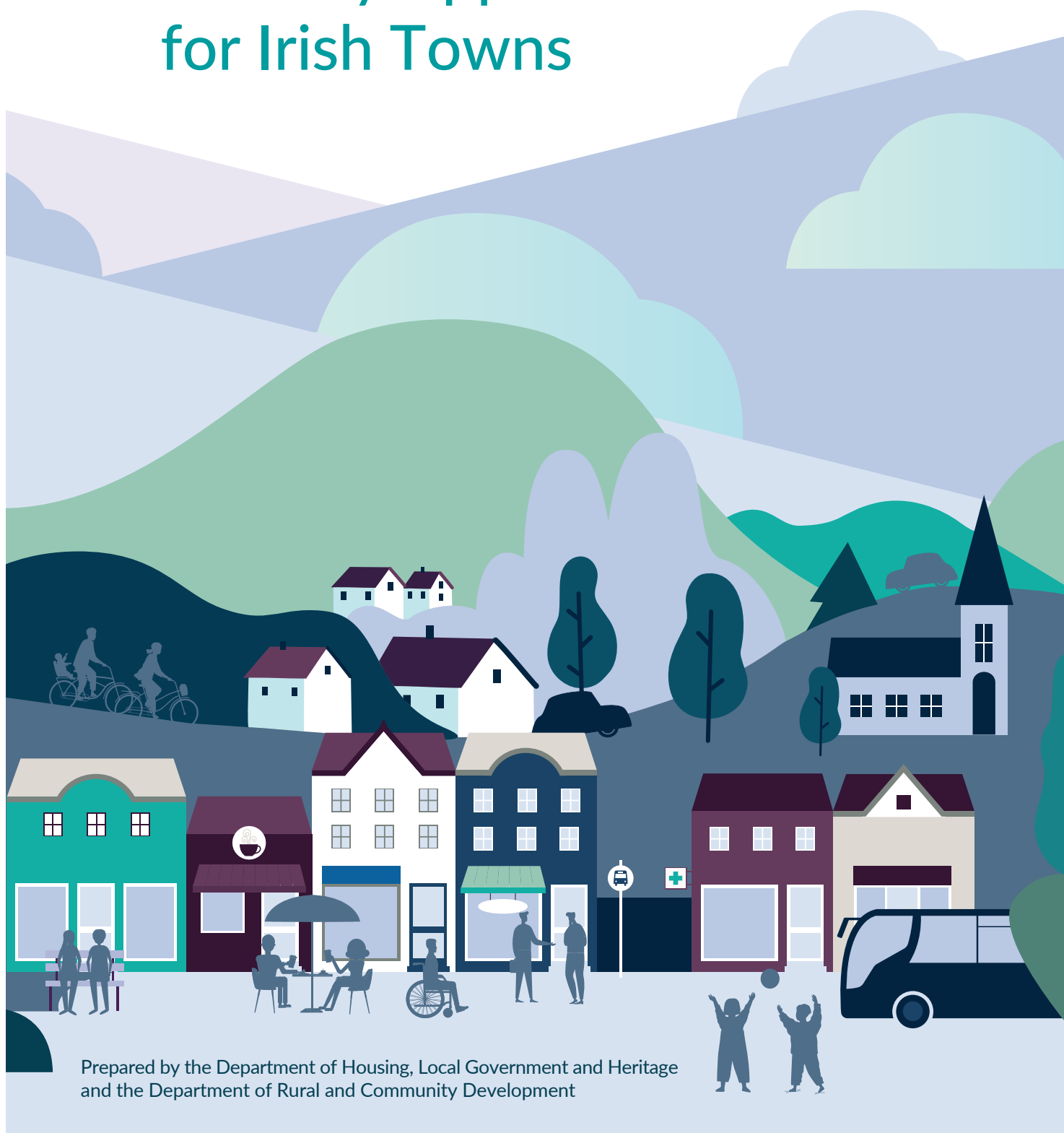




Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Town Centre First

A Policy Approach for Irish Towns



Prepared by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage
and the Department of Rural and Community Development

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Minister's Foreword

Our Rural Future outlines a vision to support the regeneration and development of rural towns and villages to contribute to local and national economic recovery, and to enable people to live and work in a vibrant environment. The *Town Centre First* policy is central to this vision.

Town Centre First represents a new approach to the development of our towns where local communities and local businesses can be central to reimagining their own towns and planning their own futures. Every town is different. Each town is unique and requires unique solutions to the challenges and opportunities they face. Our *Town Centre First* policy recognises that diversity and acknowledges that a "one size fits all" approach will not deliver the outcomes we all want for our towns.

Our policy sets out a framework to facilitate and resource each town to chart their own future through a tailored plan, developed by a collaborative Town Team, and supported by their Local Authority. It sets out the structures and funding that we will put in place at a national level and at a local level to support our towns to design, deliver and implement a plan that can reimagine each town. A plan that captures their important economic and social role in our society; a plan that recognises the importance of place making; and a plan which delivers vibrant lived-in spaces in the heart of our towns. While it is focussed on our towns, it establishes a framework and principles which can equally be applied to the development of our rural villages.

My Department is investing substantially in our towns and villages, particularly through the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund, the Town and Village Renewal Scheme, and most recently, the Streetscapes Enhancement Initiative. These investment programmes are already having a huge impact on our towns and villages; the *Town Centre First* structures that we are putting in place will ensure that this funding delivers even bigger impacts and even better outcomes for our towns.

The rationale for investing in our towns is clear. They are central to so much of our lives – they are where we work, where we live, where we spend much of our time. Our towns also have the potential to make a major contribution to our societal response to issues such as housing provision, new ways of working and community engagement. Investing in our towns can help deliver a better quality of life for all.

The *Town Centre First* policy comes at a time when we are implementing our most ambitious and transformational policy for rural development in decades. It is a time of significant change and of substantial opportunity for our towns. I am confident that this new policy can facilitate our towns to respond to these opportunities and I am committed to its delivery.



Heather Humphreys T.D.

*Minister for Rural and
Community Development*

Minister of State's Foreword

I am delighted to welcome the publication of the *Town Centre First* policy as an important step in supporting the future development and regeneration of towns across our country. It is a key element of the Programme for Government and recognises the importance of towns in enabling social, economic and environmental development in our communities. Our towns can sustainably deliver new homes and employment for our citizens, together with a high quality of life that reflects the strong pride and connection people have with their locality.

Town Centre First is built on the firm foundation of our National Planning Framework which seeks to build strong towns that can provide services and opportunities to local residents and businesses alike. Some of the decline that has been experienced in our towns, most noticeable in physical dereliction and vacancy, must be arrested by promoting the consolidation of new development within the town where existing services and infrastructure can be utilised. Housing for All also strongly supports the greater re-use and refurbishment of existing buildings as a policy objective, with more infill and brownfield sites activated to regenerate the heart of our towns and bring people and activity back.

In supporting town regeneration, my Department is leading a significant public investment programme under the Urban Regeneration Development Fund with development projects in every county.

This investment is enabling local initiative and innovation to deliver improvements to our towns and generate further economic and environmental benefits. This investment programme will continue and will be combined with other new funding streams to ensure that local *Town Centre First* Plans are fully realised.

In delivering on the principles *Town Centre First*, Local Authorities have a vital role to play. Their links and strong engagement with their local communities will enable them to support the development of tailored local development strategies. Local Authorities can work with the 'Town Team' of motivated local stakeholders by providing technical, administrative and other supports in devising effective *Town Centre First* projects and programmes.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the members of the Advisory Group which I chaired for their valuable contributions and insights which informed the preparation of the policy. I am certain that the *Town Centre First* policy will enhance much of the excellent work that is already being done by local communities to revitalise and rejuvenate their own towns. My Department will continue to assist in the regeneration of towns and ensure that the *Town Centre First* policy is implemented, so that our town centres support vibrant communities where people want to live, work and socialise.



Mr. Peter Burke T.D.

*Minister of State with
responsibility for Local
Government and Planning*

Executive Summary

“The Town Centre First policy aims to create town centres that function as viable, vibrant and attractive locations for people to live, work and visit, while also functioning as the service, social, cultural and recreational hub for the local community”.

Irish towns are facing significant challenges and opportunities that require a coordinated and comprehensive response. This *Town Centre First* (TCF) policy will facilitate that response by towns of all sizes across the country so that their centres can function as the sustainable and vibrant heart of the communities they serve, in ways that are adaptable and appropriate to 21st Century needs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made us more aware of the importance of quality public realm, streets, parks and other amenities in towns which provide space for communities to socialise and recreate. From a broader perspective, towns impact on our quality of life and should be attractive places for people of all ages, abilities and social background to live. They remain the focus of work and enterprise, with new opportunities now presented by remote working. Towns also service the needs of visitors and tourists, as well as being an important source of community character, identity and local pride.

Town Centre First: Local Delivery

The Town Centre First policy recognises that every town is unique. It lays the foundation for each town to develop, at a local level, their own planned path forward. This will be expressed through a tailored TCF plan which is underpinned by a clear diagnosis of local strengths and challenges. This TCF Plan will be driven by the local community and businesses as part of a Town Team who will be supported by newly appointed Town Regeneration Officers and technical expertise within each Local Authority. Crucially, our towns will be supported to deliver on their TCF plans through substantial funding made available to support TCF implementation, particularly via funds such as the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund and the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund.

Local Authority and Town Regeneration Officer

Supporting and enabling the Town Team and local TCF delivery

Multi-stakeholder Town Team

Driving TCF delivery through a team of local business and community representatives and other stakeholders

Town Health Check

Providing detailed analysis to help understand the town

Town Centre First Plan

Outlining a comprehensive vision for the town, covering key themes and identifying specific interventions

Investment Programme

Accessing funding and supports in place to support TCF

Delivery and Impact

Delivering on the vision outlined in the TCF Plan

Town Centre First: National Framework

The *Town Centre First* policy sets out a range of Actions which collectively will create the framework required to support our towns to achieve the desired outcomes and deliver on their own unique vision. These Actions are centred around improving our knowledge and understanding of our towns and what they need, enhancing the capacity of delivery agents to implement this ambitious policy, building new structures at national and local level, and ensuring that new and existing funds are co-ordinated and targeted towards the implementation of *Town Centre First* in each town.

Key priorities in establishing and growing this framework include:

1. **A network of Town Regeneration Officers** to bring a co-ordinated approach to delivery across the country and to act as a forum for sharing best practice and informing the ongoing roll-out of the policy. The Town Regeneration Officers will lead the engagement of multi-disciplinary team within each Local Authority, while guiding and supporting Town Teams through the TCF process.
2. **Capacity building programmes for Town Teams** to increase the skills and capabilities of Town Teams and enable them to deliver effectively. This will be supplemented with National TCF Awards and national TCF themed events to recognise successful town initiatives.
3. **A national, integrated and scaled-up Health Check Programme** for towns which builds and expands on the success of the Heritage Council's Collaborative Town Centre Health Check model and results in a national database of towns.
4. **A Town Centre First Toolkit to include a Web Portal** which will provide access to all available TCF resources and funding. The Toolkit will provide a best practice model for developing TCF plans that is informed by existing models and include specific strands targeting key issues associated with the development of our towns such as climate action, digitalisation, enterprise development and social purpose.
5. **A targeted investment programme** to support towns in delivering the interventions identified in their bespoke Town Centre First Plans. This includes existing [Urban Regeneration and Development Fund; Rural Regeneration and Development Fund; Town & Village Renewal Scheme] and new [Croí Cónaithe (Towns) Fund; European Regional Development Fund] funding programmes which will prioritise the delivery of this *Town Centre First* policy.
6. **Pathfinder towns** that will be immediately assisted to act as initial demonstrators of the TCF policy approach. A key ongoing focus of the policy will also be to identify **early-stage towns** where local stakeholders require more support to collaborate as part of a Town Team and to access investment programmes.
7. **Mechanisms to put town centres at the heart of decision making** including a methodology to assess the impact of development on town centres for applicability within the statutory planning system and tools to aid Government Departments and their agencies to assess the impact of their investment decisions on town centres.
8. **Better data which enhances our understanding of Ireland's towns** and builds an evidence base for the ongoing evolution of the TCF policy. This will include a new research and evidence platform, agreed data measurement requirements in respect of key social and economic outcomes, and research aimed at establishing the social return from investment in our towns.
9. **A new National Town Centre First Office** established within existing structures to lead and drive the implementation of Town Centre First actions and co-ordinate stakeholder engagement at a national level and across the Local Government Sector.
10. **Cross-Government focus and alignment** through a National Oversight and Advisory Group that will monitor and guide the delivery of the policy, together with Annual Implementation Plans and a commitment to review the policy at three-year intervals. It will include new approaches to collaborating across the range of new and existing Government initiatives impacting on our town centres.



1

Chapter 1

Policy Context

Our Towns deserve to thrive, Town Centre First provides the policy to enable them achieve their potential.

1.1 | Introduction

The National Planning Framework and *Our Rural Future* set out a vision to develop thriving Irish Towns which are integral to our national economic, social, cultural and environmental wellbeing and development. This vision is built on the interdependence of urban and rural areas, and recognises the diversity of individual towns, the centrality of people, the importance of vibrant and lived-in places and the potential to create quality jobs and sustain our shared environment.

The Town Centre First policy seeks to support the delivery of this vision and complement a wide range of Government policies impacting on our towns. It provides a cross-cutting and collaborative framework for central government, Local Authorities, public and private sector stakeholders, and especially communities, to build sustainable vibrant town centres.

The development of this policy was facilitated through the work of an Interdepartmental Group (Appendix 3) and an Advisory Group (Appendix 4), which shaped not only this policy, but other elements of housing policy and national investment developed alongside this policy document.

1.2. | Why Town Centres Matter

We have a sense of pride in our towns and villages. Each town is unique, varying in their size, characteristics and central function. They remain the lifeblood of local economies, supporting business and generating employment opportunities. Towns and villages provide important administrative, social, community and recreational functions. They support clusters of local services, have a significant share of homes and jobs, and act as transport hubs.

Importance of Place

Our towns and villages are valuable economic, social and cultural assets. They provide us with a sense of place and belonging, while also being central to our tourism product. The built heritage of towns and villages is key to a community's sense of place and to attracting both visitors and new residents. The relative attractiveness and vibrancy of towns and villages has also become an increasingly key element in competitive advantage and in driving economic investment; Foreign Direct Investment is increasingly influenced by the quality of life towns can offer to prospective talent.

Vibrant towns are also important catalysts for balanced regional development with place-making identified as a key differentiator in *Enterprise 2025*, Ireland's National Enterprise Policy 2015-25.

Ireland's towns and villages are an important resource to protect and nurture. We want to ensure that they remain resilient locations with vibrant inclusive communities and a strong cultural and social fabric that deliver a good quality of life for future generations. We will support them through a strong commitment to 'place-making' so that any town centre environment is one in which people want to live, do business, visit and is ultimately successful.

Many Irish towns have already implemented significant place-making initiatives that are having a transformative effect on the town centre environment and its 'sense of place'. These provide the template for place-making in our Town Centre First policy.

The Town Centre First policy recognises that successful places:

- Are characterised by an attractive public realm (streets, spaces and parks) that is designed to invite people to meet, mingle and dwell;
- Contain a variety of services/shops that provide employment opportunities, enable people to shop locally and meet the needs of the local community;
- Provide a range of cultural, recreational and community spaces (that includes scope for periodic events and festivals) that bring together community members and attract visitors/tourists;
- Contain a well maintained building stock that creates visual interest and animates streets and spaces;
- Conserve, adapt and highlight historical buildings and streetscapes that provide the town with a unique identity;
- Are attractive vibrant places for enterprises to grow and develop;
- Are well connected and accessible to sustainable modes of transport, enabling a high proportion of journeys to be made by foot and/or bicycle from the immediate hinterland (e.g. the '10 minute town' concept);
- Manage traffic within central areas so that streets prioritise vulnerable users (pedestrians and cyclists), enabling them to move about safely and in comfort;
- Provide a mix of housing typologies and tenures to cater for diverse communities in terms of age, income and mobility;
- Utilise digital technology to enhance the experience of living and working in towns, enabling greater choices in terms of location and lifestyle;
- Provide opportunities for the amenity, health and well-being of residents, workers and visitors.

Impact of COVID-19

COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of towns and villages for local communities. As a result of travel restrictions and home working, many people have rediscovered the value and convenience of shopping locally, and the importance of local towns and villages for social and cultural engagement. The widespread adoption of remote working, which will have an enduring impact, has the potential to enable workers across a wide range of industries and sectors to avail of a greater range of locations to live and work. Remote working will also allow many workers to spend less time commuting and more time living in their own communities.

This re-engagement within local towns and within local communities does not necessarily mean a pause or reversal of medium and long term trends for commercial and social activity in towns and villages. Rather, it has highlighted the ever changing role of our towns and villages, and the need for each place to chart their own evolution in response to these trends.

1.3 | Ireland's Towns

Between 1996 and 2016, the population in cities and suburbs in Ireland increased by 23% while the population in towns increased by 62%. This overall increase was primarily driven by population growth in 'commuting towns' in counties around the major cities and, in particular, within the Greater Dublin Area. There has also been a trend of significant urban development outside of our cities and larger towns, rather than increased urbanisation within a compact urban footprint.

We know that our rural areas, towns and cities are interconnected and interdependent. We all depend on our towns and cities, regardless of where we live. According to the Central Statistics Office, in 2016 around 29% of the population were living in towns, some heavily influenced by nearby cities and some considered to be more independent urban towns. A further 29% of people were seen to be living in rural areas (settlements with a population of less than 1,500) with a high or moderate urban influence based on where people in these locations worked¹.

In effect, 58% of our population at the time of the 2016 Census lived in a town of 1,500 to 50,000 people, or, lived in a surrounding area with high or moderate urban influence. The health of our town centres has a particularly significant impact on the lives and wellbeing of this proportion of our population.

In areas accessible to cities and towns, commuter-generated housing has affected the character and cohesion of some locations. In other, less accessible rural areas, it has been challenging to retain and/or develop community and social facilities and local infrastructure as populations shift. Building vacancy and, in some cases, dereliction in towns and villages has become increasingly prevalent, resulting in the demise of the historic vibrancy and vitality of town centres. The re-use and regeneration of these buildings can be an essential catalyst to transforming the capacity and potential of smaller towns in Ireland.

Focus of Town Centre First

This policy has the potential to be applied to a wide range of towns of varying population size and varying characteristics. In total, there are over 500 towns in Ireland with a population of over 400 people.

The largest of these towns include the five *Regional Growth Centres* of Athlone, Drogheda, Dundalk, Letterkenny and Sligo identified in the National Planning Framework (NPF).

1 See CSO Urban and Rural Life Report 2019 for more details: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-urli/urbanandrallifeinireland2019/>

Ireland's Large Towns

Large Towns – 20,000+²



2 Per 2016 Census of Population

The remaining towns can be divided into Medium-Large Towns of 5,000-20,000 population and Small Towns in the category of 400 to 5,000 population³.

Medium-Large Towns



Small Towns



³ As defined in the *Sustainable Residential Development in Urban Areas, Guidelines for Planning Authorities*, 2009.

While this policy is primarily aimed at what is generally described as a town which has more than 400 people, there are principles incorporated in this Town Centre First policy which will equally apply in smaller villages, and also to parts of cities.

Furthermore, given the number of towns in Ireland, all with varying populations, challenges and opportunities, many more advanced than others in terms of regeneration, there will be some targeting and prioritisation required at Local Authority level to ensure that the impact of this Policy is optimised.

1.4. | Challenges Facing Towns

Regardless of the level of vibrancy of each of our towns, they all continue to face an array of challenges to their ongoing function and purpose. There is a need to reverse the pattern of stagnation or decline of many towns, which may require the identification and establishment of new roles and new functions, the enhancement of local infrastructure and amenities or a greater emphasis on services, hospitality and social interaction.

The challenges include the provision of greater employment opportunities, the effect of vacant and derelict properties on the vitality and attractiveness of towns, the impact of out-of-town and online shopping on town centre retail, and the closure of services where providers have found it is no longer viable to maintain such services. In many places there has been a general drift away from town centre living and town centre commercial activity, which has had a “hollowing out” effect on some of our towns.

The centre of many of our towns and villages are sometimes perceived as less attractive places in which to live or operate particular retail or services. The edges of some towns within commuting distance of larger urban centres have been developed at a pace that has overwhelmed existing communities and sometimes this has been done at the expense of the core town centre. The format of such development has been such that it locks-in car-dependence, with poor pedestrian or cyclist connectivity to the town centre. As new development has moved away from traditional town centres, they have become increasingly seen as purely commercial areas. In some, but not all cases, the range of shops, services and employment that once characterised town centres are to be found on the edge of town and designed for access primarily by car.

The Challenge of Town Centre living

The pattern of locating functions at the edge of towns has been accompanied by fewer people choosing to live within town centres. As our towns respond to the changing commercial and retail environment, and as our population grows, attention has been refocussed on the need for town centre living and the array of benefits this brings from an economic, social and environmental perspective. However, encouraging and facilitating people to live in town centre locations, and to adapt older buildings to the demands of modern living, presents specific challenges.

There are often significant costs involved in bringing existing building stock into viable use. There are also challenges to adapting older buildings to modern living requirements in terms of access, gardens and parking. In many cases, there is a perception that there is a greater return on investment in green field sites on the edge of town, particularly when other factors such as the availability of existing services and environmental impacts are not factored into the economic investment decision.

The Report on the Town Centre Living Initiative, which informs the development of this policy, encapsulates many of the challenges in encouraging people back to live in town centres⁴.

1.5. | National Policy Context

There is a strong national policy framework in place to support a Town Centre First approach, from the overarching aspect of Project Ireland 2040, through to specific policies on climate action, housing and rural development.

Project Ireland 2040

As the overarching policy and planning framework for the social, economic and cultural development of Ireland, *Project Ireland 2040* set out Ireland's high-level strategic objectives for spatial planning over the period to 2040. The delivery of these objectives under *Project Ireland 2040* are supported by the detailed updated capital investment plan, the *National Development Plan* (NDP) 2021-2030, and the 20-year *National Planning Framework* (NPF).

Project Ireland 2040 recognises that the quality of the urban environment and ‘place’ are key elements of the economic proposition for both urban/rural regeneration and consolidation while providing a cultural/social core to settlements.

4 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/86215-the-town-centre-living-initiative/>

National Planning Framework

The NPF is the Government's high-level strategic plan for shaping the future growth and development of the country to 2040. This is in the context of an expected additional one million people (over 2016) living in Ireland by 2040 and an additional two-thirds of a million people working here. The NPF frames the development and implementation of regional spatial and economic strategies, county and city development plans and local area plans across the country for the years ahead.

The aim of revitalising our towns and urban areas is strongly reflected in the objectives and priorities of the National Planning Framework. Many of the National Strategic Outcomes identified in the NPF, such as Compact Growth, Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities, Sustainable Mobility, Enhanced Amenities and the Transition to a Low Carbon Society, are all closely aligned to a focus on improving our towns and supporting their increased population and employment growth in the future.

In particular, securing compact and sustainable growth is a key objective - this means tackling the inefficient recent pattern of urban sprawl through favouring more compact forms of development that focus on reusing 'brownfield' land, building up infill sites and reusing or redeveloping existing sites and buildings. Many of our towns are well placed to support new development to consolidate within their existing footprint and provide new life and opportunities in a compact setting

Preparation of a programme of individual city and county development plans at a Local Authority level incorporates planning policy into a local context. Development plans provide a statutory development context within which local communities can formulate their local town development initiatives and programmes in responding to the Town Centre First agenda. The Planning Act also requires the preparation of a Local Area Plan⁵ (LAPs) for towns with a population of >5,000 people and such LAPs may provide an opportunity to put elements of a TCF strategy onto a statutory footing.

A more detailed consideration of the linkages between the NPF and Town Centre First is outlined in Appendix 2.

The National Development Plan

The updated National Development Plan 2021-2030, published in September 2021, mirrors the national strategic objectives of the NPF, and provides specific funding measures to support the compact growth agenda, strengthened rural economies and communities, and sustainable transport. The updated plan identifies specific investment vehicles that will support the Town Centre First policy, particularly those outlined below. As part of the development of the Town Centre First policy, a mapping exercise of available funds to support town centres was developed and these are set out at Appendix 5:

The Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) of over €2 billion supports sustainable growth in Ireland's five cities and other large urban centres. By putting in place a centrally managed mechanism to drive collaborative, co-ordinated and complementary packages of investment between Departments, agencies, Local Authorities and other public bodies in pooling their assets and working with local communities and the private sector, the URDF has already supported a large number of projects with the potential to transform our cities and towns.

The URDF's support for larger towns and cities is complemented by a €1 billion Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) to target smaller urban centres, rural towns and villages. RRDF provides funding for the development and construction of capital projects that will support the sustainable regeneration and future growth of rural towns and villages and drive economic growth and footfall, regenerate town centres and heritage buildings, deliver essential infrastructure and make rural towns more attractive places to live and work. The RRDF has already supported a large number of projects to date across many sectors, including town and village regeneration, enterprise development, tourism development, digital and co-working initiatives, libraries, arts and cultural facilities, and sports and recreation facilities.

5 In accordance with s.18-20 of the Planning and Development Act, 2000 (as amended)

The Government has significantly increased the funding allocated to the **Town and Village Renewal Scheme**. Since its inception in 2016, this scheme has invested €93m across over 1,300 projects designed to rejuvenate smaller towns and villages across the country. As part of the wider strategic vision of *Our Rural Future*, the Town & Village Renewal Scheme has recently shifted emphasis to support Town Centre Living and Remote Working, and introduced targeted initiatives such as the enhancement of town streetscapes which received funding of €7 million in 2021.

As part of *Housing For All*, a new **Croí Cónaithe (Towns) Fund** for servicing sites for new homes in regional towns and villages alongside supporting the refurbishment of vacant houses will play a key role. Public infrastructure agencies, such as Irish Water, and local communities will work to provide serviced sites for housing. This will help attract people to build their own homes and live in smaller towns and villages. Such development will be incremental, small scale, walkable to and from the town/village centre and will occur on sites that have access to adequate water supply and provision for disposal of domestic effluent.

The **European Regional Development Fund** is managed in Ireland by the Regional Assemblies for delivery through the 2021-2027 programme with oversight by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. The regulations set out that a minimum of 8% of Ireland's total provision must be dedicated to Sustainable Urban Development. It has been proposed that the tackling of vacancy and dereliction in towns, in support of the Town Centre First approach, will be considered for the ERDF 21-27 programmes, which are to be developed by early 2022.

Irish Water's Capital Investment Plan for drinking water/wastewater infrastructure on a multi-annual basis to deliver the €8.5 billion funding package that was committed to for water investment in Project Ireland 2040.

Climate Action Plan

The compact growth agenda outlined in the NPF is reinforced through Ireland's *Climate Action Plan 2021* which promotes extensive retrofitting of existing premises and housing stock and the prioritisation of brownfield and compact development.

The actions committed to in the Climate Action Plan 2021 strongly align and support the regeneration and revitalisation of Ireland's towns, including through reducing demand for travel by car, sustaining economic and social activity at street level and increasing access to shops, employment and amenities by sustainable transport modes.

Our Rural Future and Housing for All

Our Rural Future -Rural Development Policy 2021 – 2025 represents the Irish Government's blueprint for the post-COVID recovery and development of rural Ireland over the next five years. It provides the framework to achieve the vision of transforming the quality of life and opportunity for people living in rural areas.

Our Rural Future contains a number of key commitments that deliver on the aim to support the regeneration, repopulation and development of rural towns and villages to contribute to local and national economic recovery, and to enable people to live and work in a high quality environment.

Housing for All highlights the overall housing growth required each year in the next decade rising from 24,600 in 2022 to some 40,500 by 2030.

Housing for All has specific pathways on addressing the vacancy and efficient use of existing housing stock and also the provision of a Town Centre First policy that aligns with the objectives of the NPF.

Both *Our Rural Future* and *Housing for All* have reflected the concept of **Town Centre First** which gives an operational focus to the ambition flowing from the NPF in relation to Ireland's towns and villages.

Other Key Supporting Policies

There are many other supporting policies, guidelines and other enablers in place currently that can have a positive impact on supporting a town centre first approach. The aim of the Town Centre First policy is to ensure that each of these other policies, guidelines and enablers are working cohesively for the betterment of our towns and villages. Examples include:-

- A new **Sustainable Mobility Policy** will set out the framework for walking, cycling and public transport to support Ireland's overall requirement to achieve a 51% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. Sustainable mobility has a key role to play in town centre regeneration and promoting residential occupancy.
- **Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs)** set out the objectives and actions needed to promote and support the economic development and the local and community development of the relevant Local Authority area, both by the Local Authority directly and in partnership with other economic and community development stakeholders. The LECPs can support the development and delivery of the Town Centre First policy, including by acting as a coordinating framework for the even and equitable development of towns within their catchment.
- The **Report of the Night-time Economy Taskforce** afforded an opportunity for relevant stakeholders from across the night-time culture sector to develop an innovative approach to supporting and developing a vibrant, diverse, and sustainable night-time economy in Ireland.

1.6. | EU Policy Context

The EU Urban Agenda represents a new multi-level working method promoting cooperation between Member States, Cities, the European Commission and other stakeholders in order to stimulate growth, liveability and innovation in the Cities of Europe and to identify and successfully tackle social challenges. The Territorial Agenda is a strategic policy document for Europe, its regions and communities. It provides a framework for action towards territorial cohesion and a future for all places in Europe. The EU Sustainable and Smart Mobility Policy is also relevant in the context of urban and inter-urban mobility.

One particularly important feature of the European approach to urban development is its "integrated place-based approach" to policymaking which assumes that the geographical context, with its unique spatial, social, cultural and institutional characteristics, thoroughly matters. A place-based policy is tailored to the context of a territory and is based on the effective use of its development potential. This place-based approach is particularly well suited to Town Centre First. It also highlights that many issues are interconnected spatially and impact their surroundings, shaping a shared destiny between cities, suburbs, towns and rural areas.

1.7 | Building on our existing Town Centre supports

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the vital role that Local Authorities can play in engaging with local community and voluntary organisations and the great appetite of people to engage locally and shape their environment and their communities. The Government's Town Centre First policy seeks to leverage these elements to support local government and communities to adapt to changes in towns, re-envisioning spaces, and building the fabric of towns of the future.

Project Ireland 2040's alignment of our National Planning Framework and National Development Plan provides the foundation for the Town Centre First policy. This Policy seeks to align and harness all of this available funding and other policy supports, and build on the many examples and good practices of town revitalisation

The Town Centre First policy has the potential to facilitate Local Authorities, businesses and communities to avail of the supports and opportunities for town centres and to put town centres at the heart of their decision-making. As part of this, each town (and village) can understand its own unique position and chart their own response to the emerging challenges and opportunities.

There is clearly an opportunity now for a Town Centre First policy to further support a strategic approach to town centre regeneration that ties the national policy framework to local expertise. It can ensure that an understanding of local opportunities and challenges will more effectively support the utilisation of existing buildings and unused lands for new development, and better address issues of vibrancy and future function, while promoting residential occupancy. The next section highlights some of the specific opportunities for towns as part of this process.

1

CASE STUDY

Boyle, Co Roscommon

Boyle was a pilot town under the *Town Centre Living Initiative* (TCLI) project. The Boyle Town Team had already, through collaboration with Roscommon County Council, developed *Boyle 2040* a masterplan for the development of the town. The TCLI project focused on the historic centre of the town, and in particular recognised the need to support the maintenance of historic buildings that are key to creating a sense of place.

Stemming from the Boyle 2040 Masterplan and the work done as part of the TCLI project Boyle has leveraged funding for two large projects from the RRDF. €2.1 million has been approved for Boyle Regeneration project which will see the old Royal Hotel premises refurbished and converted into an Enterprise Centre and remote working hub, exhibition space, information point and coffee dock. A further €2.1 million has also been granted for the Energising Boyle Town Centre and King House project which focuses on the King House Cultural Quarter (pictured below), and will deliver public realm improvements which will transform the area into a vibrant, town centre that will be attractive to both the local community and visitors.

Boyle also has a remote / co-working facility in the heart of the town centre located in the former Roscommon Herald offices, which originally in the 1800s was a spool factory. In 2017, the owner of the site converted the vacant premises into a remote working hub that could offer local people and new arrivals a vibrant work space in the heart of Boyle town centre. Today the Spool Factory is a thriving workspace offering hot-desks, own-door offices, an events centre with audio-visual and conferencing facilities and boardroom facilities to their clients. A fitness centre and nail salon have also opened in the building, and many local businesses have benefitted from greater footfall in the town centre on a daily basis. The Spool Factory has recently received further support and funding through the Atlantic Economic Corridor Hub Outreach programme, administered by the Western Development Commission, and €75,000 through the Department of Rural and Community Development's Connected Hubs fund.



2

Chapter 2

Opportunities for Our Towns and Villages

While the changing environment in which towns and villages operate presents distinct challenges, a wide range of opportunities to drive future growth and development have also been identified.

2.1 | Climate Change and Adaptation of our Towns

Our towns and villages, of all sizes, can contribute to the transition to a fair, low carbon and climate resilient society. In this transition, actions to address the spatial patterns of development and how people travel are required. Utilising existing infrastructure, buildings and sites and reducing the need to travel long distances will reduce energy consumption and carbon emissions. Towns offer the opportunity for people to live closer to local services and amenities and to get around more safely by a sustainable mode of transport.

There is also a renewed focus on the sustainable and adaptive reuse of existing assets and increasing the energy efficiency of individual buildings, including the thermal upgrading of the historic building stock. The sustainable growth of towns can support these goals through the reuse/repurposing of vacant and underutilised building stock and provides opportunities to support local skills and craftsmanship and encourage community led initiatives and engagement. Given the concentration of historic assets/brown field sites in the urban core of our towns, there is the potential for jobs-rich investment in these existing assets.

2.2 | Digital Transformation and New Ways of Working and Living

The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to trigger changes in preferences and behaviour in the medium to longer term, resulting in an increased demand to work remotely. This change is being supported and enabled by Making Remote Work, the National Remote Working Strategy, which was published in December 2020. This new way of working has the potential to support balanced regional development and reduce commuting times.

In response to this change in working practices town centres can become attractive places for workers to live or engage in connected working spaces. Increased investment in remote working hubs that are in locations that suit commuters and are close to childcare facilities will also potentially attract people to live in towns. The ongoing development of the National Hub Network under the ConnectedHubs.ie brand will, for the first time, facilitate a strategic, nationwide, understanding of this increasingly important infrastructure.

Where the demand for additional capacity in the network is identified, there may be significant potential to occupy vacant/underutilised spaces and increase the working population of towns which will sustain and support other businesses and services in the vicinity.

There is also the opportunity to utilise technology to enhance the experience of living and working in towns, and to integrate digital technology into daily commercial and social life. Digital technology can improve the quality and accessibility of services, and can be used to address challenges faced by our towns, providing them with new roles in the digital economy.

2.3 | Demographic Change and Housing Choice in Towns

Many parts of our town centres are underutilised and contain a limited variety of housing types. There are opportunities for infill development on sites which are underutilised, including large areas to the rear of existing buildings which is generally referred to as 'back-land' development. New innovative housing models may also enable more compact and adaptable forms of 'own-door' housing that cater for a greater range of household types within the town centre. The Town Centre First policy supports development proposals of varying character, scale and density facilitating the provision of a mixed supply of private, affordable and social housing in our towns.

Developing urban centres that are 'place' focussed with an appropriate mix of housing types will become increasingly important as the demography of Ireland changes. With the percentage of the population aged 65 or more projected to increase from 14% in 2019 to 26% in 2051⁶, there is an opportunity for older people to choose housing that is centrally located within our towns and appropriate to their needs. This can help them to enjoy more active, healthy and socially connected lives and to age independently and comfortably within their community. This will help people to choose the most suitable home to meet their needs and enable them to 'rightsize' as they move through different stages of their lives.

6 Housing Options for Our Ageing Population –Policy Statement. Government of Ireland <https://assets.gov.ie/9398/ca553fa753b64f14b20e4a8dcf9a46ab.pdf>

2.4 | Experience-Led Retail

Many traditional town centres have suffered from a decline in retail activity due to the loss of their immediate population base and shifting retail patterns, including an increase in on-line sales. This leads to increased rates of vacancy and can have a major impact on the vibrancy and vitality of a town centre.

In response to international trends, in-store retailing is shifting away from being solely reliant on the purchasing of goods toward more 'experience-led' retailing that includes a blend of retail services (including food and drink), leisure, entertainment and cultural uses. Many large retailers are also moving towards a model where shops act more as showrooms for goods to be viewed, ordered and delivered to the home.

Traditional city, town and village centres are in an optimal position to take advantage of the shift toward more blended retailing as many of the non-retail 'experiences' exist in such locations in the form of built heritage, parks and squares, and cultural institutions. Town centres can capitalise on this potential and generate additional footfall through enhanced place making and an appropriate balance between vehicle use and quality public realm. Through engagement with the *Retail Forum*, we can explore how towns can build on these opportunities through the implementation of this policy.

2.5 | Regeneration of Public Space

Public spaces, which include public streets, squares, parks and gardens, have an important role and function within the social and economic life of communities, and the attractiveness of the town centre. These public spaces are vital for town centres, providing visual amenity and spaces within which people can rest and interact (including for cultural events). They improve the quality of life for residents, workers and visitors. They provide important benefits and help to create local attachments, which are at the heart of a sense of community.

In some cases, these spaces have lost their traditional function as civic/cultural spaces and many are now used as parking areas. The dominance of vehicles within the public realm has contributed to the decline of many town centres, making them unattractive places in which to live or visit for extended periods. Our towns can also present significant access challenges for people with disabilities.

These concerns have been further highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic which has brought into sharp focus the quality of the public realm, the narrowness of footpaths on many streets and the lack of available outdoor spaces in which people can safely interact.

Whilst many urban centres in Ireland are, at present, dependent on cars for day-to-day activities, their dominance within towns has had a major impact on their liveability, their attractiveness to visitors and on the quality of the public realm environment. A balance needs to be struck by carefully managing vehicle movement so as to ensure that streets are accessible places that are not dominated by cars and car parking. The Town Centre First policy can encourage and support local communities to be creative and ambitious in developing a public realm that is welcoming to all, is safe, is easy to access for all modes of travel (particularly walking), has low noise and air pollution levels and provides the community with things to do, places to sit and relax, and attractive views. We must also use this opportunity to adapt towns and public spaces to fully cater for persons with a disability or limited mobility.

2.6 | Sustainable Mobility

The historic legacy in many towns is an emphasis on private vehicle movement, poorly connected street networks and inadequate pedestrian/cyclist facilities. As a result, many people drive short journeys which could otherwise be undertaken by foot or bicycle. This adds to traffic congestion with intrusive vehicle noise and emissions contributing to an environment which is not attractive to town centre living.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many people have become much more aware of the benefits of having easy local access to most of their daily needs, especially within easy walking or cycling distance of their home – promoted as the '10-minute town' concept. This desire for the proximity of local services and amenities is a key sustainability indicator and has particular potential in many Irish towns where the majority of the population lives less than a kilometre from the town centre.

With 56.9% of car journeys taken in 2019 being for less than 2km⁷, there is clear scope to promote greater walking and cycling through appropriately designed infrastructure and the allocation of space for this purpose within existing streets and public spaces. There is a growing international evidence base which indicates that implementation of a mobility and place based transport model can have significant benefits with regard to urban regeneration. Expanding sustainable mobility options to provide meaningful alternatives to everyday private car journeys is also necessary to reduce transport emissions. The forthcoming Sustainable Mobility Policy will include continued significant investment and expansion of active travel and public transport infrastructure and services.

2.7 | Realising the Existing Cultural and Heritage Assets of Places

There is a recognition that heritage-led regeneration ranging from large scale brownfield sites to the incremental re-imagining of smaller infill sites, can support and make best use of already existing resources. Irish towns have evolved from the earliest human settlements and are enriched with many protected structures, recorded monuments and archaeological heritage. Several towns have begun to reap the reward of heritage-led regeneration and investment in public realm improvements, and the conservation of built heritage, including the promotion of our natural assets and bio-diversity networks. Clonakilty, Kilkenny and Westport are good examples of where *place* has become a key element of the economic proposition with the importance of developing local heritage assets - like the Medieval Mile in Kilkenny centred on St. Mary's Church - central to delivering social, economic and cultural benefit to a community. Other cultural assets, like our libraries, can also be a key focal point in towns and villages.

There are real benefits to be gained from the sustainable management and conservation of Ireland's urban built heritage. Not only are the built assets enhanced, but the ongoing, sustainable conservation and upgrading activity provides a market for specialised construction skills, which gives rise to demands for local up-skilling training in all built environment occupations.

Repair projects which are focused more on using human skills rather than fabrication of energy-intensive products is inherently sustainable. This increases the economic viability of small contracting firms and aids social cohesion through providing young people with marketable skills in their own localities. There is a new opportunity through Town Centre First to re-focus on re-using our existing historic building stock. The forthcoming National Policy on Architecture – '*Places for People*', will further support the empowering and transformative dividends of fully integrating architecture into local decision-making, for the benefit of individual projects and whole neighbourhoods and towns.

2.8 | Gaeltacht and Gaeltacht Service Towns

Under the Gaeltacht Act 2012, Gaeltacht Service Towns are defined as those towns situated in or adjacent to Gaeltacht Language Planning Areas and which have a significant role in providing public services, recreational, social and commercial facilities for those areas. There are 14 Gaeltacht Service Towns (and two Cities) that may attain recognition as such, subject to having a population in excess of 1,000 people and the preparation and implementation of a language plan, by an organisation active in the town⁸. There are also additional smaller towns and villages located within Gaeltacht areas.

One of the principal purposes of the Gaeltacht Act is to foster and reinforce the positive impact Gaeltacht Service Towns can have on the Irish language as the community and family language of the Gaeltacht. Accordingly, the cultural and economic interrelationships between Gaeltacht and Gaeltacht Service Towns and the surrounding or adjoining areas, present a particular opportunity for those towns in tandem with TCF measures, especially in the context of an agreed community-led language plan, which may form part of an overall TCF plan or programme as discussed in Chapter 6.

7 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-nts/nationaltravelsurvey2019/howwetravelled/>

8 Letterkenny, An Clochán Liath and Donegal Town in Co. Donegal, Béal an Mhuirthead, Castlebar and Ballinrobe in Co. Mayo, Clifden in Co. Galway, Daingean Uí Chúis, Tralee and Cahersiveen in Co. Kerry, Macroom in Co. Cork, Dungarvan in Co. Waterford and Athboy and Navan in Co. Meath, as well as the Cities of Cork and Galway

2.9 | Empowered, Inclusive and Engaged Communities

Communities are empowered when everyone has a say in those decisions that affect their lives, their places and their towns. An increased level and quality of community participation in local decision-making structures, particularly by the most marginalised and disadvantaged communities, leads to better and more sustainable decisions for everyone. The Government's strategy for the community and voluntary sector, *Sustainable, inclusive and empowered communities*, seeks to create a vibrant and active civil society, developing opportunities for all communities to contribute, engage and participate in decision-making and policy implementation. The place-based locally-led approach outlined in the Town Centre First policy is informed by this strategy.

The interface between the Local Authority and its community will be pivotal to the success of Town Centre First. There is clearly an opportunity in the delivery of the Town Centre First policy at a local level to engage with the Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs), the Public Participation Networks (PPNs), the community and voluntary sector, and local development organisations. Volunteering, in particular, allows individuals to connect with their community to make it a better place and contribute to a healthier and resilient community. Capturing some of the community and voluntary sector's spirit, experience, networks and infrastructure in the Town Centre First delivery process will be crucial to its success.

2 CASE STUDY Ramelton, Co. Donegal

The Historic Towns Initiative (HTI) is a joint undertaking between the Heritage Council and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage which aims to promote the heritage-led regeneration of Ireland's historic towns. The programme has been running since 2018 and awards were made to seven towns across Ireland in 2020.

One of the towns, Ramelton in Donegal, worked with local property owners to conserve the historic built environment, reinforce civic pride, enhance attractiveness and promote the tourism potential

of its historic core. One of the projects included the conservation and adaptation of three small houses which were amalgamated to form a single family home. The houses open directly off the street and had no garden space attached. One of the houses, which had been derelict, was given a glazed roof to provide a winter garden and entrance to the house.

The before and after pictures below really show the impact. The owner is now going on to restore another building on the street.



Ramelton - Before



Ramelton - After

3

CASE STUDY

Athlone, Co. Westmeath

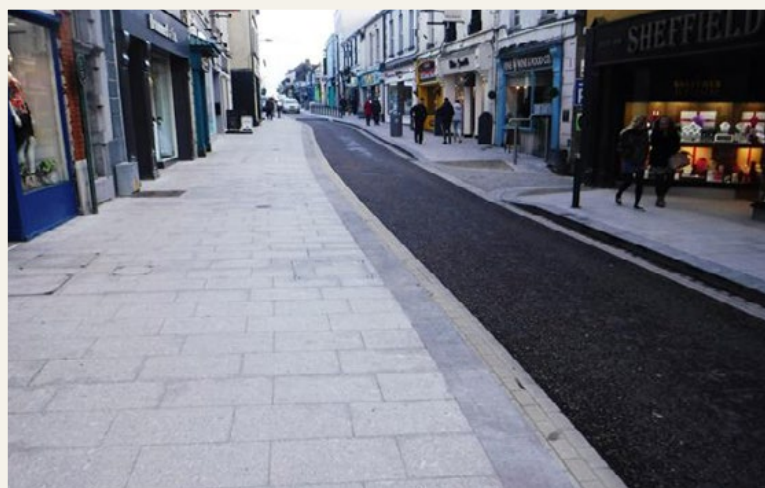
Westmeath County Council, with the support of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), invested over €4 million on a regeneration project which has transformed Church Street giving the centre of Athlone a welcoming, pedestrian friendly and modern town centre.

The aim of the transformative redevelopment scheme is to revitalise the heart of Athlone's central shopping area by creating an attractive and vibrant town centre which contributes to the sustained and future growth of Athlone.

The project, which was completed in February 2019, has transformed Church Street from a thoroughfare dominated by traffic to a street that is pedestrian focused with wider accessible footpaths, paved areas and seating so people can browse in shop windows, stroll and enjoy the centre of the town at their own pace.

A further regeneration project for Athlone town centre has been funded under URDF for c.€4 million. The project has a number of initiatives including extending the public realm and streetscape enhancement works, progressing the redevelopment of a derelict strategic site at a prime location at the main entry point to the central shopping district of the Town and further developing a successful 'Shopfront Enhancement Grant Scheme' launched in 2019 by the Westmeath Local Enterprise Office to incentivise and financially support owners of local retail and commercial premises to improve their individual shopfronts and improve the overall streetscape in Athlone.

This project represents a good example of a multi-dimensional approach to regeneration – public realm enhancements, active land management and support for retail/commercial operators.



4

CASE STUDY Abbey Quarter, Kilkenny

The Abbey Quarter, site of the former Smithwick's Brewery, is a strategic city centre site located on the banks of the River Nore in the heart of Kilkenny City. The regeneration project is framed by the Abbey Quarter Masterplan, the vision of which is *"to develop the Abbey Quarter as a seamless complement to the medieval city."*

The project links the old and the new. The central brownfield site is being transformed through investment in new buildings and the re-use of old buildings. Underutilised sites are being converted into public spaces integrating with the city's Medieval Mile.

€11 million is being provided through the Urban Regeneration Development Fund (URDF) to fund significant public realm works and community and cultural infrastructure projects within the Abbey Quarter. Sub projects include an public realm enhancement, new Park, a riverside Boardwalk and related cultural projects.



3

Chapter 3

Town Centre First – *A Co-ordinating Policy*

The Programme for Government recognised the need for, and committed to, the development of a co-ordinated, strategic approach to town centre regeneration that would maximise the impact of the Government's considerable investment in urban regeneration. This Town Centre First policy, informed by the model in Scotland, encourages Government Departments, Local Authorities, businesses and communities to put town centres at the heart of decision-making.

3.1 | Background and Aim

The Town Centre First policy aims to create town centres that function as viable, vibrant and attractive locations for people to live, work and visit, while also functioning as the business, service, social, cultural and recreational hub for the local community.

It is recognised that Irish towns are diverse places; supporting these towns requires a flexible, adaptive, and strategic approach. The Town Centre First policy therefore does not offer a single top-down solution to the challenges faced by Irish towns. It is as an enabling framework that will co-ordinate actions across Government, Local Authorities and key stakeholders to support towns to identify, develop and progress their own unique town centre revitalisation plans which incorporate best-practice with regard to place-making.

Policy Development Process

An Inter-Departmental Group (IDG) was established by Government to progress the commitment to a Town Centre First approach. The Inter-Departmental Group was supported by an Advisory Group, chaired by the Minister of State for Local Government and Planning, which included key stakeholders and experts who offered insights and views on issues affecting town centres.

This blended approach, informed by significant cross-disciplinary expertise both within the IDG and the Advisory Group, identified a number of commonalities in approach in the conception, planning and delivery of urban regeneration.

Through this process, a range of actions were identified to effectively deliver Town Centre First in a manner appropriate to the Irish context.

3.2 | A Collective Vision for Irish Towns

This Town Centre First policy will empower local communities and businesses, working with Local Authorities, to develop plans to maximise the particular strengths and assets of their town. These plans will also provide a link to the objectives in the statutory development plans and local area plans that are relevant to each town.

The policy will align other Government policies and target our investment programmes to deliver the best outcomes for town centres.

Our Town Centre First Vision is for:

- Places that are shaped by the communities that live there, where local residents and the business community are enabled to plot the future for their own towns and villages;
- Towns that embrace the opportunities presented by technology, climate action and demographic change;
- Places that are the fulcrum of economic, social, cultural and recreational activity, with a sustainable mix of commercial, retail, service and hospitality offerings;
- Town centres that reflect the current and future needs of the local community, with quality public realm, sustainable mobility infrastructure and green spaces that facilitate vibrant, connected local communities and economies;
- Vibrant, accessible and lived-in town centres that are home to young and old, which are not seen as a second-best option to more peripheral locations.

3.3 | Commonalities of Approach

There are many investment programmes and policy supports focusing on the regeneration and renewal of towns, much of these being delivered through the Local Government sector. However, there is a clear need for a more integrated and co-ordinated approach to the development of Irish Towns; with a central, co-ordinating lead, would benefit each of the various investment programmes and policy supports cumulatively.

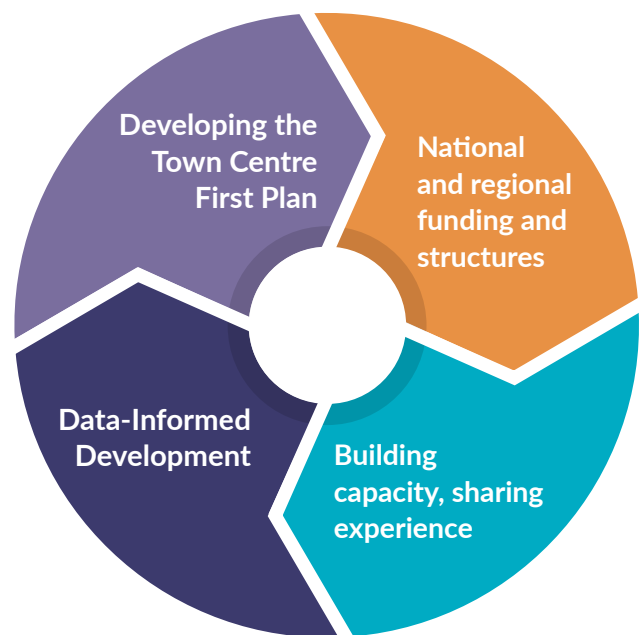
To this aim, a recurring set of “qualitative ingredients” have been identified in the approach to delivering revitalised towns. These could be summarised as:

- (i) A collaborative vision and Plan-led approach to place is critical, based on an acute diagnosis of the local challenges and a tailored response to match;
- (ii) Community and Business engagement and buy-in which is essential to developing the plan-led approach, driving implementation and drawing widest support for the actions formulated;
- (iii) A strong local governance approach or dedicated Championing of the strategy is essential. This is typically a multi-sectoral ‘Town Team’ of diverse stakeholders, supported by the Local Authority, who understand the place and have a stake in its future;
- (iv) The economic or business case of the plan is comprehensive and has examined both the risks and opportunities of investment in terms of viability, cost benefit and in some cases long term commerciality;
- (v) The methodology for implementation and the funding model is sufficient to deliver the various plans and investments identified;

3.4 | Key Elements of Town Centre First approach

As outlined in Chapter 1, the fundamental building blocks for the Town Centre First approach have been provided through the National Planning Framework and the funding outlined in the National Development Plan 2021-2030.

Alongside this national framework, there are a number of inter-related components that are essential to the delivery of town centre revitalisation through this Town Centre First policy.



Chapters 4-8 outline a series of Actions to make the optimal use of the investment outlined in the National Development Plan through:

- Building capacity and sharing experience;
- Delivering a vision plan for each town;
- Putting in place the necessary national and regional structure;
- Data informed development

These central components are each addressed in detail, in addition to a commitment to support pathfinder towns which can demonstrate the Town Centre First concepts.

5

CASE STUDY

Cavan Town, Cavan 'Abbeylands Regeneration'

Cavan County Council secured funding of c.€15 million for an ambitious regeneration project the development of the Abbeylands Cultural Quarter to regenerate this important town centre site with vibrant town centres uses, new pedestrian street and public spaces.

The project is multi-faceted, including significant public realm and civic space works, a community services centre, a remote working hub, cultural/ community space and involves an 'active land

management approach', with a variety of site acquisitions identified to enable the works.

The project is plan-led with the “Abbeylands Masterplan” having been completed following extensive community, landowner and business consultation and identified a series of high value and transformational interventions, supported by key partners, devised to stimulate social, cultural, economic and amenity regeneration.



4

Chapter 4

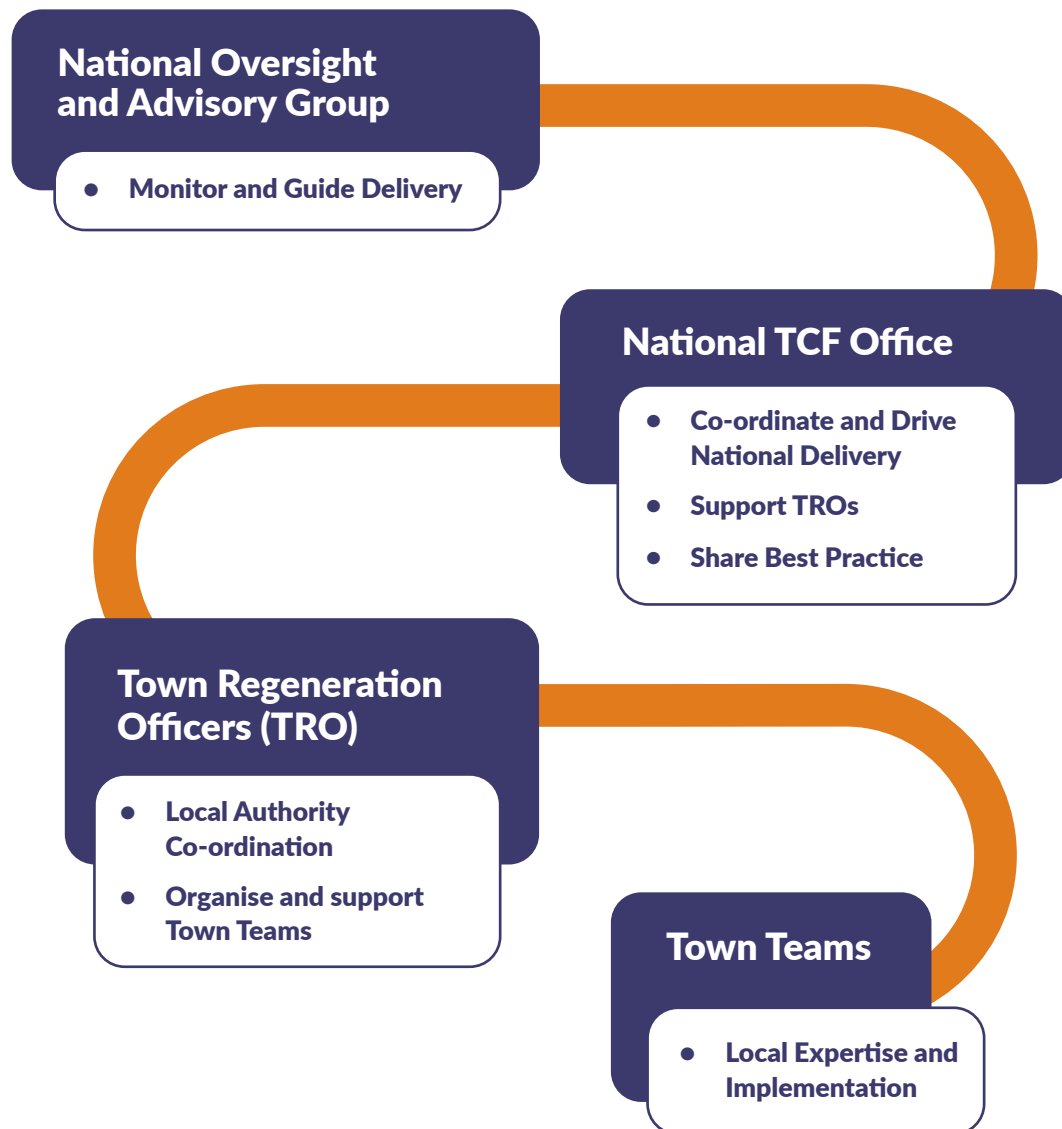
Building Capacity and Sharing Experience

The TCF Policy will develop a national framework to provide a consistent implementation approach across the country, while empowering towns at a local level to identify their own individual path based on their unique situation. Every town has different characteristics which will require tailored approaches to their future evolution.

The approach in one town or village may not be appropriate in another.

A first step is to ensure that there is dedicated capacity at local level to drive the Town Centre First approach. This chapter sets out the actions associated with building that capacity where it does not exist, ensuring that best practice is disseminated and that good data and supportive toolkits are available to support individual towns.

Town Centre First - Roles and Key Responsibilities



4.1. | Local Capacity

The Town Centre First policy requires specific implementation structures to be in place within Local Authorities and aims to facilitate wider involvement by stakeholders and the community. This includes assigning a lead person dedicated to town regeneration in each Local Authority and supporting town teams to provide input from the local community and businesses.

4.1.1. Town Teams

A TCF Town Team is a group of local residents, business people, community representatives and other stakeholders who come together to make their area a better place to live, work, visit and invest. They represent diverse sectors and backgrounds. They have a unique position in the community to become 'local experts' on their area and to take a lead on the development of interventions that can make positive long-term changes for the town.

In addition to the Local Authority, stakeholders for consideration to be included on the Team include Chambers of Commerce, Public Participation Networks, business associations, public representatives, local development sector, community groups, business owners, developers, retailers, landlords, residents, tourism groups, An Garda Síochána, charities, social enterprises, cultural groups, sports organisations, voluntary groups and educational facilities.

The selection of the chairperson will be a matter for the Town Team. For some towns it may be considered appropriate that the Town Team, while supported by the Town Regeneration Officer and the Local Authority, would be chaired by an independent person who can champion and lead the work of the Town Team and ensure appropriate communication and engagement between the Local Authority and all stakeholders.

Town Teams already exist in many towns and operate in many different guises – in other areas these teams do not exist and will need to be established. The development of a Town Team, supported by the Local Authority on a technical multi-disciplinary basis, will ensure that local level knowledge is combined with the correct level of technical support and assistance to successfully drive the implementation of Town Centre First. This will mirror and build upon the structures and Town Teams already in place in many areas. The locations for new Town Teams will be identified by the Local Authorities. Further detail is set out in Appendix 7.

Town Teams will be supported to build their capacity and capability to work effectively as a unit and to deliver positive outcomes for their towns. This training and knowledge transfer process will be delivered locally in conjunction with the newly appointed Local Authority Town Regeneration Officer (section 4.1.2) and with the potential to be assisted by the Local Development sector. There may be the potential for new Town Teams to be mentored by more established and successful groups. This training might also be augmented with funding for small pilot projects delivered through the Town Teams which can help build buy-in to the process and deliver early wins.

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 1	Support the establishment (where the equivalent does not exist) and operation of Town Teams	Town Regeneration Officer	Local Government Sector, DHLGH and DRCD
Action 2	Develop a skills building programme to increase the capacity and capability of Town Teams	Town Regeneration Officer and the National TCF Office	Local Development Sector, DRCD and DHLGH

4.1.2 Town Regeneration Officer

A range of supports, policies and programmes are in place to assist the regeneration of towns. This includes funding through the URDF, RRDF and Town & Village Renewal Scheme, and support for personnel such as vacant homes officers who are charged with supporting actions to bring vacant stock back into residential use. The Town Centre First policy seeks to align these supports, policies and roles in support of Town Centre First through the introduction of new Town Regeneration Officers. These individuals will have the appropriate expertise and status within the Local Authority so that they can draw on a multi-disciplinary team in managing delivery and link into the wider economic and social programmes within Local Authorities.

A key role of these Town Regeneration Officers (TRO) will be to facilitate the establishment, training and ongoing work of Town Teams by providing technical, communication, administrative and project management supports. The TRO will be supported by multi-disciplinary teams from within the relevant Local Authority, including in terms of consultation and engagement with the community and also the design and delivery of the TCF Plan. The multi-disciplinary team may include expertise in the area of planning, architecture, engineering, conservation, urban design, building vacancy, arts and heritage, community engagement, community development and economic development. The Town Regeneration Officer will be a key conduit between this multi-disciplinary team in the Local Authority and the Town Teams.

In providing this multi-disciplinary support, Local Authorities may wish to explore how they could collaborate on a regional basis and leverage any opportunities presented by regional structures to support delivery across a number of Local Authorities. There may also be scope to drive efficient use of resources through the use of shared services for the delivery of Town Centre First.

The Town Regeneration Officer will guide the Town Team in delivering the TCF Policy and ultimately identifying and accessing potential sources of funding. The TRO will support the local Town Teams through capacity building and the development (where not already in place) and delivery of the TCF Plan for each town. They will have a particular focus on building capacity of towns that have been less successful in collaborating and accessing support funding previously.

The Town Regeneration Officer will engage with the local development sector and the Public Participation Network, as appropriate, to build community involvement and capacity within the Town Teams. The TRO will also be an important contact point for property owners in each town and will be empowered to develop a “one-stop-shop” for business and individuals seeking to adapt buildings in towns, as appropriate. Finally, the TRO will form part of a national network that will support knowledge development and sharing of best practice at a national level.

A more complete outline of the role of the Town Regeneration Officer can be found in Appendix 6.

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 3	Provide Town Regeneration Officers, supported by multi-disciplinary teams in each Local Authority area, to drive the implementation of TCF	Local Government Sector	National TCF Office, DRCD and DHLGH

4.2. | National TCF Office

A dedicated National Town Centre First Office will be established with staffing from the DHLGH, DRCD, Local Government Sector and external expertise as required. This office will be established within existing National structures. The Office will specifically drive the delivery of this Town Centre First policy and deal with the range of actions referenced in this policy document including:-

- Establish and support a collaborative National TCF network to ensure consistency and best practice in the roll-out of the TCF policy (Action 5);
- Develop a new national Toolkit to support the implementation of the TCF Policy by providing a range of examples of best practice and available resources to guide implementation. (Action 6);

- Establish improved data sources, defined measurement requirements and commission research on cost benefit analysis of actions (Actions 11, 12 and 13);
- Produce an Annual Implementation Plan to guide delivery at a national level and monitor delivery through regular Progress Reports; (Action 29)

The Office will be a focal point for co-ordinating engagement between stakeholders on town centre regeneration and inputting into national policy development in the area of town centre regeneration.

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 4	Establish a dedicated National TCF Office to assist in policy delivery and implementation of the TCF actions, and to co-ordinate stakeholder engagement at a national level	LGMA	DRCD and DHLGH

4.3. | TCF Network

In order to support the Town Regeneration Officers (established under Action 3) and ensure best practice across all areas, a collaborative TCF network will be established. The national network of TROs will be drawn from every Local Authority area and be co-ordinated by the National TCF Office.

The role of the network will be to ensure consistency in the roll-out of the TCF policy nationally by respective Town Teams, share experience and good practice, provide a key instrument of delivery for the National TCF Office, and to report back on implementation. The network will explore how to build the capacity of towns that have been less successful in getting local stakeholders to collaborate and/or access funding support.

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 5	Establish and support a collaborative National TCF network to ensure consistency and best practice in the roll-out of the TCF policy	National TCF Office	Local Government Sector, DHLGH and DRCD

4.4. National Best Practice and Guidance

Best practice guidance and tools will be required to support the implementation of the TCF Policy and facilitate the Town Regeneration Officers and Town Teams to follow exemplary practice tailored to an Irish setting.

This guidance will form part of a national Town Centre First Toolkit. The Toolkit will inform the approach to town regeneration and will encompass specific strands targeting key factors such as urban development, economic purpose (enterprise development), social function, culture, community engagement, digitalisation, sustainable mobility, accessibility and climate action. These are key areas of challenge and opportunity for our towns, where knowledge sharing and innovative thinking will be required.

This toolkit will build on work advanced by the Heritage Council, RGDATA and the Retail Consortium, in collaboration with a number of other stakeholders, which developed and delivered a trans-disciplinary Collaborative Town Centre Health Check Programme (CTCHC).

The Collaborative Town Centre Health Check Programme brings key stakeholders and agencies together to take stock of how a town is faring across a variety of parameters through a 'health check' process. It seeks to work collaboratively to build on a town's strengths and to address particular challenges which it might face. Ultimately, this pioneering programme is about establishing an empirical base initially and then bringing partners together to work hand in hand with state agencies to attract people back into town centres, to reimagine the possibilities for a town and to ensure a vibrant future for it. Output from Health Checks are accessible, featuring infographics on a variety of parameters. It has formed strong linkages with third level institutions who have been of significant assistance in gathering data and providing an evidence base

The empirical baseline will help monitor and drive development of the town centre. Work to date includes

- Land Use surveys to establish the overall vacancy rates in the town.
- Retailer surveys to establish current levels of commercial activity and outlook.
- Pedestrian counts to establish actual town centre visitor numbers.
- Shoppers surveys to rate visitor experience and satisfaction.

We will develop a scaled-up and extended version of the CTCHC Programme to take into account a broader range of issues and provide for a consistent basis for the town analysis process that can be rolled out nationally. It will explore what aspects of other data collection models might be incorporated, including for example the *.IE Digital Town Blueprint* developed by DCU Business School. Through the information gathered by a scaled up Health Check model, the Toolkit will help establish and build a national database on our towns, helping us to understand our places better.

The Toolkit will also allow the development and sharing of a best practice model for developing TCF Plans that can be adapted to suit the characteristics of all towns and inform future investment decisions. This is explored further in Chapter 6. The Toolkit will also draw on much of the quality resources already available. While drawing substantially on existing models and guidance, the TCF process will bring the relevant stakeholders together to collaboratively develop best practice guidance which will evolve and grow based on new learning and evidence from TCF implementation.

The Development of an online Portal to share all of this information, including the Toolkits and models of best practice, will be central to ensuring that this knowledge resource is widely accessible. The Portal will also be utilised to share case studies of the *Pathfinder Towns* (see chapter 7) and other examples of what works in successfully revitalising town centres. This will also assist in growing the capacity of Town Teams to engage with the Town Centre First process.

Examples of Existing Guidance Includes:

- In the area of developing a plan-led approach, existing resources include the Town & Village Toolkit produced by the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland, the Community-led Village Design Statements produced by the Heritage Council and the Framework for Town Centre Renewal produced by the Retail Forum.
- The 'Bringing Back Homes: Manual for the reuse of existing buildings' guidance issued by the DHLGH in 2018 contains helpful and practical advice in seeking to rehabilitate vacant and derelict buildings for residential use.
- The RIAI's 'Old House, New Home' initiative is also another useful resource when pursuing the conversion of historic structures to residential accommodation.
- In relation to community engagement, the Local and Economic Community Plan Guidelines (November 2021) provide a template for community consultation and also include Values and Principles which should guide collaboration with community and voluntary groups.
- The Irish Architecture Foundation's Reimagine Pocket Guides
- Policies in relation to the development of Age Friendly Towns and Healthy Communities.

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 6	<p>Develop a new national Toolkit to support the implementation of the TCF Policy by providing a range of examples of best practice and available resources to guide implementation. The Toolkit will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A TCF Web Portal to provide an accessible and central dashboard to navigate the TCF Framework including the National Toolkit, National Policies, Sectoral supports, available funding and specific enabling tools nationally; • Specific strands targeting key factors such as urban development, economic purpose, social function, digitalisation, sustainable mobility, accessibility for persons with disability or reduced mobility, community engagement and climate action; • A national, integrated and scaled-up Health Check Model which utilises existing progress through the Heritage Council's Collaborative Town Centre Health Check approach and builds a national database on our towns; • A best practice model for developing a TCF Plan that can be adapted to suit the characteristics of all towns and inform future investment decisions; • Varied examples (Pathfinder Towns/ Case Studies) of successful, vibrant, revitalised town centres 	National TCF Office	Government Departments, State Bodies, Academic Institutions, Sectoral Bodies, Practitioners

4.5 | Learning from our Successful Towns

There are a range of successful towns of varying type and scale in Ireland that have already undertaken many of the steps being promoted through TCF – there is significant investment and progress already in-train. It is important to demonstrate what can and is being achieved by these towns. We also want to recognise the work of the Town Teams who are successfully harnessing change in their local area.

While the experience of these towns will be shared through the new TCF Portal, we will also recognise and acknowledge the successful initiatives of towns and Town Teams through an appropriate awards programme. The learning from these exemplars will be further reinforced through TCF-themed events that provide an opportunity for both stakeholder networking and promotion of good practice.

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 7	Develop and share exemplary/ operational practices of TCF through a National TCF Awards scheme and host events that provide networking opportunities at a national level	National TCF Office	DRCD, DHLGH, Local Government Sector

4.6 | Other Supports

A key challenge for Town Teams in addressing vacant properties in town centres is the need for expert and technical guidance. We will ensure that there is sufficient technical capability within the Local Authorities for the regeneration of vacant houses or to facilitate the construction of new homes on infill sites to combat the issue of vacancy and dereliction. There will also be potential to assist the development of new housing schemes with the identification and development of infill sites or vacant properties or brownfield areas in a town.

Town centre living is also recognised as having benefits for people living with reduced mobility to access services and social outlets. In light of this, *Housing for All* aims to increase and improve housing options and supports for people with disabilities as a key objective. This will be delivered through a New National Strategy for People with a Disability. Town Centre First will support this objective through collaboration with Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs), as well as Local Authorities' own housing delivery, to develop accommodation in town centres more suited for those with reduced mobility.

The significantly increased social housing budget under *Housing for All* gives a particular opportunity for Local Authorities and AHBs to support the Town Centre First policy in their housing delivery. Some AHBs are pursuing such opportunities.

It is proposed to provide technical support to AHBs who will tackle housing delivery that is quick, high priority, high profile and town centre based. Renewal projects delivered with the available public housing capital budgets have considerable potential to deliver significant improvements in towns and encourage further development to follow after. Clones, Co Monaghan is an excellent example of success with this approach.

Targeting the conversion of existing town centre properties (derelict or former commercial buildings) into viable social homes can be challenging. Technical support (Architectural and Quantity Surveyor) can be provided through selected AHBs to source properties, to assess their viability for renewal as social homes for priority individuals on the social housing waiting list, and to support the advancement of the selected projects. A priority focus will be on town centre homes that could include Age-Friendly housing for our senior citizens, housing for people with a disability or reduced mobility and increased provision of 1-bed homes suitable for smaller households including under the *Housing First* programme.

Governance for such technical staff will come from the Housing Agency 'Procurement and Delivery Unit' which provides support to Local Authorities and AHBs in related work areas. Having a small number of these technical support teams would facilitate tackling a spread of regions and thematic priorities.

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 8	Provide support to Approved Housing Bodies and Local Authority Housing Teams to develop suitable accommodation in town centres for people with specific requirements including senior citizens, citizens with a disability and smaller households. The Housing Agency will also put in place supports and accommodation suitable for Housing First, as part of the Social Housing Programme	Housing Agency	Local Government Sector, AHBs, DHLGH

The Land Development Agency has been established with a particular remit, in line with the National Planning Framework, to deliver affordable housing options on State lands in towns of a population of 10,000 or more. Arrangements are set out in the Land Development Agency Act to facilitate the LDA working with Local Authorities as part of the sustainable development of mixed tenure sites.

The Land Development Agency will take account of the Town Centre First policy objectives in the development of brownfield sites in towns and is actively engaging with Local Authorities and other State bodies to identify the potential for reuse of vacant and underutilised State lands for residential purposes. There will often be opportunities for engagement with a range of owners, including the private sector, in the re-development of town centre sites, where the LDA is involved in part of the development.

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 9	The LDA will support the Town Centre First Policy objectives in the developments they are involved with in towns with a population of over 10,000 people	Land Development Agency	DHLGH

6

CASE STUDY

Cappoquin Regeneration

Cappoquin, Co Waterford has a population circa 700. It developed at an important crossing point on the river Blackwater. The town, like so many has lost its traditional industrial base and needs to reinvent itself. Much of the town's architecture is 18th, 19th century construction, its essential character has not changed dramatically from this time.

Cappoquin was a pilot town under the *Town Centre Living Initiative* in 2018. It was identified as having significant challenges including vacancy and dereliction at the town centre and a lack of quality housing. Some of the reasons for dereliction included: loss of industry and employment, a lack of family life in town, inconvenient parking, Low numbers of buildings up for sale and refurbishment costs being prohibitive contributed to a low level of suitable housing stock. The Cappoquin pilot project

resulted in nine elements of a proposal for the revitalisation of the village centre, one of which was the creation of a masterplan for the town.

Since the Pilot project Cappoquin has leveraged €100,000 funding from the Town and Village Renewal scheme to facilitate facade improvements on Main Street with circa fifty properties included. Cappoquin has also had over €1.2 million funding approved under RRDF for a Regeneration and Renewal project in the town centre. Elements of that project include the improving of residential attractiveness and capacity of the town centre; the developing of new and improved enterprise spaces; facilities and partnerships in and around the Town Centre; the developing of the amenity and tourism potential of the River Blackwater.



5

Chapter 5

Data-Informed Development

The TCF Framework will deliver mechanisms for developing improved data on towns This will help us better understand our towns, inform policy and guide the implementation of the TCF Policy.

5.1 | Data on Irish towns

Before deciding what interventions work well, we need to understand our towns better and collect the right data to allow us to compare between places. The Scottish Town Partnership has developed the “Understanding Scottish Places” platform which includes a typology of towns and an assessment of the inter-relationships between towns. The platform utilises both national data-sets and town specific information developed through local audits to build a picture of each town and allow a useful tool to compare across locations.

In Ireland, there are already multiple data sources available through organisations such as the LGMA, the CSO, the Heritage Council, third level institutions and other bodies. Local Authorities and the Regional Assemblies have additional data sets that can inform the national picture. At the same time, we know that there are gaps in our knowledge and understanding of towns in Ireland, including vital information such as comparable data on vacancy levels between towns. As an initial step, the TCF approach will seek to explore the existing evidence base and data sources to ascertain what data is available, how this information can be aligned nationally and where there are gaps in our existing knowledge.

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 10	Map existing and emerging data for towns in order to provide an on-going evidence base	National TCF Office	DHLGH, DRCD, academic institutions, CSO, State Bodies

5.2 | Building Better Data

Mapping our existing data is the first step. Specific mechanisms will be required to address the identified gaps, to guide a research programme and to gather evidence. This will ensure effective monitoring of the outputs of interventions and potential improvements to policy interventions. The data must be shaped into a format that is useful for, and used by, all of the stakeholders, from the Town Team right through to central Government.

Collating and utilising enhanced data on our towns will be vital to informing policy development aimed at the revitalisation of Towns and monitoring the impact of the interventions that are put in place. The development of an improved evidence base will underpin the ongoing development of a *National TCF Toolkit* and assist in identifying the appropriate interventions required in each town. The TCF Policy will support research that improves our understanding of towns and interventions that can encourage and support town centre living. It will build linkages with research institutions active in this space, including the new *Centre for Irish Towns* in UCD.

An important facet of building the evidence base will be enhancing the digital capability of our towns and also building our capacity to harness digital data.

The *IE Digital Town Blueprint* developed by DCU Business School is instructive in this regard. There will also be an important role for the proposed national Health Check model to assist in developing a consistent and comparable data set across towns which can be used to categorise these towns and measure the impact of the interventions over time. In this regard, the “Understanding Scottish Places”⁹ platform may be a useful guide for potential outcomes in Ireland.

The data gathering and research process must be cognisant of the economic and social purpose of towns. It must provide the tools to identify opportunities, to highlight best practice, to allow a comparison of towns and to monitor progress. The new and emerging opportunities for our towns and villages, as identified in Chapter 2, must be a key focus of the evidence base that is developed in Ireland. If the Town Centre First policy is to facilitate towns and villages to embrace these new opportunities, then this must be underpinned by evidence of what works – how it works, why it works and how it can be adapted to different situations. This is particularly important in areas such as digitalisation and climate action, where the position is constantly evolving.

9 <https://www.usp.scot/>

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 11	Establish a dedicated and on-going TCF research and evidence base platform which can be shared at a national level by towns	National TCF Office	DHLGH, DRCD, Academic Institutions, State Bodies
Action 12	Identify agreed data measurement requirements with respect to social and economic outcomes, digitalisation skills and climate action	National TCF Office	DHLGH, DRCD, Academic Institutions, State Bodies

5.3 | Cost-benefit and Social Return of Town Centre Investment

The decision to invest in the development of a town centre location, a location on the edge of town, or an alternative green field site is typically based on a comparison of the direct cost involved. At the same time, we know that reusing older buildings in town centre locations has implicit economic and non-economic benefits that are not always factored into the investment decision. The adaptation of existing buildings in town centres has a lower carbon footprint and utilises existing utilities and services which must otherwise be provided to new locations on the edge of towns.

Town centre properties also underpin more sustainable transport movements through reduced car journeys and better access to retail and service needs.

The cost of intervention in town centres should be measured vis-a-vis the varied economic and non-economic benefits of locating in accessible town centres and utilising existing buildings and services. This research is vital to better inform public policy interventions that impact and shape investment decisions in our towns.

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 13	Commission research to inform the assessment of the costs, benefits and social return of investment in town centres, which will better inform public policy interventions that impact and shape investment decisions in our towns	National TCF Office	DHLGH, DRCD, Academic Institutions

It is also necessary to assess the impact of development in relation to Town Centre First policy objectives. The planning system currently enables retail impact assessment of large scale-retail development and includes the concept of a 'sequential test' for development or zoning in relation to proximity to the centre of a town. There is now a broader set of considerations with regard to assessing the impact of a different types of development format on town centres that must be considered.

Any assessment of the impact on town centres should also extend to investment decisions in services and infrastructure, particularly those made by state and semi-state bodies that include public investment. We will develop an appropriate methodology to assess the impact of development and investment on town centres, for applicability within the statutory planning system and the public spending code.

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 14	Develop and establish an appropriate town centre impact methodology to assess the impact of development and investment on town centres, for applicability within the statutory planning system and the public spending code	DHLGH	DPER, Local Government Sector, DRCD, National TCF Office

5.4 | Research and Behavioural Change

Our town centres need to be promoted. Town centre living, in particular, needs to be encouraged. Town centres are not always viewed positively as locations for particular business or for residential living. This can often be linked to poor perception of our town centres or limited awareness of the countless examples of where town centre living is not only working well, but is an attractive proposition that people aspire to.

This requires better understanding and, in some cases, a change in perceptions. Making town centres better places to live, work and socialise are central to the Town Centre First policy. This alone will not be sufficient to ensure behavioural change. Using the newly developed data and research base, and availing of appropriate expertise, we can explore how to encourage behavioural change in Ireland so that town centre living is more widely viewed as a positive option for a wider variety of citizens.

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 15	Promote existing exemplars and current models which illustrate successful Town Centre living and explore how to encourage behavioural change	National TCF Office	DHLGH, DRCD, DETE, Research Institutions

7

CASE STUDY Clonakilty

Clonakilty is a typical Irish market town whose overall function and built fabric of main streets and squares have been eroded, along with town's traditional identity, in recent decades. People no longer wanted to inhabit the townscapes, town centre retail was under threat or replaced by out of town retail, while significant flooding had also occurred on several occasions impacting on business confidence in the heart of the town.

In response, the Clonakilty 400 Urban Design Masterplan was designed as multi-phased delivery of a long-term vision in collaboration with the citizens. This collaborative effort and open engagement process was established with the local communities at an early design stage with different construction phases identified to attract various funding sources:

Phase I: Asna and Emmet Square (completed in May 2013);

Phase II: Michael Collins House Museum and the main Streetscape (opened in June 2016)

Phase III: the OPW Flood Relief Scheme (completion by end of 2021)

The project made the local community aware of the heritage value of its townscape including the preservation of traditional shop fronts and re-establishing social activities on the street. The town main square changes from a car focused, antisocial behaviour and derelict town centre, to a hub that could facilitate increased socio-economic activity, socialising and wellbeing.

The Development Plan for Clonakilty included a strict policy for the protection of heritage architecture, important in retaining features like Emmet Square - unique example of Georgian Architecture in a rural context in Ireland.

In Emmet Square, the central parkland was redesigned based on new movement patterns, including towards the Michael Collins Museum. Along Main Street, car spaces were removed to provide pocket parks which create space for comfort and pause along the main street, the locations of which are chosen to coordinate with the attributes of the existing historical architecture and urbanism.



6

Chapter 6

Developing a Town Centre First (TCF) Plan

The delivery of Town Centre First at a local level, regardless of the scale or category of the town, will be underpinned by an assessment of the current position of the town and the development of a plan which provides a vision for the future direction of the town – a TCF Plan. An outline of the key attributes of this plan-led process and its link with statutory spatial plans is provided below.

6.1 | Components of the Plan

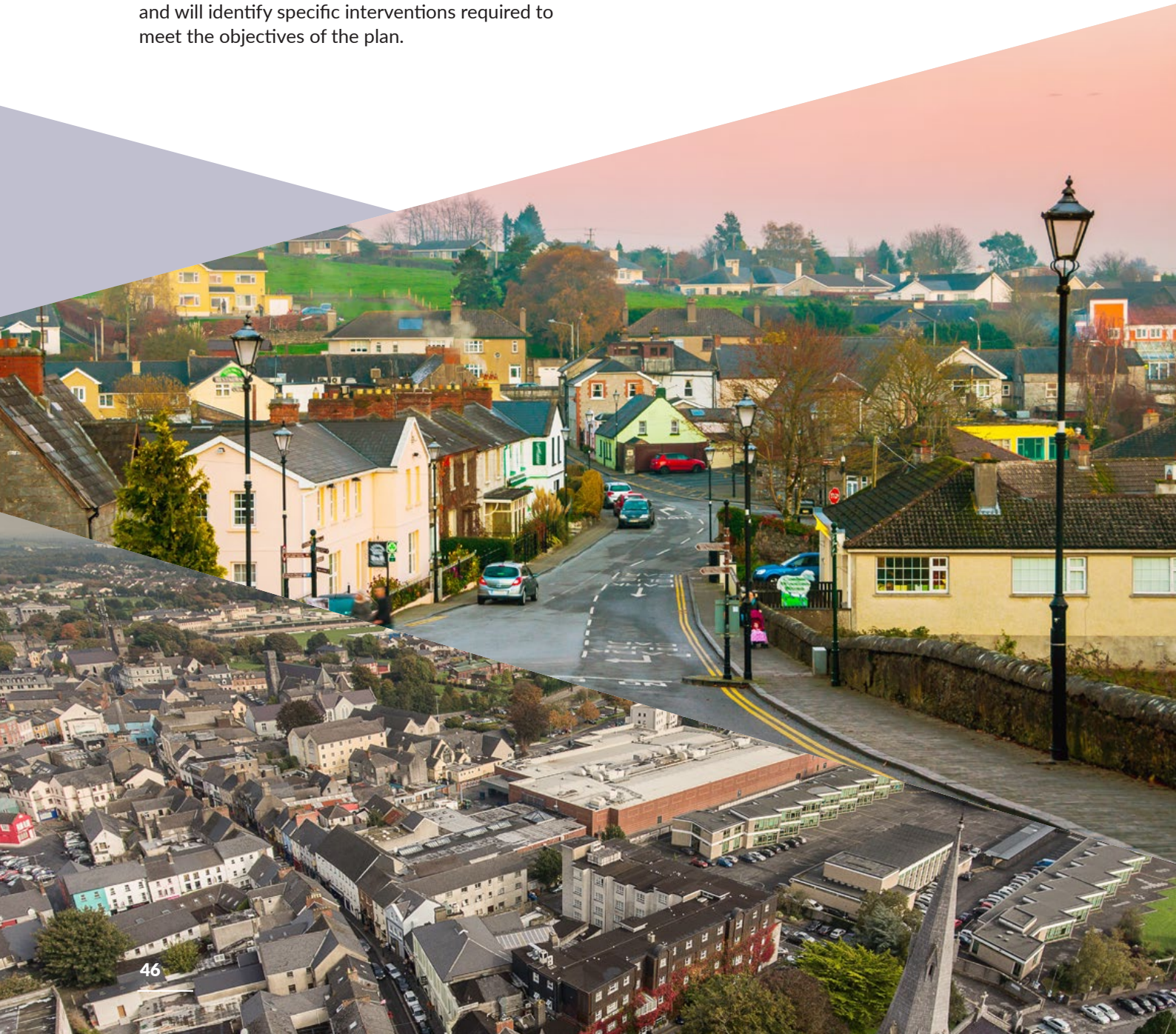
There are a number of different names for town revitalisation plans - master plans, vision plans, action plans, frameworks or strategies. Within this Policy they will be referred to as TCF Plans and they will be focussed on place making. Place making requires an extensive process of analysis, collaboration and conceptualisation, prior to the detailed design process.

The analysis underpinning the Plan will be based on a new integrated National Health Check (data gathering) Programme as referenced in Section 4.4. The TCF Plan itself will build upon the positive attributes of the town, address the challenges it faces, and offer a comprehensive path forward to revitalise the town and secure a desirable place to live and work. The TCF Plan will outline a shared vision for the development of the town centre and immediate surrounds, will be action orientated, and will identify specific interventions required to meet the objectives of the plan.

The Plan may also involve, where appropriate, preliminary design and costing of interventions to be prioritised through the Plan. A best practice model for developing such plans will be developed as part of the TCF Toolkit as referred to in Section 4.4.

The plan-led place-based approach envisaged by this Policy is flexible enough to be adapted to towns of varying type, size, character and location. In certain circumstances, a single TCF Plan may be developed for a group of smaller towns in a shared location so as to consider their development collectively, building on their collective resources and synergies rather than considering their development in isolation.

The TCF Plan will be central to informing the future direction of the Town and the priority investment interventions to be supported through the various TCF-aligned funding streams.



Plans which have included elements of the approach envisaged by this policy include:

Boyle 2040

Project Carlow 2040: A Vision for Regeneration

Tuam 2040

Tipperary Town Revitalisation and Action Plan

Kilmarnock Town Centre Strategy (Scotland)

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 16	Promote and assist towns to develop a TCF Plan which will also align with the National Planning Framework approach to compact urban growth	Town Team supported by the Town Regeneration Officer and multidisciplinary team in the Local Authority	LGMA, DHLGH, DoT and DRCD

6.2 | The Town Economy

Successful towns are underpinned by a strong local economy and the creation of sustainable employment. Supporting businesses of all sizes, both indigenous enterprise and foreign investments, can act as a catalyst for town regeneration, strengthen local markets for the supply of goods and services and increase overall footfall and activity within the town centre. These economic impacts can create spin offs for other businesses, particularly in the retail, hospitality, professional services and sub-supply sectors of the local economy. Providing a range of job opportunities in town centres can also support wider social inclusion programmes and enhance the attractiveness of town centres as places for people to live.

The TCF Plan should consider the underlying economy of the town concerned and analyse how this can be developed and supported through the implementation measures that are formulated.

The Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP), activities of the Local Enterprise Office (LEO) and other local and national agencies can feed into the economic and employment aspects of the TCF Plan. Wider local and national government supports for businesses such as grant aid, mentoring, skill development and fostering innovation can be focused through the TCF process.

For example, enterprise and connected working hubs have a strong role to play in both providing important workspace for local employment and also bringing people into the town for work purposes with consequent impacts on economic and social activity. The redevelopment of brownfield sites and underutilised buildings for new business purposes within town centres also offer opportunities for innovation and employment growth and can be done in partnership with state, educational and other organisations to maximise their impact on the town overall.

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 17	Support the implementation of local and national economic initiatives in the TCF Plan including enabling and collaboration measures for employment generation	Local Government Sector, National TCF Office	Government Departments, State Bodies, Sectoral Bodies

6.3 | The TCF Plan Process

TCF Plan

Informed By/Informs

National and regional policy

- National Planning Framework
- Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies
- s28 guidelines (and supporting best practice Manuals)
- Design Manual for Urban Roads and Streets

Local policy

- Development Plan
- Local Area Plan
- Non-Statutory Plan

Best Practice Guidelines

- National TCF Health Check
- National TCF toolkit

Case Studies and Pathfinders

Athlone, Balbriggan, Boyle, Callan, Cappoquin, Cavan Town, Clonakilty, Ennis, Kilkenny, Monaghan Town, Ramelton, Sligo

Includes

Analysis and Appraisal

- National, regional and/local context
- Data gathering (e.g. health check) and auditing
- Consultation/workshops
- Opportunities and challenges

Objectives

- Role
- Image
- Vibrancy and Vitality
- Growth
- Heritage and Culture
- Sustainability
- Social Inclusion

Strategy and Actions

- Connectivity and accessibility
- Traffic Management
- Public Realm (Streets and Spaces)
- Mix of uses
- Housing Choices
- Climate change and adaptation
- Digital transformation
- Cultural and heritage assets
- Regeneration/refurbishment of building stock
- Infill/backland development

Prepared and implemented by

Key Personnel

- Town Centre Team
- Town Regeneration Officers
- Local Authority Multi-Disciplinary Team
- Local community
- Business Groups

Enabling

- Funding Streams
- Business case
- Public/Private investment
- Detailed plans/projects
- Local resources

While the process for developing the Plan will be elaborated through the development of the TCF Toolkit, we know that the approach will be centred on:

- Collaboration and communication – a collaborative process involving all relevant local stakeholders with good communication in respect of issues raised and the agreed direction;
- Understanding the place – analysis and appraisal underpinned by the Health Check process referred to Section 4.4
- Defining the place – shaping the plan around high level objectives that are subsequently expressed through a series of actions
- Enabling the place – identifying a clear path to delivery of the Plan, cognisant that this will require actions of varying scale to be delivered by different partners

These steps are outlined in greater detail in Appendix 8.

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 18	Enable a consistent methodology for the development of TCF Plans by each town	National TCF Office	Local Government Sector, DHLGH and DRCD

6.4 | TCF and Statutory Spatial Plans

It is embedded in the planning system that our towns grow and develop in a structured and planned fashion that supports both regeneration and sustainable new development. The development plans¹⁰ and local area plans¹¹ of the Local Authority are statutory policy documents that govern regeneration and development policy within towns – identifying key infrastructural capacities, housing growth targets, zoning land uses, specifying local development objectives and identifying areas in need of regeneration. These plans are informed by national policy and provide the strategic context within which individual development proposals are then assessed.

It is important that there is a strong interrelationship between the content of a TCF plan and the relevant statutory plans. This integration can work both ways, meaning that the objectives and policies of the plans may provide the strategic policy basis that is the impetus for a Town Centre First Plan. It may also be the case that the TCF First Plan will inform town development policies to be expressed in statutory plans.

Both approaches to alignment between the TCF Plan and statutory plans are critical to ensure that there are complementary initiatives and strategies to regenerate the town concerned, while recognising that the TCF Plan may be focused on a specific area and/or matters more related to implementation.

In certain instances, statutory plans will be subject to review and this provides an opportunity for their consultation and preparation processes to fully reflect the TCF agenda and approach. Such plans can formulate regeneration, land use and development policies to support TCF actions that are currently in preparation or underway. This includes in particular, the provision of required mandatory objective for regeneration that may be based on local analysis undertaken as part of the TCF plan process.

Overall, for TCF to be successful it will need to be integrated, where appropriate, with the statutory development planning system to ensure that overall planning-related outcomes are supportive of Town Centre First and do not give rise to alternative development scenarios that may undermine it. This includes seeking to avoid the facilitation of proposals elsewhere in the town or the Local Authority area that would be at odds with Town Centre First.

¹⁰ Under sections 9-13 of the Planning and Development Act, 2000 (as amended)

¹¹ Under sections 18-20 of the Planning and Development Act, 2000 (as amended)

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 19	Ensure TCF plans and initiatives are informed by and supported in relevant statutory development plans and local area plans in order to integrate TCF plans with the statutory planning system	Local Government Sector	DHLGH, Town Regeneration Officers, DoT
Action 20	Ensure that Guidelines for the preparation of County Development Plans incorporate the need to take account of TCF plans when drafting statutory plans	DHLGH	Local Government Sector, Town Regeneration Officers

Local Authorities will also need to ensure alignment between their Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs) and TCF Policy when setting out the medium term objectives for the Local Authority in terms of economic and community development. Similarly, there is a requirement to develop Local Transport Plans to support the delivery of the National Planning Framework and these will need to consider TCF policy considerations in their preparation and content.



8

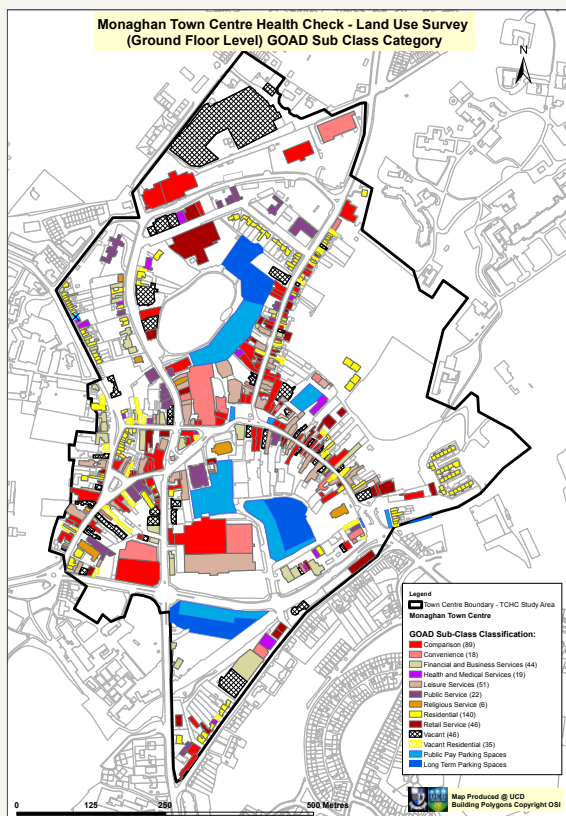
CASE STUDY

Dublin St, Monaghan Town,
Co. Monaghan

Monaghan County Council have secured URDF funding (c.€13 million) for a comprehensive urban regeneration project for the core of Monaghan Town. The project is plan-led, under the 'Dublin Street Regeneration Plan' and was informed by an evidence base having been part of the Heritage Council's pilot Town Centre Health Check programme.

The project is ambitious in scale, and creates opportunity for mixed use development in a historic town centre location and ensuring connectivity the existing historic streetscape. The proposal has a strong focus on underutilised backland and will both create and to upgrade public spaces, streets, footpaths and car parking, create new connections with new streets and spaces which enhance the urban structure, and quality of the public realm of Dublin Street.

The project enables a range of development types and includes provision for residential, commercial and retail floorspace in the core of the town.



9

CASE STUDY Ennis

The Ennis 2040 Economic and Spatial Strategy seeks to regenerate and revitalise Ennis and to secure a more sustainable future through compact growth. Public consultation played a key role in the production of the Ennis 2040 Strategy enabling the plan to reflect the needs of the communities, businesses and all the stakeholders.

The plan was delivered through the Economic Development Directorate of Clare County Council who set up formal structures to include elected members, the Ennis Chamber and community and businesses. The extensive stakeholder involvement and engagement had multiple benefits including the following:

- ensuring the development of a comprehensive Ennis 2040 spatial and economic strategy
- early identification of trends and emerging challenges
- facilitated ownership of the Strategy by all the stakeholder groups and the wider community
- created a town vision and strategic action plan

The Ennis 2040 designated activity company (DAC) was subsequently set up to deliver the strategy and it will continue throughout the implementation of the Strategy and Ennis 2040 will have its statutory footing in the 2023 – 29 Clare County Development Plan.

In support of the Ennis 2040 Strategy, Clare County Council are currently undertaking a comprehensive multi-stage regeneration programme for Ennis Town Centre including the utilisation of a total of, c.€7.5 million in URDF funding.



7

Chapter 7

Funding and Regulatory Supports

The delivery of the TCF plans will be supported through co-ordinated and focussed funding instruments and regulatory interventions. The National Development Plan outlines an unprecedented level of investment in our towns.

7.1 | Funding for Towns

The TCF Policy will assist in the co-ordinated alignment of various new and existing funding streams to support the implementation of the TCF Plans on the ground. This includes funds such as the:

- Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF)
- Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF)
- *Housing for All* Crói Cónaithe (Towns) fund
- Investment supports from the forthcoming ERDF programme for Towns via the Regional Assemblies
- Active Travel Fund
- Town & Village Renewal Scheme
- Climate adaptation/retrofitting
- Built Heritage supports such as the Historic Towns Initiative (HTI).

A core aim will be to ensure specific TCF funding streams within each programme which targets delivery of the TCF Policy and implementation of TCF plans locally.

Significant investment in housing under *Housing for All* will also take account of the TCF policy as projects are developed, particularly where town centres can meet the emerging needs of particular groups such as older people and people with a disability or reduced mobility, in terms of building design and accessibility to services.

7.2 | URDF and RRDF

Both the scale and the nature of the URDF and RRDF mean that they are game-changing Funds in delivery of a range of infrastructure required to deliver on the TCF policy. To date, some €1.277 billion has been allocated under the URDF to metropolitan areas, while some €323 million has been made available to towns. In addition, some €249 million has been earmarked for towns under the RRDF.

The National Development Plan 2021-2030 specifically outlines the alignment of these funds with the TCF. Further funding under the URDF is to be targeted across a number of strands separately addressing the needs of cities and towns, and aligned with the TCF. Specific criteria will be included in the URDF to encourage the activation of vacant properties, and to bring stock back into productive use. In addition, it is proposed that the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage will work with Local Authorities to ensure a steady pipeline of projects for consideration for URDF funding.

The National Development Plan also commits to ensuring that the RRDF will continue to support ambitious investments of scale, delivering the necessary facilities and infrastructure to revitalise rural towns and villages. This includes funding to address vacancy and dereliction and to drive town centre residency, remote working and enterprise development. It will play a part in making rural areas attractive places to live and work and deliver balanced regional development. In this way, the Fund will also be central to delivering the objectives of the Town Centre First policy.

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 21	Provide targeted TCF funding through Government investment programmes such as the URDF and RRDF	National TCF Office	Local Government Sector, Funding Providers, DRCD and DHLGH

7.3 | Regulatory Supports

As signalled in Housing for All, the Government intends to extend planning exemptions currently applying to the conversion of commercial premises to residential developments. These regulations are due to expire in February 2022, and new regulations will therefore be presented to the Oireachtas in early 2022 to facilitate this extension. The current regulations are currently being reviewed, to facilitate the inclusion of certain classes of public houses in the exemption, where such premises are no longer licensed as public houses and form part of the streetscape of the town or village and thus can be easily converted to residential use.

While planning exemptions can be permitted in such circumstances, it is important that appropriate health and safety standards relating to the building and fire regulations are met. The Department see the need for guidance in this area and is committed (Action 20.2 of Housing for All) to developing guidance relating to protected structures to encourage the use of such properties for repurposing and/or refurbishment for residential accommodation.

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 22	Update the planning regulations that exempt certain vacant commercial properties from requiring planning permissions to change of use for residential purposes, to extend the timeline to 2025 and to include certain classes of public houses	DHLGH	National TCF Office, and NOAG
Action 23	Develop guidance relating to protected structures to encourage the use of such properties for repurposing and/or refurbishment for residential accommodation	DHLGH	National TCF Office, and NOAG

7.4 | Pathfinder and Early-Stage Towns

In order to lead out on strong development of the TCF Policy, a number of towns will be identified to act as early priority demonstrators of the approach – Pathfinder Towns. These will include a selection of towns that are already at an advanced stages in the ascribed TCF process i.e. data gathering and analysis phase complete and/or TCF-type Plans developed and/or Town Teams already in place. We will ensure these towns have access to the necessary finance through the available funding streams. This approach will require early collaboration across all funders and agencies.

The capacity of towns to collaborate, develop plans and access funding varies considerably. A central objective of TCF is to assist those towns that traditionally have demonstrated a lower capacity to shape their own development. The Pathfinder Towns will help to inform our approach to supporting these other towns that are at an earlier stages in the TCF process and particularly those towns which have historically demonstrated a lower capacity to leverage investment opportunities. Utilising the lessons learned from the Pathfinder Towns, a number of early-stage towns that require additional support to begin the TCF journey will be targeted and prioritised for funding. The Town Regeneration Officers will be vital in supporting such towns.

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 24	Identify a number of towns to act as early priority demonstrators of the TCF process – Pathfinder Towns	National TCF Office	Local Government Sector, DRCD and DHLGH
Action 25	Identify and support towns where stakeholders require greater capacity building and support to engage with the TCF approach	National TCF Office	Local Government Sector, DRCD and DHLGH

7.5 | Croí Conaithe Towns Fund

Housing for All provides a new pathway to a sustainable housing system by clearly setting out how we plan to address the short, medium and long-term challenges ahead. The overall aim of our new housing plan for Ireland is that everyone in the State should have access to a home to purchase or rent at an affordable price, built to a high standard and in the right place, offering a high quality of life.

The new Croí Conaithe fund as outlined in *Housing for All* is intended to ensure that, aligned with the objectives of the National Planning Framework, additional choices are made available to home buyers in our urban cores and town centres. It will do this by expanding home ownership options and tackling the challenges in towns where there are no viable sites available for the building of new homes.

In this regard, there is significant potential for Local Authorities to both:

- Support homeownership in these areas by making available serviced sites
- Provide support towards the refurbishment of vacant properties where the level of vacancy or dereliction is high.

A pilot programme will be initiated as part of a Croí Conaithe (Towns) fund, to facilitate the making available of some 2,000 sites for homes by 2025, depending upon demand, and to design support funding for the refurbishment of vacant properties. The programme will be reviewed at that point. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage alongside core partners is developing an operational basis for this new fund, which will work in tandem with other related funds such as the Affordable Housing Fund and will be at the core the Towns Centre First Policy.

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 26	As part of a pilot programme to be initiated as part of a Croí Conaithe (Towns) fund, TCF will promote an integrated approach to both a Towns Serviced Site programme alongside adaptive re-use supports to be delivered through Local Authorities to enable the delivery of more housing choice and encourage town centre living	DHLGH	Local Government Sector

10

CASE STUDY

Balbriggan Town Rejuvenation

Balbriggan in North County Dublin has a planned, comprehensive regeneration strategy 'Our Balbriggan Rejuvenation Plan 2019 – 2025'.

The regeneration plan is aimed to harness the town's economic and physical advantages, a significant part of which is the "celebration of water", the town's river corridor, its coastal location and its distinctive architectural and harbour features.

The project includes a number of elements including the redevelopment and refurbishment of buildings, creating new residential and commercial units in the refurbished buildings and enabling and encouraging new uses close to the station, in the harbour and viaduct. Also a comprehensive programme of improvements to the public realm close to the town centre to create and safe recreational facilities along the shoreline are proposed.

The creation of a highly accessible public realm amenity space will be designed to address the harbour, improve the visibility and access to the harbour and create a lively waterfront environment.

Provision of sustainable infrastructure promoting walking and cycling with significant expansion of the walkways and cycle ways connecting the town centre as well as connecting leisure destinations such as Bremoore Castle and Ardgillan Castle, Beach and Harbour.

In total, a suite of seven projects have been funded through URDF for €25 million in order to deliver on the vision of the rejuvenation plan.

The broader regeneration projects are complemented by recent investment in the Town, with the opening of two new playgrounds, a skate park and an extensive refurbishment of Balbriggan Library, and the repurposing of a vacant shopfront as an "Our Balbriggan Hub", signalling a "constant link between the plan and the people of Balbriggan."



11

CASE STUDY Sligo Town

Sligo made history in 2016 in adopting a Business Improvement District Scheme (BID), the first such entity located on the west coast of Ireland. The 758 cross sector business organisation formed after completing two years of research on town centre within the community of Place Management practitioner models. Since 2016, the business members have contributed in excess of €1.25 million to projects and initiatives that have had a positive impact on the BID zone. Sligo BID has invested more than €100,000 in Christmas Lighting and over €110,000 in sponsorship of the Sligo Tidy Towns. Sligo is a Purple Flag award (internationally accredited award for reaching a standard of excellence in the Evening and Night-Time Economy - ENTE) winning town since 2015.

Sligo has been a participant of the Heritage Council's Collaborative Town Centre Health Check (CTCHC) programme. In October 2020, Minister Noonan launched the results of the Sligo CTCHC report, which included a land use survey detailing occupancy and vacancy of the core of Sligo town centre. Working with the Local Authority and building owners on the issues identified through the health check will be a priority project for Sligo BID in 2022.

In February 2021, Sligo BID held its second plebiscite, and the participating businesses cast ballots that voted in favour (80%) of continuing the BID for another five-year term (2021 to 2025). The primary goal of Sligo BID is to improve the prosperity of the Business Improvement District; enhance the wellbeing of the community thereby creating a viable and sustainable Town Centre Economy. Sligo town centre needs to appeal to residents and visitors alike and Sligo BID is acutely conscious of staying informed on current and future research that details the changes in consumer sentiment.



8

Chapter 8

National Implementation

The TCF Policy will include a dedicated governance structure at National Level to drive, manage and resource implementation.

8.1 | National Implementation Structures

Ensuring support from across Government Departments and agencies is important to deliver a whole-of Government approach. A National Oversight and Advisory Group (NOAG) will be established to monitor and guide the delivery process, and provide a shared forum for engaging across Government and national stakeholders.

The Group may include Government Departments, the Local Government sector, agencies central to supporting towns, other experts, and sectoral, business and community representatives as appropriate. The National TCF Office will provide ongoing updates to, and be guided by, the NOAG.

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 27	Establish a National Oversight & Advisory Group (NOAG) to oversee the delivery and implementation process and to provide a shared forum for engaging across Government	DHLGH and DRCD	National TCF Office, Local Government Sector, State Bodies, Government Departments, Expert Bodies

8.2 | Regional Dimension

The next round of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) 2021-2027 in Ireland must have some 8% of the total provision dedicated to urban areas. In accordance with Objective 19.4 of *Housing for All*, it is proposed that there will be a particular emphasis in this regard on tackling vacancy and dereliction of towns in support of the Town Centre First Approach.

The Regional Assemblies, as ERDF Managing Authorities, are in a good position to contribute to the objectives of the Town Centre First policy, engage with the national TCF Office, and support delivery on the ground through ERDF funding.

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 28	The Regional Assemblies will support Local Authorities in delivering the objectives of the Town Centre First Policy through proposals to utilise ERDF funding for urban development	Regional Assemblies	LGMA, DHLGH, DPER, Local Government Sector

8.3 | Monitoring and Implementation

An Annual Implementation Plan, underpinned by regular Progress Reports, will be used to guide the work of the National TCF Office at a national level and to monitor implementation of the policy. The Annual Implementation Plan will be produced by the National TCF Office with oversight and agreement from the National Oversight and Advisory Group. The National

TCF Office will report to NOAG on the delivery of the Implementation Plan. The Plan should be underpinned by Key Performance Indicators to assist in monitoring progress.

This process will provide an opportunity for the NOAG to not only monitor delivery but to consider adaptations and additions to the actions outlined in this Policy during its implementation.

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 29	Produce an Annual Implementation Plan to guide delivery at a national level and monitor delivery through regular Progress Reports	National TCF Office	NOAG, Local Government Sector, DHLGH and DRCD

The National TCF Office shall also provide updates on the delivery of the Implementation Plan to the Cabinet Committee on Housing. The effectiveness of the Town Centre First policy approach shall also be subject to review every three years to ensure its continued alignment with wider Government policy and responsiveness to emerging challenges and opportunities.

The Key Performance Indicators and reporting to both NOAG and the Cabinet Committee on Housing shall serve as key inputs into these reviews.

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 30	Provide Annual Progress Updates on the Implementation Plan to the Cabinet Committee on Housing	National TCF Office	NOAG, Local Government Sector, DHLGH and DRCD
Action 31	Carry out a review of the effectiveness of this Town Centre First Policy Approach every three years	National TCF Office	NOAG, Local Government Sector, Government Departments

8.4 | Cross-Government Focus

A whole of Government approach is necessary for the future success of our towns. We will introduce tools to influence investment decisions by Government Departments and Agencies related to amenities such as schools and colleges, health centres, courts, sports facilities, cultural amenities or connected working hubs. The tools could allow the impact on the town centre to be a stronger consideration in these investment decisions; the economic cost of investing in a town centre must be measured against the cost of town dereliction, environmental impact, sustainable mobility and

future vibrancy. This action will be underpinned by research to inform the consideration of the economic cost versus other public good benefits from locating in accessible town centres and utilising existing buildings and services (see Action 13). Other large investment decisions in relation to physical and economic infrastructure (such as power, water services, transport services), which can often impact on Town Centre viability, also need to be considered in developing these tools.

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 32	Develop and Implement tools to assess the impact of investment by Government Departments and their agencies on Town Centres in terms of economic, social, cultural and sustainability parameters	DHLGH, DRCD and DPER	Local Government Sector, National TCF Office, Government Departments

There are a range of other cross-Government policies and initiatives that impact on our towns.

Our town centres are a key consideration for Fáilte Ireland and are a core element of the experience of any overseas or domestic visitor. The TCF Policy will support the alignment of local investment with tourism focused priorities within the town/region based on quality place-making principles.

The night-time economy is also central to the offering of many towns. The implementation of the Report of the Night Time Economy Taskforce notes the synergies with the the Town Centre First policy, and the need for shared delivery in some areas

The Irish Architecture Foundation's (IAF) Reimagine Programme supported by Creative Ireland offers unique and innovative solutions to addressing place-specific challenges.

The Reimagine Programme facilitates communities across Ireland to co-create and co-design solutions to challenges or problems they've identified in their locality. The Creative Ireland Programme also impacts on participation in creative activities in our towns with significant implications for individual and societal wellbeing

Making town infrastructure a better enabler of higher physical activity levels is also a consideration in the development of our towns. The TCF will seek to align with programmes under the National Physical Activity Plan (NPAP) and National Sports Policy 2018-2027.

These are just some of the cross government policies and initiatives that impact on the revitalisation of our town centres. We will explore how to engage collaboratively with these other initiatives to deliver enhanced and targeted integration with the TCF Policy.

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 33	Explore approaches to collaborating with linked cross-Government programmes and initiatives	National TCF Office, DHLGH and DRCD	Government Departments, Stated Bodies, Sectoral Bodies



Appendix 1

Summary of TCF Actions, and supporting actions from Our Rural Future and Housing For All

Town Centre First

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 1	Support the establishment (where the equivalent does not exist) and operation of Town Teams	Town Regeneration Officer	Local Government Sector, DHLGH and DRCD
Action 2	Develop a skills building programme to increase the capacity and capability of Town Teams	Town Regeneration Officer and the National TCF Office	Local Development Sector, DRCD and DHLGH
Action 3	Provide Town Regeneration Officers, supported by multi-disciplinary teams in each Local Authority area, to drive the implementation of TCF	Local Government Sector	National TCF Office, DRCD and DHLGH
Action 4	Establish a dedicated National TCF Office to assist in policy delivery and implementation of the TCF actions, and to co-ordinate stakeholder engagement at a national level	LGMA	DRCD and DHLGH
Action 5	Establish and support a collaborative National TCF network to ensure consistency and best practice in the roll-out of the TCF policy	National TCF Office	Local Government Sector, DHLGH and DRCD

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 6	<p>Develop a new national Toolkit to support the implementation of the TCF Policy by providing a range of examples of best practice and available resources to guide implementation. The Toolkit will include:</p> <p>(vi) <i>A TCF Web Portal to provide an accessible and central dashboard to navigate the TCF Framework including the National Toolkit, National Policies, Sectoral supports, available funding and specific enabling tools nationally;</i></p> <p>(vii) <i>Specific strands targeting key factors such as urban development, economic purpose, social function, digitalisation, sustainable mobility, community engagement and climate action;</i></p> <p>(viii) <i>A national, integrated and scaled-up Health Check Model which utilises existing progress through the Heritage Council's Collaborative Town Centre Health Check approach and builds a national database on our towns;</i></p> <p>(ix) <i>A best practice model for developing a TCF Plan that can be adapted to suit the characteristics of all towns and inform future investment decisions;</i></p> <p>(x) <i>Varied examples (Pathfinder Towns/ Case Studies) of successful, vibrant, revitalised town centres</i></p>	National TCF Office	Government Departments, State Bodies, Academic Institutions, Sectoral Bodies, Practitioners
Action 7	<p>Develop and share exemplary/ operational practices of TCF through a National TCF Awards scheme and host events that provide networking opportunities at a national level</p>	National TCF Office	DRCD, DHLGH, Local Government Sector

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 8	Provide support to Approved Housing Bodies and Local Authority Housing Teams to develop suitable accommodation in town centres for people with specific requirements including older people, citizens with a disability and smaller households. The Housing Agency will also put in place supports and accommodation suitable for Housing First, as part of the Social Housing Programme	Housing Agency	Local Government Sector, AHBs, DHLGH
Action 9	The LDA will support the Town Centre First policy objectives in the developments they are involved with in towns with a population of over 10,000 people	Land Development Agency	DHLGH
Action 10	Map existing and emerging data for towns in order to provide an on-going evidence base	National TCF Office	DHLGH, DRCD, academic institutions, CSO, State Bodies
Action 11	Establish a dedicated and on-going TCF research and evidence base platform which can be shared at a national level by towns	National TCF Office	DHLGH, DRCD, Academic Institutions, State Bodies
Action 12	Identify agreed data measurement requirements with respect to social and economic outcomes, digitalisation skills and climate action	National TCF Office	DHLGH, DRCD, Academic Institutions, State Bodies
Action 13	Commission research to inform the assessment of the costs, benefits and social return of investment in town centres, which will better inform public policy interventions that impact and shape investment decisions in our towns	National TCF Office	DHLGH, DRCD, Academic Institutions
Action 14	Develop and establish an appropriate town centre impact methodology to assess the impact of development and investment on town centres, for applicability within the statutory planning system and the public spending code	DHLGH	DPER, Local Government Sector, DRCD, National TCF Office

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 15	Promote existing exemplars and current models which illustrate successful Town Centre living and explore how to encourage behavioural change	National TCF Office	DHLGH, DRCD, DETE, Research Institutions
Action 16	Promote and assist towns to develop a TCF Plan which will also align with the National Planning Framework approach to compact urban growth	Town Team supported by the Town Regeneration Officer and multidisciplinary team in the Local Authority	LGMA, DHLGH, DoT and DRCD
Action 17	Support the implementation of local and national economic initiatives in the TCF Plan including enabling and collaboration measures for employment generation	Local Government Sector, National TCF Office	Government Departments, State Bodies, Sectoral Bodies
Action 18	Enable a consistent methodology for the development of TCF Plans by each town	National TCF Office	Local Government Sector, DHLGH and DRCD
Action 19	Ensure TCF plans and initiatives are informed by and supported in relevant statutory development plans and local area plans in order to integrate TCF plans with the statutory planning system	Local Government Sector	DHLGH, Town Regeneration Officers, DoT
Action 20	Ensure that Guidelines for the preparation of County Development Plans incorporate the need to take account of TCF plans when drafting statutory plans	DHLGH	Local Government Sector, Town Regeneration Officers
Action 21	Provide targeted TCF funding through Government investment programmes such as the URDF and RRDF	National TCF Office	Local Government Sector, Funding Providers, DRCD and DHLGH
Action 22	Update the planning regulations that exempt certain vacant commercial properties from requiring planning permissions to change of use for residential purposes, to extend the timeline to 2025 and to include certain classes of public houses	DHLGH	

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 23	Develop guidance relating to protected structures to encourage the use of such properties for repurposing and/or refurbishment for residential accommodation	DHGLH	
Action 24	Identify a number of towns to act as early priority demonstrators of the TCF process – Pathfinder Towns	National TCF Office	Local Government Sector, DRCD and DHLGH
Action 25	Identify and support towns where stakeholders require greater capacity building and support to engage with the TCF approach	National TCF Office	Local Government Sector, DRCD and DHLGH
Action 26	As part of a pathfinder programme to be initiated as part of a Croí Cónaithe (Towns) fund, TCF will promote an integrated approach to both a Towns Serviced Site programme alongside adaptive re-use supports to be delivered through Local Authorities to enable the delivery of more housing choice and encourage town centre living	DHLGH	Local Authorities
Action 27	Establish a National Oversight & Advisory Group (NOAG) to oversee the delivery and implementation process and to provide a shared forum for engaging across Government	DHLGH and DRCD	National TCF Office, Local Government Sector, State Bodies, Government Departments, Expert Bodies
Action 28	The Regional Assemblies will support Local Authorities in delivering the objectives of the Town Centre First policy through proposals to utilise ERDF funding for urban development	Regional Assemblies	LGMA, DHLGH, DPER, Local Government Sector
Action 29	Produce an Annual Implementation Plan to guide delivery at a national level and monitor delivery through regular Progress Reports	National TCF Office	NOAG, Local Government Sector, DHLGH and DRCD
Action 30	Provide Annual Progress Updates on the Implementation Plan to the Cabinet Committee on Housing	National TCF Office	NOAG, Local Government Sector, DHLGH and DRCD

	Action	Lead responsibility	Other Stakeholders
Action 31	Carry out a review of the effectiveness of this Town Centre First policy Approach every three years	National TCF Office	NOAG, Local Government Sector, DHLGH and DRCD
Action 32	Implement and apply tools to assess the impact of investment by Government Departments and their agencies on Town Centres in terms of economic, social, cultural and sustainability parameters	DHLGH and DRCD	Local Government Sector, National TCF Office
Action 33	Explore approaches to collaborating with linked cross-Government programmes and initiatives	National TCF Office, DHLGH and DRCD	Government Departments, Stated Bodies, Sectoral Bodies

Our Rural Future

Within *Our Rural Future* there are a number of actions which will support the Town Centre First policy. The policy is divided under a number of policy areas which each impact on our towns. In particular Chapter 6, revitalising Rural Towns and Villages – has a very specific focus on our towns and includes a number of complementary actions to this TCF policy.

To see the full policy document please visit [Gov.ie](https://gov.ie) or [click here](#) to go direct to the ORF document.

Housing for All

Housing for All also builds upon the ambition set out in *Our Rural Future* to support the regeneration, repopulation and development of towns and villages across Ireland. To this end, *Housing for All* contains a number of actions that compliment and support the Town Centre First policy approach.

Under Pathway 3: Increasing New Housing Supply actions 11.1 and 13.5 will provide updated development guidelines to better support Town Centre regeneration. Pathway Four of *Housing for All*: Pathways to Tackling Vacancy and Efficient Use of Existing Stock contains a number actions which will support the revitalisation of urban centres including actions 19.1 to 19.13 and 20.1 to 20.9.

To see the full policy document please visit [Gov.ie](https://gov.ie) or [click here](#) to go direct to the *Housing for All* document which contains a full list of all actions.

Appendix 2

National Planning Framework and TCF

The National Planning Framework (NPF) is the Government's high-level strategic plan for shaping the future growth and development of the country to 2040. This is in the context of an expected additional one million people (over 2016) living in Ireland by 2040 and an additional two-thirds of a million people working here. The NPF frames the development and implementation of regional spatial and economic strategies, county and city development plans and local area plans across the country for the years ahead.

The aim of revitalising our towns and urban areas is strongly reflected in the objectives and priorities of the National Planning Framework. Many of the National Strategic Outcomes identified in the NPF, such as Compact Growth, Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities, Sustainable Mobility, Enhanced Amenities and the Transition to a Low Carbon Society, are all closely aligned to a focus on improving our towns and supporting their increased population and employment growth in the future.

In particular, securing compact and sustainable growth is a key objective - this means tackling the inefficient recent pattern of urban sprawl through favouring more compact forms of development that focus on reusing 'brownfield' land, building up infill sites and reusing or redeveloping existing sites and buildings.

Importantly, NPF compact growth strategy emphasises the locating of new development and investment in areas with existing physical and services infrastructure. Many of our towns are well placed to support new development to consolidate their footprint and provide new life and footfall, contribute to the viability of services, shops and public transport, increase housing supply and enable more people to be closer to employment, recreational and sustainable transport opportunities.

Specific targets are set by the NPF to ensure the sustainable growth of towns and villages with a greater proportion of future housing development within their existing "footprint" of built up areas. Overall, the NPF envisages that brownfield sites will deliver 40% of all new homes within the footprint of existing settlements, comprising at least 50% of all new homes in the five cities and 30% of new homes in settlements elsewhere.

National planning policy also supports increased rural growth and attempting to reverse town/village and rural population decline, by encouraging new roles and functions for buildings, streets and sites. Improving local connectivity to principal communication (broadband), energy, transport and water networks is supported while also promoting new economic opportunities from digital connectivity, indigenous innovation and enterprise in traditional food and tourism sectors, all underpinned by an enhanced quality of life offering.

At the regional planning level, the NPF is focused on more balanced growth between the regions, targeting 50% of overall national population growth in the cities and the remaining 50% in Ireland's network of large and small towns, villages and rural areas. The NPF recognises that the five cities are not evenly distributed across each of the three regions and that some towns will fulfil a more significant regional role than others. The five *Regional Growth Centres* of Athlone, Drogheda, Dundalk, Letterkenny and Sligo are identified in the NPF as having significant capacity to grow sustainably and to secure investment via the regeneration of brownfield sites and targeted areas of urban expansion that can be serviced by public transport.

These national planning objectives have been formally integrated into the planning system at a regional level through the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSEs) of the Regional Assemblies and inform the strategic investment programs of key state infrastructure providers such that planned development is closely related to the enabling infrastructure required.

Preparation of a programme of individual city and county development plans at a Local Authority level is on-going across the Country, incorporating planning policy into a local context. The development plans are formulating local strategies for their settlements to develop – identifying key infrastructural capacities, housing growth targets, zoning land uses, specifying local development objectives and identifying areas in need of regeneration and investment¹². Comprehensive consultation and plan preparation exercises underpin the formulation of these local development policies with local elected representatives playing a central role in their production.

Development Plans

Development plans therefore provide a statutory development context within which local communities can formulate their local town development initiatives and programmes in responding to the Town Centre First agenda. The Planning Act also requires the preparation of a Local Area Plan¹³ (LAPs) for towns with a population of >5,000 people and such LAPs may provide an opportunity to put elements of a TCF strategy onto a statutory footing.

Future residential development is central to developing strong and resilient towns. To address the specific demands of housing, specific new statutory planning guidance on housing supply was developed and issued to planning authorities in December 2020 by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. These Housing Supply Targets (or HSTs) will ensure that a consistent and integrated national approach to housing projections is being implemented at Local Authority level in the preparation of their county development plans. This approach has been further strengthened by the issuance of draft Planning Guidelines on the making of Development Plans in August 2021 creating a clear requirements for housing to be delivered within towns consistent with the national compact growth strategy.

Climate Action and National Recovery

The overall approach to this compact growth agenda, is reinforced through Ireland's *Climate Action Plan 2021* which promotes extensive retrofitting of existing premises and housing stock and the prioritisation of brownfield and compact development. Aligned with the National Planning Framework, the *Climate Action Plan* reflects the commitment that 'Brownfield' sites are to deliver at least 40% of all new homes nationally within the built-up footprint of existing settlements, comprised of at least 50% of all new homes in the five cities, and at least 30% of all new homes in settlements elsewhere.

Retrofitting and brownfield development within existing urban footprints will facilitate compact urban growth as a key mechanism to enable sustainable development as well as driving action on climate change and congestion. In addition, it will mitigate the significant environmental cost of new build developments. The actions committed to in the *Climate Action Plan 2021* strongly align and support the regeneration and revitalisation of Ireland's towns through:

- Reducing demand for travel by car, travel distances, and journey times
- Increasing travel choices, reducing car dependency, and mitigating traffic congestion
- Reducing air pollution and promoting cleaner and more active modes of transport
- Sustaining economic and social activity at street level creating vibrant communities
- Increasing access to shops, employment, transport services, and local amenities by sustainable modes

Similarly, the *National Economic Recovery Plan 2021* commits to supporting a balanced and inclusive recovery through strategic investment, regional development and a focus on improving living standards throughout the country. The compact, sustainable development of town centres will be a significant contributor to this work and will serve as a co-ordinating focus for a wide-range of funding and activity programmes under Project Ireland 2040.

¹² In accordance with s.10(2)(h) of the Planning and Development Act, 2000 (as amended)

¹³ In accordance with s.18-20 of the Planning and Development Act, 2000 (as amended)

Appendix 3

Inter-Departmental Group (IDG) and Working Groups

Inter-Departmental Group

Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Co-chair)

Department of Rural & Community Development (Co-chair)

Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment

Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media

Department of Environment, Climate & Communications

Department of Transport

County and City Management Association

Appendix 4

TCF Advisory Group (Nominee's/Organisations)

Regional Assemblies Representative

Association of Irish Local Government (AILG)

Local Authorities Members Association (LAMA)

CCMA Representative from IDG

Local Government Management Agency (LGMA)

Professional Bodies:

- Irish Planning Institute (IPI)
- Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland (RIAI)
- Society of Chartered Surveyors of Ireland (SCSI)

Chambers Ireland – Chambers of Commerce (Representative)

CEO Heritage Council

CEO Housing Agency

National Transport Authority (NTA)

Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI)

IBEC

Academic Institutions (2) (UCD Centre for Irish Towns CfIT/TUD)

CEO Offaly Local Development Company

Chair Sligo Tidy Towns/Sligo BID (Business Improvement District)

All-Island Local Authority Programme (Co-Chair)

IDA

Irish Rural Link

Town Centre Living Initiative Pilot (Representative Town)

Director of Regional Development, Fáilte Ireland

Director of Irish Architecture Foundation

Director General, RGDATA

Programme Manager North East Regional Enterprise Plan

National Physical Activity Plan Representative (Co-Chair)

Sport Ireland (Director of Participation)

CIF (IHBA)

Irish League of Credit Unions (ILCU)

Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)

Appendix 5

Supporting Investment Framework

As part of its work the IDG also carried out a mapping exercise which catalogued the wide range of government schemes which could provide investment and other supports which can support a Town Centre First approach to regeneration.

Urban and Rural Regeneration Funds

The Urban (URDF) and Rural (RRDF) Regeneration Funds were established under the National Development Plan to support the objectives of the National Planning Framework.

The **Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF)** supports urban regeneration/compact urban growth in cities/towns with a population of over 10,000, and enables a greater proportion of residential and mixed used development to be delivered within the existing built-up footprints of our cities and towns and make them more attractive and vibrant places.

The **Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF)** supports the regeneration and development of rural towns, villages and outlying areas. The purpose is to support job creation in rural areas, address de-population of rural communities and support improvements in our towns and villages with a population of less than 10,000.

The Urban and Rural Regeneration Funds were established in support of more compact and sustainable development, through the regeneration and rejuvenation of Ireland's cities, towns and villages, and National Development Plan. This is to enable a greater proportion of residential and mixed-use development to be delivered within the existing built-up footprints of our cities and towns and to ensure that more parts of our urban areas can become attractive and vibrant places in which people choose to live and work, as well as to invest and to visit.

In addition to the URDF and RRDF there are a wide range of key policies currently in place which support the regeneration, development and renewal of towns and their environs.

Other Funds

The **Town and Village Renewal Scheme** provides funding of up to €200,000, (increased to €500,000 max) to support the economic and social recovery of rural towns with a population of less than 10,000, and focusses on projects that have clear positive impacts on the town in terms of place-making and town centre regeneration. It has also provided specific funding for streetscapes enhancements in 2021.

The new **Croí Cónaithe (Towns) Fund** for servicing sites for new homes in regional towns and villages and to support refurbishment of vacant houses. Public infrastructure agencies, such as Irish Water, and local communities will work to provide serviced sites for housing. This will help attract people to build their own homes and live in small towns and villages.

The **European Regional Development Fund**, which is managed in Ireland by our Regional Assemblies are currently developing their 2021-2027 programme. It has been indicated that 8% of Ireland's total provision must be dedicated to urban areas. It is envisaged that the tackling of vacancy and dereliction in towns, in support of the Town Centre First approach, will be a particular emphasis for this future round of this element of funding, which is to be agreed by early 2022.

The **Historic Towns Initiative** funds works to significant historic buildings, streetscape conservation and enhancement, and public realm works so that heritage can be used to regenerate urban centres.

The **"Destination Towns" initiative** seeks to develop the tourism potential of destination towns, and to create a sense of place in towns across Ireland, attracting visitors to the area and helping to provide the necessary infrastructure to support regional growth in the tourism industry.

Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund (LIHAF) provides public off-site infrastructure to relieve critical infrastructure blockages. This will enable the accelerated delivery of housing on key development sites and in urban areas of high demand for housing.

Serviced Sites Fund (SSF) provides key facilitating infrastructure, on public lands, to support the delivery of affordable homes to purchase or rent.

The Repair and Lease Scheme provides upfront funding for any works necessary to bring privately owned property up to the required standard and in return the property owner agrees to lease the dwelling to the Local Authority to be used as social housing.

The Buy and Renew Scheme supports Local Authorities and Approved Housing Bodies in purchasing and renewing housing units in need of repair and makes them available for social housing use.

The **Sustainable Mobility Investment Programme** will include support for the rapid roll out of new and improved active travel infrastructure in towns and villages.

The **Living City Initiative** is a very specific tax incentive with the aim of encouraging businesses and home-owners back to the centre of Irish cities in order to preserve historic buildings in special regeneration areas.

The scheme offers relief from income or corporation tax for qualifying expenditure incurred on the refurbishment and/or conversion of qualifying buildings located within the special regeneration areas in the centres of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway, Waterford and Kilkenny.

The Creative Ireland Programme is an all-of-government, culture-based programme led by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media to promote individual, community and national wellbeing. Within the Creative Ireland Programme, the **Creative Communities initiative** enables local community engagement with creativity to support individual and community wellbeing, social cohesion, and economic development. Place-making remains central to the work of each of the 31 Local Authorities within the Creative Communities initiative.

The Creative Ireland Programme has been partnering with the Irish Architectural Foundation (IAF) on a project called Reimagine. Reimagine is a national campaign that facilitates communities across Ireland to co-create and co-design, with architectural practitioners, solutions to challenges they've identified in their local built environment.

The **Historic Structures Fund** is capital grant scheme for conservation and enhancement to heritage structures and historic buildings, in both private and public ownership, for the benefit of communities and the public.

The **Built Heritage Capital Grant** provides smaller grants for works at historic buildings but may also be used to conserve and repair historic structures in towns and cities.

The **Social Housing Investment Programme** is a Multi Annual Capital Investment Programme in Cities/Towns.

Irish Water's capital investment Plan for drinking water/wastewater infrastructure on a multi-annual basis to deliver the €8.5 billion funding package that was committed to for water investment in Project Ireland 2040.

Funding under the **Strategy for the Future Development of National and Regional Greenways** is pivoting following the *Programme for Government* to fully integrate Greenways into our town and village centres by ensuring that funded projects bring access from the Greenway to places of education, employment and entertainment in our town and village centres.

The **Climate Action and Retrofitting Initiatives** sets a target to upgrade 500,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2 / cost optimal equivalent or carbon equivalent by 2030. Local Authorities are funded in undertaking an ambitious programme of insulation retrofitting of the least energy efficient social homes.

The Regional and Local Road Grant Programme supports the maintenance of public roads in towns and villages. In addition the National Development Plan 2018-2027 included provision for a number of distributor road projects designed to reduce traffic travelling through the centre of towns and to also provide infrastructure to support more sustainable travel modes to local schools, residential areas and places of employment.

Appendix 6

Role of the Town Regeneration Officer

The role of the Town Regeneration Officer will be to support the establishment and ongoing work of Town Teams, ensuring development and delivery on the Town Centre First Plan alongside the local champion. They will be a vital link between the Town Teams and the expertise within the Local Authority and other organisations, and facilitate the Town Teams in accessing funding. This will include the following

1. Build relationships with the Town Teams and other stakeholders, acting as a key link with the relevant Local Authority.
2. Oversee the process of community engagement, in collaboration with the Local Authority multi-disciplinary team, PPNs and Local Development Companies, as appropriate.
3. Provide technical, communications, administrative and project management support to participating Town Teams – including to support and facilitate the initial establishment of the teams. Build capacity of Town Team members by providing access to appropriate training and skills development.
4. Support the Town Team in undertaking a Town Centre Health Check to build baseline data on the town (e.g. through surveys and data collection) and subsequently developing a TCF Plan. These will be delivered based on national templates and guidance with specific elements outsourced as required. The Town Regeneration Officers will support discussion with local stakeholders on key topics and issues.
5. Work closely with the multi-disciplinary technical team in the relevant Local Authority, including the Vacant Homes Officer, utilising their skills and expertise, and building linkages with the Town Team and other stakeholders.
6. Support business and residential property owners by providing a “one-stop-shop” facility and advice workshops, utilising expertise within the Local Authority or externally. This may include advice, for example, on building renovation, protected structures, adaptations for reuse, grant funding, tax incentives etc.
7. Support the Plan delivery and implementation phase through:
 - Supporting further detailed feasibility and design work and preparing funding applications under the many categories of grants consistent with the TCF plan.
 - Liaising with multi-disciplinary team in the Local Authority responsible for project delivery and matters such as feasibility, detailed design, contract documents and tender stage.
 - Contributing to project management and budgeting process; preparing a communications plan; and reporting on delivery to Town team
8. Represent the local Town Team, as required, at meetings with staff of agencies, Government Departments, elected representatives, community/general interest groups, businesses, and residents.
9. Form part of a national TCF network that will support knowledge development and sharing of best practice at a national level.

Appendix 7

TCF Town Teams

A TCF Town Team is a group of local residents, business people, community representatives and other stakeholders who come together to make their area a better place to live and work. TCF Town Team members may come from diverse sectors and backgrounds. They have a unique position in the community to become 'local experts' on their area and to take a lead on the development of projects that can make positive long-term changes for the town.

- Town Teams already exist in many towns and operate in many different guises – the TCF policy does not propose to supplant these teams, but to build on their success. Some existing teams may need to be reconfigured or seek additional membership – in other areas teams do not exist and will need to be established.
- Efforts should be made to bring key stakeholders together to discuss the formation of a Town Team where none is established. This will ensure strong local level buy in which is imperative to the success of future evolution of towns.
- Stakeholders for consideration to be included on the Team include Local Authorities, Chambers of Commerce, Public Participation Networks, business associations, local development sector, community groups, business owners, developers, retailers, landlords, residents, tourism groups, An Garda Síochána, charities, social enterprises, sports organisations, cultural groups, voluntary groups and educational facilities.
- The Team may be led by a local “champion”, potentially somebody who is already active in supporting town centre initiatives. The Town Team lead ideally would have the necessary experience, skills, and leadership qualities, and be selected directly by the Town Team to support the town.
- The Town Regeneration Officer will assist in building the capacity of Town Team members by providing access to appropriate training and skills development and education. This is with a view to building their capability to work effectively as a unit and to deliver positive outcomes for their towns. There may also be the potential to augment training with investment into small pilot projects delivered through the Town Team/Partnerships, building buy-in to the process and delivering early wins.
- The Team, supported by the Local Authority TRO and multidisciplinary teams, will lead the health-check process and TCF vision plan development for their town and they will formulate an implementation plan in collaboration with the Local Authority.
- The delivery of projects will be done in collaboration with the Local Authority and others as required, with the Town Team consulted by the Local Authority during the delivery phase.
- There will be a continuous role for the Town Team in overseeing delivery, communicating with stakeholders and reviewing the plan over time so that they retain ownership of the process.

Appendix 8

Elements of the TCF Plan

1 | Collaboration and Communication

The process of developing a plan for a 'place' is a collaborative exercise that must involve the local residents, local community groups and voluntary organisations, business community, Local Authority and other key stakeholders. These participants will form the core of the Town Team. The Town Team will ensure continued engagement of a consultative decision making process with access to a multidisciplinary team of professionals. Community consultation will take place over several stages. By working together through the process each will benefit from one another's knowledge and expertise so as to gain an in-depth understanding of issues confronting the place, varied perspectives on how challenges may be met the range and effectiveness of the solutions required to address them.

Part of this process will be to engage with the broader community over several stages. To reach as many members of the community as possible this may include:

- The creation of multi-media content
- Engagement across a variety of social media platforms
- Community workshops
- Information kiosks set up in prominent locations
- Household booklets or information brochures
- Surveys and interviews
- Working with libraries or schools

Early engagement provides a unique opportunity for the Town Team to tap into local knowledge and develop the understanding of the town. An understanding of place is important during the analysis phase, specifically in relation to how people engage, or not, with their town.

Communication is a key part of the development and progression of the Plan, from communicating the needs and desires of the local community and stakeholders, to the communication of the developed plan and how the raised issues will be addressed and responded to through the Plan. Collaboration and communication between all key stakeholders will lead to an in-depth understanding of the issues and challenges in each town, and the range and effectiveness of proposed solutions.

Effective Collaboration- Building on the success of the Community Call model

Delivering this TCF Plan will undoubtedly be challenging. Effective collaboration between local stakeholders and local government and designing an agreed way forward will be key.

The Community Call model, recently developed as part of the Government's response to COVID-19, has demonstrated how effective community action, with appropriate supports and co-ordination, can be in achieving challenging policy goals. Similarly, the Town Centre First model recognises local community fora, working with State agencies and community and voluntary groups as a critical success factor.

The engagement, mobilisation and empowerment of community networks by Local Authorities across the country provided the programme with significant operational capacity.

This multi-layered governance structure will support the successful implementation of a Town Centre First methodology by allowing flexibility in delivery. As each specific town or village will have its own unique strengths and challenges, this model will support the development of appropriate plans to be developed at 'ground-level' with the support and engagement of the community through the Town Team in particular. As Community Call has demonstrated this flexibility will also allow for iterative adjustments to incorporate learnings that will develop. The ability of the programme to respond to a change of requirements will also allow for additional gaps to be tackled and momentum and trust maintained.

2 | Understanding the Place (Analysis and Appraisal)

Many of the characteristics of a place are intangible and are linked to personal experience, how people remember a place and how they feel about a place. Others are tangible and can be physically identified and be measured (e.g. vacancy rates).

As such the process of understanding a place involves consulting with a wide range of people and collecting and collating data/information on the characteristics of the town centre and its surrounding context. *Context* is therefore key when dealing with specific towns as each town requires a different set of interventions based on size, scale and regional location. Understanding the towns context within the broader region and gaining a detailed insight of its characteristics is key and represents on the first major steps in establishing a vision

The key task in understanding the place will be the gathering and analysis of data about each place. While the type and extent of information to be gathered will vary from location to location, it will generally include:

- The physical character of the town (i.e. the pattern of buildings, streets, spaces) and it's setting within the landscape (i.e. topography, views, rivers/streams, nature and planting);
- Building usage survey (i.e. retail, commercial, cultural, community and residential) including those that are vacant;
- Survey of built environment (including amenities, vacancy, dereliction, heritage, architectural or conservation factors etc);
- Business/Enterprise focus of the town and any key industries
- The age, quality, location, format and diversity of housing;
- The history and heritage of the town, how it has evolved over time, famous residents, stories and events.
- Identification of protected structures, monuments, architectural conservations areas and areas of archaeological interest;
- Information/surveys on how people travel to/ though the town including any pedestrian, bicycle, available public transport linkages, and traffic counts (and speeds) and parking audits (including the length and duration of stay)
- How people use streets and spaces, areas where people can rest, recreate and interact;

- Building a socio-demographic profile of the town including age's, education, income and employments rates (see also Pobal HP Deprivation Index) and type/tenure of housing;
- The availability of community services and resources, such as health facilities, cultural facilities, education and training facilities, sport and recreation and social and community clubs;
- Major land holdings, rights of ways and wayleaves;
- Review of all relevant planning policies of the Local Authority contained in their county development plan and relevant local area plan overview of infrastructural services capacity, extant planning permissions, and community/public realm projects.
- Review of similar areas where extensive 'best practice' regeneration/development has taken place.

There are also various auditing tools that can assist with the assist process:

- Information on Quality Audits, including a Design Manual for Urban Roads and Streets Design Audit can be found from www.dmu.ie.
- The National Transport Authority, Age Friendly Ireland, Green-Schools and the National Disability Authority's Centre for Excellence in Universal Design have also developed a Universal Design Walkability Audit Tool.
- The Scottish Towns Partnership have also developed a broader 'Place Standard' auditing system that can be used to assess the quality of a place.

The information gathered will also need to be appraised, so that it is understood in context. The process of appraisal should present clear findings, noting how these issues will shape the vision for the town. There are many appraisal techniques that can also be used to communicate the findings in a succinct manner,

SCOT Analysis

Strengths

The features of the town are successful and set it apart from others

Challenges

The aspects of the town that puts it at a disadvantage and could be improved

Opportunities

What can be changes an how can the strengths of the town be built upon

Threats

What external factors could impede the success of the town

Possible issues to explore



Movement and connections

- Accessibility
- Ease of Movement
- Traffic and parking



Nature and Landscape

- Climate
- Public Realm/landscaping
- Scenery/setting
- Civic spaces



Land uses and Economy

- Mix of uses/housing
- Variety of shops
- Employment/Services
- Capacity for growth



Social Community and Culture

- Events/attractions
- Tourism
- Community spirit
- Safety



Built Form

- Quality
- Streetscapes
- Heritage
- Vacancy rates/dereliction

3 | Defining the Place (Objectives and Actions)

The process of analysis and appraisal will set the basic 'building blocks' for a responsive TCF Plan that provides a holistic response that builds upon existing assets, directly addresses pressing issues and identifies future challenges. The plan should be shaped around high level themes, or objectives, that emerge such as role and image. As the objectives are largely aspirational in nature detailed consideration must be given to how they can be fulfilled. This may be expressed as a series of 'Actions' or 'Strategies' that address the steps that are necessary to fulfil the objectives. This may include how the objective is measured, how it will be further developed (ie supplementary plans and strategies) and how it will be implemented.

Examples of approaches

Many such plans are shaped around high level themes, or objectives, that emerge during the analysis process, such as:

Role: What the town's primary function is/ will be (industries, tourism etc.) in relation to its location and the broader hierarchy of settlements within the county/region.

Image: What the town is/will be known for, how it will attract people/investment and the impression it will leave on those who visit it.

Vibrancy and Vitality: How the town will generate activity, support a diverse range of businesses, provide animated streets and spaces and an attractive living environment.

Inclusion: How the town will support the wellbeing of a diverse community.

Heritage and culture: How the towns (and broader regions) rich history and cultural life will become a meaningful part the town centre experience.

Climate: How the town will adapting to future challenges and build in climate resilience.

Practical issues to be addressed may include:

- Optimising connectivity and accessibility to encourage sustainable mobility
- Traffic management so as to reduce the impact of private vehicles on the public realm and living environment.
- Enhancement of the public realm to create more attractive streets and spaces, and meet needs of persons with disability or reduced mobility.
- Encouraging a complementary mix of uses generate activity within the town, with further regard to both the day time and night time economies.
- Encouraging diverse living and housing choices with more opportunities right-sizing for different needs over time.
- Climate action opportunities for the built fabric of towns.
- Digital transformation and new ways of working and living post pandemic.
- Realising the existing cultural and heritage assets of the place.
- Returning to use by the refurbishment/ repurposing of vacant and/or derelict buildings.
- The development of underutilised infill/ backland areas.

The outcome of this process should be a written statement supported by key visuals (such as sketches and models) that communicate a 'feel' for a town and the vision going forward. The plan may also contain reference material (photos) from other places that contain or share these similar aspirations.

4 | Enabling the Place

The Local Government sector, with the support of various Government Departments and Agencies, has been at the forefront in delivering the various plans, programmes and policies that create successful towns. TCF seeks to build upon this resource base to ensure an integrated and co-ordinated approach. In this respect the Vision provides 'joined-up thinking' of how individual strategies and projects will work together to make the place.

A clear path to delivery should be identified in the TCF Plan. Identified actions or projects should, where practicable, be assigned a timeframe for delivery and identify how it will be achieved.

This provides a greater sense of 'additionality' which is an important and fundamental consideration in terms attracting investment from both the private and public sector investment. In particular public sector investment can change market perceptions, making investment attractive to developers who would otherwise perceive it to be unviable. To support the implementation of the Plan a clear path to delivery should be identified, including:

A number of key projects, context given for each, description and potential benefits of the projects, and key actions for immediate development.

Detailed plans may also be included where viable;

Appropriate funding streams/potential sources of funding (see Appendix 5 of the TCF policy);

An economic or business case that examines both the risks and opportunities of schemes in terms of viability, cost benefit and in some cases long term commerciality;

Actions or identified projects stemming from the TCF Plan may also be translated into a more detailed accompanying Urban Design Framework, or similar, to address more specific issues and/or wider integration with structure of the town centre (links, land use, parks/squares, building layouts) and particulars related to its character (street layouts, architectural language, materials palettes). Such plans demonstrate further commitment by authorities and provide greater certainty for communities and potential investors/developers.

12

CASE STUDY Callan, Co. Kilkenny

The Town Centre Living Initiative (TCLI) is a pilot scheme managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) where up to €100,000 has been made available to participating towns to develop innovative proposals that encourage the reuse of vacant and underused buildings in town centres for living.

Upper Bridge Street in Callan was chosen as the location of a TCLI pilot project. An initial Health Check of Callan in 2018 identified Bridge Street and the extent of vacant buildings on it as a key area of interest-accounting for 42% of vacant properties in the town. This Health Check fed in to the formation of the Callan Local Area Plan which featured Built Heritage Management Objectives designed to protect and enhance the historic character of the town.

A series of community/cultural projects based around Bridge Street in Callan and supported by the Callan Town Team provided a catalyst for small-scale but impactful commercial/residential regeneration.

The 'Bridge Street Project' was a "collective re-imagining of Bridge Street Upper as a public space with a civic future". The project developed through an interdisciplinary collaboration between theatre makers, architecture practitioners, residents and business owners of Bridge Street, and the wider community of Callan.

A series of positive interventions followed – the reopening of a former pub as a café/cultural venue, the redevelopment of a previously vacant building as residential apartments, the introduction of a one-way traffic system and a public realm enhancement at St Mary's Church supported by the Heritage Council.

These interventions, in combination, demonstrated how a synergy between community and cultural groups, involvement in partnership with the non-profit housing sector and Local Authority can bring about a positive outcome.



Notes

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Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland