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## Cork can tap EU €1bn fund to help salvage tourism season

Approximately 1.6m people a year, from abroad and from within Ireland, visit county Cork. They come to see everything from the rugged coastline of West Cork to the city itself, which is steeped in history. However, Covid-19 has seriously challenged Cork's tourism sector.

As we move out of more stringent lockdown conditions, Cork, along with many other cities across the EU, is grappling with these challenges. Many in the tourism industry are looking to the EU to see how this summer season can be salvaged.

In May, the European Commission published guidelines, outlining how tourism could commence again, provided it

were safe to do so.

Additional public health measures at border crossings and airports, fewer passengers allowed on transport, widespread availability of hand-sanitiser, and mandatory wearing of masks have been proposed for travel.

In tourist destinations, the EU recommends that there should be more health protocols, with staff receiving additional health-and-safety training, reduced numbers of staff on rotas in restaurants, and widespread use of contact tracing.

With many businesses in the tourism sector facing financial difficulties, the EU now has a €1bn fund from the European Investment Bank to

aid 100,000 small- and medium-sized businesses.

The EU's coronavirus response investment initiative will allow EU countries, like Ireland, the flexibility to direct funds to businesses and local authorities to help them adapt to proposed public health measures. The European Regional Development Fund, which has provided support to many tourism initiatives in Cork over the years, will also have a large role to play in the recovery of regions, such as by promoting skills to help small- and medium-sized enterprises to recover.

Existing EU-funded programmes, such as Destination SME and the LEADER, are

examples of projects that receive EU support in order to promote the tourism industry in Cork.

Destination SME is run by Cork County Council and co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund. It is centred on the development of small- and medium-sized tourism enterprises in certain regions.

This project brings together partners from EU countries — such as Finland, France, Italy, Ireland, Malta, and Slovenia — that work collaboratively, sharing their experiences and best practices.

Given its focus on supporting rural development, this project has the potential to help small villages and towns

to capitalise on their tourism potential. As part of the project, in December 2019, Cork County Council hosted a workshop to showcase supports available in tourism and business. The workshop, attended by local business owners, examined both the importance of promoting a destination and the supports that are available for local enterprises.

The LEADER programme, set up by the European Commission in 1991, also promotes rural economic development. Since the programme was launched in Cork, in 2017, 91 projects, across a range of areas, have received funding to the value of €4m.

LEADER West Cork divi-

sion had a recent funding call that sought to develop tourism "business hubs" and make funding available for training and mentoring initiatives within rural tourism.

While it remains to be seen how the tourism sector in Cork will fare this summer, EU funding projects may offer support to local organisations challenged by the fallout of the Covid-19 crisis.

With its position on both the Wild Atlantic Way and the Ancient East, its scenery and culinary character, and with EU and national supports, there are many reasons to be positive and hopeful for the future of tourism in Cork, despite the challenges that face it at present.