



Cliffs of Moher viewed from boat

# VISITOR SAFETY IN THE OUTDOORS

**Helen Lawless** reports on a Visitor Safety Group workshop held at the Cliffs of Moher

**T**he **Visitor Safety Group** (VSG) is an UK and Ireland-wide network, bringing together more than fifty organisations with a role in visitor risk management.

**Mountaineering Ireland** has been a VSG member since 2017, and Mountaineering Ireland Access and Conservation volunteer **Vincent McAlinden** was elected to the VSG Management Group earlier this year.

The Visitor Safety Group's guiding principles provide practical guidance on how to create safe access to the countryside in ways that do not spoil the landscape and heritage, or lessen the visitor's sense of exploration and adventure.

The kernel of the VSG approach is that the balance between management intervention and a visitor's responsibility for their own safety should change depending on the location, with a higher degree of self-reliance expected of people in more remote and rugged locations. This aligns well with Mountaineering Ireland's values and the ethos of personal responsibility which is at the heart of mountain activities. The VSG approach is increasingly being recognised across the island of Ireland as best practice in visitor management in the outdoors.

While the VSG hosted many useful webinars during the Covid period, I was pleased to get back to an in-person network event in Clare in September and to have the opportunity to visit the **Cliffs**

**of Moher** with VSG members. A tour below the cliffs the evening before with the Doolin Ferry Company displayed the beauty, and the extent, of the cliffs – a very enjoyable scene-setter, especially for those unfamiliar with the area.

In the presentations the following morning, Cliffs of Moher Visitor Experience CEO **Geraldine Enright** outlined the history of Clare County Council's acquisition of a core, 800-metre section of the cliffs, the development of the new visitor centre, which opened in 2007, and the day-to-day challenges of managing this busy and iconic location.

With visitor numbers of 1.6 million in 2019, this is Ireland's most visited natural attraction. A new 2040 strategy is currently being prepared for the Cliffs of Moher destination site, looking at how to

improve visitor experiences, protection and restoration of the natural environment, and how to deliver economic benefit in the local area and across the county.

### At the Cliffs

Workshop participants split into three groups, each led by a member of the Cliffs of Moher team. The group I was in first looked at the area immediately around the visitor centre and learned about the efforts to spread visitors throughout the day, including control of the number of coaches and the times they can visit.

Moving north along the cliffs, there's a highly managed area up to **O'Brien's Tower**, with a wall of flagstones, a metre or more in height, to discourage people from going to the edge for a view down

Steps with handrails on the Cliffs of Moher walk







Cliff danger sign festooned with stickers



Food trucks by the Cliffs of Moher cliff walk

and along the cliffs. This also protects the foraging habitat of the **chough**, one of the birds for which the site is designated as a **Special Protection Area**.

Moving beyond the tower, we left the Cliffs of Moher Visitor Experience area, crossing onto the **Cliffs of Moher Coastal Walk** on privately-owned land. Signage here indicated the path was closed, while in reality it was easily accessible and evidently busy. Further along, concrete steps with a metal handrail stimulated comments and questions from participants, some of whom considered this an over-engineered solution which detracts from its natural setting.

Just after the steps was a short, steep and very muddy scar with a very old 'Cliff Danger' sign, now obliterated by stickers from every part of the globe. These all provided ample fodder for a discussion about the importance of clear messaging that addresses the desired visitor management outcomes and recognises the perceptions and expectations of visitors. One couldn't help wondering if many of the people negotiating the tricky terrain were simply following along the path seeking a photo of the cliffs, which is difficult to achieve until you reach the end of the (visitor corral) fencing on the coastal side of the path.

## South from the centre

Returning to the centre, most of our group continued south for a few hundred metres along the cliff path. It is quicker and easier to get a photo of the cliffs from this side. We observed differences in signage and path width compared with the northern side.

Immediately beyond the core Cliffs of Moher area, the group was surprised to see food trucks and a number of vehicles parked close to the cliff edge. Further along, there was another flight of concrete steps with handrails, all of

which detracts from the natural grandeur of the cliffs.

## Wrap-up

Back outside the centre, we had a lively wrap-up session facilitated by Vincent McAlinden on behalf of VSG.

The feedback from VSG members showed that the future development and management of the Cliffs of Moher could usefully be informed by the VSG approach, for example in making clear the transition between different zones, and having a turn-around point.

The natural abruptness of the cliffs and their sheer scale has understandably influenced decision-making to date, with a well-intended aspiration to minimise or eliminate risk to life.

Appropriate interventions to manage natural hazards in reaction to their popularity are rarely straightforward. If over-influenced by a workplace health-and-safety approach it can both inadvertently impact on the special qualities of the site and diminish the experience that attracts visitors in the first place. The members of the Visitor

Safety Group seek to create, contribute to and share best practice to help site managers find solutions.

One of the observations from the Cliffs of Moher site visit was that clear messaging is key. Giving visitors accurate information, possibly with a map showing different zones (in keeping with the VSG Risk Control Matrix), would enable people to make informed choices about how far they go along the cliffs. On-site messaging could be complemented by information on the **Cliffs of Moher app** as to what visitors to the site can expect.

Looking to the future, greater integration between the management of the visitor centre area and the Cliffs of Moher path seems important and should improve the experience of visitors. Overall, the long-term sustainable management of this unique natural asset should take precedence over accommodating visitors and commercial opportunism – there is only one Cliffs of Moher. ■

**FIND OUT MORE** Learn more about the **Visitor Safety Group** on [www.visitorsafety.group](http://www.visitorsafety.group).

Workshop participants having wrap-up discussion

