

Footprint

National Support Guide

Ireland

Footprint

Table of Contents

Introduction and National Context 3
Overview of the Tourism Sector in Ireland 4
Sustainability Challenges in the Irish Tourism Sector 4
Why Sustainability Matters for Irish Tourism SMEs 4
Purpose of this National Support Guide 5
National Policy and Support Frameworks 6
Overview of the Policy Landscape 6
Key National Policies and Strategies 6
Role of National Agencies and Tourism Bodies 7
Funding and Business Supports for SMEs 8
Certification and Sustainability Standards 10
Practical Takeaways for SMEs 10
Linking Policy to Practice 10
Application of the Practice Principles in the National Context 11
Ideas and Opportunities 12
Environmental Responsibility 12
Biodiversity and Natural Resources 12
Cultural Sustainability 13
Resources 13
Sustainable Resource Management 13
Community Empowerment and Social Inclusion 13
Into Action 14
Visitor Education and Engagement 14
Innovation and Green Tools 14
Bringing It All Together 15
Best Practices 16
Adventure Tourism 17
Cultural Tourism 19
Ecotourism 21
Recommendations for SMEs 23
Resources and Further Reading 25
References 27

Co-funded by the European Union

Introduction and National Context



Overview of the Tourism Sector in Ireland

Tourism plays a vital role in Ireland's economy, society, and cultural identity. As an island destination known for its rich heritage, scenic landscapes, and strong hospitality culture, Ireland attracts millions of domestic and international visitors each year. The sector contributes significantly to employment, particularly in rural and regional areas where alternative economic opportunities may be limited.

The Irish tourism industry is characterised by a high proportion of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). These include independently owned accommodation providers, activity and adventure tourism operators, cultural and heritage sites, food and beverage businesses, and transport services. SMEs are essential in delivering authentic, localised experiences that define Ireland's tourism offering. They also play a vital role in sustaining local economies and communities. Tourism in Ireland extends beyond economic impact. It contributes to:

- The preservation and promotion of Irish culture, language, and traditions
- The revitalisation of rural and peripheral regions
- The protection and interpretation of natural heritage and biodiversity
- The development of community pride and identity

In recent years, there has been a clear shift towards more sustainable tourism development. This reflects both national priorities and changing visitor expectations. Increasingly, success in tourism is not only measured by visitor numbers, but by how well destinations protect their environment, support communities, and create meaningful experiences. For Ireland, this means ensuring that tourism growth is carefully managed so that it remains beneficial in the long term. SMEs are central to achieving this balance.

Sustainability Challenges in the Irish Tourism Sector

While Ireland is widely recognised as a green and unspoilt destination, the tourism sector still faces a number of sustainability challenges. These challenges are often interconnected and can affect businesses in practical ways. One of the most significant issues relates to environmental impact. Tourism activities can increase energy use, waste production, and pressure on natural resources. For example, accommodation providers often face high energy demands, while hospitality businesses must manage food waste and packaging. In popular destinations, large visitor numbers can also place strain on local environments, particularly in sensitive coastal or rural areas.

Climate change is an additional and growing concern. Ireland is already experiencing more unpredictable weather patterns, including heavier rainfall and more frequent storms. These changes can affect tourism businesses directly, particularly those that rely on outdoor activities or seasonal demand. Over time, climate impacts may also influence how and when visitors travel. Another key challenge is how tourism is distributed across the country and throughout the year. Ireland continues to experience strong seasonal peaks, with the majority of visitors arriving during the summer months. This can result in overcrowding in well-known destinations, while other areas remain under-visited. For businesses, this creates an imbalance, with busy periods followed by quieter months that can be difficult to manage.

Tourism also interacts closely with local communities. In some areas, there are growing concerns around housing availability, pressure on infrastructure, and maintaining local character. At the same time, tourism brings clear benefits, including employment and investment. The challenge is to ensure that tourism supports communities in a balanced and sustainable way. Although Ireland has made strong progress in developing sustainability policies and strategies, these can sometimes feel distant from the realities of running a small business. Many SMEs recognise the importance of sustainability, but face challenges such as limited time, resources, or clarity on where to begin. Bridging this gap between strategy and practical action is essential.

Why Sustainability Matters for Irish Tourism SMEs

For SMEs, sustainability is becoming an increasingly important part of doing business. While it can sometimes feel like an additional pressure, it also presents real opportunities. Businesses that take steps towards sustainability can benefit in several ways:

- Reducing operating costs through improved energy and resource efficiency

- Attracting visitors who value responsible and environmentally conscious businesses
- Strengthening their reputation and brand
- Accessing funding and support programmes linked to sustainability

At the same time, it is important to recognise the challenges SMEs face. Limited resources, time constraints, and uncertainty about where to start can make sustainability feel overwhelming. This is particularly true for smaller businesses where day-to-day operations already require significant attention. A key message is that sustainability does not require large, immediate changes. Instead, it can begin with small, practical steps that build over time. For example, reducing energy use, reviewing suppliers, or improving waste management can all contribute to more sustainable operations without requiring major investment. There is also increasing support available in Ireland to help businesses on this journey. National agencies, tourism bodies, and EU programmes are providing guidance, training, and funding opportunities. However, these supports are not always easy to navigate, which can make it difficult for SMEs to know what is available and relevant to them.

Purpose of this National Support Guide

This National Support Guide has been developed to make sustainability more accessible and achievable for tourism SMEs in Ireland. The guide aims to:

- Translate European sustainability principles into the Irish context
- Highlight relevant national policies, supports, and funding opportunities
- Provide practical guidance that can be applied in day-to-day business operations

Rather than focusing on theory, the guide is designed to support action. It brings together key information in a clear and structured way, helping businesses to identify realistic steps they can take based on their size, capacity, and priorities.

Whether a business is just starting to explore sustainability or is already taking steps in this area, the guide offers a pathway to build confidence and progress over time.

By supporting SMEs in this way, the guide contributes to a tourism sector in Ireland that is not only economically strong but also environmentally responsible, socially balanced, and prepared for the future.



National Policy and Support Frameworks

Overview of the Policy Landscape

Ireland has made strong progress in recent years in embedding sustainability and climate action into national policy. For tourism businesses, this means there is now a clear direction of travel: moving towards a more environmentally responsible, community-focused, and resilient tourism sector.

At a national level, tourism policy is closely linked with wider strategies on climate action, sustainable development, and regional growth. While these policies are often broad in scope, they create a framework that directly influences how tourism businesses operate and how support is delivered.

For SMEs, the key takeaway is that sustainability is no longer a standalone concept. It is increasingly integrated into:

- Business supports and funding schemes
- Tourism development strategies
- National climate and environmental targets

Understanding this landscape can help businesses identify opportunities, access supports, and align with future expectations.



Key National Policies and Strategies

A number of national policies shape the direction of sustainable tourism in Ireland. While businesses are not expected to engage with these documents in detail, it is useful to be aware of their focus and relevance. Ireland's national tourism policy places a strong emphasis on developing tourism in a way that benefits local communities, protects the environment, and supports long-term economic resilience. This includes a shift away from simply increasing visitor numbers towards improving the quality and sustainability of tourism experiences.

Alongside this, Ireland's climate action framework sets out national targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and transitioning to a low-carbon economy. Tourism businesses are part of this transition, particularly in areas such as energy use, transport, and resource management.

More specifically, the Tourism Climate Action Plan provides guidance tailored to the sector. It highlights the need for tourism businesses to:

- Reduce energy consumption and improve efficiency
- Minimise waste and support circular practices
- Protect natural assets and biodiversity
- Build resilience to climate-related risks

For SMEs, these policies are important because they influence the types of supports, funding, and expectations that are emerging across the sector.



Role of National Agencies and Tourism Bodies

In Ireland, several national organisations play a key role in supporting tourism businesses to become more sustainable.

Fáilte Ireland is the main body responsible for supporting the development of tourism businesses and destinations. It provides a wide range of practical supports, including training, advisory services, and funding opportunities. One of its key initiatives is the Climate Action Programme, which helps tourism businesses to understand and reduce their environmental impact. Through this programme, SMEs can access:

- Energy audits and sustainability assessments
- Training workshops and online resources
- Guidance on reducing carbon emissions and improving efficiency

Fáilte Ireland also supports businesses through destination development programmes, which aim to spread tourism more evenly across regions and throughout the year.



At a national level, the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment is responsible for setting overall tourism policy and strategy. It works closely with industry stakeholders to ensure that tourism development aligns with national economic and sustainability goals.

In addition, the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) provides important support for businesses looking to improve energy efficiency. This includes grants, technical advice, and tools to help reduce energy costs and emissions.
Together, these organisations form a strong support system for SMEs, although navigating the different programmes can sometimes feel complex.

Funding and Business Supports for SMEs

A range of funding schemes and supports are available in Ireland to help tourism SMEs transition towards more sustainable practices. These supports are designed to reduce the financial barrier to making changes and to encourage innovation. Some of the most relevant supports include:

- Fáilte Ireland supports, which may include capital investment grants, sustainability advisory programmes, and digitalisation supports
- SEAI grants, which help businesses invest in energy-efficient equipment, retrofitting, and renewable energy solutions

- Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs), which provide training, mentoring, and financial supports for small businesses at local level
- Enterprise Ireland supports, particularly for businesses with growth and export potential

In addition to national supports, SMEs can also access EU-funded programmes, which often prioritise sustainability, innovation, and green transition. These may include funding for training, pilot projects, or collaborative initiatives. While the range of supports is strong, one of the main challenges for SMEs is identifying which schemes are most relevant and how to apply. This highlights the importance of clear guidance and signposting.

Oifig Fiontair Áitiúil
Local Enterprise Office

Enterprise Ireland

An Roinn Fiontar, Turasóireachta agus Fostaíochta
Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment

Fáilte Ireland

Co-funded by the European Union

seai SUSTAINABLE ENERGY AUTHORITY OF IRELAND

Certification and Sustainability Standards

Certification schemes can play an important role in helping businesses demonstrate their commitment to sustainability. They also provide a structured framework for improving practices over time. In Ireland, tourism businesses can engage with both national and European certification schemes. These may focus on areas such as environmental management, energy efficiency, and sustainable operations.

Common approaches include:

- Participating in recognised sustainability programmes supported by national agencies
- Working towards eco-certifications that are recognised across Europe
- Using sustainability frameworks to guide internal improvements, even without formal certification



For SMEs, certification is not always the first step. However, it can become valuable as businesses progress, particularly in terms of marketing, credibility, and alignment with international standards.

Practical Takeaways for SMEs

For many businesses, the policy landscape can feel complex. However, the key messages are straightforward:

- Sustainability is now a central priority across tourism and business policy in Ireland
- A wide range of supports, funding, and guidance is available to help SMEs take action
- National agencies are actively supporting businesses, particularly through practical programmes
- Small, incremental changes are encouraged and supported

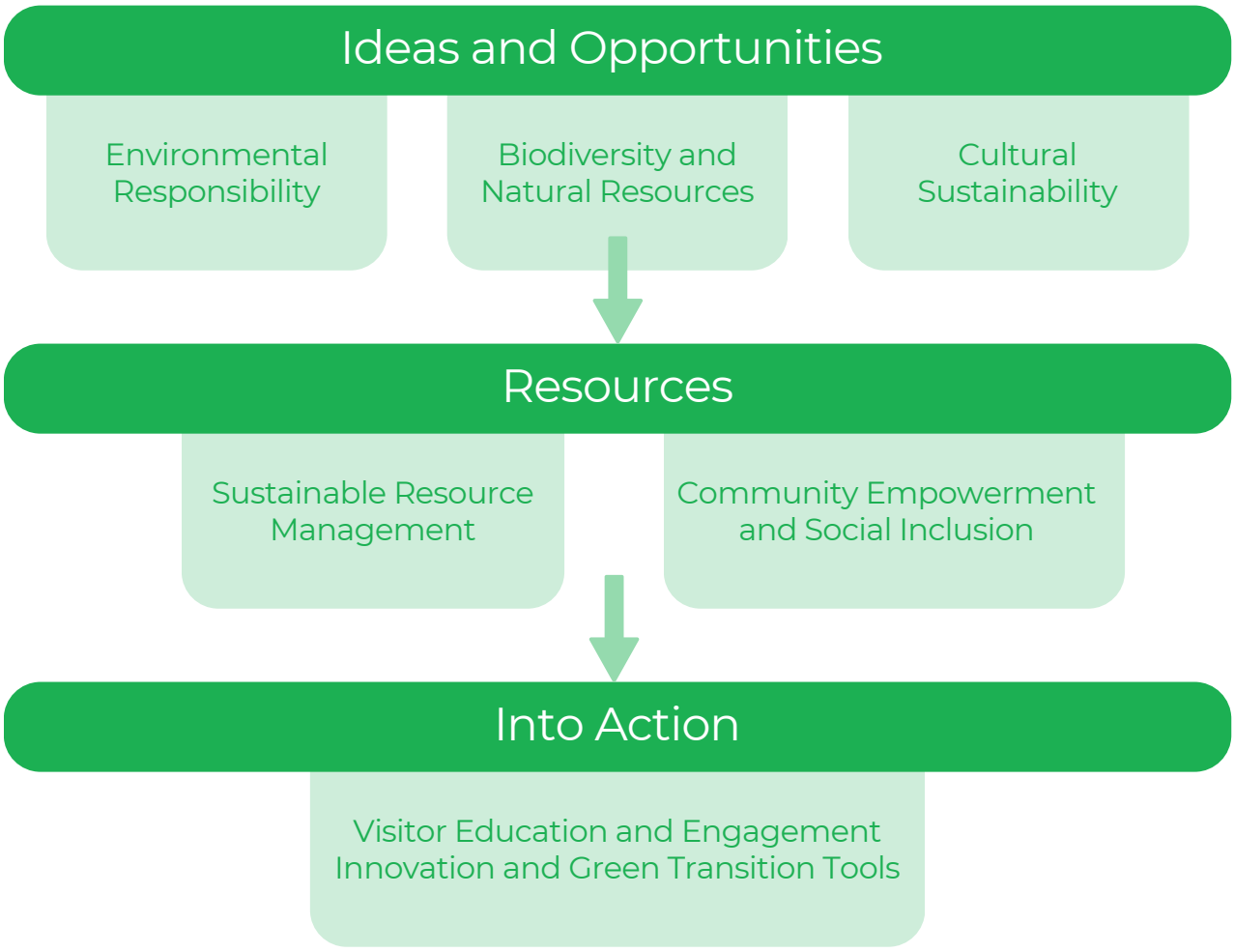
Rather than needing to understand every policy in detail, SMEs can focus on engaging with the supports available and taking practical steps that suit their business.

Linking Policy to Practice

The purpose of understanding these policies and supports is not to add complexity, but to enable action. The next section of this guide will build on this by showing how the Practice Principles Framework can be applied in the Irish context. This will translate high-level sustainability concepts into clear, practical actions that SMEs can implement in their day-to-day operations.

Application of the Practice Principles in the National Context

This section translates the FOOTPRINT Practice Principles into practical actions for tourism SMEs in Ireland. The principles are aligned with the which supports businesses in identifying opportunities, mobilising resources, and putting sustainability into action. These seven principles directly align with the GreenEntreComp Framework developed in the Green-4-Future project, ensuring coherence with recognised European standards for sustainability competences. When mapped across the GreenEntreComp structure, the principles reflect the three overarching themes.



Rather than approaching sustainability as a single task, SMEs are encouraged to see it as an ongoing process. The principles below provide a structured way to begin, based on what is realistic for your business.

Ideas and Opportunities



Environmental Responsibility

Environmental responsibility focuses on reducing the overall environmental impact of tourism activities. In Ireland, this is particularly important given the country's reliance on its natural landscapes and reputation as a "green" destination.

For many SMEs, this is often the starting point for sustainability, as it connects directly to day-to-day operations and costs. In practice, this might involve reviewing how energy is used across your business, identifying areas where waste can be reduced, or making simple changes to materials and suppliers. Even small adjustments, such as switching to energy-efficient lighting or reducing single-use items, can have a noticeable impact over time. Support is increasingly available to help businesses take these first steps. Programmes delivered by Fáilte Ireland, particularly through its Climate Action supports, as well as guidance and grant schemes from the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, can help businesses understand where to focus their efforts.

Biodiversity and Natural Resources

This principle focuses on protecting and enhancing the natural environments that tourism depends on. In Ireland, this includes coastal areas, farmland, forests, and protected habitats that are central to the visitor experience.

Tourism businesses often operate in close proximity to these environments, which creates both responsibility and opportunity. Protecting biodiversity is not only an environmental concern but also a way to maintain the long-term attractiveness of your destination. In practice, businesses can take steps such as maintaining natural areas on their property, using native planting, and guiding visitors towards responsible behaviour when exploring outdoor spaces. Even simple actions, like providing clear information about walking routes or wildlife sensitivity, can make a difference. There is growing national emphasis on biodiversity protection, and businesses can align with this through local initiatives or by engaging with guidance linked to Ireland's wider environmental and heritage policies.

Cultural Sustainability

Cultural sustainability is about preserving and promoting the unique identity of a place. In Ireland, culture is one of the strongest aspects of the tourism offer, from music and storytelling to language, food, and heritage.
SMEs play a key role in ensuring that culture is shared in a way that is authentic and respectful. This does not require large changes, but rather a conscious effort to reflect local identity in the visitor experience. This might include working with local producers, incorporating local history into tours or accommodation experiences, or highlighting Irish traditions in a meaningful way. These approaches not only strengthen sustainability but also enhance the overall visitor experience. Support for cultural tourism is embedded in national tourism development strategies, with organisations such as Fáilte Ireland promoting destination storytelling and experience development across Ireland.

Resources

Sustainable Resource Management

Sustainable resource management focuses on how businesses use energy, water, and materials. For many SMEs, this is one of the most practical and immediately beneficial areas to address.
In Ireland, rising energy and operational costs have already encouraged many businesses to look more closely at efficiency. This creates a strong link between sustainability and cost savings. Practical steps might include monitoring energy and water usage, reducing waste, improving recycling systems, or reviewing supply chains. Often, these changes do not require major investment, but rather a more structured approach to existing processes. Businesses in Ireland can access targeted support in this area through organisations such as the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, which offers grants and advisory services, as well as sustainability-focused supports through Fáilte Ireland.

Community Empowerment and Social Inclusion

This principle focuses on the relationship between tourism businesses and the communities in which they operate. In Ireland, where many tourism businesses are locally owned, this connection is particularly strong. Tourism can bring significant benefits to communities, but it is important that these benefits are shared and that local identity is respected. SMEs are well placed to contribute positively, often through everyday business decisions. This might involve employing local staff, collaborating with nearby businesses, or participating in community events and

and initiatives. It can also include making services more inclusive and accessible, ensuring that a wider range of people can engage with tourism experiences. Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) and regional tourism networks can provide support in this area, helping businesses to connect, collaborate, and strengthen their local impact.

Into Action

Visitor Education and Engagement

Visitors play a key role in sustainability, and businesses have an opportunity to influence behaviour in a positive way. In Ireland, where tourism is closely linked to nature and culture, this is particularly important. Rather than placing restrictions on visitors, the focus should be on encouraging awareness and responsible choices. This can be done in a simple and friendly way, without adding complexity to the visitor experience.

For example, businesses can share guidance on respecting natural areas, encourage the use of local products and services, or highlight low-impact activities. Storytelling can also be a powerful tool, helping visitors to feel more connected to the place they are visiting. National tourism initiatives increasingly emphasise visitor management and responsible tourism messaging, providing a useful reference point for SMEs.

Innovation and Green Tools

This principle focuses on using innovation and practical tools to support sustainability. For SMEs, innovation does not necessarily mean large-scale investment but rather finding smarter ways to operate. In Ireland, there is growing support for businesses adopting digital and green solutions as part of the wider transition to a low-carbon economy. This includes both technological tools and new ways of working.

In practice, this might involve using digital systems to reduce paper use, improving booking and scheduling to manage visitor flow, or exploring renewable energy options over time. Training and upskilling also play an important role, helping businesses to build confidence in new approaches. Supports are available through national agencies and enterprise programmes, including training and advisory services offered by Fáilte Ireland and local enterprise supports.





Bringing It All Together

These principles are interconnected and should be viewed as part of a wider approach to sustainability. Progress in one area often supports another, for example, improving resource efficiency can reduce costs while also lowering environmental impact. For tourism SMEs in Ireland, the most important step is to begin with what is realistic. Sustainability does not require immediate transformation, but rather consistent, practical action over time. By engaging with these principles and making gradual improvements, businesses can strengthen their resilience, enhance their visitor offering, and contribute to a more sustainable tourism sector across Ireland.



Best Practices

Footprint

Adventure Tourism



CAVAN ADVENTURE CENTRE

Butlersbridge,
Co. Cavan,
Ireland

Sustainability Challenge Faced

Cavan Adventure Centre operates within a sensitive natural environment, including a designated Special Area of Conservation. While their activities are inherently low impact, the business faced several challenges in strengthening and demonstrating its sustainability approach.
These included managing visitor impact on water and wildlife habitats, reducing waste and single-use materials, and balancing the time required to implement sustainability improvements alongside daily operations. There was also increasing expectation from visitors and the wider community to clearly demonstrate environmental responsibility, even where the business already had a low carbon footprint.

Actions Taken

The business adopted a practical, values-led approach, focusing on small, achievable changes that could be integrated into daily operations while building long-term impact. Key actions included:

- Installing a refillable water station to reduce reliance on single-use plastics
- Introducing a rainwater harvesting system for washing equipment and watering plants
- Designing buildings to maximise natural heat and minimise energy use
- Delivering zero-carbon activities such as kayaking, paddle boarding, and cycling
-

Alongside environmental measures, the centre embedded sustainability into its wider operations:

- Providing Leave No Trace training for staff, with several team members becoming certified trainers
- Delivering biodiversity and environmental education through woodland school programmes and guided experiences
- Recording wildlife sightings in partnership with National Biodiversity Ireland
- Supporting local community groups through training, education, and shared initiatives

Cultural sustainability is also reflected in their approach, with experiences rooted in the stories, traditions, and natural identity of the Lakelands region. Activities such as bushcraft, navigation, and nature-based wellbeing programmes help visitors connect more deeply with the place.

Adventure Tourism



CAVAN ADVENTURE CENTRE

Butlersbridge,
Co. Cavan,
Ireland

Outcome and Impact

These actions have delivered both environmental and business benefits.
The introduction of rainwater harvesting and low-energy design has reduced operational costs, particularly in relation to water and energy use. Waste reduction measures, including refillable water systems, have significantly decreased single-use plastic consumption.

At the same time, the business has strengthened its reputation as a responsible and environmentally conscious tourism provider. Visitors respond positively to the subtle, non-intrusive approach to sustainability, where actions are integrated naturally into the experience rather than being heavily promoted. The centre has also had a wider impact on the community and environmental level.

Through education programmes, partnerships, and biodiversity monitoring, it contributes to increased awareness and protection of the local environment.

This commitment has been formally recognised through a Gold Award from the Sustainable Tourism Network, highlighting the centre as a leading example of sustainable tourism practice in Ireland.

Key Takeaway

Sustainability does not need to be complex or highly visible to be effective. By embedding small, consistent actions into daily operations and aligning them with clear values, SMEs can create meaningful impact while enhancing both the visitor experience and their long-term business resilience.

Co-funded by the European Union

Funded by the European Union. The views expressed are those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). [Project Number: 2024-1-ES01-KA220-VET-000255069]



MIND BODY BREATH HEALING

Co. Cavan, Ireland

Sustainability Challenge Faced

As a small, independently run wellness business, Mind Body Breath Healing operates with limited resources and a highly mobile delivery model. While sustainability was embedded in the founder's values from the outset, there were practical challenges in maintaining low-impact operations while delivering sessions across different locations.

These included reducing reliance on printed materials, managing fuel use when travelling between sessions, and ensuring that activities delivered in natural and heritage sites were conducted in a respectful and environmentally responsible way. At the same time, the business sought to maintain a high-quality, meaningful experience for participants while aligning with its sustainability ethos.

Actions Taken

- The business adopted a simple, values-led approach, focusing on everyday practices that reduce environmental impact while strengthening community and cultural connections. Key environmental and resource management actions included:
- Delivering sessions outdoors using natural light, reducing energy use
- Moving to a fully digital approach for materials, avoiding printing where possible
- Encouraging the use of reusable items, such as mugs and notebooks
- Preparing homemade food and sourcing fair-trade ingredients to minimise packaging
- Planning travel efficiently to reduce unnecessary fuel use

Alongside these measures, the business actively supports the local community and creative economy by collaborating with local suppliers and practitioners, including food producers, artists, and wellbeing facilitators. Events are designed to be inclusive and accessible, offering alcohol-free social spaces that support wellbeing and connection.

Cultural sustainability is a central element of the experience. Sessions are often held at sacred and historic Irish sites, where participants are encouraged to engage respectfully with the landscape. This includes sharing the history and significance of each location, integrating Irish arts and traditions, and applying Leave No Trace principles throughout.

MIND BODY BREATH HEALING

Co. Cavan, Ireland



Outcome and Impact

These actions have resulted in both practical and intangible benefits for the business. By reducing energy use, eliminating disposable materials, and minimising printing, the business has lowered operating costs. At the same time, the sustainability ethos has strengthened its brand identity, attracting both local participants and international visitors seeking meaningful, environmentally conscious experiences.

Participants respond positively to the approach, particularly the integration of nature, culture, and wellbeing. The use of outdoor settings and heritage locations enhances the overall experience, creating a strong sense of connection and authenticity.

The business also contributes to the local community by supporting small producers, promoting cultural awareness, and encouraging more sustainable habits among participants. Through its activities, it helps foster respect for natural and cultural environments, particularly among those who may be engaging with these spaces for the first time.

Key Takeaway

Sustainability can be embedded from the very beginning of a business by aligning everyday decisions with clear values. Even small, low-cost actions, such as reducing waste, working locally, and using digital tools, can create a strong impact while enhancing the overall experience for visitors.

Co-funded by the European Union

Funded by the European Union. The views expressed are those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). [Project Number: 2024-1-ES01-KA220-VET-000255069]

Ecotourism



FEEL GOOD BICYCLES

Wilkinstown,
Co. Meath,
Ireland

Sustainability Challenge Faced

Feel Good Bike Rent operates within a seasonal tourism environment along the Boyne Valley Greenway, where balancing sustainability with day-to-day business operations is essential. While cycling is inherently a low-impact activity, the business faced practical challenges in reducing its overall environmental footprint while maintaining high-quality service.

These included managing waste from packaging and spare parts, controlling energy use during quieter periods, and maintaining a rental fleet in a way that minimised unnecessary material consumption. There was also a need to ensure that sustainability efforts remained financially viable, particularly within a seasonal business model.

Actions Taken

The business adopted a practical, efficiency-focused approach, prioritising actions that reduce waste, extend product lifespan, and support local engagement.

Key environmental and resource management actions included:

- Maintaining and repairing bikes in-house to extend their lifespan rather than replacing them
- Reusing parts where safe and appropriate to minimise material waste
- Recycling cardboard and packaging from deliveries
- Offering e-bikes to encourage low-carbon travel among a wider range of visitors
- Adjusting opening hours during off-peak periods to reduce energy consumption

Alongside these measures, the business actively supports the local community and visitor experience:

- Employing local staff and providing training in bike maintenance and customer service
- Collaborating with cafés and tourism providers along the greenway, encouraging visitors to support other local businesses
- Providing safety guidance and local knowledge to enhance visitor confidence and experience

Cultural sustainability is also reflected in how the business connects visitors with the Boyne Valley region. By promoting local heritage sites and sharing insights into the area, staff help visitors engage more meaningfully with the landscape and its history.

Ecotourism



FEEL GOOD BICYCLES

Wilkinstown,
Co. Meath,
Ireland

Outcome and Impact

These actions have delivered both operational and reputational benefits for the business. By focusing on maintenance and reuse, the business has reduced long-term equipment costs and minimised unnecessary waste. Energy-saving measures have also contributed to more efficient operations, particularly during quieter periods.

At the same time, the business has strengthened its reputation as a responsible tourism provider. Visitors respond positively to the opportunity to explore the Boyne Valley in an environmentally friendly way, with many specifically seeking out cycling as a low-impact activity.

High-quality, well-maintained bikes and strong customer service further enhance the overall experience. The business also contributes to the local economy by encouraging visitors to engage with nearby cafés, attractions, and services along the greenway. In doing so, it supports a more sustainable, community-based tourism model centred on low-carbon travel and local connection.

Key Takeaway

Sustainability can be closely aligned with efficient business practice. By focusing on extending product lifespan, reducing waste, and supporting local networks, SMEs can lower costs while delivering high-quality, low-impact tourism experiences.

Co-funded by the European Union

Funded by the European Union. The views expressed are those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). [Project Number: 2024-1-ES01-KA220-VET-000255069]

Recommendations for SMEs



Sustainability can feel like a big concept, but in practice it starts with small, manageable steps. For tourism SMEs in Ireland, the most effective approach is to focus on actions that are realistic, relevant, and easy to build on over time. The recommendations below are designed as practical starting points. They can be adapted depending on the size, capacity, and type of your business. Every tourism business is different, and there is no single approach that fits all. The key is to start with what is realistic and relevant to your situation.

By taking practical steps, engaging with available supports, and building gradually over time, SMEs in Ireland can play a central role in shaping a more sustainable, resilient, and competitive tourism sector.

Start with a simple sustainability review

Before making changes, it is important to understand where your business currently stands. This does not need to be complex. A basic review of your day-to-day operations can help identify quick wins and longer-term opportunities.Focus on areas such as energy use, waste, water, and sourcing. Ask simple questions like: Where are the highest costs coming from?

- Where is waste being generated?
- Are there any easy changes that could be made immediately?

Many businesses find that this first step already highlights opportunities for improvement. Support is available through programmes delivered by Fáilte Ireland, which can guide businesses through this process.

Prioritise actions that reduce costs and impact

A good way to begin is by focusing on actions that benefit both your business and the environment. This helps to build momentum and demonstrate value early on.

Prioritise actions that reduce costs and impact



Examples of practical first steps include:

- Switching to energy-efficient lighting and equipment
- Reducing food and material waste
- Improving recycling and waste separation
- Reviewing heating, water use, and insulation. In Ireland, supports from the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland can help businesses invest in energy efficiency measures, often with financial assistance. Starting with these types of actions can lead to immediate cost savings while also reducing environmental impact.

Make sustainability visible to your visitors

Sustainability does not need to remain behind the scenes. Communicating your efforts to visitors can enhance their experience and strengthen your brand. This can be done in a simple and authentic way, for example:



- Sharing information about local sourcing or environmental actions
- Encouraging responsible behaviour in a friendly and positive tone
- Highlighting local experiences, products, and culture

Visitors increasingly value businesses that align with their values. Making your efforts visible helps build trust and can set your business apart.

Connect with your local supports and networks

You do not need to do everything on your own. There are a wide range of supports available across Ireland to help SMEs take action. Engaging with these supports can provide access to:



- Training and workshops
- Mentoring and advisory services
- Funding and grant opportunities
- Opportunities to collaborate with other businesses

Organisations such as Fáilte Ireland, Local Enterprise Offices, and regional tourism networks can provide guidance tailored to your business and location. Connecting with others can also help you share ideas, learn from experience, and build partnerships that strengthen your offering.

Take a step-by-step approach and build over time.



Sustainability is not about doing everything at once. It is about making steady progress in a way that works for your business. Start with a small number of achievable actions and build from there. Over time, these steps can lead to more significant changes, such as investing in new technologies, working towards certification, or redesigning aspects of your business model. What matters most is consistency. Even small improvements, when maintained over time, can have a meaningful impact.

Resources and Further Reading

The following organisations, programmes, and certification schemes provide useful guidance and support for tourism SMEs in Ireland seeking to improve their sustainability practices.

Category	Organisation/Resource	Description
National Ministries/Agencies	Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment	Responsible for national tourism policy and strategy, including sustainable tourism development and climate adaptation planning.
	Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI)	Provides grants, tools, and expert advice to help businesses improve energy efficiency and reduce carbon emissions
	Environmental Protection Agency	Offers guidance on environmental management, waste reduction, water quality, and sustainability practices.
	Local Enterprise Offices	Provide training, mentoring, and financial supports for SMEs at local level, including sustainability and innovation supports.

Category	Organisation/Resource	Description
Tourism Boards	Fáilte Ireland	National tourism development authority offering training, funding, and sustainability supports, including climate action programmes for tourism businesses.
	Tourism Ireland	Responsible for promoting Ireland overseas and supporting sustainable destination branding.
	Discover Ireland	Provides visitor information and supports the promotion of tourism experiences across Ireland, including sustainable tourism initiatives.
National or EU Certification Schemes	EU Ecolabel	A recognised European certification for environmentally friendly products and services, including tourist accommodation.
	Green Hospitality Programme	An Irish certification programme supporting hotels and hospitality businesses in improving environmental performance.
	Global Sustainable Tourism Council	Provides internationally recognised sustainability standards for travel and tourism businesses.

Category	Organisation/Resource	Description
	EarthCheck	A global benchmarking and certification programme for sustainable tourism businesses and destinations.
Project Website	FOOTPRINT project	Provides access to the project's full range of resources, including the Practice Principles Framework, National Support Guides, training materials, and tools to support tourism SMEs in adopting more sustainable practices.

References

Bianchi, G., Pisiotis, U. and Cabrera Giraldez, M., GreenComp The European sustainability competence framework, Punie, Y. and Bacigalupo, M. editor(s), EUR 30955 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2022, ISBN 978-92-76-46485-3, doi:10.2760/13286, JRC128040.

Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment. (2022). A new era for Irish tourism: Ireland's tourism policy framework 2025–2030. Government of Ireland. https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/publications/publication-files/a-new-era-for-irish-tourism-national-tourism-policy-statement.pdf

Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment. (2024). Tourism climate action plan 2025–2030 (Draft). Government of Ireland. https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/consultations/consultations-files/draft-tourism-climate-change-sectoral-adaptation-plan-2025-2030.pdf

Environmental Protection Agency. (2023). Guidance for businesses on environmental sustainability.

References

European Commission. (2019). EU Ecolabel for tourist accommodation. https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/circular-economy-topics/eu-ecolabel/eu-ecolabel-tourist-accommodation_en

Fáilte Ireland. (2023). Climate action programme for the tourism sector. https://www.failteireland.ie/climateactionprogramme.aspx

Green4Future Project. (2023). GreenEntreComp framework: Supporting green entrepreneurship competences. *https://green4future.eu/*

Global Sustainable Tourism Council. (2022). GSTC industry criteria. https://www.gstc.org/gstc-criteria/

Local Enterprise Offices. (2023). Supporting small businesses in Ireland. https://www.localenterprise.ie/cavan/news/press-releases/new-supports-for-sme-as-part-of-budget-2023.340738.shortcut.html

Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland. (2023). Business supports and energy efficiency grants. https://www.seai.ie/grants/business-grants



Footprint

FEVECTA
Federació Valenciana d'Empreses Cooperatives de Treball Associat

spectrum
RESEARCH CENTRE

albea
building up your resilience

Ajuntament de
Quart de Poblet

CEDRU

TOURISM ORGANIZATION OF THE MAZOVIA REGION

Co-funded by the European Union

Funded by the European Union. The views expressed are those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). [Project Number: 2024-1-ES01-KA220-VET-000255069]

CC BY NC SA