and ecosystems, with the unique combination of mountains and maritime landscapes • Volcanic and glaciation geology of international significance that tells the tale of two oceans • An exceedingly rich cultural heritage that embraces ‘the story of Ireland in microcosm’ • A living landscape that has been shaped by centuries of maritime, farming, industrial and commercial heritage • Strong recognition for adventure and outdoor-based recreation such as mountain biking, hiking and an array of marine and inland water-based activities • A burgeoning local foods and drinks sector, increasing emphasis on wellness, and international awareness of its golf 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A long list of ‘things to do’, but no strong cohesive sense of ‘promise’ or destination identity • A wealth of stories but no regional approach to developing consensus on these stories and limited efforts to utilise them effectively in building experiences and creating destination identity • A range of access challenges relating to internal public transportation linkages, accessing water, carrying capacity of rural roads, signage, and parking at local points of interest • Tourism operators that generally do not relate to the wider destination experience from Ring of Gullion to Strangford Lough • A fragmented marketing message and limited collaboration in the delivery of experiences • Over dependence on the domestic market





1. Understanding the Visitor

'The customer experience is the next competitive battleground.' Jerry Gregoire (DELL CIO)

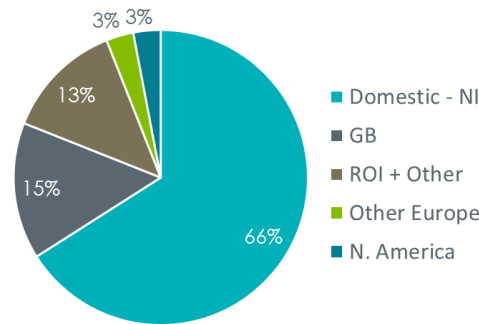
Our current visitors

As a starting point, let's look at the current visitors. Our destination is particularly attractive to domestic residents – visitors from elsewhere in N. Ireland – in fact more so than anywhere else in the country. While Newry, Mourne and Down local government district has benefitted from the highest level of growth in trips and overnight stays in 2016 throughout the province, it is still characterised by a low length of stay and a low average spend.

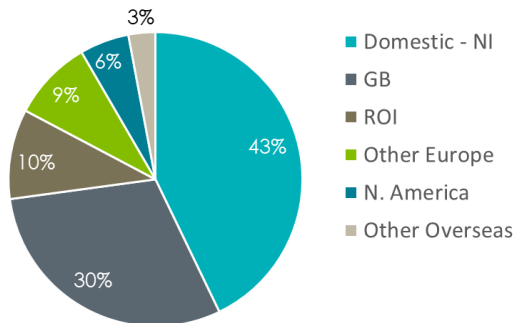
The graphs below show the volume of trips to N. Ireland from the various markets, together with the level of spend from each market. Those visitors travelling further clearly tend to spend more – highlighting the benefits to be gained from attracting out-of-province visitors.

While N. Ireland visitors will always remain important to our destination, the need to expand market share in out-of-state markets, particularly the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain, will increase the value of tourism. However, success in these markets is dependent on creating new and compelling reasons to visit.

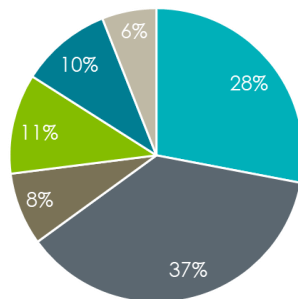
Volume of Trips to NMD



Volume of Trips to NI



Value of Spend in NI



Do you collect data on your visitors? If you do, look at where they are coming from and see how your volume compares with Northern Ireland as a whole and with Newry, Mourne & Down.

Which are your most important geographic markets in terms of numbers?

If you have data on visitor spend, which visitors tend to spend more at your business?



Where is the growth opportunity?

A significant and exciting opportunity for growth in the demand for new experiences lies across the border in the Republic of Ireland. A new strategic approach to growing this market was released by Tourism NI in December 2017, and highlights a new customer segmentation model that is prioritising segments on the basis of propensity to visit, size of segment and estimated level of spend. RoI visitors as a whole have a lower degree of awareness of opportunities than might be assumed, and have generally not identified compelling reasons to come. But, if they can be attracted to visit the North, they are more likely to disperse throughout the regions and are more likely to come out of peak season compared to other out-of-province visitors. This is good news for the Mourne-Gullion-Strangford area. With Tourism NI now strongly focused on growing revenue from the rest of Ireland, the key emphasis will be on aligning with the three new targeted segments. These segments are presented below with their top 10 activities, and offer exciting potential for the industry – particularly in light of this Plan’s emphasis on developing unique short-break experiences.



ACTIVE MAXIMISERS

- Like to **squeeze in as much as possible** on a short break
 - **Passion for outdoors** and the natural environment
 - Looking for **unique and mind-broadening experiences**
 - **Digital** – significant influence in trip planning
 - Look to get a **good deal**
 - **10%** of the market – **31%** intend to visit NI in next 12 months
1. Wildlife & nature
 2. The natural environment
 3. Music festivals
 4. Coastal touring / beaches
 5. Ancient history
 6. Sporting events
 7. Eating & drinking
 8. Shopping
 9. Hill walking
 10. Water sports



OPEN TO IDEAS

- **Conduct research online**, influenced by reviews/media
 - Open-minded and interested in the **outdoors, sport, music and history**
 - Seeking **organised ‘energetic’** but not adventurous activities, motivated by nature / outdoors
 - **Like to plan** and have an itinerary / **value** for money
 - **‘Easy to get to’** destinations
 - **18%** of the market – **35%** intend to visit NI in next 12 months
1. Wildlife & nature
 2. Sporting events
 3. Music festivals
 4. Eating & drinking
 5. Coastal touring / beaches
 6. Golf
 7. The natural environment
 8. Political history
 9. Shopping
 10. Ancient history



OPEN MINDED EXPLORERS

- Wish to **engage with local people and local culture**
 - **Seeking unique experiences** and are interested in **learning**
 - Want **high quality** hotels/food
 - Appreciate and enjoy the **natural environment and scenic beauty**
 - Enjoy **planning** & doing a lot of **research** – rely on tourism websites and traditional media more than others
 - **17%** of the market – **34%** intend to visit NI in next 12 months
1. Coastal touring / beaches
 2. Eating & drinking
 3. Sporting events
 4. Ancient history
 5. The natural environment
 6. Music festivals
 7. Houses, castles & gardens
 8. Shopping
 9. Wildlife & nature
 10. Opera

Targeting international markets

To be effective in targeting international markets, it is important to align with Tourism Ireland’s country brand and key markets. For the island of Ireland, the words that underpin the brand promise are “**joyful immersion**” delivered through the friendliness and warmth of the people, the stunning and dramatic scenery, and the distinctive Irish culture. Accentuating these strengths and providing new opportunities for “joyful immersion” is indeed the underlying purpose of this plan and will play a role in increasing demand from both the RoI and international markets in North America, Europe and elsewhere.

In aligning with Tourism Ireland’s key markets, the focus is on two particular segments – the Culturally Curious and the Great Escapers, and a third market to a lesser extent – the Social Energisers. The visitor profiles below help in understanding what motivates these visitors to travel and the types of activities, experiences and settings that are likely to appeal to them. You will find that through working to create experiences that will appeal to the RoI markets, these experiences are also likely to appeal to these international segments.

CULTURALLY CURIOUS

KEY WORDS – Curiosity, authenticity, insight, independence, immersion in culture, off the beaten track, exploration

FOCUS – Broadening the mind, active sightseeing, historical buildings and attractions, World Heritage sites, events, artisan food and local specialities

WHO ARE THEY – The age group for this demographic is 40 plus. They are independent active sightseers and rarely travel in a family group

GREAT ESCAPERS

KEY WORDS – Slow travel, relaxation, rebalancing, getting away from it all, connecting with loved ones

FOCUS – Breath-taking landscapes, ancient sites, remote places, landmarks, restaurants offering fresh and local food, authentic pubs, ease of getting away

WHO ARE THEY – They are often couples, approximately 30 years old – sometimes travelling with children. They are seeking to reconnect with nature and their partner

SOCIAL ENERGISERS

KEY WORDS – Excitement, energy, fun & laughter, adventure, spontaneous, social, the ‘wow’ factor

FOCUS – Entertainment, festivals, contemporary culture and music, clubbing, water sports, the pub experience, shopping, sightseeing

WHO ARE THEY – Generally young couples and adult groups looking for excitement, new experiences, and a fun, social holiday in somewhere different

Think about your ideal target market. Who would most likely relate to the experience or activity you offer, or to your geographic setting?

What are your particular strengths in relation to your ideal market(s)?

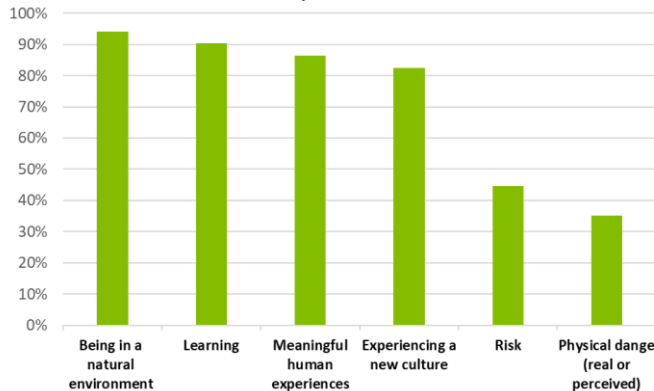


Benefitting from emerging trends and research

The nature of tourism and the associated business opportunities are continuing to evolve and change as new market trends shape demand. A number of these trends are particularly relevant to the development of EPIC experiences in Newry, Mourne & Down and to the region's focus on outdoor adventure.

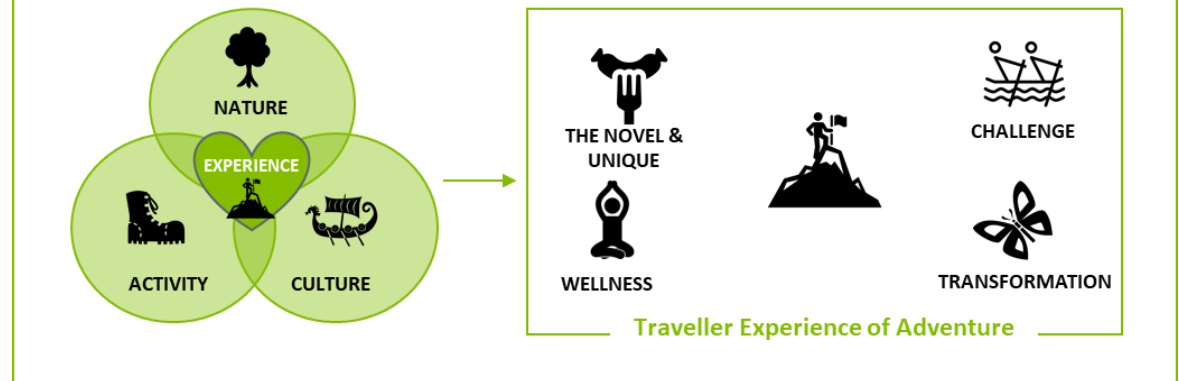
- **Adventure travel will cater to experiences** – Trend 7 for 2018, IntrepidTravel.com. The definition of adventure is changing to be less about risk and more *about culture, physical health, excitement, off the beaten track and fun.*

What are the elements that play a role in adventure travel experiences?



¹ British adventurer and author, Alastair Humphreys

Components of an Effective Adventure Trip



I see myself as kind, efficient, organized and imaginative.

I enjoy working on new ideas and consider myself an intellectual.

I actively seek out new experiences and think travel should be about enriching my knowledge and expanding my worldview.

I work hard to keep my body healthy. I enjoy a feeling of discovery related to nature.

I am not very interested in owning luxurious products. I have a moderately altruistic nature and sometimes give to others.

I am interested in traditions of indigenous cultural communities and enjoy cultural immersion when I travel.

EMOTIONAL PROFILE OF A NORTH AMERICAN ADVENTURE TRAVELLER

Illustrations adapted &/or created from *North American Adventure Travelers: Seeking Personal Growth, New Destinations, and Immersive Culture, 2017*

Benefitting from emerging trends and research

- **Wellness trips will become more active** – Trend 3 for 2018, IntrepidTravel.com. This provides new opportunities to build active experiences with a strong emphasis on health and wellness that will appeal to visitors interested in this niche sector – and fits well with the product that is currently available.

At the same time there is an increasing demand for buildings and settings that feel healthy, encourage mindfulness, and are both comfortable and relaxing. The most recent focus is a shift to mindful movement that brings attention to the physical activity in a way that enhances the physical and psychological benefits¹.

- **Personal achievement grows in importance** – this goes a step beyond experiential to focus on travel experiences that allow travellers to achieve a goal or accomplish something they have never done before. This is more than simply connecting with local life, to using travel to “find oneself” – with activities such as longer distance/multi-day hiking growing in popularity².

¹ healthandfitnesstravel.com – emerging wellness spa travel trends for 2018 and beyond

² e.g. momondo.ca – the rising trends in travel and tourism for 2018

- **Authentic culinary experiences can differentiate the region** – it has become less about expensive dining and much more about authentic food experiences that create unique moments and memories. Websites such as MealSharing.com are beginning to emerge to provide new ways of eating with locals (similar concept to AirBnB), and there is growing interest in learning new cooking skills, visiting local markets to source ingredients, and meeting local producers.

Creating themed banquets, providing access to private or unusual settings, offering a master-class, or integrating authentic local food experiences into other activities and events are all opportunities to strengthen the focus on the food and drink that is distinctive to the Mourne-Gullion-Strangford area. The combination of our seafood, the flavours of the local countryside and the myths, legends and stories that can be told about our food provides the basis for unique experiences.

³ Alastair Humphreys – global explorer and adventurer

- **Touring or sightseeing with a local** – no one knows an area better than a local. With the wider interest in engaging with local people and making a real connection with a destination, the role of the local guide is key to delivering *EPIC moments*. This will be someone who knows the myths and stories, who can bring the landscape, archaeological ruins and townscapes to life, and who understands what motivates travellers and is trained to engage in a dynamic and professional manner.

The emergence of websites such as ContextTravel.com, ToursByLocals.com, and This Is My Athens website with clear booking mechanisms and pricing structure is a direct response to this trend.

- **Microadventures** – in the *ABTA Travel Trends Report for 2017* the growing demand for bookable microadventures was highlighted as a key trend shaping what travellers are doing on holiday. Defined as “small and achievable, for normal people with real lives”³, these can be anything from overnight treks, to a cooking class or a two-day kayaking trip. Being “small”, they are seen as an affordable way to bring an element of excitement to a trip or they are used to form the core of a short break, and the interest in them is often fuelled by social media and news feeds.



2. Experience Development Framework

'Be different or be dead. Memorable experiences are about creating value. Value is the defining factor. When there is no difference in value people buy on price alone. You can only compete on price for so long but you can compete on value forever.'

- Pine and Gilmore, *The Experience Economy*, 1999

Understanding the concept of developing experiences

Visitors today, particularly those from out-of-province, want to see much more than just the local sights. They are looking for a higher level of engagement – a way to connect with the people and the essence of the place on an emotional level, and an opportunity to venture off the beaten track. They are seeking experiences that will enrich their lives and create lasting memories that they can talk about.

The core of building experiences is based on story-telling – using stories to help visitors connect with the past and gain unique insights on the present – whether it is the geology of the area, its history and traditions, its contemporary culture or simply the way local people make a livelihood. Where landscapes and distinctive settings have inspired art, literature, music, and films, these have added another dimension to presenting local destinations to our visitors.

Stories in turn bring a place, its people, and the activities on offer to life. They add a unique dimension to every element of the visitor journey and should be inter-woven into the messaging from the outset of the ‘purchase cycle’.

Developing an experience requires a shift away from the traditional product versus price mentality. It is about delivering life-changing moments that inspire visitors to not only share their experience with others, but also makes them want to return. (Fáilte Ireland)

DESTINATION PROMISE: *Delivering EPIC Moments*

Our promise to our visitors – creates an expectation about the experience(s) that they will enjoy in the destination

THEMES / KEY PROPOSITIONS – The stories and underlying themes that sets this destination apart and makes it distinctive.

EPIC MOMENT EXPERIENCES – The experiences that are your signature/EPIC – best delivered in the Mourne-Gullion-Strangford area

SUPPORTING EXPERIENCES – What each business does to bring the EPIC experience to life – the products that allows the customer to access the experience

ANCILLARY EXPERIENCES / SENSE OF PLACE – How the wider tourism offering and sense of place/ public realm supports the destination promise



Weaving stories into the delivery of the overall destination experience needs to be based on the techniques of thematic interpretation – identifying key themes and sub-themes that help the visitor “understand” the destination. This Plan presents a structure that is designed to be used to bring the various stories together into a framework – a framework that shows the inter-relationships between the stories and themes and how these can be used to present the destination, enrich existing activities, and form the basis of developing new experiences and *EPIC moments*.

The Experience Spectrum



Destination Asset
e.g. Struell Wells



Product
e.g. St. Patrick Centre



Service
e.g. Interpretive guide



Potential experience
e.g. Animated /immersive
experience – food, stories



As you work through this Experience Plan and workbook, you may find it helpful to return to this page and use it to think through experience development. This can be completed by a cluster of businesses and agencies or by an individual operator. As an individual operator, your success will likely depend on working with partners to add value to your particular offering.

Remember, by building an association between your experience and the signature features or unique themes of the area, visitors will associate your experience with the destination, and will become advocates for it.



NOTE: This progression of economic value as you move up the experience spectrum from commodity or asset is derived from Pine & Gilmore's writings – *The Experience Economy*, first published in 1999



3. Destination Themes

A Framework for Experience Development

'it's no longer just about trekking to Buddhist monasteries in Bhutan or sipping Malbec in Mendoza. It's about how we experience those places viscerally, and how they change us when a monk or winemaker provides a new way to understand our world.'

- SKIFT, *The Rise of Experiential Travel*, 2014

Defining the essence of “Mountains, Myths and Maritime”

“Clarifying the headline from the Tourism Strategy provides a basis for redefining the ‘destination’. Newry, Mourne and Down is an administrative entity – something that is distinctly different to a visitor destination.

The visitor destination experience has to embody the headline and bring it to life. This destination experience has to be easily understood by the marketplace.”

Newry, Mourne & Down Tourism Strategy

¹ Percy French

² Translated extract from Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee (9th century)

A land where the mountains, myths and maritime themes are so intertwined as to be inseparable – *where the dark Mournes sweep down to the sea*¹.

A land of the mystical where past and present coalesce. *Am I asleep? Or has the future come now and I am it?*²

A land that takes us back to the beginning of the very story of Ireland and allows us **to savour its mysteries, to immerse in its beauty, to climb its peaks, to sail its shores, to embrace its lyrics, and to indulge in its flavours.**

Developing the themes

Defining the essence of the Mourne-Gullion-Strangford area is the first step in understanding the identity of the region. It is an identity that is based on this mystical sense of past and present coalescing and its unique interplay of land and water – from geological forces that resulted in the disappearance of an ocean and the formation of today’s distinctive landscape with its gateway ‘gap to the north’, to the fusion of indigenous and invasive cultures over the millennia.

The second step in the process of developing the thematic framework for experiences involves **unpacking this overview and identifying a series of themes that together present the story of the area**. These themes, presented in a series of summary statements, are based on all the stories collected, and are structured in a way that will allow experiences to bring the multi-faceted character of the region to life. They will provide a basis for visitors to truly immerse themselves in discovering this part of Northern Ireland.



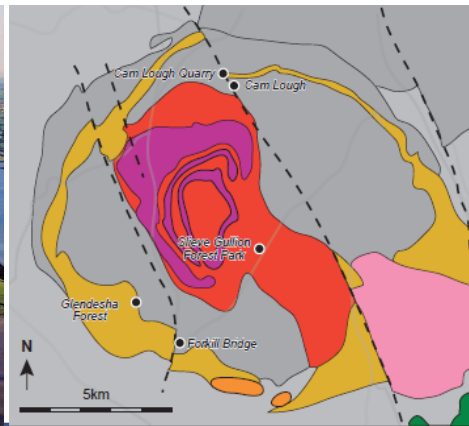
THEME

Fire & Ice

Fire & Ice is the first of four themes. The underlying geology of the area is particularly distinctive and is the basis for pursuing Global Geopark status for the Mourne-Gullion-Strangford area. The shaping of the landscape has had a profound impact on the unfolding stories and the local economies down through time. This sub-theme is not only key to achieving the UNESCO designation, but it is an integral element of the remaining three sub-themes.

Presenting this sub-theme to the visitor will require building local knowledge among operators – helping each business to understand how their local viewscape fits into the broader geological story.

A geological story of fire and ice spanning 400 million years. From disappearing oceans and colliding landmasses, to mountains evolved from reservoirs of molten magma, circular fractures and volcanic eruptions. As fire and heat gave way to ice and glaciers, sculpted valleys and rolling lowland drumlins emerged. This interplay between the underlying geology and the surface processes has shaped the entire area and left us today with a **geological landscape of international significance** and a terrain that offers everything from huge expanses of shallow water and mudflats to the highest peaks in the country – **the perfect backdrop for anything from quiet contemplation to adrenalin highs.**



THEME

Giants, Druids & Early Saints

The words of C. S. Lewis continue to resonate with so many of us in the Mourne-Gullion-Strangford area. The presence of our mystical past and the imprint of Ireland's early Christianity remain prevalent in every corner of the region.

Our visitors have questions about our cairns, crosses and archaeological relics, and we have an abundance of stories that can animate these landmarks and provide the basis for new experiences that build on this mysterious past.

I have seen a landscape which, under a particular light, made me feel that at any moment a giant might raise its head over the next ridge¹.

A landscape that displays the relics of giants, druids and early saints. The passage of ancient time is marked with Neolithic megaliths and cairns, giant folklore of Finn McCool and Cú Chulainn, frontier hill forts and earthen ramparts, high crosses and holy wells, the graves of Ireland's earliest saints and monastic ruins, and the compelling story of St. Patrick. A sense of mysticism still pervades today and these archeological sites remain as a testament to the spiritual journey of our forebears.

¹C.S. Lewis



THEME

Castles, Thrones, Invaders & Conquests

Every part of the region has a story to tell of defence, invasion or conquest relating to medieval times. The remnants of these turbulent centuries and the efforts of different regimes to hold power are found in the fields, on coastlines, and on prominent hill tops. The dramas of the past provide a strong basis for re-enactment, animation, and story-telling, and give us an opportunity to bring fresh meaning to these archaeological sites.

Inevitably the geography of the Mourne-Gullion-Strangford area impacted how ruling dynasties and invaders selected sites and moved through the region. It is that dynamic relationship between the natural and cultural heritage that adds so much value to the concept of a Global Geopark, and is one that needs to be reinforced in the delivery of visitor experiences.

The visitor's interest in the *Game of Thrones* as a destination experience is a contemporary expression of a fascination for this age-old theme of 'castles, thrones, invaders & conquests'.



Ulaid dynasties, high kings, and invaders from the sea have all left their stories in the shadows of archaeological ruins. Castles, keeps and towers can be found on prominent locations and each has a story to tell of power, rebellion and conquest. With Viking invasions and clashes in Strangford Lough, the warring of the Anglo-Normans and the Battle of Down – the stage for modern fantasy and ongoing sagas of dynastic warfare has been set with *A Song of Ice and Fire* now played out in *The Game of Thrones*.



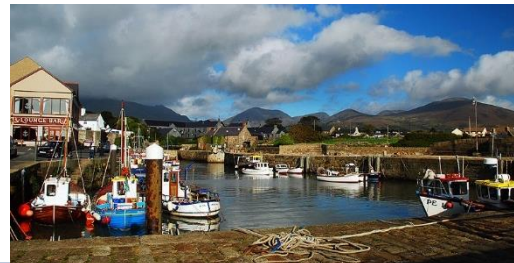
THEME

Livelihoods & Lifestyles

The buildings and bridges, the harbours and town centres, the uplands and reservoirs, the abandoned rail-lines and canal way – all elements in the landscape that we take for granted, yet hold the potential to fascinate the visitor if we have the ability to build authentic stories of our more recent past and integrate into our visitor activities. Whether it is walking the Bessbrook and Newry Tramway Trail or stopping to explore Kilkeel Harbour, there are opportunities to add new dimensions to these existing activities that will encourage visitors to stay longer and to spend more in our communities.

The visitors we are looking to attract are seeking authentic experiences, ways of connecting with locals, something bespoke and different. We, in turn, have the opportunity of developing immersive experiences that take in everything from our local pubs and festivities to finding new ways of elevating our creative culture, our traditions, and our local food and drink.

The past continues to shape today. The story of our industrial, agricultural and maritime heritage is around every corner. The tapestry of fields and stone walls, the fishing villages, the legacy of the railway and canal era, the proud linen mills, the corn mills, and the stately buildings that stand as a strong reminder of the importance of our granite and the significance of commerce throughout our history. Times of prosperity and the lifestyles of stately homes stand today in mellowed contrast to times of hardship and stories of famine ships setting sail from Warrenpoint. Today this rich tapestry of livelihoods and lifestyles that depend on maintaining the integrity of our *mountains, myths and maritime* heritage is still with us – in our music, our arts, our museums, and in the words of our poets and writers; in the unique blend of flavours that our terroir and local waters have produced; and, in that strong sense of community we offer as we celebrate this amazing heritage and our culture of today.



MOUNTAINS, MYTHS and MARITIME

A land where the mountains, myths and maritime themes are so intertwined as to be inseparable – *where the dark Mournes sweep down to the sea*¹. A land of the mystical where past and present coalesce. *Am I asleep? Or has the future come now and I am it?* A land that takes us back to the beginning of the very story of Ireland and allows us **to savour its mysteries, to immerse in its beauty, to climb its peaks, to sail its shores, to embrace its lyrics, and to indulge in its flavours.**

Fire & Ice

A geological story of fire and ice spanning 400 million years. From disappearing oceans and colliding landmasses, to mountains evolved from reservoirs of molten magma, circular fractures and volcanic eruptions. As fire and heat gave way to ice and glaciers, sculpted valleys and rolling lowland drumlins emerged. This interplay between the underlying geology and the surface processes has shaped the entire area and left us today with a **geological landscape of international significance** and a terrain that offers everything from huge expanses of shallow water and mudflats to the highest peaks in the country – **the perfect backdrop for anything from quiet contemplation to adrenalin highs.**

Giants, Druids & Early Saints

*I have seen a landscape which, under a particular light, made me feel that at any moment a giant might raise its head over the next ridge*¹. A landscape that displays the relics of giants, druids and early saints. The passage of ancient time is marked with Neolithic megaliths and cairns, giant folklore of Finn McCool and Cú Chulainn, frontier hill forts and earthen ramparts, high crosses and holy wells, the graves of Ireland's earliest saints and monastic ruins, and the compelling story of St. Patrick. A sense of mysticism still pervades today and these archeological sites remain as a testament to the spiritual journey of our forebears.

Castles, Thrones, Invaders & Conquests

Ulaid dynasties, high kings, and invaders from the sea have all left their stories in the shadows of archaeological ruins. Castles, keeps and towers can be found on prominent locations and each has a story to tell of power, rebellion and conquest. With Viking invasions and clashes in Strangford Lough, the warring of the Anglo-Normans and the Battle of Down – the stage for modern fantasy and ongoing sagas of dynastic warfare has been set with *A Song of Ice and Fire* now played out in *The Game of Thrones*.

Livelihoods & Lifestyles

The past continues to shape today. The story of our industrial, agricultural and maritime heritage is around every corner. The tapestry of fields and stone walls, the fishing villages, the legacy of the railway and canal era, the proud linen mills, the corn mills, and the stately buildings that stand as a strong reminder of the importance of our granite and the significance of commerce throughout our history. Times of prosperity and the lifestyles of stately homes stand today in mellowed contrast to times of hardship and stories of famine ships setting sail from Warrenpoint. Today this rich tapestry of livelihoods and lifestyles that depend on maintaining the integrity of our mountains, myths and maritime is still with us – in our music, our arts, our museums, and in the words of our poets and writers; in the unique blend of flavours that our terroir and local waters have produced; and, in that strong sense of community we offer as we celebrate this amazing heritage and our culture of today.

The Thematic Framework

This framework presents the key themes – the unique propositions that can be used in developing experiences that are distinctive to the Mourne-Gullion-Strangford area. Once you are familiar with these themes and how they can be used across the entire area, you will begin to see how the framework can help businesses create 'cut-through' in a busy market-place and how it can bring a sense of cohesion to the destination.

How our stories fit the thematic frame



The stories below are those that were ‘collected’ during the process of developing this Plan. It is likely that there are more stories, and these can be noted in the columns. As you think about each theme and your locality, review the lists and note any additional stories that would contribute to a theme.

<i>Fire & Ice</i>	<i>Giants, Druids & Early Saints</i>	<i>Castles, Thrones, Invaders & Conquests</i>	<i>Livelihoods & Lifestyles</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tectonic / volcanic / glaciation activity – the geological story and the tale of two oceans • International significance of landscapes & ecosystems • Diverse coastlines and seascapes • Granite – formation & classification • The story of water / Silent Valley • Ecology – coastal & upland – e.g. Murlough Bay’s 6,000 year old sand-dune system • Ancient woodlands • Resource assets (land & water) and outdoor adventure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early Neolithic / Bronze Age + archaeological sites • Finn McCool & Cú Chulainn – Cloughmore Stone • Manannán Mac Lir • Bricrium • Gap of the North • Cattle raids & Bronze Age ramparts & ditches • Fairies • St. Patrick & arrival of Christianity • Kilnassagart Stone – one of the oldest inscribed stones in Ireland • St. Bronagh’s bell • Crosses – Christian sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vikings • Coast as the highway • Dál Fiatach • Normans – John de Courcy • Edward the Bruce • Castle sites – their stories – Dundrum, Ardglass, Greencastle, Narrow Waters • Gap of the North • Rath • Downpatrick story • Battles & rebellion – Battle of Down, Betsy Gray songs, Battle of Dolly’s Brae, Bloody Bridge, Mass Rocks • Plantation history • International trade • Narnia • Game of Thrones 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farm landscape – stone walls – Mourne Wall; hedgerows - Lecale • Maritime stories – fishing, ship wrecks, lighthouse • Smuggling • Industries – granite, linen, export – role of Newry • Hans Sloane & the story of chocolate • Railway and canal • Famine and emigration • Stately homes • Horse racing • Writers / films • Contemporary arts/music/crafts • Links with US, Canada, Australia – GIs and convicts • Traditional sports & daily life • Brewing & distilling



4. Theme-based Experiences

Creating *EPIC Moments*

*‘Beauty is a great place to start
....but....modern travellers demand much
more – they don’t just want to see, they want
to feel. They don’t just want to tick things off
a list, they want life-affirming experiences
they’ll never forget.’*

Tourism Events Queensland

Developing *EPIC Moments* and new experiences

The following pages in this Plan illustrate types of experiences that can be further enhanced or developed as new experiences. This is not an exhaustive list, but is designed to show how to profile the stories that are unique to this area, and how businesses can work together to create experiences that are ‘joined up’. A collaborative approach to developing and delivering experiences adds value all round – to the individual operator who can offer an enhanced product through working with a partner, and to the visitor who benefits from the activity that has been enriched through the merging of experiential elements.

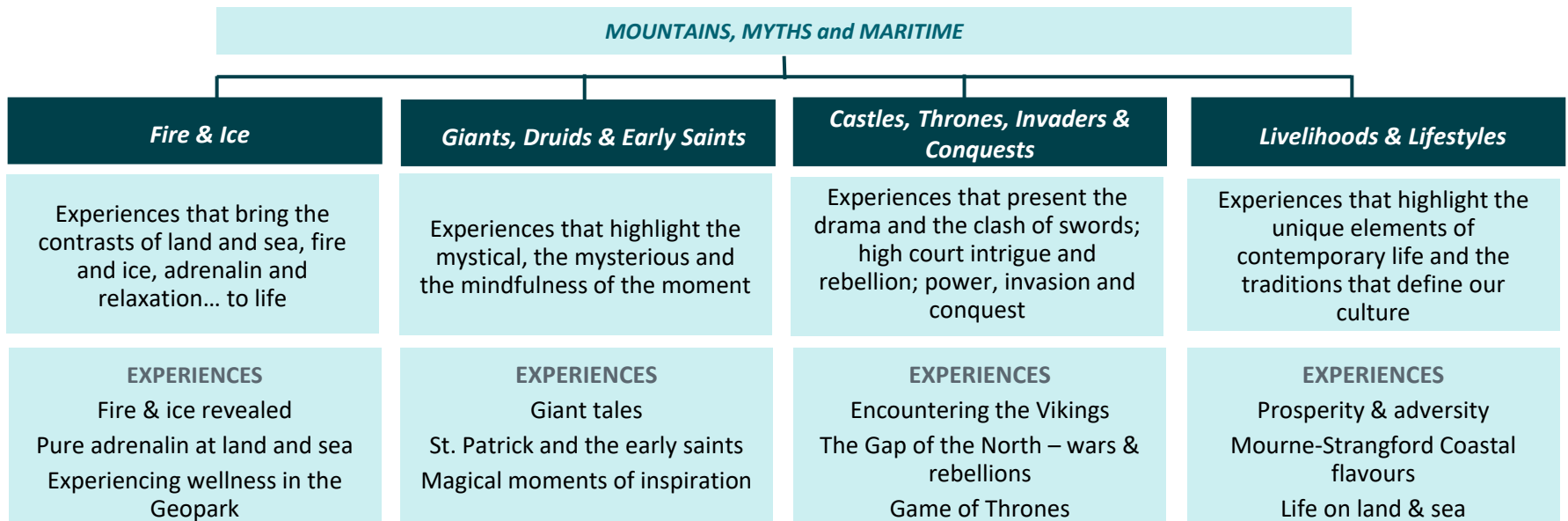
Each themed set of experiences (e.g. Fire & Ice Revealed) is presented with a short statement to position the experiences, a description of a potential EPIC moment, followed by ideas and notes on how to develop the activities. The themes and positioning statements are NOT designed to be mutually exclusive and many experiences will be supported by a range of themes. *Experiences in italics are dependent on proposed capital projects that are anticipated at some point in the future.*

Hallmarks of success

An experience that:

- Offers quality and is delivered as seamlessly as possible, and in a way that makes it easy for the visitor to plan, book and participate in the experience.

- Targets a specific market and is designed accordingly. Each market segment is looking for something slightly different, and an approach that looks at their travel values and what motivates them to engage in activities, will be more successful.
- Creates a platform to tell part of the destination story.
- Provides an opportunity to engage with locals.
- Promotes a sense of discovery and an emotional connection with people & place.
- Builds on our local strengths and brings to the forefront our coastal flavours, leaving the visitor truly inspired by everything related to our **mountains, myths and maritime** heritage.
- Leaves visitors feeling enriched, rejuvenated, wanting to return and keen to share the experience on social media or other contexts.



THE EXPERIENCE: **Fire & Ice Revealed**

The geological story is foundational to all our stories – the shape of our landscape, the nature of our coastline, our granite buildings and archaeological ruins, even the unique flavours of our food. An understanding of this theme reveals the distinctive identity of the area, explains the global classification of granite and the international significance of the proposed Geopark.

While the experiences listed here focus particularly on the geological story, this theme has the potential to be integrated into the delivery of many experiences described under other themes.

CREATING EPIC MOMENTS

Multi-day themed hiking experiences – the increase in demand for planned hiking itineraries and slow travel options has grown significantly in the international markets. This type of activity is ideal as a basis for interpreting the landscape and the underlying geology. The region has a diverse number of existing long-distance trails: Lecale Way (47 miles); Ring of Gullion Way (38 miles); Newcastle Way (26 miles); Mourne Way (23 miles) – but currently it is very difficult to get a clear overview of potential walking/hiking multi-day themed experiences. With assets of this nature and the extensive areas available for hiking, there is considerable potential to create and market ‘joined-up’ itineraries.

Guided hiking experiences provide an ideal opportunity to present the geological stories of Ice & Fire, together with a number of other themes. Equally, multi-day themed hiking experiences can be delivered in a self-guided format, with each format appealing to a distinct market.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

To be effective in developing a market ready product, the following need to be put in place:

- Walking holiday infrastructure and related services, including baggage transfer services, route cards and maps, appropriate signage, and daily weather forecast services made available through the accommodation venue.
- Identification of accommodation partners in close proximity to the walking route. These businesses need to be ‘hiker-friendly’ with appropriate facilities for drying clothes etc. Consider giving visitors the option to select between at least two grades of accommodation when booking – higher-end and mid-range. The accommodation needs to be integrated into the package to facilitate ease of purchase. If the venue is not close to the trail, consideration will need to be given to providing transfer transportation.
- Meals packaged with the experience to include breakfast, and possibly packed lunch and evening meals – ideally presenting local cuisine – or sufficient and accurate information for visitors to make their own arrangements, including opening hours.
- Identification of certified guides that are recognised for their ability to engage effectively – for guided itineraries.
- Consideration of graded alternative hikes in areas such as across the Mournes.
- Identification of value-add experiences in close proximity to the trail that will enhance the overall itinerary and provide opportunities to connect with locals, sample regional produce, engage in local culture, and provide unique insights into everyday life, past and present.
- Identification of an appropriate inbound tour operator to partner with that can market to international markets – e.g. Headwater Holidays Ltd., Sherpa Expeditions, Contours Walking Holidays.

In planning the itinerary, careful consideration needs to be given to developing the ‘story-board’. This should be ‘mapped’ out against the proposed route to see how the experience and the underlying story/themes can best unfold. Ensure that businesses involved in the overall delivery of the experience have an understanding of the itinerary and ways in which their role assists in exceeding overall expectations.

THE EXPERIENCE: Fire & Ice Revealed

CREATING EPIC MOMENTS

Themed day hikes – these hikes are already available, but can be difficult to ‘locate’. Websites such as Context Walks highlight the potential approach that is needed in creating short, bookable tours, walks or hikes and the benefits of presenting a readily accessible click, book and pay menu.

Swimming in the wild – conquer the challenge of distance swimming in the wilds and explore the coastline of Camlough Lake from boat. This Lake is receiving increasing recognition for wild swimming which could form the basis of a new microadventure experience

Experiencing the summits – assuming that the signature access opportunity that is being explored for the Mourne Mountains moves forward, this development offers the potential to build an exciting summit-top experience that combines the adventure of ascending and descending in a new access facility with a new range of summit-based guided activities. Furthermore, with Geopark designation and new forms of access in place, the development of a proposed interpretive centre will also significantly enhance the ability to present the geological story and related themes to the visitor.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

All themes provide the basis for creating new short day or half-day walking or hiking experiences that are themed and targeted at small groups. The combination of the landscape and rich array of themes and stories that can be used to animate this landscape, together with the potential to build in additional components related to what other businesses can offer, such as afternoon tea at a unique teashop, create the basis of a diverse range of themed day hikes.

Assuming Geopark status, there is the potential to develop a themed series that ties the human stories in with the geology. **In the Footsteps of.....** Saint Patrick, Cú Chulainn or the Celts in general, a stone mason, John de Courcy, or C.S. Lewis, all provide interesting perspectives on the landscape and will help in tying the geological and cultural elements together in an appropriate way for a Global Geopark.

Wild swimming in dark and deep waters is not for the faint-of-heart – but for those looking for a unique challenge and the opportunity to train for the Camlough Lake Water Festival, it could be just right. In developing the experience, it will need to be a combination of:

- Professional swimming instruction and training;
- The opportunity to explore the lake from boat and to hear the geological history of this ancient Faultline, its former role in producing electricity, and appeal for anyone who fishes;
- Accommodation and evening entertainment that enhances a sense of camaraderie and provides the context for celebrating personal achievement.

An experience of this nature will set the destination apart and will increase the spend of both day and overnight visitors. It presents an ideal tour for cruise passengers coming into either Warrenpoint or Belfast and can be combined with other iconic experiences for longer day excursions, such as a Game of Thrones experience.

The facility provides the basis for developing guided summit interpretive hikes, star-gazing in the evening, and winter viewing. Whether it is yoga on the summit or an alternative setting for mindful reflection, summit experiences associated with a new form of access will appeal to a broad range of visitors.

An interpretive centre will augment the range of facilities for inclement weather and can offer a base for evening talks, films, and for presenting the range of stories associated with the area.

THE EXPERIENCE: Pure Adrenalin at land and sea

Experience the adrenalin of adventure and personal challenge year round, and discover how the underlying granites shape the climb or accelerate the ride; how the ebb and flow of our currents and the nature of our loughs and coastline offer everything from serenity on the water to intense challenge; and how the glacial drumlins gave us the landscape of gentle hiking and biking.

The destination already has a wide range of adventure activities available and has strong domestic market recognition for a number of its adventure operators. To attract the international and UK market, there is an opportunity to develop and offer experiences that build on existing activities, but provide an element that adds interest and intrigue, and can be readily purchased by the online consumer. Section 1 on trends has identified the growing interest in ‘microadventures’ and shows that the components of an effective adventure trip now need to be much more than simply the physical activity. This is where the story-telling, the integration of a cultural experience, and/or the opportunity to participate in some other form of learning packaged into a single marketable experience can enhance the overall value of the product to the traveller. Here again, it is about packaging and presenting existing activities in a more joined up manner to increase the overall appeal.

CREATING EPIC MOMENTS

Re-position existing adventure activities – whether it is mountain biking, road cycling, climbing, sailing, or coastal kayaking, there are activity operators already offering these activities. Newry, Mourne & Down is seeking to become the premier outdoor/adventure destination in Ireland, and the basis of this aspiration is already in place.

The challenge now is to create new and innovative ‘microadventures’ that will appeal to travellers who also want to experience somewhere off the beaten track; taste the local beer; see how it pairs with mountain lamb or fresh oysters; hear local stories; or enjoy the ambiance of a barbeque.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

Repositioning has started and operators are already benefitting from adding a new dimension to traditional activities.

- **Trails and ales** (recently developed and tested by Life Adventure Centre) – a day of e-mountain biking in the Mourne and Slieve Croob area that allows visitors to savour both the landscape and local ales in a new way. The opportunity to meet with local brewers, enjoy the benefits of an experienced guide, and gain insight on life in the hills without undue physical exertion widens the appeal of the experience and provides the connection with locals that is increasingly being sought.

Continue with this trend through creating activity-based experiences that provides the opportunity to do something unusual or ‘braggable’.

- **Guided kayak/culinary experience to Island Taggart** – access unto Strangford Lough can be challenging for the visitor. A guided activity of this nature removes the logistical issues for the participant, and provides the opportunity to visit somewhere unusual, learn about the formation and biodiversity of Strangford Lough and the birdlife of the island, understand the role of the National Trust on the island, imagine the Vikings or Saint Patrick approaching the coastline along these waters or farming this island in more recent history, and enjoy a ‘picnic’ of local foods and drinks. The activity can be further packaged with a night of accommodation in Strangford. (Salt Island provides an alternative option).
- **Learn to sail in the Lough** – there are sailing courses already available in both Strangford and Carlingford Loughs. However these are not targeted at visitors. Explore working with a local sailing club to develop an experience packaged with meals (highlighting local seafood) and accommodation, together with an evening itinerary and insights on the geological history and what makes these areas distinctive sailing waters.

THE EXPERIENCE: Pure Adrenalin at land and sea

CREATING EPIC MOMENTS

Fishing in waters ancient and new – again, both fresh-water and salt fishing as activities already exist but need to be reassessed to see where further experiential value can be added. These activities have domestic appeal, but will need to be repositioned as a unique experience to attract a wider market.

Cycling the byways and greenways – the region has so much potential to become a well recognised cycling destination. With the existing country roads and the ongoing extensions to the greenways, the ferries, together with the scenery there is potential to create day and multi-day tour itineraries.

Flights of fancy – Build on the Festival of Flight to offer the bird's eye view of the area, or a behind the scenes experience.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

The strengths include:

- A great selection of fishing lakes, spate streams and reservoirs, offering coarse and game fishing, and coastal waters providing acclaimed sea angling opportunities.
- Geological settings that provide waters 'ancient and new', and the basis for tying in this geological story with the type of experience on offer, from the waters that lie within the glacial sculpted Cam Lough Fault line, to the restored Kilkeel River and the man-made Newry Canal.
- Existing operators and charter-boats.

What's needed? The perspective that turns this into a 'bucket-list' activity for the area.

Packaged day and overnight trips that provide experienced guides, quality watercraft, the ability to cater for all levels of ability, fishing equipment and wading gear, and an understanding that the visitor is looking for a memorable experience. The ability to clean and vacuum pack the catch will be an added bonus for many.

Developing multi-day guided or self-guided itineraries and tours will require similar steps as outlined under themed day hikes. The cycling tours presents additional opportunities to integrate interesting pre-booked experiences into the tours, such as a half-day felting course at Turnip House, a time of prayer and reflection with the Benedictine Monks and a chance to explore the monastic heritage of Kilbroney, time to sample craft beers at a local pub, or the opportunity to meet with a local farmer to hear about farming in the uplands.

- Identify suitable routes where there is potential to create experiences through blending the cycling with immersive activities that highlight local culture and heritage, and work with these businesses to create day and multi-day packages.
- Assess signage and work with the NMDDC to address any needs.
- Identify 'bike-friendly' accommodation facilities that can be included in the itineraries, including safety of bike storage.
- Offer e-bike options and pick-up services, and ensure that the route maps and information are adequate and easy to follow.

Through working with one of the flight companies, this highly successful event could be made all the more thrilling with an exclusive experience that offers an aerial tour or the opportunity to see the planes close-up and meet the pilots behind the scenes.

THE EXPERIENCE: Pure Adrenalin at land and sea

CREATING EPIC MOMENTS

Biking & barbeque – the area is gaining notoriety in mountain biking circles, particularly in Rostrevor. Build on this through creating new events aimed at women or children and combine these events with family fun or opportunities for interaction with locals in the evening.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

The focus of this experience is to widen the market and to grow the appeal of the area for mountain biking, while reducing any perceived gender gap. Newry, Mourne & Down has already hosted a series of high profile events such as the Red Bull Foxhunt, the Irish Downhill Mountain Bike Series, and Mourne Psyche 8. There is potential to create new events that are aimed at younger riders and women. Consider developing events that include elements such as:

- A guided trail ride for young riders that involves some of Ireland’s top mountain bike riders as guides – position it as an opportunity to bike with the champions – (East Coast Adventure are well positioned to take a lead in this);
- Mini race event for younger riders;
- A mountain bike orienteering event;
- Skills clinics and bike maintenance workshops;
- Women’s team event and women-only coaching sessions;
- Exhibit stands with the opportunity to try on female specific gear;
- Regular family festivities, music, and a barbeque in the campsite area at Kilbroney Caravan Park

Work with local businesses to offer accommodation packages. For a women’s event, staying at the Rostrevor Inn and participating in a traditional session or a folk club evening will add to the *EPIC* nature of the experience.

Strangford Lough land and sea safari – the sea safari component already exists with the rib trips that are offered by Clearsky Adventures.

Build on this concept to offer a more inclusive experience with lunch in a pub, in addition to a well-structured themed interpretive tour that highlights local geology, ecology and history.

- Pair the experience with a land-based activity such as a local food tour that could also be combined with cycling;
- Stay overnight in Strangford or in Killyleagh.

Newry, Mourne & Down Summer Trophy – this event is played over the Spa Golf Club, St. Patrick’s Golf Club and Royal County Down Golf Club and culminates with a Gala Dinner.

The opportunity with this event is in developing themed package add-ons that will increase the length of stay. These need to be identified and specified on existing booking sites such as thegolfpa.com. Offering a selection of themes and activities will increase the uptake.

THE EXPERIENCE: Elemental wellness and relaxation

Embrace the intoxicating mountain air and relax to the sounds of the waves, while gaining an appreciation for the unique blend of land and sea. Discover the revitalising qualities of seaweed and local minerals, and find new ways to become immersed in elements of healthy living in a setting that has been famed for luxury and decadence since the late 1880s.

The natural elements of a Global Geopark landscape and its association with the elemental forces of fire and ice can be used to strengthen existing health and wellness experiences and expand the focus on relaxation in new directions. The iconic Slieve Donard Resort and Spa and the restoration of Killeavy Castle as a luxury boutique spa and wellness centre, provide a strong basis for building a Geopark focused wellness experience.

CREATING EPIC MOMENTS

Strengthen existing wellness experiences – as travellers seek new perspectives on health, wellness, relaxation and healthy living, the elemental themes of fire and ice, the focus on the landscape, and the opportunities to experience majestic mountain peaks, river valleys, undulating lowlands, and coastal waters can all be incorporated into revitalised and innovative wellness experiences.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

The Global Wellness Institute defines wellness tourism as "journeys made by tourists who seek to improve or maintain their well-being during or as a result of their trip." The growth in demand for wellness experiences is a global phenomena and incorporates a wide range of components from yoga and mindfulness to sport fitness, outdoor activities, the concept of sustainability and conscious eating. With Global Geopark designation and the emphasis on geotourism, there is scope to strengthen existing wellness experiences.

- Develop an **Only in (named) Geopark Wellness Experience** – a unique package that blends treatments based on local elements and activities that are distinctive to the area. Whether it is new spa treatments, yoga on the beach, a visit to the UK's only Seaweed Bathhouse, forest therapy, or local foods that connect visitors to farmers, growers and fishermen, combined with local activities such as golf, sailing, hiking or e-mountain biking – the Wellness Experience can be truly distinctive to the Geopark. Variations of the experience can be developed depending on businesses that can be brought together in partnership.
- Work with event planners associated with extreme and endurance events to offer an additional wellness experience to participants that can be booked at the point of registration.
- As wellness becomes increasingly core to the destination, smaller businesses such as a strategically located B&B can be encouraged to add on experiences and wellness activities to their core business – to diversify the range of experiences.

Kayaking the Canal – experiences built around potentially kayaking the Newry Canal are aspirational.

The development of the Newry Canal as a 'blueway' remains a project that may advance in the future. Its value in creating the basis for new experiences and for animating Newry City centre further is substantial. As the canal becomes fully navigable for small craft, it will allow for multi-day trip packaging that can be combined with other activities such as cycling, to explore adjacent areas. The story of the canal as the first summit level canal to be built in Ireland or Great Britain, its linkages with the ship canal and its use to move coal, together with the stories of emigrants fleeing the famine and sailing to New York from Newry provide a context that will add real interest to anyone seeking an experience that offers relaxation, physical activity and a new way of exploring the countryside.

THE EXPERIENCE: **Giant tales**

The stories of giants can be found across the region, and their ‘marks’ on the landscape are there to be discovered. This mythical presence is the very essence of this part of Ireland. This sense of mystery intertwined with myths is captured in M.J. Murphy’s poem relating to Slieve Gullion:

*Mountain of Mystery;
Of Fionn the brave;
Of Saint-scholared Gael;
Of legend and tale – I am your slave.*

This theme is already well established in the area with events such as Wake the Giant Festival, and attractions such as The Giant’s Liar. The Big Stone at Cloughmore illustrates the blending of mythology with geology, while the pre-historic dolmens around the region only seem to ‘confirm’ that giants must have walked the hills at one point in time. With human settlement dating back over 6,000 years in the Ring of Gullion, this early period of time can be used as a lens to explore a fascinating cultural legacy and to look at the inter-play of this early period of human history with the Ice & Fire theme. It is not surprising to find landmarks, such as the Lough of Calleach Béara at the summit of Slieve Gullion, be the subject of legend and superstition – a story that only adds to the sense of accomplishment when you reach the peak.

CREATING EPIC MOMENTS

In the footsteps of Celtic Warriors – with legendary warrior figures such as Cú Chulainn arising out of an explosive landscape, there is scope for creating an experience that transports the visitor back in time to stories that would rival any modern day fantasy. Intrigue, romance, grief, strength and power all play out in the dramas that unfolded in the Ring of Gullion.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

Work has already commenced in developing this unique experience. There are a range of distinctive elements that can be woven together to create a truly innovative experience – including fire rituals (fire festivals marked the turning of the seasons), ice swimming, drumming activities, packaged together with a Bronze Age feast. The archaeological sites can be explored, and hills climbed all within the context of an unfolding drama of intrigue, romance, grief, strength, and power.

Adding in modern day elements, such as watching a game of Poc Fada or learning how to play it, allows the visitor to experience *A land of the mystical where past and present coalesce*.

Bringing an experience of this nature to market will require:

- Partnering with an accommodation venue that can add to the overall theme;
- Utilising appropriate transportation and providing pick-up and drop-off services to points of arrival, such as the Newry Train Station;
- Developing an appropriate business model that will allow for a call to action, the ability to purchase the packaged experience, and the basis for strengthening the experience and adding new elements to it, such as a craft activity or an expanded musical activity.

The Celtic Feast could also be developed as a stand-alone, with the packaged activities aimed at a smaller group tour.

The An Grianan Hotel in Inishowen provides an [example](#) of a Celtic Feast Night experience with Irish dancing, singing, battle re-enactments all around the legends of Tuatha De Danann.

THE EXPERIENCE: **Giant tales**

CREATING EPIC MOMENTS

In the footsteps of Celtic Druids – the stories of archaeological sites and burial grounds and the tracing of holy wells and the arrival of Christianity into Celtic Druid society offers a fascinating opportunity to explore the inter-relationships between the landscape and religion, and the evolution of spiritual thinking.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

Again, initial work has started to bring together an experience within the Ring of Gullion area that will combine the elements of pre-Christianity, early Christianity and modern day spirituality. The celebration of dark and light, the circular nature of time, and recognition of this Celtic calendar is already in place with the Lúnasa Festival. Developing an experience that can be offered outside the festival can bring together activities, talks and experiences relating to mindfulness, healing, and foraging based on traditional beliefs.

The experience can be presented in different formats – as a retreat, a guided tour, an opportunity to learn a new craft skill (such as a traditional Brigid’s Cross). A version of it could also incorporate learning how to play the ancient strategy game of Fidchell – allegedly invented by Lugh, the Irish God of Light, and played very skilfully by his son, Cú Chulainn.

Again, bringing together the accommodation, a culinary element, transportation, and the various activities into a cohesive and well-themed experience is what is required to be successful in attracting international visitors.

Variations on the theme can be developed such as a Samhain event at Halloween, which could incorporate mask-making, costumes, storytelling by a fire, and foods that celebrate the harvest time.

THE EXPERIENCE: **The arrival of Saint Patrick and the early saints**

The arrival of Saint Patrick is one of the key moments in the birth of Christianity within Ireland. There is fluidity in the transition from Druids to Saints and much to discover in tracing the story from cairns to crosses.

CREATING EPIC MOMENTS

In the footsteps of Saint Patrick – the Downpatrick area can lay claim to so much of the story of this world-wide recognised saint. The importance of the area as a spiritual centre is evident with the relics of Inch Abbey and the imposing presence of Down Cathedral.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

This story needs to be presented from a fresh perspective with a greater opportunity for an immersive experience. Bespoke guided small group tours are available but difficult to find on the internet. Work with a guide/historian (such as Dr Thérèse Cullen, founder of Irish Monastic Tours, who has developed a tour, *Saint Patrick: The Man, the Myth, the Legend* to raise the profile of this tour as a bookable event, and work with partners such as Denvir’s to include accommodation and dinner.

The area has much to offer in telling stories that relate to all the themes, but these are currently underplayed. Whether it is geological, natural or cultural heritage, there are opportunities to develop intimate experiences that can give a fresh perspective on this rich heritage.

Attention needs to focus on tying the Saint Patrick’s Centre, the Down Museum, the Cathedral and the Downpatrick & County Down Railway Museum in a more cohesive manner with attention to ease of access for older visitors. These are four key assets, and the linkages between them are easy to miss.

THE EXPERIENCE: **The arrival of Saint Patrick and the early saints**

CREATING EPIC MOMENTS

Saint Patrick's Walk – the Pilgrim Trail – this 82 mile EPIC trail from Armagh to Downpatrick is in place, with the supporting print materials and signage. It now needs to be repositioned into a bucket-list 'pilgrimage' trail experience – Ireland's equivalent to the Camino de Santiago Trail.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

The steps identified in relation to developing multi-day hikes all apply to this trail. Abbey Tours are already expressing interest in developing and promoting itineraries for this trail, so there is an urgent need to put the walking holiday infrastructure in place. In addition, attention needs to focus identifying accommodation partners and working with them to make sure that they fully understand the needs of long-distance walkers, and have the capacity to contribute to the telling of the Saint Patrick story. Other areas that need to be addressed:

- Working with local land owners to increase the off-road sections of the trail – such as between Downpatrick and Dundrum.
- Determining new ways of entering into Downpatrick that would allow trail users to avoid the busy roadway and would provide a real sense of accomplishment through creating a new line of approach toward the Cathedral.
- Using technology more effectively to enhance the experience through story-telling.
- Providing bookable opportunities to meet with a local guide in areas that are particularly rich with Celtic and early Christian sites.
- Creating an additional bookable experience to mark the completion of the trail, to include a behind the scenes tour of the Saint Patrick Centre, the Cathedral and/or the Down Museum, together with a celebratory lunch.

High Crosses, Round Towers & Evensong – as the birthplace of Christianity in Ireland, the region promises to reveal many insights into the country's Christian heritage and can offer the chance to become immersed in local traditions and experiences.

A bespoke experience that brings the story of Christianity and monastic heritage in Ireland to life, may not appeal to everyone, but it will certainly create a high level of interest in smaller international niche markets. There are excellent guide books available such as *The High Crosses & Round Towers of County Down* and *In the Footsteps of St. Patrick, Early Christianity in County Down*, but limited availability of experience-based tours. The Saint Patrick's Centre provides the orientation – from the Centre, there are a range of sites and themes waiting to be explored. In developing this experience:

- Identify suitable guides that understand how to animate a church, cathedral or archaeological site in an inspirational way (it is easy to get this wrong for the 'non-specialist').
- Partner with smaller-scale boutique accommodation to offer the opportunity of an overnight stay.
- Where possible, add in immersive moments such as attending evensong in a church or arrange for an opportunity to participate in creating traditional decorations for Harvest. Consider exploring the option of a candle-making workshop in the evening.
- Make sure that the meals included offer the chance to profile local foods and drinks
- Consider a 'behind the scenes' experience at the Down Museum or Bagenall's Castle.

THE EXPERIENCE: **Magical moments of inspiration**

The mountains and the sea are renowned for the way in which they have inspired creativity down through the ages. Our creative arts and music reflect the elemental forces of fire and ice, of land and sea. Writers, such as C.S. Lewis drew inspiration for his classic Narnia world of fantasy from the Mourne Mountains, while M.J. Murphy felt that Slieve Gullion itself seemed to whisper ancient secrets to the gliding mists that caressed its heathered slopes. The mountains, myths and maritime elements have all touched many who create music, song, and dance, and have inspired artists, photographers, poets and artisans alike. Through building on this rich association between landscape and the arts, and the existing artistic strengths, there is potential to create experiences that result in 'magical moments of inspiration'.

CREATING EPIC MOMENTS

There are a number of music festivals that already offer *EPIC moments*, including Fiddlers Green Festival, Blues on the Bay Festival, Soma Festival, and the Lú Cinn Fleadh Festival. Workshops, guided hikes, food fest, tall ship cruises on the Newry Ship Canal and art exhibitions together with the core events of the festivals provide magical moments of inspiration and the basis for continuing to build out an extended focus on the arts in this part of the region.

Inspired by Narnia seeks to leverage the existing strengths through an ongoing focus on offering opportunities to learn and participate in a range of artistic disciplines.

Music from the rafters – offering year-round performances in alternative venues, such as churches will provide further magical moments of inspiration.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

The collective profile of the existing festivals needs to be raised to strengthen the region's association with signature music events and to promote cross-marketing. Through working with businesses, there remains opportunities to develop specific experiences that leverage the existing festivals, and offer additional reason to stay overnight.

Inspired by Narnia is all about building on this strength throughout the year and giving the Mourne-Gullion-Strangford area the preeminent position in the country for a wide range of music experiences.

- Identify times of the year and week when local accommodation venues have the capacity to accommodate small groups and use these times to determine the schedule of new events.
- Start with developing a participatory workshop based on any of the creative disciplines and build an overnight programme that includes the opportunity to learn new skills, using artists from the region in addition to out-of-region experts.
- Combine the learning activities with an opportunity to explore the local area through a guided walk or a relaxation activity that helps the participants to draw inspiration from the mountains and the sea.
- Include existing experiences, such as a 'traditional music session' or a 'writer's evening at the Rostrevor Inn.
- Work with local restaurants to make sure that the experience package includes the opportunity to savour local foods and drink.
- Provide transit transportation for visitors arriving by rail from Dublin or Belfast.
- Highlight the local stories throughout the experience.

Tunes in the Churches in Dublin and Galway provides an example of a successful similar initiative. Again, building specific over-night packages will extend the benefit of such events into the wider community.

THE EXPERIENCE: **Magical moments of inspiration**

CREATING EPIC MOMENTS

At Slieve Gullion's Foot © - the writer, Michael J. Murphy has preserved a way of life in his book of this title – *a classic evocation of a place and its people, illustrating the deep connection between the two...* Whether it is through creative writing or learning a craft, the Ring of Gullion offers unique ways of connecting with the landscape.

Captivating arts – with spectacular coastal, mountain and pastoral landscapes, unique remnants of cultural heritage, and architecture that ranges from the gothic to the industrial, it is not surprising to find this area has a significant number of artists and photographers, and a range of galleries. Creating an experience that is based on the visual arts – whether it is workshop-based, a tour of galleries, or a combination – will have distinctive appeal to a niche market.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

This experience is all about tapping into the local creativity in the Ring of Gullion. The landscape speaks to the soul, and there are opportunities to develop an experience that combines this evocative relationship between place and people. Elements that can be considered include:

- A literary reading in the grounds/small stage of Creggan Parish Church – a number of Ireland's best known Gaelic poets are buried in the graveyard;
- Creative writing workshop – discovering how to use the landscape to inspire creativity;
- Learning a new craft such as woodturning with a member of Ring of Gullion Handcrafters & Artists;
- A barbeque followed by an evening of local musicians and story-telling around a fire;
- Accommodation in pods under the stars at Slieve Gullion's Foot.

There are a number of artists and photographers that are interested in working with the tourism sector to create new experiences. These resources, combined with the Down Arts Centre, provides the basis for developing a compelling artistic experience offered over the course of a short break.

- Work with local artists and photographers to create a series of workshops offered throughout the year.
- Partner with local accommodation businesses and create an inclusive package.
- Consider including a touring component and the chance to meet local artists in their studios and galleries.
- Explore the opportunity to work with Keith Drury in creating a series unique to the Mourne-Gullion-Strangford area that can be explored virtually – with the potential capacity to bring local stories to life in a very unusual way.

THE EXPERIENCE: Encountering the Vikings

The stories of Viking raids along the coast of Ireland are prevalent. The ebb and flow of power was particularly evident in the Strangford Lough (Lough Cuan) area. Final defeat of the Vikings by the Ulaid brought about the renaissance of Downpatrick – their base of local power.

CREATING EPIC MOMENTS

Viking invasions – the arrival of the Vikings into Strangford Lough was by water, and an experience on water remains an opportune way of presenting this story, and weaving in the ability to appreciate the scenery along the River Quoile and to see it through the eyes of these early invaders.

Earth matters – what did foraging for food look like in the Medieval times? What can we learn today from these ancient practices?

Take a train to the past – a steam train ride to Inch Abbey already exists, but this experience has potential to be strengthened.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

The Magnus Viking Association has been trying for some time to elevate the profile of the Viking story through local events, re-enactments and proposals to build a medieval village. There is potential to move forward with developing a river trip up the Quoile in the Association's replica Viking vessels, with the possibility of rowing as far as Holymount Forest. While there are logistical issues relating to accessing the water and docking at places such as Inch Abbey, if this experience was to be developed it would offer a new perspective on the Downpatrick landscape, including the Mound of Down and the story of the ancient Dál Fiatach, the clan that ruled this part of the country in the first millennium.

Assuming the Viking experience develops with the creation of a medieval village near Ballyduggan Mill, there is scope to use the village as a base to offer additional activities, such as traditional crafts, textile working, combat skills and ancient games. The experience could be completed with a medieval meal and accommodation at Ballyduggan Mill, together with stories of the fall of Viking King Magnus Barefoot, before being transported back to Downpatrick.

Stay at Ballyduggan Mill and take a foraging class. Learn how to find wild garlic and make pesto sauce to accompany fresh bread. Develop a spring cleansing tonic through tapping and sapping birch trees. Forage for wild fruits to make distinctive jellies in a local farm kitchen, and take time out to learn about Celtic musical and meditative traditions.

The current experience would benefit from further development that should consider:

- Using actors of heritage guides to animate the experience at Inch Abbey and provide a stronger sense of destination.
- Improving the food and beverage service and making that part of the experience distinctive in its own right.
- Offering the opportunity to take a guided kayak tour – commencing at Inch Abbey.

The role of the train in local experiences could be strengthened further through capital investment in the line toward Ballyduggan Mill.

THE EXPERIENCE: **The Gap of the North – Tracing the Path of Wars & Rebellions**

Explore how the geology of the area created the most important strategic gap in all of Ireland – reflected in the folklore of Cú Chulainn, the story of the Battle of Moyry Pass, and the more recent political history of the Borderlands. Elsewhere, the reminders of defence systems can be seen in the castles scattered throughout.

CREATING EPIC MOMENTS

Gap of the North – how does geology impact defense strategies? Why did this ‘gap’ result in stalemate so many times over the centuries?

What does today’s landscape in general tell us about past battles, invasions and conquests, and how are the castle and tower house relics of the past an interesting reflection on the dynamics of attacking and defending.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

This experience presents an ideal opportunity to develop a guided driving tour that ties together the geological story of ‘Fire & Ice’ with the various stories down through the centuries of the battles, invasions and efforts to defend this part of the country. There are plans to develop a Tower House Tour and this could be broadened in scope to look at defence positions in general, and how the terrain is the key factor.

This type of tour can be offered in different areas, with slightly different themes and topics – e.g. the Lecale Coast, Ring of Gullion and the ‘Gap of the North’, and Downpatrick.

Elements to consider including:

- A visit to the Down Museum with a theme-based tour on this story-line.
- Visits to various castle and tower locations, with the opportunity to review the strategic context in relation to the terrain, and to note the use of granite.
- Extend or vary the theme to look at sites of wars, battles, and massacres in general – this may seem to be a fairly macabre storyline, but it could be tied in with fantasy battles associated with *Game of Thrones*. There is potential to work with a theatrical group, such as Footsteps Theatre to animate select castle sites, including present small cameo scenes from the Game of Thrones.
- An opportunity to savour local foods and to get some insight into how terrain and geology have ‘shaped the meal’.

With the restoration of Killeavy Castle (anticipated for 2018) and the development of the boutique hotel, this new form of accommodation to the destination can be used to bring a unique element to this overarching theme.

- The addition of a medieval banquet at Killeavy Castle in the evening would further add to the experience.

THE EXPERIENCE: **Game of Thrones**

Fact gives way to fiction and the power of the screen. Walking around the ancestral castle and the base of power for the House of Stark at Winterfell has an irresistible appeal that provides a new twist to this theme. *EPIC moments* are in place with the **Winterfell Experiences** and the **Winterfell Festival**, and will appeal to film enthusiasts and those curious to see what the buzz is all about. These should continue to be supported as a key part of the overall destination experience, but there is still an opportunity to develop an experience that examines this blend of fact and fiction.

When we look at the stories relating to ‘Castles, Thrones, Invaders & Conquests’ alongside the *Game of Thrones*, the landscape setting is the same, the storylines of power, invasion, conquest and betrayal are the same – so how can we use the fascination with the fictional element to bring new understanding to life on what actually took place in during centuries gone by.

CREATING EPIC MOMENTS

Wars, battles & massacres – the region’s history has as much bloodshed, violence and intrigue as *Game of Thrones*, but many of the stories have lost relevance to contemporary audiences. An interest in the past can be enhanced by looking at past clashes and crusades through a lens that understands fictional warfare.

A knight’s banquet – experience a little of the decadence of the ‘high’ life – the wine, the beer, the roast lamb, the trout, the music of entertainers. Creating a culinary event within a setting such as Dundrum Castle and recounting the John de Courcy story and his victory against King Rory MacDunlevy at the Battle of Downpatrick. See how the setting of this Norman castle controls access into Lecale, while providing commanding views over the bay and the mountains.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

There are many sites of battles and massacres across the region, but their stories often remain unknown to the visitor. A tour of sites – real and fantasy – such as Bloody Bridge, Ballynahinch, Downpatrick and Castle Ward/Winterfell could be developed to explore the impact of this theme in shaping contemporary landscape.

- If handled well and in a non-partisan way, this theme could be expanded to include the more recent history of The Troubles.
- Include a personalised tour of Down County Museum.
- Compare the pacifist approach of Daniel O’Connell and stage an O’Connell dinner at Denvir’s (where he addressed the crowd in the street from an upstairs window). Use the evening event to further unpack the sub-theme of wars, battles & massacres in the local area.

This event could be offered as an exclusive one off event in the year, or it could be repeated at different settings, such as Inch Abbey, recounting different stories. It is designed to take an historic setting and animate it in a way that is unique and memorable, brings history to life, while simultaneously combining this with a musical performance and a banquet of local food and drink.

- Use an event planner to pull the entire event together, including working with the N. Ireland Environment Agency.
- Package with local accommodation, and provide transport between the accommodation venues and the event.
- Given the unpredictable nature of weather, this event may have to be held under cover at the site.
- Work with other providers to include options for the following morning, such as a spa experience, or a round of golf.

THE EXPERIENCE: Prosperity & adversity

Commerce and industry have had a profound impact on the look and feel of the region today. The remains of this legacy – maritime and land-based, can be seen throughout – in stately homes, industrial heritage, street architecture, railways and canals. But industries come and industries go, and local economies wax and wane. A canal that carried coal, also carried Famine coffin ships, a Linen Hall built to service the linen industry soon housed prisoners before becoming a military barracks, while the famous Mourne granite exported worldwide to create buildings of grandeur was produced through the hard graft and daily toil of the ‘stone men’. The stories around prosperity and adversity can be retold in many different contexts and can bring the more contemporary elements of life to the forefront.

CREATING EPIC MOMENTS

City of Merchants – a festival animating Newry’s past and present, its maritime and industrial heritage and the ‘trade secrets’ of its commerce sector. A series of tours, interactive games, pop-up theatre, dance, street art, canal cruises, fireworks and food – were all combined in the 2017 inaugural event.

A town at the Races – what does a town look like when everyone gets involved in the presenting the story of the races, when the entertainment spills into the streets, when the shop windows reflect the theme, when the festivities extend to the golf course, the Arts Centre, and all the town’s favourite attractions, when the atmosphere compels you to stay that extra night?

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

This festival is a celebration of ‘Lifestyles & Livelihoods’ in Newry. It takes the themes of commerce, industry and maritime heritage and brings them to life in a creative way – themes that can be built upon further in the quarterly Twilight Markets that highlight local foods, chef demonstrations and entertainment.

- Continue to work with the retail sector to promote the value of engaging in these events in innovative ways.
- Develop packages that combine accommodation with the events. Package the Twilight Market with an experience during the day or the following day, such as a variation of Textiles and Tea (see below), or a customised tour of the City.
- Work with the retail sector to be able to include incentives that will encourage further local shopping.

The history of Downpatrick Racecourse extends back to 1685. Who went to the races then? Who went over the centuries since? Is there a chance to see any of these celebrities from a by-gone era?

This experience is based on the concept of the entire community of Downpatrick coming together to host a racing festival – one that would involve the retail sector, the restaurants and coffee shops, the Arts Centre, the key attractions, the golf course, and any business that has a room to offer to visitors who will look to stay overnight.

For this event to capture the imagination, it needs to take the racing event and see it roll out beyond the confines of the racecourse. Through the use of actors, celebrities of the past can stroll around telling their story, the life of Downpatrick over these past 300 years can be reflected in coffee shop discussions and pop-up theatre, and the celebrations at the Racecourse can reinforce the key themes.

- Work with all accommodators to develop multi-night packages.
- Aim toward positioning the festival as one of the Giant Adventures in Newry, Mourne & Down.
- Integrate a wide range of activities as add-on elements for both day and over-night visitors
- Include a finale either at the Race-Course or in town involving food and entertainment.

THE EXPERIENCE: **Prosperity & adversity**

CREATING EPIC MOMENTS

Hidden Gardens – what inspired garden design and species collections in this region? Discover plants from around the world – everywhere from South America to Tibet. Experience hidden gardens with an expert and enjoy meeting famed ‘hosts’ for afternoon tea.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

A focus on pulling the various gardens of the region together – public and private – to create a tour that is directed at visitors with an interest in our gardening heritage. This should be led by a recognised gardening expert, and can include gardens such as the walled arboretum at Castlewellan and the Maze, the gardens of Rostrevor House, Rowallane Garden, Castle Ward, and an exclusive visit to the private gardens at Myra Castle – (could include Mount Stewart).

This experience could offer:

- Afternoon tea with a host portraying an original owner such as Lady Annesley – recounting the design and development of the garden;
- Boutique accommodation such as Ballymote Country House;
- Dinner profiling local foods and an evening discussion with a celebrity gardener.

THE EXPERIENCE: **Mourne-Strangford Coastal flavours**

The region has the potential to become a lead destination in culinary flavours of coast and mountain. Whether it is a meal in a restaurant or local pub, or whether it is an integral element of an EPIC experience, the Mourne-Gullion-Strangford area can achieve stand-out in its local foods, artisan drink, and in the stories that relate to the terroir and the producers. There are a number of hands-on culinary experiences, bread-making activities and bespoke food tours that already offer *EPIC moments*, such as those hosted by **Northern Ireland Food Tours**, and strong partnerships are being developed with local producers. While the following experiences builds on this focus, it is important to see an opportunity to profile coastal flavours in almost every crafted experience.

CREATING EPIC MOMENTS

Catch & cook – this is a variation of *Fishing in waters ancient and new*. It focuses on the maritime stories – everything from the sea mythology of Manannán Mac Lir to the stories of the fishing industry, and times of prosperity and adversity. It includes cooking the catch with a professional chef, and enjoying the camaraderie evoked by the thrill of catching and the fun of cooking.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

This experience requires:

- A licensed charter operator and, potentially, a guide that can highlight the maritime heritage and the marine environment.
- A professional chef that has access to kitchen premises such as the Mourne Seafood Cookery School, with the capacity to accommodate a small group of visitors for the cooking demonstration and dinner.
- The opportunity to stay locally overnight.
- If developed within the Kilkeel area, the opportunity to visit the Mourne Maritime Visitor Centre at the Nautilus for a guided interpretive experience.

THE EXPERIENCE: **Mourne-Strangford Coastal flavours**

CREATING EPIC MOMENTS

Gin & chocolate – with the opening of the new Rademon Estate Distillery and its visitor facilities and the proximity of Killyleagh with its story of Hans Sloane and chocolate, this is the perfect pairing for a decadent and unique coastal flavours experience. The links with Game of Thrones add an additional element of intrigue to this EPIC moment

In addition to this experience, continue with developing the concept of the existing **Hans Sloane Chocolate & Fine Food Festival** that is hosted every two years.

Textiles & tea – an experience that unpacks the story of flax and the production of linen in the Newry-Bessbrook area. Imagine the linens from here once adorning the Savoy tables in London or the palatial dining saloon of the Cunard White Star Liner ‘Queen Mary’ on its inaugural 1936 voyage. Explore the remnants of this industry, its social context, and enjoy afternoon tea with a touch of class that is synonymous with linen finery.

This experience can be varied to include craft making opportunities, soda bread making and Mourne honey for the afternoon tea.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

Consumers have fallen in love with gin again, and the romance of chocolate remains strong. Here is the perfect opportunity to leverage market trends through offering an experience that is all about refining the flavour, indulging the taste buds, and learning how to make an exceptional product. This is a Masterclass in Gin & Chocolate that highlights what is involved in creating exceptional flavours, that explores the source of the wild clover, apples, elderflowers, and berries included in the botanicals, and that teaches new skills in the process. In developing the experience:

- Include an interpretive and exclusive tour of the gardens at the Rademon Estate to provide an understanding of the unique flavours of Shortcross Gin;
- Identify and work with a chocolate maker that can offer an experience in learning how to make chocolate confectionary or the perfect chocolate dessert;
- Demonstrate what is required to prepare unique cocktails;
- Enjoy the flavours of what has been created with a private dinner at the Distillery;
- Include transportation to and from a boutique accommodation venue;
- Consider an exclusive additional element for the second day, such as a private visit to Killyleagh Castle.

This experience can take various formats either as a day-tour or an overnight activity. Elements that can be brought together include:

- A guided interpretive walk from Newry along the Bessbrook and Newry Tramway Trail, that includes the chance to see the impressive Craigmore Viaduct.
- A guided visit to Derrymore House and grounds that presents the story of its role in the Act of Union, and later, the life of the Richardson family.
- The spinning mill site and an opportunity to explore Bessbrook, one of the earliest Quaker ‘model’ settlements in the UK, including a visit to the new Bessbrook Museum when it is developed.
- An arrangement for an exclusive afternoon tea – this could be in a resident’s home in Bessbrook.
- While travel time would be almost an hour, the opportunity to stay in Ballyduggan Mill may bring additional appeal to the experience.
- An experience with overnight accommodation could also include a visit to the Irish Linen Centre in Lisburn.
- Alternatively, extending the walk along the river through to Camlough, presents opportunities such as dinner at the Yellow Heifer, followed by transport back to overnight accommodation in Newry.

THE EXPERIENCE: **Mountains & maritime livelihoods**

The stories of the past two centuries through to today present insights on the character of the countryside, contemporary rural and village lifestyles, sport, and local arts and culture – whether it is Gaelic football at Crossmaglen or craic in the pub.

CREATING EPIC MOMENTS

In the footsteps of... – the potential to develop themed guided experiences that highlight how people lived and made a livelihood on land and at sea has already been highlighted. This series can be further developed to portray more recent themes.

The mysteries of the past – there are many stories with unresolved endings. Themed Murder Mystery nights have already been offered and are proving to be successful.

From ordinary to extraordinary – there are many aspects of daily life that intrigue visitors and could offer the basis of an unusual experience.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

A number of guided experiences have already been developed, and can be used as the basis of a broader experience, such as the story of granite and the stone workers, the building of Silent Valley and the Mourne Wall, smuggling, and the GI story.

- Promote these as experiences that can be easily booked.
- Make sure that the experiences are being led by qualified guides and that there are measures in place to ensure overall quality of the experience.
- Identify add-on elements, such as an opportunity to learn how to build stone-walls, and consider after dark activities, such as star-gazing at Silent Valley.

A number of venues have been used. Continue to explore the options for using unusual settings, such as a stately home or a private castle. Build the story line around existing stories.

- As an evening event, this activity should be packaged with accommodation, or can be presented over an entire weekend.
- Feature local foods and use the dinner to accentuate the period of history.

Think through the ordinary – perhaps a game of Gaelic football or everyday life of running a stately home, and identify ways of adding dimensions to this that would create an *EPIC moment*. What needs to be added? Who do you need to work with? How can the visitors engage with locals? Reviewing these questions may well identify new ideas that can be tested.



5. Enabling Success

'Stories are the creative conversion of life itself into a more powerful, clearer, more meaningful experience. They are the currency of human contact.'

- Robert McKee (screenwriting coach)

How can we enable success?

Everyone has a part to play in enabling success. While Newry, Mourne and Down District Council can take the lead in many initiatives that will support the growth of tourism, success is equally dependent on all businesses and organisations that deliver services to visitors identifying new opportunities to work together to build new experiences.

There are five factors to consider:

1. As already emphasised, **a key step in creating a distinctive destination with unique experiences in the minds of visitors, will be the designation of the Mourne-Gullion-Strangford area as a UNESCO Global Geopark.** To achieve this goal, the concept must be embraced by the entire community, particularly everyone within the tourism sector. The Geopark can become synonymous with the destination brand. It can act as a the platform for telling all the stories that differentiate Newry, Mourne and Down. It provides an opportunity for linking these stories to the other activities on offer and for meeting the expectations of today's' adventure travellers that are looking for more than simply an outdoor activity.

2. **Adopt a visitor-centric approach in all aspects of planning and developing an experience.** How can you deliver the experience as seamlessly as possible? How can you make it easy to book the experience? As these questions are considered, new opportunities start to emerge. Visitors arriving by yacht into Strangford or Carlingford are looking for on-shore activities. Including pick-up and drop-off services increases the appeal and saleability of an experience.
3. **Deliver a high quality and authentic experience.** The focus must be on QUALITY. This will require embracing new opportunities for training and certification, and making sure that you are always well informed of new market trends and have recognised experience in engaging the visitor.
4. **Know the stories and know how to tell them effectively.** This requires understanding what stories are relevant to your business and the experience you are offering. If your visitor is interested in your storyline, are you familiar with related stories and are able to recommend other activities and places that would interest your guests? Stories can play a key role in moving visitors around the destination.



5. **Be familiar with the experiences** – have an appreciation for what the entire Mourne-Gullion-Strangford area has to offer. This includes knowing the local food and drink sector – and the stories such as the tale behind “Maggie’s Leap”. With this knowledge base, every operator becomes a tourism ambassador for the entire region.

Giant Adventures – Microadventures

The region has seen significant growth in its festivals and events, with five key events now positioned as **Giant Adventures**. These festivals support the themes in this Visitor Experience Plan, and help in raising awareness for what the region has to offer and for its dynamic adventures and experiences.

While these Giant Adventures can be leveraged further through packaging and the promotion of overnight stays, the real benefit of this positioning is to see its value in relation to the experiences outlined in this Plan. The majority of these experiences will not be Giants in the sense of large numbers of visitors, rather they are a series of Microadventures that can be enjoyed year round, in a more intimate and immersive way. The one approach complements the other.



The poster features a vibrant, multi-colored geometric background of triangles. At the top left is the logo for 'Mourne Mountains & Ring of Gullion'. The central text reads 'GIANT ADVENTURES' in large, white, distressed font. Below this, it says 'EACHTRAÍOCHTA OLLMHÓRA I GCEANTAR AN IÚIR, MHÚRN AGUS AN DÚIN' and 'FAMILY EVENTS ACROSS NEWRY, MOURNE AND DOWN'. The website 'www.visitmournemountains.co.uk' and hashtag '#GIANTADVENTURES' are listed. Five event logos are displayed at the bottom: 'FOOTSTEPS IN THE FOREST' (3-4 JUNE SLIEVE GULLION FOREST PARK), 'FESTIVAL OF FLIGHT' (4-5 AUGUST NEWCASTLE), 'Wake the Giant' (26-27 AUGUST WARRENPOINT), 'SKIFFIE STRANGFORD LOUGH' (22-23 JULY DELAMONT), and 'CITY OF MERCHANTS' (30 SEPTEMBER - 1 OCTOBER NEWRY). At the bottom left is the text 'Ag freastal ar an Dún agus Ard Mhacha Theas Serving Down and South Armagh'. At the bottom right is the logo and name of 'Comhairle Ceantair an Iúir, Mhúrn agus an Dúin Newry, Mourne and Down District Council'.



6. Developing your Experience

People think that stories are shaped by people. In fact it's the other way around....

Terry Pratchett (author)

The process of developing stronger experiences and *EPIC moments* can be approached in a systematic manner.

The following pages will guide you through a logical process. You may want to copy the worksheets and keep them in a binder as you take time to work through them.

If you are working as a cluster, you can commence by identifying a number of experiences that could be developed, and then begin by focusing on a particular experience.

It is important that you spend some time at the outset on the initial tasks to get a full appreciation of your existing assets.

Step 1: Identify your relevant stories

The first step is to see how the themes and stories of your immediate locality relate to the overall thematic framework. Work as a cluster of businesses or an individual business to identify the core elements of each theme that is relevant to your current visitor products and your geographical setting.

You may be able to do this on your own, or you may need assistance with aspects, such as the 'Fire & Ice' geological theme.

In the Worksheet check which of the following themes are applicable and note the core elements.

Step 2: Prepare a brief positioning statement for your locality

Develop a short summary statement that positions your locality within the broader thematic framework.

Step 3: Identify existing assets

Create a preliminary list of attractions, businesses, sites and events associated with each theme. This task is designed to help you think through how various products connect into the broader story.

As you work through this process, you are likely to come back to add to this list, particularly in terms of supporting experiences and attractions. This list will become helpful in identifying partners for and elements of an *EPIC moment*.



RELEVANT STORIES / THEMES – SUMMARY (Step 1)

POSITIONING STATEMENT – points to cover (Step 2)

Worksheet : Step 3 – Existing assets (sites/attractions/events/guides etc.) by theme



THEME	EXISTING SITES / ATTRACTIONS / EVENTS / GUIDES	

Step 4: Identify potential theme-based experiences

Share ideas and agree on a preliminary list of potential theme-based visitor experiences that can be developed or enhanced. Use the ideas in this Experience Development Plan to stimulate further thinking.

For cluster groups, make sure that this is a free-thinking discussion where ideas are simply captured.

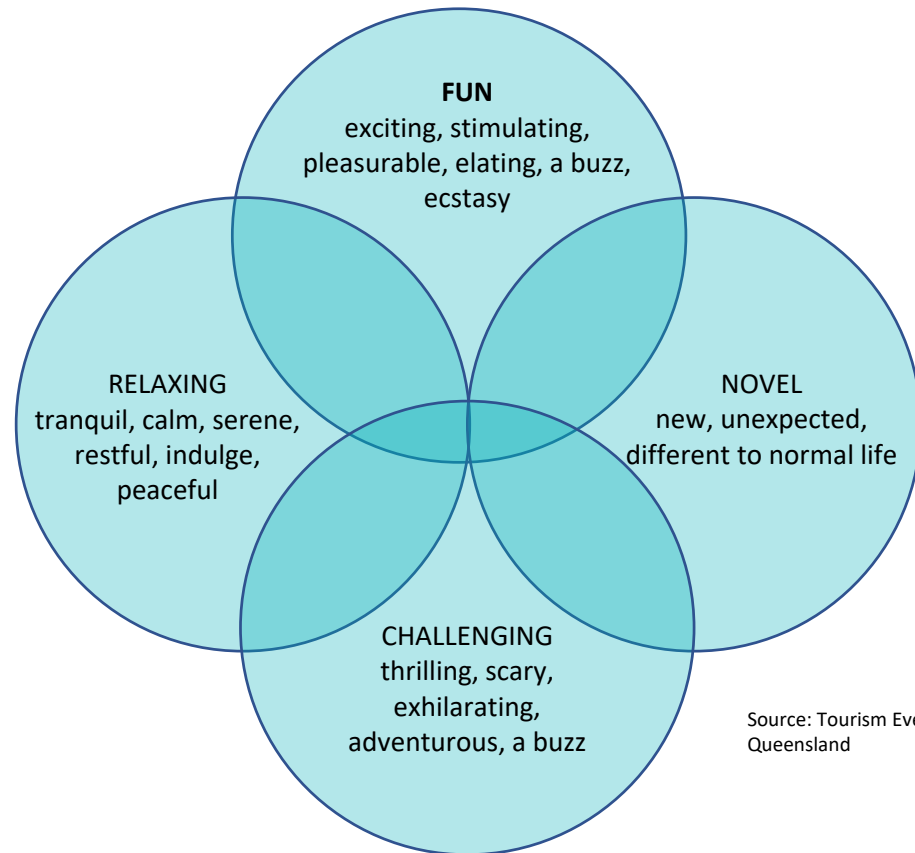
STEP 5: Assess and select an experience to develop

Review each proposed idea in turn and identify the key issues that will have to be addressed in developing the experience.

Consider the following:

- Strength of the underlying story
- Nature of the emotional response that the experience is likely to elicit
- Partners likely to be involved.

Select at least one experience to be developed. Complete the Summary Sheet entitled **Overview for the Experience Plan**



Source: Tourism Events Queensland

Creating EPIC Moments – point to reflect on

In thinking through a potential experience, consider the type of emotion that it is likely to elicit or that you would like to evoke from those participating. There are four core emotional reactions to experiences.

In designing the experience you will need to think through how you will stimulate an emotional response. What will your visitors see, touch, hear, taste and smell?



Worksheet – working document to be used to summarise discussions on Steps 4 & 5

PROPOSED EXPERIENCES

CURRENT CONSTRAINTS / WEAKNESSES THAT WILL NEED TO BE ADDRESSED

Overview of Experience Plan



LOCALITY

BUSINESS NAME / CLUSTER

RELEVANT STORIES / THEMES – SUMMARY

POSITIONING STATEMENT

POTENTIAL THEME-BASED VISITOR EXPERIENCE TO BE DEVELOPED OR ENHANCED



NOTES ON STORIES OF PARTICULAR INTEREST



RELEVANT STORIES / THEMES – SUMMARY (Step 1)

FIRE & ICE

- Shifting continents, the remnants of shallow tropical seas and desert sands
- Vertical dykes of molten lava
- An ice sculpted landscape of drumlins partially drowned by floods of melting ice
- View of the Mourne

GIANTS, DRUIDS & EARLY SAINTS

- Celtchar – mythological warrior of Ulster (Gaelic name of Downpatrick was Rath Celtair)
- The cradle of Christianity in Ireland and the remarkable story of St. Patrick – his landing, ministry, and burial
- Allegedly the burial site of St. Brigid and St. Columba.

CASTLES, THRONES, INVADERS & CONQUESTS

- Viking invasions from sea – raiders and settlers (meaning of name, Strangford)
- Dál Fiatach dynasty – chief royal site and religious centre was at Downpatrick
- Plundering of Downpatrick in 989 + building of a fort on Mound of Down by Niall, King of the Ulaidh
- Death of Magnus Barelegs, king of the Vikings
- John de Courcy's invasion and the influence of the Anglo-Normans
- Battle of Down
- Game of Thrones settings

LIVELIHOODS & LIFESTYLES

- A long commercial and sea trading history – Downpatrick and Ardglass,
- The story of rail
- Downpatrick gaol – hanging of Thomas Russell / Daniel O'Connell's visit
- Horse racing – dating back to 1685
- Chocolate, gin, and seafood

**PARTIALLY COMPLETED
FOR THE DOWNPATRICK/
STRANGFORD/ LECALÉ
AREA – as an example**

POSITIONING STATEMENT – points to cover (Step 2)

The story of St. Patrick from his landing to his burial unfolds in this area – a landscape shaped by the forces of continents shifting and carved by ice. The turbulent history associated with the Vikings, the Anglo-Normans, and the 1798 Rebellion awaits discovery within the streets of Downpatrick and along the coastline of the AONB

THEME	EXISTING ASSETS	
<p>FIRE & ICE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shifting continents, the remnants of shallow tropical seas and desert sands • Vertical dykes of molten lava • An ice sculpted landscape of drumlins partially drowned by floods of melting ice • View of the Mournes 	<p>Strangford Lough / Delamont Country Park</p>	
<p>GIANTS, DRUIDS & EARLY SAINTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Celtchar – mythological warrior of Ulster (Gaelic name of Downpatrick was Rath Celtair) • The cradle of Christianity in Ireland and the remarkable story of St. Patrick – his landing, ministry, and burial • Allegedly the burial site of St. Brigid and St. Columba. 	<p>Museum Saint Patrick Centre Cathedral Saul Church Struell Wells Quolie River</p>	<p>Delamont St. Patrick Festival Viking events</p>
<p>CASTLES, THRONES, INVADERS & CONQUESTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Viking invasions from sea – raiders and settlers (meaning of name, Strangford) • Dál Fiatach dynasty – chief royal site and religious centre was at Downpatrick • Plundering of Downpatrick in 989 + building of a fort on Mound of down by Niall, King of the Ulaidh • Death of Magnus Barelegs, king of the Vikings • John de Courcy’s invasion and the influence of the Anglo-Normans • Battle of Down • Game of Thrones settings 	<p>Quolie River Mound of Town Inch Abbey Magnus’ grave Castleward / Game of Thrones / Winterfell Festival Denvir’s</p>	
<p>LIVELIHOODS & LIFESTYLES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A long commercial and sea trading history – Downpatrick and Ardglass, • The story of rail • Downpatrick gaol – hanging of Thomas Russell / Daniel O’Connell’s visit • Horse racing – dating back to 1685 • Chocolate, gin, and seafood 	<p>Down Rail Museum Downpatrick Racecourse Ardglass Harbour Shortcross Gin Distillery Down Museum Down Art Centres Denvir’s</p>	



Comhairle Ceantair
**an Iúir, Mhúrn
agus an Dúin**

**Newry, Mourne
and Down**

District Council