



REJUVENATING Ireland's small town centres

A Call to Action



The focus of this report is on small Irish towns outside the catchment area of the five main cities. Recommendations in this report relate to smaller towns, with populations below 10,000. Ensuring the vitality and long-term functioning of these smaller towns is critically important to ensure vibrant rural communities and – making better places to live, work in and visit. Larger towns such as Letterkenny, Sligo, Athlone, Ennis, Tralee, Clonmel, Kilkenny and Wexford have been excluded for the purposes of this study as they function in the same way as cities, due to their size and regional importance, with self-sustaining economies. The population size of 1,500 and 10,000 was determined from the CSO (Central Statistics Office) definition of an ‘aggregate town’ which refers to those towns with a total population of 1,500 or more.

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Foreword



Des O'Broin
President

On behalf of the SCSi Board, Council and Professional Groups, I'm delighted to present this SCSi Report focussing on the main street of our small towns around the country.

The decline of our small towns, in particular their main thoroughfares, is a real challenge and concern for all, particularly those that live and rely on its success for their livelihood.

Our Report is for those community groups and local authorities to adopt so that practical issues faced by retailers and other business groups can be addressed and therefore help promote a return to a vibrant environment. The importance of town living and having an injection of residential occupancy on our main streets is another recommendation of this report which is encouraging to see. This report, informed by chartered surveyors working in construction, land and property, is the best example of joined-up thinking and collaboration to solve a problem that ordinarily would be more challenging in isolated groups.

Every town in Ireland has its strengths and should be given the opportunity to develop a framework in which the community spearheads the rejuvenation of their main street.

We envisage the main street offering a place in which to work, live and share the public space whilst understanding the way business is conducted in rural towns has changed.

We would urge the Government, Local Authorities, community leaders and interest groups to take note of our report and adopt our recommendations.

I would like to thank my fellow members of the committee and SCSi executives for their participation and Future Analytics Consulting for their assistance.

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Executive Summary

Concern over the vibrancy and future of our regional high streets has been part of social discourse for the last few decades. As more streets and towns began to suffer a slow decline, policies and funding schemes have been formulated to counter this. However, it is perhaps only in the last decade, with the onset of the economic crash and the extent of damage it caused, that there has been a clear and determined effort on the part of successive governments to address the fundamental issues that are leading to this decline.

Regional high streets have been significantly affected by the recent economic downturn. The impact has been felt throughout Ireland with increasing vacancy rates and a decline in the vibrancy of many rural communities. Conversely, there are many positive developments, which can change to act as demonstration projects for other towns.

Finding a way to effectively share this can be a challenge.

Drawing on national and international research, as well as consultation with national influencers, this policy statement, issued by the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland (SCSI), is aimed at central and local government and the private sector based in Irish towns and villages and those local communities who are affected by the decline of the regional high street.

The purpose of this report is to:

- PURPOSE**
- provide an overview of the trends currently influencing the regional high street and the impacts those trends on the ground,
 - consider a range of barriers in enabling a vibrant regional high street,
 - identify critical success factors at play, and succeeding elsewhere, in animating regional high streets, and
 - provide pragmatic policy interventions – recommendations to revitalise the regional high street and bring a stronger sense of place and new lease of life to rural communities.

This report is intended for use by local communities and local authorities who are considering or are in the process of interventions to revive and rejuvenate their high streets.

This document highlights several **key trends** in section 2, those that are driving the transformation in the retail landscape, and with implications for the regional high street. These include:

- KEY TRENDS**
- Growth of online retail sales,
 - Increasing broadband availability,
 - Changing demographics,
 - Changing commercial landscape,
 - Changing consumer behaviour,
 - Increasing vacancy,
 - Reform of governance,
 - Lack of critical mass.

A range of **barriers to developing vibrant regional high streets** are identified in section 3.

BARRIERS

- Increasing costs and overheads,
- Lack of Collaboration,
- Reduced funding for local authorities,
- Governance challenges,
- Legacy of out of town shopping centres,
- Unattractive urban realm,
- Dominance of the car,
- Lack of connectivity,
- Failure to Innovate,
- Demographic change.

An awareness of the successful measures and interventions that can overcome these barriers is vital. A range of **critical success factors** are outlined in section 4, measures that have either been implemented in towns throughout Ireland or are policy recommendations that have emerged during a review of national and external studies, policies and approaches.

SUCCESS FACTORS

- Strong leadership,
- Plan led change,
- Community support and buy-in,
- High quality broadband provision,
- Public realm enhancement,
- Effective management of parking and public transport,
- Use of incentives and dis-incentives,
- Simplification of planning,
- Sense of place enhancement,
- Creating vibrancy,
- Marketing and promotion.

Having identified key trends, barriers to successful rejuvenation and critical success factors this report includes a **series of recommendations, in section 5**, designed to revitalise the regional high street and bring a stronger sense of place and give a new lease of life to rural communities.

Thirteen recommendation themes have been identified, framed in terms of Positioning, People, Planning, Product & Place, and Promotion. **SCSI consider these recommendations the key initiatives required to rejuvenate and revitalise the regional high street.**

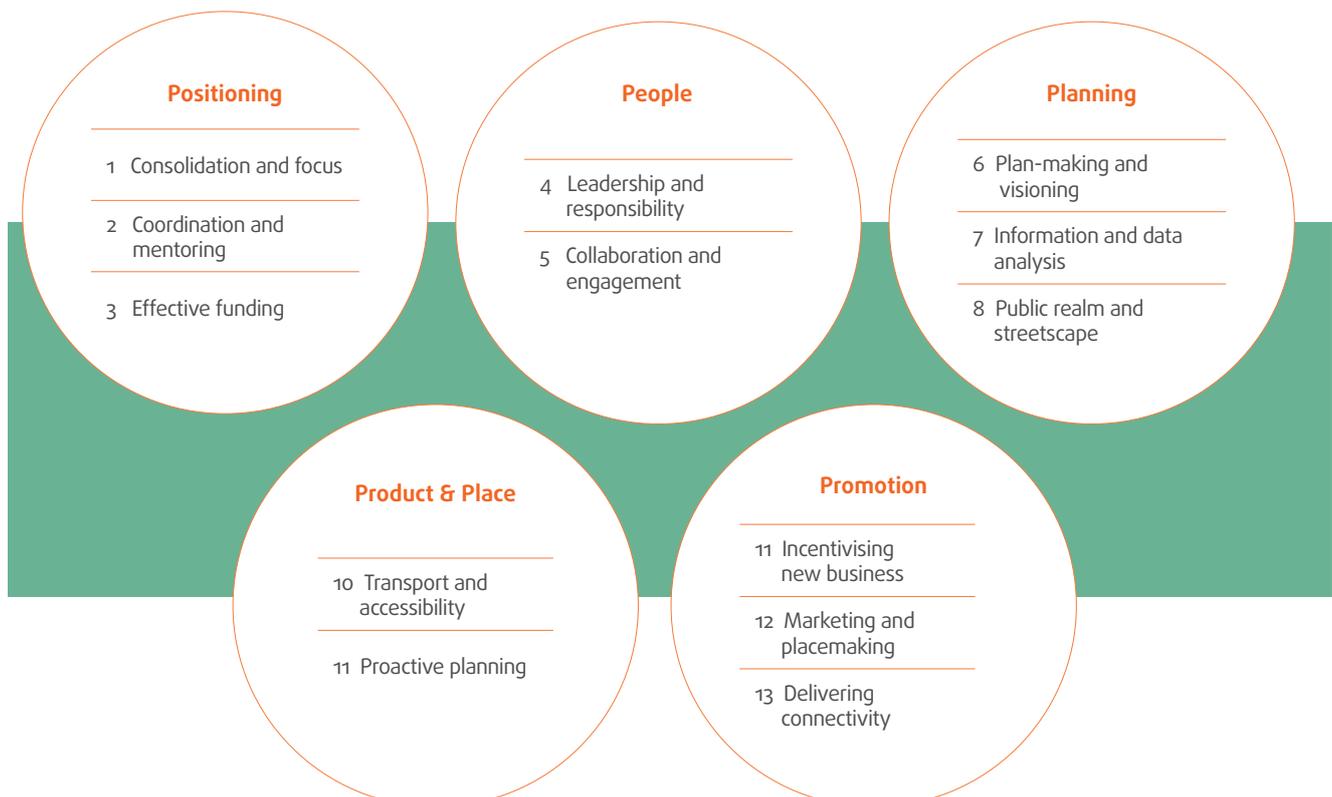
The goal of the SCSi is to start a dialogue and encourage the rejuvenation of the heart of our rural communities – the essence of Ireland. This report is a call to action for stakeholders in the regional high street including local, regional and central government, residents and business communities in each town.

Priority Recommendations for Local and National Government

There are seven priority recommendations that the SCSi believe are fundamentally important to ensure that regional high streets can thrive and become vibrant and successful community hubs.

These include:

- **Informed high streets** - An Irish Towns Partnership should be established to enable sharing of best practice, innovation and mentoring.
- **Viable high streets** - Further development of large scale retail centres and convenience stores that compete with, rather than complement, small town centres should be managed to encourage consolidation and enhance economic viability and vitality.
- **Collaborative high streets** - Inclusive and collaborative engagement mechanisms must be created that includes the local authority, community and business.
- **Attractive high streets** - Public realm strategies must be commissioned for each town and included in town plans.
- **Living high streets** - Local authorities must proactively address vacant buildings in towns to revitalise town centres.
- **Working high streets** - Local authorities and other stakeholders must recognise the changing commercial landscape and attract new high street business through incentives.
- **Connected high streets** - Delivering quality broadband connections to rural areas is fundamentally important for high streets and must be prioritised by government.



1.0 Introduction

Concern over the vibrancy and future of our high streets has been part of social discourse for the last few decades. As more streets and towns began to suffer a slow decline, policies and funding schemes have been formulated to counter this. However, it is perhaps only in the last decade, with the onset of the economic crash and the extent of damage it caused, that there has been a clear and determined effort on the part of successive governments in Ireland to address the fundamental issues that are leading to this decline.

Regional high streets have been significantly affected by the recent economic downturn. The impact has been felt throughout Ireland with increasing vacancy rates and a decline in the vibrancy of many rural communities. Conversely there are many positive developments, which can act as demonstration projects for other towns.

The focus of this report is on small Irish towns outside the catchment area of the five main cities. The reason for this is that the reach of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford is growing, particularly in the case of Dublin, creating metropolitan regions where cities act as a magnet for economic and employment opportunities. There are many towns that are slowly but increasingly being subsumed into our cities, acting as commuter towns or suburbs. **Recommendations in this report relate to smaller towns, with populations below 10,000**, as shown in figure 1.

Most play a vital role for their surrounding hinterlands, but do not fulfil a significant role at a wider, regional level. This is not to dismiss their importance, quite the opposite. As a traditionally rural country, Ireland has a landscape dotted with small to medium sized settlements, with few major towns or cities.

Ensuring the vitality and long-term functioning of these smaller towns is critically important to ensure vibrant rural communities and – making better places to live, work in and visit.

Larger towns such as Letterkenny, Sligo, Athlone, Ennis, Tralee, Clonmel, Kilkenny and Wexford have been excluded for the purposes of this study as they function in the same way as cities, due to their size and regional importance, with self-sustaining economies. The population size of 1,500 and 10,000 was determined from the CSO (Central Statistics Office) definition of an 'aggregate town' which refers to those towns with a total population of 1,500 or more. Settlements are categorised in bands of 1,500 to 3,000; 3,001 to 4,500; 4,501 to 6,000; 6,001 to 8,500; and, 8,001 to 10,000. Figure 1 shows each of these 154 settlements, with a colour code based upon the defined size. The total population of all towns with between 1,500 and 10,000 residents is 597,619 people, according to Census 2016 records. Towns included in this study account for approximately 12.6% of Ireland's total population.

This policy statement, issued by the **Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland**, is aimed at central and local government, the private sector based in rural Irish towns and villages - those local communities who are affected by the decline of the regional high street.

The purpose of this report is to:

- provide an **overview of the trends** currently influencing the regional high streets and the impacts of those trends on the ground,
- consider a **range of barriers** in enabling a vibrant regional high street,
- identify **critical success factors** at play, and that have succeeded elsewhere, in animating regional high streets in rural areas, and
- provide **pragmatic policy interventions** – recommendations to revitalise the regional high street and bring a stronger sense of place and a new lease of life to rural communities

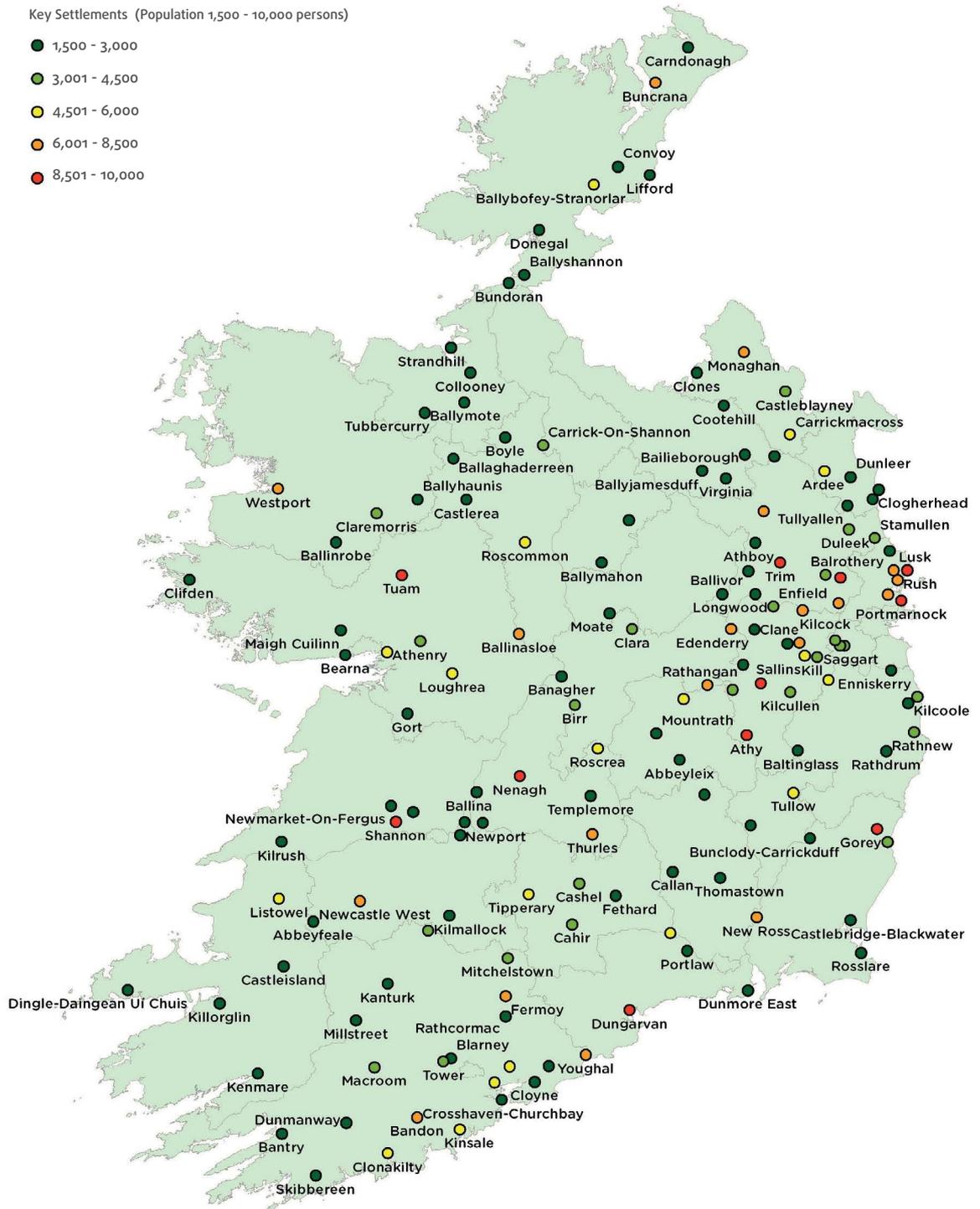


Figure 1 Irish Towns between 1,500 and 10,000 population

2.0 Trends Influencing the Regional High Street

Ireland's geographic location places Ireland on the western periphery of Europe. Although our location ensures Ireland is geographically remote, in a relative sense, this remoteness does not mean Ireland is removed from global trends. Ireland is a prosperous, developed European nation, therefore the country follows the same patterns of development as our counterparts. A review undertaken for this report has highlighted several trends in global retail that are just as relevant in an Irish context, those that are driving a transformation in the retail landscape. These are grouped under broad themes that best reflect their influence.

KEY TRENDS

- Growth of online retail sales,
- Increasing broadband availability,
- Changing demographics,
- Changing commercial landscape,
- Changing consumer behaviour,
- Increasing vacancy,
- Reform of governance,
- Lack of critical mass.

Growth of online retail sales

Undoubtedly the most significant global change we have witnessed in recent decades has been the increasing digitalisation of economic activity. This paradigm shift has occurred in such a relative short space of time that it has proven to be a difficult adjustment for many individuals and businesses, as traditional means of working have been consigned to the history books. Online retailing has emerged because of digitalisation and helped create some of the world's largest companies, such as Amazon, who base their entire model around online consumerism. These frontrunners have managed to establish a dominant presence in the online market and as a result their profits have soared. Now, almost every large retailer of brand has a strong online presence. Traditional retailers have struggled to keep pace with this shift in sales dynamic.

Globalisation has been boosted by the growing influence of the internet. The internet has increased connectivity to a global level and there have been many businesses that have capitalised on this new global market. Industry giants in countries such as the US suddenly had the capabilities of entering new markets through the internet, and without the need for a physical presence. While undoubtedly a positive development for major companies, it has also benefitted consumers, who now have access to high-street retailers at the click of a button, almost irrespective of their geographical location. This additional choice has seen more and more consumers choose to shop online, rather than in-store.

Smaller countries that have traditionally relied on indigenous retailers are now exposed to a global market, and this is impacting consumer behaviour. For example, **Ireland possesses one of the largest proportion of consumers who purchase online via "cross-border" websites¹.**

Trends indicate that online shopping will continue to grow, and while Ireland has a lower prevalence than the UK and other developed nations, it is expected that it will follow the same path. A recent report reveals that China and the UK have the highest percentage of consumers who shop online weekly, with 68% and 51% respectively, while Ireland lags at 25%².

¹ PayPal Cross-Border Consumer Research Report 2018 indicates that Irish consumers have among the highest incidence of online shopping through websites based out of foreign countries.

² PwC Retail and Consumer Report 2018.

Increasing broadband availability

The National Broadband Plan (NBP) was launched in 2012 with the aim of delivering high-speed broadband to all premises in Ireland. The perception being that if every home and business has access this will stimulate economic growth, particularly in more remote locations. The issues surrounding the tendering process, with all but one tenderer exiting the bidding process, is an indication of the difficulties with a commitment to service every premise.

A map of current broadband availability has been overlaid with towns with 1,500 and 10,000 population, see figure 2. Dark blue areas are those in which commercial operators are already delivering or have committed to deliver high-speed broadband services. Light blue areas are those locations where an operator has committed to "commercial rural deployment plans" and provide broadband services by the end of 2018. The amber areas are targeted by the government in the NBP.

This observation would appear to be supported by census data available from CSO which indicates that over 90% of the 154 towns studied have 60% or more households connected to broadband in 2016. In addition, there was an expansion of over 50% in the proportion of all towns in Ireland where over 60% of people had access to broadband (44.2% of towns with over 60% take-up of broadband in 2011 to 71.7% in 2016).

Increasing access to, and take up of, broadband in rural areas.

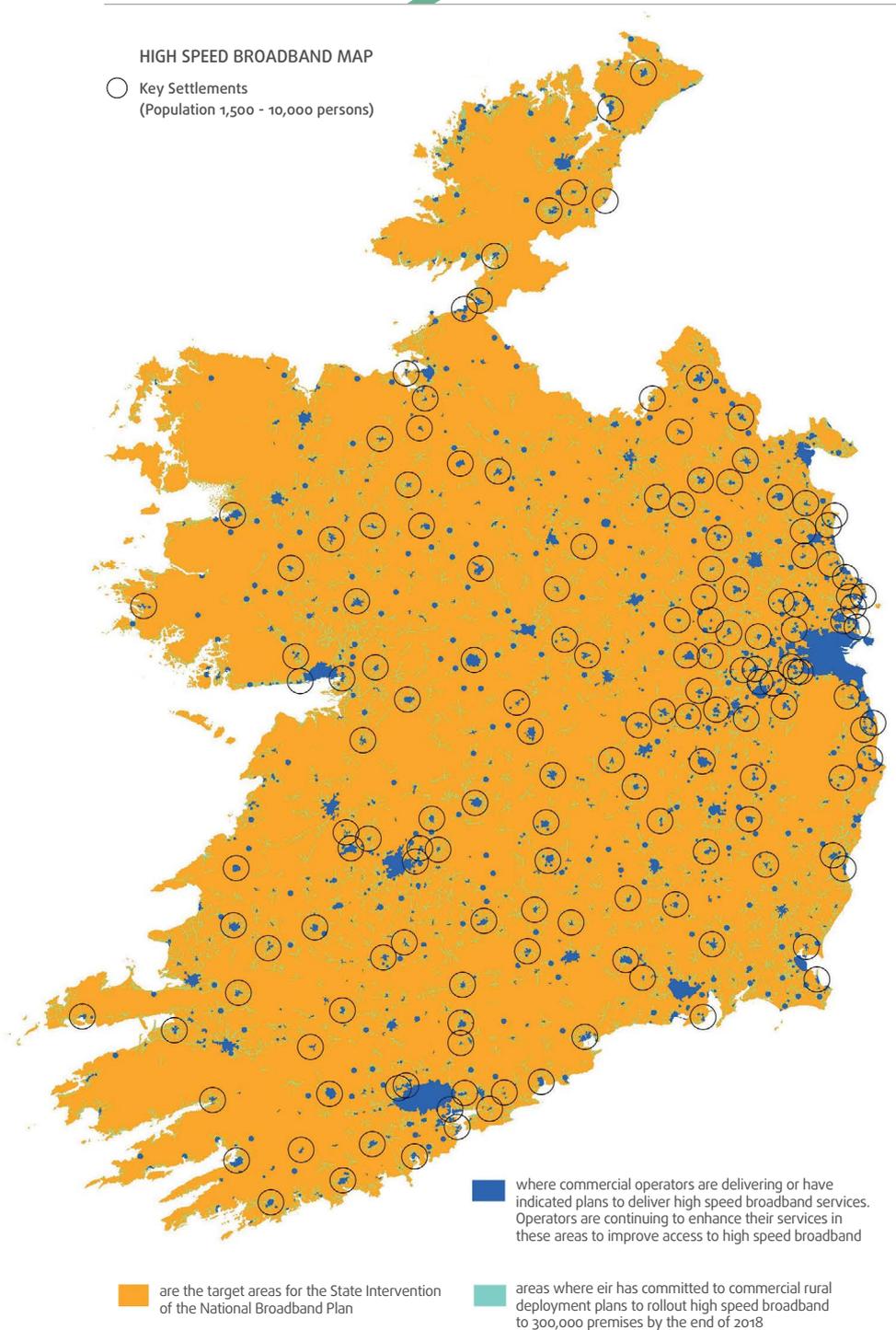


Figure 2 Broadband availability with rural towns indicated

³ Source: Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment

Changing demographics

Population

The global population doubled between the years 1966 and 2016, from approximately 3.4 billion people to 7.4 billion. Although populations are increasing, the dispersal of people is not occurring evenly. Instead, what we are seeing is that **more people are choosing to live in larger urban centres**.

The UN estimate that in 1950 around 30% of the global population lived in urban locations, by 2014 this had risen to 54% and this is expected to climb to 66% by 2050⁴.

Between 1966 and 2016 Ireland has seen its population grow by approximately 65% from 2,884,002 to 4,761,865. This is a significant level of growth and unusual in a European context. Many European countries have seen their population growth stagnate, with increasingly ageing populations now a real concern. By most standards, Ireland has a relatively young and growing population, however the recent decades of growth have not occurred evenly throughout the country. The figure below provides an insight into the levels of population change experienced in each of the 26 counties in the Republic between 1996 and 2016.

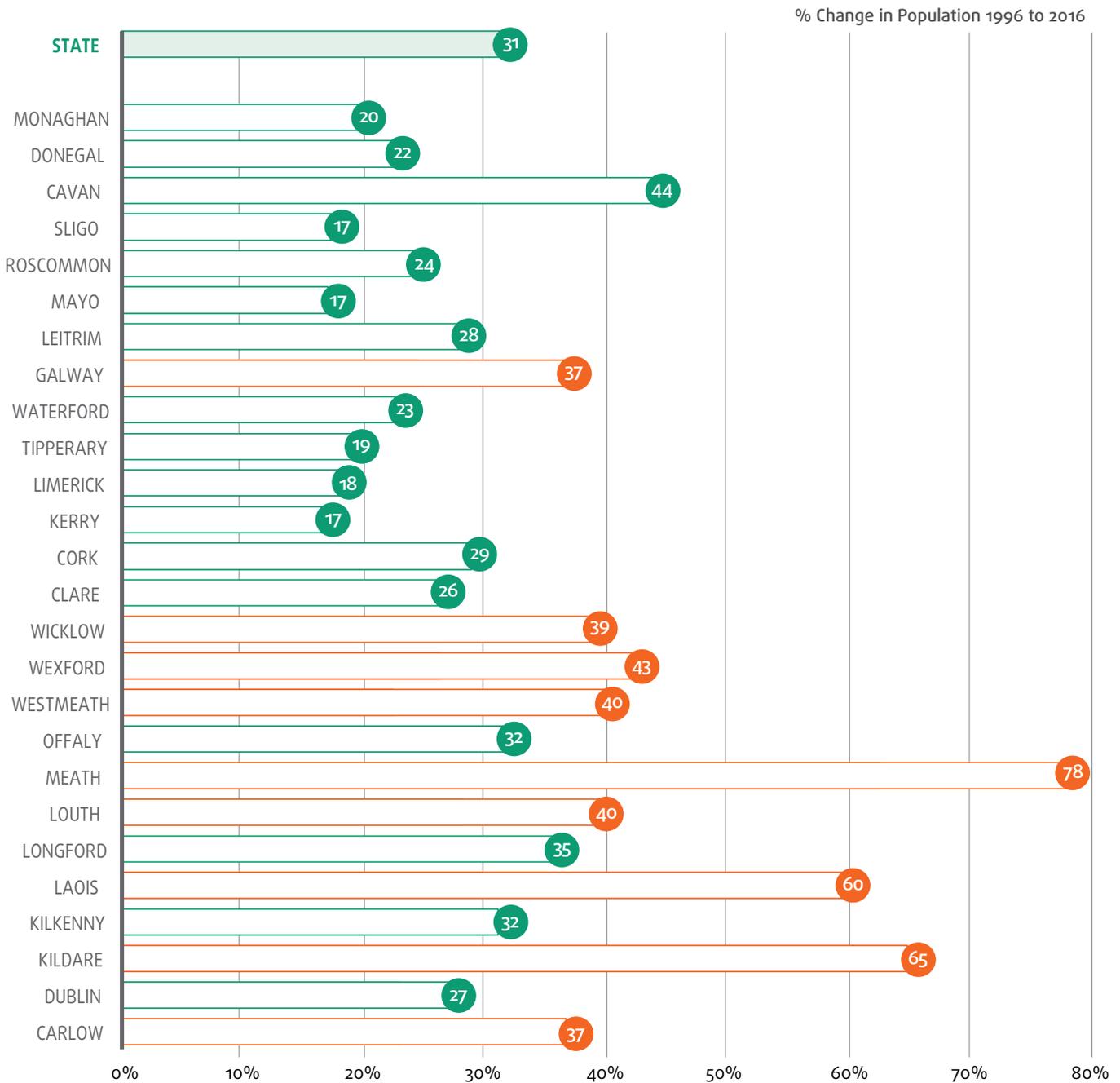


Figure 3 Population growth by County, 1996-2016

⁴ The United Nation's Department of Economic and Social Affairs published a report in 2014 entitled 'World Urbanisation Prospects' which details the dramatic growth of our urban population.

The bars coloured orange are those counties that experienced growth levels above the State average (65%), while those coloured blue are the counties where growth levels fell behind the average. It is interesting to note that every county in Leinster, except for Longford, Offaly and Kilkenny, saw large increases in their population while the only county from outside Leinster to be represented within the above-average growth category is Galway. Perhaps the most striking figures are those for counties Meath, Kildare and Laois, which all saw major increases in population size, Meath growing by a significant 78% in 20 years.

This is a clear and obvious indication of the influence that Dublin has over the island, drawing people in huge numbers to its immediate metropolitan catchment.

A visual representation of the demographic changes experienced in Ireland between the years 1986 and 2016 is shown in figure 4. Clear from the map is the pull of larger urban locations such as Dublin, Cork and Galway. This indicates a gradual decline of rural locations, with Ireland's population increasingly locating in areas surrounding the larger urban centres. While specific data, is lacking overseas emigration during the recession period has also had a significant impact on many rural communities, impacting local retailers and sports clubs and the vitality of many communities.

Increasing urbanisation and decline of rural population.

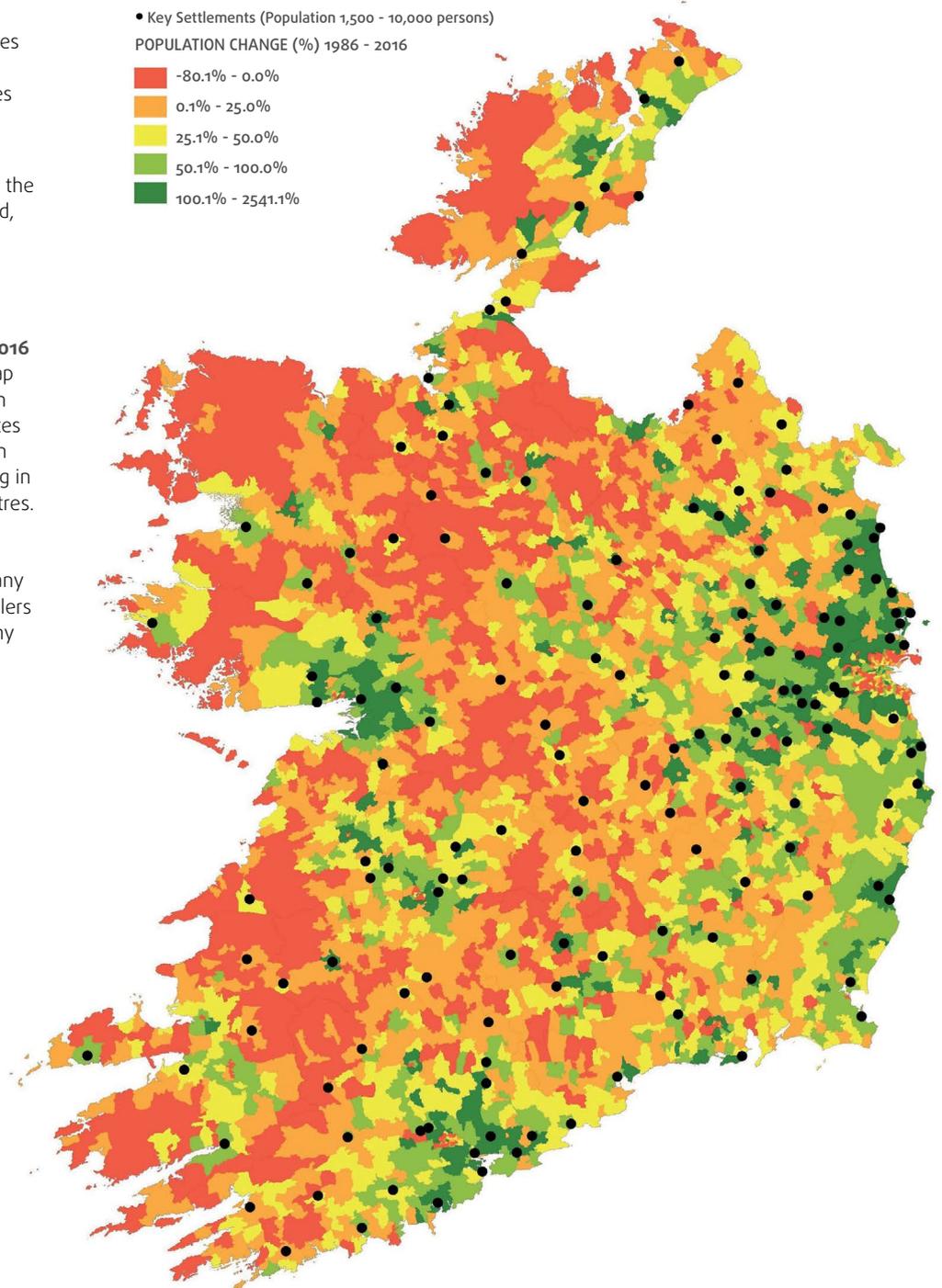


Figure 4 Population change 1986 to 2016 by Electoral Division

Working population

CSO provide information on the numbers of people working in settlements, broken down into sub-sections of resident workers working in the town; resident workers leaving town for work; and, persons commuting into the town for work. From this data it is possible to work out the percentage of the working population from a settlement that commutes out of the settlement for work. The implication being; the lower this percentage, the healthier a settlement is as it can retain workers with the employment opportunities it has. However, when a settlement has greater numbers leaving for work it can lack vibrancy or thriving economy to retain people. The data can offer an interesting insight into the economic conditions of a location. The tables below which show the top and bottom twenty settlements, in terms of the percentage of resident workers who leave for work.

The lowest twenty towns for external commuters are those with the lowest proportion of the resident working population leaving the area for work. Conversely, the highest twenty towns for external commuters have the highest proportion of resident workers who commute elsewhere to work. For this study, which has a focus on rural towns, the data excludes Ireland's five cities and several of the larger settlements. This has altered the composition of the list showing the lowest twenty, as major settlements score well in this measure, retaining a large proportion of their resident workers. The list showing the lowest twenty has not been altered at all and represents the highest scoring twenty towns.

The geographic distribution of these forty settlements is shown in figure 5. Grey icons are towns with the lowest proportion of external commuters, and red icons those areas with the highest. Those locations that have the highest proportion of their working population leave are all found within the immediate catchment of the largest cities, particularly Dublin. The concept of commuter towns has existed for a number of decades and their prevalence has grown, particularly as Dublin's economic pull has increased. Five of the settlements with the highest proportion of external commuters (Carrigtwohill, Castlemartyr, Cloyne, Rathcormac and Tower) are within the wider catchment of Cork City. Two (Annacotty and Sixmilebridge) are on the outskirts of the Limerick metropolitan region. Twelve are near Dublin, with the final settlement (Castlebridge) located just outside of Wexford Town.

Locations where there are a greater number of persons living and working within the same town, i.e. the lowest twenty towns for the proportion of external commuters, are far more dispersed across the country. This suggests these locations are either too far removed from significant economic centres to allow for regular commuting, or they have sufficient economic activity within their boundaries to allow locals to live and work in the same location. Towns such as Skibbereen in Cork, Dingle in Kerry, Kilrush in Clare, Ballina in Mayo and Bunrana in Donegal are all examples of peripheral and rural locations.

Similarly, the Midlands is well represented, with Carrick-on-Shannon, Roscommon, Tullamore, Nenagh and Tipperary all possessing a low proportion of resident workers leaving for employment.

Lowest 20 External Commuters		
Settlement	Working Population	% External Commuters
Dingle	662	19%
Clifden	476	20%
Westport	2,129	32%
Castlebar	3,940	33%
Bantry	790	36%
Kenmare	707	39%
Kilrush	620	40%
Ballina	2,967	40%
Carrick-on-Shannon	1,361	40%
Skibbereen	804	41%
Roscommon	1,818	42%
Longford	2,434	43%
Bunrana	1,812	43%
Ballyhaunis	679	44%
Ballinasloe	1,755	44%
Nenagh	2,715	45%
Killorglin	728	45%
Tipperary	1,261	46%
Listowel	1,294	46%
New Ross	2,307	47%

Highest 20 External Commuters		
Settlement	Working Population	% External Commuters
Kinsealy	2,965	95%
Saggart	1,300	94%
Sallins	2,377	94%
Balrothery	717	94%
Longwood	543	94%
Rathcormac	668	93%
Kill	1,325	93%
Tullyallen	560	93%
Tower	1,200	92%
Stamullen	1,263	91%
Newcastle	1,162	91%
Carrigtwohill	1,992	91%
Cloyne	601	91%
Lusk	2,935	91%
Sixmilebridge	974	91%
Castlebridge	625	91%
Castlemartyr	539	90%
Annacotty	1,203	90%
Donabate	2,895	89%
Ratoath	3,585	89%

Table 1 Top twenty lowest and highest settlements for external commuters

Figure 6 provides a visual of electoral division (ED) analysis on commuting patterns, based on Census 2016 information. Each of the settlements that fall within the 1,500-10,000 population range are represented by black dots. Areas coloured red are EDs where a significant number of persons (between 12,000 and 1,000) travel outside of their area of residence for work. Orange coloured EDs are those where there is a large number of net external commuters (between 999 and 500). The beige colour indicates locations where there is close to an even proportion of internal and external commuters, (499 to 0).

Light green are areas with a slightly higher level of net inward commuters. Dark green areas represent those where there is a significant number of net inward commuters. Locations with the highest numbers of net inward commuters are found in cities such as Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Galway, while large regional towns such as Kilkenny, Clonmel, Wexford and Longford also attract large numbers.

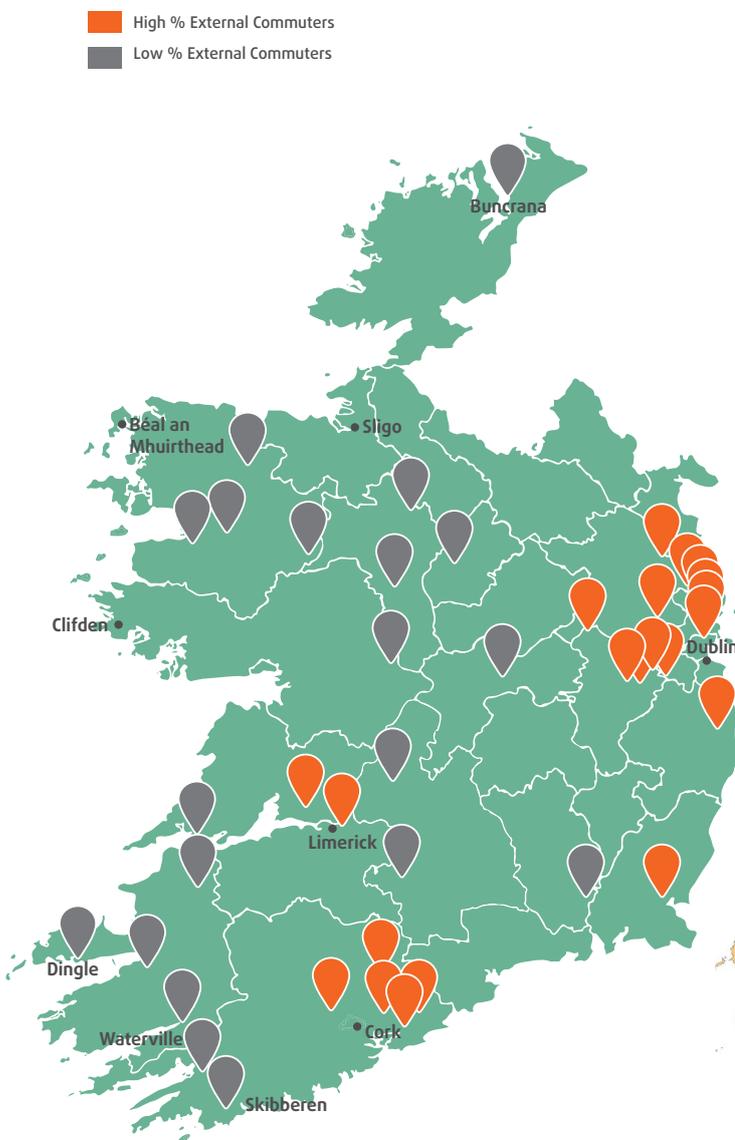


Figure 5 Geographical distribution of towns with low and high proportions of external commuters

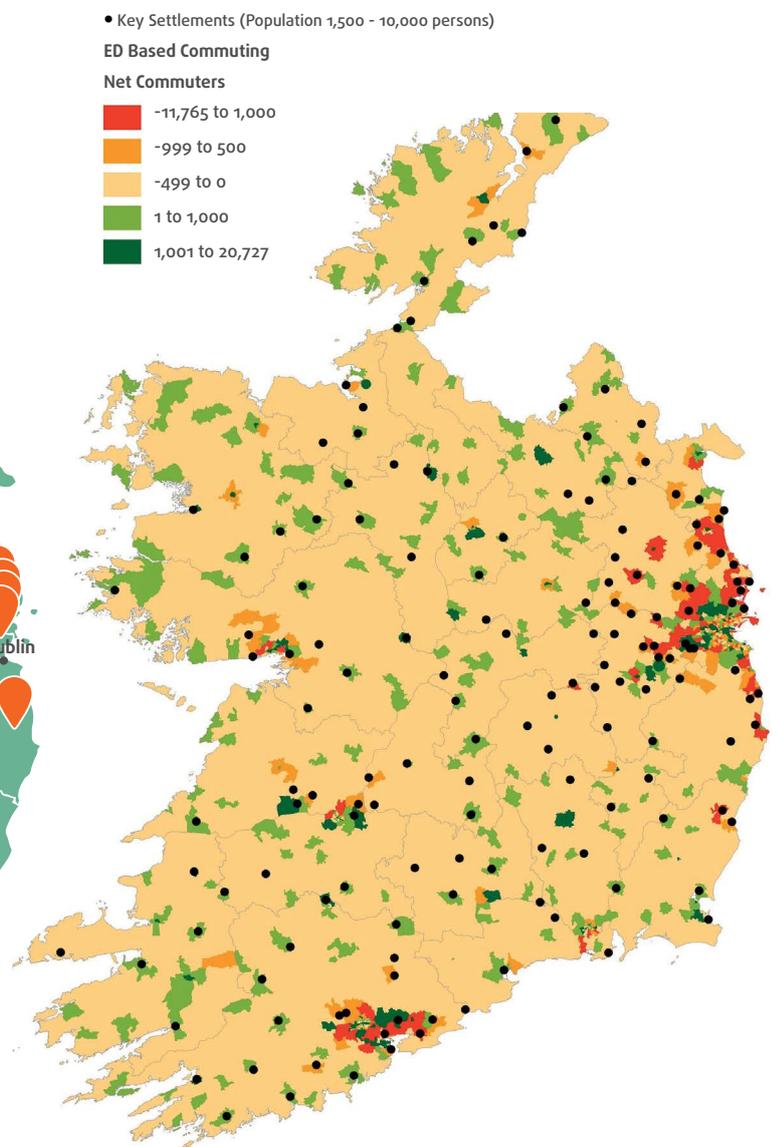


Figure 6 Commuting Patterns Analysis

Unemployment

Unemployment figures are available at a national level through various sources, this includes the Live Register which provides monthly figures. Understanding unemployment numbers at settlement level is a more complicated task, with limited data available. Each Census will ask questions that record such information and the CSO provide limited data on this. Due to the changing nature of settlement boundaries, confidentiality issues and other factors, settlement level data can only be obtained for 2011 and 2016, and for approximately 200 settlements. Table 2 provides a summary of this data.

In 2011 there were a total of 423,843 persons listed as either 'unemployed looking for a first-time job' or 'unemployed having lost or given up a job', which we will now group as 'unemployed'. Census 2016 recorded a drop in the numbers of unemployed, with 297,396 persons now listed. This means that 127,447 people were able to find employment over the inter-census period, which is 30% reduction on the 2011 figure. If we take this methodology and apply it to the settlements included in the datasets we can see which locations saw similar, or better, levels of increased employment, and those areas that saw fewer numbers.

The table below identifies the ten best performing towns and the ten poorest performing towns. Millstreet in County Cork had a 51% reduction in the numbers of people who claimed to be unemployed between the years 2011 and 2016. This is the highest proportion recorded from all included settlements. It is one of four towns from Cork that make it into the top ten best performing settlements, the others being Blarney, Tower and Carrigaline. All four can be deemed to fall within commutable distance to Cork City, which may be one factor in their success. Ballina in Tipperary, Clifden and Oranmore in Galway, Newmarket-on-Fergus in Clare, Dunleer in Louth and Malahide in Dublin are the other locations.

10 Most Improving Towns			
Settlement	Unemployed 2011	Unemployed 2016	% Change
Millstreet (Cork)	174	86	-51%
Ballina (Tipperary)	197	110	-44%
Blarney	189	106	-44%
Tower (Cork)	210	118	-44%
Carrigaline	1094	619	-43%
Clifden (Galway)	180	103	-43%
Newmarket-on-Fergus (Clare)	203	116	-43%
Oranmore	345	195	-43%
Malahide	723	416	-42%
Dunleer (Louth)	197	116	-41%

Table 2 Most and least improving towns for unemployment levels

Increasing rural unemployment.

With the exception of Clifden and Ballina, the remaining towns are all in close proximity to major urban centres, which again could prove the decisive factor in their success.

In contrast are the towns of Ballyhaunis in Mayo, and Edgeworthstown in Longford, the only two from the entire list of approximately 200 settlements that experienced increases in the numbers of people recorded as unemployed. Ballyhaunis recorded a 9% increase from 221 to 240, while Edgeworthstown went from 262 to 283, an 8% change. Tobercurry in Sligo recorded no change. The other seven settlements had marginal decreases in unemployed, ranging from 2% in Ballymahon (Longford) to 8% in Bunclody (Wexford). The most immediately obvious observation to be made is their relative remoteness, in terms of proximity to major urban centres. Another observation is that a cluster exists in the Mid-West region, with Sligo and Longford represented twice, while Mayo, Roscommon and Cavan also have settlements in this list. Kilrush in Clare, and Courtown in Wexford are the remaining two locations.

This exercise is by no means a definitive take on unemployment, particularly as the selection of twenty towns is an arbitrary figure, and a trend cannot be developed with only two years of available statistics, a longer-term study would be required to determine genuine trends. However, this study offers an insight into locations of towns with positive and negative changes in unemployment levels between 2011 and 2016.

10 Least Improving Towns			
Settlement	Unemployed 2011	Unemployed 2016	% Change
Ballyhaunis (Mayo)	221	240	+9%
Edgeworthstown (Longford)	262	283	+8%
Tobercurry (Sligo)	220	220	0%
Ballymahon (Longford)	233	229	-2%
Ballymote (Sligo)	164	157	-4%
Cavan	1229	1175	-4%
Courtown (Wexford)	428	409	-4%
Kilrush	355	340	-4%
Ballaghaderreen (Roscommon)	253	241	-5%
Bunclody (Wexford)	270	249	-8%

Evidence of shift from expansionist international brand presence to consolidation to reduce costs.

Changing commercial landscape

Aside from online shopping, perhaps the most significant challenge to traditional town centre retailing has been the **growth in numbers of out-of-town shopping centres and retail parks**. Ireland's first shopping centre opened in 1966, since then growth has been extensive, with shopping centres equating to 1.98 million square metres as of December 2012⁵.

In total, there are 202 purpose-built shopping centres throughout Ireland, with Dublin alone accounting for 32% of the overall stock. **Since 2013 there has been very little development in this area**, with development primarily occurring in the form of extensions to existing premises.

For example, approximately 27,900 sq.m was completed in the form of extensions in 2015, the majority of which can be attributed to Liffey Valley Shopping Centre.

Retail parks also encountered issues during the downturn, and similar to shopping centres there has been very little construction since 2009, with no known developments planned. Total stock of retail parks stood at 1.17 million sq.m as of 2012, with more recent figures unavailable. Of this total, 24% is found in Dublin, with 8% in Limerick, 7% in Cork and 4% in Galway. The following table provides a count of the number of retail parks and shopping centres by county, taken from the Sherry Fitzgerald report, referenced earlier. The landscape within which retailers and other businesses has dramatically altered in recent years.

As indicated earlier, globalisation and online retailing have led to an influx of international brands and retailers into previously closed or peripheral markets. This increased competition has proven to be detrimental to many smaller, indigenous brands. Larger retailers expanded their global presence at dramatic rates and this has added to a major restructuring of the high street⁶. Expansion of major retailers and brands into almost every urban settlement of significance, often with multiple representations, is obvious in Ireland.



However, this expansionist vision is now in reverse. Consolidation is now occurring, where underperforming stores, in peripheral locations are closing in attempts to boost efficiencies and cost savings, leaving behind large vacant lots. Reports claim many countries have an oversupply of stores, dues to this expansionist trend, with the UK apparently possessing a 10% over-supply of stores⁷.

County	Shopping Centres	Retail Parks	County	Shopping Centres	Retail Parks
Carlow	3	3	Longford	1	2
Cavan	1	3	Louth	12	5
Clare	5	2	Mayo	2	5
Cork	17	10	Meath	3	4
Donegal	7	1	Monaghan	3	2
Dublin	64	24	Offaly	4	1
Galway	11	4	Roscommon	1	4
Kerry	3	3	Sligo	3	3
Kildare	10	3	Tipperary	9	4
Kilkenny	4	2	Waterford	8	5
Laois	5	1	Westmeath	6	5
Leitrim	1	2	Wexford	5	6
Limerick	8	7	Wicklow	6	2

Table 3 Retail Parks and Shopping Centres by County

⁵ Irish Shopping Centres and Retail Parks: Stock Analysis, Sherry Fitzgerald 2013. | ⁶ Peel, D., and Parker, C., (2017) "Planning and governance issues in the restructuring of the high street", Journal of Place Management and Development, vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 404-418. | ⁷ Grimsey Review 2, 2018.

Changing consumer behaviour

Consumer behaviour has changed drastically, with the concept of "experiential" shopping now widely proclaimed as the key driver of town centres. Essentially, consumers now spend less on comparison goods and instead spend more on experiences, such as food, beverages and services such as beauticians and barbers. This trend is reflected in the composition of our high streets now, with town centres switching from locations of predominantly comparison stores to ones where services, cafes, bars and restaurants dominate.

The CSO Business Demography release uses revenue data to provide a summary of enterprise activity and employment in various industries. By analysing data between 2011 and 2016 a picture of broad trends across counties can be drawn. Perhaps the two most pertinent industrial categories for this study are the 'Accommodation and Food Services' category, and the 'Wholesale, retail trade and vehicle repair'⁸ category. Although both categories contain a range of enterprises, many not traditionally found on high streets or in town centres, they offer a useful insight into trends. Almost every county has seen a decrease in the total number of active 'Wholesale, retail and vehicle repair' enterprises between 2011 and 2016. Figure 7 below shows the only six counties where there was growth.

It is a clear indication of the difficult environment that exists for retailers that 20 of the 26 counties record a decrease in the total number of active enterprises in this category.

The 'Accommodation and Food' sector has had a more mixed result for enterprises, with fifteen counties recording increases in numbers of active enterprises, while eleven saw decreases. Longford, Meath and Dublin all scored well in this respect, while Roscommon, Laois and Tipperary performed poorly.

In the US there have been increasing numbers of store closures in recent years. Many reasons can explain this; online shopping is growing, **consumers are now spending more on experiences than on items** (2016 was first time ever that Americans spent more at restaurants and bars than at grocery stores), and the retail

environment is too large so contraction was inevitable. Larger "big-box" stores, clothing stores, and fashion department stores have shut, however other areas of the sector are expanding like grocery, discount stores and sports goods.

Growth in demand for experiences over products.

Increasing vacancy

Due to the competitive, and dynamic nature of the retail environment in recent years, vacancies have become more commonplace on our high streets. While this is undoubtedly a problem, it also has knock-on effects. Vacant premises that lie unoccupied for a sustained period can create a negative perception of a place. This, in turn, can be off-putting for both consumers and any potential investors or retailers, who will see vacant premises as an indication of poor health, creating a vicious circle of decline.

Residential vacancies also contribute to the overall perception of a place and therefore understanding the trends in this area will provide a useful indicator. The CSO produce a dataset which highlights the changes in residential occupancy in 845 settlements across Ireland. This data is available for both the 2011 and 2016 census and the chart overleaf gives an indication of change that has occurred in 845 settlements between 2011 and 2016. Only 3%, or 23 settlements saw no change in the number of vacant residential properties. Almost 1 in four settlements – 23% - have shown an increase in residential vacancy over the 2011-2016 period. A more positive indication is that 74% of the 845 settlements recorded a decrease in residential vacancy.

This indicates that as the housing crisis is intensifying, more vacant homes are coming back into use.

Commercial vacancies are not recorded by the CSO, however, Geodirectory release annual reports outlining commercial vacancy

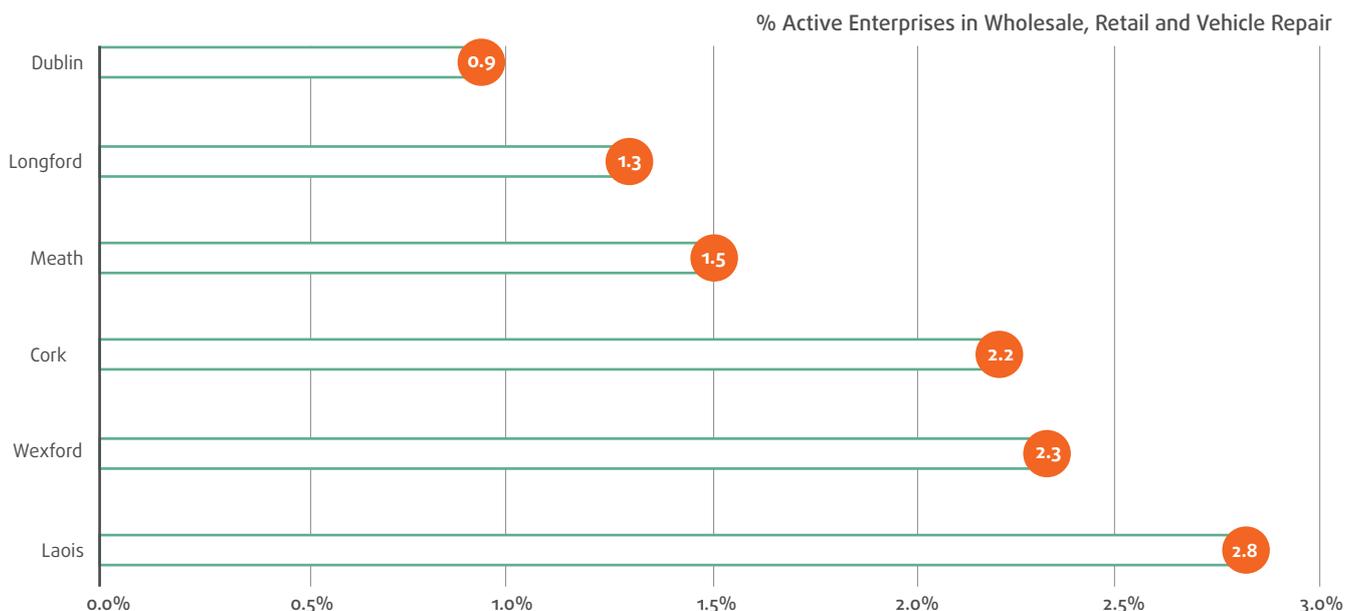


Figure 7 Counties in which there was positive growth from 2011-2016

⁸ The classification of sectors is derived from the NACE classification system, which limits this study's ability to perform a detailed analysis of the retail sector solely.

⁹ Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland, Annual Commercial Property Review and Outlook 2018.

rates in a hundred settlements across the country. Geodirectory, an affiliate of An Post and their database, is utilised for the delivery of post throughout Ireland. For this study Dublin is excluded as it is included multiple times based on postcodes. This leaves 79 settlements of which 24 recorded a decrease in commercial vacancy rates between Q3 2013 and Q4 2017. The remaining 55 towns (i.e. 70%) all recorded increases in commercial vacancy rates over the 2011-2016 period. While there are undoubtedly some anomalies and extenuating circumstances that may explain a number of these increases, it is still a worrying statistic and highlights difficulties many towns are encountering.

The **SCSI Commercial Property Review and Outlook Report** offers some interesting insights into the current commercial landscape from the perspective of Chartered Surveyors. Office investment continues to perform well in Dublin and Cork, while retail rents have remained steady across the country. Demand for high quality office space is expected to continue to rise, which is perhaps an indication of the changing composition of the labour force. Regarding retail rents, it is stated that rents remain substantially below Celtic Tiger levels, even though the economy has returned to similar levels.

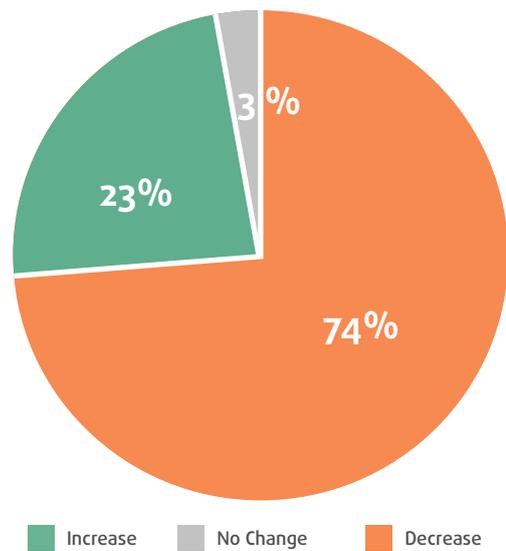
While there have been several attempts by national government to stimulate development of vacant sites, derelict and vacant buildings, this has had limited success.

Both "carrot" and "stick" measures have been attempted, through tax reliefs, grant offerings and levies, but there remains a significant stock of vacant dwellings, derelict buildings and brownfield sites. There is a common perception that current measures do little to force large property investors and international vulture funds to release this withheld stock. Therefore, more punitive measures are required. There is a requirement to counteract what is termed "market disincentives", which essentially is the way in which growing markets make it cost-effective for a property owner retain underutilised lands. Because the value of the lands will increase as the market grows, the longer an owner waits, the greater their eventual return.

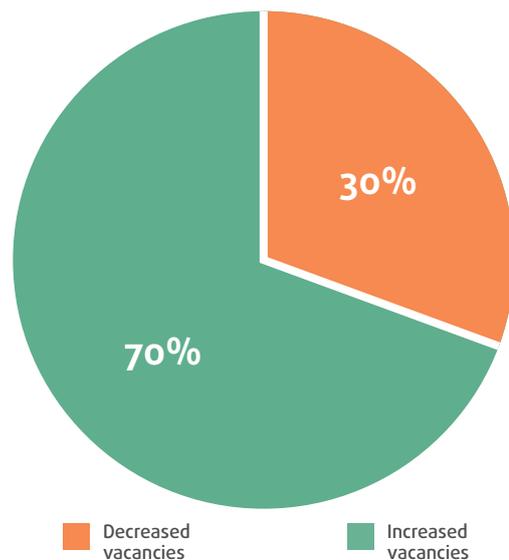
An alternative mechanism is the introduction of a land value tax (LVT) which could replace contentious taxes such as the property tax. This tax is the best mechanism for reducing land hoarding. Every bit of land with productive potential would be liable to pay this tax, however, each site is taxed on a proportion of the current rental value. This means that more rural locations would not suffer from excessive costs, while sought-after locations such as Dublin would see higher rates. It is generally accepted by economists that LVT deters land-hoarding and contributes towards reducing inequalities.

Increase in commercial and residential vacancy leading to negative perceptions.

Residential Vacancies 2011 to 2016



Commercial Vacancy Rates 2013 to 2017



Impact of governance reform has resulted in increases in costs for retail businesses.

Reform of governance

A restructuring of how society is governed is continually at play, with dominant forms of governance emerging for sustained periods before being replaced by another. Numerous terms have been assigned to the form of governance or political agenda that has been dominant in western democracies for the last half century; neoliberalism, capitalism and entrepreneurialism, to name but a few. This style of governing is market-driven, with governments at all levels taking a less proactive approach to governing, and ceding control of many services to the private sector¹⁰. These changes to a more entrepreneurial style of governance have seen unprecedented levels of economic growth, however, it has also created conditions where nearby towns are forced to compete for capital, in a zero-sum game.

Local government has often been consigned to a minor role, while the national agenda is pursued. Indeed, the ability of local authorities to influence the direction of development and the fortunes of their own towns has been dramatically reduced¹¹.

In Ireland, various government reforms and policies over the years have contributed to a fractured governance environment. The Local Government Reform Act 2014 made provisions for the dissolution of town councils, the creation of municipal districts and the merging of several separate local authorities. Although these reforms were touted as a way of creating a more efficient and accountable form of governance, there have been claims of a federalisation, **where decision-making has become centralised or removed from where it is required**. Lack of funding has also led to a loss of essential local authority staff, such as Town/Municipal architects meaning there is no "champion" within the Council to steer appropriate development.

Local authorities have limited means through which they can raise revenue. Rates, parking fees, development contributions and property taxes are the key sources of income. While local authorities have been, in some cases, designated more powers to influence, they have not received additional funding. This, some key influencers have argued, has forced many to increase the fees in those areas they have control over, such as rates, which in turn disproportionately impacts smaller retailers.

Lack of critical mass

Ireland is unusual in Europe in terms of the structure of the urban environment. Traditionally the Irish have been predominantly rural, indeed up until relatively recently a majority lived in rural locations. The island was composed of many small towns and villages, with compact centres and a clear differentiation between urban and rural. The compactness remained for centuries, until in the 1950s and 1960s there was an increase in urban development, with almost two thirds of us now living in urban areas according to the 2016 Census. **However, in many cases development was an unstructured sprawl spreading from the core.**

Urban sprawl is not limited to Ireland. It is a global epidemic which originated in the US with the development of the motorised vehicle. Sprawl has been facilitated by the emergence, at a large scale, of the motor car which allowed a person to travel longer distances than previously possible. Our urban environment was no longer limited by distances and could now develop outwards, in lower densities, because the car allowed it.

Short-sighted development, destruction of older buildings, the growth of the car and the enlargement of roads all contributed to the destruction of the traditional rural streetscape. Our market towns now saw their central square become a parking garage. Streets that were never designed with the car in mind, now must accommodate vehicles in huge numbers.

Ireland, as a traditionally rural country, has always had dispersed development. Therefore, although not caused by the car, this dispersal has been enhanced. With comparatively very few major urban centres, Ireland is instead dominated by a collection of smaller towns. This is problematic for retailers as they do not have the required critical mass in smaller towns to thrive. Similarly, supply chain issues are caused by the poor regional transport network, which cannot be sustained due to our dispersed population.

Urban sprawl and dispersed rural population has led to lack of critical mass in rural towns.

¹⁰ Harvey, D., 1973. From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism. *Geografiska Annaler*, Vol. 71, 1.

¹¹ Peel, D., and Parker, C., (2017) "Planning and governance issues in the restructuring of the high street", *Journal of Place Management and Development*, vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 404-418





Case Study 1

Westport 2000: An Integrated Action Plan for Westport

Plan-led Collaborative Approach to Rejuvenation.

As an offering to the town of Westport, prior to the turn of the Millennium, the town council created a document that would act as an "intellectual gift" for the public. This document was a comprehensive, integrated design statement that set-out a vision for the town's future. The document was progressed and championed by the local authority architects and offered a "plan-led approach" to development.

It contains an extensive profile of the town with: character assessments; an existing infrastructure audit; a discussion on the potential for tourism; a review and analysis of residential, industrial and commercial potential; a targeted action plan; and, a design statement.

This was an example of a local authority taking a proactive approach to the growth of a settlement and offered the council a structure through which all planning applications and designs could be assessed.

It effectively allowed for the coherent development of Westport and provided a structure that negated ad-hoc developments that could later prove detrimental. By having a plan that can direct development in a manner that will prove beneficial to the town, an element of control over external factors is created that would otherwise not exist. Westport is renowned throughout Ireland as an exciting, attractive destination, and it owes a lot of this success to the creation of the management plan.

In this example the town management plan was created by the council, however there are other examples where different stakeholders lead change.

The many facets of the re-imagining of Westport have re-invigorated the towns, leading to a more lively and attractive place to live, work and visit. There has also been a positive commercial impact, with vacancy rates now under 5%.



Case Study 2 Clonakilty's Elected Mayor

Effective Leadership.

With the abolition of the 80 town councils because of the Local Government Reform Act, the role of Mayor in these settlements no longer existed. Although the importance of this position varied throughout the years, with some towns utilising the function more successfully than others, it nonetheless offered local populations the opportunity to have an elected representative to champion the town.

The Duchas Clonakilty Heritage Group were spurred into action by the dissolution of the town councils and felt the need to ensure that the people of Clonakilty had a representative voice who could lobby for change when required. Utilising a clause in the government document Putting People First: Action Plan for Effective Local Government, the Group saw an opportunity to create the position as a form of "place-based representation".

Elections are held every five years, in conjunction with the council and European elections, and five members of the public from the ballot paper are chosen. The five members rotate the position annually during the five-year term. This is an example of a local community choosing to create the conditions that allow for their town to be championed by a figurehead. The leadership shown by the heritage group to drive this initiative has now ensured the wider community have a representative voice.

1

Online weekly shopping is on the rise, with Ireland set to follow international trajectories

PWC Retail Consumer Report 2018

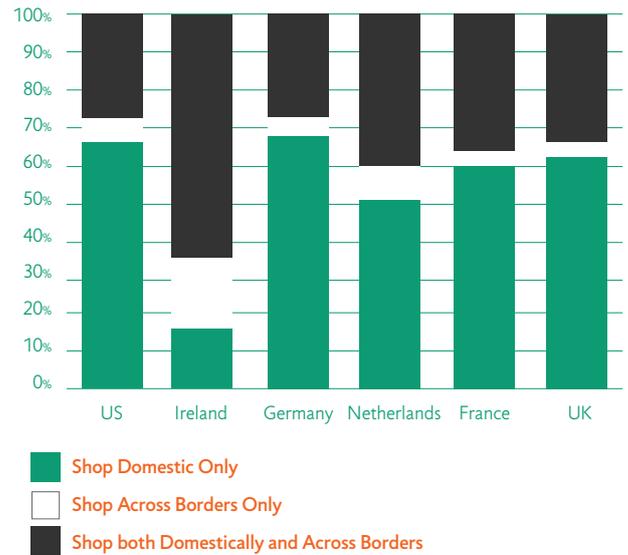


2

Irish online shoppers are more likely to purchase through international websites than those in other nations

PayPal/Ipsos Insights 2018

SURVEY OF ONLINE SHOPPERS



5

The total number of businesses operating in the 'Wholesale, Retail and Vehicle Repair' sector has fallen in 20 counties, with only 6 seeing growth

CSO Business Demography release 2018



6

55 out of 79 towns recorded by GeoDirectory since 2013 have seen increases in their Commercial Vacancy rates

Geodirectory Commercial Vacancy Rates Report, 2018 Dublin removed from study



3

Ireland's first shopping centre opened in 1966. There is now 1.98 million square metres of shopping centre floorspace

Irish Shopping Centres and Retail Parks, DTZ/Sherry Fitzgerald, 2013

1966 = 1
2012 = 212



7

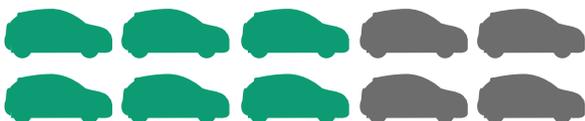
The CSO record that since 1986 there has been an increase in the reported modal share of the motor car from 33% of respondents to 58% in 2016

CSO

33% CAR USERS IN 1986



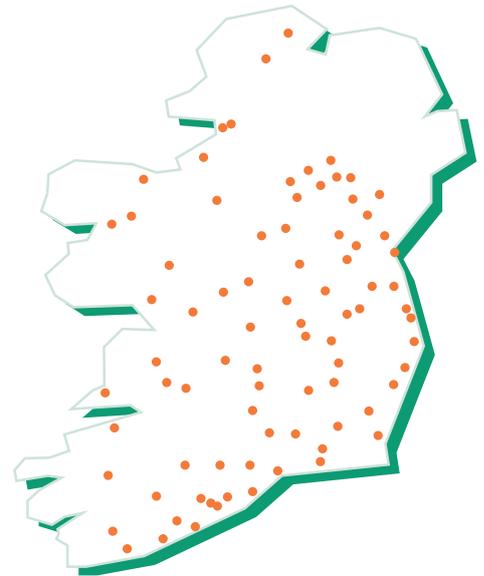
58% CAR USERS IN 2016



4

The reorganisation of governance structures have reduced local control over towns

Dissolution of 80 Town Councils through the Local Government Reform Act 2014



8

Ireland's population dispersal is becoming increasingly unbalanced with the majority of the population increase since 1986 occurring in the EMRA

CSO



3.0 Barriers to Ensuring Vibrant Regional High Streets

The previous section highlighted some of the key trends that have and continue to influence our high streets. Trends provide an indication of the direction, pace and form that change is occurring, and in most cases these changes are inevitable - attempting to influence the direction of a global trend is practically impossible. There are however interventions that can be made at local and national level to mitigate against negative change. To make these interventions it is imperative that the barriers are first identified, after which point measures can be taken to overcome them. This section describes a range of barriers to developing vibrant regional high streets.

BARRIERS

- Increasing costs and overheads,
- Lack of Collaboration,
- Reduced funding for local authorities,
- Governance challenges,
- Legacy of out of town shopping centres,
- Unattractive urban realm,
- Dominance of the car,
- Lack of connectivity,
- Failure to Innovate,
- Demographic change.

Increasing Costs and Overheads

- **Excessive and inflexible rates valuations** can be detrimental to struggling retailers and smaller, independent stores. Certainty over rates is required, with flexibility to allow underperforming businesses to apply for a reduction or freeze on rates.
- **Insurance costs** have continued to grow over the years, both for retailers and commercial property owners, but also in the wider community. Having certainty over the cost of premiums for the coming years is important for retailers and there needs to be more government control over insurer's ability to raise premiums.
- **Cost burdens faced by retailers are proving to be a major disincentive for people considering remaining or entering the retail industry**, particularly for smaller enterprises. Rates, insurances, bank levies, water charges, electricity, as well as ongoing statutory and regulatory compliance training etc., all contribute towards the increasingly low margins retailers, cafes, restaurants and other town centre businesses must work within.

Lack of Collaboration

- **While some towns have strong collaborative networks, others lack an effective network between the community, private sector and public sectors.** This can lead to a lack of focus or vision for development and ability to respond to a changing commercial landscape.

Reduced funding for local authorities

- With a more centralised form of governance, funding must now be dispersed to a wider base and **local authorities are plugging gaps through measures such as parking and property taxes.**

Governance is a hindrance

- **Dissolution of eighty town councils has removed localised control** with local authorities less able to determine development of their towns.
- **Planning and building regulations** can hinder change of use and restrict larger floor plates.

Legacy of out of town shopping centres

- **Out of town shopping centres and retail parks have decimated town centres.** The spread of such facilities across the country has negatively impacted the sustainability and vibrancy of the traditional town centre, where previously retail activity was concentrated.
- **Local authorities have been slow to respond to the impacts of these development,** in many cases they have actively pursued them as they offer further opportunities to increase rates revenue. This short-sighted outlook has exacerbated the decline of town centres.
- **Town centres cannot compete with the offer of retail parks and shopping centres** which can provide customers a high concentration of retailers along with often free parking facilities in an easily accessible location, often beside a major road artery.

Unattractive urban realm

- **For too long the quality of the urban realm in our settlements has been neglected.** Many towns have stagnated and require major investment in their streetscape. This neglect has now led to some unattractive centres which have no appeal to the local population. In many cases the only changes to the built fabric of our towns that have taken place in decades, has been increasing the road infrastructure. Although in some case initiatives, such as the Tidy Towns programme, has led to significant enhancement in the urban fabric of rural towns.
- The combination of an unattractive public realm and lack of viability has meant that many retailers are unwilling to invest in high street locations in rural Ireland, **leading to a cycle of perceptions of vacancy.**

Dominance of the car

- **The dominance of the car is evident in the structure of our towns,** with our streets prioritising private vehicles. Many Irish settlements still retain their original layout, which developed long before the car was designed and as a result cannot accommodate the large volume of traffic that regularly leads to congestion.
- There remains a perception that a vibrant town is one that makes provisions for the car user above all else. This is not the case, as is obvious from studying successful towns and cities internationally.

The pedestrian should take priority on high streets, followed by the cyclist and public transport user. Designing streets with this hierarchy in mind creates more pleasant environments that lead to vibrant places. **Place-making is key and neglecting public spaces will lead to decline of the streetscape.**



Lack of connectivity

- **Many rural towns lack a high-quality broadband connection** which hinders the ability to undertake online sales and to compete with a wider audience.
- **Many retailers still not possessing an online presence which means they cannot compete with those that do.**

Failure to Innovate

- In some cases, **town centres are not creating a sufficient mix of uses or diversifying their offerings to cater for changing consumer trends.** Others that are, such as Westport and Clonakilty are noticeably more vibrant and successful. **More experiential offerings are required.**
- Many regional high streets lack flexible opening hours i.e. no Sunday cafes, a 6pm close etc. and **lack a vibrant night time economy.**

Demographic change

- Population decline in rural areas, particularly because of recession-driven emigration and migration, has resulted in a **lack of viability for many rural retailers because of custom base, footfall/passing trade and employment.**



Case Study 3 Waterford's Viking Triangle

Maximising Heritage Assets.

Our towns and villages have become the places they are today over the course of centuries, in most cases. This long sequence of development inevitably means that there is a rich tapestry of heritage and culture interwoven into the settlement's identity. If a town is to provide an appealing, and individual offering to consumers and visitors alike, then it needs to seize upon and promote its heritage assets.

Waterford is known as the oldest city in Ireland, having been established by Vikings in c.900 BC.

In the centre of the city exists several historically significant buildings which reference the city's origins.

Rather than continue to ignore the untapped potential of Waterford's Viking past, the local authority, in collaboration with public and private partners, sought to capitalise on this. As a result, Waterford now has 'Viking Triangle', an area of the city centre that is characterised by historic architecture, narrow streets, open public spaces and cultural attractions.

This intentional branding of the area was backed by public realm investments and the entry of private sector stakeholders.

It provides the city with an identity that locals can have pride in and prove attractive to tourists. It has also allowed the city to capitalise on national level marketing and branding propositions such as Ireland's Ancient East.



Case Study 4 Scotland's Town Partnership

Independent Oversight Body.

A range of organisations, groups, memberships and committees with interests in the regeneration of towns and villages exist. They come in many forms; community based, business-led, local authority driven, and other blended forms. As a result, there are innumerable agendas and objectives for rejuvenation proposed, sometimes conflicting, and it can therefore be difficult to ascertain the best course of action. To create coherency, and provide a solid structure to achieve these aims, an organisation with a national outlook is useful.

In Scotland, such a body exists. Scotland's Town Partnership (STP) was formed in 2012 and was initially composed of professionals with an interest in communities and settlements. This coincided with a review by the Scottish Government that sought establish a strategy for the rejuvenation of ailing towns. This review recognised the role of the STP and awarded funding that would allow the organisation to strengthen its role as the 'go-to' body for "information, advice and sharing of expertise around town centre development".

STP now act as an essential stakeholder and advisory body for any group seeking to promote and develop their town centre. Their range of supports and services offer tried and tested methods for reinvigorating towns, and this has proved invaluable.

4.0 Critical Success Factors

Understanding barriers to rejuvenation is only one aspect of creating change, an awareness of the successful measures and interventions that can overcome these barriers is vital. This section describes a range of success factors that have either been implemented in towns throughout Ireland, or policy recommendations that have emerged during a review of national and external studies, policies and approaches.

SUCCESS FACTORS

- Strong leadership,
- Plan led change,
- Community support and buy-in,
- High quality broadband provision,
- Public realm enhancement,
- Effective management of parking and public transport,
- Use of incentives and dis-incentives,
- Simplification of planning,
- Sense of place enhancement,
- Creating vibrancy,
- Marketing and promotion.

Need for strong leadership

- **Local authorities have a unique role and can have the most effective role.**
A common theme that emerged throughout the consultation process undertaken for this project was the importance of strong and visionary local authorities. While the dissolution of the town councils removed truly local decision-making from the hands of individual towns, more powers were provided to local authorities. Therefore, it is the local authority who must drive forward the rejuvenation efforts in towns within their boundaries. An awareness exists from local authority management on this, as is evident in a City and County Management Association's (CCMA) report from 2015¹².
- **A leader is required to drive change**, such as a town manager or town architect.

Change must be plan-led

- **A coherent vision for development is required** - a plan must be developed that can guide change, ideally in tandem with a design guide for each town.
- **The plan must be informed by quantitative and qualitative data** to provide an effective and accurate baseline.

Get community support and buy-in

- **Residents, local retailers, business groups leaders from town, district and regions must be engaged** in rejuvenating the regional high street. Collaboration and consultation are essential elements of developing and implementing an effective plan. This could be a focus of a new national campaign by all councils nationwide over a month specifically aimed at the subject matter of this report hosting public workshops, forums, media, radio, get corporate support i.e. Supervalu tidy Town, Bord Failte, IDA, IBEC.
- **Uniting the local community behind a competition** or focus such as Tidy Towns can be an effective way of enhancing unity.
- **Some changes may need to be tested or developed incrementally** to ensure they are effective and ensure continued support.

¹² The CCMA report, Local Authority Retail Support – Improving Our Cities and Towns, was submitted as part of the Action Plan for Jobs initiative.

Provision of high quality broadband

- **Broadband is now as essential as any other urban service such as water, energy and waste collection.** It is imperative that regional towns are provided with a high-quality broadband connection as a matter of urgency.

Enhance the public realm

- **People visiting a town centre are increasingly doing so with a focus on the experience.** The customer experience in-store and on-street is becoming more important, and ensuring a pedestrian friendly, permeable and attractive environment is essential.
- **Heritage must be embraced as a tool of place-making.** Utilising and enhancing natural and built heritage assets is not only important in reinforcing sense of place, but is important in creating a sense of destination.



Manage parking and public transport effectively

- **Successful towns rationalise parking,** only allowing free parking on high streets for short periods with higher charges for stays past the free period, facilitating shoppers but limiting longer term 'experience customers'. In some cases, on-street parking has been reduced with additional trees and seating provide in its place.
- **Ensuring effective and efficient public transport and prioritising pedestrians and cyclists** ensures a more accessible high street, where dwell time is likely to be longer.

Use incentives and dis-incentives

- **Flexibility by the local authorities with regards to rates and taxes** can create more of an incentive to high street investment.
- **Tax relief and grants for can be used to improve buildings and shopfronts** with a collaborative local authority led approach the most effective way of implementing this, in tandem with a design guide.
- **A grant relief scheme can be used to incentivise take-up of vacant premises.**
- **Disincentives** can be utilised in terms of penalising land owners for land hoarding and dereliction.
- **Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO's)** have, in some towns, been a useful instrument in enabling acquisition of key sites.
- **Transparency on budget allotment and dedicated spend to stimulate local enterprise, specific to economic rejuvenation.** An annual, bi annual council public accountability presentation open forum could be held to discuss what was done, what wasn't and why not as well as strategy for forth coming 6-12 months. Consistency is vital in delivery in the medium to long term.

Simplify planning and adapt to the changing commercial landscape

- **Currently the processes that exist for a change of use are more complicated than they should be.** Simplifying the option to change a vacant commercial property to use as residential or other purposes would make it easier to bring buildings back to life, recognising that towns need more mixed uses.

Enhance a sense of place

- **Support for, and attraction of, indigenous retailers** such as craft and food stores can encourage production of locally produced goods, create employment and bring diversity and personality to regional high streets.

Add vibrancy

- **Regional towns can add vibrancy to their high streets by focussing on ways to stimulate the night time economy and supporting festivals and events.** Towns could consider mini/ local versions of popular events such as Bloom Beag, Flead Cheoil for the regions, October Fest, Red Bull Flying Machines, Ideal Homes, Local Ploughing shows, the Big BBQ, local beach day, skating on ice etc.

Marketing and promotion

- **Digitisation of retail means retailers need an online presence.** Supports can be given for online branding.
- **A marketing coordinated approach** can mean high street retailers can share the cost burden, stimulate activity and increase their reach – co-opetition.



Case Study 5

Tidy Towns

Awards Recognition.

There are not many things that can engender a sense of civic pride and togetherness better than healthy competition, which is precisely what the Tidy Towns initiative promotes. Launched in 1958 by what is now Fáilte Ireland, Tidy Towns encourages communities to improve their local environment, so it becomes a better place to live, work and visit. By pitting similar sized towns against one-another, a rivalry aspect exists which adds impetus to the works undertaken by each community group. Over the years, Tidy Town committees have sprung up in every town and village and are now an important stakeholder in town rejuvenation.

The spirit of competition is one aspect of Tidy Towns that makes it so successful, however another equally important element is the promotion generated for winning towns. Westport acts as a good example, winning the competition outright three times in the last 20 years. This is the fundamental point, that by targeting awards and competitions, towns can not only generate local enthusiasm, but also find their area promoted at a national stage. Another example of an award that provides towns with much needed marketing would be the Purple Flag, which is provided to those areas where there is a successful night-time economy.



Case Study 6

Wolverhampton Public Realm Improvements

Pedestrian Prioritisation.

Due to the dominance of the car in the last century our towns and villages, for the most part, have been redesigned to accommodate private vehicles. Although preference was given to car users, the layouts of the streets could not change dramatically without major demolition. What this has led to are streets congested with traffic, and pedestrians forced to inhabit reduced space. While removing cars entirely from our town centres is neither possible, or warranted, reducing their dominance is something worth pursuing.

As a response to increasing levels of congestion, degrading environmental conditions and declining economic activity, the City of Wolverhampton undertook a review of their transport policies.

This review determined that more roads, and more cars would not solve the issues and instead placed greater emphasis on urban realm improvements, public transport and pedestrian prioritisation.

Over the course of several years the city removed through roads, created one-way sections and pedestrianised certain areas entirely. The result was a cleaner, safer and more pleasant environment, with Wolverhampton winning the 'Town Centre Environment Award' issued by the British Council of Shopping Centres. It is also worth noting that although car traffic reduced significantly, this did not impact retailers negatively, something that is often a common misconception. Although Wolverhampton is significantly larger than the towns that are the focus of this

report, it is still useful as a case study as introducing pedestrianisation measures in larger towns and cities is arguably an even greater challenge than in smaller locations. Therefore, successful examples, such as that in Wolverhampton, should inspire other towns to act.

5.0 Recommendations to Rejuvenate the Regional High Street

The objective of the SCSi recommendations are to revitalise the regional high street, to develop a stronger sense of place and give a new lease of life to rural communities. SCSi have identified several priority recommendations. In doing so it is recognised there needs to be a strong focus on macro-level issues to achieve effective change, to ensure Ireland's high streets can continue to act as vibrant hubs for future generations. Recommendations are based on a review of best practice nationally and internationally, site visits to successful towns, and consultation with a range of stakeholders and influencers.

Recommendation themes: Thirteen recommendation themes have been identified. Each of these themes can be framed in terms of Positioning, People, Planning, Product & Place, and Promotion.

SCSi consider these to be the key initiatives required to rejuvenate the regional high street.

Priority Recommendations: Seven priority recommendations have been identified that have the most significant potential for influencing change and animating our high streets.

These include,

- **Viable high streets** - Further development of out-of-town shopping centres in towns with a population of under 10,000, should be restricted to encourage consolidation, and to enhance economic viability and vitality (see theme 1: consolidation and focus).
- **Informed high streets** - An Irish Towns Partnership should be established to enable sharing of best practice, innovation and mentoring (see theme 2: Coordination and Mentoring).
- **Collaborative high streets** - Inclusive and collaborative engagement mechanisms must be created that includes the local authority, community and business (see theme 5: collaboration and engagement).
- **Attractive high streets** - Public realm strategies must be commissioned for each town and these included in town plans (see theme 8: public realm and streetscape).
- **Living high streets** - Local authorities must proactively address vacant buildings in towns to revitalise town centres (see theme 10: Proactive Planning).
- **Working high streets** - Local authorities and other stakeholders must recognise the changing commercial landscape and attract new high street business through incentives (see theme 11: incentivising new business).
- **Connected high streets** - Delivering high-quality broadband connections to rural areas is fundamentally important for high streets and must be prioritised by government (see theme 13: delivering connectivity).

1	Consolidation and focus	Positioning
2	Coordination and mentoring	
3	Effective funding	
4	Leadership and responsibility	People
5	Collaboration and engagement	
6	Plan-making and visioning	Planning
7	Information and data analysis	
8	Public realm and streetscape	Product & Place
9	Transport and accessibility	
10	Proactive planning	
11	Incentivising new business	Promotion
12	Marketing and placemaking	
13	Delivering connectivity	

Positioning

THEME 1 Consolidation and Focus

Further development of out-of-town shopping centres in towns with a population of under 10,000, must be restricted to encourage consolidation, and to enhance economic viability and vitality.

The National Planning Framework encourages **consolidation of urban centres and reduction of urban sprawl**. It is imperative that local authorities focus development in rural towns and villages to increase the viability of retail and services on the high street.

THEME 2 Coordination and mentoring

An Irish Towns Partnership must be established to enable sharing of best practice, innovation and mentoring.

There is a need for a holistic national approach to town and high street development. Consideration should be given at national level to establishing an **Irish Towns Partnership**, similar to the Scotland's Towns Partnership model (www.scotlandstowns.org). It is recommended this could sit within the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, with an **associated grants scheme**. The Town Partnership model could include a **portal for best practice case studies, toolkits and innovation**. It could also include access to a panel of **high street mentors** for local authorities – enabling a coordinated approach.

THEME 3 Effective funding

Local authorities should target a range of current national funding mechanisms to facilitate the rejuvenation high streets.

Funding schemes, as outlined at the end of this report, are valuable tools to stimulate and enable investment in high streets. Programmes such as the **Rural Regeneration Development Fund** should be targeted by local authorities to prove investment in measures such as the **urban** realm. Importantly these measures should mean that local authorities will be **less reliant on commercial rates for funding**, enabling a reduction in rates to encourage new businesses to invest and leading to more vibrant high streets.

People

THEME 4 Leadership and responsibility

Dynamic leaders must be appointed to drive positive change on high streets.

This should ideally be a **town manager role and/or a town architect** with a strong understanding of design and urban realm. In some counties it may be more realistic to appoint a municipal architect with responsibility for several towns.

It is also considered vital that any grouping composed to direct town development, for example a **town team**, should have a wide representation including business leaders, community groups, individuals local and regional. Drive for change will come from those whom it affects directly and offering them a chance to interact and effect change is key.

Local authorities are the most appropriate agency to engage with community and private sectors and drive change on high streets and have a responsibility to rejuvenate high streets.

Many local authorities have used their leadership role to enable and provide long term support for town centre revitalisation, including capacity building, start-up funding and creating authority-wide linkages.

THEME 5 Collaboration and engagement

Inclusive and collaborative engagement mechanisms must be created that includes the local authority, community and business.

Collaborative development is the most effective way of reviving our high streets. The engagement process must include community organisations, businesses, residents, local authority and public agencies and visitors. Agencies can include the local authority, Local Enterprise Offices, retail associations, Chambers of Commerce and Tidy Towns Groups. Groups can be brought together in a variety of ways including town teams, steering groups and/or **Business Improvement Districts (BID's)**. It is important to gain **collective ownership of the change process** and giving responsibility to communities can be an effective way of bringing groups together. The mechanism can be tailored to the place, some towns may find it more effective to work together as part of a Town Team, others as part of a BID.

The mechanism is less important than encouraging ownership, engagement and local leadership. BID's can be useful in enabling local networking, group purchasing, joint marketing or to create events. Local authorities can and should provide **greater transparency on budget allotment**, for example an allocation of dedicated spend to stimulate local enterprise and specific to economic rejuvenation. It is recommended an annual or bi-annual open forum public accountability presentation be established to outline what has been done, what wasn't done and why, as well as an outline strategy for the forthcoming 6-12 months.

The engagement process must begin with a conversation about what people like and dislike about the high street and what are their ideas for the future. **An external facilitator can play a valuable role in this dialogue.** A town communication plan, issued by the selected steering body mechanism, can be used to keep local people informed about changes on the high street and to promote events and businesses, encouraging increased footfall. Uniting a **community behind a competition**, such as Tidy Towns or a bid for funding can be an effective and catalytic way to rally different groups behind a common purpose.

Planning

THEME 6 Plan-making and visioning

Image-led town design statements must be commissioned to provide focus and structure for high street related development and for the wider town area.

For high streets to flourish **changes need to be plan-led**. Whether the plan relates to the wider town or is solely focussed on the high street, it should contain a collective collaborative vision, key objectives, a list of identified projects, a design guide and a set of Key Performance Indicators.

THEME 7 Information and data analysis

Development decisions and plans must be evidence-based.

Plans and development decisions must be evidence based and where possible use data to determine issues and to monitor change. Stakeholders should use a **range of qualitative and quantitative data** to provide an accurate baseline of the high street. The Town Health Check process can be a useful tool for undertaking this.

Quantitative data can include footfall, vacancy rates, parking occupancy, rental levels, business mix, community assets, public services, customer origins and purpose of visits, where this is compatible with GDPR requirements. **Using customers digital footprints ethically can be a cost-effective way of understanding use of place.** This can include travel movements, parking, mobile phone activity, social media interaction and Wi-Fi usage.

Qualitative data can include the commissioning a customer/visitor survey, establishing the views of those that are using the high street would provide an additional layer of evidence to inform the plan. **Data could be delivered to stakeholders in an online dashboard format, monitoring the impact of a plan over time.**

Product & Place

THEME 8 Public realm and streetscape

Public realm strategies must be commissioned for each town and these included in town plans.

Public realm and streetscape measures, which can significantly improve the appearance of a high street, **making it a more attractive place to visit and encouraging increased dwell time,** include:

- signage policy to reduce visual clutter,
- landscape and planting policy,
- lighting strategy to highlight significant buildings and ensure people feel safe,
- consideration of ways to balance street space,
- restrictions on use of roller shutters or roller shutters set back from the shop window,
- placing overhead cables underground,
- introducing a colour palette consultation to enhance street frontage,
- coordinated replacement of street furniture, as well as paving and landscaping,
- opening landlocked brownfield sites on back-lands and creating cut-throughs linking other streets to enhance permeability,
- maximising opportunity of natural and built heritage assets – it is this rich unique heritage, in most Irish high streets, that sets each town apart and should be celebrated,
- sponsorship of new public shrub planting, local shop signage painting and decorating, outdoor seating or paint a street by local businesses, hotels and business groups.

Identifying quick wins will galvanise support, while a focus on long term objectives will achieve significant change. Westport has required new developments to install heritage windows, which over twenty years of implementation, has had a positive impact on streetscape.

THEME 9 Transport and accessibility

Pedestrians must be prioritised in small town centres and high streets to encourage increased footfall and dwell time.

Making it easy for customers to visit the high street will increase footfall and contribute to rejuvenation. However, to increase accessibility the public transport network must be optimised, and interchange areas and bus stops made as attractive and comfortable as possible. **Pedestrians must be prioritised with people friendly junctions, a barrier free and de-cluttered pedestrian network.** Pedestrians must be guided to and along the high street with effective wayfinding infrastructure. Ensuring a safe cycle network will make it more attractive for people to visit the high street by bike, with convenient cycle parking also a priority.

Many towns are now rationalising car-parking, with a parking strategy part of an overall plan. Recognising that many businesses are dependent on cars being able to park nearby the recommendation is not to remove cars altogether. Measures to reduce high street car parking spaces, replacing them with seating areas and trees, moving car-parking to back land or edge of town centre sites, and introducing a charging policy that encourages short stays and deters long stays enhance the attractiveness of a town, encouraging people to stay for longer, and spend more.

THEME 10 Proactive planning

Local authorities must proactively address vacant buildings in towns to revitalise town centres. In addition, it is recommended there be national-level consideration of exempted development provisions for bringing vacant buildings back into use in town centres, for example using similar powers to the Derelict Sites Act or section 57 of the Planning Act 2000, as amended.

Vacant buildings impact on the vitality and image of Irish towns, discouraging future investment. It is imperative that local authorities work with owners and overcome issues of fragmented ownership to find new uses using a targeted and coordinated approach. **It is important that all stakeholders accept that town centres need to be repopulated as community hubs** with a mix of uses including housing, health and leisure, entertainment and arts to enliven town centres and bring buildings back into use.

New measures to simplify the process of conversion of commercial use to residential use must be communicated to building owners and other stakeholders to ensure awareness.

Local authorities use of Compulsory Purchase Orders should be considered where this will be of benefit to the wider plan for the high street or town - the wider benefit for the local community should be of consideration. Encouraging anchor tenants such as supermarkets back into the town can provide a focus for high streets, increasing footfall and encouraging further investment.

Promotion

THEME 11 Incentivising new business

Local authorities and other stakeholders must recognise the changing commercial landscape and attract new high street business through incentives.

High streets must become more **multi-functional** and focus on the demand for **experiential retail**. The retail mix need to be varied and interesting. The contemporary high street must be increasingly flexible and offer a full range of activities. Supporting **local artisan food and craft retailers** can add interest and drive local employment generation. These retailers can also act as **local champions**, promoting the high street to a wider audience. The **night-time economy** is increasingly important and can bring a new audience and invigorate rural towns. A plan for the town should consider ways in which this can be stimulated on the high street.

Innovative incentive measures can be utilised to encourage start-ups, for example a **defined period of rates reductions for certain types of industry, including education and experiential retail**. It is recommended this could include a 75% commercial rates rebate in year 1, 50% in year 2, and 25% in year 3. This should go hand in hand with reductions in energy and telecoms costs. Different local authorities currently offer varying levels of incentives. It is recommended that consideration be given to a **national high street incentives** policy. This could include fit-out costs, which are currently deterring new business from starting up. Tax or rates rebates or other commercial incentives could be linked to a **start-up business course** delivered through Local Enterprise Offices.

It is further recommended that local authorities review the level of commercial rates, taking a strategic view to encourage reduced high street vacancy rates through reducing rates where possible.

This should be linked to an incentivisation scheme and include measures to maximise clarity on rates system for new businesses.

THEME 12 Marketing and placemaking

A marketing and promotional strategy must be produced for each town focussing on measures to rejuvenate the high street and attract increased footfall.

The collaborative strategy must focus on what the town offers and what makes it special. This can include identification of a brand, who the audience is, how it will be marketed and who will act to make things happen. Development of a **programme of festivals and events** can bring a buzz to high streets, and appeal to families and the Millennial markets. **Businesses should be engaged in developing such a programme as they can act as a key promotional tool**. Local authorities could focus on ensuring a **space is available for events and markets**, with appropriate lack of clutter and easy access to power for lighting, amplification etc.

The **local media can be a powerful tool** in promoting the high street and communicating events and festivals to a wider audience. As part of the strategy high street stakeholders should be encouraged to unite behind a **destination promotion vehicle** e.g. co-opetition marketing with a combined marketing budget.

THEME 13 Delivering connectivity

Delivering quality broadband connections to regional areas is fundamentally important for high streets and must be prioritised by government.

High speed broadband is an essential service and is necessary to enable the rejuvenation of high streets. There are several reasons for this. **Technology can be used to facilitate new ways of working**, for example hot desks and digital hubs, and serviced offices which offer a major opportunity for creating spaces for people to work in local towns, retaining people through the day. In addition, to compete with the online market high street business must have an online presence and require effective broadband to do so. To encourage increased footfall, dwell time, and online engagement local authorities must provide **free wifi** as a public service. Innovative approaches from elsewhere should be considered, such as a **'dating app' for property owners and start-up businesses**. For example, an online tool could be developed to enable the listing of available properties through the Local Enterprise Office and to link this to those seeking space.



Case Study 7

Limerick Business and Retail Incentive Scheme

Fit-out Incentive Schemes.

Successful and vibrant town centres share many characteristics including an attractive visual appearance. If people are to visit a town centre and spend time there, they must find it to be a pleasant and attractive place to visit. Dereliction, vacancies, poor quality design and deterioration of shopfronts all detract from the appeal of a town centre, therefore targeting these issues is fundamental.

To attract businesses and retailers back into town centres across the county, Limerick City and County Council have developed a Grant Incentive Scheme. The financial package will contribute towards the fit-out costs of a new premises and is intended to address vacancies in towns and villages. By facilitating the uptake of vacant properties within these areas, the council aims to revitalise the streetscape and remove any negative perceptions that may exist because of empty stores.

Grant relief is supplied for fit-out costs up to 50% of the annual rates of liability for the first year. Year 2 sees relief based on 25% of the annual rates of liability. In conjunction with the Living City Tax relief initiative, and other similar supports, there are numerous cost-reducing offerings for potential business owners and retailers to avail of.



Case Study 8 Naas Gift Card Scheme

Innovative Ideas.

Local Community Groups or retailers need not solely rely on more traditional approaches to rejuvenation. Innovation and interesting solutions to town centre improvements should be considered and developed upon. Naas acts as a recent example, where a local group of businesses have established a partnership which is the first of its kind in Ireland.

The Naas Regeneration Group acted as the impetus for a project that saw the Me2You gift card company collaborate with local businesses in Naas to produce a Naas Gift Card. This gift card can be used across all involved retailers and businesses in Naas to purchase goods and services. It qualifies for a government scheme whereby employers can award members of staff with gift card up to €500 tax free. The card can only be used within Naas, therefore creating a used loop which sees expenditure and profits remain in the town.

The initiative has received the support of the Chamber of Commerce, local authority and EU URBACT. It is expected that similar schemes will be introduced in other towns and cities across the country over the coming years.

¹³ European Network for Rural Development Case Study. Available at https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/tg_rural-businesses_case-study_ludgate-hub.pdf



Case Study 9 Skibbereen Digital Hub

Repurposing Vacant Units.

Due to the changing retail and business environment, exacerbated by the digitalisation of economic activities, many stores and offices have closed for good. Left in their wake are vacant premises that prove an unsightly addition to town centres. In these instances, it is inappropriate, and foolhardy to attempt to replace a failed enterprise with a similar business. Similarly, there are many derelict properties, often with interesting heritage value, that have laid idle for years. The repurposing of such buildings offers towns an opportunity to reintroduce a vibrancy to their high street.

In Skibbereen, County Cork, an underused building in the centre of the town has now become a nationally renowned digital hub, named the Ludgate Hub.

The building can now facilitate up to 75 entrepreneurs and business owners in a co-working space. Rather than become a victim of the digital age, Skibbereen has taken steps to embrace it by providing a dedicated facility for the modern worker. It encourages local budding entrepreneurs to innovate and create within an environment suited to their needs. Not only that, but it also provides a completely new use for a previously vacant business. The Ludgate Hub has been lauded as a major success, and something worthy of replication elsewhere, for the following reasons¹³:

- Enabled 11 retailers to trade online,
- Employed 11 people in one year and facilitated 100 direct jobs to date,

- Engaged with 25 co-working companies in the first year,
- It hosts a 'National Digital Week' which attracts 1,600 attendees each year,
- Supports "2,800 bed nights" in the local area with its events and operations,
- Has delivered coding classes and innovation classes to over 100 people; and,
- Supports 15 local community groups.



Case Study 10 Clonakilty Public Realm

Collaborative Town Enhancement.

The objective of rejuvenating town centres is to make these places more inviting to people, and spaces where people want to be. Redesigning the urban environment in towns will inevitably benefit the locals, therefore locals should have a say in this. Collaborative planning, directed by professionals such as Council Architects or Planners, requires input from the community and is essential in creating better public spaces.

Clonakilty is an award-winning example of collaborative urban enhancement plans. It was named the Best Town in the UK and Ireland for 2017 by the Academy of Urbanism for the quality of its urban environment.

Under the stewardship of a team of architects from Cork County Council, the town gradually redesigned its streetscape, improving paving, adding street seating and creating a more attractive public park. Creative thinking was used by the local authority architects to secure funding for public realm improvements, with already limited budgets allocated for other infrastructure works shared.

By using a 'Community Architect' model, the thoughts and concerns of locals were listened to, while explanations for redesign were provided.

This collaborative effort ensures that the local community can gain a sense of ownership of the projects undertaken. It also ensures that a civic pride develops, which leads to the community themselves performing minor maintenance and upkeep works.

Appendix 1: Policy & Funding Supports

There are a wide range of public and private policy supports targeted at the socio-economic development of rural areas. These supports exist within a broader context of national and European rural policy, each of which set out their own visions and objectives for rural development. Overarching policies and supports that seek to drive rural rejuvenation are outlined below under headings of national policy, funding supports, competitions that encourage rural regeneration, and collaborative regeneration.

National policy

The National Planning Framework: Project Ireland 2040 is an overall strategic framework for spatial planning and public investment up to 2040. It contains ten strategic outcomes to be achieved in this period, including the strengthening of rural economies and communities. The National Planning Framework contains a further thirteen national policy objectives to support the development and diversification of Ireland's rural areas. These objectives commit to combating decline in areas suffering from low population growth, the regeneration of small towns and villages through both reuse and development of their built environment and to enhance the rural economic and cultural assets. The National Development Plan 2018-2027 outlines how public capital investment will achieve the outcomes and objectives set out in the National Planning Framework. It commits continued funding into several support schemes outlined below and establishes a €1 billion Rural Regeneration and Development Fund to invest in the regeneration of towns, villages and other rural areas.

The Charter for Rural Ireland was published in 2016 as a statement of intent to support the rejuvenation of Ireland's rural economy and rural society. The Charter contains ten commitments to be implemented within the context of existing national and European policies. These commitments aim to contribute to rural regeneration of Ireland, and acknowledge the importance of social and cultural, as well as economic development, to rural communities. The Charter included commitment to develop a Rural Development Policy Framework by the end of 2016, and an assessment system to ensure all Government policies are designed with full consideration of their impact on rural Ireland. The Charter also saw introduction of guidelines for local government organisations to ensure participation of rural communities in economic and community development and commitment for implementation of the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020.

The Action Plan for Rural Development consolidates progress and commitment made under previous government strategies and sets the national agenda for rural development up to 2020. Launched in January 2017 the Action Plan for Rural Development builds on commitments made in the Charter for Rural Ireland and sets out actions and policies by which government will support economic and social development of rural Ireland. Developed by way of consultation with key rural stakeholders, the plan sets several key targets to achieve by 2020. These include the creation of 135,000 new jobs in rural Ireland, increasing tourism to rural Ireland by 12%, increasing the number of apprenticeships and traineeships available in rural locales, and investing €50m in recreational and cultural facilities across Ireland. The Plan lists 277 actions by which these broad objectives are to be achieved, as well as the timelines and bodies responsible for delivering each action.

Funding supports

The LEADER Programme constitutes one of the measures under Ireland's Rural Development Programme 2014-2020. It provides funding for private and community led projects that improve the quality of life and contribute to economic activity in rural areas. In doing so it aims to promote both social inclusion and the sustainable economic development of rural Ireland. The budget for Ireland's LEADER Programme 2014-2020 is €250,000 million, and funding is available for projects that fall within three broad themes: Economic Development, Enterprise Development and Job Creations; Social Inclusion; and Rural Environment. These three themes are further divided into sub-themes diverse enough to encompass the needs of a rural area. LEADER funding is delivered through a network of 29 Local Action Groups. These Local Action Groups design Local Development Strategies for their areas and have been assigned funding from the Department of Rural and Community Development.

This funding is used to deliver projects that are driven by the local community and that meet the needs of rural areas across Ireland.

The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund has been established under the National Development Plan. The fund will be used to support projects with a demonstrative positive impact on the sustainable economic and social development of rural Ireland. In doing so the Fund aims to drive the regeneration of rural areas by improving infrastructure, supporting entrepreneurship and innovation, and creating employment opportunities. The Government has committed €1 billion for 2019-2027, with initial funding of €315 million allocated for 2019-2022. The Fund will support large-scale projects outside the scope of pre-existing schemes which would not be deliverable without the additional grant support available. Recently the Government has announced the first tranche of funding, amounting to €24.4 million for 18 projects, as part of this scheme. In total there were 290 projects that applied for the first round, all of which aimed to demonstrate their relevance to the National Strategic Outcomes listed in Project Ireland 2040. Proposals must involve collaboration between public bodies and community or private sector organisations. A second call is expected to take place in mid-2019.

The Urban Regeneration and Development Fund applies to the five cities and their metropolitan areas as defined further to the NPF (as set out in DHPLG Circular FPS 04/2018), larger towns with a population of more than 10,000 people and to a number of smaller towns with fewer than 10,000 people but with more than 2,500 jobs and which function as significant centres of employment (all figures as per 2016 Census).

These include:

- Gorey
- Shannon
- Nenagh
- Westport
- Roscommon
- Monaghan
- Tuam
- Thurles
- Dungarvan
- New Ross
- Ballinasloe
- Carrick-on-Shannon
- Trim

Ireland's Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 was adopted by the European Commission in 2015, as part of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). It contains a suite of measures aimed at enhancing the competitiveness of the agro-food sector, achieving more sustainable management of natural resources, and achieving balanced development of rural areas. The programme is co-financed by the national exchequer and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, with total funding for the programmes period set to amount to €4 billion. The programme contains nineteen measures in all, with each measure allocated set funding up to 2020. These measures range from the provision of knowledge transfer sessions and specialist training for farmers, to investment in the restoration and enhancement of biodiversity in rural regions.

The Town and Village Renewal scheme aims to support rejuvenation of Ireland's rural towns and villages by providing grant support to projects that enhance their economic, tourism and social sectors. Funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development, the scheme is targeted at both towns and villages with a population of 5,000 people or less, and those with a population of 5,001 to 10,000 people. However, weight is given to smaller rural areas, and these areas receive 60% of total funding available. The scheme supports projects that will have a positive economic impact by way of supporting entrepreneurship or tourism initiatives or developing individual sectors within the area. Successful projects might involve developing digital training facilities, investing in an artisan food hub or enhancing a local heritage site. Grant support of up to 80% of total project costs is available for successful applicants, with a maximum of €100,000 available. Though the application process is competitive, provision is made for even geographic distribution of funding; where possible at least four projects in each county are selected. Since its initial launch in 2016, over €31.6m has been allocated to over 450 projects across Ireland.



Repair and Lease/Buy and Renew schemes - The Repair and Leasing scheme (RLS) and the Buy and Renew scheme (BRS) form part of the Government's Rebuilding Ireland programme. Both schemes aim to act as incentives for property owners to bring currently vacant properties back into use, with a specific focus on the provision of social housing. The RLS provides funding up to a maximum of €40,000 for the repair of existing dwellings so to bring them to a sufficient standard that they can be leased out. Under the scheme, the costs will be paid up-front with the property then being used to provide a fixed-term social housing lease. The costs of the repairs are offset against this rent. An approved housing body, or Local Authority, will manage the renting of the property for the agreed period, which has a minimum lease term of five years, and a maximum of twenty. Recent news reports have castigated the scheme due to the limited success it has had in bringing vacant properties back onto the market, however, it is still in its infancy and there is an expectation that it will deliver in time. A large proportion of applications have been refused due to the levels of disrepair found in the properties. Remediation works to these properties would far surpass the €40,000 available, and as a result many applications have been directed towards the RLS's sister scheme. The BRS has had greater success than the RLS, for reasons touched upon previously. This scheme provides funding to Local Authorities and Approved Housing Bodies to purchase vacant properties from owners, undertake remediation works and make them available for social housing. The RLS has directed many applications to the BRS due to the significant levels of dereliction that were found. The benefits of the BRS are that properties come into the full ownership of AHBs and LAs, which means there is a growing stock of social housing in existence.

Living Over the Shop/Living City Initiative - This is a tax incentive scheme aimed to encourage commercial property owners to renovate and convert upper stories of their premises as residential units. The scheme underwent several iterations, with the original pilot introduced in 1994, and a revised scheme extended from 1999 to 2006. Tax incentives were available for conversion of commercial premises into apartments on designated streets in Cork, Dublin, Galway, Limerick and Waterford. The Living Over the Shop Scheme has been replaced with the Living City Initiative, introduced in 2015 and scheduled to operate up to 2020. It aims to relieve pressure on housing supply, promote greater economic use of disused premises and foster a more diverse vibrant urban environment. The Initiative offers tax relief for money spent on the refurbishment or conversion of residential or commercial properties in designated streets or "Special Regeneration Areas" in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway, Waterford and Kilkenny. Tax relief is available for the conversion or renovation of commercial premises to include owner-occupier housing or rented accommodation, or for renovation of disused premises to make them suitable for commercial use. Different rates of relief are offered depending on the intended use of the property. There are general qualifying conditions and specific conditions, depending on the type of work being conducted. All properties must be located within a designated Special Regeneration Area, and related expenses must exceed €5,000. For refurbishment or renovation of residential units the property must have been built pre- 1915, must be used as a home by either the owner or a tenant, and the owner or landlord must produce proof facilities have been installed to a basic standard. If the property is to serve a commercial function it must be used for retail purposes or the provision of services within Ireland.

The Community Enhancement Programme amalgamates two Government schemes; the RAPID Programme and the Communities Facilities scheme. The Community Enhancement Programme provides capital funding to enhance facilities in disadvantaged areas across Ireland, with the aim of improving quality of life and social cohesion. The RAPID Programme originally ran from 2002 to 2012,

before being recast in 2017 and coming under the umbrella of the Community Enhancement Programme in 2018. The programme provided funding for small scale projects to improve the quality of life for residents in disadvantaged urban areas and towns, such as the provision of CCTV cameras, equipment for community gardens and streetscaping measures. The Communities Facilities Scheme was first introduced in 2017 and funded larger upgrade projects to community facilities in disadvantaged areas, such as the renovation of community centres and public parks. Both programmes have been replaced by the Community Enhancement Programme, which aims to streamline the provision of funding to disadvantaged areas. Funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development and administered by the Local Authorities, the programme supports both small and large-scale community improvement projects. Projects are selected by designated Local Community Development Committees, who are responsible for overseeing community development funding for their area.

CLÁR is an investment programme that targets rural areas suffering the greatest levels of population decline. Funded the Department of Rural and Community Development, it provides funding for infrastructural projects that will support the sustainable development of those areas. The CLÁR programme originally ran from 2001 to 2010 before reopened in 2016 and has been expanded twice in its operations. The areas originally selected for the scheme were those which suffered average population decline of 50% between 1926 and 1996. In 2006 analysis of 2002 census data led to the programme being expanded to include areas that had suffered an average population decline of 35% between 1926 and 2002. The Department have announced intentions to review the scheme in light of 2016 census data. The programme provides funding for different projects under three categories: Support for Schools/Community Safety Measures e.g. construction of access footpaths, upgrades to road markings and safety signs, renovation of community facilities; Play Areas e.g. provision of new or upgrades to existing playgrounds and game areas; First Response Support Measure e.g. mountain and diving equipment, defibrillators for local communities. Under the first two categories the scheme will provide up to 90% of total project costs. Under the third category funding of up to 85% of total cost is provided for equipment for voluntary organisations involved in emergency rescue and first response measures.

The Built Heritage Investment scheme was introduced in 2016 and provides funding for repair and conservation of protected heritage structures. It aims to maintain and improve the quality of historic built environment in towns and cities across Ireland and support the employment of skilled conservation professionals. The scheme provides funding of up to €15,000 for repair and conservation of protected structures or structures that contribute to the character of an Architectural Conservation Area. In doing so it promotes tourism and contributes to rural regeneration, contributing to the vitality of towns and cities and the sustainable re-use of historic developments. A greater amount of funding is provided for conservation works under the Structures at Risk Fund. This fund is intended for the repair of heritage structures suffering from significant deterioration or are deemed at risk. Funding of up to €30,000 is granted for conservation projects to these at-risk structures, encouraging regeneration and reuse of elements of historic built environment which might otherwise be lost.

The Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure scheme is funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development and provides grant support for development and maintenance of outdoor amenities. By developing Greenways, Blueways and cycleways, as well as other types of outdoor recreational infrastructure, the scheme aims to encourage local community activity and attract tourism. Since its launch in 2016 the scheme has funded 368 projects, with €12 million in funding announced for 2018.

Though not restricted to rural areas, most projects supported have occurred in rural areas across Ireland. Applications are accepted under three categories, determined by the size of the project. Small maintenance measures, such as the upkeep of trails or walkways can earn grant support of up to €20,000. Medium scale projects might more intensive repairs or upgrades, or the development of new outdoor infrastructure, and can earn up to €200,000 in grant support. Finally, large development projects can earn up to €500,000 in grant support. Application is open to local development companies, local authorities and other community groups.

The Historic Towns initiative, launched by the Heritage Council in 2018, aims to support the regeneration of towns across Ireland with significant cultural and heritage assets. Overall funding of €1 million was made available to regeneration projects with the aim of driving economic development, attracting visitors and decreasing the number of vacant buildings and commercial premises in such towns. This Initiative was based on a previous pilot scheme that operated from 2013-2014 in towns in Kerry, Mayo and Cork, with learnings from the pilot scheme used to develop a nationwide programme. Funded was allocated on a competitive basis whereby local authority were invited to apply in respect of one historic town in their area, and projects were assessed regarding their contribution to the regeneration of the town, the towns track record in caring for its historic environment, and community participation. Seven towns received funding under the 2018 programme.

Competitions encouraging rural regeneration

The Tidy Towns Competition, administered by the Dept. of Rural and Community Development, is a national competitive initiative to encourage towns and villages across Ireland to maintain and improve their physical environment. Urban and rural areas of all sizes can enter under eight categories depending on the size of their population. Participating areas are assessed under eight competition criteria, including built environment, landscaping, residential areas and community involvement. The competition has a total prize fund of €250,000, and three main national, regional and county winners are awarded cash prizes, along with smaller cash prizes for different categories. Tidy Towns is popular and transformational with 870 towns and villages across Ireland entering the competition in 2017. Though based on the physical appearance of participating areas, the competition also incorporates elements of community engagement and strategic planning with the aim of fostering long-term sustainable development. Improved built and natural environment can support rural rejuvenation by encouraging civic pride and social/economic activity, while also attracting tourism to an area.

The Purple Flag Initiative is an international accreditation scheme that rewards towns for achieving excellence in their night time economy. It represents a best-in-class standard for towns and cities that provide a vibrant and safe night time experience to residents and visitors. Application is open to local authorities, town centre organisations or community and private partnerships, and applicants must demonstrate that their area meets five core standards. These standards are based on well-researched integrated public policy, high standards of safety and customer care, provision of transport and ease of movement, a diverse choice of leisure and entertainment facilities, and the blend of overlapping activities within an area. There are multiple benefits associated with the achievement of a Purple Flag Award.

These include an improved profile and image for an area, increased economic activity, increased tourism and improved safety. The process can also help foster new partnerships between the public and private sectors, as well as help drive a mixed-use economy. As of 2018 eighteen towns across Ireland have achieved a Purple Flag, with a total of 70 awarded across the UK and Ireland.

Collaborative regeneration

The Town Centre Health Check Training Programme was co-developed by the Heritage Council, the RGDATA (Retail Grocery Dairy and Allied Trade Association) and several other private and public-sector bodies. The programmes aim is to raise awareness of the impact town centres have on socio-economic development and to drive development by establishing a collaborative model for town centre regeneration. Running as a pilot programme from 2016 to 2018 the Town Centre Health Check Training Programme will train representatives from ten selected Irish towns in how to conduct a town centre health check which assesses a town by a range of criteria such as vacancy rates, footfall, dereliction and retail and social mix. They will establish a baseline of town centre activity and inform the development of new town plans, which will direct future development and revitalisation efforts in the selected towns. An evaluation of the pilot programme is due to be published for the end of 2018. Representatives from participating towns are comprised of local authority staff, business owners and community stakeholders. They receive training and support by way of two dedicated workshops and ongoing mentoring from governmental bodies and professionals with experience in planning, urban design and environmental management. By providing these supports the scheme aims to establish a development model for towns involving collaboration between public, private and voluntary sectors to shape and rejuvenate towns across Ireland.



The Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland is the independent professional body for Chartered Surveyors working and practising in Ireland. Working in partnership with RICS, the pre-eminent Chartered professional body for the construction, land and property sectors around the world, the Society and RICS act in the public interest: setting and maintaining the highest standards of competence and integrity among the profession; and providing impartial, authoritative advice on key issues for business, society and governments worldwide. Members of the profession are typically employed in the construction, land and property markets through private practice, in central and local government, in state agencies, in academic institutions, in business organisations and in non-governmental organisations.

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