

The Town Centre Living Initiative

Six Pilot Towns: Synthesis Report

May 2020

Commissioned by the Department of Rural and Community Development



PLEASE NOTE

This report has been prepared by Space Engagers, a research and co-design collective that explores how towns and cities can be made more resilient and sustainable.

The report records the findings of the Department of Rural and Community Development's (DRCD) Town Centre Living Initiative (TCLI) using primary data received directly from the 6 pilot towns and participants. In the final section the authors synthesise the findings and put forward suggested actions. Please note therefore, that any views expressed in this report accurately reflect those of the participants or authors and not necessarily those of the DRCD.

This report records activities and findings of the TCLI up to the end of 2019. The report was completed at the end of February 2020 before the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and lockdown.

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Acronyms

AIRO	All Ireland Research Observatory at NUI Maynooth
AFI	Age Friendly Ireland
AHB	Approved Housing Body
APRD	Action Plan for Rural Development
ArcGIS	Geographic Information System hosted by the ESRI
BAL	Ballinrobe
BAN	Banagher
BBR	Bygnings- og Boligregistret (Danish Buildings Registry)
BCAR	Building Control Amendment Regulations
BER	Building Energy Rating
BOY	Boyle
CAL	Callan
CAP	Cappoquin
CAP19	Climate Action Plan
CAS	Castleblayney
CCN	Carr, Cotter & Naessens Architects
CPO	Compulsory Purchase Order
CSO	Compulsory Sales Order
CSO	Central Statistics Office

CTCHC	Collaborative Town Centre Health Check
DBEI	Department of Business, Employment and Innovation
DCCAE	Department of Communications, Climate Action and the Environment
DCHG	Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht
DoHPLG	Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government
DRCD	Department of Rural and Community Development
DTTAS	Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport
FAC	Future Analytics Consultancy
GIS	Geographic Information System
GOAD	Site classification system named after Charles Goad
HSE	Health Service Executive
HTI	Historic Towns Initiative
IDA	Industrial Development Agency (Ireland)
LCI	Living Cities Initiative
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer
LPT	Local Property Tax
NESC	National Economic and Social Council
NIAH	National Inventory of Architectural Heritage
NUIM	National University of Ireland Maynooth (Maynooth University)

NVHRS	National Vacant Housing Reuse Strategy
OWCH	Older Women's Co-Housing
RRDF	Rural Regeneration and Development Fund
SEAI	Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland
SME	Small or Medium Sized Enterprise
SOA	Self-Organising Architecture
STP	Scotland's Towns Partnership
TCO	Town Centre Officer
TCLI	Town Centre Living Initiative
UCD	University College Dublin
VAT	Value Added Tax
VPIM	Vacant Properties Indicator Model (United States)
WOR	TCLI Workshop

Introduction

The Town Centre Living Initiative (TCLI) is a pilot scheme managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) where up to €100k 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.

The following six towns were selected to take part in the pilot scheme:

- Ballinrobe, Co Mayo
- Banagher, Co Offaly
- Boyle, Co Roscommon
- Callan, Co Kilkenny
- Cappoquin, Co Waterford
- Castleblayney, Co Monaghan

The TCLI was announced in October 2018 by the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Mr Michael Ring TD. The towns were selected to provide a geographical spread, a mix of size and character, and on the basis that the pilot scheme could build on efforts already underway to address challenges.

This report documents the activities and findings of each pilot project in the six towns and a collaborative workshop involving representatives from the TCLI pilot towns and other stakeholders held in September 2019. The report also analyses and synthesizes the findings, identifying issues arising and suggestions for action areas.

Project brief

The scheme acknowledges and responds to the significant challenges facing towns relating to vacancy and underuse of buildings, and a common preference for living outside the town centre. Given the complexity and variety of reasons behind vacancy in Irish towns, the towns were asked to take an holistic approach that explores all aspects of living in towns including the buildings, amenities, public realm, infrastructure and services. The towns were also asked to examine and identify issues arising that contribute to vacancy and potential solutions. Towns were asked to focus on one specific area within the town centre, and on the potential for residential occupancy in particular.

The TCLI complements the Town and Village Renewal Scheme and the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund, and it is hoped that projects that emerge from the pilot will form part of the wider solution for the regeneration of many rural towns and villages. It is envisaged that the implementation of emerging projects could, subject to the quality of the proposals and the expected outcomes in terms of available residential properties, potentially be funded through the new Rural Regeneration Development Fund.

Overview of process to date

October 2018	Launch of the Town Centre Living Initiative
November 2018	The six towns are briefed on the details of the scheme
January 2019	Towns form teams to investigate their situation & begin work
May 2019	Interim progress reports are submitted by all towns
September 2019	Workshop with representatives from all six towns
November 2019	Updated reports on actions and findings submitted by each town
December 2019	Follow-up interviews conducted with representatives from each town
February 2020	Draft Final Report on the pilot scheme is presented to Department of Rural and Community Development

Methodology

The information recorded in this report is sourced from progress reports and presentations by the 6 participant local authorities, interviews carried out in December 2019, and a recording of the meeting of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Rural and Community Development on 13th November 2019. The descriptions of each pilot project in this report were reviewed by their respective local authorities in January 2020. The summary of the facilitated workshop is extracted from a record of outputs by Space Engagers dated the 29th of September 2019.

Please note that any vacancy rates included in the descriptions of the pilot projects have been provided by the participant local authorities and it may not be possible to compare figures between towns. Please refer to Appendix 2 'Notes on Key Terms' for more information on 'vacancy rate'.

The TCLI review adopted a case study approach as this allows for an analysis of both the particularity of each of the six towns and the many ways in which the towns face common challenges. Case study is a research strategy commonly used in a wide range of disciplines including urban studies and is suitable for the TCLI because the project is interested in specific examples of phenomena, requires a flexible approach and seeks innovative ideas. With case studies the emphasis is not on unearthing generalisations, but on understanding whether or not a particular instance in its context can be transferable to another context, building on the participant or reader's tacit knowledge in order to identify resonances or potential applicability to another context. It is therefore important to be clear that the findings of the six pilot towns cannot be generalised to definitively represent the situation across the island of Ireland. However, the findings can lead to suggestions for actions for future consideration and testing.

The report structure is as follows:

Key messages	Summary of the project, 6 pilot towns, issues arising and suggested action areas.
Six Towns: Reports	Summary reports on the pilot project and findings for each town.
Workshop summary	TCLI Workshop summary on the problem definition and potential solutions.
Discussion	Reflection and observations on the six pilot projects.
Synthesis	Synthesis of issues arising and suggestions for action areas under 5 themes.

Key messages

The Town Centre Living Initiative (TCLI) is a pilot scheme managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) where up to €100k has been made available to 6 participating towns to develop innovative proposals in response to challenges relating to vacancy or underuse of buildings and a common preference for living outside the town centre. It is hoped that emerging proposals for the towns will generate applications to the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) and that findings will be applicable to other towns throughout Ireland.

The TCLI was announced in October 2018. The towns have since come together for 5 progress meetings and a facilitated workshop, and made submissions to a Joint Oireachtas Committee on Rural and Community Development on 13th November 2019.

This report documents the activities and findings of each of the 6 towns and the facilitated workshop. A final section synthesizes the findings into issues arising and suggested action areas.

6 pilot towns

Each pilot project (listed below) is led by the relevant local authority and builds on existing efforts to revitalise the towns, providing an opportunity to continue close collaborations with Town Teams and local Regeneration Groups. Each local authority has taken their own bespoke approach in response to the different characters, histories, challenges and needs of each town. The projects all contribute to knowledge and insight, for example by engaging directly with individual property owners, and they demonstrate how productive a modest input of resources and a dedicated project team focused on the one town can be.

Ballinrobe includes a detailed study of adaptive reuse of town centre historic properties on 3 principal streets that demonstrates there is no return on investment; an exploration of systemic factors and potential policy relating to vacancy; a database on vacancy by floor; and engagement with individual property owners. The project will result in an exemplar project from design to completion.

Banagher includes a detailed survey of vacant property owners on Main Street that highlights the role of inheritance and protected structure legislation in persistent vacancy; puts forward proposals for innovative projects such as a community and enterprise building that will facilitate remote working and community-run tourist accommodation; and promotes an exemplar design for adaptive reuse of a typical historic building and associated backlands.

Boyle progresses the vision plan *Boyle 2040* that resulted from collaboration between the Council and Town Team. The project focuses on Main Street and recognises the potential of backlands facing onto the river; the need for maintenance of historic buildings; and the value of a quality public realm. A proposal to coordinate funding streams, for example relating to heritage, accessibility and energy efficiency is put forward.

Callan focuses on a narrow medieval street with high levels of vacancy and the adaptive reuse of 3 buildings, one of which is to be an exemplar for best practice in energy efficient deep retrofit and conservation. The buildings sit within a mini-masterplan that examines access and public realm issues. Findings highlight the role of systemic causes; the difficulty in figuring out ownership; and that existing buildings represent a store of embodied energy and carbon.

Cappoquin focuses on a compact historic urban block in the town centre and explores innovative architectural design solutions that will create new options for town centre living. A clear roadmap for the future includes an innovative development model; an incentive scheme bridging the gap between property values and development costs; a one-stop-shop for advice; and a regeneration entity working to a long term vision plan and design strategy.

Castleblayney focuses on central urban blocks and streets. The project prototypes a new mechanism for revitalisation where a dedicated person or team works directly with property owners on the ground as a mediator, facilitator and enabler. The project facilitated 3 participatory workshops that explored the idea that collaboration between property owners is key to addressing limitations and realising the potential of historic town centre properties.

Issues arising and suggested actions

Issues arising and the potential solutions in relation to vacancy or underuse of buildings and the lack of residential use in town centres are listed for each pilot town project. In this report the issues and potential solutions have been synthesised into 15 issues arising and suggested action areas. These are organised under 5 themes that emerged during the TCLI: Providing supports; Finances and resources; Imagination and vision; Confidence and motivation; and Approach. Please see summary tables overleaf.

The projects highlight that action is needed at all levels, including from national and local government to communities on the ground. The cross-cutting actions needed span multiple government departments and agencies.

It is evident that the pilot projects have generated a sense of momentum and expectation in the towns that must be maintained going forward in order to support and facilitate collaboration and practical measures to address the issues of vacancy and lack of residential use in town centres.

PROVIDING SUPPORTS

Issue arising: There is a lack of coordinated national support for towns

Suggested Action 1

Establish Ireland's Town Partnership

Issue arising: There is a lack of quality and accessible data and knowledge on our town centres

Suggested Action 2

Establish an evidence base and methodology for mapping and understanding Irish towns

Issue arising: Many property owners need help in bringing properties back into use

Suggested Action 3

Appoint dedicated Town Centre Officers and/or Management Team

Issue arising: Property owner dynamics can result in protracted vacancy or underuse

Suggested Action 4

Strengthen legal supports to facilitate easier and clearer ownership change

FINANCE & RESOURCES

Issue arising: The funding landscape is complex and incoherent

Suggested Action 5

Introduce simplified grants processes

Issue arising: The costs of reuse can be prohibitive

Suggested Action 6

Incentivise the use of vacant buildings through taxation strategies

Issue arising: There are no financial disincentives for under-use

Suggested Action 7

Explore financial disincentives for vacancy and underuse

Issue arising: Access to credit can be difficult

Suggested Action 8

Explore alternative models for access to finance for the adaptive reuse of vacant buildings

IMAGINATION & VISION

Issue arising: It can be difficult to envision how to live well in a town centre

Suggested Action 9

Develop, document and communicate a range of high quality adaptive reuse case studies in towns

Issue arising: The ways in which we traditionally deliver housing are not working for Irish towns

Suggested Action 10

Develop and support collaborative processes and community-led housing models

Issue arising: There is an opportunity to create town centres for everyone

Suggested Action 11

Reimagine and communicate how town centres can be high quality and desirable places to live, work and belong

CONFIDENCE & MOTIVATION

Issue arising: It can be difficult to have confidence in the future of the town centre

Suggested Action 12

Resource and support Local Authorities to invest in and demonstrate confidence in their towns

APPROACH

Issue arising: There is a need for systems thinking and a national programme

Suggested Action 13

Establish a cross-cutting Town Centre First Approach

Issue arising: Towns have a critical role in the climate emergency

Suggested Action 14

Support towns as centres for the national low carbon transition

Issue arising: Involving as many people as possible in processes of change is critical

Suggested Action 15

Develop best practice in participatory planning and co-design

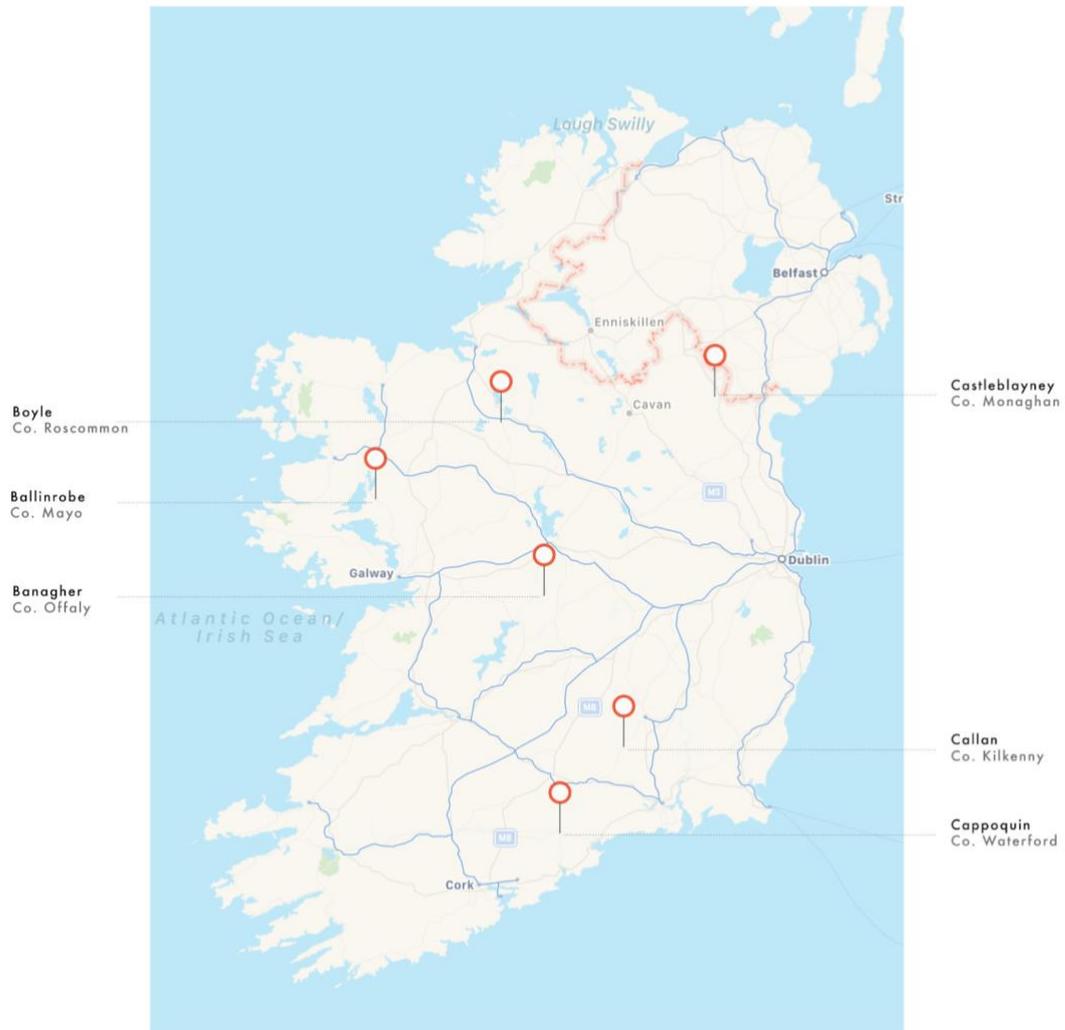
Summary matrix

	Ballinrobe	Banagher	Boyle	Callan	Cappoquin	Castleblayney
Population	2,786	1,760	2,568	2,475	699	3,607
Town Context – Current Situation	Key town for Mayo County Council with Public Realm plan and good community stakeholder engagement in place. Town has lost significant population.	Shannon for tourism & recreation; good levels of employment; community development group which has secured past funding. Tourists to Shannon don't use the town.	Historical assets, Water leisure, Good access. Very high residential vacancy in study area.	Historic assets, thriving arts community. High vacancy in centre (42% of vacant properties in town are on Bridge St).	Picturesque location; IDA business park; high no. of historic buildings. Key industries gone from town; no jobs for 3 rd level graduates.	Nearby lough, historic streets, country music culture, good community participation. Border town with Brexit challenges, lack of jobs, loss of young people.
Area Chosen	<u>Bridge St, Main St, Bowgate St</u> Mixed residential and commercial; narrow street proportions; four building typologies identified for investigation and redevelopment.	<u>Main Street</u> Mix of residential, commercial, and community units. Some quality vacant units and some landmark buildings. Long-term vacancy: most require complete renovation.	<u>Main Street</u> Architectural Conservation Area; protected structures; very few residential occupants; 3 storey terraces with residences over shops.	<u>Bridge St</u> Medieval core; narrow street dimensions; narrow plots; limited space to rear. 19 th century town extension with bigger, classical style buildings and market street. Mostly retail units. Poor vehicular access.	<u>Main Street, Market Square, and Green St</u> Whole block approach. Highest area of town vacancy. Residential, fine grained, narrow block with 2- and 3- storey houses with some fine 19 th century shop fronts.	<u>Market Square, Muckno St, Main St, Henry St</u> Historic core with high dereliction over a sustained period. Adjacent to lake amenities. Some protected structures.
Planning Context	Town Renewal Scheme study (2000); Conservation Plan for Bower Walk; Biodiversity Management Plan; Public Realm Plan; HTI and Free Market Re-Use Project.	Town Plan (2014); Town & Village Renewal Scheme (2018); Offaly County Development Plan 2014-20.	Boyle 2040 plan; Boyle Local Area Plan; Boyle Historic Town zone.	Callan Health Check (2018); Local Area Plan (2018).	Vacancy Survey (2018), Health Check; Development Strategy & Masterplan; Public Realm Plan currently being drafted.	Monaghan County Development Plan 2019-25; Castleblayney Public Realm & Economic Plan (2019); Monaghan Local Community Plan; Historic Landscape Plan (2012).
Project Approach	Build on Adaptive re-use study. Preliminary structural surveys carried out.	Built on work of Banagher Development Group.	Build on Boyle 2040 masterplan. Engagement with property owners.	Vacancy Survey. Explore potential for adaptive reuse of five buildings.	Identify focal block of buildings.	Preliminary data gathering. Appointment of consultants.

	Consultants hired to assess vacancy. Consultation with building owners. Vacancy mapping.	Surveyed Main St. and engagement with owners (successful). Prototype units designed. Applications for RRDF Cat 1 & 2.	Essential work seminar. Focus on River Boyle area. Developing plan for public realm works.	Appointed architects & conservation experts. Site assessment. Plan exemplar building and mobility plan.	Outreach to owners. Negotiate purchase of properties. Engage design consultants. Develop exemplar house.	Three clinics held: Listening, Capacity Building, Collaborating to Move Forward.
Future Plans	Workshop for town stakeholders in wake of TCLI Pilot findings. Adaptive re-use of exemplar building. Develop new tax initiatives. Identify sites for CPO.	Two planning applications to be developed. Advice Workshop planned.	Improvement of public realm. Preparing RRDF application. Completion of works on two key sites. Implement Destination Towns.	Redevelopment of energy-efficient exemplar building. Mobility Management Plan. Reassess Protected Structure status. Access funding from TVRS & RRDF.	Complete Development Strategy & Masterplan. Progress property purchase and carry out demonstration project. Trial one-stop-shop advice clinic.	RRDF Cat B funding submission. Restoration of several key structures. Continued engagement. Public Realm and Economic Plan delivery planned.
Reasons for vacancy	Land and property values. Property ownership dynamics. Cost of renovation & repair of town centre properties. Statutory risk acting as a deterrent to town centre development. Streets dominated by heavy traffic, negatively impacting residential amenity.	Issues re building regulations & planning permission. Inheritance tax deterrent. Protected structure regulations. Return on investment uncertain. Long-term vacancy & inertia. Difficulty obtaining finance for renovation.	Owners untraceable. Difficulty accessing mortgage for commercial building. Lack of collaboration among owners. Negative equity. Cost of repair (protected structures). No back gardens. Lack of employment in the area. Lack of accessible funding.	Age & condition of buildings (1830s). Unclear ownership. Limitation of tenure. Lack of access to buildings. Public realm & street life issues. Incompatible regulatory requirements.	Town loss of industry & employment. Lack of family life in town. Inconvenient parking. Buildings not for sale. Poor housing stock, too small. Refurbishment too expensive/economic return uncertain. Planning/Regulatory issues.	Lack of know-how on refurbishment. Inertia, lack of confidence. Problematic ownership dynamics. No return on investment. High cost of renovating historic buildings. Lack of existing opportunities & amenities in town. Lack of leadership to address issues. Lack of private amenity space.

Potential Solutions	Streamlining access to Funding Schemes. Harnessing the potential of digital mapping. Addressing statutory risk. Measures to address anti-social behaviour. Development of tourism. Restrict one-off housing. Financial incentives such as one-off loans.	Incentivise Redevelopment – Vacant Building Tax, Use-or-Lose, Low-Cost Loans, Multi-Annual Funding. Identify further role for SEAI funding schemes in towns.	Public realm improvements to attract families. Connection with multiple funders to provide packaged supports. Provide guide to taking on such properties. Promote to diaspora. Architectural advice from departments. Promote buy-in from banks. Adapt “repair and leasing” scheme for owners.	Prioritising a collaborative approach. Making redevelopment economically viable.	Set up regeneration entity. Use a plan-driven approach. Identify properties suitable for group redevelopment. Seek to reduce soft costs. Investigate an incentive scheme. Complete a demonstration project.	Highlight benefits of town living. Appoint support worker for owners. Develop collaboration between owners. Tax and funding incentives. Exemplar projects. Social enterprise potential. Collaboration between sectors. Reinforce LA leadership.
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Six Pilot Towns: Reports



Map of the six pilot towns prepared by Shaffrey Architects.

Map base: Apple Maps.

Ballinrobe, County Mayo

Population:	2,786
Vacancy Rate:	15% residential vacancy within the study area (excluding holiday homes)
Participants:	Mayo County Council, consultants, property owners



Ballinrobe was first established as a market town in 1605. It is strategically located in the south of County Mayo, mid-way between Castlebar and Galway where seven roads converge. The town's situation along the River Robe provides a popular Riverside Walk and other cultural highlights include a 14th century Augustinian Friary and the Harry Clarke windows of St. Mary's Church. The town centre contains a central urban block of six hectares bounded by four main streets which feature consistent building frontages and, like many small Irish towns, relatively narrow street proportions and traffic congestion.

The residential vacancy rate in the town is 18.9% for the town overall, excluding holiday homes. The equivalent vacancy rate for the pilot study area is 15%. This includes large vacant apartment buildings. The dereliction rate is estimated as 6% for the pilot study area.

Pilot Project – Ballinrobe

Pilot study area



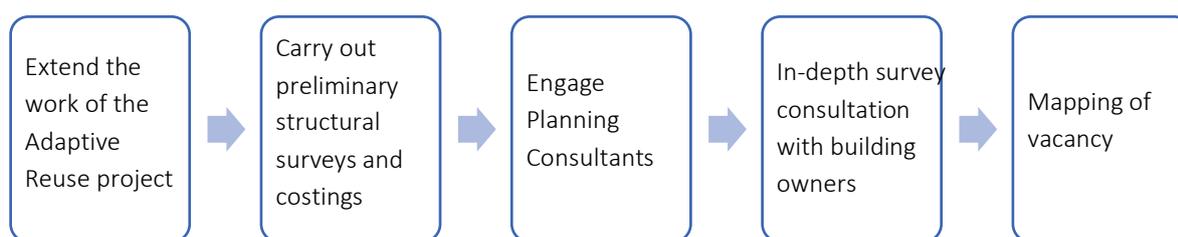
The chosen pilot study area encompasses Bowgate Street, Main Street, and Bridge Street. These streets are part of an area of the town particularly affected by vacancy and dereliction. Along these streets, four building typologies were used as case studies to examine the challenges and opportunities of adaptive reuse.

Planning context

Previous studies carried out include a Town Renewal Scheme study (2000); a Conservation Plan for the Bower Walk (2013); a Biodiversity Management Plan (2018); a Public Realm Plan (2018); projects carried out under the Historic Towns Initiative scheme; and an Adaptive Reuse Project carried out in collaboration with Free Market.¹ The Public Realm Plan includes key objectives around the sustainable reuse of existing buildings and a need to encourage town centre living.

¹ Free Market is a collaborative architecture practice established to research, design and deliver the Irish pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2018 which explored public space in Irish towns.

Pilot project approach



The 2018 Adaptive Reuse Study proved useful as a basis for the pilot project. This study sought to highlight the potential of town centre adaptive reuse, to encourage and assist building owners and occupiers, and to investigate the potential of long-term vacant buildings to be reused for residential and mixed use. Three case study building typologies were selected and outline design proposals developed, including for commercial uses on the ground floors with residential above.² Statutory planning processes, building regulations compliance, energy efficiency measures, and fire safety and disability access certificates were taken into consideration. Owners of the buildings were engaged with as part of the process. Subsequently, a fourth building was included in the study, which has been purchased by Mayo County Council.

With TCLI funding, Mayo County Council commissioned preliminary structural surveys of the buildings. These structural surveys then allowed the Council to appoint D.L. Martin & Partners to prepare comparative estimates for the reuse of three existing buildings compared to the cost of providing similar accommodation on greenfield sites. They found that the cost of refurbishing an existing building is generally less expensive (per square metre) than providing a building of similar size on a greenfield site. However, the cost of providing equivalent accommodation in a purpose-designed new building that is more efficiently laid out (providing the same accommodation but over a smaller area) is often lower than refurbishment of the existing building. Table A below summarizes the findings from this study.

	Area m ²	Existing site: Refurbish and some new build	New build: Greenfield site	New build: Efficient residential areas (adjusted total area)
Bridge St.	696	€1,430,000	€1,580,000	€1,290,000 (566m ²)
Main St.	515	€840,000	€1,180,000	€890,000 (395m ²)
Bowgate St.	425	€760,000	€970,000	€710,000 (312m ²)

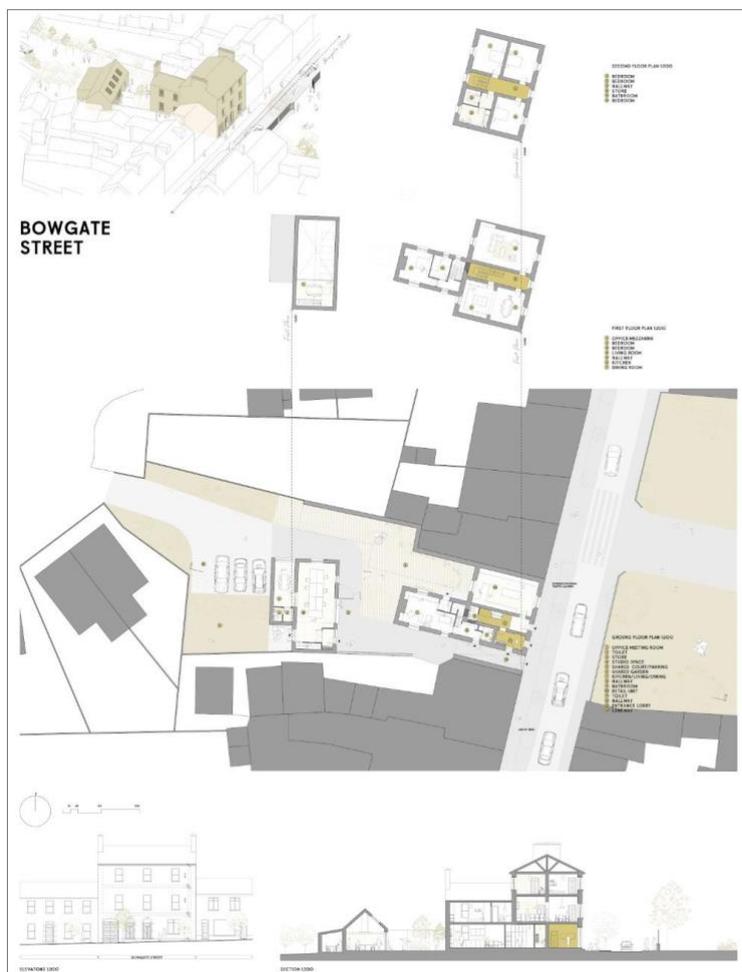
Table A: Costs associated with the adaptive reuse of 3 buildings in Ballinrobe.

² Note: conclusions from this study can only be drawn in relation to the buildings in question. Other buildings or other locations may not show the same results.

In terms of a return on investment, the preliminary order of costs for the adaptive reuse of each property revealed a cost over-run of between 14% and 38% (with an average of approximately 28%) relative to the final value of the adapted building.

In July 2019, Future Analytics Consulting Ltd. (FAC) were appointed to undertake a detailed analysis and explore issues surrounding residential use and vacancy (economic, social, environmental and cultural). FAC were to propose policies (national and local) and incentives to encourage town centre residential use, and to identify opportunities to guide and prompt public and private investment.

FAC carried out extensive surveys with owners of vacant buildings in Ballinrobe, and presented a draft report in December 2019. This survey has also enabled the development of a fully electronic ArcGIS database with each property geo-located, recording its vacancy or dereliction status by storey, along with survey photographs and comments attached.



Ballinrobe Adaptive ReUse Study with Free Market. This study looked at the potential to adapt three long-term vacant buildings on Main Street, Bowgate Street and Bridge Street for a range of residential uses. In this proposal, the existing building, a protected structure, is adapted to accommodate a large family home, smaller dwelling, and live/work studio. A large garden and off-street parking are accessible from the laneway and rear access.

Ongoing or future activities

- A workshop for building owners, residents, and stakeholders in the town centre for sharing the results of the pilot scheme investigations and working together with local stakeholders to develop tactics for the redevelopment of town centre buildings, including accessing supports and resources to make building adaptation more achievable.
- Adaptive reuse of the case study building owned by Mayo County Council to provide for retail use on the ground floor and social housing dwellings on the floors above. The Council will work through the statutory processes of Parts B (Fire Safety), L (Conservation of Fuel and Energy) and M (Access and Use), with a view to using this process and building as an exemplar.
- Formulation of outline tax incentive proposals to address the disparity between the costs of adaptive reuse and subsequent market values (return on investment), as identified in the case studies.
- The identification of potential sites for CPO or joint public/private initiatives.
- Advance traffic studies and proposals to address traffic congestion in the town centre.
- Capital funding applications for public realm projects.
- Development of measures to combat anti-social behaviour in the town, including reporting mechanisms, passive surveillance and education.

Findings - Ballinrobe

Issues arising

Reasons for vacancy include:

- The value of land and properties do not justify the cost of renovation.
- Property ownership dynamics.
- Cost of renovation and repair of town centre properties.
- Regulatory requirements acting as a deterrent to town centre development, for example fire or health and safety regulations.
- Streets dominated by heavy traffic, negatively impacting residential amenity.
- Health of the local economy.
- Patterns of dwelling in recent years have tended to favour newly constructed dwellings in suburban multi-unit developments, or one-off houses in hinterlands.
- Lack of parking.
- Lack of confidence in town centre property market.
- Derelict and vacant buildings have impacted the town negatively, affecting perceptions of the town, local confidence and, through lack of investment, the condition of Ballinrobe's built heritage.
- Anti-social behaviour in the town centre at weekends.

Potential solutions

- A strategic approach to funding:
The council team in Ballinrobe noted during interviews that there were so many different funding schemes it can be challenging to navigate all of them. They also observed that these schemes

were very time intensive in terms of preparing an application. They had found that the best way to manage the schemes and harness the potential funding was to put long-term plans in place – such as a Public Realm Plan – and then strategically plan for and target those schemes which would most directly fund elements of that plan’s delivery.

- Better data on vacancy:
As part of their vacancy survey in Ballinrobe and three other towns in Mayo, consultants Future Analytics Consulting developed a set of maps of the vacant properties in order to geolocate all such properties in mappable form. Using their own app, they were able to map dereliction at different levels, making this available digitally so that the Council can generate maps showing different levels of data. The team suggested that a national standard of mapping would be very useful, so that everyone could map baseline data in the same way, which could be used to measure actions and progress.
- Addressing regulatory risk:
Council architects running the pilot noted that while it is undoubtedly complex to achieve statutory compliance in every respect in adapting these buildings, relaxation of the regulations is not really feasible.
- Build up a set of case studies:
The complexity of planning and funding systems is restricting development. A proposed action to address this would be to build up a set of case studies which could be used to identify successful approaches and knowledge sharing. The importance of looking at how other countries manage these challenges was also noted, for example in Italy, France and Scotland.
- Introduce measures to address anti-social behaviour.
- Development of the tourism offering.
- Greater efforts to achieve an appropriate social mix in future developments.
- Financial mechanisms such as low rate loans, tax incentives, and working in partnership with the Council.

Banagher, County Offaly

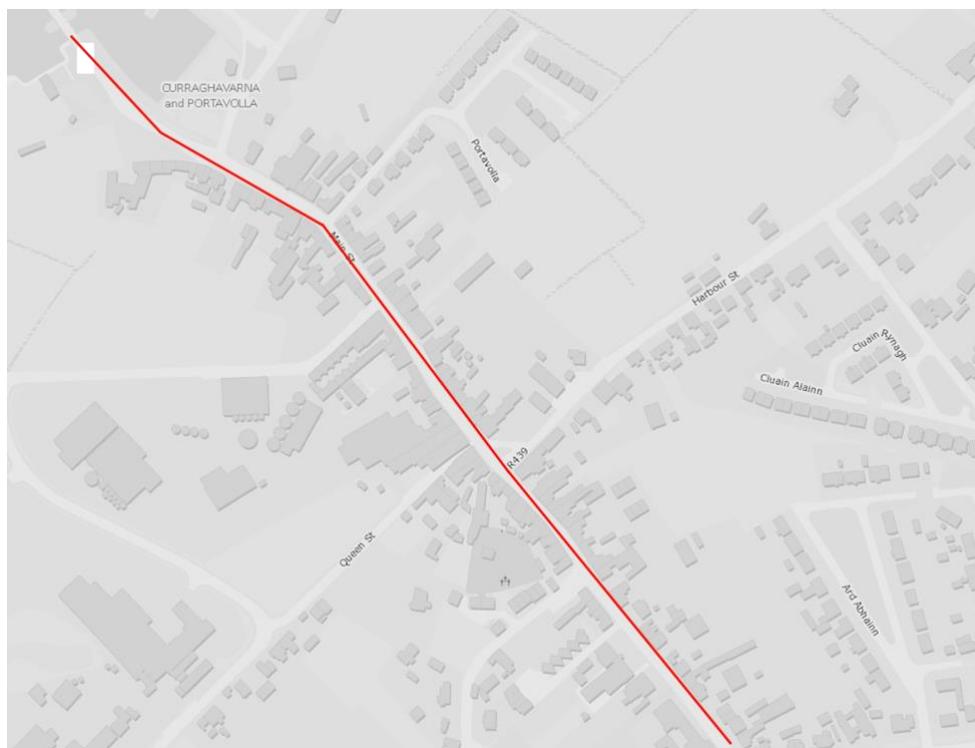
Population:	1,760
Vacancy Rate:	15%
Participants:	Offaly County Council Architects, Banagher Development Group, property owners



Banagher is located on the banks of the River Shannon in a strategic position that in the past generated many thriving businesses in the town. At one time, Banagher had a population of almost 3,000, though this has now almost halved. Today, the town has good local employment in a number of key enterprises such as Banagher Concrete and a number of cruise-liner businesses at the local marina. The town has a core of well-functioning services, including two well-established schools (a primary school of 250 pupils and a secondary school of almost 600), a bank, credit union, post office, supermarket, and library.

Pilot Project - Banagher

Pilot study area

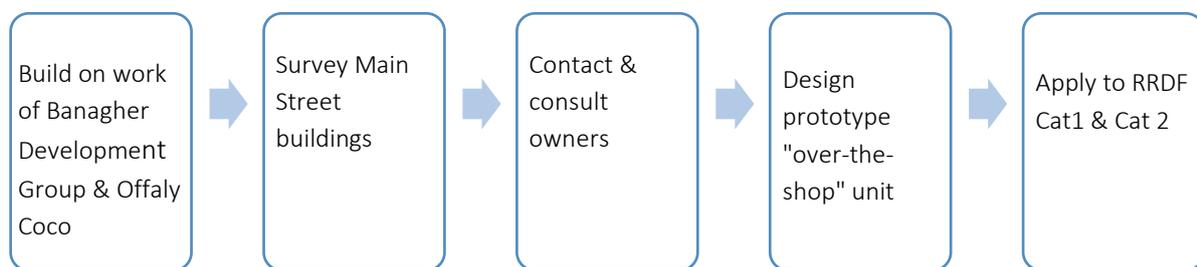


The Banagher team focused on Main Street in the town, running from the Marina area to the town square, featuring 156 buildings. A number of vacant properties are prominent on the street, including 20 residential units, 3 commercial units, a hotel, and a significant three-storey property containing commercial units and office space. This street forms the commercial and retail core of the town but its high level of vacancy has a negative impact on the streetscape. There are a number of quality vacant properties that have the potential for re-occupation as private residences or for use in the hospitality industry. Visitors coming from the West and the Marina get their first impression of the town as they travel up Main Street.

Planning context

The maintenance and improvement of the town centre is a strategic aim of Offaly County Council's Town Plan for Banagher (2014) and further improvements to the streetscape would complement the public realm enhancement works recently completed under the Town and Village Renewal Scheme 2018. Offaly's County Development Plan 2014-2020 also highlights that the Council would like to facilitate individuals in the creation of employment opportunities for themselves and others, and this aspect of the County's planning can be seen in the town's plan to develop an incubator/digital hub in one of the long term vacant premises in the town centre. The Council supports the development of incubator units providing work space for start-up businesses in appropriately zoned areas in the town.

Pilot project approach



The pilot team in Banagher were able to build upon existing work by the Banagher Development Group and Offaly County Council in order to gain a more specific understanding of the levels of vacancy, the reasons behind it, the barriers to reuse of these buildings, and what might be done to assist redevelopment. The Banagher Development Group, which has proven very successful in developing improvement projects for the town in the past, was involved in the process.

Members of the County Council began work by surveying the buildings on Main Street, identifying which buildings were vacant using initial data provided by the Offaly County Council Vacant Homes Officer. The properties were photographed, linked to Eircodes, and the owners identified. Some buildings assumed to be vacant were on closer inspection, found to be in use. Using local knowledge, they managed to contact 16 of the owners. A survey was developed for investigating the experiences of those owners and their knowledge pertaining to the vacant buildings. There was a high level of engagement in all cases, especially where property owners were local or from the vicinity. Owners were forthcoming with information on the properties, the reasons for their vacancy. The owners were also very enthusiastic about the project and any potential benefits to the town that might come from it.



Banagher “Living Over the Shop” study. As part of the Banagher pilot project, a design was explored for a typical vacant building on a long narrow plot, to convert it to use as a family home, with large private open space, off street parking and home office/remote working potential.

The Council team also worked to develop a detailed design for one building typology as an example of “living over the shop”, illustrating how a typical town centre building could be converted to modern family accommodation.

A Category 1 application to the Rural Regeneration Development Fund (RRDF) was made in August 2019 to purchase and develop the 3 storey town centre building on Main Street as a community facility, digital hub, office accommodation, meeting rooms and exhibition space. Offaly County Council have since negotiated the purchase of the unit.

Ongoing or future activities

- **Two Planning Applications:** The initial Category 1 funding application to the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund submitted by the Council was unsuccessful, but the team intends to re-apply with a more developed submission. This new application is for the development of a Digital Hub/Library/Exhibition space to be housed in the existing vacant three-storey building on Main Street. There is a sense that this innovative reuse could energise the town, attract remote workers to live in the town centre, and provide a strong amenity anchor function for the whole town population. A second proposal under the same funding stream is currently being considered, which seeks to develop an existing ten-unit development into a community-run self-catering accommodation project. This application will also include improvements to the currently derelict hotel in the town centre, regeneration of the marina, and public realm works.
- **Advice Workshop:** The actions carried out under the Scheme have helped to raise awareness of the assets of the town. Because the pilot highlighted the particular need for support and advice around Protected Structures and how to go about adapting them for reuse, the Council is planning an open evening with a “one-stop-shop” format to offer specific advice from a

Conservation Architect. This event will be targeted at owners and stakeholders and give information on supports for redeveloping vacant properties.

Findings - Banagher

Issues arising

The pilot team in Banagher worked very closely with a number of building owners, town stakeholders and the Banagher Development Group, and were able to develop a nuanced understanding of vacancy in the town centre.

Reasons for vacancy include:

- Issues around building regulations and planning permissions.
- Legal disputes relating to rights-of-way.
- A reluctance to sell inherited buildings and a fear around inheritance tax if the property is sold.
- Owners of protected structures are reluctant to carry out works as they fear they will be unduly restricted in their plans and the potential costs involved could make projects unviable.
- Prospective property developers voiced worries about the challenge of creating viable investments were they to develop their properties as the return on investment through rental is not sufficient.
- The cost of purchase/refurbishment is relatively more expensive than purchasing an equivalent out of town or suburban property.
- There is little to discourage holding on to empty properties.
- Some properties have been left vacant for long periods of time and have now become uninhabitable and will be very costly to repair.
- It has been challenging to identify available finance to carry out necessary repairs.
- There are a number of “over-the-shop” properties which are inhabited on the first floor but have vacant commercial units on the ground floor due to the difficulty in finding tenants or suitable businesses.

In addition, the following issues were observed:

- The Repair and Leasing Scheme is not popular and considered impractical and too restrictive among the owners surveyed.
- Some properties that are so dilapidated as to appear vacant are in fact occupied, but in need of urgent renovation works.
- Despite the level of vacancy in the town, there are limited accommodation options available to tourists, including a shortage of hotel accommodation.
- Some houses are being used as holiday homes, and as such are not technically vacant but are in use only two or three weeks a year.

Potential solutions

Incentivising Redevelopment:

The team identified the need for incentives to encourage adaptive reuse and reduce the pressure on demand for rural one off housing. Incentives put forward include a Vacant Building Tax; a requirement to “use or lose” inherited buildings; low cost loans; or tax write offs of rental income for a period of 10 years. One suggested mechanism for the delivery of these incentives could be the designation of a specific area to avail of a grant or taxation scheme, to complement the existing social housing initiatives.

The importance of making multi-annual funding available was also highlighted as a means to give clarity and confidence to those willing to take on the adaptive reuse of protected structures.

Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) grants:

The SEAI offers funding for community based projects under the Better Energy Communities scheme. This is Ireland’s national retrofit initiative aimed at upgrading building stock and facilities to high standards of energy efficiency and renewable energy usage, thereby reducing fossil fuel usage, energy costs and greenhouse gas emissions. All projects have to be community oriented with a cross-sectoral approach. Applications could be made for groups of properties which meet the criteria in the project areas.

Boyle, County Roscommon

Population:	2,568
Vacancy Rate:	80% residential vacancy in town core
Participants:	Roscommon County Council, Boyle Town Team, Property Owners



Boyle town and its environs had a population of 2,568 in the 2016 census. The population has declined since 1831, when Boyle town centre would have been a much smaller, compact area with a population of 3,433. The Georgian town would have been a much more vibrant and prosperous place due to the density of buildings, uses and consequent interactions which this compact settlement pattern would have created. Located in North Roscommon on the Boyle River, Boyle is rich in historical assets and water/outdoor adventure, for example at King House, Boyle Abbey and Lough Key Forest and Activity Park. There are good access links by road/rail. The residential vacancy level in the Town Core (the study area of the *Boyle 2040* plan) is 80%.

Pilot Project – Boyle

Pilot study area



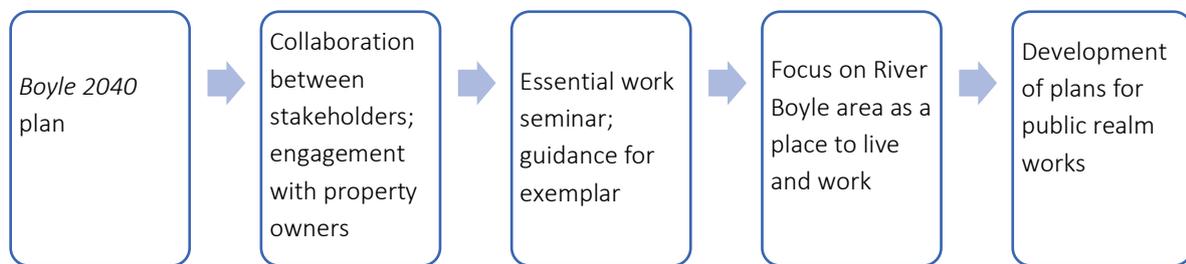
The chosen focus in Boyle is Main Street, which is part of the study area for the *Boyle 2040* plan, and has therefore already been subject to in-depth examination.

Planning context

The town's extensive engagement in developing the *Boyle 2040* plan has been a key influence in this pilot. Past experience has shown that experiments in peripheral developments have displaced investment from the main streets of the town and *Boyle 2040* envisions a gradual reversal of this process through attracting people back to live and invest in the core town centre areas.

Main Street is designated an Architectural Conservation Area in the current Boyle Local Area Plan and the block is also within the Boyle Historic Town Zone of Archaeological Potential on the Record of Monuments and Places. Several buildings within the street are listed on the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage or are protected structures, providing an opportunity to examine the challenges involved in the adaptive reuse of such properties.

Pilot project approach



The *Boyle 2040* plan advocates a town centre first approach to the location of new urban communities as well as public and private investment.

Roscommon County Council worked very closely with the Boyle Town Team in preparing *Boyle 2040* and this engagement has continued during the TCLI pilot project and as related projects have come on stream. The TCLI funding has, combined with Historic Towns Initiative funding, facilitated wider collaboration, for example with property owners and the Heritage Council. Engagement with property owners has taken place on an individual basis and in a group. This has included advice on essential maintenance and guidance on outline steps for the renovation of one property as an exemplar.



Boyle 2040 design study. Part of the *Boyle 2040* plan is the regeneration of the backlands and long plots leading to the river as a way to densify the town core and address the river. This massing study explores this potential. Buildings coloured yellow represent the “Activated Street Wall”; orange buildings represent the ‘New Backland Spaces’; red buildings represent ‘Key Attractions’; brick-coloured ground planes represent New Public Spaces; and the dark green coloured blocks represent ‘Urban Expansion’.

The redevelopments achieved and ongoing under Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) funding (including TCLI) in Boyle are centred around improving the public realm associated with the adjacent River Boyle area with the aim of making it more attractive to live, work and invest in. Many of the properties on Main Street back on to the River Boyle and the riverside pathway, creating opportunities for redevelopment to the rear of these properties facing onto the River Boyle.

Projects include:

- The Boyle Cycle Corridor, currently being completed using funding from the Fáilte Ireland “Destination Towns” scheme,³ links Lough Key Forest and Activity Park with its 270,000 visitors through to Boyle town centre, passing the regional and nationally significant assets of Boyle Abbey and King House.
- The redevelopment of the old Royal Hotel site with associated riverside promenade, acoustic shell and kayak launch point is immediately adjacent to the study area.
- An Historic Towns Initiative (HTI) for the southern side of Main Street provided an incentive for owners to tastefully improve their street frontages using a heritage conservation-led approach.

During the consultations with owners, the concern over the poor state of the public realm in this area was raised as a disincentive to living and doing business on this street. Public realm improvements, allied with creating a “defined approach” to this culturally significant area, will be part of the next project for the continued development of the town.

³ Destination Towns is a Fáilte Ireland scheme which helps Irish towns to develop their tourism potential.

Ongoing or future activities

- Improvement of footpaths and public realm on the street.
- Application to the RRDF for Public Realm improvements in the wider area to address barriers to wanting to live in an area which has suffered from decades of dereliction.
- Completion of work on the Royal Hotel site and Cycle Corridor which will impact on the attractiveness and permeability of the area.
- Implement the Destination Towns project which was announced in December 2019 and will improve linkages from the pilot study area to a number of key tourist attractions, including Lough Key Forest and Activity Park.
- Work with the Town Team to promote the pilot study area and wider town for the relocation of families.

Findings - Boyle

Issues arising

For the team in Boyle, the aim of the pilot project was to identify both the macro and micro level issues impacting on the low residential occupancy in the town centre. From their consultations and work so far, a sample of the issues arising relating to vacancy are:

- Properties bought for investment several years ago where it is difficult to trace the owner.
- Properties not transferred following the death of an owner due to there being no will.
- If an owner uses the lower floor for commercial use they are not eligible for a mortgage for the overall property.
- Lack of “community” amongst owners resulting in high costs for maintenance when operating on an individual basis.
- Uncertainty relating to the structural integrity of the building until works commence.
- Age profile of owners.
- Complications and cost when properties are in the Architectural Conservation Area and/or are designated protected structures.
- Properties are stuck in probate.
- Lack of finance to renovate properties.
- Properties are in negative equity.
- It is difficult to make a return on investment.
- In a number of cases the lack of access to the rear of the properties and/or no garden limits the attractiveness for families.
- Preference for suburban living with access to own garden.
- Complaints about the public realm/footpath conditions in the area.
- Lack of adequate range of employment opportunities in the town to encourage people back who have skills in new areas (in particular for young people).

Potential Solutions

Overall, the funding received across the 3 programmes of DRCD, along with *Boyle 2040*, is leading to a new sense of optimism in Boyle. It is leading to people with and without a connection to the town making

enquiries both to the Roscommon Planning Department and Local Enterprise Office. Work on the pilot has identified the need for the following:

- A programme of incentives/funding to attract people in to renovate and live in the town centre.
- Continued development of the public realm and civic spaces to allow good quality shared spaces for families.
- Connection with SEAI and other potential funders to provide a package of supports for the renovation of properties.
- A step-by-step guide to the issues when you take over/purchase a property and an understanding of what works can be carried out without massive investment.⁴
- Promotion to the diaspora of the area who may be encouraged to come back to former family-connected town.
- Access to best practice examples from outside Ireland, where other models have worked in other locations.
- Access to expertise from Irish sources, such as the senior architect from the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht who was available during the pilot project, to consult on the on-the-ground reality of projects ongoing in Irish towns.
- Presentation and buy-in from banks to support people to renovate.
- The model used to develop the Repair and Leasing Scheme, but for private owners and developers, would be worth exploring.

⁴ The Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government has published a guide addressing some aspects of this: [Bringing Back Homes](#) (2018).

Callan, County Kilkenny

Population:	2,475
Vacancy Rate:	16%
Participants:	Kilkenny County Council Architect and Conservation Officer, Callan Town Team, consultants, property owners



Callan is a medieval town and one of five district towns in Kilkenny. Located on the banks of the King's River, it is built around the focal points of St. Mary's Church and the Augustinian Friary and Motte. Callan's narrow winding streets reflect this heritage. A 19th century extension to the town features classically styled buildings and a market street.

Contemporary Callan has an established Town Team and a very engaged community of artists.

Pilot Project - Callan

Pilot study area



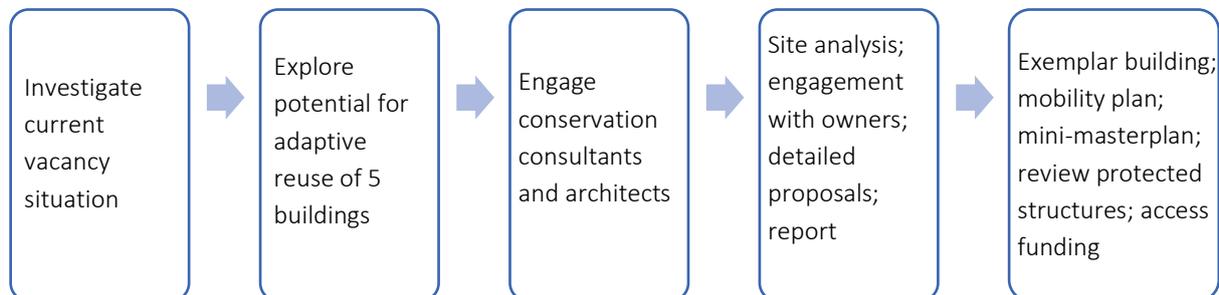
The medieval core of Callan encompasses Mill Street, Upper and Lower Bridge Streets, Coyne Street, Mill Lane and Clodine Lane. Street widths are narrow and building heights are generally two to three storeys. There is limited private open space to the rear of the buildings that front onto the main thoroughfares. Although the dereliction of historic properties has become a problem in recent decades, the character of the buildings here continues to have significant architectural merit and group value. The majority of the buildings within this area were built in the 19th century, with the associated characteristics of narrow building plots (5-7.5 metres), vertical emphasis fenestration, smooth render building finishes and traditional shop fronts.

Upper Bridge Street was chosen as the particular focus of the pilot project. A Health Check of Callan by Future Analytics Consulting in 2018 identified Bridge Street and the extent of vacant buildings on it as a key area of interest. The Health Check revealed that Bridge St. accounts for 42% of vacant properties in the town.

Planning context

The Callan Health Check (2018) fed in to the formation of the Callan Local Area Plan. This plan features Built Heritage Management Objectives designed to protect and enhance the historic character of the town. The objectives include the retention of existing buildings, the sensitive restoration of protected structures, and a recognition of the embodied energy to be found within the historic buildings of the town.

Pilot project approach



In order to identify opportunities to develop vacant properties for residential use on Upper Bridge St, the project team (led by Kilkenny County Council and including Callan Town Team) prioritised the investigation of the current vacancy situation in the town. This involved identifying and contacting as many of the building owners as possible, using information gathered during the Callan Health Check (2018) and more informal local knowledge. Identifying ownership was not straightforward as the majority of properties were unregistered. This investigation showed that ten of twenty-seven buildings in the Bridge Street area were fully vacant and that many of these were protected structures. Following on from this investigation it was decided to examine the potential for adaptive reuse of five particular buildings with three different owners.

The key themes of heritage and energy were identified as critical to an approach to unlock the potential of the buildings. Kilkenny County Council recognises the potential for deep retro-fitting of existing buildings to achieve a B2 BER rating without undermining the inherent character and cultural or material

value, and the potential for towns to play a meaningful role in the transition to a low carbon economy and society. The pilot project also aims to revitalise the street during both the day and night.

The Council then worked with Carrig Conservation, a consultancy service specialising in energy efficiency retrofit and conservation of historic buildings, and developed a brief for architectural services which was tendered. Carr Cotter & Naessens (CCN) won the tender to develop an energy efficient design approach to the five buildings and an outline public realm plan for Bridge Street. CCN carried out site assessments, maintained stakeholder engagement, and developed detailed proposals for selected properties where owners expressed an interest in redevelopment. Plans for 3 buildings have emerged from the pilot. A draft report has been prepared with rough cost estimates.



Callan Adaptive Reuse Study. Concept designs were developed for three typological buildings to examine how they might be reused and upgraded while maintaining their historical character and improving their energy efficiency.

Ongoing or future activities

- **Exemplar Building:**
Kilkenny County Council has identified the need to address the energy efficiency upgrading of traditional buildings in a sympathetic manner. Kilkenny County Council would like to support the demonstration of energy efficiency upgrades to their own building stock whilst also supporting the general public and other local authorities with the best options for traditional energy efficiency upgrades. A number of objectives of Kilkenny County Council's Climate Change Adaptation Strategy (2019 – 2024) highlight this important issue. The Council will apply for funding to secure purchase of one of the buildings identified during the pilot project in order to redevelop it in line with CCN's plans. This proposal will be subject to the feasibility of any proposed future use within the context of the street and in relation to other infrastructure projects in the town (see Mobility Management Plan below). The exemplar building will aim to test the process of adaptive reuse of a protected structure, trialling best-practice techniques in energy-efficient deep retro-fit and conservation, and providing much needed research and development in this area.
- **Mobility Management Plan:**

In the course of the pilot project work it was discovered that one particular obstacle to the redevelopment of key buildings is the lack of parking and easy access. A Mobility Management Plan has been tendered, with the aim of identifying measures to free up traffic movement, parking provision and relieve congestion. This task has been prioritised as a necessary tool to inform all future planning for the town centre.

- Working with owners of the 3 buildings:
Once the Mobility Management Plan is underway, the findings will feed into the preparation of a “Mini-Masterplan”. The Design Team will work closely with the current owners of a number of key properties to release access to the backlands of the properties. The plan would include new parking and access for the buildings.
- Re-assessing protected structure status:
The Kilkenny County Council Conservation Officer is evaluating the protected structure status of the buildings on Bridge Street to see if any should be de-listed. The buildings will still be subject to the requirements of an Architecture Conservation Area. In many cases the buildings have few remaining internal features, so full protection may be unnecessary.
- Submitting applications to the Town & Village Renewal Scheme and the RRDF for projects including the “Friary Complex Library and Arts Centre” and the King’s River Improvements and other amenities.

Findings - Callan

Issues arising

The reasons identified for the vacancy levels on Upper Bridge Street are complex and challenging. Extensive engagement with property owners and other town stakeholders revealed the following issues:

- Age and condition of buildings: most date from the 1830’s and providing a modern standard of accommodation requires significant refurbishment and investment.
- Ownership dynamics: the original owner may be deceased with no clear instructions in relation to inheritance; the title may be unclear; legal disputes leaving the property “in limbo”; multiple family members may be involved and some may have no interest in the maintenance or investment required.
- Limitations of tenure: leases may involve conditions and limits that are not attractive to prospective residents.
- Lack of access to the buildings: no dedicated parking space on hostile, traffic congested, narrow streets; inadequate access to the rear of the buildings.
- Street life is lacking: retail business has moved away from the street towards more peripheral locations or online; quality of the public realm has declined.
- Statutory compliance requirements: modern space standards cannot be met by the smaller buildings; security, access and fire safety, for example in mixed use buildings; and conservation requirements render refurbishment impractical. Supporting infrastructure is required to facilitate the regeneration of the street and the historic core.

In addition, Kilkenny County Council makes the following observations:

- Town centre residential regeneration needs supporting measures that relate to mobility, parking, backlands, accessibility and public realm. Vacancy and low numbers of people living in town centres cannot be viewed in isolation from other systemic factors.
- Funding must be leveraged from various sources for supporting infrastructure and for different aspects of an individual or group building project.

Potential solutions

Taking a collaborative approach:

Early on in the work of the scheme, the Kilkenny County Council team identified a number of key stakeholders whose engagement would be crucial: building owners, elected representatives, the Callan Town Team, engaged local citizens, Approved Housing Bodies, Kilkenny Leader Partnership, SEAI, the Three Counties Energy Agency, the Heritage Council, local arts organisations, and various government departments including the Office of the Revenue Commissioners. The pilot project has presented an unparalleled opportunity for the town to initiate significant engagement with these stakeholders and, crucially, with the owners of buildings on Upper Bridge Street. This has created a sense of momentum in the town and allowed the Council to demonstrate its commitment to improving the area.

Making redevelopment economically viable:

In its investigation of costs for the adaptive reuse of buildings on Upper Bridge Street, it became apparent to the Callan project team that the high cost of the specific proposals developed would require in-depth analysis. They found that the cost of adaptive reuse per building was often higher than standard costs used for the provision of new-build social housing per unit. However, the reuse of these buildings is socially and culturally desirable, and this must be taken into account. Callan is due to grow in population and the revitalisation of the town centre will be crucial to the future of the town. Greenfield sites also have associated costs related to the development of servicing infrastructure such as roads, public lighting, water, waste water and digital connectivity. Financial and regulatory incentives are therefore a practical step to ensure that some town centre dwellings can be delivered successfully back into the housing market.

Cappoquin, County Waterford

Population:	699
Vacancy Rate:	40% in pilot area
Participants:	Waterford County Council Architects Studio, Cappoquin Community Development Company, consultants



Cappoquin is a market and estate town positioned at a crossing point on the River Blackwater at the foothills of the Knockmealdown Mountains. The town was once an important economic and social centre in west Waterford. The town has an impressive industrial heritage that was based on food production, associated crafts and trades, light engineering, carriage works and foundry, all of which are now defunct. The population has declined from a peak of over 2,200 people in the 1840s to around 700 or so today. Urban living has been largely replaced by suburban and rural re-settlement leading to the decline of traditional town life and consequent loss of value and maintenance of the building stock.

In terms of employment, Cappoquin has an IDA business park with approximately 200 jobs, approximately 18 retail businesses on the Main Street, and a Glanbia Agribusiness Depot in the town centre. The town has a modern national school and community centre, childcare facilities and local walking trails and water sports.

Pilot Project - Cappoquin

Pilot study area



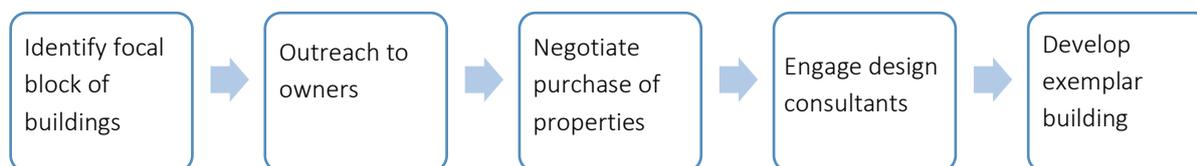
The Cappoquin team chose to focus on Main Street, Market Square, and Green Street. While the overall vacancy rate in the town is approximately 17%, these streets have a vacancy rate of 40%. These are predominantly residential streets, with narrow urban blocks and plot divisions. Main Street comprises predominately of two- and three-storey terraced houses with classical proportions. There are some excellent examples of 19th Century shop fronts on Main Street.

Planning context

The recent merger of Waterford City and County Councils led to a reassessment of how the Council could support and work with towns and villages across the county. The Cappoquin Community Development Company has been active in the town and their projects have laid the groundwork for the pilot project actions. For example, an existing Vacancy and Dereliction study by Cappoquin Community Development Company informed the pilot project. The Waterford City and County Council Rural Development Officer carried out a Town Health Check prior to the pilot project and there is a draft Public Realm Plan which will feed into the new Development Strategy and Masterplan being prepared for Cappoquin. The Tomar Trust provided financial support for this work.

Landmark buildings within the townscape include an early 19th Century Catholic Church, a Church of Ireland, Cappoquin House and Richmond House. A small central square with a traditional market house remains a focal point. The National Inventory of Architectural Heritage (NIAH) has recorded over 70 sites within the town of which 32 are protected structures. The town therefore has an extraordinarily rich built heritage.

Pilot project approach

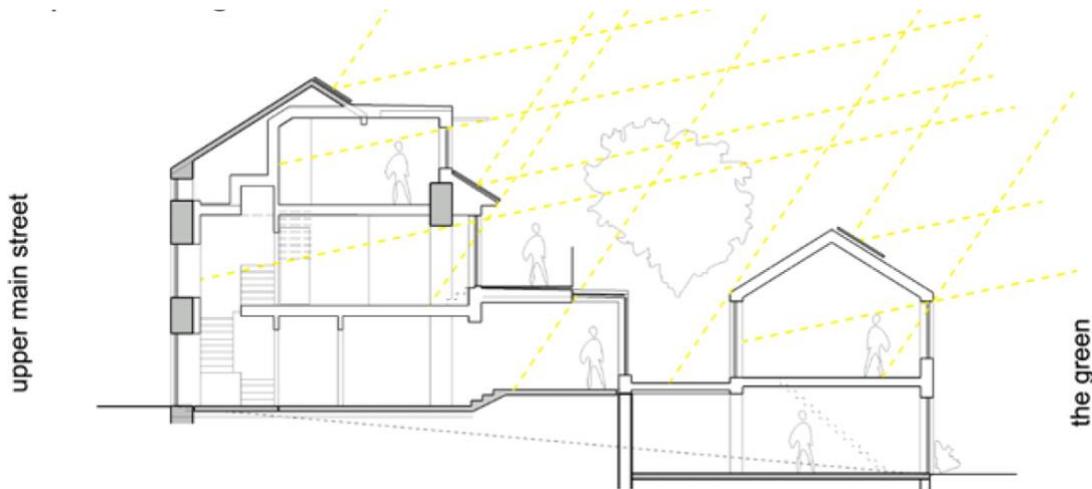


The council team established a working group with the Cappoquin Community Development Company to steer the work of the pilot project. They began by exploring three potential sites in the town. One urban block comprising 27 properties was chosen, referred to as the Main Street/Green Street block. 12 of the properties in this block were found to be vacant. 8 of the properties in this block are owned by one family. The Main Street/Green Street block comprises very narrow plots, 3-storey properties onto Main Street Upper and small rear properties onto Green Street. The team decided to explore how the properties might be connected between Main Street and Green Street in order to redevelop the buildings for contemporary family residential needs. This project will provide a rare opportunity for people looking to settle in the town centre.

After consultation with property owners, the Council is negotiating purchase of two, and potentially four, linked properties which stretch from the front to the back of the Main Street/Green Street block. It is hoped to develop one pair of these buildings, to refurbish them and use them as a show house, demonstrating what can be done and how much it costs. The council used a portion of the funding

provided to engage the services of dhb Architects, who are now concentrating on developing concepts for the Main Street/Green Street block.

The council's in-house projects team are working with a consultant architectural technician on developing the public realm within the town centre and on the visualisation of the opportunities and improvement works identified. It is intended that the overall strategy and masterplan will incorporate a network of projects which will dovetail into each other and be aligned with interested local groups, allowing the greatest possible opportunities for sourcing funding.



Cappoquin design study. The existing slope and orientation is explored to adapt existing small houses on narrow plots into courtyard homes with flexible accommodation to allow for contemporary dwelling and working needs.

Ongoing or future activities

The Cappoquin pilot project has resulted in 9 elements of a proposal for the revitalisation of the village centre, as set out in the section 'Potential Solutions'.

It is hoped that the Main Street/Green Street urban block redevelopment will progress using a people-led approach in line with these 9 elements. For example, there is potential for a rolling refurbishment and sale of the buildings in a Developer Trust model that negotiates and collaborates with owners of the buildings. It is also hoped to introduce a One-Stop-Shop to offer advice to people and help take the uncertainty out of the process of working with these buildings.

Findings - Cappoquin

Issues arising

High vacancy levels in Cappoquin's pilot study area have been examined closely by the pilot team and its stakeholder group. Their findings are summarised below.

Town-specific challenges affecting Cappoquin:

The town team cited the core problem of a loss of scale, critical mass, function and purpose in the town; the loss of social and economic infrastructure such as local factories, jobs, schools, and banks, which has had a profoundly negative impact; a continued population decline in the town; high social dependency

and age dependency; and a dislocation between the town centre and the social, recreational and sporting activities at the Community Centre.

Lack of family life in the town:

There are only three properties on Main Street housing families with children. Of sixteen active businesses on the street, only five of those have residential accommodation active above the business level. The housing stock itself is of a poor standard and in many cases too small for modern family living, as in the case of the Main Street/Green Street block. There is also no convenient parking in the urban core.

Problems with the property market:

Very few properties are coming to market in the town, and property ownership is concentrated in too few people. This was found to be due to owners retaining the property for occasional use; owners moving on or dying with the estate awaiting legal action; owners unaware of options for renewal; and owners preferring to hold on to derelict property in the hope that values will increase.

Time, cost and risk associated with adaptive reuse:

It is recognised that the cost of refurbishing a building would be more than the value of the completed building. Owners also cited difficulties in obtaining planning or other regulatory consents; uncertainty as to how to go about the redevelopment process; and challenges finding a suitable design professional to carry out refurbishment works.

Potential solutions

As noted above, the Cappoquin pilot project has resulted in a proposal of 9 elements to address vacancy and revitalise the town centre. The 9 elements are briefly introduced here as potential solutions that have emerged from this pilot project.

1 Set up a regeneration entity:

It is recognised that there is a need for a bespoke and multi-lateral approach driven by a dedicated regeneration entity made up of a combination of the Local Authority and Cappoquin Community Development Company. The local authority can provide technical, planning, conservation and architectural expertise, liaise with government departments, process grant applications, and access legislative tools such as CPO to acquire properties. The Cappoquin Community Development Company has local knowledge and therefore credibility, can acquire properties (with the support of the Tomar Trust), and they have access to regional development grants.

2 Plan Driven approach:

Generate a long term plan and design strategy that can be used to provide the context for funding applications for prioritised projects. The plan and design strategy will generate a critical mass of projects over time that together create a tangible and coherent presentation of the town to the wider community. A masterplan and development strategy for Cappoquin is currently being prepared.

3 Identifying and assembling properties:

Historic town and village centres often comprise properties that are not fit for purpose in terms of contemporary living. This may be due to plot sizes, access, rights of way, plot configuration etc.. The

assembling of appropriate properties can help overcome limitations of individual plots and realise the potential of urban blocks in town centres.

4 Developing an architectural solution:

Engaging skilled designers to ensure appropriate and sympathetic responses to particular conditions of a place. In Cappoquin, architects have developed flexible property types with the potential for income generation that include flexible spaces that can operate as live-work units, short-term tourist accommodation, main residences, studios or garages in the Main Street/Green Street urban block.

5 Reducing soft costs:

Produce economies of scale by providing standard and flexible design solutions for property owners. In Cappoquin, architectural plans will be made available that can be adapted to all variations of a plan found in the selected urban block on Main Street/Green Street. In addition, a Local Authority One-Stop-Shop can provide advice on development options, statutory obligations and consents.

6 Rolling scheme:

Instigate a rolling development model where, as properties are developed and sold, further properties are purchased and refurbished. It is noted this model requires initial funding from the RRDF and may need to be supplemented by a flexible incentive scheme as set out in element 8 below.

7 Efficient delivery:

Efficient use of resources for construction by the use of a project management model. This is to be tested in Cappoquin through acquisition of a property and development of a pilot project to verify costs and provide an exemplar.

8 Incentive scheme:

A financial subvention is required to bridge the gap between property value and development costs. From outline costs in Cappoquin it is estimated that this shortfall is approximate to the acquisition cost of a property. It is proposed that the Government finances property acquisition and site assembly. The site is then provided to a client on a lease basis with a diminishing pro-rata financial claw back facility on the sale of the property over a specified number of years, after which the freehold transfers to the client at no charge. Additional sources of funding, for example from SEAI, would ensure quality refurbishments that meet modern comfort and energy requirements. It is noted that former estate towns such as Cappoquin, where an estate company retains many properties and has access to working capital, may lend themselves to tax incentive schemes where upfront funding is required (such as the Living City Initiative, were it to be expanded).

9 Show house and promotion:

Completed demonstration projects can test propositions fully, verifying costs, demand and sales prices. A show house can illustrate the quality and affordability of adaptive reuse in the pilot project and assist with marketing and dissemination. In Cappoquin, discussions have taken place with the local Credit Union who have indicated that the pilot project proposal is compatible with their construction loans.

Castleblayney, County Monaghan

Population: 3,607

Vacancy Rate: 16%

Participants: Monaghan County Council, Castleblayney Regeneration – Town Team, property owners, elected members



Castleblayney is a rural market and estate town located in a drumlin landscape equidistant from Belfast and Dublin. The border has had a strong influence on the town and Brexit now presents an unprecedented level of uncertainty. The town centre has a largely intact historic urban form with terraced buildings on narrow and often long plots with characteristic arched laneways accessing rear outhouses and gardens from the main street. Hope Castle and Lake Muckno public park are accessed directly from the town centre. The town is known for its country music heritage.

Castleblayney has a lack of employment opportunities, no third level education institution, a low youth population retention rate, and an aging population. There is a high level of vacancy: CSO residential vacancy (excluding holiday homes) at 10.8% in 2016; CSO town vacancy rate at 16.6% and urban vacancy rate at 23.6% in 2016; GEO VIEW Commercial vacancy at 22.4% in Q4, 2018.

Pilot Project – Castleblayney

Pilot study area



The study area in Castleblayney is the historic town centre consisting of the Market Square and streets leading from it with their backlands: Muckno Street, Main Street and Henry Street. From a visual analysis and previous vacancy surveys (such a Vacancy and Dereliction survey from April 2014 by Castleblayney Town Council) it is known that this area has had very high levels of vacancy over many years. The derelict Market House building is at the centre of the Market Square and the study area also includes the gates to Hope Castle on the south-east side.

The study area is adjacent to the Lough Muckno recreational amenity area which the Council aims to upgrade. It is noted that the revitalisation of the study area would support and complement this aim.

Planning context

Monaghan County Development Plan 2019-2025 sets out the strategy and vision for Castleblayney, including a specific objective to refurbish existing buildings to regenerate the town centre and eliminate dereliction. Monaghan Local Economic and Community Plan 2016-2021 promotes development in town centres, a Heritage Towns Initiative in Castleblayney, the restoration/redevelopment of derelict and vacant buildings, and community initiatives to address rural town decline.

The Castleblayney Historic Landscape Characterisation Plan 2012 provides a comprehensive analysis of the townscape and buildings. Castleblayney Public Realm and Economic Plan 2018 presents a Shared Vision for the town focused on the study area of the TCLI pilot project.

Pilot project approach



The pilot project has allowed Monaghan County Council to continue efforts aimed at the revitalisation of the town centre in collaboration with the Town Team and elected members. The pilot project approach builds on the Historic Landscape Characterisation Plan and Public Realm and Economic Plan. The latter plan involved community participation.

The pilot project has included both data gathering to provide an evidence base and inclusive participatory processes focused on supporting property owners in moving forward together.

Preliminary data gathering:

A land use survey was carried out using the GOAD Sub Class Category classification system. The survey can be inserted into the County Council GIS. The ground floor survey is reproduced overleaf.

A database of properties and their owners in the study area was assembled in collaboration with a local estate agent. Ascertaining ownership and contact details was challenging for several properties. Preliminary interviews were carried out with owners of vacant or derelict properties. These elicited a positive response to the idea of redeveloping the properties. Reservations were expressed about the Repair and Leasing Scheme, for example in relation to having no control over future tenants.

An architect-led consultant team of Shaffrey Architects and Space Engagers was commissioned by a competitive tender process based on their proposal for a new mechanism for the revitalisation of Castleblayney town centre as a place for living well, that can be replicated in other Irish towns. The mechanism is based on the formula:

Data + collaboration + inclusive participation can lead to opportunities for innovation + adaptation, which can then lead to revitalisation.

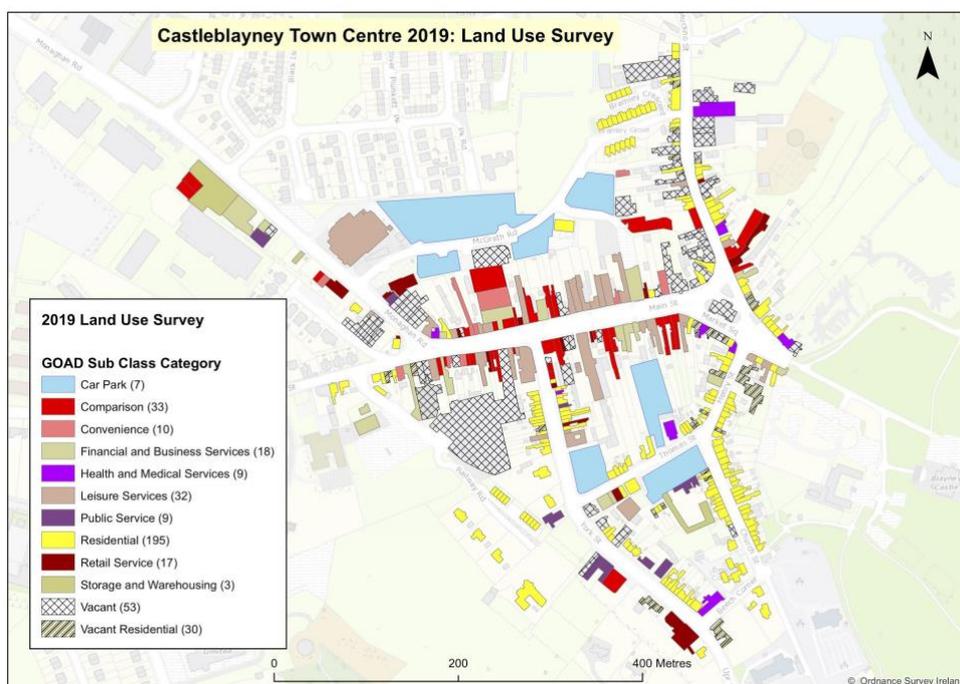
The pilot project also puts forward a ‘town centre living first’ model, based on the assertion that if people can live well in a town centre then other aspects of a healthy and thriving town will fall into place if the correct supports from local and national government and other stakeholders are established.

Inclusive participatory processes:

The pilot project has made the case for the new mechanism through 3no. Town Centre Property Clinics, entitled Listening (Workshop 1), Capacity Building (Workshop 2), and Collaborating to Move Forward (Workshop 3).

Workshop 1, “Listening”, was advertised by leaflets and word of mouth, focusing on properties in the study area. Scheduled consultation slots provided a ‘One-Stop-Shop’ for understanding a property owner’s situation and providing advice as appropriate. The clinic aimed to understand the reasons for vacancy and dereliction, and to identify clusters of properties that might be interested in working together. The clinic was oversubscribed and demonstrated:

- willingness on the part of property owners to get involved;
- demand for living in the town centre but an awareness of many barriers;
- the need for a more diverse housing offering in terms of typology and quality;
- strong attachment to place and individual properties often over several generations;
- living memory of better (and worse) times in the town.



Castleblayney land use survey. This survey of existing buildings at ground floor within the pilot study area uses the GOAD classification system to map use and vacancy.

Workshop 2 “Capacity Building” aimed to initiate dialogue and collaboration and co-create suggestions on how to address barriers to reuse. Property owners from the identified clusters of properties were invited.

Findings from workshops 1 and 2 are listed below under “issues arising” and “potential solutions” respectively.

Workshop 3 “Collaborating to Move Forward” explored a design scenario for each of the three clusters through 2D plan drawings in order to initiate debate and gauge what could be achieved. The design scenarios were presented as a series of steps that included: identification of assets to be retained, what is used or could be reused, and what can be added; (re)established routes through clusters from backlands to street; and suggestions for private and public external spaces. This third property clinic demonstrated

that it needs to be clear how collaboration might “relieve some pain” for the property owner, or provide tangible and common benefits such as improving the experience of living and working in the town or simply providing more housing in the town centre.

It can be concluded from the 3no. workshops that there is a case for the type of dedicated, focused, collaborative and supportive mechanism proposed. As the process has built up trust and established relationships between property owners, consultants and the local authority, it is important that the momentum is maintained and the clusters are progressed further.

As many of the reasons for vacancy lie beyond the particular conditions of an individual property, for example those related to confidence in the future of the town, it is noted that systemic issues must be addressed in parallel.

Ongoing or future activities

The report for the Regeneration Plan pilot project by Shaffrey Architects and Space Engagers was completed in early 2020 and will inform the next steps. This includes recommendations to:

- continue engagement with the clusters of property owners;
- engage an urban economist in relation to potential financial vehicles;
- consult a legal expert in relation to how collaboration could happen.

In addition, and in parallel, the following steps will be taken in relation to Castleblayney:

- Continued support for property owners (dependent on resources).
- RRDF Category 2 funding submission for the Market House, setting out a process for bringing the building back into a sustainable use.
- Restoration of Gate Lodge II for a public library/gallery/cultural space with RRDF 2019 funding (approved).
- Restoration of the Market House, Hope Castle, and the Hope Castle Annex buildings (subject to funding and appropriate proposals)
- Delivery of the Public Realm and Economic Plan (subject to funding).

Findings - Castleblayney

Issues arising

From data gathered during the 3 workshops the following issues relating to vacancy and dereliction can be identified:

- Lack of know-how and the need to have access to expertise in relation to, for example, finance, grants, regulations (planning, fire, tax etc..).
- Inertia or lack of impetus/motivation.
- Ownership dynamics relating to age, multiple family members ownership, inheritance, negative equity.
- Rights of ways and other disputes with neighbours.

- No return on investment in the short-term.
- Reluctance to take on more debt.
- Demands on resources in terms of finances and time.
- Maintenance costs.
- High costs associated with restoration of historic buildings.
- Domino effect of vacant buildings.
- Vacant or derelict public buildings reduce confidence in the future.
- Lack of employment opportunities in the town.
- Lack of business confidence.
- Lack of clear leadership to address vacancy and dereliction.
- Uncertainty about adjoining properties and future planning (utilities, services, zoning).
- Lack of private amenity and service space including front gardens and car parking.
- Town centre living experiences high levels of noise pollution, traffic and general disturbance.
- Strong emotional attachment to buildings and place.
- Easier and cheaper to build out of town on a greenfield site.

Potential Solutions

From data gathered during the 3 workshops the following issues relating to potential solutions for the revitalisation of Castleblayney were identified:

- Independent support worker for property owners (dealing with the know-how, facilitation and mediation).
- More support on planning, fire regulations, conservation from the local authority: all need to work together proactively.
- Grant support and changes to taxation structures for adaptive reuse.
- Access to direct funding supports to encourage adaptive reuse.
- Higher maximum grant level for enhancement / restoration / reuse of protected structures / historic streetscapes.
- Disincentives for out of town development.
- Alternative community finance initiatives and housing typologies.
- Town centre employment supports.
- Flagship projects for public buildings and services.
- Consistency and certainty in planning policy and decisions going forward.
- Certainty on infrastructure and utilities going forward.
- Reinforce leadership of local authority.
- Exemplar demonstration projects for quality adaptive reuse and infill housing in backlands.
- New housing types for different age groups and modern day demand including for visitors.
- Positive image promotion of town centres.
- Frame the reuse of vacant buildings in town centres for living well in the context of the Climate Emergency, linking to embodied energy, reduced commuting and the importance of attachment to place for community resilience.
- Collaboration between property owners to address limitations and realise the potential of the town centre.

- Pursue role of social enterprise in delivery of services and housing in town centres.
- Collaboration / greater strategic planning between sectors, e.g. healthcare, education, arts, elderly sector, accessibility, energy efficiency etc..

Workshop Summary

Collaboration toward a Strategy to Address Vacancy in Irish Towns

One of the key functions of the Town Centre Living Initiative is the development of strategies to address the problem of vacancy in town centres across Ireland, beyond the six participating towns and beyond the life of the scheme. As such, it has been critical to provide opportunities for sharing insights and experiences across the different participating towns in order to facilitate the co-creation of strategies which can respond to the diverse realities of towns across Ireland. On behalf of the Department of Rural and Community Development, Philip Crowe and Orla Murphy of Space Engagers designed and facilitated a workshop for all six pilot towns on September 5th 2019 in Navan, County Meath.

The workshop was attended by representatives from DRCD, from each Local Authority and Town Team related to the six pilot towns, and a number of other stakeholders. The workshop participants, either through their close involvement with the Town Centre Living Initiative or from their specialist perspectives, had considerable understanding of the challenges of persistent residential vacancy in town centres. By bringing together knowledgeable representatives from each of the pilot towns to tell their own stories, it was possible to observe common issues and problems, and to gather suggestions for strategies to tackle those problems. This was a crucial step in the development of the initiative's findings, and it proved to be influential in the ongoing work of individual towns.

The purpose of the workshop was to:

- bring together and share collective experience and knowledge of vacancy in Irish towns and town centre living;
- provide resources to the six pilot towns through connections with relevant and complementary disciplines and initiatives, to ensure an holistic and inter-disciplinary approach;
- help the six pilot towns to move forward and to support more informed and developed studies and subsequent submissions to the RRDF;
- move towards formulating recommendations to government on how to address vacancy and support/encourage town centre living.

The workshop was divided into two parts and used the “World Café” dialogue technique as a way to facilitate structured conversational processes for knowledge sharing and co-creation. Attendees sat at five tables in pre-designated groups designed to ensure a mix of voices at each table and that no town was represented by more than one person at each table. In the first half, the “Problem Definition” stage of the workshop, each group was tasked with listing reasons for residential vacancy in towns and to relate them to one of five headings: Supports, Finance and Resources, Confidence & Motivation, Imagination & Vision, and Other. The groups considered reasons for residential vacancy in general and through the examination of individual cases known to them. Next, in the “Action” stage of the workshop, each group was assigned one of the same headings and asked to suggest potential solutions that could be taken to specifically address residential vacancy in relation to one of the five headings.

The workshop successfully identified a number of common patterns, trends and themes across the participating towns, some of which are listed on the following pages. Through the articulation of typical scenarios and personas, participants were able to share insights on the lived realities of their own towns,

which in turn fed into the development of a shared understanding of the complexity of vacancy as a systemic challenge.

Problem Definition

At the workshop, each group was tasked with listing reasons for residential vacancy in towns, considering issues arising generally and specific to their own towns. They were asked to structure their responses using the categories below. The responses below are a representative sample of ideas proposed.

Support

- Lack of on the ground know-how in relation to realising adaptive reuse projects.
- Apathy and/or not knowing where or how to start.
- Challenges in navigating complex planning and building regulation processes (Building Control (Amendment) Regulations (BCAR)).
- Particular challenges relating to protected structures and Architectural Conservation Areas (ACAs).
- Difficulty in accessing expert advice.
- Legal issues connected with title, multiple ownership, rights of way, inheritance – for example poorly defined rights of way and lack of legal documentation.
- Perception that it is easier to buy/build a home in peripheral or out-of-town locations.
- Configuration of sites can make it difficult to use space efficiently (re rear access, connection to gardens and parking, natural light etc.).
- The (small) size/footprint of some houses can create challenges for modern living and meeting regulations.
- Lack of secondary physical supports for living well in town centres, for example relating to quality public space, safe and clean streets, managed traffic, residential amenity (noise, private external space, safe spaces for children to play etc.).

Finances and Resources

- Construction costs for the adaptive reuse of an existing building can be prohibitive, and it is often cheaper to build out of town.
- Loss of access to grants and credit to invest in upkeep, maintenance and repair of existing vacant buildings since the financial crash of 2008.
- Properties in negative equity and/or fear of taking on debt and inability to raise finance for buildings already in negative equity resulting in further deterioration.
- Lack of awareness of existing grant schemes, for example SEAI and Leader grants, and the difficulty and complexity involved in obtaining them.
- Annual funding schemes which prohibit long term planning and implementation of good conservation and adaptive reuse practice.
- Buildings are being left vacant to hold as capital assets in the hope their value will increase over time.
- Inheritance tax can leave new owners with a lack of funds to carry out works.
- Lack of any financial disincentive to hold on to empty buildings (in the form of domestic rates (not used since 1977), Vacant Building Tax, Land Value Tax).

- Lack of directly available financial resources within Local Authorities to address vacancy and inter-related regeneration challenges in a strategic, evidence-based and long term way.

Confidence and Motivation

- Visible exodus of public services e.g. Post Office, Garda Stations, schools.
- Lack of investment in public space and/or public buildings.
- Sense in towns that they are “being left behind”.
- Lack of employment opportunities and supports for small businesses.
- Long term lack of tangible positive change leads to inertia/despondency.
- Reluctance to be the first to invest/take a risk by committing resources (time and money) – there is no guarantee anyone else will follow suit.
- Lack of social cohesion/sense of a community working together with a common purpose.
- Vacancy domino effect - moving out of town becomes attractive when the majority of other buildings in the town centre are vacant.
- Over dependence on voluntary groups can lead to volunteer fatigue.
- Age demographic of many owners – embarking on a building project late in life is not always appealing or practical.
- Nostalgia, sense of attachment or intergenerational responsibility preventing owners putting properties on the market.
- Public amenities, such as primary care centres, located on the periphery generate car dependency which can make it easier to live outside the town centre.

Imagination and Vision

- There is no clear national vision for the future of Irish towns.
- Towns do not have a positive image, particularly for younger people.
- There is no contemporary vision of how to live well in a town centre.
- Suitability of a town centre as a place to raise a family, for example concerns around relative proximity of amenities with potential to generate anti-social behaviour, such as pubs or night clubs.
- There are relatively few examples that demonstrate the potential of a town house and garden to provide quality accommodation.
- Conflicting interests of businesses and residents, for example the former might resist any reduction in car parking or increase in tree planting.
- Pervasive image/dream of the one-off detached house surrounded by garden and parking spaces, with little awareness of the benefits of alternatives.
- The longer buildings remain empty the more distant is the social memory of them being used.

Other

- Lack of joined up vision, thinking and action across government departments and between central and local government.
- Narrow streets, narrow pavements, air pollution and noise pollution from traffic, rubbish and anti-social behaviour in town centres.
- HGVs driving through towns and car dominance.

- Lack of good quality public space and green amenity space.
- A lack of diversity of housing types, quality of accommodation, tenure and socio-economic profiles in towns.
- Structural condition of buildings, particularly historic buildings.
- Insurance and flood risk.
- Poor quality workmanship that is expensive to reverse.
- Perception that town centre buildings are of poor quality, have poor energy performance, or are unsuitable for modern requirements.
- Ideas of absolute property rights with no responsibilities.

Potential solutions

After considering some common reasons for vacancy in towns, participants were then asked to suggest some potential solutions or actions to be taken at national and local level to address the problems they had listed. Again, groups developed ideas based on general and specific cases.

Providing Supports

- Establish a governance structure to support towns comprising: an inter-departmental cross-cutting group across the DRCD, DoHPLG, DCHG, DCCA, DBEI, DTTAS, and DoF; an inter-agency and local authority collaboration relating to enterprise, education, EU funding, IDA, HSE etc.; a local authority and town/community team with technical and professional resources related to adaptive reuse of existing buildings for housing, regeneration, and modal shifts.
- Close collaboration between local authorities, town communities, town teams, cohousing groups, and developers to support high quality implementation of low carbon adaptive reuse projects as an exemplar model of development.
- Visible, physical One-Stop-Shops providing advice to guide people through the planning, financial and regulatory processes, and how to approach/manage a construction project.
- Introduction of Town Centre Officers as direct contacts on the ground who can provide advice and project management support, locate funds and direct citizens to supports as appropriate.
- Strategic Local Authority Management to assess, plan around and address residential vacancy, set goals for reuse, and measure progress against these goals.
- Implementation of exemplar demonstration projects to provide best practice examples of adaptive reuse of a range of different typologies of vacant buildings and plots for housing.
- Reuse to be actively incentivised and supported over out-of-town development in a clear and consistent way with funding supports, regulatory guidance, technical advice and supports on the ground.
- Support for research and skills training in the area of adaptive reuse of buildings for housing.
- Review protected structure designations.
- Re-establishment of the Collective Preventative Maintenance Service to support ongoing maintenance and upgrade of buildings and public spaces.⁵

⁵ The Heritage Council funded a “Feasibility Study for a Preventative Maintenance Service” in September 2002 that sets out a proposal for testing the viability of establishing a pilot cross-border project for the preventative

- Support community in getting to know neighbours / build community capital with a view to collaborating to address challenges.
- Help identify potential uses (for non-residential components) and/or locate tenants.

Finance and Resources

- Introduction of interest-free loans and micro-finance options to private property owners.
- Introduction of live/work incentives which would encourage mixed reuse of vacant buildings.
- Streamlining and review of existing grant schemes (e.g. SEAI) and introduction of simple, accessible, and easy-to-implement funding supports for adaptive reuse of private dwellings.
- SEAI grant scheme targeting older buildings.
- Review Repair and Leasing Scheme with a focus on flexibility and understanding experiences.
- Introduction of holistic multi-annual funding for structural works to existing buildings, in particular protected structures (similar to the Historic Structures Fund from the DCHG).
- Low interest community finance for group initiatives, for example cohousing projects that could take on grouped plots or larger scale vacant sites for cohousing.
- Support community focused financial and ownership mechanisms for development, for example through Community Land Trusts and/or social enterprises.
- Town-scale urban renewal funding, including for streetscape and public realm projects.
- Vacant Building Tax and/or Land Value Tax to disincentivise the hoarding of vacant buildings as capital assets.
- Support the use of Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) powers and/or introduce Compulsory Sales Orders (CSOs) in order to provide housing for older people (private or social housing).
- CPOs could be used by local authorities to purchase potential exemplar buildings for adaptation.
- Removal of inheritance tax relating to derelict buildings and reduction in Local Property Tax (LPT) rates in certain areas.
- Living City Initiative extended to towns and streamlined for ease of implementation.
- VAT exemption and/or zero interest finance available to individuals who adapt existing vacant buildings into new homes.
- Extended roll out of Historic Towns Initiative.
- Development contributions reviewed and possibly reduced to incentivise developers in town centres.

Confidence and Motivation

- Appointment of a dedicated Town Centre Officer.
- Introduction of a single point of responsibility within each local authority accountable to on-the-ground teams in each town.
- Pro-active planning implementing town centre public realm works, supporting sequential development, prioritising tangible and visible town centre regeneration projects.

maintenance of historic buildings in Ireland. The study makes the case for prompt small-scale interventions to avoid major long term problems in historic buildings. The report examines 2 international precedents: Monumentenwacht in the Netherlands and MAINTAIN in England.

- Introduction of a National Government Policy for Towns to guide local authorities in getting their towns working again (addressing issues including locations of services, broad-band availability, development control re greenfield/brownfield sites, balance of uses etc.).
- Fast tracking of exemplar flagship projects to demonstrate the confidence of government in towns and lead the way in best practice.
- Design of a long term and bespoke co-designed vision for each town that is implemented and ensures the town is a good place to live into the future.
- Development plans and Local Area Plans to guarantee and protect residential amenity in the long term.
- Introduction and enforcement of restricted zoning for out-of-town development.

Imagination and Vision

- An ambitious structured vision for towns that is planned for, managed, implemented and evaluated over the long term.
- Promotion of existing best practice examples of buildings, public spaces and cooperation between local authorities and communities.
- Promotion of positive images of living well in town centres and the benefits to the wider community.
- National and local government to take the lead in the roll out of adaptive reuse projects to demonstrate the potential of town centre properties and encouraging change by replication.
- Learning in relation to all new actions should be shared across agencies, departments, local authorities and research institutions nationally and internationally.
- Social enterprise models including cohousing, co-operative housing and Community Land Trusts should be supported as potential alternative models.
- Support the institutional and public recognition of the fact that financial support to private property owners can have public benefits.
- Local authorities to lead cultural/attitudinal change in relation to living well in town centres.

Other

- Links could be made to develop training opportunities in traditional building skills and deep retrofit.
- Introduce metrics for carbon profiling that reward reuse (over new build), town centre locations (over out of town), restoration of historic buildings, and retrofitting for energy efficiency etc..
- Better traffic management imperative to address the quality of public realm of towns to create healthy and inclusive urban places for living.
- Review best practice for parking in towns, for example promoting parking behind streets.
- Revised rural re-settlement programme, possibly linked to remote working.
- Improved transport and communications infrastructure.

Suggestions and proposals brought forward at this workshop have contributed to the suggested actions set out in the Synthesis section of this report.

Discussion

The Town Centre Living Initiative project provided the six local authorities with the opportunity to:

- build on efforts already underway to address challenges including previous plans (inter alia Public Realm Plans, Local Area Plans, Health Checks, Vacancy Audits, Biodiversity Plans, Development Strategies) or projects (Heritage Town Initiative projects, Town and Village Renewal Projects, Adaptive Reuse projects, community led projects);
- gain a more detailed and in-depth understanding of the reasons for vacancy and dereliction;
- generate innovative proposals to address vacancy and encourage more people to live in town centres;
- work closely with community stakeholder groups, either formally with Town Teams and Regeneration Groups, or informally with building owners.

The flexible structure of the TCLI has allowed each local authority to design and/or direct their own bespoke approach, resulting in a rich diversity of methodologies that respond to the different characters, histories, challenges and needs of each town. A notable consistent approach, facilitated by the TCLI, was to work at the level of the individual plot and property owner, gaining insight into the myriad of different experiences with property ownership, vacancy and dereliction in the towns. Despite the diverse contexts and approaches the results reveal consistencies between towns, such as the differential of between 15% and 40% between costs for adaptive reuse and market sale value in Ballinrobe and Cappoquin, or the challenges of identifying property owners in Castleblayney, Callan and Banagher.

The six pilot town projects demonstrate how productive a modest input of resources and a dedicated project team focused on the one town can be in terms of

- building an evidence base for informed actions going forward;
- carrying out innovative projects;
- building momentum and trust with the community and other relevant stakeholders;
- and setting out future plans to revitalise the town centre as a place for living well.

Each town pilot project contributes to knowledge and insight into the complexity and variety of reasons for vacancy and dereliction and the lack of residential occupancy in town centres, and how these issues might be addressed and the town centres revitalised. A short reflection on each town is provided below.

Ballinrobe:

The Ballinrobe pilot project focuses on 3 principal streets in the town and on four building typologies. Mayo County Council has been working at several scales, ranging from a detailed examination of the reality of adaptive reuse of historic town centre properties to an exploration of systemic factors and potential policy related to vacancy at the town and national scale. The findings of the adaptive reuse studies, and in particular the building that will be developed as an exemplar, will provide lessons learnt and findings that are relevant to many other towns.

The pilot study findings emphasize the need for consistent definitions and better data on vacancy and dereliction obtained through a comprehensive and dynamic nationwide mapping process.

Banagher:

The TCLI pilot project has allowed Offaly County Council to gather an unprecedented depth of knowledge on vacancy at the scale of an individual property in the pilot study area of Main Street, providing legitimacy and an informed evidence base for actions to address vacancy. Findings include the evident role of both inheritance processes and protected structure legislation in persistent vacancy. Innovative projects have emerged from the pilot project including a community and enterprise building that will facilitate remote working and create new opportunities in terms of employment; a new type of tourism accommodation that is community-run; and an advice workshop that recognises that the adaptive reuse of historic buildings can be daunting.

The Banagher pilot project also highlights both completed and imagined examples of adaptive reuse of historic buildings that communicate the potential of similar buildings in most Irish towns.

Boyle:

The pilot project in Boyle started from a very different place to other towns in that an innovative vision document, resulting from a close collaboration between the Boyle Town Team and Roscommon County Council, is in place. *Boyle 2040* focuses in on the fine grain of the town and is based on agreed principles. It proposes reimagining, reconnecting and recolonizing the town centre, providing supports and confidence to property owners and potential new residents. Boyle is using a suite of funding programmes including TCLI and HTI to revitalise the town centre in line with *Boyle 2040*.

The Boyle pilot project is focused on Main Street in the historic centre. The project recognises the need to support the maintenance of historic buildings that are key to creating the sense of place in the town; emphasises the need for a high quality public realm; and advocates for a co-ordinated suite of funding streams for individual property owners, for example relating to heritage and energy efficiency.

Callan:

The pilot project in Callan is focused on a specific, narrow, traffic congested medieval street with high levels of vacancy that is recognised as critical to the revitalisation of the town. The project surveyed and developed proposals for the adaptive reuse of 3 buildings and proposes restoring one as an exemplar of best practice in energy efficient deep retrofit and conservation. The project findings linked vacancy to numerous specific and also systemic causes such as the quality of the public realm, mobility, amenity and access. A mobility Management Plan is proposed. Many issues were highlighted including: it can be challenging to figure out core data such as who owns a property as many properties are not registered; existing buildings represent a store of embodied energy and carbon; achieving a high BER rating for the adaptive reuse of an historic building is challenging but possible; and that the costs of a good quality, energy efficient, adaptive reuse project are prohibitive and therefore a range of funding streams and incentives are necessary.

Cappoquin:

Cappoquin is a former estate town with a small number of people, including an estate management company, owning many properties. This may present an opportunity for efficient revitalisation of the town as properties can be developed collectively. To demonstrate this potential, the pilot project focuses

on a compact urban block in the town centre and explores innovative architectural design solutions that will create new options for town centre living.

The pilot project has resulted in a clear roadmap for the future, comprising a number of potential solutions that include: an adaptation of a rolling development model where the profits of one sale support the next adaptive reuse; an incentive scheme that bridges the gap between property values and development costs; a One-Stop-Shop that provides supports and advice, and also design solutions that can be adapted to different contexts; and a regeneration entity formed between the local authority and a local community development company that drives the revitalisation of the town centre based on a long term vision plan and design strategy.

Castleblayney:

Over the past 7 years Monaghan County Council and the community of Castleblayney have taken a series of steps towards revitalisation of the town centre including gathering data to provide an evidence base and a vision document in the form of a Public Realm and Economic Plan. The TCLI pilot project was focused on the urban blocks and streets around the Market Square and Market House. The project facilitated 3 innovative participatory planning workshops with property owners that explored the idea that collaboration between property owners is central to addressing limitations and realising the potential of historic town centre properties. These workshops revealed that there is a clear desire from property owners to reuse buildings and sites, but that there is also a diverse range of circumstances and reasons holding them back from making progress. There was a general understanding that collaboration is a way forward in many cases, albeit with inevitable challenges.

The TCLI pilot project has effectively been a prototype for a new mechanism for the revitalisation of Castleblayney where a dedicated person or team works directly with property owners and the community on the ground as a mediator, facilitator and enabler.

Observations:

Common issues relating to vacancy, town centre living and urban revitalisation can be observed across the towns:

Measuring and understanding vacancy

The TCLI six pilot towns have confirmed the extent and impact of long term residential vacancy in town centres.

There is no consistent definition of vacancy in Ireland, and levels of vacancy can vary widely and refer to multiple different conditions, criteria and areas. In addition, vacancy is a dynamic condition that changes over time and may vary within the constituent elements of a building. As a result, comparison of levels of vacancy between towns and over time can be challenging.

Mapping is critical to gaining an understanding of the extent of vacancy but currently in Ireland no standard method of mapping vacancy (or land use) exists. Within the six pilot towns, different means of mapping vacancy were used. For example, GOAD classifications were used in Castleblayney and an app for geo-located vacancy and dereliction was employed in Ballinrobe. Vacancy baseline studies are needed in order to plan and measure the impact of interventions. Many of the pilot town projects

suggested a single standardised mapping tool is required to help measure, understand and address vacancy in towns.

Strategic long term planning

All of the pilot towns have some form of vision plan for the future in place such as a Public Realm Plan, a Local Area Plan, or a framework for revitalisation such as *Boyle 2040*. The latter provides an interesting precedent. Cappoquin proposes a new Development Strategy and Masterplan as a key part of addressing vacancy and revitalising the town centre. Many towns, including Ballinrobe and Cappoquin, noted the importance of good long term strategic planning to inform efficient, timely and relevant funding applications on a multi-annual level. In Castleblayney, confidence in a vision for the future was identified as critical to motivating owners to invest and reuse their buildings.

Informed evidence base

The pilot projects provide an opportunity to gather missing data and build an evidence base to inform the visions plans and decision making. All the towns had obtained some level of data already using different methods, for example as in Cappoquin and Callan where Town Health Checks had been completed by the local authority and external consultants respectively. A standardised method for gathering core and dynamic data on a town would allow easy comparison and measurement of progress. It is noted that the Heritage Council of Ireland has developed and piloted a more inclusive and dynamic model, the Collaborative Town Centre Health Check (CTCHC) in recent years, working in partnership with 3rd level education institutions and communities. The findings of the TCLI pilot projects are generally consistent with the findings of the CTCHCs and both have benefited from direct engagement with communities, stakeholders and property owners.

As with a single standardised mapping tool, a national CTCHC framework would ensure consistent and comparable results, and community participation and buy-in.

Public Participation

The six pilot towns have demonstrated close collaborative working relationships with community based stakeholders. Town Teams or Town Development Groups are active in Banagher, Boyle, Callan and Cappoquin. In Ballinrobe and Castleblayney close working relationships with community groups have been built upon, in particular by Heritage Officers within the local authorities. Developing participatory planning and co-design methodologies is recognised by all of the six towns as key to positive development and the future of the towns. The approach taken in Castleblayney, facilitating property owners in working together, suggests a new role for a local authority or a third party entity as a mediator, facilitator and enabler.

One Size does not fit all

One clear point that emerges from the six towns is that no single solution can address vacancy. While towns have much in common, they are unique places with unique identities. Therefore, while clear strategic supports are necessary, it is also important to recognise the need for bespoke approaches to each town in conversation with the local community stakeholders who know their towns best. Intervention is needed both at the local level (the scale of the building, the urban block and the town

centre) and at the networked national level, providing a supporting partnership that guarantees a consistency of town centre first approach backed by evidence based research.

Emerging themes:

The issues arising and the potential solutions in relation to vacancy and dereliction were consistently related to 5 themes that emerged during the initiative:

- **Providing supports** refers to hard or soft supports, at either local or national level, which are needed to deliver practical assistance to address identified gaps in knowledge, expertise or capacity.
- **Finances and resources** refers to financial issues that may be holding back reuse, and to ways in which these might be addressed.
- **Imagination and vision** refers to what future towns are for, what they look like, and how they may need to change to accommodate modern living.
- **Confidence and motivation** refers to the less tangible issues that hold property owners back from moving forward towards adaptive reuse.
- **Approach** refers to the broader, national context of towns and vacancy, and the significant challenges and opportunities facing Ireland in the future.

These themes provide a structure to the following section of this report: Synthesis.

Synthesis

In this section, the authors of this report seek to synthesise the ideas generated by each of the six towns during the pilot project and develop suggestions for actions which may be taken by relevant authorities at national and local level to address the challenges faced by Irish towns today. Issues arising and potential solutions have been synthesised into **15 issues arising and suggested actions**. These are organised under the 5 themes that emerged during the TCLI: Providing supports, Finances and resources, Imagination and vision, Confidence and motivation, and Approach.

Precedents are provided for each action. These are not exhaustive lists and are intended only as a starting point for further discussion and development of the ideas emerging from the TCLI pilot towns.

Pilot towns where the issues and/or potential solutions were raised are listed. The first 3 letters of a town are used to identify the town. For example, CAS refers to Castleblayney. WOR refers to the facilitated workshop.

It is clear from the range of issues identified in the course of the pilot that action is needed at all levels including from national and local government to communities on the ground. The cross-cutting actions needed span multiple government departments and agencies.

Issues arising and suggested action areas

Theme 1: Providing supports

1.1 There is a lack of coordinated national support for towns

The TCLI pilot projects demonstrate that excellent work is being carried out by Local Authorities, Town Teams, Town Regeneration Groups and Community Groups in towns across the island. However, there is no single national body specifically charged with the support and representation of towns. A number of public bodies and government departments play various roles in the support of towns but there is a lack of an agreed cross-departmental approach. The lack of a coordinated national support for towns is reflected in issues such as:

- Small changes in a few towns in a piecemeal way will have little impact on the overall national problem.
- Relevant projects can occur in isolation and there is a danger of towns reinventing the wheel or failing to learn from previous successes and failures (lessons learnt);
- There can be a lack of shared knowledge and support for relevant initiatives, for example in relation to community-based and alternative modes of housing tenure and development such as Community Land Trusts, cohousing and cooperative housing.
- Revitalisation is often reliant on voluntary groups such as town teams who receive insufficient supports or guidance.

Suggested Action 1	Establish Ireland's Town Partnership
What does this involve?	<p>Ireland's Towns Partnership (ITP) could act as a hub for all information and resources pertaining to Irish towns. It could be responsible for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • overseeing a national evidence base and methodology for mapping and understanding Irish towns including measurement of vacancy and dereliction (Action 2); • leading participatory planning workshops (Action 15) and sharing a common Town Toolkit resource; • offering advice on simplified funding streams and potentially administering a single online grants portal; • supporting the drafting of Development Strategies and Vision Plans (Action 11); • liaising with and supporting agency partners including the Heritage Council, SEAI, Age Friendly Ireland, all relevant government departments; • providing a resource for best practice and guidance. <p>The ITP could also link with academic research institutions, such as the emerging UCD Centre for Irish Towns (CfIT), to commission and partner on evidence based transdisciplinary research on towns.</p> <p>It is suggested that the ITP would be a small, agile and independent not-for-profit entity funded by the Government of Ireland, that reports to a representative board, coordinates a cross-party working group, and manages a network of stakeholders across the towns of Ireland.</p>
Towns	BAL BAN BOY CAP CAL CAS WOR
Where has this been done?	<p>The proposal above is based on <u>Scotland's Towns Partnership (STP)</u> which has been very successful in this capacity over the last five years. STP is guided by the Town Centre First Principle that recognizes the import of an holistic, cross-sectoral and collaborative approach, and of people living in town centres. For more information on the STP please refer to Appendix 1.</p> <p><u>Villes de France</u> is an association of elected representatives for towns between 10 and 100,000 inhabitants that provides many of these services, representing, defending and supporting towns across the country.</p>

1.2. *There is a lack of quality and accessible data and knowledge on our town centres*

The TCLI pilot projects demonstrate that there is a lack of a consistent and measurable evidence base across towns, which makes the assessment of impact and value of funding programmes and interventions difficult. There are several different models of town health checks and town toolkits in use, resulting in the same problems. A standardised method for gathering core and dynamic data on a town would allow comparison and more accurate measurement of progress.

Several towns noted that there is no standard definition or coordinated method of measuring and understanding vacancy in Ireland. This leads to data being gathered in an ad hoc way using different apps, classifications and GIS tools. It is therefore impossible to understand the extent and nature of the

problem spatially and temporally. Data gathered on vacancy and the reasons for vacancy is not dynamic and exists in silos.

There is also a notable lack of metrics for non-financial benefits, for example, of restoration of heritage buildings or living in town centres.

Suggested Action 2	Establish an evidence base and methodology for mapping and understanding Irish towns
What does this involve?	<p>This action would deliver:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A standard methodology for mapping and analysing aspects of Irish towns modelled on the 15-step Collaborative Town Centre Health Check process developed and trialled by the Heritage Council in recent years. • A national, dynamic, comprehensive and accessible evidence baseline of data on all towns with consistent metrics, definitions and methodologies. Data to include land use, movement patterns, demographics, vacancy and dereliction, education, employment etc.. This could be developed in partnership with academic research institutions such as the emerging UCD Centre for Irish Towns (CfIT), AIRO in NUIM and others, as well as the Heritage Council, CSO and the CCMA. • A robust, accurate, consistent, and dynamic dataset on vacancy and underuse using existing datasets and technology in an intelligent mapping system. This dataset would have numerous uses including as a baseline for the work of vacant homes officers. <p>This action could be implemented and overseen by the Ireland’s Towns Partnership (see Action 1 above)</p>
Towns	BAL BAN BOY CAP CAL CAS WOR
Where has this been done?	<p>Scotland’s Towns Partnership and the University of Stirling have developed Understanding Scottish Places, an evidence baseline of data on all Scottish towns. This model was recently used for Understanding Welsh Places.</p> <p>The Heritage Council of Ireland has developed and piloted the Collaborative Town Centre Health Check (CTCHC) in recent years, working in partnership with 3rd level education institutions, business representative bodies, and communities.⁶</p> <p>In the US a Smart Growth Self-Assessment for Rural Communities helps communities identify gaps in policies, plans, codes and zoning regulations.</p> <p>Philadelphia’s Vacant Properties Indicator Model (VPIM) brings together proxy datasets on land and buildings from many City of Philadelphia departments and utilities to create a flagging system for the ‘likelihood of vacancy’.</p>

⁶ The Heritage Council’s Collaborative Town Centre Health Check model is an holistic, bottom-up and inclusive approach that involves a range of stakeholders including businesses, citizens and 3rd level education institutions in a robust and dynamic 15-step process and acts as a basis for revitalisation going forward. Supporting and employing a consistent model such as this will allow comparison of data nationally and measure progress in addressing challenges. Town audits and health checks are recommended in policy documents such as “A Framework for Town Centre Renewal” from 2017 (Retail Consultation Forum), but these tend to be top-down and once-off audits.

The [Scottish Empty Homes Partnership](#) coordinates dedicated Empty Homes Officers in every county who use a baseline inventory of vacant homes derived from Council Tax records.

1.3 *Many property owners need help in bringing properties back into use*

The processes involved in adaptive reuse can be daunting and complex, for example in relation to planning, regulations, legal issues and finances. It is evident that there is a lack of clear, accessible advice and support for property owners and that this is a barrier to reusing their buildings. For example, it can be difficult and expensive for prospective owners to understand the best approach, the likely costs and time needed for an adaptive reuse project. These concerns were noted in particular in Banagher, Cappoquin, Castleblayney and Boyle.

Protected structures were repeatedly highlighted as a hindrance or obstacle to development or innovation due to complex and costly rules on conservation, maintenance and limits to adaptation. Many Local Authorities lack essential expertise, for example they may not have a County Architect or a Conservation Officer who would be able to provide advice and support. Further research is required to understand what expertise exists and what expertise is missing in Local Authorities.

Challenges were also identified related to:

- relocating or downsizing, for example in terms of finding a suitable property and accessing local knowledge;
- a lack of motivation or wherewithal to refurbish and/or downsize with older property owners;
- legal problems that can deter reuse and may be shared by multiple properties.

Suggested Action 3	Appoint dedicated Town Centre Officers (TCO) and/or Management Teams
What does this involve?	<p>A dedicated officer or team providing a presence on the ground in a town. The TCO would drive the implementation of the strategic long term plan for the town, for example drawing on existing Local Area Plans, Public Realm Plans, and the County Development Plan.</p> <p>The TCO would organise and oversee the delivery of expertise and ensure that relevant support and advice can be accessed, for example from Local Authority Conservation Officers and County Architects.</p> <p>The role could relate to a specific town or cover a number of smaller towns within a municipal area.</p> <p>Advice could be delivered via a One-Stop-Shop model in the form of multi-disciplinary technical advice clinics that could be accommodated in an adapted vacant retail space, or at scheduled and regular times within libraries.</p> <p>One-Stop-Shops could also accommodate co-design, collaborative and participatory planning workshops or citizen observatories.</p> <p>The TCO would advise on and apply for various relevant funding streams, for example bringing together grants for energy efficiency, heritage, tourism etc..</p>

Towns	BAN CAP CAS BOY
Where has this been done?	Town Architects have successfully delivered positive results in Westport, Co. Mayo, and in Clonakilty and Skibbereen, Co. Cork. Limerick City and County Council provides a One-Stop-Shop advice clinic for property owners in the Georgian Neighbourhood and recently opened a Citizen Observatory where people can learn about and take part in the EU H2020 +CityxChange project. The Revitalisation des Centre Bourgs programme in France includes provision for project managers to be appointed to towns to directly support revitalisation. French towns also use the “One-Stop-Shop” model (guichet unique) to provide support around housing development and energy retrofit. Examples in Agen , Albret , and Dieppe-Maritime can be seen on the website for each town.

1.4 Property owner dynamics can result in protracted vacancy or underuse

Several towns in the TCLI pilot project reported issues related to:

- Inheritance, where there might be a lack of instructions; strong emotional attachments to a property that result in a reluctance to release to the market; or a lack of certainty about potential taxes accruing from sales of inherited buildings.
- Family or joint ownership where there may be no agreement on future plans resulting in inertia in the disposal of the property.
- Legal title, where a lack of clarity can impact on the ability to sell, for example where a neighbouring property might rely on a right of way that is not clearly recorded.
- Many towns being predominantly in the ownership of a small number of people.
- Difficulties in identifying ownership of long-term vacant or incomplete boom-time buildings.

Suggested Action 4	Strengthen legal supports to facilitate easier and clearer ownership change
What does this involve?	Availability of legal supports and mediation through the One-Stop-Shop facility (Action 3), for example for instances where no will has been written or a right of way is in dispute. Legal incentives or stimuli to encourage inheritors to either “use or sell” a property, for example through a higher rate of property tax, a land value tax, or a Compulsory Sales Order (CSO) mechanism. Adding legal responsibility for maintenance and use to definitions of property ownership. A free and open land registry is needed to assist the identification of the owners of vacant buildings. The legal structures to develop alternative tenure models should be explored, for example for Community Land Trusts, shared ownership or equity partnership models.
Towns	BAN CAP CAL CAS BOY WOR

Where has this been done?	<p>Since <u>2004 in France</u>, local authorities have the option to assume ownership of vacant properties where the property has been vacant and taxes unpaid for three years or where no owner can be located.</p> <p>In the UK, <u>Empty Dwelling Management Orders</u> have been in effect since 2004, but the programme is underperforming.</p> <p><u>Compulsory Sales Orders (CSO)</u> in Scotland are a proposed legal mechanism that permits local government to sell long term vacant buildings to the highest bidder.</p> <p>The UK Government White Paper '<u>Fixing Our Broken Housing Market</u>' (2017) commits to making land ownership and interests more transparent.</p> <p>The <u>WhoOwnsEngland</u> campaign advocates for transparency around property ownership.</p> <p>Denmark has a Central Register of Buildings and Dwellings (BBR) recording information including occupancy and ownership.</p> <p><u>Community Land Trusts</u> are not for profit organisations which own and develop property on a non-profit basis on behalf of a community. A trust might own land and enter into long-term and renewable leases with homeowners on that land.</p>
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Theme 2: Finance and resources

2.1 *The funding landscape is complex and incoherent*

It is difficult to navigate the disparate and various grant schemes in relation to different aspects of adaptive reuse, such as grants for energy efficiency, accessibility, conservation etc.. Funding schemes are available from numerous government departments or agencies and can be open to Local Authorities, community groups, or individual property owners. The application processes are often complex and time intensive, for very modest amounts, and there are limited chances of success. Grants available to individual property owners may be under separate schemes in relation to repair, conservation, energy efficiency, accessibility. They may run on an annual basis, rather than as needed by the building. Grants open to communities are overly reliant on volunteers, and success can be predicated more on good applications rather than proven need. For Local Authorities, a long term strategic vision needs to be aligned with funding goals in a multi-annual approach.

Suggested Action 5	Introduce simplified grants processes
What does this involve?	<p>A single online grant portal, developed and managed by Ireland's Town Partnership (see Action 1) that makes funding applications and draw down much simpler, easier and time efficient for applicants.</p> <p>This would allow different types of applicant to apply for funding under a selection or combination of headings such as energy retrofit, conservation upgrade, regulatory upgrade, repair, in a single application. The portal would eliminate the need for replication of information and would allow cross cutting funding to address repair and refurbishment, conservation and heritage, and energy upgrades at different scales</p>

	<p>from an individual property up to community development and urban upgrade projects.</p> <p>Application procedures and funding decisions would remain with the current Departments and Agencies, while the portal acts to streamline access and improve visibility.</p>
Towns	BAL BAN BOY CAL CAS WOR
Where has this been done?	<p><u>UK Grants online</u> portal offers comprehensive access to funding opportunities. It provides access to its database and timed alerts, but only for paying subscribers.</p> <p>The Irish <u>Community Foundation</u> offers an example of supported grant applications, with common questions answered and comprehensive access to grant opportunities presented.</p> <p>On a larger scale, the <u>EU funding and tenders</u> portal is the entry point for potential participants.</p>

2.2 The costs of reuse can be prohibitive

Several of the TCLI pilot towns explored costed design scenarios for the adaptive reuse of long-term vacant buildings in their town. Cappoquin, Ballinrobe and Callan all found that when associated costs of purchase, design and regulatory fees, and refurbishment costs were taken into account the total was 25-40% higher than the resulting capital value (market price). The towns found that it is cheaper and easier to build on the periphery of a town.

Suggested Action 6	Incentivise the reuse of vacant buildings through taxation strategies
What does this involve?	<p>Introduction of tax reductions or exemptions for the reuse and/or renovation of buildings. For example, reduced VAT on construction costs and professional fees, reduced regulatory fees, tax relief on income tax, exemption from stamp duty, or reduced local property tax for a designated period. These reductions or exemptions could be applied to all existing buildings or some could be limited specifically to targeted buildings or designated areas with high vacancy rates.</p>
Towns	BAL BAN BOY CAL WOR
Where has this been done?	<p>A <u>tax incentive scheme</u>, modelled on the Living City Initiative, has been suggested by the Heritage Council of Ireland.</p> <p>In <u>Scotland</u> VAT on renovations of a vacant property is reduced to 5% if a property can be shown to have been empty for 2+ years, and 0% for 10+ years.</p> <p>Historic England, the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, and the <u>Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission</u> are advocating for VAT on renovation to be <u>dramatically reduced</u> (from 20%). These demands relate to the findings of the <u>'There's No Place Like Old Homes: Re-use and Recycle to Reduce Carbon'</u> from Historic England.</p>

2.3 *There are no financial disincentives for under-use*

A common finding of the TCLI pilot projects was that it is often easier and less risky for owners to leave properties vacant than to reuse them. While supports for building owners are vital, they also need to be accompanied by financial disincentives to discourage long-term vacancy.

Suggested Action 7	Explore financial disincentives for vacancy and underuse
What does this involve?	<p>Setting up a working group (as for Action 8) with appropriate representation to explore and progress the design and implementation of disincentives. Options might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • application of full rates charges on all vacant commercial properties; • the vacant sites levy (currently under review) could be adapted to include all recorded vacant sites and buildings regardless of size and without the current requirement for housing demand; • application of higher levels of Local Property Tax to vacant or derelict properties and second homes; • a Land Value Tax, perhaps with credits for properties in use and/or higher rates applicable to peripheral development zones.
Towns	BAN CAS WOR
Where has this been done?	<p>Vacant properties are commonly subject to tax in other countries, including France, Spain and Canada.</p> <p>In Wales, a tax on second homes is discouraging empty holiday homes in rural areas and supports local communities.</p> <p>A Land Value Tax has been widely considered a fair way of taxing land and property since the early 1700s. Land value taxes are used in many places including Denmark, some regions of Australia, and Pennsylvania (US). A Site or Land Value Tax was previously proposed in Ireland in 1910 and more recently in The National Recovery Plan 2011-2014, Section 6.8.</p>

2.4 *Access to credit can be difficult*

All the pilot towns acknowledge that a lack of return on investment in the adaptive reuse of vacant properties is a major barrier and that access to traditional forms of credit are difficult or impossible. In Boyle, it was also noted that access to credit can be difficult where a building includes a ground floor commercial unit with residential above. Alternative options for financing adaptive reuse are therefore critical.

Several towns also noted that existing financial supports such as the Repair and Leasing Scheme are not being taken up and are not considered fit for purpose by property owners (see Castleblayney).

Suggested Action 8	Explore alternative models for access to finance for the adaptive reuse of vacant buildings
What does this involve?	<p>Setting up a working group with appropriate representation to explore and progress the design and implementation of ‘alternative’ development models and financial incentives for the adaptive reuse of vacant properties, including those emerging from the TCLI pilot towns and those put forward by think tanks and advisory bodies such as <u>NESC</u>. A clear understanding of the experience of existing financial support schemes is also necessary.</p> <p>The TCLI pilot project findings under ‘potential solutions’ include numerous suggestions. For example, Cappoquin puts forward a rolling development model where the profits of one sale support the next adaptive reuse, and a local authority-led incentive scheme that bridges the gap between property values and development costs. Other suggestions that emerged included financial aid to an owner/developer with conditions for returning the property to market within a specified time; a Local Authority acquiring targeted properties and either leasing to a developer with an agreed return over a specified period, or leasing to a developer with an option to acquire ownership at an agreed price and deferred payment date on completion of the redevelopment within a specified time period; or assembling and supporting a local housing cooperative to activate and enable development of vacant and opportunity sites.</p>
Towns	CAP BOY
Where has this been done?	<p>Scotland’s <u>Town Centre Empty Homes Project</u> (2015) made £4 million available in a 50:50 grant to loan model, resulting in 87 additional homes.</p> <p>The <u>Village Renewal Pool</u> scheme in Denmark has made the equivalent of €90 million available between 2014 and 2020 to cover 60% of costs incurred by 55 municipalities in a range of defined solutions for vacant properties including renovation and demolition.</p> <p>Community led housing London is a resource and advice hub that supports communities and future residents in housing development and management.</p> <p>Please see the NESC report: <u>Urban Development Land, Housing and Infrastructure: Fixing Ireland’s Broken System</u> (2018).</p>

Theme 3: Imagination and vision

3.1 *It can be difficult to envision how to live well in a town centre*

From the TCLI pilot projects it is evident that there are relatively few examples of vacant town centre buildings that have been adapted for reuse to a high standard in Ireland. This means there is a general lack of awareness and understanding of the potential of these buildings to become great places to live and work. The sense of place, history and assets of a town may not be immediately evident. The pilot projects have illustrated that vibrant town centres that are walkable and sociable, and where people lived above the shop, generally now exist only in the memories of older generations. Town centres are instead often associated with the negative effects of heavy traffic, noise and air pollution, anti-social behaviour and poor quality public and private open spaces.

Protected structures, in particular, are often regarded as a hindrance rather than an asset. There is now an urgent need to change the narrative around living in town centres, to reimagine what contemporary towns are for, and to combat peripheral drift in order to strengthen town centres as viable, attractive, compact urban places.

Suggested Action 9	Develop, document and communicate a range of high quality adaptive reuse case studies in towns
What does this involve?	<p>Many of the pilot towns have identified and tested typological design case studies of the adaptive reuse of vacant buildings. This action involves funding and developing a series of these case studies, taking them from the design stage through to planning and regulatory compliance, and on to construction and completion on site. The case studies should illustrate how to achieve high levels of energy efficiency and preserve the historic and heritage value of the buildings in an economically viable way.</p> <p>Shared learning and experience of how to adapt these buildings to achieve contemporary residential and mixed use buildings in town centres would be of immense value in demonstrating the potential of buildings in town centres to be great places to live and work.</p> <p>Dissemination of good exemplar case studies and the changing narrative around a vision for towns could be communicated through a range of platforms including publication, exhibition, social media, radio and television.</p> <p>Ownership and care of protected structures needs to be transformed from a burden to a desirable asset through demonstration projects and financial incentives or benefits.</p>
Towns	BAL BAN BOY CAL CAP CAS WOR
Where has this been done?	<p><u>Shaping the Future - case study in adaptation and reuse in urban environments.</u> (Dept. of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, 2012) could be built upon to track and highlight particular case studies of adaptive reuse of vacant buildings in towns.</p> <p>The <u>Traditional Building Skills Initiative</u> from the Heritage Council of Ireland has also sought to develop traditional construction skills. In Wales, the <u>Townscape Heritage Programme</u> provides upskilling workshops for the same purpose.</p> <p>A European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018 initiative entitled <i>Heritage in Transition: Re-imagining industrial, religious and military spaces for the regeneration of urban</i></p>

and rural areas, communicated the benefits of adaptive reuse strategies, good practice, and challenges and barriers to implementation. This culminated in the [Leeuwarden Declaration](#).
The World Green Building Council has recently launched a [case study library](#) of exemplar sustainable buildings.

3.2 *The ways in which we traditionally deliver housing are not working for Irish towns*

As previously noted the finances for refurbishment of individual properties do not always add up (Action 6). In addition, the adaptive reuse of individual properties will be inefficient and insufficient for the required scale and speed of change. This is demonstrated in the Cappoquin and Castleblayney pilot projects, where it is recognised that working at the block scale can unlock otherwise unseen potential, for example through infill development in backlands, and potentially make re-use more financially viable.

To address these challenges we need new and imaginative ways to deliver housing and unblock potential. This might include collaborative processes, as piloted in Castleblayney, and community-led housing models, as explored in Cappoquin. As previously noted (Actions 4, 7 and 10) there is a lack of knowledge and support for community-led and alternative modes of housing tenure and development such as Community Land Trusts, cohousing and cooperative housing.

Suggested Action 10	Develop and support collaborative processes and community-led housing models
What does this involve?	Facilitation and support for collaborative processes to overcome limitations of individual properties and realise the potential of groups of properties. Supports and policies for community-led housing models at national and local level, to include cohousing, Community Land Trusts and co-operative housing. ⁷ Awareness-raising of different housing models through information portals and exhibitions. Expansion of the remit of local authorities to develop housing beyond current social and affordable homes using these alternative models to ensure the reuse of key sites and a balanced social mix within the town centre. For example, a cohousing or supported housing model for older people looking to move into smaller properties in the town centre close to services and amenities.
Towns	BAN CAP CAS

⁷ See List of Terms Used for further information and examples.

<p>Where has this been done?</p>	<p>The <u>Revitalisation des Centres Bourgs</u> programme in France provides a project manager to a town to help people work together through facilitation and building trust.</p> <p><u>Community Led Housing</u> in London is a semi-independent body set up by the Mayor of London to give support, mentoring and funding to groups interested in alternative housing models.</p> <p><u>Community Land Scotland</u> supports the purchase and management of land by local communities.</p> <p>The <u>Cornwall Community Land Trust</u> develops affordable housing tailored to the needs of local communities.</p> <p>The <u>Development Trusts Association</u> is a network of over 250 towns working on community-led regeneration in Scotland.</p> <p><u>Self-Organised Architecture</u> in Ireland is working to promote community-led housing models. An exhibition from a 2019 conference is in storage at the TUD Dublin School of Architecture.</p> <p><u>Older Womens Co-Housing (OWCH)</u> in North London is a community-driven and managed development of houses for 26 women whose ages range from the early fifties to late eighties.</p>
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3.3 *There is an opportunity to create town centres for everyone*

For people to want to live in towns there needs to be a vision of towns as high quality, inclusive places for people of all ages and abilities. Currently, the public realm in towns generally does not meet universal accessibility standards and is heavily dominated by cars. This serves to exclude older and younger citizens as well as those with special needs. There is a general perception that streets in towns are not safe for children due to high levels of traffic and air pollution. Good public realm and street design, green infrastructure and public amenities that support people of all ages and abilities are a vital part of re-imagining our towns for contemporary needs. Creating biodiverse, healthy places can aid well-being and mitigate negative effects of loneliness and isolation.

Many of the towns acknowledge that the Urban and Rural Regeneration and Development Funds, Town and Village Renewal Scheme and Historic Towns Initiative play a vital role in funding and investing in the public spaces and amenities in towns, but that more needs to happen and faster to have a significant impact on a national scale.

Work patterns have also changed and towns offer a unique potential to accommodate innovation hubs and remote working and co-working models. In imagining towns as places that foster employment, small business and innovation, they can again become attractive places to younger generations.

There is also a lack of appropriate housing stock and tenures in town centres for all age groups. This is pertinent when people are living longer and more active lives and an increasing percentage of the population is over 65. Appropriate housing for younger people was noted as a critical need in the workshop and in the Castleblayney pilot project.

Suggested Action 11	Reimagine and communicate how town centres can be high quality and desirable places to live, work and belong
What does this involve?	<p>This action firstly entails imagining the future of our towns – for example, what would a zero carbon, age friendly, remote working town look like? Non-statutory Vision Plans could be inclusively co-created that imagine the best version of what each town could be. We need to be presented with a positive narrative for how great towns can be, how they can be compact, walkable, healthy and connected urban places that offer high quality employment, infrastructure, access to nature and quality of life. A Vision Plan can act as a management tool for funding applications over time, demonstrating an inclusive, coordinated and coherent approach.</p> <p>Secondly, a central role of an Ireland’s Towns Partnership could be to promote, share and communicate the best examples of high quality public spaces, homes, streetscapes, and urban environments in Irish towns. National awards schemes, building and expanding on Tidy Towns, could be a vehicle for this.</p> <p>Towns can be encouraged to define their unique characteristics and to develop these. Book Town, for example, is a good example of where this approach has worked in other towns internationally.</p> <p>A national accreditation programme, similar to the Green Schools and Purple Flag awards, might also be explored to encourage towns to apply for badges or credits for their towns in relation to heritage, digital capacity, remote working, creativity, biodiversity, visitor experience, dining, age friendliness, low carbon, etc. Fáilte Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, the Heritage Council, and the HSE might all be able to play a part in such a programme.</p>
Towns	BAL BAN BOY CAL CAP CAS WOR
Where has this been done?	<p>Boyle 2040 and Moycullen 2030 are good examples of recent Vision Plans. The success of this approach is borne out by the Westport Plan 2000, which set out a strategic vision for the town leading to many of the urban realm improvements that have been instrumental in the town’s success.</p> <p>There are numerous examples of quality public realm in Irish towns and cities, for example at the Viking Triangle in Waterford or the Parade and Canal Square Kilkenny.</p> <p>The DigiClare project by Clare County Council supports rural communities by providing community digital hubs.</p> <p>The Ludgate Hub in Skibereen, a co-working space, invites people to “live and work in Ireland’s first rural 1 Gig society”.</p> <p>Gteic Gréasán Digiteach na Gaeltachta is a network of 30 innovation and digital hubs being developed by Údarás na Gaeltachta in rural towns throughout the Gaeltacht areas.</p> <p>Grow Remote is a project which aims to use remote work as a tool for community development in Ireland.</p> <p>In Scotland, the Digital Towns Demonstration Project is working with tech partners to support digital development projects in towns.</p> <p>Also in Scotland, Icecream Architecture has worked with several Scottish towns and agencies to explore their identity, strengths and potential. Recently they have worked with the Scottish Land Commission to interactively explore ways in which</p>

	<p>Scotland’s land is owned, used and managed and how this affects young people, in the “MyLand.Scot” project.</p> <p>Scotland’s Towns Partnership runs a number of awards and communications forums to highlight and showcase best practice in towns across Scotland.</p> <p>Irish libraries are already playing a vital part in the life of many towns across the country and a recent Public Libraries Strategy (2019) aims to enhance their functions in the community.</p> <p>The Irish Active Travel Towns programme sought to encourage a modal shift in travel in towns outside of Dublin.</p>
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Theme 4: Confidence & motivation

4.1 *It can be difficult to have confidence in the future of the town centre*

From talking to individual town centre property owners, for example in Castleblayney, it is clear that low confidence in the future of the town is a major barrier to investment and action. Contributing factors include:

- Long term vacancy, dysfunctional retail, dwindling services and amenities (such as Post Office closures) signal a weak future for town centres.
- Prominent public buildings can be vacant or derelict.
- Public spaces can be of poor quality and the dominant use is for car storage and parking.
- Statutory and non-statutory plans for the future of the town may not be widely known or trusted.
- Incomplete modern buildings can be in financial and ownership limbo.
- There can be limited employment opportunities and/or options for flexible and/or remote working.
- The draw of cities creates a demographic imbalance that towns are failing to compete with.
- Lack of any visible improvements over a number of years can make the challenges seem overwhelming and intractable, thereby reinforcing a pattern of decline and further hollowing out of town cores.

Suggested Action 12	Resource and support Local Authorities to invest in and demonstrate confidence in their towns
What does this involve?	<p>To break the cycle of decline, local authorities can demonstrate their confidence in towns through action and investment. In partnership with citizens, local authorities need to be adequately resourced and encouraged to develop clear, funded long-term Vision Plans for towns (Action 11), and to invest in the upgrade of public spaces and streetscapes, smarter travel infrastructure, alternative housing models (Action 10), and key public buildings.</p> <p>Immediate roll out of actions identified in Public Realm Plans, which many towns have completed, would deliver tangible and impactful demonstration of this confidence in towns.</p>

	<p>The Town Centre Officer and Management Team (Action 3), applying a Town Centre First Approach, can drive the implementation of the Vision Plans.</p> <p>Local authorities can lead by example by upgrading vacant protected structures and prominent buildings in their ownership, and by taking action using CPOs or CSOs to bring vacant buildings back into use, including through the implementation and support for innovative housing delivery modes.</p> <p>Change has to be tangible and sustained. Flagship projects such as digital hubs combined with other cultural and community uses in restored historic buildings (Actions 10 and 11) can build confidence on a number of levels and act as a catalyst for revitalisation.</p> <p>Adequate support from central government and funding prioritisation at local level is essential if local authorities are to lead this action.</p>
Towns	BAL BOY CAP CAL CAS WOR
Where has this been done?	<p>Westport Co. Mayo, Clonakilty Co. Cork, Ennistymon Co. Clare are all examples of towns which have benefited from sustained confidence building measures, including long term Vision Plans delivered by municipal architects; support for smarter travel initiatives; public realm investment; and sustained support for tourism, business and SME innovation.</p> <p>The Heritage Council of Ireland runs several programmes promoting public realm and the unique qualities of a place, including the Irish Walled Town Network and Ballybrilliant (The Heritage Council)</p> <p>In France, the Petit Villes de Demain initiative (Small Towns of the Future) provides support for towns to grow. For example, the town of Luzy upgraded its facades and public realm and then hosted welcome weekends for prospective inhabitants, and Guiscriff used a community library project as an anchor project in the town's redevelopment.</p>

Theme 5: Approach

5.1 *There is a need for systems thinking and a national programme*

It is clear from the pilot projects that addressing the problem of vacancy only at the level of an individual building is not, in itself, enough to ‘fix’ vacancy or towns. Ireland has a large number of low density towns and small changes happening in a piecemeal way will have little impact on the problem as a whole. There is a need for systems thinking, linking vacancy to systems such as property, tax, the legal system, culture, mobility and economics.

The pilot projects make clear that vacancy is a symptom of systemic problems that result in towns being “left behind”, compromising national social cohesion and potentially leading to broader and potentially significant negative impacts. There is therefore an urgent need for systemic change.

Suggested Action 13	Establish a cross-cutting Town Centre First Approach
What does this involve?	Establishment of a cross-cutting Town Centre First Approach that puts the health of town centres at the heart of decision making and is applied across all government departments and agencies, local authorities and community level organisations. For example, in practice this would mean that all future policy and plans are obliged to ensure that compact urban town centres are prioritised over peripheral locations for residential, commercial, cultural and amenity use. The Town Centre First Approach would be the foundation of all other suggested actions noted in this report and would reinforce the need for our towns to be thriving places for living well. The Town Centre First Approach would require the introduction of national programmes for the revitalisation of town centres of different scales that provide supports, including funding, in line with the suggested actions set out in this report.
Towns	BOY WOR
Where has this been done?	In Scotland, the <u>Town Centre First Principle</u> was the first step in the national Town Centre Action Plan, which emerged from a National Review of Town Centres (2012 and ongoing). The Town Centre First Principle asks that “government, local authorities, the wider public sector, businesses and communities put the health of town centres at the heart of decision making. It seeks to deliver the best local outcomes, align policies and target available resources to prioritise town centre sites, encouraging vibrancy, equality and diversity.” (Scottish Government, 2014) In France, there is a recognition at the highest levels of government of the essential role of small to medium sized towns in providing services and in maintaining social cohesion across the regions. The decline of town centres is considered an issue of national importance as it is essential to avoid people and places feeling left behind. Various national programmes exist for different scales of settlement that take a collaborative, holistic and cross-sectoral approach Examples include <u>Action au Coeur de Ville</u> and <u>Revitalisation des Centres-bourgs</u> .

5.2 Towns have a critical role in the climate emergency

The revitalisation of town centres to create resilient and sustainable communities is an example of climate change adaptation that makes best use of existing infrastructure, buildings, and materials.

From the pilot projects it is clear that there is currently a lack of:

- recognition of the benefits of reusing buildings in terms of embodied energy and nurturing a sense of place and belonging;
- the potential for town centres to facilitate sustainable patterns of living with reduced carbon emissions and local circular economies;
- the potential of rural towns as distributed centres for processes of change related to climate change mitigation and adaptation in the transition to a low carbon society.

Ireland is well placed to lead a just transition to a low carbon society, for example by adapting our towns for reuse intelligently.

Suggested Action 14	Support towns as centres for the national low carbon transition
What does this involve?	Establish relevant towns across the country as focal points for the low carbon transition, for example providing supports including finance and advice for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the adaptive reuse of heritage buildings with high energy efficiency ratings; • the upskilling of construction industry professionals and trades, potentially in partnership with SEAI; • positive energy communities and community owned renewables to provide a local energy economy with tangible benefits to communities through feed-in tariffs and investment options; • smarter travel initiatives including greenways linking towns and villages, public transport and new mobility technologies; • bioeconomy and circular economy initiatives that reduce waste, create new jobs and support the local economy; • behaviour change and alternative practices in industries such as farming, forestry and waste management.
Towns	CAL CAS
Where has this been done?	The SEAI Sustainable Energy Communities programme supports communities in Ireland that are interested in community energy. The Transition Towns movement is making the low carbon transition in towns globally. Transition towns in Ireland include Kinsale, Kildare, Roscommon and Kilkenny. Limerick City is part of an EU H2020 +CityxChange project developing Positive Energy Blocks and energy communities. Portlaoise is running an innovative project to become Ireland's first low carbon town . The Alpine Partnership for Local Climate Action supports local authorities to take a key role in climate adaptation. In France, the Eco-Quartier designation provides towns with training, access to a membership club, and extensive information support on climate resilience in local areas.

The [Scottish Borders Climate Resilient Communities Project](#) used action research to improve understanding and approaches to building climate resilience in Scotland.

5.3 *Involving as many people as possible in processes of change is critical*

Public participation and co-design, for example in creating a long-term Vision Plan for a town, are vital if people are to develop confidence that their voices and ideas are represented, and if towns are to adapt to the changing needs of their citizens. Participatory planning and co-design go beyond public consultation to actively seek out, listen to and incorporate the views of citizens in towns.

Participatory planning and co-design are vital strands of understanding, planning, designing and implementing a vision for towns as healthy, socially cohesive, inclusive and attractive places to live, work and learn.

All of the pilot towns have noted the value of engaging with and listening to the people who live and know their towns during the course of the pilot study.

Suggested Action 15	Develop best practice in participatory planning and co-design
What does this involve?	<p>Developing a hub for best practice guidance, training and resources for participatory planning and co-design, possibly under the remit of the proposed Ireland’s Towns Partnership (Action 1), that would offer case studies of successful co-design projects and share toolkits on core functions such as Collaborative Town Centre Health Checks (see Action 2).</p> <p>A role for Town Centre Officers (TCOs) and/or Management Teams in Local Authorities in facilitation, mediation and support of participatory planning and co-design processes, guided by the knowledge hub of the Towns Partnership.</p> <p>Learning from successful Irish projects (some examples below) which demonstrate the possibilities for citizen engagement, for example in creating a collective vision for the town in the future.</p> <p>Other participatory and co-design mechanisms might be design residencies within local authorities; town workshops; GeoDesignHub workshops; collaboration with research bodies such as the Irish Research Council or the UCD Centre for Irish Towns; and artist collaborations.</p>
Towns	BAL BAN BOY CAL CAP CAS
Where has this been done?	<p>The Participation City Foundation in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham involves large numbers of people in participatory planning, co-design and neighbourhood projects. This builds on the Open Works project in the London Borough of Lambeth, where a reused high street shop acted as an ‘ideas station’ where people could drop in and share ideas, attend events, and eat together.</p> <p>Online participatory planning tools are increasingly used, for example Civiq, Consul and Decidim. The EU H2020 +CityxChange project in Limerick is exploring these participatory planning and co-design tools. The project has developed a Citizen</p>

Participation Playbook and is piloting an 'Innovation Playground'. The latter is described as "an area of a city where different virtual and physical places and activities related to innovation are brought together into a coherent whole to facilitate collaboration, empower citizens, and find new ways of addressing challenges that matter to people." (+CityxChange, 2020) A Citizens Observatory has been opened in the city centre to provide a hub for participatory planning and co-design.

Other examples in Ireland of the application of participatory planning and co-design include:

- Moycullen 2030 Plan
- Boyle 2040 Plan
- Nimble Spaces Callan
- Bring Your Own Chair

The Citizens' Institute on Rural Design in the US works to build capacity and form a vision for small towns through participatory activities and co-design.

Appendices

1 Scotland's Towns Partnership

How did Scotland's Towns Partnership come about?

Scotland's Towns Partnership (STP) is variously described as the 'go-to' body for Scotland's towns; a support agency for towns; and a national towns collective. It is a hub for relevant news and resources; knowledge and good practice; supports for learning and communities; influencing and sharing policies; and raising the profile of Scottish towns. The STP has a coordinating function, including for actions to deliver the Town Centre Action Plan, and pilot projects in the areas of digital towns, sustainable towns and town centre living. The STP is also responsible for Scotland's Improvement Districts.

The STP emerged from a number of initiatives including the Scottish Town Policy Group (from 2008) directed by the thinktank Centre for Scottish Public Policy, which created STP as a spin out company that would have a more operational remit for towns in 2012. The nascent STP supported the National Review of Town Centres, commissioned by the First Minister in 2012, and reported on the subsequent Town Centre Action Plan by the Scottish Government. In 2014 the Scottish Towns Minister officially launched the STP with funding from the Scottish Government.

How is Scotland's Towns Partnership structured?

STP is a small, agile, not-for-profit, independent company that receives funding directly from the Scottish Government. The STP is not a Scottish Government agency. The core team coordinates 3 main entities:

- A Board that reflects influencers relating to town centres including from academia; spatial design practice; the community, retail, telecommunications, energy, tourism, sustainable transport, financial and business sectors; and the Carnegie Trust. A Scottish Government observer sits on the Board.
- A Cross Party Group (CPG) that reflects the apolitical nature of STP. The CPG analyses proposed policies and develops ideas and innovations, working towards sustainable economic growth in towns.
- A Membership Network of organisations and individuals that includes local authorities, national and local private and third sector bodies; funding organisations; Development Trusts; Business Improvement Districts (BIDs); and community organisations. The network has a digital reach of 10,000+ stakeholders.

The STP is in effect an example of adaptive co-management, with a focus on learning, knowledge sharing, capacity and network building, promotion and collaboration between diverse actors at all scales (see Olsson et al. 2007; Folke et al. 2005).

What key activities does Scotland's Town Partnership manage that might be mirrored in an Ireland's Towns Partnership?

- Resource Hosting: STP host a number of practical Toolkits which their members can avail of, including Town Audits, Digital Towns Guidance, BIDs, Stalled Spaces Toolkit, Living Streets Campaign, and the Test Town Portal among others.

- Knowledge Sharing: STP are linked with Understanding Scottish Places (USP), an evidence based online dashboard to measure, compare and understand the characteristics of towns.
- Funding Support: STP provide a central support for funding for towns through hosting workshops on funding, managing a funding finder platform, and offering advice to organisations on available funding and how to access it.
- Promotion and Collaboration: STP host events including Scotland's Towns Week and Scotland's Towns Conference (among others) which aim to promote towns and share knowledge and experience of best practice nationally and internationally.

Focused, lean and evolving actions managed by a dedicated partnership with a broad membership has proven successful in addressing challenges faced by Scottish towns. Many of the same challenges are faced by towns in Ireland.

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2 Notes on key terms

Approved Housing Bodies

Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) (also called housing associations or voluntary housing associations) are independent, not-for-profit organisations. They provide affordable rented housing for people who cannot afford to pay private sector rents or buy their own homes, and particular groups such as older people or homeless people. AHBs also include housing co-operatives, which are housing organisations controlled by their members/tenants who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions.

Cohousing

Cohousing involves a group of people developing a housing community together for their own needs (as opposed to co-living, which is a commercial model). Co-housing features smaller private living spaces and larger communal shared spaces that are usually for dining, recreation and services, relative to more conventional developments. Some cohousing developments are intergenerational, some focus on providing independent living for people with disabilities, and others have been created to cater for particular communities such as older women or LGBTQ groups. There are many examples in the UK and some relevant initiatives in Ireland such as cohousing cafes and information sessions provided by Self Organised Architecture (SOA).

Community Asset Transfer

This is an option, now mainstream in Scotland and Northern Ireland, for the transfer of land or buildings from a public body (usually a local authority) to a community based organisation at less than market value. The community organisation could, for example, be a town's Development Group or other local social enterprise. These arrangements commonly involve a long-term leasehold arrangement (at nominal rent) which allows the community organisation to secure a sustainable income stream and gives them a secure base for community activity, service delivery and local enterprise. Further information is available from the Northern Ireland Department for Communities and the Scottish myCommunity website.

Community Land Trust

Community Land Trusts (CLT) are not-for-profit organisations which own and develop property on behalf of a community. A Trust might own land and enter into long-term and renewable leases with homeowners on that land. When the homeowner sells, they earn only a portion of the increased property value and the remainder is kept by the Trust. The Trust effectively acts as a steward of the land, ensuring the housing built on that land remains affordable. No CLTs currently exist in Ireland, but the model has proven successful in the UK where there are over 225 Trusts at present.

Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO)

A CPO is a legal function that allows certain statutory bodies to purchase land without the consent of the owner, and is currently most commonly used in the development of major infrastructure projects (roads, public transport). It also applies to derelict property, particularly where a Local Authority has a

responsibility for public safety which may be threatened by a particular site. The CPO is designed to be used for the common good.

Compulsory Sales Order (CSO)

Not currently available in Ireland, these powers are to be introduced in Scotland under the Land Reform Act. A CSO allows for the compulsory sale of a piece of land or building which has fallen into disrepair or dereliction, particularly in those cases where no clear plan for the land or building has been arranged (such as would be required by a CPO). The aim is to transfer the ownership of the land or building to a more active and responsible owner. Further information on the [Scottish proposal](#) is available from the Scottish Land Commission.

Cooperative Housing

A housing co-operative is an organisation mutually owned and democratically controlled by its members. Housing co-operatives can be involved in the building, management and maintenance of houses and apartments across various forms of tenure – rental and ownership. They may work with Local Authorities as Approved Housing Bodies to provide housing for those on housing lists, or develop private housing for the market. [Cooperative Housing Ireland](#) provided 371 new homes in 2019.

Derelict Sites Act

Under the [Derelict Sites Act 1990](#), Local Authorities are responsible for dealing with derelict sites in their area. They can use certain powers to enforce the clean-up of these sites. Under the Act, Local Authorities can prosecute owners who do not comply with notices served, make compulsory land purchases, or carry out necessary work themselves and charge the owners for the costs incurred. Local Authorities have similar powers regarding dangerous structures under the Local Government (Sanitary Services) Act 1964.

Dereliction rate

Dereliction is defined in the Derelict Sites Act from 1990 and refers to any building or site “which detracts, or is likely to detract, to a material degree from the amenity, character or appearance of land in the neighbourhood of the land in question.” (Government of Ireland 1990). The interpretation of this definition can be subjective and change depending on the immediate context. It is important to be clear as to what applicable areas are being used for any stated dereliction rate, for example relating to defined parts of a town. As a consequence, comparisons of dereliction rates in different places or over time must be treated with caution.

Land/Site Value Tax

Land value tax is a charge on the value of land, not taking into account any of the physical capital built on the land. It is calculated as a percentage of the value of the site, which is related to the location of the site. It is potentially a more progressive option than the current property tax model in Ireland as it incentivises the efficient use of land. Where a property tax model can disincentivise owners from improving their buildings, a land value tax would not be affected by renovation works.

Town Centre First Principle

In place since 2014 in Scotland, the Town Centre First Principle relates to public policy for town centres. It places the health of town centres at the heart of decision making and ensures that the future of towns features in decision-making processes of local authorities and other public bodies. In the Scottish context the Principle is not prescriptive, but it is used as a starting point in decisions affecting town centres.

Vacancy rate

There is no consistently used definition or method of measurement of vacancy in Ireland. A building or part of a building is generally considered vacant if it has not been used for an extended period. It is important to be clear as to what definitions, criteria or applicable areas are being used for any stated vacancy rate, for example relating to certain floors, uses (residential, commercial etc..) or defined parts of a town. As a consequence, comparisons of vacancy rates in different places or over time must be treated with caution.