FUNDING AND GOVERNANCE DYNAMICS IN SUSTAINABLE PLANNING FOR TOURISM: INSIGHTS FROM THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

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Abstract

Purpose – This study explores the critical relationship between funding and governance in the context of sustainable planning for tourism in the Republic of Ireland, building on Wheeler's (2013) work on sustainability. It investigates how these factors influence the implementation of sustainable tourism initiatives.

Methodology/Design/Approach – The research employs qualitative semi-structured interviews with senior planners from all 28 Local Authorities in the Republic of Ireland. This method provides in-depth insights into their perspectives on the interplay between funding, governance, and sustainable tourism planning.

Findings – The interviews reveal a significant discrepancy between the positive views of senior planners on tourism support and the practical challenges of insufficient funding and staffing for sustainable initiatives. While there is a favourable opinion of the assistance from Fáilte Ireland and Local Authorities, this has not resulted in dedicated budgets or sufficient staff resources, hindering the effective implementation of long-term sustainable tourism strategies.

Originality of the research – This study highlights the crucial disconnect between positive perceptions of support for sustainable tourism and the resources allocated to it by Irish Local Authorities. It underscores policymakers' urgent need for action to bridge this gap, ensuring effective governance and resource allocation to advance sustainable planning for tourism.

Keywords Sustainable Tourism, Sustainable Destination Management, Tourism Governance, Funding, Qualitative Research, Republic of Ireland

INTRODUCTION

Wheeler's (2013) emphasis on sustainability as a fundamental principle in creating livable and ecological communities provides a suitable foundation here for understanding sustainable planning for tourism, highlighting the importance of integrating sustainability into development strategies. With the National Tourism Development Authority (Fáilte Ireland) recently intensifying its commitment to advising on sustainable tourism planning and development (Fáilte Ireland, 2024), understanding the underlying mechanisms that drive this sector's development at a local level becomes paramount, especially considering its vital role in both economic (Henry & Deane, 1997; Hanrahan & McLoughlin, 2015; Burnett & Johnston, 2020) and cultural vibrancy (Kneafsey, 1998; Collins & Fahy, 2011). While existing literature offers valuable insights into various aspects of sustainable planning for tourism, including Local Authorities' roles in policy development and implementation (Hanrahan & McLoughlin, 2015; McLoughlin & Hanrahan, 2016, 2019, 2023; McLoughlin et al, 2023; Manner-Baldeon et al, 2024), there is a notable gap in the comprehensive analysis of the interplay between funding, staffing, and governance within these Local Authorities. This paper aims to bridge this gap by examining the dynamic relationship between theoretical support and practical resource allocation for sustainable tourism in the Republic of Ireland. Specifically, it explores the alignment — or lack thereof — between the positive perceptions of senior planners and the tangible resources allocated for long-term sustainable development. In doing so, this study not only investigates a critical discrepancy noted by Local Authority senior planners but also contributes to the theoretical understanding of sustainable tourism planning by highlighting the influential yet often overlooked role of governance structures and resource constraints in shaping effective policy implementation at the local government level.

Despite Angelica Bock et al. (2021) initial discussion on the concept of governance in tourism research and existing literature offering insights into various aspects of sustainable tourism (González-Reverté, 2019; Mitrică et al., 2021; Protić et al., 2024), destination management (Magaš & Bašan, 2007; Bagarić & Žitinić, 2013). This paper will build on the limited in-depth analysis regarding the interplay between funding, staffing within the context of Local Authorities. Thus, this paper aims to bridge this gap through qualitative semi-structured interviews with planners from all 28 Local Authorities. The insights gathered reveal a concerning lack of dedicated funding and staffing, thus undermining the implementation of effective long-term sustainable strategies for tourism. However, this paper also addresses another critical aspect: the role of effective governance in tourism planning. It examines how a lack of governance impacts policy direction, practical progress, and overall sustainability in the Local Authority tourism planning process. It is this aspect that highlights a crucial gap in Irish Local Authorities' approach towards sustainable planning for tourism.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Before discussing any potential relationship between funding and governance when it comes to sustainable planning for tourism, it is necessary first to revisit some definitions that help to contextualise sustainability as it can relate to tourism planning. It was the UNWTO who reasoned that the sustainable development of tourism provides visitors with a high-quality experience while helping maintain the quality of the natural environment. It is these elements that tend to be reflected in the definition provided by the UNWTO: '*Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is envisaged as leading to managing all resources so that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems* (UNWTO, 2001). Additionally, the UNEP/UNWTO illustrated how sustainable planning for tourism signifies an actual condition of tourism that can be based on the principles of sustainable development. '*Taking full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts*' (UNEP-UNWTO, 2005:11-12). Given that previous studies have discussed how this concept of 'sustainability' has become the goal of most tourism-related policies (Moscardo, 2008; Lane, 2009; Bramwell, 2015; Guo et al., 2020). These definitions offer a valuable foundation for understanding that with suitable resources and specialist support, Local Authorities' efforts to plan for tourism might reflect sustainable development and long-term sustainability. However, in order to link the discussion of sustainability and its overarching goal regarding tourism planning with the practical considerations of governance and financial resourcing, it is necessary to understand that the actualisation of these policies in practice is largely contingent upon the financial and administrative capabilities of Local Authorities.

1.1. Funding Issues in Tourism Planning

Funding difficulties regarding tourism remain at the forefront of academic discussions (Clements & Georgiou, 1998; Issa & Altinay, 2006; McLoughlin & Hanrahan, 2019). Weaver, Tang and Zhao (2020) argue that sustainable planning for tourism requires sound, feasible policies. Jordan et al (2013) goes further when discussing governance, power, and citizen participation in the planning process, and argues that local governments are often the only bodies with the necessary financial resources to fund tourism planning adequately. Mowforth and Munt (2016) further reason the need for associated budgets and implementation timelines. Nevertheless, from an Irish context, nearly a decade ago, several Irish Local Authorities faced significant debt in the past decade (McDonald, 2014). Turley and McNena (2020) discussed at length the financial positions of several rural Local Authorities, that required ongoing consultation and monitoring by the national government. Yet, arguments persist that remains that adequate financial resources are crucial for tourism planning. Guiver and Stanford (2014) for example warned that the tourism industry's structure, limited public funding, and challenges aligning multiple agencies can hinder effective strategic planning. Transitioning from the discussion of governance, power, and citizen participation in tourism planning to the broader role of public services, it becomes apparent that the financial capabilities of local governments are just one element of a multi-dimensional approach to tourism governance. This broader perspective, which includes financial and service-oriented aspects, is critical in understanding the complex interplay of factors influencing the sustainable planning and development of tourism.

1.2. Local Authority Governance

Public services play both a supportive and protective role at every stage of tourist activity, and as noted by Wu and Wang (2024) are of critical importance when it comes to discussing governance within tourism studies. This focus on governance is essential for comprehending how the state responds to tourism-related social, economic, political, and environmental policy challenges. Over the past three decades, the study of governance in tourism has evolved, as evidenced by existing research (Jamal & Camargo, 2018; Marafa et al., 2019; Pierre & Peters, 2020; Bock, et al., 2021; Ullah et al., 2024). It is evident that this evolution tends to be marked by a growing interest in understanding the policymaking and planning processes within tourism, a trend initially considered by Hall (2005, 2008) and later expanded upon by Mandić and Kennell (2021). The latter having specifically highlighted the increasing influence of organisations in tourism governance. To help ensure feasible policies, adequate resources are needed to allow policymakers to provide necessary infrastructure, services, and facilities without negatively impacting the local environment, economy, and social fabric (McLoughlin & Hanrahan, 2019). However, a debate remains around the successful transition of sustainable tourism policies into practice (Moyle et al., 2013; Sharpley, 2020), together with the actual ability of Local Authorities to govern (McLoughlin & Hanrahan, 2019).

For example, Boyle and O'Riordan (2013) questioned the adaptability and effectiveness of the central government's growing control over policy issues, including tourism planning. While the concept of governance has remained influential since the 1970s (Pierre, 1999), according to both Bramwell and Lane (2012) and later Islam et al (2018), it is the challenge of securing cooperation and coordination among diverse actors that remains a problem. Considering such concerns, it becomes evident that the successful implementation of sustainable planning for tourism depends not just on policy formulation but on effective governance and coordination among various stakeholders in the tourism planning process.

2. METHODOLOGY

This paper aims to explore and understand the relationship between funding and governance in sustainable planning for tourism from the perspective of Local Authorities in the Republic of Ireland. Given the critical role that Local Authorities play in tourism development and planning (Charlton & Essex, 1996; Page & Ross, 2002; Dodds & Butler, 2009a, 2009b; Maxim, 2013; Barrutia & Echebarria, 2015; McLoughlin & McLoughlin, 2019; Elliot, 2020), this study aims to uncover the complexities of how funding and governance policies impact on tourism initiatives among the Republic of Irelands Local Authorities.

To facilitate an in-depth exploration of the perspectives and experiences of senior planners, conducting and analysing qualitative interviews represents the most appropriate method (Bergmann, 2016). This approach permitted the authors to gather unique understandings (Picken, 2018) that quantitative data might overlook (Altinay & Paraskevas, 2015), especially concerning interpretation, challenges, and the lived experiences of Senior Planners. Semi-structured interviews were conducted over a period of three months in 2016 with senior planners in all 28 Local Authorities in the Republic of Ireland. These interviews were based on the theoretical framework initially presented by McLoughlin and Hanrahan (2019), which was also utilised in subsequent studies by McLoughlin and Hanrahan (2023) and McLoughlin, Maguire, and Hanrahan (2023) to examine issues related to evidence-based planning among Local Authorities. Table 2 (below) provides an overview of the distribution of interviewed senior planners across the four provinces in Ireland. Despite the initial data collection occurring eight years ago, the insights remain highly relevant. In the Republic of Ireland, Local Authorities are legally required to produce a six-year County Development Plan (CDP) under the Planning and Development Act, 2000. This strategic planning process, spanning a six-year period, ensures that the views expressed during these interviews continue to reflect the ongoing challenges and considerations regarding sustainable planning for tourism across the Republic of Ireland.

Table 1: **Semi Structured Interview Questions**

Q1	**Does the Local Authority have a set budget in place for tourism planning?**
Q2	**Does the Local Authority employ a tourism officer/manager?**
Q3	**If no, do you feel it would be beneficial to appoint a tourism office/manager within the Local Authority?**
Q4	**How supported are you in the role of tourism planning within your Local Authority?**
Q5	**How supported are you in the role of tourism planning by the following outside organisations?** *(Fáilte Ireland, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA))*

Source: McLoughlin and Hanrahan, 2019

The authors specifically targeted senior planners from all 28 Local Authorities in the Republic of Ireland. This was based on their legal obligation to develop and publish CDPs containing tourism policies, their role in tourism-related infrastructure, and planning permission decisions. Qualitative semi-structured interviews here allowed participants to convey their own opinions from their perspective (Sayrs, 1998) while providing some privacy (Adeloye et al., 2020). Such insights were considered critical in helping to understand how policies are interpreted and implemented at the destination level. The interview questions were piloted before the data collection stage, as advised (Altinay & Paraskevas, 2015; Lune & Berg, 2017).

Table 2. **Profile of Interviewed Sample**

Province of Local Authority	Number of Senior Planners Interviewed
Ulster	3
Munster	6
Leinster	14
Connacht	5
Total	28

All senior planners responded to this request, yielding a response rate of 100 %. All interviews were audio recorded, similar to both Bergmann (2016) and Diehl (2020) and with the interviewees' consent over three months, where critical issues were documented and in line with Göbel et al (2015), coded thematically. Which as Walters (2016) noted, is a rigorous and valid means of analysing tourism texts. To maintain anonymity and confidentiality, references to a particular Local Authority were removed from planner responses in line with Durbarry's (2017) ethical principles.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Discrepancies Between Positive Perceptions and Resource Allocation

Wheeler's (2013) emphasis on sustainability as a fundamental principle in creating liveable and ecological communities lays the groundwork for helping to understand why senior planners have now identified sustainable tourism planning and development as a top priority in practice.

> *'Tourism is hugely valued in the city and County, and sustainable development remains one of the top priorities in planning. Budget and resource management aside - the County Council is committed to a balanced, carefully managed, and sustainable growth and is open to exploring new ways to evolve the tourism experience'* (Planner 27).

Senior planners recognise the importance of addressing future generations' needs through careful planning, which, as highlighted by Edgell et al (2008), includes economic, sustainable, and community development, which are considered essential for a long-term sustainable approach to tourism (Jamal & Dredge, 2014). While academic discussions (Liu, 2003; Maxim, 2015; Mowforth & Munt, 2016), persistently advocate for well-funded tourism policies, including Radović et al.'s (2020) focus on rural areas. There is a notable gap in actual practice, as evidenced by Senior Planners' admissions that specific budgets for tourism planning remain unallocated by Local Authorities.

> *'We wouldn't have a specific budget in place for tourism planning'* (Planner 28).
> *'I know; we have a budget for heritage but I'm not sure about tourism'* (Planner 14).

The limitations in revenue-raising powers for Local Authorities, as highlighted by both Turley and McNena (2019) and Considine and Reidy (2015), not only raise concerns about the practical implementation of tourism policies but could also place senior management and elected county councillors in a challenging position. They must navigate the complex balance between maintaining essential Local Authority services and allocating funds for tourism planning and development. Such a balance is critical for the long-term sustainability of the local tourism industry. Yet despite the financial constraints and competing priorities faced by Local Authorities in the Republic of Ireland, several Senior Planners acknowledged the presence of dedicated tourism officers within their respective Local Authorities. Thus, helping to underscore the recognised importance of tourism planning and development.

> *'Yes, we have a tourism development officer'* (Planner 3).
> *'We have a tourism officer through the community and enterprise section'* (Planner 25).
> *'We have a long standing experienced acting tourism officer in place'* (Planner 27).

While some senior planners recognised the potential benefits of having dedicated tourism officers, in fact the reality appeared more complex. Several local authorities where without such positions, potentially due to the limited budgets and resource constraints mentioned previously.

> *'Oh yes, the employment of a rural recreation officer (whether through LEADER or County Council) would assist in the development of the outdoor activity-based products including walking'* (Planner 16).
> *'Yes. A dedicated tourism team would be highly beneficial for the County, given the range of attractions it possesses* (Planner 9).
> *'Awh yeah, I'd say so. Anything that can help the council develop this industry, especially in rural areas would be welcomed by the council and indeed the community. Like we would need someone with a full time focus on tourism'* (Planner 23).

Despite the recognition that human resources and skilled staffing are crucial for sustainable tourism planning and addressing industry trends and disruptions (Baum, 2018; Carlisle et al, 2021; Minor et al., 2024). Findings here highlight a concerning gap, as it is evident that tourism remains an inadequately staffed activity within Local Authorities.

> *'Well, ideally, yes, we would love to have more staff working on tourism'* (Planner 21).
> *'In terms of additional staff, yes, by all means'* (Planner 28).

Effective tourism policy requires adequate staffing (Churugsa et al., 2007; Mowforth and Munt, 2016). So, this lack of dedicated staffing for tourism planning at the local level raises concerns about the feasibility of implementing effective tourism policies. A broader examination of the governance context and support mechanisms available to senior planners is therefore warranted, especially as policy development tends to be considered within the larger governance framework (Hall, 2013; Hall & Page, 2014).

3.2. Challenges in Governance and Resource Allocation

Most senior planners acknowledged that they received significant support from their local authority in their tourism planning role. This support can have implications for sustainable tourism planning, affecting the relationships between policy actors and the Local Authority's ability to act.

> *'The planning department would be tremendously supported in tourism planning. It is a role that the council takes very seriously. Fellow planners and I would work together on various tourism planning projects. Both management and the CEO would be extremely obliging and supportive of our efforts* (Planner 21).
> *'I'd personally feel I am very supported. Now this assumption is based on what interaction I have had with tourism planning to date. I don't work on tourism a lot, but every now and again it comes by my way. I suppose the support from the likes of head of services, or other planners does make it a lot easier to get things done. We would all work together. But again as I said, tourism is not something that I work on regularly'* (Planner 23).

While this might suggest that Local Authorities provide a supportive environment for tourism planning, which aligns with the recognised importance of effective governance for promoting sustainability in tourism (Bramwell & Lane, 2012; Jamal & Camargo, 2018; Marafa et al, 2019). There is a need to ensure that this support prioritises sustainability considerations, as poorly planned tourism can have detrimental impacts on local communities (Faulkner & Tideswell, 1997; Mason, 2020). Therefore, this would necessitate guidance and backing from senior leadership and planners to achieve the complex goals of environmental, economic, and socio-cultural sustainability. However, discussions with Senior Planners tend to reveal a favourable perception of the positive support provided by Fáilte Ireland in the tourism planning process. This support is demonstrated through constructive and professional assistance on tourism planning-related matters.

> *'Fáilte Ireland also provides valuable guidance. This support enables the provision of sound developments, which unfortunately has not always happened* (Planner 24).
> *'Fáilte Ireland would play an active role in supporting the planning and development of tourism within the Local Authority, particularly in terms of policy development'* (Planner 7).

While Fáilte Ireland, as the national tourism development authority, could play a role in promoting sustainable planning for tourism by supporting senior planners. A point was raised that highlights a concerning lack of mobilisation and action towards sustainability in tourism from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), whose legal mandate encompasses protecting and improving the environment for the people of Ireland (EPA, 2023).

> *'We receive considerable support from all tourism agencies however, support from the EPA has only been minor to date'* (Planner 2).

This tends to suggest that senior planners do not benefit from the vital advice the EPA can offer to minimise tourism's negative impact on the natural environment. Such support is fundamental for future Local Authority tourism land-use policies to have adequate protection measures, potentially hindering future sustainability.

4. CONCLUSION

Ziritt Trejo et al. (2024) emphasised that current tourism management must incorporate sustainability to achieve sustainable development. This requires assessing the support and resources allocated to sustainable tourism by policymakers. Revisiting Wheeler's (2013) advocacy for sustainability as a foundational principle in creating liveable and ecological communities, it is reassuring to see that senior planners across Ireland's 28 Local Authorities recognize the importance of tourism and prioritise sustainable development. This alignment with sustainable practices underscores tourism's economic, social, and community aspects, demonstrating a commitment to sustainability (Dangi & Jamal, 2016) beyond immediate financial concerns. Despite the widespread recognition of tourism's long-term importance, there is a noticeable gap in allocating specific budgets for sustainable planning for tourism, an issue highlighted by Jordan et al (2013) above. However, as noted by senior planners, such allocations were somewhat abstract. This discrepancy between well-funded tourism policies and the practical challenges of resource allocation underlines a critical disconnect between policy formulation and implementation regarding sustainable planning for tourism by the Republic of Irelands Local Authorities.

This paper also highlighted how governance is a pivotal factor when it comes to the successful implementation of sustainable policies. The evolution of governance in tourism (Hall, 2005, 2008; Marafa, Qi & Chan, 2018; Pierre & Peters, 2020) stresses the importance of coordination among various stakeholders. While findings from the Republic of Ireland's Local Authorities suggest the need for more robust governance frameworks, this also presents an opportunity for improvement. Striking a balance between economic, social, and environmental considerations is a challenge (Edgell et al, 2008), but with suitable governance structures, this might be overcome. Thus, further emphasising the need for effective governance mechanisms for sustainable planning for tourism. Another key finding of this study is the need for more staff dedicated to tourism planning within local authorities, despite recognition of the need for skilled personnel to address industry trends and disruptions (Baum, 2018;

Carlisle et al, 2021; Minor, McLoughlin & Carlisle, 2024). The lack of staffing capacity illustrated by the Republic of Ireland's local authorities regarding sustainable planning for tourism raises concerns about the feasibility of implementing effective long-term tourism policies, which can have broader implications for sustainable tourism planning. Finally, while most senior planners acknowledged receiving significant support from within their Local Authority, it is necessary for Local Authorities to strengthen collaborations with national organisations such as Fáilte Ireland. Thus utilising their expertise and resources to strengthen their capacity for effective, sustainable tourism strategies. There was also a disparity in how policies are interpreted and implemented at the ground level. This suggests a need for financial resources and strategic guidance from senior leadership to achieve sustainability goals.

While this paper has illustrated and discussed the complexities of funding and governance in the Republic of Ireland when it comes to sustainable planning for tourism by Local Authorities, it has also initiated avenues for further investigation. It needs to be acknowledged that the dynamics of funding and governance when it comes to sustainable planning for tourism discussed here are not necessarily isolated to the context of the Republic of Ireland's Local Authorities. Since the tourism has always been a complex system, with its planning it is necessary to integrate the development of all its segments, offer and demand, physical and institutional elements (Jovicic & Ivanovic, 2008). Future research could examine these dynamics across different countries and jurisdictions. Such an investigation could offer valuable insights into contrasting governance structures, funding mechanisms, and cultural contexts that might influence sustainable planning for tourism. Understanding these differences, might also help identify best practices applicable to different settings. Thus further enhancing knowledge of how different systems can influence the implementation of long-term sustainable planning strategies for tourism. Furthermore, this study highlighted the challenges of governance when it comes to sustainable planning for tourism. Yet, it would be necessary to explore further the barriers to effective governance by examining potential underlying factors that might hinder efficient governance, such as political influences, bureaucratic constraints, or limited stakeholder engagement when it comes to sustainable planning for tourism. Lastly, the geographical focus on the Republic of Ireland means the findings are tailored to its unique political and planning landscape, limiting its applicability elsewhere. Future studies should conduct comparative research across different jurisdictional boundaries. Furthermore, the reliance on qualitative interviews, while providing in-depth data, lacks the broad quantifiable measures that quantitative methods offer. This limitation, coupled with the absence of perspectives from other stakeholders like local businesses, tourists, or residents, suggests the need for a more comprehensive approach to understand the challenges and opportunities in sustainable tourism policy implementation.

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