



EMBRACING AGILITY TO DRIVE SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

CROSS BORDER TOURISM CONFERENCE,
CARLINGFOR, 17 APRIL 2024



Siubhán
O'Connor

About me

Born & bred in County Louth – grew up in Ravensdale

Studied Law at NUIG – Qualified as a Solicitor in Dublin, before moving to Belfast in 2010 to join PwC.

Forensics investigations – Moved into People & Operations lead responsible for 400+ team

Other experience – Nursing homes, Hospitality, Tourism

Bought Corcreggan Mill in 2019 with my husband Ciaran

Role at Corcreggan – clear division of responsibilities – “Indoors” v “Outdoors”

Live between Belfast & Donegal



About Corcreggan Mill



A “quirky & eclectic” accommodation hub outside Dunfanaghy, on Donegal’s WAW

Wide range of seasonal & year-round accommodation to suit a range of budgets – Apartments, Millhouse rooms, glamping, apartments & Motorhome Park – food offerings & entertainment during high season

Sleeps 55 to 75 guests, depending on season

Core business over the last 18 months – Holiday & Group accommodation

Core team of 6 – Grows to 25 in High Season which includes international workaways



History of Corcreggan



18th Century Corn Mill ✨ est. 1789 by the Stewart family – number of associated buildings

Mid 19th Century – Hanlon family – fell into disuse in the early 1960s, following a tragic accident.

Deep local connection with the Mill

1989, Comdt. Brendan Rohan, a former Irish Defence Forces commandant, purchased the site and over 25 years, transformed it into a seasonal accommodation business.

Key focus on low-budget seasonal accommodation options (camping/glamping, hostel & motorhome park) ✨





The Vision

- On taking over in May 2019, occupancy running at **17%–19%** in previous 3 years
- Clear sense of what we wanted to do, and how we wanted to do it:

Aim: To extend the season and increase occupancy by leveraging the beauty and amenity of the site & the surrounding area

How: Creating family holidays, **we** would like to go on, which included

- Warm Irish hospitality & a 'Home from home' feeling
- Authenticity of experience and a flavor of local culture, language & music
- Great food available on site
- Suitable for all budgets

The Reality

It wasn't going to be as easy as that!

- **Acute seasonality** of a hospitality industry in NW Donegal – *"The lights go out in October"*
- Managing **spiralling costs** of keeping the business open when market profile/reach was low
- Challenges in **recruiting and retaining** skilled staff
- Managing the **low morale and energy** which comes with seasonality
- **Increasingly difficult trading environment** – Covid, global war & uncertainty, COL crisis ...
- **Poor tech infrastructure** made remotely managing the business particularly difficult

To create & build a sustainable business, we needed to pivot & change the model – and quickly





New “8:4” Strategy

June to Sept

- Serviced Offering
- Food, Music, Entertainment (Campfire sessions, Tasting events, Package breaks etc.
- Target market: Families and Solo Travelers – **No groups**

Oct to May

- Fully self-catered Group Hire - Millhouse and Railway Carriage
- Additional Services provided upon request - e.g. catering, travel arrangements, activity bookings etc.
- Target Market: Events, activity breaks, retreats, multigenerational families, friend groups, activity groups, friend/family celebrations - **Only groups!**

4 Key Changes since 2021



1. Millhouse B&B Reconfiguration & new year-round accommodation

Reconfiguration and upgrade works on Millhouse B&B to make it fully self-contained and suitable for Self-Catering Group Hire

3 x new apartments

Zoning the property to make it attractive to smaller or large groups

Setting the property up with group specific needs & desires (communal spaces, functional wine bar, games room, workshops space, integrated music system etc.)

Resurfacing works on upper area to create marquee friendly site



Key changes (contd.)

2. Infrastructure investment & embracing tech

Invested heavily in key infrastructure (Gas, Solar, & Water) – most significant investment has been 1 G WiFi

Strong WiFi enabled digital platforms have been essential to allow the efficient & effective remote management of the property

- VOIP Phone systems
- Heating & Lighting
- Guest interaction & concierge portal
- Payments & Card pre-Authorisations
- Music

Tech has also allowed us to improve guest experience through increased responsiveness (digital concierge)



Key changes (contd)

3. Offering Group enhancements & packages

Introduction of **Private Dining** for groups

Travel & concierge services, activity planning and additional staffing on request

Teaming up with local providers of experiences to create **group packages**:

- Mobile saunas
- Guided hikes
- Yoga/Meditation workshop
- Photographers
- Food tours
- Boat tours
- Music & entertainment
- Mobile pubs ...

... and even balloon specialists!





Key changes (contd)

4. Leveraging the beauty of the site

Enhancing **existing features** and improving accessibility:

- Meditation Cave
- Seven Oaks

Creation of **new outdoor recreational spaces & amenities** on the site

- Lakepoint picnic & viewpoint areas,
- River Walk
- New Campfire Area

Most recently, **refurbishing of Old Mill Wheel**



Outcomes

We've been able to;

- Pivot away from 'high volume, low value' stays in peak season, to an **experience-led offering** which drives **increased spend per head**
- **Attract groups** of varying sizes, requirements & budgets during the low season
- **Balance out the revenue** peaks & troughs which negatively impact cashflow
- **Reduce costs**, relative to occupancy



Outcomes (contd).



- Tap into the **local eco system** of providers and suppliers to complement our offering, and enhance the guest experience
- Drive strong revenue growth, increasing overall revenues **3-fold**, since taking over in 2019
- Overall occupancy has increased from **19% in 2019, to 56% in 2023**, with group stays representing the majority of that growth

Outcomes (contd.)



External validation that we are on the right track



Key learnings



- **Be brave** and respond to change quickly – don't dither
- **Innovation** isn't a 'nice to have', it's an absolute necessity. So don't be afraid to try new things!
- Follow the **data**
- Importance of creating and **leverage a network** of local suppliers & providers
- Be **completely honest** with the end-user about what this business is, and what it isn't.
- Remain open to change – 'No Groups' v 'Only Groups' – and we're still pivoting!
- Change doesn't mean compromising on values / ethos of the business



Go raibh maith agaibh