



KILKENNY FESTIVAL AND EVENTS STRATEGY 2026-2030



Comhairle Chontae Chill Chainnigh
Kilkenny County Council

Kilkenny

THE BEST
OF IRELAND



**Fáilte
Ireland**



July 2026

Photography: Courtesy of Kilkenny Tourism
Cover Image: Yulefest Kilkenny



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Kilkenny County Council



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Foreword – Cathaoirleach, Kilkenny County Council

Festivals and events are central to the cultural, social and economic vitality of County Kilkenny. They bring people together, showcase our distinct identity, and contribute significantly to tourism, enterprise and quality of life. The Kilkenny Festival Strategy 2026–2030 provides a strong framework to support this important sector into the future.

Kilkenny County Council places immense value on the work of festival and event organisers throughout the county. Their dedication, creativity and resilience continue to deliver experiences that enrich our communities and attract visitors from across Ireland and beyond. We acknowledge with deep appreciation the role they play in sustaining Kilkenny’s reputation as one of Ireland’s leading festival destinations.

We are also grateful for the partnership with Fáilte Ireland in the joint funding of this strategy. This collaboration reflects a shared vision to strengthen Kilkenny’s festival offering, enhance its appeal, and ensure long-term sustainability through strategic investment and planning.

Through this strategy, Kilkenny County Council reaffirms its commitment to supporting festivals as key drivers of cultural expression and economic development. We look forward to working with our partners to realise the opportunities outlined and to ensure that Kilkenny continues to thrive as a dynamic and welcoming place for residents and visitors alike.

Cllr Joe Malone
Cathaoirleach, Kilkenny County Council



Cllr Joe Malone



Foreword – Mayor of Kilkenny

Kilkenny's identity as a vibrant, creative and welcoming city is deeply rooted in its festivals. Across every season, our streets, venues and communities are animated by an extraordinary programme of events that celebrate our heritage, arts, food, music and innovation. This Festival Strategy 2026–2030 sets out a clear and ambitious path to sustain and grow this vital part of Kilkenny's cultural and economic life.



Cllr Andrew McGuinness

I want to express my sincere gratitude to the festival and event organisers whose vision, commitment and professionalism continue to shape Kilkenny's reputation at home and abroad. Their work not only delivers memorable experiences for audiences, but also strengthens community connections, supports local businesses and enhances civic pride. The energy and creativity of these organisers are at the heart of Kilkenny's success as a festival destination.

This strategy also reflects the strong partnership between Kilkenny County Council and Fáilte Ireland, whose joint support and funding have been instrumental in its development. That collaboration underscores a shared confidence in Kilkenny's potential and a commitment to investing in a sustainable and high-quality festival offering.

As Mayor, I am proud to support this strategy and look forward to seeing it guide the continued growth, innovation and inclusivity of festivals in our city in the years ahead.

Andrew McGuinness
Mayor of Kilkenny



INTRODUCTION



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Festivals and events are an intrinsic part of the social, economic and cultural fabric of Ireland and have a transformative impact on creative place-making, tourism and fostering inclusive and diverse communities. Festivals and events are essential to the vitality and viability of cities, towns and rural villages across the country and key to Irish tourism, offering visitors a chance to engage with our culture, people, and places. They motivate both domestic and international visitors to 'visit now'. When held outside peak seasons and traditional hotspots, they help distribute tourism revenue more evenly, supporting a sustainable industry and benefiting wider business sectors.

The contribution of festivals and events to local economic development is evident from recent studies which shows that:

- Music festivals and events generate over **€786 million** in consumer spending annually, with Irish adults spending €757 per year on music events, and support **13,400 jobs**¹
- Arts events contribute over **€1.5 billion** to the economy through total spending²

With growing evidence to support the significance of festivals and events as a key sector within the economy, combined with a surge in visitor demand for festivals and events, the timing of Kilkenny's first festival and events strategy is opportune.

Kilkenny Festivals and Events

Kilkenny has a diverse and innovative portfolio of approximately twenty-five festivals which take place throughout the year across the city and county, attracting almost half a million visitors made up of mainly local and domestic audiences, with a small but significant percentage of overseas visitors.

Kilkenny also has a successful track record in hosting major events, such as the Irish Open at Mount Juliet Estate in 2021 which attracted 80,000 visitors over 4 days; and Nowlan Park, with standing capacity of c. 24,000, which has staged major international artists, including Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band in 2023.

Kilkenny’s St. Patrick’s Festival, 2024 - Impacts³

- Attracted 120, 000 visitors in 2024
- 44% were local, 27% were domestic and 29% were from out of state
- 52% of visitors cited St. Patrick’s Festival as the main reason for visiting Kilkenny
- Families with children under 18 years (37%) and couples (35%) dominated the visitor mix
- Three quarters (74%) of attendees were aged 35+ years
- Repeat visitation and online communication were the main ways attendees found out about the festival
- 84% were ‘very satisfied’ with their festival experience

Kilkenny’s festivals are complimented by a wider programme of entertainment, cultural events and live music across the county’s diverse mix of vibrant venues and spaces which are seeing growing demand. *Kilkenny City Night Time Economy Action Plan* found that 70% of people said they would participate in additional night time activities in the earlier part of the week to support the post 6pm economy.

Kilkenny Festivals’ Growth Potential
Kilkenny’s Destination Experience Development Plan and Tourism Strategy identify the opportunity to develop and enhance the existing festival and events offering in order to maximise tourism impact.

Visitor numbers to Kilkenny in 2024⁴ were made up of **167,000 overseas tourists** and **488,000 domestic tourists** with **14%** of domestic visitors engaging in a combination of festivals, events and non-traditional cultural events.

Lifestage

Unconstrained Adults Aged <45	20%
Unconstrained Adults Aged 45+	44%
Families	36%

Table 1: Characteristics of Domestic Holidaymakers to Kilkenny, Fáilte Ireland

Kilkenny’s festival and events strategy provides a roadmap to strengthen and grow the share of domestic and international visitors through addressing gaps and opportunities in the current offering and investing targeted supports and resources to ensure maximum tourism impact, working in collaboration with all the key stakeholders.

1 Ireland Music: Music Report 2025 The Cultural and Economic Value of Music
2 Arts Events Related Spend National Survey 2024, The Arts Council / An Chomhairle Ealaíon.
3 St. Patrick’s Festival Kilkenny 2024, Consumer Planning and Insights, Failte Ireland
4 Kilkenny Key Tourism Facts, 2024, Fáilte Ireland

APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY



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The methodology adopted for the design and delivery of this strategic plan was designed to ensure the interests and ambitions of Kilkenny's festival and events community and key stakeholders was front and centre. This involved engagement with a wide range of individuals across Kilkenny County Council, Fáilte Ireland, Office of Public Works (OPW), Design and Crafts Council of Ireland, Heritage Council, Heritage Week, Irish Walled Towns Network, Arts Council, LEADER, DEDP Kilkenny, night time economy office, attractions, festivals and historic sites.

It was also essential that this strategic plan aligned with the policy and positions of local and national agencies involved in arts, culture, heritage, tourism, night time economy and local economic development as well as considering the wider European and international policy context.

Development of Kilkenny's festival and events strategy was led by the festivals and events working group, Fáilte Ireland and Kilkenny County Council, in collaboration with consultant Gráinne Millar, GM Innovations. The process was framed by an overarching focus on five strategic pillars:

- Celebrating local culture and heritage
- Creating and supporting the existing festival sector
- Increasing tourism
- Ensuring all festivals are sustainable
- Marketing and communications

Core elements of the consultation included the following:

Desk Research

- A comprehensive review and analysis of key policy documents, strategy and industry reports at local, national and international level to identify the key themes to consider in this strategy.
- A review of international best practice across tourism festivals, resources and marketing initiatives.
- An analysis of festivals supported by Kilkenny County Council to capture a high-level overview of funding models, visitor numbers, thematic focus and seasonality.

Stakeholder Consultation

- An on-line festival survey
- In person focus groups
- One to one interviews with key stakeholders



Kilkenny – Building a Festival & Events Destination



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Throughout the year, Kilkenny has a year-round programme of festivals and events that celebrate music and arts, food, culture and heritage among other themes. This includes Ireland's oldest and most prestigious arts festivals, *Kilkenny Arts Festival*, to the pioneering *Cat Laughs*, *Savour* food festival and *Home of Halloween*. There are also a range of festivals that take place across the county from *Town of Books* in Graiguenamagh to the *Iverk Show*, Ireland's oldest agricultural show in Piltown, and *Tailteann Games* in Kells which revives traditional Irish sport, music, community and culture in a modern way.

Kilkenny County Council owned festivals have grown to become hallmarks of the calendar with *Yulefest* and Christmas market transforming the city into a winter wonderland; *St. Patrick's Festival*, and its gathering of local musicians, street performers with international marching bands; and Kilkenny's recent designation as a *Home of Halloween* destination.

Kilkenny has also played host to international stars at Nowlan Park from *Andrea Bocelli*, *Rod Stewart*, *Bob Dylan*, *Neil Young*, *Paul*

Simon to *Bruce Springsteen* and the *E Street Band* in 2023. Mount Juliet Estate, situated in Thomastown, holds an esteemed position across the Irish golfing landscape, and has hosted a series of prestigious, international golf events since 1993 including the OFX Irish Legends golf tour 2025. Kilkenny's vibrant night time economy also offers a diverse range of events and activities in the evening and night time that connect with whole new audiences.

Kilkenny's Annual Festivals Programme

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**COME SEE
COME DO**

EVENTS CALENDAR 2026

 Kilkenny Tradfest 13th - 17th March	 St Patrick's Festival Kilkenny 14th - 17th March	 Kilkenny Macra Mr Personality Festival 10th - 11th April	 Marble City Music Festival May - December	 Kilkenny Roots Festival 1st - 4th May	 Mayhem 1st - 29th May	 Callan Open Doors 21st - 24th May	 Irelands Woodland Show From 2nd May
 The Cat Laughs Festival 29th May - 1st June	 Kilkenny Pride Festival 23rd - 26th July	 Kilkenny Arts Festival TBC August	 AKA Fringe 1st - 31st August	 Stormfest 6th - 16th August	 Iverk Show 22nd August	 Song of the Scythe: National Scything Festival 21st - 23rd August	 Graigueanamanagh Town of books 28th - 30th August
 Bailar Connigo SBK Festival - Ireland Edition 28th - 30th August	 Rás na mBan 2nd - 6th Sept	 Christy's Whiskey & Spirits Festival 19th September	 Kilkenny Law Festival 25th - 27th September	 Witches & Wizards Festival October	 Ireland Home of Halloween Watch This Space!! Oct & Nov	 Kilkenny Animated 2nd - 4th October	 Savour Kilkenny 22nd - 26th October
 Keep Her Lit Folk and Trad Festival 31st Oct - 1st Nov	 Yulefest November - December	 Kilkennomics 6th - 9th November	 Subtitle Film Festival 23rd - 29th November	 ALT EFF All Living Things Environmental Film Festival (ALT-EFF) Nov 27 - Dec 6th	 Wellie Race 1st January 2027		

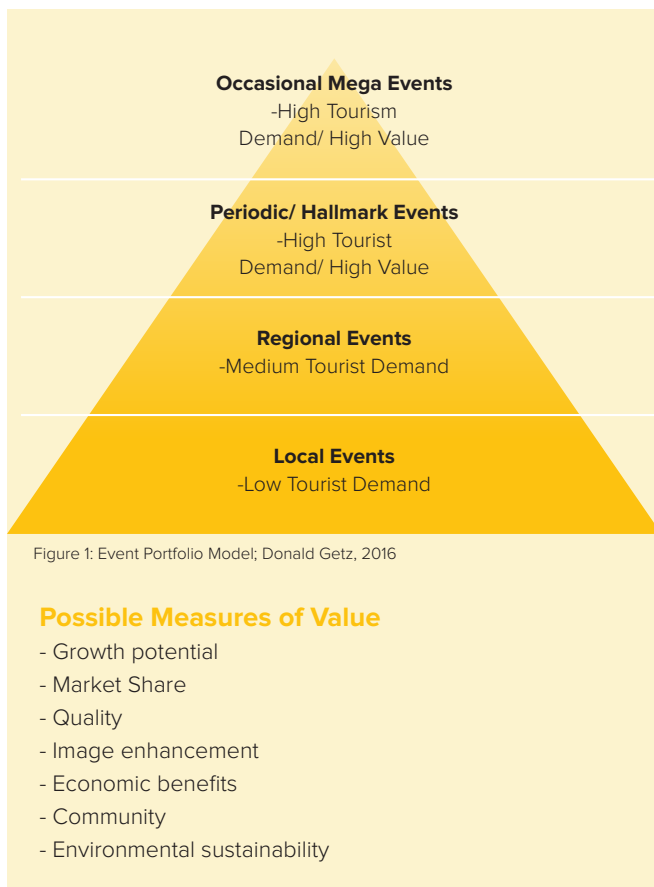
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For more information visit our website: [visitkilkenny.ie](https://www.visitkilkenny.ie)

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■ International festival and events destinations

International research shows that the most successful festival and event destinations have a diverse festivals and events portfolio ranging in size and scale from large to small, delivered by diverse organisers and at different stages of maturity, with support for feasibility into new ideas. These festival portfolios are made up of local events to medium / high tourism impact festivals and occasional mega events that create high tourism demand and value (Figure 1). The profile of medium and high tourism demand festivals and events is measured by a range of values which, among others, include market share, image enhancement and economic benefit.



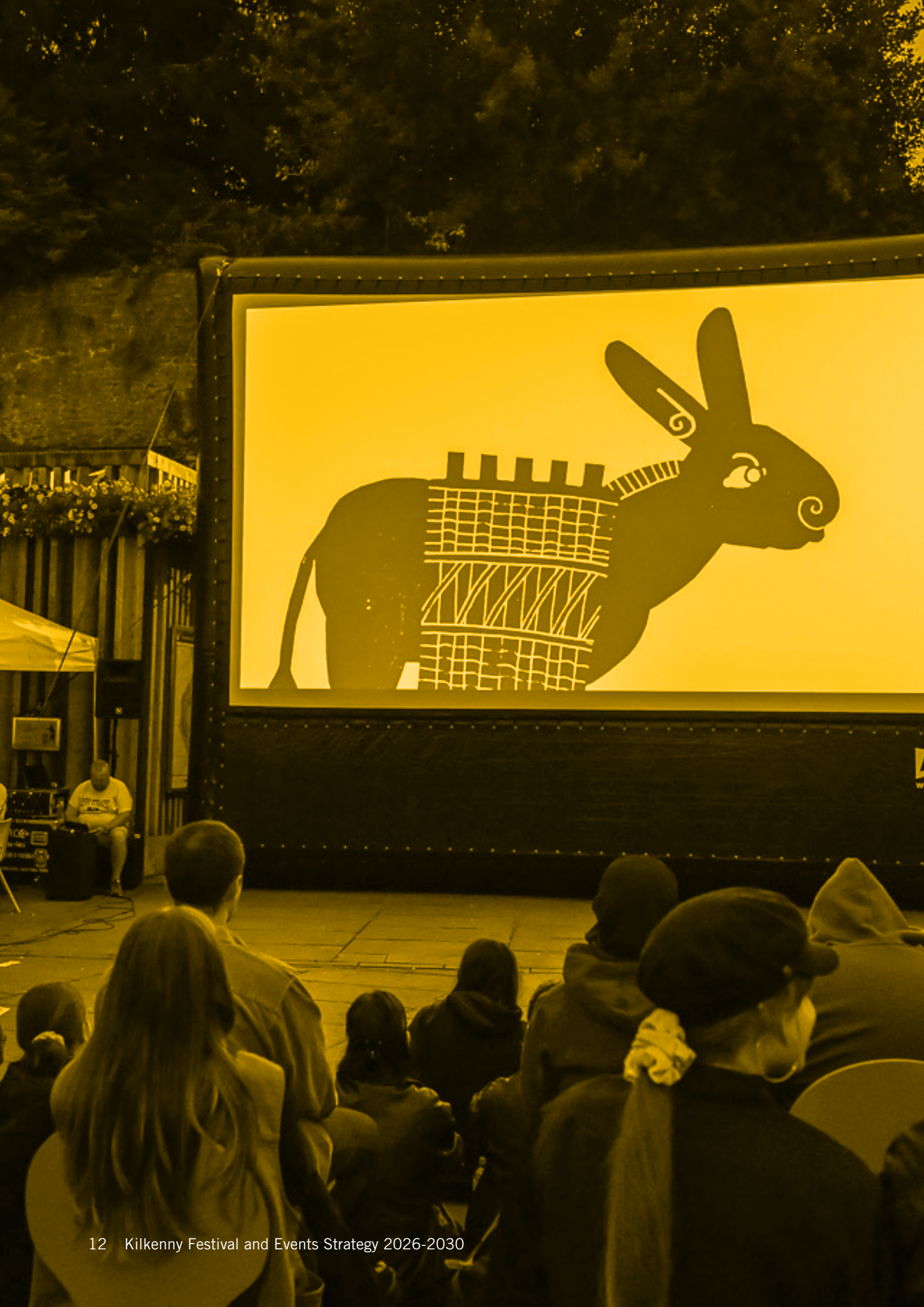
Viewed in this context, Kilkenny's has potentially 2-3 high impact festivals – in other words, festivals that have a high tourism demand and that take place each year. The majority of festivals and events in Kilkenny would fall into

the local to medium tourism demand category. Events such as the international golf events at Mount Juliet and concerts at Nowlan park would constitute “mega-events”, driving high demand and value and are more likely to take place on occasional years.

An analysis of the available data on festivals in Kilkenny, shows diverse funding models that combine a mix of box office income, festival sponsorship and local and national funding, which is essential to their survival. Kilkenny County Council funding represents approximately 18% of the collective festival turnover⁵ and is a critical source of public funding for festivals across the county and city. Fáilte Ireland, The Arts Council and LEADER among other key funders who provide support based on specific criteria.

Festivals in Kilkenny are delivered by diverse organisers, from the local authority to independent producers, promoters, music venues, festival companies and volunteers. Significant expenditure is invested by festivals in artists fees (53%) followed by staff overheads, production and programming, with limited resources to invest in marketing and promotion. All of these factors are important considerations when determining the potential for festivals to grow their tourism impact with existing resources.

⁵ Data based on a sample of Kilkenny County Council Funding Post Event Reports





Understanding the wider context in which Kilkenny festivals operate is also essential to shaping a strategic plan that is both realistic and ambitious. In this regard, the festival and events strategy is informed by a broad national and local policy context that recognises the importance of festivals to the social, economic and cultural fabric of the island and their transformative impact on tourism, creative place-making and the unique space they occupy in fostering inclusive and diverse communities.

The wider European and international context is of particular relevance to Kilkenny as a world class medieval and contemporary city with the year 2027 designated as the EU Year of the Normans, aimed at celebrating a shared history that has shaped the island of Ireland and Europe. Equally, the inclusion of three elements of Ireland's living heritage in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, resonates with important aspects of Kilkenny's living heritage, particularly in sport.

The local policy context is summarised below with details on the broader national context outlined in Appendix 1.

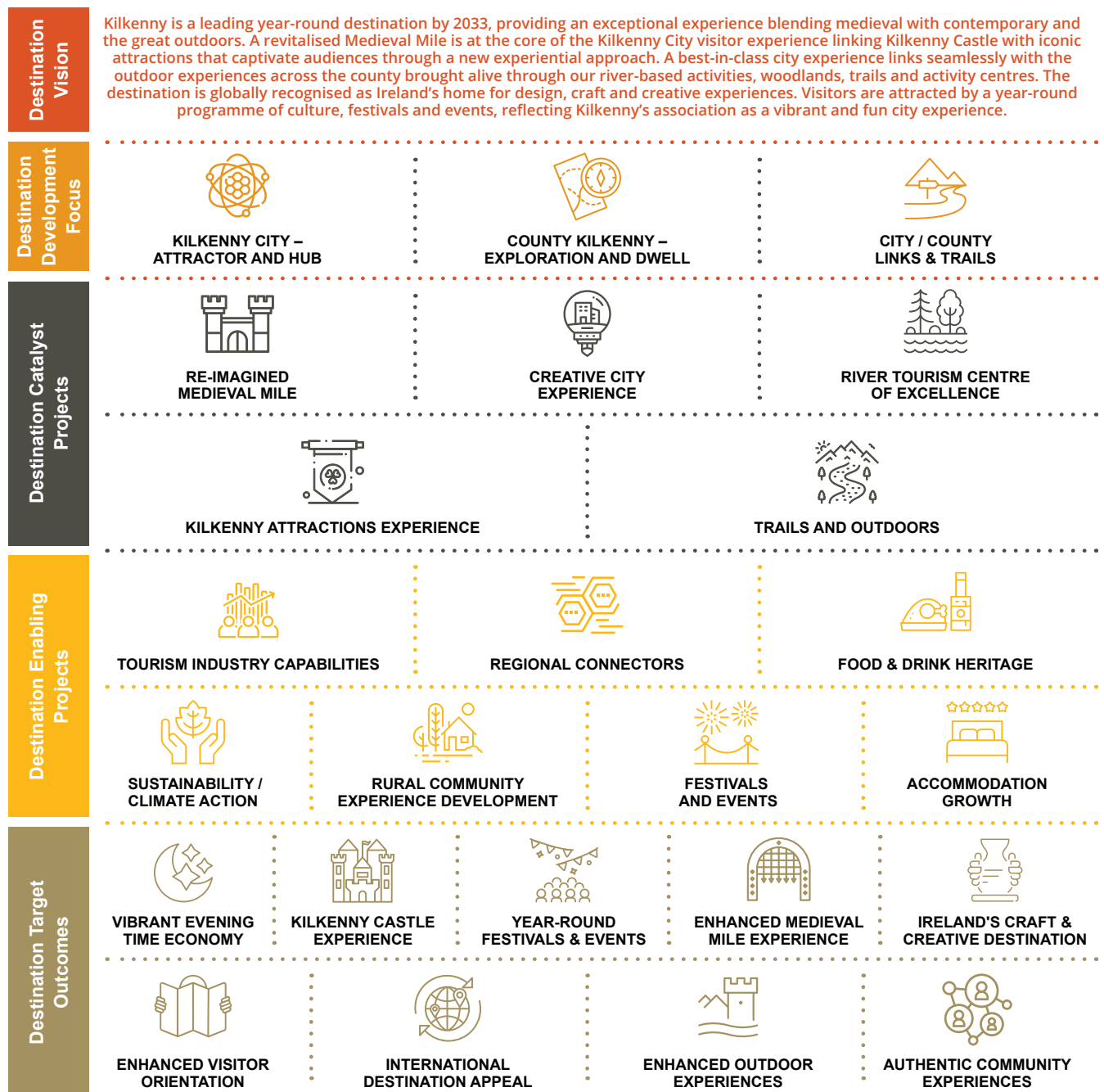
Local Context

Kilkenny Destination and Experience Development Plan

The *Kilkenny Destination and Experience Development Plan* (Kilkenny DEDP) is a five-year sustainable tourism development plan. It has been created through a programme of research and consultation guided by the V.I.C.E. (Visitor, Industry, Community, Environment) model for sustainable tourism development. Kilkenny's festivals have been explicitly identified in Kilkenny DEDP as central to the vision in making Kilkenny a sustainable year-round international destination.

Kilkenny Local Tourism Development Strategy 2024-2028:

Festivals form a key part of the vision in making Kilkenny a sustainable year-round international destination recognised for a creative city experience blending medieval with contemporary animated by vibrant festivals and events hosted in a mix of venues that reflect the creativity of the destination.



Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) 2023 – 2028:

Festivals are a core component of arts and culture in Kilkenny as well as the visitor experience, where the LECP aims to “realise the economic and social value of Kilkenny’s built and natural heritage, its cultural reputation and its growing tourism, creative and cultural sectors” by implementing the actions identified in Kilkenny’s Destination Experience Development plan and by continuing to support local tourism partners in Kilkenny to continue to develop the visitor experience to Kilkenny City and County.

Climate Action Plan 2024 – 2029

The Kilkenny County Council Climate Action Plan 2024-2029 sets out the actions that will be taken by Kilkenny County Council to prepare the County and people living in Kilkenny for the impacts of climate change whilst also laying out measures to mitigate the effects of climate change. Specific actions relevant to the festival and events programme focus on supporting young people, communities and artists to creatively and positively respond to climate change.

Kilkenny Night Time Economy Action Plan 2024-2025

The Kilkenny City Night Time Economy Action Plan is a collaboration between various stakeholders on an agreed vision to fully realise the potential of the night time economy to support economic growth, cultural enrichment, enhanced community engagement, increased opportunities for tourism and the development of additional experiential events and festivals.

Kilkenny Leadership Partnership: Local Development Strategy 2023 – 2027

Kilkenny Leader Partnership (KLP) strategy contains several complementary actions focused on rural and economic development, where festivals could play a valuable role such as harnessing Kilkenny’s international accreditation World Craft Council Craft City and Region; recognising the significant heritage sites of the Linguan Valley and enhancing tourism and recreation opportunities along Kilkenny’s three rivers.

Kilkenny Heritage Strategy 2026-2030

The County Heritage Strategy is Kilkenny County Council’s statement of intent in relation to Kilkenny’s heritage. This 5-year strategy, which is currently in development, will set out the long-term vision and strategic goals across all areas of heritage underpinned by preserving, protecting, and promoting the rich heritage of Kilkenny within a local, regional and national context.

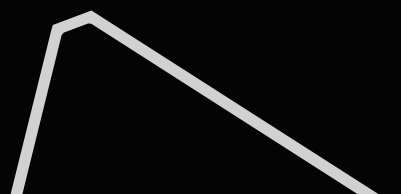
Kilkenny Culture and Creativity Strategy 2023-2027

Recognises Kilkenny’s year-round calendar of festivals as core to culture and creativity in Kilkenny, forming a key part of the vision of the strategy and their importance to local economic development.

Kilkenny Craft Strategy 2025–2027

The Kilkenny Craft Strategy is designed to foster a thriving, sustainable, and innovative craft sector that builds on Kilkenny’s rich heritage while embracing new opportunities for growth.





CONSULTATION FINDINGS



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The consultation process informed the development of a SWOT analysis and key themes which capture the current situation and future opportunities for festivals and events in Kilkenny. This offers a clear understanding of how Kilkenny can position itself as a festival and

event destination in order to generate value for communities, partners, and visitors. The insights gained here provide the foundation for setting strategic pillars in response to the realities and opportunities for the festival sector in Kilkenny.



SWOT analysis

Strengths

- A world class medieval and contemporary walled city
- Kilkenny Castle attracting 430k visitors in 2024
- International designation as a *World Craft Council Craft City and Region*.
- Location of the 5-time Academy Award nominated animation company Cartoon Saloon
- Home to the national state agencies Design and *Crafts Council of Ireland and Heritage Council*
- Diverse calendar of festivals and events attracting various demographics to Kilkenny
- Internationally recognised festivals, *Kilkenny Arts Festival, Cat Laughs and Kilkenny Animated*
- Role of Kilkenny County Council in developing Civic Festivals *Yulfest and St. Patricks Festival*
- Kilkenny's inclusion in Fáilte Ireland's designated *Home of Halloween* festival programme
- Ability to attract high profile sporting events such as *OFX Irish Legends golf tour 2025* at Mount Juliet Estate
- Diverse infrastructure and venues such as The Parade and Nowlan Park and outdoor spaces such as Watergate Urban Park
- Unique brewing and distilling heritage dating to 17th century
- Kilkenny's night time economy and focus on festivals and events

Weaknesses

- Gaps in the festival and event offering at key times such as earlier in the week and June/ July
- Gap in high impact festival offering in heritage, history, design and family programme
- Limited data available from festivals on domestic and overseas visitors
- Limited capacity of mid-scale indoor and outdoor venues (2000+)
- Lack of space for the creation, production and presentation of arts and culture
- Cost of programming and producing events in non-traditional venues and spaces
- Limited promotion and visibility of festivals
- Lack of collaboration between festivals and trade to maximise tourism impact
- Lack of measures and indicators to capture data on visitor numbers

Opportunities

- New festivals inspired by Kilkenny's medieval history, home of craft, design and sport
- European Year of the Normans in 2027
- Opportunity to bid for and attract mega events to Kilkenny
- New spaces being developed such as Abbey Quarter and Brewery Quarter and potential sites along the river
- Relationships with Arts Council, LEADER, Fáilte Ireland, Creative Ireland, Design and Crafts Council of Ireland, OPW, Heritage Council among others
- Demand for events as part of night time economy experience
- Sponsorship opportunities from national and international enterprises located in Kilkenny
- Local, national and European funding opportunities
- Kilkenny Festival brand and marketing campaign
- Role of LEADER supporting new Solstice Festival in the Linguan Valley
- Lead on innovative sustainability measures for festivals and events.

Threats

- Festival saturation and competition from neighbouring cities and counties
- Impact of climate change on international travel for artists
- Lack of sufficient investment to create festivals and events of scale and impact
- Competition for talent and expertise at peak times of the year
- Rising cost of living, impacting artists and creatives and their ability to live and work in Kilkenny
- Insurance costs
- Fall in consumer spending impacting on travel and spend on entertainment
- Insufficient resourcing of structures, supports and leadership to deliver on the strategy

Key Consultation Themes

An analysis of the feedback from the survey, focus groups and one to one conversations with stakeholders identified a number of areas where Kilkenny can capitalise on its unique strengths and international recognition as captured in the following themes.

■ **Harness Kilkenny's World Class Heritage,**

Craft and Design: A festival offering that reflects Kilkenny's distinct heritage and history has been identified as an opportunity and could fill a gap in the months of June/ July. A number of ideas were suggested including:

- A festival of history, pageantry, re-enactments and major exhibitions, inspired by Kilkenny's medieval knight, William Marshall, founder of Kilkenny town and Kilkenny Castle.
- Building Kilkenny's national profile as the Medieval City of Ireland through leveraging Heritage Week in Kilkenny.
- Drawing on the historical significance of Alice Kytler and her accomplice, Petronella, the first known case in Ireland or British Isles of death by fire for practising witchcraft, building on the programme of events which took place to mark the 700th anniversary.
- Opportunities to leverage an authentic story through EU Intangible Cultural Heritage Label designations for Ireland in hurling, Gaelic football and camogie drawing on Kilkenny's sporting heritage which includes 36 times winner of the all – Ireland Senior Hurling Championships; and reference to Statue of Kilkenny in 1366 which sought to ban hurling.
- Showcasing craft and design in Kilkenny to elevate Kilkenny's position as home of design in Ireland.
- Building on the international profile of 5-time Academy Award nominated animation company Cartoon Saloon to strengthen Kilkenny's profile as a cultural and creative destination.

■ **Grow the capacity of existing festivals to boost their impact:**

While Kilkenny has an eclectic mix of established and new festivals that take place across the year, there is scope to develop and grow their tourism impact through greater alignment to Kilkenny's key market segments and night time economy priorities. This would involve:

- Identifying festivals across the city and county with potential to grow their tourism impact.
- Identifying festivals with potential to grow and develop a stronger family offering.
- Diversifying the current offering to appeal to the under 40-year market segment.
- Extending festival and event programmes into the evening to support night time economy activities, particularly earlier in the week after 6pm.
- Supporting festivals to develop saleable experiences around the needs of domestic audiences/visitors to help grow their tourism impact.

■ **Place making and promoting the**

destination: Kilkenny's festivals play a central role in generating pride of place, bringing the city and county to life, creating a unique atmosphere and sense of the unexpected, and helping to share Kilkenny's story as part of Ireland's Ancient East. This can be further enhanced in the following way:

- Developing more on street animation around specific festivals and key times of the year to enhance the visibility.
- Facilitating easier access to heritage sites and historic buildings for festival and event programming.
- Ensuring public realm enhancements, such as the Abbey Quarter, Market Yard and Watergate Urban Park, are equipped to add new outdoor capacity for event organisers and producers.

- 
- Identifying potential events sites along the river to encourage greater access to and usage for cultural and creative programming.
 - **Impact:** The impact of festivals and events can be felt across a wide spectrum, from the economic impact on accommodation providers, food and beverage outlets, retailers and attractions, to strengthening communities and growing the cultural sector. Opportunities to maximise these impacts include:
 - Programming festivals and events in the shoulder season.
 - Undertaking an economic impact of festivals to demonstrate this impact.
 - Developing measures to capture data on the wider cultural and social impacts of festivals and events.
 - Maximising the potential of Kilkenny's venues such as Nowlan Park and Mount Juliet to host mega events to the county.
 - **Marketing and Communications:** Festivals have very limited capacity and resources to invest in domestic and international marketing campaigns to target domestic and international visitors in key markets. Suggestions to improve this included:
 - Leveraging marketing supports through Fáilte Ireland and Kilkenny County Council.
 - Development of an annual festival calendar, on-line marketing resources and industry festival toolkits to benefit hospitality and tourism industry to enhance and differentiate their offering to visitors.
 - Improving links between festivals and the hospitality/local business to create new synergies and marketing opportunities.
 - Creating festival branding and on-site promotion to enhance the sense of the destination being “*en fete*” and grow awareness of festivals.
- 



INTERNATIONAL COMPARATORS



The ambition underpinning the strategy is to pioneer new best-in-class visitor experiences, aligned with Kilkenny's distinctive visitor proposition as a destination that is globally recognised as Ireland's home for design, craft,

heritage and creative experiences. Examples of international initiatives that can provide inspiration to Kilkenny have been researched and an overview is provided below.





Photo credit: Jorvik Viking Festival

JORVIK VIKING FESTIVAL

DATES: February 16th to February 22nd 2026

VISITOR NUMBERS: 50,000 in 2026, bringing in more than £6.6 million to the local economy.

The Jorvik Viking Festival was established in 1985 following a downturn in visitor numbers to the Jorvik Viking Centre, in an attempt to boost footfall in York during the February half-term holiday. Norwegian partners showed interest and support, initially focusing on a regatta of Viking-style boats on the Ouse. International teams raced boats on the Ouse, a tradition that continued until 2006. While the festival's content, format, and duration have varied over the years, some traditions have persisted. Marches and torchlit processions by costumed Vikings have become a familiar sight in York each February. The core elements of the festival consist of:

- Traditions and Re-enactments
- Marches and torchlit processions
- Re-enactment groups
- Celebrity involvement and support
- Dramatic performances and spectacles
- Community involvement and educational outreach
- Literary contributions and the Bloodaxe Book Challenge

Key Learning: The festival is an example of how a city harnessed the potential of its heritage and history as a backdrop and stage to create a festival that has grown year on year, inextricably linked to place, by drawing on traditions, involving the community and innovating around new experiences.



Photo credit: Aquelarre de Cervera

AQUELARRE DE CERVERA (The Coven of Cervera), Catalonia

DATES: August 29th to August 31st 2025

VISITOR NUMBERS: 40,000 people with a visitor spend of approx. €1million

The Coven of Cervera was born in 1978 to recover and rediscover the mysterious alley of the Witches, referring to the meeting place of witches with a very special guest, the devil, in order to obtain supernatural powers from him. The festival became incredibly popular and now draws a loyal following of people fascinated with witches, fire and water. For three days, the city is awash with spectacular shows, magic and correfocs (fire runs) featuring dozens of witches and the Macho Cabrío (a satyr) as protagonists. The festival also includes parallel activities such as parades and activities for children. The core elements of the festival consist of:

- Large-scale shows in the streets and squares, involving witches, demons, fire-breathing figures, and mythical creatures.
- Symbolic rituals performed by the figure of the Gran Boc (Great Goat), who presides over the witches' gathering.
- Drum beats, folk music, and modern concerts throughout the night.
- In 2025 450 kilos of gunpowder was burnt in the streets and squares of the capital of La Segarra

Key Learning: The festival is an example of how a regional town in Lleida, Spain, took inspiration from an ancient Catalan tradition and historical association of witches and their rituals, to regenerate the town, all centred around a mysterious street called the Alley of the Witches. The festival provides an interesting reference point for celebrating unique aspects of Kilkenny's history, such as the Alice Kytler story and also Kilkenny's designation as a Home of Halloween destination. The festival has grown exponentially over 48 years featuring events like the correfoc (fire run), medieval pageants and performances with pyrotechnics and devils over three days through a highly curated programme and creative direction.

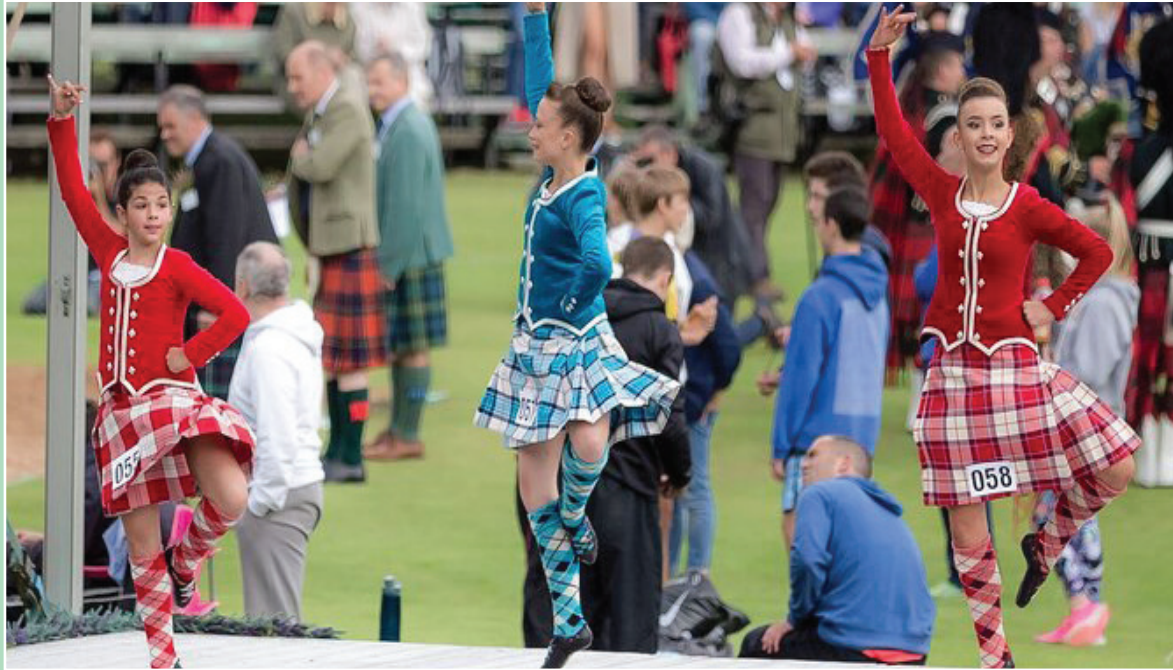


Photo credit: Highland Games

HIGHLAND GAMES - Various places across Scotland

DATES: Highland games start in May, kicking off with the Gourrock Highland Games. Most of the games take place in July and August.

VISITOR NUMBERS: from 8,000 to over 20,000

Highland Games are a unique mix of sporting, cultural and social events which take place across Scotland. They usually comprise a programme of field and track events, piping and Highland dancing competitions. Some believe that the Highland games date back to 2000 BC in Ireland. Over time the games grew in number and popularity but suffered a mortal blow with the Act of Proscription in 1746 following the crushing of the Jacobite Rebellion. The act outlawed Scottish dress, customs and gatherings and was in force for almost 40 years. After its repeal the games started to revive, and the fortunes of the national customs were given a tremendous boost with the visit to Scotland in 1822 of George IV. Today, the games remain a stirring celebration of Scottish identity and cultural pride which have endured through centuries of political turmoil and upheaval. Every Highland Games event in Scotland has a unique character and tradition and many are held in stunning locations.

Key Learning: The Highland Games have many parallels with Ireland's Tailteann Games - an ancient Irish festival revived as a modern sporting and cultural event in 1924, 1928, and 1932 - featuring a mix of Gaelic sports, international athletic competitions, and cultural events. Inspired by the ancient Aonach Tailteann, the modern games were created to celebrate Irish identity and boost tourism. With core elements of Ireland's living heritage inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity including hurling, Gaelic football, camogie, uilleann piping and the harp, the model presents an opportunity to harness an authentic and rich cultural experience.



Photo credit: Festivals Edinburgh

FESTIVALS EDINBURGH

Festivals Edinburgh is a strategic umbrella organisation focused on over-arching areas of mutual interest. It was founded by the Directors of Edinburgh's leading festivals in 2007 with a mission to maintain and develop the Festivals' and the Festival City's position locally and globally - through major collaborative projects and strategic initiatives.

Festivals Edinburgh commissioned ground breaking research in 2005 on the social, cultural and economic impacts of Festivals Edinburgh and the most recent report in 2022 shows the following impacts:

- An estimated £407 million in economic impact in Edinburgh and £367 million across Scotland
- Visitor spending reached £137 million with substantial contributions to accommodation and food and drink.
- The festivals create a large number of jobs and boost local businesses, particularly in the hospitality sector.
- International profile: They are Scotland's leading cultural brands, attracting audiences second only to the Olympic Games.
- Community engagement: The festivals foster community and school connections,
- Artistic platform: They provide a vital platform for both established and emerging artists, both Scottish and international.
- Cultural exchange: The festivals bring together artists and audiences from around the world, promoting cultural diversity and international understanding.

Key Learning: Festivals Edinburgh is an example of how festivals have come together to strengthen and develop the sector and to capture the economic, cultural and social value that festivals bring to the city. The dedicated website for Festivals Edinburgh provides an online calendar, information for visitors on how to get to Edinburgh, where to stay and where to eat and suggested itineraries. The website has high quality vivid photography on each festival with a media section containing the contact details for all 11 festivals and issues a regular Newsletter and is a useful model to consider for Kilkenny's ambition as a festival destination.



Photo credit: The cast of Six perform to the crowds at West End LIVE 2026 (c) Danny Kaan

WEST END LIVE

West End Live, now in its 20th year, takes place each June with a weekend of outstanding performances from top West End musicals, live and free in Trafalgar Square. West End LIVE is a major promotion of the top West End musicals and shows. Theatre's biggest stars are showcased from London's leading musicals and must-see new shows. West End LIVE is presented by Westminster City Council and the Society of London Theatre with support from the Mayor of London, partners and sponsors.

Key Learning: West End live is an innovative example of promoting one of London's signature cultural tourism products to locals and visitors alike in one of London's most well know locations Trafalgar Square. It is a novel way to offer local audiences and visitors a taste of what is on or coming up in the year ahead, to boost ticket sales and international press. Such an event could be applied to Kilkenny's festivals offering by curating a sample of highlight events and could be extended to encompass wider arts and cultural activities in a highly visible, iconic outdoor public setting, such as Kilkenny Castle.

Vision, Objectives & Strategic Pillars



Vision

Kilkenny is a world-renowned sustainable festival destination by 2030, with an anchor programme of high and medium tourism impact festivals across the city and county, showcasing heritage, culture and design and supported by a year-round programme of concerts and events, contributing to a vibrant night time economy. The festival calendar is enhanced by a diverse range of historic sites, venues and new public spaces which are animated throughout the year, all combining to deliver growth in the number of domestic and overseas visitors travelling to Kilkenny to attend festivals and events. Committed stakeholder and industry collaboration has succeeded in positioning Kilkenny as a sustainable, inclusive and family friendly festival destination.

Objectives

- Leverage Kilkenny's unique world class strengths to pioneer new best in class festivals and events to attract international and domestic visitors.

- Grow the capacity and capabilities of festivals and events to harness existing and emerging destination development opportunities.
- Develop a compelling Kilkenny Festivals brand and year-round marketing campaign as a world leading sustainable festival destination.
- Develop evaluation and accountability measures to capture the cultural, economic and social value and impact of festivals and events.
- Build committed stakeholder and industry collaborators across public bodies, funding agencies, hospitality, trade and industry to support the festival ecosystem in Kilkenny.
- Ensure Kilkenny festivals and events commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The Strategic Pillars that will deliver on these objectives are focussed on the following key areas:

Strategic Pillar 1: World Class Culture and Heritage

The focus of this pillar is on harnessing Kilkenny's unique world class strengths to pioneer new best in class festivals and events to attract international and domestic visitors as well as growing the tourism impact of existing festivals. This will include developing Kilkenny as *Home of Halloween* to support shoulder season growth; creating a new festival to celebrate Kilkenny's medieval heritage and history; strengthening Kilkenny County Council owned festivals and integrating Kilkenny's strong craft sector and heritage more deeply into festivals and events.

Strategic Pillar 2: Capacity and Capability

The focus of this pillar is on growing the capacity and capabilities of festivals and events to harness existing and emerging destination development opportunities and create sustainable, resilient and inclusive festivals. This will include providing easier access to information on available resources and supports that help festivals motivate and attract domestic and international visitors; strengthen their operational resilience and environmental sustainability; and deliver an enhanced range of accessible and inclusive family experiences.

Strategic Pillar 3: Venues and Spaces

The focus of this pillar is on maximising the potential of existing public spaces and venues for a wide range of festival and event programming and identifying new outdoor performance sites to strengthen and develop Kilkenny's reputation as an attractive event destination. This will include optimising public realm enhancements, such as the Abbey Quarter, Market Yard and Watergate Urban Park, to add new outdoor capacity for events across the city and county and to support the night time economy. It will also involve an assessment of suitable event and performance sites along the river and working with partners to package and market Kilkenny as an attractive destination for promoters and concert organisers.

Strategic Pillar 4: Promotion and Marketing

The focus of this pillar is on developing a compelling Kilkenny Festivals brand and year-round marketing campaign that positions Kilkenny as a world leading sustainable festival destination. This will include producing an annual Kilkenny Festivals calendar for inclusion in national and international tourism campaigns and creating Kilkenny Festivals marketing assets, such as industry toolkits, for tourism businesses to leverage throughout the year.

Strategic Pillar 5: Resources and Delivery

The focus of this pillar is on building committed stakeholder and industry collaborators across public bodies, funding agencies, hospitality, trade and industry to support the festival ecosystem in Kilkenny to ensure the successful resourcing, delivery and evaluation of this strategy. This will include a focus on maintaining and growing public funding in festivals working in partnership with key agencies and strengthening and developing evaluation and accountability measures to demonstrate the cultural, economic and social value and impact of festivals and events.



Kilkenny Festival & Events Strategy 2026-2030: Action Plan

The Kilkenny Festival and Events Strategy is a five-year operational plan based on an agreed focus for Kilkenny city and county. Delivery of the strategy is based on stakeholder commitment to the vision, objectives and strategic pillars which are underpinned by specific actions. The actions will build on existing festivals and events as well as introduce new initiatives and supports. All stakeholders will

be consulted in relation to the delivery of the identified actions.

The implementation of the Kilkenny Festival and Events Strategy will be overseen by the creation of an implementation group that will operate until 2030 and tasked with delivering on the following actions.

STRATEGIC PILLAR 1: World Class Culture and Heritage	Timeframe	Partners
Actions		
Develop a compelling <i>Home of Halloween</i> programme across the shoulder season of October/November	2026	FI, KCC, KT, KHO, KAO, Festivals, Private Sector
Undertake a feasibility study for a new festival in June-July inspired by Kilkenny's medieval heritage and history	2026 - 2027	FI, KCC, HC, KHO
Strengthen delivery of Kilkenny County Council owned festivals to maximise tourism impact	2026 – 2030	KCC, FI, KT, Private Sector
Identify existing independent festivals with potential to increase their tourism impact	2027	KCC, FI, Festivals
Integrate Kilkenny's strong heritage sector more deeply into festivals and events	2027	KCC, FI, DCCI, LEADER, Festivals
Integrate design more deeply into Kilkenny's festival offering	2027	KCC, KHO, FI, HC, LEADER, Festivals
Maximise the potential of the EU Year of the Normans in 2027 for festivals and events	2027	KCC, KHO, FI, HC, Festivals

STRATEGIC PILLAR 2: Capacity and Capability Actions	Timeframe	Partners
Actions		
Signpost festivals to relevant available resources to help grow their tourism impact	2027 - 2030	FI, KCC, LEO, KCETB, Festivals
Provide greater awareness of relevant resources available to support the operational sustainability and resilience of festivals	2027 - 2030	FI, KCC, AC, LEO, KCETB, Festivals
Ensure all festivals and events are committed to promoting environmental sustainability	2027 - 2030	KCC, KAO, KHO, FI, AC, Festivals
Utilise Visit Kilkenny website to provide a dedicated festivals section with festival toolkit and resources	2027 - 2030	KCC, KT
Support festivals to deliver an enhanced range of accessible and inclusive family experiences	2027 - 2030	KCC, FI, Festivals

STRATEGIC PILLAR 3: Venues and Spaces Actions		
Actions		
Identify and promote existing and new outdoor spaces suitable for festival and events programming	2027	KCC, FI
Support a sustainable, vibrant and diverse programme of events to strengthen the night time economy	2026 - 2030	KCC, FI, Private Sector, Festivals
Strengthen relationships across key partners and venues to package and market Kilkenny as an attractive destination for promoters and concert organisers	2027 – 2028	KCC, KT, LEO, FI, Private Sector,
Conduct an assessment of suitable event and performance sites along the river to support festival and event programming	2026	KCC, FI, LEADER

STRATEGIC PILLAR 4: Promotion and Marketing Actions		
Actions		
Develop a Kilkenny Festivals brand	2027	KCC, KT, FI
Develop a year-round Kilkenny Festivals marketing campaign	2027 - 2030	KCC, KT, FI
Produce an annual Kilkenny Festivals calendar	2027	KCC, KT, FI
Create a Kilkenny Festivals industry toolkit	2027	KCC, KT, FI Private Sector

STRATEGIC PILLAR 5: Resources and Delivery	Timeframe	Partners
Actions		
Establish a festivals and events strategy implementation group	2027	KCC, KT, KAO, FI, LEO, KHO, HC, DCCI, Private Sector, Festivals
Maintain and grow public funding and investment in festivals working in partnership with key agencies	2027 - 2030	KCC, FI, Festivals, Private Sector
Ensure that funding and grant application forms and processes are designed to capture data and metrics relating to economic, cultural and social impact	2027	KCC, KAO, KHO, FI, LEADER

Key Partners

AC – Arts Council

FI – Fáilte Ireland

HC – Heritage Council

KCC - Kilkenny County Council

KHO - Kilkenny Heritage Office

KAO – Kilkenny Arts Office

KCETB – Kilkenny Carlow Education Training Board

KT – Kilkenny Tourism

LEO – Local Enterprise Office

Appendix 1 – National Policy Context

- *Arts Council: Making Great Artwork – 2020-2025* where the arts are valued as central to civic life, as a hallmark of local and national identity, and as sign and signature of Ireland’s creativity as a people, with a range of funding programmes to support festivals and events.
- *Arts Council Festival’s Policy and Strategy 2020-25* which advocates for and supports the development of a diverse and varied arts-festival ecology, providing a suite of supports that encourage models of national and international significance and best practice.
- *Design and Crafts Council Strategy 2021-2026* which champions design across Ireland, located in Kilkenny, and responsible for the national Design Week initiative.
- *Fáilte Ireland Festival Strategy* dedicated to supporting the development of brilliant visitor experiences in Ireland by creating and promoting a selection of world class festivals through targeted investment.
- *Heritage Council Strategic Plan - our place in time, 2022-2028*, with a remit to promote interest, education, knowledge and pride in, and facilitate the appreciation and enjoyment of heritage, illustrated in initiatives such as Heritage Week and Irish Walled Towns Network
- *National Tourism Policy Statement - A New Era for Irish Tourism, December 2025*, which sets out the vision to grow visitor and employment numbers in the sector across Ireland.
- *Project 2040* ten- year plan for Ireland’s social, economic and cultural development in which festivals and events are recognised for their role in enhancing the attractiveness of cities, towns and villages; contributing to good quality of life; defining the character of urban and rural areas and adding to community and sense of place.
- *Report of the Night Time Economy Taskforce* which focusses on diversifying the social, cultural and economic activity occurring during specified evening and night-time hours, and has led to dedicated Night Time Economy officers in a number of locations across Ireland, including Kilkenny

Kilkenny



Comhairle Chontae Chill Chainnigh
Kilkenny County Council

Kilkenny

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