Town Living Pilot Scheme

Joint Oireachtas Committee – Department of Rural and Community Development

13th November 2019
Callan, Co. Kilkenny

- 1 of 5 district towns 16 km SW of Kilkenny City
- Callan population of 2,475 in 2016 +6% on 2011
- Historic 13th C core on King’s River- Upper Bridge St. at the heart
- Callan Health Check 2018
- Callan has 16% vacancy (28 out of 179)
- Vacant housing 10%
- Bridge St. accounts for 42% of vacant properties in Callan
- Anglo-Norman motte and the Augustian Abbey
- Thriving Arts community
Callan, Co. Kilkenny

PILOT REGENERATION

BRIDGE ST, CALLAN, CO.KILKENNY
Learnings and Requirements
Callan, Co. Kilkenny

• Strategic Long-Term Plan
• Community & Stakeholder Engagement
• Private & Public Solutions
• Policy & Funding Alignment
Banagher, Co. Offaly

- Located on Western edge of County Offaly on banks of River Shannon
- Population 1,760
- Biggest asset - River Shannon once for industry now tourism and recreation
- Good local employment – Banagher Concrete, cruise liner businesses at the marina
- Good Community Development Group
- Residential/commercial town occupancy decline leading to vacancy/dereliction
- Need to bring tourist from marina to town centre approx. 30,000 visitors per annum
Banagher, Co. Offaly

Causes of vacancy

- Lack of tenants – especially mixed use
- Lack of finance to refurbish to occupy
- Lack of incentives to invest in properties
- Lack of knowledge
- Lack of interest
- Protected structure hinders investment
- Inherited property
- Holding on to property might be needed in future
- Used for storage
- Legal Issue e.g. Right of way
- Open to offers would sell
EXISTING VACANT TOWNHOUSE WITH VACANT COMMERCIAL UNIT, BOTH IN NEED OF COMPLETE RENOVATION. ADVANTAGES: CENTRE LOCATION IN BANAGHER, GENEROUS SITE AND PRIVATE ARCHED ACCESS.
Castleblayney, Co. Monaghan

Market House

Roof Collapse 2012
- Secure as derelict - €290,000
- Demolish & rebuild - €3m
- Demolish & plaza - €730,000
- Refurbish - €6m

Internal Wall Collapse 2019
- Internal Wall Collapse
- Bracing to retain walls & Clear out debris
- Structural Report
- €420,000

Gate Lodges

Refurbished for Community Use 2015
€315,000 investment

Development of
New Library
RRDF Grant - €2.7m
Boyle, Co. Roscommon

Causes of Vacancy

• In Probate
• Age Profile
• Negative Equity
• Costs of Repair particularly due to NIA/Protected Structures
• No Back Garden
• Lack of jobs in the area so young people do not return

Impact of Historic Town’s Initiative Intervention

• Very useful in getting strong level of engagement
• Built Confidence in broader town
• Identified the barriers for owners in refurbishment
  • Lack of capital
  • Property succession
  • Challenges of interior restructuring
  • Lack of jobs in area

What’s Needed

• People need to want to live there – Sell the potential of the town, jobs, quality of life, “hipster/cool” place to live
• Realising the potential of the backlands
• Joined up approach with tailored grant scheme to cover essential repairs, modern fit for purpose living
• Build up a sense of community on the streets
Cappoquin, Co. Waterford

Overview

• One of the larger settlements in W. Waterford
• Market & Estate Town of 700 people
• Important crossing point on the Blackwater
• Architecture is 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} century
• Many rental properties & social housing
• Vacancy 17\% (108 out of 505)
• Selected Block – Upper Main St. / Green St (40\% vacancy)
• Assets including picturesque location on a bend in the river, at the foothills of the Knockmealdown Mountains
• Modern national school and Community Centre and childcare facilities, local walking trails and water sports – increase in permanent residential population needed. Industry also required
Approach

• Start Up
• Research & Analysis
• Develop Design
• Develop Delivery Model
• Final Report

Long Term Design Strategy

• Connect to natural environment and river
• Improve the built environment
• Increasing permanent residential population
Cappoquin, Co. Waterford
Selected Block – Upper Main Street/Green Street
Cappoquin, Co. Waterford

Proposal

1. Site assembly – link across site
2. South facing – solar gain
3. Open plan layout
4. Increase floor area
5. Flexible use of ‘mews’
6. Flexible permutations
7. Retain historic main façade
8. Contemporary façade to rear
9. High level of insulation (NZEB)
10. Pilot scheme to test proposal
Profile of Town

Castleblayney is located on the main national route N2 from Dublin (112km) and is linked to Dundalk (28km) by the N53 national secondary route, and 4kms from the border with Northern Ireland.

As a border town, Castleblayney has suffered greatly from the legacy of the troubles which discouraged inward investment leading to dereliction and placing the town even more distant from any real business financial recovery at this point. The imminent onset of BREXIT has also served to exacerbate uncertainty around investment and business confidence in the town.

The town is situated on the shores of Lough Muckno, a resource used for angling, water sports, children’s adventure park, walking, picnics, golfing and festivals. Community participation is healthy with key annual festivals in the town include Muckno Mania Festival and Castleblayney Drama Festival. However, business participation levels are low and there three derelict public buildings which require major investment.

The town has two secondary schools located within the town offering a high-quality education. The Castleblayney Enterprise Centre provides training courses for businesses and SMEs. Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT), the third level institution for the region is less than located 30 minutes drive from Castleblayney and the town has a young age profile, with a high percentage of 20-34-year olds than the state average (CSO 2016).

Key statistics

The town and environs population fell from 3,634 in 2011 to 3,607 in 2016. The decline in the Town population between 2011 and 2016 was more severe, falling from 1,752 to 1,690 persons, a decline of 3.6%.

Relative Deprivation Scores also indicate increased social deprivation for the town (urban district), with the score decreasing from -10.4 in 2011 to -11.7 in 2016. The score for the rural area also decreased from -5.1 to -7.2 for the same period.

Vacant dwelling rates for Castleblayney at 2016 were 16.6% for the Town and 23.6% for the Urban area (CSO, 2016). The commercial vacancy rate for Castleblayney in Q4 2018 was 22.4% compared to 19.8% for Q4 2017.

Castleblayney Regeneration Committee (Town Team)

Following the abolition of the Town Council in 2014, Monaghan County Council, together with voluntary community and business groups in the town, established Castleblayney Regeneration Committee in 2015 to explore how the town’s economic growth could be harnessed. The Town Team initiated a highly successful programme to promote economic activity in the town centre, including retailer training, town branding and promotion, broadband business survey and a coordinated property façade painting scheme. The Town Team partners with the Council on public realm projects funded under the Town and Village Renewal, Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure and Heritage Grant Schemes. In 2019 the Town Team hosted the Venice Biennale/Free Market Town exhibit.
Pilot Town Centre Living Initiative

**Project Objective:**
The key issue to address is the decline of the town centre as a place of economic and social engagement, which incorporates the loss of town centre living (and population), retail shops and services and also the decay of the town’s historic fabric.

The project seeks to provide a *strategy/framework for revitalisation* that generates comprehensive and quality data, builds capacity for change, provides human and financial resources, and receives the support, will and energy of local people and stakeholders.

**Project Outline:**

**Key Activities:**
- Property identification survey (completed)
- Town Centre Land Use survey (completed)
- Regeneration Study for a defined study area of Market Square, Muckno Street, Main Street and Henry Street – to identify areas with potential for property owners to collaborate – identify individual challenges, barriers, potential collective solutions, and identify mechanisms that need to be put in place to encourage revitalisation (Shaffrey Architects)

**Update**

*Shaffrey Architects* have carried out analysis of the town centre study area and hosted two property clinics – a capacity building workshop and an owner-groupings workshop – which have been attended by approximately 20 property owners.

In tandem, the County Development Plan 2019 and the Public Realm and Economic Plan 2018 support many actions to build on and promote Castleblayney’s existing economic, architectural and cultural assets to enhance the town as a place to live, work and visit, including place-making, greening, mobility interventions, activating historic buildings and connectivity which are vital in ensuring the town can sustain itself into the future.

Shaffrey Architects’ engagement has been very positive, in understanding the owners’ composition and barriers to development and importantly, building confidence collectively within the owners. The workshops have created enthusiasm and some positive momentum within the property owners to do something with the properties. They will complete their report from the study by the end of 2019, to include some potential concept design schemes along with key recommendations around facilitating future development of town centre properties.

**Anticipated Outputs:**

**Final Report by Shaffrey Architects to incorporate:**
- Detailed analysis of study area
- some concept design drawings based on the workshop meetings which identified three groupings of properties
- recommendations regarding facilitating town centre redevelopment

A key recommendation will be to identify the need for a designated role for a dedicated person to work with the property owners to work through the complex process and regulation of development, such as planning permission, building and fire regulations, energy ratings, access to grant funding supports, etc. The role could possibly be sourced by a Government Department, similar to the model used for Broadband officer and Vacant Homes officer. With a dedicated officer to support the property owners, there is a stronger chance of the private sector contributing more to regeneration.
Cappoquin Pilot Scheme - Addressing Residential Vacancy

Name of Local Authority: Waterford City and County Council
Name of Town: Cappoquin
Size of Town: 699

Profile of Town:

Historical Background: Cappoquin is a small town in west Waterford almost equidistant from Cork and Waterford cities at 65km. 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 now defunct.

Change in Size: The population has declined from a peak of over 2,200 people in the 1840s to around the 700 or so today. Urban living has been largely replaced by suburban and rural re-settlement, leading to a decay of traditional town life and consequent loss of value and maintenance of the building stock.

Economic Activity: There is a IDA business park with approximately 200 jobs, retail employment on the Main Street of approximately 18 businesses (including grocery, pharmacies, garage, pubs, F&B, barber, credit union and betting shop). Glanbia Agribusiness Depot is located in the town centre. Cappoquin Bacon Factory and Cappoquin Chickens Factory have closed with the loss of over 200 jobs. There is no suitable local employment for 3rd level graduates.

Physical Layout: The architecture of Cappoquin largely dates to the eighteenth and nineteenth century, displaying evidence of a ‘planned ensembles’ of streets and terraces. Its typology is a combination of industrial river port, market and estate town. The 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 the Main Street. Landmark buildings include an early 19th Century Catholic Church and Church of Ireland Church. Cappoquin House and Richmond House form prominent buildings within the townscape. A small central square with a traditional market house remains a focal point. The NIAH has recorded over 70 sites within the town of which 32 are protected structures – an extraordinarily rich built heritage with a picturesque location on a bend in the river, at the foothills of the Knockmealdown Mountains.

Current occupancy: In the centre of town, mostly commercial, some residential and vacancy issues.

Existing Amenities: Cappoquin Primary School has 214 pupils. An Orthodox Monastery occupies the now closed Mercy Convent and secondary school. Mt. Melleray secondary school has closed. The Cappoquin Rowing Club is active. The Bank of Ireland and AIB branches have closed but there is a Credit Union. There is a very successful and active community centre.

Vacancy: In 2018, Cappoquin Community Development Company carried out a survey of premises (505), 86 were vacant (17%) and of these 37 were derelict (7%) many formerly residential over shop and concentrated in the centre of town, 108 (21%) were for rent. Much of the building stock is not attractive for modern residential needs. There is 40% vacancy on Main St.

Community engagement/past and future funding: Cappoquin Community Development Company (CCDC) was set up in 1993 and Cappoquin Regeneration Company (CRC) in 2019. Achievements include the purchase of 6 acres for housing, construction of 6 small industrial units for start ups and the construction of Cappoquin Community Centre containing gym, hall and day care. It has purchased 2 vacant properties and is actively pursuing 5 further properties. CRC was set up in
response to dereliction and vacancy working in partnership with WCCC, Waterford Leader and the Tomar Trust. CCDC has partnered with Waterford Leader Partnership (WLP) and 5 other community groups in adjoining towns in making joint application for RRDF funding as part of Blackwater Valley Economic Development Zone (refurbishing of one of purchased buildings). 100k has been awarded under the Village and Urban Renewal program for painting buildings.

Project Objective:

*Key problems to address.*

- Vacancy and dereliction. 40% vacancy on Main St.
- Continued population decline
- Less than 3 properties on Main Street contain families with children. Of 16 active businesses, only 5 have residential over.
- Loss of scale, critical mass, function and purpose.
- Loss of social and economic infrastructure (closure of local factories – loss of 200 jobs, schools, banks)
- Non functioning real estate market – few properties coming to market.
- High social dependency and age dependant population.
- Greater choice of suitable employment elsewhere.
- Poor standard of housing stock, existing units too small for modern family living.
- Property ownership is in too few hands.
- Uneconomic cost of refurbishment of buildings (cost higher than value of completed building).
- The N72 creates a dislocation between town centre and Blackwater and the social, recreational and sporting activities hosted within the community centre.
- No convenient parking in urban core.
- Lack of movement in market (retention of property for occasional use, owner has moved on, vacated property, owner has died, and the estate is awaiting legal action, owners are not aware of the options for renewal, some owners preferring to hold on to derelict property in the hope that value may increase).
- Difficulty in obtaining planning or other regulatory consents.
- Uncertainty in how to go about process, finding a suitable design professional to carry out refurbishment works.
- Time, cost & risk of adapting buildings to re-use

Project Outline

*Phase 1 – Start-Up*

1. Working Group established WCCC team & CCDC representing the community. WCCC Architects Studio assumed project lead role.
2. Funding possibilities: RRDF, T&V Renewal Scheme, Waterford Leader, Tomar Trust, European & National specific purpose funding.
3. Working Group procured architectural consultants to give advice on design & technical aspects.

*Phase 2 – Research & Analysis*

2. Vacancy, dereliction and photographic survey carried out.
4. Potential sites are prioritised for maximum impact and viability of delivery.
5. Study area agreed (Main Street, Market Square & The Green).

**Phase 3 – Develop Design**

1. Design parameters established and typical building inspected.
2. Aims, objectives and barriers established (existing units are too small/site assembly barriers)
3. Develop a best practice model (design Team develop a flexible approach which will facilitate a number of permutations).

**Phase 4 - Develop Delivery Model**

1. Financial Package (some financial subvention is required. Grant aid scheme &/or tax incentive scheme).
2. Development entity to assist/manage schemes and will carry out development of pilot scheme.
3. Flexible procurement model such as project management contract investigated.

**Phase 5 – Final Report**

1. Working Group preparing a report to be complete by December.
2. Working Group aim to progress the pilot scheme through the planning process to detail design and cost evaluation stage.

**Provisional Findings**

**Summary:** We wish to address the issues of vacancy and the stagnant housing market in Cappoquin by a direct and practical approach that produces results. There is little incentive to develop in small towns like Cappoquin because the cost involved in acquiring and improving a property is not matched by its ultimate value. From an investment perspective the potential yields are too low for commercial viability. We are advocating an integrated approach that relies on the sum of its parts rather than any simplistic solution and takes a long term delivery horizon:

1. **Regeneration Entity** - A long term, plan driven approach by a combination of the Local Authority and Community Development Association is necessary through setting up a dedicated regeneration entity. The local authority can provide technical, planning, conservation and architectural expertise, liaise with government departments, process grant applications and has access to legislative tools such as CPO and can acquire properties. The Community Association has local knowledge, can acquire properties and have access to regional development grants.
2. **Plan Driven** - Our proposal is envisioned as part of a flexible, adaptable long horizon plan and design strategy for Cappoquin that can form the basis for a pipeline stream of projects to be used to prioritise actions.
3. **Identifying and Assembling Properties** - The identifying of a site and assembling of appropriate (adjacent) properties is key part of the process.
4. **Developing Architectural Solution** - We have developed a tailored response to the selected block that creates an appealing contemporary solution and includes having flexible spaces that can be partitioned from the main residence and can then be used as work studios, serve the local tourist market by providing short term accommodation or as a garage.
5. **Reducing Soft Costs** - We are proposing the option the provision of a generalised architectural solution that addresses the typologies found in the block and therefore reduces unit soft costs. The LA could provide technical and planning expertise.
6. **Rolling Scheme** – We propose a rolling model whereby as properties are developed and sold, a pipeline of new properties can be brought to bear within the scheme.
7. **Efficient Delivery** - We are investigating a potential path to efficient construction delivery by the use of a project management model. To this end, the CCDC has acquired a property to test the model and develop a pilot scheme, verify costs and provide a show house.

8. **Grant Aid/Incentive Scheme:** There needs to be some financial subvention to bridge the gap between property value and development costs. Our proposal would suggest the government provide the finances to assist in property acquisition and site assembly. This could be managed/administered by the LA or a local regeneration entity. The site would be provided to the client on a lease basis with a diminishing pro rata financial claw back facility on sale of the property over twenty years, after the stated time period the free hold would be transferred to the client at no charge. The LA/local entity could vary involvement from facilitation to full delivery. This proposal is somewhat reminiscent of the Affordable Housing Scheme model.

A tax incentive scheme such as the Living City Scheme could be expanded to include designated town centers. However we have reservations at to the efficacy of this approach as the primary vehicle, given the requirement for up front funding and the potential yield. However this model may prove successful in former estate towns such as Cappoquin where an estate company retains a substantial property portfolio and has access to working capital.

9. **Loans** - We have discussed the scheme with Local Credit Union who believe the proposal is compactable with the provision of their construction loans.

10. **Promote** - Pilot Scheme Show House, the regeneration entity would promote the scheme, establish local demand and recruit clients. Downstream, it may be a possibility that the regeneration team develop a ‘shared ownership’ model to reduce initial cost to their clients.
Callan is one of 5 district towns in Kilkenny with a population of 2,475 in 2016. The town is a historic 13th century trading town built around a cross roads adjacent to the Kings River with a narrow bridge crossing. In line with Governments “Framework for Town Centre Renewal” the community section of Kilkenny County Council, working with Callan stakeholders and communities followed the 3 steps within that framework of:

(i) stakeholder engagement and health check,
(ii) establishment of a town team and
(iii) preparation of a town plan.

Having established the town team and commenced the action plan process it was apparent that the Bridge Street/Mill Street area of Callan town centre is suffering from high levels of vacancy of aging properties mostly from retail units. This section of the town centre is constrained by poor vehicular access and lack of parking and has become unattractive for potential redevelopment. The town team specifically identified tackling vacancy in the Bridge Street area as a town action and sought advice on how to take steps to address vacancy of potential residential properties.

The Pilot Project objectives were:

- To identify opportunities to develop vacant/under occupied premises for residential use.
- To develop proposals for potential repair interventions to high conservation standards using high quality long lasting materials.
- To develop low carbon, energy efficient solutions using compatible materials for the buildings in question.
- To improve the image of the street and exploit its built and visual assets.
- To identify grants and financial incentives to potentially support proposals identified, private and public.
- Focus on in depth proposals for 3 typologies -5 buildings, identifying barriers to potential development

Following a procurement process Carr, Cotter & Naessens Architects were appointed to carry out site assessments, stakeholder engagement, prepare a report on the objectives outlined and develop detailed proposals for selected properties where owners expressed an interest in redevelopment of properties. A preliminary report has been prepared by Carr, Cotter & Naessens identifying opportunities for development on individual sites and barriers to the general redevelopment potential of the street.
Problems or barriers identified:

- Age and condition of buildings
- Space standards and compliance with modern regulatory requirements including conservation requirements
- Constraints of plot sizes and shapes
- Cost and funding models
- Parking
- Traffic congestion
- Older residents/families leaving the area

A final report will be available in the coming weeks.

The 6 pilot schemes have co-ordinated their approach throughout the process to identify the shared learning across all the projects within the pilot scheme.

**Learnings to date:**

1. A need for a strategic long term plan and funding stream for implementation of a meaningful regeneration project.
2. Need for both public and private residential occupancy to ensure socially sustainable outcomes.
3. Need for both public and private investment solutions based on sound financial returns.
4. Supporting initiatives identified as requirements are amenity and public realm provision to improve the overall attractiveness of the area.

In Callan RRDF and Town & Village funding has been secured to provide river clean up and amenity provision adjacent to Bridge Street. Supporting policy initiatives are also identified as a requirement including aligned planning policy objectives in local area spatial plans, conservation policy reviews (RPS), ecological and environmental screening and in Callans case mobility management planning. The challenges associated with the achievement of modern building, fire and private rented standards, high energy efficiency and good conservation practice without compromising the integrity of the buildings and street should not be underestimated. This requires inter-departmental co-ordination.

Most importantly the high cost of the specific proposals developed requires in depth analysis. The unit cost of redevelopment or adaptive re-use of these properties is considerably higher than unit cost ceilings used for the provision of social housing. This results in a requirement for private investment. Again the unit cost established to achieve desirable standards in energy, design and conservation exceeds the potential return from sale or rent of such units in Callan. These sites are fully serviced and their re-use is socially desirable. The value placed on these aspects must be determined and costed. The population of Callan grew by 6% between 2011 and 2016 and is projected to increase further over the next 10 years. Without appropriate
intervention to encourage the redevelopment of town centre sites, with their identified challenges, future development to meet residential needs will take place on green field sites outside of the town centre. These sites will require costly servicing infrastructure such as roads, public lighting, water, waste water and digital connectivity. This pilot scheme has identified the measures to be taken to support innovative adaptive re-use of a town centre properties. There are cost premiums associated with the appropriate redevelopment of these sites which the current property market cannot meet. Financial and regulatory incentives are therefore required to ensure that some of these units can be delivered successfully back into the housing market.

**Required:**
- Alignment of policy objectives and a prioritisation of importance: should getting occupancy and life in town centres trump heritage?
- A funding scheme strategic in nature that can facilitate joining up with other funding streams i.e. RRDF with SEAI, with Heritage Grants etc.
- Incentive for private sector, perhaps no VAT for materials and works on Protected Structures in the Pilot areas to see if it would encourage private sector engagement.
Name of Local Authority: Roscommon  
Name of Town: Boyle  
Size of Town: Population 2,568 in the 2016 census  
Profile of Town:  
Boyle town and its environs had a population of 2,568 in the 2016 census. In its past, Boyle town centre would have been a much smaller, compact area with a population of 3,433 in 1831. The Georgian town would have been a much more vibrant and prosperous place due to the building, use and interaction density, 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 – King House, Boyle Abbey, Lough Key. There is good access links by road/rail. The residential vacancy level in the Town Core (study area of Boyle 2040) is 80%  

The area of the town which suffered the most profound loss of population in recent times is the Northern end of the town centre around the banks of the Boyle River, with only a handful of residential addresses in the three urban blocks adjoining the River Boyle which make up approximately one third of the core town centre area. For the purposes of this pilot, concentration is on, in particular, Main Street which is the street next to King House and contains a number of buildings of interest.

Very few family homes were built in the town centre in the second half of the 20th Century due to the popularity of the suburban lifestyle and consequently footfall quickly diminished in and around the main streets in the town centre. The reasons for selecting this area are as follows:  
- They form part of the original town core and continue to be very important in the context of their location adjacent to King House and on the approach street to Boyle Abbey;
- They are part of the study area in Boyle 2040, which has been extensively studied during the preparation of the Boyle 2040 plan;
- Boyle 2040 advocates a town centre first approach to the location of new urban communities as well as public and private investment as central urban locations generally achieve maximum economic and community benefit;
- 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 population inputs and investments in the core town centre areas;
- Detailed research, as a background to Boyle 2040, looked at different measures of viability and vitality of a town – but a simple approach is to ask “Are there many people on the streets in the town centre?” – with people, the lifeblood of successful towns and community life develops through everyday encounters and interactions;
- In addition, 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 either on the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage or protected structures. The street front buildings are primarily three storey terraces with residences over commercial premises. This gives an opportunity to examine the challenges for people where the buildings are in an ACA area.

The whole project fits within the Boyle 2040 Framework, which seeks to focus on the regeneration of the town centre as a desirable and convenient place to live, work and recreate, with businesses, homes, services in the same place providing the footfall and population critical mass to underpin quality urban spaces, amenities, vibrancy and diverse street life.

Roscommon County Council worked very closely with Boyle Town team in preparing the Boyle 2040 Plan and continues this engagement as projects come on stream. The redevelopments achieved and ongoing under DRCD funding in Boyle are all centred around improving the public realm and attractiveness of the adjacent River Boyle area to make the area more attractive to live, work and invest in. The Boyle Cycle Corridor, currently being completed 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 which provides a dual aspect for many of the properties on Main Street and opens up opportunities for redevelopment to the rear of these properties facing onto the River Boyle.

A Historic Towns Initiative (HTI) has just been completed for the Southern side of Main Street which 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. This 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.
**Project Objective:**

The objective of the project is to identify both the macro and macro level issues impacting on the low residential occupancy in the town centre. From our consultations and work on this project so far, this is a sample of the issues emerging:

- Lack of finance to renovate properties;
- Complications and cost when properties are in SAC or are protected structures;
- Difficult to get return on investment;
- Structural uncertainty of the building until works commence;
- Age profile of owners;
- Lack of access to the back of the properties in a number of cases limits the attractiveness for families;
- Properties bought for investment several years ago and difficult to trace owner;
- Properties not transferred following death of owner due to no will;
- Complaints about the public realm/footpath conditions in the area;
- If an owner uses the lower floor for commercial use, then they are not eligible for a mortgage;
- Preference for suburban living with access to own garden;
- Lack of adequate employment in the town to encourage people back who have skills in new areas where employment does not exist for as yet in Boyle;
- Lack of “community” amongst owners resulting in high costs for maintenance as done on individual basis.

The top five causes of vacancy identified are:

1. Property is still in probate
2. Negative Equity on property
3. Costs of Repair particularly due to NIA/Protected Structures
4. No Back Garden
5. Lack of jobs in the area so young people do not return

**Project Outline:**

Boyle, as a pilot town, was in a different position to many of the other towns as “Boyle 2040” had already involved carrying out significant research into the area and the potential developments of the area.

The project focused on meeting on utilising the HTI funding to provide the property owners on the southern side of Main Street with an external conditions survey and 70% grant aid towards enhancing the street façade and carrying out minor repair improvements. This allowed us an opportunity to trace the ownership of each house and discuss the conditions survey carried out with the owners. As the funding did not allow for actual works to be carried out, we have instead organised for a conservation architect to review a number of the properties and a seminar is planned to outline how one such house could be transformed into a living space for families. This will include a step by step approach to dealing with the issues that emerge in an old house within an ACA area.

As outlined above, the availability of HTI funding in the project area has made it possible to develop a strong rapport with owners on Main Street. It is giving a good opportunity to identify the individual issues impacting on why properties are not being lived in, renovated or used commercially. Out of 19 properties contacted, 17 engaged with the
consultation and 11 proceeded to full involvement in the scheme. The Historic Towns Initiative (HTI) provided assistance with cosmetic improvements to the street frontages and essential maintenance in terms of slipped slates, blown plasterwork and removal of redundant wires.

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 our Planning Dept. and more recently to our Local Enterprise office (LEO) as they consider re-locating from the East Coast of Ireland.

Part of the funding will be retained to promote the area to Boyle and Broader Roscommon Diaspora to encourage them to consider relocating to the area and provide them with a step by step template from purchase through to living in the street.

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<th>Provisional findings:</th>
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<td><strong>Potential solutions/Ideas</strong></td>
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<td>Our work on the pilot has identified the need for the following:</td>
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<td>- Programme of incentives/funding to attract people in to renovate and live in the town centre;</td>
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<td>- Continued development of the public realm and civic spaces to allow good quality shared spaces for families;</td>
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<td>- Connection with SEAI and other potential funders to provide a package of supports for the renovation of properties;</td>
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<td>- 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;</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Promotion to the diaspora of the area who may be encouraged to come back to former family-connected town.</td>
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Name of Local Authority: Offaly County Council

Name of Town: Banagher

Size of Town: 1,760 (Census 2016)

**Profile of Town:**

Banagher is located on the banks of the River Shannon and this strategic position resulted in it being the focus of thriving river business in the past. At one time, it had a population of almost 3,000 however that has now reduced significantly.

Main Street in Banagher is 1.3km in length from the bridge over the River Shannon to the Church of Ireland at the top of the town and has 156 buildings, with a mix of residential, commercial and community units. The town has 2 schools, the primary school which has over 250 students and the post primary school with almost 600 students enrolled. It also has essential services such as a bank, credit union, post office, supermarket and library as well as a number of shops and pubs.

There are several large vacant buildings on Main Street including the now derelict Royal Shannon Hotel, 10 unit new build, 3 storey town centre building and the La Sainte Union Convent. The majority of vacant properties are located to the west end of the town, towards the river.

Banagher Development Group are a very proactive voluntary group in the town and have been successful in securing €50k REDZ funding in 2016 as well as €5k LEADER funding. OCC secured €100k in 2017 under the TVR Scheme to carry out public realm enhancement works.

**Project Objective:**

If we were to look at all of the elements that go into making towns and villages more attractive for residential occupancy including, the buildings, amenities, public realm, infrastructure and services and also to look at all the issues that contribute to vacancy etc. as was the intention at the outset of this pilot, the following must be taken into account in Banagher:

- The vacant 3 Storey multi-unit building in the town centre
- The vacant 10 unit residential development on Main Street
- Vacant buildings – both residential and mixed use
- 6 of the vacant buildings, including the Royal Shannon Hotel are protected structures. These form a significant part of the streetscape and require careful consideration.
- Dilapidated looking buildings that are in fact occupied
- The Royal Shannon Hotel and its’ potential uses
- The public realm of the town and continued enhancement of same
- The Marina which is the main tourist attraction in the town.
The plan is not to address issues identified in isolation but instead take a holistic approach with long term results in mind. Immediate action is being taken where possible with an aim to address all issues in the medium term.

**Project Outline:**

- **40 properties investigated** in order to establish their vacancy status. Following extensive research, 22 properties/sites which include the hotel and the 2 multi-unit developments were confirmed as being vacant. Of that 22 surveys were completed in relation to 16 properties.
- **Reasons for vacancy** include lack of finance, indecision about how to develop/refurbish properties, lack of suitable tenants and lack of incentives to invest and reoccupy property. The Repair & Lease Scheme has not attracted interest from private owners and it is not desirable to provide further social housing in Banagher.
- **Detailed design completed** for one unit as an example of “over the shop living” illustrating how a Town Centre unit could be converted to modern family living accommodation.
- **Community engagement** has played an important role in this process. Local voluntary group, Banagher Development Group are a very active stakeholder in the community and have an excellent working relationship with OCC. The Council’s Regeneration Project Team met with the group initially in May and subsequently presented a progress report on the project in June.
- **Category 1 application for Rural Regeneration Development Fund** made in August 2019 to purchase and develop the 3 storey town centre building as a community facility, digital hub, office accommodation, meeting rooms and exhibition space. OCC have negotiated purchase of the unit
- In conjunction with an Approved Housing Body, a 14unit vacant development was purchased and tenanted in the Town Centre.
- **Category 2 application for Rural Regeneration Development Fund** will be made when call is made to develop the 10unit development into a community run self-catering accommodation project. This application will also include improvements to the public realm, regeneration of the Marina and a feasibility study for the now derelict hotel.
- **Conservation Architect** to give advice to property owners on protected structures, window repair, painting scheme and development /refurbishment of vacant and derelict properties.
- **TVR application** to be made in 2020 for Façade Painting Scheme and street enhancement measures.
- **Information session** will be hosted in Banagher for residents/property owners, at which, professional advice will be given, and a presentation will be made on potential for transformation.

**Provisional Findings**

**Banagher**

- Banagher has the potential to be an attractive Town Centre to live in because, services, schools and amenity are situated close to the Town Centre.
• There is a lack of incentive to do anything with the vacant properties, as they cost nothing to leave alone and require significant investment to bring into use.

• In order for individual property owners to invest in having their property occupied, an incentive scheme is required, within a designated area, which provides financial support. Currently, the return on investment through rental is not sufficient to encourage owners to invest. Equally, the cost of purchase/refurbishment is relatively more expensive than purchasing an equivalent out of Town or suburban property. Such incentives could help reduce the pressure on demand for rural one off housing.

• A vacant property tax could also be considered.

• The development of the multi-unit Vacant building in the Town Centre (Remote working hub, incubation offices, community facility, library) could act as a catalyst to re-energise the Town.

• Holiday accommodation, to capture tourists beginning and ending River Shannon cruises from the Marina, could be provided by conversion of the 10-unit residential vacant property.