National Policy on Architecture

REPORT ON TOWNS CONSULTATION WORKSHOP 12th JUNE 2020

The potential of a joined up approach to town centre revitalisation

Report compiled on behalf of Department of Culture Heritage & the Gaeltacht, Built Heritage Policy
by *Chris Chapman: The Change Exploratory*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"Town quality is not an add-on. It's an intrinsic part of social wellbeing, societal wellbeing, economic well-being .... it's that intrinsic-ness that needs to be woven together"

(Ciarán O'Connor, President of the RIAI,
State Architect and Principal Architect in the Office of Public Works)

This workshop was organised as part of the consultation on the National Policy on Architecture, but by virtue of its timing at the end of 'lockdown', it took on an additional importance and urgency.

The intention of the workshop was to support the development of a national strategy, designed to raise awareness, understanding and appreciation of the critical role that town centres play and the wide-ranging impacts that their vitality and viability have on overall socio-economic, environmental and cultural growth and development, and on quality of life for citizens and visitors alike.

(Note: A perspective on the impact of 'lockdown' on town centres has been captured by art students Eugenie and Claudia Dalby on this video - https://vimeo.com/431303538)

The complexity of the issues and the level of engagement with the subject matter is represented by the number of the contributions and the range of stakeholder organisations represented at the workshop *(see Appendix Two to this Report for a list of participating organisations).*

There were three opening presentations:

- Ciarán O'Connor, President of the RIAI, State Architect and Principal Architect in the Office of Public Works, encapsulated the importance of towns and the potential benefits for society that could arise from an effective National Policy on Architecture, weaving together the threads of different policies into 'a garment that can bring us forward for the next 5 to 10 years'.
- Orla Murphy, UCD Centre for Irish Towns (CfIT) summarised work and findings from the Venice Biennale - Freemarket project and the Town Centre Living Initiative (for a copy of the Town Centre Living Initiative Report, published by the Department of Rural and Community Development, please click here)
- Ali Harvey, Heritage Council, gave a presentation on the experience of implementing the Heritage Council's Collaborative Town Centre Health Check (CTCHC) programme as a means to building business and community capacity and potential.

Discussions demonstrated high levels of consensus regarding the importance of towns and the need for leadership to enable revitalisation and quality of life improvements to happen. At the core of the conversations, there was a wish to improve cross-disciplinary co-ordination in the delivery of policy and actions, nationally and locally.

Key questions identified included;

- *How to increase public confidence in the future of town centres?*

- *How to reimagine and communicate the potential for town centres as desirable places to live, work and belong, for example through a "Vision Plan", using an "Urban Design Approach"?*

- *How to incentivise the reuse of vacant buildings through financial and non-financial supports?*

- *How to strengthen legal supports and instruments to facilitate easier and clearer changes of ownership?*

- *How to establish a cross-cutting Town Centre First Approach which puts town centres at the heart of decision-making?*

Specific areas where further guidance was identified as being required included:

- The consolidation of existing town structures, (using appropriate densities and diversity of uses, to make town centres more desirable places for people of all ages and abilities to live, work and play in).
- The appropriate upgrading, adaption and reuse of town centre buildings for residential purposes
- The development of new typologies of inter-generational housing, design of back lands and the enhancement of public amenities/natural assets
- The funding and design of flood defences and infrastructural upgrades (to address climate change) as an integral part of the development of towns amenity, tourism and recreational facilities

In order to improve co-ordination, there was particular support for:

- Improving the availability of core data (including a survey of national building stock)
- Appointing Town Centre Officers and/or Management Teams to assist property owners and to drive implementation of plans for individual towns.
- Engaging through arts and cultural heritage programmes, to build buy-in and develop the capacity of communities, property owners and potential investors, to participate in the implementation of long-term holistic visions for town centres
- Bringing together existing funding programmes, planning and communication tools (co-ordinated / led nationally by a designated Minister/Manager/Team to ensure the implementation of long-term vision)

It was recognised that a resourced focus on the revitalisation of town centres and more effective engagement of stakeholders (including property owners, potential investors and all sections of the

community) has the potential to bring wide-ranging economic, social and environmental benefits and to support policy across many other areas (e.g. health, housing, heritage, environment etc).

The National Policy on Architecture - Overview

The proposed new **National Policy on Architecture** will set out the Government's ambition for high quality, coordinated built environment action.

George's Place Dun Laoghaire: DLR Architects and A2 Architects. Photo: Marie-Louise Halpenney

Architecture and the built environment are central to our society. Good quality buildings and places have a positive impact on people, their health and well-being and their ability to prosper.

Theme 2 - Designing quality places for public benefit

The proposed new National Policy on Architecture will reflect the values, needs and aspirations that people and organisations share with us.

Historic Towns Initiative

Further decline of rural areas and towns remote from large urban centres of population.

Stagnation of inner city and older suburban areas, with missed opportunities for the utilisation of existing infrastructure and services.

We must demand the sensitive reuse of our existing built environment resources as well as high quality, sustainable new buildings, places and spaces that reflect our values.

Introduction to Facilitator's Report

This online consultation event was organised by The Department of Culture, Heritage & the Gaeltacht (DCHG) in partnership with the RIAI (Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland), under the auspices of the National Policy on Architecture.

78 stakeholders from academy, practice, policy and funding perspectives attended the 90 minute conversation. (One participant described the event as being attended by 'just about every townie I know'). 39 stakeholders completed the survey in advance of the event and many stayed to chat afterwards too.

Presentations were given by Ciarán O'Connor, President of the RIAI, State Architect and Principal Architect in the Office of Public Works, Orla Murphy from the UCD Centre for Irish Towns (CfIT) and Ali Harvey, Planning Programmer at The Heritage Council.

(Selected slides from their presentations are included on the following pages)

The workshop was facilitated by Chris Chapman from The Change Exploratory.

This report is based on a combination of responses to the advance survey and opinions expressed during the event (including text chat and the chat afterwards). Responses and opinions were expressed by individuals, so are not necessarily agreed by everyone. To make this summary report relatively easy to read, responses and opinions have been grouped under headings, as follows:

1. Re-thinking our approach to Town Centre Revitalisation
2. Co-ordination and Collaboration – National and Local
3. Communications and Engagement
4. Data
5. Resources
6. Other Specific Suggestions
6.1 Reducing Car Dependency

6.2 Economic Regeneration
6.2.1 Vacant / Derelict / Underused Sites
6.2.2 Hubs and Remote Working

6.3 Social Regeneration
6.3.1 Health
6.3.2 Residential
6.3.3 Older People

6.4 Environmental Regeneration and Sustainability
6.4.1 Heritage
6.4.2 Public and Green Spaces
6.4.3 Other Environmental Improvements

At the end of the Report, there are two appendices, one listing additional resources as mentioned by participants and a second listing organisations represented at the workshop)

(Note: Divisions between headings above are inevitably somewhat artificial. There is some repetition in opinions expressed to help make the linkages between headings more obvious. Original wordings are used, as far as practical, although some editing has been done to improve flow and limit excessive repetition)

Introduction to Towns Workshop

"Re-use isn't just about conservation, it's about re-imagining …. We can enrich the present, whilst respecting the past"

*(**Ciarán O'Connor**, President of the RIAI,*
State Architect and Principal Architect in the Office of Public Works)

https://www.riai.ie/whats-on/news/riai-launches-town-and-village-toolkit

https://www.riai.ie/whats-on/news/riai-publishes-old-house-new-home-a-free-online-guide

Ciarán O'Connor, President of the RIAI – Presentation Slides

Presentation 1

Orla Murphy, UCD – Selected Presentation Slides, Freemarket

SUMMARY PROPOSALS TO THE JOINT OIREACHTAS COMMITTEE ON RURAL TOWNS BY FREE MARKET

1: Introduce a Multi-Level Towns Partnership

2: Link this partnership with an academic Centre of Research

3: Develop, support and communicate built exemplar case studies

4: Introduce quality participatory design and decision-making processes

5: Appoint Town Architects

6: Design long-term spatial action plans for climate smart towns

The Centre for Irish Towns (CfIT) is a trans-disciplinary centre for research and collaboration in UCD focused on the towns of the island of Ireland, supported by the Earth Institute Strategic Priority fund 2019.

The initial aim is to build a trans-disciplinary network (within UCD and beyond), and to make a case for the CfIT and to identify what exists in terms of relevant research (both nationally and internationally), networks, pedagogy, engagement and collaborations.

Identification of partners in government, agencies and community stakeholders.

Do get in touch!
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CfIT
UCD Centre for Irish Towns

Orla Murphy, UCD – Presentation Slides, Centre for Irish Town

Presentation 2

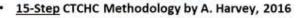

1. CTCHC Programme: Autumn 2016-to Date

- 5 Pillars: Government Departments/Agencies, Local Authorities, Civic Society, Business Representative Groups & Third-Level organisations – e.g. IT Tralee, UCD, IT Sligo, QUB
- 15 no. towns based on criteria in Project Charter plus 16+ towns on a waiting list!!!
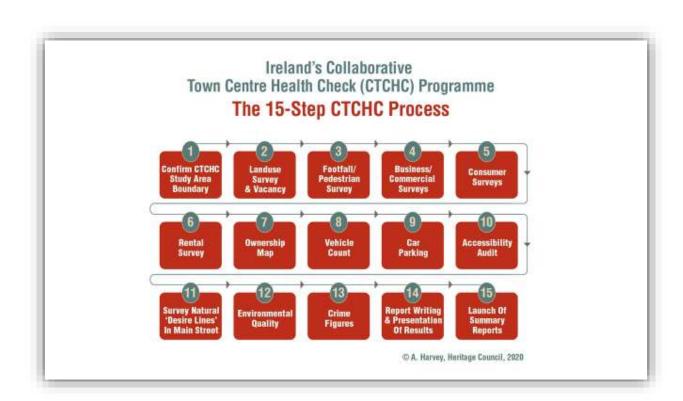- 70+ Partners including DCHG, DHPLG, DRCD, etc. Heritage Council is 'Lead Partner'
- Training Workshops: County Towns (Dublin Castle (2016/2017), Border Towns and Atlantic Economic Corridor (AEC) Towns (2018 & 2019)
- 15-Step CTCHC Methodology by A. Harvey, 2016
- CTCHCs to be included in EPA State of the Environment Report – EU SEA Directive?
- Awards: e.g. Bank of Ireland National Enterprising Towns – National Winners 2017 & 2018

Ireland's Collaborative
Town Centre Health Check (CTCHC) Programme
The 15-Step CTCHC Process

1. Confirm CTCHC Study Area Boundary
2. Landuse Survey & Vacancy
3. Footfall/ Pedestrian Survey
4. Business/ Commercial Surveys
5. Consumer Surveys
6. Rental Survey
7. Ownership Map
8. Vehicle Count
9. Car Parking
10. Accessibility Audit
11. Survey Natural 'Desire Lines' In Main Street
12. Environmental Quality
13. Crime Figures
14. Report Writing & Presentation Of Results
15. Launch Of Summary Reports

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Reopening Our Town Centres

The Top 3 Highest [Retail] Vacancy Rates in CTCHC Programme (pre-pandemic)

Tipperary Town
26%

Regeneration Engine:
Tipperary Town Taskforce

Tralee
25%

Regeneration Engine:
No Taskforce or BID?

Dundalk
24%

Regeneration Engine:
**Dundalk Business
Improvement District (BID)**

Comparisons

Denmark	The Netherlands	Dublin City Centre
5%	**6.8%**	**7-8%**

©CTCHC Programme, Heritage Council, June 2020

3. Benefits & Impact of CTCHC Programme

- Data-driven Programme = Evidence-based spatial planning + VFM
- Support for Commercial SMEs in Town Centres, e.g. on-line data
- Creation of Social Capital + Public Value - Ireland needs Social Cost Benefit Analysis (SCBA)
- Creation of Local Regeneration 'Engines'
- Enhanced Collaborative Processes + Participative Democracy
- Regeneration of Historic Town Centres – focus for Local Communities
- Enhanced Sense of Place, Civic Pride and Belonging……..

An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council

Alison Harvey, Heritage Council – Selected Presentation Slides CTCHCP

Responses to Advance Survey – Selected Slides

Q. 1 - *How would you describe what a town means to you in one word?*

Q. 2 - *What are the main obstacles to our towns working better?*

1. Re-thinking our Approach to Town Centre Revitalisation

The discussion in the workshop made clear that there were potentially a **broad range of benefits** to be gained from a more joined-up approach to town-centre revitalisation including:

- Economic benefits *(reducing vacancy rates and increasing economic activity)*
- Social benefits *(improving health – physical and mental, quality of life, social cohesion and housing provision, particularly for older people)*
- Environmental benefits *(reducing dereliction, reducing carbon emissions, helping us to adapt to climate change, improving the built environment and enhancing green spaces and biodiversity)*

The advance survey had asked participants to identify obstacles to the re-vitalisation of town centres. Some of the **perceived obstacles** identified by participants relating to our overall approach included:

- 'A lack of long term-thinking'
- *'Entrenched conservative values'*
- 'Over-responding to business interests before community interests'
- *'Over-centralisation'*
- 'Silos and Lack of joined up thinking – locally and nationally'
- *'A lack of place-making'*
- 'An imbalance of private property rights vs the common good'
- *'A culture of individualism - people not working together'*
- 'A Dublin-centric view of the world'

Suggestions for what might make a difference, at a fundamental level, included:

- 'An openness to new people and ideas'
- *'The facilitation of a more cross-disciplinary approach to our built environment, particularly engaging more with health professionals on how health can be more integrated into decision-making processes'*
- 'An approach where quality of life comes first - a focus on creating rich living environments and reducing reliance on peripheral developments'
- *'A holistic approach to re-generation with buy in from local authorities and communities.'*

It was recognised that **successful approaches** needed to:

- 'Respect local communities'
- *'Acknowledge the unique character of each town, valuing the totality of towns and the sense of place'*
- 'Facilitate towns' role in supporting rural communities' – '*(Towns have a symbiotic relationship with their surrounding regions and should not to be considered in isolation)'*
- 'Build and nourish consensus'
- *'Develop demonstration projects that build momentum, identifying key areas to create vibrancy, confidence and pride'*
- 'Adopt a hierarchy of people, cycle, public transport and then vehicular considerations'

Individuals made **specific proposals** for:

- 'One heavily invested demonstration project of how we can have an Irish version of restoring viability to a historic core'
- *'Plan-led, co-created, long-term revitalisation projects with quality outcomes a priority'*
- 'An exemplar project for the Midlands'
- *'Adopting a Town centre 1st principle, as advocated in Scotland'*
- 'A re-emphasis and upgrading of main street functions lost throughout the period following the crash.'

More generally, it was felt:

- 'A focus on compact growth could promote town centre regeneration, address vacancies and sustainable mobility.' *(However it was recognised that the concept of density is different when it comes to Irish Towns and definitions of density need some attention)*

Overall, it was felt that there had been '**a lack of focus on the benefits possible** with a coordinated policy approach, and support'.

"The call for an urban design approach"

There was a strong interest in Urban Design:

'Visionary planning, land management and urban design led interventions to attract living, working and leisure activities into towns and to produce more liveable streets and vibrant town centres.'

'Attractive and purposeful urban design with a focus on connecting towns centres to their hinterlands'

'An urban design approach … must be evidence led and based on a robust urban design analysis (together with extensive public consultation) to inform a town renewal / reactivation plan (out of which key projects are identified for delivery). The urban design analysis should include socio-spatial analysis, socio- demographic analysis, observational studies along with 2D and 3D analysis. Arising out of observational studies, data such as pedestrian counts etc should be recorded and, on completion of projects new data should be collected, recorded and assessed.'

'Better considered growth strategies for towns to open up backlands, create new streets(rather than distributor roads), encourage new housing in town centres, create more walkable enjoyable centres (not car choked streets and spaces)'

'Compliance with DMURS. Rebalancing streets to support liveability' - *'Implementing good public space designs; making sure towns are walkable, lived in, connected, diverse, and creative places to be.'*

'An urban design plan to inform infrastructure investment including engineering spending.'

'N.B. Revitalization of the street scape will be aided by engaging with stakeholders in the telecommunications industry, to ensure that this now essential service is available to these areas and delivered in a sustainable way.'

'We need to design the streetscape experience, especially the walkable experience of historic centre to detached housing on the edges. – We need a greater balance of residential and amenities plus more intergenerational spaces.'

There was a strong recognition of **the centrality of Economic Drivers:**

"We need financial models (from Dept of Finance) that encourage the things we want, e.g. quality, housing for older people, developments / refurbishments in centres rather than on edges, backland sites subsidising front sites etc"

2. Co-ordination and Collaboration – National and Local

The traditional way of managing complex, multi-facetted challenges (such as town centre revitalisation) has been to divide the challenges into component parts and have different people / Departments address each piece. This has clearly led us to under-achieve, to not fully recognise the inter-relatedness of the parts and to leave some issues to fall into the gaps between the parts.

As a response to this, it is natural enough to say 'there must be more co-ordination', but there are lots of reasons why this is not easy and it is taking us time to learn how to co-ordinate multi-facetted challenges more and more effectively.

(Some of the reasons that co-ordination is not straightforward include that the parts are moving and not entirely predictable, i.e. aspects of the challenge are dynamic rather than static, and also the complexity of the challenge keeps increasing, as we realise that more and more aspects are actually inter-connected.)

The complexities of the challenges and the co-ordination involved are illustrated by the image below produced by the Centre for Irish Towns at UCD.

The advance survey had asked participants to identify obstacles to the re-vitalisation of town centres. Some of the **perceived obstacles** relevant to co-ordination included:

- 'The legacy of poor planning decisions' – 'bad planning'
- *'Piecemeal and uncoordinated projects and uncoordinated use of funding streams'*
- 'Collective efforts not leading to a coherent whole'
- *'Divergent and unco-ordinated policies and actions.'*
- 'DMURS not being applied pervasively'
- *'There is a lack of a framework'*

In summary, it was seen that the *"traditional development plan policy, objective and land use zoning model is not sufficiently nuanced to forward plan our towns."*

a. Co-ordination and Collaboration at a National Level

Participants identified the following **necessities**, at a national level,

- 'National level catalytic policies, incentives and projects (funded) for town centre revitalisation'
- *'A coordinated policy approach for our towns led by National Government, to coordinate all public investment affecting towns.'*
- 'Targeted funding programmes to consolidate and improve our towns as attractive places to live and work'
- *'To build in flexibility to cope with changing priorities'*
- 'Coordination of national and local development plans'

(The graphic below illustrates the multiplicity of Departments and Agencies involved).

It was suggested that **national policy is needed** to:

- 'Provide a stronger normative idea of the role of towns in ecologically sustainable development'
- *'Give greater emphasis on balanced regional development that clusters employment in secondary urban centres'*
- 'Prevent development that undermines city and town centres and ensure proper planning with plan-led investment'
- *'Ensure planning applications can only be submitted by registered architects.'*

- 'Support small-scale infill development through policies and programmes to restore and reuse vacant buildings and develop town centre sites for innovative businesses and town centre living, and increase cost of edge of town car-based development on greenfield sites.'
- *'Encourage people to live at appropriate densities as part of a national housing policy (N.B. density may need a new definition to make sure it includes liveability) inc to have people living above shops and to strengthen neighbourhoods'*
- 'Drive state investment i.e. health, housing, libraries, etc seeking to deliver in town centre locations, including CPOs where necessary.'

Possible national initiatives:

1. 'A Multi-Level Towns Partnership' *(recommendation from Centre for Irish Towns to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Rural Towns)*

2. 'A National Towns Forum' *(N.B. OPR possibly interested)*

3. 'A National Town Centre Taskforce, properly funded and staffed by regeneration experts'

4. 'A National body to drive a good quality / best practice urban design agenda and to assist urban designers and architects in local authorities. This body could be similar to the Scottish Towns Partnership or the Urban Design Group in the UK. Perhaps it is a body that has members from the RIAI urban design committee along with members from the IPI, IEI etc. This body needs to be able to inform and shape urban design policy for implementation through works carried out by the local authority. For example, the current COVID 19 crisis could benefit from guidance (from such a body) similar to the UDG's guidance titled 'Fast Urban Change - A how to guide' for LA's in the UK. This body would also be responsible for the collection and analysis of data from Irish urban design projects - to help inform future evidence led design solutions, best practice guidance and policy.'
'(From the perspective of key business owners in town centres - I agree about the need for some overarching agency to deliver the joined up thinking. There are lots of policies and different schemes run by a variety for agencies and government departments but this is very confusing for a town group that comes together to try and evaluate what needs to be done to revitalise their town. RGDATA has been involved in the CTCHC programme from the outset and we would love to see it properly funded so that it can be expanded out. The family owned shops that we represent have been at the heart of a fantastic community coming together to ensure that everyone in the local community got their essential items and kept in contact with others in the community. We have an opportunity now to build on this social cohesion but it's hard for a group of local people to start with a blank sheet - they need a way of engaging with the experts.)'

5. 'In the absence of funding available to resource planning authorities, a 'Centre of Excellence' in urban design (such as the former National Building Agency model), within the Department, to provide shared knowledge and shared expertise.'

6. 'Establishment of an academic Centre of Research' *(recommendation from Centre for Irish Towns to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Rural Towns)*

b. Co-ordination and Collaboration at Local Level

The advance survey had asked participants to identify obstacles to the re-vitalisation of town centres. Relevant **perceived obstacles** included:

- 'A lack of efforts to build a shared vision and consensus on actions for effective town management' – '*(Different, often vested interests tending to pull against each other rather than work with each other)*'
- 'A lack of understanding on behalf of stakeholders'
- *'Silos of disciplines within local authorities'*
- 'Health often being left out'
- *'Decision-making within local authorities made by those without relevant professional expertise (and a lack of specialist expertise more generally)'*
- 'The perhaps daunting array of policies and schemes supporting towns and villages.'
- 'A lack of sufficient on the ground (consistent) supports – '*(promoters shouldn't just be voluntary)*'
- 'Inertia'
- 'Local Area Plans very often have poor implementation mechanisms' –' *they rely on development sector to implement them.'*
- 'In many cases, there is a lack of a town plan, at all'

- *It was suggested that 'town management had been heavily negatively affected since the closure of Town Councils.'*

In order **to make progress**, it was suggested that:
- 'The built environment we want can only be achieved through collaboration *(no one profession is the lead on this and likewise no one profession is capable of delivering all that is required'*
- 'There were a broad array of policies that need to be actually implemented *(in a multi-disciplinary way).'*
- 'A new framework for collaboration is required (ref RIAI) with supporting toolkits (ref CTCHC) to build relationships with citizens, property owners and key stakeholders, to build and nourish consensus in the community on both the dilemmas to be faced (e.g. movement away from car-dominated places to green mobility) and effective solutions and to develop demonstration projects that build momentum'
- *'We need proactive land management, bringing forward key urban opportunities'*
- 'Revitalising towns can be of benefit from all perspectives'
- *'We need to focus on implementation as much as planning'*

To improve **co-ordination and collaboration**, it was suggested:
- 'Local authorities need to have positioned and trained senior personnel to act as <u>"go-to" contact points</u>'
- *'<u>Town Teams</u> could make a big difference informing the preparation of local area plans with really exciting and implementable proposals for their enhancement rather than vested interests fixed on edge development.'*

- 'Each town requires a <u>'Plan Led Vision'</u> specific to the strengths and weaknesses of each town centre, emerging from a coordinated, meaningful multidisciplinary approach. Plans need to be creative and designed, with a people first, quality of life approach. This will allow the identification of strategic / key projects for the overall town, which in turn should inform a coordinated approach for funding applications - joined-up planning and urban design, participative decision-making'
- *'There needs to be <u>engagement between all stakeholders</u> - Proactive town management that brings all the key stakeholders together in forging a strong vision for planning - Stakeholders agreeing principles and working together to find solutions - Councils working with the community - Towns needs to focus on creating coherent, dense, vibrant centres and create more opportunities for street life and enjoyment of centres. - join forces between expert and hands on citizens and the local authority.'*
- 'Establish <u>independent Towns Partnerships'</u>
- *'It needs <u>direct reporting to a senior person</u> to make things happen (rather than multiple developments reporting to different people)'*

In relation to **Local Area Plans and Town Plans**, it was commented:

- 'We have long established LAP process to build on – lots of potential in doing that process more fully and focussing on practical steps that actually deliver town centre improvement'
- *'Local Area Plans to include Urban Design master plans identifying green ways connecting to town centres, rather than roads infrastructure led developments'*
- 'We need to invest proper time and resources into visionary, yet practical, implementable town plans that are focused on communities, environmental quality and sustainability and supportive economic activity'
- *'Planning policies need to focus on town centres rather than periphery, including the retention of amenities such as schools in town centres'*
- 'Support is needed to help policies make sense to practitioners and ensure follow through'
- *'We would benefit a lot from adopting the policies in DMURS, hierarchy, people, cycle, public transport, car (DMURS is a core policy to dress place-making through the everyday funding streams of Municipal Districts and this is not yet implemented)'*
- 'A density plus definition could be built into Local Area Planning'
- *'Local Area Plans don't deal with 3D design and the Public Realm generally speaking. This should actually be the starting point of all LAPs.'*
- 'Local Area Plans have potential, but plans need to be visionary, to communicate and to encourage people to invest. They should be creative, and designed, to identify strategies, to help prioritise projects and applications for funding.'
- *'Too few LAP's deliver a powerful and effectively communicated vision for the future of towns. More and better access to highly trained and experienced urban designers to work as an integral part of the planning team would help hugely. You can literally see the towns that have had the benefit of excellent architects working alongside the planners, engineers and so on. But we also need to have a focus on delivery, plans have to be implementable - they have to work in economic terms too.'*

Further, in relation to **the role of Local Authorities**, it was suggested that we also need:

- '<u>Design Panel Reviews</u> I would believe crucial to be carry out. We still witness large SHDs lodged designed on car dependency, lacking connection with the town centre compromising the public realm strategy of out towns and villages.'

- *'<u>Designated resource</u>, with decision making powers, within local authorities to support the administrative demands of the realisation of community aspirations and endeavours'*

- '<u>A dedicated 'town architect'</u> to encourage and support town centre renewal (All the built/natural environment professionals - planners - architects - engineers - ecologists - have a key role to play in working together in informing and assisting communities find the best way forward) practical, efficient, multi-disciplinary professional teams of urban planners, community representatives, architects, health practitioners, engineers, and ecologists working together – A holistic design approach is only possible when multi-disciplinary design teams are present at local authority level - to ensure key disciplines who shape the built environment are engaged in plan making, and development control (pre planning and decision making); architects, urban designers, engineers and planners.'

- *'Decision-making within local authorities made by those with relevant professional expertise'*

- '<u>Properly resourced Planning Authorities with the skills that they need</u>, - Planning Authorities urgently need to adopt a collective multi-disciplinary approach, where the core disciplines participate at an equal level to guide and inform future development'

- *'Street floor plans for town centres to be provided'*

- 'To create buy-in'

3. Communications and Engagement

The advance survey had asked participants to identify obstacles to the re-vitalisation of town centres. Some of the **perceived obstacles** in relation to communications / engagement included:

- *'A cultural shift towards city living (especially Dublin living) and negative perceptions towards town life (as not being places of quality to live)'*
- 'A lack of communication between citizen and local authority'
- *'A history of poor consultation and engagement (A bias towards business voices rather than diverse community voices)'*
- 'The system is very daunting and does need to bring people together in easy coordinated steps.'

Suggested Ways forward

One objective of communications needed to be <u>to grow a desire to live and work in towns</u>,

- 'to appreciate the assets of the town - to build pride in the quality, beauty and culture of what we have'
- *'to create a living sense of place and of the potential of what can be created together'*
- 'to create a shift in the cultural mind-set as to the benefits to one's health and well-being of living in a walk-able town'

Local authorities were seen as needing to do more <u>to build and sustain relationships with citizens and property owners</u> (and the conversation about living in towns was seen as needing to be extended to include people who use them but don't live in them).

There was a perceived need for:

- 'Proper and extensive community outreach and engagement, particularly amongst marginalised groups' *(n.b. it was noted that immigrant voices are largely missing and could offer interesting perspectives)*
- 'Better community engagement with the planning and management of public amenities and green spaces ' - *'So much opportunity to engage local communities such as creating new Green Infrastructure for embedded learning for school children which I recently heard about.'*
- 'More public discussion of planning proposals, and more public engagement with the decision making process'

It was felt to be important that '<u>everyone has to be engaged</u> if we are to get to long-term thinking' and that 'engagement needed to <u>work across disciplines</u>.'

'We also need to recognise the groups that do not get represented in many consultation processes, as they are not part of formal groups - People who due to language, accessibility or limited cultural representation find their voice is overshadowed by more dominant voices with different interests.'

'<u>Growing a culture of co-creation</u>' was seen to be really important – 'lots of new groups have sprung up, many with good cross-sections of population' – 'the pandemic has given us opportunities to re-imagine and to be more inclusive and equitable. Involving everyone is key to creating social cohesion in a community.'

'<u>Language is so important</u>.' 'Architecture is often seen terms of bricks and mortar – we need to focus on social connections' – 'the 'feel' of a place really important.' 'To do collaboration we need to look at overall language'. 'Also connecting in with the sustainable development goals - sustainable communities, life on land, health and well-being etc. etc.'

"N.B.. IAF have been bringing forward an innovation in engagement with communities - RE-IMAGINE, supported by Creative Ireland, more of this approach is required."

4. Data

The advance survey had asked participants to identify obstacles to the re-vitalisation of town centres. **Relevant obstacles** in relation to data included:

- 'A lack of robust data (particularly in relation to Floor space / Vacancy/ Building Condition/ Ownership and Building Types (the last building stock survey was in 2001 - Other euro countries doing building stock surveys every 2/3 years)'
- *'A lack of correlational research on traffic and economic viability'*
- 'The difficulty in getting spatial and non-spatial data that actually speaks to each other.'
- *'We are not good on measuring success of public realm outcomes in terms of data. What are our KPIs ?'*
- '700 towns need a baseline check'

Suggested ways forward

It was felt to be possible to create 'evidence-based regeneration schemes and initiatives based on collaboration between all stakeholders'. These would require:

- 'Analysis of needs (Good data that is captured in a clear, transparent and unambiguous manner)'
- *'Precise and accurate mapping (in ITM and interoperable with OSI & PRA information data sets) Technology is so advanced that could enable spatial info to underpin planning'*
- 'Evaluation of outcomes'

'Data would support academic research; help with the creation and dissemination of good case studies and assist in the Implementation and evaluation of new ideas / projects in towns'

A specific opportunity was identified 'to capture a national data set through the town and village design statement scheme (section 7)' - 'to take a real pulse and bolster our understanding of our natural and built heritage.'

'(N.B. there are obligations under the EU INSPIRE Directive - robust data is necessary to secure EU funding)'

'The data we capture today [the town and village 2020 initiative is a superb example] can become tomorrow's investment. A good spatial framework can and will enable all stakeholders to compare data in a consistent manner'

'Where is our data? The OECD has an excellent report (2019) on Ireland's need to create a 'data driven public sector'

See https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/059814a7-en.pdf?expires=1591976936&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=0E1243524BE0FC3DC7D110F6B4FF1DCC '

5. Resources

There was a general sense of:

- a <u>lack of sufficient on the ground (consistent) supports</u> and
- a <u>lack of investment in towns</u>
- a <u>need to bring funding streams together</u> and to create <u>a shift towards incentivising use of existing resources</u>, including derelict buildings and upper floors 'over the business'

'Town Management is struggling with local funding - even small issues such as maintenance of street furniture, to planting seasons and cleaning the paving.'

'The lack of funding for maintenance of public space is even affecting the choice of material used in heritage towns. Maintenance expenses are a big struggle for Municipal Districts and there is a missed opportunity for supporting local community groups of volunteers such as tidy towns etc.'

There were calls for:

- 'A Living Towns initiative similar to the Living Cities'
- *'Maintaining funding under URDF, RRDF'*
- 'Tax designation zones tied into embodied carbon measures'
- *'Specific town centre regeneration funds that respond to the specific needs of individual towns'*
- 'To link up the various incentives to have weighted renovation grants for homes in town centres that deliver multiple benefits of being car free and energy efficient. Banks need to come on board multi criteria environmental assessments, that would provide preferential rates for the purchase of homes in town centres'
- *'Initiatives for small-scale infill development, building refurbishment, etc. and levies to limit suburban car-based development'*
- 'Funding for baseline surveys (we need investment in the CTCHC Programme, particularly technical support staff.)'

"We need financial models (from Dept of Finance) that encourage the things we want, e.g. quality, housing for older people, developments / refurbishments in centres rather than on edges, backland sites subsidising front sites etc"

"LA's could lease land for HA's to develop and manage, whilst keeping ownership (N.B. LA landbanks are at an all-time low)"

'Land Value Tax might be part of the solution here to help release long term vacant buildings to the market.'

"A very large amount of money will be released through EU Programmes to assist Member States in coping with the economic and social fallout of the COVID-19 crisis. Sounds to me that many of you on the call could be able to access the new funding, but it will rely on getting the ideas and projects into national plans and proposals that are submitted to the EU. Note that the approach proposed by the European Commission still needs to be approved by the Member States... In particular, energy renovation of buildings will (I hope) get priority treatment..."

Resources for Training and Capacity Building

The following needs were identified:

- 'Training in relation to National Planning Framework, DMURS, Climate Action plans and site visits of benchmark projects for the elected members '
- *'To grow a culture of critical reflection – learning from what has and hasn't worked and prioritising quality'*
- 'Developing knowledge exchanges'
- *'Upskilling local contractors (re historic building stock)'*
- 'Developing leadership in this area, - all on a long-term basis with local stewardship

(N.B. Part of leadership role is encouraging multi-disciplinary work)'

6. Other Specific Suggestions

(Facilitator notes:
- *The distinctions between the categories below are artificial and shouldn't detract from the inter-relatedness of the issues.*
- *Car Dependency has been listed first, as this was the single issue most frequently mentioned by participants.)*

6.1 Reduce Car Dependency

It was noted that *'the recent drop off in traffic has improved air quality and enjoyment in town centres.'*

Specific suggestions included:
- 'The removal of all on street parking '
- *'Restructuring of the process for design, oversight, implementation and funding of active travel infrastructure (between LAs, Dept of Transport, NTA)'*
- '(Specifically in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic) Implementation of a streamlined approach for funding, quality design, implementation, oversight of local Mobility Plans'

It was recognised that 'each town has great expertise in the resources in the local community and it would be super helpful to find solutions for car parking alternatives to Main Street parking'

'Question - *How do we ensure that we don't give a free pass to out of town centres with free parking, meaning town centres with limited parking can compete?*

Do we need to apply parking rates on out of town centres per space in order to fund town centre initiatives and level the playing pitch?'

6.2 Economic Regeneration

Many towns had experienced economic decline arising from population loss, The decline of main street retail, low levels of employment and the trend to 'out of town' services

It was suggested that key to finding a way forward is *'developing financial models and progammes to maximise economic and social benefits. Economic viability is often missing from plan-making, and the economic consequences are very costly. Compact urban living can be more cost effective, with less hidden costs.'*

'Question: *How can we achieve compact towns and cities if we continue to allow one-off rural housing?'*

It was felt that *'Commercial Rates created an unfair disadvantage for businesses competing against online trade?'*

6.2.1 Vacant / Derelict / Underused sites

There was interest as to *'why Denmark and the Netherlands have vacancy rates of 5% and 6.8% and we are finding the vacancy rates in our town centres are 20%+ and if their town centre experience was more pleasant, what was it that they were doing right ?'* (n.b. There was specific interest in the Danish Model of Compulsory Sales Orders).

'We have surveyed some upper floors and they are at vacancy levels of 80% plus - vacancy levels like this mean we really need to urgently address are the question of what we want our towns to be like, what are they for, how can we make better use of such a valuable, and precious resource? In addition to a vacancy survey we need to address the dereliction of listed buildings'

It was recognised that **integrated approaches are needed**:
-   'supporting Imaginative reuse of existing buildings and 'backlands' sites to create living town centres'
-   'creating town centre housing developments'
-   'encouraging pedestrian friendly urban spaces, parks, etc'
-   'focusing on the support of existing structures supplemented by incisions of new and reused structures'

It was felt that <u>Site Value Tax</u> would make 'a major contribution to help release long term vacant buildings to the market'.

'Owners needed support to refurbish vacant properties, individually or collectively (Currently, it is very difficult to get the finances to adapt existing buildings for dwelling to stack up in towns. The final capital value often does not make sense,) Support, to walk potential owners of vacant structures through the regulatory process is also key to getting these buildings back into use).'

'There also needs to be transparency around building ownership'

'Specific approaches are required in relation to listed buildings'

Question : H*as any thought been given to possibly engaging with Approved Housing Bodies for them to lease / purchase and refurbish these vacant units with our towns?*

6.2.2 Hubs / Remote Working

It was noted that, (where broadband allows), 'there are already a lot of hubs in existence (at least 101 in the Atlantic Economic Corridor, although definitions may not always be clear and consistent)' and that following the pandemic, 'there is increased interest in improving infrastructure for remote working and supporting local business centres, with the potential added benefits of reducing commuting and keeping economic benefits local. (Remote working hubs are transformational for many people and offer fantastic opportunities for communities)'

'Note - *Members of the TIF (Telecommunications Industry Federation) have already agreed to take part in a trial of a new design of shared ducting to be installed below ground, the goal of this project is to provide a ducting design that can be used in redeveloped townscapes, future proofing them*

from the need to dig up footpath and roads to provide telecoms services once a redevelopment is complete'

There was concern expressed that 'n smaller towns that after Covid that in particular key community hub buildings, in smaller villages will need the livelihood of the owner to be supported to ensure they remain in position to be revitalised.'

6.3 Social Regeneration

6.3.1 Health

It was felt that there had been 'a lack of focus on the impact of 'place' on public health and social integration / cohesion and specifically, a lack of awareness on the health/ socio-economic advantages to be gained from active mobility and walk-able towns'

It was suggested that *'the pandemic offers a once-in-century opportunity to improve the resilience of our collective public health and the social fabric o*

f our communities. Town Centres could be consciously developed to support intergenerational relationships.'

'Healthy Place-making is one of the key principles of the Regional and Economic Strategies which support implementation of the National Planning Framework'

'Public spaces and active travel infrastructure within town centres and on the outskirts of towns, are key for social interaction, social integration and physical health….. Multidisciplinary teams should also include health professionals/public health expertise, in addition to urban design and planning and engineering.'

6.3.2 Residential

There was a clear desire for 'a return to greater residential use to town centres, supported by necessary amenities such as open space, schools, etc. This would help generate the need for shops and services and 24 hour life'

It was mentioned that *'recommendations of the 1974 Kenny Report had still to be implemented.'*

'Housing departments in rural authorities can play a significant role in reinvigorating town centres and should be proactive in the delivery of homes in town centres, particularly with the increased priority for apartment housing provision within Project Ireland 2040.'

'With increased home working and online shopping, it has never been more important to encourage people to live in town centres to support the local shops and services.'

6.3.3 Older People

It was recognised that 'there was an opportunity to enhance a sense of community and the support available for elderly people by increasing the residential provision for them in town centres (and that this would be sensible as the older population grows)'

"When you design for the old you include everyone"

'To prioritise brownfield sites for older people will require strong leadership, mandatory measures (and more enforced redevelopment).'

'Note ; To offer effective alternatives to nursing care will require changes in financial policies and measures'

'There will be particular opportunities with the redevelopment of now increasingly redundant Religious convents or smaller schools , rather than demolition and rebuild'

'All Irish towns and villages contain great opportunities for visionary planning that thinks ahead and adapts to a much greater cohort of older persons in local communities. Many older people are keen to explore options for living in or closer to town centres and we need to act on this in our planning and housing strategies. Age friendly communities and housing require particular focus.'

'Forthcoming Housing Needs Demand Assessment guidance from DHPLG could be very helpful here'

6.4 Environmental Regeneration / Sustainability

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 relates to Sustainable Cities and Communities and includes targets in relation to Housing, Transport, Heritage and Green and Public Spaces.

'As well as taking immediate steps to improve the environment, Town Centre Revitalisation needs to include an element of future-proofing to adapt to and help mitigate climate change.'

6.4.1 Heritage

Infographic- Covid 19 Impact on the Heritage Sector – Heritage Council Survey 2020

Discussions identified 'a lot of potential in using heritage-led regeneration (adaptive re-use) to make towns desirable places to live and work and also environmental gains to be made by retrofitting properly (acknowledging the embodied carbon in older buildings) Historic town centres are our most valuable and vulnerable heritage assets. We need to understand our towns' origins and fabric.'

'Heritage Assets (national parks, monuments, natural heritage areas and walks) were seen to be the essential link pieces between the town fabric, well-being and inhabitants.'

There was a strong call for 'renovation to be prioritised over one-off development.'

It was recognised that *'there is a very vulnerable cohort of properties that are not represented nor being provided for - the traditional [historic] building that is not on the RPS. The manner that this building needs to be "rejuvenated" is not to a modern standard. Equally so the property owners are funding without any incentives' [despite having to comply with many regulatory matters at a significant cost]. This class of building needs addressing'*

6.4.2   Public and Green Spaces

'Our public green spaces serve as a bridge between rural and urban life. We need to promote them, and protect them from future development.'

'They offer particular benefits to 'deprived' groups (thereby helping to make more equitable communities)'

'Enhanced public spaces such as squares, streetscapes and markets engage visitors and enhance their experience in towns, encouraging people to stay longer'

'Such spaces also take pressure of nature conservation sites (SAC's, SPA', NHAs) which may suffer from disturbance impacts (i.e. ground nesting birds and walk walkers)'

'Successful high density development needs public green space to be realigned with what it is; part of public health policy. Only then will the accountancy definition of parks being an expenditure change to be one of investment.'

'Specifically during this pandemic, our public spaces need to be reimagined as to how to accommodate all sectors of our communities'

'Public spaces should create confidence. They need to be of significant size and quality, and also equally distributed between urban and suburban areas.'

'N.B.. in Dundee Town Park in Scotland, public green spaces are being used for ground heat pumps and district heating projects.'

6.4.3   Other Environmental improvements

'Litter is a major factor in how people feel about their town centres, also the dirtiness of buildings, dog poo and bird poo.'

Appendix One: Additional Resources Mentioned by Participants

Age Friendly Ireland - hosts a number of valuable publications and research documents on town centre and public realm including consultation processes and MDT collaboration

https://agefriendlyireland.ie Twitter: @AgeFriendlyIrl

Atlantic Economic Corridor Hubs Project - https://www.atlanticeconomiccorridor.ie/aec-hubs-project/

Department of Culture, Heritage and Gaeltacht (DCHG) - National Policy on Architecture Resources

https://www.chg.gov.ie/heritage/built-heritage/architectural-policy/national-policy-on-architecture/

Heritage Council

https://www.heritagecouncil.ie/content/files/policy_proposals_irelands_towns_2015_5mb.pdf/

https://www.heritagecouncil.ie/content/files/Dundalk-Town-Centre-Health-Check.pdf
https://www.heritagecouncil.ie/content/files/Ireland-Scotland-Collaboration-on-Town-Centres.pdf/

The Heritage Council has published a celebration of community-generated long-term visions for the areas they love - 'Ballybrilliant' https://www.heritagecouncil.ie/content/files/Ballybrilliant.pdf/
(Sadly, Ballybrilliant is an academic piece and not replicated nor seen in too many instances.)

Public Realm Plans supported by the Heritage Council are an important starting point for engaging multi-disciplinary teams and the community while allowing for the identification of historic town assets.

IAF – Irish Architecture Foundation
'If you want to get in touch about the IAF community led and collaborative placemaking programmes get in touch - engagement@architecturefoundation.ie'

The Office of the Planning Regulator - https://www.opr.ie/   - includes communications toolkit on increasing public engagement with local authority development plans

RIAI (Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland)

https://www.riai.ie/whats-on/news/riai-launches-town-and-village-toolkit/ (Toolkit can be downloaded from this page)

https://www.riai.ie/whats-on/news/riai-publishes-old-house-new-home-a-free-online-guide

Scottish Towns Partnership

https://www.scotlandstowns.org/   - 'Scotland's Towns Partnership is Scotland's national towns' collective; representing and promoting the diversity of our towns and places, and supporting those organisations and groups that have an interest in or ownership of them.'
https://www.usp.scot/ (understanding Scottish places)

UCD Centre for Irish Towns @UCDCFIT (Twitter)

Appendix Two: Organisations Represented by Participants

Academy of Urbanism (AoU)

An Taisce

Architecture Ireland

(The) Barn Studio

Chambers Ireland

Clanmil Housing Association

Cork County Council

Corridan Auctioneers and Chartered Surveyors

Department of Climate Action, Communications and the Environment (DCCAE)

Department of Culture, Heritage and Gaeltacht (DCHG)

Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD)

Dun Laoghaire Rathdown Council

Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly (EMRA)

Failte Ireland

Galway County Council

Healthy Ireland

Heritage Council

HES

Housing Agency

ICOMOS Ireland

Irish Architecture Foundation (IAF)

Irish Green Building Council (IGBC)

Irish Walled Towns Network (IWTN)

Kerry County Council

Kildare County Council

(The) Liberties Dublin

Liberty Bell

Limerick City and County Council

McCullough Mulvin Architects

Mayo County Council

Metropolitan Workshop

Monaghan County Council

Murphy Surveys

Office of Public Works (OPW)

Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR)

Pasparakis Friel Architects

Reddy Architecture

(The) Retail Grocery Dairy and Allied Trades Association (RGDATA)

Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland (RIAI)

Scott Tallon Walker Architects

Sheridan Woods Architects and Urban Planners

Southern Regional Assembly

Space Engagers

Trinity College Dublin (TCD)

University College Cork (UCC)

University College Dublin (UCD)

Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT)

When Niccolo Machiavelli wrote, "Never waste the opportunity offered by a good crisis." He understood that crises shake people out of their complacency, create opportunities that challenge conventional wisdom and give leaders some room to take on vested interests and achieve transformative change.

Our present crisis presents opportunities and challenges with decision makers, politicians and public servants, doing their best from within a state of epistemic poverty never-the-less decisions that will impact all our futures and beyond. In the case of Limerick, where I work, measures are currently afoot to reshape the city and urban environment as the region attempts to become a magnet hub attracting rather than repulsing both residents and visitors as we emerge from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

There is now an opportunity to design out waste and encourage next to nature living while introducing the latest in technology and sustainable energy systems. As we face the challenges of reawakening our communities and re-galvanising our towns and cities in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, we need to keep a number of factors in mind. It is far too easy to respond to the latest crisis or the most recent challenge while losing sight of those all-important long term goals that are urgently needed to protect future generations from what may prove an even great peril than our recent pandemic. We must not allow the distraction of the recent events to blindside us from the greater challenges ahead, challenges that are being addressed by those who will suffer little from the consequences of their decisions: "those with no skin in the game".

The mediocrity of much of Ireland's built environment is partially the result of a post-colonial rejection of the British empire's values - the architectural baby was thrown out with the philosophical bathwater. The ensuing incoherent, ostentatious and copycat modernisation has, since the foundation of the republic, sadly been embraced by the statutory planning authorities, sometimes in the name of a dubious 'progress'- a progress to nowhere in particular. The result is a vacuous disregard of the hard-earned values of traditional building and design, garnered over millennia of experience and experimentation – values that yet inform the very best of modern architecture. The result is the clearing out of traditional buildings and the associated trades, indigenous industries, traditional residential and industrial buildings all in the whims of fashion (replaced with the global multiple stores and peripheral shopping centres). These traditional buildings, both noble and familiar reflect an intimacy which creates and sustains communities and pride of place. The attraction of place is reflected in local individualism and how people live is attractive to visitors and residents alike, Limerick has a holistic civic history steeped in Viking, Norman and Williamite influences, all still very much evident in its streetscape, even a Geraldine influence is evident here. The 19th century saw Limerick embrace the industrial revolution largely due to its maritime setting in the midst of rich farmland and a skilled farming class. It abounded with mills, food producers, and meat factories, it was the great food producer of Munster. Today sadly we fail to recognise that all the necessary resources including skilled human capital exist in abundance to regain that position under the EU Green Deal and new government agricultural policy.

In opening our communities we need to adopt a tactical fluid response, overriding our instinct to create a fixed and rigid formula in reacting to the most recent challenges. Any reaction needs to be reviewed as it develops and circumstances

change with the long term overall benefits for the community at the heart of and purpose in the plan. A response that protects our communities as much as possible can be achieved to avoid a future pandemic, all the while it strives to address a response to environmental concerns by creating green repurposed city centres that are sustainable, waste free and culturally rich significant places for people to live, work and play.

Thus, as we face the challenge of re-galvanising our communities in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, we need to maintain a broad perspective, informed by history, and not lose sight of those all-important long-term measures and essential changes, which are essential to protect future generations from greater, perhaps insurmountable, threats they will face if we choose not to act wisely today with outcomes that are destined to be only compounded by the degradation of the relationship between Britain and Ireland and once again we need to look beyond our larger neighbouring island to the mainland and once again establish ourselves as a north Atlantic nation smaller than many of the larger cities across Europe countries. A small island distinguished with a minority European language with only circa five million English speakers post Brexit, driving on the wrong side of the road.

The imminent decisions of our Dublin government and their colleagues in Europe as we exit from the pandemic will set the agenda for our collective future. Will it be the future we want or the future that will be imposed upon us by others. They will impact upon what sort of sustainable social, economic and ecological future our children will inherit. We, and our youth need to give government guidance.

Life goes on!