Chairman, Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you to discuss the pilot Town Centre Living initiative. I know that the Committee has taken a keen interest in this pilot and you have here today representatives from the Local Authorities who are participating in the pilot to give you a first-hand account of their engagement in the process.

I propose to give you a short background to the initiative and then hand over to the Local Authority representatives.

The Town Centre Living pilot was announced by Minister Ring in October 2018 to develop innovative proposals to encourage more people to live in rural town centres.

The pilot complements the Town and Village Renewal Scheme and the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund, both of which are administered by the Department of Rural and Community Development.

Six towns were identified initially to test the pilot approach. The towns in question are:

1. Boyle, Co Roscommon
2. Callan, Co Kilkenny
3. Ballinrobe, Co Mayo
4. Banagher, Co Offaly
5. Castleblayney, Co Monaghan
6. Cappoquin, Co Waterford.
These towns are of different sizes and in different locations. We hope that the learnings from their involvement in the pilot will provide an indication as to what might work well for similar types of towns on a wider scale.

The issue of residential occupancy in many rural towns is not necessarily a need for new houses, but, rather, how to the make best use of properties that are available and to encourage people to live in them.

The reasons why properties are not being used in town centres for residential purposes are complex and I am sure you will hear more about this from the Local Authority representatives.

Apart from issues that can arise around the property itself, other factors such as the availability of services, recreational facilities, civic space, and a good retail mix, all need to be part of the offering to encourage people to want to live in town centres.

It is also important to recognise that that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to rejuvenating towns and villages in rural Ireland. Each settlement is different, each with its own strengths, as well as issues that need to be addressed.

The pilot scheme was designed to allow the participating Local Authorities to examine the issues in their own particular towns and develop blueprints to attract more people to live in the town centres.

The Department is making technical assistance of up to €100,000 available to each Local Authority to support their work and to develop proposals to encourage town centre living. You will hear from the Local Authorities how they have been using this money to identify the issues and solutions that influence the number of people living in their town centres.

It is envisaged that the lessons learned through this pilot will help to inform the approach to supporting and investing in rural towns and villages in the future.

The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund provides an opportunity to take forward the blueprints that emerge from this pilot by providing funding for strategic proposals that can rejuvenate towns and increase town centre living.
It is encouraging that some of the towns involved in the pilot have applied for funding from the RRDF, while others have received funding through the Town and Village Renewal Scheme.

I will leave my comments there for the moment to allow the Local Authorities to make their presentations, but I will, of course, be happy to answer any questions the Committee may have later on.

Thank you