

'Free Market'

**Presentation to the Joint Committee on Rural and Community
Development**

06 November 2019

"Co-ordination of grant aid to support rural towns and villages"

Speakers:

Miriam Delaney (MRIAI), Architect and Lecturer at the Dublin School of Architecture,
Technological Univerity Dublin

Laurence Lord (MRIAI), Architect at AP+E and Lecturer in Architecture at School of
Natural and Built Environment, Queens University Belfast

Framing Statement

On behalf of 'Free Market' I would like to thank the chair and committee members for inviting us to present on the topic of "*Co-ordination of grant aid to support rural towns and villages*". My name is Laurence Lord and I'm joined today by my colleague Miriam Delaney.

'Free Market' are a group of six architects and designers (JoAnne Butler, Jeffrey Bolhuis, Miriam Delaney, Tara Kennedy, Laurence Lord and Orla Murphy) who were selected by Culture Ireland, The Arts Council and the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaelteacht to represent Ireland at the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale. We formed a non-profit organisation, and our exhibition built on previous work and study we have engaged in through our practices and academic research. The Venice Biennale is the largest global forum for architecture exhibition and debate with 63 national pavilions and 71 invited participants, it attracted 280,000 visitors over six months from May to November 2018.

The subject of our exhibition, entitled 'Free Market', was Irish Market towns, highlighting their character, history and future potential to an international design audience. Our exhibition focused on small towns and particularly on the market places that are typically central to Irish towns. We wanted to highlight the diminishing quality of public spaces in most towns as vehicular transport and carparking have taken priority over all other considerations.

The public spaces and market places of our towns do not exist in isolation; they are a symptom and a product of the overall health and vitality of towns. Because of this our project addressed issues of vacancy, car-parking, demographic change, housing and re-use. Our exhibition contained drawings, models and photos of a selection of ten Irish towns, describing their past and our proposals for their future.

Between July and September 2019 the 'Free Market' pavilion and exhibition toured to four towns: Castleblayney, County Monaghan, Macroom, County Cork, Mountmellick, County Laois, and Kilmallock, County Limerick. The tour focused on learning from small towns; through a comprehensive public engagement programme, we sought to hear from people who live in towns about their direct experiences. In a concerted effort to reach as diverse as possible an audience, we have engaged in debates, lectures, workshops and festivals all over Ireland, meeting volunteer community groups, business people, school children, politicians, Local Authority Architects, Heritage Officers and Planners.

The "Free Market" project began life as an architecture exhibition but has developed into one that considers the connections between politics, planning, decision making and design. We produced a "Map of the Agencies & Policies Affecting Towns in Ireland" in an attempt to understand the complexity of decision making impacting towns, it highlights the vast numbers of parties engaged in Irish towns and the raft of policy written about towns. We also attempted to map the funding streams and agencies awarding funding. This diagram is a snapshot of the dynamic funding system for towns - it illustrates the number of agencies involved in distributing and awarding funding.

From our research and on-going conversations we make the following observations:

Irish Towns are unique

In media and public debate, there is often a dichotomy drawn between urban and rural, with the significance of towns overlooked- towns are not country-side, nor are they mini-cities. We tend to think of towns as centres of tourism, but we need to shift the focus to make towns great places to live. Innovative adaptation of towns can ensure that their future is one that supports a growing population, in a low-carbon, compact urban model, with health and well-being at its core.

All Departments and none

Control and decision making about towns falls between too many Government Departments and agencies – the Department of Rural and Community Development, Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaelteacht, The Heritage Council, Enterprise Ireland amongst many others.

Navigating the enormous raft of policy that affects towns is a complex and frustrating business. Within these layers of policy there is an insufficient holistic focus on towns, this is true too of funding.

The various agencies and Departments do not always seem aware of what is being funded by whom in towns. There is inadequate communication between the funding awarding bodies on who and what is being funded, place-specific funding oversight is often missing.

Funding following Timelines not Projects

The funding related to towns is often delivered annually on a case-by-case basis, meaning that significant time and energy is spent tendering small projects, rather than coherently actioning bigger strategy.

Volunteer community groups face an uphill struggle to navigate complex funding applications in order to achieve any tangible success. Many community groups lack the skills to know which fund is appropriate for which project, and how to successfully apply for funds.

Evaluation of best practice and knowledge sharing

Funded projects are not always evaluated independently for impact, value and outcomes. Opportunities to share knowledge are therefore often missed, which can result in each town starting from scratch, rather than building on shared experience.

Likewise, there is insufficient awareness of best international practice in town regeneration, there is no central point to access advice, research, case-study projects and best practice models.

Lack of Long Term Vision

The annual funding cycles of Local Authorities and Government Departments mean meaningful engagement with local communities is very difficult. Decisions on funding by Local Authorities are often rushed towards the end of the calendar year, money is sometimes spent quickly without reference to any overarching strategy for specific towns. Community groups need funding, but they also need a vision for what their town could be.

Lack of support for community stakeholders

We noted that many community and voluntary groups within towns are frustrated by a lack of advice on funding options. It appears that some Local Authorities coordinate well with community groups, and are proactive in managing funding applications, other Local

Authorities less so. Some towns, and their community and voluntary groups, suffer because of weak links with Local Authority employees and lack a direct point of contact.

The loss of Urban and Town Councils in 2014 has left a gap in grassroots representation and access. Public Participation Networks and Towns Teams are attempting to bridge this gap, but are uneven in their successes.

Lack of specific funding (and taxes) to address long term vacancy

Vacancy in towns is the major issue that needs to be tackled across Government Departments and directly with Local Authorities. Compact urban settlement, which is at the core of *Ireland 2040: The National Planning Framework* and *Climate Action Plan 2019*, will only happen in towns if we address vacancy. Adaptive re-use of empty buildings must be actively supported by Local Authorities. A Vacant Building Tax is also needed to incentivise sale or re-use of long-term empty buildings, which are currently held as capital assets with little or no incentive to release them for sale or reuse. Priority must be given at all levels to new homes within town cores over peripheral sprawl.

Public Projects in Town centres

Public buildings should be located within town centres - Local Authorities and Government Departments need to take the lead here. We can learn from Scotland's recent adoption of a **Town Centre First Principle** in locating public services and amenities in towns, prioritising use of existing town centres at every opportunity. New schools and Primary Health Care Centres must be located in town centres- we see over and over again where this has not happened. Public realm plans need to be adopted and implemented, with car parking gradually decreased in favour of better public space, pedestrian connections and cycleways. We cannot expect others to have confidence in towns, unless it is first demonstrated with consistency and ambition by Government Departments and Local Authorities who are responsible for towns.

Building on our observations noted above, we submit the following six proposals for consideration by this Committee:

Proposal 1: A multi-level Town Partnership

We need a Cross-Departmental Partnership with dedicated multi-annual funding to deliver a coordinated **Town Centre First** strategy to towns, that links Government Departments, Local Authorities, and local communities and stakeholders. The **Scotland's Towns Partnership** model is one that could be easily translated to Ireland.

Proposal 2 - Academic Centre of Research

The proposed Town Partnership group should be aligned to an academic centre of excellence - potentially in the newly emerging transdisciplinary UCD Centre for Irish Towns (CfIT). The centre would support Departmental policy and decision making, and have the resources to identify, research and disseminate best international practice and successes within Ireland.

Proposal 3 - Built Exemplars

We believe that community and business groups need to see concrete built examples of town centre housing, of first-class public realm design and of re-use of vacant buildings to build confidence that change is possible.

For this we need implementation of clear and accessible, stream-lined, multi-annual funding for exemplars. Support is required for actions to deliver longer term change, for example adaptive re-use exemplars delivered by Local Authorities; wider and simplified roll-out of the Living Towns Initiative; implementation of Public Realm Plans; guaranteed support for the Heritage Towns Initiative and Collaborative Town Centre Health Checks.

Proposal 4 - Participatory design and decision making

We need to strengthen the mechanisms through which the voices of citizens in towns can be effectively heard in decision-making. New forms of design processes with effective community engagement are critical in developing holistic plans and strategies that work in the long-term. Participatory design, and participatory decision making will need to be supported financially and with more time in developing project briefs.

Proposal 5 - Town Architects

We see the need for the appointment of Town Architects, architects are trained to provide a vision of what could be- very few Irish towns have a long term spatial vision. Local Authority Town Architects would be responsible for good design, would provide funding guidance, and implement public space design and adaptive re-use projects. Irish towns that are highlighted as successes, Westport, Clonakilty, for example, have benefitted from committed Local Authority Architects. Some Local Authorities in Ireland still have no architects, and the role of architects and urban designers in town rejuvenation is not sufficiently acknowledged and supported.

Proposal 6 - Long term action plans for sustainable towns

Each town should have a strategic spatial plan identifying projects and potential funding streams. This plan needs to be developed by Local Authorities in partnership with community groups to achieve sustainable town development in an era of climate change. These action plans should highlight short, medium and long term goals for each town and identify appropriate means to fund these goals.

Executive Summary

To summarise, we see the need for two levels of reform to maximise the benefit of public funding for towns and villages. Firstly, we see a clear need for **more cohesion and clarity at national level between Government Departments and funding agencies - supported by a dedicated academic town research group.**

Secondly, **stronger supports for participatory decision-making at grassroots level** is required.

The 'Free Market' project is fundamentally optimistic; we believe that there is real value and potential in our small towns, and that they are resilient places that can provide sustainable communities in the future. Good design should be the connecting tissue of all built projects and public realm works in small towns, and towns need designers at the heart of decision making. Towns need structural reorganisation of funding for greater efficiency, but they also, more critically, need a vision of what they could be.

The issues that affect rural towns affect our cities too. If we do not address the challenges that face towns with urgency and ambition, cities will come under increased pressure to house and provide infrastructure.

We acknowledge and commend the increased funding of rural towns and villages in recent years, and recognize the work done by committed Local Authority employees, by the Heritage Council and the many Government Departments engaged in rural town regeneration, but believe that more can be achieved with this funding through clearer and more strategic oversight and greater community engagement.

We wish to thank the Committee for inviting us to speak, we welcome any questions on our observations and recommendations.

www.freemarket.ie

FREE MARKET

Joint Committee on Rural and
Community Development

WWW.FREE-MARKET.IE / [#FREEMARKET_IRL](https://twitter.com/FREEMARKET_IRL) / [@FREEMARKET_IRL](https://www.facebook.com/FREEMARKET_IRL)

FREE MARKET

What's on today at the market square?

EVENT TIME

FREE MARKET
IS COMING
TO TOWN





'FREE MARKET' IN VENICE



TEMPLEMORE , CO. TIPPERARY



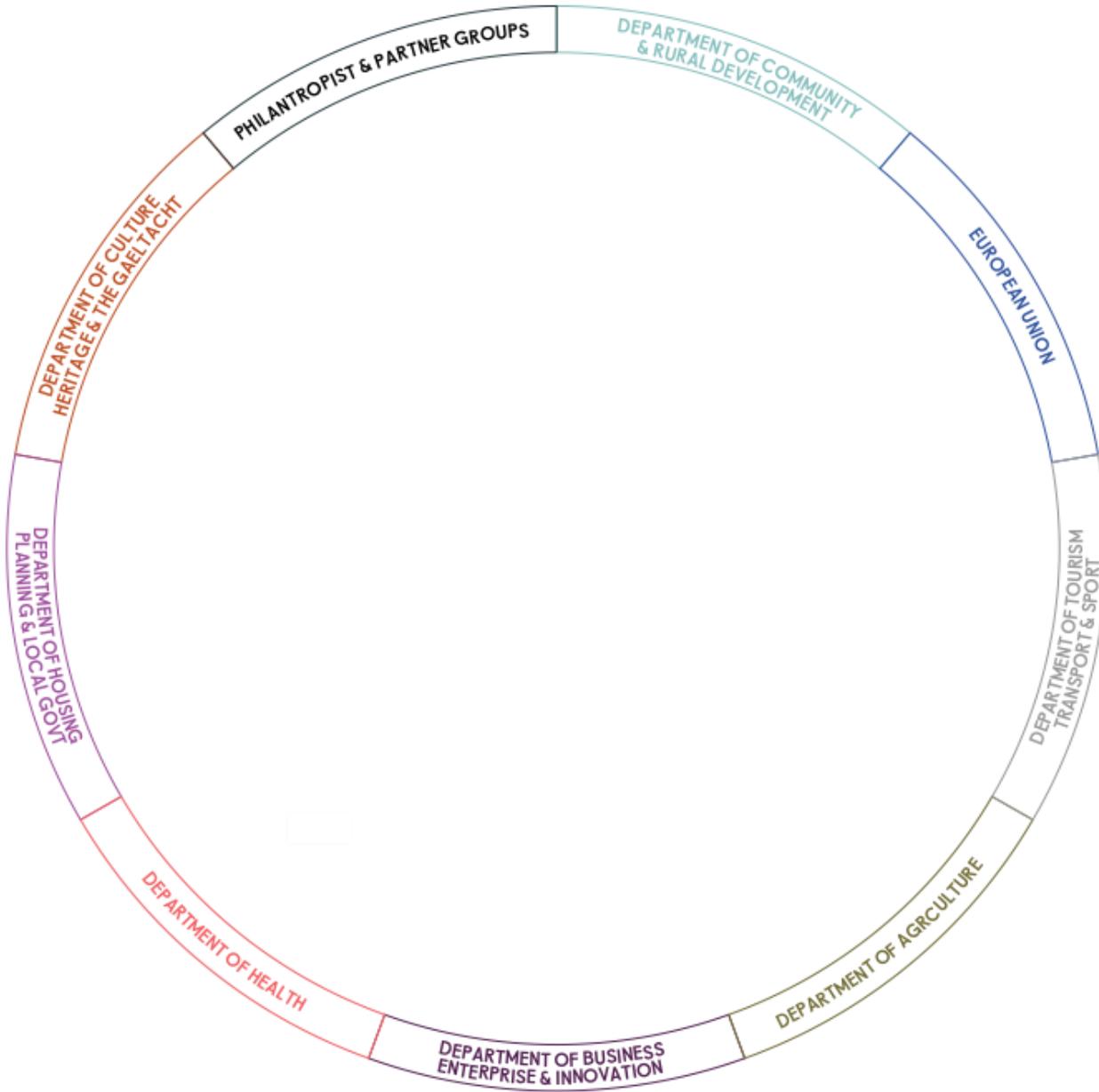
MACROOM, CO. CORK



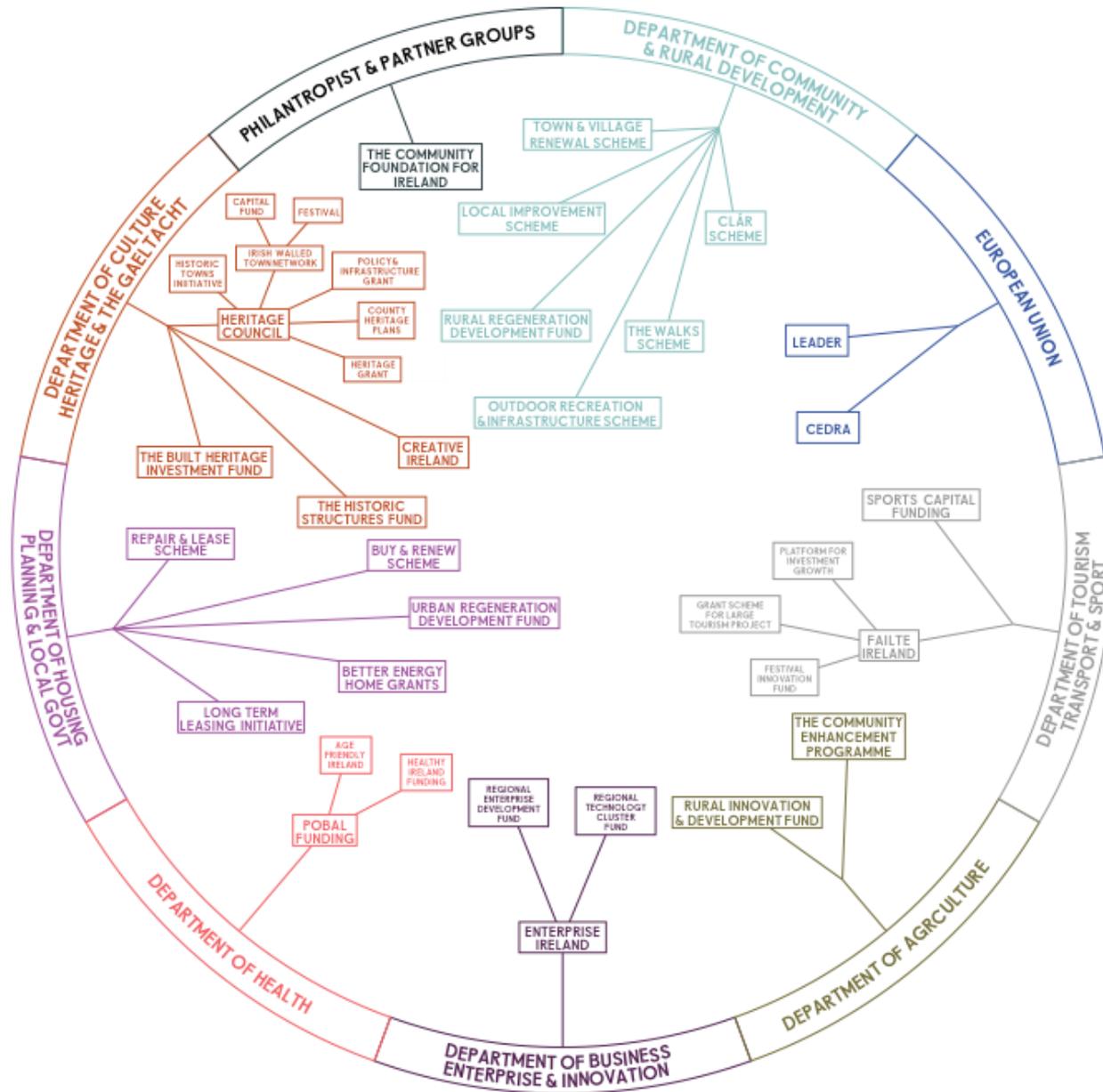
TOWN PROPOSALS



FREE MARKET NEWS



FUNDING AGENCIES AND GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS



FUNDING STREAMS



'FREE MARKET' IN CASTLEBLAYNEY



'FREE MARKET' IN MOUNTMELICK



'FREE MARKET' IN MACROOM

FREE MARKET

A photograph of a building facade featuring a large, illuminated sign that reads "FREE MARKET" in orange, three-dimensional letters. The sign is mounted on a metal frame above a glass entrance. The background shows a white wall and a dark, grid-like structure on the left.